



Relentless Refuge

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Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult

Description: I married the most ruthless alpha don, and I don't regret a second of this sham marriage.

After all, I did it to save my father's legacy.

Marco's arms protect me against danger that threatens to destroy me every day.

My father's death may have led me to his arms.

But it's my heart that's willing to stay wrapped in them.

My Italian mob husband is a monster to the world.

But his soft side is reserved only for me.

I am his arranged wife, but the secret I'm carrying is all too real.

And he cannot get a whiff of it.

I'm carrying an heir to both our thrones.

The pregnancy is undeniably true... but is the marriage still a big fat lie?

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MARCO

Atmosphere is everything, and darkness is the shroud within which I work best. My office is lit by only one small lamp on my desk. The crystal chandelier dangling from the center of the domed ceiling is off. Nelson sits trembling in the leather wingback armchair between my uncle and brother, who stand with a hand on each of his shoulders. I pace in front of him, furious with his “mistake”.

“Men like you don’t last long in this Family, Nelson.” I can’t even look at him. The loss we’ll suffer because of his stupidity may very well break us. Our enemies now stand in our way, and short of all-out war, which will end too many lives, they have bested us.

“Marco, please,” he snivels, “you know I didn’t do this on purpose. I’ve been loyal to you for five years, ever since you took over for your father. Can we just forget this happened?”

Nelson’s hands shake as he grips the wooden arms of the chair, his knuckles white. He knows what I have to do. This type of problem has to be dealt with swiftly in a way that shows everyone why things like this cannot happen. Loyalty to the Family is the number-one rule every made man promises when he takes the pledge. He fucked up too badly this time.

“Forget this happened!” I growl, bending over him. My hands grip his wrists, pinning them to the arms of the chair, which I also grab. My face is inches from his, and I

know he can see the rage scrawled across it. Beads of sweat pepper his forehead, a light layer of perspiration glistening in the dim light across his nose and cheeks. “Do you understand what your slip-up cost us?”

“Marco, I?—”

“You gave our enemy direct access to our supplier, and now he’s dead. We have no supplier, no way to get our customers their weapons. No, Nelson, I can’t just ‘forget this happened’. You have to pay for your sins now.” I push the chair hard, scooting it backward a foot or so. My uncle and brother move with it, forcing Nelson back into his seat as he tries to stand up.

“Marco, please. It was a mistake. I didn’t know they were Bratva. I swear. I thought they were customers. They set me up. I was trying to make a deal.” His pleading and swearing only enrage me more. He squirms like a coward unable to contain his bladder.

Anyone who can justify such a wretched failure as this one doesn’t deserve the ability to speak at all. My men aren’t weak or cowardly. They take responsibility and own up to their failures, and Nelson is proving to me with every breath he takes that he’s not cut out for this business.

“I make the deals around here.” I reach into my pocket and pull out my pocket knife, flipping the blade open with my thumb.

“Marco, please!” Nelson’s pleading rises three notches in volume and several more in pitch. “Please... I swear... I’ll be more careful.” He squirms, trying to get up again, and my brother shoves him back in his seat. He and my uncle pin Nelson down as I move back toward him with my knife in hand.

“I know you won’t make this mistake again because you won’t be making any deals

at all now.”

“No!” he screams, kicking and lashing out. My family holds him in place as I put my knee on his crotch and rest my full weight on it.

I tip his jaw and pry his mouth open, then swiftly insert my knife, coming up with a large chunk of tongue covered in blood. Nelson’s screams are probably heard across town, but they’re quickly muffled by gurgling noises as the blood fills his mouth. I back away, dropping the bloody tongue on the hardwood floor and using my trouser leg to wipe the sticky red fluid from my knife before closing it and putting it back in my pocket.

“Warren!” I shout, and my right-hand man instantly appears in the office doorway. “Take Nelson to see the doc. He’s going to need that cauterized or he’ll bleed out.” I gesture at the man responsible for what I fear may be my financial demise and turn to reach for my glass of brandy sitting on the corner of my mahogany desk.

“Sir, do I take the tongue?” Warren asks, staring at the bloody lump on my carpet, and I scowl at him, then glance at Nelson who is still moaning and now sobbing.

“Loose lips sink ships, Warren. Nelson has enough tongue to survive and not enough to speak. I think that’s a good lesson to learn, don’t you?” I eye him as I sip my brandy. The copperystench of Nelson’s blood on my fingers, combined with the stickiness, makes me satisfied after having been livid for so long this evening. Warren looks afraid, and for good reason. Men who defy me or fail this Family in any way are all treated the same, and this isn’t his first rodeo.

“Understood,” Warren says, then he grabs Nelson by the back of the neck and forces him to stand. They’ll have a five-minute drive to the doctor who is already on standby waiting for their arrival thanks to my brother’s quick thinking. I don’t want Nelson dead. I’m just making an example out of him.

Now if the Family goes under, there will be hell to pay.

After Warren and Nelson are out of the room, I walk across the room to the suede couch and sit down. My glass sticks to my hand, so I hold it rather than setting it on the table in front of me. The day went from bad to worse, and now I have a crisis to solve. Thankfully, Victor and my uncle are here to help.

“Cleaner is on the way,” Victor says, joining me in my repose. He sits across from me in the matching wingback chair situated on the other side of the coffee table as he slides his phone back into his pocket.

Uncle Darnel walks to the liquor cabinet, avoiding the droplets of blood splatter on the floor. His heavy footfall reminds me of my father, God rest his soul. I watch as he pours a drink for himself and one for Victor and then returns to sit at the other end of the sofa, setting Vic’s drink in front of him. Both of them drink deeply and then Darnel leans back in his chair.

“Seems you’ve got yourself quite the situation to manage.” His wiry beard hides the dribble of whiskey that escapes the corner of his mouth as he drinks. Mine would be just as wiry and hard to manage if I didn’t keep it well groomed at all times. Maybe it’s a result of his old age that he cares so little about it now.

“I say we move on it while it’s hot.” Victor takes a swig of his drink and sets the glass on the table. My younger brother, he’s not quite my six-foot-three height, but his broad shoulders stretch wider than mine. We’ve been mistaken for twins at times, though now he remains clean-shaven while allowing his hair to grow out. That pony tail separates us in looks, but my authority over the Family separates us in rank. I’m the leader, and he’s proving to me exactly why father left me in charge when he passed.

“You’d run into the lion enclosure at the zoo if you dropped your phone in there too.”

I roll my eyes at him. Moving on this situation will have catastrophic effects. The Bratva cut off our supplier the instant they knew who he was. His business is all but a total loss, if there is even someone to keep running it for him. Those types of relationships take years to establish. Years we don't have.

"I'm just saying, the business is up for grabs. We work with his people well. We have for years now. They won't trust Bratva." Victor's lips wrap around a cigarette he places between them, and he extracts a lighter from his breast pocket.

"They don't need to trust them. They only need to fear them." After finishing my drink, I pry the sticky glass from my hand and set it on the table. My fingerprints are sealed in blood on the glass, incriminating me. "And we will not be storming the gates."

Victor scoffs. "You're afraid, then?"

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“I fear nothing.” I glare at him sternly and calm myself. “Wisdom is knowing your enemy and when you’ve been bested, and in this scenario, it’s better to step back and make a new plan moving forward.” Victor has so much to learn. His impulsive nature will get him killed if he’s not careful.

“Well,” Darnel chimes in, “there is the possibility of an alliance.” He raises his cup and tips it, appearing thoughtful. “Albert runs a tight ship. Surely, he has connections. If you’re willing to cough up a percentage, he may allow you to tap some of his resources, perhaps help his business grow.”

The D’Angelo family from Newark is a formidable force, and yet they remain happily within their territory. My father had a history with them, and my grandfather before them, but I’ve not worked the connection since taking the Family’s reins. Our mutual enemy assures me that they would be open to at the very least a gentlemen’s meeting. After all, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

“Tell me more.” I glance at the liquor cabinet, wishing it were closer but not feeling like rising to refill my glass. Then I look back at Darnel who is stroking his beard.

“Think about it, Marco. Albert runs the largest gun smuggling business west of the Hudson. In fact, it’s likely that our guy had connections with his suppliers too. We don’t know their names, but we know a man who knows their names. We’re at peace with the Family, and we have no history of hostility with them. It’s a smart move. Your father would have done it.”

An alliance with the Italians on the other side of the river seems like a long shot, but it’s worth thinking about. If nothing else, we’ll have exhausted our resources and

options. But this is a last-ditch effort to keep the business afloat and save the customers we already have in line for military-grade weapons.

“We’ll do it. Set up the meeting.” I rise, ignoring the scowl on Victor’s face, and walk to the liquor cabinet. This night calls for another drink, and then I’ll wash the blood from my hands and turn in. I hope Darnel knows what he’s talking about.

2

ISABELLA

The door to my father’s office is cracked. Smoke sneaks out, tickling my nose. The man who sits across from his desk is handsome—strikingly so. His thick, dark hair hangs across his forehead, threatening to cover his dark eyes, and his well-groomed beard is flecked with a few gray hairs. But he’s younger than Father, probably by a decade or more. I’m eavesdropping, but only because the man is so magnetic.

“What you’re suggesting is controversial, Mr. Romano. I wonder what your father would say about it.” Father rolls his cigar along the rim of the ashtray and reclines in his leather chair. Lucco, my half-wit brother, tries to act cool by mimicking Father’s actions, and the cherry from his stogie rolls away into the ash. He scowls and fumbles with it, only to send ash plumes into the air.

The tall, dark, and handsome man leans forward in his seat to dispense of his ash just as the maid approaches up the hallway. I watch him roll his cigar around and listen to his mellow baritone as he sits back in the seat.

“New things lead to new possibilities and new friendships, Alberto. You know that. And what better way to expand both of our empires than a mutually assured success story, rooted in this alliance? You have nothing to lose.”

I could squeal with delight at the rumbling of his voice. It's melodic and warm, sinking into my pores and awakening my feminine desires. I've listened in on Father's meetings before, but I've never seen this man before. Besides the fact that most of his acquaintances are older and firmly attached to someone. But this man, Mr. Romano, has no wedding ring. And though he's older than me by several years, the way it appears, he is pleasing on the eye and makes my heart flutter each time he speaks.

"Ms. D'Angelo, I must take your father his tea." Elsa, the maid and my nanny when I was just a girl, stands politely behind me. She's seen me eavesdrop on Father's meetings plenty of times and knows not to say a word. The last time she ratted on me for listening to his meeting, I stole my mother's diamond tennis bracelet and placed it in Elsa's room, framing her for the job.

When I just "happened" to come across it, I accused her of thievery and threatened to tell my father, which of course would have been the end of Elsa, and she quickly learned not to double-cross me.

"I'll take it in," I blurt out, reaching for the tray with the porcelain teapot and three white teacups. She's arranged a smattering of sweetener packets, a creamer, and three small spoons.

"Oh, I can't let you do that, Ms. D'Angelo. Your father will?—"

"Give me the tray, Elsa," I snap at her and grip the edge of the tray with a glare aimed at her. If looks could kill, she would be dead, and she gets the point.

"Yes, mum," she mutters, backing away.

Satisfied, I turn with the tray in hand and take a deep, cleansing breath. I'm more interested in the handsome gentleman with whom my father speaks than the actual

topic of the meeting. I'm literally starved for any romantic attention. Father has me "set aside" for something special, he calls it, but I know that means he's waiting until an arrangement comes up to marry me off in a business transaction. I've known that was my fate since I was just a preteen. Though I've always longed to be in the action with him, leading the Family.

When Elsa is down the hallway, I nudge the door with my knee and push it open. Their conversation—which I've missed half of now—drops as I walk in carrying the tray. Father pays me no attention, but Lucco glares at me like a rabid dog about to attack. Mr. Romano, whose first name I have yet to learn, watches me carefully, his eyes tracing every movement I make as I walk in and set the tea tray on the desk between the men.

It's silent and awkward, and I was hoping for some sort of a different greeting from at least one of them, but I pour the tea and offer them each their cup. Lucco snatches his out of my hand and sits back in his seat hastily. Father nods at the sugar packets and snaps his fingers at me, the way he would Elsa, so I oblige him and tear two packets open and pour them into his cup.

"Mr. Romano?" I say, turning my attention to the handsome stranger.

"I'll have a splash of cream, thank you." He holds his cup up, but his eyes stay fixed on my face as he continues speaking to my father. "Mr. D'Angelo, you didn't tell me your daughter was so stunning."

Father waves his hand in the air and furrows his eyebrows. "She's spoken for. Now, Isabella, if you would excuse us, we have some business to discuss."

"I believe business would be sweeter with such a beautiful and charming young woman to ensure my teacup remains full. Don't you?"

Mr. Romano is charming as well as handsome, and I find myself feeling giddy over the attention he pays me. I don't even look at Lucco's face. It would only ruin my good mood. But I do look to my father because I respect him and believe he knows best, even when I don't like what he decides for me. He merely waves his hand at me again, but the look on his face is consent enough for me to stay.

“So, for ten percent of the profit of every transaction, you will have access to my suppliers and their businesses? That sounds too generous, Marco. Deceptively so.” Father takes a drag from his cigar and blows smoke rings that swirl and rise toward the ceiling, and my new-found obsession sips his tea.

“This alliance will be mutually beneficial.” Marco's gaze wanders from my face to my father's. “In the beginning, I will work at a loss, but as we build the trade, everyone will benefit. You will see, in time, we will exceed your wildest dreams.” He, too, sucks on his cigar, then turns back to me. “And what does the lovely Isabella think of our arrangement? You've heard it from your place outside the door, have you not?”

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My body stiffens at his calm revelation of my eavesdropping, but Father doesn't seem surprised by it at all. If anything, he looks annoyed that Marco brought it up. Lucco, however, who has been very quiet, chimes in with anger laced in his tone.

"She's a woman. Their ideas are about how to decorate homes and plan weddings." He smirks and laughs beneath his breath, and I scowl at him, happy that our new acquaintance pays no attention to him.

"Thank you for asking, Mr. Romano."

"Marco, please."

"Marco," I say, nodding. "I believe you're a fool for giving away ten percent when you could easily have won my father for five." I smooth the front of my gray slacks and notice Father raises a single eyebrow. "But now that you've committed to the ten, you're stuck. As for the efficacy of this arrangement, time will tell, but all true alliances are built on mutual respect and trust. Are you trustworthy, Marco?"

"I've built my business on the foundation that my Family does and will always come first. That being said, I will never jeopardize the business or my blood. If the arrangement fails, it will not be because you cannot trust me. My only goal is to see both of our families succeed." His eyes narrow on me. "You take an interest in your father's business?"

I walk around the desk to stand next to Father and rest my hand on his shoulder. He pats it knowingly. My heart and soul belong to him in every way. He isn't just my father, he is my leader and my protector. Wild horses could not pull me away from

my loyalty to him.

“It is our family business, not my father’s. If the world were a different place, I’m certain I would be leading right alongside my brother and father.” I know how Father feels about it, and my boldness and speaking out of turn may well earn me a lecture later on, but Mr. Romano asked, so I answered.

“Interesting. And if you were to lead this Family, what would you do?” The way he wraps his lips around the cigar pinched between his thumb and fingers is seductive.

“Well, firstly, I would deny this arrangement and offer a new one.” I set my jaw and wait for him to take the bait. This isn’t a business meeting. He’s testing me—testing our Family.

“A new arrangement?” His drags on his cigar are aimed at intimidating me. He hasn’t even touched his tea.

Why would this man invite me to stay in a meeting I don’t belong in, only to question me on hypothetical business arrangements? He’s interesting and commanding, and even my father seems mesmerized by how he controls the conversation.

“I would proffer you this. We take twenty percent of all transactions off the top. You receive no access to our suppliers, least of all our arms dealer, and we do the trading for you. Outside of that, you pay a fee of ten thousand dollars on each sale on top of the ten percent, and we decide what types of munitions you can trade.”

He sets the cigar down and claps his hands loudly, grinning like a madman as he stands. “Bravo, Ms. D’Angelo. Alberto, you have a powerhouse here.” He reaches out a hand to shake my father’s, and Father stands to take it.

A bit surprised by the reaction, I take a step back as they shake hands and Father

speaks first. “I will think this over. You’ve given me a great proposition, and I agree with your sentiment. My daughter is brilliant, Marco. You may just have to change the stakes on this alliance of yours.”

Marco retracts his hand, picks up the tea cup, and downs the entire contents at once. As he sets it down, he looks directly at me and says, “I’ll give you time to think, Alberto. Ms. Isabella, it was good meeting you. I do hope we will meet again.” He runs a hand through his hair and walks out the door without another word, and I’m speechless.

“Hmm,” Father growls as he sits back in his chair, and before the dust can settle, I turn to look at him.

“It’s a good deal, Father. He’s right. In just twelve months’ time, we could see the Family’s influence grow. You should do it.” I cross my arms over my chest. Father never lets me make decisions, but he does listen to my advice at times.

“You’re a fool, Isabella. This man wants to move in on our territory and nothing more.” Lucco picks up his cold cigar and the lighter and puts the stogie in his mouth.

“Both of you stop.” Father glowers at me and nods. “Thank you for tea, Isabella. Darling, would you leave us to discuss this?” He pats my hand, and I nod at him.

“Of course, Father.” I turn to walk away, but when I reach the door, I pause. “I like him. I think he will make a good partner,” I say over my shoulder and then open the door and walk into the hallway. The lingering scent of Marco’s cologne and the smoke from his cigar still hangs in the air, and I smile as I shut the door behind me.

I hope I see a lot more of this man, and soon.

MARCO

Victor sits next to our uncle across the table from me, and beside me my cousin, Peter, devours a large plate of spaghetti. So far, the evening has been filled with banter and lively conversation, but with the meal nearing its end, I feel it's time to get down to the brass tacks. We've made an alliance with the Family from Newark, but it comes at a cost.

I push my empty plate away and wipe my mouth with the black cloth napkin. The waiter approaches, but I wave him off. I can't have anyone eavesdropping on our business talk. Then I drape the napkin over my empty plate and clear my throat. Victor's chatter about some bird he's been chasing for a few weeks fades away and Darnel leans forward, also pushing his plate away.

"So, we have an arrangement. That's fantastic. We'll be able to deliver on those orders?" His question reminds me of the lingering deals we have in place, which without this alliance with the D'Angelo family we'd otherwise be unable to fulfill.

"We'll be delayed, but yes. They will be fulfilled." I drum my fingers on the white tablecloth and watch Peter eating. He'd lick the plate clean if we weren't in public. The man has zero manners, but he's a fantastic accountant, so I tolerate him. But I make a mental note to reserve our important meetings behind closed doors and not involve a meal.

"How delayed?" Victor asks, setting his fork down. He's right to ask that because a delay in the supply chain could have effects that we'd rather not endure. Even a single day may dissuade our customers from returning.

"I'll get the timeline from D'Angelo tomorrow. I have the meet set, but I've not been introduced to the supplier yet." I spoke with the Don of the Newark family earlier this morning to confirm our agreement, and barring any minor catastrophe, things will

work out as we've planned. "I'm going to attend the meeting myself the first time. We have to make sure things go smoothly."

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Somewhere in the kitchen, there is a crash followed by some swearing, and Peter looks up from his now-empty plate to wipe his face clean. Uncle Darnel seems pleased with how I'm handling things. At times, I think he feels jilted by the fact that I was given this role as leader of the Family when my father passed, but he respects me and never steers me wrong.

"I've seen the agreement, Marco." Peter drops his napkin on the table and takes a swig of his wine, then continues. "You're losing a lot of money on this. Ten percent of the profit off the top is a massive cut."

I'm aware of the cut. We're talking tens of thousands of dollars of our hard-earned money going to the D'Angelos, but it's this or we lose our entire trade business.

"We're raising prices," I say, gesturing as if it's nothing. "They'll pay ten percent more for the guns or we won't supply. We'll blame inflation or rising costs. It doesn't matter what the excuse is. And this way, we won't lose any money."

Victor scowls at me but he doesn't say a word. He still thinks we would be better off storming into our former supplier's business and demanding the reins. I like to make calculated moves—less like Battleship, more like chess—thinking several steps ahead of my enemy. Ms. D'Angelo's bold ideas were very much like my own, though they leave me with less control than I'd have liked. Her father maintains that control, and despite my need to hold the reins, for now, I believe he can be trusted. In the meantime, I am building redundancies and fallback plans to assure my Family stays in power.

"What are you thinking?" Darnel asks, scratching his beard. His pensive eyes study

me, searching for the thoughts I hold back.

“I am thinking how the daughter of our new ally presents a unique opportunity to us.”

Victor chuckles at my statement and rolls his eyes. “You want to leverage her against her father? I can have a few of our men slip into the D’Angelo estate and bring her to you. We can get the information for the supplier without the Newark Don and save our money, and still raise prices.”

My brother’s hasty and impulsive nature grates on me, especially given the fact that I’m so meticulous with my actions. Victor is a ticking time bomb and a liability, but he’s blood. My father would roll over in his grave if I cut Victor off, so I humor him. But if he makes one wrong move, I have to do what I have to do. The Family is everything.

“No, smartass, I’m thinking we can use her ideas.” I fold my hands in front of me, and before one of them can offer a singlebreath of protest, I continue. “She listened at the door while we discussed our arrangement, and when we invited her in and listened to her perspective, she upped the ante. She’s bold and intelligent, and I believe we can use that sass to expand our empire. Her father seems to not listen to her ideas. Let’s show him why he’s a weaker man for doing so.”

Darnel scoffs and shakes his head. “A woman? Marco, have you lost your mind? This isn’t a woman’s game. She’ll be torn to shreds.”

“I’m with Darnel, Marco.” Peter finishes his wine and belches, then leans back and rubs his belly as if his rotund stomach is full to capacity. “This is a dog-eat-dog world. Women aren’t fit for leadership.”

Victor remains surprisingly silent as I continue. “Well, neither of you gets a say, anyway. I intend to invite Ms. D’Angelo to dinner to discuss her business

propositions. It's possible we can strengthen the alliance, or perhaps capitalize on her brilliance and make moves on our own, branch out."

I think of the way she so boldly announced her own conditions for this alliance. All that untapped potential inside her has been overlooked because she has a pussy and tits. And those are two of the most powerful weapons against any man—even me. I feel my cock twitch as I remember how stunning she is too, though a little young still. But having an ally like that is a major asset and one that I won't neglect.

"You're cock-whipped by a child and you haven't even fucked her," Victor grumbles, and it pulls bellowing laughter from Darnel and Peter's lips. The three spend a few minutes in jest, berating me for having the audacity to think a woman could add any value to our organization outside of giving me an heir.

"Enough!" I say sternly, and they fall silent immediately. "We'll not discuss it again, and you'll all do good to remember that openly mocking my decisions will earn you a reward you won't soon forget."

"Sheesh, Marco. Lighten up. She's a flesh hole with legs. You're not getting anything out of her except a good orgasm, but if you want to tap it, by all means, go for it. Just don't hold your breath. This is a man's world." Victor pushes his chair back from the table and stands. "I'll see you tomorrow." He reaches into his wallet, pulls out a few crisp bills, and drops them on the table, just as the bell over the door to the diner rings.

We all look up as the commotion at the front door draws the attention of everyone in the dining room. I see Warren there, pushing past the host who looks irate for being dismissed. Warren storms across the dining room, and when he gets to me, he's slightly out of breath.

"Sir, there's news," he says, his chest heaving. His eyes flick about the dining room,

and I see the urgency in his expression, so I rise.

“Gentlemen, I’ll be going now. Darnel, please handle the check.” I button my suit coat and step away from the table, pushing my chair in. I feel the eyes of the entire room on me and Warren as I follow him toward the front door. Victor remains on our heels as we weave through the tables.

“Apologies,” I say to the host who glares at us as we pass, and then we step into the cool night air, where only the streetlights and a rat scurrying past a trashcan keep us company. “What is it?” I use a low volume, glancing around to be certain we’re alone.

“It’s the new ally,” Warren says, sounding calmer. “He’s been gunned down in cold blood. Him and his son. They’ve been rushed to the hospital, but the son died on the way. No word whether Alberto is alive.”

Warren’s news is a blow not easily absorbed. My enemies have become the D’Angelo’s enemies and they’ve acted swiftly. They can’t get to me, so they take out everyone and everything around me, and in doing so, they’re crippling my organization. There’s no telling how the Bratva discovered my alliance, but what’s done is done.

“Who will assume power should the Don die?” Victor runs a hand through his hair, and I can see the look on his face of “I told you so.” He’ll likely suggest we use force to demand access to the supplier now.

“There is no heir, though I’m certain they have a line of succession as we do, sir.” Warren wipes sweat from his forehead. “But the supplier has cold feet now. I’ve heard from Sal D’Angelo that they may terminate our agreement.”

Sal D’Angelo—the don’s brother—may not want our alliance to continue, but I plan

to do everything in my power to make it happen. Any thought of including Alberto's daughter is gone now. We have to make very good choices and think carefully about how to move forward. If my enemy is their enemy now, they need us more than we need them. My security is so good my enemy can't get to me, so if they can get to the D'Angelos this easily, they're in danger.

"Move... We need to make a few calls. If the Bratva are on the move, there's no telling where they'll stop."

The only thing that's important now is securing that alliance once more. After that, I'll toy with the idea of Isabella D'Angelo.

4

ISABELLA

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The alcohol I've ingested makes my head swim a bit. I'm not drunk by any means, though I'd like to be. My heart aches, as does my body. It's like grief has the ability to affect my thoughts, emotions, and physical form. I haven't cried this hard in years, not since Nanny D'Angelo passed from cancer several years ago. I was just a girl, but I took it hard. This time is worse.

"I want them back," I say, my voice just a whisper. I curl against my mother's side on the couch and lay my head on her shoulder. She is silent, unmoving as I cling to her. We haven't even changed out of our funeral attire. My black dress has white hairs on it, courtesy of the long-haired cat Father loved so much. He's around somewhere, but even he seems to notice something is wrong. Father isn't just on a trip this time. He's gone forever, and so is Lucco, both of them gunned down last week.

"We have to look forward now, Isabella." Mom's words are cold and hollow, something she's forcing herself to say to avoid feeling the depth of mourning that I'm going through. My pain is visible, but she hides hers as well as she can. I suppose it's her way of trying to be brave for me, something Father would have wanted for her to do for me. But I hate it.

I know she's hurting. She hasn't eaten a bite of food since Uncle Nicky came with the news that they were gone. The bags under her eyes are dark, and her eyes are empty, staring out across the living room blankly. I don't know how she can sit so stoically and unmoved. Maybe she's still in denial, telling herself that they're not really gone. To lose a father and brother is one thing, but a life partner and son? I can't imagine her pain.

Everything reminds me of him—the brown leather furniture he insisted was more

aesthetically pleasing than Mom's choice of red, the bookshelves lining the walls filled with special editions of all his favorite books, and even the flames flickering in the hearth, a testament to his winning the argument over whether wood or gas was better to burn. I remember that argument between my parents vividly.

I also remember playing on the floor next to the gas-burning fireplace as a child with Lucco. Our make-believe was anything but for us. We were superheroes and cops and robbers, days endlessly spent playing with toy cars and minifigures. God forbid I bring out my fashion dolls. Lucco had chewed the feet off one of them in spite for my making him play with me. I got so angry I threw it at his head, and then I got a whipping for hurting him.

Memories like that would normally bring a smile to my face, but not today. There will be no more memories made, except visits to their gravestones in the cemetery. I can't believe they're not coming back. This isn't just a work trip. I have to keep reminding myself, because every time the door opens, I look up, expecting it to be them walking in after a dinner out or a meeting.

"Remember how Father fussed over that rug?" Mom asks, and I look down at the Persian rug. A hint of the deep-red wine stain near the corner still shows through. I remember that day. The maid came in with his wine in hand, and he was headed out, and they ran into each other and the stemware took a tumble. I'll never forget the look on his face when he saw the mess on his rug.

"He was so angry when Elsa spilled the wine there by accident. I thought he'd fire her." I squeeze Mom's bicep, hugging her tightly as if to keep her next to me where she's safe. It's shocking how vulnerable I feel, as if death has a way of reminding me that I'm not in control of anything. It comes in and steals from you when you're sleeping or otherwise occupied, and the worst part about it is that you can't stop it. It's not an enemy who can be thwarted with guns and security systems. It takes greedily with no recompense for your loss.

“Yes, and I heard about it for weeks.” Her tone is dry, not at all the warm, compassionate tone with which she usually expresses herself. I wonder what she’s actually thinking, but I don’t pressure her. Something has to be done about the Family leadership or chaos will ensue. I know they have a line of succession, but I’ve never been told what it is. Things seem really uncertain right now.

“Do you want another drink?” I ask her, glancing at her empty stemware on the oak end table next to mine. She’s had substantially more to drink than I have, but then she’s also had years’ more experience and time to build up a tolerance. Still, her blank stares worry me. If she only numbs the pain, I’ll be picking her up off the floor for months. Who will pick me up?

“Of course, dear.”

Mom remains on the couch while I stand and carry the glasses to the kitchen. We’ve emptied one wine bottle already, but there are dozens more in the wine cellar. Elsa hovers as I refill the glasses. Tears in her eyes tell me she is mourning too, and part of me hates her for that, for the way she secreted away with Father at times. I don’t have the heart to tell Mom about it, but Elsa knows better than to cross me. She’ll have to grieve in solitude. She isn’t part of this family.

“Hello...” I hear a male voice down the dark hallway and know it’s Uncle Nicky here to check on us. He was my father’s right-hand man for many years and probably thinks he’s taking over this family now that Father and his heir are gone. He may be the best person for the job, though I’d rather the Family remain how it is. My mother’s brother doesn’t have a claim to the throne.

“In here,” I call to him. Mother will be useless as far as conversation or family direction goes. She’s too numb, still in shock. Her life partner was just stolen away from her in the dead of the night.

After filling the glasses with wine, I turn to face him. He still wears his suit, the one he wore to the funeral earlier. He, along with a few of my cousins and other men, were pallbearers. It took twelve of them because we had two caskets, and Mom and I were devastated watching the men carrying them to their graves.

“Mom isn’t well, Uncle Nicky. She’s worse today. I think it was seeing them in the caskets.” I walk over to him, leaving Elsa to herself. He follows me as I pass him and head up the hallway to the living room again. I’m glad he cares enough to stop by, but I’m not in the mood for visitors. I don’t know when I will be again.

“It’s going to take a while, Isa. Grief isn’t something you snap your fingers at and it goes away.” Uncle Nicky is like a father to me at times, and he’s told me on more than one occasion that Lucco and I are like his own children. His wife is unable to bear children, and it’s unthinkable to adopt a child into this Family. So, he remains barren, and now, I know he will hover around me, attempting to parent me well into adulthood as my father should have.

I sniffle and take in his words. Grief isn’t something to snap my fingers at. Of course it isn’t. But I can feel grief as I move forward, and that’s what I’m going to do. Staying stuck in misery isn’t going to help anyone.

“What brings you by? I thought Mom told you we don’t want visitors right now.” My question comes out of sheer curiosity. Nicky knows we’re in no mood to talk business yet, and for now he’s kept the hounds at bay. Mom and I haven’t discussed what should happen next or who will lead us from now on. For all I know, she intends to sign everything away and leave this place. Just sitting in the same rooms where we shared time with Father and Lucco is too hard.

“Well, I know you don’t want visitors, but if we do not establish our chain of command now, we’ll face challenges.” He emphasizes the word “challenges”, and I know what he means. Without strong leadership, even the most loyal followers will

disband or rebel. Father was well-loved and deeply respected, but my cousins can be obstinate at times.

I round the corner into the living room to find that Mother has lain down. Her eyes are shut and tears moisten her cheeks. She clings to an old throw pillow plucked from Father's office chair. It probably smells like him—sweet tobacco and musky whiskey.

I set her glass on the end table next to her and lean down to kiss her temple, sniffing again. It's hard seeing her hurting so badly, and it's a good distraction from my own pain. If I focus my concern on her, I'll feel more capable of moving on and healing.

"Giana, I'm here," Uncle Nicky coos, but Mom's eyes remain shut and her silent sobs wrack her body.

"She isn't prepared to deal with this." It's the first emotion I've seen her express, and it's healthy for her to let it out. I turn to Nicky as I sip my wine. My face must look horrendous—smeared makeup and mascara lines—but I'm no less capable of rational thought now than any other time.

"We must enact our plan, Giana. You have to give consent to my leadership."

And there it is. Nicky's plan is to take over. It upsets me, but there's little I can do to stop it. If this is what Father wanted, then I have to respect it. Mom is in no shape to answer him, so I wipe my face and take it upon myself to answer.

"What is the plan you're enacting? Who did father say was his appointed heir if Lucco wasn't here?" I'm direct because the only way to get answers in this family is to be this way. Nicky sobers, his eyebrows rising. I'm sure he doesn't mean to step on toes or cross boundaries. He loves my mother and he loved my father too. But no one told me anything about this, and I can see he's nervous about it. He mops his bald

head with a handkerchief before he responds to me.

“Well, Isa, there is no appointed leader. Your father believed Lucco would take over, and his son after that. Your mother and I discussed?—”

“In her grief?” I interrupted. “You mean to tell me you swooped in here and took advantage of her grief by pushing your agenda?” I’m calm, just like Father taught me. I am not letting anyone take this Family and make it something Father would be ashamed of. Even if it means leading them myself.

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“No, Isa, it’s not like that. You know your father and I were close.” His sincerity is moving, but I’m still not going to kowtow so easily.

“What about me?” I ask, setting the stemware next to Mom’s untouched glass. She whimpers and trembles as she hugs the pillow to her chest, and I look back up at my uncle. It appears both of them have overlooked me entirely, as if they’ve forgotten that I was born or that I exist.

“What about you?” He seems confused, so I spell it out for him.

“Well, I know this Family better than anyone. Better even than Lucco. I know most of Father’s business associates and?—”

“And they’ll never respect you, Isabella. You’re a woman, and you’re barely that. A child cannot lead a revolution.” I hear how he patronizes me with his tone, and I hate it. I’m not a child, and I’m not a feeble woman with a weak mind who can’t handle herself. Father took my advice time and again. He respected my thoughts and opinions, and I won’t stand for anyone looking down on me.

“And an old man can only lead until he dies.” I’m indignant, yet controlled. I walk to the fireplace and look up at the portrait of my family hung above the mantel. In my heart, I know what Father would want. His leadership taught me to be strong in the face of tribulation, and I’d say grief is no exception. Nicky is a good man, the best man maybe to lead, but the Family won’tfully support him. I know that much. He’s not blood, and those in the Family who may ascend to my father’s throne are less than loyal.

