



Redemption (The Partners #3)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: The Partners are back with a vengeance

Everyone thinks I died three years ago.

I sacrificed my life for my friends.

To redeem myself for all my wrong doings.

I don't exist. Not in the real sense of the word.

I'm just a man fulfilling my destiny that was laid out for me from the day I was born.

A man put in position to take over the largest criminal organization.

I'm just a pawn in a game with nothing to lose.

Until my past hits me like a freight train. The only woman I ever fell for reappears in my life.

But she isn't just anyone. Her family is one of the most powerful mafia families in Italy.

And it's the family I'm after for trying to take down The Partners.

We never should have been together. We never should have met.

Our story could start a war. Especially when she drops a bomb I never saw coming.

And now the stakes are so high even my own life is forfeit.

I may not exist.

But that won't stop me from taking what's mine.

And risking everything for a family I didn't know I had.

****This is book 3 in The Partners series. While they are standalones, it is best they are read in order.**

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PROLOGUE

I knew my fate my entire life.

I knew what was laid out in the cards.

I knew my role since the day I was born.

But that all changed after a chance meeting in a bar.

Fate had other plans.

The cards changed.

My role was forfeit.

But I didn't know it ten years ago. I only realized it now.

Funny how fate works. Showing its hand at the most inopportune time.

And now I am left deciding what choice to make.

A decision that will change everyone's lives.

But even as I have the gun in my hand, the only thing I can focus on are those dark, midnight eyes. The faintest hint of gold hitting them like the embers of flames. Because those eyes burn. Not just for her own worth and Aria's but for her fury, her

passion, her strength.

They burn for me too. That's one thing I have always seen. I've always known. Ten years never changed that fire burning in either of us.

And now as I aim my gun at the people threatening to destroy us both. I only have one choice to make.

Her or me?

Only one of us was meant to survive this game we were both born into.

It now comes down to who will pull the trigger first.

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1

KILIAN

“It’s simple. My people receive shipments. The money goes through one of your shell companies. You get a fifteen percent cut.”

“Fifteen percent!” the man across from me shouts. “That is not enough. I could be caught by the government. By Interpol. I need fifty percent.”

I chuckle as I watch the man in front of me. A sorry excuse for a businessman. “You need an out, Mr. Riley. You’ve been caught up in insider trading. You need us to save your company. You know I can make all those accusations go away.”

He glances to his business partner next to him. “It’s risky.”

“You’re in investments. I think you understand risk perfectly well. And this isn’t one of them. Besides, we all know what will happen to you if you don’t join us. Prison isn’t a friendly place.”

“How long will this go on for?” he asks me.

“That’s entirely up to you, Mr. Riley. But from my experience, the money is too good that no one wants to leave.”

“Who else is—”

I tsk at him, the corners of my mouth curling up into a smirk. “Don’t ask those kinds of questions.”

“But I—”

“You are not privy to that information. No one is. No one will know you are involved. Just as you will know no one else who is involved.”

He turns to his partner, whispering to him.

I place a tablet in front of him, the contract ready and waiting. “All you have to do is sign. One signature and all your problems go away.”

I lean back in my chair as I watch the two of them argue. Sweat drips down Riley’s face. I know he will sign. I’m not worried about that. They always do. Whether to save their own asses or because the power they feel from doing something illegal is so magnetic. A power that I always promise can lead to more.

But it rarely ever does. I only know seven people in the last ten years who have moved up through the ranks. And only twelve in the last twenty. I clench my jaw as I try not to dwell on the past. Of the things I’ve done, the lives I’ve destroyed. I never had a choice. This life was always meant to be mine. But I ruined many in the process. Broken friendships beyond a state of repair. My mind flickers to Bastian Montford. A friend whose life I ruined again and again. I destroyed his family. And I am still picking up those pieces. Still trying to right what I did wrong.

I dig my nails from my curled fist into the palm of my hand. Pulling myself out of the memories. Putting the mask back in place. Letting the man with no soul take over the room.

* * *

I hate New York City. Despise it. I never understood why. The first time I came here I thought maybe it was because of the bitter cold. It's cold at home in London and in Ireland. But something about the way the cold seeps into every crack of your marrow has always made me repulsed by this city.

Of course it could be the people, the rats, the trash. I could go on and on about the things that make me hate coming here. But when I sold my soul to my father, to The Partners, I gave up all the choices I could have in my life.

I stare off into the crowd as I sit in a dark corner of an upscale bar. I thought about going to a dive like the pubs I frequent in London and Dublin but in my bespoke suit I would stick out like a sore thumb. And that is not the kind of attention I want while I am here.

I watch girls in fake designer dresses dance on the dance floor. Their desperate need for attention not something I miss as they bat fake eyelashes at the rich men in the bar.

Not that I am much different from those rich men. It doesn't really matter where I am, either here with the fake girls or at a pub with the normal ones. If one of them catches my attention I'll be sure to take them back to a hotel for a good time. To give myself some type of pleasure while I live in hell.

I don't know how many drinks I've had but I begin to grow bored of this scene, not one girl catching my attention. I pay my bill and walk toward the exit when I do a double take of a woman with an hourglass shape, dark luscious curls, and dark eyes. I shake it off, my mind playing tricks on me. But then she bumps into me as I try to leave. She is not who I thought she was. I gave up on finding her years ago. But she reminds me of that girl I knew. The one that made me believe in something other than the destiny that was laid out for me.

“Excuse me,” she says with a Brooklyn accent. “I didn’t mean to run into you.”

The sound of her accent nothing like the one in my head makes the magic of the woman fall away. But the carnal need in my body, the whiskey that’s creating a fog in my brain has a different idea of how the night should turn out.

“My apologies,” I say to the woman as I wrap an arm around her waist. “I feel like I ran into you.”

She giggles and I fight the urge to roll my eyes. “I like your accent.”

Of course she does.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

She smiles at me, revealing brilliant-white teeth. “Please.”

I guide her to the bar and order another whiskey for myself. She orders a sex on the beach and I wonder why I am even bothering with this one. I know she will be easy. I know she will give me the release I need with no questions asked but something inside of me is tired of this game. I’m forty-one years old. I should be like my brothers. Married with kids, running the legal investment business my family owns. But I’m not. I am the one stuck in the black market, running the syndicate that made us billions.

The woman whispers in my ear, giggling as her tongue slides down my neck. I’ve already forgotten her name but as she not so subtly glides her hand over my dick, I give in.

I throw cash on the bar and pull her arm roughly as I direct us outside.

“You didn’t ask if I wanted to go anywhere with you?”

I smirk at her then grip her chin. “Baby, I don’t need to ask.”

She gasps just as I press my lips against hers. She gives in immediately and it almost takes the fun away. I like when they have a fight in them.

I pull away from her then drag her across the street to my hotel, avoiding the copious amounts of traffic on the busy streets of the city at this time of night.

She is all over me in the elevator on the way up to my room. I’m disappointed but not surprised when I grip her tits and find them fake. Everything about her is fake.

I scan my key card and pull her through the door. She gasps as she takes in the presidential suite, the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Manhattan. But I don’t let her admire it for long. Instead I push her to her knees and unbuckle my pants.

“Do I need to ask?” I say as I grip her chin.

She smiles up at me from her spot on the ground and pulls my pants down without a word.

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2

KILIAN

I lie in bed and stare at the ceiling. Not at all satisfied with the woman lying next to me. Just another day and another meaningless fuck. I don't even know why I bother anymore. Nothing will ever feel real, feel worth it.

The buzzing of my phone on the nightstand gets my attention. I grab it and see a text from my father. It's three in the morning here but eight a.m. in London. I'm surprised it took him so long to text me. I usually have messages from him by six.

I send a message off to my pilot then turn the screen off on my phone and silently groan as I get off the bed. I grab my clothes and pull them back on. I slide the suitcase I never unpacked out of the closet and walk out of the room.

* * *

I manage a couple hours of sleep on the plane before we land in London. I greet the driver my father sent as I slide into the back seat of an SUV.

I turn my phone on and answer emails as we drive out to my parents' estate just north of London. When we drive through the gate I sigh deeply as I take in the massive property. It's been in my family for generations. The house I grew up in, the house that I used to one day want as my own. A massive twenty-five-thousand-square-foot mansion on two hundred acres. It screams opulence and status. As a kid, I loved the freedom of the house. But now it feels confining, suffocating. I never thought such a

large house could feel so small. But now it does. The walls closing in on me every time I set foot through the grand front doors.

“Kilian!” my mother exclaims as their butler opens the door for me and takes my coat. “I’ve missed you.”

I wrap my arms around my mother. She is one of the strongest women I know. She knows all the secrets my father keeps, the secrets I keep, but she maintains her status like she knows nothing. A good societal wife who dotes on her husband, the CEO of the world’s largest investment firm, not the man who runs the largest crime syndicate in the world.

“I missed you too, Mum. It’s been too long.”

She grabs my hand and drags me to the parlor room. “It has been. You need to spend more time at your penthouse and less traveling for work. That way you can visit me more often.”

I squeeze her hand. “It’s hard to be a mama’s boy when I am away all the time but you know duty calls.”

A servant hands us each a drink as we take a seat in the formal sitting room. She frowns at me. “You should have the freedom to choose the life you want, Kilian.”

“Better not let father hear you.”

She scoffs as she sips on her martini. “Alistair knows my opinion on everything.”

“Yet he doesn’t listen to you.”

She smiles. “I get my way with most things. I just wish I got my way with you but...”

She trails off as she looks out the window into the distance.

“Mum?” I ask as I reach over and grab her hand. I study her, the way her face falls as she looks out into nothing in the distance. Her dark strawberry-blonde hair glowing orange in the afternoon light. Small frown lines form around her mouth and tiny lines crest her eyes. For someone in her late sixties who has been through more than any woman should have she still looks surprisingly young and beautiful.

She sighs and turns her brilliant-blue eyes toward me. The same eyes as mine. “I just wish you had what your brothers have.”

“Father has always had a plan for me,” I say quietly.

“That’s not what I mean, Kil. I know that one of you will have to take over the business someday. I know you risk your life and that worries me more than I will ever let you know. But... I wish you had what I had. A family. A wife and kids. Grandkids one day.” She pauses as she fiddles with a bracelet. “It’s not too late. I know your father set you on the path to take over The Partners because you weren’t married. But he has a family and he runs it. That doesn’t mean you can’t have one.”

I swallow down the glass of whiskey in my hand and gesture to a servant for more. “I know, Mum. But I gave up on that part of my life a long time ago. I am fine with the choices that have led me here.”

She gives me a sad look. “If that’s what you want to believe.”

“I—”

“Kilian.” My father’s pronounced voice booms as he enters the room.

“Father.” I nod at him.

“I take it everything went well in New York.”

I nod.

“Good.” He leans over and kisses Mum on the cheek. “I know you haven’t seen him in a while but I must steal him away for a few minutes.”

My mother rests her hand on my father’s cheek and nods. Despite how much anger I feel toward my father at times, my mother has always appreciated every side of him. When he is angry, frustrated, happy, sad. She never strays from his side. And I know he loves her dearly. He would protect her with his life.

“Come. Let’s speak in the office.”

I kiss my mum on the cheek and follow my father down the long, dim hall that leads to his office.

“I’m glad to hear the deal went well in New York. I wasn’t sure they would take the bait.”

I swirl the whiskey in my glass. “I made sure the right people had the insider trading documents.”

“Good. They were a smart choice, son. They have a lot of pull in the American government. And after those senators failed us, we need someone worthwhile.”

“They will do just fine. I am fully confident in that. We can send Lancaster and Dalby to the States soon. We will be the ones controlling power there within a year.”

He smiles at me as he rests his elbows on his desk and steeples his fingers. “I seem to have taught you well. But a year is pushing it, Kilian. You need to be careful you

don't overstep too much and get yourself killed."

I cross my ankle over my knee as I lean back in one of the wingback chairs across from his desk. "I learned from the best, Father. I know what cards I am playing."

He nods, his face falling serious. "How has the hunt for Di Masio been going?"

We never found out what family the Calvettis were working with. The men that attacked at the warehouse all escaped. My father wasn't happy that I was more concerned with Matías's life than finding the family that Charles Vanguard had been working with. He has lectured me a hundred times about how I am to take over as a Partner. That I need to accept my role in this organization. I have proved to him time and time again that I have. I let them fake my own death to prove my loyalty when I used my rank to save my friend. But it's never enough. Some days I wonder if my father will be the one that pulls the trigger that kills me.

I rub the back of my neck as I answer. "Progress has been slow."

"It's been five months, Kilian." His tone changing to the cruel man I know.

I clench my jaw. "I've had ten men working on finding him. I've been chasing ghosts trying to find him. He disappeared."

"The only way a man disappears like that is if he is dead," my father says, and I don't miss the warning in his tone.

"Then he may very well be," I growl. "I've never not been able to find someone. But everything leads to a dead end. His name isn't Nicolas Di Masio. Of that I know but without anything else, with Charles being dead, my resources are being stretched thin."

“Vanguard deserved his death.”

“And you never found anything from his tapped phones, father. What makes you think that I can find a man whose real name I don’t even know?”

“I suggest you figure it out, Kilian. And watch your tone with me. I may be your father but you are my protégé and I have no qualms against finding a new one.”

I keep my composure even through my father’s threats. I have no other choice. He dismisses me with a flick of his wrist and I walk out the door. I find my mother in the parlor room with my brothers after I grab my coat.

“You aren’t staying for dinner?” she asks me as she stands from the navy pin-tuck couch.

I shake my head. “I have business to attend to.”

“If Alistair said something to you...”

I shake my head. “No, Mum. I just need to go.”

I see the looks on my brothers’ faces. Looks of pity and sorrow. They don’t deal with The Partners. Their lives strictly focused on the investment firm. But I don’t want their pity. I accepted my role a long time ago and I have no regrets over it.

MIRABELLA

The salty breeze from the sea air plays across my hair as I bring two bowls of cioppino to a table sitting on the patio. I skirt around the rest of my tables, refilling drinks, and taking orders before heading into the kitchen and slumping against the counter.

“You overwork yourself, mimma .”

I sigh as I look over at the older woman. Thick gray hair is pinned up to her head with a clip, her weathered skin a deep olive with lines around her eyes and mouth. They are more prominent as she smiles at me. This woman who gave me a job, took me under her wing, acts like a grandmother to me. Hell, she calls me mimma , which means child. But we aren’t related. She used to be childhood friends with my grandmother. I always think that’s why she has cared for me in such a loving way, like family. Like the family I wish I had and not the one I am stuck with.

I moved to Sicily ten years ago. Escaping from the mess I got myself into. My real family is still close and they know where I live but it’s nice that they are not breathing down my neck every second of the day. Demanding things from me I don’t want to give. If my parents were still alive everything would be different. I wouldn’t feel like I am constantly watching over my shoulder, wouldn’t feel like I was walking a thin line between life and death. But that is the reality of my situation. The life I was born into.

But it's not the life I want for my daughter. It's why I ran here instead of being in Genoa where the rest of my family lives. I wanted a life for her that felt safe, where she didn't have a shadow hovering over her at all times. I made a deal with my family to live this life. And for some reason, they have agreed to it. My baby is safe even though I'm not. And maybe it's a lie I tell myself that she is truly safe. Because I don't think you can ever be safe when your family runs one of the largest mafia organizations in Italy. Not even just Italy. I know their power reaches further than that. Across Europe and no doubt to the States. But I try not to think about the blood that runs through my veins. The life I never wanted. I could have had everything I wanted ten years ago. I almost did. But just like fate would have it, I fell for the wrong man. A man who would have me killed if he knew who my family was. But that part of my past I try not to think about. Not that the thoughts don't rack my brain and dreams frequently. It's a life that I could never have. It's impossible now.

“Mimma?”

I blink a few times, shaking the thoughts from my head. “Sorry, Magda, it's been a long day.”

“You need to take a day off. I told you that you don't need to work five days a week here,” she scolds me.

“I know but Aria loves being in the kitchen and helping you with the pastries. I might as well make some money while she is here.” I stretch my back and grab the plates she sets in front of me.

“You know I am more than capable of watching her while I work. She is a smart girl. She doesn't get into trouble.”

“I know.”

“You need to take some time off. I don’t even remember the last time you took a vacation.”

I yawn as I make my way to the kitchen door. “I don’t need a vacation, Magda. I have everything I need here. A beautiful home, an amazing daughter, and you. What else could I need?”

Her eyes crinkle as she stares at me. “I may be old but I am not stupid. You need a man, Mirabella. You are wasting your good years.”

I roll my eyes as I walk through the doors to bring lunch to my tables.

“You don’t have many years left for another baby,” I hear her yell as I step outside.

By the time the lunch rush is over, I am exhausted. Maybe Magda is right and I need a vacation. I haven’t taken time off in eight years. Not since I had Aria. I let myself live off my family’s money for a year while I watched her grow. And when she turned one, I told my family I didn’t need them anymore, and I went back to work for Magda.

When I moved to Cefalù I had no idea what I was doing. I just knew that my grandmother had a home here and it was still in her maiden name. In my parents’ will, I found they passed it down to me. My mother left me a letter telling me it was always her escape from father when times got rough and she knew I would appreciate it. My grandmother’s childhood home has a simplicity and luxury to it I wouldn’t have expected. She lived here until she married my grandfather when she was only seventeen. He was vacationing in this peaceful seaside town and it was love at first sight. She didn’t learn until later that he was the son of a mafia don. But from my memories of her, she never regretted it. Never hated her life.

I wish I had her composure and her strength because the second I was old enough to

understand just what the family business was I was resentful. I remember my thirteenth birthday. I had invited kids from the private school my parents sent my brother and me to. I never had many friends but my mom promised me I could finally have a birthday party. I was thrilled, excited, I thought this may finally be the chance to build friendships with my classmates. But when the time came. No one showed. I waited for two hours by the pool. I remember feeling foolish as I cried. My brother laughed at me. My mother tried to soothe me but my father sent her away. He then told me the truth. Said that I was old enough to know. That I would never be able to have friends because their families were too scared to associate with a family like us. I told him I didn't understand. He said I would learn quickly. He gave me a knife for my birthday that year.

"Mama!" I hear Aria shout as she runs through the seaside restaurant, dropping her football bag, and launching herself into my arms.

"Hi, sweet angel." I wrap my arms around her, breathing in the strawberry smell of her luscious dark curls.

She pulls back from me and I look into her sapphire-blue eyes. "I got an A on my science project!"

I smile at her as I push her wild curls out of her face. "I'm so proud of you. I know how hard you worked on that."

She starts spewing off everything about her project and the science fair as I think about the destruction she made in the kitchen last week. She may only be eight years old but I can tell my family's blood runs through her veins with her fascination with explosions. I'm sure other parents would be worried about their kid's allure to explosives but I'm not. Besides, it was just a volcano project but she may have used more than just baking soda and soda water. I might try to keep her away from the mafia as much as possible but I know she needs to learn these skills. I can only

protect her for so long. Maybe it's because after my father gave me that knife, I became obsessed with it. I shut down all the feelings a thirteen-year-old girl should have and learned to like weapons. It all changed when my parents were murdered.

"Do you want me to make you dinner?" Magda asks as she wraps her arms around Aria.

I look at the clock. "No, it's fine. I need to get her to practice and it'll be cold by the time we make it home."

"I can drop something off."

I shake my head. "It's not necessary. I have something I can scrounge up for us after practice."

Magda tsks at me as Aria heads to the bar to talk to Magda's husband, Salvatore. "You have been here since you dropped her at school. Now you take her to practice and then get home and make her dinner." I go to cut her off but she beats me to it. "Then you help her with homework before putting her to bed. And I know you, Mira. I know that you then sit in a chair on the balcony and watch the waves as you drink enough whiskey to make you forget the past. You can't keep doing this to yourself. You need to take a break. You need to live your life. Not your past."

I pinch my fingers between my eyes, sick of the same lecture I get weekly from her. "All that matters is that little girl."

Magda purses her lips and eyes me with disdain. "You need to take care of yourself, mimma . Because when you burn yourself out, who is going to take care of her?"

"I will always be there for her."

She shakes her head. “Until you’re not.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

She shrugs. “I have orders to make. And she is going to be late to practice.”

I groan as I walk away from her. I’ve never told her or Salvatore about my past. About Aria’s father, about my family. But from her hints, I wonder if she knows more than she lets on.

I pick up Aria’s football bag and wave goodbye to Salvatore as I walk my daughter to practice.

* * *

By the time I get Aria tucked into bed and I’m sitting on the balcony drinking whiskey, all I can think about are Magda’s words from earlier. And the said realization I am doing exactly as she said.

I swallow down the whiskey my glass, feeling the burn slide down my throat. The bottle is sitting next to me on the table and I pour another glass of the pot still Irish whiskey. It’s one of my favorites. The smoothness of it hits my tongue before it warms my insides all the way down as it reaches my stomach. I toy with the label on the bottle as I try not to think about my past. About a time when I thought I was going to have everything I wanted. Until it all came crashing down. Of course the events that led to me moving here ten years ago were nowhere near as painful as that day two and a half years ago when I sat just inside the house with the news on. A story that should mean nothing to me broke my heart all over again and to this day I still feel its burn. The ache so deep inside of me I wonder if it will break me.

I close my eyes as I hold back tears I haven’t let myself shed in ten years, except for

that day two and a half years ago. The only tears I let myself shed for him. I swallow the lump in my throat then pour myself another glass of whiskey to drown out all the memories that threaten to flood to the surface.

MIRABELLA

I take the scraper and smooth out the grout on the bathroom tile of the guest bathroom. I love this house. It's nearly a hundred years old and just a few blocks from the hustle and bustle of the center of town. Not to mention it looks right out onto the Mediterranean. But because of its location and lack of upkeep in the last thirty years it became outdated and run down. My mother did what she could, but never spent much time here to rehab it into something modern.

I've spent the last eight years saving up as much money as I can to pay for the renovations. It's part of the reason I work so much at Magda's café. I have money. A lot of it. But it's sitting untouched in a bank account. I don't want dirty money. I never have.

So over the last five years, I've remodeled the house into my dream home. I only have a few rooms to add some finishing touches to and then it will be done. But to me, it's already perfect. An old Italian kitchen with a wood-fire stove but with more modern amenities to make it more sufficient. Including the huge island which I paid a pretty penny for. I turned the entire third floor into my master suite. A large deck takes up the expanse of the house and it's covered with a beadboard roof. I spend all my evenings out there, smelling the salty air, and watching the waves crash against the beach. Usually accompanied with whiskey.

My other favorite spot is the small garden in the back, shaded by an ivy-covered pergola. I filled it with lush plants and vegetables. Something my mother always had

at our home in Genoa. Aria loves it more than me and spends all her time out there when she isn't at school or playing football. Of course she is back there practicing though.

I wipe away excess grout when I hear the front door open then close. Magda agreed to watch Aria for the day so I could get some of these renovations done around the house that I had been putting off for weeks. Plus the café is closed today and she always enjoys spending time with my daughter on her days off.

“Mirabella.”

I wince when I hear my brother's voice as he enters the house. I rarely speak to him. My hatred for him is palpable. And I hate when he shows up unannounced. Not that he ever shows up announced. He never tells me when he is coming by and I hate it. Hate that I have to keep myself on my toes. I would much prefer if he never came by at all.

“What do you want, Ezio?” I say as I wipe my hands on my sweats and walk out of the bathroom to find him in my kitchen.

He snags an apple out of the fruit bowl on the island and sinks his teeth into it. He chews slowly as he stares at me, his brown eyes penetrating into me and I want nothing more than to pull the gun out of the drawer in the island and shoot him.

“Can't I visit my sister whenever I want?” he says with a smirk.

“No. I've told you not to come here.”

“You know that isn't an option.” He takes another bite of the apple and swallows.

“Where is my precious niece?”

I clench my fist, my long nails piercing my skin. “Not here.”

“I do miss that little girl.”

“Ezio,” I stammer. “What do you want?”

He rounds the kitchen island and stands next to me, pushing a strand of loose hair off my face. “You really should come home to Genoa. You wouldn’t have to work like you do now.” He gestures to the house. “Fixing up this old village home.”

I push his hand away. “I’m not going back to Genoa. You know that. Giancarlo knows that. You can’t say—”

“You’re a Renzetti Mirabella, no matter how much you wish you weren’t.”

“And Giancarlo has no problem with me living here,” I say as I cross my arms over my chest.

Ezio scoffs at me. “Believe what you want, Mira, but you and I both know he would much rather have you at home.” I glare at my brother as he runs his fingers over the butcher block on the counter. “You do have a useful set of skills that we could use.”

“Get out of my house, Ezio,” I stammer. “Now.”

He shrugs his shoulders then walks toward me so close he presses his chest against mine, causing me to lean back against the island. His gaze powerful as he stares down at me. He may only be older than me by a year but he knows how to evoke fear in me. “I came here to warn you, Mirabella. It’s not safe right now. You need to come home.”

I shake my head. “You are making it not safe by showing your face here, Ezio. I’ve

had no threats, nothing in three years. Not since the last time you showed up.”

“Our enemies are watching.”

I push against his chest, forcing him to back up. “No. Your enemies are watching you. They are not my enemies.” I push off the counter and walk toward the door to the garden, staring out at the small fountain, the wind chimes, the small patch of grass Aria uses to practice. “Every time you come here, you bring danger.”

I hear him sigh behind me. “It’s part of our life, sorrellina .”

I close my eyes knowing he speaks the truth. That I can never escape the Renzetti name. Never live a life like I dreamed of ten years ago. “I’ll be careful.”

“You’ll be safer at the estate.”

I turn around and lean against the glass door. “I am not pulling Aria away from her friends, her football, her life.” I pause then look up at Ezio. “Remember what it was like when we were kids? We had nothing. Kids didn’t want to be friends with us because their parents knew who our parents were, who our family was. We only had our cousins. I don’t want that life for Aria. I want her to be a kid. I want her to be normal.”

Ezio takes a step toward me and wraps his arms around me. “That was your life, not mine. I had friends. I think you remember them.” His grip tightens, squeezing me to the point of pain as his grip crushes my lungs. As horrible memories flood my system of those friends he is talking about. “I know what you want, Mirabella. But that is something she can never have.”

I gasp for breath as my brother squeezes tighter, a threat. I move my leg enough that I slam my knee into his balls, causing him to let me go. I duck under his arm and slide

across the kitchen floor, grabbing a knife from the counter. “Don’t you ever do that to me again. And don’t tell me what I can and cannot provide for my little girl. Get out of my house, Ezio. Leave Sicily. You aren’t wanted here.”

He holds his hands up in front of me. “Fine. I’ll leave. But watch your back. I don’t want to lose my sister.”

I scoff at that as he leaves my house. I slump against the island. Thoughts swirling in my head. I have no idea who he is talking about and I have no idea why anyone would come here. I haven’t played a role in the family business in thirteen years. There is no reason anyone would come after me now.

* * *

Despite not wanting to listen to my brother, I did. For a week. I spent it being cautious of everything. I dropped off and picked up Aria from school every day. I didn’t let her walk the three blocks home with her friends. I cut my hours back at the café and I saw the worry in Magda’s eyes at the change of my behavior.

But despite all of my precautions, nothing happened. Not one damn thing. It’s been two weeks and I am utterly sick of keeping an eye over my shoulder. It’s not that I don’t believe what my brother said could be true because I am not naive to think something couldn’t happen when you are the daughter of a mafia family. But usually there are some signs and there was absolutely nothing.

“You look exhausted,” Magda tells me as we sit along the sidelines of Aria’s football game. “And you haven’t been working as much.”

I glance over to her and shrug. “Maybe I’m coming down with something.”

She gives me a look that tells me she doesn’t believe me. I have no idea how much

she knows about my family. What my grandmother may have told her when she met my grandfather or what my mother may have let slip. Or maybe she just knows that my last name isn't just any last name but actually related to the Renzetti crime family.

I don't give her anything else and focus on Aria's game. I watch as she shouts back and forth to her teammates as she kicks the ball to them. She loves football. She asked me when she was four if she could start playing when I found her sitting inches from the television watching the Italian team lose in the World Cup. She went on and on about how she analyzed how they were playing and knew what they screwed up. I couldn't help but laugh when she droned on for ten minutes. But then she rewound the live play and my jaw dropped to the floor. She was four but she analyzed the game like she was twenty years older. Needless to say, I signed her up for a children's league the next day. Next year she will be eligible to try out for a junior travel league and I hope I have the money to pay for it. I don't want to break into the family fund that was left for me but the urge is there if it's for my daughter.

She scores a goal and I jump out of my chair screaming and dancing for her. The smile that whips across her face as she looks at me makes my heart warm. She is the best thing that ever happened to me. My pride and joy. I love her to the moon and back. And I will do anything to protect her. And I truly mean anything.

They end up winning six to three, Aria scoring three of those goals. I think she very well may be a star one day.

She comes sprinting over to me with one of her teammates, giggling and laughing. "Mama!"

"What a game, baby girl! Three goals! I hope you remember me when you become a famous football player," I joke as I wrap my arms around her.

She rolls her eyes at me as I pull away and a little piece of my heart breaks. This girl

is getting so big and soon enough she will be a teenager. I have no doubt she will have an attitude like I did and she will fight me daily. I just hope she remembers when that time comes that I am still her best friend.

“Can I sleep over at Tina’s tonight? Her mom is making homemade pizza and ice cream sundaes and we are celebrating our win. Like half the team is going and I can’t be the only one not there. Besides, I scored the most goals and I should be a part of the party. And Tina is like my best friend, so it’s only natural that I go. Everyone else would think it’s weird if I’m not there.”

I bite down a smile as she blabbers on. She always goes off on a tangent when she wants something. And normally I would let her go to a sleepover but my brother’s words still linger in the back of my head making me more cautious than normal. But it’s been two weeks and nothing. Not one single thing has made the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

“Please, Moooooommmmm,” she begs as she sticks out her bottom lip.

“Yeah, please.” Tina drops to her knees dramatically in front of me, her hands clasped together. “We haven’t had a sleepover in so long and what if something happens between now and the next time we have one and Aria can’t come? You have to let her come.”

Magda snickers next to me as I let a laugh slip from my lips. I look up and see Maria, Tina’s mom, walking toward us.

“Tina, are you really on your knees begging Mirabella to let Aria stay over?” She huffs. “You are so dramatic. I swear I should be paying for acting lessons, not football.”

Tina shoots her mom a look that has me snorting in laughter.

“How are you, Maria?” I ask, even though we see each other four times a week at practice.

She picks up her toddler, who is pulling on her hand. “Don’t even get me started.” She groans. “This one will not leave my side today. I had to rush the twins to ballet practice before this game, Angelo left early for his traveling league, which at least gives me a little more peace, so I only have to deal with four children the next three days instead of five.”

I laugh. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“My husband is a saint. If it weren’t for him, I would be drinking wine right now out of my water bottle.”

“I wants the wines,” her toddler whines as he pulls on her hair.

“I probably should give him some so he sleeps,” she says sarcastically.

“You sure you want to have a sleepover tonight? You seem to have your hands full.”

She shrugs. “I promised Tina I would let her have one. And the twins are staying at their friend’s house tonight. So you know, may as well exchange two kids for eight more.”

I laugh. “You literally are a saint.”

“I grew up with ten siblings. Five kids sounded easier.” She looks over at her daughter and mine who have gone to kicking a ball back and forth between each other. “So are you okay with Aria coming over tonight? Tina really wants her there.”

I glance at my daughter and see how happy she is with her friends. I feel terrible that

I've kept her sheltered the last two weeks. Her only time with her friends at school or practice.

I nod. "Yeah, she can sleep over. When should I drop her off?"

"I told the others five was fine. I need to pick up the twins from ballet then take them to their friend's house. Gino should be off work soon so he can get the house ready," she says as she refers to her husband.

"Okay, sounds good."

Maria smirks at me. "You should go out tonight. Flirt with a man. And you know..." she clicks her tongue.

I shake my head at her. "As much fun as that would probably be. A night alone sounds even better."

"One of these days, I will make my sisters watch all the kids and we will have a girls' night. God knows I need one just as much as you. And I would love nothing more than getting tipsy and horny and stumbling in the front door to bang Gino's brains out."

I nearly spit my water out at that.

"What's horny?" her toddler asks.

I do spit my water out that time.

"Nothing important," she mumbles to him and then sets him down. "See what I mean? I need a night out."

I laugh. “We’ll plan for it.”

“Good,” she sighs. “Well, I better get this caravan home. See you later.”

Aria skips over to me, over the moon excited that I agreed to let her sleep over.

* * *

I settle into my sofa and pull up a movie as I sip on my whiskey. It’s been so long since I have been alone in this house. I thought the quietness would make me anxious, but I actually feel relaxed for the first time in weeks. I pull a blanket over my legs and lean my neck against the back of the couch, the warmth of the whiskey settling any of my worries.

I let all my thoughts float away. My brother’s warning, my family drama, and a past I want to let go of.

My eyes drift closed as I let the quiet of the night seep in. Just the sounds of the TV and the tumble of shoes in the dryer fill the space. To most people, that would mute out the sound of anything else. But my eyes fly open when I hear the slight creak of a door, the light step of a foot on the stairs. My ears trained to listen for it.

I hold my breath and wait for more movement. Listening to the number of feet I hear, the direction they are walking.

My brother’s warning resonates through my body as I hear the lightest footsteps get closer to the living room.

5

KILIAN

I stare out my window at the dreary view outside. February in London is one of my least favorite times of year. A mix of snow and rain and gray skies. I should find business to do somewhere warmer. But I have too much paperwork to look at to take the time to acquire new business for The Partners. I am still trying to regain some of the business back that we lost when the Calvetti family tried to screw us over by getting involved with whatever family Di Masio was working for. I've managed to find all but one order of weapons. It wasn't hard to get our buyers to come back to us. I don't make idle threats and they have learned to listen well.

I'm skimming through some delivery documents when my phone rings.

"We found him," one of my men says through the line.

"Are you sure?"

"Ninety percent. We cross-referenced a lot of CCTV footage with every town where a Di Masio lived. It took a long time. But we have some grainy footage of a man very similar to Nicolas in a small town outside Palermo. He looks different, he has a full beard but my software got a partial match on his eyes. It's worth checking out."

I run my fingers along my chin. "When was this?"

"Two weeks ago. But we have no footage of him leaving. We saw him in the town

for a few days, saw the vehicle he was driving. It's parked a few blocks from a residence with the name Di Masio."

"The car hasn't moved? He could have ditched it."

"It's possible," my associate tells me. "But he could also be hiding out at the house. We have footage of him entering but never leaving."

Interesting.

"Who else lives there?" I ask.

"A woman and a kid. They could be hiding him."

"Do you have information on them?"

He clears his throat. "I'm sending over what I have now. But I will tell you that is not who is living in the house. The property is under the name of a man who passed away fifty years ago. There are some illegible documents about current ownership but the last name is clear, Di Masio. There is a young woman living in the house now."

"Send everything you have to me," I say, then hang up the phone.

A grin takes over my face once I read the documents my man sends over to me. I finally found the man who has eluded me for the last five months. A man that tried to take down The Partners, the crime syndicate that is almost mine. And I know the second I get my hands on Nicolas Di Masio and the family he is working for, everything that I have sacrificed will be worth it. The power will be mine.

* * *

I sit in the back of an SUV with my bodyguard and two other men as we watch the house in Cefalù, Italy. There is another SUV with four other men on the other side of the street awaiting my signal. From the information I got from my source, a woman and child live here. I am guessing they are related to Di Masio since he doesn't come here often so I doubt he has a wife.

We checked out the house where the car was ditched and the house looks like it's been abandoned for years. We broke in and found no sign of squatters.

My gut tells me this house is where he is. One of my men used body heat cameras and only one person is inside. It's either him or someone who knows where he is. And I will use whatever means necessary to find him and destroy him.

"The house behind this one backs up to the garden of this house," Andre says as he climbs back into the SUV. "No one is home. I had Marcus deactivate both security systems."

I nod as I take in the house in front of us. My redemption within grasp. "I'll go through the back with you and Mario. The others will take the front once we are inside."

The guys in the van nod. I load my clip into my gun and place it into the holster at my shoulder as I climb out of the vehicle.

We walk silently down the street as if we are just tourists enjoying the ocean view. We round the block and Mario picks the lock to get us into the empty house. We make our way to the second floor and to a small balcony that opens up just above the wall dividing the properties.

Andre goes first, climbing over the railing and stepping onto the wall. He then lowers himself into the backyard. I follow with Mario behind me.

The sliding door to the garden is unlocked, making it easier for us to get into the house. I nod to Mario and he takes the lead to unlock the front door for the other men. Andre heads up the stairs and I make my way to the living room, the sound of the TV pulling me in.

I turn the corner expecting to find someone on the couch. A bottle of whiskey sits open and a half-full glass next to it. But the room is empty.

The click of a gun safety causes me to spin abruptly, my weapon out and my finger on the trigger.

I'm greeted by a woman in a silk bathrobe with dark hair piled on her head. Dark-brown eyes, they are almost black, penetrate me as she points her weapon at me. A confused look takes over her face as she takes me in but she doesn't drop her hold on the Smith and Wesson pointed at me.

I don't miss the ache in my chest at the vision in front of me. I must be hallucinating. I haven't seen her in ten years. Not since she disappeared without a word. I spent three years trying to find her before I gave up. My mind focused on The Partners and the destruction I was causing.

"Bella?"

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6

MIRABELLA

“Kilian?” I blink a few times, unable to comprehend how the hell the man in front of me is standing in front of me. “You... you’re dead.”

He takes a step closer to me, a smirk on his face. “I assure you, I am very much alive.”

I back up to keep my distance. This may be the man I fell for ten years ago but he broke into my house and has a gun pointed at me. “But... I saw the news. I saw... they said you were dead.”

“I know,” he says as he prowls closer to me.

I back up and glance up the stairs where I see another man with a gun. This isn’t good.

What the hell do they want? What did Ezio do?

I back up into the kitchen as Kilian stalks toward me. I listen for more footsteps, more men. If he isn’t here alone, then he has to be here with more than one other person. A quick glance to my left lets me know no one is in the kitchen. I back my way around the island until it’s my only shield against Kilian besides the gun in my hand.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

He studies me and I have a hard time shutting my brain off to all the memories with him. The secret conversations, the inside jokes, the stolen kisses, the twisted sheets.

“I could ask you the same thing, Bella.” He clicks his tongue as he takes a casual stance against the wall, his gun still aimed at me. “Or should I say Mirabella? I’m not quite sure I know who you are. Who you ever were.”

I gulp at his words. He must have looked for me. Figured out the fake name I had in Dublin wasn’t really me.

“Tell me, is it Bella Gallo or Mirabella Di Masio? Or maybe some other name you are keeping secret.” He takes two steps toward the island until he is leaning over it, his elbows propped in front of him. “Or maybe neither of those names is real.”

I clench my jaw. “I know who you are.”

A diabolical grin takes over his face. “I would hope so, mo stór . We did spend two years fucking.”

I ignore the term of endearment and his crass words for what we had. “You’re in The Partners.”

He blinks in shock so briefly someone else might miss it but he doesn’t miss a beat with his words. “And you are in the mafia.”

“No. I’m not.”

He starts to move around the island but I move with him to keep our distance. “How many lies are you going to tell me tonight, Bella?” He laughs then, a cynical laugh that sends chills down my spine. “Actually, one truth is all I would really like. Since it seems you lied to me since the day we met.”

I swallow and wonder just how much he knows. Does he know about Aria? “I’m not in the mafia.”

“I have evidence that proves otherwise.”

I glare at him. “Why would it matter if I was? You’re in The Partners. Just as merciless as any mafia family.” I pause as anger boils in my blood. “Actually they’re worse.”

His expression remains blank at my accusation. “Where is Nicolas?”

I scrunch my brow in confusion. “Nicolas? I don’t know a Nicolas.”

He continues to have us circle around the island. And I don’t miss what he is doing, trying to force my back to the doorway to the kitchen.

“Is he not your husband? Or maybe your lover? From the looks of it, he isn’t giving it to you like I did.” He inches closer to me as I fumble to keep my footing and my eye on the door behind me. “Do you remember those nights? The ones where I had you tied up and screaming my name for hours. When you let me take a knife and slide it—”

“Enough!” I shout.

“Mmm, you are getting riled up just the way I like it.”

“What do you want, Kilian?”

His playful face turns serious. “Where the fuck is Nicolas?”

I skim my hand along the bottom lip of the island and find the secret door that holds a

knife I keep hidden. “I told you I don’t know a Nicolas.”

“He was in your house just a few weeks ago. I doubt you forgot about a gentleman caller?”

I scrunch my brow. What the hell is he talking about? Then it hits me. “You mean Ezio?”

“Ezio?”

“My brother,” I say just as I hurl the knife in my hand and hit Kilian in the shoulder, causing him to drop his gun. My stupid heart not willing to use my own gun to shoot him.

“Fuck!” he yells as he grips the blade with his other hand.

I turn and run, making it through the kitchen doorway and sliding across the tile as I try to make it to the front door. But a large man steps into the hall, blocking my escape. I drop and go to roll underneath him but he’s too quick. All I see is the butt of his gun coming for my head before everything goes black.

* * *

My head is throbbing as I come to. The warm feeling of blood drips down the side of my head and down my neck. My eyes flutter open but the pain of the light is too much to keep them open. I try to gain my senses. I’m sitting in a chair. My arms tied behind me, the cut of zip ties pinching my skin as I move my wrists. My legs are also tied down. All I can think of right now is that I’m happy I let Aria go to a sleepover. I just pray to God they don’t try to find her.

I attempt to open my eyes again as I lift my head. I blink away the pain and take in

my surroundings. I'm still at home. In my kitchen. I'm tied to one of the kitchen chairs.

I glance to the side and see Kilian talking to the man that knocked me out. Kilian was wearing a dark-gray three-piece suit earlier but he's removed the jacket, vest, and shirt. He stands shirtless with a bandage covering his right shoulder, bloodstains still on his skin. I smirk, I hope it hurt when I hit him with that knife.

"Are you just going to keep me tied to this damn chair, or are you going to tell me what the fuck you want?" I growl to get his attention.

He looks over at me and smiles. That smile that won me over twelve years ago. "Ahh, she's awake." He walks over to me and traces a finger down the side of my head where I'm bleeding. "I never would have someone hurt you, anam cara. But you did throw a knife at me."

"You deserved it."

"Did I?" he asks as he circles me. I follow his gaze when he reaches my front, lust fills his eyes as he takes in my body. That's when I notice the silk robe I have on has fallen off my shoulder, revealing my see-through red lace bra. His finger trails over the top of my breast causing goose bumps to flood my skin. "You always had a taste for sexy lingerie. I'm glad to see that hasn't changed."

"Fuck you."

He leans over me, his hands clamping down on my thighs, his face inches from mine. "Maybe in a different life. Now tell me where your brother is."

"I don't know," I spit as I look him in the eyes with fury.

“You know, for someone who claims they aren’t in the mafia, you seem to have a handful of weapons in this house. And your knife-throwing skills are on point.”

I grit my teeth. “I’m not in the mafia.”

He squeezes my thighs harder. “But your family is.”

I keep my face straight, not giving anything away.

“Boss, we found the girl. She is at a friend’s house.”

Kilian glances over at the large man in the doorway. “Good. Send someone to retrieve her.”

“Don’t you dare put your hands on my daughter,” I yell.

He lets go of my thighs and stands tall, then takes one hand and wraps it around my throat, pushing my head back into an uncomfortable position. “Then tell me where Ezio is?”

“I don’t know,” I hiss. “But my daughter has nothing to do with this.”

“I’m not here to play games, Bella. And no harm will come to you or your daughter if you answer my questions.”

“Then take your hand off my throat.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because if you kill me, I can guarantee you’ll be just as dead as I am.”

He leans into me. “Who are you?”

I glance at the man at the door. “Don’t go near my daughter and I’ll tell you.”

“Deal,” he says but doesn’t take his hand off my throat, his grip tightens.

“Only you,” I gasp.

“You know everyone will find out anyway.” He steps between my legs, his knee coming close to my center.

“Maybe I have more secrets that I don’t want the others to hear.”

His eyes take in my body once more. He leans over and whispers in my ear. “I know you liked it rough, Bella. Dirty and raw. But I don’t think I once tied you to a chair and fucked you until you blacked out.”

I swallow down the lust as he whispers those words in my ear. “Get your men to leave and maybe you’ll get your chance,” I lie.

He chuckles into my ear then bites hard on the lobe, causing a muffled scream. “You only wish.”

I meet his gaze and I can see the lust in his eyes. He turns to the man at the door. “Leave. Get everyone out. I have this under control.”

“Are you sure? We can wait—”

“Leave,” he commands, power ebbing through his words.

I glance to the side, see the man nod and leave the kitchen. Kilian’s grip drops from

my neck and I gasp in deep breaths.

This is not the man I remember. No this man is like my brother, my cousins. Cruel. Ruthless. Heartless. I don't know how I ever fell for him. I didn't even know the lie he was living until the day I left Dublin.

“Who are you?”

I snarl at him. “I thought you wanted to know where my brother was.”

He pulls another chair from the kitchen table and sits across from me. “What is your brother's name?”

I sigh. “Ezio. I've already told you that.”

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and shows me a picture. “Is this your brother?”

I could play dumb and pretend it's not him. But it is. An older picture from when I used to see him more often. He's clean-shaven and handsome. He looks like the son of a don. Unlike now, where he looks like he has been living in shambles, hiding out.

“I played by your rules, Bella, and I let my men go. Answer the question.”

