



Arranged for the Assassin

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Category: Romance, Crime And Mafia, Thriller, Action, Suspense

Description: She's mine the moment I see her.

But only in my dark dreams.

Because she's a mafia princess and I'm a lone-wolf freelance assassin, way below her social class.

She's destined to be an arranged bride to seal an alliance with a rival mafia Family.

And I'm destined to live out my days knowing that another man gets what's mine.

But three weeks before her wedding something snaps in me.

And my destiny changes.

Events rearrange themselves.

Arrange themselves for me.

Giving me a chance to take what's mine.

And keep her forever.

Total Pages (Source): 39

AMELIA VOLINI

The assassin says nothing. He never does. Just stands there quiet like a monk in a monastery, silent like a tree in a nameless forest.

His name is Zedd. No way that's his real name, but it's what Father calls him. As for the rest of the Family . . . well, nobody calls him anything. See, Zedd occupies this strange position in the Volini Family. He's got direct access to Father. One of just two men in the vast hierarchy of our crime family with whom Father talks business directly.

“Zedd is an insurance policy, a backup plan in case your father needs to putmedown someday,” Carlo Giani, Father'sconsiglieriand the only other man trusted with direct orders from the great Anthony Volini had grumbled to me one morning three years ago, shortly after I'd returned from my private schooling in Italy, when Zedd was alone with Father, leaving Carlo to pace the Italian marble floors outside the closed oakwood doors of Father's fortress of an office. “See, every mafia family uses the trustedconsiglierto pass on orders to the captains and soldiers. That way nobody lower down the ranks can testify that Anthony Volini ordered them to do a damn thing. But the flip side is that theconsiglierknows enough to put away the Godfather for a hundred years. So your father maintains this one other direct connection to make sure I don't get any treacherous backstabbing ideas. Hell, right now your father could be giving Zedd the order to cut my balls off and feed me to the gators on the edge of the estate.”

“Why would Father have your balls cut off before throwing you to the gators? Don’t they like to eat testicles?” I’d peered up with a flash of sweet wickedness when Carlo had grinned nervously at me as I sat there on the sprawling balcony outside Father’s office, pretending to read a book bigger than my boobs, peeking up now and again to see if Zedd had emerged from his monthly private meeting with Father.

Zedd always showed up on the thirteenth day of every month, and I made sure I was preened and perfect just in case this was the day Zedd looked my way, maybe even talked to me.

Carlo had gulped at my comment, then rubbed his savage mouth and shaken his balding head, muttering something in Italian under his breath before snatching up his phone which buzzed nonstop every moment of every day. He put the phone to his ear, talking in muffled tones to one of the captains, pushing through the glass-framed doors to the mansion and disappearing into his own office adjoining Father’s.

I’d giggled and then adjusted the blue velvet cushion in the white-painted wicker chair, positioning myself at just the right angle for Zedd to see me when he emerged from Father’s office. I always scheduled a tennis lesson on the thirteenth of the month, right after Zedd’s meeting. That way I had an excuse to wear my white tennis skirt and a black top cut low enough to show my cleavage without making it obvious that I wanted to display aforementioned cleavage. The angle of my chair was set up for me to plop my tennis-shoed feet on a wicker footstool, showing off the pronounced curves of my thighs beneath that white skirt. Then I’d pretend to look down into the open book on my lap, my heart hammering like an excited rabbit beneath my boobs as I waited for Zedd to emerge.

Of course, that day—like every other day—Zedd had stridden past the glass balcony doors without so much as a sideways glance in my curvy direction. My heart had sunk a little, but it wasn’t like I actually expected him to approach me. He never spoke to anyone except Father. This was just a dumb game I played with myself. It

was just a silly girl's infatuation for a silent beast with a gladiator's physique and a monk's mystique.

"Nobody's ever seen Zedd with a woman," I'd heard the maids whispering one night when I snuck into the kitchen to steal a slice of tiramisu from one of the six fridges. The maids and kitchen staff were out on the service porch in the back, sharing a jug of wine like they always did after the night's work was done. I'd frozen in place, my toes curling in my socks, my butt tightening beneath my nightshirt. My pussy was still wet from touching myself beneath the covers, eyes closed as I imagined they were Zedd's fingers sliding through my soft folds, his big thumb pressing down on my little clit, his hot mouth on my quivering lips as I came hard like I always did the night of the thirteenth, with the most recent Zedd sighting clear in my mind. "Some of the soldiers see him eating dinner at Marco's, but he is always alone. No wedding ring. No girlfriends. None of the soldiers have ever seen him take a whore either."

"Maybe Zedd does not like pussy," one of the male cooks had said gruffly, perhaps a hint of envy in his voice at the swoony curiosity of the maids.

"Oh, Zedd most certainly does like pussy," one of the maids who worked the upstairs bedrooms had slurred. "One in particular, if you ask me. Except that virgin vagina is off limits for anyone without pureblooded Italian mafia pedigree."

I'd almost dropped the plate on the kitchen tiles as my heart skipped a beat, maybe just straight up stopped beating.

Did she mean . . . me?

"You mean Amelia?" one of the other maids had gasped. "Zedd likes her? How do you know that?"

"Don't tell anyone this, but I saw Zedd upstairs once, a couple of months ago," the

slurry maid had replied after a hiccup. “The main floor bathrooms were closed for cleaning and Zedd had come up to the second floor to take a leak, I guess. It was the big bathroom in the hallway with the jacuzzi and the sauna behind that dividing wall. I was wiping down the wooden benches in the sauna. He didn’t know I was in there. I was about to call out but stopped when I saw him standing at the window overlooking the tennis courts.”

My heart had almost exploded, the dessert-plate trembling in my hands, my pussy tightening and squeezing out fresh wetness as I listened like my entire life depended on what came next.

“Amelia was having her tennis lesson. That white skirt and black top, everything bouncing and bobbing,” the maid had continued. “Zedd watched her quietly for a while. And then he . . . he unzipped.”

“Ohmygod, did you see it? How big is he?” Gasps and giggles rose up from the bevy of maids and housekeepers. My nipples immediately pebbled, the tips tightening to sharp points, my sex so wet I had to clamp my thighs together to not leave a puddle on the kitchen tiles.

“Did you go out there and offer to help?” teased one of the maids.

“Oh, I’d have been on my knees sucking him if he asked,” groaned the first maid. “But I was petrified. Have you seen the size of Zedd’s hands? He could snap my neck like a chicken’s. If he knew I’d seen him jerking himself off to the boss’s daughter . . . shit, he’s a fuckingassassin,you guys. I just hid in the sauna and prayed for it to be over.”

“I’d have gone out there and helped him out for sure,” declared one of the other maids. “He could keep watching Amelia’s big ass bouncing on the tennis court while he came on my tits, for all I care. I’d be cool with that.”

Cackles broke out from the maids. “I doubt he’d like your mosquito-bite sized boobs,” teased another maid. “After all, Zedd clearly likes some meat on the bone.”

“Keep your voice down or we’ll all get tossed to the damn gators,” cautioned a housekeeper. “And Amelia is an innocent sweetheart. Stop being mean.”

“Nobody’s innocent in this family,” grumbled the other maid. “But you’re right, I guess. Amelia Volini’s about as innocent as it gets in this world. Poor thing. I almost feel sorry for her. She’s just part of the system, born to be nothing but an arranged bride to secure an alliance with one of the other Families.” There’d been a pause while more wine was poured. Glasses clinked. A cigarette was lit. Sips and sighs followed, then the maid continued. “But wait, finish the story about Zedd. So you saw him watching Amelia. Then you saw him unzip. But then you said you hid. So you didn’t actually see him jerking off?”

“Well . . . no,” said the first maid. “But he didn’t take a piss, that’s for sure. Just stood by the window for maybe five minutes. Then I heard him grunt under his breath, let out a stifled groan. Heard him snatch some tissues from the box near the sink, heard him wipe off. Then he stomped over to the toilet and flushed the evidence before washing his hands and heading out the door.”

The first maid sighed dramatically. “I can’t believe you didn’t actually see his cock. What use are you to us?”

“Yeah, what a missed opportunity!” cackled one of the kitchen helpers.

The teasing went on, and soon the conversation moved on to other topics. But my heart and mind stayed fixed on what I’d heard. I’d left the slice of tiramisu on the counter, scurried silently out the kitchen, padded up the back stairs to my room, locked the door and slid back under the cool sheets which got warm very quickly once I lifted my nightshirt and found my pussy slick and hot, my clit stiff and erect,

my mind going to places that would most certainly have caused that housekeeper to retract her statement about little Amelia being an innocent sweetheart.

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Because no “innocent sweetheart” imagines being taken rough and hard by an older man twice her size with hands big enough to choke a bull, the blood of a hundred dead men on those hands.

Now suddenly I see those big hands push open the balcony doors, and before I understand what’s happening Zedd is standing there in the open doorway, the late morning sun casting dangerous shadows on his stubbled jawline, his tree-trunk sized neck, his thick arms with veins the size of pythons snaking all around.

“Your father wants to see you,” he says gruffly, keeping his deadly green eyes averted, just like every man who works for Father does. But he’s looking off to the side, not down at the floor like most of the low-level soldiers and all the house-help do when they encounter the boss’s protected daughter.

I want you to see me, comes the thought as my gaze tries to burn a hole in his forehead, penetrate Zedd’s brain, make him turn that vicious gaze in my direction.

Like he’d maybe done once in secret from that upstairs window three years ago, when I was freshly returned from the Volini olive plantation in Southern Italy, the prime of my teenage years spent sequestered by servants and security-guards, protected from the perversion of the American high-school experience.

But of course, that maid hadn’t actually witnessed Zedd doing anything in that bathroom, I remind myself like I have a hundred times in my low moments, when I look in the mirror and see a face far too plain to be pretty, a figure not exactly designed for the catwalks of Milan or Paris.

“What does Father want?” I ask, putting the heavy book down on the glass-topped table with as much grace as I can muster when my heart hammers like it’s about to explode. “Where’s Carlo?”

Obviously Carlo is busy doing something, or else Father would have sent him to get me. But this is the first time Zedd’s actually spoken to me, and although a part of me is shy like a rabbit, the excitement has got my tongue wagging a thousand times a second.

Zedd shrugs those massive shoulders, keeps that deadly gaze just off-center from my face—which is hopefully tanned enough to hide the blush of raw aching desire. Since he isn’t looking at me, I allow myself to take in the sight of his contoured body beneath that fitted black long-sleeve shirt with sleeves rolled up past his forearms.

Yup, those hands are big enough to palm my entire head, maybe even pluck it off like I used to do with my annoyingly well-proportioned Barbie-dolls. Those thighs are about twice the size of mine—which is saying something. Heavy pectorals like slabs of granite, his torso narrowing to a viciously masculine V down past his flat abdomen all the way to his peaked trousers.

Wait, peaked trousers?

Oh my god, is that bulge just his normal size or is he . . .

Now Zedd turns his body away from me like he feels my gaze on him, senses that maybe I’ve noticed how the front of his black combat pants are tented and throbbing like there’s something alive in there, awake and alert, enormous and erect.

“Wait,” I say awkwardly as Zedd moves towards the open balcony doors, away from me, heading back into the mansion, presumably out the front door, not to be seen again for another month.

Zedd stops, body still halfway turned away from me. “What?” His voice is gruff, strained, like it’s taking effort to not turn all the way towards me, like he’s just barely restraining himself from bull-rushing me and shoving his grizzly head under my clean white tennis skirt, tearing my black panties off with his bear-like teeth, driving his python of a tongue into my virgin slit and sucking the cherry right out of me like it’s his.

My imagination is wildly out of control, and I force myself to rein it in, shut it down, act like the quiet, courteous, innocent princess I’ve been raised to become.

Fantasies stay inside, you silly goose.

I have to remind myself of that occasionally when I find myself saying things that should only be said with my inside-voice. Too many years of seclusion in the company of stern tutors and cordial coaches. Absolutely no fraternizing with boys my own age as I hit puberty, like my virginity is my most important asset, to be protected like pirate’s treasure, kept sacred and intact until the right alliance with the right Family comes along.

At the right time.

And suddenly it hits me that maybe this is the right time.

It’s why Father wants to see me in the middle of the working day.

Because in three weeks I turn twenty-one.

My time has come.

Now suddenly a desperation grabs my throat from within, almost stopping my heart as Zedd stands there half-turned, waiting for me to continue after I told him to wait

and then clammed up because my mind was spiraling to that dark place where I'm face down and ass up, screaming as Zedd spans me, howling as Zedd spreads me, wailing as Zedd fills me.

Somehow I manage to stay composed on the outside even though I'm wet like a waterfall in my black Spandex panties beneath my tennis skirt. "You . . . you like watching tennis?"

Now Zedd's gaze meets mine, and in that one deadly moment I see the truth in those killer green eyes, sense the secret in that vicious gaze, understand what I can't explain, can't verify.

That he was looking at me that day three years ago from the upstairs bathroom, those very same killer's eyes fixed on my tanned curves, those big turkey-sized hands stoking his pillar-sized cock as he stared like a stalker, watched like a vulture, claimed me in his imagination just like I have so many times in mine.

"What?" he says again, his brow crinkling with the question even though his eyes shout the answer. "Do I like . . . tennis? What the fuck kind of question is that?"

I gulp at the aggression in his voice. No man would dare speak to me like that. Not because I'm the "off-with-his-head" type—it's just a matter of respect for the Family.

But Zedd's response doesn't come from a place of disrespect or contempt. He just blurted it out, like the question about tennis exposed him, took him right back to that filthy moment three years ago.

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Though of course that moment could all be in my imagination, comes the heart-sinking thought again, the self-doubt which lives with me like an imaginary friend, whispering that my only purpose is to be married off as an arrangement, that my only assets are my family name and my looks.

Looks that everyone knows aren't exactly movie-star level, even though nobody would dare say it, not even Father. But the message comes through loud and clear in the make-up artists and body-coaches he sends my way. I hear it in the way the maids and housekeepers talk about me with pity when they drink too much wine, all of them speculating that I'm not pretty enough to secure an arrangement with a top-level Family, not thin enough to even become the bride of a first-born son from one of the second-tier Families.

But what I lack in looks I make up for in smarts and spunk, I try to assure myself as I swing my legs off the footstool and stand, hurriedly smoothing out my skirt as it rides up just enough to show the bottoms of my black Spandex tennis-underwear.

"The U.S. Open Tennis starts next week in New York," I say hurriedly, my sharp mind thankfully salvaging the awkward question into something vaguely reasonable. "Father always gets VIP tickets from the Brooklyn and Queens Families. He never goes, so the passes always end up getting tossed. He can probably give them to you if you like tennis. You can take your wife," I add, my heart almost jumping up my throat at the obviously leading question. "Or girlfriend."

Zedd flicks his gaze to my eyes. This time he keeps the gaze on me, moving his eyes down along my short curvy body in my carefully curated tennis outfit. My butt tightens, goosebumps prickling my smooth thighs like Zedd's gaze is doing that to

me.

“Your father offers me those passes every year. I always say no. I don’t like crowds.” His brutal jaw tightens in what appears to be a smile. “What about you? You obviously like tennis. Don’t you head to New York every year for the Open?”

“I wish!” Blinking rapidly, I shake my head. “I don’t get out much, as you probably know.”

Zedd raises an eyebrow, seems about to say something, then nods almost like he pities me too, just like the rest of them. “Well, looks like that’s about to change, Princess,” he says softly, a hint of emotion in his voice, something that feels like regret, like again Zedd’s holding something back, a question that can’t be asked, a statement that can’t be made. “Go on. Your father wants to see you.”

And with a lingering look that hints at the same desperation that tugs at my own heart, Zedd turns his back to me and strides through those glass balcony doors, his broad frame moving rapidly down the wood-paneled hallways of my mansion, my privilege, my prison.

2

ZEDD

It’s like being in prison. You’re trapped in a cage, looking out at something you can’t touch, can’t reach, can’t have.

Can’t possess.

Even though in your mind you’ve possessed her a thousand times, claimed her countless ways, owned her like the treasure she is, worshipped her like the goddess

she must be.

Carlo Giani glances at me as I storm past his office like an angry monster. I'm usually cool like a polar bear in December, but right now I'm a fucking grizzly in heat. For years I've come to this mansion on the thirteenth of every month just to catch one glimpse of Amelia Volini, that curvy little beauty with her nose buried in some big book, her feet up on that footstool, her tennis skirt just short enough to make my head spin, her black top just revealing enough to make my blood boil.

She's the only reason I keep coming back here.

Seven years now I've been on Anthony Volini's private payroll, giving up my independence as a freelance assassin to serve just one Family. I was ready to quit after four years, but then Amelia Volini returned to America after coming of age, her skin bronzed from spending most of her teenage years hidden away in Southern Italy, protected from either her father's enemies or other boys her age who would undoubtedly be all over a stunner like Amelia if she'd shown her gorgeous face and perfect body in any American school.

I'd never seen her before. She'd been sent to Italy before I ever stepped foot on the Volini Estate here in Florida. She'd been back less than a month when I showed up on the thirteenth to collect that month's assignment and payment—and to inform Anthony Volini that I would no longer serve him exclusively, that I yearned for the freedom of freelancing, the ability to roam the world at my leisure, reject any job I didn't like, no matter who was offering, no matter what was being offered.

But that changed when I saw Amelia Volini.

I was trapped and I knew it.

Trapped in a prison of desire that could never be fulfilled.

After all, she was hallowed ground, not fit for mongrels like myself. She was pure Italian blood from a well-respected—if not top-tier—mafia Family.

As for my blood?

Hah!

Good luck dissecting the origins of my murderous ass. The last memory of my parents is my father butchering my mother and then blowing his own psycho brains out. They told me I spent eighteen hours trying to wake my mother up before I passed out exhausted in a pool of her clotting blood.

I was six.

Grew the fuck up that day.

Never could figure out why my deranged dad didn't kill me too.

Not until I saw Amelia.

I survived hell to find my heaven in her.

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Though of course I've spent the past three years trapped in purgatory, a prisoner behind that glass wall of status and bloodlines, hierarchy and history.

Fuck, if I could count the number of times my mind has plummeted down to those dark places where I steal Amelia from her father and Family, pull her through that glass wall of society into my dirty world of death and destruction . . .

But there's a reason they call those thoughts fantasy.

They aren't real.

They can never be real.

Because if I touch that divine ass, I'm a dead man.

And in that extremely unlikely world where Amelia Volini actuallywantsme to touch her?

She's dead too.

No way Anthony Volini lets his only daughter slum it with a nameless mongrel like me, a man with no history, no past, no future.

No future with Amelia, at least.

But shit, what was that question about watching tennis, I think as my heart thunders behind my chest, my head spinning as I stomp down the marble-floored wood-

paneled hallways of the mansion.

Could anyone have seen me three years ago in that upstairs bathroom?

Nah, I tell myself as I step through the front door and take a gulp of fresh air. If anyone saw me, I'd already be a dead man. At the very least Anthony Volini would have cut all ties with me. No way he would trust a perverted beast like me around his precious daughter. These Italian mafiosos take the whole virgin thing way too fucking seriously, like there's something holy about that sweet red cherry.

Though damn, there is something holy and hot about being Amelia Volini's first.

Her first and only.

The thought almost makes my head explode, and I wince at the late morning sun and shake my head to clear the manically possessive urges. Three years now I haven't touched a woman. Just lost interest in every other pussy after seeing Amelia, after my body roared that she's mine even though she'll never be mine.

I clench my fists at my sides in jealous fury, barely able to hold back the blind rage that some privileged Mafia prince gets to be Amelia's first and only, not me. It's just wrong how these Mafia families violate each of the Ten Commandments every day and twice on Sundays, but want all their daughters to be pure like the driven snow for a wedding night with some spoiled privileged Mafia prince who's been fucking whores and housemaids ever since his little pecker got hard.

Fuck that.

Amelia deserves better than that.

But although I hate to admit it, Amelia deserves better than me too.

I have money, sure. Millions safely tucked away in untraceable cryptocurrency and offshore numbered accounts and even a few storage lockers with cold hard cash and bars of gold in case the fucking apocalypse finally shows up.

But money wouldn't be enough. What kind of life would Amelia have with a lone-wolf assassin like me? We'd be on the run from Day One, her father's soldier's hunting us down to save face for the Family. Alone and on the run isn't the kind of life a princess like Amelia could handle.

Though now it occurs to me that maybe Amelia does know a thing or two about loneliness and seclusion, about being trapped in her own gold-plated prison. What was that she said just now?

I don't get out much.

Well, that's about to change, Princess, I'd replied with far more emotion than I wanted to reveal, a hint of the raw desperation that surged in me when I overheard Anthony Volini closing the deal over the phone.

A deal for Amelia.

Her time has come.

Her arrangement has been made.

With the fucking Romero Family.

I almost broke her father's neck right there.

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What gives him the right to say yes before she does?

What gives him the right to give Amelia away like she's his property?

She isn't his property.

She's my damn property.

My fucking woman.

Now I stare directly into the sun, wondering if I should blind myself so I never have to bear witness to another man claiming a woman my heart and cock have both claimed as their own. Not that the boss is going to invite me to the wedding, but that will be a dark and dangerous day regardless.

It'll take every ounce of restraint to not find a spot within range of my modified M-13 sniper rifle. I'd wait for the wedding vows to be done before putting a bullet in Ralph Romero's head, streaking Amelia's virgin-white wedding gown red with the stain of my possessive rage. She'd be a widow three seconds after becoming a bride. Still untouched and perfect for me, but too tainted for any other Mafia Family to consider another arranged marriage.

Not that any Mafia Family would risk another precious prince's life with an unknown assassin on the prowl.

A predator protecting his possession.

A beast protecting his beauty.

A chuckle rumbles deep in my throat as I put my sunglasses on and march down the marble front steps to where my black Ford F-150 truck is parked in the service lot off to the mansion's east side. Killing Amelia's husband on the wedding-day is a nice fantasy, that dark middle-ground between sex and violence where men like me live most of the time. But it's just a fantasy. I'm not crazy enough to assassinate a Mafia prince without it being sanctioned by the Consortium of Families. That pretty much gets all the Families to send their soldiers and enforcers after your dumb ass. And I sure as hell don't have a death wish.

Though the image of Amelia being married within weeks sure as hell makes me want to die.

I stride down the path along the side of the mansion leading to the service lot. Across the manicured garden are the tennis courts. I rub my jaw as my mind snaps back to what Amelia had said about watching tennis, about the U.S Open in New York.

And about not getting out much.

A wild idea hits me and I stop like I've been shot. Furiously rubbing my jaw I turn and stride back to the front steps, bound up them like a wolf, storming past the sentries at the front door. They're surprised, but they have standing instructions to let me pass during business hours on the thirteenth of every month, so they step aside before I steamroll them with my eagerness to do what will probably end up being a big disappointment but is worth a shot and is safe enough that it wouldn't arouse any suspicion.

Though maybe it will arouse something else.

I get to the main atrium, walk past the marble fountain with a naked Italian dude

spouting water from his tiny marble dick.

My dick, however, is thicker than the marble pillars lining the way to Anthony Volini's office. The heavy oakwood doors are closed but I knock anyway, knowing that I get special privileges with the boss on account of my direct relationship with the man.

Carlo Giani pokes his head out, quizzical frown on his well-lined face. The guy is rightfully wary of me—after all, part of the reason I'm here is to make sure the boss's consiglieri doesn't get too big for his boots.

Of course, Carlo Giani is loyal to the core. There's no scenario other than dementia where Anthony Volini asks me to take Carlo out. Still, the boss is a crafty strategist. He understands incentives, knows that the best way to keep a man honest is to remove all temptation to be dishonest.

"Let him in," calls Anthony Volini from the deep reaches of the cavernous office when Carlo tells him it's me. "What is it, Zedd? You forget something?"

I shake my head, enter his office, do my best not to glance at his daughter's ass as she stands in front of her father's walnut desk with her back to me. I sense her body tense up at the sound of my voice, but she doesn't turn.

"U.S. Open Tennis starts this weekend," I say casually, my gaze firmly on Anthony Volini even though all my attention is on his daughter, my every sense heightened to pick up any sign that she understands what I'm really asking with the question I'm about to pose her father. "You offer VIP passes to me every damn year. I always say no. Thought maybe I'd flip the script this year if the offer still stands. I'll take a couple of passes if you've still got them."

