



Unresolved

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Category: Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: I was his first love. And now he's found me.

Evander

I never got over losing Gemma. I'm still putting together the shattered pieces of my heart after she walked away from me, as though I meant nothing to her, as though I'd never even existed. It didn't stop me from searching for her, and now I've finally found her I don't intend to ever let her go again. She is mine. A shame a war breaking out between rival mafia families threatens to take her away from me yet again.

Gemma

He doesn't try to pretend I didn't hurt him when I left without even saying goodbye. Perhaps that is why he doesn't care if he hurts me in return by taking away my freedom. He's keeping me hostage in his cabin by a lake in what looks like the middle of nowhere. But if it almost killed me being with him the first time, how can I survive a second time?

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Chapter One

Evander

I couldn't believe what I was seeing—who I was seeing.

Gemma Parks.

The woman I'd loved. The one and same woman who'd broken my heart and was now laughing and talking animatedly to a man and two women as they waited for their morning coffees in front of a mobile coffee van.

My jaw clenched. These were the type of people she hung out with now? They looked about as exciting as straw-stuffed scarecrows in a field. Do-gooders dressed in ill-fitting, cheap knockoff dresses and a suit. Wannabes who'd likely never make their mark on the world.

The gray, overcast morning suddenly cleared, a beam of sunlight shining down, haloing Gemma like a beacon to entice me closer.

Bitterness clogged my throat while the love-sick madness I'd managed to keep under wraps all too quickly unraveled within. I had to remind myself she'd betrayed me. That she'd walked out on me—on us—for this life.

I lowered my binoculars and leaned back against the luxurious leather seat of my town car as anger surged. My teeth clenched together as I tried, and failed, to make sense of it all.

We'd been happy together, ecstatic. But it'd all crashed and burned the moment she'd found out I was an Agostino. Our relationship had then well and truly turned to ashes when she'd disappeared without a trace.

That she was an only child, raised by a single mother in a tiny apartment trying to make ends meet, should have made her want me twice as hard. Instead, she'd pushed me away like yesterday's garbage, as though the wealth I made was nothing more than paper money.

How would she feel if she knew I was now the Agostino underboss? That I was second-in-charge to the don, the boss?

I blew out a harsh breath. She'd probably be nauseated, her insides twisted with disgust. That most women threw themselves at me—at any of the Agostino men—for being a mobster only added insult to injury. Now finally seeing her in person was akin to picking a scab off a deep wound and making it bleed again.

I swallowed down bile and restrained my snapping and snarling inner beast by taking deep, slow breaths. It still took every ounce of my willpower not to explode from my car and grab her, then forcibly bring her with me. Instead I concentrated on calming my adrenaline and slowing my pulse.

Had she really presumed I'd just let her go? Had she seriously hoped I'd give up on her?

Not. A. Fucking. Chance.

She'd known me well enough to realize I'd never allow that to happen.

I closed my eyes and used every one of my five senses to recollect everything about her.

Her lush coconut and vanilla scent. The soft, silky strands of her caramel colored hair that brushed my arms when I held her. Her sensual and soft lips made for kissing. Her glowing, sun-kissed skin and the smattering of freckles across her nose. The rich, clear sound of her laugh, and the taste of her as she screamed with pleasure while I licked and sucked her clit.

A flashback filled my mind, and I squirmed at the image of our sweaty bodies and tangled limbs as we made mad, passionate love. She gasped and moaned, then cried out as she came, our hearts beating furiously together even before I roared my own rapturous release. Warmth and adoration filled me, emotions mirrored in her beautiful aqua green eyes as I stared down at her staring up at me.

The memory fell away as I reopened my eyes. I blinked, disorientated, before I focused on Gemma as she accepted her coffee. The man next to her placed a proprietary arm around her waist. It didn't matter that she stepped out of his clasp. All that mattered was the stab of jealousy plunging into my heart, the violent urge to kill the motherfucker who'd dared to touch my woman.

My breathing slowed as a smile spread across my face. It was too bad she'd run, because I really didn't take rejection lightly. I also didn't do rivalry. What was mine was mine.

I raised my binoculars to continue closely watching her, like a voyeur staring at his woman in a bedroom. My dick twitched as she stepped toward me, a breeze fluttering her yellow silk dress that was belted around her waist. It was so obviously an upmarket gown, one made especially for her.

Did she even realize she made the other two women look dowdy? No, she'd always been clueless about her looks, her natural beauty and style. Despite the fact her dress had been part of the wardrobe I'd bought her; she'd instinctively known which fabrics and colors suited her best.

That she hadn't completely let me go was evident by the clothes she still wore that I'd gifted her, clothes she still apparently loved.

The man fell into step beside Gemma, brushing back his receding blond hair as he chatted to her, leaving the other two women frowning as they followed. It was apparent I wasn't the only one pissed by the man's blatant interest.

My stomach contracted as I watched them head toward the gallery. Gemma had been a talented artist, her landscapes nothing short of spectacular. And now? Now she wasted her life running a gallery that showcased other artists' creations.

It sickened me knowing she'd given up on her dreams, her ambitions just to keep her identity hidden.

Just to keep me from finding her.

Warmth radiated through me. How would she feel when she finally glimpsed the unmistakable sign that I'd found her?

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My tinted windows concealed me well enough as she clicked past in the heeled yellow shoes I'd also bought her, cheap-suit man sticking like a bur to her side. I watched her retreat in my side-mirror, my chest burning.

Her plan to disappear had worked for a while. But I'd found her now, and I wouldn't let her out of my sight again.

She took the dozen long steps leading up to the art gallery, then disappeared from my sight.

My gut clenched, the powerful need to run after her and keep her close almost overwhelming. Instead I pushed my seat back and got comfortable. Patience was a virtue and I was feeling extremely virtuous after my tireless pursuit.

I exhaled long and deep. It'd been two years, seven months and five days since I'd last seen her.

Not that I was counting.

My muscles twitched and I sat up again. Fuck it. I'd waited long enough.

I pushed open my door. Staying here wasn't achieving anything.

One way or the other, she'd be mine.

Chapter Two

Gemma

I clutched my coffee tightly and shivered with distaste as I stepped away from Gregory, though I couldn't solely blame him for the fear skittering up and down my spine.

Something felt...off. Either that or I was being paranoid.

I exhaled roughly. What was wrong with me? I'd been living my own life, accepting of my fate, my future without the man in it I'd loved with every scrap of my existence. I mightn't ever be carefree, might not ever be completely, utterly happy, but I'd been safe. I'd moved on...sort of.

Gregory stepped beside me as we headed toward the gallery. He glanced my way with a knitted brow. "Is everything okay, Fi?"

I grimaced at the nickname he'd given me from a name that wasn't even my own. Fiona. It was so...uninspired. What I'd give right now to be Gemma once again, and to hear Evander calling me by my real name.

I shook my head. I must be going mad, my anxiety catching up on me. I forced a smile as we climbed the steps toward the brick and steel building that had housed so many beautiful works of art. "I'm fine," I said brightly. "Why do you ask?"

We stepped inside the gallery, my heels clacking across the brightly patterned mosaic tiles, which were a work of art in themselves. My stare swept across the artwork, which featured an up and coming artist who was fast becoming a star in the art world. Chase Holland. I knew the name well enough, many people did now, but I didn't know his face. He was a recluse, a hermit who didn't like to mix with other people.

I'd thought he might be a little bit crazy. Art buyers loved to interact with the creators of their favorite pieces. Now I was beginning to think he was clever. He was the great unknown and everyone was intrigued.

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I had no doubt our gallery would be packed later today. He was becoming an obsession, an icon.

That could have been me.

I pushed the envious thought away. I wasn't that type of person. I'd made peace with my circumstances, accepted I couldn't have what or who I wanted.

I'd moved on.

Or so I'd thought.

Gregory shrugged awkwardly, bringing me back to the present, one he seemed to want to feature in. Fat chance. I had zero chemistry with the man, and therefore, zero interest in him. He cleared his throat. "I don't know, you just seemed...edgy." He flushed. "I think I know you well enough now to sense when you're not yourself." His flush deepened. "I-I care about you, Fi."

I inhaled sharply even as our work colleagues hurried past and headed to their respective jobs. Shit. Had they overheard? The last thing I wanted was work gossip to ruin my fledgling career. I'd already become aware of the rumors circulating about us, insinuating I'd gotten my managerial position by sleeping with Gregory, the owner of the gallery.

In reality, I'd gotten it thanks to my hard work and knowledge of art, not to mention my eye for detail. I had a knack for knowing where single pieces and groupings would look best and be most appreciated.

Still, I had to tread carefully. I didn't want to lose everything I'd built since my world had crumbled apart. I looked up at Gregory, at his dull blue eyes that scrutinized me like I was one of his cherished pieces of art. "You're a wonderful man, Gregory, and a good friend. I don't know what I would have done without you."

He pushed a hand through his thinning, dirty blond hair, his suit jacket flopping open to reveal his scrawny body. "I was hoping you might think of me as more than a friend by now."

My stomach dropped. "I'm not planning on being anything but single anytime soon." I reached out and touched his arm, the sleeve of his suit coarse under my palm, so unlike Evander's luxurious designer suits. I shook off the comparison. I had to stop thinking about Evander and finding other men lacking! "I hope you understand," I added.

His face tightened. "What's to understand? I'm offering you a good life." He put his hand over mine, and I tried not to notice his clammy touch. "I'd do anything for you, Fi. Anything."

I resisted taking a step back, though nothing could stop a distasteful shiver rolling through me. I didn't want a good life, not after experiencing an incomparably perfect life. Evander really would have done anything for me—killed for me, even—had I asked. Gregory would equate putting the dishes away for me as anything.

His hand tightened on mine. "What aren't you understanding, Fi? I want—"

His voice broke off even as we turned simultaneously, sensing someone behind us. A figure in a black suit stood framed in the wide doorway, the sun behind him making him blurry and indistinguishable.

So why did I suddenly feel faint, my heart pumping hard and my insides rolling? Then

the figure stepped away and the momentary lapse of fear that froze me in place as quickly faded.

I pulled my hand free, Gregory's clasp falling away.

He cleared his throat, his voice thready. "We'll talk more about this...later."

I barely nodded. Though I was no longer distressed, I was still unsettled. My senses stayed in hyper-drive as a thousand emotions churned through me. Was it seriously possible the man who'd appeared so briefly in the doorway had been Evander?

No. I was being paranoid. Gregory's revelation had unnerved me, pushed me into fight or flight mode, triggering my past traumas along with my overactive imagination.

Except, Gregory had seen the man too and had seemed just as anxious. I turned to him, only to realize he'd gone, leaving me standing alone in the gallery's space.

I glanced at the wall to my left, at the portrait of an old man. He stared down at me with cynical boredom, though his dark eyes showcased a keen intelligence that was offset by shadowy darkness. A cigar was perched between his lips, its tip glowing and creating a waft of smoke that gave the entire painting an eerie quality, like the man was half-hidden behind a murky fog that embodied his mind.

My arms prickled. The man had the look of a mafia kingpin. Not just because of his quality suit, but his air of arrogance and self-importance, his soulless eyes that seemed to look right through me.

I snorted. I'd really allowed my mind to run rampant. Add in Gregory's infatuation and I'd let myself be disturbed on a level I'd thought had been buried from the moment I'd started my new life.

A shiver slithered down my spine, my eyes prickling with sudden tears. I sucked in a steadying breath. I refused to allow myself to think about anything else I'd had to bury.

Ming, our security guard, approached me. His brow was furrowed under his cap, his wide shoulders stiff under his navy-colored shirt. "Is everything okay, Fiona?"

I nodded before I managed a weak smile. "Never better, Ming."

A crowd was already gathering at the front of the gallery when the last painting was brought in. It was a huge canvas, which had been covered to protect it. I guessed this was the *pièce de résistance* of the artist's collection. I had no doubt it was also the artist's drawcard, the special piece that would get the art enthusiasts and critics talking.

It'd been my biggest accomplishment to date enticing the reclusive artist to Gregory's boutique gallery. That he'd declined major gallery offers hadn't escaped me. Though I'd done all my sweet talking to Chase via emails, it'd been enough to secure his latest works for public viewing.

A pity I didn't have time to view it or appreciate his biggest painting. I needed to help manage the crowd. After directing the two men to a far wall, which was hidden behind some temporary partitions that showcased Chase's other portraits, I hurried to the front of the gallery.

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It was opening time.

Chapter Three

Gemma

Shadows were beginning to creep into the gallery when the last of the visitors exited the building. I'd been kept busy with the many pieces that had sold for a very good profit.

The buyers had been beyond enthusiastic.

I only wished I could afford one of the pieces myself. I'd fallen in love with many of them when I'd had the chance to take a look at them as I'd written down the names of each piece and their corresponding code so that each one would be shipped off to their respective new owners.

That I hadn't seen Gregory all day was beyond odd. He'd seemingly hidden in his office, away from the eager art crowd. So unlike him. I'd been expecting him to preen over our up-and-coming artist's works, his face beaming as he welcomed in all the prospective buyers.

I shut and locked the doors, then sagged a little, just as I heard the heavy, familiar tread of Gregory from behind me. I turned, a smile on my face. "Well, I'd say that was a rousing—"

I didn't finish my sentence. I blinked at Gregory's sullen glare, his rigid spine offset

by his slumped shoulders. “What’s wrong?”

“You didn’t think to tell me that you knew the artist personally?”

I frowned. “What? I don’t know him. I only know his name and the contact email I was given from an associate of his.”

“Is that right?” Gregory gritted out, “because he sure as shit seems to know you.”

My frown deepened, along with barely stifled irritation. “What do you mean? What is this all about?”

He pushed a hand over his face. “Allow me to show you something.”

I nodded, then followed him past the portraits, whose lifelike eyes seemed to follow us as we went. I repressed a little chill even before we stopped in front of the extra-large portrait with a red, Not for Sale sticker emblazoned across the bottom corner of the gold frame.

I blinked, then blinked again, my breath stalling in my lungs while my mouth went bone dry. The portrait was like peering into a mirror. It showcased my face, my bared shoulders and breasts, though my nipples were barely noticeable thanks to the shadow that shrouded me from behind.

A shadow that was clearly a man.

Though his features were blurry and indistinct I knew exactly who he was.

Evander.

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I took a step back, the room doing a slow spin around me.

I had no idea how much the artist had been paid to paint me and the shadowy silhouette of Evander behind me, but it must have cost a small fortune. That it showcased us as lovers was more than evident by the feral lust glittering in my eyes, my head that was tilted back and my partly-opened mouth as I succumbed to the mastery of my lover behind me.

Little wonder Gregory had stayed cooped up in his office. Though he'd decided I was his, this one artwork negated his belief in just a few profound strokes of the brush. The painting was undeniably seductive and beautiful all at the same time, capturing the essence of my and Evander's earth-shattering passion to perfection.

"Well?" Gregory asked bitterly. "What do you have to say?"

It took a moment for me to speak, a moment to think beyond my dazed confrontation of a past I'd been trying so hard to forget. A past that had featured Evander in it. The fact the painting had turned up in the gallery I ran told me everything I needed to know.

He'd damn well found me!

I managed to shrug, though my entire being felt strung out and on edge. "What can I say? Clearly Chase Holland was commissioned to paint me and a man I used to see."

"A m-man you used t-to see?" Gregory spluttered. "Who exactly was that man?"

I frowned, overwhelmed by the emotions that spun out-of-control inside me. “Why does that matter? He’s in my past now and I fail to see why you’d need to know.”

Gregory crossed his arms, his lips thinning. “I never would have exhibited Chase Holland if I’d known one of his paintings showcased such a provocative piece of one of my workers.”

I pushed back a sudden burst of anger. He would have cared less had it featured any one of his other workers. He only cared that it’d been me. “I worked my ass off for this exhibition, and you’ve made stellar commissions of the artworks, all of which have sold.”

“All except for the one centerpiece featuring you,” he said scathingly.

“I should be the one who is angry, not you! But since our elusive Chase Holland isn’t here to question how he got a picture of me to paint, I’m not going to dwell on it. He is renowned for being reclusive almost as much as he is renowned for his stunning portraits. We were extremely lucky he chose this boutique gallery to feature his latest works.”

Gregory narrowed his eyes. “And why do you think he chose this gallery?” he asked brusquely.

“If you’re suggesting I had something to do with it, think again. I reached out to him sight unseen.”

Gregory nodded slowly, then conceded, “Perhaps he researched your name after you contacted him. When he saw some of your photos on social media, he decided he needed to paint you.” His eyes crinkled at the sides. “You do have an exceptional profile.”

I didn't reply. I no longer had the energy to defend myself against his fixation with me. I'd been happy here losing myself in my work, doing everything in my power to forget about Evander and everything in my past, and then, bam, one painting showcasing our passion, and I was back to square one.

I had no doubt now Evander had found me.

I had no doubt now I'd have to move on.

I had no choice but to leave behind everything and start again.

If I had the energy to cry I would have, but I needed to preserve it while I decided on my next plan.

I walked out of the gallery, Gregory walking alongside me as though he belonged there. I barely withheld a grimace as he held my elbow with a proprietary hand. It wasn't until I turned to him outside the doors that I shrugged his hand off and said, "I thought I'd made it clear, Gregory. I'm not looking for a relationship. I'm not interested—"

"In me?" he interjected. "Is that what you're saying?"

My patience was hanging by a thread. "I was going to say I'm not interested in any man."

His dull blue eyes sharpened, then narrowed, the dim afternoon somehow exacerbating his weak chin and thinning hair. "But you are still interested in the shadowed man in the painting, aren't you?" He shook his head. "Don't answer that, I could tell right away you still have feelings for him."

"Maybe I do," I said, my voice cooling. "But I've learned there are some things in life

people can't have, no matter how much they wish otherwise."

"Yeah, I'm starting to know how that feels." His breath hissed out, his eyes turning flinty and hard. "You do still want this job, don't you?"

I inhaled through my teeth, disbelief filling me from the inside out. "Are you threatening me?"

"Threatening you?" He laughed coarsely. "Fi, sweetheart. You know me better than that, I'm a good guy, I'd never hurt you."

Unless I gave him reason. He didn't need to say it, the implication hung heavy in the air. I almost snorted. He wasn't to know I was planning on leaving. I'd play along with him and see where he was going with his...threat.

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“I’ve managed this gallery for you, did extra time without pay, gone above and beyond for you and the artists who exhibited here.”

“That’s right, you have,” he acknowledged. “But don’t think for a second you’re indispensable. I’m sure there are plenty of young, starry-eyed graduates who’d love to take over from you.”

I lifted my hand and struck him hard across the face, the slap resounding in the still air. “Bastard,” I hissed. I wasn’t holding back anymore. “Have fun trying to find someone as dedicated as me. I. Fucking. Quit.”

He gaped at me even as he touched the red imprint of my hand on his cheek. “You’ll be back,” he snarled, his voice edged with an inkling of disquiet.

Huh. Guess I wasn’t quite as dispensable as he pretended.

I spun away, my shoes clattering as I hurried down the steps. My vision distorted as tears threatened. After everything I’d done for him and his business, this was how he repaid me? The only positive to come out of it was that I had no choice but to leave, so his opinion hardly mattered anyway.

A shiver suddenly trickled down my spine even as the hairs on the back of my neck lifted. I turned around, my senses sharpening and my eyes drying. Gregory was already walking away.