I close my eyes. I don't have much of a choice. If I don't talk, I know he will kill me or one of his men will. And then what will happen to Aria? I'm sure my uncle will take her and bring her up in the family. The exact opposite of what I want. “Yes, that's him.”

“Why is he going by the name Nicolas Di Masio?”

Di Masio? He's never used that name. I shrug. “I don't know why he would use

Nicolas.”

Kilian leans his elbow onto his knees. “But Di Masio is your name?”

I drop my head and look to the side. “Yes.”

He clicks his tongue. “Don’t lie to me, Bella. Or should I call you Mirabella?”

I stay silent as I glance at him. He’s playing with a knife. The knife I threw at him that still has his dried blood on it.

“My name is Mirabella,” I say in defeat.

“Did our two years together mean nothing to you that you couldn’t tell me that?” he asks with venom in his voice.

I snap my eyes at him. “My mother called me Bella. I used to only let those closest to me call me that. But not anymore.”

“Why?”

I drop my head again, realizing I said more than I wanted. His presence is causing me to lose my composure. And I can’t afford that. But I was never able to keep my composure around him.

I feel the cold blade of the knife under my chin as he lifts my head so our eyes meet. “Why, Bella?”

I flinch at the name. But then his hand touches my cheek and I can’t help but relax at his touch. Even if he has me tied to a chair.

“Fine. If you aren’t going to tell me that, then tell me where your brother is.”

“I’m telling you the truth. I don’t know.” I say in defeat.

“Why was he here then?”

“He warned me that I was in danger. Wanted me to come home,” I lie.

“And where is home?”

“Venice,” I lie again. I know we have some distant family there. It should keep him off Ezio for a bit.

“So I’ll find him in Venice?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. That’s just where he told me to go.”

He stands up and circles me again. “And why would you be in danger?”

“I don’t know, Kilian. Okay? I live out here on my own with my kid. Ezio has always been trouble and I try to stay away from him,” I explode.

His fingers trail over my shoulders and I feel his breath in my ear. “If he were to show up here again, would you tell me?”

I could give two shits about my brother. But I don’t want Kilian to know that. I can’t trust him. “Can you guarantee nothing will happen to my daughter?”

He circles back around me and sits down, studying me. “Yes.”

“Then fine. But the last time he was here was the first time I heard from him in over a

year.”

Kilian twirls the knife in his hand. “If he is worried about you, he may come back sooner rather than later.”

“Maybe.” I shrug.

He leans back in his chair. “Well, that’s settled then.”

“Then untie me.”

He gives a derisive laugh. “I like seeing you like this though.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Kilian.”

He takes the knife and presses the edge of the blade against my breast, then slowly drags it down my stomach, pushing the silk fabric of my robe open as he does it. “I missed you, Bella. I went back to the bar the night after you rushed out of my home. They told me you quit. I went to your apartment, the landlord said you moved out. What happened?”

I take a shaky breath. I can’t tell him. I can’t risk it. Instead, unwanted tears come to my eyes and I fight like hell to keep them in.

“Why did you leave without a goodbye, Bella?” he asks as he slices through the sash on my robe, causing it to fall open. His voice turns soft, almost broken. “Why did you leave me?”

I can’t hold back the tears any longer. I bite my lip as I try to keep my uneven breaths in. But being around this man I would have given my whole heart to is making my walls crack. This man I thought was dead. The man that has owned me since the day I

met him.

Suddenly I feel the knife against my ankles, the zip ties snapping off. I open my eyes to find Kilian kneeling in front of me, a look of despair on his face. “Why?” he pleads.

I shake my head. “I can’t... I can’t.” I struggle to get the words out as I look into those sapphire eyes I spent so many nights staring into. Nights we told each other everything. Everything except for what made up the core of us.

His hands move up my thighs, to my hips, and slowly along the outside of my breast before his hands cup my face. “Why?” he asks again.

“Let me go,” I cry. “Just please, let me go.”

He drops his hands as his head falls. He slowly stands without another word. He cuts the ties on my wrists then walks toward the window across from me.

I pull my hands in front of me, rubbing the red lines on my wrists. I stare at Kilian’s back. I can see the sadness and the defeat in his shoulders. I also see scars and marks that weren’t there ten years ago between the ink of his tattoos and I wonder what he has been through. What has changed him from the carefree man I knew so well. Because now he is a stranger.

I am standing and walking toward him before I even realize what is happening. My hands land on his back and memories hit me as I feel my hands on him again. “Kilian,” I whisper.

He spins around so fast I nearly lose my balance but his hands grab my hips and he presses me into the brick wall behind me. His nose is in the groove of my neck and he inhales deeply. “You still smell like you used to. Of lemon and patchouli.”

“Kilian,” I whimper as his hands tighten on my hips.

“I never thought I would find you, Bella. Never thought I would see you again. But for years I told myself if I ever saw you again, I would never let you go.”

I shudder at his words. At the meaning behind them. Knowing he felt the same way I did even though neither of us actually said it.

“But I can’t be with you.” His lips press into my clavicle, across my neck, and up behind my ear to that spot that makes my toes curl. Then his lips are on my temple, my cheek, the outside of my own lips. I want to grab him. I want to pull him into me. But I don’t. I slowly put a hand on his chest and feel him shake underneath my touch. His lips graze against mine. “I can’t be with you until you tell me the truth.”

He pulls away and I feel the sudden chill from the loss of his body heat. “And I don’t think you will ever give me that.”

He picks up his shirt from the table and pulls it on. I watch as he buttons each button, then pulls on his vest, then his jacket. He slips a card out of his pocket. “If you see or hear from your brother, call this number. They will get in contact with me.”

He says nothing else as he walks out of my house and I am left standing with my heart in shambles in the kitchen.

7

KILIAN

By the time I get back to my penthouse in London, my anger has erupted. It's past boiling. Bella Gallo, the woman who left me without a word, the woman I spent three years looking for, the woman I thought was a ghost, was standing right in front of me. And her name isn't Bella Gallo, it's Mirabella Di Masio.

I punch my fist through the wall in my office as I pick up my phone and contact Tomas. He answers on the first ring.

"I need you to find everything out that you can about a Mirabella Di Masio. She lives in Cefalù, Sicily."

"Do you have any other information on her?" Tomas asks.

"She is related to a mafia family. But I believe she changed her name. Di Masio is not her last name."

I hear the scratch of a pen on paper through the phone line. "I'll call you in two days." Then he hangs up on me.

I slide into my desk chair and rest my head in my palms. My mind is in overdrive. Who the hell is she? How did she disappear without a trace, that not even my men could find her? She has to be related to the mafia. It's the only way she could have disappeared the way she did.

I feel my heart tighten in my chest as I think about how she looked. That damn perfect body hasn't changed. If anything it's gotten even more appealing. I remember the feeling and taste of every curve of her body. The sounds she would make as I licked my way from her toes to her lips. How her body sucked me in every time I entered her. The feeling of her nails across my back. Her teeth on my shoulder. The way she gave me her entire body like it belonged to me.

I take a deep breath as I try to push away the thoughts of her. But it's no use. I haven't been able to get her out of my head since the day we met.

I slide onto a stool in the corner of one of the busier pubs in Dublin. My head pounding from a day of fixing business deals. I should kill the man that fucked everything up for my father but I know I need to wait until I find out more information. He couldn't have been working alone. There is too much fucked-up shit going on for one stupid, power-hungry man to do. And Carl is worthless. He doesn't have the mental capacity for this shit. If it was someone like me, I can understand one man doing it all. But there is only one me and that is why my father sent me to fix it.

Not that I mind coming to Ireland. I have my own home here in Dublin. My grandparents live less than an hour north of the city on a sprawling estate. The same place my mother grew up. I loved coming here as a kid. And I still love coming here now. It feels like home, more so than London ever has.

“What can I get you?” an unfamiliar female voice asks me.

I've been coming to this place since I was eighteen. And that is not a voice I recognize. I look up to meet dark eyes, so dark they are almost black. Lush, black waves reach halfway down her chest. A chest with a tank top on that does little to cover her full breasts, accentuating her tiny waist. My eyes trail down her body to find full hips with jeans glued on to her. My gaze travels up her body as she folds her arms across her chest, only pressing her tits higher. She's young, far younger than me

but those full lips and sassy eyes have me clenching my fist.

Perfection.

“It’s a hundred euro to look at me like that.”

I smirk at her. “You are worth far more than a hundred euro.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “You’re right. I’m priceless. But unfortunately for you, I’m not on the menu. Now order a damn drink or get out.”

I laugh at her rebuttal. “The Brennans would never kick me out of here.”

She raises a brow at me and the sassiness in her eyes is turning me on. “You think that if you just spit out the owner’s name, I’m going to believe that you know them? I’ve been working here for six months and never seen you here before.”

I shrug. “I travel for work.”

“Sure.” She taps her finger on her arm, her patience with me growing thin.

I want to tease her, drag on this game but I need a drink more than anything. “I’ll have a fifteen-year Redbreast. Neat.”

“That’s a hundred-euro whiskey. How do I know you can pay for it?”

I snort at her as I look down at myself. I’m dressed nicer than anyone in here. My custom-made three-piece suit yells money and she knows it.

I lean forward so our faces are inches apart. “I was willing to pay far more to look at you. Trust me, I can afford it. In fact, why don’t you pour yourself one, doll.”

“Don’t call me doll,” she snaps as she turns her back to me and grabs a step stool and reaches up to grab the whiskey this bar keeps stocked for me.

I run my fingers along my lip as I watch that perfect ass of hers. She is definitely priceless. And I am willing to bet her screaming my name will be just as priceless.

She stomps over to me and sets two glasses down as she pours the aged whiskey into the glasses. “It’s so nice of you to buy me a drink. But your prickish attitude is buying my ass a double.”

I smile at her. “Whatever you want, doll.”

She stops pouring and snaps her gaze to me. “You are about to make it a triple.”

“Whatever you want,” I say again, a tease in my voice.

She rolls her eyes again and pushes my drink to me. “That’s three hundred.”

“Keep my tab open.”

A man a few seats down yells to get her attention but she ignores him as she leans her elbows onto the bar in front of me, giving me a front-row seat to her tits. “Then you better be willing to buy me a lot of drinks.”

She clinks her glass to mine and I nod at her. “Sláinte.”

I take a sip of my whiskey as I watch her throw back the entire double I just paid for. “You know you’re supposed to savor it.”

“I did.” She winks at me and then walks away, serving the other patrons.

A few hours pass and the woman has already weaseled four more drinks out of me. But I don't care. Because the more she drinks, the livelier she becomes. A gorgeous smile taking up her face as she laughs and talks with the bar patrons. I can't keep my eyes off her. Not as she rounds the bar and serves the tables. Or as she sings along to some pop song I've never heard. She is a shining star, a treasure to hold and never let go of.

As the night dwindles toward closing, she slaps a bill in front of me. "Eleven hundred euro."

"You sure you don't want one more?" I tease her.

She shakes her head and I take in the flush to her cheeks, the slight daze to her eyes. "I have class in the morning."

"You shouldn't be working so late then," I say as I throw my card on the bar.

Her hands fly to her hips. "Excuse me. I wasn't aware that you were in charge of my decisions."

"Not yet," I growl.

She leans forward, her lips inches from mine. "I don't like dominant men."

"I'm sure that's a lie."

Her hand clutches my tie and pulls me even closer to her, close enough I can see flecks of gold in her obsidian eyes. "You'll never find out."

Fuck, this woman is getting to me. I wrap my hand in her hair and pull her so her lips are practically touching mine. "Looking for your tip?" I ask as I lick her bottom lip.

“Asshole,” she growls as she lets go of my tie and makes to push me away.

But I’m quicker and wrap my other hand around her neck and pull her lips to mine. It’s a quick rough kiss, her lips fighting mine as I suck her bottom lip into my mouth and bite. I let go before she can hit me. And when I pull away, the look on her face has me mimicking her. She’s in shock but a look of contentment crosses her features. She blinks a few times as if in confusion about what just happened. Then grabs my card and slides it through the machine.

I sign my receipt then stand and leave the bar without another word.

I think I may need to stay in Dublin just a little longer.

I rub my temples at the memory of her. Of our first meeting. Of a time when I thought she would be a quick fuck and then I would never have to see her again.

But here I am twelve years later after we first met and she has the same effect she had on me that first day. I dig through my drawer and find a picture of us. The only one I have. The two of us tangled up in sheets. She insisted we have one picture together. Both of us knowing whatever we were doing wasn’t going to last.

I run my finger over it. Outlining her cheekbones and the curve of her breast. She’s looking up at the camera and smiling with that gorgeous smile that makes my heart stop. I’m looking at her. Looking at her like there is no one else in the world that could ever matter as much. I look like a fool in love.

Fuck. I need to clear my head of her. I throw the picture back in the drawer then slam it shut.

And then it hits me. I didn’t even think to question the fact that she knew about The Partners. Knew I was involved. Who the fuck is she?

MIRABELLA

I lean my head against the back of the bathtub as my brain goes into overdrive. I thought a bath would help. Since I barely got a wink of sleep last night after he left. I cleaned up any evidence of him breaking into my house. I washed the blood away from the knife I threw at him. I righted the chairs. Then I drank half a bottle of whiskey hoping it would help me sleep. It didn't.

I need to clear my head of everything Kilian Bancroft. But it's easier said than done. He is the one man who has ever owned my heart. And I thought he was dead. I remember the day I saw the news. I was drinking a cup of coffee and it slipped from my hands. The one man that I would risk everything for was dead.

Years of regret hit me like a train. There were so many times I wanted to reach out to him. Apologize for disappearing on him. Apologize for that last night together when I needed to tell him something but chickened out. I shouldn't have let my family threaten me. I should have followed my heart. But I didn't. And I left him.

I cried for days after the news broke that he was dead. Aria tried to comfort me even though she had no idea why. Magda was just as confused as Aria. She gave me a week off. She brought me food every day and made sure Aria made it to practice. But I couldn't tell them. I couldn't tell anyone about Kilian.

I dance my fingers over the top of the water. I'm relieved he is alive. But what does it mean? What does he want with my brother? What does he want with me?

Ezio is an idiot and no doubt got himself buried in shit he shouldn't have. But why did that bring Kilian back into my life?

The harder question I keep trying to ignore is am I going to see him again?

I pinch my eyes shut at the thought. At the memories of his body all over me.

“Mama!”

Aria's voice shakes me from my thoughts. I look at my phone and see it's past noon. Maria told me she would drop her off on the way to picking up her twins.

“Just a minute,” I yell, not sure if she can hear me.

But I don't even get a minute as she bursts through my bathroom door and runs to the bathtub. “Last night was so much fun! We got to make pizzas and ice cream sundaes and then we watched movies until midnight!”

“You stayed up until midnight?” I ask with a surprise in my voice. “I'm gonna have to talk to Tina's mom about that.”

“No, Mama, don't! We didn't do anything bad. We—”

I cut her off with a laugh. “I'm kidding, princess. That's so fun! Did you talk about boys?” I tease her, knowing she is getting to the age where cooties turn into crushes.

“Eww no.”

I breathe a sigh of relief, knowing I still have time before that happens.

“What did you do?”

Besides get tied to a chair and throw a knife at a man I want you to meet. “Oh nothing. Fell asleep watching a movie.”

“Then why do you look so tired?” she asks me. Her inquisitive brain definitely a family trait.

I pinch her cheek. “I kept tossing and turning in my sleep because I missed you.”

She pushes my hand away. “Whatever, Mom.”

“Why don’t you get started on your homework so I can get out of the bath?”

She groans. “But I don’t have any science homework. Just stupid social studies.”

“Well you’ll never get to play professional football if you don’t pass your classes.”

“Ugh, fine.” She huffs as she stomps out of my room and down the stairs to her own room.

I sigh as I stand from the tub, grabbing a fluffy towel from the warmer. What I wouldn’t give to tell her about Kilian. Tell her about a time in my life that was special and meant something. Tell her things she should know. But I can’t. Not yet. She is too young still. Too innocent.

* * *

“Can I get you anything else?” I ask the table in front of me. They shake their heads and I wander to the bar. Luigi is working today, a man a few years older than me.

“Slow day?” he asks me.

I snort. “Obviously. This downpour is not doing anything for business today.”

“I just wish someone would sit at the bar. Could use someone to talk to.” He pauses and laughs. “Besides you, of course.”

I shake my head and look at the tabletop clock behind the bar. “It’s almost seven. Maybe a few people will stumble in.”

“One can hope.”

I give him a curt smile and go check on the handful of tables I have left. I am off at eight. Aria is at Tina’s house while I work. I yawn, bored from a slow Wednesday night. The one night shift I work that usually makes me a good amount of extra cash. The dinner crowd more likely to tip than the lunch crowd.

When my last table leaves, I slide onto one of the barstools at the near-empty bar. Luigi got lucky and two people came in half an hour ago and sat at the bar.

“Sticking around?” he asks.

I nod. “Waiting for the rain to slow a bit before walking home.”

“Whiskey then?”

“You know me too well, Luigi.”

“Not well enough, Mira.”

I bite my lip and close my eyes. “Not happening.”

“It’s worth a shot.”

“And it’s never worked for you.” The man has been asking me out on a date every time we work together for the last three years.

He shrugs as he pours my preferred whiskey into a glass. “Maybe one day you will say yes.”

I sigh. “Maybe you should spend your time chasing after another woman.”

“I chase after plenty.”

I snort. “You are not winning your case here.”

He pours himself a shot and knocks his glass against mine. “I just worry about you and Aria. Don’t you think she needs a father—”

I hold up my hand, stopping him. “No. We are fine on our own.”

Luckily for me the two patrons at the bar wave Luigi over. I know what he was going to say. Just like Magda says, even Salvatore. I need to date. Find a good man. Someone that could be a father to Aria.

Some days I agree with them. But it’s mostly to get them off my back. She has a father. A good man. He just doesn’t know it. And I can’t see anyone except for him being her father.

Even when I thought he was dead, I didn’t want anyone to take on his role. But he isn’t dead. He is very much alive. I saw him in the flesh for the first time in ten years, five days ago. But he doesn’t know.

I look out the window as I slowly sip my whiskey. Watching the rain patter against the old window, the metal frame covered in patina.

I think back to meeting Kilian. That day he walked into the bar I worked at in Dublin. He was a cocky prick. But there was something about him. Something that made me crave his attention. And it wasn't the fact I got him to buy me hundred-euro whiskey.

He was charming. In a way that most men weren't that came into the pub. I had just met him but he was already protective of me. I liked the way he called me doll, even when I pretended I didn't. He practically purred it and that sound went straight to my core.

Just thinking about him now is doing things to me. The way he acted when he broke into my house. And the way he acted when I finally gave him the time of day. They are two different men. But they are both a Kilian I know. A Kilian I used to love.

I wrap my sweater tighter around me. The temperature dropped significantly since I left for school this afternoon. Fall is soon going to turn to winter. I can almost feel the welcoming touch of snow on my skin.

I walk past the pub I work in, it's a few blocks from Trinity and on my way home. A few people are outside smoking and laughing obnoxiously. The windows are beginning to steam up from the temperature difference outside to inside. I see the fireplace roaring and a handful of patrons sitting around it.

Then I notice him. I know his name is Kilian only from his credit card. We never actually introduced ourselves. Even with him coming into the bar the last four days I've been working. As much as I hate to admit it, I like having him there. He drives me wild when he calls me doll. And we argue back and forth the whole time. But I like it. It makes my nights go by. And his presence scares the boys my age away. I've seen him scowl at them whenever one lays a hand on my arm or tries to get my number. Kilian always gets my attention right away and finds a way to get me to lean over the bar as he whispers something in my ear. Usually something completely dominant and filthy, trying to break me into telling him I like a dominant man. But I

won't break. He then skims his finger along my jaw or down my arm and every young horny boy in that place stops flirting with me.

I wonder what it would be like to kiss him. Like really kiss him. Not that quick, hard, fast kiss from the first night. But one where we explore each other with our hands. Where his filthy tongue does the things to my mouth that he teases me with words. Maybe even let him do those things he whispers to me. Let him devour my body inch by inch. Feel him pulse inside of me.

I groan as I think about him, my fingers running across my lip as I find myself still standing outside the pub, staring at the man. I wonder if he went there for me tonight.

Before I know it, I am walking into the pub and sitting on the empty stool next to him. Thankful there was a seat. Standing next to him would be too obvious.

I order a drink without looking at him but feel his eyes on me. I try to hide my smile as I talk with the man next to me. A regular that I see weekly since I started. When Sean, the bartender, comes back with my drink he starts talking to me about I don't even know what. Because Kilian's eyes being on me has moved to his hand. It sits on my thigh, underneath my long sweater. He doesn't move it, just leaves it there, with a random circle of his thumb every now and then.

If one touch from this man can cause me to space out, what the hell would happen if I let him kiss me, lick me, fuck me? I probably shouldn't find out but every single nerve ending in my body is begging me to.

When Sean finally stops talking to me, I nod and turn toward the man that is making my insides turn to mush.

"What are you doing?" I whisper-yell at him.

“Nice to see you, too, doll.”

I ignore that word. “Are you stalking me?” I ask because I can’t think of anything else to say.

He raises a brow at me as the left side of his mouth rises in a smirk. “Considering I was here long before you showed up, I believe you are stalking me.”

I roll my eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“I don’t think I entirely do,” he says before taking a sip of his whiskey.

“Why are you here?”

He raises his glass at me. “What does it look like?”

I click my tongue at him and turn back to the bar. “Sean!” I yell. I quickly glance over at Kilian and he looks at me inquisitively.

“What can I get you, Bella?”

“I’ll have a double Redbreast fifteen year.”

“Uhh... I don’t have to tell you how much that is since you work here.”

I smirk smugly at him. “Oh, well this kind gentleman offered to buy me one,” I say as I gesture toward Kilian.

Sean glances toward Kilian and I follow his gaze. Kilian looks over at me, a hint of displeasure on his face. “I never said that, doll .”

I clench my jaw at that word, he knows well enough how it makes me feel. “I swore you were just saying how you came by here in hopes I would be here so you could buy me a drink.”

He runs his tongue over his bottom lip. “I actually said, I wonder how much it takes for you to drink before your clothes start to fall off.”

My eyes widen at his words, pink flushing my cheeks. Sean coughs behind me and I am not sure if he wants to kick Kilian out or know if that’s what he really said.

“Get the lady whatever she wants,” Kilian tells Sean without taking his intense, lust-filled gaze off me.

“Sure thing,” Sean says before I hear him scurry off.

Kilian leans into my ear. “Trying to make me broke?”

“As if you could go broke?” I say, trying to pull away from him but his hand lands on my hip, making me not want to move.

“How do you know?”

I guffaw. “I knew you were rich from the beginning. Your bespoke suit kind of gives you away. Not to mention the drink you order.” And the way he presented himself was just like my family and his attitude like all the assholes in private school. Not that I am going to tell him that.

He doesn’t take his eyes off me as he speaks. “I could have been a prick trying to look rich.”

I laugh at that. “You would never have bought me as many drinks as you did if that

were the case. One night, and you would have been trying to fuck me like those pricks do.”

His hands suddenly pull my stool closer so my knees are locked between his. “You better not be letting those pricks take you home and fuck you.”

I try to pull away but his hands reach for my jaw. The look in his blue eyes is possessive, hungry, and it’s making my panties damp. “Why do you think you have a say—”

“Because you belong with me,” he growls, cutting me off.

“I don’t belong—”

“Shh.” He pauses, running his thumb over my lip. “Not yet, but you will.”

I roll my eyes. “You are gonna have to try a lot harder than that, Casanova.”

He drops his hands and throws his head back laughing, the sound going straight to my core. Why the hell is he so fucking handsome?

We both hear a throat clear and turn our heads to see Sean staring between the two of us. “Umm, here are your drinks. I’m just going to...” He walks away without finishing his sentence.

I drop my head and smile as I feel Kilian’s hand back on my thigh. When I look over at him he is handing my whiskey glass to me. “I’m Kilian, by the way.”

I take the glass and blush. “I know. I saw it on your credit card.” I watch as he picks up his glass. “I’m Bella.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Bella. But I much prefer doll.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes and instead slam back the hundred-euro whiskey since I know it will piss him off.

“Cheers,” he says to himself before taking a sip of his drink.

We spend the next two hours laughing and giving each other shit. Being around him is much too easy. Too playful. I find myself smiling more than I have in the last three years.

After one too many cocktails, I realize the time and tell him I need to leave.

“I’ll walk you home.”

I shake my head. “Not necessary. I only live a handful of blocks away.”

“How many is a handful?”

“Five,” I mutter, knowing if I don’t tell him, he will find a way to get it out of me.

“You aren’t going to walk home alone that far at this time of night,” he says abrasively.

“I do it all the time. At least while the weather is nice.”

“You don’t have a coat.”

I scrunch my brow at the subject change.

“I’ll let you borrow mine for the walk home. Then you can give it back.”

I sigh as I stand from my stool. “Sorry, Kilian, but I am not letting you walk me home.”

“Why is that?” he asks as he flags down Sean.

“Because someone like you would try to take advantage of me.” I turn and rush out before I let him answer.

I hurry around the corner and down the next block, my body freezing. What the hell was I thinking flirting with that man all night? I cannot get involved with him. He screams power. Maybe I am overthinking it but he is not the kind of man I can date knowing my family will find out. Some random student, my uncle wouldn’t care about. But a man like Kilian and I know my uncle would put a hit on him.

It’s stupid for me to feel anything for the man. But the way his blond hair falls across his forehead when he laughs too hard does something to my insides. Just like the way his sapphire eyes turn more cobalt when I see the lust in them. Or the way I want to feel the light scruff on his square jaw rub against the inside of my thighs. Ugh, I need to get him out of my head. Maybe I should quit.

I feel a drop of water hit my face. Dammit, I didn’t bring an umbrella either.

I start to walk faster, hoping I avoid a downpour when I feel a strong grip wrap around my bicep. I go to scream as I think of everything Kilian said about walking home alone at this time when I smell cedarwood and spice with a lingering scent of woodsmoke. And I immediately know it’s him.

His hand wraps around my throat as he pushes me into the brick building I was walking past. His other hand is on my waist, his body flush against mine.

His lips are so close to my mouth when he says, “You left without saying goodbye.”

“I didn’t need an escort,” I hiss as my heart rate speeds up from his touch. From the feeling of his hand at my throat.

“What if it wasn’t me that pushed you into this wall?”

“I am sure you wouldn’t have been far behind since you clearly followed me. Like I said, stalker.”

He growls and I feel his breath on my lips, if I were to lean forward an inch I could brush mine against his.

“What am I going to do with you?” he moans as his head drops toward my neck, lightly kissing me below his hand.

I whimper as I feel his lips on me. “Whatever you want.” My brain instantly regrets the words as they fall from my lips. But my heart rate speeds up and my core turns molten.

“Good girl,” he says into my ear. His lips twisting into a smile as they brush over my cheek. “Very good girl.”

His lips are on mine a second later and I can’t help but moan from my first true taste of him. He tastes like whiskey and peppermint. A spiciness all his own.

I wrap my arms around his neck and he pushes me farther into the bricks. His grip on my hip tightening, his fingers on my throat squeezing. I can’t help but push my own hips into his as he presses his tongue across my bottom lip. I grant him access and I nearly lose my mind from the way he devours me. My entire body is on fire from this kiss alone, I can’t imagine what sex would feel like. Hell, I shouldn’t be thinking about that. But I can’t get the thought out of my head. If this man can kiss me like this, what would it feel like with his lips on my pussy?

His hips push into mine and I feel his hard-on. I moan as he pushes his thigh between my legs, rubbing against my center.

“Fuck, Kilian.” My words are breathless.

“You taste like every desire I’ve ever had,” he groans into my ear.

I find his earlobe and bite hard. “And what are those desires?” I purr.

“Doll, you don’t want to know.”

I pull away from him despite his protests. “What if I do?”

He growls so loud as he drops his hand from my throat and grabs my ass, lifting me up, so I wrap my legs around his hips.

“We shouldn’t do this here.”

“I would fuck you on a stage in front of thousands, doll.”

“We can discuss that later,” I manage to get out as I grind on his dick.

The few sprinkles of rain start to turn heavy and I shiver from the ice-cold drops.

“How far are we to from house?”

“Three blocks,” I whisper.

He sets me down and grips my hand. “Good thing we are across the street from mine.”

Before I know it, he is pulling me toward a three-story brick building with indigo shutters.

“Earth to Mira.”

I blink a few times and then look over at Luigi, who is staring at me like my head fell off. “What?” I ask.

“I’ve been saying your name for five minutes.”

I feel my cheeks turn red. “Sorry I got lost in thought.”

“Clearly,” he says as he folds his arms across his chest. He nods to my empty glass. “Want another?”

I could use ten more.

“No, I need to get Aria and head home.”

He nods. “Be safe getting home. See you next week.”

I jump off my barstool and run to the back to grab my things. I hurry out the back door to pick up my daughter. Embarrassment still flooding my cheeks over what I was thinking about.

9

KILIAN

I pull up in front of my parents' estate. My father summoning me after my trip to Sicily. I see my brother's Mercedes in the drive and I clench my fist. Besides my mother, my brothers Grayson and Liam are some of the few that know I am alive. Even their families think I'm dead. I hate my father and the rest of the board of The Partners for putting me in this position. Making my brothers lie about missing me. My mother heartbroken that our father put me in this position. He says it was a necessity but I know he did it as payback. For getting the Montford's out of his debt. For having compassion when it came to my best friend losing his brother. For making sure he didn't endure the same loss with his other brother.

I hate to say it though, it does help with the business The Partners run. We have people who recruit new members, businessmen, entrepreneurs, anyone with a nice price tag on their name. Most join willingly, hungry for power and wealth. Others are more hesitant. But once you know about The Partners, it's hard to break away from their grasp. I then get sent to make threats, close deals. Most successful businessmen know who I am and they don't want to end up with my fate.

I go to open my car door when my phone rings, Tomas's name popping up on the car radio.

"Tomas," I answer.

"Sorry for the delay Mr. Bancroft but I hit some walls."

Fuck. I need something. I'm sure my father won't be happy to hear I only have vague information from a woman in Sicily. "Did you find anything?"

"I wouldn't have called if I didn't." His voice even and calm. "It took some digging on the Di Masio name. It looks like someone worked hard to cover things up. You said the house was occupied by a Mirabella Di Masio. Well that name doesn't exist. It's a fake. The house used to be owned by a Di Masio, with a daughter named Valentina that disappeared sixty years ago."

"And?" I ask impatiently.

"That's why it took an extra day. She didn't disappear. She married into the mob. Her records were wiped. Valentina Di Masio was legally dead in 1963. Only seventeen years old. But I recovered photos from then. She was with a young man I can only assume was vacationing out there. Francesco Renzetti."

"The previous don to the Renzetti Mafia family?"

"The one and only. I guess she ran away with him. Her family didn't know. She was declared legally dead a few months after she went missing. I am guessing the Renzettis had something to do with that."

"So Mirabella Di Masio is Mirabella Renzetti. Is she the daughter of Giancarlo? I thought he only had sons."

Tomas is quick to answer. "Daughter of the late Benito Renzetti. Mirabella seems to have disappeared not long after her parents' death in 2007. I can't find anything about the years between 2008 and 2012 when she showed up in late fall in Sicily and took ownership of that house in Cefalù."

Because she was in Dublin with a different name during that time. A name that

someone with a lot of power was able to cover up. Even from my man that can find anything.

“If I find anything out about that time, I will let you know. But her brother Ezio Renzetti is a piece of work. From what I uncovered, he feels like he should be next in line to take over the family. But he doesn’t seem to have much power. And he disappears often then turns up years later.”

Because he is a fucking mole and is running undercover for the Renzettis. “Thank you, Tomas. Payment will be delivered to you by the end of the day.”

He hangs up without a word. I sit in my car and stare out into the garden.

She lied to me. She said she knew nothing about her brother. Which is why I saw the tiny flick of her eyes when I mentioned the name Di Masio. He must never have used it like she does. But that doesn’t mean she had no idea what was going on.

That also means she lied about Venice. The Renzettis live in Genoa. I wouldn’t put it past her if she is covering up for them. Does she work for them? Work for the family trying to tear The Partners apart?

That also makes me wonder if our relationship was a lie? Did she get information from me then disappear? I try to remember what we talked about but nothing that would have made her know what I really did. We never spoke of our families to each other.

That also reminds me that she can throw one hell of a knife. What else is my doll hiding?

I dial Andre.

“Yeah, boss?”

“I need you to go back to Sicily. I need you to watch over that house. I want to know where she goes and what she’s doing. Any visitor that she has.”

“Yes, sir.”

I hang up just as someone starts tapping on my window. I look up and see Grayson.

“You gonna sit in your car all day?”

I take a deep breath and open the door, shoving my phone in my pocket. “I had business to take care of.”

“Yeah, I know. Dad was the one who sent me out here to get you.”

“He has no patience.” I pull the sleeves of my suit down as I walk toward the house with my brother.

“Hey,” my brother says as he grabs my arm to stop me from walking into the house. “You doing okay? You... this is the worst I’ve—”

“I’m fine,” I say as I grip the back of my neck. I know Grayson and Liam both worry about me. They are older than me, they both thought they would be doing what I am doing. But that’s not how the cards played out.

Grayson hesitates before answering. “Just... you know I’m here if you need me.”

“And what would I need you for?” I bite.

Grayson scowls but doesn’t say anything. Instead he walks into the house without

me.

* * *

My father wasn't happy to find out about the Renzetti family when I told him last week. A look crossed his face I haven't seen before. I have no idea what it means and what it has to do with the Renzettis. I know The Partners don't ever negotiate with the mob. There's been some bad blood between them over the years. Which would make sense why they targeted us and our shipments.

I stretch my legs out as my plane lands in Bari, Italy. There is a shipment of weapons being delivered tonight and I want to make sure they land in the right hands. I don't usually do this. We have other men who take care of sales and trades. Dean Arrington is in charge of weapons, his son, Roland, the one that is usually here for trades but with the threat of the Renzettis, I want to make sure that everything goes smoothly. These weapons will never be in our hands. A simple purchase from Libya will be delivered and an hour later a sale to the Spanish cartel. We have guards everywhere and men on our payroll at every major shipping port along the Mediterranean.

I step off the plane and make my way out to the waiting car, Mario tight on my heels. We are silent as we make our way to the harbor and drive near the pier where our shipment should be. We both check our weapons before getting out of the car then walk in the dark to the shipping container.

It's after eight, the night mild with a cool breeze. Workers are busy loading freights off a ship, the noise a welcome distraction for the deal.

Dimitri, one of the men I trust the most out of the associates with The Partners, nods as he sees us approach. "They are lifting the cargo off the ship now. There was a delay," he says in his thick Russian accent.

“How long of a delay?” I look at my watch. “The cartel will be here in less than an hour.”

Dimitri points to the transport being lifted overhead. “That’s it. The serial numbers match what the Libyans said.”

I nod. “I’m going to take a walk around the harbor.”

“You aren’t usually here. It’s usually Roland. Is there something going on?”

I shake my head. “No. Just following orders to supervise.”

“I’ll keep all eyes and ears open,” Dimitri says, understanding me.

I give him a curt nod and signal for Mario to follow me. We make a round around the harbor as the freight gets moved to its designated location. My eyes are peeled but nothing seems out of order. It’s like any normal day at the docks. Trucks in and out, men shouting, nothing out of the ordinary.

We make our way back to Dimitri. “Why was there a delay?” I ask him.

He shrugs. “I couldn’t get much out of the men working. Something about the crane. A malfunction of some sort.”

“A malfunction?”

He nods.

“Why didn’t they use another crane?”

“I assumed it was in use.”

I clench my jaw as the irritation grows. “Did you see it in use?”

“Yeah, there was another ship at the dock a few hours ago. By the time that load was finished they had this one running again.”

I relax slightly.

“I checked for foul play. Don’t worry, Kilian. I know what’s been going on.”

I put one arm on his shoulder. “Thanks, Dimitri.”

The loud clunking of the crane above us stops us from talking. We watch as the container gets set down in the spot we were told. After the workers disconnect the freight, Dimitri pulls out a key to unlock the cargo.

Men stand at the ready, guns aimed at the door in case of any horseplay. But nothing happens as the door opens. Twenty wooden crates sit inside the container and I follow Dimitri inside to check the cargo.

“Everything is here,” he tells me.

“Then let’s hope the cartel shows up soon so we can get out of here.”

Dimitri chuckles. “You don’t like the docks.”

“No,” I mutter as I walk backward and lean against a container and wait.

My father used to have me run shipments when I was twenty. Weekends away from school, my life, the parties, the drugs, the women. All to do something I had no interest in. Of course, back then I had no idea how deep this went. How interconnected The Partners were around the world. I hated him for making me do

this. Learn the tradeoffs. And every time I come back to a dock, a feeling of shame runs through me.

Twenty minutes later, our contact in the cartel shows up. The deal is done. Keys are handed over and money is transferred.

“Drinks?” Dimitri asks me.

I want to go home but I can’t pass up opportunities to build trust with everyone in the game. “Sure.”

We meet at a hole-in-the-wall bar a few miles from the harbor. Mario is in the car, so it’s just Dimitri and myself. From what he’s told me, everything seems normal. He was present at one of the missing shipments. The container never made it on the ship.

I know now that had to do with Calveti and Sons and their deceit to The Partners. I am glad Dimitri is aware of the threat even if he doesn’t know everything.

“How have you been, Kilian? I’ve talked about myself for an hour.”

I sip my whiskey. “Same as always.”

“Any women in your life?”

I laugh. “Only the ones I find for the night.” But my thoughts go directly to dark-chocolate eyes and black hair.

“Still playing the field?”

“I don’t have many choices.”

Dimitri's face falls at my words. A man who knows the man I used to be, the walking dead I am now.

“What about you? How are your wife and daughter?” I ask, curious.

A smile takes over the Russian's face. “We just had a baby boy! The whole family is great. We plan to...”

I barely listen as he talks, my mind wandering elsewhere. I'm startled when my phone rings and I see Andre's name on the screen.

I throw money on the bar. “Dimitri, it's been good to see you. But I have to take this call.”

“No worries, boss. Duty calls. I get it.”

“I'll see you around.”

He says goodbye in Russian and I make my way out of the crowded bar.

“What did you find out?” I ask Andre. I don't say a word as he speaks.

10

MIRABELLA

I put the last of the dishes away before heading into the laundry room to switch the clothes into the dryer.

I am grateful for a day off. My thoughts have been a distraction at work for the last week and Magda has noticed. She's kept quiet. Mostly. She kept her nose out of my business but did tell me I need to get away.

Maybe she is right, just like what Maria was telling me the other day. I need to have fun. Live a little. Do more than work, do house renovations, and take care of Aria. I feel the tiredness in my bones. Like I should be ten years older than my thirty-one years. I'm dragging and thoughts of Kilian only make it worse.

I sit at my computer and book a trip to Malta. It's a short flight. And a three-day trip should help relieve the stress from my shoulders, the fear that creeps in every now and then. Cocktails and the beach are what I need.

I settle into the couch and pick up a book, falling asleep as I read.

The bell on the dryer wakes me up. I yawn and notice I slept for over an hour. I really do need a break.

I grab the laundry and bring it upstairs and start folding it on Aria's bed.

“Mirabella.”

I jump at the voice, dropping the shirts I was folding on the ground. I turn and see my cousin in the doorway. “Dante. What are you doing here?”

He looks around the room, taking in the football trophies and the science ribbons. He studies the pictures of Aria with her team, pictures of us. “She’s so big.”

“She’s almost nine.”

“She looks just like you.”

I know he is holding back his next words, the words my uncle and cousins have always said, except for her eyes. “She is my pride and joy.”

“Hmm,” he says as he takes a seat at her desk.

“Dante, I am not going to ask again. What are you doing here?”

He flips through some of the papers on the desk. “Ezio was here not too long ago.”

“He was,” I say impassively.

“What did he want?”

I shrug. “The same as usual. Be careful. Come home to Genoa.”

Dante freezes at my words. “Why would he tell you to be careful, Mirabella?”

“You tell me,” I snap. “He said you and your father were the ones that wanted me home.”

He stands and walks over to me. I try not to move or flinch. Dante is the same age as me but his presence is domineering, intense, frightening. He pushes a piece of hair behind my ear and a slight shudder takes over my body. He smirks at me then picks up a piece of Aria's clothing. "The thing is, I haven't seen your brother in six months."

"He said he was here on business with you."

"Strange."

I grab the shirt out of his hand and try to fold it with my shaking fingers. "If he stops by again, I'll let you know."

"Will you now? Just like you are going to let whatever man was here last week know?"

My face goes pale at his words. "What are you t-talking about?" I stutter.

"Who was here, Mirabella?"

I drop the shirt in my hands and walk around Dante, making my way to the door. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Then why are you trying to leave?"

"I'm not. I just forgot to switch the laundry," I lie.

"I wouldn't leave this room, Mirabella."

Despite the fear this side of my family puts in me, I glance over my shoulder and snap. "You can't control me, Dante."

I barely make it through the threshold of the door before my uncle, Giancarlo, is in my face.

“He might not. But I do.” His tone is raw power.

I stumble back a few steps and realize I am cornered in this room. I thought last week was bad but at least then I had a knife and a gun. I have no weapons in here. Instead I take a deep breath and try to calm myself down, remembering the meditation exercises I used to do when I moved here and feared for my life.

“You are a part of this family, Mirabella, whether you like it or not,” my uncle says to me in a calm but lethal voice.

“No, I’m not. The second my parents were murdered, I became an orphan.” I back up until my butt runs into Aria’s desk.

“You know that isn’t true. I became your guardian.”

“And a hell of a job you did at that,” I mutter.

He seethes at my attitude as he steps closer to me. “You listen to me, Mirabella. You are to do what I say. You’re lucky I have kept you on such a long leash, giving you more freedom than I would ever give one of my children. But as a member of the Renzetti family, a blood member, you are expected to help the family as I see fit.”

My knuckles grip the edge of the desk, knowing I am playing with fire with my next words as I stare at my uncle’s scarred face. “I don’t have to do shit.”

“Your defiance will be the death of you. And I have no trouble burying your body right next to your parents.”

I shake in rage. I am sick of this bullshit. The expectation I am supposed to commit crimes just like anyone else in this family. “My father would have been much better as the boss of the Renzetti family. He at least had compassion for his own blood. If he hadn’t died, you know grandfather would have had him take over. You just fell into the role because you were next in line. You are a tyrant, Giancarlo. Not a leader. Not a boss. You are no—”

He backhands me across the face then pulls me into him, spitting across my cheeks as he talks. “You listen to me, you weak girl. You will do as I say. Because I know your secrets. I know that you think the father of that child of yours is hidden. Some random man from a one-night stand. But I am no fool. I know who the father of that child is. And I am not afraid to use that girl against you.”

My chest deflates at his words. My heart rate picking up speed. He can’t have any idea about Kilian. No one knows he’s the father. Not even Kilian.

Rage starts to burn through my veins at the thought of him using my daughter against me. Blackmailing me to commit crimes for the family. But I won’t risk her, not my little girl with so much life in her. A life she deserves to have. “What do you need me to do?”

His devilish smile takes over his face. “First, you need to learn not to show your weaknesses, Mirabella.”

I frown at his words. A lesson my father always taught me and here I am showing firsthand that Aria is my lifeline.

“I just need an envelope dropped off to someone. I even made it easy and have it at the hotel you are staying at. Three p.m. on Friday. Cocktail bar, seaside. Third seat from the right. Set it down and keep walking.”

How the hell does he even know about my trip? I booked it this morning. “That’s it?”

He finally lets my arm go. “That’s it. Now just think if you listened in the first place, you wouldn’t have given away so many of your secrets.”

He says nothing more as he walks out of my house, my cousin right behind him. I touch my face where he hit me and feel the warm blood on my fingers. I’m sure the family ring left a nice mark on my skin.

* * *

“Are you sure you are okay with this?” I ask Magda as I drop Aria’s weekend bag in her foyer.

“Of course I am. You know she is like my granddaughter and I want to spend as much time with her as I can.”

“Yes, but she has football practice and games and—”

“And you have a flight to catch.”

I frown. I don’t know if I am worried about Aria and Magda’s safety or if I am more worried about leaving my daughter for the first time ever.

“Mom, you are acting like I’m a baby. Magda is perfectly capable of taking care of me. Besides, I’m old enough to take care of myself.”

I prop my hand on my hip and stare at my daughter. “You’re eight.”

“I’m almost nine, which means I am nearly ten and only a few years from being a teenager,” Aria says with attitude.

“Uh, don’t remind me.” I squat down in front of her. “I’m just going to miss you.”

“Which is why you need a vacation, Mama,” she groans. “You need alone time.”

I push a piece of her hair behind her ear. “How did you get so smart?”

She points at herself. “Almost a teenager, remember?”

I laugh as I stand up.

Magda smiles at me. “We will be fine. You can call her every day too. It’s not like you are going silent on her.”

I fold my arms over my chest, trying not to cry. The surge of emotions I’ve been having lately is overwhelming. “I know.”

“Now scoot.” Magda pushes me toward the door. “Go enjoy your weekend away.”

I grab Aria and give her one more hug and a kiss before Magda pushes me all the way out the door.

I turn to walk down her front steps.

“Mira.” Her words stop me. Her voice fierce in a motherly way.

I turn to look at her.

“What happened to your face?”

My hand goes to the healing cut. She wasn’t at the restaurant the last two days, so she didn’t see it when it was worse. “I slipped. You know socks and tile floor don’t mix

well. And one too many glasses of wine...”

“You don’t drink wine,” she says sternly.

