



Obsession (Sinners of New Orleans #3)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: A mafia princess desperate to escape.

A ruthless attorney driven by revenge.

An obsession that consumes them both.

Madi

I've always been the black sheep of my family—a burden, a disgrace.

Now they've sold me off in an arranged marriage to Adrian Russo, a cold, calculating lawyer on my brother's payroll.

At first, I thought he was just another puppet in their cruel games.

But when he touches me, his punishments turn into something darker...something addictive.

And I begin to wonder if the man who shares my bed and rules my nights is my captor—or my savior.

Adrian

The moment I laid eyes on the blue-haired girl, I knew she'd be mine.

Her defiance, her fire—it was irresistible.

Marrying her was supposed to be a means to an end—a calculated step in my plan for revenge.

But every look, every touch, every scream has me craving more.

I tell myself I'm saving her from a worse fate, but that's a lie. I'm not her hero.

Only the devil would force his bride down the aisle.

And once she says "I do," she'll belong to me.

Forever.

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PROLOGUE

Madi

Ten Years Old

The hardwood floor is cold against my bottom as I curl into the corner of the closet. My newly claimed hiding spot is located in my grandfather's office, tucked behind musty smelling jackets and boxes of wrinkled papers. I wrap my arms around my knees and close my eyes so I can pretend it's not pitch black in here. Still, it's better than being out there.

Nonno's oversized New Orleans home is currently crowded with people. Too many people. They make sad faces as they press me into unwanted hugs while whispering pity filled words.

I'm so sorry for your loss.

Your father was a good man.

I'm here if you want to talk.

Talk? Talk about what?

Their sympathy and weird phrases swirl in my head, causing nothing but confusion. My father wasn't a good man. There was a version of him that resembled one. At least, I think so. But all the versions of him tangle together, the edges so faded, I can't

tell where one ends and the other begins. The good has been entwined with the bad, tainting everything in a red haze of anger and screaming matches.

Al Ricci, my father, was a large man with bulging muscular arms covered in scars and tattoos. I tried to count them once on a vacation we took to the beach. But the mangled flesh mixed with the black ink and I lost count once I hit fifty. I couldn't ask him to tell me the number. My father was a stranger in my house. Multiple strangers, really. Every time he walked through the front door, I didn't know which one to expect.

Of the many versions, the nice one was my favorite. The one I called daddy frequently brought home candies, took us out for ice cream, and spent late nights watching movies in the basement theater with me. But he was infrequent and never stayed long.

Shame burns in my stomach when I think of all the mourners outside this office. People who announced their sorrow by crying tears of sadness over my father's death. The man we sealed into a metal coffin this morning was not the version I loved. I could barely remember the one I loved; he hadn't come out in far too long and I already considered him a ghost. In my head, Al Ricci died years ago. The body that now sits in a tomb at Lafayette Cemetery is not my father. I don't mourn his death, despite what everyone else thinks.

I mirrored their faces of sadness, pretending that this event affected me much more than it did. The truth was, I was thankful when my mother told me my father would never return home. I exhaled a breath and sucked in fresh air.

Our house was lighter, easier to navigate without him there. I felt like I could walk. The broken eggshells that once lined our floors were swept away, allowing me to dance through our home freely. I was happier this past week than I've ever been.

But that happiness was inappropriate. At least, that's what my mother said when she saw me smiling. I was supposed to be grieving.

This was my third funeral of the year, and I thought I had it down to a science. Black dress with matching Mary Janes, stay silent and look sad. But my father's funeral proved to be harder than I had anticipated. The acting was more difficult. The other funerals were different, people I didn't know. It was easy to pretend then.

But I knew my father, and I wasn't sad. Despite the fake tears that rolled down my face, I felt nothing .

A creak on the old floors of my nonno's estate jolts me out of my thoughts, and I curl tighter into myself, hoping no one thinks to open the closet.

"You did good, Son." It's my nonno's voice. He wouldn't be upset if he caught me in his office. I'm his favorite, after all. The baby of the family. But his voice is low, and I can hear him shuffling around as he sits down at his desk. "But you'll have to keep this from your sister."

There's someone else in the room. I can hear their footsteps as they take the seat across from my nonno's desk. I seal my hand over my lips, keeping myself quiet as I listen to them talk.

"You don't have to tell me that." It's my Uncle Junior who responds. "I have no interest in telling Caterina I murdered her husband."

That single word reverberates through me. I know what it means; I've heard it said in my house, heard it broadcasted on the news. But my father wasn't murdered...he died in an explosion. That's what the TV said.

But still, my uncle's statement sloshes through my brain.

Murder?

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ONE

Adrian

29 Years Old

The girl has blue hair.

It makes me smile as I watch the interaction over the rim of my cognac glass, trying to hide my reaction from her brother — the terror of New Orleans. She walked into his house with a grin on her face, reveling in her act of defiance. Marcus, on the other hand, has waves of anger rolling off him, so palpable it silences the whole room. The whole room being his Uncle Damien, his mother, and myself. Our other guests have yet to arrive, but I can tell by the looks on their faces that there's no time to fix the blue hair debacle before they get here.

She's stunning. Even with the blue hair. I've heard about the younger Ricci girl; I even drafted her marriage contract, but this is the first time I've seen her. I try my best not to let my eyes linger, but it's hard to take my gaze from her heart-shaped face with her dark eyes and creamy skin. Her hair is still dark at the roots but fades into a teal-blue color as it hangs off her shoulders in long waves. Suddenly, I have an itch to wrap those locks in my fist and tug back. I wonder what the column of her throat would look like, if those eyes would still be so sassy once I had her at my mercy.

I shake the thoughts from my brain. She's not mine. I know better than anyone that she's meant to marry someone else.

Caterina, the mother of the two siblings who are currently engaging in a staring contest, drops her head into her palms. I think she might cry, but then she looks up, steadying herself. “A dress. We can get her changed into a dress,” she says to Marcus, as if a dress might suddenly change the color of her hair.

Marcus turns to his mother, nostrils flaring and jaw tight. “You think that’ll fix this?” He waves his hand over his sister like the whole thing is broken. Damaged beyond repair.

It’s just a little blue hair.

But I don’t say that.

I’ve only been working with this family for a year now, and I’m playing the long con here. Pissing off my boss by telling him his sister doesn’t look bad with the teal painting her head will only make him angrier, and I’ve seen Marcus when his temper explodes. It normally ends with a body on the floor.

“No...” Now Caterina looks frazzled as she tries to talk her way back. “But it might distract from it.”

For a moment, I think Marcus is going to lay a hand on his own mother, something that makes my blood boil. My mother is long gone, barely in my life for a few years before she passed, but my father taught me at a young age never to hit a woman.

“I’m not marrying him,” Madi bites out with venom, still holding strong despite the look of rage on her brother’s face. I want to laugh again, but I refrain. So much sass for such a little thing, who’s way out of her depth.

Marcus takes two steps until he’s in her face, his head hovering above hers too close. I have to grip my fingers around my glass to keep from stepping in. I don’t like

watching him abuse women, and I have a feeling Madi is about to be on the bad side of his temper.

“You’re fucking lucky Rafe Bianchi is about to walk through that door, or else I would make sure you feel every second of the consequences for your actions, you stupid little bitch.”

Madi doesn’t flinch. Her only reaction is the slow lifting of her fingertips to delicately wipe away the bits of spit that landed on her face during her brother’s outburst.

“Do it,” she taunts, making my stomach drop. I know damn well that Marcus doesn’t give empty threats. I’ve watched him kill men for less and this little girl is antagonizing him.

“Madi, let’s get you changed.” I give Caterina credit for trying to step in, but before she can get an arm around Madi, her son flings his, backhanding her across the face. She stumbles on her heels but grabs onto the wall to steady herself before she falls. Her hand covers her face, and I can tell she’s trying not to cry, but somebody was going to get hit tonight. Marcus doesn’t know how to quell his violent tendencies, and one day, it’s going to get him killed.

“Go upstairs, put a fucking dress on, and then come back now here. I don’t want to hear another fucking word from your mouth tonight. Capiche?”

Madi doesn’t speak. Doesn’t agree. Doesn’t give him an inkling that she might behave tonight.

“Now!” he roars at her. Only then does she move. Going to the stairs of the large mansion and trudging up them one by one.

“Go with her and make sure she doesn’t make a fool of this family any more than she already has,” Marcus growls at his mother, who quickly rushes to the stairs, following her daughter.

I take another sip of my cognac. This family is fucked up.

It’s not that I thought they’d be normal. I knew they were powerful, but I didn’t think this was going to be a family full of love. Not with the bodies they leave in their wake.

Marcus inhales a breath once the women are gone, turning to the table where Damien and I are sitting. “Do you have the paperwork drawn up?”

I lift the contract that’s currently covered in a manila folder. “Yes.”

“And everything we discussed is outlined in there?” Marcus slumps into a seat across from me like he’s exhausted from screaming at his family for the last five minutes. Damien pours him a glass of cognac, and he shoots the whole thing back, wiping his lips on the back of his hand.

“Yes,” I say again. He’s selling off his sister’s hand in marriage for some smuggling routes and a cocaine connection. What the contract doesn’t spell out is how his connection to the Bianchis, one of the five New York famiglias is worth more than his sister’s life or happiness. If he wants to solidify his power in this city, having a New York backing is worth every penny.

“Good. Finally, someone who’s not a fuckup,” he says, refilling his glass. Pleasing Marcus has been easy since I figured out all his ticks. It was simple enough to sell my services to him since he killed his last lawyer out of anger. He was in need of someone to keep his men out of prison and to handle all his legal matters — like selling his sister to the New York mafia. My Italian heritage might have helped seal

the deal. These men like to keep everyone in the family pure blood. An antiquated notion. But I'm not here to get them into the 21 st century.

I want to burn their kingdom now.

Revenge is a dish best served cold and all that. So I'm taking my time. Weaseling my way into his good graces so I can crumble his empire, brick by bloody brick.

Madi makes her reentrance known. Stomping her heels down each stair. All three of our heads lift to follow her. She's wearing a navy-blue dress that hugs all her curves, making her look sexy as hell. But the neckline is high, the sleeves are long, and the bottom hits just above her knees — making the dress seem less revealing. The color plays nicely off her new teal locks, the subtle contrast of the two colors pairing well. It's still bright and too improper for what Marcus wants, but it looks better than when she walked in wearing ripped jeans and a top that exposed her stomach.

Marcus growls some form of approval and gestures for his sister to come to him. "Sit here," he demands. "And keep your mouth fucking shut."

Saluting her brother is another act of sass, and I see the way Marcus's face pinches. The doorbell ringing is the only thing that saves the girl as she slumps into the seat and crosses her arms over her chest.

Caterina opens the door, greeting our guests before scurrying into her corner to not be seen or heard. I make a mental note that she's afraid of her own son.

"Rafe." Marcus extends his hand to shake the man's. "Thank you for coming."

Rafe Bianchi doesn't look amused or impressed. There's a stoic look on his face as he enters Marcus's family mansion, with two men stepping in behind him.

“Where’s the girl?” he asks, giving Marcus no greeting. No hellos, no niceties. Straight to business. Expected, since this meeting was set up as a finality. Rafe wanted to see what he was buying before signing the final contract and setting a wedding date. This is just a simple transaction. It doesn’t matter that the object involved is a living, breathing human.

Not that I care about her.

I want to burn her family to the ground, her included. So what does it matter to me if she’s forced to marry some asshole from New York?

“Here’s my sister.” Marcus leads him over to where Madi is sitting, gesturing for her to get up. She does so begrudgingly, still holding her arms across her chest. I can see Caterina wincing in the corner, the look on her face screaming please behave. But I don’t think she raised this girl to behave. I’m not sure Madi even knows what the word means.

Marcus’s face tightens as he tries to push down his rage at how she’s acting. “This is my sister, Madalena,” he says.

Rafe looks her over, his eyes wandering every inch of her skin. That shouldn’t bother me. She’s not mine. I don’t know how many times I have to repeat that phrase to myself to get through the night, but it’s feeling like a mantra.

She’s not mine.

She’s not mine.

She’s not mine.

I can’t care about the silly girl with blue hair who’s standing in front of me. I have

bigger things to be worried about. Like worming my way into Marcus's good graces so I can get all the information I need to take his family down. The legal way, of course. I'm not a gangster like him. Like this family.

I clench my fist as Rafe eyes the girl skeptically.

"Her hair is blue." It's a monotone assessment.

"We can fix that," Marcus responds immediately.

"Then why didn't you?" Rafe eyes Marcus. The man holds all the power in this room. Marcus might be in charge, but everyone knows it's only because Junior Costello, the rightful heir, was murdered and his son, Sam, was put in jail for his death and denied bond. After his grandfather, Carmine Senior, died, this family has been split down the middle, each vying for a side. Junior and Sam leading half the family, Marcus the other. He thinks this deal will solidify his place in the family hierarchy, and who are we to stop him? There's a plan running through that man's head, and he sees it leading him to victory, no matter how many bodies will forge his path.

"It will be taken care of."

Rafe turns his head away from Marcus and back to his sister. "Is she pure?" he asks while looking at her, but the question isn't directed at the girl.

She scoffs loudly. "No," she answers, right as her brother says, "Yes."

Everyone in the room freezes. That one simple, archaic question has the ability to change the outcome of this deal entirely.

"She's lying," Marcus says, trying to fix things.

Rafe shakes his head. “She says she’s not. I wouldn’t have come down here if I’d known you were selling me a whore.”

“Fuck you!” Madi spits out, jumping from her seat as all heads turn to her. Damien quickly grabs the back of her dress, yanking her into her seat and hissing for her to be quiet.

It’s a long moment of silence before Rafe speaks again. “The deal’s off.”

Anger glows in Marcus’s gaze as he looks at his sister, then he turns quickly, following Rafe, who’s on his way out of the house.

“She’s not serious!” he shouts. “She’s just rebelling. We can take care of this.”

Rafe turns on his heel, stopping in Marcus’s face. “I don’t have any desire to train your rebellious sister. You promised me a wife.” He looks at Madi, standing fiercely with her blue hair and a scowl etched across her face. “ That is not a wife. We’re done here.”

The door slams behind the New York boss and his men, and suddenly the house is launched into another bout of silence. There’s nothing but the sound of our breathing filling the air before Marcus flings himself at Madi.

“You stupid fucking whore!” he shouts, his hand wrapping around her throat. She claws at him as their mother screams, and Damien leaps from his chair, trying uselessly to pull his nephew off his niece.

“I’ll marry her.” I don’t know why I say it. The declaration leaves my mouth without my brain approving of the sentence.

The house is silent again. All four heads turning to look at me.

“What?” Marcus asks, his voice low and gruff.

“I’ll marry her,” I repeat.

“And why would I agree to that?” Marcus releases the girl, and she slumps back into the chair, her hands coming to her red throat as her eyes shoot daggers at me. She’s not the least bit grateful that I saved her from being strangled. Who knows when her brother would have stopped. If he would have stopped.

“Once the word is out that Rafe Bianchi called off the wedding because she’s an unfit bride and lacking her virginity — no one will want her. He said it himself; she needs training. I, on the other hand, don’t mind an untrained bride. Sounds like a challenge to me. You’ll get the girl off your hands and save your reputation. Not to mention, my legal services.”

Marcus runs his fingers over his chin, thinking through my offer.

“And what do you get out of this?” he asks.

Better access to this family while I plot your downfall. I don’t say that, though. Instead, I say, “I’ll be part of the family.”

Marcus must like my answer, because he smiles, turning to his sister. “Meet your new husband, Madi.”

When the little blue-haired vixen looks up at me, there’s nothing but disdain simmering behind those brown orbs.

And I can’t help but think: she’s mine.

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TWO

Madi

Three months later

There are no bachelorette parties when you're being forced to marry a man you hate. No one wants to celebrate a marriage that is nothing more than a business arrangement with penis confetti and matching t-shirts.

So I had to make my own fun.

Unfortunately for me, I only have two friends, and one is currently hiding out in New York to escape her own arranged marriage. Lucky bitch. That leaves me with Sadie, my newly twenty-one and only friend. She's also the only dumbass willing to disobey my family with me. That may be because she doesn't watch the news, leaving her naive about what my family actually does. I'm not gonna be the one to tell her, though.

Marcus, my brother, is good at scaring away more than just the boys who want to date me. He also effectively scares off anyone from wanting to be my friend. I have plenty of acquaintances, but actual friends are scarce. The only one who understood what it means to be born a Costello was my cousin, Lana, and now she's gone.

Lana was arranged to marry Davis LaFontaine, a congressman in New Orleans. And then she met the love of her life, who unfortunately for her, was a low-level soldier who worked for my brother. They snuck around for months before her wedding, and

then at the last minute, my cousins, John and Sam, helped her escape. Now she's in New York City under the protection of Leo De Santis and the Colombo family.

If John and Sam were able to get her out of a marriage to a congressman, surely my marriage to a lawyer can't be that hard. Right?

But currently, Sam, the cousin who is supposed to take over the Costello famiglia after my nonno's death, is holed up in prison for attempting to murder his father. Something we all know he didn't do, and John is set on proving.

The only problem is, my family is split down the center. My mother and brother make up the side that's vying for power against Sam, the rightful heir. Getting his father out of the picture was likely the doing of my family — not that I'm supposed to know anything about the “business” side of my family.

Bearing the Costello name definitely comes with its burden.

In high school, girls and boys alike were driven away by nothing more than the look of my brother. And then once the stories started being passed around and everyone learned my father was “Crazy Al Ricci” and my grandfather was Carmine “The Boss” Costello, absolutely no one wanted to take the chance of being my friend.

The people around me tend to die in gruesome ways. And after I watched my brother beat the first boy who kissed me, I stopped seeking them out. Flirting with me was bound to get you a warning if you were lucky, a black eye if you weren't. Kissing me clearly got you hit. But fucking me? That would have to come with a lot more pain. And I've never been willing to inflict that sentence on anyone.

So now I'm a virgin being married off like cattle to a not-so-clean lawyer willing to do all of my brother's dirty work.

Sadie, however, is an excellent distraction from the shitshow that is my life.

“This place is fucking wild!” she shouts over the loud music, a pink concoction of too much alcohol sloshing around in one hand while her other is up in the air. The color of her mixed drink matches the skin-tight dress she’s wearing. There’s a wide smile stretching across her glossy lips and her blonde curls bounce as she moves her body in time with the music.

Bourbon Street is wild. New Orleans is known for our crazy drinking culture and the lack of a closing time. You can just walk around the Quarter with a drink as long as it’s in plastic. Every street corner has a Daiquiri bar and souvenir cups for the tourists.

Marcus doesn’t approve of me venturing to Bourbon Street, as he scoffs at the thought of drinking cheap liquor with tourists. But the thing is, this street is filled with locals. The city thrives on the money tourists bring here and locals crowd the streets with tarot cards and photo opportunities. Not to mention, the bars that exist solely for the drunks who wander Bourbon.

I had to lose my enforcers in order to be here tonight, something Marcus would be pissed about, but what he doesn’t know won’t kill him.

I tug on Sadie’s arm. “I need a shot!” She grins at that, dragging me over to the bar, where we both chug the rest of our drinks and flag down the bartender for another round. Our third round? Fourth, maybe? The alcohol has blurred all the lines in my head, and all I know now is that I’m undoubtedly drunk.

But there’s no incentive to stop. Not now, not when I can still remember the lines of my future fiancé’s face and the way he smiles when he’s laughing at me.

The way he looked me in my eye and told me I was marrying him.

In one day, I'll have a new set of chains belonging to my new owner.

Adrian Russo.

Marcus is probably drawing up a contract with him now. My marriage being nothing more than an arrangement. I wonder what I'm worth to these men. Is there a sum of money associated with me? A shipment of guns or drugs?

As long as I can remember that Saturday is my wedding day, I'm going to keep drinking. Drinking until I forget it all. All the rules, the lies, the ties that bind me to this family and this marriage.

The bartender slides two shots in front of Sadie and me. We take them quickly, tilting our heads and letting the liquor burn our throats.

"I can't believe you're getting married!" Sadie slurs. She's smiling widely, mostly because she doesn't know it's a sham. "So fast!" she adds. "How did you two even meet?"

She's a supportive friend, even though I can tell she knows something is off. But she hasn't said a word. Maybe she's smarter than I give her credit for.

"Family!" I shout over the music, taking another sip of the fruity drink.

"Is he hot?" she asks. Leaning her back against the bar, she looks out to the club floor. It's past midnight, and the place is packed. Nothing but a sea of sweaty bodies pressed against each other, drinks in hand.

"Yeah," I admit. Adrian is hot, a fact I can't deny and one that makes it even harder to hate him. Even when every word spilling from his lips pisses me off, I can't pretend that his face doesn't look pretty. Or that I'm not imagining what it would feel

like between my thighs.

I have to stop that image in my mind.

“Do you have a picture?”

Heat rises to my cheeks, because I do have a picture. One downloaded from the website of the last gala we attended. It’s a picture of him in his navy-blue suit, his hand resting gently on my bare arm. He’s looking down at me with a grin stretched wide from cheek to cheek. I’m angled so you can only see the low back of my dress, my exposed skin, and my hair twisted into a bun. I wish I knew what face I was making because from this angle, you can’t tell I hate the man touching me. We look like a couple in love, a story that makes sense when you hear he proposed a few days later.

I pull the image up on my phone and show it to Sadie, watching her eyes while she takes in the man who’s soon to be my husband.

“He’s fucking hot ,” she announces, a smile on her lips. “I’ll drink to that!” She raises her glass to clink against mine, and then we both tilt them back.

With each sip, the world has gotten a little wobblier, and when Sadie hands me another shot of tequila, I shoot it back without a care. And when she leads me out on the dance floor illuminated by bright flashing lights, I follow her.

Sober Madi is somewhere else. Somewhere pouting about her problems while drunk Madi takes the reins. I let my body flow with the music, and as everything starts to feel heavier, my limbs like weights pulling me down, I barely notice.

My eyes are closed when two hands come to either side of my hips, and when they drag me off the dance floor, I can’t be bothered to care.

It's not until the warm June air feels sticky on my skin and my back is pressed against something hard and scratchy that I realize something is wrong. Something, someone, is touching me. Hands moving over my body.

My eyes open and the dark alleyway slowly comes into focus. There's a man in a denim shirt touching me, kissing me, his lips clinging to my neck and moving to my mouth.

"No." It's spoken low, mumbled because of the shots, and the stranger doesn't stop. "No," I repeat, and I lift my hands this time, positioning them on his chest and pushing. But my strength is gone, holed up somewhere with sober Madi.

"Get the fuck off her."

I don't know what happens. One minute, I'm standing, my hands pushing on the stranger's chest, and the next, I'm slumped against the wall, my ass on the cement as I watch the man fall, his head hitting the ground with a thud.

And then Adrian's there, hovering over him, his fists crashing down into the stranger's face. When he pulls his hand back, there's blood on his knuckles, and the first thought that flies through my mind is, it can't possibly be a good idea for a lawyer to act like a gangster.

But then again, Adrian Russo never promised to be anything else.

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THREE

Adrian

She's wearing a stupid fucking dress.

That's what I've been thinking about since I found her in the alley with another man's hands all over her. A low-cut black leotard under a completely sheer and sparkly oversized shirt. The fact that she looks amazing in it only makes me angrier. She has no right to be so stupid and look so goddamn sexy.

Anger buzzes through my veins, and I'm not too ashamed to say I take it out on the asshole in the denim shirt beneath me. At first, I thought she wanted whatever this asshole was doing to her, then I heard that first meek no, and white-hot fury replaced all the blood in my body. If it wasn't for the small gasp that distracts me, forcing me to turn my head and see Madi there, slumped against the brick wall, watching me with fear in her eyes, I'm not sure that I would stop punching this idiot.

Beating up shiteheads isn't really a normal thing for me anymore. Not since I was a teenager. No, I normally leave justice for the courtroom. But his hands were on my girl.

I pause long enough to look down at the idiot who thought it would be okay to touch Madi. Shit. He's knocked out now. Blood dripping from his nose and lip. I release my hands, dropping his body and letting it fall limp against the cement.

"Fuck," I grumble. I came here in search of Madi, but I didn't expect to find her

pressed against a wall while some asshole had his hands all over her. Anger burns hot in my blood at the thought. Push it down, I remind myself.

I reach into the guy's pocket, pulling out his wallet and tugging his ID free. Royce Nichols . Tucking his ID into my pocket, I put his wallet back. I'll deal with him tomorrow, but right now, I need to deal with my bride.

Madi looks shaken, her back pressed against the brick wall. Her pupils are blown wide and her teeth chatter even though it's not the slightest bit cold.

"Come on." The words are gruff, maybe harsher than they should be, as I extend my hand for her. She takes it, surprisingly, letting me pull her up onto wobbly legs. She can barely hold her weight, but I'm not sure if it's from the alcohol or from what just happened. Either way, I slide an arm under her legs and lift her up. A squeak leaves her lips, but she doesn't fight me as I carry her down Bourbon to where I left my car.

"Jesus, Madi." I can still feel the rage radiating through me as I deposit her into the backseat of my Alfa Romeo. "What were you thinking? Bourbon Street? Are you a fucking tourist?"

"No," she slurs.

I give her a look. That was a rhetorical question.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you trying to get yourself raped?"

That sobers her up. Something about it should make me feel guilty, but the anger overpowers any regret I might have.

"I drank too much," she whispers. As if on cue, her fingers reach for her temples like she's feeling the nasty side effects of her night of mistakes.

“Clearly.”

“Where are we going?” she mumbles.

“My house.”

“I-”

“Don’t fucking argue with me, Madi.”

At my tone, her mouth snaps shut. Any argument she had disintegrating.

I inhale a deep breath to calm my nerves. “Close your eyes. We’re only a block away,” I tell her. She must listen to me. Within seconds, I hear her breathing even out, and I pull the car onto the busy touristy streets, my knuckles gripping the wheel so hard they turn red.

I drive through the gate outside my home, parking in my normal spot. Rounding the car, I retrieve Madi from the backseat. Thankfully, at 1 a.m., all of my staff is gone. I can’t imagine what Ms. Sinclair would think of me carrying in my fiancée drunk and passed out. She’d probably swat me with a newspaper and tell me to get out.

The old woman has worked in this house longer than I lived here. As long as I’ve been alive, really. When I bought the place, she approached me, telling me as much. I hired her on the spot. Truthfully, I did need someone to manage the house. It’s not like I was going to do it, and she already knew the place. Made my job easier. But her moral compass is stronger than mine and she makes sure I know it every damn day.

This wasn’t how I expected tonight to go. I expected that her family wouldn’t let her slip her guards and trapeze through the French Quarter unattended. And I definitely didn’t expect to get a phone call that she was missing.

I lay her down on the couch in my sitting room and scrub a hand over my face. I'm supposed to marry this girl in a day, and she's running around the French Quarter almost getting raped. The asshole's license burns a hole in my pocket, waiting for me to do something about it. But I can't do anything right now, no. First, I need to make sure my future wife is taken care of. Then the next thing on my list will be to punish the man who dared to touch her.

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FOUR

Madi

“Are you okay?” My eyes flicker open to find my fiancé sitting in front of me. I’m on a leather couch now, in a really pretty house with high ceilings, white curtains covering the windows, and a sparkling chandelier hanging above me. My guess is we’re still in the Quarter and this is his house he was talking about.

“Where am I?” I ask.

“My place,” he answers gruffly.

How did I get here? I must have fallen asleep in his car.

“Here.” Adrian hands me a bottle of water and two pills. I look at him skeptically.

“Tylenol, Madi. I’m not going to drug you. How low do you think of me?”

My eyes widen at that question. Does he really want to know what I think of him?

“Don’t answer that,” he says with a huff. Once I take the pills from him, he rubs his hands down his thighs and avoids looking at me for a long moment. I take the pause to look at him instead. He’s still handsome, a fact that pisses me off. It would be easier to hate him if my mind and body weren’t trying to betray me at every turn. He’s still wearing a suit—he’s always wearing a fucking suit. I don’t even know why that makes me angry. I just want to see him looking like a normal human being in

sweatpants and a t-shirt for once.

There's blood on his clothes. Flecks of it spotting the pure white button-down and dried on his knuckles. I briefly remember the sight of him punching the guy who tried to touch me. My stomach falls as I recall what almost happened. What Adrian stopped from happening.

He lifts a hand, running it through his dark, perfectly cut hair. His fingers destroy the gel that was holding the locks in place and now his dark hair looks wild and imperfect. For some reason, I like him better like this.

As if he can feel me staring, his head whips back around, dark eyes fixated on me.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing," I spit out quickly, chugging a bit of water to keep myself busy.

A soft chuckle rumbles past his lips. "Ya know..." he says, smiling, "it's okay if you want to admire me. I am your husband, after all."

"Not yet."

That makes him smile wider, but he agrees. "No, not yet. But it will happen tomorrow."

I set the water down gently, trying not to show my spiraling thoughts. Tomorrow . Is it after midnight? Does that mean it's officially the day before my wedding? The wedding I don't want. I slide my hands down the side of my dress, looking for where I stuck my phone.

"Here." As if he knew what I was searching for, he grabs my cell phone from the

coffee table he's sitting on and hands it over to me.

Two a.m.

It's the day before my wedding and my future husband is sitting in front of me with a scowl on his lips. And I almost got... I can't even say what almost happened at the club.

The liquor swirls uncomfortably in my stomach, and when I clutch at it, Adrian knows exactly what to expect.

He lifts up a small circular trash can lined with a plastic garbage bag, and I don't waste any time grabbing it from him and letting all the alcohol go from my stomach into the bin.

I'm still heaving over the can when I feel the couch dip behind me and Adrian's hand comes to my back, rubbing small circles over the surface of my dress. When I'm done, he helps me to the bathroom. Giving me a toothbrush and watching me through the mirror while I clean myself up. There're a million questions running through my head. How did he find me? Why did he save me? Why did he bring me here?

Our eyes meet in the reflection of the mirror, two shades of brown staring at each other. Normally, I'm always the first to break the silence. I hate quiet; it leaves everything left unsaid with unbearable tension. But the look in his eyes is dark and filled with something I can't quite place, and I'm afraid to find out what he wants from me.

"What were you trying to accomplish tonight?" He sounds angry, but like he's trying to suppress it. I wonder if I should thank him for that. Thank you for not screaming at me like everyone else does. What a great show of restraint.

“Drinking,” I tell him instead.

“Obviously.” He scowls. “It’s not safe, you know that.”

“What do you think is going to happen?” I spit back. “Someone is going to kidnap me? Marcus would kill them.” I huff, crossing my arms.

I feel like the little kid who needs a bodyguard. The annoying one who constantly slips her leash and has to be chased. The bad one who’s loud, mouthy, seeking attention. All those labels have been slapped on me over the years and I’ve shaken each off, not giving a fuck about anyone else’s opinion.

But for some reason, standing in front of Adrian, I feel those words drifting back to me, clinging to me like a second skin.

I am a child. A little girl who has to be chased around and kept out of trouble.

He makes me feel small.

“Jesus,” he hisses. “You make me fucking crazy. Ya know that?” He scrubs a hand over his jaw, through the stubble.

“Easy solution, then. Don’t marry me.”

Within seconds, he has his hands on my waist, spinning me around and caging me against the bathroom counter. His fingers grip onto the edges of the marble, his face is mere inches from mine. We stay like that for a long moment, staring at each other, as my heart thunders at our proximity.

“Why did you even come to the club? Why not leave me the fuck alone?” I try to suppress the venom seeping into my tone, but it still comes out to show him how

unhappy I am.

“Jesus, Madi. I came to tell you something.” He backs off now, his hand raking through his hair again.

“What?” I ask, brow furrowing as I watch him pace. “Just tell me.”

“It’s Marcus.”

“What about him?”

“He’s gone.”

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FIVE

Adrian

The liquor, the sheer dress, that man's hands on her body — it all distracted me from what I actually needed to tell her, the whole reason I was searching for her in the first place. Her brother is missing, and I've been focused on the wrong thing: her. I was supposed to find her, make sure she was safe, and report back to her mother. Not cage her against the sink and think about what those luscious lips would taste like if I pressed mine against them.

Something about this girl makes all my brain cells disappear, putting my dick in charge, which is never a good idea. Anger still courses through me despite trying to restrain myself. I don't want to scream at her, don't want to scare her away—the girl already hates me and the fact that she has to walk down the aisle to marry me tomorrow isn't helping. But her recklessness is grating. Still, I should have broken the news gently, eased off the band aid. Instead, I announced her missing family member with the same finesse as a kid with a loudspeaker.

Madi's eyes, brown with little flecks of gold, hold all her emotion. Every other inch of her is sealed off, guarded under lock and key. But those two brown orbs tell me everything I need to know.

“What are you talking about?” Her face is still, completely calm. But inside those brown eyes, I can see the surprise mingling with the confusion.

“Marcus,” I repeat, rubbing a hand over my face. “Marcus is missing.” This wasn't

how I wanted to tell her. I wanted to be softer, nicer, the kind of guy she deserves. But she has a way of bringing out the worst in me.

Two dark and perfectly groomed eyebrows narrow, bunching up on her forehead. “Is he dead?” she asks, matter of fact.

“We haven’t found a body.”

A long breath leaves her lips as she nods. “You probably won’t.”

I knew she and Marcus didn’t have the best relationship, but still, he was her brother. I expected a little more emotion from her. Something... But this girl in front of me doesn’t look like she cares at all.

“Can you excuse me?” she says. “I have to pee.”

Her nonchalance throws me off, but I step back anyway, letting her shut the door to my half bath. I stand outside like a stalker, listening to her pee before she flushes and washes her hands. When the door swings back open, she gives me a look, once that clearly shouts, “what kind of fucking weirdo listens to his future wife using the bathroom?”

“If you want to-”

“Talk?” she finishes for me, one eyebrow lifted. “Is that what you want me to do, Adrian? Talk about my big brother?” Sass drips from her lips. She’s the queen of it, always ready with some sort of quip. But right now, I want to shake her. Regardless of what he’s done, he’s still her brother...

“I’m not sad my brother is gone, Adrian.” She says each word clearly, her eyes shooting daggers at me. “He hasn’t been the boy I grew up with for a long time, and I

won't mourn for a monster.”

“Is that what you think of him?” I eye her, waiting for an answer.

“Yes.”

“And then what do you think of me?”

She doesn't speak for a long moment, instead her eyes drop to my feet and rise slowly back up my body to my face. “Are we still getting married?”

There's very little that can stop me from getting what I want. And what I want right now is Madalena Ricci. I didn't intend to ask for her hand in marriage; my original plan was only to gain Marcus's trust through my legal services. And then she was in front of me, bright blue hair and a failed marriage proposal. Maybe I have a hero complex, wanting to come to her rescue before her brother choked the life out of her. Or maybe I adjusted the plan because I thought marrying her gave me a better in with her family. Regardless, the outcome is the same. Tomorrow, she'll walk down the church aisle in a white dress and promise herself to me.

Princess or not, she's mine.

I wet my lips before I answer. “Yes.”

“Then you're a monster too.” She turns quickly on her heel, but I catch her, spinning her and pushing her back against the wall so I can cage her in again.

I want to tell her to stop running from me, that no matter where she goes, I'll find her. That I would hunt to the ends of the earth if it meant keeping her. Maybe that makes me crazy, maybe that makes me unhinged, but I don't care much.

“Oh, but I’m your monster, princess.”

“Don’t call me that.” She frowns.

“No? What would you prefer?”

“How about my name, asshole.”

I can’t help the smirk that rises on my lips. I like when she’s a brat; it makes me want to punish her smart mouth. Maybe not tonight...but soon.

“Nah.” I shake my head with a grin. “I like princess better.”

She rolls her eyes, hands poised on her hips. “Are you going to let me go to bed or not?”

