



# His to Honor (Reluctant Vows #4)

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**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** He didnt ask me to be his. He told me I was.

When I let myself into Matteo Volantes house uninvited, the fact that Ive known him since I was a little girl didnt keep him from pinning me over his desk, wrenching my panties down, and spanking my bare ass bright red and it didnt keep me from being soaking wet for him either.

But hes not my childhood best friend anymore.

Hes a ruthless mafia boss who wont hesitate to take off his belt and teach me a lesson that will leave my bottom burning inside and out for even thinking about flirting with another man.

And hes going to make me his bride whether I agree to it or not.

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## PROLOGUE

G iulia

Being the punchline in such a cruel joke feels like punishment for some crime I committed in a past life. It certainly wasn't because of anything I've done in this one. I've always tried to be a good person. To redress the balance for my family's involvement in the mafia, I try to help those in need. Nice could be my middle name. You'd think that would buy me some consideration, but not in this world. As far as the people around me are concerned, compassion is a synonym for weakness. It makes me a prime target for their mockery.

Walking through the restaurant in new black shoes that pinch my toes, I politely acknowledge my guests. I can't help feeling that most of them are reveling in my misery. It's only been a week since the same people attended the celebration of my wedding. Today, we're gathered for my husband's wake.

Gossip about his sudden demise and whether I played a part in it is rife. It's not my fault Johnny's heart gave out. A man his age should have known better than to exert himself by carrying his new bride over the threshold.

Perhaps I should have stayed away from the funeral. I could have claimed to have been too overcome with grief to face people. Nobody would have believed me, though. Johnny Lombardi was considered a complete pig. Everyone probably imagined he was a brute to me. It was what I expected when I was told I had to marry him, but he wasn't as bad as I feared. Despite his reputation, he was pretty decent to me. He was upfront about his expectations. He wasn't what I wanted in a husband,

but I think he'd have taken care of me.

When it came down to it, skipping the funeral wasn't really an option. My absence would only have amplified the gossip. As it is, I'm under intense scrutiny. Every gesture I make, each expression that forms on my face is being torn apart as people try to work out how I feel about the unfortunate turn my life has taken.

Some of the women openly discuss my appearance. From what I've overheard, it seems my hairstyle doesn't suit me. My face is too round for the wavy look. My dress doesn't fare well with them either. Apparently it's too drab even for a funeral. I'm dishonoring Johnny with my lack of sartorial elegance. I don't see what's wrong with what I'm wearing. It's a simple black shift dress that falls to just above my knee. What do these women want me to wear? A ball gown and tiara?

While the women critique my fashion sense, the principal topic of conversation among the men is whether the marriage was consummated before Johnny collapsed. There are a lot of crude jokes being made and I think some men are even laying bets on the current state of my hymen. I'll never tell any of these assholes I am still a virgin. Johnny keeled over seconds after helping me out of the monstrous wedding gown my stepmother, Valeria, insisted I wore. People can never know I'm still untouched. It would make me a worthy prize for some other mobster, and there aren't many I'd want to be shackled to.

Just as I decide I've been among these awful people for long enough, I finally see a friendly face. Ava Volante, the beautiful fifty-something matriarch of the crime family my father is a part of, gets up from her chair and throws her arms around me.

"Giulia, my darling. I am so sorry this happened to you."

I'm not sure if she means me being married off to a man more than twice my age or becoming a widow so soon.

“Thank you, Mrs. Volante.”

Holding me away from her, she shakes her head and tuts. “It’s Ava. You know me well enough by now to call me by name.”

I nod, though it’s hard for me to be informal around a woman who’s not only the widow of the feared mob boss Marco Volante, but is also the mother of my oldest friend. Her fourth son, Matteo, and I have been close since we were in elementary school. I shared my snacks with him one lunchtime and it seems it’s true about the way to a man’s heart being through his stomach because we’ve been friends ever since. His mother is a woman I’ve always had the greatest respect for. It feels weird to address her by name.

“Yes, Ava.”

She drops her hands from my shoulders and tilts her head to one side as she studies me. There’s no criticism in her gaze, only concern.

“You look pale, sweetie. Let’s go to the terrace.” She links her arm with mine. “Matteo’s out there.”

It’s like she said the magic words to lift me out of my funk. My mood instantly lightens. “I didn’t realize he was here.”

“Of course he is. We all wanted to be here for you.”

“Not Isabella.” I speak without thinking.

“No,” Ava says sadly. “Not Isabella.”

After Matteo, Isabella is my oldest friend. She married Ava’s son, Antonio, a few

months ago. Something happened between them and she was sent away. I tried to get in touch with her, but it was made clear to me that contacting the boss's wife is strictly forbidden. All I've been able to find out is that Isabella is living in some beach house the Volantes own on Long Island. I've asked Matteo for more information, but he always brushes me off.

Allowing the subject to drop, I let Ava lead me out through the French doors to the terrace overlooking Central Park. The view from up here is spectacular. Johnny left specific instructions about how he wanted his funeral and asked for a magnificent party to send him on his way. I left the organization to his sister, Cosima, and she's done him proud.

I scan the terrace and immediately find Matteo. He's standing with two of his four brothers, Alessandro and Leo. All three are tall and muscular, with dark hair and deep brown eyes. None of them would look out of place on the cover of a steamy romance novel.

Standing with them is a shorter man with blond hair and a woman I can't stand, Marissa Locatelli. She's exactly the type of woman I imagine Matteo will marry one day. A tall, slender brunette, she's always up to date with the latest fashion trends. People clamor to be by her side.

Unfortunately, she has all the personality of a cardboard cutout. Matteo won't care about that, though. A beautiful woman to warm his bed and bear his children is all he requires in a wife. He may be a good friend to me, but when it comes to the women he fucks, he's as much of an asshole as the other Made Men.

We walk toward them, but I stop dead, ten feet away, as the man I don't know speaks. "Poor old Johnny probably froze to death the moment he touched her."

It doesn't take a genius to realize he's talking about me. Ava tries to pull me forward

so we'll be noticed before any further remarks are made, but I dig my heels in. Whatever they have to say about me, I want to hear it.

"Or strained himself trying to force her thighs open." That came from Alessandro. A stab of pain strikes deep in my chest. Although I don't know him as well as I do Matteo, I always considered him a friend.

"You are terrible!" Marissa giggles. "What do you think, Matteo?"

"Giulia," Ava hisses under her breath. She tries to drag me away, but I refuse to move. Matteo will defend me. I know he will.

"I think Sandro's being unfair." Matteo grins wickedly and my heart sinks. "It's not Giulia's fault her legs clamp shut every time a man looks at her. Frigid bitch."

As the group laughs at my expense, my stomach roils. How could Matteo be so cruel? I can put up with mockery from strangers, but it's unbearable to have someone I love joining in. I mean, he called me the b-word. That hurt.

Patting my arm sympathetically, Ava clears her throat. Finally, Matteo and the others notice us.

"Oh, Gia, darlin'. I didn't see you there." If that's Marissa's idea of an apology, it's lacking, especially since she misnamed me. I don't correct her.

"Giulia!" There's a pained expression on Matteo's face. I suspect he's about to apologize, but I hold up a hand to silence him.

"Don't say a word, Matteo. I thought we were friends. It seems I was wrong."

Despite Ava protesting that I shouldn't leave, I turn and march back into the

restaurant. I cut across the room, ignoring my stepmother as she calls out to me. I can't face her right now, not on top of everything else. The one good thing that was going to come from my marriage to Johnny was freedom from my stepmother. I'm sick of her endless scheming to use me to rise within the ranks of the Volante organization. She's always wanted my dad to be more than a mere soldier, even if he is valued in that role. My husband's body is barely in the ground and she's probably already plotting her next move.

Thoroughly disgusted by the people in my life, I march to the elevator and push the call button. Luck is on my side as the doors open immediately. I need to get out of here before the tears burning my eyes fall. I press the button for the lobby. The doors are just closing when Matteo pushes through. In such a confined space, my body is all too aware of his presence. My body thrums with a desire I wish I didn't feel.

As the doors shut and the elevator begins its descent, Matteo puts his hand on my shoulder and turns me to face him.

"Giulia, I'm sorry."

"Are you sorry for making jokes about me, or that I overheard?"

He hesitates for a moment too long. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

That's not the apology I hoped for. He's only sorry I know what he said, not that he made fun of me when I was at my lowest ebb. If Ava hadn't made our presence known, he'd probably have carried on laughing behind my back.

"You know what, Matteo? If this is your idea of friendship, I want no part of it." A tear rolls down my cheek and I swipe it away. "Go back to Marissa. I don't want to spend another minute in your company."

As the elevator doors open, I step out into the hotel lobby.

“Giulia.” His tone suggests I’m being unreasonable. He follows me to the exit.  
“Giulia.”

I whirl around to face him. “Go away, Matteo. We’re done. Don’t call me, don’t text me, don’t show up on my doorstep when you need to vent about some girl getting too clingy. Pretend we never met.”

Holding my head high, I walk away. Matteo Volante let me down today. I won’t ever give him the chance to do it again.



## Page 2

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### CHAPTER 1

S ix months later

Giulia

Some people find the smell of fresh paint unpleasant, but not me. I love it because it signifies progress, renewal. This building was run down when I bought it. There was black mold on the walls. The floorboards were rotting to where it wasn't safe to enter some rooms. The city was ready to condemn the place. But, thanks to the considerable bequest my husband unexpectedly made me in his will, I could buy the single-story building and restore it to its former glory.

Most of the work is being done by contractors, but I wanted to put the finishing touches on this room myself. I painted the upper walls and ceiling a pretty blue to mimic a summer sky. For the lower parts and floor, I chose a grassy green. I painted a few animals on one wall. I'm particularly proud of the family of rabbits I just completed. They're super cute. The younger kids are going to love spending time in here. At least, I hope they will. I have a lot pinned on this place being a success.

When I found out I was going to be financially independent for the first time in my life, I knew immediately I wanted to do something to help my community. The mafia isn't hot on emotional support or equal opportunities. Some wives and children of the Volante organization's soldiers have a tough life. This center will be a place where they can come and spend time together socially, and also get advice and counseling if they need it. A lot of mafia women need help to cope with the shit the men in their families heap on them.

As I hear the door closing, I set down my paintbrush and lean out into the corridor to see who's there. The only person I'm expecting is the carpenter who's going to make shelves for the office and he's not due until later.

My heart leaps into my throat as a man who's very definitely not the carpenter strides into view. Tall and broad-shouldered, he wears an impeccably tailored suit and shoes that cost more than the average person earns in a month. Antonio Volante. There's only one reason I can think of for the mafia boss to show up here, and it isn't good. He's going to shut my project down.

"Mr. Volante." I step out into the hallway to greet him.

"Antonio." He doesn't smile, twisting his lips in a disapproving scowl as his eyes scan over me. I guess he doesn't like my new hairstyle. "No need to be so formal, Giulia. We've known each other a long time. You and my wife are friends." His frown deepens. "Or is that no longer the case? As I understand it, my wife has tried to call you several times and received no reply."

Confused, I furrow my brow. That can't be why he's here. The boss of one of the biggest crime organizations in the country can't have tracked me down to tell me off for not answering his wife's phone calls.

"I meant to call her back. I've been busy."

Antonio arches a skeptical eyebrow. "For five weeks?"

Has it been that long? I guess I knew that. If I'm honest, I've been reluctant to speak to her. We haven't seen each other for more than a year and I worry things will be awkward between us, especially now Matteo and I aren't friends anymore. He's her brother-in-law so Isabella may feel her loyalty lies with him rather than me.

“I...”

Before I can come up with an excuse he'll find acceptable, Antonio waves off my concern with an imperious flick of the wrist. “I'm not here about my wife.”

He walks past me and strolls into the room I've just come out of. I follow him and hover aimlessly as he looks around. “This is for my men's wives to bring their children?”

There's an edge to his voice that makes my heart sink. It sounds like disapproval.

“Yes.”

“And you're planning to employ a guidance counselor, a therapist?”

“You approved my plans.” I can't hide the desperation in my voice as I wonder if he's going to tell me he's changed his mind. “You said it was okay.”

Growing up in the mafia, I know how this world works. Before I even spoke to my realtor about this place, I sought permission from Antonio to go ahead with my plans. Everything was run past Dante Parisi, his terrifying right-hand man, in advance. All the contractors I use are mafia-affiliated.

Tears prick my eyes. “I did everything right.”

“I can see that.” Antonio goes to the window and glances out at the small garden I've created in the parking lot. “I remember how this place looked before. You've done a great job.”

“So you're not here to shut me down?”

Turning to face me, Antonio smiles tightly. “Not yet.”

Dread sweeps over me at that ominous remark. “Why are you here, Antonio?”

He exhales sharply. “Matteo.”

That catches me off guard. I thought Antonio was well aware his brother and I were no longer friends. The last I heard of Matteo, he was accompanying their sister, Olivia, to Italy. “What about him?”

“He’s been involved in an... incident.”

“Got caught banging some Italian bigwig’s wife in a public restroom, did he?”

Antonio’s lips twitch, but I can’t tell if it’s with amusement or annoyance. The man is remarkably hard to read, but I can’t imagine he approves of Matteo’s antics.

“No, there was a shooting. A girl was killed.”

“Oh, my god.” Now I feel like a complete shit for making light of it. “What happened?”

“I can’t give you details. What I can tell you is that Matteo did not pull the trigger.”

“Okay, so...”

“Why am I telling you this?” He purses his lips as I nod. “Because Matteo is having a... crisis. He refuses to leave Italy.”

“I see.” Actually, I don’t. If Antonio wants his brother to come home, surely all he has to do is issue an order. What has any of this to do with me? “So, what do you

want from me?”

“I want you to go to Italy, help him resolve whatever shit he’s going through, and bring him back.”

Unable to hold in my response, I huff out a laugh. “You want me to go to Italy and drag Matteo back? Don’t you have people who’re better equipped for that sort of thing?”

“I do.” Antonio leans back, resting his ass on the windowsill.

I wince. That was painted earlier. I hope it’s dry because his suit probably cost more than I spent decorating this entire room. I don’t think I can afford to replace it.

“So send them.”

“I will, as a last resort. I want to try a gentler approach first.”

Balling up my fists, I rest them on my hips. “What makes you think I’ll be gentle with him?”

Now it’s Antonio who barks out a disbelieving laugh. I guess I’m not known for inflicting violence, but he’s wrong to assume I’m willing to go halfway across the world to coax Matteo out of whatever mood he’s in. I’ve had enough of being taken for a fool.

“You’re one of his oldest friends.”

“I was his friend.”

“One little comment does not cancel two decades of shared history.”

There's no point in arguing with Antonio. He'd never understand the hurt and betrayal I felt when Matteo laughed at me the day of Johnny's funeral. Perhaps my reaction has been extreme, but I can't help it. When I needed him the most, he let me down. I don't want to see the asshole ever again.

"What about Isabella? She's his friend. Why don't you send her?"

Antonio's jaw clenches. He's never been entirely at ease with his wife and his brother having a close relationship. Matteo, Isabella, and I became friends at elementary school. Antonio barely noticed his wife existed before she became an adult.

"My wife will not be traveling to Italy." He fixes me with an intense stare. "Look, Giulia, I'll be honest with you. I think you are what he needs, so you will do as I ask. You will travel to Italy on my private jet, drinking champagne and being waited on by my attentive staff. You will stay in a luxurious villa in the most beautiful part of the country and enjoy the finest hospitality. I will even ensure this place is looked after until you return."

The offer he's making is a tempting one, but I can't help wondering what the alternative is. "And if I refuse?"

"Well, this place doesn't have to open." Antonio smiles grimly. "It would be a shame if all your good intentions went to waste."

I suck in a breath, but he's not finished with the threats yet.

"And I could tell your father and stepmother I changed my mind about them leaving you alone after Lombardi's death. I could tell them to start looking for another husband for you."

"But I don't live with them anymore. I have my own money now."

Antonio looks at me as if I'm a naïve child. "You think any of that matters?"

No, I don't. The only reason my dad and Valeria allowed me to move into my own apartment and haven't already forced me into a new marriage arrangement is that Antonio told them to back off. He insisted they gave me time to get over what happened with Johnny. Somewhere at the back of my mind, I guess I knew my newfound freedom was an illusion. My money only bought temporary autonomy. Where the mafia's concerned, it doesn't matter. I could be a billionaire, but I'd still have to live within the rules of this fucked-up world my great-grandfather dragged our family into when he pledged allegiance to the Volantes.

Tears burn my eyes as Antonio stalks closer. I blink them back, but it's too late. He's seen them.

"No need to cry, Giulia." There's a flash of something like regret on his face, but he quickly masks it. "None of this needs to be a hardship for you. Bring Matteo back and I will ensure you can follow your dreams. Get him back within a week and I'll throw in a generous donation to this place."

He holds my gaze. At first I remain defiant, but I'm no match for the harshness in his eyes. I soon cave. "When do I leave?"

"Dante will pick you up in two hours and drive you to the airport. Tell him what needs to be done here and he'll see to it."

"Okay." I hate how defeated I sound.

"You might want to clean up first," Antonio says. "You have paint on your nose."

As he walks away, I snort in disbelief. Paint on my nose? That's the least of my worries. I fear I've been given an impossible task. Antonio knows as well as I do that

it will take more than gentle persuasion to wrangle Matteo onto a plane. Once he's dug in, it's extremely difficult to change his mind.

A stab of fear pierces deep. What if I fail? Displeasing the head of the Volante organization would be a spectacularly bad idea. Am I going to lose everything I worked so hard to achieve?

No. I strengthen my resolve. I will get Matteo back to New York by whatever means necessary. If I have to drag him here by the balls, then so be it.



### CHAPTER 2

Matteo

My brothers would say I'm wallowing in self-pity. Hell, they have said it. Repeatedly. For weeks I've been refusing to go home. I can't. Not until I sort out the shit in my head. My sins are weighing heavily on me right now. I'm not fit to be around people. I want to shut out the world and drown in misery. If I'm meant to come through this, I will. If not, then my family's better off without me. They can leave me here to rot.

I don't know why Sofia Montalbano's death is bothering me so much. I barely knew her and it's not as if her killing is the first I've witnessed. She's not even the first innocent I've seen getting caught in the crossfire. But she was young, guileless, and her only crime was passing in front of me as the assassin took his shot. I should have caught the bullet, not her.

The worst of it is I didn't see it coming. I was distracted, watching a bridal party as they processed through the cobbled streets of the village. I lost focus for a moment as I allowed myself to be swept into the fantasy that I could have what the young bride and groom had, that special bond.

My three older brothers have all married incredible women. Even my mother is getting a second chance at love with the Bratva boss she fell for. I'm not a romantic guy, but I've always imagined I'll get married and raise a family one day. Letting myself daydream about that for a minute cost a young girl her life. Though I hunted down and killed every one of the Rossis who were involved in the botched hit on me,

my guilt hasn't been assuaged.

Taking another sip of vodka, I reread the latest text my brother sent me. Antonio has been relentless with the voice messages, texts, and emails. He's asked our cousin Damiano to come up here to persuade me to leave more than once. My brother wants me back in New York. There's civil war raging within the Bianchi family right now. As our primary enemies tear themselves to pieces, it's a good time to consolidate our family's power. For that, Antonio needs all of us by his side.

His latest message perplexes me. He's tried everything—threats, promises, pleading. He even tried emotional blackmail, trying to guilt me for not being around to support our youngest brother as he recovers from being shot. Now Antonio tells me he's sending someone to keep me company. Fuck knows who that will be. Whoever he sends, I'll make it clear they're not welcome here. I don't need a damned babysitter.

As I drain the vodka from my glass, I hear the front door clicking shut. I'm not expecting anyone and I have no idea how they'd have gotten past the security system. My senses sharp despite the alcohol I've consumed, I grab my gun and head out into the darkened corridor, just in time to see someone slipping into the study. What do they want in there?

Treading lightly so I don't alert the intruder to my presence, I walk along the corridor and peer into the room. Against the moonlight coming in through the window, I make out a distinctively female form. It's not the housekeeper, who acts as if I'm a vampire or some shit and avoids coming here at night.

It isn't my sister either. She's the only other woman who would have a legitimate reason to be here. This woman isn't short, standing at around five nine, but she is curvier than Olivia.

Her hair is short, but I can't make out the color in the half light. She's wearing a

flared dress that falls below her knee and high-top sneakers. It's not the typical attire of a burglar. Who the fuck is she?

As the woman gropes about in the dark, apparently searching the desk, I rush forward and wrap an arm around her throat. She gasps as I pull her back against me. Immediately, I detect a delicate floral fragrance on her skin. It's familiar, comforting, but I can't place it. My cock twitches as she wriggles her firm ass against me, trying to break free.

"Uh-uh," I scold. "Don't struggle."

"I..."

"Why are you creeping around my house?"

Before she can answer, I slap a hand over her mouth. I don't care what she's doing here.

"There are consequences for sneaking about in the dark."

Removing my hand from her mouth, I shove her face down over the desk.

"Don't!" she protests as I whip her skirt up around her waist.

Something about her voice strikes a chord, but I don't know why.

"Shh." I run a hand over the soft cotton of the panties that cover most of her ass. "You'll take your spanking without complaint or I'll whip your ass with my belt."

The mystery woman sucks in a sharp breath, but offers no resistance as I slide her panties down over her hips and then nudge her ankles with my foot to spread her legs

apart. I draw my hand back and bring it down hard on her left butt cheek. The woman squeals—in surprise, I’d guess, rather than pain.

I briefly consider putting the lights on so I can see her flesh turning red beneath my palm, but I don’t. There’s something unsettling about being in the dark with this woman. My desire is running rampant, though I haven’t even seen her face. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I’m nervous and I don’t know why. I should turn on the lights and get a look at her, but I fear that would somehow ruin the moment.

Holding her down with a hand at the small of her back, I spank my little captive repeatedly, giving both sides of her ass equal attention. She wriggles and moans, the sounds becoming frantic as her flesh heats beneath my hand.

“Are you enjoying this, sweetheart?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“You know, I’m not the type of man you should lie to.”

Keeping my hand firmly on her back so she can’t escape me, I run a finger along her feminine slit, finding her drenched.

“And you just lied to me, sweetheart, because you are soaked.”

I push a finger inside her. Fuck, she’s tight. I add another finger and her pussy clenches.

“Is this what you came for?” I pump my fingers in and out of her. “You want to get fucked? You want me to fill all your holes with my cum?”

“No,” she denies, though her desperate moan says otherwise.

“You sure about that?” I pull her upright, wrapping an arm around her chest. I squeeze her breast as I drive my fingers deep. “Because I think you’re ripe for fucking, sweetheart.”

I release her breast and unfasten my jeans. As I lower my zipper, my little captive stiffens. “Matty, stop.”

My blood chills. I stumble backward as if someone just turned a hose on me. I move to the door and fumble around the side for the light switch. I press it and the room fills with a yellow glow. My worst fear is confirmed.

“Giulia.”

She pulls up her panties, smooths down her dress, and offers me a weak smile. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes glazed. She’s never looked more beautiful, but I can’t allow myself to think of her that way.

“What are you doing here?”

She raises her chin in a defiant response to my harsh tone. “Antonio sent me.”

“Of course he did.” Boss or not, I am going to beat my brother to a bloody pulp when I see him next. I need to fix this disaster first. I almost fucked my best friend, who I’m pretty sure is still a virgin, over a desk. “Don’t you know how dangerous it is to creep about in the middle of the night?”

“I couldn’t find the light switch.” She balls up her fists and rests them on her hips. When she’s pissed, she resembles an angry kitten. It’s hard to take her rage seriously. “But that doesn’t excuse what you did.”

“Fuck, Giulia, you think I don’t know that?” I pace back and forth, trying to get a hold of myself. Anger, desire, and regret all merge to create a tangled knot in my stomach. I glare at the woman before me, trying to find a way to shift some of the blame for what happened. “Why didn’t you stop me sooner?”

“I don’t know.” Her tone is defensive. “You caught me by surprise.”

I scoff at that. “That’s your excuse? I caught you by surprise?”

“Yeah, you grabbed me and I froze. It’s what you’d expect, right? From a frigid bitch?”

I guess I don’t have to wonder whether Giulia’s still nursing a grudge over the stupid comments I made at Johnny’s wake because she’s just made it clear she is. I’m not ready for a conversation about that yet, so I change the subject. “You look different. When did you change your hair?”

She used to have the most amazing brunette waves tumbling down her back. Now she’s got one of those pixie cuts and her hair is a light purple shade, lavender, I guess. It completely transforms her appearance. It’s no wonder I didn’t recognize her.

Except, a nagging voice at the back of my head says, perhaps I did. Deep down, I think I knew it was her. She smelled familiar. Her voice resonated with me. I recognized Giulia at the most basic level and spanked her anyway. I hardly dare analyze what that means.

“I got it cut about a month ago. It’s liberating.”

“Liberating?” I don’t mean to scoff, but my tone comes off kind of mocking.

“Yes, it feels like a big fuck you to everyone who expects me to look and behave a

certain way, just because my father's in the fucking mob."

"Stop cursing." It's hypocritical of me to pull anyone up on their language, but I've always hated hearing such words from Giulia's pure pink lips. "It doesn't suit you."

"You wouldn't know what suits me."

"Of course I would. We've been friends for twenty years."

Giulia shakes her head. "We were friends, Matteo, and the more I think about it, the more I realize I was always more your friend than you were mine."

"That's not true." Though Giulia has always been more open about her feelings than I am, I've never been shy about demonstrating how much she means to me.

She purses her lips. "I beg to differ. Now, it's been a long night, and I'd like to get some rest. Show me where I can sleep and I'll get out of your hair."

"You plan to stay here?"

Her lips twist. "As per Antonio's instructions."

"Since when do you take orders from my brother?"

Giulia lets out a disbelieving laugh. "Everyone takes orders from your brother, Matteo. I'm no different. Now, tell me where I can sleep. We'll discuss what happens next in the morning."

I don't want to consider what she means by that. Though I'd rather not have her here, I can't send her away at this time of night. There's only one small hotel in the village and I doubt they have twenty-four-hour check-in.

“Upstairs, second on the left.”

Though I wasn't expecting guests, the housekeeper, Rosalia, keeps the whole house in pristine condition. I know she has all the bedrooms made up. She's probably hoping my sister will return. The atmosphere was a lot lighter when Olivia was here, but, of course, that was before the Montalbano girl was killed. I sent my sister to stay with our cousin Damiano in Florence in case Sofia's family comes looking for revenge. They made it clear they blamed my presence in the village for her death. They're right, of course. This is a peaceful place. If I hadn't been here, the Rossis wouldn't have come.

“That's it?” Giulia huffs. “You're not going to offer to help with my suitcase?”

“No, and don't bother unpacking. You won't be staying.”

She purses her lips and narrows her eyes. I know that look. She's determined to defy me. “We'll see.”

I don't have the chance to set her straight. Spinning on her heel, she flounces from the room, leaving me with the urge to bend her over and spank her ass again. Disturbed by the thought, I head back to the living room and pour myself another vodka. It's cheap shit that burns my throat as I swallow it down, but I've developed a taste for it.

As I flop onto an armchair, there's a thudding sound on the stairs, Giulia bumping her suitcase up the steps. I should have carried it up to her room, but I don't want her to get the mistaken idea she's welcome here. As much as I want to make up with her after the stupid things I said at Johnny's funeral, now is not the time. I can't have her around me, not if it might put her in the crosshairs of my family's enemies. She can stay tonight, but tomorrow morning, she's gone, whether Antonio likes it or not.



### CHAPTER 3

#### G iulia

Every summer when I was a kid, I spent a week at a cabin in Maine. Until I was eleven, I went with my mom and dad. After she died, my dad started to bring along my half-brother, the product of an affair he'd had with a Colombian whore. You'd think that would be awkward, but I got on well with Philip from the start. It wasn't his fault my dad cheated, after all.

Whenever we went to Maine, we had the most incredible time. My dad may have been a shitty husband, but he was actually great with his kids. Sure, he was strict, but he was fair, and he never lashed out in anger. On our vacations to Maine, he could put all the mafia bullshit he was involved in aside and really let his hair down.

Our cabin was on Flagstaff Lake. My dad loved it there. He couldn't get enough of the water, being in it, on it, just looking at it. He taught us to swim, to fish. We went kayaking. We explored tiny, uninhabited islands and built campfires. It was like one of those classic kids' adventure books.

After Dad married Valeria, we stopped going to the cabin. She isn't a fan of the great outdoors and she didn't want us going up there without her. Maybe she feared my father would find another Colombian hooker in the wilds of Maine and get her pregnant. She isn't willing to turn a blind eye to my dad's indiscretions like my mom was. If he so much as looks at another woman, she raises hell. I hate to admit it, but I respect her for that.

I went back to Maine a couple of times after that, with Matteo's family. It was a totally different experience. Their cabin was more of a mini-mansion. Where we'd made do with sleeping bags and rickety old camp beds, the Volantes slept on Egyptian cotton sheets. It was nice, but there was always a certain tension within their family. Their father was the boss of the Volante Organization and even though he was good to his kids, they were always aware of his position.

My dad objected to me going to a remote cabin with the Volante boys, but Valeria convinced him. I think she hoped one of them would do something inappropriate and have to marry me. I think she saw me as the heroine of a Regency romance, ripe for plucking. It was why she persuaded my father to put off finding me a husband for so long. She had the idea that, given time, Matteo would realize he wanted more than friendship with me. When it didn't happen, she looked for another match. I think she chose Johnny as punishment for my failure to land a bigger prize. That move backfired on her.

I loved the landscape in Maine, but the view from my bedroom is something else. As I stand on the balcony, looking out over the valley below, it's actually hard to breathe. The sublime beauty of the countryside is almost overwhelming. I can see why so many poets have drawn inspiration from it.

Checking my phone, I see it's seven-thirty. My stomach rumbles as if to confirm it is, in fact, past the time I usually eat breakfast. I snap a couple of photos of the view, then head into the bedroom. Often when I'm not in my own bed I don't rest easy, but last night I slept like a log. The bed is a huge four-poster with cream floral sheets. The walls are painted a pale yellow, and the carpet is a cornflower blue. It's a very relaxing place to be.

I glance at my suitcase, which I didn't bother to unpack last night. It's not because Matteo told me not to bother. I was just too tired after the long flight and the sixty-minute drive to get here. I decide not to get dressed. My pajamas, comprising of red

cotton pants and a white t-shirt, are comfy and I want to convey the message to Matteo that I intend to make myself at home.

Leaving my phone on the nightstand, I head downstairs. The house isn't huge, but it takes me a couple of minutes to find the kitchen tucked away along a narrow corridor behind the staircase. I don't mind that I got a bit lost. It gave me a chance to get my bearings. This house is gorgeous. There's an enormous living room, a dining room, a media room, and, of course, the study where I encountered Matteo last night. The less I think about that, the better. What I allowed him to do to me is mortifying. I have no idea why I didn't speak up sooner and tell him who I was.

When I walk into the wonderfully spacious kitchen, which has a huge table at its center, I find a young woman there. Probably not out of her teens, she has long black hair and flawless olive skin. I really hope Matteo isn't fucking her.

My sudden entrance seems to startle her. She clutches the knife she was chopping melon with to her chest.

"Hi, I'm Giulia." I offer her a reassuring smile. "I'm a friend of Matteo's."

Hopefully, this girl speaks English because my Italian is dreadful. My grandfather used to pepper his conversation with a few words here and there, but the language hasn't been passed down through the generations. Despite my heritage being Italian on both sides, I've only been to the country of my ancestors once. We came when I was fourteen, to attend the funeral of a great-uncle I'd never heard of. My dad used it as an excuse to have a few days' vacation. I picked up a few phrases, but unless I need this girl to tell me where the bathroom is, I've got nothing.

"I'm Rosalia, the housekeeper. Signore Volante didn't tell me he was expecting a guest."

I take a seat at the large farmhouse-style wooden table. “He wasn’t expecting me.”

“I see.” She purses her lips. “He hasn’t brought a woman back here before.”

Her obvious disapproval tells me she’s got the wrong idea about me. “I’m not someone random woman he hooked up with. I’m a friend from New York.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I thought...” She waves her hand dismissively. “Never mind what I thought. Is this your first time in Italy?”

“No, I’ve been to Rome. It’s my first time in Tuscany, though. I can’t wait to explore.”

“There are lots of wonderful places for you to see.” Rosalia sets down the knife she’s been brandishing so casually. “Can I get you some breakfast?”

“Sure. What do you usually eat?”

“ Signore Volante prefers coffee and pastries.” She points toward a basket on the table that contains croissants, pain au chocolat , and some sort of cake with what appears to be an apricot glaze.

“Pastries and coffee would be great.” I don’t want to put her to any trouble. Besides, I am practically salivating just from looking at those.

