



As Devils Love (Little Flame Duet #1)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: I'm a cold-hearted killer.

Until she stopped me dead in my tracks.

When the Mafia wants someone gone, I'm their go-to guy. My secret is simple. I never fail.

But this time is different.

She's the daughter of a rival Don, and I had her in my sights...

But something about her made me hesitate, and I f*cking hate her for it.

I'll get another chance to strike.

Until then, I'm going to toy with her. Torment her.

She hates my guts, and the feeling is mutual. But I'm dead-set on claiming her heart.

Because I'm her worst nightmare...

And her darkest fantasy.

*As Devils Love is Book 1 in the Little Flame Duet. The story continues in Book 2, As Angels Sin.

Total Pages (Source): 22

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:57 pm

Chapter One

CRUE

“Sweet baby Jesus. Are those slobbering pencil dicks gonna get off their asses and do something?” Mark groans with fervent annoyance and sinks so far into his seat that his ass is practically in the footwell of my car.

“At this rate, I’m gonna drill my own eyes out before I get a chance at theirs.”

Patience is a wise man’s game. It’s part of a forbearing nature and comes from a deep understanding of the interconnected fabric of existence. It’s about believing there’s more to life than charging headlong into every escapade, knowing we will reach the same outcome in the end.

That’s why patience, virtue, and wisdom don’t belong in the same sentence as Mark Leone. He bulldozes his way through life, and I’ve got to give him credit where it’s due. His no fuck’s given attitude has served him well.

“We know where they’re headed. Let me remind you that we’re watching them out of want, not need. Go wait at the club, if you can’t refrain from whining the whole time we’re sitting here.”

My focus remains on the two guys standing outside Lorenzo Napoli’s Sanctuary Club, even as I reprimand Mark.

A long-exasperated sigh is his reply, followed by, “That’s no fun either. Watching

you squirm, while all the pretty chicks gang up on you, is my favorite part of going out.” He readjusts himself until he’s sitting upright again and then he rifles through my glove box for a pack of smokes that he stashed away before we got here. “And what if shit goes sideways here? There’s no chance in hell I’m gonna let you have all the fun yourself.”

He runs a hand through his shoulder-length mess of mousy brown hair, to get it out of his face, and lights his cigarette.

“Fuck's sake, man. This is a new car.” I growl, but Mark ignores my rebuke.

“Gotta break her in somehow. Show her how a real man handles his bitch.” In my peripheral vision, I see him wink at me.

I don’t really care about the car, or the smell of smoke that’s going to cling to the leather for the rest of its existence. Mark knows that too. He’s been a part of my life for as long as I can remember.

We’re brothers, birthed in the blood of others. Mark’s always had my back. From the trenches of middle school – where I got my first bloody nose after taking one too many hits to the face, all the way to highly classified, special ops missions in the desert in the middle of Butt-Fuck nowhere. We’ve fought too many wars together for something this small to have any meaning. Hell, for all the shit I’ve put him through, Mark could set this car ablaze and leave it a smoldering ball of scrap.

After all, I’m the reason we were in all those battles. All it took was one bad day and a bully who pushed too hard, after years of driving me up the walls. Mark stood by my side and watched as I beat that kid into a coma. He would’ve been my first kill if it hadn’t been for Mark pulling me off the husk of his body.

Then there’s that huge heart of his. A quality I’m sorely lacking in. His heart gave

him the strength to hold my weeping mother, after we were offered the deal, military service or juvenile detention. He kissed her cheek and whispered that he'd protect me, no matter the cost, when we shipped off to our first war-torn country.

It was a promise he made then and that he still keeps to this day.

If I knew how to love, I'm sure I'd love him.

My trip down memory lane is cut short by the sight of a fascinating creature emerging from the Sanctuary's exit. I'd call her a woman, but the word doesn't do her justice. Her movements are too fluid to be called merely walking. It seems as if she dances and skates on the very ground beneath her feet, as she side steps the very guys, who have an appointment with my blade tonight.

One glance at her dark-haired exquisiteness, and my blood runs feverishly hot instead of the tepid cool I'm used to. Each new heartbeat sends another wave of excruciating warmth through my body, and it's all settling in one place: my stiffening cock.

Beneath the rim of her tank top, her petite frame is surprisingly athletic. Her massive tits must contribute significantly to her workouts. Her long, wavy chocolate-brown hair almost seems out of place as it ripples down her body. The tips of her hair reach her waist, flowing down from where it is secured in a very loose band.

I'm enamored by the sight of her. My gaze drifts down her slender waist, where her curves bloom into a plump, round ass and full, enticing hips. All that flesh is squeezed into tight, blue jeans that hug and accentuate every sultry contour of her body.

Get a hold of yourself, Crue, I reprimand myself, but to no avail. Saliva is flooding my mouth as images of her tight, wet slit rubbing against my face roll across my mind.

“Not gonna say anything, huh?” Mark eases back in his seat and obscures my vision with a well-placed plume of smoke.

Perfect timing. His distraction snaps me back to reality just long enough to regain my senses and cool off.

If I were the sort of man who chuckled, I’d be doing it now, because I must be losing my damned mind, drooling over her instead of focusing on my targets who have since started walking to their car.

My eyes don’t linger on them for long, though, and I steal one more glance at the slender beauty as she gets into the back of a cab.

What is someone so pure doing in a dirty place like this?

“Got nothing to say,” I finally reply to Mark. “We both know you’ll ignore me, anyway,” I finish my lackluster answer.

And then, as if this wasn’t enough of a complication to my night already, my phone starts buzzing in the center console. The caller-I.D. reads Unknown .

“Yes?” I answer. If whoever is trying to reach me wants to remain anonymous, it usually means that it’s business, but answering with a hello is way too civilian for someone like me.

“Come over, Crue.” It’s Matteo Baronne, my employer. “We’ve got something to discuss.”

Pleasantries and greetings aren’t Matteo’s style. That’s why I’ve taken a liking to working for him these past few months. Why waste the time checking in, when neither of us gives a shit about how the other is doing?

“I’ll be there in—”

“Good, good, see you then.” He cuts me off and kills the call.

I start the car and drive.

Mark lets out a shrill screech of excitement.

“Fina-fucking-ly,” he slaps my dashboard with an open palm. “I was going bonkers watching those two do nothing all night.”

“Time better served steeling your mind for the mission, I’m sure.”

He chuckles as if it were a joke. “Killing is what I do, and buddy, let me tell you, I’m damned good at it.”

Mark turns on the radio. For the rest of our drive, old blues and classic rock blare from my speakers. He sings along to some of the songs and hums the tune to others. His lack of interest in me is highly appreciated.

I should be taking the time to prepare for my meeting with Matteo, but instead, my mind returns to her. That out-of-place stunner who left a knot of unease in my gut. I need to know why someone so ordinary rattled my world like an earthquake.

We arrive at the Baronne family’s villa on the outskirts of New York in less than half an hour. The streets weren’t quiet, but if the military taught me one good lesson – other than how much I enjoy killing – it was how to drive at dangerously high speeds.

“Is this where you tell me to play it cool and watch my tongue?” Mark’s grin stretches from ear to ear, as he reaches for the door handle. He’s deliberately trying to press my buttons. To make this harder than it needs to be. Although I’m loath to say

it, he's giving me the ribbing an older sibling might. Under different circumstances it would've worked too, but I hate these mafia sorts. They're a bunch of holier-than-thou pricks, who don't deserve a lick of respect.

Aside from Matteo's offered opportunity of a lifetime and his blood money lining my pockets, I view him exactly the same as I do his enemy, Lorenzo Napoli; he's a cockroach waiting to be exterminated.

"For this piece of shit? Nah, give him hell."

I get out of my BMW and Mark follows closely behind me. One of the Baronne family's dogs meets us at the front door. He greets me, which I just ignore, taking a page from his master's playbook. His face turns several shades of red darker with fury, but he leads us to Matteo's office.

The don of the Baronne family is not an intimidating specimen by any stretch of the imagination. He's tall enough, sure and his crown reaches my chin, but age and years of boozing have made his body plump. However, beneath the superficial layers of flab, I can tell that his muscles are still strong and primed for violence.

Matteo's head is buried in a stack of papers on his desk when we enter. He's so deeply engrossed in the binder he's thumbing through that he doesn't even bother looking up.

"Outstanding work so far, Crue. I'm impressed at how many names you've managed to strike off my list."

His words are another reminder of why this is the perfect gig for me. No beating around the bush or feigning interest. We're all business, all the time.

"What can I say?" I give Mark enough room to enter the office as well, but neither of

us head for the visitors' chairs opposite Matteo. Two more names will be ticked off his list tonight, and we don't have time to sit around and play footsie under the table. "Money's a powerful motivator."

It's my favorite of the many lies I use to sound normal. Whatever normal is in this context. But saying I'm in it for wealth and notoriety is far easier than admitting that I derive pleasure from watching the light leave my victims' eyes. I love listening to the whistle of their final breathe, and that oh, so intimate sensation of my blade slipping beneath the layers of their skin as I plunge it into an artery...

It's fucking orgasmic.

"Good. Because I'm adding another zero and another name." Matteo lifts his head at last, and the mess of curly salt-and-pepper hair atop his head bounces in front of his face.

"The more of both, the merrier." I keep my gaze level with his dark-brown eyes.

"Same rules apply. Stay on your current trajectory, working your way up through Lorenzo Napoli's underlings. I want him to believe you're a rogue unit, cutting his way to the top for whatever reason will plague that sack of shit's mind."

He reaches for an envelope that's some distance from the rest of the chaos scattered across his desk.

"I am a rogue unit." It isn't my favorite way to describe myself, but Matteo knows that already. It's why he hired me. He preyed on what little emotion I let bubble to the surface and lured me in with the promise of revenge.

"Hmm. That's right." His face hardens and he tips his head in an unnaturally respectful gesture. "I'm sorry, son. I forgot that this isn't just a simple job for you.

Forgive me?” He runs a hand through his hair, collecting the stragglers to press into a messy middle-part.

“Oh shit,” Mark finally says something. I’m used to him hijacking every conversation we’re in, so I could’ve sworn he’d left the room, before Matteo and I started speaking.

“No need for forgiveness. I don’t want or expect sympathy or pity for what happened to my mom. But I will take your money and keep ticking names off your list, until that fat sack of shit , Lorenzo Napoli—”

Feels the fear she did in her final moments surrounded by his men. I finish the sentence in my mind only.

I clear my throat and try to rid my mind of those thoughts. Emotions complicate things. That’s why I count myself one of the lucky ones, who rarely feels them.

“Yes, well, you’re going to love what I’m holding in my hands, then.” He waggles the envelope, and I walk over to take it from him.

And just like that, we’ve moved on.

“Gonna tell me who’s inside or would that ruin the fun?” Unlike the other dossiers Matteo has given me, this one is surprisingly thick. Must be someone very important to Lorenzo. The Napoli family’s balding second-in-command springs to mind, but I don’t stay on the thought long.

Matteo’s previous notes have always contained a few candid photographs, a name, and a loose schedule of the intended’s comings and goings; from the lowest member I’ve been given the pleasure of killing, right up to the made-men Mark and I are headed out to kill tonight.

What's so different about the person waiting for me inside here? I fiddle with the envelopes unglued flap.

"Lorenzo's daughter." Matteo opens one of his desk's drawers and pulls out a fat cigar. He cuts off the end and shoves it in his mouth before speaking again. "Isn't it funny how things work out, sometimes? He killed your mother; you kill his daughter. Generational genocide."

"I don't think that word means what you think it does." My bad attempt at a joke raises Matteo's eyebrow.

He's the one who said it's funny. Why's he looking at me like I'm the crazy one?

He shrugs it off and continues, as if I hadn't spoken at all. "Fiametta Napoli is his biggest weakness. She's the Napoli family jewel."

"Why haven't I heard about her, then?" It's back to straight-faced seriousness for me.

"That's exactly why you haven't. She's a well-guarded treasure. Had it not been for my wife, God bless her soul, being present at Fiametta's birth, even I wouldn't have known she existed."

Would this be a better time to crack a joke? Something about how it's only the women who suffer at the hands of their wicked men. Probably not. I'll just keep my mouth shut.

"She's to be your last kill, Crue, but that doesn't mean you can't have some fun with her in the meantime. Taunt her, torment her; I don't mind how you choose to do it, but I would prefer her pretty mind broken before the deed is done."

"What the fuck? Why?" Mark asks the question I won't with flabbergasted disbelief.

I'm glad he does, because this is an odd request, even for Matteo.

“Why go on a murder spree to hurt the man who killed your mother? Why stand at Crue's side for a fistful of dollars? Why do anything?” He scrounges around in his desk for a golden flip lighter and starts snapping the lid open and closed. “It's about the message we send. Killing Napoli soldiers is going to rock the foundation. But force Lorenzo to watch his little angel's descent into the murky depths of insanity, well, there's no real coming back from that, is there?”

“Huh.” Mark utters the sound. I shift my gaze to see wicked approval in the shape of his pursed lips. “You've got a strange head on your shoulders. I kinda like it,” he says.

Matteo chuckles.

It's not the time for confusion, but it permeates my brain anyway. Mark can insult the man to his face and get a laugh, whereas I get raised eyebrows and the same concerned look our enrollment officer gave me when I signed up for the military...

I must be getting worse at telling jokes.

“Now, my elite assassin, and your ever-flattering colleague, if there isn't anything else.” He brings the lighter to the tip of his cigar and puffs a few times until it catches. “Get the fuck out of my office.”

We do as we are told.

The Baronne guard, who brought us here, is waiting outside Matteo's office and follows us back the way we came. His dutiful watch ends at the villa's front door, and he slams it shut once we're through.

“What happened to giving him hell?” I jab an elbow into Mark’s side as we descend the grandiose staircase to my Beemer. Teasing someone in a friendly manner is another trick I’ve taken years to learn. Unlike joking, I find the addition of mockery an easier concept to grasp.

Mark's disgruntled snicker reaffirms my belief that I’m getting better at it.

“Nah, man, I’m not going anywhere near that crazy piece, if I don’t have to.” He rubs down the front of his shirt where I connected with him.

Like me, Mark isn’t afraid of Matteo Baronne. Neither of us are stupid enough to believe we can go toe to toe with the criminal empire under his employ, but our fearlessness comes from years of living life on a razor’s edge. Dying is less of a worry when you’ve put yourself in front of as many bullets as we have and do - since that very first fight that left a kid brain dead.

Back in my car, I reach for the envelope in my pocket. I drop it into Mark’s lap, so he can have a look at it while I drive.

“Doesn’t this chick look familiar?” he asks as soon as he looks at the very first candid photograph. “I’m sure I’ve seen her before.”

I snatch the picture out of his hands and an uncomfortable sensation of hot blood coursing through my cold veins leaves a dizzying nausea in my guts.

He has seen her before. So have I. Less than an hour ago, to be exact, exiting Lorenzo’s Sanctuary Club.

Ah, fuck! Why does it have to be her?

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Chapter Two

FIAMETTA

“Come on, get dressed. Let’s not be any later than we have to be,” Simone orders as I step into my bedroom. She’s in the en-suite bathroom, wearing only white lace lingerie, and she’s focusing intently on applying her eyeliner in the mirror.

“Yes, ma’am,” I give her a half-assed salute and grab the one-of-a-kind black dress I had laid out on the bed before she summoned me to the Sanctuary Club.

The dress is perfect for our night out. Low-hanging shoulder straps extend into a very deep V to show off my cleavage and are accompanied by a tight bodice that shrink-wraps my body down to my waist, highlighting my frame. The high hemline barely touches my knees to allow for high maneuverability, and it frills out at the hem to give the overall look some depth. Finally come the glittering sequins that give the eye something to look at. That is, if anyone who looks at me cares about my dress, rather than all the skin I’ve left on display.

Without wanting to sound too egotistical, I love it the most because I’m the one who designed and made it.

“Where did you go?” Simone looks at me through the mirror’s reflection, moving away from the eyeliner and onto her lipstick.

I sigh before finding the strength to reply. It doesn’t relieve any of the weight my meeting presses on my shoulders. Everything is such a song and dance with my father

and it's starting to drive me nuts. Especially, now more than ever, with what's going on among his ranks. You'd think he would want to be direct and avoid middlemen. Instead, I am being dragged across the city to listen to his message.

First, one of his men came to my front door, and he escorted me to the Sanctuary Club without as much as a hello. Then, I was left to wait for half an hour while another guy finished a meeting with some empty suit. Finally, our business was concluded in less than a minute, with his instructions:

Your father wants to see you for dinner tomorrow evening. He has organized it at his home and expects you to arrive before seven. Dress appropriately and make sure no one sees you coming.

Two hours of my night wasted, when I could've been getting ready for my wild night out with Simone. But this bullshit isn't surprising anymore. It's been happening since I was a child, and there won't be an end to it until Father leaves his seat as head of the Napoli mafia, or one of us is dead.

If I were a betting person, I'd put my money on the latter.

"Family business," I answer, starting to undress out of my less provocative jeans and crop top and into my dress.

"Almost got scared when I arrived, and you were nowhere to be seen. Thought something had happened to you." Her eyes narrow like a mother's would when trying to scold their child.

That is a missed pleasure when it comes to my own mother. Father said she died from unforeseen complications when I was young. I did attend my mother's funeral though. Her closed casket didn't strike me as odd as a child, but the more I think about it now, the more I realize that it probably was to hide the sight of her remains

from her grieving relatives.

In our world ‘unforeseen complications’ means someone got to her, to hurt my father. I’m not surprised. He’s made an enemy of everyone in New York. But that doesn’t stop the sharp sting of sadness when I think about how broken he looked on the day we laid mother to rest.

Still, I’m not going to cut him any more slack than I have to about his secrecy surrounding me. Although I understand that it’s for my safety, I still crave the love and family togetherness any daughter would. But you don’t get to choose your family. That’s a saying that has burdened me since birth.

“Nah, you don’t have to worry about me.” I slip my bra off and toss it onto a growing pile of clothes in the corner of my room. I’ll have to take care of it this weekend, if I don’t want my entire closet to become a messy decoration. Or worse, leave this mess for the cleaners to happen upon. They work hard enough as it is and don’t need me adding to their workload. “It’s just the way things go.”

Simone frowns and, after a brief silence where I can tell she wants to say something but can’t find the words – or chooses not to – she nods.

“Holy shit, you have a rocking bod,” she says instead, allowing her eyes to travel from my eyes to my toes.

“Jeez, you can’t say stuff like that to me while I’m naked.” Heat rushes to my cheeks, and I cover my bare chest with my dress.

I used to hate getting ready like this. Simone broke down those walls during our college years of clubbing. It’ll save time if we both get ready together. And what’s the worst that could happen? I see your cookie. Reality check, babe, I’ve got one, too. Those words convinced me to go ahead with it, but they didn’t do much in the way of

stilling the bundle of nerves I felt under her leering blue-eyed gaze.

I'm not unattractive, at least I don't think I am, but I'm also vastly inexperienced when it comes to compliments from someone who actually means them. Shrugging off drunks, who want to get in my pants at bars, is easy; they'll say whatever you want to hear as long as it gets them laid. But real kindness? God, it makes me want to curl up and hide in my bed.

"You're not naked. You're wearing panties," she grins wickedly, finishing the last of her makeup and joining me in the room, to get dressed.

Makeup and panties were as far as I got before father's man appeared at my door. At least it cut down my to-do list.

In contrast to my ensemble, Simone's wearing an off-white dress. It has some of the same skimpy proportions as mine does, but with a higher riding hemline and no sequins that sparkle. I'd say she looks like an angel in her outfit, but it's only half true.

Her unnaturally vibrant, crystal-blue eyes are enhanced by her powder-white skin. She has delicate and dainty features, from her freckled cheeks to her small feet. But the mess of long, ginger curls that comes to a stop just above her shoulders is a telltale sign of her fiery personality.

Simone's the perfect blend of heaven and hell.

"Zip me up and I'm all set to go." She spins around and walks backwards to me. I do as she asks and gather up the last of my things.

"Then, let's get this party started." Excitement oozes through me as I slide into my platform heels. They add an extra three inches to my height, and at five-foot-three, I

can use all the help I can get.

We make our way out of my building and Simone waves down a cab that's passing by. Apart from a few stolen looks from the cabby in his rear-view mirror, it's an uneventful ride to the nightclub.

"Oh, and don't forget this." She slips her hand into her purse and draws a white winged plastic mask from it. In all the tedium I endured earlier, I completely forgot that this was a masquerade party.

"Right, thanks. I almost forgot the most important part." I take it from her and slip it over my face. Given how cheap the plastic feels against my fingertips, it fits surprisingly well and feels pretty comfortable.

"Don't worry about it. I've got you covered." She snickers at her pun. "I knew you'd forget anyway. It's why you're my scatter-brained princess."

It was Simone's idea for me to wear a white mask, so she could wear a black one, so we'd be matching to some degree. If it were up to me, I'd have spent some time making something that actually matched my outfit.

She isn't wrong, though. I'd have spent days crafting the perfect accessory for my dress, only to forget it at my shop on the night of the party.

"Here we are, ladies. Cash or card?" The cab driver asks and reaches for a portable point of sale terminal underneath the meter box.

"Card," I say, but it comes out unanimously with Simone's saying cash .

"You've already done enough, the least I can do is buy our ride over." She rolls her eyes at my wanting to pay for another thing.

It's in my nature to give. Not only to my friends, but to others also. I can complain all I want about being born into the mafia, but it has afforded me opportunities that few people will ever have the pleasure of experiencing. Aside from running a fairly successful, high-end clothing store, my father pays weekly allowances into my bank account.

And really, there's only so much happiness money can buy before you realize it's better served in helping others.

"I heard someone say this is going to be the hottest party of the year." Simone grabs my hand and pulls me out her side of the taxi and onto the sidewalk. The enormous line stretching from the club's entrance, all the way to the end of the block confirms what she heard. "Great DJ's, guest appearances and celebrities from all circles drinking in the festivities."

I understand why the event organizer made this a masquerade. Hiding everyone's faces shrouds them in obscurity. Celebrities, who are approached day in and out by fans, can kick back and let loose and no one will even know that they're there. It's brilliant.

"Holy shit, it's a good thing I got tickets," I comment.

My eyes travel the lengthy coil of people, who probably won't get in, even if they wait out here all night.

"Hell, yeah it is. How did you manage to swing it anyway?" Simone asks, as she drags me toward a second, much shorter line, on the opposite side of the entrance. "This event has been sold out for months."

"All the suffering of being a mafia kingpin's daughter should come with a few perks, don't you think?" I giggle. As much as this city despises him, no one would dare turn

down a request from Lorenzo Napoli.

I hate that she knows my dirty little secret, and my father would probably kill both of us if he found out I had told her, but I wasn't going to spend my life coming up with answers for all the shit he puts me through. Like earlier, saying Family Business is usually enough to steer her off course when it comes to what I get up to. And though I can tell it eats her up inside not to be in the know any more, she respects me enough not to pry.

We fall into line with the rest of the masked partygoers and wait our turn to get in. The wait is much shorter than expected and, before I know it, Simone and I are inside.

Still clutching my hand, Simone pulls me from the entrance to a small room sectioned off from the dance floor. It's a separate bar area, where patrons of the club can relax, far away from the eardrum shattering music in the main dance floor.

I let my eyes scan the room to build some sort of familiarity of my surroundings, but my excitement about the night ahead quickly starts to fade. Among the masked horde circling the bar, I spot the first of many familiar faces. I don't know his name, but I recognize him from outside the Sanctuary Club, when I was earlier.

Tilting my head to one corner, then the next, I see two more faces instead of masks. Of course, father would send men to watch over me. Why wouldn't he when so many of his men are dying like flies? But it makes me wonder if having a security detail in the club isn't doing more harm than good to his secrecy. People will wonder what he is trying to hide. And if the guy, who is murdering Napoli soldiers, is here tonight, their maskless faces scowling menacingly will be a huge indicator that someone of importance to my father is here.

“Quick drink to keep us hydrated, and then I'm not stopping my groove until the sun

comes up.” Simone sways her hips and adds a raise the roof gesture with her hands to sell the statement.

I’m glad she hasn’t noticed my father’s men, and I doubt she will. It’s easy enough to label them as security and bouncers, without knowing the full story.

“Sounds like a great idea. You got the ride, so I’ll buy our first round.” I wink and slip between her and the bar so she can’t decline my offer.

“Is that right?” Her nose crinkles deviously. “Then I’ll have the most expensive thing they have on the menu.”

“A finger of whiskey doesn’t strike me as your kind of drink,” I tease, gesturing to the liquor cabinet’s top shelf, where an imported bottle of Japanese whiskey reigns supreme above the rest of the cheap liquor.

“Hmm. You’re not wrong.” Her eyes sink to the glass-fronted mini-fridges and their easy drinking options. “Fine, a shot of tequila and a cider will do.”

“Coming righ—” the rest of my words get stuck in the back of my throat as my eyes move to the far side of the bar.

They’re instantly drawn to a leather jacket clad towering figure, who fills out his bar stool so well, it looks as if he’s floating on air, instead of sitting down. Beneath the jacket, rippling muscles flex and strain against a tight gray tank top, which barely extends over the golden belt buckle holding up his jeans.

His exquisite body aside, it’s his emerald-green eyes that hook me. If Simone and I hadn’t just gotten here – and if I didn’t want to get on the dance floor immediately – I’m sure they’d be able to reel me in, too. His gaze is inviting, but it looks so calculated. I guess it has to be, when the rest of his face is hidden beneath a black,

biker's face mask and all his desires have to exit through his eyes.

It's his lack of inventive originality that makes me want to go over to him and see what makes his mind tick. He spent a great deal of money to get in here, and probably took the time out of what is no doubt a busy schedule, if what Simone says about celebrities and high-powered individuals is true. But, instead of playing the game and going all out on his mask's design, he's wrapped his face with a cheap covering of cotton that you can buy for ten bucks at a dress up shop.

Someone moves over to his side and snatches his attention away from me. They share a brief conversation before both depart for the dance floor.

I'll see you out there, big boy.

I order our drinks, choosing to get the same as Simone. A tequila to lower inhibitions, and a sweet cider to quench the thirst that will come from the workout we're about to get.

After slamming back our shots, we head back into the wall of noise and join the many gyrating bodies on the dance floor. At first, everything is great amid the feverish dancing and sweat-sparkled bodies of New York City's royalty. At least, that's what I'll call them, since I don't know who's underneath the masks swaying and weaving between Simone and me.

As I dance, I catch glimpses of father's men, but it's not them I want to see. I don't know where my infatuation for the guy at the bar has come from, but I presume it's something about the way he managed to hold my interest longer than a few seconds without making some filthy remark about my attire.

Or the nonchalant way he walked off without so much as a single word said. Tall, dark and mysterious is right up my alley, and he has it in spades.

After a while of it just being Simone and I, someone steps in between us and whispers in her ear. She stops dead for a second, eyeing the guy up and down, before leaning in to speak into my ear. Even this close, she has to shout for me to make out what she's saying.

"This guy asked for a dance. Mind if I entertain the request?" I know I would hear lust dripping off her words, if she wasn't competing with the music.

"Of course not," I shout back. I'm not worried about security with father's men here, so why stop Simone from enjoying herself? "Go have fun."

As her focus moves to the man who came to steal her away, mine falls to the second drink of the night. I downed the cider somewhere between the second and third track we were dancing to, and after this short break to speak, I notice how parched I am.

I wade through the sea of frantically moving bodies and make my way back to the secluded bar we were in earlier. Might as well have my thoughts to keep me company since I'm alone.

But the barman who served me before is ready and waiting the second I approach. I'm sure there's a coy smile on his lips, and it matched the playfully raised brow above his right eye.

"It's your lucky day," he announces as I take a seat in the stool. "Saw you eyeing the bottle up there, and it just so happens someone ordered you a cocktail that has it, and several other high-priced drinks, inside it."

He pulls a cocktail out from behind his back and sets it in front of me. It has a dark orange bottom and grows progressively lighter in color until it reaches a yellow top.

"What? Who?" I take it off the counter and inspect the contents.

He shrugs and shakes his head. “The whole point of a night like tonight is secrecy. Couldn’t tell you if I wanted to.” Bullshit . If my suspicions are correct, it was the towering slab of muscle I saw earlier. Masked or not, you’d remember him. But it’s the barman’s job to keep the secrets for tonight, so I won’t ask any more than that.

“Well, that sure wasn’t what I was expecting.” I chuckle to myself.

“We call it The Morning After... ” The barman goes back to do his job and waves a hand over the drink as if presenting it to me. “...because once you’d had it, you’re not gonna remember a thing until tomorrow morning. Only the highest end booze, blended with orange juice, various sweeteners and served over crushed ice.”

“Sounds dangerous.” I’m salivating for my first sip.

“For your wallet...,” he starts. I can’t help but chuckle at his salesman-pitch mentality to a single drink. “...this puppy will run you more than my week’s paycheck. You must’ve made a real impression on the dude who bought it.”

“Couldn’t tell you if I wanted to.” I parrot his words from earlier but it’s a sincere answer.

If it is the green-eyed guy I saw earlier, I didn’t do anything to deserve a drink like this. We barely looked at each other before he wandered off.

I swish the small straw through the glass, mixing the top contents with the bottom before I take my first sip. An involuntary hmm of satisfaction follows it. Holy shit, it tastes like angels dancing across my tongue. My next sip, and all the subsequent ones are met with the same thrill as the first, until half the glass is empty.

“Woah. Easy, tiger.” The barman returns after serving some other patrons. “It’s a stiff drink, and I’d prefer to see you walk rather than fall out of here.” He laughs, but I can

hear how serious he is.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.” I’m not a huge drinker, but dinners with my father and Simone often end up with more than a few empty wine bottles.

“Not worried. Just a heads up, is all. Have a great rest of your night,” he concludes and heads back to work.

Though I doubt a single cocktail is going to be the difference maker on my level of sobriety, I heed the barman’s advice and take my time with the second half.