Someone else watched me, I was certain of it.

Evander? I couldn't, wouldn't think about it. I swiped a hand over my face, angry at myself, at the world. I was letting everything get to me, Gregory's actions disturbing me on a deeper level... a level I've been trying so hard to forget.

Chapter Four

Gemma

It trudged home, my emotions shot. But I'd been through worse. When I'd left Evander it'd been the end of my world. Watching my mom escape overseas with a man who swore to protect her had almost undone me all over again, not to mention...

I shook my head. I wouldn't go there. I couldn't.

At least I knew my mom was safe now.

I took a seat at the bus shelter, waiting for my usual bus home. I glanced left, then right, looking for the man who still filled my mind and, all too often, my dreams. Not that I wanted to see him. He was the last man I wanted in my life right now.

I sighed heavily. I would not think about him now.

I needed to focus on my present issues. As much as I'd loved my job, it was probably past time to move on anyway. I'd find someplace else to live and work. I might have put all of my heart into the gallery, but at least my experience would hold me in good stead for my next job.

I stepped onto the bus, its doors hissing closed behind me. The doors reopened ten minutes later, and I stepped off at my usual stop. I walked a couple of hundred meters toward the modern apartment complex ahead, where I'd lived for almost three years after I'd ran from Evander. My mother had stayed with me for the first eight months

before she'd given up on a life in New York and had hedged her bets with another man in another part of the world.

My stomach compressed a little as my mind wandered. My mother had lived an extraordinary life. She'd been a runaway teen who'd survived by becoming an exotic dancer, then the mistress of a mafia boss who'd seen her dance and had wanted her all to himself.

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She'd been smart enough to squirrel away any cash he'd gifted her, then afterward had sold every piece of expensive jewelry he'd bought her. It'd been enough to buy this apartment outright, under another name, another persona.

My mother had been pregnant when she'd disappeared from my sperm donor's life. She'd given birth to me nine months later, a home birth aided by a trainee midwife who'd been more than happy with a bundle of cash for her trouble.

I pushed aside nostalgia and a prickling of heat in my eyes as I turned left, between two garden beds filled with petunias and dahlias, the rusty-red cobbled path making me feel welcome every time I traversed it.

I took the railed stairs, climbing to the third level, then walked along the covered walkway before stopping at my apartment. Pushing in my key, I swung open the door. I sighed, smiling as I stepped into the sanctuary my mother and I had created together.

Lavender walls were offset by soft gray furniture, including the sofa and armchairs with their deep, padded cushions, and the white marble dining table with its dove gray seats. A large, gold-framed landscape I'd painted featuring a sage green mountain and the setting sun in various shades of orange and pink hung above the flat screen television in the lounge room.

A charcoal-gray fluff-ball padded toward me with a pitiful meow and I bent and scratched under his chin. "Did you miss me, Rembrandt?"

He purred and I laughed as I picked him up and snuggled him. "You're precious, but I

bet you know that already.”

He purred louder and I put him back down, opening a can of wet food for him. While he ate it like he hadn't eaten in a week, I poured a glass of red wine, then stepped back out onto the balcony that faced a park.

I took a seat at the small square table and raised the glass to my lips, taking a deep, appreciative sip. This was my favorite time of the day, with the sun going down and glittering through the leaves, turning them a burnished gold.

I sighed and leaned back, my eyes taking in the landscape as I imagined it would look on a canvas.

Most nights I didn't bother with dinner, my spare time was taken up doing what I loved. If I was happy, I painted. If I was sad or stressed, I painted.

Today would be no different.

But first I'd savor my wine and enjoy what was left of the day.

Rembrandt padded outside, then standing on his hind legs, his front paws on my closest thigh, he checked to see if my lap was free before he jumped and plonked himself down, then began purring.

I laughed as I ran my hand over his silky soft head and back. “You're just what I need right now.” I sighed softly. “Are you going to be happy in another apartment in the city?” I chewed my bottom lip. “Or perhaps we'll move far away from here, someplace random in the country, and start again?”

I lifted my glass and took another sip of my red wine just as movement caught my eyes.

My heart jerked.

I'd seen something...someone as they'd stepped behind a tree.I was certain of it.

I should leave now while I still could, but it was nearly dark outside and I didn't fancy my chances of staying in a motel with a cat squawking in his carrier cage.

Rembrandt meowed, as though sensing my anxiety, then jumped off me with his fluffy tail swishing.I pushed to my feet and hurried inside, rinsing out my glass then changing into black-faded-to-gray leggings and an old, paint-splattered T-shirt that had once been white.

Making my way barefooted into what had been my old bedroom, and which I'd converted into my art room after my mom had gone, I was soon lost in my own creative world, brushing a silvery misty sky that was atmospheric and somehow chilling.I added olive-colored leafy trees that overhung a pathway that drew the eye to a distant figure in black.

I gasped, realizing I'd painted the figure I'd seen earlier.A figure who'd materialized in my work just as he had in my reality.I unlocked my fingers and my paintbrush clattered onto the floor even as I backed away.The landscape was beautiful, haunting and magical.Butthatfigure really was all too familiar.

A tread sound behind me, yet I couldn't move a muscle.I could barely breathe.

“Hello, Gemma.”

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Chapter Five

Gemma

I was frozen, caught somewhere between petrified and a terrible yearning. Then the man stepped closer behind me and I was like a mouse in the presence of a cobra that was about to strike.

He clucked his tongue. "All this amazing talent going to waste. You hated me for my criminal life, but hiding your talent from the world is a far bigger crime as far as I'm concerned."

I didn't speak. I couldn't speak. Not when his big body throbbed with menace and desire, a chemistry I'd tried so hard to forget. He closed in on me from behind, millimeters away from touching me completely before he reached out and clasped my jaw. I moaned a little at his touch, at the forbidden feelings I'd imagined I'd gotten over.

Need flooded through me, a dark and dangerous desire I didn't ever want to end even as I wished I'd immediately packed my bags, scooped up my cat, and gotten the hell away before it'd been too late.

Had I subconsciously wanted to be caught?

I shook off the fleeting thought. No. I hated this man. Hated him for what he did to others in his criminal world, even as I hated him for what he did to me...to my hungry-for-him emotions.

His clasp tightened and my blood heated even as my stomach clenched, right along with my core.

Holy fuck. I didn't want this. I couldn't want this. He was off-limits. He was mafia and I had to stay well away from him and his kind. If I didn't...everything I'd ran away from, everything I'd tried to protect was at risk.

"Why did you run?" he growled. "What did I do to make you think I wouldn't move mountains for you?"

I stood my ground, though everything inside me trembled with fear and a constant, shameless need. "It's not what you did to me," I finally managed. "It's what you do to others."

He didn't need to know it was mostly what he did to me via association. It wouldn't take much for someone to put two and two together. I shivered. I'd contemplated cosmetic surgery for that reason. Perhaps I should have gone ahead with it.

"I don't do anything bad to anyone unless they deserve it." He chuckled darkly. "Right now I'm contemplating what punishment you deserve after your betrayal."

"Betrayal?" I gritted out. "You don't own me. I'm free to do what I want with my own life."

"You were my woman, we were happy together. Until the moment I told you about my family." His breath touched my scalp, hot and angry. "Your betrayal cut me deeper than a knife wound."

"Your family wasn't some ordinary, run-of-the-mill folk. Your family is the mafia."

"That is who I am. You insulted me by leaving me."

Anger churned in my gut. Did he realize how hard it'd been for me to leave? To run away from the man and the life I'd fallen in love with? It'd broken my heart into a thousand pieces, so much so I was still sticking the fragments back together.

I finally managed to move, to snap my head out of his grip before I turned around and looked up. I was made instantly dizzy by his proximity, by his height and his power, my senses drinking him in like water in the desert. His fitted dark gray suit reeked of wealth, of success and control. "I betrayed you because I dared to leave you. But how many women have you loved and left?"

His eyes darkened, his teeth barely a glint behind his shadowed stubble and hard lips as he stared down at me from his lofty height. "I didn't have feelings for a single one of them. They weren't the love of my life."

"Neither was I," I stated softly, though my voice lacked conviction. I had meant something to him, just as he'd meant everything to me. I just didn't want to accept it now. I didn't want to accept it...ever.

"You and I both know that's not true." He interlaced his fingers behind my ass and pulled me closer, pressing my feminine curves against his masculine hardness. My heart jerked in my chest as he held my gaze with his merciless stare. "I don't tolerate liars."

I lifted my chin. "More punishment?" I asked sweetly, even as my heart jerked harder still.

His hands moved apart, then drifted to the front of my body. They cupped my breasts and I couldn't help but breathe heavily, helplessly as he asked, "Do you remember how you used to moan when I did this?" He circled my nipples with his thumbs through the fabric of my paint-stained T-shirt. "And this?" he added, pinching them hard enough to sting.

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I gasped, fire burning through me and electricity zapping right after. The combination of wanton heat and tingling power fizzed through my bloodstream before centering in my core.

His eyes darkened, his voice deepening. “Did you really think you could forget about this? About us?”

I was panting, my feelings exacerbated by the fact I’d never really gotten over him, by the fact I hadn’t been with any man since.

None had measured up.

Then he pushed a hand down past the waistband of my leggings and under my panties. I jerked and moaned even as he crooned, “So wet. You’re ready for me right now.”

“Go. To. Hell,” I gritted, my voice rougher than his fingers that pried open my pussy to touch the wetness inside. When he brushed my clit I jumped and moaned yet again.

Damn it. He was making me fall apart all over again. He was proving without a doubt he could do whatever the hell he pleased to me and I’d rejoice in the act.

He smirked, his eyes heated even as they were hard and unyielding. “I don’t think you want me there. Not when I’m so busy taking you to heaven.” He rolled my clit and I almost fell to my knees.

“Stop!” I croaked.

I can't take anymore!

He paused. "Do you really want that?" he asked. "Because I know your body. I remember how quickly you succumbed to orgasm just from me doing this." He rolled my clit faster and faster, putting more pressure on it, just exactly how I liked it, how I'd always liked it.

I staggered, my knees giving way as an orgasm hit hard. Stars blotted my vision while pleasure exploded through me, sucking away my breath along with my strength...my sanity.

"See," he murmured throatily. "Nothing's changed. You're. Still. Mine."

"No! Never!"

"Then allow me to change your mind."

I struggled in his hold, then whimpered at the sharp, piercing sting in the side of my throat. My eyes widened. He'd injected me? I wanted to scream, to fight back, but I was fading fast when I heard his voice coming from a great distance.

"You won't escape from me a second time, la mia Gemma."

Chapter Six

Gemma

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I couldn't be more in love if I tried. My heart was full to overflowing when I glanced at Evander as he pulled out a seat for me at an Italian restaurant that was rumored to be mafia-owned.

Perhaps because some rivals had been shot and killed just outside it.

Did he know this place was likely owned by mobsters? I drew in a deep, steady breath. I wouldn't allow the possibility to spoil my mood or my appetite. Evander was perfect. He was everything I could ever want in man.

He took a seat opposite me at the table, his smile lighting up his face, his dark eyes crinkling at the sides. "You're staring."

"I am," I conceded. "It's hard not to."

His smile widened into a grin. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

"You always make me feel beautiful. I want you to feel the same way."

"You are beautiful. It's not even up for debate."

I laughed, though passion thrummed through me. He really was perfect. "See? You're a born charmer."

"Only for you. Charm doesn't come easily to me for anyone else."

I glanced down our long table, arching a brow at the vacant chairs, the empty spaces

beside us. “Are you expecting company?”

He reached for my closest hand, his face somber. “Yes. I wanted you to meet the rest of my family.”

I gaped, my heartbeat accelerating. “Really?” He’d already met my mother. It was nice to know he now wanted me to meet his family. Although unlike me, it was obvious by the many seats at the table he had a big family, and likely more than one involved parent. I guessed he had siblings, maybe aunts and uncles as well. My cheeks hurt from smiling so much when I said, “I’d love that!”

“You would?” he asked, the taut planes of his face softening. “I was worried it might be too soon.”

I giggled. We had only been dating a few months. “Well you’ve already met my mother.”

“True,” he said huskily. “Your mom is an amazing woman. I can see who you take after.”

My mouth dried. Thankfully, he’d never asked about my father. That I looked so much like him in the few photos I’d seen terrified me no end. It’d be so easy for anyone who knew him to connect the dots.

Even coming here I was taking a risk, though the chances of a mobster being here and seeing me, then somehow recognizing me were slim to none.

I pushed away misgivings and managed a smile. “It’s my turn now to see who you take after.”

He grimaced. “As long as it’s not my father. I’d like to think I have none of

his...attributes.”

Something within me softened. It was kind of nice and more than a little reassuring to know I wasn't alone in not having the perfect role model for a father. “I'm sure you've inherited all his good parts.”

He snorted. “Believe me when I say he has no good parts, no redeeming qualities whatsoever.”

“Oh?” I wasn't sure there was anything I could say to reassure him.

He shook his head. “I'm not saying I'm perfect either, not by a long shot.” He sighed heavily. “In fact, I know I have some of my dear old dad's traits.” His eyes searched mine, as though delving into all my secrets by sharing his own. “Gemma, I'm not the man you think I am.” His smile turned crooked, self-damning. “It's why I brought you here. You're not just here to meet my family, you're here to meet the real me.”

A shiver of unease prickled through me. I shook it off. “I know you're not perfect, Evander. I'm not either. But nothing you tell me will scare me away. We might be moving fast, but it feels right. We belong together.”

He nodded, then conceded softly, “We do belong together.” He leaned forward and kissed me with a tenderness that made my heart ache with yearning. When he drew back, his eyes glowed. “My brother will join us soon. No doubt he's distracted overseeing the chefs and making future plans for his restaurant. He often loses himself—“

“His restaurant,” I interjected with a squeak. “The owner is your brother?” I shook my head and added, “The one rumored to be a member of the mafia?”

Evander blinked, caution filling his stare. “Would it bother you if the rumors were

true?”

My heart contracted, my throat tight as I countered, “Are you saying they are true?”

He nodded. “The rumors aren’t rumors. My family is the Agostino mafia.”

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I sucked air through my clenched teeth, my heart dropping to my toes and my senses reeling so hard I was close to blacking out. The Agostinos were even more infamous than the Accardi mobster family. A shiver of distaste ricocheted through me. “And you?” I asked numbly.

His eyes narrowed a little as they searched my face. “I’m an Agostino, being a mobster is my birthright.” His hand tightened a little on mine. “I’m a capo, in charge of my own soldiers.”

My insides squeezed together, even as grief thickened my voice. I couldn’t be with this man, not anymore. The life of my mother and my future, my freedom, depended on not being with him.

My chair scraped back as I stood and withdrew my hand from his. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I need to use the ladies room.”

He frowned up at me, but relented with a nod. “Of course. I’ll be here. I’ll order you a drink.”

I nodded absently, then headed toward the restroom. Only once I was out of his sight did I quickly head toward the elevator and step inside. As its doors closed and I descended alone, I pulled out my cell. “Mom, it’s me.” I squeezed my eyes shut briefly. “You know how we talked about a plan B? I’m sorry to say it looks like we’ll need to use it.” I swallowed back a taste of burning acid. “Evander is an Agostino.”

I woke with a gasp, and to the thrumming of a sedan’s powerful engine as I lay on its backseat. My wrist was snared by a cuff, which was attached at the other end to a

metal arm that sat just below the door handle. I pulled my arm and the cuff rattled and snapped tighter around my wrist.

“Did you really think it’d be that easy to escape from me a second time?”

I stilled, then glared into the rearview mirror at his dark, fathomless eyes reflecting back at me. “You don’t seriously think you’ll get away with this?”

A smirk hardened his face, his resolve. “I seriously do. You won’t be leaving me again.”

“I left you once,” I gritted out, struggling against my restraint. “I’ll do it again.”

His stony stare lifted to meet mine once again in the rearview mirror. “I doubt that very much.”

I paused, my heart surging into frantic beats. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean...by the time I’m done with you, you’ll never want to leave me. Not. Ever. Again.”

If those words had come from anyone else, I might have laughed. But I knew better. He was serious. Deadly serious.

It didn’t mean I’d yield to him. “You don’t scare me!” I snarled. “You’re not the only one with connections—”

He raised a brow. “Oh?”

I lifted my chin, my face as heated as my burning arm. “You’ll get nothing out of me.”

He chuckled darkly. "It seems to me I've already gotten more out of you than expected." His eyes again met mine. "If there is one thing I've learned over the years since you left me, it's patience. A lot of patience. His gaze returned to the dirt road in front of him. Though I'd yet to see any other traffic, it appeared to be meticulously maintained. "I'll find out everything I want to know. It's just a matter of time."

"Then I hope you have a million years to uncover everything I've buried, because you're going to need it."

His nostrils flared, as though a predator scenting prey and anticipating the hunt. "We'll see."

I sat higher, the cuff digging into my wrist. "Is this restraint really necessary? It's not like I'm going to jump from a moving car."

"I'm not taking any chances with you this time around."

I wanted to scream, to cry and wail. At the very least I wanted to continue protesting. Instead I slumped back, the chain on my cuff snapping tight. There wasn't any point. There was no give in his hard, merciless face. "You can't do this to me," I said, my voice pitched high enough to be a whine.

"Did you forget I'm a mobster? I can do whatever the hell I want."

I ground my teeth together. "One day you'll push someone too far."

He shrugged idly. Perhaps. But until that day... I'm going to enjoy our time together."

My gaze darted around wildly. All I could see were trees, trees and more trees. There weren't even any signs on the side of the dirt road to indicate where we were heading. "At least tell me where we are!"

The sedan topped an incline, which showcased stunning views of a verdant green valley beneath. A small log cabin sat back a few yards from a small stream. Behind the cabin was a small orchard, but otherwise it was a long sweep of rocky, grassy land.

Holy shit! It couldn't be...could it? Though it seemed impossible, I'd imagined this scenery in my head, painted it almost exactly how I saw it now.

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I swallowed hard, my senses reeling as the car swept down the long incline toward the cabin. “This place is yours?” I asked weakly.

He nodded. “Welcome to la mia oasi.”

My oasis.

Despite its beauty, it didn’t feel like an oasis. Not now I was so rattled. I scowled even as my stomach curdled a little. “It looks more like inferno in terra.”

Hell on Earth.

It wasn’t until he braked the car sharply and turned his head to look at me, that I realized my mistake even before he growled, “You know Italian?”

Chapter Seven

Evander

Every one of my senses hummed with awareness. Why hadn’t Gemma ever mentioned her Italian heritage? What else didn’t I know about her? Had I been that clueless?

Yes, I’d met her mother, and I’d learned about and loved her artistic side, but beyond that I’d known very little about her.

She blinked back at me, any vestige of guilt dissolving like it’d never been. She shrugged, then said blandly, “I know enough of the language to get me by. My

grandmother swore enough in Italian for me to have a bit of a grasp of the language.”

“So you are Italian?”

She shook her head. “No, I was born in the US. This is my homeland.”

And yet she was hiding something. I’d been too blinded by my love for her the last time to have noticed anything amiss. Anger surged at my stupidity along with her duplicity. If she thought for a second I’d allow her to walk over me like a doormat, she’d soon learn the error of her ways.

I hadn’t been made an underboss for nothing. I killed as easily as I made love, and I’d revert to my merciless side to keep her until I’d had my fill of her—if that ever happened—and could walk away without looking back.

