



Omega's Vengeance: MM Mafia Romance Mpreg Book Two

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Category: LGBT+

Description: I'm omega Alessio Abella and I have an axe to grind.

I hate Valentino Syracuse with a vengeance. I also hate his second in command, alpha Dario Coppola. They both drove my father to the grave, and I'm going to murder them both.

I don't care that Valentino and Dario are brutal, powerful alphas. I don't care that I'll probably die trying to get my revenge. Some things are worth dying for, and kidnapping Dario is the first step in my plan of retribution.

Unfortunately, I'm stabbed in the back by my own blood. From there I'm thrust into a nightmare where I have to work with Dario just to stay alive. But I'll get mine. This truce is temporary, and eventually I'll have Dario on his knees begging for his life.

This is a dark mafia romance and contains violence and graphic smexy times. If you're sensitive to either of those things this story may not be for you.

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Prologue

Dario

I'm flabbergasted when the sexy blond omega seated alone at the bar refuses the drink I bought him. I can't remember the last time an omega turned me down. Doesn't he know who I am? I'm Dario Coppola, Black Knives syndicate leader Valentino Syracuse's second. That commands respect in Los Demonios. That little omega should be trembling in fear that he just disrespected Valentino's right-hand man. But as he glances at me over his shoulder, his expression isn't anything close to fear. He looks... smug?

Lewis, the bartender, gives me an apologetic smile and a little shrug. My cheeks heat because he looks almost sorry for me.

Fuck that.

I stand, bumping the table, and the two guys I'm with, Lucio and Paul, look up at me questioningly.

"Something wrong, boss?" Paul asks, glancing around warily, putting his hand on his piece under his jacket. "You see something coming?"

"No. Relax," I rasp, eyes still trained on the omega who refused my drink.

Lucio's gaze follows mine. "Oh." He elbows Paul. "Boss is on the hunt."

Not responding, I move slowly toward the bar and stand behind the omega. I can tell he feels my presence. His shoulders are rigid, belying the dismissive look he shot me a moment ago. I inch closer, wanting him to feel the heat of my body hovering. I inhale his sugary lavender omega scent. He must know who I am, so I'm intrigued by his standoffish behavior. But that's okay. I like the chase.

Sometimes it's the best part.

"Something wrong with the drink?" I ask gruffly.

The omega hesitates and then once more glances over his shoulder at me. The second our eyes meet, my cock is hard. Up close, he looks even tastier. Thick, black lashes surround stunning jade-green eyes. His lips are full and red like ripe cherries, and his features aristocratic and refined. He's fucking gorgeous. He's like something Johannes Vermeer might paint. A little smile has the corner of his mouth inching upward.

"When an alpha buys me a drink, I prefer it when he does so in person." His voice is husky. Confident.

Okay, I can work with that.

So, he's not disinterested. He's high-maintenance. Fair enough. I take the empty barstool next to him. "Well, I'm here now."

"Yes, you are."

"What's your name?" I ask, signaling to Lewis to get the guy another drink and me as well.

"Alessio."

“Do you have a last name, Alessio?”

“Does it matter? Are you planning on embroidering my initials on something?”

I laugh. I can’t help it. He’s a smart ass, and I’m partial to mouthy omegas. The mouthier they are, the more I love conquering them in bed. “Okay, so no last names.”

He studies me, and I’m surprised to feel my pulse flutter a bit. That isn’t like me. Omegas don’t get under my skin very often. But he does. I really want to fuck this omega. I don’t care where either. I’ll take him right here on the bar if he wants. I can just imagine what it would feel like to have his warm, lithe body trembling beneath mine. I haven’t wanted anyone this much in a while. I think it’s his snooty manner that’s getting me so turned on. I doubt he’d look that unflappable with my cock pounding his ass.

Lewis sets our drinks down in front of us. Alessio picks up his martini, and I grab my whiskey and hold out my glass. “To new connections.”

He smirks a bit. “Sure. That works.” He sips his drink, licking his lips once he’s swallowed.

“I haven’t seen you in here before. You look too classy for this joint.”

“Yeah?” He shrugs. “Well, sometimes I like to slum around with the little people. It pisses off my dad, and I love pissing him off.”

“Is that right? I don’t suppose you’ll tell me who your dad is?”

“Nope.” He laughs, and it sounds sincere.

“Okay, I don’t mind not knowing.” I sip my drink and then add, “I hated my old man

too.”

He glances at me sharply as if surprised I’d tell him that. “Why?”

“He liked to put cigarettes out on the back of my neck as a kid. That didn’t endear him to me.”

“Shit.” His response is sharp, and I can see he’s rattled by my little story.

“But let’s not talk about him. Let’s talk about nicer things.”

“Sure.” His coy smile returns, but his knee bounces up and down beneath the bar, once more showing he’s not as unaffected by me as he pretends. What’s his deal, I wonder? He looks too high-end to be a hooker. Plus, he’s ignored every alpha’s attempt to talk to him. So far, I’m the only one who has had a semi-conversation with him. I can’t help but feel honored. I get the feeling he’s picky. I’m picky too.

Lately.

I didn’t used to be. I used to sleep with all of Valentino’s cast-offs. But ever since Valentino settled down with his omega Nico, I’ve been a little envious of how happy they are. I’m still super close to Valentino, so it’s not a jealousy thing. I simply sometimes wish someone would look at me the way Nico looks at Valentino and vice versa.

Not that I’m expecting to have that sort of connection with an omega I meet in a bar. Alessio isn’t exactly giving off nesting vibes. But I do think about settling down more these days. Maybe I’m getting old. I’d like to have a kid someday before I’m ancient. Something tells me Alessio would produce gorgeous offspring.

Why the fuck am I thinking about that shit now?

“I don’t usually do this sort of thing,” Alessio says softly, looking at me from under his thick lashes.

“No?”

He pushes one slender finger through the condensation on his glass. “My father keeps me locked up in his stuffy old house.”

“He keeps you there against your will?” I can’t quite keep the alarm from my voice.

He laughs. “Well, I mean, I’m not a prisoner, but he discourages me from going out alone.”

“Oh, I see.” I frown. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

That’s a bit old for a parent to be so controlling of their adult son. But who am I to judge? “He’s probably just trying to protect you because you’re an omega. That’s what we alphas do. We protect our omegas.”

“Is that right?”

“Sure.”

“Seems to me alphas just take advantage of omegas every chance they get.” His eyes glitter with something akin to resentment.

I smirk. “It’s been my experience some omegas like that.”

His mouth thins. “I’m not weak.”

“That I do not doubt.”

“A lot of alphas think omegas are weak.”

I shrug. “A lot of alphas are idiots.”

He laughs, seeming pleased at my response, and he inclines his head toward me. “I like you.”

“Yeah?” Excitement thrills me, and I feel actual anticipation. My palms are even a bit sweaty. If he turns me down, that will be a huge disappointment. I really, really want to fuck him. “I like you too.”

He studies me, and his face is close enough that I can see a dark ring around the green of his iris. “Would you want to maybe... get out of here?” he asks softly.

My dick throbs so hard I grunt. But somehow, I manage a calm, “Yes.”

He puts his hand on my forearm, and the heat seeps into my skin through my suit jacket. His body temperature is raised, indicating his arousal. My pulse spikes as my body responds to the pheromones he’s giving off. I want him bad. I want him more than once. I don’t think I can wait until we get to either his place or mine. I need a taste now. Then, we can go somewhere else, and I can take my time with him.

While I live in Valentino’s home most of the time, I have my own place for when I have time off. I don’t like bringing guys back to the Syracuse mansion. It feels too much like bringing a boyfriend home to my parent’s house. Especially now that Valentino and Nico have a kid. I’d feel like a weirdo sneaking my one-night stand into my bedroom, knowing baby Antonio is down the hall in the nursery.

“My car is out back,” Alessio says huskily.

“Then let’s go.” I grab my phone and text Paul and Lucio a short message.

Take a cab home. I have other plans.

Shit, boss, you move fast. Paul responds.

Pay my bar tab. Lord knows I’ve paid yours enough times.

Somebody is in a hurry to get some.

I stand and meet Lewis, the bartender’s gaze. “Paul’s got the tab.”

“No problem, sir,” Lewis says smoothly.

I turn to Alessio. “Ready to head out?”

He stands too and says softly, “So then, your friend Paul bought my drink, not you? Maybe it’s Paul I should go home with.” That little smirk is back.

“Yeah, I don’t think so.” I slip my arm around his waist. “You say your car is out back?”

“It certainly is.” He allows me to lead him toward the dark hall that winds past the restrooms. At the far end is the exit, which doesn’t have an alarm hooked up. It’s where everyone slips out to smoke or get blow jobs.

As we move down the hall, I let my hand glide down his back, and it comes to rest on his firm ass. He gives a small grunt, and he shivers. I like that he’s so responsive to my touch. Yeah, I definitely need to take the edge off with this guy before we get to his place. I don’t want to come in the car, and I feel like just the brush of his hand could get me off. I want to come inside him.

Now.

Once we step outside, the night air is damp and cool. I feel so hot and bothered by this omega, I'm surprised my skin doesn't sizzle as the moist air hits it. There are six cars parked in the back; one of them is a white BMW. I know instinctively that car belongs to this snooty omega.

He starts toward the BMW, but I grab his arm and pull him back to the building. Then I press him up against the wall, and I kiss him. He's surprised, and I can feel it from the tension in his body. But then he gives a surprised little moan and opens his mouth to my tongue. Lust roars through me at his sweet taste. No omega ever tasted this good. I'm drunk on his scent and flavor.

"You on the pill?" I mumble, rubbing my hands over his bulging crotch.

He nods, looking dazed. "I didn't plan this part."

I narrow my eyes. "What part?"

He swallows hard and unzips his pants. "What the hell? I'm horny. You're horny. Who's gonna know or care?"

"Fuck, yeah." I have no idea what he's talking about, but it's fine with me because he's pushing his pants down and turning to face the wall. I stroke my trembling hands over his firm, white ass. Leaning my weight against his, I whisper, "I'm gonna take this little ass hard. You want that?"

He shudders and turns his head. His lips are so full and tempting, I take his mouth hungrily. Fuck, I've never enjoyed kissing more. It's like I can't get enough of him. He arches his back, and I push my pants below my ass and tug out my dick. I'm so fucking hard, and his hole is dripping slick like a faucet.

“Fuck me,” he whimpers, his slender fingers splayed on the brick wall. “This is fucking stupid, but I want it.”

Again, I have no idea what he’s babbling about, but the head of my cock is pressing his hole, and as the tense muscles give way and let me in, my brain short circuits. His insides are hot and tight, and my eyes roll up in my head as I sink deep. “Fucking hell, your little hole feels good.”

He groans and pushes back on my dick, he’s trembling, and I’m worried his legs are going to give out. So I wrap my arms around his waist, and I start fucking him deep and fast. He cries out, an anguished cry of lust and want. That sparks something primitive deep inside of me. The hairs on my body rise, and my teeth ache. If my kind still shifted, I’m pretty sure I’d be in wolf form by now.

“Oh, shit. Oh, fuck.” His voice wobbles with every thrust. “I... I didn’t expect this, shit.” He’s breathing hard, and he reaches back, digging his nails into my bare thigh. “I’m gonna come. Fuck. You’re gonna make me come.”

“Yeah, I am,” I growl, and I thrust even harder.

He gives a strangled cry and paints the wall with his release. It slides down the red brick, white and creamy. His body is shaking and convulsing with his orgasm, and his quaking hole sends me over the edge.

“Fuck,” I hiss, and my dick jerks and pumps a huge load inside his warm center. He moans and rides my dick, milking every last drop. I’m wheezing like a racehorse as I finish inside him. I feel drugged as my climax gently fades from rabid desperation to warm drowsiness. I pull out of him quickly because my knot is trying to form. I pinch the base of my cock, and grit my teeth. It’s uncomfortable to stop the knot, but it’s also bad form to knot an omega you’re not claiming.

He rests his head on his forearm, breathing hard. “This was most definitely not on the agenda for tonight.”

I’m not sure why he’d say that since he was in a bar known to be a pickup spot. “Yeah, well, you’re a surprise to me too.” I wipe my dick clean with a tissue from my pocket.

He turns and watches me as he pulls up his pants. His expression is odd. Usually, after sex, omegas immediately start asking when we can hook up again. But if anything, Alessio looks distracted. Uneasy. Frustrated.

He’s perplexing to me. I can’t read him like I can most omegas. I straighten my clothing and smile at him. I want more of him, but he’s looking so uncertain, I’m not sure if that’s what he wants too. “I just needed to take the edge off. No reason we can’t still go to your place.”

“Yeah?” He looks surprised. “I figured since you got what you wanted, you’d be on your way.”

“I only got a taste of what I want.”

He shivers, but he also frowns. “This is getting way more complicated than expected.”

I give a confused laugh. “Is it?”

Alessio flicks his gaze over my shoulder. “Took you long enough to get here.”

“What?” I scowl.

I hear the scrape of a shoe behind me, and I swing around. A yellow-eyed alpha is

standing there with a gun trained on me. He's vaguely familiar, but I can't place him. "Who the fuck are you?" I growl, uneasiness shifting through me.

The guy smirks, but before he can answer, I feel the stab of a needle pressing into the side of my neck. I bat the arm away, spinning around to see Alessio standing there, holding a hypodermic needle. I press my hand to the stinging spot on my neck, and my limbs feel heavy.

"What the fuck did you do?" I mutter, my tongue sluggish. The outer corner of my vision blurs and my legs feel weak. "What the hell is this?"

Alessio shrugs, his smirk returning. His eyes glitter with malice as he hisses, "I'm going to give Valentino a taste of his own medicine."

I try to respond with something threatening. Witty. Dangerous. Instead, I make a sort of gurgling sound and fall toward the ground like a felled redwood.

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Chapter One

Dario

My eyes feel glued shut. I feel nauseated, and I'm covered in sweat. My thoughts are hazy, and I'm not sure where the hell I am. Slowly, my memories begin to filter in. I remember having sex with Alessio, and then some guy showed up. Then the little prick Alessio jabbed a needle in my neck.

I check my pockets for my phone. No huge surprise it's missing. Unfortunately, so is my suit jacket. The chill of the space sinks into me with just slacks and a dress shirt. I clumsily manage to get to my feet. It's dark, and I can't see a damn thing. It smells and feels damp. I begin to inch along what feels like a stone wall. The stones are cold and rough against the palm of my hand. That means I'm not in a finished basement or anything that luxurious. So then, where am I?

It's perfectly obvious I was set up by that punk Alessio. He played me just right too. By acting standoffish, he drew me in. If he'd come on to me, I'd have been disinterested. Whoever sent him must know that about me. That's an unsettling idea. The part I really find mystifying is why he had sex with me. It's one thing to kidnap a person, but you don't usually fuck them first.

I didn't plan this part.

Alessio said that right before we fucked. So then, the sex had been spontaneous? Not part of the original plan? I don't know whether to be pissed or flattered that I was apparently irresistible. I give a harsh laugh as I walk slowly along the wall. I'd love to

get my hands on Alessio right about now. I'd make him pay for making a fool of me. I can just imagine squeezing that slender pale throat of his until all the life drained out of his pretty green eyes.

My head is pounding, and my legs won't stop shaking. I'm not used to feeling weak, but I have to stop every few feet because I'm on the verge of puking. Whatever they injected into me, the after-effects are not pleasant. There are boxes and crates that I have to work my way around. As my eyes adjust to the gloom, I begin to see shapes. At the far end of the room, there appear to be stairs. At the top of the flight of steps, there is a door. A sliver of light beneath the door shows shadows moving occasionally as if someone is walking back and forth.

Ignoring the nausea clawing at me, I make it to the bottom of the stairs. I crawl up the steps, finally making it to the door. I pound my hand on the thick wood, and the door shakes on its hinges. "Whoever you are, you just made the biggest fucking mistake of your life," I roar.

Someone on the other side laughs, and I bang on the door some more. I even kick it a few times for good measure, letting every curse word I can think of fly freely. It helps to unleash my fury on something. Every slam of my fists on the rough wood hurts, but also feels good. The pain helps me forget the fear gnawing at me deep down in my gut.

"You think you're going to live after this? No one touches me and lives to tell the tale," I yell.

Another snide laugh comes through the door.

I'm so angry I'm trembling. I can't begin to imagine who would be dumb enough to grab me and think they wouldn't pay dearly for that stupidity. Even if they kill me, there's no way Valentino won't take his revenge. An attack on me is an attack on

him. Not to mention, we've been friends since we were kids. I like to think he'd avenge my death for that reason alone. But the truth is his main priority needs to be his own reputation.

He can't tolerate anyone murdering his second without facing horrifying retribution. He could lose the respect of the syndicate, and that might mean his death and the deaths of all the people he loves. His men could be targets too. Gang war isn't pretty. No one escapes unscathed.

I pound on the door for another few minutes, using what little strength I have left. Finally, I fall silent and sit down against the wall near the door. My mouth and throat are as dry as a bone, and I have a horrible taste in my mouth. I'm sure that's from the drug. I close my eyes, willing my throbbing head to quiet.

I don't know how long I've been down here. For all I know, I could have been unconscious for days. Does Valentino know I'm missing? Is he already looking for me? Is Valentino okay? Panic swells in me as that thought crosses my mind. What if someone has attacked Valentino's home? He's got a ton of guys on security, but people can turn. They can be bribed. They can do shit for power and money you never thought they'd do. I've had men turn on me. Men I trusted. That's why these days, the only person in this world I trust is Valentino.

He'll come for me. I need to believe that.

Of course, that doesn't mean I'm going to sit around waiting for him. I'll do my best to get myself out of this situation. After all, me and my dick got me into this mess. I should have been more careful. It wasn't like me to be so careless and unaware of my surroundings. But Alessio had drawn me in instantly, and I'd been stupidly distracted. His scent alone had been addicting. Even now, though I'd love to strangle him, I'm aroused remembering the feel and taste of him.

I rise and clamber down the stairs. I sit against the wall at the bottom of the steps, breathing jaggedly. I end up falling asleep. I'm sure it's the drugs that are still in my system. When I wake up, I'm shivering and cold, but at least the nausea seems to have passed. I really wish someone would come and give me some fucking water. What exactly is their plan? If they intend on holding me for ransom, they need to keep me alive. I have to have water.

I'm surprised my kidnappers didn't bind my hands. They must feel very confident that I can't get out of my little prison. Not having my hands tied does make escape more of a possibility. Are they so arrogant or stupid they don't think I'll try to get away? I will. First chance I get I'll definitely try and get out of this place. I just pray Valentino and his family are safe.

When the door jangles and lurches open, I stumble to my feet. I glare at the yellow-eyed alpha who enters my little dungeon. He's carrying a tray of food and a cattle prod in his hand. I do my best to look intimidating, but I feel weak and pathetic.

He smirks and sets the tray on the ground. "You look rough. I guess Sleeping Beauty didn't get enough beauty sleep."

"Fuck off," I rumble, taking a step toward him.

"Ah, ah, ah." He holds up the cattle prod, and I stop.

I've used cattle prods on other men enough times to know the pain they inflict. They're beautiful torture devices. Nothing like having a cattle prod zapping your balls to get you to talk. If he uses it on me, it won't kill me, but it can burn my flesh. I have enough problems at the moment.

"Why am I here?" I demand.

“Because my boss wants you here.” Yellow Eyes shrugs. “Mine is not to reason why. I just do what I’m told. Like you do, for Valentino.”

“Your boss is a fool. He’s going to end up dead if he does anything to me,” I say harshly.

His gaze flickers. “Trust me, I know he’s playing with fire. But he has his reasons.”

“Oh, yeah? What possible reason could he have for doing something this stupid?”

“Look, that’s not for me to say. He’ll come talk to you when he’s ready.”

“I may not be here when he gets around to visiting me,” I say, bending down to grab the bottle of water from the tray. I twist the lid and hear a satisfying crack of the seal. I don’t trust the food, but the water should be okay since it was sealed.

Yellow Eyes guffaws. “You aren’t going anywhere, buddy.”

“That’s what you think.” I gulp down half of the bottle of water and feel life returning to my cells. I don’t exactly have a plan for my escape, but I’m determined to get the hell out of here ASAP.

“I guess you think you’re shit don’t stink because you’re Valentino’s Second?” He curls his lip. “You’re gonna wish you’d never met him when my boss gets through with you.”

“Oh, really?” I shake my head. “I don’t know why he has a beef with me. Maybe if you’d tell me who he is, I could figure out why he has a grudge.”

“I can’t. If he wants to tell you, that’s his prerogative.”

“Whatever.” I nudge the tray of food with my foot. “You can take that. I’m not stupid enough to eat anything you serve me.”

“We’re not trying to poison you.”

“Well, you certainly seem trustworthy,” I say drolly.

He gives a humorless laugh. “Suit yourself.” He bends down and grabs the tray, keeping a wary eye on me. When he straightens, he says, “Boss isn’t gonna like it that you’re not eating.”

I chuff. “What does he care?”

He lifts one shoulder. “He doesn’t want you to starve to death. He wants to take his pound of flesh in other ways.”

“Who’s your boss?”

He narrows his eyes. “You met him. He’s the one who jabbed you with the needle. You didn’t know?”

“You mean that omega kid is actually running this shitshow?” I laugh, but I’m mostly trying to hide my embarrassment. I thought Alessio was just the bait. I didn’t realize he was the boss. That makes my situation even more humiliating. Young or not, Alessio reeled me in like a clueless trout.

“That’s right. He’s in charge.”

“Unbelievable.” I frown. “You’re familiar to me. How do I know you?”

He moves to the door. “I’ve said too much already. Boss will come see you when

he's good and ready." He leaves, slamming the door behind him.

"Asshole," I mutter under my breath. The chill of the cellar is getting to me. The damp sinks into my bones, and my teeth chatter every few seconds.

My eyes are adjusting to the dim lighting. The boxes that I stumbled over earlier have fishing rods sticking out of them. Sadly, there are no hooks or fishing line that I could use as a weapon. I open some of the boxes one by one, hoping there will be something inside that I can use to escape. Unfortunately, they're just full of old clothing and pots and pans. I'm freezing, so I put on one of the old sweaters I find. It smells of mothballs and damp wool.

Feeling shaky and tired, I return to the far end of the room where I first woke up. There's a small cot with no pillow or blanket. Once I get more energy, I'll go back and grab more of the clothes from the boxes. Maybe then the bed will be cozier. I sit down and finish my bottle of water. I keep the bottle nearby for other reasons too. I don't see a toilet anywhere. I'm not going to piss on the ground where I sleep and marinate in the scent of urine. The bottle will have to do as my bathroom for now.

The cot squeaks alarmingly when I lower myself onto it. I wouldn't be surprised if it collapsed, to be honest. My feet hang off the end of the small bed, and I rest my head on the canvas material, feeling anxious. I don't feel good physically, so that makes me feel vulnerable. Not something I relish.

Somehow, I doze off and only wake when the door at the other end scrapes open again. I quickly sit up, head spinning, and face the dark figure moving toward me. The shape is too slender to be the yellow-eyed alpha. When the person is a few feet from me, his honeyed scent fills my nostrils.

Alessio.

He flicks a flashlight on, and I wince as it momentarily blinds me. “How are you enjoying your stay with us, Dario?” he asks snidely.

“To be honest, not that much. I never got any chocolate with my turn-down service.”

He laughs, and the huskiness of it shivers through me. Why the fuck am I still attracted to him? But I am. I’m half hard just standing near him in my little dungeon. He moves closer, but not so close I can grab him. He’s holding the cattle prod Yellow Eyes had earlier.

“Why am I here?” I ask.

“Because Valentino needs to be taught a lesson.”

I frown. “And you think holding me hostage is teaching him something? All it’s gonna do is piss him off. You’re being dumb.”

“I think you underestimate me, Dario.”

“I don’t even fucking know you, so how does that work?” I take a step toward him, and he lifts the cattle prod higher.

“Don’t. I’ll use this. If you think I won’t, you’re dead wrong.” His voice is hard. Cold.

“Aww, that’s not nice. Do you use that thing on all of your lovers? Or am I just special?”

He purses his lips, running his gaze over me. “You’re nothing to me. What happened before? Outside that bar? That was a mistake.”

“Ya think?” I growl.

“I was horny, and so I went with it. I don’t usually let strange alphas fuck me, especially in such a dirty and low-life way.”

“Is that right? You’re too good for that kind of thing?”

“Damn straight,” he snaps.

“Bullshit.” I laugh. “You loved it.” He’s not trying to seduce me anymore, but there’s still something about the way he looks at me that makes me certain he wants more of me. I’m flattered. Excited. But mostly confused about how that makes sense.

His mouth hardens. “Like I said, it was a mistake.”

“Yeah, it was. Most definitely.”

“I’m glad we can agree it shouldn’t have happened.”

I cross my arms, eyes pinned on him. “If I’m not here to be your sex slave, how about you tell me why I am here?”

His cheek twitches. “You’re here because I want Valentino to come face me like a man.”

“And why would he need to do that?”

Curling his lip, he says, “Because Valentino killed my father.”

It’s not beyond the realm of possibility that Valentino did indeed do that, but it would help if I knew who the hell Alessio was. I frown. “So all that talk about your father at

the bar was just for show?”

“Everything I said about my father was true. I did like pissing him off. He was controlling, and he did try to keep me cooped up in his home. But he was still my father, and I want vengeance.”

I grunt. “Who was your father?”

He lifts his chin. “Joseph Abella.”

I knit my brows as surprise shifts through me. “Seriously? You’re Joesph’s son?”

“That’s right.” The flashlight in his hand seems to tremble slightly.

Now that I know who Alessio is, things make a little more sense. Valentino came down very hard on the Abella syndicate after they kidnapped Nico last year. “I heard about your father’s death. I’m sorry.”

He scowls angrily. “Save your condolences. It’s your boss’s fault my father is dead. And you’re not innocent. You helped Valentino do all the shit he did to Dad.”

“I’m definitely no innocent, no.” I hesitate. “But if you ask me, Valentino showed amazing restraint after your dad grabbed Nico. Frankly, I thought Valentino would have your father and his entire family killed. But he didn’t. He just took some stuff away from your dad. It was basically a slap on the wrist.”

“Restraint? A slap on the wrist?” Screeches Alessio, eyes wide. “He took away ninety percent of my father’s business. He humiliated my father, and the shame of it all put him in the grave.”

“Like I said, I’m sorry for your loss, but Joseph fucked up when he kidnapped Nico.”

“My father just wanted a slightly bigger piece of the pie. Why shouldn’t he have had that? He’d worked loyally for Valentino’s family for decades. What would it have hurt to give him a little bigger slice?” he demanded bitterly. “But Valentino wouldn’t do it. He said he didn’t trust my father to control the ports. What bullshit was that?”

“Seems to me Valentino was right about your father. Your father showed bad judgment in taking Nico hostage. It was foolish. A stupid move.”

“He wasn’t going to hurt Nico. He was bluffing,” rasps Alessio.

“Says you. But even if you’re telling the truth, there’s no way Valentino could have known that. You know as well as I do men rarely bluff in our business.” I sigh and sit down on the cot again. I’m feeling weaker by the minute, something that worries me. How am I going to escape if I’m this feeble? “All Valentino knew was Nico was taken, and he could have been killed.”

“Not by us,” Alessio says harshly. “How were we to know Roberto would get involved? We had no idea he hated Nico and wanted him dead.”

“Decisions have consequences,” I say, my voice hard and unyielding. “Your father put Nico in a situation where he could have been murdered. Your father needed to be punished. If you can’t see that, you’re a fool. But I already suspect you are because you grabbed me. Do you seriously think this is going to make things better?”

“I’m not interested in making things better. I want Valentino dead. You’re like a brother to him. He’ll never let anything happen to you without trying to protect you. He’ll come for you, and then he’ll pay for the shit he did to my family.”

“And you’ll die because Valentino won’t forgive your family twice.”

He leans toward me and snarls, “Fine by me. I’m more than willing to die so long as

Valentino dies too. And believe me, he will.”

Anger surges inside of me at the threats he’s making, and I try to grab him. Unfortunately, my coordination is shit, and he’s able to evade my grasp. Curling his lip, he slams the cattle prod into my chest, and I grunt as electricity jolts through me. My insides feel like they’re on fire as the cattle prod sears into me. I’m in agony but grit my teeth against the pain. No fucking way I’m going to make pathetic whimpering noises. I won’t give Alessio that satisfaction.

As I crumple onto the cot, Alessio steps back, scowling. “I guess you want to get the party started early?”

“Fuck you,” I hiss, my chest throbbing painfully. I’ll be lucky if the little shit doesn’t send me into cardiac arrest.

“No thanks. Once was enough.” He backs up and heads toward the doorway. “We’ll visit some more later today. Fair warning, it won’t be pleasant.”

“You won’t get away with this,” I growl at his receding figure. “I’ll kill you with my own hands.” I’m talking tough, but I’m about as dangerous as a lamb right now.

His harsh laughter is his only response as he goes up the stairs and locks me into my dungeon again.

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Chapter Two

Alessio

My unwanted attraction to Dario ruins all my fun at having him captive in the cabin's cellar. But then, if I hadn't been hugely drawn to him in the first place, I'd never have let him fuck me. I still have no idea why I did that. Sure, I was horny, but even so, having sex with my mark was dumb. Risky. Still, even down in the cellar just now, his scent did something weird to me. I was twice as mean to him because of how he affects me. It pisses me off. I don't want to be attracted to Dario. He's just a card to be played. A tool to be used.

And I'd love to use him and use him some more.

I shiver and then curse under my breath as I tromp up the stairs to the kitchen. As I enter the room, Enzo glances at me uneasily, his yellowish eyes glitter in the dim light. "Did you have a nice chat?" he asks.

I pull out a chair at the oak table and plop down, setting the cattle prod on the table top. "He's an asshole." The kitchen is small. Dated. It has oak cupboards, yellow Formica countertops, and old green appliances. But dated or not, it's cozy.

"Is that supposed to be news?" Enzo laughs. "All of the Black Knives guys are pricks. They think their shit doesn't stink."

"I'm gonna enjoy torturing that jerk." I get up and head to the coffeemaker. I pour myself a cup of coffee, still seething at how arrogant Dario is. He didn't even seem

the least bit scared. That pisses me off. He should be peeing himself by now, like most “visitors” who’ve had the pleasure of staying here have. Instead, he made me feel like he had the upper hand. Which is fucking ridiculous.

“I remember that guy’s face.” Enzo sips his coffee, looking thoughtful. “The day your dad took Nico, that guy kind of saved my life.”

I scowl. “Excuse me?”

“It’s true. After Roberto stabbed me, that guy put pressure on the wound and drove me to the hospital.”

I narrow my eyes and grate out, “What the fuck are you saying? You feel loyal to him or something?”

“Hell no. I’m not saying I feel like I owe him or anything.” Sweat breaks out on Enzo’s face as I stare him down. “I just appreciate he didn’t let me bleed out, that’s all. I don’t think he even remembers me.”

I pour cream into my coffee giving a hard laugh. “Sounds to me like you feel beholden to Dario.”

“Absolutely not. Not even one bit.” He swallows hard.

“How sweet that you were reunited with your savior. Maybe I should fire you and Valentino can give you a job. Then you could work side by side with your hero.”

“Boss,” Enzo sounds nervous, “I’m just saying that I recognized him. I mean, he saved my life and I’m glad to be alive. But my loyalty is to you. To the Abella syndicate. You must know that.”

I lean against the counter, watching him as I take a sip of coffee. Enzo has worked for my family since he was a boy. He's probably loyal to us, but you never fucking know in this business. People can smile in your face, promising undying loyalty, while slipping a blade between your ribs. It's hard to trust anyone when you're in the mafia, and yet trust and loyalty are what can keep you alive too.

It's a complicated life.

When I don't respond, he frowns. "You trust me, right?" His eyes gleam as he holds my gaze. "I'd die for you, boss. You know that."

I'm happy to hear him say that since I've always felt Enzo was trustworthy. But it's best to keep him on edge. I don't want him feeling too sure of his place beside me. "I guess we'll see. When I start torturing your pal, how you react will tell me a lot."

He sighs. "He's not my pal and I'll happily help you cut his balls off, okay?"

I wince inwardly at that imagery, but say, "That's more like it."

"I mean it too. Just tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it. I have no qualms killing Dario. Not one." He lifts his chin, eyes glittering with determination.

"I'm glad to hear it. There's a reason you're the only man I brought with me on this little revenge tour. You're the only one of my dad's men I truly trust. Hopefully, you won't disappoint me."

"I won't," Enzo says quickly. "I'm a hundred percent loyal to you."

I give a sharp nod and he relaxes. We stay silent for a few minutes, then I say, "It's been a day and a half. Have you heard any chatter about whether or not Valentino knows Dario is missing yet?"

“There’s some talk, yeah. But so far Valentino isn’t saying anything publicly.” He smirks. “I’ll bet he’s rattled his main man isn’t around to help him figure out his next step.”

I frown. “I don’t think Valentino is weak or vulnerable just because I have Dario.”

“No. No. You’re right.” Enzo nods agreeably. “But he’s probably not at his best since his right-hand man is gone.”

“Or he’s ten times more dangerous because he’s pissed,” I murmur.

“True.” Enzo shudders.

I clear my throat. “But that isn’t a surprise. I knew Valentino would be upset if Dario went missing. That was the entire point of this. I want him flustered. Then maybe he’ll make mistakes.”

“What’s next?” Enzo rises and goes to the sink to rinse his cup. “Are you actually going to kill Dario, or just torture him up to that line?”

“We’ll have to kill him. No way that fucker won’t want revenge after I off his boss.” I fight the uneasiness that seeps into me at the thought of murdering Dario. His death was always in play. I’m not sure why I now find the idea so distasteful. Is it because we had sex? It wasn’t exactly a loving, bonding experience. It was fast and dirty.

But so fucking good.

I bite my tongue against the wave of lust that washes through me. I’d love another rough fuck with Dario, but I realize that’s never gonna happen. That ship has sailed, and it’s now time to look at him as what he is: bait. That’s all he was ever supposed to be; leverage to lure Valentino here.

“Do you think Valentino will really come for him?” Enzo asks.

“I absolutely do.”

“When do we let Valentino know we have him?”

I laugh. “We don’t. We will continue to drop breadcrumbs. Valentino needs to think he found Dario on his own. He can’t know this is a setup. It’s imperative he not realize he’s being played.”

“He’s smart though. He might know he’s being played.”

“Maybe, but trickling out clues is still the best strategy for us.” I glance at Enzo, taking in the nervous tick in his cheek. “You still up for this?”

“Of course.”

“You seem edgy.”

He frowns. “If you’re going up against the head of the Black Knives and you’re not edgy, you’re a fucking fool.”

My face warms. “Are you calling me a fool?”

He winces. “No, I’m saying of course I’m nervous. Valentino Syracuse is a fucking beast. He’s ruthless. We need to be sure we kill him fast or we’re toast.”

“We will.” I lift my chin, but inside I’m quaking. Despite what Enzo might think, I’m not a fool. I know perfectly well going against Valentino will probably get me killed. But I’ve made peace with that. I never thought getting out of this alive was guaranteed. But I don’t care if I die so long as that fucker goes too. I must avenge my

father's shame and subsequent death. I have no choice. In my world, there's nothing more important than your loyalty to family.

"If something were to happen to you," Enzo begins hesitantly, "Your older cousin, Carlo would take your place, right?"

"That's right." Unlike me, Carlo has always chomped at the bit to be the head of the Abella Syndicate. I was never power hungry. I'd have preferred a quieter, less violent life. But I was born the son of Joseph Abella and my fate was sealed. Because of that I was trained from a young boy to one day be my father's successor.

"We need to be sure nothing bad does happen to you," Enzo says gruffly. "I'd hate to think of Carlo taking over your father's syndicate."

"Me too. Mostly because that would mean I was dead." I smirk and finish off my coffee.

Enzo shifts to face me. "We could just kill Dario now. He'd be less of a threat then and he's dying either way. Makes me nervous having him loose and wandering around down in the cellar."

"I don't want to kill him yet. I want him to suffer." I grit my teeth. "He helped Valentino destroy Father. He needs to suffer before I kill him."

"Copy that." Enzo nods. "What's our next move?"

"I want you to go into town. Go to The Golden Ring and start some rumors. Say you heard from someone in one of the other syndicates that Dario is being held in the mountains. Be vague. Give just enough detail for Valentino to start narrowing his search."

“Okay.”

I give him a grim look. “But don’t hang around long. Just have a drink, talk a bit, and get your ass back here. You stay too long and Valentino might grab you and torture you for more info.”

Enzo swallows loudly. “Got it.” He moves toward the door.

“And Enzo,” I call out.

He stops and faces me. “Yeah?”

“If you do get caught by Valentino, you won’t talk, right?”

He scowls, looking insulted. “Fuck no.”

I narrow my eyes. “Even if he cuts off your fingers or your dick?” Few men hold out long when being brutally tortured. Even if they have good intentions, the agony makes silence impossible. Loyal or not, slice off a few choice body parts, and most men start spilling their guts.

Enzo looks sickened by my question. “I won’t rat you out.”

“Everyone says that.”

He grimaces. “Okay, well, if... if it comes to that, I... I’ll hold out as long as possible. If I don’t get back here quickly, I guess assume the worse and get out of here? I won’t cave easy, but I guess if they cut off my dick, I might.”

I appreciate his honesty and I smile grimly. “If you’re not back in two hours, I’ll disappear.”

He gives a curt nod and leaves.

I hear the engine of the car start and then it fades into the distance. The cabin is deadly quiet once he's gone. The silence makes sense. The cabin is tucked away in a remote area of the mountains a few hours out of the city of Los Demonios. Father bought the place forty years ago, but not as a vacation home. He purchased the cabin because it was so remote, he could torture people to death and conveniently dump the bodies on the mountain, never to be found.

I shiver, thinking of all the people who've been murdered in this cabin. Glancing around, it's hard not to feel creeped out. Are the spirits of the dead here now? Are they watching me and wishing they could get their revenge? I laugh gruffly, the hairs on the back of my neck stiffening. I stand, shooting an uneasy glance around the small kitchen. I decide to give Dario another visit. It's better to be around a flesh and blood man who hates me, than a vengeful ghost who hates me, right?

I open one of the kitchen drawers and pull out a pair of oversized handcuffs. I planned ahead about how to restrain Dario. He's a big guy and I knew his wrists would be too big for regular cuffs. I tuck the key into my back pocket. Next, I grab my flashlight, the cattle prod, and I go down to the cellar. I haven't been to the cabin in years. As I move down the steps, the stench makes me gag a little. I hadn't noticed the smell before because I'd been so focused on Dario, but the cellar fucking stinks. The small area is damp, and it reeks of urine and blood. I almost pity Dario for having to sit down here for days.

Almost.

Dario sits up when he hears me coming down the stairs. His size is intimidating as he gets to his feet. He's much bulkier and muscular than me. I remember the feel of that big body pressed up against my back when we had sex. I hate how my mind swirls with memories of that moment. I'd love to put it behind me, but I find it hard not to

think about the rough way he entered me. I shiver at the memory of how he just took what he wanted. There was no negotiating. He took me how he wanted, and it was fucking hot. I enjoyed the hell out of being manhandled by this brute of an alpha. In fact, even now, my dick hardens at the thought of it. But I clench my teeth and push the lusty memories from my brain.

“Back so soon?” he says gruffly.

“I figured why wait?” I smirk. “You deserve to suffer, and I look forward to being the one to make that happen.”

He doesn’t come back with a snappy retort, which surprises me. He’s generally pretty mouthy. He just stands there quietly, the dark shadows giving his angular face a sinister appearance.

“Turn and face the cot,” I command.

He hesitates. “Why?”

“So I can cuff you.”

He wrinkles his brow. “Maybe I don’t want to be cuffed.”

“This isn’t a democracy.” I lift the cattle prod. “You’ll regret it if you’re stubborn.”

He takes a step toward me, leaning in. His masculine power radiates off of him, and I get a whiff of faded cologne, sweat, and wool. “If you’re going to torture me either way,” he says softly, “Why should I let you cuff me? What’s in it for me if I’m agreeable?”

I shiver, instinctively inhaling his alpha scent. I can’t help my physical reaction to

him, and it's annoying. I'm embarrassed by how much he turns me on. I'm not usually attracted to big alpha thug types, but Dario makes me hard. I find myself drawn to how rough and base he seems. He's so different from me. From anyone I've ever allowed to touch me. He's a hoodlum but I want more of him..

I need to get a fucking grip.

I clear my throat, desperately trying to get control of my perplexing lust. "If you play nice, I'll be nicer too."

"Meaning what? You're still using a cattle prod on me. You still plan on torturing me either way."

"Yes," I say harshly. "But if you cooperate, I'll avoid your balls for now."

He swallows loudly. "How about you avoid them all together?"

"Sorry. We both know you're not gonna want to talk. You know the score. I'm sure you've tortured hundreds of men over the years. You know as well as I do that threatening a man's junk is a fabulous ice breaker."

"I'm not going to tell you anything that would harm Valentino or his family. You can zap my balls all the live long day. I'm not talking."

"We'll see," I grate. "Now turn around so I can cuff you, or else."

A muscle works in his cheek and he looks obstinate. But then, after a moment, he turns.

I do my best not to show it, but I'm relieved he's complied. Regardless of my cocky attitude, going head to head with Dario is intimidating. I tuck the prod under my arm,

and drop the flashlight near my feet. Then I move forward quickly and cuff him. As suspected, his wrists are thick and I'm glad I thought ahead about the cuffs. Regular cuffs would never have fit. Then I step back and he turns to face me. The flashlight's yellow light bounces off the walls, and I'm able to see the outline of a hardon through his slacks.

The knowledge he's got an erection does very weird things to me. I'm not sure what to feel. I'm vaguely flattered that just being near me turns him on, but pissed that I too am sporting a woody. Apparently we're both kinky fucks. I want to pretend he's the only one being affected by our weird connection, but I'd be lying. Truth is, I have to control my need to move closer to him. I want his full lips on mine again. I want his tongue in my mouth and his cock in my ass. I feel shaky and hot with need, which is humiliating. Bewildering. Why the hell are we so aroused by each other? We have been since the second we met. I've never experienced anything like this.

Is this some primitive alpha omega thing?

Whatever it is, I resent the hell out of it. Frustrated with my own arousal, I jab the prod into his stomach. He's not expecting it and he cries out and falls to his knees. Breathing hard, he coughs and pants, head down. Still angry at the way he affects me, I jab him again in his shoulder. This time he doesn't cry out. He wasn't taken off guard this time around. He grunts and his entire body shudders, but he doesn't show any weakness.

His stoicism pisses me off even more, so I shock him half a dozen more times. I don't stop until he's lying on the ground like a broken doll. He groans and tries to roll onto his stomach, but I stop him with my foot. Because his hands are cuffed behind his back, I feel fairly safe getting really close. I think I surprise us both when I straddle his thighs. His body is trembling, and his eyes are shut.

"I love seeing you in pain," I murmur. "Bringing you to your knees is exhilarating."

He opens his eyes. “You’re a sick little punk.”

“I know,” I smirk. “It’s part of my charm.”

“Fuck you. Fuck you and the entire Abella Syndicate.”

“Oh, yeah?” I jab the prod under his arm and he roars angrily. His entire body is shaking and his thigh muscles are tensed as hard as steel. My dick is still stiff and his is tenting his slacks. Does he like this shit? Is he getting off on the pain?

He’s breathing hard as our eyes lock. “Valentino was too lenient with your family,” he growls. “Screw you and your thieving father.”

Furious he mentioned my father, I jab him with the prod again and he groans in obvious agony. “You like this? Keep talking about my father. Just keep fucking talking. I can do this all day, Dario.”

When I stick him again he arches his back. With his head thrown back, veins bulge in his thick throat. My mouth waters and I’d love to lick and suck the skin of his throat. I must be a fucking nutcase. The more pain he’s in, the harder I get. I’m mystified by my reaction to him. I’ve never been into BDSM shit, but having him squirming under me is definitely a turn on. I can’t help myself, and I rub my hand down over his raised crotch.

He shudders, and rumbles, “I thought you weren’t going to go near my balls.”

“Well, they’re right there.” I leer.

I startle when he suddenly jolts his hips up, and I fall onto his broad chest. Since I’ve fallen forward, he’s able to clamp his legs around my calves. I’m tilted forward, balancing on my knees, so that our faces are mere inches apart. I’m horrified, yet also

excited by the new position. As I look into his dark eyes, the lust and danger I see swirling is exhilarating. I need to do something quick because in this position, he could turn me over and I'd be at his mercy.

"Get your legs off mine, Dario," I demand in a cold voice, gripping the cattle prod tight. He looks so smug, it worries me. Why does he look so freaking calm when I'm the one with the weapon?

He swallows hard, his dark eyes glittering. "You gonna pretend you don't want me?"

I'm sure the position we're in makes it impossible for him to not feel my erection. Still, my pride dictates I deny my desires.

Deny. Deny. Deny.

I say hoarsely, "All I want is for you to let me go."

His upper lip curls in a derisive smile. "Liar." An embarrassing whimper escapes my lips when he thrusts against me slowly, his movements are sensual. Seductive. "Undo my pants and ride me," he whispers, eyes glittering with lust.

Shocked by how much I want to do as he says, I clench my teeth. I'm sickened by how much I'd love to take him up on his offer. The asshole is my prisoner. He's cuffed and on his back in my cellar. Yet the smile he gives me is cocky. Assured. The bastard seriously thinks he has the upper hand, and he's not even completely wrong. I am tempted to give him what we both want.

The only protection I have from the bewildering lust eating away at me is cruelty. So I swiftly jab the prod against the side of his throat, and when he roars in pain and his legs release me, I scramble off of him and retreat toward the cellar stairs. Without looking back, I escape up the steps. Only when I've slammed the big door closed,

locking him in the cellar, do I calm down.

