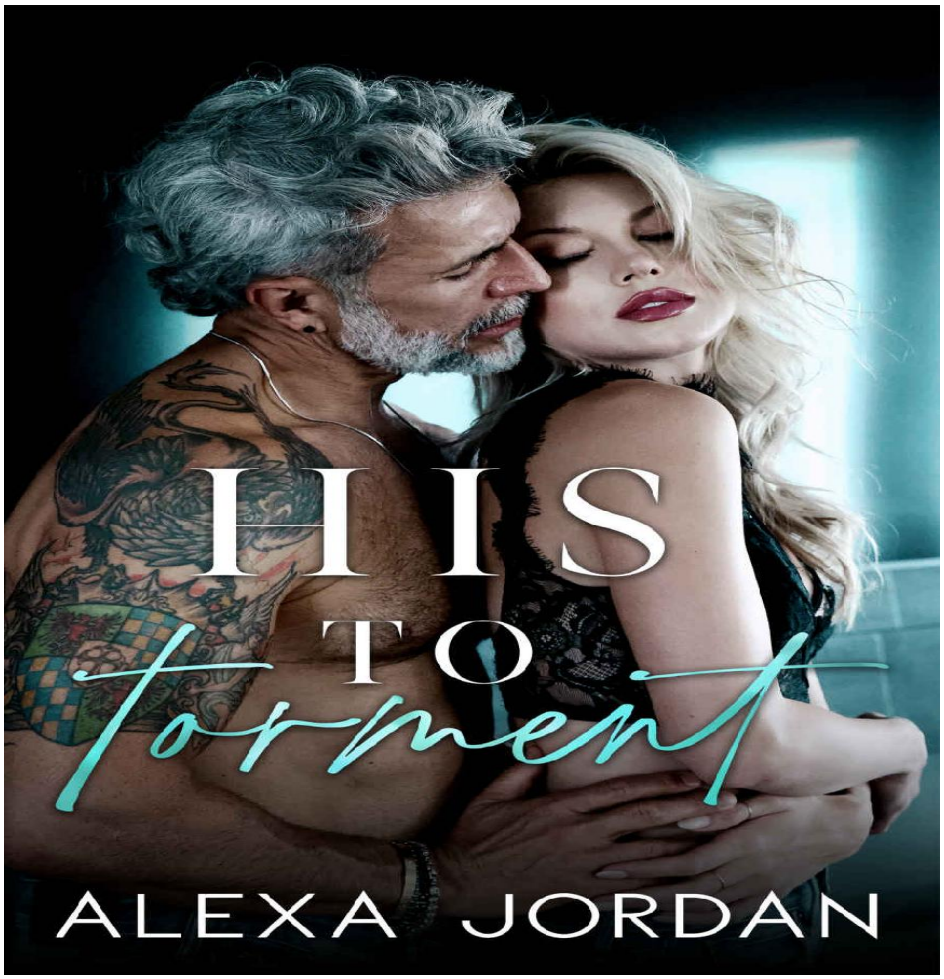

HIS
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# HIS TO TORMENT

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# DEDICATION

*To Andi and Glenna*
*This book would never have been written if it wasn't for you!*

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# CONTENTS

Prologue
Chapter 1
Willa

Chapter 2
Felix

Chapter 3
Willa

Chapter 4
Felix

Chapter 5
Willa

Chapter 6
Felix

Chapter 7
Willa

Chapter 8
Felix

Chapter 9
Willa

Chapter 10
Felix

Chapter 11
Willa

Chapter 12
Willa

Chapter 13
Felix

Chapter 14
Willa

Chapter 15
Felix

Chapter 16
Willa

Chapter 17
Felix

Chapter 18
Felix

Chapter 19
Willa

Chapter 20
Felix

Chapter 21
Willa

Chapter 22
Willa

Chapter 23
Felix

Chapter 24
Felix

Chapter 25
Willa

Chapter 26
Willa

Epilogue
Sneak Peek of Room Twenty-Three

More books by Alexa Jordan
About the Author

# CONTENT WARNING

These content notes are made available here so readers can inform themselves if they want to. Some readers might consider these as ‘spoilers’, particularly for the detailed trigger warnings.

In this case, there are major spoilers in the headlines too. If you don’t like spoilers, look away. You’ve been warned.

Abuse (physical and sexual)
Attempted rape
BDSM
Blood/Violence
Dubious Consent
Excessive or gratuitous violence (i.e. torture)
Kidnapping (forceful deprivation of/disregard for personal autonomy)
Pregnancy: Side character
Rape: On Page, described in detail
Sexual Assault
Slut Shaming
Torture

# PROLOGUE

# WILLA

"You're bleeding!" I screech as I drop to my knees, my hands fluttering around Felix's body, searching for the source.

A few moments ago, we were making breakfast and planning to have a quickie on the kitchen table while we wait for the timer to go off. Then crash. The window shatters, and Felix pushes me under the table, protecting me with his body.

I've been waiting on pins and needles for something like this to happen, but after two years, I figured they'd forget about us and the sick games they've been playing with me and my sister. I asked Felix a million times where my sister was and what their plans for her were, but he didn't know. I don't know how she's doing. If she's living happily, protected and safe, or if they're holding her hostage somewhere. I knew it was a gamble to run away with Felix, but I couldn't stay there. There was no doubt in my mind that they'd have done something more to me than they already had. Something that would've had me wishing for death.

"Fuck. That hurts." He grunts, knocking over the table to give us a little more cover as bullets continue to rain down on us.

"It's not supposed to tickle, that's for sure," I snap back, not knowing what to do with all the emotions swirling around inside me.

My knees press into the floor, shards of glass cutting into my skin as I rip my shirt over my head and press it hard against his shoulder. Felix has been my only constant through all of this. The only person I know has my best interest at heart. Yeah, he stalked me and delivered me to Joseph, but that was before. The tears pooling in my eyes slip free as I'm reminded of the last three years of my life. I thought this was over. I thought we were

finally free of his family's grasp, but I should've known better. We are up against Joseph Bianchi, the man of your nightmares. There was no way he was going to let my escape go unpunished.

"I thought we'd have more time." I whimper as Felix struggles to stand, pulling a small pistol from behind his back.

His face contorts in pain for a moment before it quickly disappears. He's trying to be strong, not wanting me to worry like he always does, but I know better. He's concerned, or maybe the better word is apprehensive, about our chances of making it out of here alive. We got comfortable, living in an almost perfect small town outside of Chicago. I'd gotten a job, under an assumed name, of course, and things were good. Better than good, but there was a nagging feeling in the back of my mind that they wouldn't let this go.

"There's no time," he growls, firing off a few shots before ducking back down behind the table and holding his hand out toward me. "We need to move."

My vision begins to blur. The only sound I can hear is the white subway tiles covering the opposite wall shattering, splintering into tiny little pieces as they come crashing to the floor. My chest tightens as I panic, staring at Felix's outstretched hand. I know I should reach out and grab it, but I'm frozen in place as my mind goes back to the night my life changed forever.

If only I went right home after work, if I'd gone to see Celia like she begged me to do, or the many other things that led to me being assigned to Joseph's room that night. I wouldn't be here fighting for my life. My sister… hell, I don't even know where my sister is. When Felix grabbed me, I thought my life was over, but it was only the beginning.

"We have to go, Willa." Felix grips my hand tightly, giving it a squeeze before pulling me to my feet. I flatten myself against him, pressing my ear to his chest. The sound of his heart beating is my only focus. If his heart is still beating, I'll be safe, cared for, and protected. "On the count of three."

My eyes snap to his, and I nod, letting him know I'm listening as he holds up his fingers and begins ticking off numbers. One. Two. On three, Felix grips my hand tightly in his and makes a break toward the other room in search of additional cover.

Gunfire fills the air as we sprint forward through the opening. Pain radiates up my legs as my bare feet slap against the floor, shards of broken tile and glass piercing my skin with each step. Felix pulls me to a stop,

pressing our bodies against the living room wall, before ducking back into the opening and firing another shot. I hear a cry of pain come from the other room.

*He must have hit someone. But how many more are there?*

"There are too many of them. You need to go, *bambolina*." (You need to go, little doll)

"No!" I shout, wrapping my arms tightly around his waist and burying my nose in his chest. "I won't leave without you."

Painful sobs wrack my body as he fires off a few more shots, the muscles of his chest constricting tightly with each movement. I know I should run out the door behind us to safety, but I can't bring myself to leave. Felix risked everything to save me. Everything he's ever known to protect me from Joseph, and I won't leave him alone.

"Willa." He groans as I pull away, wanting desperately to see his face. "I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you."

"And I can't live without you!" I scream, swiping at the continuous stream of tears rolling down my cheeks. "You promised you'd always be with me, and I'm holding you to that."

Felix's gaze locks with mine as he releases the empty clip before pulling another out of his pocket to reload. He fires off a few more shots before turning back to me. "Head directly to the car. There's a set of keys in the visor. Start the car, and I'll be right behind you."

"Promise?"

It seems silly to make him promise at a time like this, but I know Felix. If he promises to be right behind me, he will be. He may have done horrible things in his lifetime, but he has never once broken his word. Especially to me.

"I promise. Now go, Willa!" he shouts before ducking out from behind the wall and firing toward our attackers.

I don't waste any time moving straight for the front door, flinging it open and heading directly toward the car. Bullets continue to rain down around me as men approach the other side of the yard, attempting to box us in.

*Get to the car. Get to the car. Get to the car,* I chant repeatedly to myself to keep focus. If not, I'll fall apart, choking on my fears. Somehow, I make it to the car and climb inside, finding the keys exactly where he said they'd be.

“You thought you could escape us,” a sinister voice shouts as he rips open the door, pointing a gun directly at me.

My eyes drift closed as my muscles lock in fear, waiting for the pain that I know is coming.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THREE YEARS AGO

### WILLA

*What are you going to do with your life?* That's the question everyone asks as you slowly approach eighteen, which seems like a lifetime ago. Every person in my graduating class had plans: go to college, get a job, move away, and follow their dreams. Everyone except me. Growing up in foster care will do that to you, I suppose.

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm thankful for my life. My bio parents were junkies and OD'd when I wasn't old enough to take care of myself. I bounced around between foster homes before landing with the Washingtons. Everyone around me was on pins needles as I was growing up, waiting for me to have some sort of meltdown and head down a similar path, but I was stronger than that. I downright refused to become another statistic. Just because I got dealt a shitty hand in life doesn't mean I couldn't win this game of life.

"Earth to Willa…" Lyra waves her hand in front of my face, bringing me back to the present. "Did you hear anything I had to say?"

I barely resist the urge to roll my eyes at her antics, but I know she means well. Lyra has been the queen of the reception area at the club since I started working here. This isn't a place that anyone would expect me to work, but the moment I saw the advertisement, I was drawn here.

Maybe it was the obscene amount of money I was going to be paid or the fact that it was the opposite of where I grew up, but I knew I had to work here. The ink hadn't even dried on my high school diploma before I packed up the early nineties Volkswagen Golf my foster parents gave me and hightailed it to Chicago, and I haven't looked back since.

“Yeah. Yeah. Take a drink to the second floor to Mr. Bianchi’s suite.” I barely resist the urge to roll my eyes as I pull my bottom lip between my teeth.

*You know this, Willa.* I’ve been an attendant on the second floor for a few months. I’m requested by a few clients when they come here, but this is the first time I’d be working in Mr. Bianchi’s room. Rumor has it, he’s a head honcho with the Sicilian Mafia, but none of us dare ask. He’s been a member of the club for a few weeks and spends a good amount of time here with his men. He better, for the amount of money he’s shelling out per week to have an entire suite in the back of the club. He says it’s for privacy, but if the whispers around the break room are true, he’s doing a little more than having some kinky sex back there. But like I said, that’s none of my business.

“And?” Lyra places her hand on her hips, cocking her head to the side.

“And…” my voice trails off as I try to think of the last rule.

You don’t follow the rules one time and suddenly you’re unable to do your job properly without supervision. You laugh, but this place is no joke. It has to be with the clientele they have coming in and out of the club. Some of the most powerful people in the world come here to let off some steam or to make whatever underhanded deals they need to make to stay in their positions of power. My job here is to entertain the guests, keep my eyes down, and my mouth shut. In that order. We are mostly around to be seen, which is made obvious by the skimpy black dresses they require us to wear for each shift.

“And knock before entering.” Lyra flicks my forehead hard with her perfectly manicured fingers. “Don’t forget, Willa. The rules are important. They keep our guests and us safe.”

“I know. I know,” I mutter softly, rubbing the sore spot on my forehead. “If you left a mark…”

“Relax, girlie.” Lyra reaches under the desk and pulls out a small compact mirror, flipping it open before pointing it in my direction. “See, not a mark on you.”

“You’re lucky,” I grumble before reaching over the counter and grabbing the beeper for Mr. Bianchi’s room from its slot behind the bar. “What time is his appointment?”

“See, I knew you weren’t listening.” Lyra huffs before rolling her eyes at me. “He’s already in his suite with four guests. Somehow, he wasn’t

assigned an attendant when he arrived."

"When do you ever forget to assign someone to a guest?"

"If I had been the one at the desk when he arrived, it never would've happened. But he slipped in while I was on break, and Chastity just let him go right up to his suite without assigning someone."

"Uh-oh." I giggle softly, sending up a silent prayer for Chastity's safety.

Lyra prides herself on running a tight ship. She ensures that all guests have what they need when they arrive and provides any accommodation they may request during their time at the club.

"Uh-oh is right. As soon as I get my hands on that girl…" Lyra begins as my phone vibrates inside the small garter bag tucked neatly beneath my dress.

"Don't kill her. You don't look good in orange. It'd clash with your hair."

Lyra cackles loudly as I clip the pager to the almost nonexistent spaghetti straps on my dress and hightail it toward the break room. We aren't supposed to have cell phones or anything like that when we are working in the club, but I've been waiting to hear from my sister, Celia, for days. We just keep missing each other.

"What's up, buttercup?"

"Nothing much, Kitty Kat." Celia giggles softly as I slide into one of the plush chairs tucked into the corner of the breakroom. "I'm surprised I didn't get your voicemail. I was getting a complex."

"You know I'd never do that to you."

Celia isn't my sister by blood, but she is in all the ways that matter. Celia and I were both placed with the Washingtons at a young age. We grew up together, depending on each other in ways we never could depend on anyone before.

"I know," she responds softly, but I can practically feel her pulling away from me.

Being abandoned by our parents at such a young age had different effects on the two of us. For me, it made me want to take life by the horns and make it my bitch. For Celia, it made her practically afraid of her own shadow, waiting for the next person to disappear from her life. I promised her the day I left for Chicago that I'd always be her bigger sister, and I've kept that promise as best I could.

“Only two more years and then you can be my sugar momma,” I respond, attempting to lighten the mood.

Celia was ready to move to Chicago to be closer to me when she graduated from high school, but I knew she had bigger things in her future. She was smart, the valedictorian of her class, and she had all the Ivy league colleges and universities in the Northeast begging her to go there. She tried to convince me it was a bad idea, letting her fear get the better of her, but somehow, I convinced her that going to college was the best plan for her. It killed me to do it, but Celia never had many friends growing up, preferring to live inside the fantasy world she created with her imagination instead of the real world. And that terrified me. I wanted her to get out and live life, not have her nose stuck in a book. She needed to live life on her own terms, taking back that part of herself she lost when her parents left her at a fire station.

I visit and call her as often as I can, but she knows nothing about the club and what I do here. I’m not ashamed of what I do. I provide a service, but nothing more. I’m not a whore, but everyone doesn’t see it that way. I don’t want to let my sister down or embarrass her. But I don’t ever want her to be disappointed in me.

“I miss you.”

“I miss you, too, buttercup.” I pause as a brilliant idea pops into my head. “Hey, I have some vacation days saved up. Why don’t I come up there, and we can cause some trouble on campus during your spring break?”

“Spring break is months away.”

“I know, but how else am I going to enjoy hot, shirtless frat boys playing football in the quad?”

“Do you even know what a quad is?” She giggles softly as I glance at the clock hanging near the door.

*Shit.* I really should at least introduce myself to Mr. Bianchi and see if he needs anything. I don’t know if Lyra called to let him know she assigned him an attendant for the evening.

“A large place… with grass… and half-naked frat boys playing football,” I respond quickly, before pushing to my feet and heading toward the door. “I hate to cut this short, Celia, but I need to get back to work.”

“Okay. Call me tomorrow? I have class until two, but after that, I’m free.”

“I’ll set an alarm.” I make a show of crossing my heart before remembering she can’t see me.

“Don’t forget about the time change,” she says before ending the call.

I quickly shove my phone back into its hiding place before scurrying out the door and making a brief stop at the bar. I grab a bottle of our most popular whiskey and four glasses before heading for the stairs. I only make it about halfway down the hallway before I hear a shrill scream coming from the Bianchis’ suite.

I freeze in place, my ears straining to catch any other sounds coming through the door. Hearing someone scream on the second level of the club isn’t out of the ordinary, but there’s something about it that causes the hairs on the back of my neck to stand at attention.

“Help! Someone help me, please,” the voice begs from the other side of the door as I spring to action, striding toward the door and pushing it open.

*Lyra is going to have my ass for not following the rules.*

The door creaks open, and I freeze. My eyes cannot process the scene in front of me.

Usually, there are men stationed all around these rooms in different stages of undress. Most of them are getting their rocks off, but there’s always someone watching over them. Waiting for someone to strike, but this time, the room is empty but for the two people on the couch directly in front of me.

There’s a man looking over Chastity on the couch, her small hands grasped in one of his, pinning them above her head, spreading her out for the world to see. Her panties are down around her knees, and the man’s knee is resting on top of them, ensuring she can’t move.

“Wait your turn,” he sneers as he reaches into his pants and pulls out his cock, stroking himself a few times. “I wanna know if her cunt is as chaste as she says it is.”

“Please don’t do this, Mr. Bianchi,” Chastity whispers, tears streaming down her face as she pushes on his chest.

“Shut up.” He leans down, licking the side of her face before whispering in her ear, “You’re nothing but a stupid whore. Now take my cock like a good little slut, and maybe I’ll let you watch while I have a turn with your little friend.”

Chastity’s eyes widen in surprise as I drop my tray and spring forward, pulling a small switchblade from beneath my dress and pressing it to his

neck.

"You're going to let her go," I growl, pressing the blade deeper into his throat and breaking the skin.

*Have I lost my fucking mind?* Not only will this small act cost me my job, it could very well cost me my life, but none of that matters right now. Mr. Bianchi may be the head of the Sicilian Mafia, but no one, and I mean no one, touches a woman without her permission. The club has rules against these things for a reason. We aren't required to have sex with the clients unless we want to. It must always be consensual, and this is anything but.

"Aren't you a little spitfire?" He chuckles darkly, releasing Chastity and holding his hands up in surrender. "I can't wait to fuck that right out of you."

"If you still have a dick when I'm finished with you." I lift the knife slightly in the air before swiping it down the side of his cheek, marring his perfect skin, before pressing it back against his neck. "Chastity, let's go."

Chastity doesn't waste any time sliding out of his grasp and putting her clothes back into place. I want to tell her everything is going to be okay, but we both know that's not the case. Men like him always get what they want, whether it be by using money or by force. Neither one of us is safe until we put a lot of space between us and him.

"Yes, Chastity. You may leave. You can even report this to management to save your job and get me barred from the premises. It is of no consequence to me."

Chastity hesitates for a few moments, her head swiveling back and forth between the two of us, before mumbling a quick apology and running out the door. I don't blame her. Hell, I probably would've done the same thing in her position, but there's a part of me that hopes she went to get the calvary. There's no way I'll be able to hold my own with Mr. Bianchi for too much longer. The only reason I've stayed alive this long is because I caught him off guard.

"That's bullshit." I grind my teeth together, pressing the knife into his skin a second time. "You're going to pay for what you've done. Being barred from the club is going to be the least of your worries."

"The only person who's going to pay for what they've done is you." He smirks as something is pressed against the back of my head.

I drop the knife immediately, raising my hands in surrender. Fear tightens its grip around my heart, but I refuse to break eye contact with Mr.

Bianchi. I'm going to die. I know that now, but I refuse to break. Men like him feed off other's fear, but not me. I'll go out kicking and screaming.

He makes a show of standing, taking time to adjust his clothing, and tucks himself back into his pants before taking a seat back on the couch as if nothing happened.

"I'm feeling generous today." He waves his hand in the air, and the pressure on the back of my head disappears. "*Corri, topolino. Il gatto è pronto per giocare.*" (Run along, little mouse. The cat is ready to play.)

I don't hesitate before spinning on my heels and running out the door. The sounds of his maniacal laughter follow right behind me.

# CHAPTER TWO

# FELIX

"What are you doing here?" I growl, annoyed about being interrupted while I'm working. "I'm kind of in the middle of something here, Ezra."

"A little of this and a little of that. I was bored, so I wanted to stop by for a visit," he responds nonchalantly, as if this were a regular occurrence for the two of us.

Ezra is different. That's the only way I've been able to describe him after all these years. Not really a psychopath or a sociopath, but something in between. Both are equally useful in the right situation, if you ask me, but neither is wanted right now.

Ezra lives in the shadows, and the fact that he's standing in front of me can't be a good thing. We aren't enemies, but we aren't exactly close, either. The two of us are bound by the blood we've spilled for the Bianchi family. Both of us have the same darkness simmering beneath the surface, waiting to break free. I don't know much about his past, but I understand the look in his eyes. A kindred soul, broken, but there is a part that continues to cling tightly to the remnants of our humanity. His is a lot smaller than my own.

No one really knows who Ezra is or where he came from. He appeared on Joseph's doorstep a few years ago, requesting a job. Request probably isn't the right word, especially because he had a gun pressed to Joseph's temple. He's the only person who has ever gotten the drop on Joseph Bianchi until several days ago.

"Trying to get some information out of him?" Ezra motions his head toward the body slouched over in the chair.

“Hardly. I was just having a bit of fun.” I pull my pack of cigarettes from my pocket, light one, and place it between my lips.

Life or death are the only things at stake for anyone who enters this room. Tell me the information I need, and depending on my mood, I may let you live. Don’t give me what I want, and you’ll end up with a one-way ticket to meet your maker. However, the man before me is useless. We don’t want information or money. He’s purely here so we can prove a point. Disappoint Joseph Bianchi and pay the consequences. A lesson I learned the hard way. Joseph rarely gives second chances, but for a chosen few, he may make an exception.

“Can I have a go? I haven’t had a good torture session in weeks.” Ezra’s voice brings me back to the present as he runs the tip of his knife along his hairline, licking his lips. His eyes are lit with mischief as he focuses on our prisoner.

My captive’s body is slumped down in a chair. His broken arm is lying limp at his side, and his chin has dropped to his chest. Bruises and cuts from my knife mar his once-flawless skin. Chunks of his hair and skin are scattered around him from where I yanked them from his body.

“When do you ever ask permission?”

He shrugs his shoulders, his eyes never leaving the captive as he strides toward him. Ezra grips his chin tightly in his hand, tilting it upward before licking the side of his face. Ezra groans loudly, adding more weight to the load of the cables tightening around our prisoner’s body. Just letting him sit there would be too easy, but of course, Ezra has other things in mind.

“Can I use the pulley?” Ezra questions.

I don’t say a word, causing Ezra to smile brightly. *Didn’t I say he was different?* He quickly wraps the cables holding our prisoner around the pulley attached to the ceiling, tightening it occasionally to bring him just a fraction more pain.

“Please. Just kill me. I beg you.” The prisoner groans as the cables tighten. Thin lines of blood trickle from his wounds as the barbs embed themselves further into his skin.

“Why should we?” I take another drag from my cigarette and quickly become bored with these games. I can think of a million other things I could be doing in this moment other than proving a point. Some of them are more enjoyable than others.

Ezra pushes the barbs deeper, his screams of agony filling the room. “Besides, that wouldn’t be any fun.” He chuckles before turning his attention back toward me. “I almost forgot; Joe wants to see you.”

“You know he’d cut out your tongue if he heard you calling him that.”

“And that’s supposed to scare me?”

“Not really. Just stating facts.” I take a long drag from my cigarette before dropping it onto the ground and stamping it out. “I’ll leave you to attend to our guest.”

“It would be my pleasure,” he grumbles in response, before turning his attention back to our captive as I stride toward the door.

Heading directly toward my car, I hit the button on the key fob to unlock the trunk. I don’t waste any time pulling the lid open and reaching inside for a clean shirt and some wipes. Joseph is fully aware of what happens when I’m here, but he also expects me to be presentable when I appear before him, specifically free of blood and skin.

I change quickly, throwing my soiled clothing into a bag before slamming my trunk closed. Before climbing into the car, I light the bag on fire before dropping it into a nearby barrel and head toward the Bianchi home in the Gold Coast area of Chicago. I’d have preferred to continue to “play” with my guest, but when Joseph Bianchi calls for me, I come. There’s no other option.

The first time I saw Joseph, he had a gun pressed to the back of my father’s head. I was only ten years old, barely old enough to take care of myself, but I knew the type of man my father was. He tried to hide it from us, but we all knew he had a gambling problem. We always scraped by, but we all knew deep in our hearts that he loved gambling more. My mother cried herself to sleep almost every night before she died, praying to the lord to protect my father’s soul, but I knew that one day, the devil would come to collect.

Joseph was that devil. He came into our home with a few men, scooping up my mother and sister before forcing my father and me to our knees, putting a bullet between his eyes before giving me a choice. I could be sold to the highest bidder to recoup some of the money my father owed him, or I could work for him. That was the day I became Felix Bianchi. Part of the organization, part of the family. I was no longer the boy I had been before that moment. Now, my only purpose in life was serving Joseph and living to protect the members of the Bianchi family. Nothing else matters but

protecting our family at all costs. I promised to put no one above Joseph and our family. A promise I've only forgotten once, and it cost someone their life.

To an outsider, it seems like a cult, stripping each of us of our individual identities. But for most of us, it gives us a sense of belonging. We came from nothing, tossed to the side by society at a young age by everyone that was supposed to care for us. In the Bianchi family, we're all the same. Loyalty and our respect for each other keep us bonded together.

I pull to a stop in front of Joseph's home. It's a little ostentatious for my taste, but it's not my home. Joseph always ensures he has access to the finest things in life, in constant competition with some invisible adversary that very few knew existed.

In the heart of Chicago's Gold Coast neighborhood, the house contains six bedrooms, eight full bathrooms, and five half bathrooms. Expansive living spaces set for entertaining all the different families and executives wanting to come and discuss business with Joseph, along with intimate gathering spaces that only the family has access to. The house may be an eyesore, but it's home to Joseph Bianchi and his men. None of us have to be concerned about having a roof over our heads or food in our bellies. Whatever we need, we can get it from this house.

"You better hurry, Felix," Adler says as he pulls my car door open, leaning his forearms on the door frame and resting his chin on top of them. "He told me to stand on the portico until you arrived."

"Why can't you speak like normal kids your age?" I chuckle as I climb out of the car and ruffle his hair.

Adler is the newest edition to the Bianchi Family. Joseph caught him trying to pick his pocket one night as we came out of Doc B's restaurant a few years ago. Joseph gave him a choice, just like each of us. Now he lives here with Joseph, running errands and doing whatever any of us need, instead of firearms training and karate classes.

"No reason. The word sounded cool when I heard the mayor's husband use it the other day, and I googled it."

It's times like this that I'm reminded of how much younger than the rest of us Adler is. He has his whole life ahead of him, and a chance to not have his hands forever covered in blood. Joseph treats him more like a younger brother than anything, and none of protested. We all remember when we were his age, full of hope for the future and all that bullshit.

“You should pay more attention to your classes instead of what some *ragazzo stronzo* (rich asshole) says when he’s trying to impress Joseph,” I chastise him as I stride toward the front door.

No firearms or martial arts training for Adler. A few months after he got his GED, Joseph took him under his wing and enrolled Adler into college. He’s a little older than most of the students, but he’s been going to the University of Chicago for the past few months. Not sure what exactly he’s been studying, but it must be going well.

“I’m doing just fine in my classes. Thank you very much.” He raises his chin in defiance before opening the front door and striding inside.

“Based on the sounds coming from Joe’s office, I doubt he’s in the mood to wait.” Adler grips my shoulder tightly. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.” I don’t want to waste any more time and turn right, heading straight for the library and knocking lightly on the pocket door before sliding it open to enter.

Quickly moving to my right, I shut the door right before a glass shatters against it. Liquid drips down the heavy door.

*He barely missed my head this time.*

“How the fuck did that whore slip through your fingers? Find her, or you’ll be the next person to visit Felix. Do you understand?” Joseph stands at his full height, anger burning in his eyes as he listens to the voice on the other end of the line.

“I don’t care. Find my mouse and bring her to me.” He slams the phone down on the receiver, promptly ending the call.

“Ezra said you wanted to see me.” I wait patiently by the door. “Although I’d much rather you used the phone.”

“We both know if I’d done that, you wouldn’t have come.” He sighs, sinking into his desk chair, spinning around to pour himself another drink. “Have a drink with me.”

I don’t hesitate and walk further into the room, stopping right in front of his desk. He hands me a glass of amber liquid. Probably scotch, since it’s his drink of choice. Something heavy must have gone down for him to be drinking this early in the day.

“Find my mouse, Felix. You’re the only one I can trust to find her.”

“Finding people is not my specialty, Joseph. Maybe sending Ezra would be a better idea.”

I'm grasping at straws. I cut people up to get information. Finding them really isn't my thing.

"We both know I won't have anything left to play with if I send him. If I'm lucky, he'll bring her dead body back whole instead of in pieces like the last mark."

We both chuckle at memories of the last person Joseph sent Ezra to fetch. Let's just say, after that, we learned we had to give him very specific instructions before letting him loose in the world. We no longer use the phrase "bring me their head on a silver platter." The housekeeper wasn't thrilled when she found a head resting on a silver platter in the center of the dining room table one evening. Ezra was banned from the house for weeks.

"Fair enough. But I still don't think I'm the best person for the job." I rub the back of my neck, trying to think of another excuse to get out of this mission.

If he pushes the issue, I'll do it. For no other reason than because he asked, but there's this nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach about this girl. Some girl working at the club shouldn't have been able to just disappear into thin air like that. She's either incredibly lucky or she has someone pulling her strings. For her sake, I hope it isn't the latter of the two, although things won't end well for her either way. Just ask Joseph's guard from the club that night. We know he had nothing to do with it, but Joseph sent him to me to prove a point to anyone who might be watching. No one is safe from Joseph Bianchi's wrath.

"Find my mouse and bring her to me." Joseph throws back his entire glass. "Become my right hand."

There must be something about this girl that has Joseph on edge for him to promise something of this magnitude and dangle it in front of me. Joseph and I have a relationship outside of boss and underling. We argue and talk things through. I'm the only person, other than Ezra and Adler, given permission to use his first name. But I've been at his side for years, however, only in theory.

I didn't realize this was what I wanted, to be Joseph Bianchi's right hand. To be the person he depends on above everyone else, the man he comes to for advice and protection. Having the title of right hand changes nothing, but in our world, titles mean everything. With a title comes respect from the other members of the family—both new and old—along with respect from outsiders. And the respect of my brothers is something I've

been working hard to earn back since that night so many years ago. Joseph may have forgiven me after I was punished, but I didn't have his respect. Now, I'm finally being given the chance to earn it once again.

Joseph gave me a family, a place to call home, but respect isn't given. It's earned. And once lost, it's almost impossible to get back. This is my chance. I've worked my way through the ranks, attempting to earn back everyone's respect. Some have given it freely, but some are keeping me at arm's length. By giving me this title, Joseph Bianchi is telling the world that I deserve their respect because, from that moment forward, I had his.

"Find my mouse, Felix." He pushes back from the desk before getting up and circling it to stand in front of me. "She needs to pay for what she's done." His hand runs absentmindedly over the side of his face where she sliced his cheek.

Thankfully, it wasn't anything a few stitches couldn't fix, but he refused any type of plastic surgery. He said he wanted to remember the moment they met for the rest of his life, tying them together for the rest of eternity. He felt some kind of connection with this girl when he saw her, before she sliced his cheek open with her blade.

"You could've had her right then, but you let her run."

Straightforward and to the point. I don't mince my words, especially with Joseph. There was a time when I couldn't speak this freely with him. I had to choose my words carefully or chance losing my life, but now we have an understanding. I will always speak the truth to Joseph on all matters because there is no other option. Lies cost people their lives, a fact I learned a long time ago.

"The chase is the best part."

I open my mouth to protest, but he holds up his hand, stopping the words before they can leave my mouth.

"Find her, Felix. I can't trust anyone else with this task but you."

"Understood," I respond, before turning to head out of the room.

I leave, mentally listing everything I have to do to find Joseph's little mouse. I know nothing about this girl, other than the small file we could get from the club. Basic information, her home address, phone number—but none of that tells me about the woman.

"Where are you, *bambolina?"* I mumble to myself as I pull open my car door and climb inside.

I'll find Willa Kennedy. And then I'll have everything I've ever wanted.

# CHAPTER THREE

# WILLA

I stare out the window of what feels like the millionth bus ride I've been on in days as it pulls off the side of the highway in the middle of nowhere. The sun has gone down hours ago, giving way to the endless darkness of night.

*I really wish I still had my car.*

I ditched it at my apartment building before gathering as many things as I could fit into one bag and dropping my keys and an envelope full of as much cash as I could spare into the overnight mailbox for my building. My rent isn't due for a few weeks, and I can only hope the building manager might be able to sell some of my possessions for any remaining balance I have on my account.

*I couldn't risk them finding me.*

There's no telling what Mr. Bianchi and his men are planning to do with me. A shiver runs down my spine as his face pops into my head. His eyes were lit with something I couldn't place as he told me to run from him, his laughter taunting me as I ran for my life. I didn't even stop to say goodbye to anyone. I went directly to the breakroom, grabbed the things I had out of my locker, and hightailed it out of there. I have no idea what happened to Chastity, but I feel in my heart that she went directly to Lyra or to management and told them what happened, as Mr. Bianchi instructed. He gave her permission, after all, and based on his attitude about the situation, I doubt this was the first time he forced himself on an attendant at the club, and I doubt it will be his last time unless someone stops him.

I'm not naïve. I know what the men that come there think of us. Parading around in skintight clothing, showing parts of ourselves no other

person has seen. They see us as nothing more than property, ripe for the picking. Some girls bask in the attention, wanting to have a rich and powerful man begging at their feet, but some of us are only there to collect a paycheck. I fall into the latter category, but who am I to judge what someone else does with their body?

The problem is that men with power believe they own every person they encounter, no longer fearing repercussions for their actions. They take what they want, never thinking that someone may refuse them. That night, I made one of them pay. Too bad it cost me my life.

*Don't be so glib, Willa. You're not dead yet.*

*Yet* is the keyword in that sentence. There's no doubt in my mind that the Bianchi family has put a price on my head. It's not like I saw anything damaging. If Chasity hasn't reported the assault, what the hell can I do to implicate them? Nothing. Without a victim, there's no crime. At least, that's what the police say in all those crime dramas I watch on my days off.

It's been three days, and I still haven't been able to relax and stop looking over my shoulder, ready for one of Bianchi's minions to pounce. I've done nothing during that time but switch buses. My only thought was that they all needed to be heading south. I've been trying to get some sleep when I can and living off anything I could find in the vending machines or convenient stores near the stations, but they can't be too far behind me. If the Bianchi family could spread their reach across the ocean to Chicago, it would only be a matter of time before they're able to find me. I need to put as much distance between me and them as possible, but I'm not sure anywhere on this continent will be far enough.

*I should call Celia again.*

I shake my head no, answering my own question. I had risked her safety enough by calling her right before I boarded the bus. I left a message as if nothing was wrong, but I know she'll know something is wrong. That I'm hiding something, but she doesn't need to know the trouble I've gotten myself into. Not only will she drop everything and come to my aid, but I can't risk something happening to her. I would die if Mr. Bianchi went anywhere near her. Staying away from my sister is for the best, at least until I can find some place safe to hide out and collect my thoughts. Celia has her whole life ahead of her, and the last thing I want to do is bring her into this mess.

“We’ll be taking our next scheduled break in a few minutes. If you wish to get off the bus, please take all your personal belongings with you,” the driver announces over the intercom system before turning right.

*When was the last time I ate?*

My stomach rumbles loudly in response to my thought. It seems it’s been longer than I thought. Reaching into my bag, I frantically search to see how much money I have left. Pulling out my wallet, I see only a few twenty-dollar bills remain.

*Fuck, I’m going to have to resort to stealing soon.*

Something I swore to myself I’d never do, steal, but I don’t see myself having other options. I’ve worked several jobs—nanny, server, gas station attendant—but the moment I use my license or anything with my name on it, I’ll be as good as dead. The only way for me to survive is to blend into the shadows, whether I like it or not.

As the bus pulls through town, there is an unwelcoming air to the entire area. The streets are lined with rundown buildings, not a person in sight, making this seem more like a town out of the movie “Deliverance” than anything else. The entire place gives me an uneasy feeling, making me think twice about getting off the bus when we stop.

As the bus pulls to a stop at the light, I notice a very well-lit gas station ahead on the right and sigh in relief. The last thing I want to do is walk around in this creepy town. Rest stops are few and far between when you’re riding on the bus, especially when I’m out in the middle-of-nowhere America. There’s no telling how long I’m going to have to wait if I don’t grab something to eat and stretch my legs here.

“You have about twenty minutes. Be back on the bus or it’ll leave without you,” the driver shouts through the bus before scurrying off in a hurry.

Taking a deep breath, I pull my hood up over my head and walk toward the front of the bus. I need to get in and out as quickly as I can and pray no one notices me. Fear hits me right in the center of my chest as I look around, searching for any signs of someone paying too much attention to me. My heart pounds in my chest as I get closer to the door, realizing that everything in this town is a threat: the man behind the counter, the guys striding towards the door, not to mention the big, bad mafia men trying to kill me…. Man, I have the worst luck.

It's not like I could do anything if someone grabbed me. I mean, I can defend myself, having taken self-defense classes at the Y when I moved to the city, but I doubt I'll be a match if more than one person comes after me. I also highly doubt that anyone sent by the Bianchi family will be using their fists.

The little bell over the door jingles as I enter the store, pulling my hood further over my face before heading toward the front cashier. The guy behind the counter doesn't look up from his phone, only giving me a slight nod of his head.

"Can you tell me where the ladies' room is?" I nibble on the end of my thumb, my eyes shifting back and forth to ensure no one can sneak up on me.

"On the right side of the building." He reaches down and grabs something, throwing a key connected to a long piece of wood onto the counter. "First door on the right."

"Thanks," I mumble under my breath before storming out the door, stopping abruptly when I see another truck pulling into the parking spot at the edge of the building. Directly in front of where the clerk said the bathrooms were.

My head swivels from side to side, searching for another bus passenger to make the trek to the bathroom with me, but come up empty. How's that possible? There were a handful of people that got off the bus, but I didn't see anyone inside the convenient store. I didn't hear the bell or anything signaling that someone else entered the store either. Turning on my heels, I head back toward the store when I hear a voice ringing out in the darkness.

"Hey, pretty girl."

My heart pounds inside my chest as I turn my head slightly, glimpsing a man strolling towards me out of the darkness, a dark trucker hat pulled down, shielding his eyes from view. His hand runs down a dark, scruffy beard as his tongue peeks out between his lips. His eyes roam my body, sending a shiver of terror down my spine, as he licks his lips and waves his hand in the air to get my attention.

"Where you off to in such a hurry?" The man grins as he comes closer, stopping a few inches away from me.

My entire body is on high alert, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. I have exactly two options: head back across the parking lot for the bus and hope I can get inside before he calls his friends, or make

a run for it. Neither of those options seems appealing if I'm being honest, but the bus is closer. I can hold it.

"Just wanting to get back on the road," I mumble before ducking my head and making a beeline for the bus. I make it a few steps before someone grips my arm, pulling me backwards.

"Do I know you from somewhere?"

The deep, southern twang in his voice sets off warning bells in my mind. This is exactly the person I did not want to run into. He's obviously not a member of the Bianchi family based on the way he's dressed, but I can't be too careful. Everything about this man screams trouble. One wrong move and I'll wind up dead either way.

I flash him a bright smile, pulling my arm from his grip and taking a step back. "Nope. I just have one of those faces."

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice two more men slinking toward me from the shadows, both with equally sinister looks on their faces.