Anthony Volini blinks, raises a bushy eyebrow, then cracks a grin. The old man likes

me. I think he's also a bit scared of me. Good combination.

“A couple of passes?” The boss slides open a desk drawer and pulls out a shiny file folder, tosses it on the desk, flips it open and holds up two laminated passes for the Flushing Meadows Tennis Center in Queens, New York. “Now that's really flipping the script, Zedd. The lone wolf has a woman now?”

Now Amelia stiffens in that imperceptible way nobody but me would notice. She'd asked me that obviously leading question about a wife or girlfriend.

I avoided the question.

After all, it would be a bit awkward to declare that in my mind Amelia Volini is my wife, my girlfriend, my possession, my property.

I shrug as I take the passes from the boss, leaning past Amelia as I do it. The scent of her floral body-spray rises up to me, but through it I swear I pick up the scent of her pussy, the musk of her sex, pheromones of her femininity.

It's my perverted imagination, of course, but when you spend so much time alone the obsessions become more vivid than reality. For one wild moment my mind almost breaks, that demon inside urging me to just take her now, fucking snatch her like the prize she is, sling her over my shoulder and barrel my way out of the room like a madman.

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But years of discipline pay off, and I smile coolly and nod out a thanks to the boss. Moments later I'm out in the hallway again, those oakwood office doors closing behind me.

Perfect.

Quick glance to make sure nobody's watching and then I'm out on the balcony, standing above where Amelia was just sitting. The cushion on her wicker chair is dimpled in the shape of her beautiful round ass, and I groan under my breath as my cock strains. I briefly consider stealing the cushion, taking it to my car, locking the doors and sealing the tinted windows before fisting my cock and jerking off into the outline of her butcrack like a deranged savage. But that's not part of the plan.

This is.

Her book sits on the table, a home-made bookmark sticking out of it.

I slide out her bookmark.

Replace it with one of the VIP passes.

A thrill of excitement goes through me. This isn't as risky as telling Amelia point-blank that she's mine, but it carries some risk. It's clearly an invitation, and I can't know for sure how Amelia will react.

Most likely she'll be insulted at the suggestion. She might tell the boss, in which case I'd be out of a job at best, on the run with a price on my head at the worst.

I can live with that risk.

Because there was something in that brief interaction with Amelia today.

Something that tells me she feels time running out just like I do, the window of opportunity closing, the sand running low in the hourglass of our fate.

Now the ball is in her curvy little court.

She can ignore the invitation.

She can snitch on me and take it to her father.

Or she can find a way to make it to New York this weekend.

What will you choose, sweet Amelia?

3

AMELIA

“So I have no choice?”

Father sighs and rubs his eyes, motions for Carlo to leave the office, waits until the doors open and close, then huffs out a breath and directs his weathered gaze up at me.

“Ralph Romero is a good match,” he says softly even though there is a hardness in his eyes, a look which means this isn’t a negotiation. “The Romero Family is a dominant power in Atlanta. They own Georgia, bordering our Florida territory, so it’s a perfect alliance. Old man Romero is bed-ridden, on his way out of this world. Ralph isn’t in line to take over, but already runs many of the operations along with his older

brother. The older brother is in line to be the next Don Romero, of course. But Ralph has a reputation for ruthless ambition. It's possible Ralph will rise to the top of his organization someday. It's a good move for our Family. A good move for you." He tents his fingers, narrows those eyes. "Besides, it's not like the offers have been rolling in for your hand in marriage. Most arrangements are made when the girl is sixteen, wedding vows taken the day after her eighteenth birthday. You're almost twenty-one, Amelia. This is the world you were born into. With it comes privileges. But there is always a price to pay."

I close my eyes tight, slump down in the hand-carved chair facing Father's looming dark desk which feels like a sacrificial altar right now, me as the virgin lamb. "And my price is a lifetime with a man I don't even know, let alone love?"

Father snorts. "Love is a luxury reserved for Disney princesses, not Mafia brides. Your mother and I did not meet until the day of our engagement. In our world marriage has always been about economics and politics. This crap about love is a recent invention, made up to sell movie tickets and cheap paperback novels. When your younger brother comes of age and returns from Italy to sit by my side on the throne, he will be subject to the same fate."

A dry chuckle escapes my throat. "My younger brother is banging the housemaids and the olive harvesters and the Italian village whores as we speak. And we both know that keeping mistresses is a long-accepted tradition in the Mafia world. I hardly think the men are subject to the same fate as the women."

Father shrugs. "It is not my fault that a woman's virginity is so valued, her reputation so easily destroyed. Yes, it is a double standard. But not one that I have created."

"Doesn't mean you have to perpetuate the double-standard," I grumble, crossing my arms over my boobs and scowling up at Father. Of course, none of this is a surprise. Before she died Mother explained it all to me, told me in her gentle but firm voice

that the tradition of arranged marriages is old as the hills, showed me statistics that implied arranged marriages resulted in fewer divorces than so-called “love” marriages. Finally, she made it damn clear that privilege such as ours does not come without a price.

I’ve always known this was going to be my fate.

And I’ve always been mostly fine with it.

Until about ten minutes ago.

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Until Zedd spoke to me.

Until Zedd looked at me.

Looked at me like I was his.

Now that urgent desperation rips through me again. That sense like time is running out, like choices need to be made now or else the window of opportunity will slam shut forever.

It's ridiculous, of course. Just the anxious panic of being forced into a new life, becoming a new wife. In three weeks I'll be Amelia Romero, and there's really nothing I can do about it.

Sure, I can throw a tantrum, threaten to leave the Family, pack up my Louis Vuitton roller-bag and hop onto a boxcar heading north, make my own way in the world.

But that's not me.

I don't run away from my fate.

I've absolutely enjoyed the privilege of wealth and security, grown up in a world where every need was met, where I truly am treated like a princess, a treasure to be guarded. I understand that all of society's rules exist to restrain and control the basic human drives of sex and violence. And those rules are even stricter in the violent world of the Mafia.

So yes, I could tell myself I'm being brave and rebellious by protesting now when it's time for me to pay the price every privileged mafia princess must pay. But by doing it I'd hurt our Family's reputation, lower our standing in this cruel society of organized crime, embolden the other Families to perhaps make moves on our territory, perhaps even take a shot at Father, maybe even my kid brother. It sounds far-fetched, but a simple act of childish rebellion could snowball to where people I love might die because of some fantasy to hold out for true love.

And what would I know about love, anyway?

Mother loved Father, didn't she? Yes, there was always a sadness behind her strong gaze, but she accepted her role in this world, understood that every woman makes choices and tradeoffs when it comes to marriage and family, that the inconvenient truth is that marriage is a crapshoot anyway, that more than half of all American marriages end in divorce—which means the odds are against you once you say “I do” at the altar.

A familiar sense of despair washes over me. Even if I did protest, on what grounds would I do it? It's not like I have some secret lover I can insist on marrying until Father relents. This isn't that kind of story.

Now Zedd comes to mind again—not that he ever leaves my mind. But I force the silly thought aside. I don't even know the man. Whatever I think I feel is just the frustrated lust of a young woman who's been sheltered from the world of sex and desire.

Besides, Zedd obviously has a woman. He asked for two passes to the U.S. Open, didn't he?

So there's your answer from the universe, I think gloomily. There's fantasy and there's reality, and never the twain shall meet.

The rest of our father-daughter meeting passes in a surreal haze. The date's already been set. Three weeks from today, just after my twenty-first birthday. At least I'll be able to legally drink on my wedding day.

Now Carlo knocks twice and enters. Something about Father's next meeting. Trouble in one of the casinos near Tampa. One of the bookies in Miami is stealing. An enforcer in Gainesville got picked up on a DUI charge and needs to be sprung.

Business as usual. Life goes on. Father has his role to play, and I have mine.

So I slide my sulky butt off the chair and make my exit, my hands hanging limply at my sides like a doll, my gaze dragging along the hand-woven carpet leading out the door to the marbled hallways. My heart feels dead, my body lifeless, my future bleak.

Maybe Mother was right. Maybe I'll come to love Ralph Romero once I get to know him.

And if I don't?

Well, tough shit, sister, I tell myself with dark resignation. This is the life you were born into. You're going to enjoy the privilege of wealth and security all your life. So you can't sulk when it comes time to pay the price. You think married couples working three jobs each and surviving paycheck-to-paycheck are living some fairytale romance of eternal joy and everlasting happiness? Grow the fuck up, you spoiled brat. You've got it easy. Be grateful, not grumpy.

My phone vibrates where I've shoved it into my sports-bra beneath my black tennis top. It's my tennis coach politely checking to see if I'm still coming. I text back a thumbs-up emoji even though I'd rather stomp upstairs to my room and lose myself in a tub of Chunky Monkey ice-cream and some melodramatic movies about women submitting to their fates in a man's world.

I head past the balcony doors, which are open for some reason even though I know I closed them before heading to Father's office. Through the open doors I see my book on the glass tabletop, my bookmark sticking out like a flag.

Except wait, that isn't my bookmark.

A chill snakes up my back when I see a shiny laminated rectangular plastic card that someone's slid into my book where my home-made bookmark used to be.

"What the hell?" I mutter, hurrying over and sliding it out.

It's one of the VIP passes Father gave to Zedd a few minutes ago.

Oh. My. God.

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Is this real?

Now that snaky chill turns into a roaring thrill.

My knees go weak and I almost pass out with excitement.

Shakily I sink into a chair, my fingers trembling as I stare at the VIP pass like it's a key to freedom, a symbol of salvation, an invitation to something that I've imagined a thousand times but never with the expectation that it could ever actually happen.

I press the cool plastic card to my heart, close my eyes and wait for my breathing to settle down enough that I can think clearly. It takes several long minutes, and even then I know I'm not thinking clearly at all.

Because I'm actually considering doing it.

My vision blurs as my heart starts to hammer again. I'm getting married in three weeks. My secret crush spoke to me for the first time ever today. And now he's left an invitation.

But an invitation to what?

Innocent adventure?

Fairytale romance?

Dirty sex?

What does it mean if I show up in New York this weekend?

Only one way to find out, I think feverishly as my mind snaps into high gear. I haven't been to the U.S. Open since I was twelve and I went with Mom just a few months before she died. But I know how things work at the tennis center in Queens, New York.

There are a dozen courts within the tennis center, with multiple matches going on at the same time. The VIP pass gets you into any court, and each court has a reserved VIP section where you can take any unoccupied seat. There's no assigned seating, so I could wander in and out of the various matches, sit anywhere in the VIP section.

Sit next to anyone I like.

Now I hurry up to my room, excitement carrying me flying up the stairs until I'm breathless at the top, running down the hallway like a rabbit as everything starts to fall into place.

We're a Florida Mafia Family, with zero business dealings in New York. I'm not on any Social Media, so nobody's going to recognize me—especially not in a big hat and sunglasses. I'd have to take a personal maid and at least two bodyguards, but they won't come into the secured tennis center with me. They'd wait outside and be with me at the hotel all night, of course, but during the day I'd be alone inside the tennis center, safe like a kid in Disneyland.

Yup, so long as I take my personal maid and the bodyguards, Father will probably give me a VIP pass—obviously I can't tell him I already have one—and let me go without worrying too much. Especially if I can make him feel a bit guilty about the upcoming arrangement with Ralph Romero, perhaps a bit melancholy that I'll be moving out in less than a month, his daughter all grown up and leaving home forever.

I can totally pull this off.

And I don't have to make any decisions about what it means until I get there.

If it's weird and awkward or if I'm reading this whole thing wrong . . . well, then I can just enjoy a weekend of tennis and avoid Zedd altogether.

Of course, avoiding Zedd might not be an option.

The guy's an assassin, trained to stalk his prey, hunt his target, strike before his victim even knows he's there.

The dark fantasies grab me by the throat, and suddenly I'm on my bed again, legs spread wide, fingers down the front of my black tennis underwear, fingertips working the seam of my slit, careful not to push all the way in and damage that oh-so-important seal of feminine purity.

My eyelids flutter as I flick my clit, rub my vulva, stroke that dark space between my vagina and asshole. I come fast and hard, my body hunching forward as I sputter and gasp through a raging climax, my head thrashing against my silk pillow, face twisted in a grimace of ecstasy, eyelids clamped shut tight as the familiar fantasy of Zedd between my legs takes on a dangerously real vividness.

Now panic streaks through me as I pant my way down to reality. What the hell am I doing, I ask myself as my climax winds down. Remember that some fantasies are arousing precisely because in real life they'd be dangerous, perhaps even deadly.

And shit, if this fantasy plays out in reality this weekend, I might be a dead woman on my wedding night.

Because Ralph Romero will expect me to bleed red for him, like a cherry that's just

been popped.

4

THREE DAYS LATER.

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U.S. OPEN TENNIS CENTER.

FLUSHING, NEW YORK.

ZEDD

My ears pop from the pressure building up in my head. My frenzied mind has spent the last three days oscillating back and forth between wild fantasies of claiming Amelia Volini and killing Ralph Romero. Every time I blink I see red, my soul roiling at the deadly mix of sex and violence that's creating a powerful potion, casting a dark spell over me.

It's the first day of the U.S Open, and I must be nuts to be here. What the hell do I seriously expect to happen? There are only two possibilities: Either Amelia shows up or she doesn't.

And honestly, a part of me hopes she doesn't.

Because if I see her pretty face here in the crowd, catch a glimpse of her dynamite curves in this sea of strangers, her father a thousand miles away, no bodyguards within sight . . . fuck, I don't know if I'll be able to restrain that possessive beast in me from saying things I won't be able to take back.

Doing things that can't be undone.

Because if Amelia shows up here and gives herself to me, allows me to take her the way I've dreamed about for years . . . well, then she's a dead woman on her wedding

night.

I know Ralph Romero. Did a job for the Romero Family about a decade ago, before I went exclusive for the Volini Family.

Ralph Romero was a teenage asshole back then, but I know a killer when I see one. He'd take it as an insult that Anthony Volini offered him a woman who'd already been fucked by another man. It's fucking primitive, medieval, ridiculous even. But so is the whole violence side of the Mafia world. They execute people for insults. They torture men to send messages. Hell, they even murder their own blood for ambition. Hell yeah this world is primitive and medieval.

And the dark truth is I understand it.

Maybe even love it.

Because I'm a part of this primitive, medieval world.

And there's a primitive part of me that needs to be Amelia's first, yearns to be her only, aches to be her husband, her lover, her mate, her protector, the father of her children, the keeper of her secrets, the light of her life.

And because that can never happen, I am tormented by that medieval part of me that will never rest in peace knowing that Ralph fucking Romero gets to go to bed with Amelia every night, fill her with his filthy seed, watch his babies grow in her precious womb, spend decades watching sweet Amelia mature and blossom, getting more beautiful with each passing year, the lines of wisdom and experience marking themselves on her smooth skin, motherhood making her glow like the goddess she is.

I watch a family of four make their way past the snack counters to my left. They don't notice me even though I'm the size of a brick wall. I adjust my sunglasses and

look away, merging silently into a moving crowd heading to one of the side courts. Most of an assassin's work is about staying invisible, a shadow in the night, a ghost in the light. I've perfected the art of staying hidden in plain sight, always moving slow and casual, no sudden moves that attract the eye, no unnecessary interactions that might be memorable.

Of course, the best way for nobody to remember you is if you were never there. And again I question my sanity for still being here.

I also question my motives.

Because if I really loved Amelia, I wouldn't be here, putting her life in danger.

Which means this isn't love, it's obsession. Pure selfishness. A hunger to possess, to claim, to fucking own.

Of course it isn't love, you dumb ape, I growl inwardly before stopping at the entrance to the side-court and backstepping to a spot near the concrete walls where I'm out of the way and can watch the crowd unnoticed.

But the conflict rages too hot for me to focus on the hundreds of sunglasses-covered faces beneath hats and visors of all sizes and shapes. Amelia might be smart and brave, but she's innocent and sheltered, totally unprepared for what's simmering in my obsessive heart, burning in my primitive brain.

If you love her, you'll walk the fuck away now, I warn myself. Before you put both of you in danger.

Especially her.

Prove you love her by walking away, Zedd.

Something glimmers in my heart now. A flicker of warm emotion, something deep and powerful which whispers that possessing her and protecting her cannot happen at the same time, that you need to choose between the animal in you and the man in you.

The animal in me growls, but the man in me is what loves Amelia in a strangely selfless way. Loves her enough to accept that maybe there's a different life where we're together, that maybe this powerful attraction is just a bleed-through from some other reality where we're together, where I can have her without destroying her.

Relief washes over me, and I gulp back the sinking dread and turn my body towards the exit.

And I see her.

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Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:51 am

She just walked into the open-air atrium from the South Entrance.

Amelia Volini.

She's here.

She showed up.

I stagger backwards as my heart almost stops with the shocking realization that Amelia accepted my invitation, made a choice I never truly believed she'd make.

And now suddenly the beast in me growls inside, spreads its possessive claws and takes control of my beating heart, my throbbing cock, my aching head, my burning balls.

She hasn't seen me yet, I realize as I stay silent and still against the gray concrete wall. I watch Amelia quietly as she looks around nervously, touches her big straw hat, adjusts her oversized sunglasses.

She's in a white sundress that hugs her curves and shows the subtle outline of a white bra-and-panty set. She's pure as a new morning, glowing with a light that ignites every part of me, sending me into a dangerous mix of blissful love and brutal desire.

I scan the faces around her, sweeping my gaze to the entrances and exits, looking for bodyguards or chaperones. Amelia's not in any imminent danger this far from Florida. Nobody would even recognize her up here—especially not with her thick brown hair all tied up and hidden beneath a big straw hat that belongs at the Kentucky

Derby.

My throat constricts as I swallow hard. Fuck, I'm hard all over, every muscle tensed, my balls tight, my cock almost fully erect at the manic excitement that she's actually here, actually considering giving herself to me.

It's just a desperate grasp for adventure before she submits to her future as Ralph Romero's wife, I remind myself. Play it cool, scope it out, don't tell her how you really feel. She catches a whiff of the obsessive, possessive beast that's wanted her for years and she's gone. A rabbit like Amelia isn't going to be able to look into the eye of a wolf without being scared shitless.

Now I'm moving towards her, my feet gliding like I'm floating through the crowd, my body magnetically drawn to hers. She still hasn't seen me as she gets in line at a drinks counter, digs into her little shoulder-bag for her wallet, pulls out a twenty just as I stride up beside her.

"You know they're going to card you," I say coolly, startling her so badly her sunglasses go crooked. "And I don't think Anthony Volini wants his daughter to get busted with a fake ID so far from the friendly Florida cops."

"I . . . I'm only getting a Coke," she stammers, her face blushing red like a beet, her fingers trembling as she fixes her comically big sunglasses that can hide her identity but not her beauty. Not from me, at least. "And I don't have a fake ID. Besides, I'm going to be twenty-one in three weeks."

"You're also going to be Ralph Romero's wife in three weeks," I say softly, doing my best to control the growl of jealous rage that tightens my throat. She stiffens, is about to say something, but we're at the front of the line now and the girl behind the counter is looking at us expectantly.

“Two Cokes,” I say when I realize Amelia is still in a mild state of shock. Perhaps the realization is hitting her now. Maybe she’s only just understanding that she’s here alone with me, that her being here is an implicit acceptance of an invitation that even an innocent virgin knows is dark as night, dirty as sin, dangerous as fuck.

And maybe that’s why she’s here.

I pay for the Cokes with a hundred, grab the cardboard cupholder with the two drinks, slide my free arm around Amelia’s waist, lead her away from the counter without bothering to get the change. She’s trembling beneath my touch like a scared kitten, and I know my priority is to make her feel safe right now, communicate clearly that nothing needs to happen if she’s scared, that it’s all right to turn around and walk away.

Even though it’s going to be fucking hard to let her walk away now that I’m so close to her body, my fingertips digging gently into her soft sides, her hips brushing against me as we walk in lockstep towards one of the side-courts that’s almost empty because it’s a first-round doubles match with no-name players.

All the courts are open-air, and the expanse of blue sky and bright sun makes Amelia relax beneath my touch. I lead her to the VIP section, which is a sea of empty green seats, with just a few spectators down at the front rows—probably family and friends of the players.

“Sit,” I tell Amelia, leading her to the second-to-last row and gesturing with my head, knowing she needs some direction right now, some guidance. She does what I say, sitting in the seat I point out, making sure her sundress is smooth beneath her ass, pressing her thick bare thighs together as I fill the seat next to her with my big body. “Take a drink,” I say, handing her one of the Cokes, watching as her lips close around the straw hesitantly at first before sucking the sweet soda with petite little gulps.

My throat tightens and I force my gaze away from her lips, trying not to imagine that sweet mouth hungrily sucking my fat cock as I fist her hair and push her head down over my lap. Of course, when you try not to imagine something, it means you're thinking about it, and my cock stiffens to full mast in my pants, tenting my trousers to an obscene peak.

There's no hiding what my body wants, but I've sworn to play it cool, so I begin to adjust my position so she won't freak out at the obvious sign of my obsession.

And then a shadow falls over my bulging crotch.

It's Amelia's big straw hat.

Looking straight ahead at the tennis court, she coolly places the hat over my tented crotch. Her lips tremble with a suppressed laugh, and I crack a grin when I feel the tension break like a dam caving in.

She's still trembling, but it's the kind of involuntary shiver which means the adrenaline is draining from her system. Adrenaline is the hormone of fight or flight, so if it's leaving her system, it tells me something.

It tells me she isn't fighting her fear anymore.

And she isn't going to fly away.

She's mine.

5

AMELIA

I'm his, comes the sickeningly thrilling thought as my senses spin like I'm flying over myself, watching the two of us from above. The initial shock of Zedd suddenly standing beside me when I didn't even see him approach has worn off, leaving my body tingling with the aftereffects of that momentary sense of danger.

At first I'd panicked, of course. This was all still a girlish fantasy until Zedd slid his arm around my waist in that possessive way, leading me through the crowd which seemed to open up for us like the Red Sea parting for Moses. My vision was blurry, my knees wobbly from the shock of understanding that I'm really here, he's really here, this is really happening.

Of course, part of me knows that nothing needs to happen if I don't want it to happen. There's no chance of Zedd coming to my hotel—not with two bodyguards at the door and my personal maid sleeping in the other room of the large suite at the Four Seasons in Manhattan. And this is about as safe as it gets—we're in a crowded tennis stadium on a sunny morning.

So why does everything feel so deliciously dark.

And why does it seem like we're the only two people in the world.

I sip my Coke and stare straight ahead at the blue-painted concrete surface of the tennis court. I feel Zedd's gaze fix on my lips as I suck at my straw like a thirsty little

slut. I can't see his eyes through the sunglasses, but there's something about how his body stiffens that sends a dark thrill through me, like my body knows exactly what he was thinking.

And I was proved right when Zedd's pants peaked like the circus was in town, pitching the big-top tent beneath which the animals prowled and growled, pranced and danced, licked their chops, sharpened their claws.

Placing my straw hat over his erection was a move so daring I almost blacked out. My white cotton panties are already soaked knowing Zedd is hard for me, that he was totally imagining me sucking him off like a good girl, my head bobbing up and down on his lap as he sprawled on his seat under the sun.

"You're surprising," Zedd says now, his voice soft but deep. He swallows thickly, his big Adam's apple moving in the center of his massive neck. "I didn't think you'd come. Do you know how fucking dangerous this is?"

I force a shrug, take another sip of Coke, put the drink down in the plastic cupholder in the armrest. "More dangerous for you, isn't it?"

"Don't think so, sweetheart." Zedd chuckles darkly. "Ralph Romero expects to marry a virgin princess in three weeks."

"I'll still be a princess in three weeks." I glance at him, grateful that my sunglasses hide the effort it's taking to act this cool. "Will I still be a virgin?"

The hat almost flies off Zedd's crotch. His tanned, stubbly face goes dark with color. "Fuck, Amelia. You are on dangerous ground here. I should have my head examined for bringing you out here."

"You didn't bring me out here. I chose to come out here." I glance at him, my body

tightening when I take in the sharp contours of his rugged face, that jutting jawline, brutal lips, scars from battles he's won, lines from years of experience doing his deadly work. "Besides, we're just two VIPs enjoying some tennis. If you're worried about the danger, you can drink your Coke and be on your way."