“Sometimes I do. I guess this means I shouldn’t,” I say as I point at my face.

She steps down until we are face to face. “Mira, be careful.”

“Huh?”

She shakes her head but doesn’t say anything more before turning around and heading inside her house.

I stand there for a few moments, confused. She couldn’t possibly know what I am doing. What has been going on. But she is observant and wise. I wouldn’t put it past her if she knew all of my secrets.

MIRABELLA

It's unseasonably warm in Malta for the end of February, which helped make it easy to decide to come here. The sky is cloudless, the water perfectly picturesque as the turquoise water laps on the shore of the beach.

My toes are in the sand as I sip on a cocktail, trying to clear my mind. Of course it's difficult to do when all I can think about is the envelope in my beach bag. The one I found in my mailbox yesterday morning. The stupid task my uncle wants me to do. I doubt it's even anything important. Just a test to see if I will follow his orders.

I know it's stupid to do it. To play into his game. But if he really meant that threat about Aria, I have no other choice. I can't let anything happen to her. I will risk my own life a thousand times to guarantee her safety.

I look at my phone and see it's nearly three. I pull my cover-up on and grab my towel and bag and head up to the hotel. My nerves are getting the best of me. And I don't know why. My parents raised me better than this. Ever since I found out the truth on my thirteenth birthday, since I got a knife as a present, I learned the rules of this game. Not to show weakness, not to let on if you are scared, keep a straight face and act normal.

I take a deep breath as I slide my sandals on and make my way to the waterfront bar. It sits cliffside, just above the beach, overlooking the blue of the Mediterranean. White curtains blow in the arched doorways that separate the bar from the outdoor

lounge area. At exactly three o'clock, I walk past the bar, dropping the envelope at the designated seat. I grip my beach bag hard with both hands to keep them from visibly shaking as I walk through the garden area and into the lobby of the hotel. I walk briskly as I make my way to the elevator. I press the button a few times as I feel eyes on my back. Finally the door opens and I slip inside, pressing the button to my floor. Once the doors close, I lean back against the wall, my breathing uneven as I think about what I just did. Either it was a test or I just made it known that I work for the Renzetti family.

* * *

I sat on my deck for hours until I watched the sun set below the fathomless sea. I tried to shut my mind off multiple times but I couldn't. Not even after talking to Aria and confirming she was safe. I don't know why I thought something would have happened to her. Giancarlo and Dante wouldn't be stupid enough to make a move against me immediately. I know how they work. They are calculating. They would retaliate against me when I least expect it. But they shouldn't be doing it, not after I did what they asked.

Part of me wonders if I should have stuck around and waited to see if someone picked up that envelope. And who the hell picked it up.

I know the only way I am going to be able to shut off my brain is alcohol. I know I shouldn't drown my anxiety but I am on vacation. I am here to let loose. And there is no harm in getting drunk alone in my room.

I dial up room service and ask for two bottles of wine to be delivered. I rarely drink wine, only during a nice dinner or special occasion. Yes, it's strange for an Italian woman to not enjoy wine but ever since the four years I lived in Dublin, I've only had a taste for whiskey.

A knock hits my door, followed by a man saying room service. I tie my silk robe I brought with me around my body. For some reason, the cool, smooth fabric has always brought me comfort. I pad over to the door and open it, expecting to find a hotel employee. But another man stands there, a bottle of whiskey in his hands.

“Kilian.”

The memory hits out of nowhere as I stand and stare at the man who once owned my heart.

I grab a bottle of whiskey off the top shelf as a group of young men celebrate a business deal and want only the best. I snicker to myself at what they ordered, it may be good but it's not the best. My hand brushes against the Redbreast fifteen year and the memories of Kilian hit like it was only yesterday. We spent four nights tangled in sheets before he had to return to London. It was some of the wildest, dirtiest, incredible sex I ever had. I wish I could have just one more night with him. But it's been over three months since I've seen him. He said he would be back but I didn't ask when. Mostly because I wasn't sure if he was speaking the truth. What we had was just sex, nothing more. We didn't exchange phone numbers. We didn't talk about ourselves. We only got lost in each other's bodies.

I shake the memory as I grab the whiskey next to that bottle and pour four drinks for the men. It's a Friday night and packed in the pub. I'm running around like crazy as I pour drinks and serve tables since one of the waitresses called out. It's just me and Sean working and we are doing our best to get everyone served.

I'm setting drinks down on a table when someone brushes behind me and grabs my ass. I want to turn around and say something to him but someone at the table asks me a question and I forget about it.

When I make my way back to the bar, Sean tells me someone is waiting for a drink at

the end of the bar but he hasn't been able to get to him. I nod and head over and nearly stop in my tracks when I see the three-piece suit on the man with slicked-back blond hair and piercing blue eyes.

He stares at me, a smirk creeping on the left side of his face. It sends a jolt of heat right to my core and I want nothing more than to kick everyone out of the bar and let him fuck me against it.

I grab the Redbreast from the top shelf and make my way over to him, picking two glasses up along the way.

"Am I buying you a drink?" he asks as I set the glasses down.

"Why wouldn't you?" I tease.

He grins at me as he takes me in, his gaze traveling down my body. "Whatever it takes to get your clothes off."

I blush at his words as I pour our drinks. Like usual, I slam the whole thing back while Kilian sips on his, his eyes never leaving mine.

I don't talk to him most of the night. The bar getting busier every hour. But any time I walk to the end of the bar to pour him a drink, he finds a way to touch me. His fingers grazing mine as I pass him his glass. When I lean over the bar and reach past him to hand off drinks to customers behind him, his knuckles graze my hip or the curve of my breast. Twice he leaned into my ear and filled my head with very dirty thoughts sending lust straight between my legs. Eventually he leaves and whispers in my ear he hopes to see me soon. He bit my earlobe and my panties got wet.

When two o'clock finally rolls around, I work as fast as I can to get the bar shut down. Sean looks at me in confusion and I just tell him I'm tired and want to get

home. We lock up the bar and I head toward Kilian's house. I'm nervous it's not what he meant. That he didn't mean for me to come over but I bite back my nerves as I walk up the steps to his front door and ring the doorbell. He doesn't answer right away and I'm worried I mixed up his signals.

I go to turn away but then I hear the door open. I turn slowly and find the man wrapped in a towel, water dripping down his chest. I follow the drops as they glide over his six-pack and hit the towel sitting dangerously low on his hips. I bite my lip hard.

"I didn't think you would get here so quickly," he says.

"I've never shut down a bar so fast."

He chuckles then licks his bottom lip and I want nothing more than to suck that full lip into my mouth. Hell, I would take any part of him in my mouth right now.

"Well, I'm glad you moved quickly. Gives us more time." He smirks.

"Time for what?" I whisper.

He doesn't answer, just pulls me into the house so fast I trip over the lip of the doorway. He catches my fall and slams me against the door as he closes it. His lips on mine instantly as he kisses me roughly. I groan into his mouth as he bites onto my lip. My hands drop to his towel and pull it off, my desperate need to run my hands over every inch of him.

His mouth moves to my neck but I push him away as I drop to my knees.

"That's the Bella I missed," he groans as I grip his cock before taking him deep into my mouth.

12

KILIAN

I smile at her as she says my name and I watch as a million emotions flash over her face. Anger, fear, confusion and my favorite, lust. The hazed look in her eyes that I caused so many times for nearly two years. I wonder if she is remembering those moments now. Of us fucking all over my house. Against the front door, on the dining room table, the couch, the study, the kitchen, the balcony, the shower. We fucked in every room of that house and on every surface. The thoughts sending blood straight to my dick, I have to will it to calm down.

“Did you miss me, doll?” I ask as I take her in. She is wearing one of those damn silk robes again and it causes memories to hit me all over again.

She blinks like she was lost in thought then a sassiness takes over. “What are you doing here?” Her voice is like venom.

I lift the fifteen-year-old Redbreast in my hand. “I heard you ordered room service and I couldn’t possibly let you have wine. I know where your taste truly lies.”

She pushes against my chest. “You can’t be here.”

I grab her wrists and walk her backward as I kick the door shut behind me and set the whiskey on a table. “And why is that, doll?”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Nice to see things haven’t changed.”

She struggles against my hold. “I mean it, Kilian, you have to leave before...” She trails off.

“Before what?”

She shakes her head.

I hold both wrists with one hand then grab her hip with the other, walking her backward until she hits a wall. I can’t help but lean in, placing my nose in her neck, smelling her. My favorite smell in the world.

She freezes at my touch and I feel her heart rate picking up. “Before your uncle finds out I came to visit you?”

I pull back just as her eyes go wide. “What... how... that’s not—”

“I saw you drop off that envelope in the bar. And I saw the man that sat down ten seconds later to pick it up. What are you up to, Mirabella?”

She pinches her eyes shut and I feel the fight go out of her. I let her go but lean my hands on either side of her head. “Tell me.”

She shakes her head and I see tears fall down her cheeks. I can’t help but comfort her. My hand goes to her jaw. “Bella,” I whisper, lifting her chin up so she has to look at me.

She opens her eyes and I see them filled with sorrow. I quickly brush away her tears, the moment intimate but it doesn’t feel wrong or foreign. It feels like us, like what we became before she disappeared.

“I know who you are.”

She visibly swallows.

“I’m not here to hurt you.”

She takes a deep breath. “How did you know I was here?”

I let go of her knowing she isn’t going to do anything rash, like throw a knife at me, although I am sure she has one somewhere in this hotel room. “I’ve had one of my men watching you since that night.”

She stays pinned against the wall. “Why?”

I back up and sit on the corner of her bed. “Because for some reason, I can’t get you out of my fucking head.” I pause as I look up at her. “And you lied to me. You said your brother wanted you in Venice. But you are Mirabella Renzetti. Your family is based out of Genoa.”

Her dark eyes stare into mine, the emotion she had earlier is gone, her eyes lifeless now. But I look at her fist and see it curling tightly into a ball.

“I want to know why you lied.”

“You said you weren’t here to hurt me.”

“I’m not,” I say as I lean back onto my palms.

“How did you find me in this hotel? How did you know—”

I smile at her with a crooked grin. “You know who I am. You let that little fact slip

when I came to visit you.”

“You had me tied to a chair, Kilian.”

“Safety first.” I shrug. “Anyway, you don’t think I have men that can find this stuff out? You should actually be thanking me.”

She raises a brow at me in confusion. “Why would I be thanking you?”

“Because I had my men change your room number from where Giancarlo thinks you are staying. He won’t know I’m here, well he doesn’t know I am alive. And you’ll be safe.”

She edges her way toward the small table and chairs by the balcony doors. “And why wouldn’t I be safe?”

“The man that picked that envelope up from the bar is a known associate of Giancarlo Renzetti. He’s an assassin. And I wasn’t risking the chance Giancarlo set you up to kill you.”

“He won’t.”

“How can you be sure?”

“He’s looking for my brother just like you are.”

I run my finger over my lip as I watch her subtle movements. I hold in my smile, knowing exactly what she’s doing. “Interesting. Are you working for him?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not a Renzetti.”

I snort. “Technically you are.”

“I dropped that name the second my parents were killed.”

“When you moved to Dublin?”

She nods. “They died the year before, so as soon as I was eighteen, I left.”

“But you are still a Renzetti.”

She clenches her jaw and takes a step toward me. “No, I’m not. Only their blood runs through my veins. I’m Mirabella Di Masio.”

“Not Bella Gallo?” I ask.

She swallows and takes one step closer. “She was never real.”

“I am pretty sure she was real when I had her screaming my name as I ate her cunt out so hard she blacked out.”

She growls at me and pushes me into the bed, a knife at my throat, but I catch her wrist a few inches above my neck.

“That wasn’t very subtle,” I say. “I saw you pick up that knife.”

She doesn’t say anything, just straddles my hips and glares at me, pieces of hair falling out of her messy bun and into her face. I will my dick to stay down. Because having the sexiest woman in the world straddled on top of you with a knife to your throat is a fucking turn-on. “Why are you doing this?”

“I don’t trust you.”

I laugh at that. “I didn’t mean this, doll,” I say as I point to the knife. “It’s actually turning me on.” I thrust my hips into hers to let her feel what she is doing to me.

She guffaws and tries to pull away from me but I let go of the wrist holding the knife and grab her hips quickly, flipping her onto her back so I am straddling her. I grab the knife out of her hand and toss it to the floor as I pin her wrists on either side of her head. “Why are you working for him if you say you aren’t a Renzetti?”

She sighs, knowing she is trapped under me. “I didn’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice.”

She pinches her eyes shut. “Not when it comes to him. Not when he threatened my daughter.”

I frown at her words and let go of her wrists. The idea of her having a kid hurts me in a way I would never tell her. I thought we had something between us, something we never admitted to but then she disappeared. I felt things for her I never felt with any other woman I’ve been with. And that list is long. She is also the only woman I ever slept with repeatedly. Besides a few girlfriends in high school and college. And to think she shared what she and I had with another man causes something to stir in me.

I run my hand along her cheekbone where a cut is healing. “Who did this to you?”

“Kilian, let it go,” she sighs.

“Did he do this?” I ask, rage burning through my veins.

She gazes into my eyes, a feeling of hopelessness overtaking them. “Why do you care?”

“Bella, I’ll always care about you.”

“Even if I’m a Renzetti?”

I brush the loose pieces of her hair across her face. “Especially if you are. They are dangerous.”

“Aren’t you?”

I don’t answer her.

“You can’t save me, Kilian. Not from this life. I was born into the mafia. I will die by their hand. There is no escaping it. I’ve accepted that path. Just like you’ve accepted yours.”

I close my eyes as I accept the truth she has already come to accept. I move off her and walk toward the open doors of the balcony, letting the smell of salty air overtake my senses.

We are both quiet for a long time, neither of us talking. I don’t look at her. Because I don’t know what there is to say. I know I can’t save her. Hell, I shouldn’t even be here. But I took the precautions I needed to keep myself in the shadows, my presence unknown. I just can’t keep myself away from her. She’s forbidden fruit. I’ve had my taste of her and one taste is never enough.

I hear her moving behind me. But I don’t have the energy to worry if she is picking up a knife, ready to kill me. The sound of a bottle opening and liquid being poured acts as a white flag.

She moves to stand next to me, handing me a glass of whiskey. “For what it’s worth, I never wanted to leave you.”

I close my eyes at those words. “Then why did you?” I finally ask as I turn to look at her.

She gathers her thoughts carefully. “It’s a long story.”

“I have nowhere to be.”

A short laugh falls from her lips. “Maybe another time.”

I feel something break in me, to know this woman who used to tell me everything as we had lain in bed late at night, won’t tell me the reason she disappeared on me. I swirl the whiskey around in my glass before I toss the entire glass back at once.

“You know someone always told me you are supposed to savor it,” she teases.

My lip curls up at her. “I did.”

She throws her head back in laughter then tosses her own drink back. “I missed you, Kilian. I wish I never had to leave.”

“I thought you said that story was for another time.”

“It is.” She looks at me then looks out at the water below. “But I have nowhere to be tonight. And we have an entire bottle of whiskey.”

I raise a brow at her. “Drink for a story?”

She smiles at me and I can feel it all the way in my bones. “Just like we used to.”

13

MIRABELLA

I am laughing so hard I am sure the fish in the Mediterranean can hear me. It's almost four in the morning and Kilian just poured the last of the whiskey into our glasses.

I feel alive again. Like I was in Dublin. The happy-go-lucky college girl who forgot about her family and the obligations she had. A girl who found her place in Ireland. In the pubs and restaurants, hiking in the mountains and rolling hills, opening her heart to a man.

"I can't believe you dropped an entire pizza on the back of someone's shirt."

I hiccup as I laugh. "It was a white shirt too. And this woman was about ready to murder me. Who cares if I ruined her Chanel?"

Kilian throws his head back in laughter. "She sounded like a bitch anyway. I'm surprised she didn't ask you to pay for it."

"Oh she did."

He shakes his head and laughs while picking up his glass. "This is the end of it."

"I can't believe we drank the whole bottle."

He raises a brow at me. "We used to."

“Ten years ago! I’m old now, Kilian. I am going to be so sick in the morning,” I say as I stand up and lean against the balcony railing.

He looks up from underneath his lashes. “You’re old? I’m forty-one. How do you think I’m going to feel?”

I shove his shoulder. “You’re Irish. You bleed whiskey. I’ve never seen you hungover.”

“I’m only half Irish. It has gotten harder over the years.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Whatever,” I slur, then knock my glass against his and finish off my drink.

He sets his glass down and stands, his hands going to my hips. My heart rate picks up when I see him staring down my bathrobe that has fallen open. Maybe I should have put on more appropriate clothes when I decided to drink with him.

“I can’t believe you still wear these robes.”

I blush. “I like the way they feel.”

“I know,” he says as he steps into me, pressing me against the railing. “That’s why I bought you one in the first place. Only silk sheets and silk robes for mo stór. ”

My treasure. He started calling me that one night when I coerced him to stop calling me doll.

His hands glide up the front of my robe, his fingers grazing my exposed breasts before he pulls the robe closed over my body. He presses a kiss to my collarbone.

I close my eyes. “Kilian, don’t call me that.” I sigh. “We can’t...”

“You should get some sleep,” he says as he steps back.

I can see the sadness in his eyes. I recognize it instantly. It’s not because I pushed him away. It’s the sadness I’ve felt the last ten years knowing I ruined a good thing. That I let this man slip between my fingers and I didn’t even give him a reason.

I watch as he looks at me one last time before walking to the door. He turns to face me, his shoulders slumped, his face full of sorrow. “It was good to see you again, Bella. Please be safe.”

He shuts the door. And tears start to slide down my face.

I can’t do this. Not again. I can’t let him out of my life. I know it’s impossible for us to be together. What we have is forbidden. But I’ve always been one to make a rash decision. Maybe we were meant to see each other again. So we could have this weekend. One last time for us to pretend.

I run to the door and pull it open, ready to chase after him. But he is standing right in front of the door. His face in a scowl like he is trying to figure out what to do.

“What are you doing?” I ask breathlessly.

“Figuring out if I should make the stupidest decision of my life and walk away.”

A smile cracks on my face. “Don’t.”

He looks up at me and I don’t see the man he is now; I see the man from ten years ago. The one who stole my heart and changed my entire life.

“Bella.” My name falls from his lips in a plea.

I don’t know who reaches for the other first. Our lips crash together. His unique taste of peppermint and whiskey flooding my senses. And it’s like an inferno. My entire body lights up, a burning flame of desire and passion entwining myself into him.

His tongue pushes into my mouth, rough and forceful. His need demanding as his grip tightens around my body.

We scramble backward until his body weight is pressing into mine on the bed. His lips moving to my neck, my clavicle, my chest. I thrust my hips into his. Needing him as much as he is needing me. It’s like the ten years apart were forgotten and I’m in his house in Dublin.

“As much as I love seeing you in this silk robe, I need it off,” he says as he pulls it open, revealing the lace teddy underneath. “Fuck, woman, you still wear these things?”

I laugh as I watch his eyes fill with lust as he takes in my lingerie-clad body. “Every day.”

He growls as his hands glide up and down the lace. “No man is ever allowed to see you in this but me.”

I want to tell him no man ever has. That even when I went on a few dates over the years, I always wore boring panties and bras. It always felt wrong to let a man see me in lingerie after Kilian. “You don’t have control over me.”

His hands drift up my body and he twists my nipples hard. I yelp at the pain. “I do now.”

Before I have the chance to argue with him, he has me moaning as he sucks one of my nipples into his mouth, flicking his tongue over the lace. He switches his mouth to the other side and his fingers pull on my wet nipple, twisting and pinching until I am squirming underneath him.

“You always loved when I played with your tits, Bella.”

I moan at the loss of his mouth on me. “I loved when you played with any part of my body.”

He smiles at me, his blond locks falling onto his forehead. “Oh I remember. I remember all of it. Every night. Every morning. Every damn second of the time you allowed me to use you as my own personal toy.” His fingers trail down my stomach and across my hip bone before tickling the inside of my thighs. “And I plan on making you remember everything I did to your body.”

“Show me your best.”

He smiles at me devilishly. “Oh, Bella, I’m here to show you my worst.”

His mouth dives back onto mine. His teeth biting and sucking my lips and tongue. I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him closer, needing to feel every inch of him against me.

He pulls the sash of my robe out from under me and before I know it, my wrists are pinned above my head and he is binding them tightly while his lips never leave mine. He pushes my arms up as far as they’ll go, causing my back to arch off the bed.

“You’ve always been so pliant and flexible, doll. So submissive. So willing to do anything I ask you to,” he murmurs against my lips.

“Since when do you ask?”

He pulls back and slaps my left breast. “I missed this dirty mouth of yours. The one that likes to talk back.”

“Then maybe you should stop talking and kiss me,” I say as I press my body toward him.

He laughs. “I have better plans.”

He rolls off me so quickly I miss the feeling of his body heat against me. He disappears from my sight for a second and a sudden wave of anxiety hits me.

What am I doing? I shouldn’t be doing this with this man. I shouldn’t risk both of our lives over one more night with him. I can’t risk Aria’s life.

“I see that look on your face, doll.”

I look around for him but I don’t see him. I only hear the clink of his belt buckle and the sound of a shirt falling to the ground.

“Don’t doubt this, Bella. Don’t doubt us.”

“We can only do this one night, Kil. One night and then we have to go back to pretending none of this is real.”

He comes sauntering back into my vision, completely naked. “Last I checked, you were here for a weekend. So it looks like you better be prepared for what I have in store for you.”

I swallow down my lust. “What do you have in store for me?”

He smirks as he leans over the side of the bed, his face inches from mine. “You are just going to have to find out.” The knife I threw at him appears in his hand. “First order of business, you have entirely too many clothes on.”

I bite the side of my cheek as he presses the dull side of the knife against my chest. Then twists it and cuts the fabric between my breasts. “Such beautiful olive skin. You shouldn’t cover it up.” The knife slides down my stomach as it rips apart the lingerie. I hold my breath when it reaches just above my slit. I look into his eyes and see the mysterious man I fell for over ten years ago. The side of his mouth curls into a smile as he watches me watch him, just as he flicks the knife through the lace covering my pussy. The cold edge of the blade against my center making me shiver.

“You better buy me new lingerie,” I huff.

“We’ll see,” he mutters, tossing the knife to the side then dragging his hands up my body. “Much better.” His rough fingers glide up my arms before twisting around the sash on my wrists. He pulls it backward, pulling me over the edge of the bed, my wrists almost reaching the floor as my head hangs off the side. “Now that’s even better.”

He brings one of his hands along my jawline before pulling my mouth open. “Now show me what I have been missing from this filthy mouth of yours.”

Before I even have time to take a deep breath, he leans over and shoves his hard cock into my mouth. I gag as gravity pulls it down my throat. Kilian’s hands make their way over my body. Pinching my nipples, grazing my thighs, and teasing my pussy.

He pulls out of my mouth long enough to let me breathe before he plunges back in. This time I’m ready and I welcome his girth into my throat. I hollow out my cheeks as I suck him in, pulling and pulling until his hands are gripping my thighs like a vise.

“Woman, are you trying to swallow my dick?”

I graze my teeth along the underside of his cock, where I remember a thick vein runs. He shudders from the movement as his hands find their way to my slick center.

He brushes a finger through my slit and I moan against his dick. “I see you haven’t forgotten the right way to use that mouth.”

He shifts his hips, causing his cock to go even deeper into my mouth. I start to gag but then I feel his lips graze my core. An aching need shoots through my limbs as I wait for his tongue to dive inside of me. Just when I think I can’t take the teasing anymore, his tongue circles my clit.

“Fuck, Bella, you taste better than I remember.” His lips vibrate against me before he bites on my clit so hard I arch off the bed, screaming his name as best I can when my mouth is wrapped around his cock. He plunges three fingers into me and every single nerve in my entire body ignites in flames. I can’t take the pleasure, it’s been too long and this is by far too much for my body to take. My head falls back farther against the side of the bed, his dick falling from my mouth as I let out the loudest guttural scream I’ve ever had in my entire life.

I feel Kilian chuckling against my core before he pulls his fingers from me and stands up. “Goddamn, woman. Everyone on this island had to of heard you scream.”

He pulls my body up then sits on the bed next to me, untying my wrists. “Do I need to gag you so I can put my dick into this tight pussy?” He slaps my center and I almost come again.

I shrug as I climb onto his lap, straddling him. “I guess you’re just going to have to find out.”

His lips crash to mine and I can taste myself on him. The tanginess of myself mixed with the spiciness of his kiss. He lifts me up and guides his dick to my entrance. “Are you ready for me, Bella?”

I wrap my arms around his neck, my fingers playing with the hair at the nape of his neck. “I’ve waited ten years for you, Kilian. I’m more than ready.”

He grins at me with that boyish smile I fell for right away just as he takes my hips and slams them down on his cock. I bite my lip to hold in my scream. I forgot how big he was, how much he stretches me. I can feel every inch of him pulsing against me.

“Ride me, Bella,” he whispers into my ear.

I don’t hesitate as I start lifting my hips and lowering them, my pace changing from slow to hard with every thrust. His teeth bite hard into my shoulder as I tease him with tiny circles of my hips. I know he is close by the way he quickens the pace, the way his fingernails are leaving crescent moons on my hips.

He growls as he tosses me onto my back. He lifts both my legs to his shoulders as he pounds into me. His feral groans spurring my own need to come again. I let the sensation burn through my limbs and I hold on as long as I can until I explode around him.

“Fucking hell,” he mutters as he slams into me three more times. I feel his hot release inside of me and I groan at the feeling. It’s been far too long since I’ve been with a man but nothing and no one has ever compared to the way Kilian owns my body.

He collapses on top of me, his lips on my neck. “There is something about you, Bella. You do something to me every damn time. And I’ve never had anyone like you in all these years.”

My heart seizes at his words. Disappointment taking over. I know he's been with women since me. And I am sure he can't even count how many. I never thought I would see him again but I held on to some false hope that I would. I only slept with one man after him. And I regretted it instantly. Like my body was only ever meant to be with him.

But his comment has me crawling inside myself, letting doubt and fear take over. I never should have done this with him. Never should have let him touch me.

I push him off me and grab my robe from the bed before heading into the bathroom. I splash water on my face and pat it dry.

You can do this, Bella.

Hell, now even I am calling myself that. I wrap my robe around me. I shouldn't be mad at him. I know he slept with other women. I am the one that left him with no way to contact me. For weeks I hid in my room at the family estate and cried. When I couldn't take it anymore, when Dante was giving me strange looks, I knew I had to let Kilian go completely.

I brush my hair out and retie it up on my head. I have no claim to him now like I had no claim to him then. We are both free to do what we want. To sleep with who we want. Maybe I should be looking for a man. At least one to provide me with the sexual services I need.

Why is my head even going there? I need to get Kilian out of my room, out of my mind, out of my life.

You can do this.

I tell myself one more time before readjusting the tie on my robe and opening the

bathroom door.

I find Kilian sitting on the edge of the bed. His elbows on his knees and a sadness on his face. “I’m sorry, Bella. I shouldn’t have said that. Not that way.”

I cross my arms and lean into the doorway. “I left you. You were free to sleep with whomever you wanted.”

“Yeah, but I don’t need to tell you about it.”

I shrug. “We never planned to see each other again, Kilian, so I have no claim over you. You can sleep with whatever women you wish.”

He sighs as he runs his hands through his hair. “When you left...”

“We weren’t in a relationship, Kilian.” I cut him off but know my words will cut deeper. It’s the truth though. We weren’t together, not really. We fucked for almost two years. Our relationship consisted of whiskey and late nights, silk and secrets. But we never considered ourselves in a relationship. We were two people looking for a release.

“You know it was more than what you are making it out to be.”

I snort. “Says the man in one of the largest international crime organizations. Is that what you were really doing all those times you were in Dublin? Doing whatever it is you do instead of telling me you were there to see your sick grandmother?”

I watch his fists clench before he snaps his eyes up at me. “And what were you doing there? Trying to find secrets for your family. Lying to my face the whole time.”

“And you weren’t?” I snap.

He stands and I can't help but take in his perfect form. The tattoos that cover his shoulders and chest that lead down to his six-pack. The man is lean but all muscle. My eyes drop further to the vee leading to his favorite part of his body. I'm so busy studying him that I don't see him lift his arm. He grabs my chin in a strong hold. "So you were working for them then and now?"

"What?" I ask, forgetting what the hell we were arguing about.

"How long have you been working for them, Mirabella?"

I wince at the sound of my real name on his lips. "I've never worked for them. Not in Dublin and not now."

"Then why did you leave?"

I close my eyes. "Please, Kilian, anything but that." I can't tell him. Not now. Who knows if I ever will. I can't let him know about Aria. Now with the risk as great as it is between our two worlds.

He drops my chin but grabs my hips, pulling me into him. "I searched for you, Bella. I spent three years trying to find you. I swear I went crazy looking for you. My friend, Bastian, called me a fool. He said if you didn't want to be found you wouldn't be. I paid one of my men a lot of money but even he couldn't find you. He can find anyone."

"How did you find me in Cefalù then?"

"I didn't. I was looking for your brother." He lifts my chin. "Seeing you again woke something in me, Bella. It reminded me of the man I used to be. The one I was with you all those years ago. Don't ever downplay what we had back then. Because we might not have called it what it was but you know what it was." His forehead falls to

mine. “You know.”

A tear crests my eye. I hate how this man brings out so many emotions in me. “For what it’s worth, I didn’t want to leave. It wasn’t my choice.”

“Your family?” he asks, pulling back and looking into my eyes.

I nod. “They forced me back to Italy. I-I ran to Dublin. I felt like it was so far from home. I remember going there as a kid with my parents and staying in a castle. I thought it was so magical. When they died, when my uncle became my guardian, I wanted nothing more than to get away.” I rest my head against Kilian’s chest as he pulls me into him. His chin lands on my head as his hand trails up and down my back. “It was the nicest Giancarlo has ever been to me. He let me go there after I begged and pleaded. I wanted to study—”

“Languages.”

I tilt my head up at Kilian. “You remember?”

“I remember every one of our nights in Dublin. Including those where I watched your naked ass on my bed as you studied.”

“You distracted me. A lot. I wouldn’t call it studying.”

His fingers leave a trail of chills down my back until he reaches my ass and squeezes. “I couldn’t get enough of you.”

“Thank goodness you finally brought me those robes or I would have failed out of school.”

“I’m glad you still wear them. Although I think you should take this one off.”

I let out a soft chuckle into his chest.

“Please continue. Tell me about Dublin.”

“I—”

“Wait,” he cuts me off. He lifts me up and carries me to the bed. He settles next to me and then pulls my head into his lap.

“You know it would probably be better if you put your briefs back on.”

“You don’t like my dick in your hair?” he jokes.

“Kilian!”

“Alright.” He throws his hands up and grabs the sheet and pulls it over him. “Better?”

“Yes.”

“So how was I never able to find you after you left Dublin?”

“Like I said, Giancarlo was nice to me for maybe the only time in his life. Maybe it was guilt over my parents’ death—”

“Guilt?”

“You are still unbelievably talented at interrupting stories,” I say as I pinch his arm.

He swats me away. “Sorry. Please continue.”

“I don’t have proof or anything other than a gut feeling that Giancarlo had my parents

killed. My father was his older brother. He would have taken over the family once my grandfather died. And my grandfather was sick. It was only a matter of time.” I pause, remembering those days when I felt so lost without my mother. “Anyway, he let me go to Trinity. My parents had told me I could go there. My mother excited for me to get out of the country and experience a different life. Giancarlo was able to get me registered under a false name, he got me all the documents, everything I needed.”

“And that’s why I was never able to find you.”

I nod. “When I went back to my family’s estate, I went back to being Mirabella Renzetti.”

“When did you change your name to Di Masio?”

I stare at the ceiling, the memory of me realizing I had to find a way to hide the baby. I was nearly two months pregnant and I had to find a way to lie. “I couldn’t stand being there. Too many bad memories. I fought Giancarlo tooth and nail to let me leave. My grandmother’s home in Cefalù was unoccupied. It was mine by right. So I convinced him once again to let me leave.”

Kilian’s fingers run up and down my arm, into my palm, and then back up. “You must be a master negotiator.”

I snort. “If only it still worked on him. He’s only gotten more ruthless as the years have gone by. Of course, Aria has learned some master negotiating and manipulation skills. She had to have gotten those from me, although...”

I almost said you are good at negotiating too. I don’t know why I even brought her up.

“Aria is a beautiful name. How old is she?”

I swallow back my anxiety. “She’ll be nine in April.”

He’s silent after I say that and I pray to God he is not doing math. Not figuring out the time line from when I left to when I had her. So instead I say the stupidest thing to cover up my slip. “I was so mad when I got back to Genoa. I never wanted to be around my uncle or my cousins, so I snuck out almost every night. I got drunk and hooked up with some random guy. I never even knew his name.”

Kilian’s hand freezes on my arm before he takes it away. He’s quiet once again and when I look at him he’s looking out the balcony doors, his jaw tight, anger prevalent across his features.

Why didn’t I just lie about her age? Instead of saying I slept with someone right after I left Dublin. I bite my lip, not sure what to say to him.

I wait for nearly ten minutes before he says, “I think you should get some rest.”

He goes to move but I clamp down on his wrist. “Kilian, please.”

“Please what?” he asks me through clenched teeth.

“Stay.”

“I have some work to do.” He climbs out of the bed and grabs his clothing. I watch as he slides on his pants and his shirt, leaving it open. “I’ll see you later.”

I watch as he walks out of the room, more upset than he was when he walked out the first time.

I turn the lights off and grip a pillow as I try to fall asleep. It’s nearly morning already, the sun turning the sky orange. I should close the curtains, black out the

room so I can sleep. But all I can think about is that maybe I should have told him the truth about Aria.

14

KILIAN

I slam my door shut, wanting to break something in this hotel room. It's not that I can't stand the thought of her with another man. She's a woman, she has needs. But the fact that she slept with someone within weeks of leaving me, pisses me off. Almost like what we had didn't matter. And maybe it didn't. We never put terms on what we had. We never went out to eat or on a date. I spent time at her bar when she was working or we were naked in my house together.

I strip off my clothes and head into the shower, hoping hot water will wash away my anger. My regret.

Because more than anything that's what I feel right now.

Regret.

Should I have acted differently ten years ago? Called what it was we were doing a relationship. Would she have left if I did? Would both of our lives have been completely different?

Probably not. She is part of the Renzetti crime family. We never would have been able to be more than a secret. What we had was forbidden. It still is. And she was so young ten years ago. I had no way of knowing if she would stick around for me. And I had so many ambitions back then. Until everything changed. Until I resented what I had become.

I let the hot water of the shower calm my thoughts as much as possible. The whiskey working its way out of my system with every minute that passes.

Maybe that's all tonight was. A drunken mistake.

That's a lie that I can't believe.

Bella has always been different for me. She isn't just the young coed that she was ten years ago. Overly sexual and flirtatious with a pussy that begs for attention. No, now she is a woman with a knack for knives. Her curves even more seductive than before. Now she is everything I could ever want. More than I thought I wanted ten years ago.

Fuck.

This woman will be the death of me.

Literally.

I shut off the water and grab a towel before collapsing on the bed. I either need to find a way to keep her or find a way to forget her.

Too bad I know I will kill as many people as I can in order to get the former.

* * *

After dealing with my father demanding to know where I was—I kindly told him I took a weekend off—I decide to head to the beach. I have no doubt Bella is spending her afternoon here and I need to apologize.

A few hours of sleep made me realize I was a heartless bastard leaving her the way I did. I had no right getting mad at her. She is a sexual being, it's what attracted me to

her from the start. And I shouldn't have expected her to remain loyal to me, not after she disappeared. And everyone knows I didn't remain loyal to her. My dick has seen its fair share of pussy in the last ten years. Although, nothing compares to hers.

I keep my eyes peeled for her as I make my way down to the beach. It doesn't take long for me to find her. She is fucking gorgeous and half the men here have eyes on her.

She is lying on her stomach, propped up on her elbows, a book open in front of her. Her black hair is down, blowing in the wind, making her look like a model at a photo shoot. She is wearing a turquoise bikini, her magnificent ass on display.

I get closer to her and I can see anger fuming from her. I'm not quite sure if she is mad at herself or mad at me. I know how she is. I remember that first night after we were together and her incessant blabbering that what we did was a mistake. It didn't take her long to come around to me again. Less than twelve hours later, I had her pressed against me in the bathroom at the pub.

But I am sure she is feeling that regret now. I am her enemy after all. Even if she says she isn't working for the family. Her blood is enough to deem her an enemy.

I keep my distance from her, letting her have her afternoon to herself. She needs the time to think, to figure out her shit. And I should be doing the same. I shouldn't even be here. I should be handling business. Ensuring deals are completed, information traded, companies kept in our hold. But the thought of letting Bella go is enough to make me stay. Even if it means repercussions from my asshole of a father.

I watch as she wades into the aquamarine water. Her body a goddamn treasure as she dives underneath the gentle current and rises on the other side of a small wave. Her hair is slicked back, her olive skin glowing as the sunlight hits it. Her tits on full display, her nipples hard as she rises above the water. Her bikini should be illegal.

The triangles barely cover her full tits. I am just glad no one can see that ass in the water. Because I saw it walking in and her perfect round ass looked even better in a thong bikini than it does naked.

I will my dick to calm down as I watch her from a distance. She is the perfect woman and not just because of her body but her mind too. And she has only gotten better with age. Her body even more curvy than it was before. But it's her mind that I'm so attracted to. The way she holds her own against her family. The way she cares for her daughter. I thought she was a strong woman before but now she is on an entirely different level.

She makes her way out of the water and I am not the only one to notice. I see eyes on her all over the beach. My fist clenching when a young man approaches her, someone far too young for her. Some may say she is too young for me but I know I am the only man she needs in her life. I just need to prove it to her.

A smile hits her face as she talks to the prick. She laughs at whatever asshole thing he is saying to her. Before I know it, he is helping pick her things up and moving them over to the area he is sitting at with a group of friends. I don't know how long I watch them for as they all sip on drinks. He reaches out to touch her and she doesn't push him away. She leans into the touch and I nearly lose it. I want to stomp over there and pull her away from them. Claim her as mine in front of everyone. Take those lush lips and devour them on the beach but I know I can't cause a scene. Instead I head inside and let her have her fun.

* * *

I spent the rest of the afternoon focused on working to keep my mind off Bella, but it was useless. My eyes kept glancing at the beach from my balcony doors, wondering if she was touching that man, kissing him, taking him back to her room.

It's how I found myself at a table near the bar in the late afternoon. Work wasn't keeping my mind off her but I figured a few drinks might help.

Of course it only made my longing worse. I don't know what is wrong with me. I am a forty-one-year-old man and I feel like a teenage boy pining after his crush. In those ten years we spent apart, I thought about her often but I never felt this longing that I feel now. Maybe it's because I tasted her for the first time in years last night and it brought all the memories back. The way she let me tie her up, spank her, torture her until she was begging me to fuck her any way I wanted.

Fuck, I need to get her out of my head.

A group of loud boys walks into the bar and I glance up to see the group she was hanging out with earlier. They grab a lounge area just outside the bar area on the terrace that overlooks the Mediterranean. They are loud and rambunctious, probably halfway to wasted by the looks of it. They order a round of drinks and I watch them as I sip my whiskey.

That's when I see her join them. Freshly showered, her hair dried into loose curls down her back. She is wearing a black dress made of chiffon. The front dropping into a deep vee showing off her breasts. The skirt is floor length but two high slits come up on each side hitting mid thigh. Her lips are painted red. My jaw clenches. She looks like a goddamn Greek goddess. A siren of seduction. And I know those boys are going to have their grimy hands on her.

I slam my glass down in front of me when I get sick of watching her with them. I head up to the bar to order a double when the woman in the seat next to where I'm standing turns to me.

"Hey there, handsome."

I raise a brow at her as I take her in. Her fake tits barely held into the tight white dress she has on. Her red hair is pulled over one shoulder, revealing perfectly tanned skin dusted with tiny freckles. My gaze lands on her face. Her eyes lined in dark liner, her too-full lips a glossy pink. She is attractive. At least by my old standards. If this was a few months ago I would have her upstairs and naked in my bed within ten minutes but she is nothing compared to Bella.

An all too familiar laugh rings out over the noise in the bar and I glance toward the couches outside. Bella's head is thrown back in laughter as one of the boys has his arm wrapped around her.

I crack my knuckles and decide to speak to the redhead. "Hello, beautiful."

She smiles at me and it seems all wrong. Not the smile I want to see. But I ignore it as she talks to me. "I'm Lana."

"Oliver," I say, using the name I usually tell women these days.

"Nice to meet you," she purrs.

I hold back an eye roll as I turn to the bartender and order my drink. "Where are you from?" I ask her, a futile attempt to make conversation.

"LA. Just here on vacation with my girls," she says as she nods to the women next to her. "And you?"

"London."

She smiles at me as her hand lands on my arm. "Explains the accent. I've always loved an accent."

“Is that right?” I ask.

She nods as her tongue comes out to lick her lips.

I take the opportunity to lean into her ear as I whisper. “I am sure you would like it even more as I mumble words against your pussy.”

She lets out a soft moan and I know I hooked her. Not that I have any intention of fucking her. But the second she said those words I saw dark hair walk toward the bar. And I know Bella, she doesn’t handle jealousy well. So I made sure to whisper those words loud enough for her to hear as she passed me.

“Maybe we should—”

“Are you really hitting on someone in front of me?” Bella’s words cut off the redhead whose name I’ve already forgotten.

I smirk as I turn toward her. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“Liar. I felt your eyes on me since I sat down at those couches.” Her lips are pursed and I know she is pissed. My mind flutters back to all those times I would be sitting at the pub and women would try to flirt with me. She would get so pissed she would lean over the bar and smash her lips to mine to get them to back off.

“You seem pretty satisfied to have the attention of all those boys. I thought I would find myself some fun for the evening.”

She looks at the redhead next to me then back to me. “She isn’t your type.”

“Excuse me!” the redhead shouts. “But I think you need to leave. I was quite enjoying my time with Oliver.”

“Oliver?” Bella laughs as she glances at me.

“Who are you anyway?” the woman asks her, jealousy taking over.

Bella’s hand lands on my chest, pulling me into her. “I’m his wife. So you better leave him the fuck alone before you regret trying to make a move on my man.”

I hold in my laugh at her jealous rage. Rather liking the fact she said she was my wife. But I know her game, she’s done this before to get women to back up off me.

The redhead seethes. “Well, I suggest you keep a leash on your husband. He’s a douchebag that whispers dirty things into women’s ears.”

Bella laughs at her. “You’ll never even know the dirty things he’ll say.”

The redhead slides out of her chair and yells at her friends to leave. I shake my head as they walk away and the jealousy slips from Bella’s face. I pull her into me and cage her in between me and the bar. “Wife?” I ask.

“You’re an asshole,” she says to me as she fights to get out of my arms.

“You were the one that looked like you were ready for a gang bang with a handful of twenty-year-olds.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Please, you know I never would have touched them.”

I drop one of my hands to her hip and with the other, I pick up a lock of her hair. “Then why flirt with them?”

“I was bored and you left me this morning in anger. Figured you were done with me.”

“Then why interrupt my flirting?” I ask as I press my hips into hers, forcing her farther into the bar.

“Because maybe I wasn’t done with you. No matter how much I think I should be.”

I smirk at her and drop my face closer to her. “I like when you’re jealous.”

“Oh please. You never would have fucked her. Not when I could feel you drooling over me from the corner.”

“Drooling?” I ask as I drop her hair and my other hand slides between the slits of the dress. “I don’t drool over women.”

She swipes her finger over my lip and I fight the urge to bite it. “Nope, that’s drool.”

I chuckle as my hand grips her ass, my other hand making the same path along her other thigh. I drop my forehead to hers. “Only for you.”

“Are you mad at me?” she asks. “Because of Aria?”

I sigh as I shake my head. “No. I was in the moment but not anymore. How can I be? I didn’t expect you to never fuck another man. Not when you never planned to see me again.”

Her hands trail over my chest, along the buttons of my white shirt. “I’m sorry, Kil. I—”

I cut off her words by sliding my fingers underneath the seam of the lace boy shorts she is wearing. I don’t want to talk about her with other men. I just want to cut both of us off from the world so we can be in our own bubble. Like how we used to be in my townhome in Dublin.

“Kilian, stop. Not here.”

One side of my mouth lifts into a smirk as I slide my finger along her slit. “Why not?”

She looks around. “It’s crowded, someone will see.”

I slide a finger against her clit, wetness pooling on my finger. “No one will notice if you keep quiet,” I say against her neck as my lips trail kisses away from her ear.

She lets out a soft moan as my finger slides to her entrance. “Maybe I don’t want anyone seeing the panties I put on for you.”

My teeth dig into her neck at her words. “For me? So you did have every intention of seducing me tonight.”

Her grip tightens on my shirt as she bites on my ear. “I would have fucked you in the water today but I was having too much fun watching you get angry about me flirting with those boys.”

I drop my hands from under her dress and she lets out a groan of dissatisfaction. I waste no time pulling her out of the bar and toward the steps that lead down to the beach and the rocky shore beneath us.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t want to waste any more time seeing these panties.” I pull her down the steps and hear her giggle behind me. So many fucking memories hitting me. “And I sure as hell don’t want anyone else seeing them either.”

“Then why are we going to the beach?”

We hit the sand and she stumbles behind me, pulling off her wedged sandals as she tries to walk. I turn to her and drop to my knees, pulling off her shoes. “It’s closer than the elevators to the room.”