I parked at the side of the cabin, then shut down the car’s engine before I pushed open the driver’s door and climbed out. I glanced around at the vast emptiness, the wilderness that appeared empty but was full of life.

I inhaled the crisp, clean air, drawing it deep into my lungs. Though the land around me had been cleared of many of its trees long before I’d purchased it, the far-off mountains were filled with them in a riot of color displaying red, orange, yellow and mottled green.

The stream nearby bubbled gently. When the rains came it’d be a raging torrent, with the cabin precariously close to its banks, but though it was hard to see with the naked eye, the land sloped away naturally from my little abode, keeping it safe and dry.

Even better, few people ever visited my patch of paradise. If the ‘private property’ sign on the driveway leading in didn’t dissuade them, the tall fence around it deterred even the most determined trespasser.

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Gemma was the only other person I wanted here.

That she clearly wanted to be far away stirred up feelings within I'd been trying hard to push down. I jerked open her door and she fell to the ground outside thanks to the cuff attached below the handle.

Her breath hissed out, not from pain but humiliation. She almost looked like a street urchin in her faded leggings and splattered-with-colors T-shirt. "Was that really necessary?" she asked, her shocked, big green eyes staring up at me.

I pushed down remorse. I refused to show her any compassion. She deserved to be punished and humiliated. I dug the cuff's key out of my jacket pocket, then released the cuff from the sedan's door with a little click.

"Take a good look around," I instructed as I pulled her to her feet. "This will be your home for some time to come."

She blinked at me before horror filled her eyes. "I-I can't stay here."

Fury threatened to boil over. How many women threw themselves at me on a regular basis? Yet with just a few words Gemma made me feel as worthless as my own father had for so many years. When Ethan had shot and killed him, I'd felt nothing but relief.

When Gemma had left me, nothing had given me any relief. Not sex, not drugs, not even killing the many enemies who deserved to be six feet under.

"My cat will starve to death," she blabbered. "He's all I've got."

Something pricked my conscience, but I masked my face of any emotion. “Inside, now.”

“You really did fool me all those years ago, didn’t you,” she said bitterly as she trudged with me along the grass then up onto the small porch at the front of the cabin. “I really believed you were a good man.”

“Is that why you left?” I asked hoarsely. “Because I was good?”

“No, I left because I found out everything I believed about you was a lie. That you really weren’t a good man at all.”

I nodded. “I’m glad you finally worked that out.” I unlocked the door, then drew her inside, my grip on her arm verging on cruel. I nodded at the interior. “As you can see the cabin is a simple, open design.” The kitchen cabinets were aged oak and matched the floorboards that also featured in the adjoining dining and lounge room. “The bathroom is next to our bedroom.”

“Our bedroom?”

I smirked. “Did you really think for a second I’d allow you to sleep in a separate bedroom from me?” I bent my head and lowered my voice. “We have a lot of fucking to make up for.”

Her breath hissed, horror all but emanating from her right along with carnal need. She’d always reveled in our sexual chemistry, I doubted that had changed, even if she did try and deny it.

I nodded at the far room that I’d had tacked onto the end of the cabin after I’d bought the property. “The door to that room is locked, for good reason. You’re to stay out of it for the duration of your stay here.”

Her voice quivered. “So you will let me go at some point?”

“I didn’t say that,” I snapped, my so called patience wearing thin with her obvious wish to be anywhere but with me.

As if it hadn’t been bad enough feeling the lowest of the low with my father’s scornful words becoming arrows that cut deep into my self-esteem, into the very fabric of my existence. Even more unbearable had been watching my mother surrender to her addiction, which had corroded all logic and made her believe I was cast from the same mold as my father.

When Gemma had defined me thanks to my mafia heritage, it’d completely undone me, damaged me so deeply I’d yet to be mentally repaired.

But she was right about one thing. I wasn’t that man anymore; I’d never be that man ever again. I wouldn’t expose my heart to her or anyone else. I’d never allow anyone to shatter it into countless pieces.

I stalked over the floorboards toward our bedroom. I swung open the door, satisfaction filling me at the king size bed that barely fit into the space. With its blood-red cover and black bed posts, it verged on being an eyesore.

She stumbled a little and I pulled her back by my side. “What’s the matter? Don’t you like what you see?”

“Would it matter if I didn’t?”

I laughed coarsely. “No, it wouldn’t. This is your room as much as it’s mine now. Love it or hate it, that’s completely up to you.”

“How sweet of you to give me a choice in this one thing,” she said.

“Don’t get used to it,” I commanded softly.

Damn it was good to have the last word.

Chapter Eight

Gemma

I stepped into the lion's den with my body coming back to life even as my mind screamed run. I ignored both and put on a bland face as I crossed my arms and looked at anything but Evander and his king-size bed.

If he wanted sex, I wouldn't cooperate. I'd be a lifeless piece of flesh, immune to him in every way. If only the handcuff dangling from my wrist was as easy to ignore. It reminded me all too well I was nothing more than Evander's prisoner.

My peripheral vision caught him arching a dark brow. "Would you like a drink or to use the toilet before I attach your handcuff to the bed?"

I blinked at him. "Please tell me you're not going to keep me chained up like a dog?"

"I am," he said somberly, gesturing then toward the edge of the bed.

I stepped to where he asked, my legs suddenly heavy and my mind numb. "You don't have to do this," I protested weakly. "I'll stay here willingly. It's not like I can go anywhere."

He nodded at me to sit. I did what he asked, slumping on the mattress. He reached out and clasped my hand, his warm touch creating electrical sparks even as he pulled my arm back before attaching the other end of my handcuff to the bedhead.

I refused to cry, refused to plead with him. Instead I stared at him with empty eyes and a stoic face. He was mafia. He'd get off on my fear just as much as he'd get off on me begging him to release me.

My mother had told me enough stories about her life with the Accardi mafia to make me realize how low those kind of men went to enact revenge. I'd humiliated Evander by escaping and leaving him alone when he'd taken me to meet his family.

No doubt his family now thought the worst of me and imagined he couldn't keep his slut in line. Mafia families might respect their own kin, but they most certainly didn't respect women who'd done the dirty on one of their own.

I couldn't help huff out an aggrieved breath. Mafia men could treat others like shit even while they expected the utmost respect in return.

Assholes.

I tensed as the handcuff clinked as it was locked into place, imprisoning me once again. I squeezed my eyes closed as Evander straightened; his powerful frame towering over me and making me feel tiny and inadequate.

He spoke then, his voice hard. "From this moment on you will stay quiet unless I ask you a question or you absolutely need to tell me something. Maybe then I won't feel a need to gag you."

Sweat beaded on my brow, my top lip, my muscles so tight they quivered. As if taking my freedom away wasn't bad enough thanks to being cuffed to the bed like an animal. Having a gag in my mouth, which restricted my breathing was an even more horrifying thought.

It wasn't until his tread retreated from the room that my eyes popped open and my

tension slowly leached back out of me.

I heard the faint snick of a lock before a far door opened and closed.No doubt he'd gone into the room he'd told me never to enter.

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I blew out a slow breath. I'd been expecting him to rip off my clothes and take me against my will. So what was this?

Was he just going to leave me here alone to slowly rot?

I'd go stir crazy!

What, do you want him to fuck you now and get it over with?

Was it terrible that I did? I hated not knowing what was going to happen next. I hated waiting for the unexpected. The only thing I knew for sure was that he would take my body. It was just a question of when.

I wasted hours watching the shadows grow as they slowly crawled across the floorboards. My eyelids finally fluttered and fully closed, darkness then descending in a rush.

I stood at the traffic lights with a folder of my precious artworks clutched in one hand, my cell in my other. The pedestrian signal flicked to walk just as my phone rang. I stepped across the road with dozens of other people, juggling my folder as I answered the call.

My phone slipped from my grasp and I fumbled to keep a hold of it even as I misstepped, slamming into someone coming from the other direction. Oomph. I somehow clamped hold of my phone even as my folder dropped and fell open on the ground, a dozen acrylic landscape and seascape paintings on paper scattering free.

My breath hissed out as pedestrians stepped onto my precious work. It was only when a man bent and collected my paintings that I realized he was the one and same man I'd collided into.

It took one breathless heartbeat for me to take in his magnificence. His tall, lean yet masculine body that was encased in a dark suit likely tailored especially for him. His shadowed stubble showcased a strong jaw and sensual lips, while his nose was perfectly proportioned to his high cheekbones and dark, mysterious eyes that hid tantalizing secrets.

He looked at me, freezing for a second before he asked huskily, "Are you all right?"

I am now.

At my shaky nod, he gathered up the last couple of paintings, pushed them into my folder, then drew me with him off the road. "You look far from all right," he said in a deep, concerned tone. "I think you could do with a strong drink."

I was made weak by his powerful presence, his intoxicating scent of forest and smoky leather aftershave. "I think you're right," I admitted with a shaky laugh.

He smiled then, his dark eyes crinkling slightly at the edges. "There's a bar half-a-block away from here. Maybe I can buy you a drink while you tell me all about those amazing paintings I saw."

I smiled, a glimmer of joy lighting me up from the inside out. "Thank you. I-I think I'd like that."

I woke with a start, though my arm stayed asleep and tingled with pins and needles. I jerked the handcuff and its chain before I half-sat, then looked around, my memories flooding back with a vengeance.

I'd been dreaming, totally unaware I was prisoner now to the same man I'd been salivating over. I might have fallen madly and passionately in love with Evander in the past, but things were a whole lot different now.

I despised him and everything he stood for. He was mafia. He wasn't just a bad man, he was evil personified.

Morning light flooded through the net curtains of the bedroom that was now my home, a bird twittering just outside as though welcoming me to my new home.

Piss off, bird. This will never be my home.

I yanked my arm again, clattering the chain on my restraint. That my bladder was full only added to my urgency. "Hello! Evander? I need to pee!"

Silence answered my query and panic grew inside of me like a tsunami, wild and aggressive. "Evander you son-of-a-bitch, I need to peenow!"

A far-off door creaked open then shut. The sound of approaching footsteps made my heart rate settle considerably, until Evander walked into his bedroom in the same suit he'd worn last night, the whites of his eyes tinged red and dark shadows beneath.

I gulped. Had he slept at all? "I need to use the bathroom," I said hoarsely.

He nodded, then retrieved the handcuff key before he bent and unlocked it. It was a relief to move my arm and I shook out the pins and needles before I stood on too-weak legs.

"Thank you," I muttered ungraciously before I walked quickly out of the bedroom and to his bathroom, all too aware of him following me close behind. Before I had the chance to shut the bathroom door, he put a hand out and caught it.

“The door stays open,” he said in a gravelly, no-nonsense voice.

“I’d like privacy while I pee,” I gritted out, even as I stumbled toward the toilet and pulled my leggings and panties down together, then sat on the seat. My bladder couldn’t be restrained a second longer and he stood watching me silently while I tinkled loudly for what seemed like forever.

“Pervert,” I snarled when I finally finished.

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He snorted. “Believe me when I say watching you pee doesn’t make me want to jerk off.”

“It’s good to know you’re not completely vile.”

His eyes narrowed. “Not every member of the mafia is a sadistic fuck.”

I pulled up my panties and leggings, then flushed the toilet. “Really?” I asked sweetly. “Says who?”

“Says me,” he growled before he stalked forward, then turned on the tap for me to wash my hands.

I squirted some liquid soap into my hands, then slowly washed off the bubbles. “Then perhaps you’ll show me that nice side by letting me go?”

His dark chuckle reverted around the small bathroom with its off-white walls and pearly-white tiles. “My inner goodness only extends so far. You’re stuck here with me for the foreseeable future.”

Chapter Nine

Evander

I absently checked my hands as Gemma washed hers. My fingers and palms were well cleaned, with no visible signs revealing my true self. I’d slung my jacket and shirt over a hook on my door, slipping them back on before entering my bedroom with

Gemma in it.

How many times had I been tempted to enter the bedroom and kiss her protests from her lips before I kissed other parts of her delectable body? I'd been doing everything possible to ignore my raging hard-on for most of the night, distracting myself with other pastimes.

It hadn't worked particularly well.

My cell abruptly rang and I pulled it from my jacket pocket, biting back an expletive when I glanced at the screen and saw the caller ID.

"Don't move," I growled at Gemma, before I shut the bathroom door and leaned against it, effectively locking her in as I greeted my Don. "Ethan."

"Evander," he replied in return. "Where are you?"

"My cabin," I said.

"Really? That's a surprise. You haven't been there for some time."

"I haven't felt the need," I conceded. "What is this all about?"

"I guess you haven't heard the latest?"

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“No?”

“The O’Malley and Accardi sons-of-bitches shot and killed three of my soldiers along with one of my most loyal informants.”

I sucked in a harsh breath. “Today?”

“Yes, about an hour ago. I can’t look past such a violent and hostile act. I can’t look weak. We need to make a stand and show them who they’re up against.”

It was going to be bloody and brutal. But Ethan was right, turning the other cheek would only make our family look feeble and inadequate. As the underboss I’d defend our turf with my life. “I’ll be there,” I said, even though everything inside of me wanted nothing more than to stay at my cabin with Gemma.

Either way, I’d planned to return to New York soon enough, Ethan’s order had just expedited matters. “I’ll leave shortly.”

“Good,” Ethan said in a clipped voice. “Be here by 5.00 pm.”

The call disconnected and I opened the bathroom door before directing Gemma toward the kitchen. “I’ll cook something for our breakfast.”

Did she remember how much I’d loved cooking for her? How often we’d eaten home cooked meals together?

“Then what?” she asked bitterly. If she remembered anything from our past, she

wasn't letting on. "I suppose I'll be chained back on the bed?"

I nodded tightly. "Yes, I suppose you will."

I took my time cuffing her to the leg of the table, and even though she sat sullenly, I couldn't help but admire her all over again. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. But then I'd always been enamored by her, my lust for her undeniable.

I whipped up eggs with some milk I'd recently purchased, then salted and peppered the mix while a knob of butter melted in a pan on the gas hob. Pushing some bread into the toaster, I emptied the eggs into the hot pan, stirring the mixture round and round to scramble it.

Turning off the gas, I buttered the two pieces of toast and then allocated half the scrambled eggs to each plate. I pushed Gemma's plate in front of her even as she lifted her chin and looked away.

I hid a wry grin. "This will be your only meal for the day. It's up to you, of course, if you want to starve yourself or not."

I opened up the refrigerator door and pulled out a carton of orange juice, pouring myself a glass before filling a plastic cup for Gemma to drink out of. There was no need to risk her deliberately breaking the glass and using a large fragment as a weapon to cut me.

I sat opposite her and began devouring my breakfast. I was halfway finished when she grabbed hold of her plastic fork. Barely withholding a glower, she dug into the eggs and began to eat in earnest.

After I finished my breakfast, I sat watching her while I sipped my juice.

She really hadn't changed one bit. She still wore her hair past her shoulders, the caramel shade still the same natural color. I was surprised she hadn't dyed it to better hide from me, but perhaps after all this time she'd imagined she was safe?

She had lost some weight though, not that she'd had any to spare. No doubt constantly looking over her shoulder had taken its toll. Unlikely. She didn't show any signs of ill-health. Her skin glowed a light golden color, her eyes bright without the haunted look I'd seen in so many others on the run.

I tamped down a sudden flash of fury. She'd been living her life to the fullest while I'd been driven half-mad with lovesick despair and endless questions.

"That's enough," I growled, dragging her half-eaten eggs and toast away from her before emptying it into the trash. She was smart enough to drain her orange juice before I took that away from her as well.

Filling her plastic cup with water, I unlatched her handcuff, then drew her with me back into the bedroom. She sat down heavily before I locked her cuff to the bedhead once again.

When I placed her cup of water on the flat top of the mushroom-shaped bedside table, she asked, "You're leaving me?"

I ignored a sudden urge to reassure her and instead focused on the anger churning constantly inside of me as I ground out, "I am."

"H-how long will y-you be gone?"

"Even if I knew I wouldn't tell you," I said dismissively. "No doubt I'll be back before you starve to death."

I was halfway out the bedroom door when she said icily, “How...considerate of you. I guess that phone call you took must have been important for you to leave so soon.”

I paused. “You guessed right,” I acknowledged.

She snorted out a deprecating laugh. “Let me guess...it was your wife? Are you married now?” She ran with the idea and added, “Does the poor woman know you have another woman captive? Or is that normal behavior from her mafia husband?” She snorted harder. “I shouldn’t feel sorry for her, but somehow I do.”

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“I have no wife,” I said heavily. “The only woman I ever wanted to marry left me, remember?” I sensed her gaping after me even as my muscles unlocked and I continued walking away from her, though everything inside of me itched to turn back and fuck her into complete submission before I left for my meeting with my mobster family.

I refused to give her the satisfaction. She didn’t need to know how I really felt about her.

Not now.

Not ever.

Chapter Ten

Evander

I arrived at the mansion I’d grown up in, one that held too many bad memories for me to want to stay here for any length of time. I was just thankful I also had lots of good memories thanks to my brothers.

If sex and drugs were heaven on earth then this place had to be paradise, all I needed was to adjust my halo and forget about my many other darker recollections

I climbed out of my car, nodding at the soldiers standing at the front door. I’d already noted the extra security around the house. Ethan, my eldest brother and my don, wasn’t taking any chances.

The soldiers stepped aside as I paused at the front door, then raised my hand and knocked.

The door swung open shortly after and Sabrina stood there in a black lacy dress and a beaming smile, her silver hair falling down her back. “Evander, since when do you knock? This is your home too, you know!”

I shrugged. “It’s your family home now as far as I’m concerned.”

She blinked and shook her head. “You have an entire wing of the house that will always be yours, don’t ever forget that.”

Ethan appeared behind her then, his arms encircling her waist and her growing belly. “We might be trying to fill the house with children but we’ve got a long way to go if you think we’ll need any of the other wings of the house.”

I grinned. “How is the pregnancy going this time?”

“Well, we’re having twins,” Sabrina declared happily. “So I guess that means double the trouble.”

“Or twice as nice,” Ethan said with a grin.

Sabrina brushed back some of her shiny, straightened blonde hair. “Thankfully I’m not even a little bit sick, so I’m counting my blessings.”

“I’m the one counting my blessings,” Ethan said as he tenderly stroked her belly and kissed the top of her head.

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I ignored the sudden, brutal stab of jealousy. Though I was happy for my brother, a part of me wondered where I'd gone wrong with Gemma. I'd had countless women warming my bed and wanting so much more from me, yet I'd had to chain Gemma to my bed in a cabin in the wilderness just to keep her.

My stomach clenched even as my dick jerked in anticipation.

She must be going crazy wondering when I'd claim her body. But something held me back. I wanted more than her body. I wanted her heart, her mind and soul.

I cleared my throat, then reminded my brother—my don, “There was some urgency in me coming here today?”

Ethan stepped aside, his wife following suit. “Of course. Everyone else is already here. They're waiting upstairs in the parlor.”

I nodded. “Then I'd better not keep them waiting any longer.”

Sabrina winked. “I guess I'll go and finish my orange juice with the girls.”

As Sabrina went one direction, I took the stairs to the next level with Ethan. I looked his way. “Is Sabrina's brother joining us?”

Ethan nodded. “Yes, his family is under attack too. They want to resolve this as quickly and efficiently as we do.” He chuckled. “I'm only surprised our women have chosen not to be involved.”