“What do you suggest, then? Because I see no other path forward. It’s me or we lose everything.” Nicky says “we” as if he has anything to lose in this matter to begin with. It isn’t his Family or his legacy. It’s my father’s. It’s mine, and it’s time for things to change.

“I will lead this Family,” I tell him, making eye contact with my father’s image above me. His gaze is a mirror of mine which was formed by looking at him, learning from him, watching everything he did, and molding my thoughts and actions around his. I am my father’s daughter, and I can do more for this Family than Nicolo ever would.

“Isabella D’Angelo, you are in no shape to lead,” Mother croons between sobs, but she has no say. Even she isn’t blood. I am blood, the only heir left to my father’s throne. If my cousins and uncles will reject me as the leader, how much more would they reject Nicolo?

“Then I’ll take a husband who will support me, and the two of us will lead.” The idea springs to mind like the first shoots of daffodils in late March when the earth begins to thaw. It blossoms as Uncle Nicky complains and protests. I hear his pacing behind me, but my mind is at work, spinning a new plan, and when he pauses his ranting to take a breath, I cut him off.

Spinning around, I say, “Call Mr. Romano, my father’s ally from New York. Offer him my hand in marriage in exchange for our original alliance. He will be my husband to support me so my family will remain strong and loyal to my father’s legacy, and we will supply him with the resources and connections he needs to keep his family strong.”

Uncle Nicky looks flustered and in shock, sputtering and gasping. He’s heard of arranged marriages before and he knows it makes sense. He mops his head again and shakes it, and Mother sits up and dabs her face with a tissue she produces from her bra. Both of them look frantic and opposed to my idea. They exchange glances and

scowls, but the unspoken language they have between themselves is obvious. Both of them are upset and opposed to my idea.

“Isabella, you can’t make a decision like that right now. You’re thinking foolishly.” Mom grabs the wine and downs it in two gulps. I can see her fear that creases her forehead. She probably thinks I’ll regret it later, that I’m too young to understand what an arranged marriage is or what it means for my future. I don’t care. There’s always divorce if need be.

“Your mother is right. You can’t make a decision for this Family. You’re just a?—”

“I’m what?” I cut Nicky off. “A woman? Have you forgotten that of the three of us in this room, I am the only one who has my father’s blood running through my veins?” I stare them down in a calculated move I’ve seen Father do tons of times. “I am the only heir, and I am taking what’s mine. Now, you call the Romanos and sort it out. I expect to be wed by this time next week, and I expect the full support and cooperation of this Family behind me. Arranged marriages happen all the time in this world. Father reserved me for something, some agreement that would benefit this Family, and right now, I know he would approve. Go do it.”

Offering Uncle Nicky a stern expression, I cross my arms over my chest. He looks at my mother, who slumps back to the couch in a fit of crying.

“Giana, you can’t let her do this.” He’s exasperated and flustered. His breaths come in short, choppy movements as he wrings his handkerchief in hand and paces the floor.

“Go, Nicolo, do as she says. She’s her father’s daughter.” And with Mother’s command and a wave of her hand, Nicky retreats to do as I’ve told him. I watch him vanish into the hallway, and I stand there facing away from my mother. Maybe I’ve made a wrong decision, but I can’t very well let one of my cousins lead. I’ve heard

how they disagreed with Father's decisions at times, and given the chance, they'd have double-crossed him soon enough. He ran a tight ship, though, and they feared him.

All I have to do is capitalize on that fear they've had for him and make sure they understand that I will do as he has done in the past. They'll come around, and I will be the leader neither my mother nor my uncle believes I can be.

I only hope Marco Romano will listen to Nicky and agree to this new arrangement. My Family and my father's legacy depend on it.

5

MARCO

When I got the call from Nicolo expressing Isabella's thoughts on how to strengthen our alliance, I was floored. I'm still shocked. I knew she was bold and opinionated based on the meeting I had with her father only days before his death, but I had no idea she was this ambitious or determined. She stands beside me facing the judge, and all I can think about is how strong she is to throw away her entire future or any chance at love just to save her Family legacy.

"Do you have rings?" the judge asks. He's a spry older man in his seventies, with a sparkle of mischief in his eye. He's on my payroll, which is how I was able to make a call and arrange a time for our nuptials.

I expected Isabella to be nervous or uncomfortable, but she is confident and put together as she reaches into the pocket of her jacket and produces a ring. "My mother's," she says, nodding. I pull out the gold band that belonged to my father before he died and silently place it into the judge's hand, and Isabella's gaze meets mine. I swear I see her lip twitch, but it's the only crack in her serious façade.

Her mother, however, is a mess of a human, understandably so. She sits in the back of the room in the stiff wooden chair, sniffing and blowing her nose. It's the first I've met the woman, Giana, I've been told, and my second time meeting her brother, Nicolo. The first was when I met with him and Isabella to discuss this new arrangement, my hand in marriage in return for the necessary access to the assets I need. It's not a bad deal for me at all.

The judge looks up at me over his wire-rimmed glasses and nods his head. "Well, then, I suppose the two of you need to put these on." He extends his palm which holds the rings and waits for us to take them. I reach for the gold band, but Isabella takes it from him as if this were a real wedding where she puts the ring on my finger. I hide a smirk and follow her lead, taking her ring as she turns to face me.

"So, I just put it on his finger and that's it?" She licks her bottom lip and stares at my hand, now holding her ring. I study her for the first time since I walked in the room. Her ivory skin is pale, as if she's anemic, or perhaps it's just another symptom of the emotion she's burying inside herself. Her hazel eyes are clouded, further proof of her grieving. The simple blue dress shirt she wears fits snugly, revealing her curves, and I think about undressing her.

"Yes, well the whole pomp and circumstance of a marriage ceremony is never necessary. I just have to sign the paperwork and you're good to go, but if you want me to spice things up, I can." He pushes his glasses up on his face, and rather than waving him off, I let Isabella respond. It's fascinating watching her take charge. There is no doubt in my mind that she will try to lead her Family's organization, though I doubt she'll be successful. It takes something special to do the job I do, the job she covets.

"Oh, yes..." She stutters and sighs, causing her chest to rise and fall and the faint hint of cleavage to be seen in the dip of her neckline. It's a tantalizing view, one I hope to have more of eventually. It's something we haven't discussed yet, how personal this

arrangement will be, but those talks will happen soon enough.

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Isabella looks up at me, and I see that her cheeks are dusted with pink. Thick, dark eyelashes veil her eyes as she fumbles with the ring, taking my outstretched hand and sliding the ring on my finger. Her hands are clammy, cool, and sweaty, and she locks eyes with me. It's a strange and tense moment where I feel like I see into her soul. She loved her father very much, and this is her way of honoring him.

Perhaps she finds me attractive—most women do—but this isn't about me. This is about her and her father's legacy. I find it refreshing that she understands how these things work, how a marriage can unify and align our two families to better us both and how she willingly becomes the pawn in her own game to assure mutual success. It's sexy and powerful, and I find myself impressed again.

The ring slides onto my finger easily, and I take her dainty hand to put the ring on her finger. As I push the small silver band across her knuckles, I hear her uncle clear his throat and her mother release a moan and more soft cries. They aren't pleased with this arrangement, but they won't try to stop her. Isabella made it clear to me that as the child of the late Don, she is the heir, and the Family will be forced to fall in line under her leadership or suffer the consequences.

And now, looking into her determined gaze, I believe her. She'll either whip them into shape or she'll die trying. I hope for her sake that it's the former because a beautiful, strong woman like this deserves a shot at the very least. It's an unforgiving task in a dangerous world where men kill each other for crossing the street at the wrong intersection, and it isn't often that they let a woman lead.

"So, that's all, then," the judge mumbles as he scrawls his name on the marriage certificate lying on this desk behind him. "You're married." His hunched over form

shows his age, and I wonder if I'm going to need to consult a new judge soon should this one die of old age.

"That's it?" Isabella asks, sounding confused. I watch her tongue drag across her lips again, and she glances around the room, at the judge, then her mother, then her uncle. When her eyes land on me, she says, "We're married now?"

I chuckle and let her hand go, and she hastily rubs it as if I've somehow hurt her by holding her hand. I see the way her eyes dart around frantically. I'll have to teach her a thing or two about having a poker face if she plans to be even remotely successful at leading her Family.

"This is more of a business arrangement than a wedding. Were you expecting flowers and music?" I slide my hand into my pocket as the judge holds up the marriage certificate and hands it to her. I hear her uncle sigh heavily and her mother mutter something unintelligible.

"Well, of course not."

"Good, then we're done here. I'll expect you at my house at five p.m." I button my suit coat and run a hand through my hair as her face scrunches in confusion.

"I..." Her timid protest is adorable, but as my wife, she will do as I say, and soon, she'll realize I'm on her side.

"I'll send a car. You don't have to worry about your things. Everything you need will be provided for you." I move toward the door, walking past Nicolò, who eyes me skeptically. He's leery of me, which is fine. He's a businessman, and it's right to be cautious, which is more than I can say for the young, beautiful Isabella. She's rushing right in, and I'm not stopping her.

“Mr. Romano?—”

“Please, call me Marco. We’re married now.” I turn and look at her over my shoulder.

“Marco, I don’t intend to live with you. At least not just yet. Mother needs me. She’s grieving.” And there is the confident and bold woman I know lies under that nervous surface.

“Dinner at five. I’ll be waiting.” I nod at Nicolo and take one last look at Giana, who now looks like she’s lost everything, then I walk out.

I get the guns, she gets the backing of my family to help keep hers in line while they determine whether she can lead them. I like this arrangement already.

Now if I can convince her that conjugal duties aren’t optional, I’ll have the best of both worlds.

6

ISABELLA

Marco’s driver picks me up as he indicated he would, and the car delivers me to his home at precisely five p.m. I’ll give the man credit for having punctual staff. It’s more than I can say for my cousins, though Father wasn’t very punctual, either. As I step out of the car, I notice his landscaping is in perfect order. Not a single piece of mulch is out of place, and his topiary bushes are well-manicured too, which speaks volumes in terms of curb appeal.

The row home nestled in a line of them isn’t a brownstone, but it might as well be. It’s as beautiful as the two-hundred-year-old historic homes in the Upper East Side,

and it appears Marco takes great pride in ensuring his home is well-maintained.

Clutching my purse to my side, I mount the steps, escorted by the driver, and he leads me into the home and past the stairs that greet us as we enter. “Right this way, Ma’am,” the man tells me as he gestures down the hallway. Large rooms with ornate pocket doors line the hallway on both sides of us, all of them but one shut to my view, and portraits of what I can only assume are Marco’s family hang on the walls between them.

“It smells delicious,” I offer, breathing in the savory scent of a meal being prepared or served. The home is quiet, not the familiar bellows of laughter or banter that would greet someone if they entered my home.

“Mr. Romano is waiting for you here,” he says, stopping by a door. “I believe the cook has prepared a hearty potato soup and fresh bread.” His hand grips the metal handle, and he slides the pocket door toward himself, the wall behind him swallowing it as an entrance to the dining room is provided to me.

“Thank you.” I nod at him and walk past, squaring my shoulders and raising my chin. I’m not sure what to expect at this dinner. After all, I’ve never been married before. Nor have I entertained male company on my own. Father had his ways of making sure he kept me chaste and isolated—mostly by assigning his men or my cousins to watch me around the clock. When I once snuck out, it earned me three weeks of zero access to the outside world, including no phone to call a friend or even talk to my family, and all I did was go to the movies to watch an R-rated film.

Marco stands as I enter. His chair at the head of the table has a place setting laid out for him, as does the chair to his right. The tablecloth runs the full length of the twelve-person table, though there is enough space in this dining room to permit up to three more chairs on either side, with leaves inserted into the table, of course.

“Welcome, Isabella,” he says, reaching his hand to take mine.

I take note of the crystal glasses, real silver cutlery, and personalized China with his initials centered on the bowls. I move toward him with purpose, taking his outstretched hand as if to shake it, but he turns my wrist, bringing the back of my hand to his lips. Warmth flushes across my skin and sinks into my body from head to toe. I swallow to remove the lump forming in my throat and nod at him.

“Thank you for your invitation to dinner. Shall we sit?” I gesture at the chair, expecting to pull it out and have a seat, but he sweeps around me and pulls it out, helping me sit before positioning it back at the table properly. Then he joins me, but the way he looks at me isn’t what I expect, either. His eyes are studious, examining me, or what he can see of me. I’m careful to keep my poise, and I’ve chosen a modest top to discourage any untoward behavior—advice taken from Uncle Nicky.

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“You are breathtaking....” Marco rests an elbow on the edge of the table and his arm rests next to his plate. He’s not so bad himself, with his charming smile and stubbled chin. He’s got a rugged look about him, one I noticed the first time we met at my father’s house for that meeting. If I’m not careful, this man will steal my heart.

“Thank you...” I’m slightly uncomfortable. Not that I don’t like the compliment, but I’ve been advised by Nicky and my mother that certain rights a husband has in an arranged marriage must be discussed. My core tenses at the thought, though Marco hasn’t brought it up yet. He’s devastatingly handsome, I’ll give him that, but I’m not prepared for that yet.

I open my mouth to speak, to bring up the business arrangement and break the ice a little, but the door slides open again, this time revealing Marco’s butler and maid. She pushes a wheeled cart loaded down with pots of food and a bottle of wine, and they approach the table in silence. Steam rises from the pot as she takes her ladle and serves a large portion of soup into Marco’s dish first, then returns her ladle to serve me.

“Only a small portion, thank you.” I hold my hand up as she pours to indicate when my bowl is full enough. Marco’s eyes are on me the entire time, watching every move. I feel tense, like I’m on display for someone or like he’s making an assessment of my worth. And when the butler lifts the wine bottle to fill my glass, I halt him with a hand on top. “Only water for me, thank you.”

The man glances at Marco as if it’s okay to take an order from me, and Marco waves him off. Soon, the two retreat and I’m left alone with my husband again. It feels strange thinking that... that I’m married. I don’t know this man, though I know his

type. And I don't know his expectations for me or for the future of this arrangement. To me, that's all it is—an arrangement. I've got too much on my mind, too heavy feelings suffocating me for this to be anything more than business.

“You handle yourself well. I can tell you've been raised in a home like mine.” He takes his napkin and snaps it, then drapes it across his lap before picking up his spoon.

The food smells wonderful, but I'm just not hungry. I haven't eaten well in weeks, anyway, and the anxiety I've had over this dinner has stolen every last bit of my appetite. Grief is funny like that. For some people, the thought of eating is akin to forgetting their loved one existed. Unthinkable. For others, all they can do is eat. I fall somewhere in the middle.

“They're staff, are they not?” I take my napkin and drape it over my knee too, forcing myself to have a bite of soup. It's just as scrumptious as it smells, and I decide eating a little would do me good, though I take small bites. Eating in front of a stranger is always awkward, and I may be married to this man, but he's definitely a stranger.

“You are a fascinating woman, Isabella. Other female guests I've had don't carry themselves the way you do, with authority.” His spoon dips into his bowl and returns full of thick, chunky soup before vanishing into his mouth.

“I know who I am, Mr. Romano, and so do they. Confidence in self comes before others can put confidence in you.” My gaze meets his, and I see a flash of intrigue there, then something else. Attraction, maybe? I'm not interested in hearing his compliments or praise. I feel like taking charge of this meeting will enable me to understand his desires and also his needs. This arrangement can only benefit us both if we communicate openly. So, I start the discussion.

“Now, our suppliers will be fully known to you, of course, and we no longer intend to

take a cut of your profits.” My mouth waters for more soup, so I have a quick bite as he digests what I’m saying to him. He doesn’t seem eager to hear what I’m saying, but I continue anyway. “My family needs a strong leader, and that is what I will be to them. As we already discussed, the only part you’ll need to play is to help support me as I take the reins and garner the trust and respect of my cousins. I know there are a few who would like to assume the leadership role, but Father wouldn’t have it.”

The chunks of potatoes and carrots mesmerize me with each bite. I can’t seem to get enough of it, and I think it’s because I’ve starved myself too long. Or maybe it's because I feel in control of my life again. Marco has given me that back after our enemies stole it when they murdered my father. I have another bite, then another, carefully laying out what I expect from him, and when I’m finished and my bowl is empty, he wipes his mouth on his napkin and drops it across his half-empty dish.

“It sounds like you’ve got it all figured out.”

“We’ve been over these things before, so none of this should come as a shock.” I, too, wipe my mouth with my napkin, but as I lay it over my empty bowl, Marco snatches my hand. His fingers are rough, his hands callused. I’m surprised by his action.

“I’m more interested in you, Isabella.” He kisses the back of my hand again, but this time, he doesn’t let go. The room crackles with tension as our eyes meet. Nicky warned me this would happen, that Marco would expect certain duties to be upheld by me. My body responds to him in a surprising way, my heart racing and my hands growing sweaty. “As you know, arranged marriages operate very much the same way as any normal marriage. Our families will expect to see you living in my home, sleeping in my bed.”

He emphasizes the word “sleeping” and I feel my core tense. My eyes dart around his face, noticing the lines near his eyes, the sparkle in them too. He’s attracted to me, aroused even, and he’s not going to be easily dissuaded. I knew this was a possibility

when I proposed an arranged marriage, and I'm fully willing to uphold my duties as his wife in every sense of the word, but not now. Not yet.

"Marco, I?—"

"I want an heir, and you will need one eventually, if this arrangement works out." He brings my hand to his lips again and presses his lips into my skin, and fire shoots through me. His eyes never leave mine. They're dark and mysterious. Storms brew in them, cracking lightning bolts that send shivers down my spine.

"The arrangement will work out, but like every business venture, things take time." I'm squirming, my sex pulsing with desire for him. And no doubt, when I get back to my bedroom, I'll find mypanties are soaked. But the idea of bedding him tonight scares me. He's fifteen years my senior and probably very experienced, and I know nothing. I've done nothing.

"It's our wedding night." Another kiss, another douse of fuel to the inferno raging in my body. As much as my fleeting youth would like to throw caution to the wind and let him ravish me, my heart is so wounded right now.

So I do what I've been taught to do my entire life. I dig deep and find my confidence and strength, the way I will be forced to in my near future as leader of my Family. I lay it on the line for him in a direct way. I'm not to be pushed around.

"Mr. Romano, while your offer is very tempting to me, I have to decline. My father died ten days ago. My mother is home alone, grieving. I will not be moving into your home until I'm ready, until I believe Mother is ready for me to leave her, and I will not be joining you in your bed until I'm satisfied with this arrangement." I stand up and pick up my water glass and gulp it. Then I set it down as he stands with me, taking my hand again.

“But don’t you see what you’ve done to me?” he asks, putting my hand to his crotch. His dick is rock hard inside his pants and it makes me stiffen. God, I want him, and if I hadn’t just put my foot down, I’d probably let him have his way with me, but there is no going back now. I have to stand my ground to show him I can handle leading this Family. If I can’t tell my own husband no to sex, how will I tell my rebellious Family to get in line or get out?

I want to put him in his place, but the way he makes my hand rub up and down his length has me melting, and the bold, determined woman inside me shrivels as I mutter, “I’m a virgin.” It’s a tiny squeak of a sentence, but I manage to pull my hand away from him. His eyes flash with hunger, but he doesn’t grab my hand again. “I have to go.”

I turn and walk toward the door hastily, but when I get the latch in my hand, ready to pull it open, I feel his hand on my elbow. I turn to see him holding my purse. I left it lying on the table next to my dirty dishes.

“Dinner tomorrow, five p.m. I’ll send a car.” His eyes are still hungry, but he’s not demanding. I’m thankful for that.

I nod and take my purse, then dash out, hoping to hide in the back of his limo before I die of humiliation. God, that was horrible. He probably thinks I’m going to fail at leading my Family, but I’ll still prove him wrong.

I can do this.

I know I can.

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MARCO

The two SUV limos roll up to the warehouse and stop outside. A large van casts a shadow on the parking lot. I can only assume it's the supplier's van and inside it are the guns we've come to collect. Isabella's Family rides in the other limo, and a few of my men, Darnel, and Victor ride with me in this one.

The first time we meet a new supplier is always tense. They try to test me, push me for more money, or even haggle over whether they can have access to my clientele, but I'm used to it. I'm sharp and alert, but not at all anxious. We have enough muscle and firepower to start a small war. I'm only concerned for Isabella, as this is her first rodeo.

"Flank the back of her SUV and make sure all angles are covered." I pull my weapon out of the back of my waistband and chamber a round before putting it back. "I know she has her men, but we don't know their loyalty yet."

Darnel nods at me then points at two of our guys. "You two make yourself at home with her and keep your eyes open. If any of her men seem sketchy, don't be afraid to call them out."

I'm thankful that for the past five years I've experienced nothing but commitment and faithfulness from my Family. Victor has his moments of asinine behavior, but he'll grow out of it.

"Ready?" I ask them, and they nod.

Victor slides out of the limo first, followed by Darnel. Then I climb out and stand aside as the rest of my men file out and form a V with me at the head. Isabella is already on the ground, moving toward the van, which is now open with men pouring out. I take a deep breath and sober myself. These events can be peaceful or they can turn on a dime and get violent quickly.

As I walk toward the van, I think about how irritated Isabella was when I tried to coach her on what could go wrong. We've had dinner every night for more than a week now, and each one has taught me a little more about her. I'm patient, biding my time with her, and this meet will probably teach me more than anything else.

I nod at her when she removes her sunglasses and stretches out her hand to a gentleman I don't know. She greets him and then turns to me. "This is Mr. Romano, my husband. We'll be handing over the weapons to him." She steps back and I offer my hand, but the man, dressed in a tan cargo vest and dark blue jeans, shakes his head.

"No way, man. The only reason I showed up today is to tell you I'm out. I seen what they did to your old man. They're gonna come after me next. This Romano fella is bad news." The supplier holds his hands up in defense. I make a quick assessment of his temperament and notice a gun tucked into his boot. He's antsy, afraid. Men who are scared are often jumpy and make poor choices.

"I think we've already made an arrangement, and you will continue with it. You have the full support of both Families, defense, protection, and of course, financially." So far, so good. Isabella is handling herself with tact, but she's going to have to be more forceful if she wants to be a real leader.

"Then I want more money. Ten percent more. It's a risk I have to take." The guy is pushing his luck, and if it were me, he'd have a gun to his head already, but Isabella remains collected and merely glares at him.

My men are restless, shifting and murmuring, as are Isabella's. We all come to these meets with a lot of testosterone and pent-up frustration coursing through our bodies. It only takes one wrong comment to set things off. I'm about to open my mouth when I hear Victor murmur something about taking what we came for, and I turn and scowl at him. He sobers instantly, squaring his shoulders and raising his chin. My men don't fuck with me, though Isabella's men seem to not care that they could be causing a stir.

A man standing behind her speaks quietly, almost imperceptibly, and if I weren't looking at him, I don't think I'd know who was speaking. "This is what we get for having a woman in charge." It draws a few chuckles, and I feel my chest tighten. I clench my jaw and turn to address him, but in the same few seconds it takes me to respond, the supplier pulls his gun and points it at Isabella.

She draws her weapon and whips around, using the butt of it to whip her own man across the face, then spins around and points it at the supplier. In such a graceful and swift move, she demonstrates a courage beyond her abilities. All of my men draw their weapons and point them at him in her defense, and slowly, her men follow suit. The supplier's men have their weapons out now too.

"I said we have an agreement, and you will uphold it." Isabella takes a step forward in another act of boldness and presses her gun to the man's temple. "My men speak out of turn, and I'll deal with them later, but I will deal with you now, swiftly and surely. You can continue working with us, or you can record a video saying goodbye to your family."

"Shit, lady. Fuck's sake. Just back off," he says, whimpering and dropping his gun. She kicks it away, but she doesn't lower her weapon and I'm very impressed.

"What will it be?" For a twenty-one-year-old who is new to this game, she has balls. It makes my dick hard just thinking about her.

“Fine, fine... but if they come after us, I’m coming after you.” The supplier’s threat earns him a knock to the back of his head, and Darnel chuckles.

“Looks like you'd better just listen to the lady, buddy.” Darnel holsters his weapon, and slowly, the others follow suit. The last to lower a weapon is Isabella, and she glances at me, almost as if for approval.

And now I believe she really can lead them. Which only makes her more attractive to me. If the woman who will provide my heir can do this, imagine how my son will fare?

This arrangement is going to work out better than I thought.

8

ISABELLA

Mom sips her tea and studies every move I make. She looks at me differently now, after Uncle Nicky’s recounting of the events two days ago with our gun supplier. I don’t know if she’s shocked by my actions, appalled, maybe? Or perhaps she is impressed and now believes in my ability to lead despite this being a man’s world. It’s not like I’m the first woman to assume control of an organization like this. There have been female leaders before me, but few and far between, and never in our Family.

“But did you see the way his men cower before him, Isa? He will run ramrod over us if we’re not careful. You’ll see. The man is the devil himself.” Uncle Nicky slurps his tea loudly, and I grit my teeth to avoid asking him to use his manners. This will be a fine line to walk, respecting those who have gone before me and leading them the way Father would have.

“I don’t think he has any interest in assuming control of my Family, and if he should begin to exhibit signs that he does, we will resist. It’s that simple. Our arrangement is solid, Nicky.” I smooth the front of my skirt down and cross my legs, tucking them under the chair.

Mom, who has been spending more and more time out of bed in her mourning, sighs softly. “You know, Isabella, part of this arrangement actually grants you the power to use your feminine wiles over him. You know, convince him to do things your way.”

Heat flushes through my neck and face, and I stand abruptly, moving to the window where I peek between the curtains. He said he’d send a car again, the way he has every night for just over two weeks. The car isn’t here yet, though, and I’m wishing it were. Using sex as a manipulative tool over him is not something I want to talk about with my mother.

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“As I mentioned, I hardly think that will be necessary. Mr. Romano is a gentleman and?—”

“And all men want only one thing, Isabella.” I hear her moving behind me before I feel her hand on my elbow. “They grow impatient with business pursuits when things are going well. Sometimes, they like to make trouble. And that won’t bode well for you or for us. I found it best early on to charm your father... for lack of a better word... with my body.”

She clears her throat as if she is embarrassed for saying that, and my cheeks burn hotter than ever. “Mother,” I hiss so quietly I’m sure Nicky hasn’t heard it.

“What did you think would happen when you married the man, Isa?”

I turn to face her, and she cups my cheek. The look in her eyes is one of compassion and worry. She was against this arrangement to begin with, and now I partly understand why she was. Her arrangement with my father was a pleasant one, though maybe not always so. I can see the pain in her eyes from experience—something she wishes I never had to go through.

“You’re lucky, though. He’s an attractive man, Isabella. You’ll make beautiful babies, and this mutual respect for each other will one day blossom into like. That like, if nurtured, could develop, as it did between your father and me, into love.” She pats my cheek. “But you have the power in that only the woman can pull the heartstrings of her husband. And those strings must be pulled in our favor.”

I hear the rumble of an engine and glance over my shoulder to see the limo waiting

out front. “He’s here,” I mutter, now feeling ten times more nervous than I was before. It’s encroaching on the time I’ll have to move in with him, and I know when that happens, I won’t be given a choice whether to uphold my marital duties.

“We aren’t trying to assume control of his people or his territory, Isabella.” Nicky stands and takes my hand as I pass by him. I stop and look in his eyes. “He can grow his empire on the other side of the river. What we want is only for him to be the lion behind your back when you address your followers. Only you can sate the predator and hold him back from devouring us.”

A lump forms in my throat and I swallow it down. I’m getting very good at that now, pushing my nerves away to put on my bold face. I look Uncle Nicky in the eye and nod.

“You don’t need to worry. I’ll handle it.”

He kisses me on the cheek, and I let myself out and head down the hallway to the front door where Marco’s driver is knocking. The entire drive, I can’t stop thinking about what Mom and Nicky said. It isn’t that I don’t want to have sex with him, just that I always hoped that when I had sex for the first time, it would be to someone I love, not as part of a business arrangement.

I could love him—someday—if things were different. But my job is not to fall in love and be swept off my feet. My job is to build a strong alliance that will further my Family’s interests. We need each other now—our guns to keep his Family in business, his strength to keep my Family in line. If sex is what it will take to make sure he is happy with me and upholds his end of the bargain, then so be it.

Sex is what he will get, but I’m not sure he will like it. I know nothing. Father sheltered me to the point that I didn’t even know what sex was until I was sixteen, and when I found out, he built walls around me to lessen my exposure. He wanted a

chaste bride for whoever it was who met his expectations, whoever would become his ally. I don't know if Marco would have passed his tests, but he is my husband now, and that means I have a job to do.

The car pulls up outside his home, and this time, he waits for me on the stoop. His black suit is dapper, tailored to fit his lean, muscular body. His dark hair is slicked back to one side, revealing his striking blue eyes, eyes that drink me in like I'm water in a desert every time we meet.

"Good evening, Isabella." I love the way he says my name, with just a hint of the northeastern accent and a touch of Scottish brogue. It's strange given that he is Italian from a strong Italian upbringing, but when I asked him, he said it had more to do with the friends he spent time with growing up.

"Marco," I say, ascending the steps. It feels odd calling him that. I address every one of my father's business associates with their title and surname, not like this. But he corrects me every time I call him Mr. Romano.

"Shall we?" he asks, holding his elbow out as I mount the final step, and I wrap my hand around his bicep. His firm muscle makes my fingers tingle, aching to feel more, and I picture him shirtless with corded abs and rippling pectorals.

"What does Anna have on the menu this evening?" His servants have become my servants and I've learned their names by heart. Though, he treats them as servants, and I prefer to think of them as extensions of my family. I suppose that's the difference between masculine and feminine leadership—I will always lean toward relationship while he always leans toward usefulness.

"I believe we'll be taking dinner a bit later. I hope you don't mind. Anna is preparing a roast and potatoes, and my favorite—peanut butter pie—for dessert." His tone is lower than normal, as if he's stressed. As a business partner, I feel the urge to ask if

he's stressed over me or over our arrangement, but I realize that's not the way I should think. I have to trust that he runs his Family smoothly and rely on him to help me do the same.

"Then we'll talk. I think things are going well. I'm sure my men got the message the other day." I tense as he leads me into a room I've never been in. It looks like a study or den of sorts. Tapestries of the Far East hang on the walls between bookshelves. A large portrait of a beautiful woman is mounted on the wall behind a massive oak desk. It's beautiful, and very tastefully done. I see some family resemblance to Marco.

"Yes, you are a formidable force. I admit I had my doubts at first, but you surprised me." He lets me go, and I walk toward the painting, listening to the sound of the door sliding shut behind me.

"She's beautiful..." I mumble, taken by the way her eyes seem to follow me around the room.

"My late mother, rest her soul."

Marco joins me in staring up at the painting, and I feel his hand in the small of my back. I feel out of place, as if he's lost inside his head, in memories of his mother when she was alive. I want to speak but I feel shy, so I remain silent until he speaks.

"She would have loved to meet you, Isabella. Such a beautiful and strong woman like you, and my only regret in marrying you is that it was done too late. She'll never have the chance to meet our children."

The word "children" makes my body tense and surge with heat. He hasn't brought up the topic of sex again since the first night I had dinner with him. He's being patient, allowing me to grieve, and I haven't brought it up either. I'm too focused on gaining

control of my Family and ensuring they have a proper leader. I don't think it's a coincidence that Mom prepared me for this talk. It's as if the fates have intervened—prepared me for tonight.

“Our children?” I ask, hearing my own voice crack.

Marco's hand presses into my back and he turns me to face him. He's smooth, confident, and bold. I'm meek, shrinking into myself and trying to hide. My mind races. Is tonight the night? Can't I wait until I move in? Does it have to be this soon? I haven't gotten to know him at all.

“Yes. We both need an heir, which means two children, hopefully two sons, though I'm not discounting the fact that you could raise a daughter as strong as you.” His hand remains in the small of my back, pulling me against his body. I feel the bulge in his slacks that presses against my thigh. He's not hard, but it won't take much.

“Then you think our alliance is a good one, that we will make this a long-term partnership?” Again, my voice cracks. Blood is rushing everywhere—to my groin, to my cheeks, to my palms that are now sweaty, clasped between us and pressing against his stomach.

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“I play for keeps.” His other hand joins his first, pulling me against him harder. “You’re so beautiful, so stunning, and I have never met a woman who uses her pistol the way you do.”

I find myself blinking furiously, biting my lip, squirming uncomfortably. This is it. He’s going to kiss me and I can’t resist him. But I don’t want to resist him. I want this. And it feels wrong. I shouldn’t want this, should I? To bed him even though I don’t know him... I will eventually know everything about him, but this?

“I’m going to kiss you now, and you’re going to kiss me back.”

“But I...” I push on his chest, protesting but not really. I just don’t know what I’m doing. I’m embarrassed. What if I’m no good at it?

“I’ll teach you.”

Before I can stop him, his lips are on mine, moving and sliding across mine. I open my mouth and let his tongue search me, tangling my tongue with his. He tastes like whiskey and cigars, and my head swims delightfully with a heady sensation. My body, once rigid and stiff, melts against him as he guides me backward. I don’t know where we’re going and I don’t care. He can take me anywhere he wants.

We end up against the wall in a frenzy. His hands roam my body, touching me everywhere—up my thighs, under my shirt, cupping and squeezing my breasts through my bra—which he eventually rips off. He groans into the kiss as he feels my hardened nipples pressing against his chest. His fingers trace patterns on my stomach, and then they’re under my skirt, sliding upward, and then I feel them tease at the edge

of my panties. My thoughts blur as he pushes them down.

I don't know where to put my hands or how to touch him. This is so new to me, but my body wants it. My groin is on fire, burning and aching to be touched.

To be filled. He breaks the kiss and whispers in my ear, "Sit on the desk."

I do as I'm told, my legs closed, trying to hide my wetness from him. He watches me, a predator eyeing his prey. I feel exposed, vulnerable. Wearing only my skirt, with my panties on the floor, I watch as he strips his shirt off, then undoes his belt buckle. As he slides his slacks down, his cock springs upward, standing erect. He's huge—or maybe he's not. I've never seen a dick in real life, only in pornography I managed to sneak into my room when my father didn't know. What I do know is I'm embarrassed. My folds drip with so much liquid, I think I've pissed myself, but my legs shake in want.

Then his strong hands part them, and I let out a small gasp, biting my lip again as he finds my clit with his fingers. His hand is rough and callused from hours of handling his gun, but it feels good. What's even better is the way he looks me dead in the eye as he does it, growling and gripping my thigh.