“Anything you want, princess.” I gesture for her to move, but when she does, I grab her one last time, pulling her back until her spine hits my chest. “One last thing.” I run the tip of my nose from the crook of her neck up to her ear, breathing softly. “You will marry me, Madi. You’ll walk down the aisle with a smile on your face, and afterward you’ll thank all our guests for coming and then you’ll come home with me. There’s no out. No alternative. That ring on your finger makes you mine. Understood?”

“You’re a psycho!” she hisses.

“No, princess, I’m your husband .”

Madi looks at me with fury in her eyes. “If you choose to marry me,” she says, low and dripping with a warning, “I will make it my life's mission to make you miserable every. Single. Day. You take my life, I’ll take yours.”

“Is that a threat?” I ask, tamping down my growing smile. I can’t deny that I like her like this. My dick is hardened just at the thought of taming her, punishing her for every little threat she tries until she realizes that she belongs to me.

Her tongue darts out, wetting those perfect pink lips. “No, it’s a promise.”

Madi goes to sleep in my spare bedroom, and I find myself itching to join her, annoyed that she’s across the hall instead of curled up next to me.

Not that she’d come to this room willingly.

The girl hates me, after all.

I wanted to tell her there was only one bed in this house, force her into the spot next to me. But some old wives’ tale hangs over me, making me believe I can’t spend the night with her yet. Not until she’s my wife.

That word radiates beneath my skin, warmth flooding me. She doesn’t want to marry me; she’s made that abundantly clear, and yet, here I am forcing her down the aisle.

Before her brother died, I would’ve told you I was doing it to save her from an even worse marriage. Marcus wanted to marry her off to whoever offered him the best deal, which to him, meant the most money. He didn’t care what happened to his sister as long as his pockets were filled. So in some way, me marrying her is in her best interest.

But he’s gone now.

What reason do I have to keep her, other than the fact that I want her ?

Seeing her at the bar tonight with that douchebag's hands on her body only made my

desire for her stronger. I don't want to see anybody else touch her. Don't want to see anybody else's hands roaming her skin. Madi belongs to me.

I have no right to her, and she has no reason to believe I'm one of the good guys when all of my actions have proved contrary. And still, I'm going to keep her like a bird in a gilded cage because everything in me wants to.

And I don't deny myself the things I want. Not anymore.

I don't sleep well, visions of her flooding my brain, and when my alarm rings only a few hours later, I don't feel anything close to rested. I get up anyway. I need to return Madi to her mother before she has a conniption.

Caterina Costello Ricci called me in a panic last night. Madi was MIA, and she had just been delivered the news of her son going missing. If she hadn't, I'm not sure I would have gone out searching for my fiancée. I trusted that her mother had her tucked in for a night of beauty rest, since we have a day of wedding activities ahead of us. If she hadn't called me, though, who knows what would have happened to Madi.

Madi's already up with her back to me when I enter the spare room. For a moment, before she turns and sees me, she looks peaceful. I can imagine waking up to her every morning. Maybe even one of these days, she'll roll over and greet me with a smile.

But today, it's a frown that's marking her perfect lips. She's not happy to see me. Never is.

"Morning, princess."

She scoffs at my greeting. "Are you taking me home, or do I need to call an Uber?"

She waves her phone at me, like it's a threat.

"I'll drive you."

She's wearing the one-piece leotard, but when she stands up, she reaches for the sparkly shift dress she was wearing over it last night. Her tanned skin is creamy and on display, and I have the urge to touch her, to trail my fingers and mouth over every inch of her skin, make sure she knows who she belongs to.

"Ready?" I ask once she's pulled the black boots onto her feet.

She doesn't answer, just gives me an annoyed look and walks past me toward the stairs. On some level, I think living with her is going to be like living with a teenager. But on another, the brat in her excites me to no end.

She can be as bratty as she wants, because in one day, she'll officially be mine.

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SIX

Madi

I 'm barely two steps into my mother's kitchen when the overreactions begin. Caterina Ricci is nothing if not dramatic.

"Oh, thank God," she crows, slamming down the newspaper she was reading. Mother Dearest doesn't look happy to see me. "Were you out all night?" she questions, her eyes wandering down my sparkly sheer dress to my bare legs and Doc Martens before gliding back up to my face. She's disgusted; the emotion shows in the curl of her lips and her fiercely clenched jaw.

Luckily, Adrian walks in behind me and her face changes at the sight of him. To anyone else, the shift would be jarring. Her emotions change so quickly, pure disgust and anger to happiness in the blink of an eye. But my mother's shapeshifting abilities aren't new to me. When she's trying to impress someone, she's the most delightful woman you'll ever meet. But once the doors close, her claws come out to play and her focus squarely settles on me. She won't yell while he's here, standing behind me with his hands tucked into the pockets of his black slacks. No, Caterina will be the perfect host for Adrian. She'll keep her anger tucked away, neatly under the surface until the moment he leaves.

But I'll take the reprieve while I can get it.

"No, Caterina," Adrian answers my mother's question for me, a habit I hope is infrequent in our pending marriage. "I picked her up last night."

“Oh, thank God you found her!” she coos his praise. “God knows what would have happened if anyone else found her in that... dress .” The comment is coated in sugary sweetness. Doting over Adrian’s perfection while getting in a dig at me.

“Really, Ma?” If she knew something almost did happen last night, she’d lock me up in my room right after spitting out the words I told you so.

My wonderful, loving mother has been telling me for years that everything about my appearance sends men the wrong message. My hair makes me look unfit, my outfits unappealing. Every signal I’m sending is telling men: look at me, I’m easy and slutty and broken. She can’t comprehend that everything I do isn’t to please the other gender. And there’s something about your mom calling you a slut as a teenager that makes it hard to gain any self-esteem.

“You’re the one who sent him after me,” I add, kicking off my Doc Martens and leaving them in a heap by the door. I can see my mother’s eyes twitch as she looks down at the shoes, but she keeps her lips wound up in a tight smile. Can’t send Adrian the wrong message and make him think she’s anything less than the perfect mother .

Appearances are everything, after all.

I think a girl and her mother are supposed to have some kind of unique bond. At least, that’s what a million hours of television have taught me. There’s supposed to be this mother/daughter relationship that is unbreakable, but if that is a thing, it doesn’t exist in this house.

My happiness is the last thought on Caterina’s mind. The first is making sure I walk down the aisle and marry Adrian Russo.

“Yes, I sent him after you.” My mother spins around, pressing her hands on the

counter as she hangs her head, the perfect portrayal of a grieving mother. “Your brother...” She can’t even finish the sentence before her words fail and a sob leaves her lips.

Laughter bubbles up in my throat, but I swallow it down. I can’t tell if my mother’s grief is real. Do sociopaths care about anyone other than themselves? Surely, a woman who would marry her daughter off unwillingly is a sociopath. Right?

“Caterina.” Adrian moves to my mother in a few swift strides, pressing his large palm to her back and soothing her cries. “I’m so sorry about Marcus.”

Ugh . The sight makes me want to hurl. I run both of my hands through my hair. My mother is making me crazy, and Adrian isn’t helping anything. I’m not sure if I want to punch him or... never mind . I shake the almost dirty thought from my mind.

“Your brother wouldn’t want this,” she says steadily, lifting her hands and wiping the imaginary tears from her eyes. “Wouldn’t want me crying before your big day.” She’s dramatic in the way she pats at her under eyes and sniffles loudly.

I roll my eyes. How would she even know? Marcus wasn’t much of a brother or son, more like a dictator, controlling every move that happened in this house. He saw the world as one big chess game and we were all just pawns on his board. Pawns he wasn’t about to let make any moves on our own, God forbid we fuck up his long game. But I guess none of that matters anymore. His long game, whatever it was, is gone now. Just like him.

“We’re still having a wedding?” I question, blinking my brown eyes to feign ignorance when both Adrian and my mother turn to me. “I mean, I would hate to interrupt everyone’s grieving by being selfish. We should postpone.” When she narrows her eyes at me, I add, “Just until we find him.”

Without a body, this could go either way. But we all know that Marcus didn't just go missing. That's not what happens in this life.

Adrian's lips have tilted up into a slight smile, and I think if my mother wasn't standing next to him, he'd laugh. Does he find my attempt to cancel our marriage amusing?

"No,"—my mother waves dismissively—"what's selfish, Madalena, is trying to take this one piece of joy away from everyone." She turns to Adrian as if she can't stand to look at me anymore. "Thank you, bello, for bringing my daughter home." She pats his shoulder affectionately. "I have to get her ready for the wedding now. We'll see you at the rehearsal dinner, si?"

"Si," Adrian confirms, leaning in and giving my mother a peck on each cheek. He gives her one last smile before he turns to me, taking two long steps into my orbit.

I don't back up this time, unlike last night, when he had me pinned against the wall.

"Be good, princess," he whispers, low enough that my mother won't hear. "And in twenty-four hours when you're mine, maybe I'll give you a reward."

"It's more like thirty hours," I correct him. "But I guess that's close enough." I can't help but to let the corners of my lips tilt into a smile.

Adrian's eyes glimmer at my comment. I think the sick fuck likes it when I mouth off to him. My comebacks and child-like brattiness have the habit of pissing off most men in my life. But Adrian smiles like he has a secret. Maybe he's a glutton for punishment? I'm not sure. But either way, the cocky asshole is intent on marrying me.

So I'll have to find more than just sassy comebacks to make him realize what a

goddamn mistake he's making.

I promised him I would steal his life for taking mine, and I intend to keep it.

I manage to shower and change my clothes before my mother drags me out of the house to my hair appointment. I'm not sure why I need an appointment the day before my wedding, but I keep my lips sealed and go anyway. Arguing with my mom is futile. We both inherited the same Costello genes, and this family has had a stubborn streak for three generations. We'll never come to an agreement; both of us will argue and say nasty things until someone cries. That's always how it ends, with one of us going just a bit too far and hurting the other's feelings. Then we'll ignore each other for a few hours and eventually apologize and make up, but nothing will ever change.

"Vanessa!" My mother greets her longtime stylist with a hug and a peck on the cheek. The dyed blonde woman I've known since I was ten gives me a smile and a look over. Her eyes linger on the strands of blue in my hair. She hates it, refused to dye it that color, so I did it myself. Much to my mother's dismay, she wasn't successful in trying to control every aspect of my life.

But the look on her face says today is different. She and Adrian want this marriage to happen, and nothing I say is going to change their minds.

"Can you fix that mess?" my mother asks her friend, both sets of eyes landing on my hair.

"Yes," Vanessa says confidently, her hand patting the back of her chair in a gesture for me to sit down.

"Thank God." My mother huffs out a breath. "She can't get married with such an... offensive color on her head." She clutches a hand to her chest as if that's the worst possible situation. Another ache rattles through me. My mother is more concerned

about the color of my hair than the man I'm marrying. She has no cares about if we get along, if he treats me well, if he even loves me. Not to mention, she hasn't even asked me my opinion. All she cares about is making sure her status isn't lost.

I've avoided wedding planning at all costs, but I know my mother has spent hours putting together what she believes will be the wedding of the century. In this family, the men run the businesses and the women plan parties. Her entire self-esteem is based on how good of an event she can throw, and my mother refuses to let anyone else in this city be better than her.

"What's offensive about blue?" I question, crossing my arms over my chest as my mother stares at me like I've offended her.

She presses her lips into a thin line. "It's not normal," she says, stressing her point.

What's not normal is what our family does to support themselves. What's not normal is how we flaunt our wealth around the city, pretending we've earned it the same way everybody else does. What's not normal? It's us. But she'll continue to pretend my hair is the problem.

I don't say any of that, though. Instead, I march over to the shampoo chair like a petulant child who's being forced to do something she doesn't want. I give my hair one last look in the mirror before a cape is draped over me and Vanessa leaves to start mixing the dye.

"Do you think you could drop a curling iron in there while you're at it?" I ask, laughing at my own joke. The assistant Vanessa tasked with washing my hair freezes her movements, her hand still on the faucet.

"Madalena, stop that nonsense right now," my mother scolds me. Now I've really done it.

I give her a smile. “Well, Mother, if you don’t want people to make suicide jokes, you should stop forcing arranged marriages on them.”

The assistant pauses again, this time her fingers covered in shampoo and hovering over my head. She coughs a little, probably covering up the gasp. She’s not accustomed to what my mother would call our culture. Normal people don’t arrange the marriages of their children and use force when they don’t agree.

“Don’t stop,” my mother hisses at the poor assistant. Her hands spring into action, assaulting my head with the mint scented shampoo. “Honestly, Madalena,” she mutters, low enough that only I can hear. “It’s just hair. I don’t know what in the world is the matter with you.”

It’s just hair . Sure. But in a world where everything has been prescribed to me, every decision made for me, my hair was the only thing I had. And maybe it’s stupid for me to care so much, but it was the only thing I could count on to be fully mine. My life, my future, my body — all of it no longer belongs to me. But at least my hair could reflect who I really am.

My mother sighs heavily when I don’t respond. “I never could control you, ragazza. Maybe Adrian will have better luck.” She spins on her heel and leaves me there.

I try not to cry as Vanessa paints the globs of black dye onto my hair, wrapping them neatly in foils. I don’t want anyone to know how much this bothers me or how attached I am to the color of my hair. But when she spins me around to show me the final product, long, dark, and shiny locks framing my tanned face, I break. Just for a moment, just a slipup when my facade cracks and my lips twist and it’s obvious that I hate it more than I can bear.

But then I straighten my features and nod at Vanessa and stand from the chair.

They've made me into a perfect little doll for my new husband, but it won't tame me.
Won't make me compliant.

I still plan to make that asshole miserable.

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SEVEN

Adrian

“What are we doing here, brother?” Fede sounds displeased as his eyes roam the building in front of us. We’re less than a mile from Tulane University, where I’m guessing this little prick goes to school based on the slew of cars with Tulane University stickers on their back windshields.

“What Fede?” I smile. “Too good for the dirty work these days?”

Fede runs a hand through his dark hair. He’s wearing a suit, and so am I. And not something off the rack at Macy’s, but tailored pieces of art made for our bodies, with a logo on the collars that screams money. Years ago, when we were scraping by, I could have never imagined me and my brother would end up in tailored suits. And yet, here we are.

We weren’t too good to throw a few punches to send a message back then. No, back then, throwing punches was part of surviving. But you don’t have to send messages that way when the law’s on your side. A privilege our father never had.

Fede sighs. “No,” he answers my question. “But you are. You’re a lawyer now, not a thug.”

My younger brother grew up idolizing me. Not that I intended for that to happen, it just did. After our father went to prison, I was the only man left in his life, and I vowed to drag us out of the pit of hell we were left in. Our nonna tried, she did. She

took care of us like we were her own sons. But still, I wanted more.

And I got us more.

Just needed a law school degree and the right connections to do so. And Fede, he doesn't want for a thing now.

"Consider it like old times." I clap him on the back. "Come on, he's in apartment three."

Fede rolls his eyes, but he follows me. "What'd the guy do anyway?"

"Touched Madi."

"Jesus," my brother hisses. "That's why we're here? Who fucking cares if he touched your fake wife. You do realize that, right? That this isn't real?"

I wave a hand at my brother. "The marriage isn't fake."

Fede rolls his eyes once more. "Just everything else, then?"

I ignore him, instead seizing the opportunity of two blondes exiting the building. I smile and nod as I catch the door they've opened, allowing me to get inside without having a key to the building. An old trick that works every time. It's only a few minutes until we're standing in front of the black door with the gold number three nailed to it.

"This is stupid," Fede grumbles.

"Noted." I knock, three loud pounds against the door, ignoring the clear disdain from my brother. Fede's right, this marriage is a sham. Still, that doesn't mean that anyone

can just put their hands on my wife.

The door swings open, revealing a blond-haired frat boy looking college student wearing sweats and sporting a black eye. The non-black eye widens when he sees me, recognition flooding his brain and fight-or-flight kicking in. He tries to slam the door in our faces as quickly as he opened it, but it's not enough. My foot slides in the doorway, blocking it from shutting. His new plan is to put up his hands, as if that will protect him.

"Please." The plea is pathetic, and his legs stumble backwards as he tries to put space in between us. I can hear Fede mumble a laugh at the asshole as I drag the driver's license from my pocket.

"Tell me"—I look down, reading the name off the piece of plastic—"Royce . Why the fuck do you think it's okay to touch girls while they're clearly saying no? Hmm? Does that get you off? Do you like being a rapist?"

"N-no!" He's still moving backwards, and with each step, I move toward him. "I didn't! I wouldn't!"

"Don't lie," I say calmly. Slowly, I take off my suit jacket, handing it to Fede as I take measured steps. I work on rolling up my sleeves next, and the little fucker at least shakes with fear as he watches me. "I caught you red-handed, Royce. You were literally touching my girl and I heard her say no. What else would you consider that? Hmm?"

He doesn't respond, instead the back of his knees hit the couch, and he stumbles, falling back onto it, giving me the perfect opportunity to angle my body over his. Hovering above him, I can see his eyes dilate, his skin pale, as he trembles beneath me. I wouldn't be surprised if he pissed himself from fear.

“Come on, Royce. What other lies are you gonna spin for me? Or are you ready to tell the truth?”

“I’m sorry,” he blubbers, tears forming in his eyes.

“Aww,” I chuckle. “Do you hear that, brother? The rapist says he’s sorry. How cute. Unfortunately, that’s not going to save you now.”

I can’t kill the man. I could, but I’d need help cleaning it up, and I’m not in the mood to owe a favor to the family I’m currently trying to sabotage. So I decide to rough him up a bit. I let my fists pound into his face, a few knees to the ribs. He doesn’t fight back, just mostly tries to get away from me, and it’s a futile attempt.

I can’t stop seeing her body under his. Her meek hands trying to stop him, her soft voice saying no. She looked so small in that moment, not like the bratty, head-strong woman I’ve come to know. I like her spark; I have since the moment I laid eyes on her. And no one gets to break her but me. With my vision tinged red, my hands keep finding the asshole, hurting him as I unleash all of the pent-up anger.

It’s when Fede coughs that I finally stop. There’s sweat dripping from my brow as I stare down at the blubbering mess beneath me. His eyes are already swollen, and he keeps mumbling soft pleas.

I drop his collar, letting his body fall to the floor. Standing up, I shake out my hands. My knuckles are bruised and bloody—not the best look for the day before my wedding, but it will have to do.

“Stay away from Madi Ricci,” I spit at the kid, who’s now curled up in the fetal position on the floor.

“Ricci?” he mumbles. “Fuck.” His drawn-out curse tells me he just realized how

badly he fucked up.

I uncuff my sleeves, taking my suit jacket from my brother and sliding it back on.

“Feel better?” he asks once we’ve emerged from the apartment building.

“Much,” I say with a grin.

Fede shakes his head, his annoyance with my shenanigans this morning evident on his face, but it doesn’t bother me. I knew the second I saw that stranger’s hands on my girl that I was going to need to punish him. No one touches what’s mine and gets away with it.

“Now, let’s get ready for my rehearsal dinner.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:52 pm

EIGHT

Madi

There's an ache brewing in the pit of my stomach as I enter my rehearsal dinner. The beautiful location feels jarring in contrast to the darkness of my pending marriage. There's a long wooden table in the center of the courtyard surrounded by brick walls and greenery, settled under the open sky. Warmth from the setting sun coats everything in a golden haze that matches the strings of cafe lights.

Vases of pink roses and eucalyptus stems sit on top of the gauzy white linen runners and candles of various sizes fill in the blank spaces, the flames adding a bit of extra ambiance.

This is what I would have chosen if I'd planned it myself. For some reason, that makes me angrier. This should be mine. This moment should be special, but now it will always be tainted by the wrong man.

"You changed your hair." As if on cue, Adrian appears behind me, pressing his palm against my lower back. He's wearing a navy-blue Tom Ford suit with a white linen shirt and a pale pink tie that matches the roses on the table.

I want to move away from his touch, but I hold myself steady. "Not by choice." I say, turning my body to face him. Something lingers in his eyes. I'm not sure if he's just remembering the blue color of my hair with disgust, or if he doesn't like the dark brown my mother had it dyed. Not that I care what he thinks.

“Are you ready?” he asks, snapping out of it and changing the subject.

“No,” I tell him.

“I thought you might say that.” He chuckles. “Here.” He tilts the glass of champagne he’s holding to me.

There’s a part of me that wants to beg, that wants to get on my knees and ask him to call this whole thing off. I should run. To Lana, maybe? What would that even look like? Hop on a plane and go? Someone would stop me, I’m sure of it. There are enforcers who follow me everywhere these days.

I take the champagne flute from him and chug it.

“Easy there,” he says, taking back the empty glass. “You don’t want to be drunk.”

“That’s exactly what I want to be.”

Adrian’s lips tilt up into a smile. “So sassy, ” he says with a laugh. “You always need to have some kind of comeback, don’t you?”

Everything with Adrian is back and forth, give and take. He says something, I retort. And so on.

My lips open, ready to tell him if he wasn’t such a jerk, I wouldn’t need to always have a comeback, but the words die on my tongue when I see John.

I should probably be angrier at my cousin, as he was the last one to see my brother. Or at least that’s the line I heard from the family gossip tree. I can tell by the look in his eyes that he’s gauging my reaction, waiting to see if there is enough love left in my heart to be mad at him for what he might have done.

If John did kill my brother, I'm not mad at him in the slightest.

The opposite, actually. As horrible as that sounds.

My relationship with Marcus was all dried up. Dead roses on the vine. He took and took from me until I had nothing left to give, and then he kept going. Love doesn't thrive in that type of relationship. It withers and dies.

But Marcus is gone now. A thought that shouldn't make me happy. But his death felt like chains were being cut, freeing my body. Freedom feels good.

Only, I'm not really free. I've just traded one jailor for another. Despite my brother's death, the marriage he arranged for me still stands.

When I see John, there isn't an ounce of anger lingering inside me. Instead, there's hope. Maybe he can rescue me like he did with Lana. Showing up on my wedding day and helping me escape.

Adrian sees me staring and turns, facing my cousin.

"John," he greets. "Wasn't sure if you'd make it."

"She is my cousin." He nods toward me. "I can't miss her wedding festivities." Zoe, his girlfriend, stands beside him, wearing a pretty floral-printed halter dress and pale pink heels. The two of us hit it off immediately. I never expected to see my cousin committed to a woman, but I knew the moment Zoe saw a dead body at his feet and didn't run away crying that she was the perfect fit for my psychopathic cousin. Even now, she stands by his side, holding her head tall.

Adrian plasters on a fake smile. He probably has too much practice sucking up to judges and juries. "It's nice to have you." He claps a hand on John's back.

“I was hoping I could get a moment with Madi. To talk.”

Adrian chuckles with a knowing grin. “I was told not to leave her alone with you.”

John helped Lana run away from her arranged marriage, and Adrian’s afraid he’ll do the same for me. Apparently, Costello girls are useless if they’re under the protection of the Colombo famiglia in New York City .

“It’s not like that.” John smiles as he raises his hands in a nothing to worry about gesture. “I just want to talk. We’ll stand right here in the hallway, and when I’m done, she’ll go inside and hang on your arm just like the doll you want.”

Adrian barks out a laugh.

“I’ll go with you,” Zoe adds, moving from John to my fiancé. She extends her arm for Adrian to take, and he eyes it suspiciously, moving his gaze between her and my cousin.

“Fine,” he relents. “Five minutes. And princess ”—he turns his gaze onto me—“just remember, tomorrow you marry me. Nothing is changing that.”

His words rattle my bones, but I nod in agreement, watching him walk away with a satisfied grin. As soon as he’s gone, I whip my head back to John, praying he has a plan, some good news to get me out of this arrangement.

“Don’t get too excited,”

I immediately deflate. “Marcus is gone , John.” It takes effort to keep my voice low and steady, preventing it from shaking. “Why am I still marrying him?”

“I talked to Sam.”

“And?” My fingernails bite into my palms, impatiently waiting for my cousin to spit it out.

“He thinks Adrian could be useful.”

An icy sensation rushes through my veins. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“Madi, I know you don’t like him-”

A rush of air burst through my lips. “Don’t like him?” I scoff. “He represents the scum of New Orleans. He’s the reason rich assholes think they can get away with whatever they want. Not to mention, he’s a prick, John. It’s more than just me not liking him.”

“And what are we, Madi?” He shakes his head. “We’re the rich assholes he’s representing, the scum . Aren’t we?”

I press my lips into a thin line. I know my family’s reputation, but we do good too. Does that fix it? Does that make it okay that when everyone has their heads turned, we cheat and lie and steal? That our money is just as dirty as the rest of it? There’s a blurry line between where my morals begin and end.

“Sam wants to use him,” John says. “He thinks he could be beneficial in getting him out. So for now, we don’t want to piss him off.”

Don’t want to piss him off. The words ring loud and clear in my head. Because Sam wants to use him, I have to marry him.

“I thought you took care of it. With the detective or something?” I’m bargaining now. It’s one of the stages of grief and I’m grieving my life. Every minute is getting me closer to my life sentence of becoming Mrs. Russo.

John scrubs a hand over his chin. “Damien killed him.” There’s a hint of emotion, or at least as much as I think he can muster. He feels bad for me. I’m not sure if it’s because he hates Adrian as much as I do, or if he just feels guilty that he’s making me do this. “We need a new plan.”

Fuck. Murder is an easy solution in my family when someone doesn’t do what you want. I learned that lesson as a kid, listening to my grandfather and uncle discuss my father’s accidental death. John got what he wanted from the police, so Damien killed them to make sure Sam stayed in prison.

“You’re going to ask Adrian to defend Sam?” I ask hesitantly. That seems like a bad idea, considering Adrian is in Damien’s pocket currently. Once glance into the dining room shows them laughing together. Adrian’s eyes spot me watching the two of them, and he looks at me, possessive and proud, like he knows John is giving me bad news.

“Yes.” John eyes me as I turn back to him. “You can help, ya know? Make him want to get Sam out. For you .”

For you. His meaning is clear. Make him fall in love with me, so in love with me that he’d change his alliance. My stomach sinks a little further.

My uncle is well polished on the outside. He doesn’t look like the gangster the news paints Uncle Junior and Sam as. But underneath his exterior is a ruthless asshole. He tried marrying off both his daughters to Davis LaFontaine to strike a deal. It didn’t matter that Lily proved she’d rather die than marry the congressman. Damien still tried to force Lana to marry him. If Sam and John hadn’t helped Lana run away, he would have been successful.

“And what about me?” My voice shakes. “You and Lana both get your happily ever afters, and I’m just supposed to pretend?”

It takes every ounce of self-control I have left not to cry. I'm resigning myself to a future of unhappiness. Of days and nights filled with the same face. A charade of putting on a daily show. The perfect housewife. What if he wants kids? Then I'll have to pretend that I don't hate the man they came from?

And if I leave? If I run?

Who am I without my family?

"It doesn't have to be forever, Madi." John touches me gently on the arm, like he wants to comfort me but isn't quite sure how. I know he doesn't mean to tear my hopes and dreams apart, but he won't tell Sam no. Especially not if he agrees with him.

And Sam doesn't deserve to be in prison, not when I know there's no chance he ever killed his father. Marcus was good at setting people up when it suited him. Everyone was just another pawn in his game.

"Okay," I whisper. John gives me a small smile. It's meant to be reassuring, I think.

"Thank you, Madi." He squeezes my hand before using it to gesture forward. We need to enter the room now. I have to slip my mask back into place and pretend I'm not falling apart at the seams as I join my rehearsal dinner.

Adrian watches me as my heels tap against the concrete, his eyes sparkling as I get closer.

He's victorious, a king at the head of the table. He has the career, the money, and now the cherry on top. The girl.

NINE

Adrian

I watch as Nonna studies my reflection in the mirror. “You look so handsome.” It’s warm and honest. Something about the woman transforms my current situation, briefly taking me on a trip down memory lane filled with hot summer days, warm chocolate chip cookies, bruised knees, and lemonade.

My grandmother raised me, and in her mind, this wedding today is an honest-to-God marriage. The eighty-year-old woman is blissfully unaware of the fact that Madi hates me and this is all one big show I manipulated her into. I prefer to keep it that way.

Shame burns hot in my stomach at the thought of what Nonna would think if she knew what I was doing. That I’m forcing Madi to marry me. Despite whatever pretenses I spew off, deep down, I know that’s what I’m doing. If I said the word, this wedding would be off in a minute.

But I won’t.

And who’s to say that her mother isn’t just as horrid as her brother? If not me, then it’d just be another man Madi would marry unwillingly.

Nonna’s golden eyes fill with hope as she smooths her hands over the shoulders of my black tux. “The blue is a nice touch.” She smiles, nodding at the teal-colored bow tie I chose.

Instinctually, my fingers come up, running over the fine silk. The wedding planner Caterina hired wanted me to wear a pale pink one. She said it matched the color scheme about three hundred times as she showed me inspiration pictures on her MacBook. I cared little about what the color scheme was, still don't. I just knew I wanted this color.

As expected, last night when I saw her at the rehearsal dinner, her once colorful locks were dyed a more natural shade of brown. And while I know it's probably for the best, there's a piece of me that will miss the wild blue shade. It was fitting for the spitfire girl, the artist with no cares. But it was also the thing her family hated the most about her.

That first time I saw her is still etched into my brain. Stunning, but she looked like she might bite anyone who came too close. Before her, I'd never understood the phrase beautiful but deadly.

Madi looked like she could hold her own, take down any man who tried to enter her orbit, and yet, I wanted to be crushed by her.

Maybe I'm a masochist.

Or maybe I'm the fool who thinks he can tame her.

"Can I have a moment?" The question is paired with a quick knock on the open door.

Nonna glances at Damien Romano before her eyes pass back to me. Naive, maybe, but my grandmother isn't dumb. She knows what the Costello family does for a living, and she knows that with Marcus and Junior gone and Sam in prison, Damien is the head of the family.

"Of course. I'll get out of your hair, amore mio," she says brightly, pressing onto her

toes to leave a kiss on my cheek. She swipes her thumb over the spot, removing any lipstick that clung to my skin, and gives me one last warm smile before she leaves.

Damien shuts the door behind her. “Your nonna?”

“Si,” I answer, walking the three steps it takes to get me to the makeshift bar I set up on the coffee table. It’s not much, just a thirty-year-old bottle of Glenfiddich and two crystal tumblers. I pour us each two fingers’ worth of the pricey liquor.

Wordlessly, Damien takes his, clinking the glass against mine before tilting it back.

I let the liquid burn its way down my throat before I bring my gaze back to the man across from me. “So, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?”

“I was surprised to hear the wedding was still on,” Damien says, perching himself on the edge of the velvet couch. His dark eyes wander over my suit, pausing at the sight of the blue bow tie before coming up to my eyes.

Bringing the crystal to my lips, I take another slow sip of the amber liquid. “Yeah?” I question. “Why’s that?”

“I would’ve thought my nephew’s death would scare you off. It’s a dangerous line of work, after all.”

“Not if you’re just the lawyer.”

Damien laughs like I told the funniest joke. I can’t quite place his angle, and normally, I can scope out everyone’s intentions. This family isn’t any more ambitious than most; they just happen to be ambitious in a very specific niche. One that’s not quite legal.

As far as Damien knows, I'm just a money-hungry attorney with loose morals willing to work with the mafia. It's not a hard story to believe, considering how many corrupt people are in positions of power in this world. They see me as another chess piece they can move around as they see fit. The lawyer who will do their bidding in the courtroom. They give me favors and cold, hard cash in exchange, and I take it like a greedy little pup, only encouraging their idea of me.

And I won't lie, the money is nice. I was making plenty before I got involved with the Costellos, but working for them easily quadrupled the amount I was taking in.

But what they don't know is that I don't care about the money.

All I care about is my end game. The plan where I tear down this family piece by piece. Until every last one of them is dead or in prison — punished for their sins.

"Even if you're just the lawyer, " Damien mimics me. "You have blood on your hands, just like the rest of us."

As he says the words, I can feel the metaphorical blood on my fingertips. I close my eyes for a moment, sucking in a breath and centering myself. I can't show weakness, not in front of Damien.

My rule from the beginning has been to make sure no good men like my father find themselves punished for the crimes of this family. I got off the men they wanted back on the streets, and if someone was sent to prison, I made sure he deserved it. I'm not in the business of letting innocents suffer.

"Maybe, but my job is to clean up that blood." I hold up my free hand, flipping it back and forth. "Looks sparkly clean to me."

Damien chuckles deeply. "It's gonna get bloodier, you realize that, right?" His thick

eyebrow ticks upward with the question. “Marcus’s death just means that Sam isn’t going to go down as easily as we thought. That kid’s a fighter.” He shakes his head like he’s both proud and pissed at his other nephew. He’s also the first one to point blank say that Marcus is dead. I assumed as much, but until now, everyone else has said “missing,” paired with the fact that there’s no body. But I guess it’s easy enough to put two and two together. Marcus started a fight with John Vitale that he couldn’t finish and only one of them walked away with their life intact.

I press my fingers against the glass, squeezing it tightly. “What’s your point, Damien?”

He shrugs his shoulders, a smirk playing on his lips. “If you’re one to scare easily, you should back out now.”

I run that eerie statement through my mind, analyzing it for the meaning that lingers underneath. “You’re expecting a war.”

“Something like that...” Damien eyes me. “So the question is, are you in or out?”

I should say out. I should leave this church, let Madi and my revenge scheme go, and get the hell out of New Orleans. My father would have never wanted to see me working with the mafia. He’d be disappointed if he knew what I succumbed to.

But he’s not here anymore.

And I am.

“I’m in.”

Damien smiles. “That’s what I hoped to hear.” He polishes off the rest of his drink and pats my shoulder on his way out.

Fede comes in right as Damien leaves. I chug the rest of my drink, hoping to wash down the bitter taste of that conversation. My brother looks at me, a touch of concern lingering in his eyes. “Are you ready?” he asks.

It’s a loaded question.

Am I finally ready to take down these assholes?

Am I ready to avenge my father?

Am I ready to walk down that aisle and marry into the family I hate so much?

My mind shifts, thinking of what Madi will look like in a white dress, saying her vows to me. At the end of tonight, my little vixen will finally be just that. Mine.

“Yes. I’m ready.”

TEN

Madi

Whether I like it or not, today I'm marrying Adrian Russo.

My mother all but pushed me out the door to the dressing room and now I stand at the beginning of the aisle in a dress that's clinging to my skin in the worst ways. It's pretty, that I can't deny. And yet, I'd do anything to get out of the white fabric. To get out of this church.

There's an ache in my chest. A longing for the freedom that's now run out. I wish Lana was here; she'd be able to quiet the anxiety raging inside me. But she's not. She's in New York with the man she loves, and I'm here, marrying someone I hate.

Processional music begins to play, and the large wooden doors open, revealing the church filled with guests. This wedding is a spectacle designed by my mother, and everyone is here to watch my demise.

At the end of the aisle is him . Adrian Russo. Dressed in a black tux with a white shirt and a teal bow tie. The color taunts me. It's almost an exact match to what my hair looked like only yesterday. I suck in a breath, trying to hide my surprise, but Adrian catches my eyes anyway and gives me a wink.

Something about that wink makes my blood boil. He's forcing me to marry him and he's taunting me? With those charming eyes and the way he's watching me, waiting for me to walk down this aisle and become his.

He thinks he's won.

My mother told me no theatrics today. She was clear that if I did anything other than walk down the aisle and marry Adrian Russo, I would be an embarrassment to the family. This morning, I felt so small and pathetic that I didn't even think to protest my marriage anymore.

But now?

The anger is reappearing, building up in my chest.

Fuck this family.

And fuck Adrian Russo.

I make my way down the aisle, and instead of walking gracefully like my mother taught me a thousand times, I stomp.

It's hard to do so in these ridiculous heels, and I bet I look like I just don't know how to walk, but it doesn't stop me.

I continue my way, ignoring the faces of the guests lined up in the pews. Each step is lacking any sort of grace, and Adrian smirks as he watches me. I probably look like a child, but if you're going to force my hand, then this is what you're going to get.