Heart pounding, I lean on the door, covered in sweat and breathing hard. There's something weird going on between us. If I'm not very, very careful, Dario will get the upper hand. If I let my guard down again, he'll likely be the one running the show.

I can't let that happen. I owe it to my father's memory to destroy the Black Knives Syndicate. The first step in doing that will be to spill Dario's blood in front of Valentino. Then I'll brutally murder Valentino Syracuse and reclaim all the things that were taken from the Abella Syndicate. I don't just want the ports, as my father wanted. I want it all. I want to run this town and erase the name of Syracuse from people's memories.

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Chapter Three

Dario

My neck and ribs throb painfully after my little visit with Alessio. Unfortunately, those body parts aren't the only thing throbbing. Alessio turned down my offer of sex, so now I'm left to suffer the pangs of a raging hard-on with my hands cuffed behind my back.

It's probably for the best that he turned me down. The last thing this situation needs are more complications. It was stupid to even tempt him. I need to get my head in the game. Need to be focused on escaping, not trying to seduce Alessio. Of course, if I'd been successful, perhaps I'd have been able to get the upper hand on him. Maybe I'd already be free if he had gone for my offer.

But he didn't.

Instead of obsessing about Alessio, I should be focused on finding a way out of this dank cellar. That task has only been made harder because the little asshole didn't uncuff me before he made his escape. I roll onto my side and clumsily manage to get to my feet. I stumble over to the cot and I lie down.

As the hours pass my anger grows. My arms ache from being stuck behind my body and cuffed. The metal restraints are cutting into my skin, and the longer Alessio leaves me down here cuffed, the more furious I grow. Now and then I hear voices upstairs, but it sounds like the same two voices: Alessio and the yellow eyed alpha. Did Alessio only bring one guy with him? That seems odd. If he wants Valentino to

come rescue me, shouldn't he have a bunch of guys here? Two people won't be able to stop a brutal force like Valentino.

I doze on and off throughout the night. I only know it's morning because above my cot is a tiny, tiny window. Way too small to escape out. The glass is difficult to see through after years of rain and sun. But it lets in just enough light that I can tell when it's day or night.

I'm dying of thirst. I don't understand why they're not bringing me water. If they just wanted me dead, they could have injected me with something lethal at the restaurant. Of course, I already know Alessio enjoys my suffering. I don't doubt that for a moment. He's definitely a sadistic little bastard.

When I hear the door at the top of the stairs clang open, I sit up. Heart pounding, I wait as Yellow Eyes comes slowly down the stairs carrying two bottles of water. I lick my dry lips, and I'd salivate at the sight of the water if I had any spit left in my mouth.

When he's close enough Yellow Eyes says, "Stand up and face the cot."

I do as he says, desperate for the water. He uncuffs my wrists and I grunt in pain as I am finally able to move my arms to the front of my body. It's agonizing as the blood flows back into my arms, and the muscles stretch. I have to grit my teeth to stop from whimpering.

Yellow eyes tosses the water bottles on the cot. "I assume you don't want food?"

"No." I reach for one of the bottles. My hands shake as I twist the lid off and swallow the first gulp of tepid water. My body absorbs the liquid greedily and I finish off the bottle quickly. I lower the bottle and say, "I don't mind starving, but you have to bring me water more often."

“We don’t have to bring you anything at all. You should be happy I remembered you hadn’t had water in a while. If it was up to Alessio, you wouldn’t have any.”

“If I die, how am I useful to you?” I rasp, wiping my wet chin.

“Frankly, I don’t think Boss wants you dead yet. He just doesn’t mind torturing you.”

“Well, I need water to survive, so maybe you should think about that. You can’t torture a dead man.”

“Look, I’ll pass your concerns along to management,” he says snidely. “But you need to get it through your thick, stupid head that I’m not calling the shots. You already know that, so stop whining to me all the time.” Despite his harsh words, I swear I glimpse a hint of regret in his mustard brown eyes. I suspect he feels sorry for me. Is that something I could use to my advantage in the future? I certainly hope so.

“I guess I work as bait, dead or alive? Either way, you’re hoping Valentino will show?”

“Yep.” He grimaces. “But like I said, I don’t think Boss wants you dead yet. He’s looking forward to you dying in front of Valentino. Alessio has a dramatic flair for things.”

“Your boss is a fool. He’s going to die along with us,” I growl.

Shrugging, Yellow Eyes says, “I think he knows that. I don’t think he cares.”

I shake my head and sit back down. Yellow Eyes is shrewd enough not to get close enough for me to grab him, and standing takes more energy.

“Anyway,” he says moving away, “You enjoy the rest of your day. I have to go into town later, anything you want me to pick up? Maybe some flowers, or a comforter with a few accent pillows?”

I don’t bother responding. He’s just being an asshole.

Left once more in my little prison, I get up and move around the perimeter of the room. I haven’t really explored every inch of the cellar yet. I’ve mostly checked over the area I’m being kept in. Unfortunately, my search doesn’t reveal any secret passages to freedom. Just a lot more old clothing, books, and fishing poles.

I decide the fishing poles will make the best weapon. If I snap one of them and get a sharp edge, I can use it to stab my kidnappers. I grab a fiberglass pole and I put the tip against the ground. I apply pressure with my weight, and it doesn’t take too many tries before it snaps. I’m frustrated when it breaks off without producing a sharp edge. I try that two more times, and each time the edges are flat.

I let loose a string of curses in Italian, but I hold onto the broken pole. It’s not sharp, but with enough force, I could thrust that through someone’s eye socket. Maybe through their stomach, if luck is on my side.

Hasn’t been so far.

Things could change. Situations like these evolve. I need to keep a positive attitude if I’m going to make it out alive.

I continue breaking fishing poles, and trying to get a sharp edge. It’s not like I have a lot else to do. My weapon making is interrupted by the sound of raised voices from behind the door at the top of the stairs. Frowning, I listen, straining my ears to hear what’s being said. I find it hard to believe Yellow Eyes and Alessio are having a quarrel. Yellow Eyes is too submissive and loyal to challenge Alessio. I continue

listing, but before I can actually figure anything out, the door at the top the stairs opens.

I watch warily as three men I don't recognize shuffle down the stairs. There's one older alpha with short gray hair, wearing a dark designer suit with a pink tie. Accompanying him are two younger alphas. None of them look particularly friendly. There's no sign of Alessio and Yellow eyes. Who are these jokers? Do they work for Alessio?

They don't see me at first because the lighting is poor down in the cellar. But as they near the cot area, the older alpha spots me. He curls his lips and says something to the other two men in Italian. I don't catch what he says. I speak Italian, but he speaks too softly for me to grasp his words. One of the guys turns around and heads back upstairs.

The remaining younger alpha moves toward me and I back away. I'm used to having a weapon. I feel naked without one. "Who the fuck are you?" I growl, hoping if I sound aggressive enough they'll back off.

"I'm Carlo Ferrari," the older alpha says in a tone that implies I should know who he is.

I've heard of the Ferrari syndicate, and I know there are blood ties there with the Abella family. I don't, however, recognize this alpha. "Where's Alessio?"

"That's what you want to know?" He gives the grungy area a disgusted look. He tugs a handkerchief from his suit pocket and presses it to his nose. "I'd be more concerned with yourself. This place is a pigsty. Alessio must really want you to suffer to keep you down here."

"I don't suppose you're the Cavalry?"

He purses his lips and shakes his head. “Sorry.”

“Do you work for Alessio?” I ask, frowning. He has an air of authority, which makes me think he probably doesn’t take orders from many people.

He laughs. “No. He’s my cousin.”

“I see.” I rub the back of my neck, trying to get a bead on the guy. He’s staring at me like I’m the prize heifer at the fair. But he’s not bothering to explain his presence in my little dungeon.

The younger alpha who went back upstairs comes down the steps. This time he has Alessio with him, and Alessio doesn’t look happy. I’m surprised, but not entirely displeased, to see Alessio’s lip is bleeding. He also has a cut on one cheek. My pulse picks up as I begin to comprehend the situation.

It would appear, Alessio is no longer running things.

I’m not sure whether to be happy about that or worried. Carlo has already admitted he’s not my ally. He’s been frank about the fact that he’s not here to rescue me. To be completely honest, I’m getting a really bad feeling about Carlo. Some people say, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” But that’s not always the case. Sometimes the enemy of your enemy is still your enemy. I get the sense that might be the situation with Carlo.

The younger alpha shoves Alessio toward me. He stumbles slightly, but catches himself. That’s good because I’d be inclined to let the punk faceplant.

He faces Carlo and the others, chin lifted. “You must be out of your mind if you think you can get away with this, Carlo,” Alessio snarls. “If my father were alive, he’d have your throat slit.”

Laughing, Carlo says, “But your father isn’t alive, is he? He’s gone. Somebody needs to step up as the head of the Abella syndicate.”

“I have stepped up,” hisses Alessio.

“Oh, come on now, Alessio. That isn’t true.” Carlo examines his glossy nails and then looks up. “You’ve been too busy planning your revenge on Valentino to focus on your organization.”

“Of course I want revenge,” mutters Alessio. “Who wouldn’t in my place?”

Carlo grimaces. “What happened to Uncle Joseph was unfortunate. But he brought Valentino’s wrath on himself. Valentino had to do what he did. You’re lucky his retribution wasn’t worse.”

“My father died because of what Valentino did to him.” Alessio’s voice shakes with anger.

“Your father knew the risks when he kidnapped Nico.” Carlo shrugs. “It’s unfortunate his health was poor and the stress took its toll. But Valentino didn’t kill your father. You’re too blinded by grief to see that and to listen to reason. You’ve gone off the deep end trying to get vengeance on Valentino, and that’s forced me to take action.”

“Don’t pretend this is some noble deed, Carlo. You’ve always wanted to take over our syndicate.” Alessio touches his swollen lip and stares at the drops of blood on his fingertips. “Getting revenge is my duty as my father’s son, and as the head of the Abella Syndicate.”

“Your fixation with revenge is worrisome. Your men are concerned about your mental state.”

“That’s bullshit. My men trust me to lead them. If there was a problem, my captains would have told me.”

Carlo shrugs. “They’re not comfortable talking to you about their concerns because you’re so volatile. They don’t dare approach you.”

Alessio curls his lip as he glares at his cousin. “And you’re implying they’re talking to you instead?”

They’re both distracted which would be the perfect moment to make a break for it. If not for the other two alphas, I might have tried. But I wouldn’t get far with those two young thuggish alphas hovering.

Carlo’s tone is bored as he says, “Your men aren’t sure they want you leading them, Alessio. It pains me to be the one to tell you that. We’re family after all. I take no pleasure in making this move on you during your time of grief.”

Alessio spits blood onto Carlo’s shoe. “Liar. You’ve always wanted to take over from Father. Don’t pretend you give two shits about me. At least give me that much respect.”

Carlo looks down at his shoe and he bends down to wipe the blood from his shiny leather footwear with his handkerchief. When he straightens, he sighs. “You’re my blood. Of course this isn’t pleasant for me. I loved Uncle Joseph like my own father, but something has to be done. Your men need a real leader.”

“Fuck you, Carlo,” snaps Alessio.

I laugh gruffly and Carlo glances at me. “You find this amusing?”

“Not really.”

“Then why are you laughing?” Carlo arches one dark brow.

“Because both the Abella and Ferrari syndicates are toast if you two clowns are running the show.” I shake my head, ignoring Alessio’s disgruntled harrumph. “I’ve never seen such a disorganized bunch. Neither one of you are born leaders.”

Carlo scowls. “What would you know about leading? You do Valentino’s bidding.”

“I don’t need to be the one giving orders to know a true leader when I see one. I respect Valentino. I’d die for him without a second thought. That’s how it’s supposed to be. Valentino inspires loyalty. You’re never going to inspire devotion by backstabbing your own blood.”

“My men are already loyal to me,” snaps Carlo.

“But the Abella men aren’t. After this move, I doubt they’ll ever follow you. They’d more readily follow Alessio even though he’s young. He bit off more than he could chew by grabbing me, but his men will respect how loyal he is. You’re showing that you’ll do anything to get more power. That doesn’t inspire men to lay down their lives.”

Carlo takes a menacing step toward me. “You should watch how you talk to me.”

“Why? I’m a dead man no matter which one of you is in charge.” I glance at Alessio and find him watching me. His expression is odd, but I don’t have time to muse. I gesture to him. “Is Alessio young? Yeah, he is. You should have stood beside him during this difficult time. Instead, you’re betraying him. You should have honored your uncle’s wishes for Alessio to take his place. Instead, you’re greedy. That greed will get you killed.”

“No one will ever know about this, and I’m not interested in your opinion. You know

nothing of what my uncle wanted. I've always been the backup plan should something happen to Alessio." Carlo's smile is cold. "My uncle trusted me to run his syndicate."

"He never expected you to try and kill me," rasps Alessio.

Carlo shakes his head as he eyes his younger cousin. "You act like I wanted this. It's your impetuous behavior that has brought this on."

"No, it's your greed for power that has brought this on," Alessio growls.

Carlo's jaw clenches. "I'm done discussing this. Your plan was foolish. Reckless. Now this is where we are. The hard truth is you're both going to die. The scene will be staged to show you murdered Dario, and then took your own life."

"I'd never do that," Alessio says angrily. "Anyone who knows me knows I'd never take my own life."

"It doesn't matter," Carlo says gruffly. "Even if there are those who don't believe you'd kill yourself, they'll all just assume Valentino killed you. No one would fault him for murdering you, not after you killed his second."

One of the young alphas comes over and says something quietly in Carlo's ear. Carlo scowls and says, "Right now? Can't you tell her I'm busy?"

The young alpha winces. "I tried, sir."

"Well, try harder," Carlo rumbles.

The young alpha looks like he'd love to crawl into a hole rather than push back against his boss, but he takes a breath and says "I'm so sorry, sir. Mrs. Ferrari insists

you promised her you'd accompany her to the gala tonight. She really wouldn't listen when I told her you were otherwise engaged."

"I thought that stupid gala was next month," Carlo snaps irritably.

"It appears not, sir." The alpha grimaces.

"This is ridiculous. There will be other galas," growls Carlo, giving us an impatient look. "I don't have time for one of her tantrums right now."

"I'm sorry, sir," the young alpha repeats yet again. "Shall I tell her you'll call her back later, and that you won't be joining her?"

"No," mutters Carlo, eyeing us. "I'll never hear the fucking end of it if I blow her off tonight. Jesus, it's like she's trying to fuck things up for me."

The young alpha shoots a dismissive glance at me and Alessio. "If you'd like, sir, Harlan and I can handle these two. It might be better if they die while you're with Mrs. Ferrari at a public event."

Carlo exhales roughly. "No, I need to be here when it happens. But I can't rush things." He rubs his jaw, his expression assessing. "Everything has to be perfectly staged. I didn't get where I am by outsourcing my most important moves. I can't afford for there to be even one loose end. Nothing must lead the cops to me, and nothing must clue in the Abella's men that I had hand in Alessio's death."

"Harlan and I would be very thorough, sir."

Sighing, Carlo shakes his head. "No. I can't trust anyone with this. It's too important. I won't be able to relax unless I know beyond a doubt these two are dead. One mistake could fuck up the entire operation."

“Yes, sir. As you wish.” The young alpha nods politely. If he’s insulted by his boss’s lack of trust, he doesn’t show it.

Carlo turns back to us, impatience etched in the lines of his face. “Looks like you two get a reprieve until tomorrow morning.”

“Does Charmaine know what you’re planning?” Alessio sounds wounded. “I find it hard to believe she’d be okay with you murdering me.”

“She has no idea.” Carlo wrinkles his brow. “She’s rather fond of you, kid. Your death will break her heart.”

“Still, you’re going to do it,” mutters Alessio.

“I have to. It’s the perfect moment for this move. You’re behavior has given me my chance to take what I deserve.” Carlo shrugs and turns away, heading for the stairs. “Enjoy your last night on earth, boys. I’m sorry I can’t provide a fancy final meal or anything.”

Alessio lets a string of curse words fly as he flips off his cousin’s retreating back.

I don’t bother wasting my energy on anger. I move to sit on the cot, feeling some relief. Because of that phone call, I now have until morning to figure a way out of this nightmare. It’s not much time, but it’s better than Carlo putting a bullet in my brain right this minute.

Once the big door at the top of the stairs clangs shut, Alessio stands awkwardly staring at me. Now that the others are gone, it’s probably sinking in that he’s at my mercy. I’m sure the kid is shitting his pants to be left alone down here with me. He doesn’t have to worry though. As much as I’d love to strangle him, I don’t have time to waste on him. Taking out my anger on him won’t get me out of this mess.

“Why do you look so fucking calm?” he grates out.

“Would you rather I cry and scream with frustration?” I laugh. “Sorry, Kid, that’s not my style.

He hesitates. “No, I’m not saying that. But you don’t even look at all worried.”

I glance up at him, taking in the nervous twitch of his cheek. He looks young and scared, and against my will, I feel sorry for him. I’ve been betrayed in the past by my own blood and it’s painful as hell.

“How... how come you don’t look worried?” he asks quietly.

“Probably because I don’t plan on dying tomorrow.”

He moves closer, although he still keeps some distance between us. “How are you going to pull that off?”

“Don’t know yet.”

He chuffs. “Carlo isn’t going to just let you go.”

“Obviously.” I lie down on the cot, putting my arms behind my head.

He moves closer. “So what’s your plan?”

“Don’t know yet,” I repeat testily.

“You really think you can figure a way out of this?” His voice is hushed.

I don’t respond. I stare up at the stained ceiling, trying to decide if I want to try and

save Alessio too. After the way he's treated me, I should let him die. He deserves everything horrible that will happen to him. He's the reason I'm in this mess. Of course, if I can't come up with a plan, saving his ass is a moot point.

"Answer me," he commands. "Why are you so sure you can outsmart Carlo?"

When I still don't answer him, he stares at me in silence for a bit, then he inches closer. He clears his throat and says in a snooty voice, "Move your feet and make room for me to sit."

I lift my head and squint at him. "Excuse me?"

His chin rises. "You heard me. Make room for me to sit. The cot isn't just for you." He looks like a snobby little prince the way he's staring down his nose at me.

I sit up on my elbows and give an incredulous laugh. "You've got to be shitting me."

He doesn't respond, he reaches down and grabs hold of my feet. Then he pushes them toward the wall. Next, he brushes off the spot where they were, and he gingerly sits down on the rickety cot. The little bed creaks alarmingly, and for one second, I'm pretty sure we're both going to end up on our asses. But somehow, the cot holds.

"Bed hog," he mumbles.

I'm tempted to wrap my legs around the little shit's neck and choke him out. But I control my murderous rage and simply watch him in silence. He eventually turns to look at me. His expression is stuck-up, but there's a lot of fear and uncertainty in his pretty eyes. I fucking hate that my heart flutters as our eyes meet. I resent the attraction I still feel for him.

He swallows loudly, and then says, "We should work together."

“Seriously?” I arch one brow.

“Sure. I... I can help you,” he says softly. “It’s better if there are two of us. You’ll never be able to pull anything off without my help.”

“Still,” I rumble, “I kind of like the idea of leaving you here to die.”

His mouth thins. “Be smart. Use your brain, not your emotions. You know that two is a better number than one.”

“We’re still out numbered.”

“Yes.” He shifts so that his knees are pointing toward me. His hip touches my leg. Is he aware of that, or is he too distracted to notice? “But I’ll do whatever you tell me to do. I have to survive this so I can have Carlo murdered. How dare he pull this shit on me?”

“Forgive me if I don’t care about your problems right now. It’s your fault I’m even in this fucked up situation.”

He turns his head away, avoiding my gaze. “I’m not going to apologize. I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

“You’re stupid, kid. If you want me to help you, you need to think before you speak.”

He meets my gaze and a spark of resentment glimmers in his eyes. “I don’t lie well. There’s no point in me pretending I regret what I did to you. I still blame you and Valentino for my father’s death. Nothing about that has changed.”

I can’t help but laugh. He’s like an angry little kitten hissing at Godzilla. “You’re unreal. You should shut up before I make you shut up.”

I expect him to give some snide, mouthy remark, but instead, he leans toward my face. He's so close, his warm breath puffs over my lips and I'm embarrassed when my dick gets hard. I hate the sexual power this brat has over me.

"Come on, Dario," he purrs. "You don't really want to leave me here to die, do you?"

He's so cocky. He knows I'm lusting after him and he's trying to use that to his advantage. I'm tempted to head butt him, but I'm reticent to mess up his pretty face. Instead, I move quickly and shove him off the cot, and he lands on his ass with a yelp.

Chapter Four

Alessio

“Asshole,” I grouse, glaring at Dario. “I could have broken my neck.”

Dario smirks. “Oh, well.”

I scramble to my feet, scowling. “I guess I should expect that sort of treatment from a low life thug type.”

“You’re not exactly an upstanding citizen,” he mutters, rolling over and presenting me with his backside.

I don’t speak for a moment, then I say, “Instead of sleeping, shouldn’t you be thinking of a way out of here?”

“I am thinking.”

I should probably count my lucky stars that Dario is ignoring me, instead of trying to get revenge on me for how I’ve treated him. I’m trapped down here and he could do what he wanted with me. I don’t have my cattle prod anymore and he’s a lot bigger and tougher than me. If he wanted to make me pay for what I’ve done to him, he could do that easily.

Feeling dejected, I shiver while glancing around the dark, dank space. As much as I’d like to believe Dario can somehow get us out of here, I know there’s no way out. For

decades my family has used this cellar to imprison people. Not one of them has ever escaped. As I stand in the chilled room, inhaling the rancid scent of urine and blood, I'm seething. The cavalier way Carlo just left me down here enrages me.

Carlo was right about one thing though, I was so fixated on my revenge, I didn't notice he was about to make a move on me. I suppose I trusted him because Father did. I always knew he was power hungry, but I never suspected he'd turn on me. If I make it out of here alive, which I'm beginning to doubt, he'll regret how he treated me today.

I blow on my chilled hands, trying not to fixate on my throbbing face and lips. My thoughts go to Enzo. I hope he's okay. He was with me when Carlo and his goons arrived at the cabin. One of Carlo's thugs stabbed Enzo, and I'm worried he might be dead. The thought of that actually bothers me. I've known Enzo so long, he's almost like family. When Carlo showed up, I had no idea he was going to attack me and Enzo. We didn't have our guard up and now look at the mess I'm in.

The biting cold of the cellar sinks deep into my bones. I'm tempted to get back on the cot with Dario so we can share body heat. If I try, will he knock me onto the ground again? Stupid prick, why should he get to lay there while I stand here shivering my ass off? Gritting my teeth, I move to the cot. Dario's breathing is so slow and even, I assume he's asleep. How can he sleep at a time like this?

He must sense my nearness, because he turns over and gives me a wary look. His body is tenses, as if he's ready for a fight. "What are you doing?" he growls.

"I thought you were asleep," I mumble.

He sits up and throws his legs over the edge of the bed. "No. I'm trying to think of a way out of this." He sighs and rubs his hands together, trying to warm them up. "Are you any good in a fight?"

“Yes.”

He runs his gaze over me. “You don’t look like you would be.”

I bristle. “Well, I am. My father insisted I study martial arts. I absolutely know how to fight. I’m a blackbelt in Taekwondo.”

He squints at me. “Is that a real fighting technique, or one of those artsy fartsy styles that rich brats like you take to find themselves?”

Scowling, I retort, “I can kick a guys ass, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m asking. Sophisticated breathing techniques aren’t going to help us in this situation.” He stands and we face each other.

His features are hard, and I sense he’s worried. That fact is unsettling. The entire time he was my captive, I never once felt like he was scared. But I can sense uneasiness in him now. Does he think we’re screwed? Does he assume we’re going to die? If a guy as tough as Dario is worried, I have trouble not feeling hopeless.

“What can we do?” I ask softly. “We can’t get out of here, so what can we do?”

His dark eyes meet mine. “We have to get the drop on them.”

“How do we do that when they know we’re down here?” I frown.

Without answering, he moves to where there are boxes of old clothing. I watch as he grabs armfuls of sweaters and pants and carries them over to the cot. He drops them on the ground and goes to get more. I watch him, confused by what he’s doing. Once there’s a sizeable pile of clothing, he puts his hands on his hips and meets my bewildered gaze.

“Since they know we’re down here, we have to make them think they know where we are in the room.” As he speaks he grabs a coat from the pile, and he shakes it roughly. “We’re going to stuff this full of clothing and make it look like a person.”

His strategy slowly dawns on me. “So, we’ll make them think the clothing is us, and that we’re still on the cot?”

“Yes. In reality,” he grates, going back to the boxes, “We’ll be lying in wait.” He reaches into a box of fishing poles and he turns to face me. The pole he holds is snapped off, making it half the size it would normally be. He laughs gruffly at my blank expression. “It doesn’t look like much, but it can do some damage with enough force behind it. We can impale them in the gut or the eye, if we can get the drop on them.”

“Okay,” I say softly, trying not to shudder with revulsion. I don’t want Dario doubting my toughness any more than he already does. Truth is, I’m not a violent person by nature. My upbringing has forced me to be vicious on occasion, and I’m pretty brave with a cattle prod in my hands. But the idea of shoving that pole through another person’s eye socket makes me want to vomit.

Maybe something in my expression gives me away because Dario exhales impatiently. “This is life or death, Alessio.”

“I’m well aware,” I snap, annoyed he was able to read me so easily.

“It’s us or them. I need to know I can count on you when the time comes. If you’re going to pussy out, then forget it. I’ll do what I can on my own.”

I curl my lip. “I’m not pussying out. Naturally I don’t relish the thought of shoving a fishing pole through a guy’s eyeball. That doesn’t mean I won’t do it.”

“If we’re doing this, I have to trust you.”

I laugh because the idea of him trusting me is pretty fucking ridiculous. “Then I guess we’re fucked.”

A muscle jerks in his angular cheek. “I mean trust as in I trust you’ll act when it’s required of you. No, I won’t trust you for real, Alessio. Not after the shit you’ve pulled.”

“Something tells me you don’t trust many people whether they kidnap you or not,” I murmur. He gives me a wary look, but doesn’t argue. “What do you think our odds of getting out of this alive are?”

He grimaces and avoids my gaze. “Not great. But we have to try.”

“I agree.” I gesture to the cot with the clothing piled on it. “What do you want me to do?”

He hesitates, then says, “Grab another coat if you can find one. We need two fake people.”

As I go to the boxes I wonder if I’m digging through the clothing of the many prisoners we’ve kept down here? That’s an unsettling thought. Will my clothes end up in one of these boxes if Carlo murders me in cold blood?

I watch Dario out of the corner of my eye. He’s moving around, stabbing the air with one of the broken fishing rods. He thrusts the pole with such brutal force, I shiver. I can only imagine what it would feel like to have that pole shoved through my body. I’ll do whatever I need to so that I can survive, but I can’t say I’m looking forward to piercing another person’s eyeball with a fishing rod.

“How will this work?” I ask, stuffing a big wool sweater into the cavity of an old coat I found. “We don’t know exactly when they’re coming tomorrow.”

“We’ll have to be ready before daylight.” Dario pauses his play fighting for a moment, and he glances at me. “There can be no hesitation. If you think stabbing Carlo will be a problem for you, you should tell me now.”

I scowl. “How many times do I have to tell you I’ll do what needs doing? I look forward to stabbing that asshole.”

“I think instead, I’ll handle Carlo,” Dario says, studying me. “You can take on the others.”

I frown. “Excuse me? Shouldn’t I have the pleasure of murdering Carlo?”

“Why? Because you’re related?” He chuffs. “That’s not what matters. What matters is that he goes down fast. There will be no second chances with him.”

“I told you before, I’m not weak,” I hiss, straightening.

Dario shrugs. “I’m not saying you’re weak, but he’s an alpha and I’m an alpha. We’re more evenly matched.”

I huff. “Well, I don’t take orders from you. And, besides, they’re all alphas, so your logic makes no sense.”

“It’s important Carlo dies fast. I’d feel better being in charge of that happening.” Dario turns his back on me as if the subject is closed.

I wrinkle my brow. “This isn’t settled.”

“Yeah, it is.” He goes back to jabbing the fishing pole in the air.

I give a short laugh and move toward him. “No, Dario, it’s not. Like I said, you’re not in charge of me and I want to be the one to take Carlo out.”

“Jesus,” he rumbles, turning to face me. His eyes are black and angry as he steps toward me. “We’re going to die if you challenge me every step of the way. What happened to you doing whatever I ask you to do? Was that just a line so I’d take you with me if I get out of here?”

Heat prickles my cheeks because I did say that to him. “I don’t think it’s right that you’d be the one to kill Carlo when I’m the one he betrayed.”

He sighs and his rigid expression softens ever so slightly. When he speaks, his voice is not exactly gentle, but it’s less harsh. “I understand you want revenge, but I just want out of here.”

“I want that too.”

A muscle works in his cheek as he studies me. “I think we have a better chance of succeeding if you’ll listen to me and follow my lead. I’m not trying to push you around. I think you’re very clever. You ambushed me and I didn’t see it coming. I don’t doubt you’re tough, Alessio. But this situation is different. Brute force is what’s needed here. There will be no do overs. Do you understand?”

My pride tells me not to listen to him, but the rational part of my brain knows he’s right. There’s no denying Dario is bigger and tougher than me. I’m no hot house flower, but I’m not built for brutality, and he is. His fists are huge compared to mine. I’m not soft, but I’m soft compared to him.

As if reading my mind, he grimaces and says, “Kid, I’m built like a tank, and you’re

built like a thoroughbred. Let me do the dirty work, okay? I know you can handle those other two guys. I'm not confident you can murder your own cousin without hesitation. I don't even blame you for that. It's actually good that you'd have qualms about murdering family. Take it as a compliment that I think you have a soul, okay?"

I hold his gaze, fighting my pride. "Fine."

He nods his approval. "Good."

I return to stuffing the coat and pants to look like a person. I'm so cold I'm tempted to put on one of the old sweaters. When my teeth start chattering, I give in and slip on a light blue cashmere sweater from the pile. Dario takes note, but says nothing.

Eventually, we have two fake people constructed. "Should we put them on the bed?" I ask.

Dario hesitates. "No. We can put them on there later. I think we should try sleeping a little bit."

"Oh. How exactly would that work? Do you mean we should sleep in shifts?"

He rubs his unshaven jaw and the tips of his calloused fingers rasp against his skin. "I think it's best if we both lie down on the cot at the same time."

"Why's that?" I squint at him. I highly doubt he wants to seduce me at the moment, so I'm curious why he wants us to share the cot.

Pursing his lips, he admits, "Because that way I can feel if you get up."

I laugh. "You mean you don't trust me while you're sleeping?"

“Can you blame me?” he asks. “It’s not like you’ve made any secret about wanting me dead.”

I smile grudgingly. “True. But right now I need you.”

“Still,” he murmurs, his gaze wary, “I’d feel better knowing where you are at all times.”

“Such a suspicious fellow.”

“It’s one reason I’m still alive.” He gestures to the cot. “You get in first. I want to be on the outside.”

I frown. “Why?”

“Because I just do,” he says smoothly.

I smirk. “I’m guessing it’s not so you can protect me?”

He snorts. “No. I’m not interested in protecting you, Alessio.”

“I see. But you need me right now.”

“Exactly. We need each other. If we get out of here, that changes. But for now, we have a truce.”

I narrow my eyes. “If we have a truce, why are you so worried about what I’ll get up to while you’re snoozing?”

“Because I’m afraid your desire for revenge against Valentino might outweigh your desire for my help. I’d rather not have a fishing pole jabbed through my brain.”

I shudder and climb on the cot. “You have a real way with words, Dario.” I lie down, staying as close to the wall as possible.

“I don’t trust you. Why lie about it?” As he speaks, he joins me on the cot. He carefully lowers himself down, and the cot squeaks beneath our weight. His bulk takes up a lot of room, and even though I know he’s not trying to cuddle with me, our bodies are pressed together.

“The feeling is mutual,” I mutter. “I have no reason to trust you either.”

“Exactly.” He turns so that his back is to me, which is a relief. I’m not sure I could have relaxed with him watching me with those dark eyes of his. His body is so warm, I lean into him a little. We’re already crushed together, so what’s the difference? He may be an thuggy jerk, but he’s a warm thuggy jerk.

I allow my face to rest against his broad back. He smells surprisingly good, considering he’s been stuck down here for days without a shower. The wool sweater he’s wearing has a hint of mothballs, but Dario’s natural aroma is pleasing to me. His scent is masculine. Woodsy. I’m bewildered why I feel calmer being next to him, but I do. I’ve never been particularly in touch with my omega instincts, but something about Dario brings them out.

We lay like that for a while, and I soak in the heat of his body. I’m warmer now, but don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep. I’m pretty wound up. I wonder what my father would think if he saw me cuddling up to Valentino’s second. Is he rolling over in his grave right now? If I was more ruthless, maybe I would try and stab him with one of his broken fishing poles while he’s sleeping. But as he said, we really do need each other right now.

I jump when Dario suddenly speaks. “You should try and rest. I don’t think Carlo and his goons will show up before dawn.”

I frown. “How do you know I wasn’t already asleep? Maybe you just woke me up by talking.”

“I could tell from your breathing you were awake.”

I grunt in response and close my eyes. I’d never tell him this, but I’m curious about Dario. I wonder what his childhood was like. Why is he content to play second fiddle to Valentino? He’s an alpha who commands respect. Has he never wanted to be the one in charge? Is he truly happy to simply follow Valentino?

Of course, I can see why Valentino values him. Dario is a tough, smart guy. He doesn’t panic in a bad situation. He stays calm and he just keeps thinking. He did that earlier today when Carlo showed up. He was completely taken off guard by what went down with my slimeball cousin, but he kept his head. Was he born into this lifestyle, or did he fall into it like a lot of guys do? I never really had a choice, but many people do.

Dario exhales loudly. “Jesus, kid, I can literally feel your brain buzzing. Go to sleep.”

I sit up on my elbow, feeling irritated. “You know, that’s easier said than done. We might die in a few hours. I’m sorry if the thought of that doesn’t relax me.”

“Well, count sheep or something,” he grumbles.

I lie down again, scowling. “Mind your own business. You’re not asleep. Why do I have to sleep?”

He sighs. “Because you’re different than me.”

“Oh, I get it. I’m a weak little omega who needs his rest?”

He laughs gruffly. “This has nothing to do with you being an omega. It has to do with you being pampered. You probably can’t function without your beauty sleep. You probably have a little sleep mask, silk sheets, and a humidifier back home, don’t you?”

“Are you going to pretend as Valentino’s second you live in squalor?” I roll my eyes. “We’re both living pampered lives.”

He’s quiet for a moment, then he says, “Maybe that’s true. But I wasn’t pampered from birth. You were.”

I’m kind of hoping he’ll expound about his childhood, but he doesn’t. So I say, “You’re the one who started talking. If anything you’re keeping me awake.” I scowl at his broad back.

“I won’t say another word. Now go to sleep, okay?” He exhales roughly and shifts around, trying to get comfortable.

I let out a shaky breath, willing my body to calm. He’s not wrong about the amount of anxiety buzzing through me. I want to sleep, but I also know before I know it the morning will be here and I could very well die. He shifts around some more as if trying to find a comfortable position. Then at one point, he sits up. That scares the hell out of me because I’m afraid he’s heard something.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, heart racing.

“Oh, uh... nothing,” he grumbles. “It’s just that my arm is hanging off the damn cot.”

I frown at his surly tone. “I’m not sleeping on the floor, if that’s what you’re hinting at.”

“I wasn’t hinting about anything, Alessio.” He shakes his head. I can’t see his expression in the dark, but I can feel his eyes on me. “Is it okay if I face you?” he asks quietly. “Then my arms wouldn’t hang off the cot.”

I swallow nervously. “Oh, uh, yeah.” I’m surprised he asked for my permission. “I can face the wall.”

“I don’t care if you face me.”

Facing each other feels way too intimate. He’s supposed to be my mortal enemy. We’re only working together right now so we don’t both die. “It’s fine.” I turn to face the wall. I feel him shifting his weight as he rolls over. When he rests his hand on my thigh, I stiffen. “What are you doing?”

“Sorry.” His voice is gruff. “I just don’t know where to put my arm. This cot is so cramped.”

“It’s not made for two people,” I mumble, praying he can’t hear how breathless I am. He starts to move his hand away, but I say, “It’s okay, Dario. I know you’re not trying it on with me. Go ahead and rest your hand on me. It doesn’t bother me.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

He shifts a bit more, and then he settles. His breath is warm on the nape of my neck, and the hard press of his chest against my back feels nice. I’m annoyed when my dick twitches. I don’t want to feel attraction for him, but I do. It’s dangerous to have any feelings for him other than hatred, but I’ve felt a weird connection with Dario since the moment we met. I don’t recall ever experiencing that with an alpha before.

The most surprising thing is that after a few moments of feeling really uptight, I begin to relax. My lids are heavy and I find my breaths begin to match the slow, deep rhythm of his. The heat of his bulky body seeps into mine, and the most delicious sensation of serenity washes through me as I drift off to sleep.

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Chapter Five

Dario

Sleep ends up eluding me. I try really hard to go under, but there's too much anxiety eating away at me. Having Alessio in my arms isn't helping me relax either. Every time he moves, the feel of his warm, lithe body rubbing against mine makes me hard. It's nearly impossible to ignore him.

I stay awake the next few hours, listening to Alessio's soft breaths. I'm surprised he actually fell asleep. He was so wound up, I didn't think he would. To ignore my arousal, I run the possible scenarios in my head of what will probably go down when Carlo returns.

They'll all be armed with guns, so it's essential that we take them completely by surprise. Fishing poles are no match for bullets, unless they never see it coming. I pray my decoy plan works. Needing to trust Alessio to carry off his part is asking a lot of me. Valentino is one of the few people on this earth I trust with my life. But in a few hours, that trust will need to be placed with an omega who wants me dead.

I don't know what time it is exactly, but I get up off the bed and go to the farthest corner of the room to urinate into one of the empty water bottles. I don't want to go into battle with my bladder full. When I return to the cot, Alessio is sitting up with his legs over the edge.

He rubs his eyes roughly. "I actually slept."

“Yeah.” I carefully lift one of the decoys off the ground. “We should probably get things set up.”

He stands. “I need to pee.”

“Okay, then do it.” I lay one of the decoys on the cot. I place it in a sitting up position. I think us sitting up, in fear for our lives, is something Carlo will believe. He wants us scared. He wants us dreading his return. Lying down sleeping will probably seem suspicious to him. I glance at Alessio because he’s still standing there looking uptight. “I thought you had to take a piss?”

“I do.” He bites his lower lip. “It’s just disgusting to urinate where we sleep.”

I straighten, studying him. “Funny how that thought never crossed your mind where I was concerned.”

Guilt shifts through his eyes, but he lifts his chin. “You were my prisoner, not my house guest.”

I squint at his snippy tone. “How about you figure out where to piss on your own?”

“I will.” He scowls. “I was simply curious how you handled the situation. Excuse me if I don’t love the idea of walking in piss.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that.” I move to get the other decoy. “We’re either going to be gone from this place, or dead in a few hours.”

He swallows loudly and heads toward the far corner of the room.

By the time he returns, I have both decoys staged. I have the smaller one on the cot, and one propped up, as if standing beside it. I pray this fools Carlo and his men just

long enough for me and Alessio to do what we need to do.

Alessio eyes the decoy I have propped up standing. “What if that falls over as they’re coming toward it?”

“Hopefully they’ll think I just fainted with fear,” I say sardonically. He laughs, which surprises me. I meet his gaze. “Want to know the plan?”

“That would be nice.” He rubs his hands together, shivering.

I grab two of the fishing rods and hand one to him.

He takes it, fingering the broken tip. “I’d feel so much happier if this was sharp.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers.” I move toward the stairs. “When they first come down, their eyes will need to adjust to the dim light. My guess is Carlo will hang back and let his guys come down first.”

“What if he brings more men with him today than he had yesterday?”

“I don’t think he will. I think he wants as few as men to know he turned on you as possible. Just like you only brought that one yellow eyed alpha with you. Loose lips sink ships, right?”

“Right.” His lips thin. “I think those fuckers murdered my guy, Enzo.”

He actually sounds upset about that, which is surprising. Alessio doesn’t usually show a lot of emotion. “Were you close to him?”

He sighs. “I’d known him since we were both kids. He was loyal to our family.”

“I see.” He wants me to believe he only cares because Enzo was loyal. I’m not buying it. “Good men are hard to find.”

He nods and murmurs, “He said you saved his life once.”

“Did I?” Was that why he seemed so familiar to me?

“When my father took Nico. Roberto stabbed him. I guess you took him to the hospital.” Alessio grimaces. “And now he’s probably dead anyway.”

“That was him?” I ask.

“Apparently.”

“Maybe he’s alive,” I offer.

His mouth droops. “If he was alive, I think he’d have tried to help me by now.”

“I see.” I don’t really have time to worry about Enzo, but I don’t want to piss Alessio off by seeming overly callous.

When I don’t say anything else, he glances at me and his face hardens. “Anyway, where do you want me to be?”

Glad he’s back on track, I lead him toward the stairs. There are short walls on either side of the stairs. At the edge of each wall there are shallow alcoves where we should be able to hide. Enzo and Alessio were too familiar with the layout of the cellar for me to use those alcoves to my advantage. But Carlo and his men don’t seem familiar with this place. I’m praying that will work to our favor.

“When they come down the stairs,” I say, “I’m sure they’ll look to the side to be sure

we're not standing there. What I'm hoping is they have no idea there are hidden spaces. Either way though, that's our best option. We have to surprise them or we're dead meat."

"If Carlo is behind them, how do we take out the first guys without spooking Carlo back up the stairs?"

"We'll have to wait until Carlo is down the stairs fully. Then we pounce." I do my best to sound confident about my plan. The truth is, it's gonna take a miracle to make it out of here alive. Especially both of us. The odds are not in our favor, but I'm not going to lie around and let them murder me without a fight.

Alessio nods, but he looks uneasy. He's not stupid. I'm sure he knows our chances of survival are small.

"You think you can handle two of them?" I ask. "Once Carlo is down the steps, we'll have to move at the same time. We have to be coordinated. I'll help you if I can, but I need to take out Carlo first."

Alessio shrugs. "I'll do my best. I don't know these guys. Maybe they're amazing at hand to hand combat. Maybe they'll kick my ass."

I scowl. "You said you could handle yourself in a fight."

"I can. I'll give it my all. I'm just saying, I don't know these guys."

"Don't go into it with a negative attitude." I frown, anxiety eating at me. I can't take on three guys at once.

He opens his mouth, and from his surly expression, I assume he's going to give me one of his smart ass retorts. But instead, he closes his mouth and nods. "I'll fight with

everything in me, Dario. Okay?”

“That’s all I ask.”

There’s the sound of footsteps upstairs and both of us freeze. Adrenaline starts pumping through me like a tsunami. They’re actually earlier than I thought. I meet Alessio’s gaze and we nod and retreat to the alcoves on the side of the stairs. I press into the small area, heart racing. I’m practically shaking I’m so pumped up for this fight. This is the moment of truth. I’m not ready to die and I hope to god it isn’t my time.

The door at the top of the stairs opens and I hear the thud of boots on the steps. It’s hard to hear over the blood rushing through my head. I grip the fishing pole, praying it does a good job as a weapon. There are so many variables, it’s impossible to feel confident. It’s also terrifying to have to rely on Alessio when I have no idea of his capabilities. We can’t look at each other or communicate, so all I can hope is he has good instincts on when to attack.

I see the two alphas from yesterday reach the bottom of the stairs and pass by. They stop a few feet away, probably waiting for their eyes to adjust to the dark, just as I’d hoped. Carlo appears too, although he’s hanging back a little. All three of the men are peering toward the cot at the end of the room as Alessio bolts from his hiding spot, and attacks the alpha nearest him.

With the element of surprise on his side, Alessio manages to spear the guy square in the face. The guy makes a horrifying gurgling sound, and Alessio grits his teeth as blood splatters on his cheek. But Alessio doesn’t hesitate or freeze. He yanks the pole out of the first alpha, and as the guy slumps to the ground, he attacks the second alpha.

Before the first alpha hits the ground, I’m already lunging for Carlo. He lets out a

growl and starts to leap for the stairs behind him. I ram the fishing rod toward the side of Carlo's neck. He must sense my presence because he raises his arm at the last second, and the pole stabs through his upper arm. He screams in pain as I swear under my breath because I missed my target. As Alessio wrestles with the second alpha, I yank at the pole embedded in Carlo's arm, trying to pull it out so I can try again.

There's a loud bang as a gun discharges beside me, and I can't hear for a few seconds. I don't feel any bullets ripping through my flesh, but I have no idea if Alessio has been shot. However, I can't stop to find out. I manage to pull the pole out of Carlo's arm, and I try again to jab it through his throat. The fucker once more manages to block me. With a snarl, I kick his leg sideways and the snap of bone is audible. Carlo screams and goes down to the ground.

I still don't know if Alessio has been shot or not, and I sneak a quick glance and find him wrestling for the gun. The alpha is bigger than Alessio and muscle bound. My gut churns as I realize the alpha is winning the wrestling match. He's inches away from blowing Alessio's brains out. I should just finish Carlo off, but for some reason I'm driven to help Alessio. Swearing under my breath, I dive toward them and shove the gun away from Alessio's face.

The gun goes off and Alessio looks stunned for one second, as if he's not sure if he's been shot or not. I punch the alpha's head as hard as I can, and he falls down on the ground unconscious. Alessio grabs the gun out of the guy's hand and he stands over him and puts a bullet in the guy's head.

I turn back to Carlo, who's lying on the ground. He's not making any noises. He's still as a corpse. I'm about to shove the fishing pole through his skull, when Alessio's foot slips in a pool of blood. That causes him to stumble into to me, throwing off my aim. I scowl at Alessio, who's covered in blood spatter and sweat. He opens his mouth to speak, but before he can get a word out there's another loud bang from behind me. I swing around to find that Carlo is now sitting up, holding a small hand

gun and looking murderous.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

By some miracle his first shot missed us, but then Carlo starts firing wildly. Alessio cries out, and drops the gun he's holding. Cursing, Alessio cradles his hand as blood drips from his fingers. There's no time for me to find the gun Alessio dropped. We need to get the hell out of the cellar before Carlo's aim improves.