“Behind every great man is a great woman,” I quoted. “I’m betting every female inside this house has whispered a suggestion or two into the ears of their men.”

Ethan made a noise low in his throat. “See this is why you’re the underboss. You’re cynical and disillusioned enough for the job, while still holding out hope for a positive outcome.”

I winced. Ethan knew what I was capable of. That I’d yet to tell him what I’d done didn’t make me a bad person. He had enough on his plate without me telling him about the hostage I’d taken, a woman I intended to force into submission...perhaps even into loving me.

Hadn’t Ethan done the same by kidnapping and forcing Sabrina into marrying him? It certainly hadn’t worked against him. I’d never seen two people more in love...well, aside from the rest of my brothers and sister, and our enforcer.

For fuck’s sake. I must have been missing in action when my family had been gifted their lucky in love vouchers? I’d probably been too busy fucking some nameless whore.

Whatever. I’d found my woman. Now I just had to keep her.

We stepped into the parlor.

My brother-in-law, Salvatore lifted his platinum-haired head, his light blue eyes holding mine even as he nodded greeting. Valentino’s shrewd dark eyes held mine next, as though communicating the seriousness of the meeting. Serafino sat back in the shadows, as per usual, though the coldness in his gaze had lifted like a veil. Alessandro smiled, his stare glittering.

All the men looked different, happier. Of course they did, they’d fallen head-over-

heels for their women. A pity that kind of happiness came with great responsibility and risk. No matter the precautions, they were aware our enemies could too easily take away the women they loved.

My heart contracted in my chest, and suddenly I was glad I'd kept Gemma a secret. If my enemies didn't know about her, they couldn't hurt her.

She was mine to hurt. If anyone else dared to touch her I'd kill them slowly, painstakingly.

It was only our consigliere, Carlo, who looked dissatisfied, perhaps even a little resentful. But then Carlo hadn't been himself since Ethan had overthrown our father by putting a bullet in his head.

One of Ethan's soldiers stalked to the bar and poured whiskey shots for us all as our don spoke. "We all know why we're here." There was rumbling assent before Ethan continued. "We've come under attack, our position as mafia members threatened by rivals daring to take out our own. As don I can tell you right now I will take vengeance for the cold-blooded killings of our soldiers."

We accepted our drinks before raising our glasses in the air with violent cheers.

Ethan smiled, though there was no warmth in his stare. "I have trusted men watching our enemies as I speak. Once we've worked out their daily rhythms, their everyday routines, we'll strike hard and fast!"

More vicious cheers sounded and I nodded with grim satisfaction. We had no choice but to strike sooner rather than later to send a clear message. Never fuck with an Agostino. I doubted anyone would want to start a war with the Costas, either. Our families were now tied by blood, and were far stronger for it.

I also didn't doubt that was why the Accardi and O'Malley mobster family had united. They needed strength in numbers to try and take out our powerful alliance.

Ethan turned to Carlo. "Let's hear what our consigliere has to say,"

Carlo nodded, his gray, receding hairline somehow adding to his charisma, to the power radiating from him. "I say we scatter their ranks, dethrone them before they settle into a unified mobster family."

Everyone cheered, and tipped another shot down their throat.

Ethan looked my way. "Evander, do you have anything to add?"

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I smiled, my voice cold. "Let's send them a clear message so they know never to fuck with us again. Let's take the motherfuckers out."

Chapter Eleven

Gemma

I had no idea how long I stayed chained to Evander's bed. It felt like days but I guessed it was no more than twelve to fifteen hours before I heard his car engine outside the cabin, followed by sudden silence, then the clunk of the driver's door and his tread up onto the porch.

I was quivering by the time he unlocked the door and entered. I'd drank the plastic cup of water he'd left me not even a few hours after he'd gone and my mouth was as dry and sawdust even as my bladder was fuller than the Mississippi.

His presence seemed to suck the oxygen right out of the room and any scathing rebukes died on my tongue as I feasted my eyes on him. Even visibly exhausted he radiated power and charisma, his tall frame filling the doorway and his brilliant eyes seemingly pulling all my thoughts out of my head.

I tilted my chin, my voice cold. "Are you sure you couldn't have taken any longer? I mean the cabin might have burned down with me in it while you were away, but I'm sure you thought of that in your contingency plans."

He didn't reply as he stalked toward me, then bent and unclicked my handcuff from the bedhead. "I presume you'd like to use the bathroom."

“I was about to aim into the cup,” I said between gritted teeth. “If you’d taken any longer I wouldn’t have had any other option.” He straightened as I pushed onto my feet and shook out the all too familiar pins and needles in my arm. “I suppose you want to watch me pee again?”

“No. But I will leave the bathroom door open.”

“Thank goodness for small mercies,” I said even as I trotted to the bathroom and relieved myself a minute later.

I walked back out of the bathroom when I heard a distinct meow. I blinked at the charcoal fluff-butt as he stalked from the kitchen toward me. “Rembrandt!” I gasped, my vision blurring.

I’d been doing everything possible to not think about him being alone in my apartment with his food running dry. Knowing he’d had enough water for at least three or four days had kept me from having a total breakdown.

I dropped to my knees as he trotted up to me, dragging him close and cuddling him. “I was worried about you,” I said, then looked into his unblinking stare and added, “I missed you!”

He meowed again, as though chastening me, before he pulled away and flicked his tail, going off to explore the cabin.

I looked up at the man who had a faint grin on his face. “You brought him back with you.”

It wasn’t a question, it was pretty obvious what he’d done. He nodded anyway. “I couldn’t have you hating me more than you already do.”

I looked away, my face heating. He didn't need to know that my hate was intertwined too closely with lust and a scary amount of yearning for what we'd had.

"I also brought back some of your clothes and everything needed to continue your paintings."

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I jerked my head back around. “You did?” A scowl filled my face, hiding the glimmer of anticipation growing inside me. “You should have asked me first!”

He smirked. “That’s like asking me to shut the door after the horse has already bolted. I’ve kidnapped you, why should it matter that I brought back your art supplies, some clothes and your cat?”

I sniffed heavily. “It doesn’t matter,” I muttered. Though I would have been destroyed if my cat had been left to slowly die in my apartment. “Like you said, you’ve made no effort to get permission about anything else, so why start now?”

He pulled a jug out of a kitchen cupboard, then proceeded to fill it with ice then lemonade. “I’ve set up your easel and a canvas outside along with your paints and brushes.”

“You expect me to paint right now?” I asked, my voice a squeak.

He nodded. “Why not?” He grabbed two glasses and set them onto the counter next to the jug. “You’re still dressed in your paint clothes, and I’ve always enjoyed watching you paint.”

I gulped as a surge of anticipation bolted through me, an undeniable intoxicating thrill. I lifted my chin and managed to mutter one last protest. “Are you going to chain me to the easel?”

“That would limit your movements,” he said. He approached me then. “Lift your arm.”

When I did as he asked, he stuck the key into the handcuff on my wrist, then unlocked it and removed it completely. “You’re free to paint.”

I kept a lid on my emotions as I headed outside with him. But my feelings were exacerbated by the fact that not only was I going to paint, Evander would be there watching my every brushstroke.

He’d always been the biggest champion of my art.

Are you crazy? He kidnapped you, made you his prisoner! He doesn’t give a fuck about you or your art. He wants you to fall for his kindness before he really makes you suffer! It looks like you might already be suffering from Stockholm syndrome?

I pushed away all negative thought to focus on living in the moment. It was a beautiful morning, the sun gently warming my skin as the smallest breeze caressed my face and lifted wisps of hair off my face. The stream bubbled gently just ahead, some mossy rocks sticking out of the water along with dark green reeds.

My easel faced the stream and some distant mountains, the dark green leaves of a nearby, solitary tree glowing burnished gold under the sunlight.

“How beautiful,” I said softly, finally giving into my senses and seeing the world outside through an artist’s imaginary lens.

I picked up a sable brush from a jar with a dozen other brushes, ranging from a wash brush, half-a-dozen fan and round brushes and the more intricate liner brushes.

I was only half-aware of Evander as he took a camping seat next to a small table, where he placed the jug and empty glasses. When he pushed a pair of sunglasses onto his face and settled back into his chair, I hesitated, my skin prickling at his interest.

Was it weird to be excited to paint outdoors again?

No, what was weird was that I wanted to paint while Evander watched. It took me back to those times he'd taken me and my art supplies to the beach, or to the mountains, out in nature where I'd spontaneously paint.

But that had been before I'd known who he really was. Before I'd been aware that just being with him put my mother's and I entire existence into jeopardy.

I bit my bottom lip. Nothing had changed, so why did I feel different now? My mother might be overseas with another man, but it didn't make her any safer. It didn't make me any safer, either.

I couldn't do anything to change any of that, not while I was here as Evander's prisoner. Yet, all of that had been offset by being outside without a handcuff on my wrist and with my cat safe and sound here with me.

Despite Evander's presence, or perhaps because of it, I wanted to enjoy this one artistic experience. I wanted to lose myself in painting the beauty of nature spread out in front of me.

I squeezed out a blob of cerulean blue and titanium white and mixed them together before brushing it across the top of my canvas. Once I'd filled in the basic sky color, I used cadmium yellow, ultramarine blue and some more of my white for the foreground of lush grass.

After painting the shapes of the far-off mountains, I added in the stream and its mossy rocks and reeds, then the lone tree with its now fading burnished gold leaves. I painted in more details, including ripples around the rocks and the glistening bits of light hitting the water, and some yellow wildflowers along the bank on the other side.

It wasn't until I signed my name with a flourish on the bottom of my painting, then turned around to see what Evander thought, that I realized he was sleeping soundly.

Chapter Twelve

Gemma

I didn't even think twice about my next move.

I ran.

I raced up onto the porch and straight into the cabin, putting almost all my weight on my toes so that I was soundless and light-footed. I found Rembrandt sleeping peacefully on the bed I'd been chained up on. I scooped him up then sprinted back into the open kitchen, dining and lounge room, my eyes darting left and right as I searched frantically for the car keys.

Ugh. They'd be in the car's ignition, of course they would. There was no one around here to steal his only mode of transport!

Rembrandt wasn't impressed when I ran outside, pulled open the driver's car door only to find no sign of the keys.

"Looking for these?"

I spun around to find Evander smirking my way, one arm lifted with the car keys dangling from his fingers.

I shrieked, then holding Rembrandt closer to my body, I ran away from the cabin and the car, from the jerk Evander, and toward the stream. I splashed through it, the icy-

cold water deeper than I'd expected as it soaked me up to my waist before I waded through to the other side where it was shallow once again.

A sharp rock pierced the underside of my bared foot and I winced, then stumbled, water splashing Rembrandt and making him hiss.

I gathered him closer, then straightened before glancing back. My breath shuddered out. The jerk had reclined his seat farther back and appeared to be enjoying the sunlight, relaxing as if he didn't have a care in the world!

I scrambled up the opposite bank, aware then Rembrandt's claws were digging into my chest and arms as he looked wide-eyed back at the water we'd traversed.

That he'd stayed relatively high and dry didn't seem to matter, he clearly had trust issues.

"Yeah, you and me both," I ground out.

I only wished I'd worn runners before I'd been kidnapped, instead I raced barefooted across the grass with its intermittent stony ground and headed toward the far-off mountains. I wasn't that far from New York, was I? It might look like the wilderness out here but I'd bet there was plenty of people just outside the perimeter of his property...wherever that might be!

I'd run for probably half-an-hour before I was too winded and footsore to run anymore. I half-limped, half-walked toward the mountains, which didn't appear to be growing any closer.

It was only when I saw the tall, chain link fence in the distance, one I wouldn't even attempt to try and climb, that I stilled, my arm muscles going weak even before Rembrandt jumped free.

The deep resounding thrum of a motorbike pierced my senses long before I spun around to see the Harley Davidson motorbike heading toward me, Evander sitting astride it like he was the king of the world.

I had no doubt he was the king in this part of the world.

I slumped. Wasn't it bad enough he ruled half of New York along with his brothers?

I wilted a little more as Rembrandt streaked away from me and the motorcycle, heading straight back toward the cabin. I had no doubt the traitor would get wet and swim across the stream to return to the apparent safety of his new home.

It was more than apparent my pet also had more common sense than I did.

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Who had I been trying to fool by running away a second time? There was no way Evander would let me escape again. He'd probably put a tracker on me the next time I slept as a backup plan.

Though tears welled, I refused to cry. I lifted my head as Evander rode toward me as though he had all the time in the world. I huffed out an aggrieved breath. Probably because he did have all the time in the world!

I wasn't going anywhere. Not anymore. The tall fence hemmed me in as effectively as the handcuffs had kept me prisoner.

I crossed my arms and raised my chin another notch, trying not to notice how damn masculine he looked as he approached, the wind ruffling his dark hair, while his shadowed bristles verged on becoming a beard.

If he was tired I no longer noticed. He looked vibrant and alive on his motorcycle, his arms spread wide as he gripped the handlebars, his shoulders relaxed and loose and his dark eyes crinkled at the edge as he smirked.

The bastard was enjoying my defeat.

I glowered as he slowed the bike then pulled up beside me. "Going somewhere," he asked roughly.

I wanted to scream at him and stamp my bare foot in the grass, but I'd only look sillier than I already did. Instead more tears threatened, my vision misting with red. "Does it look like it?" I asked mock-sweetly.

He arched a dark brow, then gestured with a jerk of his head toward the back of his bike. “Get on.”

I baulked even as I muttered, “Let me guess...I don’t have a choice.”

A corner of his mouth twitched. “You guessed right.”

“Asshole,” I gritted out.

Except, although I might hate man—I did hate him—all the feel good parts of my memories came flooding back as I put my arms around his waist, his six-pack rippling beneath my hands.

How easy would it be for me to slip my hand lower and caress his dick through his pants? He was likely already hard. I’d learned from our past dalliance that it took very little to give him an erection.

It was my turn to smirk. I’d just had to look at him in a certain way, flutter my fingertips down his chest, then lower, and he’d been ready, willing and able.

Then the Harley thrummed with menacing power and we took off, the landscape flashing past in an adrenaline-fueled rush that made me realize how thrilling it was just to be with Evander again.

The wind whipped at my hair, pulling it back behind me like the tail of a kite, my fingers flexing against the musculature of his abs while his jacket fluttered either side.

My core clenched and flooded with wet heat, my traitorous body wanting the one man on the planet I didn’t want to want. But I also knew I wasn’t alone in my yearning. Even when I’d been with Evander in the past, women had thrown themselves at him, making no attempt whatsoever to mask their lust.

He veered to the right, following the recently depressed track in the grass. A minute later we went over a rickety wooden bridge with a lack-click-clatter, the stream below shadowed from the overpass.

I released an aggrieved sigh even as I glanced down at my soaked leggings. But of course there had been a bridge. And of course there was a motorcycle. No doubt he'd hidden the Harley Davidson out of sight behind the cabin.

A minute later he pulled up at the cabin—behind the cabin just as I'd suspected—before I removed my stiff, cold body from the metal beast and the warmth of the rider I'd attached myself to. I stood sullenly, waiting for him to alight.

I scowled even harder when I acknowledged he didn't even need leathers to look the part. Even in his suit jacket and pants, his white dress shirt, he oozed toughness and power, like he belonged on a motorcycle in just the same way he belonged in the mafia.

He stalked toward me and I turned and hurried toward the front of the cabin. Rembrandt sat out the front on the grass, looking pitiful as he licked his wet fur. I slowed and clucked my tongue. He'd always hated baths, add being cold into the mix and he was probably hating on me more than ever.

Evander pulled off his suit jacket as he approached the cat, then dropping into a crouch he pulled Rembrandt into the cozy warmth of his jacket, drying him off like he was something precious.

I inhaled slow and deep. This man was a killer, someone who took away life, at the very least, he tortured and seriously hurt people.

So why was he carefully drying off my cat?

Despite my hardened resolve against Evander, my heart softened more than a little. When he cared about someone, he cared deeply. Once upon a time, I'd been the recipient of that care.

Now vengeance was his one and only goal. That I was vulnerable to him and to his acts of goodwill were suddenly becoming all too clear to me. I reveled in his caring side even as I reveled in his dark, wild side.

Hate and lust really were becoming harder and harder to differentiate between.

He pushed back to his feet, Rembrandt in his arms and purring loudly.

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It was ridiculous how envious I was in that moment, like I'd been punched and left reeling, then snapping and snarling like a rabid dog, one that'd chase Rembrandt up the nearest tree. Or perhaps he'd climb higher on Evander, seeking his protection.

Evander smirked, as though reading my every thought, my every emotion. "Though I probably have no need to warn you about running away again, you can consider this your cautionary probation."

"How kind of you," I sneered.

Though I was playing with fire, I didn't much care in that moment. I was getting my just desserts by becoming his prisoner yet again.

He chose to ignore my comment as his gaze swung to my finished painting. "I must also congratulate you on your landscape. It's...exquisite. You're exquisite. I'm pleased to see you haven't lost your passion."

My hands fisted at my sides. It was as if his words were taunts aimed directly at my churning doubts and heaving hormones. In five long steps I was in front of my stunning artwork. Lifting a fisted hand, I punched the canvas off the easel. It flew through the air, then thudded dully onto the ground.

It was enough of a racket and emotional disturbance for Rembrandt to jump from Evander and onto the ground. He scampered inside then, his tail high and fluffed-up, and flicking with agitation.

I froze as shock pulsed through me. What was wrong with me? I never disrespected art,

and I certainly never disrespected my own hard work!

I didn't look back at Evander, I was too embarrassed, too torn up by my own telling emotions to want to read his reaction. Withholding a sob, I raced up the steps and along the porch before I burst inside the cabin—just as he caught my arm and tugged me around to face him.

His eyes burned down into my mine, his voice a low, thrumming growl. “I think we both know you redirected your passion in the wrong direction.”

I gasped, my whole body vibrating with fury, with unfulfilled need. “Go to hell!”

“You already sent me there, la mia Gemma.”

Chapter Thirteen

Evander

What was it about this woman that sent raging, violent passion coursing through my veins? She'd driven me crazy trying to find her and now that I had it was taking everything I had just to keep from taking that tempestuous emotion out on her.

Or perhaps that was what she wanted?

She'd always travelled a little more on the wild side.

I pressed her backward until her spine hit the wall. Her breathing was as frantic as my own, her stare just as emboldened and daring. With a growl of need I bent and slammed my mouth over hers, kissing her with a rough, crazy need that I was certain sizzled through us both.

I'd been waiting too long for this.

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Her lips were like ripe peaches and twice as sweet, her coconut and vanilla scent filling my nostrils even as our tongues tangled and twisted as one, our teeth clanking together in our rush to get closer together.

I drew back and held her dark and stormy gaze as she panted heavily. I was breathing just as fast. I pushed a hand down the waistband of her leggings and into her panties, and though she moaned as I dipped a finger deep in-between her moist folds, she didn't look away.

I pushed my finger deeper still, then withdrew it slowly, delighting in her flushed face as she succumbed so easily to my foreplay. I added another finger, then pushed them both in and out, quickening into a rhythmic pace that pushed her toward an orgasm fast.

I flicked her plump clit next and she closed her eyes and gasped. I leaned down and kissed her opened mouth, sucking on her tongue while I pressed hard on her clit and rotated the flesh round and round.

Everything about her was so achingly familiar, her body made for mine.