As I spare a look at my mother's horrified face, something about her down-turned lips and clear dismay fuels me. I did tell my husband that if he chose to marry me, I would spend the rest of my days finding ways to make him miserable. He should have listened better, because misery starts today.

Adrian meets me at the end of the aisle, just as we rehearsed. He's not frowning like

my mother, though. No, there's a sly smirk still ghosting his lips, like he's amused with my theatrics. Large hands reach forward and I flinch, something that pauses Adrian in his tracks. One eyebrow lifts as he looks at me with a questioning gaze. It takes me a moment to realize he was just moving my veil, like he was told to do in rehearsal, not about to hit me.

I inhale deeply and nod for him to continue. He moves the lacy fabric over my head as practiced, revealing my face. Leaning in closely, he fixes the material so it lays smoothly down my back, but also giving him the opportunity to whisper in my ear while no one else can hear.

"You're being a brat, Madi." He tsks, the vibration of the action sending a spark through my body. "What did I tell you about being a brat, hmm? It's gonna get you punished."

Heat rises to my face, even though I'm begging myself to not be affected. Adrian notices the minute he pulls back, that smug smirk widening on his cheeks as he takes my hand. It feels like he's leading me to my death as we step up to the altar where the priest is waiting.

Butterflies twist my stomach as he continues to hold my hand. He nods at the Father to begin this joke of a marriage ceremony. I don't hear any of what's being said, I just hear Adrian's voice on a loop in my mind. You're being a brat, Madi. It's gonna get you punished.

I wonder what a punishment from Adrian looks like... From my father, it would hurt, leave bruises on more than just my skin. Even from Marcus, a punishment would mean pain. My scalp tingles in response to the thought, like I can feel him pulling my hair as he drags me through the house, even though he's not here at all. My mother punished with words. Or lack of them. The silent treatment was her favorite way to show me I meant nothing to her.

So many options, I can't decide what I think Adrian will pick. But he doesn't seem like my father or brother. I don't think he'd physically hurt me. And ignoring me would be a gift.

"And now for the vows. Madi, repeat after me." My name coming from the priest's mouth nearly makes me jump out of my skin.

"Actually," I interrupt him before he can start spitting out the normal vows, a new plan coming to life. Adrian already said he was going to punish me, what's a little more at this point? "I wrote my own."

Adrian's eyebrows lift, questions showing on his face, and I swear I can hear my mother audibly gasp from her pew.

"Go head." The priest gestures for me to begin, and I suck in a deep breath, steeling my spine as I prepare to improv my vows to the man I hate.

"I vow to be there for you in sickness and in health, especially when the sickness is the result of my cooking, and the health is the miraculous outcome of surviving it." I can hear my mother mutter Jesus's name from her pew, as this is surely the embarrassment she told me to avoid. "I promise to cherish and respect you, in every argument that we have, ensuring I always have the last word. I vow to support you through all your hard times, standing by your side, and occasionally reminding you, 'I told you so,' in most of them. And I vow to always be there for you. Just remember, you're stuck with me now."

I feel validated hearing a few giggles from the crowd as I finish my vows, but quickly, that's wiped away from the amused look on Adrian's face. He doesn't seem angry at all. Rather, he seems like he enjoyed every word.

The priest nods at Adrian.

“That was beautiful, wife.” The way he calls me wife opens a pit in the bottom of my stomach that threatens to swallow me whole. “I wrote my own as well.”

Adrian recites standard sweet vows. Promising to take care of me forever, to love me through everything. The thought of forever makes me want to throw up. I inhale deeply to keep myself from vomiting all over his leather shoes. I thought I would catch him off guard by writing my own, making him stumble through his vows, but he’s not affected by me in the slightest. He must finish because then the priest announces us as Mr. and Mrs. Russo and tells Adrian to kiss me.

There’s that sly smile on his face as he leans in, his lips ghosting my ear. “Such boldness in your vows, princess. It seems only fair that I hold up my end of the bargain. I can’t wait to punish you tonight,” he whispers, and I’m still frozen when he moves his head, bringing his lips to mine in a searing kiss that makes me dizzy.

The world stops spinning as his tongue breaks the seal of my lips, invading me as his arms wrap around my body, holding me close. There are whoops and cheers coming from the crowd, but all of it is hazy background noise.

When Adrian finally lets me go, my lips are buzzing, pulse fluttering and face flushed, and the asshole looks satisfied as ever.

So much for not letting him affect me.

There’s a parade.

A goddamn parade after the ceremony.

Adrian has a million-watt smile as he raises a teal parasol in time with the music. I can’t help but notice the color is a perfect match to his bow tie. Two things are bothering me about the sight as I take my own white lace parasol.

One, is that while I kept as far away from wedding planning as possible, I still know the chosen colors are pale pink and champagne gold. His unique teal color scheme seems out of place and has me itching to run my fingers through my hair. The color feels like a phantom limb, like something that should be there even though it's not. Why did he choose that color?

Two... "Why the fuck are we having a parade?" I ask out loud.

"It's tradition." Adrian grins as he continues to wave to the crowds gathering at the edges of the sidewalks.

The tradition is loud and has too many eyeballs pointed in my direction. People look and cheer as we follow the small brass band. It should be a short trek to the restaurant, but the charade is drawn out as we're guided down the long way.

Traditions are everything in our world. God forbid you step out of line and be unique. This one, however, feels like a show made specifically for my discomfort.

But I guess the wedding wouldn't be a PR spectacle without the spectacle .

"Kiss her!" someone shouts from the crowd, and people chant their agreement with loud cheers and hollers.

Adrian's kiss from the church is still burning on my lips, confusing the shit out of me as we're dragged through the French Quarter. I'm not ready for a repeat, but when he turns to me, that same grin plastered across his face, I don't think I have much of a choice.

"Should we give the people what they want?" he asks, sounding as arrogant as can be.

“Only if you want me to bite you in public,” I snap.

Laughter booms from deep within, and his head rolls back, his hand clutching his chest like I’ve told the funniest joke. For a moment, I can’t tell if he’s truly laughing at me or if he’s exaggerating for the show.

Moving closer to me, he wraps his arms around my waist so he can tug me against him. “Princess, look at me,” he whispers, the softness a stark contrast to the laughter.

When I tilt my head up to him, he takes the moment to lean in, pressing his lips against mine in another kiss. This one doesn’t last as long. It’s quick and gentle, and when he pulls away from me, the people on the streets cheer once more.

The reality of this charade weighs on me. Everything he does is manipulation. He wants to show the world what a pretty couple we are, pander to the media while behind the scenes he helps cover up the crime, the money, the blood.

And I’m just a pawn in the narrative.

A cute distraction.

The pretty princess in a white gown.

ELEVEN

Madi

“Welcome to the family, sis.” Adrian’s brother slides into the seat next to me. I met Fede briefly at the rehearsal dinner, not that I remember much of what was said, as my head was still buzzing with the news that I wasn’t getting out of this marriage.

Fede puts an arm around my seat, and I eye him skeptically. Adrian isn’t here right now. After we entered the beautifully decorated venue, we cut our cake and sat down for dinner to be served. As soon as he finished, he excused himself, telling me to stay right here. The demand made me want to not listen, just to prove to him that I’m not a pet he can boss around. But my feet hurt from these stupid high heels, and I have no desire to mingle with the people here.

I take a gulp of champagne. “What do you want?”

“Ouch,” Fede chuckles. “You have claws.”

Turning my head, I give him a scathing look. “That’s what you want? To insult me. Please go away.” I flutter my fingers in a motion to shoo him off. Fede doesn’t budge, though.

“I just want to get to know my new sister-in-law.”

“Ugh,” I groan. “How about we don’t and say we did?” It’s a petty line, something I remember saying far too much in grade school, but Fede smiles.

“You married my brother. We’re family now, Madi.”

I find Fede’s insistence to refer to me as his family — his sister — infuriating. I have no desire to make polite conversation with the man. I don’t want to be here at all, and if I had a choice in the matter, I surely wouldn’t be his sister-in-law.

“This is all a sham. You do know that, right?” I finish off my champagne, feeling disappointed when I see the bottom of the glass.

“I know.” Fede grins. “And I’m glad you know it too.” He leans in close enough that I can smell his breath, making me nauseous. “You’re just the arm candy. The cute little princess that secures his place in your family and looks good while hanging on him. You gonna be able to do that?” His voice is low, and one eyebrow tilts up as he waits for me to answer his question.

“Fuck off,” I spit at him.

Fede leans back, more laughter leaving his lips.

Before I can tell Fede where he can shove his antiquated ideas of what a woman should be, Adrian interrupts us, an older woman sheathed in a pale blue dress on his arm.

“Madi, this is my nonna, Teresa.” He introduces me to his grandmother while giving me a look, one I recognize easily, telling me to watch my words. It doesn’t take me long to realize that the woman doesn’t know about our arrangement, and everything about Adrian’s expression is hopeful I’ll play along. Immediately, I want to tell her this is a fraudulent wedding and that her grandson all but dragged me down the aisle.

“Nice to meet you, Teresa.” I try my best to smile like I’m not miserable.

“Call me Nonna.” Teresa ignores the hand I extend to her, instead pulling me into a hug, her arms wrapping around me while she squeezes. In any other situation, I would push someone away for touching me, but with Adrian’s grandmother, I find myself leaning into her hug, finding a sense of comfort in her grasp.

I can’t help but smile at the warmth that radiates from her. She reminds me of my grandmother, the thought simultaneously making me smile while sadness fills my gut.

“I’m sorry my grandson had no sense to bring you over for dinner before marrying you.” She smiles warmly at me while shaking her head at Adrian. “I raised him better than that, but seeing how beautiful you are, I think I understand the rush.” As if she figured out a secret, she winks at me. I could never be the one to tell her this isn’t love, even if the idea of crushing Adrian entices me.

Adrian groans at her words. “I wasn’t hiding her, Nonna.”

“Mmhmm.” Her eyes are still on me, sharing a look that says sure he wasn’t. I’m surprised when a laugh bubbles out of me. I can’t remember the last time I did that. She squeezes my arm in a long touch. “You and I will have to get together, yes? You’ll have to tell me what you like to do. I mostly cook, but I’m not going to be the old lady who forces her grandson’s favorite recipes on his new bride.”

“I would love your recipes,” I shock myself by saying. I don’t cook. Not really. “But I’m afraid I’m a terrible cook.”

“Nonsense.” She shakes her head. “I don’t believe that. We’ll have to cook together then, si?”

“Si.” I nod.

“Come on, Nonna.” Adrian tugs her away before we can conspire anymore. “Let’s get you onto the dance floor.”

“It was nice meeting you, Madi.” She smiles, and then she’s off, leaving me surprised that someone so sweet could be related to someone so evil.

“Come to the bathroom with me.”

I’m swishing my champagne around, watching the flecks of edible glitter sparkle in the flute, when Zoe interrupts me. There’s a serious look on her face, and I can see her fingers twitching at her sides. Luckily for her, Adrian is off schmoozing up to someone. He told me the name, but I couldn’t be bothered to retain it.

“Do you need help?” I lift an eyebrow with my question.

While John’s girlfriend might be the perfect match for him, the one thing she isn’t is a good liar. Or maybe I just have a nose for deception.

“Just...” She stumbles over her words. “Come with me,” she urges.

“Fine.” I set the flute of champagne back onto the white-clothed table and follow her.

I can feel eyes burning through my back as Zoe leads me across the venue. Everything is too pretty here, too Pinterest perfect. The venue is half inside, half out, with a stunning courtyard clouded with greenery. The magnificence of everything has a ball of guilt and anger coiling in my stomach. I’m not sure if I’m mad that all these people are taking part in my fraudulent wedding, or if I feel like a fraud for sitting at the front of it all in a white dress.

Zoe swings open the door to the single bathroom, ushering me inside and locking it behind me.

“What is up with you?” The words have barely left my lips when I spot John leaning against the brick wall, his black-cased phone gripped in his fingers. “What the fuck, guys?”

Without a word, John turns the phone around in his hand, showing me the blue-lit screen. Lana’s face lights up when she sees me through the camera, and it takes me a second to realize what’s happening. My cousin slash best friend is staring at me through a cell phone screen, her hazel eyes glowing with excitement as she lets out a screech.

“Madi!” Her voice is the same, and it sends a spark of mixed signals through my body. Happiness and pain swirl together like twisted ice cream. I’m so ecstatic to see her, I want to scream, but at the same time, I feel tears prick at the corners of my eyes.

My fingers reach for the phone, as if holding it might make her closer to me. I wish I could hug her, wish she was tangible in front of me. But I’ll take what I can get.

“Lana.” Saying her name feels different. It’s been pressed to the back of my throat too many times since she ran away, leaving me behind. I was never mad at her, could never be mad at her. Staying in New Orleans just for me would have been stupid. She would have been married off to that prick, and God knows how he would have hurt her, beat her down until there was nothing left. Or worse, pushing her to end it herself.

I want my cousin to be happy and safe more than anything in the world. I just selfishly wish I was happy and safe with her.

“How are you? Are you okay? You look beautiful!” The questions and compliment rattle from her mouth in a flurry of words.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” I say quickly, the lie rolling off my tongue easily.

“You’re not fine,” Lana accuses, tilting her head to the side as she watches me.
“You’re not fine, Mads, and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

My eyes move to John briefly, wondering what he told our cousin. Does she know that I asked for an out and he said no? He’s leaning against the wall, one arm wrapped around Zoe and the other tucked into his pocket. His eyes meet mine for a moment, and he nods at the phone as if he can tell I zoned out whatever other pretty words Lana was saying to me.

She’s trying to make me feel better, but I’m not sure if words alone can do that.

This is all temporary, I remind myself as I blink away the emotion building behind my eyelids and bring my focus back to Lana.

“Honestly, I’m okay, Lana. How are you?” I try to redirect, but her eyes tell me she’s not buying it.

“We’re good.” Her lips tick up into a small smile as she tells me about New York, about Naz, about the happiness they’ve found away from this city.

Something burns in my chest, the fire taking over the organ pumping blood through my body. My emotions are coiled so tightly around my heart, squeezing until I think it might explode.

This is all temporary, I repeat the mantra to myself.

But it’s still real right now.

And even temporary grief feels world-ending.

“We’re running out of time,” John interrupts the conversation. “Someone will notice you’re missing soon,” he adds, his eyes glued on me.

Lana’s face twists into a frown on the phone. “One more minute?” she asks, her voice raising an octave as she whines.

“Sorry, Lan, but no.”

“It’s okay.” I try to slip my mask back on, put on a reassuring smile for my cousin. “I’m glad I got to see you.”

“Me too. We’ll see each other soon. I promise.”

I don’t know if she can keep that promise. The future seems bleak, and even though I want to be on her side, my marriage ties me to the enemy.

“Soon,” I assure her anyway, trying to take comfort in the idea, at least.

But something tells me this isn’t going to end the way I want it to.

TWELVE

Adrian

Everything with my new bride is a game.

Two steps forward and one step back.

A kind of twisted tango with two leads fighting for control.

The heels of her shoes click against the refinished hardwoods as she enters my home. For some reason, I feel judged under the scrutiny of her brown eyes. She assesses the living room from my entryway—velvet couch, walls lined with bookcases on one side and windows looking out to Royal Street on the other. One of her dainty fingers swipes across the bookshelf and she examines it for dust like this is all one big test.

Madi might yield to me out in public, when the eyes of others are glued to her. But between these walls, I have a feeling she's going to make me fight for her compliance. Or regret marrying her.

Is it wrong that a bolt of excitement rushes through me at the thought? This game of ours does something to me, like an electric wire has been corded through my veins, a spark keeping me alive.

“Home sweet home,” I say, shutting the door behind us. Her dark eyes land on me as I lock us in, and when I turn around, she's still watching me. She looks stunning in the creamy white dress, the silky material clinging to her skin. And while I miss the

blue hair, I can't deny how elegant she looks with the dark locks twisted at the back of her neck.

"So what now?" she asks, pivoting so she's facing me from across the room.

"Now we live happily ever after."

A burst of laughter explodes from Madi's pink lips, and her hand flies up to cover her mouth. It continues for a long moment before she looks at me again. "Oh, you're serious?" She calms her laughter long enough to ask, "Do you really believe that, Adrian? You think people like us could actually have a happy marriage."

I let my feet lead me to her, three long steps until I'm standing close enough to touch her, but I keep my hands to myself. "And why can't we?" I ask.

With her heels on, she's tall enough that the top of her head hits the middle of mine. Without them, I know it reaches my chin, like she's made to fit perfectly against me.

She narrows her eyes, bringing her bare arms up so they cross over her chest. "This marriage was cursed the second I said no, but you made me walk down the aisle anyway."

I bring my finger to my chin like I'm mulling that over. "I think you need a new line, princess. You've used that one already."

Immediately, her eyebrows pinch and frown forms on those perfect lips. "Doesn't make it any less true."

"Maybe not." I shrug. "But it also doesn't make this marriage any less real."

"So what is your plan, then, huh?" There's strength in her tone; she's always stronger

when it's just the two of us. "Set the rules, Adrian." Her arms uncross, flinging open as she gestures around the room. "Show me around my new cage."

"Well, if it's a prison, you have to at least admit it's a nice one."

Her hands clench into fists as she sucks in a breath, her face turning into a scowl.

"This isn't funny," she snaps.

"I'm not laughing, princess." I rub a hand over my jaw, already feeling a thin layer of scruff. "What do you want me to say? Hmm? You want me to lay down the ground rules so you can paint me as your villain? Would you like me to lock you in your bedroom without dinner so you can pretend I'm the bad guy? You want someone to hate, Madi. That's fine. I can be that person for you. But we both know I'm not the one you hate. You're pissed at your brother for selling you off like cattle, I get that. But I'm not the one who gave you away, just the one who kept you from being sold to some gangster in New York who wouldn't tolerate your attitude."

The lines on her face deepen with every word that leaves my lips.

"I'm sorry, do you want me to be thankful you married me? Do you want me to drop down to my knees and praise you? Oh, thank you, Adrian, what would I ever do without you?" she mocks.

"A little gratitude wouldn't hurt," I say, and she audibly scoffs.

Turning so my back is toward her, I shrug off my jacket and throw it over the back of the velvet loveseat. There's a kink in my neck and my hand moves to it, rubbing out the tension.

I'm thinking over my next words, when I feel a hard object slam against the middle

of my spine. “What the fuck?” I growl, spinning on my heel.

Madi stands behind me, one of her nude heels gripped between her fingers, the other on the floor at my feet. I bend down and pick up the dainty shoe. "Did you just throw this at me?" I'm not sure if I want to laugh or scream at her childish antics.

Her pink-painted lips pull into a thin line, and she crosses her arms again, the second high heel still dangling from her fingertips. I'm not sure if she's pretending it wasn't here, but the evidence is clear.

I heave a sigh, stretching my shoulders out before I walk to her again. This time, I don't stop once I'm in her space, I keep going. She moves back as I move forward, and we keep that pace until her back hits the bookshelves. Her arms drop to her sides and the other shoe hits the floor, leaving her hands free to raise up and push against my chest.

I grab both of her wrists in one hand, bringing them up so I can hold them above her head. She sucks in a breath, and I note the way her chest rises with the action, her plush lips parting just the slightest bit.

“Princess,” I say low, leaning in against her ear. “You’re being a bit of a brat. ”

Her exhale flows out in a harsh rush of air. “Bit judgmental coming from the man who has me pinned against the wall.”

“I’m only trying to prevent you from attacking me .”

“It’s self-defense,” she scoffs.

“Oh yeah?” I laugh. “You hit me from behind. I’m pretty sure I could argue against your self-defense claim in court.”

The column of her throat bobs as she swallows, and her eyes slowly rise to meet mine. I like her like this, pressed between the wall and my body, her soft skin so close, her hands grasped between mine.

It takes will power to control my cock.

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t, princess.”

Anger rolls off her in waves, each rise and fall of her chest like a knife is slicing into mine. She’s at a precipice, swaying between standing strong and crumbling in my arms.

There’s a sick part of me that wants to break her, watch her come undone for me and me only. But I don’t want her anger, not really. It’s more than just wanting her compliance. I wasn’t lying when I told Marcus I wasn’t afraid of taming her, that it sounded like a fun challenge.

“Go upstairs,” I tell her. “Take off that dress and wait for me in our bedroom. You earned some punishments today.”

Madi rolls her eyes. “You’re not going to hurt me.”

“Who said I was going to hurt you? I’m going to punish you, princess. You were a bad girl today, and bad girls get punished. Now, be a good girl and go get ready for me, hmm?”

Soft hands push against my chest, and she grumbles something unintelligible under her breath as she stomps away from me and up the stairs.

I lean my head against the bookshelf, fighting the urge to chase her and bend her ass over my knee right here in the living room, spanking it until a cherry color rises on her flesh. She wants me just as pissed as she is, wants me to experience that bitterness she can't escape.

But my little princess is in for a rude awakening if she thinks I won't enjoy punishing that attitude out of her.

THIRTEEN

Madi

It's my wedding night. I'm not an idiot. I know what's expected of me tonight, and the idea of it has my stomach churning. Not to mention, Adrian announcing that he's going to punish me for my antics.

I have myself locked inside the master bathroom after I ran away from my new husband downstairs. I'm avoiding leaving the safety of this room to see what's in store for me in my new bedroom. Bedroom. I groan at the thought. I have to share a bed with him tonight.

Taking my time, I strip out of the silk gown, hanging it on the back of the bathroom door while I change into my pajamas. I picked the least revealing, least sexy set for tonight. I don't want to give him any impression that I'm interested in anything he has to offer. So I chose long black pants and a matching button-down top that I do up to my neck. I waste more time washing my face slowly and thoroughly. Then I slather it with serums and creams until I run out of stuff to do. Finally, sucking in a long breath, I open the bathroom door.

Adrian is waiting for me on the bed, still in his suit sans the jacket and tie. His head pops up when I exit, his eyes roaming over my conservative attire. There's an awkward tension that buzzes through the room as we stare at each other for a long moment.

"Cute," he finally says, the words slicing through that tension like a knife.

“It’s not for you,” I spit out in a rush, which only elicits a laugh from my new husband. Husband , that word makes me cringe.

“Still,” he says, rising from the bed as his fingers reach for the buttons on his shirt. I swallow thickly as he undoes the top one, revealing the beginning of his chest covered in dark hair. “I like it.”

I blink rapidly, turning my head so I’m not looking at him while he continues to undo the buttons one by one. “Well, I’ll keep that in mind and be sure to buy pajamas you don’t like.”

Adrian barks out another laugh. “Feisty,” he says in his deep tenor, then takes another step, this time bringing himself too close to me. I can feel the heat radiating off his body. I take a step away, but my back hits the dresser. “Ya know, I think I like that too.”

The last button comes undone and then he’s sliding the white shirt down his toned arms. Toned arms that I should not be looking at, least of all admiring. Adrian catches my gaze.

“Do you like the view?” he asks with a smirk.

I feel trapped between him and this piece of furniture, watching as he tosses the shirt in a way I should not find sexy. I need to get a grip. “Not even a little bit.”

When he laughs again, this time it’s louder. I’m having the opposite effect than what I planned. I need to abort all plans and just go to bed before he can toy with me anymore. My only problem now is that he’s blocking my path.

“What’s wrong, Madi?” he asks, amusement tinting his words.

“Nothing.” I swallow.

“Nothing?” he mocks. “You seem uncomfortable.”

“I’m not,” I answer too quickly, and his eyebrow ticks up. He moves in closer, his hands hitting the edge of the dresser behind me, caging me in without laying a finger on me. “I don’t bite, princess.”

“I know that,” I huff.

“Then tell me,”—his hot breath skates across my cheek—“what’s wrong? What are you afraid of?”

I don’t like the insinuation that I’m afraid of anything. Even though I’d be lying if I said I’m not afraid, at least a little bit, of what he might do to me tonight. It’s not the pain, per se. I’ve learned how to take that over the years. But mental scars are harder to heal.

“I’m not afraid of anything.”

“Tell me,” he urges again, this time softer. He’s so close, his arms barely grazing my sides.

I need to tell him something so he backs off, and admitting I’m afraid of sleeping with him because I’m a virgin doesn’t feel like the best thing to say. “I didn’t realize we were going to share a bed,” I settle on.

“Well, you are my wife,” he emphasizes the title, “and typically, husbands and wives share a bed.”

“I know, I just...”

“What?” He touches me now, a light brush of his fingers against my arm.

“I’d prefer my own room.”

“Not happening.” His answer is quick, not even a second of thought.

I frown. “You-”

I don’t get a chance to finish my sentence, not as he picks me up and tosses me onto the bed effortlessly. My back lands on the soft mattress and my breath leaves my chest in a swoosh. Adrian crawls onto the bed within the next second, his body hovering above mine.

“I owe you a punishment, because you couldn’t just walk down the aisle like a good princess and repeat your vows nicely.”

I suck in another breath, my senses in overdrive with Adrian above me like this. He smells too damn good, something that drives me crazy, considering we just spent hours at wedding festivities. My makeup was melting off me and I was covered in a sheen of sweat, but Adrian still looks perfect. His minty breath skates over my cheek as he leans in.

“Now, princess, punishments don’t have to hurt.” I don’t know what he means by that, but there’s a glint in his eyes, so I assume he’s about to show me.

Slowly, his fingers trail down my side, goosebumps rising under my pajamas. He reaches the waistband of my pants and begins to tug on the fabric.

“Wait.” I reach for his hands, attempting to stop him, but he slaps mine away.

“Tell me, princess, has anyone actually ever touched you here?” As he asks the

question, his hand moves over the material to cup my sex. I told Rafe Bianchi that I wasn't a virgin—my attempt to keep him from wanting to marry me—which worked, except now, here I am, lying under Adrian while he asks the same question.

The lie sits on my tongue. I want nothing more than to tell him lots of men have touched me there. That I'm so far from being pure, he might as well apply for an annulment and let me go. But I don't. I just chew on my lip while his dark eyes stare me down.

"I don't think anyone has," he muses. "I think that was a lie to keep Rafe Bianchi away from you." He must see the truth flickering in my eyes. "I'm not mad that you lied to him, princess. But don't lie to me. Are you a virgin?"

I swallow thickly, the lie stuck in my throat. "Yes." The admission is so low, so soft, and it brings a grin to Adrian's lips.

"So no one has ever made this sweet pussy come, then?"

I can't even open my mouth to respond. All the oxygen feels like it's been sucked from the room as my heart gallops in anticipation. I shake my head.

"Good girl," Adrian purrs, and then he's tugging on the waistband of my pants, taking them off with my panties in one effective swipe.

Air catches in my lungs as Adrian runs his nose over my exposed pussy, inhaling deeply. Embarrassment floods my cheeks with a shade of red. I've never had anyone that close to my sex before, let alone sniffing me.

"What are you—" My words freeze as his tongue runs along my seam.

"I'm giving you your first orgasm. Based on your antics today, I think you're acting

out because you're not getting enough attention. If you want attention, you can have all of mine. Now, you're going to come until I'm tired, wife. ”

He doesn't waste another minute, bringing his mouth back to my pussy, licking me over and over again. His tongue swirls over my clit, and I melt into the bed, the feeling sending sparks of electricity through my whole body. I'm ashamed that while my new husband, this man I hate, is between my legs, I'm enjoying it more than I could have imagined. He continues at a quickened pace, building me up and up until I can't take any more.

“Adrian-” His name is a plea on my lips, but I'm not sure if I'm begging him to stop or keep going.

Then, I feel his finger enter a place no one has been. Red heat blankets my body when I hear the wet sounds as his finger moves in and out. But the sensation immediately diminishes any shame. When he curls that single digit, hitting a spot I didn't know existed, my world breaks apart.

“Adrian!” Involuntarily, his name escapes my lips as I come undone in waves of pleasure. I've never felt anything like that, and it leaves me panting on the bed as Adrian pulls his face away from my pussy with a smile.

“I love hearing my name on your lips, wife. Now, let's do it again.”

“No, I can't!” I try to pull my exhausted body away from him, but Adrian's hands hold me down.

“I said, I was going to make you come until I was tired. I don't care if you can't, wife. Lay down and take what I'm giving you.”

Adrian's mouth moves back to my pussy, finding my clit and sucking on it harshly.

Another finger enters me, the two digits working in and out languidly. He builds me up again, this time with less effort, and when I fall over the edge, I'm screaming for him.

"I love the sound of your moans, princess. How about another time?"

"Please no," I beg, squirming to get away, but Adrian doesn't let me go. He restarts his performance, working my body like a finely tuned instrument. My resistance is a distant memory as my body completely gives in to the waves of ecstasy. He does it over and over again, until I've come at least five times.

Suddenly, his quip about punishments not hurting makes sense. I'm oversensitive, taking only minutes for him to bring me back to that heightened state. My body is exhausted, and I feel like he can't possibly make me come one more time. And yet he does. He wrings another orgasm from me as tears leak from my eyes. Finally, he looks up from my spent pussy, a grin etched across his lips, coated in my arousal.

"Good job, princess. I think you've had enough for tonight."

There's not a thought that comes to my brain to respond to him. I'm too exhausted, my pussy satisfied and worn out.

Adrian goes to the bathroom and comes back with a warm washcloth that he cleans me up with. I don't even move as he works, and when he crawls into bed and curls my body against his, I let him.

"You did such a good job, princess. Rest now."

When I close my eyes, I drift off to a peaceful sleep.

FOURTEEN

Madi

When I wake up, I'm alone in the king-sized bed. Something I feel grateful for as the onslaught of memories from last night crashes over me.

My husband made me come repeatedly in this very bed.

Shame clings to my skin, making me feel itchy. I wanted to make him miserable, not let him eat me out until I cried his name.

I go to the shower in the master bath first, hoping to wash the remnants of his touch from my body. Then I take my time getting ready, slathering my face with moisturizer and throwing on shorts and a loose t-shirt. I'm hoping I've wasted enough time that my husband will be long gone when I go downstairs in search of coffee.

If he is gone, I'll use the opportunity to walk the couple of blocks down to my studio and let out some of my aggression on the pottery wheel.

"Good morning, Mrs. Russo." The warm and gentle voice greeting me belongs to an older woman with graying hair standing in the middle of Adrian's kitchen. I jolt to a stop when I see her. "I'm Beverly Sinclair, the house manager for Mr. Russo's estate. Lovely to meet you."

Somehow, I manage to nod. "Nice to meet you, too," I say tentatively. I don't know why I'm shocked to see staff in Adrian's house, considering my own home had a

slew of people working there.

“This is Bea.” Ms. Sinclair gestures to a smaller, slight woman with blonde hair dressed in black slacks and a tucked-in white shirt. “She’s the housekeeper. If you need anything, you let one of us know, yes?”

“Sure.” I manage another nod.

“Mr. Russo is in the dining room having breakfast. I’ll bring you out a plate.”

I’m in a daze as I move into the dining room. Adrian’s sitting at the head of the table, fully dressed in another one of his suits with a newspaper open.

“I didn’t realize people even read those anymore,” I say, watching as the newspaper is lowered and Adrian looks at me. His eyes rake over my body, taking in the plain, comfy outfit. I feel hot under his gaze, waiting for him to scold my appearance. My mother would be disgusted to see me in something so simple, expecting me instead to be dressed to the nines every day. But Adrian doesn’t say a word about it.

“You don’t read the news?” One eyebrow quirks with the question.

“Not with that.” I gesture to the paper as I wiggle my phone. “Everything’s online.”

Adrian sighs, as if that’s the most uncultured thing I could have said.

“Are you fifty?” I ask as I slip into the seat across from him. “Only old people read the paper these days.”

“Are you done insulting me, or do you want to go a few more rounds?”

“Hmm...I think I could go a few more rounds, old man.”

He folds the paper in front of him, setting it down on the table slowly. “You should know then that every insult earns you a punishment, and I won’t be as gentle as I was last night. I’d tread carefully if I were you.”

There’s a glint in his dark eyes, something devilish and promising. His words should turn me off, send me running, or at least make me shut my goddamn mouth. But they do the opposite, instead bolstering me to be worse, more annoying. Test his limits until I can see what he’s made of.

I twist my lips into a wide smile and put on my best demure look. “Sorry, grandpa, I couldn’t hear you over the rustling of all that paper.”

Adrian doesn’t look mad, no, his lips turn upward as he slides his chair back a few inches. I brace for him to come over here, scream in my face or slap me around, but he doesn’t.

“Come.” He says the word calmly as his fingers bend, indicating I should move to him. I stay seated.

“What?”

“Come here, Madi. Now.”

It’s a command spoken with ease, his promise coming true. Slowly, I rise from my seat, heart pounding as I make my way toward my new husband until I stop right in front of him.

“Turn around,” he orders in a deepening tone.

Swallowing hard, I do. I’m facing away from him, unable to see what he’s doing as he moves behind me. But I can feel him. His hands find my hips, and he stands with

his body against my back. His breath skates across my ear and a shiver ripples down my spine.

“You’re a brat, Madi,” he says, so sure and confident. “And if you want to act like a brat, I’ll treat you like a brat. Now bend over.”

I don’t have a chance to process before his hand is on my spine, pushing me down until my upper body is laid out on the dining room table and my ass is out for him. A chill runs over me at the lewd position, but from the soft groan I hear, Adrian must like what he sees.

“Now, we’re going to start slow, but know that if you continue to be a little brat, I’ll take that as an invitation to go harder next time. Understood?”

The question hangs between us. No, I don’t understand. “What are you going to do to me?” I ask, breathier than I intend them to be.

“I’m going to punish you, princess. And you’re going to do your best to be a good girl and take it for me, yes?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him to fuck off when his hands reach for the band of my pants, pulling the shorts and underwear down at the same time. My ass hangs off the end of the dining room table, completely exposed to him. On instinct, I go to move, to cover myself, but Adrian’s palm lands on my back, keeping me pinned to the table.

“What the fuck-”

“Shh,” he cuts me off. “None of that.”

Heat flushes my body as his palm caresses my exposed flesh. It shouldn’t feel good,

but it has me relaxing, my muscles unclenching one by one. I should hate this. On some level, I do, I think. But then again, I don't. The memory of what felt like a million orgasms last night hangs in the air, and I know if nothing else, Adrian sure knows how to make me come. The motion feels so good and Adrian's palm on my low back keeps me still. I should be begging him to stop, pleading with him. But I don't.

"Good girl," he whispers while he practically pets me. Those words shouldn't make me feel as good as they do. "Now, I think five spanks should cover your outburst this a.m. Has anyone ever spanked you, Madi?"

When I don't immediately answer, he slaps my ass softly, and I gasp.

"No," I sputter.

"I didn't think so. Why don't we start with five and see how you're doing, hmm?"

I think I must nod, because Adrian doesn't ask again, moving forward with the punishment. I hear rustling as he takes the newspaper from the table, but it's not clear to me what he's doing.

"You'll count after each one," he tells me, and then quickly lands the first blow. He must have rolled up the newspaper because I hear the swish of it before it hits my bottom with a loud smack. It's not anything like the little slap he gave me when I didn't answer. This one stings my right cheek. I yelp and instinctively try to pull my body away from him, but that hand on my back keeps me in place.

"Say one," Adrian orders.

"One," I squeak.

Adrian hits my other cheek with the paper next, restarting the process where I yelp and squirm and he has to remind me to count again.

“Two.” Another squeak from my lips.

We continue through three and four, and finally, when he lands the fifth blow, I yell, “five” while panting.

“Good job.” The softened praise, a contrast from the man who was just spanking me. He rubs his hand over the reddened flesh softly. “How do you feel, princess?”

“I-I don’t know.” My head is hazy and my ass hurts, but my core throbs in a way I’ve never felt before. Mortification strikes me as I want nothing more than for Adrian to move those fingers lower and lower until he reaches the part of me that is aching.

I hear the paper again, and then I feel something against my sex. Shame coats me in red as I realize what he’s doing, running the newspaper along my pussy. My wet pussy. Did I really get turned on by his spanking? And is the evidence of my arousal about to be all over the paper I just made fun of him for?