“Oh,” she says with a gasp as I toss her shoes aside and press my nose into the fabric between her thighs.

“You smell like dinner.”

“Kilian,” she groans as I slip my hands through the slits in her dress and squeeze her ass.

I slide my hands up her body, over her hips, against her slim waist, and over her breasts, pulling at her nipples as I stand. I grip her hand and pull her behind me as I make my way to the rocks. I slip between two large boulders and against the wall where the restaurant sits above us. Dim lights from the balcony light the area just enough so I will be able to see the look on her face as she screams my name.

I press her into the wall with my hips, my lips at her neck, my hands in her hair. I inhale her scent, remembering the times I would come back to my townhome in Dublin and the pillows would still smell like her, months later.

“Do you remember that time I brought you to my roof and fucked you so hard the neighbors turned on their lights and came to see what the ruckus was?”

“Yes,” she moans as I tug on her ear with my teeth.

I smile against her neck before moving to capture her lips, plunging my tongue into her mouth as I hold her possessively to me. Her hips rub against mine, her need apparent. I could smell it seconds ago when I pressed my nose to her sex. I pull away from her, her eyes dazed from the possessiveness of that kiss. I grin at her in a way

she knows I am about to devour her. “I think we should do that again.” I look up at the railing about thirty feet above us. “I bet a nice couple is sitting right on the other side of that railing. Let’s see if you can come hard enough you spoil their meal.”

She smiles at me in a way only she ever has, accepting my challenge. “Well then, Casanova, you are going to have to put those dirty words to work. I do believe you told that redhead you would whisper them against her pussy. I suggest you do so on me.”

I smile at her as I drop to my knees. My hands land at her ankles, a featherlight touch as I draw circles around them.

“You know that’s not where I wanted you.”

“Patience, doll. I know you will only be louder the longer I take to work you up.”

“I’ve waited ten years. I think that’s long enough.”

I chuckle as I press my nose back between her thighs. “I had you last night.”

She presses her hips into my face. “That was the appetizer. You said you wanted dinner.”

I bite at her pussy through the folds of her dress. “Touché, dirty girl. But I want to see how close I can make you to coming before I even touch your clit.”

She groans and I laugh as I pull my face away from her center. I slowly drag my hands up her legs until I hit her knees then drag them back down, my touch causing goose bumps on her skin. I finally make it above her knees, my fingers grazing along her outer thighs and I can smell her need. I knew she was wet before but I know she has to be soaking by now.

I brush my lips against her left thigh, causing her body to stiffen. I then twist and drag my tongue to her inner thigh and bite into her flesh a few inches from her pussy.

“Fuck, Kilian,” she moans, her hips gyrating with my teasing.

I smile against her thigh before pulling away and moving to the other one. Soft kisses above her knee leading up to her midthigh before I drag my lips and nose so close to her core. “I’ve dreamed about this pussy for ten years, Bella. Compared it to every woman I fucked. But none of them were you. None tasted as sweet, none tasted as good, none tasted like home. Because that’s what you taste like, fucking home. I want your taste imprinted on my lips forever.”

I watch as she presses her thighs together, trying to find any friction. But I don’t allow it. I press one hand firmly to her inner thigh as I dive under the front of her dress. I lick my way along the seam of her boy shorts and a guttural moan comes out of her. I slide my hand to her ass, clenching one of her cheeks hard before I pull her hips out enough that I can smack her ass. She starts panting hard and I know she is close. So close and I haven’t even touched her. Her panties still on.

I press my tongue against her other thigh, nibbling at the seam of her panties before I pull away and slap her ass again.

“Kilian,” she moans so loudly I can feel it in my gut. But I know it’s not loud enough for the people above us to hear. No, my doll needs to be much louder.

I slip my fingers on the edge of her boy shorts and pull the lace down slowly, my tongue following its path until it reaches her ankles. I nibble my way up her other thigh as I lift one of her legs onto my shoulder. Her hands grip my head, trying to pull me into her but I am not ready to taste her yet, to devour her. I blow a soft breeze against her clit and that’s all it takes for her to fall apart. Her orgasm hits her as she screams my name, her legs shaking.

Her cum drips down her thigh and I finally get my taste. I lick up her sweet cream before sliding my tongue between her folds. Her taste is heaven. “So sweet, doll. So perfect,” I mumble against her wet center.

“Oh my god, Kilian. Don’t stop,” she whispers as I work my tongue along her slit. I don’t touch her clit, my tongue focused on the hole I want to fuck with my tongue. So I do just that. I push her leg that’s on the ground to open wider, while pushing her leg on my shoulder to the side, giving me the access I need to shove my tongue into her core. I can tell she’s close again. Can tell she is ready to explode. I play with her a little longer, twirling my tongue inside her, humming against her lips. When I feel her hands tighten on my scalp I finally touch her clit, sucking it hard into my mouth while I shove two fingers inside of her.

“Oh my fucking god!” she screams as I feel her come on my fingers and tongue. She almost collapses but I use my weight to hold her up. “I can’t... I can’t take anymore,” she pants.

I smirk against her wet lips. “They haven’t heard you yet.”

“How do you know?”

I pull out from under her dress and smile at her. Her juices coating the lower half of my face. “Because no one has said anything yet.”

She looks up, probably to make sure no one is looking at us, then her eyes fall to meet mine. “Then fuck me, Kil. Fuck me into this wall and I promise my screams will be loud enough.”

I shrug, her leg still in my grasp as she tries to move it off my shoulder. “I could, but this is more fun.” I don’t waste a second before I am back under her dress, my fingers pulsing inside of her. I suck her clit back into my mouth and I can feel it pulsing, her

body overwhelmed with sensation. I bite on it gently and she groans into the night air. But it's still not loud enough.

I work another finger inside of her, coating them in her wetness. I fuck her hard, her groans egging me on, making me push harder, suck harder. I quickly pull my fingers out of her and she huffs at the loss. I replace my fingers with my tongue, swallowing all of the cum dripping out of her, but I know it's not enough. I glide my wet fingers around her ass until I'm met with her tight hole.

"Kilian," she whispers.

I hum against her lips as I slide one slick finger into her ass. She tenses from the intrusion, but I slowly work my finger deeper until she relaxes, my tongue encouraging her to take more. When she starts to grind her ass down on my finger, I take the opportunity to add a second. A guttural moan comes from her lips, incoherent words follow as I work my way deep into her.

I bite at her thighs as I work her ass, her body nearly ready to collapse from the intense pleasure. I use my shoulder to support her weight as I slide my fingers from my other hand into her pussy. Three fingers at once in a powerful thrust.

"Oh fuck," she screams so loud I know someone heard. But I don't stop. She tastes too good and I can't deny her this pleasure.

I work both my hands in and out of her, finding a rhythm as she curses in Italian at the top of her lungs as my teeth graze her inner thighs.

"What's going on down there?" I hear someone shout from above and I smile against her thigh.

I know she feels my smile because she says, "You're such a sick bastard finding this

pleasurable.”

“I’m not the one moaning so loud she can be heard thirty feet away over the crash of waves.” I twist my fingers in her ass and feel her entire body tighten. Her pussy sucks my fingers in and I wish it was my dick with how tight it’s pulling them in.

I ignore the pressure in my cock, the unbearable need. It’s hard as a fucking rock but I want her to come. I want her screaming my goddamn name.

A beam of light flashes around us and I know someone must be trying to find the source of the noise she is causing. I waste no time finding her clit when I know she is about to explode. I suck it hard before dragging my teeth along it.

Her screaming my name sounds like it’s coming out of a megaphone. It’s loud, passionate, and I know everyone at that restaurant that can hear her knows exactly what is causing those screams.

I pull my fingers out of her and press a chaste kiss to her cunt before sliding her panties back up her legs and pulling out from under her dress.

I stand up and she throws her arms around my neck as she collapses into my arms. “That was...”

“Delicious,” I say as I pull her head back and smash my lips into hers. I know she can taste herself. I’m covered in her but she doesn’t care. Her tongue devours my own as I support her weight.

Her hand drops to my pants and rubs against my cock. I shudder at her touch and am ready to fuck her against one of these rocks when a shout comes from somewhere near us.

“Excuse me! Who is out here? You cannot be here!”

I pull away from her and a lazy smile hits her face. “Let’s get out of here before we are caught.”

“Who cares?” she mumbles. And I know she is completely sated.

I wrap an arm around her shoulder. “I do. Because I want to go eat and see the faces of all those people that heard you come all over my face as I fucked that pretty pink pussy of yours and that tight little ass with my fingers.”

I see a blush hit her face. “We can’t—”

“Where did my promiscuous little vixen go?” I ask.

She gives me a look like she forgot about that girl. Her eyes dropping until a smile hits her face. “She hasn’t been around since you.”

A beam of light just misses us from behind. “Well, we better get moving before they catch us.”

She lifts her skirt up and skips ahead of me before turning around. “Hurry up, slowpoke, I could really use a steak after that.”

I chuckle as I chase after her.

15

KILIAN

She moans as she eats a bite of steak.

“You know if you keep that up someone might recognize those noises.”

She grins at me. “Wouldn’t that be an interesting conversation?”

I chuckle before taking a bite of my fish.

“You really worked up my appetite.”

I raise a brow at her. “I did all the work.”

“Semantics.”

I shake my head at her and take a sip of whiskey. “I really am sorry, Bella. I never should have been mad with you about your daughter. I had no right to be.”

I see something pass through her eyes. Regret. Sadness, maybe.

“Don’t. Kilian, please...” She pauses. “Not tonight. Not her.”

I study her and wonder why she doesn’t want to talk about her. I let the feeling pass as we continue on with our dinner. Once again, it’s like old times with her. Laughing

and joking around. It makes me sad that so many years have passed. So many things we have both missed out on. I don't care about our families. This woman in front of me has understood me better than anyone ever has. I guess I let her see a part of my soul that I never let anyone else see. And now she knows it all. And she isn't running away. She's running her fingers over my hand that rests on the table.

My anam cara .

My soul friend.

She always laughed at me when I said that before. She thought I was trying to impress her with my Irish. I didn't know that she was studying languages at school. Didn't know that she knew exactly what that word meant. I recovered by telling her I only try to impress her with my dick. That led to an eye roll and her drinking expensive whiskey all night while she worked. Although, she did end up in my bed that night. Her mouth wrapped tight around my impressive cock.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks me.

I grab her hand in mine and squeeze it. "You don't want to know."

"I think I do," she says as she straightens up in her chair.

I smirk at her and lick my bottom lip. "I was just thinking about your lips wrapped—"

"I cannot believe someone had sex down there while we were eating dinner. Do you know how hard it was to explain to the kids what that noise was?" Bella and I both break out in laughter as the woman at the table next to us talks to what I can only guess is a manager.

“Absolutely terrible,” Bella snorts.

“Dreadful,” I chime in.

The woman turns to us with a scowl on her face. “You might think it’s funny but it was highly inappropriate.”

“Sounds like it needed to be you down there. You seem a little uptight,” Bella retorts.

I throw my head back in laughter and even hear a small laugh coming from the manager. The woman turns bright red.

“How dare you—”

“Ma’am,” the manager interrupts. “How about we talk about this in my office? I am sure I can find a few ways to make your accommodations for the rest of your stay better.”

I turn to Bella once they walk away and the manager apologizes to us. “You are a dirty, dirty woman.”

She swallows back the rest of her whiskey. “I just know when to open my mouth.”

I smirk at her. “That you do, doll.”

After I charge dinner to my room, we head back to hers. I hold her hand the entire walk to the elevators and it feels normal. Like something every human does. I don’t even remember us doing this back when we were fucking. Not on the walks back to my townhome together. Or any time in the bar. Even when what we had turned into more than fucking. This is something entirely new.

When the doors open, I press my hand to her back as I guide her in. When the doors close, I press her against the wall. My hand cupping her jaw, my eyes mesmerized by hers. “You are special, Bella.”

She shrugs.

“Just so you know, I compared every woman I slept with to you. Every single one. And no one compared. I swear it. I was searching for you. Trying to find someone that gave me what you did. But I never found anyone. All I could ever think about was you.” I drop my gaze to her lips before raising it back up to meet her eyes. “All I’ve ever wanted was you.”

She leans forward and presses her lips to mine in the gentlest kiss. I want to intensify it but the doors open and we are on her floor. She smiles at me as she pulls away then grabs my hand as we walk to her room.

Once we’re inside, she stops in the middle of the floor and turns to me. “There has never been anyone else but you to me. I compared every man to you. Every single one. And none of them lived up to you. Even after all these years. I held on to the hope that I would find you one day. I wasn’t a part of my family. I didn’t have the resources. Because of Aria, I couldn’t just hop on a plane when I saw in some tabloid where you were in Monaco or Paris or the Algarve. And then you were dead and I lost all hope. I knew I would never find another man like you.”

I pull her into me, kissing her with reverence. This woman will be the death of me. But that is the one death I will accept.

* * *

After fucking each other’s brains out, we lay spent on the bed. Her hand circling the tattoos on my chest, her leg wrapped around mine, my hand resting on her ass.

“Did you ever want to be with The Partners?” she asks me out of nowhere.

I am quiet for a few minutes. Unsure of how to answer. Normally I wouldn't let anyone in on my feelings but this is Mirabella, my Bella, the only one I would let see my ghosts and demons. “I did when I was young. I wanted the wealth and power. Hell, I didn't know how deep my father was involved with The Partners until seven years ago. I thought he was just like everyone else. But he wasn't.” I contemplate how much to tell her. How many secrets I could possibly give away in one night. “My father is a cruel man. He had my life written out for me by the time I was twenty-two. He knew I would never marry, never have kids, never settle down. Both my brothers were in serious relationships. He knew they couldn't take over the darker side of the family business.”

Her fingers still on my chest. “Your—your family runs The Partners?”

I run my fingers through her hair. “The Partners are an intricate business. No one knows who runs them. They work on levels. So many hoping to get to the top, get greater cuts in the business. But it's something that rarely ever happens. I didn't know my father was a Partner until my best friend's brother died. Until I saw the lack of empathy and emotion my father had for anyone or anything other than money. Most days I don't think he even cares about me. He just wants the Bancroft name at the table. A legacy seat. Like my grandfather and my great grandfather.”

“Does anyone else know this?” she asks me hesitantly, her chin resting on my chest as she looks into my eyes.

I shake my head. “I could get killed for letting you know that.”

“I could get killed for telling you anything about my family too.”

I squeeze her ass. “Then I guess we're even.”

“I guess so,” she says with a shy smile.

“My brothers know and my mother. The only other people are those at the table. And I only found out who they were when my death was faked. When I sold my soul to them and my father.”

“Why? Why did you fake your death?”

“My father found it as a way to intimidate potential businessmen. Companies that buy into us, that filter our money, that ship our drugs and weapons. If they know the price someone like me, the son of a prominent businessman in the world’s largest investment firm, paid for failing them then there is no way they would say no to The Partners or turn their backs on them. I was a bargaining chip my father groomed me for. I played into his hands to free my friends from the despair and destruction of their family.”

“You risked everything to save someone else.”

I nod. “Bastian, my good friend, his brother would have been killed for screwing The Partners over. Bastian had gotten out, one of the few who had, but he turned himself in to save his brother and the woman he loved. I couldn’t let him lose everything for something I dragged him into to begin with. So I gave my life to them. And I’ve been paying for it every day since.”

She crawls up the bed and straddles me, grasping my cheeks with both her hands. “Most men wouldn’t sacrifice their lives for others. In my family, they kill to keep secrets, even their own family. You are an honorable man, Kilian.”

I shake my head. “I’m not. I got them involved—”

“We all make poor decisions. We all do things we regret. But if we find a way to

redeem ourselves then that cancels out the bad we did.”

I brush a loose piece of hair out of her face. “You are something else, Bella.”

“I’m just a girl running from her own life.”

I shake my head. “No, you are a woman living the life you always wanted.”

A sad smile crosses her face. “Almost.” I want to ask her what she means by that but then she asks another question. “So what about now? Do you want out? Can you get out? What do you want for your future?”

I chuckle. “That’s a lot of questions.”

“I’m a curious woman.”

I sigh, letting myself be completely honest with her. “I don’t know. Parts of me want it. Want the power. Other parts wish I could live a different life.”

“I’m not one to judge you if you want to lead a criminal organization.”

I smile at her. “You are probably the only woman who would say that.”

She smiles at me and my heart clenches. “What is the different life you want?”

“I met this woman once who made me question things, made me think there was more out there than the life I was born into. I thought maybe we could have it all. But then she disappeared and I couldn’t help but wonder if there was something better out there.”

A blush hits her cheeks. “Must have been a pretty special woman.”

I pull her up onto my chest so we are face to face. “She is.”

A tear falls from her dark eyes. “But you know it can’t—”

“Shh,” I say, cutting her off. “Let’s just be us while we can.”

A sad smile crosses her lips. “Okay.”

“Do you have to leave tomorrow?”

She nods. “Aria is with a friend and I need to go home.”

“Can that friend watch her another night?”

“Kilian...” She trails off but her answer is written all over her face.

I should know I can’t compete with her daughter but I try anyway. “Please give me one more day, Bella. It’s been ten years since I’ve felt this way. Please just give me one more night. I need one more night with you.”

She bites her lip but then presses those lush lips to mine. When she pulls back, I’m surprised by her answer. “Okay.”

16

MIRABELLA

It's been two weeks since I went to Malta and I have been in a daze ever since. I can still feel Kilian between my thighs. The way he fucked me thoroughly, like he was making up for ten years of lost time. Because that's what it was. We had our own little bubble in Malta. Where I was just Bella and he was just Kilian. It felt like being in his townhome in Dublin.

I miss Dublin. And not just because of him. I miss the green hills and the cliffs and the people. He told me I tasted like home. Well he is home to me. He reminds me of everything that felt good and right in the world. Before we knew who we really were. When we were just happy between the sheets. Young and free. I always worried that he wouldn't want me because I was so much younger than him all those years ago but I should have known that what we had isn't something you can find with just anyone.

Anam cara.

Soul friends.

The words he used the fourth time he returned to Dublin, six months after we first met. We still had amazing sex but our late nights turned into deep conversations. It made me believe we were anam cara . It was always one of my favorite phrases I learned in my Irish language courses. It meant more than just a soul mate to me. It means knowing someone on the deepest level beyond love. And yes, I did fall in love with him but to me he always was and forever will be my anam cara . No matter what

fate has in store for us.

It was hard to leave that morning. Magda was nice enough to watch Aria for another night and of course Aria didn't care because it meant she got to make more cookies with Magda. I woke up early to take an early flight home to get back to the restaurant in time for work. Kilian didn't want me to leave. Neither did I but I knew I had to.

"I wish it didn't have to be this way. I wish I could just visit you whenever I wanted."

"If my uncle wasn't a Renzetti, it would work."

He grabs my hip and pulls me into him. "If I wasn't a Bancroft, it would work."

I let the tears fall as I grip his shirt. "We can't do this again. It's too dangerous for both of us."

He frowns. "I know."

"I don't want to do this," I say as the tears fall harder.

His hands gently cup my jaw, his lips so close to mine. "Neither do I," he says then presses a soft kiss to my lips. "But I'll find a way."

It was a false hope. We both know we can't be together. Maybe in another life. But not this one.

"I think that glass is clean. You've been washing it for ten minutes."

I jump at the sound of Magda's voice. I didn't even hear her approach the bar. "Magda, you scared me."

“Well, when you are gazing off into space for ten minutes when you have new patrons at the bar, I get worried.”

I glance behind me and see two women sitting patiently. “Sorry, just tired and have a lot on my mind.”

“I had you cover the bar today because I thought you could handle it more than anyone else here.”

“I will... I mean I can.” I set the glass I was washing down on a drying rack then turn to help the ladies with their drink orders, Magda impatiently watching me.

Once I hand them their drinks, she waves me over. “I don’t know what happened to you in Malta but ever since you got back you have been in a trance. Did you fall in love there?” she asks with a wink.

I can feel the flush in my cheeks turn a deeper red. “No. You really think I went away for a weekend to hook up with some random guy?”

“If I wasn’t happily married, you better believe that’s what I would be doing.” She smirks.

“Magda!”

“Just because you have a kid and feel like you are getting older, which by the way, you aren’t. You’ll be thirty-two soon. You still have your entire life ahead of you. Live a little. That’s why I told you to take that trip to begin with.”

I lean against the bar and fold my arms over my chest. “I know. But it’s not that easy. I have Aria. And I can’t get serious with anyone. It’s just too hard.”

“Who said anything about getting serious?” Magda raises her brows up and down suggestively. “A little dick could do you good.”

“Magda!” I shout again as I look at the women at the bar and see if they overheard her.

“Oh don’t act like a prude. Besides, I know you got laid when you were in Malta. It was written all over your face when you got back. Not to mention the poor job you did covering up those bite marks on your neck.”

I immediately go for my neck, my hand covering up skin that used to have teeth marks that I know are long gone.

“Live a little, mimma . That’s all I’m saying.”

I sigh. “I know. And I promise one of these days I will get there.” The door chimes and a handful of people walk in. “Want me to keep watching the bar or go seat them?”

“I’ll seat them. Then you can take over their tables. Salvatore should be in any minute to watch the bar and I should head back into the kitchen.”

I nod at her and put away the glass I was washing earlier when I see my cousin take a seat outside on the patio. “Fuck,” I mutter to myself.

Salvatore joins me behind the bar a couple seconds later and I say hello before heading over to the three new tables that walked in. I figure I’ll hit my cousin last because there is no good reason for him to be here.

I take my time filling drink orders and taking food orders until I finally get the courage to walk outside and talk to him.

The cool wind whips through my hair but the abundant sunshine keeps the patio warm and heats my skin. “What are you doing here?” I ask Dante in a quiet voice.

“Can’t I just enjoy myself in a quaint seaside town and eat at one of the best restaurants there is?”

“No,” I say bluntly. “What do you want?”

“Darling Mirabella, I haven’t had a chance to look at the menu yet.”

“Dante, I am being serious.”

He folds the menu in front of him and sets it on the table. “For starters, you can get me a drink. Scotch. Then we can discuss our business. Maybe you could even take a seat and join your dear cousin for a short conversation.”

“I’m working.”

“I am sure your boss won’t mind you taking a quick break.”

“I am the only waitress today.”

“And my men will be happy to ensure your boss understands.”

My heart rate picks up and I quickly glance around to see three people near the building that look out of place and I have no doubt they are packing. “Fine. I’ll get you a scotch. Then you have five minutes of my time.”

“How generous of you.” I don’t miss the sarcasm in his voice.

I rush inside and check on my tables before running into the kitchen to talk to Magda.

“Can I take a five-minute break?”

“We just got busy.”

I lean my palms on the center butcher block island. “I understand but it’s important I take this break.”

“Maybe in twenty minutes after you serve their food.”

I go to speak but then a burly-looking man in a crisp black suit bangs through the back door of the kitchen, a handgun hanging loosely in his hand.

Magda’s face remains stoic when she sees him. As if seeing a dangerous mafia hitman doesn’t even faze her. She turns back to me. “I’ll have Salvatore bring out the food when it’s ready.”

“Thank you,” I say before scowling at the man who works for my family.

I head through the double doors of the kitchen and across the restaurant, grabbing Dante’s scotch and walking to his table, sliding into the chair across from him.

“Now that wasn’t so difficult, was it?” Dante asks, sipping on his scotch.

I fold my arms over my chest, acting indifferent as I speak to him. “What do you want?”

“I would like to congratulate you on passing your test. My informant was happy to get that information from you.”

“You mean the assassin that picked up the envelope?”

He raises one of his dark, thick brows. “And what would you know about that?”

Shit . I was only supposed to drop the envelope and not know who picked it up. It was Kilian who told me. I quickly gather my thoughts and lie. “Please, it wasn’t hard to figure out when I saw a big, burly man carrying the envelope across the hotel lobby and through the front doors as I was waiting for an elevator.”

Dante strokes his fingers across his chin. I am not entirely sure he believed my lie. “Hmm. Well that is not entirely why I’m here.”

“Figures,” I mumble under my breath.

“I need you to do something else for me.”

I stand abruptly from the table, slamming my hands down on the tabletop. “I am not a part of this family. You know I don’t do this shit.”

“I am sure I can find motivation to get you to do things.”

I shake my head and start to walk away but one of the men from before is standing behind me, blocking my path. I didn’t even hear him move.

“There is a small shipping trade happening at the port in Augusta a week from today. I just need you to be a distraction.”

“A distraction?”

He nods and sips his whiskey.

“That’s two and a half hours away. It’s a school night.”

“Well, I suggest you find a babysitter.”

“Why not find Ezio and have him do this?”

Dante tsks. “Ezio is handling other things.”

I scoff. “You mean you still don’t know where he is.”

“Ezio has...” Dante trails off as he looks at someone behind me.

“Mama,” I hear Aria shout from behind me.

I freeze. Dante and Giancarlo haven’t seen Aria since she was a baby. I fake a smile as I turn to face my daughter as she throws her backpack on the ground next to me.

“We got a new project for science class and I am so excited. We get to—” She stops midsentence as she turns to Dante. “Who are you?”

“I’m Dante, sweet one. I’m your mom’s cousin.”

She purses her lips. Then breaks into a grin. “I’m Aria. Nice to meet you, Dante. But if you are my mom’s cousin, why haven’t we met before?”

“I am a busy man.”

I bend down so I am eye level with Aria. “Why don’t you go tell Magda all about your science project?”

“Okay!” she shouts before throwing her arms around my neck and kissing me on the cheek.

She starts to run into the restaurant. “Backpack, Aria.”

She skids to a halt then turns around and fetches her backpack before running inside.

“What an adorable kid you have.”

I ignore him. “I’m not doing this, Dante. I told Giancarlo I would drop the envelope but that’s it.”

A sinister grin crosses his face as he looks toward the door Aria just ran into and then back at me. “I think it would be wise you do as I ask.”

“Why?” I ask, even though I feel every ounce of my skin freeze over with his look.

“I wouldn’t want anything to happen to your daughter.”

“Do not threaten her!” I grit through my teeth.

His grin grows on his face. “Who did you say her father was again?”

“I don’t know. Some man I fucked when you dragged me back to Genoa.”

“From my recollection, you went willingly.”

“It doesn’t matter. Stay the hell away from my daughter. She has nothing to do with this family.”

“She’s a Renzetti.”

I shake my head and snap. “No, she is a Di Masio. I will never let her have that name.”

Dante finishes his scotch and stands. “You can deny your bloodline all you want, Mirabella. But we all know the truth.” He glances back toward the restaurant door. “More than you know.”

He starts to walk away, not letting me have another word. He turns and says, “I’ll be in touch with what I need you to do.”

I watch as he walks away, the men he brought with him following behind.

I take a deep breath, not realizing I was holding it in as a million thoughts fly through my brain. Why now? Why are they dragging me into everything now? And the way he looked at my daughter. There was something in his eyes. Like he knew I was lying. Like he knew some random man isn’t Aria’s father. Even if he figures out who her real father is, it shouldn’t matter. In his eyes, Kilian is dead.

I head back into the restaurant and try to shake off the encounter. Magda is staring at me, a look of concern on her face. But I simply brush it off. “Thanks for watching my tables. I’ll get back to them now. Aria will just be in your office working on homework.”

Magda purses her lips at me but keeps her mouth shut as I get back to work.

17

KILIAN

I make my way through the private entrance of one of the newer clubs in London. The beat of the bass is reverberating through the walls as I make my way to a darkened VIP table on the third level of the club. These days I am always using private entrances and darkened hallways to go anywhere in public where I may be recognized. But as the years have passed since my “death” the memory of Kilian Bancroft has faded. Which makes my life somewhat easier. And I know as more years pass, the memory of the man I used to be will be completely forgotten. Maybe then I will have the freedom I’ve wanted.

“What can I get you to drink?”

I look up to see a scantily clad waitress standing inside the small room. “Redbreast fifteen year.”

She smiles. “I’ll be right back.”

I watch her ass as she goes. A silver fringed skirt that does nothing to cover the bottom of her round cheeks. Her back is bare, only a thin string holding the small top on. I sigh as I watch her go. I have no interest in her. If it were a month ago, things would be different. I know how the owners of these clubs expect their waitresses to treat guests like me. If I ask for her to suck my dick she is encouraged to do so. Hell, I’ve had my fair share of the waitresses in these clubs. Most are willing to ride my dick, even offer to and I wouldn’t be surprised if this girl is no different. That’s the

elusiveness of these places. Private memberships for the richest of the rich. And there are no rules. The waitresses are paid well enough and most enjoy sex so that it isn't a job for them.

She walks back in with my drink and sets it on the table in front of me. Her hand lands on my knee. "Can I get you anything else?" she asks, her hand slowly sliding closer to my dick.

I take her hand off my leg. "No," I say with a stern voice.

An irritated look crosses her face. "Mr. Arrington said—"

"I don't give a shit what he said. Leave." My voice is harsh and I could give a shit how I sound. I don't want this woman. Or any woman other than the one that spent three nights in my arms in Malta.

I slam back my entire drink, annoyance building. I knew Roland would tell his staff to offer their services but it's the last thing I want.

A new waitress comes into the booth and drops off another drink for me. This one doesn't say a word and I don't look at her. I just watch the crowd of young people below.

"Is it necessary to snap at my staff?"

I run my finger along the rim of my glass as it sits perched on my knee. "When they touch me without my permission it is."

"What crawled up your ass?" Roland laughs as he takes a seat across from me.

I turn to face him. "Long day."

He nods and snaps his fingers at the new waitress standing near the entrance to the room. She quickly turns away.

“Your father has been working you to the bone?”

I raise a brow at him. “How do you know?”

“I overheard Daddy dearest.”

I smirk at him. “I didn’t realize you were one for gossip.”

He chuckles as he spreads his arms out on the back of the booth. “You know I love gossip. It got me to where I am.”

I shake my head at him and prop my feet on the table between us. The waitress quickly returns with a bottle of Redbreast, a bottle of Beluga Epicure, an ice bucket, and a glass. Roland runs his hand along the back of her thigh while she is bent over the table filling his glass with vodka. He smacks her ass when she stands.

“Good girl.” He then pulls her onto his lap, squeezing her side and by the look on her face, I can tell she is nervous. “Next time, make sure this is already here or else I’ll remove you from VIP and put you back on the floor.”

“Yes, sir,” she says meekly.

“And speak with confidence. Make sure the men want you.”

“Yes, sir,” she says louder, her chest pushing out as she says it.

He runs a finger along her breasts and I watch a shiver roll down her spine. “Good girl.” He helps her stand and smacks her ass again. “Tie the curtain and don’t come in

unless you are called for.”

“Yes, sir,” she says again before doing as he says.

“New toy?” I ask.

He shrugs. “We’ll see. She wanted to work this floor and did fine at the second-level table service. But as soon as I moved her up here, she got shy. You know some of the assholes on this floor like the shy ones but I worry they may take advantage.”

“Sounds like she crawled under your skin.”

He laughs before sipping his extremely overpriced vodka. “Nah. But I am hoping she crawls into my bed eventually. Did you see those tits?”

“Nothing special to me.”

“Is Kilian Bancroft really turning down a piece of ass?”

I sip my whiskey and look out into the crowd. “Not in the mood.”

“So something did crawl up your ass?” he chuckles.

“Some days I’m not in the mood,” I say blandly before leaning over the table and pouring myself another drink.

Roland and I grew up together. Our family’s estates on the same streets. He was a little shit when we were little and now he is a bigger shit. I blame the fact he’s younger than me by four years. But I love the guy. How can I not? We are one and the same. Both cocky assholes who get everything we want. Our fathers both have seats at the table with The Partners. Something neither of us knew until a year ago

when both our fathers brought us in and groomed us to take over. But Roland has one too many loose screws. He makes mistakes. I've seen them. And I know he won't get the seat he is dying for anytime soon.

"How are the clubs doing?" I ask.

"Exponentially profitable as usual. And ever since this one opened four months ago, there is always a line to get in."

"You have naked men and women swinging above the crowd on swings and ropes. Everyone wants to see it with their own eyes."

"It was one of my better ideas."

"You've always had a taste for the extreme."

He throws back the rest of his vodka. "It pays the bills."

I shake my head. The man doesn't need to work. His family is deeply involved in the oil business and they have enough money to live off billions for centuries. Not to mention their involvement with The Partners. But Roland always was a daredevil, a risk-taker. As a kid, he did a few too many wild things that caused a few broken bones. And once he went to college, he had more fun playing with coeds than actually getting an education. When he told me he wanted to open a club I knew he would succeed. He is as much of a playboy as me. And the two of us easily drew in a crowd when he opened his first club. Now he has ten. Four in London, the rest around the world. All places where the rich can indulge in sexual activities if they pay the right price. I am still waiting for the day he opens a sex club.

"So what's going on?" I ask.

“The Holmes family closed off our access to their offshore account we were funneling money through.”

“I told you we never should have brought them in.”

He tosses ice into his glass. “It was a rookie mistake.”

“I’m surprised my father even approved of that acquisition.”

Roland pours vodka over the ice. “It was one of my first. I think he was teaching me a lesson.”

“Did you talk to your father about it?”

He snorts. “What do you think he said? He told me I needed to learn my lesson somehow.”

“Have you been in contact with them?”

“They won’t answer my calls.”

“Have you used any of our mercenaries to encourage them with a little force?” I ask as I lean my elbows onto my knees.

“Before I did that, I was hoping to ask you about that account you had in Boston. The senator.”

I shake my head. “They were already involved in illegal shit. I just found someone weak enough to believe my lies about being related to the family. I gave her the information to expose them and she did. The company folded. And I got the money out and anything tying us to them wiped before the feds even looked into it.” I drink a

sip of my drink. “Holmes didn’t do anything. Just needed help with their failing business. That’s why I never bring those men in. They are weak. And they have nothing we can hold against them.”

“So you suggest I have someone killed?” he asks.

I lean back in the booth. “Or kidnap someone.” I shrug with indifference. “Someone weak like that will shit their pants out of fear and pay out.”

“You were always good at this game,” Roland says to me with a look of sincerity in his eyes.

“It’s business, not a game.” My response is sullen. This is the reason Roland isn’t ready to take a seat at the table. His father didn’t groom him like mine did. He is too careless, too reckless at times.

His gaze moves to the dance floor, either watching the crowd or watching his employees. I’m surprised when he speaks. “I never understood why you did what you did for the Montfords.”

I feel my chest tighten but I act like his words don’t affect me. “Bastian and I go way back.”

“Not as far as you and I.”

“But we were born into this. He wasn’t.”

He turns to look at me and his eyes narrow. “But I thought this was business.”

I tilt my head at him, my gaze condemning. “It is.”

“Why do you seem like you don’t want that seat?”

I shrug. “Maybe because I’m not a bastard like you.”

He leans back in his chair, a sinister smile on his face. “Thanks for the compliment.”

“It’s the truth.” I pause and sip my whiskey. “You want this more than anyone.”

“I never understood why you don’t.” His voice is curious.

I run my fingers along the top of my glass. “I used to. But maybe after twenty years of being the villain and acting like the saint, I’m finally over it. I’m tired.”

“You don’t have much of a choice, Kilian.”

I nod, well aware of the few choices I have left in this life. “I know.” I turn my head and look back at the crowd. Both of us sitting in silence for a while.

He clears his throat. “Your father asked me to take care of the Renzettis.”

I snap my head to him. “He did what?”

“It’s why I called for this meeting. I knew it was your job to handle them.”

“Why the fuck would he do that?” My fist clenches around my glass.

Roland shakes his head. “I have no idea. He called me this morning. That’s why I texted you. I didn’t know if it was a setup.”

I close my eyes and let the anger wash through me. I take a deep breath before I say anything. “I don’t know what my father is doing. But I spent months looking for

Nicolas Di Masio. I found him, he's Ezio Renzetti, as you know, I presume." Roland nods. "I've tracked him to somewhere between Southern Italy and Sicily. I have a contact."

"More shipments go missing?"

I nod. "Alistair isn't happy at the speed I am working. I'm usually faster. But this fucker is hard to find."

"Why not go after the Renzettis directly?"

I run a hand through my hair. "Because I don't want one of the biggest mafia families putting hits on us."

"Makes sense."

I question whether or not to tell him any more, but if he came to me with this, I hope he is on my side and not my father's. "My contact has led me to believe even the Renzettis don't know where Ezio is."

"You think he went rogue?"

I finish the last of the whiskey in my glass. "I'm not sure."

Roland nods. "I won't do anything. I'll play along. Just tell me what you know and I'll pretend I'm doing it."

I can hear the sincerity in his voice. He's never wronged me. He has no reason to. At the end of the day, we both have seats being handed to us at the head of The Partners. We aren't competition. But I still need to be careful. I never know how deep my father can dig his claws. Or what he has planned. Even if he has me watching over

Roland.

Roland leans over the table and pours another drink for each of us. “Shall we have some fun and get shit-faced like old times?”

I laugh as I pick my drink up off the table. “You mean like every time we hang out at one of your clubs?”

He grins at me as he texts someone on his phone. Within seconds, four of his employees come into the room. “I brought you your favorite,” he says with a nod to a petite blonde who walks in behind the girl from earlier.

She sits on my lap, her lips going to my neck. Normally I would fuck this girl. Her pussy is tight as hell but she isn’t what I want. Isn’t what I crave.

I pick her up and set her on the seat next to me. “Unfortunately, Roland, I have some business to attend to tonight.”

He raises his brows at me but nods. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you turn down pussy.”

I ignore his statement. “Enjoy your night,” I say as the timid girl from earlier crawls on his lap.

“You know I will.” He winks at me just as another girl starts sucking on his neck.

I walk out of the room, closing the curtains behind me. No doubt he will be fucking all four of them.

* * *

I wipe the sweat off my brow as I run on the treadmill in my penthouse. Anger and frustration sweating out of my pores. And I accept it. If I run it off, at least I won't take my animosity out on anyone in a different way.

Ever since I got back from Malta, I keep replaying all the conversations I had with Bella. Especially the ones about my involvement in The Partners. She asked me what I wanted. The first person to ask me that in a long time. For the last twenty years of my life, I've done what I'm told. Played the role I was meant to play. The villain that everyone thinks is the good guy. I've ruined so many lives in the last twenty years. But I don't feel remorse. I couldn't care less about the people I dragged into this underworld. They wanted it, I just held the bait.

But Bella asking me what I want made me think about things deep inside of me. Recently, I thought I wanted to get out. But according to the world, I am a dead man. Where would that lead me? Hiding away on an island somewhere until enough years pass that no one recognizes me? I know deep inside of me I still crave power. I like being in control, having others bend to my will. Maybe I am a fool for thinking The Partners aren't my destiny. Maybe they are. But I don't want to prove myself to my father. I don't want to be the completely cruel man that he is.

I still have a heart. I still care for some people. My brothers. My mom. The Montfords. Bella. My list may be short. But I know I am not as callous as my father.

Roland noticed too. He saw that I wasn't in this a hundred percent. That I've retreated and just gone along with things instead of being proactive. Maybe I am confused and don't know what I want.

I turn off the treadmill and head over to the punching bag. Anything to get me out of my head. Anything to get me to figure out what the hell it is I want.

Too bad the one thing I am irrevocably sure that I want is the one thing I have to fight

to have.

I grunt as I slam my fists over and over again into the punching bag. Sweat dripping down my face, my back. My muscles aching from every move I make.

The only thing that makes me stop is the sound of my phone ringing. I see my father's name on the screen. I clench my hand around my fist as I go to pick it up. I called him immediately after leaving Roland at the club three nights ago and he is finally getting back to me.

"Hello," I answer, keeping my voice steady.

"Kilian, you said you needed to meet with me in your voice mail."

I don't miss the smugness in his voice. "It took you three days to call me back."

"I've been busy." I hear him shuffling papers on his desk in the background. "But if you would like to meet with me, I am in the office today. I'll be free in thirty minutes."

He doesn't say anything and just hangs up.

I slam my fist one more time into the bag for good measure. Then take a quick shower.

I speed over to the Bancroft Enterprises office. I slam my car into park in the underground garage and head to the elevator that leads directly to his private floor.

The door opens to the hall across from the side door to his office. I don't bother knocking and barge in.

“Kilian,” he says. No surprise in his voice.

“What the fuck is this about you handing the Renzettis off to Roland?”

He turns in his office chair to face me. The wrinkles around his mouth pointed down as he frowns at me. “You’ve been looking for that man for over six months. You are not moving fast enough.”

“I am working on it as best I can,” I grit through my teeth.

“You’re weak, son. I never should have chosen you for this.” Venom leaks from his mouth as he says, “I don’t even want to call you my son. You fail at so many things. I should have had Grayson or Liam take over for me. I thought you would succeed with your charm and your personality. But you let your feelings get in the way.”

I clench my fists at my sides as I stand in the middle of his obnoxiously large high-rise office. “I do not let my feelings get in the way.”

He laughs at me. “We both know you do. Do we need to have this conversation again? The one on how you took Bastian and Thiago Montford from me. You lost some of my best assets. Even the fuckup Matías was better than you.”

“They wanted out. You worked with Thiago. You allowed him to pay an abhorrent amount of money to get out. And instead you took his life.”

“You know The Partners had nothing to do with the death of Thiago Montford.”

I scoff. It’s always been the one thing my father has never admitted. The one thing that all The Partners deny. “I gave those men their lives back and gave you mine.”

“And it seems like a waste.”

I hold back my retort, my anger. All the wretched things I want to say to him. If I had the courage, if I had brought my gun, I would kill him now. Maybe I am weak. At least around him because instead of standing up for myself, I fold into one of the chairs across from his desk. “I will find Ezio Renzetti. I’m close.”

He ignores my statement and changes the subject. “I need you to close the deal with Hayward Shipping. He’s ready to join. And we need that business. They will make trade easier in Australia and the Philippines.”

I hold back my smart-ass remarks. I am well aware of why we need them. I am the one that got my hooks in them. Seduced them to the dark side. Did the job I’ve been given since I found out about The Partners. The job I’ve done for the last twenty years. The one where I convinced my best friend to join with his brother. “Consider the deal closed. I have a meeting with him tonight.”

My father looks pleased. “Good. Then I need you at the docks in Athens for the next shipment. It’s scheduled for Monday night.”

“Why are you putting me at the docks? That is a job far below mine. Roland should be there and Dimitri can handle it like he always does. There is nothing I need to check on. Not for this.”

His brow pinches as he looks at me. “Because you don’t seem to have your priorities straight.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. I’m working on finding Ezio Renzetti. He is hard to find. Even Giancarlo Renzetti doesn’t know where he is.”

“Roland is taking care of that now. He seems much more motivated to take his father’s seat, unlike my own son.”

“I’m handling the Renzettis. No one else is,” I command.

“Is that because you are fucking one of them? Is that what you mean by handling them?”

I clench my jaw. How the hell does he know that? “What are you talking about?”

He shakes his head at me then opens a file drawer at his desk. He drops the file open and shoves a picture toward me. “It looks like it’s hard to find Ezio when your head is stuck between the legs of his sister.”

I mentally count backward from ten to not flip the fuck out on my father. The picture he’s pointing at is a picture of me taking Bella’s sandals off on the beach before I dragged her behind the rocks. The moment captured when I inhaled her scent through her dress. The rest of the photos on his desk are all from Malta. Us at the bar, my hands under her skirt. Us eating dinner, her hand over mine. Us in the ocean, her body wrapped around mine.

“I’m fucking her to get information on her brother,” the lie slipping easily from my mouth. “She means nothing to me.”

My father studies me and I think for a second he believes me. Until he says, “Give Roland whatever information you have. Let him fuck the brother’s location out of her if he needs to. I know he doesn’t mind sticking his dick wherever he wants.”

“Father,” I say, but he holds up a hand, cutting me off.

“You want to prove to me you are worthy of being a Partner then do as I say. Roland’s father is concerned with your behavior, just as Hajar and Kozlov are. I might not kill my own son but I guarantee the others will not hesitate if you betray us again.”

18

MIRABELLA

I laugh as Aria throws flour into my hair. We are making cupcakes for a fundraiser for her football club. “You know the flour is supposed to go into the batter not all over the kitchen.”

“But it’s fun to see you covered in it.”

“It’s fun to see me in it. What about you?” I tease.

She looks at me curiously before I blow a handful of flour right in her face. “Mom,” she shrieks as she runs around the island with me chasing her.

“You brought this on yourself, Aria.”

“Noooo!” She giggles as I chase her. I grab her around the waist and smear frosting across her face. “Ewww!”

I laugh as she tries to wipe the frosting off her face but ends up smearing it all over the place. “You should go take a shower. I’ll finish frosting these cupcakes so you can take them to practice today.”

“What about the ones we are keeping?”

“I’ll let you frost those tonight. You need to get a move on. We have to leave in forty-

five minutes.”

She runs up the stairs and I turn back to the mess in the kitchen. There is flour and batter everywhere. She really wanted to help with the cupcakes, so I let her do most of the work. I start to move the cooled cupcakes to the individual containers and frost them with a simple buttercream, then throw some sprinkles and a football ball decoration on top.

By the time the last batch is done, I have no time to clean up. I figure I can do it later. So I grab Aria’s football bag out of the closet and make sure all her things are inside.

She comes pounding down the stairs. She definitely ate too much sugar before practice. “Did you get all the cupcakes packed? Tina was just asking me if we made them all.”

I point to the four bags of cupcakes near the door. “All ready to go. Can you grab the fold-up cart out of the laundry room?”

She nods and skips to the back of the house to grab it. I use the mirror by the front door to wipe excess flour off my face and shirt. I should change but I don’t want her to be late.

“Ready!” she yells as she slides back into the living room.