She cried out something, the sound lost in my mouth as I kissed her mercilessly, then held her upright as her legs all but folded out from beneath her. I withdrew my hand only after she'd finished convulsing with her release.

Lifted my hand, I sucked her dew off my fingers, my throat vibrating with pleasure. I'd never tasted a woman with such delectable flavor. She was salty sweetness with a bitter tang aftertaste that had me wanting more. She was the sea and

she was treacle, she was citrus and she was spice.

She might have been lost in the moment, but her razor-sharp mind seemed to quickly overtake her hazy senses as she narrowed her eyes at me and said, “I hope you don’t imagine I wanted this? I never asked for your paws on me.”

I narrowed my eyes right back. How long was she planning on being in denial? What secrets was she hiding from me to want to continue this charade of living her life without me in it?

She really was an enigma, one I couldn’t wait to crack open and expose. If I had to shake every last secret out of her, I would. I smiled, though I doubted any warmth leaked from my demeanor. “I believe a shower might be in order.”

She lifted her chin, her eyes flashing green heat. “Great idea, but I’d like to shower alone.”

“And I’d like your full cooperation. Unfortunately we don’t always get what we want in life.”

I ushered her into the bathroom, then flicked on the water until it was the perfect temperature even as I stripped off my clothes. She glared at me before she began to peel off her shirt and bra, then pulled off her leggings along with her panties.

My mouth watered. She was as beautiful as I remembered. If anything, she was even more perfect, her body more defined thanks to her maturity and slight weight loss. A smile tugged at my mouth. She still had the tiny little mole next to her right breast.

My smile faltered ever so slightly at the stretchmarks on her stomach. She hadn’t lost that much weight had she? I reached out and touched the white, streaky lines that fanned out over her flesh, fascinated by the barely-there indents. “These are new,” I

murmured.

She stepped back and pushed my hand away. “Did you expect the still young version of my body? If so, I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

I frowned at her bitter sarcasm. “You’re perfect just the way you are.”

“Am I?”

My frown deepened, but I refused to cater to her need for adoration. I’d done enough of that in the past before she’d disappeared, almost without a trace. I opened the glass door and stepped inside under the warm, gushing water. When she followed me in I pulled her under the water with me and she lifted her face up into the streaming shower and closed her eyes with a sigh.

But she wasn’t going to escape my wrath completely. I bent a little, the water loud as it hit the floor tiles as well as our bodies. “On your knees,” I growled into her ear.

She flinched, then looked up at me with disbelieving eyes. “You’re joking.”

“When it comes to what I want, I never joke.” Her breath hissed as I put a hand on her scalp and encouraged her descent. “Take me in your mouth like you can’t get enough,” I instructed harshly.

She dropped to her knees and I spread my legs apart to give her perfect access to my long, hard dick that desperately throbbed. How many women had given me head while I’d closed my eyes and imagined it was Gemma doing the deed? Much of the time it was the only way I’d come.

Then she drew the head of my dick into her hot, wet mouth and I jerked at the intense sensation. She flicked her tongue around the ridged helmet until I could barely hold

me own weight.

Fucking glorious.

Then she pressed her mouth down on me until my dick hit the back of her throat. She didn't gag, she sucked in my length like a world-class whore, her big aqua eyes looking innocently up at me as she did it.

She was both novice and experienced, her skills somehow green even while they were practiced and proficient. I pushed my fingers through her hair and urged on her rhythmic sucking. She hesitated for a nanosecond, then seemed to realize she was playing with fire and knew better. Knew what was good for her long term.

She sucked up and down, faster and faster, one hand cupping my heavy, overladen balls as she gave me oral like her life depended on it.

I knotted my fingers through her hair. No doubt her scalp was burning, but she was as lost as I was now in the act and nothing was going to stop her achieving my sexual downfall.

My balls lifted and my guttural shout echoed within the bathroom walls as my seed shot out of me and into her mouth. She took it all, my pleasure somehow intensifying as I watched her cheeks bulge before she swallowed, then licked her lips for any excess.

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I gentled my fingers in her hair, rubbing and soothing. “You really are perfect,” I half-growled, half-groaned. Her breasts bounced a little as she drew back, and I nodded down at her gorgeous tits and said, “Maybe next time I’ll mark you with my seed.”

I reached down to offer her my hand and she accepted it before I drew her to her feet. I held her shoulders then turned her around. “Allow me,” I said huskily.

I lathered some shampoo between my hands, then massaged it into her hair before rinsing it out and adding conditioner. Then adding some liquid soap between my palms and foaming it up, I washed her skin all over before rinsing the conditioner from her hair.

She pivoted and looked up at me as she blinked the water out of her “Why are you being so nice to me?”

Was that before or after she’d dropped onto her knees and crammed my dick in her mouth?

I cocked my head to the side. “When was I ever not nice to you?”

She bit her bottom lip. “You brought me back here as your prisoner. You can’t tell me your intentions are good.”

I flipped off the shower and stepped out onto the mat. She followed suit and I grabbed a fluffy towel and dried her off, then wrapped her inside it. “You’ll find some of your clothes in a bag inside the wardrobe.”

She nodded, then left me standing looking after her until she disappeared through the doorway and into the bedroom. I sighed, then pushed a hand through my wet hair.

What the fuck was I doing?

Chapter Fourteen

Gemma

I dragged on cream underwear then a pair of cut-off denim shorts and a blue-green blouse that knotted at my waist and brought out the color in my eyes. I was grateful to find Evander had thought to also throw in a little bag filled with my toiletries, including my toothbrush and hairbrush.

After brushing out my hair, I pushed my feet into a comfortable pair of woolly slippers.

Bliss.

I was dressed by the time he came in with a towel slung low on his hips. I resisted licking my lips. From his corded shoulders and the dark hair that tapered from the middle of his chest down past his corded abs before arrowing beneath the knot of his towel, he was masculine perfection.

That he'd noticed my stretchmarks, my battle scars as my mom had called them, had brought back a rush of painful memories I'd managed to push into a box at the back of my mind. Now they were like open wounds once again, burning and aggravated and just waiting to hurt me all over again.

I pushed a hand over my face. Some things really were better left dead and buried.

He stilled, his eyes assessing me. “Are you all right? I-I didn’t hurt you?”

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I jerked my head up. “Don’t pretend you care now.”

His eyes narrowed, a muscle in the side of his cheek moving convulsively. “Does it sound like I’m pretending?”

I threw my brush onto the bed. “I-I don’t know anymore,” I admitted in a small, hollow voice.

“La mia Gemma, come here,” he said throatily.

That I stepped into his arms like it was as natural as breathing was my own fucked up fault. And yet, I took great comfort in his physical touch.

More fool you.

I forced myself to step back. “Since we missed breakfast, I assume lunch is on offer?”

He nodded. “Of course. How does lasagna and salad sound?”

“Delightful.”

“Good, because you’ll be helping to make it.”

I couldn’t stop the grin from spreading across my face. “Are you sure that’s wise? Last time I cooked for you I turned our food into charcoal.”

“You can dice the vegetables and herbs, I’ll cook them along with the mince and the

béchamel sauce.”

It was kind of nice to sit on an old wooden stool at the kitchen bench and chop up the onion, celery, garlic and herbs for the lasagna. While he cooked those along with the mince, I chopped up the salad ingredients, which included lettuce, tomato, cucumber, radishes and grated carrot.

I tossed it all into a bowl and wrapped it up before I put it into the fridge while Evander assembled mince, lasagna sheets and béchamel sauce in layers in a baking dish, topped it with cheese, then shoved it into the oven.

He straightened, looking approvingly at the bench that I’d wiped clean. “I think we should check your landscape painting now, see if it’s salvageable.”

I nodded, though it was the last thing I wanted to do. No artist in their right mind would treat their work with such callous indifference. I followed him outside, Rembrandt joining us as far as the porch where he scratched the decking to sharpen his claws while we continued out onto the grass.

I followed Evander to where my painting lay face-up and seemingly unharmed. “I think it’ll be fine,” he said as he picked it up with a satisfied nod. “There’s no damage done to the actual picture itself.” He lifted his eyes to mine. “You were lucky.”

I shrugged, sheepish now. “It’s not like it will ever hang on anyone’s wall.”

“Says who?”

I huffed out a breath. “Not everyone can be the mysterious Chase Holland and enjoy a meteoric rise.” I blinked at him. “Speaking of whom, how did you manage to convince him to paint us together?”

That the artist had captured the essence of our intense passion without ever seeing us together still blew my mind. Though nothing had really been shown in a physical sense, I'd felt compromised and exposed, the intimacy on the canvas far too personal.

He blinked back. "Is that what you—"

He shook his head as if to clear it. "You really haven't put two and two together."

I narrowed my eyes. "If only I'd known I was here to solve an equation!"

He carefully placed my landscape back onto the easel, ignoring my defensive outburst as he informed, "I'd like you to paint a canvas every morning."

"Thank you, but no thank you."

Never mind that the idea held too much appeal, I refused to obey his every whim and command.

He crossed his arms, his stance unyielding. "Either that or stay chained to my bed. It's your choice."

"That's blackmail," I breathed.

"It's a choice. Your choice."

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I blew out a slow, steadying breath. “Why? What’s in it for you?”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “I enjoy watching you work.”

“You also enjoy me taking your dick in my mouth. It doesn’t mean I’m going to do that every day.”

“Says who?” he asked with a grin, repeating his earlier words.

My pulse rate escalated, my words coming out husky. “Says me.”

“There was a time you wanted to do exactly that every single day.”

“When I didn’t know any better.”

“Or maybe you did know better back then.”

I blew some hair off my face. “Have you always had this ability to twist words around to your favor?”

He shrugged. “I heard it’s a gift.”

“So you don’t just specialize in murder and mayhem?”

He curled a hand around the back of my head, his touch warm. “You’ve got it all so wrong,” he said throatily. “I specialize in foreplay and fucking.”

I managed to snort even as my entire, traitorous body quivered in response.

His thumb stroked the back of my skull and it took everything I had not to push into his hold and purr like a contented cat. Rembrandt could take some lessons from me at this rate!

“If it’s proof you need,” he added, “I’m happy to provide it. I’ll have you know I’m a man of many talents.”

“I’m fine, thank you,” I said, wrenching my head from his intoxicating hold. I was not going to fall for him a second time!

He smirked a little, his eyes glinting. “You don’t sound impressed. Perhaps I should woo you with my cooking and feed you instead.”

“I wouldn’t think about the intimate feast he’d already provided as I nodded my head like a puppet and stepped back. “Good, I’m starving.”

Chapter Fifteen

Gemma

One day bled into another and by the fifth morning I realized I was beginning to get used to my routine that threatened to become a comfortable pattern. I was creating some amazing landscapes while I lived in a bubble with Evander, with no outside influence or intrusion.

Rembrandt most certainly adored his newfound freedom. He spent his days batting his paws at the many bugs hidden in the grass outside and jumping high into the air to capture the plentiful butterflies fluttering past on their brightly colored, elegant wings.

It was ironic that while my freedom had been taken away, Rembrandt had gained his.

Perhaps I'd feel more certain of my place here if Evander demanded more from me. Instead I was living on a knife-edge waiting for him to claim my body completely after our one-off intimate act in the shower.

And wasn't that the biggest irony of all?

The fact he disappeared at nighttime in his sanctuary, a room that was strictly off-limits to me, then didn't reappear for at least a handful of hours meant there was very little to worry about in that regard other than my raging, dissatisfied hormones.

I blew out an aggrieved breath and put down my brush with cadmium yellow paint glistening on its bristles. I might hate everything Evander stood for with his role in the mafia, but it didn't stop my body craving his.

I was an emotional wreck, an outwardly normal woman living with rampant hormones and a terrible yearning I couldn't quell.

Sudden cramping pain hit my midsection and I sucked in an unsteady breath as I pressed an outspread hand to my stomach. I squeezed my eyes closed. Shit. I hadn't given a thought to my imminent period. I'd been too busy focusing on other problems.

Like the push-pull of emotions that threatened to tear me completely apart thanks to being in Evander's world once again. It certainly felt like I was being pulled apart, but then I'd never had an easy time with menstrual pain.

"Gemma, are you all right?"

I shook my head at Evander's query from behind me. Though he'd placed my easel in different angles and positions to give me totally different visuals for my landscapes, he always sat in his usual place behind me.

If he thought staying out of sight left me undisturbed, he could think again! It took me at least half-an-hour to forget he was there and fall into the world I created. Even then a distant part of me was always aware of him.

I turned around, grimacing at the sticky wetness that was already soaking through my panties and probably my denim shorts. "Please tell me you brought what I'd need for my monthly cycle?"

His eyes widened. "You don't have your implant anymore?"

"No, I—"

I pushed down the tremors threatening to wrack through my body. "I had it taken out not long after I—"

“Ran away,” he interjected harshly. “A pity. You were one of those lucky women who never got a period while you were on it.”

Yeah, so lucky.

I managed a nod. “Well my period is back now with a vengeance.”

He pushed to his feet. “I’ll drive to the shops. We could do with some more groceries anyway while I’m there.”

I exhaled softly. What had I thought? That he’d humiliate me and make me suffer by keeping me in bloodied clothes?

I lifted my chin, determined not to keep searching for his good side. My voice was scathing. “I’ll be here. It’s not like I can go anywhere.”

His eyes narrowed, but he chose to ignore my disrespect, though I knew the mafia valued respect even above their wealth.

“I’ll fold some towels on the bed for you to lie on while I’m gone.”

I gaped, my heart beating furiously. “You’re seriously not going to cuff me to the bed while I’m,” I waved a hand down low, “like this?”

He cocked a dark brow, his jaw set. “If you think I’d risk leaving you loose, you’re sadly mistaken.”

My throat convulsed. “What happens if you don’t come back? Would you leave me chained to the bed so that I’d slowly die of thirst and starvation?”

He shook his head. “So dramatic, la mia Gemma.” He took a step forward, closing the

distance between us. Then clasping my chin he said, “I won’t let anything bad happen to you, not while you’re here with me.”

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I held his dark stare. "That's just it though, you won't be here."

His eyes narrowed, then turned speculative. He sighed heavily, as though disbelieving of his decision to give in. "If I did leave you free, will you give me your word you won't go anywhere?"

I didn't flinch, didn't react at all. "I promise."

His stare glittered as he considered me. "If you break your promise," he said in a low, menacing tone, "I can promise that you will live to regret your lie."

I scowled. "I'm Not Going Anywhere." I jerked my head from his grasp, then brushed an imaginary piece of lint off my blue T-shirt. "There is no need to threaten or blackmail me. I'm not your enemy."

He narrowed his gleaming eyes that appeared far too judgmental for my liking, then nodded toward his cabin. "After you, then. I'm sure you'll find something to make do with while I'm gone."

"I'm sure I will," I conceded, falling into step beside him. I glanced up at him as we stepped through the doorway. Awareness shivered through me. Even in his casual pleated gray pants and a cream polo shirt he was deliciously handsome, the epitome of masculinity. "Please don't be too long."

He smirked down at me. "Oh? Are you going to miss me?"

"No," I spluttered indignantly. "My period can get heavy."

“Then I’ll be as fast and efficient as possible.”

I headed to his pantry and riffled through it to find an unopened packet of napkins—they would have to do—while he retrieved his car keys from somewhere in the bedroom.

I hurried to the bathroom, not even glancing back to see if he’d gone. I needed to get under the shower and feel clean again. I was undressed and under the hot, streaming spray when the bathroom door opened and Evander stepped inside.

He leaned against the closed door as he regarded me. “Don’t I even get a goodbye?”

I looked over my shoulder at him, trying not to give into a cascade of tremors thanks to his heated eyes drinking me in. It was as if he was memorizing my every curve and line, my perfection along with my defects. I tossed a hunk of wet hair over my shoulder. “Addio.”

His eyes flared, my Italian clearly inciting a primal reaction from him. He drew off his shoes and socks then pulled off his polo shirt. “It’s not Addio just yet,” he rasped.

I stared at the flex of his abs and his shoulders, at the trail of dark hair that disappeared beneath the waistband of his pants. Then he unzipped them and pulled them down his thighs, giving me an eyeful of his hardening cock.

I swallowed heavily. Of course he was commando. It...expedited things for him. That he’d withheld his base nature when I recalled just how exactly carnal he’d been in the past made me want to rejoice even as I wished I had the willpower to reject him and the pleasure he was about to extract from me.

Then he pushed open the glass door and joined me in the too-small shower, his powerful presence sucking all the oxygen out of my lungs. And yet I was panting

when he stepped closer to me from behind, his cock pressing against the small of my back as he pushed my hair aside and kissed my neck.

I gasped at the hot tingles charging through my body. He cupped my breasts, holding their weight in his hands even as he plucked my nipples between his fingers and thumbs until I was dizzy with need.

Then he lifted his head just a little and murmured into my ear, “How badly have you wanted this...wanted me?”

Denial flooded through me and I stepped away from him and almost into the tiled wall when I grated recklessly, “I left you, remember? If you take me now it will be by force.”

His breath hissed out. Then he put an arm around my waist and jerked me back against him. “Your refusal to admit how you really feel is pathetic when your body tells me exactly what you want.” He dropped one arm from my waist and touched between my thighs, opening my outer folds like I was some exotic flower then massaging the bud inside.

I moaned, almost collapsing from the sheer pleasure he induced. It was only his arm locked around me that kept me upright.

His cock jerked against me, his voice rough and husky. “Your body doesn’t lie to me, la mia Gemma. But I won’t take you. Not until you ask.”

I wanted to howl rejection, wanted to sob refusal. If only my body didn’t burn for his possession, for his ownership one more time.

“I-I want you,” I gritted out.

His whole body tensed behind me, the very atmosphere hanging heavy with anticipation. “Say it like you mean it,” he growled.

Did the bastard want me to beg?

My whole body tingled with need. My breath shuddered out.

So be it.

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“I want you,” I said hoarsely. “I want your cock deep inside me. I want your hands and your mouth all over me. I want to pretend we’re happy in this moment in time. I-I think I might even want to pretend we’re together again.”

“Pretend?” he repeated. Then his breath hissed out and he clasped the base of his cock and aligned it to my core. “Baby, we’re not here to play pretend.”

In one incredible thrust he filled me completely, utterly. I whimpered at his size, my inner muscles stretched to capacity. But then he wasn’t to know I hadn’t been with anyone since I’d left him.

No had come close to measuring up.

Literally.

Then he pulled back ever so slightly before he plunged back inside.

My breath wheezed out. I was caught somewhere between pleasure and pain.

With a low, throaty growl, he stroked in and out, creating a perfect tempo that made me forget all about pain as pleasure became the center of my universe.

He planted hot kisses all over my neck, sucking on my sensitive flesh while he pummeled me with his masterful cock.

Holy mother. I was seconds away from falling off the edge into an abyss of pleasure. Or maybe I’d skyrocket into space and experience nirvana. It wouldn’t be the

first time he'd sent me to both of those places. It was just the first time in a long time I'd been there and the journey was as incredible as the—

I fell before I was flung high, my cry of ecstasy a piercing, unearthly sound that echoed in the small confines of the shower before it was joined by Evander's guttural groan as he followed right behind me, his hot seed pulsing inside me.

Pleasure coursed through me, undiluted and bright, colors exploding behind my eyelids as I shut my eyes and allowed my senses to ride out the bliss that superseded anything else I could possibly imagine.

