



Unhinged Little Angel (Mafia Bound #3)

Author: K.M. Neuhold

Category: LGBT+

Description: Forcing Salvatore Moretti to marry me at gunpoint isn't the craziest thing I've ever done... I hate being desperate, being scared. It's a filthy, helpless feeling. I'd much rather be enraged, violent... unhinged.

Salvatore watches me dance and calls me Angioletto, his little angel. He doesn't know the demons that haunt me. He's too blinded by my beauty to see the blood on my hands. Then again, he's a mafia capo, so maybe the blood wouldn't bother him anyway.

My past is like fire licking at my heels, ready to consume me. But Sal won't let that happen, he'll protect me. He has to.

I learned a long time ago not to trust anyone but myself. It's dangerous the way he manages to unravel all of my defenses and turn me from a guarded Dom into the submissive brat I've never felt safe enough to be. It's terrifying the way I'm starting to crave him. I wasn't sure I would live long enough to worry about this marriage starting to feel real, but this well-dressed mafioso might just manage to save my life after all. We can argue about divorce once the threat is neutralized I suppose. And in the meantime, he is my husband, I might as well enjoy the perks...

Total Pages (Source): 25

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:53 am

Chapter 1

DANTE

The smell of weed and cigarettes clings to my skin and lingers on the back of my tongue, my lungs burning and a cough tickling my throat as I pass through a cloud of smoke hanging heavily in the dressing room. The row of mirrors hanging on the yellowed wall are all clouded with years of smoky buildup and smudges of makeup, hazily reflecting the countertops lined with spilled vials of glitter and white powder directly beneath them. I snort with amusement like I always do at the smoke detector sitting on the far end of the counter, filled with ashes and a hundred stubbed-out cigarettes and joints.

“You going to show the rest of us up with a fancy new routine again tonight?” Lucifer’s reflection meets my gaze in the mirror as he runs his fingers through the long locks of his dyed auburn hair, making sure they’ll spill over his broad shoulders just right when he struts out onto the stage a little later.

A wicked grin spreads over my lips, flashing entirely too many teeth for it to be mistaken for anything friendly. Maybe it would be easier to make friends if I didn’t take so much pleasure in intimidating and outperforming the rest of the dancers, but where would the fun be in that?

“Aw, I’ll try to leave them with some cash in their wallets for you, baby.” I wink, bending down to adjust the lace on the heels that climb all the way up my calves, ending below my knees.

“We’re more worried about you leaving a few fingers unbroken so they can pull their wallets out for us,” Damnation mutters, sticking a neatly rolled joint between his crimson lips and lighting it.

“Well, no promises on that one.” I straighten back up, tugging my leather vest and tight red shorts into their proper places again.

Noisy chatter and laughter from the other dancers blends with the thump of hypnotic music coming from the front of house. An eager tremor works its way through my muscles. When I used to dream of being on stage, dancing under the glare of hot lights with hundreds of people watching in rapture and awe, being the lead attraction at Wild wasn’t what I had in mind. But my body doesn’t know the difference, doesn’t care that everyone out there is salivating to see my ass, not my adagio.

I hear my cue and everything else fades away. The music pulses through me as I push the curtain aside and step out onto the stage that might as well have been built for me alone. Wolf whistles and cheers swell briefly over the pulsing bass, but the colored lights dancing over my skin blind me to any of their faces. I’ll adjust to the strobing colors eventually, and then I’ll notice every last one of them, leering, panting, dragging their hungry gazes over me, their eyes sparkling with predatory intent. But for a few minutes, it’s just me and the music.

The song I chose starts with a slow, sultry rhythm. I roll my hips to the beat of it, letting it stroke over my skin and seduce me the way no other person has ever truly managed. I grip the pole with one hand and artfully fall into the move, finding a fluidity that feels more natural than breathing and swinging my legs up to wrap around it. The grip of the metal against my skin is sure to leave bruises, but I’m used to it, just like I spent years getting used to the numbing feeling of my ballet shoes.

More cheers ring out. I could do this pole routine in my sleep, but that doesn’t stop my heart from pounding with the thrill of it. Clinging to the pole with the strength of

my thighs alone, I yank the buttons on my vest apart before putting my hands on the stage to flip myself off the pole. I smirk and slowly shrug my open vest off my shoulders, still rocking my hips to the beat. My eyes are adjusted to the stage lights now, sweeping absently over the jackals pressing themselves close to the stage, like starving animals salivating for a meal. If they look at me and see an injured gazelle, easy pickings to slake the gnawing, greedy pit inside themselves, they're sorely mistaken.

I near the edge of the stage to toss my vest into the crowd, and sure enough, one of them is stupid enough to try his luck. A hand snakes out of the shadows in a bold movement, full of privileged expectation, groping for me with the clear mindset of a man who thinks that wanting something entitles him to take it without question. I don't hesitate for a second, a thrill even more heady than the one I felt before stepping on stage rushing through me as I bring the sharp point of my heel down, pinning the hand to the stage with unrepentant force.

The men around him back up quickly, some trading knowing looks. Clearly, these naughty boys didn't warn their friend what happens when they don't follow the rules at Wild. With my weight still pressed into my heel, I crouch down and look directly into the eyes of the man who dared to try to touch me.

"You have trouble reading, sweetie?" I purr.

His eyes dart to the side, looking for help from his entourage and finding none. He swallows hard and shakes his head quickly, not daring to move any more than that.

"Perfect," I coo sweetly. "Then make sure you have one more quick read of the No Touching signs plastered all over the club. If you get tripped up on any of the big words like 'no,' just let me know and I'll be happy to go over it with you." I grind my heel down harder one last time, savoring the choked gasp he keeps clenched behind his teeth before I stand back up and move my foot.

He retracts his hand even faster than he reached for me and melts into the shadows again. I'm sure I'll have to hear another lecture from Cyrus, the manager, before the end of my shift tonight. It'll be some bullshit about people paying to see friendly strippers, not to get their hands broken. If that were true though, I wouldn't be the most popular dancer here. They want me to put them in their places. If they didn't, would crumpled bills be flooding the stage now?

I continue my dance, gathering up the cash as I go and tucking it into the waist of my silky black G-string after peeling my shorts off.

On a Saturday night, with hundreds of men inside this club, all focused on me right here center stage, it should be impossible to feel one specific pair of eyes on me, but I swear they're a physical caress. I'm well practiced at ignoring them, but that doesn't stop the prickle of irritation from creeping up. The sultry expression I'm going for as I do another spin around the pole hardens slowly into a glare, and when my feet are planted firmly on the stage again, I can't stop my gaze from going straight to him.

In the dim lighting beyond the stage, surrounded by a sea of faceless voyeurs, I couldn't miss Salvatore Moretti if I wanted to. And believe me, I want to. I'm already more involved than I want to be with the Morettis and the well-dressed mafioso who only seems to have eyes for me. If my heart beats a little faster, it's only because I'm starting to overheat. If I stare at him a few extra seconds, missing the cue for my next move by several beats, it's only because some animal part of my brain knows how dangerous he is and knows better than to look away too quickly or show any signs of fear.

Not that I'm afraid of Salvatore, leaning back in his chair with heat in his eyes and an otherwise impassive expression on his face. The Morettis might own this city, but if they think they can own me... well, they're welcome to try. I flash my teeth threateningly and keep dancing, my gaze returning to his table more often than I would like as one song blends into the next, one memorized dance after another, until

sweat glistens on my smooth skin and the lights flash to signal the end of my set.

I gather up the last of the cash pooled at my feet, ignoring the urge to glance at Salvatore one last time, and strut off stage just as gracefully as I stepped onto it.

“They’re surprisingly well behaved tonight. No broken fingers at all, just one bruised hand,” I announce, waving off the tightly rolled bill Lucifer offers me, white powder clinging to the edges of it and to the rim of his nostril.

“Don’t sound so disappointed.” Damnation chuckles, stubbing out what I’m sure is his second or third joint since I took the stage. His eyes are bloodshot, and he sways a little as he gets to his feet, but I’m sure once he’s out there, he’ll be fine. He always is.

I shrug and chug down the contents of a water bottle, using the back of my hand to wipe my mouth when I’m done. “You should try breaking a finger or two. It’s therapeutic as hell.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re insane?” Damnation asks blandly.

“Every goddamn day, sugar.”

“Dante,” Cyrus barks, cutting through the voices of the other dancers around us.

My hackles rise immediately, and I grind my teeth together.

“Come on, you’re not going to give me shit for that one guy tonight. I didn’t even spit on anyone. I was practically a saint.”

He glares at me for a second, his broad shoulders and towering height reminding all of us of his years spent as a bouncer before he somehow got himself promoted to

manager. Considering it was right around the time Lorenzo Moretti ‘acquired’ Wild from the previous owner, I’m guessing Cyrus licked the right boots and made all the right promises to the Mafia boss. But whatever. None of my business. He never tries to cop a feel and he’s fair about scheduling, so it could be worse.

Instead of a lecture, he plucks a stack of mail out of his back pocket and shoves it at me.

“I told you to put your change of address through. I’m tired of collecting your mail for you.”

“Yeah, I’ll get right on that,” I lie, exhaling a laugh through my nose and plucking the envelopes out of his hand.

He nods sternly. “And stop encouraging the other guys to break bones. One of you is already more than I need.”

I use the stack of mail to salute him without making any actual verbal promises to stop advocating for violence, and he walks away. I don’t know why he bothers to gather up all of my junk mail anyway. I keep telling him I pay my bills online like any normal person and that he can just toss anything that comes to the club with my name on it right into the trash.

I flip through them in a hurry, tossing each one into the garbage as I go, until I reach the last one. The return address stamped in the upper left corner has my throat tightening and my vision swimming.

MacFord Correctional Facility.

No.

No, no, no.

I shake my head and my knees quake.

“You alright, Dante?” Sin stops in the middle of pulling on his G-string to ask.

“Fuck off,” I snap, sucking in another unsteady breath.

It’s fine, it’s just a letter. A letter can’t hurt me.

I tear into the seal and fumble to pull the single sheet of lined paper out with quaking fingers. If I was expecting a long, heartfelt apology I would be disappointed. Luckily, I’ve never been that naive. In neat handwriting there’s simply a date, just over a month from now, and then a single sentence.

I think we’re overdue for a family reunion.

I’m sure all the other dancers are staring at me as I struggle to get my breathing under control. I’m not going to give him my fear and I’m sure as hell not going to give him the satisfaction of sending me into a panic attack. It’s a threat, there’s no doubt about that, but I’m not going to run and hide. He thinks he knows who he’s fucking with, but he has no clue.

I crumple the paper and toss it into the trash with all the rest of my mail before reaching over and plucking the cigarette from between Vex’s lips.

“Hey,” he grunts.

I don’t bother with an apology or even an acknowledgment before I toss the lit cigarette into the garbage can. It only takes a second for the paper inside to catch, flames jumping up and crackling cheerfully. I grin at the beautiful, simple destruction

of it while someone shouts about needing a fire extinguisher. If only getting rid of the man himself were that easy.

SALVATORE

“That should be all of it.” The man sitting across from me leans in anxiously, bouncing his knee under the table.

I pin him with a look that stills him momentarily, then return to counting the wad of cash he just handed over. It does all seem to be there, but since he seems so nervous about it, I count it again, nice and slow, taking a little bit of pleasure in how hard he tries to keep himself from squirming.

“It’s all there,” I agree in a low voice that barely carries over the music and the cheers coming from the men crowding around the stage. I slip the cash into my briefcase and bring up the spreadsheet on my tablet to mark down the payment. “Only a dozen more installments to go, Gino. I’ll see you next week.”

He nods sharply then shoots out of his chair and vanishes into the dim light of the crowded club. I double check my list. Gino was it for tonight. I let out a little sigh and roll my neck slowly from side to side to work out the kinks brought on by sitting so still for hours.

