



# Honor and Claim (A New Reign #2)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Cosima was a temptation I couldn't resist.

I was born into blood and chaos. It raged inside of me, bleeding on everything around me after my parents' death. The Marino family took me in as a young boy. They were a powerful family that tried to save me, but I was too far gone—until Cosima came along.

Even as a young boy, I knew she was different. I gave her my heart when we were kids, and it has always belonged to her, the girl who could cool the monster inside of me that was always fighting to get out.

As we grew older, the feelings I had for her changed. They became deeper and more obsessive. A new battle rose up inside of me, one no one could contain, not even my sweet innocent Cosima, so she ran.

I was shaped by the devil himself, and even though I would never be worthy of her, that didn't mean I would ever allow anyone else to have her... or the secret baby growing inside her. That was mine too.

Little did she know there was no escaping me. No one could keep her from me, not her family, not her, or the man she was being forced to marry. I did what I had to.

Cosima belongs to me, and it's time the world knows.

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am*

## Chapter One

### COSIMA

“ We are not getting upset about this or apologizing.” I pace back and forth in my bedroom. It might be the adrenaline, but I can’t get myself to calm down.

I’m a mix of emotions, which isn’t a shocker for me. I have never been great at control, especially when it comes to my feelings. I know that and try to balance myself, but in the heat of the moment, I respond in kind. What energy you give me, I’ll give right back.

Hence why I stabbed the guy; he totally had it coming. The jerkoff backhanded me, but I’d wanted him to. I was doing what I thought was best, protecting my friends and my sister-in-law. That is who the creep was after to begin with.

My sister-in-law has only grazed the world my family lives in. She has lived on the edge of it, and Tova is so sweet. There was no way in hell I was allowing some jerk to take her from us. She and I have become really close since I’ve been home from school abroad.

When that man pulled the gun out, I did what my family taught me. I bided my time and tried to keep his attention off Tova. I knew the second he came through the door who he was after. My sister-in-law married my oldest brother Warren, who we all call War.

War has been taking over for our family, our father slipping into semi-retirement. My

father has held a stronghold of the city my whole life; it's really all I know. Now War is in his place, and my brother is different from my father.

He is far more deadly in my opinion, but he's also very rational and was intent on making changes and going more legit, and it has been working. Other people haven't been happy about that. War didn't give a shit.

That was until Tova. People considered his affection toward her a weak spot and figured he was slipping. That he wasn't being rational anymore. They made the mistake of trying to go after her.

It didn't play out well for them, and maybe I stabbed someone because they were dumb enough to even hatch a plan to take Tova. These things happen. I should be getting a thank you card, maybe some nice chocolates.

All I got was an ass chewing from Zenzo, who we all call Z, but that's par for the course these days. The man is bossier with me than my own brothers, who he grew up with. Z may tower over me but I can hold my own. I give as good as I get.

I don't get why Z is so pissed about it. I was protecting my family the same way he does. I suppose he doesn't think I'm competent enough. Not everyone can be a genius like him.

Sure, he does it from behind a screen usually, but it's the same thing. Such a double standard. But then again, Z and I haven't been getting along for a few years now. He snaps at me about everything. Not that I'm much better.

I'm not sure when things shifted, but they did. He's more overbearing than my brothers, which is saying a lot. But at one time we'd been close. I would have called him the closest person to me in the whole world, and damn do I miss that, miss him.

My whole life, Z has been around. My father brought him home when he was only a young boy. I wasn't born yet. My mom was actually pregnant with me at the time. He grew up with my brothers and was always with them.

Z always was more protective of me, but he also took a more active role in my life when we were younger. Then things changed. I can't even put my finger on exactly when or why, but they had. He and I can only seem to fight anymore.

When I went off to school in Europe, I thought things might get better, but when I would come back, he either ignored me or was on my butt about this or that. He's had a stick up his ass for a while now. Which makes me always snap back at him.

Today, though, it was different. I have never seen Z lose his shit the way he did. This time I didn't have a smart-ass response. I could see not only the anger in his eyes but worry as well.

It was a fight not to burst into tears after he shouted in my face and then kind of lost it. Which is saying a lot because I had had a gun in my face, been backhanded, and then stabbed someone a few minutes prior, and I wasn't anywhere close to tears through all of that.

Even now, thinking about Z's harsh words, my eyes start to burn.

I should go talk to him. Maybe I do owe him a teeny-tiny apology for the whole Marks thing.

We hadn't told anyone she would be showing up too.

I may have gone too far this time, but in my defense, we had already planned to go shopping.

Our small side quest didn't change what would have happened.

Plus, if Marks wasn't there and hadn't used my phone to dial them so they could hear what was going on, who knows what would've happened.

On second thought, I don't owe him anything.

I fold my arms over my chest, focusing on my anger and not the hurt that I'm actually feeling.

Also! He was the reason I had to go on a side quest. Z is good with computers. Who am I kidding? The man is a genius with them. I'm convinced he was somehow in my phone. He always knows what I'm up to and is three steps ahead.

So when we went on our shopping adventure, we invited Tova's friend Marks, who I think might be as badass with computers as Z. Marks was going to have a peek into my phone to see if I was right and to also see if she could get him out of it.

I mean, it's not like there is anything juicy on my phone, but maybe a girl doesn't want him checking out their Kindle. Those things are private, but with Z, he doesn't believe in much privacy when it comes to me.

He thinks I can't take care of myself. I hope today finally showed that I could handle myself. I didn't panic, and I did what needed to be done. What did that get me? Screamed at.

I was pretty much told I was a spoiled brat. I can concede that one. I mean, I'm the only girl in this family, or I had been before Tova. It was him saying that I think everything is a game and joke that struck a chord for me.

He might be right in part. I do things to get his attention. I can't deny that. I've turned

into the boy on the playground pulling my crush's hair to get some kind of reaction.

You either laugh or cry. I know I use humor as armor. Then when he said, And you wonder why we keep you in Europe , that cut deep.

It made me feel as though no one wanted me here. I had been asking to come back to the States and was pushed off time and time again. It might be for the best if I went back.

I'd miss him. Hell, I miss him when he's right next to me. Thinking about going back makes my heart hurt. It ached the whole time I was gone. I hoped Z would have missed me, but it doesn't appear that way.

If it's not already obvious, I am in love with him. I think I have loved him my whole life. I can't pinpoint when it happened, but I swear the feelings I have seem as though they've been there forever. Always a part of me.

I really need to talk to him. To try to iron this out. I would rather not leave things this way. He might be being an ass because he feels it too. There is a lingering tension between us. I can't be the only one feeling it.

I mean, watching my brother and Tova together, Warren was kind of a dick at times, not realizing that he was hopelessly in love with her.

I have always been one to say what I'm thinking, except when it comes to Z.

I should go to his room and speak to him.

I'll never be able to sleep or come to the right decision about leaving if I don't. I can put it all out there.

"I'm doing it," I say, trying to pep myself up. I hurry into the bathroom, fluffing my hair and putting on lip gloss. It's late; if I do much more, it will appear like I'm trying too hard. I'm not going to beg. I only want him to be honest with me. I can't keep living this way.

I debate changing out of my pajamas. It's a sweet little sleep dress that used to hit right at my knee when I got it a couple years ago. It had been one of my Christmas gifts from Z. Now it's on the shorter side, but I still wear it often. It reminds me of him.

I poke my head out of my room to see if anyone is around. This house is massive; even if a lot of people are here, it never feels that way. When I see the coast is clear, I hurry out of my bedroom and down the hallway toward Z's room.

He normally doesn't stay here, but everyone had come back home for my brother's wedding. Now most everyone has left, besides me, which is why I think Z stayed. I'm sure he's here to keep an eye on me, making sure I'm not up to anything. What does he really think I'm going to do? Stab someone again?

When I make it to Z's room, my fist hovers before knocking. I can do this. I give myself another pep talk before knocking. I press my ear to the door but don't hear anything. He might be at his billion computers with headphones on.

I test the knob, and it's not locked. Normally it is.

He keeps his room on lockdown. Was he so mad at me he forgot to lock it?

Slowly I open it to peek inside, expecting to see him at his desk with a million and one monitors, but he's not.

The only light comes from the wall of screens, casting a soft blue across the room.

I slip inside, shutting the door behind me.

If he went to the city, it's going to piss me off. Okay, I will act pissed off, but it's hurt that I will actually feel. With everything that happened today and his worry over me, I was sure he'd come back to the farm. I want him to need to be near me.

I should snoop is the first thought I have as I venture farther into his room.

With the house as massive as it is, everyone's bedroom looks like a small apartment, just without a kitchen.

I stop walking when I see Z lying on the bed, his arm over his eyes, his dark hair is messier than usual.

I creep forward, not sure if he's awake or not.

I wish I could have fallen asleep. Normally Z is always awake, it seems like.

Gently I sit down on the side of the bed closest to him, not wanting to wake him.

I want to watch him, if only for a few seconds.

As usual, I have no control. I reach out to touch his arm that is thrown over his face, but I never get the chance.

Z moves, grabbing my arm and flipping me over and onto my back, pinning me beneath him.

“Z, it’s me,” I gasp. He stares down at me, his chocolate colored eyes darker than normal.



“It’s always you,” he responds before his mouth is taking possession of mine, not giving me a chance to ask what he means... but with his mouth on mine, I don’t care about anything else because for me it has always been him too.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am*

### Chapter Two

Z

Cosima's sultry sweetness consumes me. It's not surprising.

She has always had a way of consuming every part of me.

Of drawing me in, even when we were younger.

There is a pull to her that sets her apart from everyone else.

I think it might be slowly killing me. A bittersweet way to die.

Even now she's in my dreams. She has been for years.

It's the only time I can truly have her.

I deepen the kiss. Cosima's lips are softer than anything I have ever felt before. My tongue thrusts into her mouth, and she strokes hers against mine, matching my pace. That's my Cosima, giving as good as she gets. Her lips may be sweet, but her tongue is wicked.

With Cosima, you never know which side of her you might get. She's unpredictable and hard to control. That shouldn't make her all the more alluring, but it does. Then again, I've never been good at staying away from things that should be off-limits.

“You smell so damn good.” I kiss down her jaw to her ear. “I need to taste you, sweetness.”

“Yes,” she moans as I continue my journey down the column of her neck. My hands push up the nightgown I bought her years ago. What once was cute and adorable now fits her more snugly, showing off all her curves.

In my dreams, she’s always wearing it. The same as when she’s actually home to drive me insane.

It shows off way too much of her legs, my mind now always wondering what kind of panties she might have on.

It would only take a small lift to find out.

I have to fight myself not to do it when she’s roaming around the house in it.

But right now I can find out. In my fantasies and dreams I can do anything to her that I want, and fuck me, I have.

If her family knew the things I wanted from Cosima, they’d skin me alive.

What makes it worse is that they are like family to me, and I know this is the only way I can ever have her.

These are stolen moments when I can find rare sleep.

I lift up on one arm, wanting to see her.

The computer screens are the only light in the room.

Cosima shifts, pulling it the rest of the way off, leaving her in only a pair of panties.

My eyes roam over her body. My hand strokes up the side to her breast before cupping it in my hand.

My thumb feathers across her nipple, making it harden more. Perfection. Every damn inch of her is.

“Z.” Cosima’s hand lifts to cup the side of my face. “Don’t stop.”

“I’m not. Not until I’ve tasted you. Felt you come around my cock.”

Cosima sucks in a breath, nodding. I don’t need her approval. Not in my dreams. I can take and let that darkness consume us both.

I lean down, sucking her nipple into my mouth. She gasps, her back lifting to press her tit farther into my mouth. I latch on, my hand going for the other. Her tits spill between my fingers.

Cosima has always been on the curvy side, filling out over the last few years.

That’s when I knew how badly I wanted her.

My thoughts of her went to a darker place.

One I didn’t know existed inside of me until she brought it to light.

A side of me that I’m finding isn’t all that sane or rational. Not when it comes to her, anyway.

My mouth moves farther down her body, licking and sucking. I press kisses to her

stomach, an ache hitting me in the chest. In my last dream, she was pregnant. How can I have a sense of loss over a baby that was never real? But it's there, deep in my chest.

I can still keep fantasizing about it. Even now, my goal is to put my baby inside of her. Then maybe in my next dream, the bump will come back.

"Z," Cosima whispers my name when my fingers slip into the top of her panties. I pull them down her legs, tossing them away. I drop back onto my knees between her spread thighs.

Cosima's blond hair is spread out across my pillow, her lips parted and swollen from our kisses.

My eyes linger down farther to her tits and hips.

They land between her spread thighs. The folds of her sex glisten, her tiny clit poking out between them, begging for attention. She is the embodiment of a woman.

Fuck me, I hope I remember every second of this. I want to play this over and over again in my mind.

She shifts, about to cover herself. I grab both her wrists, stopping her. "Don't fight me," I order. "Not on this." Cosima and I are always arguing about something. It both drives me crazy and turns me on, but then again, everything the little brat does gets me hard. "Understood?"

She licks her lips. "Yes, sir." My cock jerks at her response. A smirk plays at her lips, and she bites her bottom lip to hide it. There's my little brat.

"Good girl." Yes, my thoughts have grown dark with her. I don't want to only have

sex with Cosima. I want to own her, fucking her how and when I want. Her giving herself to me fully.

“Good girls get rewards,” she says playfully. That tongue of hers coming out to wet her bottom lip makes me want to fuck her mouth, but not more than I want to bury my face between her lush, soft thighs.

“You get what I give you. Understood?”

She nods her head quickly, spreading her legs more. It’s too tempting to resist. I bury my face between her thighs, keeping my hold on both of her wrists.

I thrust my tongue between the folds of her pussy, greedily lapping at her clit.

Cosima's sweetness explodes into my mouth, making me groan. Needing more, I trail my tongue down to her opening and push inside of her. I’m greedy for every drop of her.

Another deep groan rips from me. I need to be deeper.

I slip my hands under her ass to lift her partly off the bed so that I can do just that, thrusting my tongue in and out of her the same way I’ll do with my cock. Cosima’s hips jerk, sexy moans pouring from her. Her pussy flutters around my tongue.

“Please.” Her sweet pleas have my tongue returning to her clit. I suck it into my mouth, giving soft pulls as I continue to lap firmly back and forth until she’s crying out my name. Her thighs tense up as her release coats my face.

I drink every drop, thrusting and rutting my hips into the mattress. I come right along with her, my balls drawing up tight before I explode. I won't stop. I'm too hungry for her.

I lick and suck, feasting on her like the starved beast that I am, ready to pounce and devour all of her. Savoring every single second. When she comes for me again, her legs shaking, I am finally satisfied. I crawl up her body, coming down over her so that her body is covered with mine.

Cosima's eyes flutter open, and my chest grows tight with emotion that I always battle when it comes to my love for her. I have been a part of the Marino family for most of my life. They are my family, and so is she, but with her, it's not the same.

She is the kind of family to me that a wife would be. That's her place in my mind. I might be able to resist that physically, but mentally it feels like a losing battle. One that I have long stopped fighting.

I claim her mouth, settling in between her thighs. My cock slides through her slick folds, finding her opening. I push the head inside of her. She might be slick, but it's still a bit of a fight to get inside.

Cosima kisses me back, her hands going to my shoulders as I slowly sink inside of her. She whimpers against my mouth as I fill her inch by inch. Her pussy is strangling my cock with how damn tight she is, but her body takes me. As I knew it would. It knows it belongs to me and only me.

Cosima might be tiny compared to me, but her body is built for me. It has to be. It's utter perfection, more than I could ever imagine. My complete fantasy. It's as though it was plucked from my mind, or I suppose it was crafted all around her. Either way, it's mine.

When her hips start to shift, I know I have to move. I'm trying to keep from coming again already. I want to savor this, but her tiny body moving under mine is making it too hard to hold back. I pull out, pushing back in.

We both moan, breaking the kiss. I keep my eyes locked with hers as I thrust back out and in. Over and over I move, keeping us connected. The pleasure is almost too much to comprehend. My fantasies have never felt this real before.

“I need you to come.”

“I can’t.” She shakes her head back and forth, her hips rising to meet mine. I shift, pinning her beneath me, needing her under my control. “It’s too much, oh God.” Her nails dig in deeper.

“Fuck that, sweetness. You’ll give it to me.” I slide my hand between us, my fingers going to her clit, demanding that she obey me.

“It’s too much.”

“It’s never enough.” A small gasp leaves her, her body doing as I command.

Cosima’s pussy clenches around my cock, coming for me once more. I growl, thrusting into her as deep as I can, digging my knees into the mattress.

I come, releasing inside of her. The orgasm is so hard black spots form in my eyes before I collapse on top of her, shaken to my core. My heart pounds as I bury my face into her neck, breathing her in, wishing I could live in this moment forever.

But I know better than anyone that in a matter of seconds your whole world can change, taking everything you love right along with it.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am*

### Chapter Three

#### COSIMA

A smile overtakes my face before my eyes can open.

I feel the weight of Z's body pressed to mine, spooning me.

I'm not sure when he moved. The last thing I remember was his body collapsing onto mine.

His weight was pressing me into the mattress.

It wasn't crushing; in fact, it was soothing.

Z had surrounded all of me, like he was trying to consume me, and I wanted him to.

Slowly I roll over, wanting to face him.

It takes a second for my eyes to adjust to the small trace of light still only coming from the computer monitors.

I'm in a bit of shock that it actually happened.

For so long I've wanted this from Z. For him to feel the same way I do.

My fingers itch to reach out and touch him, but I would rather not wake him.

I want to watch him for a few minutes without him knowing.

It's always Z that watches the rest of us.

Unable to help myself, I lean in and brush my mouth to his in a feather kiss. "Cosima," he mutters in his sleep, making my smile grow more. If I'm not careful, my cheeks will be as sore as the rest of me. There is a delicious ache between my thighs.

I can't help but wonder how this will all play out.

Z had been intense when we made love. He can always be bossy, but this was another level.

I have never seen that side of him before.

I always felt a connection between us and was sure he felt it too, but last night, I could see it in his eyes and feel it in the way he touched me. He couldn't get enough of me.

This will change things between us, and honestly, it's about damn time. I'm not going to be able to get back to sleep, so I ease out of bed. I find my discarded panties and nightgown on the floor. I grab them both, slipping them back on.

Knowing I'm likely a total mess, I decide to go back to my room to get myself put back together.

First, I lean down over the bed and press another kiss gently to Z's mouth.

He looks so damn sexy right now with his hair disheveled, and the sheet barely covering his lean but muscular body.

So many nights I pictured him like this.

This all feels as though it's a dream. I reach down and pinch myself just to make sure. Definitely reality.

When I make it back to my bedroom, I grab clean panties before heading to my bathroom. It's not until I'm under the full light that I notice the inside of my thighs.

Oh crap. I hadn't thought about bleeding. I mean, I know logically you can bleed when you have sex for the first time, but it hadn't been at the forefront of my mind in the heat of the moment. Nor had protection.

There is clear evidence of that between my legs.

I should be freaking out, but the smile on my face doesn't falter.

Yesterday, I'd been hurt about how things had gone and Z losing his shit on me.

I was debating going back to Europe, but now everything is different.

I truly have a reason to stay. For the first time in a long time, I feel happy.

I think about how we'll tell my parents and brothers about this as I brush my teeth and hair. We could wait and enjoy our time together before anyone else gets involved. That actually sounds rather nice.

I swipe on some mascara and pause on the lip gloss. I shouldn't overdo it, then Z will know I got out of bed only to sneak back into it after I'd pampered myself.

Fuck it, I'm putting it on. It is, after all, me. I have lived for lip gloss since I discovered it in my mom's purse when I was young. I have been a girly girl my whole

life. That's who I am, and Z knows that.

The only times I ever got down and dirty with the boys or men is when I was learning and practicing self-defense.

A must, growing up in our family. One I thought was normal for everyone else too.

I'd been gravely mistaken. In fact, a lot of things hadn't been normal in comparison.

You don't realize that until you're thrust out into the world.

My reality check may have been a bit different from a lot of others, considering I was put in a fancy private school, but it was still a shock to me.

When I went to school here, I was a black leopard.

No one wanted to come near me. I'm sure the other kids didn't know who I was, but their parents did, and they told them to stay away from me, and that's exactly what happened.

That made school rather lonely. Everyone pretended I didn't exist but I got through it.

When I went to Europe, things were different.

I was in the same company when it came to the kids that went there.

I flourished there, making some acquaintances.

It had been nice, but then I got homesick and missed my family. There was no winning either way.

When I'm done making myself presentable, I decide to go downstairs and make breakfast and bring it back up. Chef Marcello eyes me when I enter the kitchen. He can be rather territorial.

He's been with our family for decades. I'm starting to think he came with the house.

When my brother War took over for my father, he also took over the farm, as we call it.

It's really a giant estate with other homes on it.

It sits right outside of the city, but it's been deemed the farm because of its rolling hills of land.

There are a few barns on the land. One I'm not allowed in, which obviously made me sneak inside. The place was squeaky clean and smelled of bleach. It was easy for me to put together what the barn was used for. My impulse control just sucks, which means I had to see it for myself.

"Morning," I chirp at him.

"What are you up to?"

I hold back a laugh. "I was going to make breakfast."

"Then, what is all this?" His Italian accent bleeds into his words. It always does when he gets huffy.

"That is food." Chef Marcello already has a full spread laid out. He slides his hands into the pockets on the front of his white apron. He has worn the same attire every day for as long as I can remember. It's rare I see him out of it, but those pockets are

different.

"It is food you eat. It's already made."

"What if I want to cook for myself?" His expression turns into one of horror. "What?"  
I laugh.

"You'll blow my kitchen up."

"Hey!" is my only response because he might not be wrong. "Why do you have to call a girl out?"

"I must protect my kitchen."

"What's with the new apron?" I ask, searching under the kitchen island for a tray. A glass baking pan comes sliding out, hitting the floor. I cringe.

"Move." He bumps me with his knee, so I dramatically fall over. "Don't start with me. What are you searching for?"

"A serving tray." I sit up. "That was assault."

"You assaulted my baking pan first." He picks it up, inspecting it.

"It's fine." I stand, taking it from him. "I'm looking for a serving tray." Marcello nods, going around to the other side of the kitchen island to pull one out.

"Lady Tova designed the pockets on my apron. It's rather convenient."

"Lady Tova." I smile, shaking my head as I take the tray from him. Since Tova married my brother, Chef Marcello told her she was now the lady of the house and

could pick out the meals and such to be planned.

"You know I'm on to you." I point toward him. "Making Tova homemade Pop-Tarts and then calling her the lady of the house. You buttered her all up."

"Butter always does the trick." He smirks.

"You're not wrong." I laugh.

Tova's pockets are rather convenient. She's added them to a few of my dresses, and they came in handy. It's a nice spot to hide a small knife, in case you need to stab someone. I can't let Z find out that I put knives there. Then he might ban me from having pockets next.

I decide Chef Marcello might be right about my cooking. It's not a skill set I was taught. When I was away at school, we had dining halls. I never had to cook, and the few times I have, when he was sick, it hasn't gone well. I can accept that cooking isn't one of my strengths.

I grab a couple of plates and start to fill them with a variety of foods before I grab some oranges and one of Z's protein drink things. Chef Marcello's eyebrows lift when he sees me get the protein drink, knowing those are Z's. Marcello makes them fresh whenever Z is here.

"He had a long night; I thought I'd bring him breakfast," I rush to say, a bit too quickly.

Chef makes a motion like he's zipping his lips, and I know my secret is safe.

That man has to have a million secrets stored in his mind at this point.

"Thank you." I give him a kiss on the cheek before grabbing my now filled tray to carry back up the stairs, hoping I don't run into anyone else.

I'm sure they too would make the same note about Z's drink.

There is no way they'd think I was doing this out of the kindness of my heart. A few years ago? Maybe, but not as of recently. I would be more likely to throw this tray at Z.

When I get to Z's door, I contemplate knocking but decide against it. I mean, the man was inside me last night, took my virginity; I shouldn't have to knock to enter his room. Balancing the tray against the door hinge, I turn the knob and enter.

I immediately pause. His computer screens are now off, but the bedside lamp is on. The bed is still a rumpled mess. I put the tray down, checking the bathroom and closet, but he's not there either.

Where the hell did he go? I hurry back toward my bedroom, thinking he might have gone there if he woke up while I was getting breakfast. When I enter my room, there is no sign of him there. I must have missed him coming or going, but this house is ginormous.

Then I spot a piece of white paper by the door that I didn't notice when I entered my room. I put the tray down and snatch it off the floor.

"No." I shake my head, not believing what I'm seeing, but there is no misunderstanding what it says. He's made it all too clear.

I'm sorry

I crumble the note in my hand, fisting it into a ball.



He's fucking sorry? Oh, he will be.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am*

### Chapter Four

Z

My head is pounding. I wake up from a sweet dream of Cosima to a nightmare of my own making. I sit up in bed, and I swear I can smell her. What the hell did I do yesterday after we'd all gotten home?

Seeing the half-empty bottle of whiskey sitting on top of my dresser lets me know everything that I need to. Fuck me, that wasn't the only bottle of whiskey; I'm pretty sure I'd chucked one down the hallway after my drunk ass stumbled into my brother's bedroom last night.

I'm lucky he didn't shoot me after the shit we'd all gone through.

Now that really was a nightmare. Even thinking about the danger Cosima had been in and the part she played, putting herself center stage of it, has me wanting to finish the rest of that bottle.

But I won't, not after how drunk I'd gotten last night and went in search of her only to accidentally go into my brother's room.

Thank fuck for that because I'm not sure what my drunk ass might have said or done if I'd actually stumbled into Cosima's room.

I wanted to equally fuck the shit out of her and spank her bratty little ass.

She thinks everything is a goddamn joke and has no regard for her own safety.

I take a deep breath, remembering the scene that played out yesterday.

How she had put herself in harm's way without a second thought.

I run my hand down my face. She's young, I remind myself.

I know I'm pissed because of how that situation made me feel.

How a fear unlike any other had overtaken me and made me feel out of control.

Something I'm not used to. It had taken me back to my first memories in life.

Ones I know I only have because the scene that unfolded in front of me when I was only a small boy is one you never forget.

My fear of anything happening to Cosima is unmatched even to that night. If I didn't already think Cosima meant everything to me in this world, I for sure know now. I shouldn't have screamed at her yesterday, but I'd apparently snapped.

The fear I'd felt, thinking she might be hurt or worse, tangled with the rush of emotion I had over her being safe, all exploded out of me.

It was an out of body experience, like something else had taken over, coming from a deep, dark place inside of me.

I can still feel it simmering inside of me, crawling to get out and to her.

My eyes flick to the door, the urge to go to her and drag her back to my room stronger than ever before.

I flick on the light on my nightstand, grabbing my phone off it, checking it as I head toward the bathroom. There are a million missed alerts and messages, but one stands out from them all. My contact Bruce. Fuck me. Before I can respond, the phone is already going off in my hand.

“Zero,” he barks out the name I’m known by in the tech world into the phone, not helping my headache. All Bruce speaks in is barks. Military life was drilled into him.

“I’m here.” I don’t want to be. I want to be with her. What if I just took her? Then I would know she was always safe. We would simply disappear. I try to shake that thought loose. She’d hate me. Cosima loves her family. She’s so full of life, it’s one of the things I love about her.

“We need you in Kansas.” The motherfucker hangs up on me before I can respond, not that there is much to be said.

If they need me now, and in the middle of what people think is Nowhere, Kansas, something big is happening.

No other details are necessary to know that there is already a plane waiting for me.

This might not be a bad thing. If I lock myself up in Kansas, then I can lock Cosima away in one of my safehouses, keeping her all to myself. That idea is far too alluring, and the reality is it’s not the first time I’ve had it.

I pop a couple of pills for my headache before I hop into the shower, not fucking around. I quickly get dressed and shut down my system, taking a few servers offline. This is the last thing I want to deal with right now, but some space might do me good. I can get my head straight.

Sure, I could tell Bruce to go fuck himself, but then in a few days I’d find out the

fallout of why they had needed me, which often means lives lost. If only I could be colder like War and not give a damn, but I know what it's like to lose people, and often the people whose lives could be lost in whatever is going on are innocents.

Cosima would even hate that. She can be a tough little brat on the outside, but she's pure sweetness inside. A sweetness I want to get lost in, and fucking hate when I see it given to anyone else, which is messed up in its own right, but I can't stop those thoughts.

When I step out of my closet with a small packed bag, the bed catches my eye. The dream of the night before replays through my mind. I reach down and adjust my cock. Was it the alcohol that made this one feel so real? I don't think I have ever drunk that much before.

Even now, I ache more than ever to go to Cosima. I cut those thoughts off, not letting my mind venture there. It never ends well. In fact, the things my imagination has been conjuring up to do to Cosima have only grown darker.

It will be good for everyone if I get out of here for a few days. I need to not only reel my anger in but my dick as well. Each time I see Cosima, it's getting harder and harder to resist her. I need to figure my shit out.

I know what I'm fighting is inevitable, but she's still so damn young. Not only in age but in life, at least when it comes to the world we live in. She has been very sheltered from the darkest parts of it.

Still, I don't want to leave things the way they are at the moment. I hate the way I treated her. I grab a piece of paper, not trusting myself to talk to her in person. I'm still not sure what I would do, but fucking her is on the top of the list, and I'm sure she wants to gut me right now.

I scribble I'm sorry down, slipping it quickly under her door before I head out the back way, not wanting to run into anyone.

I'll send War a message when I'm in the air that I'll be back in a few days.

He might be pissed about it, but it's that or kidnap and fuck his sister. I think that would piss him off more.

I hop on my bike but sit there for a second.

I don't want to leave. I close my eyes, taking a deep breath.

Cosima flashes through my mind, moaning my name, her fingers digging into me.

I touch my shoulder in the same place. It felt so real, but it's also not the first time I've had a wet dream about her.

This is different. I think I am losing my grip on reality.

I know something has to change. I can't keep going on this way. The more I try to keep my distance, which I'm shit at even when she's a whole country away, the more my sanity and control slip away.

I'm becoming irrational and angry. It takes me back to when I was a small boy. I'd been filled with rage and anger at the loss of my parents. I would start fights with War and Ronan that would leave us all pretty bruised up and bloody.

Then Rochelle had Cosima. The first time I held her was the first sense of peace I'd felt since losing everything I'd ever known. She brought a sense of calmness to me that I needed.

The thought makes me smile, shaking my head. Even in the chaos that can be her, Cosima still fills me with that calm lightness. I changed after that day. I embraced the Marino family, becoming one.

Over the last year, I've felt that calmness leaving me, and yesterday has now sent me into a spiral. I have no clue how I'm going to handle it.