I’m glad I do, too, as by the time I finish and slip off my bar stool to go back to the dance floor, a warm haze of good liquor is coating my brain and making my knees wobbly.

Okay... now I’m really ready to get this party started.

I approach my next session with new vigor. The thrum of music against the inside of my chest takes control, and before I know it, I’m lost to the sounds, swaying my hips like I just don’t care, throwing my arms around in vicious flurries, and taking on every newcomer who wants a dance partner.

It’s a whirl of music and movement. Men, women, anyone who wants a turn; I don’t discriminate. I lose all of my fears about what tomorrow night’s meeting with father might bring, for one night of normalcy.

That is, until his gloved hands slide over my hips.

Until his enormous tattoo laden chest is in direct line of my eyes.

Until his emerald eyes shimmer beneath the low light of the floor.

“Thank you for my cocktail.” Holy shit, I’m slurring my words. Moving constantly from one partner to the next, I didn’t realize when I shifted from warm giddiness to actually feeling drunk.

I’d better keep moving so it doesn’t catch up with me even harder.

“You’re most welcome.” His voice somehow carries itself as a husky whisper through the music.

“I knew it was you.” I proclaim giddily, but never allow my feet to stop moving. I’m starting to feel something, and if I take a break now, it’s going to get a whole lot worse. I really don’t want to make an ass of myself in front of my mysterious stranger.

“Are you doing alright?” His smooth as silk voice travels down my ear.

“You’re probably so freaking sexy under that mask.” I blurt out, without thinking. My eyes widen and I gulp down hard at my outburst.

There goes any attempt at not making an ass of myself.

He uses his hands, on my hips, to pull me tighter against his body, when he leans in again. I can feel every inch of his firm body now. The tight abs he must spend way too much time in the gym for. His strong hands grip me firmly in place, while we rock back and forth to the beat. Most surprisingly, it’s the stiffness of the muscle dangling between his legs that I feel most of all.

If I hadn’t just caught myself saying something I’m already regretting, I’d have probably made some crude joke about his club bashing down my walls. Well... if he’s lucky, I might still do it. Aren’t random hook ups part of the clubbing experience?

As my mind crosses from nearly drunk to full-blown, on the verge of making big mistakes drunk, my senses reach new heights. He moves smoothly to the music and pulls me along with every one of his motions while I breathe in the intoxicating, woody aroma that clings to his skin. I can feel every flex of his muscles against my breasts and belly as we dance, and I'm constantly reminded of the bulge in his pants with every hip gyration he makes.

I've never been swept off my feet before. Who would've guessed it would be someone wearing a mask? Turns out, this bad boy shit is totally my jam.

But my euphoria is short-lived. Barely a song goes by before my head suddenly feels as if it has tripled in weight. My limbs follow suit, and it's becoming harder and harder to keep time with the mysterious stranger's energetic movements.

For the first time since he came over to me, his entrancing eyes have shifted away from me. I can't see where he's looking, but there's a cold intent in that gaze. Total hardness that rivals the rod jamming into my side.

"It's time for you to go home, Fiametta."

Did he just use my name? No. It can't be. My drunken brain must be playing tricks on me.

"What did you ju—" My words aren't slurring anymore, they're full-blown gibberish in my ears. I can't even shout them out to cut through the music anymore.

"Go home. You're not looking well." His eyes continue gazing out into the distance while he speaks. "Wouldn't want to see you hurt by someone looking to take advantage of you."

That's a plus, right? He can tell I'm on the verge of blacking out, but he's trying to

help me get away from here. His good-natured spirit makes me want to stay even longer. Spend time in his arms and—

“Fia?” Simone’s voice tickles the inside of my ear. Her hands wrap around my waist, breaking the stranger’s contact for the first time since he touched me. “Are you okay?” Her question comes out in a frenzy of anxiety.

“I’m fine ” is what I try to answer, but the noise “ im fn” is all I can muster.

“Do you know her?” The stranger asks Simone, staring into her eyes with a dangerously protective glare.

“She’s my best friend.” Simone hooks one of my arms over her shoulder. “What happened to her?”

“Drunk, I think.” He rolls his enormous shoulders. “Started collapsing in my arms.”

I admit to Simone, in the broken language of inebriation, that I had a drink without her.

“Oh, Lord, let’s get you out of here.” The giggling that follows her statement is proof that this isn’t anything serious. At least not to me.

Well, Mr. Barman, you weren’t lying about that drink. So, cheers to a great night out and The Morning After .

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:57 pm

Chapter Three

CRUE

“Let’s get this done quickly,” I growl at Mark when I find him lingering in the hallway between the men’s and women’s bathrooms. He’s lazing against the wall with his back pressed against it, and a lit cigarette hangs from his hand, as if we aren’t here on a job.

“Not gonna ask how it went with that ginger firecracker?”

I don’t have time to indulge his teasing tone. My timer for these kills started ticking the second the ginger firecracker whisked Fia away. If I still want to finish these kills and be out in time to catch them, we’d better get moving.

“Heard enough from her.” I pat him on the shoulder as an indication to follow me.

“What? Really?” He sounds surprised. Maybe it’s excitement.

Who cares? Emotions muddy the senses. This wasn’t the right time to rib him about the best chance he’s had to get laid in weeks.

“No,” I shut it down. “She was preoccupied with Fiametta after the chemical cocktail I fed her.”

“Taking Matteo’s words to heart, are we?” Mark hooks an arm over my shoulder and starts walking out of sync, as though he’s had way too much to drink. “Break that

poor girl in a million different ways before you kill her.”

I won't confess it to Mark, at least not yet, but I beat Matteo to the punch on this one. Fiametta Napoli became my plaything the second she stepped out of the Sanctuary Club. Finding out she's Lorenzo Napoli's daughter only sweetened the deal. I can have my toy, rough it up, and when it's broken and boring, I'll throw it away and move on.

“Shut it,” I reprimand him in lieu of an answer. “I want you tip top until we're done.”

“Whatever you say, boss man.” Mark lets his words start rolling longer, emphasizing his false inebriation as we reach the bathroom door.

I'll give him credit where it's due. Mark's a good actor. We don't do it often, but under conditions such as these, where we want to appear as inconspicuous as possible, it's a valuable tool in our toolbox.

It has always come naturally to me. I suppose that's because I've been acting normal my whole life. In my youth it was falsifying emotions of happiness, irritation, or grief. Mimicking the other children, after our teacher gave us tasks or orders. As I grew older, it became a matter of survival.

The fact that I can kill with a grin on my face, as well as my eagerness to be sent from one battle to the next, raised more than a few eyebrows. A handful of tests and checks later, some blonde bimbo doctor labeled me a psychopath and suggested removing me from the army and placing me in an institution for my own good.

My commanding officer didn't buy her bullshit and kept me on to finish my tour, before releasing me to do as I chose with a firm nudge toward the mental health options. But what self-respecting monster would try and hide his demons inside a prison in his mind?

Instead, Mark and I opened a hunting shop. It's a perfect cover for guys like us. I started blending into society as Crue Amos, American every-man. Luckily, I don't have to play the role often. No one comes into our store to strike up a conversation or to make friends. They're all like me. Jumping from one kill to the next.

"Can't we move any faster?" Mark's gone fully into his character now, and I can barely make out the words he's trying to use. We burst through the restroom door and rush to one of the stalls. "I'm about to piss myself."

"Almost there, buddy. Hold it a little longer." I take the time to scan our surroundings. There are three guys in the bathroom. Our two targets, who are standing side by side at the urinals, and a third, unfortunate bystander washing his hands. He has about thirty seconds to get out of here.

"She's gone. Looks like we can call it a night." The meatier of the two says.

"No trouble from the masked crusader, either. All in all, I'd say it's a good night," the shorter one replies.

Mr. Meat and Short-stack have a name for me? How sweet.

"Wha' the fu' are y' doing?" Mark starts our mock fight as we reach the stall. "I'm not goin' in with you."

He's loud and obnoxious and he's drawing everyone's attention to him. Exactly as planned.

"You can't stand on your own feet, man."

"I'm pissing at the wall." He tears himself off of me and starts fumbling over his feet toward the urinals.

Last chance, little man in the mirror. You better start running.

I chase after Mark and extend my hands out toward him as he reaches our targets. As soon as I'm near enough, I give him a hard push that sends him firmly into Mr. Meat. Mark slams against him and, even though the other guy is big, Mark has fifty pounds on him and slams him into the urinal.

All hell breaks loose.

"What are you doing?" Mr. Meat roars, yanking his cock through the zip and inspecting the piss stains accumulated on his trousers from the urinal.

"Oh, you know," Mark's voice is back to normal, "having some fun with it."

He grabs Mr. Meat by the neck and drives his head forward into the wall. Short-stack recoils from the scene, with his dick still dangling out of his zipper. He's well-trained enough to know he should go for his gun first but doesn't have the iron edge needed to do so amid the confusion.

My time to shine.

I slip my hand beneath my leather jacket and bring it back out after pulling a shimmering silver dagger from its sheath. I launch toward Short-stack before he clears his holster and press the tip of my blade into his throat.

I hate that I can't have my usual fun with these two. Take my time. Watch the fear flicker in their eyes and listen to the all-empowering sound of their drawing their last breath. The guy at the mirror hasn't moved away and, if I want to deal with him before he disappears out the door, a quick flick of my blade into Short-stack's jugular will have to do.

“Holy shit, you killed him.” The guy squeals, recoiling away from me.

“I did.” I remove my blade from Short-stack’s neck, and flick it hard, to remove any excess blood. There’s nothing worse than a slippery blade. “You should’ve run when you had the chance, Fuck-Face.”

Mr. Meat, Short-stack and... Fuck-Face. Not every nickname’s going to be a winner.

“I won’t tell anyone. Promise. I don’t even know what you look—”

“Oh, shut up,” Mark groans. He, and Mr. Meat, have come down from the wall in the time it took me to handle Short-stack. Mark has moved from slamming him against tiles, to slamming him directly into the urinal. Given how Mr. Meat’s face is caved in, I’m pretty sure he’s dead already. But what kind of friend would I be, if I took the joy out of killing for Mark? “Your whimpering is drowning out the sound of this guy’s head smacking against the porcelain. And I’ll tell you what, son, it’s a much better sound than the dogshit they’re playing out there.”

I catch up to Fuck-Face quickly and wrap my gloved hand around his throat. I’m not going to torture him. Hell, if I could feel anything at all, I’d probably feel bad for what I have to do to him.

As it stands, he’s a complication.

I don’t like those.

“I’ll make it as easy on you as I can,” I whisper, trying to muster up as much raw emotion as possible to make his journey to the afterlife slightly easier.

With one hard thrust of the dagger, I drive the blade between his ribs and pierce his heart. Another perk of owning a hunting store, I suppose. No one asks questions

about how you know anatomy so well.

“There, there. It’s all over now.” I keep my gaze locked on his. I missed it on Short-stack, but I won’t let his light extinguish without catching a glimpse of it.

“Alright, we’re done here.” Mark drives the heel of his hefty boot into what was once Mr. Meat’s nose. He does it again for good measure.

We’re off without another word, leaving the brutal aftermath for some poor soul to find. We head straight for the exit.

“What’s next?” he asks, as the first gust of fresh air washes over us.

We’re barely out the door, and I’m already scanning the street for the rest of my night’s delight. It only takes one up and down sweep of the street to find Fiametta. She has an arm hooked over the ginger firecracker’s shoulder, and they’re both leaning against their Uber driver’s car for support.

Maybe I was a little heavy handed when I dropped my sleepy pills into her drink. Oh well, the more she’s had, the less she’ll remember about what happens tonight.

“Go home and rest. I’ll see you at the store on Monday. Don’t be late. We’re getting in that order of buckshot and bait. I don’t want to deal with those pricks alone.” An order for him, but not for me.

Matteo’s dossier includes Fiametta’s address, but I prefer to hunt the old-fashioned way. There’s no better thrill in this world than tracking a target, be it man or beast. Discovering its habits, evaluating its weaknesses, and creating the perfect strike to bring it down.

A file full of information would definitely make it easier, but there’s no fun in being

spoon fed.

“Shouldn’t we lay low or something? We just killed two guys.” Mark’s concerns are valid, but irrelevant. Breaking the rigorous order and structure of our routine of the past eighteen months would be more suspicious than carrying on as normal. Besides, we were wearing masks when we killed two of Lorenzo Napoli’s goons, no one’s going to bat an eye at their deaths. The only complication that may arise might come from Fuck-Face’s not leaving when he had the chance. I won’t lose any sleep over him, though. Casualties of war happen every day, and when the cops find Napoli men lying dead in pools of blood and piss, they’ll just think of him as the unlucky victim of some turf war.

“Sure. Until Monday. Buckshot and bait,” Mark echoes my words.

I give him a pat on the shoulder. It isn’t much of a reward for a job well done, especially considering what I’m getting, but it will have to do.

We part ways, with Mark heading up the street, where he left his car a few blocks away. I walk calmly to my BMW, get into the driver’s seat, and watch as her friend struggles and manages to get Fiametta into the car.

I follow them from the club to her place.

Fiametta can hardly stand on her own two feet when they stop outside her apartment building. Her friend’s forceful pulls are the only thing keeping her moving, and she’s assisted by the Uber driver who has a deeply worried look on his face. The ladies disappear into the lobby, leaving the Uber driver waiting outside.

I spend the next forty-five minutes waiting for the firecracker to conclude her business upstairs, taking in my surroundings while I wait. The first thing that catches my attention is a Rentals Available sign outside the building opposite Fiametta’s. She

lives in the nice part of town, full of tall buildings, with regal, elegant architecture. Most are apartments, but a few are triple-story houses with front lawns.

I haven't seen a single bum loitering on the street, and the same security truck has done its route twice in the time I've been here. They must come out every half an hour or so, to ensure their streets remain clean and tidy.

Whether they are in secrecy or not, the perks of being a mob boss's daughter are astounding.

Right, time to move , I urge myself as the ginger firecracker leaves by the front door. She gets into her car, and I watch her drive away, until her headlights vanish in the distance. To save myself the hassle of having to find exactly where Fiametta is inside this building, I grab Matteo's notes and read the few that are related to her apartment's interior:

Remington Building, apartment forty-eight. An end apartment with the main bedroom joining the fire escape to the street, and the second conjoined to the neighboring wall.

Master bedroom: en-suite bathroom. Walk-in closet. Access to main balcony.

Second bedroom: down a T-shaped adjoining hall. Bedroom on the right. Bathroom on the left. Smaller. Standard cupboards. No access to the balcony.

Open-plan kitchen, dining and living room, with an overhanging loft – part of which extends to a second, higher balcony. The other is cut off for staircase use.

Balconies, top and bottom, overlooking the street.

The already thorough notes are accompanied by a design and layout blueprint with measurements for each of the listed spaces. If only Matteo made it this easy for all of

my targets, I would've finished his list weeks ago.

From the outside, everything matches so far. Now, let's take a look at the inside.

I get out of my car and cross the street, breaching the Remington's main door. An old man is snoring at the front desk, with a tiny box TV at his side playing decades old re-runs of Cheers, making slipping past him an easy task.

A familiar sensation raises the hair on my arms as I press the number four in the elevator. It's the same feeling I always get when I'm alone with my prey, watching them silently from the shadows, while they cower and squirm or try their hardest to break free of their bonds.

It shouldn't be surprising, but it is. I'm not here to kill Fiametta. I'm here to observe, gather intel, and start building my own report on her routine and habits.

So, why am I so excited?

That's when I realize how worked up Fiametta has me, and I'm thankful I haven't lowered my mask since I got out of the car.

Cameras . I didn't bother looking for them when I walked into the Remington, and now it's too late to scour the front and lobby. The elevator doesn't have one, and when I step off onto Fiametta's floor, I can't see any along the ceiling. Maybe I dodged a bullet by blind luck, this time, but I can't allow myself to be this reckless again.

The halls are empty, but that's unsurprising since the clock just struck two A.M. I slip my hand into my leather jacket's breast pocket and pull out my leather toolbox, before I walk the short distance to Fiametta's door. Outside it, I grab the various items I need to pick the door's lock and get to work.

I learned lock picking as part of my Special Ops training, and I've mastered the skill over my years of becoming New York's most elite assassin. Slipping in and out of wherever I need to go is an important skill, and rudimentary door locks pose no challenge. Less than a minute passes before I hear the satisfying click of an unlocked door.

Since Fiametta will be sound asleep, and the firecracker departed not long ago, the deadbolt is unlatched, and the door swings open with a push. I step inside and lock the door behind me, on the off-chance reinforcements were called in at any point during my wait outside.

My first glance leads me to believe that all of Matteo's notes were correct. The living room lamp is still on, as well as one in the dining room, and it gives me a clear view of it and with light fading as it enters the kitchen. Overhead, the wooden floors of the loft make up the ceiling, and through the tall windows I can see the narrow balcony it leads onto.

I almost want to find a flaw in his notes, and if I had brought my measuring tape, I might've gone through the flat, room by room to see if the blueprint is also correct. There's time to waste, after all. Fiametta won't wake from my chemically induced slumber for at least another seven hours.

As I didn't know what to expect when I embarked on this venture, I'm surprised to see that her apartment is spotlessly clean. Everything in the living room has its place and is laid out neatly. If it wasn't for the freshly wiped counter tops, I'd have thought she never used this space.

But Fiametta is daddy's spoiled princess, and she probably has a score of maids who come in and out of this place to make sure it's perfect for her.

Ignoring the spare bedroom for now, I head straight for the open door that sits

between the dining table and kitchen counter. Although the combination of drugs I slipped into her drink has never failed me before, I still approach with caution. Every step I take carries the same wave of discomfort I felt when I first saw her. Unsteady heartbeat, pumping hot blood through my otherwise tepid body. And once more, it all seems to settle in my loins, forcing my cock to swell and stiffen uncomfortably in my jeans.

Her slow, steady breaths, accompanied by the occasional bout of light snoring, fill the otherwise silent void of her blackened room. It takes a moment for my night-eyes to kick in, as I travel from one corner of her room to the next. First, I find my way to the door leading onto the balcony, and test its lock. It slides open with the lightest of pulls. Makes sense. Why would she be concerned about someone getting in through it, when she's on the fourth floor?

I creep along the tall windows on the far side of the room and inspect the window leading out to the fire escape. She's smart enough to keep this one locked, but a quick look tells me it'll be easy enough to slip something long and thin inside to unbolt the window if needed.

Her room doesn't say much about her personality. Apart from the clothing monster growing in the corner, it's minimalist and sparse. Even some of the items that are haphazardly placed on shelves are of no value in gaining an insight into who Fiametta is. There are no family photographs and no trinkets that carry real meaning, just things that are there for the sake of being there. Maybe that's a look into her mind in itself. Maybe she isn't bothered by material things.

As I am making my way back through the darkness, I nearly trip over the mountain of clothing piled up on the floor that I saw from the door. I stumble forward and catch onto a tall chest of drawers to stabilize myself, knocking everything atop it over in the process.

“Fuck,” I mutter to myself with annoyance, rearranging the items to an upright position. I have no idea how it looked before, so here’s hoping Fiametta won’t think twice about it in the morning.

All those thoughts are stripped clean from my mind when I hear Fiametta utter a soft sound from behind me. I snap my head in her direction. The noise disturbed her but didn’t break her sleep.

Good. I haven’t been myself during this entire expedition, and I don’t want to resort to threats or violence to keep her calm. But now that I have her in my view, I can’t look away again. I’m drawn closer to her, this time giving the clothing monster a wide berth, until I’m standing right next to her sleeping body.

I kneel down beside her. I watch her thin, white duvet rise and fall with the rhythm of her breathing. I listen to her soft coo and gentle snores. For a very brief, and fluttering moment, I could see myself enjoying this sight and these sounds for a lot longer than just tonight.

If Fiametta really was just an innocent stranger disembarking from the Sanctuary club for whatever reason, there might’ve been a chance at something more. What that means to a man like me, I can’t say.

Those pure thoughts leave as quickly as they came. To my great annoyance, it’s not my mind that insists I get back on track with my task, but my throbbing cock, which urges me to pull away her blanket. To strip her naked. To shove myself into her mouth to lube up, before I force my way into her tight little pussy.

I’ve never denied myself the pleasure before, so why would I now?

I run my gloved hand up over Fiametta’s body, making my way to the end of the blanket resting just below her neck. I caress the grooves and lines of her toned body,

and my fingers come to a stop on the crest of her breast, lingering at the sensation of her already hard nipples poking through the blanket.

Fiametta lets out a soft humming noise while I stroke the sensitive bead. Only a few moments ago, I was glad she remained sound asleep. Now? I'd love for her to wake up. I would love to have her stare deeply into my eyes as I draw back her covering and have my way with her.

These thoughts inspire my next actions. My hand snaps to her duvet's opening and I yank it off her body with such force, a gust of wind blows in my direction. Still, she doesn't stir.

I was definitely heavy handed in my delivery of her dose. Not that I had much choice in how much was dropped in. There was a very narrow window between the barman's collecting my bill and getting back so he could take the drink to Fiametta.

Oh well, I'm not going to let that ruin my fun.

As the duvet falls to the floor, I'm given my first up close and personal view of Fiametta Napoli. She is sleeping soundly, dressed in a pair of lacy black panties and an oversized T-shirt that rides up her body to expose the bottom of her tits.

I lick my lips and swallow a mouthful of saliva as my eyes glimpse the sweet spot between her legs. Digging my knee into the bed, I lean closer and breathe in the lightly sweet, vanilla perfume she's wearing. It tickled a nerve in my brain while we were dancing earlier together, and now it makes my cock strain agonizingly against my jeans.

I trail the tip of my finger over her exposed belly, which prompts another noise from Fiametta. It's an almost silent whimper, triggered by gently tightening muscles being tickled. Her body won't be numb from my drug. I designed it with the goal of

knocking my targets out but leaving them with enough sense of touch to feel my blade pierce their skin. After I understood how well it worked, it became my weapon of choice for every circumstance, including taking a woman I want, when I wanted her.

It wouldn't be fair for them not to experience the pleasure I'm indulging in for myself.

With the positives, come the negatives. And in Fiametta's case, too much of a good thing has put her in a deep sleep she won't come out of until the drugs wear off. If I understood the chemistry better, I could synthesize it to be better in times like these. But that's for the nerds in the lab to figure out.

And not to steal from Mark, but he said it best.

Killing is what I do, and buddy, I'm damn good at what I do.

My finger slips lower until it hooks the waistband of her panties. I move my free hand to join it, and slowly peel away the lace material. It's too dark to see what I'm looking for, but that won't stop my exploration. I brush the back of my finger along her now exposed skin.

Even through the glove, I can tell she's smooth. Cleanly shaven for her night out, on the chance of getting lucky. If tonight goes well, she'll never realize she did.

I come to a stop before reaching her clitoris. If anything's going to get close to that little nub of joy, it's going to be my mouth. I'm not wasting this first intimate touch to a glove.

I slot one hand between Fiametta's thighs and the other against my cock to give it the attention it deserves for bringing me this far. I spread her legs apart.

My touch is met with another soft utterance, this time closer to a moan than just a garbled noise. I pull down the front of my mask and descend to her thighs, slowly stroking the length of my erection as I go. My lips make contact with her thighs, rousing another moan from Fiametta. This time it's deeper and more guttural. It plays in my ears on repeat, long after she falls silent again.

Does she want this as much as I do?

Trailing kisses along the curvature of her body, I head for her core. Her soft skin caresses my cheek as I move, and it feels fucking amazing.

Then, before I can reach my destination, a cellphone starts to ring on her bedside table, and the sound pulls me away from my prize. It's Lorenzo, no doubt calling to ensure his daughter's safety, after hearing that two men wound up dead in the club where she was spending the evening.

This has got to be some wicked trick that fate is pulling on me. I could end it all here and be done with this whole ordeal, even if it pisses Matteo off that I'm working out of order. But I'm also being cock blocked by the man I'm trying to hurt.

Hmm, she definitely has an interesting effect on me. It's the first time I've thought about my job since I saw her. As soon the distraction forces my dick to release control of my mind, my good sense returns.

What am I doing here?

Killing Fiametta Napoli isn't just another paycheck. It's also my opportunity to get revenge for what her cunt father did to my mom. I'm risking too much by rubbing my dick through my jeans like an amateur stalker hunting his first college slut.

Next to her phone, and illuminated by the still ringing screen, I see something vastly

out of place in this modern, minimalist wasteland. It's an obviously well-read hard copy of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. I open the front cover, and instantly see the notes and questions Fiametta has scribbled in it over the years. Thumbing through the pages, I see more notes scribbled throughout. Certain sections are underlined and have sticky notes stuck to them. Others have a rudimentary color scheme highlighting the words. From my limited understanding of Fiametta's system, red seems to have some meaning but not much, orange and yellow inch closer, and green holds the highest importance.

One line in particular has a combination of all Fiametta's of various systems. It's underlined with a ruler, unlike some of her sloppier work before it. It's highlighted in green with brackets etched in pen to block it out from the rest of the text. It lies beneath three sticky notes that are filled to the brim with her thoughts and feelings.

In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.

The first note is an analytical view of Darcy's mindset. I read it, though the tedium makes my brain reject holding on to the information any longer than it must. The second is Fiametta fawning over the relationship Darcy and Elizabeth share.

It's her final sticky note that gives me a deeper insight into her mind. It isn't a rambling mess like the others, but focuses on one succinct point.

Can such a connection really exist? It reads. This purest form of love after rejection.

Interesting. None of these words can be about me. We only met a few hours ago. But they speak to me in a way I can't rationalize. It's as if Fiametta was given the gift of foresight and peered into the future to see me standing here, watching her sleep, while my own inner turmoil begins.

Out of everything I've come across, this old book has told me more about her than the environment she dwells in. She's intelligent, a deep thinker, and she protects anything that holds meaning in her life.

With a final glance in Fiametta's direction, I rise from the bed and head for the door. I leave her in the state I put her in, while want and reason battle in my head. Yes, she's a target and my best shot at avenging my mother's untimely death, but I also want to feel her tight pussy wrapped around my shaft.

I finish my inspection of her apartment, taking note of the entryways, exits, and places I can hide away in a pinch, if it ever comes to that. These are the important points Matteo's notes couldn't cover, and they're the only ones that actually mean anything.

Once done, I reluctantly go back the way I came. I typically wouldn't let a phone call scare me off, but for all I know, Lorenzo's dispatched an army to check on his daughter.

I've had a taste of Fiametta Napoli, however short and not the way I really wanted.

And like a ravenous wolf tasting blood after a long period of starvation, I need more.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:57 pm

Chapter Four

FIAMETTA

What the hell happened last night? This waking thought permeates the thumping in my skull. My eyes strain to focus, as they open, and are relieved by the comforting sight of the familiarity of my bedroom.

Okay, good. At least I'm not in some stranger's place with no memory of how I ended up there.

But what do you remember, Fiametta?

Dancing. Lots of dancing. Feeling the bass reverberate through my body and shake me to the bone. Jumping from one partner to the next, taking on all comers without question. And then...

Him.

Emerald eyes shining beneath the dim club lights. An incredible physique and strong hands he didn't want to take off me. Surprisingly limber and graceful on his feet for someone so enormous. The firm pressure from his hips jabbing into me every time he swayed his hips.

My cheeks burn at that last thought.

No time for that. What else? Think. How did you get here? My inner voice

reprimands me for veering off course. I'm trying to solve a mystery here, not indulge in fantasies about a stranger I'll never see again.

The barman. He warned me not to drink the Morning After too fast, but I didn't listen. Even so, this isn't a typical hangover. Hell, I haven't been able to move from my bed or turn my eyes away from the ceiling while my brain spins in overdrive.

Wait a second! The guy I was dancing with, he... he said my name. He ordered me to head home.

Then my world went black.

My throat closes up and I shoot upright in my bed. I wince as the sudden movement makes the throbbing pain in my head trickle down my spine. My bottom half is uncovered, and my duvet lies on the floor, which elicits a new wave of anxiety. I rarely sleep this exposed. I love the feeling of being cozy beneath my blankets.

I reach for my phone and see six missed calls from my father. I swipe the notification away, searching for one that might ease the tension mounting in my stomach.

A deep sigh of relief barrels out from my chest when I see a text from Simone:

Hey, Fi-Fi.

Got you home safe. You weren't looking too good. Put you to bed. Got you cuddly and cozy, the way you like, and headed out. Give me a call if you need anything.

xoxo

Her message is packed with emojis, from smileys to hugs, and a ton of multicolored hearts at the end. Something happened last night, that much is clear, but without

Simone there to get me out, my night could've ended much more badly.

I send a reply to let her know I've survived:

Thanks for the assist. Don't know what happened. One minute I was dancing, the next I was out cold. Probably some creep trying to get into my pants.

I delete the last sentence. If it didn't cross her mind, I shouldn't add to her concerns.

"Oh shit," I mutter to myself, noticing the time in the top corner of my phone. I'm already an hour late to open my shop and, if I want to get there at all, I need to get moving.

I take slow steps from my bed to the en-suite, and stare at myself in the mirror for an uncomfortably long time while the shower heats up. Running my hands over my face and wiping the sleepy sand from my eyes helps restore enough of my blurred vision to notice the wreck that last night left me.

I have bloodshot eyes and scuffed make-up with long lines of mascara running down my face. My sunken cheeks and blocked nose have me pulling funny faces as if I've got a serious cold. I don't even want to look at the knotty shambles that is my hair.

I grab a bottle of eye-drops from the cabinet and give each eye three good squirts. The sudden wetness against my pupils helps ease my headache and makes getting in the shower a less laborious task.

Alright, I can get back to sleuthing later. As deeply curious as I am, running it through in my head and letting the what-ifs of last night play on my emotions will only fuel my paranoia, and I can't have that.

Father's meeting stokes enough fear inside me as is. Our dinners aren't really that

rare. We see each other twice a month at a minimum. But his men are dying, and he doesn't know why. It's smarter to assume this isn't a catch up and nice meal. He is going to want something from me.