"Come on, don't be like that." He smiles. The smell of stale cigarettes and liquor wafts over me, causing me to gag. "My friends and I just want to have some fun."

It's just my luck that I run into a group of lunatics while I'm trying to hide out from another group of lunatics. Small world, huh? My entire body tenses, ready to run, when I back into something hard, and a possessive arm wraps around my shoulders.

"The lady's taken."

I don't look up to see who's talking because there's no way I'm getting out of this situation without this man's help. I just hope I'm not walking out of one bad situation and right into another one.

"There's more than enough to go around, friend," the man snarls, reaching for my arm and tugging me towards him. "You'll just have to wait your turn."

I stumble forward, but my possible savior tightens his hold on me and shoves me behind him, his broad back cutting off the other men from view.

"I suggest you move along, *friend*." I press my cheek against his back, letting his voice soothe the fear coursing inside me. "I said the lady is spoken for."

I peek my head around his side, my eyes flicking between my savior and attackers. They stare at each other for a few beats before my attacker and his friends turn on their heels and leave, mumbling under their breath

the entire time. I wait for the men to disappear inside the store before releasing the breath I didn't know I was holding.

"Thank you." I drop my head onto the man's back, sagging in relief.

"Don't thank me yet, Willa."

My instincts scream at me to make a run for it, but I was frozen in place.

"How do you know my name?" My voice trembles as he turns around, my eyes focusing on my supposed rescuer, and my blood runs cold.

Standing over me, with a black leather jacket resting on his shoulder, the first three buttons of his black shirt open, exposing the softer hairs on his chest, and tousled silver hair blowing slightly in the breeze, was someone I never wanted to run into. The monster of my nightmares. The man I'd put money on that the Bianchis sent to get rid of loose ends. His emerald eyes are focused directly on me.

*I'm so fucked.*

# CHAPTER FOUR

# FELIX

"I have a feeling you know exactly how I know you, Willa."

I don't know whether to call this good or bad luck. I guess it depends on which one of us you're speaking to. It wasn't that difficult to find her. No wonder Joseph was livid about everyone's incompetence. One of our men that works at the bus station caught sight of her climbing onto a bus headed toward Indianapolis, and the rest was easy. I tracked her using the bus station cameras before she climbed aboard a bus in Nashville heading toward Birmingham, Alabama. We didn't have anyone in the area, so I hopped in one of our planes and flew directly to Nashville and worked my way backwards.

"Lucky me. I didn't have to search very hard to find you, Willa." I chuckle darkly as I stare into a pair of haunting, ocean-blue eyes.

Thank fuck for the predictability of the Greyhound transit buses. This was only the third stop I've made, and I found her. But now what do I do with her? My job is to bring Joseph his mouse, but we're miles away from the family home in Chicago, and I highly doubt she's going to go with me quietly.

"There's nothing about our meeting that's lucky," Willa snarks back. "Now, are you going to tell me who you are?"

If I didn't know any better, I'd assume she had a death wish. But by the way her entire body is trembling in my arms, I can tell it's nothing but false bravado. There's a fire in her eyes that I don't see very often.

Most of the men that come before me are resigned to their fate. Knowing that the moment they're brought into my sanctuary, they're going to die. It is only a matter of time. If they give me the information I'm

searching for, they die quickly and as painlessly as possible. If they choose to defy me, well, those are the ones I enjoy playing with the most.

Willa is different. She refuses to go quietly and accept her fate. Deep down in her soul, she knows she has to pay for what she's done to Joseph Bianchi or else she wouldn't have run. However, she has no idea I have no intention of killing her.

"If you try to run, it will only make things harder."

Her eyes narrow as she turns in my grasp, pressing her body tightly against mine. Warning bells go off in my mind to remain focused and not let the feel of her body pressed up against mine distract me. If I was a weaker man, I'd give in to her charms. Too bad for her, I'm not.

"I have to at least try, don't I?" She tilts her head upward, flashing me a bright smile, but there is nothing but mischief in her eyes.

"Go ahead, and you'll see what happens." The corner of my mouth tips upward, and I raise my eyebrow.

"You wouldn't hurt a poor, defenseless female, would you?"

I unwrap my arms from around her and take a step backward. My blood sings in my veins at the idea of chasing her into the darkness. Listening to the sound of her breathing as she fights to put space between us before realizing there's no use. I'm the hunter, and she is my prey. And I always catch my prey.

There's something about this girl that calls to me like a siren to an unsuspecting sailor. I can guarantee if I'm not careful, she'll lead me to my demise. Charming me in a way I never thought was possible. Now that I've met Willa in person, I can understand Joseph's fascination with her.

"You and I both know you're not defenseless." I chuckle humorlessly before motioning my head to the darkness. "You're more than welcome to run, but I have a feeling your friends are still lurking in the shadows. They don't take too kindly to your kind in these parts."

"My kind?" Her eyebrows raise, and fire lights in her eyes. "What in the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

She had no idea of the trouble she was in, even before I arrived. An attractive woman, alone and in the middle of nowhere, can lead to nothing but trouble. Long, blonde hair hangs over her shoulder in some type of braid, eyes shifting back and forth, searching for any threats lurking around the corner. Too bad the biggest threat to her right now is me.

I don't even bother to hide the fact that my eyes are roaming over her entire body. A dark-colored hoodie covers her lean frame, with her sun-kissed legs encased in a pair of cutoff jean shorts. My mouth waters as my mind conjures up images of her body laid out before me, begging for me to claim her as my own.

"A whore, *bambolina."* My teeth clench as I fight to regain some form of control.

It's as if my body has a mind of its own. A raging need burns its way through my body, urging me to rub against her and grind my cock into the softness of her belly before claiming her mouth with my own. A hunger unlike anything I've felt before this moment.

Women mean nothing to me any longer. A means to a desired outcome. Crass maybe, but it's the truth. A warm body and a hole to sink into when the need arises—which, for me, isn't very often—is all I need.

Although it hasn't always been that way. Women are just a complication, a distraction that leads to nothing but pain and heartbreak. Unfortunately, I learned that the hard way. The one and only time I let a woman get between me and my duty, it cost me dearly. I can't ever let that happen again, or it could cost me everything I hold dear.

This is why I try to keep to myself. I attend meetings with Joseph when it's absolutely necessary, but I spend all of my time torturing someone for information. Trust me, that doesn't make for the best small-talk conversations. I keep to myself, preferring to be alone with my thoughts or a book than being surrounded by people. But now, seeing this girl, I want more.

*You can't have more. She belongs to Joseph.*

That's right. Willa has committed a crime against the Bianchi family, and she must pay. No matter how badly I want to wrap her tightly in my arms and bathe in her scent, it's impossible.

"I'm not a fucking whore." Her gaze flicks down to my groin before locking with mine and raising her eyebrow in question as she pulls her lip between her teeth. "But I'd be willing to help you take care of that monster in your pants if you'd let me go."

"And only a whore would offer to sink to her knees and let me fuck her mouth in the middle of a gas station parking lot."

My cock pulses behind my zipper as that image blazes through my mind. I'd love nothing more than to force Willa to her knees and fuck her

mouth. Her eyes are ablaze with anger as spit drips down her chin and she gags on my cock.

There's something about this girl that sends all my control out the window. I could chalk it up to being horny, but somewhere in the back of my mind, I know it's something more. The moment I laid eyes on her, I knew she was going to be trouble. But the question is, exactly how much?

"I'm not a whore." Her head tilts downward, allowing her hood to cover her face again. "I worked at the club, but I've never…"

I bite back a groan, unable to resist the pull I feel to her as I lean forward, capturing her mouth with mine. My heart races—no, gallops—in my chest as my cock hardens, wanting to crawl inside her skin.

I should've asked before kissing her, but the only thing I could think of at that moment was how badly I wanted to taste her lips. My entire world comes to a halt as heat crackles between us. My entire body thrums with electricity, with the need to devour her whole. The gentle caress of her fingers on me feels like fire licking at my skin. Instead of pushing her away, I pull her tightly into my chest and shove my hands into her hair, giving a gentle tug.

Her hardened nipples brush against my chest as she moans. "More."

I plunge my tongue into her mouth, tasting her for the first time. Her hands glide up my arms, and her fingers slide into the hair at the base of my neck before we break apart with a gasp.

"That was…" she begins before shaking her head, as if searching for the right words to describe the kiss we just shared.

"Never happening again." I lean down so I'm eye level with her before gripping her chin tightly between my fingers. "I've been ordered to bring you back to Mr. Bianchi."

"That's it?" Her cheeks turn a delicious shade of pink as she looks everywhere but at me. "You're going to kiss me and then send me off to my death? What a gentleman."

"There is nothing gentle about me, Willa. It'll do you good to remember that."

There's a small twinge in my chest as I stare down at her, noticing for the first time the tears in her eyes. Our eyes lock in a battle of wills, both fighting for control, but for very different reasons. Willa is trying to escape, nothing more, and will do anything she can to ensure she lives another day.

*She isn't attracted to you. You are standing in the way of her freedom.*

I need to get my body under control. I have everything I've wanted for my life within my grasp, and I'll be damned if I let a woman get in the way. Every human on this planet is driven by their need to survive by any means necessary. I happen to be the one blocking Willa's chance of escape. That kiss meant nothing and will be nothing more than a moment of weakness.

*Then why is the sight of her tears making my soul howl in pain?*

No, I won't be swayed. She is my prisoner. I will deliver her to Joseph and be done with her and all these emotions swirling in my body. Everything will then be as it was meant to me.

"Move," I growl, motioning her to walk past me to the large SUV parked a few feet away.

"I don't think so." She turns on her heels to run in the opposite direction, but I grip her arm tightly, pulling her into my chest.

Biting back a groan of pleasure as her ass brushes against my cock, I use my free hand to pull my Sig Sauer from its resting place at the small of my back. Jabbing it into her side, I lean down and whisper in her hear. "I don't want to hurt you, but I will."

An anguished sound escapes her lips as she continues to struggle. "You can die here or come with me. Your choice."

"Do I die either way?"

I hesitate for a moment, not knowing the proper way to answer her. "I don't know."

Her entire body stiffens before she nods her head.

I wish I could put a bullet in her head right now and be done with it, but Joseph would be furious. My mind screams at me to follow the norm, gather whatever information I can get out of her and then kill her before dumping her body somewhere and disappearing into the darkness. But there's something about this girl that Joseph feels he needs to explore further, to make her pay for what she did to his face. For the embarrassment she caused him. I know first-hand how Joseph likes to take revenge. When the time comes, I'll turn her over to him to do as he pleases, but I want to know what makes Willa so special.

For the first time in years, my soul is calm, at peace, and I believe it has something to do with her. I haven't experienced this type of peace since the last time I saw *her*, the day I almost lost everything. Until this moment, I believed this feeling was something I'd never experience again. A type of peace that can bring me nothing but death and heartache. This peace will be

short-lived; it has to be. Even though I wasn't given a timeline on when we had to return, I need to make this quick. I refuse to risk everything for one night of peace, even if it could last me a lifetime.

She yanks her arm free from my grasp and turns to face me, causing the hood to fall off her head. When her eyes meet mine, I'm expecting to see fear and maybe even resignation to her fate, but there is a fire blazing behind them. Every muscle in her body is pulled taut, waiting to strike at the first sign of weakness on my part.

My nostrils flare as I stare down at her, her scent enveloping all my senses. The stench of sweat and body odor waft around her, but there's a hint of something sweet, something that can only be defined as uniquely her, and I want to smell more of it. Bathe in her scent until it's the only thing I can think of, but I can't.

I can't forget my duty. My orders are to bring her back to Joseph and await further instructions, no matter how much my soul yearns for me to do something else. To throw her over my shoulder and disappear into the night, or even to lie and say I never found her. Either way will lead nowhere. Joseph Bianchi always gets what he wants, even from me, and right now, he wants her.

"I won't go quietly." Her chin raises in defiance as her eyes lock with mine.

"As if you have a choice." I chuckle, raising my gun and cracking her on the back of the head with the butt.

Her body sags against me as I scoop her into my arms and stroll towards the car tucked into a dark back corner of the parking lot. I pull her tightly to my chest as I lean down and open the passenger side door, convincing myself it's to stop her from escaping, but if I'm being honest, I like it.

I like the way her luscious body feels pressed against mine. She should be out for at least a few hours, but what happens when she wakes up before we make it back to the city? I could sedate her, give her just enough to ensure she remains asleep for the entire ride, but I can't bring myself to do it.

*She's innocent. Innocent of any crime except for stopping Joseph from raping her friend.*

But to imagine what my life would be like without Joseph Bianchi, without a family to call my own, I no longer see her as anything but a means to an end. She's an assignment. Once I deliver her to Joseph, I'll

have everything I ever wanted in my life. Respect. Power. A Family. What more could a man ask for?

*Peace. A peace only she can provide.*

I drop her into the front seat like a sack of potatoes before slamming the door shut behind me. This is the life I chose. The life I've lived for the last forty-plus years. I belong to Joseph Bianchi, no different from a soldier in battle, and I'll lay down my life for him and for the good of my brothers. Nothing else.

Willa Kennedy is nothing more than a distraction. A mild infatuation. I need to focus on the task at hand: deliver her to Joseph. End of story. No matter what peace I may have found in a few moments of conversation, it means nothing compared to my family. Family means everything to me, and I'll do everything to ensure they remain protected. Even if it means turning her over to them.

With my mind made up, I pull off my leather jacket as I make my way around to the other side of the car and climb in. The engine roars to life as I pull out of the practically deserted parking lot and head toward Chicago. It's not too late. If I can make good time, I'll be back in Chicago before midnight. Just as I'm pulling onto the freeway, my phone rings. I quickly hit the accept button on my steering wheel, already knowing who's calling.

"You found her?" Joseph states, a hint of laughter in his voice.

"Yes. Was there any doubt I would?" I chuckle softly, glimpsing my captive out of the corner of my eye, passed out in the passenger seat.

Willa's head rolls to the side as she groans, sweat dotting her brow. My muscles tighten, waiting to see if her eyes open, but she burrows deeper into the seat before pulling her knees to her chest and sighing loudly.

*She must be cold.*

I take one hand off the wheel, feeling around the back seat before gripping my leather coat. I drape it over her, covering as much of her as possible without taking my eyes off the road and killing us both.

"Of course not. I should've sent you in the first place." Joseph scoffs softly. "I'm thinking about sending everyone who failed to your warehouse to ensure they'll never fail again."

My grip on the steering wheel tightens, needing to inflict pain on someone other than this slip of a woman in the seat beside me. I want to channel all these foreign thoughts and feelings into something I know. Pain, suffering, and torment. These are three emotions that I know. I find strength

and power in them, something I never knew until the moment Joseph Bianchi took my last shred of humanity. And after I deliver Willa to him, it will be my right. I'll be the right hand to the head of the family. No one will dare defy me, or they'll pay the ultimate sacrifice.

"Are you listening to me?" The sound of Joseph's voice brings me back to the present.

"Excuse me, Joseph. My mind was elsewhere," I respond, relaxing my grip on the steering wheel and my shoulders.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?"

"Yes." I don't hesitate, knowing Joseph would know immediately that I'm lying to him.

"Did you touch her, Felix?"

I hesitate for a moment as memories of the earth-shattering kiss we shared before I knocked her out filter through my mind. I'll never forget the taste of her lips and how her body felt pressed against mine as I devoured her mouth, but it all means nothing. She belongs to Joseph, and there can be nothing between us.

"Of course not. I'm bringing her back to you as promised." I chance a glance at her and notice a small bump forming on the top of her head. "Other than a small bump on the back of her head, she's fine."

"A bump?"

"She was… hesitant to come with me. I had to hit her over the head with my gun."

Joseph's laughter fills the car cabin as Willa's eyes lock with mine.

"How amusing. I can't wait to see what my *piccolo topo* will do when you deliver her to me."

"We'll be there in a few hours," I respond, not taking my eyes off Willa as her eyes widen in horror.

Willa disrespected and injured the head of the Bianchi Family. Each of those actions requires punishment, I remind myself as tears stream down her cheeks.

And she will pay for her sins. There is no other option.

# CHAPTER FIVE

# WILLA

"Fuck." I groan softly, trying to blink my eyelids open, but what seems like a fog covers my vision.

A wave of nausea hits me, and I clamp my eyes shut. I really should learn what my limits are when it comes to drinking alcohol. But when a customer buys you a drink, you drink it, or you don't get a tip. I lie there in silence, perfectly still, waiting for the nausea to pass before I even attempt to open my eyes a second time.

I force my eyes open, feeling as if there is a ten-pound weight laying on them. I groan a second time as a muffled voice filters to my ears.

*What the fuck is going on?*

Memories from the last few days filter through my mind. Cutting Joseph Bianchi's face to save Chastity from being raped, grabbing my belongings in a hurry, and the last thing I remember is coming face-to-face with one of Bianchi's goons and the earth-shattering kiss he gave me.

I may still be a virgin, but I know my way around the opposite sex, and the chemistry between the two of us was just as much of a surprise to him as it was to me. The moment he touched me, my body was on fire. Alight with a burning desire for this man to do whatever he wanted with me, however he wanted, whenever he wanted. A shiver of need runs down my spine as the deep timber of his voice reaches my ears.

"Of course not. I'm bringing her back to you as promised. Other than a small bump on the back of her head, she's fine."

"A bump?"

*He called him.* Of course, he called his boss. I don't know why I believed he would choose to do something different. This isn't one of those

romance novels I read when I have time. The hitman is not going to whisk me away to some cabin in the woods, fucking me into obedience before we run away to parts unknown together.

*I could hope, though, right?*

He's doing a job. Nothing more, nothing less. But that kiss meant something, even if it was only to me. A shudder wracks my body as I imagine the way he made me feel with just a simple kiss and wish there was some way for me to find out what pleasure he'd have in store for my body if he wasn't delivering me to his psycho boss on a silver platter.

I swallow the lump of fear filling my throat as I search for some way to get out of this car. My eyes scan the interior but find nothing that could aid in my escape. Moving my wrist in a circular motion, I test to see if my hands are cuffed or bound in some manner, but they're not. I do the same with my ankles and come up empty. Either he's the worst hitman in the world or some part of him doesn't want to turn me over to Joseph Bianchi.

"She was… hesitant to come with me. I had to hit her over the head with my gun."

I want to reach up and feel around for the supposed bump on the top of my head, but I don't dare. One move could cost me my life, sooner rather than later. I need to bide my time and find a way out of this mess. My mind is a jumble of emotions. I should run, pop open the car door and take my chance with oncoming traffic instead of waiting to be led to my doom. But there's something about this man that calls to me. An undeniable pull that makes me want to climb into his lap and go to sleep.

*He's not your savior. He's your executioner.*

"How amusing. I can't wait to see what my *piccolo topo* will do when you deliver her to me."

Joseph's maniacal laughter fills the cabin as my eyes lock with my captor's. I expect to see nothing but hate and judgment staring back at me, but I find something I wasn't expecting—pain. *But why?*

"We'll be there in a few hours," he responds, not taking his eyes off me for a second.

I force myself to raise my head, pushing my body up into a seated position to get a better look at my surroundings. Nothing but darkness surrounds us, except for the occasional headlight coming towards us on the asphalt roads that stretch as far as the eye can see.

"You're awake."

“What an astute observation,” I snark back before silently chastising myself.

This man is my only chance to escape certain death when I arrive back in Chicago. I don’t want to piss him off.

“I’m not your enemy, Willa.”

“You’re kidding me, right? You were sent to bring me back to Joseph Bianchi, the one man I never want to see again for the rest of my life, but you’re not my enemy.” Clenching my jaw tightly, my teeth grind together.

I search his face for any emotion, something to let me know there’s a person underneath that hardened shell, but I come up empty. He remains stone-faced, his eyes facing forward and attention focused on the road in front of us.

Nervousness wells in my chest, and I pull my bottom lip between my teeth to stop the bubbling laughter in my throat. Fucking nerves. That’s one thing I can say I hate about myself: my need to laugh at the most inopportune times.

“What’s your name? I really don’t think you want me calling you all the names I’ve been thinking.”

“Felix.”

That’s it? No last name or further discussion? Not that we should be having a conversation, but my nerves are getting the best of me. I talk a lot in general, but when I’m nervous, it’s three times as bad, and the silence just makes it worse. However, it seems Felix is a man of few words. Not that I can blame him in his line of work. I’m sure hearing people beg and bargain for their lives would get old at some point.

“So how about them Bulls?” I question as he turns toward me, raising his eyebrow quizzically.

“Of all the things you could say, you want to talk about basketball?”

“I’d say sorry, but I’m not. I’m teetering on the brink of laughing hysterically and shitting my pants. It’s a very fine line when it comes to me.”

“Please don’t shit in my car.”

“Oh, he has a sense of humor.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” I squirm in my seat as his eyes sweep over my entire body.

I shouldn’t be surprised he doesn’t have a sense of humor. He is a stone-cold killer, sent by the Bianchi family to do their bidding. No matter what it

is—murder, kidnapping, torture—he's cold and heartless, the same as his master. I knew the moment my blade sliced into Joseph Bianchi's skin, I was signing my death warrant, but I thought I'd have more time before they caught me. Damn, I should've taken my car instead of the bus.

"Singing in the shower is fun until you get soap in your mouth. Then it's a soap opera."

"Stop talking," he growls, the sound going directly to my lower lips.

*There's no way you're getting turned on by this.*

*Yes, yes, I am.*

I always had a thing for bad boys growing up. The boys that lived on the edge, social outcasts and delinquents, the people no one wanted. Just like me. My bio parents tossed me to the side, not giving a shit whether I lived or died. That fear has lived deep inside me, making my heart race and the blood rush through my ears. I used to ignore it, but as I got older, it became something I craved. Chasing the high of all those feelings has led me to this moment right here. Hell, if this asshole wasn't carting me off to meet my maker, I'd probably offer to give him a blow job…. Hmm, that doesn't sound like that bad of an idea.

"Do you like blow jobs?"

The stupid part of my brain and my raging libido seem to be the ones in charge now. I mean, what else could go wrong? What else could he possibly to do me that could be worse than whatever his boss has planned? My life has been one shit show after another. No matter how hard I fought to keep my head above water, it was only a matter of time before I hit rock bottom.

"I'm hot. Most men would love to have a chance to have me, or so I've been told," I state, leaning forward and reaching for his belt for the second time today.

Fear shoots through my entire body as bile rises in my throat. I promised myself it'd never come to this. That my body was the one thing I'd refused to give to anyone out of fear, but it could save my life.

His hand shoots forward, gripping my wrist tightly in his hand and shaking his head slightly before turning his attention back to the road. Only I would be kidnapped by the last man on earth who thinks with the brain between his ears instead of his dick. There has to be a reason he's turning me down. No sense of duty can override a man's libido, especially a man as hot as him.

I lean back against the seat and cross my arms under my breasts. “Everyone likes blow jobs, not that I’ve ever given one myself, but I’m sure it can’t be too hard. Open your mouth and suck, right? Unless you’re one of those guys with a monster cock I’d probably gag on. I mean, I’m not about to yuck your yum. I’m not an asshole, but I’m sure if you don’t want shit in your car, you don’t want to smell my vomit all the way to Chicago. So, no blow job, then, but I’m sure we can come up with another arrangement. I can cook and clean. What about a barber? I used to cut my foster dad’s hair all the time when I was younger. I hear cutting hair is just like riding a bike.”

My eyes widen in surprise as he pulls over to the side of the road, turning in his seat so he’s facing toward me. “Stop talking.”

“I can try, but I make no promises. I told you I was freaking out, and when I freak out, I can’t seem to shut up.”

“Freak out in silence, Willa.”

“Silence is worse. Can we put some music on or something?”

“Are you going to sing?”

“Hell no. I don’t want to torture both of us with my singing.”

He stares at me for a few moments before shaking his head and reaching forward and flicking on the radio. The opening of “Chocolate Starfish” by Limp Bizkit plays as he eases away from the curb.

“Have you heard about the chocolate record player? It sounds pretty sweet.” I chuckle. and my body lurches forward, barely missing slamming my head on the windshield.

“What the fuck?” I shout, turning toward Felix sitting beside me, but immediately close my mouth and raise my hands in surrender. “Sorry! I warned you I didn’t know how to keep quiet.”

“Learn or I can guarantee your death will be anything but quick.”

Fear laces up my spine as bile rises in my throat for what seems like the millionth time today. There isn’t one hint of remorse in his eyes as he stares at me. Cold and black, just as I’m sure his heart is.

I shove my middle finger into his face before turning my entire body around to face the door, focusing all my attention on the darkness. Every part of my body is trembling as the weight of my situation settles on me.

“There’s nothing you can do, Willa. You are going to Mr. Bianchi, and he’ll decide what happens after that.”

I pull my legs up to my chest and bury my face in my knees, wishing for my tears to remain at bay. I don't know what future awaits once I'm delivered to Mr. Bianchi, but no matter what it is, I'll face it head on. As if I have any other choice. My only hope is the biggest asshole I've ever met, who is preparing to deliver me to his master.

I don't care that he gave me the best kiss of my life and is the hottest man I've ever laid eyes on. The moment I figure a way out of this car, I'm going to put as much distance between me and them, and never look back.

# CHAPTER SIX

# FELIX

I pull the car to a stop in front of Joseph's house, allowing myself to glance over at Willa in the seat beside me. After her outburst in the car, she became quiet. Curling into herself, mumbling softly. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but I tried to engage her in conversation. But nothing. The silence quickly became almost suffocating. Even the soft hum of the music in the background wasn't enough to keep my mind from focusing on what I was about to do.

I was expecting her to be angry, to call me every horrible thing she could think of, or even make a futile attempt to persuade me to help her, but she remained silent. She's turned into a lifeless shell, resigned to her fate, and I should feel nothing for her. I shouldn't have wanted to turn the car around and disappear into the night. I shouldn't have wanted to wrap her in my arms, telling her everything was going to be all right. I shouldn't feel the need to protect her from what's about to happen the moment I open that door. But I do. I feel each and every one of those emotions and so much more.

*What the fuck makes her so special?*

The moment I laid eyes on Willa, I knew she'd be my ruin. There was a spark, drawing me closer to her like a moth to a flame. Her need to defy me every step of the way was only fuel to the raging fire burning deep within my soul. But no matter how much I want to make her mine, it's not possible. I owe Joseph Bianchi my life. He made me into the man I am today.

*Can I betray him?*

That's the question I've been asking myself since I laid eyes on Willa, and I still don't have an answer. Either way, I'll deliver her to Joseph because there is no other choice.

"Are you going to sit in the car and stare at her all day, or are we going to get this party started?" Ezra ducks his head inside the car, whistling softly under his breath as he stares at Willa. "Hmm, I wonder if boss man will let me take her for a spin before he's finished with her?"

A possessive growl leaves my lips. "Don't fucking think about it."

Ezra straightens up, his eyes brows shooting upward toward his hairline. "I guess someone doesn't like to share." He cocks his head to the side as he takes a step back and shoves his hands into his pockets.

I don't have to see his face to know what he's thinking. *This is going to be a problem.*

I don't say a word as I thread my arms through my jacket before opening the center console and pulling out a pair of handcuffs. I can't take Willa inside, not yet, but I can't leave her here alone in the car either.

With a plan forming in my mind, I climb out of the car and head around to the passenger side, coming to a stop right in front of Ezra.

"You going to leave her there?" Ezra questions, every muscle in his body on high alert as his hand moves instinctively toward the gun holstered at his hip.

His eyes are laser focused on my movements as I raise my hands, allowing the handcuffs to fall from my grasp. The swing back and forth slightly, letting Ezra know that I'm not a threat—for the moment.

Ezra and I have known each other for a while now, to where he knows every move I might make, but this confuses him. Hell, it confuses me. If it were anyone else, I'd toss them over my shoulder and deliver them to Joseph as promised. But we both know Willa is different.

*But how different?*

"Yes. She isn't going anywhere." I focus my eyes on his hands as they flex slightly before I continue to ease his concerns. "I'll send Alder to keep an eye on her while I talk to Joseph."

"There's no talking to Joseph. You know that, right?" Ezra responds, his hand relaxing at his side, but his eyes remain focused on every move I make.

Of course, I knew that. Joseph wants his pound of flesh, and there is nothing I can do to stop him. No matter how much I may want to at the

moment.

"I need to know what to do with her, Ezra. Nothing more, nothing less." I scoff, pulling the car door open.

Taking in the sight before me, my eyes roam down her body, and I suck in a sharp breath. Her eyes flutter but don't open. I wait patiently for her to make a move to get out of the car, but she doesn't budge.

"I know you're awake, Willa."

Her eyes fly open, darting around, searching for some way to escape. My lips twitch slightly at the corner, imagining a frightened bunny searching for a means of escape. In this instance, Willa is the bunny, and I'm the hungry fox waiting to devour her whole.

Bending at the knee, I crouch down just enough so we're eye level, using the door frame to support my weight as I stare into her eyes, daring her to defy me.

"If you try to run, I will chase you. You'll only be making things harder for yourself in the long run. Give me your hands."

She swallows hard, relaxing back into the seat before crossing her arms under her breasts. "What if I don't want to?"

Ezra guffaws loudly before trying to cover it with a laugh. "I think I like this one."

"What's not to like about me, handsome?" Her eyes flick over my shoulder where I know Ezra is standing, and I watch as they roam down his body.

I pull my Sig Sauer from the holster at my hip and flick off the safety. "Don't test me, *bambolina*. Give me your hands," I growl, my patience wearing thinner by the second.

"Aren't you going to say please?" Her sultry eyes flick to mine as she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth.

She has a death wish. There's no other explanation for her behavior right now. Anyone else in this position would beg for my mercy, but Willa refuses to back down. It's both endearing and infuriating.

"Do you have any idea how much trouble you're in right now, little girl?"

"Yes, but does it matter?" Her breath shudders slightly as her chin lifts in defiance. "Either way, I'm going to end up dead. I might as well make it harder for you."

“It doesn’t matter.” I reach out, gripping a fistful of her hair and tugging it hard.

Her cries of pain tear at my soul, causing my black heart to cry out in anguish, but this is how it has to be. I’m not her protector or knight in shining armor. I’m the monster of her dreams. I bring pain and torment to those Joseph sets before me, and Willa will be no different.

“No one will show you any mercy. When you get out of this car, your life as you know it has ended. There is nothing but pain in your future. Do you understand that?”

Her tongue darts out over her lips, wetting them, as her soulful eyes lock with mine. But instead of being filled with fear, they’re blazing with anger and defiance, ready to strike at the first chance she gets.

*Please let me put us both out of our misery.*

As if she could hear my thoughts, her eyes drift shut, and she nods slightly. Goose bumps pebble across her skin as she raises her arms, locking her hands together as if in prayer.

I don’t say another word as I grab her wrist and close the cuff around it, leaning forward to link the other to the passenger side door, when I notice movement beside me.

“This is for your own good, friend,” Ezra states before sliding a small needle into her neck, pressing the plunger down into the syringe.

I watch as the clear liquid empties from the barrel directly into her bloodstream, and her body sags forward.

“You che… che… ated,” she grumbles a second before her body slumps forward, all her weight resting in my arms.

Emotions rage inside me as I lean her back, carefully resting her head on the back of the seat before standing to my full height.

“You know—” I don’t let Ezra finish before I grip the lapels of his jacket tightly and spin, slamming his back into my car.

Ezra grunts but doesn’t make a move to fight back. Instead, he laughs loudly. A red haze settles over my eyes as I let the anger take hold, letting it fill every cell in body, pushing me forward to make him pay for what he’s done.

My hand shoots forward and grips his neck, squeezing just enough to make it almost impossible for him to breathe. I lean forward, looking him directly in the eyes. “The next time you touch her will be your last.”

“She doesn’t belong to you, Felix. You need to remember that.”

“What’s going on?” Alder questions as he inches closer, eying each of us skeptically.

“Nothing, just a slight disagreement,” I growl before releasing Ezra and taking a step away from him.

Clenching my teeth together, I count backwards from ten, attempting to calm the rage burning beneath the surface.

“Okaaay,” Alder drags out the word, his head still swiveling back and forth between us. “Mr. Bianchi asked what was taking so long?”

“We’ll be inside in a minute,” I respond, slamming my shoulder into Ezra before leaning forward and scooping Willa into my arms.

“It’s for your own good. You know that.”

“I know.” I turn on my heels and glare at him.

“No, you don’t.” His jaw ticks slightly before he reaches his hand out and rests it on my shoulder.

I stare at him for a few moments, knowing he’s right. Ezra may be a pain in the ass, but everything he says is true. Willa Kennedy doesn’t belong to me and never will. The quicker I get that through my head, the better off things will be.

I am Joseph Bianchi’s right hand, and it’s time I act like it.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

# WILLA

I slowly open my eyes, already knowing I won't like what I see once they're open. I slowly raise my head, nausea pawing at my stomach, but I ignore it. It seems as if I'm alone, and I don't want to waste any time. I need to get out of here. The room spins, and I clamp my eyes shut again.

After a few moments, things settle, and I open my eyes again. Blinking a few times, I wait for my eyes to adjust to my new surroundings before attempting to get a good look at where they're keeping me. Darkness covers most of the area except for a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. It gives off just enough light to allow me to see this isn't a room, but more like a cell. The floors, walls, and ceiling are all concrete, but there seems to be a large door directly in front of me. A small sliver of light peaks from beneath the door leading to somewhere else in the massive building Felix parked his car in front of before someone knocked me out, I'm sure.

*Body, cooperate.*

Every muscle in my body screams in protest as I move. Rotating my wrist slightly, I attempt to ease the burning in my muscles. They pulled my arm taut behind me, my shoulders rolled back, and my hands bound tightly together at the wrist. My legs are also bound at the ankle, my bare feet resting on the cold, hard floor. I breathe slowly, in through my nose and out through my mouth, willing my stomach to calm down. The room smells off, something I can't place but know deep down that it's wrong. It's damp and cold, two things that don't bode well for me.

*Things could be worse.*

Yea, sure. There has to be something worse than being drugged, bound to a chair, and at the mercy of a psychotic mob boss out for blood. Right.

Sure. It could definitely be worse; I just can't honestly think of anything right now.

*Being dead. That'd be worse.*

I'm not so sure, if I'm being honest. Joseph Bianchi has something in store, or he wouldn't have sent Felix searching for me. I have a feeling that whatever it is will be worse, *much* worse.

*I have to find a way out of here.*

I shake my head slightly, attempting to clear the fog lingering in my head as I rotate my wrist before tugging slightly on my bindings. My heart gallops in my chest as I rub my wrists together, trying desperately to get free. My muscles burn in protest as the ropes dig further into my skin, but I bear it.

I inhale a deep breath, choosing to ignore the rotting stench of the room, forcing myself to calm down. I need to remain focused on the task at hand. The only thing going for me at the moment is I'm good at running, probably one of the few things I got from my real parents. If I can get a big enough head start on these guys, I'll be gone. Besides, I have some practice now. It took them almost a week to find me. This time, I'll make sure it takes them forever.

*Unless he sends Felix to find you again.*

*Felix*. No, I can't think about him right now or I'll lose my nerve, which is insane. The man kidnapped and drugged me. The last thing I should want to do is go looking for him, but if I'm being honest, a part of me wants to. A pulse aches deep in my belly as memories of the kiss we shared enter my mind.

Felix is a man that commands respect the minute he walks into a room, an air of danger following him everywhere, but I couldn't bring myself to be afraid of him. I should be afraid of him. He towers over me, has muscles on top of muscles, and is easily a few decades older than me. My mind wonders what it would be like to feel his callused hands dancing across my skin, his penetrating eyes reading deep into my soul, learning all my dark secrets. The need to be wanted, protected, and loved. He could give me all those things and more. A hot thrill stirs in my chest, the crazy, irrational part of my mind wishing for those things and more from him. Screaming out his name, begging for him to come and protect me.

*Get a fucking grip, bitch. We have to get out of here.*

Right. Get out of here or suffer a fate worse than death. How could I have forgotten?

*Because you were thinking with your pussy again instead of your brain.*

It has to be some weird side effect to the drugs they pumped into my system. Yeah, that's it, because there is no way I could be attracted to Felix. He kidnapped me, threatened me multiple times, hit me over the head, and last but not least, drugged me. Although, I'm not entirely sure he was the one that drugged me. But that's not the point here. There's no way any rational human being would be attracted to him in this circumstance.

*You're having a conversation with someone in your head. Are you really rational?*

"I guess not," I mumble aloud as I hear heavy footsteps coming closer.

*We're out of fucking time.*

"No shit," I respond just as the door creaks open, followed by a bright white light shining directly into my face. I clench my eyes closed and turn my head, not needing any more discomfort. I hear multiple sets of footsteps coming towards me as they enter the room, but I don't dare open my eyes.

"Good, you're awake," a deep voice says, sending a shiver down my spine.

I open my eyes and look sideways up at him. He looks exactly as he did the last time I saw him, except for the pronounced scar on his cheek from my blade. Thick, dark hair with hints of silver at the roots, a dark beard covering his face, no doubt an attempt to make himself look younger to the ladies. The deep lines in his forehead, probably from scowling, and the pronounced crow's feet near his eyes are a dead giveaway. I'd put him in his fifties, if not older.

I blink a few times, looking past him. Another man, closer to my age than his, stands in the doorway, with another man beside him. Both are very tall, blocking most of the light coming into the room, dark shadows surrounding them. I can't make out either of their features, aside from large, muscular builds, but I know one of them is Felix. I can't explain how I know, but I do.

"Joseph Bianchi, as I live and breathe," I snark, the corner of my mouth lifting slightly.

I really should learn to keep my mouth shut, but at this point, it's too late for me. My wit and sharp tongue are my only weapons against these

intimidating men. They came to break me, mind, body, and soul, but I refuse to go quietly.

With lightning speed, Joseph pulls back his hand and smacks me hard across the face. My head recoils to the side. Blinding white light blurs my vision as I clench my teeth shut tightly and swallow the bile in my throat.

"There are better uses for your mouth than talking, *piccolo topo*."

"She uses it like armor as a weapon against her enemies. A form of protection, as you would say."

My heart skips a beat at the sound of Felix's voice, soothing my fears bubbling to the surface. *What the fuck?* Why does this happen every time I'm around him? He's dangerous, the enemy, and I need to stay as far away from him and his boss as possible.

"Nothing is going to protect her from me. Isn't that right, Willa?" Joseph says, taking a step closer and caressing the damaged side of my face.

I recoil back, disgust roiling in my stomach, but he grips my chin tightly between his fingers, forcing me to look at him. Feelings of panic and fear flood my system, but I refuse to whimper. His grip tightens on my chin, and he stares into my eyes, but I give him nothing, locking my emotions deep within me—too bad for him, I've had a lot of practice.

Showing him fear will give him more power over me. The monster in the closet or your dreams can only scare you if you give them that power; take it away and they're nothing. Joseph Bianchi isn't any different. He can be the monster of someone's nightmares, but only if they give him that power over them.

"Stop calling me a mouse. I've always seen myself as more of a fox or a mongoose, if I'm being honest." I laugh, continuing to tug at my bindings before I'm rewarded with yet another hard smack across the face.

Pain radiates through my entire jaw as I lean forward, vomiting bile and stomach acid onto the concrete, barely missing his shiny black shoes. Fuck, that hurt.

"*Stupida cagna*," (Stupid bitch,) he growls, taking a step away from me as Felix and the other man step into the light.

Felix looks just as delicious as the first moment I laid eyes on him. He lost the leather jacket, the sleeves of his shirt rolled to the elbows and tucked into a dark pair of jeans. Black military-style boots cover his feet.

I vaguely remember the man standing beside him from when we first arrived at this building. He's the same size as Felix. A dark-colored long-

sleeve shirt covers his large, muscular arms. An intricate tattoo peaks out of his collar, winding around the back of his neck and disappearing from sight. His dark eyes are focused on me, a slight smirk pulling at the side of his mouth. Basically, this guy fucking screams trouble, as if I need any more of that.

"I'm not 100 percent sure what that means, but I'm pretty sure *stupida* means stupid. I'm not stupid. Reckless, stubborn, and petty? Yes. But not stupid."

I risk a glance at Felix, and for a brief second, his gaze softens, pain and anguish shining back at me, but it's gone just as quickly. His friend takes a step closer, leaning forward so he's only inches away from my face.

"Says the girl bound to a chair." Felix's friend chuckles as he slides his hands into his pockets. "I'm going to have so much fun playing with you."