“You don’t look ready. Grab your coat and shoes. I’ll load these up,” I tell her as I grab the cart from her hands.

By the time I have them all loaded outside, Aria jumps down the steps to meet me. “I bet we will have the best cupcakes. Tina made cookies. Blah, who is going to want cookies when there are cupcakes?”

“I’m sure some people will want to buy the cookies.”

“Are we going to stay for the whole bake sale today?”

“We’ll see how tired you are.” After practice, all the local sports teams are hosting a small carnival with games, food, and rides. But I can already tell after her two-hour practice she will be whiny and tired.

We walk the four blocks to the park and see the carnival already in full swing across from the practice field.

“I wish we could go to the carnival now!”

“Hey, no whining. You have practice and then you can have fun.”

“No fair,” she pouts.

“Don’t even start with me, Aria. You know football is your priority.” I tell her as I wave at some of the parents. “Besides, all your friends on the team will be here anyway. Then you all get to go over together and have fun. It wouldn’t be any fun if you were there without them.”

She kicks her foot around in the grass. “I guess.”

I kneel down in front of her. “What’s wrong? You are always so excited to play.”

She shakes her head. “It’s nothing.”

“Really? Well, you better tell me later or no cupcakes tonight.”

“Okay, Mom.”

I run my finger through her ponytail and then stand. “Go get ’em, tiger.”

She smiles at me then runs off to join her team. I drop the cupcakes off with the team mom and then head out to the market.

It’s the beginning of April and the outdoor weekend market is just starting. It’s my favorite thing to do on the weekends. I walk the one block over to where the market starts and buy some fresh vegetables and fruits. I am looking through the beautiful floral bouquets when a man bumps into my shoulder.

“Excuse you!” I yell as he continues walking briskly down the street.

I turn back around and a hard chest is right in front of me. “Excuse me,” I say as I try to move around the man. I go to move out of his way until his cologne hits me. The smell of cedarwood and spice. I look up to see Kilian smiling down at me. A pair of aviator sunglasses over his eyes and a baseball cap on his head.

“What are you doing here?” I ask as I pull him farther into the tent behind a huge display of flowers.

“I can’t get that weekend out of my head.”

“You can’t be here,” I say as I look around to see if any of Giancarlo’s men are around.

His hand comes to my cheek and pulls me to look at him. “It’s fine. I made sure of it.”

“You know we can’t do this,” I plead, dropping my gaze to his T-shirt-clad chest. I didn’t even know my hand was gripping his shirt.

“We can find a way, Bella. You know we can.”

I look back up at him. “You’re delusional. We’ll both end up with bullets in our heads.”

“Meet me later.”

“I can’t.” I try to pull away but he grips my arm.

He pulls his sunglasses off and looks at me with intense eyes. “Please, Bella, I need you right now.”

I see the sorrow in his face, the pain haunting his eyes. And I can’t tell him no. Especially because my heart is beating so fast. Being around him does something to me and I, too, remember our nights in Malta like they were yesterday, not nearly a month ago. “Tomorrow,” I concede.

He smiles that smile that is so rare and I can feel my heart falling for him all over again with just one damn look. Shit, this isn’t good.

His hand goes to my hair. “You have flour in your hair.”

I reach up to touch my head but he pushes my hand away as he brushes the flour out and blows cool air onto my head. “Aria and I were making cupcakes.”

His smile drops and I know it’s because just talking about her hurts him. If only he knew the truth. If only I wasn’t scared to tell him. My chest aches thinking about the memories I have made with her and how he should have been there for them all.

He shoves something into my hand. “I’ll text you.”

I look down and find a burner phone in my hand and when I look back up, he's gone.

* * *

The rest of the day went by in a blur. I felt dazed the whole time thinking about Kilian. Luckily, Aria didn't seem to notice as we spent a few hours at the carnival. And whatever was bothering her earlier seemed to pass.

By the time I lay in bed I am burned out. And it's not just because of baking and shopping, and football and the carnival. It's because my mind is centered around Kilian. Granted, it has been for the last three weeks but after running into him in the market, it's worse. Like my mind was running a marathon and I feel brain dead. Then I remember the burner phone in my purse. I scramble out of bed so fast I nearly fall out as I get twisted in the blankets. I run down the stairs and grab the phone out of a zippered pocket in my purse where I stashed it earlier. I look down at the phone.

Six new messages.

I bite my lip, beyond curious what Kilian sent me. But I wait until I am back in my bed before unlocking the phone.

Unknown number: I miss you.

Unknown number: More than you know.

Unknown number: I don't know why it hurts to miss you more now when it's only been weeks compared to those ten years apart.

Unknown number: I cannot wait to ravish your body tomorrow. To make you scream my name so many times your voice is hoarse the next day.

Unknown number: But what I really wish is that my head was buried between your thighs right now as you sat on my face. Your hips grinding into me as my tongue works you to the brink of orgasm. Your knuckles white from gripping the headboard so hard. Your head thrown back in ecstasy.

Unknown number: But I know that pretty cunt of yours won't come until I shove my fingers up that tight ass of yours. Working both your holes and biting your clit until you fall apart on my face.

I flush as I read the messages. The one thing I've always loved about Kilian is that he was never shy of dirty talk. He always knew exactly what to say to turn me on. To bring me to the precipice every damn time.

We've never done this before though. Back in Dublin we never had each other's phone numbers. I just waited for him to show up at the bar. That's when I knew he was in town. To have a way to communicate with him now feels different. It feels like more. And that is something we shouldn't have.

I hesitate. Worried that I am making a mistake by texting him back. But then I think about those nights in Malta. Where I felt like I was twenty years old again. Young and in love.

Fuck, I cannot be in love with Kilian.

Not again.

I set the phone on my nightstand and stare at the ceiling. What the hell am I supposed to do? Ignore him? I know he will just come looking for me if I don't say anything.

I grab the phone off the nightstand and hold my thumbs over the screen to text but my nerves get the best of me and I shove it under my pillow.

Stop, Bella, don't do this.

But the fact I just called myself by the name only he calls me has me digging that damn phone out again. My fingers glide across the screen and hover over the send button. Everything about this is wrong. I shouldn't be doing this. But I hit send before I can chicken out.

Bella: And what would you do to me after?

I bite my lip after I hit send. He sent me those messages hours ago. So who knows how long it will take for him to respond.

I drop the phone to my chest, my heart rate picking up, excited about Kilian's answer. It doesn't take long for me to feel the vibration on my chest.

Unknown number: I would lick up every last ounce of your cum then flip you over and tie you to the bed.

My body heats up as I read his message.

Bella: Then what?

Unknown number: I would lick every inch of your body until you were squirming and begging for me to fuck you.

Bella: How would you fuck me?

My hand slides under the sheets as I wait for his answer. My fingers gliding over the silk of my nightgown until I reach the lace of my underwear.

Unknown number: I would spread your thighs so wide your back arches up from the

pressure. Then I would bite down on those dark rosy nipples of yours I love so much while I shove three fingers deep inside of you.

Bella: Just your fingers?

Unknown number: I want to make sure that tight little cunt is ready for my cock. So I'll pump you hard, getting you as wet as you were while I ate you out.

Bella: I'm wet just thinking about it.

I blink when I read the text I just sent. I was always a wild one in bed but I have never had phone sex. Never sent dirty texts to anyone in my life.

Unknown number: Are you touching yourself, doll?

I swallow hard as I glide my fingers along my clit.

Bella: Yes.

Unknown number: Good girl. My cock is so hard right now thinking of those long slender fingers of yours sliding into your juicy cunt.

Bella: Keep telling me how you would fuck me.

Unknown number: Once I have you begging for my dick I'll pull my fingers out and slam into you so hard your head slams into the headboard. Then I'll shove my fingers down your throat and make you lick them clean while I pound into you.

Bella: Don't stop.

Unknown number: Fuck, Bella, what I wouldn't give to have you in my arms right

now.

My toes curl as I think about Kilian's massive dick driving into me, stretching me. My fingers aren't doing what he could do.

Unknown number: Just when I think you are ready to come I'll pull out of you. I'll unbind your hands and flip you over and bring you to your knees, your ass high in the air. I'll tease that tight hole of yours with my wet dick and when you grow tired of begging me for my cock, I'll pin your hands behind your back and press into that ass, stretching you inch by inch until you can't take it anymore and your orgasm explodes out of you so that you feel it in every inch of your body.

My entire body is on fire as I press my fingers into my clit. I come all over my fingers as I think about him fucking my ass. I remember the first time we did it. I thought I would hate it. But he made it feel amazing. I felt closer to him than I ever had before. And I miss that connection with him. Us knowing each other on the deepest, basest level.

Unknown number: I wish I could see your face right now.

Bella: You know what my face looks like right now.

Unknown number: It doesn't mean I still don't want to see it.

Bella: I've never come on my hand so hard.

Unknown number: You should be coming all over my dick.

Bella: Tomorrow.

Unknown number: Tomorrow.

Unknown number: I'll text you.

I smile into my pillow as I think about seeing Kilian tomorrow. I type his name into the phone and shut it off as I curl up into my bed. My body still tingling from the aftermath of my orgasm.

* * *

I'm woken up the next morning by Aria jumping on my bed.

"Mom, get up! It's pancake day!"

I groan as I roll over and toss the blankets over my head. "It's too early."

"It's eight thirty!"

"Ugh," I moan into the pillow. "Why are you up so early?"

"I want to work on my science project before practice so that way I can just bake cupcakes with Magda tonight."

She keeps jumping on the bed and I swear she is going to make me throw up from the movement. I peel the covers off my face and when she isn't looking, I pull her down and attack her with tickles.

"Mom, stop!" She giggles.

"This is your punishment for jumping on the bed! Remember what I told you?"

She squeals as she squirms underneath me. "No jumping on the bed or I may fall off and break my head!"

“That’s right,” I say with a smile as I pull away from her. I slide off the bed and she shifts up with the goofiest smile on her face. “You make sure all your practice clothes are clean and packed and I’ll make breakfast. Then we can work on your science project.”

“Okay,” she says with excitement as she sprints toward the door.

“What kind of pancakes do you want?”

She taps her finger against her lips. “Lemon mascarpone!”

I roll my eyes. “Of course you do.”

She starts to run down the stairs and I shout after her, “No running down the stairs with your socks on!”

I run to the bathroom and freshen up, tying a robe around my body. I check the burner phone for any texts from Kilian but there are none. I contemplate texting good morning but decide against it. That sounds too normal and I have no idea what the hell we are.

I head into the kitchen and start pulling all the ingredients out for pancakes. They are Aria’s favorite. But I only let her eat them on Sundays. It’s our little tradition.

As I pour batter onto the griddle I hear her dragging her practice bag down the stairs behind her. I shake my head. I have told her so many times to carry it but she never does.

I catch a glimpse of dark hair skip past the kitchen as she puts her bag by the front door.

The alarm chimes that the door is open and I am ready to grab a knife and run for Aria but then I see her skipping into the kitchen with a brown box tied with raw cord in her hand.

“I found this outside,” she says as she sets it on the island. “It has your name on it.”

I immediately think it’s from Dante with whatever stupid instructions he has for me. I have no intention of playing that game with him. He can fuck himself for all I care. I know he won’t touch Aria. It’s just an empty threat.

“Why don’t you go get your science stuff ready so we can work on it after breakfast? Pancakes will be done in ten minutes.”

“Okay,” she singsongs as she runs back up to her room.

I eye the package on the island. Wary of opening it.

I flip the pancakes on the griddle and grab the mascarpone out of the refrigerator. But my eyes keep flitting back over to the box.

What could they possibly be sending me in a box?

Maybe it’s not from Dante.

I set the mascarpone down. And pull the pancakes off the griddle before pouring another batch on. My curiosity gets the best of me and I drag the box toward me.

I pull the cord off and open the top. A handwritten note sits on top with my name on it. I open it to find a familiar script.

Wear this tonight.

I smile when I realize it's from Kilian. I pull back the tissue paper and find a beautiful red silk dress. It's simple but I know it will hug every one of my curves. Beneath it sits another note.

For the panties I ruined.

I laugh as I find three silk thongs in the box, all black, all the same. Another note sits underneath it.

I thought I would buy a few because I am sure to destroy these too.

I smile as I shove everything back into the box and run it upstairs before Aria sees what's inside.

I flip the pancakes and send a text to Magda confirming that she is still okay with watching Aria tonight.

She lets me know she is and then tries to pry out details from me. I only told her yesterday that I had a date and of course, she wants a full dossier on the man taking me out. I lied and told her I hit it off with a man I ran into at the market. Which is kind of true.

I know it's a risk seeing Kilian tonight. But I trust him. I know he will take every precaution to make sure no one sees us.

I pull the last of the pancakes off the griddle and shout for Aria to come downstairs. We eat at the island, indulging in lemon mascarpone pancakes. And then I help her with her project.

* * *

I run my hands down the side of the red dress. Kilian knew exactly what would look killer on me. The dress hits at my knees to keep it modest in length but that's where the modesty ends. It's tight around my hips and ass and the plunging neckline accentuates my girls.

I paired it with a pair of black stilettos, a drop diamond necklace that used to be my mom's and set my hair in loose curls over my shoulder. I swipe my red lipstick over my lips and head downstairs.

"Mommy, you look so pretty!" Aria shouts as I walk into the living room where she is watching television.

"Thanks, baby girl."

Magda whistles as she walks out of the kitchen, a towel in her hands. "You look gorgeous and sexy as hell. Where is this mystery man taking you? You must be going somewhere special."

I really have no idea. I assume he is sending a car to pick me up and take me to some hotel where he will either fuck me in this dress or rip it off me. Hopefully both.

"It's a surprise," I lie to Magda.

"How romantic," she sighs. "He better come to the door if he is a gentleman. And I want to meet him."

"Magda, stop. It's nothing. A first date."

"Chivalry, my dear. Besides if you dress like that for a first date, he must be important."

More than you know.

“I just wanted to look nice. It’s been a while since I went on a date.”

“Mmhmm,” Magda says, giving me a look like she can see right through me.

I grab a leather jacket and wrap it around my shoulders. “Don’t give me that look.”

“You are the one with the look on your face,” she chastises. “Looks a lot like the same look you had when you came back from Malta.”

“You mean relaxed?” I ask as I grab my clutch and switch a few things from my purse.

“No. In love.”

I freeze at her words and wonder if my feelings are that transparent. If Magda can see it then surely Dante or Giancarlo will notice something is going on with me.

“Mama, are you in love?” Aria asks as she quits paying attention to her television show and kneels on the couch to look at me.

I shake my head at her. “Nope. Just a date.”

Magda shoots me another look.

“Magda, please stop. There are no fairy tales here. It’s a date.”

I really should have hired a teenager to babysit so I didn’t get the third degree from Magda. I look at my phone and see it’s just about five when Kilian told me to be ready. I wait for a text to let me know my ride is here when I hear a knock at the

door.

Shit.

He can't really be stupid enough to come to the door and pick me up.

Magda brushes past me and opens the door before I can stop her. A man stands there I don't recognize.

"Hello, I am here on behalf of Mr. Oliver to pick up Ms. Di Masio," the man says. I smirk at the name Oliver.

Magda throws a glance my way and I shrug.

I give Aria a kiss on the cheek and head to the door. "I'll be back by eleven," I tell Magda as I pass.

"Mira." The authority in her voice is enough to make me stop on the threshold of the door. "Enjoy your night. But be safe."

She has a look in her eye, almost like a warning. I just nod and follow the man to the waiting Bentley outside.

He holds the door open for me and I thank him as I slide into the luxury car. I half expect Kilian to be inside, the windows tinted so dark no one would know he was in here, but he isn't.

I settle into the soft leather seat and watch the town pass as we drive along the coastline. The driver lets me know we are headed just outside Palermo. I sit quietly in the car for the forty-five-minute drive. My stomach is in knots and my heart is beating a million beats a second.

I didn't realize until now that this is the first time I have ever been on a date with Kilian. Besides dinner at the hotel in Malta but I don't count that. This is the first time I've dressed up with the intention of meeting him for a date. I'm thirty-one years old, you think I would be able to handle this but a swarm of butterflies has taken over my stomach.

They only get worse when we pull up to a marina. The driver stops next to a pier then gets out and opens the door for me.

"This way." He gestures and I follow him down the dock.

We get to a boat lit up with Edison lights on the deck and I see Kilian standing in one of his classic three-piece bespoke suits waiting for me.

"Enjoy your evening, Ms. Di Masio," the driver tells me before walking away.

Kilian takes my hand as I step onto the small yacht. "Good evening, Ms. Di Masio," he says into my neck as he wraps his arms around my waist. "You smell divine and you look gorgeous."

I blush as he pulls his face from my neck, his hands squeezing my ass. "But maybe I should have bought you a different dress because all I want to do is take you to bed and fuck you."

I pat his cheek as I step out of his embrace. "You'll need to feed me first." He makes a face that tells me exactly what he is thinking of feeding me. "Real food, Kil."

He presses a kiss to my cheek. "Of course."

I sit on a bench and slip my heels off before taking Kilian's hand as he guides me to a small sitting area near the front of the boat. A bottle of Redbreast sits on the table

with two glasses.

He sits down on the small sofa and I cuddle into his side. Needing to be as close to this man as possible with whatever time we can steal with each other. My stomach is still full of butterflies as we sit in silence. The boat starts to move as we move out to sea. Kilian pours us each a glass of whiskey. Then he sits back on the couch, his arm wrapped around my shoulder.

“I know this isn’t a date like at a restaurant. But I wanted to give you something more than I’ve ever given you,” he says softly into the air.

I look up at him. “Kilian, this is perfect.”

“I didn’t want to risk anything. And the weather is nice enough for a sunset dinner.”

“I appreciate it all.”

He looks down at me. “You’re nervous.”

Wow, maybe I am transparent. I swallow down my glass of whiskey and set it on the table. “This is the first time we’ve ever done this. Like a real date. I’m just... I don’t... I’m scared...” I trail off not able to find the right words.

Kilian sets his glass down on the table and pulls me closer to him. “It’s just us, Bella. You and me. I wanted to take you out so many times back in Dublin but I knew you didn’t want that. You were young and carefree. You wanted that freedom that anyone your age would want. And I was fine with our relationship the way it was.”

“You know I wasn’t as carefree as you thought.”

He looks down at me, humor etched on his face. “I didn’t know you were a mob

daughter at the time.”

I laugh. “True.” I pause as I take in the beauty of the sea in front of us, the way the sunlight dances across the water. “I wanted more with you back then but I was too scared to admit it to myself much less you. And I was hiding such a big secret from you and I knew there was nothing I could do. There was no way we could be...”

“Like this?” he asks, finishing my sentence.

I nod. “We always understood each other on the deepest level. But I knew I could never let you into my heart.”

“What about now?” he asks me.

I take a deep breath to admit the truth I wish I’d told him ten years ago. “I think I let you into my heart back then and you never left. When I disappeared, I left you with a piece of my heart I never thought I would get back, but now that I am with you, I feel like this is right. Us. Together.”

“Is that why you are nervous?”

I shrug. That and the fact I still haven’t told you Aria is your daughter.

“It’s just us, Bella. Don’t be nervous.” I nod before he continues. “And just so you know, I think you’ve always had a piece of my heart too.”

“Anam cara ,” I say softly.

“Forever,” he answers.

We spend the rest of the night enjoying ourselves in a way we never let ourselves

before. Pretending we are a real couple, laughing, dancing, enjoying the freedom that comes on a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean. We don't think about our families or the reasons we could never be together. It is just the two of us, dancing under starlight.

MIRABELLA

I never showed up to the docks that night to be a distraction. I talked to Kilian about it on the boat and he told me not to go. He was worried for my safety. It's been three weeks since then and I still haven't heard from Dante. I don't know if it was another one of Giancarlo's stupid tests or what. But I still worry what may come of me not following their orders. Kilian ensured me that he would have someone watching me, making sure my safety was a priority.

And now I am back to looking over my shoulder every day. I worry about Aria. I worry about Dante following through on his threats. But Kilian assured me nothing would happen to my daughter. And every time he gives me that reassurance I know I should tell him the truth. But I can't tell him over text that he is a dad. I need to tell him in person. But it's too dangerous, too risky to meet up with him.

I take a deep breath as I grab my purse and umbrella to head to work. It's pouring outside today and I know it's going to be a slow day. Not many people will be out and about in the rain. I almost wish I could stay home and do nothing for once.

I am about to leave when I feel the vibration of my burner phone in my purse. I always keep it with me now. Kilian and I text every day. And every night he sends me dirty texts that have me wishing he was in my bed.

Kilian: Happy Birthday

Bella: You remember?

I hadn't said anything about my birthday coming up. I don't really care that much anyway. I know Magda will give me some cash like she does every year. I'll order in dinner and have cake with Aria then watch a movie with her.

Kilian: I remember everything.

I blush at that. God, this man. I never blush. Ever. Yet he has been the only man in my entire life to bring a flush to my cheeks.

Bella: Well thank you

Kilian: I wish I could be there. I would give you a birthday present you would remember for the rest of your life.

Bella: Would it involve your dick?

Kilian: Baby, you better believe it would involve more than just my dick. I would have you begging for me to stop pleasuring you as I make you come over and over again. From my fingers, my tongue, my dick, toys.

I press my thighs together.

Kilian: I would fuck you ten ways to Sunday. You would forget your own name. And you'd be able to feel every place my dick was for a week.

I moan as I read his text. Really wishing he was here so we could do just that.

Bella: You are making it really hard to leave for work.

Kilian: You make me hard just thinking of you.

I grab my keys and lock the door, opening the umbrella as I walk down the front steps.

Bella: Even though it's my birthday I would have no problem getting on my knees and letting you fuck my mouth with your dick.

Kilian: You filthy woman. I am about to walk into a meeting and now all I want is your lips on my dick.

Bella: Well I am walking to work and all I can think about is your cock pounding into me. So I guess we're even.

Kilian: You shouldn't be talking to me if you are walking outside.

Bella: It's pouring rain. No one is around. I'm fine.

Kilian: I'll talk to you tonight. Happy Birthday, beautiful. Be safe.

I smile as I shove the phone into my pocket. His words brightening my day.

I should have known texting in public was a bad idea but I feel like I make a lot of bad decisions when it comes to Kilian.

I cross the street as the rain starts to pour even harder. I'm only a block from the restaurant when a large body presses me into an alleyway and covers my mouth with his hand.

I try to grab the knife out of my purse but it's ripped away and thrown on the ground. The umbrella snaps against the brick wall I'm thrown into, remnants of its spines

digging into my back.

I am about to scream when I see my brother's eyes looking into mine. I manage to pull his hand off my mouth. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" I spit.

He doesn't let me go and pushes me harder into the wall. "What did you tell Giancarlo?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Just tell me!" he shouts into my face.

"Ezio, you are going to have to be a little more clear."

He grunts and I take him in. He looks wild. His beard longer than it was the last time I saw him, his hair grown out. It looks like he has been on the run but I have no idea why. "He came looking for me."

I am utterly confused. "You work for him."

He shakes his head. "He tried to have me killed."

"Why?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Ezio. You know I don't communicate with the family."

He shoves me harder into the brick. "I know he's sent Dante to talk to you. To make you do their bidding."

“They can ask me to do whatever they want but I don’t follow through.”

“Who have you been meeting with?” he asks me.

I shift against the wall, trying to get him off me but to no avail. “I don’t know what you are talking about. I am not meeting with anyone.”

“Liar, liar,” he growls.

“I seriously have no idea—”

“I’ve watched you. Someone is protecting you.”

He has to be lying. If he was watching me, Kilian would have found him already.

“Get your hands off me, Ezio.”

He smirks at me, then shoves his hand into my pocket, right where I stashed the burner phone. He pulls it out and steps backward, finally freeing me from the wall. Rain pours down all over me as I toss the broken umbrella to the side. “Give that back.”

He doesn’t say anything as he opens it. “Who is this?”

“Some guy I’m fucking. Clearly you can tell from the messages.”

He paces, blocking me from getting out of the alley. “No, no, no. I know who this is. Sister, are you fraternizing with the enemy?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

He pockets the phone before pulling a gun. I keep my hands up to not provoke him. I

am positive he has lost his mind.

“Since it’s your birthday, I won’t shoot you. But watch your back, Mirabella. Good things won’t come from this.”

He drops the gun down, then takes off around the corner. I grab my purse and run after him but through the pouring rain it’s hard to see a thing. I check the next block and can’t find him anywhere.

I run to the restaurant, worried as fuck. What the hell just happened?

And now he has my only way of getting in contact with Kilian. What if he uses the phone to lure him out? No, Kilian is smarter than that. I know he is.

Then I remember that first time I saw Kilian. When he broke into my house. He left a card with a number to contact someone who could contact him. But that’s buried in the junk drawer at home. I can’t go back there now. It would be too obvious. I’ll just have to wait until later.

I push open the back door to the kitchen of the restaurant.

“What the hell happened to you? You look like a drowned rat,” Magda says as she wipes her floured hands on her apron.

“Nothing. My umbrella broke.”

She gives me a curious look but then goes back to the bread she was working on. “Horrible thing to have happen today of all days. Happy birthday, mimma .”

I smile at her and head to the bathroom. I shut the door, locking it behind me, and want to shout or cry or both. I have no idea what the hell just happened. What is

going on with Ezio and why he was asking about Dante and Giancarlo. A fit of anxiety hits me as I think about Aria and immediately dig my real phone out of my pocket and call the school. Luckily no one has tried to pick her up and I told them only I am allowed to. They probably think I am crazy but I am so worried that the threats Dante made will come to fruition. Especially now that Ezio has that phone. I don't believe for one second he isn't still working for Giancarlo. Dante's words from weeks ago echoing in my brain, telling me not to worry about him.

Magda knocks on the door of the bathroom. "You alright in there, Mira?"

I press paper towels through my hair. "Yeah, just trying to dry off."

"I may have some extra clothes upstairs for you. I'll be right back."

"Thank you," I mumble through the door.

I try to pace my accelerated breathing to calm my heart and my worry. I just want it to be tonight. I want to make sure Aria is safe. And I need that number to get in contact with Kilian.

* * *

I managed to fake it last night around Aria. We had my birthday celebration as usual. Maybe because I felt safer once I picked her up from school and got home, set the alarm and texted that number Kilian gave me months ago. I didn't expect a response. But a few minutes after I sent the text I got one back that said more eyes were on the house. The rest of the night went smoothly and Aria's positivity kept me relaxed.

This morning the sun was out and it felt like an entirely different day. As if the rain from yesterday was an omen for a bad day.

I kept on my toes as I walked Aria to school and on my way to work. But nothing seemed strange or out of the ordinary. Maybe Ezio really is losing his mind and yesterday was some weird fluke.

Luckily, the restaurant is much busier today because of the nicer weather and it helps me keep my mind off everything. By the time I get a break for lunch, I am starving. I rush into the kitchen and nod at one of the cooks before grabbing a sandwich out of the refrigerator and slumping against the island where Magda is busy making desserts.

“Good day for business,” she says.

I nod around a mouthful of bread. “It’s so busy.”

“Makes up for yesterday.”

“For you,” I say after swallowing a bite of food. “I feel like I am running in circles.”

“Did you want help with the tables?” she asks me.

I shake my head. “I’m fine. Rosa and I are handling it.”

She smiles at me, and I shove the rest of the sandwich into my mouth. “Okay, back to work.”

“Would you be a dear and throw the trash out before you head back to your tables?”

I look at the overflowing trash cans. “Of course.”

I tie up the bag and push the back door open with my back. I drop one bag to the ground then sling the other into the dumpster followed by the second bag. When I am

about to go back in, I am grabbed from behind. A hand over my mouth and I immediately curse myself for being careless. A repeat of yesterday flashing through my brain but I know there can be no way it ends the same. A far worse ending will come out of today.

I am dragged to a small alcove in the building where a door used to be and pressed into the archway. It isn't until then that I smell the familiar scent and know it's Kilian.

He spins me around, letting go of my mouth, his hands flying to my jaw. "Are you okay?"

I push him off me. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry," he says as he studies my face. "I said your name, you just didn't hear me."

"You can't be here," I say as I look around him and down the alley, making sure no one is around.

"It's safe. I checked."

"What the hell, Kil?" I brush hair out of my face and he closes the gap between us.

"I was worried as fuck when I texted you yesterday afternoon and got a weird response back. I was ready to jump on a plane and head here to make sure you were safe. I actually did jump on a plane. It wasn't until I was in the air that I got the message from my associate when you texted that other number." His thumb traces over my lip. "What the hell happened?"

I tell him. About Ezio, the weird comments he made, the threats.

“He was here?”

I nod.

“You promise me that you will stay safe?” he asks.

“What are you going to do, Kilian?” I worry my lip between my teeth.

“Don’t worry, mo stór . I am just keeping you safe.”

I don’t believe a word he is saying. “You know what Ezio was doing here?”

“I have a slight inclination as to what.”

I pull him into me. “But you can’t tell me?”

He shakes his head. “The less you know, the safer you are.”

I want to argue with him but I know he’s right. I could be in worse danger if I knew what he was going to do.

He presses his lips to mine and I go still, worried that someone may see. But then he presses me farther into the alcove so my body is completely covered by his. I give in and kiss him back, my knees going weak as he kisses the hell out of me.

He pulls back and whispers in my ear. “Happy belated birthday, Bella. I’ll speak with you soon.”

He presses something into my hand then walks down the alley. I stay hidden in the alcove for a few moments while I catch my breath. I shove the phone into my apron he pressed into my hand and smooth my hair back before heading back into work.

20

KILIAN

I sit in the dark, inside of a cheap rental property in Southern Italy. I drum my fingers along the edge of the rickety table as I stare at the burner phone lying next to my whiskey glass.

Bella: I don't know what you're doing. But be safe. Please. I know I can't have you but I don't want to lose you again.

I clench my jaw as I read her message for the hundredth time. The words I know I can't have you infuriate me beyond belief. I am doing everything in my power to make us a reality. But I worry that she will never believe it. Never feel safe.

I pour more whiskey into my glass when a knock sounds from the front door. I grab my gun off the table and make my way to the door, my feet silent on the worn-out wood. I knock twice on my side of the door. When I get a single knock response, I open the door.

A large tattooed man walks in first, he scans the small apartment then nods at me with his soft blue eyes. For a man who looks like a mercenary, he has the kindest eyes I've ever seen.

Behind him walks in the man I called in for a favor. The man whose life I saved seven months ago.

“Good to see you walking again,” I comment.

Matías Montford rolls his eyes at me. “Fuck off, Kilian. You know I started walking again six months ago.”

I wrap my arms around his shoulders just as he does the same to me and pats me on the back. “I hear congratulations are in order.”

A smile appears on his face. “Thanks, man.”

“I’m glad you’re happy. That it all worked out.”

He pats me on the shoulder. “If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t even be alive. Much less engaged to the woman of my dreams.”

“I owed your family.”

He shakes his head. “No you didn’t. You paid your debt when you sacrificed yourself for my brother.”

“Well, I couldn’t have Bastian losing you either.”

He studies me with sincerity and nods.

“Enough of the reminiscing. Let’s get to business, shall we?”

I lead them into the kitchen and sit down at the table, setting my gun next to the burner phone. I pour whiskey for myself and Matías. Demont, Matías’s bodyguard, holds his hand up and I leave his glass empty.

“So you found Nicolas Di Masio?” Matías asks after taking a drink.

“More or less. Sneaky bastard has been flying under the radar. But I believe he will be at the docks tomorrow night.”

“How did you find him? What family was he working for?” Matías asks. He has as much interest in Nicolas Di Masio as I do. Nicolas was working for his fiancée Alessia Calvetti’s father. He double-crossed The Partners and the Calvettis, then almost got Alessia killed.

“His real name is Ezio Renzetti.”

“Shit,” Matías mutters under his breath.

“I have a source that has given me information he was in Sicily recently. I also believe he is behind the missing weapons over the last two years. Giancarlo Renzetti has said he is also looking for Ezio. But I have intel that says the Renzettis’ business has been growing significantly. I can only assume with our stolen weapons.”

Matías nods. “So you think Giancarlo is lying about Ezio’s whereabouts to keep The Partners off his scent.”

I nod and take a sip of my drink. “I received information that there was to be a sale in Augusta, Sicily, three weeks ago. I went to that dock to see if it was our missing weapons. It wasn’t but the Renzettis are into some shit. I found Ezio there arguing with a man. I couldn’t see his face, it was too dark. But it sounded like Ezio was trying to steal weapons from him and got caught. He got away before anything happened.”

Matías runs a hand over his five o’clock shadow. “So you think the Renzettis are stealing from multiple people.”

I nod.

“Fucking idiots. They are going to get themselves killed.”

“I don’t know if it’s Ezio or Giancarlo. From what I heard Giancarlo is losing his mind. Becoming more ruthless than his father and it’s costing him a lot.”

“So what is the plan for tomorrow night?”

“When our shipments go missing there is always some sort of distraction or commotion. I was in Bari over a month ago and something happened with the cranes. Luckily nothing happened with our sale. But a month before that, weapons went missing when the same thing happened.” I throw back the rest of my whiskey. “My men have put cameras up around the dock. We have no trade or sale happening but started the rumor. Our men will be there. Dimitri knows what is going on and to act normal. I am hoping that we can grab Ezio Renzetti while he waits for the freight to unload.”

“Where do you want us?”

“There is an old warehouse I scoped out earlier. Abandoned. It will do,” I say and tell him the address.

“We’ll be there, Kilian. You don’t know how long I have waited to get my hands on that son of a bitch.” A sinister glaze takes over Matías’s eyes.

“Not as long as I have.”

* * *

I lean against a wall in the basement of the grimy warehouse as I wait for Ezio to wake up. My men caught him two hours ago and knocked him out hard. He’s been tied to this chair for the last hour and a half, randomly twitching. Blood drips from

the side of his head, down his neck and into the dark T-shirt he has on. He looks nothing like the man I spent the last seven months looking for. Nothing like the man that was well put together and always dressed in a suit whenever I saw him on video with Vanguard.

This man is run down. His hair overgrown. His beard long and unkempt. Even his skin looks dirty as if he has been hiding in derelict homes.

I glance over at Matías who is smiling as he texts on his phone. I have the strange feeling he is sexting his fiancée. Which I find disturbing since I know he is about to torture the man in front of us.

Demont keeps watch at the door to the room we are in. My men are upstairs and outside. But with the Renzettis we can never be too cautious.

Ezio stirs again and slowly lifts his head, blinking a few times to make out where the hell he is.

Matías slides his phone into his pocket and claps his hands. “Finally. I was beginning to think you would never wake up.”

I laugh as I take in the look on his face. Matías used to be the life of the party. He was an asset to The Partners years ago because he could draw in anyone and make them agree to do business with us. But he got into drugs and the party lifestyle and nearly exposed us. When I sacrificed my life for his brother’s, Matías was put into a role I never would have put him in. He was in charge of gathering intel and interrogating. He spent two years maiming and killing those who did us wrong. It broke something in him. Turned him into a monster. And now the man finds some kind of pleasure in it. I was never one for this kind of game but Matías hasn’t had the opportunity to kill in over seven months and I can tell he is itching for it.

I watch as Matías circles around Ezio, who is still not quite sure where he is. From the way he is scrunching his brow and pinching his eyes closed, I can tell his head is still throbbing from where he was knocked out.

“Did you miss me?” Matías asks from behind him.

Ezio attempts to look around but he can’t see him. I am not sure if he recognizes his voice or not. “Where am I?”

“You don’t get to ask the questions here,” Matías says smoothly behind him. “You look like shit by the way.”

Ezio tries to turn again but Matías clicks his tongue then taps him on the head where his bleeding wound is. “Eyes forward.”

Ezio struggles against the bindings on his wrists. I can see sweat start to drip from his forehead as he tries to get free.

“I really wouldn’t struggle if I were you. You aren’t getting out of those ties,” I say nonchalantly from where I’m leaning against the wall.

His eyes snap to mine, he struggles to make out who I am in the dim light. But he won’t recognize me. We’ve never met. “Who are you?” he grits.

Matías rests his hands on Ezio’s shoulders. “It shouldn’t matter who he is. It should matter who I am. And the last time we saw each other you held my fiancée back as you forced her to watch me torture her father and brother. That wasn’t very nice of you.”

“Matías Montford,” he seethes. “You were supposed to die that night.”

“Well I didn’t.” He pauses then makes his way around until he is squatting in front of Ezio. “And you weren’t supposed to run at the first signs of danger. At least according to your boss, Charles Vanguard. But it seems he wasn’t your real boss. Giancarlo Renzetti was. And still is. Isn’t that right, Ezio ?”

The way Matías says his name makes his eyes bulge. I snort. He really thought we thought he was Nicolas Di Masio.

He watches Matías as he paces in front of him. “Well?”

“I don’t know who Ezio is. My name is Nicolas Di Masio.”

I let out a laugh at that. “Okay, if that’s what you want us to call you. Either way, you fucked over The Partners. I couldn’t care less about your name.”

He shakes his head. “I didn’t, I swear. Charles Vanguard wanted to get in with the mafia. I just did his bidding.”

I click my tongue. “So you admit to stealing shipments from The Partners.”

“Only under Vanguard’s orders.”

“Vanguard has been dead for seven months.”

His eyes glance to Matías then me. “And I’ve been hiding from the Renzettis ever since. That’s why I didn’t know you were alive, Matías. That’s why I’ve been living—”

“Cut the shit, Ezio. You were at the docks tonight because you somehow knew that we had a shipment coming in. Don’t even say it’s coincidence.”

He looks over at me. “I don’t know who you are. But I swear I am not working for the Renzettis.”

Matías shoots me a look and I nod. That sinister grin taking over his face. He pulls a switchblade out of his pocket and slices a long line from the top of Ezio’s shoulder to his wrist. Ezio hisses at the cut but doesn’t say a word. Matías copies the movement along his other arm.

“Come on, Ezio. I’m not really into blood. If you just answer the questions, we will let you go,” I say.

He laughs. “You think I actually believe that? I may not know who you are but I know how The Partners work, know how he works,” he says, gesturing with his head toward Matías. “I have nothing to say other than I don’t work for the Renzettis.”

Matías takes his knife and slams it into Ezio’s thigh. Ezio screams and I watch as his blood drips on the floor.

“Fine. You don’t work for them. Then where are my shipments?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” he grits through his teeth.

“I have video footage of you at three different docks when my shipments went missing. I find it hard to believe that was purely coincidence.”

“I’ve seen stranger things,” Ezio says. Matías doesn’t even wait for my signal just twists the knife in Ezio’s thigh. I know he is enjoying this. Enjoying torturing the man that tore apart Alessia’s family.

I walk forward, pausing next to the table of tools Matías set up for the interrogation. I run my fingers along them then face Ezio. “I am not one for getting blood on my ten-

thousand-dollar suits. So please just tell the truth.”

Sweat pours from his face, no doubt in pain from the wound in his leg. “I told you I don’t know shit.”

I sigh as I pick up the hammer. I really despise this. Only once have I done this in all my years with The Partners. But Bella’s brother is a piece of shit and I will get my suit bloody for this. “I don’t know why you are pretending to have any sense of honor.”

He watches me as I stand in front of him, the hammer hanging from my right hand. “You know, I knew this girl once. A long time ago. She told me stories about her brother. How ruthless he was. How terrible he was. She used to get bullied and he did nothing. Even his friends would bully her. He just laughed when she told him.”

Matías gives me a curious look. But Ezio’s eyes are focused on me as if he is trying to piece things together.

“Then one night, she told me about how her brother had his friends over. But he left with one to run an errand. His other friends found her, bullied her like they usually do then raped her. Her brother came home and she heard his friends bragging about it and he just laughed.” I watch him and wait for him to say something but he remains silent. “You have no sense of honor or loyalty. It’s no wonder she hates you.”

Matías reads the room and pulls a wrench off the cart and slams it into Ezio’s knee. “Piece of shit,” he yells at him. “You don’t do that to your family.”

“I wonder why she hasn’t killed you in all these years. Probably because she has a heart of gold. Although I do know she is well skilled with a knife. If given the opportunity, I am sure she would kill you.”

“My sister is weak. She always has been.”

I take the hammer and slam it hard into his hand. I can hear the bones crunch as his knuckles and fingers shatter. His body convulses from the pain. His broken hand and knee. The wound in his thigh that is dripping blood. “I know you put a gun to your sister’s head in order to find out who she was texting the other day. Thinking she was crossing your family. Feeding information to the enemy. Well let me set things straight Ezio. I am keeping her safe. In a way you never could. And the second you took that burner phone from her and texted me you gave yourself away.”

He spits at me, a vengeful anger glaring from his eyes. “You think I have no loyalty? She won’t help the family. Won’t take her place. I only held a gun to her head on Giancarlo’s orders to find out who she’s been talking to.”

I smirk at him. “Well I am glad you finally admitted you are working for Renzetti.”

I nod at Matías and turn to walk away when Ezio’s words stop me. “I know who you are,” he says, his eyes going wide. “You were the man my sister was fucking years ago. Dante told me. Kilian Bancroft. Fuck. I thought you were dead. Fuck!” he yells. “You don’t know, do you? I didn’t know it, not until now as I look at you.” He laughs, his teeth bloody as he stares at me mockingly. “Have you met Aria? Maybe you should. Should pay really close attention to all those lies my sister is feeding you. The secret will come out soon enough. Giancarlo will know you are alive soon enough. And he will take it all away from you. Including Aria.”

“Aria has nothing to do with me.” My voice is stern.

His grin grows as he speaks. “Clearly you’ve never met her. But from the second I realized you knew my sister ten years ago, I knew.” He laughs like he knows the funniest thing in the world. “She didn’t fuck some random guy and have a kid. That lie she told our uncle.” His shoulders shake as he laughs again. “This is too good.

That bitch had a kid with the fucking successor of The Partners.”

I drop the hammer in my hand. The realization hitting me right in the chest. All of Bella’s words coming back to me. The sad looks she got on her face when I brought up Aria. The regret in her eyes when she talked about her. The way she always looked like she was keeping something from me.

“You are the father of a Renzetti kid. Giancarlo will have your head the second he finds out you are alive.”

I stumble backward. Matías looks at me with wide eyes like he can’t believe the words that just came out of Ezio’s mouth either.

I straighten my jacket and clear my throat, then head toward the door.

“Finish him off. Do whatever you want.” I turn to Matías before I open the door. “My men will clean up the mess.”

I storm out of that warehouse, my chest aching in a way it never has.

21

MIRABELLA

I scream as my daughter runs down the field well ahead of any of the other players. She scores and is met by her team as they all cheer up and down for her scoring the goal to break the tied game.

A feeling washes over me. The hair on the back of my neck standing at attention. I immediately think Giancarlo is around. But when I look around it's not him that has me frozen in place. I see a man, a ball cap pulled low on his face, but one glance of those eyes and I feel myself going pale.

"Mira, are you okay? It looks like you just saw a ghost," Maria says as she places a hand on my shoulder.

In many people's eyes, I did, considering the man is legally dead. But that's not what has me struggling for breath, it's that he saw Aria. I swallow as fingernails dig into my palms. He knows. He has to.

"Mirabella?" Maria asks again.

I shake my head. "Sorry, I thought I saw someone I knew. It's nothing."

She gives me a curious look but turns back to the game. I look back up to see if I can spot Kilian anywhere but he's gone.

* * *

I sit at the table after giving Aria her dinner. My mind a clusterfuck as I try to piece together what the hell happened today. Why was he there? Why did he think he should just show up to her game? He knows it's a risk to even show up in this town with my uncle and cousin breathing down my neck. And after he was here a few days ago asking about my brother, I knew something happened. I knew he did something. And that makes me even more worried about my uncle.

Kilian didn't answer any of my texts or calls I sent him on the burner phone after the game. I know he is mad, reeling. He had to have figured it out. How could he not? Aria's eyes are the same color as his. I barely touch my food as I remember when everything in my world felt like it was crashing down.

The pub is so packed tonight that I barely have any time to talk to Kilian. Customers are obnoxious, a bunch of college kids back in town. I push my way to the other end of the bar when I see a face I haven't seen in four years. "Dante."

"It's been a long time, Mirabella."

I glance toward Kilian, not wanting him to see Dante. I don't want all my secrets coming out in one night.

"Do you know who that man is?" Dante asks and I realize he followed my gaze.

"What man?" I ask dumbly.

"The one you are staring at."

"I'm not staring at anyone. Just checking the bar to make sure everyone's drinks are fine. Do you need a drink? I can get you a beer."

He holds his hand up. "I'm fine. I just came to talk. But I do want to know if you know him."

I shake my head. "He's someone who comes into the pub now and then. I don't know him except for that."

"Do you talk to him?"

I raise a brow at him. "I'm a bartender, Dante. Of course, I talk to him."

My cousin gives me a pointed look. "You know what I mean."

"Why do you care?"

He looks down the bar again at Kilian and I watch his face as he does. He barely gives anything away but I know he knows something I don't.

"Can you talk outside?"

I throw my hands up. "If you haven't noticed, I'm kind of busy right now."

He scowls at me. "Fine. I'll make this quick. Dad wants you home."

"He's your father, not mine," I snap.

"Mirabella, you know he is your guardian."

"My name is Bella. And was is the word you are looking for. He was my guardian. I'm twenty-two. I'm an adult. He still feels like he has power over me, he doesn't."

"You know well enough he does."

“No,” I say once more as I scan my eyes around the bar, noticing some people are in need of refills.

“He was kind enough to let you come here for school. Clear your head. But you graduated five months ago.”

“And I have a visa here that is still valid. I love it here, I’m not leaving.”