I splash lukewarm water over my face to stop my mind from jumping straight to the worst possibilities and start scrubbing yesterday's sin off my body.

Fifteen minutes later, with freshly washed hair and feeling as refreshed as I can with my head weighing double its normal state, I finish showering and head for my walk-in closet. Opting out of my usual work attire – a summer dress, belt and sandals – I pick out a dark-blue blouse, black jeggings and sneakers.

It's a little more formal, and that is Father's preference.

However, as I turn away from my closet, I notice something out of the ordinary which makes my heart stand still. My collection of trinkets, which includes miniature glass animals, tiny dancing cherubs and a plush teddy the size of my thumb, is out of position on my chest of drawers. And although I'm not overly pedantic about everything having its place in my room, or even in my house for that matter, seeing them scattered in the wrong formation feels like a bad omen.

Maybe Simone did this when she left for the night. But she's walked through my room a thousand times, and if all she did was tuck me into bed, there was no reason for her to come this way. Even checking the sliding door's lock wouldn't bring her close enough to the chest to bump into it.

So, if it wasn't her, then who was it?

Could Father or one of his men come to check on me when I didn't return his calls? Another no. He wouldn't risk it unless he was absolutely certain my life was in danger.

The mysterious stranger with those dazzling eyes? My entire body tenses as I remember how I woke up. No duvet covering me, no panties, no memory.

I gulp down hard and run a hand through my still damp hair. I'll brush it on my ride to work, and let it air dry for however long it takes.

Come on, Fia. You're being crazy. It wasn't him .

Unless... he followed us.

No. Of course, not. It's a coincidence I'm looking too deeply into the whole thing.

But if that's the case, why is the cold dagger of fear quickly being replaced by hollow disappointment? Is his invasion of my home and wicked touch preferable to knowing I walked away unscathed?

Holy shit, I really am being crazy.

I gather my things and bolt out of my apartment, wanting to put as much distance between it and myself as possible. A twenty-minute taxi ride later, I'm inside my boutique, with a big mug of coffee in hand, waiting for customers.

After the first two hours tick by with just a few window-shoppers and browsers, I come to the same realization I always do. Opening without any appointments lined up is a huge waste of time. Although I've formed a small community of upper-class woman, who want what I make, I still lack the credibility of a big brand name as far as the general population is concerned. It can't help that my entire operation consists of my two seamstresses and me. Where mainline shelves are stocked with at least four sizes of each article of clothing, I don't have the staff to keep everyone happy.

In my fugue state of boredom, waiting, and letting my overactive imagination run

wild, I catch a glimpse of something outside. I swear I see my mysterious stranger standing between the cars in the strip mall's parking lot. He's dressed, from head to toe, in the same outfit as last night. Jeans, leather jacket, and a biker mask that covers everything but his eyes and his dirty blonde hair.

A truck obscures my short glimpse of him, and after it passes, the place where he stood is vacant.

Oh good, now I'm seeing things. It's easier to believe my mind is playing tricks on me. Searching desperately for an answer, and too sleepy to function properly, I'd take anything out of context as long as it fits the narrative I want it to.

I decide it's a dud of a day and close my doors, before retreating to my studio in the back. I spend a couple minutes going through patterns and ideas, and then I collapse onto a pile of unfinished projects and material scraps for a long nap. When you're as tired as I am, it's surprising what could be considered comfortable enough to sleep on.

Deep, dreamless sleep follows, until I wake up to a call from one of Father's men. I expect him to give me a long set of instructions on how best to get to the family mansion, but to my surprise he tells me to meet him in the parking lot.

I creep almost nervously to my store's front window and peer out to see if I can spot my father's man out there. The most I can make out is the Napoli-signature midnight-blue G-Wagon. It's the same car all of Father's made men drive.

After what happened yesterday, and the sudden change in how we usually do this, I'm not taking any chances. The G-Wagon's tinted windows aren't helping, either. For all I know, the shadow moving behind the steering wheel, is that jewel-eyed monster, coming to finish off what he started last night.

I'm way too on edge. He was a guy in a club. Where we wore masks. He's definitely out there somewhere, just nowhere near me. I'm creating demons in my head to justify a bad thing that happened to me. And while that's okay, sometimes it's better to let sleeping dogs lie.

Here goes nothing.

I exit the shop and lock up before I head to the G-Wagon. The doors unlock as I get to the passenger door, and I swing one open.

"Evening, Miss Napoli. Let's get going," the driver glances in the rear-view mirror as if looking for someone.

"Hi," I say, and crawl into my seat. There's a touch of sadness hidden in my tone, and I have no idea why.

Unless I do, and I don't want to admit it.

Shrugging it off as we start to drive, I turn my attention back to the brute in the driver's seat. Looking at him, reveals how little I actually know about the mysterious stranger from last night. Apart from his dark-brown eyes and the deep crow's feet running from the corners of his eyes, they could be one and the same person. I chuckle at the lunacy that's kept me in its grip all day and snap back to reality.

"Did my father send you here? To take me home?" If I wasn't sitting down already, I'd fall to my ass in astonishment. I can't believe it took me this long to realize how unprecedented this is.

"Uh-huh," his answer is less than satisfactory. But maybe he doesn't know how big a deal it is for my father to have normal people see I'm his daughter.

“And he isn’t worried about anyone seeing us?” I furrow my brow at him. I better get more than a grumble for an answer this time.

“Said it’s for the best.” Darn it. Four words is definitely more than a grumble. He keeps his deadpan gaze on the road ahead, as the car starts roaring through the higher gears. Before long, we’re cruising in overdrive and heading down the highway at a ludicrous speed. No cops will dare stop us, I’m sure. Father has far too many of them on his payroll.

“Not much of a talker, are you?” I humph and turn my attention away from him.

“Nope.” Our conversation dies with that single word, and we drive the rest of the way in silence.

When we stop at Father’s mansion, I find I am in a rush to get this over with, and I head straight for the dining room. I barely make it down the first hallway before a gentle voice comes from behind.

“Miss Napoli.” I turn around to see a beautiful, young blonde wearing a black and white maid’s outfit. Behind her, other members of staff carry serving trays, in the opposite direction of where I’m walking. “Mr. Napoli instructed us to move dinner to the veranda.”

His second favorite spot.

“Thank you.” I follow along behind her and the others.

Father is sitting at the head of a six-person table. His left hand, adorned with rings of various stones across every finger, holds a cocktail glass by the stem. Among the array of status symbols, his wedding band remains firmly in its place on his ring finger. Old and worn now, from years of his playing with it.

To his right, Tomas Bernardi, the Napoli family consigliere, is chewing on the end of a cigarillo. His beady eyes snap to me the instant I step outside, while father's remain fixed on the looming shadows, cast by the tall trees scattered across his property.

“Where were you last night, Fiametta?”

Shit. He is pissed. Father never says my full name unless I'm in serious trouble.

I swallow audibly and clear my throat. I've got to choose my words very carefully, if I want to walk away from this still in his good graces.

“We were at the club. I had a few too many and—”

Father raises a finger to silence me. He looks up at me with forced indifference. He's trying to stay calm, but he can't control the anger that's bubbling to the surface.

I take my seat on his left and pour myself a glass of water.

“A few too many? You were dead to this world. I had to send Tomas to your apartment to ensure you weren't dead to me .” Father's eyes narrow to tiny slits while mine widen in disgust.

Was it him all along? Was Tomas the monster who plagued my thoughts all day? Oh, God, I'm gonna throw up.

Tears sting the rim of my eyes while flashes of what might have happened dart across my mind. His mockingly twisted, yellow-toothed grin spreading wide while his gnarled, tobacco-stained fingers run across my skin.

I can imagine him, lost in the darkness and pretending to do routine checks on windows and locks, stumbling into my desk of drawers. Adjusting my trinkets to look

almost correct. I can see him putting on the whole show just to have an excuse for why he was in my room at all.

But somehow, behind the brewing nausea and disgust, my heart sinks.

This hard to swallow pill quells any delusions I had of the mysterious stranger's breaking into my apartment. As messed up as it sounds, the idea of it had started tickling me in a way I didn't want to shake.

It could've been the start of our very own fucked up love story. God, I need to get laid if this is what I consider the start of a relationship.

Finally putting the entire ordeal to rest should make me happy. It should halt the bile that's clawing up my throat, as I look at Tomas's sneer. At least I'm not in danger.

But there's a chance I never was in danger. Anything could've happened to my drink. Maybe one of the fruits, added for garnish, wasn't washed properly and gave me some short-lived food poisoning.

"Wha..." I choke on the word, and sip some more water. I don't even know what I want to say. I'm just speaking to fill the silence and to still my racing mind.

Tomas jumps in before I can finish my sentence. "Oh, come now, don't look at me like that." He puffs on his cigarillo and rolls his eyes as if he's annoyed. "Your door was locked. I couldn't get in."

A heavy sigh of relief barrels out of my me, and that seems to be the perfect segue to my father's next question.

"Was someone with you last night, Fiametta?" His eyes trail lazily from me, back to the shadowy skyline once more.

“Simone. She helped me into bed and went home.” No use lying about it.

“No men?”

My eyes nearly shoot out of my skull in disbelief. “What? No.”

Unless...

If Tomas isn't lying, I can still dream about my stranger. Not that I'd mention anything about what truly transpired last night to Father. He'd go berserk if he found out I'd been drugged and potentially followed home.

“Don't be a child. I don't give a damn who you choose to fuck.” Father growls. “This isn't about my fatherly pride taking a hit, I'm trying to protect you.”

I hang my head to avoid further contact with his intense gaze. “Honestly. After Simone left, I was alone.” I allow him a moment to take in my response, before I ask. “What's this about? I haven't seen you this upset since—” Since Mother passed, I think, but don't dare say.

“Two more dead. Normally I wouldn't let it interfere with our arrangement or concern you, had the murders not occurred in the very same club where you were partying.” Father speaks with the calm stoicism of a mafia don. He isn't my parent right now, and this isn't a family dinner.

It's an interrogation.

“What?” My entire body coils so tightly, my muscles start to hurt.

“I fear that whoever is doing this knows our secret. They chose to send a message, with you there.” Father's voice softens enough to let me know he still cares, but the

fire in his eyes doesn't dwindle.

Could it be? The man who swept me off my feet, is the very same man who has slaughtered so many Napoli soldiers.

"Why wasn't it me?" A sudden fever hits my body and sweat forms on my brow. Just because it didn't happen last night, doesn't mean being added to his list isn't on the cards.

"Nothing is ever clear cut. I can make assumptions, but there's no point. To assume makes an ass out of you and me." Father shrugs and gives me a glum look as if to say you're going to hate what comes next . "Instead, I'm tightening security. For the foreseeable future, Tomas is going to be your personal bodyguard. Where you go, he goes." Father turns away from me, no doubt to avoid the look of disgust that comes over my face.

"Why Tomas?" I blurt out and I scramble to add onto it before Father notices my disrespect. "It would be easier to remain anonymous, if it was someone else. Wouldn't you prefer it that way?"

Father snaps his head back at me with flaring nostrils that match his enraged scowl.

Yup, he saw right through me.

"My decision is made, Fiametta. Keeping you hidden has been a waste of time. They found you anyway," I can almost hear the regret on his voice, for the years of missed time we can never get back. "No more hiding. If they want to come for me, for my family, then I'll meet their charge head on."

"I—" as much as I want to fight, I won't. The only thing it would change is how upset Father would get. "I understand."

“I knew you would. And it’s only temporary. Once we’ve dealt with this threat, your life can go back to normal.” Father turns a shifty gaze in Tomas’s direction, and they nod at each other. “As for why I chose Tomas, I trust him with my life. As a result, I know I can trust him with yours.”

Tomas eases back in his chair, locking eyes with me. He rolls the cigarillo between his lips, and chuckles sheepishly.

“So, roomy, do I get the big room or the little one?”

Chapter Five

CRUE

A nother day, another notch on my belt.

Groggy sounds emit from Rocco D'Angelo's mouth as he begins to stir from his sleep. While he was under the effects of my chemical cocktail, I sat him down in a cheap plastic garden chair and tethered his arms and neck to the concrete floor below us with thick chains.

Rocco's a big guy, and I'm not risking him breaking free.

He asks the usual slurred questions everyone in his position does as they wake: Who are you? Where am I? What is this place? You sick bastard, let me go. Do you know who you're screwing with?

I don't bother answering them anymore. They've lost all meaning. If he were a different man, perhaps I'd entertain them. Give him the satisfaction of knowing why I brought him into my kill chamber. But as he is one of Lorenzo Napoli's decorated capos, I'm sure Rocco knows exactly why I've brought him down here. Any second now, reality will trickle through his confusion and our fun can begin. Unlike Fiametta, I injected my concoction into Rocco, rather than feeding it to him. I find the precision of dosing with a needle easier than crushing up pills and dropping them into a drink.

"You're in luck," I say, once his feeble mockery and attempt to reason this out

passes.

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?” He has the stern gaze of a stone-cold killer. “Nothing about this feels lucky.”

“Yeah, you’re gonna hate what I’ve got in store for you.”

Intimidation amid mindless chatter. I don’t often engage in it, but today is a special day. For the first time in months, I’m alone. “But, on the bright side, at least you won’t be found in a nightclub’s restroom with several men’s piss splashed across your face.”

Men like Rocco are the reason I’ve long moved on from interrogations. The world has become desensitized to the art of torture. Sure, the body may hurt, but the mind doesn’t crack quite as easily. Because deep down they know what I’m doing is nothing compared to what will happen when Lorenzo gets his hands on them. They’d rather die in agony, than face their boss’s wrath.

They’re a unique breed, these Napoli goons.

“I’ve had a lot of help dealing with your kind, of late. From my employer.” I pause for dramatic effect, and intrigue dances in his hazel eyes. He’s the first to know who the masked crusader is, and I bet that somewhere in that thick skull of his, he believes he’ll walk away from here to tell Lorenzo. “Matteo Baronne, of course.”

“That son of a bitch put you up to all this?” He scoffs as if we’re two old friends, shooting the shit together.

“Sure, he did. Made a very compelling argument as to why I should help him, too.”

“Money?” Rocco raises an eyebrow, shifting his neck around to test the rigidity of his

metal collar. Don't worry, big guy, you aren't going anywhere.

"The money's good, I'll give Matteo that, but I'm here for a diffe—"

"Wait a second, do I know you?" Rocco cuts me off. My chemical cocktail must be releasing its hold on him.

Good.

"Do you?"

He does. But I don't want to spoil the fun for him yet, and I quickly change the subject. "Back to what I was saying. Between Matteo Baronne and a dear friend of mine, I've barely had time to myself as of late. And I truly cherish moments alone."

"Are you one of those sick fucks who gets off on banging corpses?" Rocco speaks in such a deadpan manner that even I want to applaud him. Not for what he says, that's just vile, but for the fact that he is staring into death's eyes and refusing to back down.

"No, you silly little man." There isn't anything little about the behemoth sitting in front of me. He's taller and more broadly shouldered than me, and his bald head is nearly double the size of mine. "It's because I can say what I want. Do what I want. And there are absolutely no consequences. Like telling you I work for Matteo, or that I'm the man who slaughtered your friends." His face doesn't move. "You're the only person I can be completely honest with."

"And what's so important that you had to kidnap me to get it off your chest?" He refers to my first two points as if we are chatting about the weather during a lunch break.

“Fiametta Napoli,” I say.

His eyes widen as if my speaking the name of the Don’s jewel is a curse. Shock turns to terror, and Rocco’s limbs start to rattle the chains that are keeping them in place. Perhaps I was mistaken about him. His suave calm is starting to crumble quite quickly.

“There’s something special about that pretty little thing, isn’t there?” I stare straight into his fluttering eyes. He can’t keep them still long enough to focus on anything in particular. Not that there’s anything in my chamber to look at.

Though I change the layout from person to person, the general vibe is always the same. Empty walls, a chair, and whatever they’re bound to.

Most importantly, the six-inch dagger I play with throughout our entire conversation is always the same.

“Managed to stoke a fire in this cold heart of mine.” I go on, as panicked huffs and uneasy grunts come Rocco’s lips. “It’s fitting that her name means flame, isn’t it?”

“Who are you?” he gulps. “Where am I?”

“This again?” I growl and my annoyance starts to build. “I ignored it once; do you really think I’ll do anything different this time?”

Yeah, I was wrong. It must have been shock that kept Rocco cool as a cucumber. Now that it’s starting to wear off, and adrenaline is taking over, his actual personality is starting to shine through. And here I thought, I’d finally met someone who could go toe-to-toe with me.

Ah, well, such is life.

“What is this place? How did I get here?” His eyes narrow as he prepares his final question, but he can’t face me while asking it. “What have you done with my wife and kids?” Rocco’s voice increases in pitch and temper as he thinks about his family. He makes a valiant attempt to lunge at me, but the chained collar around his neck chokes him back into his chair and makes him splutter.

Took you long enough to remember you had a family. That should’ve been his first thought, especially since I snatched him straight out of his home while they were in it.

“Thank whichever God you pray to that I have a soft spot for children,” I say, rotating the dagger in my hand until it catches the only light above us and reflects it into Rocco’s eyes.

Men and women are vile creatures. Wasted meat bags that hurt without care and take by destroying. Children are innocent. They aren’t born the monsters they become. They’re molded into them.

It’s a reality I understand, better than most.

“But we aren’t talking about you, Rocco. We’re talking about me. That’s why you’re here and not lying in some awkward position for your boss to find. You’d be wise to remember that.”

“Why me?” His eyes finally settle once the light strikes them.

“Your name is next on Matteo’s list. You’re not special, if that’s what you’re wondering.” That last part’s a lie. Over and above being on Matteo’s list, Rocco D’Angelo has been on mine for a very long time. “You’re an ear that’s about to go deaf, and it feels good to talk things out. Reasoning with the voices in my head doesn’t quite cut it sometimes.”

This conversation doesn't feel like anything to me. It's a tendency that's part of the disease that my military doctors dubbed psychopathic tendencies . And since they made it very clear that traditional therapy won't work for me, and that I'd be better off institutionalized, I resort to bouncing my wicked ideas off whoever ends up down here.

I've learned, through copious studying of the trade, that talking is the root of a therapy session. Some sources approach it with the utmost love, proclaiming it saved their lives, while others believe you're paying someone to tell you why you're right in doing what you do.

My results have varied, but the conclusion remains the same: the word of a man on the brink of death, someone who has lost everything and doesn't need to stimulate or berate you because of learned methods or societal norms, is the perfect candidate to set you straight. There's no reason to lie when you've got nothing to lose.

"Fiametta. Tell me about her," Rocco brings the conversation back around. Buying time against the inevitable, I presume.

However, since she's the reason I brought him here, I might as well go along with it.

"First girl who ever caught my attention. Genuinely snatched it by the throat and squeezed until I could hardly think straight, and it turns out she has an appointment in that chair you're sitting in. Mind you, if I keep up my good work, she should be down here in two weeks. Three, if I want to extend my fun. Life's a cruel bitch, isn't she?"

"So, what? You're taking your anger out on us, because you have to kill the don's daughter?" Rocco's trying to find a reason where there is none. Like a puppy chasing its tail. Even if he managed to catch it, he'd only hurt himself by biting down on it.

"No. I'm killing you because I want to. Because it stills the noise in my head and

satiates the loudest voice that is screaming to burn this whole world to the ground. My situation with Fiametta is unique. Uncomfortable. Definitely unsustainable.” I toss my head around while I speak. It isn’t doing anything in particular to help me think, but it feels nice. “And yet, I can’t get her out of my head.”

Rocco tests his bonds again, straining every muscle in his body to break free of them. But after a short fight, he starts panting, out of breath, and settles down.

“You wanna know when I knew she wasn’t just another name on a list?” At this point I’m talking more to myself than Rocco. Saying the words that plague me out loud to see if it’ll give me a new perspective. “I snuck into her room the other night. Considered the kill, but it was only a fleeting thought. All I could do was drop down to my knees and—” Worship isn’t the right word. Neither is praise. But other than devouring her cunt, they’re the closest I can find to what I wanted to do. “The really strange part is that I’m following her around. You might think, jeez, Crue, how is that strange ? Well, I’ll tell you Rocco, ol’ pal. It’s because it doesn’t feel like a hunt anymore. I’m intrigued by her beyond the thrill of seeing her flame extinguished.”

I shake my head to fight off intrusive thoughts of Fiametta. My mouth against her skin. My nose close enough to breathe in her scent. My tongue inches out of reach from its first taste.

“Anyway, let’s not go there. I’m going cross-eyed.”

“No, no, tell me about it,” Rocco says, adjusting himself to sit upright in his chair. He’s definitely stalling for time. Smart man, if he actually stood a chance of escaping here.

“Nothing more to tell. See, there’s a duality situation going on. On one hand, she shook me to the core, and I don’t think I’ll ever be able to look at another woman in the same way.” I fiddle with my blade intentionally to keep it in the forefront of

Rocco's mind. "On the other hand, if I kill Fiametta I'll be avenging my mom. I'll also be causing Lorenzo tremendous pain and anguish, and he is the one who took the only person who meant something away from me. It's poetic, really."

"Your... mom?" Rocco swallows but chokes on the dryness in his mouth. "I knew I recognized you," he suddenly roars, attempting once more to fight the solid steel chains. This time, he doesn't give up on the first flex of his oversized muscles.

"You're right. I was there." I crack my neck from side to side and stand upright. "You were there. Mom was there too, though I guess we wouldn't be here if she wasn't."

"I was just following orders, man," he is shouting now, with tears streaming down his face and snot dribbling out of his nostrils. His weeping gets worse as I take my first step toward him.

"Orders?" I snap my right arm down to my side, watching his eyes follow the movement of my blade. "That's what I'm doing now. So, don't cry about it. We're both big boys. We chose to play this game, and it landed us where it did."

"I'm sorry," he sputters. "Please don't do this."

"Are you mocking me?" I raise a brow at him. Obviously, he isn't. This is his final desperate plea to stay alive. But I can still hear the way my mother said those exact words to him and the others who were huddled around her. "You laughed when she begged for her release. Bellowed, when I did the same. Howled at the moon when you shoved her face into the mud and made her choke on it. Not so funny when you're on the other side of the knife, is it?"

They used a gun, but my point stands.

“It’s not funny. It’s never been funny. It’s a job, man.” He’s still howling, but for very different reasons.

I’m not sure what I was expecting from this impromptu session with Rocco. Answers to questions I don’t know how to ask? Maybe. But beyond the veil of my small delights, my dagger of justice remains ever focused on its task.

Do I feel better? Yes.

No.

Maybe.

At the very least, I’ve managed to admit my interest in Fiametta to myself.

They won’t change anything. She still has to die. Just like the heavy chunk of testosterone infused meat, screaming Please don’t do this in front of me.

But it’s good to come to terms with the oddness.

“Ah, well, there’s no easy way to do this, so—” I slip the point of my blade into Rocco’s neck. With a flick of my wrist, I sever his carotid artery and within seconds, he’s choking on his own blood.

This is real poetry. Feelings come and go, but taking a life lasts forever.

But if that’s true, why do I want to see Fiametta again?

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Chapter Six

FIAMETTA

Three days have passed since Father ordered Tomas to remain at my side in everything I do. The only peace I've had is when I'm sleeping – and I've had to start a habit of locking my bedroom door – and using the bathroom.

Luckily, mine's an en-suite. I'm sure I'd have caught him rifling through my clothes for my panties by now, had it been a shared situation. I shudder at the thought, disgusted with myself for even thinking it and at him because it's definitely true.

I glance over my shoulder at him while Simone and I walk hand-in-hand down the busy New York street. Tomas doesn't walk. He lurks like a real-life reincarnation of Frankenstein's monster, with a thick brow and dull-eyed gaze to boot.

He gives me the heebie-jeebies.

“Ogling him isn't the deterrent you think it is, Fi,” Simone snickers, and tugs my arm snapping my focus back in the direction we're walking.

“Yeah, but what else am I supposed to do?” I'm complaining for the sake of complaining and we both know it.

I know that Father's idea to have someone watching over me is the purest form of love. He cares about me, so much so that he's willing to let his second in command follow two women around New York, rather than help find the man responsible for

all the deaths in the family. But there are many other better-looking men carrying the Napoli flag. It's hard to accept that I could've had one of the hot ones, who I would've enjoyed gawking right back at, but instead I got the creepy one.

"Go on as normal. Pretend he isn't there. Carry on living," Simone drops her airy tone in an attempt to break through to me.

"Easier said than done when you don't share a house with him." Not that Tomas has tried anything, yet. When he isn't on the phone to my father or someone else under his command, he drinks himself to sleep before ten P.M.

"You need to relax. It can't be easy, but we've got a long night of work ahead, and I don't want to see your sourpuss the whole time." Simone smiles as if it's a joke, but I know she is serious. And she is right.

She is also making me feel bad for getting sucked into my own problems, which are pretty inconsequential, when we're headed to a place of actual suffering. I can handle Tomas looming over me like a heavy, gray cloud about to pour, because tonight I can get into my warm bed, with a full belly, and no genuine concerns in this world. Well, unless you count the fact that I was drugged and the mysterious stranger who slipped it into my drink broke into my apartment. Probably touched me while I was sleeping and...

I cut myself off right there, as butterflies start fluttering in my tummy, instead of the nauseated pit I used to feel. God, I must really be screwed up to think of that night with anything but horror. Yet, the more I do, the more tantalizing it's becoming.

Part of me knows it's because it won't happen again while Tomas is on guard. No one is getting into my apartment without his express approval. So maybe I'm not messed up for feeling this way. Without really knowing what happened that night, it could just be a wild fantasy.

Who hasn't had one of those, involving some cloaked hottie pinning them down and—

Not the time, Fia. And those fantasies are usually reserved for strangers. Not the mysterious masked man whom you've placed on a pedestal. He'll never be able to live up to your imaginary version of him.

“You're right. I'm sorry. Tonight isn't about me.” I move my hand up Simone's arm and hook it around her elbow.

Our destination is in what most would call the bad part of town. A free-standing building beneath an overpass ramp onto a bridge that leads to Manhattan. I've always found it so messed up that on one side of the water, there's beauty and wealth in massive abundance, whereas the other side is riddled with poverty and depression.

We arrive at the Davis Diner soup kitchen early, out of necessity. Any later, after the folks start to arrive for their meals, and we won't be able to get inside the building, let alone offer our help.

“Hey, Joe.” Simone's voice echoes inside the vast emptiness of the soup kitchen's eating area.

“Si-Si and Fi-Fi, my two favorite twins,” Joe Davis says with pure seriousness. I would've believed we were twins had I not been one of the two names mentioned.

“I told you, we aren't twins,” Simone giggles, and wraps her arms around Joe's shoulders, taking care not to startle him.

“Anyone ever tell you your voice is like honey on a blind man's ear?” Joe returns the hug, with the biggest, goofiest smile I've ever seen.

“Anyone ever tell you, that you’re too sweet for your own good?” Simone rolls her eyes as she pulls away.

“The only way for your medicine to go down is by being sweet, Sugar.” I’m damned sure Joe would be winking at Simone right now, if it wasn’t for the blacked-out Aviator’s covering his eyes.

“Medicine is usually a bad thing,” I chime in before jumping into his arms for my hug.

I’d never admit it to Joe, but these hugs have become something of the highlight of my week. He’s around my dad’s age, with a similar dad-bod build, and for the few minutes we share an embrace, it feels as if I can picture what a normal life with a normal family could’ve been.

“Look where we are,” he releases me and waves his arms around the empty recreational hall. “Ain’t nobody coming here for a big bowl of mama’s loving.”

“Too true. But we do what little we can to give ‘em a taste of it on a Wednesday night.” I gently rub his shoulder in a comforting way.

Before Joe opened his soup kitchen, he lived a terribly hard life. He worked with hoodlums and thieves to make ends meet, until he lost his vision. The old adage rang truer than ever when it happened, and with no honor among thieves, Joe found himself in a place not unlike this one.

Penniless, homeless and on the verge of giving up, he managed to turn his life around. And rather than enjoy the excess of his success, Joe opened his own kitchen to help those in need, believing that each and every person who walked through his door, could turn their lives around. All they needed was a push in the right direction.

Simone and I were so enamored with his story, when he came to our college looking for volunteers, that we signed up on the spot and we've been here every Wednesday night since.

"Who's the newcomer?" Joe asks, once our pleasantries are over. "Is he helping or hungry?"

I'm stunned that he knew anyone was with us. Tomas hasn't made a peep since we entered the building, and he isn't all that close to us either. It's as if Joe's been gifted with vision we normal folk will never understand.

"A bit of both," Tomas answers in a drawl. "But don't mind me, I'm just taking in the sights."

"Ain't no one sightseeing on my watch. You're either in the kitchen or you're out the door."

"A blind man playing watchdog? Now I've seen everything," Tomas's snarky jab causes Joe to furrow his brow in frustration. "I'm neither, and you're going to accept that."

"Holy shit, is this guy for real?" someone shouts from across the room. He isn't a big guy by any means, and he doesn't look much older than twenty, but he's storming toward us, with total disregard for his own well-being, and fixing to knock Tomas's head off his shoulders.

His words speak volumes about the loyalty that the folks around here have for Joe Davis.

"You don't want to do that, kiddo. Go back to your station," Joe intervenes. "He ain't worth the time, and I don't want the paperwork."

I scowl at Tomas, as Simone and I follow Joe into the kitchen. He just grins the same yellow grin he gave me the night this arrangement was set. I'll have a word with Father about this. Tomas is supposed to be unobtrusive. Just standing by in case of emergencies and nothing more.

Insulting my friends is beyond disrespectful.

"I'm sorry about him." I mutter under my breath, afraid that even from this far away, Tomas might hear me.

"Nah, Fi-Fi, don't lose a minute of sleep over it. Whatever has him chasing you two around is more important than an old man's ego." Joe's back to all smiles, as if nothing happened.

"I'ma station you ladies on serving tonight, if it suits? The cooks are cooking, but plates aren't moving. Need as many hands in front as we can get."