There wasn't anything half-as-thrilling as having sex with Evander.

Then he pulled out and turned me around. Cupping my chin, he lifted my head and kissed me under the hot spray like he wanted to possess me in an entirely different way. Not with his body, but with his heart, his soul.

That I wanted that exact same thing was the only reason I pulled away.

It didn't matter what I wanted...whateither of us wanted, I'd left him the first time for a reason.

I didn't dare risk having a relationship with him again.

Chapter Sixteen

Gemma

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Evander reached out and flipped off the lever for the shower, stopping the hot spray. I blinked up at him, resisting touching the water droplets that looked like tiny gems in his long black lashes.

He searched my eyes, then nodded. "I should probably go now."

I nodded. "Yes, you probably should."

Less because I needed feminine items and more because my heart was about to shatter all over again. And he didn't need to see that, or be witness to me trying to put the pieces back together again.

His stare narrowed, his voice husky. "I won't be long." He stepped close again, then drew my wet, too yielding body against his own, his mouth covering mine before he kissed me with passionate and unyielding intensity.

I shivered even before he released me and stepped back. His kiss told me exactly who was in charge of our relationship, if it could be called that. I would be severely punished if I went back on my word and betrayed his trust.

Though I'd been kidnapped and held hostage, he'd treated me well.

What the fuck do you mean? He took away your freedom. He's not the good guy here!

I stared after him with steadily building, seething rage as he stepped out of the shower. He quickly dried himself, then dressed back into his pants and polo shirt.

Then he walked out of the bathroom door without a backward glance. As though we hadn't just had earth shattering sex. As though I hadn't just handed him my heart on a silver platter yet again. As though I wasn't about to relive everything from my past all over again.

I heard him stalk through the cabin, his tread then echoing on the porch outside. A handful of seconds later the car door clunked open and then shut, the engine started and whined slightly as he reversed. The tires swished as he turned around and drove along the driveway that would eventually take him to a main road and the nearest grocery store.

I waited until the car receded from my hearing before I wrapped a towel around me and raced outside, down the porch steps and around the house, my bare feet pounded the grass as I headed toward his Harley.

I bit back disappointment. The key wasn't in it. But of course it wasn't! He wasn't stupid. He'd likely taken them with him.

I wanted to kick the shining silver chrome along with its blood-red fuel tank and fenders. Except it really was a beautiful beast and I wasn't crude enough to wreck such superb craftsmanship.

Who had I been kidding anyway? It wasn't like I knew how to ride the thing, I'd probably break my neck trying.

I trudged back inside, my bare feet barely making a sound on the grass. I squirmed a little at the growing wetness between my thighs. I'd need to take another shower at this rate. I took the steps to the porch and stalked across its deck. It was only when I stepped inside that my eyes were drawn to the closed door of the room Evander locked himself in every night.

What was in there that kept Evander away from me for so long? How many nights had he disappeared within its four walls without a sound? The fact he'd forbidden me to enter only heightened my curiosity. I stepped closer then turned the door handle. Of course it'd be locked but it would be silly not to test it anyway.

My pulse jerked rapidly when the handle gave way and the door swung open. In Evander's rush to get to the shops he must have forgotten to lock up!

Caution pulsing through me, I paused before I stepped inside. My mouth dropped open as I stared around the room.

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

Portraits were stacked on the floor around the room in various stages of completion, with many finished ones hanging on the wall. Some portraits were done in oils, some in acrylics or pastels, there were even some watercolors along with charcoal sketches.

The one and only dominant feature about each of the canvases was who the portraits showcased.

Me.

I stepped further inside, my mouth drying as my breathing became choppy and uneven. Most of the portraits had been done almost three years ago, from a time in my life when I'd still been with Evander.

I walked toward one that showcased me at the beach in a yellow bikini. The turquoise sea was behind me, the sun glinting on foamy waves even as it lightened the top of my caramel hair into burnished gold.

My breath caught in my throat when I read the artist's signature, then spun around

and read more of the same.

Chase Holland.

Everything fell sharply into place.

EvanderwasChase.

I brought a shaky hand up to my brow even as a wave of hot and then cold went through me. He loved watching my artistic side because he was an artist himself, one with far more talent than I'd ever have.

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That he was clearly a famous artist who hid behind a pseudonym because of his infamous mafia background made all too much sense now.

What made even more sense was the portrait that had hung in the gallery where I'd worked. I'd assumed Evander had known Chase and had paid big money to have the painting done by him. I shook my head. Little wonder Evander had snorted at my assumption and asked how I'd hadn't put two and two together.

I couldn't have got everything more wrong if I'd tried!

I stumbled back even as I glanced around at more of the portraits. He really was a man of many talents. How gifted, a master of his work! Each creation was brilliant and detailed, his creative side flawless, faultless.

My eyes were drawn to three pictures hanging side-by-side, all of them done in thick, rich sepia oil colors that made them look like old photos. My heart stuttered as I recalled the time and place these memories had been created, probably long before any paint had been applied to the canvases.

The first portrait showed me looking down, my dark lashes sweeping low and my lips curled into a fledgling smile. My whole face glowed, radiant with joy after Evander had told me he loved me.

I swallowed heavily. That might have been the best day of my life, with his love and devotion shining in his eyes, his voice thick with emotion.

The next portrait showed me looking straight back at the man who'd spoken those

three little words. The sepia painting popped with the glaring-yellow of a wildflower he'd picked from the side of the road. I'd stuck the flower behind one ear, my smile wider now and my teeth white, my glistening stare full of returned love.

In the third portrait, a tear was rolling down my cheek, my effervescent joy captured after he'd whispered how much he wanted to make me his woman in every way, including in name.

I took a step back, my emotions in turmoil, my heart in shambles. I'd loved him so deeply, so unrestrainedly that I'd never really gotten over having to leave him. I'd become a shell of my former self, a living and breathing husk.

Perhaps that was also why I now felt like a trespasser, a voyeur of my own once joyous façade staring back at me. The portraits might show my deepest feelings, but they also showcased Evander's from his perspective behind the brush.

I shook my head. How did someone so deadly and dangerous paint with such loving and passionate intensity? It was as if he lived a double life. He did live a double life! Or perhaps painting was a way for him to let go of the darker side of his nature and fill his soul with light.

So why was every painting in this room of me?

It should have been disturbing, yet a deep, visceral part of me basked in delight knowing he was still so obsessed with me.

That I returned those feelings turned my love into an even deeper despair. He'd ruined my life from the moment he'd told me the truth about his mobster life. Mafia. It was akin to saying he was the devil.

I pressed a hand to my cramping stomach. If he'd been normal, an everyday person

with everyday aspirations, I had no doubt we'd still be together. Gotten married.

Had a family.

My hand fisted and pressed tighter against my stomach.

Instead I'd lost everything.

That Evander would never be normal wasn't lost on me. If he had been I wouldn't have developed such overwhelming feelings for him.

I took another step back.

Squick.

I lifted my foot off the floor and checked underneath. I gasped at the sticky puddle of red beneath my foot. I'd been so captivated by the paintings I hadn't noticed just how strong my menstrual flow had become.

I needed another shower, then I'd clean up any and all evidence of me being inside his studio.

Chapter Seventeen

Evander

I didn't expect to enjoy shopping like some pussy-whipped house-husband while imagining future meals—breakfast, lunch and dinner—as I plucked the ingredients off the shelves and into my trolley, so why did I?

I guessed even shopping for Gemma was a far nicer option than not knowing where she was or what she was doing.

I chose a packet of tampons with a self-deprecating grin. Even choosing sanitary items felt right when it came to Gemma.

Knowing she wasn't on birth control had sent me into a spin. I'd never been the fatherly type—my traumatic childhood had seen to that—so why the fuck had yearning soon after flooded through me?

I could almost picture her belly swollen with our child. I'd kiss every new—and old—stretchmark she had. I'd be tender and sweet so that she'd never again have reason to leave me.

Of course with the mafia families on the brink of war I couldn't afford to get emotionally attached again. Having a child meant having an extra target for my enemies to use against me...just as they'd use Gemma against me.

I'd put off fatherhood forever if necessary, but how long could I put off anyone else

knowing about Gemma and my fixation toward her? I couldn't hide her forever, just as I couldn't shield my feelings about her for much longer.

A protective instinct rose up inside me, alongside an unyielding knowledge I'd invoke deadly retribution if anyone dared threaten my own. Because Gemma was mine, I just had to remove the blinkers from her eyes that kept her shortsighted from the truth.

Sudden weakness flooded through me, my lungs tightening and trapping all oxygen. If she thought being my prisoner was unbearable, she likely wouldn't survive what my enemies would do to her.

I paused, my fingers clenching around the shopping cart handle. I'd kidnapped Gemma to seek redemption and retribution. Instead it'd underscored my true feelings for her.

What happened to her deserving to be punished and humiliated?

I snorted at my own idiocy. I'd been kidding myself to think all this was about revenge. I was still in love with her... I'd never stopped loving her. The only difference was that tendrils of bitterness now darkened my affection.

I didn't realize how tense I'd become until I drove back and parked at the side of my cabin, then released a taut breath. I couldn't wait to get inside and simply share Gemma's space again.

I already had an idea for a painting I wanted to do of her, one where she was asleep peacefully in her bed, with the morning light streaming in and haloing her head like she truly was an angel sent from heaven. Then there was one of her in the shower, with her perfect body glazed with rivulets of water.

I grabbed the half-dozen shopping bags from the trunk of my car and carried the groceries inside, only to stop short at seeing Gemma sitting in front of the door to my studio. She'd yet to get dressed from her shower, the lower half of the once-white towel that was wrapped around her torso tinged a bright pink.

She lifted her head, her eyes wet and her voice shaky. "I was going to pretend I didn't go into your studio and see your art. Except I-I really don't want any more lies between us."

I was so overwrought with emotions my brain shutdown all feelings, making me numb when I placed the grocery bags to one side on the floor, then knelt down in front of her. It didn't escape my attention that it was as if she was a goddess I worshipped. "I don't want that either," I said, reaching out and taking her hands in mine. "The portrait of us in the gallery should have given away who I really was."

She exhaled softly. "It didn't even enter my mind. There isn't any way in my mind to mesh a mafia man with an artist."

I nodded. She was right. Mafia men were hardhearted killers, not sensitive artists. "It's why I stayed anonymous."

She bit her bottom lip, her mind no doubt churning with questions. "When we first met and I spilled my folder of landscape paintings, were you an artist then?"

I nodded. "Yes. Though I had more time back then to be what I wanted, with my family commitments not as stringent as they are now."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Has your don relegated you more work?"

I winced. She wouldn't take my next words lightly. "I'm the underboss now. I have a lot more responsibilities."

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“And a lot more power,” she whispered dully.

“Yes, there is that,” I conceded. “But it hasn’t changed me. I’m still the same man.”

She pushed a shaky hand over her face, her voice higher-pitched. “If you say so.”

I bit back an expletive. Why did she always think the worst of me? “I am.”

She looked back at me. “Does anyone in your family know about your side hustle? Do they know about your talent?”

I shook my head. “I reserve my time behind an easel for when I can escape to my cabin.” I snorted. “I guess we all carry secrets.”

“Yes, I guess we do,” she said, a tinge of bitterness creeping into her voice.

I squeezed her hands, my gaze staying on hers when I said, “I know you have secrets too.”

She pulled her hands from mine, then pushed to her feet before looking down at me. “Some secrets stay secret for good reason.”

How did she still look like a goddess while wrapped in her bloody towel? I exhaled away my silent thought as I straightened to my full height. “At least tell me why you left.”

She paused, considering her next words. “Let’s just say it was for my own safety.”

Horror squeezed my chest. “I would never hurt you.”

She blinked, then conceded, “Not intentionally, no.”

My frowned deepened as I tried to make sense of her cryptic words. “If you think for a second my family would hurt you, you’re sadly mistaken. We protect our own.”

“Maybe,” she said softly, listlessly. “But I doubt my ‘other’ family would see it that way.”

I didn’t speak a word, I sensed if I allowed her to continue I’d finally see the answer I craved with every beat of my heart.

She pushed a hand to her mouth, then said almost inaudibly, “If they ever discovered my identity my life wouldn’t be worth living.”

My senses froze, hovering in another realm of time and space. When they finally dropped, crashing into jagged pieces inside of me, I inwardly screamed for answers. “Who is your family?”

Chapter Eighteen

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Gemma

I resisted clapping a hand over my mouth. For fuck's sake! What had I been thinking? Now I had to brazen my way out of the verbal mess I'd created. "You met my mother, she is my family."

I couldn't tell him the truth. Not now. Perhaps not ever. It would mean exposing my true identity, one that would then expose my mother's deception. I couldn't live with myself if she was harmed—or worse—because I hadn't kept my mouth shut.

She'd hidden me from my father because she'd known he would have used me to his advantage. Marrying off daughters to rival mafia families was common practice. Daughters were used in the worst way, made to submit to men who were all too often little better than animals.

"Gemma, I'm not asking you again."

He wasn't going to back down, not unless I gave him the ultimate diversion. Another secret that would undoubtedly shake him to his core and make him hate me forever.

So be it.

Hating me might end his fixation with me.

If only I could find a way to end my fixation on him.

I blinked up at him, then whispered, "My stretchmarks...they weren't from weight

loss, not really.”I swallowed hard, my mouth and throat going sawdust-dry.“I-I was pregnant.”

He inhaled sharply, his nostrils flaring and his face draining of all color.“You have a child?”

I shook my head.“I had a child.He was stillborn.”I struggled to breathe as the memories crystallized in my head, startling and horrifically painful.“He was your son, Evander.”

He shook his head.“That’s...impossible.You had an implant.”

“Which obviously wasn’t one hundred percent effective.”

He took a backward step, then another.His eyes grew cold, stony.I gasped when he reached for the non-existent gun he usually wore on his holster beneath his suit.Something broke inside of me at the realization he might have shot me if he’d had his weapon on him.

“You took my baby away from me,” he ground out.

“No, I never...it wasn’t like that, I—“

“Stop!”he roared.He shook his head, then reached into one of the shopping bags he brought inside.Withdrawing the sanitary packets, he pushed them into my hands.“Put these on.”

I clutched them against my chest, grief ripping at my insides, but there were no words that could soothe the chasm opening up between us, nothing I could say that would bridge it and make things right.I bit my bottom lip until I tasted blood, then said, “You’re not the only one who lost a son.”

“Just tell me one thing,” he rasped. “Did you ever plan telling me?”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. Nothing I said would excuse what happened, nothing but the truth would do, and I couldn't reveal that. I shook my head, slowly, forcibly.

“That's what I thought,” he snarled. He grabbed my forearm and directed me toward the bathroom. “Take care of your immediate needs.”

I was numb, retreating into self-protect mode when he took off my towel, then pushed opened the bathroom door for me to step inside. I was on the toilet when he came back and handed me panties, then stood inside the door, waiting for me to finish.

I choked back sudden tears. I wouldn't cry, not now. I'd done all my crying a long time ago. I'd cried and cried until I'd wrung out every drop of moisture from my body, leaving me dried up and desiccated inside.

Little wonder I hadn't connected with another man since my loss. Not only hadn't anyone measure up to Evander, my emotions had been wrung out of me as effectively as my tears.

It wasn't until I stood that I realized he held the handcuffs in one hand.

I looked up at him. It was like looking at a stranger. Whatever he'd felt for me was no more. He was all mafia now, a man without a conscience, without an ounce of love or compassion.

“On the bed,” he commanded.

I didn't have the strength to argue. I was wretchedly tired and weak. Even worse, a part of me decided I deserved his ire and whatever retribution he dished out. An even

bigger part of me was relieved I'd finally unloaded the truth, even if Evander hated me now.

I walked woodenly into the bedroom, then sat on the bed, shivering a little in just my panties. I lay down and lifted my arm for the cuff he snapped around my wrist, attaching its other end to the bedhead.

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Stalking around to his side of the bed, he bent and opened his bedside drawer and retrieved his holster and his gun, along with more bullets than seemed necessary. I was too tired at that point to care. Whatever he was going to do I couldn't stop him.

He stalked away without looking back, and I knew I was in trouble. The front door slammed shut behind him, his Harley Davidson thundering into life a minute later. It roared then as he swung it away from the cabin at full speed.

Tears threatened yet again, but I refused to allow them to pour out and cleanse any of the guilt from my conscience. I deserved to keep it all bottled up inside. I deserved to relive the pain all over again.

Rembrandt jumped on the bed and sashayed over to me, his tail waving in the air like a feather duster. He butted my chin with his fluffy head and I lifted my free hand to stroke his back.

He purred and snuggled against me.

"Looks like it'll be just you and me again, bud," I said hoarsely. I laughed, but no joy filled the hollow sound. Rembrandt seriously loved being here as much as he appeared to love Evander.

Join the queue.

I inhaled sharply. It wasn't true... it couldn't be true.

Except I was past the point of denial now. The truth hit me in the face harder than the

force of a sledgehammer.

I'd never stopped loving Evander.

It was as if that knowledge, along with all the drama and pain, the trauma I'd tried so hard to repress, slowly drained me of energy...of life.

I didn't want to fight anymore, I just wanted peace.

I closed my eyes, darkness sweeping me away even as it took me back to the past I could no longer keep locked inside my head.

Though I was dry-eyed, I wanted nothing more than to burst into tears as I watched my mom zip up her final suitcase before she turned to me with deep concern in her tired, hazel eyes. "Gemma, are you certain you want to stay here?"

I nodded. "We've made this our home. I don't want to leave. I feel safe here."

She grimaced, her blonde hair that was threading with gray somehow more noticeable with her pinched face. "I was with the mafia long enough to know the men there don't give up. Evander won't stop searching for you, sweetheart. I saw the way he looked at you."

I shrugged helplessly. "He hasn't found me yet. With my name and career change I'm counting on him never finding me."

"I hope you're right. I don't even want to think about the consequences if your true identity was ever uncovered." She stepped toward me then and drew me in for a hug, my bump already large enough to get in the way. She stepped back, her hand gentle as she touched my growing belly. "You know where to find me if things suddenly change. Raising a baby alone isn't easy. I can leave Craig—"

“That won’t be necessary, but thanks, Mom.” I huffed out a breath, then added, “I know it won’t be a walk in the park, but you raised me alone, I intend to do the same. I’ll be the best single parent possible.” I shrugged. “It’s got to be better than letting the mafia raise my child, right?”

My mom smiled sadly. “Right.”

A knock sounded at the door. I pulled back and went to step toward the man I’d yet to be introduced to. Mom stepped in front of me and shook her head. “It’s best for you both if you don’t meet him. If he doesn’t see you he can never confirm who you are...to anyone.”

I sighed heavily. She’d been dating Craig for nearly three months and she’d been deliriously happy. It hurt, more than hurt, that I couldn’t meet him and decide for myself if he was Mr. Right, but I understood her concern. The less he knew about me the better off we’d both be. That he likely didn’t even know I existed wasn’t something I wanted to think about.

“You’re right.” I barely held back tears when I said, “I love you, Mom.”

Her face pinkened, the faint lavender scent of her body wash making me want to hug her all over again. “I love you too, Gemma.” She winced and added, “Fiona.”

My mother spiraled away in an oddly disturbing vortex of color, like smoke twisting up and around before it dissipated. Another scene righted itself in front of my eyes. I looked around. I was in the same house, but in my old bedroom. A canvas sat on an easel in front of me, where I was painting a landscape that had been filling my head for weeks.