“You’re needed at home.” His voice is low and authoritative.

“No, I’m not.” I walk away to refill a handful of drinks, I half expect Dante to be gone but he’s still here when I get back to the end of the bar.

“Don’t fight me on this. Please. I need you to listen for once,” he says when I get back to standing in front of him.

“You can’t control me just like your father can’t. Leave. I have to work and I don’t want you causing a scene.”

He doesn’t argue with me and walks away. I breathe in a sigh of relief and get back to work.

* * *

I was so tired after work last night, I told Kilian I couldn’t come over. I couldn’t deal with him after seeing my cousin. He would know something was wrong.

There is something wrong. And it has nothing to do with my cousin.

I have been feeling off the last week, overly tired, nauseous. I thought I was getting the flu. But as I walked through the drugstore earlier and saw pregnancy tests, I

remembered my period was late. We never use condoms but it's not like I'm not on birth control. And I take it every day at the exact same time.

I grabbed a couple, just in case. But I knew it was all in my head.

Until it wasn't.

Kilian insisted last night that I come over tonight for dinner and I reluctantly agreed. I need to tell him. I need to figure out what we should do. But as I try to get ready and stare at those stupid bluelines, I get more and more worried.

I don't even try to impress him. My mind a fucking mess. I slip on a pair of leggings and an oversized T-shirt before walking the three blocks to his house.

He cooked us dinner. And I know he knows something is off when I turn down whiskey and I've been quiet all night.

I know I need to tell him. It's sitting on the tip of my tongue. But the words taste like ash every time I try to say them.

"Are you sure you're feeling alright?" he asks me.

I shake my head. "I think I am coming down with something. I've felt off all day."

He pulls me into him and presses his lips to my forehead. "Come upstairs. You can go to bed and hopefully sleep it off."

I want to say okay. But I am worried the longer I stay here, the harder it will be for me to say the words I need to say. What if he doesn't want to keep it? What if he gets angry at me and says he never wants to see me again?

We aren't in a relationship. We see each other randomly whenever he is in town. We mostly just drink and fuck. Tonight was a rare occasion we ate dinner. Yes, we talk a lot, and I used to spend days here studying. But we never called it anything more than us fucking. And he's ten years older than me. I am barely out of college and he's a successful businessman. Why the hell would he want to be with me? Some girl that he can't be with. Not if he knew the truth. Because I am lying to myself if I said I could be Bella Gallo for the rest of my life. I can't. The truth of my identity would come out sooner or later. And where would that lead him? To a death by my uncle's hands, no doubt.

"I think I'm just going to go home."

He wraps his arms around me. "Are you sure?"

I nod. "I don't want to get you sick too. How long are you in town for?"

"Another couple days."

"Okay. I'll come over when I'm feeling better."

"Let me drive you home."

I shake my head. "It's just a few blocks, Kil. I can walk."

"If you don't feel good, I don't want you walking."

I push his hands off me. "Maybe I just need some fresh air."

He studies me and I know he can tell I'm lying about something. "How about I call you a cab?"

I know if I don't agree he will insist on driving me and I just need to get away from him before I blurt out those two words that will ruin everything. "Okay."

When I get home, I climb my staircase, despair and disappointment in my heart. I should have told him. Instead I chickened out. But it's not like I could say, 'I'm pregnant. Oh, and by the way, my real name is Mirabella Renzetti and my uncle is the head of the mob.'

I let out a laugh as I climb to the third floor. Yeah, that would have gone over really well.

I pull my keys out, ready to open my door, when I hear a voice on the other side.

Dante.

I press my ear to the door to hear what he is saying and nearly throw up my dinner when I hear his words.

"Yes, I am one-hundred-percent positive it was Kilian Bancroft. No I don't know if she knows him." He pauses and I realize he must be on the phone. "I have no idea if he knows who she is. But if he does, I am sure The Partners will make a move soon."

The Partners?

I try to search my memories, that name sounding so familiar. Then I remember an argument between my uncle and my dad years ago. I have no idea what it was about, I was fifteen and barely paid attention to family business. But I remembered that name, remembered they were a crime organization. And something about my dad telling my uncle to never work with them, never contact them.

If Kilian is a part of them, does he know who I really am?

Dante starts speaking again. "I can put in a hit. If he is in Dublin, we can end it all."

A hit? No, they can't kill him.

"We don't need proof!" He pauses. "Fine, if I can get her to leave, we won't do it. Not yet, not until the right time."

I pull away. There is no way I can be with him now. Not after what I just heard. I need to leave Dublin. I need to get as far away from him as possible if it will save his life.

My hands drop to my stomach. I wish my mom was still here, I wish she could tell me what to do. I don't want to get rid of this baby but I can't let my family know who the father is. They will kill him for sure if they found out.

I take a deep breath as I open the door to my apartment. I don't act surprised when I see Dante in my living room.

"I'll go home," I tell him.

"Finally listening to what we tell you," he retorts. "Pack your shit. We leave tonight."

"Mom!"

I blink and see Aria standing in front of me, waving her hands in my face. "I thought you were having a stroke. You weren't answering me. I was about to call Magda."

"Sorry, I just got lost in thought."

She gives me a funny look but then sits back down and eats her chicken. "You were weird, Mom."

I give her a short smile. “Moms are supposed to be weird.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Whatever.”

“Did you just say whatever to me?” I ask, feigning shock.

She doesn’t say anything and just takes a dramatic bite of her dinner.

I pick up my fork. “How do you even know what a stroke is?”

“I was looking up medical conditions in history class. I was bored.”

I laugh. Of course she was. I push my memories aside and make small talk with her for the rest of dinner.

* * *

After Aria goes to bed, I stand in the kitchen for half an hour. My mind no better than it was at the football field. Maybe I was seeing things. Maybe it wasn’t Kilian, and that’s why his texts are unanswered. He has no idea why I am flipping out because it wasn’t him.

I make my way upstairs, hoping a bath will help ease the tension out of my shoulders. My hand is gripped firmly around my burner phone. I want to text him again. I want to call him. I want his voice to calm me, tell me he wasn’t here. I could play it off as missing him. That the phone sex and dirty texts aren’t enough. But I am sure he would see right through me.

I shut my bedroom door behind me and take a shaky breath as I drop the burner phone into my nightstand.

“Who is her father?”

I jump at the sound of Kilian’s voice behind me. My heart going into my throat. I turn around and find him leaning against a wall, his arms crossed over his chest, a scowl on his face. “Kilian.”

“Who is her father?” he snaps.

I bite my lip as I try to find some sort of lie inside of me. “I told you. He was some man—”

“Dammit, Mirabella. Don’t lie to me.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I saw her.” He pauses. “I saw her.” His words fade away as he remembers seeing her face.

“Don’t call me Mirabella. I can’t stand it from your lips.” I know those aren’t the words he wanted to hear.

“I’ll call you what you want when you tell me the truth. I deserve the truth. I deserve to know who her father is.” His eyes never leave mine as he says those words. A desperate plea in his eyes he keeps out of his voice.

My mind drifts back to the memory from earlier. Finding out I was pregnant, wanting to tell him, and being too chickenshit to do it. How would things have been different if I had told him that night? If I didn’t go home. Or if I didn’t overhear Dante speaking on the phone. My own mind questioning Kilian’s motives. If I hadn’t heard those words, I know I would have gone back to him. Would have told him everything. Every secret I kept from him. My real name, my family, the baby. All of this would be different.

“Bella?”

My name on his lips is soft, quiet. Like he knows I am battling a million emotions. Tears fall from my eyes as I collapse onto the bench at the end of my bed. He knows. I know he figured it all out. But I am still scared to say the words. Because ten years has changed things. We can no longer go back to the people we were. We aren't young lovers hiding in candlelight between silk sheets. We're adults. And even worse, I'm the daughter of a mobster, the niece of a don. And he is in one of the most notorious crime syndicates in the world.

"Is she my daughter?" he asks, his voice unsteady.

I take a deep breath and meet his eyes and nod.

His face falls, emotions flooding it. The same emotions I had when I found out I was pregnant. Elation, happiness, fear.

"I'm a father."

I'm in tears as he takes in the truth. "Yes." Those words rock my body. I never thought I would say them to him. Never thought he would find out the truth. And then he was dead. And I knew my secret would be hidden forever. But all of that has changed. Everything has changed.

He frowns as he looks at me then walks to the glass doors that lead to the balcony. His eyes focused on the view of the water.

I wait for him to say something, anything. But he is silent. Still.

I step toward him until I am just a foot away. "I wanted to tell you," I say softly. "I was going to tell you and then I freaked out. I wasn't ready for a kid. I wasn't ready to tell you. We were just... I didn't know what we were, Kil."

“I’m a father,” he repeats like he didn’t even hear a word I just said.

“I—I found out who you were and knew my family would kill you. I didn’t have a choice.” I plead. I just want him to look at me.

“When?” he growls.

“When what?”

“When did you find out?”

I watch as his hand curls into a fist. His anger palpable in the air. More tears fall down my cheeks. “T-the day before I left.”

“You mean the day you disappeared?”

I touch his back and feel him flinch underneath me. “I had every intention of telling you that night. But like I said, I was scared.” I groan as I pull away from him. “I was twenty-two, Kilian. A college graduate that worked as a bartender with no plans. You were thirty-two, a businessman, successful. You didn’t even live in Dublin. We never defined what we had—”

He spins around and gets in my face. His words quiet but harsh. “You don’t think I deserved to know? So you just up and disappeared on me? You ran away when I would have accepted this burden.”

“Burden? Aria is not a burden.” I step away from him as anger takes over.

“That’s not what—”

“And you think I ran away? Vanished to keep her hidden? I was so fucking scared

that night, Kilian. What was I supposed to tell you after I told you I was pregnant? That I lied about my identity? I couldn't put you in that position."

"That wasn't your choice to make."

"No?" I ask harshly. "That night when I left your house, I was so broken. I didn't know why I didn't tell you. I wanted to turn around and run to your arms but I didn't. Instead, I found out you were lying about who you were. My cousin was at my apartment ready to put out a hit on you." I shudder as a realization hits me. One I never thought of until now. "I made the only choice I could that night. I wasn't just saving our daughter's life. I was saving yours. And even if that meant I would live the rest of my life with a broken heart, that was the choice I had to make. Because I couldn't lose both of you."

He watches me as I break down. My body slumping onto the bed, my head falling into my palms. "I wanted to tell you," I cry. "And I hate myself every day for lying to her, for lying to you about all of it. When I thought you died, something inside of me shattered. I felt horrible for never letting you know about her, meet her. And I hated myself for not letting her ever meet her father. I could have reached out to you. Found a way to get in contact with you without my family knowing. But once again, I was too scared. Scared of your rejection. And now every time I see you, I want nothing more than to tell you, to let myself fall back into those feelings I had for you back then. The ones that hit me like a freight train the second you came back into my life."

"What feelings?" he asks. The pleading in his voice piercing my soul.

I swallow my fear. "That I loved you back then. That I wanted nothing more than for us to be a family. And even after I left, after I did everything I could to protect her, to keep her identity a secret from my family, I still felt those feelings. They were burned into my soul. You are burned into my soul."

“And what about now?” he asks as he grabs my hands, pulling them away from my face, and lifting my chin. “How do you feel now?”

“I never stopped loving you. Even when I pretended you didn’t exist. Even when I thought you were dead. Even when you tied me to a goddamn chair. I never stopped loving you.”

He falls to his knees in front of me, wrapping his arms around my legs, his head falling onto my thighs. “I’m a father.”

More tears fall down my cheeks, landing in his blond locks cradled in my lap. I cry as I feel his body shaking, a moistness hitting my bare thighs. “To the best little girl anyone could ask for.”

He raises his head and looks up at me. “You loved me?”

My hands go into his hair as I see a yearning in his eyes, a need that I have always felt into the depths of my soul. “How could I not?”

He pulls me down into his lap, my legs straddled around his hips. “I love you,” he says softly, his palm cupping my jaw. “I’ve loved you since we met. I just didn’t know it at the time. It wasn’t until someone tried to tell me what love was. I saw it in her face and I knew. I knew that the whole damn time I was in love with you. And even to that day three years ago when I asked that woman what it felt like to be in love, I knew that I still loved you.”

More tears fall from my eyes as my heart clenches at his words. “What does this mean for us, Kilian? We can’t... you and I... it’s not—”

His finger covers my lips. “We’ll figure it out. All of it.”

“We’ll both end up dead.”

He chuckles as his thumbs wipe away my tears. “If you knew the other side of me, you would know that isn’t an option.”

I grip his shirt, pulling his chest closer to me. “I want to know that side of you. I want to know everything. No more secrets. No more lies.”

His lips brush against mine. “You and me, Bella. Anam cara.”

I crash my lips into his. I need as much of this man as I can get. I need all of him. The other half of my soul.

I push him back against the floor as I grind my hips into him. His hands trail down my back until they are cupping my ass. I assault his mouth, pouring every single one of my feelings into him. Like I am making up for ten years without him. Without the man that changed my entire life.

He growls as I bite his lip and he flips us over so he’s on top of me. The steel in his pants driving hard against my silk pajama shorts. His hands grab my wrists, pinning them to the floor as he licks and sucks his way across my neck.

“Your body has always been made for me, Bella. Only you. It’s only ever been you.”

I moan as his lips make their way down to my nipple, sucking the peak into his mouth through the silk of my top. “I’m all yours, Kilian. Always yours.”

He shifts abruptly, his hands on my hips as he jumps off the floor, then pressing me into my bed. “Bellissima,” he groans into my neck before pulling my top off me, exposing my breasts to the cool night air.

I wrap my legs around his hips, grinding into every suckle he makes on my chest as I pull his T-shirt over his head. I glide my hands down his tattooed chest and abs, my fingers playing with the happy trail that disappears into his pants. I grab his buckle, making quick work of his leather belt before I have his jeans unbuttoned and unzipped and my hand is wrapped around his velvet steel.

He moans against my nipples before his mouth makes its way down my stomach. His hands pushing my shorts down as far as they will go with my legs locked around his hips. He grins when he sees my bare pussy and wastes no time latching on to my clit.

I grab a pillow and shove it over my face to make sure I don't wake up Aria as Kilian shoves two fingers into me while his tongue laps through my folds. My entire body is on fire as I pulse against him, my orgasm so close. He chuckles against my clit before pushing my legs off him and kneeling back on his haunches.

"Why... are... you... stopping?" I pant as he pulls the pillow off my face.

"You're so beautiful when you come. I need to see that pretty face of yours."

"And I am going to scream so loud the neighbors will call the cops. What do you think will happen if Aria hears?"

He smiles then sucks his fingers coated in me into his mouth. "Mmm. You are just going to have to stay quiet, doll."

I writhe against him as he calls me the name he knows I hate. But for some reason, it's turning me on more. He shakes his head as he climbs off the bed, pulling my shorts the rest of the way off. He kicks his pants and shoes off before he crawls over me, pressing his body weight against me. "Maybe I just wanted you to come all over my dick."

“I always come—” I can’t even finish the sentence as he slams into me. The orgasm hitting me so hard my scream is silent.

“There’s my girl.”

His mouth latches on to mine, his kisses soft and languid as he picks up his rhythm. I meet him thrust for thrust, my legs wrapped around him, my hands digging into his scalp, his hands gripping my face. He hits me in just the right spot, I can already feel another climax building and I know he is close too, by the shift in his hips.

“Open your eyes,” he whispers against my lips.

I do as he says and see the love pouring into mine as I realize this isn’t us fucking. This is on an entirely different level. We keep our gazes transfixed on each other as we both reach the precipice.

He collapses onto me, his mouth against my ear. “You are the most beautiful woman I have ever met and will ever meet. You are mine. I love you.”

I can’t help the tears that form. “I love you too, Kilian.”

* * *

“Tell me about her,” Kilian says to me as we both lay spent on my bed after three rounds of the most intense sex we’ve ever had. His hand plays with my hair as I trace circles along his abs.

“I’ve already told you about her.”

“Tell me more.”

I smile as I look up at him. “You’ll just have to find out everything from her at breakfast in the morning.”

His teeth snap at my lips. “Breakfast? You’re letting me stay?”

“I want you to meet her. You’re her father.”

His eyes turn sullen. “What if she doesn’t like me? What if she wants nothing to do with me?”

“That won’t happen. She will probably hate me for keeping you a secret. Keeping you to myself for the last months.”

His finger runs along my jawline. “We don’t have to tell her that.”

“I think she will love you, Kilian. She’s a part of both of us. And I know her. I know you. God, I wish I had told you sooner.”

He cups my jaw. “There are a lot of things we should have told each other. But we can’t change what happened to us. We can only change our future.”

I smile at him then lean forward to brush my lips against his. “Her middle name is Niamh.”

“You named her after my grandmother?”

I shrug. “I wanted to feel close to you somehow. I needed that. For me. For her. And I knew my family would never question it. I went to school for languages. They knew I loved Ireland.”

“I love you,” he says to me, his lips caressing mine in the gentlest of kisses. His hand

reaching around to cup my ass, pulling me into him.

“It’s just a name, Kilian.”

I can feel his length hardening against my stomach. “You know it means more than that.”

I swallow as I press a kiss to his chest. “I know.”

He pulls me on top of him and I waste no time sliding down on his length, making love to him. Because I know that this is easy, us right here, right now. But by morning things will change. And I need as much of him as I can get right now.

22

KILIAN

I flip sausage and bacon over in a pan. Bella is showering upstairs. I joined her for part of it, her on her knees, my dick deep in her throat. But she pushed me out after and said she needed to actually shower.

I grew impatient waiting in her room. So I came down to make breakfast. It's early, just before eight, so I am hoping Aria doesn't wake up before Bella comes downstairs.

My stomach does a flip thinking about Aria, my daughter. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous to meet her.

Fuck. I'm a father.

I laugh, thinking about the irony of it all. My own father choosing me as his protégé because he knew I would never settle down. I wouldn't hold back The Partners by being burdened with family life. Yet here I am making breakfast for my kid before I even meet her.

"Who are you and why are you laughing?" a high-pitched voice says.

It makes me jump and I drop the tongs into the hot oil, causing it to splash on my hand. "Fuck!" I shout. "I mean, shi—shoot."

“It’s okay, Mom swears all the time. She just thinks I don’t hear it.”

I turn and look at her and my stomach drops. I saw her yesterday but it was from afar. But now that she is three feet from me, I freeze. Her hair is a mess around her face and shoulders, loose curls of dark hair going in every direction. She’s tall too, at least tall for what I think a nine-year-old should be. She’s wearing pink pajamas with a pink silk robe like her mom wears. But it’s her eyes that make me freeze. Sapphire-blue eyes, nearly identical to mine.

“What is with adults lately? Yesterday I thought Mom was having a stroke and now some stranger in the kitchen.”

I blink a few times at her words. Then get protective of her immediately. I am a stranger in the kitchen. She should be scared. Or know how to defend herself. What am I thinking? She is nine years old.

“Mooooooooommmmm!” she yells toward the stairs. “There is a strange man in the kitchen and he is staring at me like I have three eyes!”

She turns back to me and I have this strange urge to grab her and hold on to her and never let her go.

“It’s Sunday. We have pancakes on Sundays.” She moves to one of the stools at the island and sits on it. “Who are you anyway?”

“I’m... umm...” This little girl has me at a loss for words.

The sound of feet flying down the stairs has both of us turning to the doorway to the kitchen. “Kilian,” Bella breathes before looking at her daughter. “Aria, I’m so sorry. I... I forgot something upstairs and—”

“I came over this morning to see your mom. She had a few things to do but let me in.”

Aria looks between the two of us then her eyes glance to the security system panel by the back door. “The alarm is still set.”

Damn, she’s smart.

“Okay... what I meant was... that—”

“Is he your boyfriend ?” Aria asks Bella.

“What?” Bella asks in shock.

Aria rolls her eyes. “Oh come on, Mom. You went on that date a couple weeks ago and you are always on your phone. Magda and I were making bets how long it would take for you to tell us.”

“Oh... umm... well—”

“And Tina was telling me that her older brother sneaks his girlfriend into his room. So I know boys and girls sleep in the same room. Her mom and dad do. So I can only guess he came over last night after I went to bed.”

I blink at her in surprise. No idea what the hell to say.

Bella turns to me, her cheeks the color of a tomato. I shrug my shoulders at her. I have no idea what to say. I’ve never been in a situation like this in my life.

Bella must take the hint because she turns to Aria. “Yeah, sweetie, this is my boyfriend. He came over last night and I asked him to stay for breakfast.”

“Well you didn’t tell him it was pancake day,” she moans.

I turn the heat down on the bacon. I frown, sad that I wasn’t here to build these traditions. “Pancakes it is,” I say.

“I’ll... umm... grab the stuff out of the refrigerator.” Bella moves to the refrigerator and grabs a few things before she starts rambling. “What kind, Aria? We are out of mascarpone so no lemon mascarpone. I think we have chocolate chips. Or I have blueberries and strawberries.”

“Fruit and whip cream!” Aria answers.

I smile at her enthusiasm. Still nervous as hell. Bella and I never got to discussing how we were going to tell her that I’m her father. I take a drink of water and nearly spit it out when Aria says, “We have the same color eyes. That’s so cool.”

Bella freezes as she shuts the refrigerator door.

I look at Aria and lean closer to her, trying to remember how I acted around my brother’s kids when they thought I was still alive. “Blue eyes are the coolest eyes.”

Aria’s smile takes up her face. “That’s what I always tell my mom. I tell her that her eyes are boring.”

I look over to Bella, who has made her way next to me. I mouth to her, your eyes aren’t boring .

“Aria, why don’t you make sure all your stuff is ready for your game today? Your uniform might still be in the dryer.”

Aria huffs but jumps off her stool and heads out of the kitchen.

Bella turns to me and whisper-yells. “Why the hell didn’t you wait in my room? I would have told Aria we had a guest. And then—”

“And what?” I ask her.

“I don’t know,” she responds, flustered. “I’ve never done this. I don’t know what to do.”

“You mean, tell your child she has a father?”

She hits my arm. “No! Asshole. I mean, I’ve never had a man here before.”

This time I’m surprised. “You mean you haven’t dated anyone since we were together?”

She shakes her head. “No. I mean, there were a few, but it didn’t go past a date or two and I never had any of them meet Aria.”

My chest fills with pride on that. I pull Bella into me, wrapping my arms around her waist. “Hey, we will get through this, okay? Does it make you feel better to let you know I am nervous as fuck right now?”

“Don’t swear.” Her hand comes to my mouth. “But yes, it does. Maybe we should have talked about what we were going to tell her.”

I brush a piece of her hair behind her ear. “How about I’m just your boyfriend now and we figure it out later?”

“Okay,” Bella says with a sigh of relief. “This is already a lot to handle.”

I lift her chin up with my fingers. “Hey, I love you. Okay? It’s us. Like we were ten

years ago. Except now we just have other shit to worry about. But it's still us. We will get through this."

"Language. But you're right."

I laugh, knowing I am going to have a hell of a time not swearing in front of my kid. I press a kiss to Bella's lips just as Aria flies back into the room.

"Ewww."

Bella pulls away from me and moves to a cupboard to grab a mixing bowl. "Let's make pancakes."

* * *

"You sure this is okay?" Bella asks me as we walk to the park where Aria has a game.

I pull the ball cap down on my head. I'm wearing what I had on yesterday, jeans and a T-shirt. I haven't dressed this casually since college. "It's fine. I have eyes around."

She nods. But I can tell she is nervous. "You didn't have to come," she whispers.

"I wanted to. Aria wanted me to." I gesture to Aria as she skips ahead of us.

She grabs my hand and squeezes, then drops it. "Okay."

Aria turns around as we reach a crosswalk. "I can't wait for you to watch my game," she singsongs. "Mom says I can be a pro one day."

Bella clicks her tongue. "If you work hard enough and get good grades."

“I’m not worried. I know I am going to be a pro footballer.”

I smile at the toothy grin on Aria’s face. “Bella, you can’t deny she is motivated. She knows what she wants and how to get it. Like someone else I know.”

Bella gives me a look, knowing exactly who I am talking about. She knows I had the same determination and grit Aria has.

The light changes and we cross the street, Bella leaning into my ear. “I know exactly who she gets it from and it worries the fuck out of me.”

I give her a charming smile. “Look how I turned out though.”

Bella snorts as Aria turns back around to us once she is safely across the street. “Why do you call my mom Bella? Her name is Mirabella but everyone calls her Mira. Well, except for me, I call her mom.”

I go to answer but Bella cuts in. “Well, Kilian and I go way back. We knew each other before you were born.” She glances at me and I’m worried she is just going to blurt out the truth. But she doesn’t. “My mom and grandmother used to call me Bella and Kilian just did the same.”

I look at her. I had no idea about that. To me she was always Bella because that’s what she told me. I had no idea it had to do with her mom.

“I like it,” Aria says as we reach the park. “Everyone should call you Bella because it means beautiful and you are the most beautiful mom in the world.”

Bella shakes her head. “Stop sucking up. It doesn’t mean you’ll get ice cream after the game.”

Aria groans before running off to join her team.

“Is that why you chose Bella?” I ask.

She nods.

I cup her jaw but she pushes my hand aside. “Kil, not in public. Just in case.”

I nod at her and let her walk ahead of me. I slap her ass as she walks by and she yelps, turning around to flip me off.

I laugh out loud and throw my hands up like I don’t have another choice.

We end up standing along the sidelines where I saw her yesterday. She’s ignored the other parents except for one named Maria that wouldn’t let her not get the scoop on who I was. I can tell she is uncomfortable I can only guess because she has never had a boyfriend around.

It’s strange thinking of myself as her boyfriend. In my head, we were always so much more than that. That was why I never put words to what we had in Dublin. We weren’t bogged down by titles and relationships. We just were.

Aria is playing well. Her eyes continuously bouncing over to me. I know she’s smart. And I wonder if she has put two and two together. I wouldn’t put it past her. Not after this morning and everything Bella has told me.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I see Matías calling me and I excuse myself from the field. Bella asks me if everything is okay and I nod before walking away.

“Hello,” I answer when I am far enough away.

“I thought I would give you a day or two to cool off,” Matías says.

“Thanks.”

He clears his throat. “Are you really a father?”

I ignore him. “I’m assuming he’s dead.”

“Yeah. Your men took care of everything.”

“Good. I am sure Giancarlo will be in contact soon. My men were instructed to send him Ezio’s head with a warning.”

Matías grunts. I know that isn’t something he would put past The Partners.

“You going to be okay?”

“I’ll be in touch, Matías.” I hang up the phone and look back over to the park. I should tell Bella about her brother. I know she won’t care. I know how she feels about him. But she deserves to hear the truth from me.

I send off a few texts to my associates and then head back to watch the end of my daughter’s game.

23

MIRABELLA

I push Kilian's hands off me as I finish getting ready for work. The man is insatiable but I already knew that. I woke up to his head between my thighs. I had to bite down so hard on a pillow to keep myself quiet as he pulled an intense orgasm from me. Then he fucked me thoroughly from behind. I missed mornings like that. But then I was almost late taking Aria to school as the time got away from me, due to Kilian's need to be in me at all times.

When I got back from dropping her off, Kilian was waiting for me in the foyer. Naked. I had my clothes off within ten seconds.

"Stop, I need to go to work." I kick him away as I pin my hair up.

It doesn't keep him away for long though. His hands grip my hips so hard and pull me into him, his lips at my neck. "You could call out."

I spin in his arms. "Unfortunately, I have bills to pay."

"I—"

"Don't even say it," I cut him off with my fingers over his lips. "Until we can figure out how this will work, don't you even suggest paying for things."

He gives me a lazy smile. "How did you know I was going to say that? Besides, I

know you aren't poor. You should have a nice chunk of money from your parents."

I frown. "I don't touch it. To me, it's blood money."

He nods then kisses my cheek before finally letting me go. "We'll discuss that later."

"Kilian. There is nothing—"

"Get to work," he commands as he smacks my ass.

I shake my head at him. "You are impossible."

He follows me down the stairs and to the front door. "Will you be here when I get back?" I ask.

"We'll see. I have things to take care of. But I want to spend one more night with you, with Aria, before I need to head to London."

"You're good with her," I say. "She likes you."

He gives me a short smile. "Get to work."

I give him a quick kiss and head out the door. It seems so normal for him to be here. Kissing me goodbye as I head to work. But I know our relationship is anything but normal. We still haven't discussed how or when we are going to tell Aria. I want to wait until all this shit with Giancarlo, Dante, and Ezio blows over. But I also feel the longer we wait to tell her, the more upset she will get with Kilian. And I fear she may resent me for keeping it from her.

When she first started school and found out most families have mothers and fathers, she would ask me who her father was. Ask what happened to him. As she got a little

older, she asked why he left her. And I couldn't tell her the truth. I lied. Told her I didn't really know her father. But now that Kilian is here, in our lives, it's going to be hard to tell her the truth. Because I can't just tell her that he's her father. I need to tell her everything. I need to be honest with her. She needs to understand the danger that comes with her life. She may only be nine but I wish I had known at nine.

"Good morning, Magda," she chimes as I walk through the back door of the kitchen.

"Morning."

"You are glowing today."

I ignore her comment as I put my coat and bag away and head to the front of the house to prep for the day.

She follows me, of course.

"Rumor has it that you were with a man yesterday at Aria's game."

I spin around. "Rumor? Are people really talking about me and my dating life?"

She smiles at me. "Is it that man from the other night?"

I groan. "People need to stop being busybodies and find something else to do with their time."

"Who is he?"

"How about you go back to baking and I will set tables?"

She scowls at me but turns around and heads back into the kitchen. When I am alone,

I let out a deep breath. Worry takes over me. If everyone is talking about Kilian being at that game, word is going to make it to Giancarlo.

As if on cue, my phone rings in my pocket. I pull it out and see his name on the screen. I hit ignore and go back to work. But after the fifth time he calls, I finally pick up.

“Mirabella, you should answer your phone when I call you,” he says before I even say anything into the phone.

“I’m working. I was busy.”

“You should really stop lying to me.”

“I’m not—”

His voice turns vicious as he cuts me off. “You’ve been lying to me for months, it seems. I thought you were loyal to this family. But Dante and Ezio both felt like you were giving information to someone. And I believed that to be true after what Ezio told me last week about that burner phone you have. But then it all came together when I received a present this morning. A nice box with The Partners signature all over it.”

A chill goes down my spine. “W-who are The Partners?” I ask.

“Don’t play coy with me, Mirabella,” Giancarlo snaps. “Your brother’s head showed up in a box on my doorstep this morning.”

“What?” I gasp as I collapse into a chair. “Ezio’s dead?”

“Don’t act like you didn’t know. You gave away his location. And the man you’ve

been feeding information to took his first opportunity to kill Ezio.”

I’m in shock. Not over Ezio’s death. But that I know it was Kilian. I have no doubt in my mind about that. And the fact he didn’t tell me. After spending the last two days with him makes my blood start to boil.

“What a surprise to find out a man that the whole world thinks is dead is actually alive,” Giancarlo purrs. “And the part that I find the most entertaining of it all. Something I should have seen years ago but brushed it off. Something that Dante only realized when he came to see you and saw Aria in person. That dead man is her father. You were fucking Kilian Bancroft when you lived in Dublin. And I guarantee he did it to find his way into our network. A child was an unfortunate byproduct. He obviously didn’t want it, which is why you left.”

My heart clenches at his heartless words. But I decide to give him some truth for once. “He didn’t know. Kilian never knew.” But I switch back to lying to save him. “And he died not knowing.”

“You can keep lying but I know he is alive. And I know you know he is alive. That burner phone gave it away, Mirabella. You shouldn’t have saved his name in there.”

Stupid, stupid me. But I never thought anyone would find it.

“Now you have a chance to redeem yourself to this family. Tell me where he is and I won’t do anything to harm you or your daughter.”

I grip the phone in my hand with white knuckles. “Do not threaten my daughter.” My voice is gravel as I speak into the phone.

“Mirabella, I don’t think you understand. Aria can be used against The Partners. To give us information we need. And don’t think The Partners won’t do something when

they find out about her.” My heart is beating so hard in my chest, anxiety setting in. “Now all you need to do is turn him in and we won’t touch her.”

“She’s your family.”

“And I’ve killed family members before.” I can see his grin through the phone. “You have three days. If you fail to do as we say like last time, you can expect worse consequences than just your daughter going missing.”

He hangs up but I don’t let go of the phone. My hand is shaking. My mind is spinning. What the hell am I supposed to do?

“Mira, are you okay? You look like you are going to pass out.”

I didn’t even see Magda walk into the dining room. Didn’t feel her hand on my shoulder and forehead.

She pulls my phone out of my hand and sets it on the table. “Let me get you some water.”

She walks away and all I can do is stare at the floor. Shame and regret wash over me. I let Kilian back in, knowing it could turn deadly. But I never thought Aria would be thrown into the mix. She’s innocent. She’s just a kid. I can’t let him touch her.

“Drink this.”

I push Magda’s hand out of the way and stand up, grabbing my phone. The one good thing is that Giancarlo has no idea Kilian is here. In Cefalù. In my house.

I need to get him out of here.

I run to the back and pull the burner phone out of my purse. The phone rings and he doesn't answer. My heart drops. What if Giancarlo was lying? What if he knows Kilian is here?

I end the call and dial again. But he still doesn't answer.

I pull on my coat and grab my purse. I need to go home. I need to make sure he is alright. I need to get Aria from school.

"Mira, what is going on?" Magda asks.

"I-I—" I can't tell her anything and I don't even know what lie I would say. But the vibration of the burner phone in my hand stops me from talking to her.

"What's wrong, Bella?"

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"I'm fine. What's going on?" he asks, concern in his voice.

I rush out into the dining room, hoping Magda doesn't follow. "G-Giancarlo called me. He threatened me. Aria. He said he would take her."

Kilian doesn't say anything and I know what I believe to be true is true.

"Did you kill my brother?" I ask him.

He sighs into the phone. "Yes."

"Good."

“Did Giancarlo tell you—”

“His head in a box? Yeah.”

“Look, Bella. I—”

“I don’t care. He deserved it. But you need to get out of here, Kilian. He will kill you.”

Kilian’s tone turns deadly. “I need you to tell me everything he said to you.”

So I do. I tell him the threat to Aria’s life and his. The way Giancarlo thinks that Aria can be used against The Partners. That he knows he is her father.

“Okay, I need you to calm down.”

“Kilian, he threatened our daughter!” I scream.

“Nothing is going to happen to Aria. I swear my life on that. I need you to call the school, tell them I am picking her up in an hour. I will be at the restaurant right after. When I call you, meet me in the alley. We’re leaving.”

“We can’t just run.”

“We aren’t running. I am putting the two of you somewhere safe.”

“And what about you?” I ask.

“Don’t worry about me, Bella. This is my life. This is what I deal with every day.”

I hold back my emotions but hiccup into the phone. “Kilian...”

“An hour and a half, Bella. Be ready.”

He hangs up on me, and I finally let a tear fall. I know I am stronger than this. But the thought of anything happening to Aria kills me.

Magda clears her throat and I see her in the doorway of the kitchen. I don't say anything and call the school like Kilian instructed.

When I hang up, Magda speaks. “What have you gotten yourself into, mimma ?” she asks with concern on her face.

“Nothing I wasn't born into.”

She nods. A look of understanding crossing her face. “You know, when your grandmother left here all those years ago with that boy, I knew something was off. I knew he wasn't just some random summer fling. I knew he was different. He had an air about him that said he was dangerous.” She pauses as she walks toward me. “She used to write me. For two years, she wrote me. And then the letters stopped. But I knew from those letters. I saw the clues she wrote hidden between words. He was a bad man.”

I swallow as I see the truth across Magda's face. My tears flowing harder from her words.

“I prayed for her every day. I prayed that she would survive. I prayed that she was happy. Even though I know from her letters she wasn't. But I prayed after they stopped that things changed. In my mind, she was living her life with the man of her dreams. Even though there were days I thought she was surely dead.

“And then, nearly ten years ago, you walked into my restaurant. I swore I was seeing a ghost. You look just like her. Just like your grandmother and when I saw you, the

biggest relief flooded through me because I knew she made it. She survived. She had a daughter and a beautiful granddaughter. I swore to protect you like I couldn't protect her."

The tears fall freely now. "Magda, you've always been like a grandmother to me. You've always taken care of me and shown me so much love. My grandmother was happy. Her kids made her happy, her grandkids made her happy. And she died peacefully."

"I never would have wished this life upon you, Mira."

I laugh at that. "Me either. Trust me. I've been trying to escape."

"But you can't."

I shake my head. Her understanding meaning more to me than I can ever express.

"What do you need me to do?" she asks.

"Nothing. Just pretend you know nothing. If anyone comes here asking, say I left one day and never came back."

Her hands grip my cheeks. "Tell me you'll be safe."

"I'll try as best I can."

* * *

The warm humid air of Mallorca warms my skin but it does nothing to take away the ever-present chill in my bones. I turn to the back seat and watch Aria as she takes in the scenery outside. When Kilian picked her up from school, he told her he surprised

us both with a trip. She was worried about missing football practice. But I reassured her everything would be okay.

Kilian reaches over the center console and squeezes my hand. I take my eyes off Aria and he mouths are you okay .

I shrug. I don't know what I am. Aria's life is in danger. Kilian's life is in danger. Hell, my life is probably just as forfeit, too.

He squeezes my hand again and then wraps his fingers through mine.

I look outside as we climb a mountain, the hairpin turns doing nothing for my stomach that's already in knots.

We pull up to a sizable estate along a cliffside. Gorgeous landscaping covers the grounds and from here I can tell the view out to sea has to be magnificent.

"Where are we?" I ask as we get out of the SUV.

"My friend's house," he answers. Probably the same friend that ensured there was a vehicle for us at the private hangar at the airport.

Aria starts to run to the house but I stop her. "What? Aren't we on vacation?"

"We are," I sigh. "But someone still lives here, you can't just barge in."

Kilian grabs the bags he packed for us from the trunk and meets us on the sidewalk. I follow him to the front door, when we are ten feet away it opens revealing a beautiful woman with platinum-blond hair pulled high into a ponytail and light-blue eyes.

"Hello," she says with an American accent. "Welcome to our home."

Kilian drops the bags and gives her a hug. “Good to see you, Cam.”

“Too bad we can’t see each other more.” A spike of jealousy hits me and I wonder who this woman is. If she is a former lover.

He turns to us. “Cam, this is Bella and her daughter, Aria.”

“Nice to meet you both. I’m Cameron Wilder but you can call me Cam. Come, let me show you the house.”

Kilian moves the bags inside where an older woman in all black is standing and waiting with a smile on her face.

“Bienvenido.” She nods.

Cam mutters off some words to her in Spanish, then guides us all to the living room and kitchen.

“This is where I always spend the most time when I am here. So I figured I would show it to you first. I just love how all the doors open out to the deck and pool. And wait ’til you see the view,” she says excitedly as we walk through the open kitchen to the outside.

It’s beautiful here. The way you can see the mountains and the sea. Aria gets excited when she sees the pool and I brush my hand over her curls.

“Marta was the woman at the front door, she will get you anything you need. Her English isn’t great but her daughter Lucia should be back from the store soon. She is filling the fridge for you guys.”

“You don’t live here all the time?” I ask curiously.

Cam shakes her head. "I wish, but my brute of a boyfriend demands we work from Paris rather than here. He needs to get his priorities straight." She gestures to the view. "This is a much better office, in my opinion."

"Is Bastian here?" Kilian asks as he shoves his phone back in his pocket.

"In his office. You know how he is." She turns toward me. "The man doesn't know how to take a break."

Kilian snickers. "Oh, Cam, how I've missed you. I'm guessing you still haven't softened the bastard."

Cam looks to see if Aria is in earshot, but she ran off to look off the side of the balcony. "Only in the bedroom. And even that takes convincing."

"I'm sure you're quite skilled at it," Kilian jokes.

A huge smile takes up Cam's face. "Of course I am. No one else can tame the beast."

I smile softly at their banter. My jealousy fading as I piece together that they are good friends.

"Kilian." A deep, brooding voice comes from one of the archways of the kitchen.

"Bastian," Kilian answers. "Come here, you old brute."

Bastian shakes his head as he shakes hands with Kilian and then they give each other a one-armed hug.

"Thank you for letting them stay here."

“You’ve done so much for me and my family. You know I will always help you out.”

Bastian turns toward me and holds out his hand. His grip firm as I shake it. “I’m Bastian Montford. Kilian and I go way back. Before he was dead,” he jokes.

Cam coughs. “Did you just tell a joke?” She clasps her hands to her chest. “I think I am gonna have a heart attack.”

I laugh. She is something else and I can tell the two of them are completely opposite but I don’t miss the love in both their eyes.

“I’m Mirabella, well Kilian calls me Bella. So you can as well.” I yell for Aria and she comes skipping over. “This is my daughter, Aria.”

Bastian gives a small smile to me, then does a double take when he looks at Aria. His gaze drifting over to Kilian before going back to Aria.

Well it didn’t take him long to figure it out.

Kilian claps him on the shoulder. “Let’s go enjoy a whiskey and a cigar, brother.”

Bastian grunts and I watch the two of them walk inside.

“Well, that was awkward,” Cam says. “How about I show you two your rooms and then we can lie out on the deck, enjoy a martini, and soak up some sun?”

With the way my day is going, I’ve never heard a better idea. “Sounds great.”

* * *

I’m lying out on the pool deck next to Cam, drinking martinis as Aria splashes around

in the pool. Kilian and Bastian haven't come out of the office since they walked away a few hours ago.

"So how long have you known Kilian?" Cam asks me.

I sip my martini, I can already feel its effects. I never drink vodka. And on top of that, I've barely eaten anything today despite Lucia bringing out a tray of snacks an hour ago. "That feels like a loaded question."

Cam pulls her sunglasses down to the end of her nose. "It is." She glances at Aria, then back at me. Her voice quiet. "Considering that man is technically dead. I figure there is quite a history there."

I chew on my lip, not really sure where to start. Not to mention I have no idea if she knows who I really am. Would Kilian tell them a mob daughter was staying at their house? Then again, they know about Kilian, know he isn't dead, which has to mean they are involved with The Partners.

"Look," Cam says after taking a large sip of her martini. "We both live lives full of secrets. I don't need to know all yours and you don't need to know all mine. But whatever you have to say will not leave this house." She pauses, finishing off her martini and setting it on the table next to her. "I met Kilian when he was still 'alive.' Bastian's family were involved in a scandal. You probably heard about it. It happened three years ago. Anyway, The Partners were responsible for it. And you must know about them if you are walking around with a living dead man."

I nod. I look over at Aria and smile as I watch her splash around. To be oblivious to this all must be so nice. "I don't even know where to start," I answer honestly.

Lucia walks out with two new martinis for each of us. Cam thanks her then turns toward me. "Wherever you feel comfortable."

I take a sip of my martini for courage. I've never told anyone about my time with Kilian in Dublin. I never had girlfriends. Even back then, the girls I hung out with weren't worthy of my secrets. But there is something about Cam that makes me feel comfortable.

"We met nearly twelve years ago in Dublin."

"Oh, I love Dublin!" Cam exclaims. "I made Bastian take me to Ireland last year. I wanted to stay in a castle."

I smile at her. "It's beautiful there. One of my favorite places. I went to college at Trinity."

"How did you two meet?" Cam's energy is infectious. "Was he a professor? He never told me he was but that would be hot. Or maybe he was doing business and you were someone's secretary and he stole you away."

I laugh. "No, nothing like that. I was a bartender. I worked at a pub a few blocks from Kilian's townhome. He frequented the place whenever he was in town."

Cam's eyes roam my body. "I'm sure he went for the whiskey," she remarks sarcastically.

I let out a soft laugh. "He gave me the same once-over the first time I met him. I actually ended up making him buy me five of his favorite drinks that night. A hundred euro a drink."

"Chump change to him," Cam snorts.

"But yeah, we hit it off and he kept coming back for two years."

“You mean he kept coming for two years,” Cam says, raising her brows up and down suggestively.

“You could say that.” I laugh. “We were just... friends with benefits.”

“Then what happened?”

I don’t miss the glance she makes toward Aria from under her sunglasses. I guess she figured it out too. “I left. Family emergency. I didn’t see him for ten years. Not until...” I trail off. I almost said he broke into my house and tied me to a chair. Maybe I should say it. Cam would probably get a kick out of it.

“Until what?” she asks in anticipation.

I sip my martini and go for it. “He broke into my house and tied me to a chair.”

“Hot. So hot. I’ll have to tell Bastian...” She looks up and a smile hits her face. “Wow, I thought you guys would never come out. I thought I was going to have to break up with you because you decided to fall in love with Kilian.”

Kilian throws his head back in laughter while Bastian gives her a look that even makes my thighs clench. That man is dangerous.

“Well take that stuffy suit off and join us. No more work for the day. I have declared it a day off!”

“I think the martinis have decided that. Did you forget you work for me and I make the decisions?”

“Oh stop being a broody asshole. Live a little.”

Kilian takes a seat on the end of my lounge, lifting my feet and setting them in his lap. "I was going to head to London today but I can't turn down a night with Cam."

"See, Bas. Even Kilian is willing to take off his metaphorical suit." She pauses as she takes him in. "I think this is the first time I've ever seen you not in a suit. Weird."

"Why do I put up with you?" Bastian mutters.

"Because you love me." She stands up and pushes him to the door. "Do I need to help you change? I can. Oh, by the way, did you know Kilian tied Bella to a chair? That sounds so hot. I think we should try..." Her voice trails off as she walks inside, pushing Bastian along.

Kilian raises a brow at me. "You told her about that?"