I know Dante’s set ended ages ago, but that doesn’t stop the plummeting feeling of disappointment in my gut when I swing my attention to the stage to find one of the other dancers up there instead, writhing under the colorful lights with none of the grace and temptation that is written in every move my Angioletto makes.

“Would you like another drink, sir?” a pretty little twink wearing nothing but a pair of fishnet stockings and high heels asks sweetly.

“Is Dante gone for the night?” I ask instead of answering his question.

He blinks, fluttering his long eyelashes, and digs his teeth into his lush, shimmering bottom lip like he’s fighting a pout.

“Yes, sir. But if you want a private dance or anything, I’d be happy to help you out with that.” He cocks his hip, and I take a second to look him up and down.

He’s a pretty thing, the glitter on his skin twinkling under the club lights, a sweet little blush already creeping into his cheeks in spite of the confident promise in his eyes. Part of me wants to take him up on that, to drag him to a private room and let him grind that pert ass up on me until my dick is hard and thoughts of that mouthy, gorgeous brat are nothing but ash. But no matter how hard I try to get excited by the idea, nothing inside me stirs.

“No, thanks.” I sit up and reach into my suit pocket, tossing more than enough cash onto the table to cover the two drinks I had and an extremely generous tip.

His eyes linger on me for another second before he nods.

“Dante’s next shift is tomorrow night. He’ll be on stage at eight, then working the floor until close.”

I know . I hate that I know, but that doesn’t change anything. Maybe one of these nights I’ll find a way to bleed him out of my veins, but not tonight. Until then, I guess I’m as pathetic as the rest of his fans who press up against the stage with their tongues hanging out and their dicks in their hands, hoping to catch a droplet of his sweat or a few seconds of his wrath.

Dante.

Dante.

Dante .

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:53 am

Chapter 2

SALVATORE

I pick an imaginary piece of lint off my emerald suit jacket and shift in my seat to cross my ankle over my knee. Half my attention is on Lorenzo's low, authoritative drone and the other half is focused on not watching Dante dance. The hypnotic bursts of movement I catch out of the corner of my eye test my self-control. This song is one of his favorites to dance to—"Dirty Thoughts"—with a sultry pulse and suggestive lyrics that leave just enough to the imagination to invite a barrage of fantasies, and Dante knows exactly how to stoke them with the sway of his hips as he slowly peels the tight clothes off his temptingly smooth skin.

Alessio's seat next to mine has a direct view of the stage and he doesn't even try to pretend he's not looking. His eyes dance with mischief as he interrupts Lorenzo's briefing about the most recent surveillance of the Fitzpatricks' slowly expanding organization, irritatingly skirting right along the edges of the city of Wildcliff, which the Morettis have laid claim to, with a wolf whistle.

"Damn, Dante is in rare form tonight. He looks like he wants to tear someone's throat out with his teeth." Alessio leans his elbows on the table and whistles a second time.

I shift in my seat again, my cock perking up immediately and a crick forming in my neck with the effort it takes not to turn my head and see for myself. I can picture that feral, violent look in Dante's eyes easily, I've imagined it too damn many times late at night, with my hand around my cock and his name on my lips. Seeing it again would only make me crave him more, and this obsession I have with him is already

well past anything reasonable.

Lorenzo stops talking, clearly unamused by the interruption. He pins Alessio with the threateningly stoic look that makes most grown men piss themselves. Of course, none of those other men know Enzo the way any of us do. Would he put a bullet through Les if he absolutely had to? Most likely. But it would take a hell of a lot. It would take Alessio doing things I can't imagine him ever doing, like betraying The Family or Lorenzo in particular.

On Lorenzo's right side, Xaviaro's lips twitch with an almost-grin before his expression melts back into his usual stoic impassiveness.

"Interesting kink, Les," Elio, Lorenzo's brother and second-in-command, teases from his other side. "Is it the biting or the rage that's doing it for you?"

"You're one to talk. Yes, Boss ," he mimics the breathy, submissive voice we've all heard Elio use around his fiancé when he thinks no one is paying attention. Alessio reaches for the drink in front of him, bringing it to his smirking lips and taking a sip.

The humor on Elio's face disappears immediately. "Don't make me order Xaviaro to shoot you."

Les gasps dramatically. "Would you shoot me, Xav?"

"Eagerly," the trigger man deadpans.

"And here I thought your little Sparrow was softening you up." Les purrs Sparrow's name in the same tone Xaviaro always does when talking about his beloved little vigilante psychopath.

"Nothing soft over here." Xav even manages to return the teasing innuendo in a bored

tone.

“Is it too much to ask that we get through a single meeting without it devolving into a discussion of everyone’s kinks and a series of juvenile dick jokes?” Lorenzo asks with a long-suffering sigh.

“Hey, you’re the one who bought the strip club and decided we should do most of our business here,” Elio points out, joining Alessio briefly in looking towards the stage for the end of Dante’s performance.

“Mm.” Enzo drums his fingers on the table. “I thought we could all enjoy the view, but maybe I overestimated your ability to stay on task with so many tempting distractions.”

I stifle a snort at how formal he sounds, like a professor with a major stick up his ass. It’s hard to reconcile the stoic, commanding Mafia Boss Lorenzo with the goofy cousin I grew up with, climbing trees and catching toads to sneak into each other’s lunch boxes as a prank. The shadow of exhaustion constantly smudged under his eyes tells me all I need to know about how stressful it must be to be in his position—essentially running a multi-million-dollar corporation where the retirement plan is a car bomb or a bullet in the back of the head more often than not. He’ll never admit it, but I think that’s why he holds our meetings here. He likes that even now, with all the weight on our shoulders, we’re still the same horny idiots we were before he became the most feared man in the city.

The music fades briefly and the swell of cheers signals an end to Dante’s performance. My shoulders sag with relief and I let out a slow, steady breath. I made it the full hour without looking. Much, anyway. A few quick peeks hardly count.

“Sorry. We’ll behave.” Alessio holds up his hands in surrender.

The thin line of Lorenzo's mouth tells me he knows as well as the rest of us that a promise to behave from Les will only last until another distraction comes along.

“Right, as I was saying, I have Vander and Grif continuing to feed me any information they receive about what the Fitzpatricks are up to, and a few of our men on rotation surveilling every one of Declan Fitzpatrick's moves, both waking and sleeping. That man doesn't blow his nose without me getting a report about it.”

Alessio shoots me an amused look and I swallow the delight that threatens to show on my face. As casual as we are with Lorenzo most of the time, none of us are stupid enough to comment on just how much of his attention seems to be fixated on the gorgeous Irish boss. He might actually shoot us for that one.

“So, still no moves on that yet?” Elio confirms, and Lorenzo nods.

“It's still a ‘wait and see’ for now. I don't want to go to war with them if we can avoid it, but it might be necessary eventually if they keep pushing their boundaries.”

We all nod, and Lorenzo leans back in his seat, signaling that he's finished with the briefing. Even though I know Dante's performance is over, I reflexively turn my head to glance towards the stage, but the view is obscured by a much better one.

The clothes Dante shed and tossed into the crowd are no doubt long gone, but he's pulled on another pair of skintight shorts, unbuttoned to show off the lacy thong he has on underneath as he struts towards our table with an air of confidence and violence that wafts around him like cologne. My jaw tightens briefly at the thought of what those men plan to do with their trophies—what I would do with a pair of Dante's skimpy shorts still warm from his body heat. But I don't have long to think about it before he stops less than a foot from me, glitter sparkling on his eyelids and the metal piercing his nipples and belly button shimmering in the club lights. I wonder if he has anything else pierced.

“Don’t they even let you take a smoke break between getting off stage and sending you out to take drink orders and get groped?” Elio’s tone is friendly and conversational, but the urge to rip his eyes out for even daring to look at Dante nearly chokes me.

“Normally they would.” Dante puts his hands on the table and leans in like he’s going to tell us all a secret. The move brings him close, the smell of his sweat and spicy cologne tickling my nose and hardening my cock, tempting me to shift closer and drag my tongue over the fluttering pulse point in his throat. “But the rumor around here is that you boys are a bunch of terrifying criminals, so some of the guys are a little nervous to serve you.”

“Kill one stripper for bringing us the wrong drink and suddenly we’re ‘dangerous criminals.’” Alessio flashes Dante a teasing grin, and even Lorenzo rumbles a low laugh at the joke.

“You’re not afraid of us, Angioletto?” I drag my tongue along my lower lip slowly, watching the predictably steady beat of Dante’s pulse.

He turns his head towards me, a wicked smile spreading over his lush lips.

“Baby, I’ve left scarier men than you bleeding.” The threat itself isn’t what sends the delicious spike of heat through me, it’s the glint in his eyes that tells me he’s not lying. “Besides...” He leans in even closer, so close I can taste his breath dancing across my lips on his next exhale. My balls tighten and everything inside me aches to drag him onto the table and bury my tongue between his lips. “I never get a drink order wrong.”

He winks and pulls back before I can do something as stupid as act on the horny impulse to kiss him. It’s not just that I think he would bite my tongue off if I tried it that’s stopping me. I never touch a man unless he begs.

DANTE

Salvatore's expensive cologne lingers in my nose even after I walk away from the table of mafiosos. For one brief, flickering second the heat in his eyes threatened to make me feel something other than blinding rage and disgust. Fuck me, that would be stupid, and not just because he's in the Mafia.

Actually, if anything, the blood on Salvatore's hands is a benefit. I know just last night I was telling myself that I don't need to be any more involved with the Morettis than I already am. Between the friendly banter when they come in and the contract hacking work I did for them last year, I've already cozied up to them more than most people would dare to. But maybe I'm thinking about this the wrong way. They like me well enough, I'm sure they wouldn't want to see anything bad happen to me...

Then again, why should they care? They're not two-bit criminals, licking their chops at any excuse for a little violence. They're running a business, albeit an illegal one, where death and destruction just happen to be part of routine operations. My problems aren't their problems, and I'm not sure it's worth whatever it would take to convince them otherwise.

A sick, inky feeling of dread creeps up my spine at the memory of the letter I got last night. Maybe I'll keep my options open, and finding a way to convince the Morettis to save my ass can be a backup plan for now.

I'm so lost in my thoughts as I make my way towards the bar to get their drinks that I don't even notice the man leering at me until he's out of his chair and planting himself directly in my path.

"Hey there, beautiful." He rakes his eyes over me like I'm a piece of meat, and I force a smile that's probably closer to a snarl than anything friendly. "I was rock hard the entire time you were on stage. You're something else."

He takes a step closer, and I hold my ground, straightening myself up to my full height, which isn't bad when I'm in my platform heels, but still barely brings us eye to eye.

"Thanks, sugar. Private dance is five hundred if you're interested, I just have to grab a few drinks for another table first."

He balks. "Five hundred? Cutie last week only cost a hundred, and that was full service."

"We set our own prices and mine is five hundred, dance only . The only way to get full service from me is to impress me, and you're not off to a great start."

His eyes narrow and my pulse kicks up. Oh, honey, if you want to play, I'd love the excuse to throw hands. Adrenaline has been coursing through me ever since I read that fucking letter and I would love the excuse to do something with it.

"I'm not paying five hundred dollars."

I shrug. "No problem. Have a nice night."

I move to skirt around him, but apparently he's too smooth brained to know just how fucking stupid it is to piss me off. He wraps his arms around me from behind, bringing his large, sweaty body into contact with mine. Feral, animal rage courses through me instantly, coiling in my muscles and scattering all rational thoughts to the wind until the only one remaining is to bite and claw and hurt anyone who dares to touch me without my permission.

I snarl and snap my elbow back, savoring the pained yelp he lets out and the feeling of his nose crunching before a hot, sticky burst of his blood coats the back of my arm.

“Ew,” I yowl. “You bled on me, you fucking prick.” He’s already stumbling back, but I give him a hand by whirling around to face him and shoving him in the chest.