A deep growl echoes through the room, vibrating through my entire body as wetness pools between my legs. *How the fuck am I getting turned on at a time like this?* Felix's friend's eyes snap toward Felix quickly before he takes a step back.

"No one is playing with anything until after I get my pound of flesh." Joseph sneers, stepping between the two men.

I open my mouth, another snarky retort resting on my tongue, but I snap my mouth closed. I really would like not to get smacked again. Besides, they're wasted on a man like Joseph Bianchi. Not only does he not have a sense of humor, but he would rather see me lying dead on the floor in a puddle of my own blood. That's not a feeling you can come back from easily.

"And I hate waiting, but somehow, the wait has made this moment so much sweeter." His lips morph into a sinister smile as he turns his attention toward Felix. "Make her sing."

"Sing? Am I a bird now?" I mumble, trying to break free.

It's obvious he wants something from me, but I have no idea what. Information or something else? Either way, I know nothing. I don't have any information to give him. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Overcome with some misplaced sense of justice for Chastity and the need to protect her. Fat lot that got me other than tied to this chair.

"*Dimmi tutto, topo.* (Tell me everything, mouse.) There's no way you could've disappeared for a week with no trace."

“Maybe your men are just idiots. Besides, this one found me.” I motion my head toward Felix, my eyes widening in horror as he pulls a knife from somewhere.

Light reflects off the blade as he inches toward me, slowly and methodically. Each movement is designed to evoke fear in my soul, and it’s working. Felix presses the cold steel of the blade against my throat, the same way I did to Joseph what seems like forever ago.

“I’m just an attendant at the club, who barely graduated high school.” I jerk at my bindings, willing them to loosen enough for me to get free, but Joseph’s other lackey grips my shoulders tightly, holding me in place.

“Maybe I should have him slit your throat right here.” The caramel and smoky wood smell of scotch on Felix’s breath fans across my face. I continue to struggle in his friend’s grasp, but I don’t put any space between us.

I beg with my eyes not to do this, to spare me the pain I know is coming, but he does nothing. His eyes are dark and vacant, as if he’s retreated inside his head, protecting his mind from what he’s about to do to me, but I know better. These men are killers who will do whatever they must to remain in power and protect their family. Family before all others.

“Not man enough to do it yourself?”

My eyes shift to Joseph. He’s the picture of calm, with one hand tucked into his pocket as he examines his nails. I mean nothing to him. My life means nothing to him, but the moment he looks back at me, there’s a glimmer in his eye. He’s enjoying each second of this, and that is the only reason I’m still alive. For his enjoyment.

“I’m not dressed for torture.” He chuckles as Felix drags the blade to my chin, digging the tip into the soft flesh. My jaw clenches shut, but I don’t move another muscle. Any small movement could sink the blade deeper into my skin. We don’t want that, now do we?

“I don’t know anything about anything.” I whimper, finally giving in to the fear coursing through my body. “Was just at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

My entire body trembles in fear as my emotions take hold. My chest tightens, as if all the air is being sucked out of the room and someone has wrapped their fingers around my neck. I struggle to take a breath as panic bubbles up from my stomach and settles in my chest. Beads of sweat dot my forehead, but I never once take my eyes off Felix.

“Smells delicious.” The man behind me groans before he buries his nose into my neck, inhaling deeply. “Good enough to eat.” He chuckles before resting his chin on my shoulder.

He must have done something to antagonize Felix, because his expression quickly changes from a blank stare. His eyes are ablaze with fury as he pulls his knife from my chin and thrusts it toward his friend, but the man moves at the last moment. The knife plunges into the fleshy part of my shoulder, and blinding hot pain radiates through my arm. Tears form and fall down my cheeks as he pulls the blade out and takes a step back.

“Oops.” The other man chuckles as something digs into the wound, causing me to scream out in pain. “Music to my ears.”

Felix’s eyes widen, a mixture of pain and regret flashing across his face as the knife clatters to the floor. His eyes lock with the man behind me, the two of them communicating silently for a few moments before he spins on his heels and heads toward the door. My eyes follow him the entire way, hoping that he would turn around and save me from this pain, but he does nothing but pull the door open and storm through it.

“Interesting,” Joseph says, my eyes snapping toward him.

His brows are pulled down in confusion, no doubt wondering what’s going on with Felix, like the rest of us. But he quickly waves his hand in the air, motioning toward the knife lying on the floor. “Ezra.”

Pain radiates through my body a second time as something is pulled from my shoulder. Blood dribbles down my arm, droplets falling onto my thigh, as I watch Ezra bend down to grab the knife from the floor. My eyes widen in horror as he raises the blade to his mouth, slipping it through his lips before dragging it out, cleaning my blood from it. He winks at me before replacing the knife with his thumb. I gag, my mouth filling with saliva as I lean forward, ready to empty the last bits of stomach acid from my mouth, but I swallow it down.

“I forgot how squishy people are when they’re alive.” His eyes shift back and forth between my face and the blood dripping from my shoulder.

It’s as if he’s at war with himself, fighting the desire to lick my wound clean or to inflict more damage. Insane.

“Focus, Ezra. I want information first.”

He nods his head as he drags the tip of the blade across my collarbone, searching for the perfect spot to stick me again.

“I don’t know what you want from me. I don’t know anything!” I yell in Ezra’s face, but he doesn’t listen, his knife poised to strike a second time.

“I swear I don’t know anything,” I whisper softly, begging him with my mind to please believe me and call off his dog.

Because I know nothing. I’m no one. A girl from the middle of nowhere who was trying to make a life for herself in the big city. A girl who has no blood relations, no one but Celia to miss me if I’m gone.

“Please, believe me.”

I can’t see Joseph’s face or read his expression to know if my words are getting through to him because I’m focused on Ezra with the knife as he drags it lightly against my skin, barely missing the wound Felix inflicted moments earlier.

“Maybe we could give her some scopolamine? That’s worked in the past.” Felix reappears in the doorway, his voice full of authority.

I doubt this is the first time he’s had to get information out of someone for Joseph Bianchi, and I doubt it will be his last.

“I’m not lying to you. I don’t need anything to tell the truth because I already am.” I lift my chin and lock eyes with him over Ezra’s shoulder.

I expected to see remorse in his eyes, but there’s nothing. The little flicker of emotion he showed before he left the room is gone, once again replaced with a mask. Fear tightens its grip around my heart, but this time, I fight it. I need to keep my wits about me if I’m going to make it until tomorrow. My focus is no longer on escape, but survival, and the first order of business is convincing these men I’m not working against them.

“Then please tell me how you managed to slip past my men in the club and evade capture for over a week.”

“Luck?” I sniffle, shifting my focus back toward Ezra as he shakes his head before slowly sliding the knife into my shoulder a second time.

This time is worse than the first as he twists the knife, and it enters my skin, tearing at the muscles and flesh of my shoulder as he laughs. I scream loudly, crying out in agony as the blade sinks deeper than before. I pull away, trying to ease the pain, but it only makes it worse, creating a gash in my shoulder.

“Wrong answer.” He smirks as he pulls the knife free before plunging it back into my shoulder, twisting it the other way this time. Agony beyond anything I could’ve imagined fills me as my vision blurs. I fight with

everything I have to remain conscious, my stomach once again revolting with the need to empty its contents onto the floor.

"Please. I don't know anything. I can't tell you what I don't know," I beg and hate myself for it at the same time.

Ezra yanks my chin back toward him, forcing me to look into his eyes. His eyes flutter back and forth, as if he's searching for the truth like a shark searching the water for his prey. I can't focus on anything but the pain as he searches for the lie. If I could speak, I'd tell him. But either way, they wouldn't believe me.

"You're going to be his ruin," Ezra says with disgust as he jerks the knife from my shoulder, and additional pain rips through me, clearing my vision.

My throat burns as I choke on my sobs, raw from screaming, and he releases me, allowing my head to drop forward.

It's not the first time I've heard someone say that phrase, but this is the first time I've ever agreed with them. Walking into that room and cutting Joseph Bianchi to save a friend is the dumbest thing I've ever done.

"Patch her up and throw her into one of the cells in the basement. I'm not finished playing with her yet. Oh, and take a picture for posterity's sake," Joseph commands before turning on his heels and striding toward the door. He takes a few steps before looking over his shoulder, making sure he has my complete attention before speaking. "I want to remember what my mouse looked like the day I caught her in my trap."

Felix comes toward me as Ezra walks around the back of the chair, loosening the bindings. My entire body slumps forward, pain radiating through my head as I fall into Felix's arms.

"I hate you." I laugh between sniffles.

"As you should." His chest rumbles as he speaks before lifting me into his arms and heading for the door.

As I let the darkness overtake me, I remind myself for the millionth time that no matter what I feel, Felix isn't my protector or my safe place to weather the storm. It's his fault I'm here in this mess in the first place, why I've been stabbed and more than likely have a concussion. Well, not completely his fault. I did slice Joseph's cheek open, but he didn't have to bring me back here. He could've left me at that gas station, pretending he never saw me. Or left me out on the side of the highway to disappear into the night. But he didn't do any of those things.

He delivered me to his master like the lap dog he is, and there's nothing I can do to change him. No matter how much I want to learn his secrets.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

# FELIX

"What the fuck is going on with you?" Ezra growls as I lay Willa on the small cot tucked into the side of the room. No, not a room, a cage. One of many lining the walls of the concrete room, deep underground and far away from prying eyes.

Very few of the men know of this place's existence. It was hidden deep under the Bianchi mansion, requiring special access cards and fingerprint scans just to gain entry. This is Joseph's sanctuary, the place where he brings his special prizes or his mice, as he prefers to call them. Men, women, and sometimes children that have displeased him in some manner. I've only ever been here once.

*One time too many.*

Abigail. *My Venus*. I only saw her in passing as I was coming and going from the house. I didn't have any idea exactly what Abigail did in the house, but she always popped up whenever I was around. I tried to ignore her, but I was young and naïve, thinking with my cock instead of the brain I was given. I loved her with my whole heart, more than my own life. More than Joseph and my brothers. A crime punishable by death, but Joseph had other ideas. He wanted to teach me a lesson. I watched as he raped her. Abigail's screams for help rang in my ears for years. The same screams that escaped Willa's mouth the moment the blade sank into her shoulder.

I was helpless. Chained to the cold, concrete floor. Beaten and broken, my eyes covered—a courtesy, according to Joseph, but I knew better. He wanted me to hear her screams. For them to be embedded into my soul for all of eternity as a reminder of what happens when we put anything before our brothers. It was to be my penance for daring to believe that I could

remain in the light. Now I lived in darkness. My heart once again committed to Joseph, to my brothers.

*Until I saw her.*

"I'm following orders, same as you." My jaw clenches tightly as I stare down at her.

Blood oozes from the wound on her shoulder, staining the dirty shirt crimson. She whimpers softly, her brow pulling down as her heads rolls to the side. She doesn't deserve what has happened to her, what will happen to her in the near future at Joseph's hand.

*I need to do something.* But I banish the thought the moment it enters my mind. I can't be swayed again. I cannot betray my brother again or allow myself to be swayed by Willa. She's a captive, my captive, and a casualty of the war Joseph is waging with those in power here in Chicago. Whomever they might be.

"No, you're about to get yourself killed." Ezra's knowing tone brings me back to the present.

There are no second chances, but for some reason, Joseph gave me one. I'm sure I won't get another.

"Aww, you'd miss me?"

"I wouldn't go that far, but I'd really hate having to train someone else on the proper way to dismember a body."

"You sure know how to give a man a compliment."

"This is only going to end badly, just like last time," Ezra deadpans, before leaning down to check the wound on her shoulder. "Joseph notices everything. The first chance he gets, he's going to take this one just like he did *her*. And where will that leave you? Brokenhearted again."

If she dies… I'll have the blood of another innocent person on my hands. Joseph never gave her a second glance until my loyalty wavered. Until I was spending more time with her than on my duties to the family. If I'd only…

"You were a shell of a man the last time. This time, I can already tell it'll kill you. Leave her in her cage and disappear."

My mind conjures up images of Abigail's body—broken, lifeless, and pale, lying on the bed before me. Her long, curly auburn hair that used to hang in tight ringlets over her shoulders morphs into a clump of blonde, matted hair. Willa's eyelids twitch slightly, as if she's dreaming, reminding me of the last time I saw Abigail. Her lifeless eyes stare up at me, unshed

tears pooling in them, delving deep into my soul and cursing me. Reminding me for the rest of my life how my weakness cost her everything.

*I can't let it happen again.*

"Where will I go?"

"Anywhere. Joseph will test your loyalty, like always." I acknowledge his words with a nod. As Willa's eyes flutter open, her gaze zeroes in on me, her eyes full of hatred and betrayal.

"Get away from me." She groans as she attempts to sit up. Her arm gives out, sending her tumbling onto the mattress.

My hands reach towards her, but Ezra shakes his head. *Leave it be.* My arms drop as I clench my hands into tight fists, fighting the urge to reach out and touch her. To protect her from the pain I know awaits her, but I can do nothing. The pain is only temporary, and her fire burns bright. They may beat her, rape her, torture her, but I know in my rotting soul that they will never break her.

*And you're sure about this? Are you going to stand here and let the same thing happen again?*

I have no other choice. To protect her, I must leave her. Ezra is right. I need to leave here until Willa has been sold off to the highest bidder or broken by Joseph, or it will cost both of us everything.

"Bandage her shoulder and get her ready for Joseph," I spit out through clenched teeth, taking one final look at her before heading out of the room.

I only make it a few feet outside of the door before I hear Joseph calling my name. I turn, noticing him leaning against the wall a few feet away from me. His back is flush against the wall, ankles and arms crossed. He's the perfect picture of calm as usual. His dark suit lets him to sink into the shadows, only allowing him to be seen when he wants to be.

"Is she ready to talk?" he asks as he pushes off the wall and comes strolling towards me, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"I cannot tell. She was still passed out when I left the room."

"She's a distraction, Felix. A distraction you cannot afford." He wraps his arms around my shoulder, dragging me in for a rough hug. His palm slaps loudly against my back before he pulls back, flashing me a sinister grin. "You are to be my right hand, and with that comes certain responsibilities.

He stares into my eyes, daring me to disagree with him, but I refuse. I can't. Joseph notices everything around him. "You'd kill her if I asked you

to."

I clench my fist, my nails digging into my flesh, and I welcome the pain. Something to think about other than doing his bidding. *But do I have any other choice?* I am a Bianchi, and our family comes before all others.

I nod my head, focusing my eyes on the tiny crack in the cement above his head. I'm unable to even look at him. He'd see the lie in my eyes and immediately be able to see how much Willa means to me already. He'd use it to his advantage, just like he's done to everyone else in the past. I can't let him find out, at least not until after he's finished with her. It's the only way I know how to protect her, and that's by staying away. Once Joseph knows how much she means to me, she'll become so much more valuable to him. Yes, he wants information from her, but he'd want to punish me more.

He wants Willa to talk, but not because he needs the information. He wants to break her spirit. To make her beg him for a death that only he can provide. It's a different type of torture, one that he's especially proficient in. He always knows the perfect way to take a piece of her as he slowly breaks her down to a shell of the person she was before. I know all of this; I've watched him do it a million times before.

*Can I do it again?*

"I'm starving." Joseph gives my shoulder a squeeze before strolling towards his office at the end of the hall, and I follow. "Please, have a seat." He motions toward the table in the center of the room.

We usually use it as a conference table when we need a more secure location for meetings with our men, but they have transformed it into a dining room table. A stark white tablecloth covers the table. Two plates with steak, mixed vegetables, and a large bowl of salad rests in the center. I wait for him to take his seat at the head of the table before choosing one at the opposite end, closest to the door.

"Will Ezra be joining us?"

"I'm not sure. Honestly, it depends on how long he takes to prepare the prisoner," he responds, as he stuffs a small piece of steak into his mouth. "I have the cameras set up. Would you like to watch?"

I wave a dismissive hand in the air, grabbing a glass of wine sitting on the table in front of me and taking a large swig.

"Are you sure?" he pushes, grabbing his own glass and taking a sip. "You always love to watch Ezra do his work." Joseph huffs out a laugh,

waiting for me to respond when I don't. He continues. "I want you to break her."

"She doesn't need to be broken. She's just scared," I retort, taking another long pull from my glass, almost emptying it.

I can feel his eyes scrutinizing me, waiting for my temper to get the best of me, but I maintain my control. Barely, but I manage. Any sign of weakness from me and the delicate balance between us will be broken. And it will cost Willa and me dearly.

"She should be scared," he continues. "But you and I both know Ezra will lose control and kill her. We need to find out what she knows, who she's working for, and what she told them about our operation."

"She's just a server, Joseph. You know that." I lean back in my chair, already knowing all this information from the file he handed me before sending me to collect her. We never do anything without having as much information as possible.

"Then maybe I should just kill her."

It would be easier. Get rid of the problem before it festers. I should let him kill her, putting us both out of our misery. But I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"If that's your wish," I respond formally, not knowing if this is what I truly want. "What about her friends, the girls she works with at the club? Surely, there must be someone looking for her," I ask, needing a diversion from the thoughts running through my mind.

Willa was brought up in the foster system—came from nothing and has amounted to nothing. So far, her crowning achievement is scoring a job at the club, although it has to be purely by accident. There's no one looking for her. No one that's willing to go to the police to protect her. She's completely alone in the world, the perfect target for a man like Joseph Bianchi.

"The receptionist at the club already reported her missing to the police," he responds, as if it's nothing.

"The last thing we need is the cops fishing around for information. I wasn't careful while I was searching for her."

"I have it handled." He shoves another bite into his mouth, bits of steak and vegetables falling to the table as he continues to speak. "I had one of our men plant some drugs in her apartment. To the police, it will look like a druggie that took off for a score. When we're finished with her, we'll dump

the pieces of her body by the river. They'll assume she's just another junkie."

I nod my head. This isn't the first time we've disposed of a body using these means, and it won't be our last. But the thought of doing that to Willa causes a deep ache inside my chest.

"Very well."

On paper, Willa was nothing before she arrived in Chicago. Mediocre grades and a wild personality. The police will take that story and run with it. Her only saving grace is that she worked at the club for over a year. Men who are members at that club are there for the anonymity. It allows them a place to let down their guard and have beautiful women at their disposal. It's the main reason Joseph wanted to become a member there. He wanted to get his dick wet while also getting information on his mysterious enemies.

"You get her under control. I want any information she might have immediately." He points his knife at me.

"That won't be a problem," I assure him.

It's never been an issue before, and it won't be now. No matter how beautiful she is, she cemented her fate when she put herself in Joseph's line of sight.

He smiles brightly before emptying his glass of wine. "I want you to make her talk. Use any means necessary."

I nod in confirmation. She could have information about his mysterious enemies, who he told us were also members of the club. A nagging voice in the back of my mind whispers that Joseph has made a mistake. He gives me exactly what I need to protect her from his wrath, even if it's only for a short amount of time. At some point, he'll want to question her again, especially since I know he suspects she knows something we can use to our advantage, but I won't allow it. Not yet.

"Very well," I respond as he waves his empty glass above the top of the table.

"You have one week to get me some useful information, or I'll turn her over to Ezra." His head drops to his chest as he pushes back from the table. "Wine, Caitlin."

Caitlin, a short, blonde-haired, barely legal woman, slides out from beneath the table. She's wearing a brightly colored corset and lace panties my "father" forces all his girls to wear when serving meals. She turns,

bowing her head slightly toward me, before she grabs the open bottle of wine from the table and fills his glass.

I'm not sure where Caitlin came from, but she's been with Joseph for the last five years. She does anything and everything he asks, trained to be his obedient servant, but sometimes I see a flash of emotion in her eyes. An anger that runs bone deep, waiting for the right moment to be unleashed on the world.

"Go call off Ezra before he does irreparable damage. He already stabbed her once," I ask, hoping to get his attention, but nothing changes.

His focus remains on his toy, eyes glued to her body as she slinks back down to the floor and slides beneath the table. "You're right, I really hate women with scars." He groans loudly, his head dropping back as his hand grips the table.

I bid him goodnight before pushing my chair back from the table and heading back to the holding room. The moment I turn the corner, I notice Ezra bandaging her shoulder. Her eyes widen as I get closer to them. My heart aches that she's afraid of me, but it's a good thing. I'll use her fear to my advantage.

"Why is she gagged?"

Ezra scowls in my direction before focusing all his attention back on her shoulder. "She wouldn't shut the fuck up. It was either gag her or slit her throat. I assumed this would be the preferable of the two options."

Her eyes blaze with anger as she tries to talk through the gag tied around her mouth, causing Ezra to chuckle. "It also looked really good for Joe's picture."

*The picture.* I completely forgot Joseph's request to take a picture of Willa. It was strange, but nothing out of the ordinary. I doubt Joseph has any use for it other than a means to control Willa in some manner.

"The cameras are on." I motion my head toward the camera in the upper right-hand corner of the room as both a reminder for Ezra and a warning to Willa. She needs to know that someone is always watching her.

"If Joe has a problem with the way I address him, then he can come and make me stop. Until then… well, we both know I'll do it anyway."

"She going to live?" I ask, keeping my voice as casual as possible, but failing.

I glimpse her pale skin peeking out of the top of her light pink bra with some type of design covering the fabric. Her dark-colored hoodie was

clutched against her chest as he continues to wrap white gauze around her shoulder.

"Sure. Gave her some pain meds and stitched her up as best I could. It won't be pretty, but she won't bleed to death," Ezra responds, tightening the bandage around her shoulder one last time and using a bandage clip to secure the end.

We stare at each other, holding a silent conversation. Ezra only nods his head before placing a set of handcuffs on the chair beside the bed and leaving the room. I'm finally alone with her. "How are you feeling? Any pain?" I ask, pulling the gag from her mouth and taking a seat on the bed beside her, the flimsy mattress flexing under my weight.

"My shoulder hurts. There's blood in my hair. And I hate you."

I ignore her last statement as I examine the bandage on her shoulder before dragging her roughly towards me. Paying close attention to her shoulder, I tug on the ball of clothing pulled to her chest. "You won't be needing any clothing here. Lie down and get some rest. We can talk more in the morning."

"Talk? Is that all you want to do is talk?" she says, helplessly pulling at the fabric before I wrench it away from her and grip her chin tightly, forcing her to look me in the eye.

"I will only hurt you when necessary," I growl as her good arm swings up, and she slaps me hard across the face, causing my head to reel backward from the force.

"You stabbed me, you bastard," she spits as I reach out, grasping both of her wrists in one of my hands.

Anger surges in my chest at her defiance, but the feeling is quickly replaced with pride. Even after being stabbed multiple times and stripped of her dignity, she has the courage to attack a man twice her size, but it's for nothing. There's no chance of her escaping this place, especially with Joseph currently watching our every move.

"I'm going to make things clear for you, Willa. You are my prisoner, my captive, mine to do with as I please. Joseph wants information, and I intend to get it for him, by any means necessary.

"For now, you're going to strip naked and lie down on the bed. I'll cuff you there until I'm ready to deal with you. Now, strip."

"Are you going to rape me?"

I recoil at the thought, but I don't deny it. She needs to fear me, and if this is the only thing she fears, then so be it. This is a line that I refuse to cross, no matter what the consequences, but she doesn't know that.

I don't say a word, only raise my eyebrow in question, waiting for her next move. She stares at me for a few moments before she moves, dropping her shit into a pile on the floor and reaching back and unclasping her bra. Her tits spill out of their enclosure, making my mouth water. Her pert nipples taunt me as they pebble to a hardened peak. The musky scent of her arousal fills the air as she reaches for her waistband. My cock hardens as she slowly slides her pants to the floor, wincing slightly as she bends, before stepping out of them and tossing them onto the pile with her remaining clothing.

"The underwear, too," I growl, my eyes focused on the damp space between her legs.

I lick my lips, spit pooling in my mouth as she slips her panties down to her ankles, stepping out of them before kicking them to the side. Another time or place, and this would be the perfect game of foreplay. I'd bend her over that bed and fuck her pussy into submission, burying myself deep inside her.

"Do your worst. I won't break so easily," she whispers, rubbing her legs together in search of some relief that will never come.

We both know she will break, but the question is, how long will it take? And what will be her breaking point? I could go right for sheer violence, beating her into submission, but something tells me that will hurt me more than her.

"You will," I respond, stepping closer to her.

My hand moves on its own accord, cupping her left breast in my hand and running my thumb along her nipple. Her eyes drop shut with a moan as she thrusts her breast forward, begging me to continue touching her. I massage her breast with my hand, rolling it in my palm before gripping her nipple between my thumb and index fingers and pinching.

Her eyes fly open as she gasps, quickly replaced with a moan as I pull her toward the bed and shove her down. "Give me your hands."

She immediately raises her hands as I grab a set of handcuffs Ezra left and attach one to her wrist before attaching the other to the bars next to the bed.

“We’ll talk more in the morning.” I release her wrist, bending down and grabbing her ankles before resting them on the bed. “You need to get some rest. It’s late.”

My condescending tone isn’t lost on her as she rolls her eyes, but she doesn’t say a word. She only lowers herself down on the bed, waiting patiently for me to cover her, but I refuse.

“Don’t I get a blanket?” she whispers, her body shivering slightly from something other than fear.

This may be easier than I thought. She’s blossoming at my touch, wanting more and more of it with each passing moment. When I walked into the room, she feared me, but now her entire body is shivering in anticipation of my next touch. Her mind knows she should be scared, but her body refuses to be overruled by her fear, giving her freedom some women only dream of. If I didn’t know Joseph was watching our every move from his office down the hall, I’d praise her. Tell her how proud I am of her for not showing any fear, for taking the mixture of pleasure and pain I’ve given her.

“No,” I respond, before turning around and heading out of her cage, shutting it tight behind me. “Good night, Willa.”

“Good night, Felix,” she whispers as I struggle to walk, reaching down and giving my cock a squeeze, hoping to relieve some of the pressure, but it’s no use. My cock only hardens further as I imagine the response I’ll pull from her body in the future. She’s taken everything that we’ve thrown at her, and I can’t wait to deliver more. I don’t just want her tears, though they were fucking beautiful, or her screams of pain—more like music to me than cries—but the way her body responded to me. How her entire demeanor changed the moment my hand caressed her skin. I wouldn’t go as far to say she enjoyed the pain. Enjoyment comes with time, but the way she melted against me, bending to my will, if only for a few moments, gave me the one thing I didn’t know I craved. Her complete submission.

The moment I make it upstairs to one of the guest rooms, I strip down to my boxers, tempted to log in to the closed-circuit feed, monitoring every one of her movements, but I force myself not to. Instead, I head for the shower. I need to give her time to come to terms with what is happening to her. Her submission today was a step, but there’s still fire in her eyes. A hope that she can find a way to escape this place, though it’s not possible. She needs time to accept she is never getting out of here until Joseph finds

what he’s searching for, time to adjust to her new reality. To understand that she’s not leaving this place until I discover all her secrets.

# CHAPTER NINE

## WILLA

My entire body aches, and my eyes burn from all the tears I've shed. I somehow fell into a deep sleep after Felix left me, but I was jolted awake by something in the night. When I opened my eyes, I could see nothing, the small light in the room having been turned off. Not for my pleasure, I'm sure. I tried not to cry. I want to be brave and keep control of my emotions, but once the dam broke, it was hard to stop the raging emotions rolling through me.

My whole body shivers as I push myself up to a seated position while attempting to ignore the pain in my shoulder. I'm freezing. Being handcuffed and naked inside an underground dungeon will do that to you. Over the course of the night, the chill from the room seeped into my bones, making it damn near impossible to get warm. I tried to curl myself into a ball, using my body as a heat source, but that was impossible. Especially while being handcuffed to the bar above my head.

Before Felix left, he did everything in his power to ensure I didn't escape my cell. I shouldn't complain; he could've used the bad arm. Although I'd prefer to not be handcuffed at all. It's not like I'm going to get out of this cage. Not that I could, even if I wanted to. I don't have a death wish.

*Are you sure about that?*

Okay, maybe I'm reckless at times, but I know when to fight and when to bide my time. Joseph Bianchi wants something from me, or I'd be dead. The only problem is, I don't know anything besides what some of the high-profile clients that come into the club like to drink and what kinks they may

prefer. Nothing that could give Joseph the upper hand over his enemies. No, this is about something else.

Suddenly, the bulb hanging in the center of the room comes on, bathing the room in a warm glow and giving me just enough light to check out the rest of my surroundings. There are two other cages in the room, on either side of me, and thankfully, both are empty. I don't know what I'd do if I had to listen and watch someone else be tortured a few feet away from me.

*Especially if it was Felix doing the torturing.*

The door to the room creaks open, and Felix comes strolling through the door, heading directly towards me. I should be terrified of what's going to happen next, but that's not what I feel. All the blood rushes to my ears, my mind going blank as my eyes rake down his body. Man, if I thought that man looked good in black leather, this is a whole new level. He has tanned skin and intricate tattoos covering both his arms, running to his wrist and around the back of his shoulders. I lick my lips before pulling the bottom one between my teeth as I take in his lickable abs, wanting to take a bite from the deep V peeking from beneath the grey sweatpants he's wearing. My skin itches as I remember his beard scratching against my skin as he kissed me last night.

"Good morning." The deep baritone of his voice travels through my body, causing moisture to pool between my legs.

*No. I need to focus on getting out of here.*

"The only good thing about this morning would be a blanket and some food," I mumble, trying desperately to hide my body's reaction to him.

He comes to a stop right in front of the bars, not moving a muscle. He doesn't unlock the door or anything, just stands there staring at me and saying nothing. For the first time in my life, I want to know what a man is thinking.

His hands flex at his sides, his shoulders rolling back, before he points his finger at me. "Stand up."

A normal person would probably try to figure out a way to climb off the bed, but not me. I bend my legs, being extra careful not to twist or turn the wrong way and damage my shoulder further, and push to my feet, standing on the bed. The handcuffs slide up the bar easily enough, thank goodness. Once I make sure the flimsy cot won't buckle beneath me, I flash Felix a beaming smile.

The corner of his lips pushes up into a smirk but disappears quickly. “Strike one.”

The deeper timber of his voice sets my skin on fire, my pussy muscles pulsing with a need I’ve never felt before. I know I should be terrified, but my body has other plans. Moisture pools between my legs as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a set of keys. They jingle against each other as he chooses one and slides it into the lock, opening the cage and stepping inside.

He shoves the keys back into his pocket, standing with his arms crossed over his chest as he continues to stare at me. The same vacant look from yesterday is back in his eyes, but I don’t see any anger. Still, this situation makes me slightly nervous. I don’t know what he’s here for—pain or pleasure, but both sound equally concerning. I need to keep my guard up and be prepared for whatever he might do to me.

“How’s your shoulder?” he questions as he walks toward me, his eyes focused on my bandage. “It doesn’t seem to be bleeding any longer.”

“I’ll survive,” I respond as he drops something onto the bed beside me before leaning forward to unlock the handcuff and taking a step back.

“Get down.” His voice is dark, deep, and commanding, leaving me no choice but to comply with his request.

I’m all too eager to follow his commands. The sound washes over my skin, causing my nipples to pebble and my pulse to race. I try to take a step forward but stumble slightly, barely keeping my balance.

“Let me help you.”

“Yes, sir.”

*Where the fuck did that come from?* I’ve never called a member of the opposite sex that before. Not even at the club. It was always mister. And hell, even missus once or twice, but never sir. However, in this moment, it felt right. Felix is in control right now; it feels as if he’s a puppeteer holding my strings, and I have no choice but to follow his instructions.

My cheeks heat in embarrassment as he reaches out his hand toward me. I should ignore him and climb down off this bed myself, but all my common sense just flew out the window the moment our eyes locked. He’s looking at me as if he is ready to devour me whole.

*But that couldn’t be right, could it?*

My body tingles the moment his hand touches mine, helping me climb down. His scent envelops all my senses, causing my knees to buckle

slightly, and I bury my nose into his chest, inhaling deeply before taking a step back.

"Good girl."

A little thrill of pleasure ripples through my body. I don't know why such a simple phrase has an effect on me, but it does. I barely swallow down the moan of pleasure bubbling in my throat, wanting to keep this information to myself. Wanting to mask the way my body reacts to those two words.

Something flashes in his green eyes before he takes a step back, breaking the spell between us, and focuses back on my shoulder. He reaches toward the bandages, and I jerk away from him, but he grabs my arm to hold me in place. "Don't pull away from me."

"Don't touch it," I hiss as I try to jerk from his grasp, but he only grips me harder. "Please, it hurts."

He shakes his head in disapproval as he pinches my nipple, using it to pull me closer to him. The burn of the pain causes my eyes to roll into the back of my head, a loud moan escaping my lips. My eyes fly open, widening in surprise.

"Ahh, the *bambolina* likes a little pain." He doesn't release me, only smiles as he twists my nipple harder. "Pain can be both good and bad. If you listen to me, you'll be rewarded. If you disobey, you'll be punished."

"Is there an option three?"

"Yes." He leans down, bringing his lips to my ear. "But you will not like option three."

He quickly lets go of my nipple, and I hiss just like last night. I should be ashamed of how I'm acting, then and now, but the moment he touched me and called me a good girl, it awakened a part of me I never knew existed. I should want to put as much distance between us as possible, but I find myself craving his touch. Wanting to push his buttons to make him punish me, but punishments like that will bring me nothing but pleasure.

"Now stand still so I can check your shoulder." He immediately starts peeling the bandages back, not even worrying if I'm going to listen.

I turn my head to the side, not sure I can stomach the sight of the wound a second time. I caught a glimpse of my mangled skin as Ezra stitched me up last night and gave me some pain medicine. One thing I was very thankful for. I would give anything to have some more as the burn becomes

unbearable after all the moving around I've done this morning, but I want to be alert. I don't want to miss my chance to get out of here.

My eyes clench shut as he releases my shoulder and begins probing at the wound, sending waves of pain rippling through my body. I clench my eyes closed as I try to fight the wave of nausea that overcomes me. It takes a few moments for it to pass, and when I open my eyes, I notice something. He forgot to close the door.

"You seem to be healing nicely. As long as you don't struggle against your binds, you won't tear open your stitches," he says in a low voice, and he turns slightly to the side, probably to grab whatever he dropped on the bed beside me.

*This could be my only chance.*

My heart thunders in my chest as I try to inch toward the door, not wanting to give away my plans. I make it a few steps before his strong hand wraps around the back of my neck, holding me in place. My eyes shift toward the open door, but I don't move a muscle.

"I wasn't going to run."

I whimper as his mouth comes closer to my ear. His breath was hot against the back of my neck. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

My head shakes back and forth as my eyes drift closed. He pulls me backward as his grip tightens around my neck.

"You will not attempt to leave this cage. You will stay here like a good girl and do whatever I ask of you or suffer the consequences. Do you understand me?"

I'm trapped. There's no escape, at least not anymore. Felix made a mistake, but he's a smart man and will never make it again. But to go to him willingly would mean I've given up. That my last bit of hope has evaporated into thin air, and I don't have it in me. I'm going to make him work for it. I don't know how to be any other way.

"No." My lips quiver as he pushes my body forward, shoving my face into the thin mattress. The smell of body odor and other bodily fluids fills my nose, causing me to gag.

"You need to trust me, Willa. I won't hurt you any more than necessary, but if you continue to resist me, Joseph will step in." He sighs loudly, a softness entering his voice as he continues. "He will beat you, rape you, and then sell you off to the highest bidder for the same thing to happen repeatedly until you die."

I swallow down the whimper bubbling in my throat. He's right. I know the type of man Joseph Bianchi is. He will do it and enjoy every minute. I can do this. I have to do this, because it's the only way I know I'll survive.

My entire body sags in defeat as I surrender to my fate. Felix must notice my acceptance because he releases my neck. "Give me your arms," he commands, any hint of softness gone from his voice.

I hesitate for a minute before laying my arms on the bed beside me. He grips each one in his hand before bringing them above my head. My shoulder burns as I hear the handcuffs being threaded through the bar, and each cuff is fastened tightly around one of my wrists. I yank instinctively, but there's no give. I should've known better. I want to scream in anger, rage against my captors, but it's no use. My pleas will only fall on deaf ears.

I jump slightly as something trails down my spine and over my ass. "I'm going to spank you now, Willa. You are going to take your punishment like a good girl."

"What if I don't want to?"

"Then I'll keep punishing you until you do. Remember, every act of defiance will only cause you more pain." He grips my ass tightly in his palm, kneading the flesh for a few moments before his nails dig into my skin. I moan as he digs them in further, causing more of the addicting mixture to course through my body.

His hand falls away, and I brace myself for what's coming, but nothing could've prepared me for the sharp, stinging pain radiating down my lower body. The next one is slightly harder, followed in quick succession by another one. Each smack harder than the last.

I bite down hard on my bottom lip, to the point of tasting blood, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing he's causing me pain as I try desperately to get away from his smacks, but I can't. His hand lands again and again on my ass, down my thighs, across my lower back. He covers my entire lower half with his handprints, careful of anything too important, ensuring that there's no chance of me finding pleasure in this moment. No, this is a punishment that he plans to see all the way through.

I had my fair share of pain before, but this is unlike anything I've ever experienced in the past, and there seems to be no end in sight. I didn't bother counting each time he struck me, but I have to at least be in double digits at this point. A full-on sob escapes my lips as panic builds inside me.

“Stop. Please, I’m begging you. Stop!” I scream, tears and snot streaming down my face as I feel his body pressing down against mine, pushing me deeper into the bed. He buries his nose into my hair before gripping it and tugging my head back and exposing my neck.

He licks the side of my face before biting down hard on my ear. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” he says over and over again as his body trembles, his hips thrusting forward, grinding my body into the bed. I can feel his rock-hard cock as it slides between my ass cheeks. On instinct, I thrust my hips backwards, grinding them onto his cock.

But the moment is over as quickly as it started. My entire body can feel his absence as he jerks away from me. The chill of the room causes goose bumps to pebble across my skin. I turn my head to the side, trying to look into his eyes, but he’s no longer there. His mask is locked firmly back in place, cutting himself off from me and the world.

“I’ll need…” he begins, but his mouth snaps shut before spinning on his heels and storming toward the cage, opening and slamming it shut behind him.

The sound of the cage rattling fills the room as he doesn’t spare me another glance. I twist, trying to get a better look at him. I yank at the cuffs, but the throbbing in my shoulder returns with a vengeance, and I stop, only watching as he leaves the room, and a profound sense of loss fills my soul.

Something happened, but I have no idea what it was. What does all that mean? What started out as a punishment turned into something more. For one brief moment, I caught a glimpse of the man underneath the mask. Not Joseph Bianchi’s lapdog, but the man. A true sense of who Felix really is, and it has me rethinking everything I know about it.

My chest heaves as tears fill my eyes. Instead of fighting the sadness and fear, I let it take me over like a wave, carrying me off into the deep recesses of my soul. It could have been hours or only a few minutes, but eventually, my tears turn into sniffles before completely disappearing, and I’m left to stew in my confusion. One thing keeps repeating in my mind.

Maybe I’m not as expendable to Felix as I thought.

# CHAPTER TEN

## FELIX

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* I stomp down the hallway in the main part of the house, growling at anyone that got too close. Thankfully, no one else bothers me before I make it to the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind me. I flick the lock closed before bracing my arms on the sink. As I stare at my reflection in the mirror, I'm reminded of who I really am. My face is set in a hard scowl, twisted in disgust, and my eyes are filled with nothing but anger and hate.

*This is the face of a monster.*

I clench my eyes shut, trying to force the feelings of despair from pulling me under. She doesn't matter. She means nothing to me. I only need to get the information Joseph wants, and I'll be done with her.

*Can you let her go?*

My heart feels as if it's going to beat out of my chest at the mere thought of her leaving this place. No, I can't let that happen. But this obsession with Willa is going to be the end of me. Ezra was right. She'll be my ruin. But these feelings for her are deeper than anything I've ever felt before. I want to go back into that room, wrap her in my arms, and tell her I'm an asshole. That I should have never punished her for thinking about escaping. That I feel as if I'm going out of my mind with need. The need to claim her, the need to protect her, the need to own her. I know it sounds insane, but I want every part of her to belong to me. To be the only man she will ever think about for the rest of her life. The only way to ensure that happens is to keep her here, locked away from her troubles and anything or anyone that wants to harm her.

I need to get control over myself, especially before I see Joseph again. I push my fingers through my hair, trying to think of anything besides the way my cock sank between the globes of her ass. The way her hips lifted in the air, grinding against me.

