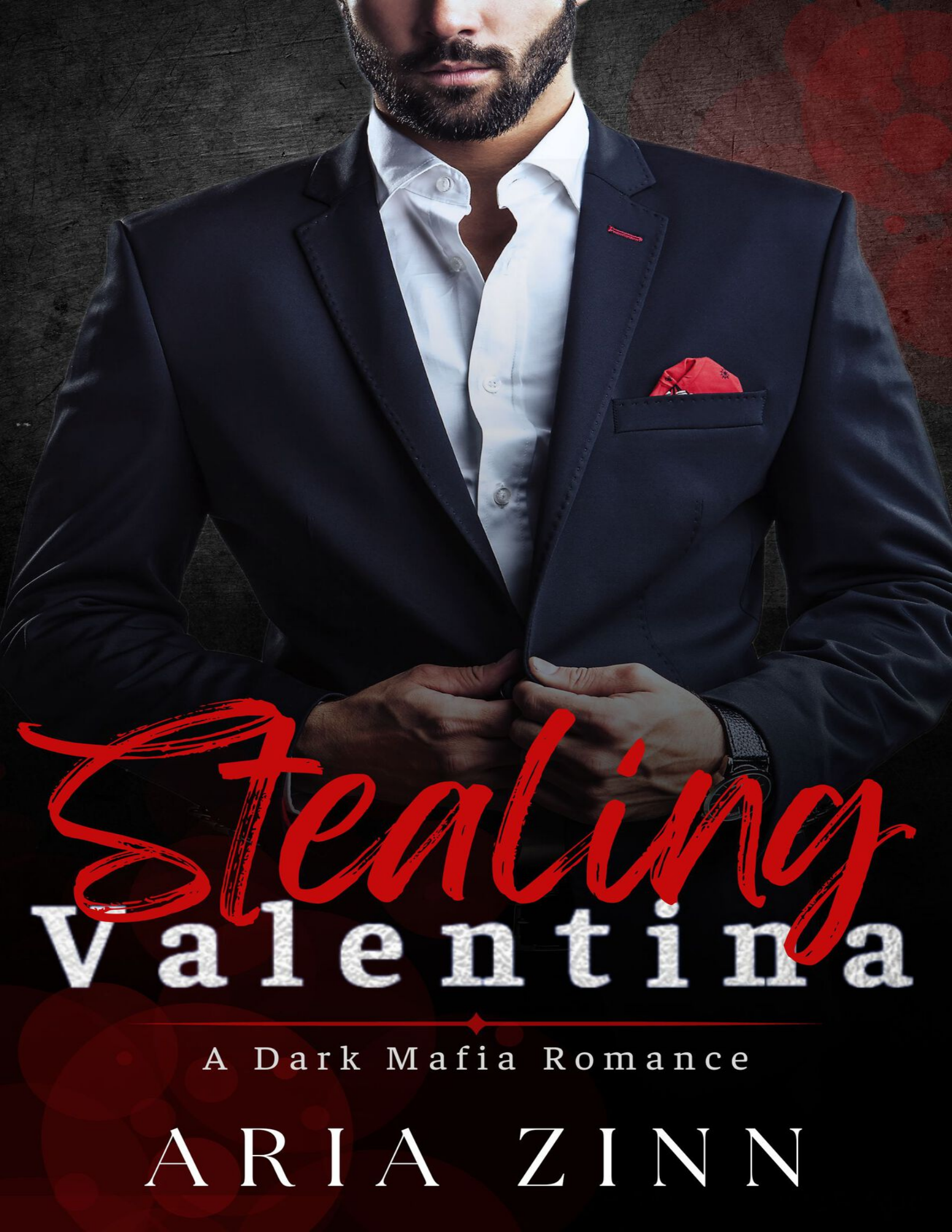

Stealing
Valentina
A Dark Mafia Romance
ARIA ZINN

# Stealing VALENTINA

ARIA ZINN

Stealing Valentina

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# Also by Aria Zinn

*Ruthless Lessons*

*Gilded Chains*

# Stealing Valentina

As the only daughter of a *Camorra* Boss, I've lived a life of opulence and extravagance. From afar, I seem to have it made. But all that privilege is nothing more than a gilded cage, keeping me from the one thing I crave the most – freedom. The truth is, I'm nothing more than a bartering chip for the *famiglia.*

My father signed my future away years ago to an ancient *Cosa Nostra* Boss whose sons had all been killed. I'm expected to be obedient, despite the bleak reality that I'm going to be nothing more than a baby-making machine for a nascent mafia dynasty.

Except on the day of my dreaded arranged marriage, I never make it to St. Mark's Cathedral. Instead, I'm kidnapped by a renowned assassin known only by one name: Raith. The hitman is exactly like his namesake, a wraith that seems to walk through walls. He's untouchable, lethal, and sexy as sin. He steals me out from beneath the nose of my security detail, and away from the only life I've ever known.

His motives confuse me. One minute ,he's icy and distant. The next, he burns red-hot, seducing me with things I've never experienced. Is this some revenge plot with me as the lynchpin in his plans, or are his reasons more personal?

The only thing I know for certain is that war is coming, and I am the prize to be won.

# Author's Note

This book's contents might be intense for some people. Triggering situations such as depictions of anxiety and depression, domestic violence, sexual molestation/assault, cum play, threats of pregnancy, pregnancy, stalking, kidnapping, forced marriage/engagement, suicidal ideation (please take special note here as it does get heavy), graphic violence, assassinations, mentions of femicide (off-page), and mafia-related conversations and situations are a part of this story.

Please, take care of yourself and err on the side of caution when choosing whether to read this story or not.

*For those who need a bit of spiciness on this Feast of Saint Valentine, this is my storia d'amore to you: a scarily intense man who will go to the ends of the earth – and murder a few people along the way – for the woman he loves. He's a sexy, blue-eyed hunk of baddassdom with a side of marshmallow fluff (to lick off him of course).*

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# Part One

# Chapter One

## Raith

### One Year Ago

"Holy shit, man, you should see this contract. It's unreal. Someone wants this man dead because this has *Moby Dick* written all over it. It's a fucking white whale that is either going to get you killed or make you famous."

Snack's voice echoes in my head through the small flesh-toned earpiece tucked into the lobe. His tone is filled with palpable excitement. His usual high-energy personality is switched up to ten, and I can hear him practically vibrating as he fills me in on our next potential assassination.

"You could put a down payment on a house in La Jolla if you accept it."

"You're a size queen." We've worked together remotely for the past few years, and the one thing I can say that is an absolute truth about him is that he's a sucker for dangerous jobs. He goes completely ga-ga over them. Mostly because it directly impacts his percentage of the take. He's the type of person that can never have enough money. A bit of psychosis I suspect comes from an early life of hardship and poverty.

In his eyes, the bigger the better. Though the price tag correlates to how lethal the contract is, and it's my ass that's out in the field while he gets to

play on his computer from afar.

“Hasn’t a girl ever told you, bigger isn’t always better?”

Snack snorts. “That’s what they say to small-dicked men, mate. If you have a woman telling you that, I hate to say it, but you belong to the itty-bitty-prick-committee.”

The mic strapped to my throat picks up the vibration of my laughter, even if the sound is muted. I’m on a stake-out, watching the front door of a dingy, illegal casino in some backwater, hillbilly town in Pennsylvania. I’m out in the sticks, having driven for the past four hours trailing my target, Luca Castillo, as he has tried to find a casino that *doesn’t* know him or his reputation.

“Besides, you’re not seeing the girth on this one. It’s high six-figures. Real high.”

The fact is, neither of us needs the cash. I’ve been in the assassin business for over a decade, and with Snack’s computer skills and financial witchery making my money work for me, my net worth is outrageously fat. Another year or two, and I might break into a half-billion dollars in pure assets.

“Who wants to live in La Jolla?”

“Yuppies, rich people. Isn’t that the dream, to move to California and have an enormous house and many fast cars?”

Snack isn’t American. His nationality is a big question mark that I haven’t asked about. Information is a high-cost commodity, and risky for anyone who might acquire it. Snack doesn’t know my real name, and I don’t know his or where he’s from. Whatever accent he might have been born with, he whittled away to a plain, general tone long before I met him. It’s only times like these when he slips up. Talking about the American Dream and California as if both things are still the goal of the working-class people.

The Gen-Z wet dream affordable healthcare and a resolution to the housing crisis.

My phone buzzes as Snack sends an encrypted file to it. Simultaneously, a shimmer of movement at the club’s doors draws my attention.

“Hold that thought,” I murmur, knowing the subvocal vibrations will translate.

“Damn, is he already done? He must have lost his ass.”

I carefully screw a suppressor on the end of my Ruger, before rolling the window all the way down, giving me a clear shot when Luca tries to reach his car. The rental I'm driving is wedged up against his driver-side door, preventing him from getting in without first coming to see me.

"How long was he inside, an hour?" I ask Snack. He keeps track of the fine details from afar, while I focus on what sits right in front of me.

"About that, yeah. Anyway, go do you, boo."

Snack silences his mic as I surveil the man.

There's nothing special about him. Luca's your average Northeast mobster with his dark hair and bow-legged swagger, relegated to the lower rungs of any corporation because he's too much of a braggart and can't be trusted. He's arguing with a man just inside the low-lit foyer. Probably a bouncer, or maybe even the owner telling him he's out of money and they won't give him a line of credit. These small-time gambling pop-ups never do. Finally, the person gets annoyed and gives Luca a shove.

My target's arms pinwheel to catch his balance as he steps off a slightly raised stoop and into the hard-packed earth right outside. But he doesn't fall.

The metal slams in his face, and I watch as kicks his foot off the reinforced base. He's distracted as he paces in front of the barred door. I don't feel bad for Luca, even though addiction of any kind is a disease. He ripped off his Don by skimming money off the top of some construction deals, lost a boatload of that cash in a casino in New Jersey, and generally fucked up badly enough that the Sicilians put a hit out on him. Large enough to nudge the blip on my radar. Since I was in the area and didn't much care one way or another about the paycheck, I took the job.

It's the *thought* that counts for me. Luca will be one more criminal feeding the fish. He's a criminal, and this is what I do. Though I'm no vigilante. I'm being paid decently to take this guy out.

Luca gives up his fruitless pacing, and stomps toward his Nissan. Only when he's right at the bumper does he realize he can't get in. He rakes his hand through his hair with frustration, before realizing I'm inside, pretending to look at my phone. When in reality I got my eyes glued on him, and my Ruger down by my side.

He leans over and looks into the window I so generously left down for him.

“Hey man, I can’t get into my…”

Luca doesn’t even get the words out as I raise the gun and shoot a 9mm slug into his right eye in one fluid movement. We’re close-up, which makes it a through and through. Though the bullet won’t travel too far. The area contains more than enough trees for a trunk to stop its trajectory.

He drops like a sack of bricks, the bare, half-frozen ground absorbing the impact without kicking up noise.

Popping open the door, I grab my cell phone and snap a picture, sending it off to where it needs to go so the money that’s held in escrow for Snack and I gets deposited into our accounts.

I *love* how technology makes my job easier. It used to be all clandestine deals and hushed face-to-face meetings where you never knew if you were walking into a trap set by the FBI. Now it’s nearly all digital and anonymous. I never meet my employers and I prefer it that way. Once the funds are paid, it’s all untraceable, and I vanish into myth only talked about like a scary story.

“What is it that you were saying.” I start the Ford, and navigate out of the gravel-strewn field they are using as a parking lot and head down the bumpy road.

“Do you have time to look at the details?”

I glance in the rearview as the lights of the wanna-be casino fade behind me. There’s no neon, just a few sad landscape LEDs illuminating a painted, wooden sign. Easily missed if you didn’t know the place existed.

“Yeah, I’m almost to Route 6.”

Before I merge onto the highway, and head to the turnpike, I check my phone and skim through the dossier.

I read through the important facts. There aren’t many, just the target’s name, contract price, and itinerary for the next few days. Only amateurs try and set up a mission in that sort amount of time. Along with a slew of pictures and a sketchy video taken on the down-low that lets me memorize his gait and body movements.

People can conceal almost every aspect of themselves with a change of clothing, some hair dye, and a few prosthetics. But it takes concentrated effort to alter how you move. It’s a major reason the study of body language is becoming more popular in certain circles, from policemen to petty

criminals and high-ranking kingpins. Any leg-up on not getting shot or caught helps.

Many times, the person I've come to kill rarely looks like their photograph, but I find them because they never thought to change how they walk, or a particular tick with the way they eat or even talk on the phone. Everyone has a tell, which makes my job infinitely easier when I discover it. This man favors his right leg when he walks, but he refuses to offset his limp with a cane.

I don't recognize the man's name or his face, but there's a flourish of colorful ink barely visible around the neckline of his black, open-collared shirt. I flick to another picture, this one where he's walking around by a pool in gaudy board shorts. With his shirt off, he's proudly showcasing the full-body artwork that's eternally etched into his skin. A brightly colored koi fish dominates the back piece.

The artist etched the fish to look like it is writhing up the man's spine as if swimming up an imaginary waterfall, then metamorphosing into a sinuous Eastern dragon as it flares out in full glory between his shoulder blades. The tattoos armor the man's body and fold over his shoulders and down his chest like an open kimono in stylish scales and cherry blossoms. They aren't just for decoration but are meant to tell a story.

The man's *irezumi* is elaborate, and it pings on my mental radar. Tattoos are like resumes in organized crime, if you can read the language, you can learn the important details. This man's tattoos bear the sigil of the Ishikawa-gumi, a syndicate of the Japanese mafia.

"Yakuza?"

Snack hums in approval. "Yep."

"No wonder the price is so high." Most people won't touch Eurasian criminals without a few additional zeros for recompense because of the martial arts cliché. In American media, every Asian criminal knows kung fu. That's why a smart person won't grapple with a Yakuza member but shoot them from a distance or sneakily incapacitate them. Poison might be the trademark of women assassins, but I like it just fine too.

"You're not just a pretty face. A+ my man."

I ponder the choices before me. I'm not afraid of the Yakuza. Fear isn't something I feel much of. Death eventually comes for us all, though often, it arrives by my hand.

My requirements when choosing whether to take a target are both fairly broad and singularly narrow. I only have one caveat: they must be criminals. I like to think of myself as the hitman who watches the hitmen, making sure they walk an acceptable line.

When they don't, I kill them for a price.

The crime families I accept work from don't realize my true motives. They understand that I have the skills to get the job done and that I have never been caught.

Curiosity scratches down my brainstem, leaving behind a phantom tingle that I need to assuage. My jobs always begin like this: with a question and a need to know more.

"Why is the Yakuza fraternizing with the *Camorra*."

"Drugs, probably. Maybe human trafficking. It's one of the shared interests between their clans. Maybe knock-off electronics in exchange for guns." Snack rattles off a few more of their overlapping criminal interests.

The Japanese industrial complex is unparalleled when it comes to mechanical imports and integrated circuits, while the Italians usually go for drugs, gambling, and protection schemes.

"The usual."

"Yep." Snack knows me well enough that there's only one outcome for the questions I'm asking.

I don't realize it now, but I seal my fate with three little words.

"Okay, I'm in."

# Chapter Two

## Raith

The top rule of sneaking into places is to act like you belong. It seems simple, but that advice has gotten me into hard-to-access areas, and out without causing an alarm. If you ooze confidence and a bit of 'fuck around and find out' swagger, most people will avoid getting into your business.

The second suggestion is to carry a clipboard if you intend on busting into an office building. I don't know why, but something about clipboards paralyzes the rent-a-cops which are usually at the security desk, and they let you through, no questions asked.

This operation requires a more creative approach because New York is overrun with criminals and mafiosos. I do the bulk of my work spread between three cities: New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. When things get too hot, I take a reprieve in South America or Europe. Interpol loves it when I hop over the pond and start picking off the crooks.

Snack runs the specs, and based on the intel, we learn that Oishi Kin is going to be at an elaborate fundraiser gala at the Plaza Hotel on Valentine's Day. Why the planners thought anyone would want to attend a black-tie affair on what's meant to be the most romantic day of the year baffles me. Maybe it's the promise of dancing, free booze, and canapés, making it a buffoon's version of a glamorous date.

I keep wondering about the date until we look at the guest list and realize it's a front. While the party is going on in the Grand Ballroom, it masks the meetings that will simultaneously be happening upstairs in the Rose Club.

Sprinkled amongst the legitimate businessmen, politicians, socialites, and your regular wealthy person who loves these sorts of events, there are criminals of all rank, creed, and background; both bosses of *the Company,* a few Yakuza players, two fake names that I know are the aliases of Irish mobsters, a Polish diplomat who is s rumored to be a spy for Russia, and various other unsavory types. That doesn't include people like me, the nameless, faceless assassins who mingle in the crowd, grabbing morsels of intelligence or committing a straight-out murder in a hallway closet.

Yes, I've done both.

Essentially, this Gala is business as usual for an elite New York event – a front of legitimacy barely covering up all the criminal activity.

Scoping out the location turns out to be easy enough. The entire floor-plan is accessible online, and a trip to Fifth Avenue for a room sets me back a thousand for the night, but it lets me wander unchecked through the opulent, sprawling hotel. I digitally sketch out the entry and exits and draft a few extraction plans. It all depends on where my target is going to be and how I kill him. After he's dead, I'll pick one of my failsafe routes and be out of the hotel before Oishi's body is discovered.

The only hard part in the run-up to the event is deciding who I want to be.

"What about the catering team?" Snack smacks his lips, and the faint sound of him blowing a bubble with his gum makes me want to reach through the earpiece and strangle him.

Ignoring the irritating sounds, I lift the barrel of my 3D-printed gun. It resembles a Ruger but is made wholly of plastic. It is going to be the piece I carry with me into the Plaza Hotel. A beauty for concealment, even if it sucks at long-range targets, and guaranteed to fall apart after a few continuous shots. It will give me enough firepower to get myself out of sticky situations, and not ping the metal detectors on my way in.

"*Nyet,*" I say practicing my Russian accent, because a plan is forming even as we talk about it. "No crossover potential. I won't be able to finagle into the Rose Club from the Ballroom without attracting attention." It will

be a cluster fuck with how many guards are going to be spread everywhere with so many big-shots in the mix.

“You sound as if you have an idea.”

“Don’t I always?” Methodically, I move onto the next section of the gun and buff it gently with a microfiber cloth. At this point, it’s more of a ritual than a need. The piece is freshly printed, and the seams are filed down. But shoddy gun care gets people killed, usually the shooter, and never the intended target. It needs to be perfectly prepared before I assemble it and trust my life to its manufacturing. “Do you know who I didn’t see on the guest list?”

“Hmm?”

“There’s no representative from the ‘*Ndrangheta*. Won’t Dante be fucking pissed not to have received an invitation?”

I have a hard-on for Dante Riccio ever since he managed to evade one of my elaborate assassination plots. I failed the job, and the contract was rescinded. I don’t have a perfect record because that’s just not possible in real life. That I let a barracuda like him slip away irritates me like a piece of grit in the eye. So, when I need a cover that won’t garner a lot of questions, while simultaneously throwing shade on his name, I use his.

Snack is speechless for a second, and I savor the power I have to stun him, though it’s short-lived.

“You’re going to get yourself killed.”

I allow myself a grim smile, even if no one is around to see it. “Probably, but not by them.”

---

A week later, Dante Riccio arrives at the Plaza Hotel fashionably late. The meeting is scheduled to begin in the next hour, which means all the criminal players and their bodyguards will be leaving the first floor and heading to the mezzanine and elevators. The underground chat channels have been in uproar since one of his known aliases popped up on a flight manifest arriving at JFK International.

That’s all Dagger’s (D4663r) doing. I never left New York as I put the finishing touches on the plan, and I surely didn’t fly in from San Luca, Italy.

I hate mingling as the chess pieces shift on the board, but I do it because it helps me get into character. So does the Tom Ford tux I'm wearing. I have an entire closet devoted to clothing, each piece I consider a costume. Even though this is meant to be a ploy to help me blend in, I don't follow the modern fashion trends. Because the only color I prefer to wear is black and the occasional blood red.

Instead of a white shirt and accessories, my vest and pocket square are a deep shade of cranberry, offset against the sheen of my pure-black dress shirt, and the two-tone tie that marries both shades to harrowing perfection. Even my tie-tack is black, the obsidian polished to a glossy luster and studded with black diamonds.

An hour after the latest arrival swans through the doors in a flurry of paparazzi snaps and sequins, I watch as Enzo di Maio enters the Grand Ballroom from the back. His steps are angry, and the look on his face means someone's going to die.

Right before he reaches the ballroom, he stops at the entry, plucks a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, and takes a phantom sip. He's a chameleon, hiding his barbary behind a bright, ultra-white smile.

I've worked for Enzo in the past, anonymously and in disguise. Very few people can attach my handle (WR41TH) to my face. Everything is handled electronically; the dark web and blacker applications opened up world-wide connections for the criminal underbelly. No longer is a city one's territory, but the globe. I know the things he's done, and it's a fucking shame that nobody wants to take a contract out on him. The world would be better off without that son-of-a-bitch walking amongst the living.

I tell myself eventually someone will hire a hit out on him, and then I can come up here and put him where he belongs; six feet under.

Unfortunately, my ethos is that I don't kill for pleasure. That's a treacherous path from professional hitman down to serial killer. I don't want to be picked up by the cops because I decide to keep trophies or some shit that is always dramatized and splashed across the news when a psychopath gets nicked. My father did a number on the family name by being *that type of* psycho serial killer who targeted women and did crazy shit to them, and I'm not about to carry on that aspect of the family business.

I'm not clean by any means. If Enzo's dirty because of the type of *chattel* he traffics, I'm dirty because I snuff out a person's entire life for

money.

Turning away, I shove Enzo out of my thoughts and trail the moving parts of this mobster round table.

Oishi Kin is slick, wading through the gathering much like his sigil. He navigates along the fringes, keeping a safe distance between himself and the men around him.

In a physical fight, it would be difficult to grab him. He's short and compact. So, I put Plan B in effect, and pay a waiter a thick wad of cash to dose his drink and any plate of food that he encounters. The liquid works like ipecac syrup to induce vomiting, but it's tasteless, colorless, and odorless and favored by government officials whenever they need a distraction or to force a suspect to barf up contraband.

Ten minutes later, after watching Oishi knock back the rest of his dark n' stormy, my trap springs as he charges into the bathroom used by the Rose Club, hunched over, holding his gurgling bubble guts, and cursing under his breath in Japanese. While I'm not yet fluent in the language, I can pick up a few words I've heard before.

I grin as he blames the sushi-style tidbits for his ailment.

I'm waiting behind the door and let him almost reach a stall before I spring. The blade I use is flexible and thin, and I drive it deeply into his side. While I would love to puncture his heart, the angle for that type of instantly fatal wound needs to be perfect as the ribcage tends to fuck that up.

Instead, I aim lower, serrating his diaphragm with a vicious twist. That incapacitates him, sucking the fight out of him like a pin in a balloon. He physically deflates, because it's hard to cry for help or defend oneself when you can't breathe.

The second slash goes across his throat, opening the flesh beneath his Adam's apple. Effectively severing his windpipe, so that the pink-tinted, foamy air gets trapped in his chest. Yet not hitting his carotid artery or any large veins that would make this a messy affair.

It's a horrible death to drown in one's blood. I wait it out since it only takes seconds. Then I snap a photo and send it to Snack for him to pass it onto the contract's instigator. They wanted proof of completion, and there it is so we both can get paid and move on with our lives.

Snack texts me a thumbs up, and our communication goes dark as I pluck out the SIM card and flush it down the toilet. I know he's doing the same on his end.

Wrapping the knife in tissue paper, I drop it into the garbage. I check my appearance in the mirror and don't see any blood. That's why I chose dark colors because if I did get some on me, the black would eat it up.

Then, I enact my exit plan, walking a path I've memorized and mentally and digitally traveled a dozen times.

After weeks of planning, Oishi's death is anticlimactic. After almost fifteen years in the business, I might have reached the stopping point.

I'm fucking bored. No matter how many criminals I kill, a new one is waiting in the eaves to take their place. I'm on a treadmill running to an end goal without ever making headway. Normally, I'm not so moody after a hit. A burst of exhilaration usually follows after cleaning up one small-time devil from the world at large.

Instead, I'm low, my energy levels ebbing as a familiar weight settles on me. The feeling blankets me, holding me down and covering up the light in a good old surge of depression.

But I don't think about that now because that leads me into the darkness where I start questioning going against my code. I focus on getting away smoothly.

An access point on this floor leads into the stairwell, part of the original design of the hotel before elevators were invented, and mainly used by staff and maintenance workers when they need to avoid their guests. A gritty, grimy aura of age clings to it, but it's clean, which tells me the hotel doesn't neglect even these out-of-the-way spaces.

I'm almost home free as I swing the door open on my level when a noise catches my attention. Jerking my head around at the sound of another door opening, and thinking I'm already caught, I'm ready to tackle the person coming down the stairs. It's not a bodyguard, but a girl who is hurrying down from the upper levels, floating in an expensive gown that tries to bury her luscious figure in tiers of onyx satin.

It fails because it would take more than that sack-like dress to conceal the sumptuous shape of her.

She stumbles, and I don't know what I'm doing as I catch her. It's just pure instinct. I grab her around the waist, trying not to notice how my

gloved fingers fit sublimely in the turn of it, and lift her down. I twirl her slightly, naturally putting my back to the door, and protecting her body with mine from any trouble that might come through it.

And then my world spins on its axis as she looks up at me with a pair of shimmering mocha brown eyes. I've found, after watching many eyes fade out to nothing in death, that there are three shades of brown an iris can be. The light, almost tawny shade. A kind of middling brown that is what people think of when they hear it. Then there's this one, rich, dark, and deep with a hint of ruddiness in their depths.

*Bedroom eyes.*

She takes my breath away, and everything fades with it. The Gala downstairs. The mobsters upstairs. Oishi Kin's cooling body a few feet away, and the imminent danger of it being found before I've vacated the premises. Things I once thought important plummet from the top of my mental list. After, there is only her.

Breathtaking.

Radiant.

Young.

The girl can't be more than her early twenties. Making her somewhere between eight-to-ten years younger than I am. Her skin is flawless despite the layers of cosmetics, showcasing that unblemished tautness of youth and a plumpness to her cheeks that will gradually thin as she ages. Her evening gown is sedate, especially in comparison to some of the eye-catching outfits I've seen. It doesn't make a statement, and all her tantalizing olive-tone flesh is hidden away beneath the high neckline and cap sleeves. She is an Italian goddess of abundant curves. She is Monica Bellucci's physical successor or will be in a few years when she embraces her voluptuous figure instead of hiding it.

She blinks up at me, and I know I'm fucked because the interest that's roaring in my blood stream and streaking like a fire arrow down to my cock is reflected in her sultry-looking eyes.

# Chapter Three

## Valentina

"Papa, you can't do this!"

I'm about to have a full-on panic attack as my father's fingers bite savagely into my arm. He fastidiously manicures his nails, making them as sharp as sickle-blades. They gouge into my flesh, leaving bruises and welts behind from how he clamps down. I don't care about the wounds or the blood which might stain my designer gown, all I care about is being *free*.

I tremble beside him because I know if I don't get away *right now*, I never will.

"Stop behaving like a brat and keep your voice down." Papa hushes me, and his gait quickens as he hauls me across the ballroom.

My father's hand is like a Chinese finger trap, the harder I struggle, the tighter it coils. That I want to escape enrages him, and it's not long before his true side emerges.

He manages to keep it together until he shoves me right where he wants. Then he blocks me in, his sleek, impeccable tuxedo at odds with the rage on his face.

We're in a faraway corner of the Plaza Hotel, the luxury landmark hotel in New York City that overlooks Central Park and Fifth Avenue. Though we're not in the Grand Ballroom where the Fundraising Gala we've been invited to is underway. But further in, away from prying eyes, which puts me in a precarious situation. Since the Aunties are nowhere to be found, and

the staff aren't going to help me, there is nothing *and* nobody to stop the abuse that's going to rain down on me.

My father shakes me hard enough to jar my teeth together. Then he looks around to make sure that nobody is witnessing the *infamous* Enzo di Maio abuse his daughter. Because *God forbid* that he acts like the mobster he is.

As the *capo* of the *Camorra*, he controls dozens of criminals. His odious touch weaves all through the various boroughs of New York City, but none as prevalently as Little Italy. There, he is a politician without an elected seat, reigning over many first-generation Italians with a flare of the world they left behind. He's 1950s braggadocio in the modern era, trying to return the mafia to the feared, grandiose standing it once held in the boroughs. The 90s devastated organized crime, and many of the families collapsed beneath the FBI's sweeping raids.

It doesn't work. Because while his money buys him entry to events like this, it's a tight-lipped welcome. Especially when we have to rub elbows with the upper-crust elite who maintain Manhattan's exorbitant real estate prices with their multi-story brownstones and penthouse estates on Fifth Avenue. The truth becomes obvious. We are *less than.* Though they come to my father for handouts, we're nouveau rich. Because of that, I'm nothing more than that *dirty mobster's daughter*. It's why I don't have many friends, since the old money families are afraid that I'll somehow taint their Ivy League brats or get them killed or kidnapped. I understand the latter issue, it's the former one I have problems with. There's nothing I can do about either. So, it leaves me isolated, and without anyone to assist me during desperate times such as this.

*If I scream, nobody will come.*

There are worse things than being alone and afraid, but in this instant, I can't think of one. All I know is that I don't think he'll make me cry tonight. Because we're in the glittery heart of Manhattan, which means he's trying to act a certain way. Presenting to society and the socialites and old money families that he's simply a wealthy entrepreneur and not one of two kingpins who control the remnants of New York's Five Families.

Since he's worth multiple hundreds-of-millions of dollars, they accept the façade in public. As long as nothing *criminal* happens in their direct line of sight. They don't care how Enzo makes his money, it all spends the same

way, as long as it's green and some of it comes their way. But abusing his daughter is probably a step too far over the line, which is why he's being restrained.

Lucky for me, though I know I'll pay the price later. Bullying me into a corner is the furthest he should go. With how fickle his moods can be, I'm not positive, and that unknown is what makes me tremble.

Right now, there's nobody to witness this scene, and it's going to get worse if I keep arguing with him. The nook we're in is right by the Grand Ballroom's kitchens. Nobody but staff lingers in the clouds of misty dishwater and food odors that belch around the swishing doors.

"Why are you acting this way? You've known for years you are to marry Cesare."

"No," I hiss back at him. "You told me I was getting married. You never said to whom. I think you mentioned Cesare one time."

"Yes, I informed you." His dark eyes grow darker with anger.

"I thought you were joking!" Though my father doesn't have a sense of humor, never in a thousand years did I think he was *honestly* going to marry me off to Cesare Palermo.

Cesare is the second kingpin of *the famiglia* and the other half of *the Company*. He is the Don of the *Cosa Nostra* and my father's biggest ally and stand-in father figure. "Have you seen what he looks li…"

I don't even see my father's hand move. His wrist snaps out as if he's swatting a fly, and my head whips back at the collision. My shoulders nearly hit the golden tile because the slap is so abrupt. It makes my ears ring, and I lose my balance, sagging on my two-inch heels. Somehow, I don't crack my head against the wall, or fall. But that's because my father's holding me up, yanking me out of the recoil of his punishment, and keeping me close in case he needs to slap me again.

My father's sharp eyes scope the immediate area. Only a few waiters are rushing by with platters of *hors d'oeuvres* and trays full of refreshed drinks and flutes of effervescent champagne, studiously ignoring the bit of domestic violence happening in the corner. I get it. They aren't paid enough to interfere. Worse, they could lose their job if my father decides to be a bastard about it. That he *is* a bastard means I forgive them for not stepping in.

Tears well in my eyes, and I lift my fingers to the throbbing handprint tattooed on my cheek. He always knows just the right force to smack me with, all under the guise of making sure I am obedient. He never leaves a black eye or splits my lips. Sometimes I wish he would, just so that I can look at it and remember and *hate* him for how brittle and fragile he makes me feel. But I'm not so lucky. In five minutes, the redness will fade. But what it does to my psyche? That's indelible.

I should be so lucky to only get away with a slap. Later, I'm sure there will be worse punishment. The kind that will leave maroon-centered bruises and keep me homebound for a week until they heal.

Mentally I add this hit to the scores of others he's given me over the years, jadedly watching as my stifled tears swell the mental pool filled to the brim with them. Soon, I know that the pool is going to overflow and drown me in its bitter black tide.

"Do not make me repeat myself, *cara*."

His cycle of violence-and-forgiveness continues as his voice gentles. In the wake of his brutality, he softens. His fingers loosen from my arm, and I don't look at the way the blood lances back underneath the flesh. His grip had been tight enough that my skin had been pressed white by his fingers. There will be a bruise, but since my dress bears three-quarter cap sleeves, nobody will ever see them but me.

"Papa," I whisper, begging him with my watery eyes, and holding my clasped hands out to him. I will get on my knees right now and pray in his name. I will crawl through the streets naked and be bludgeoned with clubs like his favorite martyr if only he'll stop this heinous idea.

As a second-generation Italian American, I speak liberally with my hands, and right now they are saying *please, please, please*.

It's my birthday, *happy fucking twenty-two to me*, and I just got told I'm marrying a quinquagenarian. Enzo is announcing it tonight to the *famiglia*, and sometime in the next couple of weeks will be my engagement party. I can't fathom that for my future. It's killing something inside of me, and I'm half-delirious with the need to beg and plead and pray until he relents.

"Please. Please don't do this to me."

I have never begged him for anything. But now, I beg him for everything: my hope, my future, my life.

Enzo looks at me as if I'm scum that's stuck to his shoe. The glare stabs me in the heart, and I tremble inside as I realize there's no escaping from this. He doesn't care about me as a person. I'm a commodity he cultivated and now I'm ready to be sold off.

"Don't whine, Valentina." He sneers down at me, revealing the pitiless monster that is my father without his society mask on.

Sometimes, I think he hates me. Because I don't understand the enmity he feels toward me. It takes only a glance, and I'm bleeding out from the fatal stab wound his disdain renders to my heart.

"The contract has been signed for years. It's time you do what's right for the *famiglia* and give Cesare his heirs."

I drop my hands, hearing the finality as loudly as a prison door clanging shut. While I've never had *real* freedom, that stupid bundle of hope that I held inside of me believed I'd have a say in my future. That I would be able to at least pick who I would share my life, bed, and womb with and get to veto who I didn't want.

My father smooths away imaginary wrinkles from his woolen suit jacket. He tucks his disheveled metallic tie back under his waistcoat, the gilded threads matching his diamond-studded tie-tack, and then slicks a hand across his impeccably styled, salt-and-pepper hair. When he's situated, and the mask is back on, he cuts me a cold look, abrading the wound with his derision.

"Go to the lavatory and pull yourself together. I have a meeting with the families and will be with them for the next hour. After, I expect you in the ballroom, looking every inch of Cesare's doting and blushing bride-to-be."

Numbly, I watch as he taps his pocket, and one eyebrow takes wing. The look is a crescent blade and reaches a high point which gives him wrinkles. That I can see wrinkles means he's due for his Botox. The chest tap is so that I don't miss his meaning. As if I could. If there weren't metal detectors at each entry-and-exit into the Plaza, he would have a gun in that pocket. It's his favorite threat: *behave, be obedient, or I'll put a fucking bullet in your head, Valentina.*

I swallow the tears. "Yes, Papa."

His eyes are as flat as a shark as he pivots on his shiny dress shoes and stalks back into the Ballroom. I'm left behind, trying to gather my fallen hopes and dreams, and put myself back together. But they are so wide

flung, like funerary ashes scattered on the wind, that I have no hope of ever finding what my father just shattered.

The hope inside my chest quivers, the ember of it fading until it all but extinguishes.

# Chapter Four

## Valentina

I know this blackness well.

It does not sneak as I'm always aware of it lurking inside myself. It ambushes me, waiting until I'm low enough that my mental walls are down to crawl out from the dark. The weight of it wraps around me, pretending to coddle me, only to inform me that it's useless fighting against my father's orders. That I might just give in.

I am lost beneath the weight of my thoughts, and I have nobody to turn to. The Aunties are more scared of my father than I am.

I'm left alone, *always alone*, trembling in the wake of his decree. My life is a horror show, and it's only going to get worse.

Deep down, everyone knows my father should have remained childless. But that's a sin in big, highly religious Italian families like mine. That he only sired one heir, me, a worthless daughter, puts him on a lesser standing in many people's eyes. That's why he works harder and is more vicious when he deals with the Families. Since he couldn't prove his virility and robust manhood by having a half-dozen children, he proves it by being the iciest, most heartless bastard to ever run the Big Apple's criminal underbelly.

Crying is a luxury I can't afford right now, even though it might help ease the stranglehold these feelings of hopelessness have on me. But I can't,

not when I need to be picture-perfect for the photo-ops that I'm sure are lined up for tonight's big announcement.

I'm not the last to know about my engagement, even if it catches me by surprise *now.* I've known since I was twelve years old that my father had signed a marriage contract, wedding the *Camorra* to the *Cosa Nostra* through me. But, until now, I hadn't known *who* I would be marrying. As a teenager, I imagined that my husband would be a dashing, dark-eyed, fit Italian man *who was my fucking age.*

Not Cesare.

*Never Cesare.*

Breathing weakly through my nose, I close my eyes and do the math. There are thirty years between us. I'm not going to shame some people's sexual preferences, but Cesare isn't mine. He is not the sexy George Clooney, Brad Pitt, Keanu Reeves, or Rob Low of his generation, all of whom are sixty-years old or older and still reasonably attractive if you like older men. Even my father is well-preserved, having a lean, hungry Viggo Mortensen type of look to him. It's a mood that gets many, many women chasing after him. They don't even care about being the next *missus* because they are content with just being candy on his arm.

That kind of movie-star upkeep takes money, good genetics, and an army of people from trainers to surgeons and everything in between to help maintain what time wants to claim.

Cesare has the money, but not the motivation to defy aging. He hasn't had any cosmetic surgery, nor does he have the bone structure to age *well*. Everything, including his hairline, has gone south. So, he looks older than his years. If he *wasn't* trying to marry me, someone young enough to be his *granddaughter*, I might not be so critical. But he is, so I am, and I will think every bitter thought I please about it.

I sigh and peel myself from the elaborate marble wall. I don't need to go to the bathroom and repair my face, because my makeup artist slathered it on with a trowel. But in luxury hotels such as these, the bathrooms are these multi-suite affairs where I can sit in a deeply upholstered chair and pretend that my father just didn't take a shit on my future and flush it down the toilet.

What I do want is some time *alone*, which is a rarity when I'm constantly surrounded by my chaperones and bodyguards. I have the perfect

opportunity to sneak away, and I take hold of it with both hands.

I don't follow Enzo's trajectory. Instead of going straight into the Grand Ballroom, I veer into the Centennial Foyer.

The click of my heels is muted by the burgundy runners that pad the champagne-colored tiles, turning the *rat-tat-tat* cadence into a stealthier step. Before I reach the fork in the L-Shaped hallway, I decide to alter course. A chocolate-brown wooden door labeled 'Stair B' catches my eye. I hesitate, looking toward the Oak Room and bar just beyond it.

*Fuck it*. I have an hour and I'm going to take every second of it for myself.

The door isn't locked, and there are no alarms because, in case of an emergency, this is one of the exits to the main floor which leads out and onto Fifth Avenue. Nobody is around as I slip down the cement stairs. Most people ride the opulent elevators to whichever level they are partying or staying on. And being that this is a black-tie gala, it means a lot of expensive gowns and designer shoes, only the foolish – or desperate – would jog down four flights of dingy stairs and risk a broken neck if one's heel gives out.

I am a flight-and-a-half down when the door on the level I approach jerks open. I'm so surprised at the sudden appearance of a tuxedo-clad man, that I lose my step and stumble down the last stair. I would have fallen, but the ungainly clatter of my footsteps gives away my harried descent. He turns and catches me with reflexes that are startling when viewed up close.

A well-built chest meets my eyes. He's taller than I am, which is a surprise. I'm leggy for a woman. Not quite model height, but in pumps? I'm nearly five-ten, and he still has a few inches on me. So, it's an unusual, delightful sensation that shimmers down my spine as I'm forced to look *up* at my savior. The electric jolt from meeting a heavily lashed pair of aqua-tinted eyes renders me speechless.

*Oh wow, who is this?*

I am a sucker for black-haired, blue-eyed men. He's a little older than I am, but it's a negligible amount because he is that type of strong-jawed, intense-eyed look that the Dutch and other Nordic countries have in spades. When I want to scandalize the Aunties, I tease them about what I would do if let alone in Sweden. No lie, I would fuck my way through that country. All the men who I have met – and movies I've seen - from those nations all

possess incredible amounts of smoldering sex appeal that's held purely in their gazes. They could have horse faces, but the eyes do it for me.

"Are you okay, Miss?" His voice is rich and deep, carrying an accent I can't quite place. But it is delectable, and I have the inanest desire to lick his throat so I can taste where it comes from. He's polite too as he gently sets me back on my heels, even though I want to continue clinging to him.

My father really shouldn't have let me loose without my chaperones. Aunt Sara and Aunt Giulia have kept me under lock and key since I reached puberty. I have never been alone with a man, since *purity aka virginity* is part of any marriage contract that deals with the Italian mafia.

I've also never met a man whose eyes cut straight through every part of me and stare into the depths of my soul. His gaze is unfiltered, and in return, I see his too.

I am breathless, and not because of my mad dash down the stairwell. It's all in response to *him.* Feeling how feverish my face is, I manage to stand on my own two feet. I need to come up with an excuse, or something because this man could be anyone. His tuxedo is, I so discreetly check out the cut, this season's Tom Ford worn with a jet-black dress shirt and a thin crimson-and-black tie that matches his ruby-colored waistcoat to perfection.

"Yes," I say with a bright smile. Even if it causes my cheek to ache a bit at the expression. Maybe my father *did* hit me hard enough to bruise this time. "I just needed a break from the Gala. Here I thought nobody but me would be silly enough to escape down these stairs."

His grin charms me as it flickers to life, a slow ignition as if he's unused to wearing the expression. Then getting into the indulgence of it as he smiles wider. It's kind of lopsided, drawing attention to his well-groomed beard, and his rather lush pink lips.

"Here I was thinking the same thing. Especially not a beautiful young woman racing down a flight of them in high-heel shoes."

*Oh – did he just call me beautiful?*

I stare up at him as butterflies erupt in my belly. Surely, that's just indigestion, right? Because that quivery, trembly feeling that's written about in romance movies and love songs doesn't actually *happen.*

But that effervescence is not because of the Dom Perignon I drank earlier. Nor is the light-headedness that has me swaying toward him because of inebriation. At least not the alcoholic type. I'm high on his

nearness, and the words he's conjured like a spell. *Beautiful*. This gorgeous, fine-assed man called *me* beautiful.

A compliment is such an easy thing to gift. It costs nothing but a dollop of ego, but when done right? It means everything.

Suddenly, I'm on the verge of crying as I think about everything I'm going to miss out on. I'm never going to have a first love, experience a first kiss, or first *time* with someone who I desire. That's all being taken from me, bartered off by my father to secure the power base of his life's work. You would think that *I* would be his greatest achievement and that he would want me to be happy and confident. Original sin stains me, and I am cursed in his eyes since I am a woman, and I can never be the mirror with which to reflect his purpose and aspirations.

"Ahh," the man's voice turns deeper, and somehow, he is closer to me than before. "You should not look so devastated to hear a compliment."

How can this man read me so clearly? He doesn't know anything about me, and yet he sees the way my heart's being torn apart.

His leather-clad hands – *how odd he's wearing gloves - maybe he just arrived* – cup my elbow. He doesn't stop there, and they slide up along my bicep, brushing the modest edge of my sleeve.

"What upsets you, *zaya?*"

*Oh, is he Bratva?*

I love the sound of the Russian language. Like the other Slavic languages, it's beautiful and melodical and it sounds like an aria coming from this man's delicious-looking lips. Being the business my father's in, I'm not surprised to run into a member of the Brotherhood. I'm pretty sure upstairs in the Rose Room is a who's-who of organized crime; from the Irish Mob to the Yakuza, apparently the *Bratva* too. I really shouldn't get too close to a mobster of *any* nationality, but this man is pulling me in with his magnetism and endearing kindness.

"I'm getting married." I don't mean to blurt it out, because saying it makes it *real* and not a nightmare. But it is real, even if I don't have a diamond on my finger or a wedding date picked. Sometime, in the next year, I will be given to Cesare.

My lower lip trembles, and I suck it in, so I don't break into embarrassing tears.

The man’s fingers hesitate on my arm. Surprise blankets his eyes he as blinks his dark lashes down at me. “That should be a cause for celebration, *nyet*?”

“No.” I vehemently shake my head. “Not this one. My father arranged it.”

The man murmurs a sound, something like a drawn-out sigh and an exclamation of shared distress. A true gentleman would pull away from me now that he knows I’m attached. But he doesn’t because he’s not a gentleman. He doesn’t give me room. If anything, he pushes closer, until the shinty front of my bodice whispers against his velvet lapels.

“It is one of those, *da?”*

I gaze up at his strong, almost stern features, and find myself captivated.

His raven-black hair is ravaged by an under-cut, with a severe skin fade on the sides and quite long on top. It’s styled away from his broad forehead, accenting the lines of his straight eyebrows that are a few shades lighter than his coal-black hair.

His cheekbones are high, prominent, and diamond-sharp, but make the flesh beneath it look flat by comparison. At some point he broke his nose, so the bridge isn’t straight and it has a bump on it. His lips are sultry and sulky looking, perched above a strong jawline that’s adorned with a short but full beard. His facial hair is fastidiously groomed. I can see the line where a razor edged all around it, making a sharp separation between skin and beard. It highlights the slender, sharp angle of his jawline and the perfect bow of his lips.

Altogether, his features aren’t an arrangement one would consider classically handsome. He bears a European aesthetic. But *mio Dio*, I can’t look away. Because those intense eyes pull it all together, and I feel faint each time those ice-blue hues touch mine. I can’t and don’t want to free myself from their pull.

The screeching voice of self-preservation, which suspiciously sounds like my Aunt Sara, fades away. My heart stills in my chest as if it’s been jolted into a coronary. Before it returns to beating again, faster, and harder than ever before.

Then there is the heat. It’s a slow, tingling thing that slinks down my belly and between my thighs, making me feel afire.

This man is reading me all wrong. I don’t just go around giving up favors. First, because my father will *literally* murder me if I bring shame to the family name. Secondly, because I’ve never had the chance.

*But you’re alone now and this man is fucking fine.*

Maybe he isn’t reading me wrong after all. I know I’m inviting trouble into my life, but I don’t look away from the temptation in front of me. The vindictive side of me wants to tear my father’s plans, and his marriage contract to the ground. The *best* way to do that is to destroy one of the conditions of it.

Stifling a little gasp, I press a hand to my chest, wanting to soothe the clamor there. My heart throbs, beating so swiftly I can scarcely hear anything over my thundering pulse. I tremble as I reach a crossroads of indecision.

*Do I risk it?*

I’ve been preached at and scolded and threatened with an exorcism about *the blasphemy of lustful* thoughts. None of the punishments took root. Maybe they did the opposite because now that I’m alone for the first time with a man, I’m thinking about sex and all the salacious things the two of us can get into while nobody is watching. Those ideas are *never* appropriate, per Aunt Giulia. And if I *must* have the morals of a bitch in heat, they should be restricted to only fantasizing about my groom.

I’ll *never* feel that way for Cesare. But I feel it for this man. The lust tightens my lower belly, sinking lower, and lower until I throb at the juncture of my thighs. Lust is, I find, the truest emotion. It has no logic or rationale. It simply *is*, flaring brightly between two people whether they are strangers or not. I don’t know if it is his scent or his face, or the fact that I am feeling a reckless mania surging up from the bottomless well of sorrow that carried me here, but I suddenly feel *alive.*

Slowly, I lick my bottom lip, capturing his attention as his frosty eyes drop and get caught in the glide of my little pink tongue leaving wetness on my smudge-proof red lipstick.

“Yes,” I whisper, my voice dripping with a tone I’ve never heard before. It sounds seductive and hungry. “It’s one of those.”

His gloved hands slide higher, the leather soft as brushed suede against my skin. He curls his fingers around my biceps, grasping my arms. I’m caged in by his pseudo-embrace, and it makes me feel shockingly delicate

and feminine. It zings my pulse higher, and simultaneously lower, settling in a needy throb between my thighs.

*I dare. I dare everything.*

I may never get this type of chance again. I might never feel this all-consuming fire that's lashing away the saner, dutiful parts of my psyche. That fear of missing out makes me ache to misbehave, but I'm too scared to make the first move. I don't want to be rejected, nor do I have any idea of what I'm doing. I've never been kissed, let alone gone beyond that into the things I'm now imagining with this stranger.

He reads the ascent in my eyes. He walks the pair of us into the corner between floors, almost mirroring the violence that has caused this wild, wanton behavior. This man might be a mobster like my father, but I know he's nothing like him. Because his hand is gentle, whereas my father is always hard-fisted on any woman in his clutches, lover, daughter, or sister. We all get treated the same way, without regard as if he wants to crush us for breathing the same air as he does.

This landing is neither the floor I came from nor the one he arrived one. It's a middle ground that seems to float away from reality, carved out of the flow of time as if this moment, this experience, is captured in a bubble.

"I don't have the time right now to answer all of those questions I see burning in your eyes, *zaya*." His voice rasps with regret, and my heart almost breaks that I don't get a chance to experience everything my needy body wants with this stranger.

It's deranged. I don't know his name. I know nothing about him. But my body is burning with the sultry fire that this strange interlude has caused.