“You broke my nose, you psychopath,” he mumbles, his hands over his mouth and nose, crimson blood spilling down his chin and staining the front of his formerly crisp white shirt. “I’m going to get you fired. No, fuck that, I’m going to have you charged with assault.”

I refuse to flinch, but the second threat hits its mark. Typically, a simple assault like breaking someone’s nose is a misdemeanor if that, but when you’ve already done prison time for aggravated assault? Yeah, I’d rather not find out how that would impact the court’s opinion of the situation. And, fuck, it would be a pain in the ass to lose this job too. No way am I going to apologize though. I glare at him, tempted to knee him in the balls too for daring to threaten me. You know what? Fuck it, he fucking deserves it. I snarl again and take another step forward, preparing to strike and make this asshole wish he’d never set foot inside Wild.

“I wouldn’t do that.” A smooth voice cuts in before I can find out if lodging this prick’s balls permanently inside his body with my knee will help the situation or make it worse. “You’re drunk and we all saw you trip and break your nose on the edge of the table. No need to cause trouble for anyone else over your own clumsiness, is there?”

He looks over his shoulder with a glare, and his face goes pale so quickly I’m surprised he doesn’t faint from the combined terror and blood loss. Salvatore stands behind him with a dangerous glint in his eye, his suit jacket unbuttoned so the handle of his pistol is just barely visible, the threat clear as day.

The man bobbles his head like he can’t decide if he’s saying yes or no before he mumbles an apology. His large frame trembles like he’s dying to make a run for it, but he’s afraid that if he moves, it’ll trigger Salvatore to chase. And Salvatore clearly

enjoys toying with him for a moment, holding his gaze with the simmering menace dancing in his dark eyes.

“Go,” he barks, and the man flees, still clutching his bleeding nose.

The blood on the back of my arm is starting to dry, crusting and sticky on my skin, making bile rise in my throat. Salvatore steps into the space left empty by the grabby creep, his gaze sweeping over my face like he’s looking for any sign of distress or injury. I stare right back at him, my jaw still set firmly and my heart still racing with the unspent adrenaline.

“This is the part where you say, ‘thank you,’ Angioletto.”

“Thank you?” I scoff, grinding my teeth, my brain still operating on its animal level instead of a logical one, drawing me into his space, shoving at his chest the way I did to the other asshole. Salvatore doesn’t stumble though. He doesn’t budge, which means I’m just up in his face, breathing heavily, full of anger that just keeps building inside my chest. “In case you missed it, I already had him handled,” I growl.

“I saw that.” His tone is still perfectly even, in spite of my snarling.

“Exactly.” I shove him again, and he still doesn’t budge, but I swear a grin flickers at the corners of his lips. “Don’t ever mistake me for someone who can’t take care of himself.”

“Never, Angioletto,” he purrs, still so fucking agreeable, heat simmering in his eyes that should make me feel disgusted and violated, just like everyone else does.

I want to rage and scream at him more, I want to see what it would take to get him to respond, to make him show me the violence I know is lurking inside of him. Luckily, enough self-preservation kicks in to stop me.

“Fuck you,” I growl, turning on my heel.

If he responds, I can’t hear it over the music as I stomp towards the bathroom to clean myself up and pull myself back together.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:53 am

Chapter 3

DANTE

It's two in the morning when I step into my dark, silent apartment, still keyed up from getting grabbed by that asshole earlier and on edge from that fucking letter. I press my back against the door without turning on the light. I already know there's only one way to even out the frenzy of chaos simmering just under the surface, threatening to choke me. I tried using sex as an alternative, finding a pretty sub—man or woman, it doesn't matter to me—to dominate and control for a couple of hours, chasing a release that should exhaust me if nothing else. But for some reason all it ever did was make me feel even less satisfied. Frustration tightens in my throat, making its way down into my chest until it feels like I can't drag in a proper breath.

I don't even bother trying to rationalize what I'm about to do. I'm way past that; I have been for years. My harsh breathing and the distant hum of traffic from outside are the only sounds I can hear as I push off the door and stride through my apartment to my bedroom, still not bothering with any lights. There's more than enough light coming in through my windows from the surrounding buildings, even in the middle of the night, for me to see as well as I need to. Even if it was too dark for me to see, I wouldn't have any trouble finding the bottom drawer of my dresser and reaching straight to the back where I keep what I need.

I trade my skintight clothes for excessively baggy ones that make me look even smaller than I am, and slide the cool metal of my favorite brass knuckles down my fingers and into place. I flex to make sure they're positioned comfortably, then shove my feet into a ratty pair of sneakers I pulled from under the dresser. There are a

couple of dark splotches on the toe. I lick my thumb and use my spit to wipe them off before straightening back up. With my oversized hood pulled up and my brass knuckles hidden inside my pocket, I'm already feeling calmer, more settled. My heart beats out a steady rhythm as I stuff my keys into my other pocket and slip out of my apartment again as quietly as I can.

The streetlights illuminate the sidewalk and the occasional car or truck drives by, but I'm the only one out... at least around here. In a nice neighborhood like this one, everyone is safely tucked into bed so they can wake up fresh in a few hours, put on a suit that wasn't expensive but has a label that's high-end enough to impress the people they're trying to intimidate, and go to their office jobs where they'll spend all day thinking about going up to the roof and jumping off. I might have been impressed by them once, envied their lives, but I know a fancy job and a nice suit is often just a mask to hide the monster underneath that they don't want you to see.

I round the corner, walking a little faster but keeping my head down and my shoulders hunched. The difference a few blocks makes is almost enough to make you laugh, if it doesn't make you sick to your stomach. There are still streetlamps, but half of them are burned out, graffiti and litter marring the sidewalks and the sides of the buildings. I pass a couple of bars that are still open, brazenly flouting the law because they know the Morettis have half the police force on their payroll anyway.

I shrink into myself a little more and slow my steps, still moving quickly like I'm nervously trying to make it home, but stumbling every so often to give off an air of vulnerability, a stink of prey to any predators who might be lurking in the shadows. A few drunks amble by on unsteady legs, not paying me any attention, and somewhere in the distance, a car backfires. The smell of cigarettes, exhaust, and garbage lingers in the air in a way it doesn't in the neighborhood I was able to buy my way into by shaking my ass on stage every night. Where I live now is a lot more like the neighborhood I grew up in, but for some reason, this one feels more like home. Or maybe this one feels more like where I belong, where everyone knows how fucked up

they are, and they don't bother trying to hide it.

"Hey, kid," a low voice croons, and the first genuine smile I've had all night spreads across my lips.

I make myself flinch away from the voice and purposefully pick up my pace, ducking my head lower and curling in on myself as much as I can. It only takes a second before I hear the echo of footsteps right behind me.

"Kid," he says again, trying to sound friendly but unable to keep the growl completely out of his voice. "This isn't the kind of neighborhood you should be walking through all alone. Let me give you a ride."

I slow and put a tremble into my shoulders. The footsteps get closer until they're right behind me, his breathing fast and loud like a dog panting for a bone, the sour stench of body odor coming off of him in waves.

"I'm close to home," I say, making my voice higher and softer like I really am the vulnerable young boy he thinks I am, wandering the mean city streets, all alone before dawn.

His hand closes roughly around my bicep.

"Not close enough." He doesn't bother to hide the growl this time, not now that he thinks he has me.

The drug dealer leaning against the flickering streetlight on the corner won't even look this way if I scream, and none of the cars driving by will bother to stop. On this side of Wildcliff, people mind their own business, for better or worse. He's about to find out why that's just as bad for him as it is for me.

I gasp quietly and pretend to put up a token struggle as he shoves me towards the mouth of the alley.

“Don’t you know how dangerous it is around here for sweet little pieces of ass like you?” he whispers right into my ear, his hot breath just as rancid as the rest of him.

I swallow down the bile in my throat and focus on the churning pit of rage in my gut. I never know whether I should be glad that it’s so easy to find a target or if I should add it to my list of reasons this city deserves to be burned to the ground along with everyone inside of it. But as I tighten my fist, feeling the weight of the metal wrapped around my fingers and the adrenaline rushing eagerly through my veins, I settle on grateful. At least this gives me purpose. Every disgusting pervert I leave bleeding is a good deed done for this city. They should build me a fucking statue at this rate.

He pushes me towards the nearest wall in the shadows of the alley, and I pretend to trip, using the move to stumble forward a few steps, catching him completely off guard as I spin on him. The hard metal around my knuckles connects with his jaw before he even realizes what’s happening, and my hood falls back. I don’t know how well he can see the hatred in my eyes or the light stubble on my jaw giving me away as a grown man rather than a pre-teen, but as his head snaps to the side, I’m sure he at least knows he made a big fucking mistake.

I haul my fist back again while he’s still stumbling and deliver another hard blow. Unlike at the club, there’s nothing holding me back. It’s too dark for him to ever identify me, and he deserves every ounce of my rage. Every fleshy hit is righteous, every pained grunt that falls from his lips is a prayer for my deliverance. He tries to fight back at first, but I already have the upper hand, my knee pressed down on his chest to pin him to the ground as I batter his face, thinking about all of the weak, terrified, vulnerable people he’s pulled into alleys before who had no way of fighting back.

“Does it make you feel strong to hurt kids, you sick fuck?” I hiss between clenched teeth. “Not so strong now, are you?”

My chest is heaving and the muscles in my arms ache from the exertion. He’s barely moving now, his chest still rising and falling weakly, his breaths wheezing out through his broken nose.

“Think about me the next time you want to hurt someone. You never know where I’ll be hiding, and I promise you that I only give gentle warnings like this one once.” I spit on his bloodied face, wipe my hands off on his crumpled shirt, then get to my feet.

A flash of light at the mouth of the alley makes me wince, but it’s gone just as quickly. Probably headlights from a car. I stuff my hands back into my pockets and glare down at him for another second before I turn and walk away. The beast inside of me is finally soothed and sleep is calling to me.

SALVATORE

“Looked like you pissed off your Angioletto earlier,” Alessio says with a slight slur and a chuckle, slumping in the seat next to me while our driver dutifully looks ahead, navigating the nearly empty pre-dawn streets of Wildcliff and ignoring our conversation.

A flare of heat fills my gut at the memory of Dante getting in my face earlier, seething like the brat he is, practically daring me to push back and prove to him that I’m the same kind of monster he thinks everyone else is. He barely looked at me when he finally brought our drinks and never lingered the rest of the night. I could see it in the set of his shoulders and the repressed rage in his eyes that he wasn’t satisfied with how the altercation ended though. I just don’t know if it was yelling at me or only getting to break the other asshole’s nose that left him wound so tight.

I can't decide which part of Alessio's drunken taunting to address, but I settle on murmuring, "He's not mine."

Alessio chuckles again and shakes his head, and irritation claws its way into my chest.

"You're the one who couldn't stop staring at him while he danced tonight," I remind him, carefully keeping a handle on the urge to press my thumbs into my close friend's eyeballs until it's impossible for him to ever defile my angel with his filthy, lecherous gaze again.

"Yeah, but that was only to piss you off." He shrugs and loosens his tie, flashing me a shit-eating grin.

"You know I could shoot you, right?" I say blandly, and the driver's eyes flicker to the rearview mirror for a fraction of a second before he remembers to mind his own business and returns them to the road.

"But you won't." He's got the kind of confidence that makes me want to at least pistol whip him a little so he remembers I'm capable of violence. But he's right, I won't. "Why don't you ask him out already? Flash your platinum card around a little, take him to a fancy restaurant, promise to take him away from a life where he has to let strangers grope him, and make him a kept man like we all know you want to."

Maybe I should rethink my stance on pistol whipping him. It's not like it would leave any permanent damage, it would just shut his stupid, drunk mouth.

"He's like a dog that's been kicked too many times, all teeth and claws. If I tell him I want to take him out, he'll probably think I'm telling him I'm going to kill him."

Alessio cackles. "You scared he'll break your hand if you ask him on a date?"

“No, Stronzo , I want to show him he can trust me before I make a move. Things like this take time.”