But I do know one thing: Cosima will always be mine.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am*

### Chapter Five

#### COSIMA

Calm down, I tell myself as I shove more items into my bag.

It's a stupid thing to tell myself. Calm isn't really my style when I get worked up, and I'm all kinds of worked up now.

The more I think about that stupid note, the madder I get.

I don't know where Z went, but he's lucky I don't know.

I want to choke the hell out of him. He may be a lot taller than me, but I bet I could take him down if I really wanted to.

I still can't believe he did this. When I feel the sting of tears in my eyes, I stop myself and focus back on my anger.

Yes, I want to stay in that state of mind.

I'm so not crying, not yet. Not until I get my shit together and get the hell out of this house.

Once I'm on my flight with an ocean between him and me, I'll let myself feel all the things. I just need to focus for now.



The problem is I can't just up and leave. It's not easy to come and go from the farm. The whole estate is surrounded by a massive stone wall that appears to be beautiful. That is until you're trapped behind it.

It wraps around most of the property except for a section of thick woods that has motion detectors all over it. You don't come and go from here without War or Z knowing. They are, after all, Z's security and motion detectors. The man always knows where I am. Except now I have a secret weapon.

I grab my phone off my bed, calling Marks. She answers after a few rings. "Yo," she says through the line.

"Is this secure?" I ask.

The plan when we met up yesterday was for her to make sure my phone wasn't being monitored by Z. I have my phone back, but when she was messing with it is when everything went sideways. I'm not sure if she was able to do whatever computery tech smart things to it to see if he was and get him out.

"You think I talk on nonsecure lines?"

"I don't know. Your ass disappeared like Houdini."

"Who what?"

"Never mind," I tell her. "I need to get out of here."

"You and me both," Marks mutters.

"Are you still here?" I honestly don't know where Marks is from.

She doesn't talk about family except for a mention of her dad here and there.

Marks bounces all around. Tova says she is never quite sure where she is.

It sounds interesting but also lonely. I can relate; maybe that's why we clicked so easily.

"I'm always around." I hear her blow and pop a bubble. "And I'm dodging work, so you need out of the Marino compound?"

"The farm."

"Same shit." Not sure that's true, but I'll take her word for that.

"Why are you dodging work?"

"It's kind of work, and I don't want to. Last time my handler threatened me with prison." I can hear Marks' eyeroll.

"Prison?" The hell?

"It's not his first time to threaten me with it. The fucker has to find me first." Marks lets out an evil-sounding giggle. I didn't know an evil giggle was a thing, but she has nailed it.

"You really think they can't find you?" I ask out of curiosity.

"I could go dark, but it's not easy to simply disappear. I have an out plan, but when you resurface, which most do, you'll be found."

"How does one go dark?"

“You’re not going dark.” The hell?

“It’s a pain in the ass. You have to disconnect from everything. Like walking out the door with nothing.” I grab my purse off my bed.

“Everything?” I hold it closer. Okay, I love nice things. Hey, we all have our vices.

“Yeah, everything.”

“Okay, can I just go gray?”

Marks bursts into laughter. “What’s going on, and I’ll see what we can do.”

“Z.”

“I had a feeling you were going to say that name. I will say I was surprised to see him lose his shit. That’s not the Zero I know of.” A wave of jealousy fills me, and I push it down. It’s not really about Marks; it’s about people getting to know more about Z than I do.

Once upon a time, we told each other everything. At least I did. I was probably naïve. I’m sure he was hiding things back then, and I don’t really know Z. The Z I thought I knew would never fuck me and then take off leaving only a fucking note! I take a breath, getting my shit back together.

“I want to go back to Europe, but I don’t want Z to stop me.” Marks goes quiet. “Hello? Is that not possible?”

“I tend to be rather blunt.” Marks finally speaks.

“I’ve noticed.” Marks has this strange way of being blunt but also sneaky. The girl

really can be a mystery.

“So I’m going to hit you with it.”

“All right.”

“Hasn’t Zero been asking when and saying you should go back?” I sit down on the side of my bed. “Shit, I’m sorry.” Marks’ voice softens. “But if you want to be a sneaky brat, like I know you love to do, to needle at Zero, then I can help with that.”

“I do want to be a brat,” I admit. Maybe he doesn’t care if I leave anymore. He’s hit his limit with me. “But I want to be a brat that he can’t get into contact with. So my phone is clear?”

“For now.”

“For now?” What does that mean?

“Yeah, for now. I can’t predict what Zero will do, and he’s better at all of this than me. I’m still a baby when it comes to this world. I mean, like Boss Baby but still a baby.”

I’m not shocked. Z always knows what I’m up to and where I am.

“I get it. I only want to send him a message, you know? That he doesn’t have all this control over me.

Not fully.” I want to piss him off. Is it petty?

It is definitely petty, but if he insists on calling me a brat all the time, then I might as well embrace that label.

“You really want to sneak out of there?”

“Is it possible?”

“It will be in twenty minutes.”

“Why in twenty minutes?”

“Zero isn’t home, is he?”

“I think he snuck out this morning.” Did he do the walk of shame? Gah, I’m so pissed and hurt.

“Yeah, I figured as much.”

“Wait? How do you know that?”

“I have my ways. Ways I can’t talk about.” I’m far too nosy to let that stand without some push.

“You know where Z is?” I wonder if I called him if he’d pick up, or is he now going to full-on ignore me? Will he pretend he never took my virginity? I grit my teeth. Yeah, he can get fucked. I’m not calling him, and I’m not making myself available to him.

“I have an idea. Some shit is going down, and I want no part of it. I’ve got my own crap to deal with,” Marks says.

“What kind of crap are you dealing with?” See, nosy. I can’t help it.

“We have a window here. Ten minutes, and part of that is that you’ll have to

maneuver yourself. I can't get eyes inside that house, honestly. I'm not going to try. I think I have poked enough at the Marino brothers. I don't need to be on their shit list any more."

"I'm good with that," I tell her. "And as much as I adore you?—"

"You wouldn't help me get in, and I wouldn't ask." I smile. I'm really happy Tova introduced me to Marks. It's nice being able to openly talk to people who get things about the world I live in.

"Move your ass, Cosima, and put sneakers on."

"Like with shoestrings?" I cringe. I'm not even sure I know where to find a pair.

"Well, I was going to take you through the woods, but after your tussle with Psycho Cop yesterday, maybe you can scale a wall."

I debate which would be easier. The wall would be hard to get over, but the woods have bugs, and I loathe bugs. Sadly, I'm not sure I can do the wall, and I might end up falling off it.

"I don't want to scale the wall, but wait, can you scale a wall?" That hooker popped up out of a ceiling yesterday.

"If I planned for it, probably. Your family isn't the only one who is trained."

"Say more." Now I want to hear this.

"Timetable, Cosima. Focus."

"Right." I jump up, grabbing my AirPods to put in before changing my clothes. I

push over the standing jewelry box my mom got me years ago to pull up the board I have money and other things stashed in. I toss what I need into my bag. “I’m ready.” I pull my hair into a ponytail.

“Head for the tree line and tell me when you’re there. I’ll kill the motion sensors.” I hear Marks clicking away, I’m sure on her computer. I can barely remember my passwords, and this girl can hack anything. I can speak a few languages. Does that count for anything?

Those thoughts are depressing because I know where they’re leading. To the fact that I’m not really great at anything. Especially when it comes to my brothers and Z. They each have their own talents, and as for me, I’m just Cosima.

We both go quiet as I make my way out of my room and down the hallway.

I use the back stairway. I want to tell Tova that I’m leaving, but she’s likely still in bed with my brother War, and I don’t want to put her in a weird position with all of this.

I’d already done that with the whole shopping trip, and I feel terrible about it.

“Pick up the pace,” Marks orders when I make it out of the back.

“Okay,” I huff, hurrying down the east side of the house and toward the woods. It’s not a short trek.

“All right, you have five minutes once I say go.” How the hell did she know I was at the tree line?

“How did you know I was here?”

“I know everything.” She lets out a playful villain laugh that has me smiling. At least with these shenanigans going on, I can stop thinking about Z for a few moments. I’m dreading when I have to go to sleep; lying down in a bed with my own thoughts sounds brutal.

“Are you now tracking my phone?”

“Not at the moment, but look up.” I drop my head back to see something small way up in the sky.

“Is that a drone?” What else could it be? When I was younger, Z played with them and let me fly them. That often ended with crashing them, but he hadn’t cared. That seems like a lifetime ago. When he was actually sweet and easygoing with me.

“Yep, cool, right? I love these things.”

“How close are you?”

“I’m not there,” she tells me. “Are you ready?” I shift my bag, tossing it over my shoulder.

“Ready as I can be.”

“Go.” I take off on a dead run. “Damn, Cosima. You’re quicker than I thought you would be.”

I don’t bother responding to her. I’m saving my breath. Although I’m not a runner, I learned how to control my breathing when necessary. Thankfully, we all played in these woods as kids, and I still remember them.

That was back when most of the security was done by men. There still are men on the



grounds for that purpose, but they don't do rounds. So unless there is an alert, no one should be out here. I inwardly cheer when I see the end of the tree line come into view.

"Now what?" I ask a few seconds before I break through the trees and onto the gravel road. "Oh shit." I start to backpedal when I see a car coming.

"That's me," Marks says.

"It's you?" I stop moving, the car coming to a stop. "I thought you weren't here."

"I'm not." The driver side door opens, but there is no one inside. "In you go. Hop to it, Cosima." She claps twice.

"I can't drive." Wow, my privilege is showing.

"Get in the car!" I jump inside. The door closes on its own before it takes off.

"The hell?" I sit up, my hand on my pounding heart.

"Welcome to the future."

"Holy crap." I shake my head. "Z says these electric self-driving cars aren't safe."

"They aren't. I wouldn't ride in one."

"Well, then. I guess I'll just die," I say dramatically, making Marks laugh.

"It's because they're electric. See, I'm not there and controlling it. I'm sure he's worried that someone could take the wheel from him."

“Oh.” I hadn’t thought of that. I’m more of an act and think about the fallout later kind of person. “Where are you taking me?”

“It’s a surprise.” Marks sounds excited about this. “We’ve got a bit of a drive. You want to tell me what happened after Zero lost his shit on you yesterday?”

Do I? Who else am I going to talk to about it? I think Marks might be the only person I can openly share the details about my mess with Z, so in true me fashion, I unload.

“Hello?” I ask after I’m done and there’s a long stretch of silence.

“That’s a lot.” I bark a laugh. Marks isn’t all rose petals and love notes, but she does enjoy a good dirty book.

“He popped your cherry then took off, only leaving a note. That’s messed up.

” It’s a lot more than that. It’s devastating to me, if I’m being honest. While Z and I haven’t seen eye to eye a lot lately, I thought he had more respect for me.

“Like I’m some random girl!” Thinking about it pisses me off all over again, or at least brings that anger back to the surface.

“So we need to plot revenge.” The best revenge would be him not being able to locate me because it would drive him insane but not sure that’s possible.

“I don’t know. Right now I just need…” I trail off, not sure what I need.

“You need girl time.” Damn. That does sound nice.

“If only,” I mutter. Tova is with my brother, and Marks is, well, Marks. Z is like a son to my mom, so I don’t wanna pull her into the middle of it.

A knock on the window has me screaming bloody murder.

“My ears!” Marks shouts right back.

“I’m stopped and someone is knocking at my window,” I rush to tell her as I hear the locks unclick, the door opening. I reach into my pocket, my fingers wrapping around my knife.

“It’s me!” Marks holds her hands up. I didn’t even realize the car had stopped.

“The hell! You scared the crap out of me.”

“You said girl time,” she deadpans, then a smirk plays across her lips. “Where do you wanna go?” Marks steps back, and I notice we’re at a private airport. “The possibilities are endless.”

It’s not the private airport or the plane that’s shocking to me. In fact, I’ve been to this airport many times. It’s Marks popping up here ready to go. She’s becoming the definition of ride or die.

“You know,” I grab my bag, stepping out of the car, “I think it’s your turn to spill.”

Now, more than ever, I want to know who the hell Marks truly is.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am*

### Chapter Six

Z

No clue why when I landed I didn't go straight to my place in the city. Instead I'd gone back to the farm, without much thought to what I was doing. I knew Cosima wasn't there, and she was the only reason I ever stayed at the family estate anymore. If she was there, then I would be too.

Nope, her little ass actually did what I'd told her and went back to Europe. The one fucking time she listened. It doesn't matter what Cosima is doing; even when she is doing what she's supposed to, she still has a way to get under my skin deeper and deeper.

Cosima is so deep now I swear she's in my bones. She's part of me. Even when she wants nothing to do with me. She's made that all the more clear as of recently since she made the decision not to respond to any of my messages or calls.

I can't say I blame her, considering how everything went down the last time we were together. I'm guessing the note I left wasn't enough of an apology for her. It wasn't, and I know that. I just needed a second to get my mind right.

I pull my helmet off and throw it as hard as I can against the garage wall, making a dent.

Doesn't solve shit, but it felt good. I swing my leg off and over my bike.

I need sleep, and then I need a plan. What the plan is, I'm not sure.

I know what I want it to be, but I'm trying not to piss her off more.

I miss her sweetness, and I want that now more than ever.

It's the only thing that will calm me, and I'm quickly realizing it.

Checking my phone I see Cosima is still tucked away in the small villa she rented or she thinks she rented and found on her own.

My girl is trying to be independent. That will never happen.

As long as I'm alive, I'll never be able to take my finger off the pulse of Cosima.

That is a reality we're both going to have to face soon.

She should be in for the night. I have an alert that goes off when she comes and goes, along with two guards that keep a close eye on her. Cosima is never out of my sight or without a guard close.

I'm not sure if she has spotted them or not, but so far at least it's working out for the time being. I've been trying to give her the illusion of freedom. I'd been so close to ripping it all away from her.

If she thought she and Marks got away with their sneaky plan, then she really had no clue about all the things I've done and do when it comes to how close I keep my eyes on her. She'd lose her shit. I smile thinking about her throwing a fit.

I was tempted to go after her and drag her back, but I let her land in Italy.

We have a lot of contacts there. Keeping track of her there isn't an issue, and as soon as the plane was wheels down, I already had one person en route to watch over her.

She had Marks with her, too, which I found extremely interesting.

Marks is clever, and I knew she too would have eyes on everything when it came to their security. I am also confident that if things did go to shit, she'd let us all know. She'd given us a head start the last time things had gone sideways.

I gave Cosima a week to calm down and then tried to message her. When she didn't respond, I tried calling, but I got the same cold shoulder. I'd even watched her little ass send me to voicemail or roll her eyes from random surveillance I would hack into when I'd text her.

I enter the house through the back, not wanting to run into anyone, but of course War is standing right there when I walk in. I'm sure he got an alert when I pulled up. Should have turned it off, but my mind was on Cosima.

"Waiting for me?" I ask. He's leaning up against the wall on the staircase landing.

"Just checking to make sure you're okay." I keep heading up the stairs. War falls into step next to me. I knew this discussion was coming based on the last interaction I had with him, barging into his room.

"I'm good," I tell him.

"You weren't good the last time I saw you."

"I am sorry about that." I'd sent him a message saying as much. "It was an accident."

War shrugs it off. A fucking lucky accident, if you ask me. I'd been on a drunken

search for Cosima. Who knows how that would have played out. She was already pissed at me.

"I'm also sorry I took off so quickly after everything." There was a mess that had been made, and I wasn't here to help clean it up. Though it appears everything is fine; in fact, it's going to end up making an assload of cash when all's said and done.

"I knew something big must have been going on, and if I had needed you to handle anything, you would have done it from wherever you were. You tracked down our sister before I knew she'd snuck out."

"Not my sister," I mutter before I can catch myself.

"That is the second time you've said that to me." War follows me all the way to my bedroom. I pause at my door.

"What's up? You need something?"

"I can't talk to my brother? Or am I not your brother anymore?"

"Warren—"

"That's what I thought. Now go." War nods and gestures for me to enter my room, then follows me inside. Everything is as I left it. I don't want people in my bedroom, even staff, unless I'm here. Not with my computer system. "How are you and Cosima?" he asks as I turn on all my shit.

"She's not talking to me, so I suppose we're normal." I turn back around to face him. "Is she talking to you?"

"Not at the moment. She and I had an argument." I can guess over what. I also might

have heard the call for myself. I don't give a shit that it was between her and War. She's mine before she's his.

"Marks, in herself, is harmless." For now, anyway. Marks is damn smart, and I'm sure her knowledge will only grow.

"What do you mean, 'in herself is harmless'?" War asks, folding his arms over his chest.

"She is curious, and that curiosity is what has gotten her to where she is today, but you know what they say about curiosity."

"She'll bring trouble to her own door," War fills in.

"And she hasn't surrounded herself in favors when it comes to the government."

"You found more information on her?" Marks is good at hiding her past. Too good, in fact, which leads me to believe wherever she came from, it was mostly off the grid. Where that is, I have no fucking clue. She keeps that part of her life squeaky clean.

"I asked my handler about her. She was supposed to work on the same project I was, but she bailed.

"That had pissed her own handler off. I'm pretty sure we have the same one, only I have a closer relationship with Bruce.

He gives me more information than others, but I do have a higher security clearance than most.

"But she was off with our—" War cuts himself off, and I swear he fucking smirks. Which is not normal for War, but he's changed a lot since he got married. Tova brings



out a more human side to him. Cosima makes me less human. Fuck me. "Off with Cosima," he corrects, not calling her our sister.

"You two fought over Marks and her getting her off the continent before you knew what was happening."

"I fought with the three of them when everything went down on the shopping trip." Wars' brows furrow together. "Those three together are..." He shakes his head.

"Chaos." They're all young and naive in their own right. War nods his head, still appearing annoyed. I am too. I would rather Cosima be here, but I had gone and run my fucking mouth.

"What is your plan now?"

"Plan?" I lean up against my desk, kicking my legs out. Where is he going with this?

"Are you sure you're all right?" He doesn't answer my question, instead asking one of his own.

"I'm good."

"You're off. Stiff." He shrugs. "Not yourself. Is it whatever you were working on or Cosima that has you in this state?"

"I'm good," I repeat, not in the mood to get into it. I haven't even figured out what the hell I'm going to do about Cosima and all of these emotions she makes me feel. I sure as hell am not ready to tell War that she's the reason for me being off.

That I obsessively stalk his sister and want to fuck the hell out of her.

It's all I can think about suddenly. Sex isn't something I let rule my life, but there is this force gnawing at me to take her, claim her. The hell is wrong with me? It's not only about sex when it comes to my Cosima, but now it's dominating my thoughts even when I sleep.

There is no escaping it, and it is only growing worse. Time away didn't help at all, and it's only made me more on edge. And more than that, I'm missing something. I'm not sure what it is, but it's there on the fringe of my mind, just out of reach.

"You know if you need anything that I'm always here." I give him a head nod. "I'll leave you be then," he says before exiting my room and leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I turn back to my computer and bring up the feeds I have on Cosima.

She's asleep. I've slept like shit since I left.

When I do manage to get a few hours, I dream of her, and it's always the same dream over and over.

I reach out and touch the screen, stroking her cheek.

She makes my chest ache in a way only she can.

I walk over to where I left the half-empty bottle of whiskey and debate taking a swig. I almost do but stop myself, going into the bathroom to pour it down the drain before I strip my clothes off and take a shower.

My hand goes to my cock, and I close my eyes as the warm water runs down my body. I start to stroke myself, letting that fantasy dream play back through my mind. I swear I can still recall the way her pussy tasted and how sweet she smelled. Those

little sounds she made as she came for me.

It doesn't take long before my balls are drawn up tight and I'm coming. I open my eyes and watch it go down the drain. The orgasm is doing nothing for me. That ache that's been inside of me for weeks is only growing worse. I flip off the water, drying off.

I have to go to her. This not speaking to her is driving me slowly insane. I need to be there in person, not only because I know that's the only way I can get her to speak to me but because I need to see her too. To touch her.

I grab my phone and fire off a few messages and see about getting my ass over to Italy. I get a message back about having a flight lined up. I should try and get a few hours of sleep in the meantime.

When I pull the blankets back on the bed to try to straighten it before I face-plant into it, I notice a red stain.

I lean over the bed to get a better look.

It's no doubt blood. I might do my best work behind a computer screen, but that doesn't mean I don't get my hands dirty.

I've spent many nights out in the barn with Ronan and War when times called for it.

"What the fuck is that?" If I'd cut myself I would have noticed the next morning, even with a hangover and in a rush to get out of here.

I march back over to my computer to see who the hell was in my room while I was gone.

I keep a camera on my door, for security reasons.

There would have been an alert while I was gone if someone came into my room.

I start to backtrack through the footage but don't see anything.

I go back further to the night I drank myself to sleep.

I watch myself stumble into my room. I fast forward to the next morning but stop when I catch sight of Cosima coming to my door. She knocks, tilting her head toward the door to listen. I had to have been out cold at that point.

Then she turns the knob, slipping into my room. I speed up the footage, watching the time keep going, ticking away, and her not exiting my room. What the hell? Finally, hours later, the next morning, in fact, Cosima slips from my bedroom.

I freeze the frame, zooming in on her. If this was anyone else leaving someone's bedroom, I'd bet my life that person had just been thoroughly fucked. Cosima's always perfect hair is a wild mess.

What the hell happened? I run my hand down my face before I keep watching the footage until I see myself leave with my bag and that note in my hand.

"Fuck me." I glance back to the bed, a pit forming in my stomach. No, it was a dream. The best dream of my life. I go to rewind the footage to watch her enter and exit my room again, but before I can, I see her heading back toward my bedroom with a tray in her hand.

She enters my room again, this time not bothering to knock. A few moments later she is coming back out with the tray, an irritated expression on her face. Then she disappears out of sight. My guess is to return to her room and find that note.

My mind starts to race. I rush back over to the bed. “No, no, no fucking way.” I grab the sheet, ripping it off the bed to inspect it closer.

What the fuck have I done?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am*

### Chapter Seven

#### COSIMA

“O h my God, she’s going to kill us!” I screech, grabbing a hand towel for myself and tossing another to Marks.

We fan the smoke detector, trying to get the beeping to stop. I pray Chef Marcello never finds out about any of this. If he does, I’ll never live it down, and he might never let me in the kitchen again.

“Karen is so mean to us.” Marks fans faster. Karen is mean to us, but her grouchy demeanor is somewhat endearing. It’s safe to say she’s grown on us. She has also fed us more than once, and that’s a quick way to earn a number one spot for Marks and me.

As if on cue, Norina, who we call Karen when she’s not in earshot, comes bursting through the back door of the little villa we rented.

She’s speaking so fast that I’m almost unable to follow. “It is always something with you two. You are going to burn this whole town down. What am I going to do with you?” She visibly takes a deep breath, trying to get her frustration with us under control. The smoke detector stops going off.

“I only caught the words burn and town out of everything you said.” Marks doesn’t speak a lick of Italian except for what she has been trying to pick up for the past couple of weeks.

"What will I do with you two?" Norina flips over to English for Marks, shaking her head at us.

"I have a suggestion." I hold up one finger like I'm trying to answer a teacher's question.

"Out with it," Norina orders me.

"You could teach us to cook."

"You think I have the time for that?"

"Yes," Marks mutters. I elbow her in the side. "What, she goes for runs, reads, and fiddles in the garden."

"That is what is known as retirement." Norina gives us a pointed stare like we're ruining said retirement.

"You're too young to be retired," I point out. I would guess her to be in her forties, but I do know she was in the military at one point.

Norina shakes her head at us, muttering under her breath. We both stay quiet like two kids in trouble.

"Clean this mess and come over in twenty." Norina turns, going back out the door.

"Why does it feel like we're being ordered to do what we wanted to do anyway?" Marks picks up the muffin baking sheet, dropping it into the sink. The muffins are blackened and caved in. How are we both so bad at this?

"It's her superpower." A whiff of the smoke and burnt muffin assaults me, making my

stomach turn. “Oh noes.” I put my hand over my mouth and run toward the bathroom, barely making it to the toilet before I’m throwing up.

Marks is there a second later, running a washcloth under the water to hand to me. I press it to my mouth.

“That’s the third time this week.” Marks rests her hip up against the sink counter. I shake my head no. Not to her count of three but to what she is getting at. “Denying what this might be doesn’t make it go away.”

“Not today.” I drop the cloth into the sink before heading toward my room to use that bathroom to brush my teeth. Of course Marks follows me.

“Have you talked to him at all?”

“No, why would I?” I start brushing my teeth aggressively.

“Okay, your gums didn’t pop your cherry and maybe impregnate you. Take it easy on them.” I snort a laugh, which I’m pretty sure is what Marks was going for. “Can I go get a test now?”

“This whole town will know then,” I remind her.

We’d found the cutest villa in a charming small town on the coast. Since it’s so tiny, everyone knows everyone and their business. Half of the homes are vacation homes here.

“They’ll think it’s mine.”

“They’ll think you went and cheated on me.” We’re pretty sure a few locals think Marks and I are a couple.



“Good, they could use something to gossip about. I enjoy stirring the pot.”

“At least we can’t burn that pot,” I say, leaving the bathroom to grab my shoes.

I might have thrown up, but I’m still going to Karen’s for breakfast. That woman can cook, and this town doesn’t have DoorDash or fast food. We had not thought of these things before renting this place.

“Don’t be so sure about that. We can burn just about anything.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” I mutter. “Plus, you shouldn’t stir the pot if you’re in said pot.”

“I can’t.” Marks throws her hands up. “I have to know. You could be knocked up. Then what? Should you even be standing?” My brows lift. I’m pretty sure she’s fucking with me, but I can never be sure with her. “What? I know shit about babies or pregnancy.”

“Fine, but I’m eating first.” There is no point in telling her no. Marks is worse than I am with listening. She’ll sneak and do it.

“Are we going to eat or what?” Marks is ready to get this show on the road, which would be her shoving whatever breakfast Karen made for us down her throat as quickly as possible, which will again get us in trouble. I’m in enough trouble as it is.

“What if I’m pregnant?” I finally say the words out loud. I think I already know the answer to whether I am or not, but I haven’t allowed myself to really think too much about it. I probably need to know for sure sooner rather than later. Especially if I get to use it as an excuse not to stand.

“You scared? Babies are creepy looking. Especially when they come out.” I laugh out loud because Marks is absolutely ridiculous.

"I'm not scared of the baby." I have always wanted a family.

While my family isn't typical, we are still all close, and my dad adored my mom. Even in our world, their relationship wasn't the norm. Despite the arranged nature of their relationship, they were deeply in love. That wasn't the case usually.

I want love too, and I feel as though they got lucky.

I don't know of any other arranged marriages in the families around us where the couples are truly in love.

It's why when my brother War took over, I begged him to never make me marry against my will.

He'd made me that promise. It is because of my parents that I want that kind of love and babies of my own one day. It is a dream.

"Do you want the baby?"

"Yes!" I rush to say. I am also scared of the possibility that I might not be pregnant. That's why the test as a whole freaks me out altogether. "I know it's stupid or silly, but I have always wanted a family of my own."

"Why is that stupid?" Marks asks.

I shrug. "Because it's old school-ish? I'm supposed to want to further my education and whatever else." I wave my hand around.

"Who said you should do any of that? I didn't even go to college, and I was homeschooled." Marks' childhood, from the pieces I've put together, was different than any I've ever known before.

"That's part of it. Where I come from, girls don't go to college; you get married and have babies, but I was given the choice to go to college." And I didn't want it. Although it kept me occupied and I didn't despise it. However, I missed home but felt compelled to stay, so I did.

"You were kind of given a choice. Didn't they ship you off to school?" It sounds bad when she says it like that. I know it's the truth, but in some ways I kind of understand that my brothers and father were trying to keep me out of their line of work. They should have allowed me to make the decision for myself, but I can't blame them for wanting to protect me.

"It wasn't all terrible, and it was better than school back home."

"All I'm getting at is if your dream is to have babies and be a traditional wife, then have at it.

Don't hide it because it's not what others are doing these days.

That kind of defeats the whole point of women doing what they want.

"She's right, but I can't outright say that to Marks. We try to keep her ego in check.

"I can only see that life with one person, and he doesn't want it with me."

"Right," Marks snorts. "The man is up your ass. I had to remove him from your phone, which I should probably check again if you want."

I don't want her to check my phone, and the reason is pathetic. Before, I was getting pissed about his overbearing ways, and now I know it will break my heart to find out he's not even bothering with that anymore. Just like the pregnancy test, either outcome sucks.

"How about we get some food in us before we do anything?" I nod in agreement, food being the only thing I can agree on right now.

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am*

### Chapter Eight

Z

It doesn't take me long to throw a bag together. I can order anything I need or get it once I get there if I have to. Plus, I have my own place there, and the family has more than a few homes across Europe. All that matters is getting to her.

I'll sleep on the plane because I know I won't be getting any if I stay here. When I'm in the air, I'll at least know I'm getting closer to her. That I'll be on the same continent as her in a matter of hours.

I still don't have a damn clue what I'm going to say to her. The worst part is that fucking note. I'm sure she thinks I was apologizing for fucking her like an animal into her virgin cunt.

I run my hand down my face. This is bad.

She's obviously not only pissed but hurt as well.

She may put on a tough exterior, but I know her heart.

It kills me to think she is hurting because of me.

Everything I have done has been crafted to not hurt her, to keep her safe.

Now I'm the one who hurt her in a way I can never take back.

I took a precious gift from her, and she thinks it meant nothing to me.

My mind replays what I thought had been a dream. What the hell is wrong with me? It's no wonder that when I woke up, I swore I could still smell and taste her. I thought I was going crazy, which is par for the course when it comes to me in regard to Cosima.

I adjust my cock that has been hard since I saw the blood on the sheets, which is fucked up in its own right. I should feel shame for how I took her and how I acted the next day. How I slipped out of the house without a word.

My dick doesn't give a fuck how it happened; it only wants it to happen again and again. Okay, not only my dick but fuck me. Cosima's first time should have been sweet and handled with care. There should have been candles and rose petals and whatever shit you do.

But she let me do all those things to her, didn't even fight me or run that mouth of hers that drives me crazy in more ways than one. Even when she's pissing me off, she's making me hard. Everything about her was made for me. Is perfect for me.

I lock down my shit, even pulling my hard drives out and putting them into my safe before I head out.

I'm not sure how long I'll be gone, and for all I know, I might not be welcome back once everyone finds out about these feelings I've been harboring all this time for Cosima. They may no longer look at me the same way as they used to. Cosima is actually their flesh and blood. I'm only a boy they'd taken in out of pity.