Now Zedd whips his head in my direction, cups my chin and turns my head towards him. "Take off those sunglasses," he orders. "Let me see your eyes."

I do what he says.

Immediately.

I'm in a safe place with a hundred options to leave, but there's something so overwhelming about Zedd's presence that I'm rooted in place. He's holding my chin with a huge hand that I know has throttled men twice my size. His grip is firm but somehow still gentle.

Still, there's a dangerous edge to Zedd's body language, to his touch, his tone, the tension in his muscular body. I sense it like I can see it, see the conflict living in this brute like a two-headed snake, trapping him between man and beast, predator and protector.

Now we look into one another's eyes, and the world fades away into black nothingness. My big brown eyes widen with innocence and perhaps a hint of fear. His green orbs burn like slits of molten emerald. I see desire and danger, but also a desperation, maybe even despair.

"Whatever happens between us this weekend," he whispers, those eyes flashing with unbridled sincerity. "Will also end with us this weekend. You're a smart girl. You know the rules of the world into which you were born." He shrugs, grunts, shrugs again. "Look, I understand why you came. I'm a taste of the forbidden for you. A bit

of adventure before you settle into the life that's been planned for you." He shakes his head now, his eyes softening in a way that sends a warm ripple through me. "But I won't allow myself to do anything that puts you in danger, Amelia. If all we do is sit next to each other and sip Cokes and share a few laughs over the next two days, I'll cherish those moments the rest of my fucking life."

I blink twice, frown once, glance at the way my straw hat is perched atop his peaked crotch, then cock my head and raise an eyebrow.

His scarred, handsome face crinkles in a grizzly smile, those dangerous eyes flashing with humor. "Oh, that? Don't worry. I'm used to taking care of myself. It's been that way three fucking years now."

I blink rapidly. Three years is how long I've been back in America. Three years is how long it's been since that maid saw Zedd in that upstairs bathroom watching me. "You mean for three years you haven't . . . haven't had a woman?"

Zedd is quiet, his rough hand still cupping my chin, big thumb stroking my cheek, eyes studying my face like he's searching for something. "Oh, I've most certainly had a woman. The only woman who does it for me anymore. But I only get to have her in my head. That's the only place it's safe for me to take her the way I want, the way I crave."

Shockwaves of desire move through me. "Me too," I manage to whisper.

His eyes narrow, the hint of a frown furrowing his brow. "What do you mean, me too?"

I shrug as his rough thumb continues to stroke my cheek, now his fingers caressing my neck, making my nipples prick up beneath my white bra. "I mean . . . in my head . . . my imagination . . . me too. I imagine things that aren't safe in the real world.

Things with you, Zedd. Stuff you do to me.”

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A low growl rises from Zedd's throat, His fingers briefly tighten around the back of my neck. "Fuck, don't mess with me, Amelia. I'm this fucking close to losing control, to making you mine in the flesh like I have a thousand times in my mind."

"I've imagined it a thousand times too, Zedd." My words come out as a strained whisper. So many years dreaming of his fingers stroking my pussy, massaging my tight opening so it relaxes for his cock, him entering me with a dominating thrust, his cockhead blazing through my secret space, opening me so wide I'll never be satisfied by another man, taking me so deep I'll always feel empty without him. "Ever since I found out that you watched me from the window. It did something to me, hearing that."

Zedd's fingers close tight around the back of my neck. "What? How the fuck do you know about that?" Color darkens his deadly cheekbones. "Shit. Listen, that was just one time."

There's a flinch at the end of his sentence. I raise an eyebrow as excitement burns through the seam of my pussy.

"Wasit just one time?" The truth lurks back there in his hungry eyes, and I want to draw it out, hear it for myself. "Just once, Zedd?"

His grip is still firm on the back of my neck. His gaze confidently riveted on mine. "No." He takes a breath, grunts out an exhale. In his gaze I see that he's not going to waste any time lying to me. "I watch you from my car every month after my meeting with your dad. I park in the side lot, not far from the courts, wait for you to scamper out there in your shiny tennis shoes and little white skirt. I'm already fucking hard

from getting that glimpse of you reading on the balcony outside your father's office, your feet up on the stool, the curve of your thighs and ass almost blinding me with desire, that hint of your black underwear hiding what I know is mine."

I almost melt into a puddle of wetness. "You notice me sitting out there?" My heart flutters like a butterfly being tortured. "But you never glance my way."

"Peripheral vision. Years of training on how to hunt, to stalk, to sneak, creep, capture, fuckingclaim."

My pussy almost squeaks in shocked pleasure like it's already been claimed. "Oh, shit, Zedd. That makes me want to . . ." I can't finish the sentence. "So then you sit in your truck and wait for me to walk to the tennis courts?"

"Yeah, Princess." Zedd strokes the back of my neck, his lips tightening to a dangerous smile, eyes shining with a potent mix of possession and obsession. I see the hunter in his eyes, feel the stalker in his touch, smell the predator in his scent. He isn't even trying to hide who he is, and what's more shocking than the truth is how my body's responding to it. "Tinted windows so you can't see inside. One hand holding my scope to my eyes as you bounce up and down on the hot tennis court, my other hand on my cock like a fucking pervert. I'm not going to bullshit you, baby. I've been fucking obsessed for three years. And I'll be obsessed for the next three hundred. Take it or leave it, this is who I am. This is who I've turned into once you came into my life."

I almost pass out from the blunt, shameless honesty of this man. He's openly admitting that he's watched me like a stalker, pleasuring himself in private like a deranged pervert.

And somehow I love it.

The darkness thrills me.

The filth intoxicates me.

I want more.

And I want it now.

“How do you touch yourself?” I ask breathlessly, shocking myself with the boldness of my question, glancing down at his bulge barely hidden by my straw hat. “Show me, Zedd.”

Zedd’s hand on the back of my neck tightens almost involuntarily, like his entire body seized up. There’s a moment where I sense his tremendous strength, realize he could snap my neck without flinching. This man is a killer, a trained assassin, but although the edge of danger is ever-present, so is an overwhelming sense of safety, like this man couldn’t hurt me—not the bad kind of hurt at least.

“Show me,” I whisper again, my voice almost a whimper. I’ve never touched a man’s cock before, and my trembling hands curl into tight fists. “Please, Zedd. I want to make you feel good.”

“Fuck, Princess, you already make me feel good just by existing.” Zedd leans in and kisses me delicately on the lips, sending a shockwave of raw panicked ecstasy through me. “Oh, hell, Amelia. Your lips taste so damn sweet. Better than I ever imagined. And trust me, I’ve imagined those lips a million times. Open that sweet mouth for me, Amelia. Open wide, all the fucking way. That’s it. Good girl.”

He drives his tongue past my trembling lips, palm cupped against the back of my neck, stroking roughly upwards into my hair before fisting my tresses and locking my head in place as he claims my lips and mouth and tongue and throat.

The kiss is hot and thrilling, a first kiss that I know I'll never forget, will stay vivid in my imagination forever, will be burned into my brain even after I'm dead.

"Oh, Zedd," I whisper as my hand slides down and rests on his muscular thigh, fingers clawing inwards at my palm as I yearn to feel how hard he is for me.

Forme!

Now Zedd senses my curiosity. His teeth close on my bottom lip, biting gently and then pulling away. His chest expands as he takes a heavy breath. He studies my face for a long moment, then grunts and leans back in his seat, puts his sunglasses back on, takes my hand in his, and guides me down between his legs.

My trembling fingers close around his swollen shaft. He's so big and hard through his trousers that my fingers are splayed all the way wide. I don't think I could get my fist even halfway around his erect cock if it were standing straight up. I'm not sure it would fit in my mouth even if I unhinged my jaw. As for my pussy . . . oh, fuck, the thought makes me tremble. But vaginas are designed to stretch, aren't they?

My pussy clenches as Zedd groans and arches his neck back, gazes over at me as I rifle my hand up and down his sheathed shaft. My lower lip is clamped between my teeth with concentration. I've never touched a man's cock before, and it's thrilling to feel how hard Zedd is for me. Combined with the thrill of knowing he's been fantasizing about me from the first time he laid eyes on me . . . oh, shit, I'm soaked through my sundress already, sticky on the seat beneath my butt.

"Lift up your dress for me," comes his throaty growl. "Spread your sweet thighs. Slump down in your seat so you can spread wide for me, Princess. I want to see your white panties all wet and shiny in the sun."

My fist tightens on his cock as my pussy tightens between my legs. Zedd's hands are

gripping the armrests so tight his knuckles are white, like he's trying damn hard not to put those hands on me, like he knows he won't be able to stop before he ravages me out here in the open, makes me scream so loud the players stop and the referee blows her whistle.

"I said pull your sundress up for me," comes his command. "Don't make me ask again, Amelia. I'll rip it off you, then put you over my knee and spank you so hard you'll cry. Then we're both fucked. I'll go to prison, where your father will get me shanked for spanking his baby girl and bruising her tender ass, spoiling her for every other man. So do what I say quietly, Princess. Push that fucking dress up over your hips, spread those smooth thighs so I can see how wet your little pussy is for me."

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I do what he says with a whimper, gasping when I see a thick vein in the side of Zedd's neck bulge and throb as he watches me slide my big butt lower in the seat, spreading my legs, then slowly raising the bottom of my sundress to reveal my snow-white panties pressed tight against my wet slit.

“Oh, fuck, that pussy's mine,” he mutters, his jaw clenching as he rips off his sunglasses and stares at the outline of my waxed slit clearly visible through my drenched panties. “I'll never have it, but it's still mine. Fuck, you need to make me come now before I lose control, Princess. I'm this close to claiming that cunt right here in the open, ripping those panties off and taking you hard and deep until the cops pull me off you. But if I start, I won't stop until I fill you with my seed, pour every drop of my semen into your tight hole until my balls run dry. They'll have to kill me to get me off you. The cops won't have the firepower. They'll have to call the National Guard, Homeland Security, the fucking United Nations. But I'll fight them all off until I take what's mine, until I claim my property, until I see you overflowing sticky and white down your thighs, your weeping slit pink and plump from my fat cock. Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Ohfuck!”

The outpouring of his manically filthy words barely registers before Zedd's left hand whips away from the armrest and he raises three thick fingers and smacks them between my legs, right on my throbbing pussy, doing it twice and then palming my crotch and rubbing the front of my panties rough and hard, thumb grinding into my clit, fingertips pushing my panties into my slit.

I'm about to cry out in shock but suddenly he's kissing me full on the mouth as I wrench and pull at his cock, feeling it spurt angrily in his pants, coming like a beast being murdered, thrashing like a caged animal as he tongue-fucks my face and

ravages my pussy through my panties.

My screams are throttled by Zedd's hungry mouth as he drives his tongue down my throat, his obsessively deranged words finally hitting me and drawing forth a filthy furious orgasm, the climax charging out of me like a caged mare out the gates, so many years of needing to be touched by him, stroked by him, filled by him, fucked by him all rushing out in a breathless gush of ecstasy.

Zedd's still kissing me as my climax thunders through my slumped down body, and I realize my hand around his cock is wet and sticky, like he's soaked all the way through his underwear and trousers. The scent of his semen is divine, and I smell my own pussy heavy in the air around us. My lips and chin are covered with Zedd's saliva, my sundress hiked obscenely over my hips, panties pushed into my slit like a big wink, his long rough fingers caressing the sensitive insides of my smooth thighs as he pants into my mouth.

Finally Zedd breaks from the kiss, his breath heavy and warm against my cheek.

I smile dreamily at him, wait for him say something.

"You need to leave," is what he says. "Immediately. Just go, Amelia. Right fucking now. You need to go before you get hurt. Badly hurt."

6

ZEDD

The hurt in her eyes cuts me like a blade. But it's my only move, and it has to be done now, while I'm temporarily sane. The moment after blowing a load is the only time a possessive beast like me can think using logic and common sense, reason and calculation. Ten minutes from now I'm going to get hard again, my balls tightening

for another monstrous release.

And after touching that pussy through her panties, I know what my cock wants, what that beast inside me needs, what that creature inside craves.

I thought I could stay in control out here in the open, the danger of being discovered too great to seriously consider fucking her.

But I was wrong.

I can barely recall that gush of word-puke that poured out of me as I came. All the manic-obsessive filth that I mutter when I'm alone fisting my cock like a deranged beast came out like the stream-of-consciousness confession of a madman who's lost his grip on reality, is sinking into a fantasy that's putting this sweetheart in danger.

So she needs to go.

And so do I.

This is over ten minutes after it began.

It's the only way to keep her safe.

She'll be married in three weeks.

Before the thirteenth of next month.

So when I show up at the Volini estate for next month's meeting, there'll be no Amelia Volini sitting on that wicker chair.

There'll be no Amelia Volini anywhere, in fact.

She'll be Amelia Romero by then.

And that's how it should be.

It's the only way this plays out without destroying her life.

“What do you mean, go?” She's staring at me, hurt and accusation in those big brown eyes, like I've used her to get myself off and now I'm sending her packing. “We just got here, Zedd. We're just starting to . . . just starting to . . .” She trails off when she sees the cold resolve in my eyes, that dead expression which blocks access to normal human emotion.

It's the emotional switch I can flip by choice, the mindset shift that allows me to kill without remorse, without the trauma that comes with taking human life.

But somehow the cold wall that protects me from the psychic impact of murder can't blunt the pain of the confusion I'm causing in Amelia right now.

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She's just had her first sexual experience, and it's with an asshole who placed her hand on his dick, told her to lift her dress so he could stare at her panties, gape at her untouched little pussy. Then he blew his load and it's over, thank you very much, now fuck off.

And you know what?

Good.

Let her think that.

Let her think I'm an asshole.

Because if she hates me, she'll leave without a fuss.

Fuck, I really do love her, don't I?

She's right here for the taking, that pussy primed and plump, ready to be wrecked by my hungry cock. But instead I'm turning away, bottling up the beast of my desire, ending this tryst with a hasty petting session that's not even an appetizer for the hunger raging in my core.

But this is the way it has to be. We go any further and I'm not stopping until I'm balls deep in Amelia, stretching her so wide Ralph Romero's pencil dick will get lost in there, filling her so deep every other cock will feel like a toothpick for her.

Of course, once my dick claims Amelia I already know that no other man will be

allowed to get within ten feet of her pussy.

Because that pussy will be mine.

And that means Ralph Romero will be a dead man walking, to hell with common sense and logic. There's no reasoning with the monster inside me. It's primitive, protean, primordial.

Pure masculine energy.

The craving of a caveman.

So I have to get the fuck away from her now.

Before my cock overcomes my common sense.

Before my balls take over my brain.

I put my sunglasses back on. Snatch Amelia's hat from where it's fallen on the ground between my legs. Hand it to her without looking in her direction even though I can feel her wounded glare burning a hole in the side of my head.

"You're serious?" she manages to blurt out as she pulls her sundress down over her pretty white panties. She closes her legs and sits upright, fidgets with her sunglasses in her lap, doesn't look up at me. "You really want me to leave? That was enough for you?" Now she looks up, and I see the insecurity in her pretty round face. "The reality doesn't match the fantasy for you. I get it. I know I'm no beauty. Wasn't born with the supermodel hourglass shape that turns men on. My butt's too big for my height, and my thighs are—"

"Stop it!" I snarl, clamping my hand over her mouth. I can handle Amelia hating me,

but there is no way in hell I will let Amelia leave here hating herself. “Are you insane, Amelia? Whoever or whatever has put that crap into your head is wrong, completely wrong. You are fucking perfect, you understand? Hell, I just told you the filthy truth about how I’ve watched you for years, lusted for you in body and mind, soul and spirit. You’re the real deal, Princess. The complete package.” I chuckle dryly, cup her sweet chin and direct her gaze to where my black pants are shiny at the crotch from where she made me come like a geyser in about three minutes. “You know, a man’s cock is the ultimate instrument of truth. It’s out of the brain’s conscious control. All it knows is pussy, and when it finds a pussy it wants, it gets hard. Brutally simple, but it’s a compass needle that always points true north.” My gaze softens when I see a flicker of that girlish thrill light up Amelia’s pretty eyes again, that same delight I saw when she understood how badly I crave her, how deeply I want her, how wildly I . . . I love her. “I love you, Amelia,” I blurt out without thinking. Fuck, I swore to keep my feelings locked up, to not say crazy shit like this which makes it clear I’m delusional. Only delusional psychos fixate on women they barely know and think it’s love. But the words keep coming, driven by a desperate need to make sure this sweet precious creature understands that real men don’t get hard for airbrushed photographs of professional models—they get hard for women like her, glowing with gorgeousness, bursting with beauty, shiny like the sun, magnificent like the moon. “I fucking love you, all right? There. I said it. I’ve said it to myself a thousand times, and I know it’s ridiculous. But it’s also real. I know I love you because it’s why I have to walk away even though I never want to walk away, have to let you go even though it’s ripping me to shreds inside, have to live knowing a man who doesn’t deserve you will get you because of the way our world works. The way your world works.”

“You . . . you love me?” Amelia stares, mouth half open, eyes wide and unblinking. “Oh, Zedd, what if I . . . what if I love you too?”

I gulp back a choking breath as my heart tries to leap out through my throat. My cock is stirring again. The beast will come to life soon enough, claim what it’s craved for

years. Leave now, you asshole.

“You don’t love me,” I say with a false confidence that almost wrecks me. “What you’re feeling is infatuation, curiosity, the lure of something dark and dangerous that’s so far from your planned and perfect world that it feels exciting. But you don’t love me, Amelia.” A dry chuckle escapes my tightly drawn lips as I fight to keep her away, to keep myself at bay. “Besides, as I’m sure your father has explained, love isn’t part of the arranged marriage equation in your mafia world. A mafia marriage is about alliances and contracts, politics and power. You were born into that world, and that’s your fate, Princess. It’s your world.”

She’s staring with that wide-eyed mix of confusion and chaos, the flash of desperate urgency all over her peaked face. “Can’t I . . . can’t I leave my world and enter yours, Zedd?”

My throat closes. It’s hard to breathe. My cock stiffens, drawing precious blood from my brain to my balls. The beast of possession growls inside. The animal of obsession raises its violent head.

Kill them all, hisses the animal in me. Her father, her fiancé, anyone who stands in the way. You know she’s yours, so take her. You can do it, Zedd. Bring her into your world. Just like she asked. Just like she wants. Run with her. Hide her. Protect her. She’s yours, so what are you waiting for?

“My world is built for one, not two.” Not sure how I’m managing to stay the course instead of breaking like I want, taking like I want. “It sounds exciting to a sheltered little princess like you, but it’s lonely and desolate, Amelia. We’d be running our entire lives. I’d die to protect you, but I can’t protect you from an army of mafia soldiers forever. Besides, you’d be torn apart knowing you ruined your family’s reputation. And now that your arranged marriage has been fixed, disappearing with me would be an insult to the Romero Family.” I shake my head as reality thankfully

sinks into both of us. Her face falls, her eyes dim, her fingers curl. But she's smart enough to know I'm right. "Ralph Romero is a vindictive sonofabitch. He'll respond to that insult with violence. Maybe even start a war." I force myself to stand. "A war would wipe out the Volini Family. The Romeros outnumber and outgun your father three to one."

Amelia looks up at me, the pain of reality hardening her sweet young face. But there's also the fierceness of a mafia princess, a streak of independence, a flash of rebellion. "I'll do my duty and marry Ralph Romero," she says softly, her eyes fixed on me, her gaze holding me in place even though I need to be gone, should already be gone. "But I don't want him to be my first. I want you to be my first, Zedd."

My world almost shatters as my cock rises to full mast. Fists clenched against my sides, I manage to smile tightly and shake my head. "I already am your first in my mind, Amelia. Make me your first in your mind too, Princess. Just close your eyes and I'll be there."

She shakes her head stubbornly. "It's my body, and I get to choose who I give it to. Besides, this isn't the Middle Ages. Just because a woman doesn't bleed on her wedding night doesn't automatically mean she's not a virgin." Her eyes widen. "In Italy we rode horses every day. I'll tell Ralph that my hymen broke on a rough ride when I was thirteen." She blinks those heavy lids, blushes beneath her tan. "It will be a rough ride, won't it, Zedd? Just the way I imagined? Just the way you imagined?"

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My cock almost explodes in my pants. I almost wish it did, so I'd be able to think straight, make the right choice here. She's clearly asking me to be her first. She's almost twenty-one, a full-grown woman. And fuck, she does get to give her body to whoever she damn well wants, right? What the hell is this mafia hypocrisy about all their brides being untouched virgins? Those motherfucking men bang everything with a hole before they're old enough to drive. Fuck their rules. Fuck them all.

Do it, Zedd.

That's why you came here.

That's why she came here.

My eyes flick around the mostly empty stands. Not enough cover here, not even in the back row. She'll be screaming like a witch being burned if we get on this train, and we need privacy.

My throat tightens as my well-trained mind goes over a mental map of the entire tennis center. I scoped out the inner hallways earlier, found several private locations ranging from single-occupancy handicap restrooms to janitor closets big enough for two.

But although I'd take her anywhere with wild abandon, Amelia deserves better. Her first time isn't going to be hunched over a bathroom sink or pressed up against a pile of mops and brooms. She's a princess and she deserves more.

More than this.

More than me.

It's over.

You love her too much to take the risk, Zedd.

You'll never know the sweet taste of her pussy.

But at least you know what it feels like to love someone enough to let them go.

And so I let her go.

I turn and walk the fuck away.

7

AMELIA

Fuck him.

Fuck men.

Fuck all men.

I storm through the Four Season's lavish lobby, my maid hurrying behind me, Father's two bodyguards flanking me like I'm the First Lady of the United States. The elevators leading to the Penthouse suite are ready and waiting, and when I get to the room I head straight for the master bedroom and slam the door and lock it tight.

Throwing myself on the king-sized bed I try not to burst into tears, do my best not to hammer the bedspread with my fists like a child throwing an epic tantrum.

Except I am a child, will always be a child in this primitive mafia world where women are property, used for their fuck-holes and their wombs, all of it done under the guise of “protection” and “privilege.”

“Privilege, my ass,” I grumble, rolling myself onto my back and staring up at the ceiling. “It’s prison, not privilege. And I want out.”

But I’ve been through this a hundred times before. There is no realistic way to get out of this life. Not without hurting the Family, hurting Zedd, hurting myself.

And now, with my arrangement sealed with Ralph Romero, there’s no getting out without putting all of us in real physical danger. Zedd is right that the Romero Family outnumbers and outguns us. They own Atlanta, and their territory reaches all the way into Northern Florida. And Father is right—an alliance between the Romero and Volini Families makes sense because of how the borders of our territories line up. I know how mafia politics works. It’s not so different from nation-state politics.

Shared borders are the number one cause of wars.

If your neighbors aren’t your allies, they’re your enemies.

My arranged marriage will seal a permanent peace between the Romero and Volini Families.

And me breaking that arrangement will guarantee war.

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People die in wars. They die in horrible ways.

Do I really want to live knowing that my childish act of rebellion got dozens, maybe hundreds, of men killed?

Of course not.

Remember what Mom said about this being the price we mafia brides must pay in return for our privilege. The men pay a price too—they're the ones who die in wars, who risk taking a bullet while working the streets and bringing in the cash that pays for the Maseratis and the mansions, the vineyards and the vacations, private tutors and personal trainers. Be grateful, not grumpy.

Besides, maybe Zedd is right, I think as I stare at the ceiling and absentmindedly play with my nipples. Maybe what I'm feeling is that last desperate gasp to live a little before I die a slow death in a loveless arranged marriage. Maybe I just want to live out my fantasy before I'm resigned to a lifetime of starfish sex and producing Ralph Romero's ugly babies.

"Except I don't want to produce Ralph's babies," I pout while pinching my nipples so hard they hurt. "I want to feel Zedd's seed growing in my womb."

The thought sends a surprised tingle through the center-line of my body. All these years I've fantasized about Zedd taking me in every hole, in every position, hard and rough, deep and dirty. But it's always been about the raw sex, not so much about what comes after.

Has something changed?

Why am I suddenly imagining more than just animal sex with Zedd?

Why am I imagining everything more with Zedd?

Imagining forever with him.

“It’s because he said he loves me,” I whisper. “Said it in a way that felt so real it can’t be a lie. I know it. My . . . my pussy knows it.”

I rub my mouth absentmindedly. The smell of Zedd’s semen rushes into my nostrils, and my pussy clenches and releases a sudden flood of wetness, like it’s agreeing with my answer.