The car slows to a stop in front of Alessio’s building and he sits up, reaching for the door handle.

“If you say so, Coglione .” He ruffles my hair like the pain in the ass that he is and then hops out of the car and disappears inside the building.

I settle back into my seat as the car pulls away from the curb again, Alessio’s words echoing in my head. I know I’m right on this one though. If I rush things with Dante, he’ll just fight harder. I’ve never seen anyone with their guard up so high. He doesn’t just have walls up; he has an electric fence around the wall and a goddamn moat filled with crocodiles on the other side. But he’s not counting on the amount of patience I have.

“Change of plans. Drop me here.”

The driver glances back at me through the mirror and nods.

“Yes, sir,” he murmurs, pulling up to the curb so I can get out. “Do you want me to wait?”

“Nah. Go home and get in bed with your wife while it’s still dark out.” I lean forward to stuff a twenty-dollar tip into the cupholder for his trouble, then get out of the car.

He waits for a minute before pulling away. I head down the sidewalk, confident in every step of my well-trodden route. I reach a familiar building and dip into the alley. Climbing a fire escape in chinos isn’t ideal, but it’s doable. The metal staircase rattles and groans as I make my way up to the roof.

Dante's shift ended nearly two hours ago, so he should be fast asleep by now, but just as I reach the roof and look across the street, his lights flicker on like he's just getting home. My heart creeps into my throat and my skin heats the same way it did when he got in my face earlier. He comes into view, shrugging off an oversized hooded sweatshirt and stopping to run his hands over his face. It's hard to tell from across the street, but I could swear there's blood on his knuckles. Is it his or someone else's?

Protective rage swells inside me. If anyone hurt him, it'll be the last fucking thing they do. Dante may not know it yet, but he's mine, and I protect what's mine. Always.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:53 am

Chapter 4

DANTE

There's a distinct feeling that comes with being watched. Not just looked at but watched, followed, stalked. It's that animal instinct that raises the hairs on the back of your neck and puts all of your senses on edge as you wait to spot the telltale flicker of a lion hiding in the underbrush or a crocodile disguising itself as a log to get close enough to drag you into the water and drown you. I rub the back of my neck and glance over my shoulder for the third time since leaving my apartment this morning.

Nothing looks out of the ordinary though. No mysterious cars driving too slowly behind me, no hint of anyone trying hard to blend into the crowd, nothing. Of course, that doesn't mean they're not there, just that they're better at hiding in plain sight than I am at picking out someone suspicious. I curl my hands into fists and scan the bustling street one more time. My knuckles still ache days after the incident in the alley, but the slight twinge is a comfort, a reminder of what I'm capable of when someone thinks they can turn me into a victim. Maybe I am being paranoid this morning. Not that I don't have reason to be, but he's not supposed to be released for nearly a month still, so there's no reason to waste my energy snapping at shadows in the meantime. I'm still not convinced that letter was anything more than his way of trying to gain the upper hand, with no real intent behind it other than to take some joy in scaring me when I can't do a damn thing about it.

And if anyone is following me, it's not like they're going to attack me in broad daylight in the shopping district. I shake the tension out of my shoulders and step inside my favorite store, Ricco's. I'm dressed perfectly respectably in a pair of black

slacks and a plum blouse, but I get a few lingering looks anyway as the doors swing closed behind me, cutting off the hum of street noise and replacing it with soft piano music. Maybe it's my few visible tattoos, or that the shirt I'm wearing was displayed on a female mannequin when I bought it and that's somehow supposed to dictate who's allowed to wear it. Small people putting themselves into even smaller boxes are not my problem though.

I ignore the glances and start to browse, gravitating towards a gorgeous white lace top with intricate pearl beading that I'm sure is out of my price range even without looking at the tag. I pick it up and hold it up to myself, imagining the way it would drape over my skin and make me look like a goddess in an oil painting. I flip the tag over and sigh. Maybe I'll save up for a few weeks and buy it for myself as a birthday present.

It might be my last one, after all .

I immediately shake off the thought. He doesn't have the balls. And if he does, I'll happily separate them from his body and then show him what happens to people who fuck with me. Ideally, without landing my pretty ass back in prison. That's the part I'm still working out. How to defend myself without ruining my own life. Strangers are one thing—there's nothing tying me to any of them, even if they're stupid enough to go to the police to complain about being attacked by someone they were attempting to victimize. But I've already seen how this one plays out. I did my time behind bars for it, and I'd rather not gamble my life on a murder charge if I can help it, even in self-defense.

“Hey, Dante.”

I nearly startle straight out of my skin, my heart leaping in my chest as I jump a foot in the air and spin around to face whoever managed to sneak up on me, my hands raised defensively. The fighting stance earns me a few more odd looks from the

WASP-y customers who were already sure I didn't belong in here and are now probably seconds from digging their phones out of their Gucci bags to call the police. I barely notice though, my attention focused on the grinning man behind me. He's no taller than I am, but that's where the similarity in our appearance ends. He's pretty in a rugged kind of way, blond hair hanging messily over his forehead, his green eyes glinting with confidence and mischief.

"Jesus fuck, Sparrow, don't scare me like that." I put a hand over my chest and glare at him. "Are you stalking me or something?" I look him up and down. He's wearing a pair of jeans with holes in both knees and the same ratty leather jacket he always seems to have on. He definitely didn't come into a store like this one to shop.

He snorts and arches an eyebrow at me. "Paranoid?"

I bristle and deepen my glare. "Usually not without reason."

He smiles wider, seemingly unbothered by my suspicion. I can't think of a good reason for him to be following me, but I'm sure if I had a little time to get creative with it, I could come up with something. Like maybe Lorenzo hired him to keep an eye on me for some reason.

"Relax, I was just on my way to meet Xav for lunch down the street and spotted you in the window. I figured I'd pop in and say hi."

"Why?"

"Why? Because I like you, Dante. You've got sharp teeth and you aren't afraid to use them. Because sometimes it gets fucking old hanging around with a bunch of mafiosos."

I'm not sure that explanation puts me at ease at all. If anything, it raises my hackles a

little more.

“I don’t need friends. Thanks though.”

I realize I’m still holding the shirt, and I put it back down with one last wistful look, promising myself I’ll come back and treat myself later. Then I walk past Sparrow and out of the store without a backward glance. Being out of my apartment has suddenly lost its appeal.

I hail a cab and tell the driver my address, keeping an eye out for any cars following on the way back, but just like earlier, I don’t spot anything out of place. The car rolls to a stop in front of my building and I hand him enough cash to cover the fare and a tip.

I climb the stairs to the second floor, considering how I’ll spend the rest of the afternoon. Maybe I’ll finish the needlepoint I’ve been working on—a cheeky drawing of a Molotov cocktail and the words ‘be the light you want to see in the world.’ My apartment comes into view, and I stop in my tracks, my pulse immediately skyrocketing.

I didn’t leave my door open. I would never be that careless. My hands shake and my muscles tense, readying my body for fight or flight. Maybe it didn’t catch for some reason and then the force of someone else closing their door nudged mine open? Did I lock it? I always do, but I can’t actually picture myself doing it. It’s one of those mindless, automatic actions that you do every day and isn’t important enough for your brain to actually hang on to once it’s over. I flex my hands and wish like hell I’d thought to keep a weapon with me.

I take a cautious step forward, taking measured breaths, my eyes fixed on the small crack in the door, watching for any sign of movement on the other side. As far as I can tell, everything is still and quiet. Once I’m close enough, I put my hand on the

door and ease it open, standing to the side in case someone is right on the other side with a gun. But no one's there. I hold my breath as I step over the threshold and still nothing, no sign of anyone inside, nothing out of place that I can see.

Okay, so maybe I was just careless. It's not like me, but it's not impossible either. My fingertips tingle with unspent adrenaline as I cautiously check the rest of the apartment, looking for any signs that anyone was here. My bedroom looks exactly the way I left it, with the bed messy and the drapes closed, and the bathroom is clear too. I loop back around to the main living space and my gaze finally lands on something that I'm sure wasn't here when I left. There's a large envelope right in the center of my coffee table, nothing written on it and no sign whatsoever of where or who it came from.

Fear and rage swirl in my chest, feeding each other in an endless cycle. I'm pissed that someone would dare to come into my apartment and try to scare me, and fucking terrified of what might be inside the envelope. I stare at it like it's a rattlesnake, coiled and ready to strike, then turn to grab my laptop off the chair where I left it charging earlier.

I ease myself down into the chair, glancing at the envelope every few seconds while I navigate to the Department of Justice website and type a name into the search bar. Don Moreno. His profile loads in just a few seconds and next to his mugshot his status is listed as: Incarcerated, Awaiting Release. I let out a slow breath. So, he's still where he belongs. For now, anyway.

I slam my laptop shut again and inch forward in my seat, glowering at the envelope.

"Fuck you," I mutter. How dare some stupid tan paper make me feel small and vulnerable, even for a second. I snatch it off the table and crinkle it in my fist to test the contents. At least nothing is ticking, so I try my luck and tear into it.

I turn it over to dump the contents onto the table. A handful of photographs spill out. Photographs of me . They're mostly boring, just pictures of me coming and going from the building, dressed for work or on my way out for a jog. Until the last one. The last photo is me, clear as day, just like all the others, dressed in dark, oversized clothing, my hands bloodied and hatred shining in my eyes as I glare down at the battered man at my feet.

That flash the other night... It wasn't headlights, it was a camera.

"Fuck you," I hiss again, tossing the pictures back onto the table. They're clearly a threat. Maybe it's a threat that they'll go to the police about my 'hobby,' but more likely just wanting me to know I'm being followed, watched . And if Don is still behind bars, it's either unrelated—unlikely—or he managed to make friends and convince them that helping him get his revenge will somehow benefit them too.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance," I grind out between clenched teeth, gathering up the photos and stuffing them back into the envelope so I won't have to keep looking at them.

This is worse than I thought. He's not going to settle for trying to spook me, not if he's getting other people involved and having them stalk me. I need a plan, a real plan that doesn't involve waiting around for his release date to see what he's spent his time behind bars planning.

I swallow hard, an idea already forming. It's fucking insane and could backfire on me in at least a dozen different ways, but that's never stopped me before. Instead of giving myself time to talk myself out of it, I pull my phone out of my pocket. Don thinks he's ready to play with the big boys? We'll see about that.

SALVATORE

“This looks really good.” I finish looking over the spreadsheets my nephew, Luca, prepared and hand them back to him.

“You think Lorenzo will go for it?”

I nod and take a sip of the black coffee he offered me when I came by. “The numbers look solid. I’ll sit down with him next week and lay the groundwork, then we can bring you in to officially pitch it to him. How does that sound?”

Luca’s chest puffs up a little and I give him a fond smile. He’s not the knobby kneed, dirty faced kid tugging at the sleeve of my suit jacket anymore. I recognize that hungry look in his eyes, that burning desire to prove himself to the boss and earn his place in The Family for more than just his name.

“Thanks, Uncle Sal.” He gives me a crooked grin and I can’t resist the urge to lean over and ruffle his hair. Even if he is all grown up, it doesn’t hurt to remind him that he’s still a baby face with a long way to go before he’s earned the respect I know he wants.

“No problem, kid.” As I take another sip of my coffee, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I hold up a finger to tell him one second, then unbutton my jacket to reach for it.

Dante’s name lights up the screen and my stomach does a flip. We exchanged numbers months ago when he did some hacking work for us, and I had to spend a few days keeping an eye on him while we worked out a plan to take down a massive child trafficking ring trying to put down roots in our city. But he hasn’t called me since. As much as I’d like to hope that this is a social call, my gut tells me that’s about as likely as Elvis crawling out of the grave and belting out a lively rendition of “Blue Suede Shoes.”

“Angioletto,” I purr into the phone, just in case it is my lucky day. “Please tell me this wasn’t a misdial.”