"But." His grin is wicked, and I see a hint of something savage lurking behind the curtain of his polished smile. That peek-a-boo of darkness adds spikes of adrenaline to the pheromones drugging my system. "I can give you one thing to remember me by."

I search his eyes, seeing myself reflected in them. In that look, I see who I could be, and it sets me aflame. Because in his eyes, I'm not the untouched daughter of the *Camorra's capo*, but something of heat and fire and ripe sexual hunger that burns as high as a pyre beneath his attention.

I arch closer. "What is that?"

He flashes an incubus smile as he closes the distance between us. Sin leaks from his words as his lips nuzzle my ear. "I can give you a kiss."

I almost want to ask, ‘Is that *it’*. But I give myself a little shake because beggars can’t be choosers, and this is something *new* and just for me. If I had a normal upbringing and dating life, I would already have had my first kiss as a teenager. There are no fumbling experiments, or slobbery kisses in my history to tell my non-existent girlfriends about.

“A birthday kiss,” I whisper. It *feels* right.

His eyes flash, and his presence swells, growing larger until I am cloaked by his shadow from the overhead fluorescent lights that backlight him.

“Happy birthday, little dove.”

I don’t get a chance to question his choice of nickname or intent, because his lips glide across my cheek, scalding me with the pressure of his mouth, and the roughness of his scruff.

When he sinks to his knees, and I realize what kind of *kiss* he means to give me, I am not prepared.

*Holy fuck this is not what I think he meant.*

Blindly, I flatten my hands on the walls, staring wide-eyed down at him.

“You’re shaking.” He is feral as he teases me with his words and eyes, torquing the tension until I feel as if I’m about to leap from my skin. The leather sheathing his fingers is soft, and expensive with a tactile grip at the tips that means he can use his touchscreen while wearing them. Their nubby roughness leaves chills racing over my skin.

My blue-eyed stranger pauses as if now realizing he still has them on, because he shakes his head, yanks them off, and stuffs them in his suit-jacket pocket.

The sensation of his rough, bare fingers gliding under my dress ‘rouses the heat in me. I sink against the cement wall, trying to find coolness in the stone. But he won’t let me. He makes me burn, the trembling getting worse the higher his hands move, stroking silky skin with his roughly calloused fingers.

He has worker’s hands, which means he’s not a fat-cat in the *Bratva* like my father is in the *Camorra*. Maybe he’s just a low-level enforcer. Maybe he’s a drug dealer. He could be the fucking *chauffeur* for all I care. Because I’ve never felt anything like this.

“Mmm, fuck you’re burning up.”

He talks to me as if I'm capable of carrying on a conversation. Or maybe he doesn't care that I can't answer him. I whimper, trying to be flirtatious, trying to be anything but who I am. The words don't come, especially when he palms my pussy.

He growls with approval, and my quim quivers with delight.

"You are so wet. Is this for me, *kleine*?" I don't recognize the words he uses. It doesn't sound Russian to me, because it loses the smooth softness of the Slavic language, and takes on a hard, clipped inflection. I can't focus on it since he chooses right that moment to hook his fingers in the gusset of my lacy panties and reel them aside.

"Yes," I pant, answering his query *and* urging him on.

I'm not ready for the heavy pressure as he slicks his finger in my wetness. The touch makes me buck my hips backward as if I want to get away when I don't. He must be using his middle finger because it's so thick and blunt as he rubs along my groomed lips. I haven't recently shaved, so there's a bit of velvet trim for him to tickle as he follows the sodden trench up my split and then rubs at my clit.

I see fireworks and would have collapsed into a swoon, but he anticipates my reaction. He shoves the ankle-length skirt of my ball gown up and pries my thighs apart.

I'm *ever* so helpful as I hold onto the gown's taffeta hemline, watching his dark head dip between my wide-flung limbs.

"Spread your legs for me." His fingers grip the soft meat of my inner thighs as I comply. "Wider."

*Mio Dio*. I'm spread-eagle in front of him, and I can't look because I know my pussy is all on display in front of his eyes.

Then he gives me *that* kiss, and I suddenly realize what all the obsession is about oral sex and why there are so many slang terms for it.

I yelp or scream or make an embarrassingly high-pitched sound. The noises don't even sound *logical,* because he stops kissing and cocks a sooty brow at me. There is the tiniest silver scar through it, and it makes him look rakish as it pulls tight.

"You'll have to be quiet, or else someone might come and see me with my tongue in your sweet, wet pussy."

*Jesus.* Do people really talk like this during sex? It's so, so dirty.

I bat my lashes at him, promising silently to be a good girl. Lifting my hand, I muzzle myself, and show him that I can be well-behaved, while my eyes plead with him to not stop.

*Please don't stop.*

He answers me with a violently turbulent look in his blue eyes. Then this tongue is right back *there.* Slipping and sliding between my puffy folds and striking white gold as he laps all my sweetness up. My hips rock forward on their own accord, needing that connection, and he encourages me.

"That's it. Ride my face. Smear this sweet cunt all over my mouth. I want to smell you in my beard."

I can't handle this. I can't. I'm about to collapse into cinders. He knows his way around a pussy. Because he licks and sucks and *slurps* me down. Alternating between fluttering his tongue around the swollen button of my clit, to dragging its flat side across my slit.

When I masturbate, I love rubbing my fingers along my core, and this is almost familiar territory if it wasn't his tongue doing the stroking. But then he teaches me something new as he pushes me closer toward my orgasm. I hate that it's going to be a quick one. I want this moment to never end. He warned me though, and now both of us are aware of the timeclock ticking over both of our heads. This will end, sooner than I would like, but at least if I'm good I'll have had an orgasm.

I've touched myself before. I've even watched pornography. Though it seemed kind of boring and clinical when compared to what *this* is.

The missing component is penetration, and I realize it as he slides his finger *into* me. I almost tense up because it's so new. The sensation is so foreign. He doesn't relent, and I'm so drenched that it slides easily up to the first knuckle. His fingers are big enough that they give me a delicious bit of stretch and friction.

He twists his wrist, hooking his calloused finger pad on some secret spot inside. He seals his mouth around my clit and tugs at the same time he's stroking that spot.

I lose all control of myself when he sucks my joy-button out from the hood. The orgasm that smashes into me is violent. I dissolve, shattering and *crashing* into irreparable pieces. My non-smudge lipstick gets a workout as

I slam both hands over my mouth. Hopefully smothering my delirious screams as he gives me the hardest orgasm I've ever had.

It seems unending. The universe collapses and re-builds itself thrice over before the final wave recedes. In the aftermath, I am beached on the shores of this stranger's expertise, altered in unseen and dramatic ways.

I pant against the wall as he gives my pussy a final kiss. Reluctantly he retreats, sliding my panties back into place, lowering my dress, and standing slowly.

I gaze up at him, completely wide-eyed, and utterly unmade.

He plants his hands on either side of my shoulders, and I can see the wet shine of my juices drying on his skin and smell the sweet musk of my arousal. His lips are slightly swollen. His eyes gleam like polished sapphires. And God, there is a damn tentpole digging into the soft thatch between my thighs.

My pussy is a slut because it quivers weakly, wanting more even though I'm not sure I could come again.

He ignores all of that as he gives me the sweetest, softest kiss. Both of our eyes remain open. Locked. Holding onto the other's gaze as we share something…magical. That's what it feels like between us as if Cupid or a Fairy Godmother or some story-book creature has happened upon the pair of us and decided that we are meant to be. It is the silliest notion, but I can't stop thinking that this is it. This is what the songs and stories and poems are written about.

He is my soulmate.

"You are what men like me dream of," he whispers in goodbye.

I am tongue-tied and completely incapable of speech. I can't say anything as he strokes my cheek, turns, and continues down the stairs as if he didn't just crash like a hydrogen bomb into my carefully ordered world.

# Chapter Five

## Raith

### Nine Months Ago

Viktor Blok leans against the balcony overlooking Manhattan's glittery skyline smoking a Cuban cigar. That stogie is going to kill him. Not because of cancer or emphysema, but because he's outside without his guards and I'm right behind him.

The Russian doesn't know what hit him. One moment, he's tilting his head back to exhale the plumes of pallid gray smoke as he attempts to make a smoke ring. The next I have my garrote wire strung around his neck.

Sparks flash and brighten the shadows as his cigar falls and hits the mosaic tile, freeing both of his hands that immediately reach for his neck. The ligature is tight, and all he can do is ineffectively claw at it, trying to hook a finger between his flesh and the slicing, strangling grip of the wire.

Strangling a man takes strength and no small amount of skill and willpower. While Viktor loses consciousness within seconds, it takes five long minutes of maintaining the same force and consistent pressure to ensure that he's not simply knocked out from lack of air, but well and truly dead, while having the testicular fortitude to go through with it. It's as close-up and personal of a killing style as you can get. The only other way

that I find more intimate is if I straddled him, strangling him with my bare hands, and staring down into his eyes as his life fades away.

I've only killed one person that way, and he deserved every second of seeing his eternal damnation reflected in my wrathful gaze.

I stare out at the brightly lit landmarks of NYC, letting my mind wander while my gloved hands remain immobile. I'm too far away and at an unusual angle to see the Statue of Liberty, and it's too dark to pick out the details even if I could. The water filling New York harbor shimmers like black silk as all the city's many lights ripple across its surface. It's picturesque with how the sky-rises and harbor lights glitter. There's a boat out there, looking like a well-lit buoy as it glides silently across the water. It's probably some kind of night-time sightseeing tour because the view of New York at night from the water is breathtaking.

Valentina is somewhere out there, and I can't help but wonder what she's doing. It took less than a day for me to find out who she was, and since then I haven't been able to do anything but think about her. She is my obsession, dominating my thoughts over the past three months, and while I have been at the same parties and events as her, we've not crossed paths. Mostly because of the constant chaperones buzzing around her and an increased guard presence ever since her engagement was announced.

What is Enzo thinking? How could he marry his daughter to that wrinkled sack of shit? I've kept myself busy, and out of New York, so I didn't go and kick down Di Maio's and Palermo's door and murder them for this bullshit. I can't interfere.

*I can't*

Though I crave her, she can't be mine. Snack would laugh me out of the country if I tried to start a war for a piece of ass. Even one as fine, and luscious as Valentina's.

I sigh and check the face of my tactical watch. Six minutes have elapsed, and I let my hands relax. Viktor's body drops at my feet. Crouching above the former *Bratva* enforcer, I check his pulse, and I'm satisfied that he's singing with the angels. But, to make sure, I tie the garrote together at his nape, keeping the thin, flexible metal dug into his bruised flesh. Taking a picture, I'm already half-way down the hallway before I send it to Snack for confirmation.

Snack sends me an emoji smiley face with x's for its eyes, and I pull out the SIM card and crush it under my heel without losing my stride.

Swiftly, I follow my exit route. Viktor's room sat only a few doors away from a stairwell access point. I jog down the stairs, slip through the extraneous storage, circumvent the employee area, and make it to the beginning edge of the theater's atrium through a side door that isn't marked as an exit.

Though not quite a fundraiser, this party is in celebration of music and theater, and a private showing of *La Traviata* is about to begin, showcasing the extravagance of the Lyric Theater and the tragedy of the opera. The orchestra launches into the early strains of a melody, exactly on time.

I nearly make it into the concession area, when fate decides it wants to fuck with me. Because the moment my soles sink into the foyer's plush carpet, so close to the front doors I can hear the muted rumble of cars driving down W 43rd Street, I see Valentina.

I stop and stare because it's like there's a spotlight following her, casting the whole world in her shadow. My endorphins are already running high from a successful hit. Couple that with the view of my Italian goddess, and my arousal is instant.

I know I should leave. I know I need to escape before the cooling body upstairs is found. But I can't. Because the adrenaline that's pumping through my veins has a lead line from my heart to my cock, both of which are saying *follow her*.

Her hips sway as she hurries down toward the lavatories, which are adjacent to the sprawling, enormous rooms that are shared by a second, smaller auditorium at the far end of the Lyric. This gives me ideas. I smooth my hand down my tie, shuck my gloves, and follow sedately behind her. She doesn't have her chaperones, and her guards are interspersed throughout the building.

The timing is perfect. The moment the hallway shifts and the shadows of the low-lit area spreads across her, I can't resist stealing a moment of her attention. She doesn't see me coming as I approach her from behind. Not until it's too late and my hand is already locked on her arm.

Valentine turns, a retort already blooming on her lips, a juicy *fuck you* loaded on her tongue and shaping her mouth. Then she sees me and doesn't

say anything as I drag her further down the plush, crimson-carpeted hallway, pushing her ahead of me into the empty theater. It's not as grandiose as the main one, but it fosters the same moneyed charm that reminds me of a Parisian opera house.

The doors swish closed with a quiet rebuke as I haul her away from the usher's windows and into a dark corner. I crowd her in and stare down into her beautiful face. Her eyes bewitch me as she looks up, doe-eyed and shocked.

"Where are your chaperones, little dove," I murmur. "You're tempting fate by not being with them."

Valentina wets her lips, probably thinking up a retort. I don't give her a chance. Instead, I do what I've been fantasizing about for the past few months.

I kiss the fuck out of her.

My girl melts as I drag my rough fingers up her dainty spine and curl them tightly into the back of her neck, clamping her hard as if she is some wayward kitten. I yank her lush body into mine, demanding that she yield her Rubenesque softness into my hard planes.

Her mouth parts with a gasp. The last time I had her in my arms, we didn't kiss. Not properly. I merely brushed my lips to hers. Now, I'm slaking my thirst like a man dying in the desert, finding a sweet oasis in her honeyed mouth. I slash my lips across hers, plundering the silky cavern between her cheeks with the ardent dip of my tongue. Fucking it with the slithering undulation of the muscle.

She shudders as I take what's mine, melting in sublime submission into my chest.

The connection between us is somehow more intense than it had been the first time. For a while, I thought perhaps it had been a fluke. Until I found myself wanting to return to New York for no reason other than to just be in the same city as her.

Now, I know this odd emotion is not something that will go away on its own. I have touched her *once*, and I became addicted. With her in my arms nibbling back at my kiss, I can't get enough. I fill my hands with the hourglass shape of her, squeezing her soft, thick curves as if I can crush us together and take her with me wherever I go.

Valentina’s arms and hands go from limply resting on my biceps, to clawing and curling up my arms, digging into the width of my shoulders. She clings to me as tightly as I clutch at her. Yanking her harder against me, I let her feel the effect she has. I am hard as a rock to the point that my zipper is in danger of splitting.

Life and death dance a macabre waltz in my life. I just summoned death, looked him in the eyes, and walked away unscathed. Now, I’m stealing life with my kiss, rejuvenating myself with Valentina’s passion and vigor. I don’t care that I shouldn’t. The rules of right and wrong and polite society aren’t meant for me.

Valentina makes a soft, needy noise in the back of her throat. I swallow down every decibel, drinking deep the flavor of the red wine and dessert she’s eaten that lingers on her ruby red lips. The flavor is bound together with honey notes that are purely *her.*

Eventually, I break the kiss and stare down into her pleasure-drugged eyes. She has completely capitulated from being her father’s obedient daughter to being my wanton girl. I could do anything to her right, and she would let me.

The temptation to ruin her rears in the recess of my thoughts. She squeaks as I pivot her around, pressing the front of my body to her back, and angling her lush tits and shapely hips against the reception table that’s been pushed away.

I slide my hand around the narrowest part of her waist, and then up between her breasts until I can cuff her throat with my fingers. I squeeze tightly so that I can feel the ragged tempo of her pulse against my fingertips. Her heart rate is elevated, zipping along with mine.

Nuzzling my lips to her ear bared by the sweep of her hair tumbling over one shoulder, I whisper, “Have you missed me?”

“I don’t even know your name,” she gasps.

My other hand occupies itself by palming the meaty curve of her thigh. I hate whoever her designer is. They put her in clothing that doesn’t suit her figure. She’s dressed as she was before in a gown that’s on the modest side of things. As if her father or chaperones or whoever the fuck is hoping that every man who lays eyes on her is blind.

This time her dress is a soft silky champagne color, lacking in risqué cut-outs, glitz, or glamor. The only thing that makes it gleam is the inherent

sheen of expensive fabric that glistens beneath the chiffon overlay that froths out from her hips like a bell. It's a girlish dress, one meant to soften and detract from the voluptuous and ripe sex-appeal that any red-blooded, heterosexual man – and more than a few lesbians – would feel when they lay eyes on her.

She's wearing stockings beneath, and I glide my hands higher, crimping the length of her skirt until I can rake the hem up and over the swell of her bottom.

Valentina quakes as I bare her from the waist down, admiring the garter and belts that are holding up her thigh-high stockings. I doubt her chaperones know about those.

"Bend over," I order.

Valentina is a good girl because she immediately obeys. She trembles in my arms as she stretches onto her tiptoes, hooking her hips on the table's edge, and bends until her belly is flat against the tabletop, and the perfect peach of her sweet-heart ass is hip level with my groin.

"You're such a good girl when you listen to me," I praise.

Her panties are cut generously, the satin stretched seductively across her thick buttocks. A growing wet patch is obvious between her thighs where her pleasure seeps through the silky fabric.

I lick my lips, half-drooling in remembrance of her taste. Again, I should be making my escape. But I'm all caught up in my girl. Hooking my fingers into the side of her panties, I slide them over and drink my fill of Valentina's exquisite cunt. This time she's bare, while before she'd been mostly groomed with a downy layer of tuft that hid her charms.

"Fuck," I groan. "Did you shave for me?"

There's nothing to stop the sultry trickle of her arousal from dripping out of her and sliding down her inner thighs. She's soaked. Each puffy lip glistens with her arousal.

"Yes." Valentina shudders beneath me, echoing the same full-body trembles that I feel quaking my marrow.

"Do you know how tempting you look to me right now?"

I loom over her and push her down by the nape. She tries to lift her head to look at me, but I force her flat until her cheek touches the wood.

"Be my good girl." Because that's what she's meant to be. *Mine*.

I’m on the edge of losing control. My heart is throbbing in my chest. Lust is in the driver’s seat. I need to back away. Give us distance. Let both of us cool off before I do something she’ll regret.

And yet, I take it a step further. Because I need to touch her. I need to dominate her memories and scorch her body with every bit of *me.*

Valentina jerks beneath my palm as she hears the clang of my belt loosening, and the metallic rasp of my zipper lowering.

My cock throbs with relief as it pokes out through the slit in my boxer briefs as if seeking Valentina’s wetness all on its own.

“I could fuck you right now, and you’d beg me too, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes,” she moans. She spread her thighs wider, and her hips arc instinctively, seeking the pressure and fullness that my cock could give her.

I groan as I step closer, unable to resist the siren’s call of her bare, flooded cunt. I don’t know what I’m doing. I only intended to jerk off to this perfect vision of womanly loveliness in front of me. But somehow, I’m closing the distance, until the head of my dick presses against her wet, swollen lips.

Valentina groans in the back of her throat. I have to shift my hand and grip her hips because she rocks them savagely. She would have impaled her pussy all the way down my dick at the angle we’re in if I didn’t stop her.

But I do stop her, and I hate that I’m not buried balls deep inside of her. I keep control of her pelvis by pressing my palm against the dip of her back. My other hand secures my cock, tightening a fist just beneath the head so that if she somehow gets my dick inside of her, it won’t be enough to *really* ruin her.

Then I torture us both as I slip it between her lips, swabbing the spongy head up and down her slit. Her wet heat burns me, and I grit my teeth and drop my head back.

“You are so fucking wet. So eager for my cock.”

Everyone knows that the *just-the-tip* game is dangerous. It’s a way to get between a woman’s thighs and let them feel *just the tip*, manipulating them with how good it would feel that so that they decide all on their own that they want the *whole* thing.

Yet here we are, playing this unhinged game. As if we both don’t already know it would feel fucking amazing for me to fuck her. She’s eager

and lustful for a virgin, and I want to teach her everything. I crave to tap all the potential that's driving her onward.

I draw a circle along her clit with the tip and follow the silky wet line back until I'm pressed right against her hole.

I stare down, mesmerized by the way her pussy clenches, trying to latch onto my prick. We both freeze as she shivers, and my dick slips against her hot inner flesh.

"You are just one hip thrust away from ruin. Do you feel that little dove? Do you feel how needy your cunt is trying to suck down my dick?"

The desire to deflower my *Cosa Nostra* princess drums inside of me like a call to war.

I angle my cock toward her clit, dragging the length of my shaft between her lips, and rock back and forth with a slow grind.

"Fuck you should see it, baby. I'm right there. Right there," I growl.

Valentina cries out as I press a mere millimeter of my cockhead into her sopping lips. Threatening to pop open her slit if I go any further. She goes wild beneath me, and I need to push down harder as she bucks, rubbing herself back and forth along my steely length. I almost slip a few times, and just once the very head of my cock sinks up to my fingers in her juicy core, kissing my knuckles with her wetness. I'm about to cum and I haven't even fucked her. Only toyed with the feverish feeling of her pleading sex as it licks overtop my shaft.

She lets loose a wild sound and tries to push her hips onto me. But I move away just in time.

"Bad fucking slut, you need to stop doing that."

My willpower is stretched thin, and Valentina has none as she undulates beneath me. I should get a fucking medal for how I resist her. It's not that I don't want to. It's because she's not mine, even if my heart and soul think otherwise.

"Please." She's half-sobbing as she begs. "I want to feel you in me."

I almost give in. Every nerve is firing with arousal.

*Would it be so bad to just slam inside and take her?*

The war going on in my head does nothing to deflate my dick.

*All it would take is a little push.*

But at what cost?

Reality breaks in, and I close my eyes.

If she’s not a virgin on her wedding night, Cesare Palermo will kill her. That her life hangs on the whims of her hymen is the only thing that pulls me away from the temping, feverishly hot promise of her cunt. Because no matter how good the sex would be between us, I’m not willing for her to reap those fatal consequences.

“You are a bad fucking girl.” I accentuate my snarl with a hard smack of my hand off her ass. Leaning over her, I push my cock down so that it angles away from her slit, and glides through the buttery grip of her pussy.

“I am going to make you cum, because I want you to remember and thank me for being so fucking gracious and not popping this cherry.”

Keeping my fist tight on her hip, hard enough she will have bruises, I slide the other around her body and cup her pussy from the front. Then I tap the underside of her clit with my cock, and encircle it with my finger.

She drips on me as I work her into a wild lather. Her hips jerk as she glides atop my cock, and I punish her with the mock-fucking of my hips. I let her feel how hard and thick I am as I wedge between the outside of her twat; a lip job or a thigh job or any fucking job because I’m not inside of her.

It doesn’t take long before she’s shuddering beneath me and making these cute, gasping sounds in the back of her throat.

Dipping my finger beneath her clit, I stuff it inside. It is the only part of my anatomy I let disappear into the fiery nirvana of her needy pussy.

I feel her tense against me, and I manage to cover her lips as she shatters for me. She shakes as her pussy creams, filling the air with a wet squelch that makes me wonder if she didn’t just squirt. Her musky wetness soaks my hand, and dribbles between my fingers.

Slowly, I pull her upright and press my lips against her throat so that I can feel the vibration of her pulse against my tongue tip. I hold her like that for a long minute as her climax flows through her.

Then it’s my turn as I shove her right back over. It only takes two strokes before I cum. And I do the second most dangerous thing I could possibly do. Instead of capturing my seed in my hand or a napkin, I press my spurting dick against her taint. I coat her with my cum, watching my virginal girl get slathered with it. It oozes and globs as it slides thickly down the valley of her sex.

Valentina is barely making sense as she stutters. I drag my fingers through the mess I made, and stuff my cum inside of her. Because that's where it belongs. Even though it shouldn't be. It's risky because she could get pregnant like this without ever being fucked. I can't help myself as I pull my middle finger out, gather up more of my release, and shove two fingers right back into her fluttering sex.

"Do you know what would happen if I got you pregnant?" I'm seduced by the way her pussy sucks my fingers clean, prompting me to shove every drop into her. "Not even your father could deny me when I come to claim you."

Valentina hurtles toward another orgasm. I hold her close as I finger-fuck her with my cum-soaked fingers. This time, when she climaxes, I slam my mouth over the top of hers and drink their sound. Nobody gets to hear her pleasure. Her moans are mine.

Eventually, she calms down enough for me to slide her panties back into place. I pat them gently, rubbing the material into her glossy pussy lips and feeling the telltale seepage of my release soak into the fabric.

She's boneless as I pull her upright. Carefully, I arrange her dress, smooth her hair back over her shoulder, and make sure she's mostly put together.

Then I tuck my cock back into my trousers.

Valentina turns to look up at me, and I wrap my arms around her waist. These stolen moments are all we get, and I steal another kiss.

"Be a good girl and walk around the party with my cum leaking between your thighs."

Her eyes are dreamy as she stares up at me as if I hung the stars just for her pleasure. It's a look that sends lightning bolts into my chest, making me feel alive. I live for that look, more than I've ever lived for anything. I feel as if I can leap over the Empire State building and wrestle the moon from its orbit to give it to her like a jewel.

I drag my nose across hers, breathing her in and watching the shared passion shimmer in her eyes.

Regretfully I pull away, making my much-belated escape from the Lyric Theater and disappearing with the flow of traffic down 43rd. Though every step takes me further and further away from Valentina, she's swimming in

my seed. I’m all but hoping that our forbidden liaison gets her pregnant. Because then, *nothing* and *nobody* would keep me away from her.

I would have a reason to go to war and keep my dogma in place.

# Chapter Six

## Valentina

I tremble as I watch my blue-eyed stranger disappear from my life again.

It takes herculean effort not to cry because I don't know when – or if – I'll ever see him again. Despite the uncertainty, I don't regret it. My body hums with pleasure. The strange, viscous wetness between my thighs is shockingly intimate.

Yet, despite *all* that, I'm still a virgin. I don't know how he managed to restrain himself because I surely couldn't. I might think he didn't *want* to fuck me if he hadn't stuffed his cum inside me. That single act threatens to seal us together more permanently than any marriage certificate.

I press my hand to my belly, and I know I'm courting all types of wrath, but I hope, deep down, that it works.

But now, I need to face my real life and not the fantasy world that *we* create when together. This time, I make it to the bathroom. I look feverish. Over-wrought with emotion. I wonder if the Aunties, or Cesare, will see the secret in my eyes, that I let a strange man fill me with his seed.

I bite my bottom lip, trying to stifle the giggle that longs to break free. I feel drunk, and I haven't had a single sip of champagne yet.

I don't clean up. Even though this wet feeling is borderline uncomfortable. I wash my hands, rearrange my hair from where it got knocked askew from the bejeweled barrette holding it over my shoulder, and make an elegant exit out of the bathroom.

Only to run into Dario Palermo, Cesare's nephew, and the third last person I want to see. Cesare and my father being the top two.

He is leaning against the wall in between the men's and women's bathrooms, looking at me from beneath the brooding line of his brow. *He* is the type of man I thought I would marry, cut from the '50s fable about made men and their molls as it seems all the *Cosa Nostra* are. His hair even does that glossy swoop over his brow, giving him a rakish air that I'm sure is attractive.

He scares me. Because unlike my father and Cesare, he sees things that I don't want anyone to. That he thinks he should be the one to marry me, and *not* Cesare, makes him both my biggest ally and worst enemy. I might eventually be the motive of why the first shot will be fired in an Italian-mafia war, but *he* will be the one to pull the trigger.

I try not to look nervous as I walk toward him. His eyes are dark as they sweep over my knee-high, flouncy dress.

"Dario," I say when I'm right in front of him.

*"Principessa."*

I stiffen beneath the title. Though it's accurate, the way he says it is mocking. As if the only thing I'll ever *be* is a Mafia princess. "You know I hate when you call me that."

"It is what you are, and soon you'll be the Queen of the *Cosa Nostra*."

Dealing with Dario on a day when my emotions aren't high-strung and raw is a challenge. Right now, after fleeing the too-close-to-home storyline of *La Traviata*, and my encounter with my mystery man, I can't handle his brutal half-teasing.

I look away from his narrowed gaze.

"You know I hate that too," I sigh as the ever-encroaching sadness comes back to roost swifter than I want. My stranger is the perfect way to forget, but it only lasts so long. Because reality is always right there, baring its teeth at me.

Dario is used to my more frequent bouts of unfiltered truth. Before my engagement, he floated on the edges of my awareness. Afterward, he's always there, quiet, and watchful and I can't figure out *what* he wants other than to be the *Cosa Nostra's* next Don. It would be easy for him to kill me and end Cesare's plans for rebuilding his bloodline. But he doesn't.

Instead, he watches, making me feel as if he's toying with me, and turning me into a chew toy that he battles over in this silent feud he engages in with his uncle. The *Cosa Nostra* way is very clear on how a new Don is picked. It's usually a son or close family relative. Obviously assassinations are frowned on, and you need all the other underbosses and Consiglieres to give their support.

Dario is building his power base, but he's not there yet. Because Cesare makes all the underbosses rich with the many deals he's signed, and his close connection with my father.

"I know." Dario pulls away from his lean against the wall. He holds his arm out for me. "Come, let us get you back to the Don before he too wonders why you're slinking around looking like that."

I swallow quietly while feigning ignorance. "Looking like what?"

Dario's eyes glitter in the low mood-lighting of the theater's antique bronze wall sconces. My heart bangs against my chest as his head lowers, and he whispers so softly I strain to hear him.

"Like you've just been fucked, *Principessa."*

I feel the blood drain from my face, and while I could lie, a person's first reaction is *always* the truth. My stranger's dick might not have gotten wedged all up in my pussy, and if I have a hymen, it's intact, but I don't *feel* virginal anymore. I feel as if the mysterious veil of sex has been swept away, showing me what is on the other side.

Schooling my features, I arch a brow at Dario. If he wants to call me the princess, I'll act like a fucking monarch.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed, *Capo Bastone*?" I pull rank because no matter how much he desires to elevate himself. He's only the second, and if I have a child he will move down the line to Consigliere.

Dario laughs at me. "Such a tiny kitten with big claws, *Principessa.*"

He shrugs casually and grabs my ice-cold hand and tucks it into the nook of his elbow. He becomes my escort as he physically leads me away from the bathrooms, and down the hallway toward the lower mezzanine level and its opulent auditorium.

"I don't care who you fuck or if you're a virgin on your wedding night," Dario murmurs for my ears only.

The pair of us returning together draws a few looks from the crowd that is milling in front of the auditorium doors and near the roving concessions

and scantily dressed cigar girls that sell snacks instead of tobacco products. I've lost track of time, and I can only assume that the opera is now in its first intermission.

I catch a few judgmental eyes. I know my ilk; they're all wondering if I'm fucking the *capo's* nephew beneath his nose. But that's all they have on me, the occasional bit of gossip in hopes that something sticks. Because the favorite pastime of the people in the lower ranks of the *famiglia* is to scheme and dream of tearing down those higher than they.

They can have my position if they think it's easy being Enzo's daughter. They look at me and see wealth and privilege. What they don't see is the heartache, pain, and bruises he likes to imprint on my skin with his knuckles.

Dario jerks his chin to the shadow of a man I assume is his bodyguard. He slips away from the wall and slides behind us as I'm tugged toward the auditorium.

"I don't think Cesare will care either. This whole thing isn't about blood-ties or passing the title down. If that's all *Capo di tuttu capi* wanted, he has an entire second-string of us nieces and nephews that can fill the stable up with Palermo heirs."

We draw to a stop at the top part of the stairs, and Dario lets me go when he sees my father looking.

"Then *why."* That one word has been gnawing at me for months now. There's so much veracity to Dario's comment, that I don't doubt it at all.

"That, *Principessa* is for you to find out."

I wish he could tell me, but I know he can't. Because I'm not part of the *Cosa Nostra* yet. I'm not in *their* family. Like mine, they don't do well with traitors, and sharing information like that from the Don's table is the worst type of disloyalty because it would come from his bloodline. Dario would be feeding the fish before the morning if it ever came out that he sang to uninitiated ears.

I nod, telling Dario with my eyes that *I get it.*

Flamboyantly, he cups my hand in his, and elevates it to his lips, brushing my knuckles with a closed-mouth kiss. While flattering to be shown such respect from the underboss of the *Cosa Nostra*, this performance isn't meant to fluff my ego.

Dario’s eyes are on his uncle, drilling straight into him with the accuracy of a sniper rifle. The two men hold eye contact long enough for me to pick up the animosity.

Before Cesare takes that look like a challenge, because even though he’s an old lion, the Don is *still* a lion in charge of his pride, Dario drops my hand.

Then he stands up, flashes me a wink, and vanishes into the auditorium, leaving me with a head full of questions.

# Chapter Seven

## Valentina

A month passes in a heartbeat, and I am not pregnant.

The day I began bleeding, I spent the whole of it locked up in my room. The Aunties don't worry overmuch, because there are times when I do get very dramatic about my menstrual cramps. I play on that history of pain mismanagement and PMS, and hide among the nest of pillows, with a pile of snack-sized chocolate bars that eventually turn into nothing but wrappers.

I don't ever expect to see my mystery-man again, at least not one-on-one. Whatever businesses he has in the city brings him onto the fringes of my world, close enough for the occasional bump. But over time, he'll recede into the background.

*He has to.* I don't know how I can live my life knowing what it's like outside the bars of my gilded cage.

The wedding planning kicks into high gear, beginning with a date. I'm to be married three days before my twenty-third birthday. And *oh,* that is not at all suspicious or coincidental. It gives me an idea of what Dario meant about the *real* reason behind this wedding.

*Money*. It's always about fucking money. Being that *gain* is one of the most common reasons people commit murder, I'm not surprised. The shock is that I didn't realize what Enzo and Cesare planned, or why they've stooped to such a low level.

My father is inside his home office when I barge in. I never bother him while he's working, but I'm so angry I'm vibrating with it. This confrontation is worth whatever beating I'll receive for standing up to him.

"February 11th?" I spit at him, wishing that my venomous words were a lot more dangerous like a Molotov cocktail.

The leather tufted executive chair beneath my father protests as he leans back into it. He looks up at me with those bored, flat eyes that are Stygian black when he's in the shadows like this. He keeps the blinds across the windows shut, and the antique Tiffany desk damp dimmed.

"What of it?"

"Don't insult my intelligence, Papa. You know what it is. It's my wedding date that *you* and Cesare chose." I tremble as the rage swirls through me, buffeting my emotions higher.

Stopping in front of his desk, I look down at him, trying to see my *father* in this man before me. Surely, when I was younger there were good times. We'd been a family once, right? I've wracked my brain, but all I come up with are loving images of my mother and her replacement in the Aunties. I can't remember if he'd been gentle before, because all I've ever known is this ruthless asshole in front of me.

"You bastard." I refuse to cry, even if my voice creaks with the threat of them. "If you wanted the money so badly, I would have given it to you on my birthday."

"You are such a fucking child, Valentina." His voice snaps as accurately as his palm often does. It almost smacks me backward, and I have to control my instinct to scurry and hide and make myself small so that his anger has a narrower target.

I straighten my spine, refusing to be cowed.

"You know your mother's stipulation in the will. I will *never* get my hands on her money. You can't give it to me." His voice overflows with old bitterness, and I see his resentment. He's nursed a vicious grudge about being outsmarted by a woman, one that he's hidden and carried for all these years.

I close my eyes, feeling the wetness well behind the lids.

"But my husband can," I whisper.

My mother originally comes from a family of the *Sacred Corona Unita*, Italy's fourth, lesser-known mafia behind *the Camorra, Cosa Nostra*, and '*Ndrangheta*. They didn't expand into America like others did but remained the big fish in the smaller pond of Southern Italy.

Of course, they didn't trust an upstart *Cosa Nostra* Consigliere like my father, and crafted a pre-nuptial agreement *and* iron-clad will that gave all of her considerable assets to her children. That she only had one means a quarter of the *Sacred Corona Unita's* four billion a year crime industry comes to me on my twenty-third birthday.

A date, I'm now realizing, I might not live to see. If I manage to survive my wedding, I might not make it through the honeymoon. The chips are stacked against me unless I play nicely.

If I do behave, my husband won't kill me for my inheritance and share it with this *testa di cazzo* in front of me. Cesare will be considered my next-of-kin for the inheritance because God-fucking-forbid they let me speak with a lawyer and draft up a new will once I marry.

My mother's money – and mine – wasn't supposed to matter to Cesare or Enzo because, individually, they had twice her wealth.

"How are you broke?" I open my eyes and look down at my father.

Here, he at least has the decency to grimace. His reputation is built on the foundation of being able to manage his sprawling empire. If people find out he doesn't have two pennies to rub together, that trust evaporates, and his power along with it. The worst thing to be for my father is to be a *has-been.* It's why he's always trying to climb higher up the social latter.

He shrugs carelessly, as if my figuring out that I'm a pawn – and a dead one – doesn't matter to him. "Bad business decisions and the fucking *Bratva* in Little Odessa having a direct pipeline of flesh and drugs in and out of the Port."

"At least I know I'm worth ten-figures to you," I say bitterly.

Turning, I walk out of my father's office. I knew that marrying Cesare was a life sentence, but I hadn't realized it would be a short one. I'm walking not the green mile to my death, but one made of imported Italian marble and gilded accessories.

It depresses me, and I fall into despair as my wedding plans continue around me. At night, I step out onto my balcony and stare out at the sky

wishing upon each shooting star that I'll see my stranger again. Only this time instead of us parting ways, I go with him.

He is my bridge to a new life, and I clutch desperately at that fantasy with both hands.

# Chapter Eight

## Raith

### Six months ago

"So, you are the *infamous* wraith."

Enzo di Maio is staring at me from across a cloth-covered tabletop in his restaurant in Little Italy. Getting into *Dolce Vita* is by invitation only, as such, the joint and the burgundy velour booths and polished mahogany tables are mostly empty, save for the one I'm sharing with Enzo and a few of his bodyguards which are clustered nearby.

I stretch my legs out underneath the table. Now that I'm sitting, my height is better disguised, and I can subtly work out the kink that being hunched over all the time creates in my spine. When I get older, my body is going to rue all this cloak-and-dagger bullshit, but it's the only way to navigate in shark-filled waters and remain untouchable.

"I am," I say in perfectly accented Italian. Among my talents with weaponry and planning, this is my topmost skill; I am a chameleon at voices and accents, with an ever-growing repertoire of languages to pull from.

Enzo narrows his eyes, doubting his own ears. The last time we spoke, I'd altered my dialect to sound Sicilian. Now, I am the perfect aural mimic of a man from Naples.

Nobody knows my true origin, and I've worked for years to perfect the proper accent-less cadence. I reserve that for my 'normal' voice. Every other time I affect an accent, blending in with the mobsters I do business with, so they never really know who my fealty is with.

I'm not wearing a mask, because I'm not hiding. Though I do have prosthetics on that alter the shape of my face just enough to thwart any facial-recognition software and the video cameras that I know Enzo has all through the restaurant. The dentures fitted over my real teeth change the shape of my lower jaw just enough to skew the results. A fake nose is seamlessly built on top of mine, and I'm wearing a long, curly wig and unruly beard inspired by Jason Momoa. I look *nothing* like me, and this persona will be gone the second the job's done.

Enzo leans forward and braces his elbows on either side of the fine China place settings, his fingertips pressed together. We're sitting in a horse-shoe-shaped booth, with a chair on one side for me, and him with his back tucked up against the blood-red upholstery.

At my back are his guards, and though I hate that I am so exposed, I'm not vulnerable. Beneath my all-black Versace suit is a thin tactical vest that will slow down a bullet, hopefully long enough to get a few shots off and escape before I get plugged in the head or otherwise incapacitated.

"I have heard good things about your work. They say you are worth your fee."

"Of course, I am worth my fee, *capo.*" I spread my hands apart atop the table, opening my body language to appear humble. "A poor assassin is a dead one."

Enzo grunts and I can tell he hasn't decided if he's going to hire me for the job.

Snack hates these types of meetings because they can all go wrong if egos come out to play. I do well to keep mine in check, but Enzo is not a man known to be modest. He's an arrogant prick because you need to be if you want to control the Five Families.

There's another reason I'm thinking of taking this job, and it isn't the seven figures attached to the contract. It's the chance of maybe seeing Valentina. I've only caught fleeting glimpses of her from afar, and the past three months without her have been excruciating. I have had to curb my

wanton behavior of working strictly in the city, spreading out my known arrivals in ninety-day increments.

A waiter attired in a nondescript white dress shirt, tailored black trousers, and a matching skinny tie approaches the booth carrying a tray overflowing with Italian delicacies. He sets the platters and dishes down in the center of the tabletop, tops up our wine glasses with a thick burgundy red wine, and then backs away.

Enzo waves a hand toward the steaming offering. "*Mangia, mangia*."

It's considered rude to say 'no' when ordered to eat by the Don, so I serve myself some plum-sized meatballs, *spaghetti aglio olio*, and a helping of *melanzane alla parmigiana* while waiting for Enzo to chew over the issue that has brought me here to him.

I barely have tomatoes and basil piled on top of my bruschetta when I hear steps behind me.

I freeze and tell myself not to turn around, but to hold still. I don't *need* to look and verify because I know it's her. I've memorized the way Valentina walks from the thousands of videos I've taken of her from my new apartment in the high-rise two blocks away from her house.

It took me forever to find the right vantage point, at the right level, without trees or buildings blocking the view. While I can't see her or the di Maio estate with my naked eye, the high-optical telescope pointing out my balcony window gives me a hawk's view. Then there are the cameras, but I don't like to think about how far down the stalker hole I went when I tapped into the traffic cameras and added a few of my own.

"Papa," Valentina says as she slides into the booth beside her father. Suddenly, I'm thankful that I'm not in the booth but isolated in my chair. I would not be able to keep my hands to myself if we were side-by-side. One of her aunts takes the other spot.

"*Valentina, Gia*," Enzo says in greeting. He doesn't attempt to introduce me because he doesn't have my name. Nobody does. I'm just *the wraith* and Raith in general. A man with no name, no face, and a formless past. Just the way I like it.

I keep my eyes lowered, hoping that Valentina can't see through the disguise. She is one of the very few people in the world who could put the two together, the real face of the wraith and the deeds that I've done if she thought about it.

“This is my daughter Valentina, and my sister Giulia.” Enzo introduces, though it’s not pride that I see in his face as he looks over at Valentina. It’s hate. How can Enzo hate his daughter? His eyes narrow on her profile, and I know that look. It’s a man inspecting something and trying to gage its worth. His nostrils flare as he finds some fault in her.

I don’t look because I know she’s fucking perfect, and I can’t lose my focus.

Valentina grabs the tongs and drops some salad onto a plate. She smooths her hands across a fork, then savagely spears a tomato wedge. I wait for her to add more food, maybe grab some bread. But she primly drops her napkin over her lap and settles down as if she’s about to dine on a four-course meal instead of a few lettuce leaves. I eye what she’s eating and look over at the heaping piles of pasta and hearty cuisine on everyone else’s plates.

Why is she eating like a rabbit?

Her figure is lush, and even now at the most inappropriate time, I want to dig my hands into her. I want to hear her cry out for me again.

Valentina’s gaze is duller than usual, her eyes lacking the usual luster I’ve seen in them and the spark of life I crave.

“It’s a pleasure to make your…” Her gaze collides with mine, and it’s as if the clouds covering the sun have been torn away. Her sherry-brown eyes brighten, and recognition sparks in them.

*Fuck me running. I should have worn contacts.*

Her brain catches up as she takes in the disguise, and she finishes her belated sentence. “Excuse me I had a frog in my throat.” She coughs to establish her lie. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance…”

“Pssh,” Enzo says as he waves his hand airily. “You will not get a name from him. He is only *the wraith.”*

*“I am pleased to meet you as well,”* I say in flawless Italian.

Her brow furrows as she hears the cadence of my voice. She *knows* it’s me, but the accent and language throw off her suspicion. The first time I met her I was Russian, the second I’d been too lost in the moment to conceal my voice. Now I’m speaking Italian as if I had been born and raised in the heart of the Amalfi Coast.

“Are you a new hire of my fathers?” Valentina’s hand trembles as she curls it around the stem of her wineglass. She keeps darting glances at me,

her brown eyes striking mine and then skittering away.

“In a sense. I’m… how you say an *assassino*.” I lay the accent on thickly, the fake mustache I wear helping to enhance the flutter of my lips as I shift my vowels into the recognizable cadence.

Valentina chokes on her wine. “You’re an assassin?”

Enzo is following the conversation as if this type of interaction is usual dinner fodder. I don’t know why he has me meeting with him during family time. Normal fucking people don’t talk about hitmen and assassins over pasta.

“Not just *an* assassin, one of the best.” His eyes narrow as they land on me again. “You really should work for me full-time. Your expertise with a sniper rifle would save me from the *Bratva* taking more control of New York.”

This is the problem with being as good as I am. Everyone wants me to work for them, only. It wouldn’t be a problem if I’m not actively trying to eradicate every corrupted tendril of criminal activity I can find. I work on the international field, and won’t be tied down to such a small little toad in a city-sized pond.

I give him a vague smile and wag my head as if I’m considering his job offer.

Then the reason why we’re having this dinner meeting becomes obvious as another bunch of people enter the restaurant.

For a moment I think I’m being set up, and I press both palms flat on the table atop the silverware; getting ready to grab the fork and butter knife in case I need to stab my way out.

“Ahh, Cesare, it’s good you’ve joined us.”

I haven’t seen this much animation in Enzo, and now there’s color in his cheeks and brightness in his eyes as he greets the second head of *the Company.*

I file the inkling away and turn to greet the man’s arrival. Nobody notices that I’ve slid the butter knife down and underneath my sleeve. Except for Valentina. She’s pretending to be intrigued by her salad, but I watch her eyes flick, tracking my hand movements as the silver disappears.

Her eyes meet mine, and only a quiver betrays her question.

“Enzo.” The two greet each other with much enthusiasm as Cesare joins the table. He and Enzo shake hands, and he bends over my girl, pressing a

kiss to her cheek. It's the only intimacy they're allowed, even with the obnoxiously sized, ten-carat diamond solitaire that's anchoring her hand to the table. Uncolored diamonds are too cold and pale for her. If Cesare truly knew anything about Valentina, he'd have gotten her something hotter, bolder, like a red or orange diamond.

*Fucking cheapskate.*

I grip the fork tighter, wanting to stab it through his jugular. I can't, because I'm surrounded by a half-dozen armed gangsters who would shoot first and maybe ask questions of my corpse.

"This is the man we spoke of," Enzo says with another of those grandiose waves, making sure the dim overhead lighting flashes off his gold-and-onyx signet ring with every movement. He's showing off, playing Don for me. I've seen his true face from afar and have seen the devastation on Valentina's face. This is all showmanship, and it makes me rethink my qualms about killing him.

I slowly stand, making sure to shorten my stature. It's fucking hard work trying to shave off inches from your height without making it obvious that you're doing it.

"It's good to meet you Don Palermo," I say fluidly in a spiel of Italian that would make the original mafiosos weep with joy.

Cesare pumps my hand in his and claps me on my shoulder before the three of us settle down again.

"Serve your fiancée, *cara,"* Enzo suddenly orders, barking at Valentina as if she's a slave.

I cram a chunk of bread into my mouth to keep it busy.

Valentina's shoulders stiffen, but she's the epitome of grace in a shapeless emerald-green dress as she stands from her meager meal. She's quiet as she scoops out generous portions of each of the platters, arranging tapas plates and salad bowls until Cesare's meal is laid out like a king's feast.

"That's my girl," Cesare says, and I maneuver both of my hands under the table so nobody can see my fists clench.

*Not your fucking girl.*

*Mine.*

But she's not. I might have branded her flesh with the feeling of mine. I might have rubbed my cum all over her pretty little cunt. None of that

matters, because it’s Cesare’s ring on her finger, and it’s *his* bed she’ll be spread across on her wedding night; as virginal as I can possibly leave her when I want to claim and take her in every way.

I slow my breathing and calm my racing heart as I hike the wine glass and take a slow sip. As if the scene of domestic fucking bliss right beside me isn’t making my chest hurt and violence fly around my mind like agitated bats in a belfry.

“Now that we’re all here.” I cut through the clang of silverware on porcelain with my raised voice. “What is the job, *i miei capi*.”

Cesare grunts as slurps up a gob full of pasta, and then rubs his bread through the olive oil that drenches the bottom of his plate. He doesn’t seem like he’s going to stop eating to fill me in, and he motions with his fork for Enzo to continue.

Enzo sighs and dabs at his lips with the white linen napkin, before he returns it to his lap.

“I want you to kill Dante Riccio.”

I’m glad I don’t have anything in my mouth because I would have fucking choked. Only the fact that I’m trying to hold down my laughter keeps me focused on the movements of eating. I cut a slice of parmigiana and consider the fried eggplant, before popping it into my mouth and chewing. The cooks know their authentic cuisine because the breading is golden brown and crisp, the flavors perfect. As I chew, I present a façade that I’m thinking about what he has to say.

Surely, they can’t be this stupid, right? They really believe that the head of the *'Ndrangheta* came all that way from Calabria to whack a Yakuza member. Yes, I planned it this way. But come on!

*Jesus fuck* how are these men the leaders of New York’s *famiglia.*

I swallow the eggplant and slice another sliver.

Enzo shares a look with Cesare. As one, they both lock their eyes on me.

“You know who that is, eh?”

I daub my mouth and sip my water before I speak. Making them wait is hilarious because they’re both on edge as if they are now facing the reality that I might say *no.*

“Of course. He’s the *capo del capo* of the *'Ndrangheta*. I did not realize he was in the country.”