"Fuck."

She's so goddamn gorgeous that I knew I'd have fucked her right there, bent over her cot with her hands handcuffed to the bars above her head. The way she gasped in pleasure before lifting her hips into the air, grinding against me. Her eyes were dark with need, begging me to give her more.

*She's Joseph's prisoner.*

My head knows that, but my dick has other plans. Everything about Willa seems to be made for me. Her snarky mouth, the way she moans in pleasure, the taste of her skin. I'm losing control. I should take a shower and disappear, but I want to storm back in there and make her beg me to fuck her, to make her mine, to ruin her for all other men.

"This is not helping." I groan as my hand grips my cock through my sweats, but it's no use. No amount of willpower is going to stop the images of Willa's perfect breasts waiting for me to pull them between my lips. I'm powerless against the raging need flowing through my veins as I lower my sweats to my thighs and pull out my cock. I groan loudly as I tighten my hand around my shaft, pumping my fist up and down a few times to relieve the pressure, to no avail. I gather the pre-cum leaking from my tip and use it to lubricate my movements. "*Bambolina,*" I groan as I pump faster up and down my shaft, my mind drifting back to when I was back inside the cage with her.

If I'd have acted on my impulses, I could have tasted her skin as I pulled one of her nipples into my mouth. I imagine her begging me to fuck her right there, not caring if someone caught us. She'd arch her back toward me as I give the opposite nipple the same attention, thrusting my hips into her warm center. My cock hardens even further as the tip hits her sensitive bud before sinking into her.

"That's right, baby. I can't wait to feel your juices dripping down my cock," I mumble quietly into the empty bathroom, thrusting my hips as I climb higher toward oblivion.

Visions of Willa's eyes filling with passion as she begs me to make her come fill my mind. "Come for me, *bambolina*. I want to see you come undone. Come all over my cock like a good little girl."

I continue to thrust into my hand, picking up the pace as she comes, biting down on my shoulder. Ribbons of jizz shoot onto the floor as I bite down on my biceps, trying to keep my actions a secret from everyone in the house. My knees buckle from the pleasure coursing through my body, and I plop down on the toilet seat.

"Are you finished with your wet dream, or can I come in now?" Ezra shouts as he bangs on the bathroom door, bringing me back to the present.

"Fuck off, Ezra," I growl out as I grab a handful of tissues and clean up the floor. Once all evidence of my indiscretion is hidden, I shove my cock back into my pants, wash my hands, and open the door.

"Who pissed in your Wheaties?"

"This better be fucking good." I wipe my hand down my face before brushing past him and heading further down the hall. I don't have an actual destination other than getting as far away from Ezra as possible.

"Aww, is that the way you want to treat someone who comes bearing information about your girl?"

"Depends on the information." I sigh, turning around to face him.

"I knew I had you," he whispers before checking over his shoulder. "Can we go somewhere more private? The walls have ears in this place."

"Just tell me, Ezra," I growl, crossing my arms over my chest. "Joseph wants the information. It doesn't matter who hears."

"Fair enough." Ezra throws his arm over my shoulder and drags me into his chest. "She has a sister," he whispers, as if this is some big secret.

"And how is this new information? We already know that from the file." I groan, quickly losing my patience. "You said it was something good."

"Good things come to those who wait."

Ezra is annoying as hell, and I'd love nothing more than to slit his throat at the moment, but right now, he has something I need.

"You're going to keep pushing me until I lose my patience, aren't you?"

"Yes," he responds as I inch toward him, my hands balled into tight fists at my side. "Calm down. Joseph plans on blackmailing her so he can get information about the Genoveses."

The Genoveses are one of the most powerful families, both here and in Sicily. I wouldn't say we were enemies, but we aren't friends either. We keep to our own territories and maintain a tenuous peace between our two families.

"The Genoveses? Are they the reason we're in Chicago?"

“Who knows? It wasn’t really an asking questions type of conversation. He gave me the information, and I slit his throat.” He shrugs. “Oh, by the way, I need you to come with me. He’s one fat fuck, and it’s going to take two of us to cut him up.”

Ezra’s eyes darken as a sinister smile crosses his face. This is what Ezra looks like, the need to cause destruction whenever he has the chance bubbling right beneath the surface, just waiting for a chance to be let loose upon the world.

“Focus, Ezra. What other information did you find out?” If I were anyone else, I’d be cowering in fear, but Ezra doesn’t scare me in the slightest.

“Depends. Are you going to help me get rid of the body or not?”

“You’re a pain in my fucking ass.” My eye twitches slightly as I open and close my fist. “I’m thirty seconds from kicking your front teeth in.”

“Love you, too, asshole. So, are you going to help me hide the body or not?”

“Yes, I’ll help you.”

“Joseph plans to start working with the Irish. He has a meeting with Shamus McKenna and his boys later in the week.”

“Shit,” I respond, pinching the bridge of my nose.

There’s no love lost between us and the McKennas, but the Irish haven’t had a strong hold in Chicago for years. It is the reason Joseph gave all of us for why he wanted to come to Chicago. A chance to relax and not have to look over our shoulders when conducting our business. We’ve met with several other families since arriving in Chicago and made connections with each of them but one. There has to be a reason Joseph is going after the Genoveses, but what is it?

“It seems Joseph has been keeping information from you, my friend.”

His words hit me deep in my gut. Thinking about Joseph keeping something this important from me makes me feel sick to my stomach. If he is keeping something as small as a meeting from me, what else is he hiding? And why?

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

# WILLA

The handcuffs dig into my wrist as I try desperately not to move. My ass is on fire from the beating I got from Felix before he ran from the room like his pants were on fire. Ran may not be the best description, but the way he left means something. I just can't put my finger on what.

*I wonder where he went.*

The small, confined space is slowly making me lose my mind. No windows or light in the room beside the single light bulb hanging in the center of the room. There are no other noises in the room but the sound of my beating heart. The only thing I can do is sit here and wait for the next time Felix appears.

I turn my head to face the door, wishing for it to open. At this point, I don't care who comes through the door as long as it's someone and they have some food. My stomach growls loudly in response, reminding me I haven't eaten since the night Felix took me.

*And how long ago was that?* Days? Weeks? Months? Definitely only a few days or I'd have starved to death. No, they wouldn't do that. They need me for something, but I don't know anything. A small fact that's going to cost me my life.

"I should've walked away," I announce to the empty room, as if someone will answer, but I'm met with nothing but silence.

If I'd have just minded my own business, ignored the terrified screams of Chastity coming from that room and continued about my day, the way they trained me to do the moment I started working at the club. If I had just listened to the voice in the back of my mind warning me to look the other

way, I wouldn't be here. I'd be somewhere safe. But I knew the moment I cut Joseph's face, he was going to make me pay for what I'd done.

I close my eyes and try to think of anything but the pain radiating through my body and the growling of my stomach. My ass aches, the skin burning as I shift slightly, searching for a comfortable position. No doubt there are bruises forming across my skin. An unbearable ache builds between my legs, intensifying as memories of our time together filter through my mind. I'm sick in the head. This is clearly the beginning of Stockholm Syndrome. Right, that's all it is, because there's no way I can have anything but hate in my heart for Felix.

The heavy sound of the door creaking open fills the room, bringing me back to the present. My heart flutters slightly, wanting to see Felix again, but someone unfamiliar comes strolling through the door. The man is tall with broad, muscular shoulders, just like everyone else in this place. I can't make out many of his facial features in the dim light, aside from his chiseled jaw and dark head of hair on the top of his head.

"Don't they make normal size Italians?" I mumble as he strolls toward me. The sound of his boots hitting the pavement echoes through the room before he opens the door.

"I guess we all have good genes," he says as I notice the tray of food he's carrying with him.

My stomach growls loudly, and my mouth waters as the smell of eggs and breakfast meat reaches my nose. I try to crane my head toward the ceiling to get a better look at the man in my cell, but I can't see anything but his shadow.

"Do you want some breakfast?" he questions, and I freeze, the feeling of his hand caressing my ass before giving it a hard smack. "Man, he worked you good last night, didn't he?"

I try to pull away, but he grips my hair tightly in his fist, wrenching my head backwards and forcing me to look at him.

"Let go of me," I snarl, grinding my teeth together, knowing I have no power here.

My arms are handcuffed to the bars of my cage, leaving me ripe for the taking. Felix promised he won't hurt me without reason, and I believe him, but this man hasn't made me any promises. No one has.

"Did he fuck you last night, *puttana?*" (Whore.) He pries my ass cheeks apart, shoving his finger into my ass. I scream for him to stop, but my pleas

fall on deaf ears. “Guess not.”

“We aren’t supposed to fuck your pussy, but…” His voice trails off, wiggling his fingers in my ass. It’s not too deep, but enough to let me know his intentions. And I refuse to make things easy on him. Gathering all the saliva in my mouth I can manage, I spit in his face. It lands just above his mouth before sliding down over his lips, and his eyes blaze with anger.

Without hesitating, he pulls his arm back, smacking me hard in the face. My head recoils from the force but is quickly pulled back by his grip on my hair, and he smacks my face again before releasing my hair. My body drops to the bed, my tears now soaking the mattress beneath me.

“*Te ne pentirai, puttana,” (*You’re going to regret that, whore.) he growls before leaning forward and reaching his hand around my front and gripping my breast in his hand.

He chuckles darkly as he pistons his finger in and out of my ass, scissoring them back and forth before sliding deeper inside me. My screams of pain turn into sobs as tears stream down my cheeks. His touch makes my stomach churn. A new tremor of fear runs through me as I hear the zipper of his pants moments before he presses his cock against my flesh.

“Now I’m not even going to spit on my dick before I fuck you.” He pulls his finger from inside me, leaning forward and sliding his hand around my body, and he grips my tits tightly in his hand.

My entire body shudders as I throw my hips back, trying to shake him off, but it’s no use. He’s going to rape me, and there’s nothing I can do about it. *Felix. Help me!* my mind screams as I thrash on the bed, doing everything in my power to get away from him, but it’s no use.

He grinds against me before pulling back, spreading my ass cheeks apart. My screams turn into sobs, but I continue to fight him, thrashing around and throwing my head back, doing anything I can to stop this from happening. I kick my legs back and throw my weight from side to side in another sad attempt at trying to get him off me, but it fails.

“Get the fuck off her!” Felix shouts, my assailant’s weight disappearing as he throws him toward the cage entrance.

My eyes widen in shock as Felix grinds the heel of his boot into the man’s dick, causing him to howl in pain. “*Non l’ho scopata. Non ho infranto nessuna regola.*” (I didn’t fuck her. I broke no rules.)

I have no idea what he said, but there’s no doubt what he says has to do with me, and it enraged Felix even further. He pulls his boot up off his cock

before kicking him hard in the side, over and over again.

The man curls into himself, attempting desperately to protect all his vital organs, but it's no use. Felix continues kicking him as he growls, "No one touches her but me."

"She's just a whore." He spits, rolling to the side and pushing to his feet. "Nothing more than another hole to fuck."

"She's mine," Felix spits out, charging toward the man, ready to continue what he started.

"Stop." My eyes flick toward the door and see another shadow standing in the doorway. I can't make out their face, but the voice sounds familiar. "End this now, brothers."

"He's no brother of mine." The man's eyes burn with rage as he responds to the voice, never taking his eyes off Felix. "*Pagherai per questo*." (You'll pay for this.) He growls before tucking his battered cock back into his pants and backing toward the door.

The figure in the doorway steps into the room, putting himself between Felix and my assaulter, his eyes narrowed. No one says a word, the room filling with tension as the man finally makes it to the door and pulls it closed behind him.

"You've fucking done it now."

"I know," Felix responds, before turning his attention to me.

He heads right for me, and I turn my head, not wanting to see the fury I know is still in his eyes. Felix makes quick work of uncuffing my hand, moving me around like a damn rag doll and not a full-grown adult female. I rub my wrist; angry red marks cover my skin. Thankfully, they weren't too tight, unable to do any damage to my skin. It's a relief to have control over my body again. Felix examines my skin, running his thumb over the damaged flesh before wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me toward him.

We both tumble to the floor as he curls his arms around me, burying his nose into my neck and inhaling deeply. Neither one of us moves a muscle as I sink into his arms, taking comfort in the fact he saved me. "Thank you."

"Don't thank him. He just made things much worse for you." My head snaps toward the door, and I see Ezra standing there. His clothes and skin are covered in splatters of dark spots. I open my mouth to ask him what they are, but change my mind. I have a feeling that I won't like his answer.

“What do you mean?” I question, my eyebrows pulling down in confusion.

Someone just tried to rape me while I was handcuffed and in a cage. Felix stopped him. What’s not to thank?

“Joseph is going to know you mean something to me. Making you more valuable than ever before.” Felix’s voice vibrates through my entire body, and I lean into his embrace further.

“I don’t have anything to give him.”

“Your sister.”

Fear, unlike anything I’ve felt before, takes my breath away.

They’re going to take Celia.

As soon as the thought comes to me, I can’t breathe. My lungs constrict tightly as the air is sucked out of my lungs. My nails rake down my skin as I try desperately to get rid of the feeling of being choked. My body shakes, shivering so hard that I feel as if I’m vibrating in place.

“Willa,” he responds gruffly, my head dropping back onto his shoulder. “Breathe in and out.”

My eyes drift shut as he wraps his arms around me, pulling me tighter into his chest. The feel of our bare skin pressed against each other, the rise and fall of his chest against my back, helps me focus. In and out. In and out.

His arms tighten around me to the point of pain, but he continues to whisper words of comfort. His voice is low and calm, the exact opposite of what it was a few moments ago. I take a deep breath as his scent envelops all my senses as I commit it to memory.

*Safe. Protected. Peace.*

Those words are the exact opposite of what I should feel wrapped in his arms, but that doesn’t make them any less true. This is who Felix is, the man beneath the tough façade he portrays. Underneath, there’s a good man. A man whose hands aren’t covered in the blood of Joseph Bianchi’s enemies. I want to know that man and what made him turn into this.

“No one is going to hurt you, *bambolina*.”

I scoff. A promise from a mafia man whose boss wants to kidnap my sister to do his bidding. Yeah, as if I’d believe that.

“Liar,” Ezra growls as he takes a seat on the bed above us. “You can’t protect her, Felix. Not from him.” He tilts his head to the side, running a finger down my bruised cheek.

Felix growls loudly, pushing to his feet and bringing me with him. He pushes me behind his back, putting himself between Ezra and me. “Don’t. Fucking. Touch. Her.”

Pressing my cheek to his back, my arms slide around his waist, pulling him toward me. “Please, make him leave.” I whimper, realizing my nakedness for the first time.

“Get out.”

“I’m going.” Suddenly, Ezra’s face appears over his shoulder, his eyes full of hate and something else I can’t place. “Listen to everything he says or else.”

“Or else what?”

“Or else nothing can protect you from me. Not even him.” I can tell by the tone of his voice that he means it. “Take this.”

I blink a few times and notice his stained shirt hanging off the tip of his finger. I wrinkle my nose in disgust. I have no desire to have that fabric touch my skin, especially having no idea what is on it.

“It’s better than being naked.” He shrugs his shoulder before dropping the fabric on the floor. “Wear it or not, up to you.”

He shakes his head slightly before gripping Felix’s shoulder. The two of them have another silent conversation. It only lasts a few moments, but Felix nods his head before squeezing his friend’s arm twice, and Ezra drops it to his side.

“Be careful. I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Let me know.”

“Always.” Ezra gives me one final look before turning and heading out of the cage toward the door. The door bangs loudly against the concrete wall as he swings it open, not bothering to close it behind him, and he disappears from sight.

“I’ll do everything in my power to protect you,” Felix says in a deep, hoarse whisper, pulling me around to the front of his body.

“Promise?” I question, knowing damn well he can’t do that. It’s not possible because at the end of the day, his loyalty belongs to Joseph Bianchi, not me.

*But things change.*

“Promise.” My breath hitches in my throat as he smiles down at me. He looks amazing with his furrowed brow and brooding gaze, but this is a

whole new level. His eyes shine with emotion, and I'm powerless to resist them. If I'm not careful, I could lose my heart to this man.

*And that's a bad thing.*

Yes, a terrible thing. Especially when I have no idea if this is just part of a game he and his boss are playing to get what they want from me. No, I need to keep my walls firmly in place, protecting my heart in the process.

"Will you come with me?"

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere safe."

"Is there anywhere safe from your boss?"

"I'm taking you to my sanctuary. The safest place for you right now." His hand slides beneath my chin, lifting it so I'm looking him in the eyes. "I need time to discover what Joseph has planned for you."

This screams nothing but trouble. If I leave this room with him, I'll be going into the unknown. Even though this room is driving me insane, it's something I know. I know what to expect here. Pain and torment. But outside of this room could give me a chance to escape.

I gaze at Felix's face, searching for any sign of deceit, but I find none. Something about his stare unnerves me. If the circumstances were different, I could find myself falling in love with him. I'd give him all of me and ask for all of him in return. But this isn't a fairy tale. Felix is my captor.

"Are you coming?" he asks again, putting some space between us and grabbing Ezra's shirt off the floor.

"Arms up." My arms raise slightly, and I hiss in pain as my shoulder protests the sudden movement. He quickly slides the shirt over my head, helping me thread my arms through the holes.

I stare at him, completely lost in thought, attempting to figure out what I should do. I want to get out of this room. I want to feel the breeze against my skin. I want to protect Celia. And I need to get out of this room to do all those things. With my mind made up, I say the one word he's been longing to hear. "Yes."

Felix smirks down at me. Tingles run all over my body like I've been electrocuted by a live wire. His finger runs down my cheek before stopping at my chin and grips it between his fingers, holding me in place. My eyes widen as he leans forward and brushes his lips against mine softly. He pulls back quickly, his eyes searching my face for something before he presses his lips against mine again.

As soon as our lips connect, I open my mouth wide enough for his tongue to sweep inside, sending tingles down my spine as I nibble lightly on his bottom lip. His hands thread through my hair as he pulls me down, deepening our kiss. He pulls back, running his lips against mine softly before pulling back.

"Follow me."

My heart races as I follow behind him like a lost dog, my feet shuffling against the floor as I inch closer to the cage door. I never want to see the inside of this room—this cage—again. Just as I'm about to step out of the cage, Felix steps in front of me.

"Excuse me. I can't leave with you standing in my way."

"I can't wait to fuck that attitude out of you." He eyes me skeptically, like he's trying to figure out what makes me tick.

Good luck, buddy. Better men and women have tried and failed before. You won't be any different. There's only one person who has taken the time to peel back the layers to find the person I keep hidden under all my bravado and careless actions, and I just served her up to them on a silver platter.

"You plan on fucking me?" I respond instinctively, my hands going directly to my hips.

"You can't seem to help yourself, can you?" He chuckles, his eyes challenging me to put my foot in my mouth a second time. "Now, let's go."

I open my mouth to respond, but quickly change my mind. I only nod my head and follow him out of the cage to the door. I hold my breath as I step through the door, waiting for someone to jump out and tell me it was all just a dream. But they don't.

"If you try to run, or escape me while I transport you, I won't be able to save you a second time." I nod, certain that I won't find another person in this place willing to help me. "Keep your eyes pointed to the floor and don't speak to anyone. The house is rather empty this time of day, so we should be able to avoid everyone."

I drop my head to my chin as instructed. The last thing I want is for someone to come and start asking questions. Felix risked a lot by taking me out of that room. The least I can do is follow his instructions.

The air is stale and musty, letting me know that we're more than likely in a basement. I notice a few breaks in the wall, showing there are more rooms down here than I expected. *One, two, three.* I count each opening we

pass, wanting to get a better sense of where we are located. I don't know where or if I'm going to end up back down here again, so I need to pay attention.

*Do you really believe he'll let that happen?*

*Good question.* Felix saved me from getting raped, but why? He delivered me to Joseph like a lamb to the slaughter, but now he wants to protect me.

*He said you were his.*

*She's mine.* That's exactly what Felix said when he pulled that goon off me. Now I wonder if he meant that physically or literally. Felix said that Joseph wants him to find out information for him. Maybe his anger was because someone else came to do the job for him.

*You know that's not it.*

No, I know nothing. I know nothing about Felix except that he's intimidating as fuck when he wants to be, but he also has a softer side hidden deep, and I mean *deep* inside. I only caught a glimpse of it during the time I've spent alone with him, but I know it's there somewhere.

*You could ask him.*

"Fine, I will," I mumble, responding to myself aloud. Between whatever drugs they pumped into me and being stuck in that cage for lord knows how long, it's only natural I'm having a conversation with myself.

*Yeah, you keep telling yourself that.*

"What did you say?" I jump slightly, surprised by the sound of Felix's voice.

Shit. While I was fighting with myself, I completely stopped paying attention to where we were going. I raise my head slightly, looking out the top of my eyes to get a handle on my surroundings again.

"Can I ask you a question?" I blurt out, chewing on my lip so hard it bleeds.

"Yes."

"Why are you doing this?" I question as he places his hand on my lower back, leading me down the hallway.

"I don't know," he responds honestly, as I chance a look at him. His eyes narrow almost to slits, and his brows pull down as if he'd been deep in thought. We walk in silence for a few moments before he continues. "You give me peace, and that's not something I've felt for a very long time."

I can't read him when he gets that vacant look in his eyes. It's like an impenetrable wall that he puts in place around all his emotions, locking everything else out. It's frustrating beyond belief. He only gives me half answers, refusing to elaborate on anything, which only leads to more questions.

"You're beyond frustrating," I huff loudly. "I used to be able to read people, but from you, I get nothing. Just more riddles and unanswered questions."

I glance up at Felix, and he's staring right at me.

"Whenever you have doubts, just ask me. I'll never lie to you, Willa. Even if I know you won't like the answer," he responds, gripping my arm and tugging softly. "Watch your step."

He motions his head toward the set of stairs in front of me. *When did we get to the end of the hallway?* Fuck, I really need to pay more attention. Felix puts pressure on my back, urging me forward.

We climb the stairs in silence, his hand resting on my back, urging me to keep moving forward. Then he opens the door at the top.

"Fuck, that's bright!" I exclaim, throwing my hand up in front of my face to block the light shining through. After giving my eyes a few minutes to adjust, I turn my attention to Felix and scowl. "You could have warned me."

"If your head was down, you'd have been fine," he growls, pushing on the back of my head and forcing it downward.

"Touché," I mumble before taking a step forward and allowing the door to shut behind us.

Felix grips my arm at the elbow, guiding me forward. A few people pass us by, but no one says a word. Each one of them looked right through me as if I didn't exist, and to them, I probably didn't. I don't know why I'm surprised. Seeing girls practically naked, with no shoes and bruises covering their legs, is a normal occurrence here.

"Do you live here?" I question, wanting to know more information about this place.

Whoever the owner is, they obviously have money. Lots of fucking money. The plush blue carpet beneath my feet feels expensive. Besides, if this is the same house he pulled up in front of, it probably belongs to Joseph Bianchi.

“No. I have my own… office, you could say, a few miles from here,” he responds quickly as a cool breeze blows over my bare legs.

The sound of the city filters to my ears, letting me know we’re headed outside. My hands clench tightly at my side, the desire to run bubbling up inside me, but I push it down. I’m not out of the woods yet. Yes, I’ve made it outside, but I’m not out of danger. I doubt even the outside of this place isn’t crawling with mafia men just waiting for me to do something dumb like run.

“Don’t run from me, Willa. Trust me, you won’t get very far.”

I nod my head before taking a deep breath and stepping through the doorway. I don’t move my head an inch, not wanting anyone to mistake my movements as trying to escape. At this point, escape is my least concern. Right now, I just want to make it to see tomorrow.

“I never pictured you as an office kind of guy.” I break the silence building between us.

“I’m not.”

I wait for him to elaborate, but he doesn’t. Great. My imagination is going to run wild with that information. Not that it matters. I doubt anywhere he calls an office is somewhere I want to be headed right now. However, I’m currently out of options.

“Who do you have there, Felix?”

My body stiffens as I notice a pair of sneakers step into my line of sight. I pull tightly on the edge of the shirt, trying desperately to cover my private parts from view. A flash of shaggy, dirty-blonde hair appears beside me, and I turn my head. His whiskey-colored eyes are opened wide, a look a surprise covering his face as his mouth pops open in shock. He has a light dusting of freckles across his face, putting him closer to my age than Felix’s.

“No one,” he growls, wrapping his arm around my shoulder and pulling me tight to his chest. “I don’t want anyone knowing I left; do you understand me?”

“*Ho bisogno che tu mantenga questo segreto,”* (I need you to keep this quiet,) he responds.

I try to look up again and growl, frustrated I can’t see anything and have no control over my own damn movements.

“*Cos’hai fatto?*” (What have you done?)

*“Fai questo per me fratello, per favore.” (*Do this for me, brother, please.)

The only word of that I understood was please, not something you hear a mafia man say too often. Whoever Felix is talking to must be important to him, someone he knows he can trust, because it would have been much easier if he’d slit his throat and kept moving. No one should leave a witness behind; everyone knows that. The more people who know what you’re doing, the more likely you are to be caught. Ezra is the only other person who knows Felix is taking me without permission, but I doubt there’s any amount of pleading Felix or I could to stop him from telling someone. Ezra doesn’t see like the type of man to be controlled by anyone. He does what he wants, when he wants to. If he tells someone where I am, it’s because it benefits him.

“Of course,” the voice responds as Felix lifts me from the ground and throws me over his shoulder. I grunt, his shoulder digging into my stomach. My braid falls in front of my face, blocking my view.

“I can walk,” I say, bucking my hips slightly, and I almost fall off his shoulder. He wraps his arms around my waist, pinning me in place before giving me a swat on my ass. Without other choices, I hang over his shoulder like a limp bag until he bends over, placing my feet on the ground, and opens a car door.

“Get in.”

I stare at him for a few moments, searching his face before challenging him again. What can I say? I really love pushing people’s buttons. “Where are we going?”

Felix doesn’t respond. He only points to the seat and gives me a small shove. I look up at him, wanting to push every one of his buttons. If this was another situation, I’d tell him to go fuck himself, but that doesn’t sound like the best idea.

“Fine. Be that way,” I retort, before climbing into the car and pulling the door shut behind me.

While I wait for Felix to climb in on the other side, my only concern is what’s going to happen to me now. I left one prison for another, and I probably won’t figure out if this change is for the better or worse.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

# WILLA

"Rise and shine." His gravelly voice wakes me, and I bolt up straight. I must have fallen asleep during the ride because I'm no longer sitting in a car. Instead, I'm in a luxurious king-size bed. Light fills the room from a few small windows above.

"Where am I?"

"Nowhere," he responds matter-of-factly before placing a small tray of food in my lap. "Eat. Then we need to figure out a plan."

He waits for me to take a bite of food before turning his back on me and heading down the few steps to my left into the kitchen.

I shove more food into my mouth as I examine the room, noticing how empty the house is. It is simple, too clean—like no one lives here. There's nothing but an end table with a lamp to my right. The walls are a steel gray, like concrete. To my right are another few steps down to a living room area containing a small couch with a large television in front of it.

Just beyond that is an enormous desk covered with multiple computer screens. One screen shows multiple images with different angles of what seems to be an abandoned warehouse, the perfect place to hide in plain sight. I ignore all the questions floating through my mind and continue eating my breakfast. Almost immediately after I finish, he comes back and takes the tray.

"There's a bathroom to your immediate left." I turn but see no door.

He chuckles at my confusion. "It's there. As you get closer, you will see the outline of the door. Just push on it for it to open."

I swing my legs over the side of the bed and stand. They wobble, causing me to fall back onto the bed.

“Take your time.” He places the tray of food beside me, reaching out his hand. I gently place my hand inside it, and he pulls me to my feet, stealing me as I wobble again.

After a few moments, my legs strengthen, and I take a step forward. “You can let go now,” I say as he helps me walk toward the hidden door.

“I know.” He continues to lead me toward the bathroom, tapping the door slightly for it to open. “Everything you need is in there. I’ll put out some clothes for you while you’re in the shower.”

“Thank you,” I whisper as I step out of his arms and into the bathroom.

I walk carefully over to the shower and turn it on. A waterfall showerhead trickles water onto my hand as I check the temperature before turning toward the mirror and staring at my reflection. Turning my head from left to right, a large purple bruise has formed on my cheek from where Joseph smacked me last night, but it’s nothing that some makeup can’t hide. Not that I’ll have the chance to wear makeup anytime soon. Reaching my arm over my head, I notice purplish bruises down my side from the beating —I mean, the punishment Felix gave me last night. Inhaling deeply, I test for any broken ribs, but I don’t feel any pain—this time.

The way Felix asked for my complete obedience and submission last night made him sound like a lot of the men that come into the club. They want the women they spend time with at the club to do whatever they want, when they want it. There’s no wiggle room or discussion. They want obedience, or the women will pay the consequences.

When the girls told me about all the things these guys ask them to do, I turned up my nose in disgust. I never thought I’d be able to give someone else all the power, but the moment Felix asked, I gave it immediately. It was fucking hot. I won’t lie. He called me a good girl, and I was done. It was as if all the walls I surround myself with went crumbling to the ground. I want him, and I think he wants me, but this isn’t the time for love. Everything I do from this point forward is about survival. It takes precedence over everything else, even my raging libido.

I step into the shower. Water runs down my face, over my shoulders. I think about my shoulder briefly, but shove that thought away and concentrate on my breathing. No matter what happens next, I will survive. I will find a way out of this fucking stronghold and get free.

I can’t seem to stop thinking about how that man’s grimy hands felt against my skin. I was ready to give in, to let him have his way with me.

This time, Felix was there to save me, but what if he wasn't? What if he was the one attacking me? I can't forget that he's the enemy, or at least working with them. He claims he's going to protect me, but what happens when his owner calls? Felix is a monster, just like Joseph and all the men like him that come in and out of the club. They sit there, waiting in the shadows like a wolf in sheep's clothing, waiting for their next victim.

Shaking my head to clear the dark thoughts, I focus on the water, allowing myself to enjoy the calm, even if it's only going to last for a few minutes. This is the best I've felt in weeks. I take a deep breath. Hot water pours down over my body as I reach for the soap and begin scrubbing. My skin pinks, not sure if it's from the temperature of the shower or my desire to rid myself of the images running through my mind.

I tilt my head back under the spray and wash my hair. I fill my hands with conditioner, ready to lather my hair, when I hear something. My senses heighten ever further as I strain to hear any other noises. I wait a few moments but hear nothing besides the water trickling from the showerhead. Fear shoots through my veins, and not for the first time. With images of what might have happened with the man from earlier fresh in my mind, I rinse my hands and shut off the shower. Another creaking sound comes from near the door. Not wanting to be surprised, I swing the shower door open and step out. Water drips down my body as I come face-to-face with my captor.

"I just brought you some clothes. No need for the show, but I'm not complaining." He places a stack of clothing onto the counter before reaching for the towel hanging on the wall.

He takes a few tentative steps toward me before wrapping me inside the towel. His muscular frame dwarfs my body as the warmth of his touch causes me to shiver.

"I can…" I begin, but quickly snap my mouth closed.

"There is a towel you can use for your hair under the sink," he whispers as his lips brush against my cheek. The plush towel runs over my body, and he makes quick work of the task, paying extra attention to drying my breasts and hair. When he reaches my pussy, he pauses. Our eyes lock as he lowers himself to the floor, grabbing one of my feet and placing it on top of his leg.

"Hold on to my shoulder." He doesn't lift his head as he takes his time drying my foot before shifting his attention to the other one.

He leans forward, the feel of his breath fanning across my skin causing me to shiver. “Open your legs,” he says, barely above a whisper, as I move my right leg out and stand with my feet shoulder-width apart. The towel runs up my inner thighs to my pussy. For some reason, I get self-conscious, counting the days since the last time I did some maintenance in that area. I might not be letting anyone get near that part of my body, but that doesn’t mean I don’t take care of myself.

He leans forward further, burying his nose between my legs and inhaling deeply. “You’re wet,” he states, a hint of laughter in his voice.

“That can happen when someone takes a shower, you know,” I snark back, regretting it immediately. I need to get better control over my tongue. I brace myself for his retort, but nothing comes. He continues drying my thighs before dropping the towel to the floor and gripping my waist in his hands, pulling me forward.

I try to pull away, but he’s too strong. My eyes widen as his tongue snakes out, swiping through my folds and swirls around my clit.

“This is a bad idea.” I moan as he continues lapping at my juices, sliding two fingers between my folds as he continues to nibble at my clit. My hips move in time with his movements as I ride his fingers, climbing towards release. “A very bad idea.”

“This may have been my best idea to date.”

Men like Felix don’t want relationships, they only want one thing—a quick roll in the hay—and then they disappear, never to be heard from again. Getting mixed up with Felix is going to lead to nothing but heartache for me, but if I’m being honest, right now I don’t care. Right now, the man who has my full attention is Felix.

“Are going to come for me?” he asks as he adds another finger, thrusting them both deeper inside me.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I chant repeatedly, searching for relief from the ache only he can give me. I arch forward, running my hands through his hair and tug hard on the strands. His tongue is as stern as the rest of him, and he continues to lick and suck my pussy as he fucks me with his fingers. His teeth bite down on my clit before being replaced by his tongue, fucking me with his fingers, curling them slightly and hitting just the right spot.

Stars dance around the edges as pleasure beyond anything I can imagine races through my body. I’ve never felt anything like this. It’s like floating and being on fire at the same time. I doubt that’s the best way to describe

what I'm feeling, but the one thing I know is I want to do it again, and soon.

His tongue flicks over my clit as his fingers move faster, pumping in and out of me.

"Your pussy is so tight, so good. Be a good girl and come for me, *bambolina*," he says, and the tip of his tongue touches my clit, spiraling me out of control.

Waves of indescribable pleasure ripple through my body, from head to toe. My screams echo around the bathroom.

"Mine." The deep tenor of his voice mixes with my screams.

My hands wave around in the air, searching for something to keep my teether to the world around me. But he doesn't stop. He keeps fingering me until the very last pulse falls away, and then he places a soft kiss on my clit and sits back.

My chest heaves, and I suck in air, my eyes focused on the movement of this tongue as he licks his lips clean from my juices.

"What about…" I motion toward the bulge in his pants, my cheeks heating with embarrassment as the reality of what just happened filters through my mind.

He pushes to his feet and takes a few tentative steps toward me before grabbing the towel from the floor, wrapping me inside it. His muscular frame dwarfs my body as the warmth of his touch causes me to shiver.

Pulling away from his warmth, I look into his eyes and ask the million-dollar question. "Are you going to kill me?"

"I only kill those who deserve it."

"Good to know," I respond, not knowing the proper way to deal with this new side of him.

I know Joseph believes I deserve to die for what I've done, but by some miracle, my life has been spared. For how long, I'm not sure.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# FELIX

"Damn it." I slam my fist against the wall outside the bathroom door. I'm not used to all the feelings Willa has stirred up inside me, and I have no idea how much longer I can resist her charms.

Willa is not the first woman I've had to kidnap and bring back to Joseph. I have a system. Grab the girl, deliver her to Joseph, and continue on with my life. Sometimes, I have to assist Joseph in his fun, but most of the time, I stick to myself. I have rules for a reason. To keep myself safe and in Joseph's good graces. I've spent years getting to this position. To earn Joseph's complete trust once again, and I'm about to throw it away all for one girl.

*She's worth it.*

That she may be, but I need to get my emotions under control, especially with Willa's sister entering the mix. It's obvious that Joseph has plans for them both. Plans I wasn't made aware of before they were set into motion. He's hiding something from all of us, but I'm his right hand. The one person who's supposed to be loyal to him above all others, and I have been. Until a few days ago.

*He doesn't trust me.*

Joseph has every right not to trust me. Because of my past and for what I'm about to do. Willa and her sister are innocent. They don't deserve to have any of these things happen to them, and I'm the only one who can stop him. I have to discover everything I can about his plan before things get set too far in motion, costing Willa and her sister everything. But there's no way I can do this on my own.

*Maybe I can ask Ezra for help.*

Things must be dire if Ezra is my only option for help in this situation. But Ezra is the only one of us whose loyalty is to himself above everyone else. Yes, he does jobs for Joseph and stops by to ask me for help when he had a difficult kill to make, but he's his own person. He's not a Bianchi. He came here by choice and can leave at any time. My brothers are loyal to Joseph above everyone else. Asking one of them for help will put all of us in even more danger than we already are.

"I need a fucking shower and a drink," I mumble to myself, running my fingers through my hair before heading toward my home gym. I have a large space set up on the other side of my warehouse. There's a full bathroom, so I can shower.

I turn on the hot water and step inside, ducking my head beneath the stream of water, and watch the dirt and grime wash off my body before disappearing down the drain. Bracing my arm on the wall in front of me, I drop my head onto my forearm, letting my mind wander and trying to think of anything but Willa. I could just walk right back into the other bathroom and shower there, but I don't know if I can stop myself from touching her again.

*Coward.*

Damn right, I am. I took advantage of the situation I found myself in. One of my brothers tried to rape her. Yes, I have every intention of making him pay for what he did to her, but instead of comforting her, I took from her. The wounded look on her face when I walked out of the bathroom is branded on my soul for all eternity. She thought I was turning her down, but it was the exact opposite. I was protecting her.

I want to protect her from the demons raging inside me. The darkness that is bubbling right beneath the surface of my skin. I want nothing more than to turn Willa's skin a delicious shade of red, making her submit completely to me and my will. No more fighting me for control, not that she really wants control, trusting me I know what's best for her. I just need to gain her trust. Yeah, that won't be hard at all.

"Stop jerking off and get out here. We need to talk!" Ezra shouts through the door before pounding on it. "Oh, and we brought her stuff."

"We?" I question as I turn off the water and dry off quickly.

"Adler and me."

Fuck. Adler is the last person I wanted to bring into this. He's young, and he has his whole life ahead of him. He doesn't need to be involved in

this because it'll end in nothing but heartache.

I grab a new pair of jeans and slide them over my hips before shoving my arms into a shirt and pulling it over my head. I take a deep breath before swinging the door open and striding through. I stomp through the hallway, searching for Ezra and Adler, finding them sitting in front of a security camera.

Ezra's face is only a few inches from the screen, his eyes narrowed into slits as he searches the screen. Suddenly, he leans back, his fingers flying over the keys on the keyboard before he repeats the process a second time.

"Why the fuck did you bring him here?" I growl.

Patience has never been my strong suit.

"And what are you doing out here?" I ask, lowering my voice slightly, not wanting Willa to come out of the room.

"I had to ask someone for the doctor's number," Ezra responds quickly, not bothering to stop whatever he's doing with my camera.

Adler steps around Ezra, coming to a stop a few inches to my left. His arms are crossed over his chest, and his eyes are narrowed in my direction. "Where is she?"

Adler shouldn't be here, and we all know it, but here he is. He's always been kept on the outside, wanting to allow him to keep his innocent view of the world for as long as possible. He may be a Bianchi like the rest of us, but I can't let him interfere.

"Go home, Adler," I order, running my hand down my face before dropping into a chair beside Ezra. I don't have the patience to deal with both at the same time. "Doctor?"

"For your bitch. He'll be here in a few hours," Ezra chimes in, completely oblivious to what's going on around him.

"Don't…" I growl, my hands clenching in fists at my side.

"I know, I know. Don't call her a bitch." He holds up his hands in surrender before turning his attention toward me. "The kid can help."

"I can't risk him being involved in this. His blood will be on my hands if anything happens."

"I'm right fucking here, you know." Adler waves his hand between the two of us, attempting to get both of our attention. "How about you ask me what I want to do?"

"Give me one reason I shouldn't kill you right here." I continue to ignore Adler, focusing all my attention on Ezra.

“Because you need me.” Ezra stops whatever he was doing with my cameras before turning and giving me all his attention. “You won’t be able to protect your girl and get information about what Joseph is planning at the same time.”

“And who do you plan on helping keep Joseph off your back?” Adler chimes in a second time, a deep scowl on your face. “And before you say no, remember, you really have no other options.”

I have no reason to doubt Adler. I trust him, and he’s right. Besides Ezra, he’s the only other person I can trust right now. Especially with Willa’s safety. My brothers—Joseph’s men—could turn on me in a heartbeat. I can’t take the chance of someone getting to Willa, not a second time.

“You’re right.” I stare at the door to my bedroom and frown. Adler is my only option. Not only did he see Willa and me leave Joseph’s earlier, but now he knows where she is. Even if I wanted to send him back to Joseph, I’d be sentencing him to death.