I shove Alessio toward the stairs as Carlo fires again. The wall next to my head splinters as a bullet hits it. I scramble after Alessio, fully expecting to feel a bullet rip through my spine. By some miracle, we make it upstairs without dying. Maybe Carlo's injured leg slowed him down, because by all rights, we were sitting ducks on those stairs.

We burst into the kitchen, and I sprint toward the back door at the end of the room. I expect Alessio to follow me, but he stops next to a body on the ground next to the stove. There's a big pool of blood around the body, and Alessio kneels down, looking rattled.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I growl, giving the door to the cellar an uneasy glance. "We need to go."

"It's Enzo. I... I think he's alive," Alessio mumbles. "I think I saw him move."

"Are you nuts?" I roar, moving toward him. "We can't help him even if he is alive. We need to go, Alessio."

At that moment, Carlo crawls to the top of the stairs, his face is red with veins bulging. When he sees us, he snarls and pulls the trigger. Bullets zing and ping off the refrigerator and stove. I grab hold of Alessio and I haul him with me out the back

door of the cabin. There's a black BMW in the dirt driveway, and I scramble toward it. But when I try the door, it's locked.

Of course it is.

Bullets kick up the dirt near my feet and I'm forced to abandon the vehicle. Alessio follows me as I bolt for the thick pine trees a few feet away. That's good because I'm done babysitting him. He either follows me or he's on his own. I don't have time to coddle him. This is life or death and I need to save my own skin.

The pine branches whip my face as I hurdle through them and away from the cabin. I hear Alessio behind me. He's breathing hard and swearing under his breath. I don't think Carlo is able to follow us, but I can't be sure. I'm not positive if he crawled up the stairs to throw us off, or if he actually couldn't walk. Just in case he can walk, it's best to put as much distance between us and him as possible

I have no idea where we are, so I don't know which way to run. If I knew the area, maybe I could find a road that would lead down the mountain. But for now, running deeper into the woods is what my instincts tell me to do. If Alessio feels differently, he's welcome to stay behind and die.

We run for what feels like an hour. My muscles are exhausted, so I stop and sit at the base of a tall pine tree. I feel the trunk against my spine swaying in the breeze, and I close my eyes. Even though I'm in fear for my life, I can't escape how quiet it is up in the mountains. There's nothing but the sound of the wind in the trees and birds. Alessio grunts as he sits across from me. When I open my eyes, he's staring at his bloody hand. The fact that he was able to keep up with me tells me it's probably just a flesh wound. If he'd lost a lot of blood, I think he'd have stopped running ages ago. Adrenalin will only carry you so far.

He's breathing hard as he looks up. "How come Carlo isn't dead?"

I avoid his gaze. “Nothing went like I hoped.” I’m frustrated that I failed to kill Carlo, and part of the reason I failed was because Alessio bumped into me. He threw off my aim and now Carlo is alive and still very much a threat. But if I accuse Alessio of being part of the reason Carlo survived, he’ll probably get pissy. I don’t need that right now.

He studies me and then mumbles. “Fucker shot the tip of my finger off.”

“How much of the finger is gone?”

He grits his teeth and holds out his hand.

“I can’t really see,” I say, squinting. “You’re too far away.”

He crawls over, settling next to me. His hip presses mine as he scowls at his bloody finger. “It’s just the very tip and part of the fingernail.”

“It might grow back.” I examine the injured finger.

He scowls. “It might grow back? How? I’m not a lizard.”

“Some scientists did a study a while ago. So long as there’s still nail, the fingertip could grow back. Something to do with nail stem cells.”

He gives a gruff laugh and his teeth are white against his blood spattered face. “I’m shocked you’d know that kind of thing.”

“Why?” I ask, getting to my feet. Being so close to him is distracting. I need to be alert, not thinking about how warm his body is, and how much I like his sweet scent.

He shrugs and also rises. “I don’t know.”

“Because you think I’m just a dumb thug?” I chuff.

“Maybe.” He smirks. “I mean, if the shoe fits.”

“Ha. Ha.” I narrow my eyes. “If the comedy show is over, we need to keep moving.”

“Okay.” He tugs a tissue from his pocket and he wraps it around his wounded finger. “I think the bleeding is slowing.”

“Good, we don’t need to leave a bloody trail for your psycho cousin to follow.” I shove into the thick brush, and all conversation stops. It’s good we don’t talk. I need to think. I’m not sure what to do next because I don’t know the area. I’m a city boy and I’m out of my depth.

We walk until late afternoon. I feel it’s important we get as far away from that cabin as possible. I’m thirsty and starving, but there’s little hope of fixing either of those things. I’m a bit surprised at how well Alessio is keeping up with me. He’s not complaining about his finger or how tired he is. I expected him to be higher maintenance. So far, he’s just rolling with the punches. I’m forced to feel a grudging respect for him.

At one point we come upon a small cabin. There’s no smoke rising from the chimney and no cars anywhere around. The cabin isn’t well kept. There are no flower boxes in the windows, or Home Sweet Home signs.

Alessio comes to stand beside me, peering at the cabin. “Looks deserted,” he says.

“Yeah, but looks can be deceiving.” I’m not sure if stopping here is smart. I have no idea where this cabin is in relation to the one we just left. For all I know we’ve been going in circles.

“We should check it out,” he says.

I meet his hopeful gaze. “Should we though?”

“I’m dying of thirst.” He grimaces. “Maybe there’s food in there, or first aid supplies. I need to clean and wrap my finger.”

“Still, we shouldn’t rush,” I murmur. “Let’s watch it a bit more and make sure there are no signs of anyone living there.”

He shivers and glances up at the sun that’s lowering behind the mountains. “It’s getting colder.”

“I know, but we need to be careful.” I also shiver, giving the cabin a longing glance. “Where are we exactly?”

“How would I know?” He frowns.

I grimace. “I don’t mean our exact location. I mean are we still near Los Demonios, or did you take me out of state?”

“Why would I have taken you out of the state? That would have made it harder for Valentino to find you. I wanted him to find you, remember?”

I meet his green eyes, and find resentment shimmering there. I need to remember we’re not pals or allies. We’re simply working together for now so we don’t die. Alessio is merely biding his time. As soon as he decides he doesn’t need me anymore, he’ll turn on me.

“If not for you and your failure of a revenge plan, I’d be home in my warm bed right now,” I grumble.

“Yeah, and if not for Carlo, you and Valentino would be dead.”

“You’re assuming I wouldn’t have escaped.” I smirk. “If I could get the drop on Carlo, I’d have got the drop on you too.”

His mouth thins. “I doubt it.”

“Of course you do. You’re an arrogant little shit.”

He clenches his jaw. “I’m going to check out the cabin. You can stay out here and freeze your ass off if you want.” He gives me a surly look and moves out of the cover of the trees.

Gritting my teeth, I stay where I am. He’s being reckless. We have no idea if someone is inside that cabin. I’m not rushing into anything. But if he wants to be the sacrificial lamb, he can do that. I’ll just wait and see what happens.

He creeps around the cabin, peering in the grimy windows. Eventually, he makes his way to the back door of the cabin. I watch as he tries the door. He tucks his arm up into the sleeve of the cashmere sweater he’s wearing, and he smashes the glass on the door with his covered fist. He waits, listening, and I do the same. When no one sounds the alarm, he slowly opens the door and disappears inside.

After about ten minutes, I’m feeling impatient. Why isn’t he giving me the all clear? I didn’t hear any noises like he’s been accosted. What the hell is he doing in there? Scowling, I slowly make my way out of the trees. I cautiously crawl around the side of the small house to the back door. When I step inside, I listen. There’s a crunching sound coming from the room just off the kitchen.

Heart racing, I slowly creep to the doorway and find Alessio sitting in a chair with his feet up on a big oak table. His hand is bandaged, and he’s chowing down on a box of

dry cereal.

“What the fuck?” I rasp.

He glances over, looking bored. “What?”

“Why didn’t you tell me it was safe?”

He lifts one shoulder. “I’m an arrogant little shit, remember?”

“Yeah. And as you’d say, if the shoe fits,” I mutter, going back into the kitchen. I turn on the faucet and let it run for a few moments. Then I bend over and greedily slurp water into my mouth. Once my thirst is sated, I open the cupboards and find one can of beef soup, a dented can of peaches, and a loaf of bread that’s as hard as a log. The soup is two years out of date and the peaches more like five.

I’m starving and decide I’ll try the can of soup. I don’t trust the dented can of peaches. I don’t want ptomaine poisoning on top of all my other problems. I search the drawers but there’s no can opener. There is, however, a rusted steak knife. After a clumsy, swear filled struggle, I manage to open the lid on the soup can. I sniff the soup and it smells okay. The color is off and the vegetables pretty disintegrated. From what I understand it’s okay to eat out of code canned foods, so long as the cans aren’t dented and you don’t have very high expectations of flavor. I just need nourishment. I don’t care about taste.

I search the bottom cabinets and find one small, battered sauté pan. I tip the can of soup and the contents plop into the pan in a congealed blob. I grimace and my stomach churns, but I’m starving. I haven’t eaten since Alessio grabbed me. It’s imperative I get some calories and carbs in my body, disgusting or not.

I glance around the small area observing dusty yellow curtains hanging half off the

rods, and peeling paint. As far as appliances go, it's not promising. There's no real stove or fridge, but on the counter there's an ancient looking Coleman-type two-burner propane camp stove. The odds of the small canister still having propane is slim, but I set the shallow pan on the little stove hoping for the best.

Alessio wanders in, still eating cereal out of the box. I give him a grumpy look as he leans over my shoulder. "How are you going to light that?" he asks. "It doesn't have an auto lighter thingie."

I frown, my mouth watering at the scent of the cinnamon cereal he's eating. "It doesn't?" I bend down, examining the burner.

He snorts. "No. You need matches for this type of camping stove." He looks amused, which pisses me off. "Didn't you ever go camping as a kid?"

"No."

"Oh, that's right. You told me your father liked to put cigarettes out on the back of your neck." His smile is mocking. "I'll bet you'd kill for one of those cigarettes right about now."

I grit my teeth. "I didn't tell you that so you could mock me. You really think a father doing that to his kid is funny?"

"Only because the kid was you." He snorts a laugh, and nimbly avoids me when I grab for the box of cereal.

"Give me some of that."

"Nope. This is mine," he says. "I'm the one who took the risk coming in here."

“Alessio, I’m fucking starving,” I rumble, advancing on him. “If I can’t cook anything then you need to share that cereal.”

“Eat the peaches.”

“They’ll probably kill me.”

“Oh, well.” He laughs and circles around me. “One less thug in the world is no big loss.”

I growl and grab for the box of cereal again. Unfortunately, I miss.

“You’re such a Neanderthal. What are you going to do, Dario? Beat me up and take my cereal?”

“Maybe.” I hunch my shoulders, inching closer.

He sighs. “There’s a book of matches next to the can of peaches, asshole.”

I stop moving toward him. “There is?”

“Yes. I was just too lazy to heat up the soup.” He rolls his eyes and walks away. “Keep your hands off of my cereal.”

I spin around and head back to the cabinet that had the canned goods. Sure enough there’s a crumpled book of matches in the corner of the shelf. There are only two matches left, but I can work with that. I move to the camping stove, praying there’s some propane left in the little green tank. I turn the knob on the front of the stove and strike one of the matches. There’s a soft hissing sound and the burner lights.

I have to stifle my groan of relief as I watch that little blue flame appear. I rifle

through the drawers and find a wooden spoon. It appears to be the only utensil in the kitchen. Figures. Every kitchen in the world has extra wooden spoons. I stir the soup for a few minutes but then the flame sputters out.

“Shit,” I say under my breath. The tank must have been almost empty. It would be foolish to waste the last match hoping to relight the stove. Gritting my teeth, I continue stirring the soup, using what’s left of the heat from the pan. I’m not able to completely melt all the soup, but manage to get it to a thick stew-like state. Even though the soup is old, it still smells like heaven to me. I grab the pan and I start eating straight out of the pot as I stand over the stove.

In the other room I hear Alessio mutter, “Fucking Neanderthal.”

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:29 am

Chapter Six

Alessio

While Dario wolfs down his disgusting soup, I check out the fireplace. There was a huge stack of wood outside against the house. My fingers and toes are chilled to the bone. It's great to be out of the cold night air, but a warm fire would make everything that much better.

"We should start a fire," I suggest, straightening.

Dario pauses the spoon half way to his mouth. "Too risky." He goes back to eating as if the subject has been decided. I hate it when he does that. He seems to think his word is final, no matter what's being discussed.

"I think it would be fine."

He stops eating again, and narrows his eyes. "Carlo and his goons could see the smoke. We don't need to do anything that draws attention. We just need to stay alive long enough to get back down to the city."

"There are other cabins around. Just because they smell smoke doesn't mean they'll know it's us," I grumble.

"It could catch their attention though, Alessio. Then what? We have no guns or weapons of any kind. Am I supposed to defend myself with a wooden spoon?" He shakes his head and finishes off his soup. He sets the pan in the sink and rinses it

Then he leans his elbows on the edge of the sink as if he's feeling weak. "It's too risky."

I exhale impatiently. "Well, I'm fucking freezing."

"Check the bedroom for blankets."

"There is no bedroom. It's just the kitchen, this room, and the bathroom."

He scowls. "There's no bed?"

I laugh at how disappointed he sounds. "Sorry, Princess, no. There's no bed."

He straightens to his full height, twisting his spine. "That cot just about did my back in."

"I guess it sucks to get old," I mumble, still staring longingly at the black fireplace. Is he right about the possibility lighting a fire could bring Carlo running? My body core is so cold, I feel like I may never get warm again.

He enters the room where I am and he eyes the raggedy couch. "That looks like a pull out couch."

"Yeah. I think it is."

"Then there is a bed."

"Kind of?" I frown.

He moves to the couch and grabs the worn brown pillows, tossing them on the ground. Once he has all the pillows off, he grabs hold of the thick black bar at one

end, and he yanks on it. There's a loud squeaking noise, and the bed slowly unfolds into a bed. The mattress is sunken in the middle, but there are sheets and one thin blanket. It's not a very big bed, probably a twin at best.

He puts his hands on his hips. "It's too risky to light a fire, but we can share body heat."

I clench my jaw. "Sharing body heat is getting to be a thing with us."

"You're welcome to sleep on the floor." He shrugs. "But I'm sleeping on the couch."

I eye the faded sheets and frayed blanket. "God knows who slept in that thing. There might be bed bugs."

"Nah. It's too cold for bugs. They can only survive for a short time in cold temperatures."

I narrow my eyes. "You're just a wealth of useless info, aren't you?"

He ignores me and grabs hold of the blanket and sheets. He pulls them off the bed and goes outside. Then one by one he shakes them. They're dusty, and he coughs a lot, but he doesn't stop until they don't produce much dust. He comes back inside, gives another raspy cough, and says, "Good as new."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, this place is just like they Hyatt."

He shrugs and tosses the blankets on the bed. "I need to wash up."

"Help yourself."

He goes into the tiny bathroom, and I put the sheets back on the thin mattress. I hear

water running. The cabin might have indoor plumbing, but I'm a hundred percent positive there isn't any hot water. I guess that doesn't stop Dario from washing up though. When he comes out of the bathroom, he's bear chested and his hair is damp and slicked back.

I'm annoyed by the buzz of awareness that shifts through me. But there's no denying Dario is a handsome guy. Even with a nose that looks like it's been broken a few times, he's sexy. His cheekbones are high, and his lips full. I remember well the feel of that hungry mouth on mine. I shiver, taking in his thick sinewy biceps. He exudes raw, alpha masculinity. I'm mesmerized by the way his muscles flex beneath his smooth pale skin as he arranges the blanket on the bed.

When he glances over and catches me watching him, I quickly look away. He doesn't say anything though. He simply slips on his shirt and raggedy sweater, and gets slowly on the bed. As he lays down, he lets out a heartfelt groan. I make no move to join him, but he doesn't seem insulted. In fact, he seems to have forgotten I exist.

He rolls onto his side, and presents me with his backside. I try not to fixate on how his slacks hug his muscular thighs, and tight firm ass. It's not easy though. He's a beautiful male specimen. When he tugs the thin blanket up over his body, I relent. It would be foolish to stubbornly sleep on the cold, hard floor. He's not going to care and I'm the only one who'd suffer. The only warmth available to me in this cabin is his body heat. It's silly to reject that small bit of comfort just because I don't like him.

I go into the bathroom and peel off my shirt and pants. I'm generally very picky about hygiene. Not having a shower for two days isn't sitting well with me. The first thing I did when I got in the cabin was wash the blood off of my face. But I'd give a million dollars to be able to take an actual hot shower. However, that isn't going to happen. So, I wash up as best I can with the frigid water and an old towel. There's a mostly empty tube of toothpaste on the back of the sink. I'm able to squeeze a drip of

paste out onto my finger. I rub some onto my gums and teeth, craving the minty freshness. I'd kill for a toothbrush.

Once I feel semi-clean, I redress and leave the bathroom. I get on the bed with Dario, and I can tell from his breathing he's awake. I slip under the thin blanket, grimacing at the musty scent of the material. I turn so that my back rests against Dario's. He's toasty warm, and I let out a shaky breath as I relax against his sturdy body. After a few minutes, that strange sense of peace from last night comes over me. It must be something about Dario that's soothing my inner omega. All of these instinctive alpha omega emotions are very new to me. Is Dario feeling them too, or is it just me?

I close my eyes, feeling drowsy.

"You did well today," Dario says gruffly.

I open my eyes, surprised he's saying something nice to me. "You mean at the cabin?"

"I mean all of it. I assumed you'd whine and be a pain in the ass."

I frown. "Gee, thanks."

He laughs. "I'm trying to say you've been a real trooper. You've barely said a thing about your finger." He shifts his body and turns to face me.

My pulse spikes when he does that. Even though I have my back to him, I can feel him watching me. When he gives me his full attention, it makes me nervous. But I don't want him knowing he has me flustered. "I'm still your enemy, Dario."

"I know."

I turn my head, but I can't see him clearly in the dim lighting. "Why are you being nice?"

He hesitates. "You earned my respect today."

I shouldn't care if he respects me or not, but I'd be lying if I didn't acknowledge his words please me. I don't get the feeling Dario is an easy man to impress. I can't help but feel flattered that he respects me.

He's Valentino's second. Who gives a fuck if he respects me?

When that thought comes to me, I feel foolish. What am I doing getting all gooey inside at a few words of praise? Does it really only take a few kind word from Dario to make me forget he's my enemy? He works for the alpha I still plan on destroying. I'm not giving up. I've had a setback, that's all. I still fully intend to take Valentino down.

I shift to face him, scowling. "Is this your way of trying to get me to drop my vendetta against Valentino?"

"No, but since you brought it up, you're never going to succeed. You have even less of a chance now that I know your plan."

"I guess we'll see," I mutter.

His dark eyes glitter in the dark. "If you try again, this time you'll die."

"Then I die," I mumble. "Nothing has changed."

"Everything has changed, Alessio." He sits up on his elbow. "You have no advantage anymore. Valentino will know you're coming now."

“Not if I murder you in your sleep.”

He grunts. “Do you seriously want our syndicates to go to war? I doubt your men would want that. And what about Carlo? If he’s still alive, you have him to contend with. Don’t you think putting out that fire is more important than trying to take out Valentino?”

“No.”

“Why? Carlo is the real threat to you, not Valentino.”

Through gritted teeth I say, “Valentino needs to die.”

“How can you be so dense?” he snaps. “Going after Valentino is a suicide mission. Our syndicate is way more powerful than yours. We’ll annihilate you. You don’t stand a chance.”

Frustration gets the best of me, and I growl, “I have no choice. I have to do this. Whether I die or not, I can’t rest knowing how unfairly my father was treated.”

I expect him to growl back at me, but he doesn’t. Instead he says quietly, “Look, I won’t pretend to understand the love you had for your father. As you well know, I wasn’t close to my mine. But you’re not looking at the circumstances logically. The head of a syndicate must always act logically, not emotionally. That’s what’s needed when deciding whether or not to start a fucking gang war, Alessio.”

“I don’t want war. I... I just want Valentino to pay for what he took from my father.”

“What he took was material things. You’re trying to take Valentino’s life. I’m not going to allow that. None of the men will.”

“Then try and stop me,” I hiss. “Valentino is going to pay for what he did, and that’s final.”

He’s quiet for a moment and then he asks, “What would you have had Valentino do to your father? Your father took his omega captive. Nico was almost killed because of what your father did. Do you really believe that Valentino should have completely let him off after what he did to Nico? Valentino would have been in danger then of being perceived as weak. You know how this works.”

“He took almost all of my father’s business away. He humiliated him.”

“And as I told you before, Valentino let your father off easy. You don’t seem to understand that by sparing Joseph’s life and that of his family, Valentino was trying to be fair. By all rights he should have had your father and his entire family slaughtered. How can you not see that?”

“You’re not going to change my mind.” My voice wobbles with anger. “Just stop talking about it.”

Frustration radiates off of him. “It’s hard to be silent after the things I’ve seen in my life, Alessio. So many men will die needlessly because of how naive you are,” he mutters. “Maybe you don’t understand because you’re young and blinded by too much pride.”

“I don’t care about your opinions, Dario. You’re nothing to me.”

“Do you care about your bloodline?” he rumbles. “Because the Abella line will die with you. Is that truly something your father would have wanted?”

My stomach churns at his words. He’s right. If I die before I leave an heir, the Abella bloodline goes with me. That’s the curse of being an only child. But I’m also the only

one who can avenge my father's honor. Dario doesn't seem to grasp that. "It can't be helped."

"Of course it can be helped." He sounds disgusted as he lays down again. "If this was what your father had wanted, he'd have done it himself. You think you're honoring your father?" He chuffs. "You're destroying everything he built. You're spitting on his grave, Alessio."

Anger jolts through me and my face heats. "Fuck you, Dario."

"Careful what you ask for." His voice is low and threatening.

The hairs on the back of my neck stiffen, as does my dick. I need to be careful with Dario. He's an alpha after all, and he isn't my prisoner anymore. I turn my back on him again, pulse racing. "I don't need your advice, nor do I want it. I want nothing from you, Dario. Once we get back to Los Demonios, I hope to never see you again."

"If you come after Valentino, you'll most definitely see me."

I close my eyes, trying to shake off the uneasiness his deep voice sends shivering through me. I inch away so that we're not touching in any way. I'm confused by him. By his motivation to stop me from seeking my revenge. Is it simply that he's trying to protect his boss? It feels like more. It feels like he's trying to protect me. By all rights, he should want bad things to happen to me after how I treated him.

Neither of us says anything else. Feeling agitated, it takes me a while to fall asleep. Eventually, I do drift off. My dreams are a violent, jumbled mess starring Carlos and Dario. I wake up covered in sweat, shivering. I'm relieved I was only dreaming, but so fucking cold to the bone.

Instinctively, I roll over and move closer to Dario's warm body. I'm not as angry

anymore, just mostly freezing. He suggested sharing our body heat, so hopefully he won't mind. I'd prefer he didn't wake up and catch me snuggling, but I'm willing to risk it. As his heat seeps into me, I press my face to his broad back.

His woodsy scent fills my nose as my body slowly warms. My shivering calms, and I let out a relieved sigh. I hate that I need his body heat, but the cabin is like an ice box. I can only imagine how much colder it is outside the cabin. His breathing is deep and even, and when I'm certain he's asleep, I inch even closer to him. I carefully tuck my body against his so that my chest hugs his back, and my thighs fit into the curve of his.

I'll move away as soon as I'm warm enough.

The heat radiating from him feels so fucking good, I have to stifle a whimper of pleasure. I'm annoyed that my dick is hard, but I can't seem to control my bodies reaction to him. I remember the night we met. My plan was simply to lure him outside and jab him with the needle. But instead, I let him fuck me. My lust was off the charts with Dario from the beginning. I'm not sure what's different about him. I've never been like this with any other alpha.

When Dario stirs, I go very still. I sense he's awake now, and his breathing picks up slightly. I should probably move away since he's no longer asleep, but I don't want to leave the heat of his bulky body. When he reaches back, resting his big hand on the curve of my ass, I stiffen. My mouth goes dry as his hand slides lower, and he rubs two fingers between my ass crack.

I should tell him to get his fucking hands off me, but I stay silent. Every inch of my skin tingles as his warm hand squeezes my ass. I know what he wants. It's not like he's being subtle. The scary part is I want it too. I want more of Dario. I want him to fuck me again. This hunger I have for him makes no sense. It's dangerous. It's insanity. He's my enemy, but all I want to do is roll onto my stomach and offer him

my hole.

Perspiration prickles my heated skin. I feel shaky and feverish. It's like I'm in heat, but that's impossible. I'm on a heat suppressing pill. I missed a few pills with all the drama happening with Dario and Carlo, but surely a few missed pills wouldn't stop the effectiveness of that medication completely.

I shake my head, trying to clear the lusty fog that's descending. He turns over and now we're facing each other. His warm mouth is only inches from mine. I feel drenched in his pheromones. We share heated breaths and I begin to tremble. Something weird is happening deep inside of me. I feel weak. Submissive. I want to give Dario anything he asks for, which makes no sense. He's my enemy. Why do I want to submit to him? But I do. My ass hole aches and throbs with the need to give him what I know he wants.

His usually dark eyes are a light golden brown. There's a low growl rumbling deep in his throat. As he slips his hand behind my head, tangling his fingers in my hair, I whimper. I fucking whimper. I should knee him in the groin. I should punch him. Yell at him. The obvious thing is to warn him off, but instead, I part my lips willing him to kiss me.

He gives a soft snarl and he takes my mouth. The feel of his hot mouth on mine has me melting into him. He rolls over on top of me, and the kiss deepens. He's heavy. His weight crushes me into the sagging mattress. All I can think about is his taste as he pushes his tongue deep into my throat. I suck on his tongue, feeling delirious with need.

He rubs his hands down my sides, thrusting his hips against mine. There's too much clothing between us. I crave the feel of his warm skin on mine. I slip my hands under his shirt and sweater, digging my nails into his back. He reaches up and pulls his shirt and sweater off, and I run my hands up his muscular chest. I want to absorb him

through my fingers. I want him inside me in all ways. The need to consume and be consumed is raging in me.

“Alessio,” he whispers, his eyes glittering with raw lust. “Will you give me what I need?”

As if hypnotized, I nod and drop my hands to my jeans. I undo the top button and he helps me unzip them. Then he sits up and tugs them off of me roughly. He tosses them off the bed and slips out of his slacks. He’s fully naked now, and I’m only wearing my shirt and cashmere sweater. But the chill of the cabin is a distant thought as he settles between my thighs. My dick is so hard, it’s painful as he begins licking and sucking the head of my cock.

I tangle my fingers in his short hair, gripping tight. “Feels good,” I moan.

He grunts and swallows my length deep into his tight throat. Instinctively, I thrust, using his mouth for my pleasure. His big hands cup and stroke my swollen balls, and the suction is perfect. He’s definitely skilled. The way he uses his mouth and tongue is obscenely delicious. I could blow so easily, but I want to come on his dick. I want that more than anything.

“Fuck me,” I plead, rocking my hips and going deeper into his throat. I arch my back, hands gripping the sheets tight as I fuck his mouth. “Oh, God, Stop. You’re g... g... gonna make me come.”

He ignores me and continues sucking, bringing me to the edge of my climax over and over. I’m shaking with the strain of trying not to come in his beautiful mouth. Eventually, he gives a little self-satisfied laugh, and slowly pulls his mouth off of me. He crawls up my body, his eyes glittering eerily.

He begins kissing me again. His mouth is teasing now. The kisses are lighter, almost

playful. He's driving me nuts, as he teases me with his skillful tongue. I don't want finesse, I want him to fuck me deep and hard. I press closer to him, moaning and opening my thighs wider. My body aches for more. It's like a madness has taken over my brain. I'm confused and frustrated as I recognize that I am indeed in heat. I don't know how that's possible, but I know it's true. I suspect he's in an alpha rut as well, responding to the scent of slick oozing from my hole.

He inhales my scent, nipping my neck. "Fuck, you smell good," he hisses. "So ripe and fertile."

Uneasiness moves through me, but it's drown out by my need to be bred. I'm supposed to hate him, but I'm drugged with the need to give myself to him. My feverish desire to be taken has driven all logic from my mind. "Give me what I need, alpha" I whimper, panting and clawing at him.

"Yeah? Want me to fuck you, Alessio? Even though you hate me?"

My response is a cross between a snarl and a purr. Instinct is driving me, and all pride has evaporated. He may be my enemy, but all I can think about is his cock pushing up inside me. All I want is to feel his hot seed pouring into me. Primal hunger has completely taken over as I arch my back, thrusting against him. "Please."

There's a cocky smirk on his full lips as I pant and wiggle against him, seeking friction. His cock is hard against mine. He watches me as he flexes his hips, dragging his dick over mine. I growl impatiently as he lowers his head and nips and sucks my skin. I swear he's trying to torture me. He's a cruel bastard, and he's enjoying denying me way too much.

The first time we fucked, he just took me fast and hard. This time, he's purposely drawing it out. He's touching and tasting every inch of my skin, leaving goosebumps over my flesh. My mind is a churning blur of lust and want. My body is slick with

sweat and trembling with longing.

When I try to reach between our bodies to stroke myself, he grabs my hand and shakes his head. “No,” he says in a menacing voice. I struggle to free my hand, but he digs his fingers into my skin. “No.”

A tiny thread of sanity flutters through my fuzzy brain. I ignore the words buzzing through my brain at first, but then they sink in.

You’re going to get pregnant. If you do this, you’ll be carrying Dario’s offspring.

Even as I spread my thighs wider to tempt him, I say hoarsely, “Dario, I’m in heat.”

His golden eyes flare with lust and he says through bared teeth. “I know.”

I whimper, kissing the smooth skin of his chest. I inhale his musky, masculine scent, body aching. “I hate you.”

He kisses me hungrily, teasing my tongue with his. I suck on his tongue, feeling out of control. “Hate you too,” he mumbles against my lips as he presses the head of his dick to my hole.

Our eyes meet and then he’s pushing inside me. I cry out, shuddering as he slowly penetrates my hole. Our eyes cling to each other, and he covers my open mouth with his. He swallows my cries and moans as he begins to thrust. I’ve never experienced so much pleasure. I feel faint and flushed as he pumps in and out of my aching hole. I’ve fucked many times, but this is different. I feel him everywhere in my body, from the tips of my toes to the ends of my hair.

He growls and thrusts, watching my every expression. He seems mesmerized as he studies me. His face is flushed and the tendons of his neck and shoulders are

distended. The old couch squeaks loudly as we fuck like animals, desperately chasing pleasure. I drag my nails down the skin of his back, knowing full well I'll leave marks. He winces, but there's also a weird smile on his face. It's like he's enjoying the pain. Enjoying the loss of control.

His cock grows deep inside of me and I nod my approval. His lips part and his eyes glaze over. The golden brown of his iris is almost yellow now, and he pulls his lips back over his teeth. Excitement spikes through me, sweeping my body like a sickness. He's about to give me his bite. I'm panicked and equally excited as I meet his thrusts. He's so deep inside me I can barely breathe. His musky scent surrounds me, and I moan loudly.

This is wrong. This not how it should be. He can't give me his bite. He can't claim me. We're enemies.

But instead of saying those words, I open my mouth and hiss, "Do it. Do it. Do it."

He shudders and his eyes roll up in his head. With a growl he lowers his head and bites down on the side of my throat. The pain is agonizing and I'm incapable of holding in the aching scream that rips from my throat. But that only seems to excite him more. His thrusts pick up speed as he suckles my neck. I sink my nails into his biceps, clinging to him as he fucks me like an animal.

My head is pressed to the back of the couch, as he grunts and takes what he needs. My lust continues to grow, swamping me like molten lava. The scent of slick and sweat fills my nose. I'm lost in a storm of lust and need and primal instinct. Rational thought has gone out the window as we use each other's bodies. The pain of his bite is so intense, the only thing keeping me sane is the pleasure of his cock moving deep inside me.

My orgasm begins like a low hum through my body. My balls swell and warm and

his cock grows inside me. My inner muscles clench and then release in a delicious burst of ecstasy. Pleasure like I've never known roars through my shaking body as he also begins to climax. I'm clenching my teeth against the intense pleasure as his hot flush of seed is unleashed. Something deep within me seems to open like a flower, sucking in his release. I come so hard, I almost pass out. He growls and gnashes his blood smeared teeth, his amber eyes burning into me.

We stare into each other's eyes as we come. I can't speak. I can only moan and whimper as I watch his black pupils expand and contract. They seem to match the throbbing of his cock as he breeds me. If I was sane, I'd push him off of me, but I'm not sane. Instead, I push down harder on his cock, mumbling for more.

He slips his arms under me and he holds me against him as my hole milks his cock. I pant against his neck as his knot forms, expanding painfully inside me. I moan and tremble, and he strokes my back kissing my hair. The moment is erotic. Confusing. Terrifying. I don't even know myself right now. I'm allowing an alpha I despise to knot me. Breed me.

I've just made the worst mistake of my life. I'm fucking ruined. No alpha will ever want me now that I bear Dario's bite, and I'm almost a hundred percent pregnant with his baby now. Yet, even knowing I've destroyed my future, all I can do is fucking cling to Dario, purring like a kitten.

Chapter Seven

Dario

Ten minutes later, the fever breaks.

The crippling lust fades as my knot slips from Alessio's body. I've never experienced an alpha rut before, and I feel weak and foolish. My muscles are mush. My brain is still groggy. I'm mortified that I lost complete control with Alessio.

I claimed Alessio.

I squeeze my eyes closed, panic washing through me. How do I fix this situation? What we just did with each other is a fucking disaster. I can't claim Alessio. The kid wants to murder Valentino. And even if he wasn't on a murderous vendetta against Valentino, I have no desire to have an omega or a kid right now. If I did secretly want that, Alessio isn't the omega I'd pick. He's too obnoxious. Mouthy.

Hell bent on murdering my best friend.

Was this some sort of trap to get to Valentino? Could Alessio be that devious? Was he acting just now? Was I the only one truly lost in the moment? Paranoia shifts through me as I lie there with Alessio in my arms. Or was this real for him too and now he'll become needy. Clingy?

I'm jogged from my thoughts as Alessio suddenly hauls off and punches my chest as hard as he can. Scowling, I glare at him as he rolls off the bed. He grabs his jeans

from the floor and slams into the little bathroom. I get off the bed and I quickly dress. I sit on the edge of the bed, waiting for Alessio to come out of the bathroom. I rub my chest where he hit me, scowling. What was that for? Is he going to pretend he didn't want what just happened between us?

After about five minutes he comes out of the bathroom. There's tissue stuck to the bite mark on his throat. His face is pale as he dresses quickly. His hands are trembling and he won't look at me. It's obvious he's as upset as me about the circumstances, so I'm certain now that he wasn't trying to trap me just to get to Valentino.

"Look?" I begin.

"Save it," he snaps. "What's done is done."

"Alessio, you're probably?"

"Pregnant?" He growls. "Yeah, I know. We need to get back to the city for many reasons, not least of which so I can get a morning after pill."

I'm relieved to know he's at least trying to get ahead of the problem. "What happened, it was a mistake." My voice is gruff. "You went into heat and I just lost control."

He swallows hard. "I'm well aware of what happened. We both lost control. Now, can we please just drop it? It's not like we haven't fucked each other before."

I frown at how he's trying to play down what happened. "Yeah, but this was different. I gave you my bite."

"You think I don't know that?" He reaches up and rips the tissue off the bite mark. His face twitches as he balls the tissue in his fist. "I can't worry about that now. I'll

handle the pregnancy first and figure the rest out later.” He leaves the room and goes out the back door of the kitchen.

I use the restroom and then follow him outside. I find him around the back of the small structure. There’s an open carport at the back of the lot. Tires are piled inside of it along with some rusted barrels. There’s also a dirt bike, and Alessio is tinkering with it as I reach him.

I crouch beside him. “Do you think this runs?”

“Not at the moment.” He pokes at a thin green wire that’s flopping loose. “It looks like the ground wire came loose from the stator. But there could be a ton of other issues as well.”

I frown. “You know about dirt bikes?”

He shrugs. “I was always interested in them, but my father wouldn’t let me near them. Still, I read a bunch of magazines and watched stuff online.”

“Huh.” He seems like such a refined type of guy, it’s hard to picture him interested in dirt bikes. I wouldn’t think he’d want to get grime under his perfectly polished nails. “Can you fix it and get it running?”

He grimaces and stands. “I don’t know. Like I said, I’ve never owned a motorcycle of any kind.”

“So then you don’t think you can fix it?” I stand too, studying his tense face.

“I don’t know, Dario.” He sounds exasperated. “I want to get the hell out of here as much as you. It’s just none of my knowledge is hands on.”

“Can’t hurt to try, right?”

He rakes a hand through his silky blond hair, looking unsure. “I guess. But I don’t have any tools and I don’t see any lying around.”

“What kind of tools do you need?”

He grimaces. “At least a screwdriver.”

I nod. “Would a knife do? There’s one in the house. I used it to open the soup yesterday.”

He bites his bottom lip. “I guess I could try using that.”

“If you can’t fix the bike, we’ll have to hoof it down the mountain. That’ll take forever.” I finger the rusty handle bars of the dirt bike. “Obviously, Carlo’s is looking for us right now. Getting back to the city undiscovered, and on foot, will be no easy task.”

“No, he’ll be watching the roads for sure. He’ll want to deal with us up here. He’s not going to risk us getting back to the city.”

“Exactly,” I say. “He can’t afford you telling your people what he tried. That’s a death sentence for him. Since the two alphas he brought with him are dead, he’ll have brought in new guys by now. He didn’t want many of his guys knowing what he was up to, but catching us will probably trump that. He can’t let us survive.”

“No,” he murmurs. “He’ll stop at nothing to prevent us returning to Los Demonios.”

I rub my jaw, my nails rasping against the stubble. “We don’t actually have to get all the way back to the city. We just need to get to a phone.”

“There’s a small gas station half way down the mountain. They have a pay phone.”

“Yeah?” I perk up. “Then let’s do everything we can to get there. The sooner, the better. Wait here. I’ll go get that knife.”

I head back to the cabin, and hurry inside. I grab the utensil off of the counter and turn to leave the cabin. As I do that I catch movement outside the cabin. My heart stutters as I see a black SUV driving up the long dirt road that leads to the cabin.

“Fuck,” I hiss under my breath. The vehicle isn’t the kind of SUV you might see in the mountains usually. It’s way too clean and has expensive rims. Everything in me screams it’s Carlo’s guys.

There’s no back door on the cabin, and I’m afraid the vehicle is too close for me to slip out the door without them seeing me. I try not to panic as the vehicle rolls closer. Most of the windows in the cabin are small and facing toward the road. Gritting my teeth, I hurry into the little bathroom and I size up the window in the room. It’s facing the back of the property, and bigger than some of the windows in the main room. But the window is not a big window by any means. It’s tall and narrow, and I’m a big guy. I don’t think I can squeeze through that opening, and getting stuck half way would be disaster.

I go back out into the main room and then back to the kitchen. The only way I’m getting out of the cabin is through the main door. I watch the SUV as it continues down the bumpy road toward us. My only hope of getting out of the cabin without being spotted is in the fact that there’s a row of spruce pines that line the road. The occupants of the SUV will lose view of the cabin for a few minutes when it passes behind them.

Sweat breaks out on my face as I watch the SUV approaching that blind spot. I’ll have to time it just right, but that blind spot is really my only hope. I hold my breath

as the SUV disappears behind the row of pine trees, and then I bolt like a bat out of hell toward the back of the property. I don't know if Alessio is aware of the approaching SUV. As I reach the carport, I can see he isn't. He's kneeling down by the bike, oblivious to the danger rapidly approaching.

"Alessio," I call out.

He looks up, frowning.

"Incoming," I growl and I slide to a stop beside him. "Carlo's men are driving up to the cabin."

"What?" He widens his eyes, obvious panic glittering in the green depths.

"There's no time to work on the bike. We have to hide, now." As I speak I move past him toward the thick wall of pine trees.

"We're just going to leave the bike?" he rasps, stumbling to his feet. "It's our only quick way down the mountain."

"If we're dead, the bike is no use to us."

"But..." He looks muddled.

I move back toward him, eyeing the road nervously. "We'll double back if we can. But right now, we need to run, Alessio. They're gonna see the broken glass on the back door, the couch, and the food and know someone was there. They'll probably know it was us. We have to get as far away from the cabin as possible."

"Fuck," he says harshly, scowling.

I grab his arm. "Come on. We need to go now."

He pushes my hand off. "I just need a few minutes to get the wire attached."

"There's no time," I growl.

"I should at least try." His eyes shimmer with frustration.

"And if the wire isn't the only problem, then we're fucked. Be smart, Alessio. We need to go and come back later if possible."

Just leave him.

That's obviously what I should do. Especially since he's being obstinate. Why am I risking my life trying to convince him to come with me? His survival isn't attached to mine. I don't have to wait for him. I didn't even have to tell him Carlo's men were coming. Why did I do that? I'd already be hidden in the woods if I hadn't stopped to get Alessio to come with me. Every second I waste trying to convince him to come with me slashes the odds of me surviving.

He grabs the knife from my hand, and he kneels next to the bike again.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I rumble, panic rising in my throat at the sound of tires crunching on the road out front.

"Trying to save us." His hands are shaking so bad he almost drops the knife, but he manages to scrape off some of the green plastic that covers the wire. Next he attaches the bare wire to a small metal part.

"Goddamn it," I mutter, torn between leaving him and staying. I don't understand why I can't seem to abandon him. But my feet feel glued to the ground as I stand over

him. I feel an overwhelming urge to protect him, even as my instincts scream I should leave.

Once the wire is attached, he stands, breathing hard. "I'm gonna try and start it now."

"Do you even have the key?" I ask, glancing uneasily at the cabin.

"It doesn't use a key" he says breathlessly. "Most dirt bikes don't. It has a kick starter and a kill switch." As he speaks, he straddles the bike. He places his foot squarely on the kick pedal, and says, "Come on you mother fucker, start."

I have no faith the bike will start. Fear surges inside of me and I take a step toward the forest. "You're a fool, Alessio. I don't want to die with you."

"Then go." He pushes down hard on the pedal, and nothing happens. He tries it a few more times, and still nothing. Swearing under his breath he tries again, and the bike sputters to life. It instantly splutters out again, but the excited look on Alessio's face stops me from leaving.

I once more look to the cabin, hope of survival sinking. I know it's a matter of seconds before those guys come out back. They probably heard the motorbike starting up. We're fucking doomed and I'm still unable to do the smart thing and just leave Alessio. I study his young face as he grips the handle bars tight, gritting his teeth. Something inside of my chest aches painfully. I don't want to die and I don't want to see him die, but I can't leave him.

"Come on, baby." He pumps the starter pedal hard two times and the bike starts. He tweaks something on the handlebar and the bike roars loudly. A plume of blue smoke puffs out of the tailpipe, and I cough, waving it away from my face.

The surprise on Alessio's face is obvious and then he grins at me. We're probably

about to be murdered in cold blood and the idiot is grinning like a fool because he got the damn bike started.

“Get on,” he yells over the noise of the bike. I hesitate and he scowls. “Dario, get the fuck on the bike.”

“They’ll shoot us as we pass them,” I say hoarsely.

“They’ll shoot us for sure if we stay.” He revs the engine impatiently. “You have two seconds to get on the bike, or I’m leaving you behind.”

I have no reason to doubt he’ll leave me. Cursing, I relent and climb behind him on the bike. I wrap my arms around his slim waist, and he revs the engine again. The blue smoke once more puffs from the back of the bike. If Carlo’s guys don’t shoot us as we drive by, with our luck the bike will malfunction and drive us off a cliff.

He presses the gas and the bike jerks forward. We almost tip over because neither one of us has any idea how to ride a fucking motorbike. But Alessio somehow manages to keep the bike upright, and we speed toward the front of the cabin. The smell of gas and burning oil fill my nostrils as we roar toward the dirt road.

Just as we pass the cabin, two men in black suits come running out of the structure, guns drawn. Alessio guns the motor and the bike speeds past them. I can’t hear anything over the roar of the engine, but I fully expect to feel a bullet rip through my body. I should have run into the woods and let Alessio distract them by driving off on the motorbike. Instead, I’m clinging precariously to him as we speed down the bumpy dirt road that leads away from the cabin.

When a bullet doesn’t tear through me, I glance back over my shoulder. I see the SUV in the distance, dust churning from its tires as it follows us. The road is uneven, and we’re able to go faster than the big SUV over the ruts and dips. Still, our balance

is precarious, and we almost tip the bike many times. When I glance back at the SUV, they've gained ground.

"They're following us and they're closing in," I yell.

Alessio nods and speeds up. The wind whips my face and I hug Alessio's slim body harder. I'm still in shock he managed to get the bike running. It was foolish to keep trying, but he succeeded. I don't want to think about what would have happened if he'd failed. Those guys didn't hesitate to shoot at us just now. They're not interested in capturing us. They're definitely trying to kill us.

We pull far enough ahead of the SUV that I lose sight of them. I don't want to get my hopes up, but thanks to Alessio, we may actually make it down the hill alive. When we reach the main road, Alessio shocks me when he turns to go further up the mountain instead of down it.

"What are you doing?" I growl.

"They'll expect us to go down. I'm trying to throw them off." His husky voice carries to me on the wind. He leans forward as the bike races up the road, carrying us even further from the city. "Trust me, Dario," he calls out.

Trust me?