I was due to have my baby any day. Lord only knew my nesting phase had hit a few days ago when I’d taken apart the spare bed and turned my bedroom into my personal

art studio.

I'd been impatient to paint the landscape that had been filling my head, a scene that had featured a cabin beside a stream, with mountains rearing up in the distance. A faint trace of chimney smoke was the only indication anyone lived in the cabin.

I'd managed to portray someone living a lonely and solitary existence, even as I'd conveyed a rugged beauty to the landscape where many people would envy the homeowner his pristine solitude.

I put my paint brush down, a strange knowing hitting me front and center. It was as if I knew the place intimately, though I'd never visited it before in my life. Could it possibly be somewhere I'd lived in a past lifetime, or some parallel world?

I sighed. I was being silly and letting my imagination run away from me. Or perhaps my pregnancy hormones were taking over from all common sense.

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My mother had rung a few hours earlier, as though sensing from overseas my mental chaos, my psychological disturbance. I preferred to call it pre-baby jitters. I should have created a nursery in my old bedroom, instead I'd created my art studio and painted the landscape that had been haunting me.

I cleaned my paintbrush off with a wince. Perhaps I needed therapy after my heartbreak with Evander. If I hadn't been pregnant with his child I might have tried dating someone else. I might have tried even harder to forget about Evander.

A pity he'd consumed me. He'd been my everything.

Fate had given me his baby to love.

I'd set up a cradle in the bedroom I'd taken over after my mom had gone. I'd placed it right next to my bed where I could monitor my newborn at all hours of the night.

I touched my stomach with a smile. I'd do everything in my power to nurture and protect my baby.

I turned around simultaneously to a piercing sharpness tearing through me. I gasped, pressing my hand harder against my stomach while my other hand moved lower, between my thighs. Sticky warmth coated my fingers before I lifted them to see the bloody evidence.

My heartbeat slowed, my vision blurring as disbelief filled me. Then a shrill whimper burst past my lips, a sound dredged from the deepest corner of my soul.

This wasn't the start of childbirth. What I was experiencing was far from normal.

I took another step out of my studio and toward my cellphone that sat on the kitchen bench. Tearing, terrible pain lanced through me and I doubled over with a sharp cry.

"Evander, I'm...sorry," I gasped brokenly.

Chapter Nineteen

Evander

A son...I'd had a son!

I rode my Harley like the hounds of hell were on my tail. Like I was doing my best to escape a past trauma that I hadn't even known existed, until now.

But I couldn't escape it. Not while it snapped at my heels and bit deep into my soul, making me bleed internally.

The wounds might be invisible but I was dying inside.

My jaw tightened as I accelerated, pushing the motorcycle faster and harder. I took a corner at dangerous speed, spraying gravel as my back wheel slid beneath me. I regained balance and control, my heart rate steadying.

Fuck.

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Gemma had been right. If something happened to me she had no one to release her from the handcuffs I'd put on her. I slowed as self-loathing filled me. She had good reason to worry. I'd let my emotions rule my head.

Not that it excused her in any way, shape or form. She'd betrayed me so deeply I wondered if I'd ever heal.

My breath caught. Had she even named our son?

Had she healed from the ordeal of losing her newborn?

I couldn't imagine the pain she'd gone through. I only hoped she hadn't been alone. I'd met her mother and she'd seemed normal, an everyday, attractive older woman struggling with everyday issues.

So different to the women in my mafia family who never had to worry about finances or paying bills, who never had commonplace struggles. Their problems centered more on the possibility of losing their husbands or other family members to mobster enemies.

Anger resurfaced, then flooded over. Gemma had still deceived me, had intended raising our son alone, without my input or knowledge of his existence. It was the lowest of low act. That it had been Gemma, the sweetest woman I'd known, who'd done the dirty on me hit me harder than I'd believed possible.

I kept riding, but stuck to the speed limit. I wasn't intent on a destination, not until I saw the lookout sign ahead, I pulled in and rode over a rough dirt track then braked in

front of a safety fence, which kept visitors away from the edge of a drop-off that showcased red maples, white oak, black birch and dogwood trees.

I killed the Harley's engine, flicked down its jiffy stand to keep it upright, then stretched my back as I stood and checked out the beautiful vista spread out before me.

I bet Gemma would love to be here to paint this magical landscape.

I snorted raggedly, the scent of pine and something vaguely lemon then filling my nose. I pushed a hand through my wind-whipped hair, then clasped the safety fence in front of me and closed my eyes.

Was it Karma that I'd lost a son even before I'd decided I didn't really want children? I'd done a lot of bad things in my life, I'd had to just to survive in the world I'd grown up in.

My mind drifted to the past, to a time my father had still been alive, still been don. Still been an asshole of the highest order. A man who hadn't deserved a son, let alone four of them along with a daughter.

I walked barefooted out of the wing of the house I shared with my mom, into the dark shadows of the corridor that would take me to the stairs of the ground floor. My fingers ached from clenching them into the fists I'd made after hearing my mother sobbing yet again in her bedroom across the hallway from mine.

I hated my dad. He treated mom like shit, worse than shit. I hated even more that she was weak, too weak to stand up to him. Little wonder she used coke like it was her dearest friend.

Just because I was thirteen, it didn't mean I was unaware when it came to drugs...and sex for that matter.

I'd snuck around enough parties to witness the drug use and orgies that happened afterward. I'd even partaken in some coke that had been lying around on a small mirror on a table. I'd loved the rush and decided if sex was half as good I wouldn't say no to that either.

I only wished my brothers didn't despise me so much because our dad had moved my mom into the house. That he'd done it just weeks after their mother had been sent away probably made them think my mom had replaced theirs. I huffed out a breath. It couldn't have been farther from the truth. My mother would never replace my beautiful and caring stepmother.

If my brothers hated me for the presence of her in the house, I'd burned with envy wishing their mother was mine. Instead I had a coke-addicted, weak-minded mom who didn't have a maternal cell in her body, and I shared a father whose power-crazed outlook saw him walk over anyone weaker, which was just about every one he knew.

Stepping past the corridor's weakly-lit wall lamps that pushed back the worst of the shadows, I took the stairs that would take me to the ground floor and the kitchen of the house...just as familiar footsteps echoed from the steps below.

I heard them too late to avoid a confrontation, and my dad slowed as he saw me coming down. Even in the shadows I noticed his face tighten and his lips compress, his eyes flashing. "What are you doing up at this time of night, boy?"

I held his stare, though I secretly quivered in his presence. "I'm thirsty."

"You're thirsty?" He held out a decanter half-filled with amber-colored alcohol, most likely bourbon. "Then drink this."

I gaped. "I want water."

His eyes narrowed. “Are you a boy or a man?”

I pushed down anxiety. If I didn’t take his offering he’d take it out on me in some other, worse way. It was better I did what he asked now so I didn’t suffer later.

I took the crystal decanter without answering. Taking out its stopper, I lifted the decanter to my lips and chugged down the liquid that burned all the way from my throat to my stomach.

I drank every last drop before I handed the decanter back to him. I was already woozy when he took it back from me, one of his eyebrows cocked in amused satisfaction. “It looks like you’re a man, after all. Good thing you take after me and not your mother.”

My body was buzzing, the world tilting and twirling. Shit. If I wasn’t careful I’d fall down the stairs and break my neck.

“Speaking of whom,” my father continued, seemingly unaware of my growing intoxication as he drew me with him back up the stairs. “I’m going to have to do something about her. Put her in a treatment program or something. I can’t have her snorting half my coke supply while she pretends you need her. She’s becoming a liability.”

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He shook his head, though his face was blurry now when I looked up and tried to focus. “She’s weak, insufferable really,” he continued. “I can’t tolerate that behavior inside of my house.”

I could barely concentrate on his words, they each blended into the other as we turned into the wing of the house I shared with my mother. Even worse, I was staggering now, the walls doing a slow spin around me that made me dizzy and more than a little ill.

“I-I think I’m going to be sick,” I said.

My dad snorted. “Go to the bathroom then, I’ll deal with your mother.” As he stepped away, he threw over his shoulder, “It’s only lucky you have me, boy, or you’d be stuck with a woman who cares more about her drugs than family.”

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The alarm woke me the next morning and I woke with bleary eyes and a sinking feeling inside. My mother wasn’t here anymore. Dad had thrown her out. I mightn’t remember much of our conversation, but I knew that much at least.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

I shook my head, brought back to the present with a start. It hadn’t been an alarm in my memories, it was my cellphone. I pulled it from my pocket and answered the caller. “Ethan.”

“Evander, where are you?”

I paused at the urgency in my don’s tone. Thanks to our dad’s ever-changing emotions I’d grown up learning to read between the lines. “I took my Harley for a spin. I’m presently at a lookout admiring the view.”

Ethan blew out a breath. “Thank fuck for that.”

My heart jerked like a yo-yo inside my chest. “Why is that?”

“I’ve just received fresh intel from one of our moles. The Accardis have somehow tracked you down. They’re heading to your cabin as we speak.”

My pulse pounded like a drum in my ears, my entire body shutting down as I processed the information. “You’ve got to be shitting me.”

“I’m afraid not, bro. As my underboss they’re gunning for you while you’re alone and exposed. You need to get back here where I can protect you...where we can protect each other.”

I swallowed convulsively, sweat beading on my brow. “You’re my don and my brother,” I said harshly even as I touched my holster and gun. “I’d do anything for you. I’d die for you if you asked. But I’ve found Gemma. She’s alone in my cabin. They’ll kill her if they get to her first.”

I waited for Ethan to deny me my one chance to save her, but he too knew what love felt like, knew what he’d do to protect that loved one. He paused for a second, as though disbelieving I’d actually found the one woman I’d always loved. “Go. Do what you’ve got to do,” he said quietly. “We’ll be there to back you up as soon as we can.”

“Thank you,” I said, disconnecting before I scrambled for my bike and started it with

a roar that scared half-a-dozen tawny birds from a nearby tree.

I barely noticed.If I'd ridden fast away from the cabin it'd be nothing compared to the speed I'd be taking to get back...back to the woman I loved with everything I had.

I couldn't let the Accardis get to her.I had to confess my true feelings for her.I had to tell her I loved her...that I forgave her.I had to tell her I wished I'd been there for her when she'd lost our son.

All I wanted now was to take care of her, to make sure she wasn't taken from me yet again.Because if the Accardis got to her first, there would be no return for either of us.She'd be dead and I'd wither and die without her in my life.

I accelerated hard, rocks spitting out from my back tire and the trees either side quickly blurring.She was everything to me and I'd kill every enemy who stepped foot on my property to prove it.

Chapter Twenty

Gemma

I woke with cramping pain. But this time it wasn't from losing the baby I'd wanted with every cell of my body, it was the period that mocked me for being lacking as a mother.

I might have carried my son to full term, but his heart had stopped working long before I'd delivered him alone in my apartment. Not even the paramedics had been able to save him when they'd finally arrived.

I'd been sitting in a puddle of blood, my still baby in my arms while I'd sobbed over him. The paramedics had had to pry him from my arms, then treat me for shock along with blood loss.

The memory made me ache all over even as a great, yawning emptiness grew bigger inside. I would have given my life to save my baby, my love for him as instinctive as breathing. But at least I'd seen his face, touched his lifeless body. I'd never given Evander that same opportunity, and now guilt stabbed at me like a thousand knives.

My dark thoughts faded as the noise of an incoming vehicle intensified. I frowned. I'd been so distracted by grief and guilt I hadn't noticed anything else. That it sounded more like a car than Evander's Harley made me sit up straighter, my heart pounding.

Though a hopeful part of me wondered if rescue was imminent, a bigger part was filled with foreboding and dread. Then I made out yet another rumbling engine. Two

cars approached.

A shiver of hot and cold pulsed through me. I pulled the bedcover over my nakedness. This wasn't good. Not at all.

The first car stopped in front of the cabin, its engine cutting off as the second car pulled in and went quiet. Doors opened then thumped shut as every muscle I had drew tight.

I knew I was in trouble even before the tread of what I guessed were six or seven people sounded on the porch outside. Indistinct voices murmured near the front door, but I made out a few sentences.

"The Harley's gone."

"Son-of-a-bitch. So much for an element of surprise."

So definitely the bad guys, then. A bead of sweat rolled off my brow as my stomach churned. I wouldn't be getting saved by these men. It didn't take a genius to realize I was in real trouble now.

"You five wait out here while Tommy and I look around inside." The man speaking sounded like the leader, his don't fuck with me tone coming across loud and clear. That I'd soon be discovered sent my heart racing into overdrive. "We might find something useful."

I bit back a whimper as two sets of footsteps entered the cabin.

Rembrandt sensed my high emotions as much as he sensed the intruders. He hissed, the fur on his neck standing high along with his now super-thick tail. Shit. He was in danger too. I shoved him off the mattress and he scooted out of sight under the

bed...just in time.

Two men sauntered through the bedroom doorway as though they owned the place, as though they didn't have a care in the world. I held their hard stares even as I gulped down escalating panic. Of course they were carefree. They weren't the ones cuffed to a bed and left vulnerable and without any defense.

I immediately recognized the man at the front in his tailored dark suit and black fedora hat. Enzo Accardi. He didn't know it but we were related. His eyes were the same color as mine; his nose the same tilt. His skin was paler, his stubble-free jawline a little broader, stronger, his chin more indented, but otherwise the likeness was uncanny given we only shared a father.

He paused at seeing me cuffed to the bed, a smirk then pulling at his full-lipped mouth. Some errant strands of dark hair stuck out from under his hat and across his brow. "Well, well. What—who—do we have here?"

The man behind him, Tommy, had thinning gray-brown hair, a paunch that stretched tight his tweed-colored suit jacket, and a black star inked across his left cheek. He stopped just behind Enzo and I knew right away his deference meant Enzo was the leader. But then, Enzo would be the future Accardi don.

I'd grown up observing my half-brother from pictures on the internet and in newspapers. I'd learned about his often devious acts that had landed him in trouble and often in court, where a highly-paid legal team then cleared him of any charges.

He was daddy's golden boy, his one and only son. His only child...as far as anyone knew.

It was odd finally studying my brother in person and discovering he had the same dimple in the left cheek as me. We were the spitting image of our dear old dad, I only

hoped and prayed Enzo didn't notice or all my subterfuge, my sacrifices had been for nothing.

"Looks like you've scored an unexpected little prize, boss."

Boss? I frowned. Surely Enzo hadn't stepped into our father's role just yet?

He nodded. "If she's a prisoner, she's someone important to Evander." He rubbed his jaw with rigid knuckles inked with symbols similar to hieroglyphics. "But would killing her be enough of a payoff after what they did to my father?"

I blinked.Huh?

“You could kill a hundred of the Agostino whores and it wouldn’t make up for them murdering our don.”

I sucked in a startled breath.My father was dead?No.Impossible!I would have heard!He was an infamous mobster, his exploits all too often in the tabloids.I’d made it my mission to keep up to date with his every move.I’d decided it was for my own good to keep my friends close and my family AKA enemies closer, even if it was never going to be in a physical sense.

I bit back a devastated sob.Had I seriously given up all chance of love, cast aside my soulmate, for nothing?With my dad gone I’d had nothing to worry about.I doubted very much my brother would care about one of the many women our dad had fucked, even if I’d been born as a result.

Enzo squeezed his eyes closed, pain radiating from his every pore.

Holy shit.He’d loved his father—ourfather—and grieved for him still.Had his love been misplaced or was it just that he didn’t know any better because of his upbringing?

Tommy nodded somberly at Enzo’s distress.“Blood for blood.”He glanced my way with a curled lip before turning back to Enzo.“He’d be proud of everything you’ve accomplished since the Agostinos whacked him in cold blood.”

Enzo’s jaw tightened, his fists clenching.“Nothing will ever make up for his death.”

I blinked up at them, waiting for grief to come, for any emotion, really. I experienced nothing but relief knowing all my fears were now unfounded. "He's really dead?" I bit my lip at Enzo's hard stare. "I-I hadn't heard."

He took a step toward me. "That's because we stopped the media from releasing any and all information. No need to make our enemies look like heroes for ridding the world of the big, bad Accardi wolf." He bared his teeth at me and said in a low tone, "Guess I'm that motherfucker now."

I shrank back against the mattress, curling my fingers around the bedcover and dragging it higher. I swallowed hard. I had to play it smart if I wanted to survive. I sucked in a steady breath. "Good." I managed a smile at his narrowed eyes. "You don't know how glad I am that you're here to fuck up Evander's plans."

He arched a brow and grated out, "Is that so?"

I nodded, then rattled the cuff attached to the bedhead. "He trapped me here, made sure I couldn't escape. I'm his prisoner."

"Tell me something I don't know." He crossed his arms, then added, "What might he do to get you back if we took you from him?"

My heart rate surged yet again. Surely Enzo wasn't planning on taking me? How could he? I was chained to the bedhead. And I didn't want to leave one prison just to become a prisoner somewhere else!

"Boss, that's not a good idea," Tommy interjected. "There's something about her..." He shook his head as if to clear it, then added, "We should kill her and avenge your father. Make these fuckers pay."

Enzo rounded on his soldier. "When I want your advice, Tommy, I'll fucking ask for

it! You're my soldier, not my god damn consigliere!"

Tommy nodded stiffly. "Understood, boss."

My shoulders tensed as I read between the lines. Tommy wanted more control and was undoubtedly power hungry. He craved something beyond his current soldier status.

Enzo refocused on me. "Where does Evander keep the key to your cuff?"

My breath caught. I couldn't admit he took them with him. I needed to buy some time or risk being caught up in the violent storm that was my brother. He really did seem a little unhinged. His bloodthirsty soldier definitely wasn't helping my cause. "I-I wish I knew. He's hidden them in a different spot each time."

Enzo nodded at Tommy and his soldier immediately left the room, making a racket in the kitchen soon after as he opened drawers and swept aside dishes and utensils.

Enzo sat on the edge of my bed before he reached out and traced my cuff with the back of his blunt fingertips. "I'd really hate to have to cut off your hand in order to bring you with me." He shook his head. "I'd hate even more for your blood to destroy the upholstery in my car." His lip curled. "There really is nothing I hate more than a sticky, smelly mess."

I guessed his father had given him that little phobia after being witness to more than a few mutilated and bloodied bodies in numerous cars.

Though fear spun in a vortex inside of me, I casually blew some hair off my face and said, "If it makes you feel any better, I'd hate to lose my hand and possibly die from blood loss."

Enzo laughed. “You’re really trying to brazen this out, aren’t you?” His eyes warmed the smallest bit. He shrugged. “I admire that. You remind me of my younger self when I had everything to prove and even more to lose.”

A door banged open, its wood splintering. I winced. Tommy had obviously given up on finding the key to my handcuffs in the kitchen and lounge room areas and had kicked open Evander’s studio door. I chewed my bottom lip. How was I going to explain the artwork inside?

Tommy’s voice echoed from inside the studio.

“Boss, you might want to take a look at this. There are paintings—portraits—in this room...everywhere.”

My breathing hitched even as an idea formed inside my head. I tossed back my hair. “What’s inside that room is yet another reason I’d like to keep my hand.”

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Enzo frowned as he searched my stare. Then he stood and strolled out of the bedroom before his tread disappeared into the studio.