“We didn’t either, but six months ago he slithered in and took out a hit on one of my associates while we were having a meeting at the Plaza Hotel. He covered his tracks well enough, but our investigation is better.” *Fuck this man and his chest puffing.* “We finally found out where he came from, and the alias he used. It’s Riccio.”

This time it’s Valentina who chokes. She wheezes as a piece of rabbit food gets stuck in her gullet.

Cesare leans over and pats her on the back, while she blindly reaches for her water glass. Over the rim, she stares at me, and I can see that of the people at this table, she realizes the truth.

Pride and trepidation form an abyss in my chest. If she says anything, I’m going to have to kill everyone at this table. Silently, I order her to remain quiet.

Dante never went to the Plaza. Nor did he kill a Yakuza member. Why would he? I did. It’s a beautiful setup and an excuse to take out the head of the *'Ndrangheta*. Something I’ve been dying to do for a couple of years now. Yes, I had hoped there’d been an imbecile along the way who would gobble up my breadcrumbs and do *this*. That is happening because these two goons don’t have a single brain cell between them angers me. They are obvious, oblivious, and yet they have my Valentina trapped. My sides hurt from the restraint I’m showing. I want to laugh, and then cut out their hearts.

I twirl my pasta fork in my spoon, loading up a big bite of spaghetti. Holding Valentina’s eyes as if I don’t see the shock wavering in them like an aura borealis whipping through an evening sky, I give her a wink.

It pushes her over the edge.

“Excuse me,” Valentina wheezes as she stands abruptly.

Cesare looks at his bride-to-be with mild concern.

Enzo waves a hand her way. “Whatever you need to do, *cara.* There’s no need to make a big production of it.”

“Yes, Papa.” I can feel Valentina’s stare bouncing against my profile, but I refuse to turn and meet her eyes.

Instead, I motion with my fork.

“Tell me more. How much are you offering for this assignment? The exact number. The listing alluded to seven-figures.”

# Chapter Nine

## Valentina

It's *him.* I know it's him, but he looks so different.

My throat aches from where I choked on a bundle of lettuce. The Aunties want me on a diet so that I don't look like a blimp (their words) in my wedding dress. I would have told them to fuck right off with that nonsense if my father hadn't agreed.

But none of that is why I leap up and bolt from the table. It's because I don't know what type of mad, insane scheme is going on and that I'm a witness too. How is my father blind to the truth that's right in front of his face? Did he miss the smirk that my blue-eyed stranger gave me? The one that looks like Sylvester the Cat getting a mouthful of Tweety and refusing to spit the damn bird back out even when told to. He's getting away with murder. Literally.

And I can't keep sitting here acting as if I don't *intimately* know the man that my father called 'the wraith'.

Am I imagining things? Do I want to see my mystery man so badly, that I'm envisioning his crystalline baby blues in this man's face? They look nothing alike, not the hair, not the face, nothing except for that singular detail.

I'm losing my mind. The stress of the wedding planning must have finally cracked me like an egg.

I’m trembling as I disappear into the lady’s suite which is adjacent to the bathroom. Sinking into the high-back chair that’s part of the intimate lounge area, I try and calm myself in the familiarity. There’s a heavy floral scent in the air from the day-old rose bouquet that’s sitting in the center of a low-slung marble occasional table.

This little nook has everything for a proper young woman to relax away from the menfolk, a throw-back to the separation between genders after a Victorian-era dinner when women took sherry in the solar, and men smoked cigars and kicked back whiskey in their dens. That type of gender segregation no longer exists in the wider world, but we Italians love our traditions, and when my father renovated *Dolce Vita,* he brought some whimsical, retro charm into the ambiance. There’s a room with a green-velvet card table, enormous leather chairs and couches, and a lot of deep, heavy mahogany tables in the back, while the occasional female guest gets this floral-decorated space to decompress.

I fluff the small throw pillow behind my back, and lean into it, for once thankful for my father’s blatant sexism.

So, the wraith is a hitman. One of the best my father has ever seen. That’s considerable praise because when *he* was an enforcer, his reputation was cunning, lethal, and vicious.

The wraith is something else instead. He should have called himself the chameleon. So far, I’ve seen him pretend to be Russian, American, and now Italian. He does it so convincingly, that I don’t know what his true nationality is.

And he killed a man during our first meeting at the Plaza and blamed it on the *'Ndrangheta*. That must have been what he was doing when I ran into him sneaking down the stairwell – escaping from the scene of the crime. Before he decided to take a detour, and then drop and give me twenty tongue lashes.

The reality of that fucked-up scenario smacks me in the face. I lean forward and bury my eyes in my hand as if I can hide away from the awful thoughts marching all over my brain. I came all over his face and fingers while there was a dead body a dozen feet away. Is that why he initially wore gloves? God, did he get blood on me?

*Mio Dio.*

Then I wondered what he'd been doing at the Lyrical. Swallowing nervously, I rummage in my Lady Dior micro-bag and pull out my phone.

Google coughs up the answer a browser-search later.

He killed some guy staying in the luxury suites above, where the actors live during the high season because the practice rooms are right there. Though nobody knows why the victim was murdered, the name is distinctly Russian: Viktor Blok.

Now the wraith is here, working for my father. H*as* worked for my father before. This is not a new situation.

I sit upright as a stab of shocking pain skewers me, the force of it stealing my breath away as I'd been gut-shot by a bean-bag gun. The type my father likes to train with and has at times shot me with. Those mother fuckers hurt, even if they're not lethal.

*The wraith knows who I am.*

If he's closely bound to the various global crime syndicates, he probably has *always* known my name and affiliation. If not immediately, then very soon after. He can't be well-connected and oblivious at the same time. All this time he *could* have sought me out. *We* could have had more than the fleeting, lust-charged moments that we stole in the dark.

Then the truth sinks in, and I realize how stupid I am.

He didn't come to me because he didn't want anything more than what we did. I, in my naïve, foolish belief, thought all that baby talk, all those searing looks, and intense kisses, meant that he felt more for me than what I am.

*A willing body*.

I don't want to cry. Too many tears have already been shed these past few awful months.

I hate it, but nowadays I sob at the drop of a hat. I can feel the familiar pressure swelling behind my eyelids. Aunt Sara has been wanting to try a new waterproof mascara for the wedding, but I haven't yet. This means if I do start bawling, I'm going to look like a raccoon and that will have Enzo and Cesare asking me questions I don't know how to answer.

*You are stupid. Who would want a person like you?*

Those mean thoughts don't sound like anyone else but *me*. I wish I could blame it on something someone has said, or a retort I heard. This type

of self-flagellation is purely self-induced, growing louder and louder each time I hear that nasty voice crawl inside my head.

I can't blame *the wraith* for how I'm feeling. He never offered me anything. He only took what I gave him. In my naïve, love-starved brain and passion-hungry body, I assigned *more* to simple…lust.

*Did you really think he was your soulmate? There's no such thing.*

The tears are not a catharsis as they begin. I might think I'm half-in love with a mystery man – *not so mystery now* – but I am just a means to an end, a post-murder adrenaline dump. Some men like to get drunk; others like to fuck. It seems he likes to eat pussy. I know enough of my father's hired hitters and enforcers to understand the euphoric high they get when escaping clean from a dirty job.

My heart aches as I push away from the chair. Now, I must decide what to do. Do I tell my father and Cesare that they are going to war with the wrong man? Whoever wanted their associate dead, it is one-hundred percent unlikely that it was the Boss of the *'Ndrangheta*. Instead, the *real* assassin is sitting a foot away, eating spaghetti as if he's not worried about getting caught.

I know I should hate him now that I understand what his *I will bathe in your blood* looks mean. But I don't. Because I also saw what burned behind his murder-and-mayhem mask. He carries a brightness that rivals the darkness within him, a tenderness and passion that would make a hedonist weep, and a sybaritic beg for more. I might be wrecked now, but I can't deny that he showed me what I will be missing and gave me a taste of the forbidden.

Pushing up from the chair, I square my shoulders and prepare to march back onto the battlefield. That is what these dinners with Cesare and Enzo have been like lately. Once a week, I am forced to wait on Cesare under my father's eye, aware that I'm being assessed for *continued survival.* If I behave well enough. If I can be charming and be the perfect bauble on Cesare's arms, then maybe they won't bump me off on the honeymoon.

That notion of my impending death has remained with me, and I've become obsessed with wondering *how* they would do it without attracting the attention of the authorities *or* the latent family members I have in the *Sacra Corona Unita.* That mystery hasn't unraveled, but I've been making sure I don't eat or drink anything they touch.

I make it to the suite's threshold when the heavy wooden door is thrust open from the other side. I expect to see Aunt Giulia stride in because, other than the waitstaff, she's the only other female in the restaurant. But that's not who I see.

*The wraith* strides into my sanctuary, confident, and arrogant and somehow not worried that there are nine armed men a few feet away who'd put a bullet in his head for trying this.

I back away as he crowds the space, helplessly watching as he shuts the door, and flicks the deadbolt with deft hands. Unless I scream, and they have a battering ram, nobody is getting past the reinforced façade. This little room also doubles as a saferoom in case my father's enemies come to *Dolce Vita* and decide to have a shoot out.

I keep putting distance between us until my spine hits the floral wallpaper.

He crosses his arms across his tautly muscled chest and leans against the barricade behind him. The smile he gives me is a cruel slice of pink lips amid the nest of his dark beard. His facial hair is longer, coming to a point a few inches below his chin, and the hair is wild. I don't know what he did to his nose, but the rest of him?

Yes. There is no doubt. This is my mystery man.

"Fear looks good on you." His inflection is shameless, with his sinful voice shaping the vowels until I feel a rush of heat ignite between my thighs.

I lift my chin. Does he think he scares me? Has he not met my father? "I'm not afraid of you."

"The way your pupils are dilated, and the rapid beat of your pulse in your throat says otherwise."

"Fuck you," I spit.

My anger comes in sharply. I hate being afraid of men. My father loves frightening me. I'm not about to add another man to that list. "If you want to kill me, go ahead. Do you think death threats are something new? My father threatens to shoot me weekly, and I'm pretty sure he's going to go through with it after the wedding."

His stare burns white-hot, the blue irises so bright that it makes my heart ache from how beautiful they are.

I close my eyes…because this? *This hurts.*

*You were supposed to save me.*

My lower jaw trembles as I suck up all the pain and bury it down deep. When I open my eyes, I know I look hard and distant. He doesn't get to access any more of my pain or heat or emotion. This honeypot is *closed.*

"There you are." His voice melts into the most decadent of chocolate, and I blink with confusion. "I thought they broke you."

My hitman crosses the distance between us in two steps, his long strides eating up the few feet until he's invading my space. Now that he's in front of me, I have to angle my head back, looking up if I want to continue holding his eyes.

His hands are rough he curls one against my throat. He presses his palm down on my larynx, its weight a ruthless promise. The blade of his thumb scrapes along my jawline. He doesn't hold me as a threat, despite how big his hands are. He's supporting me as if I'm some fragile glass curio that's in danger of shattering.

I want to cry because *this* is what I yearn for. This softness and tenderness and voiceless declaration of endearment. But I know it's a lie. This man doesn't feel anything for me.

Fuck. The tears well up suddenly and make my vision swim. I don't close my eyes, because doing so will make them drip over. If I just...hold them open maybe, they'll dry out and I can say that *this man* didn't make me cry.

"Ah, *kleine.*" He rasps in that guttural accent, and I realize now what I'm hearing. "Don't cry, not for me."

*The wraith's true voice.*

Not the affected Italian accent, or the smooth Russian purr, or his genial Americanized dialect. This *growl* is the man behind his many masks. It dips into the top octave of bass, rumbling in his chest and making me tremble as I feel its cavernous tone echo in my bones.

"You've known this whole time?" I sound so young, but perhaps this is the last burst of my youth. They say heartache matures you. I feel older, and wiser to the perils and situations that can spring up between a man and a woman. Maybe I should marry Cesare, just so I don't feel all this…soul-destroying bullshit again.

"No. Not the first time." His thumb continues to caress my cheek, lulling me away from the precipice of tears.

He doesn’t even look guilty as he gives me a tiny, suggestive smile. “The last time? Yes. I knew who you were, Valentina. My Valentina.”

It’s an effort to breathe around the clamor in my chest. My heart is having a spasm as it struggles against the chains of despair and sorrow that cling to it.

*My Valentina.*

I will never forget how such a simple term of endearment sounds when it’s meant. I don’t know his name, and I probably never will. Somehow, I know I’ll never see him again because this thing between us is dangerous. Now more than ever since I know secrets about him that can get him caught and killed.

But I don’t care that I don’t know those details. Because names are transient. They are bestowed at birth, most of the time as an homage to another person. I am named after my father’s obsession with Saint Valentine, an omen from God since I was born on Valentine’s Day. Somehow, my father thinks he’s a martyr, meant to change the fabric of the world and return the Italians to their true heritage.

Past the name, his nationality, and his history, I am beginning to understand this man’s *true* self and why he hides so much of it. While I wonder what in his life made him want to become an assassin, it’s a precursor issue that doesn’t impinge upon *us.*

“Is that why you wanted to get me pregnant? Did you want to attach yourself to the *Camorra?”* It wouldn’t be the first time a woman’s womb was used as a gateway into organized crime, nor would it be the last. If that is his motive.

His eyes flick away from my face, and he assesses my stomach. I’ll never have a flat belly. I’m too soft around the hips and thighs, but there’s no bulge or baby bump.

I swear he looks disappointed when I shake my head to confirm what he’s silently asking me.

*No baby. No pregnancy.*

“No. That was me being selfish.” He closes his eyes, and his jaw clenches, flexing the thick muscles on either side of it. They flare and then recede as he relaxes.

When he opens his eyes, they are dead, and I know he’s made his choice. Much like I’ve come to understand.

The bridge I hoped he would become burns around me.

“I would never kill you. But you know now why this between us is impossible.”

I reach out for him but I change my mind a second later. Because hearing the same thoughts I have, spoken by him with finality, makes me feel crazy. The tears return in earnest.

“No, I don’t. Because you *can* change all of this.” I swear I’m not blood thirsty. But ever since I learned the reasons behind my approaching nuptials, I’ve often fantasized about the deaths of my father and Cesare.

“I could.” He agrees, and hope sparks anew. “But you’re not seeing the cost of it.”

“If you’re talking about your conscience, give me some poi—”

“No,” he cuts me off with a snort as if I offended him by thinking he has a conscience. “Nothing like that. Do you know what will happen if both heads of the *Cosa Nostra* and *Camorra* fall?”

I swallow and look away because I don’t, and that I don’t know makes me feel juvenile.

“Not many people think of those details when they are planning an assassination.” His voice is gentle as he breaks my heart again. “I don’t have a plan on how to extricate you from this contract business. Not without a war, and not without considering the far-reaching ramifications. I don’t want to be the one to cause a civil war and turn the streets of New York into a battleground. While I do not care how many mobsters will die, it’s the other cost that gives me pause.”

He doesn’t have to tell me about collateral damage. History is littered with the innocents who died when a mafia war broke out.

My head droops, as do my shoulders. This feels like a breakup, even though we were never in a relationship.

“I know I’m not worth such a high cost.”

“You are worth everything.” His hand goes from stroking my cheek to cupping my chin, lifting my head high so I can look into his eyes. “I could tell you the cost is my oath that I took not to kill for pleasure or personal reasons. But I realize that I would, I would kill if you asked me to. I would wipe out every person that’s ever wronged you if you just crooked your little finger.”

He sighs and drops his forehead to mine. We're so close our breaths mingle, and I taste the saltiness of his sorrow in his words.

"The cost is *you,* Valentina. If anyone ever learned the reason why they were killed, they would send men like me to come and take you out. There would be no end to the killing, and no guarantee that you'll be safe."

His lips brush against my forehead as he whispers, "*Occhio per occhio*."

*An eye for an eye and the whole world goes blind.*

"I cannot be the cause of your death." It is the sweetest thing anyone has ever said, and the most devastating. Because he will not save me, and I can't save myself.

I should tell him about my father and Cesare's plans. I should tell him about Dario and the *Sacra Corona Unita*. But I don't because none of it matters anymore. Not if *he* doesn't want me.

*The Wraith's* palm sears my cheek, and I turn my face into it, pressing a dainty kiss to his roughened hands in farewell. I want too much from him, and he can't give it to me. The two of us have always been on the same wavelength, and we don't need words to understand that the only way forward is to avoid each other.

He presses his cheek against mine, and whispers, "With an R, Raith." He rolls the letter as he gives me a version of his name. Perhaps his real one begins with an R, and when he became infamous, adopted a new one to suit his business.

I keep my eyes closed as he clutches my face. He can't resist touching his lips to mine, but I don't look up. I don't open my eyes again. I keep them closed because if I see him walking away, I'm going to dissolve into tears.

I don't want him to see me cry. It's not pride that makes me strain to hold back. I just don't want him to feel *bad* for breaking my heart. He never asked for my love and affection, but it's his all the same.

I don't hear his footsteps as he retreats. I only know he's gone because the lock clicks, and the air in the lounge flows easier, as if the world held its breath to see what would happen, and exhales now that the danger has passed.

Only then, when I know he's gone for good, do I collapse to my knees and let the tears fall. They make a poor balm for my devastated heart

because as anyone knows, salt in a wound leaves behind a scar.

# Part Two

# Chapter Ten

**valentina**

## Now

"I thought you were on a diet." Auntie Sara's voice pops through my champagne-bubble high and sends me crash-landing into reality.

I catch her reflection in the bridal boutique mirror, before swirling the fizzy white wine in my glass.

"No, you and Aunt Giulia said I should diet. I considered it, and after a month of eating nothing but salad, I decided not to take your advice." Lofting my drink, I give her a silent toast and then kick back the rest of the champagne as if it were a cheap shot and not Dom Perignon.

The seamstress who crouches at my feet covers up her laugh with a cough. Though I had the final fitting months ago, boredom and anxiety have sent my appetite haywire. I've actually lost weight, enough that a few new stitches are needed at the waist, but not enough to suit the Aunties. They think I should drift down the aisle looking like a waif dressed in ivory. Never mind that such a feat is physically impossible. I'm shaped like an hourglass, one of abundant curves and jiggly softness which is thankfully in vogue. As a thick girl, I owe the Kardashians and bootylicious influencers of the world a huge thanks for making Brazilian butt lifts a *thing*.

Even with Aunt Sara's negging, and despite my body issues, I have to admit the wedding gown is a masterpiece.

*It suits me.*

I turn away from my aunt's glare and stare at this gorgeous, fetching creature who is reflected in the mirror. While she has the sun-warmed hue of my Italian ancestors, and her hair is a wild, untamed mess of cocoa curls, that's where the familiarity ends. Because *wow.* This dress is straight out of every bridal magazine and look-book I've ever seen on how to enhance one's curves, with some careful concealment for women with a soft belly. AKA: me.

I couldn't have imagined a better wedding gown. I went a bit daring with the lace-detailed, off-the-shoulder bodice but made up for it with the long, translucent chiffon sleeves which stretch to elegant points in the center of my palm.

The whole thing is overlaid with a lace mosaic, from the sweet-heart detailing around the neckline to the delicate embroidery on the cuffs, around the waist and the first few inches below, and ending in a band of hand-embroidered decorations around the hemline. Though all the ivory lace fades out into the million layers of filmy tulle that make up the dreamy-looking, and enormous skirt.

I turn, and shimmer in the recessed lighting that shines down on me like a spotlight.

Hand-sewn beads and delicate sequins spark as they catch the light, making me look as if I'm floating amid a dewdrop-speckled cloud. It's a gown fit for a mafia princess.

I fucking hate it.

Not because of how it looks, but because my bridegroom is not someone who I want to see me looking like a picture-perfect bride clutched on his arm.

Devastation gurgles in the pit of my stomach, and I can't quite keep the expression of hopelessness and loss off my face. It's not fair. I want to scream at my reflection and rent at my hair. I want to claw at my face as if wiping away my beauty will make Cesare less willing to marry me.

I want Raith. I want him to be the one waiting to sweep me into his arms at the end of the aisle.

But I can’t have him, and I can’t get out of this situation. Instead of hysterics, I suck down a deep breath and hold it. I hold it so long, trying to smother the frantic, panicky throb of my elevated pulse that black spots dance across my vision.

I blow it out, forcing the dark thoughts to retreat.

Aunt Sara drops her arms and approaches me, looking elegant in her camel-colored slacks and emerald-green satin blouse with rather ridiculous fluted sleeves. Her heels are only two-inches tall, putting us at the same height as she comes up behind me. So that I can see our twinned reflection in the multi-panel mirrors.

“I just don’t want you to look back at your wedding day pictures and be disappointed.”

As if the worst thing about my wedding day is going to be that I might look chubby in the photographs.

The soft effervescence from my champagne which helped mute the painful edges of the day fades away, leaving behind a layer of ice that hardens into cold, hard facts.

*I’m getting married in a week.*

Aunt Sara can’t comprehend that I won’t *ever* look at my wedding book. Because not only do I not *want* to get married, but I also don’t want my groom. He’s a man who is old enough to be my father without any of that silver-fox sex appeal that one would hope for. It just sucks that men remain virile throughout their entire life. Some days, I feel as if I’m back in medieval times because this whole scheme of my fathers completely strips me of my autonomy as a woman and turns me into a walking baby incubator instead of a person with thoughts, feelings, and aspirations.

Then there’s the whole likely getting killed the day after. I probably won’t ever make it to our honeymoon destination. The plane carrying me will go down, or the boat will sink, or some hopeless tragedy that gives control of my upcoming vast inheritance to Cesare and my father.

I’ll be twenty-three in a few days. Last year, I got a kiss for my birthday. This year, I’m probably getting a bullet in the brain.

Glumly, I hold my hand out to the seamstress’ assistant, silently requesting a refill.

“Valentina!”

“Look. You’re not the one on this pedestal being stuffed into ten pounds of fabric and sold off to the crypt keeper. Until you are,” I pinch my forefinger and thumb in the air beside my mouth and draw it across my lips. “Zip it.”

Aunt Sara *harrumphs* but she does as I ask her. Mostly because I can still say no to this whole antediluvian affair. I mean, theoretically, I can say no. Except, that I want my continued survival rate to be above the 0% it will drop to if I deny Cesare. So, there’s no way I can get out of my marriage unless Cesare kicks the bucket from a heart attack.

I take a sip from my refreshed glass and blindly stare into the mirror in front of me. Vaguely I recognize the bride I’m meant to be, but all I see is the bleak, endless span of my future yawning before me.

To those not part of the *famiglia*, it seems as if I have free will. But when you’re on the inside, dealing with the constant one-upping and posturing of the Italian Mafia? There’s no such thing.

There are just hard truths that I remind myself of like a mantra. My father, Enzo Di Maio, is the leader of the *Camorra*. My future husband, Cesare Palermo controls the *Cosa Nostra*. Jointly, they are *the Company,* disbanding the traditional notion of a *capo* and reigning alongside one another. Together, they oversee the Five Families. They came up together, beginning as lower-level enforcers, dealers, and bookies, before working their way up to become the Mafia’s hydra. If you try to cut off the head of one, the other will come and kick your ass. That is their vow to one another, and the families who follow their lead.

When Cesare’s entire family, including his three sons, were killed, my father agreed to help him in any way he could. I was twelve years old when it all happened. Back then, the only things I worried about were dolls and how to avoid getting boy cooties.

I don’t want anything to do with this nonsense. But my father signed a contract, and they took an oath before the other families. For years, a tenuous peace has existed between the two organizations. If I refuse to adhere to this deranged, decade-old agreement, it won’t be long before hostilities will reignite between the *Camorra* and the *Cosa Nostra*. I’ve only heard horror stories of the bloodbath the last power-struggle caused.

Last year, when the wedding planning began in earnest because my *beloved* fiancée was not getting any younger, dear old dad promised me that

if I didn’t marry Cesare, I wouldn’t live to see the outcome of the broken contract. It would not be *his* blood that would appease the *famiglia,* but mine. I would be the first causality, felled by a bullet from *his* gun.

Of course, that was before I learned the whole soundbite is bullshit and it’s just a money grab.

But I can never forget the feeling of the gun as he pushed the barrel against my forehead. Usually, he would just bop me on the nose with it. This time he brought it close, tapping his expectations into the flesh between my eyebrows. Scarring my mind and memory with each *clack* of the metal punctuating his viciousness, until I really believed he was going to pull the trigger right then and there.

Which means in three days, I’m going to be gliding down the aisle of St. Mark’s Cathedral on my father’s arm, as he gives me to the Boss of the *Cosa Nostra*.

It’s enough to make me want to hurl, though that could also be the champagne. I haven’t eaten, so there’s nothing to sop up the deluge of expensive alcohol I drowned my stomach in. I keep it down by pure willpower because there’s nothing worse to me at this moment than wasted booze.

I have the glass half-lifted to my lips when Aunt Sara speaks again.

“You look like your mother.”

I flinch because she’s not usually this sentimental. Aunt Sara is my father’s sister, but for a while, she and my mother were as thick as thieves. Both were reared in the world of the *famiglia* and knew the expectations that come from that lifestyle. They were even married the same year, and while Aunt Giulia lives in Hudson Yards, Aunt Sara lives nearby us in Little Italy so that dad can be amongst his people.

The only things I remember about my mother are her laughter, and how her arms were always open for me when I needed a hug. Sometimes, when I’m in a fit of whimsy or melancholy, I imagine she’d have told my father off for what he’s done to me. But she’s been buried now longer than I’d had her in my life.

So why do I want to cry hearing Aunt Sara’s comparison?

I rapidly blink my eyelids, hoping to quell the tears I feel building behind them. Managing to hold back the waterworks, I’m stone-faced as my aunt steps up beside me, joining me on the slightly raised dais. The

seamstress slips aside, giving us this private moment without eavesdropping.

Aunt Sara's arm winds around my waist. While age has buffed away some of her verve, and two enormous Italian boys have softened her figure and widened her hips, when I'm older, I'll look exactly like her. I don't think it's a bad thing. She's not exactly matronly but carries herself with a well-aged elegance that extreme wealth can provide. A light hand with Botox and cosmetic fillers has smoothed out many of her fine lines and wrinkles. I know she's also gone under some laser treatments for sunspots and age-related blemishes, leaving her looking fresh-faced without being overdone.

In fact, *everyone* including Cesare has had a bit of a nip and tuck in preparation for the wedding.

I barely see any of my mother's features in me. I have the same wayward, nut-brown curls as both my aunts and father. My skin is a tint lighter, more honey than her sun-deepened bronze. At five-foot-seven, I'm a bit taller than her five-five. She's had a mommy makeover, so her breasts are just as firm and upstanding as mine.

My aunt easily reads the doubt in my eyes. "It's not so much your features, though you have her gorgeous brown eyes. It's the look on your face. She looked exactly like that when she married your father."

I always knew my parents weren't a love match. I mean, are marriages ever in our world? What would the Italians be without arranged marriages? It's not even reserved for those from the families. There's a whole enclave on Staten Island that just seems to trade their kids around, only occasionally shipping them off to marry into the families in Brooklyn and Queens. But I hadn't known she faced her future with such dread.

At least my father had been closer to her age, and not the enormous age gap between Cesare and me.

"But she still went through with it," I say without much emotion.

Aunt Sara sighs deeply, the kind of exhale that comes from the very depths of the soul. She nods, and neither of us needs words to commiserate the weight and unfairness of our expectations.

I wonder if she knows about the money and if I told her, would she escape? I hold Aunt Sara's eyes.

“Your father’s entire world is *the Company*. I know he’s threatened you, and I hate to say it, but if pushed into a corner. He’ll carry through with it. In his eyes, nothing is more important than maintaining the peace between the families, the *Camorra* and the *Cosa Nostra*.”

I have my answer. She doesn’t know *all* of it, but she knows enough. She’ll be of no help because she’s not in my corner nor is she in my father. He’s broken her and she’s in pure self-preservation mode.

“Why is he like that?”

“Because he lost his family to a street skirmish when he was twenty. Your grandparents, and a younger brother. It’s a tragedy, the same as what happened to Cesare. You are the sacrificial lamb that’s going to keep the fragile balance. And if you aren’t willing to do that, then…”

She leaves the rest unspoken, and I fill it in with the echo of my father’s words.

*What good am I?*

# Chapter Eleven

## Raith

"You're almost on target. Move your scope a few inches to the left."

Snack's voice is ever present in my ear as he plays spotter. Despite the tension of the moment as I line up my shot, his voice is dappled with a breezy inflection. I wish I could say that he only gets this way on the job, blowing off steam with an easy and laid-back attitude, but this is his personality. Nothing is serious to him, though in the next few minutes I will be mired in anxiety and tension.

He's not the one exposed. That's me, where I lay on the gray, industrial carpet on the thirty-fourth floor of a posh high-rise in the Chicago Loop aiming north toward Parkline. Though it's fully furnished to look like an office, with cubicles, ergonomic chairs, and enough computers, monitors, and other office equipment to look legit, it's a front for a splinter group of the Irish mob. Cillian's given me the go-ahead to use the building for whatever dirty affairs I get into, in hopes of throwing suspicion onto the man who owns it.

Only a single office in the entire building is ever used, and that Boss is currently enjoying a weekend in Monte Carlo, none the wiser that he's about to be blamed for a mafia-style execution. I have the whole weekend to set up my sniper's nest, but I won't need it. Because my target is on his way, hitching a last ride from the airport, but his ferry driver isn't Charon, but more a Judas working for me.

I angle my scope in the direction that Snack suggests. Every twitch and movement are collected as data from the rangefinders and ballistic calculators I have with me. Snack is using a satellite to tap into the meteorological equations. Each piece of information is sent back to Snack. Then, he deciphers it, just to tell me that the wind is fucking up my shot by a millimeter, and I need to correct course.

“There. You’re on target. Now don’t move and let’s hope that the wind doesn’t change again.”

That’s like asking a bird not to fly. It’s the Windy City. Of course, it’s going to change. It’s an apt name, but when one is up in the sky trying to snipe out a person many yards below, it’s more of a curse than a point of pride.

“I don’t know why we don’t do this next week.” Snack chatters on, occasionally causing the wireless feed to crackle with the loud smack of his lips. From the occasional sound of a bag crinkling, and the loud *crunch,* it sounds as if he’s eating potato chips.

I close my eyes, wondering if I need to pray to God or sing a song for the Devil to put me out of this misery. Snack and I have run jobs together for years, but his lack of focus and his penchant for talking non-stop grinds on my last nerve.

I’m not much of a talker, on the job or other.

“Next week is Valentine’s Day,” I remind him.

“Yeah, which is perfect. You know how they celebrate the Valentine’s Day Massacre around here. And there’s the wedding. That would be a perfect place to take out a few of our contracts. *Pop*, *pop*, *pop,* all lined up. The only thing missing is a Tommy gun. It’s easy pickings and easy money.”

*“Wedding?”* The skin on my nape tightens, and I lose my focus for a second. The lack of concentration makes my head twitch to the side and yanks my vision off the scope I have directed at the plaza down below. I’m angling my head as if it can help me hear Snack better, even though the wireless earpiece is crammed straight into the drum.

His breathing goes quiet as if realizing he’s fucked up. “You don’t know?”

“I wouldn’t be asking if I did.”

“Wow, Raith. Here I thought you knew everything.” His laughter is deep, drummed up from his belly although he’s tall and lean; cut from a model-thin gauntness that works when he wants to disappear in a crowd. Nobody looks twice at pretty people when a crime’s committed.

“Tell me.” There’s murder in my voice, a death knell that is calling out Snack if he doesn’t stop. I have a deep dread curling in my gut over just *who* is getting married.

The months since I last saw *her* have dragged by. Each new dawn is another tally of my self-imposed suffering. I don’t know if I expected her to already be married by now, or if I’d hoped she’d found a way out.

She’s a caged bird who deserves to be free, and I’m the fucking coward too afraid to open the door for her. Because freedom means danger, and at least stuck where she is, she’s safe. I can’t guarantee that she’ll remain alive and well if I interfere, and a world without Valentina is a world I don’t want to live in.

I grit my teeth, controlling the emotions that are crowding in the back of my head. Some part of me that I’ve buried in deep bays at the cage’s bars, but I shush it with a mental smack.

Snack is quiet. Then his voice comes through my earpiece, his throat mic picking up a mere whisper. “Valentina di Maio is getting married three days before Valentine’s Day.”

I don’t know if it’s relief or anger that they are forcing her to get married so close to her birthday.

I swallow a hoarse sound and refuse to explore why my heart feels as if it’s cracking open. “I’m surprised it’s not on her birthday. “

“Yeah. I mean everyone knows her old man has a total obsession with Saint Valentine. For fuck’s sake he’s only known as a martyr. I guess he took it as a sign when she was born on the day, and since the Camorra and Cosa Nostra are being bound by blood now, he wants to give their wedding chances the best outcome. Maybe they are trying to her pregnant on the same day his favorite saint died since it’ll be in the middle of her honeymoon.”

The idea of her having Cesare’s baby makes me sick.

She’s supposed to have mine.

Violence stirs on the edges of my psyche, but I hold it down. Because while Valentina and I might have had a few moments, she’s not mine. She

can’t be mine, because I made a promise at my mother’s grave that I wouldn’t end up like my father, *the Phantom of Rhine.* A pathological serial killer who refuses to give up his actual number. He only gave up one of his burial spots for a cushier prison sentance. While I might have the same genetic predisposition for violence, I won’t be like him. I won’t do it for pleasure.

It's a job. That’s all, and Valentina isn’t part of it.

I push out an agitated breath.

Who she marries is none of my business. Valentina and I had a few serendipitous times when I wasn’t really *thinking* right and high on the post-kill adrenaline rush. She’s the only person who knows who I am, both as the wraith and my new name Raith. But she doesn’t know who I am in any way, shape, or form, other than a hitman who sometimes works for her father.

But that hasn’t stopped me from obsessing over her. The year since we met has been agonizing. Ever since we stepped out of our lives together and took a risky chance.

Her at getting caught with my tongue in her cunt.

Crying out as I bent her over.

Her trying not to cry in front of me when I walked away.

That was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, and it remains so because I keep wanting to go back and change it.

While physically I stay away, I haven’t. Not really. I’m obsessed. It’s not something I flaunt, but it’s also hard to conceal. Because I’m always running back to New York to check to make sure she’s safe. As if she wouldn’t be, surrounded by goombahs armed to the teeth with orders to shoot anyone stupid enough to give her a side-eye.

When I’ve watched her, it’s been from afar. I said goodbye but didn’t give up the apartment from where I spied on her.

I got caught by Snack during one of my trips because I’d been in too much of a rush to disable my tracker. He’s never said anything about Valentina to me, making it an unspoken agreement between us. He doesn’t ask me why I linger in the shadows in the mansion across from her father’s estate, watching a girl who is both too young and too innocent for me.

Snack’s voice is sober as rides the airwaves. “I thought you knew.”

*No, I didn't fucking know. If I had I wouldn't be over a thousand miles away while my girl's getting sold off.*

Adrenaline rushes through me, threatening to upset my shot. There's only a narrow window of time for when my target is going to be in view and vulnerable. But right now, with the slight shake in my hands, I don't trust that I won't fuck up the shot.

"Shit." I roll over onto my back, and force my eyes closed. Digging my palms into the sockets, I try to calm down. A sniper with the case of the shakes is a dead man. I know that and so does Snack.

"I shouldn't have said anything." Snack doesn't do guilt, but I think I catch a hint of the emotion in his tone. He's even stopped snacking, which is as close to serious as he ever gets.

"It's fine."

*It's not. It's never going to be fine because Valentina belongs with me. I've known that from the first moment our eyes met in that dingy little stairwell.*

Eventually, though, the meditation practices I learned over the years when caught in hairy, them-or-me deadly situations, push me away from the ledge of letting my overwrought, jittery adrenal system fuck up my mission. Soon, my heart rate slows, bringing my pulse down, and stopping the frenzied rushing of blood as it is pumped in heady, potent doses to my extremities.

I lay there in the dark, imagining I'm anywhere but here. This is the part that Snack doesn't understand. He's hundreds – or maybe thousands – of miles away, watching everything on the screen of a laptop or through the heads-up display fed into a pair of nondescript glasses. Snack could be anywhere, and that's how he likes it.

Me? I have to be right here in the thick of it, doing the wet work while he does the tech.

Murder for hire is high-tech. Especially when one works as a freelancer. Though I've had more than a few crime syndicates try and recruit me, I make more capitalizing on my particular skill set. This job, as many have been this year, is funded by the *Bratva*. War is, disgustingly, great for business. This contract is netting me high six-figures to put a bullet in the head of an ex-Russian spy who chose to sell nuclear secrets to Dubai.

Money makes people stupid. There is no way any of the NATO powers would allow a Middle Eastern country to turn into a nuclear power, and the Russian Oligarchs have ears everywhere. Including stowed in the scientific circle of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia who had floated the idea to the Crown Prince of Dubai in the first place.

With the ill-gotten money burning a hole in his bank account, the Russian ran to America, hoping to get lost in the masses and buy a new identity. That I'm on his tail means it didn't work, but he doesn't know it. Nor will he if I do my job successfully.

I need to push Valentina out of my thoughts. Easier said than done, but I manage by telling myself that I can't change her future. We had our time. Eventually, this connection which feels like a fishhook digging into my heart will go away.

Maybe, in the past few months, she's learned to be happy about the wedding. The last time I saw her, her father was teaching her how to be a good wife to Cesare. She'll finally get out from beneath her father's thumb. Isn't that what most girls want? A home of their own?

But is being beneath Cesare Palermo the better choice?

No, but it's not my business. Nothing to do with Valentina is my business anymore. I just have a stupid obsession with the girl because she looks as sweet and fresh and fucking innocent as a field of untouched wildflowers and tastes like honey and cream, and doesn't shy away from me when I show her the dark parts of who I am.

I roll back onto my stomach and readjust myself. Whenever I think about *those nights* and our forbidden touches, the blood rushes south and my cock reminisces about what could have been.

*Whenever we touched, she'd been dripping for me, and so hot and so fucking tight.*

I grit my teeth.

*Focus, man.*

Snack thankfully remains quiet as I get under control. Along with a million other things he's monitoring, my vitals are tracked. He knows I'm in a mood. He calls it the "Valentina Effect", when it looks like I'm about to have a stroke because my heart rate's up, my temperature is spiking, and my respiratory rate is nearly doubled.

When I’m once more under the glacier calm that I’m infamous for, he returns to talking about nothing. Thankfully, he stays away from any mention of the Italian Mafia, New York, and anything that has to do with Valentina.

Finally, thirty minutes later, Snack cuts off mid-sentence.

“Your target is about to pull up. He’s two blocks down, stopped at the intersection of W Adams and S State streets.”

There isn’t any anticipation or excitement as I watch a limo pull up in front of the luxury apartment building across the street. I feel nothing. Except for a mild ache in my hips and low-back from having laid on the floor for hours. Industrial carpeting isn’t known to be plush, and the floor is cement beneath it.

The apartment building is a behemoth, a glass spire that’s barely six years old that jabs toward the dark-clad sky overhead. Doing sniper missions at night isn’t my favorite, though I have quite a few night-vision optics to make it easy enough. But, considering how the building is lit up, you wouldn’t think it was evening.

The ten-story building is clad in all glass and chrome. Both aspects of its almost futuristic construction reflect the streetlights, flood lights, and ambient landscape halogens tucked in the hedges and trees that make the whole thing gleam as brightly as an electric blue, fluorescent needle in the night. The architect is apparently from Tokyo and brought his neon love affair to Windy City.

Very few things surprise me, and that a former Russian spy, who probably grew up in the poor areas outside of St. Petersburg, would choose such an opulent apartment for his new life doesn’t.

Pressing my dominant eye into the scope, I close the other and focus down on the car. When I took the contract, I’d studied everything about the man written in both his official and covert dossier. He’d been in his prime when the Soviet Union fell, and the KGB disappeared along with it. That didn’t mean that the spy programs quit. But neither was it the prestigious experience it had once been. Now it was all covert. Sergei Pavlov changed along with the game, but the wealth he expected to earn never materialized. Now at sixty-five, he’s retired on a military man’s pension. Which, being Russian, is enough cash to keep one fed *or* drunk on vodka. Never both.

Maybe I should feel bad for the old geezer. But that would require having a heart, and mine is long dead, and the scraps that remain belong to Valentina. She stole it and I never asked for it back.

When Sergei steps out of the back of the limo, his pay-by-the hour, uniformed driver stands politely at the open door. I don't know the chauffeur's name, but he's been paid enough money to turn a blind eye to what's about to happen. The Russians have men *everywhere*, and this chauffeur is more than meets the eye.

I don't hesitate. I sight in on Sergei's thin, wispy-white hair and pull the trigger. There are only a few blissful seconds after the pull and the .30 caliber bullet sings through the air. Then it finds its mark, punching a hole straight through the back of Sergei's head and getting lodged up in bone and brain matter. As far as assassinations go, it's clean and painless. Sergei never saw it coming, and it's what most of us in business can only hope for.

There won't be any screams, police, or an investigation. The chauffeur oversees clean-up. Already he's on the move. Sergei fell backward into the limo, and the man is already shoving him in by lifting his legs and rearranging the body.

Pulling the firing pin on the rifle, I simply get up and walk away. Nothing I leave behind can be traced to me. That's the beauty of illegal weaponry sold on the black market.

Three minutes later, exactly, I'm stepping out into the employee parking lot. The street lamps are off. There used to be a single safety light at night, positioned in the center of the lot to cast the widest illumination. But it was dismantled. Along with all the security cameras that run along this section of State Street. There are good things in everything being run by computers. The bad is that a hacker like Dagger can get in and dismantle it all without anyone being wiser. He has backdoors built into all sorts of places, and gave Snack a skelton key.

There's nobody to see me as I slip into a common four-door Ford sedan that was dropped off for me five-minutes ago.

Snack is already gone from his cubby hole, disappearing into smoke and mystery. Much as I do.

There's a reason I chose WR417H as my handle – because I am a wraith. A ghostly apparition that nobody believes exists. Because once a job is completed, I simply disappear.

Snack's *other* name is Quicksilver (QU1CK51LV3R) because he's just fucking gone in a flash of silvery-white hair and blue-gray eyes when he's done.

There's nothing supernatural about me. I just plan every job down to the finest detail. Few people know the name I go by or my true face.

I'm invisible, and that's just how I like it.

That I need to remain incognito doesn't stop me as I hop on I-294 and pause as I consider the choices laid out before me. The highway goes all over Chicago. It can take me north toward Wisconsin, west to link up with I-88 and Michigan, or I can ride it to the airport and stop pretending as if I didn't leave my heart in New York City. I could depart Chicago like I intended, by driving up to Woodstock, ditching the sedan, and crossing the state line before taking a flight out of Wisconsin.

Instead, I choose the path that's going to cause me the most grief. I turn left and head northwest to O'Hara airport, where a red-eye flight will take me to New York. Just in time to watch my girl get married to another man.

It's a stupid choice. A fool's errand. I've honed myself into a weapon. A cold, unfeeling machine without any entanglements, and zero vulnerabilities. I've seen what happens to other men, men better than me, who inadvertently show their weaknesses to men ruthless enough to take advantage of it. It ended up with a lot of dead innocents, and one dead mobster. Not by an assassin's bullet, but by the fact that he couldn't live without his family and chose to eat a bullet to join them.

But I'm an addict, high off the startling notion that I *feel* something. It's been an unsettling reality for the past year, whenever thoughts – memories - of Valentina would ambush me. Upsetting my equilibrium and leaving me feeling…*changed.* I've been numb for a decade. In this line of work, you need to be able to shut off emotions and empathy. I thought I was untouchable. Except all it took was a single look into a pair of rich, mocha-brown eyes, the sheen of tears, and a fading slap mark for me to realize how wrong I'd been.

That doesn't mean Valentina can be mine. That idea is laughable at best, and suicidal at worst. While I have the backing of the *Bratva* right now, my fealty is ever-changing, and they won't put their necks out to save me from myself. Especially if I go after a blood-relative of the *Camorra* Boss and the betrothed of the *Cosa Nostra* Don.

I know all of this. I know I’m breaking the promise I made to my mother. I’m about to start sliding down a slope that I hope doesn’t end in a pile of bones.

But I drive into long-term parking twenty minutes later. Leaving the keys in the ignition, I pull a Cub’s ball-cap low, shrug into a bulky sweatshirt that matches the kitschy logo, and stroll into the International Airport with a small carry-on bag so as not to raise suspicion, and the passport of one of my many identities in hand.

The flight is a little over two hours non-stop, and I use every second of it to try and convince myself that I’m only going there to *look*.

I’m not her knight.

I’m nobody’s savior.

But I *could* be.

# Chapter Twelve

## Valentina

"Valentina." Cesare's voice is a whiskey-coated drawl as he ambushes me outside of the downstairs powder room.

I freeze with one hand on the brass knob, trying to control the surge of panic that has my heart beating against my breastbone.

Tonight is our rehearsal dinner. Though the rehearsing part is over. Now, it's time for partying. My father has spent lavishly knowing that he'll soon have access to my inheritance. I can hear his voice booming in the ballroom, enhanced by the microphone and speakers that allow all the sycophants who've been invited to hang on to his every word. I'd thought to slip out for a moment. Just a second to catch my breath and try not to break down. The past week since we picked up my dress has been stifling and hard and downright torturous. I've been walking on eggshells for months now, and my entire body aches from trying to keep my toes on the safety line and not fall into oblivion.

Swallowing my nerves, I straighten and turn toward my betrothed. I'm too tired to force on a smile. I am drained of all self-preservation. Now I'm nothing more than a well-used marionette whose lines are finally breaking down so that she can't dance and smile and laugh on command.

"Cesare. Do you need to use the facilities?"

The dim light in the hallway does no favors for Cesare. The shadows make his sunken features look haggard. I hate to think about it, but I almost

prefer the Cesare of last year. Before he took to plastic surgery as if it were the second coming of Jesus.

He should have taken my father's advice and tried to erase time with a light hand. That's what many of the over-sixty movie stars do. When they become *men of a certain age*, they go in for refreshment beneath a surgeon's scalpel. However, not all plastic surgeons are created equal, and some might as well be using a hacksaw.

There's a certain point where a bit of a nip-and-tuck and the sprucing of one's face, can become dramatically too much. Cesare hit that point two surgeries ago when he decided to mess with his eyes. That always seems to be the case with men. For women, it's the nose and lips. Cesare had his doctors trim up his drooping under-eye area, and lift to the upper lids, and – as expected – has become a surprised caricature of himself.

That Cesare was never an attractive man, even in his youth, means that this current edition gives me a case of the *icks.* Because he's gone into uncanny valley territory, looking as if he's wearing a too-tight mask that makes his brown eyes bulge out, and his already receding hairline pulled back so far from its natural orientation that he has a serious case of a five-head. The face-lift is still healing, and I can see the scars behind his ears from where the surgeon stitched his skin together after nearly peeling it off.

I avoid looking at his eyes and instead focus on his over-plumped lips. I can't tell if it's swollen or if he went in for another syringe of hyaluronic lip filler, but it is wide and perturbing.

"No, I came out to see you." He steps closer, bringing more of his grotesque face into the light. His suit is expensive, even if the cut is baggy and old-fashioned. The lapels are dark and shiny. His paisley-patterned tie is wide and large, with an enormous Windsor knot that dates his whole ensemble.

Obviously, he hasn't had a modern woman's touch on his wardrobe in a long, long time. But not even the best tailor can hide the soft paunch that strains his dress shirt. In his prime years, he had been a burly, barrel-chested man. But all that width has fallen south and hangs over his belt as an apron of skin. It's not a *large* one, but his enjoyment of liquor and fatty foods has made it noticeable. Where I've been told to lose weight, Cesare has put it on.

“I don’t have my chaperones.” Being that I wanted time alone, I’d wiggled out from beneath the auntie's eyes. Since Raith, I’ve grown better at sneaking away from them. However, I haven’t used those free moments for lustful purposes like I did with him. I’m pretty sure he took my libido with him when he left the state. Because I haven’t had any carnal thoughts since.

Thinking about my blue-eyed assassin is emotionally difficult because it brings up the cauldron of memories and wants that still bubbles beneath my ribs. I’ve salted over the wound, buried it, but it’s like a fucking zombie. The hope that I’ll see him again claws out from the crypt and tries to latch on again.

Cesare’s smile stretches his mouth wider until he looks like the Joker minus the face paint. “I know.”

*This isn’t good.*

Dread percolates inside of me. I know that look because it’s the same one that Raith used to give me. Seeing it on Cesare’s face makes me want to die. I can’t fathom having this man touch me in the same way Raith did, and even more, like putting his dick in me.

My womb shrivels, and I swear my pussy leaps up to hide in my pelvis.

I shy away, but there’s nowhere to go. The bathroom door is a barrier behind me. Since it opens outward, and my back is pressed against it, it might as well be an unmovable wall. Cesare is standing in front of me, barring my return to the ballroom. The sprawling kitchen and servant’s quarter-turned guest rooms are dead ends at each part of this hallway. There is nowhere for me to go. Nor can anyone hear my scream, because just as Cesare’s hand snaps out and coils painfully around my wrist, the live DJ kicks up the music. The bass is a steady *thump, thump, thump* that vibrates the foundation of the mansion, its frenzied cadence something I can feel in my chest, threatening to crack my ribcage wide open.

Cesare uses that distraction to close in around me. He crushes me with his girth, threatening to smother me as he grinds against me. That I’m as trapped as any damsel by his considerable bulk lets his hands-free to roam. The one on my wrist loosens, and his lecherous fingers stroke the shape of me before finding purchase on my hips. His hands are clammy, I can feel them wet and fleshy through the soft, flowing gauze of my pink polka-dotted dress.