“Does my pussy point true north just like a man’s cock?” I wonder out loud as I raise my dress and slide two fingers down the front of my panties. “Is it telling me it wants Zedd’s seed?”

The thought of my pussy being a living breathing creature with a mind of its own makes me giggle, then sigh as my fingers settle in the familiar position, thumb on my clit, two fingers on either side of my slit, careful not to slide too far inside lest I break that seal of quality, the holy wrapper that certifies a woman isn’t a whore, that your sweetheart isn’t a slut, that your fiancée didn’t just get fisted and fucked by the groomsmen and ushers before walking down the aisle in her virgin-white gown.

I’m giggling and gasping now, my eyes closed as soaring arousal takes the edge off my disappointment. I come quickly, my pump still primed from the violent way Zedd slapped my pussy three times before rubbing me to climax out in the open.

But although my body relaxes after the fresh release, my mind still spins with the

chaotic mix of today's whirlwind of ecstasy and emotion, of something ending before it had really begun, a door closing before I even realized it had been open.

I turn on my side and stare forlornly out the large windows overlooking Manhattan's towers of steel and glass shimmering in the twilight. I stayed at the tennis center all day, hoping that Zedd would show up again, my eyes feverishly scanning the crowd in search of his stealthy gaze, his shadowy frame, his stalker game.

But it was game over when the sun set and the last match ended and it was time to head back to the hotel. I'm considering staying the rest of the weekend, but I don't think I can stand the idea of spending another day anxiously hoping Zedd is going to show up again.

He was right, of course. Going any further would be dumb. And he loves me enough to decide for the both of us.

So I make a mature, sensible decision too.

I grab my phone, change my plane ticket to leave first thing in the morning from La Guardia Airport.

The decision settles me somewhat. Takes away any hope of seeing Zedd again. I'll be married before the thirteenth of next month, which means I'll be gone before Zedd's next meeting with Father. No way Zedd will be at the wedding, of course.

And no way Zedd is getting into this hotel room.

Not with my maid playing chaperone in the next room.

And two armed thugs outside in the hallway, watching for a thief sneaking in to steal the princess's precious cherry.

The ridiculousness of it all makes me snort out a laugh. I wonder if all those fairy tales where pirates search for treasure and knights slay dragons are all just metaphors for man's eternal quest for virgin pussy.

"Sure, let's go with that," I sigh to myself as nightfall settles over Manhattan and I pull my dress down over my treasure, my dragon-fire, my sacred cherry which tempts and torments the dreams of princes and paupers, knights and knaves, kings and assassins.

8

ZEDD

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The dreams torment me. My eyes flick open at 3 a.m. in my hotel room in Queens. My naked body glistens with sweat. My dick stands upright like a dark tree in a shadowy forest. Cockhead gleaming like a searchlight, angry cyclops-eye roving for its treasure.

The sheets are soaked in sweat, sticky with semen from my rage-filled ejaculations that spurted thick ropes of seed all over the bedclothes. I was insatiable after leaving Amelia, inconsolable after making a decision I know was right but feels wrong as fuck.

“Fuck,” I snarl, sitting bolt upright, staring at the red digital clock and then bounding out of bed and pacing like a caged panther, cock bouncing ahead of me like an angry snake, fists clenching and releasing, jaw tightening and grinding. “Should have gone to the airport and flown the hell out of here, maybe down to Atlantic City, spent the night banging nameless whores, exorcising this demon that wants you to take what’s yours, claim your prize, hunt your treasure, pluck your cherry.”

Of course, I already know I’ll never touch another woman the rest of my lonely forsaken life. My cock belongs to Amelia, just like her pussy belongs to me.

Which means I’m kidding myself if I think I’ll be able to go through life without filling that need.

I’m a ticking time-bomb without Amelia.

I punch the air and shout. My mind races with the wildness that comes when you bolt awake from a vivid dream, your consciousness still trapped in some netherworld

between darkness and light, reality and fantasy, sex and violence.

And the violence is burning strong in my blood. That stifled sexual energy has turned on itself, transforming to its dark opposite, the energy of creation transmuting to the rage of destruction.

Which means Ralph Romero is already a dead man.

There's no way I can allow him to touch what's mine.

All that big talk about walking away to protect Amelia like some honorable knight who sacrifices himself feels like crap now. It's the reason the dreams roil my brain. It's why the nightmares boil my blood. It's why I'm seeing red behind my eyelids, feeling bloodlust in my heart.

It's the reason I'm still in the city.

I'm not that honorable guy.

I don't play by the rules of righteous war.

I fight dirty.

I claim what's mine.

And Amelia is mine.

At least she will be tonight.

Now I'm pulling on my clothes, groaning as I squeeze my stiff cock into my combat pants. My laptop is open on the table, all my tracking apps hooked up to databases on

the dark web. I already know Amelia's in the penthouse suite at the Manhattan Four Seasons. Got the hotel's blueprints open in another dark-web window, so I know the layout of the building, see every elevator shaft and stairwell, every door and window. Years of experience with mafia protocol tells me Amelia will have a personal maid in the suite's second bedroom, two bodyguards out in the hallway.

Nobody will be on alert. It's just standard procedure, not a response to a specific threat. I could disable the hallway cameras, cut down both those goons with my killing-blade, smother that maid if she tried to get between me and my prize.

I shake off the dark thoughts. I'm not killing two Volini soldiers, certainly not smothering some clueless maid who's probably passed out drunk from the hotel mini-bar anyway. There's another way into that room where my princess lies in her feather bed, waiting for her knight, her prince, her lover, her assassin.

Ignoring the voice of caution that's distant and faraway at this time of night, I find myself dressed and ready, the hotel layout memorized, that switch in my head already flipped to the setting where I've got a mission, a target, a goal, a destination.

Right between her fucking legs.

I've shut out that feeble-minded knight who proclaims the virtues of honor and sacrifice. The protector is very much alive in me still, but to protect what's mine, first I have to make it mine.

Mine in the flesh, not just the spirit.

Mine in the body, not just in the head.

Mine in reality, not just in fantasy.

I almost black out as I allow myself to be possessed by the need to possess. Somehow I make it to the subway station, hop the right train, exit at the right stop.

The streets of Manhattan are never deserted, but right now I'm the only man in the world. Nobody can see me. I'm untouchable, unstoppable, unreachable, unbeatable.

The bright entrance of the Four Seasons snaps me out of my stupor but can't break the spell. I'm in the fucking zone, a hunter on the trail, a predator on the prowl. Forty-six floors down from the Penthouse I smell her cunt in the night breeze and it fires my desire, stokes my obsession, shatters my reason, shreds my sanity.

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In my madness I am sharp like an arrow, years of training and practice paying off now, thousands of hours where I stalked and hunted, swooped in like an owl in the night, snatched my prey like an eagle in flight.

The alley behind the hotel is my way in, and I find the metal side door that leads to the kitchens. Glance at my watch, then lean against the wall near the trash dumpster in my all-black attire and wait. It's a weekend night at 4 a.m. and the kitchens would have been busy till late.

Sure enough, I barely have to wait ten minutes before the door swings open and a white-aproned kitchen staffer with big headphones on his bobbing head pops out. He props the door open, drags out two heavy-duty trash bags swollen and bulging like my dick right now. Tosses them in the dumpster. I grin as I hear the rats attack.

Just like I'm about to attack.

First thing is to breach the fortress border, and when I hear the staffer release the door-stop and disappear into the hotel, I move quick like a viper, catching the door with my gloved hand before it closes all the way.

Now I'm inside. Hotel blueprint lights up in my brain like a map, directing me to the service stairs. Moments later I'm bounding up the metal back stairs two at a time. It's forty-six floors up to Amelia's room, but I've got the energy of a mountain goat right now, the persistence of a mule, the single-minded focus of a machine.

My clothes are soaked in sweat when I thunder up the last flight of stairs and see the door marked 46 in white paint. Catch a quick breath, then carefully crack the door an

inch, peer into the hallway, exhale happily when I see Amelia's bodyguards halfway down the corridor, both slumped low in their chairs, staring glassy-eyed at their phones.

With a grin I let the door close. Turn back to the stairs, bound up another flight to the roof. There's a rooftop restaurant and an infinity pool up here, but this side of the building is sectioned off for all sorts of utility pipelines and water tanks and all the shit that a building the size of a small country needs to stay operational.

The night air is cool, and my sweat-soaked clothes stick to my skin. Doesn't matter, they'll be off soon.

In my sling-bag there's a grappling hook, body harness, and rappelling line, along with my circular glass-cutter. I get to the edge of the roof, take a second to get my bearings, move to the right spot, then harness up, hook my line to a steel pipe-base that could hold an elephant's weight, and soundlessly swing down to the dark windows of my sleeping beauty, my Rapunzel, my forbidden fairytale princess waiting for me in this fantasy-world I now inhabit.

The windows don't open, of course. The Four Seasons doesn't want any jumpers skipping out on the bill.

That's why I have a glass cutter.

They say a rat can get through any hole big enough to stick its head into. Not quite the same for a man the size of a bulldozer, but I've got a German-made glass cutter that's used by Special Forces assassination teams all over the violent world of alpha men who need to get into tight spaces. It makes a nice big hole that I've learned how to twist my body through.

Minutes later the piece of thick round glass pops out, stuck to my handheld suction

cup. Carefully I push the glass into the room, my head spinning when the warm scent of Amelia rushes out of the hole.

Fuck, she's been sweating in bed too, I realize as my dick stiffens so fast it messes up my maneuvering. I have to contort my body like a corkscrew to get my erection past the bottom lip of the glass hole.

But somehow I make it without waking her. Carefully I drop my sling-bag to the carpet, then peel off my clothes. They're sticky with chilled sweat, and I don't want my sleeping sweetheart to feel cold before I get her all hot and ready.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the bedroom mirror, and I'm startled by the wild glint in my eyes. Every muscle in my naked body is bulging and pumped. My cock is so erect it's curved upwards like a sea-monster yearning to touch the sky. Even in the darkness I can see the gleam of fresh pre-cum oozing from its bulbous head.

Amelia stirs beneath the covers now, turning on her side away from me. The covers come off her back, and I groan softly when I see her nightshirt has ridden up over her ass.

Her bare, naked, perfect ass.

Fuck, she's got nothing on beneath that nightshirt.

My cock throbs and pulses like it's panting, groaning, straining, yearning.

For a long dark moment I watch her sleep.

Then I slide into bed beside her.

Take a shuddering breath.

And clamp my big palm over her mouth and nose, shoving the scream back down her throat as she bolts awake in wide-eyed terror.

9

AMELIA

The terror transforms to a thrill when I realize it's him. Still, my heart races as my body tries to process what's happening, come to terms with the overwhelming weight of Zedd's leg over my hip holding me down, his massive palm covering my nose and mouth so I can barely breathe, his other hand draped over my chest, pressing my boobs into my body.

He's naked behind me, and the rock-hard cylinder pressed against my bare ass must be his erection. It feels bigger than a pumping firehose, and my pussy clenches as Zedd's dick throbs against my butt-crack like it's alive and seeking.

"Scream and we're both dead," comes his low growl against my neck, his tongue snaking out and tasting my cheek, sending a shudder through my totally trapped body. "Nod if you understand, Princess. Or else I'm going to hold my hand over your mouth while I fuck you."

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My breath catches so hard I almost black out. Zedd yanked me out of a vivid dream into a fantasy, and for a moment I lose track of what's real and what isn't, what's in my mind and what's in my body.

And Zedd just confirmed that his cock is going to be in my body soon.

Somehow I manage to nod. Zedd takes his paw off my face, then turns me towards him, drawing me into his body. I cuddle up instinctively, burrowing into his huge chest, inhaling his heavy musk. The aroma of clean sweat and dried semen conjures an image of Zedd alone in his hotel room, fisting his frustrated cock, spurting all over the place as sweat oozes from every pore.

I gulp back the vestiges of the fear that ripped through me when he came in like a killer in the night, dragged me from the dreamworld into his world.

Our world.

“You . . . you're going to fuck me?” My voice is a low whisper, my eyes wide in the darkness, riveted down along the thick muscles of his ripped body, down to the enormous piston of a cock pressed against the top of my smooth mound, stretching all the way to my boobs, it's so damn long. “You've changed your mind about us? Oh, Zedd, we'll find a way to be together. I know it. Maybe Father will come around. Maybe he can break off the arrangement without starting a war. Or . . . or maybe we really can disappear together, leave the country, go to—”

My words are stuffed back down my throat as Zedd clamps his palm over my mouth again. His eyes are shining with an eerie dark green light, but behind the madness I

see the man.

The man who really does love me.

Zedd smiles, leans in and kisses me gently on the forehead even though I feel the dangerous desire simmering in him. “None of that can happen. But what also can’t happen is me letting another man take what’s mine before I claim it the way I want, the way I need.” The smile fades as Zedd’s gaze drags down past my covered breasts to my exposed sex. “And that pussy is mine. I’m not strong enough to walk away without tasting it, without stretching it, without filling it, without owning it.” He flicks that deadly gaze back up to my eyes. “So I’m going to fuck you tonight. All night. As many times as you can take me. As hard as you can handle.” He’s panting now, his chest heaving as his cock flexes and slaps against my belly, a sticky trail of fresh pre-cum stretching from my skin to its head. “If you still want me to be your first. Do you?”

My eyes are wide, my head spinning from his directness. He takes his hand away from my mouth, and I suck in a breath and nod. “Y-yes,” I stammer. “I do, Zedd. But . . . but what happens after tonight? Will I see you again?”

Zedd’s grizzled face breaks into a dangerous grin. “Don’t know, Princess. Haven’t worked it all out yet. All I know is that I need to workthisout first. I’m a ticking time-bomb, and there’s no kill-switch on what I need.” He kisses my lips, strokes my cheeks, then runs his rough hand down to where my nightshirt barely covers my boobs. “So take this off. Come on. Up over your head.”

I sit up just enough for Zedd to pull my nightshirt up over my head. He groans when my boobs pop into view. Zedd cups my globes in his big hands, squeezing so hard my back arches and my nipples ache. He pinches each nipple hard, twists until I cry out, then suddenly takes his hands away and smacks my boobs with shocking speed, making me gasp in surprise, whimper in pain.

He smothers my whimper with a ferocious kiss, and now Zedd sits upright and slides his hands under my ass and lifts me clean off the bed and places me on his lap. I feel light like a feather in his strong arms, and it's so comforting I sigh.

Zedd massages my ass, kisses me gently, then rougher. "Straddle my waist, wrap your legs around me, get my cock up between us, Princess, lengthwise against your slit." He looks down between us, licks his lips and groans. "Oh, fuck, it's so pretty. All smooth and plump, but it looks too tight, Princess. We'll have to ease you open, stretch you carefully." He grinds his teeth, kneads my ass, moves me up and down on his lap so his upright cock rubs lengthwise against my slit, drawing forth my wetness until I'm coated and slick, my pussy already opening up to reveal its pink readiness which looks dark red in the night. "Fuck, I think you're already getting there, baby. See, your little hole knows it's mine. No way is Ralph Romero ever getting close to this. Your pussy will close up like a zipper if his dick tries to enter my territory." He takes my hand, guides it down between us until I'm gripping his shaft, massaging his balls, making him groan, making myself gush with excitement from feeling how aroused he is for me.

For me.

Oh, God, I'm totally his.

Nobody else is going to touch me.

I know it already, and so does my pussy.

Not sure how that's possible, but anything seems possible when I'm in Zedd's arms, enveloped by his warmth, swaddled in his love.

Owned by his sex.

“Yeah, he’s never getting his dick anywhere close to you.” Zedd’s voice is thick as I jerk him slowly up and down, cup his balls which are so big they make my fingers seem small and girlish. “There’s no way I can allow him to touch you. It’s just not in me. I’m not that honorable knight who can walk away. I own you, and if I can’t have you, no other man can have you either.”

My throat tightens at his words.

For a mad moment I wonder if he’s going to fuck me and then kill me.

And somehow the dark thought makes me grip his cock tighter, whimper as he slides his fingers down along my slit and teases my seam open, licking his lips and cracking a wicked grin.

“Don’t worry, I’m not that kind of psycho,” he murmurs when he sees the fear flash in my eyes. “I’m going to kill him, not you, baby. That’s when you’ll see me again. On your wedding day, right after you take your vows, right after Ralph Romero kisses the bride.” Zedd grabs my left breast, clamps down on my nipple, twists hard. I gasp at the raw rage I feel in him. Is it because he just thought of another man kissing me? Shit, why does that sort of violent possessiveness turn me on? Am I as twisted as he is?

Am I maybe worse than he is?

Obviously he’s just playing out a fantasy, but the thought of Zedd killing a man for touching me makes me wet like a whore, sticky like a slut, hot like a harlot in hell. “You’re going to kill Ralph Romero after I marry him?”

He growls out a tortured yes, then pushes me down onto my back, smacks my boobs and yanks my thighs apart. He’s big like a bull but graceful like a panther, and suddenly Zedd is crouched between my legs, bending my knees and spreading me

wide, his hot breath against my cool wet hairless pussy, his thumbs carefully spreading my slit. “Yeah, you’ll be a widow who’s never been fucked by anyone but me, never will be fucked by anyone but me. You’ll be part of the Romero Family, which means the alliance might still hold. You’ll be told to wear black and remain celibate the rest of your life. They’ll call you the virgin widow. You’ll be a legend.”

I giggle, then gasp when Zedd pulls up the little hood hiding my clit and taps his tongue on my sensitive nub. Waves of raw ecstasy flood me. Wetness gushes from my slit, and immediately Zedd is lapping at my pussy, drinking like a wolf at a waterfall. “Oh, fuck, you’re getting close, baby. Almost there. Let me take a look.” He spreads my vagina with his thumbs, careful and gentle, like I’m precious treasure, a delicate piece of art. “Still too tight, but I can’t hold back any longer. You’re going to have to stretch for my cock.”

My throat tightens with a gulp of fear. Zedd felt huge when I touched him through his pants earlier that day. But right now his cock looks formidably large, big like a torpedo. My fingers didn’t go all the way around as I stroked his naked dick. Which means he’s about twice as thick as a tennis racket handle. Is my pussy really designed to stretch that wide?

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“You’ll be . . . you’ll be gentle at first, right, Zedd?” I gape down along my bare breasts, which are streaked dark red from where he’d twisted my nipples and slapped my flesh. “Just to make sure I can . . . oh, oh,oh!”

Instead of answering Zedd presses his cockhead to my entrance and pushes the heavy bulb past my folds and stops. My eyes go wide as my pussy locks up like it’s stunned at what’s about to happen to it.

Zedd’s throat moves as he swallows, his eyes narrowed to slits of desperate restraint, like he’s thisfucking close to ramming his way into me but is holding on because he doesn’t want to hurt me.

“Relax, Princess,” he whispers, stroking my hair gently, wiping the beads of sweat from my forehead. “We’re going to stay like this for as long as you need. Your pussy’s locked up, but it’s going to open up for me. It knows what it’s been made for. Just takes a minute to come to terms with what’s coming. Relax. I’m going to take care of you, Princess. I’m not going to hurt your precious body. I’d fucking die before I do anything to hurt you, baby. I love you. I mean that. You know I mean it.”

I nod out a trembling smile, feeling my vagina start to relax from Zedd’s soothing words. He pushes in another inch, then stops again, his body so tense I marvel at his restraint even as my body tingles with a sickening mix of fear and excitement.

“I know you love me,” I whisper, gulping back an image of me in a wedding dress streaked red at the crotch. “But you aren’t really going to kill Ralph Romero at the wedding, are you?”

He rumbles out a breath. “I want to. Fuck, I want to so badly.” The exhale shudders both our bodies with his suppressed rage. “But it’s too reckless and I know it. They’ll blame your father for the hit. That alone could start a war.” He grits his teeth, pushing another inch into me, making me bite down on my lower lip to muffle a squeal. “No, Princess. I will have to let you go after tonight. Should have let you go this afternoon, but here we are. You ready for this?”

Still biting my lip, I nod. Zedd grunts an exhale, then slowly begins to push all the way into me, slow at first, then picking up speed, gathering strength, driving his length past my barrier, way past any semblance of what seems reasonable as I feel a sharp pain that makes me cry out, arch my back as Zedd leans in and smothers my lips and drives his tongue down my throat.

And my pussy opens up with a gasp of surrender, warm blood easing his thick entry, my thighs spreading wide as Zedd presses his heavy body down on me, then begins to thrust.

10

ZEDD

Every thrust takes me further from reason and closer to recklessness. Her sweet warm blood coats my shaft, lubricating my entry with its dark stickiness, drawing me deeper into this manic state where sex and violence swirl together like our naked glistening bodies sliding across each other, my cock so deep in her tight hole there’s no way to tell where I end and she begins, where this fantasy ends and reality begins.

Because every step I’ve taken today has taken me deeper into danger, dragged Amelia deeper into danger along with me.

Her pussy squeezes tight against my shaft, milking me like a hungry mouth, drawing

the hot semen up from my heavy balls as they slap against her smooth wet undersides like sandbags in the rain.

“There’s no way I’m pulling out,” I pant as I slide my palms beneath her quivering ass, raise her slightly off the bed so I can angle my thrusts and drag my cockhead along that fibrous cluster of G-spot nerves on the front wall of her vagina. She’s opening up nice and easy, but she’s still deliciously tight, a perfect little hole designed for my dick, made for me, to be fucked by me and nobody else. “Not when your pussy is milking me like that, not when you’re so tight and hot, so slick and juicy, so perfect and pretty. So mine.” The next stroke is harder, makes her cry out. “Say it,” I grunt. “Mine. Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” she whimpers as I fuck her deep, her pussy so wet and smooth that I can’t help but go faster, go deeper. “Oh, I’m yours, Zedd. Oh shit, oh hell, ohfuck!”

She lurches in ecstasy as I drag my cockhead past her G-spot and then drive all the way deep. My middle finger slides into her mouth, and she sucks it hungrily. “That’s it, Princess. Suck my finger as your pussy sucks my cock. That’s it, oh fuck, I’m close to exploding, Amelia, I’m going to fill you with every last drop. There’s no way you aren’t getting pregnant just from this one time, but I can’t pull out, won’t pull out, going to fill you and fuck you and own you and love you.” I shove three fingers all the way down her throat to stop her from screaming, making her suck and bite my fingers as I thrust harder, deeper, rutting my Princess like a savage but she can take it, she’s taking it, she was born to take it and she’ll take it until we’re both dead, even after we’re both dead, because this is love that transcends death, real love that’s going to find a way to exist through eternity. “Own you and love you,” I say again with a panting growl. “Love you forever. Don’t know how we’re going to be together but we have to find a way. I’m never letting go, Amelia. I had no idea what being inside you would do to me, would awaken in me. There’s no way I’m leaving your side after tonight, Princess. I’m going to sneak into your room every fucking night for the next three weeks before your wedding. So make sure your pussy knows I’m coming for it

after the sun goes down. You understand? Do you?”

“Y-yes,” Amelia stammers as she sucks my fingers and moves her hips to take me as we both get close to sealing our fate, writing the ending to our forbidden love story, one that my heart dreads will climax with both of us dead because of this choice. “Yes, Zedd. I’ll be waiting every night in my bed, under the covers, naked under my nightshirt, waiting for you, waiting for this, waiting for us.”

Her words come out garbled, saliva bubbling out the sides of her mouth as my fingers fuck her throat and my cocks owns her pussy. I don’t know what’s going to happen in three weeks on her wedding day. Don’t know if I’m going to murder Ralph Romero at the altar. Maybe I’ll let him live, let the wedding happen, spend the rest of my life sneaking into the Romero mansion after dark. I’d secretly fuck my woman right after Ralph puts his filthy seed in her, making sure I flood her womb with my semen and drown his swimmers with the force of my love, make sure every baby she produces is mine, all mine, just like she’s mine, fuckingmine!

The thoughts rage wild like a fire out of control. I hear myself saying all those things, everything from gutting Ralph Romero like a fish in front of the buffet table on her father’s lawn to filling Amelia’s womb with my babies instead of Ralph’s, sweet Amelia lying to her husband about whose kids they really are.