“Help yourself.” Rosalia says. “You want cappuccino?”

“Please.”

I take one of the little cakes and place it on the plate Rosalia hands to me. As she makes my coffee using a very complicated-looking machine, I take a bite of the cake.

It's dense and not too sweet, with a delicious burst of apricot.

"Do you live here?" I finish the cake and grab a croissant.

"No, in the village with my parents."

"That's nice."

Rosalia makes a face that tells me exactly how she feels about that as she sets my cappuccino down in front of me. "They are overprotective, but hopefully my friend Carlotta and I will move into an apartment soon. We are waiting for my birthday. When I'm eighteen, I can do as I wish."

Fuck, this girl isn't even eighteen yet. She's young to be running a house this size, but I guess that's not my business.

"When's your birthday?"

"Tomorrow. Carlotta and I are going to La Stanza Rosso on Friday to celebrate." Her excitement is palpable.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what La Stanza Rosso is."

She stares at me with a look of incredulity, as if I should somehow have heard about this place even though I live halfway across the globe.

"It's a nightclub in Firenze, very exclusive. Signore Volante's cousin owns it. We didn't think we'd get in, but Carlotta bribed a doorman and got us on the list."

I don't say anything, but I can't imagine Damiano Volante being happy that an employee is selling access to his club.

“It sounds great. Why didn’t you ask Matteo to get you on the list?”

Rosalia grimaces. “I couldn’t take advantage.”

My suspicion that she was too intimidated by Matteo to ask is confirmed when he saunters into the room a moment later. Rosalia immediately scurries off to the other side of the kitchen and busies herself preparing a cappuccino for him.

Matteo looks rough his morning, like he hasn’t slept, but he’s still insanely hot. Wearing nothing but a pair of black sweatpants, he displays his muscular physique. His arms and torso are covered in tattoos. Skulls and roses are the dominant images. There’s also an old-fashioned clock face on his left arm that has blood dripping from it. The number of drips is constantly increasing, with each representing a life he’s taken.

I’ve never asked him why he chose that particular design to mark his grim tally. I guess he’s trying to convey something about the march of time and the inevitability of death. Perhaps it’s not that deep. Matteo isn’t known for his philosophical musings, after all.

“You’re still here.” He flashes me a glare as he pulls out a chair and sits at the head of the table. Rosalia sets his coffee down in front of him and hurries from the room. She definitely doesn’t enjoy being around him.

“She’s a nice girl. What did you do to her?”

“Not a fucking thing.” Matteo reaches across the table to grab one of the incredibly buttery croissants. It would have been easier to ask me to pass him one, but Matteo’s a stubborn asshole when he wants to be. “We need to talk about last night.”

“Oh, that’s okay.” I try to make it sound as if what happened was no big deal.

“There’s no need to apologize.”

Matteo scowls. “I wasn’t going to. I was going to remind you how reckless your actions were.”

“My actions?”

“Yeah, sneaking in here like that. I could have shot you.”

I return his dark glare. “That might have been preferable to being beaten and pawed like that.”

“I did not beat or paw you.”

“Okay, then, spanked and fondled.” I viciously tear the end off my croissant and dunk it in my cappuccino. “Whatever you call it, your behavior was reprehensible.”

“That’s why you were so wet for me? Your cunt practically swallowed my fingers.”

Matteo’s words give me way more of a thrill than they should. I’m supposed to be outraged by him, not turned on. To distract myself from the troubling tingle in my lady parts, I focus on eating my breakfast.

“When are you leaving?”

I set my croissant down and smile pleasantly at Matteo. “When you agree to come with me.”

He shakes his head. “Not happening.”

“You have to come home, Matty.” I try to soften him with the use of his pet name.

“No.”

“Then I’m staying.”

Matteo slaps his hand down on the table. If another man had done that, I’d have been startled, but if there’s one thing I know about Matteo Volante, it’s that he would never hurt a woman. Well, not physically. He’s left a string of broken hearts and shattered egos behind him.

“Giulia, you cannot stay here. It isn’t safe.”

Ah, it isn’t safe, the go-to excuse of any mobster who wants to tell a woman what to do.

“Is this something to do with the girl who got shot?”

Matteo’s jaw clenches. “What do you know about her?”

“Not much. Antonio told me a girl was killed.”

Matteo sits back in his chair. “They were aiming at me. She got in the way.”

It sounds as if it was a tragic accident, but the turbulent look in Matteo’s eye tells me he doesn’t see it like that.

“And you blame yourself?”

“The Rossis wouldn’t have come looking for trouble if I wasn’t here.”

“The Rossis?” I purse my lips as I try to recall a dispute the Volantes might have with people of that name. I come up blank.



“Yes, they were allied with the Contis. You know, Emilia’s family.”

Now then, I have heard of. Emilia Conti married Matteo’s older brother, Alessandro. Then she found out her grandfather, who’d just been murdered, was a mob boss here in Italy. I’d already ended my friendship with Matteo by the time Emilia came to New York, so I don’t really know her, but I have heard plenty of gossip.

Apparently, Emilia was the primary beneficiary of her grandfather’s will and her uncle came after her as a result. The Volantes got rid of him in their usual fashion and assumed control of his empire. Matteo’s cousin, Damiano, is running the criminal side of things here in Italy, while Alessandro and Emilia have taken over her grandfather’s legitimate concerns, moving operations to New York.

“But the Contis are no longer a threat. Your cousin took over, yes?”

“He did, but the Rossis aren’t happy with the new arrangement.”

“They want power for themselves?”

Matteo nods. I shake my head in disgust. It’s always about power with these people. They’re prepared to wipe out anyone who gets in their way.

“Why hang around then?” I ask. “You’d be safer back in the States.”

He raises an eyebrow because, naturally, he doesn’t give a damn about his own safety.

“You want to stay here and wipe them all out?”

“I already did. Well, most of them.”

Of course he did. They came after him, and an innocent girl was caught in the crossfire. Matteo isn't the type to allow that to go unpunished.

"So, why would I be in danger?" I consider the situation for a moment. "Ah, the girl's family. You think they'll try to avenge her death?"

He shrugs and I shake my head in despair. "You know, Matteo, not everyone meets violence with violence."

"When have you ever known anyone to turn the other cheek?"

I'm mildly pissed that he has a point. In the circles we move in, honor is everything and even petty slights attract retribution. If any of the women in the Volante family were killed like that, blood would definitely be spilled. The girl's family probably doesn't operate that way, but I can tell that argument won't work on Matteo.

"So why are you sitting here waiting for them to come at you?" I demand. "Don't you think it would be better for everyone if you came home?"

Again, he answers me with an infuriatingly lazy lift of his shoulder.

"Fine." I take a long sip of my coffee. It's so good. Rich and smooth, just the way I like it. "But if you stay, so do I."

Matteo heaves out a breath like he's some poor, long-suffering parent, burdened with a problem child. "If you insist on staying, you will abide by my rules."

Oh, this will be good. I can barely keep the amusement off my face as I turn on my seat to give him my full attention. "Okay, what rules?"

"You are not to disturb me when I'm in my bedroom, the office, or when I'm in the

pool.”

“There’s a pool?”

Matteo treats me to a stern glare for interrupting. He seems to have forgotten after years of friendship, I know how to push his buttons. “Yes, there’s a pool and I like to swim alone.”

“Since when?”

“What?” I don’t know if he didn’t hear me or if he’s in disbelief that I dare to question him.

“Since when do you like to swim alone? You and I have often messed about together in the pool.”

He treats me to a derisive snort that makes me want to slap him. “Since we grew up, Giulia.”

I don’t remind him we’ve used the pool at his apartment building several times since we reached adulthood. He’s obviously got a bug up his ass about this and simple facts won’t dislodge it, so I leave the subject alone.

“Okay, no intruding on your quiet time. What else?”

“You will not report back to Antonio on every little thing that happens here.”

“I’ve got no intention of speaking to your big brother.”

“Or any other member of my family.” Matteo takes a sip of his coffee as if fortifying himself and then continues. “You will do what I say when I say it and you will not

leave the house unescorted.”

“Okay, I can agree to that.” Shoving back my chair, I get to my feet. “So, I’m going to get dressed. I suggest you do the same. I want to head out in an hour.”

“Head out?” Matteo sounds adorably confused. “Head out where?”

“Florence. I want to visit the Uffizi, maybe some other sites.”

Matteo groans. “Fuck, no. Those places are tourist traps.”

“So what? I’m a tourist and I want to see The Birth of Venus . I don’t care if some guy trying to feed his family wants to take me for a few bucks for some shitty souvenirs.”

“No, I’m not taking you.” His tone suggests he’s digging in his heels, but I know how to make him change his mind. Pushing Matteo’s buttons doesn’t require a genius level of thought.

“Then I’ll call your cousin. He was kind enough to give me his number when he dropped me off here last night.”

Matteo scowls. “You are not calling Damiano.”

I cross my arms over my chest. Matteo is about to find out I can be manipulative when I want to be. “You said I couldn’t leave unescorted. If Damiano takes me to Florence, you can rest easy that I’m protected and I’ll get to spend the day with a sexy Italian.”

Matteo grinds his teeth audibly, making me shudder. “You think Damiano’s sexy?”

“Don’t you? He sure looks like he knows how to show a girl a good time.”

“Is that so?”

I know I’m poking a bear now. Matteo doesn’t take well to competition, even if there’s never been anything sexual between us—until last night, that is. “Yeah, he’s got a commanding nature. I’ll bet if he bent a girl over his desk...”

Before I can finish whatever dangerous taunt was going to come out of my mouth, Matteo startles me by jumping out of his chair. He slams the palms of his hands down on the table and glares at me. He closes his eyes. His chest heaves up and down and I can tell he’s trying to calm himself. “Be ready in thirty minutes. If you want to see the sights, I’ll show you the fucking sights.”

With that, he stalks off and I can’t help wondering just what the hell I’ve got myself into.

### CHAPTER 4

M atteo

Steepling my fingers, I watch Giulia cross the table at the restaurant I brought her to. Despite my initial reluctance, I enjoyed our whirlwind tour of the Uffizi Gallery and allowed Giulia to talk me into going to the Pitti Palace as well. We stopped for a quick coffee, but haven't eaten since breakfast, so I wanted to bring her to a place where she could get the authentic Tuscan cuisine she said she wanted to try.

As she scans the menu, I can't help thinking how different she is. It's not just her hair. Her clothes are new. She's wearing eye-catching purple cropped pants that match her hair and a gauzy white blouse, a departure from the grays and blacks she used to camouflage her incredible body with. Her demeanor has also changed. She's less self-conscious. Giulia was always fun to be around, but shyness held her back. She's definitely more confident than before. I have to admit I find her boldness alluring.

"I've wanted to see Botticelli's paintings since I was a kid." Giulia sets down the leather-bound menu. "But they paled in comparison with that Titian."

"Uh-huh." I actually have no idea which painting she's talking about. There were dozens of masterpieces in the gallery, but I noticed few of them. My attention was focused on the woman in front of me. I always recognized Giulia's beauty, but never imagined wanting to fuck her. Our relationship started when we were too young to know about physical attraction, but when I developed an awareness of sex, I marked her as off limits. Unwilling to risk our close bond for what might be only fleeting

pleasure, I convinced myself friendship was all I wanted from her.

Then one stupid remark changed things. Not seeing her for the last few months has created enough of a distance between us for me to see Giulia differently. Her turning up in Tuscany has thrown me completely off balance. I want her more than I've ever wanted a woman.

"Thanks for playing tourists with me." Giulia reaches for the bottle of San Pellegrino on the table, but I grab it first and pour her a glass. Now that all thoughts of getting rid of her have left my mind, I can be chivalrous. "I know it's not your thing."

She nods in thanks as I slide the glass of water to her.

"I can appreciate beauty, Giulia."

As she meets my eye, she smiles wryly. "I'm glad you found something to admire."

"I found it a long time ago. I was just too blind to see it."

Shit. Even to my own ears, that sounded cheesy. There's an awkward silence as Giulia looks at anything but me. This restaurant has an amazing view of the Ponte Vecchio and the River Arno that flows beneath it, but I refuse to believe she's so mesmerized she can't even blink. Her whole body has gone stiff. Fortunately, the waiter arrives at the table and breaks the tension.

"What can I get for you, Signore Volante?" he asks.

"I'll take the veal saltimbocca with a side of steamed broccoli and the lady will have..."

"The same, but could I have it with French fries instead of broccoli?" She grimaces as

if she expects the waiter to pass judgment on her for the culinary faux pas. He does look snooty with his long straight nose and downturned lips, but I've been here before and Alberto's a good guy.

"Of course, signorina ."

"And bring us a bottle of the Valpolicella." It comes from a vineyard my cousin Lorenzo owns near Verona. He's Damiano's younger brother and second in command. There's another brother, Gabriele, who controls their operations in Rome. I haven't seen him at all during this trip. Apparently, he's become something of a recluse since he was attacked and left with severe scarring on his face.

"Si, signore ." Alberto bows low, then turns and walks away.

"Do you think I'm a dumbass for ordering fries?" She worries her bottom lip with her teeth.

"Nah, sweetheart. I know how much you love them."

She nods, but scans the room in case people are openly judging her. It's then she seems to realize we're the only patrons this evening. A crease appears at the bridge of her nose as if she's puzzled. "Do people eat later here?"

I glance at my cellphone, which is sitting on the table. Four-thirty. We rarely eat at this time ourselves. "It is early, but that's not why it's quiet."

Giulia's eyes widen in realization. "You booked out the whole restaurant?"

I shake my head. "It doesn't usually open on a Wednesday. Damiano had them open up for us."



Rather than being impressed by the gesture, Giulia seems pissed. Her lips thin, and her eyes narrow. “I wanted an authentic Italian dining experience.”

“That’s why I brought you here. The food is incredible.”

Giulia’s scowl deepens. “It’s not just about the food. I want to soak up the atmosphere too.”

“What’s stopping you? This place is amazing. Look at the murals on the wall. Listen to that Italian folk music. Enjoy the fucking view of the Arno. You’ve got everything you need.”

Her lips push out in a spoiled pout. “Everything except people.”

My jaw clenches. Despite not wanting her here in the first place, I’ve gone out of my way to ensure we had a pleasant day. I took her where she wanted to go. I arranged for us to have exclusive use of the finest restaurant in Florence, if not the whole of Tuscany. Still, she has the nerve to complain.

“That was kind of the point, Giulia. I want you to myself.”

She purses her lips, then rises from her seat. “Cancel our order.”

Hell, no. She did not just use that demanding tone with me. “What?”

“Cancel it. I wanted to get a flavor of Tuscan dining, not sit alone in an empty room with your spoiled ass.”

“Authentic Tuscan dining? You ordered French fries with your veal, sweetheart.”

It doesn’t seem possible, but Giulia’s glower becomes fiercer. She jabs a finger in my

direction. “You’re an asshole.”

Madder than I’ve ever seen her, she turns on her heel and storms off. She is not getting away with that. Pushing back my chair, I follow her across the room. As she’s about to open the door, I grab her arm and swing her around to face me.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I demand. “I tried to do something nice for you and you’re acting like an ungrateful brat.”

She huffs out a breath. “I hate you, Matteo. Do you know that? I really fucking hate you.”

“You hate me?” I don’t know where the vitriol she’s spewing at me has come from. I honestly thought we were on the way back to being good with each other again. “You sure about that, sweetheart?”

“I’m positive.”

Stung by her attitude, I smile tightly. “In that case, I have nothing to lose.”

Gripping her arm firmly, I walk her across the empty restaurant. Alberto comes into the room with the bottle of wine I ordered. He spots us and halts. “Signore?”

“Leave the bottle on the table, unopened. Make sure nobody disturbs us.”

Alberto nods in acknowledgement of my instructions. I pull Giulia through the door leading to the office and drag her down the corridor. She tries to break free, but with my mind set on spanking the attitude out of her, she doesn’t stand a chance.

“Behave yourself, sweetheart, or you’ll make this worse for yourself.”

I push open the door to the office the restaurant manager uses, and lead Giulia inside. Whirling around, I shove her back against the wall. Her eyes widen as I bend to growl in her ear. “Lower your pants, then turn and face the wall.”

“Matteo!”

“Not a word, Giulia. You’ve had things your way, now it’s my turn.”

Her forehead creases. “What do you mean, I’ve had things my way? None of this is what I want.”

My jaw clenches. “Didn’t I tell you to keep your mouth shut? Now, do as you’re told or I’ll take you back out there and whip you with my belt in front of the entire staff.”

For a minute, I think she’s going to call my bluff. It is just a pretense. There is no way in hell I will let another man enjoy the pleasure of seeing me turning her pretty ass red.

Giulia stares at me, chin raised and lips pouting defiantly. I can almost see the thoughts flying through her head as her eyes widen slightly and then narrow again. Her shoulders sag. She unzips her pants and lowers them, along with her panties, to mid-thigh. I didn’t ask her to bare her ass, but I’m not going to say no to seeing my palm prints on her peachy skin.

“Now, turn and brace yourself. This is going to hurt.”

She draws in a deep breath and turns. Her hands shake as she raises her palms and slaps them against the wall. Without me having to ask, she moves her feet apart as wide as she can manage with her pants wrapped around her legs. Then she shoves her ass toward me.

“Good girl.”

At that, she growls, no doubt taking my compliment as an affront to her strength and independence, both qualities I admire in her. Not wanting to draw this out, I deliver three harsh spans to her ass. Her flesh wobbles and her skin turns pink. Giulia gasps and glances over her shoulder at me. Her eyes are glassy, like she’s about to cry. I know it’s not because I’ve hurt her.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” I demand.

She shakes her head and turns away from me. “Get on with it, Matteo.”

Infuriated by the disdain in her voice and her refusal to answer me, I unbuckle my belt and draw it through the loops of my pants. Giulia spins around. Panic flares in her eyes as she watches me folding my belt in two.

“What are you doing with that?”

“Teaching you to think carefully about disrespecting me.”

“Disrespecting you? Because you’ve earned my respect, right?”

Most people respect me because of my family name and the reputation that precedes me, but Giulia knows the person I am behind the public facade and she won’t show me deference if she doesn’t feel it’s due.

“Maybe not, but I certainly haven’t earned your hatred.”

She pulls her shoulders back, squaring up for a fight. “Well, tough shit, because you have it.”

Her words sting even though I know she doesn't mean what she's saying. She might be pissed at me right now, but hate is an extreme emotion. "You don't hate me, Giulia."

"Don't I? Perhaps the last few months have given me time to reevaluate my feelings. Perhaps I realized I hated you even before you and Marissa fucking Locatelli made fun of me."

There's no ignoring the note of bitterness in her voice when she mentions Marissa. Is she jealous of that skank? I know better than to ask. Giulia's obviously upset right now, and I'm not about to provoke her further.

"You don't hate me," I repeat, firm in my belief that she's just being dramatic.

"Yes, I do." She draws in a shuddering breath. "I hate you for making me put my life on hold to sort your sorry ass out."

I snort in disbelief. "I didn't ask you to come."

"No, you didn't, but if you weren't refusing to go home, your brother wouldn't have had to come and threaten everything that matters to me, so I'd do his bidding and bring you back."

Her voice drips with disdain. Clearly she thinks my desire to spend a bit more time in Italy is down to some spoiled tantrum I'm throwing. It's not. I just wanted to stay here to sort my head out. The last thing I expected was for my brother to bring Giulia into the situation.

"What did Antonio say to you?"

"It doesn't matter." The petulant jut of her chin suggests the reverse is true. "It's your

fucking fault I'm here. Everything's your fucking fault."

"What's my fault?" I reach out to touch her face and she shrinks back against the wall. I tilt my head to the side and try to soften my expression. "Giulia?"

"It's your fault everyone in our circle is mocking me. It's your fault I had to marry a man older than my father." She takes a deep breath. "You didn't even try to save me."

My eyes narrow as a red haze dulls my vision. "What did that bastard do to you?"

If he hurt her, I'll dig up his bloated corpse and cut his fucking heart out.

"Nothing." Giulia shakes her head as if she can't quite believe what she's telling me. "Johnny didn't do a thing, but that's not the point. Everyone expected him to be an asshole to me. You expected him to be an asshole to me, but you did nothing to save me from having to marry him."

"What was I supposed to do?"

Giulia knows how things work in our world. Her father made the arrangement with Lombardi. They went to Antonio and got his approval for the match. There was nothing I could have done to change things. If anyone deserves to be the focus of Giulia's anger, it's her father. He's the one who was willing to sell his only daughter off to a notorious pig of a man. But clearly, she thinks I hold some of the blame.

"You hoped I'd ask my brother not to give his consent to the marriage?"

"His consent?" Giulia lets out an inelegant snort. "What a fucked-up world."

I reach out and wipe away the stray tear running down her cheek. "It's the world we

live in, sweetheart.”

“Yeah, I know.” She leans back against the wall. “I wish it wasn’t.”

“If it’s any consolation, when I heard you and Johnny were to marry, I warned him I’d be watching his every move. I told him I’d kill him if he hurt you.”

“You did?”

How can she sound so surprised by that? “Of course I did.”

As she looks up at me with so much emotion in her pretty brown eyes, a wave of protectiveness sweeps over me. Any desire to punish her disappears, to be replaced by an overwhelming urge to claim this woman. I need to bind her to me and make sure our world never hurts her again.

Curving a hand around her cheek, I dip my head and kiss her. Immediately, Giulia’s hands come up to my chest. She tries to push me away, but I don’t let her. I grab her wrists and pin her hands over her head. A gasp parts her lips and I take advantage, slipping my tongue into her mouth to taste her sweetness.

At first, Giulia doesn’t respond. I might as well be kissing a blow-up doll. Then she softens, her body sagging against mine. She kisses me back, pouring as much desire into it as I am. This feels incredibly right. Lust fires through my veins and all sense of reason flees.

Now that I have her participation, I release her hands. Giulia winds an arm around my neck, holding me close as my hand slips between her legs. She presses herself eagerly against my palm. Finding her soaked with arousal brings me to my knees. Literally. I drop to the floor and tug her panties down around her ankles. Then I bury my face between her legs. Her scent is intoxicating.

I lick along the full length of her pussy before giving special attention to her clit. The tiny bud pulses as I wrap my lips around it and suck gently.

“Matty!” Last night when Giulia called me by that familiar name, it was as if she’d doused me in ice water. Now, it’s more like she’s poured oil on the flames. Something inside me breaks and I struggle for control as I lap at her gloriously wet pink flesh. Her whimpers and moans spur me on. I nip her clit gently with my teeth.

“Too much!” Giulia’s fingers grab at my hair, and she tries to pull me away.

Too much? It’s nowhere near enough. I shove two fingers into her tight channel and slowly draw them back and forth.

“Matty!” Giulia shrieks as her body shakes. Fuck, that was fast. I barely had to work for that orgasm. She’s incredibly responsive.

Still trembling, she kicks off her shoes and shimmies out of her pants. As I get to my feet, she grabs my hand and leads me across the room to the long leather sofa that sits adjacent to the desk. Her assertiveness as she lies back on the sofa, pulling me down between her spread legs, is both startling and thrilling at the same time.

“Fuck me, Matteo!”

There’s a note of command in her voice that makes me want to flip her over and hold her down while I show her who’s boss, but I can’t just shove my cock into her. I don’t know how experienced Giulia is, if she’s still a virgin.

As far as I know, she was untouched when she married Johnny, but a lot may have happened between then and now. Once she gained her freedom, she might have fucked a dozen men. I hope that’s not the case. Am I an asshole for wanting to be her first?



“Stop thinking!” She fumbles with the fastening of my pants. As my cock springs free, she wraps her hand around it and pumps up and down twice. Her movement is controlled, deliberate. “I want you inside me.”

She confidently guides my cock to her entrance. Perhaps she has done this before. I push an inch inside her before common sense pokes a hole in the sexual fog enveloping us, and I pause. Does she really know what she’s doing? As much as I want to fuck her, I can’t risk her regretting this later. “Giulia?”

“Now, Matty, please. I want this.”

I shove my cock all the way into her, meeting some resistance. It’s not enough to make me think this is her first time. Giulia exhales sharply as I pump my hips.

“Fuck, Giulia, you’re so tight.”

She wriggles her hips impatiently and I give her what she needs. Propping myself up on my palms, I claim her body with long, slow thrusts. Giulia gazes at me, her eyes glazed with desire.

“You like my fat cock in you.” It’s not a question. It’s evident from the flush of her cheeks, the parting of her rosy lips as soft moans fall from them, that she’s enjoying this.

“I’ll like it better when you stop talking.”

Giulia grabs my shoulders, sinking her nails in. The pain shakes loose the last remnants of my control. Pulling out, I drag her down onto the floor, positioning her on all fours before impaling her on my cock once more. Grabbing her waist, I fuck her hard and fast, yanking her back to meet my cock with every forward thrust. Giulia moans ecstatically. I know already I will never tire of hearing those sounds.

As her pussy clenches, squeezing my cock like a vise, my climax grips me. My hips jerk and I come, groaning as the most intense pleasure washes over me. “Oh, fuck, Giulia!”

I carefully pull out of her and sit back on my heels. Before I’ve fully recovered, Giulia is on her feet. She glances down and grimaces. I follow her line of sight to where my cum is glistening on her inner thighs. There’s a crimson smear on her skin. That can’t be what I think it is. I check my cock and see the bloody evidence of her innocence there, too. Shit. I should have made her tell me she was a virgin. Fucking her like that was selfish.

“Giulia.” My tone is tinged with regret. That was too fast. I didn’t take time to explore her gorgeous body, to let her get to know mine. I showed her less consideration than I would a complete stranger.

“No need for guilt,” she says primly as she wipes herself clean with her panties and then drops them into the waste bin by the desk. “I wanted this.”

Zippering up her pants, she offers me a tight smile, turns and walks away. Fucking her the way I did makes me the biggest asshole on the planet. I’ve not got much experience with virgins, but this cannot be what she wanted for her first time. I’ll make it up to her. When I take her again, it will be the way she deserves.

### CHAPTER 5

Giulia

Growing up in a mafia family, I was never naïve enough to imagine that losing my virginity was going to be a romantic experience. I knew not to expect hearts and flowers from my husband. Because in the world I'm a part of, I should have been married when I first slept with a man.

Candles, scented baths, and rose petals strewn on silk sheets were never going to play a part in my deflowering, but I thought at least there would be a bed. A hard sofa and an even harder floor just don't cut it.

Though I used to daydream about my first time being with Matteo, I didn't think it would happen like that. I certainly never imagined I would initiate the whole thing. Because a part of me knew that there could only be one outcome to me provoking him. The moment I said I hated him, I sealed my fate. He just had to prove me wrong.

Burying my embarrassment that the entire staff probably knows we just fucked in the office, I plaster a smile on my face as the waiter approaches the table with our food.

"Is Signore Volante...?" He looks nervous. Matteo has that effect on people. He's friendlier than his brothers, more gregarious, but his reputation precedes him. Everyone knows his easy manner masks a ruthless streak.

"He'll be out in a minute." As he sets the plate of veal down on the table along with my fries and Matteo's side dish of broccoli, I coo with delight. "This looks fantastic.

Grazie .”

As the waiter walks away, Matteo saunters into the room, looking a hell of a lot more put together than I feel. His shirt is tucked into his pants and his hands are in his pockets. I have to fight the urge to jump up from my seat and strangle him. It’s not fair that he appears totally unaffected by what happened between us when my clothes are rumpled and my hair is a mess. Of course, he has a lot more experience with putting himself back together after sex than I do, a realization that makes jealousy rear its ugly head. I take a deep breath as he drops onto the seat opposite me.

“The food’s here.” Matteo’s observation is facile, no doubt intended to test the water between us. He probably thinks I’m about to collapse under the weight of emotion now that my precious innocence is gone. Maybe I will later, when I’ve had the chance to process everything.

“It is.” My voice is remarkably level. I don’t know how to act around him right now, but making Matteo feel guilty about a situation I was complicit in creating would be mean. “And it smells incredible.”

Grabbing a crisp French fry from the metal basket they came in, I drag it through the dark brown sauce encircling the veal, which sits off-center on my plate. I pop it in my mouth and have to hold back a groan of pleasure. The sauce has a rich, beefy taste. There’s definitely wine in it and some herbs I can’t identify. It’s the best thing I’ve had in a long time, though, admittedly, that wouldn’t be hard. Since I moved out of my father’s house and into a tiny studio apartment in the East Village, I’ve been living on cheap takeout. Cooking is not my forte.

As I pick up my fork and knife and cut off a sliver of the veal wrapped in prosciutto, I’m painfully aware of Matteo’s scrutiny.

“Are you okay?” he asks, just as I put the food in my mouth.

I slowly chew and then swallow, giving myself a moment to ensure I can answer without my voice quivering. “Yes, I’m good.”

Matteo frowns, clearly not convinced. “Giulia...”

“Really, Matteo, it’s all good. Can we skip the in-depth analysis of what happened, please?”

For a minute, I think he’s going to press the issue. It would be just like Matteo to decide he wants to explore his feelings on the one occasion I’d prefer not to have a heart-to-heart. He stares at me, eyes narrowed, studying my expression, trying to work out what’s going on in my head. Then he nods and turns his attention to eating.

We barely talk throughout the meal, other than to offer the occasional comment on the taste and quality of the ingredients. Matteo grabs a handful of my fries without asking and, in return, shovels some of his broccoli onto my plate. It tastes bitter to me, but I pretend to like it to avoid getting a lecture about how I should eat more vegetables. Matteo loves all food, but he’s careful to balance out the unhealthy options with plenty of fruit and vegetables. Me? I’m more of a junk food girl, despite my stepmother trying to feed me nothing but protein shakes and rice crackers since I hit puberty.

“Would you like dessert?” Matteo asks as I lay down my cutlery.

Hell, no. I want to get back to the villa, take a nice hot shower to wash the evidence of what we’ve done off me, and then lie down in a darkened room until I come to terms with the fact that I fucked my former best friend.

I conjure up a regretful tone as I shake my head. “I couldn’t eat another bite.”

Though the entrée was filling, I do have a little space left in my stomach that would

be filled nicely by the tiramisu I saw on the menu. Unfortunately for my salivating taste buds, I can't bear another minute of the forced civility between Matteo and me.

"Let's get out of here, then," he suggests.

As we get up to leave, Matteo takes his wallet from his pocket and draws out several bills. I don't know what the different denominations of euros look like yet, but I spot at least one hundred in the pile he drops on the table. Generosity has always been one of Matteo's best attributes.

We meet the middle-aged waiter as we head for the exit. Matteo shakes his hand. "Thank everyone for coming in on their day off, Alberto."

"It was our pleasure, Signore Volante."

I smell bullshit. Nobody would be pleased to be dragged into work on their day off to prepare a single course meal for two people. Creating those dishes wasn't a simple case of slapping a few ingredients together. Time and effort went into it. Matteo probably doesn't see that, though. As a Volante, he possesses a streak of arrogance that makes him think everyone around him is happy to bend over backward to do his bidding. It's one of his least appealing qualities.

We walk along the riverside to where Matteo parked his car. Actually, it was more like he screeched to a halt and jumped out where he decided it was most convenient. It's another manifestation of his cocky attitude. He believes in his absolute right to do whatever he pleases. In New York, he'd get away with simply dumping his car wherever he chose because nobody in their right mind would ticket a car belonging to one of the Volantes. Here, however, he isn't being treated like the mafia princeling he is. Some brave soul has put a ticket on the windscreen of his Bugatti.

"What the fuck?" Matteo snatches the plastic-wrapped ticket off the window and

throws it to the ground.

“Matteo!” I scold.

“What?” Anger pulses off him. “I am not paying that.”

“I don’t care if you refuse to pay it.” I purse my lips and try to channel his mother’s energy. Ava Volante is typically a sweet woman, but when she gets mad, even her sons tremble. “You cannot litter the streets of this beautiful city.”

He scowls at me, but picks up the ticket and shoves it in his pocket anyway. He opens the car door for me and waits until I’m settled before getting into the driver’s side. Something I’ve always liked about Matteo is his chivalry. Even when we were kids, he displayed excellent manners. In the school cafeteria, he always insisted on carrying my tray and Isabella’s. He cleared our plates away for us, too. He opened doors and protected us from harm. It was hard not to fall in love with him, just a little. I wish we could go back to those days.

As Matteo revs the engine and takes off as if the devil himself is on our tail, I grip the seat beneath me. I’m used to him driving like he’s on his own personal racetrack, but here in the narrow, unfamiliar streets of Florence, it feels more dangerous. The city flashes past too quickly for me to make out much of anything, but I get the impression this is a place I’d love to explore.

With Matteo apparently trying to break the sound barrier, it takes only minutes before we’re out in the countryside and heading toward the villa.