"You." Tova's eyes narrow on me when I step out of my bedroom. "You're back." She doesn't sound happy about that. Normally Tova is on the softer, sweeter side, even a bit meek at times.

"Only grabbing a few things." I lift my bag to show her.

"Whatever." Tova rolls her eyes, turning to leave.

"Hey," I call after her. If she's pissed at me, it has to be over Cosima. The two of them have gotten close. Tova ignores me and keeps on walking. I have to run to catch up with her. "You're pissed at me."

"You drove Cosima away."

"I know."

Tova stops walking. "So you admit it?"

"I fucked up, and I'm not sure what to do about it."

"What you need to do is get your shit together. The two of you can't keep bickering and being pissed at each other." If only it were so simple.

"There is more to it."

"Okay." She shrugs. "Then leave her alone and let her move on." Tova starts walking again.

Neither of those things will happen, ever. She's mine. She gave her innocence to me, and I gave mine to her. Though mine wasn't innocent at all. There will never be another for her or for me. The idea of her moving on enrages me. I fist my hand, taking a breath before I follow after Tova again.

"She's not moving on."

“So there is something to move on from?” Tova casts a glance my way that’s wrapped in a smirk.

"Stop talking about moving on," I grit out, trying to keep my temper in check. That has never been a problem for me. Out of War, Ronan, and myself, I've always been the calmer and more laid-back one. Or I presented that, but I was merely better at hiding my reactions.

"Why should I? It's pissing you off, and well"—she spins to face me when we hit the bottom of the stairs, putting her hands on her hips—"I'm pissed off at you, so I'm happy to make you pissed off too."

"She told you." Tova is always soft and sweet. I'm not used to getting her anger. I swear she and War are rubbing off on each other.

"No one had to tell me." This right here is part of what I've been trying to avoid. Cosima and I together will cause issues. It's already happening. “You were more overbearing and controlling to her than her brothers.”

“Some people see me as her brother.” Another one of the many issues at play here. “And you’re not supposed to fuck your sister.”

Tova’s brows rise, her eyes going wide. “You two had sex?”

Well, shit. I guess I’m not the only one getting that bit of news.

“She didn’t tell you that?” Tova shakes her head, admittedly, but I can see the hurt in her expression. Fucking hell. I’m messing this shit up every which way.

“I thought she took off because you screamed in her face and then started throwing things around. Everyone is always saying maybe she should go back to Europe.”



Tova shakes her head. “You ever think she doesn’t like it there? That she wants to be here?”

I don’t think Cosima knows what is best for her. She let me crawl on top of her and have my way.

“Yeah, see what being here got her?” A psycho held her at gunpoint, and then I went and rutted on top of her before dropping off the planet for a few weeks.

“So you just keep doing this? Fighting with her and having her hate you?”

I flinch, taking a step back. “Hate me?” I repeat. I can’t blame her at this point. I want to beat my own ass, but hearing that she might hate me from someone else’s mouth feels like a stake being driven into my chest.

“Hey, I don’t mean like hate.” Tova’s face softens.

“You’re pissed at me,” I remind her.

“Right.” She puts her hands on her hips again. “But that’s a good thing. It’s better than indifference.”

“If you say so.” I rub the center of my chest, a hollowness seeping in. It’s the same feeling I had when I’d come to terms with my parents being gone, this emptiness. I remember the day it went away. That feeling of emptiness disappeared when Rochelle brought Cosima home from the hospital.

“She loves you too.”

“Yeah, the same way she loves you or anyone else.” Cosima can be a brat, but her heart is big. In fact, I think she throws up the brat act as a defense. She hadn’t been a

brat when I had her in my bed.

“Now you’re just being dumb.” Tova shakes her head as though she’s getting nowhere with this conversation.

“Seriously, Z, open your eyes and figure some shit out before you truly lose Cosima and she agrees to marry one of the many offers she’s gotten.

” With that, she turns and leaves me standing there in a moment of shock that is quickly replaced with a flood of rage.

The fuck is she talking about?

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am*

### Chapter Nine

#### COSIMA

What the heck is taking her so long? It can't be that hard to buy a pregnancy test. Then again, this is Marks we are talking about.

The girl is either all-in or all over the place.

I never know what I'm going to get with her.

But I'm not one to talk; my moods and emotions change in seconds.

If I'm pregnant, I bet I'll be worse. That should be fun for everyone else.

My hand goes to my stomach. I can't help but smile.

As much as I want to be with Z, if we never are, at least I have this part of us.

A little piece of him. Even if Z regrets it, I'll cherish that moment in time.

Not that I'm still not pissed at him. I am, but I will always love him.

He's been a part of my life from the start.

It's hard to imagine my life without him.

What if in time he starts to date someone seriously?

Would he bring her home? I would have to see this person on holidays and at every other important event in our family.

That sounds like torture. I can't help all the directions my thoughts are going in as I wait what feels like an eternity for Marks.

I don't know anything about my brothers' or Z's dating life or, I suppose, fucking life. That's what the men in our world do. They have mistresses and go to high-end brothels or sex clubs. I have more than once wondered if Z took part in that lifestyle.

No one ever brings people home. You wouldn't dare unless it was serious. Hence why I knew nothing of that part of their lives. At one point I thought War might be asexual. I have no idea what Ronan's sexual orientation is. That man is tough to read.

As for Z, I could picture him as a dater, I think.

I don't want to. Out of everyone, he can be the most social. He has personality, and he's funny.

He has a way of calming a room and easing the tension.

A few times I thought it was an act, that I'd catch this expression on his face, but who knows?

I thought I knew Z, but maybe I don't know him at all.

"Buonasera," an old woman says in passing.

"Buonasera," I respond with a smile, leaning back on the wooden bench that is

starting to hurt my ass.

Everyone is friendly here, saying hello and smiling as they pass. Marks isn't a fan. She's suspicious of everyone. She has major paranoia.

If I had to guess from the bits and pieces I've put together, she gets it from her father. Even around the topic of him, she's tight-lipped, and I don't know if it's because she doesn't want to talk about him or if she does it on his behalf.

My phone goes off from inside my purse. I'm guessing it's Marks being overwhelmed by all the pregnancy tests, but it's not.

I see it's a call from my mom. I answer.

Her and my father's faces pop up together when I do.

I can tell from the background they're back home but in their place in the city.

Since my brother War has taken over more of the family business responsibilities, they have been traveling more, and often came and stayed for brief stints near my school when I was abroad.

"Hey," I say. Mom gives me a warm smile. Dad's face is always stoic; even when he chuckles, it remains that way.

"Hi, sweetheart," Mom says. "How is Valle di Luminara?"

"It's beautiful here."

"It is one of my favorites," Mom agrees.

"We have friends there this week," Dad chimes in. "The Amato family." I try to place the name. I know I've heard it before, but I swear my dad knows everyone.

"Yeah, half the houses here, they say, are vacation homes."

"You should go say hello to the Amatos. Take them a gift." Oh, man.

"Dad." His name comes out whiny, and I know it.

"Basta." There is a soft warning in his tone that has me checking my own. My father didn't rule with an iron fist, with me at least. I can't say the same for my brothers, but I do have a ton of respect for him, and if he warns me to cut the crap, I do.

"I don't know them; it will be weird."

"It would be inappropriate for you to not greet them."

"Okay," I relent, knowing this isn't a suggestion.

"You know their son Salvatore. He's single."

"Mom, no." I shake my head. "Tell her, Dad." My parents told me not to consider dating until I finished school, not that I ever tried.

I haven't finished school, but I'm in no rush to return. Not sure I'll be welcomed if I do. It might be college, but it's a Catholic one. No way I can walk around with a baby bump and have no husband. Oh, sure, I could. They wouldn't tell my father or War no, but the judgment would be harsh.

Shit, why hadn't I thought about what my parents are going to think if I am pregnant? If they found out it was Z who got me pregnant. Double shit.

“I have been getting many requests, Cosima,” Dad starts.

“I thought?—”

“I'm not making you do anything.” Except go visit the Amato family. Once my mom said the son's name, it clicked in my mind who they were. They'd been at my brother's wedding.

If I recall, Z and I had gotten in a fight about their son.

That had slipped my mind, but I did have a few too many champagnes that night, and I might have been flirting with a few people to see if I could get a reaction out of Z.

I had, but at the time, I wasn't sure if it was jealousy or him being protective.

I know on my part it had meant nothing, but I was also doing it so that Z's attention would be on me either way. It hadn't gone unnoticed that many women at the wedding too had their eyes on Z. So I kept him busy so he wouldn't notice, but I don't think the man misses much.

"You're not interested to see who is asking?"

No, but I am interested in pissing Z off.

It's a terrible thought, but I'm feeling rather petty at the moment.

I could also use an ego stroke after he took my virginity and then bounced without a word, and I'm not counting that bullshit note. A note I have tucked into my purse to pull out whenever I start to soften to thoughts of Z. Who has now stopped trying to call or text. Another thing to add to my list of shit he's done or is actively doing to piss me off.

"Maybe," I shrug. "What's going on back home?" I change the subject.

"We have dinner plans tonight with War and Tova."

"Cool." I pause, hoping they'll give more. "What about everyone else?" I ask, growing impatient, which is a major problem of mine. I'm sure that links to my poor impulse control.

"Ronan is Ronan, and I haven't heard from Z." Mom tilts her head like she's thinking. "Have you?"

"No, but he's been busy," Dad responds. It takes everything in me not to ask with what. I really try to keep it in, but I know it's only a matter of time before it comes out.

"With what?" I blurt out. Gah, yeah, no control.

"Personal stuff."

"Personal?" I repeat back. What the hell does that mean?

Aren't we his family, so we're the personal things in his life.

Unless he has a secret life we don't know about.

Which is possible. I try not to let my thoughts go down that path, but it's impossible.

What if he has someone special in his life?

Tears sting my eyes, but I keep a smile on my face because my parents can see me.



“Z often drops off. We can reach him if need be, but I’m pretty sure he has a double life.” Mom laughs. I don’t find it funny.

“Does he really?” I didn’t know that, but then again, I haven’t been back in the States for long stretches, and when I was, things were always going on, and everyone was there.

I assumed he was in the city while I was gone. I hadn’t thought about him being elsewhere and me not knowing about it. But bet your ass he always knows where I am. Tracks my every damn move while he’s out there doing whatever the hell he does. Such bullshit.

“Yes.” Mom shakes her head. “Maybe your father should see about marrying him off next.”

Right, well. I’m done with this conversation. I thought seeing and talking to my parents would make me feel better, but through no fault of theirs, I feel even worse. I’m either going to burst into tears or scream, which will give me away.

“My phone doesn’t have much battery left.” It’s the quickest way to get off the phone.

“Cosima, don’t leave the house without a full charge,” Dad scolds me.

“Sorry, I know.” I shake my head, pretending to be annoyed with myself. “But I’m going to get off and head back there now.”

We say our I love yous and goodbyes before I end the call. I spot Marks finally coming out of the store with empty hands.

“What the hell?” I ask, dropping my phone back into my purse.

“Shh,” she hushes me, walking right past me too. Okay, then. “You’re supposed to follow me,” Marks half-shouts over her shoulder.

“Right.” I rush to catch up with her. “What’s happening? Were they out of stock?”

“No, I got it.” Marks glances around before lifting the front of her shirt to reveal a pregnancy test stuffed into her pants. She's speed-walking up the hill that leads back to our villa.

“You stole it?”

“I didn’t steal it.” It certainly appears that way. “Okay, I kind of stole it.”

“Speed-walking makes you appear guilty,” I point out, making her slow her steps. Marks is used to doing most of her crimes behind a computer screen, clearly. As for me, I might have had a rebellious phase and stolen random things when I was a kid. I got in so much trouble when I was caught.

That led to my brother Ronan teaching me how to do it better. I’d only been ten at the time, but it’s those childhood, soul-bonding moments you remember tenderly.

"Is that what took you so long?" I ask when we're halfway up the hill.

"Do you always wear heels?" Marks asks, glancing down at my feet. "How do you not trip on these cobblestone roads?"

"I can do anything in heels." To prove it, I lift on my foot like a ballerina and do a spin.

"And you think you don't have any skill set. I would have rolled down this hill." I laugh, but it's not a skill set that matters. Except for me to appear pretty, and I'm

starting to think that's all people see me as. I can't even give myself credit for that. I get it all from my mom.

"If you didn't steal the test, why is it in your pants?" If she wanted to be discreet, they would have put it in a bag for her.

"I like this town. I didn't want to steal it. So I bought an item that cost more, then I put it back and stole the test, but it's not stealing because I paid. Now no one thinks you're a whore or I'm cheating."

"You're a sweetheart, you know that?" I bump her shoulder with mine.

"I am not," Marks huffs. She can deny it all she wants, but her rambling the last part about cheating and being a whore was to mask the good thing she'd done.

I glance behind us and spot the man that lives around the corner slowly coming up the hill. I make a mental note. Every time we've left the villa to go into town, I have seen him.

It's a small town, and it could be nothing—or they could be watching us. The thing is, I'm not sure if it's me they are watching or Marks.

"You better have to pee," Marks says as I enter the code to get into our gate before pulling out my key for the door. We both wave over at Karen, who is tending to the flowers that hang from her window sills.

"I don't have to pee," I tell her. Marks rolls her eyes.

"You're taking the freaking test." We enter the house together, both freezing when we spot someone sitting in the living room. Not just anyone. It's Z, and he appears pissed. That makes two of us.

Thank all the gods that Marks still has the test shoved down her pants. I can only deal with one thing at a time.

### Chapter Ten

#### Z

I'm running on fumes at this point. If I thought I'd get sleep on the plane, I was a dumbass. That was before Tova's little remark about Cosima having offers of marriage. As pissed as I am at myself for what I'd done, I also know Cosima, and she might entertain this idea if only to dig at me.

"How the hell did you get in here?" Marks throws her hands up. "I have the place on lockdown."

"It's not your place." I come to my feet.

Cosima has yet to say a word; she only stares at me.

Her coloring is off. Is it the shock of seeing me or is she not well?

I hadn't noticed her coloring change in the surveillance or any of the pictures I was sent from the two people I had watching over her.

"Well, we rented it, but it's ours for now," Marks tosses right back. "I think you should leave." She puts her hands on her hips. "We don't care to have your company right now." Cosima is rubbing off on her. "Or maybe ever."

"This place belongs to me." Cosima's expression finally changes, her brows rising.

"No, I searched the history. This home was first built in?—"

"1907 by the Barbieri family. Then it was passed on to their second daughter, who went on to?—"

Marks cuts me right back off. "You made all that up." She glances around, I'm sure trying to figure out how I was three steps ahead. I'd made up the whole story about the villa. It needed a clean past for Marks to be okay with renting it.

"Glad to know my history of the villa felt authentic."

"That doesn't make sense. How would you know which villa we were interested in unless..." Marks trails off. I can see her mind working. "Did you hack me?"

"For that? No." Could I hack her? Sure, and I have, not that I'll ever tell her that.

"For that? For that! What does that mean?"

"It doesn't matter." I take a step toward Cosima, who holds her hands out. I only halt my movement to assess her. If she thinks I'm going anywhere but to her, she's in for an awakening. God knows I've had one.

"Tell her, or she'll have a mini meltdown." I don't want to tell Marks shit. "Please." Well, fuck.

"I planted things to lead you to the villa." That's the simplest way to explain it. I'm only giving that information because it is an easy give, and it will win me some favor right now with Cosima.

Marks' shoulders drop, disappointed in herself. She's good at what she does and will only get better. "You're young and susceptible to ideas."

"Susceptible." Cosima rolls her eyes. "Why are you here?" She pushes her shoulders back, and I can tell she's fighting her emotions.

"You're why I'm here."

"Well, I don't want you here."

"Too bad," I clip back, taking another step toward her. I'll burn this villa to the ground before I leave it without her. I'll take her anger and anything else she wants to throw at me, but I won't leave her again.

"This isn't fair." Cosima shakes her head adamantly.

"When have I ever played fair?"

"See, right there!" Cosima's voice starts to rise, her cheeks flushing. I want to make them flush, but for a whole other reason. "You're playing, played, whatever. This isn't a game to me."

"It's not one to me either." Nothing is a game when it comes to her.

Cosima comes before everything else in my life, and I'm going to start letting everyone know that.

"And if anyone enjoys games, it's you." It's a hobby of hers to try to get a rise out of me.

She usually succeeds in doing so too. She is the only one that truly can get that from me.

Cosima is the only reason I ever got my rage and anger under control. I learned from

practicing. When she came along, I knew Rochelle and Dario wouldn't let me near her if I was still filled with rage, always picking fights with War and Ronan. That I would need to change, and I did, for her.

I'd thought I had mastered it, but I'm seeing now that Cosima holds the power over that control I thought I had. She has no idea how easily she wields it.

"You're not staying here, and we have plans." Cosima lifts her chin, trying to get her bravado back, but she's still off. I can't put my finger on why, but I can sense it.

"We do?" Marks asks. Cosima shoots her a look. "I mean, we do, of course we do. We have a super busy social life," Marks tries to say with finality.

"If you think you're going to visit the Amato family without me, you've lost your mind." Cosima's mouth opens and closes. "How do you know they're here? Wait, does Dad know you're here?"

"No one knows I'm here." I wasn't chancing her finding out and trying to take off. Oh, she wouldn't get away, but it would take me longer to get to her. "And I know everyone that has been coming and going from this town since you got here."

"Really, Jesus," Marks mutters. "That's a lot. Do you remember it, or do you have a program? I guess you could put in a?"

"Marks." Cosima gives her another pointed look.

"Right, I don't want to know shit from you." Marks tries to glare at me, but it comes off like her eyes are being hit by the sun, and she can't see. "Jerkoff," she adds for good measure.

"You know what?" This time it's Cosima who takes a step closer to me. "Why don't



you clue me in on why you're here at all? This is the first time you have ever come to Europe to see me."

"That's not true." Oh, I have come so many times.

Sure, I had eyes on her, but I often felt the need to see her for myself.

Even if only from a distance, and a few times not so distant at all.

She had no idea I was there. Close enough to even touch her.

It wasn't a coincidence that her dorm roommate dropped out; the person never existed.

I had set it all up so she would have her own room.

That made it easier to come and go as I pleased.

To be closer to her and get my fix of her just by being in her presence.

"How is it not true?"

"He stalks you. I told you that. With your phone."

"I'd be real careful, Marks," I warn her.

"Don't threaten her."

I keep my eyes trained on Cosima. "You and everyone else need to understand I'll do whatever I have to to keep you safe and mine.

” I clear the rest of the space between us, my hand going to her chin to tilt her head back.

“Do you understand me, Cosima? I’ll do anything .

” I let that word hang. “And if Marks thinks she can play inside my phone and I won’t return the favor?—”

“It’s her phone. I didn’t try to get into yours. I’m not that stupid.”

“Anything that belongs to Cosima belongs to me.” Cosima sucks in a breath.

“Wait, you got into my phone?” Marks asks. I answer, but my attention stays on my girl. I can smell and feel her now. Normally that soothes me, but right now it’s not. It has another need clawing inside of me.

“I’m not the only one who has a stalking problem, it would seem.” I finally turn my head to lock eyes with Marks. “And I’m guessing you don’t want me to tell that person where you are.” The color drains from Marks’ face.

“What the hell?” Cosima shoves at my chest. It was a dick thing to say, so I take half a step back, letting my hand fall away from her face.

“Stop being a jerk to her. She’s my friend.

A loyal one who has been here for me when no one else was.

” Cosima’s words hit their target, striking me where she knows it will hurt the most.

“Marks knows turnabout is fair play, and I want her to know that I know what she’s up to.”

“That’s not any of your business.” Cosima adorably pokes my chest with her finger. Her nails are painted a soft pink.

“This time it is, and she knows why it is.” Cosima’s brows pull together, and she glances over to Marks, who has taken a few steps back toward the hallway.

“I hear what you’re putting down.”

“Wait, what am I missing?” Cosima’s eyes go from Marks to me, her brows pulling together.

“It’s nothing.” Marks glances around at anywhere but us.

“Z?” Cosima asks me. I’m in sticky territory. Cosima wants to know what I mean, while I don’t think her friend wants her to know.

“I’ll tell.” I shrug. “But I don’t think she wants me to, so I’ll leave it up to you.”

Now Cosima holds the choice in her hands. “Is there something you don’t want me to know?” she asks Marks.

“I don’t want anyone knowing.” She tries to glare at me. Marks is terrible at it. Too much time behind a screen, I suppose. Cosima has a glare that can cut; she gets it from her mother.

“Why?”

“I’m still working it out myself, okay?”

“Okay, that’s fine. He won’t tell me.” Her attention swings back to me, where I want it. “Right?”

“I won’t tell you unless you ask me.”

“No.” Cosima shakes her head adamantly. “You won’t tell anyone.”

“Cosima—”

“No, promise it.” She pokes my chest again, and I have to fight a smirk.

“All right, but if things change, I will be telling you, and you can decide what should be done.” She doesn’t realize who her new little friend here is stalking.

I’m not sure how she’d feel about it. I know I probably shouldn’t be using it against Marks, but there is nothing I wouldn’t do if someone was in my way to Cosima. Marks needs to understand that.

“I don’t even understand what you said, but okay,” Cosima agrees.

“Marks understands, and that’s what matters. Right?” I cock my head toward her, and she nods.

I note that Marks isn’t saying she’ll stop, and on some level, I can more than understand that. My stalking of Cosima is leaps and bounds further than Marks’ fascination with Ronan. But I’ve had a lot more time than she has.

“Maybe I should leave you two to talk?” Marks takes a few more steps back, putting her now into the hallway. “I’ll be in my room. Come talk to me later,” she says to Cosima.

Again, Marks is terrible at hiding cues in person. There is something she wants to talk to her about, something that is a secret.

"Fine. Run." Cosima sighs. "I get it. I'd run too if I could."

"You're welcome to try," I advise her. She wouldn't get very far. Not even a few steps.

"Shut up." An admirable growl comes from her.

"Don't pretend you wouldn't enjoy me chasing you." I lean down closer, feeling her minty sweet breath against my lips. "You wanted me to chase you here."

"I ran to get away from you."

"Oh, Cosima, haven't you realized this yet?" I bring my hand to her cheek, cupping it so my thumb can stroke her soft skin. "You'll never escape me."

## Chapter Eleven

### COSIMA

I can't deny what he's saying, but it doesn't mean I'm not going to try. I did want him to chase. What girl doesn't?

The whole reason I didn't let Marks check my phone again was because I was scared to find out he wasn't still watching over me in his own way, which I'm starting to think is a whole lot deeper than I ever realized. But what I'm not getting is why.

"Why are you doing this? I can't escape you, but you treat me like shit." I lean my head all the way back so that I can look up into his eyes. Z flinches for the first time, giving me an emotion that isn't pure intensity because that is all I have felt since we walked in the door.

I go to step back, needing his hand off me. His thumb is still gently stroking my cheek, and it's hard to think when he's being sweet—okay, kind of sweet. Z doesn't let me move, but his hand does drop from my cheek, only to cup the back of my neck, keeping me firmly in place.

"I've missed you."

I grit my teeth, trying to get my anger in check, but it only lasts for a second, maybe only a tenth of a second. "Bullshit."

"I know I fucked up."

“You fucked up?” I repeat, getting louder. “You fucked up!” I mean, the man left me a note after he took my virginity. That has to count as more than fucking up.

“Stop saying fuck.” There is a warning in his tone.

Z is different. I can see it in his eyes and feel it in his touches. There is an edge to him I have never seen before. There are no jokes or teasing. In fact, he’s been laying out threats.

“Why?” I challenge, wanting to poke him any way that I can. His hold only on my neck tightens. It doesn’t hurt, but he’s making it clear he’s got me where he wants me.

“Because it’s going to get you fucked.” I can feel my heart start to thump in my chest and an ache forms between my thighs. I hate that my body reacts to him even when I’m upset.

Don’t do it, Cosima , I warn myself, but damn, I know I’m going to lose even a battle with myself. My mouth has a way of getting away from me.

“Fuck you.” The words are barely out of my mouth before Z’s is crashing down onto mine in a hard kiss. I push against his chest, trying to fight a battle I know I’m going to lose, not only because of Z but myself. As much as I want to be pissed at him—and I am—I want this too.

I am reluctant, yet my lips part for him, Z’s tongue thrusting into my mouth. My fingers dig into the front of his shirt, no longer fighting it. No, I push my body into his as heat floods through me, need and desire pooling deep in my stomach.

Z’s hands go to my ass, lifting me off my feet. I wrap my legs around him. “I hate you,” I say, sinking my teeth into his bottom lip. He grunts, pushing me up against a

wall.

“Watch it, sweetness.”

“I don’t hate you, but I want to.”

“I know.” He kisses me again. I sink my fingers into his short hair as my tongue strokes against his.

My hips move, and Z shifts, lining up his hard cock with my sex.

I whimper when he thrusts, making his cock rub against my clit.

My body instinctively moves with his, knowing exactly who it belongs to.

“Z.” I gasp. “I need?—”

“Me.” His mouth goes to my neck, licking and sucking. “You need me.” I grip his hair tighter, mad that he’s right. “Say it.”

“I need you.” I give, wanting to please him.

“That’s my girl,” he whispers into my ear.

The way he says it makes it sound so erotic, but maybe it only sounds that way because I want to be his girl so badly.

I always have. There has only ever been Z for me for as long as I can remember.

I tried for years to push down those feelings, but there was no denying them.



Z moves, carrying me through the villa, his mouth never leaving my neck.

He goes straight for my room, kicking the door closed behind him before tossing me onto the bed.

I watch as he pulls his shirt off over his head, dropping it to the floor before toeing off his shoes next.

Holy crap. Last time we were together, I didn't get the chance to really enjoy the view.

Why the hell does he have to be so damn handsome? Everything about him turns me on.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going to fuck you. That's what I'm doing."

"No, I'm mad at you." I lick my lips.

"You can fight me if it makes you feel better." He smirks, actually freaking smirks! Damn, it's hot too. "You want to fight me?"

"Maybe." I press my thighs together; that idea is hotter than it should be.

"You sure?" He steps closer, coming to stand on the side of the bed. I have to drop my head back to stare up at him. He towers over me when I'm standing, never mind when I'm sitting down.

Z's fingers slide gently through my hair before fisting a handful and tugging my head back more. "Be really sure."

My heart is now pounding so hard I'm sure he can hear it too.

"Fuck you."

Z's nose flares; his hand tugs again, harder, making me gasp. "I'll make you sweet again," he says before releasing his hold on my hair. I remember him repeatedly calling me "sweetness" during the night we spent together.

"You can—" My words are cut off when Z grabs me by the hips, easily flipping me onto my stomach as if I weigh nothing. "What are you doing?" I wiggle, trying to move, but he has a hand on my lower back, keeping me in place.

"I'm doing whatever I want to." He flips up my skirt, yanking my panties down my thighs. "Keep still," Z orders. I obviously do the opposite and keep trying to move. I gasp when he yanks me down the bed so that I'm bent over it. His hand comes down on my ass. I let out a loud gasp.

"You spanked me." Did he really spank me? More importantly, why do I want him to do it again?

"Spread your legs," he orders, already kneeing them apart before I can do anything. His hand comes down on my ass again. This time the other cheek. "When I tell you to do something, you do it."

"Go fuck yourself." Z's hand gently strokes my bottom where he spanked.

"I have been fucking myself, but now you're here, so I'm going to fuck you."

"Oh God." I try to close my legs again, not because I don't want him there. My clit is starting to ache, and I need the friction.

"Knock it off." His hand comes down on my ass again.

"Okay." I try to be still.

Z's hand drifts down lower to between my thighs.

"This is for me." He cups my sex, and I know he can feel how turned on I am. It coats my thighs. One finger strokes over the seam of my sex, making sure not to touch my clit. I try to lift my hips, but when I do, his hand stops moving altogether. He's drawing this out.

I both love and hate it at the same time.

"Sweetness," he warns.

"Z, I ache," I plead with him.

"Then be a good girl and do as you're told, and I'll make it better." I dig my fingers into the comforter. My natural instincts are to talk back to him. That has been the standard for years between us, but I know that won't get me what I want.

"I'll be good," I whisper, resigning myself to giving him total control. For now.

"Liar."

"I'll try to be good." I peek over my shoulder to see he has dropped down to one knee, his attention between my thighs. A rush of heat fills my cheeks. I shouldn't be shy because it's not like he hasn't seen me before.

"Spread those thighs wider for me, sweetness." His finger dips between the folds of my sex. "Show me this pretty pussy that needs me."

I suck in a breath at his filthy words, parting my legs for him more. “That’s my sweet girl.” Z’s fingers delve between my folds, stroking my clit. My ass lifts off the bed.

“I’m sorry, I can’t control it.” I feel him shift his hand, leaving where I need it most. “I said—” I stop talking when he grips my hips, lifting me partly off the bed before burying his face between my thighs.

“Fuck, you taste good. I’ll never get enough,” he mumbles against my sex as his lips lock around my clit, sucking, his tongue flicking back and forth. I’m too keyed up. I ignite, my orgasm bursting through my body. I cry out his name, my body jerking.

Z keeps going, licking and sucking up every drop. His tongue continues to work my clit. He doesn’t stop until I’m going off again. I bury my face into the comforter as I cry out from the pure pleasure before my body goes lax except for my legs, which are shaking.

“Need you,” I vaguely hear Z say before I flip over onto my back with him coming down over me. He yanks at the top of my dress, exposing my breasts to him, the fabric no match for him. The ripping sound is loud in the room. It only heightens my arousal.

Z’s mouth latches on to my nipple, grazing it with his teeth, then he goes for the other. I watch as he sucks, his hand slipping down between us, undoing his pants.

He releases my nipple, pushing up onto one arm, looming over me. His eyes lock with mine as he guides his cock to my entrance. Holy hell, this is hot.

“No,” I tell him, fighting a smirk.

“It’s too late. It’s already mine.” Z sinks inside of me. I gasp as his cock fills me to the hilt.

"You're too big." I grip his shoulders.

"Your tight little cunt will take all of me." He pulls out, trusting back in. "This pussy was made to take my cock." He starts to move in and out of me. His strokes are slow and teasing. "When I'm done, it will be molded only for me."

"Your mouth is terrible," I lie, loving every single dirty word that comes out of it.

"I'll remember you said that," he says, taking my mouth in a kiss, his body pressing fully into mine. I love his weight on top of me, feeling all of him as his cock works in and out of me.

"Z." I gasp when the kiss breaks. A wave of emotion overcomes me.

"I know." He presses his mouth against mine. "You're with me."

"Yes," I moan on the edge of another orgasm. "Don't stop."

"Never." His dark gaze is intent, locking me under it.