Adrian chuckles his amusement as he pulls the paper from between my legs.

“I’d say you liked that.”

“No-”

“It’s okay, princess. You don’t have to lie to me, not when your body speaks the truth.”

I whimper my response. I’m not sure what I want right now.

He doesn't wait for me to respond, just drags my panties and pants back up my legs and pats my ass. It takes me a moment to right myself, even with Adrian helping me to do so.

"Sit down," he orders. "I'll have Ms. Sinclair bring out your breakfast now." And then he's off into the kitchen like he didn't just spank me and leave me wet and wanting.

I feel like a fool sitting, waiting for breakfast.

Even worse, when he returns and opens up the paper to continue his reading, a large wet spot glares at me from across the table.

FIFTEEN

Adrian

S aints and Sinners has a neon sign in the entrance boasting Sinners Welcome. I've always thought myself a good man. One who toyed with the edges of the law, with right and wrong, but always in the name of justice.

Now I'm not so sure.

Because feeling Madi's slick pussy after I spanked her has me wanting to peel back all her clothes and fuck her silly, until she's screaming my name and begging me to stop, or for more. Until neither one of us can tell. But I don't plan on fucking my smart-ass little wife until she begs for it. I already forced her down the aisle; I can't add forcing myself inside her to that list.

Not if I want to pretend I'm not the worst type of man.

Like the ones of her family.

Speaking of Costello men, her uncle Damien greets me with a clap on the back.

"Ever been here before?" he asks with a sly grin.

To a strip club owned by his nephew that I frequently did business with? "Yes." Not that I've ever enjoyed it, though. No, the women working here either look high as a kite or afraid as a mouse. No in-between. Except for the one John claimed as his own.

Not that she works here anymore, now that she's dating him. My understanding is she was only working here to find her friend who went missing, and after Marcus "disappeared," she quit the club and has been with John ever since.

"It's a good club," Damien says. His arm wraps around my shoulder as he leads me through the space, past the stages of girls dancing with men leering at them, reaching forward to stick dirty dollar bills between the strings of their panties. "Good-looking girls."

For a moment, I imagine Madi up on that stage. What would her body look like swaying in nothing but lingerie? The thought only lasts a second before I imagine someone's grubby hands on her and anger fills the place of lust. I'd never let anyone touch Madi. No wonder John doesn't let Zoe dance here anymore.

Damien leads me to a back room, where a few men are sitting, all ones I recognize as associates of Marcus and the family. There's one girl in the center dancing as the men watch her body move.

"Out." Damien snaps his fingers, and the girl stops her movements, shuffling away on her high heels as quick as she can. The men are slower to get up, but they all follow Damien's order.

Once the room is clear, he gestures for me to sit across from him. I've been in this room before, as it's where Marcus would hold all his parties, do business when he needed. He also had an office in the club, but he preferred to be here, watching a girl dance while he did his work.

"Cigar?" Damien offers me a box of Cubans. He takes one for himself and lights it up. I hate smoking; the smell of it makes me sick to my stomach, but I take one anyway, lighting it up and puffing. It's in bad taste to decline an offer, especially when this man thinks he's now the head of the Costello crime family. Which, I guess

with Junior dead, Sam in prison, and Marcus missing — he's the highest-ranking member left. Other than John, who actually has his grandfather's blood running through his body, unlike Damien, who just married into the family. Not that I think he wants to hear my take on the technicalities of his reign.

"So..." He leans back on the leather booth. "Welcome to the family." His grin is wide, showing off his yellow teeth, stained from years of bad vices. "How's the new ball and chain treating you?"

I don't like the way he talks about Madi, but I don't let it show. Instead, I shrug my shoulders and look disinterested, not wanting him to know how damn interested I am in his niece. That she fills my brain every given second. That the scent of her sweet pussy lingers in my nose. That I had to jerk myself off in my office just to try to get relief from the thoughts of her. Not that it worked.

"Fine," I answer.

He must not care about the answer because he moves on quickly.

"You're part of the family now, boy." The way he says the words is both sinister and belittling. In his mind, being a part of the family is an honor. It's not, really. The Costello family is filthy. Built on piles of dirty money. And they'll throw anyone to the wolves to protect themselves. Just like they did my father.

I push all of that down, though, as I nod and pretend that I'm happy to be here, to be a part of the family.

"An honor," I say, puffing the disgusting cigar.

"Now that you're one of us, there are a few things that need to be taken care of, and I think you're the man to do it."

I nod once more and lean forward in my seat like I'm hanging on to every word.
“And that is?”

“Sam. My nephew.” Damien says the word nephew with clear resentment. “He’s causing problems.”

“Isn’t he in jail?” I ask, even though I know the answer. Sam Costello was arrested for murdering his father, a bold lie that most can see for what it is. A setup to get both Junior and Sam out of the game. With Junior alive, Damien would never be allowed to run this family, and with Junior dead, Sam is the rightful heir. So he took them out in one fell swoop. His original plan was to let Marcus run the family, and he’d stand by as a trusted advisor, one who pulled all the strings. But now, with Marcus gone, everything falls to Damien.

It’s a modern-day, mafia-themed Game of Thrones .

“Yeah, they’re holding him in Orleans Parish Prison until his court date.”

“And the evidence? Is it enough to convict?”

“It is.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“My other nephew, John, has always been loyal to Sam. They grew up together.” I know from Marcus that Sam and John are also the reason Damien’s daughter Lana is in New York City instead of married to a congressman that Damien had arranged.
“We had a detective on the inside that was helping. He’s not useful now.”

“You think-”

“I know,” Damien sighs. “John turned him, so I had to take care of him.”

Take care of him is a fancy way of saying the guy is dead now. I sigh. I don’t love hearing about how my new family murders cops on a whim.

“And you don’t have another man on the inside?”

“No.”

“So, what do you want me to do?”

Damien takes a long drag of his cigar. “I want you to make sure my nephew never gets out of prison.”

“And how should I do that?”

“By whatever means necessary.”

SIXTEEN

Madi

I've been ignoring Adrian.

It's for the best. At least, that's what I tell myself as I pretend to be asleep during his morning routine. Over our first week of marriage, I learned he's an early riser. 6:00 a.m. every day, the alarm rings, and he rolls from the bed and puts on his workout clothes. He spends sixty minutes downstairs, doing jumping jacks and squats and God knows what else before he comes back up with sweat dripping from his body. He takes a shower, puts on a fresh suit, and he's out the door by 7:30. And every morning, I'm amazed by the structure of his routine.

I'm still faking sleep when I sense him move to my side of the bed. I can feel his energy as he hovers over me, and I wonder if he's going to kiss me, do something sweet before he leaves — isn't that what normal couples do? He lingers for a long moment before he finally pulls back, and I hear his shoes tap against the hardwoods as he leaves.

Once the door shuts, I open my eyes, sucking in a long breath. I'm not afraid of my new husband; I just don't want to talk to him. Talking to Adrian always ends up with his body too close to mine, his scent invading my senses, his touch bringing goosebumps to my skin.

It's confusing. Annoying. Frustrating .

The more space there is between us, the easier it is for me to keep my thoughts straight.

I hate him. Something I know with every fiber of my being. But when he's near me...I'm left in a whirlwind of confusion. He's an asshole, that much is obvious. But ever since he made me come and spanked me with the newspaper, something has shifted. Something I don't want to think about.

Once he's gone, I pull myself from the oversized bed and trudge downstairs for coffee. I can't deny how nice Adrian's home is. While I know there's no way he decorated it himself, it still seems to have a touch of masculinity that matches his energy, paired with the traditional style that goes with the French architecture.

"Good morning, Mrs. Russo."

"Please stop calling me that," I tell Bea, Adrian's housekeeper.

Bea blushes. "I'm sorry, Mrs.- I mean Madi."

I try to give her my warmest, pre-coffee smile. "It's fine, Bea."

She nods and scurries away like I might bite or yell at her. On day one, I pledged not to get to know anyone who works for my husband, to detach myself from his life as much as possible. But something about Bea makes me want to wrap her in a blanket and tell her everything's going to be okay.

Bea's not the only one of my husband's employees who invade this space during the day. There's Ms. Sinclair, then a personal chef who comes every Monday and prepares meals for the week, something I'm thankful for since I have no desire to cook for Adrian. There're a few others, his personal assistant, a snippy redhead who's been here a few times, but only when Adrian is also here. A tech guy I've seen

working on his computer and installing new cameras around the outside of the house. And security. That one's not unusual to me, given my family's line of work, but still, I find it unnerving every time I see a man in a black suit at the entrance. Even worse, when they follow me silently to my studio. Adrian wouldn't even humor the conversation when I brought up not needing them.

I pull a small travel mug from the cabinet and fill it with coffee before slipping on my shoes and heading for the door. I like to go to my studio before the caffeine kicks in, embrace the morning in my pajamas while I sip coffee and throw some clay on my wheel.

Unfortunately, it means walking down two blocks in my sweatpants with my face unwashed and my hair in a messy bun. My mother would faint if she saw me. Her need to keep up appearances was worth far more than her desire to be comfortable.

I like to let my creativity flow before I do anything else in the morning. There's something cathartic about it, and when my fingers finally mold around a slab of clay, the silky-smooth texture coating my hands and running over my palms, I feel at home.

All the emotions building up inside of me seep out through my hands. As I shape the piece, they slip from my fingertips and drop away with the mud. And when my foot lifts from the peddle and my hands have finished the piece, I've turned my pain into something tangible.

My family would laugh if I told them how art really made me feel. The only way they knew to release emotions was through more pain — emotional, physical, whatever got the job done.

Marcus would hit, kick, punch. Exerting himself in any way possible to make it known that he was in charge. My mother propped herself up on the heels of her sharp

words. She had a way of slicing you open with perfect grammar and eloquent prose. Even worse, when she'd say nothing at all, throwing you into the pits of freezing cold isolation.

But my father? His specialty had a bit more... bang. He was known around New Orleans as Crazy Al . Crazy because it didn't take much to send him off the rails. The edges of his personality were so thin, one moment he'd be sweet as punch, and the next you were the punching bag. Literally.

More than physical violence, he loved a good bomb. Something la famiglia became known for during his peak. The first time I read about the stories, he was already dead, had been for five years. The search results told me he had placed dozens of car bombs in the city, using it as an effective way to kill off anyone who spoke against him.

There wasn't enough information to tell me if my nonno was okay with all the deaths he caused. But the fact that all the bombs stopped after my father was gone told me they died with him. Google told me my father was killed while placing one of his bombs. The news speculated it went off accidentally, which matched the story I heard from my mother.

But I knew the truth. My grandfather and uncle had him killed.

I wasn't sad, though.

In some ways, I was relieved. Being around him brought up walls in my heart. Shame hung heavy around me. I felt like I was walking on eggshells, trying to be the perfect version of myself, anything he needed to prevent the screaming.

When the anger took hold of him, his fists came out in droves. But if I could just keep it at bay, create the perfect environment so he wouldn't be mad, everything would be

okay.

But when he was gone? The bars retracted and the clouds of shame drifted away. I could breathe in that freedom, pause long enough to suck in air and let it loose. It was more comfortable to be in my home when my father was gone. And the idea of being in that comfort indefinitely? That seemed nice.

I didn't cry for my father, not even when we pushed his glossy black coffin into his tomb in Lafayette Cemetery. I was relieved.

You can't see all that through the dried and painted clay I sell to the local shops. But underneath the glazed exterior are ridges and lines, formed by my hands as I healed from the memories. There was something soothing about that.

After I make the new pieces, I set them on the rack to dry before locking up the studio and heading back to Adrian's house to shower, my shadow in tow. I spend my afternoon dropping off finished pieces to clients. Working in batches has created a comfortable routine for me that's consistent yet not the same every day. I alternate between spending the morning throwing pottery on the wheel or painting the pieces that have already dried. And in the afternoons, I deliver the finished pieces or film content for my social media.

My sales don't really matter; I don't need the money. Everything I have is bought and paid for by my family, and probably now Adrian.

I just wanted to prove I could do something. That people would buy my art, that it wasn't meaningless. Even if I was the only one who cared.

"Ah, Miss Madi," my favorite client greets me as I push through her door, holding a box of new pieces. "My favorite local artist." She grins as she holds out her arms for me.

“Hold on,” I laugh, setting the box on her counter and walking into her embrace.

Jada’s shop has a good vibe and the woman herself might be the sweetest I know. She’s always welcoming me into her arms and looking at me like she can see through the walls I’ve built to protect myself.

She pulls back from the hug, and I slip away before she has a chance to give me the motherly once-over. “What’s different?” Jada asks, her hands pressing onto her hips as she purses her lips, her signature pose telling me she knows something’s up.

Might as well say it. “I got married.” I shrug.

“Mmhmm, I was wondering if you were going to tell me.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “I had to read about in the paper as if you don’t come into this store every week. I thought we were friends, Madi?” Her eyebrows lift, and while I know she’s just giving me a hard time for withholding the information, I can’t help but feel a bit of guilt coiling in my stomach.

Jada’s been better to me than most. She’s carried my pottery in her store for a year now, and in that time, she’s become a good friend. The type of friend who should have gotten an invite to my wedding. Even if I thought my mother would have invited her, though, I wouldn’t want to put Jada or anyone in a room with my family.

Making connections with the Costellos doesn’t work out for everyone, and if they know you have something to offer, they’ll milk you dry. It’s better that she stays far away from them.

Pulling open the box, I remove the first piece, slowly unwinding it from the brown paper it’s packed in. “It wasn’t a big deal,” I tell her, avoiding eye contact. Jada’s much more in tune with my feelings than anyone else. With my family, you’d think I’m a locked box, but to Jada, I’m an open book. I know if she gets a chance to really

look at me, she'll see all the thoughts spiraling through my mind.

"Not a big deal?" she scoffs. "You got married. That's a pretty big deal." Flipping her braids over her shoulder, she rounds the counter, meeting me on the other side to help unpack.

"It's not..." I don't even know what to tell her. It's not real? I have a feeling Adrian would be pissed if he found me telling the city that my marriage to him was nothing but a hoax. A fraudulent agreement to get him into my family.

"What is it?" Jada's voice softens, and her green eyes assess me.

"It's just a thing." I try to shrug my shoulders, act nonchalantly, as if this is a common occurrence.

"I'm going to need you to use more words here, Madi. What do you mean, it's just a thing?" Jada sets down the piece of pottery she was unwrapping, instead pressing her palms onto the countertop and focusing her full attention on me.

"It's fake," I finally tell her. My hands fling up and back down dramatically.

"You're not married?"

"No, I'm married."

"That doesn't sound very fake, then." Jada purses her lips.

"I don't love him." It feels like a dam of water breaks as the words leave my lips. I didn't realize how much pain I was holding in by not admitting the truth.

"Ahh," Jada coos, her eyes softening as she extends her hands over the counter,

gesturing for me to put my palms in hers. “Your family, I assume?”

“Yeah.” I let her squeeze my hands and the simple gesture has tears brimming in my eyes. It’s not as if I’ve been starved of physical touch, but something about the gentle motion lets the floodgates loose. I feel seen for the first time in weeks. Months, maybe.

Before Lily died, Lana had been my go-to person. But after her sister committed suicide, it was too hard for her to get out of bed, let alone listen to my problems. And then she was gone, out of her arranged marriage and in New York with Naz.

And I was alone.

The tears fall, streaming down my cheeks one by one.

“Let it go,” Jada tells me. “I can’t tell you it’s going to be okay, or even encourage you to go against your family’s wishes, because we both know they own this city. But you’re strong, Madi. I’ve known that since the minute I met you. I don’t know this Russo guy, but I know you. You’ll get through this.”

“How?” I mutter.

“With your strength,” Jada states, as if it was never even a question. “You have it inside you, even if you don’t feel it right now. I promise you, it’s there. And it will guide you through this.”

“What if I can’t?”

“You can,” she reassures me. “Everything is temporary, Madi. The good, the beautiful. And most of all, the bad. Painful things always come to an end, and this will too.”

SEVENTEEN

Adrian

There's an ache in my head as I enter my home, probably from the hour I spent staring at a blank legal pad, trying to come up with ideas on how to get Sam Costello out of the picture without dirtying my hands.

"Evening, boss." David, the head of my security team, nods at me.

I scrub a hand over my head. I'm exhausted, and the idea of needing to handle Sam Costello, whatever that means, is weighing on me. I didn't get into this family so I could murder, I came here for revenge. I feel like I'm losing the target.

On cue, my phone buzzes with a phone call from my brother, probably wanting to know where I'm at with coming up with a plan. I silence it, not wanting to explain how I'm getting more wrapped up in the Costello family. More wrapped up in my wife.

"Where is she?" I ask David.

"Kitchen. And one thing." He stops me before I can stomp off to the kitchen to see my bride. "Your grandmother is here."

That pauses me. "Why? Did you tell her I was out?"

David shakes his head. "She came for the girl."

Interesting. Nervousness racks my body. Nonna isn't in on my plans. I can only imagine the displeased look on her face when she learns the truth. And Madi has no reason not to tell her that I forced her into this charade. In her mind, I'm the monster of this story.

Dropping my briefcase by the door, I head for the kitchen. I can feel the sweat dripping down my neck as I loosen my tie. As soon as I swing open the door, I'm hit with the smell of home. Madi's smiling as she stirs a pot of sauce, and from the smell alone, I already know it's my nonna's Bolognese recipe. My mouth waters, and no words come out as I take in the sight of her wearing an apron and cooking in my kitchen. I could get used to this.

"Il mio ragazzo!" Nonna smiles when she sees me, dusting off her flour-covered hands and giving me a tight embrace. She pulls back and looks me over like she always does, as if she's assessing for some kind of damage that might have happened since the last time she saw me. Sometimes I swear she can see past my outer appearance, straight into my soul.

"Nonna." I kiss her cheek. "What are you making? It smells fantastic."

"I'm teaching Madi all your favorites." Her smile is warm and bright as she gestures to the counter. "Ragu alla Bolognese tonight. Madi made the noodles."

I can tell by the excess flour on the counter. Nonna makes her way back to the stove right as a timer dings, signaling her to drain the fresh pasta. When I look back to Madi, she's watching me, spoon stalled in the red sauce.

"Now, I think I should leave you two lovebirds alone for dinner, si? Pasta's done, sauce is done. Can you plate everything, Madi?"

She snaps out of her stare and looks back to my nonna with a smile. "Of course.

Thank you so much for teaching me.” Something warms my heart as she hugs my nonna and they share their goodbyes.

“So,” I start once my grandmother has left the kitchen. “You made me dinner?” I like seeing her like this — in an apron, looking domesticated.

Madi’s smile drops from her face, and once again, she looks at me with disdain. “No,” she says curtly, then walks over to the trash can, taking her time as she drags it across the floor to the stove. First, she takes the pot of boiled pasta, tilting and dumping the entire thing into the trash. Next, she takes the large stock pot of sauce and does the same, dumping the contents, splashes of red sauce flinging from the container and staining the cabinets as she goes.

“What are you doing?” The question comes out harshly as I watch my nonna’s cooking go to waste. It doesn’t help that my stomach was growling as soon as I smelt the sauce.

When Madi’s done, she drops the pot back onto the stove and wipes her hands on a dish towel. “Let’s be clear, you may have forced me to marry you, but I will never be your wife. And cooking for you, that’s a very wifely thing to do. Don’t you think?” She tosses the towel onto the counter like she’s dropping the mic and moves to make her way past me.

Animal instinct takes over, or maybe it’s pure anger that she wasted all that food, but I grab her before she can pass. All my restraint must have been tossed away with the food, because my grip is tight as I slam her against the wall. Her pretty pink lips part, the air rushing from her lungs.

“What did we establish happens to little brats in this house, hmm?”

A devilish spark lights up her eyes. Fuck me. I think she likes this. I bet if I unzipped

her shorts and stuck my hand into her panties, I'd find her wet again.

"What are you going to do, spank me?" she asks with a tilt of her head.

"Oh, princess, I can do much more than spank you."

Her tongue darts out, wetting those tempting lips in a way that makes my cock ache.

"Do your worst," she says defiantly.

In one motion, I swoop her up and over my shoulder. She yelps as I do so, her fists pounding against my back.

"Let me down, asshole!" she shouts, but it doesn't stop me.

She wants to act like a brat? Then I'll punish her like a brat.

I deposit my new wife on the bed, watching as she scurries backwards to get away from me. There's no fear in her eyes, though; she's not scared of me. She still looks angry, but now it's mixed with something else. Excitement? Lust?

I can tell by the devilish glow in her brown eyes that she's provoking me just to get a reaction.

"Here we are again. Bratting off just to get punished. I think you like being spanked, princess. Is that right?"

"Not at all." She shakes her head, but I can tell from the breathiness of her words that I'm right.

I chuckle, the sound reverberating through the room. "Get undressed," I order.

“Fuck you,” she spits back hastily.

Inhaling deeply, I slowly shrug off my suit jacket, folding it neatly over the chair.

“Madi, get undressed or I’ll undress you myself.”

Tugging her bottom lip between her teeth, she chews on it, watching me intently.

“Madi,” I coo in a low voice. “You have five seconds.”

Those dark eyes only stare at me, testing me to see if I’ll actually deliver on my promise.

“Five.”

She seals her lips together and presses her back against the headboard as if that would stop me.

“Four.”

“You’re not actually-”

“Three.”

“Adrian-” I like the sound of my name on her lips with that slight bit of fear in her voice.

“Two.”

A touch of anticipation has her swallowing audibly.

“One.” I don’t wait before I’m on the bed, dragging her body so it lies flat beneath

me. “Such a little brat,” I murmur.

Madi gasps. She didn’t think I’d do it. That was a mistake on her part. “Adrian! Wait-”

“Uh uh, princess.” I tsk. “I offered you a chance to do this yourself, and you declined. Now it’s my turn.”

I tug at the strings on her apron, pulling them loose so I can rip the material from her body. Underneath, she’s wearing an oversized t-shirt and a tight-fitting pair of black shorts. I move to the t-shirt, not bothering to pull the material over her head. Instead, I grip it in my fingers and pull, relishing the sound of the cotton tearing.

Those pretty pink lips form the perfect O shape. “Adrian!” She presses her palms against my forearms, trying to push me away.

“You could have taken it off yourself, but you chose not to.”

When the t-shirt is completely torn, I pull the fabric from beneath her and toss it to the side. Next are the shorts, which I’m about to make the same mess of, but Madi’s hands reach to her waistband, frantically tugging the material down her legs. I can’t help but grin at her finally following my orders, even if it’s a bit late. Not that it matters. I’m still going to punish her ass until it’s a bright shade of red for her antics in the kitchen.

“There you go,” I praise her, taking the black scrap of fabric from her and tossing it with the rest of her clothes. “Look how pretty you are, princess.” Seeing her sprawled out naked in front of me has my dick hardening in my pants. She’s stunning, especially like this. With her pert pink nipples on display and the way she’s squeezing her thighs together, as if that would ever be enough to keep me out of the heaven resting between her legs.

I dip my head down, flicking my tongue over one of the tight buds while using my fingers to pinch the other. She squeals, her back arching, thrusting her tits into my mouth. I run circles over her nipple before moving to the other, reveling in the way her body reacts to me, as if it was perfectly made for my touch.

A soft moan leaves her lips, and she writhes beneath me. “Oh, sweet girl...” I lift myself so I’m kneeling on the bed with her body still trapped beneath my thighs. “This isn’t a reward. This punishment is meant to hurt.”

Madi’s eyes are glassy already. I can see the haze of lust drifting over her. She licks her lips. “What are you going to do?”

Reaching for the nightstand, I grab a length of silk cord from the drawer. I’ve been waiting for this moment, dreaming about the next time she acts like a little brat.

Without saying a word, I take one of her hands, using the cord to secure it to the headboard before moving to the other one.

“Wait-” She tries to pull her hand away from me. “Are you tying-”

“Yes, princess,” I say, holding her tightly as I secure her second hand.

When I’m done, she yanks on her limbs, finding no give, no room to escape the bindings. I see the concern rise on her face. “No! Undo these!”

I press a kiss ever-so softly to her forehead. “Not until you’ve learned your lesson.”

Now that she’s secure, I stand from the bed, making a show of pulling my belt from my pants. Once free, I fold the leather in half, snapping it loudly and enjoying the way Madi jumps at the sound.

“Have you ever been belted before, princess?”

Lips sealed shut, she shakes her head.

“Use your words.”

“No,” she answers, her voice barely above a whisper.

I lean in closer, ghosting my lips over hers. “Be a good girl and I’ll take it easy on you.” Her throat bobs as she swallows. I can see the tip of a retort on her tongue, but she presses her mouth closed, not saying a word.

Pulling back, I step off the bed and grab her ankles to flip her over so her ass is on display.

“Are you comfortable, princess?”

“No!” she hisses.

“Good. We’ll go to five, remember to count.” Without warning, I deliver the first strike. Madi’s entire body shakes from the contact, and I hear her hiss out a breath before she says, “one.”

I’ve never thought myself to be a sadist, but I love how Madi’s ass turns a shade of pink from my punishment and the way she whimpers through each strike. I deliver three more, enjoying each one more than the last.

“Four,” my sweet girl whines, her body tense and her legs shaking.

“Last one, princess,” I tell her before pulling my arm back to strike her bottom with the belt one last time. I want to keep going, but her ass is bright red, and this is only

her second spanking. I don't want to be too hard on her.

"Five!" she shouts, and I can hear the tears in her voice.

"Shh," I tell her, crawling my way onto the bed. I use the palm of my hand to soothe the flush while my other hand brushes the hair from her face. She turns her head to the side, and I can see the wetness that trails down her cheeks. "You did so good, princess." I lean in, clearing her tears with a swipe of my tongue.

Slowly, I let my hand drift lower to cup her pussy.

"Wait-" Madi doesn't get the word out before I slip my finger through her folds, finding her pussy wet for me.

A grin widens on my face. "Oh, princess. You liked that, didn't you?"

"No. No, I didn't."

"Don't lie to me, Madi." She wiggles beneath me, trying to escape, but it's futile with her wrists still tied to the bed. "This is the second time I've found you wet after a punishment. You say you hate me, princess, but your pussy tells me otherwise."

"Fuck you."

I chuckle deeply. "Not yet, princess. But if you ask nicely, I can make that ache between your legs go away." I emphasize my words by running my finger over her clit in quick circles. I can hear her wetness with the motion, and Madi inhales a sharp breath.

"Say it, baby," I urge her. "Say, please husband, make me come like a good little slut."

“Absolutely not.” Her voice is a whiny breath. She doesn’t want to beg me, but she still wants to come, that much is obvious. I pull my hand from between her legs and use it to spank her sore ass instead.

“Fuck,” she hisses.

“Oh, baby, I can make this so good for you.” I drag my hand back between her legs, finding her clit again to continue my ministrations. “All you have to do is ask.”

Madi keeps her mouth closed, but I can feel the change in her body as she relaxes into the pleasure I’m giving her. I flip her over, wanting to see her pretty face when she finally relents and asks me to make her come.

She gasps from the motion, and my free hand finds her neck while I bring one of my fingers to her virgin hole and push inside of her, my thumb running over her clit in slow circles.

“Mm, baby, I told you I could make this good for you.”

That pretty mouth opens, but nothing comes out before she snaps it shut again. I know she’s so close, to both coming and asking me to make her come.

“Say what I want, baby, and I’ll let you come.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I’m not asking you that.”

“Then I guess I should just stop now.” With one more flick to her clit, I withdraw my hand. Bringing it to my lips, I lick her juices from my fingers while she watches with wide eyes.

“Wait,” she hisses, pausing for a moment with a tight expression. “Please, ugh, please

make me come.”

I smile, pleased that she’s giving in. “That’s not what I asked you to say. Please, husband, make me come like a good little slut.”

Embarrassment rises on Madi’s cheeks in a beautiful shade of red.

“Please, husband , make me come like a good little slut.”

“Of course, wife.”

I move back to her pussy, this time bringing my mouth to her cunt while I use two fingers to drive inside her. It doesn’t take long for her to get close to the edge, her legs squeezing around my head as I suck on her clit.

“Fuck!” she screams. “Fuck, Adrian.”

I love the sound of my name on her lips as her orgasm washes over her. She pants her way through it, her pussy twitching as I drag it out.

Finally, I rise from between her legs, licking her cum off my lips.

“Good girl,” I tell her. “Next time, if you’re a good little slut, I’ll fill you up.”

EIGHTEEN

Madi

My ass is still sore from Adrian's punishment when he leaves for work the next day. This time, he actually does lean in and press a soft kiss to my forehead while I pretend to be asleep.

It's weirdly... sweet.

I spend the morning shifting uncomfortably at the pottery wheel, my bottom aching in every position. A reminder that I acted like a brat last night and Adrian made good on his promise. It was harder, more painful than the first time. And yet, when he dragged his fingers through my slit, I was wet for him. Even now, shame burns my face at how much I like his punishments. That's got to be fucked up, right? But when he lowered his mouth to my pussy, that shame dissipated and all I could think about was the relief his tongue promised me.

After I made my rounds delivering pieces to local shops, I headed back to Adrian's estate to avoid the rain. Now it's pouring as I watch from the window. He's still not home yet.

I've been in this house for over a week now and I realize I've barely snooped through the place.

There are only two bedrooms in Adrian's house. I'd estimate this estate on Royal Street has to be worth over a million dollars. Seems like you should get more

bedrooms for that price point.

When I first moved in, I found an oversized kitchen fitted with stainless steel appliances and marble countertops. There's also a large butler's pantry next to a wine room encased in glass, with a stupid number of bottles on display. Seems pretentious, I'd noted.

Next, I found the dining room and living room, the less formal one than the space at the front of the house. Two bathrooms downstairs, which seems unnecessary considering there are two more upstairs.

My family home is larger, though, two, maybe three times the size. It isn't lost on me that I'm a pot calling the kettle black. I might be judging Adrian for his extravagance, but this is exactly the kind of wealth I grew up with.

Now, I'm here alone, making it the perfect time to wander a little further. I make my way through his home, inspecting each room. The one I slept in the first night was definitely the spare room, and down the hall is the owner's suite with an attached bathroom. The last room on this floor is fitted with a desk that is covered in papers. They call to my nosy side, and I step over, flipping through the documents.

Nothing is interesting, though. Just a bunch of legal jargon about people I don't know. Letters and notices informing clients of their charges, trial dates. I flip through some more, noting the names and looking for anything that stands out.

When nothing sparks any interest, I move on, trailing my fingers over the edges of his red oak desk. He's messy, I think, as I continue my ventures to the bookshelf on the side wall. Unlike the one downstairs, this one is filled with law books. Some shelved in rows and others in stacks. This office doesn't match the rest of the house. It's not clean and styled. It looks lived in and used. I know Adrian has an actual law office somewhere, but I wonder if this is where he really works.

On one of the higher shelves, there's a brass statue; it looks like the one in New York. The Statue of Liberty. I saw her once when I was six and my father took me to NYC. Well, more like my mother made him take us on a business trip with him. In between his meetings, ventured to the statue as a family. Surprisingly, it was one of the few times where we didn't all hate each other.

Dad didn't yell, Mom didn't judge, and Marcus didn't try to control me. We just stood there, looking up at the giant green woman in awe. And then afterwards, we shuffled off the ferry and bought hot dogs from a cart. The picture of a normal family.

"Find anything good?" Adrian's voice intrudes my head right as I'm tracing my fingers over the blindfold of this statue. I snap my hand back, bringing it to my side as I face my husband.

"You're home early."

There's a smirk on his lips, the corners ticked up just slightly as he watches me from the doorway. If Marcus caught me somewhere I wasn't supposed to be, he'd lunge for me, something I've been able to dodge since we were kids. Adrian doesn't move, though. He leans against the molding coolly and takes me in. "I wanted to come home and check on my wife's red ass, make sure she was able to sit properly today." There's a devilish glow in his eyes as he mentions his handiwork. "So, did you find anything interesting, princess?"

"No." I calm my voice so it doesn't come out squeaky. "You're pretty boring."

"You took a liking to lady justice, though." He nods to the bronze statue I was just touching.

"I didn't know her name." I glance back at the statue. It makes sense now, realizing she's holding a set of scales in one hand and dragging a sword with her other. "Why

is she blindfolded?”

“Justice should be rendered without passion or prejudice to ensure a result which is fair.” He says the words like he knows them by heart, like he’s reciting them from memory.

I can’t help but snort, knowing that those are nothing but pretty, meaningless words. The law isn’t fair. This whole world was built on prejudice. Everything is about who you know and what you have. That’s why my family built their livelihood on their reputation as much as anything else.

“You don’t agree with lady justice?” Adrian asks with half a smirk.

“In theory. Practice, however, leaves something to be desired.”

“Yeah, well, not everyone takes our lady here to heart.”

I huff a laugh, but this time Adrian isn’t grinning when his eyes meet mine.

“You don’t believe I practice justice without passion or prejudice?”

“Passion, maybe. But prejudice? Adrian, look at who you work for.” I throw my hands up, as if to gesture to the people we’re surrounded by.

Criminals. Gangsters. Mafia.

How can you say you practice law without prejudice when you work for the mafia? Despite growing up in this world, my family’s business still makes my stomach churn. Ma would always turn the channel when the Costello name was mentioned, but once I got my hands on the internet, I could find it all with one Google search. Costello Famiglia.

It was hard to see my grandfather in the same light after that. The man who sat me on his lap and read my bedtime stories. The one who taught me how to ride a bike. I couldn't see him as the same man accused of having a distribution network worth billions in drug money. He had men who sold drugs, stole cars, and committed murder all on his behalf.

The two versions didn't reconcile.

My father and Marcus wore their hearts on their sleeves. It was obvious to me how much they cared about the family business and how little they cared about me.

And Adrian? He's just one of the same. Another man caught up in the business of making money at all costs.

I've had those before, and they all ended the same. In a heap of disappointment.

Adrian scrubs a hand over his jaw as he watches me. "Have you considered, princess, that maybe I'm out here fighting against prejudice?"

My lips part, ready to tell him that's a bold-faced lie, but he silences me with his actions. Moving toward the desk, he lifts a stack of papers and reads the names to me. "Anthony Borelli, Tony Sorchese, Marco Del'Amonte?"

"What's your point?" I ask as my arms cross over my chest.

"With those names, in this city, not one of those men would get a fair day in court. You know what they do?" he asks, dropping the papers back onto his desk.

"I assume they worked for my brother."

"Bingo." Adrian waves his pointer finger. "So while they bring in money for your

family, the money that has fed and clothed you over the years, your family has sat in your cushy towers reaping the benefits and not facing the consequences. These guys, who are using this money to feed their families, mind you, get picked up and sent straight to prison, all because of their association with your family.”

I don’t like it when he says it like that, like it makes him angry. The words curl uneasily into my brain. I have lived a comfortable life, all while I’ve stood here and told everyone how much I hated it. How much I hate what my family does, how they live.

“I didn’t ask for it, though.” I didn’t expect this turn from Adrian. I expected him to just take the cases for the money my brother gave him, not because he had any sense of justice.

Adrian exhales a heavy breath. “No. You didn’t,” he agrees, running his fingers through his dark hair. “Did you find anything?” I’m thankful for his subject change.

“Doesn’t matter, there wasn’t anything good.” I have to turn off the emotions in my head and rebuild my tough exterior, my one defense mechanism to keep Adrian at bay.

He laughs at that, his head tilting back with the gesture. “Or maybe I just knew to hide the good stuff from my snooping brat of a wife, hmm?”

I press my lips into a thin line and plant my hands on my hips, digging into the white silk. “I’m not a brat.”

“But you are a snoop, aren’t you?” I think he’s teasing, but his smirk fades for a moment as he pushes off the doorframe and moves toward me.

“I’m not snooping.”

“Yeah?” As he gets closer, I can see the way his dark eyes sparkle in the warm lighting. “You’re in my office, looking through my stuff. How is that not snooping, princess?” One eyebrow quirks as he props his hip against his desk. Between him the desk and the bookshelf, I find myself caged into the corner of his office.