Dante chuckles and I hear the slightest hint of a tremble in it. Something’s wrong. I sit forward in my seat, clutching my phone tighter and frowning. Luca raises his eyebrows in silent question, and I shake my head and stand up.

“Dante?” I say his actual name firmly, with an edge of authority that I’m dying to pour into every word I whisper into my angel’s ear as I pin him down and show him how good it feels to let himself go for a change, to trust and submit and feel .

He makes a breathy sound that strokes my cock to life then clears his throat.

“It wasn’t a misdial,” he says, his usual defiance and determination bleeding into his tone now. “Will you come over?”

I’m tempted to pull the phone away from my ear and double check that it really is Dante’s number on the display. He’s asking me to come over?

“Right now?” I ask, to gauge his reaction more than anything. Is he in danger and can’t tell me?

He hesitates for a second before responding. “No, later is better. Tonight? Is ten o’clock good?”

“Is this a booty call or a cry for help?”

He sputters a laugh, and the sound lights me up the same way the breathy one did before.

“Just...” He lets out another heavy breath into the phone. “Will you come?”

It doesn't escape me that he doesn't answer my question.

"Ten o'clock tonight?" I confirm.

"Yes."

"I'll be there."

His end of the call goes dead without a formal goodbye, and I pull the phone away from my ear to stare at it for a few seconds. I don't know what the hell that was, but my heart is thumping with curiosity to find out.

Ten o'clock can't come soon enough.

Chapter 5

SALVATORE

I circle Dante's block twice, looking for anything suspicious, any cars or people who are out of place. His apartment lights are on the first time I drive past, but dark the second time. I can't decide whether that's a good sign or a bad sign, or if it means any-damn-thing at all. The muscles in my jaw twitch and the unease I've been feeling since he called hours ago tightens in my shoulders and up the back of my neck. Maybe I'm paranoid, but considering my job, I think it's warranted. Once you've seen the worst of humanity, it's hard to look at the world through any other lens. Besides, anyone who's been paying close enough attention might have seen Dante being friendly with us at Wild most nights and figured he would be an easy in to get at us in one way or another.

Not knowing whether this is some kind of trap or hostage situation, a sting where the feds have him wearing a wire, or a booty call would be funny if it didn't have my blood pressure so damn high. I take a breath and grip the steering wheel a little tighter as I make another right turn onto his street. This time Dante is outside his building, wearing a jacket with his hands stuffed into the pockets and looking up and down the street. His usual guarded scowl is in place on his face, and I can't see anyone else hovering nearby. The weight of my pistol strapped to my chest, hidden under my suit jacket, is the comfort I need as I slow to a stop and roll my window down.

"Angioletto," I murmur the word like a growl, full of the hungry desire I'm doing my damndest to keep tightly restrained.

He's not dressed for work. No skimpy shorts, see-through material, or tight leather in sight. He's no less tantalizing in jeans that hug his legs, begging to be peeled off slowly, and a black t-shirt under his jacket with a plunging neckline that shows off the olive branch tattoos across his collarbone and the butterfly between his pecs. The barbells through his nipples make their own distinct shapes in the fabric too, and I can see them clear as day thanks to the streetlamp directly overhead. I'm well aware that I'm staring at him without an ounce of subtlety, but instead of the snarky tongue lashing I'm expecting, he sinks his teeth into his bottom lip and looks at me through his eyelashes.

The look draws me up short. It's sweet as hell, calling on every instinct I have to leap out of the car and protect him from any and all dangers that might dare to lurk anywhere near my little angel. The problem is, sweet and Dante don't belong in the same sentence.

"Get in." The words are sharp, and I glance around again as he rounds the car without argument to climb in on the passenger side. Getting him somewhere else will at least help me rule out the possibility that this is a trap. Unless Dante is the one with the plan to get violent with me. I can't imagine I'd be that lucky.

I entertain a brief fantasy of the two of us grappling, beautiful rage burning in Dante's eyes as he flails and snaps, more foreplay than any actual attempt to do either of us any harm, begging for me to tame him and make him feel safe for the first time in his life. My cock swells and Dante clicks his seat belt into place. I rev the engine and he licks his lips, leaving them glistening with dampness I'm aching to taste.

"Thanks for coming," he says hoarsely as I pull away from the curb.

"Are you going to tell me why you called?" I split my attention between him and the road, trying to find any sign that someone put their hands on him, hurt him, forced him into this situation in some way, while keeping an eye out for anyone following

us.

“Is it a crime for a guy to want a little company, Sal?” He chuckles but the sound is off, too tight, and turns his head to look out his window. We’re already out of his neighborhood, heading through the heart of the city on our way towards the highway. He doesn’t ask though.

“I’m supposed to believe you called me for a fuck out of nowhere?” I arch an eyebrow even though he’s not looking at me and take the ramp to get us out of the city. “Did the city run out of pretty subs willing to pretend all your bratting is proper Domination?”

Without even looking over at him, I can feel his mood shifting, my taunt finding its mark perfectly. He sits up straighter in his seat.

“Fuck you,” he huffs, exactly like the brat he is, whether he wants to admit it or not.

“That’s what we’re discussing, Angioletto,” I purr, glancing at the city lights in my rearview and noting with satisfaction that there’s no one tailing us. “You’re saying you called me to fuck, and I’m just not sure I believe that.”

Dante huffs again, but this one sounds a lot more like a laugh.

“I didn’t think you were hurting for self-esteem.” His hand lands on my arm unexpectedly, and he trails his fingertips over the expensive, silky fabric of my jacket—black for a change, but with embroidered details. I opted for all black tonight, from my suit to the undershirt to my tie, even the corset vest. “You’re well-dressed, powerful, charming...”

The sultry tease in his voice licks at my skin and makes me resent the layers of fabric keeping me from feeling the actual warmth of his fingers.

“My self-esteem is just fine,” I assure him. “And my brain works even better. As much as I’d love to believe that you were hit with the sudden, irresistible urge to ride my cock, it doesn’t add up.”

The roads get darker the farther we get from the city, and the turn-off I need to take is hard to spot even in the daylight, so I keep my focus on the road, which isn’t hard now that Dante has gone quiet. The traffic is sparse out here, leaving us with just the hum of the engine and our own thoughts for a few dozen miles. I could turn on music, but then how would I be able to hear the steady rhythm of his breathing or the quiet creak of him shifting against the leather seats every so often?

“Where are we going?” he asks, a hitch of worry creeping into his voice that he immediately tries to hide with his usual sharp tongue and bared teeth. “I swear to fuck if you’re taking me out into the middle of nowhere to murder me and dump my body, I will rip your dick off and shove it down your throat.”

A warm chuckle rumbles in my chest. “You’re the one who called me,” I remind him. I turn down the gravel road to our destination, wincing at each thunk of a rock or stick ricocheting off my Jaguar and no doubt scratching the paint. “And we’re just going somewhere quiet where we can talk without being interrupted.” A smirk twitches on my lips. “Or fuck, if you were serious about that.”

Another irritated, heavy exhale, and then he bites out, “Fine.”

Trees start to close in around us, blocking out the light of the moon. This wouldn’t be a bad place to get a jump on someone, out in the middle of bumfuck where it wouldn’t matter how loud they try to scream. But Xaviaro and Sparrow love to come out into these woods to play chase and fuck like animals in the dirt, and if any of us started offing guys out here, he would get all pissy about bad energy and shit. Besides, there’s no shortage of places in Wildcliff where no one gives a fuck about hearing gunshots and screaming anyway, so why waste the gas?

I slow to a stop in a clearing at the top of the hill, with Wildcliff spread out in the valley in the distance, lighting up the night sky and looking every bit a dream instead of the nightmare she is more often than not. I turn off the engine, then undo my seat belt and turn towards Dante.

“Why did you call me?” I try again.

He shrugs and reaches into his jacket pocket. I tense and follow the movement. He pulls out a flask. “I’ve had an unbelievably shitty week and, believe it or not, my radiant personality doesn’t earn me a whole lot of friends. I thought we could have a drink and shoot the shit, that’s all.”

There’s still something he’s not telling me. I can see it written all over his carefully neutral expression.

“Get out,” I say coolly, already reaching for the handle on my own door. The echo of our doors closing and the crunch of gravel under our feet is a reminder of how quiet it is out here, how far away we are from everyone else in the world.

Dante is still holding the flask, his arms crossed and his head held high as we meet at the front of the car. There’s wary defiance dancing in his eyes. If it were up to me, I would replace it with trust and submission, but that takes a hell of a lot of time. Right now, I think I’ll have to settle for reigniting my favorite spark of rage.

“I need to check you for a wire. And you’re either going to let me do it without attempting to break any of my fingers or I’m going to drive you back home now without another word out of my mouth.”

He stares me down silently and, just as I expected, the worry in his eyes sparks and sizzles, burning away until there’s nothing left but the defiance and the heat of his fury that I can almost convince myself is passion if I try hard enough.

“Fine,” he growls again, setting the flask down on the hood of my Jag, not bothering to be careful with the paint at all. He shrugs out of his jacket and drapes it over the hood next to the flask, then spreads his arms wide in invitation. “Check me for a wire.”

DANTE

The quiver deep down in my gut has nothing to do with how close Salvatore is standing or the fact that he’s about to strip me down and put his hands all over me—in one of the least fun ways imaginable—and everything to do with the fact that I’ve been on edge all damn day and there are still a dozen ways this could go wrong before I manage to pull it off. It can’t go wrong. If it goes wrong, I’m dead. Hours of thinking about those photos and the threat behind them and that’s the realization I arrived at. He wants revenge and simply fucking with me won’t be enough. He’s not going to stop until one of us is dead. But he has no idea how far I’m willing to go to make sure he’s the one who ends up in the ground.

“I hope you’re not expecting a show, honey, because I don’t do those for free,” I snark, grabbing the bottom of my t-shirt and pulling it up over my head without any of the flair or theatrics I pride myself in when I’m onstage. I toss it on top of my jacket and hold my arms out to show him there are no microphones taped to my chest or tucked under my armpits.

Salvatore’s perusal of my bare chest is much slower than necessary, lingering on every square inch of bare skin as if he hasn’t watched me take my clothes off for a hundred horny idiots every night for years. I have to admit, being naked in private hits different. On stage with hot lights glaring in my eyes, men whistling and scrambling to throw money at me, my bare body is my power. It’s my weapon, my freedom and defiance. But all alone, just the two of us, I feel exposed. It feels... vulnerable.

My skin prickles with unexpected heat and my nipples tighten, the nubs throbbing around the warm metal of the barbells. His words from earlier echo in my mind again. “ Did the city run out of pretty subs willing to pretend that all your bratting is proper Domination? ” His assessment of me is so dead wrong that it’s laughable. He thinks I’m a brat in denial, just waiting for some big, strong Dom to come along and make me feel safe enough to submit? I’ll admit, I’ve probably pushed it a little too far on occasion, putting him in his place in front of his friends, curious to see where his pride draws the line, to see just how much mouthy disrespect he can take before his true colors show. Does he think I was doing that in the hope that he would put me over his knee and spank me? If I’m such a brat, I would have to struggle, cuss at him, and fight until the hard sting of his hand connects with my ass cheek for the first time, blunted by my shorts but still enough to make me gasp and go still with shock that he would dare to punish me like an unruly child while his friends look on.

I swallow hard, ignoring the electric feeling snaking through my veins and the growing throb in my cock. That sounds more like his fantasy than mine. Besides, if I were a real brat, I wouldn’t be able to resist running my mouth now either.

“Are you staring so hard at my nipples because you think one of the barbells has been replaced with the world’s smallest listening device? Maybe you should whisper a little secret into it just to be sure.” That barely counts as running my mouth. It’s not my fault I can’t stand awkward silences.

His lips twitch and his hands land on my hips with a warm, firm grip, his fingers sinking into the skin right above the waistband of my jeans. A gasp catches in my throat as he spins me around without warning, making me stumble. I catch myself with my hands on the hood of his car, still warm from the engine, another little tremor running through me that I hope Salvatore doesn’t see. I don’t know what would be worse, if he thought I was afraid of him or if he mistakenly believed this half-assed Mafia foreplay was getting me hot.