A moment later, my release hits me hard.

I cry out his name as I ride the wave of pleasure flooding through my body.

Z lets out a loud groan, his hips jerking as he falls over the edge with me, his warm release spilling inside of me once again.

There had never even been a thought about protection from either of us.

Not that it matters at this point. I think a bun is already in the oven.

Our heavy breathing fills the room. My eyes are starting to fall closed.

“Sweetness.” Z’s mouth grazes my ear. “Not done with you yet.”

“I can’t.”

“You will,” he vows, and me and my body obey.

Z feasts and consumes all of me over and over until I’m screaming his name and begging him for sweet mercy.

### Chapter Twelve

Z

I went too hard on her. I brush a piece of Cosima's golden hair out of her face, wanting to see her. She sleeps peacefully next to me. I know she's going to be sore tomorrow. My fucking cock grows hard thinking of how many times I'd made her come, how many times I came inside her.

There was no going back. Once I had her bent over the bed, my need for her took over. I had to show her how much I wanted her. That there was nothing I wouldn't do to have her. I once again took her too hard, and I want to do it all over again.

I can tell she is exhausted—her face is thinner; that what happened between us back home had taken a toll on her. I'd done that to her, and even still, once I got here, I hadn't told her what really happened.

What the hell is wrong with me? Gently I sit up, throwing my legs over the side of the bed. I run my hand down my face. I need to get my shit together. That's what has to happen because I know I'm not going to stay off of her or away from her. I never truly could.

“Running again?” I turn back to see Cosima leaning up on one elbow watching me.

“I'm not going anywhere.”

“And I don't know what to think about that.” Cosima sits up fully in bed.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why did?—”

We both speak at the same time. “I’m sorry,” I say again. Cosima presses her lips together.

“What exactly are you sorry for? Taking my virginity or running away after?”

"I'm not sorry for taking your virginity. That was always going to be mine."

"You're a cocky asshole. You know that?"

"And you're a spoiled brat, and you know that."

"Whatever." She shakes her head as she starts to get up from the bed.

"Nope." I lean over, snagging her around the waist and pulling her back down to the bed. I roll, pinning her under me. "I didn't say you could get up."

"Excuse me?" She narrows those blue eyes on me.

“You took off too, sweetness. Now I’ll be having you on a short leash.”

“You did not just say that to me.” Cosima huffs.

“I did.” She keeps on glaring at me, so I kiss her. The second my mouth takes her, she melts for me.

“You’re terrible with those kisses. You know the effect they have on me.” She gasps when I finally release her mouth, her lips puffy.



“I am terrible,” I agree. “I fucked up.” That’s the truth, something I will always give to her.

“You more than fucked up.” Cosima pulls her eyes from me. I hate it. This is how she can pull away from me, and I can’t physically do anything about it. I need to make this right. If she cares about me even a tenth of what I feel for her, I know she’s got to be hurting badly.

“I need you in clothes.” I push off the mattress, coming to my feet. There is no way I can have this conversation with her when she’s naked. Cosima sits up again, pulling the sheet up, hiding her glorious tits from me.

“How do you move so quickly?” She blows her hair out of her face. “You’re too big to be that sneaky.”

I am a big guy. When people meet me in person after having only known me online, it surprises them. I might have spent a lot of time on my computer, but I also grew up with Ronan and War. You didn’t hit the gym to take fucking selfies of your abs; the abs were more a side effect.

We hit the gym to be trained. You need strength and endurance. You never know what you might come up against, and I rode with them. The three of us have always worked together.

"I'm guessing the same way you learned how to be so handy with a knife."

Cosima was never a fan of guns growing up. She called them loud and annoying but knew how to use them. It was a necessity in the Marino home.

Now, with a knife, she could be rather scary. It always made me so damn proud of her when she was learning. That was until she actually had to use it on a person, a

man who wanted to hurt her. I push down the rage that tries to claw out of me. That day had been one of the worst in my life.

"Why are you mad all of a sudden? It was only a question." Cosima pulls the blanket tighter, and I fix my fucking face because it must be showing my anger.

"Not mad at you."

"Oh God, you're mad at yourself? Am I about to get this whole speech about my brothers and parents and how we can't do this?" I grab my shirt off the floor before going back over to the bed. I pull it down over her head, then grab my boxers and put them on.

"Oh, we're doing this." I let out a humorless laugh. "You need to get that shit out of your head because that will piss me off."

I easily pluck her out of the bed before sitting down on it with her in my lap, my back to the headboard.

"You're confusing."

"Well, you fuck with my head, so..."

"Whatever." She rolls her eyes. I give her ass a small smack. "You!" Cosima hisses, her cheeks flushing. Oh, I know she enjoys the spankings. I felt and tasted it for myself.

I hadn't planned on spanking her, but I've done it a million times in my head when she would have one of her fits. I know her, so my instincts told me she would enjoy it, and I'd been right.

“God, I missed you.” I cup the back of her head, pulling her closer, resting my forehead against hers.

“I kind of, maybe a tiny bit, missed you too. But just this much, okay?” She pinches her fingers together to show me how much she missed me. In her true bratty fashion, it’s the smallest amount imaginable.

“All right.” I shake my head, fighting a smile. “I am sorry. I didn’t know, but it’s not an excuse.” Cosima tries to pull back, but my grip on her neck is firm. I relent, letting her have it, only a few inches.

“Why did you leave that way? I knew you were mad, but that was?—”

“Cruel,” I fill in for her. “It was beyond fucked up, and I hate myself for it.”

“Then why do it?” Her brows pull together, and I can tell she’s fighting her emotions. I don’t want her to do that with me.

Cosima is a ball of emotions. You never know what you might get, but that’s her.

She cares deeply, and she’s not bad at hiding that.

People see her outbursts as her being a brat, and don’t get me wrong, she can be a brat, but I love every part of her.

All those things make up who she is. She has a heart of gold, and she loves hard once you gain her trust.

“I don’t think you’ll believe me,” I admit.

“I know you wouldn’t lie to me. That’s why I thought you took off. You didn’t want

to tell me you regretted what we'd done." I want to kick my own ass for making her ever imagine that was the reason.

"That's not why I took off, and I do partly regret what I did." Cosima tries to move back more. She's going to need to learn that I'm not letting her go, but then again, she enjoys that struggle. "Let me finish." I pull her back in, brushing my mouth to her. The second I do, she melts into me.

There's nothing like the feeling I get from having her be this way in my arms. It's a high that I don't get from anything else.

Not even being the best at computers gives me the same feeling because it's a skill set that has come easy to me.

But damn, the ability to make Cosima melt with only a kiss is my real superpower, and one I'm lucky to have.

And I'm not ashamed to admit I'll use that power when I need to.

"Fine, finish then." One of her delicate shoulders shrugs, causing the shirt to slip off, revealing it.

I have the urge to kiss and stroke the skin there.

How does this turn me on? I know why; it's not any shoulder, it's Cosima's, and she's using it to pretend to not care and sass me. So, yeah, it turns me on.

"The last time I felt real fear was when my parents died. There had been so much blood." I close my eyes for a second, still hating to recall that night.

"You never talk about that with me." Now Cosima scoots closer.

"I've never talked about it with anyone before."

"Really?" Her brows rise, and a soft smile tugs at her lips.

"Really."

"You can talk to me if you want."

"I know."

"Do you? I mean, I know I can be?—"

"No, Cosima. Don't do that. I know how you can be, and I love all those parts of you."

Cosima's eyes widen. "Love?"

"Yes, love." Her teeth sink into her bottom lip, and I know she's fighting a full-on smile. Likely because she thinks it's not the time for one. I pull her bottom lip out from between her teeth. "Don't mask your smiles from me, sweetness."

"It felt wrong."

"It's not wrong when it's us. Got it?" She nods her head, so I keep going. "That day?—"

"That I stabbed a man." Cosima perks up. She is enjoying that far more than I would have thought, but Cosima loves her family and protects them fiercely. I'm sure that is why. She is also a Marino.

"Cosima."

“What? I did.” This time she doesn’t hide her smile, giving it to me.

“You did.” I can’t deny that. I have replayed the footage from the security cameras, watching the events unfold until we reached the girls. “It took me back to that night. That feeling inside of me.”

“Oh gosh.” Cosima covers her mouth with her hand. “I thought you were used to blood and things.”

“It’s not the blood, Cosima. It’s you. That feeling that I might be losing my whole world, and this time I knew I wouldn’t survive it.

” Cosima stares at me, her eyes wide, and I already know where her mind might be going, and it’s my fault, so I don’t let it go there.

“It’s you, Cosima; only you can make me feel that. No one else.”

It would cut deep if I lost anyone from the Marino family, but Cosima is different. She’s the reason I have stayed all along. Likely the reason I’m still alive and the anger and rage didn’t consume me. Instead she had.

"That's why you were so mad at me. You've never spoken to me that way before." Tears fill her eyes.

"I lost my shit," I agree. "Said shit I wish I could take back."

"Did things you wish you could take back." Her voice is almost a whisper when she says that part. I hate that that will be her first memory of us together. I made myself a promise that I will spend every day of my life making new ones with her.

"That night when I got back to the farm, I downed almost a full bottle of whiskey

before I went barging into your brother's room by mistake, searching for you."

"You got drunk?"

"I was loaded. I ended up chucking the bottle at a piece of art in the hallway, outside of your brother's room."

"Holy crap, was he pissed?"

"Not really. Or at least when I apologized for it, he wasn't mad. That night was hazy."

"Tova has softened him some." She really has. It's interesting how much a person can change you. "Why were you searching for me? To yell at me again?"

"I have no clue what I would have done, but if I had to guess, I likely would have tied you up, spanked your ass, and then fucked the shit out of you till I passed out."

Cosima audibly swallows. "That sounds kind of hot." Fuck me.

"You're a handful." I tuck a piece of her blond hair behind her ear. "One that only I want to handle."

"It's hard to handle me when you take off."

"Harder, but not impossible."

"Yeah," Cosima says dryly. "I'm putting together just how much you have been pulling strings from behind the scenes while on a whole other continent."

"Does that bother you, Cosima? Or do you rather like the idea of me always watching you?" I watch her cheeks flush, telling me all I need to know. She really does enjoy

me chasing her.

Cosima enjoys the idea of me stalking her, but I'm not sure she fully understands the depravity of it all.



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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am*

### Chapter Thirteen

#### COSIMA

“ Y es, it does bother me.” I can’t help the tartness in my tone; it just comes out of me.

“Too bad.”

I snort a laugh, not sure what to make of this Z.

He’s different but not really. I can’t explain it, but I like it.

This is the closest I’ve felt to him in a long time.

I love how open we are both being about our true feelings.

Even though I’m hiding some of mine behind sarcasm, he knows me well enough to expect this from me. He said so himself earlier.

“All I’m saying is why not watch me in person?” I flick my hair off my shoulder, giving him a smirk. “Isn’t it better in person?” Z lets out a small groan, his cock hardening more under me. I’m starting to think that thing never goes down. Which I will be taking as a compliment.

"I will be watching in person from now on. You'll miss your freedom." Not sure I agree, but time will tell. Z could take off again. If I’m pregnant, the news could freak

him out, and all the progress we've made could go straight down the drain.

"You still haven't told me why you took off after, you know."

"I fucked you with no regard for your virginity." He clenches his teeth. He does that when he's trying to mask his anger or temper it. "Did I hurt you?"

"No." It didn't hurt. There was a slight pinch, but I was so wrapped up in him and what was finally happening between us I didn't care about anything else. I wanted that moment with him more than I had wanted anything else in my life.

"I thought I dreamed it. I don't know." He shakes his head, his expression like he's contemplating what had happened. "I was for sure still drunk. That had to have been it. It jumbled together."

I stare at him, taking in what he's saying. A ball forms in my stomach. "Oh God." I try to move, but he doesn't let me. "You didn't want to have sex with me." I close my eyes. "I took advantage of you."

Z bursts into laughter, and my eyes fly open. "What's so funny?"

"You didn't take advantage of me. That's a ridiculous notion. I wanted it. Dreamt of it too many times before to even admit it openly." Damn, why is it so hot when he says he wanted it?

"Yeah, but not enough to ever do anything about it. If not for that asshole or me coming to your room, where would you be? Still fighting with me? Off ignoring me?" This isn't making me feel better.

"Cosima, listen to me." He grips my chin, pulling my gaze back to his.

"You and I as an us was inevitable, and it was that asshole that helped nudge along what was always a foregone conclusion.

I left that house the next morning knowing I needed to get my head right because the dream felt so real, and I knew if I saw you, I might pounce on you, and I was sober, so I got the hell out of there because I thought you were still pissed about me going off on you and wouldn't take kindly to me claiming you. "

"Claiming me?"

"All right." He smirks, making me glare at him. "Letting you be aware of my claim because I promise you this, sweetness. I have never in my life ignored you."

"I am hard to ignore." I huff, shrugging my shoulders.

"Impossible to ignore." He wraps his arms around me, pulling me into him. I bury my face in his neck.

"The stupid note." That had really been a dagger in my heart.

"I was apologizing for yelling at you."

I lie there with my head on his shoulder, not sure what is next. "This is a lot to take in."

Z strokes his fingers up and down my back. "But it's time. I can't keep going on this way." His voice sounds pained.

"I can't either. It's been so hard. I'm mad you've waited this long." I give his neck a small bite.

“Don’t be a brat.”

“I think you might enjoy it when I’m a brat.” I know I can’t deny that I enjoy getting under his skin.

“I enjoy anything when you’re near.”

“Oh, that’s why you sent me away.”

“First off, I didn’t send you away. Your parents and you came to the decision.”

“And you agreed to it.” I lift my head.

“You were young. Fuck, you’re still young, and you know this isn’t going to land well with the rest of the family.” His words only stoke the worries I’ve already been having about how they’ll all react to the news of him and me being together.

“You act like you’re a million years older than me.”

“In a lot of ways I am.” I place my hand on his cheek. He leans into my touch. Z has been through more than I’ll ever understand.

He lost his family. I can’t fathom that. I adore my parents and my grumpy brothers, who think they know everything. They have sheltered me from a lot of things, and I grew up having their love and knowing they would always be there for me.

Does Z worry that they will cast him out for this? I want to ask him, but for once in my life I have a sliver of self-control. Why hadn’t I thought about that before now?

“How about we enjoy time together without everyone else knowing? It could just be us.” I smile, glancing over to the door. “And Marks.”

“She left.”

“What!” I gasp. I wiggle to get up. “Z?—”

He relents, letting me scramble off the bed. I find sleep shorts I’d tossed on the ground, God knows when. “She didn’t leave.”

Z stands, getting out of my bed. “Fix your hair.” He stares at me.

“You look all sexy and whatever.” I wave my hand up and down at him. He’s gorgeous from top to bottom. Everything from his messy hair to his lean but broad build, to those thick thighs of his, turns me on.

“And whatever?”

“I’m not stroking your ego, okay? I think we both know I’m the pretty one and you’re the smart one.”

“You’re both, but I thought I was sexy at least.” Z pretends to be offended. “And you have my shirt.” Smart? Compared to him and hell, everyone in my family, not so much. I push that thought away.

“Right.” I glance down at myself.

“But it doesn’t matter. Marks bounced.”

“No,” I protest, rushing out of the room and toward hers. The door is halfway open, so I go right in, not seeing her stuff. When I turn around, Z is standing in the open doorway. “She just left? Why does everyone continue to do that to me?”

Z mutters a curse under his breath. He comes over to me, wrapping me in his arms.

“Marks can be flighty,” he tries to reassure me. I peek up at him through my lashes.

“Am I annoying?”

“What? Why would you ask that?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “No one ever sticks around.”

“Sweetness.” Z’s hands cup my cheeks, his thumbs pushing my chin up. “Everyone adores you. No one is a stranger in the room when you’re there. That’s a gift, but I think a side part of that is it can spook people. I don’t know Marks’ whole story, but I know it’s not typical. She’s a loner.”

“Her upbringing wasn’t normal.” I know that neither was mine, but mine was, however, filled with my family. It took Marks years to meet Tova in person. I suppose it says something that she hopped on a plane with me and has stuck by my side. “I just hope she didn’t think she had to leave.”

“Marks isn’t going anywhere.”

“What is with you and Marks? How do you two know each other?”

“Come on. I want to feed you. We can talk while I cook.” Z leans in, pressing his mouth to mine. “Fuck, do I love that I can do this whenever I want to now.” I smile against his lips. “I really have missed the hell out of you, and I don’t mean only these past few weeks.”

“I missed you too.”

“Things are going to be different. You’re not going to doubt what I feel for you.” I swear there is a hint of a warning there.

"Good." I don't ever want to question us.

"Marks will be back. People are pulled to you."

"If you say so." Not sure I believe that. It doesn't feel that way.

"I know so." He presses another kiss to my lips. This one is firm and possessive, making sure that I feel it down to my toes.

### Chapter Fourteen

Z

“ Y ou know I could help?” Cosima offers from her place at the kitchen island, watching me.

“I got it.” Her lips purse, but she quickly masks it. Does she really not know how easily I read her? “Babe, if you really want to help, you can, but I enjoy taking care of you, if you haven’t noticed yet.”

I might have done a huge chunk of it behind the scenes, but I was always there.

Maybe one day I’ll tell her all those ways I watched her but not yet.

I don’t want to freak her out. We’re in a good place at the moment, and I want to stay here in our little bubble for now and enjoy it before we have to deal with the outside world.

Cosima might think my stalking, or whatever you want to call it, is endearing, but she doesn’t know how deep it has gone.

There are so many things I should have immense guilt over, going all the way back to her first years of high school.

There were more than a few assholes that I had to put in their place.



It was convenient and helpful that schools started putting in cameras all over.

It's also very useful when you can hack people's phones and listen to anything you want.

I hadn't stumbled into the deep, dark depths of the internet because I was bored. It started out because of Cosima and that need to always be close to her and know what she was doing. It was the driving force behind why I became so good at what I do. Why the government and other private companies and individuals use me to get them information. Or hide details that they don't want any other human being laying eyes on.

"I just don't want people to think I can't do things."

"I have never thought that." In fact, she does too many things. Does she really not understand how necessary she is to the people around her?

Cosima can be spontaneous and a bundle of sassy energy, but she is reliable, loyal to her core, and always there when someone needs something.

That means more than I think she understands to people, especially people who often are loners or don't allow themselves to get close to others.

Her two best friends are examples of that.

"I know you never did, but I don't want you to think I can't help. That I'm some princess who can't get her hands dirty." I can tell how important this is to her, so I'll need to make sure that I'm hyperaware of it going forward.

"You help by keeping me company."

"All right." I finally get a soft smile from her. "I'll sit here and look pretty." That's the second time she's made that remark.

"You're more than pretty, sweetness." I round the kitchen island, sinking my fingers into her hair. I grip a handful, tilting her head back. "You're everything to me," I tell her. She stares up at me with those big, expressive blue eyes of hers. "You hear me?"

Cosima licks her lips. "I hear you."

"Good girl." I gently brush my mouth to hers. Cosima lets out a soft sigh. I release my hold on her, going back to chopping the bell peppers for our omelets.

"So you and Marks. I want the tea." Her mention of a drink has me going to the refrigerator to grab her a glass of orange juice.

"You know I do work outside of the family business?"

"The family business." Cosima snorts. "It sounds funny when you say it that way, but I suppose it is the family business."

"I do a lot of private contracting." Though it all can link back. I freelance for many different people, and that can earn favors, which can help the family. It also can have its risks. I know a lot of people's secrets, ones that I shouldn't.

"Yeah, you have a few pattens and that dark, spooky web." Spooky web. If only it were just spooky. It's a place where you can never unsee things.

"I do a lot for the government too."

"I thought you might."

“Marks does too, when she feels like it.” Which isn’t too often.

“That’s how you two know each other.”

“I knew more of her before. I didn’t dig before she slipped into our lives recently.

” I’m still not a hundred percent okay with Marks.

I find it really fucking coincidental that, of all the people in this world, she ended up making friends with Tova, my now sister-in-law, in an online book club, and their friendship bloomed from there.

I just don’t have any proof of anything nefarious.

Everything appears to be in order, and from what I've observed, Marks has shown protectiveness toward both Tova and my Cosima. I believe she cares for them, now at least. I’m not sure it started out that way, but time will tell.

Secrets have a way of always revealing themselves.

Let’s hope that Marks has good intentions for all of our sakes, especially hers.

“You both are wicked smart, but she says you’re better.

” Cosima watches me intently. Damn is it nice to have her eyes on me and to be able to speak freely with her like we used to.

To not always be at each other's throats because we both had pent-up feelings inside that we didn’t know how to handle.

It’s interesting the things you don’t realize you enjoy until they’re gone.

“She’s still young.” Rebellious too.

Marks has gotten herself in a few sticky situations, and one time her handler had to help get her out of it. Which is why he’s so pissed she didn’t show up the last time he requested. You don’t want to owe the government any favors.

I place the omelet in front of Cosima. “It’s nice to have someone in the house that can cook.

I think the lady, Norina from next door, was overfeeding us.

” That’s exactly what I paid her to do. To watch over Cosima and make sure she was taken care of as much as possible without being too obvious.

Just a friendly neighbor looking out for the younger girls next door.

“It’s part of her job.” I put the bowl of fruit I cut up next to Cosima’s plate.

“Wait.” Cosima blinks, thinking over what I said. “Norina works for you?”

“Yes, Norina is on my payroll,” I admit. “Had to make sure you didn’t burn the place down.”

“Hey!” Cosima huffs. “That was only once.” I lift a brow. That lie might work on someone else, but I know every single detail about her. “Okay, twice. Do you have cameras in here?” She lets out a small laugh. I pop a grape into my mouth. “You’re supposed to laugh with me.”

“I don’t laugh about your safety and security.” I pop another grape into my mouth. I suppose slowly letting Cosima know how insane I can be when it comes to her would be best.

As I said, all secrets have a way of coming to light. I'll ease her into it.

"You're crazy, you know that?" She shakes her head, smiling.

See, it's already working.

### Chapter Fifteen

#### COSIMA

How the heck did I not pick up on Norina being hired by Z?

Once he said it, it clicked in my head. As much as I want to kick my own booty for not catching that one, I have to give her props.

She's good at what she does, and I can't be mad at her for that.

Plus, she makes the best breakfast soufflés.

"You're not upset?" Z brushes my hair off my neck. I tilt my head when he kisses me there.

"No, but her breakfasts are better than yours." I bite into my omelet.

"Brat." He nips my neck, making me laugh. This is nice. I hate that Marks took off, which I will be chewing her ass out about later, but I'm enjoying this time with Z alone.

"You should google how to make soufflés."

"I know how to make them." I let out a pretend gasp.

"Out of all these sneaky secrets you have, I can't believe you'd keep the food ones

from me.”

“I’ll do better.” He smirks. I drop my head back, wanting a kiss. He gives me one.

“Eat. I’m going to hop in the shower.”

“Maybe I could join you.” Z’s hand slides between my thighs, cupping my sex.

“Are you sore?”

“I’m okay.”

“Not what I asked.”

“A little.”

“I’ll kiss it better,” he says against my lips. “After you eat.” Z pulls back. “You’ve lost weight.”

“You think?” The second I ask, the whole pregnancy thing comes rushing back. How the hell did that slip my mind again? I totally blame him. He can be very distracting.

Still, how could I do that? Of course I did. This is probably one of the reasons I shouldn’t be a mom. I can’t cook, and now I’m forgetting about the baby. My stomach twists with the thought of me not being able to be a good mom.

“Not much, but I want to know you’re okay.”

"Go take your shower." I nudge him, wanting a few minutes to collect my thoughts, but Z doesn't move. In fact, his eyes narrow on me.

"You know I can read you, Cosima." I'll have to learn to school my emotions a bit

better. Not that I want to hide things from him, but I'm not used to having to explain them to anyone.

"I need to eat my breakfast." I shove a giant bite into my mouth.

It's a bad idea. The sudden wave of nausea hits out of nowhere.

"Oh God," I say with a mouth full of food, pushing Z out of the way.

Thankfully he doesn't hold me in place, a new habit of his that turns me on when it should piss me off.

He lets me rush past him and straight into my bedroom's bathroom, where I throw up. Z is right there, holding my hair, his arm slipping around to support me as I lose the rest of my breakfast.

"It's okay, let it out," he says encouragingly. His words are laced with worry.

"This is your fault," I mutter when I think I'm done.

"I'll take omelets off the breakfast list." Z turns on the water, wetting a cloth for me. He presses it to my mouth. "Better?" I nod. He grabs my toothbrush for me, putting paste on it.

I have gone from Z and me fighting all the time and avoiding each other to him being my shadow and treating me as though I'm a delicate flower.

"I'm going to call the doctor."

"The doctor?"



“There is only one with a practice in town.”

“And you already know who that is?”

“We’ve been in contact.” he shrugs. Well, then.

“I don’t need a doctor. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine, and you will be seeing a doctor.” The finality of his words leaves no room for argument, but when has that ever stopped me?

“Like I said, I don’t need a doctor.” I push back.

“Didn’t ask you what you needed.” I narrow my eyes on him, feeling my emotions starting to bubble up inside of me.

Two seconds ago, I was enjoying him taking care of me and now because I’m scared of what kind of reaction he’s going to have when he finds out I’m pregnant, it’s not so appealing anymore.

“Don’t be a dick.”

“I’ll be whatever I have to when it comes to taking care of you.”

Gah, he makes it hard to be mad at him when he’s being a sweet, bossy asshole. My eyes start to fill with tears. If I thought I was emotional before, this is a whole new level unlocked.

“Baby.” I push myself into him, burying my face in his chest. The smell and feel of him calming me. “Everything is okay.” He keeps me pressed tight against him. I feel delicate and small in his hold.

“What if it’s not okay? What if it’s bad?” I mumble into his chest. Z must speak Cosima well because he understands what I said.

“We’ll handle it together.”

“What if you don’t want to handle it?” I drop my head back to peer up at him. I have no clue how Z might take this information. He’s never talked about what he wants out of life when it comes to things such as marriage and babies.

"Babe, if you're involved, I will be handling it.

" His eyes search my face. "Cosima, you used to get pissy with how much I've handled things in your life, and now you suddenly think I would be different?

" I sniff. He has a point. I bury my face in his chest again and take a deep breath.

I shake my head back and forth. "I know you're using me as a tissue. " I snort a laugh, totally busted.

"Okay." I huff a breath. "I think I'm pregnant." I just say it. There is no point in drawing it out. His whole body goes rock solid. "See, you're freaking out." I try to step back, but in Z fashion, his hand cups the back of my neck so that I can't go anywhere. I hate how hot that is.

“We need a test.” That’s not really a response to me pointing out that he is freaking out.

“I have a test, or Marks did. She got it yesterday.”

“When you went to town and she went into the store while you sat on the bench.” Well, then. He would have already been in the villa at that point. I would laugh if not

for the tension I'm feeling inside of me.

"Yeah, she picked it up."

"Where is it?" he asks but is already heading out of my room and toward the one she was staying in.

I follow after him. "Do you know where she put it?" Z starts pulling open drawers. I stand there and watch him rummaging through everything. He's one thousand percent freaking out. "Cosima." He turns to face me. "Shit," he mutters when he sees my face. "It's going to be okay."

"Then why are you freaking out? It's freaking me out more!"

"There is no reason to freak out." What the heck? He's the one running around and tearing Marks' room apart.

"Then why are you doing it?!"

"I'm not." He schools his expression.

"Oh, really?" I say dryly, rolling my eyes. "Well, when you find it, why don't you take it?" I spin around, marching back out of Marks' room.

Not that I get far. My feet leave the floor as Z scoops me up into his arms. He pins me to the wall.

"I'm only wrapping my legs around you because it's more comfortable."

"Whatever you have to tell yourself." He smirks.

“Don’t you smirk at me.” I growl at him.

“Sorry.” Z drops the smirk, his face becoming unreadable. I wish I had that skill set.

### Chapter Sixteen

Z

Cosima doesn't mean for her little growls to be adorable, but that's what they are. I know this isn't the time to mess with her. She's a ball of nerves, and I'm trying to fully pinpoint why and not make the situation worse.

"Talk to me," I encourage her. We aren't doing the miscommunication shit anymore.

"Maybe I don't want to talk to you." She lets out a small huff, her bottom lip puffed out. I have to fight the urge to not lean in and suck on it. This woman flipped a sex switch inside of me, and now I can't get enough of her.

"You need another spanking."

"Z." She hisses at me, her cheeks turning pink. Damn, maybe she does.

"I thought you wanted kids? Marriage and all that."

"I do," Cosima whispers. "But what about you?"

"How many times have I come inside of you? Do you think I don't know what that means?" Her cheeks manage to get pinker.

It was a dick thing to do, but I knew what I was doing when I came inside of her each time. If Cosima is pregnant, she'll never be free of me, not that a kid matters in that

regard, but damn, would I love to see what our babies would look like.

“That’s now. That night you didn’t know better. You thought it was a dream.” This really shows how naive she is about how obsessed I am with her.

“So? You’re claiming to know how many nights I’ve dreamt about you being pregnant?” Her eyes widen, and a small smile plays on her lips before she masks it. Thank fuck none of this is scaring her.

"Oh, I see." She tilts her chin up, letting me know she's about to be a brat. I have to smile, not wanting to ruin her moment, or mine for that matter. I enjoy her smart mouth, and I'm not going to dampen that. "You baby-trapped me."

"Yep." I’m honest with her. She needs to know that there is nothing I wouldn’t do to make sure she is my forever. I also know she’ll get off on my answer. Cosima enjoys my obsession with her.

"So you admit it!"

"Yep." A full smile starts to take over her face.

I inwardly feel the tension leave me. For a second my mind went to thinking she didn’t want to be pregnant, but I’d quickly yeeted that. I know Cosima, and she wants a family and kids more than anything else.

“Alrighty, I’ll take the test.”

“That’s my girl.” I kiss her on the top of her nose, knowing if I kiss her on the lips with my mind now flooded with thoughts of her being pregnant, she won’t end up taking the test for a few hours when I let her crawl out of bed.

I put her down on her feet. "I don't know where the test is."

"Come on." I grab her hand, leading her back into Marks' bedroom. It wasn't too hard of a find. She put it behind a pillow. I'm sure thinking Cosima would be looking for it at some point but not wanting it just left out for me to find.

Cosima proceeds to the bathroom, putting the stick on her bathroom sink when she's done. I pull her down to sit in my lap. "You okay?"

"You really okay with this?" She lays her head on my shoulder. "Before a few weeks ago you were fighting this; now we might be pregnant."

"I've been fighting to not take you too soon, not the idea of us . We were always going to happen." I feel her nod.