"Anything you need, boss," Simone says, raising a hand to her head in salute. I giggle and do the same.

"We're expecting more folks than usual here tonight, with that big ass storm rolling in. Not as many as double, but close enough. So, get those arms and legs ready for a workout."

"Yes, sir." We manage to say it in unison, as if he actually were a drill instructor. The bright, goofy smile returns as he catches on to our joke.

"Then hustle, ladies. This ain't your grandpap's army. Hop to." You can tell he's never been in the military. Hell, I'm pretty sure he hasn't even watched an accurate war movie given his lack of understanding of how a drill sergeant would bark orders.

But the fact that he's trying is beautiful in its own way. Crafted in darkness, Joe returned to the light. It gives me hope that there's still a chance for my father to find his way out of it.

That someday, we may live as a proper family, and not as this nightmarish bastardization of one.

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Chapter Seven

CRUE

A soup kitchen?

You've got to be kidding me.

I've spent three days tailing Fiametta. Trying to crack her code and see what makes her tick. And every time I've seen her face, the two sides of my internal war have battled for supremacy. Some glances give me the same feeble bodily response as the night we met, with angst-driven sweat on my brow, clammy palms and an inability to think straight. I feel a sick yearning that makes my cock throb with want – scratch that – need.

Then there's the other reaction. Pure, seething hatred. Seeing her face becomes the perfect reminder of why I'm stalking her. The thrill of sticking my blade into her heart makes me stiff enough to rival the bleeding-heart bullshit.

Huh.

I wonder what all of that says about me. Getting off on the idea of revenge for my mom. Maybe it's something to explore with whoever winds up in my kill chamber next.

Until then, focus.

My quest for information about Fiametta has come up surprisingly short. She leaves the house at seven sharp and heads to work. Afterward, she spends an hour in the gym with her ginger, firecracker friend, Simone, before they share a snack for dinner or head their separate ways.

I'm not oblivious to the notion that the mutt nipping at her heels is why Fiametta is so docile. Or maybe, she heard I killed the two men who were meant to be her security for her evening out and she doesn't want to risk anything.

Have I scared you, my pretty little plaything? Good. You should be scared.

I'm starting to understand how Mark feels during our stakeouts. Staring at nothing and hoping it will blossom into something exquisite. Where's the thrill? The excitement? Fiametta has made this hunt pure tedium.

Until now.

I had her painted as a spoiled rich kid. Happy to forego her daddy's love and affection, as long as her wallet never ran dry. There sure as shit aren't enough customers going to her store for that place to afford the luxurious lifestyle she leads.

But I'm a big enough man to admit when I'm mistaken. And watching her head into a soup kitchen isn't the kind of thing a daddy's princess would do willingly. The grimace on her mutt's face is what makes me think it's her decision, more than a forced act.

Well, it isn't going to break any records, but I've found a nugget of gold after seventy-two hours of tailing Fiametta.

And I'm deeply intrigued.

Once Fiametta, Simone and their guard dog are inside the building, I casually make my way across the street. A small line of New York's starving has started forming along the front wall, but I'll need a few more faces around before I can make my move.

It's a big risk to go inside, when Fiametta is already showing signs of knowing she's being followed. They're subtle, but obvious, like when she casually glances over her shoulders and scans her surroundings, trying to appear nonchalant. To a layman, her tactic may come off as uncaring observation, but I've made enough blunders for her to stay extra vigilant. No doubt, the one outside her store was my biggest.

And Lorenzo pretty much sealed it up, by placing Tomas Bernardi, the Napoli Family's thumb-sucking troglodyte of a second-in-charge, on her personal security detail. She's too smart to think he'd do it purely for an in-case situation. If he didn't smell blood in the water, he wouldn't have given her the best he could offer.

But I need to get inside that soup kitchen. I want to see her doing this honest task with my own two eyes before I believe it. Until then, I refuse to completely believe she's anything other than a spoiled princess.

I wait against the side of the building for the better part of an hour, watching dark-gray clouds forming in the early evening sky. The line has gone from ten early birds to what must be a hundred or more broken and beaten souls. I look among the newer arrivals for the biggest guy I can find, focusing mainly on the back of the line. When I spot him, I raise the biker mask over my face and approach him at a casual saunter.

"Give me your coat," I demand as soon as I reach him. He's wearing a filthy long coat, with an enormous tear running from the right pocket down to its hem. The reason the coat caught my attention is its high standing, wide collar. Along with my mask, it should provide ample anonymity.

“My coat?” He grabs the lapels and tightens them to his chest. “No. I can’t. It’s gonna be cold soon.”

Too much time spent with Matteo has given me the luxury of ignoring pleasantries and explanations. But a bigger takeaway, which proves most useful in times like this, is that money talks.

“I’ll give you two grand for it.” I shove my hand into my pocket and draw out a neatly wrapped bundle of hundred-dollar notes. I couldn’t say how much is there, for certain, but it’s Matteo’s money. Let’s call it operational expenses.

I throw it at the guy’s feet and watch his widening eyes fall upon it.

“Why?” He asks, mid-strip.

“Give me the jacket. Take the money. And piss off.”

Why Fiametta’s working in a soup kitchen means anything is surprising, even to me. These people are meaningless to me. Life is full of choices and circumstances. You’ve been dealt a bad hand? Fight your way out of it. Giving up won’t garner my sympathy. But her being here has to mean something.

Maybe that she isn’t a piece of shit like her old man.

Instead of handing me the coat, he tosses it at my face as if it’s some grand distraction. Once removed, I see him running down the street and my money is gone from the ground.

If there’s one thing I can respect about these folk, it’s that trust is hard to come by. Accepting a deal isn’t as easy as saying yes and taking what you can, leaving nothing behind. I shed my leather jacket and toss it onto the ground. Had my new friend

waited a moment, I'd have given it to him along with the money.

And just like that, when someone else collects it, I've helped more people in one night, than I have in years.

Is my pretty little playing rubbing off on me?

Then it's back to waiting. This is the kind I don't mind. There's purpose behind it. I'm not just sitting in my car, following some chick around.

Before long, a rotund man at the front door, who's holding a cane in one hand and a bible in the other, ushers me inside.

"God bless you," he says.

"And you." How else am I supposed to respond to that?

Then I'm inside, only to remark that I'm inches away from Tomas, who's also sitting at the front door, inspecting each new entrant with total boredom twisting his face in a frown.

Here we go.

I slip my hand inside the coat and rest it lazily on my dagger. If this prick moves, I'll slice him open.

"What are you looking at?" He speaks with a raspy wheeze accompanying his words. "Ain't got no handouts. Piss off."

She hasn't told him about me. Not that I look too dissimilar to the rest of the hungry wandering the main hall. But there are key features he should've noticed. My hair,

my eyes, and the fact that I'm built better and clearly not starving.

In an instant, as I spot her among the crowd, all thoughts and rational for Tomas's behavior disappear. My head empties at the sight of her warm smile, as she lays a tender hand on a young kid's shoulder. She's talking to him like a person, while he slurps spoonfuls of soup.

Her smile must be contagious, because both the kid and his mother are practically glowing from whatever Fiametta's saying to them. It's all I need to see to have my answer.

Her heart is pure gold.

But it will not erase the sins of her father.

Two Weeks Later

A lot can happen in a fortnight. Especially when you have your eyes on the prize. Mark and I have been putting in long days and even longer nights to clear Matteo's list. And if all goes according to plan, I should receive a message from Mark any minute now saying it's done.

I paid him a small fortune to handle most of the remaining names on my original list. Though there's always a risk involved, he walked into more danger than my tolerance would usually allow for him, more than once. But while he was handling the losers and nobodies, I've been preparing for the biggest kill of all.

My pretty little plaything.

After a lengthy back and forth, regarding my sanity concerning this job, I finalized the paperwork on one of the rental apartments opposite Fiametta's building. It caught my eye the very first night I tailed her here, and since I've spent more time sleeping in my car on this street than at home, it's my only logical next step.

My new apartment is directly adjacent but three stories taller than Fiametta's. My balcony gives the best view, but my main stalking takes place at night, from the enormous floor to ceiling window in my new living room. I conduct surveillance at night, with all the lights off, to ensure she'll never know I was watching.

With the curtains open, I can see the totality of her mutt's quarters up to the door that exits into the short hall. Her living and dining rooms are clearly in view and even part of the kitchen counter, too.

Most importantly, inside Fiametta's bedroom, I can see to the furthest end of her bed. She's only free from my ever-watchful eye when she's in her en-suite. And even then, my mind is awfully good at conjuring what she may be doing.

Not that I've had to let my imagination run riot over the three days I've been here. From the shower, her towel-wrapped body moves straight to the walk-in closet without much dawdling. I still haven't had the pleasure of a clean view of her naked body, but with the help of my binoculars, I've managed a fairly deep view of her cleavage, wrapped in that towel. Or her thighs, as the towel falls apart where she wrapped it, reminding me tauntingly of my wasted opportunity that night I first saw her.

And when I don't see her in the flesh, my own mind reminds me. It plays the tender touch of her skin against my face on repeat. It replays the soft cooing sounds as I kissed her flesh. The conjured flashes of my cock sliding inside her soaking cunt are so vivid I can almost feel it.

Even now, after a long day at her boutique, my mind is only on one thing, as she locks her door and drops onto her bed with a hefty sigh. I watch her slip off her dress, drop to her knees and parting her legs to give me a full view of her pussy. Is it still bare, I wonder? Does it even matter? I wouldn't be going for that soaking slit right away. I'd start with both hands on her head. Tell her to stick her tongue out, right before I slam the tip of my cock between her plump lips. Listen to the sound of myself smashing against the back of her throat as she fights to breathe.

And only when her eyes roll to the back of her skull and Fiametta's on the verge of passing out, would I allow her a lungful of oxygen. But only one, before it starts again. And again. Until my dick is drenched in mother nature's lubricant for the main event.

I fight the urge to stroke myself as my imagination continues to stir. I refuse to waste my seed against this window, when it's meant for her fucking womb.

Better hurry then. This Little Flame's time is running out.

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Chapter Eight

FIAMETTA

I see flashes of him everywhere.

My stalker .

Late-night wandering outside my window. A masked man hides among the masses of a crowded sidewalk. His thick, rigid frame looms like a statue from a distance, while Simone and I have lunch together.

Even now, his reflection haunts me in the corner mirror I've set up in my workshop. But I never truly see him. At least, I don't think I do. Whenever I think I do, it's in my peripheral vision. And every time I actually focus on the subject I could've sworn was the man I met nearly two weeks ago, it's just some random guy going about his business.

Sometimes I feel as if I'm going crazy. That the fever-riddled sleep from whatever drug was in my drink fried my brain permanently.

Then I remember him saying my name and two of Father's men winding up dead after I left the club. Six more men have met the same fate, and two have disappeared. Tomas finds my looks of disgust and repulsion at the news far too satisfying and makes sure to let me know, as soon as he learns of another tragedy.

"Another day of fucking around or are you seeing someone?" As if merely thinking

his name was enough to draw his attention, Tomas shouts his question from the showroom.

I groan, snatching the extravagant ballroom-style dress I've been working on off my sewing table, and I head out to meet him.

"How is that any of your business?" I struggle to keep my composure. I've had the misfortune of Tomas's ever-watchful eye on me for two weeks, and it's starting to wear thin for both of us.

"Because I'd rather do nothing in the apartment, than this dump." He was never a pleasant man to be around, but his snide remarks and cutting tone have become more pronounced over the past few days. Annoyingly, he's started referring to my apartment, as the apartment, as if we're actually sharing it.

My calm, cool and collected self has eroded to reveal a grumpy monster. Every time he looks at me, rage bubbles inside my core. And that's even before he starts drinking. Plus, he's been creeping around my apartment at night. Mumbling to himself about whatever pissed him off that day, or how he's sick of babysitting Daddy's brat .

What terrified me more than his blatant disrespect of my father, his don, is how my door handle was jostling as he said it. I can't bring myself to dwell on the mixture of drunken aggression and the lust that I've seen in his beady eyes. I just need to stay strong, until I see Father again. I need to tell him about Tomas's indiscretions, so I can cut him out of my life for good.

He gets his answer, without my needing to give it, when the bell above my door alerts us to someone's arrival. It's Mrs. Alice Walker, a once-beloved heiress among New York's high society, who has aged into elegant and graceful beauty. She's one of my longest-standing clients, and she stops by at least once a month to order a new dress

for one of the many humanitarian events her husband organizes. She, and a small handful of others, keep my boutique alive.

Today I get to thank her for one more good deed, making Tomas Bernardi sit around and suck his thumb while I do what I love doing.

Short greetings follow all around, and even Tomas manages to force a smile onto his face.

“Is this it?” Her blue eyes sparkle as she sees her dress for the first time.

“It is. All it needs is a try on and a few touch ups to perfect the fit, and you’ll be able to walk out with it today.”

“Goodness, you never cease to amaze me, Fia.” She runs her fingers over the material, and together we make our way to the fitting rooms.

“Give me a moment, then you and that lovely young man outside can give me your thoughts.” I nearly burst out laughing at her kind words about Tomas, but I just hand her the dress. Now isn’t the time.

“Just shout if you need me. I’ll be in the showroom,” I give her a real smile, as she closes the door.

However, when I step out of the fitting room hall, I see him again. He’s in the parking lot, among the cars, where I’m certain I spotted him once before. But it’s different this time. He still has his mask up, with only his eyes and hair visible. But he isn’t wearing the same leather jacket and blue jeans. Instead, he’s wearing a long-sleeved shirt and matching black cargo pants.

A spring of fear coils inside my chest and I refuse to blink. We’re making direct eye

contact, which means he can't just be a figment of my imagination this time.

Does that mean he never was?

Eventually, my eyes give in to the dryness and they snap shut. Blinking is usually all it takes for him to disappear. And though I'm more scared than I'd like to admit, I'm also a little excited. I've been dealing with this for weeks, unsure whether I'm losing touch with reality or if I've actually had someone following me around.

When I open my eyes, I'll know.

"What are you doing?" Tomas's voice interrupts this big moment.

With a groan of annoyance, my eyelids lift lazily, fooling myself into believing this is just another strange occurrence.

He hasn't moved from his place among the cars. Hell, he's got one hand in the air, slowly waving at me like we're old friends seeing each other for the first time in years.

"Oh, shit," I yell and point out the window.

"What is it?" Tomas snaps his head in the indicated direction, but my stalker dips behind the cars and vanishes again.

"Someone is out there." I gulp, staring at the spot where I just saw the man in black.

"Are you sure?" Tomas launches out of his chair, and instinctively reaches a hand behind his lapel to grab his shoulder-holstered pistol. He flicks his eyes toward the changing rooms to make sure we're alone before drawing it.

“No, but—”

He raises a finger to his lips to quiet me. “Calm now, Fia. Don’t break into hysterics.” I wasn’t going to, but maybe my face is telling him a different story. “I’m gonna go have a look. Stay here.”

Where else would I go? I can’t leave Mrs. Walker alone, if there really is a crazy man outside.

He pulls on his pistol’s slide and checks the chamber for a bullet. When he is satisfied, Tomas grabs his phone and makes a call. They answer quickly. “Yeah, looks like we’ve got something. Meet me outside for a sweep.”

He hangs up his phone and leaves.

I’m stuck in place for the first few minutes. I stare out of the giant windows in the hope of seeing my father’s men bring down the monster who is plaguing me. But as the intense adrenaline starts to fade, I decide it’s best to let them work while I do the same. Idle hands are a devil’s plaything, and I’ve got Mrs. Walker to keep mine busy.

I head into my workshop and grab my measuring tape and a few other tools I might need to properly measure her up.

“Mrs. Walker, is everything alright?” I ask, returning to the fitting room hall.

She mumbles something inside her room before answering me. “Splendid, dear. I’ll be with you shortly. My daughter called, and I’m going to finish up beforehand.”

“Take all the time you need—” Before I can finish, an arm reaches out from a different fitting room and pulls me inside it.

While one arm pulls me firmly against his frame, his other hand wraps around my mouth before I can scream. It won't stop me from trying, but the muffled noises coming from my mouth don't get far against his thick leather glove.

"Keep that up," he pins me against his chest with the hand clasp my mouth, while the other drops to his waist. "And I'll have to silence you for good." His free hand returns with a silver blade in it, and he holds steadily against my neck.

My heart begins to race out of control. I hold my breath, to stop myself from screaming, or crying for that matter. But in the initial struggle to calm myself down, I haven't paid attention to the mirror he's holding me in front of.

Suddenly my weeks of doubt and belief vanish.

It's him. It's the man I've seen all around New York. The man who was just outside.

My snake-eyed stalker, in the flesh.

I'd laugh at the irony of sending my guard outside, just to get caught anyway, if I wasn't afraid my frantic hysterics would mean feeling the sting of his blade. He doesn't make a sound while he inspects me in the mirror with a cold, calculated gaze that travels from my face to my feet, lingering particularly long on my chest when he returns.

My cheeks start to burn when I notice him leering.

I'm blushing while this monster wants to kill me.

I wasn't just seeing things, but I've definitely lost my mind.

"Why didn't you tell them about me?" His voice is a harsh whisper in my ear.

My reply against his hand is a garbled mess of sound. Realizing I can't answer his question while he has me contained, the predator pinning me against his body groans so intensely that the sound reverberates through my entire body.

"Make a single sound out of place and I will gut you , here in your fancy fitting room," he snarls viciously.

I nod my head against his palm, and he slowly lowers it. Instead of pulling it away though, he slides it down my cheek, neck and chest, until his thumb hooks the front of my white, with red flowers, summer dress. He pulls the front down to expose more of my cleavage.

I shouldn't find this so hot. The way he threatens me with his words, but everything else about him can't seem to get enough of me and my body.

"I saw you in the soup kitchen. Saw your dog, too." Is Tomas the dog he's referring to? "He didn't bat an eyelid when I walked in. So, you didn't tell them anything. Why not?"

"Because I didn't know what to say." I answer his question so quietly, I can barely hear myself. But it's the truth, all the same. It seems impossible to believe, yet here we are with everything that made me feel insane becoming true.

From this close up, I can tell he's handsome beneath his biker mask. His razor-sharp jawline cuts through the fabric and ends in a strong chin. His shimmering green eyes, which have haunted my dreams and twisted my fantasies, remain as entrancing as ever.

Before he can respond again, I notice something surprising – a look of reluctance in his otherwise stoic eyes. I also feel something unexpected. Instead of his sharp knife stabbing into me, the familiar jab of his weighty cock slams against my spine.

There's no reason to believe his erection isn't from some sick perversion that stems from enjoying killing. This might be a part of his ritual, and where I'm enjoying his touch and the way he stares at my body, my stalker could be using it as fuel to finish the job.

"Or did you not want them to know?" He pulls the front of my dress down further, until one shoulder strap snaps against my shoulder and the other slips down my arm.

His violent tugging doesn't end until the neckline of my dress is below my breasts, and his hungry gaze is aimed directly at my sheer, white, nylon bra. A satisfied growl comes from his throat, as his hand moves up once more.

"Wh... what are you doing?" A breathless moan accompanies my words as his hand returns to my breasts.

He cups one of my breasts in a tight grip, allowing the crook of his index and middle finger to slot perfectly around my rapidly engorging nipple. Noticing my own reaction, my stalker tugs on the bead, softly at first but increasingly harder in grip, until a mixture of tantalizing pleasure and pain trickle throughout my body.

While he delivers pleasure with one hand, the other remains a constant reminder of why he's really here. He glides it down my the length of my body, and I can feel the sharp edge of his knife through my dress. But all the while, the spear dangling from his body is the only thing that's actually stabbing me.

What the hell is going on?

I can't deny that he's completely unhinged.

But does that make me worse? Because this monster isn't only terrifying me...

He's turning me on.

The likelihood of my walking away from this, unscathed, is low. The beast groping me and squeezing me against his body is too far gone. But I have to try something, and my gut tells me that reasoning this out with him won't work. So, I won't appeal to the man in hopes of changing his mind. I'll appeal to the lunatic who's enthralled by my body.

"Are you going to stab me with that blade?" I ask with feigned courage, in an attempt to get under his skin. But my own words are laced with the sickening enjoyment of what he's doing to me. "Or with your cock?"

My question knocks the cold look from his eyes, and his brows raise in astonishment that I'm standing up to him, even this close to death.

Is this what he wants? Someone feisty, who'll stand up to him and deny him what he wants?

"Brave," the deep, husky growl with which he speaks melts my heart into my tummy. If he wasn't here to kill me, this would be so hot. "But how can I allow your fire to grow, Little Flame, when you would cause so much destruction?"

In an instant, my masked monster releases my chest and snaps his hand to the back of my head. He grabs a fistful of my hair and forces my entire body forward, until I collide with the mirror.

While I am half bent over and with my ass in the air, the masked monster steps behind me. He slams the full weight of his hips against my ass, and somehow, like a homing missile finding its target, his cock manages to knock against my entrance through his jeans.

I yelp out a moan, expecting to see fury in his eyes that I've made too much noise, but they don't allow anything resembling an emotion to pass. He pins me to the mirror with his lower half, constantly teasing the wet spot between my thighs, before releasing my hair. He allows his hand free to travel down my body and finds the hem of my dress.

"What are you doing?" Do I ask out of fear or excitement? Even I can't tell.

My masked monster ignores me, continuing on his path. He yanks my dress up and hooks it above my ass.

"Already. Fucking. Soaked." He says each word with the most emotion I've seen flashing from his eyes so far.

I don't even know how he can tell, considering his eyes have never left mine in the mirror.

His blade runs up the side of my thigh without breaking the skin, as he jams his waist forward to tease my yearning hole. It reaches its destination and with a quick flick of his wrist, the silver slices through my panty's waistline, and they fall to the floor.

For the first time since he's pulled me in here, he releases me completely. He drops down to the floor, but before he grabs the garment, he cut off of me, I feel his face press into my thighs. He rolls it between them, and I'm certain if it weren't for his mask, he'd steal a taste of me.

And I want him to.

Oh, Lord, how I want him to. I want him to tear off his mask, drown himself with my juices, and cease all this nonsense about killing me. I'm sure that's a no go, but how much fun could we have if he doesn't? Why does it have to stop in this changing

room with some tongue action?

We could indulge each other's sickest whims. I could hook this beast on cum drunk satisfaction, and he could scratch the need he awakened in my core that first night we met. Something tells me that his long, thick erection is the only thing that could push deep enough to reach it.

"What are you gonna do to me?" My voice is wispy, instead of startled. As if eager to receive whatever the monster has in mind.

He sets his blade down at his side and takes off one of his gloves. The action is slow, as if he's waiting for me to watch him expose his hand from the glove. Once uncovered, he presses both hands into the squishy meat of my ass. The gloved hand parts my cheeks, while the naked one starts caressing my flesh as it sinks down to my legs.

"There's something different about you." He grumbles, as his hand finds its place against my inner thigh. "And it's pissing me off."

"What is it?" The sensation of his touch comes with a soft moan I couldn't stop if I wanted to.

"I don't know." With a forceful push, he parts the leg his hand is on from the other. A growl comes from the deep cavern of his chest, as the hand parting my ass cheeks slides up to the small of my back. Another forceful push drives me forward, until my breasts and face are pressing against the mirror, and my ass is all but against his mouth. "And you see, that's what's pissing me off. It's my business to know, and an anomaly like you causes immeasurable problems."

"Uh-huh." It's meant to come out like please go on , but between my own heart thumping in my ears and my brain working overtime to fend off any satisfaction I

might be deriving from this, the message may have been lost along the way.

“And that’s why I’m here, with your cunt inches from my face, instead of my blade fucking your guts.”

Even his threats are tickling me in ways I can’t explain .

“So, what I’m going to do, Fiametta, is this.” He doesn’t give me time to react before his bare hand moves up to my slit. With expert precision, his index and middle finger lock onto my clit, and start moving in sharp, short circles.

My body immediately starts vibrating at the sensation. I choke back moans, groans and other noises that are fighting to get free. Mrs. Walker is one room over, and there’s no telling who else might be in my boutique by now.

And there’s no explaining what’s happening in here without getting a one-way ticket to the looney-bin.

He’s moving fast, trying to extract my pleasure as if there’s no time to waste. Thinking about it, there isn’t. While his fingers move in their circles, I feel his thumb glide through my folds, before the tip finds itself resting against my entrance.

All the while, his eyes remain fixed on mine. Even when I can’t keep them locked on him, and they roll to the back of my skull, his green orbs refuse to break contact. Refuse to blink. He’s watching his torture and relishing in it. He wants to see me explode and if he carries on like this, he’s going to get his wish.

“Fiametta?” Tomas’s voice bellows from the front of the store. My ever-nearing climax disappears into a bundle of nerves, brought about by fear of his finding me like this. “There’s no one out there,” he continues.

“Fuck,” my monster grumbles, and starts slowing his moving digits. “Looks as if our time’s up.”

He collects his knife and my panties off the floor, with his gloved hand, but even though the other has stopped its wicked movement, he doesn’t pull it away from my pussy. As he stands, taking his position behind me again, he presses my damp, white cotton to his mask and breathes in deeply.

“Sweet as flowers in the springtime,” he mutters to himself, before stashing them in his pocket.

“You shouldn’t stay here,” I say, as a surprising pang of heartache strikes, at the thought of his strong hand moving away from my legs.

“I know.” But instead of retreating as I expect him to, he wraps an arm over the front of my shoulders and pulls me back into his enormous frame. His arm moves up, until the crook of his elbow is around my neck, but he doesn’t squeeze hard enough to stop my flow of oxygen.

And, where I should be afraid that he’s going to choke me to death right here, I’m not. I’m wildly turned on by the strange eroticism that his eyes reveal in the mirror. How they flutter as his touch strays from murderous to sexual. Even his breathing is more audible against the material mask. It’s as if we were lovers on the verge of having crazy, hot sex with a whole lot of bondage, torture and discipline.

“I’m going to kill you, Fiametta,” he says in a low, growling whisper. “I have to.”

But his actions don’t mimic his words. While he speaks, he uses the arm around my neck to tighten my body against his, until my bare ass is in line with his hips. His free hand finally parts from my damp skin, and snakes its way up to my cheek, where he forces two of his soaked fingers into my mouth.

I'd ask him why he's so adamant about killing me, but I can't find the words behind the swarming lust that coats my brain.

All I know is this moment.

Here and now.

Tasting myself on him, while he pins me in place and doesn't give me a choice to say no.

And with another vicious thrust of his hips, matching the one he made earlier, his throbbing cock finds its way against my pussy again. He forces it forward as far as his clothing will allow him to go. So close to parting my lips and slipping inside, yet never allowing me the pleasure of fully experiencing him.

Unzip him and take it .

Intrusive thoughts start running through my head.

Grab his cock. Stroke it. Play with it. Bury it inside you.

Can't kill you if he's too busy cumming .

That last thought is the last remnant of my sanity trying to reason the forbidden delight I'm getting from this. And it's working so well, that I want to indulge this sick fantasy.

"I'll be seeing you." He releases my neck and pulls his fingers out of my mouth. He takes a single step back, observing the chaos he's left strewn across my body. Then, his eyes move from my messed-up dress to my tits reddened from how they were squeezed against the mirror, before settling between my legs where he allowed his

hands to play.

There's nothing stopping me from screaming now... if I want to. Other than the fact that he might stab me, but I'm sure Tomas brought the rest of his cronies into the store with him.

If I call for help, there's a small chance I will survive. They'll catch the man who has been terrorizing my family. And we can be done with this nightmare.

So, why don't I, as I watch him stow his blade?

"Wait." I whimper before he can open the door. He looks at me over his shoulder, with lust dripping in his eyes. "Why don't you just kill me? Finish this?"

"Fiametta?" Tomas roars before my stalker can answer. "Get out here n—"

"What do you think you're doing, young man?" Mrs. Walker's voice stills Tomas. "This is a lady's changing room, and you're not supposed to be in here. Be gone you, vile little man!"

She's standing up for me. There's no way I can believe she didn't hear what happened one room over. My cheeks are instantly set ablaze at the thought of leaving this room. I could never explain this to Mrs. Walker, or to anyone for that matter, but the thought of her believing I was getting some sneaky action on the side is enough to make me blush.

In the chaos of Mrs. Walker's reprimanding Tomas, the brute finally answers.

"Because my Little Flame." God, why does hearing him call me that turn my legs to jelly? "You can't die until I've had the pleasure of fucking you."

If I was blushing before, I'm definitely as red as a tomato now. Such a vile thought, but it's somehow so intoxicating. Stab me with your cock before finishing me with your blade. I guess it's the perfect answer to my earlier question.

He opens the door and gestures for me to leave first.

He's smart enough to know he can't leave with Tomas guarding the hallway, but how does he see this playing out? My intrigue with him can only go so far. Mrs. Walker bought us some time, but I'm still going to have to tell Tomas about what happened.

The thrill does not outweigh my urge for survival. He probably already knows that, having started our discourse by asking why I haven't told anyone yet. He wants to play this game of chance. He's risked everything by coming here to taunt and tease me, and now it's time to see how his gamble plays out.

Something tells me he won't be in this tiny cubicle when Tomas and the rest of Father's men storm it. He was one step ahead when he stood outside my window, and seems to know the layout of my store well enough to sneak through it and grab me. All the signs point toward his having an escape plan ready.

I fix up my dress as best I can and make my way back to the front room where Mrs. Walker is laying into Tomas for trying to sneak into the changing rooms. She's in her new dress, holding the trailing material that would've pooled at her feet with one hand, while wagging a furious finger at Tomas with the other.

"Good Heavens, what happened to you?" She faces me with wide-eyed apprehension.

"What the hell?" Tomas roars, ripping his gun out of his holster and gesturing toward the door where three more of Father's men wait outside it.

I don't have to say it out loud for him to know.

Mrs. Walker yelps at the sight of the weapon, and instantly jumps out of Tomas's way. The three men rush toward the changing rooms.

"Would you like to continue our business in my workshop, Mrs. Walker?" I ask hesitantly.