“The house we’re staying at. Whose is it?” I have no idea whether Matteo has rented it or if it belongs to his family.

“Gabriele’s.”

“Your cousin?” I glance over at Matteo, who grunts his affirmation. “He lives in Rome, right?”

“If you can call it living.”

I remember Matteo telling me about his cousin becoming a virtual recluse after he was disfigured in an ambush.

“He still doesn’t leave the house?”

“No.” Matteo flashes me a wry grin. “Perhaps I should send you to him. You’re good at getting people out of the house when all they want is to be left in peace.”

His dig at me is not exactly subtle. I thought he’d enjoyed spending time with me at the Uffizi and the Pitti Palace. He was happy to share snippets of information about both buildings with me. He’s always been into history and he regaled me with tales of the Medici and other prominent families who fought for dominance in the city during the Renaissance. I guess he sees parallels with his own family and their rivals.

He didn’t utter a single complaint all day, and he certainly enjoyed the meal at the restaurant. The unexpected bonus of popping my cherry was surely worth leaving the house for, not that he’s mentioned it again. Perhaps I misread him today, and he hated every minute he spent with me.

“Sure, send me to Rome. I’ve always wanted to see the Colosseum.” My flippant tone is designed to show Matteo I’m not put out by the thought he might have preferred to stay at home. “Perhaps I can get Gabriele to fuck me too.”

The moment the words leave my mouth, I know I’ve waved a red rag at a bull. Matteo slams on the brakes so hard I’d have been propelled through the windshield if I wasn’t wearing a seatbelt.



“What the fuck, Giulia?” He slaps the steering wheel and I jump, even though I know he would never turn his rage on me.

I look back over my shoulder nervously as a car horn blares behind us. Matteo, of course, doesn't give a damn if he's holding up traffic. He turns fully in his seat to face me. His anger is more intense than I expected.

I swallow hard. “I was joking, Matty.”

“Well, it wasn't fucking funny.”

Before I can even blink, Matteo is on me. He presses me back into the seat as his lips meet mine in a furious kiss. It's harsh and uncompromising, a brash statement of ownership. I should rail against him asserting his claim like this, but I find myself softening. The minute I do, Matteo pulls back as if all he wanted was my submission. He grasps my chin, his fingers digging in almost painfully. The determination in the dark gleam of his eyes startles me.

“You're mine now, Giulia. Don't you forget it.”

He glares at me, obviously expecting a response. When I nod, he sits back in his seat and drives off again. My heart pounds so hard I fear it will break my ribs. I feel like I've opened Pandora's Box. How the hell am I going to put the lid back on?

### CHAPTER 6

Matteo

As I pull the car off the main road, the enormous iron gates to the property swing open, activated automatically using license plate recognition. Antonio needs to get a similar system installed at some of our properties. It would cut down on the number of men needed to guard the gates. Their services could be used elsewhere. Perhaps I'll suggest it to Leo. He'll be more receptive than our oldest brother, who doesn't take much interest in technology.

A sense of peace washes over me as I drive along the avenue of cypress trees leading toward the house. This place is my sanctuary from the outside world. It's what I need right now, but I doubt I could ever really call it home. My life, the people I care about, are in New York. Despite what my brother thinks, I haven't forgotten that.

Giulia is noticeably less relaxed than me. Her posture is so stiff that if we hit a slight bump in the road, she might shatter into pieces. I don't try to make her feel more comfortable. She deserves to squirm after that bullshit remark about letting Gabriele fuck her. My cousin would chew her up and spit her out, leaving her a complete wreck. He used to be a real ladies' man, but these days he's too consumed by self-pity and rage to treat a woman right. I, on the other hand, intend to worship Giulia. Once she accepts she's mine, she'll want for nothing.

I should have pulled her over my knee and spanked her for even thinking about letting another man touch her, but the Bugatti Veyron I borrowed from Damiano isn't exactly spacious and a man my size needs room to maneuver. Perhaps I'll redden her

cute little ass as foreplay before I fuck her again.

That enticing thought gets shelved a minute later. The beautiful nineteenth-century villa I've stayed at for more than a month comes into view and my heart sinks. We have company. Three black Audi SUVs sit on the gravel driveway by the front door. Damiano must be here. It's unusual for him to have brought an entourage, though. Unless there's an elevated safety risk, he doesn't travel with an escort. I'm guessing the presence of his guards means he's brought my sister with him. She's not in any particular danger, but Damiano knows Antonio will have his balls if anything happens to Livvy while she's under his protection, so he doesn't take any chances.

"Is that Damiano's car?" Giulia sounds hopeful. I guess she isn't keen to be alone with me right now, since things are strained between us.

"It is."

"Were you expecting him?"

"No. I suspect Livvy heard you were here and persuaded him to drop by."

A smile spreads across Giulia's face. "Oh, I hope so. It's been ages since I saw Livvy."

Her enthusiasm has fuck all to do with her wanting to spend time with my sister and everything to do with needing a buffer between us until she sorts her head out. Giulia has known my sister since she was a toddler and they're not bosom buddies. They've attended a lot of the same social events and Giulia has come on family vacations with us, but the two women have never really warmed to each other.

Giulia sees Livvy as my annoying kid sister, the brat who used to interrupt us when we were trying to get our homework done or watch a movie. Livvy, for her part, has

always resented the time I spent with Giulia, and to a lesser extent, Isabella. My sister likes to be the focus of my attention.

Apart from Gio, who's gradually drifting away from all of us, I'm the only one of her brothers who really gives a shit about her. The others want to protect her, of course, but that doesn't translate to wanting to have an actual relationship with Livvy. They treat her with indifference or, worse, as if she's a pain in the ass. She's desperate for approval that she must know she'll never receive. It's no wonder she acts out sometimes.

I pull the car up behind the last Audi in the row and switch off the engine before turning to Giulia. If my sister is with Damiano, Giulia needs to be forewarned that Livvy might try to draw her into our family drama.

"There's something you should know before we go inside." I consider how much to share with her and decide that, despite the gulf between us, Giulia can be trusted with the truth. "My sister isn't here willingly."

Giulia tenses. "What do you mean?"

"Antonio sent her here as punishment."

Giulia rolls her eyes. "What supposed crime did she commit this time?"

I understand the sarcasm in her tone. Where my oldest brother is concerned, breathing too loudly is a punishable offense for Livvy. This time is different. She did something incredibly stupid and almost cost Antonio his marriage. Knowing how much our brother loves his wife, Livvy was lucky to get away so lightly.

"She took some photos."

“Of?”

I rub the back of my neck as Giulia looks expectantly at me. I hate to even think about the mess Livvy got herself in. “Herself. She took nude photos, you know, in suggestive poses.”

Giulia huffs out a disbelieving laugh. “So she got exiled. Why not go all out and send the girl to a convent?”

Her judgmental tone rubs me the wrong way. I honestly didn’t expect Giulia to take Livvy’s side. “She fucked up. This is for her own good.”

“You believe that?”

Actually, I have my doubts. I suspect Livvy would be better off in New York under my mother’s guidance, but Antonio preferred to send her away. It’s what he does when the women in our lives become a problem. He tries to pretend the issue doesn’t exist. Unfortunately out of sight, out of mind doesn’t work for him. He’ll worry over our sister more while she’s here than he would if she was at home where he can keep an eye on her.

Though I disagree with my brother on this occasion, I won’t express my thoughts on the matter to anyone outside of the family, not even Giulia. Unity and loyalty are the keys to our success. If I have something to say, Antonio is the only one who’ll hear it.

“I do.”

Giulia shakes her head disapprovingly. “Fucking prehistoric assholes, the lot of you.”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to hurl insults, sweetheart. You don’t know the whole story yet.”

“I don’t need the whole story to think you’re a bunch of medieval dinosaurs.”

The corners of my lips lift. “Medieval dinosaurs? I think you’re getting your time periods confused.”

Giulia scowls. “You know what I mean. So what’s the rest of the story?”

“Joey Gallo got hold of the photos.”

Her lips pull back as she hisses through her teeth. She knows as well as I do the Gallos are all snakes. “How?”

“No fucking clue.” So far, my sister has refused to go into detail about who took the photos and how they got passed to our enemies. “Joey used the photos to blackmail Isabella into letting him and his cousin Vito into their house.”

“Antonio’s house?” Giulia clarifies.

“Yeah, there was a tussle and Antonio got shot.”

“Fuck!” Giulia takes a moment to process what I’ve told her. “What happened to Joey and Vito?”

“Leo took care of them.”

Though Alessandro and I were present during their torture and execution, my second oldest brother did most of the work. He’s closest to Antonio and took the attack on our brother as a personal insult. We barely convinced him not to shoot Isabella too.

“Is that why Antonio sent Izzy away?”

“Yes.” My brother sending his wife to live in his beach house in the aftermath of the shooting is another shining example of how he deals with women who disappoint him. “She covered for Livvy.”

Giulia’s jaw clenches. I knew she’d be pissed when she found out my sister was to blame for our friend being punished.

“I assume Livvy finally told Antonio the truth, since Izzy’s home now.”

“She did, but that’s not why he brought her home.” I rub my chin as I weigh up whether to tell her the rest of the story. It’s probably better coming from me rather than Livvy blurting something out if she gets upset. “There was an incident with Rico Mancini.”

Giulia purses her lips. “Does this incident have something to do with the entire Mancini family disappearing off the face of the earth?”

“Rico tried to assault Isabella. She split his head open with a frying pan.”

“She killed him?”

The surprise in Giulia’s voice echoes the shock I’d felt when I saw Rico’s body. Isabella’s always been a gentle soul, but when she needed to protect herself, she became a savage.

“Yeah. His family came after her. They drove Dante off the road when he was giving her a ride.” I omit telling her that Isabella was only in a car with my brother’s closest friend because Antonio was banishing her again. He wasn’t pleased when Livvy told the truth and took it out on his wife. “Dante ended up in the hospital and...”

“Dante?” Giulia scrunches up her nose as she interrupts me. “He drove me to the

airport before I flew over here. He didn't mention being in an accident."

I raise an eyebrow. "Does Dante usually share things with you?"

"No," Giulia snaps. "So what happened with the Mancinis?"

"They got what was coming to them."

Giulia stews on that for a minute or two. I can sense the annoyance rolling off her.

"And Olivia gets off lightly, as usual."

It's not a great sign that she's using my sister's full name. "Livvy's being punished."

"How is spending time in this beautiful place a punishment?"

"Well, she's not allowed unsupervised access to her phone or the internet. She can't go out without a guard. She isn't receiving her usual allowance, and she has to work to earn her keep."

Giulia casts a skeptical glare in my direction. I know it doesn't sound as if my sister is being punished, but she's not having a good time over here.

"Oh, really? How is she earning her keep? Is she scrubbing floors, polishing silverware? Please tell me she's cleaning the toilets."

"I don't know. Damiano has her in his office doing..." Shit, I have no idea what he's got her working on. "Stuff."

"Stuff?" Giulia's lips thin. "Let me get this straight. She fucks with our best friend's marriage and her punishment is running errands?"



I shrug and then try to lighten the tone. “I guess that’s what passes for hard labor for our women.”

Giulia glowers at me. She glances down and examines her nails, which, I notice for the first time, are a bit ragged, like she’s been doing a lot of manual work lately. I heard she was setting up some sort of community center and that she’d been hands on with the remodeling. It makes me feel like a complete asshole for my comment about what the women in our world consider work.

She clenches her fists. Then she abruptly unfastens her seatbelt, gets out of the car, and storms toward the house. I catch up with her just as she reaches the door. Grabbing her elbow, I swing her toward me, not caring that several of Damiano’s men are watching us from their cars.

“Giulia, what are you doing?”

“I’m going to kick the shit out of your fucking spoiled brat of a sister.”

I should chastise her for threatening Livvy, but I don’t think Giulia will actually hurt her. She might be fired up, but she has a right to be after what I told her. What I can’t let slide, however, is the cursing. It just sounds wrong coming from her. “Watch your mouth.”

“Or what?” Giulia raises herself up on her tiptoes, getting right in my face.

“Or I’ll spank your insolent ass.”

She smiles at me, a forced grin that lacks warmth. “Not before I’ve shown your sister what a real punishment is.”

Giulia tugs her arm out of my grip and marches into the house. This behavior is so

unlike her. Although she has a temper, she's slow to anger, but today she's seemed different. She's on edge, spoiling for a fight. I doubt she even knows why.

I follow her into the house, intending to intervene if she does lash out at my sister. She charges along the corridor and comes to an abrupt halt as Livvy appears in view. Usually my sister looks like she's ready to strut along a runway at some fashion show, but today she's disheveled. She's wearing skinny jeans and a white t-shirt. Her face is streaked with tears that have washed away some of her signature makeup. Her hair is a mess. It's not like Livvy at all.

Giulia casts a querying glance at me. Her anger seems to have been replaced by concern. She rushes up to Livvy and pulls her into a hug. Immediately, my sister collapses in her arms, sobbing.

"I don't know what to do," Livvy says through anguished wails.

"Come with me." Giulia puts an arm around her shoulder. She gives me a warning look and I step aside to let them go into the living room together.

"What is that all about?" I ask Damiano, as Giulia closes the door behind her.

Damiano blows out a breath. "Let's get a drink."

That's not reassuring. I follow him into the office and sit on one of the leather armchairs at the window while he pours himself a Scotch and me some vodka. He passes me a glass and sits on the other armchair.

"I wasn't expecting you to be out," he says.

What am I, some sort of shut-in? I guess I was turning into a bit of a recluse, but it's not as if I haven't left the house.

“Giulia wanted to go to the city.” I take a sip of my drink and shudder at the harsh burn. “Did you piss off a meter maid?”

“What?”

“I got a ticket on your Bugatti.”

Damiano shrugs. “It’s nothing. Fifty euro, maybe.”

“You intend to pay it?”

“Yeah, it’s not worth the hassle to contest it.”

Things are obviously different here. Back in New York, no member of the Volante organization would pay a ticket. It would give the authorities the wrong idea about who runs the city. But how Damiano handles things here is none of my business.

“So, what’s wrong with my sister?”

“Piotr Reznov came to see her.”

The hairs on the back of my neck rise. Piotr’s uncle, the current head of the Reznov Bratva, is marrying my mother. The Reznovs are longtime allies of ours, but I can’t see why he would want to speak to my sister.

“Why?”

Damiano arches an eyebrow and waits for me to join the dots.

“He wants to marry her?”

“They had a discussion about it.”

“That’s why she’s such a mess? She doesn’t want him?”

“I don’t know what Olivia feels about him. They had a heated discussion, and she threw him out.”

I raise an eyebrow. I didn’t think Piotr Reznov could have heated discussions. Even when he’s in the midst of a fight, he appears unnervingly cold.

“It wasn’t Reznov who upset her,” Damiano says. “She called Antonio, and then the meltdown commenced. I brought her here because she wanted to speak to Giulia.”

It stings a little that she didn’t want to confide in me about how she feels, but I guess Giulia knows more about what it’s like to be a woman in our world than I do. While I can sympathize with the way our girls are bartered off in marriage deals, it’s not something I’ll ever experience.

“Yes, about Giulia.” I knock back the rest of the vodka. “Why didn’t you warn me she was coming?”

“Antonio wanted it to be a surprise. She’s a friend, no? There was no security risk.”

“That’s not the point. I wasn’t expecting company last night.”

Something must show on my face, because Damiano smirks knowingly. “What did you do?”

“Something that can’t be undone.”

My cousin swirls the amber liquid around his glass. “Do you want to undo it?”

“No.” My tone is firm, my mind already made up. I wouldn’t change what’s been set in motion between me and Giulia. Now all I have to do is make sure she understands her new reality.

### CHAPTER 7

Giulia

When I came into the house, ready to smack some sense into Olivia, I was acting out of pure anger. Loaded for bear is the expression my dad would use. He heard it in some old black and white movie when I was a kid and decided it was the perfect way to describe me when I lose my temper. I get mad and scream, shout, break things. Most parents would try to rein that in, but my dad always encouraged me to vent my anger. Luckily, it doesn't happen very often. I tend to be calm, collected, but on the rare occasions when I do snap, the people around me better watch out.

After hearing how Livvy got Isabella into trouble, I wanted to punish her, but that wasn't the sole reason my temper flared. I'm confused about what happened between me and Matteo and worried about where we'll go next. Pushing his buttons was reckless, and I got more than I bargained for.

No, that's a lie. I got exactly what I expected, and I liked it so much it scares me. I needed an outlet, but purging my raging emotions by laying into Livvy would have been unfair.

Fortunately, the moment I laid eyes on her, my anger fizzled out. Matteo's sister was so obviously upset, I couldn't lift a finger against her. On most days, Livvy dresses to impress, but today she's in jeans and a t-shirt. She's wearing sneakers. I wouldn't have thought she'd own a pair. Her hair is tousled and mascara runs down her cheeks in dirty black streaks.

Even if she didn't look so utterly pathetic, I doubt I'd have hit her. Though I've been trained in self-defense and I can handle a gun, violence isn't in my nature. Sure, I'll smash a vase or slam a door, but I don't like the thought of putting my hands on someone in anger. In that, I take after my poor, late mother.

"So what's the matter?" I ask as I sit next to her on the cream leather sofa in the living room I dragged her into.

"I had a visitor. He came to tell me he intends to marry me."

"Who is he?"

"You won't believe it."

I almost roll my eyes. Clearly the grand reveal is going to shock me, otherwise Livvy would have just told me who her visitor was.

"Try me," I say tightly.

"Piotr Reznov."

My jaw drops. Now I'm doubly glad I didn't lash out at her. What she needs right now is sympathy. Piotr Reznov, second in command of one of the most powerful Bratva organizations in the world, is terrifyingly unemotional.

I've only seen him a handful of times, but each left an indelible impression on me. I don't think he ever smiles, or frowns, or blinks, for that matter. Perhaps that's an exaggeration, but he is the most unreadable person I've ever encountered. When he casts his icy gaze over you, he could equally be thinking he'd like to fuck you or that he wants to gut you and set fire to your remains.

“No wonder you freaked out.” I get up and head over to the small cabinet in the corner by the window, which I hope holds some sort of alcohol. I open the door and hit the jackpot. There are several bottles in here, including a Scotch my dad drinks when he needs some stress relief. Grabbing it and a couple of glasses, I head back to Livvy. “Piotr Reznov isn’t my idea of the perfect husband either.”

“Oh, it’s not him.” Livvy wipes the last tears from her eyes as I pour a glass of the Glenlivet whisky and hand it to her. “I told him where to shove his shitty proposal and threw him out of the house.”

“You did?” I can’t keep the surprise out of my voice. I wouldn’t dare look the man in the eye, never mind order him to leave, but I guess growing up as a mafia princess has given Livvy more of a backbone than I realized.

“Yeah, I mean, he’ll be back, but I can handle him.”

“Right.” I pour myself a glass of whisky. “Why are you so upset, then?”

“After he left, I called Antonio to tell him what happened. It turns out he not only knew Piotr was coming to see me, he encouraged him to pursue me.”

To give myself time to absorb that information, I sip my drink. It’s like swallowing liquid fire, but I manage not to splutter.

“I guess that makes sense,” I say when I feel like I can speak without coughing. “Merging two powerful families is good business.”

“Piotr’s uncle is still Pakhan, and he’s marrying my mother, so the families are already merging.” Livvy sighs and then knocks back her whisky like a seasoned drinker. She holds her glass out for me to fill and I top it up. “You know, I wouldn’t care if Antonio was proposing the match for business purposes.”



“You wouldn’t?”

“No, I mean, I’d still reject the idea, but at least I’d feel like I had some worth if our family had something to gain from it.”

“You feel worthless?” I can’t believe that’s what Livvy’s saying. She’s always seemed supremely confident, obnoxiously so at times.

“My family wants me gone, Antonio especially. He laid it out clearly. I’m too much hassle. He’d give me to the devil if it meant he didn’t have to put up with me anymore.”

“Shit.” I don’t know what else to say to her.

“It’s okay.” Livvy smiles grimly. “You know, I’ve always envied you, Giulia.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I mean, you used to hang out with Matteo all the time. You were allowed to come on holiday with us. I couldn’t even speak to a boy without my brothers giving me shit.”

“They’re protective.” I don’t know why I feel the need to defend them when I think their behavior is over the top. “It shows they care.”

“Yeah, but you can care about someone without suffocating them.” Livvy drains her glass and snatches the bottle from the coffee table to refill it. She shakes her hand. “You wouldn’t understand. You’ve always been free to make your own choices.”

A loud snort escapes me at that. “Really? You think I chose to marry Johnny Lombardi?”

“Oh, shit.” Livvy puts her hand on my knee, realizing she fucked up, but I’m not done yet.

“You think I chose to become a widow at twenty-five, that I chose for my best friend to mock me when I was at my lowest ebb, that I chose to be sent here?”

“What do you mean, sent here?” Livvy asks. “I thought you came to be with Matteo.”

I shake my head. “No, your big brother told me to get my ass over here and persuade Matteo to come home or he’d set fire to the life I’ve built for myself.”

“Antonio sent you here?”

“Yes. He wants Matteo back in New York. He’s told me to make it happen.”

“Shit, I’m sorry, Giulia. My brother’s an asshole.”

I empty my glass of whisky in one gulp and then pour myself another before correcting her. “Your brothers are assholes.”

“Why, what did Matteo...?”

Her voice trails off as she stares at me, probably taking in my messy hair and crumpled clothing for the first time. Heat rises to my cheeks as she looks at me and if my disheveled state didn’t give the game away, my blushes certainly will.

“You two...?”

“Yes,” I reply quickly so she doesn’t have to find words for what she suspects her brother and I did.

“Wow!” Livvy’s brow furrows as she considers the situation. “Isn’t that a good thing? I mean, I always thought you and Matteo were right for each other.”

“Really? Is that why you hated me so much?”

Livvy shakes her head. “I’ve never hated you, Giulia. It was more of an intense dislike.”

She grins and I laugh, though I’m not entirely sure she was joking.

“Seriously, though,” she continues, “I already told you I was a little jealous. You and Matteo were so close.”

“You’re close with Matteo too.”

“Yeah, but he’d never go against Antonio for me. For you, he would.”

Is she right about that? Would Matteo go against Antonio for me? I doubt it. He didn’t intervene when his oldest brother agreed to me marrying Johnny. Of course, he might not have seen that as a life and death situation. If Antonio ordered him to kill me, would Matteo do it? His loyalty to his oldest brother is unassailable. Perhaps he’d have some qualms about ending my life, but I suspect he’d put his family first.

That depressing thought makes me slump against the back of the sofa. I empty my glass again and put it on the arm of the chair. Then I take the bottle Livvy’s holding onto. This time, I unscrew the cap and drink straight from the bottle. I shudder as the alcohol goes down.

“You know what we need to do?” Livvy’s tone is conspiratorial. “Get blind drunk.”

Get drunk? I’m halfway there. I don’t consume much alcohol, apart from the

occasional glass of wine. My head feels fuzzy and my lips are tingly. Although I suspect I'm going to regret it, I take another large gulp of Scotch and pass the bottle to Livvy.

The door opens and Matteo comes into the room. "Time to go, sis."

"I don't want to go." Livvy sounds a lot more sober than I feel.

"Tough shit. Damiano's waiting."

"Let her stay." Oh, shit. My words are slurring.

Matteo strolls over to stand in front of me. He tilts his head to the side and grins. "Had a couple of drinks, sweetheart?"

He knows I'm a lightweight. After I'd had a couple of beers, he used to have to drag my ass home from parties so I could sleep it off.

"Just a couple."

"Mmm-hmm." He turns his attention to his sister and removes the almost empty bottle from her grasp. "How about you, Olivia? How much have you drunk?"

"Leave her alone." I sit up and blink a couple of times as my head reels. "It's legal here, and you'd drink too if Piotr Reznov wanted to marry you."

Matteo laughs humorlessly and reaches down to grab his sister's arm. He hauls her to her feet.

"Matteo!" she protests. "I don't want to go."

“Tough shit. Damiano’s waiting. You two can develop your newfound friendship some other time.”

He drags her out of the room, protesting vehemently, and returns a moment later for me. I try to stand, but immediately fall back onto the soft cushions on the sofa. Matteo stands in front of me, trying to look stern, but the gleam in his eye tells me he’s amused.

“Let’s get you upstairs.” He reaches down. The world tilts as he picks me up, gathering me close to his chest.

“What are you going to do?” I ask as he carries me through the bright, airy corridor toward the stairs. “You going to punish me? Fuck me?”

“Not when you’re in this state, sweetheart. I’m going to put you to bed.”

“Alone?” I reach up and run my fingers through his hair. It’s silky. I like it.

“Yes, alone. When I fuck you, I want you fully aware of what I’m doing to you.”

“Hmm, sounds lovely.”

Matteo laughs. “Oh, yeah, it’ll be lovely, sweetheart.”

My eyes droop as we reach the top of the stairs and head along the corridor toward the bedrooms. We bypass the room I stayed in last night and go to the door at the farthest end of the passageway.

Matteo effortlessly holds me while he turns the handle of the door. He carries me into what must be his bedroom. It’s large and opulently decorated in earth tones. An enormous wooden bed dominates the space, but what tells me that this is Matteo’s

room is the mess. There are clothes strewn across the floor. I guess he doesn't let Rosalia in here to tidy up too often.

He sets me on my feet beside the bed and unbuttons my blouse. Giving him a lopsided grin, I sway toward him.

"You like what you see?" I ask as he pulls my arms out of the sleeves and tosses the blouse on the floor.

"Very much."

He reaches behind me and unfastens the clasp of my bra. I should tell him to leave it on, but alcohol is winning the war against common sense right now. Pressing my naked breasts against him, I wrap an arm around his neck. I raise myself up onto my tiptoes and try to kiss him. He dodges me.

"Giulia!"

I smirk at him. "Matteo?"

"Stop it." He pushes me down onto the bed. With impressive efficiency, he gets my pants off me. The next thing I know, I'm under the covers, tucked up so tight I can hardly move. He goes to the window and draws the curtains, plunging the room into darkness.

"Get some sleep," he commands as he heads to the door.

"Matty," I call out just before he leaves. He turns and waits for me to speak. "When I said I hated you, I didn't mean it."

"I know."

“I love you.” So I can see him better, I prop myself up on my elbows. “I always have.”

“I know, sweetheart. I love you too.”

He leaves the room, closing the door behind him, and I flop back onto the pillows. My eyelids close as I succumb to my drunken stupor. I need to get some sleep. I’ll worry about where things are going with Matteo tomorrow.

### CHAPTER 8

Giulia

Standing under a steady stream of cool water, I gradually feel more like myself again. A half hour ago, I woke with a slight headache and a dry mouth to find I was alone in Matteo's bed. I know he slept there with me because I cuddled up to him in the middle of the night. I needed his closeness.

After what happened between us, I'm feeling a little insecure. Thankfully, Matteo was happy to give me the reassurance I craved, wrapping his arm around me and kissing the top of my head.

Though he wasn't there when I peeled my reluctant eyes open this morning, he must have been in the room only moments before, because a surprise awaited me on the nightstand. Alongside a pain au chocolat and a cup of steaming hot cappuccino sat a single red rose. The scent of Matteo's spicy body wash lingered in the air.

A smile touches my lips at his thoughtfulness. I've been around mafia men my entire life and know not to expect a lot of consideration. Though they're not all the same, Matteo does belong to a specific type. He's possessive, commanding, and unflinchingly violent. But, as breakfast proves, he's also capable of being incredibly sweet.

I've been friends with Matteo for most of my life. We've shared a lot over the years. He took me to prom when Ricky Gallardo jilted me at the last minute in favor of Jessica Jensen and her gigantic boobs. He also beat Ricky to a bloody pulp and left



him in a dumpster behind the school during prom, but I'm not supposed to know about that act of chivalry.

Matteo was there to comfort me when I broke my wrist after falling from a tree and I was there to stitch up his first knife wound. Thanks to my upbringing with a father who's always been open about the world we live in, I'm not queasy about these things.

He also broke my heart when he didn't intervene to stop my marriage to Johnny, and he shattered my confidence when he laughed about me with Marissa Locatelli. A part of me might never forgive him for that.

Now I have to figure out how to handle this new stage of our relationship. Will I be able to come to terms with us as a couple? Are we a couple? Matteo said he wanted to fuck me. Despite the voices screaming caution inside my head, I intend to let him. I guess that makes us a couple. Ugh. I hate that word. It doesn't sound right for what Matteo and I are.

Trying to untangle how I feel about all this is impossible. I wish I had someone to talk to about this, but there's no one. I can't call my stepmother for advice. We've never had that sort of relationship and, besides, she wouldn't be impartial. She'd tell me to lock Matteo down in hopes of furthering my father's career in the Volante organization.

I don't want to call Isabella either. We haven't spoken for about a year and getting in touch just to lean on her for advice seems selfish. Besides, Matteo made it clear I'm not to contact anyone back home.

Confiding in Livvy isn't a possibility, either. We may have shared a moment of understanding yesterday, but I know better than to trust her with my emotions. She'd use my vulnerability against me in a heartbeat.

Switching off the shower, I step out of the glass-fronted cubicle and grab a fluffy white towel from the metal rack. I wrap it around myself and walk out into the bedroom. Matteo is there, sitting on the bed. He's wearing a pair of light gray sweatpants and nothing else. With his muscular torso featuring tattoos of skulls, snakes, and daggers, he's the personification of sin.

"How's the head?" he asks as a greeting.

"Good. The coffee helped." Suddenly shy, I look down at his feet. Hmm. He has nice feet. I didn't realize I had a thing for them before, but his are, well, manly. "It was nice of you to leave breakfast for me."

Matteo smiles, his expression softer than I've ever seen it. "I can be a nice guy."

"I know."

My eyes meet his, and we share a moment of connection. Heat rises to my cheeks as desire trickles through my veins, slowly bringing my body to life. A primal need pulses at my core. I want this man more than my next breath. Matteo's dark gaze tells me he feels it too.

"Drop that towel, come over here, and I'll show you how nice I can be."

I don't hesitate to obey his command. Unwrapping the towel, I drop it to the floor. Despite the urge to cover myself, I keep my arms at my sides as I slowly turn in a circle, letting Matteo get a good look at me. I've never been shy around him because what we had before wasn't sexual. I didn't care what he thought of my body. He's seen me in a bikini a dozen times or more. I've changed my clothes in front of him, even been naked in his presence when we skinny-dipped on particularly hot summer days. But that was a long time ago.

Now that things have shifted between us, I'm less comfortable with the extra couple of inches at my waist, the ripples of cellulite at the backs of my thighs. I need assurance that Matteo desires me, no matter what minor imperfections I might have.

As I come full circle to face him once more, any anxiety I harbored on that score is banished. Evidence of his arousal is clear in the tenting of his sweatpants, the lustful glint in his eye. Emboldened, I walk slowly toward him, swaying my hips.

"Beautiful," he murmurs as his hands wrap around my waist.

He pulls me close, leans forward, and presses his lips to my abdomen. Although the gesture is chaste, it feels incredibly intimate. A nerve twitches, making the skin beneath Matteo's lips ripple. Chuckling, he pulls back. Then he looks up at me and all trace of amusement disappears from his face to be replaced by something far more intense.

"Giulia." My name on his lips is imbued with so much emotion. He's as aware as I am that this is not like his usual meaningless flings. We aren't mere fuck buddies. Whether we like it or not, feelings are already engaged. We've loved each other since we were kids. If this ends tomorrow, it will hurt. Yet neither of us seems able to step back from the brink.

Matteo's fingers trail up my spine and I tremble beneath his touch. He curves his hand around the back of my head and pulls me down to meet him. His lips are soft as they brush across mine. It's the lightest of touches, but it makes my lips tingle. I open my mouth and he slips his tongue inside. He tastes like coffee. It's not stale or unpleasant, but warm and comforting. There's also a hint of spice that reveals he had cinnamon rolls for breakfast.

Pulling back from the kiss, I slowly sink to the floor between his legs. Matteo's eyes widen, but he doesn't stop me as I reach for the waistband of his sweatpants. He helps

me out by lifting his hips so I can drag the jersey pants down his legs. I pull them off and toss them aside. Then I study him closely. His cock is long, thick, and fully erect. The head is a deep, glossy red and there's a thick vein running along its underside. It exudes masculine power. In theory, I know what to do, but Matteo's size makes it a challenge.

"Giulia, you don't have to." He must see the trepidation on my face.

"I want to." I flash a reassuring smile in response to his concerned frown.

Slicking back my wet hair, I raise myself up on my knees. I place one hand flat on the bed to anchor myself. The other, I wrap around his shaft. Fuck! I knew he was big, but somehow he seems larger now. The thought of putting that massive thing in my mouth is scary. What if I can't handle it?