"When did you know we'd be together?"

"Always."

"No." She lets out a small laugh. "I mean like together together, not friends or whatever it was when we were younger."

"Honestly." I try to think back. "You've always been my whole world from the start. Rochelle bringing you home changed me in a way that I didn't understand back then.

I was fascinated and drawn to you." I smile, thinking back to my childhood.

Cosima was a new beginning for me, and she was always full of life too.

"You had this way of calming me. It was the first time I'd felt that since my parents died. "

"Really?" She lifts her head. "I thought I drove you nuts."

I cup the back of her neck. "You do. I wouldn't want it any other way." I press a kiss to her lips. "I don't know when it fully flipped, but you have always been my person. There was never and will never be anyone else." I've never spoken truer words. She is my life.

"I don't know." Her brows pull together, and she shifts on my lap. I can sense her pulling back from me.

"Talk to me."

"That was all really sweet; it's just..." She lets out a long, deep breath, and I know whatever she is about to say has been weighing on her.

"If it was always me and never anyone else, then—" Cosima pauses.

I wait. I'll do it all day if I have to.

"Then you weren't with other people. Dating or whatever you call it. " She glances down.

"What makes you think I have been?"

"I just figured."

"No, Cosima. Never," I reassure her. I can be overbearing when it comes to her, but I'm not a dumbass.

I'm not a hypocrite. I would have to have had some audacity to scare boys away from her while I was fucking random girls.



Being with anyone else has never even been a thought.

Cosima has and always will be it for me.

“Really?” She playfully eyes me, but I see right through it. This has been on her mind, and I hate that. It would kill me to think of her with anyone, and here she is thinking I might have been at some point. Fuck that.

I grip her chin, getting closer to her so she can see right into my eyes. “Never. Nothing. No one else. Got it?”

“Yeah.” She licks her lips. “I mean, why would you want another girl when you’ve got me?” Cosima gives a teasing smirk.

“Exactly, how could I ever?” Her eyes fill with tears. “Hey now.”

“They’re happy ones. I know I’m playing it off with joking, and I know you know that.” I do, but it’s her way. No one can break the tension in a room faster than Cosima. “But.” She sniffles. “I love you.” I let her words sink in for a second, loving the way they make me feel.

“I love you too, sweetness.” It’s not the first time we’ve said I love you to each other. Cosima has always used the L word her whole life, and we all say it back, but this is different, and I know that. This time it’s all mine.

“Obviously.” She sniffles again, making me laugh. “Oh! The test.” She practically jumps off my lap, grabbing it. A small gasp leaves her. “I’m pregnant,” she whispers.

I come up behind her, wrapping my arm around her to place my hand on her stomach. “You know I really did dream of you pregnant.”

"Really?" Her eyes meet mine in the mirror.

"All the time."

Cosima turns to face me. "I'm so happy and freaking excited."

"Good." Cosima places her hands on my chest.

"How do you think my parents will take this?" A V forms between her brows. "My dad brought up the idea of me getting married recently." I tense at the thought of Dario trying to marry her off to someone.

Dario is a difficult man to read. He doesn't give away shit.

I believe his wife is the only person who can accurately predict his behavior.

I will, however, fight him on this. I don't want it to come to that, but if he tries to go down that path, I will do whatever necessary. I won't let anyone or anything stand in my way when it comes to her and our baby.

Cosima doesn't belong to him; she's mine.

The sooner everyone gets that, the better for all of us.

"I'm not marrying someone he picks, so calm down."

"I'm calm."

"You're presenting calm, but you're not calm." She giggles, her body shaking against mine. Now that does calm me.

"It doesn't matter what he wants. In this, he has no say."

"You know my father, right?" I know him better than she does, at least the darker side to him.

I know what the man can do to a person. I've witnessed it firsthand.

Dario is the one who trained me how to do it.

"I don't want there to be this big fight.

Like I said, I'm happy and excited right now.

The last month has been rough. I want to enjoy this before everything once again turns into a mess. "

"Are you saying you want to keep this between us?" I think that's what she's getting at. Cosima nods. I hate that she's asking this of me. I've waited for what seems a lifetime to have her. I want everyone to know that she's mine.

"Please?" I don't want to, but it's not just about what I want anymore. We do need to find a way for this to come out without everyone losing their shit. Cosima might be mine, but I have a great deal of respect for Dario and Rochelle. If not for them, my life would have turned out differently.

"How about we make a deal?" I'm an asshole and willing to do what I need to keep Cosima.

"What kind of deal?" She eyes me suspiciously, as she should.

When it comes to her, I'm willing to play dirty.

### Chapter Seventeen

#### COSIMA

This is going to be hard, but I think it is possible. I glance over to Z, who is driving. I can see the tension in his body. Okay, maybe not. I would almost laugh, but it's not the time.

"You good?" I reach over, placing my hand on his thigh. It's nice to be back stateside. There is no place like home. We got off the plane a few minutes ago and are heading in the direction of the farm.

I know my father kept asking Z when he'd be back home. Z has always come and gone, living two separate lives. One he keeps to himself in a world I don't understand, and then there's the one he has with our family. Both lives carry a heavy weight.

"I'll be good." His concentration on the road is fierce. Too fierce.

Z has always been the most laid-back of everyone, or has appeared to be.

Right now if anyone were to see him, they'd know something is going on, but he might be letting it show now because it's only him and me. I know it's ridiculous, but I like that he's letting me see him in a more vulnerable state.

"Are you sure?" I slide my hand over to his cock, rubbing him over his slacks. I hate how tense he is.

It doesn't matter how many times we go at it, we're both already ready for more. And trust me, we've been all over each other for the last few weeks, forgetting about the rest of the world.

“Cosima,” he warns, as if that would stop me.

“We’re married,” I remind him, hoping that will help ease the tension. It's crazy to think that. I'm not only married but pregnant too.

Us getting married had been what Z wanted. He said it would give him a level of peace. I wanted it too, of course. I mean, I’ve dreamt of being Z’s wife for as long as I can remember. There was no question in my mind, so giving him that peace was easy.

I’m just hoping it will last once we decide to let everyone know about us. Even after we tied the knot, he still seems to be on edge about it. Does he truly believe my parents will try to tear us apart? I don't think they would, but you never know.

It could cause a ripple effect through the family. A family I think Z isn't sure would stick by him in the end. My father holds loyalty in high regard, and he could see this as a betrayal by Z.

The wedding was quick and took place on a hillside in Italy, but it was sweet, nonetheless. It belongs to only us.

We married with just the two of us and the officiant and her wife. I haven't told Marks or Tova. They are going to be pissed if and when they find out, but right now, I want to be in this moment with Z. For us to start our lives together without having to worry about outside opinions.

Plus, Tova has announced she is pregnant. I'm not stealing her moment. She and my

brother deserve the attention.

"You took your ring off." Yeah, he hadn't been thrilled about that. I wear it on a chain around my neck, tucked under my shirt, to keep it near my heart. He's been equally annoyed about taking his ring off too.

He got all huffy about taking it off on the plane. That was freaking adorable.

"Our marriage is more than a ring."

"I know that." He glances over at me.

"I love you." His shoulders relax.

"I love you, too."

"And we'll have a big wedding later. War and Tova just had theirs, and now she's pregnant. This is their time."

"War knows about us."

I stare at Z. "Wait, since when?" How am I only hearing this now?

I have been keeping this from Tova because I didn't want my brother War to find out!

I would rather not put her in that situation.

I was willing to take the hit and have her be pissed at me than for her to have to keep anything from her husband.

I know I wouldn't want to be put in a spot where I had to keep secrets from Z.

“Since I took off after you. At least that’s when he clued me into him knowing, but I’m sure my mouth didn’t help much that night I stumbled into his room.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I didn’t tell Tova so she wouldn’t have to keep things from her husband, but I guess my husband keeps things from me.” I fold my arms over my chest.

“This is our first married fight?” He smirks.

“No, it isn’t. Did you forget about Larry?”

“You know, you really shouldn’t assume Larry was male.”

“And you really shouldn’t assume Larry is a male name,” I clip right back, making him chuckle. Yay! I’ll take a chuckle over him being tense.

Over the past few weeks, I’ve seen another side to Z. One that isn’t laid-back and is quick to react. Whatever facade he might have been throwing up is long gone. That might be part of his unease if he thinks he can’t fake it any longer.

“Either way, you didn’t need to be petting Larry the hedgehog.”

“You never let me do anything fun.”

"I'll let you pet my dick later." I burst into laughter.

"You need to keep your dick in check."

"If you think we're sleeping in separate rooms, you've lost your damn mind."

"Oh, I'm going to sneak over to your room." I rub my hands together like I'm coming

up with an evil plot.

"It wouldn't be the first time."

"Hey, I didn't sneak. I knocked and everything."

Z suddenly takes a turn off onto another road and pulls over. He unclicks my seat belt, pushing his seat back in the process before lifting me up and over the console into his lap so I'm straddling him.

"What's wrong?"

"What's wrong is that we are nearly at the house, and I wish to kiss my wife before I can no longer do so openly. It's going to be the worst form of torture keeping my hands off you." I melt into him.

"Okay." I tilt my head to the side. "You can kiss me. I'll allow it." His hand cups the back of my neck. A move he often makes now.

Even with Larry, Z had cupped the back of my neck, leading me gently away. It's possessive, and while annoying every now and then, it's all super freaking hot. Hey, don't look at me, I can't help what does it for my vagina or the flutter of my heart. They want what they want.

"Don't think because you're pregnant, I won't spank your ass." I lick my lips. I've now received two spankings. If they're to deter me from doing something, it's not going to work.

"Challenge accepted," I deadpan.

"Brat," he says before pulling me in and kissing the ever-loving hell out of me. It



quickly moves past a kiss. "I fucking love and hate your obsession with dresses." Z yanks my panties to the side. "Get me out," he orders as his fingers slide through the folds of my sex.

I go for his belt, quickly undoing it and freeing his cock. I let out a moan when he thrusts a finger inside of me, the palm of his hand rubbing my clit at the same time. My dress bunches up around my waist.

"Always ready for me." He thrusts his finger in and out of me, adding another. I throw my head back, his touch almost too much for me to handle. "Eyes on me," he orders, causing me to immediately bring my gaze back to him.

"Give me more," I sass him, knowing he doesn't have the ability to hold back from me while we're in the car. He's just as desperate for me as I am for him.

"You don't call the shots, Cosima," he tells me before pulling his fingers out from inside of me.

"No." There is no way he's pulling this crap right now. I'm too worked up to care about who's in charge. Before he can stop me, I grab his cock and sit on it.

"Fuck," I faintly hear Z say once his cock is buried deep inside me. I'm too wrapped up with how good it feels to comprehend much.

Once I've adjusted to him, I begin to ride him. His hands grip my hips to help with my movements.

"It's so good. You feel so good." I moan as he drives into me, hitting me exactly where I need it.

"Show me your tits." I halt my movements, pulling down the top of my dress for him

to see. “I didn’t tell you to stop riding my cock, did I?” I let out a moan at his words and begin moving again.

I’m rewarded when I feel his lips wrap around my nipple, sucking it into his mouth. It’s too much. I go off, the orgasm courses through my body, the pleasure gripping me. Z releases my nipple from his mouth and begins thrusting into me until I feel his warm release fill me.

He pulls me into him, my head coming to rest on his shoulder as we both try to catch our breath.

After a few seconds, Z nuzzles me, looking for my mouth. I lift my head, giving him what he wants. This time the kiss is slow and sweet, and I know whatever happens, in the end it will be Z and me.

We’ll face what we have to, but no matter the fallout, he is and will always be my husband.

### Chapter Eighteen

#### Z

When we pull up to the house, I know there is going to be an issue. It might not be an issue for anyone else, but it is going to be one for me. I can already sense it. I can also bet that Rochelle and Dario will be here tonight.

“Welcome back,” War says when I enter the house behind Cosima. It shouldn’t appear strange to anyone that I brought Cosima home from the airport. I often did when she came home.

“Hey.” Cosima goes to War, giving him a hug. Normally War would give a back-pat, but he actually fully embraces her. It’s safe to say his wife is changing him, making him softer. The same can’t be said for me.

It’s not that Cosima is making me more edgy and pissed off. I’m just getting worse at hiding it. She’s making the real me come out to play.

“How was Italy?”

“It was fun, but why do you always have to send this one to collect me?” Cosima points her thumb over her shoulder at me.

“Don’t be a brat.”

“Don’t be a dick.”

Cosima is truly putting on an impressive performance. War is aware that I've been in Italy with Cosima. We hadn't gotten too deep into what he knows about our relationship. I sidetracked that conversation, and not on purpose.

That said, there are people lingering around. A few of the men have been here for decades and hold a strong loyalty to Dario. War has been transitioning them out. I don't blame him. I'd want the men in my home to be loyal to me over anyone else.

"It's good to see some things never change." War shakes his head at us. I'd given him a heads-up that Cosima wanted to keep things quiet about us for now. He didn't push for why; it's not really his style. If it doesn't affect his life, he won't insert himself.

"Is there a party you forgot to tell me about?" Cosima asks.

"My wife will fill you in on the details. You know you're more than welcome." I can't help that pang of envy I have over him being able to openly call Tova his wife—in time, I remind myself.

"Of course I am," Cosima says playfully as her eyes swing back to me. "But is he invited?" She smirks, and not a playful one.

I guess she really does want that spanking. My cock tries to come alive at the thought. I might need to see a doctor. This is becoming an issue.

"Cosima!" Tova squeals before War gets the chance to respond to her, but we already know the answer.

"Tova!" They rush to each other, embracing in a tight hug. "I missed you."

"I missed you too. I'm so excited you're here, and you'll come to the dinner party tonight?"

"Of course. You know I love a good party." She does. Cosima is a social butterfly. Her nature is to entertain. Rochelle is the same way. Tova is trying to embrace it, but she's more reserved. She didn't grow up the same way we all did.

Tova hasn't learned to bite back at people. Well, no one besides War. From what I've heard, Tova gives him a run for his money. She's the only one that can get away with it.

Cosima is sweet until she's not. In fact, her bite can be lethal because people often don't see it coming. She's like a sweet innocent kitten until you force her claws out, and those scratches can scar.

"War hired a few ladies to help me get ready. Come join me." Tova is already pulling Cosima away, I'm sure toward the library. They always hang out in there. Cosima goes with her but glances back toward me, mouthing that she loves me. That settles me for the time being.

"You good?" War asks. I nod, watching Cosima disappear with Tova. "The parents will be here tonight."

"And why didn't you give me that heads-up?" I told War we were coming back today. Cosima was past needing to have a checkup with a doctor about the pregnancy, and I wanted that to happen here.

"I knew you wouldn't come; you'd hold off."

"You really wanted us here that badly?"

"Tova. She's been missing Cosima."

"Is she still pissed at me?"

“You brought Cosima back, so I’m sure she’s over it now.” I don’t want to come between her and her friends unless I don’t have a choice.

I know high school wasn’t great for Cosima, and it’s partly why she’d gone to Switzerland to begin with. It made things easier, but the friends she did make there weren’t the kind you could pull into your life without worrying about what you might subject them to. Cosima wouldn’t want to do that.

That’s why Marks and Tova work well. I see how she lights up around them. At her core, Cosima is a girly girl. She wants to be as thick as thieves with her girlfriends. She thrives around people.

“What’s the party for?” I ask as a delivery person walks by with a case of wine, followed by someone with their hands full of flowers.

“I’m wrapping up a few deals, and Dad keeps pushing for us to host.”

“You don’t want to?”

War shrugs.

“How many people?”

“Roughly ten.”

“Send me the list.”

“I will, but it’s not anyone who hasn’t been here before.” I still want to vet them. People and things change on a dime. Anyone that’s going to be hanging in our family home around my pregnant wife is going to be triple-checked. The stakes are even higher now.

"All right, I'm going to shower and check on a few things."

"We need to talk, so don't take off on me."

"Is it about Cosima?" My hackles rise. If it's about her, I want to talk about it now.

"No."

"Does Ronan need to be there?"

"I'd prefer it."

"Is he coming tonight?" I haven't talked to him in a few weeks.

That's unusual for us; although Ronan isn't particularly talkative, I assumed he was busy given how everything unfolded a couple of months ago. He did have to wrap up the whole dead cop situation, so I'm sure he's been busy.

Ronan prefers to handle things, well, with his bare hands.

We often get sent in when you need information pulled out of someone or to do a cleanup.

"Not sure; he's been sticking to the city and overseeing the new warehouses we acquired."

"Acquired." I bark a laugh. If that's what he wants to call it. It's not difficult to do that if the owner is now dead. Convenient nonetheless.

It also worked in our favor that I was able to backtrack things to make it appear these dealings had been happening before both the father and son dropped dead.

I mean, the father dropped dead, and the son is missing.

He'll never be found. The only person who knows where that body might be is Ronan.

I'm sure he has a nice graveyard out there.

"I'll send you the list and a few other things I need you to handle personally with a few of our accounts."

"You want to move things around?"

"That's the plan. Want everything to appear?—"

"Legal," I fill in, War acting as though the word has a bitter taste to it. Legal or not legal, I could give a shit either way, but if War wants us to appear more like the Joneses, so be it.

Actually, the more I think about it, the more it has its appeal. There is a bigger picture I need to be considering, and that has everything to do with my family, one that is growing.

"Yes, legal."

"Got it." I drop my hand down on his shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

"I'm glad you're home." I nod in agreement. "And not only because it's a convenience for work."

"You going soft on me, War?" I tease.



“My wife would say I’m never soft.”

I chuckle. Glad I’m not the only one with that problem. “Did you actually crack a joke?” It’s not a side of him I’m used to seeing.

"Yes," War says, shifting his attention to where the girls disappeared. "And she didn't even get to hear it. My little mouse enjoys it when I make one occasionally."

"All right, man. Send me the list, and I'll send you a list of jokes to try out on your wife," I tell him before heading up to my room to shower. I make it a quick one, firing up my computer systems when I exit the bathroom.

I get dressed before dropping down into the chair at my desk, pulling up the list. As soon as I see the guests that are on it, I clench my teeth.

How I'm going to get through tonight without murdering anyone, I have no fucking clue.

### Chapter Nineteen

#### COSIMA

Tova taps her foot as Rina styles her hair.

We've been making small talk about what I'd been up to, and then we'd moved on to talk about books.

As much as we love talking about books, I know it's not what Tova wants to be discussing right now.

She's dying to get the tea, but she'll just have to wait.

It's almost comical how she keeps having to stop herself from asking me.

I don't think it dawned on her that we couldn't have full-on girl talk with the two stylists here. I am letting the other, Abby, put makeup on me. I normally want to do it myself, but Tova already had them here.

"Don't pin her bangs back," I say when Rina starts to push them to the side with a glittery Dior clip.

"They're long." A few strands are catching on her glasses.

"They need to be trimmed." Rina's lips press together, and I know she's fighting a retort. "Her husband loves her bangs. It's her signature look."

“Really?” Tova’s face lights up with a smile.

“Yes.” Tova has this soft beauty to her and a unique style not everyone could pull off.

Tova peeks up at Rina, and I know what she wants to say and do, but her politeness stops her. It's not about being rude but speaking up for yourself. Tova is getting there. I think she's still new to having any kind of say about things.

It doesn't, however, stop me.

"I think we're done." I clap my hands together, standing up.

"What?" Abby appears almost panicked.

"It's fine. Really. If you could leave your things, I'll have someone drop them off to you later. You'll get paid extra."

"But—" Rina starts to push back, or I can sense it coming from the furrow of her brows and the narrowing of her eyes.

"I promise it will be well worth it, and honestly"—I give her my sweetest smile—"I'm not really asking.

" Tova's eyes widen, and she fights to keep her face neutral.

"So if you don't mind." I walk over to the tall double doors to the library, opening one.

I see Mickey standing there. His arms are folded over his chest.

He gives me a chin nod, which I return with a smile. Mickey's been around for years,

so it's not shocking War has him watching over Tova.

"These lovely ladies are leaving," I tell him.

"Right," one huffs, I think Rina, but whatever.

"Thank you for your time." I close the door behind them.

"God, I love you." Tova jumps up from her chair. "You have to teach me how to do that."

"In time," I laugh. "That's why you need me."

"I need you for more than that." She grabs my hand. "Now tell me what's going on. I almost exploded waiting for the details." Tova leads me back over to the chairs we'd been sitting in.

"Sit," I tell her, scanning the items the ladies left behind and finding a pair of shears to cut her bangs.

"Come on. You're killing me here."

I laugh. "As you know, Z and I are a thing."

"Well, yeah." Tova rolls her eyes. "I need more than that."

"Don't roll your eyes. I need you to stay still," I order her as I start to cut her bangs.

"Fine," Tova says without moving her mouth, remaining completely still.

"Why don't we wait for me to tell you everything?" I tell her when I'm done with her

bangs. I run my fingers through them, giving them a little fluff. Yeah, Tova totally rocks bangs.

“What, why?” From her expression, you’d think I kicked her puppy.

“You just got married and”—I put my hand to her stomach—“you got a baby in there. This time is for you.”

“Nope, nope, nope,” Tova repeats over and over, shaking her head vehemently. “That’s bullcrap. If you don’t want to tell other people, fine, but you have to tell me,” she says very dramatically. “I can’t believe you would put so much stress on me in my condition.” Her hand now goes to her belly.

“I think you’ve been hanging out with me too much.”

“Good.” Tova raises her chin, like she’s proud of that. It hits me right in the feels. My dramatics can annoy people. Yet she seems to admire that about me.

"I'm not sure we have the time."

"CliffsNotes then."

"CliffsNotes? Really?" That is not going to work for her. Tova loves the details; we all do. That can be the best part.

"Yes, you owe me. You up and disappeared, and then I found out you're with Marks. You two were over there being BFFs, and I wasn't included." I can see the hurt in her eyes, but she's trying not to show it.

"You're pissed."

"I'm a little?—"

"You. Are. Pissed." I emphasize each word. "Go on."

"All right, I'm pissed, okay?"

"Right, and I'm sorry. That would have really hurt my feelings if the roles were reversed," I tell her. I wanted Tova and War to get their time together and not get wrapped up in my drama, but I get where she is coming from.

"Thank you."

"No, thank you. You and Marks mean a lot to me. Our friendship is special."

"It is." Now Tova's eyes start to fill with tears. I can't help it; mine do too. "Sorry, it's the hormones or whatever." She lets out a tiny snuffle.

"Yeah, I totally get that." I hand her mascara to put on.

"Thanks." She takes it from me. Then freezes. Crap, she's going to call me on my slip-up. I should've known she'd catch it. "Wait. You totally get that?" I nod. There's no use in lying.

"Oh my God!" Tova jumps up from her seat, flinging herself at me, wrapping me in a hug. The doors to the library fly open, Mickey rushes in to see what all of the commotion is.

"We're okay, just girl crap," I tell him over Tova's shoulder. She's still hugging the hell out of me.

"Yeah, totally okay." She releases her hold on me.

"Mrs. Marino?"

"No." Tova points the mascara at Mickey. "These are excited tears. Don't you go telling on me." I nod in agreement so Mickey knows she's telling the truth.

"Yes, ma'am. Let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you, Mickey," Tova says as he closes the doors. She turns back to me. "Out with more details while we get ready." I can't tell her no, so I spill more as we get ready.

When we're done, I head up to my room to change into cocktail attire.

I pick a strapless minidress that I haven't gotten a chance to wear.

It's a creamy white with embroidered 3D floral flowers I can't stop touching.

It's tight on the top but flares at the waist. I pair it with petal pink mini heels that match the trim on the flowers.

I turn in the mirror, my first thoughts going to Z and what he will think of my outfit.

As much as I love the dress, I hope it doesn't make it through the night.

I put on lip gloss before heading back out of my room.

I planned to go to Z's room and see if he's ready, but my mom is coming down the hallway toward me.

"You're home."

“Mom.” She wraps me in a tight hug. Over her shoulder, I see Z step out of his room, a pissed-off expression on his face. When he sees me, it softens, but only momentarily. The hell is wrong?

“Cosima, are you listening to me?” Mom laughs, releasing me from her embrace.

“Sorry, what?”

“How was your flight?”

“Oh, good.”

“I love this dress. Is it a Bronx and Banco?”

“Yes, I love their stuff.” I’m trying to stay focused on my mom, but it’s hard when my thoughts are now worried over Z.

“It’s perfect for tonight.”

“What do you mean?” This is a simple dinner party—or so I thought.

“Come on. People are already arriving, and we can’t leave Tova too long.” Mom slips her arm into mine. “Oh, Z, you’re home too.” Mom slips her arm back out of mine to go to Z. She gives him a kiss on the cheek and a hug. “Are you okay?” she asks him.

“No, he hasn’t annoyed me in the last hour,” I quip, keeping up the facade of us still being at each other’s throats.

“Don’t be a brat.” Z’s eyes rake me up and down. My stomach is fluttering thinking about later. “What are you wearing?” I can’t tell if he’s saying that to give me a dig back or he really doesn’t care for the dress.



"You two." Mom shakes her head at us. "Come on." I let Mom take my arm again and head down the stairs with her. I peek over my shoulder to see Z right behind us, that glare still on his face.

Even his glares are sexy as hell. He changed into a pair of dark gray slacks and a white button-up shirt.

I can faintly see a few of his darker tattoos through the shirt.

The suit fits him perfectly, molding to his fit physique.

An ache begins to form between my thighs, picturing exactly how he looks underneath that suit.

I'm never going to make it through this entire dinner if I keep going down this road.

"Dad," I call out when we enter the parlor.

This is the only time the room is used. We use it for entertaining guests, both before and after dinner.

It's stuffy with uncomfortable furniture.

It could have been plucked from the 1920s with its thick molding and oversized fireplace.

Mom once told me that was by design so people didn't linger too long.

"Sweetheart." Dad motions for us to come over. I walk over to him while observing everyone else in the room.

"Dad," I whisper into his ear after kissing his cheek. "What are you doing?"

"I came to see my daughter."

"Dad." I give him a look that tells him I'm not buying the bullshit he is trying to tell me. It's only a quick look because others are in the room, and I'm not going to be disrespectful in front of them, but he knows I'm annoyed.

"Come, I want to show my daughter off." Dad puts his hand on my back, not giving me much of a choice. I see Z out of the corner of my eye. Oh, now I know why he's pissed, and I'm worried for everyone in the room.

Thankfully, War and Tova enter the parlor. War is quick to lock in on Z, but he's good at picking out the threats in a room.

"Cosima, you remember Mr. Amato," my dad says as we approach the elderly gentleman.

"Of course. It's lovely to see you again, Mr. Amato." He leans in to kiss me on one cheek and then the other.

"Please call me Tullio. Mr. Amato makes me feel like an old man." I smile to be polite. "I swear you look more and more beautiful each time I see you, Cosima. You definitely take after your mother." I smile, knowing that comment has definitely bothered my father.

"Watch it, Tullio," my dad warns, making me giggle.

"Cosima, you remember my son, Salvatore." Crap. I know what my father is doing. I clocked it when I entered the room and saw who all was here.

No wonder Z is all bent out of shape. This is my father's way of trying to nudge me toward finding a husband without forcing me. Little does he know that I already have a husband, so none of this is necessary.

"Pleasure seeing you again, Salvatore." I reach my hand out in greeting, knowing there is no way in hell Z is going to allow Salvatore to kiss me.

"Call me Sal." He takes my hand and begins to lift it to his mouth.

I don't need to even look at Z to know he's staring at us. I can feel his gaze on me like a physical touch. Maybe in this instance it's more like a burning inferno threatening to end Salvatore's life just for touching me.

Before my hand can reach his lips, there's a loud crash, causing Salvatore to drop my hand. All of us turn to look around and realize that one of the servers dropped their tray. How convenient.

My gaze quickly goes to Z, who just so happens to be standing next to where the server went down. There's no mistaking the look on Z's face. I need to navigate this situation carefully, or Z is going to out us.

Usually, I would be a brat about all of this and try to needle Z.

I would play up the whole Salvatore thing to ruffle Z's feathers and make him jealous.

I bet that would get me one of those spankings.

But even I know there's a time and a place for such things.

This is not it. Another man flirting with me is not a joking matter.

I know for damn sure I wouldn't like it if the shoe were on the other foot.

I love you, I mouth over to Z with the smallest movement of my lips as possible.

My only plan tonight is to make sure everyone here makes it out alive.

### Chapter Twenty

Z

I never thought of myself as bloodthirsty.

That tends to be Ronan, but right now I'm salivating to draw blood, and Salvatore Amato isn't the only man that I want.

It would be so easy to pull out the gun I have strapped to my ankle and take out three of these asses, all of whom have their eyes on my wife.

"Z." War shoves a scotch into my hand. "Drink it," he orders. I toss it back. It's not enough to get me drunk or give me a buzz, but it might relax me. At least that's War's thought process. It's not going to work. I'm already wound too tight.

"What are the odds that the Amato family happened to be in the same little town that Cosima had been in and are now here?"

"I was wondering the same." Now both War and I are fixed on Sal, as he often refers to himself.

I never gave him much thought. The Amato family is high-ranking but not one of the top. They have strong ties but have never managed to move up. A marriage into the Marino family would give them that. Over my dead fucking body.

All of those politics are normal for this lifestyle, but one glaring issue I have is how

they knew Cosima's whereabouts in Italy, down to the small town she was staying in. It has my hackles rising.

I'll be digging into him and his family when this night is over. That is if I don't end up killing Sal before that. He touches my wife again and he's gonna be a goner. I don't give a fuck who his family is.

Cosima is on her best behavior right now, not lingering in any conversation with the men her father takes her to one by one. I see her glance my way repeatedly.

"Why don't we move to the dining room? Chef Marcello says dinner is ready," Tova announces over the room.

"Where is Ronan?" I ask War, lingering behind. I'm not leaving this room until Cosima does.

"Why? You want him to set up the red barn for you?"

"I would gladly do that on my own." We don't often use the barn. In fact, we haven't for years. War doesn't want to bring that kind of work home with him. We now use the dozens of warehouses we have, many of which are located right on the ocean.

"It would be like old times out there," War says with a hint of a smile.

I shake my head. "I know what Dario is doing. Did you?" I ask War as we follow everyone out of the room and toward the formal dining room that is only ever used for events such as this one.

"When I saw the list of people invited, I thought it could be the case, but he and I have had many conversations about Cosima, and I have made it clear I won't force her to marry."

War and Dario are still in a power struggle. Dario isn't letting the reins loose easily, but it doesn't matter. War, Ronan, and I have all been making plays behind the scenes.