"Have you ever had a man make you come?" he asks, and I shake my head no, fighting a whimper of pleasure. "Have you ever had a man lick you from hole to hole?"

"Ahh..." I arch my back as his fingers press against my entrance, teasing me. "No," I moan, wishing he'd penetrate me but not wanting the exquisite torture of being teased to end.

"Spread your legs wider. Let me see your delicious pussy." Marco's eyes drink me in as he speaks, and I obey him.

This doesn't feel at all like I thought it would. I expected to feel like I was performing a task, not this way. My body is on fire for him, screaming for him to pleasure me, and my nipples are so hard they could cut glass, yet he doesn't pay them any attention. He has other things on his mind, which he proves by lowering himself to his knees.

"Yeah, baby, that's it..." he whispers as he finds my entrance with his tongue. I cry out as he tentatively licks me—gently, teasingly, exploring every crevice and fold of my sex. I've never felt anything like this before, and every inch of my body tingles in anticipation.

He nips at my clit, and I cry out louder, bucking against his face. The sensation is overwhelming, pleasurable and painful. His tongue slides into me slowly, causing my body to clench instinctively. I shudder and jolt. The sensations are overwhelming and powerful, consuming every thought I have. I grip the edge of his desk hard as he slides a single finger into me, enough to make me squeal for more, but not enough to get me off.

"Shit... please... I need more."

"Mmm," he moans against my core, and I arch my back, hoping to make him go deeper, to put more fingers into me, but he pulls away slowly and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'm going to be nice because it's your first time."

I have no clue what he means by that and I don't care. I reach for his hips, pulling his dick closer to my center. "Oh, God... I want to come so badly."

He chuckles and nestles between my thighs. "Relax," he murmurs, and I try, but the head of his cock pushes into me and I hiss and gasp. He's massive, and it hurts. His hands on my hips steady me as he pushes in further, inching inside me.

"I'll stop if you need to," he says, his gaze locked onto mine. I nod, tears pricking my eyes from the pain. But I can't stop it. I don't want to stop it.

He's so big, he's stretching me too much, but I'm going to come so fucking hard. "Oh, God, please... more," I pant, clawing at his hips.

"Shit, baby," he groans, "you feel so fucking tight."

I'm embarrassed but also turned on by it. He starts moving, pushing deeper and pulling almost all the way out before slamming back into me, leaving my skin red with his handprints on my hips. I'm whimpering and crying out. My walls clench him tightly, but he doesn't stop. He slides in and out of me, pounding into my virgin pussy at a lethal pace. "Oh, God... Oh, God." I don't know if it's pain or pleasure anymore.

Tears slip down my face as he kisses me hard, his hands gripping my hair, and his cock pistons inside me relentlessly. It's more than I can take. I groan and feel my body begin to shake, tremors that start in my core and ripple outward to my extremities. A deluge of sensations submerges me in wave after wave of pleasure. "Marco," I call out, now digging my fingernails into his back, and he seems to draw pleasure from it.

"Fuck, yes. God, you're tight." His grunts match my moans until we're both twitching and his cock is pulsing inside me. I feel heat flood me, warming me from the inside out, and I feel his teeth on my shoulder, biting down. I hiss, and he stops, but his teeth return, this time to my earlobe. Then he whispers, "You're mine now." And I have the feeling that he means it—that no one will ever do this to me except him from now on.

And somehow, I don't even mind.

MARCO

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The limo rolls up to a stop, this time carrying the conglomeration of my Family and Isabella's. We've ridden together to prove a point, both to our supplier and to our Families, that this union is sealed and our partnership means a new future for everyone. We're ready—armed with guns to protect ourselves, but also with a confidence that our marriage means a better future for everyone involved.

We climb out, my men first, then me. I turn to offer Isabella my hand, and like a queen, she steps out of the limo onto the tarmac, followed by her men. We've chosen to meet at the small regional airport an hour outside the city for this exchange since we're dealing in military-grade machine guns. There is less of a chance of this going sideways with the authorities the farther out of New York we get. So, this little bump in the road, nothing more than a flea on a camel's back, is the best place.

The supplier is here too, already unloading the weapons crates from the back of his van. Three crates in all this time, and with Isabella on my arm instead of arriving separately, I hope it will encourage him to be more forthcoming with his best attitude and his best prices.

“Ah, Mr. Romano,” he says, walking over to shake my hand. This is a much more friendly greeting than the one I got last time. I reach out to take his hand, and Isabella stands at my right side patiently.

“Mr. Hitchens.” His grip is firm, the way a man's handshake should be. “Is it all here for us?” I ask, reaching into my breast pocket to produce a small manilla envelope with instructions as to where he can collect his money. It's in a locker at the bus station with a padlock.

“Of course. Ten guns per crate, with four magazines per gun. That’s thirty guns and one hundred and twenty magazines, as ordered.” He reaches for the envelope I hand him, and I nod.

“Perfect. Let’s get them transferred over to our vehicle, and we’ll be on our way.” I step aside as he walks toward his van and opens the door. Two men climb out and pick up one of the large, flat crates and slide it from the van.

I watch as Isabella takes the lead, directing the men to place the crates in the back of the SUV limo, and one by one, they’re carried over. It’s a tight squeeze to fit all three, but the guys manage it, and Nicolo shuts the hatch and shakes their hands as I turn to the supplier.

“It’s good doing business with you. My wife will be in touch with you about the next shipment. Sometime next week, I believe.” I reach my hand out to shake his again, but as I do, I hear tires squealing and the rapid report of automatic gunfire.

We both whirl around, and I draw my gun instinctively. I turn to look behind me just in time to see the Bratva's men running toward us, guns drawn.

"Nicolo! Get in the car!" I bark as I start firing, bullets zipping past my ears. Darnel comes running around the corner of the SUV with Victor not far behind him.

"They found us!" he yells, putting his body between the enemy and Isabella, who now has her gun in hand too.

I nod once and keep firing, watching as Nicolo scrambles into the car and beckons for Isabella, but she seems eager for the fight. She ducks behind the SUV and shoots across the hood at the oncoming attackers. I open the door and take cover behind it as I watch the gun supplier and his men turn to face the onslaught too. They take cover behind their van, and all that can be heard is the boom of weapons being discharged

and the ping of the rounds hitting metal.

"How did they know we'd be here?" Darnel snaps, rising to fire off a few rounds, then ducking back behind the SUV.

"I don't know!" Isabella shouts, pulling her trigger. The gun clicks, and the slide is locked back. I put my focus back on the Bratva who are now hiding in a few places, behind a cargo container, a dumpster, and the sedan they drove in, though I hear her replacing her clip and chambering a round. I don't have time to worry about her or argue with her, but my instinct is to order her into the vehicle where she's safe.

"Get in the limo!" I tell her, but she is obstinate.

"No, I want to get these bastards!" she screams defiantly.

"The hell you will!" Nicolo barks, and I see out of the corner of my eye the door open and him grabbing her. She swears at him, but knowing her uncle will protect her, I go on the offensive. I stand and fire off several more rounds, and I know my men have my back. Victor and Darnel flank me, releasing a hail of bullets as we swarm forward toward the enemy.

I spot one of the Bratva members and take him down with a clean shot to the chest. His body slumps, and I see movement from the corner of my eye as someone tries to shoot at me from the right. Victor sees it too, and he dives to push me out of the way just as another bullet whizzes past my head. Darnel ducks out of the way, his gun blazing as he takes cover behind me.

It's a coordinated effort, and we advance on them quickly, pushing them back toward their vehicle. The supplier is in on the action too, using a gun he had hidden in his van. In no time, we push them back until they're fleeing, once again squealing their tires on the tarmac.

We stand there heaving, watching their sedan flee and catching our breath. And it's then that I hear Isabella shouting at the top of her lungs.

"Get off me! Goddamn you."

I turn to see her wrestling with her uncle, forcing him to let go of her. She pushes her way past him, climbing out of the limo and straightening her shirt. Victor chuckles at her as he holsters his weapon and Darnel mumbles, "This is why women don't belong out here."

I'm quick to shoot him a glare, and I'm glad Isabella hasn't heard his remark. She stomps around the front of the limo and joins me just as the supplier also walks up to me.

"This is insane, man. I'm out. I'm not doing this. Those guys are serious. Did you see their fire power? If we hadn't outnumbered them four to one, we'd be dead." He's sweating, pale as a ghost. I can tell he hasn't had to deal with this sort of thing often.

Then I glance at the dead man, right where Isabella is staring, also pale, but less shaken. She blinks hard, and I can tell she's trying to maintain her composure, but Darnel has a point. Women are too sensitive to see this sort of thing often and stay emotionally in control.

I have to ignore that for now, though, because our supplier is trying to back out on us yet again. I turn to him and allow the adrenaline coursing through my veins to show in my expression.

"You are not backing out. Don't forget that we outnumber you ten to one. If you think facing my enemy is bad, you'll piss yourself if you have to face my Family." I narrow my eyes and feel Isabella reach out and lace her fingers through mine. It's as if she's saying the man will face both of our Families, though mine alone is enough to

intimidate him.

“Fuck’s sake, man. They found us here, in the middle of nowhere at a rinky-dink airstrip.” He’s panting like a sick dog, afraid and chasing his tail.

“If they can find us here, imagine where I’d find you. When you make a deal with the devil, you don’t get to back out.” I squeeze Isabella’s hand and continue. “We’ll be in touch for our meet next week.”

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I start to turn and go, following Victor and Darnel who have already headed toward the SUV, and he says, “Alright, but next time, you need to make sure you don’t tip them off as to where we’re meeting.”

I ignore his comments and wonder if it wasn’t him who tipped them off, but I know one thing is for sure. We have to increase security around Isabella. I think even her uncle would agree to that. I won’t let her be in the line of fire again. I don’t care what she thinks.

10

ISABELLA

The clip holding my target slides up the line drawing closer to me, and the closer it gets, the easier I can see the clear pattern on the image. After the close call at the airport with the supplier and Marco’s men, I decided to brush up on my target practice. Father used to bring me here a few times a week for fun. Mother hated it. She still does. She thinks weapons are a man’s tool, but as the leader of my Family, I need to know how to handle myself.

I feel like I’m leading a revolution, and the revolution is only as strong as its leader, so I pluck the target off the clip and hold it up so I can see it. All of my shots hit center mass, and had this been an intruder or attacker, I’d be safe. I smile at my good aim and lay the target to a side, then pick a new target off the pad hanging on the wall of this stall and clip it in place. I’d like to unload a few more rounds before I leave.

I push the button setting the pulley to action, and the target whooshes off toward the

far wall. Then I eject my clip and lay my gun to the side. I have to reload, and later tonight, I need to disassemble my weapon and clean it. It's one thing I've learned in the past few weeks of being married to Marco. He cleans his gun every night—says it ensures a consistent, accurate shot. I never knew Father and Lucco did this after their practice sessions, or at all, for that matter.

As I push more rounds into my clip, I hear noise in the gun range. Someone is talking, and their voice is familiar to me but I can't exactly place it. This club, a little five-stall, indoor shooting range south of Central Park, is where my Family goes to blow off steam and get their practice. It's not Family owned, but one of my uncles works here, so I'm not surprised when two of my cousins walk past my stall and stop to say hello.

“Well if it isn't our fearless leader.” Chase's stupid smirk is enough to irritate me, but I say nothing. I keep pushing rounds into my clip. These two clowns have always been irritating to me at times, but Family is Family.

“Hey, Bella, I saw your husband had to shove you in his limo to protect you. You sure you're ready to be the big boss lady?” Owen plays right into Chase's sarcastic greeting and my chest tightens. These two are opposed to this arrangement between me and Marco, and they've made it pretty clear to other people in the Family. They haven't outright said it to me, though.

I've heard their rumors and I've been told by Nicolo about the bit of a stir they're causing. They think they can muscle their way into power, scare me out of my decision to take the helm. I'm watching them, but I'm not stupid nor naive.

“I believe you're mistaken.” I eye them and feel my body tensing the longer they stand at my stall talking. I'm not supposed to be afraid of them, but part of me is. I don't think they would ever physically harm me, given the fact that there are cameras on every angle of this place. But I wouldn't put it past them to hatch a plot to prove

me unfit to lead, thereby putting one of them in this position of leader. Especially because both of them are older than me by a few years.

“Well, I hear you were a flop, anyway.” Owen leans on the wall of my stall and crosses his arms over his chest. His gray T-shirt stretches over his thick muscles, reminding me that if he wanted to, he could easily disarm me and physically restrain me. We grew up together, though, played in my father’s house and theirs. Lucco wouldn’t tolerate their obstinance, so neither can I.

“You’re in our world now, honey, and you are just not cut out for it. You should just go back home and pick up where you left off. Sew some curtains. Bake some cookies. Let us do the leading.” Chase hovers menacingly at the end of the stall, blocking any path I have out of this place if I feel threatened, and I take a step backward as I put the last few rounds into my clip.

“You two need to back off. Nicky won’t stand for this.” I know the man they want me to marry, the one they think my father picked out for me. He’s not the type to follow my father’s instructions or honor his legacy. And he’s not the sort of man I’d ever marry. More than twice my age, with two dead wives already, the man is just not fit to be anyone’s husband.

“Nicky’s not my uncle, babe.” Owen pushes off the wall and looks down his nose at me. “We think you need to step down. Your father didn’t put you in charge. There’s a lot of us who aren’t real happy about this. We’ve humored you enough, don’t you think? Women don’t lead organizations like this.” His nostrils flare as he glares at me, and I start to think maybe I’m wrong. Maybe they will just shoot me dead and make it look like an accident. After all, that’s what Families like mine do. They take the trash out and clean it up silently so no one knows. And with my uncle—their father—working here, I wouldn’t put it past them to even erase the camera footage.

“Back off, Owen.” I click the last round into place and think about the weapon lying

on the shelf behind me where I placed it. I can't afford to be intimidated by them and feel paralyzed. I have to be strong in the face of this sort of aggression or I really am unfit for leadership.

"Or what?" Chase asks, moving closer to me, and without even thinking, I whip around and grab my gun. The steel feels suddenly heavier in my hand as I manage it.

My clip slides in and clicks into place, and I chamber a round before either of them can touch me, and when I spin back around with my gun raised, Owen takes a step back—stopping his momentum toward me with his hands up. His eyebrows are high in surprise. He's startled that I can move so quickly, shocked that my father taught me so well.

"Whoa, easy, Bella. We were having fun." Chase shakes his head and scoffs, but his brother has the right idea.

Owen says, "Look, we're sorry. We want what's best for the Family." I can see in his expression that he's instantly regretting the comments he made and apologetic. Chase doesn't look so apologetic. He looks sardonic, as if his plan was thwarted and he's trying to figure out what to do next to make sure he gets his point across.

"Is that so?" I ask, taking a step forward. "What if what's best for the family is for me to put a bullet in your brain?" I feel a bit bolder with the gun loaded and aimed at him. They are defenseless right now.

Both of them stare at me for a moment, but only one of them seems afraid. Chase rolls his eyes and gestures at his brother. "Come on, Owen. Let's get out of here. We'll deal with this another way." He pinches Owen's shirt and pulls on it as he walks away, and Owen backs away from me with wide eyes for several steps. Even as he turns to go, he still glances over his shoulder several times.

I stand there sternly pointing my gun until I hear the door of the range click shut, and then I start to shake. I shake so much I have to put my gun down for fear of accidentally firing it. Then I slide down the wall and hug my arms over my chest. I don't cry. I find I can't cry. I'm too afraid. They were actually going to harm me over this whole thing.

I knew there would be dissent. I knew not everyone would agree with a female in charge. But I never thought for a second that anyone would seriously threaten me. And after the close call last week, Marco insisted on putting men around me, but I had refused. Now I wish I had said yes.

My fumbling hands pry my phone out of the pocket of my jeans, and I immediately dial Uncle Nicky's number, not wanting Marco to think I'm weak. But when Nicky doesn't answer the phone, I call my mother instead. She picks up on the second ring.

"Hello, dear." Mom's voice is instantly comforting, and I feel tears welling up. It's like her strength and who she is to me allows me to feel weak and vulnerable. I'm rattled to my core, and I can barely put words together.

"Mom," I say, blinking those tears back. My voice shakes, and she must hear it.

"What is it, Bella? What's wrong?" There is fear in her voice too.

"Mom, Owen and Chase just walked in here. I think they were threatening me. I had to pull my gun on them. Mom, I'm scared." I think of the gun lying on the shelf overhead and wonder if I should be holding it instead of leaving it lying.

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“Have you called Nicolo?” she asks, and I whimper. I feel foolish now that I thought I could lead this Family, and when the first threat to my leadership comes, I cower like a child.

“He didn’t answer. What do I do?” My lip quivers, and I bite it to stop the tremors shooting through it, but it does little to stop the way my hand still shakes. I can’t tell whether it’s adrenaline or just terror.

“Call Marco.” Her order is firm and resolute.

“But he will think I’m weak.” The last thing I want is for my husband to doubt my ability to lead my Family. Nicky warned me that there is a potential for him to take over our Family, and if I can’t stand up to my own cousin, how can I stand up to the head of a criminal organization? Maybe they’re right and I’m not cut out for this.

“Do you think he receives death threats?” she asks, but she doesn’t give me time to process the question, let alone formulate a reply. “Do you think he goes places alone? Your father used to have three men with him for security at all times. Why do you think he’s dead now, Bella? Call your husband.”

I think for a moment about what she says, and she’s right. This isn’t weakness, this is wisdom. “Thanks, Mom.”

I hang up without saying goodbye, a byproduct of my nerves. Then I call Marco. He doesn’t answer until the fifth ring, and when he does his voice is harsh, almost a growl.

“What is it?”

I almost feel bad for interrupting him, but this can't wait. “Marco, my cousins were here at the gun range. They threatened me. I'm alright, but?—”

“They what?” he snaps, and the irritated grumble is now a harsh, angry tone. “I'll send a car now. This is why I told you that you need security around you, Isabella.”

I expected him to be comforting, not snap at me. But at least he's sending someone. Maybe I've just interrupted a meeting or something. “I'm sorry,” I mutter, and he sighs into the receiver. Upsetting him was the last thing I wanted, that and letting him down. I want him to think I'm strong and capable, not a mere child who needs a babysitter.

“Never apologize. This is a lesson learned, that's all. You know now that you can trust my opinion and that I'm right about things. I'm just glad you aren't hurt. Text me the address and keep your gun on you and fully loaded. The car will be there in fifteen minutes.”

Marco hangs up, and I reach for my pistol and clutch it in my shaking hands as I type up a message with the address of the gun range for Marco's driver. If Owen and Chase come back, I'll be ready. And next time, they won't even get near me. I'm putting together a security team immediately.

And then I'm going to teach them a lesson.

11

MARCO

The car carrying Isabella arrives just as my meeting with Darnel and a new customer

ends. They depart through the front, and my driver brings Isabella in through the rear. She's visibly shaken and pale. Her hand is clammy when I reach for it. She still holds her weapon in hand, so I disarm her carefully and lay the gun to the side on the counter in the kitchen. She puts on a brave face, but I see right through it, though I don't tell her that. I also see how hard she's trying to prove herself to me, and I don't want to discourage her.

"Come, sit," I tell her, pulling a chair out at the island bar. I never use this area of the home. It's left to my staff for the most part. But today, it becomes my wife's haven as her hands splay on the marble countertop as she lowers herself into the seat. "Let me get you a drink." It takes me a moment of searching the cupboards to find a glass, but I manage to fill it with water from the tap and set it in front of her.

"Thank you," she mumbles, "but really, I'm okay." She pushes a strand of her dark hair out of her eyes and takes the glass to sip water, and I find myself wanting to find those bastards who have her this shaken up and teach them a lesson myself.

"I've given the order to increase security everywhere." I reach out and rest my hand on her back, and she relaxes a bit. "Even at your mother's house. I'm sure your father has excellent men, but now that we know our enemies are not only external, but internal, we can't be too careful." My mind starts to spin. Could it have been Isabella's cousins who told the Bratva where our meet was with the supplier?

"I'm fine," she says tightly, but I can see she isn't fine.

I remember my first run-in with an enemy within my own Family. I was shaken to my core to find my father's brother wanted me dead, all so he could take the throne in my place. Only weeks later, Darnel made a shocking move that exposed the man for embezzlement, and he was whisked off to prison—though I wonder if Darnel had only framed him. It was what showed me that my Family is loyal to me, but I can never be too certain.

“Alright, well, I’m here if you need to talk about it.” I retract my hand, not wanting to anger her. I can see she wants to square her shoulders and take it in stride, and if that’s what she wants, then I’ll support her. “I spoke with Nicolo last night. I’m impressed with his knowledge of your organization, and I’m more confident now than ever that this arrangement is a good thing. We make good partners, Isabella.” I rest my hand on her thigh, and she looks up at me.

“I believe so too.” Her hand still shakes as she sips her water, and her eyes betray the shock she’s still feeling.

“I’ll prepare a car to send for your things as well, and I’ll make sure your mother is comfortable with the men I send to watch over her. If your cousins are out for you, they may attempt to confront her. With you at my house?—”

“What?” Isabella asks, setting the glass down. She looks confused by what I’ve said to her, and mildly irritated too. Her eyebrows dip in the center and she says, “Say that again.”

“I said, I’ll send a car for your things and?—”

“My things?” She turns to face me, and I watch the fear drain out of her face, replaced by frustration. “I don’t need my things here. I need them where I live.”

“It’s time for you to live here.” Sensitive of her afternoon and what she’s been through, I keep my tone low. But I’m not about to be pushed around by her. She is strong—enough so to lead her Family with the right training. And that’s a feat I’m impressed by. But she’s not ready to do it on her own, and her ability to lead is contingent upon her safety. She’ll be safer here.

She scoffs and slides off the chair, shaking her head. “I can’t believe this. Uncle Nicky was right. You think you’re going to start bossing me around now? You don’t

own me, Mr. Romano. Let's get one thing straight. Our names might be on a slip of paper stating that we're married, but this is an arrangement to benefit both of us. You get guns, and I get the backing of your Family to ensure that my Family falls in line. Nothing more."

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Isabella starts to walk away, but I catch her hand and pull her backward into my chest as I stand. Her body leans into me, and I wrap my arms around her and pin her there, leaning down to whisper in her ear.

“Mi amore...” I slide my hands down her hips and grip them, then let my fingers walk across to her navel and lower, cresting her mound until she’s whimpering and putty in my hand. “I don’t take no for an answer. Soon enough, you’ll learn that. And while this marriage is a business transaction, you’ll find it’s beneficial for you to do things my way.”

Isabella pulls away from me and continues walking toward the door, but when she reaches it, she stops and faces me. “I’m not your object, Marco, and I’m not moving in with you. Mother needs me there to protect her.”

“The way you protected yourself this afternoon?” I ask, moving toward her. “Or should I remind you that you called on me to help you out of that situation?” I feel anger rising, but I know she doesn’t mean to frustrate me. She just doesn’t understand. “Let me remind you that you asked me to be your support, to ensure your Family falls in line. How will I do that if you don’t follow my lead?”

Her lips part, and she stammers out a few syllables that make no sense, then she sets her jaw and scowls at me. Her hazel eyes are full of fire as she purses her lips, and I want to kiss her and draw moans from those lips. I want to teach her how exquisite it can be to dive into the depths of ecstasy and let her inner demons out to play lustful games.

“I want to see you successful. What has you so fearful of me?” As I meet her at the

door, I take her hand and bring it to my lips. I prefer to charm her rather than control her, but if disarming her by my charisma and a little chemistry is what it takes, I'm not above it. "You chose to marry me, Bella. I'm sorry if I come across so strongly, but I want to protect you."

"I just don't need your protection. I have my own men for that." Again, she protests my aid, as if she can do this on her own, but I know she knows the truth. She will fail without my support.

"If you were capable of handling this alone, you would never have suggested marrying me, Isabella." I pull her again into my arms and kiss her forehead. "I understand that you are strong and well capable of leading, but you can't do that if you're dead."

She is stiff, holding herself away from me, but I don't relent even when she says, "It's a business transaction, as you said."

"And what good partners we make, no?" I kiss her, finally disarming her, until her body grows limp in my embrace and she clings to me. "I want you in my bed every night. I want to wake not just to your scent on my pillows but with you in my arms. And I want to show you everything I know about how to lead your Family. They'll never see it coming."

She sucks in a deep breath and blows it out as a heavy sigh, then turns her head away. I can't see the expression on her face, but I can tell by the way she resists my embrace that she's not happy. "And you'll ensure Mother is protected too?"

It's the first crack in her weak façade, but I know I've won her over.

"We can't be certain who within your Family is loyal and who will side against you. My men are objective and they follow my orders strictly. No one will even think of

touching your mother. And since you'll be safe with me, no one will come near you, either."

I take her blinking as her agreement and release her. "I still think it would be fine if I were with my mother."

"You'll see. You can trust what I say."

As she walks away, I watch her. She isn't a woman to be rushed or pushed around, but I can't let this alliance fall apart because her cousins take her out. And as much as I want this partnership to last, if only for the sake of my business, there is something about her that I want to hold on to. I'm not letting her out of my sight again. Isabella D'Angelo-Romano is my wife, and I intend to woo her until she believes it in every sense of the word.

12

ISABELLA

The sound of a door slamming somewhere in the house awakens me. I've been here less than a week, and it's too unfamiliar to me. Every little sound startles me, and every night, I've had dreams of my father and brother. I pull the covers up over my shoulder and stare into the room. It's dim but not dark. Sunlight sneaks its way past the thick blackout drapes that hang from ceiling to floor.

Marco's home isn't as comfortable as mine—or rather, my mom's. It's no longer my home at all. This is my home now, even though it doesn't feel like my home. It feels like a hotel, especially given the strange monochromatic furnishings that make every room feel the same. Mom's house is full of vibrant-colored furniture and window hangings, and each room is a kaleidoscope of colors, from the carpet to the throw pillows and even the bedding.

I listen to the sounds of the house too. They're all strangely different. This time of day at Mom's house, there would be the echo of the washer and dryer running the linens while the dishwasher cleaned the breakfast dishes. Here at Marco's, it's silent except for the hum of the bathroom ventilation fan and a bit of muffled shouting downstairs.

Mom built a home. Marco merely has a house. But maybe that's because he has never had the feminine touch in his house to make it into a home. Perhaps he wants me to handle that for him, but I'm no Betty Crocker. I'd much rather spend my time at the gun range or working with our staff or customers. I'm not cut out for interior design and household chores.

My body longs to remain here in the bed where the satin sheets kiss my skin, but I have a big day ahead of me. We have another meet scheduled with our supplier, and this time, our buyer will meet with us as well. With a new face in the business, my own customer has gotten a case of cold feet, and I need to reassure him that I can run my father's business without a problem. I'm a little nervous about how it will go down, but I've been preparing for it. Barring any catastrophe like last time, things should go off without a hitch.

I shove myself out of the warm bed into the crisp air-conditioned air and shuffle toward the bathroom. Marco keeps the thermostat set so low, my nipples harden beneath the nightgown I'm wearing. He asks me to sleep nude with him, but we're still perfect strangers, and though we've had sex once, that doesn't make it any easier. He's lucky I haven't asked for a separate bedroom to sleep in until I feel more comfortable with this arrangement, though he's been nothing but a gentleman.

The pipes squeal to life in the old house as I turn on the hot water tap and wait for it to warm up. I shiver as I sit on the toilet to relieve myself and watch the steam begin to fill the room. My thoughts are on the day ahead of me and the meet up—what will the buyer think? Will the supplier walk the line this time? Too many things could go

wrong, and too many things have gone wrong the last few times. Today has to go off without a hitch.

I flush the toilet and peel off my panties and nightgown, then step into the flow of water, letting the heat relax away my stress. The walk-in shower stall has no door, no glass to steam up. The tile surround is exquisite, though, reminiscent of the bathhouses in Rome where I used to visit my grandparents before their deaths a few years ago. It puts me more at ease as I lather up my hair and shut my eyes to dip my head beneath the flow of water and rinse out the shampoo.

When I open my eyes, however, I'm startled. Marco stands in the shower with me with an expression of complete calmness. His hands reach for me, and my racing heart nearly leaps into my throat.

"What are you doing?" I ask him, suddenly feeling very exposed. Yes, I've had sex with him, but this somehow feels far more intimate. I'm completely naked. The light is on, and his eyes drink me in like I'm his addiction.

"I thought I would shower with you. Maybe you'd like me to wash your back." He reaches for the soap, and I cover my chest. This is too much, too quickly. I'm not ready for this level of intimacy. I've only just lost my virginity, and now he's acting like we're an old married couple who've seen each other naked every day for years.

"Uh, Marco, I'm not so sure about this." My feeble attempt at protest is met with his lips on mine. He walks me backward until my back is pressed against the tile wall. His hand rubs the soap between my legs gently, massaging my tender spot and lathering it up until it slides freely between my thighs.

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"This is really not a good idea," I whisper against his lips. I think of the time and when we have to be at the meet, but it's only an excuse for my internal hesitancy to bed this man again. I'm still so self-conscious about my lack of experience, but it feels so good. His finger gently parts me and slides over my clit, sending shivers down my spine. His other hand pushes into my hair and massages my scalp as if he's saying that it's okay for me to be vulnerable with him. As he continues to explore my body, my muscles start to relax into him.

He pulls away slightly. "Look at me." I open my eyes, and his gaze locks onto mine. It's both intensely hot and reassuringly tender. "Let go. Just enjoy it."

I take a deep breath and bat my eyelashes, giving in to the blissful torture as he slides two fingers inside me and begins to move them in a steady rhythm that matches the beat of my heart. He never breaks eye contact. Every groan and moan that escapes my lips, he matches with one of his own. Every time he looks like he wants to say something, he stops moving altogether, making me whimper for more.

"Fuck, you're so tight," he pants. His other hand finds its way back to my breast, rolling my nipple between his fingers, making it harder. I can feel the way he's already getting aroused, pressing against my thigh. He leans in to kiss me again, and his tongue slips past my lips, tasting like mint toothpaste and desire. I can't help but answer in kind, bucking my hips against his palm as he thrusts deeper into me. The sensation is both foreign and familiar at once. This man knows how to touch me perfectly.

Soon, my inhibitions give way to the desire he's created inside me. My groin burns and aches to feel him enter me and fill me again like he did before. I want him to

teach me the things I've never experienced, to show me how good it feels to be dominated and to submit to pleasure. I moan and claw at his back as his teeth rake over my neck and make goosebumps rise on my arms. He's hard now, and my hand finds his thick length. I grip him, and he growls against my skin as he nips at my shoulder.

"I have so much to teach you," he says as he plants kisses across my shoulder up to my neck and earlobe. I wonder if he means I'm not doing it right or if he's eager to explore my body in uncharted ways.

"I want to learn," I mutter, though it's more like a whimper. My hips grind against his hand, and he growls.

"That's my girl," Marco praises before picking me up by my waist and turning me around so my face is to the wall. He wedges his length between my thighs, teasing me as the water cascades over us both. His hands spread my legs apart to reveal my center, glistening with anticipation. I'm dripping for him, and he knows it. His fingers play at my entrance, dipping in and out, coating himself in my slickness. He gently slides the head of his cock into my slit. He's thick and hard, and my pussy screams for him, but he just teases me.

My chest is crushed between my body and the tile, and his chest presses firmly into my back. I whimper, and my hands slide across the wall feverishly, looking for something to hold on to as his hands part my cheeks. His hot breath dusts my shoulder, and his teeth dig into my skin too. I yelp as his hand comes down hard on my ass. I know there will be a red mark there.

"Shit... oh, God," I hiss, then I moan as I grind backward into him. His cock between my thighs still teases me relentlessly, and his hips begin to pump against my backside.

"You liked this before," he reminds me, his voice rough and achingly sexy. "Don't hold back. You can take it." He slams into me hard then, filling me up completely in one stroke. I cry out from the shock of pleasure, but he doesn't stop. His mouth moves down my neck, teeth and tongue working in tandem with his hips. I feel him growl deep in his chest as he plows into me, claiming me fiercely. The water crashes around us, and the shower pressure intensifies the sensation of being owned by this man. It's like the world has slowed down around us. We're all that exists in this moment.

His grip on my hips tightens as he fucks me into oblivion. My entire body tenses, and my orgasm builds from deep inside me, primed from his previous touches and teasing earlier. He slides in and out of me, each thrust hitting my G-spot with ease. I'm moaning so loudly that I'm sure the whole house can hear us, but I don't care. The pleasure he brings me is too intense to hold back.

"Oh, God, Marco... I'm coming," I pant, still clawing at the wall. My pussy clenches around him and spasms hard, convulsions tugging at my stomach. He doesn't relent, either. His thrusts become hungry and determined, as if he's trying to make me piss myself or something. And when the waves of pleasure stop, I feel him pull back. I whimper at the lack of his girth inside me, but he comes back, this time shocking me to my core.

Marco's thumbs push into my ass, the tight ring of muscles burning and stretching as he pulls his thumbs apart. "Oh, fuck," I groan, and more whimpers rumble up out of my chest. "Oh, God, what are you doing?"

"You'll like it," he says, but it's not reassuring. I'm frantic, pushing on the shower wall, but soon, the head of his cock is teasing my ass too. "Shh... don't hold your breath. Just relax and inhale deeply. One... two... three," he counts off, and I try to do as he says, but the searing pain as he thrusts into me feels like I'm being torn in two.

I let out a wail and a sob and lay my head against the cool tile, but he starts thrusting.

After only a few thrusts, the pain is replaced by the most erotic pleasure I've ever experienced.

"Oh, fucking hell..." I manage before moaning again. Marco growls low in his throat and brings me over the edge once more. His deep, rough voice in my ear commands me to come, and I do. I come like a freight train, screaming as he pounds into me roughly.

"That's it, amore mia," he groans against my ear. "Scream for me."

His dick feels like a ball bat, his girth ripping me apart as I spasm and jerk. The water from the shower rains down on us as my body shakes with his orgasm. My ass clenches around him, and he groans deeply. His self-control is incredible. He powers through my second orgasm by biting down on my shoulder once again. His hands cup both my breasts, and he squeezes them as he grunts. I don't know how much more I can take, but he seems slow to give up.

And when he pulls out for a moment, I think he's finished. But I turn to see him washing his dick, and he smirks at me. "Give me your leg," he says, gesturing, and I lean against the wall helplessly as he hoists one of my knees in the air. His cock slides back into my pussy, and he makes eye contact as he starts fucking me again.

"Now your ass is mine too, Isabella. Every part of you belongs to me." With one hand, he holds my leg up, and with the other, he grips my wrist and pushes my hand between us. I obey him, and I massage my clit as he continues to thrust.