Tentatively edging forward, I lower my head and take a couple of inches of his rock-hard erection into my mouth. At first I just hold it there, accustoming myself to how it feels. My cheeks puff out as I take a couple of breaths to steady myself. Having my mouth stuffed with his cock is strange, but not unpleasant. Matteo tastes clean and fresh. His scent is citrus, mixed with something indefinable but unmistakably masculine. I guess he showered before I woke.

Pulling back, I swirl my tongue around the bulbous head of his cock, lapping up droplets of fluid. Okay, this is not too bad. I lick along the underside of his erect shaft, following the line of the protruding vein. Matteo murmurs appreciatively. It's encouraging, but I want more of a reaction. I part my lips, stick my tongue out, and draw as much of his length as I can into my mouth. Matteo lifts his hips, pushing deeper than I intended to go. My eyes water as he hits the back of my throat, and I fight the urge to gag.

As Matteo places his hand at the back of my head, I think he's going to take control,

but he doesn't. He allows me to slide my mouth back and forth over his impressive manhood at my own pace until I establish a rhythm I'm comfortable with. I suck lightly. When that gets no response, I go harder. Matteo groans ecstatically. That's more like it.

As I continue to pleasure him with my lips and tongue, I release my grip on the base of his cock and slide my hand down to cup his balls. The hair that covers them is coarse, the skin surprisingly soft beneath my touch. I squeeze just to see how Matteo reacts.

"Fuck, Giulia!" Matteo's voice is hoarse. "Enough!"

Startled, I pull back and drop onto my heels. Did I do something wrong? Was that completely horrible? Matteo must see the devastation in my eyes, because he shakes his head.

"Fuck, no, sweetheart. You did nothing wrong. That was amazing, but I don't want to come in your mouth. Not this time."

Okay, he's just being considerate. He grabs my hands and helps me to my feet as he rises from the bed. He strokes the side of my face and then kisses my lips with such tenderness I could cry.

"Lie on the bed," Matteo whispers.

I do as he asks, positioning myself at the center of his enormous wood-framed bed. It's a struggle not to cross my legs and cover my breasts with my arms. I know Matteo won't allow me to hide any part of myself from him, and truthfully, I don't want to. It's just difficult to expose myself to a man, even him. Especially him.

To conquer my self-consciousness, I focus on Matteo. Every inch of him is

magnificent, but it's a particular tattoo I hone in on. When he's got pants on, it's hidden, but just beneath his right hipbone is an image that doesn't fit with the rest of the mess-with-me-and-die tattoos he has inked on his body.

Matteo's eyes follow my gaze to the bright red ladybug he got when he lost a bet with me five years ago. He should have known he couldn't beat me in a game of pool. He's a decent player, but I never miss a shot.

"I still can't believe you went through with it." I smile fondly as I remember how he grumbled about my choice of tattoo.

"Leo still gives me shit about it."

"I can't believe how vivid the color still is." It looks as if the tattoo was done yesterday.

Matteo's cheeks redden. Is he blushing? I've never seen him look shy before. "I got it touched up."

"What? When?"

"A few months ago." Climbing onto the bed, he parts my legs farther. He crawls between them and kneels. His expression is soft as he gazes down at me. "When you stopped speaking to me."

My heart thumps. "Why?"

"I couldn't imagine life without you. I had to believe we'd be friends again."

He slides a hand up my inner thigh and strokes my intimate flesh. I'm already wet and so responsive to his touch. My hips lift off the bed.

“Are we friends?” I ask breathlessly.

Matteo slides two fingers inside me and curls them to caress a sensitive spot. I gasp as pressure builds at my core. Matteo pulls his hand away. Ignoring my protest, he moves forward until he’s lying on top of me, his weight supported on his elbows. He puts an arm under my shoulders and holds me close as he slides his cock into my body one inch at a time. It pinches a little, just like the first time, but I adjust quicker to the stretch.

“You’re my friend.” Matteo pulls back and then pushes into me once more. “My lover.” Another slow, careful thrust. “My soulmate.” He kisses my cheek, my forehead, my lips. “Mine.”

His declaration almost makes me come on the spot. It’s not the words as much as the emphatic way he utters them that ignites something inside me. He’s laying claim to me, not by force, but by appealing to my emotions. My heart swells. It’s almost too much to bear.

Releasing me from his tight embrace, Matteo props himself up on the palms of his hands and presses his hips against me. He lowers his head, and I eagerly part my lips for his kiss. His tongue sweeps in to dance with mine in a slow, seductive rhythm. By the time he pulls back, I’m breathless.

I reach up to grab his shoulders as he trails kisses down my neck. He wraps his lips around my nipple and sucks until I’m shaking with need.

“Matteo!” It’s a plea for more.

He tugs my nipple with his teeth. It hurts, but in the best possible way. Then he lets go. Staring down at me, he takes my pussy with firm, deliberate strokes. The intensity overwhelms me. I close my eyes.

“No, Giulia, look at me. I want to see you when you come apart.”

He comes back down onto his elbows, bringing our bodies closer once more. He strokes my hair, kisses my throat. His hand meanders down my side, making me giggle as he touches the ticklish spot at my waist. He grins, then slips his hand down to find my clit. With his finger, he circles the swollen bud, applying a gentle but insistent pressure that drives me to the brink. I whimper as my pussy clenches around his cock. My body shudders as pleasure sweeps over me. Tears fill my eyes as sensation swamps me.

“Giulia!”

Matteo follows me to completion, his seed bathing me with warmth.

As he carefully pulls out, a sob escapes me. Before I know it, tears are pouring in earnest. Matteo rolls onto his side. Gathering me into his arms, he strokes my hair.

“Why are you crying, sweetheart?” he asks. “Did I hurt you?”

I shake my head. “No.” I sniff back my tears. “It was perfect.”

“That’s how your first time should have been.”

Knowing he did all he could to make amends for the rough way he took my virginity sets off my tears once more. Matteo holds me close and lets me purge my emotions.

“I’ve never made a woman cry before,” he says as he wipes the tears from my face with his thumb.

I roll onto my side and raise an eyebrow. “We both know that’s not true.”



Matteo shrugs. "After I've kicked her out of bed, sure, but not when I'm taking her to heaven."

He flashes me a cocky grin. Slapping his chest, I throw back my head and laugh. "You're an asshole."

"Yeah, but you're stuck with me now."

That thought both excites and worries me. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. Matteo notices, of course, and sits up.

"What's the matter?"

"It's just..." How do I put this without him getting all defensive? I've seen Matteo in action with other women. He's a possessive asshole until he decides he wants to end a relationship. "Me and you. It's a lot to take in. Can we..."

"Take it slow?" Matteo fills in. He smiles gently as I nod. "Of course, sweetheart."

Relieved we're on the same page about that, I scramble to the edge of the bed and lower my feet to the floor. "I'm going to grab a shower." I run my fingers through my still damp hair. "Another shower."

"There's no rush." Matteo pats the mattress next to him. "Stay here with me."

I shake my head as I get up, trying not to wince at the dull ache between my legs that somehow feels worse than it did yesterday when Matteo took my virginity. "No, I need to get up. I want to make some birthday brownies."

Matteo frowns. "It's not my birthday."

“I know, you self-centered idiot. It’s Rosalia’s birthday.”

“You don’t even know the girl.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t do something nice for her.”

A flicker of amusement passes over Matteo’s face. I ball up my fists and rest them on my hips. “What?”

“Well, nobody would ever describe your cooking as nice.”

“It’s not cooking,” I retort. “It’s baking, and I learned the recipe from my grandma.”

Matteo grimaces. “I’ve eaten your grandmother’s brownies. She can’t bake for shit.”

Outraged by that shocking yet totally accurate insult to my grandmother, I pick up the hairbrush from the dressing table and hurl it at Matteo. He catches it effortlessly.

“Asshole!” I grumble.

Before he can respond, I walk into the bathroom and close the door behind me. Matteo’s probably itching to spank the sass out of me, but nothing is going to get between me and cleaning the sticky mess off my thighs. If he wants to punish me, he can do it later. In fact, I’ll look forward to it.

### CHAPTER 9

Matteo

Perhaps I should have chastised Giulia for throwing the hairbrush at me. She's got a great aim and if my reflexes weren't as sharp as they are, it would have hit me square in the face. I'd probably have a black eye. It's not behavior I can allow. If she did something like that in front of one of my brothers or, worse, in front of my men, I'd have to make a public example of her. It's old-fashioned, but in our world, a man who can't control his woman is seen as weak.

Right now, I haven't got it in me to punish her, though. It's been years since I was this relaxed. Contentment has seeped into my bones and I could just melt into the mattress.

I smile as Giulia heads for the bathroom. The spring in her step mirrors the intense joy I feel. This thing between us is so right, I can't believe it didn't happen years ago. I guess the stars have only just aligned, or some shit. If I believed in it, I'd say fate had finally brought us together. I laugh at the turn my thoughts have taken. I'll be studying my horoscope next. If my brothers knew I was ascribing events to some intangible force, they'd never let me hear the end of it.

Though I told Giulia we could take things slow, that might prove a challenge. The urge to bind us together, to ensure she can't get away from me is strong. I've loved this woman for most of my life. Though my brother's wife, Isabella, was a part of our friendship group, Giulia is the one I was always closest to. We spent more time together. Until I fucked up at Johnny's funeral, we shared everything. I missed her

every second she wasn't in my life.

Claiming her gorgeous body has only intensified how I feel about her. I can envision a future for us as man and wife. It seems crazy since only two days ago I was a confirmed bachelor. Settling down never entered my thoughts. Why would it? Three of my brothers are married. None of them can keep their hands off their wives, so the next generation of Volantes is assured. I was under no pressure to follow the path they took.

Now I want nothing more than to mark her as mine. I need to possess every part of Giulia. I want to put a baby in her. It must be something primal, this drive that comes with finding the right woman. Shit! There I go with the fated stuff again.

Deciding I need fresh air to clear my head, I get out of bed and rummage through the top drawer of the dresser for clean underwear. I put it on and then look for some running shorts. There's a blue pair in the bottom drawer along with my sweatpants. My dress pants and shirts are all hanging in the closet. I'd have been happy to live out of my suitcase while I was here, but Livvy insisted on arranging everything for me when we first arrived.

I pull on my running shorts, but don't bother with a t-shirt. I like to feel the air on my skin as I run. My sneakers are a pair I've had for years. Though they're well worn, they're still comfortable.

As I sit on the edge of the bed to tie my laces, I hear what an untrained ear might think is a cat being tortured. Thankfully, it's not. It's Giulia belting out some song I don't recognize. She couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, but I admire her enthusiasm.

I get up and push open the bathroom door, pleased that Giulia didn't lock me out. As I step into the room, I'm repelled by a rush of steam. Giulia doesn't go for half measures in the shower. She likes it freezing cold or scalding hot.

“Giulia.”

She pops her head out of the shower cubicle. Her hair is foamy with shampoo and she looks adorable despite the frown on her face.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m going for a run.”

Her nose wrinkles. “You’re not expecting me to join you?”

I know better than that. While Giulia has incredible stamina and speed, she doesn’t enjoy running. She prefers to mitigate her love of junk food with a combination of swimming and Pilates.

“No, sweetheart. You stay here and bake your birthday brownies. Just try not to burn the house down.”

“Jeez, Matteo, I start one small fire and...”

Leaving her to rant, I close the bathroom door and head downstairs. The fire Giulia’s referring to happened one summer when she spent time with my family up in Maine. While my dad and siblings were out on the lake, we used the fire pit at the rear of the property to toast marshmallows. Giulia panicked when hers caught alight and she couldn’t blow it out. She threw the stick into the grass, starting a fire.

Thankfully, Mamma doused the flames before they could take hold. We agreed the incident would be our secret. My father would have lectured Giulia endlessly about her carelessness and Mamma knew she’d be upset by that. She’s always had a soft spot for Giulia. She’ll be thrilled when she hears we’re together.

The house is quiet as I head downstairs. Rosalia should have been here first thing, but I messaged her not to bother coming until the afternoon. I'm not sure why Gabriele employs the girl full-time. He never leaves his house in Rome these days and according to Damiano, I'm the first guest who's ever stayed here. Perhaps he owes her family a favor.

I slip out through the front door, closing it behind me. For a moment, I wonder if I should go back inside and tell Giulia where the weapons are. I have guns stashed throughout the house in case of emergency.

I decide against it. The house is secure. Giulia is perfectly safe so there's no point in making her think otherwise.

Jogging down the path at the side of the house, I cut across the lawn. Nobody would accuse me of being a poet, but something about the Italian countryside calls to my soul. My senses are awakened by it. Every sight, sound, and smell is more vivid. Colors are brighter. Food tastes better. I feel more alive. I'm at peace with the world until I remember Sofia Montalbano's tragic death and I'm jolted back to the harsh reality of the type of man I am, one whose life is mired in violence. Somehow that hasn't weighed on me so heavily since Giulia arrived.

Picking up my pace, I enter the forest. Leaves crunch beneath my feet as I dart between the trees. The farther into the woodland I get, the darker it becomes, though there's still enough light for me to have a clear view of what's ahead.

When I reach the high fence that marks the boundary of the villa's grounds, I turn to the left and continue on my path through the trees. It's a route I know well, having run it a few times since I arrived in Italy. As I head back toward the house, the loud snapping of a twig stops me in my tracks. Instinctively, I reach back for my gun, but of course I'm not carrying. It doesn't matter. There are a dozen different ways I can disable an opponent without a gun.

I scan the forest, looking for an intruder. At first I don't see anyone. I wonder if it might be a feral pig. I've seen them a couple of times, foraging in the undergrowth. Then a flash of blond hair alerts me to the presence of a young male. He's about six feet tall and of average build. Though he doesn't appear to be a threat, I don't like a stranger being so close to the house.

I take a few steps toward him, and he turns to face me. I don't recognize him as one of my cousin's men or as a Rossi. His startled expression doesn't scream mafia soldier, nor does the way he bolts off through the trees. It does, however, confirm he had no business being here. I don't follow him. The forest is dense in places and if he knows his way around, he'll lose me easily. Besides, I want to get back to the house to check on Giulia. I'll also need to call Damiano to find out if the kid was caught on camera. Gabriele may not use this house, but he has some sophisticated security measures in place to protect it.

When I enter the house, I meet Giulia coming downstairs. She's dressed in jeans shorts that I'd insist she change if there was another man around, and a white t-shirt. She looks so fuckable, it takes all my willpower not to throw her over my shoulder and carry her back upstairs.

The light purple hair I'm gradually coming to terms with is tucked behind her ears. I hope she grows her hair long again, but don't offer my opinion. Knowing Giulia, she'd shave it off just to mess with me.

"You're back already," she says as she reaches the bottom step.

"Yeah, I just needed a quick run."

Giulia makes a show of leaning close and sniffing me. She grins mischievously. "Now you need a shower."

“Yeah, that’s where I’m headed.”

She goes to walk past me and I put a hand out to stop her.

“You didn’t see or hear anyone while I was out, did you?”

“No.” Giulia frowns. “Should I have?”

“No. There was someone in the woods, but he ran off when he saw me.”

“You think it was something to do with the girl who was killed?”

I shrug. “Probably not. I’m going to give Damiano a call.”

“Okay.”

I can’t resist pulling Giulia in for a kiss before heading upstairs. Her lips are sweet, like cotton candy. When I get to the bedroom, I grab my cellphone from the nightstand and go to the window. The view from here is of the driveway leading up to the house. Everything is peaceful, as I expected it to be.

I call Damiano’s number. He takes his sweet time about answering it and when he does, his voice is husky, like he just woke. “ Pronto .”

I forego the usual pleasantries. “There was someone here.”

“At the house?” Damiano instantly sounds more alert. My Italian cousins may do things at a slower pace than I’m used to, but with security they do not fuck about.

“In the forest.”



“When?”

“Five minutes ago. He was close to the house.”

“I’ll get my people on it.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to respond before cutting the call. There’s no point in going for a shower until Damiano gets back to me so I use the time to go to the walk-in wardrobe and pick out clothes for the day. I’ve been living in sweatpants or jeans for the last couple of weeks, but with Giulia here I want to make more of an effort. Dark blue dress pants and a white shirt will do the trick.

As I lay them across the bed, my phone vibrates. It’s Damiano, so I answer immediately.

“What have you got?”

“It’s a boy from the village, Adamo Gianotti. One of my men recognized him.”

“Is he related to the Montalbano girl?”

“No. Maurizio says the boy’s a loner. He’s harmless.”

“You sure?”

Damiano snorts derisively. “Of course not. That’s why I sent my men to have a word with him. They’ll find out what he was doing there.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Before you go, I’m taking Livvy to Lorenzo’s new vineyard near Siena. You and

Giulia should join us.”

“Yeah, sure.” Giulia will probably enjoy seeing some of the Tuscan countryside and I know she won’t be shy about socializing with my cousins because she’s used to being around my family. My mother has always said that any woman who can survive Thanksgiving with my brothers can cope with anything.

“You want me to pick you up?”

“No, we’ll meet you there.” It’s an hour’s drive to Siena. While Livvy and Giulia got on well yesterday, I doubt they’ve become bosom buddies. The thought of being stuck in a car with them if Livvy starts being a brat and Giulia retaliates doesn’t appeal.

Damiano gives me the address of the vineyard and we agree to meet at one o’clock for lunch. Usually my Italian cousins wouldn’t eat until late afternoon so I know the time is a concession to the American habit of taking an early lunch. I end the call and take a shower to wash off the grime after my run. I dress and head downstairs to tell Giulia we have plans. She’s in the kitchen with Rosalia. They’re talking and laughing like old friends. I expected to find the kitchen turned upside down since Giulia planned to make brownies, but the place is spotless. For a minute I think she changed her mind, but then I smell something sweet in the air. The aroma is coming from the oven.

The moment she sees me, Rosalia excuses herself and leaves the room. I’m not sure if she’s shy with everyone or if I scare her. Usually, women are more at ease around me.

“I thought this place would look like a bomb hit it. Did Rosalia clean up?”

Giulia scowls. “I may not be the greatest baker, but I can wash dishes and wipe down

countertops.”

“Of course.” I lean back against the table. “Damiano invited us to join him for lunch at Lorenzo’s new winery.”

Her eyes light up. “That sounds like fun.”

“Thought you’d be happy. It’s out near Siena so you’ll get to see some of the countryside.”

“Great.” She twists her mouth to the side the way she does when she’s thinking about a problem. “What time will we be back?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

She takes a deep breath and I brace myself for her to speak. “You know it’s Rosalia’s birthday?”

“Yes.” I don’t like where this is going.

“She’s going to La Stanza Rosso to celebrate. She asked if I wanted to go.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s sweet, and she knows I’m alone here.”

I scoff at that remark. “You’re not alone.”

“You know what I mean.” She doesn’t give me a chance to tell her I really don’t. “So can I go?”

I shake my head. “It’s not safe.”

Giulia purses her lips and I know she’s not going to give up easily. “It’s Damiano’s club, isn’t it?”

“That’s precisely why it’s not safe. Our enemies have eyes on the place. If you go there, you’ll be spotted.”

“Nobody knows me.”

“You’re an American woman out with the Volantes’ housekeeper. It doesn’t take a genius to work out you’re connected to me.”

Giulia’s scowl deepens. “I want to go, Matteo.”

I shake my head again.

Folding her arms across her chest, Giulia looks formidable. “Look, Matteo, I want to make something clear. I won’t be dictated to. If you want to carry on whatever this is between us, you need to accept I am not a doormat.”

Though she definitely has a submissive side, Giulia isn’t the type of woman who rolls over and plays dead just because she’s been ordered to. I like that she stands up for herself. At least, I do when it’s not me she’s rebelling against.

“I know who you are, Giulia.”

“So you know that I’m smart, that I’m aware of the dangers.”

Though I accept that Giulia isn’t some naïve girl who’ll blithely walk into danger, I’m aware there is always a risk. My natural urge is to put my foot down and refuse to

let her go, but I have to suppress it. I don't want our entire relationship to be based on me being a dictator and her resenting me for curbing her freedom.

“Okay, you can go, but you're taking several guards with you.”

Giulia's eyes widen. “Oh.” She sounds as if she's had the wind knocked out of her sails. She obviously expected to have to put up more of a fight. “I thought you'd insist on coming with me.”

“It's even riskier if you're seen with me.” Although I'm confident I can protect Giulia, I don't want to put a target on her back unnecessarily. If I'm with her, people will realize how important she is to me. I won't be able to hide my protectiveness. “Damiano's men will watch over you and I trust you not to do anything stupid.”

“You do?”

“Of course.” It's true. I do trust Giulia. She was brought up in this life and knows to be wary of strangers. She won't leave her drink unattended or nip out into the back alley with some guy for a casual hook-up. I've seen how she scans her surroundings, mapping everything out. I'll bet in any emergency she can find her way straight to an escape route.

“Thank you, Matteo.” She comes over and presses a kiss to my lips. “Really, thank you. I was afraid you were going to become a raging dictator and ban me from leaving the house.”

I laugh as if that's an absurd notion as Giulia walks off, but in reality, it's taking everything I have in me not to lay down the law and forbid her from leaving my sight. If this thing between us has any chance of working, I have to keep my urge to dominate in check. Giulia needs me to demonstrate my faith in her, but already I'm struggling. I have to tread lightly, otherwise I'll wreck everything.

### CHAPTER 10

Giulia

When Matteo said we were going to his cousin's vineyard for lunch, I conjured up images of us driving along a dirt road to a rustic farmhouse set among the grapevines. I thought there would be a little patio with a wooden table where we'd have lunch while looking out over ramshackle barns where the wine was stored. The picture in my head included flowers around the front door and a cat sunning itself on the window ledge. I guess it was a rose-tinted vision.

Perhaps in a bygone era this place was full of old-world charm, but now it's a monument to modernity. An asphalt road that's so smooth it has to have been laid recently leads up to a magnificent building that commands attention from miles around. Its sides are a sandy brick, and its roof is black slate. The entire front of the building is a wall of glass. It's nothing like I expected yet it fits the landscape perfectly.

Matteo parks his car in the large visitors' lot at the side of the building and switches off the engine. There must be fifty or more cars here. Perhaps the winery offers tours, or something.

"There's Lorenzo." Matteo nods his head toward the man sauntering toward us like he hasn't a care in the world.

His cousin isn't at all what I expected. While Damiano has been impeccably dressed in three-piece suits each time I've seen him, Lorenzo has opted for casual beige

shorts and a white polo shirt that accentuates his tan. He's wearing white tennis shoes without socks. His light brown hair is tousled, like he couldn't be bothered to comb it. In reality, he probably spent ages getting it just right.

Grinning broadly as we get out of the car, he exudes warmth and friendliness. Nothing about him says notorious mobster, but I don't suppose he'd have his kill count tattooed on his forehead. His genial manner probably makes him especially dangerous. Nobody would see him coming.

He opens his arms wide and then rests his hands on my shoulders.

"You must be the delightful Giulia."

"She is."

Matteo's growl would make other men back off, but Lorenzo ignores him and kisses me on each cheek as a greeting.

"Hands off."

Lorenzo just laughs and then reaches for his cousin to hug him. "Matteo. Welcome to Casa di Lupo."

"House of the Wolf?" I query out loud.

"It was the name of the house that stood here before," Lorenzo explains. "There were many rumors about the family who lived here for hundreds of years. Some say they were descended from wolves."

While I don't believe that for one second, it seems apt that Lorenzo would end up owning the property. His reputation is that of a dangerous predator. I don't dare say

that to him, though. He seems affable enough, but people don't tremble in fear whenever someone utters the name of a nice guy.

"Is Damiano here yet?" Matteo comes and stakes his claim by putting his arm around my waist.

"No. Your sister had something to take care of. They're running a little late." He smirks as he glances down at Matteo's hand resting on my hip. He offers me his arm and despite Matteo's warning snarl, I loop mine through it. "Come, bella . Let me give you the tour while we wait."

Lorenzo leads me, with Matteo hot on our heels, around to the back of the building. There's an incredible view over the vineyard in the valley below. He points out a massive warehouse in the distance.

"That's where we make the wine. If you're interested, Giulia, I will take you down there after lunch and show you what we do."

"I'd like that."

Matteo rolls his eyes as I smile at Lorenzo. He doesn't seem to be truly annoyed by my interactions with his cousin. The slight upturn of his lips and the glint in his eye tell me he's actually amused.

The Italian steers me around to the front of the building and in through the sliding glass doors. We enter a vast, open space, flooded with light. Dozens of people are milling about. It takes me a moment to realize we've entered a store. There are shelves along the side walls and tables display various goods for sale.

"We like to support local artisans." Lorenzo lets go of my arm and I wander around, looking at the various food and drink products, high-end craft items, and merchandise



bearing the winery's logo. It's a black-and-white image of a wolf howling at the moon. Not the most original design concept, perhaps, but it lets you know exactly what brand you're buying.

"This is fantastic," I tell Lorenzo.

He nods, pleased with my approval.

"Through there is our wine store." He points to a glass door to the left and then directs my attention to an opening in the wall at the back of the space. "And there is our coffee shop and restaurant."

As he walks in that direction, Matteo reclaims me by slinging an arm over my shoulder. We follow Lorenzo into a bustling coffee shop. It's bright and modern, with a polished pine floor and dozens of metal tables and chairs. Lorenzo veers to the left, and we walk through an archway into a more formal restaurant space. There's seating for about a hundred people at the large wooden tables that fill the center of the space, and a hundred more in the booths that run around the edge of the restaurant. The place is huge, but there are only a few tables occupied. I hear several voices speaking in English, so I guess these are tourists.

We head for a booth by one of the large glass windows. It's set for six people.

"I hope you don't mind if we eat here," Lorenzo says. "We have private dining spaces, but I prefer to be out here in the open. I like to see people enjoying the facilities."

"This is perfect."

"Giulia's been hoping for an authentic Tuscan dining experience." Matteo flashes me a cheeky wink. "She found Damiano's restaurant in Florence disappointing."

“Oh?” Lorenzo queries. “Was the food not to your satisfaction?”

“The food was delicious.” I shoot a glare at Matteo. “The company was lacking.”

Lorenzo laughs. “Ah, then it is good my cousin has brought you here. You will not be disappointed by our company.”

Before either Matteo or I can respond to that, a broad grin splits Lorenzo’s face. “Ah, here is my brother now.”

Damiano strolls toward us, wearing his signature tailored suit, but without a vest this time. He has dark glasses on, but removes them to reveal his gorgeous brown eyes as he gets closer. Livvy is at his side, exuding glamor in a pair of black wide-legged pants and a white chiffon top. With her six-inch heels, dark glasses, and crimson lipstick, she looks like a femme fatale. She’s carrying a purse someone like me wouldn’t be able to buy, not just because of its outrageous price tag, but because of its exclusivity. I guess the Volante name carries influence in the fashion world as well as everywhere else.

I’m glad I caved to Matteo’s demands to change out of my jean shorts, even though I’m still pissed that it was because he didn’t want other men to get a good view of my ass. The floral sundress I chose isn’t as elegant as Livvy’s outfit, but I feel good in it.

Matteo greets Damiano with a man hug that lasts all of two seconds before pulling his sister in for a more affectionate embrace. He ruffles her hair, drawing a protest from her. As she smooths down her hair, the corners of her lips twitch. I think she secretly likes that her older brother is playful with her. He’s the only one of the Volante males who openly shows his love for her.

“Giulia!” Damiano kisses my cheek, then steps back to brazenly run his eyes up and down the length of my body. If anyone else looked at me that way, Matteo would

punch them in the face. He doesn't seem to mind his cousins showing their appreciation for my physical attributes. I guess that's a testament to his trust in them. "Bellissima."

"You don't look so bad yourself." It's a total understatement, but I don't want to test the limits of Matteo's tolerance by gushing about Damiano's hotness. He's behaving himself for now, but I doubt that would last if he thought there was any serious flirting going on. I turn to Livvy. "And you look stunning."

"Thanks," Livvy murmurs. "Your dress is nice."

Her tone is unconvincing, but I'll take a half-hearted compliment over open hostility any day of the week.

"Shall we sit?" Lorenzo asks.

Matteo ushers me onto the banquette at one side of the booth. The seats are padded in the softest leather I've ever sat on. He sits next to me while Damiano and Lorenzo flank Livvy on the opposite side of the table. I'm not sure if they're being protective or preventing her from fleeing. She certainly doesn't look comfortable.

A young server rushes over with a couple of bottles of wine. She and Lorenzo speak in rapid Italian. I don't know what's said in their brief exchange, but the girl seems flustered. Her cheeks redden and she nods repeatedly. From the coy way she peers at her boss from beneath her eyelashes, I'd say she has a crush on him. I can't say I blame her. Both the Italian and American branches of the Volante family have been blessed with stunningly handsome features.

"This is our latest endeavor." Lorenzo holds up the bottle. "A Pinot Grigio. It's a particular favorite of mine for a light lunch." He pours us each a glass of wine and smiles at me. "Giulia, please tell me what you think."

Hesitantly, I raise my glass. Despite my heritage, I'm not much of a wine drinker. I sip the wine. It's cool and crisp. "Oh, it's nice."

Lorenzo throws back his head and laughs. "Ah, Giulia, such a harsh critic. My people sweat over that wine for years and you call it nice."

"Sorry," I mutter. "I don't know a lot about wine."

Lorenzo makes a gesture with his hands that tells me it doesn't matter. I'm relieved of my embarrassment as the first course arrives. It's a Caprese salad. The tomato is sliced thinly, but the mozzarella has been torn and dotted around the plate. The basil appears to have been scattered in a haphazard fashion, but I imagine it's been placed carefully to give a rustic look to the dish.

As everyone digs in, I spear a piece of mozzarella with my fork. It's so creamy, unlike anything I've tasted before.

"This is delicious."

"Grazie ." Lorenzo flashes me his killer smile again. "I make the mozzarella myself."

My eyebrows lift in an outward expression of my surprise.

"Ah," Lorenzo says, "you wonder how I can produce wine, make mozzarella worthy of the gods, and still help my brothers rule over our little part of Italy."

The little part of Italy his family rules over stretches from the northernmost tip of the country to somewhere south of Rome, so he's downplaying their influence. Though I was, in fact, wondering how he finds enough hours in the day, I shake my head in denial. "Of course not."

“The key is a strong family, where everyone knows their place,” Lorenzo tells me anyway. “Matteo will agree that nothing is more important.”

The three men raise their glasses of wine and toast to that. Livvy and I exchange a look, both jarred by the comment about everyone knowing their place. Was that directed at us?

“Do you have a big family, Giulia?” Damiano asks.

“I have a half-brother.” I love him as much as I would a real brother, but I don’t explain that to Damiano.

“Is he part of the Volante Famiglia ?”

“He was inducted three months ago.”

Damiano nods approvingly. If Matteo’s surprised I know about Phillip being inducted into the organization, he doesn’t let it show. My brother has never hidden his aspirations to rise through the ranks of the mafia from me. I’m not entirely happy about his choice, but at eighteen he doesn’t listen to me. He wants to make his own way in the world.

“Phil’s a boxer,” Matteo says. “Could be one of our best fighters with a little more training.”

My involuntary wince doesn’t go unnoticed. I get the impression these men see everything.

“You disapprove?” Lorenzo asks.

“I don’t enjoy boxing, but Phillip has a talent for it. I won’t stand in the way of him

following his passion.”

“Ah, yes, we must all follow our passions.” Lorenzo gestures to the room, indicating that this place is a labor of love for him. “Life would be so dull otherwise.”

“What is your passion, Giulia?” Damiano asks.

“I like to help people.”

Livvy scoffs. It’s the first sound she’s made since we sat down. She’s just been poking at her salad with her fork as though it’s offended her somehow. I know my response sounded trite, but I really do care about helping people.

“Giulia’s building a community center for the wives and children of our soldiers.” There’s an unmistakable note of pride in Matteo’s voice. That surprises me. I didn’t know he knew much about my project, or that he approves of it.

“A community center?” Lorenzo fixes me with a challenging stare. He suddenly seems less friendly than he did before. “For what purpose?”

Under his intense scrutiny, I swallow hard. I’d hate to be interrogated by this man. He wouldn’t have to resort to torture for me to reveal all my secrets. “I want to give women a place to get support with education and healthcare, things like that.”

“You don’t think it’s the job of their husbands to provide such support?”

“Ideally, yes, but many women don’t get what they need at home.”

“So you believe it’s your place to help?” This question comes from Damiano. His tone is more hostile than I’ve heard from him so far. I definitely feel as if I’m being put under a spotlight.

“It’s something I want to do.” I take a deep breath, determined to stand my ground in the face of the intimidating glares of the brothers. “You men choose this life. Women rarely realize what they’re getting into with their marriages and the children certainly don’t.”

Damiano and Lorenzo exchange a glance. I don’t know what passes between them, but Lorenzo nods decisively.