Gritting my teeth, I hold back my angry retort. Asking me to trust him is asking a bit too much. Our relationship, so far, hasn't been based on anything even close to trust. We're working together purely out of necessity. Two heads are better than one in a situation like this. But seeing as he's the one driving, I have no option other than to hold on while he does what he thinks is best.

I also have to acknowledge his move is probably smart. The guys chasing us have

probably already contacted anyone working with them who's positioned further down the hill. They'll no doubt be waiting to intercept us on the main road. I long to get off this fucking mountain, but I'll have to be patient for now.

At one point, Alessio turns onto a side road. Eventually, he pulls over, coming to a stop beneath a big pine tree. He cuts the engine and groans, "That was too fucking close."

"That was a huge risk." I get off the bike, stretching my back side to side.

"Yeah, but it worked." He pats the fiberglass side panel of the bike. "Now we have a way to get to that gas station quickly."

"If the bike keeps running."

He grimaces. "Well, yeah. I think it should. Either way, they'd have picked us off easily if we'd gone down the mountain just now."

"Now they know we're on a dirt bike. That might make it easier for them to spot us."

"We'd have been sitting ducks on foot as well." He gets off the bike and stands near me.

The breeze flutters his blond hair, and I inhale his honied scent. As I study him, that weird aching need to shield him comes over me again. Are these protective feelings because I gave him my bite? That's the only thing that makes sense. Other than Valentino and his family, I don't tend to feel it's my duty to shield anyone else.

He asks softly, "Why'd you warn me?"

"What do you mean?"

He shrugs. “You could have easily just disappeared into the woods and I’d have been none the wiser.”

I hold his curious gaze, unwilling to be honest. “I don’t know.”

He distractedly touches the bite mark on his throat. “Is it because of this?”

I blink at him but I don’t respond. There’s no way I’m showing him any vulnerability he could use against me.

“Is that why you couldn’t just leave me earlier?” He narrows his eyes. “It is, isn’t it?”

“You’re barking up the wrong tree,” I murmur.

“I don’t think I am.” He gives a humorless laugh. “Don’t become attached to me, Dario. It won’t be reciprocated.”

I curl my lip. “Your ego is huge as usual. I’m not attached to you. My decision to stay while you worked on the bike was pure logic. I knew having the dirt bike would increase my odds of survival. That’s the only reason I didn’t leave you behind.”

“I hope that’s true.”

“It is.”

He once more touches the bite on his neck. “If I am pregnant, once I’ve gotten rid of it, you should pay for me to have plastic surgery to have your bite removed.”

I shrug. “That’s fine with me.”

His eyes flicker. “Is it?”

“Of course. Why would I want you to wear my bite?”

“Because alphas can be irrationally possessive. They fight over omegas they don’t even want because they don’t like sharing.”

“I won’t fight for or over you, Alessio. Bite or no bite, you mean Valentino harm, which makes you my mortal enemy.”

A muscle works in his cheek. “I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

“We definitely are.” I move past him toward the bike. His scent is intoxicating and his eyes so piercing, it makes it difficult to keep up the disinterested act. He must never discover that I do indeed feel territorial about him. I resent the idea he wants my bite removed, so that he can attract other alphas. I really don’t want to feel territorial about him, but the jealousy is there. “We should wait for dark to make our way to the gas station.”

“There’s no need. This dirt road curves up ahead and then runs parallel to the main road.” He climbs on the bike as he speaks. “It lets out about a half mile before the gas station.”

“Okay.” I get on the bike, slipping my arms around his waist. I rest my hands on his flat stomach, and the thought of him fat with child comes to me. My dick throbs at the image in my head. I grit my teeth, pushing away those foolish thoughts. If he’s pregnant, that child will never be born. After we get to the gas station, I’ll probably never have any dealings with Alessio again, unless he comes for Valentino.

And if he’s foolish enough to do that, bite or no bite, I’ll be forced to end his life.

Chapter Eight

Alessio

The feel of Dario's muscular chest against my back, and his thighs pressed beneath mine, has me irritable and turned on. Having his arms around me and his large hands on my stomach makes me feel needy. Weak. I fucking hate it. I don't understand it. I don't actually give a fuck about Dario. Why would I? Because we had sex? Please, that means nothing in the long term.

Despite my discomfort with this unsettling attraction, I must admit something is going on with us. My attraction to him is most certainly not a conscious choice. It has to be pure instinct drawing me to him. I've never been an omega who was in touch with that part of myself, so craving an alpha feels unnatural. Despite that though, I accepted Dario's knot and his bite last night.

I must have been out of my mind.

I wince remembering how weak and pathetic I was. He must think I'm a real pushover. Twice now I've let him fuck me. I don't even like him, but I keep letting him inside my body. It makes no sense. Last night felt like a madness descended on me. If I'd been in my right mind, I'd never have allowed his knot or bite. I don't understand how I went into heat, despite the suppression pills I usually take.

Regardless of what happened last night, I need to get my shit together. Even if I did want a baby and an alpha, which I most definitely don't, I'd never choose Dario. He's a brute. A thug. He's not the kind of alpha I'd procreate with if I was in my right

mind. If I am indeed pregnant, I'll waste no time in terminating the pregnancy.

The bike sputters, and fear slams through me. Is the engine dying on us? Has something else gone wrong? I feel Dario tense too, and his arms tighten around me almost protectively. But then the bike keeps going, and I let out a sigh of relief. I expect Dario to loosen his hold, but he doesn't. He rests his chin on the nape of my neck, and his warm breaths puff against my skin.

It goes through my head to shake Dario off of me, or to head butt him. But I don't give into those peevish feelings. I tell myself I don't do those things because I might cause the bike to tip, but really I don't think that's why I hesitate. All I know is the idea of breaking his nose, or hurting him doesn't appeal at the moment. I still plan on killing Valentino, which most likely means I'll have to kill Dario too. But for now, we have our truce in place.

After another ten minutes on the dirt road, we reach where the road we're on intersects the main highway. A few miles down is where the gas station is located. I gun the engine because it's running really rough. I yell over my shoulder, "Should I just go for it?"

"Yeah. We need to get to that phone ASAP," he shouts back.

Anxiety eats at me as we leave the safety of the side road and pull out onto the main road. I travel down the road until I see the gas station on the right hand side. I feel like I have a bullseye on my back as we slowly pull into the gas station.

"Pull around the side," Dario yells.

I do as he says, noticing a skinny alpha wearing a ball cap. The guy is sitting on the curb in front of the phone booth, smoking a cigarette. The guy clocks us as we zip past him to the side of the building.

“I think that guy is with Carlo and he spotted us,” I say.

“I know.” Dario slides off the bike before I even have it stopped.

I park the bike and get off of it as quickly as possible. Dario has already slipped around the back of the building and disappeared from my sight. I’m worried the alpha smoking the cigarette will have already contacted his people to say he’s spotted us. I follow the path Dario took and when I peer around the side of the building, I see the alpha slumped against the wall beside the booth, his cap pulled down over his face.

I’m glad Dario handled the guy, but pissed when I see Dario slip into the phone booth. We never discussed who’d go first to make a call. I guess Dario made a command decision. Is that why he got off the bike so fast? So he could make his call first and bring Valentino down on me?

I scowl at Dario through the glass of the phone booth, but he turns his back on me. I try to push the door open, but he blocks it with his foot. He picks up the receiver and then promptly hangs up again.

He opens the door, looking irritable. “I need change,” he says gruffly.

“Don’t look at me.”

He scowls. “You took my wallet when you kidnapped me. Loan me some money, Alessio.”

“No.” I laugh humorlessly. “Not unless you let me make my call first.”

He narrows his eyes. “How about I just take the money from you? I’m being nice by asking.”

“Just try it,” I mutter.

He smirks. “You don’t think I could take you easily?”

“I think you could die trying.”

Through gritted teeth, he says, “You’re the most mouthy, pig headed omega I’ve ever met. I could snap you in two without breaking a sweat, kid.”

I know he’s right, but I don’t think he’ll actually attack me in public. So I shrug. “Threaten me all you want, but I’m the one with the money.”

“Alessio,” he rumbles, “I need that change.”

I sigh impatiently. “What do I look like, a fucking vending machine? I don’t have any change on me. All I have are credit cards.”

He glances back at the phone. “That works. This phone takes cards.” He holds out his hand like he’s entitled to my cooperation. “Loan me your credit card.”

“Like I said, I’ll do that if you let me make my call first.”

He mutters under his breath, “Jesus, you’re a pain in the ass,”

“And you’re Prince Charming? Not likely.” I hold his obstinate gaze. “We don’t have all day. Will you let me go first, or not?”

He grits his teeth. “I don’t trust you.”

“Pfft. Is that supposed to be news to me? I don’t trust you either.” I tug my wallet out and wave it in front of his nose. “Make up your mind, dumbass. Time is ticking.”

He leans on the phone booth door, scowling. “My call is more important.”

“Right. Of course it is.” I shake my head. “Your needs are always more important, aren’t they, Dario?”

He shrugs. “Why do you even need to make a call? Why don’t you take off on the bike? I’ll stay here and wait for my guys to come pick me up. That’s win-win for both of us.”

I squint at him. “Seriously? How stupid do you think I am? Leaving here on that dilapidated bike isn’t a win. I could break down a half mile down the road. Or for all I know you could call Valentino and have him ambush me at the bottom of the mountain.”

He exhales impatiently, glancing around warily. “Arguing like this is going to get us both killed.”

“So give in.”

“No, I’d prefer you gave in.”

I exhale impatiently. “I’m not a threat to you, Dario. You’re a much bigger threat to me because you’re going to tell Valentino everything I have planned. All I want to do is get home. I won’t come for Valentino until I have a new plan in place. For now, he’s safe from me.”

“So you say.”

I open my mouth to say something and he curses under his breath as his eyes flick to something behind me. He grabs my shoulders and shoves me around the side of the phone booth. Then he joins me, peeking around the big booth.

“I just saw Carlo and one of his men pull into the station. Fuck.” He scowls. “We have to get back to the bike make a run for it down the hill. We don’t have time to make a call.”

“But the phone is right fucking there.”

“Yeah, and so is Carlo.” He grabs my arm. “Let’s go around the back of the station. The minute they see their guy is unconscious they’ll know we’re here.”

I let him drag me with him, but I’m not happy about it. I was mere seconds from making my phone call. I don’t want to get back on that damn bike and flee down the mountain, but I also know I have no choice. If Carlo and his men are here, we need to either hide or run. Standing in the phone booth isn’t a great option.

We reach the back of the building and Dario lets me walk ahead of him slightly. I don’t think anything of it until he grabs me and puts me in a choke hold. Gasping, I claw at his muscular arm as it squeezes on my windpipe. Sputtering, I’m unable to make any actual sounds.

He puts his mouth to my ear and says softly, “I’m really sorry about this, kid. But I need to make my call first. I can’t risk you doing something that might get Valentino injured.”

Kicking my legs, I scratch at his arm, as spots appear on the side of my vision. I try to gouge his eyes out, but he’s too quick. Head butting is impossible with the vise like grip he has on my throat.

Why did I trust him?

His breath is warm against my neck as he runs his hand over my backside. He takes his sweet time before tugging my wallet from my pocket. “Don’t worry. I’ll just make

my call and give you your wallet back. Odd are you'll be fine back here behind the building. When you wake up, you can make your call. Toodle-oo, Alessio."

I want to rip his face off. I want to punch him and bite him and make him pay for deceiving me like this. He's just gonna leave me here unconscious? Vulnerable? My hatred for Dario spikes exponentially as I begin to black out. There's nothing but the sound of blood rushing through my ears, and the tension of his arm against my throat as my eyes roll up in my head.

As darkness descends, I feel him press his lips to the bite mark, and then I sink into sweet oblivion.

I wake up swinging. Or, I try. My arms are tied behind my back and I'm lying on a big bed. I stop struggling, seeing as it's futile, and take in my surroundings. The room I'm in is dark and cool. It smells of Dario's cologne, and I'm completely confused about where the hell I am.

The last thing I remember is that asshole Dario choking me out. He said he'd leave me there with my wallet, but here I am hogtied in what appears to be his bedroom? My pulse picks up speed as I realize there's someone in the room with me. It's not Dario. I'd sense him if it were.

"Why am I here?" I demand, eyeing the dark silhouette sitting across the room.

They don't respond immediately, then they stand and approach. It's an omega around my age, with blond hair and a small baby bump. I don't recognize him, and he doesn't look particularly threatening.

He stops next to the bed, and he studies me. "Dario has really stepped in it this time,"

he murmurs.

I narrow my eyes. “Why am I here,” I repeat.

He purses his lips. “Because my beloved husband wants to murder you. But for whatever reason, Dario doesn’t want him to do it. I suggested we keep you alive for a bit while we figure shit out. Luckily, Valentino listens to me sometimes.”

A chill goes through me at how flippantly he talks about my death. But then again, if he’s Valentino’s husband, he’s probably surrounded by death. “Dario wants me alive?” It’s almost comical that he’s the thing that would stand between me and Valentino murdering me.

“Yes.” He peers at me closely and I get the feeling he’s confused by why Dario would care if I live or die. “You have a bite mark on your throat. Is it Dario’s? Is that why he’s being possessive of you?”

My face warms. “I have no idea why Dario does anything.”

He laughs. “He is a bit difficult to read. If it is his bite, it’s not really my business. But it’s very surprising. Dario isn’t exactly the... settling down type.”

“Neither am I.”

“Ahh, so it’s a match made in heaven,” he murmurs, smirking.

“How about you let me go and I’ll be out of your hair?” I know he’s not going to do it, but I have to try. “Show some omega solidarity.”

He laughs. “I’ve never really gone in for that stuff. I like and respect people based on who they are, not what they are. Some of the biggest assholes I’ve known have been

omegas.”

I shift and wince because my arms are falling asleep tied behind my back. “You could at least untie me, right?”

“I don’t think so.”

I manage to sit up and he takes a step back. I lower my legs to the ground, and laugh when he inches toward the door. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to attack. My arms are just falling asleep and I needed to change position.”

He cups his slightly rounded belly distractedly. “I’ll ask Valentino if it’s okay to untie your arms. You should eat something anyway and you can’t do that with your hands tied.”

I narrow my eyes. “Why would you feed me if I might be dead soon?”

He lifts one shoulder. “Politeness?”

The door opens and a tall, dark haired alpha enters the room. I know instantly it’s Valentino. He has an air of authority that’s undeniable. He’s young for a syndicate boss, but he’s proven himself more than capable of running his family.

I, naturally, hate his guts on sight because of what he did to my father. I bristle, wishing my hands weren’t tied so I could try and strangle the asshole. Just the sight of him infuriates me. He laughs at my murderous expression, which does nothing to calm my anger.

He slips his arm around Nico’s waist as he watches me with a smug expression. “What do you think of him?” Valentino asks.

Nico glances at me. "I'm not sure yet."

"Dario is still being a pill." Valentino sniffs. "Frankly, I'm getting sick of it."

Nico pats his back. "Just be patient a bit longer. He's never given anyone his bite. I'm sure he's very confused right now."

Valentino glances at Nico, and his expression gentles. "I'll wait a tiny bit longer, just for you."

I watch them, feeling a bit disconcerted. Seeing how sweet Valentino is with Nico is like watching an allegator doting on a sweet little bunny rabbit. Is Valentino actually capable of love? I wouldn't think that's true. Not from the stories I've heard about him.

But Nico seems to take his husband's tenderness for granted. He's all smiles as he moves to the door. "Should I tell Dario that Alessio is awake?"

"Not yet." Valentino's sweet expression chills as he turns it on me. "I want to have a little chat with our guest first."

"Behave, Valentino," Nico warns.

Looking innocent, Valentino coos, "Of course, love."

Nico laughs and leaves the room, which makes me uneasy. Valentino is behaved with Nico here, but there's no guarantee that will hold now that Nico is gone. The room falls silent, now that it's just me and the alpha I long to murder.

Valentino studies me and then moves closer. His stride slow and graceful, and I feel a bit like a gazelle being stalked by a hungry lion. I don't know what he thought of my

father, but he doesn't care for me. There's dislike shimmering in his eyes as he stops a few feet away.

"You're even stupider than your father," he mutters, curling his lip.

Anger surges in me at the insult toward my father. I stand and growl, "Fuck you, Valentino."

"That's the best you've got?" He lifts his dark brows. "Dario sure can pick 'em."

I'm shaking with anger, and frustrated that I can't do any damage to him. The alpha I despise most in the world is right in front of me, but with my arms tied behind my back, I'm unable to attack. Not that I think even with my arms free Valentino would be easy to take down. I never intended to fight Valentino in hand to hand combat. My plan was always to ambush him. Why would I play fair with Valentino, when he didn't play fair with my father? "You'll get yours eventually, Valentino."

He sighs, looking at me like I'm a troublesome child. "Do you really not understand how compassionate I was toward your father? Or are you just a brat throwing a tantrum?"

"Because of you my father died."

His cheek twitches. "You've got your facts all mixed up. Why am I not surprised?"

"You humiliated him," I growl.

"I spared him," Valentino snaps. "I have to say, I'm regretting my decision to be lenient. If I'd murdered him and all of his family, then I wouldn't have to deal with you right now. I have much more important things going on, kid."

“I’ll bet. So many people to betray and humiliate. I’m sure your schedule is full.”

“The one who betrayed someone was your father. He was supposed to be on my side of things. Instead, he threw a fit and grabbed Nico. That almost got Nico killed. Do you expect I’d just stand by and let him disrespect me and mine like that?”

I’m not the idiot he thinks I am. I get that he had to retaliate. But he didn’t have to retaliate so hard, in my opinion. But we’re never going to see eye to eye on this subject. My father is gone and I want blood. Valentino’s blood, to be precise.

“You think you’re right and I know I’m right. You really should kill me,” I rumble. “Because I won’t stop coming for you.”

His mouth thins. “I wish you’d be less annoying. I don’t want Dario upset, but he might be if I slit you open. Which I’m tempted to do.”

“Then do it,” I hiss, taking a step toward him. “I’m sick to death of hearing all the excuses of why it was okay for you to drive my father to his grave. Just come at me and let’s get this over with.”

Valentino’s eyes light with a sort of murderous excitement. “You shouldn’t tempt me,” he says through clenched teeth.

When the door opens, and Dario walks in, he takes one look at Valentino and he moves swiftly toward us. “What’s going on here, you two?” Dario slips between me and Valentino, his smile strained. “Is everyone getting along?”

“Not really,” Valentino says in a gravelly voice. “I was thinking I might gut this little shit.” His muscles are bunched and he looks like he’d like to shove Dario aside and lunge at me.

“Just you try,” I mutter.

Dario gives me an impatient look, but then says to Valentino, “I’d really prefer you didn’t kill him, sir.”

“And I’d prefer you went back out of the room so I can deal with this ungrateful punk the way he deserves.” Valentino’s eyes glitter maliciously.

“Come on, Boss, just wait a bit longer.” Dario sighs. “I... I know he’s fucking annoying. I get why you want to murder him. I myself have that urge at least once a day. But, if you’d just hold off a tiny bit longer, I’d be grateful.”

Valentino hesitates, resentment burning in his eyes. But then he gives a harsh laugh and takes a step back. “Your timing was good, Dario. One minute later and the little shit’s entrails would have been on the floor.”

A chill zips down my spine when I notice the gleam of a small knife in Valentino’s hand. I hadn’t even seen him pull it out of his pocket. If I didn’t hate him so much, I might actually respect Valentino’s skill. There’s no question in my mind Dario just saved my life.

But I’m not one to back down easily, so I grate out, “Figures you’d attack me with my arms tied behind my back. You’re so fucking honorable, Valentino. Here’s an idea. How about you untie my arms and give me a knife too? Then we can see whose entrails end up on the floor.”

Valentino gives another humorless laugh as he tucks his knife away. “For Dario’s sake, I’ll allow you to live a few more hours.” He turns to leave, but he hesitates as he passes Dario. His voice is cold as he says, “Get your emotions under control, Dario. He needs to die.”

Dario stiffens but says nothing.

Valentino leaves us there and slips out of the room.

Dario exhales harshly as he turns to face me. His cheeks are flushed and his dark eyes glitter with confusion. I'm pretty sure even he doesn't understand why he's protecting me at this point. "Do you actually want to die?" he snaps. "Antagonizing Valentino is a good way to do that."

"He's an arrogant asshole."

"And you're dumb as a brick sometimes." Without warning, he pushes me backward, and I fall on the bed.

"Hey," I yelp, glaring up at him.

"Roll over," he growls.

I widen my eyes, my heart picking up speed. "Why?" He want me on my stomach? Surely he isn't going to fuck me at a moment like this? I'm embarrassed when my dick warms at the thought he craves me that much. I hold his gaze feeling rattled and unsure of what to do.

He obviously reads what I'm thinking on my face because he scowls. "Not for that, you idiot. I'm going to untie your wrists."

"Oh." My face is hot as I roll over onto my stomach. I pray he didn't notice I'm slightly turned on at the idea he wanted to fuck me. I guess he's not the only one suffering from unpleasant and unwanted instincts.

He mutters under his breath as he unties the rope around my wrists.

Once he's got the ropes off of me, I sit on the edge of the bed, rubbing my tender skin. "Where am I?"

"Valentino's home."

"How did I end up here? You said you'd leave me at the gas station."

Crossing his arms, he studies me. "That was my original plan. Unfortunately, Valentino wanted you murdered on the spot. I talked him into waiting until we got you here." He sighs. "Then, with the help of Nico, I talked him into not murdering you right away once you were here."

"You should leave me untied. Then when Valentino returns, I'll have a sporting chance."

He snorts a laugh. "You're no match for Valentino either way. Hell, you're no match for me. You might be able to take Nico, since he's pregnant and all. But maybe not. The kids pretty tough."

I grit my teeth. "You always like to underestimate me."

"All I'm trying to do is save your life." His gaze shifts to the bite on my throat. "For obvious reasons."

I touch the bite mark on my throat. "So if I didn't have this bite, you'd have let Valentino kill me up on the mountain?"

"Probably." He narrows his eyes. "You're way more trouble than I bargained for. Besides, wasn't it you who warned me not to become attached?"

I shrug. "Yes. I meant it then and I mean it now."

“Well, fear not. All that is going on here is pure instinct. If Valentino kills you, I’ll be in pain. Not because I care about you but because of the bite. But I can only do so much to keep you safe. You didn’t do yourself any favors just now. Provoking Valentino will only work against you, Alessio.”

“I hate his guts.”

“Still,” he murmurs. “You need to play nice. For example, if you were to apologize, he might allow you to live.”

I widen my eyes. “Apologize? He’s the one who should be apologizing to me.”

“Yeah, that’s never going to happen.” He rubs the back of his neck and surprises me by sitting on the edge of the bed.

I narrow my eyes. “Shouldn’t you keep your distance? I’m your prisoner. What if I attack you?”

He glances at me and then he laughs. “I’d swat you away like a gnat?”

I scowl. “Oh, really?”

“Pfft, yeah.”

I lunge at him, and manage to catch him off guard. Unfortunately, it doesn’t help much. He just overpowers me quickly and next thing I know, I’m lying on my back with him straddling me. I kick and struggle, but he’s too fucking heavy and skilled at keeping me down. “Get off me,” I hiss.

“You started this, brat,” he says breathlessly. “Now stop fighting me. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Since when?” I snarl, still wrestling with him.

He lays his body on mine, and his mouth is only inches from my lips. “Stop it,” he growls. “Calm down, Alessio.”

I ignore him, but I soon run out of steam. He’s too strong and I can’t begin to get him off of me. Breathing hard, I’m aware all that wiggling against each other has us both aroused. That wasn’t my intention, but I’m as turned on as he is.

His eyes shimmer with arousal, and I expect he’ll try and kiss me. I’m surprised when he suddenly lets go of me and gets off the bed. I’m disappointed too, which is a little embarrassing. But to hide that I say, “That’s right. Keep your fucking hands off me.”

His smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “Think about what I said. I don’t care if you have to fake it, you need to apologize to Valentino. Maybe then I can keep you alive.”

“I’m never going to apologize to him. Not ever.”

Frustration paints his face, but he just shrugs. “Then God help you.” He heads to the door and he leaves.

I lie on the bed, trying to think of how to get out of the mess I’m in. When I suddenly realize he forgot to tie my arms again, I sit up feeling excited. I wait for him to return, realizing his mistake. But he doesn’t. Heart racing, I get off the bed and hurry toward the door. It’s locked from the outside. I haven’t seen many bedrooms that lock from the outside. My guess is they switched the door knob around when they realized they were going to hold me prisoner. That’s okay. I’m sure there’s something in this room I can use to pick the lock.

It goes through my head that maybe Dario left my arms free on purpose. He instinctively wants to keep me alive. But he’d never do anything to put Valentino in

danger, and he knows full well I want Valentino dead. It's far more likely he was just flustered and forgot to tie me up again.

Whatever the reason, he did indeed forget to tie my arms. That's an unbelievable stroke of luck for me. With a snide laugh, I begin to search the room for something that will help me escape.

Chapter Nine

Dario

Valentino isn't happy with me when I enter his library. He's seated near the fireplace, sulking. We usually get along like butter and pasta. Our relationship is more like brothers than boss and employee, and sometimes the lines get blurred. But we aren't brothers. He's the leader of the Black Knives, and it's important I remember that. It's dangerous not to.

I don't blame him for being upset with me. I behaved recklessly with Alessio, and now Valentino has to deal with the repercussions. By giving Alessio my bite, I've complicated an already complicated situation. Valentino doesn't like complications, so now I'm in the doghouse.

"Boss," I say softly, "I'm sure I'll get through to him eventually. He's young and he thinks he's in the right. That makes him pig headed."

He scowls at me. "He's never going to see it our way. You must know that."

My stomach churns as I hold his surly gaze. I do know the odds of Alessio ever coming to his senses are teeny tiny. "I have to try."

"Do you?" He sniffs dismissively. "I say we slit the punks throat and be done with it. Why won't you just let me kill him?" He sounds like a petulant child. "I'd be happy to do it. You wouldn't even have to be there."

I clench my jaw because just hearing him talk about killing Alessio makes the hairs on the back of my neck stiffen. I worry what I'd do if he tried to kill Alessio. I don't think I'd be able to just stand mute. Even though I can't conceive of going against Valentino, I also can't fathom allowing him to kill Alessio right in front of me.

"If I hadn't given him my bite, I'd be only too happy to kill him myself, sir."

"Yes, but you did give him your bite." He narrows his eyes. "That was unusually reckless of you, Dario. What the hell were you thinking?"

"I wasn't thinking." I sit in a chair opposite him, slumping against the arm rest. "He went into heat and I went into a rut."

"That explains why you fucked him, not why you claimed him."

"Yes." I grimace, feeling foolish. "Your mother thinks we might be fated mates. She says that's probably why I lost control."

Valentino rolls his eyes. "Yes, I'm well acquainted with my mother's nonsensical ideas about fated mates."

I happen to know his mother thinks he and Nico are fated mates. I also happen to know Valentino has accepted the idea. I ignore the nudge of irritation that goes through me. Why is he willing to accept Nico and he are fated, but reject the idea I might be fated to Alessio?

Mine is not to reason why.

I sigh. "Whether we're fated or not, he's my problem."

"He's my problem too, seeing as he wants me dead." Valentino's expression is dark.

“What good are you to me if you’re only worried about that omega? I need my second to be at his best. If you’re perceived as weak then I look weak.”

“Neither one of us are weak,” I grouse. “And I’m perfectly capable of doing my job, Valentino.”

“You should have killed him on that mountain.”

“I know, but I couldn’t do it.” My voice is painted with frustration. Valentino has every right to be irritated with the situation. I’m just hoping I can keep him calm enough not to kill Alessio before I can figure out a solution that pleases all parties involved.

His irritable expression softens slightly as he watches me. I’m sure it’s more than obvious I’m a wreck. He leans toward me, clasping his hands. “Do you think he’s carrying your child?”

“Probably.” I pat my shirt pocket. “I have a packet of morning after pills. I planned on giving them to him when I went to his room.” I exhale tiredly. “I got distracted when I walked in and saw you about to gut him like a fish.”

“He’s lucky you came when you did.” Valentino looks a little sheepish. “He got under my skin.”

“He’s an expert at that,” I mutter.

Valentino rises and goes to pour a whiskey. He returns and hands me a crystal tumbler as well. He lifts his glass. “To getting rid of Alessio before the we both lose our minds.”

I clink his glass, smiling weakly. “I’m sorry about all of this. I really am. If I could do

it all over again, I'd have picked up some other omega that night. Unfortunately, he's the one that caught my eye."

He doesn't respond. He just reclaims his seat, sipping his drink. Valentino doesn't hand out forgiveness easily. I'm sure he'll hold this fuck up against me for a while. I don't blame him either. This was a major misstep.

"So, how do we not kill him?" Valentino asks bluntly. "In what scenario will that work? The kid wants me dead. I'd rather that didn't happen. How do we both coexist when he's determined to end my life?"

My gut aches and I'm not sure what to say. It's not like I have a plan.

When I don't respond, he says, "Your loyalty is still to me, right?" His voice is emotionless, but uneasiness shivers through me. If Valentino gets it in his head I'd be loyal to Alessio before him, I'm not a hundred percent what he'd do. He'd hate to kill me, but he might lock me away somewhere.

I meet his gaze, making sure not to waver. "Of course. I'm not going to let him hurt you, Boss."

"You'd kill him if it was him or me?"

Why must he push it?

Clenching my teeth against the stress eating at me, I nod. "If it's you or Alessio, I'll protect you sir. I promise."

"I see you avoided my direct question." He swirls the amber liquid in his glass, looking displeased. "I hope you're who I think you are, Dario."

“I am. I’d die before I’d let Alessio harm one hair on your head, sir.” I frown. “I would think you know that.”

“I suppose I have little choice other than to trust you.” He sighs.

We sit in silence for a bit then Valentino glances at me. “Carlo must know I have Alessio by now. Do you think he’s hoping I just off the kid?”

“Without a doubt. But Carlo must also know I’m going to want payback for what he did to me.”

“Oh, I’m sure he knows.” Valentino smirks. “We could just put him in a room with Alessio and let them fight it out. Might be fun to watch. We could take bets on who would win.”

I stiffen, but say nonchalantly, “My money would be on Alessio.”

“Isn’t that sweet?” His tone is mocking.

My face warms but I remain silent.

“I think Carlo will be easy to deal with once we locate him. Alessio is the problem.” He lifts one dark brow. “Because of your unwillingness to let me do what needs doing.”

I wince guiltily.

He sips his drink, looking thoughtful. “Nico and me were talking earlier about possible solutions to the Alessio problem.”

“Were you?” I’m glad to hear that actually. Nico isn’t generally in favor of murder, if

it can be avoided. He wasn't born into this lifestyle. "Did Nico have some suggestions?"

He smiles slyly. "Why yes, he did. His idea is pretty out there though. He thinks it might be a good way to keep Alessio alive, and appease me. I suspect you'll hate it."

"Why?" I ask, with a feeling of trepidation.

"Because it involves you."

I give a nervous laugh. "Okay. In what way?"

"Well, I was saying to Nico that now is the perfect time to make a calculated move. I'm always looking for ways to grow the Black Knives, as you well know."

"Yes. But I don't see how that would have anything to do with Alessio or I."

He twists his lips, then says softly, "It has everything to do with you two. Because of what happened between you and Alessio, things are already in motion. Nico suggested that, instead of just jumping off the train, perhaps it would be smarter to take control of the train."

I wrinkle my brow. "I'm not following."

He bites his bottom lip. "Well, think about it. You already gave Alessio your bite."

"Yeah. I'm well aware of that horrible mistake."

He laughs. "What if we took that mistake and used it to our benefit?"

"How?"

He looks excited as he says, “Instead of looking at it as a mistake, what if we see it as an opportunity? What if you were to embrace the fact that you claimed Alessio?”

“Embrace it?” I mumble, feeling uneasy.

“Yes. What if you were to marry him?”

I bug my eyes. “Marry him?”

“Yes.”

“But,” I sputter. “Why on earth would I do that?”

“Because then we could absorb the Abella mob into the Black Knives.” He smirks.

“We could merge together and be one big happy family.”

Disbelief rolls through me as I hold his calculating gaze. “Alessio would never go for that. First of all, he wouldn’t want to marry me, and second of all he hates you too much to join with the Black Knives.”

His smile is spiteful. “Of course he won’t want to do it. You’d have to convince him it’s for his own good.”

“How would I do that? There’s nothing I could say that would convince him.” I shake my head. “And for the record, I don’t want to marry him. I have no desire to marry anyone, nor do I want to have a kid right now. Not yet. I like my freedom too much.”

Valentino scowls. “It wouldn’t be a real marriage. You would still be free to fuck around. It would be a marriage of convenience.”

“It sounds decidedly inconvenient for me,” I grumble. “And once I marry, I won’t

cheat. I'm like you about that. I take marriage seriously. Why do you think I've put it off so long? I know once I do that, I'm stuck with that omega for the rest of my life."

"Well, it's not that bad. In fact, it can be amazing. Look at me and Nico." Valentino wears a sappy little smile. "We're as happy as can be."

"Yes, but you two are different," I mutter.

"Don't be closed minded. Look at the big picture." He laughs. "If you were willing to do this, we'd have control of the Abella syndicate."

"How? Alessio would still be the boss."

He shakes his head. "Technically, yes. You've forgotten about the Alpha Incipency Law. As an alpha, when you claimed Alessio, you automatically inherited the right to run any business he owns with him. In this case, his business is the Abella syndicate and if you were his husband, you'd have the legal right to run it with him. In essence, we'd have control."

I wince. "The Alpha Incipency Law is an antiquated law. These days omegas have the same rights as alphas. I can't remember the last time I heard of an alpha exercising his rights under that law."

"Some do. I think you should. The Incipency Law has never been struck down, therefore it's still in existence. Besides, I'm sure Alessio's men would much prefer an alpha was at the helm instead of just an omega. There are very few omegas running any of the powerful syndicates these days."

"But, Alessio is the rightful head of the Abella mob." My stomach churns as I meet Valentino's shrewd gaze. "By blood, that's his inheritance."

“I know, but circumstances change. He got himself into this mess and he needs to appease me somehow.”

“Taking his rightful place as head of the Abella syndicate feels too cruel.”

Valentino rolls his eyes. “You only say that because he has your bite. If he were anyone else you’d be fine with my plan. Besides, he’d still be running things with you. He wouldn’t be out entirely.”

“Valentino, I never planned on staying with Alessio. You must know that. Just because I have trouble killing him doesn’t mean I want to be with him. As I said, I don’t want to be married with a kid. I don’t want to be tied down.”

“It’s high time you thought about doing that, Dario. You’re twenty-eight. You’re of the age when an alpha would usually take a mate. This union would bring you power and wealth.” He purses his lips, watching me. “I’m sure you’d like to have more power than you do now.”

“Not really.” I frown. “I’m happy being your second.”

“And I certainly don’t want to lose you from that position. That’s why I’m proposing we absorb the Abella syndicate into the Black Knives. We would grow even more powerful, and the Abella syndicate would thrive. They’re weak right now. After losing Joeseeph, and with Alessio running around trying to kill me, they’re becoming a laughing stock. It’s only a matter of time before they’re taken over. Hell, that’s what Carlo was trying to do. I say we do it first. Let’s take a truly fucked up situation and turn it into something that benefits us.”

I blow out a shaky breath, flustered by Valentino’s persistence. “Even if I were willing to... marry him, Alessio will be livid at your suggestion. He’s angry enough without me suggesting to him that the Black Knives take over his family syndicate.”

“Too bad,” Valentino rasps. “He has to pay for what he’s done. If I’m going to allow him to live, he needs to pay a huge price for my leniency. For God’s sake, Dario, he came against the Black Knives’ second and it’s boss. He has to pay for that. Agreeing to this marriage would satisfy my grudge against him. He’d be dead already if I’d had my way. Don’t forget that.”

“I haven’t,” I say softly.

He rubs his jaw, nodding. “If you’ll just think logically for a moment, you’d see that this could actually work, Dario. The Black Knives would become untouchable, and I’d have a reason to keep Alessio alive without losing face.”

As I listen to him, it’s obvious Valentino feels he’s come up with the perfect solution to punish Alessio. But I know Alessio will never willingly go along with his plan. “Having spent a time with Alessio, I’m a hundred percent sure he’d rather die than be a part of us.”

Valentino lifts one shoulder dismissively. “Then maybe we just kill him and take over his syndicate the old fashioned way. At least I’m giving him an option. Not that he deserves one. He’s insolent and arrogant. But I’m willing to overlook all of that and spare his life, if he’s willing to go along with this plan.”

My stomach sinks because I know Valentino very well. He’s not bluffing. He will end Alessio’s life if he doesn’t cooperate. It won’t matter that I don’t want him to do it. Valentino will do what’s best for the Black Knives. The bigger our syndicate is, the safer we are. He knows that and he’s not wrong that this move is perfectly timed. The problem for me is I’m in the middle. I’m linked by my bite to Alessio, but also bound to Valentino by years of loyally standing beside him.

He leans toward me and says softly, “You need to remember that this isn’t about what Alessio wants, Dario. This is about coming to a solution that pleases me.”

I say in frustration, “And the fact that I have no desire to marry doesn’t sway you at all?”

He shrugs. “I’m actually looking out for you. Nico thinks it would be good for you to marry, and I’m inclined to agree. It makes you look respectable to have an omega and a child. You can’t remain a bachelor forever. You’ve already given Alessio your bite, so this works out perfectly.”

“For who? Certainly not for me. Are you really going to force this on me?” I grip the arms of my chair, feeling cornered. If I don’t give Valentino what he wants, Alessio will die. But if I do go along with Valentino’s plan, I’ll be stuck with a mouthy omega I don’t want, and a kid.

“You’re being dramatic. It’s not the end of the world. As I said, it would merely be a marriage of convenience. Your life would hardly change.”

I widen my eyes. “How can you say that? You’ve met Alessio. He’s nothing like the type of omega I eventually planned on settling down with. He’s way too high strung. I like my life just the way it is. Alessio would turn my life upside down. Especially since he won’t want the marriage either. He’ll probably take his frustrations out on me. How does that equal a happy home?”

Valentino’s expression darkens. “If you refuse, he’s going to die. Is that what you want? This was my way of allowing him to live.”

I grimace. “I appreciate you’re trying to think of ways to punish him without killing him. But why am I being punished too?”

“Need I remind you that you actually helped exacerbate the problem?”

I scowl. “If he hadn’t kidnapped me, I’d never have been in a position to give him my

bite.”

He narrows his eyes. “It’s your fault you were kidnapped. If you’d been thinking with your big head instead of your little head, none of this would have happened.”

“Not true. He was always going to come for you.”

“The problem isn’t that he came for me,” Valentino growls. “The problem is you gave him your bite. If that hadn’t happened, he’d be dead already. We both know this. Even he knows it. But you claimed him and now here we are, Dario.”

I clench my jaw, embarrassment washing through me. He’s not wrong. My stupid actions have brought us to where we are today. I let out a shaky breath. “So he dies if I don’t agree to this?”

“Of course.” Valentino shakes his head. “There is no other way out for him.”

Feeling resigned, I grate out, “What if I can’t convince him to marry me? I can’t force him and drag him down the aisle.”

“Dario,” Valentino rumbles. “You know the answer already.” He sighs and comes closer to me. “I’ve only kept him alive this long because of my friendship with you. But that can only take us so far. You know as well as I do how things work in the syndicate. You make a mistake, you pay a price.”

“I know?but?”

“I’m offering him a way out of a situation that should, by rights, end with his death. He should be grateful, but I know he won’t be. I don’t have to give him this chance. I could take everything he has and kill him today. I’m doing this for you, Dario. Because, if he dies, you’ll suffer. I don’t want that. I don’t give a fuck about that kid,

but I care about you. I don't want you to have to go through the physical and mental hell that you'd endure if he dies."

"It's not terribly flattering to admit, but I'm sure he'd rather die than marry me," I mumble.

Valentino nods. "So if he doesn't care about his life, what does he care about? What can you use to convince him? Who does he care about?"

"With both his mother and father gone, I don't think there is anyone. His men are the closest thing to family he has left. He does seem to care about his men." I remember how upset Alessio was at the thought that Enzo had been killed.

Valentino brightens. "Then we use his men's lives as leverage. You should tell him that if he doesn't agree to this marriage, I'll slaughter all his men."

I glance up, startled. "You would do that?"

"No." He laughs. "Why would I? If he's stupid and he chooses death, I'll just take over his syndicate anyway. I want his men alive. But he doesn't need to know that. He already thinks I'm a ruthless monster. Let him believe I'd murder all his men if I don't get my way."

I groan. "The kid is so damn hard headed, he still may refuse."

"Then that's his choice." Valentino's gaze is empathetic as he watches me. "I'm sorry, Dario."

I believe he is sorry. For me. Not for Alessio. "I'll go talk to him," I say gruffly.

"Good." Valentino nods. "Let me know what he says."

“Of course.” I leave the library, stress buzzing through me.

I have to figure out some way to convince Alessio that marriage to me is a good thing. Because, while I have no desire to get married, entering into a sham marriage will be less painful than watching him die.

I hope.

Chapter Ten

Alessio

I find a pocket knife tucked away in the bedside table. Heart racing, I pick the door lock, trying to be as quiet as possible. I keep worrying Nico will return with food, but then the lock clicks and the door is officially unlocked.

I slip the pocket knife into my jeans and slowly open the door. The house is silent. I strain my ears to hear if anyone is coming, but the coast seems clear. I squeeze out of the door, pulse speeding. I don't know the layout of the house, but some things are universal. For example, I know the big staircase in front of me will lead down to the foyer where the front door is.

My goal is to escape. I'll come for Valentino another time. At the moment, getting the hell away is the priority. I make my way to the stairs, still listening intently for any indication someone is coming. I practically run down the wide, curving staircase, in a panic to get outside. The double front doors loom tantalizingly in the near distance.

When I reach the ground floor, I sprint across the marble foyer. I reach the front door and hesitate. There's a painful ache in my chest at the thought of leaving Dario. It's mystifying to me that he's even on my mind at the moment, but he is. The bite on my neck throbs painfully as I open the front door. Sweat breaks out on my skin, and once more, I hesitate. Dario's damn bite is interfering with my desire to escape.

Gritting my teeth, I feel nauseous as I step out onto the big porch. I need to ignore the

anxiety rippling through me at leaving Dario behind. This is my chance to escape and I'm taking it.

In the distance, I see men patrolling the perimeter of the expansive property. I don't see anyone near the actual house though. It makes sense that Valentino has security. I figured he would. I'm hoping I can slip past them since they're expecting people to break in, not out.

I hurry down the steps and across the circular driveway. There's a fountain with Hibiscus growing near it, and statues dot the rolling lawns. The cobblestone drive winds toward the front road, and is lined with cypress trees, purple Bougainvillea, and white Oleander. I creep to the trees and slip into the vegetation to hide. If Nico does go up to the room to feed me, he'll sound the alarm when he sees I'm gone. I need to hurry to the front of the property before my escape is ended before it really even begins.

It's late evening and it should be dark soon. Unfortunately, I don't think I have time to wait. I need to get off the property as quickly as I'm able. I make my way through the trees to the front of the property. There's a tall wall that surrounds the acreage, and wrought-iron gates adorned with intricate scrollwork guard the end of the long driveway.

As I'm crouched in the brush, the gates slowly creak open as a delivery van pulls up. I watch the white vehicle drive past, noticing it's a florist van. The two men patrolling nearest the gates stop the van. I eye the open gates, anxiety eating away at me. If I could just get out those gates, that would be the perfect scenario. The walls are extremely high and the odds of me climbing them without being noticed is quite slim.

Eyeing the van and the guards, I decide to try and get out of the open gates while the guards are distracted by the van. I move very slowly so that I don't catch anyone's

peripheral vision. I reach the gates and pause, watching the van and guards. My heart is pounding so hard, I'm breathless. One of the guards laughs at something the guy in the van says, and I take the chance to make my way out of the gates.

I slip around the wrought iron gates and sprint to the other side of the wall. Panting, I stay still, praying no one saw me. I think if they had seen me they'd have called out. I press close to the wall and then jump when the gates squeak closed a few feet away.

They didn't see me.

If they had spotted me they wouldn't have closed the gates. Feeling elated, I run down the length of the big wall. The street next to me is a private road. I know from researching Valentino that he lives off of a main highway, and you can only get to his home by leaving that busy highway and traveling down a long, private road named Prime Rose Lane. If I can make it down this lane without Valentino's men stopping me, I'll reach the main road. It will take me a while on foot, however, if I can make it to the main road, from there I can probably grab a ride with someone. Maybe at the very least I can use someone's cell phone to call one of my men to pick me up.

But I need to not get captured first. With that in mind, I head across the road and slip into the trees on the other side. I move deeper into the woods, making sure I don't lose sight of the road. I'm annoyed that each step away from Dario brings an intense uneasiness. How I can be bonded to an alpha I hardly know is beyond me. Why a simple bite would create that bond is also mystifying. I never put much stock in the whole alpha and omega connection, but I'm forced to grudgingly admit it's apparently real. As strong as my desire is to flee, there's an equally nagging need to run back to Dario. It's so powerful, I occasionally falter in my steps, fighting against the desire to turn back.

When it starts to rain, I curse at the sky. I'd noticed the dark clouds gathering, but hoped I'd be home before the rain hit. Not so much. As the big drops splatter on the

ground and my head, I grit my teeth and trudge onward. I'd hoped maybe it would be a light, quick rain. Unfortunately, the rain begins to come down heavier. I slip and slide in the mud as I make my way through the trees. At one point, I see two black SUVs race by, traveling toward the main road.

"Fuck," I growl, moving deeper into the trees. They must have discovered I'm missing. Was Dario in one of those cars? My chest aches with longing at the thought he's looking for me. It's a foolish, irrational emotion, but it's powerful. The need to show myself to my alpha is horrifyingly strong.

"No, no, no," I hiss. "I need to get away. That's what's important."