This orgasm comes the most quickly. My body is so on edge from the pleasure of it all that I can't hold back. And he comes too, filling me up with his heat in an explosion I'll feel for hours. "Oh, God... mmm," he groans and slows his thrusts. We both come down from the high and catch our breath beneath the flow of the shower.

My heart is pounding, my knees weak as he takes the soap and lathers me up. His hands are gentle as he washes every crevice I have, especially when he touches my ass. The way he looks at me as he cares for me disarms me entirely. He doesn't allow me to take the soap. He wants to wash me himself. And when he's done, he washes himself and kisses my cheek. Then he whispers in my ear, "Finish up. We have to leave in twenty minutes."

And then he's gone and I'm left with legs that feel like Jell-O and a pussy that's taken a pounding.

I didn't wake up thinking this would happen, but I enjoyed it. Marco knows how to make me feel incredible. He also seems to really desire to care for me, even when I hate him for it—like letting Nicky force me into that car when I was clearly able to defend myself. And fuck if I don't like the way he makes me feel.

I rinse the soap from my skin and touch my clit lightly. It's still so sensitive, and I think of how his fluids drained from me when he pulled out. We're having unprotected sex, which is something I know will lead to pregnancy, if I'm not already pregnant. And that thought begins to tarnish the afterglow of warmth and relaxation I'm feeling.

If I have a baby, whose Family will receive the heir? Will Marco let my son lead my Family? Or if it's a girl, will my daughter be permitted to take his place? I sigh and splash some water on my hot face, then turn the water off. One way or another, I have to make my Family fall in line quickly. If he keeps fucking me like this, my stomach will be in the way of gun battles and no one will let me lead anything. I'll be barefoot and pregnant and relegated to "feminine duties".

And that is something I'm not letting happen.

MARCO

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:04 am

Isabella walks a little more slowly than usual as we cross the warehouse. I hide my smirk, knowing why she is walking a little differently, and place my hand in the small of her back. This morning in the shower was exceptional, and I expect the incredible sex will only continue to satisfy me in the future. For now, however, I need to focus on this meet.

Glancing over my shoulder, I make sure our group is together. We're on the buyer's turf here in this old, empty warehouse. Isabella's father had business with this man for years, but he's a little skittish about my joining the party. Or perhaps he's uncertain about Isabella being a woman in charge of the organization. Either way, I'm here to put his mind at ease and ensure he continues his partnership with her. But the guys from her Family who follow us don't seem to be all too happy to be here.

I watch two of them—likely, brothers, based on looks alone—who've been whispering back and forth since we climbed out of the cars. They came with an older man, perhaps an uncle I haven't met yet, and Isabella rode in my car with me and Darnel. I'm surprised Nicolo hasn't joined us today. He seems very interested in making sure Isabella is taken care of. I like that about him.

“Mr. Laslov, so good to see you again,” Isabella says as we approach her buyer. He stands tall, with broad shoulders and a full crop of silver hair. His hands are clasped in front of his body, and he stares at Isabella's outstretched hand as if she were a leper.

“Ms. D'Angelo,” he says, nodding. After a quick survey of our group, he blinks once and takes her hand to shake it. “It's such a shame what happened to your father. I expected so much more from him.”

Isabella's jaw tightens and her lips purse as she nods. I can see his comment pricks her heart. She hasn't brought her father's death up in conversation once, but I know how it affected her. I feel her tossing in the night, whimpering her father's name in her sleep.

"We all did." She sighs softly and gestures at me, and behind us, we hear the door to the warehouse open and shut. She turns as she says, "This is my husband, Marco. And it looks like our friend has joined us now too. Shall we get down to business?"

The man eyes me warily and then turns to Isabella's Family. "I'll say, I'm rather surprised to see you have taken your father's place." His eyes train on the older man behind Isabella, and I glance at him to see a calm expression on his face. It's clear these two know each other well. Maybe he used to attend the meetings between Mr. Laslov and Isabella's father.

"I am the heir to his throne, sir. And my Family supports me." She says the words with confidence, but I see the looks her cousins give her. One is indifferent, and the other is downright upset. I'm beginning to wonder if these are the two who threatened her. She never told me their names or who it was, but judging by the way the taller one is getting antsy, I can see we may have an issue on our hands again.

"Sir," I say, turning back to the man, "Isabella is more than capable of leading her family. She is her father's daughter. I assure you, the D'Angelo name is in good hands with her."

He looks up at me with mild curiosity in his eyes. "And who are you to speak for her, Mr. Romano? I've heard a lot of things about your organization, and not all of them are good. Am I to believe you are trustworthy as the spouse of someone I'm in business with? Is my business to be threatened by yours?" His eyebrows peak in the center, and I hear shifting behind me. From the corner of my eye, I see Darnel watching the younger men. His expression reveals he, too, senses their unease.

“My reputation speaks for itself, sir. I have plenty of references to that fact. Now, I believe we are here to reaffirm your commitment to my wife’s organization and nothing more.” I notice the supplier standing on the other side of Darnel. He scratches his bearded face and nods his head in silence. If things go well for us, he is assured a large profit off all of this, and he’s finally come around to trusting the arrangement since I’ve increased security across the board.

“I’m not sure that we can come to an agreement without certain concessions.” Laslov looks down his aquiline nose at Isabella and narrows his eyes. “I want a five-percent discount on all of our contracts from now on. It’s the least you can do to assure goodwill.”

There is a bit of a scuffle behind Isabella. Her cousins whisper harshly and push each other a little, and I glance at them with a scowl on my face. She ignores them fully and shakes her head.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Laslov, but my father would never agree to that. Business is business. If you want access to our resources, you will pay the price you agreed upon with him.”

The shoving gets more dramatic behind her, and the older man gets involved.

“Stop it, now,” he whispers harshly, but now Laslov is interested in what they’re saying.

“Do you two care to share what you’re disagreeing about?” Laslov’s eyebrows rise in curiosity, and he sidesteps Isabella so that he’s standing in front of them. The taller one, the one with the glare, puffs his chest out and tugs at his shirt to straighten it.

“Yeah, we don’t agree that she’s the rightful leader of this Family.” He eyes Isabella, who merely scoffs and crosses her arms over her chest. I see the butt of her weapon

peeking out of the back of her jacket and how calm she is. I'd be putting these two dimwits in their place right now.

"Is that so?" Laslov asks, and I hear her uncle mutter something under his breath.

"Yeah, and we want a ten-percent increase." If it were possible, his chest puffs out farther, and then his brother chimes in.

"Yeah, ten percent across the board."

"It's nice of you to chime in, boys, but I can handle this." Isabella turns back to Laslov with her shoulders squared, and as she does, the taller one pulls his gun on her, but before he can even get it on aim, I have my pistol pressed to his temple and my finger on the trigger ready to go.

"Do as the lady says, or your brains will be all over your brother's face," I growl and watch Darnel pull his weapon and point it at the shorter of the two.

The supplier backs away, looking frightened, as usual. And Laslov chuckles as if he's entertained by this. These two are here to be her security and support, not to try to overthrow her authority. I push the barrel of my gun into his temple harder, itching to pull the trigger, and Isabella slowly draws her weapon.

"If you could bear with me for one second," she tells Laslov, then she turns to her cousin. "Owen, I tried to warn you ten days ago that I wasn't to be trifled with, but you just didn't learn your lesson." She removes the safety from her gun and points it at his kneecap and fires. Owen drops to both knees then rolls to his side, screaming in pain. His gun slides across the floor, and Darnel picks it up. The older man behind him gasps in shock and falls with Owen, checking on him as Isabella points her gun at her other cousin.

“And Chase, you know better,” she says, firing off a round into his knee too. If it were me, these two would have been breathing their last breaths. Chase falls alongside his brother, though his weapon is still firmly tucked into his waistband. I keep my gun trained on him as he wails and moans and holds his knee.

“Now, I apologize you had to see that, but where were we?” Isabella asks as she safeties her weapon and puts it back into her waist band. Darnel and I exchange glances as Isabella’s uncle starts dragging the boys out. I can only imagine he is one very upset father after seeing that, but hopefully, she has proven to them that she is serious this time.

“Impressive, Isabella. Your father would be proud to know you handle yourself well, but I believe you missed.” Laslov pulls a cigar from his pocket and trims it carefully, then lights it and takes a drag.

“I hit my target.”

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:04 am

“Hmm...” His puff of smoke sends a ringlet upward, and the sound of wailing and howling coming from Isabella’s cousins fades as they are dragged toward the door. “Weakness is what I see. Usurpers deserve death, not a crack to the knee.”

I lower my gun when the threat is removed and put it in my waistband. The man is like me. That’s a good sign. I hope he is smart enough to see that Isabella isn’t weak at all. She just has to learn the hard way because she hasn’t seen her father in the heat of exchanges like this before.

“I do not see mercy as a weakness. I see it as a strength, Mr. Laslov. I believe my cousins will learn to respect me the way a dog respects its master. All in good time. Now, back to our topic at hand. I will provide the weapons shipments from our good friend here” —she gestures at the supplier who is still cowering— “at the same price my father offered you. Take it or leave it, not a penny less.”

The man sucks on his cigar and stares at her as he thinks, finally nodding and extending his hand. “Alright. I believe we have an agreement.” His eyes scan each of our faces as he shakes Isabella’s hand, and then he says, “Wolves come in all sorts of clothing, dear, not just sheep’s. It will go well with you if you learn that mercy is like pulling a dumb sheep out of a ditch. Unless you build a fence around it, you will continue to pull the same sheep out of that same ditch, over and over.”

As he speaks, his eyes lock on mine, and I have a feeling he is warning her, as if she should worry about me. And for her sake, I hope she takes the warning to heart, not because of me, but because Owen and Chase—whose names I have permanently etched into my memory—will only come back with vengeance.

“It’s good to continue this partnership, Mr. Laslov. I look forward to many successful transactions in the future.” Isabella pulls her hand back and tucks into my side, and I feel how her hand quivers as she wraps her arm around me and we turn to head to the car.

Her heart is racing, evidence of how frightened she was during that altercation, but no one even knew. Not even me. She looked so calm and collected the entire time. I pull her against myself firmly as we follow Darnel and the supplier out. Her uncle’s car is gone, probably off to the doctor to have bullets removed from knees. I lean down and kiss her temple.

“You should have killed them, dear,” I whisper to her, and she clears her throat.

“They just lost an uncle, Marco. They’re grieving too. Mercy was the right option. They won’t mess with me again.” Even her voice shakes now, and I know she will do things her way even when I don’t agree or like it. That’s one thing about Isabella that impresses me the most. She’s as stubborn as they come, and she’s not backing down from anything.

Now, if I can just keep her safe until the weeds in her Family garden are uprooted so she can rest peacefully at night...

14

ISABELLA

Marco wanted to come along with me to have this conversation, but I told him to stay home. It’s been two weeks since Owen and Chase tried to step on my toes, and word has gotten out to the entire Family. My marriage of two short months has made waves. The rift between loyal Family members and those who side with Owen and Chase grows by the minute now. It needs to stop or Father’s legacy will go up in

smoke.

“Isabella, you have to understand that the boys are only trying to protect the Family. It’s not often that a woman leads and?—”

“Enough!” I shout, cutting him off. I’ve had more than enough of his explanations and excuses for their behavior. Uncle Danny might be their father, but he still falls under my authority as leader of this Family, and I won’t tolerate it. “If they had done that to my father, he would have shot them dead on the spot. You’re lucky you’re not attending a wake right now.”

Danny’s head drops and he sighs hard. “Thank you for not killing my boys, Isa. I’m sure your father would be upset by your merciful choice. We’re just—they’re just worried that your arrangement with Mr. Romano is going to go sideways. He’s a powerful man. He could power his way around you and take over this Family in a heartbeat. It would lead to all-out war or worse, splintering what we have and destroying the entire organization.”

He sinks into the wingback chair near the fireplace and runs a hand across his balding head. I see Marco’s men—security he insisted come with me—exchange a glance. They stand on either side of the door. The parlor at my parents’ house is where Father used to have meetings like this. I’m ashamed of my Family that I even have to host this meeting reprimanding my uncle for going along with his sons and their insurrection attempt.

“Marco has done nothing but support every decision I’ve made. And I have every confidence he will continue to do so. Have you spoken with Nicolo about this?” Danny’s eyes haze over with anger. There’s bad blood between my uncles. Danny believes Nicolo manipulates me the way he is accused of doing to my mother too. It couldn’t be further from the truth. Uncle Nicky is just as honorable as my father, which is why Father brought Nicolo into the fold and trusted him more than his own

brother.

“Nicolo is a weasel and a snake.”

My stomach turns, and I swallow bile that pushes into the back of my throat. I don't know if I'm coming down with something or if it's nerves. The idea that I may be pregnant has also tumbled around my head a few times this week as nausea overtook me early in the morning upon waking. My cycle is only a few days late, but my gut tells me it's not coming. I sigh and sit across from Danny, clasping my hands in front of myself.

“If you cannot come to terms with Nicolo being my trusted advisor, then you may find yourself out of this Family too, Danny. Owen and Chase are lucky they still have their lives. Next time, I will not be so forgiving. This Family has seen enough death, don't you agree?” I feel my hands shaking as I wait for his response, and I wring them before wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans.

I know I'm safe. Marco's men will never let Uncle Danny harm me. That's not what I'm worried about right now. Not only do I have the growing concern of my family not fully supporting me, but I'm also faced with the expected consequence of having unprotected sex. I did not think it would happen this fast, but that fleeting thought moments ago has set up camp in my brain and it's all I can think about.

“His enemies have become our enemies, Isa.” Danny looks concerned and leans forward, clasping his hands around mine. “We've never had a problem with the Russians, and now they are on our doorstep. They interrupted our meeting, started a firefight. We're lucky no one on our side was killed. What will they do next?”

The idea that Marco's enemies, as big and powerful as they are, will come after us is absurd. They did not break up that meeting because of us. They were after Marco, and I'm not worried the least bit about them. Still, if this is the way the Family feels,

then as the leader, I must do something about it.

“All the more reason to bind together and be one strong unit. With Marco’s men, we make a formidable force. I know you can agree to that. The issue is that those who oppose me as their leader have become my enemy, not my Family. And if I have to, I will bring the full force of Marco’s organization against them to cull the herd.” I stand and pull my hands from his before he realizes how shaky they are.

His eyes go wide and then he nods. I believe I’ve sent my message loud and clear. I won’t back down. I won’t give up my right to this position, and I won’t be pushed around.

“Very well, then...” He stands too and nods at me before walking out. Moments later, my mother walks in and rushes to my side.

“Oh, baby, I’m so worried about you. You aren’t cut out for this. You deserve a life of comfort and safety.” She cups my cheeks and pushes my long, dark hair out of my eyes. I sink into her arms, wrapping myself around her until I feel calm again. I want that life—safety and comfort—but living from the safety of a comfort zone is not really living at all.

“It’s so overwhelming, but I have to do it. The Family is divided now, and I have to bring them back together.” Her hair smells like the coconut shampoo she uses. I’m transported back to a time when I was just her baby girl, crawling on her lap because I skinned my knee. Now, I’m the leader of the largest criminal organization in Newark, and I may be carrying a child of my own.

“Your father would be so proud, honey. But don’t take the weight of the world on your shoulders. You can let Nicolo lead if it’s too much. I know Mr. Romano will help him. He is a good man.”

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:04 am

Mom's remark about Marco comforts me. Even she sees that he is doing what he can to help our Family in the wake of my father's death. In time, my cousins and other extended family will see it too. I don't know what will cause them to come around, but they will. Even Owen and Chase, who used to pick on me and pull my pigtails as a child. We have too much history and love for each other to let this ruin us. At least I do.

"Thank you, Mom. I think I need to go." I extract myself from her embrace and nod at one of Marco's men. "I have a stop to make before we head home."

Mom's hand lingers on mine as I take a step away. "Please, come visit me more often. The house is so quiet without your father..." Her eyes sparkle with emotion, and I smile at her.

"I'll come by tomorrow for lunch, how's that?" When she blinks out a tear and nods, I slip out, followed by my security detail.

If I really am pregnant, I'm going to need her support and advice more than ever. She may not know thing one about leading a criminal organization, but she knows how to rear children and raise them. That singular thought consumes me the entire way to the pharmacy. I manage to slip in and out to purchase the pregnancy test—stashed in a white paper bag to keep it private from even Marco's men—and we make it home before Marco has returned from his other business errands.

I lock myself into the bathroom and pull out the box. I've never even seen a pregnancy test before other than in commercials. My hands shake as I pull out the airtight foil pack and tear it open. I lay the plastic wand on the counter and read the

directions inserted into the package too. It seems simple enough—hold the foam end of the wand under the stream of my urine and then wait three minutes for the test to develop.

It's awkward trying to hold the stick between my legs as I urinate, and I almost drop it into the bowl. But when I'm finished, it lies on the counter staring back at me as I wash my hands and flush the toilet. The stress of it has me feeling like I may vomit, so I sit on the rim of the claw-foot bath and force myself not to look at the test. Instead, I count the tiles on the floor from wall to wall, then multiply them in my head to determine how many tiles make up the floor.

Minutes pass, I'm not sure how many of them because I'm so lost in my thoughts about a possible pregnancy. What will I have, a boy or a girl? And if it's a boy, whose heir will he be? Marco will demand he be raised to ascend the Romano throne, but my blood runs thick with my father's spirit. My son should be the heir to my father's throne, not Marco's.

When I can't take the torture anymore, I stand and walk back to the sink. Two pink lines stretch parallel across the clear readout window. My chest tightens and I rub my face hard. I'm pregnant. I'm carrying a secret that may take me out of the game permanently. Not only will my stomach blossom into a huge obstacle in this business, but when Marco's enemies learn I'm carrying his heir, I'll have a target on my back.

"Isabella!" I hear in a booming baritone. Marco is home now, but he is still downstairs.

I snatch the test and all the packaging and shove it all back into the white paper bag before scrunching it up and throwing it in the trash. It's too obvious. He'll wonder what it is, so I pull it back out, take some other trash out, then put it back in and cover it. My heart races, and I scurry to the bathroom door to unlock it just as I hear the bedroom door open.

“Isabella, are you in here?” He’s so close and I’m so panicked. How will I tell him this secret? Or should I even tell him?

“In here,” I call. Then I flush the toilet again for good measure and turn on the water to wash my hands.

“I’ve brought dinner—some linguini. I hope you’re hungry.” He stands on the other side of the door, talking through it, and I look myself in the eye and will myself not to cry. I’m carrying his baby, and I’m happy about that, but I’m also terrified of what will happen next.

“Sounds delicious. I’ll be right out.” I wash my hands a little longer than I should, but I need to put my poker face on and right now, it seems impossible.

“And after that, I’ll have you for dessert. I bought a little something for us to play with.”

Sex is the last thing on my mind right now, especially sex with toys. But I squeak out, “Bought something?”

“It’s a surprise. I’ll be waiting downstairs. Don’t take too long, now.”

His footsteps move away from the door, and I fold myself over the counter with wet hands and the water running. A baby changes everything. My Family will never let me lead if they find out. I’ll be relegated to my mother’s house where I’m safe and out of the way of danger.

No, I have to keep this a secret until my body makes it obvious that I can’t. And hopefully, by that time, the rift in my family will be healed and their confidence in me will be certain. If not, I’ll lose everything.

MARCO

Soft music fills the air. The room is dim, lit by aromatic candles and the scent of whiskey, which swirls in the glass I hold. Isabella rejected the glass I offered her, which is abnormal, but she seems tired. I sit next to her on the couch, one arm draped around her shoulders as she leans into me and rests her hand on my chest. Her hazel eyes stare up at me with desire. The day got away from us, and this is the first time we've even sat to talk.

"I believe this arrangement of ours is far superior to the one I had with your father." I sip the whiskey and kiss her forehead. A soft smile graces her lips, and I think she agrees with me.

"Because you get a beautiful woman on your arm?" Her fingers play at the buttons on my shirt. We've had sex a few times, but each of those times, I've been the one initiating it, indulging in the finer benefits of this marriage. Tonight, Isabella appears to be interested, and I'm letting her guide the evening.

"I love your confidence, and absolutely, yes. I have the most beautiful woman on my arm, in my home, in my bed." She snuggles closer to me, pushing her chest against the side of my ribcage. I set my whiskey on the end table and push a hair out of her eyes. "But it's more than that. We've merged two Families into one through our union. You know the old proverb, When one is in the bed alone he is cold, but two together stay warm..."

It works in business too. Having partnerships with others, whether they be customers or suppliers or just good business connections, is always better. It's like building an empire of people all doing their own thing in partnership—cogs in a larger machine that keep it strong and running well.

“I think you mean, If it is cold, two can sleep together and stay warm, but how can you keep warm by yourself?” Her smile grows, and I capture her hand and kiss her knuckles.

“See, beautiful and smart.” I rain more kisses on her hand, and then she weaves her fingers between mine and sighs.

“I’d like to stay warm in bed with you.” Her suggestive tone sends a zing of arousal through my groin, and the animal in me wants to pull her onto my lap and have my way with her. But I restrain myself and let her lead on.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:04 am

“Yes, well, I’m tired. It’s been a long day. I suppose we can retire early if you’re ready.” I look at my watch and see that it’s only just after eight p.m. I catch a hint of disappointment in her eyes. I have to hide a smirk, though, because I have no intention of retiring early. I am merely coaxing the vixen out of her, wanting to see how badly she wants me. She’s new to all of this, and I imagine she doesn’t even know where to begin.

“Well, I was thinking of going to bed but not to sleep.” She looks up at me, tipping her head until her neck is exposed. I think about biting her tender skin, right below her earlobe, perhaps even sucking until a love kiss appears. My dick is tingling, blood already rushing to the area in preparation, and it takes all my self-restraint to keep from flipping her over and pinning her down.

“Mrs. Romano, are you suggesting we...?” I let the words trail off, hanging in the air as the smile returns to her lips. She leans closer still, her tits now crushed against the side of my body as her right leg slides across my lap.

“That’s exactly what I’m suggesting.” Her body rises slowly until her pelvis grinds on my thigh and her lips brush over mine. It’s passionate and electric, making the nerve endings in my fingers itch to touch her skin.

I cup her cheek and pull her mouth against me hard as she continues to shift positions until she’s straddling me. My hands have minds of their own, sliding beneath her shirt to brush across the soft, creamy skin on her hips. She’s hungry for me. I don’t know what’s come over her, but I’m enjoying it. It’s the first indication that she’s enjoying the more personal and intimate side of this arrangement—that it’s becoming a relationship rather than a business transaction.

“Mmm, I want you to do that thing... With your tongue...” Her hungry words come as her hands begin to undo my shirt buttons, and her hips are grinding on me. I will have no problem fulfilling each of her requests.

I push her shirt up, exposing her tits, still imprisoned in the lace and silk of her bra, and I bite the inside of her cleavage and leave a mark. She hisses and then snickers, playfully pushing me away. As I reach for the clasp to undo it, the doorbell rings. Except, whoever it is does not wait for me to come answer, or one of my staff, either. The door bursts open, rattling the pocket doors as a gust of wind is released into the main hallway.

“Fuck’s sake,” I grumble, realizing our rendezvous is at best postponed and at worst, over completely. “Who is it!” I shout, holding Isabella to my lap, though she squirms to get up.

“Marco, God...” she hisses, pushing on my chest as the pocket door separating the living room from the hallway where our guest trespasses slides open.

Victor stands gasping for air with blood streaming down his face onto his suit. The white button-down shirt he wears is covered in droplets, and the lapels of his jacket are stained red. His hands have blood on them too, and they appear burned. His hair is singed, and his wide eyes tell a tale of horror.

Isabella leaps off my lap, no longer restrained by my firm grip, and I rise with her as she scurries to the door to guide my brother into the room. Her shirt falls back down, covering her more sensitive parts I had just exposed, and I stomp over to where she dotes on him.

“Oh, God, come sit. What happened?” She ushers him to the leather armchair near the fireplace and flips on the light that sits on the stand next to the chair. In the brighter light, I can see tiny pinpricks of blood across his forehead and ears and I

know just what has happened, but not by whom or how.

“Car bomb,” he stutters out, and I see blood drop from his mouth. He’s even taken glass shards to his mouth, probably as he screamed in horror while the bomb went off. He had to have been standing right next to it.

“Christ,” I growl, and I reach for the box of tissues and thrust it out toward him. Victor reaches to take it, but Isabella grabs it from my hand and pulls out a few tissues. He inevitably takes the box, but only so she can baby him. “When...? Where?” It’s obvious he’s okay, so I want details. “Get off him and let him talk,” I order her, but she is frantic, swiping and dabbing at the blood to remove it, only to have more come oozing out of the microscopic cuts.

“What is wrong with you? Can’t you see he’s injured?” She doesn’t even look up at me as she continues to clean him up.

“Bratva... They got Tony. Man, he was right there. I tried to pull him out and my hands...” He shows me his palms, both with second-degree burns and blistering. “God, he died right in front of me. That should have been me. They were trying to kill me.” He’s in shock. I don’t even know how he got here. He must have walked the entire way from where he was.

“And the car?” I stalk over and take the tissues away from Isabella, trying to prove the point that Victor only needed minor first-aid, not a fucking wet nurse.

“It’s gone. Burned up. I couldn’t get the plates off it.” He touches the blisters on his skin and stares at his hands.

“Marco, you’re being an animal. Let me help him.” Isabella reaches for the box of tissues in my hand, and I hold them out of her reach. “What the hell is wrong with you? He’s your brother.”

“He’s a soldier in a war, and he has crucial information to give me. This is nothing but a flesh wound and you’re acting like his mother.” I glare at her, and she glares back but then walks away. I don’t know where she’s going, and I don’t care. I turn my attention back on Victor and ask, “You didn’t see when they planted it? Where were you? Is there camera footage? We need to call our guys at the precinct and make sure no one finds that license plate.”

My questions come hot and fast. We have no time to lose when something like this happens. Cover-ups are different from clean-ups, and a car bomb draws a lot of attention.

“Just off Strivers Row.... God, they almost killed me.” Victor is a bit heavy on the dramatics as I pull my phone out and shoot off a rapid fire of text messages to our boys in blue, and Isabella returns from wherever it is she disappeared to. She has tweezers in hand and an armful of towels.

“Come, lie down on the sofa,” she says as she spreads a towel out for him to lie on. He stands and removes his jacket, and I shake my head at the idiocy. “It’s going to scar if we don’t get the glass out.”

“My God, woman, you will be the death of me.” I sigh hard and bite my tongue. She’s so obstinate that she will disregard a direct order, and as my wife and the leader of her own Family, there’s nothing I can do.

Victor lies down on the couch as she hovers over him, using her tweezers to pinch the bits of glass that have penetrated his skin and pull them out. I run a hand through my hair and think of what our next steps should be, but her disobeying me doesn’t sit well with me. I’m worked up over the car bombing and my evening with her being ruined, and I unleash all that frustration on her.

“Will you get off him? He needs to help me think, not suck your tit.” I grab her wrist,

and she smacks my hand and yanks it away.

“You’re an ass!” She stands to her feet, tweezers in hand, and scowls at me. She’s seething. “Do you understand that your enemy has now become my enemy? My Family is in this line of fire right along with you, so back off. I’m leading the way I knowhow, and if I were you, I’d be going on the offensive to make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

Isabella turns around and drops to her knees beside Victor again, agonizing over the tiny cuts with white washrags in hand to stymie the flow of blood her surgery produces. Victor winces and bites down hard, gritting his teeth as she pulls out the glass, and I back down. She’s not going to listen to me right now. She’s doing the only thing that can actually be done—recovery and planning.

“She’s right,” Victor says before yelping in pain.

“God, sorry, some of these are deep.” She dabs at the fresh blood, and I see the size of a glass shard that nearly punctured his eye socket.

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“I think so too.” I pace, running a hand through my hair and thinking about our options. “We have to strike back. We can’t let them think we’re weak. They have to know that this new alliance with the D’Angelo Family means more strength and power. We are not cowards, and we won’t run away.”

I listen to the whimpers and groans my brother emits and try to decide the best way to hurt our enemy. An eye for an eye isn’t possible if we don’t know where they hide. That means we’ll need surveillance and intel. Our boys in blue might be able to help with that after they cover up this incident.

“They tried to kill me, so I say we take one of them out, or at least scare one of them real good. It can’t be some low-level schmuck, either. It has to be someone high up.” Victor is starting to think more clearly now, and that’s what we need. Level heads and clear minds.

“Yes, you’re right. ThePakhan’sson. I know where he frequents.” Isabella’s suggestion is genius, and even better that she knows where he might be found.

“How do you know that?” I ask, turning to face her. She looks up at me and shrugs a shoulder.

“I’ve seen him around when I snuck out at times. Father had me under lock and key, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know things. We’re roughly the same age, and I know people who know him.” She returns to her work, and a plan begins to come together in my head. We can kill the heir, or at the very least scare him within an inch of his life, and we’ll send a very clear message—Don’t mess with the Romano-D’Angelo alliance.

ISABELLA

It's dark. The car idles, parked at a distance from the little bookstore we know to be owned by our enemies. We watch through binoculars as two of Marco's men and two of mine approach the building. Our plan—to injure thePakhan'sson but not kill him—is in place. It's been one week since the car bombing on Victor and it's time we send our message—We won't be intimidated by you and we won't back down.

“We'll have to get out of here quickly. The cops will be on us fast,” I tell him without taking my eyes off the front of the bookstore. We expect the swarm of police to descend on us in record time since this store is the hub of a lot of criminal activity. They get called here so frequently, I wouldn't be surprised if they had a special response team just for this location.

“Yes, but the boys know what they're doing.” Marco's gravelly voice is fraught with tension. He's been on edge and angry ever since Victor staggered into his home that night. I don't blame him. I know how it feels, only worse. Lucco was shot dead, and I still haven't gotten a chance to get vengeance for the murders of the two men I loved most in this world. Even this strike isn't enough.

I'm the merciful one, the one who likes rehabilitation and second chances. But even I would gun these sick bastards down in cold blood and never think twice. Marco, on the other hand, wisely noted that if we come in that hot, it will only lead to a war that we don't want to entangle ourselves in. It's bad enough as it is. To escalate things by murdering thePakhan'sson would be to incite the entire southeast side of the city to violence.

He fails to see how they made the first strike by killing my father and explains how it was only their first hit against my Family. I say the war is on already and I'm

prepared to fight in it for the long haul, even as my stomach rolls with the nausea I hide from everyone.

I put my binos down for a moment and open the glovebox where I've stashed a few peppermints. Squinting into the darkness to keep my eyes fixed on the bookstore's entrance, I tear open the little plastic packet and pop the mint into my mouth and suck on it, then put the wrapper into my pocket and lift my binos back to my eyes. The mint helps but doesn't alleviate all of the nausea. I just have to make it through a few more minutes, and we'll be on our way home.

"There they go," Marco whispers, as if speaking the words aloud would tip off our enemy and give them a chance to prepare for the attack.

I watch as the four men walk in formation, Darnel flanking the younger three men as they open the door and rush the place. I hear the rapidPop-Pop-Popof weapons discharging and hold my breath. The lights in the storefront go off, and more gunfireechoes around the street, then the men swiftly retreat, rushing back up the street from where they'd come.

Marco reaches down and turns the key, and we hear sirens in the distance already. The report of gunfire has gone out, and the police will be here in under ninety seconds. I lean back into the seat, waiting for the call on the radio that the job is done and that no one is injured in the process. It took a lot of coercion to get a few of my cousins to work together with Marco's uncle and one of his soldiers.

"Why aren't they calling in?" I ask, buckling my seat belt. The binos on my lap slide off onto the floor as Marco pulls out into the street and accelerates quickly.

"They'll call, just hold on." I can tell he has a driver usher him around everywhere he goes because his driving abilities need work. Or maybe he's just reckless when he's fidgety and on edge. I grip the handle on the door and brace myself as he takes a

sharp turn and punches the gas pedal.

The radio crackles to life, staticky and so low in volume I barely hear it. I reach for it instinctively, cranking the sound up in time to hear Darnel's voice.

"Job is done. Target is hit but not killed. Message is sent. Over."

Sighing with relief, I drop the walkie-talkie and put my head back to the head rest. It's over. At least this portion of it. They will retaliate, but they will think long and hard about coming after the Romano-D'Angelo alliance again.

"God, I've never been more anxious in my life." Finally on a stretch of road where Marco isn't weaving back and forth and making sharp turns, I let go of the handle and wring my hands in my lap.

"Is that why you've been eating those mints like they're going out of style?" he asks, but he doesn't look at me. I'm glad for that. I have no poker face right now.

I've known for a week that I'm pregnant, and I intend to keep it a secret from him and everyone else for a while, including Nicky and my mother. I know they will be elated. Mother will be happy for a grandchild and Nicky for an heir to my father's throne. But Marco will expect my firstborn to be a son who will ascend to his throne in time, and I am beginning to realize this alliance may have been a mistake. There may have been a way to get Marco to back me up and support me as leader of my own Family without the marriage.

But hindsight is twenty-twenty, and I'm stuck with the situation I have.

"They calm my nerves, yes, but I'm feeling a bit off. I think I'm coming down with something." The lie slips from my lips, and I feel no guilt at all. I am protecting my future until I know what to think about all of this. I'm only twenty-one. So many

things could still happen to change the outcome of this arrangement. I need to protect my assets.

“Well, let's get you home to rest, and Victor and I can plan our defense. They'll be coming for revenge, and we should be ready. Now that your Family is connected with mine, I can teach them how I defend myself. You've never been safer.”

I listen to him go on, detailing how he's kept his upper circle safe from harm since his father passed and how his father followed the same protocols and his father before him. Outside of the mistake with Victor last week, they haven't had a hit that took out a major player in the history of the Family. It's valuable information, but most of it goes in one ear and out the other as I fight to keep my dinner down.

At home, Victor waits in the living room for us. I stand in the doorway and acknowledge his presence, but my stomach flip-flops and I know if I don't get to the toilet soon, there will be a mess to clean up. So, I excuse myself and head to the bedroom alone. I shed my jacket and shoes and kneel by the toilet as yet another wave of nausea crashes into me. All of my dinner comes up, and maybe some of my lunch too, but I feel much better when it's over.

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I brush my teeth and begin peeling the layers of clothing off, fully intending to take Marco up on the offer to turn in early. My body is growing a human being and it's exhausting me. I'd go to a doctor for prenatal care, perhaps some vitamins and medicine to help with the nausea, but I can't alert anyone to what's going on, so I'm left to suffer on my own.