Seeing the fear in her eyes is my first true taste of why Father wanted to keep my life separate from his. How can I go on and live normally, if the world knows I'm a mafia princess?

"Yes, dear. Let's go," she hooks an arm over my shoulder, and we walk to the back room.

"I'm so sorry about all of this, Mrs. Walker," I say, once we're in the safety of my workshop and I have my tools ready to fit the dress properly.

"Don't be," a naughty smile flashes across her face. "I've been where you are now." She furrows her brow and shakes her head at the thought. "Well, not exactly with armed men chasing my suitors. But the ripped dress, the gasping breathes, and that all too familiar twinkle in your eye."

I nearly chuckle. All those things are present, yes, but for very different reasons than my having a suitor .

"Mind if I ask you something?" I start pressing sewing needles into the material I need to tighten up.

"Go ahead. It's not as if we're keeping secrets anymore, is it?" She smiles at me.

"You must've heard something. Why did you stop Tomas from coming in?"

Mrs. Walker emits a sigh that's laced with fond reminiscence. "It might be hard to believe, but I was young once, too. I won't pretend to know what's going on with you, the guns or your tail outside, but I do understand the fiery passion of love—"

That is not what this is. Intrigue, definitely, but love is the last word I'd use to describe whatever this is.

"You're young. You need to enjoy yourself, and if it means having some sneaky fun wherever you can take it, then who am I to stand in your way?"

"Scour the parking lot. No one in and no one out until we find this son of a bitch," I hear Tomas roar from the show room.

So, the monster escaped. I'm relieved to know he wasn't gunned down in a tiny cubicle inside my store. I want this to be over. For Tomas to go back to whichever hole he crawled out of. For my life to go back to normal, so I can pretend I'm not a mafia heiress.

However, this man who has been watching me, since our dance in that club, has piqued my interest and hooked my curiosity.

"And anyway, you're my go-to-girl when it comes to my outfits for a night on the town. I wouldn't want to start getting bad designs just because I upset you," she cracks a joke to still my nerves, after Tomas's outburst.

Who would've thought a stranger could put me at ease after what just happened? But joking isn't going to make this any easier. I need to know what this guy wants with me. It has something to do with Father's shady empire, I'm sure. But what I can't wrap my head around is my role in this thing. With the killer's record sitting firmly in the double digits for Napoli murders, I have to know why he can't just finish the job on me.

Screwing me can't be his only motivation, can it?

Let's just hope curiosity doesn't kill this cat, before I can get my answers.

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Chapter Nine

CRUE

Two days and you're following her again? Pathetic.

This isn't a hunt anymore. You're pussy-whipped and you haven't even gotten to test drive the product. Grow some balls and kill this bitch already!

My inner voice is loud and overbearing. This was bound to happen eventually, but I had hoped it would take a while longer.

"I can't kill her yet." Oh, wonderful. Now I'm talking to myself while I meander through the streets of New York.

Matteo's list is taken care of. Mark saw to it personally. There's nothing stopping you from finishing this.

"Matteo wants me to break her first." Arguing with myself over semantics is a new low. But that's exactly what I'm doing by tailing Fiametta around. I know she's seen me. I allowed her to, on a few separate occasions, even before I made my first move on her.

By doing that, I'm ensuring I stay at the forefront of her mind. When I'm through with Fiametta Napoli, I'll be the only thing she thinks about. Mad rambles and panicked outbursts about the beast trying to hurt her will follow, to her father's great dismay.

And then I'll kill her.

So, break her faster. Cut off Tomas's head in front of her. Curb-stomp the ginger firecracker's skull while she watches from her bedroom window.

Tie her to a street pole and fuck her stupid for all of New York to see.

Just. Finish. It.

My mind is a self-correcting ecosystem. Killing satisfies the darkness inside me. Snuffing out someone else's flame ignites mine and keeps the shadows at bay. It's never for long, but any stillness from my own overbearing thoughts provides the clarity I need to stay in control.

Fiametta has changed that. I've been slaughtering Lorenzo's men for over a year, but since Matteo put her in my path, my shadow has grown longer.

Two weeks ago, I was killing on my own terms.

Logic dictated my actions.

I had control.

Now, I won't get it back until she's dead.

Unless, Little Flame, you're the one who will shine brightly enough to cast it away for good.

Little Flame? Cute. You still have to kill her.

"I will."

Before she ends up killing you .

“What?” I stop in my tracks.

You’re acting all brazen and brash. You’re not giving yourself, her or the goons tailing her time to rest. Keep moving down this road... keep fucking up, and she’s going to be the reason you die.

Hmm. Good point. I’ve been following her for hours today and I haven’t once taken in my surroundings long enough to know where I am. I haven’t given myself an exit strategy for if I get caught, and I won’t know where to run to if they start shooting at me.

The noise in my head, filled with overbearing thoughts and driven by insatiable bloodlust, isn’t helping either.

“Right, time to drown you out,” I grumble and slot a pair of wireless earphones into my ears. I grab my phone and put on some music, before pushing the volume up to max.

Can’t think when I can’t hear my thoughts. With momentary reason restored, I get back to my task. Fiametta and Simone have been walking for hours. Their travels have taken them for lunch at a vegetarian restaurant – Fiametta doesn’t eat meat in any form. Another bleeding-heart tendency, I wonder. Then they moved on to shopping in various stores, and finally they took a stroll in Central Park.

Tomas learned from our escapade in the boutique and has opted to keep some distance from the girls. Not far enough that I can get to her without his noticing, but there’s nowhere near enough space for him to spot me lurking in the distance.

It does make me wonder if others from Lorenzo Napoli’s crew are out and about, too.

I'm certain that Fiametta will have given them more information about me, by now. My size, hair and eye color, as well as any other defining features she might have gleaned during our escapade.

She came too close to dying in that changing room, just to make the same mistake of keeping me her dirty little secret.

During our stroll through the park, Fiametta makes another surprising gesture that sends my mind into overdrive. As we break out of the brambles and back into the more manicured park, Simone grabs a stick of gum and plops it into her mouth. While they're walking and talking, the redhead discards the gum wrapper to the ground without as much as a second glance. But Fiametta notices her friend's lack of concern for the natural beauty of this place and stops mid-conversation to return for the tiny piece of trash that isn't going to cause any real harm.

Be the change you wish to see in the world .

Where did that come from?

Fiametta keeps that tiny piece of paper in her palm until they find a trashcan where she can dispose of it properly. An incredibly insignificant action in the grand scheme of world-wide pollution, and yet, it's part of her morals and she won't break them, even for a friend.

The more I learn about Fiametta, the harder I'm hit with the realization that we're at opposite ends of the spectrum. She's a peace-loving, nature-loving, hippy. She spends her Wednesday nights helping those who suffer, and the rest of her days making money to further that goal. I'm the monster she is protesting against. A greedy, overindulgent killer, who gets off on the sight of blood and loves watching cunts like her dad's men die. I take what I want. I leave the earth upon which I walk soiled and tainted.

So, how the hell, and out of everyone in New York, is she the one who drives me crazy? Who makes me second guess my very own nature? Who makes it hard to make my kill.

Something deep inside me tells me that I already know the answer. I want nothing more than to believe she is the same cruel, power hungry monster as Lorenzo. As I am. That Fiametta was raised with a silver spoon in her mouth and believes the entire world is a steppingstone to what she wants.

But that's the furthest thing from the truth. Unless she's one hell of an actress, Fiametta is kind, happy, and vibrant.

Most of all, Fiametta is innocent.

Her father ordered my mother's murder, not her. And like that joke I wanted to tell Matteo about how it's always the women these men love who suffer the harshest consequences, Fiametta Napoli is the next in line, and set up to pay for the sins of her father.

I decide it's best to cut this short and head back to my apartment to wait for Fiametta and Tomas to do the same. Following her is becoming increasingly challenging with the way she inspires feelings in me, nearly every time we're out there.

If I want to see this thing through, I can't keep letting these feelings cloud my judgment. I've survived all these years by being tactical and precise. I make moves based on a killer instinct that has never let me down. My cruel inner voice was right about many things, but the most important was that these emotions, infantile as they may seem, will be the death of me if I can't get a hold of them.

But before I can make my move, I need to know if Fiametta Napoli is a pretty face and fleeting fancy, or if this Little Flame has lit an inferno inside of me.

This settles it.

I'm getting back into her apartment tonight and finding my answer.

If I don't like what I find, I'm finishing this job for good.

Chapter Ten

FIAMETTA

The sensation of something heavy dropping onto my bed rips me out of a very pleasant dream I was in the middle of enjoying. It involved my masked hunter, the same way most of my thoughts and dreams have been consumed by him lately.

This one had me right back in my boutique's fitting room. His knife was replaced by his bare cock, firmly in his grip, while he kept my panties pressed against his nose. Even in my dreams, it seems, I'm not allowed to look upon his face. If it isn't a mask of his own choosing, it's the fabric he stole from me.

And had I not been so rudely torn from sleep; his face would've been obscured between my legs. With his tongue finding its way between my folds while his emerald eyes peered up from below.

But, as it always seems to happen, my dream starts fading from my mind as soon as I wake up. Although, it might be that the fear that spikes through my veins at the sudden intrusion into my bedroom chases it away quicker.

My eyes snap open with a sudden rush of adrenaline, and I peer into the inky blackness of my bedroom. I don't make any sudden moves to alert whoever may be here that I'm awake, but my rapid breathing is probably a dead giveaway.

It's only when my eyes have adjusted to the darkness, that I notice the shape of someone sitting on the foot of my bed. His back is turned to me and he's fiddling

with something in front of him.

It has to be him. My stalker. My assassin. Whatever the hell he is to me.

Should I shout to get Tomas's attention? He's only a few rooms away. He could be here in an instant to deal with this guy...

Unless I'm wrong. What if this is Tomas?

I can't be so foolish as to think that my stalker would be able to get through all of my apartment's locks, past my bodyguard, and into my bedroom without also believing that Tomas couldn't at least get through a single lock.

Jumping to conclusions could make things much worse, especially when whoever it is still thinks I'm sleeping. Maybe I don't have to do anything. If I just lie here completely still, he'll do whatever he did the last time he came around. Wander around my room aimlessly, knock over some things on my drawers and side tables, and be on his way.

That's a terrible idea. If it is my snake-eyed stalker, he's probably here to finish the job he couldn't finish in the fitting room. A change of heart in the moment is one thing, but can he change who he is because he wants to have sex with me?

Then there's the most screwed-up part about all this, and it's the flutter in my stomach that finds this exhilarating. He's willing to defy all, and risk being caught by Tomas, just to be here. And if it's anything like our time in the changing room, I'm sure he isn't going to stop at pressing his masked face against my thighs or stealing another pair of panties.

He's going to take what he wanted to then, and I'll be the lucky recipient of his pleasure.

A shifting weight at my feet snaps me out of my daydream and back to reality. Holy shit, did I really just get excited by the thought of this guy touching me again? I should be repulsed by it. I should fight tooth and nail to get him away from me. I should cry out for help at the top of my lungs...

And yet, I watch him slink through the shadows instead. He gets off my bed, with whatever he was inspecting in tow, and walks around to my side. Given his size, I know it isn't Tomas. There's too much muscle for even the darkness to conceal.

I shut my eyes as he nears the end of his walk, and instead, I focus on the sound of his footfalls. Big as he is, he moves with the quiet elegance of a panther—stealthy, controlled, and unnervingly smooth.

He wanted me to wake up when he dropped onto my bed. He wants me to know he's here. He wants to prove that my father's men aren't good enough to keep him out, and that he can do whatever the hell he pleases.

"In vain, I have struggled. It will not do." His raspy whisper strikes my ear, quoting one of the lines from my copy of *Pride and Prejudice*.

My cheeks are instantly set ablaze at hearing him speak. The heat is twice as harsh, as I realize he's read my notes scattered across those pages. He's seen my ramblings and scribbles, mixed in with my own wants and desires.

Is it normal to feel embarrassed when you're about to be murdered?

He doesn't give me time to search myself for an answer, but grabs the end of my blanket in both hands and rips it off my body.

I launch myself forward with my duvet, in some vain attempt to pretend he's just yanked me from sleep. Before I can make a sound, his open palm slams against my

face with a slap, and clamps my mouth shut tightly. He forces my head back down into the pillow, pinning me in place as his body begins to move again.

His grip is different this time. It isn't the soft leather of a glove holding my mouth, but his skin brushing against my lips. And unlike in the changing room, the rest of my senses come to life as the darkness blinds my vision in here.

I hear the soft rumble in his chest, as his free hand grazes my silky-smooth shin. His oaky cologne wafts in my direction with every repeated touch. Most importantly, I feel the goosebumps forming on my skin wherever his hand moves, as he starts to ascend my leg.

My heart pounds against my rib cage as he moves past my knee and against my thighs. Try as I might to fend off his touch, my body is fighting my mind and I part my legs further, wholly accepting what he's trying to do.

Trying to fight it is pointless.

I was literally dreaming about this very thing happening before he appeared in my bedroom, and now that it is happening, I'm getting more turned on than I ever thought possible, with the man who is trying to kill me.

It's forbidden arousal , I reason with myself. The emerald-eyed monster has been taunting you for weeks. It's Stockholm syndrome without the kidnapping .

I can think of a thousand more ways to make sense of this, but none of them do my thoughts any real justice.

Because, deep down, I know the truth.

I want it just as much as he does.

After admitting my desire to myself, I finally gather the courage to meet his face. To my disappointment, he's still wearing his black mask. The biggest bummer of all is that I don't even get to see his eyes in the darkness. He's just a black mass, sliding through the shadows and—

My thought is cut off as his hand glides down my thighs and a single finger grazes my soaked panties right above my pussy.

“Aaah,” a choked sound is emitted into his palm. It inspires him to tighten his grip on my mouth further, forcing my silence.

My entire body starts to shake as he starts to move his finger down, then up, and back again. His gentle caress isn't what I was expecting. No, something told me he'd force himself on top of me. Tear away my clothes and bury his cock down to the balls inside me.

This unexpected twist only turns me on more.

What is wrong with me?

I should be scared. Trying to fight him off. Calling for Tomas and any other of Father's men who are stationed around my building.

But no. I'm letting this freak touch me. Please me. Soak his finger in my wetness and still, I want more.

As if he can read my thoughts, he slides his hand up my panties and hooks them by the waistband.

“Lift your ass,” he commands, and I give in against the last screech of good reason echoing in my head.

He pulls my panties down to my calves and leaves them there. Is he trying to trip me if I run? Probably not, but somehow thinking I'm bound here makes this feel so much hotter.

My stalker stands as his hand returns to my center. He isn't on his feet long, before the same heavy weight that roused me from slumber, drops beside me. He's on his knees now, peering down at my body as his already soaked finger finds its place again.

"Lift your shirt," another order that my mind refuses to obey, but my body gives in to willingly.

Between my muffled cries against his palm, and my body rattling at the overwhelming sensations his hand delivers with only a graze, it's a harder task to complete than simply hoisting my ass in the air.

But when my tits are finally exposed, a deep rumble rolls out from the back of his throat.

"Christ," he utters in a husky whisper, and drives the finger he's been teasing me with inside my tight hole.

My eyes roll to the back of my head while my pussy aches at the thrill of being filled. He teases my hole with a single finger, until he's satisfied with the result of my rattling body. During his fast-thrusting motions, a second finger slips inside, and his thumb finds its way to the hood of my clit.

In the back of my mind, all I can do is wonder, if his fingers are filling me to the brim, how the hell would his cock feel inside me? I can see its outline in the darkness, pressing tightly against his pants. It's the only other shape I can make out against the black, other than his frame.

Any time I try to move, or join in the fun of his hand's pleasure, he reminds me that he's in control by squeezing my body back in position with the hand that's still covering my mouth.

When my muffled groans and fierce jerking become too much for a single hand to keep pinned, my stalker presses his knee against my chest to hold me down. This new leverage gives him a free range of motion, until he's slamming his fingers inside of me to the knuckle with fast, intense strokes that seem to hit the perfect spot.

I can't hold back my squeal of delight, and to his growling annoyance, his covering hand barely catches the sound. Somewhere in the mix of this swelling pleasure, reason manages to find its way back into my mind. It isn't the fun I'm deluding myself to believe, he's violating me.

But it's too late to fight him off. He has me pinned in place, and even if I begged him to stop, those fingers would continue to fuck me as hard as he wants them to.

"Oh my God," I roar the words against his palm as he tears a climax from me.

He continues to thrust his fingers inside me while my body coils like a spring, and releases with a wave of pleasure that leaves my thighs dripping wet.

Did I really just cum at the thought of this guy violating me? While he WAS violating me?

A pit forms in my belly as he pulls his fingers out. I watch his hand move to his face, and he yanks his mask up from the bottom. Squinting in the darkness I try and get a look at his face, but all I see is two fingers slip between his lips, and I hear the lustful, hungry growls that come from his mouth.

It's the closest I've come to seeing what my stalker actually looks like, and instead

I'm left with another wave of desire at his actions.

"My feelings will no longer be repressed." He finishes another section of the quote and hoists himself to his feet. Foolishly, I almost expect him to say the rest, too: You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you . But the words never come, and as he takes a few steps back, eventually becoming indiscernible from the shadows.

I crumble back into my bed and feel the warm threat of tears in my eyelids as I stare at my ceiling. I want them to be because of what my stalker just did to me, but I'd be lying if I told myself that was the reason.

Because, as violated as I feel, I'm just as satisfied by his touch.

And I want it again.

Chapter Eleven

FIAMETTA

“What’s going on in there?” Tomas Bernardi’s voice booms from outside my door. As if it wasn’t bad enough that my stalker woke me up earlier tonight, Tomas’s screeching comes just as I’m drifting off again.

“Why are you yelling?” I shout right back.

A whole lot of good he is as security if it took him this long to respond to the noises he must’ve heard from my emerald-eyed monster’s touch. Just thinking about what happened, again, sends butterflies through my stomach, and turns my cheeks several shades of a darker red.

God, there really is something wrong with me.

“Don’t toy with me, girl. What game are you playing?” He’s drunk again. I can tell by the subtle slurring over certain words, but more so by his total lack of common sense and reason.

The ludicrous notion that anything is happening behind my closed door is one thing, but his calling me girl is what really pisses me off. There used to be a time when Tomas wouldn’t dare call me anything other than Miss Napoli, out of fear of facing Father’s rage.

He’s gotten too comfortable living in my home over the last few weeks, and it’s high

time someone put Tomas back in his place.

“You’d be wise to remember where you are and who you’re talking to, Tomas.” I don’t show any signs of my bubbling temper, favoring a calm voice with stern intention.

Silence.

Good. For the first time since he arrived here, Tomas is actually thinking before he blurts out whatever comes to mind. However, when he finally finds the nerve to respond, I don’t get the humbled apologies of a Napoli underling. Instead, Tomas erupts into hysterical laughter that lingers far longer than it ought to with how serious I’m being.

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” He finally hisses when his laughter comes to an abrupt halt. “Think I’m one of Daddy’s scared soldiers? Afraid to face the big bad don’s wrath?”

He bangs against my door in a fit of rage, and my spiking fear sends a cold shiver down my spine. Two more loud knocks follow against the wood, each one more violent than the last.

I decide Tomas has lost his mind. I need to do something about this before he gets in here. I grab my phone and dial my father’s number. He’ll know how to handle this problem better than I can. At the very least, he’ll give Tomas a good beating for his display of utter disrespect.

It isn’t the first time he’s referred to Father as Daddy . And the brazen way with which he says it, leads me to believe that this old fool has been sitting in a seat of power too long. He’s grown comfortable at Father’s side and believes himself untouchable.

Well, if I can't change his mind, the big bad don will.

Unless Father doesn't answer, and as it stands it doesn't look as if he's going to. Normally he never lets his phone ring beyond the third note when I call, and we're well past that now.

"What's the matter?" Tomas tests again. "Cat got your tongue?"

His words send me into a new panic. What if Tomas has finally become unhinged because something has happened to Father? Would the Napoli consigliere be so rude and obnoxious toward the head of this family otherwise?

"How about you open that door, Fia? Let's you and I have a little chat." His menacing tone isn't helping quell my fears. It's as if every time I think, he speaks to keep the doubt alive.

"Go away," I shout, cowering beneath my blanket.

"Open this door, right now." Tomas barks, and I can hear him jostling the handle as if every new twist might magically unlock it. "I'm not screwing around. Something's happening in there, and I'm going to find out what it is."

"Nothing's happening. I'm trying to sleep." Can he even hear me over how feeble I sound?

"Fine." An unsettling quiet follows. But as uncomfortable as it is, the silence doesn't last nearly as long as I would like it to. "Then I'll huff," Tomas starts, before another heavy thud comes at my door. This time, it sounds like his full weight is smashing into the thick wood. "And I'll puff." He's shouting the words while he continuously bangs against the door.

“Stay away from me,” I shout, trying to reason with whatever sanity might be left in him.

My attempts go ignored and the constant barrage on my door continues. It sounds like a mixture of his shoulder driving into the middle, and vicious kicks colliding with the door handle. Finally, the locks give out and splinters of wood allow the monster inside.

“And I’ll blow your house down,” Tomas finishes with a gut-wrenching grin in the doorway. His drunken, wild eyes stare at me cowering beneath my blanket, before they drift across the room to see if anyone else really is in here.

Luckily for my stalker, he vanished half an hour ago. Or is it Tomas who’s the lucky one?

“What do you want?” My voice is timid and fearful.

What the hell is wrong with me? I managed to hold my own, if only a little, against a man I know is trying to kill me. Tomas, on the other hand, makes me so scared I can barely think straight.

Unlike my stalker, Tomas doesn’t have any pleasant intentions toward me tonight. I can tell by the way his narrowed eyes scan my blanket, lingering uncomfortably long across my body.

“Trying to call Daddy?” Tomas pats a hand along the wall in search of the light switch. He flicks it on, and the sudden beam of bright white light leaves me blinded. “He won’t help you; you know?”

Just as Tomas says it, an automated voice comes from my cellphone. “You have reached the voice mail box of—” it reads father’s number, “please leave a message

after the tone.”

Not much good it’s going to do me tonight, but at least I’ll have Tomas on a recording talking shit about his boss. Tomas fumbles his way toward my bed, and as my eyes adjust to the bright lights, I realize how completely drunk he really is. He can barely walk straight without his upper half swaying. His eyes aren’t narrow out of what I originally perceived as fury, but because they’re too heavy to stay open.

“What do you want, Tomas?” I repeat my question.

“To see what all the ruckus is about.” Tomas stops at the foot of my bed.

“There was no ruckus . You’re hearing thin—”

Tomas rolls his eyes and grabs my duvet. “Then this shouldn’t be a problem,” he says, before pulling it off my body with force.

I recoil as far away from him as I can and grab the pillow under my head to place against my lower body as a barrier to his sickening gaze. Making myself a tiny ball against my headboard isn’t going to do much to stop him, but at least it stops his wild eyes from seeing something I don’t want him to.

Now, his eyes are moving. They range from my face to my shirted chest and finally to my legs which are clinging to the pillow for dear life.

“A wet spot on the bed?” Tomas snickers as his inspection reaches my sheets.

A wet spot left by my jewel-eyed monster’s touch, and all the fuel Tomas needs to go on with whatever nightmare he has in store for me.

“Either you pissed yourself, or you lied to me. Which is it?” He’s serious now, and

his brows furrow in annoyance above his heavy eyes.

“Get out of my room,” I shout, realizing that nothing’s going to change if I stay feeble and weak. That’s a surefire way of landing in a position I can’t come back from. At least, fighting will at least give me a chance of walking away from this unharmed.

“That’s what I thought, you dirty slut.” A sickening smirk forms on Tomas’s face, and he presses a knee onto the bed. “Don’t let me stop you. Show me what you were doing.”

He stretches an arm out and his fingers brush against my ankle. Fear claws at my chest over what’s about to come. I can shout and scream, but I can’t stop him from doing whatever he’s going to do. And although Father will get revenge on my behalf tomorrow, there’s not much comfort in that while I have to endure Tomas’s touch.

“Don’t touch me,” I roar, as hot tears start to well in my eyes.

But Tomas shrugs off my plea, allowing his fingers to travel up my leg. My stomach churns when his greasy hand crosses my knee. His eyes stare directly at my center, where my legs refuse to part from the pillow that’s stuck between them. I won’t give him the satisfaction; he’ll have to steal it from me.

“Smooth like silk,” Tomas shivers as he indulges in stroking my bare skin. “Is it the same all the way up?”

I want to scream. To kick my legs at him wildly to stop the inevitable. I want to launch myself off my bed and sprint for the door. Run away and never look back.

But I can’t.

My body is frozen in place. I'm trapped in the cataclysmic fear of Tomas' taking advantage of me.

His free hand joins the other. They both settle on opposite thighs, before his calloused fingers dig into my flesh. Not hard enough to hurt, but the intention is evident.

"You might as well give it to me now, Fiametta," Tomas says, in a cold, husky whisper. "It's going to happen whether you like it or not. It's just a matter of timing."

What is that supposed to mean?

"So spread 'em. Let me see what's rightfully mine. Have a touch and a taste. Help you finish what you started." He starts pulling his arms apart. Not with enough force to spread my legs, but this sick monster is enjoying this too much to rush.

With a whimper, the first tears start to fall down my cheeks. As much as I want to believe I can get away from this, I can't. He's too big, too strong and too mean for me to fight him off.

That doesn't mean I'm going to give in completely. Weeping or not, I'm going to keep myself pinned down as best I can.

But, before Tomas has the chance to force my legs apart any further, a knock comes at my front door. It's a loud, panicked banging that I haven't heard before.

"Tomas," a voice booms so loudly from the other side, that I could swear whoever shouted the name was in my bedroom. "You need to get out of here. NOW!"

"What bullshit." Tomas hisses. And while he seethes at the thought of his fun being cut short, he digs his fingers into my skin until it starts to hurt so bad, my legs start feeling numb. "Don't think I'm finished with you, Fia."

He releases me and goes.

When I'm sure Tomas is gone, I rush to my door and close it as best I can given that the locking mechanism is broken. I grab my handbag and a few scattered outfits from the piled clothing monster, to jam it shut. Sure, it won't keep Tomas out if he tries to get in again, but at least I can pretend I'm safe.

"Bruno's dead," I hear someone say, while I toss the last of my clothes pile in front of the door.

"What? When did that happen?" Tomas hisses. I'm sure he'd be shouting if the news wasn't this alarming. Not that I know who Bruno is, but another man down can only mean one thing:

My stalker is back at work.

"Ten minutes ago. Maybe twenty." The unknown speaker answers. "Happened in the alleyway while Bruno was on patrol."

"That means he was here," Tomas growls. "What about his partner?"

"Missing. Presumed dead."

I fall back into bed, shaking off what could've been had this tragedy not unfurled...

Did my masked monster kill those men to save me from Tomas?

Chapter Twelve

CRUE

Y ou're letting us down.

There it is again. The monster that dwells in the black spot of my mind, rearing its ugly head to make me feel pathetic. The more I try to fight it, the harder it becomes. I've had ample opportunity to plunge my blade inside Fiametta. Finish this gig and walk away like a bandit king.

What did I do instead?

Risk it all to save her from that slimy cunt, Tomas.

It should've been his head on my chopping block last night, and not those two low-life nobodies. I made my move as soon as I saw him enter Fiametta's bedroom, and for the first time in my life, I felt relieved, after I returned to my apartment, to see her sleeping.

And that's how I know I'm not thinking clearly. Feeling relief at someone else's peace? I should've seen it coming, when the voice in my head was louder this morning than ever before. Especially after a kill. And although the voice's cruelty knows no bounds, I still listen. For it's my last bastion of sanity, or rather, my perceived sense of sanity.

I don't think like normal people, and I shouldn't pretend to be one. There's no life for

me and Fiametta, because she has to die. Playing make-believe with her is going to cause more harm than good, and last night was a prime example of that.

Why should it bother me if Tomas has his way with her?

Nah, that's the wrong question.

I can't answer my inner voice as openly as I did the first time it returned. I'm sitting in Matteo Baronne's office, waiting for a meeting I have no interest in, and I can't have him hear me talking to myself.

Why haven't you done it already? You're dead-set on sleeping with her, so get it over with and finish the job .

I can't. Well, I can, but I don't want to. Fiametta isn't like the other woman I've ever been interested in. I don't want to walk all over her like a doormat and throw her aside when I'm finished. I want to take it slow. Have my fun. Watch her explode.

Her piece of shit dad killed your mom, Sunshine. don't you want to make him hurt?

More than anything, but why should that be at her expense?

"Crue," Matteo's voice comes from the door behind me. I'm sitting in the guest chair at his desk, which is a mistake I usually wouldn't make. Having my back to an open door, in a house full of my enemies, could lead to a swift death.

But, my Little Flame has me so turned around; I can't even remember the rules I've put in place to stay alive this long.

"Hello." This is the longest we've gone without jumping straight to the point since I've met him.

I don't like it.

"I hate to call you in when I know you're a very busy man, but I needed you here today," Matteo crosses his office and falls into his chair. His suit, tie and trilby hat tell me he's expecting someone else, who isn't me.

He's pissed. He's gonna try to kill you. You've taken too long to deal with your Little Flame.

"What's happening?"

No need to respond to my inner voice, however I'm getting the strong feeling that it's right about Matteo's wanting blood. But I can't jump to conclusions. I'm already treading on very unsteady ground, and showing my teeth to the strongest mob boss in New York isn't going to make life any easier.

"I'm going to attend a meeting at Lorenzo Napoli's home. I want you there with me," he says, as if I'm not the man who has slaughtered scores of Lorenzo's men over the past few weeks and months.

Two more last night. With no planning or preparation behind it. Anyone could've seen me slinking toward them. Then there's Fiametta. Sure, she hasn't seen my face, but I'm not exactly your average Joe in build and menace. If she painted a picture of how I look, or worse, if she recognizes me, I won't make it out of that house alive.

"Excuse me?" I widen my eyes at his request. "I'm a hired assassin, not your guard dog."