I'm sure he would see that as dirty and underhanded, and maybe it is. But I get why War is doing it, and I know why I am. I won't be beholden to anyone except my wife at the end of the day.

Everything could go to shit, and I would still have solid grounding to keep my family safe.

I understand more than anyone how swiftly your entire world can vanish, leaving you with nothing.

I won't allow that to happen to me or Cosima.

It's why I have always had my fingers in other projects outside of the Marino family.

We follow everyone into the dining room. I pause right outside, motioning for Mickey to come over to me.

"The server that dropped the tray." He nods. "Tip him well." Mickey nods again, and I am confident that he will handle it.

It was a dick thing to do to the guy only trying to do his job, but in war, there are often casualties, and this is without a doubt a war for me.

When I fully enter the dining room, I see Cosima is sitting between Sal and Tova. That's not happening. I don't give a shit if I make a scene.

"Sal." I walk over to him. "That's my seat."

“Your seat?” He chuckles. I stare down at him, letting him know I’m not fucking laughing and he won’t be in a few seconds if he doesn’t move.

“He’s fine,” Dario tries to say. I pretend I don’t hear him.

“Move,” I order him.

“Damn, man.” He pushes back from his chair. “Didn’t know you were so protective of your sister.” Sal stands, and I know he’s made that jab on purpose.

“Watch it,” I say to him, warning that he doesn’t really want to go down this road with me.

“Right.” The fucker smirks. “You’re a Marino. Not sure how I forgot that.” That glint in his eye suggests that there is more to that statement than he means. This motherfucker really does want to end up in the river tonight. Maybe I should take War up on his offer to use the barn.

“Z,” Cosima says, drawing my attention. “I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“You do.” I drop down in the chair.

“Z has always been protective of our Cosima. He has been since she came home from the hospital,” Rochelle tells the table.

"He forgets she's all grown up," Dario adds.

"Doesn't matter how old she is." I turn my head toward my wife. "I'll always watch out for Cosima." A soft smile pulls at her lips.

"He can drive me crazy at times, but he means well."



"You'll never find a husband that way," Aldo Gallo says, picking up his wine glass to take a sip. I'm letting that one slide.

"I don't think Cosima will have a problem finding a husband if she wants one," Tova chimes in.

Aldo's son is the only one I don't need to worry about.

He hasn't glanced toward Cosima except in passing.

The man already has a lover he keeps hidden away.

It doesn't matter what decade it is. Some of the old fucks from previous generations are firmly entrenched in their beliefs and remain intolerant of same-sex relationships.

Yes, I know all the Gallo family secrets. It's difficult to keep them from me. This is particularly challenging in today's world. Especially when it's me searching for them.

I keep thinking the old man is going to end up dead any day now. I have no doubt Aldo would kill his son's lover. I don't understand why he doesn't kill his own father. I would.

There isn't a soul I wouldn't slaughter if I found them to be a threat to Cosima, family or not. They would die before any harm could ever come to her. I would make sure of it.

"This is why I miss the old days." Aldo sighs. "Women don't want to get married these days. It's my father who had a hand in it."

"I strongly disagree." I fight a smirk; the old fuck has now pissed off my wife. "We want to marry; we just want to marry the right man. One with loyalty. We all care

about loyalty, don't we?" Cosima gives the sweetest smile that is anything but sweet. It does make my cock harden slightly.

"More importantly"—War raises his glass to his sister—"I trust my sister to pick her husband, so whoever wants her hand will have to earn it."

"I couldn't agree more." I lift my glass too before taking a sip.

The server brings in the first round of food, everyone falling into conversation. A few men try to pull Cosima into discussions, but she keeps her attention on Tova. I reach under the table, putting my hand on her bare thigh.

Cosima's dress has been a distraction all night. One I needed. She's breathtaking as always. I give her thigh a squeeze, drawing her attention to me. I nod toward her untouched food, which elicits an eye roll from her.

"Watch it," I warn.

"If anyone should watch it, it's you." Cosima picks up her fork, taking a bite of her salad.

My wife isn't wrong. I need to remember to keep my anger in check. It won't do anyone any good, but it's still bubbling up inside me. Two men at this table have a clear intent to pursue Cosima.

It makes me want to pull out my gun and blow their brains out for the mere thought before laying Cosima across the table and fucking her. She'd part those lush thighs for me, knowing she belonged to me.

You'd think with time and knowing Cosima only wants me that it would temper my jealousy, but it hasn't.

I don't think anything can. Especially since no one knows about us. It might lessen it a bit if we weren't keeping our marriage a secret.

That's not the situation we're in, though.

I'm even growing hostile toward her father and the idea he thinks he has some say in Cosima's life.

He doesn't. In fact, he lost that long ago.

The rest of the dinner goes off without any outward problems. They are still stacking up inside of me, however. Sal's whole demeanor and the words he said earlier are sticking with me. I can't seem to shake them.

"Anyone else want a cigar?" Dario asks the table, standing. There is a mumble of agreements.

"Cosima, will you come to the kitchen with me?" I hear Tova ask her.

"I don't know, kitchens and I don't get along too well," she says, making Tova laugh. I stand at the same time as her, my hand going to her hip. I lean my mouth to her ear.

"Be a good girl," I tell her. Cosima licks her lips.

"Or what? I get a spanking?"

"That, and no one dies." Her brows lift.

"Z—"

"I'm not joking."

“Well, this dress is white, and I love it, so please don’t do it near me.” Cosima tries to lighten the tension. It’s not going to work, but I don’t want her to stress over me.

“That dress was never going to make it through the night.” A small giggle leaves her.

Damn, do I love that sound. Normally, it soothes me, but tonight, that is not the case. All I can think about is anyone threatening to take those precious sounds from me.

I release her hip, letting her go. Everyone else but War and Tova have now left the dining room. Tova links her arm with Cosima, leading her out.

"You good?" War asks.

"Stop fucking asking me that."

"A no would have worked." I rub my hand across my skull. "Sal?—"

"I know."

"You know?"

"There are things we need to discuss."

"The same thing you mentioned earlier? You said it wasn't about Cosima."

"It's more about you." Well, shit. That could be a lot of things.

“Is there something you boys need to tell me?” Dario asks from the open doorway.

“Like where you’ve been?” His attention is honed in on me.

“Working.” He keeps that hard stare on me that makes people squirm under it.

I'm not one of those people. I have never been.

I'm uncertain if my past has played a role, but fear has never dominated my existence. The only thing that has ever ruled me is Cosima. That has really started to piece together for me over the past few months. I knew my obsession with her; I just didn't know how essential it's been to everything in my life.

"We all need to have a meeting soon." Dario checks his watch. "Where is Ronan?"

"I have him handling an issue for me," War says, and I know he's full of shit.

I don't think he knows where Ronan is. It has me wondering what Marks might be up to.

I bet she might know where he is. Which I need to clue Ronan into.

I'm not really sure how to handle that. I don't think she means harm, but you can never be too sure.

I also know Ronan is a hard man to kill.

The shit that man has done and lived to talk about is impressive. I'd almost call it superhuman.

"Come, Aldo is interested in the shore."

"It's not a topic I'm open to," War responds.

"Aldo has sold off any liquid asset he has," I inform them both. "And he did it quickly last year."

"Really." Dario ponders this.

"His accounts."

"The legit ones don't have much in them. I'm not really sure about his offshore ones. I never felt the need to dig around to find them. He hasn't been on the radar for any reason."

"Did he push for an invite here?" War asks, already thinking what I am. Marrying Cosima would be a quick way to sink your hooks into this family. All kinds of opportunities would open up for him and his sons.

I fucking hate it. I'd give everything I own to have Cosima. These men see her as an asset.

"We've always been friends. I wish he would have told me he was having issues." Dario adds.

"Desperate people do desperate things," I remind everyone.

That clears out the other two men Dario invited to meet his daughter, leaving Sal as the only one with any potential. Not that it would ever happen.

"I'll speak with him," Dario says. "Come, make nice." He nods for us to follow. War and I flick each other a glance before we do.

I don't make it past the threshold of the parlor before I notice one person missing: Sal.

"War—"

"Go." I turn, not in search of Sal, not yet at least. First, I want eyes on Cosima, then

I'll go find him. The asshat better be using the bathroom. When I step into the kitchen, I only see Tova and Rochelle along with a few staff members.

An avalanche of rage hits me, pumping through my system. Darkness is descending on everything in my path.

### Chapter Twenty-One

#### COSIMA

O h noes is my only thought when I step out of the bathroom and see Sal standing there. “Do you need to use it?” I ask, moving out of the way.

“I was actually trying to find you.” Sal gives me a smile that pulls up one side of his lips.

He’s not a bad-looking man. I’m sure many girls would swoon over this little smirk of his, but not me. Sal is too polished for me. His style is impeccable; it could rival mine, and therein lies part of the problem.

Sal has that pretty boy thing going on, and, well, boys have never been my thing. Then again, Z has only ever been my thing, but I know what is and isn’t attractive to me, and Sal isn’t it, even if he could easily grace the cover of a magazine.

I have no doubt he has graced many women's beds. Ladies talk, and I have heard his name come up more than once. While most women in the lifestyle wouldn’t care about such things, all of that is off-putting to me.

Sal rides the coattails of his dad, which is fine but isn’t respectable to me.

Even my Z, who spends a lot of time behind a computer screen, still has a roughness to his hands, a small scar that runs along his jaw.



A few marks on his body. He gets his hands dirty; he doesn't send men in to do the work.

I don't think Sal could say the same. If you asked me, that is part of why his family has stayed at the level they are at.

They could never face off with the men in my family, so it's best to come for me.

I would be a quick way in. I know that's what Sal is truly after.

I'm sure it helps that I'm conventionally pretty.

I am also a bit of a rarity with my background, having blond hair, blue eyes and a softer complexion. It often makes me stand out in a room at a lot of these parties, except for the bigger ones when some of the men bring their mistresses instead of wives.

"Sal, I'm not searching for a husband." I'm upfront and honest, not wanting to drag this out or let Sal think he even stands a chance. It takes everything in me not to say that I already have one. That would surely end this.

"You haven't even given this a shot. Take a chance to get to know me." He steps closer, making me do the same but in the other direction. My back is almost to the wall now. "We make sense."

"I'm not going to marry a man because it makes sense."

"It's Z, isn't it? And not because he has taken over a pretend brotherly, overprotective role."

"Pretend?" I'm not touching the brother comment. I wonder if others will think the

same because we'd grown up together, but I never saw Z the same way I see War and Ronan.

"He wants you. You surely know that."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Cosima, the dumb girl act doesn't play for me. I know you're far from it. Hell, you went to one of the most prestigious schools in the world. You know how to handle yourself."

Well then. I tilt my chin up, narrowing my eyes on him.

"Do you know how to handle yourself, Salvatore?"

"I do, but does Z?" What the hell does that mean? I won't be asking him, that's for damn sure. "Oh, you don't want to touch that one? Maybe you should."

"Sal—"

"I'm only trying to warn you, Cosima."

"Right," I laugh. "I think it might be best if you—" I don't get a chance to finish my sentence before Sal's grabbed by the back of the neck and tossed down the hallway like a rag doll.

Z's dark eyes lock with mine. His pupils are so big they almost consume all the color of his eyes.

"Don't move," he orders. I don't recognize his voice.

“Z—” I try to stop him, but he’s quick, too quick.

He’s already pouncing on Sal, who has barely come back to his feet.

Z slams him into the wall, making a framed old family picture fall, crashing to the ground, shattering, glass spreading out everywhere.

“Z!” I shout again, hoping my voice will cut through.

He wraps his hand around Sal’s neck, leaning in close. I see his mouth moving, but I can’t hear what he is saying. Sal struggles to try and remove Z’s hands, but his efforts are pointless, his face turning from red to blue.

“Z, stop!” I plead, rushing towards them, but I don’t make it. An arm wraps around me from behind, yanking me back. Without a thought, I throw my elbow back, like I’ve been taught, bringing my heel down on their foot. I see War fly past me in almost a blur.

"Fuck," I hear my dad grunt, making it click who's grabbed me.

"Dad." I shift my elbows so he'll let me go, but he doesn't.

"No," he barks next to my ear. "You'll get hurt."

"He won't hurt me." I struggle to break my dad's hold as I watch Z and now two of the men that work here who are trying to get him off Sal. War has his hand around Z's wrist, trying to pull his hand off Sal's throat.

"Do something!" Tullio shouts to my father. Z is in a blind rage, unlike anything I have ever seen in my life. The man is watching the life drain out of his son.

I don't know why, but I do the only thing I can think of. I scream as loud as I can. To my shock, Z's head snaps toward me, making the scream die in my throat. He releases his hold on Sal, who crumbles to the floor, coughing.

"Let her go," he orders my dad.

Holy shit. He's lost his mind.

"Z," my dad warns.

"Let her go," he tells him again.

"I'm okay." I lift my hands, palms out. My dad actually drops his hold on me.

"Come here." Now it's me he's bossing around. At least that's partially normal. I, for once, do as I'm told, going to him. "Did he hurt you?"

"No." He wasn't close to hurting me, which is why Z's reaction is on another level. It's frightening. Not for me but for others. "I'm okay."

"What did he do to her?" my father demands to know. I don't know what the hell to say, so I say nothing. Again, not normal for me.

Z is ignoring everyone; his sole focus is on me. I might have lost it too because why am I finding this situation hot? It's those kinds of thoughts that make me remember how much of a Marino I really am.

"This is insane. I come into your home, and this is how you treat us? I thought—" Tullio says, his face is almost as red a tomato.

"Hold your tongue," War says, his tone chilling. "Or I'll cut it out."

“Well, that all escalated quickly.” I let out a laugh. “Men sometimes.” I roll my eyes dramatically. “Z, I love that picture.” I lean down and pick up the busted frame. “Mom and I are clearly the only photogenic people in this family.”

Tova lets out a giggle, quickly covering her mouth with her hand. I feel some of the tension start to drain.

“Cosima,” Z whispers my name gently.

“Take your son, Tullio,” War tells him.

“If he ever touches her again, he’ll be a dead man walking,” Z warns.

“We will get this all straightened out,” my dad adds, talking to Tullio, guiding him past us like Z didn’t just threaten to kill Sal. Smart—we don’t need Sal coming toward Z; they all should go in the other direction.

“I’ll see about smoothing a few things,” Mom adds, walking past too but pausing next to Z. “Breathe, honey, no one is going to hurt Cosima.” Z gives one small nod to Mom because she keeps walking, everyone else leaving the hallway too, but War, Tova, Z, and me.

"What happened?" War speaks once he's sure we're alone.

"He tried to corner her."

"Are you okay?" War asks me.

"Yeah, I'm good." Not sure I was cornered, but I’m not arguing that with Z. If that is how he sees it, then okay.

"Z, it's not smart to?—"

"I don't give a fuck." Z cuts my brother off.

"If you—" War starts again, but this time it's his wife that cuts in.

"Everyone needs to take a break. We're not talking about this tonight." I smile over at Tova, not only because she's doing what is needed but also because I love how she is stepping up and taking control.

"You heard the lady of the house. Her house, her rules," I'm quick to add, keeping my tone playful, trying to lessen the rage I can still feel pulsing off Z.

"Go, I'll get Mom and Dad to head back to their place in the city tonight."

"Thank you," I tell War. He's letting me know that my parents won't come knocking tonight, and for me to calm Z down before morning. "Come on." I slip my hand into Z's.

"I'll kill him if he comes near her again." Holy shit. Z isn't fucking around.

A darker side of Z came out tonight.

"I know," War tells him. That calms him enough for me to be able to start to tug on Z's hand so that he comes with me. I lead him up the stairs with the intent to go to his room, but when we reach the top, Z scoops me up into his arms, carrying me toward my bedroom.

"We're going to my room?" I wrap my arms tight around his neck, linking my fingers together.

“Yes.” My eyes search his face as he carries me down the long hallway.

His expression is unreadable. As if there is nothing there, but his eyes say it all.

I don't think I have ever seen Z this pissed off before.

That's saying something since in the past I made it my goal to get a reaction from him.

Every step he takes is with intent. Z enters my room, kicking the door closed behind him before placing me onto the bed.

“Undress if you want to keep the dress,” he orders, going back toward the door. The clicking of the lock is loud in the room, a soft echo.

I'm too preoccupied observing him to follow his order. “Cosima,” Z warns, as if that will spark me into action. Z might have lost it downstairs and be worked up, but I'm not scared of him in the slightest. There isn't anything in this world the man could do that would make me fear for myself.

I don't care what anyone says, including Z himself. There's no way he would ever do anything to hurt me.

I mean, the man was beside himself when he found out what happened between us our first time together.

I let my heels fall off my feet as I scurry to my knees as Z makes his way back to the bed, undressing in the process. I had no idea how much I'd enjoy a strip show until this very moment. My eyes eat him up. I swear he looks like every inch of him was chiseled by hand.

“Z.” I lick my lips as I watch him come closer. He’s so damn hot, and he’s all mine. His fingers go to my hair, gripping a fistful and pulling my head all the way back to stare straight up at him. His breathing is heavy. I can see the rise and fall of his chest with every breath. “You?—”

His mouth crashes down onto mine, Z’s tongue thrusts into my mouth, greedily taking what he wants. The intensity of it all shifts the world around us, everything else fading away.

Heat blooms in my chest, then radiates throughout my body. The passion and love he has for me is unmatched by anything in the world. It’s weaved into him and everything he does. It’s a love I don’t think many get to experience, and I’ll do anything to protect it, and I know Z will do the same.

I gasp for air when his mouth breaks from mine, but it doesn’t leave my body.

Z keeps kissing me down my jaw and then the column of my neck.

A whimper escapes me when he rakes his teeth along my skin before he latches on and sucks.

With each hard pull of suction on my neck, it pulses down to my clit.

“Z.” I moan, my body starting to ache with a primal need.

“Done with this,” he says before I feel a tug and then a snap. Z pulls back, revealing the necklace I had been wearing, now in the palm of his hand. He lifts it, letting the ring slip free. I hold my hand out, knowing what he wants.

He slips the simple gold band onto my finger.



We'd gotten it on the fly, and Z told me he had another for me when we returned home, but I adore this one.

I think in part because it's not showy and over-the-top like most things I do.

It was a stolen moment we had together. It represents us.

That we don't actually need anything else.

Only each other, and that is and always will be enough.

"It doesn't leave your hand again."

"Never," I vow. Z still has my hair in a tight grip; it relaxes a fraction.

"Take the dress off, wife." He releases his hold, stepping back. "I want to watch."

I reach to the side of the dress, finding the hidden zipper. I tug it down, letting the dress drop, pooling down my knees, leaving me in only a pair of silky white panties.

I feel empowered by the way Z looks at me.

His eyes roam over me as though he can't get enough.

There's no doubt in my mind that he needs to be the one in control right now, but I want to give him something first. He always puts my pleasure before anything, and I want to return the favor but know it has to be his idea.

"Are you going to stare all day or do something with me?" I ask, knowing my smart mouth will most likely get the desired outcome. I lick my lips again, this time while staring directly at his cock that is now in his hand.

The man has gone down on me a million times, but I've never gotten to return the favor. He'd said before he worried about his control and was always greedy to sink his cock inside of my pussy.

"Watch it," he says as he strokes himself a few times before stepping back toward the bed. Oh, I'm watching. "Open your mouth." I part my lips as he guides the head of his cock to them. I make no protest, wanting to please him. "Good girl."

Z pushes the head of his cock into my mouth, his hand going to the back of my neck, keeping me firmly in place. He thrusts forward, his cock gliding against my tongue. His strokes are slower at first but start to grow faster as I get used to taking more of him into my mouth.

"That's it," he praises. His other hand cups my breast as he jerks his hips back and forth. There is nothing I can do but take what he is giving me, and I gladly do. Loving that I am giving him pleasure in a different way.

I whimper around his cock when he gives my nipple a small tug. I try to close my legs, needing pressure on my throbbing clit, but Z stops moving mid-thrust.

"Did I say you could move?" I peer up at him through my lashes. "You stay still and let me take what I need." Holy crap. I moan around his cock. I don't know if he meant for his words to turn me on; likely, the man knows my body better than I do, but I swear it gives me a mini orgasm.

I stroke my tongue against his cock, letting him know I'll be a good girl, for now. Z thrusts forward, harder this time, his cock hitting the back of my throat. I relax, wanting to take as much of him as I can.

A groan rumbles from him, and I start to suck while stroking him with my tongue. A string of curses leaves him in Italian. He jerks his cock back, letting it slip from my

lips before he pounces, pinning me onto the bed. That wild look is back in his eyes.

“Need you.”

“I know.” I grip his chin, making him stare into my eyes. “You with me?” He nods.  
“Good, because I need you too. Always.”

Z might have lost control, but that's more than okay because I'm starting to realize it's me who has it. I always have.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

Z

Cosima sleeps lightly with her head resting on my chest. I run my fingers up and down her bare back. I'm not sure how long I'd slept, but a dream or nightmare, I suppose, jerked me awake.

It's been years since I dreamed of my parents. They have faded with time, or so I thought. My nightmares have turned to dreams of Cosima over the years.

Now they're back but different. It's always been hard for me to recall if the dreams were memories or simply nightmares crafted on their own.

Each time the details changed, but this time they'd been more clear.

My mind has been racing since I woke, trying to decipher if any of the moments from this most recent one are based from reality.

Or if Sal's words from yesterday had struck their desired chord and that's why.

Cosima lets out a small, sweet sigh. I close my eyes, taking a deep breath.

I fucking lost it last night. I knew Sal went searching for Cosima, his intention to get her alone.

I'm not sure if I'm madder at myself for allowing that to happen or how I'd

completely lost control of my emotions and my actions.

I snapped, and in the moment, I wanted to kill him.

I still want that. I'm not sure what to make of it all, but I know I'm not done with Salvatore Amato, far from it.

He intended to get between Cosima and me.

He may not know we're married, but by his comments he is aware of there being more to our relationship.

Still, he tried to make his move, which is really what sent me over the edge.

I won't let that stand. Anything that tries to come between us, I'll see as a threat that needs to be eliminated. I don't give a shit if it goes against an old code. None of it matters to me. I have been waiting my whole life to have Cosima, and I'm never letting her go.

Gently, I shift, slipping out from under my wife, making sure her head comes down on one of the pillows as I sit up.

When I move, it tugs the sheet down that had been covering us, revealing Cosima's curvy little body to me.

I tug it down more when I see the small marks on her breast that lead up to her throat. I was rougher with her this time.

I don't stop until I get a view of her thighs. I place my hand on one, lifting and pulling them apart to see the insides. I remember licking and sucking on her inner thighs.

“Fuck,” I mutter, my eyes raking her up and down.

I marked her all over. I should feel ashamed, but I don’t.

My cock is hard again seeing her this way.

There is no mistaking that she belongs to me now.

I place my hand on her stomach, leaning down to kiss her there.

It won’t be long until she has a bump showing.

Then there will be no question whether or not she’s taken. I can’t wait until that day.

“Love you,” I say to her and our child before I pull the comforter back over her.

She’s either going to chew my ass over the marks or love them. I bet both. I’d taken her too hard, but Cosima had been with me the whole way, letting me take and take and take. She was getting off on it and giving me what she knew I needed at the moment.

Forcing myself to get out of bed, I head to the bathroom, picking up my discarded clothes on the way. I could stay in that damn bed all day, but I know I need to get answers and give some for my behavior last night.

Dario may have let it slide, but that will only last for so long. He will want to know what went down and why.

Once showered, I put back on the slacks I wore last night before pressing a kiss to Cosima. She needs her rest. I slip from the room, heading toward mine to quickly change so I’m not in the same clothes.

I go straight to War's office, and as I thought, he's there along with Dario and Ronan. They all turn to look my way when I enter.

"Morning," I say. What the fuck else is there to say, honestly? Not real sure where to start either.

"Morning?" Dario shakes his head, pissed. That makes two of us.

"What happened to not forcing Cosima to marry?" I might as well get to the fucking point. There's no use pussyfooting around it. We all know why we're here.

"I don't know; you tell me, Zenzo." It's been a long time since I heard anyone speak my given name. I stare at Dario, reminding myself he's Cosima's father and in part has been one to me as well. "I might be getting old, but I'm not senile. You think I didn't notice that ring on her necklace?"

"I don't give a shit if you did or didn't," I tell him bluntly. He might have helped raise me, but none of that matters when it comes to anything to do with Cosima and me.

"All right." War stands up from his desk, putting his fist down on it. "Are you and Cosima married?"

"Yes." I'm not going to outwardly lie. I was willing to go along with Cosima and hide us being together because she thought it would be best, but I was never a fan of the idea. It feels good to admit it out loud.

"Told you," Ronan mutters, putting his feet up on the table. How the fuck does Ronan know? He might have assumed. He's good at the shit. It's creepy at times. "Where is my sister?"

“Sleeping.”

“So you can force her to marry.” Dario stands too so he can fully face me.

“No one forced Cosima to do shit.” Ronan speaks again. When did he get all chatty? I have to say it fills me with emotion that he is taking up for me with Dario.

No, I didn’t force her; I more maneuvered her.

I’m not going to lie and say that I wouldn’t have because Cosima was destined to be mine, one way or another.

Even if I had to draft the docs myself and hack into the city’s department of deeds to file them away. I would’ve stopped at nothing to have her.

“Cosima was always going to be mine,” I say matter-of-factly because it’s the truth.

“You lost your shit last night. Sal hadn’t done anything but speak to her, if his story is true. Is it?” Dario asks.

“I know what his intent was, and it won’t be tolerated.

I don’t care what family he’s from. He made comments about my past and where I came from.

Also about mine and Cosima’s relationship. He knew exactly what he was doing, no matter what he says.” Dario stuffs his hands into his pockets, glancing at War. “Is that it?”

“No, that’s not it,” Dario grits out.



“There is a whole lot more to all of this I’m learning this morning,” War says, taking a deep breath. “How about everyone take a seat?” He motions with his hand.

“I’ll sit, but I want to make it real clear right now Cosima will be staying with me as my wife.”

“I wouldn’t get between the two of you,” War says with a firm nod.

“I wouldn’t either.” Ronan again chimes in. I throw a glance over to him; he merely shrugs. Dario doesn’t say shit, so I sit down.

“This is what I’ve been worried about.” Dario speaks when I plant my ass in the chair. “You lost your shit last night.” I don’t deny it; I only stare at Dario, waiting for him to go on with whatever he needs to say.

“Tell him,” War orders his father. “I was going to, but now, after last night and the news that Sal knows about Z’s past, he deserves to know.” War turns his gaze toward me. “Unless you already know and have not spoken of it to us.”

I sit up straighter. “Which part of my past?”

“Before you came to live here,” Dario says, running a hand down his face before he speaks again.

“Your father and I were close; he was damn good with money. Had the Midas touch. Actually, the man was good at everything he did. Smart as shit.” Dario shakes his head like he’s remembering the past, drawing from it.

“I always wondered if there was a line between genius and insanity.”

I have also wondered that. “There is no great genius without a touch of madness.” I

Speak, quoting Aristotle.

“Genius and madness is a good way to describe your father.” Dario stands, walking over to the wet bar and pouring himself a scotch. I don’t think breakfast has even been had. “You never ask about them.” He takes a healthy swig of his drink.

“I don’t.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t think that’s odd?” Dario asks. I close my eyes, rubbing them with the palms of my hands. An ache forming in my chest, the need to have Cosima close right now, is starting to gnaw at me.

“I must not want to know,” I finally say.

“Spit it out; he doesn’t need you drawing it out,” War cuts in.

“Your father loved you and your mother. Anything he focused his attention on consumed him, and he was consumed by your mother.” I close my eyes again, my mind going back to that night, trying to put together the pieces.

“We weren’t leaving for a trip.” I recall the bag by the front door. My mother’s face is becoming a bit more clear. “She was leaving us.”

“She was,” Dario confirms. “Your mother was a free spirit. I tried to warn your dad, but I think he believed if he got her pregnant, she’d stay, and she did, for a while.” I rest my forehead in my palms to slightly rub my temples. “If he couldn’t have her, no one could.”

“He killed her.” A wave of memories floods over me. I drop my hand, remembering some of the details but not all. There are still these small gaps, but I can piece them all together. “And I killed him.”

They’d been fighting, always fighting. My mother had another lover, there had been a few in fact, if I recall correctly.

I heard the shot. I was young, but I knew what the sound was, and I knew where to get a gun for myself.

When I entered the room to see my mother dead on the floor and my father with the gun in his hand, I knew he killed her, and a fear filled me that I was going to be next.

I took advantage of him being distracted by what he’d done.

“Your father lost all control that night,” Dario says, and I know what he’s getting at.

“And I lost control last night. Is that where you’re going with this?”

“It doesn’t worry you?” Dario questions.

“It doesn’t worry me,” Cosima says from the doorway. I stand when I see her. She’s got a fierce expression on her face, and it is aimed right at her father. “I’m not scared of Z. He’d never hurt me.”

“Are you certain, sweetness?” I ask her.

“I’d bet my life on it.” She smirks. Dario mutters a curse.

“Come here and stop upsetting your father,” I order her.

“Fine,” she huffs, rolling her eyes but coming to me. I pull her into me the second she is close enough for me to grab, sitting in the process so that she’s in my lap.

Cosima has on another dress that doesn’t hide the marks I put on her. “Tell them you won’t hurt me.” Now it’s her ordering me.

“I’d never harm Cosima; if she tried to run from me, I’d just have to lock the house down.” Cosima lets out a small giggle. I’m not sure what is funny, but okay. “And Cosima is too sweet to try and take on a lover knowing it would be certain death for them. One she’d have to watch.”

“You’re a psycho.” She laughs harder. “I suppose if I want someone dead, I’ll pretend to be interested in them.”

“If you want someone dead someday, you only have to tell me, sweetness.”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs. “Your jealousy is kind of hot.” Cosima turns her head toward me to press a quick kiss to my lips, solidifying what I have always believed since she entered this world.

She is my perfect match and was always meant to be mine. That is all that matters to me. Cosima is my god, the only person I live my life for, worship, and could take me to my knees.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

#### COSIMA

Everyone is watching us. It's for the best that everything is out in the open now, especially for my father.

I thought us keeping this to ourselves might be better for everyone while we moved past War's wedding and so on.

After last night, that doesn't matter. It's not good for my husband, and he comes first.

"Are you okay?" I ask him, having heard part of what they'd been saying. I have always been rather good at sneaking around the house and listening in when I shouldn't be. It's how I got most of my information growing up.

"If you're good, I'm good," he answers, placing his hand on my shoulder, his thumb stroking my neck, likely over one of the love bites he'd left.

"I'm more than good," I tell him, staring directly into his eyes. I want him to see that what I heard doesn't scare me. That it doesn't make me look at him any differently than before.