I pick up my speed, while trying not to fall and break a bone. Since they raced toward the main road, I begin to wonder if perhaps I should rethink my escape plan. It's logical that I'd flee to the highway, but maybe I should double back instead? Perhaps that would throw them off. I could always go deeper into the trees and see what's on the other side of this forest? I only hesitate because these trees could go on for miles and miles. I know nothing about the area that surrounds Valentino's home.

As I trudge along, the temperature drops. The rain worsens, and my attitude tanks along with the crappy conditions. I'm drenched and pissed off at my predicament. I don't see the SUVs again, but I highly doubt that's because they gave up looking for me. I worry perhaps Valentino's men have dogs. They could try to track me that way if I don't show up at the highway as expected.

I stop walking when the rain becomes a torrent. The visibility is so poor, I worry I'll fall down a ravine or something. Chilled to the bone, I huddle at the base of one of the aspen trees. The wind has picked up too, and I'm shivering and cursing my bad luck. I have to admit, I'm beginning to regret ever making a move against Valentino. If I hadn't done that, I'd be home in my warm bed right now. I felt driven to avenge my father. Now I realize I should have been stealthier about getting my vengeance.

I'm never going to win an all out war with the Black Knives. I'll be lucky to survive this fucking storm.

If I do somehow make it home, Valentino will probably come for me there. He's never going to let me live. I might have to leave Los Demonios. My heart sinks at the idea of leaving everything behind. Even if I promised to stop seeking revenge, Valentino won't just let me walk away without consequences. Dario can only do so much to protect me, and after this stunt, should they find me, Dario might just hand me over to Valentino. He's probably sick of me too.

"I'm sorry, Father," I whisper. "I've really made a mess of this."

I shiver, hugging my trembling body. The frigid temperature is seeping my strength. I know I should keep moving, but the rain is coming down so hard, visibility is shit. What would they do if I just returned to Valentino's mansion, tail between my legs? I give a humorless laugh, picturing Dario's bewildered expression. Would he be happy to see me, or annoyed that I came back?

"Doesn't matter to me either way," I mutter.

No point in fantasizing about asking for forgiveness. I'm fairly certain Valentino would have me murdered if I returned to his home. Besides, I'm not going to beg him for anything. I still hate him with a passion. I simply can now admit I'm no match for him.

Feeling dejected, I close my eyes and my thoughts drift to Dario again. It physically hurts to be away from him. My logical side says escaping was the right move. But my instinctive side says I should crawl back to Dario. That's humiliating to admit. I've always been independent. I've never needed an alpha, and I hate the idea I might want one now. But Dario's scent seems to always be in my nose, and thoughts of him swamp me day and night.

Independent or not, I'd give anything for my alpha's protection right now. Dario would want to protect me too. He can't help it. If he were with me right now, he'd shield me from the rain and wind with his burly body. He'd probably pretend he was doing it for some other reason, but I know he'd instinctively need to protect me. He can't help it. It's in his DNA. Since he gave me his bite, primal law dictates that Dario is now my shelter. My protector.

My alpha.

I shudder as that thought comes to me. I don't want an alpha, but the awful truth is I have to fight the urge not to skulk back to him. I'm not near him, yet I can see him so clearly in my mind. His dark eyes are burned into my brain. His scent and taste linger on my senses. I whimper, fighting the need clawing at me. The hair on my skin prickles, and I swear I can smell him nearby.

The sound of a car slowing out on the road at the edge of the trees has my eyes flying open. My heart quickens when I see headlights through the thick trees. I stay where I am, crouched at the base of a tree as the rain pelts me. I hear the sound of a car door slamming. The headlights flicker as if someone is walking in front of them. I don't think I can run in the opposite direction efficiently. It's dark and I don't know my way. With my luck, I'll run smack into a tree and knock myself out.

I hear the crack of twigs and panic roars through me. The headlights still shine into the trees but I'm positive the occupant of the SUV isn't in the vehicle anymore. I press closer to the tree trunk, praying whoever it is can't find me in the dark. The hairs on my skin stiffen as the sounds come closer. Whoever it is, they're moving in my direction.

I know who it is. Why am I pretending I don't?

All I can do is watch as a dark figure emerges from the black night. There's a sort of

humming inside of me, and I feel breathless. I grip the trunk of the tree, heat shifting through me. I feel feverish. Flushed. My lips part in anticipation because of course I know who's approaching. I recognize it's Dario even before I spot the bulk and height of him. Excitement replaces fear, which makes little sense. He's ten feet away now, and while I can't see his features, I can see his eyes. They're an eerie yellow as he moves toward me.

As if there's a beacon attached to me, he comes straight to me. I don't stand. I simply whimper at the foot of the tree. I have the oddest impulse to roll over on my back submissively. He grabs hold of me and yanks me to my feet. His lips are pulled tight over his teeth, and those golden eyes burn into me. Ran pelts him as he tugs me against his hard, warm body.

I should run. Yell. Fight. I do none of those things. Instead, I fold into him, slipping my arms around him. He growls, a low rumble in his throat, and I press closer as if wordlessly asking for forgiveness. He nuzzles my hair, and warm breaths waft over my ear. I wiggle even closer to him, seeking shelter from the rain.

He runs his large hands down my body, still making that weird rumbling growl. I'm feverish as I cling to him, embarrassed at my reaction to him. Now would be the time to fight. Attack. He's distracted by whatever instincts he's feeling. I could knee him or stab him with the little pocket knife I stole from his night stand. But instead of doing any of that, I press my lips to his firm throat, nipping the skin.

His breaths are harsher now, and they hang visibly in the chilled air. His eyes are painfully bright to look at, but my excitement only grows. I should be afraid of him, but instead my hands fumble with his belt. He glances up at the dark sky, and a snarl escapes his lips. Hand's shaking, I unzip his slacks and then fumble with my own.

He pushes me against the tree trunk that's behind me. He stares at me, looking feral. Ravenous. I kiss his mouth softly, whimpering my need. His upper lip curls up like a

dog about to bite, but then he yanks my jeans down to my knees. The cold air swirls around my bare ass, but I'm so fucking turned on I barely notice the chill.

He lifts me like I weigh nothing, pushing my thighs as wide as they'll go. The jeans are definitely restricting my movements. Still, I'm able to spread my legs wide enough that he settles between my trembling thighs. The rain pelts us as he takes my mouth hungrily. I respond, sucking on his tongue and moaning into his greedy mouth. I feel like I've gone insane. The storm means nothing to me now. I'm drenched and shivering, but all I can think about is getting Dario inside my aching body. Lust boils in my lower belly, and I hold his yellow gaze as he guides his cock to my asshole.

There's no foreplay. He's an alpha with one goal in mind: Fucking his omega. I whine as he pushes inside me, impaling me in one long, harsh stroke. I claw at him, crying out as I arch my back. He grabs my wrists, rumbling his disapproval. Then he begins to pump his hips, nailing me against the tree with his weight. I wiggle and moan as he fucks me mercilessly. The pleasure is almost too much. He's rough, but I love it. I crave it. I deserve it for running. He's punishing me for daring to run, but also giving me a reason to stay.

"You're not going anywhere," he hisses against my ear.

I whine and seek his mouth, sucking on his lips and moaning. He's so deep inside me, it's hard to breathe. What I'm feeling makes no sense to me. But I can't stop. I have no idea how he found me. It's as if my thoughts brought him here. I hold his gaze as he thrusts into me. My back scrapes the tree trunk, and I'm sure I'll be bruised. I don't care. My climax is swirling through my body deliciously. Hovering just out of reach.

His cock swells deep inside me. I moan as my orgasm begins to unfurl deep in my core. The relentless thrusting of his cock, and the scent of him sends me over the edge. As I come he comes too. He gives a primordial roar as he floods me with his

seed, and I convulse and jerk on his cock. It's the rawest, most carnal moment of my life. Even that night in the cabin pales in comparison to this moment. My body opens to his seed, quaking and welcoming it. If I wasn't pregnant already, I am now. I can almost feel his seed fertilizing my eggs.

He finishes inside me with two weak thrusts. He's breathing hard and he's spent. He leans on me, nuzzling the bite mark on my throat. After a few moments, he lifts his head and stares into my eyes. He looks a little dazed, but his eyes are a more normal brown again. He strokes my bottom lip with his thumb, and then he kisses me. It's an extremely tender kiss. Shockingly tender after how he just behaved with me. I kiss him back, still in a haze of lust.

"Don't run again," he says softly.

He pulls out of me before his knot can form, and we both quickly straighten our clothing. The feverish lust has faded now, leaving me embarrassed. I'm still not sure how things went from me fleeing for my life to fucking in the woods. The only excuse I have is instinct is guiding me. Us. I don't actually like being controlled by instincts. I prefer to know why I do things. It seems when it comes to instinct, that's not a thing.

The rain has let up slightly, but it's still cold and I'm soaked through. He is too after our little fuck fest. But I've been out in the chilled night longer than him. When my teeth chatter, he scowls. Without warning, he steps back from me, and grabs me.

Next thing I know I'm over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. I struggle, hissing and trying to get down. He ignores me and strides in the direction he came from. I pummel his back, which has no effect. The tree branches scrape across my back as he crashes through the brush on his way back to his vehicle.

Once there, he opens the passenger side and dumps me unceremoniously into the

seat. He slams the door shut and stomps around to the driver's side. He opens his car door and slides behind the wheel. He sits for a few moments, not speaking.

"How did you find me?" I mumble, still puzzled about how he made a beeline toward me in the dark woods.

"I could just... feel where you were," he rumbles.

I have no idea how that would be possible, but I saw him do it with my own eyes.

"That makes no sense. None of this makes sense."

"I know."

I stare forward, watching the rain slither down the windshield. The patter of rain on the roof of the SUV makes me feel like we're the only two people in the world. "Are you taking me back to Valentino?"

"Of course." He starts the car as he speaks.

"He's not going to be happy. He already wants me dead."

Turning his head he says, "You two are like children. You're both driving me fucking nuts."

"Then just let me go." I reach out and grip his arm. I feel the tense muscles bulging beneath my hand. "Tell Valentino you couldn't find me. On a night like this, that's completely believable. Please, Dario, just let me go."

He shakes off my hand and he puts the car in drive. He does a U-turn and heads back in the direction of Valentino's home. My gut churns because I can only imagine what awaits me. If Dario won't let me go, I'm fucked.

“Why is Valentino holding me prisoner?” I rasp. “He should either kill me or let me go.”

“He has his reasons.”

“This is bullshit.” I hug myself, shivering against the door. Dario glances over and flicks on the heater. I sigh as the hot air fills the compartment, soaking into my chilled body. The windshield wipers swish rhythmically as we drive along. “You gave me your bite. Shouldn’t your job be to protect me?”

He grunts but doesn’t speak.

“You’re taking me back to a man who wants to kill me. How do you reconcile that as my alpha? Huh?”

He grips the wheel tighter. “This situation is complicated.”

“To put it mildly,” I say under my breath.

“You’re acting innocent, but you started this entire clusterfuck, Alessio.” He sounds more frustrated than angry.

“We’re never going to agree on that.” I mutter, fiddling with the air vent.

“What are the odds we’ll agree on anything?”

I turn to him, scowling. “It seriously doesn’t bother your alpha instincts or whatever that Valentino wants to kill me? Punish me? That’s just fine with you?”

“Yes, because he’s my boss and I do what he says.”

“I’ve always heard you follow him blindly,” I snap. “I guess it’s true.”

He shakes his head. “You think that’s an insult to me? You should be so lucky to inspire the kind of faith and loyalty Valentino does. You could learn something from him if you weren’t so stubborn.”

“The only thing I want is for Valentino to die or at the very least suffer horribly.” I face forward again, and stare out the window. Everything outside is blurry through the rain spattered glass.

“And with that attitude you expect me to just let you go free? So you can scheme against him some more?” He sounds disgusted. “I can’t do that. We need another solution to this mess you’ve created.”

“I think we both know that Valentino’s solution is for me to die.”

He exhales. “Perhaps he has other thoughts on the matter.”

I frown at him. “Since when?”

“We’ll talk more when I get you in the house.”

“Why can’t you just... talk to me now?”

He rumbles, “Because I’m driving and this discussion will need my full attention.”

His answer does nothing to calm me. What the hell is it he needs to say to me? Is he telling the truth? Is Valentino considering sparing my life? Why would he? Or is it that he wants to torture me instead? I know Valentino wants retribution for my rebellion. Does he want that in the form of my hands? Or my eyes? I shudder, my mind running wild with all the horrible things Valentino could do to me that wouldn’t

entail actually killing me.

“You can’t even give me a hint?” I ask softly.

He doesn’t respond. He presses his lips tight and squints at the rain slicked road.

We drive in silence for a while and my stomach churns when I see the familiar sight of the wrought iron gates at the front of Valentino’s home. I was so close to freedom. Now I’m fucked because Dario can’t say no to his boss. I dig my nails into the leather of the armrest, eaten up with frustration.

Dario presses something on the visor and the big gates slowly open. He drives through them and takes the cobblestone road to the big house. He parks near the fountain, and jumps out of the car to open my door. I slide out of the SUV, and Dario marches me up the stairs and into the house.

I thought maybe Valentino would be waiting for me with a gleeful smile, but there’s no one in the foyer to greet us. Dario leads me up the wide staircase, and down the hallway to the room they kept me in before. I keep expecting Valentino to appear, but he doesn’t.

Once inside the bedroom, Dario peels off his wet jacket and shirt. He gives me a surly glance. “You should change out of those wet clothes and take a hot shower.”

“I want to know what you wouldn’t tell me in the car,” I demand.

He laughs. “Is that right? Are you under the impression I care what you want?”

I scowl. “No. But I don’t understand why you won’t just tell me what’s on Valentino’s mind.”

“I’ll enlighten you as soon as you do as I ask, Alessio.” His voice is more patient now. “Nico left some clean, dry clothes in the bathroom for you. You’re of a similar build to him so they should fit just fine.”

I feel like stomping my feet in frustration, but I control that childish urge. If I want to know what Valentino has up his sleeve, I need to do what Dario wants. I grit my teeth and head into the big bathroom. The room is large with light amber travertine tile, and gold fixtures. There’s a huge tub and a walk in shower with the same smooth tile.

I strip out of my wet clothes, noticing there is indeed a stack of clean clothes on the long sink counter. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror over the sink and I wince. My skin is very pale so the bruising on my arms, chest, and legs stand out. The bite mark on my neck is also stark against my white skin. It’s definitely been a rough few days and my body is showing the wear and tear of my adventures.

The shower is bliss. I’m actually glad that Dario forced me to take the shower once I’m in the middle of it. The water is hot and plentiful, and as the heat of it seeps into my chilled body I begin to feel more normal again. I wash my hair and body with cedarwood and ginger shampoo and body wash. The scent reminds me of Dario and I’m annoyed when my pulse flutters.

Life would be so much simpler if I could just hate him. But memories of him fucking me in the woods makes my knees weak. He was so commanding and it all felt so fucking good. I lean against the tile wall of the shower, giving an embarrassed laugh. God, I’d been so turned on. We’d both been consumed by each other.

There’s just something about Dario that makes me lose my control. Every time he touches me, I seem to lose all rational thought. Just like that night when we first met. Why did I let him fuck me outside that bar like that? That was completely out of character for me. I hate the strange power he has over me, but I can’t seem to do anything about it.

Once I'm clean, I dry off and dress in the clothes Nico left for me. Dario was right. They fit me perfectly. I leave the steamy bathroom and am surprised that Dario isn't in the room. There's a tray on the dresser with sandwiches and sodas. My mouth waters at the sight of the food. I haven't eaten since that cabin in the woods when I ate the dry cereal. I'm starving. But I hesitate. Am I supposed to wait for Dario? Would he wait for me? Probably not.

I decide he can go fuck himself and I help myself to one of the sandwiches. It's roasted turkey with provolone. I groan as I stuff the sandwich in, washing it down with one of the orange sodas. I'm just finishing up my meal when Dario returns.

His hair is damp and he smells like citrusy shower gel. Should I be insulted he chose not to shower with me? Or should I be pleased he gave me privacy? Perhaps he's tired of me already? When I meet his gaze, I see arousal simmering. My stomach clenches at the look in his eyes. Apparently he isn't sick of me just yet.

"Is it time to talk to Valentino?" I hope I don't sound as nervous as I feel at that prospect.

"Not yet." He sits on the edge of the bed. He's dressed in clean dark slacks and a white dress shirt, but his feet are bare. His toes curl into the carpet, and there's obvious tension in his jaw as he studies me. "He wanted me to tell you what he has planned."

"Okay. I'm all ears." I cross my arms, wishing he didn't look so grim.

He clears his throat as if he's nervous. "Valentino has come up with a solution that allows him to show leniency toward you. It would also satisfy his desire for retribution against you."

I bristle at the idea Valentino thinks he's been wronged. I'm the one who deserves

retribution. But I know Dario wouldn't agree, so why bother saying anything? "What does he want? For me to promise not to seek vengeance anymore?"

He gives a curt laugh. "If only it were that simple, Alessio."

"What then? Does he want my first born child or something?" My attempt at humor falls flat if his irritable expression is anything to go by.

"This is no joke. His ask is big. Huge, in fact. It'll require much sacrifice from you and from me." He avoids my gaze, a muscle jerking in his cheek.

"From you?" I frown. "Why would you be involved in my punishment?"

He mutters, "Because Valentino partly blames me for this mess. If I'd never been seduced by you in the first place, he feels none of this crap would have happened."

I scowl. "I'd have come for him either way."

He winces. "Yes. But I'd have never given you my bite, and you wouldn't be a thorn in his side right now. You'd be dead."

I scowl. "You don't know that."

He narrows his eyes. "Yes, Alessio, I do know that. I'm sure you must know that too."

I make a huffing sound, but say nothing. His comment puts my back up, but the truth is the Black Knives are far more powerful than my little syndicate. That's the reason I wanted to ambush Valentino, rather than go head to head with him.

He continues, "Because I gave you my bite, he wants to find a way to keep you alive."

Out of respect for me he's willing to spare your life, if we go along with his plan."

I touch the bite on my neck distractedly. "Okay. What's his plan?"

He grits his teeth. "I guarantee you won't like it. I don't like it either, but it's the only way to keep you above ground."

Bracing myself, I ask breathlessly, "Enough stalling. What's Valentino's plan?"

Dario winces and then blurts, "He wants us to get married."

Chapter Eleven

Dario

Alessio stares at me, appearing stricken. I don't blame him for being shocked. I was astounded at Valentino's plan as well. But I soon realized going along with this insanity was the only way to keep Alessio alive. For whatever reason, that has apparently become my life's mission.

"You can't be serious," he mumbles. "There's no fucking way that's happening."

"Trust me. I don't want to marry you anymore than you want to marry me." I sigh. "But Valentino needs his pound of flesh."

He squints at me. "How does us marrying satisfy him? I don't get it."

"Because that's not all he wants."

His cheek twitches. "What else does that asshole want?"

I brace myself for what I know will be an explosive reaction. "He also wants to bring the Abella Syndicate in under the umbrella of the Black Knives."

A flush creeps up Alessio's young face, and rage flares in his eyes. "No, fucking way."

I shrug, holding his rebellious gaze.

His lip curls. “Oh, I see. This is Valentino’s way of humiliating me, just like he did my father.”

“No. It’s about sparing your life, while giving him something for all the trouble you’ve caused. You have to pay for what you tried to do. You know that.”

“Fine. I’ll pay with my life,” he hisses. “I’m not handing over my syndicate to fucking Valentino. No way. I’d rather die.”

I shake my head because he’s reacting just as I guessed he would. He’s too prideful to even grab hold of a lifeline when it’s thrown to him. “Getting out of it won’t be that easy, kid.”

“What?” he asks sharply. “Even Valentino can’t hurt me once I’m dead.”

“He can hurt your men though.”

He stiffens, clenching his fists. “What are you talking about?”

I hold his angry gaze as I say, “If you reject the marriage idea, and the merge, Valentino will slaughter all your men.”

He recoils as if I’ve punched him. He takes a step back, looking shaken. “Why? Why would he kill my men? They have nothing to do with all of this.”

“Because he’s fucking Valentino Syracuse, and you can’t say no to him without consequences.” I must look and sound convincing because he’s not even questioning that Valentino will execute his men.

He gives a harsh bark of a laugh. “That fucker is just using this as an excuse to grab more power. He’s as bad as Carlo.”

“Not really. Carlo wasn’t wronged, Valentino was. Carlo is far worse. He turned on his own blood simply for power and greed. Valentino has every right to retribution after the disrespect you’ve shown him.”

“He doesn’t have the right to steal my syndicate.” Alessio’s voice shakes with fury. “That’s my inheritance. My father built that mob with his sweat and tears. What fucking right does Valentino have to swoop in and take it from me?”

It’s impossible not to feel sorry for Alessio. He looks like a trapped animal. I feel kind of sick watching him because I can feel his shock and confusion radiating. He can’t stop Valentino from doing what he wants. He has two choices: live or die.

“This is how it’s going to be. You either take the deal or you don’t.” I speak calmly, hoping by doing that I’ll somehow influence him to accept the inevitable. I don’t want him to die. I’m willing to go along with Valentino’s plan just to keep him breathing a little longer. I hope his self-preservation instincts are strong enough to make him also go for the deal. “It would merely be a marriage of convenience.”

“This is archaic. Ridiculous. He can’t force me to marry you.” He looks on the verge of tears. “That syndicate is all I have left of my father.”

I wince at his pain, but try not to show it. He can’t know that I’m sympathetic to him. He has to feel like he has no allies. No options. That feeling of isolation should force him to capitulate. Then he can live. That’s what I want. I want him to stop fighting so hard, and just go with the flow.

“Your choices brought you here, as did mine,” I say quietly.

He watches me, cheeks flushed and eyes bright with angry tears. “This isn’t fair. It isn’t right. I... I simply wanted justice for my father’s death. This is bullshit.”

I stand and move toward him. He watches me warily, his body rigid. I stop in front of him and say softly, “It’ll be okay, Alessio.”

“How?” he chokes out.

“You’ll have the power of the Black Knives behind you. You’ll still be the head of the Abella Syndicate, only you’ll be protected by us. You’ll have your own businesses making you money, just like you do now. Valentino has even said he’ll give you the ports. Your father wanted that, right? Wasn’t that the reason he grabbed Nico? Trying to force Valentino’s hand? Well, now you’ll have the ports just as your father wished. This merge is a good thing. You’ll see that once you’re calmer.”

“Good?” he hisses. “That’s a lie and you know it. This is the end of the Abella syndicate. Valentino will slowly dismantle us until we’re nothing. No one will even remember the Abella name.”

I exhale. “Kid, you’re looking at it all wrong. You’ll have money and power behind you now. No one will fuck with you, don’t you see? You’ll grow, and in turn, the Black Knives also grow. It’s a good thing for everyone.”

“You’re a liar. You’ll say anything Valentino tells you to say.” He scowls at me. “Why did he have you tell me? Why wasn’t he man enough to tell me himself?”

I laugh. “Would you have rather heard this from him? I doubt it. This way, you can hear his plan and vent all you want. I don’t take your anger and words personally. Valentino might. You tend to be pretty mouthy when you’re upset, and Valentino has no patience for that.”

“Mouthy? You’re ripping everything from me and I don’t like it. Therefore I’m mouthy?”

“You need to learn when to hold your tongue. Valentino isn’t the sort of alpha who likes being questioned. You have to tread carefully with him.” I’d usually have less patience with Alessio, but I feel endlessly tolerant toward him tonight. The longer we’re around each other, the more I’m beginning to really feel like his alpha. Is that good or bad? I’m not sure. It might come in handy, seeing as we’re being pushed into matrimony.

He watches me with different emotions flickering over his features. He’s obviously frustrated. Angry. But he’s also scared. I can see that clearly. What I might have taken as arrogance in the past I now recognize as fear. I sometimes forget how young he is. This must be overwhelming for him.

“You’ll have all the things you need and want, Alessio.” I hesitate, needing to broach the subject of pregnancy, but not wanting to set him off again. “You realize your probably pregnant?”

He blanches. “Great. Just what I need.”

He had to know having unprotected sex with me, especially after I claimed him, would result in a pregnancy. I try to put a positive spin on it since he looks so dejected. “If you are with child, you’ll have an heir and the Abella bloodline will continue.”

His face twitches. “What does that matter? If we’re married, the kid would take your name.”

“Yes, but your bloodline lives on.”

“For all the good it does.” He arches one brow. “I don’t suppose you’d consider taking my name?”

“I also need an heir.”

“Then we need to hyphenate the kid’s name,” he says, narrowing his eyes. “Little Anthony Abella-Coppola has a nice ring to it.”

“Nah. I’m thinking more of something like Rocko Coppola-Abella.”

“Rocko sounds like a thug, and why would your name go first?”

“Because I’m the alpha.” I shrug. “It’s how it’s done usually.”

His jaw juts stubbornly. “We’ll have to negotiate that. In order for a kid to mean anything to me, he has to have my name too.”

“Okay, we can probably work something out.”

He wrinkles his brow. “Still, I’m not sure I want a kid with you. Even if I agreed to having a child, I don’t know that I want a kid anytime soon. I didn’t plan on having offspring this early in my life.”

I shrug. “Well, if you’re claimed, there’s no reason to wait. Omegas are made to be bred.”

He curls his lip. “What a typical alpha statement. Am I supposed to be flattered that I’m only good for one thing in your eyes?”

“I’m not saying you don’t have other uses.”

“Gee, thanks.” He shakes his head.

“I should probably shut up cuz I’m just making it worse. My point really is only that I

don't have an omega pouch. I can't exactly carry the kid, right?"

"Obviously."

"I know you're good at a lot of things, Alessio. I've seen you in action, okay?"

He frowns. "Is having offspring mandatory?"

I rub my jaw, not sure how to answer. I don't want to spook him, but I will eventually need an heir. "It is, but it doesn't have to be right away."

He scowls. "Having kids is a walk in the park for you alphas. You get to fuck and move on. The omega is stuck with the morning sickness and the birth of the kid. Then I suppose I'll get the pleasure of changing diapers and feeding the brat, while you're off living your best life."

I consider his words. It's true many alphas approach fatherhood like that. They hand over the care of the offspring to the omegas, and don't have much to do with the kids. "I don't think that would be fair to you. You'll still have a syndicate to run. We can hire a nanny for when we're both busy."

His eyes flicker with obvious surprise. "Really?"

"Seems only fair. Plus, I'd like to be hands on with my children. I didn't have a good role model growing up, but I'd like to be one for my kids."

He studies me, his expression difficult to read. "You're not scared to be a father?"

I grimace and admit, "I'm terrified. But I want that someday. I want to be to my kids what my dad could never be for me."

His gaze flickers. “Did your father really put cigarettes out on the back of your neck?”

My face warms. “Yes.”

“What an asshole,” Alessio hisses. “Why would he do that?”

“I think I was just there? My mom died giving birth to me. I’m sure he blamed me.” I sigh. “He was a violent, bitter man. I hated his guts, and I vowed never to be like him.” Trying to reassure him, I say, “If we move forward with the marriage, I’ll be a good alpha. I don’t know anything about being a father, but I’ll do my best.”

He squints. “If this is just a marriage of convenience, why bother?”

I frown. “Just because we’re not marrying for love doesn’t mean I can’t still be a good alpha to you.”

“Are we expected to share the same bed?” His eyes glitter.

“I would hope so. I’m not the kind of alpha who cheats, but I’m not going to become celibate. I’ll want sex.”

He sighs. “I suppose it would be my duty. A necessary evil, if you will.”

I laugh gruffly. “Are you going to pretend you don’t like it when we fuck?” I inch closer to him, enjoying the way his cheeks flush and his breathing speeds up. “You sure seemed receptive to me tonight. Outside in the rain.”

“I was confused, that’s all.”

“Bullshit,” I growl. “You wanted sex. Stop lying.”

He turns his back on me. “Don’t get a big head. I don’t like you, Dario.”

“I think you like me a little.”

“No.” He gives me a surly glance over his shoulder. “And even if I do enjoy the sex, I fucking hate whatever this thing is between us. It’s unsettling. I don’t like being run by instinct.”

“I don’t love it either, but it’s happening and it is what it is.” I move closer to him, and the fine blond hairs on the nape of his neck visibly raise. I can sense his speeding pulse, and smell his arousal. His attraction to me is like mine is to him: unwanted, but inescapable.

His voice is thick with frustration as he says, “I have no choice but to marry you, don’t I?”

“It’ll be okay,” I say quietly.

“I doubt it.”

“Once your mine, no one will hurt you.” Those aren’t just words either. The longer I’m around him, the more he becomes my focus. This hunger to protect him and own him isn’t logical. The emotions feel primitive. I’ve never experienced anything like it with any other omega. This need to possess him is like a sickness; creeping in and permeating my body and soul. “I mean it. No one will hurt you, Alessio. Not if I’m around.”

“Not even Valentino?” he mutters.

“No one. I promise.” I step closer, and the heat of his body sinks into mine. “You’ll have all the things you wanted, Alessio. All the things your father wanted for you.

He'd want you to take this deal."

"You don't know that."

"I think I do." I take a chance and I pull him gently against me. He stiffens at first, but allows himself to lean on me. I swear I can feel his heart beating from outside his body. I'm so fucking in tune to him, it's disconcerting. I wrap my arms around him, and just hold him. At first, his body is rigid. I nuzzle the back of his neck, inhaling his now familiar scent. Gradually, he relaxes into me, and his breathing slows.

My dick is hard, but I don't push for sex. I know what my omega needs right now, and it's not that. It's comfort. I need to soothe him and tell him, without words, that he'll be okay. I'll keep him safe. He needs to believe he can trust me. Depend on me. I let him know all of that with soft kisses on the back of his neck, and gentle strokes down his body.

After a few moments, he whispers, "When would we do it?"

Excitement zips through me. He's giving in. He's accepting the marriage, which means he'll live. "Soon. This week." I keep my voice steady. Reassuring.

He touches the bite mark on his neck. "Okay," he says quietly. "I'll marry you, Dario. What other choice do I have? I can't just let my men be slaughtered."

I rub his shoulders and then let him go. "You've made the right decision, kid. You'll see."

He shoots me a resentful glance. "I sometimes wish I'd never met you, Dario."

I smile. "But you did."

Valentino is pleased at the news Alessio has accepted the arranged marriage, and merge. He doesn't seem the least bit concerned that Alessio is resentful and unhappy about being forced into it. I'm sure Alessio's happiness is the farthest thing from Valentino's mind.

Marie, Valentino's mother, has suggested we hold the small, private wedding ceremony here at their home. I'm fine with that. I think for now, it's best if Alessio and I stay at Valentino's mansion. I have a private residence, but I spend more time here at Valentino's home. I definitely think it's safer if Alessio is here. Carlo is still out there somewhere, no doubt scheming. He's gone underground for now, but a snake like that will slither back.

A few days pass. I'm busy with Valentino trying to find where Carlo might be hiding. I don't see much of Alessio. He's probably overjoyed about that. I've given him space, allowing him to have my bedroom for now. I don't worry about him running away again. There's no point. He knows what will happen to his men if he rebels. Or what he thinks will happen to them.

On the third morning, I walk into the dining room and find Alessio having breakfast with Marie and Valentino's younger brother, Paolo. Paolo and Alessio are close in age and they seem to get along well. They're laughing about something when I enter the room. Alessio's face is flushed and his eyes sparkle with amusement. I'm surprised to feel a spark of jealousy. Alessio acts like a brat around me most of the time, but here is laughing up a storm with Paolo.

Paolo glances up. "Morning, Dario." Paolo is a young, good looking alpha. He has the same dark hair and light blue eyes as Valentino. He's only twenty-four, but he's got the confidence that comes from being related to one of the most powerful men in Los Demonios. "Haven't seen you around much lately."

“Valentino has been keeping me busy,” I murmur, helping myself to scrambled eggs and bacon from the buffet. Once I’ve filled my plate, I take the seat next to Alessio. “Good morning, Alessio.”

Alessio gives me a surly glance, but says nothing. He instead scoots his chair away from mine a bit, and focuses his attention on his plate. His happy mood has evaporated instantly at my arrival. He doesn’t seem to have missed me over the last few days. Can’t say I’m surprised. Of course, even if the little shit had missed me, he wouldn’t tell me.

“Have you found Carlo yet?” Marie asks brightly, holding a delicate pink tea cup between her hands. She sips from the cup as she waits for my reply.

“No. The coward is hiding,” I say.

Paolo laughs. “Of course he is. If you had the Black Knives looking for you, you’d hide too.”

Alessio glances at Paolo, but doesn’t join in the conversation. I feel his tension though. The subject of Carlo bugs him. I’m sure he’d love to help find Carlo, but that’s out of the question. I wouldn’t allow that even if Valentino was okay with it. Carlo is way too dangerous. At this point, he has nothing to lose.

“I was thinking Saturday would be the perfect day for the wedding ceremony.” Marie smiles at Alessio, but he just drops his gaze to his plate. His high cheek bones are painted a rosy color, and his hand trembles slightly.

“I haven’t made any arrangements.” I grimace. “I’ve been too busy.” I turn to Alessio. “Have you planned anything yet?”

Alessio recoils. “God, no.”

Stamping down my irritation at his boorish behavior, I ask, “Do you have any requests? Any favorite flowers? Or do you have an opinion on what flavor cake we should order?”

“No. It doesn’t matter,” Alessio grates out. “It’s not a real wedding. We don’t need to plan anything. We simply need to get someone to officiate the stupid ceremony.”

Paolo laughs nervously, giving me a wary glance, and Marie pretends she didn’t hear Alessio. She sips her tea studiously, probably wishing she could leave the room and avoid the brewing drama.

I have no desire to fight with Alessio in front of them. I keep my voice patient as I say, “There are still things that need to be done. We need to get the marriage license. Even if the marriage is arranged, it might be nice to have a catered meal afterward. Perhaps some flowers for the ceremony would be pleasant?”

“Why bother?” grumbles Alessio. “It’s a sham marriage.”

“You know, Alessio,” Paolo says. “Valentino and Nico’s marriage was also arranged, but they’re extremely happy now.”

“How nice for them,” Alessio says under his breath.

“Did I hear my name?” Nico asks as he enters the dining room. He’s holding baby Antonio, whose eyes are fixed like a tractor beam on the food buffet. Baby Antonio loves to eat. He’s a chubby happy baby, with dark black hair and eyes. He giggles gleefully as Nico hands him to his Nonna.

Marie’s eyes light up as she holds her grandson. “Are you hungry, Antonio? Shall Nonna get you something to eat?”

The baby claps his hands happily and she rises and heads to the buffet with him. I watch her with Antonio, wondering if she ever wishes he had her son's blood, instead of that rat Roberto's. If she does mind, she never shows it. She appears to love him as if he were her own son's child.

"We were just telling Alessio that arranged marriages aren't all bad." Paolo says, wiping his mouth with his napkin.

Nico glances at Alessio. "They aren't all good either. Relationships take work no matter how you meet."

Alessio says nothing.

I clear my throat. "Half of the marriages where people marry for love fail. The odds might actually be better for arranged marriages."

Alessio scowls. "Right. Nothing spells bliss like being forced into marrying someone you wouldn't usually give the time of day to."

My face warms at his disrespectful attitude, but I brush it off. Getting into a big argument in front of everyone will serve no purpose. "This marriage will be good for you and the Abella Syndicate. You'll see, Alessio."

Alessio opens his mouth to say something, but Nico speaks over him. "Are you having any morning sickness, Alessio?"

Alessio is definitely distracted by that question. "No. I... I don't even know if I'm... pregnant." That pink flush has returned to his face.

Nico laughs. "I'm sure you are. Dario gave you his bite."

“Still,” Alessio mumbles. “Maybe I got lucky and my body rejected his baby.”

Marie gives Alessio an irritable glance. “Alessio, Dario has been nothing but sweet to you since he came in this room, and you’ve been nothing but rude. Could you please stop that?”

Alessio winces. “Sorry.” He doesn’t sound particularly sorry. Knowing him, he isn’t the least bit sorry.

But he’s going to be mine either way.

Excitement sparks through me at that realization. He can bitch and complain all he wants. He’ll still end up in my bed. Not that I would ever force myself on him. I don’t have to. He likes sex with me. Regardless of his pissy attitude at the moment, he hungers for me the same way I do him. Plus, I haven’t touched him since the night in the forest. I have a feeling on our wedding night, he’ll be achingly responsive. I’m exhilarated at the idea he’s going to be all mine. No other alpha will ever have the right to touch him.

Nico pats his baby bump. “If you are pregnant, Alessio, it’ll be fun to have some company. We can bitch about our swollen ankles and indigestion together.”

Alessio seems uncomfortable with the conversation. “I guess.” He picks up a piece of bacon from his plate and chomps on it with a scowl.

“Have you informed your captains about the marriage?” I ask.

Alessio sighs. “Yes. They’re confused, and I don’t blame them.”

“Just remind them that the Abella Syndicate is still the Abella Syndicate. You’re just under the umbrella of the Black Knives. You’re under our protection. You’ll still

operate independently, for the most part.”

“I’m not buying it,” says Alessio. “You’re telling me that Valentino won’t want me to ask him for permission when I make decisions?”

“Only if it’s a huge thing. He’ll want some say in how you handle the ports at first. Just until he can trust you’re able to do it without issues,” I say smoothly. “But I’ll be there for you to communicate through. Valentino doesn’t like to micromanage. You’ll have plenty of freedom.”

“If you say so.” Alessio’s tone is skeptical.

“You should see a doctor,” Marie says, changing the subject. “If you are pregnant, Alessio, you’ll need prenatal vitamins.”

Alessio pushes his mostly empty plate away. “I don’t feel any different physically. I’ll wait to see a doctor until I think there’s a reason.”

Paolo laughs. “Man, you really don’t want to be pregnant, do you? You’re in absolute denial.”

Shrugging, Alessio stands. “I’m going for a walk. Then I need to make a bunch of phone calls.” He glances at me. “Am I allowed to leave this place? I’d like to meet with my captains today. There’s a lot to discuss.”

“You can meet with them. But I’ll go with you.”

His jaw tightens. “Awesome.”

Marie sighs, giving Alessio a resigned look.

I ignore his insolence. “Let me know when you’d like to meet up with them. My schedule is flexible today.”

He nods but says nothing.

“So Saturday then?” Marie asks, looking straight at Alessio. “For the wedding ceremony?”

He exhales. “Okay.” He hesitates and meets my gaze. “Maybe while we’re out we can stop by Sugar Supreme Italian Bakery and taste cakes.” He frowns. “I mean, if this dumb wedding is actually happening, we need a cake.”

I squash my smile, pleased he suggested that little excursion. I’m happy he’s at least pretending to be on board. I don’t relish the idea of dragging him, kicking and screaming, to the wedding ceremony. If he’s willing to check out cakes with me, that’s a good sign. “Sure.”

“See you then.” His cheek twitches and he leaves the room.

Paolo sighs. “He’s a stubborn one, Dario. High maintenance. You’ll have your work cut out for you married to him.”

“Agreed,” I mutter.

Marie lifts one shoulder. “He’ll come around. As I told you the other day, I’m sure you’re fated mates. He can’t fight the pull of that forever.”

I laugh gruffly. “I don’t know, Marie. If anyone could, it would be that little bastard.”

Chapter Twelve

Alessio

I'm pleased that, while Dario accompanies me to my meeting, he stays in the car. He gives me some space to talk freely with my men, which I desperately need.

I arranged to meet at one of the Italian restaurants my syndicate uses as a front. Ciao Bella Italian Restaurant is in an older building on a seedy side of town. The restaurant has faded red leather booths, and dark wood paneling. It's décor is dated, but I find it comforting. Familiar. I used to come with my father when I was a kid. The area had been better back then, and the red leather on the booths brighter.

One of my captains, Sergio, greets me warmly. "Boss, we were starting to worry we'd have to break you out of that place." Sergio is older than me, with jet black hair that's tinged with silver at the temples. He was my father's second and he had my father's undying trust. I trust him too. He's a good man.

But good man or not, I don't want him or the others to know I was strongarmed into this marriage to Dario. Number one, that makes me look weak, and two they need to be open to the idea of the Black Knives watching over us. As much as I hate Valentino, the men need to believe I'm cool with what's happening. They can never know the truth. "Valentino and I had a lot to discuss."

"I can imagine." Sergio leads me to the tables where the others are seated. As requested by me, Sergio has gathered ten of my best capos for the meeting. The capos, or captains, each lead a group of men who are my soldiers. Those men each

operate specific territories and engage in specific types of criminal activities.

One of the men, Lawrence, hands me a tumbler of whiskey. “I won’t lie, sir, this marriage and merger took us by surprise.” He watches me with his dark eyes, and I’m careful not to give anything away.

“It made sense financially. We need to grow in order to survive. We lost some credibility when my father died. Merging with the Black Knives will be good for all of us.” I sip the whiskey, wincing slightly as the smoky beverage burns a trail down my throat.

“And the marriage?” Lawrence asks, rubbing his bearded jaw. “How did that come about? I wasn’t aware you were that close to Dario Coppola. In fact, I thought you loathed Valentino Syracuse and Dario both. We all thought that.”

I don’t mind the questions. I fully expected questions. This marriage and merger are coming completely out of left field. I’d be more surprised if there weren’t questions. “You’re not wrong. To be frank, I wanted to kill Valentino. At the time, I felt strongly that the way he treated my father sent him to an early grave.”

A rumble goes through the men.

“You’ve changed your mind on that?” Sergio asks.

“Well, angry or not, even I’m not rash enough to go against the leader of the Black Knives,” I lie. “In the end, Valentino became an ally against Carlo.”

“So, it’s true Carlo attacked you there at the cabin?” one of the men asks

“Yes. I went up to the mountains to clear my head. While I was there, Carlo showed up with Dario Coppola as his prisoner.” I sigh. “I was outraged when Carlo told me

he was going to kill Dario and blame it on me. It was supposed to be a murder suicide.”

“Jesus,” Sergio rasps. “That traitor.”

I nod. “Exactly. Carlo betrayed me and tried to take over as head of the Abella Syndicate. By some miracle, Dario and I over powered him and escaped. It was during my time with Dario that I began to understand better why Valentino did the things he did to my father.” I’m laying it on thick, but that’s necessary if they’re going to accept I’m suddenly cool with Valentino. There needs to be some reason why I’ve changed my opinion of Valentino.

“So you bonded with Dario while on the run,” murmurs, Lawrence.

“I did.” My face warms slightly at the memories of just exactly how well we bonded. “My one regret is that I didn’t take more men with me to the cabin. One of Carlo’s men killed Enzo. If I’d had more men with me, that never would have happened. My desire for privacy got one of my best men killed.”

The men mutter among themselves, looking confused.

Sergio laughs gruffly. “But, sir. Enzo isn’t dead.”

I widen my eyes in shock. “What?”

“He’s in the hospital.” Sergio grimaces. “He’s in bad shape, but he’s alive.”

“I don’t understand. He lost so much blood. I... I thought sure he’d died.” I’m swamped with shock and relief. When I’d had to leave him behind I’d felt horrible guilt.

“He somehow survived.” Lawrence smiles. “You know Enzo. He’s a stubborn bastard. He lost a lot of blood, but Valentino’s men found him and took him to the hospital.”

“Valentino’s men found him?”

“Yes. When they were searching for Dario.”

I shake my head. “Enzo’s really alive?”

“He is indeed,” Sergio says. “I’m sorry, I thought you knew.”

“No,” I say softly. “I... I was sure he’d died. There was so much blood.”

“The doctors said he’s lucky to be alive.” Lawrence laughs. “Apparently he has nine lives.”

“Yes,” I murmur. “I’m so glad he’s okay.”

“How did the engagement come about, sir?” Lawrence asks. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

I meet his curious gaze. “We worked well together. If we hadn’t, we’d have both died. I guess that sort of thing forms a bond between people.”

“I see.” Lawrence’s gaze flicks to the bite mark on my throat. “Well, I’m happy for you, sir. It’s good for you to have an alpha.”

I try not to bristle at the implication an omega can’t function without an alpha by their side. That idea is antiquated, but prevalent. I’ve been fighting against it most of my life. Even my father worried being head of the syndicate might be too much for me as

an omega. It's frustrating to have to deal with that nonsense in this day and age, but it is what it is. The only way to prove them all wrong is to excel.

Sergio holds up his glass. "Well, regardless of how this all came about, it seems like it'll be a good thing. Here's to your engagement, sir, and to working with the Black Knives. May both bring many blessings on our syndicate."

The men toast me and the merger. I do my very best to appear excited about both. I plaster on a fake smile and pretend to be eager. I'm relieved when the conversation finally drifts away from my impending marriage. I spend the next hour talking to my captains about what the merge will mean for us. Everyone is taking the merge in stride. In fact, the men actually seem pleased about my engagement to Dario and the merge. I worried they'd resent the merge, but it's the complete opposite. They're excited at the concept of being a part of the Black Knives Syndicate.

I leave the meeting feeling very positive about things. I get in the passenger seat of the black SUV and Dario starts the engine.

"Did it go well?" he asks, pulling out onto the road.

"Surprisingly well." I stare out the window at the run down business we pass as we make our way down the busy street.

"I'm glad."

"Nobody seemed to blink an eye at the idea of you and I marrying. I find that so odd. I thought for sure at least one of them would have an issue, but no one seemed to. Or if they did, they kept it to themselves."

He shrugs. "It's not their place to question. They're simply supposed to do as they're told. Good men trust their leaders."

“They are good men. Very good men,” I murmur, and then brighten. “You’ll never believe this, but Enzo is alive. He somehow survived his injuries.”

Dario nods. “Yes. I know.”

I scowl, shocked at his response. “You know? How would you know, but I didn’t?”

“One of our capos told me they found him at the cabin. They took him to the ER.”

Anger jolts through me. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

He wrinkles his brow. “I didn’t think of it.”