When I've stripped down to only my panties, I head for the dresser and open the drawer. I search for a nightgown, standing in the chilly air that hardens my nipples. I hear the door click open. I glance over my shoulder to see Marco walk in. He looks calmer than he was earlier, and he has a compassionate expression.

"Are you okay?" he asks, coming to stand behind me. His warm hands grip my biceps and he kisses the back of my head.

"Feeling sick. I think I have the flu or a tummy bug. I'll be fine tomorrow." I pluck a red satin gown from my pajama drawer and start to back away, but Marco wraps his arms around me and kisses the top of my shoulder.

"Victor left. We have a plan to keep our defenses high and our eyes alert. There isn't much we can do unless we know what sort of retaliatory strike they will bring against us." He kisses my shoulder again, and I lean my head against his.

I'm becoming comfortable with him now, no longer embarrassed or shy to be naked in front of him. It's true what they say about sex, how it changes everything. It's taken this complete stranger, a mere business partner I work with, and made him seem closer, intimate with me. And Mother was right, this mutual respect has turned to a fondness. I realized it the other night when we were alone and talking softly.

I enjoy Marco Romano as a man, not just as a business partner or leader. He's rough around the edges, he has a temper like a pit viper, and his bark is definitely bad, but his bite is lethal, and all of that amounts to a ferocious king I can both respect and feel safe with. Not to mention the way he makes my body feel and the things he says to me, the way he treats me. I get the feeling that this isn't just business for him, either. I sense he's growing fond of me, or attached at the very least. It makes me wonder about our future and our child, but I get no further than a fleeting thought before his hands slide up my arms to my shoulders.

He begins working my muscles, massaging and kissing. It feels good to have the tension rubbed out of them, so I stand there and relax, letting my head hang. The red satin nightgown hangs from my hands and I moan softly.

"Wow, I didn't realize how tense I was."

"It's not easy being at the top. You carry it all in your body, and then you find ways to get the needed release at times," he says, and a kiss follows his words. His lips brush over my shoulder, then his hands push my dark locks aside so he can kiss the back of my neck.

His thumbs push into my muscles and swirl, pinching and kneading the flesh beneath them. I lean backward into him and feel his growing erection. To him, this isn't just relaxation, this is preparation for release. He's hungry for me, and I find my body responding to the feeling of his cock against my ass. But I soak up every second of the massage and ensure that he hears my pleasure moans.

The nightgown falls from my hands, landing on my feet, and I reach around and grip his thighs as his lips press against my skin and he gives a light suck. The stubble of his chin scrapes on my skin, eliciting waves of goosebumps. This is a man I could bed every night the rest of my life and it would never get boring or old. His fingers know just what my flesh needs, and he willingly meets those needs without my even

asking.

“Should we retire to bed?” His kisses on my shoulders continue as his hands slide back down my arms. I tilt my head to the side and allow him to suck on my earlobe, and he bites it.

“Mmm, I think that sounds amazing.” He leads me to bed and turns the covers down, but I’m never quite prepared for what comes next. My body is supercharged and ready for whatever it is he wants to show me this time. I am his willing participant. I just hope I don’t throw up again.

17

MARCO

Isabella's skin is warm beneath my hands as I slide them across her body. I pluck her panties from her, tugging them over her hips and down her legs until they're puddled on the floor next to my slacks and shirt, which I shed moments ago. She lies on the pillow, looking up at me innocently. She has no idea what she does to me, how hard she makes me.

I part her knees, and she looks hesitant as I lower my face to her core. My tongue flicks out, and I tease her swollen clit, making her moan loudly in this empty room. My cock aches inside my boxers, throbbing for her.

"Marco..."

My name falls from her lips as I plunge my tongue into her wet heat, twisting and swirling inside her. She tastes like honeydew melons, sweet and delectable. Her nails dig into the sheets as I bring her pleasure, my other hand gently circling her clit. I can feel her walls clench around my tongue, and I know she's enjoying it. I groan against

her skin, and she moans louder. I increase my pace, sliding my tongue faster, fingers curling inside her, and nibbling on her clit.

"Oh, fuck... I..." She moans as her hips buck upward, grinding against my face. Her orgasm is building, I can tell by the way her body tenses.

"Marco... I'm..."

I don't reply, only push her further toward the edge by flicking her swollen nub with my tongue. Her thighs tremble around my ears as she climaxes, screaming out my name, her juices drenching my face. I continue to lick her until she finally collapses back onto the bed, panting and trying to catch her breath.

I climb up her body, pressing my lips to hers in a passionate kiss. My cock is hard and aching for release as I press against her.

"Marco..." She murmurs against my lips as her hands roam over my chest, down to the waistband of my boxers. I help her remove them before positioning myself at her entrance. She's still panting from her orgasm, but she nods eagerly when I ask if she's ready for me. Her eyes widen as I reach for the restraints from the bedside table, but she doesn't resist when I gently tie her wrists to the headboard. She looks up at me with anticipation and trust, and it turns me on even more.

"What are you doing?" she asks, and I feel her legs quiver on either side of my hips.

"There are all sorts of fun things I get to teach you, caramia." I kiss her fingers as I finish tying her hands up.

Then I kiss her lips softly before trailing kisses down her neck, collarbone, and between her breasts. Her nipples are already hard and begging for attention, so I give them some by taking one into my mouth and sucking on it lightly. She moans as I

switch to the other nipple, rolling it between my fingers while my tongue flicks over it. Her hips start to move against mine, seeking friction.

"Please, Marco," she whispers breathlessly, arching her back and pressing herself closer to me.

I can feel myself getting close to the edge just from these simple acts of foreplay, but I want to make sure she's fully satisfied first. I kiss my way down her body until I reach her core again. This time, instead of using my tongue, I take out a small vibrating bullet from the bedside drawer.

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She hisses in surprise as I turn it on and run it over her clit. "Ahh..." She gasps at the sensation and pulls against the restraints. Slowly, I insert two fingers inside her as the vibrator continues its work on her sensitive nub. She throws her head back in pleasure and moans loudly. I pump my fingers in and out of her tightness while circling her clit with the vibrator faster. It's not long before she's writhing underneath me again, unable to control herself as she approaches another orgasm.

"Marco... oh, God... Marco!"

As she reaches her peak, I pull the vibrator away and give her clit a slap. She cries out in surprise, but her body responds immediately as her orgasm washes over her. I continue to smack her pussy with my hand, prolonging her pleasure. Her hips buck and wind, her pussy clenching around my fingers.

"Mmm... Mar...co..." she moans, her eyes hazy with lust as I smack her pussy again and again. She shudders and convulses, and I grin at my handiwork as her body comes down from its high.

With one last slap, I remove my fingers from her soaked heat and move back up to look her in the eye. "Are you ready for me now?" I ask, my voice low and deep with desire.

"Mmm..." she moans, eyes closed and head limp. She's not ready for this, but I'm going to give it to her.

I grip her under the armpits and push her upward until she's sitting up. She yelps in surprise. "What now? We're done?" she asks innocently.

"Not even close," I growl, feeling my cock twitch just thinking of this. There's so much she doesn't know, so much she hasn't learned. I move closer to her, stroking my cock. Precum beads on the tip, smearing down my shaft as I stroke, and she licks her lips and stares at it as I approach her.

"What are you doing?" Her voice is a whisper, but I can tell by the look in her eyes that she's catching on.

"You're going to suck me."

I tap my dick against her chin and grin. "Open up," I tell her as the precum dots her face. She squirms a little, but she obeys me, dropping her jaw to accept my girth.

"That's good... take it all... Mmm, that's my girl," I croon as she swallows my cock, her eyes watering up slightly. I can feel her tightness around my tip, and it takes all of my self-control not to come right then and there. Her tongue is hot and wet around my shaft, licking and sucking me until my knees almost buckle with pleasure. "Ahh... fuck. Keep going. Good girl."

She moans around me, which vibrates through my length, making me even harder. Her hands twist in the restraints, and I grab a handful of her hair and pull her head back, opening her throat for me to enter. Her cheeks hollow out, creating suction as she bobs up and down my length.

"Open up," I growl, and then I'm all the way in her mouth, fucking her throat with long, deep thrusts. Her eyes water, but she doesn't complain. Instead, she suckles and moans around my cock.

She gags and chokes, but I don't let up, using her as my own personal fuck toy. Her saliva drips down my shaft, and I groan at the heat and wetness surrounding me.

"Such a good little cocksucker," I praise her, feeling my orgasm building inside me.

Isabella moans around me, the vibrations sending me over the edge. With one final thrust, I come hard in her mouth, filling it with my hot cum. She swallows greedily and licks me clean as I pull out of her mouth with a satisfied sigh.

"Fuck... that was amazing," I say, panting heavily as I untie her from the bedpost. Her arms drop to the mattress, and she yawns as she curls up on her side and pulls the blankets up over her.

I lie down behind her and pull her into my chest, kissing the back of her shoulder. She's exhausted from the day and probably still feeling sick. Maybe I should have thought of that before I initiated sex, but she didn't resist me.

"How do you feel?"

"Just tired now. I think I'd like to go to bed early, if that's okay..." Another yawn hits her, and I watch as she rubs her eyes. As much as I want to stay here and pleasure her over and over again tonight, I have business to take care of.

"Of course, bella mia. You rest. I have to speak with Victor. The men are probably in the den, waiting for me." I kiss her shoulder again and slide out of bed, making sure the blankets stay snugly covering her body. "I'll come up to bed later."

Before I'm even dressed and at the door, Isabella is snoring lightly. I pause for a moment and look at her as she sleeps. Her disheveled hair splays out around her on the pillow, but she's calm and at peace. I could watch her for hours, this beautiful creature who is mine now. I am a lucky man to have her and luckier still that no other man ever has or ever will have her.

Downstairs, I walk into my den to the sound of male voices and laughter. The maid

hovers over Dietrich, who took a bullet, apparently. She's dabbing blood from his skin as he winces. Nicolo, Darnel, Victor, and one of Isabella's cousins I haven't met yet lounge on the couches with glasses of whiskey and lit cigars sending plumes of smoke upward.

"It was a good night," Victor says, raising his glass, and all the men raise theirs.

"But there will be consequences," I remind them sternly. "Injuring the Pakhan's son on his own territory is a daring move. Yes, we were retaliating for their attempt on Victor's life, but they won't take it lying down. We sent a message that we aren't putting up with their shit. That doesn't mean they won't keep flinging it."

I walk to my liquor cabinet and take the bottle of Irish rum and fill a glass, then put the bottle back and carry my glass to my chair at the head of the room. The leather squeaks as I sit down and prop up my stockinged feet, and the men turn their attention toward me. Nicolo gestures at the unknown man in the room.

"This is Fabian, my nephew. He joined us this evening. He has some interesting things to say." Nicolo sips his whiskey as he gives space for the younger man to speak.

Fabian is green. I can tell by his overeagerness. His eyes blink rapidly, and he leans forward, folding his fingers together. I've seen him a few times, but I didn't know his name until now. He's got a lot to learn, but if he has information for me, I'll listen.

"Well, you see..." He sucks in a deep breath and continues. "I seen some of these guys just hangin' around Giana's house, lookin' sorta sketchy." He gestures with his hands as he talks, and I sip my drink wishing he'd get to the point. "They was Bratva, you know. I think they was watchin' for Bella or somethin'. I think yous guys should be watchin' her."

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The child can't even use proper English. Has he even been groomed to speak to someone in authority like me? I wonder if he ever spoke with Mr. D'Angelo this way.

"I've seen it myself, sir," Dietrich says, and I look over my shoulder at him. One of my best soldiers, he has been charged with guarding the D'Angelo home now for weeks. I trust him, so I listen. "Bratva members have been staking out the place. I don't think they're after her mother. They want her, and I think they want her because you want her."

When I turn back to Nicolo, I see the concern etched on his forehead. Darnel and Victor seem apathetic, though they have no emotional ties to Isabella, and in terms of business, we are secure enough. But this isn't about business to me. If they're stalking my wife, then we have a real problem.

"They're going to make a move," Darnel says nonchalantly, and Victor nods in agreement.

"Hopefully, not like the one they made on me. Imagine a woman being at the receiving end of a car bomb..." Victortsand gulps the rest of his drink before setting the glass on the coffee table in front of himself.

"She isn't just a woman, brother. You'll do good to remember she is my wife and La Capa Famiglia...La Donna D'Angelo. If they pursue a hit on her, no matter how insignificant, it is a declaration of war. These last few events have pushed the boundaries of my patience, but I will be out for blood." My chest tightens at the thought of someone harming her, and my fingers itch to feel the cold steel of my gun in my hand.

“Indeed,” Nicolo says. “La Regina must be protected at all cost. We will heighten security around Giana’s home and Isabella at all times.” Finished with his drink, he sets his empty glass on the table and stands, slapping the front of his legs. “I will go spread the word now.”

“Good, and I will increase security here. I want four men with her at all times, and she goes nowhere alone.” I nod at him as he snaps his fingers at Fabian, who still looks like an overly alert guard dog.

The two make a graceful exit, and Victor and Darnel fall into a calm conversation, but in my mind, I’m plotting and scheming. Staying two steps ahead of my enemy at all times is the way I work. The men are right. If the Bratva want to make a real statement, they won’t come after me. They’ll go after her, because in doing so, they get to me and they cripple her budding organization.

But I’ll see them coming every step of the way, and they won’t know what hit them when I blow in like a hurricane and stop them in their tracks. No one touches my Bella.

18

ISABELLA

This meeting has been a long time coming. I stand in my mother’s parlor waiting for Uncle Nicky to be ready to leave. My hands shake slightly just thinking of confronting my entire Family and laying down the law. It wasn’t something my father ever had to think or even dream about. They loved him. They would have followed him to the grave. But I’m just a woman in a man’s world, and they have no respect for that.

I peer out the window at the waiting car and think of how Mom warned me this may

happen. Following that run-in with Owen and Chase at the gun range, I should have known to watch my back a little more closely, but the shit they pulled at that meet was unacceptable. I should have killed them the way my father would have and I wouldn't be having this problem now. They would see me as being as ruthless as he always was.

I hear footsteps on the wooden floor outside the hall and know it's Uncle Nicky come to retrieve me after visiting with Mom. I turn, and just as I do, his head pops into the room.

"Are you ready?" he asks, and I see the hesitation in his expression.

I'm not ready, but I don't have a choice. I am their leader now, and I have to make them see that we are strong if we are united with the Romanos and we will fall prey to our enemies if we continue to be divided against one another.

Nodding, I leave my perch by the window and pad across the room to take his arm. My head dips as he leads me up the hallway to the front door and out. Mom didn't even come to say goodbye, and she knows what I'm about to do. I'm young, and I'm green, and there is no good reason my entire Family—more than half of them older than me—should trust my leadership yet. But they must. I won't allow anyone to take over what belonged to my father and destroy it.

"You seem a bit nervous," Nicky says as he waves his driver off and opens the back door to the limo. He's a proper man, and it's odd seeing him send a staff member away. He's grown used to being waited on thanks to Mom and her association with my father. Though, he's also a very personal man, and I can tell he wants to talk.

I climb in without answering, but when he's seated next to me, I sigh. "I am." My stomach is tied in knots, and I'm wondering if I've done the wrong thing in claiming my right to the throne of my father so quickly after his death.

“Good, you should be.” His hand slaps my knee, and I look up at him in surprise.

“I should?” I ask, searching his face for an explanation. I’d have thought he would expect me to be bold and decisive like Father, to not take shit from anyone and to stand my ground without fear. But I see compassion in his eyes, as if I’m his very own daughter whom he loves, and he has wisdom to impart to me.

“Of course you should. You have to look into the eyes of men you love and rebuke them. There is every chance they will walk away from you and never come back. They love you, though, so you have that going for you. They’ll never outright hurt you.” He motions to the driver, who sets off toward our destination—my cousin’s farm on the outskirts of Newark where we sometimes hold large Family meetings like the one today.

I think of Owen and Chase, my two closest cousins who most definitely intended to harm me—twice now. I think Uncle Nicky is mistaken and doesn’t know our family well at all. If my father was a ruthless killing machine when people opposed him, who’s to say my cousins and uncles aren’t as well? And what about the hired hands who have no blood relation?

“I think you might be wrong about that.”

“I’m not wrong, Isabella. They’d sooner walk away and divide the whole Family than to harm a hair on your head. I heard what Owen and Chase did and I heard the lesson you taught them. They loved your father and trusted him wholeheartedly. Whatever mal intent they had is gone. They may not fall in line with you, but they won’t lay a finger on you now.” His face grows serious and he clears his throat. “Your job now is to unite us all. I believe you’re the only one who can.”

Minutes tick past in silence as we approach the family farm. Cars line the narrow driveway on both sides all the way back to the large building near the far end of the

property. The door of the barn stands propped open, and none of Marco's men are here to protect me if something goes wrong. I know I do have a contingent within my family who will attempt to protect me, if only because they loved my father, but fear swells in my chest.

Nicky grabs my hand and squeezes, then pats it. "It's time."

We climb out of the car and head in. I've never been to one of these meetings, but I've been in this barn a million times with my cousins playing. When we walk in, a hush falls across the gathered group. As if in awe of me, or perhaps allowing their deep-seated frustrations to mount, they stare at me. Nicky leads me to the small, raised dais upon which a few chairs have been situated and a microphone stand is perched. He nods at the mic, and I approach it. This meeting may only take one minute, but so far, it feels like it's taking an eternity.

"Hello," I say in as bold of a voice as I can muster with all this anxiety swirling.

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I'm not greeted with applause or cheers. No one says hello back. I see glares and confused looks and realize this meeting should have come months ago when Father first died.

"As you all know, I have assumed leadership of the Family in the wake of my father's death." I clear my throat and stare out at their faces. They're all here—well, most of them, anyway. There are at least two hundred men in this room of all ages and sizes, staring at me sternly. "I've taken a husband as an alliance, which again, you've all heard by now."

"Romano's dangerous! Get rid of him!" someone shouts, but I don't see who. It riles up the others, who all begin to murmur. They appear to be restless, and I'm afraid they might resort to violence if it gets too far, so I glance at Nicky, who sits behind me. He nods in encouragement, and I continue.

"My husband is a good man. He is here merely to be my partner and to support our Family's business. Nothing more."

"He'll take it all!" Chase shouts. He stands with crutches, propping himself up in the center of the group, and I feel the pain in his words as they slice through my heart. Marco would never take over. He supports me.

"That's a lie!" I shout, booming over the now growing swell of dissent. I feel like I'm losing control of them, and I glance at Nicky again, who has his back turned on me, whispering something to one of my other Family members.

"The D'Angelos have been at peace for decades. Only when we took on this alliance

to your supposed husband have we found ourselves at war. We don't want to fight someone else's enemies."

"We don't want a woman to lead!"

"You should have married the one your father handpicked for you!"

The shouts come from all over the barn, echoing into the air and causing my temper to rise up and my fear to flare. I didn't realize how much they all disliked the new direction the Family has taken. The problem is worse than I thought. But I won't allow them to trample all over me. Father definitely wouldn't. And with the confidence of what Nicky said in the car goading me, I pull the gun out of my waistband and fire straight into the air to silence them. Two shots, and they are all staring at me with anger in their eyes.

"Enough!"

My chest is heaving, adrenaline coursing through my veins. Nicky comes to stand behind me, his hand in the small of my back, and I glare at them.

"Father would be ashamed of you all." I feel confidence rising. None of them have made a move for their guns. They're all attentive now, not a single eye anywhere but on me. I have their attention. "The enemy of our friend is our enemy. The Romano Family are nothing more than good alliances to us. They have brought a wealth of strength and resources, as we have to them. If they fight, we fight."

Nicky's hand presses into my back, and I get the feeling he wants me to lay off, but I won't. Father wouldn't, and neither will I. "This Family has never been so divided as long as I've been alive, or my father before me, or his father before him. You say you don't want a woman to lead, but you divide yourselves as if you get the choice. We fight together, or you fight against me. And I promise you, you will not win."

One by one, I see heads dropping. Men who feel shame for rebelling against their leadership. Their concerns are valid, but we aren't the type to fall back at the thought of a challenge that may lie ahead.

"Until such time as an heir is born and can ascend to the throne of my father, I am your leader. You may not like it, but you don't have to. You must only trust that I will do what I believe he would want, and we will continue to keep this Family strong." I sigh into the mic and put my gun away. "Those who want to continue to serve the D'Angelo name are welcome. Those who don't, consider yourself my enemy."

I slide the mic back into the clip on the mic stand, and Nicky leads me off the dais, across the dirt barn floor, and to the waiting car. The engine is still running, and we walk in silence. I'm not sure how well-received that admonishment was, but we will soon find out.

Once in the car and safely on the road away from the horde of angry men, I let the tension out of my shoulders and lay my head back. This would be so much easier if Marco had come along, but I know they would only have kowtowed to his superior strength. Their loyalty to him is only so long as fear presides. The moment they see an opening to harm him, they will. This entire time, I thought it was Marco who would protect me, and in reality, it is me protecting him.

"They are right, Isa." Nicky pats my knee in a solemn way, and I turn away from him as he continues. "They don't want to fight another man's war."

"Well, like it or not, it is now their war. Marco is my husband, which binds the two families together, and we are one. What man among them won't come to my aid if I request it? They can't dishonor my father by turning a blind eye. They took an oath."

I let my words hang in the air the entire drive back to Marco's house. I know Nicky

fully supports me now. I know he trusts Marco, and I also know he speaks the truth. Maybe I need to bring this to Marco's attention, but in doing so, I might reveal my own inability to lead my Family and keep them in line. Tonight did not go as I hoped it would, but it did not go as I feared it might, either. For now, they seem content to understand that I'm working on my father's behest and will do right by his name. That's all anyone can hope for right now. With our Family aligned as one at war with the Bratva, we have to come together. If not, we risk splintering an already fragile faction that may never recover.

And that is something I know my father would hate.

19

MARCO

I climb in and shut the door, followed by Victor on the other side. The driver pulls the car out and heads across the parking lot toward the exit. The sale went off without a hitch, though we knew it would. Victor and I have been doing this for a few years now with this particular gentleman, and we've never had an issue, so I left the fanfare of security guards and surveillance crews out of it today. It allows my brother and me to have an honest discussion.

"I think he was the last of our customers to learn about the new alliance, and he didn't seem fazed by it." Victor pulls a cigar out of his pocket and his trimmer. I nod at his window, reminding him to put it down before lighting up, and he reaches over to do so.

"Yes, well, Mr. Gentry is an old-fashioned type of man. It's best we keep the full arrangement secret for now. When he sees what we now have going for us and how he will also benefit from it, he'll come full support even with a woman at the helm." I stare out the window at the passing traffic as the car drives onto the street and heads

toward the highway.

“Full arrangement? You mean to tell me you haven’t made it clear to that wife of yours that you’re in charge?” Victor holds his cigar over the lit flame of his lighter and twists the stogie. “You can’t honestly believe she’s going to lead that mob of ruffians she calls her Family.”

I let his words fall from the air without responding to him. It isn’t that I haven’t thought of what it would be like to take over her Family and bring them into submission to my authority. I have. And I’ve thought about it long and hard. But Isabella is different. She has a certain *Je ne sais quoi* about her I can’t put my finger on. Her determination and ambition make her the exact sort of woman I would date and marry, though I didn’t know it when we signed that marriage license.

Now, though, I’ve found that the woman to whom I’m married is the woman I want to raise my son, my heir. My boy will need a strong female presence in his life, if and when that happens, and I can’t think of another woman I’ve ever met who fits the bill.

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“What’s the report at the docks? Have the new shipments arrived on time to our suppliers?” I change the subject, hoping he gets the point. We’ve been watching the man who now gives us our weapons. Isabella’s completely unaware, and I want to keep it that way. We don’t need her to be a part of this arrangement anymore. The only thing I needed was the connection to her men.

But I want her.

I find I’m taking a strong liking to her, and more than just a passing fancy. At the end of the day, when I’m exhausted and stressed about business, she’s there listening. She can share her concerns with me, and I give her sound advice. I vent my frustrations, and she calms me, anchoring me in the present so I don’t react to a nonexistent future. And my God, the sex.

Exploring her body each night as we come together after a long day has been the pinnacle of my sexual experience. Every time we come together, I teach her something new, and she’s putty in my hands—a willing vessel to explore every sexual fantasy I have. If I were to throw my weight around and pursue the leadership of her Family, no doubt I could obtain it—with bloodshed. But I’d lose her. And that’s not something I’m willing to do.

“Guns are in,” he says, sucking on his cigar. He lets the smoke puff out and slides his lighter back into his pocket. “But you’re changing the subject. The D’Angelo family will never fully support her. You’ll see. In no time, you’ll be running the show, anyway. She’ll just be a figurehead, and you’ll have the power.”

Victor has never had a real relationship with anyone and thus doesn’t understand the

intricacies of the female mind. The only thing that would come of that is war. Isabella would find her footing the instant I tried to make my move, and instead of having one enemy, we'd have two. Fighting with her isn't what I want for my future. I want a partnership, a fulfilling marriage, great sex, and an heir. I have two of those, and the other two are only a matter of time if I play my cards right.

"Do you want to make more enemies, Victor?" I turn to face him as he lets the wind rushing past the cracked window suck his ashes away.

"Of course not. I'm just saying men will not bow to a woman for long. Their egos will eat at them. Their consciences will be seared. They will rebel when they realize she bosses them around, and they will do what men do. Hunt and kill." He brings his cigar to his lips nonchalantly, and I wish I could shove it down his throat. But he's not wrong.

I've never met a man who would willingly submit to a woman anywhere but in the bed. And even then, they don't do it for long.

"Time will tell," I mumble, looking back at the passing traffic. My phone rings, giving me a reprieve from my brother's sardonic tone, and I answer it. "It's Marco."

"Uh, yeah, Marco. It's Detective Schuler. I caught wind of something I thought you should know about." The detective—on our payroll since a time that predates my leadership—never lets me down. He's not keen on the idea that we break the law to get what we want, but the way we line his pockets keeps his moral compass from getting out of check.

"What is it, Dan?" I glance at Victor, whose eyebrows go up. The detective doesn't call us unless something drastic is going on, so this is a surprise call. I haven't requested information from him or sought advice or surveillance. It's unlike him to volunteer information too.

“It’s Petroski, they’re on the move. Word has it they’re planning something aimed in your direction. I only know this because I overheard one of his men speaking with one of my sergeants.”

I’m not a naïve man. If we have cops on our books, and the Bratva do too, and at times, that pays off for us. Cops tend to look the other way if they are loyal to one faction or the other, and especially if they know what’s good for them. We like to keep the fear of God strong in our ranks to discourage disloyalty or snitches.

“Do you know what?” I ask him. After the strike against Petroski’s son, we knew it was only a matter of time before they came for revenge. The only problem is we have no way of knowing what it will look like, and covering all the bases is challenging, especially with a larger territory and more cogs in the wheel.

“No word, Marco. I’m sorry I can’t do better. I know it’s supposed to happen within the next ten days and that they’re not happy about Petroski’s son being shot. I don’t know what the hell you were thinking going after him. Were you trying to start a fucking war?”

Schuler knows nothing about how to run a Family like mine. But he does know about the hit on Victor’s car that nearly took his life and stole a precious soul from this earth. He’s the one who helped cover it up so it looked like a random explosion and not a mafia hit.

“Tell me, Dan, if your brother had been the victim of a car bomb, what would you do?” I listen to Victor grumbling something I can’t really understand and wait for the detective to answer me. But the man fumbles for words, and I know he has my point.

“That’s the reason I did what I did. Now, if you hear anything else of value, call me. If not, just be prepared for a call from me at any time, day or night, calling in your services. This won’t be pretty, but we have to do what we have to do or this city will

descend into anarchy.”

I hang up the call before he can respond, and Victor scoffs at me. “That bastard has his nose where it doesn’t belong again, doesn’t he?” A thick puff of smoke fills the car instead of being sucked out the window, and I realize he’s shut it. I reach past him and hit the button to open it again, and he scowls at me.

“He’s an officer of the law, Victor. That’s his job. But he knows what’s good for him. He’s just warning us.” I think for a moment about what the guys brought up the other night. The next logical target is Isabella. I still don’t think they will physically harm her. They know if they do, they’ll endure the wrath of not only her entire Family, but all of mine as well. Still, if they want to make waves, it’s the right move.

“We need to increase security around Isabella again. She won’t like it, but it’s for her own good and her Family’s too.” I shoot out a few text messages to my men, ordering them to beef things up. If it’s already gotten up the food chain to Schuler, it has to be soon. They won’t risk letting their plans be found out, which means they’ll act fast, tonight maybe, tomorrow. Who knows?

“You already own half her business. Why not just let them take her? The Family will flounder. You’ll earn their trust, and you’ll have it all. Double the territory, double the power, double the money?—”

Before he can choke out another breath, my hand is around his throat, clenching until he’s wheezing. “You should stop and think about what you’re saying before you talk about my wife like that.” Victor gasps, clawing at my hand with his. The cigar drops to his lap and he gasps for air. “You may be my brother, but I’m not above teaching you a lesson. Isabella is my wife and the leader of her own Family in her own right. If you can’t respect that, you get the fuck out.”

I maintain my grip on his neck a few more seconds before I smell the stench of

burning fabric. The second I let go, Victor scoops up his cigar and tosses it out the window, then pats the front of his slacks to put out the embers of fire there.

“Holy fuck, Marco... It was a joke.”

“You’re not a comedian. Stick to being my brother and obeying my orders.” I glare out the window and rack my brain. If Schuler doesn’t come back with any more serious intel, I’ll be forced to keep Isabella locked up in my home for her own safety. She’s so stubborn and will refuse the protection, and that means I’ll have to tie her to the fucking bed again, but if it keeps her out of harm’s way, I’ll do it. She’ll thank me later, and I’ll protect my assets. At least, for a little while.

It's not a long-term solution, but I have to do something.

20

ISABELLA

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:04 am

I'm impressed. Marco has cleared the entire dining room of people in this little Italian bistro he's brought me to. One by one, they shuffle out with smiles on their faces and wads of cash in their hands. A few of the gentlemen tip their hats while Marco's security guards hover around me like I'm the president or something. One woman winks at me in passing and whispers something about "such a romantic man", which I can only infer is her way of saying her husband is not quite the romantic she hoped she'd marry and she is jealous of the treatment Marco is giving me.

When the room is empty, Marco returns to me with the host on his heels. He offers me his elbow, and I take it graciously. "What was that all about?" I ask him, and he shrugs a shoulder.

"Nothing is too good for you, cara mia. Now, don't question my affection and just join me for dinner." His coos of love make me blush. There is something here between me and Marco, and I enjoy it. When we started this arrangement, Mom encouraged me that respect would grow to fondness and then on to love, and I doubted a man like Marco would ever fall for me that way, but I believe her now.

"Aren't you being romantic this evening? You've had a good day, I take it?" I set my clutch to the side and lower myself into the seat he pulls out for me. He leans over my shoulder and kisses my cheek.

"Can't a man just spoil his exquisitely beautiful wife?" The words make me blush and my cheeks feel hot. He's complimented me before, but never outside the confines of the bedroom, or if he has, I don't remember it.

"Mi ecciti, Mr. Romano." I giggle like a stupid school girl as he nips at my earlobe

before retreating. He takes the spot directly to my left and scoots his chair even closer so his fingers can brush mine as he picks up the menu. He has a charming way of disarming me, and I don't mind. My once nervous apprehension about him has fully dissolved into trust and mutual admiration. I'm falling in love with him deeper every single day.

"Good, I like when I turn you on," he growls as he brings my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles. "Now, how was your day?"

I tell him how I lounged around his home in pajamas, eating snacks and resting. I can't tell him how I threw up a few times due to morning sickness, since I'm still hiding this pregnancy from him. My trust in his goodness and the fidelity of our relationship is one thing. My decision to reveal an heir who may or may not be my own is another.

"Good, good, well I hope you're feeling better. I'm sorry I had to pull rank and enforce that you stay home. I can't have you out and about catching something worse when your immune system is compromised." He kisses my fingers again as the waiter approaches. "Two glasses of your finest chardonnay, please."

"Uh, just one," I interrupt, not sure how to explain to him that I won't be drinking. His eyes turn sharply to me.

"Still feeling ill, bella mia?" Concern etches his brow, and I smile softly to put him at ease.

"I'm only just now feeling better, Marco. I hardly think dehydrating myself with wine is the best thing after being sick." This time, the lie feels like lead in my gut, weighing me down. He's so sweet and compassionate, caring for me and putting all of his resources at my disposal because I've lied and told him I'm sick. I hate that I'm hiding a secret, but I want to discuss the future with my mother and Nicky first.

They'll know what to do and how I should tell him—what I should expect to happen.

“Well, it looks like just the wine for me, and she'll have a sparkling water.” Marco waves the waiter off after ordering for me, though I could have done it myself. I'm not averse to the treatment, though, so I let his order stand. What I'm curious about, however, is why he suddenly had so many extra men surrounding me.

“I've seen the extra security around. What gives?” I take the menu and open it nonchalantly, but I really want to know what's going on. A man like Marco doesn't get afraid, but this added measure seems to communicate that he's fearing something.

“Just trust me. It's warranted.” He plucks the menu from my hand and says, “I've ordered the chef's specialty for us. Don't worry, it will go easy on your stomach so you don't have to worry. No heavy red sauce and no dairy.”

I want to protest and tell him I can order my own food—because honestly, I really wanted a nice plate of spaghetti. But I don't say a word. He's right. Not only would the heavy sauce make my stomach queasy if I were just sick, but it would also definitely churn up the stomach acid of morning sickness, and the last thing I want is to be throwing up again already.

“That sounds divine...” I sigh and lean back in my chair. He's taking all the effort out of this night out. I can't order my food or my drinks. All I can do is engage in conversation with him and enjoy the night.

“Darnel told me he spoke with Nicolo. You had a meeting with your Family?” His question is innocent enough. I haven't told him all the details, just that I was going to meet my family and that I wanted to do it alone.

I recount to him what happened, how my Family gathered at the barn and their response to my words. I was scared stiff, but according to Nicky, I came across as

stern and bold as my father. “So I hope things are ironed out now, but if not, I’ll just have to talk to them again.”

The waiter sets our drinks out for us and walks away, and Marco waits until he’s gone to speak. “You know I can go with you when you do those things. After all, isn’t that my part of this agreement? What else do you get from all of this if not for my support and strength?”

I pat his hand and smile. “You’re right. I could lean on your strength, and you will provide it. For that, I’m grateful to you. But they already fear you’re taking over. I know that’s not true, but if you were to attend our family meetings to help maintain control, I’m afraid they would only believe that more. This is something I need to do on my own.”