“You are most definitely passionate about your cause.” Lorenzo raises his glass. “I wish you every success, Giulia.”

“As do I,” Damiano adds with a smile.

Matteo squeezes my knee under the table. I glance at him and he nods approvingly. I guess I passed some sort of test. Now perhaps I can relax and enjoy this incredible lunch.

### CHAPTER 11

Matteo

As the server sets down our coffees and a plate of my favorite biscotti, Giulia leans against the back of the booth and sighs dramatically.

“You okay, sweetheart?” I reach across and brush the backs of my fingers down her cheeks. Usually, I’m not into public displays of affection, but I’m among family and nobody else is paying us any attention.

“I’m going to burst,” she complains. She forces herself to sit up so she can glare directly at Lorenzo. “Didn’t you say something about it being a light lunch?”

My cousin barks out a laugh. “That was a light lunch, carina .”

Giulia groans. For a woman used to grabbing a quick sandwich in the middle of the day, the two-hour meal was a lot. The Caprese salad was followed by a rich, flavorful seafood risotto with the most succulent prawns. Then we had a wild boar ragu served over polenta and accompanied by sauteed spinach that Giulia definitely ate more than her fair share of. For dessert, we had a creamy panna cotta. I have to admit to also feeling pretty full.

“And all that wine!” Giulia shakes her head. “If this coffee doesn’t work its magic, I’ll be too sleepy to go out tonight.”

“You have plans?” Damiano asks.



“Yes, at your club, actually.” Giulia looks at Damiano as she talks to him. “La Stanza Rosso.”

“Oh?” He glances at me. “You didn’t mention...”

“I’m not going.”

Damiano’s eyebrows lift. He’s obviously as surprised as I am that I’m letting Giulia go to his club, a well-known hook-up joint, on her own. It’s a testament to my trust in her. Though I’ve only just made Giulia mine, we’ve been friends long enough for me to know her character. Even when she broke off our friendship, I knew she would never betray me. It’s not who she is. The least I can do to reward her loyalty is rein in my tendency toward possessive assholery.

Pursing his lips, my cousin turns to Giulia. “You’re going alone?”

“With Rosalia. It’s her eighteenth birthday.”

“It is?” Damiano sounds surprised. “Then we will roll out the red carpet for her.”

“That’s nice of you,” Giulia says. “Not a lot of employers would do that.”

There’s something about the way Giulia says employers that suggests she’s curious about Rosalia’s situation. I’ve wondered about the girl too. She’s young to be in charge of looking after such a large house and I don’t know many girls her age who would want that kind of job.

Damiano shrugs. “She’s a good girl. Her sister works for Gabriele in Rome. She asked him to give Rosalia the job so she can save money for a place of her own. Their stepfather is what you Americans would call a douchebag.”

“Why?” Giulia’s tone is laced with concern. “Does he abuse her?”

My fists clench at the thought of the vivacious young girl being beaten or worse by some lowlife. I don’t know Rosalia well, but I can’t stand the thought of a man hurting any innocent woman.

“He wouldn’t dare.” Lorenzo bares his teeth in a wicked snarl. “Gabriele made it known the sisters are under our protection.”

“Arturo is merely unpleasant to be around,” Damiano adds. “Rosalia cannot stand him.”

“So why not let her stay at the villa?” Giulia voices the question that was also on my mind.

“Gabriele offered, but her mother forbade it.” Damiano lets out a sardonic laugh. “She worries about her daughter’s reputation.”

“Because of who you are?” Giulia asks.

Lorenzo nods. “She thinks we will corrupt her.”

“Doesn’t she worry about her other daughter?” Giulia frowns thoughtfully as she sips her coffee and sets the cup back down.

“Probably.” Lorenzo picks up his coffee cup. “But Lucia works at Gabriele’s mansion where there are other staff present.”

“And Rome is far enough away that her mother doesn’t have to worry about people from the village watching Lucia’s every move,” Damiano adds.

“Ridiculous!” Livvy mutters petulantly.

Her presence has hung over us like a cloud. While my cousins and Giulia have enjoyed getting to know each other over an incredible meal paired with some exceptional wine, my sister has been quietly brooding. I expected an outburst at some point. It’s how she is when she’s upset over something. She waits for her chance to start a fight.

“What’s ridiculous, Olivia?” Damiano takes the bait. “A mother worrying for her daughter’s reputation?”

“Yes. It’s the twenty-first century in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Damiano lifts an eyebrow. “Does reputation no longer matter?”

“People need to stop worrying about what everyone else is doing.”

“Ah. Perhaps they should simply ignore it when their children take pornographic images and share them with some lowlife.”

Livvy’s jaw clenches. Damiano’s comment was unkind, but I don’t interfere. He may be family, but here in Italy he’s the boss. Besides, my sister started this, so she needs to deal with it herself. I’ll only step in if things get too heated.

“That’s not what I did,” Livvy mutters like a petulant teenager. There are times when she seems sophisticated for her age and others when she reveals a lack of maturity. Eyes glistening as if she’s about to cry, she pulls her napkin off her lap and smacks it down on the table. She nudges Lorenzo with her elbow. “Let me out!”

Lorenzo looks at me for guidance. If any other woman spoke to him that way in public, he would punish her for it.

“Let her go.” I know my sister. She needs to cool off on her own. If she stays here, she’ll start crying and creating a scene. Damiano will be forced to take action and nobody wants that.

Lorenzo slides off the bench and stands aside to let Livvy slip out. She glares at me for a solid ten seconds, probably mad that our cousin moved on my say-so and not hers. Then she storms off toward the restrooms.

Giulia sighs and shuffles closer to me. “I’ll go speak to her.”

“You sure you want to do that, sweetheart?” It’s not as if she and Livvy are close.

Giulia shrugs. “She’ll probably try to take my head off, but I can handle her.” She gives me an imploring look when I don’t move. “It’ll be fine, Matteo. If she doesn’t want to talk, I’ll leave her alone.”

“Okay.” I move aside to let Giulia out of the booth. She smiles as she brushes past me, deliberately pushing her gorgeous tits against me. My cock stirs, but there’s nothing I can do about it right now. I’ll pay her back for teasing me later. I watch Giulia as she walks away. Every inch of her is perfection. I love the way her flouncy skirt swishes about her knees, the curve of her calf accentuated by the three-inch heel of her shoe. When she disappears from view, I retake my seat.

“I’m sorry about Livvy’s behavior.”

Lorenzo waves a dismissive hand. “Even if an apology was necessary, it wouldn’t be yours to make.”

That surprises me. Livvy acted disrespectfully in a public place. My older brothers would punish her for that, but my cousins seem unbothered by her outburst. “You’re not angry with her?”

Damiano shakes his head. “She’s a good kid, really. She’s just on edge with this Reznov thing.”

I can understand that. I’m not sure how I feel about Piotr Reznov pursuing my sister. While she’s an affectionate young woman, he’s a cold fish. But Livvy lacks direction, a purpose in life. Perhaps Reznov can help her find the right path.

“Has he seen her again?”

“No. He sent flowers.”

I snort in disbelief. “That doesn’t seem like his style.”

“There was a message,” Damiano adds. “She got pissed when she read it.”

“Do you know what it said?”

Damiano shakes his head. “She ripped the card into a thousand pieces, then locked herself in her bedroom for almost an hour.”

“Do we need to have a word with Reznov?” Lorenzo asks. “We can persuade him to back off.”

I consider that for a moment before dismissing the idea. If Antonio, in his wisdom, has decided it’s okay for the Russian to pursue our sister, who am I to interfere? Unless Livvy asks for help with Reznov, I trust her to handle him herself. She may get emotional at times, but she’s a Volante to the core.

“I’ll speak to Livvy. If she needs me to deal with Reznov, I will. It’s not your problem.”

While we do business with the Russians and my mother is engaged to marry their Pakhan, our Italian cousins have historical ties to them through some pan-European organization they're involved in. It's all very hush-hush, and even Antonio doesn't know the details of what they do. Whatever they're into, I don't want Livvy's love life to cause issues for them.

"Let us know if you need us." Damiano gives me a pointed look. "Business is important, but family comes first."

"I appreciate it."

"Speaking of family." A sly grin crosses Lorenzo's lips. "Will the lovely Giulia be joining ours soon?"

Despite my gut telling me to lock Giulia down as soon as possible, I know she's not ready for that yet. "It's too soon."

"She's good for you, Matteo," Damiano says. "You're different around her, content."

"We've known each other a long time. I've loved her for years."

"Doesn't that complicate things? Having a woman as a friend and then a lover?" Lorenzo actually looks pained as he thinks about it.

"Nah." My dismissive tone masks the anxiety I'm working hard to suppress. I've never had so much to lose with a woman before. I've only just got Giulia back in my life. The thought of fucking this up worries me. Not willing to confront that right now, I change the subject and turn to Damiano. "Did you track down that kid who was in the woods?"

"What's this?" Lorenzo clearly didn't know about this yet.

“Matteo saw someone close to the house. My men identified him as Adamo Gianotti. He lives in Cetona.”

“Does he have something to do with the Montalbano girl?” Lorenzo asks.

“He was in school with Sofia, but a couple of years ahead. There’s nothing to suggest they were friends.”

“Did your men find him?” I bring Damiano back around to the original question.

“No. His father claims the boy is missing. My men are searching, but he’s gone to ground.”

That doesn’t reassure me that his presence near Gabriele’s villa was innocent. If the boy wasn’t there to cause harm, why would he go into hiding?

“I’ll need protection for Giulia while she’s at the club.”

Damiano strokes his chin thoughtfully. “I’ll assign Roberto to drive her and I will personally watch over her at the club.” He looks up as Giulia approaches the table. “Discreetly, of course.”

“I appreciate it.” I stand to allow Giulia to get back to her seat. She smiles at me as she squeezes past. Her eyes are glazed from the wine she’s drunk this afternoon, but she doesn’t look stressed or unhappy, so I guess her talk with Livvy didn’t turn nasty.

“Is Livvy okay?” I ask.

“She’s upset about the mess she made back home.” Giulia bites her bottom lip. “She’s convinced Antonio hates her because he sent her away and she thinks you’ve turned on her too.”

“Why?” It takes only a second for me to realize the answer to my own question. “Because I sent her away after the shooting.”

Giulia nods. “Deep down she understands you wanted to keep her safe, but now you’re letting me stay at the villa...”

She lets the thought hang so I can work it out for myself. Livvy believes Giulia’s presence is confirmation I actually sent her away because I didn’t want her around anymore. It’s far from true. I push to my feet. “I’ll go speak to her.”

Lorenzo drains the last of the coffee from his cup. “We’ll head down to the warehouse. I want to show Giulia what we do here.”

A flash of panic zips across Giulia’s face. I suspect she knows as well as me that the tour will involve my cousins bombarding her with questions about herself and our relationship that they didn’t want to ask her in front of me. For a moment, I consider staying put to spare her the interrogation, but Giulia straightens her spine and twists her lips into a challenging smile. “Sounds good.”

“Okay, sweetheart.” I bend and kiss her forehead before glaring at each of my cousins. “Take care of my girl.”

As I walk away Damiano makes a remark about me in Italian that roughly translates to ‘he’s drunk on pussy.’ Thankfully, Giulia doesn’t speak the language, a shortcoming she’s lamented, but done nothing to change. I’d hate for her to be embarrassed.

Shaking my head at my cousin’s crudeness, I make my way out of the restaurant and along the corridor. Livvy is just coming out of the ladies’ room. Her eyes are red-rimmed. She stops dead when she sees me. She looks over her shoulder at the door to the restroom as if considering fleeing. I stride toward her quickly and pull her into a



hug.

“Nobody hates you, Livvy.” I pull back so I can see her face. “You know I only sent you to Damiano to keep you safe.”

“Yeah, I know, but Antonio...”

“He loves you, too, Livvy. He just...”

I have no excuse for the way Antonio is with Livvy. Being busy, having the weight of the world on his shoulders is no excuse for him washing his hands of her the way he has. In the past few weeks as he’s bombarded me with messages asking, then ordering me to come home, he’s barely asked about our sister.

“It’s okay, Matteo. You don’t have to make excuses for him. But it’s not just Antonio, it’s Leo, Alessandro, and Mamma too. When they found out about the photos, they didn’t even want to hear me out. It just confirmed what they already thought about me.”

“Mamma loves you.” There’s no point trying to sell her the idea that Leo cares for her because she won’t believe it. “And Alessandro.”

“Mamma’s disappointed in me.” Livvy swipes at the tears forming in her eyes. “She doesn’t want me embarrassing her in front of Boris Reznov.”

Sensing we’re heading toward an emotional conversation I’m not equipped to deal with, I seize upon the chance to change the subject. “Speaking of Reznovs, do you need me to deal with Piotr?”

Livvy barks out a laugh. She knows damned fine I’m steering us away from a discussion about her feelings. “No.”

“You really think you can deal with him?”

Her cheeks redden. “I can deal with him just fine.”

“He’s ruthless, Liv. When he wants something, he gets it.”

Livvy’s blush deepens. “I know.”

“Really?” I fix a suspicious eye on her. “Has something happened between you two?”

Livvy shakes her head. “Not yet.”

“What do you mean, not yet?”

Shaking her head, my sister clears her throat and does what I did a moment ago. She veers away from a tricky conversation. “So, you’re with Giulia Lombardi?”

I was going to tell her not to dodge my question, but her use of Giulia’s married name makes me grit my teeth. “Costanza.”

Livvy rolls her eyes. “She was married to him. You can’t ignore the fact.”

“They were married for all of five fucking minutes and nothing happened.”

“Ooh, the black widow was a virgin until you came along.”

I purse my lips. “Behave, Olivia. What happened between Giulia and Johnny is her business and nobody else’s.”

“Oh, it’s Olivia now. I am in trouble.” She threads her arm through mine and steers me back toward the restaurant. “Don’t worry, Matteo. I won’t say a word. I like you

and Giulia together.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, you’re obviously happier with her in your life. I mean, you look ten years younger since she arrived.”

I raise an eyebrow at that. “I look fifteen?”

“No, dumbass, you look forty. Before she arrived, you’d have passed for a fifty-year-old.”

I growl my displeasure, but really I’m pleased that Livvy’s teasing me again. We don’t do heartfelt discussions and apologies, but we do mess with each other as a way of showing our affection.

“Where is everyone?” Livvy asks as we approach our now vacant table.

“Lorenzo wanted to show Giulia the winery.” I take a seat and raise a hand to summon the server. “Let’s have a coffee and join them later.”

“You’re not worried Giulia will fall for Lorenzo’s charm?”

Besides trusting Giulia, I know my cousin doesn’t view her as a potential conquest. Lorenzo’s been friendly to Giulia, paying her compliments and joking with her. It’s not how he behaves around a woman he wants. He gets territorial fast. If he had any interest in her, he’d throw her over his shoulder, carry her off, and chain her to his bed.

“Not at all. I’m the only man she wants.”

My sister grins. “Oh, Matteo, you’ve got it bad.”

There’s no point denying it so I make a so-what gesture with my hands.

“Does Mamma know you’re with Giulia? She’ll have the wedding planned before you can blink.”

I’m surprisingly untroubled by the thought. In fact, I can’t wait to make it happen. I just have to hope Giulia catches up with my way of thinking soon. If she doesn’t, there are other options. My brothers’ marriages all started in unconventional ways. Antonio more or less ordered Isabella’s father to give him his daughter. Alessandro married Emilia a day after meeting her to fulfill a promise between our families. Leo took Vinnie as his bride after she came to us looking for a husband. He locked her down fast. Perhaps I should take a leaf out of their playbook and just march Giulia down the aisle, consequences be damned.

### CHAPTER 12

#### Giulia

The scale of Lorenzo's operation here at Casa di Lupo is impressive, but it's not the volume of wine they produce that blows me away. It's his obvious interest in everything that goes on I admire. As we walked through the winery, he greeted every person we encountered by name and, in some cases, he asked after their families. His staff seem to respect him, but I detected an undercurrent of fear. I guess there's no escaping a reputation like his even when he's presenting his affable face to the world.

Lorenzo reminds me of Matteo. They're both younger brothers in branches of a prominent mafia family. Too handsome for their own good, they both have an effortless charm that masks the type of men they actually are. Perhaps that makes me a bad person, but I was raised in this life. I may not approve of what our men do, but it doesn't stop me liking Matteo, or his equally brutal cousin.

Lorenzo's knowledge of the wine-making process is incredible. From harvesting the grapes to clarifying and bottling the wine, he understands each step. As we toured the winery, he described the modern methods they use for pressing the grapes—no trampling them with bare feet these days. He talked about fermentation, the importance of getting temperatures right. To be honest, he lost me there, but he spoke with such confidence I'm sure he knew exactly what he was talking about.

After showing me the huge stainless-steel vats where the wine is made, he and Damiano took me to an enormous, vaulted cellar deep beneath the warehouse where the wine is stored in oak barrels until it's ready to be bottled. There were more barrels

than I could count. Lorenzo is also experimenting with ancient techniques, using clay amphora to create a softer, fruitier wine. His passion for the subject was infectious.

While Lorenzo played host, his older brother said little, but more than once, I caught him watching me intently. It was unnerving to deal with the scrutiny without Matteo to lend me some support.

“Thank you for showing me around,” I tell Lorenzo as we reach the last stop, a tasting room overlooking the lush green vineyard.

The room is decorated like I imagine a posh gentleman’s club would be. There’s an air of exclusivity about it. The walls, painted in a rich green tone, are adorned with paintings of the Italian landscape. High-backed leather chairs are dotted around the room. Over to one side is a long wooden table that has an open bottle of wine and several glasses on it. I feel out of place here. There should be a sign over the door—No Peasants Allowed .

“It was my pleasure,” Lorenzo says. “Now, would you like to sample our new Chianti?”

Although I sobered up considerably during our walk around the winery, I’m not sure it would be wise to drink another drop. I’m going to the club with Rosalia later and I can’t be drunk before I even leave the house. I don’t want to risk appearing rude, though, and it’s not just because Lorenzo is Matteo’s cousin. He’s not a man I’d want to offend.

“A small taste, perhaps.”

Lorenzo grins, then goes to the bar at the side of the room. He pours a small measure of wine into a glass and brings it to me.

“You’re not having some?” I ask.

A look I can’t decipher passes between Lorenzo and his brother. It makes me uneasy. Why aren’t they having some?

“We know what it tastes like.” Lorenzo’s response does nothing to relieve the anxiety crawling up my spine.

Nervous, I glance over my shoulder toward the door. The bottle was open when we came into the room. They could have instructed one of their men to slip something into it. I don’t know why they would, but I worry about why neither of them is drinking. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. Where is Matteo? He should have caught up with us by now. My mind races with disturbing possibilities. What if the Italian branch of the family intends to take out the Americans?

“Something wrong?” Lorenzo tilts his head to the side as he studies me, his trademark smile firmly in place.

“I... eh...” I’m being silly. As far as I know, the brothers are close to their American cousins. They have no reason to harm Matteo and even less to poison me.

“We didn’t spike your drink,” Damiano says wryly.

“Isn’t that what someone who had drugged my drink would say?”

Damiano laughs. “I don’t know. I don’t go around drugging women.”

“You’d better not start with my woman.”

A wave of relief washes over me as Matteo saunters into the room with his sister.

“What’s going on?” Livvy asks, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“Lorenzo wants Giulia to sample his new Chianti, but she seems to think we’ve poisoned it.” The sardonic tone in Damiano’s voice makes me feel like a total fool for harboring any suspicions. I raise the glass to my lips.

“You’re not meant to drink it straight away,” Livvy advises. “You need to assess the color and clarity first.”

Doing as she suggests, I hold the glass up to the light and study the wine carefully.

“Well?” Lorenzo prompts.

“It’s red.” Damn, I feel like an idiot. I have no idea what I’m looking for. “Dark red.”

“And the clarity?” Lorenzo doesn’t try to conceal the amusement in his voice.

“Well, there are no bits floating in it if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Now the aroma.” Livvy crosses the room and perches on the windowsill.

I tentatively sniff the air over my glass.

“No, get your nose in there!” Livvy scolds. “Get a good sniff of the stuff, but don’t snort it.”

Livvy isn’t even old enough to drink alcohol back home, but she seems to know what she’s talking about, so I follow her instructions.

“Well?” Livvy asks. “What are you picking up?”



Lowering the glass, I shrug helplessly. “It’s strong and fruity, like wine.”

Lorenzo throws his head back and laughs. “Ah, Giulia, you are refreshing.”

I suspect he means uncultured, but I’m not about to call him out for it.

“Just drink it.” Matteo puts a protective arm around my waist. “This tasting bullshit means nothing. All that matters is if you like it or not.”

Lorenzo staggers back, a hand to his chest as he pretends to be wounded by the remark. “People pay good money to come to our wine tastings.”

“You charge people to smell your wine?” With Matteo’s reassuring presence, I feel bolder. “You really are the mafia.”

For a moment there’s silence, and I worry I’ve misjudged the Volantes’ sense of humor. Then Damiano and Lorenzo both laugh. Livvy snorts in amusement and Matteo drops a kiss on the top of my head as he squeezes me tight.

“I like her.” Lorenzo pats Matteo on the shoulder as he walks past us. “Let me know what you think of the wine, Giulia. If you enjoy it, I’ll bring a case to your wedding.”

It’s a bit soon to be talking about weddings, but he’s gone before I can say that. Damiano and Livvy follow him from the room and I wonder if Matteo gave them some signal to leave. He goes to the door and shuts it behind them. Then he comes to me and runs the back of his fingers down my cheek.

“Did you have fun with my cousins?”

“The tour was interesting, but they probably think I’m a peasant.”

“Because you’re not a wine connoisseur?”

I nod. “Yeah, I mean this place is great, but I’ve never really been into wine.”

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart. They don’t give a shit if you can detect notes of blackberry or whatever. They just wanted to see what you’re made of.”

“I know.” For most of the tour I had the feeling my every gesture was being studied. “They were very charming, especially Lorenzo.”

“Is that right? You found Lorenzo charming?”

There’s a note of jealousy in Matteo’s voice I should pay attention to, but I don’t.

“Yes, I like him.”

“Oh, you do?” Something dark and dangerous glitters in Matteo’s eye. He isn’t playing so I don’t push him. He reaches out suddenly and grabs my throat, making me squeal in fright. Then he backs me against the wall. “How much do you like my cousin?”

“Not as much as I like you.” I place my hand on his chest. Heat spreads through me as the hard muscles flex beneath my palm.

“No?” Matteo slides his hand beneath my dress and cups my feminine mound. “He doesn’t turn you on?”

“Of course not.”

My heart races as he drags my panties to the side. A groan of pleasure escapes me as he slides his finger along the length of my pussy. I’ve been wet and ready for him

since the moment he pushed me against the wall.

“You’re drenched, sweetheart.” He circles my clit with the tip of his finger. His touch is almost imperceptible. I grind my hips against his hand, trying to capture the tingling sensation and bring myself closer to the edge. “Is that for him?”

Matteo’s expression is indecipherable. I can’t tell if he actually thinks I’m attracted to his cousin or if he’s just trying to make me admit that he’s the only man who can drive me crazy with a mere touch.

“It’s for you.” I pant with need as he finally puts pressure on my clit, causing it to pulse beneath his fingertip.

“You sure?” Matteo tilts his head to one side as he studies my expression. “It’s not for some charming Italian?”

Oh, fuck, he is really pissed about me saying I liked Lorenzo.

“It’s for you, Matty.” I cry out as he shoves two fingers inside me, the sudden violence of it stealing the breath from my lungs. “Only for you.”

“This mouth is mine.” He tightens his grip on my throat. It’s a possessive gesture, rather than one intended to hurt me. He leans in and kisses me, his tongue sweeping past my lips. Black spots dance before my eyes as he fucks me savagely with his fingers.

“Yes,” I groan as he pulls back, relaxing the hand he has at my throat, but not releasing me completely from his hold.

He curls his fingers to stroke the most sensitive spot inside me. My hips rock forward as I instinctively try to grab hold of the sensations threatening to spark a fire at my

core.

“This cunt is mine.”

The crudeness of the declaration sends a surge of desire through me. I never really liked that word, but coming from Matteo’s lips, I find it thrilling.

“Matty!”

“And your ass?”

He bends to nip the base of my neck with his teeth. Why is that so fucking erotic? I moan as my arousal ramps up.

“Will you give that to me too?”

My eyes widen in surprise. “What, now?”

Matteo chuckles. “No, not now. You’d need some preparation before I take you.”

Anal has never been something I craved, but I know Matteo would make it good for me. “Oh, then yes.”

“Good girl.” His obvious approval makes my cheeks heat. Who knew I’d have a thing for praise? It seems Matteo is teaching me a lot about myself.

Removing his hand from my throat, Matteo unfastens his pants, loosening his clothing just enough to let his rampant erection spring free. It’s an impressive sight, but I don’t have time to admire his raw, masculine beauty. He lifts my leg up and to the side, spreading me wide for him. He withdraws his fingers from my pussy and immediately replaces them with his cock. With an ecstatic moan, I let my head fall

back against the wall as he pushes all the way into me.

“How does it feel?” he murmurs. “Describe it.”

There’s only one word that comes to mind right now. “Full.”

“And when I fuck you?”

He slowly slides almost all the way out of me and holds himself there, waiting for my response.

“Incredible.”

“Damn right it’s incredible.” He curves a hand around my breast and squeezes tight. Even through my dress I can feel the searing heat of his touch. “Now, beg me to fuck you.”

I don’t hesitate to do as he asked. With his cock teasing my entrance, holding pleasure just out of reach, there’s no room for pride.

“Please, Matteo. Fuck me.” I grasp his shoulders as he presses his hips forward, entering me one inch at a time. “Please. I need you.”

Bracing himself with his hands on the walls, he leans down to capture my lips in a searing kiss as his rigid shaft fills me. When he breaks the kiss, the strength of the desire in his eyes almost stops my heart. He wants me as much as I want him. The way he fucks me proves it. There’s a desperation in the fast and furious pace he sets. I try to match his rhythm, but it’s impossible to do anything but hold on and enjoy the ride.

He grabs my leg and lifts it around his waist, changing the angle of his thrusts. He

slides in and out, stimulating each nerve in my sensitive flesh and bringing me close to the brink of madness.

“Beg me to make you come,” Matteo growls.

“Please, Matteo.”

He shakes his head, and a strand of chestnut hair falls over his eye. “Not Matteo.”

It takes me a second to realize what he wants. He craves the intimacy of the name only I use for him. “Please, Matty.”

“Since you asked so nicely.” Grinning, he slips his hand between my legs and unerringly finds my clit. I anticipate him caressing me until I tip over the edge so I’m startled when he pinches the throbbing bud hard instead. A jolt of pain travels through me, twisting into something intensely pleasurable as it hurtles toward my core.

Overcome by a wave of ecstasy, I buck my hips, drawing Matteo deeper inside me. As his cock swells, my body clamps down, milking everything from him as he spills his seed.

“Giulia!” There’s such raw emotion in the way he speaks my name, I come close to tears.

Flinging my arms around his neck, I cling to Matteo as my entire body shakes with the force of my orgasm. The warmth of his body, his strength as he returns my embrace, anchors me to the here and now.

When I finally release him, he carefully pulls out of me. Semen trickles down my thigh, bringing a stark reality into focus. This is not the first time I’ve been carried

away in the heat of the moment with this man.

“We didn’t use protection.” I shake my head in exasperation. “Again.”

A slight crease at the bridge of his nose is the only sign of Matteo’s concern as he adjusts his clothing. “You’re not on the pill?”

“Yes, well, no, not the pill. I get a shot, but...” How can I phrase this? I don’t want to sound as if I’m accusing him of putting me at risk. It’s something I should have mentioned when we had sex before, but I was so distracted by him, I completely forgot.

Matteo cups my cheek. “I’ve never fucked without a condom.”

“You haven’t?” Surprise makes my voice an octave higher than usual.

“No, I haven’t, sweetheart. This is a first for me.” He gazes down at me as if in awe about what’s happening between us. “Everything about this is a first.”

“Yes,” I agree, “for me too.”

Matteo bends to capture my lips. His kiss is tender, but imbued with so much emotion I can hardly breathe. When he steps back, I miss the contact. I quickly pull my panties back into place and smooth down my skirt.

“Come on.” Matteo holds his hand out to me. “You need to get ready for your big night out before I change my mind about letting you go and chain you to my bed instead.”

A frisson of excitement brings goosebumps to my arms. I suddenly wish I hadn’t agreed to meet Rosalia because the idea of being chained to Matteo’s bed is

unexpectedly appealing.



### CHAPTER 13

Giulia

As we walk straight past the crowd of excited patrons waiting to get into La Stanza Rosso, Rosalia and her friend, Carlotta giggle in delight. I can't help smiling as I remember the first time I received VIP treatment at a club. Matteo took me to the opening of Vita, one of his family's clubs in the East Village. The doormen practically tripped over themselves to welcome us in as people who'd been standing in line for hours complained loudly about the preferential treatment we received. One glare from Matteo had shut that down.

When he's pissed, Matteo can be scary. Thankfully, I'm better acquainted with his sweet, caring side. He can be incredibly thoughtful when he wants. Tonight, he's gone out of his way to ensure Rosalia has a birthday to remember. He arranged for us to travel into the city in a convoy of low-slung sports cars. Rosalia's face when she saw the McLaren Artura waiting for her when she came through her front door was priceless.

I was driven to the club in the Bugatti Veyron Matteo's been using while he's here in Italy and Carlotta was treated to a ride in a Lamborghini. It meant we didn't get a chance to spend time together before reaching the club, but I think the girls enjoyed arriving in style.

A black SUV filled with bodyguards trailed us here. I'm not sure whether they're here because Matteo's being protective of me or if it's to make Rosalia feel like a queen. Either way, their presence is reassuring. I don't know this city and though I

doubt crime in Florence is more of an issue than it is back home, I like that Matteo is looking out for me.

He's been remarkably relaxed about me having this girls' night without him. I've been around the Volantes long enough to know the men all have a protective streak that borders on obsessive when it comes to their women. Though Matteo has always been the most laid-back of the brothers, relinquishing control doesn't come easily to him. He did flinch when I came downstairs wearing a body-hugging black dress that barely covers my ass, but he didn't insist I get changed. He just pulled me close and told me how much he'll enjoy stripping it off me later.

"Welcome to La Stanza Rosso, ladies." The doorman bares his teeth in a grin. With his bald head and sunken eyes, he gives off serious horror movie villain vibes. "Head straight upstairs."

As we climb the steps, two guards from the SUV trailing us, a blonde woman appears at the top to greet us. Wearing a red corset top, black pants, and crazy high heels, she looks like a supermodel. The electronic tablet she carries tells me she works here.

"Signorina Costanza?" she queries.

"That's me," I confirm.

The hostess nods. "My name is Violetta. Would you ladies follow me, please?"

Rosalia glances at me, and I shrug. Matteo told me to expect VIP treatment at the club, but it's meant to be a surprise for the birthday girl, so I don't want to give anything away. As the glamorous blonde walks off, we follow.

Rather than skirting around the edge of the packed dance floor, she cuts straight across it, parting the crowd. The woman's command of a busy room is impressive.

She clearly wields some power here.

“How did she do that?” Rosalia whispers loudly as we reach the other side of the room.

Violetta turns to her and grins conspiratorially. “I control access to the VIP area. People tend to avoid pissing me off.”

“VIP area?” There’s a note of hope in Rosalia’s voice.

“Yes. Signore Volante has asked that you receive our finest hospitality tonight.”

Rosalia and Carlotta squeal in delight. Their enthusiasm is infectious and I feel a wave of excitement as we pass a burly security guard in a perfectly tailored suit and head upstairs to the mezzanine.

The lighting in the VIP area is low, but it’s not as dark as downstairs. There are large black sofas, several of which are occupied by men who obviously hold positions of wealth and power, and their female companions. I don’t recognize anyone, but Carlotta nudges Rosalia and points out an older, distinguished-looking man with a younger woman draped over him. From Rosalia’s excited gasp, I guess they’re celebrities here in Italy.

Our bodyguards remain at the top of the stairs as Rosalia, Carlotta, and I follow Violetta to a table overlooking the club. I’m surprised to find Damiano waiting for us. Lounging on the sofa, he’s lord of all he surveys. When he spots us, he rises from his seat and refastens the button on his suit jacket.

He dismisses Violetta with a curt flick of the wrist. She bows her head and scurries away. I grit my teeth to prevent myself from saying something that will land me on Damiano’s shit list, but that was plain rude. Violetta was brimming with confidence a

moment ago, but in Damiano's presence, she curled in on herself. Do the Volante men have no idea of the effect they have on people? I scoff internally at the question. Of course they know. They just don't care. It's all part of the mafia persona.