I shrug. "She is a bad influence."

He laughs as he runs a hand up my bare thigh. "That she is. But a fun one, I have to admit."

"Kilian!" Aria yells from the pool. "Are you going to come in and play? This pool is so fun. It has little waterfalls."

He squeezes my knee. "Give me a few and I'll join you."

He stands from the lounge and walks behind me. I figure he is going in to change, but he leans over the back, his lips at my neck. He leaves a trail of kisses to my ear. Then whispers, "I might just have to tie you up to a chair again. Except this time you will be naked and at my mercy."

He disappears and I grab my martini, swallowing the rest of it down in one giant

gulp.

* * *

The four of us hang out on the terrace. Warm white lights give a soft ambiance to the deck as the stars flicker overhead.

Aria went to bed an hour ago. The four of us tipsy on booze. After the last martini, I switched to whiskey to keep my head less foggy.

Bastian and Cam's chef cooked us a delicious meal of fresh fish and vegetables. He even made a caramel layered ice cream cake for Aria. Cam had asked her earlier about her favorite dessert and when she said caramel ice cream, the chef did not disappoint.

Kilian plays with my hair as Cam tells a story about her and Bastian. I smile as I listen to her. She is animated and it's so easy to fall into her trance. No wonder Bastian loves her.

They told me more about their lives. The hardships they went through. The risks they took with The Partners. The sacrifices Kilian made. It only made me love him more. And it made me want what Bastian and Cam have. Their love is so real and they get to live the life they didn't think they could. It gives me hope that I can have this one day with Kilian. With Kilian and Aria.

Bastian cuts a look to me. "Aria is a beautiful little girl. So smart."

I nod. She had everyone entertained at the dinner table tonight. "She is. She is a good kid."

He looks over to Kilian and I know he wants one of us to say it. One of us to admit

the truth he saw the second he looked into her eyes.

“I didn’t know,” Kilian says to answer Bastian’s silent question.

My heart clenches at his words. Because it was my fault. I should have told him that night ten years ago. Should have found him somehow to let him know that he had a daughter.

“I just found out two nights ago,” he says. I drop my head in shame. Kilian grabs my hand. “We never put a name on what we had in Dublin. She had to be scared to tell me, a man ten years older than her, charming and successful—”

“Wow, Kil.” I shake my head at him and tell the story. “I was worried what he would say. I didn’t know what to do. I never planned on being pregnant so young. And I got scared and didn’t say anything the night I wanted to. Then I left. Because my family would have killed him.

“Aria’s entire life I have lied to her about her father. I did it to keep her safe from my family.” I glance toward Kilian. “And to keep my heart safe. When I saw the news that he died. I had so much regret. I should have told him.”

Bastian clears his throat. “So what is your plan? He’s a high player in The Partners and you are still the daughter of a Renzetti.”

I down the rest of my whiskey and shrug.

“I’m going to figure it out,” Kilian says.

I watch Bastian’s fingers graze Cam’s shoulder as he speaks. “You both have families that will kill the other. It’s going to be dangerous.”

“Bas, can you not turn the situation so dark?” Cam cuts in. “They have shit to figure out. But he just learned about Aria. You can’t expect them to have this figured out in one day. He isn’t you. And your plans are dumb anyway. Like when you turned yourself in to The Partners to protect me.”

She rolls her eyes and I can’t help but laugh. Kilian smiles at Bastian and the scowl on Bastian’s face deepens.

“This is why I hate having you two in the same room.”

Cam throws her arms around him and kisses his cheek. “We make your life exciting.”

“You make my eye twitch.”

“Brute,” Cam mutters as she stands to grab another drink.

I grab mine and Kilian’s glass and follow her into the kitchen.

“Is it weird?” she asks me when we are out of hearing distance.

“Is what weird?”

“Being back with him.”

I look outside and see Kilian laughing. I can only guess at Bastian’s expense from the look on his face. “Yeah, it is.” I pause. “I never thought it would happen. I accepted the fact that he would only be a memory. Even if I still thought about him. I convinced myself that was enough.”

“But it never felt like enough?”

I shake my head. “No, it didn’t. And then I just felt like a stupid twenty-something those first few years after I left Dublin. I kept telling myself what we had was just sex. That he didn’t have feelings for me. He never did. And I needed to bury the feelings I had.”

Cam pours a martini into her glass. “You know, three years ago Kilian asked me what love felt like. I had an inkling it meant he had been in love at one point but I wasn’t sure. But I know now he loved you then just like he loves you now.”

“This is probably dumb. But I think we love each other more now than we did then. Too bad we are stuck in this situation.”

“So the mafia?” Cam questions me.

“Don’t look like a mafia girl, do I?”

She shrugs. “Can’t say I know many.”

I laugh at that. “First time for everything.”

“I guess so.” She squeezes my hand. “I hope you know you are safe here. No one is going to come looking for you at an old friend of Kilian’s second home. To us, he is dead. No one knows that we know the truth. And Bastian would never let anyone hurt you. No one can get past that first gate of this house, not even your despicable family.”

I give her a kind smile. “Thank you.”

“Kilian has always been our family in a weird way. He and Bastian go way back and they spent times hating each other and times being brothers. But that is Kilian. And if you are with him, then you are our family too.”

I give her a hug. There is nothing more I could want than a family that isn't the one I was born into.

24

KILIAN

I tighten the tie around Bella's wrist that's attached to the footboard. She's propped up on her knees on a bench that was at the end of the bed. I pull her hips back, causing her arms to stretch. After one too many cocktails tonight, she was begging for me to fuck her. And not just fuck her. She begged me to tie her up and own her body like I used to do in Dublin.

I also gagged her. Aria is sleeping two rooms away and no way do I want to wake my daughter up while I am balls deep in her mother.

I glide my hand over the smooth olive skin of her ass that's high in the air from the angle I arranged her. Her elbows inches from the edge of the bench causing just enough pain in her arms to intensify the pleasure.

I walk back and forth, a half-circle pass as I speak filthy words to her. And every sentence I say has her squirming, moaning into the gag. I push her knees farther apart, to the very edge of the bench. I smile as I watch her wetness drip down the inside of her thigh.

I swipe my finger up her thigh and bring it to my mouth. "Mmm, my favorite flavor."

She moans through the gag and I know she hates that I haven't touched her yet, not in the way she wants. Every now and then I will caress my finger over part of her or pinch a nipple but I have yet to dive into her cunt. It kills me as much as her, I want

nothing more than to swipe my tongue through her folds, lick her from clit to ass. Tease her tight hole with my fingers, my tongue before devouring her pussy.

But I wait. I let the game continue.

I take a drink of whiskey. The delay of pleasure causing her to squirm even more as I enjoy the smoky taste on my lips.

“You know the more you writhe, the longer you are going to have to wait for pleasure.”

She mumbles something through the gag and I can’t help but laugh. I know she wanted me to tie her up but this prolonged pleasure was not what she was expecting.

I watch her hands tighten around the ties that are holding her arms spread. I run my finger over my lip and wonder if I should have done this differently and tied her legs to the footboard. I chuckle at the thought.

I watch as she tries to lower her chest to the bench, any friction she can get for pleasure. But I made sure she was just far enough away her nipples couldn’t touch the leather.

I walk back over to her, whiskey in hand. “You know I’ve always loved this ass of yours. It has as much sass as you do.” I glide my hand back over her ass with the gentlest touch. “But I prefer it when it’s pink.”

That’s the only warning I give as I smack it hard, the skin immediately warming to a soft pink. Bella struggles against her restraints. Her body looking for any kind of release. I smack her ass again, this time on the other cheek. I only pause for a second before I land three more strikes, going back and forth between each side of her ass. I land two more blows at the crease of her thigh.

Her back arches from the assault and I know she is enjoying this. It's what she was begging me for. I wish I could hear her begging now, begging for me to touch her, fuck her with my fingers, my tongue. Give her all the pleasure she deserves. But I know how loud that mouth is and she doesn't know how to keep quiet.

I sip on my whiskey. "Mmm. This is even more of a sight to see now. Your thighs are glistening with need." I swipe my fingers once again through the new wetness that appeared after the slapping. "So responsive."

I crawl onto the bed and kneel at the edge. It's uncomfortable as fuck since my dick is raging hard but I am not ready to give in yet. I want her begging so hard she's in tears. It's been far too long since I've been able to do this to her.

I lift her chin up and hold the whiskey glass to her lips. I pull the tie down from around her mouth. "Drink."

She does as I say as I tilt the glass to her lips. I pull it away and finish the rest before throwing the glass behind me on the bed. I lean over, my finger tracing the wetness on her lips. "Are you ready for me yet?"

Her eyes plead. "Please, Kilian."

I smirk at her. "I bet your clit is throbbing. Begging to be touched. And I bet one flick of my tongue over it will have you screaming my name."

She moans at my words, begging for me to touch her.

"Soon, doll, very soon." I pull the tie back over her mouth and ensure it's tight enough to hold in her screams before climbing back off the bed.

I drag my fingers down her back and over her hip before descending down the sides

of her thighs. She shivers at the movement, goose bumps covering her flesh.

I walk away and head over to where the whiskey sits. A small ice bucket next to it. I pull two cubes out before making my way back over to her. I smack her ass two more times, then lean over and blow cool air along her cunt. Indecipherable words come out of her mouth around the gag and I can't help but chuckle.

“So responsive. So sensitive.” I blow against her one more time before I ever so gently swipe one finger through her folds. Her whole body shakes from the touch and she gets wetter from the movement.

My dick is uncomfortable as it strains against the zipper of my jeans. I am ready to sit back on the end of the bed and have her suck my cock from this position. But tonight is all about her pleasure, not mine.

I glide my finger through her center one more time, the tip of it sliding barely into her core. But I replace my fingers with the ice cubes. One, then the other as I press them inside of her. She groans so loud I wonder if the gag is going to keep her quiet enough. But at this point, I don't care. All I want is to give her pleasure. I run my hand over her ass, squeezing her pinkened cheeks before slapping them each one last time. Then I dive into her cunt. My warm tongue in complete contrast to the ice inside of her. Her thighs clench together. I force them apart so I have full access to her. My tongue flicking in and out of her center, gliding through her folds but stopping short of her clit. I lick my way backward all the way to her ass. Her body strains against the restraints. The pleasure I am causing her is too much. At least she thinks it is. But I know her body. I know what she can take, and she can take more.

I press two fingers inside of her, twisting what's left of the ice cubes. Water and cum running down her thighs. I lap it up before I pull my fingers out of her and replace them with my tongue. Her entire body is shaking and I know she is so close. But I pull back every time I think she is about to fall over the edge.

I reach around her front, pulling and pinching her nipples as I swirl my tongue inside of her. She mewls into the gag. Her legs shake. Her hands grip the restraints.

And when I know she can't take it anymore, when the push and pull of pleasure is too much, I swipe my tongue along her clit. Her body explodes, her thighs clenching my head between them. She falls forward as much as she can, the restraints keeping her from being able to rest on the bench. Her screams muffled and I only hope they are muffled enough.

My dick is throbbing. I pull away from her as she comes apart. I pull my shirt off and unzip my pants, shoving them off as fast as I can. Then I grab her hips and slam into her. The mixture of her warm body and the remnants of the cold ice nearly set me off far too quickly. I thrust into her over and over. Using everything I have, fucking her hard, as she writhes against me, against the bench. Her pussy clenches tight around me. And I know her orgasm is never ending. Her body in pure bliss as I act like a wild beast, slamming into her hard, relentlessly.

Both of us are slick with sweat. Beads of my own sweat dripping from my face and onto her back. Her body shakes, her moans breathless as I work her body into absolute pleasure. A tingle hits the base of my spine as my balls tighten and I know I can't last much longer. I pump into her, dragging her hips into mine with every thrust. When her body can barely hold itself up, I let go and come on a roar. Holding in as much noise as I can as I burst inside of her.

I catch myself from falling on top of her. My arms wrapping around her waist to keep her torso up and the weight of us off her shoulders. I kiss up her spine until I reach her neck. She turns to face me and I pull the gag out of her mouth.

"That was..." She can barely speak, her words a whisper.

I press a kiss to the side of her mouth. "Intense."

“I think it was more than that.”

I press my lips to her shoulder and stand up, slowly pulling out of her warm heat and she groans at the loss of me. I untie her restraints and slide onto the edge of the bench, pulling her onto my lap. I rub at her shoulders and wrists, working out any of the tension I caused, all while trailing my lips across her neck and her back.

“Do you think we were quiet enough?” she asks.

I snort. “Fuck if I care.”

“You really don’t care if your daughter heard us?”

I smile into her shoulder at that. My daughter. I pull Bella farther into me. “I love it when you say that.”

She brushes a piece of hair off my forehead. “I wish I could have told—”

I hold my fingers to her lips. “Don’t. We can’t change that.”

“I know.”

“And for the record, I don’t think she heard us. I think I finally found a way to keep you quiet.”

She slaps at my chest. “I thought you liked it when I was loud.”

I press my lips to hers. “There is a time and a place.”

“That’s the first time I’ve ever heard you say that.”

I kiss her again, shutting her up before lifting her up and placing her on the bed. I move the glass I tossed on it earlier to the bedside table and crawl into the bed next to her, pulling the sheet over us both.

She turns to face me, wrapping her leg over my hip and threading her arm around my back. “Thank you.” She stares into my eyes as if she is studying the color. “Thank you for making sure Aria and I had somewhere safe to go. If you weren’t around, I don’t know what we would do.”

I press my lips to her forehead. “If I didn’t kill your brother, you might not be in this situation.”

“Let’s not talk about him. He deserved what happened.”

“If it wasn’t for him, we wouldn’t be here.”

“I just said—”

“No, I mean, we would never have found each other. He led me to you.”

She runs her fingers down my back. “He was still an asshole.”

“That he was.”

She pulls her hand away from my back and cups my jawline. “I love you, Kilian. I love you more than I know how to say.”

I press my lips to hers briefly. “I love you too, anam cara .”

* * *

“Do you have to leave today?” Bella asks me as we eat breakfast.

I’ve spent two days here with her. More than I planned to. But I couldn’t leave her, not when I know how worried she is. And I couldn’t leave Aria. We still haven’t talked about her. Figured out a way to tell her the truth. “I have things I need to take care of.”

“Are you going to be safe?”

I drop my hand to her thigh and squeeze it. “I always am.”

She frowns at me then goes back to eating. I know those aren’t words she wants to hear. I know she wants me to stay. But I need to figure shit out with Giancarlo. And the only way I can make the dream we have a reality is if I go directly to him. But I can’t tell her that because she will throw a fit if she knows I am going to walk directly into enemy territory.

Aria is sitting outside working on schoolwork. I am still blown away that she is mine. That I have a kid. The forever playboy. It hurts to think I missed out on so much of her life. To see her first steps, to hear her first words. To take her to the first day of school or play football with her. But if I can make this work then I’ll get those things with her, not those firsts but the others.

“You raised one hell of a little girl,” I tell Bella.

She smiles at me. “She reminds me so much of you. Just all these little quirks. I think that’s what made it easier. I felt like I still had you.”

I pull her off her chair and into my lap. “You’ve always had my heart, Bella. Always.”

She presses her lips to mine and I grip her head, holding her as tight as I can to me. Wanting to remember the taste of her in case everything goes wrong.

We're interrupted by my phone ringing and she pulls away, her face falling into sorrow once again.

My conversation is brief and I curse as I hang up the phone.

"I need to leave."

"Tonight. You said you were going to leave tonight." Her voice breaking at her words.

"Things changed."

"Kilian, please. You promised Aria you would take her to the beach after she finished her schoolwork."

I clench my fist. I know I promised her that. And now I have to break my daughter's heart. "Sometimes plans change. I have an emergency."

Bella's face falls, turns from sorrow to anger. "And this is why we can never work, Kilian. Your job will always be tearing us apart. Why do you think I fought so hard to get out of the life I was born into? Because I didn't want this to be my life."

My jaw shifts as I listen to her angry words. "I made a promise to you that I would find a way for us to work."

"Yet you can't even keep a promise to your daughter to take her to the beach. Wait a few hours. For her."

I glance outside and see her watching butterflies dance across flowers. “It’s not that easy.”

“It is that easy. You are choosing between her and work right now.”

“Fuck!” I scream. “I can’t do this with you right now.”

“What the hell does that mean?” she asks me as she stands from her chair so abruptly it falls backward.

I take a deep breath then step toward her, reaching for her but she moves out of my reach. “I have to leave to make this work between us. This is important. This can fix everything.”

She sighs and folds her arms across her chest. “Will it? Or just fix things until the next problem comes around?”

I close my eyes, not wanting to argue with her. “I’ll be back in two days.”

I head to our room and pack my shit while I call my pilot to have the plane ready. She doesn’t follow me in here. The Bella I know would fight for me. But it’s like she has given up. She never thought we could make this work and I am proving to her right now my job is more important. But I have no choice. I rarely have a choice.

I head back to the kitchen and find her outside with Aria.

I step onto the sunny terrace and Aria frowns when she sees the bag in my hand.

“Are you really leaving?”

I nod. “I’m sorry. I got called into work.”

“But this is our vacation.”

“I know, sweet girl.”

She sniffles and then runs up to me, wrapping her arms around me and I inhale the strawberry scent of her hair. “I know you are just my mom’s boyfriend. But I like you. And I know my mom does too. I thought maybe one day you could be my dad.”

My heart breaks at those words and I don’t miss the tears that hit Bella’s face. I squat down in front of her. “I would like that.” I run my hand through her hair. “I’m really sorry I can’t take you to the beach. But I promise I will be back soon. Can’t keep me away from you and your mom for too long.”

“Promise?” she asks.

I nod and a smile takes up her face.

I press a kiss to the top of her head and walk over to Bella. “I’ll be back.”

Her stance is defensive but she nods. “I didn’t mean what I said.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“Kilian...”

“I love you. Both of you,” I say quietly. “I’ll see you soon.”

25

KILIAN

I hate leaving Bella and Aria the way I did but business is business. As soon as my plane lands in Montpellier, I am met by Dimitri limping to the stairs of the plane.

“What the fuck happened?”

“We were ambushed,” Dimitri tells me as we crawl in the waiting SUV. “There wasn’t even a trade. We had a shipment of weapons coming in from our supplier. A large one.”

I nod my head. “I know. It was the one to close off on six different deals. How the hell did the Renzettis know what we were doing?”

“I have no idea. Everything was going smooth. We had almost all the weapons loaded into the trucks when it happened. Four men were killed, another two injured.”

“And you?”

He shrugs. “Just a nick in my thigh and a clean shot through my arm.”

“This shouldn’t have happened.”

“No. This was an easy delivery. All that needed to be done was load the crates into the truck. They waited until we were almost done. When one truck was loaded, I was

confused why he wasn't driving off. I found him dead in the driver's seat. That's when I got shot in the arm and then chaos happened."

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath. "Is anything left?"

"A few million dollars' worth," Dimitri says quietly. "There has to be a mole."

"I need you to get me a list of every person you've had working the docks with you over the last six months." I send a text to Roland, who was supposed to be handling this. "Fuck," I yell as I slam my hand into the window of the SUV. "Why wasn't Roland here?"

"He said he had something to take care of. I promised him it would be fine."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that." I run my hand through my hair. "Why didn't you call me?"

"Roland said not to get you involved." Dimitri studies me. "He probably knew you would be pissed."

"He violated protocol."

"I know."

"There will be consequences for you. Your rank will drop. And The Partners will not be happy. Consequences may be worse than your rank. You lost nearly four hundred million dollars in weapons."

He nods. "I know. I know I fucked up. But things had been fine. Nothing happened in the last month and I figured with Ezio being out of the picture we would be okay."

I clench my jaw. “It was a foolish mistake.”

“I accept my punishment.”

“Fuck!” I yell again as we pull up to the hotel outside Montpellier in Sete. My father will find a way to take this out on me even though he knows this was Roland’s responsibility.

I jump out of the SUV and slam the door behind me. Dimitri rushes to keep up with me. He meets me at the elevators and swipes his key card and hits the button for the fourth floor.

I keep quiet. My thoughts stewing. Roland knew better than to fuck this up. But I have no doubt he did something stupid in his desperate attempt to take over his father’s seat.

I follow Dimitri off the elevator. He swipes the key card and we enter the suite.

“There is an office there.” He nods to a set of double doors.

I open the doors and face him. “Get me that list.” I shut the door and pace back and forth, trying to piece together anything and everything I have heard since Nicolas Di Masio started causing problems for us.

I dial Tomas as I wait. I need him to dig, to find out everything he can when Dimitri gets me that list.

“Kilian, to what do I owe this pleasure?”

“I’m in Sete. I need you to meet me at my hotel.”

He's quiet for a moment. "You know I don't usually make house calls."

"I know."

"I expect dinner."

"We can have a ten-course meal and a fucking ten-thousand-dollar bottle of champagne."

He clicks his tongue. "I can be there in fifteen minutes."

I hang up the phone without another word. I'm glad he lives just outside this port city. I have no idea why he chooses to. To me, it is nothing special.

I gather my thoughts for a few moments, then sit in the chair and dial my father.

"Kilian." His voice was gruff. "I am assuming you are in Sete."

"Yes."

"What the fuck happened?"

I drum my fingers along the desk. "You know this was not my job."

"I understand." His voice is surprisingly calm.

"Roland didn't show up. He told Dimitri he had things to take care of. Dimitri said everything was running smoothly until they were ambushed by a group of masked men. Men that were yelling in Italian."

"Giancarlo Renzetti."

“That’s what I believe. I have Tomas on the way ready to dig into the men working the docks for us the last six months.”

“Good. Call Roland. I want you to hear his side of the story before we bring in his father.”

I lean back in my chair. “Dean Arrington does not have the ruthlessness to punish his son.”

“I will worry about Dean. You get this shit figured out.”

I clench my jaw. “And if I can’t find the weapons?”

“Then you forfeit your position with The Partners and that death certificate will become very real.”

“This wasn’t my job,” I growl into the phone.

“No. But you knew to keep an eye on Roland. He is cocky, careless. You knew he was a loose cannon.”

I clench my hand into a fist on the desk. “I’ll find those weapons.”

“And get rid of Dimitri.”

I scoff into the phone. “This is not his fault.”

“Your weakness is showing again, son. That weakness will get you killed.”

He hangs up the phone and I slam mine on the desk. It’s days like this when I question everything I have worked for. I want my father’s seat. I want to control The

Partners. But I worry that I don't have the cruelty and callousness to take that power.

"Come in," I say as someone knocks on the door.

Dimitri walks in with a list of every man that has worked for him over the last six months. "This is everyone. All vetted by Baker," he says, referring to the man directly above him.

"Thank you."

I watch him as he walks out, a look of dread on his face. He is a good man, loyal. He has never fucked up once in his time working for us. I know my father says I am weak, that I carry too much emotion for certain people. But Dimitri is an asset to us. His connections to the Bratva and the Odessa mafia have proven useful over the years. He doesn't deserve death.

I flip through the file he gave me as Tomas walks into the office without knocking.

"This better be important," he says with a disgruntled look on his face.

"I wouldn't call you here if it wasn't."

He huffs as he opens the black hard roller case he dragged in behind him. "I need the desk."

"Of course," I say as I stand. He starts to set up multiple laptops on the desk. I've seen him work before. He is a master at finding information. But the guy is scary as fuck. He's probably six foot seven with nothing but muscle on him. An ex-mercenary, although I think he does contract jobs still if the money is right. He has long golden-blond hair pulled into a bun on top of his head with light-gray eyes that almost glow they are so clear. A large, thick scar runs down his face from the edge of

the hairline down to his neck and across his throat. He has never told me how he got it and I don't dare ask. He scares the shit out of me. I understand why most men don't want to owe him a favor. But over the years I've gotten to know him and I am the only one he likes to work with. Maybe it's because I am the only one that knows his delight in eating caviar and champagne.

He doesn't speak as he gets to work, flipping through the file Dimitri gave me. I pace the room again, needing something to do. All I can think about right now is the consequences if I fail my father's orders. What it will mean for Bella and Aria. Who would I put in charge of their safety?

My mind is spinning when my phone starts ringing. Roland's name flashing across the screen.

"Where the fuck were you?" I say as I hit accept on my phone.

"Kilian, calm down."

If he was in front of me, I would punch him right now. "Don't fucking tell me to calm down. You lost nearly four hundred million dollars in weapons. Four men were killed. Luckily Dimitri was only wounded."

"I had business to take care of."

"Your business was here. In Sete."

"This was important." His voice stern.

I run my hand through my hair. "No business is as important as The Partners business, Roland. I know your father has taught you that."

“Why do you even care? This has nothing to do with you.” His voice harsh as it comes across the line.

“If it’s Partners business, it has everything to do with me.”

“I thought you didn’t want this.”

I don’t miss the accusatory tone in his voice. “I have my reasons for everything I do. And I never said I didn’t want it. I said it wasn’t as appealing as before but that doesn’t mean I can just walk away.”

He sighs. “I was closing a deal.”

“Closing a deal?” I ask with malice. “That’s not your job. I close deals. Who the fuck were you closing a deal with?”

“Look, I thought it would be a big move for The Partners. I met him in my club a few months ago. I’ve gotten to know him. He has a shipping business out of South America. You know we could—”

“Who the fuck was it?” I yell, grit in my voice. Tomas looks up at me for the first time since I started talking to Roland.

“I’m sorry, Kilian. I know I shouldn’t have stepped into your part of the business. But I didn’t want to lose—”

“Just tell me who the hell it is?” I growl as I step toward Tomas so he can hear whatever name Roland gives me.

“His name is Sergio Rojas.”

Tomas nods at me and mouths “on it.”

“Look, Kilian, I didn’t think anything would happen. After Ezio, I figured the threat was over.”

“That was four days ago. You can’t believe he was the only man working for the Renzettis. Or that he didn’t figure something out and feed it to them before he died.”

“I made a mistake.”

I laugh. “A mistake would be telling someone the wrong time for a delivery. You lost us four hundred million dollars!” I shake my head as I walk over to the window and look out toward the water a few blocks away. “Have you told your father?”

“You know he already knows.”

“Did you tell him why you weren’t here? I am positive he knows about the stolen weapons but he needs to hear the mistake you made that cost us millions from your mouth.”

“I was hoping we could get the weapons back.”

I scoff. “Really?”

“If it’s the Renzettis then maybe we can strike a deal or kill the rest of them.”

“You’re a fool, Roland.” I pace back across the room. “We can’t just call in a favor to them. We already killed Giancarlo’s nephew. We have a target on our backs. This isn’t going to be some walk in the park. This isn’t one of the weak businessmen I get to launder our money. This is one of the most powerful mafia families in Italy and they would do anything to tear us apart.”

“Why? Why are they so invested in destroying us?”

I know one big reason but I am not about to let this motherfucker know. “That’s what I am trying to figure out.”

Tomas turns the screen to me. And I want nothing more than to shoot Roland in the head. I don’t care how far back we go. “You are an even bigger fool than I thought you could be.” I can hear him swallow hard on the other side of the phone but he remains silent. “Your Mr. Rojas that you thought would be a great business deal? That isn’t a South American businessman. That man is Luca Renzetti. You fucking idiot.”

“I didn’t know,” he mutters into the phone. He sounds pathetic.

“Why the hell didn’t you look into the Renzettis when you knew they were a threat?”

“I don’t know.”

“You need to know who every man is in this business. Threat or not.”

He starts talking fast. “I vetted him. I swear. I had the man I use look into him.”

“Who the hell are you using?” I snap. “A kid that graduated from college yesterday? Tomas figured out who he was in five minutes.”

“I should have been more thorough,” Roland says with a bit more edge in his voice.

“You should have done a lot of things.”

“I’m not you, Kilian. I don’t take my anger and rage about my father out on everyone like you do.”

I ignore his jab. “Who organized your meeting last night, you or him?”

“He did. Over a week ago.”

Fuck. There is no doubt in my mind it was the Renzettis that stole our weapons. And Luca knew about this delivery long before last week. “And you didn’t think to tell him you were busy.”

“I already told you I thought this would be beneficial for The Partners. He said he was only in town one day and I needed to get his commitment to join us.”

Fire burns through my veins. I have nothing else to say to him, nothing that will get through his thick skull that he might have just destroyed us. “Call your father. I have a mess to clean up.”

I shove my phone in my pocket and pace the room, anger fuming from every single one of my pores.

“You could give him the benefit of the doubt. Luca had quite an identity change. He is barely recognizable.”

I hold up my hand to Tomas. “And you know if I was in Roland’s shoes, I would have sent that video footage from the club directly to you. You would have used your recognition software to figure it out.”

“I do have the best there is.”

I slam my hands on the desk in front of him. “And would poorer software determine the same thing?”

Tomas looks at me in a way I feel like he looked at his targets before the final blow.

“Yes.”

I walk away from him. I know he was only trying to prove a point, but it doesn't do anything to settle the rage inside of me. Roland's mistake could cost me not just my life but Bella and Aria's too.

I storm out of the office and find Dimitri sitting on the sofa sipping a glass of vodka.

“You here to take me somewhere and kill me?”

I stare at him in shock. “What makes you think that?”

“I told you earlier I accepted my punishment. I know how The Partners work. I've said my goodbyes.”

I walk over to the bar and pour myself a glass of whiskey. “I'm not going to kill you. Roland, maybe. But not you. This had absolutely nothing to do with you.”

“I was there. It doesn't matter if it had anything to do with me.”

“I'm not like those above me. I know when I need someone in the ranks.”

“You don't have to break the rules for me,” he says as he looks down into his empty glass.

I throw back my drink, knowing I need to call my father. “I'm not. You are an asset to us. And as far as I'm concerned, you saved us from losing all the weapons.”

He nods as he grabs the vodka bottle and pours more into his glass.

“Don't blame yourself for this.”

“I just wish I had... I don’t know.”

I pour more whiskey into my glass, not sure what to say to him when my phone rings again. “I need to take this.”

I push open the office doors and answer my father’s call.

“I’m assuming you talked to Roland,” he says.

“I just got off the phone with him ten minutes ago.”

“His father texted me.” He clears his throat as I hear him settle into a chair. “What did you find out?”

“He was meeting with a man, trying to close a deal. The man arranged for a meeting last night. He thought it was some businessman from South America named Sergio Rojas. It was Luca Renzetti.”

He is silent for a few moments. “And what is your plan?”

I roll my eyes, knowing he can’t see my face. “I’m working on it. Like I said, I just got confirmation that it was Renzetti.”

“Fine.” His tone is short.

“Something needs to be done about Roland.”

“I know.” He pauses. “I am putting Dean through on the call now.”

I wait for my father to connect Dean Arrington to the call. I clench my jaw, already knowing how this conversation will go. Dean will come up with some excuse for his

kid and refrain from punishing him.

“Dean,” my father says when he connects the call. “Kilian is on the line with us.”

“I just talked to Roland,” Dean says, his tone neutral.

“And?” My answer is clipped.

“He told me that he made a mistake in not being at the delivery.”

“And did he tell you that he was meeting someone at his club last night to secure a deal? A job that does not fall under him. Nor did he bring it up with Alistair.”

Dean sighs into the phone. “Yes, he told me he met with a man with a shipping business from South America.”

I scoff into the phone. “That’s what he told you? He didn’t tell you that I had that man looked into. And that man was actually Luca Renzetti.”

“What?” Dean asks in shock.

My father talks before I can take my anger out on Dean. “Dean, you know Kilian uses Tomas Eriksson. The man that everyone should be using.”

“That man is a threat to our business. He can undermine us at any time. I’ve told you before, Alistair, that he is not to be trusted.”

I look over at Tomas who has his nose buried in computer screens, oblivious to this conversation. At least he isn’t making any mention of being able to hear the phone call.

“Kilian trusts him. He’s worked with him for years. If my son trusts the man, then I trust him. He has saved our asses multiple times.”

“I am not here to argue about the people we use to gather information,” Dean says. “What else did you find out, Kilian?”

I lean against the doors to the office as I watch Tomas work. “Luca Renzetti knew about the delivery last night. Maybe Ezio figured it out but since he is dead, he wasn’t the one to lead the ambush. So someone else did. Tomas is working on that right now. What I need to know is who else knew about the shipment?”

“It was only us and Roland besides the men assigned to the job.”

“Dean, this falls under your umbrella. It was Roland’s job. You should have been paying closer attention to him.”

“You are not to tell me what to do, Kilian.”

I hear my father click his tongue and I know he is as pissed off as I am. There was a reason he was having me keep an eye on Roland. And I am wondering if he was keeping an eye on Dean. If they were working together to undermine the rest of The Partners.

“I am sick of cleaning up his messes,” I snap. “First in New York. Then in Dubai. Now this. He needs to learn his place. And it’s not in onboarding businessmen into our claws. He is to close deals on weapons sales. And now this is the third time he stuck his head where it doesn’t belong. He needs repercussions for his actions. And they need to come from you.”

“Don’t worry, Kilian, my son will pay for his mistakes. But you haven’t taken your father’s seat yet, so do not order me around, or I will make sure you never have it.”

“He’s a liability.”

“He’s still my son.”

I sneer at his words. My father has never had that mentality. He’s already threatened my life once today.

“Dean,” my father cuts in. “Kilian is right. This is the third strike against Roland. You know what that means.”

“I will not execute my own son.” His voice was defensive.

“Drop his rank.” My father’s tone was stark.

“I’m ready to retire,” Dean says quietly.

“Then we find someone else to take your seat,” my father snaps.

“There is no one else ready for this responsibility.”

“Then I’ll take over both seats,” my father growls at Dean.

“You can’t do that,” Dean replies.

“I have enough power to convince the others it’s our only choice.”

I rest my head against the back of the door while the two of them argue. There is no way I am letting my father take majority of The Partners.

Tomas gestures for me and I head over to the desk, muting my phone. “What did you find?”

“Looks like one of the men that worked a job a few months ago is a soldier for the Renzettis.”

“Was he there last night?”

“I looked into some grainy CCTV footage and I think he was the one that led the ambush.”

I nod at him and unmute the phone.

“What about Baker?” I ask, cutting off their argument.

They both seem startled from my interruption. “What about him?” Dean asks.

“Have you looked into him recently?”

“Baker has never had any problems,” Dean answers.

“What did you find, Kilian?” my father asks.

“Baker vetted all the dockworkers?”

Dean answers. “That is his job. What is the point of all this?”

“One of them worked for Renzetti. A foot soldier for them.”

“That’s not possible. Baker has never had any issues.”

My father is the one that speaks. “Roland was talking to a Renzetti.”

“It could have been a mistake. Baker might have let him slip through the cracks,”

Dean counters.

“Possibly. But Baker doesn’t have millions to fall back on like Roland. He could have planned this. Could have been paid off,” I reply.

“You should have a conversation with him,” my father instructs Dean and I know he means to have someone interrogate him.

“I will,” Dean answers.

“And Roland?” my father asks.

“I’ll deal with him,” Dean snaps before hanging up the phone.

My father disconnects our call and then calls me back.

“It could have been Roland’s loose mouth,” I tell my father as I answer the phone. “I’ve seen what happens when he has had one too many drinks at his clubs.”

“I know he’s a cocky asshole, but I don’t think he would have let something like that slip, not to a potential client. He’s not that dumb that he would tell a client where and when weapons are being brought in.”

My father has a point. “Do you think Dean is acting against The Partners?”

“No,” he says flatly.

“Did you at one point?”

He sighs. “Yes, at one point I did. But nothing came from it. I think he just cares too much about his son.”

“Must be nice,” I retort

“Don’t get that tone with me,” my father snaps back.

Tomas must feel the tension from me because he walks out of the room. “What would you do if the tables were turned?”

“If you did everything Roland did?” he contemplates the question. “You know I would put a bullet through your head without a second thought.”

“And what if it wasn’t me? What if Liam or Grayson were in that position?”

“Don’t ask me that question,” he answers with gravel in his voice.

“Because you wouldn’t do the same to them.” The words are solemn.

“Kilian,” he sighs into the phone.

“It would be nice if just once you thought of me like your son.”

“You are my son.”

“But not like them.”

“They aren’t ruthless like you. They never would have made it on this side of the business world. You were always different. Daring, a risk-taker.”

I slump into the desk chair. “Maybe if you trained them since they were young.”

“Don’t start this with me, Kilian.” His rage growing. “You knew your role since you were sixteen. You knew what you were to do.”

“Because you knew I would never have a wife and family?” I ask.

“Look at you, to everyone you are dead.”

I clench my fist around an empty glass. He is the reason I’m technically dead. “And if I wasn’t?”

“You could never settle down. You aren’t family material. Never have been and never will be.”

“That’s what I thought,” I say with disdain.

“Kilian,” he sighs into the phone again.

“I’ll do what I have to do to get those weapons from the Renzettis.”

I hang up. I know there are no words he would say to comfort me. It’s the same thing every time. I was groomed for this role. And he sees me as no one but the ruthless man he made me to take his seat at the table.

I know I am family material. I never thought I was. But three days with Bella and Aria proved it. And now I need to find a way to save them. Even if it means taking a hundred bullets from Giancarlo Renzetti.

26

KILIAN

I crack my knuckles as I pull up to the Renzetti estate and throw my rental in park. This could be the biggest mistake of my life. But this is something I have to do. For The Partners. For Bella.

Guns are drawn as I step out of the vehicle. I hold my hands up in the air as one of the guards walks toward me to pat me down.

“He’s clean,” the man says as the gates open. He grabs my arms and zip ties them behind my back. Then walks us up the path toward the house.

I sent a note to Giancarlo yesterday calling this meeting. He didn’t respond and I didn’t expect him to. It was more of a courtesy to let him know I was coming.

Dante walks out the front door as we approach the front of the house. The fifteen-foot-tall doors a stupid display of their wealth. “Kilian, so good to see you. Alive nonetheless.”

“Wish I could say the same.”

“How’s my cousin?”

I don’t answer him.

“Don’t get shy on me. I know you’ve been fucking her. I know that kid is yours. I would just say she is your flavor of the month but considering you are a father, I’m guessing it’s more.”

I clench my jaw, not giving in to his taunts.

“You know, back in Dublin, I saw the way you looked at her and I knew you were fucking her. I could tell by the way she lied about you too. Such a pity. I was ready to kill you back then. But I didn’t out of a courtesy to her. If I killed you, she never would have come back with us.”

I raise a brow at Dante. “Nice try, Renzetti. But you could have killed me and never told her. I’m not an idiot. Your father told you not to kill me.”

The smug look falls off his face and he changes the subject. “Let me guess then, you are here to negotiate their safety.”

“I’m here for the weapons you stole from us.”

He taps his finger against his bottom lip. “I think it’s more than that. You know you can’t have both.”

“I’m not here for you, Dante. I’m here to speak to Giancarlo. So either shoot me or let me into that house.”

A cynical grin crosses his face. “Oh, I will shoot you. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve been wanting to for the last twelve years.”

I shrug the man still holding my arm off me. “Then do it,” I challenge him.

“I don’t want blood on the front steps.” He glances at one of his guards. “Untie him.”

The zip ties are snapped off my wrist and I roll my shoulders back as I follow Dante into the house.

The opulence of this place is outrageous. Marble floors, priceless art, gaudy vases lining the entryway. You'd think that the family would have turned the place more modern instead of keeping it like a museum. I'm sure they haven't changed the decor in fifty years.

I follow Dante down a long hallway, lined with sconces and more artwork. He opens a set of double doors and on the other side, Giancarlo sits at a massive carved wooden desk. His meaty hands steeped in front of him. His balding head barely noticeable against the large burn scars that take up the right side of his face.

"Kilian Bancroft. You look rather good for a corpse."

I sit in a giant leather wingback chair across from him. Not bothering for an invitation to sit. "And you look like the ever-ruthless boss to a mafia family. Although, I do have to say I would rather see you dead."

"Feeling's mutual," he retorts. "I'm not all that surprised to see you."

I laugh. "Well, I did send you a note saying I was coming. Did you prepare a guest room for me?"

Dante shoots me a death glare from the seat he took next to me.

"Unfortunately, I have no intention of letting you walk out of here alive, Mr. Bancroft."

I cross my leg over my knee and settle farther into my chair. "Pity."

“I don’t appreciate your nonchalance.”

I lean my elbow on the side of the chair and rest my chin in my palm. “And I don’t appreciate you killing four of my men and stealing four hundred million dollars’ worth of my weapons.”

“Why didn’t your father come here? He is still in charge, isn’t he? Or does he only send his pitiful son to do his work these days?”

I ignore his words. They don’t affect me at all. “Give us back our weapons or we will expose you. Humiliate you.”

He laughs. “I think you are the ones humiliated. Your weapons being stolen on your own turf.”

“That’s not what I was talking about. You are the one who gambled the family money away. You’ve resorted to threats and stealing weapons. Which I wouldn’t put past a mafia family. But the others don’t know who it is. And now that your errand boy is dead, what will you do?”

“You have no idea what you are talking about,” Giancarlo spits.

I don’t miss the look Dante gives me when I mention the money. “I think you’ve forgotten who you are dealing with.”

“No, I think you have forgotten.”

I chuckle. “Oh, Giancarlo, do we really need to dig up the past? I remember that deal you tried to make with my father years ago. But your brother told you not to. Told you not to cross The Partners because that’s what you planned on doing, wasn’t it? Making a deal just to steal from them. Then my father played you, did what you were

going to do to him, and stole from you instead.”

“My father had nothing to do with that,” Dante chimes in. “That was Benito getting too risky with business.”

I look over at Dante, into his dark eyes. “That’s what Giancarlo told you.” I click my tongue and shake my head. “Your father pretended to be his brother. Benito was the smart one, he knew when a business deal was bad. But Giancarlo over here doesn’t. He thinks he can take and take and take. My father should have killed him, but instead, he killed Benito and his wife. Mistaken identity because your father is a coward.”

“You’re lying.”

“Am I?” I turn my head from Dante to Giancarlo. “What about the other times?”

“What other times?” Dante asks his father.

“How about your own father, Giancarlo? Or your first wife? Or the gambling? Those nights you go out on business but you are just losing money—”

“Enough,” Giancarlo commands.

I smile at him in a devilish way, knowing I got to him. Knowing that Dante will badger him about everything I just said.

“What do you want?”

“Don’t threaten my daughter’s life again.” He nods. “And I want all those weapons you stole from us.”

He laughs in my face. “Oh, Kilian, you think you have the upper hand here? Because you spout some lies about me.”

“You know they aren’t lies.”

“Believe what you want. But I know the truth.” His eyes burn into mine. “You have to choose, Mr. Bancroft.”

“Father,” Dante hisses. “You aren’t really going to let him walk away?”

Giancarlo ignores his oldest son, his Underboss, and keeps his eyes trained on me. “What’s it going to be, the safety of your daughter and my niece or the weapons?”

27

MIRABELLA

I haven't heard from Kilian in three days. He said he would be back yesterday. But I am trying to keep a positive attitude around Aria. Deep down, I am worried sick. I saw that look on his face when he was on the phone. I know something was wrong. And I have an inkling it has to do with my family. The entire reason I even know Kilian is alive is because of my dead brother. But if something happened to him, I don't know what I would do.

Go after my uncle? My cousin? Both of them would kill Kilian in a heartbeat. Dante wanted to kill him ten years ago.

And I can't help but worry about the threat Giancarlo made. About my life and Aria's. Would he get rid of Kilian and come after me? He has to know I'm not home. He has to know Kilian is the one protecting us.

"You okay?" Cam asks me as she sits next to me on the terrace. "You look like you're about to chew your lip off."

I didn't realize I was chewing it. My thoughts are in so many different places.

She puts her hand on mine. "Hey, you know I'm here if you need to talk. You have so much going on right now. And I know you're worried about Kilian too."

I look over at her. "Has Bastian heard anything?"

She shakes her head. “But Kilian wouldn’t contact him. Not if it would risk your life and Aria’s.”

I glance over the hedges to where Aria is practicing drills. “We didn’t tell her.” I pause. “I mean, I never did. She has no idea he’s her father. And I am so worried that he got himself into trouble or killed and she will never know him as her father. Just the man I’m dating.”

Cam squeezes my hand. “Kilian is resilient. He is alive. You would feel it in your heart if you thought he wasn’t. That’s the feeling that kept me hanging on to seeing Bastian again. When I found out he was arrested, I was so pissed, but I wasn’t allowed to see him. That’s when I found out he wasn’t really in prison but being tortured by The Partners. I worried he was dead so many times but, in my heart”—she pauses and puts her hands against her chest—“it’s like I could still feel the part of his heart he gave me beating here. And I held on to hope he was alive. For two months, I held on.”

A tear falls from my eyes. “I still worry.”

“Of course you do, you love him.”

She stands and starts for the house. “I have some emails to catch up on. Let me know if you need anything. A friend, a glass of wine.”

I smile at her. “Thank you.”

She heads back inside and I try to focus on the book I was reading but my thoughts are still all over the place.

I must fall asleep because I am woken up to my phone ringing, Maria’s name on the screen. “Hello?”

“Mira, oh my gosh, I am so happy you are out of town.”

“Why?” I ask, confused.

“It’s just awful. Magda and Salvatore were killed last night. Someone just walked into the place after closing last night and killed them both. And Luigi. I kept thinking, what if you weren’t out of town? What if you were there last night?”

I’m in shock. Because I know that was no random hit.

“It’s just so awful. A tragedy,” Maria cries into the phone. “The police have no idea. No leads. At least that’s what my cousin is saying who works at the station.”

Of course the police have no leads. Because they were either paid off, or the hitman Giancarlo used was thorough. It was a message for me. To return home before he kills someone else. I only hope it doesn’t mean Kilian is next.