I pause as he sips his wine and wait before pressing him. I don’t like how he keeps things from me and tells me to trust him. This marriage is a partnership, not the typical sort where the man must protect his woman at all costs. I don’t like the secrecy at all.

“Marco, I understand you want me to trust you, but I admit I don’t understand why you can’t just tell me. What’s with the extra security? I’m not a shrinking violet. I am the leader of my Family. I can handle whatever it is.”

He sighs and sets his glass down and takes my hand again. “I’ve heard from my connections in the police department that the enemy is planning something. We know, based on what we’ve done to them, that they will likely escalate to something more dangerous or violent. The last thing I want is your getting caught in the crosshairs. I’ve beefed up security until we know what to expect.”

“I see.” I let him kiss my fingertips, then my palm, and I cup his cheek. “My Family will back you up. Whatever it is. We’ll support you and stand behind you.”

He kisses my palm again, but his phone begins to ring. “Hold that thought,” he whispers as he pulls his phone out of his pocket and swipes to answer.

Marco stands and walks away, leaving me alone at the table. I think of his Family and his enemies. They’ve been at war for so long, I’m not sure if they even know what times of peace mean. I’ve heard the rumors of how long this feud has been going on. I don’t want my Family to be sucked into that and trapped in a never-ending cycle of fighting and death, but Marco is my husband now. This child I carry means we are one, and I can’t let him fight this alone.

So, I pull out my phone and send Nicky a text message, telling him to gather the Family again. The meeting two nights ago didn’t go as planned, but this one will. I will call them all together to tell them Marco’s news and give the order to assemble and plan their defense. We’ll fight as one, or they’ll not be my Family anymore. And since only my most trusted family members have the information I have about running the business, they’ll be forced to fall in line.

“What’s wrong, Bella?” Marco asks, but I don’t tell him. If I tell him I’m meeting my Family to give an ultimatum—shape up or ship out—he’ll stop me. He won’t allow me to even leave my bedroom without a guard. I’ll have to sneak out under the cloak of darkness and hope for the best.

“It’s nothing. I’m worried for you.” I lace my fingers through his, and he pulls me in for a kiss.

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“I’m okay, cara mia. Nothing and no one will tear me from your arms. I have my men surrounding both of us, and this night is ours for the taking. Now, eat with me, laugh with me, and later, make love to me.” His kisses are eager and hungry and interrupted by the waiter who brings our food.

I sit back in my seat ready to feast, but with my mind fixed on the meeting later tonight. Nicky will be forced to back me up, and if he does, I know half the Family will follow. It’s the other half I worry about.

21

MARCO

My entire evening has been consumed with focusing on Isabella, except for the one small interruption. But I don’t allow that to steal my attention for a single second. When she is with me, I am a different man, perhaps calmer and more well-adjusted. She prefers mercy, I prefer action, and together, I believe we make an unstoppable team who will eventually overthrow all of our enemies.

My fingers lace through hers as she tells me stories of her father, how he handled men he worked with, how she misses him dearly. She doesn’t share memories of her brother as much, but I know she’s mourning him too. I remember carrying the weight of my father’s passing heavy on my shoulders for more than a year following his demise. I know what she’s feeling and the thoughts she’s navigating as she takes the helm of the organization like the born leader she is.

“I’m so amazed by the strength you display in all situations.” I bring her hand to my

lips and kiss her knuckles, which I can't seem to do often enough. Her lotion smells like strawberries and honey, and it makes her skin soft and supple.

"Thank you," she says, batting her eyelashes at me over the dinner table. "And thank you for dinner here. It was special that you cleared the dining room so we could have this intimate time together."

We're close now, closer than I've ever been with a woman, though that was to be expected, given that I've never been married to anyone else. I never thought my heart capable of feeling the things I feel for her—the urge to protect her, the desire to be with her and close to her. My heart is cold and hard, capable of dangerous and deadly things, but she softens my edges, makes me hope for a family and a future with her.

"I have to take you home now."

The look on her face when I say the words tugs at my heart. She's enjoying this as much as I am, and I don't want to leave her side any more than she does mine. We're better together, stronger. But I stand and leave my napkin on the empty plate between us, and I offer her my hand.

She stands too, taking her purse and leaning into me. I nod at the guard by the door. The tab is paid up. The car outside is running, waiting for us, and what lies ahead of me after I drop her at the house is anyone's guess. Detective Schuler interrupted my dinner with a demand to see me this evening, and I have to meet him. Victor is entertaining him now, waiting for me to arrive.

"I was hoping you'd join me this evening." Isabella's head rests on my shoulder as we walk to the limo, surrounded by six armed men. I'm not taking a chance. When I learned that my enemy would likely try another hit, I pulled every available asset I have.

“You were?” I ask, opening the door for her. She slides into the limo, making space for me, and I nod at my guards. They’ve been tasked with watching my limo all evening, the street, the diner, and even my home. I relax in comfort knowing my loyal followers have not let me down and that Isabella and I are safe.

“I was,” she says, curling into my side as they shut the door and the car takes off. “I was hoping we could... Well...” Her eyes meet mine, and I see the desire there. I want nothing more than to take her home and have my way with her all night long, but she will never understand the business I have to attend tonight. If I tell her, she will insist that I bring her along, and I have to protect her. She’s safer at my home under lock and key for now.

“Ah...” I sigh, understanding her unspoken request. I am not a man to deny myself the carnal pleasure of a good fuck, and she is the woman who does unthinkable things to me, or rather, allows me to do them to her. “And you think I can’t fulfill that need and also attend to my business?”

My arm, draped around her shoulders, slides lower behind her back, and I pull her onto my lap in a firm but swift movement. The black dress she wears rides upon her thighs as she turns to straddle me and my hands rest on her hips.

“Well, the car isn’t a very comfortable or romantic place to?—”

I chuckle, cutting her off, and she looks at me with confusion. “Have you ever?” I ask, but I know the answer. I am her first—at everything. And I love everything about that. I’ve stolen her virginity in every hole, and I’ve shown her the finer things I like—restraints, choking, blow jobs. And I’m not done showing her things.

“Marco,” she says, and I hear the shame in her voice.

“Allow me to show you?” My fingers inch the delicate black fabric up her thighs to

her waist, and I see the moisture pushing through her panties. She shudders as my thumb traces across her soggy center and presses into her core. “I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

Isabella bites her lip and nods at me when I begin swirling my finger against the moist fabric that keeps me from enjoying her flesh. Pulling her in, I place a chaste kiss on her lips and then bite down on her jaw. “Good girl,” I growl against her skin, my cock hardening at the thought of what's to come.

“Lift your hips,” I command, and without hesitation, she does. My fingers work her panties down as she precariously balances on one foot, then the other, and once freed, I ball them up in my fist and press them against her entrance. Her wetness assaults me as I dip a digit inside her, pushing her panties into her. “You're so damn wet for me, baby,” I tell her, but her panties soak up so much of that sweet, delicious moisture.

“Fuck... What are you doing?” She moans in response, rocking her hips against my touch. I love to see her like this, a wanton mess for me and only me. My other hand slides to her nape, palming her neck as I bring her mouth to mine. My thumb presses into the dip of her collarbone where I feel her pulse racing against my touch. My every intention is to ravage her mouth, but she bites my bottom lip again. I growl into the kiss and grind my erection into her damp core. “You want it rough?” I ask in a gravelly voice, and she nods, shamelessly grinding herself against me.

With a growl of my own, I angle her head and press my lips to the side of her neck, sucking and biting as I thrust my fingers into her soaked core. “You taste so good, Isabella. So fucking good,” I say, nipping her earlobe before sucking it gently between my teeth. “Do you like that?”

“Yes,” she moans, and it's music to my ears. Her whimpers and moans tell me I'm on the right path. “Beg me, Bella.” I pull away from her neck and look at her. “Beg me for more.”

"I—I need more, Marco. Please," she whimpers, her voice filled with need.

With that I return to her neck, sucking and biting everywhere her pulse races underneath her delicate skin. Her nails dig into my shoulders, and the more she moans, the more I want. My fingers pump in and out of her drenched core as my other hand now rests on her belly. My cock throbs against her thigh, begging to be inside her, and as she comes undone, I unzip my fly and slip my dick out.

"Yes, that's a good girl," I tell her, and she drapes herself over my shoulder and bites me through the layers of shirt and suitcoat. "Good girl..."

Her walls spasm around my fingers as I plunge them in and out, curling them, fucking her with my fingers as she comes apart. Her warmth coats my hand, and I can't wait to taste her. "Marco," she gasps, her climax rippling through her body as I slowly remove my fingers from her and my other hand comes down on her ass hard.

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She gasps and grips my biceps, and I feel her quake. "That's my girl," I whisper in her ear, my dick throbbing against her entrance.

"That was... Marco... that was..." She pants for air, and I can't help but grin. "I've never..."

"I know," I say against her ear, chuckling.

The car bumps over the road, causing my dick to grind against her sex, and I want to be in her. I lick my fingers clean, and she rocks her hips against me, inviting me in. "I want more," she moans, and I intend to give it to her. I line up with her swollen entrance and enter her in one hard thrust, driving deep into her. Her pussy sucks me in like a glove as she cries out my name. My hips grind against hers, the need to claim her overwhelming me as I drive in and out of her.

"Shit, you're sexy." My growls seem to egg her on. She rides me instinctively, like she's done this a million times. I want more too, so much more.

The thin straps that hold her dress up tear free with only the tiniest of tugs, and I fold her top down, exposing her gorgeous tits to my view. Her nipples are hard, perky, and begging me to suck them.

I continue to piston into her as one hand goes to her throat, squeezing gently, but just enough to let her know who's in charge. "I could fuck you like this... all goddamn day," I growl and suck on her nipple.

"Mine..." I say around a moan.

"Yes... y-yours," she pants out, and I increase my pace, my cock slamming against her cervix. Her nails dig into my shoulders, and that's when I know she's close again.

"That's it, come for me, Bella. Come on my cock."

She keens my name, her pussy squeezing my cock as she shatters around me, her orgasm washing over her. I continue thrusting into her, riding out her climax until she's limp and breathless in my arms. I kiss her deeply, my hand tangled in her hair as she tries to catch her breath.

"I love the way you say my name," I whisper against her lips.

She smiles and runs a finger down my jawline. "I love the way you make me say your name," she replies with a smirk. But I'm not finished yet.

My hand tightens on her throat, reasserting my dominance as I renew my thrusts. She's hot and deep, and my body wants so much more from her.

"Tell me you're mine," I growl as I pound into her.

"Y-yours... M-Marco... yours..."

I groan my approval and spank her ass cheek. "Louder, sweetheart. I want to hear you... I want the whole fucking world to know you're mine."

"Yours!" she cries out, and I pull her down onto my lap, slamming into her. "I'm yours, Marco. Yours," she moans, and it's music to my ears.

"God, I love how your cunt feels... so fucking tight... so hot," I growl in her ear. "Squeeze me, Bella... squeeze my cock."

She does as I command, and I feel myself ready to explode. My balls tighten, and I thrust in hard, shooting my hot load into her, though I feel it drain out around me onto her inner thighs. "Fuck, Isabella..." I say, panting.

"Marco," she gasps as our breaths come in spurts and we're both panting for air.

I kiss her hard, and she returns the gesture as I remove my hand from her neck and pull her into my body.

For a few moments, we remain that way, and when the car rolls to a stop, she slides from my lap and fixes her dress. I put my dick away, though my pants are soiled with our sex, so I walk her inside.

"Sure you can't stay?" she asks, wrapping her arms around my torso from behind as I button a fresh pair of slacks on and check the time.

I turn to kiss her on the forehead and shake my head. "I can't. Victor is expecting me."

She looks innocent yet violated with the straps of her dress dangling and her hair mussed like that. I want to stay with her, but the business I have to do tonight can't wait. "I'll be back soon."

She nods and backs away. "I'll probably retire early, so you can take your time."

"Alright, then, no need to wait up." I peck her on the cheek, and I think I see a look in her eye that tells me she's hiding something, but I let it pass.

Of all the places in the world she could be, she's safe enough here. My men won't let anything happen to her, and I can go hunt the bastards who intend harm for her. Hopefully, tomorrow, we will have put this entire situation behind us.

“Sleep well,” I say as I slip out and she peels her torn dress off. Now, to put an end to the war once and for all.

ISABELLA

At home in our bedroom, I watch as Marco exchanges one set of slacks for another and kisses me goodbye. I'm frustrated that he won't tell me what sort of business it is he's attending to this evening, but I can't blame him. I haven't told him I'm planning a family meeting this evening, nor have I told him about the child growing in my womb. Every marriage has its secrets, right? And this one is no exception.

In fact, this one may be the rule. Two Syndicate Families united in marriage are bound to keep secrets from one another. Nicky would never allow me to give up information on our other business practices outside of gun smuggling, at least not until our marriage has stood the test of time. So, I have to be okay with Marco doing business under the cover of darkness without telling me where he's going. Especially if I'm going to expect him to turn a blind eye to my clandestine Family meetings.

I slip out of my sex-soiled dress and shower. Dinner is staying down for the most part, though I feel nauseous. Marco was right to order me something with only a slight chance of upsetting my stomach. For a moment, I fear maybe he knows I'm pregnant and that's why he's done that, but there is no way he could know short of having dug through the trash. I can't see a man of his stature having done that, though I don't put it past his staff to have been snooping on me. Still, if he knows, he's very good at hiding it.

Once the sex is washed off my body and out of my hair, I towel off and pad into the bedroom, selecting a simple pair of jeans and a Polo shirt. It's warm enough to go

without a jacket this evening, though I choose one, anyway. With damp hair, I'll feel colder, and outside the city on the farm where I plan to meet my Family, it will feel even more chilly.

As I dress, I think of Owen and Chase and their rebellion against me as their leader. They're young and ambitious, and maybe they think they should have been chosen to lead. Who would choose them, anyway? My father is gone. My brother, the rightful heir, is with him on the other side, and my father trusted my mother's brother more than his own. Nicolo would never have been accepted as their leader, which would only have caused the same uprising.

Not even Mom would have been wanted. I am the only one who can do this job. Not only is it in my blood, but some secrets are only known by me and Nicolo, and a few of them still only by him. He will never usurp my authority nor my father's, so it's left to me. And if not me, then Nicky will die trying to preserve my father's wishes, that certain things never leave the knowledge of his direct bloodline.

I rise, having laced up my boots, and slide my arms into the sleeves of my jacket. I send a text message to Uncle Nicky to come for me and then head downstairs. My hair, still damp, leaves me on the cold side, which I expected, and I breeze toward the front door with only one thing on my mind. I have to unite my family once and for all this evening and order them to band together with Marco's men to stand against our enemy. Because whether we like it or not, his enemy is now our enemy, even if I break the agreement and end the marriage.

"Mrs. Romano, good evening," I hear. It's a husky male voice coming from the shadows at the end of the hall. A light comes on, illuminating the man's face. I don't know all of their names, but I have seen him around. He's one of Marco's security detail.

"Hello, I'm headed out this evening. Please send word to my husband that I'll be

home later, probably after midnight. I have some business to attend to.”

Moving toward the door in confidence, I take my purse from the stand in the hallway, and I’m surprised to see him step into the center of the hallway. I’m closed in on both sides. The den and living room pocket doors are shut. My throat constricts as I realize this feels a lot like a wooden tomb, walled in and staring down a man three times my size. His barrel chest puffs out as his shoulders square and he shakes his head.

“I’m under strict instructions to keep you here. We’ve been given orders by the man himself.” The guard sets his jaw, and I see the fine lines around his lips as they purse in concentration. His biceps are as thick as my thighs. There is no way I’m going to go around him. I don’t know exactly how far he’d go to restrain me here, but I don’t want to give him a reason to need physical force.

“Apologies, Mr....?”

“Call me Warren.”

“Warren,” I say, smiling. “I am just going to visit my mother. Surely, you understand she is mourning and feels alone this evening.” The lies are easier now the more I offer them. Warren is a nobody. I can lie to him and not feel guilty, though the idea that he’ll report that back to Marco and it will still be a lie then does make me twinge with guilt.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Romano. I can’t allow you to leave. It’s for your own protection.”

Protection? I think. If Marco thinks he can imprison me in this castle he calls a home, he has another thing coming. I am not his object to be stored away under lock and key, and I am not his possession at all. I am the Donna of a major criminal organization. One call to my Family for support will send a flurry of my own men bombarding this house and getting me out. But I keep my facial expression calm and

my poise intact.

“I understand completely. Then perhaps you’ll escort me to my mother’s?” I have no intention of going to or staying at my mother’s, but at least there I’d have the sleight of hand, a moment of distraction to slip into the night away from overly eager eyes.

“I’ll have to call Mr. Romano to find out?—”

“That won’t be necessary,” I interrupt. The last thing I want is for Marco to come rushing home to escort me himself. I could just call him and tell him what I’m doing, but I can’t have him or his men following me.

The last meeting was so charged with tension, I know if he shows up or even his men, it will devolve into all-out anarchy. They already think Marco is taking over. He cannot come to our Family meetings, and I have to be seen as capable without him. The arrangement seemed logical to begin with, his backing to make sure my Family stayed in check, but even after those few close calls, I know it has backfired in ways.

“I’ll just retire to my room, then. I’ll take a bit of chamomile tea in one hour, and please give me privacy until then. I will call my mom to keep her company.” Trying my hardest to sound sure of myself and unfussed, I turn and head back up the hallway. I won’t miss the Family meeting for any reason, not even this one. Marco can’t keep me here, and I don’t even know why he’s trying.

Whatever this business is he’s tending right now has me wondering if the two are connected. Why would he make his men lock me up and detain me for my “own safety”? What is so dangerous tonight that wasn’t dangerous yesterday? It has to have something to do with the reason he refuses to tell me what he’s doing.

I climb the stairs and shut myself into the bedroom, then send Uncle Nicky a new text message telling him to meet me on the backside of the estate one block away. If they

won't let me walk out the back door, I will find my own way out.

I move swiftly to the window, prying it open. The night air is cool but humid, the type of moisture that clings to everything, making every surface feel slippery and wet. I lean out, breathing in the air. It smells like rain tonight, which means I'm going to get wet, but I don't even think of heading down for the umbrella stowed away on a hook by the front door.

My eyes scan across the back lawn, stretching out for thirty yards before being hedged in by pine trees and a wrought-iron fence beyond that. There is no gate that I can recall, though I've only walked the back yard twice, and only during the day. But it's my only way out, and after this demonstration of how Marco seizes control, I may not come back. This child inside me will be mine to raise, and I have a feeling that if I remain here, Marco's control will reach beyond limits I'm comfortable with.

Looking down, I see the cement patio and barbecue area. There isn't a chance in hell I can jump and not injure myself. I'm pregnant, too, which makes it even riskier, so I can't just leap out the window the way I would if I were a child or reckless. But only a few meters down the back wall of the house is the awning that shades the back door of the house, stretching out over part of the patio where we sit and sip tea in the evening sometimes.

The bathroom light is on, the window right above the patio streaming light out in a rectangle that appears as a finger of light from the heavens. I can squeeze out the bathroom window and drop to the awning, then slide down the awning onto the edge of the stone oven where we cook wood-fired pizzas. The plan comes together in my mind as I snatch the blankets off the bed and head for the bathroom.

To ensure no one sees the shadow and comes to investigate, I turn off the bathroom light and let my eyes adjust. There is so little light outside thanks to the cloud cover that I feel certain I can sneak away and no one will see me. So, I toss one blanket out

onto the metal awning so my feet don't make too loud a sound when I drop, and I drape the other across the windowsill to avoid scratching my sides as I climb out.

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Then I sling my purse over my shoulder cross-body and climb on the back of the toilet. The tank jiggles, threatening to break loose from the bowl and pipes, but it holds as I grip the window and slide one leg out. The screen busts loose too, dropping to the blanket below—but thankfully, making no noise—and in less than one minute, I’m dangling from the edge of the window, with my tiptoes pressing onto the awning.

I shiver as my coat rises, exposing my midriff to the evening chill, then drop to the blanket waiting for me. It’s a seamless move that I feel only happens in movies or books, but it works and I’m proud of myself for having the forethought to lay out the blanket for cushioning.

Until the blanket begins to slide across the metal surface, taking me with it. I claw at the edge of the awning desperately, scrabbling for purchase all too late. The blanket slides faster, giving me no opportunity to get a hold on anything, and my body is hurtled off the edge of the awning into midair. I can’t even hold in the screech of surprise as my body tumbles into the tall spruce tree behind the barbecue area and slides through the branches which break my fall.

To my credit, the blanket wrapped around my body protects me from being scratched or covered in pine sap, and I walk away no worse for wear. Though I’m shaken a little. If I had landed on the stone oven, I’d have had a horrible bruise at the very least, or perhaps a broken leg or a few fractured ribs. As it stands, I walk now with a slight limp. My ankle took the brunt of the fall and feels like it’s sprained.

Still, I press on. My trek across the back lawn is interrupted by motion sensor lights, so I have to push through the pines that line the property and fight the branches that claw at my face and hair. So much for not being covered in sap.

By the time I make it to the back of the property and the fence that separates me from freedom, I'm winded and pine needles cling to my hair. I fight through the tangles of a few more tree branches and climb my way upward to where I can breach the fence easily, then balance precariously on the thin railing, careful to avoid the pointed finials that add decoration and security.

I have no choice now but to jump down to the soft, moist grass below, even though my ankle is already throbbing. Turning back, however, isn't an answer. As I look back up at the house through the tree line, I see the bedroom light is on, which means they know I'm gone. I leap without hesitation and roll across the dew to safety.

The street is only thirty yards away now, through the back yard of a neighboring property whose owners haven't had the forethought to put up a privacy fence, and I'm grateful for that. I'm also grateful their very large dog is on a chain which doesn't reach the property line, and I dash all the way across the lawn and in between the houses to the street and Nicky's waiting car.

Except, when I clear the narrow strip between homes, I see the headlights aren't from a later model Chrysler, but some large SUV. And before I can react, strong hands clamp down on my arms and mouth.

"Fuck, we're lucky, Dominic. Shove her in the car."

"Dumb bitch," I hear them say, and I scream for help, only to have my shout stolen by a thick leather glove that covers my lips.

What have I done?

Having left Isabella in the safest place I think possible on this planet, I head out into the night. My men know to keep her there at my home where security is stricter than the White House. No one gets in or out of the house without my knowing, and they can't even access my property without a red flag being raised. I have motion sensors everywhere, a tall fence for safety and privacy, and neighbors on all sides who know who I am and watch things for me—paid well, of course.

So I leave my immediate worry over her safety to the back of my mind as my driver shuttles me to Victor's house. It sits in a posh neighborhood beyond a gate that keeps passersby out and residents safe. The driver enters the code and rolls through the gate as it opens. I've thought of finding a nice, gated community like this one, but my home is too valuable to me, the memories of my father and mother there too precious to sell and pack up.

The car stops in front of the large, expansive troubadour, a stark contrast to my historic row house with its Brownstone feel. Victor has expensive taste. He always has. I prefer sentiment, though I spare no expense to have the finest things my money can buy. His flower garden greets every guest, while my front stoop looks much the same as the homes' on either side of mine—topiary and succulents.

I mount the stairs as the front door swings open. His butler greets me with a nod and stands aside as I enter. My home has an entryway. Victor's opens to a large open concept living/dining area with such modern touches I feel like I'm walking into a restaurant instead of a home. The laminate flooring stretches from wall to wall, and the stainless-steel appliances scream money and power. It's fitting for his personality.

"Right this way, sir. Mr. Romano is expecting you." The butler, whose name I can't remember, gestures across the wide expanse, and I follow him.

My shoes track mud, as it's beginning to sprinkle lightly outside, making everything soft and damp, but I follow. He leads me to a short hallway where a door stands open,

and I hear Victor speaking with Detective Schuler about our situation. He was right to invite the man here rather than my home. I don't want Isabella to catch wind of this threat against her and grow fearful. Nor do I want her Family to hear a peep of it. They'll blame me and turn on my Family in a heartbeat, and it will destroy the fabric of our organization's alliance. My men will never be willing to trust them or go to battle with them if that happens.

"Good, I'm glad you've made it," Victor says, nodding at me. He raises his glass and turns to his butler. "Samuel, see to it that my brother has a drink and then leave so we can get down to business."

I enter his home office, which dwarfs mine in size but not in stature. His walls are covered in taxidermy and images of his hunting exploits. Mine hold the past in every sense of the word—books, family pictures, and within the walls, our hidden inheritance.

"What's the threat, Schuler? You've been vague enough this evening. Spill the details." I unbutton my jacket and cross the room to where they sit around a small wooden table. A game of cards is spread out between them, and I see the stack of chips on Victor's side. He's winning by a lot, though I'm not sorry I interrupted.

Schuler clears his throat and sits straighter. He's Victor's buddy, not mine. To him I'm the Boss, the one with the power, the one to fear. And it shows in his posture as his Adam's apple bobs and he loosens his tie.

"Well, sir, I have information on a credible threat against your wife."

I sit down at the table and sweep my hand across the surface, pushing the cards to the floor. The men scramble to pick up their glasses to avoid wearing the drinks, and the butler sets another glass in front of us. The amber-colored liquid smells like the barrel it was aged in, and I get a strong whiff of the hints of cherry. Victor's butler

remembers my preferred drink of cherry bourbon.

“Cut the crap. Just give me the intel.” I pick up the drink and down it in one gulp, and the butler’s eyebrows rise. He backs away, then quickly slips out of the room while I stare at Schuler, ready to choke the man if he doesn’t just say what he knows.

“The intent is not to harm her, let me start there.” He fiddles with his tie again and nervously glances at Victor. “They aren’t stupid. They don’t want the entire D’Angelo clan to turn on them.”

My mind whirls with possibility. My enemy is smart, but not smarter than me. I’m already putting the pieces together before he continues.

“They want to cause fighting between your Family and hers. They want an alliance with her that reveals your secrets to them and makes their position stronger. Marco, they want to turn her against you.” Schuler shifts in his seat and drinks the rest of his liquor. Victor eyes me as I absorb what he’s said.

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“Interesting...” I pull my phone out, already feeling the tension in my shoulders growing unbearable. I want to warn her, encourage her to stay indoors and away from her phone. They may try to get to her through a Family member too, which I can’t have. She’ll feel pity and compassion and run out to rescue whoever it is they harm, and my enemy will snatch her up.

But the phone, connected to her private line, rings and rings. Either she is having a shower or she’s fallen asleep already. She never ignores my calls. It frustrates me, but I can’t control her actions any more than I can control the outcome of my enemy’s attempt to harm the ones under my protection.

“Go on... When? Where? How?” I slide my phone back into my pocket and glare at him, but he only shrugs.

“That’s all I have, Marco.” He looks fearful, and sweat beads on his forehead.

“Victor? What are your thoughts?” Isabella told me that she spoke with her Family, that they are still rebelling against her, but she promised to make them fall in line. I wonder how she’ll go about that. I asked her if she wanted me to go with her, but wisely, she rejected.

If I stand with her, they will fear me and lose all respect for her. At the first chance, they will rebel against me and overthrow her authority. She doesn’t need me babysitting her. She needs them to recognize her leadership and obey. That won’t happen if I’m there, or my men. After what she’s said, that might only make things worse.

“I think you should just assume control. I think those men are an asset waiting to be tapped, and if you control the reins, they will be forced to submit under threat of death.” Victor sips his whiskey coolly as Schuler pulls his handkerchief out and dabs his sweaty forehead. “If they harm her, her Family will blame us. After all, the D’Angelos have had no problem with the Bratva in the past. Only since marrying you.”

“And if that happens, they will turn against you and bind together with your enemy, Marco,” Schuler adds. “You’ll be fighting a war you cannot win.”

I turn my glare on him and shift in my seat. The leather beneath me squeaks under my weight as I ask, “And how do you know this information? How do you know it’s credible?”

He squirms like a roach under a magnifying glass in direct light. I know he has his own connections of which I’m oblivious, and I don’t care. I don’t need to know how he gets his information, just that it is able to be verified as true and trusted.

“I have a man... He’s on their payroll. He gives me information when he knows it is damaging to you. I can’t sell him out, man. I just trust his intel. He says it’s tonight, so it’s tonight.” Schuler is literally dripping with sweat now, rings forming under his armpits and that light blue shirt he wears, and I am getting nowhere.

“And you don’t know what the hit will be?” I scowl at him as Victor chimes in.

“Seems like kidnapping is their only option, Brother. If they aren’t going to harm her, just scare her Family into submission, then they won’t actually fire a gun or plant a bomb.” His wisdom calms me for a moment. He’s right. They will try to take her and either convince her to work with them or brainwash her into it. Or perhaps they’ll just use fear tactics. If it were me, that’s the route I’d go.

“Tonight? You’re sure?” I think of Isabella as I pose the question to Schuler, who nods. She’s safe inside my home where she should be, but until the threat is neutralized, that’s where she’ll have to stay. They won’t be successful tonight, which means they will be relentless, looking for any opportunity to snatch her up, and I will have to be on my guard.

I have a half a mind to call Nicolo myself and tell him to snap that Family into order so this nonsense stops, but I resist. I can’t throw my weight around, not yet. Not when she wants to do it herself. It’s bad enough that I’m keeping this from her. If she learns I’ve gone behind her back to enforce that her Family follows her lead, she will be enraged. It’s important that they respect her on her own merit, not because a bigger, meaner, uglier leader stands as her shadow whom they fear.

“Then we’ll wait. If her Family comes around her because of all of this, then we’ll have no worries. They won’t allow her to be taken any more than I will, even if they do resist her as their leader. She is one of them. So I think my best move is to go home and talk with her. I can let her know the threat, and she can inform her Family. She can insist that they protect her, and they will fall in line.”

I rise, ready to leave and head home, when my phone rings. I reach for it instinctively, expecting it to be Isabella returning the missed call, but it’s not. It’s a call from my home, but it’s not my number. It’s Warren’s number. I swipe to answer and hold my phone to my ear, but I don’t get a word out before he’s carrying on.

“Sir, she’s gone. She tried to leave out the front door and I told her she had to stay put. She was going to go to her mother’s house. She asked for tea in one hour, but I brought it right away. The window was open, and she was gone.” Warren, one of my best security guards, is breathless, as if he’s been running and searching for her.

“Fuck’s sake. Any sign of where she went?” I move quickly now, heading for the door, and shout over my shoulder, “Victor, load up. We have trouble.” My head

spins. This can't be happening. Why would she leave when she was tired and just wanted to sleep? Where would she go?

"Sir, the motion detectors went off in the back near the patio, then the neighbor's dogs were going nuts. I think she slipped over the back fence. I think she's met up with someone."

"Thanks, Warren, I'll be there in fifteen minutes." I stomp toward the door now, feeling angry that she would disobey my orders. No one disobeys my orders. But more than that, I'm scared for the first time in my life, and that fear makes me want to kill—my enemies, my friends, even my Family—anyone who comes between me and Isabella.

Victor catches up with me just as I'm barking orders to my driver to rush me home. We jump into the car and jet off. I hope she's just gone to her mother's house and nothing more. If they've gotten to her, I'll kill every last one of them.

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ISABELLA

I struggle against the men holding me down, wrestling to get free. Their hands are strong, gripping my biceps and knees, holding me in place, but they haven't gagged me or blindfolded me yet.

"Let me go. You have no idea what you're doing." I don't hide my rage from them, though there's little I can do to fight back. With three of them and only one of me, I'm outnumbered and at their mercy.

"Shh, sweetheart, we're not going to hurt you. We're just taking you to our Boss for a little chat." The man to my right speaks with a thick Russian accent, and I know what

this is. Marco warned me the enemy would retaliate. I told him to be ready for this.

This has to be why he locked me up tonight, why he gave his men instructions not to let me out of his house. I'm stupid enough to rebel against him thinking I know better than him, but if he'd just have told me what was going on, I may have stayed put. I would be safe right now instead of in the back seat of a car that stinks of cigars and booze.

"You know who I am, right? You know what you've done? My Family will come looking. The Romanos will hunt you down and slaughter you." I jerk and thrash, but my body is growing tired, and I'm acutely aware that I cannot take a single blow to my stomach at all. If they want to put me in my place, all they have to do is threaten and I'll cower. My unborn child must be protected and kept secret at all cost.

"Oh, we know exactly who you are and that's the reason you're here. You're going to work with us to bring that son of a bitch down, honey. The Boss will explain it all when we get there." The driver's eyes peer at me through my reflection in the rearview mirror. It's dark out, so I'm certain he can't see the hatred in my gaze, but if looks could kill, he'd be dead. These assholes have no clue what storm they've started.

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“I have to put this over your head now, you understand. It’s not personal at all. We just can’t have you knowing where we’re going.” One of the men produces a burlap sack and shakes it out while the other holds me down. I shake my head and jerk around, hoping to keep the thing away from me, but they are so strong.

I have no choice but to succumb to the inevitable, and when it happens, I feel suffocated. The bag smells like gun oil and tobacco, and I can barely breathe. My own carbon dioxide threatens to steal my oxygen, so I try to stay calm.

“You’re not getting away with this.” I steady myself when I realize there is nothing I can do. My phone is in my pocket, or maybe my purse, if I still have that after the tumble off the roof. I can’t remember. I don’t know if Marco has a way to track it without a call being connected, but he has his assets within the police department.

My mind starts to play out all sorts of scary scenarios—they’ve stolen me to kill me, or they’re going to lock me up and use me as leverage against Marco to get what they want. The truth is, however, that’s all speculation. It’s anyone’s guess why they didn’t just kill me.

But it’s obvious they were hunting me. Maybe they hacked Marco’s camera feed and knew when I left the house and where I’d be. Or maybe it was pure coincidence that I stumbled out of his neighbor’s yard just as they passed. Either way, they have a plan and I can’t let it happen.

“Where are you taking me?” I snap, though I don’t for a second think they will tell me anything, not with this bag on my head. So I count the turns. Just before they covered my head, I noticed we were at Broadway and Ninety-Fifth Street. I can only

guess which way we're going now, but I try. South maybe, toward Washington Square Park? Or are we headed northward? I feel confused and overwhelmed, and tears well up, but I blink them back. I'm the leader of a major criminal organization, not a child, and I won't break down and give anyone the satisfaction.

"Shh, sweetheart, it will all become clear soon."

The two men begin speaking in Russian, or a dialect. I don't know that much Russian at all, but I've picked up on a few key phrases. From what I gather, they are wanting me to cooperate with them somehow. Maybe they think I'll give up Marco's secrets, or maybe they think he'll come looking and they'll have a chance to kill him. He's too smart for that. He'd never put himself at risk. Even he knows the value of the Family head, and while I believe he cares for me, he won't risk everything to save me. At least, I wouldn't.