He strokes his fingers slowly down the length of my spine and I grit my teeth as goose bumps rise to meet his light touch. Whatever he's doing, it's a trick. He's lulling me into a false sense of security, hoping I'll be naive enough to believe he's a good, gentle man who only wants to worship my body instead of one who will leave me bruised and broken. A few soft touches aren't enough to erase a lifetime of experience. Besides, I'm counting on him being every bit the violent, possessive monster I need him to be. If you have a rat problem, sometimes the easiest solution is to get a cat. What happens to the cat when the rats are all gone? Well, I'll figure that part out later. One step at a time.

"I have to check the rest of you too." His deep voice comes from right next to my ear, his warm breath dancing over my earlobe and cascading down the slope of my bare neck.

Salvatore slides his hand around to my front, bringing it to rest on the button of my jeans. I bat it away before he can notice the swell of my cock straining against my zipper.

"If there's one thing I can do, it's undress myself," I mutter, keeping one hand braced on the car while I pop the button and lower my zipper with the other. "You know, if this is how you treat all of your friends, I can understand why the only people you spend time with are a bunch of criminals."

He barks out a laugh. "Weren't you the one so desperate for friends you called me?"

I wiggle my pants and underwear down around my ankles and return both my hands to the hood of the Jag, feeling every bit like a criminal being strip searched and cursing at my stiff, drooling cock for finding anything fucking erotic about this.

"Yeah, well, something tells me I won't make that mistake again," I grit out between my teeth.

Salvatore repeats the process of his soft, careful touch, ghosting his hands over my bare ass cheeks and tugging them apart. I choke on a gasp and instinctually clench. My cock twitches and I squeeze my eyes closed, my muscles all coiling and my adrenaline spiking, readying me to fight if I need to. He moves on though and I sag with a relieved breath as he drags his hands down the backs of my thighs before taking a step back.

“Almost done. Turn around, Angioletto.” He sounds just as even and unruffled as always, except that air of confident authority is back, the same one he used to run that guy off in the club last week after I broke his nose. Did he have to practice that voice, or does it come naturally? I’m almost embarrassed to admit how long I worked on my Dom voice, and it still doesn’t hold that level of unquestionable authority his does.

I push myself off the car and slowly turn to face him, careful not to trip on my pants still around my ankles. I hold my breath, waiting for his hands again. But instead, his gaze lingers on my unmistakably hard cock for a moment before he rakes it all the way up my body to meet my eyes.

“No wire,” he says, and I nod, my heart leaping with another burst of relief even though I already knew I wasn’t hiding anything. Well, not a recording device, anyway.

“Can I put my clothes back on now?” I ask, putting as much vitriol into my glare as I can manage.

“If you want to.” He smirks, then stands there and watches as I pull myself back together, like it’s just as exciting to see me put my clothes back on as it is to watch them come off.

I snatch the flask off the hood of the car again and steel my nerves. I cleared most of the hurdles; I got Salvatore alone, I’ve gained his trust, now I just have to hope this

next part will work as well as I need it to.

“You’re not married, are you?” I plant my ass on the hood of his car, right where my handprints are still smudged, and unscrew the cap of the flask.

He chuckles. “No. Not seeing anyone either. Are we back to pretending you called me tonight for sex?”

I hum noncommittally and bring the flask to my lips, turning my head slightly so he won’t see the way I press my lips together and only pretend to take a sip. I hesitate for just a second. This isn’t the worst thing I’ve ever done, it’s not even that bad, all things considered. Salvatore will be fine, and more importantly, so will I.

I hand him the flask and he doesn’t hesitate, lifting it to his lips, tilting his head back, and taking a generous gulp. I watch his throat bob as he swallows, my heart thundering so loudly I can barely hear anything else.

“You’re a good man.” I’m not sure what makes me say it, but I think I’m mostly right. As good as a career criminal can be, anyway. In a fucked up way, the fact that he’s a Moretti makes me trust him more than I trust most people. At least I have a good idea of what his deep, dark secrets are. “I bet you keep your promises, don’t you?”

He frowns and passes the flask to me. I pretend to take another sip and hand it back again.

“What promises, Angioletto? Is something going on? Do you need help?” The threatening growl in his voice is all the reassurance I need that I’m making the right call. I’ll explain everything later and he’ll understand. Maybe he would have even agreed to it the easy way, but it’s too late to find out now.

He takes another hearty drink and then sways on his feet.

“Shit,” he slurs. “Something’s wrong.”

I nod and push off the hood of the car, hurrying over so he can brace his hands on me before he falls. He might forgive me for drugging him, but I think grass stains on his fancy suit would earn me one between the eyes.

“It’s okay. Let’s get you back in the car.”

He stumbles, trusting most of his weight to my shoulders as I ease him around the car towards the passenger side.

“What the fuck?” he mumbles, blinking slowly and shaking his head like he’s hoping that will be enough to get rid of the dizziness and blurred vision, or maybe hoping it will keep him awake. I manage to get him into the seat and lean over to buckle him in. His eyes focus on me for just a second, full of clarity and confusion. “You drugged me.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:53 am

Chapter 6

SALVATORE

Wisps of memories, or maybe dreams, flutter and dance in the periphery of my foggy awareness, more welcoming than the vague awareness I have of a sharp, throbbing pain behind my eyes, unpleasant knots tightening in my stomach, and the sense that the world is moving around me. It's been probably fifteen years since I drank to the point of a blackout, but that has to be what this is. And since the dreams—I think that's what they are considering how naked Dante is—are a hell of a lot more pleasant than facing the monstrous hangover that's waiting for me, I try to use them to fight off the threat of consciousness. It creeps in little by little though, first with the feeling of heaviness in my limbs, then the twinge of a full bladder making me wonder how long I've been asleep, and finally with the knots in my stomach turning into something more urgent, forcing bile up into my throat.

The distant sound of a groan draws my attention to the hum of a car engine... my car engine. People swear they know their own baby's cry or their own dog's bark, well, I would know the purr of my Jag's engine anywhere. And since I'm clearly not the person driving...

Another groan echoes in my ears, and this time I realize I'm the one making the sound. My mouth is dry, and my eyelids feel like they weigh one ton each, but there's a niggling thought in the back of my mind that only gets stronger. Dante is in some kind of trouble. I force my eyes open and reach for my pistol in a single, groggy motion. My holster is empty though, and that realization sends a burst of adrenaline through me, burning away the lingering drowsiness, but unfortunately not doing a

damn thing to cure my throbbing headache or the fresh wave of nausea.

“Pull over,” I bark.

“Oh good, you’re awake.”

If I’m not mistaken, Dante sounds genuinely relieved. Did he expect I wouldn’t wake up? That’s only one of a hundred questions cluttering up my brain, adding to the building pressure trying to burst its way out of my skull.

“Pull over,” I demand again, grappling for the door handle and breathing steadily through my nose.

Dante hesitates for a second.

“Fine, but you should know I have your gun, so don’t bother trying to make a run for it.”

The jerk of the car as he guides it over to the side of the impossibly long, desolate desert road makes my guts lurch. The car is still rolling to a stop when I throw my door open and spill out into the sand and gravel lining the shoulder, barely able to keep myself upright as I stumble forward a few steps, brace my hands on my knees, and vomit up everything I’ve eaten in the last week. I think I deserve some kind of acknowledgment for managing to miss not only my clothes but my shoes as well. Who says you can’t learn anything useful in college?

Once I’m sure my stomach is empty, I straighten myself up, smoothing my hands uselessly over my wrinkled suit, and take in my surroundings properly for the first time. Sand, cacti, and a two-lane road that looks like it goes on endlessly in both directions. The only things that keep the desert from seeming infinite are the mountains that line the horizon.

I turn back towards my car to find Dante leaning against the hood, looking towards the road like he's trying to give me some privacy during my best impression of Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*. There's a bottle of water and a few crumpled napkins next to him, and my gun held casually in his right hand. I don't know if it was the vomiting that cleared the fog of my memories or something else, but last night comes rushing back with crystal clarity.

"Sorry I don't have anything better for you to clean up with, just some napkins that came with the drive-thru coffee I picked up around four a.m. The water bottle is still sealed though, and you should definitely drink something." He doesn't look at me while he rambles, casually using the pistol to gesture over his shoulder at the napkins and water.

"You drugged me." Between the vomiting and the dry mouth, my words are a hoarse whisper, but without another sound for miles, aside from my idling Jag, I know Dante hears me just fine.

"Yeah, I was kind of hoping we wouldn't dwell on that." He pushes himself off the car and turns to face me. He looks nearly as rough as I feel with dark circles under his eyes and rumpled clothes.

I close the space between us in a few long strides, ignoring the gun hanging limply at his side to put myself right in front of him, towering over him, with the front bumper pressed against the backs of his knees leaving nowhere for him to go.

"You fucking drugged me," I growl again. "Where the hell even are we? What's the plan here? Did someone put you up to it? Was it the Fitzpatricks?"

"No one put me up to anything." He swallows, his head tilted so he can meet my eyes and stare me right back down like he's not the least bit intimidated by me. I suppose he is the one holding the gun right now, but some stupid part of me doesn't think he'll

use it.

“It’s money then? Are you planning to ransom me back to Lorenzo? Because I guarantee that plan will end with you dead.” Anxiety builds in my chest, and I press my body into Dante’s, needing to feel the solid reassurance that he’s safe. Whatever he’s mixed up in, it doesn’t matter. I’m not going to let Lorenzo or anyone else lay a finger on him.

He squirms against me, his glare undermined by the feel of his hardening cock against my thigh.

“It’s not about money,” he grits out through gritted teeth.

“Help me out then, Angioletto, because I can’t think of another sane reason for you to drug and kidnap one of Lorenzo’s inner circle.” I run my fingers down his forearm towards his hand. “And, while we’re at it, why don’t you give me my gun back?”

Dante jerks like he just remembered he’s holding the pistol at all. His glare melts into a more calm, calculated indifference and he presses the muzzle under my chin. My heart rate doesn’t even spike. If I had a dollar for every time I’ve had a gun pointed at me, I’d be able to retire early. This is the first time my dick has been hard though. Even with the flicker of victory in his eyes, I swear I can feel his body quiver against mine. He might not think he’s a brat, but that’s exactly what this is. This is a temper tantrum, a bid for attention, and maybe a cry for help. But I can’t help him if he doesn’t tell me what the hell he’s gotten himself into.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” he says steadily, his tongue darting out to wet his dry lips as he holds my gaze and keeps the gun notched against my jaw. “You’re going to stop badgering me with questions and we’re going to get back in the car. It’s still about eight hours to where we’re going, so as long as you show me I can trust you, we’ll stop in a few more hours to stretch our legs and get something to eat. If

you don't piss me off, I'll think about explaining things then."

I consider pushing back, testing my theory that he won't pull the trigger, and my more overarching theory that all this snarling and baring of teeth is nothing more than a desperate plea for someone to make him feel safe. But I have to admit, it sounds like a lot more fun to play his hostage for a little while and see where things go.

"Alright, Angioletto, I'll come quietly." I fight the twitch of a smile.

Dante slowly lowers his gun, and I take a step back.

"Drink your water," he commands before getting back into the driver's seat.

I uncap the water bottle, using the first couple of sips to rinse and spit, then guzzle the rest of it down. It settles heavily into my empty stomach. When I'm finished, I crumple the plastic bottle in my fist and get back in the car.

DANTE

"If you don't want bigger problems though, you should let me text Alessio to tell him I'll be unreachable for a couple of days so he can pass that along to Lorenzo," Salvatore says after buckling his seat belt and fiddling with the air conditioner settings.