“But... you knew how upset I was at the thought he was dead.” I blink at him in bewilderment.

He gives me a sheepish look. “It just slipped my mind. I was busy. Valentino has had a lot of shit for me to handle. I just didn’t remember about Enzo.”

“My god, alphas are so selfish,” I growl. “I’ve been sick to my stomach about Enzo, and the whole time you knew he was alive.” I dig my nails into the armrest. “You’re a real insensitive jerk, Dario. You know that?”

He opens his mouth as if he’s going to argue, but then he says softly, “I’m sorry.”

Surprised at his apology, I grumble, “I don’t forgive you.”

He sighs. “Alessio, I’m not used to having anyone to tell things to. It just didn’t occur to me.”

“But I was upset.”

“Yes.”

“You could have made me feel better by telling me about Enzo.” I study his rugged profile. He looks embarrassed, which serves him right. “Isn’t the alpha’s role to comfort his omega? You should have comforted me by telling me about Enzo.”

He winces. “Okay, I screwed up. I’ll do better in the future, okay?”

I huff. “You’d better.”

His only response is a gruff laugh.

After a short drive, we pull into the parking lot of the Sugar Supreme Italian Bakery. The old, red-brick building is located on a sun-dappled street, nestled among a row of quaint, mid-century buildings. The bakery has been a beloved staple in the neighborhood as long as I can remember.

“I’ve never been here,” Dario says as he joins me by my side of the car.

“No? When my mother was alive, she’d always get my birthday cake from here.” I feel a melancholy twinge. “Dad found it too painful to come here after she was gone. From that point on, I got stuck with store bought cakes.”

“I’ve never had a birthday cake, period.”

I widen my eyes. “What? Never?”

He shrugs. “Who would have bought me one? My father wouldn’t have bothered.”

I wince. “And from what you’ve told me that’s probably a good thing. He might have put the candles out on your neck.”

Dario grimaces. "I never should have told you that story."

I study him. "Why not?"

"I don't know. It's the past. Who cares what happened to me as a child? I grew up just fine."

I laugh and say sardonically, "You're a thug, Dario. Gee, I wonder if having an asshole father could have played into that happening? Hmmm. Could that be possible?"

He gives me a surly glance, but doesn't respond.

I smirk at his grumpy expression. "Don't look like that. It's good you told me that story about your dad. If we're going to be married, we need to understand each other better. You don't show much emotion. Knowing how you grew up, I guess I understand why you keep everything bottled up."

He shifts uneasily. "I don't keep everything bottled up."

I smirk. "No? What do you share? Certainly not your feelings."

He avoids my gaze, a line between his dark brows. "We should go inside. It's cold out here."

"See. You're like a vault." I shake my head and make my way to the front of the shop.

A little silver bell jingles as we enter the bakery. The interior is cozy and inviting, with exposed brick walls. Vintage wooden shelves line the room, filled with an assortment of bread, pastries, and cakes. The air inside the bakery is tinged with the

scent of yeast, sugar, and cinnamon.

There's an older woman working behind the counter. Her white hair is mostly covered by a black scarf, and her red apron dusted with flour. She moves with practiced grace, sliding trays of dough into the old oven with a long-handled peel. She looks up and smiles, revealing a few golden teeth mixed in with the others.

"Buongiorno," she says, wiping her hands on her apron.

I smile at her. "Do you remember me? I used to come in with my mother a lot when I was a child. Before she passed."

She squints and nods slowly. "You're Joesph's son."

"That's right." I'm flattered she remembers me. "It's been a long time. I didn't think you'd know who I was."

"It certainly has been a while. I recognize the color of your eyes. They're a very unusual green." She comes closer. "How's Joesph?"

I grimace. "I'm afraid he passed away early this year."

Her face falls. "Oh, no. I'm so sorry. He was such a nice man. Your mother was wonderful as well."

"Thank you." My heart aches thinking about my parents, so I change the subject. "I was wondering if you do wedding cakes?"

She nods. "We do it all." She turns and grabs a big book filled with photos of cakes. She lifts it, grunting as if it weighs a ton, and drops it down on the counter with a loud thump. "Do you know what kind you want? Buttercream? Fondant?" She opens

the book as she speaks.

“I’m not really sure.”

She flicks her gaze to Dario and then back to me. “Is the cake for you?”

My cheeks warm. “Actually, yes.” It’s surreal to be picking a wedding cake for myself and Dario. I never pictured getting married this young, and definitely not to an alpha like Dario.

She grins, showing her gold teeth. “And he’s your alpha, right?” She winks at him. “You don’t need to answer. I could tell right away. The way he hovers.”

Dario frowns. “I’m just standing like a normal person.”

She cackles. “It’s the way you stand that gives you away. You’re protective. That’s good. You should be.” She waggles a gnarled finger at him. “It’s your job to protect your omega.”

Dario appears confused by her lecturing tone, but he just nods politely.

Trying to cut her off from saying more about how he needs to protect me, I say, “I remember you always had delicious buttercream cakes. Maybe that would be the way to go.” I meet Dario’s gaze. “Do you like buttercream?”

“Yes.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I love all cake.”

The old woman nods. “Of course you do. Cake is like a piece of heaven.”

“You’re not wrong.” Dario leans over and peers at the refrigerated cakes. “Ooh, those look good.” His eyes light up as he takes in all the different cakes.

“They don’t just look good, they are good.” She smiles.

His gaze stops on one cake in particular. “I’ve had that before. It’s delicious. What’s it called?”

“That’s an Italian ricotta cassata cake. It originated from Sicily. Cassata consists of round sponge cake moistened with fruit juices or liqueur and layered with ricotta cheese, candied peel, and a chocolate or vanilla filling. It’s topped with a marzipan layer and we can sometimes decorate it with candied fruits.” The old woman purses her lips. “That wouldn’t be a very good cake for a wedding though.”

He glances up. “Oh, I wasn’t thinking of the wedding. I was just thinking it might be delicious for lunch.”

I frown. “You can’t eat cake for lunch.”

“Why not?” He straightens. “People eat cereal for dinner.”

A smile hovers around the old woman’s lips. “Would you like a sample? We give out free samples.” She doesn’t wait for his response. She opens the case and takes the cassata cake out. She cuts a slice and puts it on a paper plate. She hands it over the refrigeration case along with a plastic fork.

Dario takes the cake, frowning. “That’s too big for a sample.”

“Is it? I didn’t notice.” The old woman grins and puts the cake back in the case. “Now, look through the book. I’ll need to know how many tiers you want the cake to be, and the flavors you’d like. When did you need this cake?”

“Saturday,” I say.

She bugs her eyes. “Saturday? That’s only two days away. Mighty short notice for a wedding cake. They take a while to make.”

I grimace. “It’s not going to be a big wedding. It’s just a tiny ceremony. We only need a small cake.”

“Oh, I see.” She nods. “We can probably do that.”

Dario glances up, cream on his lips. “We could always get a bigger cake and then we’d have leftovers.”

I can’t help laughing. “Jesus, you really do love cake.”

He nods and happily goes back to eating the sweet treat. He’s usually rather dour and thuggish looking. But at the moment, he looks a bit like a kid. His dark hair falls onto his forehead, and his expression is one of pure bliss as he consumes the creamy cake. As if he feels my gaze, he looks up and holds out the fork. “Sorry. Did you want a taste?”

I shake my head. “No, thank you.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.” Watching him I get a weird ache in my chest. If I didn’t know better, I’d think that emotion was affection. But there’s no way I feel affection for Dario. The things I feel for him are all based off of instinct. Affection is an actual emotion. I don’t have actual feelings or emotions for Dario. Do I?

I grab the big book and carry it over to a small table by the window. I sit down and begin looking through the book, although I’m not really seeing anything. I’m confused by why my heart aches lately every time I look at Dario. Oblivious to my

mental meltdown, he joins me. He throws the empty plate in the trash and sits at the small table with me. When his leg brushes mine, I jerk away and he frowns.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Nothing.” My voice is clipped and I focus on the photos in the book.

He wrinkles his brow. “Did I do something to annoy you? Are you mad because I ate all the cake by myself?”

“No.” I glance up and meet his puzzled gaze. “Nothing is wrong. I’m just annoyed that I have to choose a cake for a wedding I don’t want to have.”

He leans closer. “You know, I’d have shared the cake if you’d simply asked.”

“Dario,” I rumble, “I don’t care about the cake.”

“Well, something has you looking upset. I know you better than you think I do, Alessio. I can tell something is bothering you.”

I meet his gaze, annoyed when I notice how long and dark his lashes are. “I’m not upset. I promise. I... I just want to get this over with, okay?”

He looks skeptical as he says, “Hmmm.”

I turn a few more pages, aware of his leg touching mine again. I don’t want to pull my leg away though, or he’ll think I’m mad. I turn another page and come upon four smaller cakes. One of the small, two-tier cakes catches my eye and makes me stop turning pages.

The cake is enrobed in a silky, ivory colored buttercream frosting. Adorning the cake

are delicate swirls and dots reminiscent of vintage lace. There's also a small bouquet of edible lavender sugar flowers at the top, each tiny flower showing a marvel of detail. The cake is simple but elegant. I know instantly that's the cake I want.

"Pretty." Dario puts his finger on the photo of the cake I like. "I wouldn't mind that one."

I glance up surprised. "You like that one?"

He nods. "I do. I think it's my favorite so far. We should probably taste it though before we decide."

"Yeah." I say softly, "I... I like that one too."

He smiles at me, and that annoying ache returns as our eyes meet. I drag my gaze from his and stand quickly, bumping into the table. I carry the book over to the counter. "I think we know the cake we want."

The old woman comes over. "Which one?"

I show her and she nods. "That one has layers of sponge cake, separated by raspberry buttercream filling. You can do strawberry if you'd rather. There's just a hint of lemon zest too. It's delicious if I do say so myself. It's my husband's favorite."

Dario joins me. I can feel the heat of his body behind me, and my pulse picks up. I'm flustered by what's going on with me today. I feel jittery anytime he's near me. I don't like it one bit. I want to be able to ignore Dario, but today that seems impossible. I keep hoping this pull toward him will wane, but it seems to be getting stronger.

"We can do either raspberry or strawberry," I address Dario gruffly. "Which do you

prefer?”

“I like either.”

I turn to the old woman. “We’ll do raspberry.” I just need to get this cake shopping crap over with. I need some distance from Dario.

We fill out all the paperwork and Dario pays her a deposit. Then we leave the bakery, and return to the car. Dario tries to talk about other wedding details on the way back to Valentino’s home, but I only answer him with one word responses. I feel his frustration. I’m sure he has no idea why I’m being standoffish again.

I get the sense that, while Dario didn’t want this marriage, he’s now fully on board. He’s accepted that this is how it’s going to be, and he just does what needs doing. Is that because Valentino has given him his orders, and he’ll blindly follow them?

Such a good little soldier.

I’m not sure why the idea he’s marrying me because Valentino told him to irks me. It’s not like I want him to marry me for any other reason. I don’t want to marry him at all. I’m definitely not looking forward to sharing his bed.

Liar.

I grit my teeth against the lust that shifts through me at the thought of being in his bed. Being his omega. Belonging to him. I touch the bite mark on my throat as heat flushes through me. If we truly are fated mates, the universe has a perverse sense of humor.

We enter the intersection on a green light. Still feeling agitated, I glance out the window to my right. I’m horrified to see a white SUV barreling toward us as it runs

the red light. I open my mouth to shout a warning, but the SUV slams into us before I can get one word out.

Chapter Thirteen

Dario

I see the SUV right before impact. I don't have time to avoid the vehicle, but I have time to press the gas hard. That one action saves us from being T-boned by the SUV. The other car smashes the rear, right side of our SUV, causing us to spin wildly into the center of the intersection.

Panic strikes through me because Alessio's side of the car took the hit. Thank god he had his seatbelt on, and the air bag deployed. But he didn't make a sound when the vehicle slammed into us, and hasn't made one since. I pray he's okay.

On impact, I bang my head on the side of the car. Thankfully, the airbag deployed instantaneously with a sound similar to a gunshot. My vision is momentarily obscured as the airbag opens. There's an acrid scent in the car, similar to the scent of fireworks. Crunching metal sounds, and glass shattering fills my ears.

The car comes to a stop, and there's the sound of the radiator hissing, and people outside the car screaming. Alessio groans, which at least reassures me he's alive. We need to get out of the car now. I have no idea why that car hit us. Was this actually an accident, or were we rammed on purpose? I suspect that later simply because of the speed of the other vehicle. If that's the case, we're sitting ducks inside the car.

Dazed, I force myself to unhook my seatbelt and open my door. I slide out of the car and onto my knees. Feeling dizzy, I tug my Glock out of my suit jacket. I taste blood, and suspect I bit my tongue on impact. I inch around the car, moving to the front. The

SUV hit the rear of our car, so heading around the front seems smarter. I need to get to Alessio's door before anyone else does. In the distance I hear sirens, and as I round the front of our car, I see that Alessio is stumbling out of the vehicle.

Alarm jolts through me when I also see a big guy with blood on his face, climbing out of the other SUV. He immediately moves in Alessio's direction, and I grit my teeth when he draws a weapon.

"Shit," I say under my breath. I lift my gun and fire two rounds into the thugs chest, and he drop like a sack of potatoes. I didn't have a lot of time to aim. But he was big which made him an easy target. I ignore the screams of the onlookers and turn my attention to Alessio.

Alessio flinched at the sound of my gun, but now he's just staring at me blankly. There's blood streaked down his cheek, and he's obviously stunned. "We crashed?" he asks.

"In so many words. You okay?" I look past him at the white SUV. I don't see anyone else in the car, but the guy I shot exited the passenger side. There has to be another guy. Did he take off, or is he lurking nearby? Maybe he's pretending to be an onlooker. Maybe he's taking aim at my head right this second.

"Let's go," I growl, grabbing Alessio's arm. "We need to get out of here before the cops arrive."

He nods. "Right."

I tug him after me, heading toward the sidewalk. The sirens are getting closer. We need to hurry. The vehicle and registration won't lead to me. As long as we get out of here before the cops arrive, we should be golden. Valentino has some cops in his pocket, but you never know who's going to show up. It's easier if we just bounce

before anyone can stop us.

I lead the way down an alley on the side of a dress shop. I check behind us every few seconds. It doesn't appear that anyone is following us. As we run, I pull my cell out of my back pocket, and call Valentino.

He picks up on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Somebody just tried to kill Alessio," I growl into the phone.

There's silence, and then, "Where are you?"

I glance around, but there are no street signs near us. "Don't know our exact location. We crashed at the intersection of Hemmingway and Empire Avenue. We're on foot now, probably about a mile south of that."

"That's near Luigi's place. The Rattling Can. It's on Princeton Street."

"Right. I know it."

"Head over there and I'm on my way." He hangs up.

I pull up maps on my phone and locate Princeton Street. Then I tuck my phone away. "This way."

"Coming." Alessio drags his feet a bit. He's out of breath, and really pale. He's always pale, but at the moment he's ashen. The blood smeared on his face stands out even more against his white skin.

"We have to go faster," I say gruffly.

“I’m trying. I... I don’t feel so good,” he mumbles, staggering slightly. “My stomach hurts.”

Anxiety washes through me. It’s not smart to stop right now. We’re still too close to the crash. But when he stumbles and almost falls on his face, I take pity on him. “You said your stomach hurts?”

“Yeah.” He blows out a harsh breath.

I glance around uneasily. “Sit on the curb.”

He does as I ask, laying back on the cement. He holds his stomach, wincing. I kneel beside him and push up his shirt. There’s no visible wound, but his stomach does seem a bit distended. My uneasiness grows as I begin to check over his abdomen with my fingers. Usually, his stomach is flat and his abdominal muscles defined. At the moment, his stomach is definitely bloated.

“Does it hurt when I press?” I ask.

He winces. “Yes.”

I mutter, “You might have internal injuries.”

“Fucking perfect.” His eyes are closed as he says softly, “Shit. I... I think I’m going to be sick.”

I help him over to a honeysuckle bush near a fence. He wretches for a few minutes. I’m relieved he doesn’t vomit blood or anything like that. I rub his back to comfort him, and once he quiets, I ask, “Can you walk?”

“I think so.” He grits his teeth and I help him to his feet. We go along for a bit, but

he's obviously struggling. At one point, he stops and mumbles, "Sorry. I just need a second."

The pallor of his skin is alarming. Every alpha instinct in me is buzzing with anxiety. The need to protect him is eating at me, but I have no fucking clue what to do. If he is bleeding internally, he needs to get to the ER immediately. There's nothing I can do for him.

"Look," I say in a coaxing tone. "We just need to get to The Rattling Can. Luigi will have a car. I can take you to the ER from there."

"I know, I'm just so dizzy." He leans into me, resting his head against my chest. His breaths come in little puffs, and he clutches my shirt with his slender fingers. "You're gonna get caught because of me. You should go, Dario. Leave me here."

"I'm not leaving you here. Are you nuts?" I loop my arm around his waist. "You're coming with me if I have to carry you."

"Don't be stupid. You can just come back for me with the car."

"You're the stupid one. If I leave you here, you're a sitting duck," I rasp. "So just shut up about it."

"Dumb, Neanderthal," he mumbles. "Don't you even know enough to save yourself?"

Gritting my teeth, I lift him up and put him over my shoulder. He groans when his stomach presses against my shoulder. I know the position hurts him, but he's going to die if I don't get him to Luigi's place soon. He needs actual medical attention. Even I can see that.

I start walking, going as fast as I can without jostling him too much. He moans in

pain most of the way. His skin is hot and he's sweaty. My anxiety spikes when he suddenly goes limp. "Alessio?" I growl. He doesn't respond. "Fuck."

I'm winded and wracked with worry when I finally reach The Rattling Can. Luigi is out front with Valentino. I'm so glad to see him, I could cry. I trust Valentino will help me, even if he can't stand Alessio. He'll do it for me.

Luigi gives me a cordial nod, and I reciprocate. But I don't say anything. I'm too distracted. All I can think about is getting Alessio to the hospital.

Valentino takes one look at my face. "Get him in my car," he says to his driver, Samual.

Sam runs around and opens the rear, passenger side door. I lay Alessio on the back seat. I'm as gentle as possible, but Alessio groans in pain. I move around to the other side and climb in. Valentino gets in the passenger front seat and Samual slides in behind the wheel.

"Let's go." Valentino swivels to look at me as he hooks his belt. "Did he get shot?"

"No. I think he's bleeding internally from the accident."

"Got it." Valentino nods.

Alessio groans and starts thrashing around. I grab hold of his shoulders, and shift his head so that it rests in my lap. "It's okay, Alessio," I say quietly. "I'm here. I'll take care of you."

His eyes open briefly and they're pinned on me. There's fear and pain in those eyes. His face is shiny with sweat. He swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in his pale, slender throat. I've never seen him look quite so vulnerable. It's painful to see.

He's scared. He'd hate knowing I can see that. He's too prideful. He's always so worried people will think he's weak.

"It's okay. I promise." I stroke a lock of golden hair off his forehead. He sighs and closes his eyes again. He trusts me. He trusts I'll take care of him because I'm his alpha. His faith in me is instinctive. He's too weak right now for his ego to hide how he really feels. My chest tightens at the way he relaxes at my touch. It's fascinating to watch him give himself over to my care.

I glance up and find Valentino watching me. "Carlo's people might be watching the ER," he says.

"I know."

"It could be dangerous."

I narrow my eyes, trying to understand his point. "Are you trying to say we shouldn't go there or something?"

Valentino shrugs. "We could go to an ER out of the city."

I scowl at him. "He needs medical treatment now. Alessio could die if we risk driving a long distance. Internal injuries are no joke. You know that."

Valentino purses his lips. "If he did die, the merger could still go forward."

My stomach clenches at his callous words. "Boss, I'd rather you didn't say shit like that right now."

"You didn't seem that thrilled about marrying him when I broached the issue." Valentino shrugs.

“I’m fully on board now.”

He studies Alessio with an emotionless expression. “You sure you wouldn’t rather just let nature takes its course?”

I growl, “Valentino, I called you for help. I wouldn’t have done that if I thought you were going to try and finish Alessio off.”

Valentino grimaces. “I’m not suggesting we murder him. I’m simply saying going to the ER in our town could potentially be dangerous.”

“You’re implying much more, and you know it,” I say. “If we stall treatment, that could potentially cost Alessio his life. I’m not okay with that.”

Valentino sighs and faces front again. “Fine. We’ll go to the nearest ER.”

I glare at the back of his perfectly styled head. I can’t remember the last time I was really angry with Valentino. But I’m angry now. “If this were Nico instead of Alessio, would you have suggested we drive to another city for treatment because it’s too dangerous to go to the closest ER?” I demand.

“Of course not,” he says incredulously.

“That’s what I figured,” I mutter. “You may not like Alessio, but he’s my omega. I’m not going to just let him die, Valentino. Jesus, I can’t believe you even hinted at that. Why the hell did you even come to help if you’re going to be like this?”

He turns to me again. “I came to help you. Not him. You were in danger, Dario. That’s why I’m here.”

“Well,” I growl, “We’re a package deal.”

“Fine.” Valentino says, facing forward again. “I already said we’ll take him to the ER. What are you still going on about?” He crosses his arms, looking sulky as he watches me in the visor mirror.

“You know, if Nico were here, he’d be on my side.”

Valentino gives a long suffering sigh. “I know.”

I scowl. “He’d be mad at you for even suggesting we not go to the nearest ER,” I grumble.

Valentino grimaces. “I was just being practical.”

“Sure you were,” I mutter.

Valentino looks slightly sheepish. “I didn’t realize just how attached you were to him. I knew you’d given him your bite, but I can see now you’re fully bonded with him.”

I run my fingers over Alessio’s smooth forehead. “Yes, I am.” In fact, I’m so bonded to Alessio I worry what will happen should he die. I’m not sure what would happen. I’ve heard stories all my life of alphas or omegas who lost their fated mates unable to go on. I never understood that. Not until now. Somewhere along the line, Alessio has become a part of me. I don’t understand why or how. I only know in my soul, if he dies, a piece of me will die with him.

When we reach Los Demonios General Hospital, I jump out of the SUV and carefully get Alessio out of the car. I don’t want to wait for Samual to go in and hunt down someone to help. That will take too long and I’m chomping at the bit as it is. I’m surprised when Valentino helps me half carry Alessio into the ER. I’d like to think he’s changed his tune toward Alessio, but I suspect he’s just trying to rack up brownie points with me. He’s probably worried I’ll tell Nico how callous he was

about Alessio.

Whatever his reason for helping me, I'm glad Valentino accompanies me inside because the nurses recognize him. They scramble to find a doctor within minutes. The doctor is an older, weary looking alpha with salt and pepper hair. Tired or not, he takes his time as he examines Alessio's abdomen.

"He was in a car accident," I offer.

"Yes, so I've been told." The doctor straightens, looking grim. "I suspect he's ruptured something. We'll need to operate."

I nod, not hugely surprised at his diagnosis. "Will he be okay?"

The doctor grimaces at my question. "Hard to say. We can't know for sure what we're dealing with until we open him up."

Valentino steps forward. "He needs to be okay."

The doctor flicks Valentino an uneasy look. "I'm not the one who'll operate on him."

"Then I suggest you pass along my message," Valentino says coolly.

"I will. I... I'll be sure the surgeon takes good care of this patient."

"That's all we can ask for." Valentino's smile doesn't reach his eyes.

After how he was earlier, I appreciate that Valentino is putting pressure on the doctor and trying to save Alessio. But I also worry that no matter how much he bullies the staff, if the damage internally to Alessio is too great, all the threats in the world won't save him.

I feel sick as they wheel Alessio away. I start to follow them, but Valentino takes hold of my arm and leads me to the waiting room. I obediently sit in the blue vinyl chair Valentino points to. He sits beside me, looking out of place in his expensive silk suit. The waiting room is small and crowded. I'm sure Valentino would love to escape the curious stares and whispers that come his way. But he stays beside me, texting on his cell phone.

I assume he's texting with Nico, and my suspicions are confirmed when he turns to me and asks, "So how are you holding up? This must be very hard on you."

I almost laugh because those words must have come straight from Nico. I know that Valentino is concerned for me, but he's not the type to inquire about my emotional or mental state. "This is brutal," I say quietly.

"Yes." He hesitates. "Do you love him?"

My face warms and I avoid looking directly at him. "I don't know. I've never been in love before."

"No, you haven't." He tucks his phone away. "I think my mother is right. You and Alessio must be fated mates. The way you are with each other, it defies logic."

I'm not sure how to respond.

He sighs and leans back in his chair, clasping his hands over his flat stomach. "It's exactly how it was with Nico and me. I was driven to be with him, even though it made no sense. I was consumed by him. It was impossible to ignore the instinct to be with him."

"Yes." I nod. "I didn't want to want him."

“But you couldn’t help it,” murmurs Valentino. “And he feels the same way, I’m sure. However, after seeing you two together today, strange as it seems, I think you two belong together. He’s yours.”

He’s yours.

His words spark excitement in me. It’s exhilarating to think that Alessio is mine. That he was destined to be mine. The fact that other people can see the connection between us is satisfying. To know that it’s not my imagination that Alessio wants me. The idea of that thrills me, but then I remember he might very well die. The excitement fades and is replaced by overwhelming anxiety.

Valentino grimaces at my expression. “I don’t think that doctor would dare let him die.”

“I’m sure he’ll try his best,” I mutter. “But he’s not god.”

“True.” Valentino pats my back awkwardly. “It... it’ll be fine. Alessio is feisty. He’ll probably pull through.”

“I hope so.”

“Nico wanted to be here, just so you know. He wanted to show support.” Valentino sighs. “I told him not to come because of his pregnancy. I don’t think he should expose himself to all the germs here.”

“You made the right call. I wouldn’t want him to put himself or your unborn baby at risk.”

“The early stages of a pregnancy can be precarious.” Valentino chews on his bottom lip, looking muddled. “Do you know yet if Alessio is with child?”

“No.” I hadn’t thought about that at all. My only concern had been for Alessio. “If he was with child, he’ll probably lose the baby.”

Valentino winces. “Possibly.”

I groan, leaning forward, and resting my head in my hands. “I should have been more alert. I was distracted. I wasn’t paying attention. Why didn’t I pay more attention?” I look at him imploringly. “I knew Carlo would come after Alessio. Why wasn’t I more careful?”

“It’s okay, Dario.”

“No, it’s not,” I say gruffly. In the background a perky female voice makes announcements over the hospital intercom. I still can’t believe I’m sitting here waiting to see if Alessio lives or dies. “Do you know what we were doing right before the accident?” I murmur.

“No.”

I meet his curious gaze. “We were ordering a cake for the wedding.”

He tenses. “Oh.”

“Now that wedding might never happen because I’m so stupid I let my omega get killed.”

“Dario?” He squeezes my arm. “Don’t do this to yourself.”

“Why not? It’s the truth. I was distracted. I wasn’t a good alpha. It’s my job to protect my omega.” I turn to Valentino. “Carlo needs to pay tenfold for this. Why is it taking so long to find him?”

“He’s more slippery than expected. But we will find him.” Valentino’s voice is hard. “The men are combing the area for him as we speak. Someone will talk. Someone will turn on him. He won’t escape this time. He was a fool to come out of hiding. His arrogance and need for revenge will cost him his life.”

I grit my teeth. “Promise me that when you do find him, you’ll make him suffer horribly.”

Valentino’s smile is cold, and there’s a malicious twinkle in his eye. “Oh, he’ll suffer, Dario. He’ll wish he was never born.”

Chapter Fourteen

Alessio

Dario is dead in my dream.

The pain and agony of that has me waking up in a cold sweat. I feel frantic to know where Dario is. I'm terrified at the thought Dario truly is dead. Did Dario die in the accident? I thought he was alive, but so much of what happened is a blur.

I seem to remember a moment after the accident with Dario. In this memory, Dario stroked my hair and promised to keep me safe. I trusted him wholly in that instant. The feel of his hand on my flesh comforted me. His gentle voice and assurances resonated with me.

But is that a memory or a dream?

The scent of antiseptic fills my nose. The room I'm in is dark. Cool. It's not Dario's room at Valentino's home. Is this a hospital? I remember the pain I had immediately following the accident. I touch my stomach, wincing as my fingers glide over a small incision. I've had surgery? Why?

Movement near the door to the room catches my eye. A young nurse comes closer, looking distracted. When she sees I'm awake she looks pleased. "How are you feeling?" she asks, fiddling with an IV bag next to my bed.

"I don't know," I admit. "Am I in the hospital?" A dumb question seeing as she's

wearing a nurses uniform.

“Yes. Your alpha brought you in. You were in a car accident.” She smiles and pours me a small glass of water.

With a trembling hand, I take the plastic cup from her. I gulp the water down, sighing at how cool and delicious it is. I hold the empty cup out to her and she hesitates.

“You had surgery. You shouldn’t have too much liquid just yet.” She sighs at my dejected expression. “Okay, just a little bit more.”

I guzzle the rest of the water she pours and then lie back against the pillows. She said my alpha brought me in. That must mean Dario is alive. Unless someone else brought me in and she just thought he was my alpha?

“What did my alpha look like?”

She frowns. “I don’t know. I was in the surgery. That’s just what the admitting nurse told me. She said your alpha brought you in, and that he was distraught.” She smiles. “Isn’t that sweet?”

Sweet isn’t the word I’d use to describe Dario. But I’m comforted by her words. I can’t think of any other alpha who would be upset if I died. That must mean Dario is okay. It’s surprising to me that it matters. I only met Dario because I planned on killing him to get to Valentino. Now, everything has changed. I wear his bite on my neck, and my feelings for him are completely flipped.

I actually care about him.

Even now, there’s a dull ache in my gut because he’s not here with me. I’ve fought the feelings I have for him as hard as I can, but there still there. Growing stronger

every day. I don't want to run from him anymore. I want to run to him. I don't understand what has happened to me, but I'm sick of fighting it. I don't think I can anymore.

"I was injured?" I ask.

She tucks the blankets around my legs. "During the car accident the seatbelt caused blunt abdominal trauma. The force of the crash caused the seatbelt to put significant force on the abdominal organs and tissues. The exploratory laparotomy discovered a hematoma."

"I don't know what that is."

Her voice is patient as she says, "The abdomen is a large cavity that can hold multiple liters of blood. If blood starts to leak out from the blood vessels into an abdominal organ or wall of the abdomen itself, it can form a pocket. The pocket is termed an abdominal hematoma. It has to be diagnosed and treated quickly before a patient loses too much blood."

"Oh." I grimace.

"It can be very serious. But you were lucky. While there was internal bleeding, it was relatively controlled and minor. That means, if all goes well, the body will eventually reabsorb the leaked blood without the need for extensive medical intervention"

"I see." I touch my tender abdomen. "How long will I have to stay in the hospital?"

"Dr. Brown will discuss that with you when he does his rounds." She gives me a reassuring smile. "He'll be here soon."

I really don't want to stay in the hospital. I've had enough of hospitals from when my

father had his stroke. I just want to get out of here. I just want to go to Dario. That last thought fills me with confusion, and also excitement. I instinctively know that being near Dario will calm me.

The nurse leaves the room and I doze off. When I wake up, I hear someone moving around in the room. My pulse races when I think it might be Dario, but then a tall, less bulky figure appears beside my bed. Shock rocks through me as I recognize who it is.

Carlo.

At my startled expression he says, “Don’t panic. I’m not here to hurt you, Alessio.”

“It’s a little late for that, don’t you think?” I growl, struggling to sit up. My stomach aches painfully when I do that, but I feel way too vulnerable lying flat with Carlo looming over me. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Calm down.” He glances around nervously. There are scratches on his face, and he limped when he approached. “Look, things have spiraled out of control. I want to make things right. I need your help.”

“That’s not possible.”

“You haven’t even heard what I have to say yet,” he rasps.

“You’re a snake. I don’t want anything to do with you.”

He exhales. “I understand why you’re upset. If I could turn back time, I’d never make a move against you again. It was dumb. Unnecessary. You and I have always had a good relationship in the past.”

“Right. Which is why it was shocking to have you try and fucking murder me multiple times, Carlo.” I lean toward him, bristling with rage. “Did you or did you not literally just try to kill me and Dario? I’m in this hospital with a hematoma because of you.”

He winces and once more flicks his uneasy gaze toward the door. “I get why you’re mad, but just hear me out. I’ve done a lot of thinking and I’ve realized you and I don’t have to be enemies after all. I... I have a proposition for you.”

“Save it,” I grate. “I’ll never trust you again.”

“Do you trust Valentino?” He scowls. “Do you trust Dario? Aren’t they forcing you into a marriage, and grabbing your syndicate for themselves? How are they any better than me?”

Shocked he knows about Valentino’s strong arm tactics, I don’t say anything.

“Don’t look so surprised, Alessio.” He shakes his head. “I know you’d never have agreed to that marriage if they weren’t threatening you into it.”

My face warms. “You don’t know anything.” He has no idea I have Dario’s bite, I’m sure. Who knows what he’d say if he knew that little tidbit. I doubt he’d be pleased.

He licks his lips, sweat glistening on his forehead. His desperation is palpable. “Listen to me, Alessio. There are other syndicates that aren’t happy about the Abella Syndicate being absorbed by the Black Knives. We all know why Valentino is doing it. He wants to be untouchable. But these other syndicates are willing to fight with me to take down the Black Knives.”

“Good luck with that. There’s no way you can succeed. The Black Knives are way too big and powerful.”

“Even they can’t withstand a coordinated effort to destroy them.” He laughs gruffly.

“If you have these other syndicates, why do you need me?”

His smile is sly. “Your impending marriage to Dario could be our ace in the hole. With you on the inside, we could rip them to shreds. They’d never see it coming.”

“You want me to betray Valentino while living in his home? Sounds like a good way to die. But then, what would you care about that? You’ve tried killing me twice already.”

He winces. “I told you that was a mistake. Can’t you see the big picture? Can’t you put the past in the past?”

“I’m literally in the hospital because of you. How do I put that behind me?” I grip the railing on the hospital bed, wincing as my stitches pull uncomfortably.

He sighs impatiently. “I should have thought of this plan sooner. It would have saved me a lot of trouble, and you wouldn’t be so upset with me. But, there’s still time to fix this. If you’ll join with us, instead of going along with Valentino, you’ll have your freedom and your syndicate back. I’m serious. Valentino will never see it coming. He’s so arrogant he assumes you’re just going to go along with his plan. But if you work for me instead, just think, Alessio, you could be so rich and powerful, no one would ever dare come against you again.”

“I’ll have that if I join the Black Knives.”

His eyes flicker. “Okay, you’ll have power but you won’t have your freedom. You’ll be married to Dario Coppola. Don’t lie to me and tell me you want that marriage. I’ve known you far too long. Dario is a thug. He’s not your type. When you pick your alpha, he’ll be cultured and powerful. Your alpha won’t be a yes man, like Dario is to

Valentino.”

He’s not wrong about Dario not being my usual type. Still, I have the oddest surge of anger at how he’s dismissing Dario. But I hold my tongue. The last thing I want is him knowing I feel bonded to Dario. “I don’t trust you. I won’t work with you.”

Frustration glitters in his eyes. “You’re being petty. What I’m offering you is everything you’ve ever wanted. Plus, in addition to all the power and money, you’ll finally get your revenge on Valentino. How can you pass that up?”

I clench my jaw. “It’s not as hard as you’d think. You should go, Carlo. I’m certain Dario will come any minute to check on me. If he sees you, he’ll kill you.”

He laughs. “Are you seriously saying you’d rather work with them, rather than your own flesh and blood?”

I frown. “You mean the same flesh and blood who turned on me?”

“How many times must I tell you I regret that?” He sounds exasperated. “You’re like a fucking dog with a bone.”

I shake my head at his obtuseness. “Even if I was foolish enough to agree to your plan, how do I know any of what you say is true? For all I know you’re making this whole thing up. There probably are no other syndicates willing to work with you. You’ve proven yourself to be disloyal, cousin. I highly doubt people are lining up to work with you. Especially against an organization as powerful as the Black Knives.”

“I’m telling the truth.” His face is flushed. “The real question you should ask yourself is how you can join with the man who put your father in the grave,” he growls. “Even if I did fuck up, Valentino is still responsible for that. Or have you forgotten?”

I stiffen. “I haven’t forgotten. I hate Valentino.”

“And Dario?” He narrows his eyes. “You hate him too, right? He’s Valentino’s second. He’s as guilty as Valentino for what happened to Uncle Joesph.”

“I thought you understood what Valentino did to my father?”

His gaze flickers. “I’ve changed my mind. The real issue here is why you don’t seem to hate Dario.”

I avoid his gaze. “Of course I hate him. I hate them both.” It’s true I don’t like Valentino. But I have very different feelings toward Dario. The memory of his soothing touch earlier comes to me. In that moment, I knew he’d do anything to protect me. I suspect he’d even go against Valentino for me. I didn’t see that before, but I do now. Dario has fully accepted me as his omega. I couldn’t hate him if I tried.

“I’m offering you the chance to get your revenge. That’s what you wanted all along. I can give that to you.”

I curl my lip. “You’re hiding out in the hospital begging for my help. How much of a threat are you really?”

“I found you, didn’t I?” His mouth thins. “I could have gone back into hiding, but I came here instead. I came here to help you end Valentino once and for all. No, I’m not just doing this for you. I also want Valentino gone for my own reasons. And I know trusting me again won’t be easy for you. That’s why I’m making this gesture. I risked my own safety to come here in person to present this plan. I’m offering you the one thing you really want: revenge.”

Revenge against Valentino was all I could think about not so long ago. Now, that thirst for retribution has faded. I don’t like Valentino. I still blame him for the stress

he caused my father that I believe played a part in my father's death. But I've also seen a different side of the story. Even though Valentino was very harsh in how he punished my father, he thought he was being generous by sparing my father's life. I think he actually believes that.

But most of all, my respect for Dario has softened me toward Valentino. People like to dismiss Dario's loyalty to Valentino as him being weak. A yes man. But Dario is a brave, intelligent alpha. There's a reason he's loyally served Valentino all these years. He knows who Valentino truly is, and he chooses to stand beside him. Dario is my alpha, and his devotion to Valentino has influenced me. I no longer want to kill Valentino.

Carlo must see something in my expression because he curls his lip. "Wait. You don't want revenge anymore?" He sounds incredulous and his expression is one of pure disgust. "How can that be?"

My face warms. "I still resent Valentino."

"That's it?" he growls. "You just resent him now? Nothing more? Have you forgotten how angry you were with Valentino before?"

I scowl. "I haven't forgotten anything. But killing Valentino won't bring me closure. I understand that now. Nothing will bring back my father. Nothing can make that right. But if I go against Valentino, I'll just be embroiled in a nightmare I'd rather avoid."

"So you're just going to marry Dario and live happily ever after, while under the thumb of Valentino Siracuse?" He sounds incredulous.

"Happily ever after might be a stretch. But after what you pulled, I'll never join forces with a fucking traitor like you, Carlo," I mutter. "Never"

He sighs, his expression painted with frustration. “Well, this was fucking waste of time.” He pulls a knife out of his suit pocket. “I took a huge risk coming here, Alessio. This is your final chance. Will you change your mind and work with me?”

“I’ve already told you my answer,” I spit out, eyeing the knife.

His mouth thins. “Regrettably, if you won’t join me, I can’t have you running to Dario and fucking up my plans.”

My heart races at the grim look on his face. “I knew you were an untrustworthy snake.” I inch toward the edge of the bed. Unfortunately, the side railing is up, making a quick exit difficult.

His eyes glitter with resentment. “I offered you a way out. A way to get your revenge. But it’s obvious where your loyalties lie. I can’t have you blabbing everything to Dario and Valentino. That must be obvious to you. I’m sure you’d do that same in my position. You wouldn’t let me ruin your plans either.”

I growl, “You fucked up my plans first. If you hadn’t interfered, Valentino and Dario would be dead by now.”

There’s movement by the doorway and Dario and Valentino enter the room. They both stop in their tracks when they see Carlo standing over me with the knife. I’m relieved to see them, but then I realize odds are they won’t be able to stop Carlo from stabbing me. They’re too far away. I’ll have to save myself, if possible.

Problem is, I’m not at my best and Carlo is bigger than me. Carlo gives them a frustrated glare, but then lunges for me. He stabs the knife down toward my stomach, but I somehow manage to grab his wrist. We struggle for a few seconds, but he’s stronger than me. My arm gives under his weight, and the knife slices downward. It misses my abdomen by a hair, and ends up buried in the thin mattress. I grab the

railing on the bed and half climb and half throw myself over the railing. I land hard on the ground with a loud oof. Pain zips through the elbow I land on, and my abdomen feels like it's being ripped open.

Dario shouts something, but I'm too busy desperately trying to cram myself beneath the hospital bed to make out what he said. Breathing hard, I lie on the cold linoleum floor, dazed. Intense pain rolls through my aching body. Carlo swears loudly and I see his shoes moving around the bed. The bastard isn't giving up. He's determined to murder me before he can be stopped.

Carlo kneels down, swiping the blade under the bed wildly. I see more shoes join him, and I can hear Dario swearing as he wrestles with Carlo. But Carlo isn't under control yet. Not if the violent slashing of the knife is anything to go by. The base of the bed is thick plastic, and between that and the wheels, he's unable to make contact with my body. I stare at the tiny little blue and white dots that make up the pattern of the floor, wondering if this is my last moment alive. It feels like an hour pass as they try to control Carlo, but in truth, it's only been maybe twenty seconds.

At one point they seem to have Carlo subdued. I peek my head out and see Dario holding Carlo in a head lock. Dario is breathing hard, and there's a slice down the front of his white dress shirt. The white material has a scarlet stain, and it's spreading. Fear that Dario has been stabbed jolts through me, but Dario doesn't seem to be concerned. He's fully focused on subduing a snarling Carlo. Valentino is letting Dario do most of the work, but he's watchful.

As I slowly crawl out from under the bed, the nursing staff comes into the room. The nurse from earlier looks horrified as she watches Dario and Valentino drag Carlo to his feet. Carlo drops the knife, and Dario kicks it away.

"What's going on in here?" The young nurse demands, moving to kneel beside me. She scowls at Dario and Valentino. "Julia, call security."

“Yes, ma’am,” An older nurse near the door says obediently.

“Wait.” Valentino’s voice is strident. “There’s no need for that. We’ll handle this ourselves.”

“But?” The young nurse begins.

Valentino gives her a tight lipped smile. “I said, we’ll handle it.”

Her eyes go wide and she nods. “R... right.” She turns to me. “Are you okay? Did you tear your stitches?”

“I don’t know.” I press my abdomen, wincing. “It hurts, but it already hurt.”

She helps me to my feet and then into the bed. She does a cursory examination of my stitches. “They seem okay.” She frowns at my scraped knees. “Did you fall out of the bed?”

“Kind of,” I mumble.

I meet Dario’s dark gaze. I give him a tentative smile, but he doesn’t return it. He pulls his gaze away, his expression grim. He’s often deadpan, but he looks almost... hurt? I try again to catch his eye, but he won’t look at me.

“Let’s go,” Valentino says to Dario.

With a curt nod, Dario leaves with him, not even bothering with a backward glance. I watch them go, feeling confused. The last time I was with Dario, he was so protective. Doting. But just now, butter wouldn’t have melted in his mouth. Was he simply distracted by having to deal with Carlo?

Did I expect Dario to fawn over me?

No. I didn't expect that. But as my alpha, I am a bit surprised Dario felt no need to come over and check on me. He barely looked at me. Perhaps he plans on coming back after dealing with Carlo. I realize we're not the stereotypical couple, but he's always seemed so protective of me. His lack of attention stands out.

The medical staff filters out of my room. I wait for Dario to return, but he never does. Surely by now they've dealt with Carlo?

Dr. Brown makes an appearance though. He's a middle aged alpha with a bald head, and a few extra pounds. He examines me while the nurse tells him everything that's happened.

He frowns at my stitches. "The skin was pulled a bit when you fell. I don't think it's worth redoing them though. Your scar will possibly be more pronounced, but I don't think there's any risk of infection."

"When can I leave the hospital?" I ask.

"Tomorrow morning should be fine. That gives us a chance to monitor you a bit more. But when you do go home, I don't want you to do any exercising for a while. You'll need to take it easy for a few weeks, to allow the abdominal tissue to heal properly. It's fine to move around, just nothing strenuous. Don't lift weights or anything like that. If you feel the need for exercise, maybe go for walks or something like that."

"Thank you, doctor. I'll do that."

He hesitates. "Did you know you were pregnant?"

I stiffen. “What?”

“It’s very early, but it showed up in the blood tests we ran,” he says. “You could easily have lost the baby during the accident. You got lucky. The fetus is so small right now, there’s a lot of padding around it.”

“I’m for sure pregnant?” I don’t know what to feel about that. Would I have preferred to lose the baby in the accident?

“Yep.” He rubs his jaw, looking thoughtful. “I notice you have an alpha’s bite. I’m assuming that’s the baby’s father?”

I’m still trying to grasp the news that I’m pregnant. He dropped that bomb so nonchalantly. I blink at him. “Uh, yeah. That would be the father.”

“You came in with Valentino Syracuse.” He gives a nervous laugh. “I heard he put the fear of God into the staff. He was adamant we save your life.”

“Valentino was like that?” I was out of it, so I remember nothing about when I arrived at the hospital.

“Yes. I... I don’t suppose he’s the father of your baby?”

I recoil. “God, no.”

The doctor laughs. “No?”

“He already has an omega.”

The doctor shrugs. “That doesn’t always mean anything. Depends on the alpha.”

“The baby isn’t his,” I mutter. “I can assure you.” I don’t bother saying who the father is. It’s none of his business. I don’t want people poking their heads into my room to gawk at the dumb omega who got knocked up by Valentino Syracuse’s second.

“You seem surprised to be pregnant.” The doctor studies me.

“I’m not entirely surprised.” I touch my stomach, feeling conflicted about the pregnancy. “I knew it was a possibility. I’ve just had a lot on my mind, so I didn’t really think about being pregnant. I haven’t felt sick or anything.”