My guess is he's forming a search party, that maybe he doesn't even know they have me yet. I told Warren I'd be going to visit my mother. Maybe they'll look there first. That will alert Uncle Nicky, though I feel conflicted that Mom will worry about me. Right now, I don't feel like I'm in any real danger. I believe the man when he said they just want to talk, so maybe I just stay calm and I'll be fine.

My palms are sweaty, my heart racing. But fear won't control my actions or reactions. I take a deep breath and ground myself... Three things I can feel—burlap, hot hands on my arms, the rhythmic bumping of the car on the road. Two things I can smell—beer and tobacco. One thing I can hear—the thick accent of two Russians having a dialogue in a language I don't understand.

I do it over and over until my pulse returns to normal and I feel connected to the current moment without fear or panic. What I do feel, however, is nausea—a lot of it. My stomach roils and twists, and I feel like I might vomit inside this burlap sack if I have to smell the stench of it for a single second longer, and then the car stops.

“We’re here. Now behave yourself, and we’ll take the bag off soon.” One of the men grabs my arm and yanks on it. I’m pulled to the right and out of the car, where I stumble and almost fall. I don’t feel my purse against my hip or back, and I realize they’ve either cut it off me, or I dropped it at some point. I reach for my pockets, but they grab my arms and hold them behind my back.

“If you want me to respect you and listen to you, you could at least be respectful to me. Stop jerking me around. I’m a human, not a blowup doll.” My comment makes them laugh a deep, rumbling, hearty laugh, and I sigh. If I play nice and go along with them, I’ll get out of this in no time—hopefully.

“This way, your majesty,” one of them says, and I have a mental image of him bowing in front of me. What I wouldn’t do to bring my knee up to his face and give him a bloody nose, but I don’t.

I allow them to lead me forward, my elbows gripped on either side of me as I start walking. I still smell the distinct scent of rain, but there’s something else. A savory smell of food, something I can’t place. It neither smells appetizing nor repulsive, but that’s not why I’m trying to figure it out. Anything I can learn about them will help me in the future, whether or not I’m released in peace or rescued under duress. This is my enemy by marriage, and now by circumstance.

I’m led indoors, where I hear the clatter of dishes and the scents begin to meld into one amalgamation of odors I can’t differentiate. It’s a restaurant of some sort, my guess is Russian based on the snippets of conversation I hear going on around me, probably from the cook and wait staff.

Then everything grows quieter as I’m led farther into the building. The bag is removed from my head, and I blink against the light that hits my face. I’m in a room with bold red carpet, red tablecloths, red leather seats, and a man seated at a table with flowers and candles and the most distinguishable face I’ve seen all day.

ThePakhan.

“Ah, Ms. D’Angelo, please come sit.” He gestures to the spot across from himself, but he doesn’t stand. That’s the first strike against him. It reveals his utter lack of respect for me as a woman, as the wife of his enemy, and as the leader of my own Family.

I pull away from my captors and brush the damp hair out of my face, feeling the pine needles and sap still clinging to it. “That’s Mrs. Romano, thank you, and I’d rather stand.” I glare at him without a smidge of fear trickling through me. Men like him don’t do the dirty work themselves. They keep their hands clean by making others do it.

He doesn’t have to work to gain the respect of his Family the way I’ve been the past several months. As a man, he was gifted this position when his father left it to him and everyone naturally shifted their loyalty to him from the previous leader. Which is the only reason I let his disrespect fly. I stand staring at him until he stands too and gestures again.

“Please, come sit.”

Finally acknowledging my presence and authority, he buttons his suit coat and remains standing with his arm outstretched to the empty seat where a place setting is laid out. A silver tray with lid intact sits on the table at each of the places. I’ve already eaten, and even if I were starving, I wouldn’t touch that with a ten-foot pole. But I sit down.

“Now, where were we?” He sits again, unbuttoning his coat and reaching for his glass of wine. I see the glass set before me and wonder if it’s laced with something. Not a single thing will cross these lips except maybe the vomit I can feel wanting to rise up.

“That’s a good question. I have one of my own. Why am I here?” I cut right to the chase. There’s no beating around the bush. When someone steals you off the street, you hardly think they have altruistic motives or care one bit about your wellbeing. These men are playing a deadly game. Someone will shed blood soon, be it mine, or his, or even Marco’s.

“Ah, so we’re getting right down to business.” He lifts the lid off his plate and nods at mine. “Let’s eat first, shall we?” The aroma of whatever sort of soup is in the bowl situated beneath the lid wafts out and makes me feel even queasier.

“I’d rather not. I had a full dinner only a few hours ago with my husband.” Sitting back in the seat, I keep my shoulders squared and my chin high. People can only make me feel inferior if I allow them to. It’s what my Mom used to tell me when I was younger.

“Suit yourself,” he says, taking a large bite of soup and moaning over it. Part of me wishes he would choke on it, that somehow within my mental energy I possess a power that will manifest dark, horrible things simply by thinking them.

“Why have you taken me? What is this about?” I don’t let up because the sooner he tells me what the hell this is about, the sooner they can take me back to where I belong and I can be in Marco’s arms again.

Regret swirls in my thoughts. I haven’t told him I’m carrying his heir because I’ve been afraid of what that may mean for my family, for my father’s legacy. But he deserves to know. And the longer I sit here watching this horrible man eat his dinner, the more I wish I’d have told him I’m having his baby. The more I wish he’d have told me why I couldn’t leave the house tonight. Hindsight allows me to feel so much regret, it makes me want to cry.

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“Well that’s simple, dear. You’re going to come to an agreement with me. I don’t wish you harm or ill will. I think it’s fabulous that a woman has risen to assume such a powerful throne. I’ve watched your business dealings, and I think you’re doing a fine job.” He takes a piece of bread and dips it in the soup, waving it around as he speaks. “But being this is a man’s world, you’ll need alliances.”

“I have an alliance with the Romano family. It’s secure and we’re doing fine.” My words are tight, like my shoulders—squared and so tense you could pluck them like guitar strings.

“Ah, but is it really an alliance?” He winks at me as he bites the bread he sopped in his soup.

“It’s more than.” My resolve is firm, but my stomach forgets that. I feel it rising, and there’s nothing I can do about it. I try to fight it, swallowing harder and harder to keep it down, but there isn’t a glass of water to aid me.

“Marriage is tricky, Ms. D’Angelo,” he croons, just as my stomach empties itself. I lean over the red carpet and let it all out, the contents of my half-digested dinner, the vitamin I took moments before I started eating, and all my dignity, there on the rug.

The man chuckles at my misfortune as I retch until I can’t breathe, then I take the cloth napkin off the table and wipe my mouth and nose clean.

“What, are you pregnant?” he says sardonically, and I remain silent. He’ll learn soon enough that I carry the heir to the Romano throne, and then I will be even more valuable to him, but in the meantime, I will never be known for lying. My word will

be my bond. I've made that decision very firmly now, after having lied to Marco and my family more than once. I hate it. I won't do it anymore, but I won't confess either.

"Ah, you are..." He arches an eyebrow and nods. "Well, I suppose congratulations are in order."

The bile in the back of my throat is only leftover from vomiting, but I feel like this man draws it out of me. He's disgusting and terrifying, but I won't be intimidated.

"I suppose they are." Keeping my cool, I ask, "Now, what are you expecting me to do?" I will play along a little while longer, but I will never give him information on Marco. This man is a snake and a coward, and I know he's responsible for the hit on my Family. He's lucky I don't take the steak knife lying on the table next to my plate and plunge it into his heart. He doesn't even deserve that quick of a death. He deserves torture and pain, the very same amount he's put me through in mourning my family.

If Marco doesn't get here soon, I may make my move. For now, I'll be patient, though. At least I'll be able to learn a few things in the process.

25

MARCO

Victor and I jump into my car. I don't have time for a driver, nor do I want to leave that much to someone else's responsibility. I have thirty men out searching for her, deep within Russian territory. We're risking the biggest battle of this war yet, but I'm not backing down. I must get to her and bring her back.

"I can't believe she'd be so dumb. What was she thinking?" Victor sucks on a cigarette, blowing his smoke out the window as I speed down streets and whip around

corners. We have a crystal clear image of the vehicle that took her from the neighbor's security camera footage, complete with a license plate.

Warren pulled up all the feeds, and we watched on the monitors as she dropped from the awning over the patio into the pine tree in the backyard. She was wrapped in a blanket, which we later found clinging to the pine branches where she left it. There was almost no trace of her other than the lights in the back yard flipping on because of motion detection, until she landed in the back yard of my neighbor behind the house. They were gracious enough, when I barged into their home only thirty minutes ago with three of my men and guns in each hand, to show us the footage.

"She's not dumb. She is determined, and she won't let anything stop her, even if it's dangerous. In my book, that's a hallmark of a leader, Victor, and one of the reasons you were not chosen to lead this family and I was. You are a coward, and cowards don't lead." I turn a corner, deeper into Bratva territory, and my eyes are wide open and searching. The small black sedan is nowhere. We saw one we thought was it, but the plates weren't a match and when we knocked on the door, it was a family already turned in for the night with the lights off. They were frightened, but we told them not to worry about a thing.

"Did you call Schuler?" he asks, and I scowl. Schuler has been useless since the day we put him on the books. His so-called intel only gave us the warning an hour before it happened, and then it didn't give details.

"I told him to trace her line in case she makes a call, but if they took her, they've trashed her phone by now. You'd think they'd know better. Not only will they draw fire from me, but her entire Family will explode when they hear it. When I called Nicolo, he said they were already gathered, that she was headed to meet them for an important announcement." I am so furious with myself. I should have stayed with her. I should have been the one protecting her. I should have told her the threat and she'd have understood.

As it stands, I don't know how her Family will respond. They may blame me and turn on me now, thinking if I'd never gotten involved with the D'Angelo name, Isabella's father would still be alive and she'd be safe. Or they may decide my Family is an asset and added strength to their search and bind together with me. I'm not sure. All I know is if we don't find her soon, we're likely to lose her for good. These guys play for blood.

"Look, look!" Victor points down the street and flicks his cigarette out the window, then pulls his pair of binoculars up to his eyes. He reads the license plate out loud, and I know we've found the car, at least. I punch the accelerator to the floor and zoom up the block, squealing my tires on the pavement as I slam on the breaks and screech to a stop next to the car.

"It's them..." Staring at the black car, I try to see inside its darkly tinted windows, but they are all blacked out. I can't even tell if someone is in it until the window starts to come down slowly and I see the tip of the gun barrel emerge.

"Drive, drive!" Victor shouts as he bends low in his seat and pops the glove box. I take off like a bat out of hell, using every bit of power in my V8 to tear off down the street. Bullets riddle the back of my car, shattering my taillights and puncturing my trunk, but thankfully, nothing that puts us out of commission. Yet.

We head down the street, weaving left and right, the Bratva hitmen hot on our trail. "I thought we shook them off back there!" I yell through gritted teeth as I take a hard right, narrowly missing a delivery truck.

"Not these guys, they're pros!" Victor responds, fiddling with something in his lap. "Damn it, I wish I'd grabbed my AR!"

"We're in the city limits, moron, no time for your Rambo fantasies! Just hold on!" Ignoring my brother's stupidity, I swerve onto a residential street, hoping the narrow

roads and parked cars will give us an advantage over their sedan. The roar of their engine gets louder, and I glance into my rearview mirror in time to see their car fishtailing around the corner, gaining on us fast.

"Victor, do something or we're dead!" I say as I gun the engine and fly past more suburban homes.

"I'm working on it!" he growls, struggling with something under his seat. "Ah, got it!" As I watch in the mirror, he shoots upward through the sunroof. "How's that for Rambo?" he asks as he stands on his seat and pokes his head out the sunroof, returning fire.

I don't have time to deal with his stupidity since I'm too busy evading our enemy, but all I can think is how Victor is the only man who would shoot out a window rather than opening it. He sways as I turn a corner and uses his knee to brace himself on my shoulder. I try to remain steady, but the momentum has me swinging around too.

"Watch it, asshole! I'm trying to do some precision shooting here!" he hollers above the wind and gunfire.

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The Sedan's tires squeal as it follows our every move, but Vic's shots have them ducking for cover. The streets are thankfully empty this time of day, which means no one else is caught in this deadly game of chicken. We scream past a parked police car and I slam on the breaks, sliding so close that we barely stop before our bumper kisses their front fender. The momentum throws Victor forward, and he falls into the car with a thud. There's no time to think with Bratva on our tail. I whip the wheel to the right and head up an alley.

We're sitting ducks in here, vulnerable to whatever they want to do to us. I power on, slamming into potholes and dodging the dumpsters as I push the car to its limits. Victor, on the otherhand, is a different story. He's reloading his gun like this is a Sunday stroll. The Sedan flies into the alleyway, barreling after us.

"Hang on to something!" I yell as I brace myself for the exit onto the street two blocks over. The car bounces, and I drift as I turn to the left into oncoming traffic, which thankfully is light. This one-way street might afford us a little more time to escape.

"Got it!" he shouts as he sticks his head and gun out the window, firing once more at our pursuers.

The sedan's windshield explodes, and I catch a glimpse of the passenger slumping over, but the car doesn't slow down. "Crap... they're still on us!" Victor yells.

"I know that, you idiot!" I respond as a red light a block ahead looms large in my vision. I don't have time to stop or think, I just gun it through the intersection, narrowly missing a truck crossing the intersection. As we clear it, I check the mirrors

and see the sedan smashed into the truck, the impact enough to finally put them out of commission.

"Yes!" Victor shouts with his hands held in the air. "That's how you handle those assholes!"

I just breathe a sigh of relief and turn toward home. There's no telling where they have her, but I doubt it's the Chinese restaurant south of Brighton Beach.

"We have to get help. Call Nicolo, have them gather at my place. Tell them we're coming." I bark out the orders even as I formulate a plan for our next steps.

We pull up to my home to find dozens of cars parked out front, and they're not cars I recognize, except Nicolo's black sedan. I leave my badly damaged car at the edge of the property, and Victor and I head across the lawn. Light rain has started to fall again, soaking us by the time we get to the door. Warren opens for us, not saying a word as we pass by. His failure to keep Isabella safe will be addressed later. Right now, I have to tell the men my suspicions, that Isabella is in one of the buildings near the beachfront, close to where we found that sedan.

Nicolo greets me with a glower and determination in his eyes. "We are here, and we are with you." His bold statement is backed by more than three dozen men, all with shoulders squared and hands clasped in front of themselves. A few of my men mingle with the D'Angelos, but given the full room and how they've come in droves, I can see my previous hopes that this would bind the Family together are being realized.

"Men!" I shout, and all of them give me their attention. My chest constricts in anger and concern for my wife but swells with pride in seeing how they back her up. "Our lady has been taken by our enemy. We need to find out where they're keeping her and hunt the bastards down who took her. She would look to us to find common ground and have each other's backs. Are you with me?"

The response I get is nothing less than miraculous. A chorus of agreement rings out in conjunction with the chambering of bullets and grunts of restraint. Their queen has been taken, my wife, and together, we will stop at nothing to find her.

“Now, she said earlier this evening that she was going to visit her mother.” My eyes scan their faces, every single one of them betraying her lie.

“Sir,” Nicolo says timidly, “she was coming to meet us, I fear.” His face is just as stern now as it was the second I walked in. “She ordered me to gather the Family.” His hand sweeps around the room in one motion at the collective group. “You see here that only one-tenth of the men prepared to fight to bring her back. Her father would kill them all one by one if they left her, and they have sworn to protect her even if they disagree with her leadership.”

“Good,” I tell him, eyeing the two I know caused all the trouble. “And when she returns?” I raise an eyebrow at them, and the ringleader, Chase I think she called him, meets my gaze.

“When she returns, she is our leader and we will serve her as we served her father before her, and his father before him.” The boy can’t have even met Isabella’s grandfather, but I give him credit. Her “mercy” seems to have taught him a lesson. Except, I see a hint of fire in his eyes I’m not fond of. There’s something there he isn’t telling me.

I narrow my eyes at him and move through the group of men who part slightly to let me pass. “Would you swear with your blood that you will honor her authority, follow her leadership, and respect her orders?” I feel my neck constricting, the thick veins running below the surface pumping blood into my head, thrumming with the tension in my body.

He glances around, his eyes shifty and menacing. “Yeah, what’d I say?” His chest

puffs out ever so slightly. He's lying, right here to my face, in front of his whole Family who are clearly concerned about Isabella's wellbeing.

"Boys, what do we do with a traitor?" They're not my blood, but if they have even a shred of loyalty to her, they'll know what's good for them.

"They die, sir." His brother, standing to his left, answers my question, and I watch both of them square their shoulders.

This is going to be trouble.

26

ISABELLA

The large, brooding guard who followed me in here stands over me now, lifting the lid off the dish set before me. My stomach swims, as nervous and jittery as my heart. The Bratva leader stares at me, but his wicked grin never wavers. He is smooth and charming, a snake slithering around the juiciest apple, tempting me to take a bite, and I am not Eve. I'm not about to be deceived by the serpent and fall prey to his death.

"Have a bite, dorogoy..." His voice is thick and commanding, prompting me to lift the spoon and dip it into the thick soup. I've already eaten, but the stench coming from the mess on the floor reminds me—and him—that my stomach is now empty and I can at least taste the dish he so hospitably offers me.

"Mmm," I moan softly, fighting back the urge to throw up again already. The soup is good, but my nerves are shot. And between my nervousness, the fact that he knows I'm carrying an heir to someone's throne, and my racing thoughts attempting to discern a way for me to escape, I can't fathom eating this. It will end up with the pasta on the floor covered in bile and mucus.

“Now see? Didn’t I tell you?” His shit-eating grin can go fuck itself for all I care. All I can think about is how to get out of here, not this stupid, wretched soup. My gag reflex triggers, and I cover my mouth with a napkin. The guard backs off but thePakhandoesn’t. “Now, while we eat, I want to talk with you. It seems we have some ground to cover.”

I listen and take miniscule bites—only as large as I can stomach—as he tells me the history of his Family, their territorial disputes, and the attack against his son which Marco led, which was my idea, though he doesn’t know that. This man thinks I don’t understand the bad blood between them. He thinks I’m not smart enough to realize it was at his order that my father was killed. I haven’t breathed a single breath of anger or hostility toward him about that, but he’s taken my reservation as ignorance.

“And so you see, Marco Romano is bad for you,dorogoy...” His little Russian pet name for me is insulting. I am not his “dear” or his “sweetheart”. I am his enemy. A cold-blooded killer will never be my friend, nor someone I will get into bed with. Not when their bullets have been aimed at my Family.

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“And so you think I should partner with you, then? Upheave my allegiance to the Romano clan and take you on as the new partner...” I act as though I’m pondering this new agreement in sincerity when in reality, I’m imagining blood running from his throat in the wake of my knife slicing across his neck.

This stress isn’t good for the baby, but holding in my thoughts is better for me physically. I can deal with bodily tension and high blood pressure. I can’t take the physical assault I know will come if I rebel against him. He won’t take no for an answer, so the only way I’m getting out of here is to play along.

“I think you will see the wisdom in my proposal.” He opens his palms toward me as if he is giving me a gift, and I rest my spoon on the dish and fold my hands over it, leaning against the edge of the table.

“Tell me why my Family should trust you over him.” I am serious about this point. To know Marco’s weaknesses from his enemies’ standpoint is to know how his enemy may attack or use those weaknesses against him. To know this man’s pride is to go before him and cause a fall.

“Our empire is global. The Romano empire only reaches to the States, maybe Canada. He has fingers in Europe, but we are everywhere.” He winks at me and takes another bite, but I stare at him, wanting more. In time, the D’Angelo empire may well supersede even the Russians, given the right leadership and opportunity. That part means nothing to me.

“And?” I ask, feigning boredom with his bragging. It’s not boredom I feel at all. It’s rage—pure, unadulterated, violent rage.

“I see you’re not impressed. Well, let’s put it this way. Marco Romano has a history of stabbing people in the back. You’ll find with us, you will remain firmly in charge of your own Family while we merely function as a conduit for resources and assets. Romano has been known to make similar agreements, not marriage, of course, but in business, and then pull the wool over the eyes of his partners, the rug from under their feet, and how do you say, vodit’ za nos.”

I scoff at his thick Russian and shake my head. “I live in America, Mr. Kozlov.”

“It means to lead someone by the nose, or to fool with someone.” He leans forward as storm clouds form in his black eyes. For the first time, I physically see why people fear this man, though my fear level is nothing compared to my anger. “He is a little fox in your garden, Isabella.” He tilts his head at me and smirks. “He will spoil the grapes and you’ll never see it coming.”

The room seems to take a chill. I’ve heard this warning from multiple sources now, and not once have I believed it. Yet, from this evil, wicked man, my heart feels doubt creeping in. I strengthen my resolve and think of my unborn child. Marco’s heir grows in my womb, and suddenly, it doesn’t matter if he or she takes my throne or Marco’s. What’s most important to me is getting back to his arms.

“Tell me more.” I play into his hand. I have to know what he’s talking about, what secrets he has against my husband.

“Romano murdered his own father.” The striking accusation slaps me across the face, and I feign shock, though I know this can’t be true. Marco mourns his father with a heavy heart. Sometimes, when I speak of my own father, I see it in his eyes, a grief that only one soul who’s borne the same pain can connect with.

“For the throne?” I ask, praying my acting is as good as my aim in the gun range. He doesn’t know me, and thus doesn’t know how I might respond to an accusation like

this one.

“You’re starting to understand. You can trust me. You cannot trust Marco Romano.” ThePakhanleans back on his seat, dropping his napkin across his empty bowl, and I continue to play along. He needs to believe that I’m on his side, that I’ve taken the bait, and the only way to do that is to let my emotion show. So, I allow the tears to come.

Tears for my father.

Tears for my brother.

Tears for the child in my womb who will know only this life of crime and violence.

Tears for Marco, and my ache to be in his arms.

I use my napkin to dry them as quickly as they come, but they keep coming, and then comes my second round of vomiting. The tiny bits of soup I’ve ingested join the first pile of vomit on the floor, and I heave over the side of the chair. He snaps his fingers, calling someone in to clean this up, but I’ve sold my alliance to him in a way he firmly believes.

“Now, you should call your Family. You need to tell them to prepare for war. We must fight against the Romanos at once and take them down. The faster we move, the swifter the victory.” He reaches into his pocket and produces a cell phone, and as he reaches across the table, I see that it’s mine. “Do what you must, but understand, this means we are in agreement. You and I are partners now, and from here out, we fight against Marco Romano and his Family.” He holds the phone between his fingers, pinched there firmly until I nod.

“Of course,” I tell him, though in my head it is not any agreement at all. I pull the

phone from his grasp and lean away from the sturdy-looking woman who comes in with a bucket and a roll of napkins. She looks tired and sad, not at all like Marco's maid, and it's just another nail in this man's coffin. He can't even treat his staff well.

I hold the phone, and my hand shakes. I can't call Nicolo. If I reveal this to him in this way, the entire Family will be angered yet again. If I were to call my father's brother, they would think I am weak. There is only one person I can call to send this message to, only one of them who will understand the intent behind my words and see right through them.

My heart pounds as I punch in the numbers. I pray the Family isn't upset that I've missed the meeting I called. I know that by now, Warren has told Marco I'm missing, and he's called Nicky at the very least, who may or may not have informed anyone else. My only hope in sending this message is if my cousin has any heart left in him at all, if he remembers what it was like to be a child and run in the yard with me. We had such a strong bond once upon a time. I'm going to lean on that to rescue myself and keep my fingers crossed that it works.

27

MARCO

Owen's face pales, the blood draining out of his skin as he realizes I'm not bluffing. His chest is puffed out, eyes glazed over. He knows what must be done to his brother who has no good intentions in him. Isabella is missing, and though they haven't claimed credit for doing it, I know our enemy has her. This asshole can't seem to understand what loyalty and family mean, and I have had enough.

"Nicolo, you can deal with this internal threat to your family." I turn to the others and continue. "Or the rest of you can decide what to do with him. But so long as he remains uncommitted to your leader, you should consider him a traitor and do as your

former leader, Mr. D'Angelo, would have done.”

Chase glares at me and clasps his hands in front of himself with arms hanging. He's confident none of his Family members will move on him, almost as if he runs the Family and Isabella is nothing more than a talking head.

“Look, I'm just sayin' she is only going to fail at this. Look at how this turned out... You warned her to stay put, right?” He glares at me down his nose, as if her being captured is my fault. This is where I draw the line, but he continues. “And she ran out anyway. So either you failed at your job, or she is directly rebellious to you as a husband and the leader of your Family, the head of the alliance, and?—”

“Enough!” I boom, stepping forward. Our chests press together in a tense standoff. I can feel his breath on my face as he refuses to back down, and I sense movement on the periphery of the room. My men inch closer, and we are outnumbered ten to one. Nicolo is faithful to Isabella. I know if this blows up, he will attempt to rein them in, but not before damage is done.

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“I caution you to think carefully before you make any move you may later regret. You may think you have the upper hand now, but your loyalty has come into question and you will be dealt with from within your own Family swiftly.” My tone is calm and strict. If I take an action against him, his Family will retaliate and war will ensue. Isabella will come back to something she never wanted.

If he makes a move, I will have no choice but to defend myself, which means his Family will side with him and there will be all-out chaos. It’s not a good situation no matter what way you look at it, and I am furious that we are wasting time that we could be spending in finding her and bringing her home.

“Chase, come on, man.” Owen nudges him, but his eyes stay locked on mine. “Just back off. You’re gonna get yourself killed.” Owen seems to have more sense in his left thumb than Chase has in his whole body.

“You should listen to your brother,” I tell Chase, and for a split second, I think he will relent and back down, but two more of his Family members walk up behind him, then a few more.

So this is how it will go down. While their queen is being held hostage somewhere, they will attempt to overthrow me or put me in my place, and Isabella’s wishes will be completely disregarded. I knew I should have backed her up, even if the only way they ever respected her was to fear me. Well, it comes down to this, and now is my time to put them in their place.

I gesture at my men who move swiftly toward us, and Chase gives me a light push. Owen tries to hold him back, but Chase fights against him.

“Chase, knock it off.” Owen wraps an arm around Chase’s chest, and Nicolo walks up.

“This is unacceptable. Isabella needs us!” Nicolo sounds furious, and understandably so. I know my place is out searching for her, not here in this place fighting over who is in charge. Chase puts his own pride above any of it and may even risk her life. Who knows whether he himself orchestrated the kidnapping to set this scenario up? If she planned to meet with them, that means he knew she would be out and likely alone.

In the middle of the ruckus, a phone rings, loud, shrill chimes going off. Chase scowls and pats his pants pocket and his nostrils flare. He pulls the phone out and glances at it, and his eyes go wide.

“Who is it?” Owen asks, sounding frantic. I can see this Family really is divided, and I know half of them will follow Isabella, maybe more if I can just get rid of this instigator. But he looks surprised and angry as he stares at his phone.

“It’s her,” he says, barely audibly.

“What?” Owen asks, grabbing Chase’s wrist. He gasps at the phone and waves his hand. “It’s her! Shut up!” And instantly, the room grows silent. Nicolo rakes a hand through his hair, and I watch as Chase swipes right to accept the call and presses it to his ear.

“Hey, Bella, where are you?” He sounds casual enough, as if feigning ignorance of the entire event. My breath catches in my throat, and I glance at Warren, snapping my fingers. If she’s called him, then Schuler can run a trace on her number and we’ll know exactly where she is.

“Keep her talking,” I whisper as I move toward the door and look into the hallway.

Warren is on the phone now, calling the detective to run the trace, and I spin around and stand at the head of the room listening, along with everyone else in this room.

“Yeah, I understand that. Of course...” His gaze and a stern glare are turned on me, as if he is listening to her tell him evil things about my life or my reputation. I can see by this interaction that if this situation was orchestrated by him or he knew about it, he’s a terrific actor. I now believe fully that the enemy has her of their own accord.

“What? Of course...” His brow furrows, and he looks around at the men around him. Something has angered him more than he was only moments ago.

“What is it? What’d she say?” Owen goads him, tapping his shoulder urgently as if to say we need that information.

Chase’s eyes lock with mine, and I mouth the words, “Keep her talking.” I turn to look in the hallway again, and Warren is standing in the doorway now with a finger held up. I can hear Schuler’s voice talking to him, though I can’t discern what he’s saying, though I think he’s counting.

“Does he have it?” I ask, suddenly wondering why Isabella would call her cousin instead of me, and not just any cousin, but the one who openly rebels against her. She has to have her reasons for doing so, though they escape me right now.

Warren nods at me, and I turn my full attention back to Chase who now has a serious expression, stern like mine and determined. He isn’t happy about whatever it is she’s saying, but I get the feeling he understands that she’s giving him orders.

“Yes, ma’am, I totally understand. I’ll rally the Family now... Alright. I’ll call a Family meeting.” His eyes stay locked on mine as he says the word, “Goodbye.” Then he hangs up and puts his phone back in his pocket. There’s a pregnant pause as we all wait for his word on what Isabella said to him. I don’t know how she got her

phone or what they're doing to her, but my guess is that they're trying to turn her against me.

"Well?" Owen prompts, and again he nudges his brother.

Chase's eyes flick around nervously. He's trying to decide whether to listen to her orders or defy them. I give him a hard glare and cross my arms over my chest, allowing him to deliberate a while. I suppose this is what mercy may look like to some. Isabella would be grateful to me for giving this small mercy to him when I'd rather just rip his throat out.

"What did she say!" Owen snaps, clearly very upset by how long Chase is taking to respond. I can see the concern etched on Owen's brow. He loves her. To him she is like a sister, and that bond isn't one so easily broken. He pushes Chase, who shakes his head.

"Her orders are to follow Marco and do whatever he says." Chase's jaw is tight and his nostrils flare as he speaks. He's enraged by passing this information along, but he is finally respecting her.

"She said those exact words?" I ask, finally feeling like things are moving the right direction.

"No, she said you're a snake in the grass, a liar, and a cheat. She said you are trying to overthrow our family and that..." His words float off into the air unspoken. I can see the way they strangle him, lodging in his throat and rebelling against his will to speak them.

"She said what?" Owen pushes him again and seems very impatient.

"What else did she say?" Nicolo gets in on the conversation, now throwing his weight

around. With Isabella's backing, he seems more a man than previously. I am sensing a strange family dynamic I hadn't seen before. They don't respect him either. Maybe because he's not blood to them.

Chase pushes Owen back and then straightens his shirt. His eyes are full of fire and violence. He can't seem to look away from me, like I've poisoned her against them and there's nothing he can do about it. He's lost control in every way.

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“What did she say?” I ask, my tone so commanding it draws the answer from his lips against his will.

“She said, the heir to the throne will not be subjected to the Romano name. He will be raised in our home with our blood in his veins and we will partner with the enemy to overcome the Romanos.”

My heart stands still for a moment. An heir? She’s pregnant? “She said that?” I ask again sternly, knowing she would never do that to me. She can’t.

He takes a deep breath and sighs hard. “The Family is one now, bound in blood. We are obligated to follow wherever she leads, and right now, we need her back or no one gets an heir.”

His words are callous, and I know it’s not the end of the line for this conflict, but for the first time, we are united with the same goal and ready to move. I look to Warren, who hangs up the call with Schuler and looks directly at me.

“Sir, we know where she is.” Warren’s tone is resolute.

“Men,” I say, bolstering their courage, “we’re going to war to get our queen. No one backs down. I want no cowards. This could be the end of your life or the beginning of the best alliance we’ve ever seen. Who’s with me?”

A chorus of shouts goes up, and as I head out the door toward the front of the house, I hear the echo of dozens of footsteps following me. They won’t even know what hit them. We’ll go in with precision and take back what rightfully is ours, and this war

ends tonight.

Or blood will be shed—a lot of it.

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ISABELLA

I'm surprised that as soon as the call is made he doesn't take my phone away. It must be an act of trust on his part, but it's foolish. I calmly set it on the table in front of me and relax. Marco will get the message loud and clear, and hopefully, Chase and Owen will understand that despite the issues between the Families and within our own, I am the leader and they need to follow my orders.

“And that's it? Your Family will listen to you?” He takes a cigar from his inner jacket pocket, then trims and lights it. As I watch the smoke drift upward through the air, I find myself thankful Marco doesn't smoke like this often. Some men make a habit of it daily, and the stench is enough to make me want to vomit again.

“They know my orders.” My stomach is tied in knots, and I hope the knot is strong enough to hold down what's left of the food I've ingested and my nerves too. When Marco comes in with guns blazing, I'll have only seconds to react and respond. I've never practiced for scenarios like this. I've always assumed whenmen came into circumstances out of their control, some natural instinct kicked in and they just knew what to do.

Now I'm wondering if I need to be training my men like they do at the police academy or SWAT team. Tactical preparedness was never a thing I had to think of. My mind races as I try to decide in this situation what would my men need? What should I be thinking about?

“Good, then we have an agreement?” he asks, but he offers no hand to shake on it. I freeze up for a moment because while honesty is my policy, I can’t honestly tell this man we have an agreement. If I say that, he will definitely hold me to it, and I will have made an enemy of him myself, rather than in proxy as an agent of Marco’s family.

So I say the most diplomatic answer I can. “Everything is set and my men follow my orders.”

He offers a grunt of what I can only assume is agreement, and my mind goes to work planning as he begins to prattle off ways we can be beneficial to each other. I try to listen, but mostly, I tune him out. I’m assuming he has a gun under his jacket somewhere, one in his boot too. They took my gun from me when they yanked me off the side of the road, so I’m unarmed.

There were three men who brought me here—three guards to defeat, though only one of them has been in this room since I arrived. The others may be out there somewhere watching, though they may also have left at some point. And there is no telling how many people are in this place outside of that. I saw a gun on each hip I passed, including the woman who cleaned my vomit.

“You seem troubled, dear.” He leans forward and blows a steady stream of smoke in my direction. “You don’t need to worry about Romano. In no time, my men will have him restrained, subdued, and…” He pauses, smiling as if trying to find a way to say what he wants to say tactfully. “Neutralized.”

My blood boils at the thought of this man touching my husband, and now he’s promising to kill him. He thinks removing Marco is something that will make me happy. He has no idea the bond we’ve formed and how I care for him, that his words are angering me, not putting me at ease.