Terror threatened to overwhelm me but I held my nerve while I waited for Enzo, my brother, to return.

He stepped back into my prison AKA bedroom a handful of minutes later. “Who painted you?”

I lifted my chin. “I did.” I couldn’t let them know Evander was the artist. My senses screamed that it’d be a mistake to tell them the truth. “My pseudonym is Chase Holland.” I snorted belligerently. “No one has ever suspected I’m a woman artist.”

“The portraits are good,” Enzo conceded. “Very good. But your ego appears to be getting the better of you.” He chuckled darkly at my perplexed frown. “Is there a reason you only painted yourself?”

My mind whirled. Shit-oh-shit-oh-shit. “I-I didn’t have a choice. Evander forced me to paint me, myself and I.”

“A bit obsessed, isn’t he,” Enzo mused. He cocked his head to the side. “Not that I blame him, you have this certain look about you, one I can’t quite put my finger on.”

Son of a bitch.

I shrugged. “No one knows who the real Chase Holland is. It’s part of my marketing. My mystique helps my paintings sell as much as my talent does.”

I wasn't lying, not really. Evander might be the Chase Holland but no one else knew that, certainly not Enzo or his soldiers. I hoped to keep it that way. Just as I hoped to keep Enzo and his crew from knowing I was related.

I didn't doubt for a second my lovely brother would use me in some way to show his men how far he'd go to prove his worth as don. Going by Tommy's earlier attitude, Enzo mightn't have a choice.

"So whose are the landscapes?" he asked.

I flushed, caught off guard. "They're mine too." I cleared my throat, my fingers fluttering. "I use my real name for those. Evander gives me permission to paint landscapes when I've been a good girl."

Ugh. I was getting too good at this lying business. But desperate times called for desperate measures. I just had to make sure I didn't get stuck in the web of lies and deceit I'd created.

Enzo smirked. "Perhaps I'll have you paint for me," he mused.

"I'd gladly do that if you promise not to keep me chained up like an animal."

His eyes glinted, his smirk disappearing. "Do you really think you're in any position to negotiate?"

I pushed a hand through my hair. "Do you think I'll just roll over and surrender?"

He laughed then, a belly laugh that rolled off his tongue like smooth whiskey. "You and me, we aren't so different. We don't back down from a fight." He nodded. "I like that."

Bang.Bang.

My brother froze, his eyes then swinging to mine.“Seems like Evander isn’t prepared to give you up just yet.”He withdrew a gun from his holster and pressed himself against the wall near the doorway.His grin was sadistic, his eyes alight with anticipation.“May the best man win.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Evander

As much as I'd beentempted to ride my Harley to my cabin with all guns blazing, I'd chosen to park it on the other side of the hill, then run using what cover I could to close the distance silently between myself and Gemma...between myself and my enemies.

If only I had a sniper gun.Instead I'd brought my revolver, which meant I needed to get close enough to shoot with precision, to shoot to kill.

If the mobster lifestyle had taught me one thing, it was that weakness would not be tolerated.Violence was my biggest weapon, along with a fearlessness to do whatever was needed to keep on top.In this instance, to keep Gemma safe.I'd all but given her my word that while she was with me nothing bad would happen to her.

Karma insisted on testing that and making me work hard to prove my honor.

I narrowed my eyes at the pair of vehicles parked in front of my cabin.Motherfuckers.At least two of my enemies were here, but there were possibly up to ten of the bastards.

I dropped low, moving forward at a much slower pace, but not stopping until I was in range.I froze as a heavysset man ambled around the periphery of my cabin, a cigar hanging loosely from his mouth.He stopped around the side, unzipped his beige-colored pants and began pissing on the wall of my cabin.

Fury boiled through me. He was desecrating my personal space, my private sanctuary. That Gemma was chained to my bed inside and I had no idea what was happening to her meant I had to act fast and instinctively.

Flicking off my revolver's safety, I lifted my firearm and kept my finger on the trigger, my aim steady. Another suited enemy stepped into view, this man stringy and lean. I didn't move, I barely breathed. If I waited a few seconds longer I could take them both out, substantially increasing my odds of survival.

I was close enough to hear my leaner enemy chortle as fat man's piss reduced from a stream to a trickle against my cabin.

"Whaddya looking at string bean?"

He shrugged his scrawny shoulders. "Not your peanut-sized dick that's for sure, though I would have sworn you were a horse by how much piss you—"

I aimed and squeezed the trigger.

Bang. Bang.

Fat man dropped like a ton of bricks. String bean grunted as he fell back, his eyes wide as he clutched his bloodied stomach.

I didn't wait around to plug him with another shot. I got up and sprinted hard while the rest of my enemies scrambled to set their sight on me.

I probably had a minute to advance as fast as humanly possible before I'd have bullets whizzing past my head. I made it to a small boulder, throwing myself behind it just as a bullet pinged the rock.

That was when I heard it...the sound of an incoming helicopter, its blades cutting through the air in awump, whump, whumpsound that was music to my ears.

I threw my head back and laughed.I knew the sound of that helicopter!Ethan and my family had come through for me!But of course they had!They'd exterminate any enemies who dared to step outside and fire at them.

I peered around a corner of my rock and up into the sky as Valentine leaned out one side of the helicopter with his firearm, Serafino doing the same on the other.

Bang.Bang.Bang.

A man dropped to the ground from beside my stacked pile of firewood, his fedora rolling a few meters away.Another man fell to his knees, then landed face-first onto the ground, his body laying at an unnatural angle.The last man managed to fire back two wild shots from behind one of the enemies cars before he was also dispatched, crumpling to the ground with his gun still clutched in his dead hands.

A grin split my face.My brother and our family enforcer were amazing marksmen.We all were.We'd trained hard to stay in peak condition and this was the result.Then my brother and our family's enforcer aimed their sight on our enemy's vehicles, peppering their tires with bullets and shredding the rubber as if the wheels were nothing more than paper.

Ethan flew the helicopter my way then and I looked up and gave them the thumbs up.

Ethan nodded, his dark stare brilliant and intense.He enjoyed a good battle and an adrenaline rush as much as the rest of us.He also knew I was more than capable of defending what was mine.Giving a salute goodbye, Ethan swung the helicopter away even as Serafino lifted his firearm in farewell.Valentino continued scanning below for any surprises.He never really stepped out of his enforcer role.

With the sound of the helicopter still loud and distracting, a spray of bullets following its departure, I burst from my hiding spot and raced toward my cabin.

There would be hell to pay for whoever was inside.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Gemma

I was ready to dislocate my thumb to pull my hand through the damn handcuff and run far away from everyone who was mafia. Not just my brother and his man, Tommy, but Evander too.

I had no doubt his imminent rescue would conclude in a violent and bloody end. That the thought of Evander's death left me cold and empty inside told me everything I needed to know. I really did still love him.

I bit back a desperate sob. I couldn't let him lose his life to save mine.

I also didn't want Enzo's death on my conscience. He was the brother I'd never known, a part of me I was yet to understand.

A helicopter swooped low, its engine and rotors roaring overhead. More shots were fired and I shrank back even as Enzo seemed to come to life, a rush of adrenaline making him whoop out loud even before he unholstered his gun and ran toward the bedroom window.

The tires on the vehicles outside exploded—Enzo wouldn't be going anywhere now—before the metal bird swung away. My brother leaned farther out of the window and peppered the air with bullets, a couple of them hitting their mark with a ping.

“Fucking sewer rats,” he screamed. He aimed again, but this time he was unable to

shoot.Click.Click.Click.With a snort of disgust, he threw his empty firearm away, then swung around and called out, “Tommy, what’s the damage?”

“Boss, our men are down, all but one are dead, though I’d say his death is imminent.”

I closed my eyes, overwhelmed by what Evander’s family had done to protect what was his...namely me.

I swallowed back tears.My mom wouldn’t even know what I was going through.When I’d lost my baby our emotions had frayed and then snapped, and we’d drifted apart.She’d been in such a happy place for the first time in years and hadn’t known how to comfort me when I’d hit rock bottom, and I’d been too closed off to accept or want her sympathy.

I’d been like a wounded animal, unable to trust or believe in anyone.Unloading the truth on Evander had been akin to shedding an overtight, shrinking skin, loosening a tension I hadn’t realized I’d carried.

Enzo’s breath hissed out.“Allof them?”

“Yeah, boss.What do you want to do?”

Enzo pushed the back of his head back against the wall, his eyes on me.“I should kill you right now.”He blew out a heavy breath.“But you’re my one and only bargaining chip.”

I nodded.He wasn’t stupid and I got the impression he wasn’t as evil as the media made him out to be.“I understand.”

His eyes widened, then he nodded.“I’ll do my best to see you don’t get caught in the crosshairs of the war between our families.”

“So you’re not completely brutal and braindead.”

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I gasped, my attention jerking away from my brother simultaneously to Enzo's attention snapping Evander's way as he stood framed in the doorway. Though he held a gun, I hadn't heard it fired. Though the fresh blood splattered over his clothes told me everything I needed to know.

Tommy was dead.

The fact Evander had killed so silently, so stealthily, sent shivers down my spine. How did such a creative, talented man have such an uncanny ability to kill?

"Evander," I said, my voice cracking. "You're here."

He cocked a dark brow before he asked roughly, "Did you think I'd stay away?" He didn't wait for my answer when he added, "Are you hurt?"

I ignored his shrewd, assessing eyes and shook my head. "No. But I-I need to use the bathroom."

He nodded, keeping his gun trained on Enzo as he dug into his pocket and extracted the key to my handcuffs. He bent and unclicked the lock, the cuff splitting apart. "You have one minute."

I glared, but didn't argue. Emptying my bladder was becoming a priority, as was taking care of my menstrual needs.

Gathering the bedcover around my nudity, I hurried into the bathroom and did what I needed to.

It was only once I returned that Evander reached out and brought me close to his side. He tipped his gun toward the other man. "Get on the bed and put on the handcuff."

Enzo's eyes flashed. "Thanks, but no thanks. I'd rather be dead."

Evander released the safety mechanism and cocked his gun with a smile. "Good to know. Saves me from having to make any hasty decisions."

I jerked my arm free and stepped in front of Evander even before I'd considered my options or disputed my reflexive instincts. "Stop," I croaked. "Don't shoot him."

Evander looked at me with hard eyes. "Gemma, what the fuck are you doing?"

I shook my head. "No more killing."

Evander's gaze narrowed. "Enzo isn't your friend. He'd shoot you dead in a heartbeat to save himself."

"Maybe," I conceded, glancing his way. That he was motionless from utter shock was clear to me now. I'd seen him fueled by adrenaline and violence and he'd been on edge and agitated. I sighed, then conceded, "But only because he doesn't know the truth."

Evander glanced over at Enzo. My brother shuffled suddenly and said awkwardly, "You know as much as I do."

Evander refocused on me. "So what is the truth, Gemma?"

I exhaled slowly. "If I could tell you I would. Just...don't shoot him, okay."

Evander's stare hardened. "You have three seconds to tell me or I will shoot him where he stands."

I blinked. "Evander, don't—"

"One."

I shook my head. "You don't understand, I—"

"Two."

He stepped past me and raised his gun at Enzo.

My brother frowned, his eyes swinging to mine. "Ah, now might be a good time to fess up."

Everything inside me tumbled and churned. I'd kept this secret for so long now it was nearly impossible to expose the truth. Until Evander's finger squeezed the trigger. "He's my brother!" I shouted desperately.

Sudden hushed silence filled the room. I swallowed hard and added softly, "His father was also my father."

Enzo gaped. "I have a sister." His cheeks hollowed out. "I thought there was something special about you, now I know why." He chuckled. "We share an affinity because we share DNA."

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Evander's face paled, a muscle in his jaw ticking as his cold eyes gave way to endless questions. I could see the answers falling into place behind his stare even as he said, "Your father is why you left me."

I nodded, then conceded weakly, "Yes. If any of your enemies or your family had put two-and-two together, my dad would have come after me. Then he would have gone after my mother for not telling him about me."

"It seems the apple hasn't fallen far from the tree," he bit out.

I deserved that. "I guess not."

What were the odds for both my mother and I resorting to hiding our conditions from the men who'd impregnated us. The only difference was that I hadn't known I was pregnant until after I'd escaped from Evander and his mafia family.

I held his stare and added, "We were trying to protect ourselves...protect each other along with our freedom."

"We were so happy," he said starkly, "until the moment you learned who I really was." He stared down at his revolver for a moment before he lifted his eyes and asked, "How do you feel about me being the underboss now?"

"How do I feel?" I echoed, before I laughed drily. "Honestly, my feelings haven't changed. I-I was already in love with you before I left."

An expletive burst from his mouth, his emotions caught somewhere between delight

and despair. “You crushed my heart when you fled. Damn it, Gemma, you should have told me the truth! We could have worked something out.” He shook his head. “All this time wasted for what?”

“We were scared,” I said shakily.

“I think it’s time for an intervention,” Enzo said, his eyes gleaming. He turned to Evander, then lifted his hand. “Aside from the fact you chained my sister to your bed, you’re obviously deeply in love with her—tick.” He tapped one of his fingers. “You’re both still alive. Tick.” He tapped another finger. “We’re all family now, which means I don’t want to kill anyone here. Double. Fucking. Tick.”

Evander’s face stayed set, distant and cold as he looked at Enzo. “You expect me to trust a man who came here to murder me.”

Enzo shrugged. “Hey man, from where I’m standing you’re still alive and all my men are dead.”

“Your men also killed three of Ethan’s soldiers.”

“In my defense, that was the O’Malley mafia.”

“The Accardi and O’Malleys are one big happy mafia family now, and therefor guilty by association.”

Enzo nodded. “Yeah, to be honest, that’s not working out so great for us. Besides which, if I’d known I had a sister who you clearly adore, I would have protected your family, not attacked them.” He snorted. “She even has my eyes and my exact same fucking dimple!” He slapped his thigh. “How didn’t I see it sooner?”

I ignored my lunatic of a brother to focus on Evander. “I’m sorry for leaving you how

I did.”Tears filled my eyes, my voice breaking as I added, “And I’m sorry for the loss of our baby.”

“Did you name him?”Evander croaked.

I nodded.“Elijah.”

“My middle name,” he breathed.

“Wait—what?You had a baby?”Enzo interjected.

Was my brotherthat socially inept?

Evander’s eyes softened as he looked down at me.“Sweetheart, I’m sorry too.But mostly I’m sorry for what you must have endured alone.I wished I could have been there for you, wished I could have shared the burden.”

“Me too,” I whispered.We stepped into each other, his strong arms surrounding me before I looked up and added brokenly, “I’m never leaving you again.”His eyes were as wet as mine when I said, “I love you, Evander.”

“I love you too, la mia Gemma.Just...pleasedon’t ever leave me.I-I couldn’t lose you a second time.It’d break me.”

“It’d break me too,” I admitted.“And I’m not going anywhere.”I managed a trembling smile.”You’re stuck with me now.”

A slow clap sounded from behind us, my brother in full force again now.He followed it up with a long, slow whistle.“I hope that means I’ll be the best man at the wedding—yes?”

At the sudden rumbling of approaching vehicles, Evander drew back from me, his attention momentarily diverted. He sighed heavily, then reached into his pants pocket and dug out a key. He threw it Enzo's way, my brother easily catching it one-handed.

Evander nodded at the other man. "If you want to live, take my Harley. Go north. You'll find a wooden bridge over the stream, cross it and follow the fence line back toward the highway. You'll find an opening along the way."

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Enzo nodded, a smile splitting his face. “Thank you, man. At this point I doubt my reception here would be received well from the rest of your family.” He glanced my way. “And thanks...sis. I hope we’ll catch up one day and get to know one another better.”

He winked, then sauntered out of the bedroom like he had all the time in the world. The Harley fired up soon after, then he roared away from us and the entourage of approaching vehicles.

Evander smiled wearily at me. “Are you ready to face your future family?”

I nodded. “I’m past ready.” I grimaced. “Though they must all hate me for abandoning you at the restaurant.”

He shook his head. “They had no idea I took you there. I was too proud to confess you left me. I pretended I arrived alone.” He sighed heavily and conceded, “Deep down I guess I also wanted to protect you from any ill will toward you.”

“I have so much making up to do,” I said softly.

He cocked a brow. “I’ll look forward to that. But until then, you should probably put some clothes on.”

I was still giggling when I dropped my blanket, dragged on the first dress I found, then picked up Rembrandt as he sashayed out from under the bed. As I walked with Evander through his cabin to meet his family, I averted my eyes away from the deceased body on the floor.

Evander didn't seem to notice or care about the dead man, he was too busy grimacing at the broken and splintered door of his studio.

I sent him a guilty smile and admitted, "About that...my brother thinks I'm Chase Holland."

He shook his head and then chuckled as we stepped outside on the porch. "I'm more than happy to continue with that story if you are."

The driver's door of the lead vehicle suddenly banged open before Ethan strode toward us. Evander ignored his don for a little longer, his eyes locked on mine as he bent and kissed me, giving me his undivided attention. When he drew back he said quietly, "I really do love you."

My heart warmed with healing energy, love beaming through me.

This really was where I belonged, with this man, united together.

Forever.

Epilogue

Three months later...

I smiled at the huge crowd milling at the front entrance of the gallery I'd once managed, my heart jiggling with delight. They'd all come to see the fictional me, Chase Holland. But more importantly, they were also here to admire my landscapes, which were gaining popularity fast.

Evander moved to stand on the top step beside me, his arm going around my waist. It didn't hurt that my fiancée and soon-to-be husband added notoriety to my name. We'd

become something of a power couple, a force of nature.

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If only people realized the portraits had been done by Evander. But he was grateful to give me all the credit while he continued being a mafia underboss, and painting in what little spare time he found.

We'd become comfortable painting together, though much of the time he simply painted me while I painted whatever landscape was in front of me.

Our lives were pretty much complete. We'd even discussed trying for another baby one day in the future, once our grief had dulled to a more bearable pain.

I was just happy knowing my brother, Enzo, hadn't tried to take advantage of me in any way. In fact he'd kept right away from the Agostino and Costas, doing his best to protect my mafia family and possibly his connections to it.

Even better, our O'Malley enemies had also withdrawn, disappearing like cockroaches in a pile of rubbish. Our families weren't to be messed with and anyone with half-a-brain knew it.

Gregory stepped forward then, his infatuation with me sliding away as he smiled magnanimously out at the crowd of people whose wealth fairly dripped from them. There would be a lot of sales made today, with Evander's connections helping to bring in celebrities and many others with deep pockets.

Evander clasped my hand, then murmured, "Are you ready for this, my future Mrs. Agostino."

I nodded, then winked and said huskily, "I was born ready."

I barely heard Gregory's speech as he addressed the impatient crowd, not while I was lost to the man who'd given me everything. The man who was my everything. Then the doors behind us opened, and the crowd surged toward us in an unstoppable tide.

Evander pulled me out of the crush and I was made breathless by the knowledge this was our remarkable future. A future I'd nearly given up.

I'd be forever grateful that Evander hadn't stopped looking for me, and had never given up on us. I'd never stop loving him for it, or take him or our life for granted.

I grinned, and drew him toward a less crowded part of the gallery. What would he think of the landscape I'd painted of his cabin and its surrounds before I'd ever even laid eyes on it?

I had no doubt he'd agree we were soulmates who had always meant to be together, our destiny intertwined in reality and in our art.