"I think Cosima should hear the rest. It does after all center around her," War says, and I know he's speaking to our father.

"Mi dispiace, tesoro mio ." My father says sorry in Italian, making me sit up

straighter.

“What did you do?” Z stiffens, and I can feel him wanting to get up. I place my hand on his chest.

“Dad?”

“You were too little to remember, and we never told you, but your mother was taken from me once.”

“No, I don’t remember it,” I respond, but I knew it happened.

It slowly pieced together for me when I was growing up. My hearing is rather impeccable. I knew my mother was taken, but they had gotten her back relatively unharmed. The same can’t be said about the Lombardi family.

“I had an idea of who might have done it, but I was desperate to find her, and Tullio Amato was the reason we did. If not for him—” My father drops his head, not wanting to say the rest. I don’t blame him. I don’t want to hear it either.

“He was key to us finding her,” War continues. I know where this is going. Every favor is a debt owed.

“Did you promise her to his son?” Z asks before I can.

“It wasn’t a full promise of marriage; while I might be old school, Rochelle wouldn’t agree, so instead we promised to let him court her when the time came. To give him an opportunity, but ultimately it would be Cosima’s choice.”

“And that’s why they just so happened to know where my wife was in Italy. Out of all of the places in Italy, they end up in the same town as her,” Z accuses.

"No." I shake my head. My father has the same knee-jerk response as I do.

"I wouldn't." My father cocks his head, an action he often does when he's piecing things together.

"Hold on." War steps in. "You're saying the Amato family was in the small town at the same time Cosima was there, and you didn't tell them that's where she was staying?"

"I didn't," my father confirms.

Ronan clicks his tongue loudly. "No coincidence." He pulls his phone out. Ronan has a knack for appearing to not be paying attention when he really is. The man doesn't miss shit.

"Then how would they know?" I look to Z for an answer.

"Trust that I will no doubt be finding out." There is no missing the threat laced in between his words. If Z thinks something is off, then it more than likely is.

"But both of you knew they were there," I point out. My father mentioned it to me when they'd called, and Z had known too. Dad wanted me to meet up with them to say hello. It was the proper thing to do, and Z said I wouldn't be doing so without him by my side.

It all slipped my mind, and I never ended up meeting with any of them. Now I'm wondering what would have happened if Z hadn't shown up in Italy. Did the Amatos have some sort of agenda?

"Tullio mentioned in passing he was going there, but I still didn't tell him you were there. I asked you to reach out and say hello."

"She didn't," Z says as if everyone isn't already aware. If Z's plan had been to get me to forget about the Amato family while we'd been in Italy all together, he'd accomplished that.

My husband is rather clever with maneuvering me so that I don't get the chance to protest. Maybe I should find that annoying, but I don't. It's kind of sweet. I might be a bit crazy myself. It must be in my blood because all these asshats are off their rockers. Each one in their own way.

Plus, I do my own maneuvering; it just tends to be louder, and everyone is aware.

"Do a lot of people know what really happened between Z's birth parents?" I ask, remembering what Salvatore had said to Z the previous night.

"Some know, but it's not anything that is ever spoken. I gave that order long ago. I didn't want it to follow Z for the rest of his life." My dad answers.

"It's one of the things Sal brought up. That's what he'd spoken to me about in the hallway.

He alluded to things. He was trying to make me question who Z is and if I should trust him.

"I guess Sal just thought I was a pretty face that he could easily manipulate.

That he would be able to make me doubt Z.

Little did he know that there isn't a person in this world that could do that.

"He's a dead man walking."



I rub my hand in the center of Z's chest, trying to keep his anger in check. He can't run off and kill him, I mean, he can, but that would make things very messy, and Z is smarter than that.

"Let's all take a breath," War tells everyone. He is the most rational of all of us, except when it comes to his own wife.

"You just want me to sit here and wait?" Z asks War.

"No, I want you to do what you do best, dig. Get as much as you can on the Amatos and their intentions."

"Everyone needs to be very careful where they dig. It isn't as simple as poking around. That's not how things work in this world, and if people find out what Z is capable of, he'll end up with a bullet in his head."

"Dad," I gasp.

"It's the truth," he bites out. "People will not take well to knowing all of what he can do. Hell, I don't know or understand everything he can do; it bothers even me at times. When it comes to secrets being unearthed, there isn't much people won't do to keep them buried."

"You think he would hurt us?" I fire back at my dad. I trust Z more than I can trust my own reactions. I always have a fiery temper. Everything I do is in the moment.

"It's okay." Z kisses the shell of my ear.

"It is not okay; you're my husband." I turn my attention back to my dad. "Is that what you think? I want to know where you stand."

Dad shakes his head. "My stance is that Z will do whatever he needs to so that you remain his, even if that means killing everyone in this room."

"He wouldn't do that."

"Don't be naïve, Cosima. You hold a lot of power now, and you need to understand that. You're the only one in control when it comes to Z. It has been that way since he was a small boy. Only you could ever settle him."

Shit, I think he might be right. "Well, Z, no killing anyone in this family." I tap the tip of his nose. I catch a glimpse of my brother Ronan stifling a chuckle. "I mean not right now, anyway."

"He's worried my actions will put a target on the rest of the family. If I go after Sal without doing it the right way, then there will be retaliation."

"I trust that you'll do it the way it needs to be done, knowing that it's important that everyone is safe," I tell him. "I also know you love this family too; I'm just a small level up." I motion with my hand going up a smidge.

Ronan reaches over, grabbing my hand and lifting it higher, as high as my arm can go. "I'd say there." I snort a laugh.

Yes, Z can be scary when pushed around on things that involve me, but it doesn't mean he doesn't care about everyone else because he does.

"We know that, Cosima," War says. "Both our father and I know what we'd do for our own wives; that's why we know what Z is capable of, but like Father said, Z has other skill sets, ones that need to be kept close, and if he went off half-cocked, he could out himself."

I raise a finger. "Dead men tell no tales. I know it's a dark thing to say, but it's the truth."

"My hope is to not have to eliminate a family if there is no need. There is no rush for answers," War adds. "We'll take things one step at a time."

I hear what War is saying, but I'm not so sure Z holds the same timeframe.

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### Chapter Twenty-Four

Z

Cosima disappears through War's office doorway with Dario. He asked her to go have breakfast with him. Dario wants to smooth things over with her. He has always doubted her; hell, most of the family has.

As pissed as I am about the promise he made to the Amato family, I get it. I'd sell my soul to save Cosima. On that, Dario and I relate.

I did take note that there wasn't a ton of pushback when all of the details about Cosima were fleshed out to her father. It's almost as if he knew it was coming.

"Z?" War asks.

"I'm not going off half-cocked." As long as my wife is tucked away safely, then I can bide a bit of time, not much. I don't like not knowing what the Amatos are up to. That's the only way to ensure Cosima remains out of harm's way.

She can't stay locked up here forever. It would drive her crazy, and she's pregnant. Sure, I could likely pay to have everything she needed brought right here, but that's not the point. No one gets to make Cosima a prisoner.

I smirk hearing her voice in my head: No, only you could make me a prisoner. She'd roll her eyes but hide a smirk of her own.

“Should I believe you?” War pushes back, worried I might have my own agenda.

“Nope.” Ronan pops the P loudly, still fiddling with that damn phone, which now has my attention. “He’ll go off full-cocked.” He glances up at me. “Right?”

“Right,” I agree.

I don’t want to make a lot of waves if it’s not needed. Besides, Dario did have a really fucking good point when he said people wouldn’t be too happy if they knew all that I could do.

“How much history do you know about the Amato family as it connects to your father?” I ask, standing.

“They have been close but not too close. I don’t think he’s ever seen them as a threat.” War answers.

“Could he have blinders on because of them helping find Rochelle?”

“It’s a possibility.” War nods, thinking it over more himself.

“The Amato family has been stagnant for a lot of years. If they married in...” Ronan lets out a low whistle. His mind having gone where mine had.

“They’re playing the long game,” I add, making War’s brows furrow together.

“Now tell me how close the Amato family was to the Lombardi family.” I already have a few theories in mind, but I need some back information to see if I’m heading down the right path.

If I’m going to try to limit the amount of digging I do, then any known details are key

to doing that.

“I honestly don’t know. I don’t give them any thought because that family is no more.” The Lombardi name as a whole might as well be dead. Anyone that’s left is scattered.

“And no one wondered how Tullio just happened to know who took Rochelle?” That was my first thought, and I can’t see Dario not having circled back to that when all the dust settled and he had his wife safely back home.

“There was no gain for the Amato family when the Lombardi family was washed out.”

“Except there was.” I walk toward War’s desk. “Tullio got a debt and favor with Dario.”

“Bingo,” Ronan adds before looking down at his phone again.

“Start looking into Sal sooner rather than later. If they are playing some sort of long game, then we need to know what their end goal is. Marrying Cosima was to get their foot in the door, it seems.” I let out a growl at the mere mention.

“If they realize that Cosima is no longer an option, they might make another move.” War wants to make sure we are ready for whatever the Amato family has planned.

I can’t see Sal giving up on Cosima. That doesn’t compute for me, but I might be biased.

“Desperate people do desperate things,” Ronan mutters. I fight the urge not to grab his phone and check it. What the hell is he so engrossed in?

“We do this together,” War makes sure to remind me. I nod in agreement. “All right then, I’m going to take my wife breakfast in bed and hope she keeps it down.” We still haven’t told anyone about Cosima being pregnant.

War exits his office, leaving Ronan and me alone. I knock his damn feet off the table he put them on.

“We need to talk.” Ronan grunts a response. “Let me see your phone for a minute.” Finally he glances up.

“No.”

“No?” I didn’t expect that. It’s not abnormal for me to do checks on our phones.

“No.”

“You already know what you’re going to find.” Ronan shrugs.

People often sell Ronan short. He’s not thick in the head; he just doesn’t speak unless he feels the need. When you’re the one talking and dominating the room, or so you think, the quiet ones are more often the ones with more control.

You don’t know shit about them because they haven’t fucking said anything. All the while you’re running your mouth, giving many things away.

“Don’t underestimate that girl.” One thing Ronan isn’t is tech-savvy.

“Never have.” A wisp of a smile hits his mouth. I watch him. Can Ronan handle Marks?

Marks has a handler, one with the arm of the government behind them, and he can’t

keep tabs on her for the most part.

Despite this, Ronan possesses a skill for locating individuals without relying heavily on technology.

He takes everything with a hands-on approach.

Ronan is all brute force, which also shouldn't be underestimated.

"All right." I sigh knowing nothing I can say will change his mind.

It's already strange for him to be okay with the possibility of someone spying on him. Right now, he appears to be enjoying it. In my life, I have never seen the man use his phone as much as he does now. In the past, he wouldn't take it with him or he would leave it in the car.

All of that changed since Marks came into the picture.

"Welp, if you need me to"—I nod toward his phone—"I can clean it."

"Don't touch my phone." He gets defensive, standing up. I hold my hands up, letting him know I'm backing off.

"All right, but I warned her."

"You what?" He cocks his head, sliding his phone into his back pocket. Let's just say he doesn't look happy. "Warned her about what?"

"That if she crosses a line, then I'll have to cross one back." Ronan takes a step toward me.



"The fuck does that mean?" There is no missing the hint of aggression in his tone.

"Honestly," I bark a laugh, "I don't know now. I was going to expose her to you and then likely send you after her."

"You better not be fucking tracking her," he warns.

Damn, this is all kinds of interesting. I've never seen Ronan get this way about anyone besides his family.

"I'll remember that when you ask me to do that one day." I expect him to relent, thinking he might need me to ask that of me in the future.

"I know how to get the little fox to come out to play."

"If you say so." I chuckle. "I've got shit of my own to start tracking down."

Sal and the Amato family are on the top of my list right now. They are the only thing standing between my wife and me fully starting our lives together.

We've been waiting long enough to do just that already. As I said, Sal is a dead man walking.

I could give a shit if he's been up to something. He sealed his fate last night. All I have to do is to make it as clean as possible.

But only because my wife asked.

### Chapter Twenty-Five

#### COSIMA

"Y ou take your love for the color pink to a whole other level." Tova laughs.

"Why, thank you," I say. Pink should be taken to every level. If there is a level, there should be pink on it.

Pink wasn't always considered a feminine color throughout history, but if we've stolen it, so be it.

Although, I'm not opposed to bringing more back into men's worlds.

Right now the only man I'm thinking about is my own, and he could use some pink in this room of his.

All the colors are dark, except for the glow of his one million computer screens.

"Is that a pink cat balloon statue? I've only ever seen them in dog form." Tova picks up the statue off the corner of Z's desk. "I love it."

"Hold on for a second." I scan the boxes I have lined up against the far wall, trying to find the correct one. "Here!" I rush over to the box, opening it to pull out another.

"You can have it." I hand it over to Tova. She eyes the row of boxes.

"How many more have you got in there?"

"There might be one more," I admit. They were on sale, which actually wasn't helpful.

"You're insane." Tova laughs harder. "Are you still poking at Z? I thought since you two were together, that might die down."

"That will never die down." Our banter is half the fun. I think it's our foreplay, but everything leads to sex, so I can't be a hundred percent sure. "Wait, you think this is to poke at Z?" I glance around his room.

We've been back in the States for a few weeks now.

I'm not sure what's going on with the whole Sal and Amato family thing, but it has to still be going because I'm on house arrest. It wasn't bad the first week, but I'm starting to go stir-crazy. I know it puts Z's mind at ease to know I'm safe. Especially after what happened with the whole shopping trip with Tova and Marks. I'm sure that's still fresh in his mind, so I can't blame him for taking extra precautions. Even though it sucks for me.

"There's a lot of pink on his desk," she points out.

"It's to brighten his day. I'm trying to give the dark web an accent of color."

"And a mascot?" She holds up the pink cat statue.

"Mascot," I correct, making her laugh again. Having Tova home with me has made being cooped up a lot more bearable.

As much as I love it here, the home I grew up in can fit more than a few families. I'm ready to have my own place with Z. To create that space together.

“I haven’t heard from Marks in a bit. You?” Tova asks.

“No,” I say, unable to hide my disappointment. “I, ah—” I pause, not sure if I’m breaking girl code, but Tova is a girl, and she was friends with Marks first, so maybe it’s okay to tell her.

“What? Are you hiding something from me again?” Tova’s lips part, her eyes filling with sadness. There is no way I can keep what I know from her. I already slipped away with Marks to Italy, which I know hurt Tova’s feelings. She felt left out, and I don’t want her to feel that way again.

“Don’t get sad! I’ll tell you.” Her mouth forms a line. “I will, holy crap. I’ll fight a bear with a Taco Bell spork to get that expression off your face.”

She snorts, that disappointed, sad expression fading away.

“It was kind of more of a moment, and it slipped my mind until just now because she’s still being so flighty.”

“Oh?” Tova brows rise.

“It went down between her and Z, and him knowing a secret about what she’s up to.”

“Oh, so he’s keeping secrets too!” Tova throws her hands up. Now it’s my turn to lift my brows. These men have all kinds of secrets we don’t poke around about. “Yeah, okay. That we can let slide. For now.”

“That was kind of the same thing Z said. That whatever the secret was, it’s maybe around our family; I don’t know.” I huff out a breath because, yeah, I don’t get it.

“Really?” Her nose scrunches, and I’m sure mine’s doing the same.

“Ope!” I snapped my fingers. “Also that she might be a stalker.”

I try to think if I can remember more. I was still really caught up in Z showing up then; my mind had been racing with so many thoughts that day.

“But Z told her he would keep his mouth shut for now. Unless I asked him. But it was kind of clear that she didn’t want me to know or was embarrassed about it. ”

“Embarrassed? Marks?”

“Good point.” Does anything embarrass her? It’s actually one of her many superpowers. We both stand there pondering this.

“Wait, hairy thighs are coming to mind.” I stare at Tova because, out of everything she could have said right now, I just didn’t see that one coming.

"Hairy thighs?" I repeat her words to confirm that I heard her correctly. Tova nods. "I mean, thighs are nice, don't get me wrong. I'll take them hairy or not. Z's aren't bad, but his ass, that's where it's at. He's got some junk in the trunk. Good for grabbing on to."

"What's wrong with my thighs?" I spin around to see Z standing in the doorway, his arms filled with boxes.

"Are those mine?"

"Does anyone else around here have a shopping addiction?"

Chef Marcello does, but I keep that to myself. I'm not outing him. No way do I want to be on his bad side. His homemade Pop-Tarts are to die for, and I'm not losing my breakfast privileges.

"It's not an addiction." I gasp. "I'm making us a home." I wave my arms around the room. "I also have to spend some of that money. It keeps reappearing faster than I can go through it."

Z gave me a card and told me it was for our joint account.

The number of zeros attached to the balance was insane.

I thought as his wife I should spend some of it to, you know, help him out.

You have to make a man feel needed. Right?

I don't know. Sounds good in my head, and I've got nothing else to do right now.

The thing is, no matter how much I spend, it just reappears. It's magic, really.

"If that makes you happy, dear," Z chuckles, taking my boxes over to the other side of the room and stacking them nicely. He even goes about straightening a few of them while giving me a view of said nice ass.

Yeah, I'm kind of a mess, and he's well organized. Z doesn't appear to be bothered by my disorganized chaos. Hey, he chose to love me, and all of my messiness is a part of it.

"What are you two up to?" Z asks, as he strides over toward me and Tova. Why is this man walking even sexy to me? He leans down, taking my mouth in a kiss.

"Ahem." Tova clears her throat, bringing us back to reality. I might have forgotten we'd been in the middle of something.

"We were both just saying that we were worried about Marks. We haven't heard from

her much lately.” Oh, Tova is good. She’s not wasting any time trying to pump my husband for information.

“I’m sure she’s fine. It’s Marks; it’s not like she hasn’t been flighty before. She’s probably on a job or something.” Z tries to placate Tova. I keep my mouth shut, knowing that if I ask Z, he will tell me the truth, and I don’t want to put him in that position. Even though I want the scoop.

“Maybe.” Tova knows he’s deflecting. “But I think there’s something else going on. She’s my best friend, and I’m going to get to the bottom of whatever it is.”

“Hey! What am I, small potatoes over here?” I interject.

“You’re my family. My sister.” Tova rolls her eyes.

“War said for me to tell you that he’s in his office.” Z directs it at Tova, knowing that will end this line of questioning about Marks.

“Is this your way of telling me to leave nicely?” Tova challenges him. She even tries to make a serious face. Which she is getting better at.

“Yes,” Z tells her.

“Hey.” I smack his chest, hurting the back of my hand. How does he spend so much time at a computer and still manage to have a hard body?

“He does need to speak to you.” Z takes my hand, kissing the back of it.

“All right.” Tova brushes her bangs out of her face. “Later,” she says before disappearing through the doors.

“So.” I bounce on my heels. “What do you think?” I ask, motioning to his desk.

“Cute.” He nods.

“Really? You like the pink?”

“Babe, you can paint the whole room pink. I don’t give a shit. If it makes you happy.”

“I know.” I slide my hands up the front of his chest and around his neck.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” What can I really complain about?

“Getting bored?”

“A little. I mean, my current goal is trying to spend all your money, but I can’t even do that.” I sigh dramatically, making him chuckle.

“You know I’ll just keep replenishing it.”

“Oh.” I huff. “Well, now what am I supposed to do?” I ask. “I mean, besides you. I can only do that so much. The vagina can only take so much.”

“That’s why you got a mouth.” I burst into laughter. Z picks me up, spinning me around. “I’m going to take you out tonight.” He stops spinning, putting me back on my feet.

“Really?!” I’m dying to get out of here, even if only for a few hours. I’ve been trying to hide it, probably not well, but I knew Z was doing the best with whatever he has been handling in regards to the Amato family.



“Got a dress in one of those boxes?”

“A dress?” I give him a playful smile. “I’m sure I can find a lot more than that. How much time do we have?” Because I’m about to give my husband a full-on fashion show.

“For you, I’ve always got all the time in the world.” He grips the back of my neck, leaning down to kiss me. I moan into his mouth, forgetting all about any show and ditching all my clothes.

That is, after all, my husband's favorite look on me.

### Chapter Twenty-Six

Z

“ I love you so much.” Cosima sighs happily as she fixes the pink handkerchief she put into the jacket of my suit to match her dress.

I can see how much her mood has changed now that she knows we are going out.

I’d spent the last couple of hours making love to her, enjoying the fashion show she put on for me, and watching her get ready.

I honestly thought she would be complaining more about being cooped up, but she hasn’t made her dissatisfaction apparent to me, which I appreciate. She knows how important figuring all of this stuff out about the Amato family motives is.

“Over a little bit of pink?” I shake my head. “I have not put the bar on the floor before now, have I?” I tease her.

As I told her, I don’t give a shit what is or isn’t pink.

I dress for comfort and to be put together.

If she wants us to match, so be it. If it brings joy to her face, that’s all that matters to me.

She is constantly trying to do that for other people.

Cosima is quick to do what most would find embarrassing if it lifts the mood. I want to be able to do that for her.

“It’s not just the pink. It’s all of you.” She pats the handkerchief. “Are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“A dinner party.”

Cosima’s brows lift in surprise. “What kind of dinner party?”

“A few families will be there. Some from out of town.” Cosima’s glossy lips form a perfect O as she puts a few things together.

“Something is happening?”

“Something is happening,” I confirm. “A party to apologize to Sal after the last one.”

“Right.” She snorts a laugh.

“We’ll tell everyone about our marriage as well.”

Two birds, one stone. That is really fitting for the evening and the plans I have.

“Can I hear cheers to whatever is happening?” Cosima steps back, doing a twirl for me. The bottom of her dress flares out. She reminds me of a sweet treat, and I know at the end of the night she’ll be my dessert.

“I insist on it.” Cosima picks up a gold bottle, spraying it before walking through the mist. It has a honey smell to it.

She is quickly putting on her final touches.

I take her hand, helping her rub in the lotion I'd gotten for her.

Cosima's skin is always so silky soft, reminding me of rose petals.

"Now come on before I flip up your pretty little dress and fuck you in those heels."  
She links her fingers with mine.

"Is there anything I need to know about tonight?"

"If you want."

"No!" She rushes to say. "I love surprises. I want to be as shocked as everyone."

Oh, they'll be shocked. I have been formulating this plan from the moment I realized Sal had his sights on Cosima. That wasn't my only issue. I'd thought over a lot of what Dario had said about me having a target on my head if people found out all I could do.

Not to mention my work with the government. That I'll never give up. That contact is too good not to have in my pocket. It has numerous benefits.

When we reach the bottom of the stairs, we head toward the front of the house, where War and Tova have already gathered. War locks eyes with me, and I give a stiff nod so that he knows everything is in place.

He was a bit hesitant about my plan, but the more I mapped it out, the more he got it. This isn't only about Cosima; this is about a bigger picture, one I know War wants too.

"Oh, you're coming too," Cosima says excitedly when she sees Tova.

“War told me it’s dinner and a show.” Tova's excitement matches Cosima's. I give my brother a look, which he only shrugs at. The man really does have jokes these days. I suppose he’s not wrong.

“A show, you say,” Cosima responds dramatically. “I love a good show.”

“Wait, this isn’t a show like I’m thinking, is it?” Tova glances between us all, finally realizing that we’re probably not going to some theater production.

“Don’t ruin the surprise,” Cosima tells her.

“Okay, now I’m confused.”

“Don’t worry, little mouse.” War leads her out of the house. We follow behind but get in a separate car. I hold the back door open for Cosima to slip in.

“This can’t be too crazy if you’re letting us come with,” Cosima says as we pull down the driveway and out of the gates, headed toward the city.

“It’s best that everyone is there.”

She nods in understanding. “I trust you’ve got it handled.” She rests her hand on my thigh. I lift it and kiss it.

“Then no questions. I don’t want to ruin the surprise.” Cosima watches me as I start to put the plan fully into motion. It will be one domino after another. There is nothing besides my wife that I love more than a well-crafted plan.

She doesn’t ask any questions. Cosima is attuned to my playfulness and teasing, but she knows when things are about to get real. She trusts that I’ll always do what’s in her best interest. To protect her at all costs. That in itself is so satisfying to me.

My wife was born into this life and has her own switch she can flip. As much as I hate it that she was put in danger on that shopping excursion with the girls, I'm proud that she stabbed that motherfucker. It was a reminder that Cosima can handle herself when the time calls for it.

One of the many gifts my wife possesses is that she can still stay sweet and bubbly while drawing blood with a smile on her face. You really don't see it coming.

"Just know that I can take care of myself. Your focus needs to be on whatever the surprise is." I watch as my wife reaches down to the hem of her dress, discretely pulling it up to her mid-thigh, revealing to me that she has on garters.

Tucked into the top of one is a small knife. Fuck I love this woman.

"Both dazzling and dangerous. How did I get so lucky?" That gets me a smile. I lean over, tracing the top of the garter while placing a kiss on her mouth.

"You really did. Tonight, when we get home, I'll show you just how lucky." She breaks the kiss, pulling her dress back down. "But for now, you need to take care of things."

It's not long before the car is pulling up to the venue where everyone is meeting us. I lean over, taking Cosima's mouth one last time. I don't bother saying any mushy shit because even though there's a lot on the line tonight, I know without a doubt that we'll be coming out the other side.

"Ready?" I ask, breaking the kiss.

"It's showtime," Cosima states in dramatic fashion.

I step out of the car, holding my hand out for her to take.

I can tell from the vehicles parked outside with drivers waiting that most have arrived.

Lightning flickers across the sky. "A storm is coming." How fitting.

She leans into my side, peeking up at me.

Cosima gives me a cheeky smile. "I love dancing in the rain."

I'll dance with my wife until the end of forever.

### Chapter Twenty-Seven

#### COSIMA

There is already a thread of tension when we enter the old Italian restaurant. The setting pulls me straight back to Italy. I'm surprised I've never been here before. The place is beautiful.

"How come we've never come here before?" I ask Z.

"It's been closed for many years."

"Oh." There are fresh linens on the tables. There are only a handful of them. I thought they might have cleared out the space, opening it up for the private dinner. "So it's just been sitting here?" Seems a waste.

"Yes, your father shut it down." I don't get a chance to ask Z why. Kimmy is coming over to greet me. She is the second and way younger wife to the head of the Cornaro family. I have always enjoyed her company. It can be challenging to sift through who is genuine and who isn't in this lifestyle.

"I'll get you a drink," Z says, kissing my shoulder.

I nod while waving Tova over to introduce her to Kimmy.

The Cornaros hadn't made it to her wedding.



Even if they had, they probably wouldn't have met her because my brother, War, was being super protective of her that night.

He barely introduced her to anyone, thinking they would try to use her against him.

"You and Z?" Kimmy asks.

We all make small talk, but my eyes drift around the room.

There are a lot of powerful families here.

What does stand out to me is when Sal and his father walk through the doorway, they are technically a lower-tier family in rankings.

In a way, it makes them stick out. Even Kimmy's brows pull together when she sees them. They've never really been invited to the table before.

"Z and Sal had an issue a few weeks ago," I fill in for her.

"Ahh." Kimmy nods. "Oh, that makes sense. Sal has had a thing for you."

"Let's be honest. He has a thing for my last name."

I'll never have to worry about that with me being married to Z. He's here for me; in fact, I could be the very reason he sticks around.

"He's coming this way," Tova says under her breath. I'd already clocked Sal heading toward me.

"Cosima, you're as breathtaking as ever." Sal is incredibly cocky as he takes my hand and kisses it. His eyes lock on my finger. I'm not wearing my ring on a necklace

tonight. It's been back on my finger since Z put it there. "You're married." I pull my hand back.

I can feel Z's eyes on me. "Yes," I answer. Z stands across the room next to War and a few other men. He makes no move to come over and break me away, despite Sal being near me. Interesting. I go with the flow, trusting whatever Z has planned.

"Z doesn't waste time, does he?"

"Not sure I agree there. We have been waiting many years for this." I tell the truth, not wanting anyone to think any different.

"You grew up together. It's?—"

"Watch your tongue," I warn. Sal's jaw flexes, his eyes staying locked with mine.

I don't break eye contact with him, staring right back.

I had a fiery mom growing up. She taught me to assert myself.

I might be a pretty face to someone like Sal, a girl who should know her place, but I don't live by those old-school rules. I'm not going to keep my mouth shut.

"I was invited here as a show of apology for the other night."

"Then maybe you should go collect. My husband is right over there." I tell him this, but I notice that Z is already heading toward me with a drink in hand. I'm sure Sal spotted Z the second he walked in.

"Sal," Z says, not glancing toward him as he hands me a glass.

“Z,” Sal responds, shifting on his feet, his bravado wavering.

“Let’s say hello to everyone before dinner starts,” Z says to me.

“Of course.” I let him lead me away. “He came tonight for an apology?” I say behind my glass as I take a sip. Z grunts a response, and there isn’t time to ask more because we’re greeted by a few other people. Then my parents walk in.

“It’s been a long time,” Mom says, glancing around the restaurant.

“You used to come here?” I ask.

“Was one of my favorite places.”

“Really? Then why did Dad shut it down?”

“The last time I was here didn’t end so well.” Mom taps her lips, signing for me not to ask more. Not now, at least. It’s a story for another time.

“Everyone,” War announces. “We are going to start to serve the first course.”

Z leads me to our seats. I’m a bit surprised when I see Sal and his father are at our table.

The tension is thick, and I debate if I should try and crack it with my normal small talk.

I can tell they are uncomfortable. I don’t blame them.

It’s all of our family and the two of them. They stick out like sore thumbs.

“This was an interesting location to choose for dinner.” Tullio finally speaks as a few servers come out with trays. “Is there a reason you chose it?” He looks to War and then over to my father. Dad puts his arm around Mom's chair, his thumb stroking her shoulder.

“It was my idea.” Z picks up his glass, taking a drink. Sal pulls at the collar of his buttoned-up shirt, undoing a button as though the conversation has gone in a direction he's not comfortable with.

“Because in the end everything worked out that night?” Tullio gives my mom a smile. “I'll never understand why the Lombardi family thought it was okay to target a wife. They should have known Dario would kill them all after retrieving Rochelle from them.”

“But we found her, thanks to you,” Dad responds.

“Wait, did that happen here?” I ask before I can stop myself. Yeah, I'm not great at holding my tongue. Now it makes more sense why my mom didn't want to talk about it earlier when I asked. She knew it was a sore subject for my dad.

“I'd come here for dinner. One second I was eating dinner, and the next I was waking up in an old warehouse.” Mom turns on a charming smile, directing it at Tullio, but I know my mother. It doesn't meet her eyes. “But thankfully, with your help, my Dario was able to find me.”