“Nobody will mind if you give your husband a kiss.” He puckers his lips. They are so large and blubbery that it gives him a case of trout lips.

“You’re not my husband.” I recoil, just the idea that I’m going to have to be intimate and share a martial bed with him is enough to shatter my resolve to *grin and bear it.* Now, there’s just terror behind, bubbling up in my throat like a keening animal sound.

I know what pleasure is now, and in a way, it’s made my life better – and worse. Because this wedding is a horror show. There won’t be any of that liquid, addicting heat I feel about Raith.

Cesare’s fingers tighten, and what was only a restraining grip turns painful. His eyes are beady and cruel as he looks down at me. “You will be tomorrow. Then I can do *anything* to you because you’ll be mine.”

I don’t get a chance to respond as he crashes his face down on mine.

Squeaking, I push against him, needing to get away from him, needing to find fresh air that isn’t his alcohol-soaked break. But my flailing is ineffective. He has at least a hundred pounds on me. There’s a boxer’s physique underneath the layer of pudge. He’s surprisingly muscled if you can get through the visceral fat that saturates his internal organs. His abdominal obesity is a sure sign he’s going to go to an early grave, either from fatty liver disease, a heart attack, or even cirrhosis of the liver from the alcohol on his breath. Mafia men are heavy drinkers. At least my father is like he’s trying to drown his memories and sins at the bottom of a whiskey bottle. Though recently, he’s been refraining and switched to red wine. Where my dad is lean for his age, Cesare isn’t. He’ll be lucky to live another ten years. But that won’t matter because I’ll be dead. I’d rather die than continue to live like *this.*

“No!” I twist my head, avoiding his moist lips.

“I like it when you struggle.” He lewdly grinds himself against me, and I can feel the truth there. It horrifies me, and I am two seconds away from having a panic attack or breaking down sobbing. The terror makes me freeze, which he takes full advantage of. If this is what being with another man is all about, the crushing weight squeezing my lungs until I can only sip meager snippets of precious, live-giving air, I don’t want anything to do with it.

I only want Raith.

Cesare slams his mouth onto mine, hard enough that it crushes my clasped lips up against my teeth. He grunts in frustration when I don't open them for the riposte of his slug-like tongue. But before he can assault me further, I hear an agitated sound and an aggressive throat clear.

Cesare pushes me away as if I've scalded him. I stagger. My hip painfully bangs against the ornamental doorknob, hard enough I'll probably have a bruise there. One more added to the twinset that Cesare left behind from earlier. When he reminded me with his bone-crushing fingers that I would say yes tomorrow.

Catching myself with a shaky hand on the doorjamb, I look up and see that I've been saved by the Aunties. Relief swiftly rolls through me. For now, for this one last night, I'll remain unmolested. It's a fleeting, infinitesimal reprieve, but I'll take it. I've never been so relieved by the sight of them.

"Come here, *nipote*." Aunt Giulia beckons me to her, while Aunt Sara focuses her laser-beam death glare at Cesare.

He at least has the wherewithal to look flustered at being caught. He knows he's not supposed to be alone with me before we've exchanged our vows, and the paperwork is all signed. And he's especially not meant to put his hands on me.

"Why don't you take Val up to her room, I'd like to have a moment with Mr. Palermo." In my experience, there's nothing worse than Aunt Sara's tongue thrashing. It's no less than what Cesare deserves. If I had my way, I'd cut off his hands and tongue and every part of his body that touched mine without my consent.

I don't need to be told twice. Gripping Aunt Giulia's hand, I flee to the safety of my bedroom. Only when I'm ensconced behind my shut, locked, *and* guarded door, do I let my fright return. I sink onto the end of my bed, trembling and shivering as if I've been caught up in a blizzard.

I am both all out of tears and an unending font of them. Pressing my fingers to my eyelids, I suck in deep breaths.

"That man." The derision and disgust in my aunt's voice are as close to support as I'll ever get from her. She's too indoctrinated in the old ways to question a *man*, especially a made one. It's why she does my father's bidding, more than she does her husband's. She's done her duty by giving Uncle Elio his heirs. And she's reached that point in her life where her

fertility is at an end. In the eyes of the *Camorra*, she's free to do what she wants. It's a shame that freedom comes now when she's pushing past fifty.

This is my future, and I hate every part of it.

Tears slip free from my flooded eyes. I'm overwhelmed and can only lean forward into my palms, digging them into my eyes despite the mascara that coats my lashes.

"Did he hurt you?"

Aunt Giulia hovers over me. There's nothing she can do or say that will extinguish this agony. We're both trapped in our roles. I am the sweet lamb to be sacrificed for the greater good, and she's the minder to make sure I'm fattened up, sweet, and *obedient* for my future owner.

I wonder if she'll miss me should my father go through with his threats. Once he doesn't need me anymore, I'll just be a roadblock.

I should be sweet to Cesare because he might be the only one to keep me from my father's promises. I know that, but I just can't. I physically can't.

I wipe my runny nose on the back of my hand. "No, you came before anything more happened."

"I can't believe his audacity to accost you on the night before your wedding and in your father's house. I should tell your Papa." Agitation sends my aunt pacing across the width of my bedroom. Her heels click sharply on the hardwood, then become softer when she reaches the carpet, creating a lopsided cadence of *clicks* and *clomps.*

"Do you really think he'll care?" The words are quiet, but my tone is as bitter and acrid as wormwood. She might know *all* the details, but she's been turning a blind eye to what Enzo has been putting me through for months now. A little bit of me hates her too.

Aunt Giulia stops cold as if my question has become a physical barrier that she can't push beyond. She opens her mouth, about to debunk my jaded question. But there's nothing to rebuke. My father *doesn't* care. Everything he wants for his legacy is right at his fingertips. He will finally get what my mother's family denied him.

Finally, she sighs and lets the tense silence linger in the air. "I think you should stay in your room for the rest of the evening."

*Yeah, that's a great idea.*

I nod, and keep my eyes lowered as she gives me one last look, and departs. Through the door, I hear her voice as she speaks to the guards who will be on duty for the rest of the night. Their role is simple. They are here to deter my lecherous bridegroom or anyone else who might want to see this union thrown off the rails by despoiling the bride.

If only it were that simple. I don't think a bit of deflowering will stop Cesare from taking what he's owed.

With everyone gone, I'm alone with my dark, dark thoughts. They have grown in ever-increasing numbers. Every day is a constant battle to put one foot in front of the other, to find an iota of joy in a dismal life, and gray, and bleached of anything remotely interesting.

If my father cared, he probably would have sent a doctor. Because I know I have the classic signs of depression. Who wouldn't in this situation? But there's no magic pill to fix what Cesare, Enzo, and even Raith broke.

I'm getting married. Not in some future scenario years away, but in eighteen hours. By this time tomorrow, I'll be *Mrs. Cesare Palermo.* Tomorrow will be a frenzy of last-minute activities, as everyone from the caterers to the florists, both aunts, and my wedding planners put the finishing touches on everything. There will even be a notice in the society papers, to be sent back to Naples to show all the far-removed families that the American line is thriving.

While the service will held be at St. Mark's Cathedral in the AM with all the circus-like pomp and circumstance that a highly religious, Catholic wedding requires. The reception will take place here. Because when you bring together some of the most influential criminals from all over the country, and Italy, you want to control as much as possible. Security on the estate has been beefed up. I don't recognize the men who march past my window every thirty minutes. But I do recognize the assault weapons they carry, and the vigilant, flinty-eyed expression as they patrol.

Abruptly, I stand up from my bed and move to the double French doors which overlook the immaculate yard outside. During the blooming months, the entire area is flush with greenery, from a riot of fat, sun-dappled maple leaves, to an abundance of flowers and bushy, bee-attracting shrubs. Spring hasn't arrived yet. There's no new growth on the barren trees, and the gardens look like blighted patches of gray soil. Winter is still breathing over

the north, leaving the ground frozen with only the merest whisper of a thaw right around the corner.

Right now, only the much thinner pine trees are offering a shield. While the skeletal branches of the trees make the natural woodland around the property look depressing and fragile. I feel kinship with this forsaken landscape because I fear that I will never feel warmth again. Inside, there is a numbing, icy slide as if a glacier has fallen off the arctic shelf and found a new home in my body. The cold has grown daily, ever since I watched Raith walk away.

I press my hands against the curling handles of the French doors and step out into the bitter February cold. The house is hot and stifling, filled with the sounds of laughter as my guests indulge in the champagne, wine, and imported liquors my father has brought in for them all. Then there's the drugs, which flow like water because he controls the influx into the state. It is, in Mafioso circles, the party of the year.

Cold iron chills my flesh as I curl my fingers around the balcony's railing. I look down at the gloom-darkened backyard and the two-tone flagstone that makes up the patio.

*Will I break my neck if I jump over it?*

I have stayed here many nights, just like this, and considered the possibilities. The answer is always the same: probably not. I would more than likely sprain an ankle or snap a leg. Even if I managed to land like a cat, I wouldn't get far. There are at least five men stationed in the backyard. I can see the occasional flicker of a flashlight as they sweep the light into the deeper parts of the gloom. The beady-red eyes of their mobile devices they have clipped to their tactical belts glare out from the night, daring me to make a run for it. All it'll take is a single call for help, and every bodyguard in the area will be on me.

There's no escape. This is my destiny. Tomorrow I will marry Cesare.

Or I will die.

Every day after that will be a gift from my father. If I'm obedient, he might let me see twenty-four.

The tears don't surprise me. Over the past year, I've cried an *ocean* of them. When I'm not sobbing, I'm thinking about *him.* The phantom who made me feel like a woman and stole my heart in the process.

Is it stupid to fall in love at first glance? Though Raith and I shared more than a glance.

First kiss? First lick? The first time I felt a man's cock. The list goes on and on. Because I am head-over-heels from the memory, and I wish every night on the stars that he'll return and save me from this life.

He won't. He told me in so many words, and more unspoken, that I'll never see him again. As it did the first night, it crushes me in indescribable ways. The weight of the disappointment, and my terror for the future, threatens to suffocate me daily. The desperation at trying to figure out how to escape when every move is constantly watched and monitored clings onto me desperately. I have no money, no friends, and the only family I can contact is broken more than I am.

This is why I'm not altogether surprised at the thought which drifts up from the void. Because it's been there for a while, knocking on the shuttered door kept closed by concerns for my eternal soul.

*I should take matters into my own hands.*

*There,* the void breathes. *There*. That is your solution.

I close my eyes and stick a toe in the pool of despair.

If my choices are a fate worse than death *or* death, why don't I do it my way? My father has already promised to see me buried after he gets his hand on my money. If I die *now* before the wedding, he'll never see a penny of it.

It is both the simplest and hardest solution for my problem.

I've never been one to give into black thoughts. I've always had a sunny disposition. I don't recognize this person that I'm becoming or the idea that's hatching from some alien egg in the back of my brain. Yet I can't deny that it has some merit. I don't want to live like this, always wondering if *today* is the day I die, or if *today* will be another day where Cesare wants me in this bed.

The void whispers to me and I look up, considering the angle of the roof. It would be incredibly easy to climb up a few feet higher. That's all it would take. I'm too much of a coward to slit my wrists because it'll hurt, and I have endured enough pain beneath my father's hands to know I don't enjoy it. I might be able to get into the vault and get a gun, and I don't have any pills stronger than aspirin. Hanging would probably make me feel every inch of suffering.

But jumping to my death? That appeals to me. It makes my breath quiver in my lungs, and a surge of hope reignites in my chest. That it's thoughts of *unaliving* myself that stir me reveals how badly things are going. How desperate I am to escape from this grotesquerie of an arranged marriage.

I yearn to simply escape it all. If I had a single wish to give to the universe, it would be to allow me to grow wings and fly away from this life. But there's no genie and no magic that can grant me that because I spent it on Raith. Meeting him. Falling in love with him. Knowing the taste of pleasure.

Instead, I can do this. Fly free for a few seconds, before embracing *nothing.*

*Even if means condemning my soul to an eternity of fire and brimstone.*

My hands shake as I angle my body against the railing. From this vantage point, I can see the way to scurry up high enough. In the dark, the guards might see me. But they won't be able to stop me before I jump.

Nervously, I look down at the frozen ground and the swathe of stonework that would be my landing spot. Then I look up again, holding onto the night sky and the twinkle of muted stars that struggle to outshine all the landscape and party lights that have lit up my father's estate like a football stadium during a big game.

Hesitantly, I boost myself on the metal and swing my leg over until I'm straddling it. Freedom on my terms is right there if I can be brave enough – and selfish enough – to take it.

*I can do this.*

*This is the only way.*

*All I want is to be free.*

I stretch my arms out, and for a moment I imagine I'm a bird soaring higher, and higher, and higher.

All I need to do is let go when I reach the apex.

# Chapter Thirteen

## Raith

Setting up my spy room takes only a few minutes once I land in New York and drive into Little Italy in a rented vehicle.

The cameras I have set up all around Valentina's neighborhood run constantly, as do the traffic cameras I've tapped into. When I'm not nearby, the videos are fed to my phone.

There's not much that I can see during the ride back to my high-rise apartment, since I'm driving and thinking about Valentina distracts me. All I need now is to drive nose-first into another car or bridge strut. What I do know from the few snippets I've watched is that Enzo is throwing a massive party in celebration of his only daughter's marriage. Though that's ingenious. He's congratulating himself for solidifying his hold on the families. I recognize quite a few of the faces that my cameras catch. It's a who's-who of mobster society.

Snack had been right. If I'd wanted to take on extra contracts, this whole affair would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

But it's not my future victims that I'm searching for. I only want to see my girl, but she's not in any of the cameras. There are near misses, where I see a swish of her long wavy hair, or a shot of her profile as she drifts through the throngs of people.

Finally, I catch a full-view of Valentina's face, the camera capturing her in filmy color, and washing out the burnished shade of her skin, but her

heart-shaped face and smoky eyes are unmistakable.

The tension of the past week shifts away. I'm left breathing a hair easier as I lean back in my chair.

*She's not gone yet.*

*I never should have let her go.*

One might think she looks like an angel with her rather girlish-looking dress with its large pink splotches and chiffon overlay that hides much of her light brown flesh. In my opinion, her allure is too earthy for such religious connotations. Her curves are ripe and lush, offset by the hint of innocence which clings to her. As she grows older, that ingénue appeal is going to evolve into a sultry allure that will have men tripping over their tongues.

Valentina is ready to be plucked. I know this on a personal level. The taste of her still haunts me and wakes me from white-hot dreams rock-hard and desperate to sneak over and climb into her window. I'm no Romeo, and she's far too bewitching to be a silly little Juliet.

That she's blooming into her sex appeal is probably why her wedding is happening *now.* Before anyone gets the bright idea to snatch her away from the *Camorra.* Alliances in the mafia are strongest when formed by blood. This is why women are both highly prized and sought out with nefarious ploys and snatched boldly off the streets. They are both the futures of a mobster bloodline and their weaknesses, and the protection of Mafia women is second to none.

Or it *should* be.

I narrow my eyes as the movements of her supposed bodyguards and Enzo's security trigger my attention.

Through the various camera views, I have a raptor's eye window into the house and its grounds. The screens shimmer and flick as they rotate through the camera feeds, letting me watch the shenanigans unfold as if I were on the ground floor, mingling amid the organized crime elite.

Right before midnight, Enzo reveals he has more money than sense. A dazzling display of fireworks brightens the night sky. Streaks of igneous silver, diamond-bright whites, sparkly golds, and hot reds paint the firmament in a brief, loud cacophony that teeters on the cutoff of what the local municipality will allow for this type of extravagance. If anyone had gotten a copy of an itinerary, that moment would be perfect for

assassination. The pops, sizzles, and crackles would hide even the loudest gunshot.

I'm almost disappointed that nobody took the bait. There are at least six open contracts roaming around the estate, sipping expensive bubbly, eating caviar on crackers, and picking at canapes.

Alas, that's what makes me better than your average hitman. I see these things and scheme.

After the fireworks, the party moves indoors, leaving me to watch the guard's rotation as they navigate the property.

Whoever leads Enzo's security deserves to be fired. Does he not realize how precious Valentina is? All it takes is one person with spiteful thoughts to take her away from him.

*This is why she belongs with me.*

I know her worth, and I would never let any of my security hires forget who they work for and *why.*

Annoyance stews in my gut as I track the men. It takes me less than an hour to learn that they are walking the same pattern, at the same time, as if they have an alarm set on their mobile devices for every fifteen minutes.

Two of them deserve to be shot as they meet beneath a gnarled maple tree in the back corner of the yard and share a cigarette for five minutes. Then they break, acting as if they walked the whole property line, and return to their posts at opposite ends of the acreage. It's so half-assed that it makes me itch to go over and see how far I could get inside before getting caught.

Sighing at my wayward thoughts, I focus on the small square screens which are arranged in a quadrant on my multi-monitor display. The party isn't winding down, but the guards have grown laxer. If that's possible.

I grunt, and settle in to keep watch, when the camera feed directed at Valentina's bedroom window picks up a scene that makes my blood freeze in my veins. I nearly crack the keyboard as I tap a few keys and bring up a full-sized video.

I've seen Valentina in almost every mood. Her default one is a mixture of sweet and sassy with an overall sunny disposition despite being a veritable prisoner in her gilded tower.

At least, she had been. I shoulder the blame for the changes that I've watched overcome my girl.

Over the past few months, she's grown darker. Her smiles and laughter were infrequent during the summer, then they stopped altogether as the holidays marched on. Then came the tears, and the touch of hopelessness that stole the smile from her lips.

The last time I remember seeing her happy had been when I saw her at *Dolce Vita* and did the stupid fucking thing of walking away from her.

I don't know if I believed she would get over it, but seeing the changes in her has been making me crazy. The last couple of months have been the worst. Before, she always seemed to bounce back out of her black moods.

In all the times I've watched her and obsessed, she's never looked like this - tear-stained and *desperate*. My heart is in my throat, a lump of calcified stone that's begun losing its marble-hard coating and turning into a organ again. It throbs with shared pain as I focus on Valentina's face. Being the master of body language, I can practically read her thoughts in the listless line of her body, and how she angles herself atop the railing to look up at the roof.

Then, she looks down to the ground as if running mental calculations of the distance.

"Oh fuck no."

Abruptly, I push away from the desk with a creak of chair springs. My heart is thudding like a jackhammer against my ribcage. I'm so worked up, that it's threatening to burst straight through my sternum as an unrecognizable emotion wraps me in a chokehold. As I pace, I start to piece together this locomotive of heart palpitations and shudders that has me wanting to hurdle the ten-foot-high walls around Valentina's house and steal her away.

Panic.

Fear.

I'm being mobbed by emotions I learned how to defuse years ago. I can't stifle the anxiety as it churns in my gut. I'm not afraid for myself. Or even worried that harm is going to come for me. I'm freaking out over Valentina, and what has pushed her to want to leap off the roof of her house.

I keep watching as Valentina straddles the railing. For a moment she wobbles, and I nearly drop to my knees in front of the screen.

"Don't do it, sweetheart. Fuck. Please don't do it."

How stupid am I? I told her that I can't help her, because of my fucked-up vow and not wanting to turn out like my father. That is my biggest fear. That I'll stray off my established path and find a high in the actual *killing* and not the money that comes from a job well done. I am an apple that did not fall far from the murderer's tree.

Now, I realize that if it's my sanity versus Valentina's life, I'll take the whole underworld on. I don't *want* to live in a world that she's not in. If she jumps, I'll go over, murder every mobster in that gaudy ass mansion, and then blow us all up to kingdom come.

I don't want her to die, though. There's nothing I can do to stop it, though. I'm too far away. I know this. I can't make it from my apartment two blocks over, across the street, and past the lazy motherfuckers who are supposed to be protecting her in enough time to save her.

I'm helpless to do anything but watch as grapples with her choice. She is on a precarious perch as if deciding whether it's worth remaining in the world that has smothered her light.

It is the worst feeling in the world to be rendered utterly powerless.

I hold my breath as Valentina sits atop her iron horse, her head tilted back. A brief wind lifts her elegantly styled curls, making them flutter behind her. At this angle, I can't see her sherry-hued eyes. Are they open as she contemplates the world around her? Is she drinking in her last moments before she finishes her plan, or are they closed as she builds up the courage to take the final step?

It's agony, and I'd gladly rip my heart out of my chest to stop feeling this horrible emotion. In a way, I hate her for turning me into this person. She has made me weak.

It's never been a word I associated myself with. Because I push myself daily to be at the top of my game; physically powerful, mentally sharp, cunning, swift. It's all been stripped away by a girl who rules my very life from afar. Bitterness coalesces in the back of my throat that I have let things get this far. I never should have come back. I should have stayed away.

*Should have. Could have. Would have.* There was never any chance for me, not after I touched her for the first time. The quagmire of emotions batter me in grief-topped waves, locking into hers, preparing myself to join her in whatever fate she chooses.

Lightly, I trace the shape of her profile where it’s captured on the screen. “Don’t do it, little dove. There’s at least one person out here who cares whether you live or die.”

# Chapter Fourteen

## Valentina

The smoke from the fireworks has cleared, but the sky is still hidden behind the orange haze of light pollution. Living in the city makes star-gazing impossible, and it makes me wish to be anywhere but here.

I don't know how long I sit atop the railing, caught in a half-life of indecision and despair. My thoughts ebb and flow. So too do my emotions, bobbing my ideation along. At some moments, I think I should continue climbing to the rooftop. At least there, I will have a brief taste of freedom. Of dictating the path of my life without threats and the noose of expectations my father has wrapped around me.

At other moments, I'm not ready to leave this world. I've barely had a chance to live, and it would really be a shame to die a virgin and never have experienced more than the intense pleasure of my mystery man, and the kiss that Cesare stole. Calloused men like my father and Cesare have controlled so much of my life, that I feel stunted. As if my trajectory sputtered out somewhere in my teenage years. It's hard to *live* when every move you make is watched.

Finally, the cold February air penetrates the bubble of grief and despair that numbs me. The desire to be free remains. But I know, suicide isn't the answer. It's a permanent fix for a problem that has an actionable solution.

The void stares at me, and I stare back, looking into the heart of darkness and understanding what I need to do. Either I die, or they will die.

I need to kill Cesare and my father.

I stare into the darkness that stains my soul with eyes wide open. The intrusive thoughts fade away, leaving a cold conviction coating their tracks in rime; ice is all that is left in the aftermath of their invasion. This is the person that they have carved out of the softness of youth. I embrace the abhorrence of it, acknowledging that I will do *anything* to make my time with Cesare relatively short and take my revenge on my father for breaking me like this.

The only problem is, I just need to think about what to do, that isn't me murdering my husband on our wedding night. That would bring the entire *Cosa Nostra* down on my head, and probably the families too. I don't plan on this being a suicide mission. After everything is said and done, I will live on my own terms, by my own rules. It isn't Cesare who keeps threatening me with beatings and bullets. Perhaps I can entrap my father if I take out Cesare.

Regardless of how, if I'm going to get rid of Cesare and survive my father, I need to be crafty.

I need time. The only way I can get it is to buy it with my body and a wedding I don't want to participate in. If getting married is a means to an end, the key with which to pick the lock of my cage? Fine. I'll suffer it. I'll pay that cost to secure my future.

It's amazing how thoughts of homicide can perk a girl up. I almost feel cheerful, more like my old self. Cesare may think he's getting the world when marrying me, but the reality is going to be his worst nightmare.

Then there's what I will do to my father. I thirst for vengeance, and I will have it too. One way or another.

Reluctantly, but with a plan in mind to get myself through the next few days, I swing my leg back over the balcony. My inner thighs are freezing from where they gripped the barrier. Turning to give one last look at my childhood home, I close my eyes and throw a birthday wish out into the ether. I'm still a few days early, but who says wishes need to be made on the actual day? There are no candles to carry it. No smoke to waft my words to the universe. But it's in my heart, a burning ember that scorches with its single word.

*I want to be free.*

I hear the old grandfather clock down in my father's study ding, signaling the new day. It's officially my wedding day.

I blink away the tears, wobbling slightly because I'm half blind by the salty deluge. But I orient myself and return to the warmth and light of my bedroom. I'm colder than I expected because the normal temperature sends pins-and-needles jabbing into my fingers and feet like a devil's pitchfork.

Shivering, I strip out of my rehearsal dress, wash my face of the fine coating of cosmetics, and relentlessly brush my teeth. As if I can scrub away the lingering taste of my *fiancée*. Then I bundle myself in a matching flannel set that has a black-and-red plaid heart embroidered on a gray background. It's cozy and loose and probably the last time I'll get to wear such concealing items to bed.

I studiously refuse to think of the virginal-white negligee that's packed in my honeymoon vassal.

Ugh. I can still feel the weight of Cesare, and it makes me curl up in a little ball in the center of my bed. I tuck my knees to my chest and bury my face in a goose-down pillow. There is this childish want for my mother. To feel a soft, loving hand on my brow, and someone to tell me it'll be okay. I have none of that. I'm not an orphan because I'm surrounded by family members, but I feel so alone.

I want Raith, but I can't have him.

Instead, I crawl under the blankets and wrap myself around a pillow.

While I don't think I'd be able to sleep since I'm not physically tired, my mind is exhausted. I barely ruminate on how I'm going to survive my wedding night before I pass out. Maybe it's my brain's way of saving me from torturing myself. But I escape from the hard, ugly truths of my life, and into slumber.

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Morning comes too soon. There's no relief from the relentless battering in my skull which pings into life as soon as the neurons crackle into awareness.

*I'm getting married.*

*Cesare Palermo is going to be my husband.*

The Aunties find me fifteen minutes later, sitting in front of my vanity, as obedient a doll that they wish me to be.

“Good, your eyes aren’t puffy.” Aunt Sara is all business as she stalks into my bedroom wearing a velvety black robe and matching lounge pants with her hair wrapped in a silk bonnet. She’s ready for her makeover by the army of beauticians that will be descending this morning.

I stare blankly at her in the mirror. It’s too hard to drum up the strength to pretend to be anything other than morose. So, I don’t. Let them see what they’ve had a hand in doing.

“The hair people will be here in fifteen minutes,” Aunt Giulia says. Her hair is much shorter than Sara’s, and she’s already tucked and curled it into hot rollers.

“Did you get any sleep?” Aunt Sara talks right over her.

She is trying to be cheerful and upbeat as she carries in an extra cup of coffee, brimming hot and sweetened just right in my favorite teacup. I know it’s childish, but it looks like Chip from Beauty & the Beast. While I’ve never *been* to Walt Disney World, or anywhere really that isn’t Italy because of the exposure and danger to my life, I’ve always wanted to go. Because it’s someplace different and a place that sells innocent fantasies and childhood dreams.

“Yes. Last night was…trying.” Cradling the cartoon-painted mug, I inhale the steam and take a tentative sip.

Aunt Giulia clears her throat, and in the mirror, I see the sisters share a look as if they are having a whole conversation with their eyes. They’re not twins, there are five years between the two of them, but they might as well be.

When growing up, they only had each other, as all the attention and interest went to my father to make him a proper mobster. I’ve never seen closer siblings. It’s why I wish I had my own. Maybe they’d have been a buffer between me and my father.

Whatever news they want to share, they’ve decided that it’s Giulia who’s going to break it to me.

*This is going to be good.*

I internally brace for whatever good-morning bomb they want to drop on me. Blandly I sip my coffee as I wait for the morning’s buzz of activity to begin.

Aunt Giulia is blushing to the roots of her hair as she nervously wrings her hands. “We’ve been a bit remiss in your education. Do you, um, do you know what’s going to happen when you consummate your marriage with Don Palermo?”

I close my eyes and pinch my arm because there is *no way* this conversation is happening.

Aunt Sara swats at my hand. “Stop that! You need to know this.”

“Oh my God,” I cuss and earn another smack. This time from Giulia for taking the lord’s name in vain. “Do you think I need to have a bird and the bees talk? I’m twenty-two years old, and this isn’t the year 1424, but 2024.”

Yes, I’m sheltered. Yes, they have been my chaperones since I hit puberty. But there are just some things that curiosity demands one learns, and I did. In high-definition and in just about every conceivable position.

Then there is my incubus who taught me a whole lot more, especially how good a tongue feels *right there*, how slippery wet cum is, and how sex can feel like a bomb has gone off inside of you and forever warp the pieces.

I can’t tell the Aunties that, or even hint that I have experience that isn’t educational. Because then they would be forced to tell my father, and he’d kill me sooner rather than later.

God, I am entirely too blasé about the executioner’s axe at my throat.

Aunt Giulia’s eyes grow wide with shock. I don’t know how she’s managed to maintain her wide-eyed naivety at her age. It can be rather endearing at times.

Right now, is not one of them.

“How would you know about…” She presses her fingers against her bare throat, likely seeking the pearl necklace she wears. But she’s still in her pajamas, and her fingers come up empty. Instead, she nervously strokes at her collar bones, mustering up her courage as she whispers the most scandalous word in existence. At least in her mind. “Sex.”

*Jesus Christ*. Aunt Giulia needs to get laid. Badly. Which is a sad thought to have considering she’s married with two teenagers of her own. Maybe it isn’t sex she needs, perse, but a good orgasm and a lover who knows what they’re doing.

*I will not think of HIM*.

Neither of my uncles fit into that category. They’re gangsters, and it seems like a bulk of them have Madonna complexes. They enjoy their

whores and prostitutes, but their wives are meant to only be receptacles to carry life. Not to experience pleasure or do anything but lay there like a dead fish as they grunt overtop them.

I twist in my chair and grab her hand. She blinks down at me, and I know that I'm going to scandalize her with my confession. But she needs to step into the real world.

"Like any normal person. From the internet."

Aunt Giulia squeals and whips back toward the bed, where she flops on the unmade sheets. She snatches a decorative pillow stacked on the soft cream-colored bench perched at the end of my king-size and covers her face with it.

I still hear her shriek through the stuffing. "You've watched pornography?!"

"Of course, I have." I'm going to miss how easy it is to provoke her. There's a devil on my shoulder who has mugged its angelic counterpart and is urging me to scandalize the Aunties more. "Are you saying you haven't?"

Aunt Giulia lifts the pillow and looks at me. As if I'm a changeling and not the niece she's reared for the past sixteen years. She looks as if is about to have an aneurysm. Her eyes are wide. Her color is high.

Aunt Sara shakes her head and settles down beside her sister. She steps into the protective role, and a pang of sorrow taps on my chest. There's always been a distance between us because I'm not her daughter and she can't stop my father from doing what he wants with me. "Stop tormenting your aunt, *cara."*

I relent, even as I hide the wicked smile that bewitches the edges of my lips. The odd disassociation from earlier fades and I'm more myself as the vendetta I nurture settles into me. It adjusts, stretches, and gets comfortable so that I feel at home in my skin again.

The Aunties would be outraged that I'm secretly plotting a murder and finding it not to be that big of a deal. Does that make me a psychopath like Enzo? I've been surrounded by it all my life. Why shouldn't I have the nerve to take a life, when my father and his goons do it so easily?

"Why not? It's so much fun to tease her."

"You are a cruel, cruel child." Aunt Giulia twitches her nose at me, but her voice lacks any heat or true upset over my gentle ribbing.

A sudden swell of emotion carries me out of my seat, and toward the Aunties. I wonder if this feeling is a part of growing up because I see them for who they are. I understand their life.

Today, I feel a deep kindred connection to the pair of them, and I realize how I've taken them for granted. I've never considered what they've gone through in their own lives, or what they've had to sacrifice, or how loving they've both been in their own ways as they've raised me. They weren't the perfect interim parents, but they did their best, and I felt their love. Which is more than I can say for the cold disdain and distance that I always received from my father, and the gaping hole where my mother's light should have been.

I surprise them as I wiggle between them, making myself a Valentina sandwich, like I used to do before I became a tween too cool for public displays of affection from my family.

"I appreciate you both. You have been the okayest mothers, and I love you." I hadn't meant to cry, but my throat tightens, and tears well in my eyes. I'm not a pretty crier, and I'm going to make a mess of the blank canvas, to the point the make-up artist is going to have to repair my blotchiness before painting me into Mafioso Royalty.

"No, don't cry or we'll have to do an eye treatment!" Aunt Sara flaps her hands ineffectively in front of my face as if she can dry up the threatening tears with the rustling air.

"Oh, Val." Aunt Giulia is a marshmallow as she wraps me in a tight hug. I tuck my head on her shoulder, inhaling the subtle scent of her powdered skin and the astringent products she has in her hair, while Aunt Sara rubs a soothing hand down my back.

"I know that this isn't what you want, but you'll get through this and thrive, darling. You're a di Maio, after all."

I wish I could believe her. Instead, there is a portly blockade that stands between me and the world at large. All I see is the end of my short, sheltered life, and a future I can't stomach reaching out its liver-spotted hands like an evil sorcerer who wants to steal my youth for his own.

There is not a single villain in my fairytale, but two. But I won't be the weak princess in the tower anymore. I'll become the dragon.

They die, or I do. That's how *this* fable goes.

# Chapter Fifteen

## Valentina

The morning flies by, the time is eaten up by the enormous effort and army of people that deal with our hair and makeup.

A fleet of photographers and videographers are roaming around the mansion. Two of them are in my room, while the rest are spread throughout the estate, cataloging every detail for the eventual wedding video. I keep my game-face on, a sophisticated mask that doesn't let any emotion leak through. Because if I even look upset, my father will see it and there will likely be hell to pay.

"Are you sure you don't want to do a few boudoir photographs for your husband?"

This woman is about to get garroted if she keeps needling me about the *pre-dress* photographs. As if I want Cesare to have photographs of me in the silky white-satin-and-lace wedding set that I'm wearing beneath my gown. I'm still blushing that the Aunties brought it out for me, along with a matching albeit short robe, with a comment that it's a *gift from your betrothed.*

*Kill me right now.*

"No," I say with a tick to my jaw.

"Valentina isn't that type of girl." Aunt Giulia's uptight mindset saves me from adding another name to my murder list.

The photographer sighs, and I feel her look at me with envy. I mean, I get it. The lingerie set looks amazing against my dusky skin. The bra is delicate and lacy, defying the heavy-duty underwire that's keeping my breasts perfectly lifted. The panties are cut generously around my hips. There's even a garter belt and gold-tipped clips to hold up the gossamer thigh-high stockings. If it were anyone else *but* Cesare, I would give her the go-ahead.

"Okay. You just look…" She waves her hand at me, and I acknowledge it.

*I look hot. But fuck Cesare Palermo. He's not going to get wank photos of this.*

The only man I want to see me like this is a zillion miles away and probably doesn't care that today's my wedding day.

I hate the neediness that makes me want to see him again. Even after he made his choice perfectly clear.

There's a diamond tiara perched within the elegant updo that the beautician hauled my unruly wavy locks into, and from it, a filmy veil streams down my back. Before I walk down the aisle, a blusher will be added, concealing my face until my father lifts it and presents me for inspection to Cesare.

God, can wedding ceremonies be any more antediluvian?

Then comes the torturous struggle to get into my gown. It isn't the dress itself that is the trying part of the experience, but all the underthings that are meant to build a foundation to hold it all up; the scaffolding that will keep the models-esque illusion as long as I wear it.

Aunt Giulia gets her retribution for my earlier teasing because she tightens the corset I'm meant to wear beneath the silken, tulle confection until I wheeze. I plant a hand against my stomach, feeling how impossibly tiny my waist is, but my diaphragm is in my throat and my breasts are trying to escape out through my neck.

"Oh my," I don't even get to squeak out 'God' because she yanks once more on the ties, and I worry if I blasphemy in her presence again I won't be able to feel my legs.

Once all is said and done, and the numerous pearl buttons are done up, sealing me into the gown, I'm presented to the full-length mirrors that were brought into my bedroom for this express purpose. Flashbulbs from the

portable lights connected to their SLR cameras pop like paparazzi shots, briefly filling the air with an all-white haze and a sizzle of heat as they capture me from every angle.

What would a real bride look like in this moment? Would she be happy? Maybe sad that she's moving on to the next stage of her life.

Surely, it isn't the dread I feel.

Knowing that I'm being filmed, I think about a different man. The one who I would have sailed down the aisle to meet.

With Raith in mind, I drum up the proper expression, complete with a blush, and stare at my reflection in awe.

I must admit that the corsetry and stockings and the whole damn effect make me feel like a princess. While I might be mafia royalty, I can almost imagine myself as Cinderella going to her ball. Because this dress could be an ivory-white stand-in for the cartoon's glorious sparkly-blue illustration.

I wonder how *he* would react seeing me like this. Somehow, I don't think I would even make it to the altar as a virgin. Like he did in the theater, he would have me bent over and deflowered right there in the church rectory. Thinking about *that* happening makes me wriggle with uncomfortable lust.

Knowing my blush is spreading, but not because of my happiness over my pending nuptials, I clear my mind of my indecent thoughts and watch with a critical gaze as the finishing touches are added on.

Tradition has the Aunties surrounding me, bearing gifts like the Three Kings of yore.

"Something borrowed," Aunt Giulia says as she wraps a three-strand pearl-and-diamond choker around my neck, the teardrop resting as fat as a fist-sized pear in the hollow of my throat. Delicately, I brush my fingers across the pendant.

"Your wedding necklace," I say as the memory of the photograph resurfaces. Aunt Giulia had been eighteen when she married and wore this necklace that he'd given her as a present from the groom's parents.

"Yes." Her eyes are misty and bright. "You are my daughter in every way that's important, and it should be yours on your wedding day."

Aunt Giulia daubs at the wetness that's threatening to well over her lash line. The makeup artists came armed with water-proof mascara, and it's going to get put through a trial with how much she's going to cry.

“And something blue.” Aunt Sara cups my ear lobe and gingerly slips a pair of tiny sapphire studs into each one. She bends, sharing a whisper meant only for me. “These were your mothers.”

I press my palm against my chest, feeling the mama-shaped gap close a tiny bit. I still have mommy issues, but the Aunties have done well repairing it in their own ways. She is here in memory, and that counts.

“And we can’t forget the six pence for good luck!” Aunt Giulia drops a dime-sized coin in my shoe and holds my hand as she helps me step into the jewel-encrusted flats. I would rather have been wearing heels, but Cesare has a short man’s complex even though he’s average height, and I *cannot be* taller than him on our wedding day.

Everyone is fussing around me, preening, and fixing nonexistent issues, when my father walks into my bedroom. I barely pay him a look in the reflection as I pose as I’m directed. The camera people keep moving their equipment, and the lights are hot as they bathe me in their fluorescent brightness.

“Okay, Valentina. I want you to look off into the distance and tilt your head toward me.” The photographer is way too peppy as she directs me. “Remember, light is your friend, track it like a moth. We want your gorgeous face to be illuminated.”

I am sick to death of being photographed, but I do as she says. Tilting my head this way. Arcing my back that way. I could never be a model because this is just tedious being positioned like a doll.

Fifteen minutes later, under the baleful, watchful eye of my father, these photographs are finished. The next set comes at the church, where my bridesmaids – not of my choosing – and the groomsmen join us. I barely know my maid-of-honor. She’s a relative of Cesare. We met briefly at our engagement party, and once more later during planning when I was presented with a list of who will be part of the main table.

Now, the only hurdle is getting down the stairs and hustling me into the limo for the drive to St. Mark’s Cathedral. Normally, brides change into their wedding gowns in a backroom in the church’s rectory. But this is a social event, and the cameras will want to catch me stepping out from the back of the limo as if I’m the Princess of Manhattan.

“Leave us,” my father says, injecting a shadow over the rather bright, glitzy day so far.

Aunt Giulia's hands hover above my bare shoulders, her brown eyes cutting toward her brother with a look I intimately understand. *Fear.* Her expression is soaked with it.

It makes me wonder what he's threatened her with during her life. There is no love lost between the sisters and their *capo.* He says jump and they don't even ask how high. They just jump like trained show ponies.

My bedroom empties swiftly, leaving me alone with my father. The rush of animosity I feel for him is staggering in its depth. It surges through me, swelling until it strangles the heavy thud of my heartbeat. I loved my father when I was a kid. At least I think I did. It's hard to remember those early years, back when my mother was still alive. But maybe she shielded me from the worst of it. Whatever might have lingered into adulthood no longer exists. This past year has killed any of that affection. Now it's just this stony lump in my chest where the emotion used to be, mutating into a beastly thing of patricidal determination.

We stare at each other in the mirror as he comes up behind me. A dark shadow that creeps and stains the unsullied vista of ivory fabric like the monster in a horror movie. He doesn't touch me. He just looms, looking me over as if I'm some prized filly about to go off to the track or the breeder, whatever makes him the most money.

I lift my chin and don't flinch as his brown eyes connect with mine.

"You look presentable. Though this dress is a bit on the slutty side, isn't it?"

"I'm sure Cesare will enjoy it." I clasp my hands together, the light catching the fiery prisms of the enormous, round diamond solitaire that dwarfs my ring finger. These are the last minutes in which I remain under my father's control. If I have my way, I'll never see him again, except for when I come to take his life. After I say 'I do', I'm no longer a di Maio, and I don't have a father.

"Do you remember what I told you?"

"How can I forget? You put a gun to my head while you said it. You also said I won't likely live to enjoy my honeymoon." I shrug my shoulder as if the whole thing is inconsequential.

"And here you are. Obeying me." He's so proud, as if my compliance has anything to do with making him happy, and everything to do with the emotional blackmail he's put me under.

“Doesn’t it bother you that you’re marrying me to a man who is old enough to be your brother, just for fucking money?”

Enzo’s smile grows thin, but it doesn’t waver. If anything, it reeks of malice. “I wish he was my family. He’s treated me as a younger brother, a son, for most of my life. That he *is* my father figure is why you’re marrying him. Because then we’ll really be family. We’ll share blood ties through whatever child you might grow in your womb.”

He sneers at me. “If you make Cesare happy, I won’t kill you. You’ve proven to be biddable these past few months.”

I think about what Enzo just said. Their history is well-known amongst the *famiglia.* They were young men together, dominating their respective organizations with murder and mayhem. “Did you ever love my mother? I am her daughter, you know. You’d rather please your pseudo father-figure then spare your wife’s only daughter?”

“No, I didn’t. She was a means to an end. That stipulation in her will came after she had you.” He shrugs and adds a twist to the verbal knife he’s trying to stick in me. “I can have another daughter.”

His cruelty astounds me and robs me of my speech. I knew he hated me, but this is so much more.

He continues his nastiness as he murmurs, “You’re lucky I waited until you were of age. Cesare wanted you were when you were, much, much, much younger.”

Bile swirls in my stomach. My reaction is immediate at hearing such *perversion.* I almost vomit up the orange juice I drank for breakfast. The bitter, citrusy acid coats the back of my throat and I look up in sheer horror at this beast who I’ve lived with my entire life. I thought killing me was the lowest he could go. But this?

I never realized how ruthless and vile my father was. Not only because he suggested a ruinous and horrifying predilection that my brain refuses to brush on the word, let alone put the name to it, but that he’s so casual about it. I knew my father was no saint or even a good guy. I have been blind for so many years. I could have avoided this if I’d gutted him like a fish years ago.

“You would do anything for Cesare.” The realization strikes me. Because having this conversation with Enzo – fuck ever calling him ‘father’ or ‘dad’ again – is beyond eye-opening. It almost sounds as if he has a crush

on Cesare and wishes he could be the one marrying him. But he can't for many reasons, first among them he can't give the *Cosa Nostra* Boss children, meaning I'm the proxy. Binding us all together as one happy family.

My father sees the suspicion dawn in my eyes. His hand moves swiftly as it sinks into his inner pocket and pulls out the gun. I know every inch of his favorite piece. I memorized the Glock 9x9 etched on the matte-black side the last time he put it to my head.

"I see you get it, now." He doesn't touch me with the barrel because it will smudge my makeup. But he has it pointed at my face, his finger coiled loosely, almost lovingly on the trigger. The threat is blatant as if he's in my head whispering it to me: *say a word and I'll kill you.*

"Yes," I whisper around the knot in my throat. Not only am I the baby-factory, I'm also the beard. With me being Cesare's wife, nobody will bat an eyelash over my father coming to visit. "I get it now."

I don't think whatever relationship they have is sexual, for many reasons. Both have an appetite for women. But soulmates? Some bond that transcends romantic affiliation and sexual attraction?

I know that. I understand it. It's how I feel about Raith.

*Felt,* I hiss at myself, it's how I *felt* about Raith.

Enzo and Cesare are the visages of Gemini; both two-faced and cunning and enhancing each other's strengths while eradicating their weaknesses.

Cesare is the love of my father's life, but love is too light of a term for whatever mania this is.

I have so many questions. About my mother. About him. About Cesare. Have they consummated this affair between them? If so, last night's antics mean Cesare is likely bi-sexual. That I exist means my father was at some point in his youth.

Is it platonic? Or did they fuck around when they were younger before too many eyes meant they had to remain at arm's length – at least physically.

All my life I've been told that my mother died in a car accident. With the issue of money, and now this? What if she found out *this* secret and threatened to tell her Don in Italy?

Being gay or bisexual or pansexual or asexual is more accepting in the wider world, save for those pockets of Christian fundamentals that decry

every orientation. The Italian Mafia is heavily religious, as they adhere to the idea that if they confess their sins, God will forgive them for everything.

I moisten my throat enough to ask the important question. The only one that I need to know, now that there is truth between us in all its spiky, jagged edges.

“Did you kill my mother?”

If she knew about Cesare’s apparent taste for little girls, she would have tried to escape with me. I *know* this as if it’s been encoded in my DNA. If she thought Enzo would kill her for money? I would hope she would be smart enough to ask for help from her family clan.

Enzo’s smile twists over his face like a snake undulating up at the corners. Then he leans in and drops the answer in my ear, shattering the foundation of my world and leaving me hurtling into pain-soaked space.

“Yes, and I promise, if you keep asking questions, whether Cesare agrees or not, you will join her too once you fulfill your purpose.”

I grow completely numb as he grabs my hand and tucks it against his elbow. My heart is in pieces, each razor-sharp shard leaving behind the wreckage of my past and flinging it in a huge debris field. I am in the middle of it, my mind ringing from the shockwave this truth bomb leaves.

Enzo pats my hand, a mockery of the familial relationship between father and daughter. I suspect he chose *now* to flatten me with the truth so that I would be too shocked to put up much of a fuss.

“Now come along, *mi figlia*. It’s time to get you married.”

We’re halfway down the wide staircase that twists in a double, marble spiral to the main foyer when I snap out of my shock. I’m not enraged yet. This just simply gives me more reason to kill him. I already had what I considered a fistful of cause, now it’s a mountain. He deserves to die, and I am okay with being both his confessor and executioner.

At this rate, I’m going to turn into a serial killer. Maybe that’s what I’ll become. Offing all the men who’ve fucked with my life one at a time, and then hiring out my services like Raith does. While I don’t know how I’m going to do it, I will embrace the phrase, *where there is a will there is a way.*

Oh, how I have the willpower to butcher my father and future husband for denying me my mother, my autonomy, my right to live life as I please.

And I’m going to begin *defying* right fucking now.

Gripping the banister, I am thankful for Cesare's insistence on flats. Because the traction of my bridal shoes is phenomenal, and my grip is tight. My enormous cathedral-long train is pinned up in a bustle and will only be let down when I arrive at the Cathedral for the drama of those watching.

"Valentina, come." Enzo pauses a step below me, his hand still painfully tight on my arm. He talks to me like I'm a dog, expecting me to heel, but this bitch is done being good.

"I'm not riding with you."

Enzo's face turns nasty. His nostrils flare, enhancing the broken capillaries that have scarred his skin from too much drink. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Declaring my intent. Isn't that what you gangsters say during your meetings?"

I look down at him, revealing the derision that snarls inside me and curls my upper lip. My expression is clear: I wouldn't spit on him if he caught on fire, but let him burn.

"I am not riding in the limo with you to the church. If you have a problem with it, put a fucking bullet in my head and be done with it." My voice is utterly devoid of emotion. I'm done playing this game.

While I know I can't push him too far, like saying 'no' to the priest when he asks me if I want to get married. I can start picking and choosing my battles, and this is one of them. I'm not going to sit in tense silence alongside this *testa di cazzo* during my last moments as a free woman. "But you won't because you still need my cooperation to get your filthy hands on my money."

Enzo steps up onto my step, trying to brow-beat me in submission as he evens out our height differences. But he's only five-foot-nine, and the only time two inches means anything is when it comes to comparing cock size.

I smirk at him, letting him see not the di Maio backbone, but the Bilardo one – my mother's surname - that he thought he broke when he murdered her.

His face grows mottled and purple with his rage. It's a shame he doesn't have a heart attack right now and spare me having to plan his murder. "You think I won't?"

"Will the *Camorra* survive without a cash injection? Will the *Cosa Nostra*? What would you tell your precious Cesare about why I'm not there

to marry him and pass on all that money." I white knuckle the banister. If he tries to drag me down, I'll claw the whole way to the bottom stair and hope that one of us trips and ends at the bottom with a broken neck.

"I can't wait to watch Cesare break you."

I don't investigate what he means by *that.* Each time I think Enzo has scraped bottom; he shows me that there's even more below it. A subterranean realm of filth and squalor and perversion that he seems to enjoy rolling around in. I won't disparage pigs by comparing them to him, but he's of their ilk.

I clamp my mouth shut, refusing the tears that are scaling up my throat. My sinuses burn, but I'm not backing down.

*Look at my spine and how razor-edged it is now, Papa. You will pay for what you did to my mother and me.*

"*Pucca puttana."* His anger is sweet as he calls me a pig whore, and I know that I've won.

Enzo flings my hand away and stalks down the rest of the stairs. An enraged, lissome blade of a man with salt-and-pepper hair dressed in an impeccable Dolce & Gabbana tuxedo. It's like trying to dress up a crocodile in a tutu. It doesn't hide the malice and meanness beneath.