“What are you going to do with me?” I push to my feet, noticing Willa coming through my bedroom door. Her platinum-blonde hair cascades around her shoulders, the top part of my Van Halen shirt damp from the water dripping from the tips of her hair.

I groan as I stand and head toward her, wrapping her in my arms. I bury my nose in her hair; a smell that is uniquely her envelops me. She smells like the warm spring air right after it rains, with the slight undertone of something forbidden.

“What are you doing to me, woman?” I mumble into her hair.

“I’ve done nothing but follow you.” Willa places her tiny hands on my chest, giving me a gentle push.

Wanting to respect her wishes, I take a step back. “I mean these feelings. I have no idea whether I want to hold you in my arms or fuck you into submission.”

Her cheeks are pink with embarrassment, but she refuses to break eye contact with me. “Which would you prefer?”

“I don’t know,” I respond honestly.

“When you figure it out, let me know. Until then, can I watch some television?” She places her hands on her hips, waiting for me to respond. After a few moments, I nod my head and motion for her to have a seat on the couch.

“The remote should be on the table over there. I have cable with a few of the premium channels. Watch whatever you’d like.”

She has a seat, grabbing the remote off the table before she flips through the channels. “Does he have a name? I mean, I could call him asshole, but since he hasn’t done anything to me, it seems inappropriate.”

I let out a loud, boisterous laugh before wrapping my arm around Adler and pulling him to my side. “His name is Adler. He’ll be staying here with you when I’m not around.”

“No, he won’t.”

“He will.” I can’t keep the sharpness out of my voice as she defies me again. It’s a good sign but also irritating. “I can’t stay with you. I have work to do.”

“Kidnapping my sister now for your boss?” She throws the remote at the television before pushing to her feet.

Her hands are balled into fists at her sides, the muscles in her neck pulled taut, and her jaw clenched tightly closed. Her eyes blaze with uncontrollable anger, wanting to lash out and make me pay for what she knows is about to happen to her sister. If beating me to a bloody pulp would help save her sister, I’d offer myself to her right now. But we both know that won’t solve things. Joseph Bianchi is our common enemy right now. I just need to help her understand we are all on her side. The moment I saw one of my brothers forcing himself on her, I knew I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t let her, or her sister, be used to further Joseph’s plans, but I still have a part to play. Joseph must not know that I’ve taken Willa from her cage below his home or that I’m no longer his mindless pawn.

“If you think I’m going to sit here and wait for you assholes to do the same thing to my sister that you’ve done to me, you’re mistaken,” Willa growls, grabbing a pillow off the couch and throwing it at me.

“Oh, maybe Adler should make some popcorn.” Ezra chuckles, leaning back in his chair and propping both his feet up on the desk.

“Not fucking helping, asshole,” Adler mumbles as I inch toward Willa, my hands raised in the air, wanting to let her know I won’t do anything to her.

She’s been abused by mine and my brother’s hands and has no reason to trust us. But somewhere deep down, she has to know we aren’t her enemy right now. We are here for her and her sister’s protection.

“I have no intention of kidnapping your sister, or harming you, for that matter. Unless you continue to defy me. Then I’ll put you over my knee and show you what happens to girls who refuse to behave.”

My cock immediately hardens behind my zipper at the idea of turning her ass pink a second time. But this time will be for both of our pleasure, not punishment. Her gaze flicks down to my groin before locking with mine, raising her eyebrow in question as she pulls her lip between her teeth. Unable to control myself, I grip my cock in my pants, giving it a squeeze, hoping to gain some relief, but no such luck. I should be fucking ashamed of myself for having such a visceral reaction to her, but I can’t bring myself to give a shit. A raging need fills my veins as I lick my lips, the taste of her pussy still lingering there.

“Can we finish our conversation before you two fuck like rabbits?” Ezra’s voice brings me back to the present, his hand shooting up to cover Adler’s eyes. “Cover your eyes, kid. You don’t want to know what Mom and Dad are doing when you’re not home.”

Adler grabs Ezra’s hand, pushing it down, away from his face. His cheeks are bright pink, his eyes looking everywhere but at me.

“I’ll go make her something to eat.” Adler turns on his heels, scurrying toward the kitchen like his ass is on fire.

“I don’t want him to touch me. I don’t want anyone to touch me but you.” She whimpers, fear entering her voice for the first time. Her eyes are cast off to the side, but her chin is raised in the air, daring someone to refuse her requests.

To an outsider, they’d see this as defiance—wrapping her words around herself like armor and conveying a false sense of strength to those around her. But I know what she’s feeling is fear. She’s terrified of what could happen if someone touches her against her will a second time. I could try to soothe her worries with words, but that will never work. I need to prove to her I’m going to protect her at all costs.

“He won’t,” I promise, knowing in my soul that Adler will do nothing to harm her.

She stares at me, her eyes flicking between Ezra and me before she nods her head and flops back down on the couch. I stare at the back of her head for a few moments before turning back toward Ezra and taking a seat.

“Any news on her sister?”

“He found her. Bringing her to Chicago as we speak.”

Shit. I'm too late. I was hoping to figure out her sister's location before Joseph had her taken, but that's no longer possible. I can still protect her; it just makes it slightly more difficult now that she's in Joseph's grasp.

"Do we know where he's taken her? Or what he plans to do with her?"

"No. But he asked me to keep an eye on her once she arrives. I'm not allowed to kill her, unfortunately."

"Unfortunately?"

"It would make things easier on all three of us if you just put a bullet in both of their heads. Joseph will no longer have pawns to play with as he pleases, and you won't have to betray the only family you've ever known."

"Not going to happen."

"She'll never be safe until Joseph is dead," Ezra presses on, not telling me one thing I don't already know. "Are you going to kill him?"

"Yes," I respond with conviction, knowing deep down that I'd do anything for Willa. Even lay down my life. "Now, where do we stand?"

A dark cloud crosses his expression the moment my phone dings and I check my messages.

"Speak of the Devil." It seems I'm going to be speaking to Joseph sooner than I thought.

JOSEPH

I need a live stream set up for my mouse. Someone wishes to speak to her.

She's at my place. The men wanted a taste of your mouse…

I let my words trail off, my stomach twisting in pain at the mere mention of another man getting their hands on her.

JOSEPH

Fine. Get her ready now. You have one hour.

"He doesn't know what happened."

"Of course, he doesn't. What do you think I've been doing on these damn computers?" Ezra pushes back from the desk, clasping his hands together and stretching his arms high above his head. "I erased all the footage from the cage and spliced in recordings of her asleep, running on a loop, to cover the gap in time. I also gave you access to the feed. You'll find it on this monitor."

He points toward the monitor closest to me as Adler comes barging in, a tray full of sweets and other various types of food, along with a bottle of water and a bottle of ibuprofen.

"I didn't know what you like, so I made a little of everything. Eggs, bacon, and toast. There were also some cookies stashed in the cabinet. I don't know how long they've been there, but they tasted good."

"I can't say no to cookies." She shrugs her shoulders before grabbing the remote off the floor and waving it in the air. "Adler, do you wanna watch some TV?"

"Sorry, I can't. I have class in a few hours and still have to check in back at the house before heading there."

Her eyes widen in fear, but I shake my head. "He won't say a word. Will you, Adler?"

"Never," he responds with conviction, his eyes full of determination, and I nod.

"Protect her with your life, Adler." He nods his head before making his way toward the couch and placing the tray on the table. "I'll see you later. Ezra. Felix."

I slap Ezra on the shoulder, giving it a tight squeeze. "Thank you."

"No thanks needed. Don't make me regret this."

I nod my head at him as he turns around, making his way toward the door. The moment the door closes behind him, I take a seat on the couch beside Willa. I stare at her, watching for a few moments, not saying a word.

"If you have a question to ask me, just ask." She turns her attention away from the television, focusing on me.

My mind swirls with a million questions, unable to settle on one. I want to know everything that led to her almost being raped in that room, but what I want to know most is about her sister. There has to be a reason Joseph is so interested in her.

"Why would someone want to kidnap your sister?" I ask, hoping that one question will give me all the answers I desire.

Willa sighs, throwing her hands in the air. "To torture me?" She pushes up off the couch and begins pacing back and forth in front of me.

"Celia is the only person in this world I care about. If your boss wanted to get to me, the best way to do that is through her. He could torture me, sell me off to the highest bidder, or even cut off one of my limbs, but he'd never

break me. No matter how hard he tried. But Celia is my greatest weakness. I'd do anything for her and vice versa."

I clench my fist on the couch, attempting to control the rage flowing inside me. "So, if Celia thought she could save you by completing a task, she'd do it?"

"Yes. In a heartbeat."

The connection between these two must be why Joseph suddenly wants to use Celia. Willa was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Neither one of them deserves what is happening to them.

"This is all my fault. I should've just let him…" Tears pool in her eyes, but I quickly pull her into my side.

"This isn't your fault. You protected your friend. And I will help protect you and your sister."

We don't speak for a few minutes. The only sound in the room is the soft voices coming from the television.

"How did you get into this line of work?" she questions, probably believing I wouldn't answer.

"Joseph killed my father and gave me a choice. Become a member of his family or die. He said I had fight left in me, too much potential to let me die. He brought me inside, fed me, and explained how things would work."

Willa takes a seat beside me, reaching for my hand, but I pull it out of her reach. "At first, I earned my keep, cleaning and running to drop locations to grab payments. Then one day, he showed me how to fire a gun. From that day on, I learned things you don't learn in school, and I loved it. Apparently, I'm sick and twisted."

"You're not a monster." She places her hand on my cheek, turning my face toward hers. "If you were a killing machine, you would have let that man rape me and then put me out of my misery, but you didn't. Instead, you saved me from everything."

I place my hand on top of hers, pushing my cheek into her palm. "I don't know what these feelings are, but I know I'm not strong enough to resist them."

Willa leans close to my face, her nose brushing gently against mine before she whispers, "Then don't."

Those two words break the last hold I have on my control. I lean forward slightly and capture her lips in mine. A soft mewl escapes her lips

before she wraps her arms around my neck, pulling herself into my lap. Willa swipes her tongue against my lips, and I open for her.

She isn't an experienced kisser, but that doesn't matter to me. I gently stroke her tongue with my own before pulling back slightly, ending the kiss.

"What now?"

"Now, we're going to see your sister."

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## WILLA

Felix places another soft kiss on my forehead. “You need to put on some real clothes before we leave.”

“Why? I happen to like this shirt.” Climbing out of his lap, I tug on the bottom of the shirt, holding it off to the side like a dress. “Or would you rather me take it off?” My lips curve up into a smile as I turn around in a circle, giving Felix a good view of my body.

Felix smiles at me, lighting up his entire face. “I like it, too, but if I don’t get you in front of that camera in the next”—he checks his watch —“thirty minutes, Joseph is going to come here looking for you.”

Felix is terrifying, but when he smiles… that’s his most powerful weapon. At least when it comes to me. My heart gallops inside my chest as my mind goes completely blank while I stare at him. His whole demeanor changes when he smiles. I don’t even know if he’s aware of it, but for a few short moments, he looks completely at peace.

“We don’t want that,” I mumble, my face heating as embarrassment crawls up my spine. I spin on my heels and make a beeline for the bedroom, wanting to be anywhere but here right now, but I stop in the doorway. “Ummm, do we have any clothes that actually fit me?”

“Ezra must have left your bag around here somewhere,” he calls over his shoulder as he leans down to check the monitors on the table in the center of the room.

Yeah, most of the items I hastily shoved in that bag mean nothing. Clean underwear, bras, and clothes, nothing out of the usual. But both men went out of their way to make sure I had it. That I felt comfortable with everything going on around me. They gave me something I can control.

“Felix.” My bottom lip trembles as I run back across the floor and launch myself into his arms.

He stumbles backward, the desk stopping us from ending up in a heap of tangled limbs on the floor. All the emotions I’ve been trying desperately to keep in check come bubbling to the surface. “Thank you.” I sniffle as my heart constricts in my chest.

“No one has ever…” I choke out as I bite back a sob. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I pull myself closer to him and bury my nose into his neck. “Just thank you.”

His hand slides under my thighs, and he leans forward and presses a soft kiss on my collarbone. Making sure to not touch my bad shoulder, he continues his way across my collarbone, nipping and sucking along my flesh. My eyes roll back in my head, a strangled moan slipping between my lips.

“If you keep touching me like that, we won’t make it to that meeting with Joseph.”

I don’t want this. I don’t. I don’t want Felix to take me into his room and make me feel things I never could’ve imagined. I don’t want him to keep touching me, smelling me, devouring my body like its last meal. I do not want to sleep with Felix Bianchi, no matter how my body is reacting to him right now.

Felix nibbles at the space below my ear, dragging his teeth along the sensitive skin before kissing my lips gently. His eyes are shining with emotions I don’t want to put words to just yet. He pulls back, searching my eyes for something, before lowering my body to the ground.

“I suggest you hurry into that room and lock the door.”

“Why is that? I’m not afraid of you.”

“You should be, *bambolina*. You should be.” His hands slide up my arms, tugging lightly on my wrist. I release my grip on his neck and take a step back.

My eyes scan the room, looking anywhere but at Felix’s face.

“Now, go get some clothes on. Joseph doesn’t like to be kept waiting.” He grips my shoulders and spins me around to face the door, giving me a soft slap on the ass.

I yelp in surprise. “Tease.”

I wink at him over my shoulder before heading for the room, closing and locking the door behind me. Although, there’s no doubt that if Felix

wanted to get to me, that door wouldn't give me any protection.

*Do you really want to be protected from him?*

My eyes drift shut as I lean back on the door, ripples of desire rolling through my body as I walk toward the bed and take a seat. Felix isn't someone I should be lusting after. He's to be feared and kept at arm's length. If I want to get Celia and me out of this mess, I'm going to need his help, but after that, we can go our separate ways. Our paths will probably never cross again.

"He's the enemy," I say with conviction. "A means to an end. Once I get Celia back, he and I'll never see each other again." Why don't I believe that?

"Knock, Knock." I jump to my feet as Felix opens the door, shoving my bag through the small space. "You forgot to grab your bag before coming into the room."

"You gave me a fucking heart attack." I huff, scurrying toward the door and grabbing my bag before slamming it shut.

"Did you forget something?"

"No," I deadpan, cocking my head to the side, trying to figure out what he's talking about.

Dropping the bag on the bed, I dig around for something to wear, pulling out a pair of black yoga pants and an oversized T-shirt. What does one wear when a killer wants to use you as bait to blackmail your sister? This is going to have to do. I doubt this is a formal event anyway.

"Say thank you."

"Thank you," I mumble, pulling my pants on and shoving my arms into the shirt. I take a quick look in the mirror hanging on the closet door before opening the door. "Ready."

Felix stands near the door, his arms crossed over his chest. His eyebrow raises in question as his eyes scan down my body.

"What? Should I change or something?" I look down at my body, turning from left to right, searching for anything out of place, but I come up empty.

He pushes away from the door, gripping my chin tightly in his hand and forcing me to meet his stare. "After we finish this meeting with Joseph, we're going to have a talk about your behavior."

"My behavior? What am I, five years old? Daddy wants me to say please and thank you or I won't get desert for dinner?" I laugh loudly,

trying to pull free from his grasp, but his grip tightens.

"Don't test me, Willa," he growls before shoving me away from him and storming for the door. "Let's go. We're going to be late."

Felix's eyes bore into me, daring me to step out of line so he can unleash his fury on me. But what would be the fun in that? It takes some serious effort, but I bite my tongue. Barely managing to keep my snarky attitude in check, I stride past Felix, out the door.

"Good girl." He nods his head before pulling the door shut behind me. "We need to head up a flight of stairs and to the right. That's where the cameras have been set up."

I nod my head before heading towards the stairs. Taking them one at a time, I try to focus on what's about to happen. I'm going to see Celia for the first time since all of this happened. We've never gone longer than a few weeks without talking, so my lack of communication wouldn't have been anything out of the ordinary for her, but I doubt she has any idea of the trouble she's in. That we are both in.

"Do you know what he's going to do to her?" I stop once I get to the top of the steps, waiting for Felix to answer.

He hesitates for a moment before placing his hand on the small of my back and urging my body forward. "He wants her to get information about a rival family in Chicago, for some reason."

"Wait, you don't know the reason?" I allow him to lead me forward.

This can't be good. I remember Felix saying something about being Joseph's right hand. I know I'm not in the mafia, but I have watched my fair share of mob movies. That position is important and holds a lot of power. The fact that Joseph is hiding information from Felix means there is something very wrong here.

"No." Felix opens the door, ushering me through before him. "That's the part that worries me the most."

I'm at a loss for words. And that never happens. As we make our way down the hall, the entire area fills with sunlight. It's as if we've entered an entirely different universe. They painted the walls in this area a bright white color, and the floors are clean and free of any type of debris.

"Did we just cross into heaven from hell?" I mumble, committing everything I can about this area to memory. I made the mistake of not cataloging my surroundings when we left the dungeon I was being held in, and I won't make that mistake again.

“Go through that door and have a seat in the chair provided.”

“Will I be able to see my sister?”

“Yes. Now get moving.” He gives me a shove, pushing me through the door.

I stumble over my feet, barely stopping myself from falling. I turn and scowl over my shoulder, wanting to make sure Felix understands my annoyance with him right now.

Instead of looking apologetic for almost making me bust my head open on the concrete floor, he smiles brightly. *“Go,”* he mouths, pointing toward the center of the room.

I make my way toward the red chair sitting in the center of the room. A table with a laptop sitting in the center is a few feet in front of it. “Celia.” I gasp, tears immediately pooling in my eyes as I see my sister on the screen.

She’s inside some type of apartment, a beautiful skyline in the background. She looks the same as always. Her blonde hair is pulled into a messy bun on the top of her head, her face flushed red, and tears roll down her cheeks as she stares right at me. She doesn’t look like she was harmed, which is a good thing, but I can’t help but wonder how long that is going to last. Joseph wants her to do something for him, probably something that could put her safety in jeopardy or get her killed.

I want to say a million things to her. Tell her how sorry I am, that I love her, or even that everything will be okay. But the words get stuck in my throat, slowly suffocating me as I take a seat in the chair.

“I’d ask how you’re doing, but I already know the answer,” Celia says, a forced smile covering her face.

I shake my head, giving her a half-hearted smile. “What’s up, buttercup?”

To anyone else in the room, our conversation seems like nothing more than me saying hello to my sister, but for us, it’s another language. It’s our way of letting each other know we are okay or, in this case, hanging on for dear life. I want her to feel at ease and not worry about whatever is happening to the two of us. For now, the status quo is in balance, but we need to be careful. One false move could cost us everything.

“Nothing much, Kitty Kat.” We stare at each other for a few moments, neither of us knowing what to say, before a voice chimes in.

“Say goodbye, ladies.”

I don't even have a chance to say another word before the screen blinks off, breaking the connection with Celia.

"Are you okay?" Felix asks, resting his hand on my shoulder and giving it a squeeze.

*How do I even answer that question?* It's as if I'm feeling a million different things at once. Happiness, confusion, anger, guilt, sadness, and a million other emotions I don't know how to express. I take a few moments to try to make sense of everything but fail. So as per usual with me, I say the first thing that pops into my head.

*"*I'm happy to see my sister in one piece, but I'm also terrified that it will be the last time we speak to each other," I respond, tears pooling in my eyes.

Felix sighs loudly before lifting me out of the chair and crashing his lips down to mine.

We break apart with a gasp as he pulls my body towards him, pushing his rock-hard erection into my aching core, both of us moaning in pleasure as he places small, gentle kisses down my neck and along my collarbone.

He pushes his hand underneath my shirt, gently caressing my skin before capturing my mouth again. I can hear nothing but our heavy breathing as his hand makes its way down my side, pushing up my shirt and exposing my skin.

"It's time for your punishment," he whispers against my lips before his eyes meet mine.

A shiver runs down my spine, and I nod. I could try to run, to get out of whatever punishment he has in mind, but I'm rooted in place, my feet firmly planted on the floor, waiting for his next instruction.

"Good girl." He smiles, threading his fingers through mine.

Felix smirks at me over his shoulder before he leads me out of the room. I have no idea what's going to happen when we make it back to his side of the building, but I know once it's over, things are going to be different between us.

*What the hell have I just gotten myself into?*

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## FELIX

Willa doesn't make a sound as we head back toward my place. Her eyes dart to every doorway, and her lips move slightly as she walks. She doesn't think I notice, but I do. She wants to escape, probably even more now than before since she's seen Celia in the flesh.

But it's no longer that simple.

Joseph is a planner. Planning every move he makes down to the smallest detail, making it almost impossible to outthink him. Our only option is the element of surprise, which we still have, but for how much longer? But there will come a time where I have to choose between Willa and my allegiance to Joseph.

My intention with Willa has always been to keep her on her toes, keep her guessing about what I'm going to do next. I wanted to break down the walls she's surrounded herself with, without having to rely on brute force, but that time has come and gone. She has crawled into my very being. Being near her has become a drug, and I'm now a willing addict.

We head down the stairs, turning back toward my place, when I see a figure standing by the door. I tug on Willa's hand, motioning for her to stop. Her eyes widen, and for a split second, I see fear shining back at me, but it's gone just as quickly.

"I will protect you," I say with conviction before stepping in front of her, putting my body between her and the person waiting at my door. "At the first sign of trouble, you run."

She nods her head, gripping tightly to the back of my shirt, halting my movements. I turn and place a gentle kiss on her forehead. "Let go, *bambolina*."

Her grip tightens on my shirt before her hand falls to the side. “Be careful.”

I only nod my head before stepping close to the door. “Can I help you?”

“Felix?” he asks, turning his entire body toward me.

I eye him skeptically, watching to see if he makes any sudden movements. My eyes scan his body for any bulges that seem out of the ordinary. A pair of black horn-rimmed glass sit on the edge of his nose, broad shoulders, dressed in typical office attire—none of that gives me an idea of where he came from or why he’s here, but I can’t be too careful.

After a few moments of silence, he begins to fidget, rocking on the balls of his feet from left to right before bending down to pick up a bag sitting beside him on the floor. *How did I miss that?* There’s nothing too descript about the bag. It seems to be a duffle-shaped bag made of some type of black leather with a large handle.

“I’m looking for Felix Bianchi. I was told he lived here.” He pauses long enough for me to respond, which I don’t. “Oh, hello.” He continues leaning to the side and looking at something hidden behind me.

*Shit, he found her.*

“Hello,” Willa responds, stepping closer to me as he lifts his hand, wiggling his fingers in her direction before turning his attention back to me.

Not many people know my first name, let alone where I spend my time. This could be a trap. I need to stay on guard until I know for sure what this man wants, especially now that he’s noticed Willa.

“Didn’t your friend say something about a doctor coming?” Willa whispers loudly, causing the man to smile.

“Yes, that’s me.” His entire body seems to sag in relief as he takes a step toward us, holding his hand out in front of him. “I’m Dr. Jenner, but please call me Allen.”

Dr. Allen Jenner. I’ve never heard his name before, but that isn’t unusual. The men Joseph sends to me need a body bag when I’m finished with them, not a doctor. Usually, when I’m wounded, I stitch myself up. Or on the odd occasion I’ve been shot, I send Ezra a text to come help patch me up.

“Hey, Doc. Thanks for coming to see me on such short notice.” Willa steps around me, grasping his hand in hers and giving it a firm shake. “This lug here is a little paranoid. I’m Willa.”

“Hello, Willa.” He offers her a kind smile before stepping away from the door.

I don’t say a word, just reach into my pocket and snag the key, letting us inside. I quickly disarm the security system before opening the door wider. “Come in and make yourself at home.”

I force a smile as they come through the door. Dr. Jenner’s eyes scan the room, widening in shock as he takes in everything. If the doctor has any concerns about the multiple cameras placed around the room and the sophisticated security system on the wall, he has enough sense not to mention it. Being on the payroll of a powerful mafia family will do that to you. But I still don’t trust him. I hate having other people in space, especially anyone that I have to allow to leave at some point.

*But you let her come here?*

I shake my head, not wanting to delve further into that line of thinking. It’s only going to end up badly for both of us. She needs to have a doctor check her out. We’ve drugged her, beat her, and she was almost raped. That has to come with some type of lasting damage—both physical and emotional.

“Where would you like to do the examination?” Willa asks, wringing her hands together in front of her.

Realization hits her features, and her skin pales. She’s nervous. Not only have the last two days been the worst in her life, but now she has to submit to an examination from someone she doesn’t know she can trust.

I will not rest until I get my hands on the asshole that forced himself on her. My nerves are on fire as I think about what could’ve happened if I hadn’t walked in when I did. No one touches her but me. If they do, no matter what the reason, they will suffer the consequences.

“How about the bedroom? I’m going to need you to lie down so I can do a full examination.” He smiles at her gently before placing his hand on her elbow.

A menacing growl bubbles out of my chest as I step behind her. My hand runs across her stomach, pulling her tightly against my chest. “Don’t touch her.”

To my surprise, she doesn’t pull away from me or fight to get free. Her entire body sags in relief, tucking herself against me and allowing me to protect her from anything that might want to harm her. Holding her like this, tucked up against my body as if she belongs to me, soothes my anger.

“It’s okay,” she responds quietly, her head dropping back to my shoulder. Her eyes soften, and her mouth curves up into a smile. “He’s going to have to touch me to do the exam.”

I drop my head to hers, inhaling deeply. I allow her scent to calm the monster raging inside me as my grip on her loosens. She’s right. I’m going to need to let her go if I want the doctor to ensure she is doing all right. I can only protect her from the things I can see with my eyes; the doctor can help with everything else.

“I’m coming with you,” I respond, leaving no room for discussion.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

We stare at each other, having an unspoken conversation. I won’t let anyone hurt her. I will protect her from anyone or anything that comes to harm her, even if it costs me my life.

Dr. Jenner clears his throat loudly. “Very well.”

“After your examination, it’s time for your punishment,” I breathe into her ear, her eyes growing impossibly wide as she looks up at me.

“Promise?” Willa giggles softly before stepping out of my embrace and heading toward the bedroom, with Dr. Jenner right behind her. I follow closely behind them, my senses on full alert, ready to jump into action at the first sign of provocation.

“Can you lie down on the bed for me?” Dr. Jenner asks, placing his bag on the floor beside the bed.

Willa moves toward the bed, lying down as instructed. Her hands rest on her stomach, rising and falling slightly as she breathes. I take a seat on the edge of the bed, only a few inches from where the doctor is setting up shop.

“If you could give me some room,” he mumbles, his eyes flicking toward the chair in the corner, but I don’t move an inch.

“He can’t work with you hovering over me, Felix,” Willa says softly, pushing herself into a seated position. “Why not grab the chair over there and sit on the other side of the bed?”

“No.”

Not bothering to elaborate that anything could happen with me that far across the room. Yes, it’s only a few feet, but he could easily slit her throat in the time that it’d take me to get close enough to stop him. She could think of this as her opportunity to escape. I didn’t reset the security system,

locking her inside without any means of escape. I need to stay close for both of their safety.

*Keep telling yourself that.*

"I'd love it if you held my hand." Her hand reaches toward me, palm up. Her fingers are outstretched, as if they are begging me to help comfort her.

"Fine." I turn for a fraction of a second and grab the chair, placing it on the opposite side of the bed before grabbing her hand.

Dr. Jenner chuckles softly before covering it up with a cough. "Let's get started."

He leans down, grabbing a pair of medical gloves from inside his bag and sliding them on to his hands with a snap. "What's your full name?"

"Do you really need to know that?" I question.

"It's a standard question for paperwork, but I can skip it."

I nod my head. The last thing we want is a paper trail leading anyone back to Willa. Her full name is of no consequence to receive treatment, and I'm sure Joseph is paying him handsomely to look the other way when he comes to patch people up.

"Okay. How about you explain to me why you called me here."

Willa grips my hand tightly, locking eyes with me as she relives what happened to her earlier today. She tells the doctor how she was handcuffed to the cage, how he smacked her, fondled her breast, and entered her ass without permission. When he asked about the wound on her shoulder, she claimed it happened during the assault, but we both know she's lying.

She maintains eye contact with me the entire time she's recounting what happened to her. Never once looking away or stumbling over her words. Deep-rooted shame overcomes me, but I refuse to look away. If she can be strong and recount what happened so soon, then I can bear it. Each word hits me like a punch in the face. I want to drop to the floor and beg for her forgiveness. I promised no one would harm her, and it happened right under my nose.

"I'm okay." I jump slightly as her hand caresses my cheek softly. "You saved me."

I pull her hand to my mouth, kissing it gently. "Never again," I vow to her and myself. This is the last time anyone touches her but me.

"Okay. I'll give you a complete checkup. Make sure we cover all our bases," Dr. Jenner says, breaking the bubble surrounding us.

“Thank you,” she responds, giving my hand a small squeeze.

“How old are you, Willa?”

“Twenty-one,” she whispers, her eyes flicking to mine for a moment before returning to Dr. Allen.

Fuck, I knew she was young, but I was hoping she was closer to thirty than anything else. I’ve been on the planet for more than two decades longer than she’s been alive.

“When was your last period?”

“Right before…” Her words trail off as if she were searching for the right answer. “I came to visit Felix.”

Visit? Is that what I am to her? A stop off in the grand scheme of life? A means to an end? My muscles stiffen in protest as my chest tightens painfully, reminding me that this is nothing but an illusion. That the time we spend together is only until she can break her sister free, and then she’ll be gone, disappearing into the night like a figment of my imagination, no matter how much I want her to stay with me. I knew in my heart that this was true, but I wanted to hold on to the dream a little longer.

Dr. Jenner presses a stethoscope to her chest, listening intently to the sound of her heart before reaching for her wrist. He hesitates for a moment, his eyes flicking to mine before touching her. I nod my head, letting him know it was okay.

“Sexual partners?” he questions, not looking at either of us as he takes her pulse.

Her eyes dart to me, her cheeks a delicious shade of pink as she answers his question. “I’ve never had one. I’m a virgin.”

It feels as if all the air has been sucked out of the room. A virgin. My desire for her burns as hot as a forest fire within me. I want to claim her as my own, breed her, watch her belly swell with my child, make her mine for all eternity to ensure she won’t disappear.

*But what does she want?*

“Are you on birth control?” Willa shakes her head no instead of responding, and Dr. Jenner smiles at her softly before reaching into his bag on the floor. “I have a few samples in my bag. Take a look at them and choose one to try. If you like it, just have Felix let me know, and I can get you a prescription.

*She’s never taking those pills.*

I don't say a word as the doctor continues examining her body. He starts at the top of her head and works his way down, examining the purple bruises on her cheeks from being smacked. He checks her eyes for any signs of a concussion and looks over the bruises on her wrist from the handcuff. Each bruise and injury are permanently etched into my memory, reminding me of what was done to her.

"I'm going to need to examine your vaginal area and rear end, Willa."

Her entire body tenses, tears pooling in her eyes at the thought of him touching her.

"Is that necessary?" I growl.

"She could have a rectal hematoma from her assault, or other injuries in that area. I need to look to ensure everything is healing."

Dr. Jenner may work for our family, but that doesn't mean I'm going to let him anywhere near Willa without her permission.

"It's okay." Her voice quivers slightly as she reaches for her waistband, pulling her pants down to her knees, then off, and dropping them to the side.

Dr. Jenner leans over her, blocking her from my view as he examines her, giving her a small amount of privacy.

I'm sure Dr. Jenner knows that Willa isn't just visiting for the weekend, but Joseph pays him entirely too much money to take care of his girls for him to say anything. He's to take care of the girls, keep them healthy, and stay the hell out of Joseph's business.

"Everything looks good." He pats her inner thigh and smiles up at her. "Now, if you could, roll to your right so I can check your backside."

She doesn't say a word, rolling toward me and allowing the doctor to check her over. I should be paying attention to what he's doing to her, but I can't. My eyes are focused on her. Tears roll down her cheeks as he checks for damage. I need to know what he did to her. Willa flinches slightly as he probes between her ass cheeks.

Dr. Jenner's eyebrows pull down in thought as he sits up to his full height, blood covering a few of his fingertips. She must have torn. "She won't need stitches, but she'll be sore for a few days."

He pulls off his gloves and turns to me, gesturing for me to follow him out of the room.

"I'll be right back."

Willa nods her head as I kiss the back of her hand softly and follow him out. I pull the door shut behind me, wanting to make sure Willa doesn't overhear our conversation.

"I noticed some bruising on the backs of her legs, along with tearing in her backside." Dr. Jenner frowns, locking eyes with me. "I know that she isn't just visiting."

I open my mouth to respond, but he holds up his hand. "I don't need any information. Joseph doesn't pay me to ask questions. However, I can tell you care about her."

Shit. I thought I was doing a better job of hiding my feelings. First Ezra and now the doctor. If Joseph finds out, it could mean the end of us before we even have a chance to rescue her sister. I can't let that happen.

"You're mistaken." The words taste like ash in my mouth, but I force my expression to remain blank.

"In any case, here's my card. If you need me for anything, anything at all, just call. My home address is also on the back," he says, having no idea if I'm someone he can trust.

This isn't the first time he's done this. He must give a card to every girl he meets, wanting to let them know that there is someone out there that's willing to help them.

"Besides the tearing, Willa is fine. No permanent physical damage, but I'd suggest getting her counseling if possible." He says this knowing I can't do that; she can't be given too much freedom.

"Thanks." I nod, not commenting on his recommendations. "I'll walk you out."

He turns on his heels and strides toward the door, not bothering to look back or say goodbye to Willa, probably wanting to keep some distance between him and her, making it easier to leave her when he doesn't know if she's safe here with me. I want to tell him that I'd never do anything to hurt her, that I'd protect her with my life, but that could put a bullseye on his back, as well, and I'll be damned if I have any more innocent blood on my hands.

Once he's out of eyesight, I close the door and arm the alarm system. Exhaustion from the last few days hits me like a ton of bricks. I move toward the bedroom like a zombie, pulling off my shirt and dropping it to the floor.

Willa stands at the end of the bed, her pants laying on the floor, eyeing me skeptically. “Well, that went well,” she mumbles, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the bed. Her tiny hand caresses the top of my dick through my pants. I thrust my hips up slightly, and she tightens her hold around me.

“Let me make you feel good,” Willa whispers, turning me around and shoving me down on the bed. She climbs onto the bed, prowling up my body, looking up at me with her innocent eyes. I can’t seem to find the words to thank her for the precious gift she is about to give me.

My eyes focus on her hands, and she pops open the button of my jeans, unzipping them slowly, allowing my cock to spring free. Her warm breath caresses my skin as she takes the tip of my cock into her mouth.

“Fuck.” I spread my legs wider, her tiny frame falling between them. She wiggles around slightly before I thread my fingers through her blonde hair, guiding her movements as she takes me into her mouth again, stopping before she gets to the bottom and coming back up. My cock slips from her lips with a pop. “Am I doing it right?”

“Yes, you’re perfect.”

Once again, she takes me into her mouth, bobbing her head up and down as I slip further and further down her throat.

“Just relax your throat and let me guide you.” I push gently on her head and lift my hips, my cock slipping from between her lips. I tug gently on her hair, signaling for her to pull up before pushing her down further onto my cock. Willa gags slightly as the tip of my cock brushes against the back of her throat.

“That’s it, *bambolina*. Relax and take me all the way in.” I push on her head one more time as my dick slips down her throat, her muscles clenching around me as she swallows. I bite down on my lip, resisting the urge to flip her over and thrust my dick between her folds.

Willa looks up at me from her position between my legs, tears collecting in her eyes as her cheeks hollow, sucking me deeper into her mouth. “So beautiful,” I say as I look down at her, knowing I would lay down my life for this woman.

Even though I’ve only known her for a few days, as soon as I laid eyes on her, I knew she was the missing piece of my soul. Willa hums in pleasure as she grinds her pussy into the mattress.

“Are you wet for me, Willa?” I ask as I tug on her hair, pulling her head away from my cock. She mews in protest. “Answer me.”

I fist her hair, pulling her head back. I love seeing her in this position, her head tilted backwards, elongating her throat. Spit dribbles down her chin, her chest rising and falling quickly, her desire for me and my cock written all over her face.

“Yes.”

“Good girl,” I praise, as I allow her to lean forward again, thrusting my cock down her throat and causing her to gag a second time.

“Spin around,” I command, releasing her hair. She pushes up to her hands and knees, spinning around and lowering her pussy toward my face. I wrap my arms around her thighs, pulling her pussy down to my face, inhaling deeply. “Good enough to eat.”

Willa looks over her shoulder, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth. Our eyes connect as my tongue snakes out and licks her from bottom to top, suctioning her engorged clit into my mouth.

“Felix!” Her head drops to the bed, thrusting her pussy further into my face. I release her clit and thrust my tongue into her pussy as I reach up and pinch her clit, rolling it between my two fingers. Her muscles clench around my tongue, making it hard for me to pull it out before quickly thrusting it back in.

Her warm lips wrap around my cock. “Fuck, if you keep sucking me like that, I’ll explode.” The only response from her is a quiet hum that vibrates through my entire body.

I continue to play her body like a violin. The squishing sound of her pussy as my finger pounds in and out of her is our music. A symphony of moans fills the room as we both climb closer to our release.

“I’m close,” I say, lifting my hips and shoving my cock deeper down her throat while sucking her clit into my mouth again. I shove my fingers into her core, her muscles tightening even further around them. A tingle shoots up my spine a few moments before I come. “Swallow it. Take all of me.” I roar as her muscles massage my cock, pulling the cum out of me.

A few moments later, her screams of pleasure fill the room, her pussy juice squirting all over my face as I thrust my fingers in and out of her. “That’s it. I want to taste you on my face the entire day.”

Willa licks my cock clean as I lap at her folds, wanting to save the taste of her first orgasm. She kisses the tip of my cock before turning around, her

face even with mine, and places a gentle kiss on my lips.

I open my mouth to say something, but a loud ring fills the room. I sigh.

"What in the hell is that?" She grips my shoulders tightly. "It sounds like an air-raid siren or something."

I chuckle at her reaction. "Close, it's the satellite phone. I need to make sure the sound is loud enough to wake me in my sleep."

"That sound could wake the dead," she mumbles as she climbs off my body and heads toward the bathroom.

"Exactly," I respond as I lean to the side, pulling the phone out of my back pocket. Joseph's name flashes across the screen. I take a deep breath and answer the call.

"Hello."

"Is she ready to tell me what I want to know?" Joseph doesn't waste any time with pleasantries. He never has, but something about this conversation feels different. All my senses go on high alert, my eyes scanning the room, looking for anything that could be out of place, but I find nothing.

"Yes," I respond, knowing there isn't any other answer I can give him.

"Very well. Bring her to me, and we'll see how compliant she is."

"The doctor just left my place; it'll be quicker to host a video call here." Acid churns in my stomach, twisting in on itself as it tries to claw its way out of my body. I want to rip him limb from limb, but I need to keep my cool.

"Very well. You have one hour. Don't be late."

My fist clenches at my side as I hang up the phone. I would love nothing more than to tell him she isn't ready, but that will only make things worse. Denying him access to her would make this worse when he gets his hand on her. He hates being told no and only needs an excuse to take things to the next level. Any small infraction could push him over the edge.

We need to comply with his request.

"Who was that?" she asks, her pants now firmly back in place.

I wish there was a way to warn her about what's going to happen when she meets with Joseph, but even I don't know what's in store for either of us. She's going to have to figure out a way to get through this on her own. Joseph loves to play games, but only when he knows what the outcome will be.

"Joseph wants to see you."

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## WILLA

A shiver of fear skates down my back at the mention of his name. I thought I'd have more time before I had to see him. Every time I close my eyes, I see his face. The way he enjoyed what Ezra did to me. I wouldn't be surprised if he watched as that asshole tried to rape me. He sat there, listening to my screams, probably finding joy in what he was doing to me.

"Why?" I croak. My fear tightens its grip around my heart, but I fight it. I need to get a grip. Obviously, Joseph is going to want to speak to me, to gloat after capturing my sister. "He has my sister. What does he want with me now?"

"I don't know." He stands in front of me, holding a pair of handcuffs in his hands, but he doesn't look at me.

I wouldn't look at me either if I was about to lead someone to their worst nightmare. Deep down, I know Felix wants to let me go, but he can't. Not now, especially now that Joseph has my sister. Joseph found the one thing that would make me stay in this hell. I'd do anything to protect my sister. She's my only weakness, and he found it.