I slip the pistol into the holster attached to the sun visor and flip it up so he won't be able to easily reach over and grab it while I'm driving. The Morettis realizing Salvatore is missing and launching a manhunt for him is a problem that occurred to me around one o'clock this morning, and I've been thinking about what to do about it ever since. I shake my head and then shift in my seat to pull his phone out of my pocket.

He reaches to grab it, and I pull it back.

“Unlock it and I’ll text him. I don’t want you giving him a secret SOS code or something.”

“A secret SOS code?” He arches one of his thick but neatly shaped eyebrows at me.

“Yeah, you know, something you would never say to alert people who know you well to the fact that you’ve been kidnapped. Like, ‘I’m out of town for a comic book convention’ when they know you don’t like nerd shit.” I tap the phone so the lock screen appears and wave it in front of him.

He chuckles and eyes me for a second before typing in the code. He has a generic background set and no icons on his home screen aside from the dial button and a texting app. I guess that makes sense. I can’t exactly picture a mafioso sitting around playing Candy Crush. It’s even harder to imagine Salvatore lounging on the couch in one of his expensive suits, mindlessly matching colorful tiles for hours on end.

“Hmm, but you don’t know me well enough to know the things I would never, ever do. You might unintentionally alert Alessio yourself.” He opens his glove compartment and pulls out a pair of sunglasses. They’re probably just as overpriced as everything else he owns. He slips them on before adjusting his seat back to a comfortable reclined position like he doesn’t have a care in the world, like he’s not currently being held at gunpoint.

“I’ll tell him you’re too sick to work, contagious, he shouldn’t come to your apartment, but you’ll see him in a few days.”

Salvatore shakes his head. “He’ll never buy it. I had walking pneumonia and Lorenzo had to have someone sit outside my apartment with a gun to keep me from trying to come to work anyway.”

“Okay, not sick, but you need a vacation. You’ve been working too hard and decided to book yourself a few days at an all-inclusive resort. I can even take a picture of you at a pool with a drink tomorrow to really sell the story.”

He chuckles and shakes his head again. “I haven’t taken a vacation in fifteen years.”

I narrow my eyes at him. He’s being purposefully difficult right now.

“Overpriced suit convention?” I deadpan.

He makes a strangled noise and shoves his sunglasses up so he can look at me properly.

“Overpriced? Most of the suits I wear are one of a kind, hand sewn, and expertly tailored. If anything, they’re underpriced for the quality.”

I let my eyes wander over him for just a second. I’m not about to admit it out loud, but even wrinkled from hours in the car and a night’s sleep, it’s a damn nice suit and he is wearing the hell out of it. I huff and drum my fingers on the steering wheel, trying to come up with another good excuse for a few days of absence.

Salvatore slips his sunglasses back over his eyes and settles back again, folding his hands over his belly like he’s preparing to take a nap.

“Tell him I’m with you,” he says.

“Doing what?” If a vacation is unrealistic, I can’t imagine why he thinks it would be less suspicious to tell Alessio he’s fucking off of work for days to get some ass.

“Make something up.”

I chew on my bottom lip and think about that suggestion. He might be setting me up to immediately implicate myself, but I don't think he is. Actually, I think he's onto something. If I pull this off, they're going to know anyway, so I might as well skip the outright lie and lay the groundwork now.

I click on the texting app and find a chat with Alessio right near the top. I quickly tap out a message then read it over to make sure it sounds realistic before I hit send.

“Done,” I announce, shoving the phone back into my pocket.

With that taken care of, I put the car in drive and pull away from the shoulder, back onto the quiet, dusty road.

“What did you end up telling him?”

“That it's a long story and you'd have to give him the details later, but you and I are on our way to Los Vespas to get married.”

“I'm sorry... what ?”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:53 am

Chapter 7

SALVATORE

I hold up a t-shirt with absolute horror, the cheap fabric rough as sandpaper between my fingers. The front of it is printed with an image of a flying saucer hovering over a desert and the words “I got probed in Rosewood, New Vada.”

Dante sidles up beside me and cackles loudly. The sound startles me. I’ve never heard him laugh before. Not a real laugh anyway. I’ve heard him snort with derision and bark out mocking laughter, but never this.

“You have to get that,” he says.

I give him a flat look. He has to be kidding.

When we spotted this little tourist trap and attached restaurant after what felt like endless hours driving through nothing but vacant desert, with Dante refusing to elaborate on the marriage bombshell he dropped, he pulled over so we could stretch our legs and eat as promised. I thought he was joking when he led me into the shop, saying we both could use a change of clothes at this point. But this bit has gone on a little too long if he thinks I would honestly change out of my five-thousand- dollar suit in favor of a kitschy t-shirt that’s probably made of asbestos.

“I have a gun, Sal, that means you have to do what I say,” he reminds me with an air of taunting and the ghost of a smile on his lips.

If the teenage employee behind the counter finds it alarming to hear a gun threat, he doesn't show it. Out here I'm guessing it's just a regular Tuesday afternoon to hear someone casually threaten to shoot another person. Not that I have a lot of room to talk considering the routine violence in my own day-to-day life.

"You're saying that my options are to either wear this shirt or be shot?" I clarify blandly, and Dante nods. I glance at the shirt one more time and then back at him. "Okay, you can shoot me."

"Fine, but don't complain to me later when we check into a hotel and I'm comfy in my new shorts and t-shirt while you have to sleep in your suit." He looks smug as he holds up the shorts he picked out, small enough that they're unlikely to leave much to the imagination with the words "beam me up, Space Daddy" printed across the ass.

"I promise you, I won't be sleeping in my suit, Angioletto." I pin him with a heated look so he can't misunderstand the implication.

I was set on being patient with him, taking my time to slowly build his trust in me so I could do things right. But he drugged me and kidnapped me, and I'm still unclear about that marriage comment. If he's past decorum and civility, then so am I.

Dante huffs, snatches the t-shirt out of my grasp, and stomps up to the register where he already set a pair of alien-themed boxers and a keychain shaped like a UFO. The teenage employee rings it all up and I reach into my suit jacket for my wallet, half-surprised to find it exactly where I expect it to be. Unlike my pistol and phone, which are both still in his possession.

I set my credit card down on the counter before Dante can pull his out. While the cashier finishes the transaction, I press myself just a little too close to my angel, my fingers twitching with the urge to slip my hand underneath his shirt to feel the smoothness of his skin. He doesn't shift away or stiffen, but he does glare at me,

pressing his weight right back at me like a challenge. Push me, Angioletto, make me work for it . His jaw ticks but a flicker of heat dances in his eyes at the same time. He's not just fighting me, he's fighting himself. He needs permission to let go... or maybe he needs to be forced to let go.

“Here's your receipt. Thanks for stopping in and be safe out there in the desert.” The last line is delivered with a practiced air of drama that lets me know he says it to every customer.

Dante blows out a breath and grabs the bag off the counter, rushing out while I put my card away, give the cashier a nod in thanks, then hurry after him. By the time I step outside, he's already headed inside the small restaurant just a few feet away.

The chill of air conditioning running at full blast and the smell of grilled peppers hit me as I step inside. A young woman wearing an apron and a t-shirt with a cartoonish alien face on it—you can't say they aren't committed to their theme—approaches us, sweeping her eyes over me skeptically. I suppose they don't get many tourists wearing Brioni. Or maybe it's my disheveled state that's drawing her attention. Either way, she dismisses me after a fraction of a second, grabbing a pair of menus and leading us to a table with the promise to be back to take our order shortly.

Dante picks up his menu immediately, but too many hours spent staring at cacti and tumbleweeds has my patience wearing particularly thin. I reach across the table and push his menu down, ignoring the glare that earns me.

“Explain.”

“I know you're used to barking orders at people and having them fall over themselves to obey, but has anyone ever told you that a little bit of kindness goes a long way?” That's rich coming from the man I've watched break countless fingers, whose primary facial expression is a scowl.

“You kidnapped me, Angioletto,” I remind him flatly, doing my best to keep the growl out of my voice. He really is a brat, and whether he realizes what he’s doing or not, he’s trying his hardest to find my breaking point. Some part of him is dying to find out what combination of mouthiness and sour looks will earn him the spanking he’s desperate for. Or maybe that’s not what he’s craving. Maybe there’s a different kind of punishment he’d prefer, like hours of edging until he’s ready to adjust his attitude if I’ll just let him come.

Maybe my thoughts are written all over my face, or maybe he’s thinking something similar, something that makes him shift in his seat and has his cheeks darkening briefly. I’m almost curious enough about what could possibly make a stripper blush to forget my previous question. Almost .

“Fuck, okay,” he sighs. “It’s a long story and I don’t want to get into most of it, but basically, I...” He swallows hard and shifts in his seat again, drumming his fingers on the bright red plastic tabletop. “I’m in trouble. Someone’s threatening me, they broke into my apartment yesterday and left an envelope full of pictures of me.”

“What?” I roar. Forgetting that we’re hundreds of miles from Wildcliff and whoever would dare to come anywhere near my angel, I jump out of my seat. I’ll fucking kill them. Anyone who’s ever so much as had a negative thought about Dante is going to die a slow, painful death at my hands.

“Salvatore.” My name on Dante’s lips is the only thing that could break through the murderous fantasy. He stands up just enough to lean across the table, grab my tie, and haul me back into my seat. “Would you let me finish?”

“Yes, go on,” I grit between my teeth as I struggle for restraint. Maybe he knows who’s after him. That will make the task of finding the person and feeding them their own entrails slightly more expedient.

“This person, he’s a fucking coward. I don’t know who’s working with him, but they’re probably the same kind of spineless trash playing at being hard.” The rage burning in Dante’s eyes holds my attention like nothing else could. Does he realize his fingers are still wrapped around my tie? That he’s still leaning across the table towards me? “I could deal with this myself, but I decided it’ll be a hell of a lot easier to make myself too terrifying for him to touch.”

He finally sits back in his seat and lets go of my tie. I smooth it out and plant my elbows on the table, unhappy with the fresh space between us.

“And how do you plan to do that?” I think I can follow his logic, but I want to hear him say it. I want the words on his tongue so I can taste the remnants of them later when I lick between his lips for the first time.

“I think being married to a Moretti should do the trick.”

A hot shiver creeps up my spine and I smirk at him.

“That’s not much of a proposal, Angioletto. You’re going to have to do better than that.”

DANTE

I grind my teeth. I should have picked someone less irritating for this plan. My options were limited though. Alessio’s lack of seriousness would have probably caused me to shoot him, even I don’t have big enough balls to kidnap Big Daddy Moretti, and I don’t think wifing up a foot soldier would be intimidating enough to get Don to back the fuck off, so here we are.

“Sorry, I didn’t have time to buy a ring or chill a bottle of champagne,” I deadpan.

Salvatore leans a little farther across the table, still grinning at me. “That’s alright, you can make it up to me later.”

I roll my eyes. “Make it up to you? Have you forgotten which one of us has the upper hand right now? You’re my hostage, and if I say we’re getting married, then we’re getting married.”

“We’re negotiating,” he says with that damn authority ringing in his tone again. The smoothness in the way he says it instantly reminds me exactly who I’m dealing with. He’s not the average slimeball thug I spend my nights leaving bloody.

“I have a gun,” I remind him.

His smirk widens and he sweeps his gaze over me. “Not on you. And I doubt even the most questionable quickie chapel in Los Vespar will perform a wedding with one of the participants being held at gunpoint.”

“Then I’ll shoot them too,” I mutter petulantly, hating that he’s right. I’m going to need him to actually agree to this.

He lets out a low, rumbling chuckle, and the fact that the sound makes my dick start to swell tempts me to kick him under the table. Bruising his shins probably isn’t the way to convince him to marry me though. Ugh, I liked him better when he was unconscious. Maybe I should just drug him again. Eventually he’ll have to be conscious enough to at least say ‘I do’ though, which leaves me with only one option: playing nice. Grr, maybe I could kick him just a little first.

“Now, now, is that any way to look at the man you’re hoping to marry?” he taunts.