I hear the enormous front doors bang open, and then the orders he barks to his men. His voice rebounds off the elaborate masonry and stonework that decorates the mansion's front. Enzo is so irate, that he keeps switching between Italian and English, cursing my mother and me in a streak of ribald language.

The Aunties would be mad if they knew he was swearing so vulgarly in front of me and the help. They are very particular about *appearances*, even if the staff is made up of armed killers.

Serenely, I drift down the rest of the stairs until I reach the foyer, my footsteps clicking off the thick Italian marble.

I look behind me, taking in the extravagance of wealth without the taste or elegance to go with it. Enzo gilded everything, from the floor with its display of golden veins in smoky white stone, to the elaborate mosaics in the front hall, all the way to the fat, tear-drop crystals that weep from the chandeliers set in overwrought filigree.

I say goodbye to it all. Then I step out onto the stoop.

Enzo is in the drive, and I can almost see the steam shooting out from his ears. He is so angry, and I savor it.

He spins toward me, and I control a flinch as I think he is about to shoot me. His gun isn't out, but he points his finger at me as if he could wish me dead with it.

"If you are not at the church within fifteen minutes of me, I will come and find you. I will break both your hands, and force you to sign the paperwork, and not even Cesare will be able to stop me from making sure you join your mother."

I refuse to be ruffled. There's ice in my veins and a sneer in my lips that I mask with sweetness. "I'll see you soon, *padre."*

A vein bulges in Enzo's temple. I look at it, encouraging it to blow. Let him die of an aneurysm or cerebral hematoma. It would save a lot of people a whole lot of trouble.

The universe doesn't comply. Enzo unbuttons his suit jacket and slips into the back of his Cadillac that was meant to lead the bridal procession. Now, I have the Bentley Limousine all to myself, with only a single guard to sit up front.

I watch as the Caddie's driver reaches the elaborate gates, bearing the overlapping DM in the center of its thickly braided insignia. It opens, and as the Cadillac disappears down the road, I drop my courageous act. I'm not yet there at being *actually* fearless. That will take time.

I'm shaking as my driver approaches. I can't look at him, because I'm trying not to hyperventilate beneath the pressure the corset and my all-encompassing fright has on my ribcage. He navigates the length of the stretch vehicle and whisks the back door open.

"Your carriage, milady."

*This isn't a fairytale, even if I feel like Cinder-fucking-rella.*

I sink sideways into the black leather, or at least try to. It's more like I fling myself in, scooting and wriggling about to get both myself and my dress packed into the back.

Once I say my vows, I'm burning this corset. Fuck it all. I'll let my tits hang out before I suffer through the reception in this contraption.

The driver bends down, and my face is reflected in the mirror lenses of his sunglasses. I look like an ice princess; aloof and untouchable; dripping

in diamonds and pearls and enough silk and lace to double the silk trade's yearly profits.

I look away. I don't need a reminder of what I look like in this stranger's lenses.

"Are you okay, Miss di Maio?"

"Yes."

*No.*

Honestly, I'm not sure if I'll ever be 'okay' again.

"If you need anything during our journey, please let me know. Your comfort is important to me."

I give him a closed-mouth smile without looking up again. Though a polite chauffeur isn't unusual, he's a stranger to me, and I don't want to spend the next few minutes trying to have a polite, meaningless discourse with a person I'll never see again. Likely, anything we talk about, and everything I do, will be reported back to Enzo.

"Thank you."

The door shuts with a click, and I'm left alone in the back, painfully aware of the shifting sands of an hourglass that begins the fifteen-minute timer, and the larger, ticking bomb of when I'll be walked down the aisle, and bequeathed to Cesare Palermo.

# Chapter Sixteen

## Raith

Nearly watching Valentina do a swan-dive off the roof does things to me. I don't know what exactly has changed, other than my mind, but I know that the alterations are cataclysmic.

How do I know that?

Because I spend the rest of the night putting together a one-man operation that will let me swoop in and rescue her. I'm not a hero, yet I'm here thinking of all the ways I can unlock her gilded cage and set her free. I can't even call up Snack, because the less people know I'm about to kidnap the mafia Princess of the *Camorra*, the safer it is for everyone involved.

Finally, just around three AM, I have the final piece in place. That allows me to catch a couple of hours of sleep, before I leave behind my apartment, and push over the first domino of this hair-brained scheme.

If I make it through this unscathed, I'm going to be surprised. Fuck. More than that. Impressed. Because there are so many details that I didn't have time to pore over. This is the hastiest, slapped-together scheme I've ever considered.

She deserves better. I should have realized that everyone has a tipping point, and not ignored Valentina's plea for help. I'm disgusted with myself and that I put a vow to a dead woman above what she means to me. I let my fear push away the best thing to ever happen to me, and I will do anything it takes to see the light return to her eyes.

The first step in my plan is replacing the limousine driver, which is too easy. The sun is barely shooting out light beams across the midnight sky sky when I break into his apartment above a Chinese restaurant in Little Italy. The restaurant launders money for the *Cosa Nostra*, and when the driver isn't behind the wheel of a luxury car, chauffeuring the mafioso big-wigs around, he's on a bicycle, delivering drugs out of take-out containers as if they are orders of low mien and chicken fried rice.

The driver doesn't know what hit him. I may be ruthless, but I'm not into torture. That was my father's wheelhouse. The driver's death is swift and instantaneous, given by an icepick to the brain steam. I leave him in bed, where he'll be found eventually. Probably when his corpse begins to stink, and the restaurant realizes it's not their friers or refrigerator exuding the smell. I swipe his uniform, even though it won't fit it has the credentials I need, and I make my way to the di Maio estate right on time.

They don't even check the identification to make sure I am Jing Ti, the driver that Cesare has on Valentina's security detail. All it would take is a look at my face, or ask me to remove my mirrored sunglasses, for them to realize that I'm not Asian, and the jig would be up.

Instead, they wave me through after running a hand-held x-ray wand and telescopic mirror along the undercarriage of the limo. They check for bombs and surveillance equipment, but not the actual identity of the person.

*Fucking amateurs.* You always check the driver; they are usually the weak link in the security chain.

The rest of the morning is spent waiting around and ambling about the ten-bay garage and the outskirts of the yard. Just before ten AM, Enzo di Maio storms out through the front door of his mansion. The edifice screams old world, but the construction is barely older than Valentina. He had it built right when he became *capo* of the *Camorra*, sinking millions into a gaudy replica of a villa with all the imported Italian marble and stonework that one would find in Tuscany.

I lean against the Bentley's sleek, glossy side, listening to his rage. He carries a rough American accent on his Italian, and it's easy to pick up what he's saying. He's just repeating a few key phrases, that mean *pig whore* and *bitch of a mother*.

After watching Valentina almost decide to kill herself, whatever she's done this morning is a good step in the right direction. It sounds as if she

has some of her verve back, enough to provoke her father until he's wilding out like a Marsican Brown Bear on a coke binge.

There is a cadence of footsteps on the stone before the woman of the hour makes her grand entrance on the stoop. Every heterosexual, red-blooded man – sadly no woman is working for Enzo today – stops what they are doing to turn and worship this Goddess who's decided to walk amongst us.

She is no angel, but she is Aphrodite, looking ready to steal the hearts and minds of her subjects with her radiance. I don't care about her dress, because women like Valentina belong naked, spread out in Egyptian cotton sheets, with her thighs cuffed around my ears while I devour her. It's been a long year of self-imposed celibacy, and I can still taste the way she melted on my tongue. All cream and honeysuckle and cock-hardening spice.

The erotic image, along with the memory, shoots heat straight to my groin. I grind my teeth together, trying to curb the arousal that's beating like frenzied batwings behind my eyes. I need to remember that I'm incognito, just another hired hand to see the wedding of the year ushered off without a hitch.

Enzo stops his snarling and turns to the focus of his wrath. "If you are not at the church within fifteen minutes of me, I will come and find you, and not even Cesare will be able to stop me from making sure you join your mother."

My brow raises at the death threat. That's new, the last time I saw the two of them together before I accepted the job on Riccio she'd been behaving obediently. The past few months have annihilated all that. She's gone from nurturing the smallest, fledgling mote of rebellion, into a raging hellscape of disobedience.

She sneers at Enzo, and it shatters every intent I have of calming myself down. There's no way to put out the raging fire of lust that's pinging inside my veins.

"I'll see you soon, *padre."*

*Goddamn, this woman is spit and vinegar.*

*I'm in fucking love.*

She waits until her father and his hearse black Cadillac drive out of view, and then the veneer of bravery shatters.

I don’t fault her for it. She’s young, and I don’t know her training, I doubt her father would teach her how to assassinate him. But she’s focused as she takes small, slow steps to the limo. Her fingers tremble when she catches them in the filmy tulle skirts that flare out and swish around her legs. She’s completely weighed down in the fabric as if her gown is the first shackle on the road of her marriage.

I open the door for her, waiting at a respectable distance for her to get into the back. She tries to slide in normally, but she can barely bend her waist. Which leaves her toppling sideways onto the soft, calf-skin leather. I see a flash of the sequins studding her white-satin flats, and I wonder about them because she’s always worn heels. I try not to leer at the gossamer stockings that disappear up beneath her skirt before she sits herself upright.

I bend down, hating that I must wear sunglasses and a shaggy blonde wig to camouflage myself from her. I don’t know where her head is yet. She might actively hate my guts for being a coward and not sparing her these past few months of misery. Maybe she might not want to be stolen from her life. She knows what I look like, and I can’t have her recognize me right now. Not until I know for sure she’ll accept my apology.

I’ll spend my life in penance if there’s a chance for forgiveness.

Carefully modulating my voice so that it sounds nothing like me, I ask. “Are you okay, Miss di Maio?”

Her attention catches on her reflection in my sunglasses as if the silver lenses are a mirror holding up true images of herself. While it might seem she’s meeting my eyes, she’s not. She’s meeting her own. But I can’t look away or pretend that some part of her *knows* who I am. That she’s secretly urging me on this harebrained scheme.

Valentina captivates me with those mocha-brown pools. I feel a hook slice between us, spoiling a line of tripwire between where it’s sunk into my chest, and hers, stronger now than it was when it first locked on during our interlude. It might have gone taut after our meeting in *Dolce Vita*, but it’s humming again with potential.

Then she blinks and looks away, breaking the moment and setting me down into reality.

*She has no idea who I am.*

“Yes”.

*Look at me again. Look at me, Valentina. See me. Tell me this is okay.*

“If you need anything during our journey, please let me know. Your comfort is important to me.”

The minx keeps her eyes lowered, giving me a demure, polite, absolute brush-off of a smile.

“Thank you.”

Sighing inwardly, I shut the door and secure it. Then I walk around to the driver’s seat. There’s only a single armed guard driving with me. One of Enzo’s men. That’s how the security details have been paired all morning. Both organizations paired up in a one-on-one assignment.

I swipe the soft-topped hat off my head and look in the rearview mirror, watching the guard’s approach. I flick a few fingers in the jagged fringe of the wig’s bangs, rearranging it as if I’m a man fastidious about his appearance.

The guard opens his door and drops onto the passenger side. “Everything good?”

“Great.” I start the ignition with a button push, and the limousine purrs to life.

“Damn, your old geezer is fucking lucky.”

I carefully navigate out of the over-long driveway and wait for the guards at the gate to open it for us. The ostentatious halves swing apart, and I pull us out onto the street, before taking the right that will begin the mostly straight shot to St. Mark’s Cathedral.

“Why do you say that?” Small talk is mostly bullshit, but sometimes you can glean bits of information.

“Didn’t you see her? He’s going to get to deflower that hot piece of ass. Damn. I’d give my left nut to trade places with him. No offense.”

The guard gives me a sleazy half-smile as if I share his thoughts about Valentina. “But he’s going to need to buy stock in Viagra to keep up with her.”

I grind my molars together, feeling the thick wedge of muscle at the backside of my jaw flare out in a harsh, angry flex. When it comes to Valentina, I can barely control my baser impulses. Right now, they’re telling me to slice this goon’s tongue out for demeaning my girl.

He’d have to be blind to miss my anger. His voice spikes an octave higher. “Like I said, no offense!”

Playing the role I've taken on, I give him an easy smile. "Yeah. No problem, bro. You're right. She's...," I choke on the word. Even playacting I can't taint what exists between us with callous statements.

The stupid mook beside me takes my broken thought as me being speechless.

"Yeah." He bobs his head. "Yeah, she is."

The drive isn't scheduled to take long. The moment I take the left *away* from St. Mark's, the guard will know something's up.

I assess him from the corner of my eyes while making it look as if my attention is on the stop-and-go traffic stretching before us as everyone and their fucking mother who lives in Little Italy makes their way to the Cathedral. Not even a fraction of these people has an invitation to go inside, but they'll line up, just to catch a glimpse of the men and women who rule their pedestrian lives. They did it for all the royal weddings in Britain, and in a way, the di Maio's and Palermo's are Little Italy's monarchs.

The guard is carrying a piece in a shoulder-holster that's on his right, meaning he's a leftie. But he's in a three-piece suit, and he hasn't unbuttoned the jacket to sit comfortably. He's swole-chested, and there's a puffiness in his gut that says his physique is from a combination of steroid abuse and a gym. Great for appearances, but when fighting against someone whose strength comes from pure, physical labor, it's no contest.

He's wrapped up like pork-sausage stuffed in its casing, his range of motion completely fucked by the size of his biceps; a bodybuilder who pushed himself in only one area – size – without also working on his flexibility. It's an epidemic amongst a lot of the lower-tier cannon fodder. In a situation like this, there's no way he can grab his gun before I can shoot him, but he might have a knife which would even the odds.

I can't quite tell if there's a sheath or a holster on his ankle, or if the bulge in his trouser leg isn't just cankles. The daylight is shitty and dim even for February, and the tint on the limo's windows is void black.

Just ahead is the turn-off, and I have only a few seconds left to decide if I push through with my plan or scrap it. This is the breakpoint.

Either I survive here, or I die.

For Valentina, the risk is worth it.

Reaching to the Ruger I taped to the underside of my seat, I fist the grip.

I tap the gas with my foot, inching toward the bumper ahead.

*I wait.*

Another smooth roll of the car.

*And wait.*

I make it to the light right as it turns red. There's nobody in front of me, though the traffic is backing up at the limo's bumper.

*Now.*

I tear the 9mm loose with a snarl of sticky-tape ripping free and aim it at the man's temple. He barely has time to react. I see his 'oh shit' expression before I plug the small-caliber bullet into his head. There's only a small *pop* as the muzzle discharges thanks to the silencer I've screwed on the barrel, and then the guard slides sideways, crashing into the tinted side window. From the outside, it looks like he's sleeping. On my side, blood is starting to ooze into his dark, styled hair right above his ear.

Now that only leaves Valentina and me. We're finally alone, but not yet safe.

At the very next intersection, I make the hard left as I pull out of the bumper-to-bumper traffic and speed the opposite way.

"Hey," Valentina's voice is muffled through the sound-proof glass. Then the light from the call-button flashes on the dashboard. "Is everything okay up there?"

I sigh. I'd hoped that she wouldn't notice anything amiss. But in the closed quarters, I suppose the gunshot was loud enough to pierce through the soundproofing. A silencer doesn't silence much of anything. It mutes it. But in a car? A shot is still fucking loud.

*Cest le vie.*

I pull the air gun from my inner pocket but wait until I'm stopped at another red light to lower the bullet-proof partition between us. That's both the good and bad things about NYC traffic. Every stoplight is riddled with yellow taxicabs, mopeds, bicycles, and pedestrians all trying to squeeze through a narrow funnel cut into block-sized sections by an unending line of traffic lights. All of these seem to have been coded by a maniac of a traffic engineer when they flick rapidly from red to green, without any rhyme or reason or adherence to traffic patterns.

"Hey." Valentina is sitting in the middle of the bench-seat. The wide sides of her dress are puffed out beside her. "I thought I heard…"

I point the barrel at her and give her a vague smile.

“You did,” I say and pull the trigger.

Valentina flinches, but it’s not a bullet that puffs out. The tranquilizer dart hits her an inch below her collar bone. Its puffy end looks like orange-hued feathers sticking out from her chest. She blinks down at the needle that has punctured her skin. A tiny dollop of blood beads around its entry.

“Why did…” Her confusion wrecks my heart. I regret that I need to drug her.

*It’s for her own good.*

Her confusion gives way to a bleary-eyed expression. The question freezes on her lips as the fast-acting sedative hits her, and she realizes that this isn’t an assassination attempt. In her mind, this is much worse.

*I’m kidnapping her.*

“*Stronzo*,” she slurs before she slumps sideways, sinking into the layers and layers of tulle and lace that’s crumpled beneath her - out cold.

*You got that right, sweetheart. I am a bastard.*

*You don’t know how much yet, but you will.*

# Chapter Seventeen

## Raith

The margin of success for this scheme is narrow.

I have forty minutes to get us out of New York City, and into another car that's waiting for us just inside New Jersey in New Brunswick.

From there, after ditching the limousine, it'll take twelve hours to reach Chicago. Where the buffer of the Irish Mob will throw off the scent, and probably cause a conflict between the two gangs. Cillian Quinn's Mob is large enough to wipe out both the *Cosa Nostra* and *Camorra*, though I doubt he'll resort to violence. For a mobster, he acts like a pacifist.

A few years back, I bought a century-old estate on the North Shore in Winnetka, outbidding the developers who wanted to tear the old construction down and put-up high-rise condominiums and spoil the beach-side view. It is the largest in the area, sitting on acres of unspoiled, beachside land. Then I spent a fortune turning it into a fortress that would defy all but a direct nuclear assault.

Other than motoring across Lake Michigan, the only way in is through the reinforced tungsten gate and granite walls. By the time anyone breeches them, we'll be long gone, escaping through one of my carefully plotted routes.

There's even a bomb shelter and a safety room, both packed full of weapons, that leads into a subterranean tunnel that I excavated under the

guise of *home improvement.* The planning commission didn't need to know anything other than I'm wealthy and eccentric.

I make it to New Brunswick right beneath the wire of my self-imposed clock. Driving just above the speed limit, so as not to attract the wrong type of attention, is one of my specialties, and why I spent the early parts of my tenure as a hitman learning the ropes as a *driver*.

It helps that the Bentley limousine is disgustingly ostentatious, and most cops who work the Manhattan-to-Jersey beat know that pulling over a chauffeur driving a vehicle that's upward of three-hundred-thousand dollars puts their job on the line. No amount of ticket revenue is worth that gamble.

I burnt a resource getting a pair of nondescript sedans in place overnight. But it's worth it as I navigate into a six-bay, empty warehouse in Somerset. Perched close-by to both Route 1 and Route 18, it is the perfect launchpad for the next phase of my plan.

The warehouse's corrugated steel door clangs shut as I drive the limo into the dark and park it. Then I climb out, letting my eyes adjust to the dim interior lighting. Two identical four-door Prius sedans are waiting for me.

A man dressed in black leans against the door of one, giving me a look that I respect. Because it's not one full of questions, just the bored gleam of someone who's done this cat-and-mouse shit as many times as I have.

I don't know him at all. He's as much of a wraith as I am. I found him in the dark wilds of the digital landscape, a freelancer much like I am whose fealty is only to how much money he can earn from a particular job. He's the only loose thread in the whole scheme, but he's being paid a fortune in nigh-untraceable bitcoin to help me evade my eventual followers. I must trust that he knows how to escape and vanish into a crowd. That I'm sending him to Miami should let him disappear easier. Maybe he can take a boat to Cuba and stay awhile.

"We're moving out in five minutes."

"Got it."

I open the back of the limousine and look in at Valentina. I didn't trust giving her anything stronger than ketamine. There's a risk there of an overdose, but it's not like propofol. She'll be out for six hours, and I'll probably have to give her another dose before we reach Chicago.

The problem I face now is that anyone we pass on the highway is going to glance into my car and see a kidnapped bride. Every inch of her sparkles

as if she’s covered in diamonds, and I feel like the vile warlock who kidnapped a storybook princess. She needs to lose the gown, and the finery, but being that she’s completely out, that leaves the job to me.

I’ve seen her mostly naked already but with her consent. She already hates me. What’s a bit more animosity to make it fun?

Shutting the door behind me, I climb into the limo and ease Valentina onto her belly. This damn dress is unwieldy. I don’t know how she was able to move in it. Then I remember how stiffly she was sitting, and how she’d toppled into the back of the car, and I realize she can’t. They mummified her in lace and a modern corset that still pinches and binds - the fuckers.

I take out my switchblade, flick it open, and run a clean line up the back of her dress. Snapping buttons. Tearing through the fragile fabric and severing the laces of her corset. The weight of it drags everything forward and off. She’s left in nothing but an ivory silk lingerie set, thigh-high stockings, a fucking garter, her veil, and tiara.

All of this for a man who can’t get it up without medical assistant.

Hauling her leg into mine, I pull her shoes off and toss them aside. Then slowly peel her stockings down. I strip her inch-by-inch until her only modesty is her underwear, which doesn’t offer a lot of it. It’s meant to entice, and I wonder if old Cesare hadn’t meant to fuck her on the limo ride to the reception. This outfit *beneath* her wedding dress all but screams his carnal plan. Honestly, I should strip her bare. Because one never knows if they tucked a tracker in her bra. But there’s a line I’m not going to cross when she can’t consent. I don’t mind if she hates me, I don’t want to further add to the trauma she’s already going to experience when she wakes up.

Eventually, her veil, tiara, choker, and all the diamonds join the pile on the limo’s floor.

I’m running out of time, and I manhandle her around as I flick the limo’s seat down to reach into the built-in cabinet concealed behind it. There I packed clothes for her. Things I can easily get her into, gray sweats, a loose-fitting T-shirt, slip-on shoes, one of my hoodies for warmth, and a soft-knit beanie to cover her elaborately done hair.

A swipe of portable makeup wipes later, I’ve taken away the bride and left a drunken party girl in her place. I place an enormous pair of movie-star sunglasses on her. The kind that hides half of her face.

Then I back pedal, grab her by the ankle, and drag her close until I can fling her over my shoulder in a fireman's carry, and bring her to the other car. Setting her in the passenger seat, I buckle her in and glance down at my tactical watch.

*Five minutes and thirty seconds.*

Fucking wedding dresses.

I return to the limo and the duffel I have stashed in the trunk that has everything a hitman on the go needs: guns, knives, weapons, disposable cash, a couple of SIM cards, a box of protein bars, and water. That gets immediately transferred into the Prius' backseat behind the passenger side. So that I can grab what I need without stopping.

I turn to the anonymous man. He's painfully average. Average height. Average weight. Hair is not too long or short. It would be impossible to pick him out in the crowd, especially with his comfort-fit acid-wash jeans, t-shirt, and flannel on top. All he's missing is a trucker hat, and he'll fit in as a journeyman. Maybe even an off-duty trucker taking a break from his semi.

"You should have your payment in your account by now," I say. "I don't care where you go, as long as it's south and you disappear into a big city somewhere around the twelve-hour mark."

The man nods and raises his fist. The gesture is a familiar one, and I return the symbolism by pressing my thumbs down with my forefingers.

"*Ich drücke dir die Daumen,"* he says in flawless German. He slips easily into his car.

*Good luck to you, too.*

I slide behind the wheel of the sand, flick the visor down, catch the key fob, start the ignition, and pull out right behind the man. The pair of us drive in a line until we reach the intersection.

This is where the fun begins. At least for me. Because this brand of subversion is sure to annoy the fuck out of whoever decides to track us. We each take a route, splitting off cleanly into separate directions.

I take Rte. 18, which begins the westerly course that will eventually swing me into Illinois.

He chooses Rte. 1, which is a straight shot down to Florida and the Tamiami Trail.

Eventually, Enzo and Cesare will pull the traffic light cameras and maybe even the satellite feeds if they have some high-level government friends to check where the limo wound up.

What they'll see is two vehicles going in opposite directions. It'll be a fifty-fifty coin toss of which car is carrying Valentina. It's a ruse that won't buy me much time, but just enough for me to disappear for a while into Chicago. There, I can figure out the rest of this plan.

The drive is uneventful. Just the way I like it. I don't stop for lunch or dinner, but chew on the protein bars I packed, and chug a few bottles of water. Though I do have to stop to fuel up and piss a couple times. I make sure to pick out of the way gas-stations that take cash, and where I can keep the door cracked and watch the Prius while I use the urinal.

Around the six-hour mark, right as I'm cruising past Cleveland, Valentina stirs. It's just a soft moan, a groggy sound that gets caught up in her throat.

A pang of regret flickers to life inside my chest. She's going to be incredibly dehydrated by the time we reach Chicago, and I'm honestly surprised she hasn't pissed all over the seat. That she hasn't, means she's probably not had much to eat or drink while getting ready for the wedding. I'm still angry over them making her eat nothing but salad while they gorged on three-course meals in front of her. It helps this situation, but it makes me angry at the stress she's been under.

Pulling out a syringe, I dose her with another shot of ketamine. Erring on the side of caution because I don't know her exact weight and I don't want to overdose her with the drug.

She's silent the rest of the way, with only the softest snores that have me grinning over at her.

Around midnight, we reach Chicago. But I'm not taking us directly to the estate. That's just painting an unnecessary bull's eye on my back. Instead, I drive to the South Loop, where I swap the Prius for a Tesla.

This one is going to be harder to track because there are a dozen underground parking garages that all feed the Chicago Pedway and the layers of tunnels and passageways that run under the city. We don't emerge topside again as I pull into a parking spot in the subterranean garage of an apartment building owned by Cillian Quinn, the top dog of the Irish Mob in Chicago.

Slinging my bag over one shoulder, I leave the keys in the ignition, windows down, and door unlocked. Being that this is gangster territory, someone will take the bait. Leaving a car unattended like that is just asking for it to be stolen and chopped up for parts.

Then I pick up Valentina, carrying her like the bride she almost was, and ride the elevator up. Almost to the penthouse level, where Cillian keeps a bolt hole for people like me. Giving us a safe house for when times get hairy, or an assassination attempt goes wrong. It's why he has a ton of hitmen all willing to do favors for him. He treats us well.

Finally, when we are secured behind the steel-plated door, locked in, and with the security system armed, and my armory at hand, I can breathe.

Somehow, I did it. I stole Valentina and carted her hundreds of miles away to my lair in Chicago. Snack would be so fucking proud. It's a shame I can't call him and tell him about it. Knowing him, he'll hear about it eventually and will give me shit for planning an op without him.

Looking down at Valentina asleep in my arm, her cheek cradled against my shoulder, makes it all worth it. She's safe. For now. And I'll do everything in my power to make sure she stays that way.

# Chapter Eighteen

## Valentina

I'm so thirsty that I might legitimately die if I don't get up and get water. Simultaneously, my screaming bladder warns me that if I don't wake up *now,* there is going to be a situation. Both issues drag me up and out of my dreamless sleep, and into a confusing consciousness.

My first thought is I have no idea where I am. It's distorting to not immediately have a recollection of how I got into a bed that isn't my own. While it's comfortable and spacious, the mattress is firmer than the pillow-topped cloud I've slept on for most of my adult life.

Which begs the question, just whose bed am I in?

Then I remember the fact that I'm married…

*Wait.* That hasn't happened yet. It was supposed to, but I'm not married. I would remember my wedding, because of how much I dreaded it.

Finally, the scrambled pieces of my brain congeal, and the events right before I lost consciousness replay in my mind's eye.

The fight with my father, and how good it felt to finally stand up to him. The odd puffing noise from the limousine's front cab. Then the chauffeur with his mirrored sunglasses, and the gun which shot that odd-looking arrow which pinched as it sank into my chest. Right after, everything fades to black like a dramatic movie scene.

"*Figlio di puttana* kidnapped me!" I shriek as I sit upright in bed.

Then a headache smacks both of my temples in an ear-ringing tirade, and I sink back into the pillows.

Being kidnapped has always been a threat hanging over my life, and one of Enzo's motives is to keep me under house arrest with the Aunties as my wardens. But I never thought I would actually be kidnapped.

I hope my kidnapper puts the screws to my father and asks for an outrageous ransom. He can't afford it, and I want everyone to know that he's bled the *famiglia* dry.

Minding the full-body ache which feels as if I have the flu, I sit up slower. Then swing my legs over the side of the bed. My bladder insists I get out of bed *right now,* despite my brain begging me not to. I pause as my bare feet touch the cool wood-laminate floor, then I blink bewilderedly down at my bare, pink-painted toes, and the sweatpants with the light-gray Old Navy stretched logo up one leg.

*These aren't mine.*

A new type of anxiety rises, replacing my mild angst over being kidnapped. I raise a hand to my throat, my ears, and my hair, and find that all my wedding finery and jewels are gone. The bastard stripped me while I was passed out! While I'm not going to miss them, their lack reveals the truth of what might have happened while I'd been under the sedative's effects. I inhale a deep breath, order myself not to freak out, and take stock of my body. Is removing my clothing the only thing he did? Did more happen while I was drugged?

I lightly touch a hand between my thighs, half-afraid of what I'll find. But the panties and bra I received from Cesare are still on, and I don't feel anything different. I don't ache, and surely if *that* happened, I would know. Right? There would be pain. Wetness. Blood? There's no pangs of discomfort and no residue of a sexual assault.

I press my hand to my mouth, hating the fragile tremor that works through me. It's a relief, but there's also this dark blot in my memories. The only way I'll know for sure is to ask the man, and he might not be forthcoming. But, if he wants money from Cesare or Enzo, I'll need to be returned in the same pristine condition as how he stole me, aka my virginity intact. So, whatever my kidnapper wants, it isn't raping me because he could have done that easily while I was unconscious.

Sliding out of bed, I shuffle along the dim bedroom. My eyes adjust to the low light. There are some kind of thick, mechanical blinds on the windows, with a layer of even darker curtains overtop, making sure that the full glare of the sun can't penetrate the bedroom. There is just a faint gray haze around the window's border that makes me think it's daylight outside. It's enough to scope out the bedroom. Two doors are shut, one locked, which is probably the way out. Another leading into a closet, and the third half-open one ushers me into an ensuite bathroom.

I flick the light on, then flinch and fiddle with the dimmer, turning the glaringly bright LED to a more sedate brilliance.

I avoid looking in the mirror until I do my business, and then wash my hands and turn the water on full blast so I can gulp down the precious liquid from the spicket. I'm so, so thirsty that I stand there, bent over, sucking down the vaguely metallic-tasting water as if I were a camel preparing for a trip through the Sahara. My belly cramps and I relent, turning the water off.

Placing my hands on either side of the sink, I finally gage my reflection.

My makeup is mostly gone, scrubbed-free. I almost laugh, because the mascara is perfect, the water-proof stuff the beauticians used apparently like superglue for the eyelashes. My hair looks surprisingly well-maintained, even if a few shifted bobby pins are stabbing me in the scalp.

But it's the expression in my eyes that gives me pause. Because I almost don't recognize the mood that shimmers in their depths. It's one of excitement, hope, and happiness. I haven't seen them glitter like that in a long, long time. Before I learned just who Raith was, and he tossed me to the curb.

The quiver in my belly, which I assumed was pain from drinking too much water too fast, isn't that at all.

It's elation.

Reality must have been waiting for me to connect the dots because it smacks me upside the head with sheer joy.

*Holy shit, I'm free*.

Well, *freer.* I just need to ditch my kidnapper before he can achieve whatever his end goal is.

I can't control the sudden sob that breaks my lips. It catches me by surprise, and I back up until my spine hits the bathroom wall. Then I slide down until I'm sitting tucked between the pedestal sink, and the toilet,

literally crying my heart out as a year of pent-up stress, anxiety, and torment finds the open pressure vale and simply…releases. It all gurgles out like a geyser shooting steam to the surface. The release is excruciating.

Holding my hands across my lips, I sob quietly because I don't want anyone else in the apartment to hear. I don't know how many men are working with my kidnapper, or what they might do if they learn I'm awake.

The tears don't relent, not for a long while. But eventually, they dry up, and I sit there on the bathroom floor with my head resting against the dark gray wainscoting, letting the hope inside of me build, and build until it tethers to my heart like a balloon ribbon and carries it up, and up.

While I don't know what my kidnapper wants from me, the truth is blatant and obvious even in these first moments. It's better than where I was, and I now have a chance to disappear into the wider world without anyone knowing who I am.

That *chance* is all the difference.

Feeling grungy from what I can only assume has been an entire day of sleeping, if not more, I take advantage of the quiet. There could be cameras all over my 'prison', and I give absolutely zero fucks. Let them watch. They can put it on the internet. Nothing is keeping me from the shower.

Stripping out of my borrowed clothes, subtly amazed that my lingerie set that was meant to titillate Cesare remained in place, I slip beneath the hot, pelting spray.

I don't wash my hair, because it's going to take a metal detector and a few hours to pull out all the bobby pins, and anything but shampoo and treatment meant for my hair texture will ruin curls.

But I soap up everything else, scrubbing every inch of my skin until it is ruddy and half-raw from the coarse wash cloth and unfamiliar Irish Spring bar soap. That there tells me this is a man's bathroom since most women enjoy gentler soaps like dove or perfumed body washes.

Eventually, the water runs tepid and grows cold. I sigh, step over the tub's basin, and briskly dry myself. Before pulling back on the sweatpants and t-shirt.

The lingerie set goes in the garbage. Because fuck everything that has to do with Cesare Palermo.

Then I leave the misty bathroom and focus on the door that barricades my way to *true* freedom.

Sitting cross-legged in front of the luck, I eye the mechanism. Here is another sign of a man's touch. Not just a man, but someone who knows security. This isn't your common, everyday door-lock-job combo. It's a heavy-duty custom thing that could probably stop a bullet if someone shot at it.

However, there is a universal truth when it comes to locks. They all operate the same way.

Grinning to myself, I pull a couple of bobby pins free and get to work.

This isn't the first time I've been locked up against my will. I doubt it will be the last. The best way to learn anything in life is by practice. And I practiced for hours, every time I found myself *secured for my own protection* at my father's command.

Since learning and practicing, I can pick a lock in under a minute. Sometimes, I think I'd make an excellent safe cracker if I ever chose a life of crime. The lock's mechanism coos for me, offering a gentle metallic click as she shows me her belly, and then unlocks for me.

I stand and try the handle.

The door swings open without even a hint of a squeak from the well-oiled hinges. Beyond that is the unknown, and I just need to find the courage to step into it.

Swallowing hard, I peek over the threshold. The layout isn't that of a house. Though I kind of expected it. It's an apartment, but not a luxury one. Maybe a two-bedroom, two-bath that a normal person would live in. I can almost believe that a normal person *does* call this place home.

Maybe I can seduce him into letting me go. I have an inheritance, and I'll pay all of it to him if that means being free of my father. But I need to do some reconnaissance and find a knife or another make-shift weapon.

Rubbing my toes across the threshold between the bedroom and the hallway, I sneak out. My heart's loud in my ears. But thus far, I haven't heard anything. It's as if the apartment is abandoned, or my kidnapper is deep asleep and had thought the locked door would be guard enough.

Feeling bolder, I brave the dark interior in search of a kitchen. I need food too, because I'll require sustenance if I'm going to survive being kidnapped and figure out a way to escape.

Instead of walking down the aisle, or waking up in Cesare's bed, I'm in a whole new world. One that I march into on bare feet and with a purpose.

Whatever happens from here on out, I’m never going back to my father.

# Chapter Nineteen

## Raith

I don't sleep with one eye open, as the cliché goes. Instead, I've trained myself to sleep lightly. Despite how dead tired I am, I hear my door creak open, I'm immediately awake. That soft, metallic purr is as loud as an alarm, keying my body up and dumping a jolt of adrenaline into my veins.

Have we been found already?

Even as I covertly slide my hand underneath my pillow to grip my Glock, I spare a look at the digital clock on the nightstand. It's been only a couple of hours since I locked Valentina in the second bedroom and died a little death in this one. The only way they could find us this fast is if she had a sub-dermal tracker. I wouldn't put it past Enzo to microchip her like a pet, but I checked. Nothing was transmitting on or in her body.

This means either one of Cillian's men is in the apartment, or Valentina is awake.

I slit my eyes, focusing my gaze on the shadow in the doorway. It hovers there, swaddled in uncertainty, before it takes another step. That hesitancy tells me who this visitor is.

Valentina picked the lock on her door.

I bite back a grin because I installed that lock myself. I wonder where she learned that skill, but then I remind myself she grew up beneath Enzo's thumb. She probably has a lot more skills in subterfuge than I can imagine.

I pretend to be asleep as I wait to see what she does. She creeps into the bedroom on stealthy little cat feet and enough light shimmers in through the black-out curtains for me to see the steak knife in her hand. I have to bite the inside of my cheek to resist laughing. What does she expect to do with that thing? It might break the skin, but I would have her disarmed before she got another chance.

The bravery though? I admire the fuck out of it. She found a weapon and looks like she intends to stab me in the heart or slit my throat while I sleep. That conviction to harm someone takes guts, and it's deranged, but my cock rears its head, lauding her brutal instincts with an erection that rivals steel I'm so hard.

I don't move as she builds her courage. Her bare feet slap softly on the laminate floor as she minces closer. She puts most of the weight on the balls of her foot instead of the heel, and this choice in her gait tells me someone taught her how to sneak around.

Finally, she's right beside the bed, close enough that I can see the expressions as the play over her face. There are no hysterics. No drama. While there's a puffiness beneath her eyes that means she probably did have a good cry. Her jaw is firm with concentration, and her hand doesn't waver on the knife.

She leans over the bed, putting her face close so she can assess my features, and I wait without breathing to see what she'll do.

First, there is nothing as her eyes run over my face, just a pulling of her brows into a frown as if she's quizzically thinking about who I might be and how I fit into the tapestry of her life. Then she blinks, her head jerks back with a little shake as if she can't believe what she's seeing. She leans closer and her plump lips part around an indrawn breath. The muscles in her face tick, giving rise to a myriad of emotions: excitement, distress, hope, and regret chase each other from her forehead down to her lip. What I want to see is there though, recognition followed by yearning.

*She still misses me.*

I grab her before she has a chance to figure out what she wants to do with the information. She still might decide to stab me for breaking her heart, and I don't blame her. If I'd grown a pair of balls, this all could have been avoided.

Letting go of the Glock, I flex my core and lift from the bed, springing like a vampire from his coffin.

Valentina screams as my fingers wrap around the wrist holding the knife, while my other grips the soft flesh of her waist. She doesn't have time to react as I swing her around, replacing our positions in the blink of an eye.

Now she's the one flat on her back, one hand pinned up beside her head, and I'm the one looming over her, staring down into her shocked face.

Valentina's breathing is erratic. Her lush breasts tremble against her dark t-shirt as her big brown eyes swoop over me. I look down at her, wondering what she sees in this moment. Am I a fantasy or nightmare for her? Has she shoved me into a box labeled 'ex-asshole' or is there hope for us yet?

I've grown my hair out since we last met, and it hangs loose in front of my eyes like inky black spikes. Hesitantly, she pushes the strands back, holding them away so that she can look into my eyes. I'm not wearing prosthetics this time, and I look exactly as she should remember.

"Raith." She breathes my name like an ode. "It's you."

There is a wealth of emotion in those two words, but I would have to be deaf to mistake the topmost one that almost sings through her voice: joy.

*She's happy to see me.*

Valentina's lashes flutter, and her eyes fill with tears. My brave little dove dissolves beneath me. But she isn't sobbing or crying. She simply looks up at me as the tears run from the corners of her eyes, each precious bead soaking into my pillow. I lower my head, pressing my lips to taste the salt and sorrow. That I'm the cause of these and nearly lost her makes my chest hurt.

Struggling with my emotions, I try and get a grip on them. "Did you really think I would let you get married to someone else?"

I try for levity, but the humor fails me. Because this moment is one I've craved but told myself I could never have. I gave her up. I chose the job over Valentina. But I corrected the course, and here the two of us are, seeing if *those feelings* can exist beyond the false bubble of safety that we created for ourselves.

Closing my eyes, I reinforce my spine. When I again look into her eyes, I find Valentina's heart glowing in her eyes, as if I'm everything she's ever

wanted for Christmas and her birthday wrapped up in one. I never meant to fall in love. I never thought I could. But over the past year of dancing around Valentina, trying to keep her at a distance and failing, I learned the truth. Men like me are capable of love, and for me it's Valentina.

"I'm sorry." I can't remember the last time I said those two little words. Maybe never because regret is often a wasted emotion. You can't change what's already happened, but instead promise to do better. I promised my mother I wouldn't turn out like my father, and I nearly lost the most precious thing to me.

Fuck. Apologizing opens the floodgates of my emotions. I shake my head, closing my eyes against the intensity of what I feel for her.

"I should have helped you. I should have listened. I should have done a lot of things differently, but I promise if you give me another chance, I'll prove to you that I'm worth the effort."

Valentina closes her eyes, unable to speak around the emotions that are bubbling inside of her. She inhales a sniffly breath, holds it, and then blows it out in a half-laugh, half-cry. When she speaks, her words are soft, almost unheard. I might have missed it, but I'm hanging on to every nuance.

"I tried to hate you after we parted ways, but it didn't stick. Every night I wished you would come rescue me, or that I could find the strength to rescue myself." Her lashes tremble and more tears cascade down her cheeks. "Then when I decide to stand up for myself and be strong, here you are. If we'd both been brave, things might have turned out differently. But we're being brave now, aren't we? Together, and that makes all the difference."

Before I met Valentina, I wouldn't have believed in wishes or fairy tales. But now? Maybe there's something to it. Maybe the universe decided that I'd paid my father's debt and I'd done enough good in the world to deserve a woman like her. Maybe the torment she experienced growing up with Enzo as a father was her penance to make her strong enough to live by my side as an equal. I don't fucking know. All I do know is that this moment is magical, and if I die in the next five minutes, it'll be worth it because I had a chance to get to know *her.*

"I love you, Valentina."

The words are easy to say once I've accepted the truth. I don't expect her to feel the same way or say it. Because she's been treading water, trying

not to drown as the shadows and corruption and vileness of her world rose higher and higher. I've not had to live that life, watching, and learning and hanging on to every scrap of information I could get about her. I'm okay with that, because now we have time, or we will once I kill Enzo and Cesare.

Her beautiful brown eyes grow glassy with a new sheen of tears, and I let her cry as she burrows her face in my naked chest. Each dribble of wetness is acid on my soul, healing old wounds while leaving new ones behind. I will never forget the bleakness that overtakes me knowing that I'm in part responsible for this despair. Time slides by as she wrings herself dry. Then, she shudders as she purges the last of her sorrow. She inhales, holds it, and exhales, and it's the most beautiful sound in the world.

I slide down beside her, cradling my woman in the protective circle of my arms. As if we've done this a million times before, she wiggles close and rests her head on my chest. Her fingertips idly stroke the grooves that define my pectoral muscles.

"You're not upset that I've kidnapped you?"

"Fuck no." Her laugh bubbles up, half manic as she miles up at me. "Unless you're working for my father again. Then we might have problems."

I see her brows twitch together as the thought sobers her.

"No," I say as I press her palm into my bare chest. "I turned down the Riccio job, even though I really want to kill that motherfucker. While I've worked for your father before and Cesare too, you know this isn't a paid job."

Her probing gaze searches my eyes as if trying to decipher the secrets of my soul.

I lower my head and brush my lips across hers, giving her the truth in one whole chunk.

"I kidnapped you for me, and I'm never letting you go. You're mine."

Nobody is taking her away from me. I've stolen her once before, and I'll steal her again if need be.

# Chapter Twenty

## Valentina

I knew the first time I laid eyes on my blue-eyed stranger that he would be trouble.

How true it turned out to be. Because here we are, wrapped up in each other's arms. I know my father won't inform anyone but his inner circle that I'm missing, and eventually, he'll gather his allies to come hunt me. But I can't find enough worry to care. Because I'm right where I've wanted to be for months.

Raith's face has haunted me. The times we've spent together have fueled my deepest fantasies and most love-struck desires. That he's the first person outside of the Aunties to say those three magical words leaves me in a melted little puddle against him.

I know I'm very likely in love with him too, but he also broke my heart. I feel childish for holding it back from him, hopefully, he'll understand that I need more time before I give him access to the deepest parts of my heart. It's fragile, and I'm half-petrified I'm going to wake up and find out this is all a dream. Maybe I've lapsed into some strange dissociative state and made up a fantasy world where I'm not married to Cesare and Enzo isn't trying to kill me for my inheritance.

I stare up and into his face, and then trace the sharp wings of his eyebrows. He looks as if he wants to kiss me, except he seems nervous. As if he's still not sure I forgive him for everything that's gone on. I love that

he kidnapped me because it’s what I needed. I don’t love that he drugged me, but I understand why. He needed to move swiftly, and I would likely have been a liability. I hate that he broke my heart. However, that can be repaired with time.

Showing all those thoughts to him, his smile is grim, until I palm his cheek and draw his severe face down to mine. I kiss him softly, replaying our first and last one. Those fleeting, hesitant whispers of lips-on-lips and shared breath. Then I deepen it, stowing my tongue into his mouth. I entice him until he groans and crushes me into him. His tongue thrusts into my mouth, and I almost bite him as the pleasure that exists for us explodes into fire.

He sucks on my bottom lip, and the pulsing pressure causes me to arch against him. It’s not long before the pair of us are panting, breaking apart in a rush of gasped breaths.

His fingers press against my pulse, feeling the proof of life where it quivers beneath my skin. I hold his eyes, and he sees what I want in them. I make sure he does.

Raith groans and drops his forehead against mine, encompassing my entire vision with his diamond-bright eyes.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” No matter what happens, I don’t want to return to my family in pristine condition. We are finally alone. He gave me my freedom, *killing* for me to make sure the guard who was with me wouldn’t be able to inform Enzo. I should feel bad about that, but I don’t. He signed up to be a mafioso, and that is the outcome when dealing with criminals. You either kill or be killed.

“You risked your life for me, and I know you’re trying to be brave, but neither of us knows what the end game is. Enzo and Cesare aren’t going to let this go. They’ll want their revenge, even if they don’t want me back.”

*Occhio per occhio,* he whispered to me once, and that’s the way of the mafia. Always a one-up, trying to blind the world with one little revenge act at a time.

Raith dips his head in acknowledgment because he knows. He’s deeper into this business than I am, and I’d been born into it.

“I don’t want to go back to my cage. I need this. I need you.”

He drags his thumb across the flesh beneath my lower lip, and I flick my tongue against it. I seduce him until he presses it between my teeth. Our eyes are locked on one another as I purse my lips and suck.

“Fuck.” His eyes lid, growing heavy as he watches me.

I rake my fingers across his bare chest, and a few red lines appear on his skin. He has no visible tattoos, which surprises me. Most of the men who are part of organized crime are completely covered in ink.

His thumb slips wetly out of my mouth, and I cup his cheek.

“I need this.”

Pulling his mouth down to mine, I fling my arms around him with voracious passion. I dig my fingers into his long hair.

The resistance Raith felt shatters. He scoops me up from the bed until the pair of us all fall together, entangled with Raith on top of me. I fling my legs around him, digging my knee into his waist so that I can rub my throbbing pussy against his cock. He’s hard, like he always is for me. The thick length of him is probing at my core and driving me wild now that I know we won’t stop.

Raith breaks the kiss and presses his forehead against mine.

“You don’t know how badly I’ve wanted us to finish what we began in New York. I want to be ball’s deep in your hot cunt. I have thought of you like this for *months.*”

“Show me,” I pant. I’m burning up, and the only cure for what consumes me is him. The intensity between us is crazy. It has a mind of its own, controlling my body. I ride against him, biting his bottom lip until he lowers his mouth to my throat. He flicks his tongue against my pulse, tasting the ragged edges of it. Then he sucks, drawing the blood right up beneath the skin and leaving what I know is going to be a hickey in the shape of his lips.

It is so erotic because there’s no way I’m going to be able to hide that mark. I want him to own me like that. I need him to leave his fingerprints and bruises and love bites all over me.

“You have haunted me, Valentina, and fuck if I don’t miss the way you taste.” His eyes glitter in the half-light, dangerous and reminding me all over again that I’m with a man who kills for a living. But he also gave me mine back, and that weighs heavier on my scale of good-vs-evil by a whole fucking lot.

Raith moves suddenly, using his lithe body to flip us until he's on his back and I'm above him, half-writing my knees against his shoulders.

I gasp and push down on his chest, trying to wiggle away from what he seems to be implying.

He doesn't let me go. Raith hooks his finger into the waist of my sweatpants and tugs them down. I smack at his hands, but somehow, he's one-handedly holding me and stripping me at the same time. I squeal as my shirt goes flying into a bundle somewhere over my shoulder. Then he succeeds in getting my pants off. Before he gets me completely naked above him.

Crossing my hands over my chest, I look down where I kneel above him. My pussy hovers right near his chin. Gravity pulls down on my naturally heavy breasts, making them look pendulous instead of pert and perky. It's a position that makes me blush, and I tremble as my lack of experience rears its head. I want to be sexy for Raith, not a blushing virgin.

He presses his large, scarred hand into my waist, stroking soothing circles into the quivering flesh above my navel.

"You're beautiful like this."

His eyes take on a wicked gleam. "Now drop your arms. Don't hide your gorgeous tits from me."

He worships me with his blue eyes, and I get drunk at how they darken when he looks at me. It empowers me knowing he's the first man to see me naked.

Breathing deeply, I lower my arms, feeling them shake but giving him what he wants. Goosebumps blanket my skin as he takes his time, savoring every inch of my exposed body. Then his hand sweeps up, cupping the heavy weight of my breast.

"Beautiful," he rasps. "You're fucking beautiful."