“It’s difficult to relax and be calm when someone plucks you from the street and absconds with you. I was on my way to meet my Family for an important meeting.” I hope his men told him how I was escaping out the back of Marco’s property, not walking out the front door. It will lend credibility to my “unhappiness” and help him believe I really have made an agreement with him.

“My apologies, I was under the assumption that you were escaping because you were unhappy there.” He leans forward, and as he does, his suit coat parts in front, revealing his gun tucked beneath his armpit in a shoulder holster. I try not to stare at it, but it’s my salvation—the way out of here for me. I just have to bide my time.

“All is forgiven...” But not forgotten. This man murdered my father, and I won’t take that lying down. He will pay. Maybe not tonight, but soon.

“Good, then. It’s important to me that my allies are kept happy.” He nods at the door where a guard stands watch, and the man disappears. It’s my chance to make a move. With only one of them, I have a better chance at success.

“How happy would you like to make me, Mr. Kozlov?” Putting on my best fake seductive tone, I rise from my seat slowly and smooth my jeans, then walk around the table.

“Well, Ms. D’Angelo, that’s up to you. What sort of arrangement are you thinking of making with me?” His devilish smirk as I lower myself closer to his weapon and his lap is a look I will never forget. It makes my skin crawl. Bile rises in my throat, but all I can think about is getting that gun.

And then in the distance, I hear the faint sound of shouting. I know it’s Marco and my Family. My gut tells me it’s him out there, coming to get me. Without hesitation, I reach for his gun, disarming him and putting it under his chin in one swift movement.

“You sick bastard, you’re going to pay for this,” I snarl as I step around behind him, keeping the gun on his head the whole time. “Keep your hands in the air.” I drop to my knees behind him, knowing when his guards storm in, they will come from the door in the corner of the room and he will be my meat shield.

“Listen, you bitch, we had an agreement.” Kozlov has his hands up, but given the chance, he’ll reach for his gun in his boot.

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“Making an agreement with a captor is a foolish move. You understand....” My eyes are trained on the door even as I hear gunfire in the hallway. If I shoot him, I get my revenge now, but I lose the shield. I can’t hold his body up in front of myself. Everything is about timing now.

My heart is racing. My palms are sweaty. I don’t even know if there is a round chambered in this gun, but he’s acting like there’s one in there, and I haven’t removed the safety, but he doesn’t know that. This is a dangerous situation for me, and now I can’t even think straight. I have too much adrenaline pumping through my veins.

“You’re going to die today,” I tell him, but I’m not sure it’s a good idea. It would take the Bratva a while to find their new leader and recover, but they would come for us all.

“We all die someday, sweetheart.” He doesn’t sound convinced that it’s okay, though, and I feel my hand shaking.

“Sir!” I hear from the door, and I swallow hard as his guard spins around the corner and stares at me. His gun is out but not pointed in my direction, and I scream at him to drop his weapon.

“Drop it or you die too!” I push the pistol into Kozlov’s temple and wait, but the guard doesn’t drop his weapon. He instead brings it up on aim and points it at me, but before anything can happen, a loud blast behind him goes off and blood flies from his head, splattering out on the carpet and wall beside him as he drops.

Marco walks into the room followed by Nicolo, Victor, and then Owen. My heart has never felt so much relief in all my days. I stand slowly, but I keep the gun trained on Kozlov.

“I knew you’d get the message,” I breathe, and he walks toward me, but Kozlov senses our distraction, and despite the several guns pointed at him now, he attempts to go for his second gun.

With lightning reflexes, I shift the barrel of the gun to point at his leg and fire one single round, blasting into his thigh. “Don’t do it,” I tell him, and instead of going for his weapon, he grips his leg and screams.

Marco points his gun at the man, and the others swarm him, taking his other gun and giving him a beating he won’t soon forget. They all know that killing him is the worst idea. We want the war to end, not to escalate.

“We have to get out of here. I’m sure they’ve called in reinforcements.” Marco takes my hand and pulls me toward the door.

Everything is rushed, moving faster than I want it to. I want my revenge for my father and brother. I have to fight to not go back and slaughter that man and anyone who comes in my way too. But Marco is right. My pounding heart needs a break from this stress, and I know it’s not good for the baby, either.

He leads me down the hallways and out the back door, past bullet holes in walls and Family members who still stand guard. They retreat after us, running toward the exit and the waiting cars. In the distance, I hear squealing tires and know more Russians are coming in as backup, and we have to get out.

But in the dark alley behind whatever building they’ve been keeping me, I see a body lying in a pool of blood. Marco acts as if we should run right past, but when I get

closer, I see that it's Chase. His breaths come out in gurgling sounds, and I see a hole in his chest and one in his shoulder.

"Come on, he's gone," Marco growls, but Chase is struggling to breathe. He's not dead. And he's my family. I can't just leave him.

"No," I snap, dropping to my knees. My heart is torn in two again. Chase and I grew up together. It doesn't matter to me that he's been insubordinate. Love is love, and we were like siblings for so long.

"Chase," I moan, cradling his head in my lap. He's so weak he doesn't even reach for me. But his eyes open.

"I'm... sorry," he chokes out, and even though he's not dead yet, I know it will come soon. He's lost too much blood, and the hole in his chest is too large.

"Oh, God, Chase, I'm so sorry." Tears well up, and I realize how weak I must look to these men who see death all the time, and I don't even care. What is life without someone to miss you when you finally die? "I'll find who did this, and I'll kill them."

"Lead..." he says, and then his final breath pushes out blood and water. His eyes shut, and he goes limp.

"We have to get out of here now!" Marco orders, and he grabs me under the arms and hauls me to my feet. I glance one more time back at my cousin as Owen and Victor hoist him off the ground, and then I climb into Marco's car.

They rescued me, but not without casualties. Today is a bittersweet day, even as Marco grips my knee and says, "You're having my heir?" And my heart floods with so many emotions, I can't contain them. They drip from my cheeks and chin and I burrow into his chest. Finally safe.

MARCO

Isabella curls into my side the entire drive home. I can't let her go. She's trembling and crying, and for the first time since I met her, I see a frail woman who needs her husband to support her and hold her together. She's allowing me this intimacy in the aftermath of such a horrific event, but I know come tomorrow, she will glue herself back together and be the warrior she's displayed herself as for the past few months. Everyone breaks sometimes—even me—though even in this, she does it so gracefully, the world pauses to take a breath and grieve with her.

Victor drives us from the restaurant where they took her back to my house. I'm not sure how to articulate what I'm feeling—fear may be mingled with anger over what's happened and coupled with a strong need to ensure this never happens again. All of these sensations are new to me. Before meeting Isabella, the only thing I had on my mind was business and how to succeed. I hadn't a care in the world for anything other than money and keeping my Family in line.

Now, I find my singular focus is her. Is she happy? Is she upset? How does she feel knowing the life inside her womb is going to grow into the head of our Family? Why hasn't she told me yet? I have a million questions, but now isn't the time. I have to get her home and help her feel safe again.

"You're safe now, cara mia," I whisper as I rub her shoulder and pull her into my chest. Her soft cries lessen to sniffles, and she clings to me. Her quick thinking on that call to alert us to her situation was genius, and the way she sent the message to her cousin so that it wasn't detected by her captors was even smarter.

"I'm sorry..." she mutters, and I pull her back and look into her eyes. She's frightened, but ashamed, too.

“Sorry for what, Bella? I’m the one who’s sorry. I should have been open with you about the risk. I take the blame. If you had known, you’d have stayed put.” I kiss her forehead and hug her again, grateful she’s alive and their plans for her weren’t as nefarious as we’d feared.

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“But I should have trusted you and respected your wishes. We are a team, and I didn’t value your leadership as I should have. I know I can learn a lot from you.” Her hands grip the lapels of my jacket, splattered with the blood of our loved ones. She doesn’t seem to notice anything except my presence, however, and I’m not going to be the one to point that out.

“Shh, it’s over now. You’re with me where you belong, and we have the upper hand now.” I again smooth my hand up and down her arm as the car continues to bump along the road.

The car falls into a companionable silence until we reach the house. Victor parks out front where a host of men waits for us. I glance at the clock radio before Victor shuts off the car. It’s well into the night now, and exhaustion plays in my mind. This fight will never be over. Our enemies will always come for us, but at least this battle is won and we are wiser because of it. They, too, are wiser. Now the Bratva know that our two families are bound together and we are stronger as one than we are divided.

“Ready?” I ask her, but she doesn’t get a chance to not be ready. Victor rounds the car and opens the door in silence. His somber expression as we climb out is not reflective of the victory we’ve won, nor is it matching the way the rest of the Family cheers and hollers that our queen is safe.

I step out of the car and offer my hand to her. She takes it and climbs out to another round of cheers and applause. Faces from both Families beam with pride and accomplishment. There are at least fifty men here, welcoming us home. Isabella’s mother stands on the top step near the front door next to Nicolo, who holds her trembling form. She’s lost enough in the past year to make a person wish they’d

never been born. To lose her daughter would have been a travesty.

Isabella weaves through the crowd of men who continue to applaud and pat her on the back as she makes her way toward her mother. At the top step, she wraps her arms around the older woman and they cry together. This show of emotion isn't something my men have ever seen, or hers, for that matter, but having a woman in charge is different from a man leading. Women are softer in some ways, stronger in others, and none of it makes her less their leader or less capable.

I follow her with my shoulders squared, proud to say she's my wife and she is the strongest woman I've ever met. I mount the stairs knowing the way I found her—with her enemy's gun in hand and pointed at him—is the way I'd have found any one of my men, myself included. She kept her head and made a way out, and that is the hallmark of strength that no one will ever be able to say she doesn't have.

Joining them, I put my arm around Isabella's waist as she mumbles something to her mother and clings to my side. I stand with pride, looking out over the dimly lit sidewalk in front of my house as all the men from both Families—now one Family unit—crowd close enough to hear me.

“Tonight, we accomplished two tasks we previously thought impossible. We disarmed our enemy and put him in his place, and we came together as one.” A cheer of celebration cuts me off, and I let it continue even as the porch lights on surrounding homes come on. I see eyes peering at the mob from between curtains. My neighbors know me. They've seen this sort of thing before, so I'm sure they're not surprised.

“Our queen is home, back where she belongs, and she is tired. We will be retiring for the evening, but before we do, I want to tell you how honored I am to serve you all and lead you.” I lean down to her and ask, “Do you have anything to say?”

Isabella nods and swipes at her eyes. I can see her moment of vulnerability passing even as she takes a deep breath to address her family. “I am proud of you all. Tonight, you all showed bravery and courage in the face of something that could have ended very differently. We will lay Chase and Warren to rest this week as brothers and comrades. Their blood was spilled by our enemy, but we don’t have to continue the war any longer.”

She looks up at me, and I see her stand a bit straighter, her chin a bit higher as she continues, “Their lives are over now because they sacrificed them to save mine. The only thing I want is for us to come together as one and remain strong. Because our enemy is a lion on the prowl, and alone, we will all fall, but together, we are strong.”

One final round of cheers and applause erupts, and Isabella’s mother offers her a kiss on the cheek and a hug. She squeezes my hand, urging me to watch over her daughter before Nicolo leads her away. One by one, we thank the men who approach us and offer their condolences for our losses, and soon, we are alone with Owen.

He stands at the bottom of the steps with his hands wringing, staring at his feet. His brother is gone, lost to a war that shouldn’t have happened. If they had come around her when she took the reins, we would have shown our enemy from the very beginning that we are stronger together as one. His head hangs in shame and in grief. He’s learned his lesson, though it wasn’t her mercy that taught it to him.

“I’m sorry, Bella. I should have stopped him.”

I feel her stiffen at Owen’s words, but she is too kind to say a harsh word to him. She knows firsthand how desperately this part hurts, to have someone you’re close to ripped from your life.

“All is forgiven, Owen. Our Family has to heal now.” She pulls closer to him, and his head rises. I see the pain in his eyes even though he won’t shed a tear.

“And with an heir, we are all one. Chase knew that. It’s why he told the Family to follow you.” Owen nods. “We all support you now.” Owen lingers for a moment even though Isabella doesn’t respond anymore, and then he turns and walks away. We watch him disappear into the darkness, then tail lights flash in the distance before he’s gone.

“Let’s go in,” I tell her, turning her toward the door. Warren isn’t here to open for us. After his failure to keep Isabella safe inside my home, he insisted that he lead the charge to rescue her and he was the first to fall. Chase’s body tumbled after Warren’s, and those two deaths catapulted the rest of our men into action for vengeance and victory.

Inside, she walks silently with me. I take her hand and draw her toward the stairs, then lead her to our room. Her quiet demeanor now that we’re alone is indicative of only one thing. She knows that I will have questions. She stirred her Family to follow and obey me by revealing a truth she’s kept secret, and I don’t know how long she’s kept it.

In our bedroom, I shut the door and lean against it as she walks across the room and begins to undress. She has a bruise on her right bicep, maybe evidence of where someone grabbed her, likely when they snatched her off the street. Otherwise, there isn’t a scratch on her. Pine needles cling to her hair and clothing. She moves slowly with deliberate movements. She’s exhausted and overwhelmed, but she’ll never admit it. The tears she shed earlier are the only sign she will show me that anything has happened, and tomorrow, she’ll go back to normal. So, tonight is all I have.

“Bella mia, is it true?” I ask, though I remain unmoving by the door.

She looks up at me over her shoulder out of the corner of her eye. Then she immediately pauses what she’s doing. Her shirt and bra dangle from a finger as she slowly looks back at the floor, then the mirror in front of her. I stare at her reflection,

large hazel eyes, perky tits, somber expression.

“Is what true?” she asks, meeting my gaze in the mirror. Her body is relaxed, not tense or under stress. For some reason, it’s hard for her to admit I may be asking this question after everything that’s happened, but I have to know.

“You’re carrying my heir?” I push off the door and move toward her. She doesn’t bristle as I touch her arms and kiss the top of her shoulder. “My son?”

Isabella breaks the concentrated gaze and sighs. Her chin drops. “I need an heir too, Marco. How can I expect my child to be divided, to choose one Family over the other?”

“Mmm,” I grunt, realizing her dilemma. The significance of what happened this evening with our Families is lost on her, and she doesn’t realize it. “So you think our son will have to choose whom to serve? Whom to lead?”

“Or daughter,” she says defensively, and I want to help her not feel threatened. I kiss the top of her shoulder and let my hands slide down her arms to hers. I gather them and place all four of our hands on her stomach.

“Or perhaps our little one will lead our Family, because we are one now, and so our Family is one.” I look up at the mirror to see her catch my gaze again.

“One?”

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“Your cousin said it himself. In that child is the heir to both thrones. He will lead our Family, all sides of it, as one new Family. Not mine and yours. Not mine or yours. Ours, together forever.” I turn her in my arms so that she’s facing me and cover her lips with mine. She opens to me, allowing me to deepen the kiss and drink the sweet nectar from her lips.

“I don’t know what to say, Marco.” She sounds confused and distraught.

“Say you think this is the way it’s meant to be, because I think it is, Isabella. And I think it’s good.” I hold her biceps and look her in the eye. “I love you.”

“Oh, Marco, I love you too,” she whimpers, wrapping her arms around my neck. Her body splays against mine and melds into me as I hold her against myself. I won’t ever let her go again, not in a million years.

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ISABELLA

I’ve cried enough tears to drown a small city, and Marco’s arms feel so good around me that I can’t help but melt into him. His lips move over mine, syncing with my need to feel safe and close to him. All my fears about my unborn child are beginning to fade away as I allow myself to be smitten by this man again and again. I wanted a business partner, someone to help me corral my family and keep them in line. And what I’ve found in Marco is so much more. He is a life partner, one I can trust and rely on in every sense of the word.

“I knew you would come for me,” I tell him, pulling myself up and wrapping my legs around his waist as he slips his hand around the back of my thighs and lifts me.

“There was never any other thought in my mind.” His growls against my mouth give me a sense of urgency. I need him. I want to be one with him again and again, to feel our bodies unite in pleasure, but again in commitment.

Until this time, I’ve reserved a part of my heart from him, held it back so I didn’t get consumed with affection and emotion that was unwarranted. But here at this moment, I’m throwing caution to the wind. Marco is mine in every sense of the word, and even my family backs me up now. We are one in purpose and in being.

“Oh, God, I love you,” I mewl as he lays me on the bed and lets the weight of his body sink onto me. My body is crushed between his and the mattress as I lock my ankles behind his back and feel his growing erection between my thighs.

“I love you, too,” he growls out, then he plants his lips on mine again.

Instead of a slow and passionate reunion, it’s fast and frantic, the kind of desperate thrashing of lovers separated for too long. He unbuttons my pants in hasty movements, tearing them from my body so quickly the fabric of my panties rips. I lay naked on the bed, waiting as he strips his clothing off and tosses it away like the trash it is, then eagerly returns to my waiting arms.

“You are carrying our child,” he says with awe as he places a hand on my stomach, paying special attention to my growing belly. “You’ve given me a miracle,” he adds before looking back up at me with hooded eyes.

I wriggle beneath him, spreading my legs wider to accommodate his hips between my thighs, and pull him down for a kiss. Raw, unfiltered, unadulterated need takes over my body. I want him deep and hard, to mark me as his and only his. Marco senses my

need and complies with a gravelly groan that sets my body on fire. His hips grind downward against my core, and I feel how much moisture is there for him.

“I missed you. God, I need you,” I pant, clawing frantically at his back as his kisses become greedy and demanding. He nips at my lower lip and grins before he slides inside me in one rough thrust.

“I missed you too,” he breathes into my ear, slowly rocking his hips against mine as a moan escapes my lips. “Dio mio, Isabella.”

It’s like I’ve been set on fire with the way he fills me up. I feel whole and complete and every other cliché in the book I never understood until now. Our bodies move in perfect rhythm, our sex slickened by mutual arousal and need. Marco is a furnace inside me, and each deep thrust of his hips causes me to jolt and shudder, and his playful smack on the side of my ass sends a shockwave of pain and pleasure through my body.

He’s an animal, moving inside me with the need of a man crazed with lust. And as for me? I crave his touch like it’s my last.

“Oh, God,” I mewl, my back arching off the bed as he slams into me again and again.

He growls, and his grip on my hips tightens, lifting me up to meet him halfway. His length moves inside me, impossibly deeper, and I feel him hit my cervix, pleasure so intense coursing through my body that I see stars. I’m lost in the moment, feeling him in me and his hands on me, and all I want is for this feeling to never end, to feel so close to him that we’re one every second of every day.

The orgasm builds with each thrust, each moan, each filthy thing he whispers into my ear. His fingers find my clit and rub it in a circular motion as his other hand molds my breast. “Marco!” I scream, unable to hold back anymore.

“Come for me, mi corazno,” he growls, and his words are the final push I needed. My orgasm crashes over me like a tidal wave, and I see stars behind my eyelids as I come hard around him. Spasms and convulsions shake my body, and my fingernails dig into his shoulders, drawing blood, but he doesn’t stop. He urges my body to higher heights of ecstasy, and all I can do is writhe and pant.

“Sì, tesoromio. Come for me.” His words and the mind-shattering pleasure are too much, and I go over the edge, my pussy clamping down so tight around his length that I think my body will split in half. His thrusts don’t relent. He continues pounding into me, drawing gasps and moans from my lips in a way only he can. His body weighs me down, molding to mine in a passionate embrace as he hooks his arms beneath my shoulders and pulls them lower as he drives into me.

“Let go, Marco,” I beg. I want him to feel the same release I just did, I want him to know what it feels like to be so lost in me that he can’t breathe.

He obliges me with a bone-shattering groan, and he buries himself deep inside me and shudders, his thrusts faster and harder as he finds his own release. His seed shoots inside me, marking me as his again as I come down from my high. My body finally relaxes from the intensity of it all, and I lie there panting beneath him.

I don’t want him to pull away or out of me. I want to remain united like this, but he withdraws, rolling to the side and holding me against his chest. He pulls the covers over our sweat-slicked bodies and breathes across my cheek as he peppers my skin with kisses. My heart is full right now, but strangely, it’s also missing something, a part of me I decided to give up.

“Do you think our Families will really stay united long after we’re gone, when our son or daughter is in charge and we pass the baton?” I hold his hands to my chest, kissing his knuckles as I rest in his arms.

Lucco should have been leading my Family. He was preparing to take over, for my father's inevitable death would happen one day. Father never had a thought in his mind that one day I would lead, or that my son or daughter would eventually lead either. I wonder what he would say if he were here, if he would be proud of me.

"I think we have decades to find out, Bella." Marco tucks the hair behind my ear and kisses my cheek, then props himself on one elbow as his hand slides down over my breasts and lower to my stomach. "And I can't wait to find out."

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:04 am

I lie here thinking of our future and what the two of us leading our Family will be like. Marco will never assume control of my businesses or Family, and I wouldn't dream of thinking I could lead his organization. I still have so much to learn as it is, and the idea of teaching my son or daughter everything I know sounds daunting. But Marco is right. We have decades to figure that out. But today, I can rest assured that everything has a way of working out in ways I least expect them to.

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MARCO

Nearly two months have passed without incident, at least those of the Russian variety. Our message was sent loud and clear and our enemy has yet to retaliate. I sit on my back patio in the sunshine with Victor, Darnel, and Nicolo. Isabella paces the yard, discussing her pregnancy with her mother. She's blossoming into a beautifully curvy figure, and I enjoy every inch of her full figure as she grows. My child is in her womb, my heir, and it makes me all the more attracted to her every day.

Nicolo's eyes are on his niece, never leaving her. I can't tell sometimes whether he is jealous of her position or if he's in awe of her strength. I am on the latter end of that, constantly marveling over how a woman her age is able to be so intelligent and capable. If I were her father, I would be honored and proud to leave everything I have to her. But I am her husband, and now I am honored and proud to have her at the helm and fully believe she is capable of raising my son or daughter to ascend our thrones and lead the united D'Angelo-Romano organization for years to come.

"We are rolling in money, Marco. This has been our best month yet. We will have

more than enough to double the business and expand. And if Kozlov isn't careful, we'll run right over his business ventures and swallow his territory too." Victor is boastful, as usual. Being shot at, nearly blown up, and chased around town hasn't slowed him down a bit. Still foolhardy and impulsive. I have to rein him in on a daily basis.

"Let's not forget how the serpent bites, Victor," Uncle Darnel says, raising his glass of orange juice and champagne. He sips his drink and winks at my younger brother, who rolls his eyes and takes it in stride. Someday, this will bite him, and he will learn. I pray it isn't the way Warren and Chase had to learn.

"One day at a time, Brother." I pluck a piece of bacon off the serving plate situated at the center of the table and enjoy the soft breeze that picks up. We have a busy week ahead of us with meeting new clients and expanding our reach into Newark. Isabella's father left a list of potential clients for us to entertain, and we'll be taking the mayor of Newark out for dinner this evening to wine and dine him. With him on the payroll, there isn't much we can't do.

"Our business isn't about selling weapons and drugs, Mr. Romano," Nicolo reminds me. "My late brother-in-law was passionate about arming citizens so they can defend themselves in the event that our corrupt government attempts to seize control over them. That mission still remains the foundation of this organization. We partner with many other organizations to help facilitate that goal."

A shadow passes over the table, and I lift my eyes to see a bird swoop across the sky and land on the awning overhead. A cardinal, to remind us that Isabella's father is in fact watching over us, and I believe we are doing right by him and his memory.

"We all have the same goal in mind, then, to ensure the people remain the powerhouse and those who have assumed authority over us are held accountable to their own laws." The bacon practically melts in my mouth as I chew it and listen to

Darnel and Nicolo compare notes about how our organizations are run.

The D'Angelos have a different mission than mine, which has always been to make money and have power. Isabella's father was a wise man to form his companies around a principle of equality and strength in community. There is a lot to learn there, and I'm the sponge just waiting to soak up the knowledge.

Isabella pulls her seat out and sits down, placing her phone on the table next to her plate. She busies herself piling food onto the empty plate as the men banter about the proper way to get things done, Victor, of course, with horribly ill-conceived ideas, and Isabella smiles at me.

"How is your mother?"

"Oh, you know. She's lonely, still learning how to do things without Father around. But she's good. She's excited to meet the baby. She thinks it will have Father's spirit." My wife is stunning, her face practically glowing with light and love. Pregnancy looks good on her, even when she eats twice as much as any normal human should eat. Her dark hair is swept back into a braid, but ringlets frame her face, making her lips look perfectly kissable.

"I'm glad to hear she's moving on now. I trust the gift we sent to her is being put to good use..." Weeks ago, just after Isabella was taken, we installed a complete home security system. Her late husband was old-fashioned in his ideals and wanted to keep matters very personal, believing that a home security system could be hacked. He used guards and mirrors rather than closed-circuit television. We convinced Giana to let us install it and doubled up by posting guards in the same places he would have had he still been alive.

"She feels safer now, thank you." Isabella poured syrup over her pancakes and then paused and looked up at me. "Marco, when we first made this arrangement, I never

thought I would be seated across the table from you with your baby inside me, feeling in love and at peace. I thought this was business and that you'd go on with your life as you were before, dating other women... you know."

I chuckle at her confession but reach for her hand as she sets the syrup bottle down. "Cara mia, you are my world, and don't you forget that." I make sure to look her straight in the eye as I continue. "The first moment I saw you, I thought you were the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Young, yes, but stunning—inside and out. Your beauty was only rivaled by your intelligence and sass, and I couldn't get you out of my head. When only days later you proposed the idea of an arranged marriage, I knew it was fate. And if fate tied the red string of destiny to my heart and yours, then there was no use fighting it."

She smiles at me and turns her hand over, lacing her fingers through mine. "I love you, Mr. Romano."

"I love you too, Bella."

"Oh, get a room." Victor playfully pushes my shoulder, and I smile at her without breaking eye contact.

"Oh, I'm fairly certain they've gotten a room... or two," Nicolo chimes in. "Her growing figure is more than proof of that."

Isabella's cheeks warm to a deep pink, and she pulls her hand away to pick up her fork. The sparkle in her eye as she takes a bite tells me she has something to say, but she lets the conversation play out.

"I can't believe she has sex with this ogre. He's a beast of a man and I've seen how he picks his teeth when he's done eating." Again, Victor's playful insults make the men chuckle, and finally, Isabella chimes in.

“You should see how he trims his toenails.” With a wink in my direction, she joins the banter at my expense, which is okay with me. Our Families are one in heart and soul now, and I can see it in the way we exchange joy through insults and sarcasm. My heart is full, and so is my home.

Isabella has taught me there is more than greed and power and money. The human heart can feel the depths of anger and sadness, but it can soar to heights of elation beyond all measure, and everything in between on the spectrum. However, there is no ability to feel those heights if you don’t allow yourself to walk in the depths, and that is the true mystery of life.

That the easy life, the one where there are no struggles or sadness, is not a life people appreciate, because they don’t know what it means to suffer. But those who walk through suffering until they reach the summit of the mountain upon which they travel, those people can survey their life with deep gratitude and full enjoyment of everything around them. For in suffering, we see the capacity to receive joy. And in joy, we find the strength to endure suffering.

This Family is a testament to both joy and suffering. To ease and to struggle. To hope and to mourning, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

I raise my cup, and the table falls silent. They all look to me as their leader, or partner, and wait for what I may say to them, but my heart is focused on her. “To my wife, the beautiful and amazing Isabella D’Angelo-Romano. May your days be long and your light never dim. You are my anchor in this storm of life, my sail in the winds that carry me where I must go, and my hope for a better tomorrow.”

Everyone cheers and whistles as we honor Isabella with a toast, and she can only sit with tears in her eyes, full of gratitude for the men who now surround her with strength and support. She has done her father proud, and she has proven to all of us that the strength of a woman’s heart surpasses every expectation.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:04 am

I kiss her, and she responds in turn, then pushes me away gently. “Can I eat now? I’m eating for two.” A round of laughter rises, and I can’t help but steal another kiss. The woman of the house has spoken and I must submit. Her mercy has won me over, and I am forever hers.

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EPILOGUE

ISABELLA

The car pulls to a stop outside the most stunning villa I’ve ever seen. Grapevines line the entire drive all the way from the countryside road to the Tuscan-feel house. It sits a tenth of a mile off the main road, nestled in rolling hills and shaded by large Cypress trees whose knees poke up from the soil below and whose branches dangle with Spanish moss. They pull my eyes upward toward the cerulean sky where hope lives and flourishes.

“It’s beautiful here, such amazing country.” My mother, having never been to Italy in her life, marvels the same way I do, though her arms cradle my son, now four months old and full of personality already. He sucks his fist as she bounces him on her lap.

“Oh, Nonno and Nonna take their property seriously. They have a staff of thirty landscapers and gardeners who tend to the fruit and olive trees, and they even own a vineyard on the hillside out back.” Marco leans down to kiss our son’s forehead and then gestures to us as he opens the door. “Come, let me introduce you.” His large hand swallows mine as he steps out of the limo, and I follow him. Even the air is ripe

with scents that tantalize my senses.

“Your family property is gorgeous, Marco. Your father must have had an adventurous childhood. Look at all the trees to climb and the yards to run in.” I cling to his side as he continues to hold the door for Mom, who joined us on this trip to visit his grandparents before they’re too old to enjoy the heir’s infancy.

“He’s had some tales to tell, for sure. I only wish he could have met his grandson.” Marco smiles with pride at Alberto Lucco, named for my brother and father. Their memory will live on in my son and his son after him.

“He’s watching over us all, along with Lucco and my father.” I rise up on tiptoes to kiss his lips softly.

“Benvenuto, nipote!” The shout from the door is followed by a few more, then the rushing of his elderly grandparents across the shaded walk. I can see immediately where he gets his looks from. His grandfather, well into his late seventies, is charming as ever. Thick black hair peppered with white and silver strands coats his head as he wraps his arms around Marco.

The stunning woman beside him, dressed in a sheer cream tunic that flutters in the wind, cups my cheeks and smiles at me brightly. Her eyes glisten with emotion as she says something in Italian I can’t comprehend. “Che bella donna. Marco, è adorabile...Welcome to our home, Isabella. It’s so nice to meet you.”

My face feels hot as I blush and wait for her warm welcome to cease. “It’s so nice to meet you, Signora Romano.” I’m entranced by how open-hearted she seems as she turns to my mother and speaks.

“Mrs. D’Angelo, it’s so good to have you join us. Our grandson has spoken so highly of you and your daughter. Won’t you both please come join us for a glass of wine and some cheese? You must be hungry after traveling.” Her Italian accent is thick, but I

can understand her.

We follow her into the home, which is lavishly decorated, just as Marco's home is, and my husband follows behind us, chatting with his grandfather in a mix of English and Italian that flows so effortlessly, I can't tell which is which. I need to practice my Italian, because I'm not as fluent as he is, and I have a feeling we will spend a lot of time in this place as his grandparents age, which doesn't bother me.

She shows us through the house, which is mostly open-concept and bathed in beiges, mustards, and maroons. Everything about the home is warm and welcoming, including the shaded arbor under which sits a patio table and chairs. Alberto is fast asleep now, swaddled in Mom's embrace, but as we sit, Nonna Romano reaches for him and Mom relinquishes her hold.

"He's perfect, Isabella, in every way. He will be the heir to your throne, no?" Nonna touches Alberto's cheek softly, and he scrunches his nose, which draws oohs and ahhs from the loving grandparents. Even Nonno leans in to inspect the baby, and with a grunt of approval, he passes judgment.

"Strong boy..." he says, flexing an arm and squeezing his own bicep. I gather that he speaks very little English, but I nod at his compliment and relax in my seat. When Marco suggested we come to his family villa in Italy where his father grew up, I was skeptical about traveling with a newborn. He agreed to let Mom come along to help, and now I'm so glad I did.

We brunch with them, and his grandparents share stories of him as a child. I'm getting to know him in new ways, which after only fourteen months of marriage is fun and interesting. I absorb all the new information and cringe as Mom shares her own stories of me as a child. The entire time, I catch Marco staring at me as if I'm the most wonderful thing he's ever seen, and when there is a lull in conversation, he asks me to take a walk with him in the vineyard. So, I leave my sleeping child in the capable hands of his Grandma and Nonna, and I walk hand in hand with Marco

across the lawn and up the hill.

“They seem quite smitten with you and the baby,” he says as we walk. His thumb brushes over my hand lightly, and I smile up at him.

“Grandmothers always are when it comes to their grandchildren.” I am awestruck by the sheer magnitude of the vineyard as we ascend the hill and weave through row after row of grapevines full of delicious fruit still ripening. Bees buzz around us, and the summer breeze has hints of fall carried in it.

“I’m quite smitten by you too,” he says, bringing my hand to his lips. “Marry me, Bella.”

I chuckle at him and turn to face him, smiling. “I’m already married to you, Mr. Romano. Did you forget?”

His face is so serious, I wonder if he really did forget. Our marriage started as one of convenience, a business partnership and nothing more. But now, the love that has developed between us is magnetic. We are inseparable now, in spirit and in body. He is my other half, my better half. He grounds me and makes me strong.

“How could I forget that I’m married to the woman of my dreams? No, Bella, I didn’t forget, but you deserve something better than simply signing paperwork in a judge’s chambers. You deserve the wedding of your dreams, and I want to do that here, at Nonno and Nonna’s. Say you will. I’ll fly everyone in—the whole Family.”

The way he thinks of my heart moves me, and I can’t help but smile at him. For the rough and brutish leader of a criminal organization, Marco can be such a hopeless romantic. He draws me a hot bath when I’m tired. He brings me breakfast in bed when I’m weak. And when the baby wakes in the middle of the night, he’s there, speaking softly to him, telling him stories about his future and the family that surrounds him. Marco is everything I could ever ask for.

“Yes,” I whisper, giving in to my selfish desire to bask in this man’s love every day for the rest of my life. It’s a waste of money, frivolous and unnecessary, but he’s right. I always dreamed of having a huge, beautiful wedding with flowers and music and a ginormous cake too.

I throw my arms around his neck and draw him in for a kiss, and he follows my lead. His arms wrap around me, pulling me in, and we allow our tongues to dance to the rhythm of nature around us, breathing each other in. When he pulls away, he kisses my forehead before sighing happily.

“Thank you for showing me what love means, Isabella. And for teaching me that mercy can change a heart. Your mercy has certainly changed mine.”

“I think I hear our son crying, Mr. Romano. We should get back.” I glance at the house now downhill from us in the distance, and my heart feels full. We’ll set a date and return here to renew our vows and celebrate our union with our Family now united. Until then, he has made me the happiest woman alive, and even our enemies have remained silent.

They say if something seems too good to be true, then it probably is. Well, if that’s the case, then my entire life would be wrong, but I don’t think it is. I think I’m right where I’m supposed to be.