"I'm sorry, *bambolina*." He closes the cuffs on my wrist slowly, planting a kiss on the damaged skin on my wrist.

"What are you going to do if he tells you to kill me?" His gaze flicks toward mine, gripping the cuffs and pulling me into his chest.

"You don't have anything to worry about," he says, planting a kiss on the top of my head before pulling away from me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I respond quickly, my eyes stinging just enough to be annoying. "Let's get this party started."

I brush past him, heading toward the door and pulling on the handle. But it doesn't budge. I cock my head to the side, trying to figure out if I did something wrong, but it still doesn't open. "How the fuck do I open this thing?" I shout, pulling hard on the door.

Felix steps up beside me, opening a small hidden panel beside the door and pressing a few buttons before pushing it closed. "Try now."

I pull on the handle, and it opens immediately. I don't bother to address him as I swing open the door and storm out, heading right for the stairs, realizing that I have no idea where we are going.

"Up the stairs," he says, brushing past me.

I stare up at him, unable to find words to explain what I'm feeling right now. I don't even know what I'm feeling at the moment. Felix has done nothing but be honest with me and protect me from anyone that has tried to harm me. My stomach begins to churn as we draw closer to the door at the top of the stairs.

Felix promised he'd never lie to me, and he hasn't, but he also didn't answer my question when I asked him what he'd do if Joseph told him to kill me. We've spent time together, connected in a way I've never connected with another human being, but I don't know where his allegiance lies. He helped me escape the cage Joseph kept me in, and he did everything he could to shelter me from Joseph and his anger. But why? There has to be a reason.

"Is there something wrong?" Felix asks again, holding the door open for me.

I head through the door without sparing him another glance. Felix grips my arm tightly, spinning me around to face him. "What's the matter, Willa?"

What the fuck is wrong with me? I'm three seconds from bursting into tears because my feelings were hurt. *Would he kill me? Am I that disposable?* I turn my head to the side, not wanting to look him in the eyes. If I look at him, he'll know, and that will only make things worse. He's my captor, and I'm his captive. He can do with me as he pleases. The last twenty-four hours of peace evaporates into thin air.

"If you don't tell me what's wrong, I can't fix it," he growls, spinning me around and forcing me to look at him.

I want to push all his buttons. Wanting him to feel as out of control and powerless as I do now, but I think twice. I need Felix. I need his help. And

right now, I need his protection.

"You can't fix this, Felix. Now, let's go before your master gets upset and takes it out on me," I snap, yanking my arm from his grasp and stepping into the room.

"My mouse has returned to me." My entire body stiffens at the sound of his voice.

"Aww, did you miss me?"

Fuck, I really need to keep my mouth shut. It's always getting me into trouble. Felix groans loudly, no doubt thinking the same thing. Stepping further into the room, I notice the same red chair sitting in the center. A small table off to the side with a large rectangular box sitting on it. The same computer is still set in the center of the table, but instead of seeing Celia's smiling face, I come face to face with my worst nightmare.

"Of course, *piccolo topo."* (Of course, little mouse.)

"Why don't you tell me what it is you want with Celia and me? I'm sick of your games." I lean back into the chair, crossing my legs. His eyes scan my body, licking his lips before flicking them back to mine.

"Tell you my plans? What fun would that be?" The asshole looks so fucking amused. "You're here for my amusement. Nothing more, nothing less."

"And my sister?" I question, my voice quivering with emotion.

"Well, she has… other uses."

Anger builds inside my chest until I can barely control myself. I want to rage, maybe even smack that smug look off his face, but right now, I'm completely at his mercy. I don't know where Celia is, and I have no idea what he wants from us.

"Fuck you, asshole! If you don't keep your grubby hands off my sister, I will end you." Tears cloud my vision as I scream, making my throat burn.

I know that I'm completely full of shit. There is no possible way I'll ever get close enough to Joseph Bianchi to spit in his face, let alone kill him, but just saying the words makes me feel better.

His lips curl into a sneer as he chuckles darkly. "You need to learn how to control that mouth of yours." Joseph's eyes lock on to me like a wolf stalking their prey, ready to strike at any moment. His eyes roll up and down my body, panic welling in my belly for what feels like the millionth time today. "She needs to be punished."

“But…” Felix doesn’t move a muscle, his eyes focused on Joseph’s grainy image on the screen.

“No buts, Felix. Punish her.” When I look into his eyes, I see nothing but sadness. He looks down at me, begging me for forgiveness with his eyes as he reaches for my hands.

“Apologize now, Willa.”

“No.”

“Apologize now!” he growls, pulling me toward him.

“No,” I repeat, raising my chin in defiance.

Joseph may be the person holding Felix’s leash, but he’d never hurt a woman. His hand shoots forward, gripping my hair tightly and wrenching my head back. I should be terrified of what Felix is going to do to me, but I can’t bring myself to believe he’s capable of doing any permanent damage. He’s spanked me before, but he also made sure I saw a doctor and took care of me after the incident earlier today. Deep down, he’s a good man. I just need to appeal to that side of him and hope whatever hold Joseph has over him is weaker than that part of him.

“It’s time for your punishment.” He drops into the chair before releasing the handcuffs and yanking my pants down to my ankles. “Over my knee,” he commands, gripping my arm and pulling me forward.

“Please don’t do this,” I beg, tears in my eyes as I try to pull my shirt down over my exposed skin. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes, he does.” Joseph chuckles darkly. “But a spanking isn’t enough, Felix. I want my *piccolo topo* to remember her manners.”

I run my hand down the side of his face, forcing him to look at me, but he isn’t there. It’s just the emotionless mask I’ve seen a million times. He’s retreated into himself once again, protecting his soul from what he’s about to do.

*He’s supposed to protect me.*

“I had one of your brother’s leave you some toys on the table to play with, Felix.” Joseph’s voice breaks the spell as Felix pulls away from me, shoving me onto the chair. The force of my landing knocks the wind out of me, giving him just enough time to make it to the table and back before I could make a run for the door.

I hear something whistling before I hear the smack of an object against skin, sending my mind right back to the cage. Bound. Broken. Lying naked

on a bed in the middle of a frigid basement. Sweat breaks out across my forehead, my chest tightens, and my lungs feel as if I can't get enough air.

*He's going to beat me. He's going to beat me. He's going to beat me.*

"Apologize now, Willa." His feet come into view as his hand caresses down my back, squeezing my ass cheeks hard.

"Fuck you!" I spit out, my eyes focused on the screen as I brace myself for the pain.

Joseph zeroes in on me, his eyes alight with joy while waiting for Felix to dole out my punishment. Waiting for me to break, but I won't bend.

*Swish.*

I won't cry. I've taken a spanking from him before; this isn't anything different.

*Swish.*

Okay, maybe it is. Because this is so much worse.

*Swish. Swish. Swish.*

Each smack of the object against my skin feels worse than the one before. My skin feels like it's being ripped from my body, pain radiating through me. But I refuse to make a sound.

"Apologize," he commands continuing to light my skin on fire. "Apologize to Joseph, and I'll stop."

Never. I suck in a much-needed breath, tears and snot running down my face. I grit my teeth, clenching my jaw shut tightly. But I don't make a sound. I've never felt pain like this in my life, and I doubt I'll ever feel anything like this again. But I refuse to make a sound.

Felix continues to drag the object across my skin, alternating his movements. He's trying desperately to get me to submit to Joseph's authority. To give him the power over me he craves, but I will not be broken.

"Felix, please," I whimper, reaching the edge of my limit. "Stop. I'm begging you. Please stop."

"She's had enough," he says, kneeling beside me. His body blocks Joseph's view of my face, taking away Joseph's ability to watch me crumble. Felix is protecting me in the only way he can right now. He's giving me a chance to break, not for Joseph's pleasure, but for myself. Allowing me the privacy to allow the walls I've built around my emotions to crumble. My hand raises to my mouth, covering the sobs of pain as they bubble in my throat.

“Maybe she’ll remember her manners next time. I’d hate to have to treat her to the same lesson as Abigail.”

Felix’s entire body stiffens, and his hand pulls away from me as if I burned him. I stare at him. A flash of concern crosses his face, but it’s gone just as quickly as it appeared.

I have no idea if Joseph ends the call or is still watching, as my eyes are locked on Felix. I know deep down that if he had any other choice, he wouldn’t have beaten me. He wouldn’t have let anyone lay a hand on me. He’d have protected me as he promised.

*But he didn’t.*

His eyes shine with unshed tears as he pushes the hair out of my face. I reach my hand toward him, wrapping my fingers around his hand and giving it a small squeeze.

“No one will touch you again.” Felix leans forward, his lips only inches from my skin, and I pull away from him.

I know that he did what he was told to protect me, but that doesn’t mean I forgive him. He’s done horrible things to me, but he isn’t a monster. He’s nothing like Joseph, but there’s a chink in the armor surrounding his heart, and I have a feeling I know what caused it.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# FELIX

"Willa," I whisper, but she doesn't react. Her once-expressive eyes are now cold, dead, vacant. It's as if she's staring right through me. "Willa," I say a little more forcefully. "*Bambolina*, please answer me."

"Can we—" She whimpers as she pushes up of the chair, wobbling slightly. I reach out to help her, but she pulls away from me a second time. "Can we head back now?"

"Of course."

She eyes me warily as she struggles to stand. Pink stripes cover her lower back, ass, and the tops of her legs, mixed with small cuts and even blood in some places. I clench my eyes shut, not wanting to face the pain that I've caused her.

Nothing during this conversation went as planned. I was going to bring her to see Joseph. He'd play some mind games with her before giving me an order to do something unimportant. After the call, I'd scoop her into my arms and take her back to my place, locking us inside.

*Nothing went according to plan.*

The sight of her tears breaks me all over again. When I torture the men that Joseph brings to me, I feel nothing. No emotion. No hesitation. But being in this room with Willa was different. I retreat into myself, allowing the monster inside me to take over, feeding on the pain and screams of my victims. I'd use those feelings to complete my task until it was finished.

I've never regretted the things I did to those men, not once. But today was different. Today I had to listen to her beg and plead for me to stop. But

she never wavered, not once. Never giving in to Joseph's demands. I grip her arms as she continues to struggle, her body trembling in my gasp.

*She's terrified of me.*

I should walk out of this room, this building, and leave her alone. I'm the last person that she wants comfort from right now, but I can't bring myself to leave her. She's hurting. She and her sister have been kidnapped, she was almost raped, and now she was beaten by the man that promised to protect her.

*And I failed her.*

"Let me help you." I don't wait for her to respond as I bend down, scoop her into my arms, and stride out the door.

Her entire body stiffens in my arms, but she doesn't fight me. Her head is turned to the side, and she refuses to speak to me. Not that I know what to say. Right now, my words mean nothing to her. The only thing I can do is show her with my actions that I'll protect her, even if it's from myself.

I look down at my girl in my arms, her face stained with her tears, and her eyes cast off to the side. It was only a short time ago that her eyes were filled with desire for me and the things I promised to do to her body, but now, I'm sure I'll see nothing but betrayal.

Stopping in front of my door, I lower her feet to the floor. Keeping my arm wrapped around her waist and her body tucked tightly against my body, I reach forward and push in the key code to unlock the door.

The lock disengages as I bend down and scoop her back into my arms, striding through the door and heading directly for the bathroom. I don't bother to arm the extra security. Joseph has proved his point to both of us. No one is going to come looking for us—for now. But they will come; it's only a matter of time.

"I can walk, you know," she says from behind a curtain of hair, hiding her face from me.

"I know," I respond, burying my nose into the top of her hair and inhaling her delicious scent before pulling my girl closer to me.

*My girl.*

Thoughts like that are dangerous. They terrify me to my bones because she will never be mine. Not after what I've done to her. I've broken the small amount of trust she has in me; I've broken *her.*

*Can I even come back from this?*

I kick open the bathroom door with my foot before placing her on the seat of the toilet. “Would you like a bath?”

She doesn’t move a muscle, that faraway look once again in her eyes.

“I’m going to fill up the tub. Stay here.” I grip her chin, forcing her to look at me, which she does, but her eyes are blank. It’s as if she’s looking through me. She’s retreated into her mind, protecting herself from me and what I’ve done to her.

*I’m a monster.*

I stare at her for a few moments, wishing for her to give me some sign that she’s still with me, but there’s nothing. She doesn’t move a muscle. Having only taken a shower a few hours ago, none of this is needed, aside from the pain medication, but this is just as much for me as it is for her. I want to take care of her. Use this as my way to atone, even if only a little, for what I’ve done for her. Praying that this small act will bring her back to me. I can’t erase what I’ve done, but I can atone for it.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper. The three words are not nearly enough to convey my feelings. When she doesn’t answer, I sigh loudly, turning around and working on getting the tub filled with warm water.

I no longer see her as I did before. A pawn in whatever game Joseph is playing. A means to get everything I believed I wanted in life. Now she’s everything. The sun, the moon, the stars—lighting my way as I scramble to find my way out of the darkness.

I don’t know what I have to do in order to get a second chance with Willa, but I’ll do anything. I’d crawl through the pits of hell if I knew it would ease her pain. I need her to see me as something besides her abuser—as a man. As someone who cares deeply for her.

“Would you like something for the pain?” I ask, reaching my hand into the tub to test the water.

She doesn’t say a word. Her hands are balled into tight fists on her legs, with her back ramrod straight, like a statue waiting for me to make my next move.

“I’ll get you something for the pain, and then we can get some rest,” I say through clenched teeth, pushing to my feet and opening the medicine cabinet. I dump my toothbrush into the sink and fill the small cup with water before grabbing the small bottle of pills and some ointment for her bruises from the cabinet.

“Here.” I shake three pills into my hand before holding them out to her, but she doesn’t move. “You need to take these, Willa.” Reaching forward, I pry her hand open, dropping the pills in them before shoving the glass of water into her face.

Something flashes through her eyes quickly, and she nods, throwing the pills into her mouth before taking a healthy gulp from the glass. “The whole thing,” I say firmly, causing her to recoil slightly. “Please.” She nods her head again before tipping the glass toward her mouth and downing all the liquid.

“Can you get undressed yourself?” She shrugs her shoulder before gripping the edge of her shirt and pulling it over her head. She begins to do the same with her pants, but struggles, almost toppling over into the tub.

My arms shoot out beside me, steadying her, and she hisses in pain. Her palms plant firmly on my chest, shoving me away. “I can do it.”

It’s my turn to nod as I watch her struggle to keep her balance as she pulls her pants down, hissing in pain as the fabric slides across her already-tender skin. I want to look away, to hide from what I’ve done to her body like a coward, but I don’t. I force myself to catalog every scratch and welt on her once-perfect skin.

She takes her time stepping out of her pants, using the top of the toilet for balance before kicking them to the side and lowering her body into the water. She fidgets and wiggles around—no doubt searching for a comfortable position—for a few moments before settling into the water.

“Let’s get you cleaned up, then we can take a nap.”

“Okay,” she croaks, and the sound is music to my ears. I want to apologize to her again. I want her to yell and scream at me, call me a liar and anything else she can think of, but she doesn’t say another word. Instead, she turns her head away from me, leaning her head back.

Her entire body tenses as I reach for the washcloth, dipping it in the water before covering it with soap. I pause, waiting for permission to continue, but she doesn’t move a muscle. Taking her silence as agreement, I run the cloth slowly across her skin, wanting to wash away all the evidence of the violence I inflicted upon her. She doesn’t fight me, allowing me to move her body around however I see fit.

“Are the pills working yet?” I ask, leaning her forward and running the cloth against her skin. She hisses loudly, her eyes clamping tightly shut as her breathing picks up in pace.

"Yes," she grits out, but I know she's lying.

"Okay." I don't argue, not wanting to cause her to retreat into her mind. "Lean back so I can wash your hair."

She turns her head, her eyes focused on the bathroom ceiling, allowing me to run my fingers through her hair. I manage to get them through her hair without much effort. Her long, blonde hair floats in the water, surrounding her head like a halo.

She looks just like an angel.

"All done."

Willa sits up, pulling her knees to her chest and curling her shoulders forward. It's as if she's trying to make herself as small as possible. Hiding herself from anyone that might do her harm, but I'll never let that happen.

I uncork the tub before grabbing a towel from the rack. "Stand up and turn around, please."

She grimaces as she moves, using the side of the tub to push to her feet. As soon as she's steady, with her back facing me, I grab the ointment off the toilet and massage it into her back. I take my time, wanting to cover every inch of her body, not wanting there to be one scar on her skin.

Once I've assured her the entire area is covered, I take a step back. "I am sorry, *bambolina.* I should've never raised a hand to you. *Ucciderò quel figlio di puttana."* (I'll kill that son of a bitch.)

"You had no other choice. I understand," she responds, her chin tucked down to her chest.

"There is always a choice," I respond, wrapping a towel around her body and tucking the end in to itself in the center of the chest. Her eyes finally flick to mine, showing me all the pain and confusion she must be feeling at this moment.

Reaching forward, I grip the back of her neck and pull her toward me. Our foreheads rest against each other as my eyes drift closed. "I'll kill him for what he's done. To you. To us." My eyes fly open, gazing directly into her eyes, willing her to know that I mean what I say. "Never again. No one will ever touch you again."

"But he…" her voice cracks. "He will take me."

"No. You're mine," I growl. "You aren't going anywhere with anyone. I swear it."

My voice is filled with emotion. I know there's a chance that I'm lying, and so does she, but right now, with just the two of us standing in the

bathroom, it's true.

"Let's head to bed." Her arms slide around my neck as I lift her into the air.

Instead of her body being stiff with fear, she relaxes into my hold and hopefully finds some comfort in my arms. But the moment we reach the bed, something changes.

"Who's Abigail?"

My heart races as I lower her feet to the floor before taking a deep breath and telling the truth. "A woman I thought I once loved."

"Thought you loved?" she asks curiously, refusing to look me in the eye.

"Yes, thought. Because I didn't know what love was until I saw you."

Seeing Willa standing bare before me is the most beautiful sight I've ever seen. I know I need to let her walk out of this place and away from me, but tonight, I'll make sure she knows exactly what she means to me. I want her to feel my love for her in every caress of her skin. She drops her head onto my chest. I grip her chin lightly between my fingers, tilting it up and forcing her to look right at me. Her blue eyes are shining with her unshed tears.

"Don't cry," I whisper, brushing my thumb across her cheek.

She takes in a deep breath, her eyes drifting shut as she nuzzles her cheek into my palm and sighs. "I want you to help me forget. I want you to make love to me."

"And I want you more than anything in this world," I tell her, lowering her body onto the bed before climbing in beside her. "But…"

Her lips crash into mine, stopping my rebuttal from coming out of my mouth. There are a million reasons why doing this right now is a bad idea. But I can't think of anything else as our lips meld together, uniting us in a kiss unlike anything we've shared before. My cock hardens against my pants, her body wrapping itself around me.

"Please," she repeats over and over again as I nibble my way down her neck, sucking her delicate flesh into my mouth before releasing it with a pop.

I reach up, unwrapping her arms from around my neck, and take a step back. My body screams at me to go back to her, but I can't. "Do you forgive me for what I've done?"

Waves of shame and deprecation wash over me, but she smiles. “The past is the past. Now it’s time for us to plan our future together.”

I quickly strip out of my clothes and leave them in a heap beside the bed before climbing in, her legs spreading so I can sink between them. This is my second chance. No second-guessing or hesitation, wondering why she doesn’t hate me. Right now, I need to show her that I’m no longer her captor, but her salvation. Just as she is mine.

“Together.” I brush my lips along her skin, kissing her, joining my pain with hers. With every caress of my hand against her skin, or brush of her lips, I’m being forgiven. Allowing myself to share all of me, every intimate and broken part, with another human being.

I’m careful to support my weight as I lean down, slowly nipping at her lips. I take my time to savor everything about her. Thinking of every moment we’ve spent together, every touch and caress of her skin against mine.

Willa cups my cheeks and wraps her legs around my waist—the feeling of her wetness bringing me back to the present as I roll my hips, causing the head of my cock to brush her clit. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she whispers, brushing her lips against mine as I pull my hips back before slamming into her. Her entire body tenses, cheeks flushing a delicious shade of pink, as she places her hand on my chest and turns away from me.

“Relax, baby,” I whisper, peppering her face with kisses and allowing her body to adjust.

Her walls tighten around my cock, making it almost impossible for me to hold still. The need to fuck her is almost unbearable.

“It’s okay,” she whispers, brushing her lips against mine as her body relaxes.

After a few moments, her body relaxes, and I begin rocking gently back and forth inside her.

Unadulterated pleasure shoots through my body with each thrust as her pussy tightens down even further.

“Fuck.” She mews, bucking her hips off the bed and grinding against my pelvis. “I need—”

“I know what you need.” I roll us over with a groan, causing her to shriek at the unexpected movement. Lying on my back, I look up into her beautiful smiling face, branding this moment into my memory.

“Ride me. Take what you need from me.” She wastes no time grinding on my cock, bringing herself closer to the edge. I grip her hips tightly, slamming her down against me to ensure we both get the relief we crave so desperately.

Her moans run through my entire body as her hips move faster on her own, dragging my cock in and out of her as she chases the release, our skin slapping against each other as she bounces up and down.

“Oh, God,” she cries out above me as I plant my feet on the bed and thrust deeper inside her.

I grit my teeth to keep from fucking her like an animal, dropping my hips back to the mattress as she slams back down repeatedly until her breathing is ragged. Her petite frame shakes as her nails rake down my chest, leaving red claw marks in their wake. My balls tighten, ready to coat her pussy with my cum, images of her belly swollen with our baby flashing through my mind.

Staking a claim on this woman supersedes everything I’ve thought before, all my plans. She belongs to me. *From this day forward, I will protect her with my life and strike down anyone that raises a hand to her, no matter what it takes*, I silently vow, surrendering everything I have to this woman as her tight cunt milks my cock.

“Fuck, Willa!” I roar before rolling us again, pulling out of her warmth and sliding down her body until my mouth is once again at her pussy. Her back arches off the bed as my lips wrap around her clit, pulling it deep into my mouth before sliding my tongue between her folds. I thrust my tongue into her with a groan, knowing how close she is to the edge, before easing back and starting the process all over again.

“Please. I want to come!” she shrieks, making me chuckle.

I scissor her clit between my fingers and continue to fuck her cunt with my tongue. It takes seconds before she moans loud and long; her body tenses and contorts as it tries to process the pleasure.

Without giving her a chance to recover, I climb back up her body and slam into her pussy. My desperation is getting the better of me, and I am no longer in control. I need to possess her, ensuring she understands she’s mine. I fuck her hard, desperately seeking the comfort only her body can give me, slamming into her recklessly as I chase my release. My need drowns all the sounds in the room as I throw her legs over my shoulder and

feed her pussy every inch of my cock, pounding into her so hard the headboard rattles against the wall.

"Mine," I murmur, before turning my head and biting down on her neck as I come, groaning around her flesh still clamped between my teeth. I pump my seed into her, marking her as my own, pistoning my cock in and out as the pressure in my balls lessens, causing my legs to give out, and I collapse onto her soft, welcoming body. In a half-awake state, I roll to my side and bring her with me.

"Thank you," she whispers, her eyes closed, and her lips turn up into a soft smile.

"How could you give me such a gift? What I've done to you—"

"I haven't forgiven you," she says, her eyes fluttering open "But this is a new beginning. A chance for us to have a fresh start with nothing standing between us."

"I don't deserve you," I mumble, knowing that this is another gift she has given me.

I will make things up to her and earn her forgiveness if it's the last thing I do before I die. I will show her with every breath I take how much I cherish her. I will protect her from Joseph and my brothers. I will protect her sister from the Genoveses. And I will make sure they have a chance to see each other soon.

The beginnings of a plan form in my mind as I climb out of the bed and go to the bathroom for a washcloth. I'm not going to be able to do this alone, but with Ezra's help, I can get Willa and her sister away from Joseph while finding out exactly what his plans are in the process.

When I come back from the bathroom, Willa is already snuggled into the bed with the blankets pulled up almost to her chin. I quickly climb into bed, pulling her back flush to my front, and say a silent prayer that when I wake in the morning, this won't have been anything but a dream.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## ONE MONTH LATER

### FELIX

Joseph is an even bigger asshole than usual. I spent most of my life learning all his mood swings and what makes him tick, but this is different. He's up to something.

Ever since the day he watched me punish Willa, he's been hiding things from me, not that he wasn't before then, but it has been getting progressively worse. Secret meetings at undisclosed locations, phone calls that end abruptly when I enter the room. I'm supposed to be his right hand, and he's keeping me in the dark, which means nothing but trouble.

I'm positive he suspects there's something going on between Willa and me, but he hasn't made a move. Not yet, anyway. Ezra continues to search for information about why Joseph has it out for the Genovese family, but I haven't heard anything from him in a couple of weeks. It's not anything out of the ordinary for him to disappear for long periods of time, but something about this time seems off.

Tension twists through all my muscles as I pull my car to a stop in front of Joseph's house. I've never spent too much time here in the past, but there's something about being here that sets me on edge.

"Hey, Felix." Alder comes jogging out the front door, stopping right in front of me.

He's gotten much better at keeping secrets over the last few weeks. Not that he had a choice. The moment Ezra brought him to my place, and he saw Willa there, his life was in danger. He's been coming to sit with her whenever Joseph sends me off to handle business, keeping her company and making sure no one is snooping around.

As far as Joseph knows, Willa is chained to my bed, getting weekly, if not nightly, beatings for disobedience. He hasn't pushed to see her again, but it's only a matter of time. Let's just hope whatever is holding his attention can do so for a little while longer.

"How's it going, kid?" I grip his shoulder, pulling him in for a one-armed hug.

To anyone looking at the two of us, it just looks like two family members greeting each other, but it's a drop. Ever since Willa has been staying at my place, I've been changing the security code weekly, sometimes twice a week, depending on my mood.

"Good call. I'll stop by your place later, and we can chat some more, but I have to get to class." Alder gives me a wave over his right shoulder, signaling that he has the code.

My eyes remain focused on Alder as he heads toward one of my cars parked on the curb, hopping in and heading toward his school. One of the many perks he's gotten since he's been protecting Willa. No more riding the bus for him.

"Here goes nothing," I mumble to myself before adjusting my tie and heading inside.

This place is usually bustling with people—maids, my other brothers, clients. Someone is always coming and going, but today, it's eerily quiet. You could hear a pin drop in this place as I head toward the library.

*Maybe I can grab Willa a book before I leave.*

I'm sure being cooped up in my place for the last month is driving her insane. I have a television with basic cable and a few premium channels, but nothing too fancy. She says the only time she feels human is when one of us is there keeping her occupied. Maybe a book will help.

As I inch closer to the door, I hear a voice. One is Joseph's, and the other I can't seem to place.

"Your man is out of control, Shamus. I wanted him to watch the girl, not manhandle her."

Shamus McKenna, head of one of the strongest Irish Mafia families and our sworn enemy, is sitting across from Joseph, no doubt enjoying a glass of scotch while they discuss business.

"It's under control." A deep chuckle filters to my ears. "Maybe you should find your man. It's his fault O'Bainon is anywhere near her."

“Ezra has a mind of his own. It’s not unusual for him to get bored and then take off for a few weeks to blow off some steam.”

“He can get his dick wet right in the club. He didn’t have to leave to do that.”

“If you want anyone in that club to be alive when he finishes, then be glad he left.”

So that’s where Ezra has been. Joseph sent him to watch Celia. Worst idea ever. Sending Ezra to watch Celia was a gamble, but one he wouldn’t have taken without a reason. The fact that he’s out of contact and everyone is still breathing is a plus.

“Is everything else going according to plan?” Joseph questions as I inch closer to the door.

“Of course. We’ve caused major disruption in their supply chain and have been siphoning funds from one of their most lucrative businesses.”

If Joseph wanted his plans to remain under the radar, working with Irish was his best bet. The Irish haven’t had territory in Chicago for years. They’ve been content with spending their time in the shadows, working for whoever gave them the biggest advantage. That’s one of the reasons there’s bad blood between Shamus and Joseph. They spent years doing everything they can to destroy each other. Everyone expected it to continue until one of them killed the other, but now, the Irish seem to want their piece of the pie, and it sounds like Joseph is more than willing to help them get it. Provided he gets the Genoveses downfall in return. But the question still remains—why?

“Good. I want to impress upon you the consequences if you fail to get me what I want.”

I frown, running my fingers through my beard. Joseph has plans to take down the Genoveses by using Celia and stealing business from them, but I can’t figure out his obsession with this particular family. We are both cut from the same cloth and have never had any issues with them in the past. They stay in their territories; we stay in ours. An unspoken peace between us, both back home and here in Chicago.

“Felix!” Joseph greets me loudly as I walk into the library, a fake smile plastered on my face. He places his empty glass on his desk before motioning toward Shamus sitting off to my left. “It seems I have some news for you about my little mouse.”

The hairs stand up on the back of my neck at the mention of Willa's name. He flashes me that sinister grin I know all too well before motioning for me to have a seat.

"Did you need something with her?" I ask, not wanting to tip my hand. "She's been full of information about the comings and goings at the club. Client list, sexual preferences, lists of kink preferences."

"Yes. All her information has served us well so far. But Shamus has made an offer to buy her from us."

*He lied*. I've never seen Shamus McKenna in the flesh until today. If I hadn't overheard his conversation with Joseph a few moments ago, I'd have no idea.

"Isn't she our leverage to keep her sister in line?" I remind him. My mind is already playing out scenarios of what will happen to Willa if she is taken away from me. None of them are pleasant. I promised her that no one would touch her, and I plan to keep that promise.

"I've turned the monitoring of Celia over to Shamus and his men. A chance for them to prove their worth before we allow them a bigger slice of the pie. And my mouse will be his reward."

"Doesn't he have his own women? What's so special about her?" He has to have his own stock of girls, or slaves even, to keep his dick wet. Everything I know about Shamus are from rumors and hearsay, but they must hold some truth to them.

Shamus is as sadistic, if not more so, as Joseph. He not only wants his women for sexual gratification, but he takes great pleasure in making them scream. Breaking them both mentally and physically until they are nothing but a shell of who they once were. Willa is strong, stronger than the average woman, but if she's left alone with Shamus, with no one to protect her, I don't know what will happen to her.

*I have to protect her*.

"I'd ask you the same thing, Felix." Joseph arches his eyebrows, no doubt curious about my interest in keeping Willa by my side. I've never openly challenged him before today, but I realize my mistake too late. "You stopped Paolo from having some fun and breaking in my new toy as I asked, and now you have her locked away in your fortress. What's going on?"

My hands clench at my side, but I force them open. "I wanted to break her in myself. You gave her to me to question. A gift for a job well done." I

relax my stance as best I can, not wanting to tip him off to the raging torrent of emotions.

Although he's known me for years, he still has trouble getting a read on my emotions, but he isn't stupid. If he didn't know something was up before, he does now.

*I need to warn Adler.*

"You brought me back my mouse, as promised. And I rewarded you, but don't mistake my kindness, Felix. That girl is to do with as I please. She belongs to me."

This was a test. He has no intention of selling Willa to anyone. He wanted to see my reaction to the news. To see if I would protest his decision or follow instructions like a good little soldier.

"I mean no disrespect, Joseph." I bow my head in reverence, my eye flicking up toward his to see his reaction.

A smug smile crosses his face before he grabs something off his desk and thrusts it toward me. "I need you to find Ezra. He was supposed to be watching over Celia for me but disappeared about a month ago."

"And I'm just hearing about it now?" I respond casually, my eyes scanning the information in the folder. Ezra was last seen walking into the club, tracking Celia on her first day of work, before he vanished. He called in to report that she'd arrived safely before disappearing. There hasn't been any contact since.

"I assumed he'd get bored and come back like he always does. However, this time, I'm concerned. We have enemies lurking around every corner. We need to protect our own."

I nod my head, closing the folder. "I'm sure Ezra is just holed up somewhere, passing the time. We aren't the only family he works for, but he says we're his favorite. I'll find him. I can leave in a few days."

"I need you to leave now. I have pressing matters I need Ezra to attend to."

"I can handle anything you need."

"But you are needed here." His tone leaves no room for argument. I'm leaving immediately to go search for Ezra, and I doubt I'll be allowed to come back until I find him.

"Do you need me to send some men to watch over my little mouse? I wouldn't want the same thing to happen to her that happened to Abigail."

There it is. The threat I've been waiting for. Acid builds in my stomach at the mention of her name, and it won't be the last. I take a step forward, barely catching myself before I lunge at him. I've worked too hard to regain Willa's trust to let him ruin it in a matter of hours. I need to find Ezra, and fast.

"Thank you, but that isn't necessary. You provided me with the best security system. No one is getting in or out of that place without me knowing."

Stroking his ego has always worked for me in the past, and this time is no different. Joseph chuckles darkly before turning his attention toward Shamus. "If you'd like, I can have Felix drop you off before heading off to search for Ezra. You can take the girl for a test drive."

His suggestion knocks the air right out of me, but I recover quickly. His games are easy to see through, especially when I know his target. I need to remain as calm as possible because giving him any information about what she means to me will be trouble. He's just looking for an excuse to rain down his wrath on the both of us, and I refuse to take the bait.

"The clock is ticking. Tick tock," he tells me as I turn on my heels and head for the door. "I don't know how long I can keep my mouse safe from your brothers."

I give him a curt nod before pushing the door open and striding through. I don't waste any time leaving the house and climbing into my car. The moment I have it started, I hit Adler's speed dial number on my phone.

"Hello."

"Adler. Joseph knows something is up. You need to stick close to Willa and protect her at all costs."

I wish there was more time for me to go back to my place and give them the rundown of all the information I discovered, but I'm on the clock. I need to find Ezra as soon as possible and bring him back to Joseph. Lucky for me, I have a good idea where he is.

"And what about you?" Adler's voice rises a few octaves, a sign of his growing anxiety.

"He won't kill me. He didn't before, and he won't again." I sigh, running my hand through my hair. "He sent me to find Ezra. I have a good idea where he is, but I'll be out of touch for a few days."

"No problem. I'll grab some stuff after class and head there. I can bunk down at your place and keep an eye on Willa until you return."

“Make sure to keep the alarm activated at all times, even when you’re inside the house watching television.”

“Yes, *Dad*,” Adler snarks back, and I shake my head. It seems my *bambolina* is a bad influence on him.

“Be careful,” I say before ending the call.

Adler is a good kid, smart, and so is Willa. Between the two of them and the state-of-the-art security system I have at my place, they should be fine for a couple of days.

One can only hope. Either way, this game of cat and mouse with Joseph is coming to a close, but there’s still no clear winner. Right now, there’s a fifty-fifty shot of all of us coming out of this alive. I tend to like those odds.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

# WILLA

*Where is he?*

I haven't seen or heard from Felix in days. He left here to go meet Joseph, and he hasn't been back since. He warned me that this might happen, but I wasn't prepared for these feelings swirling inside me. If it wasn't for Adler popping up at the door with bags of food, movies, and library books the day Felix disappeared, I'd have gone insane with loneliness.

I should be happy, content that I'm safe behind the reinforced steel doors and a high-tech alarm system Felix outfitted this place with. It's like my personal Fort Knox, but I miss him. There, I said it. I miss him.

Felix is brutal and angry. To the outside world, he's a monster, but that's not the man I've gotten to know over the last month or so. He did what he had to do to protect himself, what he thought was right, until he found another path. He says it was me who led him out of the darkness, bringing him into the light for the first time since he was a little boy, but I disagree.

The things Felix did to me are horrible, practically unforgivable. He should be in prison for it, and I don't know if I'll ever be able to completely forgive him. But I can't forget what he's done for me. He saved me from being raped, protected me from his brothers, and he's searched day after day for my sister. A woman he's never met before, only because she's the most important person in my life.

*Or she used to be.*

"Do you want pizza or chicken nuggets for dinner?" Adler calls from the kitchen, bringing me back to the present.

Adler and I have become fast friends. Hiding away while fearing for your life does that to two people, but we also have a lot in common. Adler was an orphan and had no real siblings, just like me. This family, the Bianchis, are the only people he has, just like Celia and me. From speaking with him over the last few days, I can tell Adler idolizes Felix and his crazy friend, Ezra. He'd lay down his life for them in a heartbeat, and that's exactly the chance he's taken by staying here with me.

Adler has been my shadow since Felix left. He used to pop in and out once a week when Felix had a job to do or a meeting with Joseph, but this is the first time he's stayed for more than a few hours. Every nerve ending in my body is on high alert, waiting for the other shoe to drop, but so far, so good. Let's just hope it stays that way.

I groan, not wanting to have either one of those things to eat. "I'd really like to order Chinese food."

That's the other downfall of living in Fort Knox and hiding out from the mafia: Going to the grocery store or ordering takeout really isn't an option.

"Sorry, sweetheart. You know we can't open that door."

"We can. You're just too much of a chicken to open it," I snap, trying to push his buttons. It's the quickest and most pain-free way to get a man to do what you want. I doubt these mind games would work with a man like Felix, but with Adler, it works like a charm.

"No. I'm not falling for that shit again," he grumbles, flopping down on the couch beside me and handing me a plate full of chicken nuggets and french fries. "Your dinner, your majesty."

"Where's my ranch dressing, Adler? You know I need my ranch," I whine, before pushing off the couch and heading back into the kitchen.

Sitting in front of the television and eating dinner has become our nightly routine, and too bad for Adler that it's my turn to choose the movie. I'm feeling an eighties romantic comedy tonight. I desperately need the laughs.

"What are we watching tonight?" Adler asks as he hands me the remote.

I take a deep breath and begin searching for something to watch. "I figured we could flip through the channels until we find something we want to watch." Adler nods his head in response as mindlessly stare at the televisions.

I've been trying to find a way to ask Adler about Felix, but being tactful isn't my strong suit. Felix has slowly opened up to me over the time we've

spent locked away together, but I can tell he's still holding something back —or more like *someone*.

*Abigail*.

The only information he'll give me about her is that she was someone he thought he once loved, but nothing else. I can tell she means something to him because each time I bring her up, he gets that faraway look in his eyes, like he's reliving a painful memory. I've tried to talk to him about it, but he always avoids the subject or tells me how much he cares about me. That last one always has me clamming up.

"Go ahead and ask your question." Adler bumps his shoulder against mine, waiting for me to speak. "Spit it out, Willa."

"Nothing." My cheeks heat in embarrassment as I duck my chin, hiding my face behind my hair.

"I've spent the last few days cooped up in this place with you. I know when you're thinking too hard about something." Adler reaches over and gives my hand a squeeze. "Now, spill."

I sigh loudly before turning my body toward him. "What do you know about Felix and a girl named Abigail?"

"They're a cautionary tale to all of us."

"Huh?"

"Okay, we probably weren't even alive when this happened, but the rumor is that Felix fell in love with one of Joseph's girls. Joseph became jealous and killed her while Felix watched. He then told all of us that the family comes before everything else, even before our own personal well-being."

"Wow," I whisper, my mind working feverishly to process the information Adler just gave me. Felix was in love with a girl before. A girl that Joseph murdered because of it. Damn, that shit sounds harsh.

I want to tell Felix how I feel when he gets back, but I'm afraid, mostly of what will happen in the future. I know Felix cares about me. I can see it in his eyes whenever he looks at me. Felix doesn't tell me how he feels very often, choosing to show me with his actions instead. But what's going to happen if Joseph gets his hands on me? Is he going to follow behind me or is he going to keep living for the both of us? Now that I know at least the basics of Abigail and Felix's story, I may have my answer. I know these aren't the normal thoughts a girl my age should have, but every time I look into his eyes, I see the future I never believed I deserved. A family,

children, the whole thing. It doesn't matter to me if I'll make it until tomorrow, but I care what happens to Felix.

"Anything else?"

"What does *bambolina* mean? Felix calls me that all the time, but I always forget to ask him what it means."

"Little doll."

"Little doll," I whisper, letting the phrase roll over my tongue. "Why the heck does he call me that?"

"I have no idea. Maybe you should ask him when he gets back." Adler huffs, reaching for the remote, but I pull it away from him. "If I had to guess, he probably sees you as the perfect woman, like a doll. Someone to be cherished, protected, and loved for all eternity."

*Loved?* Loved. Adler thinks Felix is in love with me. I mean, Felix mentioned that he didn't know what love was till he saw me, but that could mean anything. It didn't have to mean he was *in* love with me, did it?