“So maybe instead of the virgin widow, you’ll be the woman with two husbands,” I snarl in my madness. “Every time he fucks this pussy, I will get you alone and fuck you deeper, fuck you harder, pump you full of my semen, so your womb only takes my seed, mine only.” She gasps in shock, but the way her pussy clenches as we get closer to the edge tells me she’s just as lost as I am in this dark world where we’ve blurred the lines between fantasy and reality, sex and violence, marriage and murder. “You know that the bulbous head of a man’s cock evolved that way to scoop out another man’s seed from his woman’s pussy? Yeah, Princess, so if that’s what I have to do to keep you, so be it.”

She almost chokes as I ram all the way in, the sense of dark competition firing that possessive drive to an inferno of ownership. Mine. Mine. Mine. That's all I know right now, all I care about, and now I feel the explosion coming, feel the climax burning, the hot seed thundering up from my balls as Amelia thrashes under my weight, writhes in my grasp, shatters in my arms.

I just about manage to cover her mouth and kill the wailing howl as we come together, biting down on my lower lip to stop the bellow of guttural release. I thrust deep and flex, my body seizing, balls tightening, cock thickening and then erupting in Amelia's depths, spurting torrents of white-hot seed, again and again, my balls delivering load after load as Amelia sobs through climax after climax, her body convulsing in my arms like she's being electrocuted, burned alive with the fire of our coupling.

Hot semen gushes out the sides of her slit as I keep thrusting, keep coming, keep emptying myself, keep filling her. The bedclothes are soaked in sweat and semen and her sweet stickiness. We're a panting heaving writhing mess of skin and flesh, dark and glistening creatures in the night, the cool air from the open hole in the window blowing against our burning skin, bringing us slowly back to the vicinity of the real world.

"Are you all right, Princess?" I whisper as my vision slowly comes back and I see her beneath me. Her eyes are closed, her chin streaked with blood from when she'd bitten my fingers so hard I think she struck the bone. "Baby, look at me. Fuck, I need to know I didn't hurt you. I lost my mind at the end, and—"

Amelia's eyelids flutter open. A trembling smile shows on her lips. "Did . . . did I do OK?"

I exhale in relief, then cover her pretty face with kisses. I kiss her forehead and her eyelids and her nose and her cheeks and her chin and her lips, her sweet lips,

carefully and gently and possessively and lovingly. Finally I collapse before rolling off her and then cuddling her into me like the precious sweetheart she is.

“Did you do OK? Are you serious? Baby, did you see how far gone I was because of you? Did you hear the deranged shit spouting from my mouth?” I gather her into my chest, a warm shudder going through me that I know is the physical bonding rooted in love. “I love you, and we’re going to have to find a way to be together.”

She blinks up at me. “Really? You mean that?”

I nod even as dread stabs my heart. Seeing the hope in her eyes pushes the blade of dread deeper. There’s no turning back now. I crossed all the lines today and now she’s mine, all the way mine, always and forever, till death do us part.

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Though maybe death is the only way we can be together, comes the dark thought as I kiss her forehead and rest my chin on her head and gaze out the window into the hazy nothingness high above the world.

Because I don't see a realistic option for us to be together. If we run before the wedding, we destroy her family reputation, publicly insult Ralph Romero. Both the Romeros and Amelia's father will put hits out on me, maybe even on both of us to salvage his reputation for being a ruthless mafia boss with total control over the Family.

If I kill Ralph Romero at the wedding, it starts a war between the families. I'd be killed immediately, of course. It's not clear what Amelia's fate would be as a widow, but it wouldn't be good. Especially not with a war brewing. She could become a hostage, a sacrifice, a peace-offering, or just killed in the crossfire. The Romero Family might even get the marriage annulled, which would leave her tainted, an untouchable in this hypocritical mafia world.

So there's no way I'm committing a suicidal murder that leaves my princess alone to face the aftermath. I'll have to let the wedding proceed, even if it kills me to watch another man kiss her honey lips, know that he's going to touch that perfect pussy with his vile dick.

The idea sickens me, but nothing can taint the true love I feel for Amelia. If I have to let the wedding proceed, I'll fucking do it. But even if I can control my jealous rage and not kill Ralph Romero, there's no way I'm staying away from this pussy.

And anything that happens between us after the wedding puts Amelia in direct danger

of being straight-up executed.

Which means we're both fucked because I couldn't control my damn dick today. Sure as hell won't be able to control it for the next three weeks while she's still unmarried, still untouched by another, still mine all the way.

As for the wedding day itself?

Will fate turn in our favor?

Will destiny shift in our direction?

We'll find out in three weeks.

11

THREE WEEKS LATER.

WEDDING DAY.

AMELIA

Fate failed us.

Destiny deserted us.

Here I am alone in the bride's dressing room, waiting for the clock to strike noon like I'm waiting to be led to the gallows of my execution, not the altar of my wedding.

Zedd wasn't invited to the wedding, and I'm relieved even though my heart died last night when we said our final goodbyes. It was my last night in my warm cozy

bedroom. A bedroom that holds the best memories of my childhood.

And what I know will be the best memories of my womanhood too.

Because every night Zedd snuck into my room and made me his woman over and over again.

I don't know how he managed to get past the guards and the cameras every night for twenty-one days straight. Every night I lay awake watching the cracked window for him, panicking if he was even a minute later than his midnight entry.

But sometimes my mood would flip, and in those dark moments I wished for Zedd to be caught. I'd fantasize about running down the stairs in my nightshirt and bunny-slippers, ordering Father's guards not to hurt him, then having a showdown with Father, trying to break him with my will, with my determination, with my love.

But Zedd was too careful for that. He knows Father just as well as I do—maybe even better, since I spent half my teenage years away in Italy, the dark mafia-boss side of my father hidden from me, allowing me to partially deny that my princess-privilege was paid for with the blood of others, with crime and cruelty, darkness and death.

And death is what it feels like now. My glum face stares back at me from the flower-framed bridal mirror. I look like a fat painted whore, comes the self-loathing thought as gloom settles over me like a dark cloud. For one awful moment I see my future as Ralph Romero's wife, with dark circles beneath my eyes from sleepless nights pining for Zedd, deep worry-lines creasing my forehead from the endless days of despair.

The despair reaches so deep into me I wonder if I should just end it.

Then suddenly the despair lurches into blind rage, anger that Zedd isn't here, isn't just killing everyone and running away with me.

He said I'm his, so why isn't he just killing everyone and making me his, comes the sulky pouty thought that I know is childish and unrealistic, that works great in the fairytale of my fantasy but would end with Zedd full of bullet-holes and my life destroyed even worse than if I just submitted to my fate and married Ralph Romero.

Which I'm going to do, comes the resigned reminder pouting back at me from the mirror. It's over. Three weeks is what you had with your true love, and it's over now.

Sure, Zedd swore he'd find a way to sneak into the Romero estate once I moved there, but we both know that's far too dangerous—for both of us. Ralph Romero wouldn't hesitate to execute his own cheating wife, and although Father might be tempted to start a war of vengeance, the depressing truth is the Consortium of Families would rule that Ralph was justified and Father needed to stand down or else face censure by most of the American mafia families.

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I glance at the clock again. Fourteen minutes to go before Father knocks on the door to lead me down the aisle to my fate. My bridesmaids—who are all part of my personal staff since I have no real friends—are outside in the anteroom. I told them to leave me alone for the last hour of my freedom.

Not sure why.

After all, Zedd isn't crazy enough to—

And then comes the knock on the window overlooking a private garden.

My heart suddenly comes to life with wild hope, desperate joy.

It's Zedd, and I rush over to the window, pushing it up, stepping back as he clambers into my bridal chamber.

But my excitement turns to dread when I see Zedd's face.

Eyes red and bloodshot, wild with violence, manic with murder.

He hasn't slept, hasn't eaten, hasn't even changed out of the clothes he wore to my room last night. The smell of my sex is all over his grizzled face from when he'd eaten my pussy like a starving animal last night, like he wanted to consume me entirely, take me into his belly so nobody else could ever get close.

“Ohmygod, Zedd!” My words barely make their way out because of the terror constricting my throat. “Why are you here? You can't seriously be thinking about

killing Ralph in front of a thousand guests and a hundred armed mafia soldiers.”

He comes to me, takes me into his arms, tries to kiss my painted lips. But I resist, turning my face away even though it’s the most difficult thing I’ve had to do in my young life.

“No,” I whisper urgently. “They’ll kill you if you walk out there looking like this, Zedd. Anyone can see the murder in your eyes, feel it in your dark energy. Go, Zedd. Please. It’s going to be hard enough for me as it is. But at least if you’re alive, I can survive with the hope that someday we’ll be together, even if it’s when we’re both old and wrinkled. Hope will keep me alive. But I won’t survive if you’re dead, Zedd. Please go. For me. I want you to go.”

“No, you don’t.” Zedd tries to kiss me again, this time grabbing the back of my head and turning me roughly towards him. I close my eyes, knowing that if I look upon his face I’ll melt, break, shatter. “You want me to stay. You want me to kill him. Kill them all. Your fiancé, your father, your maids, your cooks, the guests, the bridesmaids, the priest, the wedding planners, even the fucking pigeons waiting to gorge themselves on rice. You want me to kill them all and claim you right out there under the bright noonday sun, rivers of fresh blood flowing around us like champagne, groans of people dying playing our song as I fuck you face-down in your own filthy wedding cake.”

My mind almost breaks when I see the deranged glint in Zedd’s eyes. For three weeks we’ve played with fantasies that have taken us both to very dark places, that surreal space which Zedd explained is where sex and violence meet, the lines blurring in a way that can easily spiral out of control without the balancing power of true love to keep everything in the realm of fantasy and not bleed through into reality.

Except Zedd’s mind is breaking from the knowledge that I’m so close to becoming another man’s wife. He knows that my heart will always be his, knows that my pussy

is his too, will always be his in that dimension where our love exists for eternity. But there's too much possessive fire in him for his body to back down. He's a killer, and the violence is winning right now, taking over his will, turning his obsession into a weapon that's about to self-destruct.

"Please," I whisper as Zedd kisses me roughly on the mouth, then turns and makes for the door. I grab him around the waist, drop to my knees, lock my arms around his thighs so he can't walk out there to certain death.

Suddenly I'm face-to-face with his crotch. His bulge is about as big as my head, and immediately my body tells me what I have to do to take the edge off, swing the balance from violence back to sex.

There isn't time to undress and let Zedd fuck me before Father knocks at the door to lead me down the aisle. So as Zedd starts to peel me off his legs, I unzip him and reach for his cock and pull it out and close my lips around his thick shaft, holding on to his belt with one hand, gripping his balls with the other, sucking with everything I have, all my sex, all my love, all my fire, all my fury.

"Oh, fuck, baby." Zedd groans as he stumbles back, then slides both hands into my hair, pushing my hairpins into my scalp as my clean white wedding veil goes askew while I bob back and forth, furiously sucking Zedd's dick as the clock ticks down to my wedding vows. "Oh, fuck, Princess, you look so hot in that wedding dress, your hair all done up. That's it, suck me harder so I come fast. Fuck, I'm going to come in your hair, all over your face so everyone knows you're mine when you walk out there all sticky and sweet, claimed by my semen, marked by my seed. That's it, baby, open your throat like I taught you, fuck, you're so good, so perfect, those lips are mine, Ralph Romero won't even get to kiss them before I end him, before I shoot him in the back of the head then cut his dick off and shove it down his damn—"

"No!" I gurgle, pulling out well before that now-familiar flex which signals he's

about to explode. “No, Zedd. Look at me. Look at me, baby.”

Zedd growls in anger at my sudden withdrawal. He grabs my head and tries to shove his cock back into my mouth so he can fuck it like he’s done so many times these past twenty-one days, forcing me to deep-throat him until I gag, sometimes pouring himself down my throat, other times coming all over my neck and nipples, painting my belly and pussy like a mad artist signing his work.

I’ve loved all of it, and the truth is the idea of walking out there covered in my man’s seed makes me wet in the filthiest way. But right now I’m playing this game for his life. Zedd has lost his grip on what’s fantasy and what’s real, and I have to stay strong and bring him back into balance with my love, stand him down long enough to save his life.

“Zedd, look at me,” I plead from my knees, using both hands to hold his thick long cock even as he bucks his hips in a desperate attempt to jerk himself off and come all over my hair and face. But I need to make him come in my mouth. “Look at my lips, baby. See how wet they are? Now imagine coming into my mouth, filling me as I swallow. When Ralph kisses the bride he’s going to be tasting your seed, baby. He won’t understand what’s happening, but we’ll know, you’ll know, our bodies will know, our hearts will know. I’m yours, Zedd. I’ll always be yours. I’m your bride, not his. Your wife, not his.” I lick his throbbing cockhead, slowly take him back into my mouth, feeling his violence finally melting away as I give him my sex, give him my love, give him my throat, start sucking him again, sensing him flex now, that telltale sign which means he’s about to come, come on now, baby, fill me with your seed, that’s it, I’m open wide for you, always for you, forever for you.

And with a choking growl Zedd comes just as a knock sounds at the door.

My eyes flick open but I keep sucking, force my throat to stay open as I gulp down his thick seed, swallowing like a fish as Zedd staggers back against the half-open

window, dragging me along with him, my head still attached to his cock, still sucking and swallowing like I want to drain him, take the flame of his violence and smother it with my love, save his life just like he's saved mine, shown me parts of myself that no other man could safely expose, no other man could legitimately claim, no other man will ever truly own.

"I'm yours forever," comes my wet whisper as I pull his dripping throbbing cock out of my panting mouth and hurriedly get up off my knees, pushing him towards the open window with reluctant urgency as the knock sounds again, the bell tolling for me to walk down the aisle to my fate. "Now, go, baby. I love you and I'll always love you. So long as we're both alive there's still a chance fate will turn in our direction, Zedd. Have some faith. What we've shared the past three weeks has real power. Maybe the power to change destiny. But you have to go. Go. Just fucking go."

Zedd stares into my eyes, that glint still there in his burning gaze. But it doesn't have that same manic edge, and although I see the beast still roaring in him, some of its reckless power has been drained with the force of his climax, the spent seed that still swirls in the back of my throat, coats my tongue and teeth like armor against the looming kiss that seals my fate.

The knocks hammer at the door now, and Zedd kisses me one last time and then is gone, his big body disappearing out the window with the grace of a panther, the silence of a ghost.

Hurriedly I fix my hair and smooth out my veil, wipe my lips dry and re-apply my lipstick. Can't hide the flush on my cheeks, but I look presentable enough that hopefully nobody will suspect the virgin bride was just down on her knees sucking cock while Father Dearest banged on the door and Loving Fiancé waited at the altar.

Except it's not Father at the door.

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It's my personal maid, my maid of honor.

And she's wide-eyed and hysterical.

Frowning, I pull the door wide open and look out past the upset woman. I see through the anteroom into the garden and notice all the guests shifting uneasily in their seats, casting pitying glances in my direction as the priest fidgets up front, his face whiter than the Holy Spirit.

Because there's no groom waiting at the altar.

"What . . . what's happening?" My heart hammers, my breath catches. Streaks of hope are quickly cut to shreds by the sharp splinters of dread when I realize I've been stood up at the altar and immediately understand this was always the plan, always the play, always the move.

To publicly humiliate me.

Humiliate the Family.

Either permanently make us look like losers.

Or provoke Father into starting a war he can't win.

"Keep her in there," comes Carlo Giani's voice from the door, speaking to the maids and my bodyguards. He's striding towards the main house, where I already see Father going up the front steps followed by a throng of bodyguards, his face dark with rage

but also peaked with a strange look of confusion, like maybe there's something more going on, something darker, more dangerous.

Is this fate turning in our direction, I wonder as I slam the door shut and retreat to my white velvet bridal sofa. Destiny rearranging events just like I've prayed for every night for twenty-one days?

The flame of humiliation burns in me now as it sinks in, but so does a flicker of hope as I wonder what's happened, wonder what's happening, wonder what comes next.

12

ZEDD

The next turn almost kills me as my truck screeches around the corner way too fast. I'd made it back over the estate walls to my truck hidden in the woods, every ounce of willpower focused on taking the next step away from this wedding, far enough away that I couldn't change my mind and thunder back with the suicidal-homicidal rage that Amelia just barely managed to stifle by going on her knees and bringing me to my damn knees.

I turn the wheel and just barely manage to bring the truck under control, but there's an awful buzzing in my head and I shout out loud and try to shake it off.

Then I realize the buzzing is my phone on the seat beside me.

"What the fuck?" It's Anthony Volini's private number. Why the hell would the boss be calling me now? He should be walking Amelia down the aisle. Did something happen?

The truck swerves again as I grab the phone and swipe to answer.

It's Carlo Giani.

"Boss wants you at the mansion now. Right fucking now."

Carlo hangs up without waiting for a reply. It's an order, not a request.

I slam on the brakes, turning the wheel hard, almost flipping my truck over in my desperation. My heart hammers so loud I can't even think. I'm speeding dangerously fast, but I can't slow down or else the paranoia about what's happened will kill me.

Did Amelia do something to herself, comes the dreadful sinking thought.

But I pull myself back from that dark place when I remember that Amelia is the one who saved us both when I was out of my mind with jealous rage, about to do something that would have gotten me killed and destroyed Amelia's life.

She's too strong to give up hope.

She believes in our love too much to lose faith in our chance at forever.

The gates of the Volini Estate pop into view. They're wide open, cars streaming out in a long line of Jaguars and Bentleys. Rolls-Royces and Maseratis. The wedding can't possibly be over. Oh, God, please . . .

My heart hammers as I rip into the empty parking lot and screech to a halt just before driving into the duck pond.

Then I see the garden cottage with Amelia's bridal room is surrounded by guards.

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No ambulances anywhere.

Which means my princess is in there and all right.

My body relaxes just enough that I can turn my attention to the main house. It's heavily guarded, but the Volini soldiers part ways as I bound up the front steps and barrel into the house.

Within seconds I'm outside the boss's office. The doors open just as I get there. Carlo Giani's face is drawn with a seriousness I've never seen on the faithful old dog. Behind him Anthony Volini is standing at the window, staring out over his estate, lost in thought.

He turns when I walk in. "Zedd. Good. Carlo will fill you in. Then I want your advice."

Carlo closes the heavy oakwood doors, then paces the office, rubbing his jowls as he talks.

My body stays absolutely still as I listen. I'd already figured the first part out when I realized there was no groom in sight, no Romero Family soldiers anywhere to be seen, no Romero Family cars exiting as I arrived. That bastard Ralph Romero had always planned to stand Amelia up at the altar, a slap in the face of the Volini Family, a public insult that would force Anthony Volini to respond to save face, maybe start a war that he couldn't win.

But the rest of what Carlo says stuns me into silence.

“Ralph’s father, Don Romero, apparently died in his sleep last night,” Carlo says with an edge to his voice that makes it clear nobody really believes the old man just happened to pick this very day to die of natural causes. “And Ralph’s older brother was killed in a car accident this morning. Along with his pregnant wife and two sons.”

It takes a moment for the seriousness to sink in. “Ralph Romero just wiped out his entire family?” I growl. “The bastard had his father smothered or poisoned? Then killed his own brother in a fake accident, along with the wife, an unborn child, and two innocent kids? Which makes Ralph the undisputed head of the Romero Family.” I shake my head to clear it. “So now Ralph is the fucking Don? And he had the balls to have one of his henchmen call and inform you that Amelia is now beneath his class, that the wedding is off? Making the insult explicit, clear as day, forcing a response.” I shake my head to clear it. “But going after him now that he’s the Romero Family boss means all-out war.”

Anthony Volini turns from the window now. He’s aged about ten years since the last time I saw him twenty-three days ago. “Exactly. Masterful move. Nobody will be able to prove Ralph had his father and brother killed. Everyone will know he did it, but without proof the Consortium won’t be able to rule against him. They’ll have to recognize him as the legitimate Head of the Romero Family.” He rubs his eyes, sits down heavily in his chair. “He planned all this because he wants our territory, wants to own Florida along with Georgia. Everything was timed to happen on the wedding day, after all the guests arrived and there’d be no hiding the insult from the mafia world. Standing Amelia up at the wedding was the cornerstone of this move. He couldn’t start an unprovoked war because the Consortium would intervene. But if he provokes us to start the war, it’s fair game. His move now forces us to make a counter-move.”

“Except we’re in a no-win situation,” Carlo growls. “If we go after Ralph directly, now that he’s the boss, it’s a declaration of war. The Consortium won’t stop it

because we're entitled to respond to the insult, but no other Family will intervene. They'll let us fight it out, and that will not end well for the Volini Family."

The boss takes a grim breath. "We can choose to do nothing, of course. Ignore the insult, maybe pretend like the deaths forced the wedding to be postponed even though it's clear Ralph never intended to show up, staged the whole thing to force us into a corner. But choosing to do nothing is still a response. It's no different from bending the knee, acknowledging that we're weak, that we'll take the disrespect and do nothing about it." He shakes his head firmly. "That's a slower death, but it is absolutely a path to defeat. We lose face and it snowballs. Maybe not this year, maybe not the next, but once we show our brutal world that we're weak, that people can disrespect us without consequences, it's the beginning of the end for the Volini Family."

Carlo nods. "Makes it harder for us to recruit the best new soldiers. Other Families are less likely to do deals with us. Politicians demand bigger bribes to take our sides. Same with district attorneys, judges, union bosses, cops, customs at the docks. It's a death spiral. Eventually our bookies and dealers and enforcers start to jump ship. Nobody wants their future tied to a Family that's been disrespected and simply bowed its head and taken it. Our world is about power and dominance. We're fucking trapped."

My head doesn't move. Breath comes tight and shallow. My eyes are riveted on the old man now, curiosity quickening my heart. After all, he called me here even though this is a private Family matter.

Of course, I know why he called me here.

And I know I'll say yes.

Even though it's basically a suicide mission.

“I’ll do it,” I say without hesitation even though I know it’s insane. Ralph Romero will be expecting a hit, and he’ll be more protected than the fucking President. “I’ll kill him.”

Carlo chuckles dryly, glances at the boss, then shakes his head in my direction. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, tough guy. We called you back here because you did a couple of freelance jobs for the Romero Family back in the day. You know something about their mansion’s layout, about any possible vulnerabilities. It’s probably outdated information now, but might still be useful.”

I rub my grizzled jaw, raise an eyebrow at the boss. “So you’re going to try to blatantly attack Ralph Romero in his own home with Volini soldiers? Start an all-out war even though you’re outgunned and outnumbered? It’s just what Romero wants and you know it. If you start a war and he wins, all your territory goes to him.”

The boss takes a slow breath, his eyes darkening with a savageness that reminds me Anthony Volini is an alpha dog in his own way. He’s not going to just slink away. He’ll attack to protect his territory, even if he knows it’s going to end in defeat.

As for me?

I’m a damn alpha dog too.

Except I don’t give a fuck about territory.

Not that kind of territory anyway.

I want blood just for the insult to my sweet Amelia.

Yeah, an hour ago I was ready to murder Ralph Romero for marrying my woman.

Now I'm ready to murder him for not marrying her.

It strikes me as darkly funny, but I'm not in a laughing mood.

I'm in a killing mood.

"Got a better idea," I say as it comes to me in a rush of feverish insight, like maybe all that shit Amelia babbles about how our love can change the direction of fate is true. Either way, I see a chance here, and I'm going to take it. "Let me go in alone. Quietly. Carefully. They're expecting an all-out attack with a hundred Volini soldiers and serious firepower. They won't expect a lone assassin to get into their fortress."

Carlo snorts. "That's because a lone assassin can't get into the Romero mansion. Not even you, Zedd. Just not going to happen with everyone on full alert expecting us to strike. You'll get caught and killed, and everyone knows you've been on an exclusive contract with the Volini Family. It'll start the war anyway. Might even be more dangerous, because it'll give Ralph an excuse to attack us here in Florida. Right now he can't start an unprovoked war against us without the other Families coming down hard on him for breaking the Consortium Rules. Nope. Bad fucking idea, Zedd. Look, we didn't call you here for strategy advice. We just want—"

"Hold on, Carlo." The boss narrows his eyes at me. "Carlo is right, Zedd. No way you're getting in and out of Romero's mansion without being killed. But I'm curious . . . why would you even offer to do it? Yes, I've paid you well. We get along fine, have even become friends in a way after years of our monthly meetings. But although I'm a charming guy, you don't owe me that kind of loyalty. You're not part of this Family. You're a lone wolf, a free-sword assassin. You're already a millionaire, so it can't be the money. Especially if you don't get to spend any of it because you're dead. Why offer, Zedd? This is Family business. Why do you care enough about avenging this insult to risk your life on what's basically a suicide mission?" He leans back in his Italian-leather chair, tents his fingers, those dangerous eyes flashing in my

direction, his voice going soft in a deadly way I've never heard before. "Do you . . . do you know my daughter, Zedd? Amelia. My baby girl. Do you know her?"