I hang up the phone and run into my room. Throwing random clothes into a bag and booking a flight back to Cefalù. He has to be waiting for me to come home.

I rush into Cam’s office. “I need you to watch Aria.” The words a jumbled mess as they fly out of my mouth.

“What?” Her voice high pitched.

“I just need you to protect her. Keep her safe. I need to go home.”

“What are you talking about?” she asks as she rises from her chair.

I take a deep breath. “My uncle left a message for me back home. I have to go. I have to set things straight. But I can’t bring Aria with me. I can’t risk it.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Bella. It could be a trap.”

“Then it’s better I leave Aria here. If it’s a trap, at least it’s just me.”

She rounds her desk and walks toward me. “I think you should wait until Bastian gets back. Or let’s call him at least.”

I shake my head. “No, I have to go now. Before someone else ends up dead.”

“Bella...”

“Please, Cam. I have to go.”

“I really think we should let Bastian know. He could help. His brother could help.”

“What if Kilian is next? What if my uncle kills him?”

“Bella,” she sighs. “This is a really bad idea. You could get killed.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“What about Aria? What if something happens to you?”

I walk backward. “I can’t think about that. I just... I know if I go to my uncle, he won’t harm her. I... I have to go.”

Cam reaches her arm out for me but I dash out of the room and down the hall, out the front door where the taxi I called is waiting for me.

I don’t even say goodbye to Aria. I can’t.

* * *

By the time I get to my home in Cefalù, I feel drained. I have ten missed calls. Some from coworkers and moms of Aria's schoolmates. One call from a detective asking me to call him immediately.

I go to unlock my front door but find it already unlocked. I know Kilian would have locked it. Not to mention I made sure the alarm was set from my phone and I never got any notice about it being deactivated.

I take a deep breath as I open the door. I flew commercial so I have no weapons on me. Not even a knife. I creep through the entrance but find nothing out of place, no signs that anyone broke in. The only sign so far that someone was here is that the alarm system screen is black, completely turned off.

An eerie feeling transcends me as I walk through the house. I go to the kitchen and grab the serrated knife I keep hidden under the island counter. I make my way to the stairs and slowly climb them. Although, at this point, I don't think anyone is here. If they were looking for me, they would have already left. I think.

The guest bedroom is empty, so I cross the hall into Aria's room. The pictures of us she had on her shelves are broken and smashed on the ground. Homework is shuffled all over her desk and drawers are left open.

My heart skips a beat knowing things could have been much worse if we were here. I find a ripped picture of me and Aria on the ground and put it in my back pocket.

I climb the way to the top floor of my house worried about what I might find but as I push open the door to my bedroom, I see that nothing has been touched.

I fly down the stairs and grab my phone out of my bag. Fear creeping over me as I

think about the clear threat that was made on Aria's life.

I dial Kilian but he still doesn't answer. I need him right now. I need him to help me figure this out. I try him again and again but he still doesn't answer. Every call going to a voice mail box that isn't set up.

I then try my uncle because this is his calling card. Murdering innocent people to get my attention. But his call goes unanswered too.

My doorbell rings and I peer outside to see the cops at my house. I don't want to deal with them but I know I have to.

Just as I am about to open the door, my phone starts vibrating in my hand. I walk to the other end of the house to take the call. Cam's name on the screen. I can only guess Aria is mad I left.

"Hello?"

It's not Cam that answers. "Thank fuck you answered. Where are you?"

"Bastian?" I ask even though I know it's him. "I'm back home. There was an emergency."

"Did you take Aria with you?"

My heart drops to my stomach at those words. "What's going on?"

"I got home from my meeting and found Cam and Lucia knocked unconscious. Nothing was missing. But I couldn't find you or her."

"Aria isn't—" I can't even finish the sentence because everything clicks into place at

once.

“She’s missing, Bella. She was taken.”

I fall to the floor, my heart breaking as I realize I fell into a trap just like Cam said. I was lured out of that house and whoever took her knew I would leave alone. They used that chance to take her. To take my baby away.

“I have to go,” I tell Bastian.

“Bella, wait.” His commanding voice stops me from hanging up. “Don’t leave. I will send help to you.”

I think about the threats from my uncle and Dante. I shake my head. “No, no I need to do this alone.”

“Bella, you need help.”

“No, Bastian. I know who did this. I know who took her.” I start to mumble as I keep the tears at bay. “How did they know where to find me? He shouldn’t have known.”

“Bella, stay where you are. I will head there right now.”

“No. Don’t,” I say as I gather my thoughts. “Take care of Cam. I need to go see my uncle.”

“He could kill you.”

“If he wanted to kill me, he would have already done it. He wants Kilian. And this is the only way he can get to him.”

Bastian sighs into the phone. "I'll text you my number. If anything seems to be off, contact me right away."

"Thank you," I say and hang up the phone.

Fury rages through my veins.

I will not let my family have this power over me.

* * *

"So many surprise visitors this week," Dante says as I walk through the front door of my family's estate. I ignore his statement. No idea what he means. Nor do I care.

"Where is Giancarlo?"

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he asks me as he takes in my bitter face.

I pull a gun out of my bag and aim it at him, apparently the guards don't check family for weapons. "Tell me where he is."

Dante laughs in my face. "You think I am going to let you see him when I know you're armed?" I drop the gun and hand it to him. He smirks at me as he shoves it in the back of his pants. "He's in his office."

I nod at him and walk down the hall. I'm surprised to see his door open, so I walk through it and shut it behind me.

"Mirabella." He looks up at me when the door clicks. "What a pleasure to see you finally decided to join the family."

“Where’s my daughter?”

“You know, I spoke with Kilian recently,” he says, ignoring my question.

What the hell was Kilian doing talking to Giancarlo?

“You seem to have the wrong idea about him,” Giancarlo says as he stands and heads to the bar cart to pour a drink. “Your little lover struck a deal with me. I let him choose between you and The Partners. Can you guess what he chose, Mirabella?”

I stay silent as he sneers at me, his eyes like the devil himself. The burns and scars on his face like a demon.

“It wasn’t you or your daughter. He chose his job over you. I promised him I would hand over the weapons we stole if he left you alone and never contacted you again. And I would refrain from killing you for your treason against this family.”

“He would never do that,” I yell. But in the back of my mind, I wonder if it’s true. He hasn’t returned any of my calls.

“He would to save the life of his daughter.” A devilish grin takes over my uncle’s face.

“You would never kill her. That’s your niece. Now tell me where—”

“You know, in all these years, you never asked what happened to your parents.” He sits on the front edge of his desk, his legs crossed over each other, a smug grin on his face.

“Stop changing the subject,” I spit. “I want to know—”

“This has everything to do with the man you love.”

I fold my arms over my chest as I face off with my uncle. “What are you talking about?”

“Your parents’ death was planned.”

“No, it wasn’t. It was an accident.” A lie I tell him. I never believed it was an accident. But I keep my words quiet, scared of whatever truth my uncle may tell me. Because now I fear he was behind it all.

“Please, child. You know the world we live in. There are no accidents.”

I shake with a quiet rage as I read between the lines. “What did you do, Giancarlo?”

“I only did what I thought was right. I was trying to grow our business. Your father was holding us back. The Partners weren’t happy when Benito pulled out of the deal. The deal I orchestrated, the one where they thought I was Benito. They lost millions. So they ended his life. Such a shame your mother was in the car too.”

“You’re lying,” I mutter.

“Why don’t you ask your little lover boy or should I say former lover since he chose money over you? Not that he will ever admit the truth to you.”

I shake my head. “You threatened his daughter’s life, he would always choose her over anything. He did what he thought he had to do.”

“I must say he is a good man if he would choose to never see you again to save you.” He rounds the desk and sits back in his chair. “Such a pity you won’t ever get to see him again.”

“You killed my parents.” My voice filled with accusation.

He laughs. “Don’t be silly. Francesco would have killed me if I killed his golden boy. No, Alistair Bancroft arranged for the death of your parents. And Kilian was the one that took the order. He has known about it since the first time he stuck his dick in you.”

Fury fills every ounce of me, I swear flames are going to come out of my skin. “You’re a liar, Giancarlo. He didn’t even know who I was when we met.”

“That’s what you think. But that man is one of the best liars in the business.”

The rage is threatening to explode. I pull the other gun I brought with me on Giancarlo. “I don’t believe a word that is coming out of your mouth. You are the liar. You always have been. And a coward. Pretending to be my father to save your own ass if something went wrong.”

“I did what I had to do to have this chair. To be the Don of this family. Something your father never would have done. He was too emotional, too soft skinned for this job.”

“He would have been a much better Don than you’ve ever been. He was calculated. Not ruthless.”

Giancarlo swallows the rest of his drink. “Such a naive little girl. You always have been. You never wanted to see the truth that was sitting right in front of you. And now you are pointing a gun at me, thinking you can run off and escape this life. You should be a mafia princess, not a waitress in a tourist town. And now you are fucking the enemy.”

“Just tell me where Aria is,” I scream as I step closer to the desk, the gun in my hand

steady.

“Hmm. Maybe we could work something out. How about you get those weapons back I let your boyfriend have and you kill him.”

“You know I will never do that.”

“Because you were brought up soft just like your father. At least Ezio had some balls on him, was willing to risk his life for this family.”

I release the safety on the gun. “You are not my family.”

“No, I guess we are not. You are just as weak as your father and mother. And that is not the person I want in this family.”

Dante bursts through the door. “Mirabella, what are you doing?” he shouts.

“Giving him what he deserves,” I say, a calmness to my words as everything settles into place. My rage simmering to a slight heat. My mind focused on what I need to do.

I pull the trigger. Giancarlo moves just as I do it but not quick enough. The bullet hits the side of his neck as his head falls against the back of the chair.

“Fuck!” Dante yells as he rushes to him. “What the hell were you thinking?”

I turn the gun on him. “Don’t touch him.”

He ignores me and leans over Giancarlo’s body slouched in the chair. His hands going to his neck to stop the bleeding.

“Where is she?” I demand.

Giancarlo opens an eye and laughs as he coughs up blood. “Where did you learn to shoot?”

“My father taught me.” My voice was gravel. “But you didn’t keep him alive long enough to tell you that.”

I round the desk, pushing Dante aside as he grabs his phone from his pocket. I dig my fingers into my uncle’s neck. “Where is Aria?” I shout.

Dante tosses his phone on the desk and pushes me aside. “What the hell are you talking about, Mirabella?”

A cynical grin takes over Giancarlo’s face as he struggles for breaths, his face growing paler. “That’s the mafia princess I was looking for.” He gurgles up blood between breaths. “I never took your daughter.” He laughs.

I stumble backward at his words. “No. You’re lying. You threatened her life. You took her.”

He only laughs one more time before he passes out. Dante rips his suit jacket off and then his shirt and presses it into his father’s neck.

“Tell me, Dante,” I say, my hand growing shaky as worry takes over me again.

My cousins, Luca and Domenico, rush into the office. Both wide eyed when they see their father seconds from death.

Luca knocks my gun out of my hand and wraps his arms around me, pulling me away from Dante and Giancarlo.

Dante looks up at me, a sadness in his eyes. “If he took her, I don’t know about it.” He looks up at Domenico, who has taken over applying pressure to Giancarlo’s neck. “Dom?”

He shakes his head. “No. He didn’t take her.”

“Magda and Salvatore?” I ask, my anxiety growing.

Dante raises a brow at me. “The ones that own the restaurant you work at. What about them?”

“They’re dead.”

“It wasn’t us, Mirabella.”

My heart drops. As my mind races to piece things together. If it wasn’t him, then it had to be The Partners. They would have been the only ones that knew about Bastian and his house in Mallorca. The only place Kilian would take me.

“Did you know he was responsible for my parents’ death?” I ask quietly.

Dante sighs. “No. Not until yesterday.”

“What about Kilian?” I ask.

“He was here yesterday.”

“And he left?”

“Yes.”

I collapse in Luca's arms. He lets me go as I drop to the floor. Apparently I'm no longer a threat.

"Mira, I didn't know about your parents. I may be as ruthless as he is but I never would have taken your daughter."

"Even knowing who her father is?"

"Especially because of that. I told Giancarlo to stop stealing the weapons from them. That it would only end in bloodshed. That we are better than thieves. But he wouldn't listen."

I scramble up off the floor. "I-I need to find my daughter."

Two men run into the office, one with a medical bag. I ignore them as they try to save Giancarlo's life.

Dante grabs my arm and drags me out of the office and down the hall into another room.

"I can have our men try to find her," Dante tells me as he grips my arms.

I shake my head. "No, I don't want to owe you a favor."

"Mirabella, you are family, despite what my father says. You owe us nothing. Not for his mistakes."

I can't hold back the tears anymore. "She had to be taken by them."

"By who?"

“The Partners.”

28

KILIAN

I walk down the hall to my father's home office. Conveniently placed in a separate wing of the house. My poor mother has no idea the extent of what goes on in the secret rooms below. Or maybe she does and just keeps her mouth shut. She wasn't home when I came storming through the front door. Probably for the best.

I push open my father's office doors with aggression before slamming them behind me. "It's done."

He raises a brow from where he is looking at his computer screen. "The weapons?"

"On the way to their holding location."

"Good. It seems like you can listen."

I approach his desk but refrain from sitting, my agitation too high. "Why did you have Benito and Sofia Renzetti killed fifteen years ago?"

"It was just business."

"I never knew. You had me fuck with that car in Venice that night while the owners were at the opera. I never knew it was the son of Francesco Renzetti."

"You still haven't learned to keep your emotions out of things," my father says to me

with disdain. “How does it feel to know you killed your lovers’ parents? She will never forgive you.”

She doesn’t have to know, I tell myself. But it’s a lie. I have to tell her. As soon as I know it’s safe to talk to her.

My father stares at me, an evil grin taking over his face. “Of course she won’t forgive you either when she finds out you let her daughter get taken.”

I blink several times, thinking I heard him wrong. “What?”

He laughs and sips his drink. “Or should I say your daughter?”

I clench my jaw, my teeth grinding so hard they may break. “What did you just say?”

“You think I didn’t know? That you could keep something like that from me. You are a disgrace to The Partners. Fucking a Renzetti. Getting her pregnant. That girl is a threat to us.”

“She’s a child,” I grit.

“And the Renzettis will do anything to claim her.”

“What did you do?” I say quietly.

He leans back in his chair. “Nothing out of the ordinary.”

I slam my hands on his desk, ready to throttle his throat. “Where the fuck is she?”

He runs his fingers against his bottom lip, a smug smile on his face. “So touchy over a kid you didn’t know was yours until recently.”

“Just tell me where she is, dammit.”

“She’s safe. I think your mother is with her at the park.” I go to interrupt him but he keeps talking, holding up a hand. “But you, on the other hand. You cannot follow orders. You do what you want. The Montfords, the Renzettis, then that Renzetti girl. You have no respect for me or anyone at our table.”

“I think you just don’t want me to take over. I think you crave the power too much. You want to be in control knowing you run the largest crime syndicate in the world. So you will do anything you can to get me to fall.”

He laughs as he leans toward me. “You have no idea what I want.”

“You think I can’t read you? Can’t understand you. After the last twenty years of you grooming me for this position. I know you better than anyone. You don’t want your seat taken away. You never have. I am your pawn. The queen on the chessboard that you control. That power feeds into the empty soul you have.”

“Enough,” he commands. I can see the twitch in his eye, see that I am getting to him.

“I’m not finished,” I say as I stand to my full height. “You are a weak man hiding behind the curtain. Controlling your puppets. Well, the curtains have been opened, your secrets revealed. You cannot control me. You’ve never had control of me. All these years I have been working for that seat. Making you think I don’t want it. But I do. I always have. And all those men who you think follow you, believe in your decisions, they don’t. They listen to me. They follow me.

“You’re blind. You have never seen all the things I do behind your back. You think I just blindly follow your orders. I’ve been growing this business for years. Clients, dealers, you name it, they have been coming on because of me. And the second you pull that trigger and kill me, it will be your head on the chopping block. And they

won't be so kind as to put a bullet between your eyes. They will rip you apart piece by piece."

I can see the fury in his face. And I know he's already called for backup. So I'm not surprised when the doors fly open and I'm tackled to the ground. The jolt of electricity through my body to torture me, keep me down. The sharp cut of zip ties on my wrist. The taste of blood on my lip from where my tooth cut as my head hit the ground.

I hear the click of my father's wingtips on the hardwood floor as he rounds the desk and approaches me. "You think you know everything, son? You know nothing. You've been my puppet all along. Doing everything I orchestrated, you just couldn't see it."

He squats down in front of me, lifting my face so I meet his eyes. "And you are tied to my strings again. You did what I asked. Got my weapons back. Did you ever wonder why it was so easy? That Giancarlo would just hand them over to you. Did you ever think about that deal fifteen years ago? That maybe I was working my way back into their grasp. Those weapons were never my concern. I only wanted information. And you fed it to me on a goddamn spoon. Every move the Renzettis made, every piece of information you gave me about them, got me one step closer to infiltrating their business, taking over the Italian mafia. It started with Vanguard. I gave him Ezio Renzetti and Ezio did what he was supposed to do. He led him right into thinking he could be the Consigliere for Giancarlo. And Giancarlo played into it, let him believe what he wanted. Of course I had to kill Vanguard before he spilled all my secrets.

"I also got Luca Renzetti into Roland's nightclub. Got him a meeting with Roland. Convinced Roland he was some big businessman from South America. Used him as a distraction so the Renzettis could take those weapons. All in a deal I made with them. And then when they weren't looking, I would slaughter them all and take

control of the biggest family in Italy. A family with even more connections in the States than we have.”

I strain to look at my father. “And what would that do? The rest of The Partners would never agree to any of this. Even with their bitterness toward that family after they took out Kane, they would never agree to any of this fucked-up plan.”

“I don’t need their approval. Not when I plan to have the Renzettis take them all out and their families. I don’t need the rest of those men. I have the power to control all of it.”

I laugh at him. “You would try to take over half the criminal underground. You would have the biggest target on your back. You would be dead within seventy-two hours.”

“Such a naive boy. You think you know what I’ve been doing, what I’ve been planning? You have no idea. Hajar and Kozlov are too busy dealing with problems on their side of the business they haven’t been paying attention. Not until I exploit Dean’s weaknesses and his son’s. Then take those two out after. It could have been you and me, Kilian. The most powerful men in the world.”

I kick against the men holding me back, which just leads to another jolt of electricity through me. “Why my daughter?”

“Because she can link us together. The true heir to the criminal underground.”

I curse at him as I struggle on the ground. “You will not turn her into a weapon.”

“She was born a weapon, my dear boy. And she will stay a weapon.”

I spit on his shoes and he pistol whips me across the face. I roll onto my side, wincing

at the pain next to my eye, at the laceration I know is there as blood drips down my face.

“I’ll make sure she knows her father loved her.”

“Fuck you,” I growl.

“And I might be nice enough to let her mother say goodbye to her.”

Rage simmers through me. “Don’t fucking touch Mirabella.”

“I don’t know why you think I would agree to anything you say. Of course, I shouldn’t even call you a traitor anymore. The Partners will see you as one. But you secured my ticket to my plan by getting that Renzetti whore pregnant.”

“Don’t fucking talk about her like that.”

He laughs as he stands up, gesturing for the men to pick me up off the ground. “We’ll see what she has to say when she arrives.” He picks up a poker from the fireplace and smashes it against my knee. “Take him to the basement.”

I’m dragged out of the office. Pain shooting from my leg where I know he busted my kneecap. His guards drag me across the hall that leads to the basement. There are only two things down there. The kill rooms and the meeting room for The Partners. And I sure as hell know which room I am being dragged to.

29

MIRABELLA

“Miss Renzetti, so glad you could make it.” An older man I know as Alistair Bancroft says to me as he holds open the front door of his massive house.

“I came here for one reason.”

“As I told you on the phone. Your daughter is perfectly safe.”

“Then bring her to me,” I snap at him. “I don’t know what game you’re playing but—”

He laughs at me, shutting me up. “Oh, Miss Renzetti, I don’t play games. Games are when you have a chance to win or lose. And I always win.” He pulls me into the house. “Now I may have something else you want.”

“What could you possibly have—”

“Tsk tsk,” he interrupts me as he directs the guards to search me for weapons. “No questions. That was part of the rules. Now follow me.”

A chill goes down my spine as I follow him down a set of stairs into a dark hallway. The smell of iron permeates the cold air and I know what he does down here.

After I left the estate in Genoa, Dante made a few calls and got me to the Bancroft

Estate, as well as a call with Alistair. I don't really know why he helped me when he could be killed for doing something against Giancarlo's orders. But Giancarlo is on his deathbed, at least from the little information he told me. The bullet wound caused him to lose a lot of blood. He was stable but in a coma. And I sure as hell hope he doesn't wake up so he doesn't come after me.

I follow Alistair into a damp room. My eyes looking everywhere with each door we pass for my daughter. But like this one, the lights are off.

I can feel the presence of someone else in this room and I hope to hell this isn't the end for me.

The lights suddenly turn on and I cover my eyes from the brightness of them. When they adjust I look around the room, Aria nowhere to be found, so I breathe a sigh of relief. But I turn around and find Kilian bound, gagged, and bleeding in a chair.

I rush toward him even though I can see the message in his eyes, the one telling me to step away.

"I told you I had something else you wanted, Mirabella."

I turn toward Alistair, fire burning in my veins. "That is your son."

"I've always had a very high respect for loyalty," Alistair replies. "It really is the key to success. If one is loyal to another, it can help business grow even if the things you are tasked with aren't morally right." He circles around me where I stand next to Kilian. "Loyalty was the first lesson I taught all my children. Just like I am sure that was the first lesson your father and uncle taught you."

I turn as he speaks, my heart pounding in my chest. I have no idea where he is going with this. All I want to do is kill him and get Kilian out of this room. Kilian's fingers

barely brush mine as I turn and look at Alistair as he walks behind him. I grip them knowing Alistair can't see.

“It seems you are not loyal to your family like Kilian is not loyal to this one. I am curious how long the two of you have been secretly seeing each other. Has Kilian known this whole time who you were, since your family first started to try and take us down?”

“What are you talking about?” I cut in. “I know nothing about the dealings of my family. And as for your son, I only reconnected with him a few months ago.”

Alistair smiles at me, and I swear I can see the devil in his eyes. “Did you know Kilian knew who you were when he first met you in Dublin?”

“He had no idea who I was.”

Alistair shrugs as Kilian squeezes my fingers. “Oh he knew all about Mirabella Renzetti. In fact, I am sure he fucked you just to get the last laugh. Since he killed your parents.”

I drop my gaze down to Kilian. I can see pleading in his eyes, like he wants to tell me something but I drop his hand instead. “He didn't kill them. It was you, Alistair.”

He laughs. “I don't stoop so low to commit those crimes. But Kilian had orders and he followed through. I do hope your parents enjoyed that opera before they died.” I want to rip the smile off his face. “But Kilian knew all about them, knew about you and your brother. It was his job to research you. And yet two years later he found you in Dublin and seduced you, fucked you, got you pregnant. All like I asked him to.”

I step away from Kilian and closer to Alistair, not wanting to believe a word he is saying. But between him and my uncle, the lies might all be truths. “What the hell are

you talking about?”

“Loyalty. Kilian had it for years. He followed instructions. And now your child is just what I need, a weapon for control.”

“Aria has nothing to do with any of this.”

Alistair walks up to me. “Your daughter has everything to do with this. She has the power to control half of the criminal underworld. And I plan to raise her to.”

I lose control and slap Alistair in the face. “You will not touch her.”

He grins at me, then puts his hands around my neck, walking me backward until I am slammed into the cold brick of the wall. “You have no power here, Mirabella. Maybe you should have stayed with your uncle.”

I kick him in the balls and shove him off me. “So what? You are just going to kill me, kill your son. Raise my daughter as your own. Groom her like you did Kilian. Make her feel worthless? I know how you raised Kilian. You’ve groomed your youngest son for nearly his entire life to take over this business. You’ve been harsh, cruel, merciless. You never treated your older sons that way. And this is what happened to Kilian.” I gesture toward him.

“I find it funny that you are still standing up for him. Such loyalty you have to him even after I told you his truths.”

“None of what you said is true. I know him, I know he wouldn’t have done any of that on purpose.”

“Maybe, maybe not. But you really think he can’t be loyal to me? That he hasn’t been playing you this whole time? You are a foolish girl, Mirabella.”

“He hasn’t been. I know him. I know him better than you do. And right now, he’s torn between his loyalty to you and being happy.”

“Happiness is a gift, Miss Renzetti.”

“No, happiness is a part of life, Alistair. And you’ve deprived him of that since he was sixteen years old.”

“And are you happy? Daughter of a Renzetti.”

“When I am with your son, I am. When I am with my daughter, I am.”

“You mean his daughter.”

I ignore his statement. “You’ve ruined his life enough. There are other people that can take over your syndicate. People that want it. You’ll just have to live with the fact it’s not in your name. Bancroft will hold the same power it does over people but you will know the truth.”

“I don’t give a shit about the syndicate anymore. Not when my intentions are to use your daughter to take over your family’s business.”

“The only place my daughter is going is home with me.”

He pulls a gun from under his suit jacket and aims it at me. “You made a mistake coming here, girl. You should know by now I always get my way.”

Before he can pull the trigger, I slide out the knife I hid beneath my clothes, so close to the gun they took from me. A distraction was all that gun was.

I throw the knife into Alistair’s chest just as the gun goes off, the bullet nearly

missing me as he staggers back.

The guards from outside storm in through the door. I dive for Alistair's gun as he tries to pull the serrated knife from his chest. I slam my elbow into the ground and pry the gun from his fingers, then flip over and shoot down the first guard. The second aims his gun at me but I roll forward, the bullet hitting the ground behind me. The gun slips out of my hand as I slide across a pool of blood.

I pull my other knife out and slash at the guard's legs, taking him down, then taking his own gun and shooting him in the head.

I run for the door, knowing more guards will be on their way. I slam it shut and lock it from the inside and pray they can't open it from the outside.

I run to Kilian and remove his gag and slice off the ties binding him to the chair. I step back as he stands up. He limps toward me and I can see the pain on his face, but he cups my cheeks and kisses me with such reverence I feel my own legs shaking.

"Kil," I whisper against his lips.

"Mo stór . That was so sexy."

I wrap my arms around him as all the tension I've been holding in my body since he left the house in Mallorca disappears.

He groans and I pull back. "You're hurt."

"It will heal," he mutters as he pulls me back into him.

"We need to find Aria."

He nods. "I know where she is. She is safe. I promise you."

His lips touch my forehead and I can't help but grip him tighter.

"Isn't this a nice reunion," Alistair says as he pushes himself up against the wall. His breathing labored.

I spin around, Kilian gripping my hip hard and I'm not sure if it's because he needs me to help him stand or if it's fear.

"This isn't over." He struggles to get the words out. "My men will kill you both."

Kilian chuckles over my shoulder. "Father, you really think you will survive this?"

Alistair grips the handle of the knife, his weak arms struggling to pull it out.

"I wouldn't do that," I tell him. "That blade is serrated, the second you pull it out, you'll die."

"Finish him," Kilian whispers to me over my shoulder.

I turn to look at him. "You do it. This is your father, your redemption."

He shakes his head. "No, my redemption is taking the seat he never thought I deserved."

I turn back toward Alistair as Kilian struggles to walk. He pulls me with him until we reach his father. Kilian collapses on the floor and grips his father's hair. "Do it." He pushes a gun toward me from a fallen guard.

"The Partners will have your head for this, boy." His voice strained from the position

Kilian is holding him.

“No, they won’t.”

I ignore the gun on the floor and squat before Alistair. “You killed Magda and Salvatore. You killed my parents. You kidnapped my daughter. You are no leader, no man of power, but a despicable masochist.”

He grins at me, blood coating his lips.

“You told me earlier that you win everything.” I rip the serrated blade from his chest. “Not anymore.”

Before I can tell myself not to do it, not to kill him, I swipe the blade across his throat. Blood spilling from the deep wound. I watch as he gurgles, his lungs trying to get air. I watch until the life drifts from his eyes.

Kilian lets go of his hair and pushes him aside when he knows he’s dead. He struggles to stand up. It takes all my strength to lift him to his feet.

He takes the knife from my hand and tosses it to the side. He grips my face again as he captures my lips. I want to kiss him back. I want to forget about everything that happened. But too many truths were revealed today and I need time to think, time to process.

“What’s wrong?” he asks me.

“I just want to find Aria.” It’s not a complete lie.

“We’ll get to her. We have to get upstairs.” He hesitates as he looks out the door. “It might be hard.”

I pick up two guns off the floor and hand one to Kilian.

“I’m not worried about them,” he says as he nods to the men waiting on the other side of the door. “They will answer to me.”

“Then what is it?”

“My father busted my kneecap. I shouldn’t even be standing.”

“Kilian!” I shout as I wrap my arm around his waist.

“It’s fine. I’ll have them get me out.”

* * *

Kilian had two guards carry him up the stairs. After he brought us into his father’s office, he called his mom, who said she was on her way back with Aria. I cleaned the blood off my hands and face. My black clothes hiding whatever is left.

“She has no idea.”

“About Aria?”

He shakes his head. “She figured that out. She isn’t dumb. She knows what my father’s life was like, what mine was like.” He pauses as he looks out the window from the couch he is sitting on with his leg propped up. “She doesn’t know you are here. Or who you are. She doesn’t know Alistair is dead.”

I swallow down the thoughts that she knows about Aria’s lineage. Instead, I decide to ask him about the things we need to talk about before Aria shows up.

I sit on the coffee table in front of him. “You chose this over us.” My words are quiet.

His head snaps toward me. “No. I will always choose you and Aria over everything but I know how strong you are and I know you would never let anything happen to our daughter. I know you would put a knife through Giancarlo’s heart if he threatened her.”

“I shot him,” I say as I pick at my cuticles, avoiding eye contact with Kilian.

“What?” he asks in shock.

“I shot him. I thought he had killed Magda and Salvatore. I thought he took Aria. I thought he did something to you. And I couldn’t take his lies anymore, so I shot him.”

“Fuck, Bella.” He grabs my hands. “You’re going to have a target on your back now.”

I shake my head. “Dante was there. He let me go.”

“He just let you go?”

I nod. “He seemed upset with Giancarlo. The truths or lies, whatever Giancarlo was saying, didn’t seem to go over well with Dante.” I bite my lip as I think about what happened. “He tried to save him. But I don’t think he really cared. I think he did it so others thought he was fulfilling his duty.”

“Is he dead?”

I shake my head. “Dante said he was in a coma.”

“Fuck, Bella. I can’t believe you did that.”

I shrug. “Apparently I’m in a mood for killing these days.”

He reaches forward, wincing at the movement as he cups my face. “Alistair deserved that death.”

I nod. I hold back the tears that threaten to spill over. The thoughts that I am a killer now. No better than my uncle or cousins or my brother.

Another thought pops into my head. “You killed my parents.”

“I swear to you, Bella, I didn’t know.”

“They were my world.” My voice breaks.

“If I could take it back, I would. I was young and hungry for power. I would do anything my father said.”

I take a deep breath before I ask my next question. “Did you know who I was in Dublin?”

“What?” he asks, surprised. “I had no idea.”

“Giancarlo told me you knew. Your father said you knew.”

“Lies told by men who thrive on breaking others. On holding power over people.”

I look up at him. At his beautiful blue eyes, his strong jawline. The man I would have spent my entire life with if we weren’t in this position. “Yet here you are, ready to take your father’s seat. A seat you made it seem like you didn’t want.”

He sighs and lets go of my hand, running his through his hair. "I want it to set things right. To run this business like it should be run."

I look down and nod as I feel my heart breaking with every word I am about to say. "I don't know if I can be with you, Kilian."

"What are you talking about, Bella? I love you."

I dare a glance at him and see shock all over his face. "Sometimes love isn't enough, Kilian."

"Bella..."

I shake my head. "I don't know if I can forgive you for my parents' death. I don't care what the orders were. And how am I supposed to be with you? You take your seat and I live in the shadows? Aria lives in the shadows? She is the light in our dark world. I won't keep her from it. I won't drag her into this darkness."

"We will find a way to make it work."

I stand and back away from him. "That's the thing. It will never work. There will always be some force driving us apart."

"I just got you back." His words are sad.

I fold my arms over my chest, tears threatening to break from the dam holding them back. "Maybe we aren't meant to be."

"Bullshit, Bella. Don't say that."

I groan and throw my hands in the air. "This is lust, Kilian. Not love. It can't be love."

It shouldn't be so complicated. And our lives will forever be complicated."

"Love is complicated."

I walk over to the window and look out into the lush green yard. "I don't want complicated, Kilian. I want to feel free."

"You can't just give up on us."

"We were never an us. Can't you see that? We were two people who thought we loved each other ten years ago. And the rush of seeing each other again is all this was."

"Tell me this meant something to you. Our days in Malta, our texts, the phone calls, the time in Mallorca."

I swallow my sadness and lie through my teeth. "It was a fun time. But it meant nothing to me."

I watch his face crumple at my words. I watch as his fist hits his chest like he can feel his heart breaking as much as my own is.

I step toward him but he holds up his hand. "Aria should be here soon. At least let me say goodbye to her, Mirabella."

Pain greater than any I've ever felt penetrates my bones at the coldness in his voice. At the way he flipped a switch so quickly. "She can't see you like this," I whisper. He's bloody and bruised. And I don't want Aria to see what this life is like we are stepping away from.

"She's still my daughter, Mirabella." I don't miss how he stopped calling me Bella

when I told him we couldn't be together.

"Maybe you can come and visit her," I say bleakly.

"Yeah, sure," he answers. Rage cuts across his eyes and I know I destroyed any hope for us.

30

MIRABELLA

Six Months Later

I sit on my balcony off my room sipping on wine. I haven't been able to stand the taste of whiskey ever since I told Kilian we couldn't be together.

At least he held true to his promise. He hasn't contacted me since that day in London. When his mother arrived home with Aria, I nearly lost it. Aria was her normal self, jumping around and laughing. Like she was just on holiday and not being held a prisoner.

Siobhan Bancroft was so nice and apologetic. She thanked me for letting her meet her granddaughter. And I had to hold back tears thinking of the life I could have let her have with Aria, the life Kilian should have with Aria.

Kilian didn't say goodbye to her. And I regret that the most. I was selfish. I should have let him say goodbye. Should have let him get one last look at his daughter. But instead I took Aria's hand and left the estate without looking back.

I've cried myself to sleep most nights the last six months. I barely leave the house except for taking Aria to practice and games or when I need groceries. I finally accepted my parents' inheritance, my self-deprecation keeping me from doing anything for myself.

I should have bought Magda and Salvatore's restaurant. Should have kept their dream alive. They were like grandparents to Aria. Magda the closest thing to a mother to me. But I let their dream die with them. To this day, the place is still boarded up, no one wanting to purchase it.

Dante calls me every now and then to check on me. He keeps me informed that Giancarlo is still in a coma and that he has taken his seat as Don for the time being. Our calls always short. He may have helped me but he still isn't my family. The only family I have left is Aria.

"Mama," Aria sings as she skips into my room and stands in the doorway to the balcony. "I finished my homework. Can I go practice in the yard?"

I look at my phone, she still has an hour before bed. "Go ahead, sweetie."

She turns to leave but pauses. "Are you okay, Mama?"

I nod.

"You've been sad for a while. Is it because Magda died?"

I clench my jaw to hold back tears. "I'll always be sad about that."

"Are you sad about Kilian? I know you really liked him. I miss him too. I wish he would come around."

Tears crest my eyes and I turn my head away from Aria to wipe them away. "We chose different paths. We have different lives to live."

Her next words shock me. "But he's my dad. He should still come around for me at least."

“What?” I shriek. “How... who...”

She shrugs. “No one told me if that’s what you’re asking. I just know it. Our eyes are the same.”

“A lot of people have blue eyes.”

“Yeah, but his are special. Just like mine. Not to mention that woman in London nearly cried every time she looked at me. And she told me she was Kilian’s mom.”

I have no words to say. I am completely shocked because I never thought she knew. She never said a word when she met him or anything the last few months.

“I really wish I could see him again. You know?” she says. “Just to tell him I think it’s cool he’s my dad.”

“Aria...”

“I know you didn’t tell me for a reason, Mom. And maybe one day you will.”

I watch her as she walks away. I am in complete shock. Her words rang with maturity and my heart breaks for her. She’s right, I never should have kept him from her.

Later that night, after I polished off two bottles of wine, I do the stupidest thing I could think of. I dig in my nightstand drawer and pull out the old burner phone. I stare at it for ten minutes before I plug it in and power it on and type out a text.

Bella: I was wrong. I’m so sorry.

I clutch the phone to my chest, waiting for a response that never comes.

* * *

I drop my purse on the end table near the front door and carry my bag of groceries into the kitchen. I just dropped Aria off at football practice and I should really get dinner started.

I pull the burner phone out of the kitchen drawer I stashed it in earlier and frown when I see no text. Not that I should be surprised. It's been two weeks since I sent that drunken text to him. Two weeks with nothing in return. He probably doesn't even have the phone anymore. He did what I asked and forgot about me, shut me out for good.

I shove the phone back in the drawer then empty my grocery bag. I walk over to the refrigerator and put the milk and chicken away. I nearly jump out of my shoes when I shut the door and find Kilian standing on the other side.

"W-what are you doing here?" I stumble over my words as I hold my hands to my chest. My heart rate picking up quickly.

"You texted me," he says. His voice is gravelly and rich.

I take a deep breath and I inhale his smell. The cedarwood and spice mixed with that lingering scent of smoke. "I-I was drunk." The words fall out of my mouth so quickly I don't even know why I said them.

"I see," he says.

"I mean... I just—"

"Is that why you've been checking that phone every day, multiple times a day?"

My jaw drops open. “How did you know?”

He gets that sexy smirk on his face that causes me to clench my thighs. “I didn’t. But you just confirmed it.”

He takes a step toward me, and I take a step back. I notice the slight limp in his step and I wonder if he never fully recovered from his dad shattering his kneecap.

“Kilian...”

“Bella,” he says.

I swear my heart shatters hearing him say my name. Not Mirabella but Bella. And I know, I know that’s him waving his white flag.

Tears fall from my eyes as I speak. “I’m so sorry, Kilian. I never should have said those things to you that day. I was just so scared. Scared of what could happen. Scared of what we could become.”

He takes another step toward me and I take a step back with each one of his until my back hits the wall.

“I never believed a word you said that day. I saw your heart break as you lied to my face. And I knew it was only a matter of time until I could have you back.”

His fingers trace up my bare arm and goose bumps ignite across my skin. “N-no,” I stammer. “I meant what I said. We can’t do this because of Aria.”

“No, we do this for Aria.” His voice is a command.

“But what about the darkness?”

“She is only light and she will never succumb to the darkness that I live in.” He presses his body into mine and cups my cheek. “And neither will you.”

I bite my lip, wanting to believe the words he is saying. I can see the truth in his gorgeous blue eyes. See his need for me. His want. His desire. I see that we can really have it all.

“I love you, Bella. I’ve loved you since that day we met as two lost kids twelve years ago. I never thought my life would get better. Because after I lost you, every goddamn day, it was like a piece of my soul dissipated into nothing. But then I got you back. And I thought my best days were ahead of us. Because I finally had the woman I’ve loved for so long. But that was a false hope. Because just like ten years ago, our families tore us apart. And these last months without you nearly ripped me in two. All I could think about were those months we spent together where I thought that our best years were ahead.

“Then you threw it all away with just a few words. But I won’t accept those words from you anymore. I know what we have is real. I know what it’s like to live without you. And I know what it’s like to live with you. And all my best days are when we are together. I know what I want, Bella. What I need in this life. It’s you. Only you.” His other hand lands on the other side of my jaw and his forehead touches mine. “Fuck, Bella, I love you and Aria more than I could ever say. And I know that our lives won’t be easy. That we will have to fight for what we have every single day. But just know that I would kill a dozen more men, a hundred, a thousand if it meant I could have you for the rest of my life. And that is all I want. You and Aria for the rest of my life.”

I can’t hold back the tears anymore. And I can’t fight my brain. Because my heart is begging me to tell this man yes. Tell him that I need him in my life. That I have barely breathed since the day I walked away from him. But I struggle to get the words out. Struggle to do anything but cry.

“Bella, mo stór, mo anam cara . Can we be an us again?”

I nod as I wrap my arms around his neck. “Yes,” I mumble through my tears. “A thousand times yes, Kilian. I can’t go on without you anymore.”

His lips touch mine in a soft kiss. And I know this right here is right. This man is what I need in my life. His body, his heart, his soul.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter against his lips.

I can feel him smile against mine. “You were always stubborn when it came to me.”

“Never again, Kilian. Never again.”

“It will always be us, Bella. You, me, and Aria. Our family.”

“Our family,” I repeat his words as I crash my lips back to his.

EPILOGUE

KILIAN

One Year Later

“I wish we could be there,” Bella tells me over my shoulder as I wave at a boat in the distance.

“He wishes we were there too. But he knows we can’t be,” I tell her as I turn around and wrap her in my arms.

“At least we will get to see them soon.”

I nod as I kiss her forehead. “We will. But for now, I get you all to myself. Just you and me on this yacht for the next week. I don’t know if I want Bastian and Cam to come visit us when we get home. I would rather spend more time with you on this yacht. Naked. And maybe tied to a chair.”

She pushes me away. “We tried that. It didn’t work well.”

I pull her back to me and run my fingers along the inside of her thigh. “If I remember correctly, you were screaming my name as I fucked you with my tongue.”

She runs her nails down my bare chest and I squeeze her ass. “Yeah, but then it took you ten minutes to untie me from that chair when all you wanted to do was fuck me.”

She has a point. “Well, I have no problem turning you around and tying you to this rail and fucking you from behind while we cruise the Mediterranean.”

“Even if others can see?”

“Fuck the staff. They’ve seen it enough as it is.”

She giggles as she pulls me in for a kiss.

After I went to her house in Cefalù to claim her that day, we spent a few hours telling each other every single truth we could think of that might hurt us later. She cried a lot and my heart nearly broke but we made it through.

When Aria was done with practice, we both walked to the field to pick her up. She ran when she saw me and jumped into my arms. I nearly lost it when she said, “I missed you, Daddy.”

I’ve spent the last year growing our relationship. Being the father I never thought I would be. And it isn’t hard when you have the smartest child in the world.

Dante came through for us in the end. I may have threatened him but it didn’t even matter. I made him promise to forget about Bella and forget about Aria. I told him if he so much as tried to touch them, I would slaughter every single member of his family and every man that works for him. He nodded and told me not to sell to his business partners. I accepted his offer and we shook on it.

Neither of us has heard from him since. But rumors throughout The Partners is that Mirabella Renzetti was killed in a tragic accident.

Only a handful of people know we are married. Her name legally changed to Bella Bancroft. We got married in her backyard with Aria by our side the day after I

showed up at her house. Bastian and Cam flying out to be our witnesses.

I found a small island up for sale a few miles from the shores of Sicily and had our dream house built. Aria was scared she wouldn't be able to play football anymore. But one of us takes her to school every day by boat. She thinks she is a rock star now and I am a little bit worried about her when she gets to be a teenager.

I took over my father's seat at the table with The Partners. A job I never thought I needed until it was mine. Arrington, Hajar, and Kozlov all agreeing it was where I belonged, next to them.

Bella pulls on my hand and I look down at her as she starts to strip out of her clothes. "What are you doing, doll?"

She gives me that seductive smile as she shimmies out of her bikini. "It's sunset and the water is warm. We are docked here for the night. And I would really like you to fuck me against the side of this boat."

Her words send heat straight to my dick. "What am I going to do with this deviant mouth of yours?" I run my fingers over her lips.

"I'm sure you have something you can put in it," she teases before backing away from me and jumping off the boat.

I chuckle as I strip my own shorts and dive in after her. I will never get enough of her.

THE END

for now...

TWO YEARS LATER

I sit in silence at the table next to the other three men that run The Partners with me. Dean Arrington's son asked for a meeting and we obliged. The man has been trying to regain his rank with us ever since the slipup with the weapons. But when I found out he was the one who took my daughter from Bastian's house in Mallorca, I nearly killed him. He spent two weeks in the hospital recovering from his injuries. His father wasn't happy with me but never said a word. The rest of The Partners agreed with his punishment.

The large doors that lead to our meeting room creak open. A long hall separates us from the doors, twenty-foot ceilings, and archways leading to our ornate wooden table. A room of Gothic and Roman architecture at The Partners new residence in Ibiza.

I watch a man being dragged down the Spanish tile floor with a hood over his head. I study Roland's smug face as he drags the man across the floor.

"Why did you call us here?" Kozlov asks.

I am surprised when Roland's father speaks up. "If this is some attempt to get a spot at the table, you're mistaken, son. Nothing will get you back here."

"Are you sure about that?" Roland asks.

I roll my eyes. "Get on with it."

Roland grins at me as he pushes the man to the floor. I can smell him from here. Like the man has been living in the streets for years. His clothes torn and filthy. His olive skin covered in dirt.

“Let’s see what you have to say now.” Roland pulls the man’s shoulders back and wraps his arm around his neck as he pulls the hood off the man’s head.

I hold in my gasp when I see the man before me. I glance to the side and see no shock on the rest of The Partner’s faces.

I turn back toward the man. He looks nothing like he used to. His dark hair is past his shoulders, his beard wild and just as long. But his eyes are unmistakable, just like his brothers’.

Dean opens his mouth and I can hear the satisfaction in his voice. “Thiago Montford, we’ve been looking for you.”