*Don't be stupid. You know exactly what that meant.*

*OMG!* I being to panic internally as I try to wrap my head around all the feelings swirling around in my mind. Felix protects me like a little doll, treating me like something fragile that can break at any moment. Very similar to the way Adler described he might feel about me, but that can't be possible. Somewhere deep down in my heart, I knew Felix did care for me, that he loved me, but I've been trying to deny it. Wanting to protect my heart from being broken when Felix chose his allegiance to Joseph over his feelings for me.

"Enough with the questions. Can we pick a movie now?"

"Fine," I grumble, before flipping through the channels again.

Finally settling on *Dirty Dancing*, I put the remote down beside me and snuggle deeper into the couch, pulling a blanket over my legs. I watch as Baby struggles to carry the watermelon down the pathway, headed toward the staff party.

"Really, Willa?" Adler chuckles slightly before throwing his arm over my shoulder.

"What? Tell me one woman that wouldn't love to get swept off her feet by Patrick Swayze." I look up at him and smile, knowing that he won't resist me.

"Fine, but I don't understand how you even know about this movie. It's older than you are."

“It’s older than you are, too,” I snap back, throwing one of my french fries at him. “Just because I’m twenty-one doesn’t mean I have bad taste in movies. My foster mother, sister, and I used to watch these movies every weekend, and I’ve been hooked on them ever since.”

“So, you’re young *and* have bad taste. Poor Felix.” Adler giggles as I pull a pillow from behind my back and smack him hard in the face. “You better stop hitting me with that pillow or I’m going to change the movie. I have no desire to watch people have sex on the screen.”

I turn toward the television and watch as couples grind against each other, practically dry humping while dancing to “Do You Love Me” playing loudly in the background.

“You’re just jealous you don’t have those kinds of moves.” I giggle before snuggling back into the couch and focusing all my attention on the movie.

We get through about twenty more minutes before a loud wail fills the room, and the lights go out.

“Shit,” Adler swears, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the back corner. “Joseph must have made his move. I was hoping Felix and Ezra would be back before that happened.”

“What do you mean?” Tears pool in my eyes as he flips open a hidden keypad on the wall and plugs in a few buttons. “Joseph is coming for you. He must have sent Felix away so you’d be unprotected.”

A shudder runs through my body as we step through the door, heading down a back stairwell in an area of the warehouse I’ve never seen before. “You need to run, Willa. No matter what happens once we walk out of this building, you run,” Adler says with conviction before reaching into his jacket pocket and pressing a set of keys and a business card in my hand. “Felix’s car is parked a few blocks away from here. Go to the end of the alley and turn right. Just hit the button until it beeps.”

“But what about you?” Tears stream down my face as he pulls me toward the door at the bottom of the stairs.

“I promised Felix I’d protect you with my life.” Adler flashes me a smile before kicking open the door.

“Adler. I thought you were smarter than this.” A familiar voice reaches my ears, and I freeze.

Two goons stand at the mouth of the alley, blocking our exit. I grip Adler’s arm and pull him back toward the building, but he pulls from my

grasp. Adler shakes his head at me, his eyes never leaving the two men in front of us.

"Remember what I told you, Willa." Adler gives my shoulder a squeeze before planting a kiss on the top of my head and drawing his gun.

I take a step away from Adler as the goons advance toward us. I don't even have a chance to blink before they are on top of Adler. One throws the heel of his hand against his nose, a crunching sound reaching my ears as Adler swings his gun around and shoots one man in the throat.

Blood pours from his wound as he drops to the ground. Adler takes a step over him, meeting the other guy head on. Adler's new opponent punches him in the face, his head recoiling backward from the force. The man gets the jump on Adler, charging forward.

"Adler!" I scream as he continues fighting with the man. I should run, just like Adler told me, but I can't bring myself to leave him alone, so I hide behind a dumpster. What if he gets shot? He's going to need someone to get him to a hospital.

They trade a couple of blows before I hear the crack of a gunshot, and Adler's body goes tumbling to the ground. He immediately finds my hiding place, our eyes locking for a split second as he reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out his phone.

*What the fuck are you doing?* I mouth, but he shakes his head no as his fingers fly across the screen.

I remain in my hiding spot, eyes focused on Adler. I clamp my hands over my mouth, trying to hold back my sobs. Tears stream down my cheeks as I watch my friend slowly die in front of me.

"Run, Willa," he croaks, blood dribbling down his cheek. "Run!" he screams as a set of arms grabs me from behind, lifting me in the air as I feel a sharp pinprick in my skin.

I open my mouth to speak, but my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. I want to scream for help, to beg him to spare me from whatever they have planned, but my head drops to his shoulder, and my eyes drift shut.

*Felix, where are you?*

# CHAPTER TWENTY

## FELIX

Ezra is an asshole. That's the only explanation for why he'd disappear now. He had one simple job to do. Watch Celia and make sure no one does anything terrible to her, but he couldn't manage. Babysitting was never his favorite task; it's probably why Joseph sent him instead of someone else.

*Games. He's always playing games.*

Joseph could have sent anyone to watch Celia and to come after Ezra, but he chose the two of us for a reason. And I have no idea what that is. After the conversation I overheard between him and Shamus, he's hell-bent on taking down the Genovese family by any means necessary. He doesn't care how many lives are lost in the process, he just wanted to make it happen.

Fuck. I've been at this for a few days and nothing. A few people saw Ezra at the club a month ago, but nothing since then. It's as if he vanished into thin air. When the club was a bust, I headed toward a cabin Ezra uses for work, tucked into northern Michigan. The perfect place to hide out when you don't want to be found. If he isn't there, I don't know what my next move will be. I rotate my head in a circle while rolling my shoulders, attempting to release the tension in my aching muscles.

*I need to find Ezra.*

*Then I can go home to Willa.*

I've been on edge ever since I left a few days ago, wondering how things are going. I've picked up my phone to call and check in with Adler almost a million times, but I stopped myself. I had planned to find Ezra quickly and then head right back to her, but it wasn't in the cards.

Just as I'm pulling off the highway, my phone rings in my pocket.

"Hello."

"Felix," a voice croaks, coughing loudly into the phone.

My stomach twists in a knot. Something is very wrong.

"Who is this?" I pull the car to the side of the road, fear twisting in my gut as I try to make sense of what the person on the other end of the line is saying.

"They got her," the voice gasps. A wet, gasping sound comes through the line. "I'm sorry. I couldn't protect her."

*Adler.*

"Thank you, brother," I respond in reverence, not knowing what else to say to him.

*I failed them both.*

I promised Willa I'd keep her safe. I promised Adler that I'd be back before anything ever happened, and I promised myself I wouldn't let Joseph take anyone from me again. All those things were a lie.

"I'm sorry, Felix. I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. You fought with honor," I respond through clenched teeth, wanting to assure Adler that he did everything I asked of him and then some.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorr…" the voice trails off before the line goes completely silent.

I can hear the birds chirping, the wind blowing softly over the phone, but my brother is gone. I send up a silent prayer for his soul before turning the car around and heading back to Chicago, making a mental checklist of what needs to happen next.

But the first thing I have to do is make a phone call.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# WILLA

My head jerks to the side as pain radiates through my jaw. I've lost count of how many times I've been punched and cut since my capture last night, but I refuse to give them anything. Blood pools in my mouth before I turn to the right, spitting on the floor next to me.

"What the fuck do you want?"

"I already have everything I want." Joseph laughs before blowing cigarette smoke into my face.

The smoke burns my lungs, gasping for air while coughing at the same time, but I don't make a sound. Joseph gets off on the pain of others. It's easy to see, and I won't give him the satisfaction.

I turn my head slightly, attempting to get a better layout of the room. It's a lot harder to do with only one eye. When I woke up, I was naked and handcuffed to a chair, my legs spread wide, bearing my pussy to every person in the room. I struggled to get free when I first woke up, but I only tired myself out, the handcuffs digging into my skin. A single light swung above a table full of different blades. There were four men in various places in the room, waiting for orders.

It was about an hour after I woke up that Joseph appeared and began beating me. Each one of his men took a turn getting to hit me across the face, arms, and body. After everyone had a chance, one man left before coming back with a tray of something, tucking it away in a dark corner of the room.

"Where is Felix?"

"Busy." His voice turns hard, letting me know that he's not amused by my questions.

Something is very wrong. Joseph is usually calm and collected during our talks, showing no emotion as he watches his men do his bidding. But now he seems to be teetering on the edge of losing complete control.

*I could use this to my advantage.*

"Aww. Did someone lose—"

He scoffs before smacking me hard across the face, snapping my head to the side. "Stop fucking talking," he reprimands me, grabbing my hair and tugging hard on it, forcing me to look him in the eyes. "I'm going to enjoy this."

I thrash back and forth, trying to get free as his cigar inches closer toward me. The sweet and smoky smell of the tobacco swirls around me as I bite my lip, refusing to scream.

"Fuck you," I say through clenched teeth as ashes from his cigar drop on my face before sliding off my skin. I can feel the heat increasing as he inches closer to my face.

*Please. No. Stop,* my mind screams as I struggle, but it only makes it worse. His grip is too close to my scalp, but I have to try. I have to keep fighting. Blinding white pain races through my body as he presses the cigar to my skin. The nauseating, putrid smell of my skin burning reaches my nose, causing my stomach to rebel.

But I don't make a sound.

He lifts the cigar, giving me a few moments of relief, before pressing it down on another spot on my chest. He does this over and over again.

"Scream for me, *piccolo topo.* Scream for your master." His eyes are full of nothing but darkness. His calm demeanor breaks right before my eyes as he goes tumbling over the edge into insanity.

"I belong to no one."

"*Stupida, stupida ragazza.*" (Stupid, stupid girl.) His voice sounds as if it's a million miles away as he lifts the cigar a third time, pressing it down on to my skin and stubbing it out.

And this time, I scream at the top of my lungs. Tears form and fall down my cheeks as a sinister smile spreads across his face.

"You really do have a death wish, don't you?" he questions as he takes a step back before reaching into his pocket and pulling out another cigar. I watch as he pulls a cutter out of his other pocket, cutting the tip and butt off before placing it into his mouth. He takes a heavy pull from the cigar before blowing the smelly smoke into my face. I hold my breath, not wanting to

feel that burning in my lungs. “Not a fan?” he questions before blowing another puff into my face.

“It’s a disgusting habit,” I mumble, swallowing down the cough that tries to escape.

“Now that I have your attention, I need you to do me a favor.”

He’s crazy. There’s no other explanation for why he would ask me for a favor after what he’s done to me.

“Call your sister.” He holds a hand out to the side as one of his goons in the corner moves towards us, placing a phone in his palm. “We need results.”

“No!” I yell in his face.

He shakes his head like I’ve disappointed him, blowing more smoke into my face. “Too bad.” He bends down, sliding my pointer finger through the center of the cigar cutter. I tense, bracing for the pain, as he stops just above the knuckle.

The moment Celia sees this finger, she’ll know it belongs to me because of the word *sister* tattooed along the side with a small daisy. The same tattoo I got the last time I visited her. It was supposed to be a bonding experience, but she chickened out at the last minute.

“You sure you don’t want to make that call?” he whispers into my ear as he slowly closes the cutter, cutting my skin.

I feel the warmth of my blood trickling down my hand as the edge of the blade slowly cuts into my skin. I look into his eyes, refusing to give him what he wants.

“Very well.”

I grind my teeth together hard as the blade comes in contact with the bone and slices through it. Pain shoots up my arm like fire, a blinding whiteness exploding in my head as my stomach revolts against me.

My eyes widen in fear as one of the men in the corner approaches. The blue flame of a blow torch flicks back and forth beneath the head of a hammer. The metal glows orange as it heats from the flame.

A scream, my scream, fills the room, the sound echoing off the concrete walls as the man continues to inch toward me. I push back on the chair, trying desperately to break free, but it’s no use.

Joseph presses the hot metal against my flesh. Agonizing pain shoots through me a second time as I lean forward, emptying the little food I have in my stomach onto the floor.

“I can’t have you bleeding to death. That wouldn’t be any fun.” I scream, my throat burning from all the yelling. My head drops to my chest as a fresh wave of nausea crashes over me.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because I can.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

# WILLA

"È *ora di svegliarsi, topolino,"* (Time to wake up, little mouse,) someone whispers as I pry my eyes open.

Instead of being seated in the chair, my hands are cuffed to the back legs, and I'm bent over the seat, my ass pushed up high into the air. I can barely make out Joseph's figure through the slats on the back of the chair.

"I've been too soft with you." Joseph runs his hand down my cheek.

"Soft?" I whimper, but I don't have enough energy for much else. "If this is soft, do I really want to know what hard is?"

"Oh, you will," Joseph responds, barking out orders in Italian. My mind wanders, trying to find anything else to focus on beyond the pain.

"Say hello to your sister," Joseph whispers in my ear, his breath heavy with cigar stench, before pressing a phone against my ear.

"Celia?" My voice cracks slightly, full of emotions.

"Willa? Oh my god, Willa? Are you okay?"

"I've been better." Tears stream down my cheeks as my eyes drift shut. I focus on the sound of her voice, anchoring myself to the here and now.

"Celia, I need you to do whatever they say, or else…" My voice trails off as I hear a rustling in the corner.

Whipping my head from side to side, I try to get away from the man approaching me. His eyes are full of lust and desire as he licks his lips, running his hand up and down his cock. I have to get away. I have to break free. There's no fucking way I'm letting him touch me a second time. Not again. Felix promised he'd protect me. He promised he wouldn't touch me again.

*Where is he?*

*Why isn't he here?*

*Why did he let this happen?*

"Please. Not again. Please," I beg as he comes toward me.

"Feel special, Paolo. She seems to remember the time you spent together," Joseph says before pulling the phone away from my ear and sinking into the darkness surrounding me. Paolo. His name is Paolo. I repeat the name over and over in my head, committing it to memory. Needing to make sure I don't forget his name, the color of his eyes, or anything about him to tell Felix.

*I'll kill anyone who touches you.* That's right. Felix promised to make them pay. He promised he'd come back to me. That he'd protect me.

"Fuck you." I try to sound fierce, but he only smiles.

"Oh, don't worry. I plan on it," Paolo responds. "You need to learn your place, whore. You're nothing more than a plaything for my men."

Joseph steps back into the light, dragging a metal chair along with him, and takes a seat. A glass of amber liquid is in his hand, and a freshly lit cigar hangs from his lips. "But I'm feeling generous tonight. You only have to deal with Paolo. You owe him a debt."

A debt. The motherfucker tried to rape me. Felix saved me. Just like he will this time. I turn my head to the side, wishing that Felix, Ezra, or anyone will come barging through the door to save me. But nothing happens.

My eyes shift back to Paolo, his cock hanging out of his jeans. He strokes himself faster, his eyes locked on me like a wolf ready to devour his prey.

"Have your vengeance." Joseph lifts his glass to his lips and takes a sip, enjoying the show.

"Open your mouth," Paolo commands, gripping my hair in his fist and brushing the tip of his cock against my lips. I clamp my lips shut, trying to turn my head away.

Paolo smacks me again. Stars burst in my vision as he grips my nose tightly, pinching it shut as his other hand circles my neck. "You can either open your mouth or die. Your choice."

My lungs burn, begging for me to open my mouth, but I can't. I can feel my esophagus closing.

"Did you know it's your brain crying out for oxygen, not your lungs? That's because your brain is dying from lack of oxygen, not your lungs,"

Paolo growls in my ear. “Now you must be feeling dizzy, aren’t you? I sound far away, like I’m standing at the opposite end of the room.”

My mouth pops open, and he releases me. I gasp for air, sucking in a large breath before something is shoved into my mouth. I gag, pulling my head backward in an attempt to escape, but he holds my head. In and out, he fucks my throat. His cock spreads the sides of my mouth wider with each thrust. My throat stretches around him as he increases his pace.

“Fuck yes,” he growls over me and grabs both sides of my head, thrusting harder into me, faster. I cough around his cock, drool dripping down my chin and onto the floor, but he doesn’t stop.

“Smack her ass! I want to see the jiggle while you fuck her whore mouth,” Joseph instructs, waiting for something to happen. A few seconds pass before a hard slap on my ass jolts me forward, shoving Paolo’s cock farther down my throat.

“Take my cock like a good little slut.” He leans forward, smacking my ass repeatedly, each slap jolting my body forward. Finally, he steps back, his cock standing at attention and covered in my spit.

I gasp for air, a mixture of tears and snot running down my face. I sputter, trying desperately to get the taste of him out of my mouth.

“*Ho cambiato idea. Penso che mi piacerebbe un turno. Dopotutto è mia.*” (I changed my mind. I think I’d like a turn. She is mine, after all.) Joseph pushes to his feet and steps in front of me, blocking Paolo from view.

My eyes focus on his zipper as it slides down, each tooth releasing slowly and exposing the flesh underneath. Joseph’s hand slips inside his pants, pulling out his cock. “*Spalancati, piccolo topo*,” (Open wide, little mouse,) he whispers, rubbing his cock against my cheek.

I try to turn my head, but Paolo thrusts his cock inside me. I scream at the intrusion, giving Joseph the time to shove his cock down my throat.

Pain ricochets through my body as Paolo grips my hips in both hands, rocking my body back and forth as he thrust his hips forward and forcing Joseph’s cock further down my throat. The two men work in tandem, their moans of pleasure filling the room as my mind screams for someone to come save me.

Paolo’s fingers dig into my hips as he fucks me. I struggle and wiggle, moving everything in my body that can move, but it does nothing. I’m completely helpless. My mind cannot comprehend the feeling of being

filled, the cock choking me as it's forced down my throat as my pussy burns, stretching from Paolo's thick cock pounding in and out of it.

I try to yell and scream, but all the sounds coming from my mouth are muffled. There is no end to the pain as I fight to breathe. Joseph's fingers clamp down on my nose, making it almost impossible to breathe.

"Such a tight pussy for a whore." Paolo groans, smacking my ass in a few quick successions before thrusting harder into me before emptying inside me.

"Take my cock, *topolino*. If you do a good job, maybe I'll let you go back to Felix if he returns." Joseph grunts, pulling my ears toward him, and shoves his dick all the way into my throat. He holds me in place, groaning loudly as ropes of cum hit my tongue, sliding down my throat. I yank my head back, trying desperately to break free, but I can't, my need to breathe overwhelming, and I swallow. He holds me in place, his body quivering as he comes down from his release, and he laughs.

"*Cazzo, topolino."* (Fuck, little mouse.) Joseph stumbles backward, his chest rising and falling quickly as he tucks his cock back into his pants. "You can have her for the rest of the night." He nods toward Paolo before turning and disappearing into the darkness.

Pain bursts from every area of my body, and my mind isn't allowed to hide. Once again, my hair is pulled until I'm looking up into Paolo's face. I can barely see through my tears, but I don't need to. The image of Paolo smiling down at me, proud of what he's done, is etched in my mind.

My jaw aches from being forcefully spread open, drool and cum dripping off my chin, and I try to suck in as much air as I can. I drop my head to my chest as the sound of gunfire echoes loudly in the room.

"Fuck," Paolo groans, giving my ass another smack before appearing in front of me. "I was hoping for another ride on the cunt of your, but it'll have to wait. Until next time, whore."

Paolo licks the side of my face before disappearing into the darkness. My head whips back and forth, searching for any more attackers, but I don't see anyone. Every muscle in my body tenses as the sound of gunfire gets louder. My vision blurs, and the pain quickly returns with force—the pain, so much fucking pain.

"What have they done to you?" A hand slides beneath my chin, lifting it slightly.

I blink a few times, willing my eyes to focus, before a pair of eyes I know better than my own comes into view. *Felix.* A painful sob wracks through my body as he works quickly to release me from the cuff. “Do you know where the key is?” he asks, but I don’t have the energy to respond. After a few more attempts to ask me questions, my stomach roils, and I throw up. The stomach acid burns my throat as I purge my body of Joseph’s cum.

“It’s over now, *bambolina*.” Felix’s voice soothes me, like a lullaby lulling a child to sleep. Another promise that he can’t keep will be broken.

“You came for me.” His breath is hot against my skin as my heart settles, and his lips press against mine as I slip into the endless darkness. I want to call him out on his bullshit promises, making him feel the same soul-sucking despair I feel sinking into my bones, but I keep quiet.

Because right now, he’s here with me. I’m no longer alone.

“Sleep, *bambolina*. Everything is going to be okay,” he commands as my eyes drop shut, and I slip away into the endless darkness.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# FELIX

Dr. Allen opens the door to his office, bringing in two cups of steaming-hot liquid with him. He places one of them in front of me before making his way around his desk and taking a seat.

"Is she okay?" I ask, already knowing the answer. Images of her body cuffed to the chair, covered in cum and blood, will never leave me. I didn't arrive in time to stop them, but I glimpsed Paolo as he hurried out the back door with a smug smile on his face. I knew in that moment that he had done this. He had taken something from Willa that she can never get back, and I have every intention of making him pay for what he's done before we leave this place.

"As well as expected," he responds, taking a drink from his cup. "Her finger was a clean cut, and although cauterized in the least humane way possible, there's no infection that I can see. I have a few samples of an antibiotic in my bag. I gave her two of those before giving her something for the pain and to help her sleep. She should be out for several hours, or at least long enough for you to get somewhere safe."

The moment I had Willa tucked safely into my arms, I called the number on Dr. Allen's card. Adler was dead, Ezra was in the wind, and I didn't have anywhere else to turn. He helped us in the past, so I took the chance that he'd help us again. Thankfully, the gamble paid off.

"What about her other injuries?" I ask, trying to block out the memories of her body broken and covered in blood.

"They will all heal, but there will be lasting damage."

I nod my head, knowing that Dr. Allen can only treat her physical injuries. We will have to find someone else to help her mentally. The mind

can only handle so much trauma before it breaks. Willa is teetering on the edge and can break at any moment. I need to do everything I can to ensure that doesn't happen.

"Where will you go?" Dr. Allen asks, his eyebrows pulled down in thought. "I have a friend in Canada that may be able to help you. She's a counselor."

I nod my head, at a complete loss for words, before pushing off the chair and heading toward the window. I pull back one curtain slightly, just enough to glimpse the end of the driveway as a set of lights flash twice before disappearing into the darkness.

*He's here.*

I'll never be able to make this up to Willa. I promised to be there for her, to never let Joseph or anyone else touch her, and I failed. I can't ask for forgiveness, and I don't deserve it. I just wish I were strong enough to let her go. The last thing she needs is a constant reminder of what happened to her hanging around, but there is no other way. I failed her once; I refuse to fail her a second time.

"Who are you?" Dr. Allen says, his eyes focused on the dark figure in the doorway.

"No need to worry, Doctor. He's with me."

"I still worry," he responds, putting his mug down on the desk and reaching into the bottom drawer. I hear a faint shuffling before he bangs the drawer shut, slamming a bottle of scotch and two cups on the top of the desk. "I need something a little stronger than coffee." He quickly fills both glasses halfway before grabbing one and drinking it down.

"Don't mind if I do." Ezra chuckles, striding toward us, grabbing the other glass and throwing it back before slamming it down. "Another."

Dr. Allen fills both glasses, handing one to Ezra before sliding the other one toward me. I accept it, but I don't take a drink.

Ezra can only be found when he wants to be. Luckily, when I called him, he chose to answer. My heart ached as I told Ezra what happened to Adler, reliving every moment I spent on the phone with him, committing his last words to heart. Ezra remained silent the entire time, not once uttering a soothing word or apology, not that I expected anything else from him. He knew that what happened to Adler was just as much his fault as my own, but neither one of us pointed fingers. Both of us wanting only revenge for what happened to our brother.

After a few moments of silence for our brother, Ezra asked me what I needed. I rattled off specific instructions about what I needed and where to meet me. It took a few hours for me to rescue Willa from Joseph, but when I came out, Ezra was sitting on the hood of my car, waiting for me.

"It took some doing, but I managed to get everything you were looking for." Ezra nods, dropping a large duffle bag on the desk between Dr. Allen and me. "I also filled up the gas tank, packed the trunk full of food, and added a few extra goodies in the bag for you."

I slide the bag into my lap and unzip it, checking the contents. Passports and identification for Willa and me, burner phones, a few stacks of hundred-dollar bills in both US and Canadian dollars, and a couple of changes of clothes.

"You can stay at my cabin in Michigan for a few days, but I doubt very much longer. Joseph already has men looking for both of you."

"Fuck!" I shout, slamming my fist on the desk in front of me. "Can she travel?"

"I would like for her to rest for twenty-four hours before being moved, but it seems that isn't an option." Dr. Allen pushes to his feet before heading for the door. "I'll put together some medication and written instructions for you to take with you, along with the number for my friend."

"Thank you, Doctor." Dr. Allen nods his head at us before slipping out the door, pulling it tightly shut behind him.

"Where is he?" I ask Ezra, my blood boiling in my veins.

*Paolo*. He thought he could escape my wrath. I didn't have to say a word to Ezra about what I wanted. He took one look at Willa's beaten and broken body in my arms and took off. I knew that Ezra would do everything in his power to make sure someone would pay for what they had done. "There's a small cottage at the opposite end of the property in the woods. The perfect place to get information." Ezra places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. "You don't have to do this, brother."

*Brother*. That one word means everything and nothing at the same time. The moment I took Willa from Joseph, I became my family's enemy. There's no going back and asking for forgiveness. From this point forward, I'm no longer Felix Bianchi.

"I have to do it, brother." I pull one of the burner phones from the bag and shove it into my pocket before yanking open the door to Dr. Allen's office. Ezra follows close behind me, opening the back door and leading me

to my prisoner. I can hear Paolo shouting, pleading for his life as we get closer to the building.

"Did you find Joseph?"

Joseph disappeared the moment he was finished playing his game. He knew I'd come for Willa and anyone that harmed her, so he wanted to be as far away from things as possible. There's no doubt in my mind that Joseph took part in Willa's rape, but he wasn't my number one priority right now. If there's any chance of Willa and me making it out of Chicago alive, I need information. And Paolo is going to give it to me.

I swing open the door and step inside.

"You got started without me?" Ezra pats me on the back, brushing past me and entering the room. "You only said you wanted him delivered to you alive. You didn't specify in what condition you wanted him in."

"Fair enough. I should've been more specific," I grumble, pulling my shirt over my head and dropping it on the floor just inside the door. I don't have very many clothing options right now. The last thing I want to do is get blood stains all over my clothing.

Paolo is handcuffed and tied to a chair in the center of the room. His eyes are swollen tightly shut, bruises covering most of his exposed skin. His legs are spread wide and tied to the legs of the chair, as well. There's a large crimson stain on his side, the color saturating through the shirt. "Damn, I'm surprised he's still coherent."

"I patched him up before throwing him in the trunk." Ezra smiles, causing me to laugh loudly. "No pain medication."

It seems having a psychopath for a friend comes in handy when you're looking for revenge.

"I was only doing what I was told," Paolo pleads, frantically trying to face me. "Joseph ordered me to rape the girl. Yeah, I didn't even enjoy it."

"You've always been a horrible liar, Paolo," I respond, bending down and pulling a knife from my boot. I reach for his leg, slicing the knife down the leg of his jeans and splitting them open.

"Please, Felix. Brother. You know I couldn't say no," he whimpers, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Fucking pussy," Ezra grumbles. "If you don't need anything else, I'd like to get gone sooner rather than later."

I don't take my eyes off Paolo, only nodding my head to let him know I heard him.

“I’ll be back to clean up your mess in the morning,” says Ezra, before leaving.

“Please, I beg you,” he whimpers.

“Why should I listen to you? You didn’t listen to her when she begged you to stop.”

The knife slices through the meaty flesh of his thigh. Paolo howls in pain, thrashing hard and tugging at his bindings, but it’s no use. He isn’t getting free until I’m finished with him.

“Did you enjoy yourself when you fucked her so hard she bled? When you forced your cock down her throat with your hand squeezing tightly around her neck?

My hand shoots out and grips his throat tightly, squeezing down only enough to cause some discomfort. “You say Joseph gave you permission?”

“Yes. Exactly. I knew you’d understand, brother.”

“How many times do I need to tell you that you are *not* my brother anymore!” I shout, tightening my grip on his throat as he continues to struggle for air. His mouth opens and closes, waiting for the moment he’s able to breathe again but having no idea when or if that time will come.

Raising my knife, I slash down and slice his legs open while maintaining my tight grip on his neck. I don’t count how many times, but by the time I’m satisfied, the inside of his thighs are covered in red, blood seeping from the multiple wounds on his legs. I don’t know exactly how much blood someone usually loses from cuts in this area because I never paid attention before, but it’s definitely more than I expected. I may have nicked the femoral artery. Not that it matters, because he was never meant to leave this place.

Paolo’s agonizing screams echo around the room as his pleas for mercy fall on deaf ears. A rush of power shoots through me, knowing that I have control over whether this man lives or dies. Whether he is going to walk out of this building or if these are his final days on Earth. “How does it feel to have no power? Not knowing if you’re going to live another hour, minute, or second?”

I release my grip, and he gasps, taking in large mouthfuls of air and collapsing forward. Paolo’s bindings are the only thing keeping him upright. “You thought you were man enough to deserve her. But you thought wrong.”

“Shhh.” I say soothingly, placing the bloody knife against my lips. “Shhh, Paolo. We’re almost finished.” He freezes for a moment, sitting straight up in the chair as I circle his body. There are a million other ways I can torture him, make him feel the same pain that Willa did earlier tonight, but I don’t have the time. We need to get out of here before someone finds us. There’s no doubt in my mind that Ezra was followed, but no one would come here without backup, especially with Ezra and me working together.

If it was anyone else besides Ezra, I’d be concerned he’d be labeled as a traitor, as well. But Joseph fears Ezra and his unpredictability. Ezra doesn’t have the same allegiance to him as everyone else does. Like I did.

I step behind Paolo, digging the blade deep into his skin before whispering softly, “*Ci vediamo all’inferno.”* (I’ll see you in hell.)

“No!” He bucks again, but it’s no use. I shove the knife into the side of his throat, twisting it ninety degrees before slicing it open. I take a step back, watching as blood seeps from the wound, a few drops landing on my forearm and chest. Good thing I took my shirt off before getting started.

Paolo’s mouth gapes open and closed like a fish as he suffocates in his blood. I could have made it easier and given him a quick death, but I wanted to make him suffer, just like he did to Willa. He probably still has a pulse, but not for long.

I pull my knife free from his neck before wiping it on his shirt and taking a step back. His entire body hangs lifeless in the chair. The only thing holding him upright is the cuff on his wrists and ankles. I take a picture of my handy work, wanting to show it Willa when she’s ready. Wanting to prove to her I’ve made this asshole pay for what he’s done. One down, one to go.

I stuff my knife back into its hiding place in my boot and roll my shoulders. I was hoping the movement would release some of the tension I’m carrying, but it doesn’t. I reach for the doorknob, and a loud ringing noise fills the room.

I reach into my back pocket, checking the burner phone Ezra brought me, but the screen is dark. “It couldn’t be…” I mumble to myself before reaching into Paolo’s pocket and pulling out his phone. Joseph’s name flashes across the screen as it comes to life.

I answer the call but don’t say a word.

“Hello, Felix.”

“I’ll make you pay, Joseph,” I respond, my entire body shaking with rage as I try to maintain control of the anger seething just beneath the surface.

“I’d love to see you try. You and I both know that you don’t have the resources to do anything but hide.” Joseph chuckles darkly. “*Corri, topolino. Il gatto è pronto per giocare.*” (Run along, little mouse. The cat is ready to play.)

It was that moment when I switched from being the hunter to being the prey.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## PRESENT DAY

### FELIX

I watch as Willa takes another few shots at the target I set up for her, barely hitting the mark.

"You need to aim, *bambolina*," I growl out. Frustration at the lack of information about Joseph and his plans must be getting to me.

The last time Willa talked to her therapist, she urged her to find a way to take control of her fear. A way to channel her anger and sadness over what happened to her into something constructive. She immediately asked me to teach her how to shoot. I originally refused. I'll never leave Willa alone again. In my mind, she didn't need to learn how to shoot. I'd always be there to protect her. But after going to one of her therapy sessions, I changed my mind. She didn't worry that I couldn't protect her, but she wanted to have control over that part of her life. The security in knowing that she could take care of herself, even though she knows she'll never have to.

It's been almost three years since we ran from the only life I've ever known, but after seeing what they did to her, I couldn't stay. I couldn't allow them to continue to use Willa and her sister as pawns in their game. Especially not after what they've done. Both of us have been going to virtual therapy for a few years, trying to work through our own issues, and it's done us well. But nothing will be okay until I have my revenge.

The rage I felt when I walked into that room and saw her body broken, bloody, and handcuffed was unimaginable. Her eyes were covered in a black rag as deep, gut-wrenching sobs of pain bubbled out of her throat. Those sounds are ingrained in my brain for all eternity, and the only thought that gives me solace at night is that I made Paolo pay for touching what's

mine. Now there is only one person left to kill before my quest for vengeance is over.

I want to exact my revenge on Joseph for what he's done to her. I want to punish him for the torture he enforced upon her. But nothing can be done until I find what rock he's hiding under.

"This is pointless." Her shoulders sag as she places the handgun on the table in front of her. "Why are you still this paranoid? No one is coming for us, right?" she asks for the millionth time, staring off into the trees surrounding our home.

We've been running from Joseph and my brothers for years, only staying in one place for a few months. But when we found this house, we knew this was where we'd stay for as long as possible. It's in a rural area just outside of Chicago, surrounded by trees and a large backyard, perfect for Willa to practice her shooting.

"Nothing is pointless, *bambolina*." I let out a frustrated sigh. "You need to be able to protect yourself if I'm not here. Joseph is coming for us sooner rather than later. We can't rest until he's dead and buried. Until he no longer poses a threat to any of us—including Celia."

"I miss her."

"I know," I respond, pulling out my phone, hoping for a message from Ezra.

I've spent every waking hour searching for Celia, but it's as if she vanished without a trace, just like Joseph. Even Ezra hasn't been able to find her, not that he's been the most reliable person recently either. After having Adler cremated, and delivering Paolo to Dr. Allen's house the night we escaped, he disappeared into the night. Again, not unusual for Ezra, but I also haven't heard from him since. No texts, emails, calls, or visits, and that's what concerns me.

I walk over to the table and pick up the gun, quickly firing off the rest of the rounds in the chamber before disassembling the gun quickly.

"Show off," she grumbles from behind me as she wraps her arms around my waist, resting her cheek on my back.

I place the grip and barrel of the gun on the table, along with the magazine, before turning in her arms. I look at her and see nothing but trepidation. "What is it, *bambolina*?" There's something on her mind, but she won't ask me. Not without a little push on my end. "You can ask me

anything." I kiss her forehead and run my hands down her arms, releasing her grip around my waist, and thread her fingers with mine.

"Do you think she's dead?"

I pause, trying to find the right words to ease her fears. If she's with Joseph, there's no doubt in my mind she's dead. He probably tortured her.

"If she's anything like you, which I have a feeling she is, I doubt it."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because Joseph ordered me to capture, torture, and then silence you. But I did none of those things. Instead, I've dedicated my life to protecting you, loving you, and making you smile. I plan on spending the rest of my life learning all your secrets. Devoting myself to you and doing everything I can to show you my undying love and devotion."

I pull her toward the faux French doors at the back of our home, hitting the hidden lock and releasing the security door. "So, there's no way the Genovese brothers would react any differently. The moment they laid eyes on your sister, they'd be under her spell."

I sit down at our small kitchen table, pulling her into my lap. "You know you don't have to find an excuse to tell me how awesome I am." Willa giggles.

"I plan on telling you every day for the rest of my life if it makes you smile." I sigh before pulling her tighter into my chest. "And I won't rest until we find your sister. She's still out there, Willa. Never give up hope that I'll find her for you." I gnash my teeth together, remembering the look of grief in her eyes whenever she mentions her sister.

Willa places a gentle kiss on my chin. "I know," she whispers, spinning around so she straddles me and places a kiss on my lips. "But it doesn't hurt any less knowing she's out there somewhere. I don't know if she's hurt and alone, but I'll never give up hope.

"Have you heard from Ezra recently?"

"I had word a few months ago from someone living near his cabin in Michigan that he saw him, but nothing since. He could be anywhere in the world right now."

"But that means he's still alive. We both know that fucker is hard as fuck to kill." Willa laughs loudly, throwing her arms around my neck. "Besides, there's no way he is going to risk leading Joseph's men to us. No news is good news if you ask me. He probably found a place to hide out and is waiting 'til everything settles before he lets you know what's happening."

“It’s been at least a year, if not longer. I haven’t heard a peep from anyone about Joseph or Ezra…”

The rules of this life are clear. Once you have betrayed your brothers, your life is forfeit. I haven’t been in contact with anyone from my old life because each of them is now out for my blood. It won’t matter to them why I had disobeyed Joseph, took Willa, and disappeared. None of that matters. To be betrayed by someone in your family cuts deeper than anyone could imagine. A sin, to them, that is unforgiveable.

“Well, I have hope, and so should you.”

“Hope. I never believed in hope before I met you.” I wrap my arms around her waist and roll over, pinning her body to the couch with mine. “But maybe I can try it just this once.” I capture her lips in a searing kiss before lifting off her and heading toward the kitchen. “It’s time for breakfast.”

“What’s on the menu for this morning?” Willa asks from behind me.

“How about homemade cinnamon rolls?” I ask as I poke my head in the fridge, double-checking we have all the ingredients.

“Yes! That’s something I can help you make.” Willa claps her hands together quickly before hopping up on the counter beside me. I laugh quietly before I pull out all the ingredients we need from the fridge.

“I’m glad you agree because I spent hours last night, after you went to bed, making the dough. I really hate eating the pre-made stuff.”

Willa scrunches her nose in disgust. “Good thing. Because I’m so hungry I could eat a horse right about now.”

“All right, smartass, go wash your hands, and then you can start rolling out the dough.” She gives me a mock salute before heading toward the bathroom to wash her hands.

It still amazes me the delight she gets out of the smallest things. Whether it be making dinner together or watching a movie before bed, her smile brightens. Willa is becoming comfortable around me, her love for me shining in her eyes every day, but it still amazes me. Somehow, against all odds, this amazing woman wants to be by my side.

“Lost in thought again?” She slides up next to me, pulling the rolling pin out of the drawer beside me.

“Just thinking about how much I love you.” I smile at her, waiting for her to say something in return, but she gives me a shy smile and turns toward the island, where the dough is waiting for her.

“Not as much as I love you.” Her eyes shine with unshed tears as she takes a deep breath and smiles. “Now, let’s get to work. I want to eat before midnight.”

I watch her throw some flour down on the counter before beginning to roll the dough out flat. Then I get to work myself. We both move around each other in a well-choreographed dance as I mix brown sugar, butter, cinnamon, and heavy cream together to make the filling, spreading it inside the dough before cutting it into even pieces and shoving our creation into the stove.

I set the timer for twenty-one minutes and then lock eyes with Willa. “What shall we do while we wait?”

A mischievous smile crosses her beautiful face. “I can think of a few ways to pass the time,” she says before launching herself in my direction and connecting her lips with mine.

I growl in response, but a loud ring fills the room, and we both freeze.

“The sat phone,” we say in unison as I lower her to the floor.

“I’ll get us some coffee while you answer that. Maybe it’s Ezra,” she whispers before brushing her lips against mine and heading to the other side of the kitchen.

I take a deep breath before grabbing the phone from its hiding spot—a false-bottom drawer in the kitchen. Besides the phone, there’s a couple thousand dollars, fake passports, and two burner phones. We also have two bug-out kits in the car’s trunk, wanting to be prepared to leave at a moment’s notice.

“Hello.”

“You need to get out of there now!” a familiar voice shouts through the phone, the sound of gunfire and squealing tires echoing in the background. “They’re coming.”

“Ezra?” I question, grabbing all the contents of the drawer and stuffing it into my pockets. “Where the fuck have you been?”

“Busy. Now get the fuck out of that house. I’ll text you an address where to meet me.”

The phone in my pocket vibrates. “How the hell… You know what? Never mind. I’ll see you soon.”

I don’t even bother to say goodbye before hanging up the phone. “Willa!” I shout, my eyes scanning the horizon out the window, searching for any threats lurking behind the tree line.

She comes running towards me, placing two coffee mugs on the table. “Was it Ezra?”

I nod my head just as I hear the glass window beside me shatter, and searing hot pain enters my shoulder.