"Don Volante!" Rosalia squeals, obviously shocked by his presence.

"Rosalia." He smiles benevolently as she shuffles nervously from one foot to the other. "You look very grown up."

Even in this half-light, I see her cheeks reddening. She self-consciously tugs the hem of her silver dress down. I get the sense she doesn't wear such sexy clothing very often. From the brief conversations we've had, I know her mother is the type to disapprove. Thankfully, Damiano seems to notice her discomfort and steps closer to me, leaning in to greet me with a kiss on each cheek. "Giulia!"

"Damiano," I acknowledge him.

He turns to Rosalia's friend. "And you must be Carlotta."

The tall, skinny brunette looks as if she might faint. It's understandable. Even if Damiano's reputation didn't precede him, he cuts an intimidating figure with his above average height and muscular build. I'm not entirely at ease with him myself.

I look past him and notice, for the first time, the bottle of champagne resting in an ice bucket on the table. There's also a bouquet of red and white flowers and a beautifully wrapped package. It's a long, thin rectangle, so I'm guessing it contains a necklace or a bracelet, perhaps.

"Did you do this?" I ask.

"Of course." Damiano flashes Rosalia another smile. "It's not every day you turn

eighteen, is it?"

"No, Don Volante." Panicked, Rosalia nods vigorously.

Amused by having her so flustered, Damiano grins as he waves a server over. A young, dark-haired man with the face of a demi-god hurries across the room. Does Damiano hire his staff straight off the runway?

"This is Massimo. He'll take care of you tonight," Damiano informs us.

Massimo practically clicks his heels together before popping the cork off the champagne bottle. He pours four glasses and hands one to each of us.

"To Rosalia." Damiano raises his glass. "Buon compleanno ."

"Buon compleanno ," Carlotta and I echo.

Everyone takes a sip of champagne, and then an awkward silence descends.

"Why don't you open your gift, Rosalia?"

As she perches awkwardly on the edge of the sofa and tears the paper from her gift, I gesture to Damiano to come with me as I move a few feet away. Rosalia gasps loudly as she opens a red velvet jewelry box with a recognizable luxury brand name emblazoned on it. She removes a gold chain with a diamond teardrop pendant that sparkles as she holds it up to the light.

"That was nice of you," I say as Rosalia removes the silver necklace she was wearing to replace it with the new one.

"It's nothing." Damiano sips his champagne. "But I don't think you took me aside to

tell me I'm nice. ”

Like his American cousins, he's very perceptive. I guess it's important to be able to read people when you're a mob boss. I decide to be straight with him.

“No, I wanted to ask you to go away.”

Damiano throws back his head and laughs. “You're banishing me from my own club?”

“No, I'm asking you to go and terrify some other young women.”

“Ah, my presence is making the girls uncomfortable.” He speaks as if he didn't already know that when I suspect he's well aware of how he makes people feel.

“They're intimidated by you.”

Damiano nods. “I see why Matteo likes you so much.”

“Oh?” I'm fishing for a compliment, but I can't help it. I want Matteo's family to see me in a positive light.

“Yes, you care about others and you don't let fear prevent you from speaking up.”

“Glad you approve.”

“I'll approve even more if you can persuade him to go back to New York. Antonio is growing impatient.”

Before I can respond, to tell him I doubt I have the power to persuade Matteo to go home until he's ready, Damiano walks back to our table.

“Ladies,” he addresses Rosalia and Carlotta who still look overawed by him. “Anything you want tonight is on me. Food, drink, whatever, just ask Massimo and he will arrange it for you.”

“Grazie, Don Volante,” they reply in unison.

“Enjoy your night.” Damiano smirks at me as he walks past. “Don’t do anything I’ll have to tell Matteo about.”

I guess that’s his way of telling me he’ll be watching what I get up to tonight. It doesn’t bother me. It’s not as if I was planning to go wild. I join Rosalia and Carlotta at the table and set down my glass of champagne.

“Did you see this?” Rosalia shows me her necklace.

“It’s beautiful.”

The younger woman chews anxiously on her bottom lip. “Should I have refused to accept it?”

“You’re worried about what your parents will think?” I know they’re not keen on Rosalia working for the Volantes.

Rosalia nods. “They won’t approve.”

“It’s just a gift,” I assure her. “The Volantes are grateful for how well you’re taking care of the house.”

“Tell them you didn’t want to insult Don Volante,” Carlotta suggests. She gets up from her seat and holds a hand out to Rosalia. “Let’s go dance.”

Rosalia grabs her friend's hand and then turns to me.

I shake my head. "Maybe later."

As they walk off, heads close together and giggling, one bodyguard moves from his position to accompany them while the other remains in case I somehow find myself in danger.

I get my cellphone out of my purse. I'm a little disappointed that there isn't a message from Matteo checking in on me, but then I realize that's unfair. He's giving me the space I wanted to go out and experience Florentine nightlife.

There is, however, a message from my brother.

Came by your place this morning. Heard you got into a car with Dante Parisi and a suitcase. What the fuck are you up to?

I snort in amusement. One thing you can say about Phillip is that he doesn't mince words. I didn't tell my family I was coming to Italy because I knew they wouldn't like the idea of me being alone here with Matteo. Though he's been in my life for years, as we've become older, my dad's been more critical of our close friendship. I guess he thought it would ruin my marriage prospects or something like that.

Knowing the truth will get out in the end, I reply to Phillip, telling him I'm fine and I'm in Italy. Predictably, my phone rings seconds after I send the message. He'll suspect I'm hiding something if I don't answer, so I accept the call.

"Hey, little brother." My greeting is supposed to remind him I'm the older sister, but it rarely works. He thinks he's got to look out for me.

"Don't hey me, Giulia. What the fuck are you doing in Italy?"



I sigh. He's riled up. "Antonio sent me."

"The boss sent you to Italy?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why? What does he want you to do?"

"Nothing much. He wanted me to come see Matteo."

I can hear Phillip grinding his teeth, an annoying habit he developed as a child.

"You're in Italy with Matteo Volante?"

"It's not a big deal, Phillip." I don't want to get into a conversation about where I'm staying and who else is with us. There's going to be an inquisition when I go home, but I'm going to put that off for now and have a fun night.

"Not a big..."

"Look, Phil, I have to go. I'm out with a couple of girlfriends."

"Since when do you have girlfriends in Italy? Is that... are you in a club?"

Sensing a lecture coming on, I mutter a quick goodbye, cut the call, and switch my phone off. I shove it back in my purse and grab my glass of champagne. I get up and wander over to the metal railing to look down into the club.

It's packed. People crowd around the bar and there's barely any space on the dance floor. The pounding music creates a feverish atmosphere. Nightclubs aren't my favorite environment. When I go out with friends, I prefer a bar or restaurant. I do love to dance, though. Spotting Carlotta and Rosalia on the floor below, I decide to

join them.

I take another sip of my champagne and put the glass down on the table. It was nice of Damiano to have a bottle ready for us, but I don't much like it. As I head for the stairs, the bodyguard steps aside to let me pass. He follows me down to the main part of the club, but hangs back as I move onto the dance floor to join Rosalia and Carlotta.

"Giulia!" Rosalia acknowledges my presence. "This place is amazing!"

"Sure is," I agree, but she's already returned her attention to a young, dark-haired man with a boyishly handsome face. Carlotta's focus is also on a man. They're kind of cute together.

Not wanting to get in the way of their flirtations, I turn to head back to the VIP area. I can dance up there without being a part of this crush. A lifetime of dire warnings from my dad has made me wary of being caught in a crowd with no clear escape route. I only make it a few steps before someone blocks my path. A tall, blond boy of about eighteen or nineteen stands there, a strange smile on his face. He says something in Italian, speaking too quickly for me to understand.

"I'm sorry?"

"Ah, you're English."

"American."

His lips twist. It's more of a sneer than a smile and unease twists down my spine.

"Dance with me."

“Sorry, I can’t.”

“You want to get out of here, then?”

I blink in surprise. This guy has no finesse. He’s jumped straight from offering a dance to trying to get me to leave the club with him.

I grimace apologetically. “I think you might be a little young for me.”

“Come on. We can have fun,” he insists. He holds a hand out to me. “I’m Adamo.”

I shake my head. “Sorry, Adamo, you need to find a girl your own age.”

“I had a girl. I lost her.”

He looks so sad I can’t help reaching out to comfort him. I curl my hand around his cheek. “I’m sorry, but…”

Before I can finish my sentence, a large, heavyset man grabs Adamo.

“Leave him alone,” I shout. “He didn’t do anything.”

A hand clamps down on my shoulder and I’m spun around to face Damiano. His face is stern. There’s no disguising the fact he’s a vicious mob boss when his eyes display such cold fury.

“Come with me, Giulia.”

Grabbing my arm, he drags me toward the exit, bumping people out of the way as we cross the room.

“Damiano!” I protest. “What the hell’s going on?”

He shoves me toward one of the muscular brutes who accompanied us to the club.

“Take her home.”

The bodyguard nods and waves his hand toward the stairs, gesturing for me to walk ahead of him. There’s no point in resisting. I allow the guard to shepherd me downstairs and out onto the sidewalk where a black SUV is waiting for me. I get into the back seat and slide over when it becomes clear the guard will be joining me. As we drive off, I look over my shoulder.

“What about Rosalia and Carlotta?”

“Your friends will be quite safe,” the bodyguard assures me. “Now fasten your seatbelt, please.”

Huffing, I draw the belt across my body and clip it into place. I have no idea what the hell just happened, but I’m betting it has something to do with Matteo. So much for him being relaxed about me having a night out with the girls. If he thinks I’m going to put up with being hauled out of a club just because a man spoke to me, he’s in for a shock.

### CHAPTER 14

Matteo

Until now I didn't realize just how much Giulia's presence has soothed me. In the couple of days she's been here, I've felt more relaxed. My guilt over Sofia Montalbano's death has subsided. I still feel terrible about it, of course, but I now accept it was a terrible accident. The only people to blame are the Rossis. They're the ones who brought violence to the quiet streets of Cetona. They had no reason to come after me, other than to vent their displeasure at the Volantes taking control of the north of Italy. The Rossis could have fallen into line and accepted Damiano's rule, but they rebelled. They've paid a heavy price for their mistake. We've all but wiped them from the face of the earth.

I set aside the pasta salad I was eating but not really enjoying and wander through to the living room. Without Giulia in the house I'm restless, untethered. She's only been out for a couple of hours, but I miss her. It was a mistake to let her go tonight. I thought I could be a normal boyfriend, that I could relinquish control. It turns out it's not that easy. Though I tell myself Damiano can be trusted to keep her safe, I'm not convinced he'll do as good a job as I would. He doesn't have the same investment in her wellbeing.

The temptation to jump in my car and head to the club so I can watch Giulia personally is strong, but I don't give in to it. Giulia would be pissed if I interrupted her girls' night and I don't want her to think I'm unable to trust her. Because I do have absolute faith in her not to cheat. If a man flirts with her, she'll turn him down flat. She's not the type to lead anyone on. I just have to hope if she comes up against

someone who won't take no for an answer that Damiano or his men will step in.

Grabbing a bottle of Scotch from the cabinet in the corner of the room, I pour myself a glass and head for my bedroom. I'll watch a movie until Giulia gets home. Then I'll fuck her so thoroughly she won't want to leave the house without me again.

As I reach the top of the stairs, my cellphone buzzes. I take it out of my pocket and check who's calling. It's Alessandro. He's the only one of my older brothers who hasn't hassled me about getting my ass back to New York. While Antonio and Leo have been persistent in their demands, Alessandro has left me in peace. Though I suspect he might have been pressured into calling me by Antonio, I accept the call.

"Hey, Sandro."

He doesn't waste time with pleasantries. "I just spoke to Phil de Soto."

That's not what I expected. I didn't realize he even knew Giulia's younger brother. Though Phil was inducted into our organization a couple of months ago, Alessandro is more concerned with legitimate ventures these days. He doesn't spend a lot of time getting down and dirty with our soldiers.

"And?"

"He was pissed. He just found out his sister's in Italy with you."

It hadn't occurred to me until now that Giulia might not have told her family she was coming here. I guess it makes sense, though. She won't have wanted them to worry about her being alone here with me.

"How?"

“What the fuck does it matter?” Alessandro demands. “Is it true? Is Giulia Costanza there with you?”

It would be disingenuous to deny it just because she isn’t by my side right now. “Yes, it’s true.”

“Fuck, Matteo!”

“What’s the big deal?” Considering Alessandro dragged his bride onto a plane just days after setting eyes on her for the first time, he’s got a nerve giving me a hard time about Giulia.

“She’s Ritchie Costanza’s daughter.”

I know exactly who Giulia is. It hasn’t slipped my mind that her father is one of our most loyal and respected soldiers. He hasn’t risen high in the ranks of our organization, but that isn’t because my family doesn’t value him. It’s just that when a position has become vacant, there’s always been someone more suitable for promotion.

Personally I like Ritchie. Aside from marrying Giulia off to Johnny Lombardi, he’s been a good father to her. I assume he thought he was doing the right thing. He’s the type of man who lives up to his responsibilities and he’s got a great sense of humor. He never stood in the way of my friendship with his daughter, even when I started to gain a reputation for fucking around. I know I’ll have to appease him when he finds out about Giulia and me, but right now I don’t want to think about that.

“Yeah, I know. She’s my oldest friend.”

“So, what, she just flew over there to braid your hair after ignoring your stupid ass for six months?”

“No, she came to persuade me to come home. Our beloved brother sent her.”

“Antonio?”

“Who else?”

“Has he gone fucking nuts?” Alessandro growls. “What about Giulia’s honor?”

I’m surprised Alessandro’s concerned about her honor. He was with me that day at Johnny’s wake when we both made crass remarks about Giulia. He was trying to make Marissa Locatelli laugh because he wanted to get into her panties.

“Honor?” In our fucked-up, out-of-touch world, she’s a widow and shouldn’t be bound by the same restrictions as a young, unmarried woman would be. Of course if people knew she’d been a virgin before she came to Italy, the situation would be very different. “Since when do you give a fuck about honor?”

“Since I married a good woman, but it’s not my opinion that matters. It’s Ritchie’s.”

I sigh heavily because I know Ritchie will want to protect her reputation after the debacle with her short-lived marriage. There are still assholes whispering that she killed Johnny on their wedding night. If people find out she’s here with me, it’ll be another excuse to talk shit about her. Giulia doesn’t deserve that.

“He’s got nothing to worry about.”

“So you’re not fucking her?”

“It’s not fucking.” My tone is defensive.

“Shit. You love her?”



“I always have.”

There’s a long silence and I visualize Alessandro shaking his head in disbelief. Then he chuckles. “Okay, kid. Should I tell Mamma to book the church?”

“Leave that to me.”

Alessandro mutters something about making sure I don’t fuck up. I ignore his warning. Despite what he just called me, I’m not a kid anymore. When Antonio needed time off to be with Isabella, I stepped up and ran things. It was only for a couple of days, but I oversaw a couple of important weapons deals in that time. I should get some credit for that, but my older brothers love to remind me of my place.

“Give my love to Emilia.” My brother’s wife is one of the sweetest people I know.

“Sure.”

I’ve barely ended the call when my cellphone rings again. It’s Damiano this time. Fear freezes my blood. Has something happened to Giulia?

I answer immediately. “What’s wrong?”

“Giulia’s on her way home.”

“Why?” It’s barely eleven-thirty. I didn’t expect her until the early hours of the morning. Clubs are open late here in Italy.

“There was an incident.”

My heart hammers at my ribcage. “What happened? Is she okay?”

“Yes, she’s fine. A little pissed, but unharmed. Adamo Gianotti approached her.”

The kid who was spying on the house? My fists clench as anger surges through me. There can be no doubt now that his intentions when I saw him in the woods were sinister.

“Is she okay? He didn’t touch her?”

“No, he didn’t touch her.” There’s something in Damiano’s voice that makes me think there’s more to the story. “What? What is it?”

“She had her hand on his cheek.”

I frown deeply. “She was touching him?”

“Yeah, like she was trying to make him feel better, or something.”

Why the fuck would she be trying to console a complete stranger? My temper rises at the thought of Giulia stroking some other guy’s face.

“Tell me you grabbed the asshole.”

“We did, but he got away.”

It’s hard to believe the skittish boy I saw in the woods escaped Damiano’s highly trained men.

“How the fuck did that happen?”

Damiano blows out a breath. “One of my security guards locked him in a room next to my office so he could deal with another issue. One of my hostesses let him out.”

“Deliberately?”

“I don’t know yet.”

I recognize the determination in his tone and feel a brief pang of pity for the hostess he’s going to interrogate over this. Damiano won’t hesitate to hurt anyone who poses a threat to our family, woman or not.

“There’s a team of six escorting Giulia home,” Damiano continues. “They’ll stay on site in case of trouble.”

I assume he means at the gatehouse that’s been unoccupied since I arrived. “I appreciate it.”

Though I can keep Giulia safe within these walls, I won’t turn down additional security. I’d prefer for any intruders to be apprehended long before they reach the house. I end the call and go back downstairs to wait for Giulia to get home.

I try to stay calm, but my mind is racing with thoughts of what might have happened to her. We have no idea who this boy is, what his motivation in approaching her might have been, but I have to assume it wasn’t good. The mere idea of someone harming Giulia is enough to drive me to the brink of insanity. I want to tear this boy limb from limb just for daring to breathe in the same air as her. It’s irrational, I know, but I want to bind Giulia to me so inextricably nothing bad can ever touch her again.

Thankfully it doesn’t take long before I hear vehicles rolling up outside. I go to the front door, just as Nicolo, one of my cousin’s trusted lieutenants, lets Giulia out of the back of an armored SUV. With uncharacteristic rudeness, she barges past him and marches to the house. Fury etched in the scowl on her lips, the narrowing of her eyes, she passes me without a word and goes straight upstairs.

Closing the front door, I activate the security system and follow Giulia to her bedroom. When I enter, she's kicked off her shoes and is standing by the bed, fists clenched at her sides. I guess she was expecting me.

"What the fuck, Matteo?" she demands. "You had me dragged out of a club because I was talking to another man?"

"That was Damiano's call."

"Right, but who asked Damiano to spy on me?"

Trying to calm the situation, I breathe in deeply and speak in a steady voice. "I asked him to keep you safe."

"I was safe." Giulia jabs a finger at me. "You just didn't like me talking to another man."

My jaw clenches at her confrontational tone. "You don't know who he was."

"It doesn't matter who he was, Matteo. I was handling him. You had no right..."

That shit won't fly. She cuts off mid-sentence as I step up to her, getting in her face. "I had every right, Giulia. You are mine."

"No."

I reach out and curve my hand around her cheek. It's taking every ounce of strength I have to remain calm in the face of her aggression. "No what, Giulia? No, I don't have the right to protect you or no, you're not mine?"

Giulia slaps my hand away. "I'm not a possession."

“No,” I agree, “but you belong to me all the same and that gives me every right to do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

She shakes her head. “No, Matteo...”

“You need me to prove it to you?” I advance on her as she backs away, her retreat eventually halted by the wall. “You need me to show you that every part of you belongs to me?”

Her lips twist into a scowl as fire flashes in her eyes. She’s spoiling for a fight, trying to goad me into staking my claim in the most savage way possible. When she puts her hands on my chest and tries to shove me away, I know I’m right. She wants me to show her who’s boss.

Grabbing her hands, I pin them above her head. Giulia bares her teeth as she struggles, but I simply tighten my body as I press against her and lower my lips to hers. My kiss is harsh, demanding. I don’t relent until Giulia yields to me, parting her lips to give me access. Then I push my tongue into her mouth, tasting, teasing. I don’t let up until she finally kisses me back. The moment her body softens against me, I release her.

“Strip!” My tone is more aggressive than usual, but the desire to make Giulia see once and for all that she’s mine is overwhelming.

“Matty.” She reaches out for me, but I step back. I know what she’s trying to do. She fears what she’s unleashed and is trying to soothe the beast inside me that wants to lay claim to every part of her.

“I said strip.”

Still she hesitates. It seems she needs a little incentive to do as she’s told. Taking hold

of her shoulders, I spin her around and spank her ass three times. It can't have hurt much through her clothing, but Giulia whimpers. I turn her back to face me. "That's just the start of your punishment, sweetheart. Continuing to defy me will only add to the count." I give her a few seconds to absorb my warning. "Now, strip."

This time she obeys my instruction. Reaching behind her, she lowers the zipper on the ridiculously short dress she wore tonight. I still can't believe I let her leave the house in it without me by her side.

She pulls the slip of fabric off over her head and then tosses it across the room. Then she removes her black lacy bra and panties, dropping them to the floor before kicking them away.

Sinking her teeth into her bottom lip, she glares defiantly at me. Her arms hang by her sides. I like that she doesn't try to hide any part of herself as she waits for my next instruction. I take a moment to admire her breasts. They're beautifully plump, not too big or too small. Her skin has a warm, peachy glow and her nipples are a dusky rose color. I want to lick them until they draw up into tight peaks, but I resist. Giulia has a punishment coming and I need to attend to that before I indulge my desires.

"Bend over the bed, arms above your head, legs spread and ass pushed out."

"Matty." Her big brown eyes widen as she stares beseechingly at me. I'm not about to be distracted by her innocent look.

"Now, Giulia."

Offering no further resistance, she sighs, turns, and drapes herself elegantly over the bed, adopting the position I demanded. She glances over her shoulder. "What happens now?"

“I’m going to whip your ass with my belt and then fuck you until you know who you belong to.”

By the time I’m finished with her, she’ll never doubt it again.

### CHAPTER 15

Giulia

From the moment Damiano had me escorted out of his club and shoved into the back of a car, I've been itching for a fight I know I won't win. I wanted to show Matteo it's not okay to react to me speaking to another man by having me dragged home like a naughty child. I needed to show him he can't control me, but I guess I was wrong about that. He's made a pretty good job of taking charge. He's got me exactly where he wants me and I barely resisted.

I don't understand why I'm letting him do this to me. I guess deep down I want to surrender. It would be so simple to put myself in his hands and allow him to set the rules for our relationship. A part of me wants to, but my desire for independence isn't easily quelled. I don't know how to resolve the conflict raging inside me. Perhaps I don't have to. Perhaps I need to stop thinking and just feel.

I try to make myself comfortable on the bed, but with nervous anticipation rippling through my body, it's impossible. The distinctive snap of leather as Matteo readies his belt does nothing to calm my racing pulse. I don't know what to expect from this punishment. How badly is this going to hurt?

"Let's see if ten is enough to convince you of my right to protect you, to punish you, to own every fucking part of you."

The harshness of his tone surprises me. Matteo means what he's saying. As far as he's concerned, I'm his to do with as he pleases. I should have expected this. He's not



a man who does things in half-measures. If I'm not careful, he'll take over every aspect of my life.

This is the time when I should assert myself and refuse to let him railroad me into accepting his terms. For reasons I don't want to examine too closely, I don't speak up. I simply brace myself for what's coming.

The first crack of leather across the full width of my ass is as unpleasant as I feared it would be. The sound it makes is startling and it stings like a zap of lightning shooting across my butt. I cry out and wiggle my hips. If that's what the first felt like, I don't know how I'm going to take ten of them.

"Poor baby," Matteo croons behind me. "This is going to be a painful lesson for you, isn't it?"

He's being an asshole, and I know it's deliberate. Matteo and I have been friends for a long time. I've seen him act this way before. His dickhead behavior is usually directed at other people, but I know why he's doing it. He's trying to goad me into saying something that will give him the excuse to assert his dominance in an even stronger way. He enjoys the push and pull of a power struggle. I have to admit it turns me on, but on this occasion, I won't give him the satisfaction of subduing my rebellion. He has the upper hand already. It's enough.

"Yes, Matteo," I say meekly.

His response isn't verbal, but I feel the displeasure in it all the same. It comes as another lash of his belt, this time on my right butt cheek. It's harder than the first one. Tears spring to my eyes and I hiss loudly. Matteo doesn't wait long enough for the deep ache in my flesh to settle before striking again and again. He lands one blow after the other in different spots across my bottom, ensuring every inch of my tender flesh is throbbing. Discomfort has me writhing on the bed, but pride prevents me

from begging him to stop.

My fists curl in the sheets as Matteo pauses. Are we done already? I wasn't counting, but as much as that hurt, it didn't seem like ten spanks.

"Two more," Matteo murmurs as if reading my thoughts.

The leather strap lands across the backs of my thighs this time. Fuck! That hurt. I shriek loudly and wiggle my ass. My flesh feels as if it's on fire. It's painful, but something else is stirring deep inside me. A tingling sensation twists its way to my core where it takes root, growing into an intense need to be filled by Matteo's massive cock. It's all I can do to keep from pleading with him to fuck me.

As the belt comes down on my ass for the last time, I yelp. It was a harder stroke this time. Pain fans out from the point of impact. A tear leaks from the corner of my eye as I try not to reach back to rub the ache away.

There's a thud from somewhere across the room as Matteo tosses the belt aside. I breathe a sigh of relief, but it's premature. He isn't done with me yet. Taking my arm, he pulls me to my feet.

"Did that spanking make you wet?"

I shake my head in denial. Matteo smirks, knowing that I'm lying. He stares at me for a moment as if challenging me to double down on the lie and then uses the back of his hand to wipe away the stray tear making its way down my cheek. It's a tender gesture, but there's no gentleness in his eyes. There's undiluted lust, determination, and a touch of something that might be anger.

"On your knees," he commands.

I sink to the floor, making sure not to rest my poor punished ass too heavily on my heels. Before I have the chance to settle into position, Matteo shoves his pants and briefs down. His cock is fully erect. I guess that answers any question I might have had about whether he enjoyed spanking me.

He reaches down and traces the outline of my mouth with his thumb. "Open."

I obey immediately, parting my lips. Matteo slides two fingers into my mouth. Rather than closing my lips around him, I tilt my head back and open wider so he can watch as I run my tongue back and forth along the length of his long, thick fingers. He groans and pulls his hand away, curving it around the back of my head to hold me in place as he shoves his cock into my mouth.

Startled as his rigid erection hits the back of my throat, I reach out and grab onto his taut ass to anchor myself. He isn't giving me time to explore or to get comfortable. I don't get a chance to tease him. Matteo isn't playing. My cheeks puff out as I draw panicked breaths in through my nose. For a moment I think I'm going to pass out, but Matteo pulls back a little and I'm able to suck in air.

His ass clenches beneath my touch as he thrusts. He shows me no mercy, fucking my mouth with ruthless intent as I struggle to deal with the pace.

"This mouth is mine," Matteo growls.

My jaw already aches and I know I'll regret it, but I shake my head, as much as his hold on me will allow. I'm not going to grant him ownership over me. Though my body undeniably belongs to him, this is about something more. It would give him carte blanche to do whatever the hell he wants with me. While that might be appealing in the bedroom, I fear Matteo will try to carry his control into other parts of my life. I have my own ambitions, plans for the future. I will not give him the power to dictate every aspect of my life. Though I love this man, I'm under no illusions

about him. He could become a tyrant if I let him.

“Fuck!” Matteo curses.

He pulls out of my mouth and hauls me to my feet. He drags me over to the dresser and pushes me down so my breasts are squashed against the cold, hard wooden surface. For several beats, he stands absolutely still behind me. I suspect he’s going to spank me but he doesn’t. Instead, he surprises me by trailing kisses down my spine. My skin comes alive beneath his soft, warm lips. I wriggle my hips restlessly.

When he reaches my ass, I gasp. His kiss soothes the ache. Then his teeth nip my skin, the unexpected mingling of pain and pleasure making me whimper.

“This ass is mine.”

“No.” The denial comes out on a moan as he straightens up and slides his right hand between my legs.

“This pussy is mine.” He ignores me shaking my head. “And it’s soaking wet. Someone enjoys being punished.”

I don’t deny that. For some messed-up reason, I got a thrill out of laying myself across the bed and taking a spanking. The evidence of how much I enjoy his rough handling is on Matteo’s fingertips.

He slides his fingers along the length of my pussy then elicits a shocked squeal from me by turning his attention to my rear hole.

“Matty,” I caution as he presses a finger inside me.

“Shh,” he soothes. “I won’t hurt you.”

I breathe in and out steadily, trying to calm myself as he breaches the tight ring of muscle and pushes his finger all the way into me. I frown as I try to get to grips with what I'm feeling. It doesn't hurt like I thought it would. He pumps a couple of times and then adds another finger, scissoring them to stretch my tight channel. It's strangely arousing to have him exploring this forbidden part of me.

Matteo pulls his fingers out, steps behind me, and kicks my legs farther apart. As I realize his intent, panic surges through me. I try to stand, but he splays a hand across my back to hold me down. I tense as he positions his cock at my rear.

"You said you'd prepare me first." I'm sure he said he'd get me ready for this.

"You took my fingers without a fuss. You'll be fine."

I don't bother pointing out to him that his cock is a hell of a lot bigger than his fingers. Boosting his ego won't help me right now. My stomach churns as he pushes the head of his cock inside me.

"Relax," he commands.

"I can't. Matty!"

He ignores my protest, inching deeper inside me until he encounters resistance.

"This is happening, Giulia." He slips his left hand beneath me and massages my clit until I'm panting with need. "Now let me in."

As pleasure swamps me, my body gives up the fight and lets him in. His hips slap against my tender flesh as he sinks deep. I'm barely aware of the strange stretching of my ass as Matteo fills me.

“Told you this ass was mine,” he says triumphantly.

He fucks me with masterful strokes as his fingers tease my clit, sending me into such a frenzy I end up pushing back against him, begging for more.

“Fuck, Giulia. I’m not going to last.”

Something about the strangled tone of his voice, the desperate need it conveys, drives me wild. I love knowing that I at least have this power over him. It fuels my desire and my pussy clenches as I come with a scream of pleasure.

I’m still quivering as Matteo reaches his climax, spilling his hot seed deep inside me. As he pulls out, I wince, not just from the flash of pain, but the shame as his fluids seep out of me. It’s soon banished as Matteo kisses me with both tenderness and passion.

When he draws back from me, he has an infuriatingly smug look on his face. “Told you I’d prove you’re mine.”

I shake my head in disbelief. My body is trembling with aftershocks of the most incredible orgasm and he’s using this moment to make his point. I can’t believe he’s being such a dick.

“Deny it all you want,” Matteo says. “But you’re mine and as soon as I can arrange it, I’m making it legal.”

“What?” I don’t like where this is going.

“We’re getting married, sweetheart.”

He reaches out to caress my face and I slap his hand away.

“We are not getting married.”

He cocks his head as he looks at me. “Don’t you want my love, my protection?”

My eyes narrow. The manipulative bastard. I haven’t seen this side of Matteo before. “You’re saying I can’t have those things without marriage?”

Instead of answering, he steps closer to me. He shoves a hand between my legs and cups my pussy.

“You’re mine, Giulia. I’m the only man your cunt gets sloppy for and you know it.”

He circles my clit with his finger, and it immediately throbs in response to his ministrations. My breath catches as he leans forward and suckles on the sensitive spot at the base of my neck.

“Tell me you’re mine, Giulia, that you’ll be my wife.”

It would be easy to give in. Pleasure is just within reach and I know he’ll grant it if I tell him what he wants to hear. I can’t agree to marriage, though. While I hope that’s where we’ll get to one day, it’s too soon. I was railroaded into marrying Johnny. This time I want romance, a courtship. I need to be certain it’s right for me.

Mustering my strength, I push Matteo away. Shock flits across his face before it settles into a blank expression. It’s only the slight tightness around his lips that shows his displeasure.

“I’m not marrying you, Matteo.” I fold my arms across my chest to put some distance between us.

“Nobody will harm you if you carry my name. It’s the only way I can keep you safe.”

“Bullshit. I have my dad, my brother...”

“And what are they going to say when they find out about us?” Matteo asks as he tucks himself back into his pants. “They’ll want us to marry.”

I have nothing to say to that because I know it’s true. Even if I could persuade my dad to let me see where things go with Matteo, he’d have Valeria whispering in his ear about how much my marriage to one of the Volantes would benefit them and Phillip.

“Come on.” Matteo reaches out for me once more and curves a hand around the back of my neck. He rests his forehead against mine. “You knew where this was going from the minute I took your virginity.”

I don’t like how that sounds. He didn’t force me, after all. “You didn’t take it, I gave you my virginity.”

“It doesn’t matter. The outcome was always going to be the same.”

I know how things work in our world, but I refuse to believe we need to rush into this.

“We can wait,” I reason, “see how things go.”

“See how things go? There’s only one way this is going, Giulia. You will be my wife as soon as I can make it happen.”

“But...”

“Enough!” Something inside Matteo snaps.



I squeal in fright as he grabs my arm and drags me from the bedroom. I have to run to keep up with him as he makes his way along the corridor and down a set of stairs I didn't know were there. He's obviously furious with me. He hates to be challenged, but he's always been patient with me until now.