"Yes, you're my expert assassin. A title I will confer until the day I die." Matteo opens one of his desk drawers, and pulls out a sterling silver hip flask. "But it's going to be good for you, Crue. Your work has been impeccable. I thought it would take

years to clear my list, and you've managed to complete it in months."

"And now my sights are trained on Fiametta. I should focus on her." He can keep his compliments. Walking into that viper's den won't do me any good. It's a death sentence in waiting.

"Yes, exactly, and that's why I want you to join me. Partly as a way to scope out their home. Really, you never know when it might come in handy, but mostly because the Napoli jewel is going to be present." Matteo swigs from his flask and then drops it from his mouth with a loud ahh . Was that a sign of enjoyment or disgust? "For me and the men who join me, it's a meeting. For you, it's a reminder of what these bastards did to you. A reminder of your mission, and fuel for your fire to get the job done."

Oh shit. Does he know something?

Of course, he does. You're slacking. Skinned thirty men alive like it was nothing, only to stall at a pretty face. Get your head out of your ass.

"And if I decline?" I have to ask, even if the answer is staring me straight in the face.

"I'll be tremendously upset," Matteo's voice shifts to cold annoyance.

"Fine, I'll come. But do enlighten me as to what the job is. A precise rundown, preferably, so I don't sit around Lorenzo Napoli's home with my thumb up my ass." There's definitely a better way I could have put it, but Matteo doesn't seem to mind my outburst, as he laughs giddily at it.

"Scope out security and find any vulnerabilities in Lorenzo's defense," he starts, before taking another long swig. "More importantly, get eyes on Fiametta. If you haven't already, it will be a good time to draw her out and find her weaknesses. With

her security ramping up, after your killing spree, we'll have to be tactical with her. I want a show. I want Lorenzo to suffer. But I'd prefer not losing the best assassin I've had the chance to work with in the process."

"I already know her weaknesses," I say. I keep the real truth of my answer hidden, because it is that her weakness is a misguided fascination with me and the thought of my fingers inside her. "Her weakness is that she's Lorenzo's daughter, and that means she's the key to my vengeance."

"That's my boy." He grins sadistically. "Now, let's go have some fun."

In Matteo's mind, the word, "fun " equates to violence.

But the word sparks a completely different idea in my head.

"I'll have to meet you there. Need to make a stop on the way." I get out of my chair and start heading for the door.

"The meeting is at noon. Don't be late," Matteo says.

I grab my phone to check the time. I have two hours left to run my personal errand. Good enough for me.

After I've collected the necessities I need for my afternoon's entertainment, I arrive at the Napoli residence just as the clock strikes twelve. Matteo's parked outside, with a fleet of black SUVs tailing him. My BMW almost fits in perfectly.

And even though Matteo has brought an army with him, only he, his second-in-command, and I make our way into Lorenzo's house. We're led by a Napoli thug, from the front door, upstairs and onto a veranda overlooking the massive back garden.

The two titans of the mafia underworld greet each other, and so do the underbosses. There's something about Tomas's false smile as he shakes the Baronne consigliere's hand that makes my blood boil. I won't delude myself into thinking it's because he's Lorenzo's man, though that's a far sweeter thought than the truth.

His presence pisses me off because of what he did to Fiametta last night. And if we were alone, I'd probably give him a taste of his own medicine, just for scaring her. Only, I wouldn't be shoving my cock inside him... It would be six inches of cold, sharp steel.

Once they've finished the niceties, Lorenzo turns his attention to me. For a brief moment, I fear he recognizes me. As the man whose mother he slaughtered in cold blood – not that he got his own hands dirty, of course. While my mom was face down in the mud, he was at home watching late night TV. But perhaps he has also had a description of me from Fiametta.

“Who's this guy?” He asks and my fears are washed away.

“A new addition to my crew. Funnily, his name is Crue, as well,” Matteo snickers at the homophone, and gestures that I should shake Lorenzo's fat, sweaty hand. I do, much to my irritation.

“Good to meet you, pal,” Lorenzo nods while he speaks.

I opt to stay quiet, lest I say something that may get me into trouble.

“He a mute or something?” Lorenzo turns his attention back to Matteo.

“I think he is nervous about meeting you. Or maybe it's because I may have let slip that Fiametta is going to be here today,” Matteo says. On hearing his daughter's name, Lorenzo's eyes instantly narrow in irritation.

“Yes, well, she’ll be out soon. And as hard as it is to admit, she’s the reason I’ve called this meeting.”

“I had my suspicions from the moment it came out that Fiametta was your daughter. I know how deeply you cherished that secret.” I’ll give Matteo credit. He knows how to play the game.

“Yes. I’ve always believed that, if not for our family, we don’t have much to live for,” Lorenzo sighs. If I were normal, perhaps that would’ve set me off. Hearing him talk about family so longingly, when he stole the only part of mine, I had left. Instead, I’m more interested in the look on Fiametta’s face when I give her the surprise, I picked up on my way here.

“It’s part of the reason I wanted to keep her hidden. Keep her safe. But this world of ours is full of ups and downs.”

He breaks contact with my hand and finds his seat. The rest of us follow suit.

“Y’know, I’ve always been prone to the saying, if you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans,” Matteo says. “But don’t worry, old friend, whatever you’ve called us here for, we’ll see to it that it happens.”

And just as we all get comfortable, Fiametta steps through the door leading onto the veranda. She’s wearing a summer dress that bears a striking resemblance to the color of my eyes. Mixed in with the green are white flowers. In the first few seconds of her entrance, the whole table falls quiet. Every single one of us is basking in her stunning elegance and beauty.

Her face. Look at her face. You can’t keep staring at her tits. My inner voice roars in the back of my head. It’s right, too. Lorenzo would no doubt have me hung in the dense overgrowth of trees in his garden if he thought I had interest in his daughter.

But looking at her face is an even bigger mistake than inspecting her body. Because her wide eyes are glued to mine, and her jaw has dropped so far, it's practically part of the floor.

She recognizes me .

Chapter Thirteen

FIAMETTA

I wish I could say that I woke up with a renewed vow to make better choices, but that would just be a flat-out lie. My heart is still racing with equal parts fear and excitement over my encounters with the man who, by all accounts, wants me dead.

What I can't seem to wrap my head around is how, instead of just carrying out his twisted task, his main focus up to this point seems to be giving me an earth-shattering orgasm. Of course, I've felt threatened in his company. Felt his firm arms around my throat, while the sharp edge of his blade glistened beneath the light. But never once did he make me believe he was actually going to use it on me.

He's so carefree in taking advantage of me, and I let him. Because deep down, I want him to. I enjoy it. I like having no control, while he uses me like a glorified sex toy.

Is my enjoyment of his touch really that messed up, though? Shouldn't I be more concerned by the fact that, instead of fighting tooth and nail to remove Tomas from my security detail, I agreed to join Father at this meeting? Sure, I came here this morning to discuss Tomas's insubordination, but I was roped into this, before I had any chance to express my disdain for the man. That's partly due to Father's own troubled look after I arrived. I saw something in his eyes that I'd never seen before, and it chilled me to the bone.

Father was scared. He's hiding it well in front of Matteo Baronne, but that doesn't mean it isn't still bubbling inside him. Helping him through this is my best shot at

ditching Tomas.

“Mr. Baronne, it’s a pleasure as always,” I greet Father’s equal first, giving him a curtsy to accompany my words. He’s part of a very select few who know I’m Lorenzo Napoli’s daughter...

Well, that’s before the news broke a couple of weeks ago.

“The Napoli jewel, in the flesh.” Matteo stands up from his chair and extends a hand to me. I offer mine, and he brings it to his lips in an old-fashioned greeting.

“How are you holding up? I understand this must be a rather worrisome time for you.”

“I’m fine, thank you. A few uncomfortable interactions,” I force my eyes toward Tomas as I say the words. “But otherwise, it seems I’ve managed to walk away from whatever this is unharmed.”

I can’t tell them about what happened last night. Or the attempt on my life at my boutique. Or how a masked man been following me through New York but always seems to disappear before I have a chance to spot him properly.

Beyond wanting to help Father through the hardships of this meeting, it’s my stalker’s fault that my mind isn’t on the piece of shit, Tomas, sitting on my father’s right.

I bet we’re all here because of him too. I’ll never know for certain without proof, but every inch of my being screams that he’s the one who slaughtered Bruno last night. Another one of Father’s faceless suits, who was meant to guard me, but instead was found dead among the trashcans outside my building.

I've tried talking myself out of it. Thinking that he was there to continue his slaughter of Napoli men, rather than wanting anything to do with me last night. It stung, originally, believing our fun was an afterthought to him, instead of the main attraction.

But then I remembered the changing room in my boutique, and how he risked everything to spend a few more seconds trapped in that tiny cubicle with me. How he took the time to find a quote from my book that best suited our situation in my bedroom. My stalker wasn't there to murder a man. He was there for me.

It makes my cheeks burn red hot.

My greeting of Matteo's second in command is shorter, with less pomp and ceremony. Like Tomas, he's just another body at the table. We're here for the family heads to discuss their business, everyone else is a showpiece. But I quickly realize how foolish this thought is when my attention shifts to the final member of Matteo's party. A beast is sitting at the end of the table, with one leg crossed over the other while he stares straight into my ever-widening eyes.

One glance is all it takes for me to know it's him. I'd recognize his emerald eyes anywhere. They are a certain shade of green I could never forget. I modeled my entire outfit around them as a subtle screw you to Tomas, after what he did to me last night. But if those eyes, boring a hole deep into my soul weren't enough, his dirty blonde hair in a spiked matte mess atop his head is another clue.

My heart starts pounding in my chest as the realization dawns on me. This man isn't just some vigilante slaughtering Napoli men for fun or sport, he's under Matteo Baronne's employ.

Unless, and I know this is the biggest wish I'll ever make to be untrue, Matteo brought him here to hand him over. That Father and Matteo have decided to let

bygones be bygones and it's time to finally end the senseless brutality running rampant within the Napoli family.

But that delusion is quickly squashed, when Matteo's confused face snaps from me to my stalker, and back again.

As if this isn't a hard enough pill to swallow as is, Matteo finally speaks. "Handsome, isn't he?"

I all but collapse into my chair, nodding haphazardly in response to Matteo. Even in this state of turbulence, I find handsome to be the biggest understatement imaginable. My stalker is chiseled out of pure marble, with looks that could match the most beautiful of the ancient gods. His face is perfection incarnate, rivalled only by those piercing green eyes that have plagued both my fantasies and my nightmares.

What have I done? I've led Father's biggest nightmare into our home, and I can't even warn him about it. And the worst part is, I don't even want to.

Whatever this snake-eyed monster has done to me, has twisted my mind into being his good little girl. He wants to kill me, he keeps saying it, and yet, I can't stop myself from wanting to see things through with him.

Am I really so cock starved that I'll risk everything to feel him inside me? Sadly, I fear the answer is yes. Because it's not from lack of having sex, it's because I want him.

"This is Crue Amos. A rather new addition to my family, but one who has quickly soared to great heights." Matteo gives Crue a firm pat on the shoulder.

The monster cranes his neck to the hand, and a deep, dissatisfied rumble comes from his chest.

Crue Amos . Even his name rings magically inside my ears.

“Well, let’s not get too cozy. It may have come out that Fiametta is my daughter, but that doesn’t mean I want the world believing she’s part of my business.” Father steers the conversation away from me and Crue, and I can’t thank him enough.

I doubt I’d have been able to speak to him normally. To pretend he isn’t the man who has killed so many, and who now has his sights on me. Both metaphorically and literally, it seems. He hasn’t managed to look away from me since Matteo introduced us. I’m ashamed to admit that the same is happening to me.

He’s better looking than I pictured, and my imagination conjured something vastly superior to most men. But the longer I look at him, the more I wonder if I’m hooked on his face, or whether it’s the raw power he commands without having to say or do anything around this table. What I find is tripping me up, is that with a face like his, and sitting on top of his wet-dream physique, why would he hide away behind a mask?

His stunning good looks would make a perfect weapon in his arsenal. It’s as if he’s been genetically modified in some lab, to be absolutely appealing to the eye, in order to lure in his victims.

Deep breaths, Fiametta. This guy still wants to kill you .

“Lunch will be served at one. I’m not going to beat around the bush, Matte, I want business concluded before the meal,” Father says, easing back into his chair.

“Alright. Then tell us why you brought us here today.” Matteo shoves a hand into the front of his jacket and pulls it out, holding a fat cigar.

“There are killers on the loose.” He speaks almost as if he knows it’s Crue, Father’s

eyes turn to my monster while he says it. “I have to assume it’s more than one since they’ve killed scores of my men. I’m hunting them and I believe I’m close, but I want to call a truce between our family’s until it’s over.”

“A truce? I didn’t know we were at war,” Matteo snips the end of his cigar and jams the end into his wide grinning mouth.

“We aren’t, but we both know that the best time to strike is when the enemy is wounded.” Father’s stern gaze returns to Matteo. “But where’s the fun in kicki—”

“Gotta take a piss,” Crue says suddenly, interrupting Father’s next thought. His vulgar, upfront announcement has Matteo chortling at his side. “Mind showing me the way to the restroom?”

Father stares at him with a blended look of annoyance and disgust. “Left hallway, all the way at the end. It’ll be on your right before the bedroom.”

Crue starts to shuffle out of his chair, but before he stands, Tomas looks at me and says, “Why don’t you grab us some drinks, girl?”

What the hell did he just say to me?

Good. Showing this level of disrespect in front of Father is bound to...

“Great idea. Fiametta, why don’t you show our guest to the restroom and bring the men something to drink,” Father says, instead of tearing into Tomas as I expected he would. My heart sinks. Would he even care about what Tomas did last night, if he allows him to speak to me so disrespectfully?

But it isn’t all bad, I realize as I get up from my chair and start following the gigantic monster into my family home.

I finally get to meet my stalker, face to face.

Chapter Fourteen

CRUE

I 'm in the lion's den. So close to the monster who took away the only person I truly cared for, and I have to sit on my hands and pretend I'm interested in the bullshit these two are talking.

You're a real piece of work, you know that? The dark voice is screaming in my head. It's grown louder with every passing second that I've been in this house and haven't cut Lorenzo's tongue out of his fat mouth.

And no matter how I've reasoned my actions up to this point, I can't now. The deafening scream inside my head is what I deserve. If I wanted to think clearly, I should've finished my mission as quickly as I could. I should be done with this and should have moved on from Matteo Baronne, long before he brought me here to torment me.

You can't hide anything from me. I know you're getting angrier having to sit in front of that balding rat, Tomas, rather than the real poison at the table. For what? This piece of ass .

What a fine piece of ass she is, though. Her dress isn't nearly revealing enough for me to fully see the curvature of her body. But why would it be, when Fiametta believed she was spending the afternoon with her father and his rival? Still, I've seen enough for my imagination to run rampant. I know the outline of her body, and I can trace it through the green material clinging to her skin.

“You shouldn’t talk to Father that way, you know. He won’t be pleased,” Fiametta says, as she leads me through the house.

“I don’t give a fuck.” I don’t have to hide myself from her. She knows the truth. She recognized me the moment her eyes saw my face.

“Yes, but—”

“But nothing.” I cut her off. Intriguing as I find her, I’m not going to allow her to lecture me.

I can’t even wrap my head around why she isn’t cowering away from me or alerting Lorenzo’s men to take my head.

Fiametta stops next to a door and pushes it open to reveal an enormous barroom. “Like he said, the bathroom’s all the way at the end of the hall and to the rig—”

I snap my hand around her mouth before she can say the last word and push her into the room. I kick it shut with my heel and start walking to the far end of the room with her in tow. Next to the bar she’s supposed to be pouring drinks at, I slam her back against the wall and pin her to it.

Fiametta lets out a muffled scream against my palm. Her eyes widen as my grip tightens around her delicate face, and I can’t help but wonder what’s running through that pretty little head of hers. Clearly, she’s smart enough to know that I’m not going to kill her here. It wouldn’t do either of us any good. But I presume she also didn’t expect me to make any moves while I was under Lorenzo’s roof.

“Don’t need it. I just had to get away from them,” I tell her honestly. It’s the same principle as the men I bring to my kill chamber, I suppose. Dead men tell no tales, and someday soon, Fiametta will join them.

But I have to admit, there isn't a single part of me that isn't happy that prick ordered her to fetch drinks. As much as I want to make Tomas suffer for what he did to Fiametta, he deserves my thanks for this one.

"What are you doing?" She speaks very clearly for someone who has her mouth squeezed shut. Huh, has she had practice with a gag before?

Fucking pathetic. If my inner voice had eyes, I'm sure they'd be rolling to the back of its skull.

It's easy to ignore it with a different head leading this charge.

"Taking." There isn't much more to add. She might not understand yet, but I'm not going to keep her in the dark for long.

I slide my hand off Fiametta's mouth and lazily trail it down her face. I stop moving when I reach her chest, just above her breasts. As much as I want to grab for them, I'm taking my time on purpose. Pressing buttons to see what makes Fiametta tick. So far, she's met everything I've done with her own sick sense of satisfaction. The fact that she is speaking to me like a normal person, instead of her assassin, is sign enough that I'm losing control of her.

It's time to take it back.

Using my forearm, I press her body to the wall again. This time, I squeeze hard. So that she exhales the air in her lungs with a guttural sigh. I grab a bundle of her dress in my free hand and start yanking it upward. All the while my gaze remains fixed on her saucer-sized hazel eyes, analyzing them intently to find answers to questions her words could never answer.

First and foremost. Is she enjoying this?

Lorenzo should've castrated me the moment I set foot in his home. Since I'm rock hard, and about to burst inside my pants if I'm not careful, I take it she still hasn't told them much about me. Maybe a whisper here and there. A general outline of my size, or other features that wouldn't help much in their investigations.

Or maybe I'm overanalyzing this. She could've told them everything she knows about me, but the Napoli crew is so busy hunting in the shadows that they wouldn't dream of pointing fingers at Matteo's latest hire.

That title is starting to piss me off more than I thought it would. And I'm also starting to think that Matteo actually believes I want to be a part of his gang, the more he talks about it. The balls on that guy to tell me I have to find the weaknesses in Lorenzo's security around his house...

I'm not a dog he can order on a whim. He's getting too comfortable around me, and it may be time to do something to remind him of our relationship.

It's this burning fury that makes me hoist Fiametta's dress up so far that half of her belly is exposed by the time I come back down to earth. And with it, I see, she chose not to wear panties for this meeting.

"Naughty, naughty." I swallow hard at the sight of her bare cunt. I've had the pleasure of experiencing it twice now, but every time feels like the first. My mouth starts to water, and my eyes are locked onto its silky perfection. All I can think about is shoving my cock inside it.

I would too. Right here, right now. I would feel her warm cunt suffocate my dick until I flooded her with my seed. But I can't. It would mean our game has to end, and she would need to meet my knife.

"Wait, stop," she whispers softly, no doubt watching my eyes flicker with the burning

desire to destroy the wet slit between her legs.

“What?” I ask in a foreign-sounding, husky voice.

“Is this where you do it? Where you...?” She’s nervous. If her words aren’t enough to express it, her thumping heart against my forearm sure is.

I don’t answer. She doesn’t need to know I’ve already made up my mind of what’s going to happen here. I want to see where her panicked mind carries her.

Her hands finally move up from her side, and latch onto my forearm. She starts stroking it through the suit.

“What’s this?” This is all unfamiliar territory for me, but whatever Fiametta’s trying to accomplish by stroking my arm isn’t doing what she thinks it is.

“I could be doing this...” She pauses to swallow, though I don’t see why since when she does, she chokes on the dryness in her mouth. “To your cock instead.”

“In what world do you think a hand-job is equal to or greater than the feeling of your wet pussy?” I finish my question by releasing her dress, but I slip my hand under it before it sinks to the floor. My fingers meet her belly first, and I’m torn between moving up to her tits or down to my real prize.

I’ll let her answer guide my decision.

“It isn’t, but it’ll still feel good.” Heat rushes to her cheeks and her otherwise tanned skin turns a few shades darker red.

Pussy it is.

I slide my calloused fingertips down her body. Fiametta shivers at the sensation, but she doesn't fight against me. Her stroking is, however, replaced by a firm grip on my elbow and wrist, bracing for what's about to come.

There's no surprise that Fiametta's dripping when my hand slots between her legs. Whatever reason she has for declining sex, hasn't stopped her from enjoying my touch in the past. Why should it be different now? Other than the fact that we're in her dad's house.

But although that may be a mood killer for her, it's stiffening my cock to immeasurable proportions. Defiling the Napoli jewel in Lorenzo's abode is a wickedly tantalizing thought.

"Fine," I grumble, and slip two fingers over her mound. What starts as a way for me to wet my fingers, has an unexpected side effect that forces a shiver throughout my entire body.

It's a short, explosive sensation against my fingertips, that somehow feels like a bolt of electricity coursing through my bloodstream before it settles precariously at the tip of my cock. It gets more pronounced as my fingers linger against her wetness. Each subtle movement drives another bolt to my tip, making me so sensitive that even rubbing against my underpants forces my eyes to roll with pleasure.

What is she doing to you? The voice isn't screaming anymore. It's just as stunned as I am.

Maybe I'd have understood this foreign reaction the first time I touched her. Even the second, when she was my plaything in the darkness of her bedroom. But here and now, I should be used to this... right?

"F... fine?" She stares up at me, shocked that I'm willing to go accept her terms, but

nibbling her lip as my hand finds its way to her core. I smirk at the sight. Fiametta believes she's won me over with her pitiful attempt at seduction.

"Get on your knees, Fiametta," I order and take a step back, removing my arm from her chest, but leaving the other lodged firmly between her thighs.

"What?" Her brow furrows, as if debating whether to protest or obey.

"I'm taking a hole. And if you won't let me have this one..." I thrust my middle finger inside her to the knuckle, and she squeaks out a noise trying to keep as quiet as she can so no one outside can hear. "...then your mouth will take its place."

Chapter Fifteen

FIAMETTA

Every time I think we're making some sort of headway that isn't purely sexual, or about him trying to kill me, Crue manages to subvert my expectations. I shouldn't be this surprised. He made his intentions clear from the start, and I'm the one who's too blind to accept them as reality.

Now, I fear I've put myself in a position I'm not going to get out of as easily as I did last night or in my fitting room. I should be counting my lucky stars that he's telling me to get on my knees, instead of bending over the bar's countertop. Considering all the options of what could've happened, letting him use my mouth is one of the better ones.

But why did he have to start with a finger inside me? It drives me wild, makes me desperate for more, and serves as a depressing reminder of what could have been instead. Under normal circumstances, I'd consider this behavior selfish. Wanting a partner to touch or slip his tongue inside of me, and get nothing in return.

But these aren't normal circumstances. Crue has literally expressed his intentions to kill me. So, can it be selfish that I want no part of this? Pleasing him in my imagination is one thing. Touching myself while I pictured him tearing off his pants and freeing his enormous penis in the shadows of my darkened bedroom. Seeing the outline as it springs to life, and nervously reaching out to feel its rock-hard throbbing. I imagined how he would slap my hand away, grab my legs by the ankles and tear them apart before falling between them, until finally, his girthy tip penetrates my

aching hole.

Even now, the images flashing across my mind are enough to give me the sinking feeling of lusty want. But that's all it is. A fantasy that should never come true. And I fear it's too late to escape my fate.

I can't even call for help in Father's home. Crue would kill me before anyone had the chance of getting here.

"Why do you look so frightened, Little Flame?" Crue asks, sliding his finger out of me. The motion leaves a sudden hollowness inside me, which stretches further than just my core.

His soaked finger makes its way up to my face, where he slips it into my mouth. Once again, I can't control myself as he does. There's something so hot about it, that I lick myself off his digit without a second thought.

Maybe it's tactical this time. If I give in to some of his more twisted depravities, he might not push any further.

"It's just a blowjob," Crue adds, twisting his finger inside my mouth, and making sure I suck it clean. "Don't tell me you haven't thought about it."

"Of course I've thought about it," I admit, and for the first time since he mentioned it, I don't feel a cold chill running down my spine. Instead, it's replaced by a nervous warmth in my belly. Almost eager. Almost excited.

You can't be serious.

There's no way you want this.

I stiffen in place and shut my eyes, breathing somewhat sporadically. He removes his finger from my mouth, and it immediately finds its way to my neck. His hand grazes the skin as it crosses down my chest, finally resting against my breast.

A wickedly satisfied grin stretches over his lips as my nipple pokes through the material against his palm.

“Then indulge your twisted fantasies. I’ve done it every time I’ve seen you, and now it’s your turn.” Crue tilts his head to the side, and his green eyes beam straight into my soul.

Looking into his eyes, I realize that there is no tactic behind my decision to suck his finger clean. It isn’t some ploy to stop him. I did it because I wanted to. Because he told me to. It may have been an unspoken demand, yet I gave in without as much as a shake of my head.

The same way I’m doing now. Slowly sinking to the floor, while Crue’s hand follows on my breast.

“Good girl,” Crue says, and it lights a spark in my belly that has no reason to be there.

Feeling praised for obeying my stalker’s demands is lunacy. And yet, the spark turns into a raging inferno inside me when he lifts his hand off my breast and his thumb presses into my lower lip. With a forceful push, he parts my lips and stares into the opening with a dangerous twinkle in his eye.

“Stick your tongue out,” Crue says, sliding his hand back.

Heat swirls to my cheeks with his instruction and I avert my gaze before I can follow it. But as it drops, I get an up-close and personal look at the hardness straining against

his trousers. The sight makes my mouth part further instinctively, totally in awe. It isn't hard to stick my tongue out with it this wide, and Crue growls in satisfaction as I do.

"Stunning," Crue grumbles, more to himself than me it seems.

He reaches for his belt and works the buckle loose with both hands, accompanied by wild noises that emerge from deep inside his barrel chest. I keep my attention focused on the monster bouncing in his pants with every action he takes to get it free.

My heartbeat quickens as he completes his first task. It gets louder in my ears when he undoes the button and slowly lowers his zip. There's no turning back now. Any chance I had to run is gone, but the closer he comes to freeing himself, the less I feel the want to.

Until it actually happens, with Crue hooking his thumbs into his trousers and underwear and dropping all of it to the floor at once. His cock springs to life in front of my face, swaying wildly as it tries to settle from its sudden freedom. Trying to lock my gaze on any one part of it feels impossible with it moving so sporadically. But mostly, it's because it just seems to never end.

Even as he grabs it by the base with his gigantic hand, he barely passes a third of the length. It's thicker than I pictured while it was pressed against me through his jeans, as well. But it's the pulsating veins that draw my attention the most. There's something incredibly alluring about him having so much blood pumping through his erection, and that it's swelling this intensely.

"Like what you see?" Crue smirks, and only then do I realize my mouth is still wide open.

Only this time it isn't because he told me to do it. I'm in shock at the size of the thing

he's going to try and push into my mouth. He strokes the length of his cock a few times, and with it a warm pulse emits from my core and trickles through every nerve in my body. He takes two steps closer to me while he satisfies himself with his hand, and when he's in position, it returns to a firm grip on the base.

Scared as I may have been when all of this started, my fear has been replaced by a twisted desire. A desperate yearning to touch him. To run a fingertip against his veins and see what it will do.

I try to push the feeling to the back of my mind, remembering that this is more a nightmare than a pleasant experience. We're not lovers having some naughty fun where we could be caught, he's my stalker and a killer. Disgust is all I should feel, but as a bullet of precum leaks from his tip, it's becoming increasingly difficult to be repulsed.

I'm still a woman.

I have my own needs.

And as much as I don't want to admit it, Crue has managed to fulfill them several times already.

"That's right. Keep that tongue out for me," Crue involuntarily winces as he brings the head of his dick right up to my lips. He pauses there, giving himself another long, slow stroke, while my eyes cross as I watch him work the thick spectacle in front of me.

Then, as his hand hits his pelvis again, he inches his hips forward and lets the thick head of his cock slip between my lips. With it, I'm greeted by the first taste of his precum. As expected, the first flavor that hits my tongue is salty, but the longer I taste him, the sweeter it seems to get. Maybe it's blending in with his woody cologne,

which is tickling my nose with his standing this close.

My tongue starts moving along his swollen head, searching near the hole for more. One taste wasn't enough to fully understand the complexities of his flavor. Crue cranes his neck to look at me. His eyes burn with hungry intensity and dark curiosity. I bet mine are showing something similar. Giving in to his wicked whims, without needing his to command me.

Since I don't have any choice in the matter, I might as well have my own fun. I might as well find the twisted enjoyment my mind has conjured since we met. Crying and screaming isn't going to stop this from happening, and if I'm going to regret it anyway, it should be on my terms.

"That's it, Little Flame." Crue drives a hand toward my head, and his fingers intertwine with my hair. He takes a firm grip on me, and starts pulling me toward him, inching his length deeper into my mouth.

He doesn't get very far before the tip reaches too far in and triggers my gag reflex. Crue draws himself back, giving me a moment to breathe, but he never removes himself fully. Short breathes barely manage to get air into my lungs with his girth still crowding my mouth.

Before I have a chance to fully catch myself, he tugs on my hair again. This time, he manages to slide into the same position without my choking on his cock. I've got no idea how, but I'm sure it's my body's fight response. Disappointing the monster, who has taken control of me, won't do any good. Since I can't run, I have to adapt to what he's doing.

Right now, it's testing the limits of my throat to see when I'll collapse. I guess it also helps that gagging flooded my mouth with saliva, making it easier for him to slip around inside.

“Shut your mouth around it and suck,” he barks his order, tightening his grip in my hair.

I look up at Crue with eyes that are tear-filled from the initial choking. Until now, I hadn’t realized that my mouth was still as wide as I could keep it. Even then, my teeth still grazed his shaft as it passed by them.

I curl my lips down as instructed, trying to strike a balance between covering my teeth while still being able to accept his girth. The latter, I’m quickly realizing, is nearly impossible, without spreading my mouth wide. I suck back the pocket of air in my cheeks, until they tighten around him.