“It’s not snooping if it’s my house,” I argue. “We’re married now, aren’t we?” I tilt my head and feign sweetness.

“You’re right.” Adrian smiles with a chuckle, showcasing his perfect pearly white teeth. Something about the way he’s looking at me makes my stomach flip. “What’s mine is yours and all that,” he tells me with a wave of his hand. He looks handsome, even now after a day at the office.

Staring down at me, his lips are so close, I can feel his warm breath on my cheek. For a second, I think he might lean in and kiss me. What would I do? Would I stop him? I’m not sure I would.

And then, right as I think he’s going to, he pulls away, running a hand over his jaw.

“I’ll go see what’s for dinner.”

And then he’s gone. His footsteps echoing on the stairs and my lips still tingling in anticipation.

NINETEEN

Madi

“Madi Ricci.” A smile stretches across my friend Elijah’s lips when he sees me. My name catches Sadie’s attention, and she leaps from the bar stool she’s sitting on.

“Madi!” she screeches. “Get over here! You have to tell me all about married life!”

“Married life?” Elijah’s smile twists into a look of shock. “When did you get married?”

I didn’t anticipate how awkward post-wedding conversations would be with all my friends I didn’t invite to the wedding. On the other side of Elijah sits Mathias and Eric, both sharing the same surprised look.

I lift my left hand, flashing the stupidly large diamond and gold band.

“Don’t get weird.” Sadie waves her hand at them. “She didn’t invite anyone; it was just family.”

“A Costello party and she didn’t invite us? Sheesh,” Mathias tries to joke, but the tension still hangs in the air. Elijah’s dark eyes hold mine, waiting for a reason for not telling them.

Elijah and the guys have been part of my life for years now, probably since Nonno bought me the studio and I started hanging out in the French Quarter. I met them the

first time I saw them perform in Jackson Square. Every day at 1:00 p.m., the crowd gathers in front of the church, and they put on a show. Flaunting their best moves while Elijah makes jokes over the speaker and hypes up the crowd.

I was in awe watching them that first time. Still, after watching hundreds of performances, I can't help but to be amazed. Mathias does a trick where he jumps over a line of men crouched on a blanket while the crowd cheers loudly. Their ability to bring a group of people from all over the place together for twenty minutes never fails to make me smile.

After my grandfather died, I needed those moments more than ever. I made sure to be in Jackson Square every day to watch them. And eventually, they invited me to go to Ginos, a local dive bar, with them afterwards.

And from there, a beautiful friendship blossomed.

On wobbly bars stools and sticky vinyl booths, I became a version of myself that wasn't a mafia princess or Crazy Al's daughter. They weren't naive. It didn't take long for them to realize I was a member of the Costello family, but they didn't bring it up or press for details. Nor did they shame me for the actions of a family I couldn't control.

I appreciated that. And in exchange, I like to think I give them great dating advice that they couldn't live without. The success of Sadie and Eric's relationship was my greatest brag. I introduced them in this very bar.

Eric wraps his arm around Sadie's waist and drags her back into him. "I'm sure she had a good reason for lying to us," Eric says, and Sadie jabs him in the ribs. "So what is it, Mads?"

I imagine these guys are what a real brother/sister relationship would be. The kind I

never got with Marcus. They tease me and laugh at my mishaps, but they also call me on my shit.

Fidgeting with the strap of my purse, I sort through my brain for an excuse that's not a total lie. But I also can't tell them the truth. I was actually forced to marry a man I hate, and now he's making me live in his super nice house, but I'm really hoping when my cousin gets out of prison, he'll let me divorce him. Sorry I didn't tell you.

"I'm sorry," I finally say. "I should have told you guys, I just...didn't know how."

Elijah must sense the pain that lingers in my words because he stands up, asking the bartender for vodka soda with lemon, my normal drink, and ushering our group to a booth.

I pull my vibrating phone from my pocket to see Adrian's name on the screen with a new text message.

Adrian:

Where are you?

Madi

Out with friends.

His response comes back quickly.

Adrian

Where?

Madi

Out.

I send the text and tuck the phone back into my purse, refusing to report my whereabouts to my new husband constantly. Plus, he has a man on me. I haven't slipped my leash again, not since the night of my faux bachelorette party where Adrian found me in an alley... I shudder at the thought.

I spend the next hour catching them up on my arrangement, leaving out the part where my cousin possibly kills my brother. I stick to the bigger topics. Adrian's a lawyer. He and my family agreed that we should marry. And then they set a date.

"That's archaic," Eric says, leaning back in his seat while he takes a long sip of his drink.

"You should have told us," Elijah says, but there's no anger in his words. His dark eyes look over at me with empathy. "We would have been there for you."

"I know." I nod, trying my best not to let tears spring from my eyes. Deep down, I did know they'd be there if I'd asked. But bringing them further into my life didn't seem like the best idea. People around me never seemed to last long and I can't bear the thought of something happening to them, simply because they were at the wrong place at the wrong time. Or worse, them witnessing something at my wedding they weren't supposed to see.

I'm not dumb. I know what happens to people in this city who witness my family's wrongdoings. It's safer for them to be kept at an arm's length.

"Well..." Elijah finally relaxes his shoulders. "Does he have a big dick, at least?"

“Yes! The good questions, finally!” Sadie cheers as she sits up from her spot leaning against Eric. “We need all the details!”

I can’t help the crimson blush that immediately rises to my cheeks. “Uhm…”

“Madi!” Sadie screeches. “You slut! Tell me everything. What was it like?”

Eric groans beside her. “We do not need to hear about Madi’s sex life, babe.”

“Speak for yourself!” She nudges him.

“We haven’t actually-”

“What?” Sadie’s voice is loud and filled with shock. “You haven’t had sex with your husband yet?”

I shrug. “I don’t even know if I want to…”

“But you’ve done other things?” she presses.

I’m sure my face is the color of a tomato by now, so I untuck my hair from behind my ear, letting it act as a shield. “It’s not like there haven’t been opportunities. I just don’t think I’m, ya know, ready.”

“Oh, that’s beautiful.” Elijah smiles. “We have our own blushing virgin at the table,” he mocks me, hand on his chest.

“Hah-hah.” I press my back into the velvet booth and cross my arms. “I don’t want to give him the impression that I like him, ya know?”

“Hate sex is sooo good, Mads,” Sadie says as she pops the cherry from her whiskey

sour between her lips. “Besides, if you’re stuck with him, you might as well get the goods.” She winks.

“And what if the goods aren’t good for me?”

That’s a lie, because I already know what Adrian can do with his mouth and fingers. I can’t imagine what that dick would do if he stuck it inside of me. I cover my mouth with my hand and dip my head. I cannot be thinking about Adrian’s dick while I’m out in public.

“How do you know it won’t?” she asks.

I’d be lying if I said fucking Adrian hadn’t crossed my mind. I nearly begged for it the other night. Every time he gets close to me, I wonder what he’d be like in bed. Will he be good? Will he rush through it, or take his time with me? Based on his punishments alone, I think he’d take his time with me. Goosebumps creep up my arms at the thought.

I doubt he’d be the type of guy who finishes in two minutes. He seems like someone who likes to savor his moments.

“Sure.” I shake my head with a laugh. “I’ll give it a try and let you know how it goes.”

“Please do.”

When the door to the bar opens, I don’t even notice, thinking it’s just another person coming in. Gino’s is off the tourist path and less frequented, it’s not too busy at 8:00 p.m. on a Friday night, but still there are people here. I don’t notice as black dress shoes stomp a slow path to our booth in the back corner. It’s not until Adrian is standing directly in front of us that I finally see him.

Dressed impeccably in a fitted suit with his hair slicked back and the sides neatly trimmed, he looks down at the five of us with a heavy frown.

I realize I'm tucked between Elijah and Mathias, and from Adrian's view, I'm sure we look too comfortable.

Before he even says a word, my heart is throbbing in my chest and my lungs contract, begging for air they can't seem to breathe in. Fear blinds the edges of my vision, and my immediate reaction is to diffuse the situation.

"Adrian--"

"Adrian?" Elijah cuts me off. "This is your husband? Not bad." He smirks, and I can't help but think this is the worst time for him to be commenting on Adrian's looks.

Adrian only smiles under Elijah's gaze. "Madi," he says coolly, even though I can see the tic in his jaw. "Care to introduce me to your friends?"

"Uhm--" I stumble. His demeanor isn't threatening; he even looks interested in learning their names, but something about the situation sits uncomfortably in my gut. "This is Elijah, Mathias, Eric, and Sadie." All four of them are looking at my husband, but his eyes stay glued to mine. "We're just getting a drink." I feel the need to say it, as if it's an excuse for why I'm here.

Besides, Adrian never told me I couldn't leave the house. He never gave me any rules, really. He can't possibly be upset with me. I talk myself up in my head, preparing for whatever fight might happen once we're behind closed doors.

"Nice to meet you," he says, the corners of his lips lifting with a playful smile. "Unfortunately, I need to steal my wife from you. Madi." He gestures with his hand,

waiting for me to climb out of the booth and take it.

“See you next week?” I ask the guys.

“Always.” Elijah confirms our standing arrangement for drinks every Friday.

The soles of my white Keds have barely touched the sidewalk outside the bar before Adrian has me spun around, my back hitting the brick wall.

He cages me in with a hand on either side of my ribs, and my skin tingles at the heat of his nearness. As his head dips low, the scent of mint infiltrates my nostrils. Warm breath trails over my collarbone and up my neck, making me shiver, before his face settles in front of mine.

“Who are they?” he asks, his voice deep and throaty. He sounds different than he normally does, less in control. “To you?” he adds.

“Friends,” I breathe. “Just friends.”

One of his hands turns to a fist as he braces himself against the wall, his eyes closing for a brief moment.

“You don’t have to worry about them...” I mutter. For some reason, I want to reassure him. “I’m not going to fuck them or anything.”

Despite how many rules I broke or fights I picked with Marcus, the one thing I never did was bring other guys into it. Even with these three, I limited myself to Friday night drinks. Our friendship couldn’t exist outside the safety of the bar.

People around me die. It’s an undeniable fact.

“You don’t even get it, do you?”

“Get what?”

Dark eyes drill into me, and his parted lips hover above mine. My pulse pounds. I think he’s about to say or something...or kiss me.

And then he’s being pulled away. Dark-clothed arms wrap around him and someone drops a brown sack over his head.

I think I scream. My lips open, but I can’t hear past the sound of the blood rushing in my ears.

It’s seconds, not even a full minute, before they have him in the back of a blacked-out car and then he’s gone. Nothing but tire skids on asphalt.

“Jesus,” I hiss, my hands digging into my purse for my cellphone. It clatters to the ground, and when I bend to grab it, I feel the tears blurring my eyes.

Someone just kidnapped Adrian.

Someone just kidnapped my husband.

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TWENTY

Adrian

There's a bright light shining in my eyes. It's blinding as I attempt to blink away the haze filling my brain.

What the fuck happened?

Gathering my senses, I try to take in my surroundings. I'm in a warehouse, I think. The air is warm, thick, and smells of must. There are two guards, each of them armed with a heavy-duty flashlight and a gun. Only the former is pointed at me, a fact I'm thankful for.

There are zip ties securing my ankles to the metal chair and my wrists together. The skin on my wrist stings from the tightness of my bindings.

Not exactly my type of honeymoon bondage.

I flex my jaw, working out the kink that settled there after I was shoved into the back seat of a black SUV. That's the last thing I remember. "Was the kidnapping necessary?" I ask my captors.

"Shut up," the one on the right demands, his booted foot reaching out to kick my calf hard.

"Cazzo," I hiss.

“He’s a lawyer.” I recognize John Vitale’s even-toned voice even before he walks out between the two enforcers. “He can’t shut up. Talking is the only thing he’s good at.” There’s a screech as he drags another metal chair over the concrete floor. “Isn’t that right, Adrian?”

Madi’s cousin sits in front of me, dressed in an Armani suit, looking like he’s ready for a business meeting. He watches me, his eyebrow lifted as he waits for me to answer his question. John Vitale, the craziest of all the Costello grandkids. Well, Marcus wasn’t levelheaded, by any means, but something about John frightens me a bit more. He’s typically the quietest, and in my experience, that’s never a good sign.

“Where’s Madi?”

John’s head tilts as he looks at me, taking in the question. “She’s home. Safe.”

“If you hurt her-”

“I would never hurt my cousin,” John cuts me off. His head tilts to the side as he ponders my reaction. “You actually care about her?” He seems surprised, and I realize I gave something away.

“If you wanted to talk, John, you could have just texted.” I try to change the subject, sounding carefree, unbothered by the fact that I’ve just been kidnapped and strapped to a chair in front of a fucking psycho killer.

Of all the Costellos to get picked up by, John seems like the worst choice. His claim to fame in the family is his psychopathic tendencies. It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there, I get that. But John wasn’t the kind of man who killed because he had to. He likes it. A little too much, in my opinion.

On a normal day, I don’t mind his hobby. Unlike most men, he was good at the

cleanup. Which meant my skill set wasn't needed.

But today? I have a feeling him being good at his job isn't going to work in my favor.

The corner of his mouth ticks up, like he's just the slightest bit amused by me. "I could have. But then"—he leans him, resting his elbows on the tops of his knees—"you wouldn't have the impact of getting my full message." He smiles, and something about it puts me even more on edge. It's a soulless smile, completely void of any empathy.

I swallow the lump building in my throat. "And that message is?"

"We have a job for you," he tells me. "Consider it a welcome to the family gift."

"Well..." I try to smile, my jaw aching as it lifts. "Who should I send the thank-you card to?"

John chuckles, flashing a pearly white smile. "That's the spirit. Tomorrow, after you wake up and kiss your new wife good morning, you're going to get dressed up in one of your ugly suits and march your ass down to the courthouse and fill out whatever paperwork, file whatever petitions you need in order to join Sam Costello's defense team."

Sam Costello?

I'm supposed to be working on a way to get him out of the picture, not out of prison.

"I can't do that," I blurt out.

John tilts his head in mock confusion. "You are a lawyer, aren't you?"

“Yeah, but Sam-” There are so many things I could say, reasons to give, but John waves his hand to silence me.

“Well, now you’re Sam’s lawyer.”

It feels like a rock is sinking to the bottom of my stomach. Normally, I can pitch a solution, find a way out of a bad situation. It’s been my superpower since I was a kid. But right now, my mind reels for an angle, a sliver of light I’m not seeing.

I can’t defend Sam for many reasons. The top one being Damien will kill me.

“I can’t defend Sam Costello...” I trail off. “His fingerprints were found on the murder weapon. That’s hard evidence.”

“I guess you have your work cut out for you, then.” John brushes his hands over his thighs. “And if you need some extra motivation, Christopher and Tommy here will make sure you get the job done.”

I take a deep breath. “And if I can’t?”

John chuckles. “You should, Adrian. You really should...” He leans in again, leveling his face with mine. “Because if you don’t, Christopher and Tommy are going to pick you up again and bring you back here. Only, unlike today, it won’t be a chat we’re having. Next time, I’m going to bring my blade down here and take my time slicing off every inch of your skin. Just for fun.” He straightens with an elated smile stretching across his features. “Well then, I think that should be enough motivation for you, hmm?”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “That about does it.”

John stands, fastening the button at the center of his suit jacket. “Nice seeing ya,

Adrian.” He pats my shoulder before walking past me and out of the warehouse.

Goon one, I’m not sure if it’s Christopher or Tommy, slips the bag back over my head while two sacks me with something heavy. They land a few more hits, the motivation coming in punches to my gut and head. I slip off to the thought of blood, lots of it dripping off my skinless body, while Madi watches in horror.

TWENTY-ONE

Madi

“Y ou’re going to wear out the carpet,” Roman says gruffly, gesturing to the stretch of floor I’ve been pacing. If I’m not pacing, I’m sitting on the couch while my leg bounces furiously.

“What happened to the guy who was following me earlier?” I ask Roman. I know enough to know Roman is one of Sam’s men. So when he pushed me into a black sedan behind the van that kidnapped Adrian, I quickly realized that it was Sam who had taken my new husband. Maybe not my cousin himself, since he’s still locked up in Orleans Parish Prison, but someone on his orders.

Adrian’s loyalty lies with my side of the family, my mom and uncle Damien, so Sam kidnapping him means he’s trying to get him to switch sides. A dangerous game.

“Don’t worry about it,” Roman tells me. I’m assuming he’s dead, then, whoever he was. I didn’t get to learn his name, but I knew he was just a kid. A big, scary kid who probably spent a lot of time punching other kids, but still, he couldn’t have been much older than me.

“They’ll kill him, ya know?” I stop my pacing to face Roman.

“Not tonight,” he says.

“But eventually.” I don’t know why the idea bothers me. I should want my husband

dead. Not that long ago, I was begging John to get me out of this fake marriage. There was nothing more I wanted than to not be married to Adrian Russo. And yet, the idea of Sam finally offing my husband only makes my stomach sink. He doesn't deserve to die .

“Not if he does what he's asked.”

“And what is he being asked?” My hands have landed on each of my hips as I stare down Roman.

He sighs, running a hand through his dark hair. “Listen, if I were you, Madi, I'd encourage him to do whatever Sam asks. It's better for everyone in the long game.”

“And if he doesn't? If I can't get him to listen? Then what happens?”

“You'll be safe,” Roman says. “Sam won't do anything to hurt you.”

“It's not me I'm worried about.”

This must surprise Roman, his dark eyes lifting to assess me. After a moment, the corners of his lips tilt into a smile and he nods. “This is good.”

“What's good?” I'm getting frustrated with this conversation, my heels tapping on the floor, my body looking for any way to release the anxiety that's building up.

“You care for him,” he states, matter of fact.

“I don't-”

“It's not a bad thing, Madi,” Roman cuts me off. “If you care for him, maybe he cares for you too. And if he wants to help end this war for you, even better.”

“Adrian can’t end this war!” I throw my hands down, hitting my hips with a slap.

“No,” he agrees. “But he can get Sam out of prison, and Sam can end this war.”

The opening of my front door ends Roman’s sentence. Adrian comes through the threshold with a limp, holding his left arm to his chest. There’s blood seeping down the side of his face from a gash at his hairline. The way he’s holding himself tells me he’s in pain.

He looks at Roman and then to me. An exhale leaves his body, and his face seems relieved to see me, a fact that surprises me. Even more surprising is the realization that I’m also relieved to see him.

I don’t love him. I hate my husband.

But seeing him dripping with blood has my stomach wound up in knots.

“I’ll get a first aid kit,” I tell him, rushing off. I’m positive I saw one in the downstairs bathroom, and I run over to grab it.

“I’ll be watching,” I hear Roman tell Adrian, patting him on the shoulder before leaving. Adrian watches him leave, and when I return to the living room, he’s bolting the door behind him.

“What did they do to you?” I ask, ushering him to the couch. He winces as he sits down, his back leaning against the plush velvet.

“It’s nothing, I’m fine.” He tries to shoo me off.

“Shut up,” I say, barely refraining from rolling my eyes. He recoils when I bring the wet washcloth to his forehead, pressing it over the wound. “Where all are you hurt?”

“Madi, I’m fine. Honestly.”

“You’re a liar,” I spit at him. “Just tell me so I can help you.”

He stills at that statement, his head turning slightly so he can look at my face. His dark brown eyes search mine.

“I was worried about you,” I whisper, surprising myself with the admission.

“I’m sorry,” he says genuinely. “I was worried about you too,” he adds with a heavy breath. “When I couldn’t get ahold of Rocky, and then you weren’t answering your texts...” he trails off, closing his eyes, as if he’s trying to hold in his feelings. “I was afraid something happened.”

Something swells in my chest. “I didn’t realize he—Rocky, I mean—I didn’t realize he was gone, to be honest. I guess I’ve gotten good at ignoring my enforcers. When you came to the bar, then-”

“I had been looking for you.”

It’s not that big of a deal, I try to tell myself. I’m basically his property, the investment he made for his future. Of course he was looking for me. If I die on his watch, my family would be pissed. That’s it. That’s the only reason he cares.

“When you weren’t responding to my texts, I started to spiral.”

“Sam would never hurt me,” I tell him.

“No,” he nods, agreeing with me. “I guess not. But...there are others who would. People who would use you as an opportunity.”

“What do you mean?”

He moves his elbows to his knees, exhaling with a groan.

“Adrian, you’re hurt. Should I take you somewhere?”

“No.” He waves a hand towards me. “No hospitals.”

His words trigger a memory in my subconscious. My father sitting on the couch, groaning in pain as my mother dabbed at a wound with a wet washcloth. No hospitals.

My hands shake. I’m in a cycle. A vicious cycle where I repeat all of my mother’s mistakes. I wring my fingers, tugging on the joints as the memory assaults me.

“Madi?” Adrian’s voice breaks through the chaos in my brain, and I find his brown eyes watching me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I turn my head and avoid my gaze, trying to reset myself as I tremble, leaving the nightmares behind.

“Madi.” Adrian reaches out, his warm hand resting on my arm as he stares into my eyes. “Tell me.” He seems sincere, genuine even, as he waits for my response.

I try to laugh, try to let the sound leave my lips as if this is all a funny recollection. But the sound is harsh, painful even. “I just remembered something.” I test out the words, but my stomach feels sick at the thought of telling Adrian anything about my childhood. What happens in this house stays in this house. I can practically feel my father’s hands gripping onto the edges of my t-shirt as he shouts the words at me.

“What?” Adrian asks.

“My father.” Saying the title increases the sensation in my guy, like a lump of clay has settled down there, heavy and overwhelming. “He used to say that when he got hurt. No hospitals.”

“I’m sorry.” Adrian is quick with his apology. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay, you wouldn’t have.”

He’s quiet for a moment, thinking over what he’s going to say next. “How often did he come home hurt?” Adrian asks.

This time, I do laugh, a rough sound escaping my lips. “I don’t know,” I say with a slight shrug. “Often.”

“Geez,” Adrian hisses. “That must have been hard.”

How did we get on me?

“It’s fine.” I shake my head, trying to shake away these thoughts. “I’m fine. But you’re not. Please, let me get you cleaned up.”

Adrian stares at me for a long moment. I feel naked under that gaze, like he’s seeing into a part of me I didn’t mean to expose.

“Okay,” he finally says. “But tell me something,”

“Like what?” I ask, opening the first aid kit and pulling out the disinfectant.

“Tell me about your childhood,” he says seriously, gaze locked on mine.

My childhood.

My heart thrums quicker. Thinking about my childhood as my anxiety spiking. “I...I don’t know what to say,” I mumble, looking down at the bottle of disinfectant in my hands.

Adrian puts his hands on mine, uncapping the bottle and urging me to work as he continues. “What was it like? Were you happy?”

He braces himself as I dab at his wounds, getting them all cleaned with disinfectant. “Sometimes,” I answer. “I was happy around my grandparents; they had a lot of love to give us. And my cousins were always my safe space. Lily watched over me and Lana like a protector. And so did Sam and John, but it always felt like there was this divide between us.”

“What do you mean?” he asks as I open the band-aids to begin covering the open wounds.

“My mom and my Aunt Carlotta, Lana’s mom, always felt estranged from Aunt Cosetta and Uncle Junior. Like it was the older kids against the younger ones.”

“Because Junior was always the heir to take over the family?” Adrian asks.

“Bingo. My mom thought it should be her because she was the oldest. And when that didn’t work, then she pushed for my father, but Nonno would have never agreed to that. So finally, she wanted Marcus. But Nonno had always planned for it to be Junior, ya know.” I finish applying the bandages, but they do nothing for what I suspect are bruised ribs from the way he’s cradling them. “I should get you some ice.” I try to stand, but Adrian reaches for me, pulling me back down to the couch.

“No, stay.”

Nodding, I sit back down next to him, my skin tingling where he touched.

“Sounds like a lot of fighting,” he says, sounding solemn, going back to my family.

“It was.”

“I’m sorry you went through that.”

Something aches in my chest at his words. No one has ever apologized to me for my family. Most people get scared when they find out my lineage, like they might die just from being close to me. But no one other than Lana has ever commiserated with me.

“Thank you,” I say softly. “Your turn. Why did you become a lawyer?”

Adrian leans his head back, looking at the ceiling thoughtfully for a moment. “My dad was killed in prison,” he says finally, and my breath catches, not expecting that.

“Jesus,” I hiss. “I’m sorry, I had no-”

“You wouldn’t have,” he interrupts, ending my apology, like I did with his earlier. “It was a stupid charge. A good lawyer would have gotten him out on bail. But he had a public defender who was overloaded with cases. And then he was killed before he even got to trial.”

“That’s horrible,” I say, reaching out to place my hand over his while guilt claws its way up my throat. I practically accused him of being a money-hungry mob attorney. And that’s not even close to the truth.

Adrian shrugs with a shake of his head. “I like to think I can help men like him. That with me on their side, they won’t suffer the same fate.” For a brief moment, his eyes find mine, something lingering behind the shiny orbs.

All I can do is nod.

That's the kindest reasoning I can think of for becoming a defense attorney.

Later, after I've gotten him ice and settled into bed, I lie next to him, rethinking all the ways I've completely misjudged my husband.

TWENTY-TWO

Madi

Adrian only takes a single day off to rest before he's back at work, and I'm left reeling over my newfound feelings for him.

I can't possibly like the man who forced me to marry him, right? That would be... insane.

And yet, as I took care of him yesterday, I wasn't bothered in the slightest. I actually enjoyed spending time with him. He told me to put on my favorite movie and we laid in bed together. I checked his wounds every couple of hours, keeping everything clean and bandaged. It was the most innocent of moments we've had, nothing sexual, just cuddling in bed next to each other while I took care of him.

This morning when he got up and dressed in a suit and tie, he kissed my forehead on his way out, and I actually felt...disappointed. I should have been happy to see him go, but instead I was hoping for another day just the two of us or at least a kiss.

After he left, I pulled myself out of bed and got dressed to go to my studio. I process better with a lump of clay in my hands, and now I wedge the material as I think over the last few days.

Sam wants Adrian to help get him out of prison, something I've known since my rehearsal dinner, but I didn't care what happened to Adrian back then. Now, I can't help but feel like my family is going to tear him apart. Whatever game my new

husband is involved in seems too dangerous.

There's a knock on my studio door before David lets himself in. Adrian put his head of security on me since Rocco, the last guard who watched me, was killed. "Mrs. Russo--"

"Please don't call me that," I groan instinctively in response. I've gotten used to correcting Adrian's staff when they refer to me as his Mrs.

"Wow, so married life sucks, then?"

My head snaps up at the new voice and, sure enough, standing in the doorway is Zoe, my cousin John's girlfriend. I grab a cloth, wiping the clay from my hands so I can hug her. Something about her showing up in the midst of my lonely spiral has me wanting to cry, and I've worked hard to never shed a tear in front of another person.

Zoe hugs me back and David leaves the studio, not needing to introduce her or ask if she can come in since we're currently wrapped around each other.

"I brought wine," Zoe says, breaking the hug and holding up the bottle of merlot.

"You're my favorite." It's the middle of the day, but I snatch the bottle from her hand and head to the counter in search of a wine opener.

"I know." Zoe giggles, following behind me. "I figured you could use some company after your...wedding."

I laugh at the way she delays saying the word wedding, as if it might bite me.

"How is he, by the way?" she asks, plopping onto one of the stools at the counter.

I shrug my shoulders. How is Adrian Russo? Dark, broody, calculating. But also...not. I feel like I've seen a new side of him since the kidnapping. He's also tender-hearted and protective. My brain can't decide which set of words to land on. One second, my new husband is in a battle of wits with me, and the next, he has me laid over his knees, bringing me more pleasure than I've ever imagined. And since being kidnapped, I've seen a sweeter side of my husband.

"So, complicated?" Zoe fills in when I take too long to answer.

"Something like that."

"John said he was out today, so I figured it was a good time to visit."

"Wait, how does John know that?"

Zoe shrugs. "I don't ask questions when it comes to the...business...side of things." She says business as if the word is dirty. Which, in this context, I guess it is.

I pour the wine into two glasses. John following my husband doesn't bode well. I can tell from the beating that he took that Adrian is fighting against John and Sam, and if he doesn't follow their orders...I'm not sure things will turn out well.

John's words from my rehearsal dinner ring in my head, that if I make Adrian fall for me and help them, everything will go smoother. But I've been butting heads with him while he's been cozied up to my Uncle Damien. Do I need to convince him to work with John and Sam to save his life?

"So, how is he to live with, at least?" Zoe asks.

I can feel the heat rise to my cheeks without being able to control it. Instantly, I think of his hands on my body, the sweet punishments he's inflicted.

“Oh, so that good, huh?” Zoe teases.

“No. Yes. I don’t know.”

Zoe barks out a laugh while I use a hand to cover my face. “It’s okay if you enjoy it,” she says, taking another sip of wine. “I mean, sex is great.”

“We haven’t had sex.”

“Oh.” She grins. “And he’s already making you blush like that? Jesus. Girl, what are you waiting for?”

“I don’t know. I hate the guy! Or at least, I thought I did.”

“What changed?”

What changed? That’s a great question. What did change?

“I don’t know...he’s not that bad. He’s kind of nice to me, sometimes. I think I judged him wrong. I was just so...angry.”

“I mean, he did make you marry him. So anger seems like the right emotion.” She smiles into her glass. “But it’s also okay if you don’t feel that way anymore.”

I chew on my lip. Zoe’s not Lana, she’s not in the family the same way. But she’s the closest girlfriend I have who understands what I’m going through. “John wants me to make him love me so he’ll do whatever Sam is asking,” I blurt.

Zoe nods, and I wonder if she already knew that? She doesn’t say if she did. “And that means betraying your family?”

I shake my head. “Sam is my family. Marcus was just...an asshole, honestly.”

“Cheers to that.” Zoe raises her glass and clinks it against mine. I forget she used to work for my brother. I don’t know all the details of what went down, but I imagined she’s part of the reason John killed him. If John killed him, I mean. Not that we can confirm any of the details, but in my heart, I know he’s not alive anymore. And I’m strangely okay with that fact.

“And my mom and Damien are just using me. Sam actually cares about me.”

“He sounds like a good guy. I only know what John tells me, but he sounds good.”

“He is. He’s loyal to a fault and has always been protective of me and Lana.”

“You trust him?”

“I do.”

“So, then are you going to make Adrian fall in love with you?”

Her question hangs over me. Am I going to make Adrian fall in love with me? What if I lose myself in the process? And what if it’s already too late to go back now?”

I chug my wine in an attempt to avoid Zoe’s question.

“Hey, you should come to my new studio!” Her change of subject is deeply appreciated. “I just opened my own pole dancing place. Maybe you can learn some tricks.” She winks at me. Okay, maybe it wasn’t a change of subject.

I can feel the heat rise on my cheeks again.

“Come on.” She reaches across the counter, gently slapping my arm. “It will be fun! And sexy! And honestly, I need some students so my classes look full. Do it for me. Please?” Her puppy dog face has me nodding in agreement.

“Of course.”

“Yay! Adrian won’t even know what hit him when he sees your new moves!”

I don’t know if I’ll show any moves to Adrian. I can’t even imagine myself dancing for him without blushing.

The thought runs wild in my head, though. Pole dancing for Adrian would most definitely lead to sex. Am I really going to sleep with my new husband? And am I doing it because I want to, or because my family needs me to?

TWENTY-THREE

Adrian

“ Y ou look like shit.” Fede’s words don’t help the piercing headache currently splitting my temples, but he’s not wrong. I do look like shit. Even after a day of rest where Madi surprisingly doted on me like a caring wife, I still look and feel like absolute garbage. John wasn’t messing around when he sent me a message; he made it plain and clear what would happen to me if I didn’t agree to work for him.

“Did you bring the thing?” I ask my brother, ignoring his comment.

Fede holds up the radio frequency detector, giving it a little shake. “Are you losing it? Should I be worried?”

“Shut up,” I growl at him, standing from my desk so I can snatch the device from his hands.

Silently, I unwind the cord and power the thing on. Fede watches me like he thinks I might actually be losing it. He should know better. We’re working with dangerous people and you never know what they’re doing. I, of all people, know they’re willing to cross the line when it comes to the law. What’s stopping them from bugging their lawyer’s office? Especially when both sides think I’m a pawn in their game.

I scan the entire office, but nothing beeps to signal there’s a listening device here. Satisfied, I turn the thing off and hand it back to my brother.

“Are you good now?” he asks, one eyebrow lifted with the question, as if he’s not so sure that I am.

“John Vitale kidnapped me.”

Fede’s face drops. “Holy shit. Are you okay?”

“Do I look okay?” His earlier words ring out in my head. You look like shit.

“Touche,” Fede says as he takes the seat across from my desk. “What happened?”

“They want me to work for them.”

Immediately, Fede shakes his head. He knows as well as me that’s a bad idea. I already told him about Damien wanting me to handle Sam. Working for Sam is the exact opposite.

“You can’t get involved in their petty war.” Fede taps his fingers across the arm of the chair, something I know he does when he’s thinking.

“I already am.” I lean back in my seat with a sigh.

“We need to stay focused.”

“Do you think I’m not?” The words come out too harshly, and Fede eyes me. I’m paranoid about Madi, I realize. And she is fucking with my focus. I’m too worried about her, too interested in her to keep my eyes on the prize.

“That’s not what I said, brother.”

“I know.” I scrub a hand over my face. “We have to use this to our advantage. That’s

the only way.”

“But how...” Fede’s words trail off as his fingers tap a steady beat. Suddenly, it stops, his eyes darting up to meet mine. “You have to play both sides.”

“That sounds like a death sentence.”

“It might be,” he says, a bit too casually to be talking about my life. “Listen, we want to make this whole thing implode, send them all to prison, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And we could interfere, like we planned. But they might just do all the dirty work for us.”

What Fede is saying clicks in my head. They’re going to burn themselves to the ground. And all I need to do is stand to the side and fan the flames.

“You work from both sides, feed them both information, and just watch everything burn.”

“Fuck,” I say as nerves rush through me. “That’s a good idea. We just need to keep me alive long enough to pull it off.”

Fede laughs. “Okay, brother. Where do we start?”

The house smells like pasta when I walk in, and the scent jolts me for a moment. The last time my house smelled like this, Madi proceeded to throw my favorite meal into the trash. Which then led to me spanking her, a scene I still can’t get out of my head.

After Fede left my office, I spent the rest of my day getting myself on Sam’s defense

team, just like John had asked. Damien's not going to like that, I'm sure. But I have a plan to make him believe this helps him too.

Playing them from both sides. Just like I want.

After staring at all the paperwork today and catching up on my cases, my headache has only grown worse. I rub my temples as I slowly enter the kitchen, not quite sure what to expect from my wife. Since I took a beating from John's men, she's been nothing but caring toward me, a complete 180 from how she was before.

"Is it good?" I hear my wife ask. She sounds unsure, worried. Not at all like my confident little spitfire.

"Yes, Miss Madi, it's good." That voice belongs to Bea, my housekeeper. I check my watch; it's late, she should be gone by now.

"But like Nonna-level good?"

"Yes, Miss Madi," Bea repeats.

I enter cautiously to not disturb them. Madi is at the counter, staring at my housekeeper, who's holding a spoon as if she just taste tested something. It looks like a hostage situation from the way Madi is staring at her and Bea looks uneasy, like if she doesn't answer correctly, she's not sure what will happen. Bea's always been the most timid of my staff. Normally, she avoids me, scurrying like a scared mouse out of any room I enter.

"Are you cooking for me, wife?"

Both sets of eyes dart to meet mine.

Bea looks at me like she might get in trouble, but Madi doesn't seem nervous at all. Instead, she takes a step back from the housekeeper. "Thank you, Bea. You can go."

"Yes, Miss Madi," she says before scurrying away.

"Are you torturing my staff?" I ask once Bea is fully gone.