“Oh, it’ll be a few more weeks before that hits you. If it hits you at all. Not everyone has morning sickness.”

“Is Morning sickness hereditary?” My mother had horrible morning sickness with me. Am I going to suffer as well?

“Some think it might be.”

“Then I’m probably in for it.” I sigh. “My mother was deathly ill when she was pregnant with me.”

The young nurse laughs. “My mother was too when she had me, but I didn’t have a lick of morning sickness with my daughter. You just never know.”

Dr. Brown nods. “That’s the truth.” He sighs and heads toward the door. “You’ll want to find an OBGYN as soon as possible. You need to be healthy so that the baby can be healthy. A good OBGYN can keep you on the right track.”

“I’ll do that.”

They leave, and I lie down in the bed, hands resting on my stomach. I'm surprised I don't feel more rattled about the pregnancy. I don't feel repulsed by the idea of carrying Dario's child, like I thought I might. If I'm honest, I mostly feel numb. My feelings for Dario have changed exponentially in the last few days. But just as I start to feel closer to Dario, he behaves in a way I don't understand. Like earlier. Dario was so cold to me when he left. The scowling alpha who disappeared with Carlo bore no resemblance to the alpha who'd been smiling and happily eating cake with me earlier today.

Will Dario be pleased to know I'm carrying his child? I feel nervous about telling him. If I do tell him, should I tell him before the wedding, or after? Will there still be a wedding because of my injuries? I'm surprised when I feel almost disappointed at the thought it might be postponed. How is it that I've come full circle with Dario? I've gone from loathing him, to wanting him to be my alpha. My husband.

Earlier today, I'd have said he felt the same way toward me. But the fact remains he hasn't bothered to come see me. That not only hurts my feelings, it makes me question if I should even keep the baby.

Chapter Fifteen

Dario

If you hadn't interfered, Valentino and Dario would be dead by now.

It's the next morning and still my gut churns as I remember those words from Alessio's lips. He said them right before Valentino and I entered his hospital room. He didn't realize we were there. Is that why he spoke freely? Is that why he was honest? I thought Alessio and I had bonded. I thought he felt differently toward me now. But those heinous words flew so easily off his tongue.

He still wants me dead.

I'd love to block that fact from my brain. But not even Carlo's screams of agony can drown those hurtful words from repeating over and over in my mind. I feel like a fool. I would die for Alessio. I'd have happily laid down my life for him. Apparently he'd be only happy for me to do that. It's hard not to feel like a sucker. I thought he'd grown to trust me. I'd stupidly thought after all we'd been through, he'd realized we belong together.

I was wrong.

Obviously.

I distractedly observe that Carlo has passed out. Valentino has been torturing him since we brought him here yesterday afternoon. I'm hoping Valentino will just kill

him and get it over with. But when Valentino really hates someone, he takes his time killing them. Ultimate suffering is his goal. Valentino has already severed two of Carlo's fingers. I just don't have the stomach for this today. I've got a lot of shit on my mind concerning Alessio. I don't have the energy to sit here and watch Carlo die.

The dim basement is now silent except for the methodical scrape of metal on stone as Valentino sharpens his blade. Carlo jerks awake again, eyes wide. His breaths are ragged as he watches Valentino, his eyes fixed on the sharpened blade's edge. He strains against the ropes binding him to the chair, the fibers digging into his skin.

Valentino lifts his gaze, dark eyes boring into Carlo's. "Betrayal can't be tolerated." His voice was a low rumble that reverberates through the empty room. "You need to pay for what you've done."

Carlo's pulse visibly throbs as Valentino circles behind him. The musky scent of sweat and fear permeate the air of the basement. "Please," he whimpers. "Show me mercy."

"Mercy?" Valentino laughs. "Why would I?"

"We've known each other a long time." Carlo swallows hard. "We weren't always at odds."

"No. We weren't. But I'm afraid your betrayal leaves a foul taste in my mouth." Valentino scowls. "Plus, I never really liked you. You always rubbed me the wrong way."

"Please," snivels Carlo. "Spare me."

Valentino sighs. "It would have been best if you'd just disappeared. You were foolish to come after Alessio. But then, you always were an arrogant asshole." As he finishes

speaking he slides the blade down Carlo's cheek.

Carlo inhales sharply, clenching his fists as blood trickles down his cheek. His nostrils flare and he cries out. "Please."

"You'd have shown no mercy to Alessio. You were about to gut him when Dario and I arrived on the scene." Valentino's tone is smooth but laced with venom. "Why would you deserve mercy?"

"Because I... I have a wife. What about my daughter? Would you rob my baby girl of her father?" Carlo says, bottom lip trembling.

Valentino laughs. "You mean the wife you cheat on with any omega who'll have you?"

Carlo winces. "I can be a better alpha. Just let me prove that to you."

"I don't really care if you can be better. I don't want you around anymore. You're a threat. You want to take down the Black Knives. There's literally nothing that would make me spare you, Carlo."

Carlo starts sobbing. "Please."

Valentino rolls his eyes. "Can't you even die like a man?"

I watch Carlo feeling nothing. There's no pity in me for him. He's ruthless. He would have killed his own cousin for money. He's the lowest of low for turning on Alessio. I honestly think he'd trade his daughter's life for his own if he thought Valentino would take that offer.

I grunt when my phone buzzes in my pocket. I tug my phone from my suit and frown

at the screen. The call is coming from Los Demonios General Hospital. Fear that Alessio has taken a turn for the worse jolts through me. “Hello?” I answer, moving up the stairs of the basement.

“Dario?” Alessio’s voice comes over the line.

Relief floods me, but it’s quickly replaced by resentment. I’m afraid to speak incase I blurt out how angry I am at him. I don’t want him knowing he hurt me. I don’t want him knowing I care about him enough for that to even be possible.

When I don’t speak, Alessio says, “They’re releasing me in an hour.”

“Oh.” I close the door to the basement so that Carlo’s cries can’t be heard over the phone. “I’ll send someone to pick you up.”

There’s an awkward silence. “Can’t you come to get me?”

“I’m busy,” I say curtly.

“You’re too busy?” He gives a confused laugh.

“That’s right. We’re dealing with Carlo. Speaking of which, I need to go. I’ll send someone to get you. Just be ready so you don’t keep them waiting.”

Alessio sighs. “Dario, what’s wrong? Why are you being so offhand?”

“I just told you what’s going on. I have my hands full at the moment.”

“No, I mean, why are you being like this all of a sudden? You’re being so cold.” His voice wobbles. “You left the hospital yesterday without even seeing if I was okay. What kind of alpha does that?”

I press my lips tight. He wants me dead, but he has the audacity to be pissed off that I didn't hang around to dote on him? He's miffed that I won't drop everything to go pick him up? He's unbelievable. He's an entitled, spoiled brat. "Your ride will be there in an hour. Be ready." I hang up.

I text one of my men about picking Alessio up. My hands tremble as I type. Just hearing Alessio's voice has my body aching. Yearning to go to him. What the hell am I going to do? I've fallen for an omega who wants me dead. This is an impossible situation.

I can't help but feel dumb. I allowed myself to believe he actually had feelings for me. Now I suspect he's been secretly waiting for his chance to murder me. Am I supposed to marry him, knowing he wants me dead? That doesn't exactly sound like a recipe for happiness. He could slit my throat while I sleep.

I should cancel the wedding. But then Valentino would be mad at me for fucking up his perfect little merger. I could always enter into the marriage with the understanding it truly is one of convenience. We could have separate rooms. Do I have it in me to suck it up and go through with the marriage for the sake of the merger? I worry my feelings for Alessio might make me too vulnerable.

Feeling muddled, I go back down into the basement. I'm extremely relieved when I find that Valentino has finally finished Carlo off. Two men come downstairs to carry Carlo's body out of the basement. As they pass me, Carlo's limp arm falls out from under the blanket that covers him. The gold band on his ring finger gleams, and I have a brief moment of pity for Carlo's wife and daughter. Even if he was a bastard, they'll grieve his death. They probably loved him.

As Valentino pulls off his gloves, he watches me. "You didn't seem into it today."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

He shrugs. "I thought you'd enjoy watching Carlo get his comeuppance. Instead, you looked distracted the entire time. It almost took the fun out of it for me."

"Sorry." I grimace. "But, to be fair, you really strung this one out. I got bored." I avoid his gaze as I begin wiping down the chair Carlo had been sitting in. I spray disinfectant on the metal folding chair, and crouch down with a clean rag in hand. I give great attention to the little nooks and crannies of the seat, hoping Valentino will move on to another subject.

He doesn't.

"We spent three full days on that mobster from Detroit who was accused of molesting children," murmurs Valentino. "I don't recall you getting bored then."

"That was different. He was an especially despicable character. We could have taken ten days with him and I wouldn't have lost interest." I stand and toss the dirty rag into the trash can where we burn things.

Valentino throws his gloves into the same refuse container. "I'm willing to listen if you need to... you know... talk."

Surprised, I blink at him. "I don't need to talk."

"I don't know, old pal. You were a hundred percent in with Alessio only hours ago. Now you're moping around like your pet goldfish died."

"I don't have a pet goldfish."

"Right. Because that was my point," Valentino says under his breath.

I run a hand through my hair, feeling agitated. "I've been thinking." I clear my throat.

“With Alessio having surgery and all, we should probably postpone the wedding.”

Valentino grunts. “I don’t think so.”

I pin him with my irritable gaze. “It’s my wedding.”

“Kind of.” Valentino laughs. “You’re only marrying the kid because I want you to.”

I stuff down my annoyance. “I’m still the one getting hitched. What’s the harm in giving it a week?”

“Because I want to get things moving. The sooner the better.” He moves to the stairs, and I follow. “Are you getting cold feet?”

“When did I ever have warm feet?”

We reach the room above the basement. The space above the basement is a fully furnished gathering area where Valentino sometimes holds meetings for his capos. Valentino’s grandfather had the basement built for the express purpose of bringing people here when they needed to be punished. The apartment and basement are soundproofed, and not on the original blueprints of the house. Nobody but the most trusted members of the Black Knives know of its existence.

There’s a fridge in one corner where beverages are kept. Valentino goes to the fridge and returns to hand me a cold beer. He sits on one of the tan sofas, and watches me as I take a seat across from him.

“We’ve known each other a long time, Dario. You should be able to tell me what’s bugging you.” He drums his fingers on the arm of the couch.

“I told you nothing is wrong.”

“You’re lying. Come on. Spill it.”

I groan and lean back in my chair. “Since when do you want to talk about shit, Valentino?”

He lifts one shoulder. “Since I fell in love with Nico. He’s shown me sometimes talking stuff out is good.”

“Sometimes it just makes things worse.”

“True.” He sips his beer, looking thoughtful. “We won’t know unless you talk which one this is.”

I find him hugely annoying, but I know he cares about me so it’s impossible to be mad. “You must have heard what Alessio said to Carlo right before we entered his hospital room.”

He frowns. “I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“Alessio flat out admitted if Carlo hadn’t ruined his plans, you and I would be dead by now. I suspect he’s simply been biding his time. He still wants that to happen.”

Valentino shrugs. “I don’t think he was saying that.”

“Of course he was. He sounded disappointed about the fact we’re still alive.”

“I didn’t take it that way.”

I sputter, “How could you not?”

“He was just talking. He was about to be stabbed to death by that psycho Carlo. You

can't take anything he said seriously."

"Well, you're not the one who has to marry him," I grumble, taking a big gulp of beer. I swallow and add, "I'm not sure I want to marry him now."

Valentino makes an amused sound. "Did he hurt your wittle feelings?"

"Don't mock me," I rumble. "How would you like it if Nico said he wanted you dead?"

"Nico said that about a million times when we first got together." Valentino laughs. "He even said it to my face. He hated my guts when we met. I didn't let it bother me."

"I guess you have a thicker skin. Personally, I don't love the idea that my omega might slit my throat while I sleep."

"You're being silly, Dario. He's obviously crazy about you. He purred like a kitten when you touched him in the SUV." Valentino sets his beer on the side table. "You should go see him at the hospital. I'm sure he's wondering where you are."

"There's no need to visit him. He's coming home."

"Is he?" Valentino arches one dark brow. "When?"

"Now." I avoid his gaze. "I sent Paul to get him." Valentino is quiet, so I sneak a peek at him. He's scowling at me like I'm an idiot. "What?" I ask.

"You sent someone else to pick up your omega after he nearly died?" Valentino shakes his head, and then a little smile appears. "He's going to be mad at you."

“He’s been mad at me since we met.”

Valentino’s amused smile fades. “You’re not getting out of this marriage, Dario. Don’t even try. Everything is settled.”

“How about we unsettle it?”

He scowls. “Why are you fucking things up at the last minute?”

“Excuse me if I don’t want to marry an omega who wants me dead.”

Valentino’s patience seems to evaporate. “You’re acting like a child. I’m getting tired of it, Dario. Pull up your big boy pants and go talk to Alessio. You’re just skittish. You’re looking for a reason to bail on this union.”

“I have a reason.”

Valentino grits his teeth, but then his expression changes. He purses his lips, looking thoughtful. “Well, in that case, maybe I’ll just have to make other plans.”

“Now you’re talking.” I nod.

He gives a sly smile. “I’ll have Paolo marry him instead.”

I flick my irritable gaze to him. “Excuse me?”

He shrugs. “Plans are already in motion. If you’re too scared of Alessio to pull the trigger on the wedding, it still needs to happen. Paolo likes Alessio. He’d probably do it for the family.”

“Are you serious?” I grate out. “I gave Alessio my bite. You can’t just hand him over

to another alpha.”

“Says who? He can always have skin grafts to have the bite removed.”

“There’s more to it than just the bite mark, and you know that,” I rumble.

“Is there?” Valentino looks away and I swear he’s trying not to laugh. “I have to do something if you don’t want him. Drafting Paolo in to close the deal might be the perfect solution. The merge has to happen.”

I already had a little insecurity where Paolo was concerned. Him and Alessio seemed to laugh a lot together, and they’re the same age. Does Valentino know that I might feel threatened? Is the rat trying to spark my alpha instincts to life? I narrow my eyes. “You’re not going to make Paolo do that. I don’t believe for one minute you’d make him marry Alessio.”

Valentino grins. “Nah.”

Relieved, I blow out a harsh breath. “You’re such an asshole sometimes, Valentino.”

“I know.” He smirks. “But it was worth it to see the expression on your face when I implied Paolo could fill your shoes.”

My face is warm as I glare at him. “This situation isn’t funny. I could very well end up dead if I marry Alessio.”

“Or you might end up happy. Imagine that, friend.” He shakes his head. “I’ve seen how lonely you are the last few months. The way you watch Nico and I. You think I haven’t noticed, but I have. You’re ready for an omega of your own. I don’t know why you’re fighting this so hard.”

“You do know why.”

Valentino leans forward. “Talk. To. Him. You can’t understand what’s going on inside that head of his if you don’t talk to him. You’re jumping to conclusions based on something he said in the heat of the moment. That’s silly. Go to your omega. Stop being a pussy.”

“I’m not a pussy.” I stand, anxiety eating at me. “I’ll go talk to him, but you better understand I’m not marrying him if what I suspect is true.”

He waves his hand dismissively. “Yeah, yeah. Stop yapping and go talk to Alessio.”

I scowl and leave the apartment, exiting through the outside door. For security reasons, that’s the only way in and out of the basement. I head around to the front of the big house, just in time to see Alessio exiting a black SUV.

The second I see him, I have a physical reaction. Just a glimpse of Alessio, and every cell in my body throbs for him. I hate the universe in that moment. I hate not being in control of my emotions. It’s unfair. This need for Alessio is all consuming and illogical. How dare some unseen force bond me to another person without my permission.

Alessio glances over and our eyes meet across the distance.

When he gives me an uncertain smile, my insides turn to goo. My anger and suspicions drain away in an instant. That isn’t the look of a person who wants me dead. He’s happy to see me. I can see it. I can feel it. Even from this distance, I can sense his relief that I’m near. He’s missed me. He needs me. He wants me. I suddenly feel calmer.

Maybe Valentino was right. Maybe I’m just scared. It’s a frightening thing to commit

to someone. I've never done it before. The only person I've pledged undying loyalty to is Valentino. But romantically, I've never given myself fully over. But as my eyes lock with Alessio's, I know that's what I've already done with him. He's mine and I'm his. Scared or not, I don't see how we can ever go back from that.

I move toward him, feeling breathless. His sweet scent carries on the breeze. He smells like honeysuckle. His aroma brings to mind happiness. Hope. Moving toward him is like moving toward a golden sunrise.

Valentino is right. I have been lonely. I didn't want to acknowledge it. I tried to drown those feelings with sex and booze, but they were always still there in the light of day. Was I unable to find someone because I was destined to be with Alessio?

I reach Alessio and stop in front of him. The old me would have played hard to get, but I can't help slipping my hands around his waist, and tugging him close. His body folds into mine as if we're made from the same mold. It feels so right to hold him again.

A line appears between his blond brows and he grips the front of my shirt. "Where have you been?" he grumbles. "You just left me alone at the hospital."

"You were safe," I say gruffly. "I had things to do."

"You had things to do? I almost died."

"I knew you'd be fine." I lift one shoulder. "As your alpha, I shouldn't have to explain myself to you. If I say I'm busy, then I'm busy."

His mouth thins. "Right." He starts to step away from me, but I grab him tighter, and pull him back against my body. "Let me go, Dario."

“Why?”

“Because I’m mad at you,” he admits, frustration glittering in his green eyes. He tries again to get free, but I tighten my grip.

“No,” I say quietly.

“I’m not the typical omega. You don’t get to talk down to me.”

I frown. “I wasn’t. I was simply explaining myself.”

“I’ll need better communication than that. You can’t tell me to shut up and accept things because you’re my alpha. I’m never going to be okay with that.”

I can see I’ve inadvertently put his back up, so I say quietly, “I’m here now. Okay? Let’s not fight. Didn’t I protect you from Carlo? Can’t you remember the good things I do?”

He swallows hard. “You’re confusing me, Dario. One minute you’re bossy and the next sweet. What do you expect me to do when you go back and forth so much?”

“I expect you to submit to me when needed, like a good little omega.”

He squints. “Oh, really? Since when do I submit to you?”

I smirk. “I can think of at least three occasions.”

He starts to pull away again, but I scoop him up into my arms.

Paul laughs from where he’s standing on the other side of the SUV. “Get him, boss.”

Alessio squeaks, “Put me down.”

“You’re not going anywhere, Alessio. Now stop fighting me and acknowledge you can’t live without me.”

“Somebodies full of himself,” mumbles Alessio.

“You’re not getting away,” I rumble. “We’ve already ordered the wedding cake, and there are no refunds.”

“That’s why we have to get married?” He arches one brow. “Because there’s no refund on the cake?”

“It’s one reason.” I head for the house. “The other is I’m not letting you go because I don’t want to.”

At first, Alessio scowls up at me, but then he slips his arms around my neck. “You really are such a Neanderthal, Dario,” he mumbles, trying not to smile.

Chapter Sixteen

Alessio

Dario lays me carefully on his bed. My heart races as he begins to strip off his jacket, shirt, and tie. I watch him, running my eyes over the sculpted muscles of his chest and shoulders. “We can’t have sex, Dario. I just had surgery.”

He hesitates. “Oh. Well, we can do other stuff.”

I frown at him. “No. I’m still mad at you. I’m not doing anything with you until you explain yourself. You should have been the one to bring me home. Instead you shoved me off on Paul. Why?”

“You got here, didn’t you?” He shrugs. “What’s the big deal?”

“It’s a big deal to me. Something changed from the time we looked at cakes, until you arrived at the hospital and grabbed Carlo.”

A muscle works in his cheek, but he doesn’t speak.

“Talk to me, Dario.” I frown. “Why did you change? You were so different before the accident.”

He crosses his arms, and his bicep muscles flex. I’m sure he has no idea how sexy he looks, standing there half naked, scowling at me. There’s confusion in his dark eyes, and a little line between his brows. After a few moments of watching me, he says

quietly,” I heard you with Carlo.”

I frown. “What did you hear?”

He lifts his chin. “I got the distinct impression you’re pissed off that I’m still alive.”

“What?” I try to remember the things I said when I was talking to Carlo, but it’s a blur. “When did I say that?”

“In the hospital.” He leans toward me, suspicion glimmering in his brown eyes. “Even after all we’ve been through. Are you just waiting for the right moment, Alessio? Do you still want your revenge?”

Mixed in with his distrust I also see hurt. That emotion makes my stomach ache and it softens me. He’s my alpha and he doesn’t trust me. That’s not how it should be. He should trust me the most out of anyone else in the world.

“I don’t want revenge anymore,” I say quietly. “I haven’t for a while now.”

“That’s not what you implied to Carlo.”

I narrow my eyes. “Dario, I don’t remember half of what I said to Carlo. I thought I was going to die. I was just saying shit, hoping to stall him.” I sigh. “I don’t want you dead.”

His face twitches, but his expression is still dark and brooding.

“I promise.” I frown. “If you think I want you dead, why are you here right now?”

“You’re mine.” He drops his gaze. “It’s difficult to stay away.”

I sigh. "I don't want to hurt you, Dario. It would kill me if something happened to you."

He looks up. "Perhaps you're just saying that."

"I could lie to you. But I'm not lying."

Should I tell him about the baby?

Will that soften him? Or will the news of my pregnancy make him even more uptight? He needs to know either way. There's the small chance that knowing about the pregnancy will calm him. Make him trust me again. Maybe. It's worth a shot.

"I have something I need to tell you," I say.

He blinks at me. "Okay."

"Hopefully, you'll be happy," I murmur. "But you may not be."

"Are you going to tell me or shall I guess?"

I laugh nervously. "No, I'll tell you." I clear my throat. "I... uh... I'm pregnant."

He goes very still. "What did you say?"

"I said what you think I said."

He moves to the end of the bed, eyes pinned on my stomach. "You're... you're with child?" he asks quietly. "My child?"

I give a nod. "I found out while in the hospital." I exhale a shaky breath. "Are you

shocked?”

“I guess we knew that could happen.” He rubs the back of his neck, avoiding my gaze. “This complicates everything.”

“Why?” I wrinkle my brow.

“Because.”

“Because you’re being paranoid and you think I’m going to kill you?”

He grimaces. “Maybe.”

I laugh gruffly and hold out my hand. “Come here, Dario. I want to touch you.”

He lifts his brows. “I thought you were mad at me.”

“I’m better now. You explained yourself.” I twist my lips. “I forgive you for failing.”

He studies me for a few moments, and then he climbs on the bed. He’s shirtless, but still wearing his dress slacks. I smile at him and he moves slowly toward me, looking a bit like a panther stalking its prey.

I lay back against the pillows, heart racing. He lies down beside me, resting his head on his hand. I feel breathless as he places his other hand on my stomach. My dick warms and hardens as he slowly rubs my belly. “Careful of my stitches,” I whisper.

He immediately removes his hand. “Sorry.”

I grab his hand and place it back on my stomach. “I’m just saying be careful. I’m not telling you to stop.”

He starts rubbing my stomach again, his eyes half open. His nostrils flare and he closes his eyes all the way. His breathing slows and his tension seems to drain away. I put my hands over his, and his eyes open.

I smile at him, hoping he'll return it. He doesn't, but at least his expression is warmer than before. "Everyday, my feelings for you change," I say. "They grow stronger."

He nods. "Same."

"I didn't ask for this, but I no longer feel like fighting it either." I stroke my fingertips lightly over the back of his hands. "Do you want to fight it, Dario?"

"No."

His quick response pleases me. It gives me courage. "I want you as my alpha. I mean that with all my heart." I inhale the scent of his warm, bare skin and shiver. "I don't know why the universe paired us up, but I'm okay with it now."

"Are you?"

"Yes." I meet his dark eyes and my pulse spikes. "Valentino won't have to threaten me into marrying you. I want to be with you. I want to be your omega."

"You already are," he rumbles, inching closer.

I touch his stubbled cheek, and the look in his eyes has slick seeping from my hole. Before meeting Dario, I never had such a visceral reaction to an alpha. I now know why I react to him the way I do. It's because I belong to him. My body recognizes him. My soul recognizes him. Now, my brain and heart recognize him as well.

He leans in and takes my mouth hungrily. I respond, opening my mouth to his

searching tongue. I want to pull him on top of me and give him what he wants. But I'm sure the doctor would heartily disapprove of Dario fucking me.

As if reading my mind, Dario pulls back. "We need to wait until you heal."

"I don't want to wait, but yeah, I think we have to." Sexual frustration nips at me as I take in his smooth chest, and full lips. He's so fucking sexy in a thuggish way. I can't believe I'm into a guy like Dario, but I can't get enough of him. When he shoots me one of his dark, sensual glances, my body throbs.

"So, you still want to go through with the wedding on Saturday?" His tone is gruff. Guarded.

There was a time when I'd have thought he was hinting he didn't want the wedding. But I'm beginning to understand him. He's difficult to get close to because of how he was raised. He trusts Valentino explicitly. I can see that clearly. But other than Valentino, I suspect he hasn't let down his guard with anyone else. Maybe ever.

My chest twinges as I watch him. His face is so familiar to me now. It's like I've always known him. Yet the raw emotions I feel for him are all new. I've never loved anyone before. Not romantically. I've had people I enjoyed, but my feelings for Dario permeate my soul.

Stuffing down my pride, I force myself to say, "Saturday can't come soon enough."

He flicks his gaze to mine. I feel his fear and desire all mingled into one. Then he lowers his eyes, his dark, thick lashes hiding his emotions. "Valentino will be happy you've capitulated at last."

"But not you?" I ask softly.

He strokes my stomach again, his touch almost reverent. “So long as you promise not to kill me in my sleep, I’m fine with it.”

I laugh and his lips twitch. “I promise, Dario. If I decide to kill you, I’ll do it while you’re awake.”

He squints at me. “Not funny.”

“Too soon?”

“Yeah, way too fucking soon.” He kisses me again, his warm breath sending shivers down my spine. He sighs and pulls back again. “God, it’s hard to control myself.”

“Why don’t you lie back against the pillows?” I say quietly.

Excitement glitters in his eyes. “Why?”

“Take a guess.”

Once he’s settled against the pile of pillows, I slowly unzip his slacks. I adjust my position so that I’m not pulling on my stitches. I gently free his cock, licking the tip first chance I get. I hum my approval at the tangy taste of precum. Then I take him deep into my throat. His fingers curl into my hair as he groans, and his thighs tense.

I’ve never really enjoyed giving head before. I enjoyed when it was done to me, but I couldn’t usually be bothered to do it for the alpha. But I love Dario’s taste. I love the little growling sounds he makes. I love pleasing him. My dick is hard too, but all I want is to pleasure my alpha. I want him to believe in this thing between us. I want him to understand I need him too much to ever harm him.

I swirl my tongue around the tip of his cock, cupping his warm balls. I stroke my

thumb over his nut sack as I increase my suction. He groans and arches his back, fingers tightening painfully on my hair. He fucks my mouth, whispering words I can't quite hear. But words aren't necessary. He conveys his feelings in the sensual way he moves his hips. I know just what he needs when he tugs at my hair. I'm on the verge of coming just from his taste and sounds. I haven't once stroked my own cock, yet I'm hovering on the edge of climaxing.

Dario widens his thighs and pumps his cock deep into my eager throat. He's a picture of lusty need. He rubs a shaky hand over his flat, brown nipples, moaning. He's lost in the warm cave of my mouth. The fact that I can unravel him so completely with just my mouth is erotically beautiful.

"Alessio," he whispers, sounding desperate.

I can't answer him verbally, but I do the next best thing. I suck him harder and bring him to the edge of the cliff. He shudders and pulses his hips, watching me as he fucks my mouth. His expression is dirty. Salacious as he pumps his hips, using my mouth for his pleasure.

Then he lets out a growl and spills his warm load down my tight throat. I swallow every last drop, right before I come too. I cry out and climax with Dario's cock still throbbing in my mouth. My body jolts and shudders, eyelids fluttering as my pleasure peaks. I should have taken my damn pants and underwear off, but I hadn't intended to come. But just the taste of my alpha brings me to orgasm.

Dario is breathing hard as he finishes. I pull my mouth off him and kiss his inner thigh. He gives a breathless laugh and I move to lie beside him. His hand rests possessively on my leg. After a few minutes, I grab tissues and unzip my pants.

He laughs as he watches me cleaning myself up.

My cheeks are hot as I meet his amused gaze. "This is your fault," I mutter. "You taste too good."

"Yeah?" He smirks.

"Yep." I sigh and toss the used tissues into the trash receptacle near the nightstand. Then I zip up and lie down again. "Do you finally believe I don't want you dead?"

"I do." He turns his head to look at me. "How do you feel about being pregnant?"

"I feel like maybe it's okay." I close my eyes. "I'm also scared."

"Why scared?"

I open my eyes and meet his curious gaze. "Maybe I'm not ready to be a dad."

He grimaces. "I don't know if anyone is ever really ready. It's a big deal bringing a life into the world. Who could be ready for that?"

"I guess." I frown. "Were you serious about us having a nanny?" It's possible he was just telling me what I wanted to hear back then.

"I was very serious. Like I said, I'll want to be very involved, but we both have work to do. Valentino wants you to run your syndicate. Sure, you'll have to prove yourself a little bit, but that's how Valentino would be with anyone he doesn't know."

"Right." It's weird not to feel that pang of anger toward Valentino now. I feel resigned. Accepting that revenge isn't something I'm ever going to get. I don't even feel the need anymore.

"I'll help guide you," he says. "I have a lot of knowledge that could prove useful to

you.”

“Okay,” I say.

He smiles. “That was almost too easy.”

I shrug. “You’ve been beside Valentino a long time. You’re his second. You could step in at a moments notice. Why wouldn’t I use your expertise to my advantage?”

Dario frowns. “When it comes to the baby though, I know nothing.”

“I guess I’ll spend more time with Nico. I’m sure he’ll have lots of useful information.”

Dario looks relieved. “Yes. Nico and Valentino’s mother will be very useful to you.”

“Maybe Valentino can help you relax about being a dad. I’d have never thought he’d be a good father, but he obviously adores Antonio Jr.”

“He does.” He puts his hand on my stomach again. “This has been the strangest few weeks of my life,” he murmurs.

“Mine too.”

It’s bizarre to feel at peace with the idea of our wedding ceremony on Saturday. But to fight this union is like screaming at a tidal wave to stay back. There’s no stopping it. All I can do is go along with the swirling tide and pray I can keep my head above water.

The civil ceremony takes place in Valentino's library. Sunlight streams through ornate stained glass windows at the far end of the long room. Towering bookshelves laden with leather-bound classics cast long, elegant shadows over the Persian rugs below, while the delicate aroma of aged paper and mahogany infuse the air.

The justice of the peace is younger than I pictured. Apparently the usual man wasn't available, and they sent young Justice Harrison in his place. Justice Harrison has bright red hair, freckles, and big brown eyes. He clutches his bible as if it's a lifeline as he takes his place beside Dario and I.

Dario looks handsome in a dark, silk suit with a pink tie. He's shaved and his hair has been trimmed. My heart races as our eyes meet.

Marie looks demure in a pink lace dress with her dark hair pulled up in a sleek bun. Paolo stands next to her in a fitted dark suit, looking bored as he texts on his phone. Valentino and Nico are beside the rest of the family. Nico is seated, and baby Antonio is on his lap being exceptionally well behaved.

I thought I'd be nervous, but I feel calm. Perhaps that's because Dario is next to me. I always underestimated the ability of an alpha to soothe their omega. Now that I've experienced it first hand, I can attest to the truth of it.

Justice Harrison clears his throat and glances at his notes. "Er... as we stand here in this library, I can't help but think about how this room has been witness to countless stories nestled within its books. But now, as Alessio and Dario say 'I do' to one another, this room and us now witness a new story—their love story—binding them together in a simple, yet profoundly beautiful, celebration of love."

I meet Dario's gaze and his lips twitch. I myself have to stifle a laugh. I know Justice Harrison is trying his best to be poetic, but it just seems a bit cheesy if you ask me. He continues on referencing books and stories so often, I begin to feel like maybe

we're at a book club and not a wedding.

Thankfully, he eventually gets to the actual vows. As I pledge to Dario that I'll stick by him for richer, or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part, I find myself tearing up. It's embarrassing. I'm not accustomed to showing my emotions in front of people. But Dario squeezes my hands and gives me a little wink. For whatever reason that tiny gesture helps center me.

Dario looks and sounds less emotional when he says his vows. But he looks deep into my eyes as he recites them. I feel his sincerity. I know he'll do anything to protect me. Comfort me. Cherish me. It's difficult to reconcile this protective alpha with the thug I first met many weeks ago. I still feel the same lust and excitement I felt that night. But I also feel so much more now.

Our kiss at the end of the ceremony is deceptively chaste. Anyone seeing that kiss wouldn't realize the sparks that fly when we're alone. Once the ceremony is over, we enjoy some of the sponge cake, with raspberry buttercream filling. I can't help grinning at how delighted Dario is to get some cake. The family toasts us with champagne, although Nico and I are stuck with sparkling cider.

At one point, Valentino catches me alone near the cake table. Dario is across the room teasing baby Antonio who is still on Nico's lap. Valentino stops in front of me, his gaze assessing. He radiates power and aggression. I can't believe I ever thought I could take him on and win. He's definitely in another league.

My nerves flutter at the intensity of his stare. "Did you need something?" I ask gruffly, fingering my champagne flute nervously.

"Dario truly cares for you." He narrows his eyes. "You'd better treat him well."

My face warms. "This wedding was your idea."

“Regardless of that, I need you to make him happy.”

I scowl. “Why don’t you worry about your own marriage?” I have every intention of making Dario happy. But I don’t like being nagged by Valentino.

“My marriage is perfection.” He sniffs. “I don’t have to worry about it.”

I sip some of my sparkling cider, annoyed when my hand shakes. Naturally, Valentino notices and he smirks. I’m sure my cheeks are pink as I meet his gaze. “Dario will be as happy as I can make him. Now go away and stop bullying me.”

He glances at Dario who’s now holding baby Antonio. When he returns his gaze to me, he murmurs, “If you break his heart. I’ll kill you.”

I sigh. “Will we ever have a conversation where you aren’t threatening me, Valentino? It’s really tiring.”

Valentino shrugs. “Dario is important to me.”

“He’s important to me too,” I snap.

Valentino nods. “Good.” He moves away.

I give a sigh of relief and return to Dario. He smiles up at me, bouncing baby Antonio on his knee. His muscles strain the material of his fitted suit, and his rugged face is the farthest thing from gentle. But my chest tightens as I watch him holding the child. When we first met, I dismissed Dario as just a thug. I didn’t see his worth, but now I do. He has so much love to give. There’s a lifetime’s worth of love stored up inside that rugged body of his. But he’s been too scared to let it out.

I’m going to show him it’s okay to share that love with me.

Chapter Seventeen

Dario

By the time Alessio and I go to our room, he's exhausted. His pregnancy is new, but it seems to already be draining him. I'm so excited that he's officially mine. He wears my bite and my ring.

Despite my excitement, I know I have to restrain my lust tonight. Never mind the fact that I've been hard since I saw him enter the room for the wedding ceremony. But Alessio isn't fully healed yet, and I don't want to do anything that might hurt him.

Once we're in our room, we strip down to our underwear. We get into our bed, wearing only our boxers, and we move together. I wasn't sure how Alessio would behave tonight, but he's receptive to me. He puts his head on my shoulder and I put my arm around him. He fits perfectly into the curve of my body. Holding him is beautiful torture. I can't keep my hands off of him, even though I know I can't climb on top of him and fuck him like I want. There are other things we could do, but I want to be inside him. It's been too long.

Alessio raises his arm, and the little diamonds in his wedding band glitter in the dim room. "We're actually married, Dario."

I smile. "Yep. It's official."

"This is so weird."

“It is,” I agree. “But it feels right.”

“Surprisingly, it does.” He kisses my shoulder, inhaling deeply. “I love your smell.”

“Do you?” I rub my hand up his spine, dick throbbing. I close my eyes, telling myself to be good. My pulse races as I try to calm down the instinct to take my omega. When Alessio slips his hand down my chest, over my abdomen, to cup my junk, my eyes fly open.

“Don’t do that, Alessio,” I rumble.

“It’s been so long since we fucked,” he whispers, sitting up on his elbow. He continues to gently stroke my already hard cock.

I smell his slick. The pungent scent has every hair on my body prickling. My teeth and nails ache, just like that first night outside the bar. The sensations are primal and overwhelming. I feel like an animal, needing to feed or fuck. Maybe both. I groan as he squeezes my shaft.

“Alessio,” I growl, sweat breaking out on my face. “Stop it. I won’t be able to control myself.”

“We can be careful,” he says softly, peeling his boxers off.

I give a sort of needy whimper as he then tugs my boxers off of me. My dick is thick and straight, lying on my abdomen. “I don’t want to hurt you,” I say gruffly. “I can wait.”

“I don’t want to wait.” His tone is borderline snooty. “This is our wedding night. I want to fuck.”

“But, I’m worried I might injure you.”

“I’m willing to risk it.”

“Alessio, I?”

“Shhh.” He slowly climbs on top of me, and he lays down on my chest. “You’re my alpha. My husband.” He shivers. “I need you inside me.”

“Alessio, I won’t be able to stop if you get me started.”

“I know. That’s what I’m counting on.” He takes my mouth in a greedy, slow kiss. He sucks on my tongue and rubs his body over mine, teasing and tempting me. I grip his back, sliding down to cup his firm ass. His excitement grows and he spreads his thighs slowly, resting his legs on the outside of mine.

“You’re sure about this?” I whisper.

“Yes. This position is perfect,” he says. “My abdomen is fine like this.”

“God, I need to fuck you bad,” I mutter, rocking my hips. My cock slides between his ass cheeks, and he moans.

He reaches back and guides the head of my dick to his slick hole. I can’t fight the surge of need that roars through me. I push inside his tight heat, and he hisses his approval. I strain into him, slowly thrusting and giving into my lust. Sex was never this good with anyone else. Alessio’s body is made for my cock.

He moans and grips my shoulders, his body rubbing against mine with every thrust. His cock is hard against my stomach, and his lips part with excitement. Every inch of my body buzzes with need as I fuck my omega. He’s finally really mine. Body and

soul. I see it in his eyes. The joy he's feeling as I take his body fills me with ecstasy. I certainly never thought our tumultuous adventures together would end this way?with him as my husband.

He cups my face, staring into my eyes as I fuck him. "Yeah," he whispers. "Oh, God, Dario. I need you."

I rumble my approval and thrust harder. I'm not going to last. I never do with Alessio. It's been too long since I was inside him, and I'm too excited at the prospect that he belongs to me. Forever. He's mine for life. We're going to have a baby together. We're going to build a life together. The snobby little omega who turned down my drink is now my mine.

"You're mine," I say softly. "Forever."

"Yes." He nods. "Yes."

His insides are so tight and warm. I love his noises and the way he completely gives himself over to me when we fuck. I can feel he's close to coming, just like I am. He stares into my eyes, pupils blown with lust. He fucking loves my dick plunging inside his hot little hole. He digs his nails into my shoulders, lips parted.

"Oh, f... fuck. I'm c... coming," he whimpers and then his body goes rigid.

He shudders and cries out, and his hot release spills against my stomach. I watch pure pleasure wash over his handsome face, and I fuck him deep and slow through his climax. Then I'm coming too. Unable to hold back the orgasm roaring through me. I claim his mouth as I finish inside him.

Once we've quieted down, I hold him. He sighs as my knot forms inside him. He's already pregnant, so there's no purpose to knot him other than sheer erotic pleasure.

He moans and trembles as my knot stretches inside him. I stroke his back, also groaning at the delicious sensation of my knot filling him. When at long last the knot subsides, I clean up my stomach and his, and we fall asleep in each other's arms.

The next morning I wake up with the most amazing sense of contentment. Alessio still sleeps beside me and I watch him. I study his delicate cheekbones, and the fullness of his mouth. I hope our baby takes after him in the looks department. He's exquisite. His features are like a work of art.

Eventually, I decide I should get up and get ready for the day. I'm brushing my teeth when Alessio stumbles into the bathroom. Without a word, he goes into the little bathroom cubicle and uses the facilities. When he comes out he washes his hands, giving me a shy smile. Timidity isn't something I'm used to seeing in Alessio.

"Morning," I say, my voice still gruff from sleep.

"Good morning." He winces. "Sorry I jumped your bones last night."

I pause brushing my teeth and spit into the sink. When I straighten, I say, "You're sorry? Why? Did I hurt you?" He's wearing a T-shirt over his boxers, so I can't see his stitches.

He grimaces. "No. I'm fine. I just mean, maybe you weren't in the mood. I kind of forced the issue."

I laugh. "You're kidding right? I had a flagpole in my pants the entire ceremony and reception. If you think I was forced into sex, you're insane. I loved it." I go back to brushing my teeth.

"Okay. Good." He grabs his toothbrush and he begins to brush his teeth too.

I rinse and spit into the sink. “I wasn’t sure if I’d like having someone in my bed,” I say, meeting his gaze in the mirror. “It was nice though. Cuddling with you during the night was cozy.”

“I wasn’t sure if I’d like it either, but I did.” He smiles. “You don’t snore. I thought you might.”

I smile and turn on the shower. As the room fills with steam, I’m struck by how naturally we fall into a morning routine. I shower while he shaves. Then he showers while I shave. We move around each other as if we’ve always done this dance. I do stop to kiss him once or twice, and he responds nicely.

I’m grateful there’s no regret in his eyes about being married to me. I couldn’t help but worry there might be. But he seems content. We truly have reached a new point in our relationship. We’re finally on the same page. Neither of us wants to fight the fact that we’re fated to be together. We’re both embracing it, it seems.

I’m tying my tie, as he towels off. He wraps the towel around his hips and leans in to examine his face in the mirror. “Does my face look fat? Puffy?”

“No. You don’t look the least bit fat or puffy.”

“Hmmm.” He peers at himself in the mirror. “Something is different.”

“Maybe it’s that your look of hatred for me is gone.” I smirk, smoothing my hands down the front of my shirt. “When you’re not glaring at me, you look younger.”

“Very funny.”

I laugh at the dirty look he sends me. “Marie said you were glowing yesterday at the wedding. I noticed it too. Maybe that’s what you’re seeing.” I don’t bother adding

that beneath that glow, is a hint of fatigue.

“I don’t think I’m glowing.” He sighs, turning sideways and studying his body. “I think I look pale and pudgy.” His hands drift almost distractedly to his stomach. He’s not showing yet. But he’s probably only a month along so that isn’t surprising. He frowns at himself more in the mirror and I have to wonder what is going on in his head.

“Any morning sickness?” I ask.

“Not yet.” He leans toward the mirror. “God, I have lines under my eyes. I feel like I’ve aged ten years the last few weeks. I don’t have any of my skincare here.”

“You use skincare?” I laugh. “Are you one of those vain omegas?”

He scowls. “I’m not vain. But I see nothing wrong with taking care of my skin.”

I grimace, realizing I’ve insulted him. I move to stand behind him, slipping my arms around him. “You have beautiful skin.” I kiss the nape of his neck and he shivers. “Everything about you is beautiful. Honestly, you’re the most attractive omega I’ve ever laid eyes on. I thought that the night we met.”

“Yeah?” He smiles.

I nod and then scowl. “But then you turned down my drink, which annoyed me greatly.”

“It annoyed you but it also drew you in.” He smirks, giving me a glimpse of the old Alessio. “I knew it would. Alphas are so damn prideful.”

“Hey.” I frown. “Don’t be mean to me. I’m being nice.”

“Sorry.” He grimaces and turns in my arms. “But you must admit, alphas don’t like being turned down for anything.”

“Who does?”

“True.” He moves into the main area of the bedroom.

I follow, watching him as he dresses. I like watching him. His movements are graceful as he steps into his jeans, and slips on his shirt. He runs his hands through his damp blond hair, and notices me watching him. “Is something wrong?” he asks.

“No. I was just admiring you.”

He sighs. “Enjoy this version of me while you can. Soon I’ll be fat and lumbering around like an elephant.”

“I think you’ll be just as attractive fully pregnant.”

“I doubt it.” He wrinkles his brow. “Sorry. I’m feeling sorry for myself this morning. I... I didn’t expect to get pregnant this young. I don’t feel ready.”

Guilt nudges me. “I know. But what’s done is done.”

He nods. “Yes.” He glances down at his stomach. “I’m stuck now.”

My guilt intensifies at his disgruntled tone and expression. I force myself to say, “You don’t have to have the baby, Alessio.” Naturally, I want him to have the child, but it seems only right to give him the option not to. After all, this entire relationship was thrust upon both of us; just because we’re both accepting of it now doesn’t mean he should be forced to have a kid if he’s not ready.

He widens his eyes in obvious surprise. “You’d be okay with that?”

“Of course. You’re young. There’s plenty of time for us to still have kids if you don’t want this baby.” I’ll be disappointed if he wants to abort this baby, but I understand his side of things. Part of being a good alpha is listening to what your omega needs. This is all new to me, but I’m trying my best to do that for him.

He drops his gaze, a line between his light brows. “I’m not for sure saying I don’t want the baby.”

I’m happy to hear him say that. “Well, I’ll leave that decision up to you.” I move to the closet and I slip on my shoes. I feel him watching me, but I don’t engage with him.

“Would you be mad if I didn’t have the baby?” he asks quietly.

“No.” I slip into my suit jacket.

“You sure?” he sounds suspicious.

I meet his gaze. “Alessio, I’m giving you the power here because it’s the right thing to do. Do I want you to have the baby? Yes. I won’t lie. You already know I want to have an heir. But I also understand if you’re not ready, and I won’t be mad at you, okay? It’s a big decision and it should be yours to make.”

Some tension leaves his face. “Okay,” he says softly.

I glance at my watch. “I need to get going. I have a meeting with the capos today.”