A devilish growl escapes Crue’s mouth, and he starts moving his hips back and forth. He pulls his cock back far enough that only the tip remains in my mouth, before slotting it all the way in until he’s tickling my throat. He uses his grip in my hair to pull me along with the motion, slow at first, but each thrust brings increased speed with it.

Some haphazard thrusts press his head into my cheek, extending the flesh into an enormous ball. Others, as he starts to lose control of his actions and to sink further into my throat, bring new waves of spluttering from me. But no matter how hard I gag, or how little oxygen I get, Crue doesn’t stop like he did the first time.

Each unwanted response makes his grin grow wider. It’s as if the torturous side of this is the most enjoyable part to him. And I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t doing something similar to me.

I have no control. I feel powerless in a place where I should be safe. Mostly, just having a man like Crue do whatever he wants without a thing I can do to stop him, turns my knees to jelly and opens the flood gates between my legs.

Desire claws at my belly from this irresistible, taboo encounter. Tears pour from my eyes, not out of fear, but at the vicious slamming he drives deeper into me. Spit dribbles down my chin. And the noises I splutter around his cock are more in line with moaning than feeling afraid.

My heart skips more than a few beats as I look at Crue's face once more and see it twist in forbidden enjoyment. He slides his free hand under my chin, using it to lift my head in line with his pelvis, somehow never missing a beat with his thrusts.

"You like that, my Little Flame?" He asks in a raw, vicious snarl.

All I can focus on is his " my Little Flame" . Crue has said the name before, but he never said my . Maybe I'm reading into it too deeply, especially with him smashing into my throat, but hearing it isn't helping my own desires.

I'm a mess. Screwed up beyond repair and it's all his fault.

I can't answer, even if I wanted to. In my new position, Crue manages to find a better rhythm with his thrusts. And with a hand both in my hair and around my throat, he starts bucking his hips savagely, fucking my mouth without concern for the state it's going to leave me in.

Noises I never thought I'd hear from the giant towering over me start spilling from his mouth. Loud groans, as if he doesn't give a damn who hears him, mixed with quieter, more primal grunts. Each thrust brings another wild eruption out of him, until his body is moving at ridiculous speeds. His grip tightens around my jaw, and with it his head snaps to the ceiling.

"I'm gonna cum in your pretty little mouth." Crue snarls as his legs begin to shake. "Break you in." His thrusting starts slowing. Instead of quick bursts, he's sliding the full length out of my mouth, before driving it as far back into my throat as he can get

it. And with it, I find my own forbidden pleasure. I've never reached climax without being touched before, but something tells me if I ever do, it'll be because of Crue. "I'm going to make. You. Mine."

He pulls back as a stifled roar catches in the back of his throat. But this time, as his cock's head slides out of my mouth, hot ropes of his seed splash over my tongue. His body tenses and relaxes, and each action floods my mouth further, until all that's left is the taste of his salty, sweetness.

I wanted another taste, and I got it in spades.

And then, as if nothing has happened, Crue slips his cock out of my mouth and pulls up his trousers. He doesn't say a word, just stares down at me as he tucks in his shirt and fastens his belt. Only when he's presentable again, or as close to how he looked before, does he speak.

"Don't worry, Little Flame. I haven't forgotten about you." In a move that leaves me panting harder than Crue's face-fucking, he extends a hand down to me and helps me up from the floor.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I gulp down hard, savoring his taste that's still lingering in my mouth.

"I brought you a present," Crue says, and slips a hand into his pocket, while the other returns to a similar grip on the front of my dress as earlier.

"A present?"

He doesn't answer, just draws a mystery item from his pocket and sliding it against my bare lower half.

It's cold, metallic and surprisingly large. "I'm going to put this inside you, Fiametta, and you're going to leave it in until this meeting is over. Do you understand?"

"What?"

Instead of answering me, he does as he said he would. I'm soaking wet from our encounter, so the metal sphere slips inside me without issue. My body shudders at the foreign object's penetration, but my gut tells me that it isn't dangerous. At least not in the traditional sense.

"I want you to remember this, Fiametta," Crue releases me and finds his cellphone in his pocket. "I said you're mine, and I meant it. I'm going to do whatever I want with you, and you're going to obey me."

Claimed by my stalking assassin, who has set his heart on playing games with me... I must have lost my mind. This has to be a daydream from a padded cell. It can't be real life.

Crue taps his cellphone and whatever he slid inside me starts to vibrate. My eyes instantly shoot to the back of my skull as it tickles the places I wish his finger had moments ago.

"You can't be serious." My breathing quickens and my eyes widen. "You can't do this when I'm sitting next to my father."

Another tap stops the vibrations.

"But I'm going to. Oh, and while you're at the bar, I'll have a gin and tonic on ice. Better have crushed mint and lemon..." He pauses. I can't tell if it's for dramatic effect or if he's trying to make a joke that can't penetrate the cum drunk fog in my mind. Maybe what he's about to say next is the most important thing I'll ever hear.

“Or else.”

Or else.

That’s all you’ve got for me after what you just did?

Crue waves his cellphone in the air to further his threat. And with it, I realize, this meeting is about to get much harder to endure than I would ever have imagined.

Should I be worried about how excited that thought makes me?

Chapter Sixteen

CRUE

I shouldn't have done this.

Any of it.

Drilling Fiametta's mouth and putting her in her place is one thing, but slipping a sex toy into her wet cunt while I'm sitting at a table full of men who want my head on a pike is pretty ballsy, even for me. Lorenzo may not know I'm the man he's hunting, and Matteo might think we've formed a kinship beyond our original agreement, but how long will I survive if either of them finds out that this is all just an act?

My instincts tell me to run. They're not just saying it, they're screaming it at deafening volumes. I didn't come here with Matteo, so I can make my escape whenever I need to. But I can't pull myself out of this chair. Not while I thumb my cellphone in my pocket and know what delights are hidden inside Fiametta.

I'm risking a lot by taking this game further with my Little Flame, but I'm a risk taker by nature. Realistically, the chances of Fiametta's having an outburst are slim. She's going to fight back her urges to squeal at the wonderful sensations vibrating in her core, to avoid raising Lorenzo's suspicion that something else might be happening here.

If she does, his first thought won't be that she's harboring a remote-controlled toy, either. Besides, when will I ever get a chance to have fun like this again? It's not as if

I'm going to be a staple at these meetings, especially not once Fiametta has met my blade. I should make the best of the time I have.

A few minutes go by before Fiametta returns to the table. She's carrying a tray in both hands, with four empty whiskey glasses, a carafe of amber liquid in the center, and two gin and tonics with mint and lemon.

My, my, she listened. It almost feels wrong to pull my phone out of my pocket and press the icon that turns on the metal egg inside her. But I do it anyway, just as she crosses the threshold of the door, and I watch as the tray nearly goes flying over the self-important cunts of New York.

"S... sorry it t... took me so long," she stammers her apology. If she can't hold herself together on the lowest setting, what's going to happen when I make it rattle harder? "I needed to freshen up on the way."

Freshen up.

A nice way of putting clean the cum, tears and spit off my face. Apart from a single missed spot of blotchy mascara next to her eye, Fiametta did a good job. But I preferred the look of a cum starved cocksucker over daddy's little princess.

I turn the device off as she glares at me with narrow eyes and places the tray on the table. It was just a nudging reminder that I'm still in control.

"I can appreciate your concerns, Matteo," Lorenzo says, ignoring Fiametta's apologies and continuing the conversation they were having while we waited for her. "But I'm afraid sharing that section of the city is not something I can do."

Matteo chuckles sardonically and shakes his head. "You misunderstand me. I have no intention of sharing." He's the first to lean over and pour himself a drink since no one

else will. Matteo is ruthless and he's letting it shine bright at this table. "You asked me here to negotiate a solution to your problem, and here I am, negotiating."

"You talk a pretty big game when you don't know if this killer, or organization, or whatever the hell it is, plans on putting you in their crosshairs." Lorenzo's so angry I can almost see the cartoony plumes of steam rushing out of his nose.

"He might, but something tells me that if he hasn't already, it's not going to happen," Matteo's eyes shift between Lorenzo and Tomas.

Don't count your chickens, pal. Keep pissing me off and all bets are off.

I turn my attention back to my phone and start fidgeting with the various controls. Some have letters, others have numbers, but none of them give me an actual indication of what I'm doing.

The only icon that's clear is the big circle in the center. It's the on and off switch, and if I roll my finger over it, the speed changes. I glance at Fiametta and watch how she's trying to force the sensations building inside her to stop. She's gnawing on the inside of her cheek, breathing in slowly to find her inner peace.

Not gonna happen.

"Negotiations are a give and take thing. There has to be something else you want, so why don't we skip the bartering and jump straight to the point." Lorenzo's arrogance knows no bounds. Every time he opens his mouth, fury grips my heart. Just because I'm having fun with his daughter, doesn't mean I've forgotten what he has done to me. And although I hate giving Matteo credit for anything, he was right about this meeting putting me back onto my task.

However, I find the longer I sit in their company, the less interested I am in killing

Fiametta. I'd rather focus my attention entirely on her piece of shit father, and his dog, Tomas. They're the ones who deserve it.

"I'm offering you an opportunity to stop the violence before it begins. All it's going to take is your loosening up some of your control over the East End." Matteo clears his throat and pours two fingers of whiskey into a tumbler. He hands it to his second in charge, who's name I still don't know, before pouring another for himself.

"Some?" Lorenzo puts a finger under his chin and his voice softens.

"Yes, of course, not the entire district. That would be cruel," Matteo answers.

My eyes return to Fiametta, who is now showing more visible signs of her distress. Her eyes are closed shut, and she's clinging onto the tablecloth as though her life depends on it. I wish I could see inside her mind. See how my torment is tearing her up, and how the thrill of it is pushing her to the brink of climax around these stuffy old bastards.

"Girl," Tomas's voice cuts through the tension the two don's conversation brought. He leans behind Lorenzo and pats Fiametta on the shoulder, before saying. "Stop twiddling your thumbs and pour our drinks."

An unnerving fury brews in me as soon as he opens his mouth. I have to physically restrain myself from smashing Tomas's face in with the carafe that is sitting a few inches away. It would be so satisfying, too. Watching him squirm in fear, the same way he made Fiametta feel last night.

I wouldn't kill him first. I'd take his tongue first for the utter disrespect. His fingers would be next, as a reminder not to lay a hand on what doesn't belong to him. Finally, his eyes... not that there's any real moral justification behind that. I could lie and say it's because he looked at Fiametta, but I'd have to blind the whole damn

planet if I wanted that one to be true. No, his eyes would be just for me. Merely for the thrill of watching a grown man scream.

And then there's Lorenzo. Beyond his being a piece of shit, I'm starting to believe he's a coward. Not only is he Fiametta's dad, but he's also a man, and he still can't muster the backbone to stand up to the piece of shit who's supposed to be second in command of this operation.

There's something else at play here, that much is clear.

I direct my attention back to my cell phone, to avoid an unnecessary outburst. Toying with Fiametta is more fun, and it has a much higher chance of keeping me alive.

I adjust the big circle in the middle of the screen, and Fiametta utters the first sound that's related to the toy. It isn't a moan or a whimper, but a clumsy whoopsie, as her rattling hand messes whiskey over the tray.

"What are you doing?" Lorenzo roars, and my lazy gaze travels to him. "Christ, Fiametta, what's gotten into you?" Before he can continue berating his daughter, Lorenzo's attention snaps to me. "And you... are we boring you?"

"Excuse me?" I keep my voice low and calm, but never break my gaze.

"You heard me." Lorenzo's seething. He can't keep his emotions in check. I suppose it's difficult, when you're being whipped by your biggest competition.

"You'd be wise to watch your tone, big man. Your title might scare everyone in this room. Hell, it might scare everyone in New York City, but it doesn't mean a thing to me."

I flick the button to switch the device off, as I pocket my phone and replace it with

the folded dagger, I keep tucked next to it. I hadn't planned on using it, but you can never be too careful walking into a den of vipers.

Getting into a fight here will surely mean certain death. For everyone at this table. But I won't go down without a fight, that's for damned sure.

"Christ, man, have you lost your mind?" Matteo hisses into my ear.

"I think it's time I go."

"You think?" Lorenzo scoffs. "You better hope I don't see you again."

"Sticks and stones," I rise from my seat. "Fiametta, it's a pleasure to meet you," I add, just to piss him off more.

I leave without another word to any of them. That could've gone better, but I'm sure Matteo will find a way to smooth things over. At least he was right about it focusing my mind on the mission. I've never wanted to see someone hurt more than I do Lorenzo Napoli.

Even if it's at my Little Flame's expense.

Chapter Seventeen

FIAMETTA

One Week Later

My heart still flutters every time I think about how Crue handled my father, when he was trying to intimidate him. It was a risky move that has sent countless men to an early grave, and my green-eyed stalker did it without flinching.

What else should I have expected from the man who killed so many Napoli soldiers?

“Excellent work tonight, ladies. Keep it up,” Joe Davis says as he passes Simone and me. He comes to a stop, resting his lower back against the counter, and inhales deeply. “Last push. Our night is almost over.”

“You doing alright, Joe?” Simone scoops a ladle full of soup into a mother and her two kids’ bowls.

“Tired, Si-Si. Long day at the office with a whole lot of meanness. You know how it goes.” Sadness resonates through his words, but he gets back to his feet with a shake of his head and starts walking down the line. “But ain’t nothing gonna take away my smile. Not when we’re doing the good Lord’s work.”

“That’s the spirit,” Simone adds, before he’s gone on to the next person. She tilts her head and scans my face before speaking.

“Speaking of doing alright , what’s got you so bright and smiley tonight?”

“Whatever are you talking about?” I feign ignorance in a flimsy attempt to sound mysterious. I’ve been dying to talk to Simone about this all week, but we’ve both been too busy to get together.

The soup kitchen isn’t really the place I want to share my news, but I don’t think I can hold myself back any longer.

“Okay, now I know something’s going on. Are you having a stroke? Do I need to call a doctor?” Her mock concern comes with a sinister grin that makes me giggle.

I grab two bread rolls off a serving tray and set them on the next guy in line’s plate. He moves to Simone for his soup, and we do three more before I get a chance to speak again.

“I think I met someone.” After weeks of being followed around and multiple break-ins. But saying it out loud, making it real, makes my cheeks burn.

“Woah.” Simone stands dead still, and stares at me as if I’ve just revealed the secrets of the universe. “You’re telling me you managed to meet a guy while you’ve had...” she gestures with her head toward Tomas, keeping his name out of her mouth in fear that it might summon him closer like some sort of demon. “Him, following you around? How the heck did you pull that off?”

“It was at my father’s place.” Telling her about Crue is one thing, but adding too many details won’t go over well.

If I’m being honest with myself, I shouldn’t have brought it up in the first place. The details of our entanglement aren’t exactly a savory topic of conversation. Between the late-night intrusions into my bedroom and his vicious use of my mouth in Father’s

bar, he isn't exactly giving me a Cinderella story.

But I've kept this to myself for weeks. I have been constantly on edge and fearing for my life, only to find that Crue doesn't want to pull the proverbial trigger. I have to share my excitement with someone, and who better than my best friend?

"He's one of your dad's soldier's?" Her eyes narrow in a mix of concern and frustration.

I don't blame her for feeling this way. She knows how much I despise the family business, and chasing after some forbidden love with one of Father's men is something I would probably do.

Luckily, I don't have to disappoint her this time.

"He isn't. He's an outsider who joined a meeting, and we hit it off." While he hit the back of my throat with his throbbing cock.

"Need I remind you that a meeting at a don's house isn't exactly the sort of place you meet nice guys?" She focuses on the last group of three, who arrive to collect their meals.

We serve them, before removing our aprons and heading into the back to wrap up for the night. Someone else is on clean up duty, so all we've gotta do is return the aprons and give Joe a rough total of how many people we served tonight.

"I'm just trying to look out for you, Fi-Fi. I don't want you falling in love with the wrong guy and getting hurt. You've kept your distance from that side of things for a reason," Simone sighs as we step out the back door of the soup kitchen and make our way through the parking lot behind it.

Tomas is already waiting, leaning his ass against the trunk while he rolls a cigarette between his fingers.

“I understand.” This isn’t how I expected Simone to react. Part of me believed she would be ecstatic and elated, the same way I feel. But that’s a silly thought, considering the circumstances.

Had Crue been anyone else, or had I told her we met somewhere completely different, I know she would’ve been jumping with joy for me. Maybe her reaction is a good thing. A wake-up call to how far I’ve fallen into insane depravity.

“Did you two have a good night?” Tomas asks as we reach the car, and my eyes instantly narrow in suspicion of the kindness he is using. What the hell am I thinking? It isn’t kindness, he’s merely being civil, but it’s so out of place for this monster, I can’t stop myself from searching for a hidden meaning.

“Yup, but glad it’s done.” Simone plays along, but she’s also approaching him with apprehension lacing her words.

“Great. At least you can get some rest now,” Tomas adds. “Ready to go, Fiametta?”

Who are you and what have you done with my father’s consigliere?

Unless it was Father to begin with. Having had enough of Tomas’s disrespect, Father could have put him in his place, and this is Tomas’s desperate attempt at making things right.

I nod my head and get into the backseat. Just because he’s playing nice, doesn’t mean I’m going to change my view of him. He’s still a bodyguard and chauffeur, above all else.

“Wanna stop for something to eat on the way to your place?” Tomas starts the engine.

“No, thank you. I’ve still got leftovers in the fridge.” I stare at him through the rearview mirror, trying to see if his facade will crack. It doesn’t, the whole drive home. He doesn’t speak much, either. Which is something I’ve never been against until this ride. I might be skeptical about him, but I’d rather hear his false niceties than have time to think about what Simone said about Crue.

Because she’s right. She hit the nail on the head without even trying.

I don’t want you falling in love with the wrong guy and getting hurt . Her words repeat in my head.

Well, I don’t think Crue’s going to hurt me. He doesn’t seem like the kind of man who would, after all he’s done so far. But Simone never said anything about being killed.

And that’s a threat Crue keeps making.

Chapter Eighteen

CRUE

D on't. Do. This.

It seems I've found another way to silence my inner voice. If it isn't killing, it's drowning my cock. My restless mind has been mostly silent for the better part of this week. It has allowed me to work in silence, while I prepare for the worst of what's to come.

Because the worst is on the horizon, it seems. Speaking out of turn to powerful men isn't smart to begin with, but doing it straight to Lorenzo Napoli's face, while he is getting his ass beaten by Matteo Baronne, has put me in a rather precarious position.

For the first time, since I started hunting Lorenzo's daughter, I find myself constantly looking over my shoulder. I am waiting for his hit squad to find me, pull a bag over my head, and pin my face in the mud, the same way they did to my mom. It's only a matter of time until he puts the pieces together. By now, he's probably done background checks on me. Used the name, which Matteo offered him so freely, to discover my deepest, darkest secrets.

This is pitiful. What are you even trying to accomplish?

I grin as my mind spins. It's trying to reprimand me for doing what I'm doing. Not once was this voice bothersome while I pleased myself with Fiametta's mouth, nor has it belittled or berated me while I worked this week.

Now that I've found the two things that can keep this dark spot in the back of my head silent, it's going to be a real mind fuck when I eventually do have sex with Fiametta.

How is it going to reason my stabbing her with my blade, when I could be doing it with my cock again and again until the end of time?

Insanity has never been so damned sweet.

"Oh my. You're not the man I was expecting," says the blonde behind the counter of the antique bookstore as I enter. She tilts her neck down, peering at me over the wide rim of her glasses, while sucking on her lower lip with devilish satisfaction.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I keep a stern expression on my face.

Not long ago, the blonde's sultry tone and fuck me eyes would've been a wonderful invitation. She's a perfect slab of fuckable meat. Big tits, round ass, plump lips, all ripe to service my cock. I'd play her game, pretend my interest extends beyond the lusty banter, and get her back to my place.

That's where the real fun could begin. Ropes, whips and the other necessities I keep hidden under my bed for one-night stands. She'd walk in one woman and leave someone completely different. For better or worse, her life would be changed forever.

I find myself lacking interest in all that now, even as she leans forward and squeezes her tits together, exposing as much cleavage as she can muster through the open top button of her shirt. It's Fiametta's doing, no doubt. She has zapped my will to pretend I'm at one with normal society. She has seen me for what I truly am and hasn't chased me away.

Christ, I've told her I have to kill her, yet she still embraces me with open arms. I can

read between the lines of her smiles while she's going about her meaningless day-to-day tasks. I see how her world seems to shine brighter now that she knows who I am.

It's a pity. I believe we could have had something wonderful together, if fate had played out differently.

The blonde clears her throat uncomfortably but makes no effort to cover herself up. "A man like you doesn't strike me as the reading type. Especially not romance fiction from yesteryear."

"What do I strike you as?" I refuse to blink, forcing her into deeper discomfort with every passing second.

"It sounds almost silly, now." She shakes her head and breaks eye contact, averting her gaze to look at the book on the counter.

"No. I want you to tell me." Pushing someone to their breaking point, especially with this level of discomfort, used to be one of the many things I avoided. Blending in was my top priority. Fooling the masses into believing I deserved to walk among them.

There's no need now. And the thrill of watching the blonde squirm tickles my brain back into silence. Hiding the monster, I truly am, seems foolish, when the only person who matters doesn't shy away from it? Maybe my inner voice is right. I'm falling off the deep end with no life raft in sight.

"With a body and looks like yours... uhm... I pictured you more of a taker than learner."

"A taker?" I shove my hand into my pocket and pull out six stacks of hundred-dollar bills. "You mean a thief?"

“Of smiles.” Her gaze returns to me, this time with a sheepish smile to drive her point across. Shit. Am I sending the wrong message? “Of hearts. But most importantly, of bodies.”

She’s right about the last one. Though, wouldn’t say I took my victims’ bodies. That’s creepy.

I’m more of a collector of souls.

“Just ring up the book, I’ve got places to be.”

Her face sinks at my demand and she scans the book. I drop the stacks of dollar bills, onto her desk and grab the hard cover first edition of *Pride and Prejudice* off the counter.

How any piece of literature can be this expensive is so far beyond me, I almost regret my decision. But the almost fades to warm satisfaction as soon as I escape the stuffy bookstore.

This feeling terrifies me.

I’m getting used to hot blood coursing through my cold heart.

And it’s all my Little Flame’s fault.

Chapter Nineteen

FIAMETTA

“ I know it’s been hard on you, Fiametta,” Tomas says, as we step through the door into my apartment. “Having to live with me. What you must be going through with this killer on the loose. I just want to let you know that I’m going to try harder from now on.”

Whatever happened to make him change his tune must have been serious. He hasn’t shown any signs of being the wicked man I know him to be since we left Joe’s kitchen. And although I still have my doubts about his sincerity, after the multitude of things he’s done to show me what a piece of shit he is, seeing his softer side helps fight off my darker thoughts about Crue.

“Thank you, Tomas.” I mean it sincerely. Playing pretend or otherwise, having the man living inside my home on my side should make things easier.

We walk into the living room together, which is another huge surprise. Tomas usually makes a beeline for the kitchen at the end of the day, and starts hammering back his whiskey.

“How about you come in for a hug?” He opens his arms while gesturing with his fingertips that I bring it in. “Let’s start this new way of living right.”

“What? No.” I shake my head, but a smile still creeps onto my face. “I appreciate what you’re doing, Tomas, but I don’t think hugging it out is the right thing to do.”

You did try to rape me, after all .

As I decline, the forced smile on Tomas's face sinks into a sneer. His arms flop to his side with so much force that they clap as they strike his legs.

"Why not?" he asks as though it's perfectly acceptable to expect a hug after the vile way he's treated me.

"Because I don't want to." Dread creeps into my chest, replacing the amiability he helped foster in it.

I knew it was too good to be true. Once a scumbag, always a scumbag.

"I've put up with enough of your bullshit, Fiametta. It's the least you can do," he says through gritted teeth. His reddening face is my cue to run, but my legs don't want to listen to my brain's commands.

"What happened to " I know how hard it's been?" " I gulp down a dry swallow, feeling my breathing become shallower with every passing second.

"What happened to showing thanks to the man who has kept you alive all this time?" He takes a step closer to me.

With this question, it dawns on me, that Tomas didn't follow me into the living room to further our heart-to-heart chat. He did it to corner me. There's still enough space between us that I might make it, if I start running, but every moment I waste is another he uses to inch closer to me.

Crue isn't here to save me this time, either. It's me and Tomas, squaring off in a dangerous game I don't have experience in.

“Stay away from me.” I start walking back, until I hit the sliding door to my balcony.

“Now, why would I go and do something stupid like that?” A crooked, yellow-toothed smirk stretches over his face. “I’ve got you right where I want you.”

Those words are my starting gun, and I begin sprinting in the opposite direction to Tomas. I barely make it three steps before his hand latches onto my shirt and pulls back. My speed mixed with his sudden force, nearly cause me to fall to the floor, but I manage to catch my balance.

Tomas puts one hand on my shoulder, making sure he has a firm grip before he releases my shirt. He pulls me forcefully, and I spin around against my will to face him.

“This has been a long time coming, Fiametta.” Still holding me with one hand, his other makes its way up my side until it grazes the curve of my breast. A delighted yelp passes his lips, while his menacing eyes drink in my twisting facial features. “And it was going to happen, whether you wanted it to or not. Stop trying to fight it. Let me have my fun.”

His palm cups around my boob as he says it, and he squeezes hard. Tears flood my eyes as the pain accumulates into a disgusted pit inside me.

“Father will kill you for this.” My voice is weak and pathetic as I make a last-ditch effort to get away.

“Will he?” Tomas cocks his head to the ceiling, as if thinking deeply on what I said. “I guess I’ll take my chances then, won’t I?”

Both his hands snake lazily across my body and meet at the V of my shirt’s neckline. He stares deeply into my eyes while he wrings the fabric in both hands, before tearing

the material apart like tissue paper.

“Jesus Christ, your tits are fucking huge,” Tomas says, as they free from the torn material. He is closer to them than I’d like, but at least I still have my bra as a barrier. “I wonder how they’re going to feel around my dick.”

His hands travel again, squeezing my tits as they pass, before stopping on my leggings’s waistband. I’m sure he’s going to try the same thing with my thin-material pants as he did with my shirt.

Tears start rolling down my cheeks as his hands slide behind my back and grope my ass. He grabs my cheeks firmly, squeezing as he utters god-awful noises.

“Better still, how would it feel inside your cunt?” He groans like he’s already penetrating me. And in some way, with his pencil dick jabbing against my bellybutton through his pants, I guess he has.

But it’s also those words that spark a new fight inside me.

Absolutely not . The only person who’s going to fuck me, is my jewel-eyed stalker. He said it himself, I’m his, and I’m not going to let Tomas take that away from me. Mustering up enough courage to lift my arms, I slide them over Tomas’s shoulders.

“There we go,” he says, giving my ass another squeeze. “That’s the spirit.”

I hook my hands around his neck, grabbing on firmly until I feel as if I’m standing firmly. Then, I drive my knee into his groin as hard as I can. Tomas howls and recoils from me, while both hands immediately cup his damaged goods. As he stumbles back, his knees connect with my coffee table, and he topples over giving me a chance to run.

I do. I sprint into my bedroom, lock the door with the key and latch the deadbolt in place. Thank God I had the foresight to install a sturdier door with much stronger locks.

It doesn't take long for him to arrive outside it, however. And like the last time, he bangs away and screams obscenities that chill my blood. But no matter how hard he tries, Tomas can't get through this time.

Twenty minutes of trying comes to an end with Tomas's moving to the kitchen, howling at the top of his lungs. It's a combination of animalistic noises that have no real meaning and threats of what he's going to do when I finally leave my room. They pale in comparison to the feeling of his gnarled fingers against my skin.

When silence finally falls over my apartment, and Tomas has disappeared into his bedroom to tend to his loins and get shit-faced drunk, my weeping begins.

Scared is an understatement. I know this isn't the last I'll see of Tomas, and the way he speaks about my father leaves me wondering if I've read things all wrong.

What if Father knows about this? Or gave Tomas the go-ahead.

I wish Crue was here. He'd know what to do.

If his outburst in front of Father was anything to go by, killing Tomas would be his first act of vengeance.

The bittersweet thought is enough to keep me going. But for how long, I wonder?

Chapter Twenty

CRUE

“Can it be? The Big Bad is asking me for advice?” Mark’s sarcasm is the last thing I want right now. It’s hard enough that I’m asking for help, but the fact that he is poking fun at my vulnerability stings.

Another feeling. She’s changing you.

“Since when is big bad a nickname?” I can’t take my eyes off the window while I talk to Mark to avoid my inner voice. From the second Fiametta kneed Tomas in the nuts, I’ve been glued to it like a housewife watching her afternoon soaps.

“Since I started running out of things to call you? It was this or “cunt,” so count your blessings.” Mark cracks open another beer and flops into a more comfortable position on my sofa.

“Jokes aside, I’ll tell you what I think. But you need to promise you won’t lose your shit when I do.” He’s going to tell me I should snuff out my Little Flame. I knew it when I called him, but I have to go through this anyway. He’s one of the two people on this planet who can talk to the real me, and not the facade that keeps my death-dealing monster at bay. The other is the woman who plagues me enough to need outside counsel on the matter.

I don’t think Fiametta’s going to answer honestly, when the question is should I kill you and retain my professional integrity or not?

“Fine. I’ll wait until you’ve left before I throw a tantrum.”

Mark snickers. Looking on the bright side of this whole ordeal, I seem to be getting better at telling jokes. That has to count for something.

“Don’t do it,” he says.

“What?” I snap my head in his direction.

“Don’t kill Fiametta. Who gives a fuck about Matteo Baronne’s vendetta? That guy’s filth, anyway. She clearly means something to you. Whatever a sneaky blowy in her dad’s house can mean, anyway. Just be prepared to skip town, and not because I think the mob’s gonna have any chance of bringing you in for questioning.” Mark slurps his beer before finishing. “But let’s face it, not many folks are gonna hire an assassin who can’t get the job done.”