No more time to run. They’re here.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# WILLA

“You’re bleeding!” I screech as I drop to my knees, my hands fluttering around Felix’s body, searching for the source.

A few moments ago, we were making breakfast and planning to have a quickie on the kitchen table while we wait for the timer to go off. Then crash. The window shatters, and Felix pushes me under the table, protecting me with his body.

I’ve been waiting on pins and needles for something like this to happen, but after all this time, I assumed they’d forget about the sick games they’ve been playing with me and my sister. I asked Felix a million times where my sister was and what their plans for her were, but he didn’t know. I have no idea how she’s doing. If she’s living happily somewhere, protected and safe, or if they’re holding her hostage. I knew it was a gamble to run away with Felix, but I couldn’t stay there. There was no doubt in my mind that they’d continue to abuse and torture me, and I knew I wouldn’t have survived the ordeal.

“Fuck. That hurts.” He grunts, knocking the table over to give us a little more cover as bullets continue to rain down on us. “We need to move.”

“It’s not supposed to tickle, that’s for sure,” I snap back, not knowing what to do with all the emotions swirling around inside me.

My knees press into the floor, shards of glass cutting into my skin as I rip my shirt over my hand and press it hard against his shoulder. Felix has been my only constant through all of this. The only person I know who has my best interest at heart. Yeah, he locked me in a cage and beat me, but that’s all in the past. The tears pooling in my eyes slip free as I’m reminded of the last three plus years of my life. I thought this was over. I thought we

were finally free of his family's grasp, but I should've known better. We are up against Joseph Bianchi, the man of your nightmares. There was no way he was going to let our escape go unpunished.

"I thought we'd have more time," I whimper as Felix struggles to stand, pulling a small pistol from behind his back.

His face contorts in pain for a moment before it quickly disappears. He's trying to be strong, not wanting me to worry like he always does, but I know better. He's worried. We got comfortable, living in the perfect small town outside of Chicago. I'd gotten a job, under an assumed name, of course, and things were good. Better than good, but there was always a nagging feeling in the back of my mind that they wouldn't let this go.

"There's no time," he growls, firing off a few shots before ducking back down behind the table and holding his hand out toward me. "We need to move."

My vision begins to blur. The only sound I can hear is the white subway tiles covering the opposite wall shattering, splintering into tiny little pieces as they come crashing to the floor. My chest tightness as I panic, staring at Felix's outstretched hand. I know I should reach out and grab it, but I'm frozen in place as my mind goes back to the night when my life changed forever.

If only I went right home after work, if I'd gone to see Celia like she begged me to do, or any number of things that led to me being assigned to Joseph's room that night. I wouldn't be here fighting for my life. My sister… hell, I don't even know where my sister is. When Felix grabbed me, I thought my life was over. But in reality, it was only the beginning.

"We have to go, Willa." Felix grips my hand tightly, giving it a squeeze before pulling me to my feet. I flatten myself against him, pressing my ear to his chest. The sound of his heart beating is my only focus. If his heart is still beating, I'll be safe, cared for, and protected. "On the count of three."

My eyes snap to his, and I nod, letting him know I'm listening as he holds up his fingers and begins ticking off numbers. One. Two. On three, Felix grips my hand tightly in his and makes a break toward the other room, in search of additional cover.

Gunfire fills the air as we sprint through the opening. Pain radiates up my legs as my bare feet slap against the floor, shards of broken tile and glass piercing my skin with each step. Felix pulls me to a stop, pressing our

bodies against the living room wall before ducking back into the opening and firing another shot. I hear a cry of pain come from the other room.

*He must have hit someone. But how many more are there?*

"There are too many of them. You need to go, *bambolina*."

"No!" I shout, wrapping my arms tightly around his waist and burying my nose in his chest. "I won't leave without you."

Painful sobs wrack my body as he fires more shots, the muscles of his chest constricting tightly with each movement. I know I should run out the door behind us to safety, but I can't bring myself to leave. Felix risked everything to save me. Everything he's ever known to protect me from Joseph, and I won't leave him alone.

"Willa," he groans as I pull away, wanting desperately to see his face. "I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you."

"And I can't live without you!" I scream, swiping at the continuous stream of tears rolling down my cheeks. "You promised you'd always be with me, and I'm holding you to that."

Felix's eyes lock with mine as he releases the empty clip before pulling another one out of his pocket to reload. He fires off a few more shots before turning back to me. "Head directly to the car. There is a set of keys in the visor. Start the car, and I'll be right behind you."

"Promise?"

It seems silly to make him promise at a time like this, but I know Felix. If he promises to be right behind me, he will be. He may have done horrible things in his lifetime, but he has never once broken his word. Especially to me.

"I promise. Now go, Willa!" he shouts before ducking out from behind the wall and firing in the direction of our attackers.

I don't waste any time heading straight for the front door, flinging it open, and heading directly toward the car. Bullets continue to rain down around me as men approach from the other side of the yard, attempting to box us in.

*Get to the car. Get to the car. Get to the car,* I chant repeatedly to myself to keep focus. If not, I'll fall apart, choking on my fears. Somehow, I make it to the car and climb inside, finding the keys exactly where he said they'd be.

"You thought you could escape us," a sinister voice shouts as he rips open the door, pointing a gun directly at me.

My eyes drift closed as my muscles lock in fear. The sound of the gun cocking floats to my ears.

Regrets, hopes, and wishes for the future filter through my mind as I wait for the pain I know is coming.

*I regret not finding Celia sooner.*

*I regret walking into that room.*

No. No, I don't regret that. I could never regret any circumstance that led me to meeting Felix. He was my tormentor. My captor. My everything.

I hope—no, I wish that he'll make it out of that house and survive.

"Make them pay for what they've done, Felix," I whisper as a loud crack echoes around the car, and warmth covers my skin.

My eyes fly open, locking with Felix's hazel-brown eyes as a body crumples to the ground. I scan Felix's body, attempting to catalog his wounds, but I can't make out one from another. The entire lower half of his shirt is covered in blood as he braces himself against the open car door. One arm is wrapped around his center, pressed tightly against his side. Blood oozes from his right leg, probably from another gunshot wound.

"OMG. Where are you hit?" I question rapid fire as my ears ring loudly. Felix's lips move quickly, gesturing toward the car and back at the house, but it's almost impossible for me to hear his voice over the ringing.

"Are they all gone? Where are we going to go?" My head swivels back and forth, looking for any more signs of danger but see nothing but bodies littering our once-pristine front yard.

Splatters of deep red blood clash with the thin layer of snow covering the lawn. His hands grip my shoulders tightly, shaking my body, trying to get my attention as my hearing snaps back into place. My eyes flick back to him, locking with his hazel-brown eyes. Without a word, Felix grips the back of my head, pulling me toward him and smashing his lips to mine. Everything around us blurs. My only focus is Felix and how his lips feel pressed against mine.

"We need to get out of here. I'm sure Joseph has more men on the way." Felix groans in pain, turning on his heels and marching around the car.

He flings open the door, lowering himself gently into the passenger seat before pulling the door shut behind him. Without waiting, I turn the ignition and pull out of the drive.

"Where are we going to go?" I question, pressing the gas pedal all the way to the floor and taking off down the road.

I don't have a destination in mind, but putting as much distance as possible between us and this house is a must. Felix is right. There were only a handful of men that came after us today, probably hoping to catch us by surprise, but I doubt Joseph is going to give up. Now we are on the run, with no plan and few resources. We're right where he wants us.

"We need to find someone who can help us." I hiccup, taking the corner a little too quickly. The tires squeal in protest, but I manage to keep them on the road. "Don't you have anyone we can turn to?"

I asked the question, but I already know the answer. There's no one. Every person Felix contacted in the past told him the same thing. They wish him luck but refuse to turn their backs on family. Family means everything to these men. They will die for their family but will kill anyone who betrays them without question. But they had no problem using my love for my sister against the two of us. I never said it made sense, but it's their creed. A bond they have all chosen that brings them together in both life and death. When Felix took me with him, that was the biggest act of betrayal against his family. And now we both have to suffer the consequences.

"There's only one person who can help us now." Felix groans, reaching into the glove compartment and grabbing another pistol, placing it on the console between us.

My ears perk up at the mention of someone. "And who might that be?"

"Your sister."

Anger, unlike anything I've ever felt before, fills my veins. Felix held me every time I cried for my sister. Cried tears of despair over not knowing where she was or if she was safe or lying dead in a ditch somewhere. And all the time, he knew where she was hiding away and chose to keep it from me. When we left the warehouse, I was no longer his captive. He swore to me that he'd do everything in his power to discover where my sister was.

"Celia's alive?" I choke out, trying desperately to control my raging emotions. "And you know where she is?"

I chuckle humorously, pulling the car to a stop on the side of the road. "Of course, you do. The bigger question is why you haven't told me."

Felix has deprived me of time with my sister. I should be focused on the good news, but more questions filter through my mind. *Where is she? Why hasn't she contacted me? Is she all right?*

"We don't have time for this right now…."

“There’s always time, Felix.” I suck in a breath, shaking my head vehemently as I wrap my arms around myself. “You promised to never lie to me, and you did. You lied about the location of the most important person in my life.”

“I didn’t lie. I only found her a few days ago….” He reaches toward me, brushing his fingers against my arm before pulling his hand back.

His hands tighten into fists, blood dripping down his shoulder from his wound. I want to go to him, tell him it’s fine and that I’m just glad he knows her location, but the words freeze in my throat. How can I trust him after he’s kept something so monumental from me?

But right now, none of those things matter. Not when he found her or why she didn’t contact me before now. Nothing matters except for the fact that Celia is alive. The only thing I need right now is to make sure my sister is okay. Everything else will come later.

“I’m sorry, *bambolina.”*

My eyes cast downward, not wanting to show him the pain and sadness swirling around inside me.

“There will be time for us to discuss this later. Right now, we need help. Where’s my sister?”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

# WILLA

"Here goes nothing," I mumble to myself as I pull to a stop.

This is it. The moment I'd give up hope was even possible. I'm going to see my sister for the first time in three years. I take a deep breath, glancing at my surroundings, trying to figure out exactly where we are.

I always imagined Celia being kept in the middle of nowhere, hidden away from prying eyes, but I'm parked in front of another mansion. I don't know exactly what part of the city we are in, but it's definitely Chicago. Celia could have escaped, disappeared into the city without a trace, but where would she have gone? She had no idea where I was or if I was all right, the same as me.

*We were this close to each other for so long….*

I shake my head, not wanting to let my mind go down that path. It will only lead to more questions we don't have the time to find the answers to. I need to get inside, find my sister, and beg the men keeping her to help us hide from Joseph Bianchi. No big deal.

"I can see the wheels in your head turning, *bambolina*," he says softly, his hand brushing against mine.

"Don't call me that. I'm still angry with you." I bristle.

"Angry or not, Willa, you will always be my *bambolina.*"

Felix winces as he leans forward, kissing me long and hard. My eyelids flutter close as I give myself over to him, letting all the worry and anger leach from my body. Apparently, this is exactly what I needed.

"Thank you." I pull back and stare at him. "What do we do now?"

“You’re going to help me get out of this car, and we’re going to knock on the door,” he responds calmly, as if walking into a rival mafia family’s home unannounced is an everyday occurrence for him.

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. We don’t have very many choices, Willa. We need these men’s help to get away from Joseph Bianchi.”

“I get that, but I doubt they’re going to welcome you with open arms. Besides, whose house is this, anyway?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t have time to ask Ezra, but this is the address he told us to meet him at. We should have more answers after we knock on the door.”

My heart squeezes, and I feel tears collecting in my eyes again. Fear for my sister’s safety, and ours, washes over me as I climb out of the car and jog to the other side. I quickly fling open the door and lean down to help Felix.

“I love you, Willa,” Felix whispers against my lips.

“I love you, too,” I respond as I wrap his arm around my shoulder and help him walk toward the house.

It took us longer than usual to make it to the top of the stairs and ring the doorbell, but now our only option is to wait. Thankfully, we don’t have to wait too long before someone pulls the door open.

*You’ve got to be shitting me.*

My eyes widen in horror as I come face to face with Salvatore Genovese, the head of the Genovese family, and the man Joseph Bianchi forced my sister to spy on. Chiseled jawline. His hair has that just-got-out-of-bed look. His body is the picture of perfection, and his suit jacket is opened to reveal a crisp white button-down shirt molded to his muscular chest. But what catches my attention is his eyes, which are focused directly on Felix.

My heart pounds in my chest, the blood rushing through my ears. My vision blurs, as if I’m viewing the world through another lens. I’m panicking. I know it, and I’m powerless to stop myself this time. I knew coming here was a bad idea, but there’s nothing we can do now.

These are the men my sister was sent to spy on to save my life. Joseph forced her to work at the club to get close to them, searching for any tidbits of information they could to bring them down. Either Celia is very bad at being a spy or she was caught. Both mean nothing but pain for my sister.

And here I am, at their doorstep. Felix's body bloody and broken, unable to protect either of us from their wrath, and asking for their help.

"Who the fuck is at the door?" another man calls from behind him before stepping into view.

I have no idea who this one is, but it's not his brother, Antonio. The Genovese brothers are twins, and this man looks nothing like Salvatore. The only similarities between the two are their height and fashion sense, and neither of those things will help me figure out who he is and if he's a threat to us.

"Friends of yours?" he questions, his cold, calculating eyes switching between Felix and me before turning toward Salvatore.

"Willa, I presume?" Salvatore questions, and I nod my head.

"Yes. And we need your help." I hold out my hand and chuckle as the man examines my hand. "Maybe you could let us inside? I doubt you want someone asking questions about the bloody man and woman standing on your front porch."

I wait patiently for him to say something or show some sign he can even hear me, but he doesn't move a muscle. Salvatore continues to stare at me before the other man holds out his hand. "My name is Matteo. It seems we have a lot to discuss."

Matteo steps forward, reaching out and grabbing one of Felix's arms, supporting all his weight. "I'll take him to get looked at."

"Thank you, but when can I see my sister?" I whisper, my eyes following Felix before he disappears around a corner.

"This way," Salvatore responds before turning on his heels and heading back into the house.

I follow behind him, unsure what other options I have. This isn't going as badly as I expected, but we aren't out of the woods yet. Maybe things are looking up after all.

I follow behind him in silence, tears streaming down my cheeks as I search the house for any sign of Celia. There are no pictures or anything that I notice immediately that screams Celia. A million scenarios run through my head about where my sister could be. Is she locked in a cage somewhere? Did they sell her off before we arrived? Is she—No, I can't think like that. Not now.

"We'll wait in here." Salvatore motions for me to go into the room.

I hesitate for a moment before lifting my chin and strolling in. The room is about the size of my apartment, with a row of windows filling it with natural light. There's furniture scattered around the room. I have no idea what most of it is called, but there's a couch sitting near the opposite wall from where I'm standing. And that's the only thing I need.

Salvatore's calculating eyes follow every one of my movements as if I'd strike out at them at any moment. I should feel offended, but I know how it looks. My sister was kidnapped and forced to do lord knows what to get these men's attention, and I've been missing for almost three years. I didn't call or come looking for my sister until I needed something. To them, I'm public enemy number one.

Smoothing my hand down my clothes, I try desperately to make myself look halfway decent, but fail miserably. Being covered in blood makes that almost impossible. This is not how I envisioned seeing my sister for the first time in years. I had planned it all out in my head, like the movies. We'd run into each other in passing on the street, shocked to see each other but thankful that we were both still alive. She'd invite me to her place for coffee, and we'd talk until the sun came up. But that's only a dream.

"Where's Felix?" I ask, not wanting to move from this spot. "He's alive, right?"

"He's still being looked over by our doctors."

"You have doctors living in your house?" I question, wondering what else they have hidden here.

"No."

"Are you capable of more than one-syllable words?"

You'd think after all this time I'd have better control over my mouth, but no such luck.

"Yes." His lip twitches slightly, but that's the only emotion on his face.

*Damn, this dude has a serious poker face.*

"Are you staying out of trouble, *bambolina*?"

My eyes widen in surprise as Felix and two other men come into view. Felix has a tight grip on his side, probably supporting some broken ribs. There are cuts and bruises covering his face, but it's clean. Free of any blood and grime.

"Never." I giggle, tears pooling in my eyes as he strides toward me.

Stopping just a few inches in front of me, Felix cups my cheek before leaning down and planting a kiss on the top of my head. Just as I'm opening

my mouth to respond, I glimpse movement out of the corner of my eye.

"Celia." My attention snaps toward the door as I get my first look at my sister in years. A bright smile covers her face as she comes waddling into the room. Her blonde hair is much longer than it was the last time I saw her, hanging in loose curls around her shoulders. My eyes scan down her body before widening in surprise. "You're pregnant!" I blurt out before covering my mouth with both hands.

Her eyes shine with unshed tears as she nods her head and moves toward me. A hand shoots out, gripping her elbow before stepping in front of her. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Antonio. Please," Celia begs, tears running down her face as she reaches for him. "Willa would never hurt me."

"Never." I shake my head, bewildered that he'd think I'd ever do anything to harm Celia.

Antonio's eyes focus on me, narrowing slightly before turning his anger toward Felix. "I know who you are. But him, I don't know."

"My name is Felix Bia… just Felix."

"What, are you famous or something?"

"Or something." He pauses, planting another kiss on the top of my head before stepping in front of me.

"Can we do this shit later? I really want to give my sister a hug and ask if I'm having a niece or nephew."

"Both," Antonio says, his smile beaming with pride.

"Can I go see my sister?" Celia asks, her eyes searching each man's face for approval before taking a tentative step toward me.

"What's up, Kitty Kat?" She gives me a watery smile, and both of us giggle softly.

"Nothing much, buttercup," I respond before throwing my arms around her neck and pulling her toward me. I just hold her for a few minutes before I feel something knock against me.

"It seems your niece and nephew are thrilled you're here for their party."

"Party?" I pull back, noticing for the first time the balloons strategically placed around the room and the signs welcoming the twins into the world. Tears stream down my cheeks as I run my hand across her belly, and one twin kicks my palm. "Hello there, little ones. I can't wait to meet you."

“Now, which one of your asses do I need to kick for getting my sister pregnant without my permission?”

“I don’t know, and it doesn’t matter.”

“Wait… You… Them… Fuck! I need to sit down.” I stride toward the couch before flopping down, no longer concerned for my safety.

I drop my head into my hands and try to make sense of what’s happening here. My sister is alive, pregnant, and sleeping with three mafia men that seem to worship the ground she walks on. I mean, things could be worse, right? Even though their relationship is unorthodox, anyone with eyes can see how much they love my sister, which makes them okay in my book.

“Not that this reunion isn’t touching, but where have you been for the past three years?” Antonio drops into the chair across from me. “This one searched everywhere for news and came up empty.”

“Where have you been, Willa?” Salvatore questions before taking a seat in the chair beside his brother. He stares at me for a few moments, waiting for me to respond.

“I was… Then we…” I continue to start and stop, trying to find the best way to answer his question. “Running. I’ve been running for my life.”

“From whom?”

“Joseph Bianchi,” I say, bracing myself for his next question.

“How did you escape?”

“I helped her,” Felix chimes in from behind me and rests his hand on my shoulder. “I was the right hand to Joseph Bianchi. They’re the ones who have been attacking your businesses with the help of Shamus McKenna.”

“Fucking Irish.” Antonio rolls his eyes before crossing his ankle over his knee. “Why are you betraying your brothers? Wait, I already know the answer to that.”

Everyone in the room’s attention focuses on me, causing me to blush, but they’re right. I’m the reason the direction of Felix’s life changed drastically. I can’t bring myself to apologize or regret one minute of it.

“How the hell did you get in here?” Matteo growls.

My eyes widen in surprise as Ezra comes strolling into the room. His face is bruised and covered in blood, as I’d expect, but he seems to be carrying something. As he gets closer, I notice that it’s not something but someone.

“What’s up, Felix?” Ezra announces to the room as he comes strolling closer to us.

Salvatore, Antonio, and Matteo draw their weapons, forming a wall between Ezra and Celia. Their weapons are all pointing directly at him.

Felix shakes his head, taking a seat on the arm of the couch near me. “You don’t call, you don’t write for an entire year, and you expect things to be fine between us?”

“I cleaned up your mess and got you the information you wanted, didn’t I?” He nods his head toward Celia, who is tucked safely behind a wall of her men. “Besides, I was a little occupied.”

“It was partially your mess, too,” Felix mumbles under his breath.

“Anyone care to explain to me how you bypassed my security and got into our home without setting off one alarm?” Salvatore says, tucking his gun back into its place.

“And who the hell do you have thrown over your shoulder?” Antonio chuckles before flopping back down in his seat.

“It was simple. You need a better system. And this is my girl.” He hefts the body higher on his shoulder as she continues to struggle, her muffled shouts filling the room. “If you calm down, I’ll take off the gag.”

“That’s not the best way to treat your girl, Ezra.” I giggle, shaking my head at his antics.

“What do you mean? Isn’t this how Felix got your attention?”

“We aren’t talking about me.” My cheeks heat for the second time, causing everyone else to laugh, except Matteo.

“Say what you have to say and make it quick, or we are putting a bullet between your eyes,” he growls, stepping even closer to Ezra, placing his gun against his temple.

“Matteo has a temper. You better do what he says if you don’t want your brains splattered all over the floor.”

Ezra moves at lightning speed, twisting Matteo’s wrist in a weird direction before turning his weapon back on him. All the men move immediately, even Felix, drawing their weapons and pointing them at his friend.

“Wait, they gave you a gun when you got here? Man, the security here is more lax than I thought.” Ezra chuckles before spinning the gun in his hand and stretching it out toward Matteo, who grabs it quickly.

“Nah, I stole it from a guard in the hallway,” Felix responds, causing the other men to groan loudly.

“We really need to hire better security,” Antonio mumbles as Salvatore pinches the bridge of his nose, no doubt agreeing with his brother. Both men quickly holster their guns before focusing back on Ezra.

“Why did you send us here, Ezra?” I question, wanting to break the tension in the room as quickly as possible.

Ezra might be flighty, but he doesn’t do anything without a reason. We need the Genovese family on our side, but I doubt it has anything to do with my sister. There must be another reason that Joseph was hell-bent on bringing them down. And I have a feeling Ezra has finally figured it out.

“This is the last place Joseph would look for you. And these three want him dead just as much as we do.” Ezra shrugs his shoulder as if the answer should be obvious to all of us.

“And why is that?” Salvatore asks.

“Because Joseph Bianchi is your brother, and he has no intention of resting until you and your brother are dead.”

# EPILOGUE

## Four Months Later

I lean against the door frame of Celia's hospital room, not wanting to intrude on their family moment. Ezra is just outside the doorway to my right, typing away on his phone. As usual, I don't know who he's talking to or what he's searching for.

Ezra has several contacts, and all of them are searching for the same person: Joseph Bianchi. After sending his men to attack Willa and me at our home, he disappeared. More than likely hiding underground now that the Genoveses know he's behind their recent business troubles.

"Aren't you going to say hi to the little ones?" Ezra asks, giving my shoulder a squeeze. "Or are you imagining that will be you and Willa one day?"

*I am now.* I have nothing. A family or even a last name because it was stripped from me the moment I let myself be held under Joseph's thumb. The day I betrayed him, I lost my identity. It's been a slow process, but with Willa's help, I'm slowly learning that a name doesn't define who I am as a person. I could leave this life behind and start over again. Be anything I wanted to be, but I can't leave this world behind completely because I have unfinished business.

"She's beautiful," Willa says, her eyes focused on the precious little girl in her arms.

Celia and Willa have been almost inseparable since we accidentally crashed her gender reveal party, wanting to spend as much time together as possible. Salvatore, Antonio, and Matteo welcomed us into their home with

open arms, wanting to give Celia anything she wanted, but now that the twins are here, we need to find another place to live.

"I agree with you, but I'm a little biased," Celia responds, a content smile on her face.

If I didn't know for a fact that she'd spent the last twelve hours in labor, I would have no idea. Celia looks the exact opposite of tired, with her hair propped on the top of her head.

Salvatore kisses her gently on the head before climbing to his feet, his eyes locking with mine.

Salvatore and I have a tentative relationship. I don't believe he has a problem with me being in the house, but he doesn't trust me. As he shouldn't. I was a high-ranking member of the family that is seeking to destroy everything his father built here in Chicago. There are no words that I could say to show him I can be trusted. Trust must be earned. It will be an uphill battle, but I'm up for the challenge. I'll do anything to make Willa happy.

"When are you going to tell him?" Antonio asks as he places their son in the crib beside the bed.

"Right now, if you two can tear yourselves away from our children for more than a few seconds." Matteo smiles down at their little girl, running his finger across her cheek.

"Pot, meet kettle." Salvatore smiles at his brother and friend before striding toward the door.

"It seems baby time is over," Antonio grumbles, handing their little boy to his mother and pushing to his feet.

"Serious talks are my cue to leave," Ezra grumbles, shoving his phone into his pocket. "Besides, I need to make sure no one is harassing my girl."

I laugh loudly, the sound echoing down the hallway. "You do know Lyra can take care of herself, right?"

Lyra is a spitfire, even worse than Willa was when I first met her. After giving Ezra the what for when he tied her up and brought her to the Genoveses, they disappeared. I don't know what they were doing, but when they came back, those two were just as much in love as I am with Willa. Lyra has managed to tame the wild beast that is Ezra. He's still a sociopath, but he keeps his psychopathic tendencies to a minimum now. That is, until someone does something to Lyra, then it's like a nuclear bomb exploded. He destroys everything and everyone in his path. Not much different from

the rest of us. Our women's safety is our number one priority, even more so because Joseph is still out there.

"I know. The same way Willa can take care of herself." He flashes me a smile before heading for the stairs.

"Where'd he run off to in such a hurry?" Matteo asks, pulling the door shut behind him.

"He didn't even say goodbye," Antonio complains.

"What did you want to tell me?" I get right to the point, not wanting to beat around the bush.

Willa is on the other side of the door. I know logically that nothing can happen to her for the few minutes the four of us are out in the hall talking, but not having eyes on her makes me nervous.

A beat of silence passes between us before Salvatore responds. "We would like for you to join our family."

"What?"

"You have lost more than anyone by betraying Joseph and protecting Willa." Matteo gives me a reassuring smile. "I know how that feels. Family is not limited to blood relations, Felix. It would be my honor to call you my friend and brother."

I nod my head, swallowing down the emotions bubbling to the surface.

"You have given us the upper hand in this war against our enemies and reunited our Celia with her sister. For that, you have our thanks." Salvatore nods his head before heading back into the room.

It seems someone is just as nervous about being away from his wife as I am about being away from Willa.

"What my brother was trying to communicate is, thank you." Antonio slaps me on the back hard before pulling something out of his pocket. Hanging off the edge of his finger is a set of keys.

"Consider this an early wedding present." Antonio drops the keys into my waiting hand. "And a sign to get the fuck out. I want to make my girl scream so loud the walls shake."

"Not with newborns sleeping in the room next to us," Matteo chastises him. "Welcome to the family, brother."

I have no idea what tomorrow brings, but somehow, some way, I've gotten everything I've ever wanted.



Thank you for reading His To Torment from Myself! I hope you loved Felix and Willa's story. If you did, or even if you didn't, I would be so grateful if you could please leave a review.

Want a peek into Felix and Willa's happily ever after? Subscribe to my mailing list and you'll get instant access to an exclusive HIS TO TORMENT bonus epilogues!

Find out how Celia managed to snag her three mafia men in Room Twenty-Three. Keep reading for a sneak peek!

Find out what Ezra was doing when he should've been working in His Obsession coming in September 2023!

# SNEAK PEEK OF ROOM TWENTY-THREE

"Remember, your final is on Monday. I'll be holding additional office hours on Wednesday and Thursday in preparation. If you're exempt from finals, have a good summer." The once-quiet lecture hall is now filled with the sounds of backpacks being zipped shut and the snapping of the stadium chairs as everyone rushes to their next destination.

Instead of jumping up like my classmates, I'm rooted to my seat, trying desperately to blend into the background. Without my foster sister, Willa, by my side as a buffer, my anxiety has been getting the best of me. How will the girl sitting next to me react if I ask her to grab a coffee? Will she be disgusted with me? Will she smile and make an excuse? Will she completely ignore me as if I don't exist? So, instead of speaking to her, I duck my head, hoping she doesn't say anything to me.

Anxiety is a real pain in the ass, especially when you're more than half a day's drive away from the only person who ever made you feel remotely human. I'd be right back living with Willa if it wasn't for my scholarship.

Willa was the one who pushed me to go to college. She claimed that when I graduate, it'll be my turn to take care of her with my fancy degree. I tried to protest, but eventually, she talked me into it, as always. Willa has never asked me to do anything she knows I can't handle, but she is always pushing me out of my comfort zone. My choice to go to college while she moved to Chicago was her way of forcing me out of my shell and helping me learn how to become a functioning member of society. Too bad I'm currently sucking at it.

I've been here for almost two years, and although my grades are amazing, setting me up perfectly to graduate with honors, I haven't made

one friend. In the sleepy town we grew up in, Willa was the center of everything. Parties down by the lake, toilet papering the principal's house and front yard on mischief night, saran wrapping the coach's car door shut when he gave her an F in PE. Basically, if it was even remotely entertaining, Willa had a hand in it. But she refused to let me be home alone, no matter what anyone said. If she was going, I was too. Her friends never hid their disgust with me, complaining about Willa's weird younger sister whenever I was around, but those moments were the highlights of my boring life. Without Willa dragging me around and forcing me to interact with others, I only hold conversations when necessary.

Instead of college being a new beginning for me, I've retreated into books, wanting to live in a world of fantasy instead of the real one. Books have always been my safe place. A place where I can live the life I always wanted for myself. Inside those pages, I have the freedom to fall in love, travel to faraway lands, and even battle dragons. Every day is a new adventure, where I won't be hurt.

If all the psychologists my foster parents sent me to are to be believed, the main cause of my anxiety is my fear of abandonment. They believed the trauma from being abandoned at a fire station when I was three made it hard for me to form attachments with others. Who wouldn't have issues if they were found with only a note and a battered, brown teddy bear? These psychologists could be completely full of shit, but this is one of the main reasons I'm majoring in psychology. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I figured if I could get a better understanding of how my brain works in response to certain situations, I'll find the answers I've been searching for about why my parents left me.

Not wanting to form attachments makes it almost impossible to make friends. Willa tried to bring me out of my shell before she aged out of foster care and moved to Chicago for work. She comes to visit as often as she can, rolling through town like a hurricane and leaving just as quickly. I don't know much about her life in Chicago, other than what I can find on her Facebook profile. For a while, I'd ask her questions about her life, but she always changed the subject. Each time, she assured me she was safe and that should be enough for me, but if I'm being honest, it bothers the shit out of me. I want her to trust me, but all I can do is hope she'll tell me if there's something wrong. Willa can be flakey, but she's the only person who's

continued to care about me, even after we were no longer “sisters” anymore.

“Last one to leave class, as per usual. Did you have a question about something?” My professor smiles at me as she taps on the edge of my desk to bring me back to the present.

“No, ma’am, just waiting for everyone to clear out. I hate having to fight my way out the door,” I respond with a smile before stuffing my notebook and pens into my backpack and standing.

“It’s always a madhouse at the end of class.”

“It’s nothing personal. They’re all just trying to get to the dining hall.” I giggle softly before tucking a piece of hair behind my ear.

She steps out of the way so I can exit the row. We make it partially out the door before she taps me on the shoulder.

My eyebrow raises in question as I watch her pull an envelope from her bag and thrust it toward me. “I almost forgot. Someone left this for you. Next time, give your admirers your box number at the student center.”

“Sorry, professor,” I whisper, taking the envelope from her hands as a sense of dread settles over me.

This isn’t from someone I want to hear from. It could be an admirer like my professor implied, but since Willa and my professors are the only people I talk to, I doubt it. There’s a sinking feeling in my stomach that this is the next step in a sick game.

“No problem, Celia.” She gives me a gentle smile before breezing past me and heading out of the door.

Stuffing the envelope into my bag, I scurry toward the door. My mind’s been a complete mess over the last few weeks, and now this. There’s nothing unusual about the envelope. Whoever sent it wants to make sure there were no clues to what’s inside, but I’m not taking any chances.

Everything started a few weeks ago when I was leaving my night class in the political science building. It’s on the opposite end of campus from my dorm, but I’ve always felt safe trekking across campus before that night. About halfway back, I felt like someone was watching me. A prickle at the back of the neck, letting me know something was wrong. After looking around, I found no one. I chalked the whole experience up to my imagination, but it kept happening. Ever since that night, an eerie sense of being watched has followed me every time I leave my dorm. I even made a complaint to campus security, but they told me someone was probably

playing a practical joke on me and sent me on my way. I can't blame them, to be honest, but I also can't shake this feeling that there's someone watching my every move.

I spent the entire walk from my dorm room to class looking over my shoulder, waiting for someone to jump out of the shadows and snatch me. With this mysterious envelope showing up, I'm convinced this is more than a practical joke.

As I inch closer to my dorm building, my mind goes back to focusing on trying to figure out what the hell is in that envelope. There was nothing unusual on the outside other than my first name, which was written in beautiful calligraphy. It's about the size of my textbook, but there are no other discerning characteristics.

"I should've made sure it wasn't a bomb," I mumble to myself as I run my ID through the card reader, take one final look over my shoulder, and slide inside the door.

The entire dorm is quiet during this time of day. Unlike most college students, I'm an early riser. I prefer to have all my classes in the morning, leaving my afternoons free for studying. As I head toward my room at the end of the hall, I freeze. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle as a sense of unease overcomes me, putting all my senses on high alert.

My dorm has always been a sanctuary, a sacred space, but that went out the window two days ago. I came home and found the picture of Willa and me turned over on my bedside table. Since moving into this dorm earlier this year, that picture has sat in the same spot.

I know what you're thinking, but I spend almost all my time in this room or in class. I know exactly where each item in my room sits. And since then, I've come home every day to find something else moved, like my notebooks being left open on my desk instead of neatly stacked in the corner. The average person misses these small things, but I pay attention to everything.

"Hello." My voice comes out barely above a whisper, loud enough for someone lurking in the shadows to hear me but not disturb any of my neighbors.

Every nerve ending in my body is on high alert. My breathing is shallow and short as my body inches closer to my door. The hallway is eerily quiet. No music playing in someone's room or movement of any

kind. It's the type of silence you'd expect in a horror movie before the bad guy jumps out and kills his unsuspecting victim.

"This shit isn't funny, you know."

My arm moves forward just enough for me to slide my key into the door and turn the lock. The click of the door unlocking rings through the hall as I wait, using all my senses to see if someone is hiding in the shadows, but after a few moments of nothing, I push open the door and clamber inside. As soon as I'm over the threshold, I slam the door shut behind me.

"No more reading thrillers for me," I grumble before dropping my bag onto the floor beside me.

My head falls back onto the closed door with a thump, willing my heart to stop trying to beat its way out of my chest. After a few cleansing breaths, I get myself under control and lock my door before reaching into my backpack and grabbing the mysterious envelope.

"Who sent this?" I cock my head to the side, examining the envelope for any clues but come up empty.

*Maybe I should take it to the police.*

There's a chance that someone will listen to what I have to say and take my concerns seriously. But how likely is that? I'm sure the first question they'll ask is if I've talked to the campus security and what they had to say, giving them everything they need to send me packing.

If I'm going to get to the bottom of who's doing this to me, I'm going to have to do it myself. Gripping the right-hand corner, I rip open the top and pull out a single piece of white paper with three simple words typed on it and nothing else.

Answer the phone.

"What phone?" I mutter, reaching my free hand into my back pocket and pulling out my cell phone. My finger swipes across the screen, bringing it to life, but there isn't one missed notification, text message, or call. Not that I'm surprised. There are only a few people that even have my phone number, not that any of them use it. The only person who ever calls me is Willa. I occasionally get text messages from my professors, letting me know about class cancelations or schedule changes, but that's it.

Just as I'm shoving it back into my pocket, a shrill ringing fills the room, and it's not coming from the phone in my hand. My eyes widen as they follow the sound and focus on my bed. Instead of the mess I left from rolling out of bed late this morning, my bed was neatly made, the pillows fluffed and resting at the top of the bed with my teddy bear sitting right in front of them.

"My bed is made." My eyes zero in on the small black box sitting in the center of my freshly made bed as I struggle to suck in a breath.

My chest tightens as if all the air is being sucked out of the room and someone has wrapped their fingers around my neck. I struggle to take a breath as panic bubbles up from my stomach and settles in my chest. Beads of sweat dot my forehead as my eyes snap shut, my lips moving slightly as I slowly count backward from ten in my head. I continue counting, willing my body to calm down, only getting to three before sucking in a gasping breath and falling to the side. My knees pull up to my chest, and my arms tighten around them.

*I need to find something, anything, to ground me.*

My eyes snap open and search the room for anything that could help, landing on a photo of Willa and me from right before she moved to Chicago. Her once-platinum blonde hair has streaks of purple and pink running through it, her head resting on top of mine, with her arms wrapped tightly around my shoulders. We both have bright smiles on our faces and tears pooling in our eyes.

*Deep breath in and let it out slowly.*

My dirty blonde hair was piled on top of my head, and I was wearing my now-favorite Nirvana T-shirt I got at a secondhand store the day before this picture was taken. We're standing in front of the tire swing we begged our foster father to put up in the large tree in the backyard when we were younger. We spent almost every day out there, telling each other secrets and planning for the future, making it the perfect place to take one last picture together at our childhood home.

*Deep breath in and let it out slowly.*

I can barely focus on anything but the pain radiating through my chest as I try to focus on that day I spent with my sister. That was one of the happiest and saddest days of my life. Willa was on her way to bigger and better things, but she was leaving me alone to fend for myself and find my way through the world.

*No! Happy thoughts only.*

Willa was so excited about the job she snagged at a club in the city. I remember when she showed me a picture of the apartment she spent two years saving for. We talked about how she was going to decorate it and how much she was looking forward to having her own place to call home.

*In and out. In and out.*

I gasp for breath, my cheeks and chest feeling like they're on fire as I allow the air to slowly fill my lungs, easing my panic. I push up to a seated position, resting my back against the door for a second time. The tightness in my chest subsides, allowing me to breathe easier.

I should run as far and as fast as I can away from this room, hell, this state, but where would I go? I already reported my concerns to the campus police, and they blew me off. I doubt the police will be any different. There isn't a person in the world that would believe that I'm being followed, especially with no proof.

I thump my head against the door a few times, trying to think of something—anything—else. Fear once again tightens its grip around my heart, but this time, I fight it. I need to get a grip. Obviously, there's someone that wants my attention, and now they have it. I just need to figure out what they want and why, but I can't do that from my dorm room floor.

*Maybe I can go visit Willa?*

I don't know much about my sister's life in Chicago, but I only have one final at the end of the week. I don't want to bring my problems to my sister's doorstep, but I don't have anyone else to turn to. If there's anyone that can help me figure out this mess, it's Willa. Plus, getting out of town for a little while doesn't seem like a bad idea. I doubt whoever is doing this is going to just magically disappear, but they may lose interest and move on to someone else. In my mind, this whole thing has gone way beyond practical joke territory. I just wish there was someone else out there who'd believe me.

*Willa will know what to do.*

With my mind made up, I push to my feet and pull out my phone for the second time, swiping my thumb across the screen to unlock it. As if I conjured her out of thin air, my phone chimes, and an unread text message from my sister appears on the screen.

"Speak of the devil," I say into the empty room before opening the message.

WILLA:

Answer the phone on your bed, Celia.

I read the message aloud, my eyes flicking back and forth between the message on my screen and the black box sitting on my bed. After a few moments, another message pops up, but this time, it's a picture of my sister.

Instead of the usual selfie I'm used to getting every few days from her, it's just a closeup of her face. Instead of her bright green eyes shining with love and happiness, I see pure terror. Willa's face is covered with grime, and there's some type of cloth tied around her mouth. Black streaks of what is probably mascara run from her eyes and stain the light-colored fabric. I run my fingers across the screen as tears stream down my face, and another message comes across the screen.

WILLA

Will you answer the phone now?

Want to know if Celia ever answered the phone?
Grab Room Twenty-Three Today!

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Forsaking All Others

Room Twenty-Three

His Obsession




Alexa Jordan is a slightly twisted dark romance author who writes dirty talking, possessive, morally gray alpha men.

She’s an avid reader who believes that love is love, being called a good girl is the best, and everything should be put off for a good book.

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