"No." Madi turns her back on me, going back to the sauce and stirring it slowly with a large wooden spoon, just like my nonna would use.

I move toward her, closing the gap between us until I'm right behind her. The smell of her sauce is wafting into my nose and it's perfect. It smells like home and my childhood, the good parts of it anyway, rolled into one neat little scent. I'm almost as obsessed with it as I am with the woman in front of me. "Are you making my favorite dish just to throw it in the trash again?"

My dark-haired vixen turns at that comment. At first, I think she's going to say something wicked, flash her fangs at me. But instead, her expression looks apologetic.

"No," she says, the word soft, so unlike the sharpness she's shown me. "I thought I would make it this time, ya know, an apology or something."

"An apology," I repeat, not sure if I'm shocked or amazed. Madi's so sweet right now, so unlike the angry girl that first entered this house. Mad at the world. Mad at me. My being kidnapped by her cousins changed something between us. She was so gentle and vulnerable with me that night, tending to my wounds and opening up to me about her family. "Thank you, princess."

A smile lifts on her lips, a little pink gathering on her cheeks. "It's probably not even good," she says, her head drooping.

“Hey.” I use a finger to lift her chin, forcing her to look at me again. “Don’t talk like that. I’m sure it’s perfect.” Her smile returns, and I watch her dish the pasta and sauce onto two plates, handing one to me to carry out to the dining room.

I have a chef on staff, so Madi could never cook a day in her life if she didn’t want to, but something about her not only cooking, but using my nonna’s recipe tugs at my heart.

“Mangia,” Madi says once we’ve sat down across from each other.

It smells just like my nonna’s and my mouth is watering as I bring the first bite to my lips. And then immediately, it takes everything I have not to gag at the taste. How the fuck does it smell so good and taste horrific?

“What do you think?” Madi asks with bright eyes.

I can’t tell if she’s fucking with me. She has to be, right? I chew slowly on the gummy noodle, avoiding having to answer the question. The pasta is overcooked, the texture tough. The sauce tastes bitter, as if the tomatoes were bad, not sweet like my nonna’s. But the look on Madi’s face is so innocent, so pure. And it feels like it took us ages to get to this moment where she’s not fighting with me, so I’m not about to tell her that her cooking is atrocious.

“Fantastico,” I say, swallowing the thick wads of noodles.

Madi’s smile is bright at the compliment. “Really? Is it just like Nonna’s?”

“Mmhmm,” I tell her as I chug from my glass of wine. Her happiness makes me feel good. Except then I look down at my plate and realize how much more of this slop I have to eat. “Delicious,” I tell her as I take another bite, doing my best to chew quickly and swallow.

Madi picks at her plate, taking a few bites and drinking from her wine. I don't stop until I've eaten the entire thing and my stomach feels like it's filled with lead.

"Are you going to help Sam?" Madi spits the question out like it was burning a hole in her tongue, shocking me. I swallow the bit of wine in my mouth and take a breath.

What do I tell her? Surely not that I'm playing both sides until it leads to the downfall of her family name. But she looks at me expectantly, her bottom lip tucked between her teeth. I need to give her something.

"Do you want me to help Sam?"

Madi chews on her lip for another moment, avoiding my eyes. "Yes," she answers, but there's a look on her face, like there's more she wants to say, something else she's not telling me.

"I filed the paperwork today."

"Really?" Her eyes light up.

"Really."

"Do you think..."

"I'll get him out." I answer the question that's on the tip of her tongue. "I don't lose, Madi."

She rolls her eyes at my overconfidence. "Trust me, I know."

I can't help but laugh; it bubbles out of my throat, and soon enough, she's giggling with me. It feels light, this moment. Like she doesn't hate me, and I don't hate the

family she was raised in. Like we could be normal. But that's not true, nothing about this situation is normal. I forced her hand to marry me and now she's trapped here. Even if I give her a long leash, it's still a leash.

"Why do you want Sam out?" I ask, taking another sip of wine.

Madi shrugs. "He's always been there for me. Unlike my family."

"You don't like your family?" I question, even though the answer is clear as day, has been since the day I saw her at Marcus' house.

She mulls over the question, taking a long sip of wine and swallowing slowly. "It's not that I don't love them..."

"But you don't like them."

"No," she says on a sigh. "Not really."

I nod like I completely understand, even if I don't. My family has always meant everything to me. But then again, I've met her brother. I know how awful he was. "Why?" I find myself asking before I can stop the word from leaving my lips.

"My mom...she just doesn't like me very much. I'm not the daughter she wanted, and I can't change that." She shrugs, but the look on her face is filled with sadness.

"And Marcus?" I ask.

She blows out a long breath. "Marcus was...cruel. I don't think he cared about me, just what I could do for him. And that was never enough. He was a jerk." She seems surprised that she said that out loud.

I laugh at her widened eyes. “He was a jerk.”

Madi smiles, taking another gulp of wine. “He beat a boy up for kissing me, ya know. Put him in the hospital.” She shakes her head as she recalls the memory. “He wanted me to stay pure for my marriage.” She uses air quotes around the word pure, scoffing as she says it.

The word pure hangs in the air between us. She told me on our wedding night that she was still a virgin. What she told Rafe Bianchi was nothing but a lie to dissuade him from marrying her.

“And he succeeded,” I say, taking another sip of my wine as I eye her across the table. I’m not ashamed to be happy he succeeded in keeping her pure, even if I disagree with his methods.

Madi scoffs. “You’re all the same, aren’t you?” she asks, leaning in. “Cavemen wanting to make sure no one touches what’s theirs.”

I set my wineglass down slowly. “You are mine,” I say calmly, nodding at her left hand. “That ring on your finger proves it.”

A small smile slowly lifts one side of those perfect pink lips. “But you still haven’t fucked me yet,” she says sweetly.

Blood pumps through my heart at a quickened pace. I haven’t fucked her yet. I’ve been doing my best to let her settle into her new life before I rip the band-aid off. But not doing it doesn’t mean I haven’t thought about it nonstop. Especially since I’ve tasted her pussy.

“I can fix that.”

“Then do it.”

There’s a challenge gleaming in her eyes. If my sweet little bride wants to be fucked, I’m happy to oblige.

TWENTY-FOUR

Madi

Adrian looks nearly feral. His fingers grip the wineglass so hard, I think it'll shatter. He's holding himself back, that much I can tell, and I want to toy with the edges of his control.

"Then do it."

Those three words leaving my lips cause something to snap in my husband. He pushes dishes across the table, knocking over wineglasses that spill their red liquid onto the white linen. I gasp as he reaches for me, fisting the silk material of my tank top. He pulls me up with such force that my chair topples behind me, rattling off the wood floors as it falls.

"Upstairs," he demands, the word leaving his mouth in a low growl. "Upstairs, or I'm going to fuck you over this table, princess, and I would prefer for you to lose your virginity in a bed."

"So you are a caveman?" I say with a tilt of my head, thighs clenching.

Adrian's nostrils flare and he hoists me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, making me squeal. My fists pound against his back as he takes the steps leading toward our bedroom.

"What can I say? It's in my blood," my caveman answers.

When he reaches our destination, he tosses me onto the king-sized bed before his large body is crawling over me, his face hovering above my lips. “Tell me you want this.” His dark eyes bore into mine, a serious expression coating his face. Adrian has forced a lot on me, but for some reason, I truly believe if I told him no, he’d back off and leave me alone.

Without thinking, my hand reaches up, stroking the side of his face. There’s a few days’ worth of stubble growing there, and the bruises from his interaction with John still linger, only a pale fading yellow color left. He’s beautiful, though, even with the remnants of the bruises. With his dark eyes and perfect hair, the way his jawline looks like it’s been sculpted from marble. I’ve spent so much time hating this face...and now...

Now, I lean up, pressing my lips softly against his in a gentle kiss. Adrian’s eyes drift closed, and he kisses me back with the same tenderness.

“I want this,” I whisper against his mouth.

That’s all he needs to hear before he’s deepening the kiss, his tongue spearing my lips and opening me up so he can devour me. Electricity sparks up my spine, zaps of excitement bolting through my body and making my stomach flutter. Suddenly, his arm sneaks under my waist, flipping us over so I’m straddling his legs and he’s beneath me. His fingers fist at my top, pulling until the little pearl buttons keeping the material closed go flying across the room.

I suck in a breath as Adrian slides the fabric from my arms. Sitting up, he finds the clasp of my bra and rids me of that as well, freeing my tits so his mouth can find my nipples. My head drops back as his tongue sweeps over the swollen peaks.

“Fuck,” I hiss.

Deft fingers smooth down to my waist, unclasping the button on my jeans. He pushes me so I land with my back on the mattress as he tugs the denim material down my legs. Once he has me in nothing but a pair of black lace panties, he pauses, dark eyes roaming over me like a predator admiring his prey.

“Bellissima,” he hums his praise over me, eyes locked onto my nearly naked body. “Tell me, princess, have you ever had a man here?” His finger gently presses against my lips. Heat rises on my cheeks. He knows I’m a virgin; is he checking to make sure I’ve never been touched by a man whatsoever? I shake my head. “Words,” he urges.

“No,” I whisper, and he groans in response.

“And here?” This time, he trails his finger down my throat, over my breasts and abdomen until he lands at my sex.

“You already know-”

“Answer me,” he demands.

“No.”

Pleased with himself, he moves his finger low, circling my dark hole through my panties. I swallow hard. “And here?” he asks.

“No.” I shake my head.

A rumbling groan leaves my husband’s lips, and he leans forward, sealing his lips against mine in another heated kiss. “I’m going to take all of those holes.” His voice is so deep, eyes darkening. “I’m going to bring you so much pleasure, you’re going to beg to have me inside of you every night, princess.”

“That’s a lot of talk.” I try to keep my voice even as I sass him, but inside, I’m quivering, waiting for his touch. “Prove it.”

Those words light up his eyes, and before I can take another breath, his mouth is on me, his kiss demanding as I feel his finger pull at the lace of my panties until the material snaps. And then he’s moving lower, a trail of wet kisses in his wake until he reaches my pussy.

“You want me to prove it?” He looks up, the sight of his face above my most intimate parts sending a thrill down my spine. “Oh, I’ll prove it.”

He licks me slowly, tauntingly at first. Until my fingers are fisting the sheets and it takes effort for me to not grind against his face. And then he picks up the pace, his tongue working circles over my clit while he brings a finger to my sex. It slips in easily, and I can hear how wet I am as he works the digit in and out.

I think I should be embarrassed by how quickly I let my husband between my legs, but I’m not. I can’t be. Not when pleasure is coiling at the base of my spine, wrapping around my core, threatening to explode any second now. I’m grinding against his face, my fingers wound in his hair.

“Please.” The word flies from my lips, my mind so focused on summing.

“That’s it,” Adrian hums against my pussy. “Come on your husband’s tongue like the dirty girl you are. I want to taste you before I fuck you, princess.”

A rush of ecstasy barrels through me, tearing cries from my throat as my body trembles. And it keeps going as Adrian forces me right back to the edge. Even as I try to pull away, he holds me in place, his tongue lashing over my clit until I’m nothing but a weightless sack of bones, my body a victim of too much pleasure.

“Delicious,” Adrian murmurs, his tongue darting over his lips. “You taste so sweet, princess.”

My skin feels like it’s been set ablaze, every nerve ending lighting up. When Adrian rubs his hands over my body, the feel is electric. And then he strips himself of his dress shirt, and all I can focus on is his beautifully sculpted body. Those morning workouts have turned him into some kind of Greek god. His pants follow suit, dropping from his waist, exposing his lean and muscular thighs. My husband is a sight to behold.

And then, my eyes focus on his cock bobbing between us.

Fuck no.

It’s long and thick, way too much to fit inside me. I ache just thinking about how his massive member would stretch me out.

“No.” I try to move, but Adrian’s hands are on me, pinning me back onto the bed. “That’s never going to fit-”

“Trust me, princess. I’ll make it fit.” He leans in, his lips taking mine in a dirty kiss. I can taste myself on him. Fingers find my nipples, pinching the tight buds as his tongue invades me. He’s bringing me back to that hazy lust-filled space in my brain. My clit starts to throb, already desperately wanting more, anything this man has to offer.

“I’ll take it slow,” he says softly, and then he lines himself up at my entrance, thrusting inside me as he takes my mouth once more. His kiss is a distraction, but I accept it willingly as he stretches me open. Slowly, he pushes farther, and my breath catches. There’s a moment of pain, something stretching too far, but Adrian kisses me through it, his fingers taunting my nipples. And then he pulls back, pushing in again,

and it's not as bad as the first time.

"How are you doing, baby girl?" he asks, his eyes peering down into mine, studying my reaction.

"Okay," I whisper. The pain is becoming nothing more than a dull ache, outshadowed by the buzzing need in my core. He thrusts inside me again, and it's less painful, maybe even good. My husband's eyes are still taking me in, assessing. Making sure I'm not lying. And I'm not. I desperately want more of this, of him.

"Fuck me," I tell him.

"You dirty girl," he murmurs, a smile ghosting his lips. "Anything you want, princess." And then he pulls back, thrusting in harder this time. Leaning back on his thighs, he spreads my legs wide, watching as his cock enters me. "Fuck, that's beautiful," he growls.

His fingers rub my clit again, circling over the bundle of nerves while his cock works in and out of me. Eyes closing, my back arches with pleasure, losing myself to the feeling of him filling me completely.

"Open your eyes," Adrian growls. "I want you to watch me fuck your pretty cunt as you come. I want you to know exactly whose cock is making you feel this way."

A strangled moan leaves my lips, and I open my eyes, watching my husband as he thrusts inside me. And when I come again, it's like falling over a cliff into clear blue water. I'm weightless, screaming out God knows what until the pleasure consumes me.

Adrian follows me over, pulling his cock from inside me and squirting his cum onto my stomach with a groan. It feels obscene to have him paint me like this, like he's

visually claiming me.

And for some reason, that only makes me like it more.

TWENTY-FIVE

Adrian

There's a dark-haired vixen running circles through my mind when I should be focused on my work. On my revenge. But there's nothing in my head except the taste of Madi's lips, the sweet noises she makes when I bury my tongue in her cunt, the way her eyes rolled back when I thrust deep inside her.

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I try to pull the addiction from my head. I've never been addicted to anything; no vice has ever been strong enough to wrap its claws around me and dig in.

Until her.

"Congratulations." Fede's voice breaks through my inner turmoil. "You're officially on Sam Costello's defense team."

I've been so wrapped up in Madi, I almost forgot what's been happening outside the four walls of my house. There's a civil war, and I have myself trapped in the midst of it. Trapped is the wrong word. If I play all my cards right, I won't be trapped at all.

I'll be the one pulling the cards from the bottom and toppling the tower.

"Good job," I say to my brother. Fede stops in front of my desk, his head tilting as he looks me over.

“You look...better.”

I’m still bruised, mostly in places my suit covers, but I am better than I was a week ago. I have a sneaking suspicion my newly doting wife has something to do with that.

“Thanks,” I mutter. “What else?”

“Sam wants to meet with you. I scheduled an attorney client meeting at the prison for you tomorrow. One p.m.”

“Good.” I lean back in my seat. “I think it’s about time I talk to the Costello prodigy, see what his angle is in this thing.”

Fede slides into the seat across from my desk. “Are you going to do what he’s asking? Get him out of prison?”

A small smile rises on my lips. “If I get Sam Costello out of prison, he’s going to kill Damien Romano.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Fede asks, not following my logic, yet.

“Not at all. That’s one more Costello man gone. And if I follow him...then I can put him right back behind bars. If I’m lucky, him and John Vitale.”

Fede grins as he processes my plan.

We’re only a few chess moves away from having all the Costello men dead or in prison.

At the end of the day, the only one left standing will be me.

Royal Street is a hub for artists, so it seems fitting that Madi's studio is among them. According to Marcus, Carmine Sr. bought the studio for Madi as a birthday gift when she turned eighteen, much to Marcus's chagrin. He was more worried about marrying her off to someone than her being able to explore her passion.

I never cared one way or another if she had the studio. But now, knowing that she spends most of her days here or frolicking through the French Quarter suddenly has me curious about what my little minx is doing in here all day.

I nod at David as I turn the knob on the studio door, finding it open. Ever since John kidnapped me and killed the guard I had on Madi, I've had David watching her. Not that I think John or Sam would do anything to hurt their cousin, but still, it bothered me that they were able to get so close.

The door opens right up for me, and it's on the tip of my tongue to chastise her for being so reckless as to keep the door unlocked, but then I spot her. She's at a wheel in the back corner of the studio, wearing overalls that are coated in clay and nothing but a sports bra underneath. She's a little temptress looking like that. Even covered in the gray mud that runs up her arms, I still want to pick her up, bend her over the table in the center of the studio, and have my way with her.

She's too distracted by her work to notice me, which gives me a moment to look around the studio. It's filled with stuff. Paint bottles, abandoned canvases, cups of brushes, buckets filled with who knows what, some of them open with gray sludge spilling over the sides. The whole space seems to have a dusting of old clay everywhere. I find a shelf with colorless pieces that look like they're drying — bowls, mugs, planters. And then on the shelf next to it looks to be finished pieces. I laugh when I see them. There's a whole shelf of mugs with what looks to be boobs carved into the material. On another shelf, there are ones with the breasts molded to the outside, complete with little nipples. Some have uneven boobs and there are even a few where one breast is missing entirely, instead in its place is what looks to be a

scar. For breast cancer, I assume.

“What are you doing here?” Madi’s voice sounds panicked, and I watch as the piece spinning on the wheel collapses beneath her fingers. She huffs and lets her foot off the pedal, bringing the wheel to a stop. Grabbing a rag from the table next to her, she wipes the gray sludge from her hands and stands, looking at me.

“I came to visit my wife. Is that a crime?”

“No.” She exhales a long breath. “I just wasn’t expecting you.” She finishes cleaning her hands and tosses the rag to the side, landing back on the table.

“Is that ruined?” I nod to the smushed piece on the wheel.

“Yeah.” She nods. “But I’ll reuse the clay, turn it into something else.”

“That’s kind of...beautiful.”

“Yeah...” She smiles a little, just the corner of her lips tilting up. “That’s kind of what I like about this place.” Turning from me, she grabs something else from the table. For a second, I think she’s about to strangle me with the wire that’s connected with two small wood handles on either end, but she goes to the wheel, using the wire to remove the demolished piece. Once cut from the wheel, she tosses it into one of the sludge buckets and goes to the sink to wash her hands.

“So,” she says, looking over her shoulder, “did you need something?”

“I just wanted to see the place where my wife spends all her time,” I say as I take a step toward her.

“Jealous much?” she asks with a sly grin.

“Me? Jealous?” I chuckle darkly. “I seem to be jealous of everything you touch, princess. Of everything you lay your eyes on. Anything that gets your attention. Maybe I’m just a jealous bastard, but I want all of your focus to myself.”

Madi’s tongue darts out to wet those pink lips. She watches me like she’s not quite sure how to respond to that declaration. “You’re gonna get that nice suit dirty.”

“Fuck this suit. I’ll just buy another one.”

A laugh leaves her mouth, and I love the sound of it. I want to hear it again and again for the rest of my life.

I toss the suit jacket, letting it land on a dirty chair. She’s right; by the time I leave this place I’ll be covered in the clay she loves so much. There’s nothing wrong with that, though, I think, being covered in something she loves.

I stalk toward her, and she presses her back against the counter. When I reach her, I use my arm to swipe the counter behind her clear.

“Adrian!” she squeals as I lift her onto the surface.

“Whatever I broke, I’ll buy you new ones. Ten of each if you want.”

There’s that giggle again. It sounds like heaven from her lips, and I relish it.

I unclasp the fastens of her overalls, tugging the denim material down until it reaches her hips. She lifts them for me so I can free her from the fabric. She’s left in front of me in the black sports bra and a pair of hot pink cotton panties. There’s something alluring to me about how they don’t match, about how simple the cotton is, it even has a little bow on the front. I flick my finger over it before I tug the material off.

“This too.” I nod to the bra. Madi does that one, pulling the fabric over her head and freeing her magnificent tits. I lean forward, running my tongue over one nipple while I use my hand to pinch the other. Her head tilts back, a sensual moan crawling up her throat. I feel her hands come around me, pulling me closer.

Licking my way up from her nipples to her mouth, I want to taste every inch of her. She smells like sweat and clay mixed with the jasmine body wash she uses every day. I inhale deeply, committing the scent to memory.

“Adrian.” My name is spoken so low and filled with desire, it stirs a beast within me. I want to hear it again. I pinch one of her delicate nipples.

“Say that again,” I demand.

“Adrian.” This time, it’s even more sexual, sawing through any threads of control I have left with ease.

My mouth finds hers, taking it in a bruising kiss. This is harder than I was the first time. She was a virgin, and I wanted to take it easy on her, not bruise or damage her. But she’s not a virgin anymore.

“I want to taste you,” I speak into her mouth, my arms wrapping around her body and pulling her from the counter. I’m not even thinking about the concrete floor as I lay her down. The only thoughts in my head are centered around tasting her sweet pussy again.

I part her legs, crawling between them. As soon as my tongue runs over her cunt, her back arches off the ground and her fingers find my hair. As I lap at her core, she rewards me with sweet sounds.

“Adrian, fuck yes!” My name on her lips will never get old; the sound is its own

aphrodisiac, and when she comes, it's the euphoric sound.

"I need to fuck you," I growl as I lift her hips and position myself between her legs. Her eyes look up at me in a daze as I push into her. She's wet and ready for me, another delicious moan falling from her parted lips as I fill her to the hilt. Pulling back, I thrust in again, losing myself in her already.

My thumb finds her clit, stroking her like a violin to elicit more of those sounds. Her pussy squeezes my cock like a vise, and I know I'm seconds from combusting.

"That's it, princess. Milk my cock like a good little slut."

Madi screams my name as she comes, her pussy convulsing around me until I follow her over that edge.

The cold concrete floor feels good against my back as I roll off my wife. She has a glow about her, fully satisfied, as she curls into my side.

The shelf of boob mugs looks at me, and I can't help but laugh as I press a kiss to her head.

"What's with all the tits?"

TWENTY-SIX

Madi

I 'm home the next evening, lounging in a pair of sweats and replaying every moment with Adrian this week.

I'm crazy.

I have to be.

Because there's no way I'm falling for my arranged husband.

I'm in the process of trying to convince myself I'm just doing this for Sam, when Adrian walks through the front door, a gorgeous woman with pink hair following behind him. Immediately, my stomach drops at the sight of her. Feelings of dread fill my stomach. Is he over me already? The logic is drifting from my brain, being replaced with jealousy as I watch the pink-haired girl smile as Adrian leads her inside. She's wearing a fitted black dress with a black choker and matching heeled boots. She's way cooler than me.

"What's going on?" I sit up straighter.

"This is Ashley." Adrian gestures to the girl without even looking at her. "She's here to fix your hair."

My brain freezes. Of all the scenarios I concocted in my head, that was not one of

them. “What? What are you talking about?”

Adrian takes three measured steps toward me, bending slightly as he takes a lock of my dark hair between his fingertips. “Do you like this color, princess?” His voice is serious, not flirtatious like it’s been the last few days.

Still confused, I ask, “What?”

“Or would you rather it be blue again? Because I know it’s not my hair, but I preferred it when it was blue.”

I’m not sure what to say. It’s taking me a moment to process his words. He preferred my hair when it was blue? The color everyone around me hated and my mother forced me to dye this neutral shade. “Are you saying...?”

“Dye it blue again. Or dye it whatever color you want. As long as you’re still you, it doesn’t matter what color your hair is.”

I feel tears prick at my eyes and I push them down. That’s oddly sweet for the man in front of me. The one who forced me down the aisle. But I guess I wouldn’t be married to him if it wasn’t for the blue hair... since that was what drove my other suitor away and Adrian stepped into his place effortlessly.

“Okay.” I swallow, trying not to cry at the nice thing he’s doing for me. He can’t possibly know how much my hair meant to me. It’s just a color, after all.

“Great!” Ashley claps her hands. “I’ll get everything set up.”

Ten minutes later, Ashley has turned Adrian’s kitchen into a makeshift hair salon. I’m sitting in one of the dining room chairs with a cape draped over me while she mixes up the perfect shade of teal blue. Adrian sits at the counter on one of the bar

stools, typing away on his phone. Every few minutes, he looks up, making sure I'm still there.

I can't describe the feeling that's swirling around in my chest. It's an odd sensation. I feel...happy. I've felt happy before in my life, but it was a feeling that came far and few between and only when I was away from my family. It's always felt like it was going to fade, like it would never last because the other shoe would always drop.

Is that what's going to happen now?

Adrian's being sweet, but no one has ever really been there for me in this life. Trusting him is difficult. But as Ashley begins to apply the dye to my hair, I can't help but feel grateful. He literally hired a hairdresser to come to his home to give me the hair I so desperately miss.

It was my one attempt at independence, and my mother stripped it away from me. And now, he's telling me it doesn't matter what color my hair is.

Butterflies flutter in my stomach, another strange feeling I never really experienced before him. Adrian is growing on me, and I don't know how to handle it. I think I'm falling for him harder every day. And I don't think I can convince myself it's just for Sam anymore.

An hour later, once the dye is washed from my hair and Ashley dries the locks and curls them, she reveals the final product.

The girl in the mirror has dark roots that ombre into teal blue and a wide smile on her lips. It looks even better than it did before.

"I love it," I say, smiling.

My husband smiles back at me. “I love it too,” he says, pressing a tender kiss to my forehead.

As our eyes meet in the mirror, both of us smiling, I forget how we got here. All the family drama and obligations. The war that’s going on and how I’m meant to convince him to help Sam. It all slips from my mind, and for a second, I think this is what it would feel like to be a normal couple deep in love.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Adrian

Madi is huffing and puffing as she flings clothes from her closet. I inhale a breath as I work on my tie. One more huff and a dress comes flying my way.

“Okay,” I sigh. “What’s going on?”

My blue-haired bride comes to the doorway of the walk-in closet. “I hate everything in here.”

“That’s a lie. You have no problem finding something to wear every day. And no problem spending money on that wardrobe of yours.”

Madi scoffs. “What’s yours is mine and all that, husband. ” She flips a strand of her newly blue hair over her shoulder. “Maybe you should have married someone with less expensive taste.”

I chuckle, moving toward her so I can wrap an arm around her waist and pull her slight frame against mine. She’s not dressed yet and we need to leave in ten minutes to make her family’s get-together. “What’s really going on, princess?”

White teeth pull her bottom lip between them, and her dark eyes look down, away from me.

“Tell me,” I say, lifting her chin with my forefinger so she’s forced to meet my eyes.

“My mother.” She sighs. “She’s gonna flip the fuck out when she sees me.”

Ah, the hair.

To me, Madi has always seemed like such a strong spitfire of a woman. I didn’t think she was intimidated by anything. Seeing this vulnerability over her mother tugs at something in my chest.

“So?”

Madi rolls her eyes. “You don’t get it.” She tries to pull herself from my grasp, but I stop her, pulling her back against my chest tight.

“No, I get it. I don’t understand why you’re bothered. What does her opinion matter? The woman I know doesn’t give a fuck what other people think about her.”

She smiles a bit at that. “You’re right.”

“I’ll tell you what, princess. If you’re a good girl and get a pretty dress on this body in the next ten minutes, I’ll give you a reward when we get back later tonight.

A brightening grin spreads on her pretty face. “Yeah? Promise.”

“Promise.”

Ten minutes later, we’re in the car with Madi dressed in a pale blue sundress that I have the urge to rip off her body. It complements her blue hair that falls in soft curls down her back. Twenty after that, we’re pulling up to her family’s mansion outside the French Quarter.

The Costello brood is thinner than it was four years ago when I started working with

Marcus. He's gone, as is his uncle, Carmine Sr. died of cancer about a year ago, and the oldest Romano girl committed suicide about three years before that to avoid an arranged marriage. The youngest Romano girl ran away to New York on the day of her arranged marriage. And Sam still sits in a prison cell in Orleans Parish. Of all the Costellos, all that's left is Caterina and Madi, Damien and Carlotta, John and his parents, Cosetta and James. They fill in the gaps with their capos and the wives, though. Even some children run through the back gardens, making the place feel livelier.

No wonder Madi is anxious; all the cousins she leaned on are gone. Except for John, who's a fucking psychopath. I groan as Madi makes a beeline for him. The last thing I want to do is talk to the man who kidnapped me and had me beaten to send a message. On his arm is the small brunette who smiles brightly when she sees Madi.

"Your hair!" Zoe shouts, immediately running her fingers through the blue locks. "It looks so good."

"Thank you." Madi flips some over her shoulder. She's grinning, and I can't get over how much I like the sight of it.

"You like her." The words are deadpan leaving John's lips. Not a trace of emotion behind them. The empty look on his face is concerning. I've worked with a bunch of criminals as a defense attorney, but none of them were quite like John Vitale.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I make my way to the bar to get a whiskey, hoping John won't follow me. Of course he does.

"It's not a bad thing," he says as I order my drink. "It's good motivation."

I can't even say that John is cocky or smug. The way he talks is so even, so void of emotion, that I don't think he's taunting me as much as he's making an observation.

“I’m working on it,” I say, tossing the whiskey back and sliding the glass in front of the bartender for a refill. “I have a meeting with him tomorrow.” I don’t say Sam’s name for worry that someone will overhear me. Damien is here, wandering around somewhere behind me. For the moment, I need to keep my double play a secret. John knows I’m working with Damien, but Damien doesn’t know that I’m working with John. And neither knows I plan to fuck them both over.

“Good.” John nods, then takes another sip of his drink. “The quicker you do your job, the sooner this will all be over. In the meantime, I have another task for you.”

I withhold the groan building in my chest. I have no desire to do any more favors for John, but if I want to keep him from getting suspicious that I’m up to something, the best move is to play along. Even if I don’t want to help him.

“What is it?”

“Draw up some papers for me.” His lips twist into a smile. Whether he means it or if it’s an act, I’m not sure. “I want Saints and Sinners in my name.”

I take a sip of my whiskey just in time to nearly spit it out. “What?” If I draw up paperwork that puts Saints and Sinners in John’s name, Damien will surely kill me.

I’m stuck between be killed or be killed.

“Why?”

“Just do what I say, yeah?” John pats my shoulder right as Damien approaches us. I take another sip of whiskey to wash down the bitter taste in my mouth.

“Uncle.” John nods to him—what should be a sign of respect, but we all know it isn’t. This family is still suspicious that John is the reason Marcus isn’t here anymore.

The fact is glaringly obvious from the way Caterina watches him with malice. Not that anyone will do or say a thing. Damien benefited from John's actions, and the women all act like they have no idea what their family is involved in. Except Madi. I can see her peeking at me, worry etched on her face.

I think my little wife is falling for me.

The thought blooms in my head, then travels directly to my heart. We've turned a corner recently, and it's not just sex between us anymore. John might be right; I might also be falling for my wife.

"John," Damien says, almost dismissively to his nephew. John doesn't need much more of a hint. He tilts his head to us and walks away without any more of a goodbye.

"What did he want?" Damien asks gruffly. He's wearing black slacks, but his suit jacket is abandoned, and the top buttons of his shirt are undone. The New Orleans heat has him sweating, drips running down his temple. He takes a handkerchief from his pocket and dabs at the moisture.

"Just trying to get to know me." I shrug. "I think he's feeling a little protective over Madi."

Damien snorts. "Him and his cousin both. They got that from Junior. He put fucking women on a pedestal. If he were alive, arranged marriages would be banned from this family." Damien snorts like he told a funny joke.

Part of me wonders if the girls would be better off if Junior was here.

Then Marcus wouldn't have been able to promise Madi to me like she was nothing but an object to be traded and sold.

My eyes land on my girl, still talking to Zoe, who's now been joined by John. She'd probably be happier if I wasn't in her life.

I chuckle anyway to placate him. "Well, he's not here."

Damien grins. "That's right." He clinks his glass against mine like we're cheering for the fact that his brother-in-law is dead. "Let's get a cigar, hmm?" It sounds like a question, but it's not. So I nod and follow Damien as he leads me inside to the office that used to belong to Marcus and his father before him. Seems like a death sentence to be in the office when you think about all the men who once inhabited it.

Damien rounds the desk, pulling a box of Cubans from one of the drawers. He meets me on the other side, handing me a cigar and gesturing for me to sit in one of the deep red leather chairs. Lighting his cigar first before handing the lighter to me, he leans back in his seat, inhaling a puff of smoke. It blows from his lips in thick white clouds as I light up mine. I still hate smoking; I have to hide my grimace as I puff my own cigar. Disgusting.

"So, how's it going?" There's more to that question left invisibly lingering between us.

What he means is: how is getting rid of Sam going ?

"I joined his defense team," I say, taking another puff of the disgusting cigar.

Damien raises one eyebrow, looking at me skeptically.

"I'm going to work it from the inside," I say. "Join his defense team while I figure out the best way to fuck him over."

"Staying in prison isn't enough, you know that, right?" Clouds of white smoke blow

from his lips. “That boy is determined.”

I swallow my laugh. I know he’s determined from experience. He sent his psychopath cousin after me to make sure I switched sides.

“I’ll be able to handle it,” I assure him.

Before Damien is able to respond, I hear a shriek that sounds suspiciously like Madi, followed by, “Get off me!”

I’m out of my chair in an instant, my cigar landing in the ashtray. I take the hall quickly, leading myself back to the patio where I find my bride pushing her mother away from her.

“You look ridiculous!” Caterina shouts. They’re making a scene, people are gathered around the stone patio, watching the fight between mother and daughter.

“Your opinion doesn’t matter.” Madi’s fists clench by her sides, her cheeks red. She’s pissed.

“What’s going on?” I ask, stepping forward and putting an arm between Madi and her mother.

“Her hair.” Caterina waves her hand dramatically, also red in the face - could be from alcohol or anger.

“What about it?”

“It’s blue! ” She huffs.

“It is,” I say calmly. “I never asked you to have it dyed, did I? Now I suggest you

shut the fuck up about my wife's hair.”

Caterina's face pales as she looks at me, shocked. I think she assumed I'd be on her side and want Madi to dye her hair once again to that dark brown color. I bet she never thought it was me who told her to change it back.

“But-”

I wave my hand to cut her off. “I don't care, Caterina. I don't want to hear it. If you can't behave around your daughter, then we're leaving.” I extend my hand to Madi. She takes it immediately, a small smile on her lips.

I don't wait to hear what anyone else says. I just take Madi's hand and lead her back to my car, opening the passenger door for her.

She doesn't get in, though. Instead, her arm wraps around me, and she pushes onto her tiptoes to give me a sweet kiss.

“Thank you,” she says, and the smile on her face is worth it. Worth everything.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Madi

“Y ou promised me a reward if I was good.” I try to make my voice sound sultry as Adrian closes the front door behind us. Truthfully, I’ve been turned on since the moment he told my mother to shut the fuck up . No one has ever stood up for me against her. Even Sam and John would have found a more subtle way to handle the situation. But there was something wildly attractive to me about my husband shutting down the situation with words as sharp as hers.

Husband.

That title is starting to grow on me.

“I did.” Adrian takes off his suit jacket, tossing it over the back of the couch. “Do you think you behaved well tonight, princess?” he asks me as his fingers reach for the cuffs of his white shirt, slowly rolling the material to expose his forearms.

I lick my lips. “Yes.”

“You did get into a bit of a fight, though, no?” His head tilts, one eyebrow lifting with the question we both know the answer to.

I pout. “It wasn’t my fault.”

That makes Adrian chuckle as he switches to cuffing the other sleeve. “Not your

fault.” he repeats with a sly smile. “But still, bratty girls need to be punished, don’t you think? That’s only fair.”

The idea of a punishment has me flushing, my stomach swirling with excitement.

I nod.

“Words, princess. Tell me you want to be punished for being such a little brat.” His sleeves are now both cuffed and he’s standing in front of me, his breath skating over my face as he makes the demand.