We come to a landing, and I catch a glimpse of the kitchen. I had spotted a door at the back of the room, but assumed it was for a pantry. I guess it leads out here.

We don't stop here. Matteo leads me down another staircase into darkness. It's only now, as cold wafts across my skin, that I remember I'm stark naked. A frisson of fear prickles up and down my arms. Why did Matteo bring me down here?

He flicks a switch on the wall and lights come on. We're in a large, open cellar with racks of wine. There's a door over at the side. Matteo takes me over and opens it.

"What are you doing?" I ask as he shoves me inside.

The tiny room is lit by harsh overhead strip lighting. On one side of the room there's a narrow cot with a thin blanket thrown over it. This looks ominously like a cell.

"I can keep you safe by making you my wife, or by locking you away from the world."

I whirl around, hoping to find him grinning. but there's no trace of humor in his expression. There is, however, a gleam of determination in his eye that makes me shudder. It's not a prank. He's really doing this.

"Matty!" I whisper.

"You can give me your answer in the morning."

While I struggle to get to grips with what's happening, he steps back, closes the door, and locks it. His footsteps recede and a moment later the light goes off, plunging me into darkness. Anger and frustration course through my veins as I tentatively make my way over to the cot and sit on its edge.

I've never seen Matteo this way. He's clearly lost control of his senses. He's set on marrying me as soon as possible and I have no idea how to prevent it from happening.

### CHAPTER 16

Matteo

As I fry up some bacon for breakfast, I stifle a yawn. I barely slept last night. Telling Giulia I intend to marry her was impulsive, but the moment the words left my mouth I knew that's what I want. It's time I settled down like my older brothers have. Antonio, Leo, and Alessandro may have faced hurdles with their women, but they're all happy now. Giulia and I can have what they do. It has to be her. I can't imagine a future with any other woman.

Taking our relationship in a more intimate direction has been incredible. Fucking her feels so right I can't believe we didn't do it years ago, but there's more to it than that. We love each other. That's why I don't understand her resistance. There's no reason for us to wait to seal our bond.

The first thing I did when I woke this morning was call Damiano to ask him if he could find us a priest. He got back to me within minutes to tell me everything was set for midday at a church in Florence. Apparently, the family has strong ties to it because he organized that fast. I guess our name carries enough weight that even priests quiver upon hearing it.

I asked Damiano to send Livvy out to find Giulia a dress. My sister has a brilliant eye for fashion and has turned shopping into an Olympic sport. She'll find something to make my bride look like a queen.

When the bacon is nice and crisp, I plate it up and take it to the table where I've

already laid out pancakes, fruit juice, and coffee. Rosalia isn't coming in today, but I have enough culinary skills to make a decent breakfast. I doubt it will be enough to impress Giulia. She won't be in a hurry to forgive me for locking her away last night.

I regret having to take such a harsh line with her, but she needs to understand that marrying me is not optional. The protection of my family comes at a price and a permanent union with me is the one I plan to extract from her. The moment Giulia gave herself to me, she must have known it could never be taken back. I've desired her for longer than I care to admit. Being blind to the true nature of my feelings led to Giulia being married off to someone else. That can't happen again. I will do anything to make her mine. If that means playing hardball until she sees sense, then so be it.

As I head downstairs to let Giulia out of the cell my cousin had built in case it was ever needed for holding someone for interrogation, I wonder what sort of reception I'll get. It will either be a violent outburst or the cold shoulder. I'd prefer the former. That's something I know how to deal with. I can fuck the rage right out of her. Getting through to Giulia when she gives me the silent treatment is much harder.

When I open the door, she's sitting with her back against the wall. Her knees are drawn up to her chest, and she has a thin blanket around her. Shit. It didn't even occur to me that she was naked when I put her in here last night. Thankfully, she doesn't appear to be suffering any ill effects.

"Good morning." My greeting is intended to test the waters.

She doesn't respond but sends me a reproachful glare. It won't work on me. Nothing will make me feel guilty for doing whatever it takes to keep her safe. Who knows what that man would have done to her if he'd had the chance?

"Come and get some breakfast." My voice is soft, but I leave her no doubt that was a command.

Giulia gets up and discards the blanket. Fuck, she's beautiful. I have to will my body not to react. She follows me in silence back upstairs to the kitchen.

"I'd like to go to the bathroom and get dressed." She chooses her words carefully so she's not actually asking me for permission.

"Go ahead, but don't try anything stupid." I wouldn't be surprised if she tried to walk straight out the front door.

The scowl she aims at me would probably knock a lesser man off his feet. Having been around her for years, I'm immune.

"Why would I run?" she scoffs. "You'll only chase me."

"Damn right I will, sweetheart, and you won't like the consequences when I catch you."

Giulia snorts derisively, as if what I'm saying is a joke to her. Perhaps she's still not taking me seriously because we've been friends for so long. She doesn't realize how our dynamic has changed. Though I've always been protective of her, my instinct to keep her safe has gone into overdrive since I made her mine.

Grabbing her arm, I pull her close. I don't miss the shiver that goes through her or the sharp intake of breath that could equally signify fear or arousal. I suspect, having studied her reactions, that it's a bit of both.

"Let's get something straight, Giulia. You are mine and you will show me respect." Her answering pout isn't good enough. I tighten my grip on her arm and give her a little shake. "Understand?"

For several seconds, she glares at me. I stare right back, refusing to let her off the

hook. Eventually, she softens and bows her head. “I understand.”

She tugs her arm away from me, another act of defiance. This time, I allow it. She got the message. There’s no need to hammer it home.

Returning to the kitchen, I sit at the table. I pour some coffee and juice for both of us. Then I put a couple of pancakes and some bacon on Giulia’s plate. I was planning to scramble some eggs when she joined me, so they’d be fresh, but looking at the food in front of me, I decide there’s enough there already.

I don’t wait for Giulia before starting to eat. I try the pancakes first, drizzling them with a generous amount of maple syrup. They’re light and fluffy and taste amazing. I can’t help patting myself on the back for a job well done. The bacon might be a little overcooked, but it still tastes good.

It takes only a couple of minutes for Giulia to appear. Wearing jeans and a loose-fitting white t-shirt, she drops onto her seat like a recalcitrant teenager showing her displeasure with a heavy sigh.

“Eat before it gets cold.” I jab my fork toward her breakfast.

Giulia picks up a piece of bacon with her fingers and looks me straight in the eye as she viciously bites the end off. It’s not the most subtle way of letting me know she wishes it was my dick she was sinking her teeth into. Dissatisfied with my lack of a reaction, she drops the piece of bacon and focuses on her pancakes.

“Don’t you want syrup, or butter, or something?” I ask, as she shovels them into her mouth dry.

“No, thank you.”

“There’s some whipped cream in the fridge.”

“It’s fine like this. Thank you.”

She may be wrapping her hostility in a layer of civility, but I detect it all the same. It pisses me off.

“Eat it all,” I say. “You’ll need a decent breakfast inside you.”

Giulia sets down her fork and turns a suspicious gaze on me. “Why?”

I pick up a piece of bacon and pop it in my mouth. Giulia practically vibrates with frustration as I make a major production out of chewing and swallowing it.

“We’re getting married at midday.”

“What?” Giulia’s eyes go wider than I’ve ever seen them. “How did you arrange that so fast?”

“I didn’t. Damiano did.”

“But...”

“Don’t worry about a dress,” I cut in to stall whatever objection she has. “Livvy’s going to find you something nice.”

“Wow, it’s a real family affair.” Giulia’s tone drips with sarcasm. “Damiano organized the church. Livvy’s buying me a dress. What’s Lorenzo going to do? Hold the gun to my head?”

“Cut the dramatics, Giulia.” I scrub a hand over my face. “I don’t get why you’re

being so stubborn about this.”

She throws her hands in the air. “Because you’re not listening to me, Matteo. I wanted to take this slow. You said we could...”

“Get to know each other?” My tone is mocking, but I can’t help myself. “We already do.”

Giulia purses her lips. “There’s no point in arguing with you.”

“No, there’s not, because if you continue acting like a brat over this, you will pay a price you won’t like.”

“Oh, let me guess. You’ll lock me up.”

“That and so much more. I’ll shut down your little community project.” I know I’ve got Giulia because tears fill her eyes. Whatever it is she’s been devoting her time to, it means a lot to her. She’ll do anything to be allowed to continue her work. Still, I can’t stop myself adding an additional threat. “And then, of course, there’s your father and your brother. I’d hate to see any harm come to them.”

The sob Giulia emits tears at my soul. I don’t want to hurt her, but now I’ve started it’s impossible to rein myself in.

“So, do as you’re told today, say your vows like a good girl, and everything will be okay. Understood?”

She doesn’t look me in the eye. Silent tears run down her cheek. I want to reach out and hug her. If I could I’d take back everything I just said. But I can’t. There’s too much riding on this and I’m not a man who apologizes. Ever. It’s in my DNA to be ruthless in pursuit of what I want. Even if I have to hurt the woman I love, it will be



worth it in the end. This tension between us will pass and we'll be happy together.

"I understand." Swiping away her tears, she rises from the table. "May I be excused?"

She's barely touched her breakfast, but I can't bring myself to make her sit back down to finish it.

"Yes, sweetheart."

She hurries away, her footsteps pattering along the corridor and up the stairs. I got her compliance, which was exactly what I wanted, so why do I feel like such a fucking asshole?

### CHAPTER 17

Giulia

For the second time in a year, I'm about to exchange vows when I really don't want to. My marriage to Johnny was arranged by my father and stepmother for reasons they never fully explained to me. Knowing the importance of doing my duty, I didn't object to their plans. But I assumed if I was ever to marry again, I would have some say in it. Being widowed is supposed to grant a woman some measure of freedom in our fucked-up world. I guess none of that matters to the Volantes, who expect everyone to bend to their will.

It's not that I don't want to be with Matteo. Under different circumstances, I'd be bursting with happiness at the thought of marrying him. It's not because he's rich and powerful, though those are certainly incentives. His incredible hotness isn't the reason either. It's because Matteo is one of the best friends I've ever had. I'm comfortable with him. It doesn't hurt that he's incredible in bed, not that we've made much use of one so far. We've mostly bypassed the comfort of a soft mattress in favor of other settings.

There's little to complain about in terms of the arrangements Damiano made for us. The church is pretty much my dream venue. Tucked away beside a quiet park in the center of Florence, it was built during the Renaissance as a private chapel for some wealthy family. Despite the short notice, it's been decorated with gorgeous arrangements of blush pink roses and peonies, my favorite flower.

My dress is stunning. Livvy picked it out for me, but it's exactly what I'd have

chosen. She found me an amazing white silk dress with a corseted bodice and a floaty skirt that fans out when I walk. Miraculously, it's a perfect fit for my small boobs and wider hips. I feel like a princess in it. I'm not so enamored of the shoes she bought. They're an inch higher than I'm used to, and the heel is so delicate, I'm afraid it'll snap and I'll twist my ankle.

Livvy helped me to apply some makeup, which has given me a rosy-cheeked maiden look, and she found me a sparkly silver headband that suits my cropped lilac-colored hair. I kind of regret rebelliously changing my hair now, but there's not much I can do about that. It's not as if I can make my hair grow on command.

Everything is close to perfect, but as I stare at myself in the mirror, I still can't summon any enthusiasm for what's about to happen. I never imagined Matteo would strong-arm me into marriage like this. I don't know why he believes I'm in need of protection or that this is the best way to ensure my safety, but it's turned him into a raging asshole.

"Are you ready?" Livvy's concerned tone tells me she isn't oblivious to my reluctance.

"Nope."

She rakes her teeth over her bottom lip. "Do you want me to talk to Matteo?"

I turn to face her. "What good would that do?"

Livvy shrugs. "I'm his favorite sister. He might listen to me."

It's impossible not to roll my eyes at that. "You're his only sister and right now he isn't listening to anyone."

I know because when we arrived, Damiano took one look at my face and the tight grip Matteo had on my arm and dragged him aside to ask him what the hell was going on. Predictably, Matteo told him to mind his own business. His cousin backed off, but I can't help wondering if he would put a stop to this if I asked him to. Matteo needs a serious time out to reconsider what he's doing.

The only reason I won't appeal to Damiano is that I don't want to be the cause of a family rift. The Italian and American Volantes help to keep each other in power. Without their tight bonds, it would be harder for them to maintain control. If they lose their grip, everyone in the organization suffers, and that includes my dad and my brother. Perhaps I should quit being so selfless, but I can't do anything to jeopardize everyone's future.

"Anyway," I soften my tone because Livvy has issues of her own, "you've also got an overbearing asshole to deal with."

Livvy rolls her eyes, immediately knowing I'm referring to the ice-cold Russian who turned up at the church at the same time we did. Apparently he was scheduled to meet with Damiano this afternoon. When he heard about the wedding, he invited himself along. Livvy is playing it cool, but occasionally I glimpse anxiety in her expression.

"I could ask Piotr to help you," she suggests.

"And what would that cost you?" I can only imagine what she'd have to promise to persuade Reznov to go against the Volantes. "Just leave it alone. I'll be okay."

Livvy looks set to dispute that, but is interrupted when the door opens and Lorenzo strolls into the room. Brimming with confidence, he inhabits every space like he owns it.

"You two look nice," he says with a grin.

“Nice?” Livvy bristles. “We look fucking incredible.”

Lorenzo shrugs. “She does,” he nods toward me, “but you need some color in your cheeks, cousin. Wouldn’t want the big bad Russian to think you’re afraid of him, would you?”

I don’t like the way he teases Olivia. Everyone acts as if she’s some spoiled princess who’s devoid of feelings, but I suspect she’s hurt by the way the men in her family mess with her.

“What do you want, Lorenzo?” I demand.

“Came to see if you want me to walk you down the aisle.”

More likely he’s been sent to ensure I’m delivered to Matteo without fuss. Perhaps my earlier comment about him holding the gun to my head wasn’t so wide of the mark.

“I’d rather you walked me back to New York.”

Lorenzo laughs. “Sorry, dolcezza , but Matteo would have my balls and the ladies like them where they are.”

Livvy makes a gagging sound. “On that disgusting note, I’m out of here.”

She shoots me another anxious glance before slipping out of the room, leaving me alone with her intimidating cousin.

“You should be nicer to her,” I tell Lorenzo.

“When was I not nice?” He sounds affronted as if he really doesn’t know he

shouldn't tease her over Piotr Reznov. The Russian's interest in Livvy is obviously unsettling her.

"You tease her. You all do."

"So?"

"So you should protect her. She's the baby of the family."

"Si," Lorenzo agrees. "My family."

Message received. "I'll keep my opinions to myself, then."

"That would be best." Lorenzo cocks his head to the side as he studies me. "Are you really so unhappy about marrying Matteo?"

I sigh heavily. "It's not marrying him I object to, it's the way he's gone about things. If we dated for six months and then he got down on one knee I'd be ecstatic, but he's acted like every other arrogant mafia brute out there."

Lorenzo nods thoughtfully. "As an arrogant mafia brute myself, I can assure you he's doing what any of us would to keep our woman safe."

"Keep me safe from what? I don't understand why he thinks there's a threat."

Lorenzo rubs his chin and purses his lips as if trying to decide what to tell me. "The man who spoke to you at Damiano's club was also seen in the woods by the house. We think he was watching you."

"Why?"

“We don’t know what his motivations are yet. He may be one of the last remaining Rossis or some associate of the Montalbano family who blames us for that girl’s death.”

“So why not let me go? Nobody has a reason to target me if I’m not with Matteo. I’d be safer in New York.”

“That’s not for me to say.” Lorenzo’s jaw clenches. I guess his patience with trying to appeal to me has already run out. He holds his arm out for me. “Come, Giulia. We’ve wasted enough time.”

There’s an edge to his tone that tells me not to argue. Threading my arm through his, I allow him to lead me out of the little room where I got dressed and into the chapel. There’s no music to accompany our walk down the aisle and I can’t help but think I’d have liked something soothing like Pachelbel’s Canon in D Major. I must have heard it at a hundred weddings, but it’s a classic choice for a reason.

Each step Lorenzo and I take seems to echo in the almost empty space. Apart from the Volante cousins and Piotr Reznov, there are a handful of men, some mafia and others Bratva, I’d guess. I don’t recognize any of them. Their presence brings my sense of loneliness to the fore. Nobody is here for me. Even though I’m sure he’d make me go through with this farce of a wedding, I want my dad by my side.

We reach the altar quickly and Lorenzo releases me. I glance sideways at Matteo. Wearing a black three-piece suit and tie, he’s devastatingly handsome, but his expression is grim. I’m not sure he wants to do this any more than I do. He takes my hand and tugs me around to face him. Then he leans in close so only I can hear him. I’m longing for words of reassurance, something to show his apparent change in personality is only temporary. Instead, what he utters is like a slap in the face.

“Behave in front of my family or there will be severe consequences.”

The priest clears his throat and Matteo backs off a little. He keeps hold of my hand. The man officiating over this sham is surprisingly young. He looks to be in his early thirties. His nose is crooked, like it's been broken, but his eyes radiate warmth. When he speaks, it's in Italian. Unable to understand a word, I furrow my brow.

“Inglese ,” Matteo snaps. “Asshole.”

A shocked gasp escapes me. “Matteo!”

I would never speak to a priest that way, Matteo glowers at me like I'm out of line. I don't know why he's so pissed. He put us in this situation.

The priest doesn't bother with a sermon on the benefits of holy matrimony, skipping straight to the vows instead. I wonder if he was told to make this brief or if he's just adept at reading the room. Not that it would be hard to interpret Matteo's scowl and clenched fist as signs of impatience.

It takes less than three minutes before it's my turn to say “I do.” Matteo squeezes my hand in warning as I hesitate so I utter the words and he slips a simple gold band onto my ring finger.

The priest pronounces us husband and wife, and I brace myself for a punishing kiss. It doesn't come. Matteo merely brushes his lips against mine as if he can't be bothered to kiss me and drags me to a table behind the altar to sign the paperwork. The whole thing is over so quickly it hardly seems worthwhile to have gotten all dressed up.

“It's done.” Matteo has the temerity to sound angry. “You're mine now.”

I don't respond. What would I say at this point? I let Matteo lead me back down the aisle toward the ornate wooden doors that were sealed after our arrival. Two



bodyguards move from the shadows to open the doors. They step outside ahead of us to check the coast is clear. That's when all hell breaks loose.

One of them is propelled back into the church. Blood blooms across his pristine white shirt as he staggers and drops to the floor. Men in combat gear run up the steps toward us. There's no time to bar the doors.

"Get down!" Matteo shoves me aside.

I dive between the pews and crawl on my belly toward a massive stone pillar as gunfire fills the air. As I take shelter, bullets whizz past me. I scan left and right, looking for an escape route and see Livvy crouched behind one of the wooden seats close to the front of the church. She's clutching a gun close to her chest. I don't know if she has it in her to use it.

Though I'm desperate to know what's going on, I don't dare stick my head around the edge of the pillar. Pieces of stone are being blasted off the column behind me. Men are screaming at each other. The ear-splitting cracks of shots fired from handguns compete with the loud, continuous popping from assault rifles.

As I'm scanning my surroundings for a way out, a man's body drops next to me. Part of his face is missing. It's a gruesome sight and bile rises in my throat. The tattoo on his neck, a dagger tells me he's Bratva, one of Piotr Reznov's men. I stare at him for longer than I should, unable to look away. The image is going to be imprinted on my mind for years to come.

Just as I think this is never going to end, silence falls. Still, I don't dare move. Distantly, I hear someone shout my name, but I stay put. Feet appear in front of me, and I look up to find Matteo looming over me. There's blood on his clothing, but he doesn't seem to be injured.

“None of it’s mine.” He must have seen me studying him. He holds out a hand and helps me to my feet. “Let’s get you out of here. Try not to look.”

I get that he wants to protect me, but I’m not that delicate. Though the scene is pretty horrific, relief sweeps over me as I realize most of the dead bodies belong to our assailants, whoever they are. Lorenzo is leaning against the wall, oozing blood from a nasty gash on his head, and Damiano’s arm hangs limply from his side like he’s injured.

Piotr Reznov, who’s completely unruffled as if he just took a stroll in the park, stands alongside two tattooed brutes, with guns pointed at three men who’re on their knees. One of them looks like the young guy who approached me at the nightclub. I want to plead for mercy on his behalf because I think he’s just a bit lost. Then he stares up at me with a malevolent gleam in his eye and the instinct to protect him disappears.

As we reach the door, Matteo sweeps me into his arms and carries me down to a black SUV at the bottom of the steps. He sets me down on the back seat.

“Wait here,” Matteo commands.

“Matt...”

“I mean it, Giulia. I don’t have time for your bullshit.”

Stunned that he’d speak to me like that after what just happened, I settle back against the seat, arms crossed over my chest as he shuts the door. He jogs up the steps of the church to speak to Damiano and Piotr Reznov, who’s got a hand wrapped around Livvy’s upper arm.

After a brief conversation, Matteo disappears into the church. Piotr drags Livvy down the steps and puts her in the passenger seat of the SUV before getting into the driver’s

side.

“What’s happening?” I’m flung back against the seat as Piotr fires the engine and takes off at speed.

“Matteo wants me to get you out of here. He’s going to interrogate the assholes who attacked us.”

There’s so much for me to be upset about right now, but somehow that’s what finishes me off. Matteo should be by my side, ensuring I’m okay after that ordeal. I could have died in that church, we all could. I need the man who claims to love me to tell me it’s all over, that I’ll be fine. Damiano’s men are more than capable of getting answers about the attack, but of course Matteo wants to do it himself. Nothing is more important to him than dealing with his family’s enemies. I don’t want to take second place to that.

“Take me home,” I demand.

“That’s what I’m doing,” Reznov replies.

I meet his cool glare in the rearview mirror.

“Not to the villa, to New York.”

He shakes his head. “Can’t do it, dushka . You’re Matteo’s wife.”

“Please.” I’m not above begging. “I need to go home.”

His shoulders stiffen. “It’s not my place to interfere.”

A scream rips from my throat as I bang my head against the seat. This is so fucking

frustrating, Livvy reaches around and places a hand on my knee. Tears stream down my face as I bow my head.

“Take her home,” Livvy says.

“Olivia.” The Russian’s tone holds a warning.

“Please, Piotr, do it for me.”

They stare at each other for several long seconds. Reznov narrows his icy blue eyes.  
“You will owe me, Olivia.”

She nods. I should tell her not to make a deal with the devil on my behalf, but it’s too late. It’s done.

“Very well.” Reznov smiles grimly. “I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

### CHAPTER 18

G iulia

It's late evening when Piotr Reznov's luxurious private jet touches down at Teterboro. He didn't accompany me on the flight, something I'll be eternally grateful for. I don't think I could have coped with trying to make small talk with the terrifying Russian for eleven hours.

Though he didn't disguise how reluctant he was to help me, he made sure I'd be taken care of. He arranged for his plane to take me home, agreed to contact my dad to have him meet me at the airport, and provided me with a change of clothing. It's just a pair of black yoga pants, a loose-fitting white t-shirt, and white sneakers, but it was comfier to travel in than my wedding dress would have been.

Piotr also took care of the officials here and in Florence to ensure there would be no problems since I didn't want to waste time by returning to the villa for my passport. I had no idea how soon Matteo would be back after his interrogations and I wanted to get away.

The flight was smooth and a beautiful blonde Russian attendant called Polina saw to my every need, not that I required much apart from a pillow and blanket so I could try to get some sleep. There was a bedroom on the plane, but I didn't dare use it. Who knows what Piotr Reznov's been up to in there?

With anxiety gnawing at my insides, I didn't get much sleep. Matteo is going to be pissed that I ran from him. He'll want to punish me and I'm not sure I can face that.

When I make my way down the steps from the plane, I'm relieved to see my dad's Mercedes SUV waiting for me. He gets out of the car to greet me with a hug. He's dressed, as usual, in black jeans and a black shirt. In his mid-forties, he's still got an impressive physique.

"What's going on, kiddo?" His pale blue eyes are filled with concern as he pulls back from our embrace. "I was shocked when Olivia Volante called to tell me you were coming home from Italy."

I'm glad Livvy phoned him and not Piotr. Hearing from a Bratva leader that I'd been halfway across the world would have freaked Dad out even more.

"Can we talk in the car?"

"Sure."

Before I take a single step, Polina calls out to me.

"Mrs. Volante." She comes down the steps from the plane with my wedding dress draped over her arms. "You forgot this."

Any thought I had of hiding the news of my marriage to Matteo just flew out of the window. My dad gives me a quizzical look as I take the dress from Polina.

"Thank you," I say tightly.

"My pleasure." Polina turns and struts back to the plane. My dad's eyes follow her the whole way. The woman is incredibly attractive. If Piotr ever gets Livvy onto his plane, she'll hate Polina on sight. One thing I know about the Volante princess is that she hates sharing the limelight.

While my dad's distracted, I hurry around to the passenger side of his car and get in. My dad lingers on the tarmac for a moment and then gets behind the wheel. He looks at me, waiting for an explanation. "Mrs. Volante?"

"Can we just drive?" My voice is weary.

My dad purses his lips, displeased, but he starts the engine anyway. He's done awful things in the Volantes' name, but he treats me with as much care as he's capable of. Even if he's not happy with my lack of an explanation, he won't push me. For the first ten minutes of our drive back to the city, he says nothing.

"I married Matteo," I blurt out when the silence becomes too much to bear.

He nods, having already guessed that much from Polina calling me Mrs. Volante and the white gown that couldn't be anything but a wedding dress.

"Did he force you?"

"No, I chose to marry him." It's a half-truth. Although my choice wasn't entirely free, I opted to go along with Matteo to save myself and my family from his wrath.

"Thank god." Some of the tension is released from his shoulders. "So what happened? Why are you here alone?"

"There was a shooting at the church."

Dad slams on the brakes. I throw a hand out to brace myself on the dashboard as the car skids to a halt. He turns to me, his expression betraying horror.

"You were there?"

“Yeah, but I’m okay.”

Despite my reassurance, he huffs out what might be a sob and pulls me into his arms. He strokes my hair. “My poor girl.”

After a minute, this unexpected show of affection becomes awkward so I wriggle out of his hold.

“I’m fine, Dad, I promise you. The men who attacked us came off worse.”

“I’m sorry you went through that. A sweet girl like you shouldn’t have to witness such things.” Anger flares in his eyes. “Where is Matteo? He should be by your side, not leaving you to fly all this way alone.”

I don’t bother to point out that I made it all the way to Italy on my own so returning that way was no big deal.

“They took a couple of enemy soldiers alive. He wanted to question them himself.”

My dad nods approvingly. He’s always respected the Volantes’ willingness to get their hands dirty. They never ask their men to do things they wouldn’t themselves.

“So, he sent you home?”

“No, I needed to get away. I didn’t tell him I was leaving.”

Dad’s jaw clenches. “Did something happen?”

I shake my head. “I’m just making a point.”

“Giulia. You can’t play games with a man like Matteo Volante.”



“I can handle Matteo.” Even to my own ears that lacked conviction. “Better than I could have handled Johnny Lombardi.”

It’s a low blow, but right now I am pissed at the men in my life constantly trying to take control from me.

“Giulia...” His tone is apologetic, his face stricken.

“Why did you marry me to Johnny?” I ask. “Was it just because you hoped to further your career?”

As he turns away and restarts the engine, which stalled when he screeched to a halt, I think he’s going to refuse to give me an answer. He releases the parking brake and drives off.

“Valeria owed him money.” He speaks quietly, his hunched shoulders betraying his shame. “She likes to shop.”

‘Likes’ is the understatement of the century. The woman lives for designer clothes, purses, gaudy jewels. I never imagined she was spending so far beyond my dad’s means that she’d resort to borrowing money from one of his mob brothers.

“I see.” My jaw clenches. “And you couldn’t think of another way to pay him off?”

“Johnny wanted your brother to fight to clear the debt, but he wasn’t ready for a death match.”

“So, it was Phillip’s life or mine?”

He bows his head in shame. “Johnny wouldn’t have hurt you.”

“No, he wouldn’t because Matteo warned him off.”

Dad glances at me, his eyebrow cocked. “I thought he’d step in, offer for you himself. Why didn’t he?”

I shrug. “I guess he didn’t see me as wife material.”

“But he does now?”

I spread my hands out. “Evidently.”

“He’d better treat you right.”

“He will.”

At least I hope that’s the case. Leaving Italy the way I did is going to piss him off. He might carry out his threat to keep me locked away.

“Good.” Dad nods. “Now, tell me, Giulia, when are you going to fix your hair?”

It’s such an unexpected change of direction, I can’t help laughing.

“Soon,” I tell him, relieved to be off the topic of my marriage. “Very soon.”

I wake early, surprised I slept at all. When my dad dropped me at my apartment, I had a quick shower and changed into my pajamas, intending to go straight to bed. Instead, I sat on the sofa in my tiny living room for hours, trying to work out how I feel about Matteo. He’s my husband now and in our world ‘until death parts us’ is not a token phrase. The words carry meaning. There are consequences for trying to escape them.

As the hours dragged by, I almost convinced myself I’d overreacted by leaving Italy

the way I did. I love Matteo. Our marriage could be harmonious. It's not as if we don't get along well, most of the time. Then I remembered how he rode roughshod over my objections to marrying him so soon. I never imagined he'd threaten me and it still hurts that he did. Getting past that might not be so easy.

When I finally went to bed, it took me forever to drift off and I don't feel particularly rested this morning. Regardless, I get up and prepare to go out, dressing in jeans and a black t-shirt in case I need to do any work at the community center that will involve getting messy. I left a few tasks half-finished before I went to Italy. Antonio told me to let Dante know what needed to be done, and I gave him a list, but I don't know if he got around to arranging for the work to be completed.

On arrival at the center, I find the doors locked. There's no sign of any contractors on site. I open the doors and walk through the building, discovering that Antonio was true to his word about getting the work completed while I was away.

My office, which was an empty shell, is all set up with a desk, chairs, computer, and the pictures I bought to brighten the space have been hung on the wall. The counseling suite is ready for use and the kids' playrooms are also good to go. Shelves have been put up in the room I intend to use as a library and study space. There are no books yet, but that's okay. I told Dante I'd take care of that myself.

The kitchen wasn't on the list of things I wanted to be completed, but when I walk in, I'm amazed to find it's in ready-to-use condition. There are industrial ovens, stainless steel tables for prepping food, and dozens of cabinets in a light gray wood. A fancy coffee machine I don't remember ordering sits on the countertop. It probably requires a trained barista to operate it. Deciding it's too complicated for me to figure out before I've had a caffeine fix, I head along the corridor, intending to go to the coffee shop down the block.

I'm almost at the front door when it swings open. My heart thuds furiously as

Antonio Volante walks in, wearing his usual inscrutable expression. Does he know about me and Matteo? Is he angry with me for running from his brother? Fear surges through me as he advances on me, then dissipates just as quickly as my friend, Isabella, enters a few steps behind him.

“Giulia!” She greets me with a warm smile.

“Izzy.” Uncertainty creeps along my spine. It’s been over a year since I last saw the woman who was once my closest female friend.

“I told you to wait with Dante until I was sure it’s safe.” Though Antonio’s tone is scolding, there’s no denying his glare softens as his wife comes to his side. He wraps an arm around Isabella as his eyes scan the corridor behind me.

“It’s just me here,” I assure him.

“No bodyguard?” he growls. “What are you thinking?”

I shrug. Having someone to protect me isn’t something I’d even considered. I’ve never been important enough to be targeted before.

“Don’t bully your new sister-in-law.” Isabella steps away from Antonio and throws her arms around me. “Welcome to the family, Giulia.”

“You heard?”

“We did.” Antonio fixes me with an intimidating stare. “What I want to know is why you arrived last night on Piotr Reznov’s plane without your husband by your side.”

Isabella releases me and spins around to face Antonio. She puts a hand on his chest. “You didn’t come here to interrogate Giulia.”

She purses her lips and inclines her head in a way that tells me she's pressing him for an answer. It's amusing to see her face off against the intensely scary head of the Volante organization like this, but I wouldn't dare smile. She might not have reason to be afraid of Antonio, but I'm not so lucky.

Something passes between them, and he sighs. "No, I didn't."

"What did you come here for?" Curiosity gets the better of me.

"To tell you there will be a hefty donation in your bank account by the end of the day, a reward for a job well done."

That can only mean one thing. "He's coming home?"

Antonio nods. "Later today. Is that a problem for you?"

I shake my head.

"Because I was thinking," Antonio continues, "that there must be some issue, something that made you run from him. Something serious enough for you to turn to the fucking Bratva for help."

Isabella puts a restraining hand on his arm. "Antonio?"