I groan as his mouth finds my nipple, wrapping it around it with a suck that I in my cunt. My toes curl as I arch my back, giving him more flesh to taste. His tongue is a dagger, flickering and stabbing the hard tip of my nipple. His mouth pops as he moves to the next one, generously sharing the splendor with its twin.

"God, that feels amazing." He has me slack jawed as he nuzzles his dark head into my cleavage. He laves his meaty tongue along the silky flesh and peppers the plump tops with rough kisses.

His hand lowers, skittering across the softness of my belly and making me wriggle. Then his hands find my hips, and he digs his thumbs into the flesh above my pelvis, anchoring his hands and pulling me higher.

I squeak as he arranges me until my knees are pressed around his ears. I can't look down, not without blushing. Covering my eyes with my face, I whimper when he presses a kiss to my inner thigh.

"Open your eyes, little dove," he orders.

Fuck. I'm panting as I peek at him through my fingers.

"Almost. Be my good girl. Look at me."

I melt above him. The nervousness quivering inside me fades away.

His devilish side is showing his horns as he grins wider, and though it's only my mind playing tricks, I swear there's hellfire in his gaze as my mortal incubus gets a chance to feast.

"Now be a good girl and sit on my face."

*Holy fuck his mouth*. He's always so dirty when he gets turned on. Shivers jolt up and down my spine. Goosebumps spread to blanket my arms and legs.

I struggle to keep my eyes open because I *so want to be his good girl*, as his erotic words rush over me. There's one thing about hearing a pornographic actor say that it's hot and tasty and yes got me wet. Raith saying it makes me shudder, my pussy growing incredibly slick until I fear I'm going to drip on him.

I hesitate as every worry that a woman in my position faces rears their ugly, intrusive thoughts.

*I'm going to crush him.*

*What if I smell bad?*

*Fuck, how do I taste?*

Raith reads the concern on my face, and he short-circuits the doom-spiral of my thoughts with one swift movement.

He makes me. Raith uses my hips like handlebars and pulls me down, making a seat for me with his tongue.

"*Mio Dio*," I moan as his tongue wriggles into me. *My God.*

Then I gasp as his mouth seals over my sex, creating a gentle suction that I rock into. There is an inferno of pleasure pulsing between my thighs, and his lips are much cooler in comparison. The contrast in temperatures,

and the way he wriggles his tongue, scatters all cognitive thought until they fall off my lips in needy moans.

Raith's moans echo mine, letting me know with more than words how much he's enjoying this. I lean forward until my hands are on the headboard, using the soft, tufted fabric as my support. My mind reels.

Isn't it usually the woman in control in this position?

Because I am one hundred percent not in control. Raith has me at his complete mercy with how he cups my hips. At first, he urges me to grind against his mouth. Then as I start rocking, needing the connection that his tongue provides, he begins stroking my quavering flank, before sliding his hands around the large curve of my ass and getting a double-fisted grip.

Staring down at him through my lashes, I can barely see his handsome face. Only the tumble of his dark hair as it spreads out around him like some barbed-wire halo, and the intense glare of his icy blue eyes.

I can't look away as his look penetrates me in the same hot intensity as his mouth. He knows what he's doing to me. He's eye-fucking me. Whenever I think to break eye contact, his teeth glide across the tender button of my clit, making me squeal and threaten to hop off his face if he didn't have me clamped down atop it.

I can't last as he devours me. My heart throbs in my throat, large, and powerful and beating with a cadence the same cadence it has every night for a year: *Raith, Raith, Raith.*

"Please," I moan as my fingers tighten, turning my nails into claws. "Please, Raith, please let me come."

His eyes narrow, that *I'm going to bathe in your blood* gleam robs me of oxygen. But it's not my blood or death he wants to take, but my orgasm.

His fingers slip between my lower cheeks, gently rolling his thumb across the quivering rosebud of my back door. The dry, shocking sensation ratchets me higher, until he sinks his middle finger straight into my pussy. Since the first time he showed me *that movement*, I've copied it during my alone time. The climax Raith gives me when he hooks his calloused flesh across that hot spot of pleasure is harder and infinitely more intense.

My back cracks as I arch above him, severely wrought into a bow as he plucks on my strings, caught on this precipice of carnal heat with the only way down being by his grace.

He keeps me there, teetering on the brink. Before he gives me what I need. He sucks, and I scream as the epicenter of heat burning in my belly unravels in a million ribbons of liquid pleasure. I tremble as he licks me through the rest of my orgasm, before falling from the stars and crash-landing beside him.

He's ready to catch me, gathering me in his strong embrace.

He’s not done, though. Not at all. His cock is a monster behind his athletic pants, and I watch through hazy eyes as he hooks his thumb in the waistband.

I’ve never actually *seen* his dick. I’ve felt it, but getting to witness the length pop free? Oh God, I’m going to die. He’s going to split me right in half.

I’m such a slut because my thighs spread wide, offering my juicy, dribbling cunt to him.

“Ah fuck me, *kleine*.” His growly voice returns, and he stares at what I show him.

I push up on my elbows, loving the way he looks completely undone. His hair is in a cloud around his face. Heat flushes his pale cheeks. His mouth is wet with me and parted around his turbulent breaths.

“Do you want this, Raith? Do you want to be the first cock in my virgin cunt?” I don’t know where the words come from, but they are as dirty as his.

His dick bobs as more blood rushes into it. I like seeing the very physical response.

I tremble as I grab a pillow, copying a move I saw in one of my dirty movies. Shoving it beneath my bellow, I prop myself up for him. I don’t need to know what I look like because I do. Maybe not exactly the same, but my pussy is open like a flower, petals spread and glistening, the hard nubbin of my clit the stamen.

“Yes. I am going to ruin you, little dove.”

Raith kicks his leisure pants off and rises behind me. He is a Gladiator of old come to accept his winnings. He’s not hugely muscled anywhere other than the width of his shoulders. His body is classically tapered, with minimal body fat whittling down into that hot-as-hell V right where his abdomen meets his groin. Between his thighs, his cock bobs, the head ruddy and slick with his arousal.

His grin returns, and I groan as he loosely curls his fingers around the base. He strokes, and my pussy drips.

“You look like you are enjoying what you see.”

I can’t look away as he jerks his cock. “Yes,” I pant, “Because it’s mine.”

He closes his eyes, his hand tightening in a painful-looking cinch as if he’s trying to stop himself from coming after hearing me claim him.

When they open again, I know I’m in trouble.

Raith pins me beneath him. There’s no time for gentleness. The pair of us have danced around this moment for months. He should have fucked me in the Lyric. I needed him to, but he denied me. Denied us. He’s a goddamn pussy-tease.

Now, there’s no hesitation. Raith knows what he wants. Knows that once we cross this threshold there’s no going back. The contract is null and void, and he’s signing death warrants; ours or theirs.

He lines his cock up with my sodden hole, and I feel the thick tip of him. He’s so wide there, and I’m so very narrow.

“You are so hot and wet.” He teases the head against me, gathering my wetness all over his swollen glands.

I don’t want him to be gentle. I need this wildness, this insanity.

Raith is always attuned to my wavelength because he gives me everything I need.

He slams inside, and I scream as he fills me up. This is no inch-by-inch slide, but a battering ram plowing into my very depths. It hurts, and it feels so amazing. I cry out as he hilts himself, shattering my virginity and laying a claim in one piston-like movement.

When I think he’s as deep as he can go, he grinds deep, stretching my cleft down his cock. It’s almost too much, and I tremble as pleasure and pain fight in my body.

“I can feel your heartbeat spasming around my cock.” His forehead touches my shoulder as he gives me a moment to adjust.

Closing my eyes, I concentrate on the hot, raw pleasure that makes my pussy feel stretched too tight. Deep inside, I feel it. His cock flexing, twitching.

“I can feel yours too.”

Raith withdraws his hips until his soaked head is at my hips. Then he plunges in again, striking deeper. I rock my hips back to meet him, feeling my wetness drip down my legs from how he displaces it.

The moment for patience ends as he starts a rhythm that makes me scream. He uses every inch of his chiseled body to fuck me. Every muscle flexes as he saws in and out, picking up a swifter pace until his body drums against mine. The bedroom is filled with the slap of his flesh on mine. The headboard thunders into the wall. Raith has his cock buried inside me more often than not, and I go insane as he strikes that spot of pleasure that seems to exist right inside.

“Yes,” I moan. “Yes, oh fuck Raith yes.”

I’m singing his name, praying to him, as he pounds into me. He’s so heavy and hot atop me, crushing me into the softness of the bed beneath me. The pillows offset some of the harder thrusts, but not by much.

I feel my second orgasm rising. It rushes over me, making me feel as if I’m going to die. Because I am. I am going to have the best little death. I’d thought the orgasms Raith gave me with his mouth were the absolute pinnacle.

This one beats it. I cling to the sheets, feeling a scream burst from my chest as I cum for him. It detonates as my pussy squeezes, locking onto Raith’s cock. Then I’m over the edge, soaring higher than ever.

Behind me, Raith reaches his limit too. His bellow is as loud as mine, and not a second later he pulses inside of me. I can almost feel the velocity of his cum as he erupts, filling me to the brim and beyond. I’m overflowing with the mess we make. My pussy is greedy, because it tightens, holding him and his seed where it belongs.

Then, I collapse beneath him. The tension leaks out of my muscles, and I feel completely sated. I’ve never felt so relaxed and content.

Raith doesn’t pull out of me. He keeps me plugged with his cock as he patterns my head, my shoulders, my sweat-slicked spine with soft kisses.

“Are you okay?”

“I am buttery softness and gooey chocolate,” I murmur.

Raith laughs, and he slowly pulls out. He knows I’m not on birth control, and I quiver in delight when some of his slippery seed washes down my thigh.

I look over my shoulder. He’s admiring the mess he’s made of me, and there’s some primal, self-satisfied look written all over his face. When he catches me staring, he gives me a grin that sends the rest of my concerns splintering.

“Maybe this time it’ll take.”

I groan and bury my face in the pillows. The bed jostles as he slides against my side. I’m suddenly so sleepy. Raith has stolen all of my energy.

If he didn’t insist on making me the little spoon to the way his larger, muscled body curled behind mine, I would be a starfish in the bed.

“I love you, and any child we might have.” His voice ruffles my hair. “You’re mine, Valentina. Mine.”

Hearing *mine* in his rough voice relaxes me further. I close my eyes, sighing at the contentment which has burrowed into my marrow, wrap his arms tighter.

I’m right where I belong.

Forever.

# Chapter Twenty-One

## Raith

Valentina's breath flutters over my skin, and I don't flinch. I never let anyone get this close to me or linger after the deed is done.

She's now my strength and vulnerability, and I accept the chink in my mental armor with grace.

"Are you hungry?"

"Mm." Valentina wiggles as if deciphering the physical needs of her body. "Maybe a little bit."

"There's not a whole lot that's appetizing here." I wish I could offer her a five-course gourmet spread, but the best I can offer is ramen and protein bars.

"This isn't your apartment?"

"It is and it isn't. It's a safe house that I am currently renting from Cillian."

"Who is that?"

I grin mildly. "The head of the Irish Mob."

Valentina sifts up suddenly, and the blanket slides low, exposing her breasts and the prickly red marks my gruff left on her bronzed skin.

I lick my lips, remembering the taste of her pert nipples and how she reacted when I sucked on them.

"The Irish Mob? Where are we."

*Oh, right.*

“We’re in Chicago.”

Valentina sucks in a sharp breath. Her reaction is understandable. The Irish Mob and her father are not friendly. One can say they are enemies, but Cillian Quinn gives zero fucks about what Enzo Di Maio does or thinks about him.

“Am I safe here?”

“I would never bring you to a place that would cause you harm.” I wrap my arms around her and pull her tightly into my chest. She stiffens, and then slowly relaxes into her formerly tranquil sprawl. Her head brushes my chest, and I run my fingers along the bejeweled tops of her hairpins.

“We need supplies.”

“Are you leaving?”

“No, because you won’t be able to come with me and I’m not ready to let you alone.” I stroke a finger down the centerline of her face from between her brows to the dip in her chin.

“This beautiful face is too recognizable, and Enzo probably has access to facial recognition software. There are cameras everywhere cause it’s a metropolis, and like New York, everyone is watched.”

I grin down at her as she blushes at my compliment. “Luckily, we’re in the heart of Chicago, and there’s an application for everything.”

Being careful not to jostle her, I grab my phone and pull up a few delivery sites.

“Come here and help me shop for you sweetheart.”

Together, we digitally navigate through the aisles. She stops me a few times, and points toward an item or makes a noise and I add it to the cart. There’s enough perishable food in the apartment, and we’re not staying here long. But I add a few things I need. The one thing that I love about big box stores is you can get *anything* in one stop: clothing, food, shoes, ammunition, firearm components, and if you’re crafty enough, bomb-making materials. While I don’t need any of that right now, having that option makes the psychopathic side of my psyche happy.

Eventually, there’s a few snack foods, and things like deodorant and shampoo, body wash, a loofah, clothes, a jacket, and a pair of shoes.

“Who used to buy your clothing,” I wonder aloud as I set the delivery pin a couple blocks away. There’s no way in hell I’m letting a random person get this close to my nest.

Valentina shakes her head. “Aunt Sara.”

I grunt, but don’t say anything more, because the look she gives me, she knows why I’m asking.

“She was the one that always did it after my mother died.” Her breath hitches, and I watch her expression morph from sorrow to anger. “Enzo killed her.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Nobody does, I think. He’s been selling the ‘car accident’ story my whole life.”

“How did you find out?”

Her look is as hard as tungsten, and there’s an expression in her eyes I recognize. Not because I’ve seen it on her face before, but because it’s the flinty expression I get as I plan a hit.

“I asked him after he told me he planned on killing me on my honeymoon.”

“I don’t understand. Why is he marrying you to Cesare if he’s just going to kill you right after?”

Valentina’s smile droops, and the fragile bubble we built trembles and threatens to deflate as she sighs.

“That was always what he said, but I’ve since learned my fa—Enzo,” she cuts herself off with a growl and a little shake of her body. “He wants my mother’s money. It’s hilarious, but *the Company* and by proxy the *Camorra* and the *Cosa Nostra* are broke.”

I don’t know anything about Valentina’s mother. Maybe I should have looked more thoroughly into her past. But hearing about their financial struggles gives me an idea.

A really fucking evil one, and I’m suddenly glad I left a few party favors behind in New York.

“You’re a genius,” I murmur as I sweep her into my side. “I fucking love you. Do you know that?”

She laughs as I roll her onto her back, getting the sheets and goose-down filled comforter tangled around her lush body.

“What are you doing!”

“Kissing you,” I say, and then I take her mouth in my own. Her laughter and surprise turn into a breathy sound, and I drink each one down as if they were ambrosia.

By the time I break the kiss, her eyes glitter and her cheeks are washed with high color.

“I want to show you something, but I also don’t want you to be mad.”

Those beautiful brown eyes narrow with a mock-glare. “Why would I be mad.”

I don’t answer, but I pick my phone up again. This time I go to the secret folder buried in the background of the cell’s operation system. Then I flick up a camera feed and show her it.

“Oh my, God that’s my house.”

She tries to take the phone from me, but I hold it out of her reach.

“Just watch.” I flick through a few more, and her eyes nearly pop out of her head.

“You’ve been watching me?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“Since before the Lyric.”

Valentina mouth opens, but nothing comes out.

“I’m not sorry I stalked you. I’d do it again.”

Her expression changes, and suddenly it grows guarded and almost embarrassed.

“Did you…were you--” Valentina shakes her head briskly, and suddenly there’s tears in her eyes. She presses her fingertips to her lids.

I know what she’s asking, and I answer her gently.

“Yes.” Gingerly, I comfort her, bringing her close and nestling her cheek against my heart. So, she can hear how it beats only for her. “Don’t be ashamed of that, little dove. You are a brave, beautiful woman, and I’m glad you didn’t go through with it.”

She cries harder, caught up in a riptide of emotions I understand.

I swallow a touch of grit that’s building in my throat, and blink away the sandpaper sensation which is making my eyes water.

“I felt that way too, long time ago. Thought about it, stood on the side of some train tracks, and waited to hear if a locomotive was coming so I could step in front of it.”

Valentina’s head lifts, and her face is taut with the lingering notes of despair. Her cheeks shine with her tears, but she’s listening and that shameful look that led her to breaking down is receding.

“Why?” Her eyebrows furrow, and she looks so intent.

“I haven’t talked about this in a long time.” I pull her closer, pinning her against me so that I can savor her warmth and smell the sweet mixture of *me* and *her* as it perfumes her skin.

“I grew up thinking I had the best family. Just a warning, I’m an only child too. Sharing is a foreign concept, and I like to get my own way.”

“Gee, I’m so surprised by that,” she murmurs with a flash of sass.

I wrap my arms tighter, savoring the warmth of her.

“I grew up happy, felt loved by both my mother and father. It was just this normal life all around.” Bitterness contorts my lips. “It was all a lie, but I didn’t know that. Not until my father got arrested when I turned sixteen.”

Her dark eyes flicker up to mine.

“You have to really be into the whole serial killer thing to know about *the Phantom of Rhine*. He was a serial killer. He was convicted of killing five women in our hometown, but they suspect he might have upwards of twenty victims. Once he got caught, he wasn’t forthcoming.”

I rake my tongue against my teeth. “My mother wasn’t exactly forthcoming either. She maintained that he was innocent all the way up until he made a deal with the prosecution. He showed them one of his burial grounds in exchange for better lodgings. We don’t have capital punishment where I’m from.”

“Germany, right?”

I jolt and look down at her in surprise.

She smiles, looking smug at her accurate guess.

“How did you know?”

“You get this most delectable accent when you fuck me. You call me ‘*kleine*’. Didn’t you realize? You only speak it when you’re in some sort of high emotional state, meaning it’s your real language. The language of your heart and thoughts. The one that you hear in your earliest memories.”

I shake my head, feeling a rush of heat touch my throat. “No, I didn’t. I’ve never…I don’t lose control like I apparently do with you.”

Valentina’s hands rub gently across my chest, and her voice turns melancholy. “The language of my heart is Italian. That’s what I remember being the earliest thing I heard. My mother speaking and singing to me in the language of her home country.”

She shakes her head, and after she exposes her heart like that I'm helpless but to give her any answer to any question she wants.

"What does it mean?"

I feel so exposed, but I give her what she wants. "Little one. I call you my little one."

Valentina's lips form a soft, pale pink bow that reminds me of pink satin. "You know, I'm not little. You keep attaching the name to me. Little dove? Now Little one? Are you bli—"

I don't let her finish her self-deprecating remarks. I cup her by the face and kiss the words out of her.

"Don't you ever," I growl against her gasping mouth. "Don't you ever disparage what is *mine.* Forget all that bullshit your family told you that made you starve yourself."

Her eyes water, but she doesn't cry as she holds my fierce glare. "How did you know?"

"Because I have watched you every chance I could. You ate nothing but small, boring meals for months. And while there was a buffet of Italian Food at *Dolce Vita*, you ate a salad."

Valentina hides her face in my shoulder, and I wish her hair was loose so I could stroke through it. We bought things to remedy her hair-do situation, but that won't arrive for a while yet.

"Forget all of what they have made you feel. You do not need to be small and hide from me. I see all of you, *mein ein und alles*, and I think you are perfect as you are." I seal my devotion to her with my kisses, until she emerges from hiding her face in my chest.

I caress her gently as she grows comfortable in my side. She fits perfectly, tall enough that neither of us have to strain to accommodate the other, short enough that I can tuck her beneath my arm and guard her.

"What happened to your mother?" she asks after a while.

I close my eyes and swallow thickly. "After the plea deal and he was moved into inmate detention, I started getting into fights at school. Monheim am Rhein is this beautiful town right on the coast of the Rhine River. It is big, and yet also very small, because everyone knew what my father had done."

I swirl my thumb along the backside of her shoulder, still hearing the taunts and jeers on the playgrounds. The insults and fights while I walked

the hallways in my high school.

“After I beat up this punk who kept harassing me, my mother was horrified. She thought that I was like my father.” I fold my bottom lip beneath my top teeth, then free it with a slight hiss of disgust.

“She made me promise to never turn out like him, and then she went to sleep and never woke up again. Afterward, I couldn’t help but obsess over what she said. Was I like my father? Did I have the same sickness?”

Valentina’s fingers tighten on my naked stomach, and I drink in the small touches, and the little sounds she makes as I allow a glimpse of light into the dark foulness of my soul.

“I sat there at the tracks for a while, and then I went to her grave and promised her that I would not turn out like him. Funnily enough, I didn’t earn the reputation as being the *son* of the *phantom*, I became the *Wraith of Rhine*, but I didn’t - and don’t - kill for pleasure. I started out just running drugs for the local gangs, and then found that I have a particular way of viewing things that unfortunately has made me an excellent killer.”

“But.” I hold my finger up. “I don’t kill women and children, only other criminals.”

Valentina blinks at me, as if she did not expect that caveat. Then she laughs softly. “You’re *The Punisher.*”

It takes a minute for me to realize she’s referencing a particular crime fighter, and I ponder the comparison.

“Yes,” I finally say as my grin widens. “I can accept that.”

“You know,” Valentina says with her smoldering brown eyes locking on mine. “I would love you whether you were just a normal, jaded old hitman, and not a secret superhero.”

My breath sticks in my throat as I realize what she says. She doesn’t look away, and while she doesn’t repeat the words, I know she means them just the same.

“Good, because I mean it when I said you’re mine. You aren’t getting away from me again. Now, let me show you what I’ve done.”

# Chapter Twenty-Two

## Valentina

I don't know if it's Raith's upbringing, or that he's a hitman, but his ability to compartmentalize is astounding.

His story makes me want to weep, but I also understand too the things that despair, and desperation can cause one to do. I feel calmer knowing that he's not judging me for my black moment, but that he has felt those wings of woe and mind-numbing sorrow too.

I snuggle into his arms as he holds the phone up, and I see the video feed of Enzo's house. I flush thinking that he's been watching me all this time, apparently only a block or two away. I should be mad. I should feel as if my privacy has been invaded.

I don't, because if I had thought about it, I'd have put a tracker on him and stalked him all around New York.

"Here," he says, and I realize he's rewinding a video. "Your security forces were terrible. Who hired them?"

"Cesare, I think most of them were his men."

"They swept the limousine for explosives, but they never checked me for anything. This is after I kidnapp—rescued you."

I bite my inner cheek to keep from smiling.

I watch as Enzo comes *roaring* back to the mansion in his Bentley. A Lincoln Town car prowls up behind him, both parking in the circular drive.

Enzo storms into the mansion, and though I can't see a close-up, his face is maroon with anger. God, I wish that the cameras were HD.

Raith forwards the video, and the time stamp shows as this morning.

The driveway is filled with cars. Enzo called in his army. Even with Cesare's backing, it's not a large one. If either wants to bring the full force of the Five Families down on their enemies, they need to hold a vote with all their Consigliere's, and I don't think Dario will go for it.

"Keep watching," Raith murmurs.

He pulls *another* phone from his bag of tricks. I hear the light tap of his fingers as he makes a call, a bit more tapping, and then he ends it.

Suddenly, the screen flashes bright white with light, and I almost leap out of my skin as the camera shudders.

"*Mio Dio*, what was that!"

"A bomb," Raith says carefully.

"You planted a bomb in my—Enzo's house."

"No," he says with a grin that steals my breath away, because it's his murderer's smile that attracts and scares me. "I planted three very small devices in his garage."

I cover my mouth with my hands. I'm not horrified. I'm…

*I'm delighted.*

I start giggling.

"You blew up his cars?"

"Yes. That boom you saw was the fuel tanks popping. That explosion should only have taken out the garage and maybe scorched a bit of the house. He had millions invested in those cars."

"I know. He was so proud of them."

"Well," Raith drawls with a sexy smile. "I hope he can sell twisted metal."

Raith fiddles with the back of his phone, and he pulls out a small square chip, breaks it in half, and tosses the plastic pieces onto the nightstand.

He looks up at me from the intense tilt of his eyelashes. "You're not angry?"

*Angry?*

"No, I love it. That… was perfect."

We snuggle in bed together, until Raith gets a text informing him that his delivery person is on his way.

“I need to go meet with him.”

I grumble as Raith gently shifts me off his chest. I don’t move as he slips naked out of bed, but I do leer. Because his behind is a work of art, the muscles taut and defined and I have this wild urge to bite it. I don’t, but I covetously watch as he pulls on his athletic pants, rummages in his go-back for a clean T-shirt and slips a pair of boots on but doesn’t do up the laces.

He leans over the bed and pins me with his determined blue eyes.

“Do you know how to use a gun?”

“Yes, my father didn’t like it, but Uncle Elio took me a few times to the range after Aunt Giulia asked him to.”

“Good. If you hear anyone trying to get into the apartment that you don’t think is me, take a gun from the bag,” he nods toward the duffel at his feet, “And shoot them.”

I swallow around a lump in my throat that tastes like fear. “Okay.”

“I won’t be long.” He searches my face, and then cradles my cheeks and kisses me as if I’m the most precious thing he’s ever known.

Then he leaves, and I’m left alone snuggled deeply in the bed. It feels decadent lying about, but I’ll steal these quiet moments when I can. Because it won’t be long before Enzo regroups and comes with both barrels blasting.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

## Raith

Leaving Valentina behind in my bed is bittersweet. It's everything I've wanted for the past year, but things still need to happen to ensure her safety, and to a lesser extent, mine. I don't inform her, but my longevity isn't paramount. Hers is everything. It's the one secret I'm going to keep from her as long as I can. I might be a boogieman in the criminal underworld, but I'm still mortal. All it'll take is a sniper's bullet and I'll be pushing up daisies. I know how easy it is to execute someone from long range.

Coming down to brass tacks, while plotting this scheme over a few short hours, I realized the truth.

At the end of this, I might not make it out alive.

But that doesn't mean I plan on being stupid.

It takes me only a few minutes after exiting the apartment building to jog to the pick-up spot. The delivery person parallel parks in front of the building, and I give him a wave. A minute later, I'm laden down with plastic shopping bags. They're not heavy, mostly bulky.

Not wanting to be away from Valentina any longer, I jog back.

Valentina is sitting in the middle of the sectional when I step into the apartment, and she jerks slightly at the noise. As if she isn't expecting me to return so soon. Then her gaze alights on the plastic bags, and she practically leaps off the couch.

“Let me help you!”

Crafty wench doesn’t want to help, she just wants to get into the bags and the gifts I’ve bought for her.

I juggle them around, placing some food items on the tile-topped island that is used as a border to separate the pieces of the open-space floor plan.

I hold the bag that she wants high, nearly over my head so she can’t reach it.

She eyes the bottles inside, and then looks at me with that cute pout twisting her lower lip. I should spank her for thinking she can manipulate me with that look, and I probably will, because it fucking works. But I’m not letting her get what she wants so easily.

“There’s a trade here. If you want this,” I shake the bag so that the plastic rustles. “You need to give me a kiss.”

Color flushes into Valentina’s cheeks, and she looks so sexy and adorable standing before me in bare feet, her hair still swept up in a bridal hairdo with pearl-topped pins stuffed into her hair. But her face is freshly scrubbed, and the scent of chicken noodle soup is savory in the air, informing me she’s had something to eat during the time I was gone. The *coziness* of the moment stuns me.

“You’re blackmailing me with shampoo?” Valentina plants her hands on her hips and scowls up at me. I fucking love that she’s tall. Her head comes up to my chin, and I don’t have to move or contort myself into a hunchback to kiss her.

“It’s payment. I brought you presents, now you,” I point my finger at her. “Pay me.” Thumb to myself. “With kisses.”

I’ve never witnessed a person melt before. I drink it all in, savoring the change that’s come over her in the past twenty-four hours. The air of despair that hung over her like a funeral shroud is evaporating, revealing the bright, sunny sweetness that drew my attention the first time.

Her luminous brown eyes widen, and then grow dark with pleasure. Her blush brightens in her cheeks, and her whole demeanor softens as whatever nervous tension or residual angst evaporates from her muscles.

She steps into me, stroking her fingertips across my stomach. I’m wearing a black down-filled jacket, and I hate it because it blunts the sensation of her caress.

“You could ask me to kiss you like a normal person,” she murmurs from the back of her throat, making the words trill.

“What in this situation makes you think I’m normal?”

Valentina cocks her head, looking like an exotic bird. Then she grins and wraps her arms around me. “You got me there. This whole situation is fucked up. But I can say that for my entire life too.”

I cup her by the hip and draw her closer. “All that’s over now. If you want a white-picket fence, two-point-five kids, and a dog, I’ll give it to you.”

Her cheeks twitch as she laughs. “With a side of weekend killing?”

I flash her a merciless smile and a shrug. “We’ve got to keep it interesting.”

Valentina laughs as she closes the distance. Hearing her humor and delight causes my heart to kick over. I haven’t had control of that organ since I made her cum in a dingy cement stairwell almost a year ago. Now that I’ve fucked her and filled her tight twat up with my seed, it’s acting as if being in *my* body is too much in its bid to be closer to hers.

Her laughter quivers into a soft sigh as her mouth brushes mine. The two of us stand there, entwined in each other, caught in the riptide of that all-consuming emotion and intensity that has led us to this point.

I lower my head and deepen the kiss, trying to take away the unspoken words.

*I’m scared*, her mouth reveals.

*I’ll never let anything happen to you*, mine promises.

But I don’t know how to make that *true*, or how to fix it so that she won’t be heartbroken when it’s all said and done.

Will she be able to move on if I die?

Whatever the outcome is. In the end, I just want her to be happy.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## Valentina

The kiss devastates me. It's both raw and tender, the type of kiss that every little girl dreams of on their wedding day. Where their bridegroom avows before man and God to love you and only you *forever.*

It nourishes the very core of my love for Raith and makes it bloom. While the roots that grow deep into my heart and soul are strong and hale, it's not bright, shiny leaves that furl from the canopy. But skeletal branches which are perfect for hanging men. They rattle and shake and create this quivery feeling that I'm not going to get my happily ever after. That while the universe and some invisible, bad-ass fairy god-person might answer my silent prayers, there's going to be a catch.

Isn't that how wishes are? You get what you want most, but it's served up twisted until you almost wish you never made it in the first place. The feeling of an approaching cataclysm isn't about me and Raith. His love nurtures mine, and together I feel as if we can move mountains.

But that's the *now.* It's the future that threatens us because no matter how I try to look into it, I can't see what lurks beyond our protective bubble. In a way, that's how it's always been with us. The two of us sneakily snatching minutes from Father Time, when we shouldn't even have seconds together.

The kiss breaks but I don't move from the protective circle of Raith's arms. I nuzzle under his chin, holding him tightly. His chin rests atop the massive mushroom pouf of my hair, finding a position that won't earn a stabbing from the million hairpins in it. A minute passes as his nearness quells the worst of my fear. Then I pull away and look up at my *wraith.* His blue eyes are heavy-lidded, but his surprisingly long, midnight-black lashes don't disguise the hungry gleam in his eyes. It's like catching a glimpse of the center of a fire; impossibly blue and bright before it mellows into a darker shade as it cools.

I want him again already, even though I'm tender between my thighs. I cleaned up hastily after he went to retrieve our goodies and scarfed down a bowl of soup, but a longer shower – this time with hair washing – is due.

Holding out my hands, I flutter my lashes up at him. "Paid for, now give me my shampoo."

"Let me make you something better to eat than just soup, is there anything you want?"

I look toward the mound of bags that he carried in, and my stomach rumbles when I see a particular dessert box. But he's a man, and while his hair is longish in how it brushes the collar of his jacket, he has *no fucking idea* how much hairspray itches when it sits overlong on your scalp. The beauticians nearly shellacked my skull with the shit.

"Yes, but I really want to wash my hair." Curl maintenance would take an instruction booklet to explain to him, and even then, unless he has hair like mine, he wouldn't get it. If I hadn't had the Aunties explain it to me, I would probably hate my hair and not love it like I do.

Raith shakes his head. Instead of passing over the bag, he takes my hand.

I look down at our interlocked fingers. "What are you doing?"

"Helping you."

"Helping me do what?" My brain isn't connecting because it sounds as if he wants to…

"I'm going to help you wash your hair. You have a thousand pins in it. Come on."

He doesn't wait for me to agree. Raith tugs me behind him, and I follow him while wondering what fantasy-world I just stepped into. Men in my life don't offer to help maintain one's beauty standards. They just assume it

happens. You walk into the bathroom. *Presto-change.* You're beautiful when you walk out.

The plastic bag rustles as he sets it on the pedestal countertop. It's a small bathroom compared to the suite-sized ones back at Enzo's mansion. There's not a lot of room for the two of us, but we make it work. Raith has me sit in the tub, and he arranges himself side-ways on the closed toilet seat.

"Tell me if I hurt you," he murmurs in my ear. Icy hot shivers of pleasure dart up-and-down my spine. I tremble and stifle the tears that threaten to ignite in my eyes at how he takes care of me.

Gently, he starts removing the bobby pins. Most of them are the plain black metal kind since they anchor the hairdo at the base level. The top layer are all pretty ones of pearl and Swarovski crystal.

"Why are you doing this?" I stare at the tub's white built-in walls, trying to blink away the tears that threaten to spill free.

'Why shouldn't I help you? You'll be in here for an hour if you do this all yourself." Another handful of bobby pins clatter into the bag that held my shampoo bottles.

"This doesn't seem like man's work."

Raith's fingertips dig through the mass of curls, and for the first time in a day, there's gentle pressure on my scalp and not the painful stabbing of blunt-tipped hair pins. He massages my head and I melt backward and let him have his way with me.

"Is that something Enzo would say?"

I sigh softly, and he doesn't need my answer. Because he knows. My father was never meant to be a 'girl dad'. He would have raised a new generation of arrogant, cock-sure mobsters if he'd been lucky enough to have boys.

"Your father's wrong. Taking care of you is a pleasure. I get to touch you." He punctuates his statement with another root-deep massage that has my whole body splaying out, limp with simple pleasure. "And you feel good."

"You need to teach a course," I murmur. "Making their women feel good is a foreign idea to them."

"They are missing out," Raith says, and I whole-heartedly agree.

He divests me of at least fifty bobby pins by the time he's done. It took that many to secure the heavy weight of my hair. Slowly, each tight curl tumbles free, bouncing against my shoulder, but frozen in a kinked curl by the hairspray clinging to the strands.

"Tell me if I pull too hard." He takes the wide-toothed comb I asked him to buy, and he slowly works through small sections of my hair at a time.

Contentment laps through me, and I close my eyes and savor the sensation of someone playing with my hair. More than a someone. Raith. *My Raith*. This is almost as good as having his mouth on my pussy, but I'll never tell him that, because he won't understand the relaxation he's bringing me as he kneads away the tension I've held inside for months.

By the time he's done, he's managed to brush through the snarled, glue-like mess. Leaving me with a reasonably untangled canvas with which to work at.

Raith sets the comb down and nuzzles into my neck. His lips are searingly hot against my throat.

"I would join you in the shower, little dove. But I would make you dirtier than when you got in." His growl penetrates all the dark, sultry depths of my body. I shudder because my pussy thinks that's a great idea.

He pulls away, and I lean back against the tub's edge far enough to look up at him.

His eyes are burning blue as he stares down at me, both of us pretending I don't see the enormous erection blowing out the crotch of his trousers.

"Enjoy your bath, *kleine*."

Then he leaves me alone, wishing he'd join me, grateful he doesn't.

Thirty minutes later, I feel like myself again. I carry the towel back into the living room, and the wide-toothed comb with me, slowly separating my wet locks and gently patting them dry.

Raith is sprawled out on the couch, asleep. I'm not worried about waking him, because he has the ears of a bat, so fretting about it is a waste of energy. But I stop just a few feet away, hoping I'm out of range of his insane hearing and cat-like reflexes, and simply 'mire him. It's more than admiration because he looks so peaceful and *beautiful* when this relaxed.

Despite what the misogynist twats that my father rules think, men can be beautiful, even while simultaneously being rugged and masculine. Raith

physically embodies that juxtaposition, but only when he lets his guard down. Then the almost savagely prominent contours of his face are clearly in focus. He has cheekbones for *days* and a jawline that could support the Empire State Building.

I can't draw a straight line, but right now, I wish I had some kind of artistic skill so that I could memorialize Raith in charcoal and paper.

My sigh of appreciation breaks the smell, and I to look at the rest of my supplies.

Behind me, I'm aware of Raith's eyes opening, slitting like a big jungle cat assessing his territory for interlopers. His stare burns holes between my shoulder blades as I sort through the bags that remain on the countertop.

All the toiletries that I could need are there, in travel size, along with a few changes of clothes and a six-pack of cotton underwear.

I close my eyes and say a prayer for my girlie bits. *Good* underwear is expensive, and these are not it. But I muster on until I have a pile of clothing – and a packable puffer jacket the delivery person somehow squished at the bottom – ready to get me through the next few days.

A clamshell of brownies is what I spied earlier and snatches my attention now.

There's no way to open that type of container quietly. It pops and makes angry noises before it lets me have my prize. Biting into it, I almost groan as the taste of gooey chocolate melts across my tastebuds. My appetite has been terrible, and the Aunties were watching every morsel I imbibed. Oh, how I've missed desserts.

I get warm tingles and butterflies when I think about what Raith said in the bedroom. How he *sees* me, and I don't need to starve myself for some ideal version.

*You're perfect just the way you are.*

Fuck this man and his mouth.

Swallowing the first bite, I turn to look at Raith, catching him with his eyes open, and find him captivated as he watches me devour the brownie. He looks intense, but then again, when doesn't he? He always looks as if he's about ready to fuck someone up.

*Or fuck someone.*

I shush my libido and turn around, enjoying my treat with eyes closed.

"You're making sex noises over a brownie. Should I be jealous?"

I jump, because somehow Raith is right behind me, as if he's teleported. Turning on my bare heels, I hold his eyes as I snip another chunk of the soft dessert off with my teeth and let a happy sigh rush free.

"Should you be? I don't know. I can't seem to remember any sounds you might have made me make for you." I'm messing with him, because I can, and I wonder how he'll react to it. Aunt Giulia hated to be teased. Aunt Sara was indifferent.

Raith is not.

His eyes narrow. His supple lips thin into a line, and his nostrils flare as if he's angry. But it isn't anger that makes his hands bite *hard* into my hips. It's not anger that has him picking me up off my feet as if I weigh nothing. And it sure as fuck isn't anger that has him spinning us both around in a dizzying blur of the kitchen surroundings as he sets me on the center island.

I squeak in shock as he wedges his big body in between my thighs. Until I feel *him* right against that double-stitched seam of fabric that's been teasing my cleft all day.

And oh, he is hard. So very, *very* hard.

"You want to play games, *kleine*?" He's freer with his Deutsch now that I know, and I am learning to love the rough cadence to it. It's clipped, almost staccato at times, but it spills out in its own rapid-fire rhythm whenever he gets going. It deepens his voice, turning it into a growl that comes from the very depths of his throat.

"I didn't mean to insult your man…"

He doesn't give me a chance to finish my protest. It's a half-hearted one as he presses closer, searing my nerves with the sensation of his thick, hard body gliding between my thighs.

His head drops, and I'm caught up in the sapphire-blues of his eyes. "I thought I had a good girl on my hands, but you are a bad girl, aren't you?"

Then he slashes his mouth over mine, and he steals the taste of the chocolate off with an intense, rough, punishing kiss.

Raith's arms wrap around my waist, with his long fingers draped over the swells of my ass. Then he shoves them underneath me, cupping my ample behind as he half-levitates me above the tile.

I groan and lose myself in the unloosed tidal wave of his passion. Sinking into the kiss that threatens to devour me piece by piece, down to my carnal little soul.

He is an addiction, and I don’t think I will ever, ever get enough of him.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## Raith

I devour Valentina's mouth. I suck on her bottom lip, until she's making *better* noises than the ones she baited me with.

Who makes O-sounds while eating a brownie?

My girl, apparently, and I want to feed my cock between her rose-petal lips to see if she'll like the taste of it as much as she likes her brownie.

Valentina clings to me, and the two of us ignite once more. I don't think I'm ever going to get enough of her. I've craved her for a year, and even after finally sowing her sweet, cherry-ripe pussy with my cum, I need more.

Now that her hair is down, I take full advantage. I tangle my hair into her damp curls, and I yank her closer. She nearly leaps into my arms, because she's so eager to be loved, and I'm more than willing to saturate her with my attention.

Holding her tightly, I'm not afraid to leave bruises on my treasure, because she isn't breakable. I'm finding that out with every minute I spend in her presence. She's resilient, tough, and won't back down from a challenge.

Her lips open when my tongue makes an appeal for entry, stroking along the quivering juncture between the two of them.

A soft, feminine little mewl vibrates on my lips as her mouth widens. She jerks against me with a wanton roll of her hips when my tongue taps hers, trying to lure the slick muscle out to play with mine. Then she arches

closer, pressing those ample tits into my chest. Her nipples are hard, teasing me with their perkiness even through two layers of fabric.

This time it's my turn to groan. I gather her tighter, and she obliges by locking her long legs around my waist.

Jesus. Fucking. Christ.

My cock is harder than stone as she rocks her hips against mine. Instinct drives her to seek friction against her hot little core. I can feel the burn building against my crotch. I can't remember the last time I thought to fuck someone on the kitchen countertop, but right now. It makes the perfect position.

I lay her flat atop it, arranging her by the pressure of my hands sliding and smoothing beneath the under swells of her round ass.

The tips of my fingers brush the back curve of her cunt, and I cup her from behind. Stroking her needy pussy with my middle finger traveling up the seam of her pants, until I can feel the tell-tale wetness seeping through the fabric. I should give her a reprieve, let her get a chance to recuperate. But now that I know she's wet? I can't. Wild horses wouldn't be able to pull me away until I get my dick in her again.

I break the kiss, breathing labored as if I've run a marathon.

Her cheeks are flushed, the color like antique coins. Her mouth is wet and swollen. And she's clinging to me, making my chest swell to accommodate the sudden growing of my heart into an almost uncomfortable largess.

"Look what you do to me. I'm going to fu—"

A chime pierces through the lust, and my head jerks around as I arrow in on the sound.

*Fuck.* Someone is in the hallway.

It's difficult, but I pull away from Valentina, because that noise means trouble. I don't let her fall. She's not steady at all, but I slide her off the countertop and hold her close. Even though my eyes are on the doorway, my deeper self is focused all on her.

"What is it?"

I look down. Her languid eyes meet mine, and I watch her pleasure recede, swiftly shoved away as she keys into my tension.

"We have a visitor, and I don't know who it is. I need you to grab a weapon and secure yourself in my room."

The one thing Enzo di Maio did right for his daughter was drill her in how to handle danger. She doesn't protest. Doesn't question why I want her to barricade herself in the with a gun. She just does it. Her bare feet flash as she scurries out of my embrace, across the kitchen, and into the living room before disappearing down the hallway. I hear the bang of the door, and then she's safely hidden away.

I turn toward the door.

This floor is empty save for this apartment. Right now, it's mine, and has been for the past two years. Though I only ever spend a random day here and there throughout the month. The isolation and lack of neighbors is to keep any collateral damage to a minimum. Cillian hates to see innocents get caught up in mob business. I have sensors all along the hallway, and the one nearest to the elevators chimed, informing me that someone is where they don't belong.

I haven't heard another alert, but the person or persons on approach might realize that their stealthy cover is blown and are regrouping elsewhere.

I slide side-ways into the living room, keeping an eye on the reinforced, double-steel door, and then grab a gun I keep secured to the underside of the coffee table. I have weapons stashed all over the place. Valentina hasn't been in the fridge yet, because she would probably have questions about why there's a Ruger in the cheese drawer and a tactical KA-Bar where the butter goes.

Popping the clip, I check the load, and smack the magazine back in with a brisk *snap*.

Then I go see who is daring to huff at the big bad wolf's door.

I don't step in front of it. Because that's just asking to be shot through it. There isn't a peephole. While the person outside can't see in, they can see light and shadows. I've shot a dozen people through a door's peephole just by ringing their doorbell and waiting for them to look through the fisheye. There is a camera, with a feed running into the monitor installed in a panel right beside the door.

That is, in a normal house or apartment, the second weak point. Why have a super secure door if the walls supporting it are made of drywall? When Cillian renovated this floor, he reinforced the walls. They are as

strong as any exterior one, made of cement and rebar that will take a semi-automatic to chew through. Not a wayward small caliber.

Tapping on the security feed's touch screen, I bring up the video cameras that surveil the area. The vicinity right outside of my apartment is empty. But a few feet away, caught in between two of my alerts, is a man I recognize. He's smart. His hands are up. Fingers locked above his head, waiting for the all-clear to approach.

Thumbing the safety on, I stuff the gun into my belt and turn on the intercom.

"What do you want, Sean?"

"The Boss has a message for you."

I sigh and thumb a newborn ache of tension that's knitting itself together above my eyebrow. "I'll hear it."

"There have been some inquiries, both on the official and unofficial channels from our friends in the Big Apple."

Fuck, they are fast. They managed to track the cars in less than a day. There is definitely a mole in the CIA that's on *the Company's* payroll if they got access to the satellite feeds in under twenty-four hours.

"What is your bosses view on that?"

"He doesn't like those *daegos*, but he also doesn't have any reason to deny them. Especially with the approaching anniversary, and now the Italian's are sniffing around, and Paddy's Day coming up. It is an inopportune time for war," Sean says without hesitation. I can hear Cillian's annoyed drawl in the quick cadence.

That sounds like Cillian. He is the least blood-thirsty Mobster I've ever met. That's not saying he won't get his hands dirty. He just prefers to do the bulk of his business via politics and back-alley deals.

I glance at the clock that's ticking down the seconds at the top of the video screen. "How much time do I have?"

"Officially, thirty-six hours. Unofficially, there's probably an envoy flying here now and a caravan driving in behind them. You have a few hours before they land if they are flying private." *They probably are*. "The Boss knows about the girl." *Fucking surveillance cameras*. "And if he knows, it's only a matter of time before they know."

I close my eyes and blow out a sigh. This is all expected, I had just wanted more time before moving into phase two.

“Tell your boss I owe him.”

Sean keeps his arms above his head as he backtracks through my less lethal traps, and waits for the elevator to arrive on my floor.

I turn off the intercom and go in search of my girl.

I rap my knuckles on the door. “It’s me.”

The sound of something scraping across the floor on the other side reverberates out to me before the door opens and I look into Valentina’s dark eyes. I search her face, trying to get a read on her emotions.

No tears. No hysterics. Just heightened awareness, a tiny tremor to her hands, and excitement burning in her skin.

*I fucking love this girl.*

“We need to move,” I say grimly.

Valentina’s calm eyes rove around the bedroom, as if remembering the hours we spent wrapped in each other, pretending that the world didn’t exist and our problems were gone.

Her jaw tightens and she nods. “Let me get my things.”

# Chapter Twenty-Six

## Valentina

It hasn't even been a day, and already my father's goons have picked up my scent. I try not to let it get to me, but it's so damn difficult when I know what happens at the end of this road.

*Death.*

A whole lot of it. Probably mine, and definitely Raith's. As I gather up the clothing and toiletries he'd so recently purchased, I try to ignore that invisible clicking tock that ticks loudly over our heads. As if the Angel of Death is tapping his scythe-tipped wings against the window. Letting me know that all of this is meaningless. We'll be found, and then we'll pay. It's as easy as that.

The tears don't quite come from nowhere. I've been holding them back since Raith sent me into hiding with the gun. Now, as I thrust panties and shampoo into a plastic shopping bag, they come roaring out of me. I hunch over the bed, clutching a fist to my diaphragm as if that would keep the sobs in.

I'm not silent enough because suddenly Raith is right there. His strong arms enfold me, drawing me into the sanctuary of his arms.

How ridiculous is it? In the eyes of the law, he's my kidnapper, though both of us are now thinking of it as a rescue. He holds me like I'm the most precious thing in the world and whispers his love into my clean hair.

He doesn’t spin me around. Nor does he tell me it’s going to be okay like the Aunties would have when faced with my tears. He just curls against my back, pressing me into his chest. With how I’m hunkered, his face is near my shoulder. The emotional storm batters me. I can’t quite tease out the trigger that has me sobbing my heart out. Only that I’m so damn *sad* because this house of cards is all coming down.

Eventually, the deluge of tears tapers off into a trickle, and then finally stops. I hiccup softly, trying to inhale a soothing breath after I purged It all with my sobbing.

“Do you feel better?” The hint of Raith’s accent teases my ears. His voice is thick with emotion, as if he’s impacted by my tears more than he would ever be able to say.

Closing my eyes, I nod. I’m unable to trust the strength of my voice.

Raith turns me into him. His rough fingers brush along the sharp line of my jaw, and he smudges away the remainder of wetness glistening on my cheeks.

“I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I almost choke up again. Slowly, I blink my eyes open, letting him see the tortured longing that’s all written on my face. Every hope and dream and desire that Enzo and Cesare slowly snuffed out. All that I want burns inside me. It’s a simple wish, one I have given to the universe every night. *I want to live.*

“Ah, *kleine.”* Raith curls his big hand around my nape and presses me into his chest. I’m just tall enough that my lips skim his shoulder. Weaving my arms around his waist, I clutch at him, until where he begins, and I end fade away. We stay there for minutes we don’t have, breathing each other in.

“I’m not worried for me,” I whisper into his shirt. His muscles tighten beneath me, flexing into coils of flesh-wrapped steel. “I’m worried about what they’ll do to you.”

It’s so hard to believe in happily-ever-after when your whole life has been pre-ordained for you; you can’t change a book’s end after it’s been written. Regardless of Raith plucking me out of my life, I know my ending.