“I want to be punished for being such a little brat.” I exhale the words. All thoughts are exiting my brain, too focused on the present moment, of what awaits me.

Adrian grins. “Good girl.”

Heat blossoms in my stomach at his praise. Somewhere in the last month, I’ve become an addict for it. I never thought I’d crave someone’s touch the way I do Adrian’s. And I definitely never thought I’d want to be punished. But then again, Adrian’s punishments always come with a reward.

Adrian wastes no time as his hand comes around the back of my neck, fisting my hair and holding me in place. I suck in a breath. His face is a mere inch from mine. I can smell his cologne, a mixture of sandalwood and citrus blended with the faded scent of the cigar.

“The first time I spanked you, I took it easy on you, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” I breathe.

“I’m not going to be gentle tonight, princess.”

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him not to be gentle with me, but the second I open my mouth, his crashes against mine in a bruising kiss. One hand holds me in place while the other snakes around my waist to pull me into him until I can feel his erection pressing against my stomach. My arms wrap around him, wanting this closeness.

And then he breaks the kiss, spinning me around and pushing me until I'm bent over the back of the couch. My dress makes for easy access, allowing Adrian to flip up the skirt and expose the white lace panties I'm wearing.

"Fuck," he growls. "You've been teasing me all day with this dress, wife. " The way he says wife so possessively sends a tingle of excitement down my spine. Fingers grip around my panties and he tugs back. I gasp as the material tears beneath his fingertips and he tosses the scrap of lace to the side.

"Reach forward, hold on to the cushion," Adrian orders, and my hands move, reaching to grab the edge of the cushion. "Good girl," he purrs as he rubs a palm over my now exposed flesh. "I'm going to enjoy teaching you this lesson, princess."

For a moment, I don't feel him, as his hands leave my body. But then I hear the clink of his belt buckle being undone and the swish of the leather being pulled from his pants. Fuck. I know from the last time he used his belt how badly that hurt.

"Wait-" I push against the cushions to stand, but Adrian is quicker, as his palm finds my back and pushes me down.

"Stay in place," he orders.

I gulp. I can't see what he's doing, but the threat of the belt terrifies me and simultaneously has my clit throbbing with need.

Slowly, he drags the leather over the curve of my ass. A shiver rolls over me at the gentle feeling, knowing in a few moments that it will be replaced with nothing but pain.

“Please,” I whimper.

“What do you think the lesson is here, Madi?” His voice is low and sensual.

“I-I- don’t know!”

“Arguing is beneath you, pretty girl.” For emphasis, he pulls his hand back, and when it comes down, the leather strikes against my flesh. I yelp, my reaction to jump up, but Adrian’s palm is there, pushing me back down as I shake from the feeling of that first strike.

“Next time, you wait for me. Right?”

“Right!” I nod in agreement. “Please, just fuck me!” I shout, trying to wiggle my hips away from the belt.

“Fucking is a reward, princess. You have to earn it first.”

The belt pulls back and strikes again, and then again. I scream and whine with each one, but it doesn’t stop my husband. He keeps going until there’re tears leaking from my eyes and the only word I’m saying is a desperate please on repeat.

“Did you learn your lesson?” Adrian asks me, his palm soothing the reddened flesh.

“Yes!”

“Mhm.” He leans in, swiping the hair from my face and kissing me with tenderness.

“Yeah, baby girl? I’m not sure I heard you say you’re sorry, though. Maybe a few more?”

“No!” I shout. “I’m so sorry. I learned my lesson. I’ll never fight again. Next time, I’ll get you.”

I can feel Adrian smile against my neck. “Good girl,” he whispers, and the praise sends a zap of pleasure between my legs. “Should I kiss it better now?”

“Please,” I mewl.

Adrian drops to his knees, spreading my legs farther apart. I can feel how wet I am, the arousal dripping down my thigh.

“Oh, princess.” Adrian swipes a finger through my slit, gathering my arousal. “You love being punished, don’t you?”

I can’t answer. Can’t breathe as he uses his finger to drag my wetness to my clit, teasing me softly. I need more.

“Answer me.” His free hand smacks down on my already abused ass.

“Yes!” I yelp.

“What a good little slut,” he murmurs before his head dips between my thighs and his tongue drags along my slit.

I should hate being called a slut, but it only seems to make me wetter. Adrian continues to play with me, alternating between lapping at my clit and thrusting his fingers inside me. I’m panting, shaking as I grip the cushions and beg him to make me come.

“Fine,” he says finally. “Since you’ve been such a good little slut, come on my tongue and then I’ll fuck you until I fill you up. Is that what you want?”

“Yes! Please!” I feel desperate in my need for him.

He delivers on his promise, sucking on my clit until I see stars in the back of my eyes. I’m still panting when he thrusts inside of me, his finger finding my sensitive bud and pinching.

“I want you to come again, wife . I want you to come on my cock while I fuck you silly. Can you do that for me?”

“Y-yes!”

Adrian thrusts inside me mercilessly, his finger stroking my clit until I’m screaming his name again.

“That’s it, baby. Come again for me like a good little slut.”

Fireworks replace my nerve endings as I come again, and this time I can feel Adrian grunt as he releases inside me. And when I finally open my eyes, his release drips down my thighs.

TWENTY-NINE

Adrian

I meet Sam Costello behind the bars of the Orleans Parish Prison. As his lawyer, we get to bypass the picnic tables meant for general visits, so instead I'm led to a private room to wait for my client. They bring Sam in with cuffs around his wrists that the guard promptly undoes. The Costello heir gives him a cheeky smile as he hooks the cuffs to this belt and leaves us be.

I don't really want to be here. I want to be back home, fucking my new wife. I'm addicted to her—the taste of her pussy, the sounds she makes when I'm inside her. But I need to focus on the plan. Take down the Costello famiglia.

I was never supposed to become addicted to my sweet little blue-haired minx. And here I am, thinking about her at every turn.

Rubbing his newly freed wrists, Sam turns and looks at me. Outside these walls, I always found the man to be intimidating, but the orange jumpsuit makes him less imposing. He eyes me for a long moment, stretching out his arms before he takes the seat across from me.

“Adrian Russo.” He says my name, and I can't help but feel there's a threat lingering behind it. This isn't the first time we've met, though our other meetings always included Marcus, and I was only there as his attorney, the lawyer who did his bidding.

The tides have turned now with Marcus gone. I don't feel fear, though, no, the feeling that tingles beneath the surface of my skin is still hatred. I'm determined to bring this family down as a consequence of what they did to my family. But so many years of keeping that anger in check have numbed it. And I would be dumb if I didn't feel at least a hint of fear. A sliver of self-preservation.

"Samuel Costello."

Sam grins, his elbows hitting the table. "So you're my lawyer now, huh?"

I nod. In front of me on the shiny silver prison table sits a yellow legal pad and black pen. Sam looks them over, and then trails his eyes up my Tom Ford suit until they reach my face where he meets my gaze.

"You didn't give me much of a choice, did you?"

That makes him chuckle as he leans back against the metal chair he's seated in. "No, I guess I didn't." In another setting, outside of the poorly fitted prison uniform, I think Sam Costello would be charming. Marcus never found him as such, and their interactions never went well, both cousins normally acting out of anger.

"So..." I lean back in my seat, matching his posture. "You wanted me here."

"I did." He nods in agreement. "But first, I know about your father." Sam's stoic, watching my reaction.

My heart thumps loudly in my chest, and I can feel a bead of sweat forming on my forehead. It takes effort not to show him how those words affect me. No one in this family has ever mentioned my father. It's not like I went out of my way to hide it or anything; we have the same last name, for Christ's sake. But not one other person has put those two pieces together.

Except Sam.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to say anything.” Sam continues. “I think I can put the pieces together and you can tell me if I’m right. Yeah?” He doesn’t wait for me to agree. “You were what, ten when your father was killed? Kids have a way of making up their own realities when they’re not given other facts. That’s not me speculating, that’s just psychology.” He gives me another one of his charming smiles, and I think I want to puke. I didn’t make up my reality after my father was murdered.

“So, your dad was a dealer for la famiglia, but he got picked up. Back then, Big Al was running product, and he didn’t care much for people, but he did care about protecting the family. So he wouldn’t have even tried to get your father out—no, instead he went right to cutting his losses. He had your father killed in prison so he couldn’t rat on him. Sound right?”

I purse my lips together, not wanting to give him anything. But his story is right. My father sold drugs for Big Al Ricci, and when he was caught, he wound up dead before a court date was ever even set.

Sam nods, knowing he’s right. “So then my guess is little Adrian didn’t like that. After all, your ma was already gone, leaving you and Federico orphans. I know, you’re nonna took you in; she’s a good woman.”

My jaw tightens when he talks about Nonna. Sam must sense it because he puts his hands up defensively.

“I’m just telling a story,” he muses. “So then what? You’re left to create this story about why my family is the devil. The scum of the earth. The enemy, if you will. You probably plotted for twenty years on how to take us down. And here you are, consigliere, married into the family — you’re well on your way.” He pauses, one eyebrow lifting as he watches me. “Am I right?”

There's an ache in my jaw from how hard I'm clenching it.

"Here's the thing, Adrian." Sam leans forward, elbows resting on the metal table, his voice serious. "If your father had worked for mine, I guarantee he wouldn't be dead. Because my father would have tried to get him off. And if he didn't, then he would have been protected in prison. There are many dealers who came after your father who can attest to that. This family is broken, cracked right down the fucking middle. You just happen to be on the side that's infected with disease. You want to burn them down? I'll hand you the fucking matches. But on this side? Me and John? We don't behave like animals."

His words take a moment to process in my brain. Everything's moving slowly since he brought up my father and all the memories that came up with it. Is he right? If my father had only worked for Junior, would he still be alive?

"Who killed Big Al?" I don't know why I ask the question. I don't know why I think it's important. But I know he didn't just blow himself up; that man had been making bombs for years.

A sly smile stretches across Sam's lips. "Depends. Have you picked a side? Because we're going to war, Adrian. And I'm happy to tell you all our secrets, but I need to know you're devoted. So, are you?"

Am I? Am I devoted to this family that took everything from me? No, absolutely not. But there's a part of me that wants to trust Sam. I can't, though. Not when I know what this family has done to mine and countless others. But words are just that, words. I can promise him now and stab him in the back later. God knows that's what they did to my dad.

"Yes," I tell him.

“My father blew him up with one of his own bombs.”

Air swooshes from my lungs. Does Madi know that’s how her father was murdered?
By his own family with his own bomb?

“That seems fitting.”

Sam chuckles. “So, now that we got that out of the way. How are you going to get me out of here?”

When I finally leave Orleans Parish Prison, I have a mix of emotions. I tug off my tie in the car and inhale a deep breath. Sam is sending me to New York to meet with reinforcements. Apparently, there’s a fixer out there who’s loyal to him and will help me come up with a plan to get him out of prison. I’m so close to getting what I want; I can still fuck Sam over, can still take down this entire family.

But right now, all I can think about is getting back to Madi.

She’s on the couch when I get home, her feet propped up on the coffee table while she flips through some shitty gossip magazine. Gray sweatpants cover her legs and the matching top is too short, exposing her stomach. Her blue hair is piled in a messy bun on top of her head. She smiles when she sees me.

Absolutely fucking gorgeous.

I don’t take my time with her tonight, not when every fiber of my being just needs to be inside her. I don’t even take her upstairs like a gentleman. Instead, I rip the magazine from her hands and toss it to the side, flipping her over so she’s draped over the arm of the couch and pull off the sweats.

“Adrian-”

“Shh.” I hush whatever she was about to say. “I need to be inside you, princess. Any objections?”

I give her a moment to answer while I free my cock from my slacks, but I take her silence as consent, and once I’m free, I push deep inside her.

We both groan with the feeling as her tight pussy grips my cock. Fucking her clears all the noise from my head, silences all my demons. Who knew that I would find solace in the pussy of the daughter of the man who killed my father?

I take her rough and hard and relish the way she moans through it, loving every second.

“Touch yourself,” I demand, and her small hand moves to her wet clit, rubbing frantically. “Come,” I say once I know she’s close. “Come for me, princess. Show me what a good girl you are.”

I can tell when she comes, the sound from her lips is sweet and loud and her pussy squeezes me. I follow her over that cliff, letting her milk every drop from my cock until we collapse together on the couch.

Madi wraps her arms around me and presses a soft kiss to my lips.

For a moment, I think I don’t deserve her sweetness, not when I’m still planning to ruin her family. Will she still want me after that? She says she hates them...but she also said she hated me and now look at her.

“What’s going on?” she asks, tapping my forehead with her pointer finger. “I think you’re lost in here.”

She’s right. I am lost in my head. I thought fucking her would right me, but even that

can't clear the thoughts that Sam provoked. I was doing so well, keeping everything neatly organized, tucked away in their own mental boxes. But now it feels like everything has come out, chaos swarms around in my head and my plans feel muddy at best.

"I met your cousin Sam today."

Madi's lips form a perfectly round O. "Oh, and how did that go?"

I don't answer her question. "If you had to pick a side..." I trail off, but Madi knows exactly where I'm going.

"Sam," she says quickly, no hesitation. "I would pick Sam's side."

"Why?" I shouldn't be surprised. She's told me over and over what she thinks of her mother, and I saw firsthand how her brother treated her.

"Sam has always been good to me. He and John got Lana out of her arranged marriage; they actually care about us. My family just sees me as a pawn in their game. I trust Sam."

Maybe she's right, maybe Sam isn't the bad guy, but he sure as hell isn't the good guy. Is anyone in this family really good? There's still blood on his hands.

"He wants me to go to New York City." Madi's eyes light up when I say it. That's where Lana is. "He set Naz up with a family there that could help me get him out of prison. Would you like to go with me? You can see your cousin."

"Yes," she answers quickly with a blinding smile.

THIRTY

Madi

We're going to New York City. I practically squeal with excitement every time I think about it. I get to see Lana! I haven't seen her since the video call on my wedding day, and now I get to see her in person. I have a mental list running of all the things I want to tell her, starting with Adrian. I glance over at my husband.

We're sitting on Sam's private plane, and he's lost in thought in the seat across from me, chin resting on his palm while he looks out the window.

Adrian was shaken up after he saw Sam in prison. I'm not sure what he said to him, but it left him reeling. Unbuckling my seat belt, I move from my chair to him, setting my weight gently on his lap. Instinctively, his arms come around me and his lips find my neck, pressing a chaste kiss in the space above my collarbone.

"Hi," he murmurs softly.

"Hi," I say back. "What's going on?"

Adrian looks away, and I don't think he's going to let me in. And then he says, "Your cousin." He sighs. "He got in my head."

"How so?"

Adrian shakes his head. I can tell he's going to shut me out again, that he doesn't

want to tell me whatever it is Sam did to get him stuck like this.

I slide out of his arms until my knees hit the floor of the plane. “Fine,” I say. “Don’t tell me. But let me help you then, get you out of here.” I point to his head.

A smile tugs at the corners of Adrian’s lips as he realizes what I’m doing. “Yeah?” he asks, eyes searching mine. “You want to take my cock, you needy girl?”

I grin as I unfasten his belt and pull his zipper down. Adrian helps me rid him of his pants and the boxers that are underneath until his cock is free in front of me.

I’ve never given a blow job before, so I try not to show any hesitation as I wrap my hand around his cock, squeezing gently as I pull up. Adrian groans, his head falling back onto the seat.

“Use your mouth,” he demands.

Slowly, I drop my head, extending my tongue to lick along the side of his cock, eliciting another groan from my husband.

“That’s it, princess. Show me what a little slut you are.”

The words, dirty and demeaning, fuel me. I lick from bottom to top once more, swirling my tongue over the head. I can tell from the way Adrian’s fists curl around the chair that I’m doing a good job. Finally, I open my mouth, letting my lips wrap around him as I lower on his cock.

“Fuck,” Adrian hisses.

I flatten my tongue against his member and take him as far as I can. I pull back before I can gag, sucking in a deep breath before I take him again.

“Good girl,” Adrian praises. “Now take me deeper. You can do it.”

This time, I lower my head farther, trying to breathe through the feeling of him at the back of my throat.

“Atta girl.” His fingers reach forward, taking my hair and wrapping it around his hand. I pull up, sucking in another breath of air. “Do you trust me?” he asks.

Do I? A month ago, I would have said fuck no. But that’s not what my gut says now. I nod eagerly. “Yes, I trust you.”

Adrian smiles at that, displaying his pearly white teeth as he leans forward to press a kiss to my forehead, his grip still on my head.

“I want to fuck your face, princess, and then when I’m done, I want you to come while my cum is dripping off you. You think you can handle that?” His dark eyes look into mine, waiting for my answer.

“Yes.”

“Open wide. If you need me to stop, tap my thigh twice. Got it?”

“Yes,” I answer, opening my mouth for him.

He guides me back onto his cock, pushing himself farther down my throat than he was before. I inhale through my nose, keeping myself calm as it gets harder to breathe. Adrian groans as he pulls me back by my hair and thrusts back in.

“You’re so perfect like this, princess. My perfect little fuck doll.”

Heat coils in my stomach from the lewd act paired with his dirty words.

“Touch yourself for me.”

Immediately, my hand drifts to my pussy, finding myself wet already. I drag my finger through my slit, gathering my arousal and bringing it to my clit. I circle the bundle of nerves, feeling the pleasure zip through my body while Adrian uses my mouth.

“Don’t come,” he demands. “Not until you’re covered in my cum. Understood?”

I garble some form of yes that’s incoherent with him stuffing my mouth. The muffled answer only makes him chuckle before he continues fucking my face.

I’m covered in a warm haze, pleasure coating my body. His grunts and moans only fuel me, and there’s a tightness in my stomach, a need to come so badly I begin to mewl around his cock.

“That’s it, dirty girl,” he praises. “I know you want to come, but not yet. Keep taking my cock.” My throat feels stretched and full as he guides himself in and out.

“Fuck,” he hisses, and I can tell he must be close to coming. Suddenly, he pulls free from my mouth, his hand stroking his dick until ropes of white cum release, shooting onto my face.

“Come,” Adrian commands.

I do. Coated in his cum, I circle the sensitive nub, not taking long at all before my orgasm hits me. Everything crashes around me, his name on my lips. And when I go limp, Adrian is scooping me up, telling me what a good girl I am.

He sets me down on the seat, getting a wet cloth from the flight attendant’s station to clean me up. Realizing I just had a mind-blowing orgasm in earshot of her has a red

flush of embarrassment rising to my cheeks. Adrian smiles when he sees me with his cum still on my face. Gently, he cleans me with the warm cloth.

“Don’t be embarrassed, princess. You look beautiful with my cum on your skin, marking you. You’re mine.” He leans in, pressing a kiss to my forehead that makes my whole body tingle with warmth.

After he pulls my dress back over my head and puts my panties in place, he tugs me onto his lap, holding me close.

By the time we land in New York, I’m starting to believe that everything is going to be okay.

THIRTY-ONE

Adrian

New York City is busy and loud. Horns screech, and every street is filled with tourists and beggars. I'm not enthused by the sights, but Madi has wide eyes as she takes it all in. The private car Leo De Santis sent for me drops us off in front of a building that looks to be a remodeled warehouse. The sign on the front lists all the businesses that reside here, including King and Associates.

My understanding is that Val King, Leo's wife, created this company back when she was pissed at the man and using her resources to blackmail men for money, and mostly good causes—like not taking advantage of women. Now that her revenge scheme against Leo is done, they work together instead. Mostly still on her good causes, but in some cases, they can be hired out.

What I know is that Leo owed Sam a favor, and he cashed it in on having him protect Lana and Naz when he sent them to New York. Asking for his help in getting him out of prison must tilt the balance, I'd assume. Either way, Sam sent me here to work with Leo and his crew to get him released. The bonus, Madi will get to see her cousin.

My hand is firmly grasped around Madi's as we take the elevator up to the third floor, where the K I've done it countless times. But now it involves a judge known for his harsh sentences and his distaste for organized crime. Honestly, the perfect judge to be on Sam's case.

Luckily for me, Alessio was able to dig up dirt on him. And now all I have to do is convince him that the only way I won't make his shameful secret public is if he dismisses Sam's case.

Should be easy enough.

"Think you can handle this?" Leo asks, one eyebrow raised.

I nod. "I can take care of it."

THIRTY-TWO

Madi

Tipping back the glass, I gulp the rest of the red wine. I've finished my second serving on this lunch outing, and I'm buzzed and happy. Lana squeezes my hand, a smile plastered across her face. It feels good to be back with my cousin and to see her happy. When she left New Orleans, she was miserable. Between the arranged marriage and her awful parents, the only escape she had was Naz, and everyone was trying everything in their power to keep them apart.

It's hard to remember that it was only earlier this year she tried to end her life to escape it all, and now she sits next to me, happier than I've ever seen her.

Lana lifts her glass, and something sparkles from her finger. Her left ring finger. I gasp. "Is that a ring!?" My voice comes out louder than I intended, and Lana laughs, almost spitting out her wine.

She sets down the glass, extending her hand to me to show off the diamond. "We're engaged," she says with a smile.

"Oh my god!" I nearly slip off my chair, reaching over to squeeze my cousin. "I'm so excited for you!"

"You look like you're gonna cry." Her head tilts as she assesses my teary gaze.

"It must be the alcohol," I choke out.

Val laughs across the table. Her cousin Dom joined us for lunch, a fiery redhead with a matching personality. “Oh god,” she groans. “Please don’t make this a sappy girl thing.” She fake gags. “I can’t handle that.”

I wipe a hand under my eyes, trying to prevent any tears from falling. I feel like a sappy girl. I can’t remember the last time I’ve cried. Not when my brother disappeared. And not when I was forced to marry Adrian.

“You just look so happy,” I tell her, holding back my tears.

Lana smiles. “I am happy, Mads. Genuinely, truly happy.”

Dom sticks a finger in her mouth and gags again. “Ugh,” she groans. Val nudges her with her elbow, laughing the whole time.

“Stop it,” Val scolds her cousin. “Clearly, Madi is going through something, and they haven’t seen each other in, what? Six months?”

“Something like that.” I nod.

“Just let them have their moment.”

“Fine.” Dom rolls her eyes.

“So,” Lana says, as she angles her body toward me. “How’s Adrian?” Her eyes are bright, like she can tell something’s going on, that I’m not as miserable as I was the night of my wedding when we last talked.

I reach for my glass, wishing it wasn’t empty so I could chug more liquid courage. “It’s not...bad.”

“Oooh.” Val makes a sound from across the table. “Spill the beans, because can I say, he’s hot as fuck.”

Dom snorts, and I can feel heat rising to my cheeks. If only it was from the alcohol and not the fact that she’s calling my husband hot as fuck, something I already intimately know.

“He’s okay. He’s...not that bad, I guess.”

Lana chuckles. “Not that bad?” She laughs.

“Yeah...he’s nice sometimes.”

Val rolls her eyes this time. “Listen, I get the whole falling for your captor thing. There’s no shame at this table.”

My eyes widen. “I’m not, I haven’t-”

She shakes her head before I can finish my objections. “I saw the way you looked at him back and my office, and I saw the way he looks at you. It’s okay to be in love. Even if it didn’t start out that way.”

I want to pry more into her story if only to get the attention off of me, but Lana interrupts before I can get a question out. “It’s okay to be happy with him, ya know,” she says softly.

I swipe a hand over my face. “I really hated him. At least, I tried to. But...he got under my skin, I guess.” Even just talking about it, my heart races and my skin feels warm. I never intended to fall for Adrian. I wanted to hate him, to make his life miserable. But I don’t hate him.

In fact, I think I've fallen in love with him.

The realization makes my skin feel clammy, and I reach for my wineglass again.

Val and Lana smile. Dom takes another chug of her beer, then asks, "How is he in the sack?" Her crude question has us all bursting into laughter.

I don't tell the girls how I feel about Adrian, but when I see him again, I think I'm finally ready to admit to my husband that I love him.

THIRTY-THREE

Adrian

Madi's in a good mood when we return to New Orleans, though I had to pry her away from her cousin to get her on the plane. She seemed to have a good time with the girls and my heart warmed at the sight of her with new friends looking happy. I make a mental note to get her out of the house more, around people who aren't her awful family. Right after I figure out who she's safe around.

"I'm gonna take a shower." She rises to her tiptoes to plant a kiss on my lips. "Meet me upstairs?" she asks with a devilish glint in her eyes.

"Of course, princess."

I move to my bar cart to make a drink once she's off. I've barely poured the whiskey by the time David enters with a knock. "Boss, Damien is here to see you."

"Fuck," I grumble, checking my watch. It's after eleven. What the fuck is he doing here now? "Let him in," I tell David, who gives me a confirming nod. Seconds later, Damien strolls into my living room, dressed in a three-piece suit with a conspiratory grin stretching across his face. I'm already on edge as he takes a seat on my couch.

"Drink?" I ask, gesturing to the bar cart.

"Whatever you're having." He nods.

I pour him a tumbler of whiskey and bring the glass to him before taking the seat across on the couch. “So,” I start. “What brings you here at this hour?”

He smiles, and the sight makes my stomach uneasy, not that I show a glimpse of the feeling.

“How was your trip to New York?” he asks, taking a sip from his glass, that smile ever present.

A chill skates over my skin, but I shake it off, leaning back in my seat and making sure my uneasiness doesn’t show. This man might not be as bad as Madi’s father, running around the city setting off bombs, but he’s still a cold-blooded killer. And men like him are the most dangerous when they’re trying to solidify their power. Damien might be acting as the boss right now, but he’s not been accepted as such. He needs to squash any defiance to keep his throne, and me going to New York can easily be seen as defiance.

I take another sip of my drink and meet his gaze. “Good,” I tell him simply.

“And tell me,” he says, then leans forward, watching me closely. “How does this little trip of yours help our plan?”

“Sam wants me to get him released.” I continue, staying casual in my delivery.

“And I asked you to keep him in prison.”

“No, you asked me to kill him,” I correct. “And don’t you think it will be easier to kill him on the outside?”

Damien pauses, assessing my words.

“You have more resources out here. In there, John has paid off everyone for his protection. The guards, other gangs. He’s well protected. But out here? You’re the king.”

Damien likes my compliment, I can tell by the way his eyes light up and he relaxes in his seat. “Good points you make there.”

“Plus, Sam thinks I’m on his side. It will be easier for you to get to him if you have someone on the inside, someone he trusts.”

“Someone like you,” Damien finishes with a smile. “That’s a smart plan.”

I grin, extending my glass for him to cheers. “Thank you. And once Sam is gone...” I add as I gesture around us, “this city is yours.”

Damien’s smile widens. I have him hooked. And once I get Sam out of prison, the two of them are going to fight to the death, only one coming out victorious. Doesn’t matter to me who wins, because I plan on catching it all on video and making sure the winner goes to prison for the rest of their lives.

And the Costello family will crumble.

THIRTY-FOUR

Madi

“Plus, Sam thinks I’m on his side. It will be easier for you to get to him if you have someone on the inside, someone he trusts.”

“Someone like you.”

Fire burns through my ears. I can’t believe what I’m hearing. We just went to New York City to figure out a plan to get Sam released from prison. A plan I fully support, having no desire to see my evil uncle in charge of this family.

But that was never Adrian’s real plan.

Adrian wants to set Sam free, just to watch him die. Guilt burns in my stomach.

And I thought I loved him.

I was about to admit to my husband that I love him and then let him fuck my brains out. How stupid of me to think I could ever trust Adrian. Heat blisters through my veins as I pace back and forth in the bedroom. Quickly, I slide under the covers and keep my face away from the door. The only plan I have right now is to pretend I’m asleep and hope Adrian believes me.

I hear his footsteps ascend the stairs, and I squeeze my eyes shut and even out my breathing.

“Madi-” He pauses at the entrance to our room, presumably watching me. He doesn’t speak again, but I listen as he undresses and uses the bathroom before crawling into bed next to me. A large arm wraps around my waist, and he pulls me close to him, pressing a kiss to my shoulder blade.

The lights turn off, and I wait until his breathing steadies beside me.

Tomorrow, I’ll have to come up with a new plan.

Madi

I need you to come by the studio.

Zoe

I have classes today. How urgent?

Madi

Pretty fucking urgent.

Zoe

Got it. I can stop by this afternoon.

Madi

See you soon.

The next morning consists of me drinking far too much coffee and pacing around my studio while texting Zoe.

If Adrian really is about to betray Sam, then I need to warn him, right? But telling Sam likely means that Adrian is going to get hurt...or worse.

I have a headache.

Logically, I drink more coffee. Which does nothing to soothe the pounding in my head, nor the spiral of thoughts whooshing through my brain.

I'm not ready to believe that Adrian is going to betray my family. But I heard him loud and clear. There's no misunderstanding when he flat out told Damien that Sam would be easier to kill outside of prison. But I can't ignore that he asked me which side I would choose, and when I said Sam, he told me he was going to get my cousin out of prison.

I need to talk it out with Zoe before I get my husband killed. But I also know I can't let him get Sam killed either.

I drink more coffee, and when Zoe finally shows up at my studio, I word vomit everything.

How we went to New York and I saw Lana and it was amazing.

How I slept with Adrian. Many, many times now and the sex is better than I could have ever imagined.

And how I think I'm falling... No, scratch that, I know I'm in love with my husband.

And how I also know he's about to betray us.

THIRTY-FIVE

Adrian

I 'm in the middle of watching Judge Henry Langston drink his morning coffee. His wrinkled face is twisted into a frown as he flips through the pages of the newspaper. The sight of the black and white newspaper brings me back to that first morning with Madi in my home, where she insinuated I was an old man for reading from a physical paper before I bent her over the table and punished her smart ass.

Pushing down the fond memories before my cock gets any harder, I try to focus on the judge. In a perfect world, I'd have more time to study his movements before I got him alone and laid out the terms of our arrangement. But I'm lacking time. Pressure from both Sam and Damien has me rushing this plan. My only saving grace is that Alessio was able to give me an outline of his schedule based on his calendar, which the tech wiz kid hacked into somehow. Now, I just have to hope that the man follows his schedule to the T.

"What's he doing?" Fede asks beside me, taking a chug of his own takeout coffee.

"Just reading the paper." I sigh.

Fede sighs, leaning back into his seat. "So, how was New York?"

"I already told you," I say, keeping my focus on the Judge.

"No, not the whole plan part. How was it with Madi?"

Now I move the binoculars to the side and look at my brother. He's been against my marriage to Madi since the second I proposed it. Seeing it as nothing more than a distraction.

"What are you asking?"

"Are you serious about her?" he asks, and I fear if I tell him the truth, that will only make him angry. Fede and I have always been close, and that closeness has been built on our shared need to take down the family that ruined ours.

"I don't know, Fed," I say with a sigh, even though I know I'm lying.

I'm in deep.

I'm in love with Madalena Russo, the daughter of the man who ordered my father's death.

"It doesn't matter," I tell him. "We're still going to take down the Costellos."

"And then what?" he asks, the agitation rising in his words. "You two just ride off into the sunset? It doesn't work like that, Adrian. She's a liability."

"What do you mean?"

The ringing of my cellphone distracts me, cutting off my words. John's name flashes across the screen, and with a groan, I answer.

"What?" I ask, pulling the binoculars back to my eyes right as Judge Langston brings his coffee to his lips for another sip.

"What a lovely greeting," John muses dryly, not a drop of humor lacing his tone.

“Did you draw up that paperwork I asked for?”

A knot twists in my stomach. I did. But I was holding on to it, hoping to avoid becoming a part of whatever game John is playing.

I pull back the binoculars. “Yes.”

“I need you to bring it to the club. Now.”

“I’ll have Fede bring it over,” I say, keeping my eyes on the judge as he flips to the next page of his paper. How long is this man going to sit here, anyway? My plan is to get him in transit between his home and his office, but I can’t do that until he leaves his damn home.

“No. I want you to bring it.”

“I’m busy,” I tell John.

“Then get un-busy.”

I sigh. Conversations with John seem pointless. “I’m trying to get your beloved cousin out of jail. Would you like me to do that or come to the club?”

John chuckles, a deep sound that feels not quite human. “I’d like you to do both, Adrian. Are you having trouble with task management?”

Dropping the binoculars, I rest my forehead in my palm. This guy’s a psychopath, and if I keep pushing, he very well might kill me.

“Fine,” I say with a sigh. “I need to stop by the office and grab it, and then I’ll be there.”

“Good boy,” John says, making my skin crawl before he hangs up the phone.

“Watch the judge,” I tell Fede, handing over the binoculars. “I have to go.” Exiting the car, I walk the block to where I parked mine, Fede’s words still echoing in my head.

She’s a liability.

It takes me twenty-five minutes to get from Langston’s house to my office and another fifteen to get to Saints and Sinners. The strip club looks dreary in the light of day, a painted black brick exterior with neon lights that boast the club’s name turned off.

John is outside, leaning on the side of a sleek black Porsche. Behind him, I recognize Roman, a fixer who works for Sam. The same one who was at my house with Madi the night John and his goons kidnapped me. Speaking of goons, the set of them is also here. Tommy and Christopher, the two assholes who beat the shit out of me while I was tied to a chair.

What a lovely reunion.

“Did you bring ’em?” John asks as I exit my car.

I wave the manila envelope with the papers in question. John extends his hand, taking the envelope from me and unsealing it. He leafs through the documents, checking that I’m not fucking him over. A good call on his part, because I did consider handing him a stack of blank papers.

“The club is currently owned by Rocco Santorre, that’s who Damien gave it to after Marcus’s...disappearance.” John chuckles at my wording, both of us knowing Marcus didn’t just up and disappear. “You’ll need his signature-” I reach forward,

flipping to the correct page. “Here.” I point to the signature line. “And I’ll need yours as well.”

“And then everything will be legal.” John looks up from the papers, an unnerving smile on his face.

“I’ll have to file the paperwork, but yes. The club will legally be yours.”

“Great.” John hands the stack of papers back to me. “Now, let’s go get that signature.”

That tricky little organ in my chest begins to beat faster despite me trying to calm it. “Me?” I ask, then gesture to the club. “I got the paperwork, this is your domain.”

“Nah.” John shakes his head. “You’re gonna go in there and have Rocco sign it.”

“And what are you going to do?” I ask.

“Make sure he signs it.” I don’t like the wicked grin that’s spread on John’s cheeks right now. It promises violence that I don’t want to be a part of. But still, I follow him and the goons into the club.

There’s a guard out front. He lifts his hand, probably to deny entrance, but he doesn’t get a chance to speak before Tommy points his gun and shoots. The man falls to the ground and Christopher drags his body inside. The silencer on the end of Tommy’s barrel muffles the gunshot, and nobody flinches as we all walk over the body and into the club.

It’s quiet in the middle of the day, no loud music playing and just a few employees cutting limes and lemons behind the bar. They startle when we enter, and they must have some sense because they scurry away into the back, putting space between us

and them. I'm thankful that this isn't a killing spree and Tommy's gun stays pointed downward, letting the staff leave.

John leads us to the back office, the space that used to belong to Marcus. Inside, Rocco sits at the desk, a laptop open in front of him. He looks up, his eyes roaming over John and then the crew behind him. I give him credit; the guy doesn't show his fear outwardly, but still I can tell from the way his body tenses as he takes in the sight before him that he's scared. I wonder if he knows that the guard stationed out front is dead, or if he just assumes as much.

He's stuck in the middle of a bloody war between the Costellos.

One wrong move and anyone could die.

I'm in the same boat.

"Rocco," John greets, walking up to the desk and sliding casually into the chair across from him.

"John." Rocco closes the laptop and sits up straighter in his chair. "What brings you to the club?" he asks, trying to seem unaffected. If Damien was here, I doubt the big, burly man would even flinch at John's presence. But without any backup, and having John plus his goons here, means the man is outnumbered.

"I need you to sign some paperwork." John gestures to me, and I realize that's my cue. Opening the manila envelope, I tug the papers free and flip to the right page, sliding it across the desk to Rocco.

The man seals his lips and looks down. "You know I can't do that, Johnny."