"No, Bella," he says firmly, "if this hasty marriage is going to fuck us all in the ass, I want to know now."

Does he think Matteo's done something that would cause me to turn on the family?

"I would never betray Matteo." Even if he's being an asshole, I couldn't bring myself to harm him. "No matter what."

“So he has done something?” Isabella knows me too well. She can no doubt hear the quiver in my voice as I hold back tears.

“I... eh...”

Suddenly overwhelmed with emotion, I can’t find the words to respond to her. A tear rolls down my cheek, followed by another. Then the floodgates open. This has been a long time coming. I’ve been holding myself in check forever, since my dad first told me he’d arranged my marriage to Johnny, in fact. That hit me hard, as did losing my husband on our wedding night. I might not have wanted to be Johnny Lombardi’s wife, but it was still a shock to be widowed like that.

Matteo made the whole thing worse with his cruel comment after the funeral and then when I finally forgave him for that, he let me down again with his threats. It’s too much. I don’t have the energy to pretend everything is okay anymore.

Isabella wraps her arms around me as Antonio makes a discreet exit. I guess the sight of a woman crying is too much for the big bad mafia boss to deal with. She lets me sob on her shoulder for a minute and then leads me into the nearest room, which luckily has a comfy sofa for us to sit on.

“How about I make us a coffee?” Isabella asks.

“Uh, yeah.” I wipe away my tears. “There’s a machine in the kitchen, but it’s pretty fancy. I don’t know how to use it.”

“That’s a present from Emilia,” she says. “The café at the Vicente Hotel has one that’s the same.”

“She gave me that?” I’ve never even met Alessandro’s wife. “Why?”

“When I heard Antonio blackmailed you into going to Italy, I told the girls and we decided to do something nice for you. Vinnie and I finished the playroom and bought some toys. Emilia didn’t really have time to pitch in because she’s so busy at the hotel, so she sent the coffee machine over.”

“Wow, it’s really sweet of you all to help.”

“We Volante women need to stick together.”

“But I wasn’t a Volante when I left.”

Isabella smiles. “It was always going to happen. Antonio knew if he sent you to Matteo, his brother would finally get his head out of his ass and realize he had someone worth coming home for.”

My mouth drops open. She can’t be saying what I think she is. “You’re telling me the head of the biggest mafia organization on the East Coast was playing matchmaker?”

Isabella nods. “In his way. It worked, though. You married Matteo, didn’t you?”

“Not willingly.”

“Shit, Giulia.” She grabs my hand and squeezes it as she scans me from head to foot. “Did he hurt you?”

“No.” I can’t help scowling. Isabella should know Matteo better than that. He’d never physically harm me. “He was just an asshole about it.”

Isabella flashes me a sympathetic look. “Do you want out of the marriage?”

We both know that’s an impossibility in our world. “That’s not really an option.”

“I could talk to Antonio.”

I appreciate her offer, but she’s only been back with Antonio for a few weeks after her yearlong exile and I don’t want to be the cause of an argument between them. I shake my head.

“It will work out okay.” I try to sound certain about that, but Isabella’s frown tells me she’s not convinced. “Why don’t we go grab a coffee and you can tell me how things are going with Antonio?”

It’s an obvious deflection, but Isabella allows it. I’m relieved when she nods and gets to her feet. As I follow her to the kitchen, I can’t help asking, “How did you reconcile with Antonio after he exiled you like that?”

Isabella shrugs. “He helped me deal with a horrible situation.”

Matteo told me what happened with Rico Mancini, but I don’t tell Isabella that. If she wants to confide in me about killing the man who attacked her, she can do it in her own time.

“And?” I prompt.

“And I realized despite everything, I still love him. I don’t know if I’ve entirely forgiven him for sending me away, but the good in him outweighs the bad. I can’t imagine life without him.”

I guess that’s what I have to decide. Can I picture a future that doesn’t involve Matteo?



### CHAPTER 19

M atteo

It's almost midnight by the time I get to my brother Alessandro's place on the Upper East Side. I called him from the plane and asked him to obtain some papers for me, but that's not the only reason I'm here. The thought of going home to an empty apartment after the shitty twenty-four hours I've just had was unbearable. I need to be with family and Alessandro was the best option.

I didn't want to go to Antonio. He's been bombarding me with messages that make it clear I'm on his shit list. He's even more pissed now than he was when I decided to stay in Italy longer than he expected. The last thing I need right now is an in-person lecture about my responsibility to the family. Besides, I don't want to see Isabella. She'll be disappointed in me for wrecking things with Giulia.

I could have gone to Leo, but he'd show zero sympathy for my predicament and I don't need anyone to tell me I'm a grade-A asshole. His firecracker wife, Vinnie, would have been right by his side, getting her jabs in. I admire her refusal to put up with bullshit, but not when I'm on the receiving end of her sharp tongue.

Going to my mother's house wasn't a possibility either. She'll be devastated by how badly I've fucked things up with Giulia. Anyway, she has a lot on her plate with my younger brother Gio being a dick about time out from the family. So, being the least likely to ride my ass about the situation I'm in, Alessandro is the lucky bastard who gets to watch me drown in self-pity.

When his front door swings open, it's his wife, Emilia, who greets me. The gorgeous Italian brunette tilts her head to one side and casts an appraising look over me. She purses her lips in what might equally be disapproval or concern. I guess I'm a mess. Though I showered and changed my clothes after torturing the assholes who dared to attack my wedding, I didn't take care over my appearance. I'm wearing sweatpants, a ratty old t-shirt, and sneakers. My hair is unkempt and patches of stubble cover my jaw.

The moment I learned that fucker Reznov had put my wife on a plane to New York instead of taking her back to the villa like I asked, I headed straight for the airport. Damiano got me onto the only available flight and stuck me in coach. There was nothing to do but stew over my fuck-ups because sleeping with so many strangers around me was impossible.

Reznov is damned lucky Damiano got me out of the villa when he did. I wanted to shove my knife into his cold, unfeeling heart as he stood there and calmly told me what he'd done. My cousins got between us and my sister reminded me that the Reznov Bratva are our allies and their Pakhan is about to marry my mother. Thankfully, the long plane ride gave me time to think, and I realized all the blame for Giulia running belongs on my shoulders.

"My poor Matteo!" Emilia throws her arms around my neck and pulls me into a hug. When she releases me, I feel bereft and I realize she's the real reason I came here. Her warmth is exactly what I need right now. "You look..." She waves her hand around as she tries to find the right word.

My brother has no such difficulty expressing himself as he joins us at the door. "He looks like shit."

"Yeah, I could use some sleep."

“And a shower. You smell like a raccoon crawled up your ass and died.” Alessandro grins, obviously pleased with his juvenile insult. “Well, quit hovering in the doorway.”

He puts his arm around his wife’s waist and steers her away from the door. Shutting the door behind me, I follow them into the living room. When Alessandro lived here alone, my sister used to complain that it looked like a sex club with its black furniture and dark walls. I’m guessing she got that idea from books or movies because I’m pretty sure, despite her nude photo scandal, she’s never set foot in such a place.

Alessandro’s home has been completely transformed since Emilia moved in. Everything is brighter. The sofa is a cream color. There are throw pillows on it and the armchairs are in various shades of blue. The floor is carpeted now, so it’s softer underfoot. A wave of jealousy goes through me. I want Giulia in my home, making it cozy for us. The thought I might have fucked that up forever causes an unfamiliar burning behind my eyes. Shit! Am I about to cry over fucking soft furnishings?

While Alessandro and Emilia sit next to each other on the sofa, I quickly pull myself together and drop into the armchair.

“You got the papers I asked for?” I nod toward the brown envelope on the coffee table.

“Yeah.” Alessandro puts his arm around Emilia’s shoulder and pulls her closer. “You sure it’s what you want?”

To annul my marriage after less than a day? No, it’s not what I want, but if I’m going to have any chance of salvaging any sort of relationship with Giulia, I have to try to undo the damage I did by forcing her into marriage.

“It’s not about what I want.”

“You’re a good man,” Emilia says.

As welcome as her reassurance is, I can’t agree. “The last couple of days prove otherwise.”

Emilia smiles sadly. “You can still fix it. Alessandro and I didn’t have the best start and we’re happy now.”

As my brother squeezes her shoulder, exhaustion crashes over me, bringing with it a deep sense of sadness. I can’t sit here witnessing the obvious love my brother and his wife have for one another. Though I can’t stand being near them, I don’t want to leave either. “Can I crash here?”

“You know where the guest rooms are,” Alessandro says as I get to my feet.

I nod in thanks and walk away.

“For what it’s worth,” Emilia calls out, “I think you’re doing the right thing.”

I don’t respond. I can’t. Instead, I hurry along the corridor, choosing the guest bedroom farthest from the master suite. I don’t bother to turn the light on, but step forward and collapse onto the king-sized bed.

In the morning, I’ll go to Giulia and give her the annulment papers. I’ll set her free and hopefully some small part of her will come back to me one day. My chest tightens at the thought it might never happen. I hated those six months when she was out of my life. I’m not sure I’ll survive losing her again.

As light pours in through the window, I lie in bed and stare up at the stark white ceiling. I can’t help wondering if the pain stabbing deep into my chest as I think about Giulia is payback for what happened to Sofia Montalbano. Although my

interrogation of the Rossi assholes revealed she was actually the target that day and not me, I don't feel comforted. If I'd been more observant that day, if I'd drawn my gun a few seconds earlier, that Rossi asshole wouldn't have had a chance to fire the shot that snuffed out her young life.

Now that I'm back in New York, I should quit wallowing and get back to my routine. Usually at this time of day, I'd be down at the gym, sparring with one of the guys or assessing the skills of some of our new recruits. Today, I can't summon the motivation to go down there. I doubt the news of my marriage has spread beyond my immediate family, but I don't want to risk it. Answering questions about Giulia would be tricky. The marriage is probably going to end before it started. That won't go down well among our men, who'll see it as a sign of weakness that I'm letting her go. Stability in the leadership is important to our organization. That's something I'm sure my oldest brother will delight in reminding me, not that he can fucking talk after the shit that went down with Isabella.

Reluctantly, I haul my ass out of bed and head for the shower. If I'm going to see Giulia, I need to clean myself up. I don't want her to think I'm trying to manipulate her by looking totally pathetic.

I can't get the water to the heat I want. I like it to be scalding hot. Alessandro needs to get this fixed. As I'm rinsing the shampoo out of my hair, the door of the shower cubicle opens.

"What the fuck?" I yell as I find my brother standing there.

"Nothing I haven't seen before, little brother." Alessandro flashes an arrogant grin.

"I'm little?" Grabbing my crotch, I smirk right back at him. "I've seen what you're packing. It's a surprise that wife of yours looks so fucking happy all the time."

Alessandro's expression sours. I shouldn't have brought Emilia into our dick-measuring contest. An apology sits on the tip of my tongue, but he doesn't give me a chance to utter it.

"Get dressed. You have a visitor." He whirls around and storms from the room. I guess I'm lucky he didn't punch me.

I finish off in the shower and return to the bedroom to find Alessandro has left a dress shirt and pants for me. We're about the same size. His feet are smaller, though, so there are no shoes. I'll have to put my sneakers on until I get back to my apartment. Antonio, who I assume is my visitor, will just have to deal with me not meeting his exacting standards.

As I walk along the corridor, I hear a familiar feminine laugh. I stop dead. An uncharacteristic tremor of uncertainty runs through me. I take a deep breath and follow the sound into the kitchen. Barely noticing Emilia sitting on a stool at the breakfast bar with Alessandro standing next to her, my eyes fall on Giulia. She's perched on a high stool, eating a bagel and drinking coffee, making friends with my sister-in-law, it seems. Wearing jeans and a white t-shirt, she's effortlessly beautiful.

The moment she notices me, she sets down her coffee, her expression sobering.

"What are you doing here?" My question comes out harsher than I intended and Alessandro shoots me an unnecessary warning look. I'm not planning to give her a hard time.

"I came to see you."

"How did you know I was here?"

Giulia scoffs. "You're not the only one in this town with connections."

I raise an eyebrow and wait for an explanation.

“I went to your place first,” she tells me. “Then I went to Leo’s. He told me you were here.”

“How did he know?” I look at Alessandro who smiles condescendingly. “Fucking gossips.”

Emilia touches Alessandro’s arm and clambers off her stool. “Let’s leave them to talk.”

“Oh, no.” Giulia sounds mortified. “I don’t want to drive you out.”

“It’s okay,” Emilia assures her. “I need to get to work and Alessandro has to go smooth things over at Ava’s house.”

“Why?” I turn to my brother. “What’s going on?”

“Mamma was so thrilled to hear you were coming home, Gio decided it was the ideal time to drop the bomb that he’s leaving in two days.”

“Leaving?” Giulia asks.

“For Scotland?” My younger brother’s been talking about it for a long time, but since he got shot in an ambush a couple of months ago, he’s been more determined than ever.

“Yeah.” Alessandro shakes his head. “Maybe he’ll find some red-haired hellion to put him in his place.”

Silence falls as we all contemplate that. As things become awkward, Emilia clears her

throat. “Come on, mi amore .”

She grabs Alessandro and tows him away from the kitchen.

“Thanks for the coffee machine,” Giulia calls after Emilia.

“You’re welcome!” The reply comes just before the front door shuts with a loud click.

“Coffee machine?”

“Emilia donated one to the community center. I’ll need a PhD to work it.”

“You’re smart. You’ll figure it out.”

Giulia smiles tremulously then stares down at her hands.

“You want to sit through there?” I gesture out toward the living room. “It’s more comfortable.”

“Yeah.” Giulia doesn’t take my hand when I offer it, choosing to clamber off the stool by herself. I try not to read too much into the refusal of help. Whether she’s mad at me or not, Giulia has an independent streak.

I let her precede me into the living room. She takes a seat on an armchair. Again, I don’t make a big deal out of her not choosing the sofa where she’d be risking me sitting next to her. She probably doesn’t want me close because it will distract from her purpose in coming here, whatever that is.

As I settle on the sofa, she fidgets with the top button of her shirt. I don’t speak. She sought me out and I need to let her do this in her own time.



“I hope you weren’t too mad with Piotr.” It’s not what I expected her opening line to be.

“He’s not the one I want to spank for this.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

Giulia’s eyes widen. She’s startled, but there’s a flicker of desire there too. I have to ignore the spark that ignites inside of me. There are things that have to be said.

“Look, Giulia, I’m sorry I was such an asshole. I don’t know what came over me. I got super-protective and...”

“You were scared,” she finishes for me.

She knows me well. Not much frightens me, but the thought of someone harming her to get to me is terrifying.

“Even so, I should never have locked you in that cell. I shouldn’t have threatened your family, your dreams. I want you to know that whatever you decide to do, I won’t hurt you or your family.”

Giulia’s forehead creases as her face falls into a frown. “Whatever I decide to do?”

“Yes.” I pick up the envelope from the table and hand it to her.

“What’s this?” Her tone is wary.

“Annulment papers. We didn’t consummate the marriage, so...”

Giulia shakes her head in disbelief. “I didn’t expect this.”

She probably expected pain, punishments, demands. She came here to face whatever I intended to dish out. Brave girl.

“If it’s what you want, I’ll set you free.”

“Free?” Giulia hums thoughtfully. “So I could date, fuck who I like, marry anyone I want to?”

I grit my teeth, but like Emilia said last night, I’m doing the right thing.

“Yes, but I want to be in your life, if you’ll let me.”

Giulia’s expression is one of skepticism. I can’t say I blame her after how I behaved.

“You can cope with me dating other men?”

“It would rip me apart,” I tell her honestly, “but if that’s what it takes for us to be friends, then yes.”

“Friends,” Giulia muses. “And if I choose not to sign?”

“Then I promise I will never give you cause to run from me again. I love you, Giulia. I would rather stab myself in the eye than cause you pain.”

She grimaces at the imagery, then gets up, drops the envelope on the table, and walks to the window. She stares out over the magnificent view of the park for a minute and then turns around.

“Do you understand why I left Italy?” she asks.

“Because I scared you. I took away your choices.”

“And now you’re giving me back control?”

“Yes. Whether you dissolve the marriage or not, I won’t ever push you like that again.”

Giulia picks up the envelope and removes its contents. She scans the first page then glances up at me. “But you’ll still be you, right?”

I think about that for a moment, trying to work out what she’s looking for from me. “I’m not sure what you mean, sweetheart.”

“Well, I mean you won’t... uh... you’ll punish me for leaving you, right?”

Is it my imagination, or is there a hopeful note in her voice? Is she looking for a way to move forward? I get to my feet and stalk toward her. “Of course. You put yourself in danger when you ran. I can’t allow that to go unpunished.”

Her tongue flicks out and runs across her lower lip. “What would you do to me?”

“Well.” I wrap my left arm around her waist and pull her flush against me. I drop my head to whisper in her ear. “First, I’d order you to strip. I’d watch you every second as you bare your beautiful body to me. Then I’d bind your wrists and put you over my knee.”

“Then what?” Giulia’s voice is breathless. She’s aroused.

“I’d spank your ass raw and then show you what it means to be mine.”

She puts her hand on my chest, not to push me away, but to grab a handful of my shirt. “What does it mean to be yours, Matty?”

My heart skips a beat as she addresses me by my pet name and gazes up at me with wide eyes. It would be an innocent look if they weren't darkened with desire.

"It means putting up with me being a dominant, possessive asshole. It means letting me fuck you any way I choose." I pop open the button on her jeans. "It means your mouth, your pussy, your ass, are mine to stuff full of my cum whenever I want, wherever I want." I give her a moment to process. "Think you can deal with that?"

"I guess it depends on whether you love me."

"Oh, fuck, sweetheart," I groan. "I do. I love you so fucking much it hurts."

Lowering my lips, I capture hers in a tender kiss. She tastes of honey. As my tongue pushes past her lips, I slide my hand into her jeans to cup her feminine mound. She sways against me, then pulls back. "Wait!"

I withdraw my hands from her jeans and go completely still. Have I read her wrong? Perhaps that's my problem. I think because I know her so well that I understand her needs.

"We have a little something to take care of." She holds up the annulment papers and slowly rips them in two.

"Thank fuck!" I breathe out.

Giulia squeals as I bend suddenly and haul her over my shoulder in one slick movement. I stride toward the corridor, back to the bedroom where I slept last night.

"Matteo!" my woman, my wife, protests. "What are you doing?"

"What I said I would do, sweetheart. I'm going to punish you."

I'm going to show her who she belongs to and I'm going to savor every minute of it.

### CHAPTER 20

Giulia

When I came looking for Matteo this morning, I'd already decided to do whatever it took to heal the damage the last couple of days has done to our relationship. I spent most of the night thinking about us and realized that a life without Matteo in it would be unbearably empty. Despite how it began, I want our marriage to be a success.

I expected some hostility from Matteo, perhaps a little aggression. I wasn't prepared for him to offer to set me free. It was no empty gesture. Having the papers ready to present to me proved he meant what he said. If I wanted to leave, he'd have let me. The fact he was willing to give me what he thought would make me happy means more than I can express. It's a measure of the sort of man he is. One who loves me so much he'd be willing to do anything to be in my life.

He sets me down on the floor of what I assume is one of his brother's guest rooms. It's sparsely decorated with a gigantic bed, a couple of nightstands, and a chest of drawers. There aren't any personal touches such as pictures or soft furnishings in here. It's definitely not Alessandro and Emilia's room, thank goodness. It would be just like Matteo to want to defile his brother's private sanctuary. The sheets on the bed are crumpled, so I guess Matteo slept in here last night.

"Clothes off," he commands.

"Should we be doing this here?"

Matteo raises an eyebrow as he goes to sit at the edge of the bed. He's fucked me at Damiano's restaurant and Lorenzo's vineyard. Why should I worry about doing it in a room in his brother's apartment?

"Clothes. Off." There's impatience in his voice now. Matteo does not like to repeat himself.

Knowing there will be consequences if I don't obey, I bend to unzip my suede ankle boots. I remove them first and then my socks. Then I take off my jeans. My movements are quick, efficient. I'm not attempting seduction here. I don't need to. The massive bulge in Matteo's pants tells me he doesn't require a show to turn him on.

My panties come next. I drop them on the floor. Unbuttoning my shirt takes a little longer because my hands are shaking. It's not from fear. Nervous anticipation flows through me. Matteo is going to spank my ass and it will hurt, but I know once that's over he'll make me forget the pain.

When I finally get all the buttons open, I slip the shirt off my shoulders. I reach behind me to unfasten my bra and fumble over that for a minute. Yeah, definitely not winning any prizes for my stripping technique. I wrestle my bra off and blink in surprise when Matteo holds his hand out for it.

"Give it to me," he says.

I cross the room and hand it to him.

"Turn around."

At his command, I give him my back. I don't have to wait long to find out what he plans. He pulls my arms behind me and ties my wrists together with the bra. I try to move my hands. They're bound securely, but not tight enough to cut off the

circulation. It's strange but I like it. Got to give him points for improvisation.

Matteo spins me around and pulls me down over his lap. My feet remain on the floor. My torso is draped across his knees and my head dangles over the other side. I notice, absently, that he's wearing battered old sneakers with dress pants. Odd.

"Twenty should get your ass nice and red," Matteo says as he helps me to settle into position. Being draped over his lap brings a strange combination of feelings to the fore. I'm vulnerable and yet I'm comfortable. It's a testament to the trust I have in this man.

Matteo holds nothing back as he spanks me for the first time. His palm cracks off my ass, jolting me across his lap. My nipples rub against his leg and I know already that this is going to be sensual torture. He spanks me five times in rapid succession and then pauses, giving me a moment to register the pain. At the moment it's superficial, an uncomfortable prickling beneath the surface. It's matched by a gentle ripple of awareness in my pussy.

"I love seeing my handprint on your skin." Matteo caresses my bottom lovingly. "It shows who you belong to."

This time when he speaks of ownership, I don't balk at it. I realize now it's not to stifle me, but to give me the sense of security that allows me to be myself, to give free rein to my desires. It's Matteo letting me know I'm safe with him, that he'll protect me from harm.

I don't bask in the warmth of that knowledge for long. Matteo resumes the spanking, delivering increasingly sharp smacks to my sensitized flesh. The burn goes deeper, the ache spreading until I can't hold back my moans. I wiggle my hips, trying to shake loose the source of the agony, but Matteo puts a hand at the small of my back to hold me down. His dominance sends a jolt of desire straight to my core.



“Just two more, sweetheart. Spread your legs wider.”

I do as I’m told and brace myself, knowing what’s coming when he positions his hand beneath me. In this position, he can’t strike with the same momentum. There isn’t room for him to draw his arm back. It doesn’t matter. With a firm flick of the wrist, he delivers a slap that makes me dance up on my toes as a barely human shriek rips from my throat.

“Son of a…”

“Language,” Matteo chides. “You wouldn’t want to add to the count.”

Matteo doesn’t care if I curse. He’s just looking for an excuse to keep on spanking me. I can feel his cock twitching against my side. He’s getting a real kick out of this. Though I have to admit I’m getting more and more turned on by being draped over his lap and punished, I’d like to move this along.

“Sorry, Matteo.”

He hums, like he’s not convinced by my apology. He shouldn’t be because it’s completely insincere, but he doesn’t call me on it. I think he’s as eager as I am to get to the next phase of his plan.

He delivers the last strike between my legs. I yelp, but I’m not quite so startled by the zing of pain this time. I wait for Matteo to let me up, but he holds me in place while his fingers explore my feminine folds.

“You’re dripping, sweetheart.” His fingers skim over my swollen clit. “You’re soaking my pants. Well, Sandro’s pants.”

Mortified, I glare up at him, my eyes narrowed. “You’d better have them dry-cleaned before you give them back. Better still, burn them.”

“Are you giving orders, sweetheart?”

I suck in a breath as he squeezes my poor aching ass.

“It’s not an order,” I tell him. “Just a suggestion I strongly urge you to follow.”

Matteo grins. “I see the spanking didn’t diminish your sass. Perhaps I need to find a way to keep your mouth busy.”

There’s no mystery as to how he intends to achieve that. Lifting me effortlessly off his lap, he arranges me on my knees on the floor, my hands still bound behind me. I rest back on my heels and watch while he undresses. Although I’m not entirely comfortable on my knees like this, it’s no hardship to watch my husband strip. He toes off his sneakers, revealing bare feet. He rips his shirt open, popping buttons across the room. I’ll bet that belonged to Alessandro too.

When he shucks off his pants, it becomes apparent that while he borrowed clothing from his older brother, underwear wasn’t included. He’s suddenly stark naked. He grabs his impressive erection and strokes himself slowly, once, twice, three times.

“Thirsty, sweetheart?” he taunts, and I realize I’m practically drooling. He steps closer and places a hand beneath my chin. He gently pulls me up so my face is level with his crotch. His thumb rubs across the seam of my lips. “Open up. I’m going to fuck your pretty little mouth.”

I part my lips and he slides his cock between them. His length glides over my tongue and hits the back of my throat. Panic seizes me and my shoulders stiffen, but I quickly tamp it down. I’ve done this before. I can take him. He won’t push too hard. Repeating the words inside my head, I convince myself to relax.

“Good girl.” Matteo strokes my cheek as he slides out and back in. “Swallowing your husband’s cock so well.”

I close my eyes as he hits the back of my throat, and breathe in his clean, masculine scent. He tangles his fingers in my hair. I can't wait to grow it long again for him. Though he hasn't said anything, I know he preferred it before. If I had a ponytail, he'd be able to wrap it around his fist and use it to control my movements. Fuck! Just thinking about that makes me wetter.

"Eyes on me, Giulia." Matteo thrusts deep. My eyes fly open. "I want your full attention."

I give him what he wants, fixing my gaze on him. The connection is electric. My body thrums with need as he continues to fuck my mouth, thrusting just hard enough to send a frisson of fear through me, but not so forcefully that I choke.

A pained sound escapes Matteo as I suck gently, drawing him in deep. He throws his head back and stills as his cock jerks inside my mouth. A hot jet of cum hits my throat and I swallow it eagerly. Matteo drags his still semi-hard cock out of my mouth, his breathing ragged.

"My turn." His eyes glitter with dark intent.

Pulling me up from the floor, he shoves me face down over the bed. I wait for him to slide into me, but he doesn't. Instead, he drops to his knees behind me and forces my legs farther apart. I gasp as he swipes his tongue along my pussy. Already keyed up, it doesn't take long before my clit is throbbing. Pleasure twists my insides into a knot. The pressure builds and I'm so, so close when Matteo pulls back.

I hiss as he spreads my ass cheeks apart, digging his fingers into the tender flesh. Then he does something I never expected. His tongue circles my tight rear hole. It's weird, but incredibly hot. I clench my fists, frustrated that I can't clutch the sheets like I want to.

Matteo gets to his feet behind me, leaving me squirming on the bed, trying to find my

own path to release. He unties my wrists, picks me up, and drops me onto the bed. I scramble to the middle. The bed dips as he crawls toward me. I part my legs for him, welcoming him in.

He pushes inside me so slowly, so reverently, my heart swells. His eyes find mine and I read so much in his gaze. There's love, possession, trust, and fear. I reach up and stroke his face. This should be a moment for tenderness, for taking it slow and worshipping each other's bodies, but that's not what I need right now.

"Fuck me, Matty. Make me yours."

A crease appears at the bridge of his nose. He holds himself still. The stretch is delicious, but I want more. Despite the way he carried me in here and spanked my ass, he's not sure of himself. I hate that my leaving him placed those doubts in his mind. Fortunately, I know just how to snap him out of it.

"Fuck me, Matteo, or I'll find someone who will."

Though I'm sure he knows I'm baiting him, that I'd never seek out another man, anger flares in his eyes. An animalistic growl rips from his throat as he raises himself up onto the palms of his hands and pumps his hips. He hooks an arm under my leg and pushes it up toward my chest, lifting my ass off the bed. I pant with desperate need as he slides out of me then slams back in.

His pace intensifies. I match his thrusts, moving my hips to meet him, but I can't keep up. He fucks me too fast, too hard for me to do anything but hang onto his shoulders and take every ounce of the furious passion he pours into me.

My head thrashes from side to side as I dig my nails into Matteo's flesh. My womb clenches and my pussy clamps down around my husband's massive cock.

"You were made for me to fuck," Matteo snarls. "Your pussy knows it, you know it."

“Yes. Oh, fuck, Matty!”

“Come for me.” He punches his hips, driving repeatedly into my quivering body. “Show me what a good little slut my wife can be.”

His words have an immediate effect. It speaks to some deep-rooted instinct to please the man who’s laying claim to me. My back arches off the bed and a low keening sound comes from my throat as my vision blurs.

I sink into the bed as Matteo releases my leg. He pulls out of me and semen splatters across my stomach as he reaches his own climax. For a moment, I can’t think. I barely feel. My body is weightless, floating. Then Matteo drops onto the bed and pulls me into his arms. My head rests on his chest and his heartbeat anchors me.

“You okay, sweetheart?”

I nod as I nuzzle into his chest. For a long time, I enjoy the comfort being close to him brings. Then I shuffle across the bed and roll onto my side to face him.

“Tell me what happened after I left the church.”

Matteo props himself up on his elbow and frowns at me. “You want to hear this?”

“Not the gory details.” I shudder at the thought of the torture he inflicted on those men. “Just what you learned.”

“The Rossis weren’t looking to kill me that day in the village. Sofia Montalbano rejected Mario Rossi, so he sent his men to take her out.”

“What?” The word fires out of me.

“I can’t believe she was the target.”

“Me neither.”

“She was just a kid.”

“Mario Rossi’s a psycho.” Matteo blows out a breath. “Was a psycho. We killed him when we first went looking for revenge.”

“Would you have gone after them if you’d known they weren’t trying to kill you?”

“Yeah, they killed an innocent girl right in front of me in Volante territory.”

I get that. It was a question of honor. That’s what earns these guys respect. “You told me you wiped out most of them.” I recall him telling me that. “So, who attacked us at the church?”

“Some of the cockroaches who scuttled away when we first went after them regrouped.”

“What about the boy? Was he a Rossi?”

Something akin to regret flickers in Matteo’s eyes. He shakes his head. “He had a thing for Sofia. The Rossis manipulated him into believing she was with me that day, that I was fucking her.” I can hear the disgust in Matteo’s voice. He would never get involved with such a young, innocent girl. “They persuaded him the way to get to me was through you.”

He doesn’t elaborate on how they’d have used me, but I know enough to realize it wouldn’t have been pleasant, and I feel a little sick that the boy could walk right up to me in a nightclub, right under Damiano’s nose. I guess it’s proof I need to be vigilant when out in public.

“He seemed so sad when he spoke to me.” I roll onto my back and look at the ceiling.

“Did you kill him?”

“No.”

My eyes dart to Matteo’s face. He’s telling the truth, but I know the boy didn’t walk away alive.

“Damiano?”

“Lorenzo, actually.”

“Then he met a horrible end.”

Matteo takes my hand. “Giulia, no matter which of us did it, his death wouldn’t have been quick, it wouldn’t have been clean. You have to understand that. He was a man, not a boy. He made his choices. If he’d had his way, I’d be mourning you right now.”

I nod because I know it’s true. I understand the need to remove a threat in the most brutal way possible. It’s imperative to show the world that we can’t be touched. That doesn’t mean I have to like it.

Matteo drags his teeth over his bottom lip as he gazes down at me. “Are you sorry you asked me about it?”

I shake my head. “No. I want you to share this stuff with me, Matty.”

He smiles at my use of the name. Our eyes lock and something unspoken passes between us. An understanding that this is a fresh start.

“Come on.” Matteo gets off the bed and holds his hand out to me. “We need a shower before we go home.”

Warmth spreads through me at the thought of going home with him. We step into the shower cubicle and he closes the glass door behind us.

“You know,” he says as turns on the water, “Leo and Vinnie once fucked so hard in the shower they broke the whole damn thing.”

I slap his shoulder. “Leo should not have told you that, and you shouldn’t have told me.” I tut disapprovingly. “And you called your brothers gossips.”

“Yeah, but...” He wraps his arms around my waist and playfully prods my stomach with his erection. Trust him to be hard again. “I thought we could, you know...”

“No, we are not breaking your brother’s shower.”

“Okay, then how about this?” Matteo drops to his knees and presses his lips to my pubic bone. “How about I do what I should have done from the moment I first met you?”

“What’s that?” I ask, breathless as he carefully parts my legs and inhales my scent.

“Love you.” He kisses me softly. “Honor you.”

I grab a handful of his soft brown hair and pull his head back until his eyes meet mine. “Obey me?”

“Maybe.” Matteo chuckles and then grows solemn. “Will you do the same?”

“Yes, I will,” I tell him as he dives forward to lap at my pussy. “I will love, honor, and obey you.”

The words are a solemn vow I intend to keep. For the rest of my life.



The End