I look up into his intense eyes. They sear straight through me, piercing my heart with the truth that shines brightly in their depths. He loves me, and

he'll do everything in his power to make sure I survive. Even if it's his sacrifice.

Raith's fingertips press into the tender nerves and sinews above my spine, stroking them so gently that it almost aches from the tension bundling me all up in knots. Slowly, I relax beneath his petting, until he pushes me away and looks down into my face.

"I'm not so easy to kill." His smile isn't arrogant, just confidant, and I borrow some of that to fortify myself with. "Are you ready to go?"

I nod, and grab a couple bags, while Raith grabs a few more. He holds his hand out to me, and I take it. Together, we leave the apartment hand-in-hand.

Raith is watchful as he steps into the hallway. He has the bulk of his body angled in front of me, positioning himself like any good bodyguard would. Ready to take a bullet if a gunman happens to pop out shooting.

I don't know *why* I thought this apartment building would be a normal one. Because I realize, as I scope out the long corridor between us and the elevator, that there isn't another door or alcove or anything but a long stretch of gray-carpeted hallway and matching wallpaper. Raith doesn't have any neighbors. There's just his two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment in an industrial-feeling building.

I don't ask questions as we reach the elevator. This too is an anomaly. Because there's only one direction once we step into the car.

*Down.*

"The Irish really have their shit together." I don't mean to say it, because there's probably a camera on us right now, but in the wake of my emotional outburst I'm without a filter.

"Cillian is good people." He casts a heavy-lidded look at me. "I spend a lot of time in Chicago."

There are quite a few things I know about Chicago, though *obviously* I've never been. The key factor is that it's under the unyielding fist of the Irish Mob. There hasn't really been a *Cosa Nostra* or *Camorra* presence in the Windy City in decades. Whenever a *capo* gets a wild hair up their ass and tries to muscle into the Irish's territory, it ends badly for them.

The smell of gasoline and engine oil fills the small hallway as we exit the elevator. A few feet away, a battered metal door leads out into an underground garage. Though there are only a handful of cars utilizing the

wide, sprawling space that's sunk into the building's footprint. There's an abandoned air to it, and I wonder how many people use what feels like an enormous apartment building. Is it just one apartment per floor? That the Irish treat their enforcers so well gives them a mental boost in my mind.

I don't need to ask how Enzo got onto our trail so swiftly. I've heard him brag on more than one occasion about the various government officials, both stationed in NYC, and in Washington, D.C., who are on his payroll.

Raith's long strides snip at the distance between the doorway, leading us deeper into the garage to a car that's probably stashed in the back.

I pull us both to a stop. Me first, and then by tugging on his hand.

"There's something you need to know." I expect to feel like a traitor as I choose to spill one of the *Cosa Nostra's* biggest secrets. But I don't feel anything except scared. Scared that if we go through with this plan of driving out of here in a car, that in another twenty-four hours there won't be a strange man in the hallway giving Raith a head's up, but my father, Cesare, and a retinue of gangsters battering down whatever bolt hole we've wriggled into.

Raith turns to look at me. His gaze is unreadable in the shadows of the poorly lit garage. His eyebrow shoots up, a dark mark asking the question.

"My father. He has men from those three-letter agencies that are supposed to be working to put organized crime away, but are really in his pocket. If we just drive out of here, they'll be able to track us." I search Raith's gaze, silently praying that he won't laugh at me, and that he has a second plan in place.

Raith grins at me, and like it is each and every time, it is the scariest fucking thing I've ever seen. Because it transforms his whole face from dangerous, to absolutely feral. My pulse ratchets up as I get caught up in that psychopathic smile.

He tugs me closer, and I totter into his arms. His mouth dips low, and he snags my mouth in a kiss that replaces all that fright with a swish of heat. What a strange time for a kiss. Maybe it's a *thank you* for saving our asses?

The kiss breaks slowly. I open my eyes, and see Raith still has his closed, as if he's savoring the taste of me on his tongue. Eventually, his lids lift, and I'm ensnared by his celestial-blue irises.

"Any Boss worth the title has inside men, little dove. That's why we're not driving out of here. It seems your father has access to things he

shouldn’t, like a satellite or two in orbit that the CIA controls.”

CIA? Satellite? I blink up at him, absolutely bewildered at the information, or that the *Camorra’s* reach is that…big.

How are we going to survive this?

“If we’re not leaving by a car…” I look around the garage. All I see are cars. Are we walking? Isn’t that going to be the same problem?

Raith grins again, though it’s not his scary *I’m going to kill everyone* smile. This one is secretive and almost joyful.

He tugs on my hand, and I obediently follow him.

“I know something they don’t know.”

I want to ask him what, but the answer is soon revealed as he stops in front of a corrugated steel door that seamlessly blends with the grimy cement walls around it. There’s a palm-print scanner beside it, ultra-high tech when you consider the door it’s securing. The thing looks rust-eaten on the edges, as if it would take just a burly shoulder ramming into it to bust it open.

That feeling of being tossed in a rolling wave returns as Raith presses his hand to the scanner. Green lasers trace the contour of his palm, before the light turns from red to green, and the door unlocks with a click.

“I know Chicago’s tunnels.”

Then Raith leads me into the dark underground, and I feel my fear slip away as hope burgeons inside of me.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## Raith

Watching life return to Valentina's eyes and face is worth the staggering amount of money I'm about to spend to secure her safety.

For a terrible moment back in the apartment bedroom, I watched as that dark bleakness gobbled up the happiness in her bedroom-brown eyes and dimmed the vitality of her bronze skin. Each tear she shed, every breath-quaking sob, was a knife to my heart.

She's looked troubled since we left the apartment, haunted and twitchy. I'm still surprised she coughed up her father's secrets so easily. But it's not really a secret. Though the *names* of his informants are well-guarded. That they exist, isn't. Cillian has men too, all playing spy games that the general population thought went out with the Cold War.

It's the same thing with the tunnels. They are a twisting labyrinth carved beneath Chicago's urban sprawl, and are the remnants from old train tunnels, abandoned freight tunnels, and subterranean streets. At first a chaotic spread of openings that don't seem to have any connectivity between them, they had been constructed piecemeal over a century ago. Before being further turned into a rat's nightmare during prohibition, when the gangs and mobsters kept the liquor flowing right beneath the government's noses.

Nobody really has an accurate map, because going into certain parts of the underground is dangerous for one's health. Just as there are gangs above ground, so are there below, many made up of the mentally ill and homeless who bond together to make a unique type of neighborhood. A portion of the tunnels have been rezoned, highlighting the underground's history, and becoming the Pedway, a pedestrian walkway system that links dozens of blocks in the Central Business District.

We're far enough away from there and going the opposite way.

A few steps past the locked door, I jump down onto the long-forgotten tracks of the old railway system. Swinging my duffel around, I open it and pull out a flashlight. Flicking it on, I span the beam down both sides of the tunnel, illuminating our way before holding my hand out for Valentina.

She looks absolutely stunned in the light. Her eyes are huge as they sweep the decrepit area.

"I'm Alice," she mutters beneath her breath. Taking my hand, she hops down to my level and lands nimbly beside me.

"Alice?"

Fitting her hand back in mine, I guide us west. I'm enjoying the feeling of her fingers lacing through mine a bit too much. It's a small thing, especially after how much I've had my hands on her, but it's intimate. A thing that long-term lovers do.

She squeezes my hand, and it fills me with a calm that clarifies my desire to hunt Enzo and Cesare down and make them pay for the trauma they've given her.

Soon enough they'll pay. Right now, I'm one man and they will have dozens. When we're safe, I'll be balancing the odds in my favor.

"In Wonderland. Alice in Wonderland. You're the damn white rabbit leading me into chaos."

I chuckle because I'm loving her comparison. "I guess this does look like the tunnel she falls through."

"Right? You see it too." Valentina relaxes beside me.

I force myself to keep my pace with hers, shortening my stride. She's not a small girl. Neither petite nor thin. But her legs are still not as long as mine are, and I don't want to exhaust her. Not when she might still be feeling a minor haze from the ketamine and the powerful orgasms I've

given her. She hasn't had a proper dinner in days now, and the guilt of that is thumping me in my chest.

Twenty minutes later, roughly a mile away from the apartment building, I lead us to a set of stairs that disappear upward, where another biometric-locked door seals the way out. The light is brighter here thanks to the halogens set into the cement, but I don't turn off the maglight until we're through.

Stepping into a brighter, and more modern garage, I keep Valentina behind me. This one serves a cluster of local businesses. There are always people coming-and-going, and one more car pulling out into traffic won't be noticed.

"Wow," Valentina says as we weave through a maze of cars, avoiding the occasional security camera mounted in the corners. Glancing around one of the final corners, I watch the camera loop back around, giving us a thirty-second blind window, and step out with Valentina.

I hurry us along until we reach the spot I rent. My car sits beneath a protective thermal slipcover. I can feel Valentina's eyes on me as I gather up the canvas and pull it off the BMW. The vehicle isn't too flashy, it's a few years old, shiny black with chrome wheels that'll blend in with every other young, hip professional who is flush with cash in this area of the Loop.

Typing in the pin on the door's keypad, I sweep my arm out as if I'm Valentina's chauffeur again.

"You're amazing." Valentina shakes her head as she looks up at me, and then slides into the buttery-soft, cognac-leather seats.

I bend down, depositing the bags in the small back seat.

"You haven't seen anything yet," I whisper against her ear. Her laughter carries me around to the driver's seat.

Dropping in, I fire up the engine, listening to the engine purr.

"What would you like for dinner? It'll have to be fast food, I'm afraid."

"God, I haven't had a good, greasy burger in so long."

I hate that her family has been borderline militant about her food intake, all to try and turn her into some society bride. Are they blind? She's gorgeous with all her curves.

"Your wish is my command."

Valentina flushes a pretty shade of pink. Her slim, deft fingers slip across the center console, and she tucks them on my thigh. It's a sweet,

rather innocent gesture.

And it makes my cock harder than iron.

“How about Burger King?” she says with an impish smile. “I could smash a Whopper.”

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## Valentina

A fast-food burger shouldn't taste *this good.* But damn if I couldn't eat a whole second one.

I groan as I pop the last bite in my mouth. Raith doesn't even bat an eyelid as I chomp in the seat beside him, filling the very expensive interior of his BMW with the fumes of French-fries and grease.

"Feed me another one."

Raith is a focused driver, keeping both hands on the wheel as he navigates the treacherous-looking loop. It surely lives up to its name because we navigate about Chicago's infamous roundabout, the car's velocity turns into what feels like a slingshot as we alter course drastically.

I squeeze my feet against the floor like I would if I were on a roller coaster, holding myself steady as Raith takes the curves like a rally-car driver.

Plucking a fry from the grease-stained paper bag, I hold it up to Raith's lips. His teeth flash, hinting at a slightly crooked couple on the bottom, as he chews it all the way out of my fingers. I am amazed as I watch him. Everything he does is economical. From the controlled motions of his hands and body, to the way he simply makes each morsel of food I feed him disappear with a quickness. The only time he seems to slow down, and savor things is when he's with me. Then time seems to stop, and he worships me from head-to-toe.

My head still tingles from the way he gently combed out my curls. I haven't felt so cared for in *forever.* Nobody but my beautician ever brushed my hair, and having it played with is one of the best feelings in life.

Heat thrums through my veins, and I'm tingling as I grab another fry and hold it to his lips. It's so intimate to feed him from my hand. I would have assumed it would feel too motherly, because a whole grown ass man doesn't need to be hand-fed. But somehow, that *ick* factor doesn't materialize. Instead, I feel as if I'm taking care of him. Not that he needs it, but what man doesn't enjoy a woman's soft touch?

"Where are we headed?" I ask as to put a brake on my thoughts and shove a fry into my mouth.

"I have a place just outside of Chicago in Winnetka, on Lake Michigan."

He shoots me an inexorable glance as he offers me that tidbit. I guess if I knew Chicago real estate I would be impressed by that location, or maybe it's a run-down, creepy old fishing shack that should be condemned. Both are options, but I really don't care what it turns out to be. As long as I'm safe and with Raith, everything will be okay. *For now*.

I'm not looking any further into the future. For the first time in a long, long time, I'm in the present. I know it's a coward's way because the past sucks and the future is likely worse. At this exact moment, I'm content, and I don't want that to change. If things do go as badly as I fear, I want to immortalize these moments. So that, in those dark hours, when I'm feeling a certain way, I can dust them off and *remember.*

*Remember Raith and how he makes me feel.*

*Remember the way his eyes flash when he's surprised or happy, full of those hot emotions that thaw his murderous gaze out until it smolders just right.*

*Remember how alive I feel with my hand on his thigh and the rumble of the car's engine beneath me.*

*Remember how he says, 'I love you'.*

The tension gently recedes from my muscles, and with a belly full of warm albeit unhealthy food, I feel sleep tugging on my eyelids. I doze as Raith drives. After a while, I hear a phone ringing, and it pulls me just above the black line of unconsciousness. But I'm still all wrapped up in warmth and heat, lulled into contentment by the rhythm of the car's wheels

eating up road. Though that dissipates as I hear the caller's voice quietly fill the car. Raith must have it on the speaker so that he can talk hands free.

"An Eastern Bluebird told me a funny story about a missing princess. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that?"

I crack an eye open, catching the look Raith glances over at me, and grinning when he sees me looking.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Snack."

*Snack?* I look at Raith because I couldn't have heard that right.

"You're a shit liar. Don't think I didn't talk to Cillian before I called. He told me you have a girl with you." The man named Snack is laughing. It takes me a few seconds to hear it over the odd crackling sound that is distorting the sound.

Is he eating potato chips while he's on the phone? That's what it sounds like, and I can't believe my ears as Raith sighs.

"For fuck's sake man, put the snacks down. If I didn't know you're completely against drugs, I'd think you had the munchies."

"I do it because I know it irritates you." There's a loud sound as the bag is crumpled up, then all is quiet.

This time the man's voice is somber. "Tell me you didn't kidnap Valentina di Maio."

"I didn't kidnap Valentina di Maio," Raith deadpans.

"I know you've been completely obsessed with her for the past year, but you can't just go and kidnap women before their wedding day. You might like to think you're some Viking Berserker, but how is this going to end? The girl is probably scared out of her fucking mind."

I can't listen to this man – Snack – dress down Raith anymore.

"Actually, he saved me. I'm quite happy to be here with him," I say in my best peppy-princess tone. If I were really kidnapped, I wouldn't sound so happy, right?

"Ah," Snack clears his throat. "I take it you're the missing *Camorra* princess?"

"I really hate being called a princess. Why can't I be a Queen?" I voice my disdain, drumming up all the hauteur that I've learned from the Aunties. "It's demeaning to think that I'm not in charge of my own fate."

Snack doesn't need to know that until Raith rescued me, I wasn't. My assassin has given me a new lease on life.

“That makes this easier and also complicates things,” Snack murmurs.

Raith’s fists tighten on the wheel, but that’s his only outward sign of unease. “What are you hearing?”

“You have around fourteen men ready to fight a war on Irish soil heading your way. A jet owned by one of the *Cosa Nostra*’s shell companies is about to land.” Snack rattles off the details like he’s reading from a menu.

“Only fourteen?”

“Raith,” Snack chokes with a laugh. “What are you planning.”

“Don’t worry about what I’m planning. Worry about what I need.”

Snack is silent, but we both wait with bated breath before he finally asks. “What do you need?”

“A welcome hug for the caravan before they cross over into the state. Keep an eye on the jet and have D tell me where they hole up. After that, the usual – a *blitzkrieg*.” Though Raith doesn’t shrug, I hear the mental version of it.

Snack whistles, and then he giggles because it seems he gets giddy over violence. “I wish I could be there to see this.”

“You hate the sight of blood.”

“That’s true too.” There is a swift sound of clicking, then Snack says. “I’ve sent the notification out. You’ll have what you need before the Italian’s land. Though it’ll be close. Let me know if you need more firepower. You take care of your little cannoli.”

The call ends, and I’m left staring at Raith’s profile. I don’t know which nugget of information I should pounce on first.

*Cannoli?*

*What is a blitzkrieg?*

*Who is Snack?*

What I say is, “A welcome package?”

Raith laughs, and my heart takes flight on the lilting sound.

“Yes.” Raith nods as if what I’m asking is expected and normal. Even as what he says is beyond the threshold of it. “I’m going to blow up their caravan.”

I press my lips together, somehow not at all surprised by his scheme. Because I’ve seen firsthand what he did with a couple of devices. “You really like explosives.”

“I do.” He looks devilish as his grin hikes up the edges of his killer smile. “They make a big boom and clean up a lot of messes in one swoop.”

“How are you going to blow up Cesare’s caravan?” I know the cars they are probably driving. Each one comes with military upgrades, including bullet-proof glass.

“With a warhead packed into a drone.”

I blink because I must have heard wrong. “A what?”

Raith coughs and taps his thumbs on the steering wheel. “Snack has connections, and one of them I’m pretty sure is a black-hat operation buried in your government. He gets anything he wants, and he either was sent as payment, or commandeered one of the drones they’ve used in Afghanistan that shouldn’t exist, to sit on the edge of Illinois’ state line. When he sees the Caravan…”

His voice trails, leaving my mind to fill it in. *Big boom*.

I look out the window, watching the sun fade on the horizon. Its rays are forlorn and distant as the light flickers through the passing background, making the scenery look like a muted flip-book; the winter decay draining away all the color.

“Do you think they’ll be on the plane or in the car?” I know I sound forlorn, but I can’t help it knowing that Enzo and Cesare are on their way. If a bomb could take them out before they find us. Hope flickers again, brightening and dimming and brightening again in an unsteady pulse.

Raith surprises me as he flicks on his turn signal, filing the BMWs interior with the steady click. He takes the next road and veers off the highway. I watch him pick his way through a narrow, gravel-laid path, and then he turns the car off.

He shifts sideways in his seat, skewering me with a harsh look. I don’t know if he’s mad, upset, or about to punish me. But my heart kicks up into a quivery cadence as I return his stare with a wide one of my own.

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

## Raith

I hate how lost Valentina sounds. Her mood has shifted since Sean informed me that we'd been found. I need to see her smile again, and I know the best way to do that.

It's full dark now, and very few houses exist on this stretch of roadway. It's just fields of undeveloped tract land waiting for the growing construction boom to reach this far out. Gravel growls under my tires as I lead us further off the road. Then I put the car in park and look closer at Valentina.

Her cheeks are pale, and the occasional reflection of headlights that sweep over our secluded spot enhances the subtle shadows beneath her eyes. That type of fatigue comes from weeks of sleepless nights. She's twenty-pounds thinner than when I first met her, and I hate the way it has carved deeper hollows beneath her already high cheekbones.

Her suffering snaps the last thread of control I've had on myself. It's almost an audible sundering, and it frees something in my chest, making it easier to breathe, and think, and scheme.

I am going to destroy them, and everything they ever loved. The downward slope I'd been so afraid of is lined not with bones and blood, but the glistening tears that look like the faceted topazes of Valentina's eyes.

"Come here," I say, and she comes.

I haul her as deeply into my lap as I can. It's a tight fit. The car is small, and Valentina is all tits, hips, ass, and long legs. I reach down for the seat's lever, twist it, and both of us go sliding back as I pluck her out of the seat and get her to straddle me. She wiggles as she adjusts, and I stifle a groan as the swell of her lush bottom grinds across my groin. Around her, my cock is always in a heightened state.

Her eyes are whiskey dark in the shadows, but I can see her clearly.

I cup her face, bringing her close, so that I can breathe my air into her lungs, and fill her with life and vigor.

It's a new vow that forms, one more potent and long-lasting than the one I made at my mother's grave. "I promise you, with everything I am, they will never touch another hair on your head."

Her eyes shimmer with tears, and she tucks her face against my neck. She doesn't sob so much as leak her sorrow out quietly through her eyes. I rub my hand along her spine, moving them in soothing circles.

"Do you believe me?"

"I want to," she whispers, and my heart cracks at how small she sounds. "But I know what he's capable of. What they both are. You're one man."

"I should spank you for doubting me," I murmur, because I can't yet tell her that I've called in reinforcements. Not until I know who is answering the call that Snack sent out. "You know who I am, little dove. I'm your father's worse nightmare."

Valentina's laugh is watery, but I've brought her up a few leagues out of the depths that were sucking her down.

She pulls up enough so that she can stare down into my face.

"Your ego is out of control," she scolds.

"It's not. You just aren't used to men who are capable. Darling," I say with a sad shake of my head as if I'm informing her of dreaded news. "Your father is not. Cesare is not. In Little Italy, they are big. On a global scale? They are not. They are snakes pretending to be dragons. I am not impressed with their abilities."

"You're insane," she whispers, but now she's smiling again.

I wrap my hand against the side of her throat, teasing her pulse with the edge of my thumb. Her life force thumps steadily against my fingers.

"Maybe," I agree, because to do what I do, you need to be a bit crazy. "But what does that make you?"

“What do you mean?”

I grin and slide my hand around until my fingers slip like pale-skinned serpents coming to coil in the luxurious cascade of her hair. I sift a section away from the wavy mass, and slowly wind it around my finger, admiring the silken texture and the soft fragrance of shampoo that’s stirred by my touch.

“You are in love with crazy.”

Valentina bites her lip, but she doesn’t confirm or deny it.

I gather a few more strands in my fist, until I have a bunch sliding through the spaces between my fingers.

“Doesn’t that make you a crazy lover?” I continue with an arched look. “You are at least a person who kisses crazy.”

Valentina’s breath ratchets up into a soft gasp, as if remembering the kiss that was interrupted by Cillian’s man. Her gaze is suddenly on a circuit, tracking from mine, dropping down to my lips, and up again. She wants me to kiss her again, but I’m enjoying dragging her along lust’s edge, savoring the way she’s warming up beneath my caress. She is so receptive to my touch. I’m barely playing with her hair, and she’s already feeling the fire.

One of the things I love most about her is that I don’t have to hide who I am. She accepts the darkest parts of me, like now. When she thinks I’m crazy for planning a counterattack on the boogiemen of her life but understanding that it’ll happen in the near future. She knows I’ve killed, sometimes within minutes of me making her cum for me.

And she accepts it all.

Rewarding her, I sink my fist in her hair and tug her toward me.

“You see me. You know the depths I will go. Trust me,” I hiss into her ear.

Valentina shudders against me. Her soft, beautiful tits tremor as she fits herself like a missing puzzle piece into my chest.

I press my nose against her cheek, inhaling the clean, sweet bloom of her skin. I lower my face so that she can see the fracture her presence caused. The cold-blooded killer now overlapped with a single-minded obsession. She is my world, and I will destroy anything and anyone to make sure she is safe and happy.

“Trust me,” I whisper again. “Because I will burn the whole world down just to see you smile.”

I conquer her mouth with a kiss as I slam my mine overtop of hers.

Valentina savors life because she's been denied the chance to experience it for so long. This includes kissing. There's no hesitancy in her movements. She is the juiciest, forbidden fruit, ripe and tantalizing. She comes alive in my arms, meeting me with matching intensity.

She gasps and breaks the kiss as her round bottom smacks off the steering column and makes the horn toot.

"What are we doing." Her breathing is erratic, and her eyes are unfocused as she spreads her thighs.

"I'm making you feel better." I don't let her overthink it before I grip her curvy hips and pull her down, introducing that hot V between her thighs, to my raging cock.

We both groan as she settles atop me, and I need to close my eyes. Because the view of her from top of me is erotic. I'm in danger of making a fucking mess, and all she's done is settle atop me.

"You are so hard." Valentina's words are all wrapped up in innocence, but when she's aroused, her voice takes on a husky cadence. Rich with wonder and trembling with the pulse-pounding pleasure that has my heart thumping hard in my chest.

I coax her hips in a roll, urging her to rub her covered cunt across my dick. "You make me this hard. Every time I think about you, I need to adjust myself and, little dove, I have thought about you in really bad times."

"Like when?" Valentina's eyes glimmer in the low light, their shine picked up by the occasional flash of headlights from the cars passing a few yards away. Their proximity makes her thighs pulse around mine, little shockwaves of excitement from the risk that we could get caught.

"Like when I was about to put a bullet in a Russian spy, and I remembered how you nearly squirted for me the first time I ate you."

Valentina gasps, and she shudders in pure delight. She is such a dirty girl and I reward her for such lewdness with the glide of my nails roughly stroking down her arced spine. I grip a fistful of her thick ass-cheek, before lifting my hand and cracking it across the meat of it.

"Then there's the time I was stalking a member of the Jurez Cartel, and I remembered how you came on my fingers when I fucked my cum into you. Fuck, I've never let a woman get close to my seed. Yet with you, I had

to resist putting the head of my dick in your sweet virgin pussy and shooting every drop into you.”

Her head whips back with a gasp, her mouth all bruised and swollen from my attention.

“Raith,” she pants.

“Don’t act like you didn’t like it.” I growl at her. “Because you’re dripping in my lap.”

I hold her needy and squirming atop me for awhile longer. Drawing out the pleasure before I pull away and look into her dazed face. The dark thoughts which had dimmed her light have receded, leaving her soft and molten and eager for me.

“Be my good girl and keep my pussy warm for me. We’ll be home soon.”

Valentina protests as I help her rearrange herself back in her seat. Her color is high, and she trembles as she straps the seatbelt in again.

I start the car and wait.

She looks over at me, a question on her lips.

“Did I stutter?” I narrow my eyes and her reaction is instant when she gets caught up in my glare.

“Holy fuck,” she breathes. “You’re serious.”

“I’m always serious, little dove. Now get to petting.”

# Chapter Thirty

## Valentina

*He is unhinged.*

And *mio Dio*, do I love it. I look at him as he pins me to my seat with those icicle eyes. My whole body is one delicious throb, with the epicenter focused between my thighs. I pant as I slip my hand beneath the waistband of my sweats and close my eyes when I stroke my finger down my cleft.

"Eyes on me," he orders.

They jerk open, and I watch the intensity on his face as he follows the concealed, but obvious rhythm of my hands.

It's so hot having him watch me touch myself, that I struggle not to completely melt all over the front seat.

"Good girl, now keep that up and I'll give you a big, fat reward."

I bite my bottom lip, using the edge of pain to keep myself from climaxing. Seeing how biddable I'm being, he puts the car in drive, and returns to the highway.

Occasionally, when he's on a long stretch of road, he looks over at me. Another time, his hand slips off the wheel and he cups his fingers overtop mine where they are tucked between my thighs. Ensuring by feel that I'm toying with my sodden quim.

I catch the gleam of lights reflecting off the surface of water, Lake Michigan if I remember, and enormous houses that look like silent, isolated

sentinels on their plots. The whole place must be a woodland, because I can barely see flashes of estates behind the mature pine trees and naked oaks that will cover the view up come spring.

Wow. The antique elegance of this area rivals the gauche splendor of Enzo's mansion. *This* is what wealth buys. I get distracted by the beautiful colonial home we pass. Raith doesn't punish me for it, because I see the faint grin when he notices my appreciation of the area.

Which is, as he turns off the road and up to a gated driveway, I realize is his neighborhood.

"You can't be serious." I can't see beyond the granite walls. But with how far they sprawl on either side of the gate, the land is considerable. "This is your home?"

"Were you expecting a shack?" His eyes lid as he clicks the gate-opener. The pitch-black sheet of metal slides into the stonework, and behind that steel pillars sink into the ground. The only time I've seen such security at a *gate* is when Enzo had to go to the FBI building a few years ago.

I shake my head because I don't know what I expected. This marriage between the gilded-age mansion and cutting-edge security wasn't it. My father has been Don Di Maio my whole life, and he could only dream of getting his hands on this type of equipment.

Raith clicks the button again as he drives through the gate, and they shut behind us with only the softest whirr of mechanicals giving away their movement.

The driveway slices straight through the center of woodland, behind which possibly the most beautiful mansion I've ever seen sits.

I lean forward, wide-eyed as the landscape lightings spotlight something that shouldn't exist here in random-as-fuck Illinois.

"French is the word you're looking for," Raith murmurs, obviously enjoying my reaction. "It's a smaller replica of the Château de Fontainebleau."

Raith's French lilts off his tongue, and I wonder just how many languages the man speaks.

"You really should re-name yourself the chameleon," I mutter, and then shake my head as he pulls around an enormous, three-tiered fountain that has horses spitting water into the illuminated basin.

I wave my hand toward the mini castle. "How?"

“The owners had more money than sense? It sat in disrepair for decades, and a developer wanted to come in and tear it down.” Raith shrugs as he parks the car right at the entryway, with a Juliette-style balcony above it so those who walk around the rotunda’s second floor can easily overlook the grandiose grounds. They are fallow now because of winter, but I can imagine how lush and beautifully they’ll be in bloom.

“So,” I say as if this is the most natural outcome for a hitman. “You bought it and made it into a showpiece.”

Raith grins at me, and there’s no small hint of pride in his expression over my reaction. I wonder if he’s ever had a chance to show it off before. But that would be a security risk if people knew where he lives, so I doubt it.

*I’m the first person to see his home.*

“Something like that.”

Raith is out of the car, and around to my door before I can even unclip my seatbelt. Everywhere I look, I catch some new detail that makes me feel as if I’m in the French countryside, and not a few yards away from Lake Michigan.

He opens my door and holds his hand out for me.

Unbuckling my seatbelt, I swing my legs out of the BWM and take it, letting him lift me to my feet. But he doesn’t let me stand on them. I barely get a toe-tip on the granite tile when he sweeps me up in his arms in a bridal carry, and my heart simply ceases to function properly.

I look up at him as he holds my eyes captive with his. Raith carries me easily up the limestone stairs. The man does not like keys, because there’s another touch screen to type a code in. He punches it in with one hand, and the door unlocks. Then he carries me over the threshold, and I gasp at the twin staircases that sweep toward the second floor. There’s a stark aesthetic to the decoration, from the elaborate wrought bronze railings and gothic-looking chandelier to the cream-and-champagne colored tiled floor and the smooth paneled walls with every bit festooned in crown molding. However, it doesn’t detract from the architecture. It’s an understated opulence that begs the eyes to continue to enjoy the small alcoves and works of art and sculptures that seem to linger in the recesses. Nothing by itself is in your face and bold, but taken as a whole? It’s majestic and grand.

He doesn’t let me linger, or even set me down. He keeps carrying me as he takes a left at the base of the stairs, and strides through a set of French doors and into what I can only assume is his den, or maybe an extra living room.

He sets me down on a richly embroidered, velvet couch with a chaise-lounge attached. It’s so soft I sink back into it.

Raith looms above me, Lord of the Manor, and me his oh-so-willing captive. Then he lifts his shirt up and off, and I tremble as the fire he stirred during the drive reignites.

His body is a work of art, exhibiting the classical lines that would have made Michelangelo ache to sculpt him. Fuck, he inspires me too, and I have no artistic talent at all.

The lust that’s been at a slow burn during the car ride flashes into a fire.

I don’t look away as he keeps me pinned with his eyes. He hooks his thumb on the top of his relax-fit pants. But he doesn’t show me what I can see straining the fabric. He teases me, sliding the waist down, and down, but never enough.

“You look like you want a taste, little dove.”

I don’t even hesitate. “Yes please,” I whisper.

I thrash myself free of the couch’s clutching softness, and wiggle to the edge. I am his most eager and avid student as I gaze up at him.

“Keep looking at me like that, and I’ll make sure to put a baby in your belly,” he growls.

I shudder. His voice does things to me, as does the filthy things he says with it. I shouldn’t want his baby, but like the very first time he muttered those words to me, I grow soaked over the idea. Nobody would ever get between us again.

He teases me as he lowers his trousers, exposing a lickable slab of chiseled muscles that funnel down into that gorgeous furrow which defines his pelvis. The pressure of the fabric pushes his cock down, exposing a hint of the root and the very fine prickles of his man-scaping. He’s mostly bare, and when his cock suddenly springs free from its fabric imprisonment, it looks impossibly huge. Rigid veins crisscross his length, engorged from the blood that’s throbbing through them. A pearl of pre-cum beads on the crown, and my eyes catch at the twinkle of light that makes it wink.

He loosely slings his elegant fingers around the base, and lightly strokes the thick vein that I can see bulging lengthwise up the pot-bellied underside.

I can’t look away. My heartbeat is trembling in time with the pulse that’s making his dick jerk before my eyes. You know that saying dickmatised? Yes. That is me.

“Come closer, little dove.” His voice is all bear-like and growly again, allowing his accent to shine through. I love that I’m the only one who gets to hear his real voice. It reminds me that I’ve completely captivated a man who the wider criminal world fears.

I wiggle closer, until my bottom is nearly hanging off the seat cushions.

He steps closer, and then taps the meaty head of his length on my bottom lip. A drop of wetness beads there, and I instantly lick it clean. Immediately, the salty essence of Raith coats my tastebuds. I close my eyes, savoring the erotic flavor that reminds me of how he smells when dripping out of me.

He groans as my tongue darts out again, getting another taste as if that ruddy bulbous head were the best type of lollipop.

“Fuck, *kleine*.” His eyes slit. The muscles in his neck strain as he keeps himself in check. “You’re a natural little cock sucker, aren’t you.”

My cheeks heat, but I don’t shy away. Instead, I run my fingers like feathers up his inner thigh. Feeling the springy, hirsute pelt of his leg hair tickle my palm, and then the wiry hair between his thighs.

I push his hand away, and he lets me replace the cock-slinger grip he has with mine. Tightening my fist, my daring is rewarded as he looses another deep basso moan.

“What do you want me to do.” I hate that I don’t know how to seduce him and bring him the same pleasure he brings me each time he puts his filthy mouth on my pussy. I wish I were a natural, but no amount of watching videos can prepare me for the largess of the moment.

“Suck on the tip.” His voice cracks with strain as he guides me.

I run my lips over the soft slit at the top of him, and then I open my mouth and suckle. I know when he sucks my clit I fucking love it. Does he get the same enjoyment and pleasure that I do?

One of his large hands palms my head, and his fingers coil tightly in my curls.

*Yes, I think he does.*

I do it again, slurping and fluttering my tongue around the first inch. Whenever my tongue touches an area on the bottom where the flared rim touches his shaft, his whole-body tenses, showcasing the marble-hard flex of his sculpted body.

I do it again, and his fingers become a death-grip.

“Fuck, you’re a quick study aren’t you. Now be a good girl and take me deeper.”

I’m a bit worried about trying to shove this enormous thing in my throat, but I try it. I tighten my lips like I saw the starlets do, and then screw it down. My lips strain, and cheeks widen.

Then I pull up, admiring the wet shine my spit leaves behind.

“Mmm,” I murmur with pleasure. Stroking my hand up to gather the glaze of my saliva, I carry the wetness down and then up.

“Do that while you suck me.”

Raith is literally shaking before me. A surge of power, of pure feminine authority sweeps through me.

*I am a sexual goddess.*

Stroking his shaft, I bob my head down, sinking as deeply as I did before. Then I suckle, experimenting with depth and angle and tension, until I find a rhythm that pulls the most erotic-sounding groans from Raith.

“Ahh fuck, baby. Ahh fuck that’s it.” I glance up at him and see that his eyes are closed. His head is back, and the smooth length of his hair brushes his shoulders. He rocks on his feet, gently fucking my mouth. He’s holding himself back, his teeth clenched, face a mask of concentration, trying to make my first blow job be a good experience.

Suddenly I don’t want gentle. I drop my head, skewering my mouth with his dick. I choke because *wow* Raith is hung. But that wet gagging sound breaks him out of his mindset. It’s like waving a red flag in front of a bull.

Raith’s hands tighten in my hair, and he drives deeper, while pulling my face into his groin. I choke wetly and inhale the pheromones and spicy masculine scent of being between his thighs.

“Fuck you sound like a dream when you’re choking on my cock.”

The beast is out of his cage. Raith’s fingers twist in my hair, and he rakes me off his shaft, dragging my lips along every inch. He pushes me

down again. Tears from the pressure wet my lashes, but I don't stop. I try and open my throat, allowing him to plumb the depths of my throat.

I realize the training session is over as he starts roughly fucking my mouth. I keep trying to suck, but he moves too fast. Eventually, I let my cheeks relax, until spittle and drool thickly coat his cock.

Then he mouth-fucks me, hammering into my face with the uptick of his hips, while also bobbing my face in a rough, lip-bruising rhythm. I can only breathe when he's on the backstroke. I steal precious sips of breath, before he plugs my windpipe again. Tears blind me. I'm pretty sure snot is dripping out of my nose, making a slippery slurry on my face.

Raith rips out of my mouth, and then suddenly I'm in his arms. He spins in place, a gorgeous, graceful turn that rearranges our positions. Suddenly, he's sitting and I'm straddling his lap.

His hands are all over me. Strong fingers glide up my ribcage. His palms frame my waist. Pulling down my pants, he strips me swiftly. I don't know how he does it. It's like he has eight arms, completely divesting me of any scrap of clothes before I sit astride him completely naked.

"I love you." His voice is a balm to the soul, a lust-filled cadence that lifts me up until I feel I have grown the wings I desperately wanted.

In his arms I soar.

I hold onto him as he winds his arms around my torso, crossing them over my back, and gripping my sides with the long reach of his fingers.

Then he lifts me and catches his cock on the heat of my pussy.

I groan and writhe forward, sliding my slippery core over his cock. He is a mess from me, and his cock slips into me so, so easily. At least the first few inches do. Then the natural resistance of my inner muscles flex, and he has to do more than just set me atop him.

He shoves, and pulls down, and then he's all the way inside me with a rough *slap* of my ass hitting off his thighs.

I gasp as he completely fills me. I'm almost too full, and I squirm on top of him as if that will somehow help me adjust my seat.

His arms tremble, and he buries his face in my neck.

"I'm going to cum if you move like that."

"Oh really?" The seductress is on my shoulder, encouraging me.

I wiggle again, rolling my hips in a circle so that I can feel the hardness of him *everywhere* inside.

Raith’s restraint snaps. His nails scrape down my sides, and clamp onto my hips.

Then he fucks me, using my scorching, eager pussy like a fist to jerk off with. It is the hottest thing as he drives relentlessly into me. Flexing his glutes. Tightening his thighs. While also slamming me down. Raith gets a full-body workout because he uses every goddamn muscle group to bounce me in his lap. I am a toy, unable to do anything but hold on as he gives me almost unholy pleasure.

I clutch at him as I unravel. The needy tension that feels tight and quivery in my belly stretches, until it reaches the breaking point. One more thrust, and I beak into a thousand pleasure-filled shards. He tosses my mind high, making me soar through the heavens on wings of lust.

I scream as I cum for him, bouncing harder and faster in his lap. He joins me, his own earthy-sounding cry echoing around his palatal French Chateau. He’s one stroke, one second behind me. While my pussy quivers and creams, he lifts me half-way up his cock, and then *slams* me down. Hard enough to hurt. Deep enough that I swear his cockhead is pushing against the entry of my cervix.

Then he explodes, and I tremble as his shaft pulses, and he empties himself inside of me. He leaves marks on me; I can feel the love contusions. But it’s not one-sided, because I’m digging my signature into his shoulders, clutching at him as I squirm in his lap.

Eventually, I collapse in his arms, panting as the lack of oxygen makes me dizzy and requires deep, deep breaths. He gathers me close and lifts the pair of us. I love how strong he is because he doesn’t grunt when he moves. He doesn’t make me feel heavy. In his embrace, I am weightless.

I wrap my thighs around him and nuzzle into his throat as Raith carries me through the house, up the twining staircase, and into a bedroom that I’m too tired to investigate.

He refuses to let me go as he settles us under the covers. The bed is lush and soft, an enormous sprawl of goose-down and expensive cotton. I groan when his cock softens enough to slip free, and protest further as his slickness drips out. But all those things are minor irritations. Because Raith climbs in right behind me, turning me into a little spoon.

I fall asleep, understanding now what Raith means when he says I’m his world. They aren’t just words to him. He makes me feel it with every

action, look, and touch.

# Chapter Thirty-One

## Raith

I wake early and slip out of bed so that I don't wake Valentina.

She's buried beneath the covers, arms flung wide, as if she could hog the whole of the king-sized bed. She makes a valiant effort, but there's still more bed than even she can hug. I press a kiss to her tousled curls, pull on a pair of leisure pants, and pad barefoot down the sprawling staircase to the kitchen.

The cool winter sunlight bounces off the cream-colored tile, making the entire room glow with an unseasonal warm brightness. It's still a month away from spring, but with how the room is shaped, with its rounded rotunda-style walls, and the arched windows, and the recessed lighting, and the appliances discreetly covered by matching walnut-and-cream colored cabinetry, you wouldn't think it.

While I set up the espresso maker, I doom scroll through the various notifications that have been flagged for my attention. Either by Snack or by the application itself. There's nothing special about the app I use for the bulk of my business. Anyone who might glance over my shoulder while I'm in public would see a dark-mode screen, with barely visible text, and a generic embossed logo.

The people I need are already waiting for me to log in when I finally do show up. There's five of us: Quicksilver, Dagger (D4663R), myself, Hex (H4X), and Chase (CH453). Snack calls us Syndicate (5YND1C473). I

worry that having a name will make us a target for some stupid black-hat gang, but I've been out-voted. It's even at the top of the group-chat, where either Snack or D-man has made cartoon-style avatars for each of us.

Snack is the details and finance man. I'm the man on the ground and infiltrator. Dagger digs into backgrounds and can create a person out of thin air, Chase can track anyone like a fucking bloodhound across the world, and Hex is a woman of all trades. I wouldn't want to run into her in a dark alley, that's for damn sure.

We met by happenstance, each hired by a Yemen Diplomat who worked for Lodestar, an anti-trafficking organization. He'd been receiving death threats and wanted to surround himself with the best. People who could not only take a bullet for him, but also decipher where the threats were coming from. We stopped the assassination, but he proved to be dirty, and used the cover of the non-profit to do the very things they were trying to stop. I put a bullet in his brain the very next night. Since then, when things get tough, we work together.

Like now, Snack's rounded up by cavalry to get my ass out of the fire.

Quicksilver: About time you showed up.

Wraith: It's been a few long nights.

Hex: Did you really kidnap the Cosa Nostra princess? What were you thinking.

Wraith: It might have started out as kidnapping, but it's more than that.

Dagger: □

Dagger: □ □?

Quicksilver: □

Quicksilver: You got it in one D.

Chase: Don't strain your brain about it. Wraith has lost his fucking mind and we're here to clean up the mess.

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. This is worse than having a fucking family. They all think they're comedians.

Swiftly, I type back.

Wraith: I don’t have time for this.

Wraith: Are you in or out?

I pace around the kitchen and look out into the secluded backyard. Not only do the granite walls surround the estate, but there’s a second layer of protection hidden in the six-foot tall hedges that enclose the vicinity right past the back door. A gazebo of white stone and wrought bronze sits in the center of what is a patch of roses. But they aren’t blooming yet.

I can’t wait for Valentina to see the garden when spring arrives.

Finally, my phone dings as they answer.

Quicksilver: You know I’m in.

Chase: Yeah, whatever. I have a new toy I want to play with.

Hex: I can’t, I’m on a job in Colombia.

Dagger: □

Relief eddies through me, and I brace my elbows on the counter as I stare down at my phone. I don’t know if I would call us all ‘friends’, but we share the same morally gray morals where the ends justify the means.

Wraith: I’ll see you all soon. Snack knows the location.

I exit the application and finish doctoring my coffee.

Snack calls a minute later.

“I told you they would have your back.” He’s not eating yet, but I only give it a matter of time.

I sip my espresso. “How did the welcome hug go?”

“Fucking perfect. It took out their entire caravan on an isolated stretch of I-80 before they crossed over into Illinois. With how the cars exploded, they were bringing in some heavy artillery. Quinn is going to be fucking pissed that they dared.”

Snack sighs, then says. “The bad news is that the big wigs weren’t riding with them.”

“I figured. Where did they land?”

“Barbieri Global Aviation Services. It’s one of those executive airports that have one hangar and a lot of private jets. The D-man says they are staying a little west in Bartlett. He hasn’t peeled the onion yet, but it looks like they’re staying in one of Salvatore Barbieri’s places. They’re probably trying to stay out of Quinn’s line of sight, but that they’re cozying with one of the only mafiosos Quinn lets live in the area isn’t good for optics.”

I mull over the information. I don’t think Salvatore will help him out, especially since the New York branch is sinking fast, but stranger things have happened. “Think Salvatore will fund him troops?”

“Not if he wants to survive the fallout. I bet he’s not even in the state let alone the country. What are you thinking?”

I pace around the kitchen and do two complete circuits before I answer. “I don’t want to give them time to regroup. I sure as fuck don’t want them to get lucky and figure out where we are. We’re going to hit them hard and fast and on their turf.”

I sketch out the points of my plan, and Snack chews on it for a few minutes. He hates running an op with a quick turnaround, but he’ll do it because he’s as close to a friend as I have.

Finally, he says, “I think that can work.”

He’s quiet again, and I know I’m not going to like the question he’s building up to.

“Are you sure she’s worth this? This is all but a declaration of war with the New York mobsters.”

I use my quiet voice, the kind that he’s heard right before I kill a target. “If you don’t want me to punch you in the mouth the next time I see you, don’t ever ask me the question again.”

Snack laughs because he’s fucking crazy and has a death wish. He doesn’t reply, he simply cuts the call.

Once Cesare and Enzo landed in Illinois, the clock started ticking. Either I go and slam down their door, or they come hammer on mine. Only one of us is walking away, and that’s going to be me.

Valentina comes down an hour later, when I’m in the middle of fastidiously preparing for the oncoming onslaught. She’s wearing only the T-shirt I took off last night. Her legs from her upper thighs on down are bare. I stare at her, feeling pleasure and love begin the familiar erotic cadence in my pulse.

I hope she’s not wearing panties.

She slides sideways into my lap, and looks at the guns, ammunition, and tactical blades spread out on a black microfiber towel. Her position gives me a chance to check the underwear situation. Unfortunately, her pussy is covered up, and I pretend I’m not disappointed that she’s not walking around panty-less so that I can pet her whenever I want. Still, I stroke my finger over her covered cleft as a good morning.

“Wow, what gun store did you rob?” She shakes her head as she looks over the display before her, and then at me. “Why am I not surprised you’re down here playing with guns instead of eating breakfast.”

“Because you know that I don’t need mortal food to sustain myself, I live on spite and violence,” I quip with only a mild brow arch.

Valentina gapes at me as I serve her teasing right back. Then she laughs, and I stop shoving the pipe cleaner into the barrel mechanism of a Sig Sauer P320 to indulge in the light-hearted moment. Wrapping my arms around her soft waist, I reel her down for a good morning kiss.

She cups my cheeks between her palms, making me her captive as she feasts and savors the fruity bottom notes of my morning kickstart.

I don’t let her wiggle free after she breaks the kiss. I keep her heart-shaped ass firmly planted on my thigh. She watches me, and despite the knowing that I’m going to use them to kill her father and former fiancée, she’s not squeamish.

I keep an eye on her as I reassemble the Sig Sauer and reach for the Glock next.

Valentina leans toward the table, and then points at an automatic that I have laid at the top of the towel. “What is that?”

I follow the line of her finger, and then grin when I see what’s caught her eye. “You like that, huh?”

“I don’t even know what it is.”

Setting the 9mm down, I grab *the Banshee*. She resembles the mutant offspring of a grenade launcher and an assault rifle, but in the compact size and caliber of a 9mm handgun.

Ejecting the magazine, and double checking that the barrel’s clear, I fold Valentina’s hands around the pistol grip and tuck the buttstock against her shoulder. Her hands tremble as she adjusts them on the weapon, but then she curls her finger against the trigger guard.

Seeing her cradle the semi-automatic makes me hard. She feels it too, because her hips hitch and lift slightly as she looks over her shoulder down at my lap. I'm not ashamed as my dick salutes her impressive gun-handling skills.

Her eyes smolder from beneath her lashes. "I guess I know what you like."

"Badass, unhinged, kickass women?" I pull her closer, wrapping my arms around her waist in a bear-hug. "Yes."

Valentina flushes, and I see a crackle of doubt surf through her eyes. I don't let it linger as I press a soft kiss to her jawline.

"You. You're my type. Do you know how bad ass you are?"

Valentina shakes her head.

I press a soft kiss to the corner of her mouth. "If I'm the Punisher, you're my Jessica Jones. Intelligent, smart, and the most badass woman in New York."

Her eyes widen, letting me drown in their aged oak and espresso hues. Then she melts, and I hold her against my chest, feeling the short stock of the gun between us. Her cheek rubs against mine, abraded by the steel-wool of my morning gruff. I steal another kiss from the sultry pout of her pink lips. Their taste and color like the best cotton-candy. We linger together, breathing each other in. I engrave the shape of her in my arms upon my mind, afraid that I'll wake up and this will be all a dream, and I'll be back alone in my apartment across the street watching her get married.

I ease my python grip. "Do you want me to teach you how to load it?"

She chews on her bottom lip. "When are you going?"

"When the crew gets here."

Valentina's eyebrow levitates. "You have a crew?"

"Little dove, I always have backup. I might never need it, but there are people I can reach out to. Snack will be arriving soon, though I'm not sure exactly with who. Some of the others will remain on the outskirts, assisting but perhaps not in the thick of the battle."

She shakes her head and sits upright. "Show me. Because I want to come."

I freeze in place, wanting to bark 'absolutely fucking not' at her. The instinct to protect her and keep her safe has me twitchy. But I also don't want to smother her. I don't know what side of my psychosis will win, but I

also don’t want to go to war with her. If she needs this, I have to let her join. Even if I really don’t fucking like it.

She looks at the expression on my face, and how the denial trembles on my lips.