Tension consumes the small office. John laughs, a sinister sound that makes both

Rocco and I both flinch. “Listen, you can either sign with this pen here...” John grabs a pen from the desk and clicks it, gesturing for Rocco to take it. “Or I can stab you in the eyeball with it.”

He shakes his head, nostrils flaring. John doesn’t hesitate. Rearing his arm back, he darts it forward with enough force that the pen goes straight into Rocco’s right eye. The man screams, his hands raising to the eye that still has a pen sticking out of it. Blood runs down his cheeks, splattering on the desk.

My stomach clenches, and I swallow hard, fighting the need to vomit at the grisly sight. “Jesus,” I mutter under my breath.

“Sign it,” John demands, taking a fresh pen from the holder and forcing it into Rocco’s hand.

Tears begin to leak out of Rocco’s good eye as he takes the pen and scribbles his name on the line. As soon as he finishes, John grabs the pen from his hand and signs his own name before stacking up the papers and handing them back to me.

John nods at Tommy, who steps forward, putting a bullet in Rocco’s head. “Roman, you and Tommy stay here. This mess needs to be cleaned up, and when the staff gets in tonight, please inform them of the change in management. Christopher, you’re with me. And Adrian”—he looks over to me—“get that paperwork filed today.”

I nod compliantly, waiting until I get into my car and a mile away from the club before I scream.

Despite the nausea that wells in my stomach, I file the paperwork and get back to my main task today.

I still have to get Sam released from prison and take down this fucked-up family.

THIRTY-SIX

Adrian

“Did you get the job done?” Leo’s deep voice asks over the speaker in my car.

“Not yet.”

I hear him say something to his wife, likely telling her that I didn’t blackmail the judge yet before I hear him also tell her that she is not going to fly to New Orleans nine months pregnant. “Do you need me to come down?” he asks when he gets back on the phone.

I can’t help but be amused by their situation. Leo was a made man before he met Val, and now the woman has a death grip on his balls. Not that I think he minds. It’s obvious he’s completely in love with her. And now she’s carrying his child.

Something warms my heart at the thought of Madi being pregnant. Her stomach swollen with my child. I like the image, but I shake it from my brain as I focus on the task at hand.

“No.” I turn my car onto Tulane Street. “I’m doing it right now.”

“Good. Let me know when it’s done.”

I end the call right as I find a parking spot outside the Orleans Parish Criminal District Court. The lot attendant greets me with a wave as I pass through. I’ve been in

this courthouse thousands of times, representing a variety of clients, but today feels a little different as I pass by the familiar faces and make my way through the building.

I know from the judge's schedule that he's free right now. I storm past his receptionist, who tries to shout at me not to enter the judge's chamber, but I don't pay her any mind.

Entering the space, I'm pleased to find him at his desk, looking up at me with shock as I shut and lock the door behind me. He looks me up and down. "Adrian Russo?" He says my name like a question. "Why are you barging into my office?"

"We need to have a talk." I move forward, taking the seat across from the old man. Judge Langston has held his post for a long time, and now he sits across from me with wrinkled skin and graying hair.

"You couldn't have made an appointment with my secretary?" he asks, gesturing to the door where his assistant sits outside.

"This is an urgent matter."

"This isn't how that works-"

"Listen." I wave my hand, cutting him off. "This is about Samuel Costello." The judge pauses upon hearing his name. Everyone in New Orleans knows that name. The smart ones steer clear of the Costello business, the greedy ones run toward it, and then there's the legal system - the ones who should be fighting that family. They try, but most of them are corrupt or on the family's payroll.

I know where Langston's moral compass lands, and it's normally on the right side of justice. He's not one to fall for bribery. Maybe that's why I feel bad for blackmailing him. But it doesn't matter, because I know justice will be served if I get Sam out of

prison.

“What about him?” Langston asks, swallowing thickly.

“You’re going to dismiss his case.”

“I will do no such thing.” Anger coats his words and his hand slams down on the desk.

“You will. Because if you don’t...” I slide a manila folder across the desk. Langston looks at it for a long moment, like the contents might bite him, and I wonder if he knows what’s in it before he even opens the thing.

Slowly, he flips it open, revealing a picture of a little girl around three years old with curly pigtails and his bright blue eyes. His eyes. He winces, closes his own blue eyes, and drops his head before he can continue looking through the evidence.

Alessio did a good job putting the file together. There’s a birth certificate for the girl, copies of text messages between the judge and her mother, bank transactions showing payments to the mother every month. To the rest of the world, Judge Langston is happily married to his wife of over fifty years, with three kids of their own. A picture-perfect family. But right here in this room, we both know the truth. His five-year affair led to the birth of that little girl, the one he’s been keeping a secret by paying a hefty sum to her mother each month.

Suddenly, he flips the folder closed, pushing it toward me like it’s poisonous. He stands from his chair, turning to face the window while he drops his head in his hands.

I let him have his moment.

Finally, he turns around with a solemn look on his face. “This scandal will hurt her as much as me.” His eyes go to the file on the desk. He’s right. This scandal will haunt that little girl. She’ll forever be known as the judge’s bastard child.

“And it will end your career,” I add.

“That too.” He scrubs a hand over his wrinkled face. “Okay,” he relents, clearing his throat. “I’ll have the case dismissed.”

He doesn’t look happy about his discussion, but I whistle as I leave the courthouse, texting Leo and John to let them know the job is done.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Madi

It's past noon by the time I finish telling Zoe everything. She lets loose a long exhale, and then looks at me and says, "We need a drink."

Without missing a beat, she's up, scouring my studio for any liquor. Finding a bottle of vodka in one of the cabinets, she grabs it along with two coffee mugs - each reading a different funny phrase. Pouring out the vodka, she hands me the mug that reads Van Gogh with the Flow before chugging a gulp from the one that says not paint water. I'm a sucker for funny mugs.

After she finishes off her vodka, she pours another two shots into the mug and tilts it back. She eyes me until I do the same. The warm liquid burns down my throat and warms my belly.

"Okay." Zoe claps her hands together, her voice still sounding unsure. "I think we should call John."

With a groan, I drop my head into my hands. "There's no way this ends with a polite conversation."

"You don't know that. John can be very polite." Even as she says the words, she winces, knowing they're not quite true. With her, my cousin is a very different person. But with everyone else? Not so much. And John has been working to get Sam out of prison, so if he finds out that Adrian is going with the flow just to get him

killed, he's not going to take it lightly.

"I think I need to talk to Adrian."

Zoe shakes her head furiously. "Terrible idea! What if he, like...chains you up to keep you from telling anyone! Or worse!" Zoe stands from her chair frantically, pacing back and forth. "That's a bad idea, Madi. We need to tell John."

My lips part, ready to once again explain why calling John is equally as bad of an idea, when I hear a single pop. "What was that?" I ask, my voice lowering as my heart rate spikes.

Zoe pauses her pacing to look at me. "What?" Her face scrunches like she's not sure what I mean.

I don't have a chance to tell her about the noise before the studio door swings open and the man who enters is not David. Fear pulses through my veins, a thick, sickly feeling as the man points to both of us, a gun gripped between his fingers. "Sit," he orders.

Zoe and I both slump down into our chairs, watching with horror as he drags David's body inside my studio. My lungs seize as nausea swarms my stomach, threatening to expel all the coffee I drank today. He swings the door shut behind him and uses his sleeve to wipe his forehead, the gun still pointed in our direction.

He's tall, far taller than us, with a rugged face and cold, piercing eyes. I think I recognize him, but the fear of having a gun pointed at me rattles my brain and keeps the memories from surfacing. Something about those cold eyes feels familiar, though. But he can't be a made man. My family wouldn't send someone to hurt me and Zoe. Right?

“You.” He gestures the weapon at me. “Sit there and behave, and I won’t need to kill you.”

The words make Zoe whimper as they click in my head. He’s here for Zoe. He’s here for John’s girlfriend. Suddenly, I remember seeing the man around my Uncle Damien at the last family gathering, not thinking much of it then because lots of people were crowded around my uncle.

I try to search my surroundings inconspicuously as the man takes three steps forward, moving closer to Zoe. My only saving grace is he’s not immediately lifting his gun and taking his shot.

“You’re going to come with me, understood?” he asks as he crowds her. Zoe mumbles something unintelligible, and from the corner of my eye, I see him touch her face. “Say that again.”

I don’t have much time, and I know I need to act fast. My eyes scan the table next to me, finally landing on the wire cutter I use to remove pieces from the wheel. I glance over at the man, seeing he’s still focused on Zoe. I watch as he tucks the gun into the waistband of his jeans so he can grab zip tie cuffs from his back pocket.

“Put these on,” he demands, holding them up for Zoe to slide her wrists into. I can see the pain in her eyes as she begins to slide one hand into the opening of the cuffs.

He’s not paying attention to me. This is my moment.

Inhaling deeply, I count to three, and then I dart forward. Grabbing the wire tool from the table, I hold on to the wooden ends and wrap the wire around my fists the way I normally would when using them for clay. But I’m not using them for clay now.

I spin quickly, getting myself behind the intruder right as he reaches for his gun.

Seeing I'm up to something, Zoe kicks her feet out as he grabs it, causing it to tumble to the floor right as I get the wire around his neck.

Pulling back with all the strength I have, we both begin to stumble. I know I'm not strong enough to strangle this man, so I twist my body around until he's falling to the floor, his fingers clutching at his throat. I try my best to keep standing, pulling back with my body weight so the wire strangles him. Zoe gets behind me, holding on to keep me anchored.

Blood pebbles at the skin, the wire making a slow slice around his throat. He thrashes as he pulls at the wire, and it takes both Zoe and I to hold him there.

Finally, his fingers go limp, and he gasps at the lack of oxygen before his head falls back.

We let go of the wire, both of us falling backwards onto the floor and hugging each other tightly. The door to the studio swings open violently, and I scoot backwards, reaching for the gun our attacker dropped and pointing it toward the door hastily.

"Madi." It's Adrian's voice I hear as his hands lift. Worry etched across his pretty face.

I want to drop the gun and run into the safety of his arms, but a sick thought crosses my mind that prevents me from lowering the weapon.

Is Adrian behind this attack?

THIRTY-EIGHT

Adrian

John's black Porsche already sits outside of Orleans Parish Prison when I pull up. Langston made good on his word, dismissing the case and promptly having Sam released from prison. John grins as I step out of my car.

"Good work. You might have a place with this family, after all."

I try to act honored, even though my place within this family is watching it burn.

A buzzing noise directs my attention to the gate in front of us right as the chain-link slides open, allowing passage to the prisoner.

Sam is wearing a wrinkled suit, likely the one he was picked up in, the jacket slung over his shoulder. His dark hair is slicked back and there's a few days' worth of stubble covering his jaw. He pauses at the entrance, his eyes going to John.

"Johnny," he says, grinning before going to his cousin. They hug, Sam clapping the psychopath on his back. If I didn't know better, I'd think this was a lovely family reunion.

But I do know better.

"I have a fresh suit for you in the car." John gestures to his backseat.

Sam grins and shakes his head. “Perfect. I’ll change after I get this one dirty.” There’s an ominous undertone to his words, and I have an inkling I know exactly what getting his suit dirty means.

He’s going to kill Damien.

Normally, I think Sam would send someone else to do his dirty work, but this family war has gotten personal, and I have a feeling Sam wants to end it himself.

Which is perfect for my plan.

The second they pull out of this lot, I need to follow them. Either no one needs to make it out of their fight, or I need to catch it on camera and put the so-called winner back in prison.

After Sam greets his cousin, he turns his attention to me.

“Good work, Russo.” He walks toward me, extending his hand to shake mine.

I nod, shaking his hand amicably. Before another word is uttered, my phone begins to buzz in my pocket. Sam watches as I take it out, seeing Damien’s name on the caller ID.

“Answer it,” he tells me, nodding to the buzzing device.

“Hello?” I answer the phone, expecting it to be a normal call from Damien.

What I don’t expect is to hear his growling voice filled with anger on the other side.

“You’re two faced, Russo,” he says with venom. Sam must be able to hear his uncle on the other line because one eyebrow lifts. “I know about the club. You working for

Sam now?" He scoffs like the sentence he just spoke is vile. "Lucky for you, I have no intention of hurting my niece. But John's girl, I have no problem killing her. Count your days, Russo. Sammy boy can't protect you forever." The phone clicks, ending the call as my blood runs cold.

Immediately, my thoughts go to Madi and making sure she's safe. She's at her studio today with David watching over. Quickly, I dial David's number. Just because Damien said he wouldn't kill Madi doesn't make me believe him.

"John." I look to the psychopath as my phone rings, no answer. "Where's Zoe today?"

Concern washes over his features, and for once, they look genuine.

"With Madi," he answers.

"We need to go," I say, right as David's voicemail picks up. The lack of an answer from my head of security has my blood running cold. "The girls are in trouble."

I'm rounding my car as Sam tells John to go with me.

"I'm going to find my uncle," he says.

There's a crossroads laid out before me. Sam is about to go kill his uncle, and if I go to Madi, I won't get the video evidence I need to put him back in prison.

But if I follow Sam...Madi might get hurt. Or worse, Madi might be killed in the crossfire of this war.

Dread churns in my stomach. This wasn't supposed to happen. I wasn't supposed to fall for her. But somewhere along the way, I did. Visions of her bleeding out on her

studio floor fill my mind as my chest tightens.

I don't want her dead.

I want her in my arms.

I want to make sure she knows how much I cherish her.

I want to love her for the rest of her life.

The decision feels easy as I slide into the driver's seat, John getting into the passenger's side.

There isn't time for goodbyes as we fly out of the prison lot. My heart is thundering a mile per minute as I race back to the French Quarter. John has his phone out, calling Zoe repeatedly, even when she doesn't answer a single call. He calls his goons next, ordering them to Madi's studio as we enter the quarter.

I barely have my car in park before the two of us are flinging the doors open and running to the studio.

There's blood on the sidewalk where David should be standing, specks of it on the doorframe.

I get to the door first, swinging it open. John's behind me, a gun gripped in his fingers, both of us on edge and ready to kill anyone who might come near the women we love.

And I do love her.

The fact is clear as day from the fear that enveloped my entire body at the thought of

anything happening to her.

Madi's on the floor when I enter. She scurries backwards before she even truly looks at me, reaching for a gun that's laying on the cement and pointing it at me. Her face changes when she sees me, softening for only a moment before it hardens again.

I lift my hands. "It's just me, Madi," I say gently. She must be traumatized. I can't imagine what she just went through. There are two bodies lying on the floor, one belonging to my head of security. I close my eyes, pushing down the pain of knowing he's dead because of me, because of my vendetta.

John rushes past me, straight to Zoe who's on the floor, panting next to the other dead body. I take in the sight. There's something wrapped around the man's throat, a length of wire with two small wooden rods on either end. A tool Madi uses for cutting her pottery pieces off the wheel. A surge of pride wells in my chest because she fought back. She killed a man to protect herself and Zoe.

My princess is a fighter.

"Is he breathing?" I ask John, gesturing to the man.

John lets go of Zoe only long enough to put his fingers to the man's neck, shaking his head. "Dead. This is one of my uncle's men," he says, and then his arms are back around his girl, asking her if she's okay as he holds her against his chest.

The same thing I want to do with Madi. Except she's still pointing a gun at me.

"This is your fault, isn't it?" She asks the question with a shaky voice. "You're working with my uncle to take Sam out. And I'm just collateral damage." A single tear leaks from her eye.

That has John's attention back on me. "What?" he asks, his eyes going from me to Madi.

"He's a liar," Madi spits out venomously. "Tell us the truth, Adrian. You wanted us dead."

THIRTY-NINE

Madi

“H e’s a liar.” I can feel how shaky my voice is as the gun wobbles between my fingers. “Tell us the truth, Adrian. You wanted us dead.”

Concern is etched across my husband’s face, his hands still extending as he looks between John and me.

“Madi,” he says, trying to keep his voice calm. “Let’s talk about this.”

“Can you be honest?”

Adrian winces at my words.

“What is she talking about, Russo?” John is standing now, his focus on my husband as he keeps Zoe protected behind him.

I haven’t had a chance to check on her since we killed our intruder. Things are moving too fast. I pull myself up to standing, taking a second to glance over at my friend, who’s clinging to John. She seems okay for now.

Adrian doesn’t answer, his lips pursed as his dark eyes look at me pleadingly. “Madi, please. Let’s talk. Just us.”

“No,” John cuts in before I can say the same thing. “Tell me what she’s talking about

now.”

“Tell him,” I press. “I heard you talking to Uncle Damien after we got back from New York. You’re planning to get Sam out, just so Damien can kill him. Aren’t you?”

Adrian looks at John. I can’t see my cousin’s face from where I’m standing, but I can only assume it’s one filled with anger. John and Sam have been closer than the rest of us since they were kids. They’re practically brothers, always having each other’s back.

“Did you just lead my cousin into a trap?” John asks.

“No.” Adrian shakes his head. “Damien doesn’t know he’s coming.”

John launches at my husband, his fingers gripping around his throat before Adrian can even try to defend himself. “Are you fucking lying?” he growls.

Adrian wraps his hands around John’s wrists, attempting to pull my cousin off him. “No.” The word is strangled. “I’m not lying. I didn’t tell Damien that Sam was out of prison or that he was coming for him. That wasn’t my plan.”

“But you did have a plan?” John squeezes harder.

There’s a war raging inside me. I want to see my husband pay for his scheming and I don’t want to see my family hurt. But the sight of John’s hands around his throat has my heart pounding.

I don’t want him to die.

Suddenly, my gun clatters to the floor. I wasn’t even aware my grip had loosened on

it. “John,” I say urgently. “Let him go.”

“You said it yourself, Madi, he’s a liar. Worse than that, he’s a rat. And rats don’t live.”

The confirmation that my cousin wants to kill my husband makes my stomach churn, heart dropping to my feet.

I can’t let that happen.

“No.” I move forward, tugging at John in a feeble attempt to pull him off Adrian.

“Listen,” Adrian croaks.

“Let him talk!” I shout, pounding on John’s back.

Reluctantly, my cousin lets go, and Adrian sucks in a breath, his hand holding his own throat.

“I had a plan,” he admits hoarsely. “I wanted to hurt this family because you hurt me.”

“What are you talking about?” John snarls.

“My father...” Pain laces Adrian’s eyes as he looks at me. “My father was killed in prison because he worked for Big Al.”

I shudder at hearing my father’s nickname, and immediately something inside me softens. I recall the pained look on Adrian’s face when he told me his father was murdered while waiting for trial. But he didn’t tell me this. That it’s my father’s fault his is dead.

“He was a drug runner, and he got caught. Al didn’t want to take a chance that he would turn on him, so he had my father killed. He didn’t even give him a chance to have a decent attorney. If my father had a good lawyer, he could have been released. He didn’t need to d-” Adrian chokes on the word, and my heart aches for him.

I can’t imagine the anger he felt at his father’s death. That he was murdered simply for doing a job for my family. We should have protected him, and instead, at the first sign of trouble, my father had him killed.

Guilt floods my brain. Even knowing that I was a child and there was nothing I could have done doesn’t stop the anguish I feel for the boy Adrian once was.

Suddenly, everything about my husband makes sense. Why he’s a defense attorney, why he defends the men my family lets take the blame for our actions. Why he would want to hurt us.

Beside me, John lowers his gun and hisses out a curse.

“I was angry.” Adrian is looking at me, his eyes pleading. “I wanted revenge. It was all I thought about for twenty years. I never intended to hurt you, princess. At first, I only married you because I couldn’t stand the thought of your brother marrying you off to some prick in exchange for better shipping routes. But I didn’t expect to fall in love with you.”

My heart pounds fiercely.

In love with me.

My husband just said he’s in love with me.

“I love you, Madalena Ricci. And when Damien called me and said he was coming

after you and Zoe, I couldn't breathe at the thought that something might happen to you." He faces John. "I was going to follow Sam. My plan was to video the two of you killing Damien so I could put you both in prison. Ending this family." He turns back to me. "But I couldn't let you get hurt. I don't care about revenge anymore. I don't care about hurting your family. All I care about is you ."

Tears fall from my eyes when Adrian reaches out for my hand, his dark eyes still pleading with me for sympathy.

I take his hands, pulling myself into his embrace and wrapping my arms around his body.

"You love me?" I ask against his chest, tears streaming down my cheeks.

"I love you more than anything. You are the sun in my sky, and I would do anything to earn your forgiveness." His head is tucked into the crook of my neck, and I can feel the emotion that flows from him as he breathes heavily against me.

"I forgive you," I say softly, pulling back to look up into his eyes. "You were a kid." I choke on the last word. "You didn't deserve that pain."

Tears cloud Adrian's eyes.

"I don't deserve your forgiveness, princess," he says with a shake of his head. "You were almost-"

"Shh." I shake my head, placing a finger over his lips. "But I wasn't." Adrian nods, and the first tear falls from his eyes. I wonder how long it's been there, how many years he's been holding back his emotions, not letting himself feel anything but hatred?

“I love you,” I tell him softly. Adrian’s eyes bore into mine. “I was going to tell you the other night, but then I overheard your conversation with Damien and wasn’t sure what to think.”

“I could never be loyal to Damien.” Adrian says my uncle's name with disgust.

“I know that now.”

“This is touching,” John interrupts. “And I won’t kill you for your betrayal. But I can’t promise Sam won’t.” John has his phone out, likely calling my cousin to tell him the turn of events.

Adrian swallows thickly and nods. “That’s okay,” he says, and the words have more tears falling from my eyes, my heart cracking.

“No-”

“It’s okay, princess,” he cuts me off, leaning in to press a soft kiss from my lips. “Can I have one more night with her?” he asks John.

My cousin sighs. “I’m putting Roman outside your house. If you hurt my cousin-”

“I won’t,” Adrian says before John can finish.

There are still tears clouding my vision as Adrian takes me home. Roman settles in our front room and my husband carries me upstairs, carefully undressing me and taking me into our master shower, where he cleans this day from my body.

I cry more, and he gently wipes the tears from my eyes. “Madalena Ricci, if I get only one more night on this earth, the only thing I want is to spend it with you.”

We spend the evening wrapped up in each other's bodies, and for the first time, my husband makes loves to me rather than fucking or punishing me. We confess those three little words of I love you , over and over, like a secret prayer only the two of us understand.

And when the morning light breaks through our dark cocoon, I know our time together is almost over.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:53 pm

FORTY

Adrian

Sam

My house. 30 minutes. Bring Madi.

It feels like my phone is burning a hole in my pocket ever since I read that text. I show up at Sam's house five minutes early with Madi on my arm. There's a heaviness hanging over us at the unknown of what comes next.

Last night, I made love to my wife until we both passed out from exhaustion. Only waking this morning to find our time running out. Ever since we confessed our love yesterday, she's been attached to my side, scheming ways of getting me out of this mess.

"We could run away," she says, looking up at me with hopeful eyes.

I turn, both of my hands landing on her shoulders as I lean in and kiss her forehead. "Amore mio, that would only delay the inevitable. Besides, I don't think you'd like life on the run."

She scrunches up her adorable face. "I wouldn't. But I'd do it for you."

"And I love you for that." I give her one last kiss before I ring the doorbell to Sam's home, a Filmore mansion he inherited from his father. It seems fitting for the new

King of New Orleans.

It's John who opens the door, giving Madi a pleasant smile before he looks at me sourly. "Sam's in his office," he says, and then to Madi, "Zoe's out back."

Madi gives me one last misty-eyed look, pressing up onto her tiptoes to kiss me deeply. Her tongue says the words her mouth doesn't. I love you.

And then she steps back, a solemn look on her face as she turns away and moves down the hallway. I watch her walk, searing the image into my mind as if this might be the last time I ever see her.

I betrayed the Costello famiglia.

I'm going to die today.

I've made peace with the fact, even as my heart races as I step into Sam's office. I wanted revenge and I failed. I chose Madi over it, a choice I would make again and again and again.

And now it's time to pay the consequences of my actions.

Sam's office is at the front of the house, a well-lit room with dark cedar furniture and red accents. He's sitting behind an oversized desk, nursing a mug of coffee, when I walk in.

"Morning," he says, raising the mug. It's not a cheerful greeting, per se, but still far too nice of a greeting for a man whose life he's about to end.

"Good morning," I return.

“Sit.” Sam gestures to the seat across from his desk.

I unbutton my suit jacket and slide into the seat, facing him. We stay like that for a long moment before Sam speaks again.

“So I was right,” he muses, leaning back into his seat and taking a sip from his mug. “You were out for vengeance if what John tells me is true.”

“It is.” I nod. There’s no point in making up a story now.

“You wanted to take down the whole family for what Big Al did to your father.” It’s not a question as much as a statement.

“Yes.” It feels good to say the truth aloud.

I wait to hear what my future holds, finding it difficult to sit still. “I can’t blame you,” he finally says, leaning forward and setting the mug on his desk. “I think I would have killed us all with my bare hands if someone murdered my father.” He pauses for a moment. “Actually, I did do that.”

“I take that as confirmation that Damien is dead.”

Sam smiles, winking at me. “I stand by what I said before. Big Al shouldn’t have done that. If your father had worked for mine, he’d still be alive right now. But I can’t change the past; all I can do is work on the present.” He pauses briefly, letting the words sink in. “So, you love my cousin, then?”

I nod. “Very much so.”

“And you would have saved her yesterday if she didn’t do it herself, huh?”

I chuckle. “I should have known she’d be too stubborn for my help.”

“That sounds like Madi.” Sam laughs. “She’s been like that since she was a kid. Maybe it’s because she’s the youngest.” He smiles fondly. “But she’s always been too stubborn for her own good. So you know, I have no intentions of making her a widow.”

Shocked, I lift my head to look at him face on. “Are you saying...”

“All’s forgiven, Adrian.” He waves a hand as if that clears the past, creating a blank slate.

“I-” I stutter on my words, not sure what to say. I was certain that today would be the last day of my life. No one fucks with the Costello family and gets away with it. But Sam is offering me a chance at redemption.

“I want you to work for me, though. You’re a damn good lawyer, and I also have no intention of wasting your skills. I’m not like my uncle, Adrian. I don’t go around killing for sport, especially not my own men. If you work for me, you’ll be an advisor. A consigliere. I can keep you on the legal side of things, if you’d prefer. But I think you and I could do great work together if you’re willing to be at my side.”

I never truly wanted to work for this family. The entire time I have, I’ve always had a scheme brewing in the background, driving me forward. What Sam is offering makes me part of this family. A consigliere, his advisor. I wouldn’t be a pawn in this game, I’d be at the top. And if Sam is being honest, it would be like the family my father was working for. It’d be something better.

“So it’s done, then?” I ask, inhaling a deep breath. “This war?”

Sam nods. “Almost. I have one loose end from last night to wrap up. After that, it’s

over.”

“A loose end?”

“A witness. Don’t worry, I’ll handle it. I have men tracking her down as we speak.”

I nod, not wanting to know any more about the her currently being tracked down.

All this time, all this fighting between the Costellos...it’s over now.

“Okay.” I extend my hand across the desk. “I’m in.”

Sam grins, standing from the desk to walk around and shake my hand. “We’re gonna be great partners, Adrian. Welcome to the family.”

FORTY-ONE

Madi

“Surprise!” I’m shocked when I step out onto Sam’s back porch. Zoe’s here, like John promised, but beside her is Lana with her arms thrown up in the air and an excited look on her face. Behind her is Naz, holding a drink in his hand with his own smile, though he’s looking at Lana and not me.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, still too stunned to fully take in the moment.

“Sam called last night. He said it was safe to come home.”

Safe to come home. I hear those words for what they really mean. Damien, Lana’s father, is dead. I want to ask about her mother, but I don’t want to ruin the moment. Instead, I move forward, wrapping my arms around my cousin and best friend and holding her tight.

“I’m so happy to see you!”

“I’m happy to see you!” She squeezes me back. “Where’s Adrian?”

Immediately, I feel the tears welling up in my eyes at hearing my husband’s name. “He’s-” I’m choking on the words, not knowing how to express them to Lana.

Zoe comes over, wrapping her arms around me. “It’s gonna be okay, Madi.” Both of my friends hold me tight.

“Don’t cry, cousin.” It’s Sam’s voice that has my head whipping around. He walks out onto the back deck, Adrian following behind him. Sam pats my husband on the back and Adrian moves forward, stealing me from my friends’ grip.

“It’s gonna be okay,” he whispers softly as he pulls my body against his.

“I don’t understand.”

“I’ve forgiven him,” Sam says coolly. “We’re not grieving today. We’re celebrating.”

I can barely process the words after I’ve forgiven him. “What?” My voice comes out shaky as I look up to my husband, who nods in confirmation. “It’s over?”

“It’s over.” Adrian leans down and kisses me deeply, passionately, ignoring that we’re not the only ones on the patio.

Tears well in my eyes as I wrap my arms around my husband. We’re safe. It’s over. Warmth floods my entire body.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” Adrian whispers as he holds me close.

“If I can interrupt...” It’s Sam’s voice that pulls me from my moment, and I look over at my cousin. The six of us are gathered on the patio, all eyes on Sam. “We’ve come a long way,” he says solemnly. More blood was spilt than any of us would have wanted, especially my father.” He pauses. “But we’re all here now, the next generation, and I believe we can do better than our fathers and mothers did. I believe we are better. Tomorrow, we’re going to rebuild this family. Better than it’s been before. Stronger. But for today, we’re going to celebrate.” He raises the mug in his hand and his eyes find Lana and Naz. “Are you ready?”

“Absolutely,” Naz says certainly.

“Then let’s have a wedding.”

“What?” I shout, and Lana giggles as she unzips the white dress hanging in Sam’s spare bedroom. “Were you planning this?”

Zoe pours us each a glass of champagne and hands one over to me. I chug it down, my brain still reeling with all the things that have just happened.

My husband is not dying today.

And my cousin is getting married to the love of her life.

What. The. Fuck.

“We knew this mess was going to end eventually, and we figured when it did, we’d get married.”

“That’s so fucking sweet.” Zoe sighs, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Lana pulls the simple white dress from the hanger and holds it out to me. “Help me get into this?”

I nod, holding the dress open as she steps in. The last time I did this for her, the circumstances were far different, and I’m pretty sure both of us were crying. She was about to marry a man she hated, one who bruised her and made her miserable before he even got her down the aisle. And now, it’s completely different. There’s nothing but love and joy in her gaze as she slides into the white garment.

“What about your mom?” I ask, the words come out quietly.

“Oh, fuck her,” Lana says, spinning to look at herself in the mirror as I zip up the

dress. "She can rot in hell, for all I care."

I laugh. "Same, bestie. I hope Caterina joins her."

Lana smiles and spins, wrapping her arms around me. "We're safe now." The words wash over me. She's right. We're finally safe. No longer pawns in a war our families created.

"Don't make me cry," I say, pulling back and wiping at my eyes. "Come on, let's get you ready to get married!"

Thirty minutes later, Lana is dressed and Zoe made up her face. She looks stunning as we lead her down the grand stairs in Sam's house. He's waiting at the bottom, dressed in a suit.

"You look amazing, Lana," he says, holding out his arms to embrace her. "Now, you sure you want to marry him? Say the word right now and he's gone."

She laughs, playfully smacking his chest. "Stop that. You know I want to marry him!"

Sam shrugs. "Just checking." He leads us to the patio doors. "I did the best I could on short notice."

One look outside shows the backyard now has a white runner down the patio and to a small arch that the men must have set up. There are flowers entwined in it and vases on the tables that were pushed to the side.

"It's beautiful." Lana smiles. "Thank you."

He nods. "See you out there, cousin." With one last grin, Sam pushes open the patio

door and goes to the end of the aisle where Naz is waiting.

“Congrats,” Zoe says before she exits to join John in the seats that have been lined up.

Music begins to play, and I walk down the makeshift aisle first, waiting at the end as the music changes and Lana opens the door. Naz gasps upon seeing her in the simple white dress, and then he’s dabbing at his eyes as she makes her way to him.

The priest Sam hired goes through the whole spiel and my cousin commits herself to the man she loves. But my focus is on Adrian, who sits in one of the white chairs, his eyes glued to mine.

We made it.

Everything is going to be okay.

The priest pronounces them husband and wife, and Lana and Naz kiss, the group of us cheering.

Afterwards, we celebrate, popping open champagne bottles and enjoying the meal that suddenly arrives, courtesy of Sam, I assume.

Everything feels calm and peaceful as I look around at the group of my family that actually matters to me. For once, I don’t feel ashamed to be a part of this family.

Not when I feel surrounded by love.

Adrian

Fede angrily takes a sip of his whiskey. “So you joined them, then?”

“It’s all over, Fed.”

“After what they did-”

“The man who murdered our father is dead,” I interrupt. “And so is everyone in that family with any ill intentions.”

“So you trust Sam?”

“With my life.”

Fede hisses a sigh and tilts back his glass, downing the remainder of his alcohol. “I think you’re pussy whipped.”

“Maybe.” I shrug. “It doesn’t matter, though. It’s done. Over.”

“Even if I disagree?” My little brother looks petulant from where he’s sitting on my couch with a frown covering his face. Like a child who didn’t get his way.

“Yes, Fede,” I say sternly. “Even if you disagree. This is over.”

“Fine.” Setting his glass down harshly on my coffee table, he stands, buttoning his suit jacket. He heads for the door without a word of goodbye.

“Bye, Fede,” I call out, chuckling at his dramatics as I take a sip of my drink. He waves his hand over his shoulder and slams the door behind him.

The drama.

“He didn’t take that well?” Madi walks through the threshold. She’s in a silk nightgown, covered by a matching robe. It does little to hide her cleavage or her long legs.

“Not well at all.” I smile at the sight of her. My beautiful wife. “Come here.” I gesture, and for once, she listens, walking toward me slowly.

When she gets to the couch, she takes the low-ball glass from my hand and sets it on the coffee table so she can crawl onto my lap, straddling me. Her soft hands move to my face, cupping either side as she leans in to plant a sensual kiss on my lips.

“I love you, husband.”

Her sweet voice saying that word has a primal growl growing in my chest. “I love you, wife.”

“Mmmhmm, I like that.” She wiggles her pert ass on my lap and my cock is instantly hard.

“I was thinking,” I say as I feel her up through the silk material. “A baby sounds nice.”

Madi snorts, and then looks at me. “You’re serious.”

“Deadly.”

“I’m still a child,” she says with a furrowed brow. “I can’t have a baby yet.”

My hand moves to her stomach, running over the flat and smooth surface. “I love the idea of seeing you pregnant,” I admit.

“That sounds like a fetish! You know we have to actually raise a child then, right?”

“Good thing I also love the idea of you raising our kids. They’ll be beautiful, don’t you think? A girl with your eyes and dark hair. A boy with my smile.” I grin at her for good measure.

“Flattery won’t win you this argument.”

“Hmm, but I think I know what will.” I pull her body against mine, pressing my lips to hers. She opens for me, letting me devour her mouth in the mind-melting kiss.

And soon our clothes lay in a heap on the floor while Madi is bent over the couch, moaning my name as I thrust into her.

“I’m gonna fill you up, princess. Beg for my cum.”

“Please!” she moans, her fingers gripped into the fabric of the sofa. “Please, I need your cum.”

“You want to be filled up like a good little slut, don’t you?”

“Yes!” she shouts breathlessly.

“Say it,” I demand.

“I want to be filled up like a good little slut.”

I pinch her clit, loving the way her pussy squeezes my cock as she comes, and then I follow her, thrusting my own orgasm inside of her until she’s completely filled, just

like she begged for.

And after, as we lie on the couch fully sated, my cum dripping from her pussy, I feel light. At peace. The heaviness I've been carrying for twenty-plus years seems to have dissipated.

"I love you," she whispers against my chest.

"I love you," I say with a kiss to her head, my heart swelling with the words.

I never thought I could have this kind of happiness. I thought the only thing that would ease the ache in my soul would be to get revenge.

But that seems pointless now.

The only thing I need in my life is her.