A chill moves up my rigid spine.

My throat tightens, going dry as I swallow.

Carlo's face twists in a frown. "Boss, what are you—"

"Shut up, Carlo. Let Zedd answer." The boss watches my eyes, his hand moving to his desk drawer, his gaze still fixed on me.

My body tenses so hard I almost shatter. My gun's in my car, just like always. It's the rule here. Nobody carries a weapon into the boss's office, not even Carlo. The only gun in this room is in the boss's desk drawer.

The one he's just pulled open with that deadly glint in his eyes.

Now my life flashes before me. My fate seems to fade into black. Destiny disappears into nothing.

Anthony Volini's hand emerges from behind the desk.

Holding a shiny folder.

With the U.S. Open Tennis logo on the front.

"You think I'm a fucking idiot?" he whispers. "You think my instincts are so dulled that I don't know when a wolf like you has his eyes on my daughter, my baby girl, my . . . my property?"

Now that wolf in me snarls like a savage beast. My fists clench at my sides. Rage roars in my heart.

“She’s not your property,” comes the growling whisper that I cannot fucking stop. “She’s my property. Amelia is mine, you hear? She’s fucking mine!”

Now the room goes still as death.

The silence crackles with violent tension.

Then a smile cracks on Anthony Volini’s lined face. “I know,” he says softly. “Knew it the moment Amelia came in the next day and asked to go to New York. She asked for a VIP pass. But she already had one, didn’t she?”

My jaw clenches so hard it almost dislocates. Somehow I nod, not sure why I’m still alive. Then something occurs to me and I frown.

“If you knew, why let Amelia go to New York?” I scratch my jaw, the frown cutting deeper as I study the boss’s well-lined face. The guy has been a mafia Don for decades. He knows how to play the game.

Nah, more than that.

He knows how to play the players.

And I’m one of those players.

“You ever study military history, Zedd?” the boss asks.

I shrug, not sure where he’s going with this.

The boss leans back in his chair. “The Israeli army is famous for having a lot of women soldiers. But they’re very careful about sending women into close combat alongside men. It’s not because women can’t fight as well.” He smiles knowingly. “It’s because when men are fighting in the presence of women, they are far more aggressive, far more reckless, capable of violence that’s so homicidal it becomes suicidal, savagery past the point of sanity. Apparently, there’s a wildly protective instinct in a male warrior that gets ignited when there’s a woman around. He’s way more willing to risk his life, fight to the death, attack without consideration for his own safety.”

Now my face tightens into a grin that’s part admiration part anger. “So I was your insurance policy not just against Carlo but against Ralph too? Your backup plan? You let your daughter come to me because you wanted to ignite this reckless homicidal instinct in me just in case Ralph Romero double-crossed you and you needed to hit him?”

Anthony Volini chuckles. “Yes, but that’s not all of it.” His gaze softens. He shrugs, then sighs. “There was something about how excited Amelia was when she asked for permission to go to New York.” He pauses, face darkening for a flash. “To go to you.” He closes his eyes like he’s trying to control his own anger, his own fatherly possessiveness of his baby girl. He exhales hard, shakes his head gently, rubs his chin and glances up at me. “Just couldn’t say no to her. Couldn’t say no to the . . . to the woman in her. Hell, she was about to get married to a man even I know isn’t worthy of her love. I just . . . just couldn’t say no to her.”

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My throat tightens. I swallow thickly. Head spins because I'm not sure what the boss is saying, not sure if he's angry or accepting. Hell, maybe he isn't sure either.

Which means maybe I really do have a window of opportunity here.

And I have to fucking take it.

"The funerals," I say.

Both Carlo and the boss frown.

"Ralph Romero has to attend his father's and brother's and sister-in-law's and nephews' funerals," I explain. "He's got to show that he's a grieving son and brother and uncle. He'll have to leave his mansion to attend the funerals tomorrow."

"Sure." Carlo grunts. "We've thought of hitting him at the funerals or on the road. But he'll be even more protected while outside the safety of the mansion. He'll know he's more vulnerable outdoors, will be expecting us to take a shot."

"Perfect," I say with a smile. "We want him to think that. In fact, leak the news that the Volini Family is absolutely planning to hit Ralph Romero at one of the funerals. Drive-by at the cemetery. Car-bomb along the way. Snipers. Drones. Whatever. Put the rumors out there through some credible snitches on the street. Get every Romero captain and soldier on high alert for the funerals." My smile widens to a grin. "Leaving only a bare minimum guarding the empty mansion at that time."

"Making it easy for you to sneak in." The boss grins, glances at Carlo.

Carlo grunts with grudging admiration. “And you’ll be waiting for Ralph Romero when he gets back to his private wing in his fortress of a mansion. Might work. But what about getting out?”

I glance at the boss. “Once Ralph is dead, the Romero Family is without a leader. I’ll message Carlo when it’s done, and if you can be in position to attack the Romero mansion with a force of Volini soldiers right then, the leaderless Romero captains might stand down instead of risking their lives. A leaderless army often surrenders—especially when the leader wasn’t particular well-liked.” I shrug. “Ralph Romero was an asshole as a teenager, arrogant and vindictive with his bodyguards and the house staff. People remember that stuff. And now Ralph’s murdered the well-loved old Don. Killed his own brother and a pregnant woman and two kids. My guess is the Romero soldiers fear Ralph Romero more than they respect him—certainly more than they love him. Their loyalty to the Romero Family might have died with the old Don. If Ralph is dead, things go better for the soldiers if someone takes over and keeps the operations running smoothly. Nobody wants to die in a war when they could be making money by sticking with business as usual.”

Anthony Volini tents his fingers again, thinks for a long moment, glances at Carlo, who shrugs, grunts, and then nods.

“Risky, but it does give us a shot at winning,” says Carlo gruffly. He shoots a curious glance in my direction. “But even if the Romero soldiers do stand down when they realize Ralph is dead, there’s a pretty good chance Ralph’s bodyguards gun you down anyway, before surrendering.”

I shrug. “I’ll take that chance.”

The boss narrows his eyes at me again, and I see that he knows where this is heading.

Knows why I’m doing this.

Knows what I want.

“What do you want?” Anthony Volini wants to hear me say it. “What do you want if you make it out alive and we win the day, Zedd?”

“You know what I want.” My jaw tightens, vision narrowing with single-minded focus.

“My daughter?” That fatherly possessiveness flashes dark in his eyes.

“Nah, she’s already mine.” I chuckle dryly, then shake my head without breaking eye contact with my soon-to-be father-in-law. “What I want from you is approval. I don’t want to take Amelia away from the Family, away from her legacy, away from the life she was born into. She’s a rare beacon of light in this dark world, and I think the Volini Family will be stronger with her in it.” I shrug, rub the back of my thick neck, then shrug again and clear my throat. “So I guess I’m asking for your blessing, old man. Your daughter’s hand in marriage. An official arrangement.”

Carlo lurches with incredulous laughter. “In your fucking dreams, Zedd. We’ll be the laughing stock of the Consortium. An arranged marriage between a full-blooded Italian princess and a . . . a mongrel? Never. Gonna. Happen.”

My fists tighten by my sides, but I ignore the insult and stay focused on Anthony Volini. He’s shown a flash of humanity today, real fatherly love beneath the stern possessiveness of a patriarch.

Anthony Volini says nothing.

And that says everything.

She's mine.

“Boss?” Carlo blinks in disbelief. “Boss, you cannot seriously be considering letting this—”

Anthony Volini raises his right hand, commanding silence from his yipping lap-dog. “There is no question of letting him do anything. Amelia has already chosen him, and I know damn well that she would run away with Zedd if he asked.” He glances at me now, savage eyes softening slightly, lips tightening to a thin smile. “Asking my blessing is a sign of respect. A sign of intention. A sign that maybe the lone wolf wants to step out of the shadows and take his place in the pack, become part of the Family.”

Carlo almost falls down. “The Family? Boss, you aren’t thinking straight. Listen to me—”

“No, you listen, Carlo.” The boss shoots a dagger-sharp glance at Carlo, then turns that gaze in my direction, a strange affection warming his eyes. “Zedd doesn’t need to do any of this. He can run off with my baby girl and leave the Volini Family to either look weak or start an unwinnable war. But he’s giving us a path to not only salvage our respect but actually win against the Romero Family.” He glances at Carlo again. “Carlo, my loyal oldcompagno. We are Italian in blood, but in our hearts we are American. If this country has taught us anything it is that anyone can rise up in America, that blood is not destiny, that the winners get to rewrite the rules.” He shrugs coolly. “And if we win the Romero territory, all of Georgia and Florida will belong to the Volini Family.” The boss grins now. “And that is a lot of territory to control, Carlo. My son will grow up to be a fine boss, but he cannot handle so much territory. We will need Amelia to step up as a leader, mature from a princess to a queen.” He nods at me now, then slowly rises from his chair and holds out his hand to me. “And a queen needs a king. A king that she chooses for herself.”

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The blood rushes to my head and then leaves it almost as fast as we seal the deal with a handshake. Somewhere through my buzzing brain I can hear Carlo curse in Italian, then say something about how it won't fucking matter because it's fifty-fifty that I even make it out of that mansion alive anyway.

But I can't even think that far ahead. Or that far behind, since my imagination is already charging ahead to where Amelia and I are married without having to run from her Family, spend our days hiding like rats.

She's not going to believe this, I think excitedly as I leave Carlo and Anthony to put the plan into motion, get the rumors to circulate, round up their troops for what will hopefully be a short-lived war.

A war that wins our forever.

Now I'm pushing through the guards outside the bridal cottage, brushing aside bewildered bridesmaids, knocking confidently on the bride's dressing room like I'm in charge now, this is my show, my territory, my damn woman.

Amelia yanks open the door, gasps when she sees me. I storm into the room, shut the door behind me, start talking fast and furious. She listens with wide-eyed wonder as I blurt out the good news, tell her I've got it all arranged, that we have a chance to be together without having to run, without having to hide, with her father's blessing, the boss's approval, that it's all been arranged, arranged for us, arranged forme.

"Absolutely not," Amelia says after gathering herself. "The answer is no."

AMELIA

“What do you meanno?” Zedd tries to pull me into him but I back away, hugging myself and shaking my head. “Amelia, I’ve arranged it so that we—”

“No,” I say again, still shaking my head violently so that I don’t lose my resolve, don’t weaken from my position, don’t start to imagine a future that will never come because Zedd will be dead before he ever gets out of the Romero mansion. “You’ll never make it out alive after killing Ralph. You might sneak into the mansion while most of the Romero soldiers are out protecting Ralph at the funerals. But when Ralph gets back to the mansion, it means all his soldiers get back too. Even if Father and Carlo do ultimately win, it’ll be too late to save you, Zedd. I won’t allow that to happen. I just won’t. The answer is no.”

Zedd’s face darkens as I push his hands away from me once more. My head shakes like it can’t stop, like I need to force my body to stick with this decision even though my heart desperately wants to believe we actually have a chance at forever, that our love will somehow protect Zedd after he kills a mafia boss in a mansion infested with armed bodyguards, that this really is a fantasy, a fairy tale where the princess and the assassin get to be together against all odds.

“Of course I’ll make it out alive,” Zedd growls, a flash of anger in his eyes. “This is what I do for a living, Amelia. There’s a risk, of course. But I’ve got a chance, baby. Hell, we’ve got a chance. We have to take it.” He exhales, crosses his arms over his chest, narrows his eyes down at me in the same way Father does to send a message that this isn’t a negotiation. “I’m doing it, Amelia. That’s all there is to it.”

Now I narrow my eyes back at him, cross my own arms over my chest, stand as tall as I can in my wedding dress. “No,” I say with all the calm resolve I can find in my

trembling body that's still working through the shock of the day. "No. No. No. The answer is no."

"Well, you know what? Nobody gives a shit about your answer, because it's not a fucking question," comes Zedd's growl. His jaw tightens. He takes a step closer. "Your father and I have made an arrangement. If I kill Ralph Romero and get back alive, you and I will be married. That's all there is to it, baby. You understand how arranged marriages work, don't you, Princess? Yeah, you do. You were about to enter into one. So just a small change in plan. Just a different fucking husband now." His eyes gleam with a manic possessiveness as he licks his lips and flashes a wild grin, his gaze flicking up and down my body. "You can stay in that wedding dress. The funerals are tomorrow, so it won't be long before you're going to be walking down the aisle, saying I do, opening your pretty mouth for my wedding-day kiss, spreading your smooth legs for my wedding-night cock. You're mine, Amelia. You're fucking mine, you hear? It's a done deal."

My head spins with a sudden burst of indignant rage even as my pussy clenches and releases a bead of wetness into my wedding-white panties. "You're no better than Father, no better than any of them. I'm just property to you. A possession. A fuck-hole to put your dick. A womb to produce your babies."

Zedd flashes that wild grin again. "Now you're getting it, Princess. Glad to see we're both on the same page. Now stay here and wait for me. I'll be back in twenty-four hours and then you'll understand that this tantrum was all for nothing."

He steps forward and grabs me by the back of the neck, pulls me roughly in for a brutal kiss that's tinged with the violence boiling in his blood, thundering in his heart. A part of me knows he isn't thinking clearly, is blinded by being so close to giving us a chance at our forever. But another part of me is still furious at his rudeness, indignant that he and Father made an arrangement without bothering to ask me.

Even though I've already said yes a thousand times.

Said yes with every sighing kiss, every groaning thrust, every aching release.

Yes, I love you.

Yes, I want you.

Yes, I will marry you.

"I won't marry you even if you do make it out alive," I snarl as Zedd pulls away from the kiss. It almost breaks my heart to say it, but I have to stop Zedd from walking to his own death. I remember Father telling me how soldiers in combat become suicidally aggressive when there's a woman involved, and I see it in Zedd now, see it in his overconfidence, his bravado, his irrational air of total invincibility that's going to get him killed. "I won't say I do. I won't kiss the groom. And I sure as hell won't spread my legs for your dumb dick."

Zedd stops, turns, glances at me with an air of confident invincibility that almost breaks me, almost makes me believe that our fate is guaranteed, that we're destined for a happy ending. He smiles wickedly. "I don't believe you," he whispers with that infuriating confidence. "I think when I storm back into this bridal chamber twenty-four hours from now, your ex-fiancé's blood on my hands, you'll be waiting for me in that wedding dress, your lips red and painted for my kiss, pussy plump and primed for my cock. I know what you're trying to do, Princess, and I love you for it. But I can't turn away from our shot at forever. If it kills me, so be it. It's worth the risk. We are worth the risk. You are worth the risk. I love you, Amelia."

For a moment I almost melt, almost rush to him for one last embrace, a maiden's good-luck kiss before her knight rides out into battle. But the fear still tugs at my heart, and I wonder if I can pull that same trick to take the edge off Zedd's bravado,

turn the dial away from violence with my sex.

But Zedd is wise to my machinations now, and with a sly wink he's out the door. I hear his footsteps thunder through the anteroom, and I'm panicking now, my heart almost exploding with anxiety, a desperate urgency that time's running out again, that I need to do something or else I'll never see Zedd alive again.

And suddenly everything clicks into place.

Well, not everything—just enough of a plan to spring me into action.

I rush to the door, pull it open, call for my maid. She hurries in and I slam the door closed, lean close to her and whisper my instructions.

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“You need to stall Zedd from getting to his truck for about ten minutes,” I whisper as my maid listens wide-eyed, nodding earnestly. “Tell him Father wants to see him, that Zedd should wait inside the mansion until Carlo comes to get him. Then ten minutes later send one of the guards to tell Zedd he can leave, there’s no meeting after all.”

My maid gulps, is about to run off, but I grab her arm, lean close and give her the rest of my orders. “Then come back to my bridal chamber, come inside, just you alone. I’ll be gone by then, but you can’t tell anyone. Just lock the door and send word that I am not to be disturbed for the next twenty-four hours, that I want to be alone, that I will see nobody else but you. Understand?”

My maid’s face is stricken. She’s about to protest, but I silence her with a look that draws from the mafia princess inside me, from the dangerous blood that flows in my veins, from the fire of love that burns in my eyes.

Love that won’t let me just sit here and wait for our fate.

Love that wants me to fight for our forever.

Because if I can’t stop Zedd from riding into battle, I’m going to ride out with him, face our fate by his side, live or die with my man.

I push my maid out and close the door, my heart pounding as my gaze fixes on that window leading to the private garden. There’s no time to change out of my wedding dress, but I manage to kick off my heels and pull on my trusty tennis shoes before gathering up my skirts and clambering out the window like a runaway bride.

The private garden is empty. Creeping to the main lawn I see the buffet table still laden with untouched goodies. There's nobody in sight. The place looks like a scene out of the Twilight Zone, where all the people just disappeared, leaving uneaten food on the tables.

Quickly I grab two sealed plastic bottles of water. Scanning the buffet table, I look for something dry and non-messy to sustain me for the next twenty-four hours.

And I see my wedding cake.

Six soft layers of sweet moistness covered in virgin-white Italian cream frosting.

Beside the cake are dozens of cute little cardboard boxes for guests to carry a piece home with them. There's a gleaming silver cake-knife with a white ribbon around the handle, but something wild and childish in me just reaches out and claws at the perfect pyramid of soft wedding cake. Giggling like a lunatic I grab a fistful of cake and shove it into a box, then suck my sticky fingers and wipe them on my wedding dress.

Then with my bottles of water and little cake box, I scamper across the deserted lawn in my tennis shoes and wedding dress. Circling around the back of the mansion, I make it to the east side service lot and see Zedd's big black Ford F-150 pickup truck.

It's got a flatbed the size of Switzerland, neatly covered with a thick leather tarpaulin, buttoned down along the frames with big silver studs. I creep to the truck, unbutton one side of the tarp, flip it open, peer inside.

The space is dark and cavernous, but clean like a new whistle, with a warm aroma of genuine leather and genuine man.

My man.

My man who isn't going anywhere without his woman.

My knight who's going to have a passenger in his saddlebag.

My pirate who's going to have a stowaway on his ship.

The last button snaps into place, sealing me into my dark cozy hiding place when I hear Zedd's footsteps approach. I hold my breath, clutching my water bottles and cake-box against my wedding dress.

"In sickness and in health," I whisper with dreadful excitement as the engine starts and my body vibrates and my heart thrums. "Till death do us part."

14

EIGHTEEN HOURS LATER.

ZEDD

Death is not an option.

The dark thoughts kept me up all night, tossing and turning in my sweat-soaked bed. The prospect of death never bothered me before. I've taken so many lives that I greet death with a shrug. It comes for all of us eventually.

Except suddenly I have something to live for.

Fuck, I have everything to live for.

My truck picks up speed as I rumble past a sign that says ATLANTA EXITS and thunder up Highway 41 that passes through Georgia all the way to the Florida Keys.

It's been a long drive, but traffic was light and the weather was perfect. Quick glance at the dashboard clock tells me there's plenty of time, that in fact I'm a bit early. The Romero funerals don't get done for another three hours, which means it'll be close to four hours before Ralph Romero gets back to the mansion.

Easing my foot off the accelerator, I try to relax, to bring my mind into that zone where this is just another hit, just another job, just another contract.

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The most important contract of my life.

My fists tighten on the steering wheel as I think about my sweet Amelia. I know that her angry words came from a place of love—but fuck, they still hurt, still burn, still make me want to put her over my lap and spank her into submission, rub her wet pussy to remind her that a woman's cunt doesn't lie, is a truth-detector just like a man's cock.

The possessive fire burns my throat, blurs my eyes. I almost miss my exit, just barely swerving across three lanes and getting off the freeway in time. It takes some effort, but finally my mind settles as I get close to my destination.

Not the front gates of the Romero mansion, of course. I'll be taking a county road and driving into the nearby woods that will give me enough cover that I can get to within a mile of the Romero Estate walls. My truck will be well-hidden, and I'll hike the last mile through the woods, using a military-grade Wi-Fi jammer to fuck with the security cameras long enough to make it over the wall and into the mansion.

Once inside I'll be in the clear. No Mafia Family puts cameras inside their own homes. They're too paranoid to let their business dealings get caught on camera. In-house cameras actually make it more dangerous, not less. When it comes to the last mile of protection, every Mafia Family relies on the loyalty of its soldiers.

Loyalty that I hope to hell isn't that strong for Ralph Romero right now.

Now I pull my truck off the county road, bumping and bouncing over the rough terrain through the woods.

And I hear something.

It's coming from my truck's flatbed.

Sounded like a yelp as I hit that big bump.

Now a whimper as my truck hurtles over a tree-stump.

Followed by a groan, soft and feminine.

My head has been buzzing with adrenaline all day, so maybe it's my imagination. But then my truck lurches over a boulder, coming down hard on its tough suspension, and this time I definitely hear something.

Hear someone.

No fucking way.

I slam on the brakes, push open the door, thunder to the back of my truck, the rage already rising red and hot up my neck. By the time I yank off the leather tarpaulin and find her huddled in a white wedding dress, cake frosting mixing with her smeared red lipstick, mischief in her sparkling brown eyes, I can barely see straight because I'm so fucking pissed.

"Are you insane?" I roar, grabbing her ankles and dragging her down towards me as her eyes widen now, the mischief chased away by fear when she sees I'm not fucking around. "Are you out of your damn mind, Amelia?"

"Zedd, I love you," she sobs, her face twisting with panic when she sees the dark rage clouding my face. "If I can't stop you, then I'm going with you. Till death do us part, right?"

“Wrong!” I roar, grabbing her ankles again as she tries to kick herself free. One of her tennis shoes pops off in my hand, her stocking-clad foot coming free, her wedding dress riding up and giving me a glimpse of her underwear, those sexy white stockings ending a few inches beneath her satin white panties.

My mind almost shatters as my cock hardens immediately, but I know I can’t blow my load now, can’t discharge the energy I need for what needs to be done in the Romero mansion.

Thankfully the rage at what she’s done wins for now, and with a shout of raw anger I grab those flailing ankles and flip her over as I clamber onto my truck’s wide flatbed. I sit down hard, drag her over my lap, pushing her wedding dress up over her ass, my cock almost exploding when I see her round bottom gleaming under those satin white panties.

Now I raise my big right palm, bring it down hard on her ass.

Amelia screams, tries to turn her body, but I push her face down and yank down her panties and smack her naked ass, once, twice, three times, spanking her good and hard on the meatiest part of her beautiful butt, my cock throbbing under her naked sex, my vision going red just as her pretty ass turns rosy red, the splayed-out marks of my fingers showing up clearly on each quivering globe.

“I’m sorry, Zedd!” Amelia wails as I spank her once more, then rub her blushing bottom, massaging her smoothness with my rough hands, fingers sliding between her cheeks, now between her thighs. “I’m sorry, baby.”

“I don’t think you’re sorry at all,” I growl, kneading her ass hard then fingering her roughly, one hand still on her back, holding her firmly in place over my lap. “And why thefuckare you dressed so damn sexy for a wedding night with Ralph Romero?” I smack her ass again, lightly this time, bringing forth a wet whimper as she wriggles

on my lap. “Who gave you permission to look so fucking hot in your wedding dress? Why haven’t I seen these panties before? Why does your pussy feel so tight and hot when my dick has been stretching it for twenty-one nights straight?”

I slide my middle finger into her vagina, my thumb pushing open her magnificent buttocks to reveal her tight pink rear pucker. My throat catches and I almost pass out with the most aching need to fuck this naughty bride in every hole. Amelia moans beneath me, and I spit on her asshole and push my fat thumb inside, holding it there like a plug as I curl my middle-finger in her juicy cunt.

“Answer me,” I hiss through gritted teeth as I fight the urge to unload into her, all over her, explode like a geyser, erupt like a volcano. “Are these sexy white panties for Ralph or for me? Is this hot little pussy for Ralph or for me?”

“It’s all for you, Zedd,” she sobs, raising her ass and giving me a sunlit view of her slit stuffed with my middle-finger, her buttocks plugged with my thumb. “And these are the most conservative panties ever,” she whines. “There’s no lace trim or anything.”