She lifts the *Banshee*, pointing the barrel toward the roof. “You can’t puff me up by calling me a badass, and then not let me join in.”

Her eyes narrow, and her backbone hardens into tungsten. She is grit and grace, beauty and bravery.

And absolutely right.

I dip my head and acknowledge her reign, because she is the new Queen and I’m her helpless servant. “Okay. I have some gear that’ll fit you. Hex is about your height.”

Valentina opens her mouth, probably about to ask me who Hex is. I shake my head, cutting her off before she begins. Her story isn’t mine to tell.

“If you ever meet her, just smile and nod. If you’re the Queen of New York, she’s the fucking *Witch of Warsaw.*”

“You have some interesting friends.” Valentina’s dry humor saturates her voice.

*If she only knew.*

Together, we finish packing the duffel I will carry into the oncoming battle with Enzo and Cesare.

Then, I carry Valentina back up stairs to show her just how much I worship her.

She keeps the gun on, even when I splay her out on her back and sink face-first between her thighs.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

## Valentina

"I am going to be covered in hickeys," I sigh as I notice another sucker-bite. This one is a few inches below and to the left of the one he left on my throat. I might protest their port-wine stain, but I love them. They are tacky as hell, but it shows Raith's lack of control.

A mood that only I conjure in him.

He has dumped a pile of tactical gear in all-black on a table in the middle of his armory at home. I don't know what else to call the secret back-room filled with rows upon rows of shelves full of guns and knives and ammo and a fucking rocket launcher. And the shelving units beneath them are filled with everything else to eke out an advantage while in a fight. He really could wage a one-man war from here. I have seen Enzo's armory, and he wishes he had half of this stuff.

There are a few different sizes of plate-carrier vests, gun holsters, blade sheathes, tactical belts, and some black pants that remind me of cargo pants but more with a thousand zippers and pockets.

With the fastidiousness honed by experience, he goes through each and every one, making sure the zippers work, the buckles aren't frayed, and the nylon holds the weight.

I stand watching him, trying to pace away the anxiety that's swirling in my gut. He unearthed a pair of black leggings and a t-shirt for me, over

which he's already begun piling on *stuff*. He strapped a harness to my chest and is steadily adding accoutrements to it.

I feel a modicum of regret that I asked to go. Because I'm afraid that I'll get in the way or somehow cause the mission to fail. But then I remember the fit I threw, and I keep my doubts quiet.

Which brings me back to the 'goal' of tonight, killing my father and Cesare.

Raith hasn't said it, but he's not planning all of this to have a sit-down with him. He's going to bust in and cut both heads off *the Company's* hydra.

Only a few days ago, I was planning on doing the same thing. But now that reality is in front of me, I don't know how to feel. I'm afraid for Raith, I worry what will happen to me if he fails. I've already chosen my side, and when Enzo sees me marching on his location, he will know I've betrayed him. This is war, and the first salvo has been deployed when Raith took out their men with his 'welcome' package.

But he's still my father.

I pace around the perimeter of the room, occasionally stopping when I catch sign of a weapon gleaming lethally beneath the display lights. I lean close, because that gun looks like a shotgun if it shoots two grenades at once.

Shaking my head, I pivot and pace the other way. Every moment that passes my tension mounts, until I feel as if I'm about to leap from my skin.

Finally, Raith finishes with the gear. Though I don't realize it until he catches me by the arms. He reels me close, and I gratefully sink into his chest. My heart is pounding in my ears, echoing the percussion in my throat.

His chin rests on my head.

"Are you sure?" His breath ruffles across the tight braid I have my hair woven into.

*No.*

"Yes. I can't let you take all the risk when you're doing this for me."

He tucks his forefinger under my chin and urges my head up so I can look at him.

I hate that he sees the doubt that's bright and panicky in my gaze. I've lived terrified of my father for the past year. He is the larger-than-life

boogieman. That trauma doesn’t define me, but it alters the lens of which I look at Raith through.

His thumb sweeps along my chin. “Remember what I promised. They will never get their hands on you again.”

I close my eyes as relief and terror fight their own war in my brain. Exhaling a shuddering breath, I realize what a fool I’ve been. I have been withholding something from Raith because I have been afraid of the outcome of this moment. That he will face the dragon of my story and be slain. While that may still be true, there is one thing that I can do to bolster his morale. In the old days, a maiden tied their handkerchief around a knight’s lance before a joust.

I can tell him the truth of how I feel, instead of holding it like a miser with gold, afraid to dole it out because it’s mine to keep.

The tears threaten behind my quivery eyelids, but I won’t let them fall. I hold them in as I loosen my arms from around my waist and wrap them around him. He pulls me tight, and I fit into him as if we were meant to be together just as this; with my head resting just beneath the velvety fuzz of his sharp chin, and my cheek pressing against his shoulder.

“I love you.” It takes no courage to say the words, it only takes acceptance that being a part of someone else makes you both vulnerable and impossibly strong.

Raith’s hands freeze on my low back, where he has wiggled his fingertips up beneath my shirt and lightly strokes the flesh.

He pulls away, and I lean into him, pure feminine submission in the listing lines of my body. I lock eyes on him, seeing the surprise that glows in the rime-like irises.

“Say that again.” His accent is the strongest I’ve ever heard it. The thick German inflection resonates in the back of his throat where the words get tossed around.

“I love you. I’ve loved you since I stumbled down the stairs at the Plaza, and you picked me up and put your body between me and the door.”

He blinks, and I smile at his perplexed expression. “I noticed that, and all the small things you do where you put my safety above your own. It’s why you can’t hide from me beneath your disguises.”

I run my hands up and along his shoulders and lock my fingers together at his nape. The position lifts me onto my tiptoes, and I savor the crush of

my soft figure into his chiseled one. “Because I see *you.* I know *you.”*

Raith could not have looked more stunned if I hit him over the head with a shovel. Then the savage, fierce beauty of his face softens, and he gives me a smile that melts me from head to my combat-booted toes.

His arms squeeze around my waist, and he picks me up, spinning me in place. I cling to him, cherishing this moment. Petrified that it will be the last between us.

But there is no regret. Whatever happens, it will be worth it to have these stolen moments with him. He has saved me in more ways than one. Not only from my father’s machinations and Cesare’s lechery. But from the all-consuming void that has kept one tenebrous tentacle latched on to me ever since I invited it in.

I feel it snap as I let love in, and push sorrow out. There is no more room for doubts. No matter what comes next, I will be at his side and see it through.

# Chapter Thirty-Three

## Raith

There is knowing that Valentina loves me and hearing her say it. I didn't expect it, not while I'm preparing to cut her father down like I would any other scummy bastard.

Her doubt is stamped all over her, carved into her expression by the runaway train of her thoughts. But she doesn't let them go further. I watch as she rights herself, breaking free of the cycle of fear-and-trauma, and emerges on the other side as a flinty-eyed version of herself.

The worry over her reaction when I kill her father, or if it's the right course to bring her with me, evaporates.

We are stronger together, and our bond is adamantine.

I press kisses to her forehead, and then I tell her I love her in every language I know. I end in Italian, because it's – as she said – the language of her heart and mind.

"*Ti amo*," I say in an octave no louder than a whisper. For those words in this heart-felt moment should be a breath that carries from my lips to her ears like the brush of Cupid's arrow flying across us both, and not shouted from the hilltops. In time, I can show her grandiose.

Valentina's eyes glitter like topaz with her unshed tears. "*Ti, amo*," she breathes back.

I kiss her, holding her in a death-grip because I am afraid that I'm about to lose this all. But she is passionate, and real, and strong, and for her, I will

walk to the ends of the earth to slay her dragons.

My phone buzzes, and I begrudgingly pull away from the kiss.

I slip my phone out of my pocket and look down at the video feed that's giving me a live-few of the front gate.

"They're here."

Valentina swallows thickly. Her slim throat works around a tangle of emotions. But she's dry eyed and unwavering.

"Let's go meet your friends."

Slinging the duffel across my shoulder, I curl my hand around hers and lead her out of the gun-vault, up the stairs to the first level, and into the setting sun that is painting Illinois' night sky with streaks of cobalt and gun-metal gray.

It only takes us a few minutes to walk down the driveway, leaving behind the illuminated *Castillo.* I don't let anyone through the gate, even Snack. Pressing the opener, I let the metal slip apart only wide enough for us to squeeze through. Then I force it shut again.

Chase leans against the black grill of a tricked-out Land Rover Defender. His arms are folded across his enormous chest, showcasing his enormous, tattoo-covered forearms, and bigger biceps. He's dressed just as I am, in all-black gear from his tightly laced combat boots and the relaxed-fit of his BDUs, to the long-sleeve shirt and harness that sharpens his imposing appearance.

Valentina stutters to a stop as she blinks at Chase. I try not to get jealous when I see the way her mouth drops, and hear the sharp breath she sucks in.

"Holy fuck how tall are you."

I cover up my laugh by coughing into my fist. I'm so used to what Chase looks like, that I forget the first reaction.

Chase shrugs. He's used to the question, and he answers the same way every time. "Six-five or six-six. It depends on the chart."

He's a big motherfucker, crunching the scale at two-hundred and fifty pounds of hulking, muscled mass.

Valentina blinks again, and then she giggles. "Cesare is going to shit a brick when he sees you coming."

Snack pops open the driver's door and bounces out of the raised Land Rover. Compared to Chase, Snack looks like a twig. He's my height but carrying that gaunt thinness of a long-distance runner. It's why he's always

eating. His metabolism runs at a frantic pitch. Even now he has a long rope of red licorice tucked in the corner of his mouth as if it were a cigarette.

He bites off the edge and looks Valentina over. He opens his mouth, probably ready to make one of his sarcastic quips. But then he looks at me and closes it with a snap.

He holds his hands up in surrender because he sees his death in my eyes.

I look around for the third member of our party. Snack points up, and only then do I notice the silent cloud of drones hovering above us. Their rotors turn whisper-quiet, barely making a sound as they hang in silent, stealthy preparedness.

As if that isn't creepy.

"D-man is the eye in the sky for this mission."

I only introduce her to Snack, who knows better than to touch her. He gives her a finger wave.

"Why are you called Snack?"

Snack doesn't answer, and I shake my head and pull her closer. "You'll figure it out soon enough."

Chase gives her a fist bump, and her hand nearly disappears when it touches his knuckles, but he doesn't offer his name. She doesn't seem upset by it but takes the whole incognito aspects of this meeting in stride.

Then I introduce Valentina to them. "This is Valentina Di Maio, my future wife."

Valentina jerks beside me, but her surprise is short-lived as a look of absolute love blooms on her pink chinks.

*Wife? Her eyes ask.*

*Wife,* mine *reply.*

Her smile is huge, and she's trying not to giggle.

"Damn, you aren't slowing down at all, are you?" Chase mutters with a surprised laugh. I've shocked him, which is next to impossible to do normally.

"Fucking finally," Snack says.

He turns to Chase. "You have no idea how deranged he's been about her. If she's willing to jump on this grenade and tie herself to him?" Snack gives me a cheeky look. "Let her, it'll save me a hell of a lot of time now that I won't have to listen to his tired laments and lovelorn sighs."

Valentina leans into my arm, her hands clutching at my biceps. “Was it really that bad?”

There isn’t a whisper of shame as I lower my head and press a kiss to her ear. “Worse, much, much worse.”

Chase mutters something about *love making you stupid.* But he doesn’t say anything more. He is the easiest going person I’ve ever met, and most things that might bother or concern another roll over him like water off a duck’s back.

Snack has two tablets and his laptop set up on the hood of the SUV five minutes later.

“The welcome wagon obliterated the bulk of their forces. Whoever survived it are in a hospital or jail because they were trucking some illegal weapons ordinances across state lines. The FBI is all over them, and it’s not going to be long before they tie the caravan back to *the Company.* I don’t now if the *Camorra* will survive this, as that SUV was registered to your father.” Snack’s eyes slip to Valentina, and then away again.

I feel Valentina sag with relief against me. Her worry about what would happen if the remaining members of *Camorra* found out she had her hand in this had been one of top concerns.

“However, that leaves the *Cosa Nostra* situation. Do you know the *Consigliere*? There needs to be something in place so that there isn’t a huge power vacuum that suddenly opens in New York. That will be a fucking catastrophe, and while the Russians might fill some of the gap. The Northeast has always been known as belonging to the Italians.”

Valentina bites her bottom lip. She shifts on her heels, and then she gives Snack a curt nod. “I know him, and I know how to get him to play nicely.”

There is a vicious shimmer in her whiskey-brown eyes, and I get the feeling she’s going to enjoy twisting the balls of whoever is going to replace Cesare at the top of the *Cosa Nostra* totem pole.

“Then that just leaves these four.” Snack flicks his fingers across the touch screen of his tablet, and I get a topographical view of an area not far away.

“Your father, Cesare, and two guards that were traveling in the jet with them.”

“How do you want to handle them?” Chase joins the conversation as his eyes flick over images of the mansion’s surroundings.

“Four is a lot less than I expected.” I can handle four. I’ve killed more in one night before, but I don’t focus on the past. I look forward, shifting my gaze from the planning to Valentina’s pale face, and back again.

“We’ll do it the usual way,” I say and break down the way I want the mission to go. “I go in, and you guard the perimeter. If anyone breaks out, you take them down.”

Chase resembles a lazy, tawny-colored bear. When he’s a Siberian Tiger playing with his prey. For his size, Chase is dangerously fast. He could have been a wide receiver in a major football league, but instead he joined the army. After the army, he tried his hand at being a bounty hunter, and sometimes moonlights with the United States Marshals Service as a tracker. He can route run and chase down a fleeing suspect without breaking stride. Instead, he uses his speediness to tackle fleeing suspects and criminals. It’s why his codename is so apt, that I don’t call him anything *but* Chase.

“That’s my favorite play.” Chase’s grin is grim, showing a hint of teeth and just the gleam of madness in his green eyes.

Valentina swallows audibly because there’s something not right when Chase smiles.

Snack stuffs the rest of his licorice into his cheek. “Thems the details, folks. We’ll wait another hour or two for full dark, and then hit the road.”

He tilts his head back and eyes Dagger’s support toys. “You get that D?”

The drones move in a tight circle, and then flit off as if they are being summoned back to the mother ship.

“Creepy ass mother fucker,” Chase mutters, and I don’t disagree.

Of all of us, Dagger is the most dangerous even though he doesn’t get his hands bloody.

*That we know of.*

# Chapter Thirty-Four

## Valentina

I'm too nervous to eat, but I do nibble on the protein bar that Raith insists I try.

The chocolate is a bit waxy, but it has peanuts and a lot of vitamins, and I can feel my energy levels coming back up. We're in the back of the Land Rover, less than a mile from where Cesare and Enzo are staying.

Snack pulls to a stop, navigating the big ass SUV onto the gravel-strewn berm.

"The rest of the way we'll be in stealth mode," Raith explains when he sees my confusion.

I swallow, and my heart picks up the pace until I feel the staccato in my throat. Each thud becomes an echo of urgency, a rhythm of apprehension and latent fright.

I know the signs of a panic attack, and claw away from the tremulous feeling tightening like a corset around my lungs.

Inhaling through my nose, and pushing the air out of my mouth, I unlatch my seat belt and follow the others into the gloom.

Snack carries a black metal small case out from the back of the Land Rover, and opens it, revealing the black foam inside and the smaller boxes each tucked in their cubby. He wiggles them out and starts handing out small boxes to the men. He stops in front of me and offers one to me.

I frown and then open it, seeing a pair of flesh-colored earbuds.

“For you to listen in.” He throws me a wink with his snow-melt gray eyes and keeps moving.

The others tuck their earpieces in and wrap hi-tech looking black straps around their necks. Raith shifts a black metal piece around the front, that’s capped on either side with two metal discs, before letting it cup his larynx. I blink when I realize it’s a microphone of some sort.

This is way more upscale than simple mafia business.

“Comms check,” Snack says.

I press the receivers into my ears.

The other’s voices come through with only a mild distortion. I hear them all say ‘check’, and then a strange clicking sound.

“That’s D,” Chase says as he resumes his leaning. “He doesn’t talk.”

“Why not?”

“He has what I like to call crazy tinfoil-hat syndrome. He knows how easy it is to spy on people because that’s what he does, so he assumes everyone else is trying to spy on him.” Snack shrugs as he says it, as if having what sounds like a paranoid, mentally unstable individual on their team is normal.

But then I realize we all have our issues, because I’m a Mafia Princess wanting to kill her father and ex-fiancé, and I’m in love with an assassin.

A mental shrug later, I accept it for what it is.

Raith double-checks his gear. He pats the pockets of his slacks where the fabric is tightest as it hug his tree-trunk thighs. He wraps a sleeve of some sort around his forearm, and then tucks a tactical device with a touch screen inside of it. Putting a few extra magazines in his harness, he holds his hand out for a bulky-looking plate-carrier that’s laden with his supplies and lined with heavy-duty bullet-proof armor.

The big one passes it to him.

Raith tightens the straps, but the others are just standing there. And I get a very bad feeling creeping in my belly.

“D has his minions in place,” Snack says after some hasty typing on his laptop. “That’ll give us the eyes on the outside. The inside. Well.” He shrugs and looks over his shoulder at Raith. “That’s up to you. You do you, boo.”

I blink, finally realizing what he means, and immediately whip around. “You’re going in alone?”

“That’s what I do, *kleine.* Why do you think I am the wraith?” His grin should scare me. It’s a malignant thing of taut lips and flashing teeth. But I know the man behind his murderer’s smile, at least for me he’s all marshmallow fluff. “Because I move like a ghost.”

Leaning into him, I curl my fingers in the Velcro straps of his gear. My fear for him consumes my thoughts, but I don’t tell him not to go. If this is his strength, his ability to be a one-man murder machine as his friends think?

*So be it.*

Raith catches one of the tears that harry my lashes. He looks at the wetness that spreads on his rough flesh, and then he carries it to his lips and tastes it.

“That will be the last tear for me, little dove,” he whispers into my hairline.

I try and shake my head, because if he dies, I am going to drown the world with them.

He catches my chin and pulls me close. His lips flutter above mine. “Promise me. No matter what happens, no more tears for me. I love you. I will always love you.”

“I don’t want to lose you. I’ve only just found you.” The tears bubble up again, but I try so hard to be brave. It’s a struggle because I want to bury my head in his chest and weep. We’ve been building to this moment for days, and now that it’s here. I want to run away from it. I want to drag us both somewhere safe. But there isn’t anywhere safe. I’ll always be looking over my shoulder and hiding. I’m done hiding. I am not going to be that weak female.

I straighten my back and square my shoulders.

“You won’t lose me.” He tugs me closer, and his words brush my lips in a prelude to his kiss. “Because I will haunt you even in the afterlife. We are eternal.”

A sob rises from the depths of my chest, and then catches in my throat. His love for me is an ever-burning flame, and it’s both the sweetest and most fucked up thing in the world that he’s adamant he’ll become a *real* wraith to stalk me if he dies. It’s just the right bit of crazy to make me laugh, even through your tears.

“You’re unhinged, do you know that?”

He curls his hand in my braids and hauls me flush. I am pinned into his taller body, and I sear my memories with the steely strength of him. The way his all-black tactical ensemble suits him more than any suit or tuxedo I've ever seen him wear. "Yes, and I can't lay that blame on you. I was a little crazy before I met you. Now I'm a basket of it."

He doesn't let me answer. He lays a starving kiss on my mouth devastates me. It is a promise and a goodbye, gratitude and an apology, and a promise of the future I've always dreamed about.

We cling to each other in the twilight before Raith breaks the kiss. He nods to his men, and then strides into the thicket of pines and vanishes into the darkness without ever looking back.

I almost crumble and sink to my knees. Clutching the bumper, I lean heavily against the enormous wheelhouse.

The hulking one clicks a button on his watch, starting a timer. "We will give him a fifteen-minute head start, before we close down the perimeter behind him."

All that is left for me to do now is wait.

# Chapter Thirty-Five

## Raith

The taste of Valentina's tears and love burn on my lips and in my heart as I navigate the half-mile between the road and the mansion Enzo and Cesare are holed up in.

I make quick time. I've run across rougher terrain with heavier kits on my back. While my training has been unorthodox, the men who molded me from the scared sixteen-year-old into the machine I am now, learned their skills in the wide-world of espionage, international crimes, and full-scale wars.

I am not afraid of mobsters. I've encountered Sheiks, Warlords, and criminals whose enterprises are international. I've survived each one.

I will survive this.

The wall which surrounds the estate comes up fast. It's only six-feet tall and made of regular red brick and mortar, and I take a running start as I leap toward the top. I'm airborne for a fraction of a second, getting the leverage I need to hook my fingers into the white brick at the top. There isn't even barbed wire. They are just asking for me to come in and kill them.

Not losing momentum, I dig my toes into the masonry, pull myself up and over, and then drop silently into the quiet back yard.

If Enzo had more men, I might have taken another route. But he's scared, not knowing who is targeting him, and I'm betting that means he'll have at least one of them stay close.

Hunkering in the shadows, I race across the backyard, a fleet-footed shadow that embodies my codename. I need to get away from the landscape lighting before I'm seen. The lack of leaf-cover keeps me pressed low, using what I can to camouflage my quick bursts of movement. I'm only in the open and exposed for a quick couple of seconds before I reach the evergreen hedges that border the estate's footprint. A waist-high wall runs all around the outside, cradling the flower beds and hibernating trees.

"I'm at Point A," I murmur, trusting in the throat mic to pick up the vibrations. "I need an infrared image of where they are in location to me."

Snack's voice is a familiar passenger in my ear as he says, "D-man is sending it to you now."

I barely hear the drones as they navigate like a cloud of dragonflies around the mansion. A few seconds later, the smart display on my arm flickers and I tap it to surveil the images.

There are three red dots in the house itself. Two on the first level, one on the top. I see my location cater-corner to theirs, and mentally map that trajectory.

The fourth red splotch is outside. Trails of orange vapor fade into cooler dark blue and mint green tones, creating a misty cloud around him. Immediately, I know what I am seeing.

*The guard's having a smoke.*

Sliding my all-black KA-Bar from the sheathe on my vest, I creep around the side of the mansion. I smell the smoke before I see him, it's something minty and sweet and jarring against the hint of earthiness, damp soil, and the subtle fragrance of dormant plants and sleepy pine. Then I hear the drag as he inhales on his vape pen, and the deep exhalation as he blows it out.

I wait until I hear him take another puff.

He inhales, rattling his lungs with the smoke, and I strike. He catches only a blur in his periphery as I move in, and he raises the semi-automatic rifle that's hanging by a nylon strap over his shoulder.

He's not fast enough. I skewer the knife through the soft palate of his chin and jam it straight up, slicing through his mouth, hooking his upper jaw like a fish, and dig it even deeper still. His shocked eyes meet mine, and I watch as the light grows dimmer before he's gone.

I slide the tactical knife out.

“One down,” I murmur, and move on.

# Chapter Thirty-Six

## Valentina

Waiting sucks. After ten minutes of hoping that Raith isn't dead, I've decided that if we ever need to go and ambush someone, I'm going along with him. I might not know what to do *now*, but I'll learn.

I never want to be left behind again.

Snack is chomping on his licorice like a billy goat would chew cud. Mouth open. Making wet, slapping noises, and I begin to realize how he got his name. He *is* Snack because he doesn't stop eating. I enviously eye his lithe, tightly muscled body, and huff at the unfairness of it all.

The big one is cool as a cucumber, looking up at the sky as if he's on a scenic nature walk.

I am so anxious I could vomit. I don't drink, but I would die for a shot of *something* to take the edge off the nervous quivers that are trembling through my body.

A voice fills my ears, and I almost scream in fright and relief as Raith says, "One down."

Then he goes silent, but the others start grabbing the things they need.

"That's our cue," Snack says with a happy wriggle to his step.

I don't ask what that means because it's obvious.

*He just killed someone.*

It could be Enzo. It could be Cesare. Most likely a guard.

And I don’t feel anything but relief that Raith is okay.

I exhale and fall into step beside Snack.

Mister blonde hulk leads us through the spindly trees, taking point with an assault rifle held firmly in front of him. The way he moves, and how he checks the area around him, makes me wonder if he doesn’t have military training. He’s efficient in how he propels us further, without any grand gestures. At times, he brings his hand up and tightens it into a fist in the age-old gesture of ‘halt’.

I don’t know how long it takes us to reach the privacy wall that seals off the mansion from the rest of the forest. Snack wears two backpacks, a slim-one that holds his tech-gear across his torso, and a larger one on his back that vies for space on his lithe build. It makes him look like a hunchback.

He pauses before the wall, bounces on his toes, shakes out his arms, and rocks his head side-to-side to limber up. Then he takes a running jump and flies up the thing like a pole vaulter or a someone who leaps over hurtles. He clears an enormous amount of space in his bounding stride, reminding me of an athlete with a ton of spring and bounce in their legs and tendons. His jump is high enough that he gets his hands on the top of the wall and uses incredible upper body strength to pull himself all the way up.

When he’s secure on the top, Snack swings one thigh over, bracing himself. His athleticism is astounding, and he looks like a gymnast performing for judges as he raises his arms above his head in a pantomime of utter victory.

“Okay, now it’s your term, Miss Cannoli,” Snack beckons me onward with both hands.

I roll my eyes at the nickname because it’s silly. But I’m realizing that’s just his personality. I hand the *Banshee* to the big-guy, and nervously make my way to the wall.

Suddenly, huge ham-hock hands grip my waist, and the Jolly Green Giant lifts me high until Snack has hold of my wrists. The pair of them loft me up and over, where I drop with a loud ‘thump’ on the other side. I’m barely upright, pushing myself off my knees that give a minor twinge from the landing, and the green-eyed Giant is over the wall, landing with surprising stealth in the bushes behind me. Swiftly followed by the nimble-as-a-cat Snack as he relinquishes his high perch and drops down to the ground.

“Onward, *mi amigos*,” Snack says as he stuffs a fresh piece of licorice into his mouth.

I get the *Banshee* back, and the three of us slip across the back yard in search of Raith.

Above us, the occasional glint of starlight and the peeking eye of a crescent-moon gleams off the mostly matte-black drones as the man they call D acts as the eye in the sky.

All is quiet, and I wonder if it isn’t too quiet.

*Are we walking into a trap?*

# Chapter Thirty-Seven

## Raith

Tracing the guard's route back into the house is easy enough. Choosing the next target proves to be more difficult.

I glance down at the continuous feed that D is funneling to my arm display, and know I need to make a judgement call.

*What do I know about Enzo and Cesare?*

*Which one would want the guard with him?*

*Who would feel comfortable alone?*

I look up at the ceiling where I stand, flattened against the wall in an entry hallway that leads me from the multi-bay garage, and into this wing of the house. I suspect I'll be entering the kitchen, since that's how most mansions are laid out. You get out of the car in the garage, and then walk into the kitchen so not to track dirt and debris through more showy rooms. The two dots are on the opposite side, while the single dot is almost directly above my head.

I don't have time to waffle, so I decide to go after the dot upstairs. I don't see Enzo being the one to hide behind a guard. When I met with him at *Dolce Vita*, he only came with three men on his detail, where Cesare arrived with an entourage of six.

I creep down the corridor, and I'm correct that the wood-paneled hallway spits out into the kitchen. The dark keeps me company as I

stealthily navigate through it, past the center island and into the adjacent formal dining room.

A shorter hallway connects the two, and them I'm out in the vestibule, positioned at the right-hand pair of dark wooden stairs with heavy walnut balustrades that twist up to the second floor.

I aim my rifle at the opposite side, and the hallway that leads to where the two dots are. Putting my back against the banister, I step-slide-step all the way to the top.

Then I breathe a bit easier, because the whole upper part of the mansion is spacious. Full of open doors for me to disappear into if things get sketch. It'll take the pair on the first-floor time to reach me, and by then I can be in any one of the rooms that stretch down the hallway.

Slinging the rifle across my chest, I grip the handle of my tactical knife and prowl toward Enzo.

The door at the end of the hall is open, allowing muted noise to splash out and interrupt the quiet. A soundtrack of laughter, followed by the murmur of conversation lets me know he's watching television.

I angle myself close enough to the door jamb and look through the crack between the hinges and the frame. He's stretched out on the bed. I only see his sock-clad feet and a hint of his trouser cuff.

Tightening my grip, I take another step in, creeping as close as I can to striking distance before he sees me. Except when I finally get into the bedroom, I realize that the man on the bed isn't Enzo.

Funnily enough, it's not Cesare either.

It's the guard.

*Fuck.*

I don't have time to dwell on my screw-up. The guard catches the whisper of movement, and he jerks upright. It's already too late, his fate is sealed. But he's fast. He's not as unprepared as I'd hoped. There's a Glock on the bed beside him, concealed in a fold within the thick, bronze, and cream-colored duvet. He lifts it and fires. The gunshot is deafeningly loud in the bedroom.

His aim is trash as the bullet shatters the wood behind me.

I dart forward, feinting left as he aims, and then slide along the smooth soles of my tactical boots and fling the knife before I even come to a stop.

It catches him in the throat, and blood gurgles in his throat. He fires again, wildly, before the fact that I severed his spinal column catches up with him.

Downstairs, there's shouting. Instead of hearing what I hope to, that of loud angry shouts and footsteps on the steps. Instead, there is what I dread. The downstairs doors open, and then slam shut.

I sigh as a wave of irrational anger and fledgling failure hits me in the solar plexus.

"The bogies are on the run," I say.

Then I bolt out of the bedroom, and chase after them.

Glancing at the display on my arm, I make another choice. That's all that matters when you're in the thick of a mission. You make a call, and you stick to it.

Enzo and Cesare are in the driveway, but they can't get to the garage because there's a larger blob as Snack, Chase, and Valentina cut off their escape. Automatic gunfire stings the air as I skid out the front door.

Then one of them runs, cutting right away from the group toward the tree line.

"Who's the runner?" I bark.

"Cesare," Snack sings like a loon.

"He's yours," I say to Chase.

Then I step out of the mansion to handle Enzo.

I don't see him, but I do see the muzzle flashes as he fires his handgun. Chase is moving out around the backside of the mansion, route running to cut off Cesare.

Snack and Valentina are on the other side of the garage, with Snack boredly returning fire with his AK-45. He knows with me right behind him, that he has Enzo pinned down. All he has to do is keep throwing a spray of bullets at the man, and he'll stay put.

I pull my rifle across my chest, jog down a few of the granite steps, and use a fancy decorative Doric pillar as concealment.

"You're not getting out of this alive, Don Di Maio," I call. I need to distract him from plugging bullets where Valentina is and focus on me.

It works as he whirls around. A shot sparks off the stone step a few feet away from where I'm hiding, sending chips of granite flying across the lawn.

“Who the fuck are you?” Enzo bellows.

I grin, and I know that if Valentina ever saw me smile like this, she would probably run from me. It’s evil. I know it is. Because the way the expression stretches over my face makes my soul feel black as the night around me. The feeling of vile elation saturates me. I don’t doubt that in moments like this, where the adrenaline is pumping like a drug through my body. That my father felt this same joyous high each time he choked a victim. It's addicting, and why I’ve strived to stay away from killing for pleasure.

But just this once. Only now. Only for Valentina, will I allow myself to embrace the fucked-up heritage I received by having a serial killer for a father.

“Your future son-in-law,” I taunt.

“Like fuck you are.” Enzo’s rage is incandescent, and it slows everything down around me.

His next shot hits the base of where I’m hiding. I do some quick math. His clip holds fifteen rounds, and he’s been firing indiscriminately at Chase. Two my way. He has somewhere between three-and-five shots left.

As long as I protect my head, and he tries for center-mass shots which are the easiest, I can survive what he has left.

Making the decision, I slither out from my hiding spot, and leap over a statue of a stone-lion that anchors the stairwell. I’m already shooting before I land, stitching a seam of bullets around Enzo’s feet.

His eyes bulge out. He looks wild caught in the ambient exterior lighting, and the floodlights that he must have turned as they ran outside.

I catch his eyes, and he holds mine.

“I don’t even know who the fuck you are,” he rants. He waves the Glock at me.

“I already told you. Your future son-in-law.”

Then I shoot him three times, and watch with satisfaction as his body goes sailing backward, landing off the stone-path and in the yard.

# Chapter Thirty-Eight

## Valentina

I don't know whether to laugh, cry, or have a panic attack.

I'm crouching beside an enormous garage, with Snack working through a pack of sour patch kids. Since he finished his licorice, he's been snacking on the candy. Each time a gun shot is fired at us, or Snack tips his rifle around the edge, I flinch.

I'm not brave. Not at all, and for a minute I regret that I demanded to come until Raith felt he had no other choice but to let me. At least up until I hear my father start yelling, and Raith's ice-cold voice as he answers back.

*Your future son-in-law.*

*Mia Dio.* I love that man. His words entwine around my heart, holding it in a grip that blazes as hot and brightly as the sun.

There's a final spate of bullets, and another few far-away that I assume is the big-guy running like a goddamn cheetah after Cesare. Then there's nothing, just Snack chomping in my ear and the unnatural stillness that blankets the mansion's backyard. The quiet keeps me trembling in a petrified trance, afraid to break it and learn that things didn't go as planned.

"It's clear," I hear Raith call, both in my ears and from around the corner. His voice frees me from my paralysis.

Snack doesn't even tell me to wait. I bolt around the garage, the *Banshee* flapping against my side, and dart across the lawn.

Raith stands in the flagstone-paved driveway, the night draped around him like the inky wings of a fallen angel, looking toward a body a few feet away. All I see are the feet, stuffed into an expensive pair of Versace loafers with gold accents.

*My father's shoes.*

He did it.

I catch my breath as disbelief slams into me. The relief I feel is strong enough that I almost fall to my knees as if caught in a religious fervor. The tension that has riddled my body for what has felt like eons dissipates, leaving me suddenly boneless. My knees sag, and I'm almost brought low if I didn't use the power, the strength, that Raith loaned me to remain upright.

"Raith," I gasp.

I don't know what he hears in my voice because he turns toward me. Does he hear the love and how my heart soars for him? Is it thanks and praise that form an unspoken chorale in my tone?

But I'm not prepared for what I see when my eyes meet his. The expression on his face is scary. There's no life in his icy blue eyes, to the point they almost look gray in the dark, as if spilling blood for personal reasons drained all his vitality away. His face is unreadable, the shadows creating a savage interplay over his strong bone structure, creating a half-mask that reminds me of stories of long-forgotten bandits and highwaymen.

I skitter to a stop, and my heart kicks up a clamor against my chest. Have I lost him? He didn't want to turn into his father by killing for a personal reason.

Did this push him too far?

Then the moment breaks, and he blinks. The warmth returns to his face, chasing away the mask of death. His smile is brilliant as he turns all the way around to face me.

He takes a step toward me, and I realize I'm an idiot. Worse than an idiot. A fool too stupid to live. Because my cry distracts Raith, and he's now walking away from Enzo's body, he doesn't see the way Enzo's hands twitch. This is a horror movie, and I'm the dumb star who is going to wind up dead, or getting everyone around her killed.

He misses how my father plays possum, pretending to be dead or disabled until he lifts himself on his elbows. There are a few bullet holes

that seep blood, but more than a few show the inner threads of a ballistic vest destroyed by doing its job.

He's wearing a fucking bullet-proof vest.

Raising his weapon, the one he's terrorized me with for years, Enzo aims it at Raith's retreating back.

*No. Not ever. Not while I live.*

I don't even think or cry out or warn Raith. I am a valkyrie seeking her revenge, whooping a blood-thirsty cry of rage and denial.

Jolting forward, I lift the Banshee, squeeze the trigger, and empty the clip in my father. The recoil slams the buttstock into the tender flesh of my shoulder and armpit, bruising it with repeated force. I don't make the mistake of targeting Enzo's chest. I *spray* him with bullets. They shots chew through his chest, his neck, his face and turn half of it into mince meat.

A gout of blood erupts from Enzo's mouth, painting his face in a garish arterial-red color from the shot that took out a chunk of his neck. Then he sinks to the ground, the force of his arm smacking off the cold earth causing his Glock to tumble out and far away from his outstretched grasp.

Raith pivots, pointing his AK-45 at the now *very* dead form of my father. I don't feel any grief in that second. Maybe later I will. Right now, I just feel relief.

I break into a run, and Raith meets me halfway. We are a twisted, fucked up version of a love story as we crash into each other. Reuniting practically overtop a corpse.

I fling my arms around him, almost scaling his body in my need to be close to him. Clinging, I kiss him, desperate and half mad now that this nightmare is over. Now, there is nothing to keep us apart.

Raith cups my face between his rough palms, capturing me in a lingering kiss. He pulls back, and his heart and our future shines in Arctic-blue eyes. I don't know if it's yet midnight, or if we're still a few hours shy, but to Raith that doesn't matter.

"Happy birthday, little dove," he says, and it is the most romantic thing I've ever heard.

I've made it to twenty-three *and* it's Valentine's Day. I look over his shoulder as Snack and the Big One and the creepy cloud of drones which buzz around the backyard and linger overtop of us. Then down at the lump that remains of Enzo Di Maio.

*I’m free.*

I couldn’t have asked for anything more perfect. For some girls, romance is a walk on the beach, or candlelight dinners. Mine is the blood of my enemies spread across my feet like scattered rose petals.

Searching Raith’s face, I run my fingers down along his gaunt cheeks, savoring the roughness of his facial hair along my skin. My heart sings in my chest, and my soul feels as if it’s larger than just me, as if it’s extended beyond the boundaries of my skin and overlapping with him.

And I know what I’ve felt since the first moment we met is true.

“*Sei la mia anima gemelli*,” I whisper.

*You are my soul mate.*

# Epilogue

**Valentina**

## One Week Later

I try not to let my anxiety show as I wait for Dario to arrive. We've chosen neutral ground for this meeting. Even though the events in Chicago are well-known, the *who* is a mystery. Nobody is sure how I managed to return home, unscathed, or why I have a new bodyguard who stays by my side constantly.

The less anyone knows the safer it is for everyone. I just say that everyone involved in my kidnapping is dead. Because that is true. The *reason* is gone, and I am free to return to my life.

I don't want to. I want a new one with Raith, and that's why this meeting is important. Even if dread is percolating in my belly, and I keep looking at my *bodyguard* where he stands in bright mirrored glasses, jet black hair slicked back and pulled tight, and dressed like the perfect image of a mafioso in his three-piece Armani suit. He even applied some fake tattoos, and the dark, temporary ink curls along his hands and up his throat like the branches of a tree. They end right below his jawline, where they disappear in his fastidiously groomed beard.

Dario arrives with a small entourage. He's now the de facto Don of the *Cosa Nostra*, but the Five Families aren't beginning to vie for position, and

he doesn't have their support. That is important, because the *capo de capos* needs to have men at his back, and a solid foundation to shore up his reign. The power struggle that Raith had been afraid of is in danger of becoming real. But so is the reality that *the Company*, and through it both the *Cosa Nostra* and *Camorra* are in financial ruin.

Which is where I come in.

Dario's earthy eyes flick to me, then up at Raith, and back down again. He's on unsettled footing, but he doesn't let it show. He smooths his jacket front down and takes a seat across from me. Leaning back in the chair, he props his ankle on his knee and sprawls out as if he doesn't have a care in the world. When I know he has a few million worries.

"*Bongiorno*, Valentina. You're looking excellent after your recent scare."

"*Ciao*, Dario. It was a most trying ordeal." I keep my face deadpan and try not to crack a grin when I think about the *ordeal* I went through. The hardest part was thinking Raith would die. The rest? I can live with it.

"I'm surprised you asked for this meeting. Are you now the Don of the *Camorra*?" His eyes narrow, but there's no heat or sexism in the look. That he doesn't think I'm worthless because I don't have a penis between my legs is why I am in favor of him leading the Families into the twenty-first century.

I fan my hands out in front of me, palms open, expressing openness and trust. "In a sense. I hold the purse strings."

Dario's brows flicker, showing his surprise. He doesn't outright ask me how I have purse strings, when all the accounts are drained, but I can see the interest by his body shifts. Raith has been teaching me what he knows on body language, and it is fascinating what micro-expressions can tell you.

Dario drops his elbow from the back of the chair, and leans forward, until his forearms rest on the linen-covered table in front of us.

"I did not realize the *Camorra* was so flush."

"It isn't the *Camorra*." The bite in my voice causes Dario's expression to turn wary. "It's my inheritance. Once I turned twenty-three."

Now it's my turn to lock eyes on him. "But you knew that, of course."

Dario gives me a hint of a smile, a roguish one that drops the tension from his face. He doesn't let it gain strength, and it fades away as if I imagined it. "I neither admit nor deny having that knowledge."

A part of me wants to thank him for the head's up, another part wants me to smack him for not outright telling me what was going on. So that I could plan instead of idling in place and letting things escalate as they did.

There's a lot of *would have, should of, could have* that I try not to dwell on.

"Elio will be the new Don," I say, getting to the point. "Mattias will become his *Consigliere* when he's older. They both have my financial backing."

Dario's mouth purses thoughtfully. His swarthy eyes never waver as he meets mine directly, searching for some hint of his own future. I stop tormenting him and give him an offer he can't refuse.

"I would like to see you take your seat beside Elio." I am Queenly and magnanimous as I give him my decree, sticking it in his gullet all the many times he snidely called me *princess.* "You will have what I offer him, my financial backing."

I don't miss the relief that appears in his face, or how a single word can carve anxiety off a body. He exhales a lungful of tension and leans back in his chair.

"What do you want," he says, and I love that he rolls with taking orders from a woman.

Uncle Elio took a bit of convincing, primarily in the form of Aunt Giulia finding her backbone and threatening to divorce him if he didn't listen. That threat is not one uttered lightly and would ruin not only his standing in the *Camorra*, but his life too. The shame of being divorced where the *woman* is the one leaving would stain him for eternity. He shaped up swiftly after that, and the Aunties continued to find their bravery now that Enzo is dead.

I still am not sure if I can forgive them for their part in keeping me trapped. But that baggage will take years to go through, and for now I'm just enjoying being free.

I beckon to the wait-staff nervously waiting in the wings. Three of them come swishing out through the double-doors, carrying a feast of traditional Italian fare. A wine bottle is cracked open, and Raith sits down beside me. He shakes his napkin out under Dario's surprised eyes, and lays it across his lap.

Everyone eats at my table, including Dario's guards.

When we’re all served, I grin at the new Don Palermo. “Now we can get down to business.

# Epilogue Two

## Raith

### Six Months Later

Valentina looks like a goddess, bathed in the afternoon sun that fills the villa's spacious bedroom. She arches atop me, trembling as I hold her close, and guide the rhythm of her movements as she chases her orgasm.

She is at her most beautiful like this, carefree, and completely in the moment. Her pleasure suffuses her cheeks, making them pink and dewy from the feverish heat which rises off her. The many kisses I've given her have plumped her lips, and a fine sheen of sweat clings to her skin that's taken on a warm umber from the week's we've been in Zakynthos.

"Come for me, little dove," I whisper to her in Deutsch. She loves it when I use my native accent. It's a trigger I use shamelessly when I want her to be a good girl, like now, where she's edging herself and refusing to climax on my cock.

Her lush body quivers and tenses. Those perfect, tear-drop breast bounce and jostle, and then she cries out as she grinds her fluttering pussy down my cock. Seating herself deeply as her inner sheathe milks my dick. I groan and arch beneath her, holding her trembling form as I drive up and

into her, chasing my pleasure. It only takes a few seconds longer, a rough couple strokes as I pump deeply into her skin-tight sex, before my climax detonates in the base of my spine. Chills spread up and into my brain, and the tension of the moment spills out through my cock and floods her pussy.

Valentina melts atop me, a horsewoman having won her race, and I cuddle her close. I adore her with my kisses, peppering her hair, her forehead, her cheeks. Sweeping my hand down her spine, I clutch her to me, our heartbeats caught in a rapid, post-coital beat that feels as if we've soared off a cliff together.

I close my eyes, and breathe her in. These moments are perfect and precious, and I cherish each one.

After everything settled down in New York, she asked for one thing: to travel. Other than Chicago, she had never been outside of New York.

In the past six months, I've shown her the world. We've been to the French Rivera, went castle-hopping in Scotland, had a romantic weekend in Paris, visited the real Cinderella's Castle in Germany, and now we're sunning ourselves on the Greek Isles. We'll winter in New Zealand, because after years of dreary winter skies, Valentina has found a love for the ocean. In spring, we'll visit Italy. She's been having D track down her remaining family, and so far, has found a cousin that's excited to meet her.

I close my eyes, and drift in a sea of sunlight and her sweet scent.

Valentina wiggles off me and snuggles into my side. She props her cheek on my heart and roams her fingertips down the center of my chest. Sometimes, her thoughts grow heavy, like now. Eventually, she will tell me what's bothering her. But I always know beforehand, because there's a subtle change in her, one I always pick up on. The sun seems dimmer. The colors more muted, as if my perception of the world is seen through the lens of if Valentina is happy or not.

Now is one of those times. Despite the soft glow that remains shimmering in her skin, her eyes are troubled when they lift to mine.

I curl a finger around a lock of her curly hair. "What's wrong, *kleine*?"

"Not wrong, really." Her mouth shifts as she works out what words she wants to say.

Her beautiful mocha-brown eyes lock on mine, and I drown in their vivid cocoa depths.

Then she says what's on her mind, and my heart stops beating.

“I’m pregnant,” she whispers.

We’ve never used protection. Not once. While we’ve discussed marriage, she’s not ready for that. Because of the negative connotations she associates with it, from her father and mother, Cesare, her aunts. I don’t blame her, even though I wish I could claim her officially. She’s mine in all the ways that counts.

I swallow an unfamiliar emotion because she looks so serious telling me this. I don’t know where her head is at. She’s just begun living her life, and while I’ve wanted nothing more than to see her swell with my child, that’s the selfish part of me.

I try to find the words and realize I’m speechless.

Her eyes are luminous. “I know it’s probably not the best time.”

She starts nervously talking, and I don’t hear the words. I focus on the rhythm behind it, the anxiety that’s threading through her vowels, and I realize that she’s scared. Not of being pregnant. But of my reaction.

I shut her up with a kiss, and then I roll over and cage her in with my body. She gasps a soft sound of surprise and stares up at me.

“Niklaus,” I say to her.

Effectively, I derail her thoughts and she blinks up at me. A stitch appears between her brows, confused at what I’m telling her.

“Is…that what you want to name the baby?”

I press my forehead to hers, and close my eyes, smelling the scent of *us* on her skin, and feeling her plush warmth beneath me. I conjure the dead with that name, but it’s hard to feel grief when my heart is full to bursting.

“If you want,” I murmur against her lips. “But I was born Niklaus Wolf. I won’t tell you my middle name because it’s one I share with my sire, and it died when he became incarcerated.”

Valentina’s mouth drops open. Her shock gives me the opening to kiss her again.

And again.

When I let her talk again, she’s breathless. “You’re not mad?”

“Never. I’ve been praying every night that I would get you pregnant.” The devil is in my smile as I grin down her.

Valentina narrows her eyes. “I didn’t know an incubus prayed.”

“Oh, we do, little dove. We just don’t use altars and books.” I lower my head and rub my lips over her throat, tasting the tremble of her pulse against

my tongue. “My prayers were fucking my cum in as deeply as I can and plugging your pussy up so that none of me dripped free.”

Valentina turns pink all over. She quivers beneath me. Rolling onto my side, I lock her legs with mine, wrapping her up in my arms, I cradle her belly with my palm.

*My child is in there.*

A collision of possessiveness and love threatens to tip over into obsessiveness. But I don’t let it. I won’t smother her, even if I’m already thinking of how to protect her and the baby. She probably won’t let me dress her in Kevlar for the next nine months or prevent her from driving or riding a bicycle down the beach. She sure as fuck won’t let me take chocolate away from her, but I will try and balance my own unhinged needs to protect her, with her need to be free.

I blow a soft breath out and find her ear, being the demon whispering carnal sin in her ear. “You know, you’ll never be able to get rid of me now.”

Valentina laughs, the bed shaking with her mirth. A breezy, salt-soaked wind ruffles in through the diaphanous sheers that hang around the partly open balcony doors. It carries the scent of her into my nostrils and makes my mouth water for a taste of hers. My cock hardens, and I gather her thigh and drape it overtop mine, opening her pussy for me.

“If you thought I was overbearing before, it’s nothing compared to now.” I’m already hard again, my body’s visceral reaction showing her how happy I am as I slide into her slick, hot body deeply. She moans as I fill her completely.

“You’re mine, and so is this child.” I pull her closer, claiming her with every bit of me demanding every piece of her.

“I know,” she says with a grin in her voice and love in her touch. Her hips swirl, and she sinks further down my shaft. “But you’re mine too. Now fuck me.”

I bite her shoulder at her demand, and drive her into the mattress, showing her with devastating sweetness how her, and our unborn child are the new centers of my world.

THE END

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When he's ready to leave this accursed place, everything I feared comes true. He barters for me. And in between one violent, blood-soaked moment and the next, the man who holds my leash changes from a brutal low-level enforcer to *Mikhail Vasiliev* – one of the most powerful men in the *Bratva*.

Now, I'm in a new world, one of opulence and freedom. He promises me safety, but how can I believe in an unimaginable dream? I don't know whether I should hate him or thank him for taking me away from the nightmare that had been my life. Trusting another man is difficult. Believing that a ranking member of the Brotherhood won't hurt me if given the chance is impossible.

He's persistent, thawing the ice-cold chains wrapped around me until they melt into the hot, golden flames of lust. Slowly, but surely, something soft and delicate takes root in the barren field of my heart.

*But right when I begin dreaming of an impossible future, a monster from the past threatens to tear it all down.*

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