“I wasn’t expecting this.” My response is calm, but my head is spinning out of control. I wanted nothing more than for him to reassure me that this kill is more important than the budding sensation inside my chest.

I turn my attention back to Fiametta’s window and see her lamp is off, but the bathroom light is still on. A few more minutes and she’ll be sound asleep. Then I can make my move.

“Why? Because of the money? Screw that noise.” Mark kicks his feet onto the coffee table, knocking over the empty cans scattered across it. “You’ve made enough out of Matteo’s original list. Man, I got a fraction of what you did, and I don’t have to work another day in my life.”

“It’s not about the money. It’s about hurting Lorenzo Napoli.” I temper my mind and focus on the bigger picture. Lorenzo’s suffering is what this whole endeavor has been

about, and it won't reach its crescendo if I can't go through with killing Fiametta.

"So hurt him and spare her. Take him to that killing floor of yours. Hook his nuts to a car battery and don't turn it off until he's singing, "She'll Be Coming 'round the Mountain." Mark's right. I hate to admit it, but the best way to make Lorenzo suffer is by bringing the hammer down on him instead of Fiametta.

"I'll think about it," I say, and make my way over to the single-seater on Mark's right.

We share another beer, and then we shift our conversation away from Fiametta, focusing instead on our hunting shop. I've neglected it over the past few weeks. And as I hoped it would, bringing the mundanity of normal life back into the room, helps. Mark jumps to his feet and makes his excuses to leave.

"I'll walk you out," I say, disappearing into my bedroom to collect the book, my gloves, and my tools.

"Why?" he asks, when I meet him at the door.

"I need the fresh air to clear my head." The lie flows like water.

"Could've gotten it on your balcony." His lips curl in a knowing grin.

"Maybe I wanted to spend some more time with you, Mark."

Mark spits out a laugh. "Says the man who chased me away with mind numbing chats about buckshot and bait."

"That was weeks ago." We get onto the elevator and start moving down.

“And it still haunts me to this day.” He smacks a firm palm against my back. “You’re gonna go see her, and that’s okay. I just wish you wouldn’t lie to me about it.” More sarcasm and mockery.

Maybe inviting him here was a mistake. I wouldn’t feel this silly had I not.

“Whatever, I’ll see you soon,” I say, once we’ve disembarked the elevator and exited into the chilly New York night.

“Have fun, Big Bad .” He gets in his car and starts to drive away. I watch his car until his headlights vanish in the distance, before I cross the street. I head into the alleyway, keeping an eye out for any Napoli men who might be on patrol, before I start my ascent up the fire escape’s metal stairs. A few minutes later, I’m outside Fiametta’s room.

I test the window, expecting it to be open after my last uninvited visit. But given Tomas’s treatment of her that night, I suppose she has good reason to lock herself in.

Merely thinking his name makes my blood boil over and my mouth curl into a snarl like I’m some kind of rabid animal. I’ve had ample opportunity to slit his throat, and I should’ve done it already. The only thing stopping me is the fact that he is in Fiametta’s apartment. Being drunk all the time makes him an easy target, but if I killed Lorenzo’s second in command in her home, he’d move her away to some secure facility to keep her out of my reach.

I grab my leather toolkit from my pocket and rummage through it for the best tool for the job. A long, thin piece of metal with a hooked end and a handle. It slides through the narrow gap in the window with ease, and it’s only a matter of time until I knock the bolt loose.

I’ve been in this room a few times, but tonight is reminiscent of my first time inside

Fiametta's home. It's not about being nervous, at least I don't think it is. But the start of a hunt brings with it a certain blend of uneasy excitement.

I feel it again now, as I creep through her window. My eyes instantly fall onto Fiametta, once I'm inside. I watch the gentle ebb and flow of her chest, rhythmically raising and sinking her duvet covering. Her slightly parted lips are what draw my gaze the longest, much to my stiffening cock's dismay.

What I wouldn't give to have another go at it. To feel her soft, full lips engulfed around my throbbing erection. Her spit soothing my aching head, while her eyes roll to the back of her skull in sick enjoyment.

I'll never get tired of seeing that image.

Focus .

Was that my rational mind or my inner voice?

Get it done. Get out. Danger lurks around every corner.

Definitely the dark spot in the back of my mind.

I lower myself to my haunches and slink my way toward Fiametta's bed, but when I reach her side, I find her copy of *Pride and Prejudice* open on the side table. I turn my gaze toward it, to see it's on the very same page I inspected the night I came here. Her favorite quote from Mr. Darcy, with a new sticky note above all the others.

In big, bold Sharpie, it reads:

Our souls are connected. Mine and his. Entwined in the cosmic fabric. Destined to be together, in life or death.

But can the heart overcome what the mind wishes to reject?

Slowly opening the bedside table's drawer, I find Fiametta's writing supplies. I grab the antique edition of the book from where I tucked it into my belt along with a sticky note and pen.

It's my turn to leave her a message, and I do so, by answering her question and sticking it over the same quote from Mr. Darcy. I set it down next to her old, worn copy and focus my attention on her once more.

I press a gentle kiss against her still damp cheek.

"Your suffering is nearing its end, my Little Flame," I whisper. "I'll see to its resolution, personally."

Chapter Twenty-One

CRUE

“T wice in one night? This bird must be something special,” Mark says as he falls into my BMW’s passenger seat. “What’s it this time? You two finally fuck it out and you realized I was right?”

I don’t indulge his childish antics, favoring a straight-to-the-point approach, given the severity of what made me leave my watch when I should be keeping an eye on Fiametta, lest Tomas try to make another move.

“Lorenzo Napoli has requested a meeting.”

Mark jams his pinky finger into his ear and starts rattling it viciously. “Sorry, I must be going deaf. Say that again?” He’s oddly calm, considering I told him how I’d left things with Lorenzo, when Matteo took me there.

“Don’t come if you’re worried, but I’m going to see what he has to say.”

“You know I can’t do that. Who would I tease if they killed you?” If anyone other than Fiametta could warm my heart, I’m sure Mark would have right there.

“Then buckle in. The road’s only going to get bumpier from here.”

I drive like I’ve never driven before. Speeding through the empty streets of New York as if my life depends on it.

And to be fair, it very well might.

We arrive at Lorenzo's place, much like the last time both of us saw Matteo. A single man stands at the front door, waiting to lead us in. Unlike Matteo's man, he foregoes the pleasantries. We walk through the enormous mansion, up the stairs and into the barroom where I made Fiametta mine. Not only with words, but by planting my flag so far down her throat that no one will ever be able to remove my mark.

I shouldn't be getting a thrill out of this.

Lorenzo knows.

He brought us here to monologue at us, before he puts a bullet in your head.

There's a first time for everything, it seems. The usual cruelty of my inner voice isn't present. It's actually trying to be helpful for a change.

Too bad it's probably right.

"You've got some big balls, Crue." Lorenzo's sitting behind the bar, fixing two whiskeys. But next to the glass he's pouring amber liquid into, sit all the ingredients required to make a gin and tonic.

"Mighty big. So, fucking swollen that, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you should get them checked out by a doctor."

Screw two fingers, Lorenzo fills the glasses three-quarters of the way before moving on to make my G and T. Crushed ice, lots of mint, lots of lemon. Either he had a sip of the drink I never got the chance to enjoy, or he asked Fiametta how I prefer it.

Either way, this is going better than I expected.

It's unnerving me.

"As much as I enjoy your testicular flattery, Lorenzo, I'd prefer you didn't."

He chuckles coldly, as his big brown eyes lock with mine.

"You have quite the track record yourself, Mark." A hollow ache settles in my gut when he says Mark's name. Matteo has met Mark, and he has never heard his name. It was my design to keep him anonymous. If things turned sour between Matteo and me, he could flee without the threat of being followed.

But if Lorenzo knows his name, he must have dug into my past. Does that mean he knows who I am, now?

"Thank you?" Mark looks at me as if Lorenzo's crazy. A stark difference from the fear he displayed toward Matteo. I suppose it makes sense, with how many of Lorenzo's men we've slaughtered so far.

"But I'm curious about something," Lorenzo's eyes move to Mark without his head following. "Ex-military, turned ex-special forces, turned ex-private security, turned ex-hitman. How does a man with killing in his blood, wind up owning a hunting store in the middle of a city? There aren't too many deer here to fulfill that blood lust, are there?"

"Don't answer him," I say. If he's trying to walk us into a trap, it's not going to happen so easily.

"Like I said..." Lorenzo scoops crushed ice into half the glass before topping it with mint and lemon. "Massive. Fucking. Balls." Then another scoop of ice and more garnish on top. "You know, it used to be, people feared me. They heard my name and shit their pants." He pours half a glass of gin, and the other half tonic, before stirring

with a long, plastic stick. “These days, they look at me and laugh. Oh, it’s Lorenzo. He’s the guy who can’t take care of a single fucking killer problem .”

Lorenzo sets both our drinks on coasters on our side of the bar, and beckons with his fingers that we join him at the bar. We do, but Mark pulls funny faces in my peripheral vision with every step.

“I found out something very interesting while I was digging into you boys,” Lorenzo is the first to take a sip. Mark is close behind him. I’m still too cautious to reach for the glass. Poison comes in many shapes and forms. “You might be working for Matteo, but I know you aren’t one of his.”

The door opens behind us, as if on cue with what Lorenzo is saying. I expect to look over my shoulder and see a hundred Napoli men storming into the room, ready to open fire on me. Instead, I see Tomas stumbling his way inside. He is so blindingly drunk he can’t even make it to the bar, and he falls into a large leather chair in front of an unlit fireplace instead.

Pathetic.

But if he’s here, at least I know Fiametta’s safe.

“What’s that got to do with anything?” I shrug.

“Because you strike me as the sort who runs to the highest bidder.”

You’ve got to be kidding me.

I can feel my blood boiling inside my skin, and I have no idea why. Relief should be my first thought at Lorenzo’s lack of awareness about who Mark, and I are, but instead I find myself furious. All this digging into our lives, and he never once

thought to search his own past? A single name would've given him the answer.

Mary-Beth Amos. My mom. The innocent being that this piece of shit stole from me. I can feel the veins bulging in my neck. My eyes twitch as raw aggression commands me to smash this cocktail into Lorenzo's hanging jowls. Every fiber of my being roars that I should kill him, now. End my and Fiametta's suffering with one well-placed flick of my blade wielding wrist.

I don't. Instead, I allow my mind to wonder at how ridiculous it is, that out of the billions of people on this planet, it's only the last two Napoli family members who manage to elicit any emotion from me. His daughter makes sense. At least she satisfies my cock while she tugs at my heartstrings.

Lorenzo, however, is a big pit of despair. And sitting here is a constant reminder of my failure to deliver him the same painful blow as he did me, all those years ago.

"You were there, Crue, and you saw how Matteo talked down to me. Understandably, I'd have done the same if I were in his position. My men aren't weak, but if one man, one organization or whatever the hell these assassins are, can kill them so easily, the seed of doubt will be planted in the hearts and minds of every criminal across New York." Lorenzo's eyes fall to the drink I haven't touched. I don't plan on reaching for it just because he's beckoning me to.

"I fail to see the point you're trying to make. Why not speak clearly and drop the pretense." I take a seat on the barstool opposite him, and Mark follows suit.

Lorenzo snickers, no doubt wanting to make another comment about the size of my balls, but he holds off as we're reaching the climax of this conversation.

"I'm working on something big. Well, that's an understatement. It's going to shake the very foundation of New York, if I can pull it off." He glugs down half the glass in

front of him.

Better talk fast, old man. You're about to go the way of your consigliere, if you keep drinking like that.

"First, I'm going to need you to deal with the lowlife that's killing my men, of course. Can't have them running amok while I'm trying to rebuild."

Son of a bitch. There it is again. Another jab, Lorenzo doesn't realize he's throwing straight into my guts. It infuriates me more that his focus is on preserving his men instead of his daughter. I barely understand emotions, but even I know how cold this is.

"And what do I get in return?" I stare at him blankly.

"I'll double whatever Matteo's paying. No questions asked. You give me a number and I'll deliver the cash to your doorstep."

Mark spits a mouthful of his drink over the countertop, to Lorenzo's chagrin. I can see he wants to say something about it, but he holds his tongue because this isn't Fiametta spilling liquid on a tray. Mark's a skilled killer he's trying to employ.

"You do realize that he's paying a lot of money, right?" Mark asks and tries another sip. " A LOT of fucking money." He emphasizes the point after he's managed a swallow.

"Who cares? There's no use having as much as I do, if I can't use it to expand my operation." He shrugs, and the first sign of slurring trickles over his words.

Time to go, before he ropes me into a night of drinking as if we're old friends. I'll definitely kill him before the sun comes up, if he tries to do that.

“I’ll need time to think about it,” I say, and get out of my chair. “But if you want this, you’ll have to prove it. I want half the fee, upfront, as a deposit. No strings attached. If I choose to walk away, you will let us go without question or attempts to take what’s mine. Trust me, I don’t like to share.”

Lorenzo opens his mouth, and then shuts it, a few times before settling on an answer. I use his indecision to further list my demands.

“Before I agree to anything, you’re going to tell me what your plan is. How I fit into it. What Mark’s role is. I’ll assess the threats in my own manner, and if I find double doesn’t cut it, you’re going to raise the number.”

Lorenzo’s eyes widen and his face sinks. He is shocked that a used to be assassin turned hunting store owner isn’t afraid to make demands while standing in front of an unholy king.

“It doesn’t seem I have much of a choice but to agree.”

“You’re right. You don’t.” I take my first step and Mark follows me. “I’ll be in touch about how much it is, and to arrange another meeting. Don’t try to find me. It will only piss me off.”

More than he has already.

Every inch of my skin starts to itch as I get back into my car. This pointless display Lorenzo put on isn’t alluring. The thought of taking his money makes me sick. And where Matteo’s meeting failed to drive the point across, Lorenzo’s vainglorious attempt to win me over only reminds me more about what’s really important.

I have to make him suffer.

I'm furious beyond my own ability to soothe myself. It must be evident on my face because Mark doesn't say a word.

See you soon , barely makes it out of his lips when I drop him off at his place. And now that it's time I go back to mine, I find myself stopping in front of Fia's apartment building, instead.

Tomas isn't here, unless he somehow managed to drag his bloated, corpse-like physique back here.

It's my one chance to truly have her all to myself, and I can't waste it. I need answers. I need to calm down.

I need her.

FIAMETTA

I wake with a sore throat and puffy eyes from crying myself to sleep. Opening my eyes, I brace myself, expecting to be blinded by the morning light, but I find my room is still shrouded in darkness. I flick on the lamp next to my bed and notice that it's a little after two.

There are still many hours to rest ahead, but none of them are coming my way. Not once my mind starts to spin at the disgusting things Tomas tried to do to me.

Before my mind can truly tumble into the darkness, I catch a glimpse of a golden hardcover book on my side table. I know it isn't mine, because other than my copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, only my cell phone ever sits on it. I notice that its golden cover has red inlay running along the spine. I'm scared to reach for it at first, playing with the idea that it's some witch's tome, and that the second I touch it, I'll be cursed. But I scoff at the idea, realizing that whatever curse a witch could put on me, can't be worse than the nightmare I've found myself living in.

Then it hits me. The only person who can get in and out of my room like a shadow is Crue. My heart skips as my fingers run over the outer shell. I can tell it's old just by looking at it, but there aren't any words on the front to tell me what it is.

Cautiously, I pull the front cover open, and I see it:

Pride and Prejudice:

A Novel.

In Three Volumes.

By the

Author of “Sense and Sensibility.”

...

London: 1813

I’m stunned at the sight of the yellowed pages. I don’t want to turn them, fearful that I might damage this ancient artifact. But beyond all that, I want to scream from the overwhelming excitement bubbling inside me.

I never expected such a thoughtful gift from Crue. He may have scanned through my copy and quoted the line I’ve pondered for years, but who’d have guessed he’d turn that into such a heartwarming treasure?

Wait a second.

He read my copy. Saw my notes. What if...

I gently flick through the pages, until I reach my destination. To no surprise, I find one of my own sticky notes hanging crookedly across the line. And written on it, Crue’s message comes with an answer to my latest question, along with one of his own:

The mind brings endless turmoil, and a heart of gold will endure.

But can we change who we are, to watch a Little Flame grow into a blazing inferno?

Cryptically beautiful.

I shut the book and squeeze it against my chest as a new wave of tears stings my eyes.

As the minutes pass, I return to my new book and start scanning the lines to see if there's any difference between this ancient copy and the modern reprint sitting beside me.

A gentle tapping at my window pulls me from my books. The unexpected sound makes me tense up, and I awkwardly turn to face it as if there's a ghost waiting to jump scare me. I shut the book and rest it tenderly on my side table before getting out of bed.

Only one man would come up the fire escape. My man.

I get to the window and see it isn't locked. I'm not surprised since he slipped inside my room earlier. And just beyond, shrouded in the inky black of night, Crue's resting on his haunches, waiting for me.

I can't believe it's taken me this long to think about what else he did while I was sleeping. Did he indulge anymore of his forbidden fantasies? A touch? A kiss? A taste.

Heat pools in my core as it runs across my mind. It should terrify me, but it doesn't. Crue's strange behavior has discovered the wildest part inside me. Everything he does is taboo. His desires, wants and needs, could make the devil blush.

I open the window, and he steps inside.

"I saw your light was on. I had to see you," Crue says, but he doesn't make a move to silence me with his hand or lower his voice.

"Shh," I say. "Tomas is here."

“He isn’t. Your dad called me over, tonight. Tomas limped in, hammered, while we were talking.” Crue’s eyes move down my body. First to my breasts in my oversized shirt, and then to my legs sticking out the bottom of it.

Too bad the shirt’s just a little too long to see everything, huh?

“Father called you?” I ask, surprised.

His steely gaze never breaks. “Fiametta, it doesn’t matter. I’m here for you.”

The mix of emotions I feel from hearing his announcement about visiting Father, to the way he is looking at me sits uncomfortably in my chest. It’s a hollow void of fear and desperation, and I can’t tell which one is winning.

“For m—”

Crue snaps a hand forward and it wraps around my neck. Before I have a chance to figure out what’s happening, he pulls me into him, while leaning forward at the same time. Our mouths smash together in a passionate embrace that steals the air from my lungs.

He continues kissing me as we start walking to my bed. One hand remains pinned to my neck, while the other begins desperately searching the lengths of my body. It settles on my breast, and a muffled cry escapes me and into his mouth.

We reach my bed and Crue pulls away from me. He holds me in place a moment, before grabbing hold of my shirt with one hand, allowing his eyes to scan the outline of my body inside it.

“I want you, Fiametta,” Crue’s husky whisper sends a shiver down my spine. “I fucking need you.”

He presses the hand squeezing my shirt into my chest and pushes me backward. My knees buckle against my bed, and I fall onto it with a bounce. My legs part for him instinctively. I don't need to say it back, for my body to give him the signs.

I need this too. Sweet release to clear my mind.

Instead of climbing on top of me, Crue lowers himself to his knees. He grabs my ankles with both his hands and spreads my legs further, as his glimmering green eyes stare straight into my shirt's opening.

"Take your shirt off," Crue orders, before his lips land against my calf.

Frantically ripping at the material, I manage to pull the shirt over my head before his mouth makes contact with my knee. It doesn't stop there, not even when his eyes snap to my naked breasts, causing him to growl in satisfaction.

When he crosses over to my thigh, he sucks my flesh into his mouth and bites down. It's playful, barely crossing the threshold of painful, but it reignites the heat in my core.

He hooks my other leg over his shoulder to give his hand more mobility. While he continues to tease my skin, his hand slides up his body to be level with my panties. But Crue doesn't rip them off as I expect him to. Instead, he grabs the wet front and peels it to the side.

"Oh God," I howl as his mouth smashes against my pussy with no caution, pretense or care. He slides his tongue along my slit, coating it in a thick layer of my liquid, before he settles it against my clit.

Sucking the overly sensitive bud between his lips, he flicks over it with the pointed tip of his tongue in quick, precise lashings. And if that wasn't enough to push me to the brink of orgasm already, Crue presses his thumb against my entrance. Still

holding one of my legs in the air, to separate them as far as he can, the friction of my panties brushing against my throbbing lips, his mouth working its magic and his ever-inching finger, my mind melts in overloaded euphoria.

He drops my leg suddenly, and his hand makes its way to my breast. He squeezes it into his palm, while delighted noises rumble from below. But as his palm turns into two fingers tugging against my nipple, all the wild sensations boiling inside me hit their peak.

“Oh, fuck.” I sink my hands down to his head, grabbing handfuls of his hair as my entire body begins to tremble. And as if he were waiting for it, Crue drives his thumb all the way inside me, making me climax around it.

The sensation radiates through every muscle in my body. As if it wasn’t enough already, Crue continues to lick me, long after my shaking has stopped. It’s as if he can’t resist lapping up every last drop, even though he knows he can come back to the well whenever he pleases.

Satisfied that he’s cleaned me completely, Crue pulls his body back. His eyes travel up my body, but they don’t linger anywhere until they meet my eyes. He slowly eases his thumb out of me and brings it up to my mouth. I open it as far as my weak muscles allow, and he slides it inside, rubbing my juices all over my tongue.

“It wouldn’t be fair if I got a taste and you didn’t,” he says, groaning at the sensation of my soft tongue caressing his rough thumb.

I nod, floating in a haze of orgasmic bliss. He can say and do whatever he wants to me right now, and I’d agree. Just as long as he doesn’t stop making me feel this amazing.

Crue stands up, removing his digit from my mouth and rolls his black leather jacket off his shoulders. And with it, I realize that I’ve never seen him without his top half

covered. He's wearing a black tank top, but from the missing sleeves, black ink runs down his arms in various patterns. He rips his shirt off, exposing an incredibly muscular body beneath, and like his arms it's covered in ink.

Among the tattoos, I see scars littering his body. Some are small, looking more like scrapes, while others are enormous in comparison. Among the mix of healed over wounds, long gashes from being cut run down his chest, and there's one right above his waist that looks like he was stabbed with a jagged bottle.

Holy shit, I didn't think he could look any hotter, but seeing his war-torn body makes me shudder. And if that realization isn't enough, another flicks a light on in my head.

He's going to fuck me .

It should've been obvious by the way he is undressing, more so by his proclamation that he needs me. But somehow it didn't cross my mind until now.

"Like what you see?" Crue asks, as he works his belt the same way he did in the bar. This time he kicks his shoes off before he finishes undoing all the buttons and zips keeping his jeans up. "Or repulsed by it?"

He looks down at his own body, scanning the mix of wounds and tattoos. His question doesn't come out as serious, and if it is, he seems to not give a fuck about my opinion.

"It's amazing." I choke on the words, but it's more for the fact that Crue drops his pants, and his throbbing erection springs into view.

"You're amazing."

Crue grabs the front of my panties in his fist, and the sensation of his fingers brushing my scorched wetness makes me moan delightedly.

“You know, I still have the pair I took from you.” He pulls them off me in one swift motion. He keeps them crumpled in his hand, raising them up to his mouth and breathing in while his eyes roll to the back of his head.

Holy shit, I’ve never been more attracted to anyone in my life. He has a direct line to the pleasure receptors in my brain, and he knows it, too.

“I keep them under my pillow as a reminder of what you’ve done to me.” Crue falls to his knees between my legs and slowly lowers my panties from his nose. Instead of discarding them to the side, he cups the balled, wet cotton against my mouth, and holds it there until I let him shove them inside me. “Our dirty little secret.”

Oh God, I’m gonna cum again. He hasn’t even started, and I can feel it brewing inside me .

He starts sliding across the bed, positioning himself so his cock is just above my body. It isn’t even the whole thing, but I can see it stretching over my pelvis with its head stopping just past my belly button.

Crue wraps a hand around the base, and it makes a shiver run through his entire body. He brings it down like a hammer, knocking the tip against my body, and I wriggle with every tap.

He stares at me with dark content, and glides his tip through my slick folds, soaking it before it stops at my entrance. I moan against the panties, slowly slipping deeper into my mouth. And it seems that muffled cry is what Crue was waiting for.

His free hand grips onto my waist, and he uses it to hold me steady as he bucks his hips forward, driving his enormous head past my barrier. I cry out in blissful agony, as my pussy stretches to accommodate his size. There’s no end to the gasps and choked noises fighting their way out of me, as he lowers inch of magnificent inch into me.

“Christ,” he hisses through gritted teeth. His own breathing starting to hasten. Crue’s legs buckle, and he falls on top of me. The slow and steady rhythm he was taking to fit inside me, is thrown out the window as he suddenly crumbles. A few inches turn into the majority of his thick shaft, and I howl at the swelling pleasure of being filled to the brim.

Did he do it on purpose? Pretend to fall so we could skip the adjustment period and get straight to the fun part?

A minute ago, I’d have hated it to be true.

Right now? I can’t stop rolling my hips from side to side against his girth, while it scratches the deep itch only his cock can reach.

He brings his second hand into the crook of my thigh, and uses it as leverage to begin thrusting. I’m surprised he keeps it slow to start with. He pulls all the way back to his cock’s head, before sinking as far as my body will allow him to go.

Crue brings his mouth to mine again, and kisses me, panties and all. His tongue slides over the fabric in a way that leads me to believe he wants to steal whatever taste of me he can get. When he’s finished with my soaked panties, he uses his teeth to pull them out of my mouth. He flicks his head to the side, and they go flying across the room, as the sounds they suppressed start barreling out of my open mouth.

Moans, groans and choked sputters of delight fill the room, and with them Crue uses his hands on my hips to start pulling me into his thrusts.

“I told you once, Little Flame,” his hoarse voice struggles to get the words out. “And now you know I mean it.”

I gasp for air, trying to fill my lungs. It’s in vain, as every thrust Crue drives into me, knocks the oxygen straight back out of me.

“You’re mine.” He growls.

“My mouth.” He kisses me briefly, while he slams into me.

“My tits.” He moves his head down my body, burying his face between my breasts. He delivers this message with his tongue, coiling it over my nipple before he sucks it into his lips.

“My pussy.” He thrusts into me savagely, until my insides coil into a tight knot. There’s no delay between feeling it tighten and the overwhelming intensity of my vicious orgasm, exploding over his erection.

My mind turns to mush as his cock ravages my pussy. Any thoughts I have left are replaced by him. My man, my monster, truly claiming me as his.

His face starts tensing as I climax around him. His neck and shoulders follow, until every muscle in his body is flexing. Every new thrust is slower than the last, but they’re harder and deeper as guttural sounds begin erupting out of his mouth.

“Ah, fuck,” he growls against my breast, his breathe tickling the skin his tongue just wet. And with one, final thrust that buries his cock to the hilt, I feel the first trickle of his seed. It’s followed by a typhoon of hot, splashing liquid that coats my inner walls. I slide my hand to his face, taking a page out of his book and slipping my thumb into his mouth.

He licks and sucks on it, while he empties himself inside me. Choked sounds catch in the back of his throat, until he finally crumbles fully, panting for air against my bosom.

I hold his face against my breasts, giggling frantically at the intimacy of this moment, after the savagery he put me through. But mostly, I’m giggling at the realization that everything makes sense. Every single thought. Intrigue spurred on by twisted

fascination with the beast hunting me, has made me feel crazy. He's a stalker, a murderer, and the guy who keeps making me feel special with one hand, while the other dangles a dagger in front of my face.

But as Crue's layers are peeled away and he exposes his true self, I find he isn't a monster. He's a man, made of flesh, and blood, and bone, just like the rest of us.

He might have a roundabout way of showing it, but like the book he left on my side table, Crue does little things to show he cares about me. I feel as if I can finally answer the question he left.

Can we change who we are, to watch the Little Flame grow into a blazing inferno?

Yes. A thousand times, yes. Crue is living proof that we can. From wanting to assassinate me, to nestling against my breast like lovers do, he can't be the same man who set out on this path of destruction.

He makes me feel special. Whole. Without having to say it, I feel loved and cared for. It's a sensation I sorely lacked in my younger years, and it hasn't really changed since.

And where I'm the first to admit it sounds crazy, I don't believe it actually is. He has given me so much that I've missed in such a short time, so it's no surprise I've fallen for him.

If that's even what this is.

But there are worse things, and worse people it could've happened with instead.

"Was it all you imagined it would be?" I ask, running my fingers through Crue's hair.

"And more." His lips vibrate against my skin. "So. Much. More."

Crue gets off the bed and pulls his jeans back on before he tumbles back on top of me, resting his head on my chest once more. A strange action, but one that makes me chuckle, nonetheless. Does he feel self-conscious about being naked? After what we just did, that would be the silliest thing I've ever heard.

His shift from deep intimacy to getting dressed prompts a thought that sneaks into my head. My lips stretch into a wide smile that immediately starts hurting my cheeks, as I find the best way to say it.

“You’ve fucked me. So why haven’t you finished me yet?” I’m laughing before I can fully finish the question.

I know it’s a bad idea to poke the bear, but we’ve transcended that dark part of our relationship. He’s shown me way too much kindness, in his own special way, for me to believe he still wants to kill me. It doesn’t matter how many times he says it.

If slitting my throat was really his end goal, he’d have done it right after orgasming, instead of using me as a pillow.

Right?

His lack of an answer makes me second guess myself. Unless he screwed himself into exhaustion and passed out.

I slide a finger under his chin to test the waters. His head lifts when I will it to, and his eyes are heavy with sorrow that doesn’t reach the rest of his features.

“Because I’m going to do it, now.” His dark, husky voice cuts the silence.

I barely get to mouth out the first syllable of my question, before I feel a pin prick against my neck. Within seconds my brain starts shutting down. I force my eyes to stay open, keeping them locked on his.

Stay awake, Fiametta. Don't... drift...

But it's too late. Whatever was in Crue's syringe is too potent to fight.

My heavy eyes fall shut, and I drift off into a bleak, dreamless void.

THE END.

THANKS FOR READING!