“Exactly, you bad girl,” I scold, yanking her hair roughly, pulling her head back and making her yelp. “That makes it even sexier. Fuck, knowing that you were going to show Ralph Romero your ass in these panties makes me ache to kill him, burn to break him.”

Two fingers go deep inside my baby’s pussy now, and I finger-fuck her good and hard. I know her vagina so well that I can be rough without hurting her, and when I feel her wetness coat my fingers like sticky-sweet honey-oil, it takes every ounce of willpower to not put my dick in there and fill her little hole until it overflows down my shaft to my balls.

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Thankfully Amelia's about to come, and I find her G-spot and press a fingertip into that fibrous knob, bringing forth a wailing climax as she squirts all over my hand and truck-bed, thrashing in my lap as my fingers fuck her to ecstasy.

"Aren't you going to fuck me?" she pants as I pull my fingers out of her pussy, suck her wetness off them before rolling her body off my lap and pulling her close against me. "Zedd, I'm so wet now, so hot I think I could come for hours, keep climaxing if you put your dick in me, fuck your bride's pussy like I know you want."

I kiss her lips, tasting wedding cake, which mixes with the sweet-salty tang of her pussy-juice to create the world's most divine dessert. "You aren't my bride until Ralph Romero's dead," I remind her. "That's the arrangement. That's the deal. Your father and I shook on it."

Amelia raises her head along with an eyebrow. She opens her mouth to say something, but just sighs and cuddles into my armpit again as I kiss her hair and grin even though my mind is spinning through the options for resolving this very inconvenient twist in our tale.

"You're going to stay here with the truck while I go take care of Ralph Romero," I tell her with calm authority.

"Absolutely not," comes her muffled reply from the crook of my neck. "I didn't hide out in your truck-bed all night just to be left behind while you have all the fun."

"This isn't a game," I say sternly. "I need to focus on Romero and his guards, not protecting you, Amelia."

“If you can get one person in and out of that mansion, then you can get two people in and out,” she declares. “Besides, you can’t stop me from coming. If you don’t take me with you, I’ll follow you on my own. You decide.”

My head pounds as I grimace. I can’t tie her up here and lock her in the truck. No way I’m leaving her out in the fucking woods in hostile territory tied up alone in a damn truck. We’re too far out in the boonies for me to drive her to a hotel and tie her up there—which would be risky too, especially if I don’t make it out alive.

I glance down at her face. She’s looking up at me, her soft features hard with determination, her innocent eyes shining with that mafia-princess fire. My gaze moves down along her body, past her legs to where I can see one tennis shoe still on her foot.

Shit, I think as Amelia’s glare tunnels into my brain. Shit. Shit.Shit.

The safest place for Amelia is going to be right by my side, isn’t it?

“All right,” I growl. “But you do what I say, when I say. No arguments. No protests. No backtalk. I tell you to run, you run like there are wolves after you. I tell you to jump, you don’t even ask how high, you just start jumping. I’m running the show, make no mistake, little girl.”

“Oh, all right.” Amelia rolls her eyes at me, then frumps her face and pouts like a sulky little schoolgirl. “Now, are you going to fuck me?”

I glance at my watch, then up at the trees surrounding us like a green velvet cocoon. Suddenly a strange peace comes over me, and I’m overwhelmed with wonder, absolutely stunned when it hits me that right now Amelia is in my arms, looking at me with love in her eyes, in a wedding dress, asking me to fuck her before we ride together into a battle for our future, an arrangement for our forever.

It's everything I've ever wanted.

Everything I could ever ask for.

Life is perfect, isn't it?

Even if it ends in three hours.

"Yes," I say, cocking my grizzly head and frowning strangely as that mystical moment of serenity passes, leaving me in this vivid reality where all my dreams have come true, all my fantasies have become real, all my life has been leading up to this one moment. "Yes," I say again, smiling at my mafia-princess in her wrinkled wedding dress, one tennis shoe on her left foot, cake-frosting on her lips, mad love in her bright eyes. "I am going to fuck you."

15

AMELIA

Zedd fucks me like it's for the first time, the last time, for all of time. He hikes up my wedding dress and sits me down on his erection, bouncing me up and down on his cock until the entire truck bounces beneath us. We go for what feels like hours, the Georgia sun beaming down on us from the blue sky above, the trees of our forest-cocoon shielding us from the looming reality that this really might be the last time.

He comes like a volcano inside me, bringing me down so hard on his cock that I swear I feel him up in my throat. I scream as Zedd spurts hot jets of seed up into my aching pussy as I ride him. I'm still screaming when he lifts me off him like a doll, flips me over like a mattress, fucks me doggie-style from behind, somehow still coming as he does it, his enormous balls serving up torrents of semen like this is some exaggerated dimension of reality.

But eventually reality narrows down to a grimness of what we're about to do, and after several long minutes of satisfied silence, Zedd lifts his heavy body up from where he'd smushed me face-down into the truck-bed after collapsing on me, his cock still inside me from behind.

"You really won't stay behind?" he asks with grim hopefulness as I pull up my panties, smooth down my wedding dress, look for my missing shoe. "You know it's the safest thing, Amelia. Keep the keys, and if I'm not back in a couple of hours, drive away."

I snort, not even gracing him with an eye-roll. "You know damn well that the safest place for me is right by your side." I finish tying my shoelace, then glance up at him and shrug. "Besides, I might come in handy. If we do get caught before you kill Ralph, maybe I can negotiate our way out of there alive."

Zedd's body tenses, his face darkening, deadly gaze moving possessively over my bosom. "And what exactly would you offer him, Princess?" he growls, that thick vein on the side of his neck bulging in a way that makes it damn clear that this time the sex most certainly did not dial down the violence in his blood.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

I straighten my wedding veil, which is somehow still attached to my tightly pinned hair. My heart races when I see the possessive anger in Zedd's eyes, but I say nothing to ease his mind, nothing to cool his blood.

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Because something tells me we're going to need his possessive rage to make it through this final test alive.

Make it through together.

Zedd looks at his watch now, hops out of the truck-bed, circles round to the front passenger side, pulls the door open. I stand on the truck-bed, hands on my hips, and watch Zedd get ready.

He straps a military-style web-belt across his body, packed with extra magazines for the two silencer-equipped Glock 17 handguns stuck into holsters. He scratches his beard, grunts, then unzips a black nylon bag, pulls out a Glock 19, a smaller handgun but just as lethal. "Here. It isn't silenced like mine, but if we're in a situation where you actually need to use it, the noise won't matter. Stick it . . . somewhere."

Nodding, I take the handgun and stick it into my bra, which is as conservative as my panties, with thick straps and an underwire that takes the added weight without sagging too much. Along with my private tutoring and horseback riding in Italy came weapons-training, and I've fired thousands of bullets in my young life, emptied hundreds of handgun and rifle magazines in between saunas and siestas.

I am a fucking mafia princess, after all.

"No machine guns?" I ask when I see him check some electronic device which I think is a WiFi-signal jammer for the security cameras on the Romero Estate wall.

Zedd chuckles. "This isn't a Hollywood action movie. If we need to shoot our way

out, we're already dead. The plan is to fire just a single silenced shot into Ralph Romero's head, then hide out and wait for the damn cavalry."

I scan the woods like I'm expecting to see Carlo and a bunch of Volini soldiers crawling through the bushes in camouflage. But, as Zedd explained back at the house yesterday, Carlo is going to hang back at a safe distance until he gets confirmation that Ralph is dead.

"Here," says Zedd, handing me a little black plastic box with a red blinking light and one button. "It's a simple transmitter that sends a signal to Carlo's receiver. Easier than trying to send a text. Once Ralph goes down, you push the button."

"Me?" I frown, taking the little box that looks like a pager from the 1990s. "Why am I holding on to this?"

"In case I go down," Zedd says matter-of-factly. "Then you can hit that button, even if Ralph is still alive. Maybe you'll be able to get out in the chaos when Carlo and your father's soldiers attack."

I shake my head firmly, patting the handgun nestled against my boob. "If you go down, I'm going down with you. Besides, if Carlo gets that signal, he's going to think Ralph is dead and maybe the Romero soldiers will stand down without their leader." I shake my head again, place the box on the truck's roof, cross my arms beneath my heavily armed boobies. "I won't lead Carlo and the Volini soldiers into a battle where they're outgunned. It'll be a massacre, and I'll be killed anyway." I shrug, flash a wicked smile. "Or maybe Ralph will use me as a hostage. A bargaining chip. And I doubt you want to even imaginewhat he'll do to me to make Carlo surrender."

Zedd's face darkens to a deep red, and I'm surprised steam doesn't come out of his ears. His fists clench so hard all his knuckles crack like dry branches beneath a rampaging bear. His big Adam's apple moves as he swallows thickly, and I wonder if

he's going to just take me and run, leave this mafia-war for the mafiosos to finish, take his prize like a pirate and sail off into the sunset, flying the skull-and-bones flag, making me his curvy little wench.

But he won't.

I know he won't.

Because this lone-wolf has chosen to come in from the shadows, take his place in the pack, join the Family.

And start a new family.

Our family.

Now my hand goes unconsciously to my belly, and Zedd's gaze flicks there instinctively. It's been three weeks of nightly sex, with Zedd fucking me so deep, filling me so full, that although we don't know for sure, we absolutely know for sure.

"I must be insane to bring you along," Zedd whispers, reaching for me and lifting me off the flatbed like a doll, holding me close to his warm body like he wants to take me inside him, protect me with all his heart, all his soul, all his love. "And even more insane to not just take you and run. It makes no damn sense that I'm risking it all to win this battle when I've already got my prize. And it makes even less sense that I'm taking you along." He rubs his eyes, shakes his head. "But I can't run with you, can't take you away from your Family. And I can't leave you alone out here in the woods, don't have time to drive you to safety before Ralph gets back from the funerals."

"So then it all does make sense," I inform him with surprising composure, perhaps even a spark of excitement, like maybe the adrenaline is kicking in, making

everything sparkly and shiny, surreal and superficial, like there's a deeper reality shimmering beneath the surface of this earthly drama, this flesh-and-blood façade, this poignant game of pretend. "Come on. Let's go. Try to keep up, OK?"

I smack him on the lips, wriggle my way out of his bear-hug, then tramp off into the woods in my tennis shoes and wedding dress. But after a few steps I realize Zedd isn't following. He's just standing there with his arms crossed over his chest, left eyebrow raised, mouth twisted in a half-smile.

"This way, Princess," he says with growly satisfaction, pointing his big thumb in the direction opposite to where my ass was heading with all the confidence in the world. He waits for me to trudge over to him, then slides his arm around my waist, smacks his palm against my embarrassed butt, kisses me sloppily on my head. "And remember that I'm in charge. I say run, you run. I say jump, you don't even ask how high, you just start jumping."

16

ZEDD

"Jump," I whisper up at Amelia, who's perched atop the Romero Estate wall in her wedding dress. A glance at my WiFi-signal jammer tells me we don't have much time. The camera-signals have been jammed for three minutes, and if I don't bring them back online pretty damn quick it'll be obvious that something's up. Three minutes is about the limit for it to look like a temporary glitch, signal interference, something like that. "Come on. I'll catch you. Jump. Right now, babe."

The wall is only nine feet off the ground, but Amelia's frozen, like it's only just sinking in that we're breaching the border, passing the point of no return, simple logic telling her we're probably not making it out alive. Her brain is sending panic signals now, her ancient survival mechanism kicking in, urging her to come to her senses and

run like hell in the other direction.

And shit, that's what my brain is screaming too. How damn reckless and stupid is this, Zedd? Everything you're doing is for Amelia, and you bring her with you into the lion's den?

My head throbs as we stare into one another's eyes, time slowing down as if the universe is giving us one last chance to take the easy way out and run, leave her father to fight his own damn war, let the mafia thugs kill each other for reputation and territory while the lovers flee the scene and start a new life.

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But I can't do that.

I won't do that.

And neither will she.

She's a princess, and she's not going to surrender her territory, not going to run without a fight, not going to bend the knee.

Amelia smiles now, and suddenly that clawing uncertainty is washed away by a flood of warm emotion, giving me a glimpse of an underlying reality to this space-and-time façade, this surreal stage where we're just actors playing roles, participating in the grand drama of life and death, sex and violence, fate and destiny, always and forever.

And our forever has to take this path.

I know it and she knows it.

"Come on, baby," I say, holding out my arms, smiling reassuringly at my princess. "I'll catch you. Jump."

Amelia blinks and nods, and I wonder if she just got that same glimpse of a seething vivid dimension giggling beneath this oh-so-serious surface reality. Either way, she snaps out of that frozen state and leaps into my arms, wedding dress billowing up like white feathers of some beautiful bird.

I catch her easily, put her down on the grass, then disable the signal-jammer, take my

princess's hand, lead her quickly towards the back of the Romero mansion.

"There's an old storm cellar that leads into the basement," I say softly as we hide behind a marble statue of Michelangelo's David peeing into the air. What is it with these Italian sculptures and their tiny dicks. "Hopefully the passageway is still open, not bricked up."

Amelia nods. Her face is flushed red with what I know is an intoxicating mix of fear and excitement. My heart floods with warmth when I realize she's got real courage, real spunk.

And real love.

The kind of love that's raw and reckless.

The kind of love that's all or nothing.

The same kind of love that burns in my blood.

The lush grounds of the Romero Estate whiz past like a blur as we dodge behind manicured bushes and crouch behind marble statues. Minutes later we're at the old wooden doors leading to the storm cellar.

There's a big shiny padlock with a six-digit combination. With a disdainful grunt I slide my German-made portable bolt-cutters from my gear-belt and cut the lock like it's a strand of spaghetti.

The doors open outward, releasing a musty cloud that tells me the passage hasn't been used in a while but is still open, not boarded or bricked up.

"Don't scream if a spider falls on you, little Miss Muffet," I whisper, leading her into

the dark underground passage, deeper down the rabbithole, burrowing towards our future, our fate, our forever.

Amelia giggles with nervous energy as I lead her through cobwebs and past dust-bunnies. We're in the mansion basement now, surrounded by old wooden furniture covered in white sheets, adding to the spookily surreal sense of danger that's making us tremble like thieves.

We steal our way up the basement stairs, and now I snap into battle-ready focus, keeping my body in front of her, gun drawn and ready.

But there's nobody in the house. I know it in my gut, that instinctive sense developed from years of stealth and stalking, hiding and hunting.

The mansion's layout is fresh in my mind even though it's been years since I was here. I lead Amelia up the grand staircase to the second floor, then down the marble-tiled hallway to the East Wing, which was always Ralph's part of the house—even though the entire mansion is his now.

All this would be Amelia's too if she'd married him, I think as I lead her into the master bedroom and notice her flinch at the sight of the king-sized bed.

Possessive rage floods my brain, and I almost crush her hand before bringing myself back under control. Something about seeing that bed drives me almost insane with anger, like the very thought that Ralph might have touched my Amelia, my woman, my fucking property, is triggering a dangerous need to kill the bastard, rip him to shreds like the animal I am, the beast I am, the predator I am.

Yeah, there's something about that ancient sense of competition for a woman. It lives in every alpha man, that raging need to not just keep your own woman's pussy locked down tight for your cock alone but also to possess another man's woman, like deep

down we're all still apes who look at the other apes and want what they have.

Amelia glances at me like she senses the alpha beast growling in my core. I force a tight smile, gesture with my head towards the walk-in closet. "We'll wait in there. Shouldn't be long now."

The walk-in closet is bigger than some apartments. Rows of tailored Italian suits, designer ties, silk shirts. Handmade Italian-leather shoes lined up beneath the clothes. Big feet, I notice as my blood rises again, that jealous rage ripping through me even though I know in my heart Amelia is mine, that her love is true.

Then I notice Amelia surveying Ralph Romero's wardrobe like she's evaluating the man she was about to marry, the man she was going to spread her legs for, the man whose dick she was going to allow inside her pussy.

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Mydamn pussy.

“Zedd, don’t,” comes her whisper through my blood-rage. She squeezes my arm, looks pleadingly into my eyes. “I know what you’re thinking after seeing the bed, seeing all his clothes. But that’ll never happen now. It wasn’t in our fate to have another man ever touch me, ever taste me, ever . . . fuck me.”

I say nothing. Just look into her eyes which are shining with intelligence, like she’s smart enough and wise enough to understand these irrational urges flooding me from the possessive beast that’s part of my core.

“But we were both prepared to let it happen,” I growl, my eyes flashing as I catch a glimpse of her cleavage, the black handgun sticking out from between her luscious boobs, her bra pulled down by the weapon’s weight. For a wild moment I want to fuck her senseless now, unload everything into her one more time, maybe one last time, once more to prove to the animal inside that she’s mine, all mine, mine, mine, mine!

But Amelia senses it and backs away from me until she’s up against Ralph Romero’s silk shirts, surrounded by his fancy Italian clothes and handmade Italian shoes and—

And suddenly we hear footsteps coming down the hallway outside the bedroom.

Lots of footsteps.

Immediately I draw my weapon and press myself against the closet door. I count six men, maybe seven. Fuck, sounds like the Romero soldiers are being extra-cautious,

are going to check out the bedroom before letting Ralph enter.

“Cameras were glitching earlier,” comes the muffled voice of a Romero soldier as I hear the bedroom door open. “They came back online in a few minutes, so it was probably just some interference with the signal. But it’s best to be cautious, Ralph.”

“Don’t ever call me Ralph again.” It’s Ralph Romero, and he sounds agitated, like maybe faking his grief through a bunch of funerals has worn his patience thin. “You address me as Don Romero in public. You can call me Boss at other times. But I’m no longer Ralph. Show some fucking respect. Now get the hell out of here. There’s nobody hiding in my damn bedroom.”

“Let us check the bathroom and walk-in closet,” replies the soldier. “Wouldn’t want to lose the last remaining Romero to another freak accident. People might say it’s a bit suspicious, so many Romeros dying in . . . accidents. Right, Ralph?”

Chuckles rise up from the other soldiers.

“You’re supposed to call him boss,” one of the other soldiers says, an undercurrent of a taunt in his voice. “Or Don Romero.”

More chuckles emerge.

Then suddenly everything goes quiet.

I hear the ominous click of a handgun as somebody chambers a bullet.

“Down on your knees, you disrespectful fuck,” comes Ralph’s voice, trembling with anger so raw I can feel it through the door. “Open your mouth like you’re sucking dick. There. That’s it. Open wide. Now call me Ralph again. I dare you. I fucking dare you.”

The room is silent like death outside.

This is my chance.

Everyone's distracted right now. I'm outnumbered and outgunned, but if I can burst through the door and put a bullet in Ralph's brain before anyone reacts, maybe there's a chance the soldiers stand down. Hell, maybe they even celebrate that their asshole new boss is bleeding out on the floorboards.

It's a nice thought, maybe even plausible. But of course, regardless of whether they give a shit about Ralph Romero, these soldiers certainly don't give a shit about me. I'm an assassin, and they'll put a hundred bullets in me before figuring out their next step, whether it's celebration or surrender.

But with this protective fire burning for my woman and what I know is my child forming in her womb, I don't give a shit about my own life. This is my best shot at saving my family. I have to take it. It gives Amelia the best chance to survive. These fuckers will gun me down like a rabid dog, but so long as I kill Ralph, Amelia has a chance to make it through alive. If Carlo's attack starts immediately, these guys might rush downstairs without checking the closet. And even if they do find Amelia, they won't just gun down a young woman in a wedding dress—especially not a Volini mafia princess after Ralph Romero is lying dead with his brains all over the bedsheets.

Not the ending we were hoping for, but good enough.

Amelia lives.

And so does the new life I know she's carrying inside her.

Time has slowed down now, and I smile dreamily at my woman as I make my choice.

“Get behind those suits in the back of the closet,” I whisper to Amelia. “Stay there until Carlo and your men attack the front gates.” I force a smile when I see the panicked realization in her big brown eyes. I slide out the little black transmitter to signal Carlo to attack.

“No!” Amelia hisses, leaping at me in a flurry of wedding skirts and flying veils, snatching the transmitter away from me before I can press the button. She tosses the transmitter on the carpeted floor near a line of bedroom slippers, then wraps herself around me, her tennis-trained legs generating enough strength to slow me down as I strain to get the transmitter.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I snarl under my breath as I try to peel her off me. Time is running out, and I decide to hell with the transmitter. Amelia can push the button herself. I need to get out the door and take my shot while the window of opportunity is still open, while I can still end this without taking Amelia to the afterlife with me.

“Zedd, wait, just wait,” she whispers urgently, clinging to my neck and hanging off me so I have to clumsily drag her towards the closet door, which slows me down again. “Zedd, there’s too many guys out there. They’ll kill you. You know it, Zedd. Just wait, give fate a chance, give destiny a chance, give . . . givemea chance!”

Her last sentence puzzles me and I hesitate. Now time speeds up again as the silence outside is broken by a gagging noise as the Romero soldier with the gun shoved down his throat chokes out an apology to his asshole boss.

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And I hear Ralph click the safety back on his gun.

“Good dog,” snarls Ralph viciously as I hear the soldier clamber to his feet. Nobody’s laughing now. “Now finish your fucking security sweep and then get out.”

My heart sinks as I hear the men mobilize again.

That window of opportunity has closed.

My throat runs dry as I hear the bathroom door open in the distance. Now footsteps approach the closet door. Amelia’s still draped all over me, but I rip her off me now, drag her towards a hiding place behind Ralph’s suits. I can’t let them enter the closet and find her. Best option now is to explode through the door with both guns blazing, make sure I close the door behind me before I go down, do my best to take Ralph out before my lights go out.

And then suddenly I see white light move past me, hear Amelia’s whisper like wind against my cheek.

“Trust me, Zedd. Stand behind me. Follow my lead. Don’t draw your weapon. Trust me.”

Then I realize it’s not white light moving past me but a white dress.

A wedding dress.

Amelia rushes past me.

And flings open the closet door before I can stop her.

17

AMELIA

“What the fuck?” says Ralph Romero as I stand there in my crumpled wedding dress, crooked veil, tennis shoes on my stockinged feet, boobs almost hanging out of my bra because of the weight of the handgun sticking out of my cleavage. “No, seriously, what thefuck!”

Honestly, I have no idea what.

What I’m doing.

What I’m thinking.

What I’m feeling.

All I know is that some instinct in me stopped Zedd from bursting through the door to what would have been his death. It probably would have saved my life, but that’s not good enough.

Not when there’s a chance to end this our way.

“Hi, Ralph,” I say, straightening my veil, somehow finding my voice. Zedd’s behind me now, and I spread my arms out wide, blocking the closet door, protecting him with my body, praying he trusts me enough to follow my lead.

Even though I’m not sure exactly where I’m going.

But my intuition is buzzing, my body whispering to keep going, that my brain will eventually catch up to this plan hatched by the woman in me.

The woman who noticed how Zedd's jealousy had been triggered by even the suggestion that another man might have had me.

There's something about competing for a woman that gets an alpha man's blood boiling, makes him want that woman with desperate urgency, a violent possessiveness that's far beyond simple attraction. I remember reading some psychological studies about it, social scientists speculating on how those fundamental drives of sex and violence played out over two million years of evolution, most of which was spent in a brutal struggle for survival and reproduction, when dating meant killing the other caveman because you wanted to fuck his cavewoman.

Now it all comes back to me in a rush, and my brain starts to catch up with my intuition. Yes, there's something in how sexual competition has evolved in humans that makes a man yearn to fuck a woman he knows is already taken, has just been taken. A primal drive to flood her with his seed so that his swimmers compete against the other guy's sperm deep inside her pussy, taking competition to a different level, a deeper level.

Zedd understands it too—he's muttered something about how the bulbous protrusion of a man's cockhead is designed to scoop out any other sperm that might already be inside a woman's vagina. The in-out thrusting motion sucks out another man's semen so that the alpha can flood his woman's precious womb with his own powerful seed, breed her with his genes, pass on his own line.

It's savage as sin, primal as pain, filthy as fuck.

But it rings true, and I see it in Ralph Romero's eyes, the way his gaze flicks involuntarily to my cleavage, then darts towards Zedd towering above me from

behind like a guardian, a protector, a possessor.