I lean back in my chair. I can sense the stress rising. Sal is also showing signs of increasing tension as he undoes another button of his shirt and a light film of perspiration appears on his face.

“Of course, I'm only glad I was able to help,” Tullio says as a server starts to place the first course in front of each of us.

"Help by trying to lay claim to their daughter," Z says. It's not a question.

"It was only an idea. No harm in that." Tullio shrugs casually, but it's far from it. Others must be sensing the tension too because the chatter around the room has quieted down, people glancing our way.

"Neither War nor I would have allowed that," Z tells him.

"I believe that is up to her father and War, technically, at this point." Tullio dips his spoon in the minestrone soup.

Z slams his hand down onto the table, making everything rattle. The room falls silent, except for the sound of Tullio dropping his spoon back into the bowl.

"No one picks who I marry but me." Again, I totally can't help myself. I mean I'm sitting right here, and the Amatos are acting as though I have no damn say. Tova tries to fight a smile at my outburst. "Okay, Z might have a little say." I playfully roll my eyes.

"Sweetness." Z kisses my shoulder again, not shy at all about giving me affection in a room full of people. My father had always been that way with Mom. It did often make them stand out in this kind of setting because they were truly in love.

"My sister isn't wrong." War speaks loudly and clearly for the whole room to hear.

"Tullio isn't wrong either." Boo, I don't want to be grouped with him.

"I am in charge." He stares right at Tullio.

"And things are changing." He glances over to Ronan and then to Z.

“You might not like those changes, but it’s how my brothers and I will be moving forward. ”

“Dario.” Tullio calls to my father, who shakes his head at him. Murmurs break out in the room. I’m sure many are not happy about this news.

“You change, or you get left behind,” Z adds.

“Or we do what we need to.” Ronan speaks for the first time. Always so quiet but never missable, that brother of mine.

“This is not why I thought we were here.” Tullio keeps pushing. As for Sal, he’s not looking so great. “We were told this would be an apology for his behavior.” He points his fat, short finger at Z.

“We’re not here for no reason, Tullio,” Z responds. “I thought this place was rather fitting since you drugged Rochelle here.”

“I did no such thing!” Tullio starts to stand from his seat.

“Sit the fuck down,” Ronan orders him.

“You might not have done it, but you knew it was happening, didn’t you?” Z goes on. Holy shit. Tullio is shaking his head adamantly no. “You capitalized on it. It wasn’t really Rochelle that you wanted. No, it was a favor, a debt so you could have Cosima.”

“What?” Sal turns toward his father, sweating more. What the hell is wrong with him?

“Don’t play dumb, Sal. You knew. Not back then, but you’ve known for years.” Z

calls Sal on his bullshit.

“Dario, do you believe this? You know he’s insane. Just like his father.” Tullio tries to pave himself a way out of this.

I swear if I could, I would reach down, take my knife out of my garter, and cut that man's tongue out for talking about Z like that. But I know that I can’t lose my temper right now. Not when the stakes are so high.

“I believe him,” my father says without hesitation. “Even without the proof Z showed me.” Dad reaches into his suit coat pocket, pulling out papers to hand over to Tullio.

Tullio scans them. “What are they?” I whisper, maybe too loudly.

“Communications between them.” Z nods to Sal and Tullio.

“How do you have these?” Sal takes the papers from his father.

“I hacked them,” Z says simply. “Eat, your food is getting cold.” Tullio glances down at his soup. “Scared history is repeating itself?”

I peek down at my own soup. Did Z do something to Tullio’s food? I suppose that would be fitting; they’d done that to our mom.

Tova has a hand over her mouth, eyes wide. I can’t tell if she’s enjoying the show. I’m not sure how I feel about it yet. I’ll need to see the ending first.

### Chapter Twenty-Eight

Z

The color is slowly draining from Tullio's face. He pushes the bowl of soup a few inches away from him.

"You hacked us. As in through the computer?" He sounds shocked.

A lot of these old timers think there are only FEDs tapping your phones or bugging your house.

"That's not how things are done." Tullio stands, searching the faces of the other families at different tables.

As though him doing so is going to change the outcome of this evening.

"Is that true?" one asks. "If so, that is not how we do things."

"As Z said, you change or you get left behind," War tells them. "The old ways are dying. Times are changing, as are the rules of the game."

The murmurs start to grow loud. It's making Tullio more confident. He's nodding along with everyone.

"None of you are okay with any change. Everything I've done recently there has been pushback on," War continues.



“And you just get to decide?” Tullio puffs out his chest. Cosima rolls her eyes.

“This is how it will be.” War’s tone is filled with warning.

“You think we all will just allow this?” Someone else speaks. We knew this wouldn’t go over well, but we aren’t asking. We’re telling.

I took everything Dario told me weeks ago about the target on my head if people knew what I was capable of very seriously. If it puts a target on me, then it puts one on my wife as well. That, I couldn’t have. And I also won’t live my life worrying about them finding out.

“I won’t tolerate these accusations, and I surely won’t sit here and take them. We’re leaving.” Tullio thinks he’s on a roll now, already heading for the door, leaving his son behind.

Phones all around the room start to go off. Overriding if they’d had them silenced. I simply lean back in my chair and watch as everyone sees their secrets lighting up their phones.

“What the hell is this?”

“Who sent this?”

“How?”

A rain of questions pours from people as they check their phones. Tullio is fighting with the door that won’t open for him. The electric lock has clicked into place.

If there was fear about people knowing what I’m capable of and me searching out their secrets, I might as well do it. They won’t have to fear the possibility of it being

done one day because I've done it already. I have all their secrets tucked away. So easy for me to send out if need be.

"Someone open this door!" Tullio shouts, shaking it. "Sal!" he shouts to his son.

"Everyone sit down," War orders. Tullio's face is growing redder, but he makes his way back to the table, his attention on me.

"Yes, Tullio. Your soup is getting cold," I tell him, draping my arm over the back of my wife's chair.

"You poisoned it." He swipes at the bowl, sending it tumbling to the floor as he pulls out his gun, aiming it at me. "I'm not stupid."

Cosima tenses, and I stroke her bare shoulder with my thumb to soothe her. The whole room goes on edge. War makes a motion with his hand for no one to draw their own guns.

"You might not be stupid, but you're not smarter than me," I tell him. "I didn't poison your soup. As I told you. Times have changed. Not going to poison your food." What's the fun in that? I turn my gaze to Sal.

"What's wrong with you?" Tullio glances at his son but only momentarily; he's still got that gun trained on me, but his hand is starting to lower. The gun is too heavy.

"I warned him that if he touched my wife again, he'd be a dead man walking," I remind them.

"What—" Sal coughs. "What did you do to me?"

"You did it to yourself when you kissed my wife."

“Why do you say it like that?” Cosima huffs. “It was only my hand, and I wiped it off.” She picks up her napkin, rubbing the back of her hand with it.

“How?” Sal gasps the word.

“I know your secrets. Welcome to the digital age. Even your medical records are at my fingertips.” Sal’s eyes widen before he starts to cough more.

“You poisoned me,” he manages to get out.

“You poisoned yourself.” Sal was the one who put his mouth on her. “I warned you.” I make a tscking sound. He thought he would come here and disrespect me, but the joke’s on him.

“What did you do? Someone call an ambulance!” Tullio shouts. “Or I’ll shoot him.” He lifts the gun back up a few more inches that had lowered, but it doesn’t last. The gun slips from his hand, hitting the table. He stumbles back a step before dropping back down into his chair.

Cosima lifts her hand, smelling the back of it. “It’s shellfish,” I reassure her. I’d never put anything on her that would cause harm.

“Really? It smells good.” She nods her head in approval. Sal slumps to the side, falling out of his chair.

“Someone,” Tullio gasps. “Help.” He blinks, watching me as I pick up his gun off the table, checking the chamber, and clicking the safety back on before handing it to my wife.

“Ah, you shouldn’t have.” She bats her lashes at me playfully. Cosima really was meant to be a queen.

“What did you do to me?” Tullios asks.

“Yeah, what did you do?” Cosima's eyes dart back and forth, as if she's eager to find out herself.

“His insulin pump,” I tell her. I hear a few people gasp.

Tullio rips open his shirt, trying to get to it, but it's too late.

I couldn't fully complete that task on my own. That needed a bit of guidance from the pharmacy tech, but I made sure it was triggered. The fentanyl is now pumping through his system. Tullio's eyes roll back before he falls out of his chair next to Sal.

Everyone sits in silence, all eyes on our table. I pull out my phone, causing a few people to tense up. I press the button to open the doors. The click of them unlocking is loud in the still room.

"See how easily Z did that," War says, standing from his chair.

His tone is flat and unyielding. "This isn't a threat.

It's a warning. Your secrets are safe," he tells them.

"For now, but don't think just because you kill Z or me that it will keep them hidden.

" Tova gasps. War leans over, kissing the top of her head. "Even in death we can expose you."

War lets that linger in the room for a long moment. Then he claps his hands together. “Now.” He smiles. “We’re here to celebrate; my wife is pregnant, and my sister has gotten married.”

“Same.” Cosima lifts her glass up over her head. A few people smirk.

“You’re pregnant?” Rochelle gasps, her eyes lighting up with excitement. Cosima nods.

War motions for the two bodies to be removed. “Have them bring out the next course,” he says.

“Yeah, I don’t think anyone is going to eat the soup now,” Cosima says, and a few people snicker, helping some of the tension bleed from the room.

“Dinner and a show?” Tova glares at War, who only kisses her in response.

“That was badass.” Cosima turns to say to me. “And I got a souvenir.” She holds up the gun.

“All right now.” I chuckle, taking the gun from her. Dario is smiling and shaking his head at us.

“I told you that it would all work out.” Dario says it loud enough for the whole table to hear.

“I think your father is bored in retirement. He’s now a matchmaker.” Rochelle is shaking her head but fully smiling.

“I’m more nudging people along. War was dragging his feet, and these two?”

“Wait, you planned this?” Cosima asks. “But what about the Sal stuff?” Dario shrugs one shoulder.

“I made that deal before I saw what was happening between the two of you. But Sal

still came in handy.” There is a smugness to his tone. He winks at me. His way of saying he's good with how things have played out.

“What about that one?” Cosima points across the table to Ronan, who is once again on his phone.

“All in due time.” Dario says it like it's a promise.

I don't think he's wrong either.

### Chapter Twenty-Nine

#### COSIMA

I make Z mingle with everyone to put them at ease a bit. He's always appeared to be the more laid-back one, but now everyone is leery of him. I mean, they should be, but it was more a warning shot to the other families. Don't fuck with us and get out of line, and we won't fuck with you.

It doesn't take long with my dazzling charm and Z relaxing to get the temperature of the room to come back down. Even War is being extra chatty. It's still crazy to me how much his demeanor has changed since he and Tova tied the knot. Then there is Ronan who remains as stoic as ever.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" I ask Tova.

"I bet my life I am not thinking what anyone else in this room is thinking." Yeah, she's still reeling from that whole scene. "Dinner and a show." She shakes her head, and then a giggle bubbles out of her. "All right, what are you thinking?"

"That we need to read all the tea Z has on everyone. I bet it's so juicy."

"I don't know if I can handle any more tonight."

"All right," I sigh. "Maybe next weekend. We can do a girls' night."

"Right," she snorts a laugh. I bump my shoulder with hers.

“Look at us two married broads and knocked up too. Not to mention my dress. It’s killer.”

“Not as killer as your hands,” Tova deadpans.

I spread my fingers out. “These hands are deadly.” I wiggle my fingers. I still can’t believe all that went down. It was all very Z, though. The man is sneaky and plots further ahead than any of us can imagine. I think his hands are actually the most deadly in the room if you're going off tonight.

“Are you ready to get out of here?” Z comes up behind me, wrapping one arm around my stomach, the other over my chest. I grip his forearm, dropping my head all the way back to stare up at him.

“If you are.” I lick my lips. I don’t think the scene that played out in front of me tonight should be a turn-on, but God knows I can’t control what turns my vagina on these days.

“More than ready.” He spins me around in his arms, taking my mouth in a kiss. This one is different from all of our others. I can’t even explain it. It’s possessive but also freeing.

It’s the first time that everything is out in the open to everyone when it comes to our relationship. We no longer have to hide. We can finally show our love for one another openly.

“Take me home.” Z wastes no time, lifting me into his arms and heading toward the doorway. We don’t even bother saying goodbye. I merely wave over his shoulder at Warren and Tova as I’m carted away.

I expect to see the car we came in waiting for us when we exit the restaurant, but it’s



nowhere in sight. What the heck?

“Did you call for the car?” I ask Z, who begins placing me down on my feet.

“We’re not taking the car.” Confused, I follow his line of sight. That’s when I see his motorcycle. Holy crap. I’ve dreamt of Z taking me out on his bike so many times. Fantasized about it actually.

Z grabs my hand, leading me over to it. I can’t help but reach out and run my fingers along it. Excitement courses through my veins. “Ready for a little adventure?” I bounce on my heels, extra excited.

“No. I’m ready to finally start our lives together.” I know Z was probably waiting for me to say something sarcastic or smartass, so I don’t let him down. “You’re buying me a new dress and shoes if these get ruined.”

“I’ll be ruining that dress by the end of the night.” He grabs one of the helmets left on the seat, putting it onto my head before holding up a leather coat for me to put on too. The man really has planned this night out, and there is nothing sexier than a man with a plan.

Z puts his helmet on before throwing his leg over the bike and sitting down. He offers me his hand, helping me on. I wrap myself around him as he fires the thing up and takes off.

I keep a tight hold on him as he moves through the city, and to my surprise, it’s not in the direction of the family farm. When he pulls into an underground parking lot, I know we’re at his place in the city. I suppose if we’re married, it’s now mine too.

Up ahead, I see a giant door slide open, and Z drives right in, with it closing behind us. Half a second later, I feel it start to move. It’s a freaking elevator for a vehicle. Z

turns off the crotch rocket and removes his helmet.

"I know you've been wondering about this place," Z says after helping me off the bike along with my helmet.

"A little." I shrug, both of us knowing I'm full of crap. I hated this place when I knew Z would come here and not stay at the farm. In my mind, it was a bachelor pad. I don't think that at all anymore, but I still want to see it.

I love the family farm. We all grew up there, but I also love the city.

"Well, feel free to change anything, or we can find a new place." The door slides open to enter right into the penthouse.

"Holy Batman." I gasp. "That is totally cool.

" I step inside to the open floor plan. My eyes go straight to the floor-to-ceiling windows that line the entire wall of the living room, which leads into the dining area and kitchen.

I love how it all flows. "Is that a balcony?

" I ask. I bet you can see the whole city from up here.

"One of them."

"One!" I squeak.

"There is a roof with a big patio and garden area. I might have a pool up there too." He takes my hand, leading me up to show me. Then he brings me back down, showing me the rest of the place. At every turn or new area, I'm more shocked.

I can tell from all the details that this place isn't a bachelor pad on any level. It was never close to that. From the start, he built it with us living here as a couple in mind. It shouldn't surprise me that Z carefully planned our lives out in advance.

"Don't cry." He cups my cheeks.

"I'm not crying; sometimes a girl gets overwhelmed." I sniff.

"That's good because I still have one more thing to show you.

" I can tell from his smirk that whatever it is, it's the grand finale.

How, I'm not sure, because the closet in the master is a studio all on its own with custom cabinets for my clothes, display areas for my shoes, and a glam area.

There was even a freaking stage surrounded by mirrors for me to see myself from every angle!

He leads me to a wall that has a thin but long accent table against it. "It could potentially be used for a piece of art," I tell him, making him chuckle.

"I'm sure you can find us one, but you'll have to cut it in half."

"What?" I ask with a laugh.

Z puts his hand under the table. "Your finger goes here.

" He guides me to it, and I feel something smooth and cool.

"Press it firmly on there." I do as he instructs, jumping back when the table starts to move, splitting in half, along with the wall, to reveal, well, another wall.

Only this one is concrete with a screen in the center.

"Stand here." He moves me over so that my face is right in front of it. The screen is coming to life. My face appears on it, and I watch as it scans my features before the wall once again moves.

"This really is Batman style, but not in the basement or in a cave."

"My wife would hate that. Would think bugs could get in."

"Ahh!" I laugh because he is not wrong. I can stare down a man with a gun, but a spider and I'm out. It's every man and woman for themselves.

I'm so overwhelmed at the sight in front of me I press my hands to my cheeks, in a very Tova fashion.

"Do you control the world from in here?"

"Mostly yours." I elbow him. He grunts, making a show like I could actually hurt him. "Come on." His hand goes to my back, guiding me into the giant room.

"How did you do this?" I ask. It's not the giant display of computer screens that takes up one area, like a command center, that I'm talking about. Or even the area next to it with a pearly white desk that's decorated in my style, like in my bedroom.

No, it's all the small knick-knacks that are the same as the ones I'd bought over the past few weeks to decorate his desk he has placed here.

"You bought everything online."

"Do you track everything I do?"

“Yes.” I roll my eyes at him, even though it doesn’t shock me in the least. It would have pissed me off in the past, thinking he was trying to control me, but now I find it really hot.

“Hey!” I point to one of the screens. “Is that like tracking me?”

“Of course.” He scoffs like my question is a stupid one. Okay, it might be.

“You have me lojacked?”

“Yes.” I turn my head, hiding my smirk.

“No hiding, I already know it turns you on. You’d be pissed if you found out I wasn’t tracking you.”

“Maybe.” I roll my eyes again, making him laugh.

“Brat.”

“Jerk!”

He kisses me until I’m breathless.

“This place is pretty badass,” I tell him. His hand slips under my dress to my ass, giving it a squeeze. “Bet Marks would love it.”

“Sure she has her own setup.”

“I don’t know. She travels.”

“It can be safer to move around for her.”

“Really?” I scrunch my nose. “Why? You don’t move around.”

“We don’t really engage in the same shit. Marks can be...” He trails off.

“What?”

“Trying to think of the right word. A little Robin Hood at times. Petty?”

“A petty Robin Hood!” I laugh hard. “Oh, that’s amazing.” I can totally see her being that. Now that’s something to aspire to.

“Bold, highlight, and underline the petty part, and people are really keen when you not only steal from them or out from under them and let it be known it was you but also blast them to others.”

“Okay, it’s not so funny now.” I say now that I’m really thinking about it. “I haven’t heard from her in a few days, and before that she’s been flighty.” I stare up at Z, worry filling me that something has happened to Marks.

“Sweetness, you just have to ask what you want to know or have me find.”

“Can you just tell me she’s okay? That would make me feel better.”

“All right, let’s have a look.” Z steps over to his computer, sitting down in his chair. I grab mine, rolling it over.

“Wait, I’m not ready.” I rush back over to my desk. Damn, he really did make sure he got everything. I find my faux glasses and put them on before rushing back over.

“Okay, now I’m ready.”

“Perfect.” He kisses my cheek. “You look the part and everything.” I nod because,

obviously. Z clicks away at his computer. I've got no clue what the hell he is doing. "Come here." He lifts me, sitting me in his lap, my back to his chest. "I shouldn't have gotten you a chair."

"Anything?" I ask after a few seconds.

"Hang on." I peek over my shoulder at him. His brows are pulled together.

"Z?" I don't care for that expression.

"I can't find anything at the moment."

"Z?" I whisper, a knot forming in my stomach.

"It could be nothing. I'll have to keep checking, but it's not abnormal not to be able to find her. She could be dark right now."

"Dark?"

"Just all the way off the grid. I'm sure she does that whenever she goes home or wants to lay low. But I'll ding her."

"Ding her?" I know he doesn't mean a text.

"I'm making it clear I'm trying to find her, and I'm not doing it subtly, so she'll know that. Which in turn she'll know I need to talk to her."

"Because if you were trying to be sneaky, she wouldn't know?"

"Yeah, for now." He shakes his head.

“For now?”

“I’d be ignorant not to think Marks has the potential, drive, and?—”

“Pettiness.” I slip in.

“Pettiness, to not be better than me one day.” He shakes his head, a smirk on his lips. I turn in his lap to straddle him.

“A lot of men would be annoyed that a girl beat them, but not you.”

“My whole world centers around you, Cosima. I know and understand the power a woman can possess. Wars are created and fought over them. I’d lay down my life for my family, but I’d burn down this whole world before I ever gave you yours.”

“How do I even respond to that!” I blink, trying to not cry again.

“You don’t. You just let me have you.”

“I can maybe do that.” I shrug one shoulder. “But I do like a good chase every now and then.”

“And I do love pretending to let you run.”

“Hey!”

“Come here.” He grips the back of my neck, his hold possessive. My favorite kind.

“I am here,” I say against his lips.

“Tell me you love me.”



“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“You better.” I nip his bottom lip.

“Watch it,” he warns. I shift in his lap, my sex rubbing against his cock.

“Or what?” I sink my teeth into his lip, making him groan.

“You need me to make you sweet again?” I nod, my body heating. How does he always know what I need? I think even before I do. I let my heels fall off my feet. Z releases his hold on me, lifting his brows in a silent challenge or maybe it’s more of a head start. “Run.”

“Ah!” I spring up from his lap, taking off on a dead run. It’s not long before I hear him behind me. “Yeah, head start,” I shout, but it’s too late, I’m scooped up into his arms, where I have always belonged.

“I’ll never play fair when it comes to you.” Good, I wouldn’t want it any other way.

We play to win, no matter the cost.

ZMany Years Later....

T oday is finally the day. How I've kept this secret I have no clue, but I have. Even my oldest son is bursting to tell the news, but he's keeping it tight-lipped. Our boys might drive their mother nuts most days, but they are also very protective of her and dote on her as well.

It's safe to say that everyone is smitten with Cosima in this house, but there aren't many people that dislike her. She has a way about her that draws people in, unless she stabbed you. Then you might not be a fan, but if she wanted, I'm sure she could charm you right back in.

She deserves the world, and I do whatever I can to make sure she gets it. Cosima is always trying to make sure everyone has a smile on their face even at her own expense. That's why today is so important. I've planned everything down to the smallest detail.

“Hey, have you—” Cosima trails off when she catches sight of the boys and me. We have three ranging from eight to three. Eros is our oldest, and Cosima says is our love child. Then we have Jax and then Damon.

“You're not supposed to cry, Mama!” Damon, our youngest, runs over to her. She leans down, kissing him all over his face. He's our cuddlebug. It took us forever to get him out of our bed, but it was fun finding new places for me to have my way with my wife.

“You guys look so good. They're happy hormonal tears.” She sniffles. I have them all

in pink shirts to match the theme of the party. She's been planning it for a month.

Cosima lets the boys wear what they want, saying style is a choice everyone must make on their own, but when I pitched the boys on the idea of matching their mom's theme for the party, they more than wanted to do it, so I suppose they did choose, and they chose her. Can't say I blame them. I choose her every time.

"You look stunning as usual." I walk over to my very pregnant wife who somehow manages to get more and more beautiful by the second. She's got on a stunning pink dress that emphasizes her baby bump.

"Tell me more. Don't leave out any details." She teases me in true Cosima fashion before lifting her mouth for me to take in a kiss. I oblige.

"Do you guys always have to kiss?" Our oldest groans.

"Yes," we both reply, breaking our kiss. I could kiss her a million times and still want to do it a million more.

"I think you guys might look better in pink than me." Cosima runs her fingers through Damon's hair. He's got her blond locks.

"No way." Jax shakes his head adamantly. "I mean, I look better than these three in pink, but you're pretty, Mom."

"You get an extra cupcake." Cosima leans down, kissing him on the cheek.

"Now he doesn't have to steal one," Eros mutters.

"I'm going to steal one right now. Who's with me?" Cosima asks, taking Damon's hand.

“See, I get it from her.” Jax nods to his mom, who is already heading out of the game room where we’ve all been for the past hour. I was keeping the boys busy so they weren’t under foot.

“Trust me, I know where you get your attitude.” Cosima shoots me a glare over her shoulder, making my cock harden more than it already was just seeing her. I’ll have to steal her away later so we can have our own celebration where I can get a taste of the sweetness between those thighs of hers.

When we get to the kitchen, I see the first wave of pink. Everything has been transformed into a pink wonderland. The woman really does think of everything down to the tiniest of details.

We’re not in the city this weekend. We switch back and forth but have been spending more time out near the farm. Technically, it’s still the farm. There is so much land out here, but we built a house here when Cosima became pregnant with our second.

She wanted to be closer to Tova. Our kids are more like siblings than cousins. We have even created small roadways that you can use a Gator or golf cart to go from one house to another.

I could give a shit where we live as long as I am with Cosima. If it makes her happy, then I am happy. My wife puts a lot into what others are feeling, so I make sure she too is always taken care of.

“How are you so sure it’s gonna be a girl, Mama?” Jax asks her as she hands him his sparkling pink cupcake.

“I’m manifesting it,” she simply says as though that’s all the explanation that’s needed. I inwardly smile, loving that she hasn’t changed a bit.

I have no idea if manifesting works, but whenever I discover that she might be

manifesting something, I take the proper steps to ensure it happens. This one, however, won't be so easy. My wife wants to have a baby girl.

I told her I'll keep knocking her up until it happens, but she swears this will be her last, which I understand. Cosima is a very hands-on mom, and there is only so much of her to go around.

"Manyafestin?" Jax questions with a mouthful of cupcake. Cosima wipes the corner of his mouth that is covered in frosting.

"Sometimes if you want something really bad, you try to will it into being." She looks directly at me before shrugging her shoulders as though it's as simple as that before taking a bite of her own cupcake.

I smile at the scene playing out in front of me. To others, Cosima's logic would seem flawed, but I know my wife, and if anyone could actually manifest an outcome, it would be her. I might give a few small nudges.

"People are starting to show up," I remind them as Jax goes for another cupcake.

"Hold on." Cosima snags it from him. He lets out a huff; it sounds like his mother. Cosima splits the cupcake in half. "There." She gives him one side, shoving the other inside her mouth. They both do it in one bite, making me laugh.

"The pool." Cosima points to the back patio doors. "Wait till you guys see."

This might be a party for her to celebrate the new baby, but she wanted to surprise the boys with parts of it too with fun games and everything you could think of. It's why I'd kept them entertained in the game room.

Jax is already flying toward the patio, Damon following after him. Eros shakes his head but isn't far behind.

“Anything I should know?” I wrap my arm around her waist, pulling her into my side.

“I might have dyed the pool water pink.”

“All right.” I hold back a laugh. Cosima’s face scrunches.

“I might have manifested so hard it broke the pump, so, yeah, maybe no one gets in it.”

“I got it, babe,” I reassure her. I already knew about the pink pool idea, and it’s perfectly safe. Then, as if on cue, we hear a loud splash.

“Jax!” Cosima shouts, not having to see to know who has jumped into the pool.

She hurries out the glass doors to see Jax emerging from the pool. They might have put too much hot pink coloring into the water. I’m sure Cosima told them to keep dumping the dye and that there could never be enough pink.

“Mom! I need a shark fin; it looks like a murder scene.” Jax chomps his teeth like he is one.

He’s not wrong. I put my hand over my mouth, trying not to laugh. You can’t encourage Jax because he’ll take it up another notch. Eros has backed away, not wanting any of the dyed water on him.

"It might be a murder scene," Tova says, coming over to us and kissing Cosima on the cheek. I see the golf carts all parked off to the side. "After the whole pool boy thing."

Any laughter I had dies. Cosima flicks a glance my way. “He was only being nice.” Nice? That’s what we’re calling it?

“Are you defending him?” Maybe I should have killed him after all, but Cosima had asked me not to. That’s what I get for being nice.

“He was gay!” Cosima throws her hands up. I don’t give a shit what he was. He was staring too hard.

“I can take care of the pool,” I let them all know. We don’t need a fucking pool boy.

“Are you sure about that?” War peers down into the pool. It’s so pink you can’t see the bottom. Okay, it might be red, but I’m not saying that shit out loud. I’ll die saying this water is pink.

“Yep, absolutely positive.” I flick him a glance, letting him know he doesn’t need to worry about my house and to keep his mouth shut about what color the water is. I don’t want anything upsetting Cosima on her special day.

“He’s so over-the-top ridiculous with his jealousy.” Cosima says it as though she hates that I’m this way when it comes to her, but we all know it’s the exact opposite. She eats that shit up the same as she did the cupcake in the kitchen earlier.

“The suspense is killing me. Can we get this show on the road?” Tova asks. “I heard that he knows.” She points a finger at me like an accusation. “I don’t understand why he gets to know first. I’m the best friend.”

“Yeah,” War encourages Tova. “What my wife said.”

“I don’t even know. I’m keeping it from both of us so it doesn’t count.”

“Fine, I guess that math works.” Tova sighs.

“We need to wait for a bit. Parents aren’t here yet,” I remind them.

I'd asked them to be late on purpose. The sun is already setting, the lights flickering on back here, giving a pink hue. Others start to arrive, and I watch my wife happily work the party, welcoming everyone. She's fucking glowing, and I know it's not only the pregnancy.

"They're here!" Cosima claps her hands when Rochelle and Dario step out onto the back patio. They are rushed with grandkids. I pull out my phone and send out a text.

"Are you ready, sweetness?" I ask.

"I'm always ready." She smiles up at me.

"Really?"

"Well, unless we're going somewhere. Then I might be a tad behind. Depends on my hair, and Jax." She adds the last part. "I can't help it if he likes to match me."

"You can be late all you want." I kiss her. "But it's time."

"Everyone!" Cosima shouts, making everyone grow quiet. "It's time." She peeks up at me. "So?" The reveal has been left up to me. I usher everyone back to the patio area.

"Here we go," I whisper into her ear right as the sparkler fountains go off round the back patio and the pool. Half a second later, the sky lights up too as the fireworks go off in the distance in every shade of pink you can think of.

Cosima gasps, watching the show play out in front of her. The last and final one goes off as fire slides across the pool, outlining a phoenix. The flames are a deep, deep pink. Everyone is cheering, the kids jumping up and down.

My wife turns. "Our Phoenix."



“Our Phoenix.” I place one hand on her stomach, the other going to the back of her neck, cupping her there. That’s the name she’d picked out if we were to ever have a little girl.

“You really gave me everything I ever wanted,” Cosima says. “All my dreams.”

“It’s you that has given us everything, sweetness.”

“That’s pretty nice of me,” she says with a snuffle.

“The sweetest,” I agree, pressing my mouth to her.

This woman is the heart of this family. Fuck, she’s my whole damn heart. A heart that had turned cold and was filled with anger until she’d come home.

Now it beats just for her, and she beats for us all.

I hope you loved Cosima and Z’s book. Curious about Tova and War? Read their book, *Vow of Obsession*, available now!