“Uh, right.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I have stuff to do too.”

I hesitate. “I’m sorry we didn’t get a honeymoon. Valentino wasn’t thrilled about the idea of me taking off with the merger happening.”

“It’s fine.” He turns his back on me. “I understand why he’d need you here.”

He’s saying all the right things, but I sense some underlying disappointment. I move to him and turn him around to look at me. “Are you upset we didn’t go away just the two of us?”

He lifts one shoulder. “I mean, it would have been nice, but it’s not like this is a real marriage.”

I frown. “It is real. To me, it’s very real.”

He grimaces. “Even though you were forced into it?”

I touch his cheek. “It might have started out like that, Alessio, but I’m happy to be your husband.”

His cheeks are pink as he says, “I’m happy too.”

I study him. “You know what, I’m going to tell Valentino we’re taking two days for ourselves. We deserve that, right?”

He perks up. “We do. I mean, if you want that.”

I nod. “It would be good for us. The only time we’ve really spent alone was running for our lives. It might be nice to relax together without the fear of Carlo coming to murder us.”

He laughs, looking much happier. “You really want that with me?”

“I do.” I hesitate. “I’ll talk to Valentino today.”

“Okay.” He stands on his toes and he kisses me. It’s a warm, happy little kiss that curls my toes.

Once the kiss ends, I move toward the door. “See you later tonight.”

“Okay.” He adds, “Oh, and whatever you do, please don’t book us a cabin in the mountains. I don’t care if I never see another pine tree in my lifetime.”

“Tropical paradise it is.” I chuckle and leave the room.

Chapter Eighteen

Alessio

Valentino isn't happy about it, but Dario sticks to his guns and takes me away for two days. I thought he might buckle because he usually does whatever Valentino tells him to do. But he doesn't. He insists on taking two days where he and I can just be together with no other distractions.

Now we're lying on a white beach with the sun warming our skin. The scent of suntan oil and the salty ocean makes me happy. Of course, mostly I'm happy because Dario is beside me. He looks sexy in a pair of blue and white swim trunks. I had the pleasure of smearing sunscreen on that beautiful, muscular body. We almost didn't make it down to the beach because we both got turned on.

Dario is sipping a beer and I'm having a virgin pina colada. I haven't been to the beach in years and I've never been to Hawaii before. It's off season, so the resort isn't too crowded. I like that. I'm not a fan of crowds. There is one family on the beach with us. They're a ways down though. They have two little boys that look like twins, about five years old. The children are adorable. Blond and chubby with delightful giggles. I find myself watching them a lot.

I still haven't decided if I'll keep the baby I'm carrying. I'm leaning toward keeping it. Mostly because it's a part of Dario and the idea of getting rid of it unsettles me. But the idea of being a dad before I'm ready is equally unsettling. "What was your mother like?" I ask suddenly.

Dario frowns. "She died giving birth to me."

"Oh, that's right." I grimace. "I'm sorry. I forgot for a moment. I was watching that family down the beach and I suddenly got curious about your mom."

He's quiet for a bit, then he says, "I actually saw a video of her when she was pregnant with me."

"Did you?" I study him. He looks a little melancholy as he stares out at the ocean.

"Yeah. My father used to watch it late at night. He'd get drunk and watch that video over and over." He scowls. "Then he'd come upstairs and take out his frustrations on me."

"Jerk."

Dario sighs. "I get why he was upset, but it's not like I asked to be born."

"Only an asshole would blame the baby," I growl.

He gives me a weak smile. "I am the reason she died though."

I blink at him. "Dario, her death wasn't your fault."

"I know that logically," he murmurs. "But I'd be pretty upset too if you died giving birth to our child. I think I finally understand why my dad was so damaged. So bitter."

"No." I touch his arm. "Sometimes omegas die during childbirth. You can never blame the baby. You have to nurture the little kid because that's what the omega would want. Do you think for one second your mother would have wanted your dad

to abuse you? You must know she wouldn't have."

He meets my gaze. "You're right. She wouldn't have wanted that. Seeing her in that video, it was obvious she was a gentle, kind soul. I wish I could have met her. My life would have been so different if she'd lived."

My heart aches for him. He's not whining, he's just speaking matter of fact. And he's right. He'd have been a completely different person if she had lived. "You might not have become Valentino's second if your mother had lived."

"True."

I hesitate. "You probably wouldn't have met me either."

He frowns and reaches for my hand. His big hand is warm and firm against mine. "I don't like thinking about that."

"It's true though."

"Not necessarily. If we're fated then maybe we'd have met under different circumstances regardless."

"Maybe." I nod. "I guess that's true. Fate is fate."

He glances at the kids playing down the beach. I know he's thinking about my pregnancy. He doesn't say anything though. I appreciate that Dario never pushes me to hurry up and make my mind up. He's truly letting me come to my own decision about the baby. I assumed he'd try and change my mind. Maybe bully me into doing what he wants. But he hasn't. Not once.

We stay at the beach a while longer, then we return to the room. We shower together

and Dario fucks me up against the blue tiled wall. His dark eyes are intense as he takes me, and his hands hold me right where he wants me. We come together, our groans echoing in the shower.

After our shower, I'm hugely tired and I take a nap while Dario goes out on the balcony to make some phone calls. When I wake up we go to dinner. I'm learning to appreciate the real Dario. He's intelligent. Funny. He's many things I didn't think he'd be when we first met. I dismissed him as a dumb hoodlum, when in truth, Dario is sophisticated in many ways. We're a good match, and I never thought I'd say that.

After dinner we go for a walk on the moonlit beach, and when we return to the room, we go to bed. Dario holds me, lightly stroking his fingers down my back. I've never been more content. Dario is the reason I feel fulfilled. I know that without doubt. Dario might be the best thing that's ever happened to me.

I say softly, "I want to keep the baby."

He goes very still, and then says, "Are you sure?"

"I am. I've given it a lot of thought. Frankly, I've thought of little else." I sigh. "I was scared at first. But I want to have your baby. I actually want that."

"That's wonderful, Alessio." There's a smile in his voice. "I couldn't tell which way you were leaning."

"I can't imagine getting rid of this baby. The way the child was conceived was chaotic, but I still want it. I want it because it's a part of both of us."

"I'm so glad." He gives a gruff laugh. "So, we're going to be parents. Wow."

Excitement shifts through me. "We are."

“Now that Carlo has been dealt with, should we move into my place?”

I grimace. “What would you think about moving into my family home, instead?”

He glances down at me, but the light is too dim and I can’t see his expression. “Is that what you’d prefer?”

“It’s a huge house. There’s plenty of room for a family to expand.” I sit up on one elbow. “It’s my family home, so I don’t want to sell it. I’d like to live there if you’re willing.”

“That’s fine with me,” he says without hesitation. “My place is more of a bachelor pad than anything. I stayed at Valentino’s home most of the time. I have no real sentimental attachment to my place, but you obviously do to your family home.”

I’m relieved he agreed so easily. I worried he’d balk at the idea of living in my family home. “We can make it yours too, so you don’t feel like a guest. We can redecorate.”

He smiles. “I don’t care about that stuff. So long as we’re both there, I’m good.”

I settle back down, resting my head on his chest. His heart thumps steadily beneath my ear. The solid rhythm is comforting. Being with Dario is the same way. I can lean on him, and he won’t let me fall. I know that in my soul. My eyes sting, as I say softly, “I love you, Dario.”

His arm tightens around me. “I love you too.”

For so long the only thing that consumed me was a thirst for revenge. It was all I could think about. That frantic need brought me to Dario. I was horrible to him in the beginning, but he’s forgiven all of that. I don’t know if I could have forgiven him so easily if our roles had been reversed.

I thought he was nothing but a thick headed brute.

In truth, he's a far better man than I'll ever be.

Three months later

Dario insists on painting the baby's nursery himself. I tried to help, but he didn't approve of me being on a ladder pregnant. I hate painting, so I don't mind sitting it out. Instead, I sit in a glider we bought for the nursery, eating an apple, while he's up on a ladder painting the room a cheerful yellow. Neither one of us wants to know the sex of the baby. We want to be surprised.

"If we'd hired someone to paint the nursery, this would be done by now," I say, nibbling on my apple. "As it is, we have to work around the long hours Valentino makes you work."

"I like doing this kind of thing myself." He stops rolling the paint onto the wall, and glances at me. "There's still plenty of time until the baby comes."

"I know. I just feel bad for you. Today is your day off, but instead you're working like a dog painting this room."

"I don't mind. If I did, I'd say so." He goes back to painting.

"Okay." I watch him a bit more. "I have a doctor's appointment later today. It's my first real appointment." I want him to come with me, but I'm nervous about asking. What if he's one of those alphas who doesn't want to be a part of the journey? Many alphas don't like going to the doctor appointments.

Dario's face lights up and he climbs down off the ladder. "You have an appointment today? Are they going to do an ultrasound?"

I laugh at his enthusiasm. "I think so."

He glances at his watch. "What time is the appointment? I want to go with you."

Relief rolls through me. "It's at three."

"Plenty of time." He leans down and kisses me. "I want to see this little baby. I'm excited."

"I wasn't sure you'd want to go with me. I guess I had nothing to worry about."

"Of course not." He gets back up on the ladder, and shoots me a cocky grin. "You'll never have anything to worry about with me as your alpha."

"Oh, boy."

When the time rolls around for my doctor's appointment, Dario drives. He drops me off at the door and goes to park the SUV. I check in at the front desk, and by the time I find a seat in the waiting room, Dario is back from parking the car. He settles beside me, flipping through a parenting magazine. He frowns at the pictures of the babies.

At one point, he leans over and says, "Our baby will be much cuter than these babies in this magazine. These kids look like drown rats."

I laugh. "You can't say that. All babies are cute."

He lifts his brows. "Uh, no. I think you're mistaken. Some of these newborns are all shriveled. They look like prune babies."

“God, Dario.” I stifle my laugh. “Stop picking on those little babies.”

“I’m not picking on them. I’m simply stating a fact,” he mutters. “They’re definitely prune babies.”

Thankfully, the nurse calls us into the back. If we’d stayed in the waiting room much longer, I worry we’d have started a riot. We were definitely get some funny looks from the pregnant omega next to us.

The nurse weighs me and takes my blood pressure as Dario looks on. Next she leads us to a room. I change into a paper gown and sit on the examination table, while Dario stands next to me, distractedly tapping his foot on the gleaming linoleum floor.

The air smells faintly antiseptic mixed with the soothing scent of lavender emanating from a diffuser in the corner. The walls are adorned with framed photos of smiling babies and thank you cards from countless families offering a semblance of warmth to the clinical setting.

This is my first real prenatal checkup. I was putting it off because the idea of being poked and prodded didn’t appeal to me. I made sure to take my vitamins, but I kept stalling about actually seeing the OBGYN. To be honest, I’m filled with a blend of emotions ? anticipation, fear, and a deep-seated hope that everything is going well with the baby.

Dr. Martin enters the room with a gentle knock on the door. She’s probably in her early forties, with a demeanor that blends professionalism with a touch of maternal care. Her hair, a soft shade of chestnut, is pulled back into a neat bun, highlighting her keen, observant hazel eyes. She wears a warm smile that eases some of my anxiety. “Good morning, Alessio,” she greets me, and then glances down at her tablet. “How have you been feeling? Any concerns or symptoms you’d like to discuss?”

I take a deep breath, collecting my thoughts. “I’ve been okay, mostly. Just the usual, I guess? Mild nausea, tiredness. It’s all been manageable. I just figured it was probably time to make sure everything was going okay with the baby. I’ve been a bit anxious lately.”

Dr. Martin nods, her expression empathetic. “I’m glad you came in. You really probably should’ve come in sooner, but that’s water under the bridge. It’s perfectly normal to feel anxious, especially at this stage. Let’s take a look and see how your little one is doing, shall we?” She motions for me to lie down on the examination table, helping me get comfortable before starting the ultrasound.

So far, Dario hasn’t said a word. He’s watching everything with a very serious expression. Dr. Martin greeted both of us, but he’s in one of his quiet moods. He merely acknowledged her arrival with a grunt.

Dr. Martin rolls the cart with the ultrasound machine on it closer to the examination table. She flicks the machine on, and the only sound in the room is the faint hum of the ultrasound machine. Dr. Martin squirts cool gel onto my stomach, and begins to move the wand over my belly. I hold my breath watching the screen, searching for a glimpse of the life inside of me. Unfortunately, it’s all just a blurry flickering mess to my untrained eyes. I certainly can’t see a baby.

“What are we looking at?” Dario asks, finally breaking his silence.

Dr. Martin points at a small flickering shape on the screen. “Right there. That’s your baby.”

“Is it?” I murmur. “It’s difficult to see.”

“Yes.” Dr. Martin nods. “I’ll try to zoom in. The fetus is very small right now.” As she speaks, she zooms in, and the rhythmic sound of a beating heart fills the room.

“That’s the baby’s heartbeat?” Dario asks.

“It certainly is,” Dr. Martin says. “The heartbeat looks and sounds strong and healthy. That’s what we’re looking for at this stage.”

I meet Dario’s gaze. His cheeks are flushed and his eyes glitter with pride. I smile at him and he smiles back. “It’s real,” he says softly.

“Yes.” I reach out my hand and he grabs it. “Maybe we can’t really see it yet, but we can hear it. There’s definitely a baby in there.”

“Yes, there really is,” Dr. Martin confirms with a smile. She wipes the gel off of my stomach before helping me to set up. “Do you have any questions about the coming weeks? Any concerns or anything you’re curious about?”

“Is it normal that I’m already really tired?” I cup my rounded belly. “I’m only three months along. If the baby is so small that we can hardly even see it with the naked eye, how come I’m so tired?”

Dr. Martin gives a sympathetic nod. “Well, while the baby is very small, you’re still making a life inside of you. There’s a lot that the body is doing to prepare itself. You have increased progesterone levels right now. High levels of progesterone are crucial for maintaining the pregnancy, but that can also promote sleepiness and make you feel more tired than usual. Progesterone has a natural sedative effect leading to increased fatigue.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize that.” I frown.

“There are other things going on too,” Dr. Martin explains. “There are metabolic changes as well. Increased blood volume is produced to help nourish you and to support the placenta and baby. That can put additional strain on the heart, leading to

feelings of tiredness. By the way, how are you sleeping?"

"He's not sleeping very well," Dario says. "I give him back rubs to try and help him sleep, but he's a ball of anxiety. I'm hoping that this doctor appointment will calm him down a little."

Dr. Martin smiles at Dario. "That's nice that you're doing that for him." She turns to address me. "You don't need to be anxious though, Alessio. Everything seems to be normal. We'll take some blood today, just to keep an eye on things, but as far as I can tell your pregnancy is progressing beautifully."

I'm relieved to hear she thinks everything is going well. Just having a professional give their opinion does calm me a bit. "I should've come in here sooner. I probably wouldn't have been half as stressed."

Dario nods. "I did try to get you to come in. You're very stubborn when you choose to be."

I grimace. "I know. I don't know what I was afraid of."

"Anxiety is not unusual," says Dr. Martin. "Especially with your first pregnancy. Many omegas are balls of nerves the first time around. Not that you don't worry with the other pregnancies as well, but there's just something about the first one. I suppose it's because it's all new. You don't know what to expect yet. When you've been through it a few times, nothing surprises you." She laughs. "I say this as a mother of three."

We chat a bit more as Dr. Martin draws some blood. She promises to have the results in a few days, and Dario and I leave the office. Dario holds my hand as we walk to the SUV. It's a beautiful, sunny day and I feel more optimistic about the pregnancy than I have in months.

“Want to grab lunch?” he asks.

I grin. “Do you think you’ll ever get a ‘no’ from me when you ask me about food?”

“Just checking.” He opens my door for me. “What shall we have? You love that noodle place, The Golden Wok.”

“I do. I crave it constantly. Is it wrong of me to be Italian but be obsessed with Asian food?” I laugh, clipping my seatbelt in place. “I can’t seem to help myself. Nothing else satisfies me.”

“Nothing else?” he lifts one brow.

“I mean food wise.” I smile. “You satisfy me in other ways. And if I could only have sex with you or noodles, I’d pick the sex with you.”

He smirks. “I feel pretty special now. I know how much you love your noodles.” Dario closes my door. Once he’s behind the wheel, he says, “The important thing is that you eat nutritious food. It doesn’t matter what country the food is from.”

“In that case, take me to my noodles,” I say brightly.

“Yes, your highness.” Dario’s cheek curves in a smile as he pulls out onto the road. “Your wish is my command.”

Chapter Nineteen

(Six months into the pregnancy)

Dario

I've gone with Alessio to all of his doctor appointments. But the six-month checkup feels different somehow. It's as if the weight of the upcoming arrival of our baby is settling more tangibly on both of us.

Dr. Martin enters the examination room with her usual warm smile. "How are you boys doing today?"

Alessio says, "I'm looking forward to not being pregnant. The baby can't come soon enough."

Dr. Martin laughs. "Yes about the six month mark most omegas are more than ready for it to be over."

"Half the time he's afraid of the birth part of things, and the other half he can't wait for it to be over." I grimace. "Which is the real Alessio?"

"They both are," Dr. Martin says. "If I'm honest, pregnancy is a mixture of anticipation and dread."

"You nailed it." Alessio nods. "It's like I can't wait for the baby to arrive, but I also don't want to go through giving birth."

“That’s normal.” Dr. Martin studies her tablet as she speaks. “The rarity is an omega who can’t wait to give birth. It’s intimidating.” She smiles at Dario. “How are you holding up, Dario? Pregnancy isn’t exactly easy on the alpha either.”

“I’m okay.”

Alessio rolls his eyes. “How was it hard for the alpha? He doesn’t have swollen ankles and heartburn constantly.”

I frown. “I have stress about the pregnancy too. It’s my job to keep you safe, and I’m constantly worried about you and the baby. No, my ankles are swollen, but I do have indigestion a lot. I don’t know if it’s psychosomatic or what, but every meal gives me heartburn.”

Dr. Martin smiles. “You mustn’t negate the stress that your alpha is under, Alessio. He doesn’t have to give birth, but he’s still very much a part of this process. Dario is very attentive. He’s one of the few alphas I’ve seen who accompanies his omega to every single appointment.”

Alessio looks sheepish. “Sorry.” He reaches out to me and I grab his hand. “I’m feeling grumpy because I feel fat, and swollen, and hungry, and sweaty. There’s a whole list. None of it good.”

I squeeze his hand. “Trust me, I know that you have a harder time than me. I only mean that it hasn’t been easy for me either. As an alpha, I’m used to being in control of everything. I have no control over anything when it comes to this pregnancy. That gives me a lot of anxiety.”

Alessio frowns. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this? You always act like you have everything under control. You never seem that worried to me.”

I laugh gruffly. “I didn’t want to burden you. You have it far worse than me. I’m supposed to be comforting you, not the other way around.”

“You can comfort each other.” Dr. Martin shrugs. “That’s what a healthy relationship is like. One partner shouldn’t do all the comforting.”

“From now on,” Alessio begins, “I want you to tell me when you’re feeling stressed.”

I wince. “I’ll try.” Talking about my feelings isn’t really my thing. I know that Alessio likes that, so I do try to share things with him if I’m feeling a certain way. However, when it comes to the pregnancy, I feel he’s burdened enough.

“Okay,” says Dr. Martin. “So, we know that you’re both feeling stressed emotionally, let’s see how you’re doing physically, Alessio.” She has Alessio lie down on the examination table, and she measures his stomach. “The size of your belly looks good.” She places her stethoscope against Alessio’s rounded belly. “Heartbeat is strong.” She gives a reassuring smile. “Everything is going smoothly.”

She goes to get the ultrasound machine, and she rolls it over to the examination table. “Today’s ultrasound should be a little more exciting than the first one. You should actually be able to see the baby this time.”

“This is exciting,” Alessio says breathlessly.

“We don’t want to know the sex of the baby,” I say quickly.

She nods. “Okay. Then I won’t tell you.” She puts gel on Alessio stomach, and begins rolling the wand lightly over his skin. “Today we’re checking the development of the brain, heart, kidneys, liver, spine, and limbs to ensure everything is developing as expected.”

Unlike the first time we saw the ultrasound, this time there's a definite outline of the baby. The heartbeat is more obvious too, and the doctor doesn't even need to point it out to us this time. My chest tightens as I gaze upon our baby. It's hard to comprehend this is all real. Alessio is caring our child inside his body. It's miraculous. Astounding. It just makes me love him even more, if that's possible.

Alessio winces. "The baby just kicked. It's been moving a lot lately."

"That's normal. If you weren't feeling kicks, then I'd be more concerned," Dr. Martin says. She peers at the screen, her face scrunched. "The placenta position is good. The baby's growth seems on track. Amniotic fluid volume is excellent."

Alessio hasn't said anything for a few moments, and when I look at him I see tears running down his cheeks. My heart aches and I take his hand.

"It's just so beautiful," he whispers. "I feel closer to the baby seeing it. It's not just this faceless creature giving me heartburn and making my legs swell. It's a real little person in there."

I nod, a lump forming in my throat. "I know what you mean," I said gruffly. "This is real. This is everything I've ever wanted."

Alessio smiles at me. "It's everything we wanted that we didn't even know we wanted."

I laugh. "Exactly."

Dr. Martin watches us with a little smile. "I have to say, it's really nice to see a couple who are so in love. You two are very in tune to each other. I love seeing that."

Alessio and I smile at each other.

If she only knew how we met, she'd probably be horrified. It's true that now we're bonded perfectly. But when we first met we were mortal enemies. I wonder what she'd say if she knew that Alessio had wanted to kill me when he first met me. But that's not a story she's ever going to hear. Because as rocky as it was when we began our journey together, our love is solid. All-consuming. I'd die for Alessio without hesitation, and I know he'd do the same for me.

Dr. Martin allows us to enjoy the ultrasound for another fifteen minutes, and then she flicks off the machine. She stands and pulls off her gloves, tossing them in the trash receptacle. "Everything's going really well. There are no red flags that I can see, so just keep doing what you're doing. Maybe make sure you're getting some exercise. Walking is always good."

"Dario tries to get me to walk every evening." Looking sheepish, Alessio adds, "I'm not always as agreeable as I could be."

"Well, keeping in shape is important because when the baby gets here you're gonna need a lot of energy." Dr. Martin shrugs. "Keep nagging him, Dario. He'll thank you in the end."

I grimace. "I'll do my best. He gets pretty surly."

"Would you please stop talking about me like I'm not here?" Alessio sits up. "I'll take walks more frequently. I promise."

"You heard him, Dr. Martin." I grin. "You have to back me up if he tries to say he never said that."

She laughs. "I'm staying out of this." She moves to the door. "Are there any more questions?"

“Nope. Thanks for showing us the baby today, Doc.” Alessio slides off the table. I help steady him once his feet touch the ground, and he gives me a grateful smile.

“You two take care of each other.” Dr. Martin leaves the room.

Alessio dresses quickly, and we leave the doctor’s office. I’d planned on taking Alessio to lunch, but Valentino calls as we reach the car asking me to help him with something. Alessio’s face is pinched as we get in the car. I know he’s pissed off that Valentino interrupted our time together. I hate it when Alessio is upset. It makes me uneasy to have my omega displeased.

“I won’t be long, I don’t think,” I say gruffly.

“Sometimes I swear Valentino does this on purpose. I think he’s jealous.” Alessio crosses his arms, and stares out the window with a scowl.

I laugh. “He probably is jealous. He’s used to having my undivided attention. I don’t think he likes that I put you first. But that’s just how it’s gonna be, and he needs to get used to the idea.”

“Those are great words, Dario. But if you’ll notice, you’re abandoning me to go run to Valentino. How exactly am I coming first? He’s getting his way, as usual.”

I frown. “I’m not abandoning you. I just can’t take you to lunch. I’ll take you to dinner instead. Will that make you happy?”

“As if Valentino will let you get home in time for dinner,” he grumbles.

“I’ll see to it that he does.” I give him a nervous look. “Don’t be mad at me, Alessio. It gives me an ulcer.”

He glances over and his gaze softens. “Sorry. I’m hormonal today. I know that you have to go help Valentino. I think I’m frustrated because I’m not able to do as much work as I want. I feel like the men probably think I’m slacking. I can’t help that I’m constantly sleepy and scatterbrained.”

“The men have no idea about how tired you are. I’ve been trying to pick up any slack that needs picking up. Things are going smoothly. As far as they know, you’re running things. You’re the boss. You don’t need to worry about any of that. I’ve got your back, Alessio.”

His eyes look red as if he’s feeling emotional. “You’re so good to me, Dario. I’m such an emotional mess. How do you put up with me?”

“I’m not putting up with you. I’m honored to be your alpha. Every day is better because I met you. My life has meaning now. Before you know it, the baby will be born, and you’ll be back to normal. We’ll have a beautiful baby, our work, and our relationship. We can have it all, Alessio, because we’re a team.”

He cups his rounded belly and he gives a tearful laugh. “You have the most amazing father, little one. He’s going to help me be a good dad too.”

“You don’t need me for that,” I mutter. “You’re going to be an wonderful dad.”

“I guess we’ll see.” He sighs. “Cuz this kid is real and he’s coming soon, whether we’re ready or not.”

(Eight and a half Months into the pregnancy)

I get home late one night, and Alessio is already in bed. I’m frustrated that he didn’t

wait up, but I understand he's exhausted all the time. I'm hungry, but I forego food so that I can get into bed with Alessio. I shower and crawl naked under the covers where he's snoring softly.

The moment I touch him, he rolls toward me. He's still half asleep and I kiss him softly on his mouth. I rub my hand over his plump stomach. His stomach is big now, and he's self-conscious about it. But I find it sexy. Arousing. I tug his boxers off of him, and he finally wakes up all the way.

"You want sex?" he asks groggily.

"I always want sex with you," I whisper in his ear.

He sighs. "I'm so gross and fat. Why do you want me?"

"You're fucking sexy, that's why," I rasp. "Stop putting yourself down." I run my hands down his hips and thighs, stroking his hardening cock. He moans at my touch, and the scent of slick wafts. I inhale his scent, lust buzzing through me. "Turn over, love," I say.

He does as I ask, and I spoon him. Sex is easier this way because of his stomach. I gently insert one finger into his slick hole, and he moans. I work that finger in and out of him, and he begins to move his hips. My dick aches, and once I think he's good and ready for me, I press the head of my cock to his hole. We both groan as I push inside, and begin gently thrusting.

"Fuck," he mumbles, reaching back to grip my ass. "Dario, fuck me harder."

"My pleasure." I thrust harder and he moans louder. I cup his big baby belly, pounding into him from behind. I feel the baby kicking against my hands, and I kiss the back of Alessio's neck. "Love you. Love this."

“Me too.” His voice wobbles from the force of my thrusts.

I rub his big belly, pumping in and out of him. My balls ache with the need to empty inside him. My dick couldn't be any harder. There's nothing I love more than fucking my omega. I don't even remember what it was like having sex before Alessio. His scent and taste is all I need or want.

“I'm gonna come,” he whimpers, trembling. “Oh, fuck, I'm c... coming, Dario.” He cries out and shudders, and his hole quakes on my dick.

I fuck him through his climax, prolonging his pleasure. But it's not easy holding back. Once I'm sure he's satiated, I let go and pump my load inside his tight hole. Pleasure spirals through me and he moans as I fill him. I thrust until I'm soft, whispering how much I love him and need him.

I pinch the base of my dick to stop the knot from forming. I don't want to tire Alessio out any more than I already have. I get up and grab a warm washcloth. Then I gently clean Alessio up and the sheets where he spilled his release. He moves to my side of the bed, and we hold each other.

We fall asleep in each other's arms, but around 4:00 a.m. Alessio wakes me up.

“Dario, the baby is coming,” he whispers. He crawls off the bed, and he goes into the bathroom.

Panic shoots through me as it sinks in what he said. I get off the bed in an instant and look around, frazzled. “I need to get dressed,” I mutter and I hurry to the closet.

Alessio comes out of the bathroom, cheeks pink and eyes glittering with worry. “My water broke,” he says. “I'm having contractions.”

“Right.” I grab his pregnancy bag from the dresser. We’ve had it packed for months just in case. “Let’s go.”

Alessio smiles weakly. “I need to get dressed and your still in just your boxers.”

“Oh. Right. Of course.” I glance down at my boxers. I drop the bag and hurry to grab jeans and a shirt.

Alessio pulls on sweatpants and an oversized hoodie. He grabs his stomach and groans, breathing irregularly. “Shit.” He grits his teeth, in obvious pain. “These contractions are strong. We need to hurry.”

Anxiety rages through me as I go to him. “I’ll help you downstairs.” We make our way down the steps, stopping every few minutes so that he can tolerate the contractions. It’s slow-moving, but eventually we reach the SUV. “I called Valentino right before we started down the stairs. He said he’d meet us at the hospital.”

“I hope Nico comes too.” Alessio groans.

“He probably will.” I help him into his seat. I clip the belt below his huge belly, around his hips.

I drive faster than I probably should, but Alessio is in so much pain and his contractions are coming every three minutes. I know that now that his water broke, time is of the essence. “Remember your breathing,” I say. “They said it would help with the pain.”

“They lied,” he growls.

I grip the steering well. “It’s okay, Alessio. We’ll be there soon.”

He wiggles in his seat, grabbing his stomach and moaning. “This hurts more than I thought. I don’t like this one bit.”

I don’t know what to say. There’s nothing I can do to help them. All I can do is drive safely and quickly. It’s only about a five minute drive to the hospital, but it feels like an hour passes. I’m sure feels like even longer for Alessio. I park in front of the emergency entrance because it’s after hours. I just leave the car, and help Alessio into the emergency room.

Once inside, a bored looking nurse at the little podium says, “You’ll need to take him to the Labor and Delivery Reception. They handle all the maternity cases.”

I’m immediately pissed off at her lackadaisical attitude. I bristle and say harshly, “My name is Dario Coppola, and I need you to get a wheelchair now. There’s no way he can walk that whole way.”

At the mention of my name, the nurse widens her eyes. “Oh, I... I didn’t recognize you, Mr. Coppola. I’ll get that chair for you.”

“Thanks,” I say curtly.

Alessio lets out a wail, and he grabs his stomach. “God, shit, fuck. I’m gonna die. This hurts too much, Dario. I... I can’t do this.”

“Yes you can. You’re gonna be fine.” I glance around angrily, looking for the nurse and the wheelchair. I see her running toward us pushing a wheelchair. I grab it from her, and help Alessio into the chair. Then I take off with him, going far faster than is probably safe. But he’s in so much pain, and the labor and delivery reception area feels like miles away.

When I reach labor and delivery, they’re far more on their game. Every one of them

jumps into action when they see Alessio and me. Within minutes Alessio is taken to a labor room, and Dr. Martin is contacted. The nurses have me put on a gown and little booties on my feet. But I'd wear a clown suit if it meant I could be in the room with Alessio.

Alessio is moaning and obviously suffering as he writhes on the bed. There are stirrups at one end of the bed, but Alessio isn't quite ready for that yet. The nurses check his cervix and tell us he's ready. Dr. Martin arrives two minutes later, dressed in scrubs and looking much calmer than I feel.

She's wearing a mask, but her eyes crinkle as she smiles at me. "You boys ready for this?"

"No," Alessio wails. "I wanted an epidural. This is too painful."

"I'm sorry, Alessio. You're too far along for the epidural," Dr. Martin says, and her mask puffs as she speaks. "This baby is coming now. I'd take too long to get the anesthesiologist here in time."

"This is bullshit," Alessio whines. "I told you I wanted an epidural. This isn't right. I can't do this. I can't do it, I'm serious."

He's absolutely panicking, and I have to do something. I put my hand on his forehead. He's sweating and hot, but all I can think about is trying to soothe my omega. At my touch, he does quiet down a little. He looks at me, his eyes filled with pain. I want to help him. I want to take his pain for him. But I can't. All I can do is exert whatever calming alpha influence I have over him.

"Look at me, Alessio," I say gruffly. I stroke his hair and hold his gaze. "You're so strong. You can definitely do this, love. Before you know it, our child will be here. You can do this Alessio. I know you can."

“I’m scared,” he whimpers.

“I know. I know you are. I promise you, you’re going to be okay. It’s time. It’s time for our baby to arrive.” My eyes sting. “It’s up to you now, Alessio. I know that you can do this. Even if it’s scary, you can do this.”

His jagged breathing slowly calms. The raging fear in his eyes fades slightly. He’s still in a lot of pain and he’s still scared. But my voice is getting through to him. I can see the change in him.

I take his hand in mine. “Listen to everything that Dr. Martin tells you. She’s going to help you through this. It’s almost over, love.”

He nods. “It’s almost over,” he whispers.

Dr. Martin says, “Alessio, I need you to put your feet in the stirrups. Then, when I tell you to, you’re going to push.”

Alessio flicks his gaze to hers. He hesitates, but then he puts his feet in the stirrups. Another contraction rolls through him and he cries out, but he keeps his feet in the stirrups. He arches his back, squeezing my hand so tight it actually hurts. But compared to what he’s going through, I can handle a few bruised fingers.

I’m in awe of how calm Dr. Martin is. For all my pretending to be in control of my emotions, I’m actually freaking out inside. Dr. Martin gives Alessio calm concise instructions. She tells him when to push, and he obeys. The veins stick out on his face and throat as he strains to push the baby out. When she tells him to stop he stops, breathing hard. His face is flushed red, and tears stream down the sides of his face. My heart is breaking watching him in pain. If I could take the pain from him, and suffer it instead, I would.

After ten minutes of Alessio grunting and pushing, there's the cry of a baby. Dr. Martin holds up a squirming little infant. She suction out the baby's mouth, and the child cries louder. Alessio starts crying too, covering his face.

I lean down and kiss his head gently, and he lowers his hands. "You did it," I say, my voice thick with tears. "You did it, Alessio. I love you so much."

Alessio lifts his head, and stares between his legs at Dr. Martin. When his eyes land on the squirming child, he gives a tired smile. "What is it? Girl or a boy?"

"Not sure." I didn't even think to ask. I was so consumed by Alessio, I didn't even think to ask what the sex of the child was.

Dr. Martin says, "You have a son."

Alessio groans. "Oh thank God. Maybe then I won't ever have to go through this again."

I laughed gruffly, and kiss him again. "You did so well."

"I did not. I lost my shit." He wipes at his face. "Do we get to hold the baby?"

The nurse smiles. "Of course. Just as soon as your alpha cuts the umbilical cord."

I moved down to the end of the bed where the child is. My heart softens immediately when I see our son. He has a tuft of blond hair, the color of Alessio's. I'm so relieved he seems to be taking after Alessio's looks. He's adorable too. Even though he's covered in whatever it is babies are covered in when they're born, he's still adorable.

The nurse hands me a pair of surgical scissors. There are two clamps on the umbilical cord, and she instructs me to cut between them. It's a lot harder to cut through the

umbilical cord then I thought. But eventually, I succeed. They whisk the whimpering baby away.

I returned to Alessio. “He’s cute. He looks like you.”

“Really?” Alessio laughs.

The nurse brings the baby over swaddled in a blanket. Alessio takes the baby from the nurse, an expression of awe on his face. The baby coos and wiggles as we stare down at him. He’s probably the most perfect thing I’ve ever seen. I instantly love him. It’s the strangest sensation. I just met the little tyke, but I adore him.

“He has my hair but he has your eyes, Dario,” whispers Alessio. “They’re a beautiful brown like yours.”

I frown. “I wish he had your eyes.”

“I don’t.” Alessio smiles up at me. “I love that he’s a mixture of both of us.”

The baby starts to fuss, and Alessio looks nervous. “What does he want?”

The nurse smiles. “He probably wants to feed.” She comes closer. “You’re leaking, so it looks like your milk came in.”

He glances down to find there is indeed liquid dripping from his nipples. “What the hell?” he squeaks.

The nurse laughs. “It happens when you hear the baby crying. It’s natural.” She helps Alessio position the baby near one of his nipples. “Now, when he latches on, it might hurt at first. But your nipples will toughen up.”

“Oh, God,” Alessio whimpers. Then the baby opens it’s little mouth and begins to suckle his nipple and Alessio bugs his eyes. “Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Slow down you little pig.”

I grin, glad I’m not the one who has to feed our son. “You omegas really do get the bad end of the deal.”

“It’s not fair,” grumbles Alessio. “Why does everything with having a baby have to hurt so much? Whose idea was it that the omega had to do all the work?”

The nurse smiles and meets my gaze. “Don’t worry. All omegas complain about this stuff. It is pretty unfair. They have the right to complain.”

“I agree,” I murmur.

Dr. Martin comes over, looking tired. She smiles down at the baby. “This little guy couldn’t wait to get here, I guess. He’s two weeks early.”

“I guess I’m glad it’s over with.” Alessio grimaces, but when he glances down at the feeding baby, his expression softens. “How can he be so cute?”

“What are you going to name him?” Dr. Martin asks.

I clear my throat. “I’ve been thinking, Alessio. We should call him Joesph, after your father. I think that would be a nice, respectful thing to do.”

Alessio looks touched. “Really?”

I nod. “Yep. I think Joesph Abella-Coppola has a nice ring to it.”

Alessio’s eyes fill with tears. “You put my name first.”

My eyes sting as I say, “I’ll always put you first, Alessio. I promise.”

Epilogue

(One month after the birth)

Alessio

It's not easy juggling being a new father with running a syndicate. I had no idea how much more exhausting it would be trying to do both. Baby Joseph still isn't sleeping through the night, which means neither am I. Dario takes three nights a week with the baby, but that means four nights of the week I'm not getting enough rest.

There's added pressure on me too because Valentino gave me the ports. It's a complicated situation running the ports. Thankfully, I have Dario to help guide me, but there are millions of dollars flowing in and out of my operation in the form of smuggling firearms, alcohol, and tobacco. It's stressful as hell, especially when I feel like I'm sleep walking most days.

One evening Dario and I are just about to sit down to dinner. I have the baby in a rocking swing near the table, and he's snoozing away. Dario pours us wine while I light the two tapered red candles on the table.

"I ordered this lasagna from a restaurant. I didn't have the energy to cook. Hope you don't mind," I say, blowing out the match. "It's from that little place near the mall."

"It's food. That's all I care about." Dario sips his wine and nods his approval.

I groan as I take my seat, feeling like a creaky old man. "Did Valentino tell you he

called me to yell at me today?" I ask, scooting my chair closer to the table.

Dario instantly bristles. "Excuse me?" His dark eyes flash with anger. "Why?"

"Someone from the Murphy syndicate accused me of human trafficking. They were spreading lies all over town. The Murphy mob has always hated the Abella syndicate. My father had many run ins with them over the years." I scowl. "As if I'd ever take part in anything that disgusting." An upstanding citizen, I am not. But I draw the line at smuggling humans.

"And Valentino believed the lies?" Dario narrows his eyes. "He believed my omega would be involved in something like that?"

"He was pretty irate over the phone?"

"He actually yelled at you?" Dario growls, standing up and tugging his phone out of his pocket. "Well, we'll just see about that. Yelling at my omega for something he'd never do? How dare he?"

I laugh nervously. "Dario, it's fine. I told him it was a lie and he believed me."

"Did he?" Dario arches one dark brow.

"He seemed to." I give a weak smile. "He even apologized for yelling at me. That's why I thought maybe he'd have told you. He's probably never apologized to anyone before. I figured it was a traumatic experience for him."

"No. He didn't say a word to me." Dario slowly tucks his phone away. "He actually apologized?"

"He did. Twice." I laugh. "To be honest, I think I heard Nico in the background. I suspect he was trying to show Nico what a great guy he is. If Nico wasn't around

he'd have probably just hung up on me."

Dario laughs gruffly. "You're absolutely right. Valentino has horrible phone manners."

"Anyway, it all blew over. But I'd love to get my hands on a Murphy one of these days. I'd love to give them a piece of my mind."

"The entire Murphy clan are scum. If anyone is involved in buying and selling humans, it's that group," mumbles Dario.

"Let's not talk about them. Let's try to enjoy our meal." I serve Dario a big helping of the lasagna, and I set a piece of garlic toast on his plate too. He rubs his hands together, looking happy. My heart aches watching him. I find him so endearing these days. It's hard to remember I ever didn't love him.

I serve myself a smaller portion, and Dario notices.

He frowns. "You need to eat more. You're the only omega I know who's thinner now than before he was pregnant. Nico is always complaining he has an five extra pounds on him."

"Nico just had two kids. I've only had one." I avoid his gaze and take a bite of my food.

"You're too thin."

"And you worry too much."

Dario watches me, not touching his food.

I glance up. "Why aren't you eating?"

“Did you choose a live in nanny yet?” he asks gruffly. “I gave you six candidates two weeks ago.”

“I will.” I swallow my food with some difficulty. My throat always tenses at the idea of having a nanny. I wanted one at first, but now, I worry about handing Baby Joesph over to a stranger.

“Alessio,” he rumbles. “You can’t keep on the way it is. You don’t get enough sleep. You’re running yourself ragged with the baby and work. Should I take some more nights with the baby?”

I sigh. “No. Then you’ll just be dragging all the time.”

“Well, something has to change.” He knits his brows, looking worried. “I overheard Valentino arguing with Paolo today. He wants Paolo to get more involved with the family business. What would you think of him helping you with the ports? Paolo is bright. I think he could take some of the strain off of you, once he understands things. What do you think?”

“Valentino did mention he wanted me to train Paolo on a few things. I have no objection to him helping me with the ports. I wouldn’t mind working with him. I like Paolo.”

“Yes,” Dario narrows his eyes. “I know.”

“I laugh. “I mean as a friend. You know I adore you.”

“Well, I am an amazing alpha.” He smirks. “How could you not?”

I force myself to take another bite of food, if only to please Dario. “I’ve actually narrowed down the nanny candidates to two people.”

“Have you?” Dario looks pleased. “I’m happy to hear it.”

I eat some more lasagna and then set my fork down. “You won’t think I’m a failure, right?”

He squints at me. “In what way?”

“If I need help.” My face is warm as I hold his gaze. “An omega is supposed to take care of the offspring.”

“That’s antiquated thinking. Some omegas prefer to work these days.” Dario shrugs. “An omega can be anything they want to be. At least, my omega can be.”

I smile. I can’t help it. “You’re so much more enlightened than I ever expected.”

Dario seems to beam under my praise. “I am, aren’t I?”

My smile fades. “I still worry you’ll think I’m failing at my duties. Nico doesn’t have a nanny and he has two babies.”

“Nico isn’t running a syndicate and he has Marie to help him. Have you forgotten he has a live in babysitter with her?”

“I guess that’s true.”

“Trust me, Nico also makes Valentino pitch in too. Valentino tried to get out of changing dirty diapers and Nico would have none of it.” Dario grins. “It’s fun watching Nico boss Valentino around sometimes. He’s the only one, besides Marie, who can get Valentino to do stuff he doesn’t want to do.”

“Valentino does seem to live in fear of disappointing Nico,” I murmur.

Dario leans toward me, the candles reflecting in his dark eyes. “A good alpha always worries about whether or not his omega is pleased. If our omega is unhappy, we’ve failed at our job.”

My stomach warms. “You always make me happy.”

“I try.” Dario goes back to eating.

I watch him as he eats, feeling truly lucky. He’s right. I need help with the baby. I need to have the energy to focus on Dario too, and at the moment, I have no gas in the tank at the end of the day. I’m being too prideful about the whole nanny thing. I need to stop that. “Do you want to hear about the two nanny candidates I’ve narrowed it down to?”

He perks up. “Absolutely.”

“Okay.” I take a sip of wine and then continue. “They both have impeccable references, but one has more experience than the other. One is a male omega about my age. He’s been working as a nanny for about six years. He’d probably have lots of energy because he’s young. The other candidate is an older female omega who has twenty years’ experience and has worked for many, many families.”

“Are you leaning toward one over the other?”

“Logic says I should pick the older woman with experience.” I frown. “But for some reason, I want to go for the younger guy. I want to give him a chance.”

“Then pick him.” Dario nods. “I think you should go with your gut. Why not give the kid a chance, right?”

“Yeah? You think I should pick him?” I smile.

“Absolutely. All I care about is that you get someone in here who you trust. It would be nice to have more date nights with you. But lately, you’re asleep by 8:00 p.m.”

I wince. “I know. Okay, I’ll call Connor tomorrow and bring him here for an interview. Then I can see first hand how he gets on with Baby Joesph.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He holds up his wine glass. “Let’s toast to getting that nanny moved in ASAP. I want more time with you, Alessio.”

I clink his glass, take a small sip, and then I set my wine down. I rise and move around the table. Dario grins at me when I straddle his lap. His hands rest on my hips as I softly kiss his mouth. “How did I ever get so lucky as to meet you, Dario?” I whisper against his lips.

“Well, as I recall, it wasn’t luck. It all started when you went on a murderous hunt for revenge against my boss.”

“Oh, yeah.” I begin to unbutton his shirt. I kiss the side of his neck, and his smooth shoulder. “That’s all in the past now.”

He chuckles, his rough hands slipping under my shirt. “It’s all forgiven.”

My fingers brush over the tiny burn scars on the very back of his neck. It reminds me of all that Dario has gone through. By all rights, Dario should be a bitter, unlovable monster. But he isn’t. He may look intimidating, but he’s the gentlest alpha I’ve ever met.

I cup his face. “You’re my alpha.”

“I know.”

“You’re my husband.”

“I know that too.” His eyes shine with amusement.

“Do you know that I’d die without you?” I say softly. “Do you know I wouldn’t want to breath one second longer if anything ever happened to you?”

His amusement fades and his hands tighten on my hips. “I feel exactly the same, Alessio. Where you go, I go. Whether that’s in this life, or the next.” He stands suddenly, lifting me with him like I weigh nothing. “Baby Joesph is sound asleep, and I think it’s time for dessert.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he rumbles, lust glittering in his dark eyes.

I slip my arms around his neck, and whisper against his ear, “Sounds good to me, my darling Neanderthal.”