Clearly the sheer insanity of seeing the Volini mafia princess burst out of a closet in a wedding dress has thrown the entire room of gangsters into shocked confusion. But the shock lasts only a second, and now every Romero soldier whips out his weapon and points it at Zedd.

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“Hold on,” says Ralph Romero, raising his right hand, his gaze still riveted on me, now flicking again to my cleavage, then once more in Zedd’s direction, like his primal male mind is connecting the dots, relying on primitive instincts to make connections that have no basis in logic. He takes a breath, strokes his smooth-shaved cheek, then takes a step towards me. “Why the fuck are you here, Amelia? It’s obvious why this guy is here. Zedd’s an assassin who’s been working for the Volini Family for years. But you . . . why are you here, Amelia?” He takes another step closer, and I feel Zedd’s body move closer to me from behind until I’m almost sandwiched between the two men.

“Back the fuck off,” growls Zedd from above and behind me. “Do it now, or else—”

“Or else what?” Ralph growls back at Zedd. “You’ve got six guns pointed at your head, tough guy. So count your blessings you’re still breathing, and shut the fuck up while I’m talking.”

Zedd’s about to explode but I swing my arm back and grab his wrist, squeezing urgently for him to control his rage, hold on to that anger, give this a chance to play out.

Thankfully Zedd stays silent even though I feel the violence building to boiling point in his possessive blood. But Zedd now understands what I’m doing, understands the game I’m playing. He squeezes my hand gently, then grazes the back of my ass with his knuckles to let me know he gets it, that he’ll stay in control until it’s time to lose control.

Ralph narrows his eyes at Zedd, then flashes a grin, licks his lips, shoots a gaze down

at me, clearly taking in the view down my neckline. “Oh, I see what’s happening here. Your father doesn’t know you’re here, does he, Amelia? He sent Zedd to take me out, and you came with him because . . . because . . . what, you . . . you love him? You love . . . him?” He cocks his head now, snorting out a scornful breath. “You’re fucking the help now, princess?” He looks me up and down, that sneering smile now fading, a dangerous glint burning in his dark eyes, the fire of possessiveness igniting so clearly I feel it in my body. “You were supposed to save that pussy for me, princess. That was the deal. That was the arrangement. You let this street-thug assassin take what was promised to me?”

Now my body reacts to the primal energy crackling around me. Zedd’s cock is erect behind me, digging into my ass. Wetness seeps into my panties, along with what I know is Zedd’s semen leaking out of my pussy from when he’d filled me again and again in the woods barely an hour again.

Ralph’s nostrils flare like the primitive part of his brain picks up the scent of competition even if he isn’t consciously aware of it. His throat moves as he swallows, and although he’s too close for me to look down, I sense his bulge filling out until my body knows it’s trapped between two erections, two cocks pointing true north, two alpha dogs straining at the leash to fill their little bitch with hot seed.

“Well, that won’t do, princess,” Ralph growls now, running a finger along my cheek as I reach behind me and place my palm against Zedd’s crotch to stop him from going berserk. “I’m going to take back what’s mine before you die, Princess. And Zedd is going to stay alive long enough to see it happen.”

A bloodcurdling growl escapes from Zedd’s throat, and I clutch his erection desperately to hold him back, keep his beast at bay. Ralph’s fingers are tracing their way down my neck now, his breath hot against my lips. Slowly he slides the gun out from between my boobs, holds it out for one of his men to take.

“Boss, what the fuck are you doing?” whispers the soldier after taking my gun from Ralph’s hand. “Step out of the way and let us kill them both. The bitch is messing with you. She’s crazy, boss, showing up here in a wedding dress. Hell, they’re both crazy. Just let us—”

“Shut up,” snarls Ralph as he strokes my neck. “Take Zedd’s weapons. He’s a dead man in about ten minutes, after he sees me claim his princess’s pussy, stretch it nice and good, fill her with a real cock.”

He grabs me by the hair and yanks me away from Zedd now as the Romero thugs swarm in and disarm Zedd, restraining him just in time so he doesn’t do anything to get himself killed.

“You touch her and you’re dead,” comes the seething threat from Zedd as he stands there against the bedroom wall, face dark with rage, eyes almost bugging out of his head with bloodlust, cock still bulging inside his pants like this time the sex and violence are both rising up together, leading to an explosion that I hope to hell I can channel into the right situation. “She’s mine. She’s fuckin’ mine, you hear?”

Ralph smiles tightly, fisting my hair as he drags me towards that king-sized bed. He throws me roughly down on the mattress, the momentum making my wedding dress ride up my thighs as my legs go up just enough to give everyone a view of my ass in those white panties that are soaked at the crotch from my fresh wetness mixed with Zedd’s thick semen.

Ralph’s throat tightens as he gulps. “Oh, fuck, Princess. You’re already wet for me, aren’t you? That pussy knows what’s coming. It’s hungry for my cock. Thirsty for my seed. Come on, lift up that dress, Princess. Show me the panties you chose for your wedding night.” He shoots a glance at Zedd. “Chose forme.”

Now Zedd lunges at Ralph, but two mafia goons grab his arms and a third guy hits

him in the face with a closed fist. Blood spurts from Zedd's nose as he staggers back. I scream, almost leap off the bed and attack Ralph myself before somehow controlling my panic.

Ralph turns to me, cocks his head, narrows those eyes. Jealousy burns in them, like my involuntary scream showed Ralph that I really do love Zedd. For a moment I panic again, wondering if Ralph will wise up to this game and just end it, tell his goons to shoot Zedd twice in the head, then blow me away in my wedding dress.

Despair almost drowns me when I see the thugs wrestle Zedd to the floor, kick him repeatedly in the ribs until he groans and stops fighting. But then Zedd raises his bloody face and looks at me, the hint of a smile on his lips, the glint of understanding in his eyes.

And immediately I go calm. We're still in the game.

And now it's time to bring it to its finale.

See if I can pull off this one last twist.

Because if I can't, Ralph is going to fuck me while Zedd is surrounded by six armed thugs.

And if that happens, Zedd is a dead man.

He'll fight until they kill him.

And it'll be over for me too.

Maybe my body will stay alive a bit longer, but my soul will be dead the second Zedd leaves this earth.

Which means this has to work.

So I take a deep breath, steady myself for the endgame.

I get to my knees on the big bed.

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Start to raise my wedding dress.

Then I stop, blink self-consciously, glance over at the six gaping mafia thugs, then back at Ralph.

“Not with them watching,” I say softly, flashing a shy trembling smile at Ralph, praying I can pull this off. Ralph isn’t an idiot. He can’t think I love him or actually want to be with him. But he’s hard and heavy in his pants, that need to possess burning in his caveman core. And there’s no denying that I’m wet and aroused, my cheeks flush and rosy, my pussy plump and primed in my panties. My body is reacting to the crackling sexual energy in the room, the wild possessiveness of two alpha beasts with hard cocks yearning to fill me. Of course, my heart only wants Zedd, but the situation has also awoken the primitive female in me just like it’s turned these two men into panting beasts. “I’m still a princess, Ralph. And you’re Don Romero. You want your men to watch you fuck me?”

Ralph’s body tightens. He’s in a tailored black Italian funeral suit, crisp white silk shirt, no tie, no jacket. His crotch is obscenely filled out, a massive peak of cock straining at the fabric. His throat moves as he swallows, then he grunts and glances towards his men who are still standing watch over my Zedd.

“Tie him to that chair over by the wall,” Ralph says, gesturing towards Zedd, then nodding towards the door. “Then get out. All of you. I don’t need you guys jerking off to the sight of my princess’s pussy.”

The soldiers hesitate, then two of them grab Zedd by the arms, drag him to his feet. Another thug leaves the room for a moment, comes back with a spool of synthetic

rope.

Soon Zedd is tied to the heavy wooden chair set against the dark red bedroom wall. The blood from his broken nose is drying and forming a dark crust, making him look like some kind of monster.

But his eyes still burn with the man in him.

My man.

“Boss, listen, we can’t leave you alone in here with them,” says one of Ralph’s men. “At least let two of us stay in the room while you do whatever you need to do.”

Ralph chuckles scornfully. “What, you want to see my dick? Is that what you want, you fucking pervert? Get the hell out of here before I shove my gun back down your throat and pull the fucking trigger this time.”

The man’s face darkens. He rubs his eyes, then sighs. He walks over to Zedd in the chair, checks the knots to make sure they’re tight, then leaves the room along with the rest of Romero’s thugs. The door closes behind them, and now Ralph turns back to me.

“All right, Princess,” he whispers, unbuckling his leather belt, sliding it out from the loops, then unbuttoning and unzipping. His tailored black pants drop to the floor, and he steps out of them while pulling his white shirt off over his head and tossing it away.

Now he’s wearing black silk boxer-briefs, bulging monstrously at the crotch. He’s nowhere near as muscular as Zedd, but Ralph is still lean and fit, with tight pectorals and a six-pack of hard abdomen muscles. He rubs his bulge vigorously through his underwear, then gestures with his head towards me.

“I asked you to lift up your wedding dress and show me the panties you chose for our wedding night,” he snarls, still rubbing his bulge, now pushing his briefs down until his cock springs out, long and hard, not as thick as Zedd’s but still big and heavy, with a dark red bulb gleaming with pre-cum. “Don’t make me ask again, Princess.”

From the corner of my eye I see Zedd’s neck thicken as he strains at his bonds. Fresh blood oozes out of his broken nose from the effort, but he can’t summon the strength to rip through knots of synthetic rope.

Not yet, at least.

Now my mind spins through all those stories of people summoning superhuman strength when something really important is on the line.

When something precious is in danger.

When something they love is at risk.

Like a mother lifting up a car to save her child, soldiers taking multiple bullets and still fighting for their brothers. There’s no doubt these things actually happened, even though no scientist can explain it.

But right now I understand it.

I understand that intense emotion based in love can transcend physical reality, which means it can transcend the ordinary laws of physics, allow a hundred-pound mother to lift a thousand-pound car to save her toddler, allow a soldier to take three bullets to the heart but keep charging.

Allow my man to break free to save his woman.

By combining the power of sex and violence, the need to possess and the need to destroy, the need to claim and the need to conquer.

The need to protect what's his.

To take what's his.

So now I lift my wedding dress up over my hips, slowly push down my virgin-white panties, feeling the entire universe shift as Ralph's cock flexes and Zedd's body strains and the scent of my sex fills the room.

"Oh, fuck," Ralph groans, fisting his cock and staggering towards the bed. "I've never been so hard in my life, never wanted to fuck a woman as bad as this. Your photographs don't do you justice, Princess. There's something about you in the flesh that gets me dangerously aroused, like I need to possess you, own you, fill you, fuck you."

"No!" roars Zedd, struggling wildly against his bonds, the heavy chair hammering against the wall as he thrashes and flails, his broken nose gushing blood down his lips and chin. "Don't you fucking touch her, you piece of shit. No. No.No!"

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Ralph chuckles, then drags my panties all the way off me, snatches them up, walks over towards Zedd. “Open up,” Ralph says, crumpling my panties and trying to shove them into Zedd’s mouth. But Zedd lunges his head forward, snapping his jaws like an angry sea-monster. Ralph backs away, then punches Zedd on the chin, stunning him long enough to shove my panties into his gasping bloody mouth, stuffing them deep, then stepping back and grinning. “That’s better. Now shut the fuck up and enjoy the last few minutes of your life. Breathe deep, Zedd. That’s the last whiff you’re going to get of that pussy. Because it’s mine now.”

He slaps Zedd on the cheek, then strides towards the bed again, his cock bouncing as he clambers onto the mattress, gets on his knees and grabs my ankles, yanks hard so I’m suddenly flat on my back, legs spread wide, pussy spread even wider.

Now the panic rises up my throat, cutting off my airways so I can’t even breathe. Everything is spinning downwards as dread rises in my heart, like I’ve messed this whole thing up, like I’m a dumb stupid idiot, some head-in-the-clouds moron who thinks the whole world is a fairy-tale, that love can defeat logic, that sex can overrule science, that my pussy has some magical power, like my man can somehow break through his bonds like a fucking superhero and save me before . . . before . . .

And suddenly I’m sobbing uncontrollably as the reality sinks in that it’s over, that I’m about to be fucked and then killed, that Zedd is already as good as dead, that I killed him with my stupidity, I killed us both by being an idiot, that I should have let him come here alone, should have let him bust out of that closet earlier when he had the chance, should have pressed that transmitter button . . .

Now I’m fighting, kicking out and trying to get away from under Ralph, clawing at

his face and swinging my fists wildly as Zedd's muffled roars of anguish and anger torment me.

My vision goes in and out as I struggle, but Ralph is too strong, and now I feel his hand go around my throat, feel his cockhead press against my slit, feel the world coming to an end as darkness sets in, darkness takes over, darkness enters me, starts to claim me, starts to conquer me.

But as my vision flickers in and out from Ralph's hand choking my throat, I see movement somewhere in the shadowy fringes of my fading vision. I'm not sure what's happening, but my mind is spinning up vivid images of Zedd, of him breathing heavy and hard, inhaling the potent musk of my panties, the magic potion of my pussy giving him the superpowers he needs to stop this, my choking gasps for help pulling Zedd over the edge past insanity to invincibility, yanking us both from the coldness of death into the heat of our forever.

And before I pass out, for one wild moment I see Zedd's bloody face looming behind Ralph, see his arm sliding around Ralph's neck, feel the weight of Ralph's body getting yanked off my flesh, sense his vile cockhead wrenched back from my entrance just before it breaches my borders, violates my valley, slides into my sex.

18

ZEDD

The scent of her sex overwhelms me like a drug as I inhale the musk of her panties, swallow her secret syrup like it's a magic potion. My vision is blood-red from the uncontrollable rage ripping through my flesh from the sight of Ralph Romero's cock pressing against my Amelia's pussy, his body holding hers down, his hand choking the life out of her big brown eyes which are fading to darkness.

And it's the darkness that powers me with a violence beyond reason, summoning strength that I know comes from outside my body, like the intensity of my protective rage is pushing my muscles beyond the laws of physics, ripping through rope like it's spaghetti, breaking through the hardwood chair-frame like it's cardboard, launching my body through the air like I have wings, somehow getting to Ralph Romero just before his throbbing cock enters territory that is mine.

"Mine!" I snarl in his ear as my arm closes around his neck and I drag him off Amelia. He tries to fight, kicking and punching as I crush his throat in the crook of my elbow, lifting him clean off the ground.

His naked body thrashes as I tighten the chokehold.

Then I place my other palm across Ralph's chin and mouth and wrench his head in the opposite direction.

His neck breaks with a meaty crack.

"Mine," I whisper again against Ralph's lifeless head before dropping his naked body to the floorboards like a limp ragdoll, his rapidly deflating cock releasing his life-force into the ether, signaling my dominance, securing my place as the alpha, claiming once and for all the only prize any hero ever quested for, ever yearned for, ever killed for, ever died for.

"Mine," I snarl for the third time, staggering over towards the bed, my mind a swirling mass of raw desire.

Amelia stares up at me from the bed. She's on her back, eyes big and wide, wedding dress hiked up over her hips, thighs spread wide, pussy winking up at me, all plump and primed, glistening and gleaming.

The need rages in me like a rampaging beast, and now I'm on her, somehow ripping my pants off and yanking out my engorged cock, fisting it just in time to guide it between Amelia's folds as my hips push deep into her.

She gasps into my mouth as I devour her lips with a savage kiss, my hips already pumping furiously back and forth like a man possessed, like a demon gone berserk, rutting her like a rabid dog as she pulls my hair, claws my back, wraps her stockinged legs around me, digging the heels of her tennis shoes into my lower back as I pound her into the mattress, possess her with the hunger of a starving bear.

"Oh, Zedd," she whimpers urgently as her body starts to convulse, her pussy already squirting its sweet nectar around my pulsing cock as I thrust in and out until I'm coming like a hot geyser, our climaxes hitting together like two snakes merging into one, my heat filling her until she overflows all over her wedding bed, over Ralph's death bed, over the battlefield of our love, the landscape of our dream. "Oh, Zedd, I'm yours, I'm yours, I'm . . . I'm yours."

"Mine," comes the satisfied sigh from my throat as I spurt the last of my seed and collapse into my sweet Amelia, kissing her neck as I cover her with my body. "Mine."

She giggles wetly into my hair, then sighs out a long, slow whimper. Our hearts are beating so loud I swear I can hear them like drums pounding.

Then I realize it isn't our hearts in our chests but fists at the door.

"Boss, you all right?" comes the voice of Romero's guy. "Answer or we're coming in, boss."

Now I leap off Amelia, my cock making a wet sucking noise as I pull out of her suckling pussy. I stumble into my pants, look around wildly for Ralph's gun,

snatching up his scattered clothes until I find it near his trousers. I check the magazine, flick off the safety, square my shoulders and aim at the door.

But Amelia steps in front of me. She's holding that black transmitter box.

She hasn't pushed the button yet.

"Hold your fire!" she shouts with the confidence of a mafia princess backed up by an assassin. "Ralph is dead. I repeat, your asshole boss is fucking dead. Now, open the door slowly and hear me out. Do it now. Don't think, just open the door and fucking listen, all right?"

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There's silence from outside, then one of the guys yells, "OK."

I grab Amelia and pull her away from the line of fire, planting myself squarely in front of her, my gun drawn and ready.

The door opens slowly.

All the mafiosos are standing off to either side, all of them with guns drawn and ready, their faces peaked with confusion, eyes widening with disbelief when they see Ralph's naked body twisted grotesquely in death, head turned the wrong way, eyes half-open, tongue hanging out, cock limp in defeat.

Amelia leans out from behind me and shows the thugs the transmitter. "I press this button and a hundred Volini soldiers launch a full-scale assault on the Romero Estate in about five minutes. You might win the battle eventually, but not without losing a lot of guys. Do you really want dozens of your buddies gunned down when you don't even know who you're fighting for?" She pauses as the Romero thugs glance at each other, then look back at Amelia. "Look," she says, her voice softening slightly. "The Romero bloodline has been wiped out. You guys can't take over the territory yourselves. You try that and the Consortium will step in, seize everything, divide up the Romero territory between the East and Southeast Families. It'll be a total mess. There'll be infighting and a bunch of soldiers killed on all sides. Nobody wants that. And there's a way to prevent that, for everything to be business as usual for you guys, carry on like nothing happened, keeping the Romero operations running just like they are now, all of you still making money, living your gangster lives."

One of the Romero guys grunts out a nervous chuckle. The thugs glance at each other

again. Then one of them lowers his gun, furrows his brow at Amelia. “We’re listening, Princess. What are you proposing?”

Amelia smiles, steps out from behind me in her wedding dress. “Ralph Romero insulted the Volini Family. By Consortium law, we’re entitled to respond with violence, to avenge the insult, show that the Volini Family will not stand to be disrespected.” She shoots a careless glance at the dead Ralph Romero, then shrugs at the thugs. “And since we’ve defeated the head of the Romero Family, by Consortium Law we can legally take over all Romero territory and operations. So, technically, you now work for the Volini Family. Business as usual. You all keep your current operations, run your little fiefdoms. Once we get things organized, I’m sure we can arrange for a bonus, address any grievances you boys might have had with the previous ownership.” She shrugs again, puts her finger on that button. “Or you can try to avenge your dead boss and we can all go to war.” Now Amelia drops the smile, and in her eyes I see the defiant mafia princess who I sense is about to become a queen. “But please hurry up and choose. I have to pee.”

Another of the goons chuckles now, and then all of them lower their weapons. They’re still hiding off to either side of the door, glancing at me cautiously because my gun is still ready and armed, the glint of murder still burning strong in my eyes.

“Honey, I think we’re good,” Amelia whispers up at me when it’s clear Romero’s men have seen the light and decided they don’t want to die trying to avenge Ralph Romero. They’re good with becoming Volini soldiers. Same shit, different day. “You can put the gun down now, Sweetie.”

“Mine,” comes the low rumble from my throat, like my vocal cords are stuck on repeat, my brain branded with this manic mantra of possession, of ownership, of dominance.

And of love.

A dark kind of love.

A wild kind of love.

Our kind of love.

“What about Ralph's body?” asks one of the men.

I grunt, think, then grin. “We'll take him back to Florida. The Volini gators love Italian sausage.”

The Romero men stare at Amelia with gaping mouths. She keeps a straight face and nods like that's totally how we roll in Florida. “We'll tell the Consortium the body was donated to a good cause.” Amelia flashes a toothy grin, the kind of vaguely unhinged sweetness you might expect from a demon-possessed little girl in a horror movie.

Romero's men back away slowly, not daring to turn their backs to us before they're at a safe distance.

“Told you they were fucking crazy,” whispers one of the goons as they trudge down the hallway, exiting the surreal stage where a curvy little princess in a blood-stained wedding dress is kissing an overgrown assassin who's clutching a pair of white panties in his big fist like a perverted creature of myth and fantasy.

And maybe we are fucking crazy, I think as I take my sweet Amelia into my arms, kick the door closed, then carry her to the king-sized bed, making sure to step on Ralph Romero's dick on the way, squishing it into the floorboards like discarded sausage on the meat-factory floor.

“Um, maybe I should call my father first,” Amelia whispers into my mouth as I

almost eat her entire face with my hungry kiss. “OK, I guess we can take care of this other thing first. Oh, Zedd. Oh, baby. Oh. Oh,Oh!”

“Mine,” I grin as I feel the dark curtains of our fantasy draw shut around us, my lines glowing red on the ephemeral cue-cards.

Just one word on my script though, and I’ve got it memorized, got it branded on my brain, carved in my soul, hammered into my heart.

Just one fucking word.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

?

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER.

FORMER ROMERO ESTATE.

AMELIA

“I do,” says Zedd through a grin the size of my overwhelmed heart. “I do take you to be my wedded bride, to be my wife and companion, to be my always and forever, to bemine!” He shoots a deadly glance at the priest. “I’m going to kiss her now. You got a problem with that? Speak now or forever hold your forked tongue.”

The priest almost chokes on his tongue, hurriedly shaking his head and forcing a smile as Zedd flips up my veil and kisses me full on the lips. The audience erupts with cheers and claps, whoops and hollers. A few guns are fired into the air from the ranks of the newly combined forces of the Volini and Romero armies.

Armies that now enforce a massive new mafia empire that covers Florida and Georgia, reigning supreme in major cities from Atlanta to Miami. It took a couple of months to smooth things over with the big Families running the Consortium, but eventually the ruling came down that we were indeed within our rights to hit Ralph Romero in response to his blatant disrespect, and since our daring assassination started and ended a war at one fell swoop, the Volini Family was entitled to all Romero territory.

Including this mansion, which is now Zedd and my new home.

My younger brother will grow up to take over Florida.

But Zedd and I own Atlanta and Georgia.

After all, we conquered it ourselves.

“Congratulations, baby,” comes Father’s booming voice as he and Carlo come rolling up with champagne glasses and big grins on their faces. They both hug me tight like the family we are, and then Father turns to Zedd. “You take good care of my baby, Zedd. She’s yours now.”

Zedd’s face darkens, and I squeeze his arm to stop him from thundering that I was already his, was his from the moment he saw me, from the moment he touched me, the moment he kissed me, the moment he fucked me, the moment he killed for me.

But Zedd holds his cool and smiles warmly at his new father-in-law, then glances at Carlo Giani, who’s waiting to shake Zedd’s hand. “You do that genetics check on me yet, Carlo? How much Italian blood runs in my mongrel veins?”

Carlo’s face turns red like a beet. He chuckles, then pats Zedd on the back, gestures with his head towards the Romero mansion that’s now the Amelia-and-Zedd homestead. “Your princess is now a queen, which makes you a king. And in our world, the kings and queens get to make the rules, get to rig the game. Well done, Zedd. Saluti, congratulations, and God Bless.”

Zedd nods in recognition that the crusty old Carlo has bent the knee in his own way, and I’m flooded with warm love for my fucked-up, violent, twisted family.

And as we mingle with the guests as a newlywed couple, my wedding dress re-fitted to handle the four-month baby-bump, I glance down at my feet and smile at the tennis shoes that I insisted on wearing, giggle when I see the satiny edge of those virgin-white panties sticking out of Zedd’s jacket pocket, still sticky with the scent of my pussy, the musk of his magic potion, that seductive smell which makes my alpha dog sit up and pant, makes his cock point true north like a compass.

Point to its property.

To its possession.

To its always.

To its forever.

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