I drag my tongue along my bottom lip and shift in my seat, pulling in a slow, deep breath to keep myself from jumping across the table to strangle him.

“What do you want?” I ask through clenched teeth.

His eyes turn molten, and all the teasing melts out of his expression.

“I was raised Catholic, Angioletto, and I may not be a religious man anymore, but some things stick. If I’m getting married, it’s going to be a real marriage, with all the commitment and benefits.”

“Sex?” I bristle and my traitorous cock throbs, a flicker of heat taking up residence in the pit of my stomach. “I have someone threatening to kill me and you’re worried about our wedding night? Jesus Christ,” I mutter, pinching the bridge of my nose and willing my body to stop finding any part of this hot. I don’t want some Mafia thug to leverage safety for sex. I don’t. My cock jerks in abject disagreement.

Salvatore doesn’t say a word while I sit across from him fighting with myself. It’s a negotiation tactic to keep the upper hand—don’t say anything more than absolutely necessary. Maybe I’ll run back to the car and grab the gun, then we’ll see who has the upper hand. Then again, waving a gun around in here will probably get us kicked out without food and I’m too damn hungry to risk that.

“Fine,” I bite out the word, lowering my hand and opening my eyes again to see him still staring at me with hooded eyes and parted lips. Too many hours of driving, the repetitive lines of the road hypnotizing me and making my eyes tired, has clearly made me delirious. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he’s actually getting off on this, that he actually wants this. “We good then? You’ll cooperate?”

“One more thing,” he says. “You’re coming to me for protection, so I need you to agree to let me protect you.”

I frown. Now he’s just talking in circles. I wave my hand dismissively.

“Sure, whatever. Like I said, this guy is gutless. If I send him a copy of our marriage announcement, I think that’ll be enough to keep him away. And once I’m sure he’s moved on, we can just get divorced.”

Salvatore grunts noncommittally.

“Do we have a deal?” I ask again.

“We have a deal,” he purrs, then crooks his finger at me. “Seal it with a kiss.”

I roll my eyes again. I guess I’d better get used to it. Whatever. It’s just sex, and I’m hardly a prude. It’s a small price to pay to end this without any more bloodshed. I lean across the table and pucker my lips obediently, but the kiss doesn’t come immediately like I’m expecting. Salvatore’s chair scrapes against the linoleum floor and when I peel my eyes open again to see what’s happening, he’s right there, standing over me with a predatory gleam in his eyes that should make me sick to my stomach. There’s something different about it from the usual empty, aggressive appraisal I’m used to. I don’t have much time to try to figure out exactly what makes the look in his eyes different though. He plants one hand on the table and leans down into my space.

His breath bathes my face, and he hooks his other hand behind my neck, making a gasp catch in my throat. He hesitates for just a second, not even a full heartbeat, but it’s long enough for something inside of me to quiver and ache impatiently. No, not impatiently. I’m not waiting for him to kiss me. I just need his help, and this is the only way to get it.

His fingers dig into the back of my neck, and he drags me forward that last inch, fully in control as his lips meet mine. The kiss isn’t gentle, but it isn’t rough either. The same confident authority he wields so easily with a simple shift in his tone is written all over the way his mouth moves against mine. Demanding, possessive, claiming.

A hot shiver runs through me, and I gasp against his mouth, parting my lips and inadvertently melting into him. That ache from before sweeps through me again, leaving my cock painfully hard and my heart racing. Salvatore tightens his grip and teases his tongue along the seam of my lips with a sigh before releasing me. I sway forward in a daze.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to see if you folks are ready to order?” My heart is still pounding so loudly I can barely hear the waitress.

Salvatore slides casually back into his seat across from me, looking smug and pleased with himself.

“I’m sure this is a longshot, but you wouldn’t happen to have champagne, would you? It seems we have something to celebrate.” He’s all charm now, giving the waitress a friendly smile.

She uses her pen to scratch her head. “I think we have pre-mixed mimosas?” She says it like a question.

“Perfect. Two of those, please, and give us just another minute with the menus.”

She nods and wanders off again, and I finally manage to pull myself out of my stupor. It was just a kiss. A really nice kiss, sure, but still just a kiss. This is business... no, it’s not even that. It’s practical, it’s self-preservation. I’m just overtired and stressed, so I’m responding strangely to the relief of Sal agreeing to help me. I’ll put up with his demands because I have to, not because any part of me is curious how he plans to try to tame my supposed bratting.

My cock pulses against my thigh and I swallow down a huff, grabbing my napkin off the table and aggressively spreading it across my lap. I should have just killed Don years ago and saved myself all this trouble.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:53 am

Chapter 8

DANTE

Somewhere between drugging Salvatore and him sliding his platinum credit card across the desk at one of the most expensive hotels in Los Vespar, I think I really lost control of this abduction.

When we hit the city, we stopped to buy the essentials and a few less tacky clothing options to get us through the next couple of days. I swing the bags impatiently in my hand while he finishes smooth talking the man behind the desk and signing the credit card receipt.

“Enjoy your stay, and congratulations.” The man gives me a big, sappy smile. “I’ll see about sending something special up to your room.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I mutter, too tired from fifteen hours of driving to fake any of the necessary enthusiasm. Why Salvatore is going around telling everyone about our upcoming wedding is beyond me. Maybe the drugs scrambled his brain and he thinks this is real. Or maybe this is some mind-fuck way of getting the upper hand.

“Come on, Angioletto, I’m dying to get out of these clothes.” He puts his hand on my lower back and guides me through the opulent lobby, our shoes clicking on the marble tiles while the whirs and whistles of slot machines echo loudly from the casino.

“Not wasting any time collecting on my end of the deal, huh?” I bristle and consider

slapping his hand away from me, but I suppose it's practical to have him touching me. At least I know he's still with me and isn't attempting to make a run for it now we're in a loud, chaotic city where it would be all too easy for him to lose me if he wanted to.

We reach the elevators, and I see his lips twitch with a grin in the reflection on the shiny gold doors.

“Have you ever worn a corset for thirty hours straight? I'm afraid my ribs are permanently bruised. And I would happily murder someone for a shower.” The elevator doors slide open as he's saying that last bit. The woman on the other side gives him a wide-eyed look and carefully skirts around us, keeping one eye on Sal, then hurries away.

I snort a laugh, and he calls after her, “It's just a figure of speech.”

Somehow, he managed to talk his way into getting us the honeymoon suite. I'd bother feeling bad for the couple who must have gotten downgraded to make that happen, but if they're getting married in Los Vespar, I doubt it'll last anyway. They can try again to score a honeymoon suite on their second marriages. The elevator doors open on the top floor and before I can even step out, he slides his hand around my waist and stoops to hook the other behind my knees, sweeping me into his arms in a bridal carry.

“Hey,” I yelp. “Are you fucking insane?” I squirm and swing the bags wildly, trying to get him to put me down, but he just tightens his hold.

“Says the man who drugged and kidnapped me,” he deadpans.

“You're never going to let that go, are you?” I grumble but stop fighting him.

“Hard to say since it only happened last night. I might need to hang on to it for another day or two before I’m ready to move on.”

I huff. I guess that’s fair. Annoying, but fair.

“Do me a favor and fish the room key out of my pocket, Angel?” he purrs.

“Nope.” Like hell am I going to help him with this asinine, fake romance bullshit he’s using to torment me about my marriage scheme. “Put me down or figure it out yourself.”

He nuzzles my ear before catching the lobe between his teeth and biting down gently. I clench my jaw against the gasp that threatens to escape and stubbornly ignore the jolt of heat it sends through me.

“Challenge accepted,” he murmurs.

I’ve never seen Salvatore in anything except a suit, but I’ve never thought of him as a particularly strong man. Not that he looks weak, just average build if I had to guess. Which makes it all the more surprising that he doesn’t even grunt with exertion as he hoists me over his shoulder in a fluid motion that has the room spinning and a startled squawk spilling from my mouth. He grasps the back of my thigh to keep me in place, my hardening cock pressed against his shoulder and his ass directly in my face, and then he casually uses his other hand to pull the room key from his pocket. Seconds later, I hear the beep of the door lock.

Things are seriously getting away from me. I’m the one with the gun tucked into the back of my pants, I’m the one with the balls to kidnap a Moretti and come up with this whole marriage plan, and, goddammit, I’m the one who put Don behind bars in the first place. So how the fuck did I end up hanging over Salvatore’s shoulder like an unruly child feeling like he holds all the cards here?

As soon as we're over the threshold, I growl and bite down hard on his ass cheek. He yelps and as his fingers twitch around my thigh, I leverage my weight, grab his hips, and flip myself down off his shoulder. I should get extra points for the exceptionally graceful landing under the circumstances. I even managed to keep hold of the bags and keep the gun in my pants. I spin around to face him just as fluidly, the movement feeling like a choreographed dance the way it flows through my muscles, fueled by my annoyance. It's a hell of a lot easier than dismounting the pole. Salvatore isn't even greased up or spinning.

I drop the bags and take a step forward just as Salvatore turns around, putting me right in his face... or close to, given our height difference. I need to remind him who's in charge here, which one of us holds the power.

"Let's get one thing straight. Just because I agreed to your terms for this marriage doesn't put us on equal footing. I'll fucking shoot you, Sal."

Something flickers in his eyes, but it's not fear.

"I don't think you will," he whispers with a smirk, tilting his head down and nuzzling the tip of his nose against mine.

My fingers twitch for the gun. I should at least graze him—a small flesh wound to prove I mean business—but... fuck, he's right, I'm not going to do it. A frustrated scream rises in my throat, but I manage to choke it back down. If hurting him isn't an option, there has to be another way I can re-assert my dominance in this situation.

Sex .

He thinks he's going to extort sex from me in exchange for protection? He thinks I'm just a brat dying to be Dommed by a self-important mafioso like him? I'll show him how I like to play, and then we'll see who's using who.

I press up on my toes another inch, bringing my lips close to his, and echo his gesture, bumping my nose against his and holding his molten hot gaze.

“Fine, sweetheart, you’ve got me there. I need you, so I won’t shoot you. But don’t think that means you own me or control me in any way. Now, be good and go take your shower. When you’re done, you’re going to get on your knees and suck me.” I catch his bottom lip between my teeth and tug it roughly, savoring the hoarse growl I draw out of him, my eyes boring into his, watching the embers of his lust spark into a full-on inferno. “Say, ‘yes, master.’”

He rumbles with amusement and then cups the back of my neck the same way he did before he kissed me earlier. My pulse jumps but I stand firm, refusing to give up the ground I just started taking back. Salvatore brings his lips to my ear.

“I’ll get on my knees and suck you, Angioletto, just like I’ve been dying to do since the first time I saw you dance. We can decide afterward which one of us will go by ‘master.’” He sinks his teeth into the edge of my jaw, and I gasp, swaying on my feet, my cock throbbing violently.

He lets me go, winks, and then disappears into the bedroom without another word.

SALVATORE

I ignore my heavy, insistent cock and the fluttering anticipation in my gut, focusing instead on taking my time under the luxurious waterfall showerhead, letting the hot water work out the kinks in my muscles from too many hours in the car. While I painstakingly wash every inch of my body with the eucalyptus and mint soap the hotel provided, I picture Dante waiting for me on the other side of the door.

I try to guess his strategy. How does my angel play the part of a Dom when it’s obvious to anyone with sense and experience that he’s begging for someone to finally

make him feel safe enough to submit? Maybe he'll stay in the living room, forcing me to come find him, to crawl on my knees across the cheap, rough carpet for him. My deep, rumbling laugh echoes off the tiled walls. It might be fun to watch him try to make me crawl. Or maybe he likes to play rough. His cock was already hard. Is he lying on the bed, playing with himself, waiting for me so he can tangle his fingers in my hair and force me to my knees? Does he want to use my mouth like a fuck sleeve, chasing his own pleasure and leaving me hard and needy just to prove his point about who's in charge?

I chuckle again and wrap my soapy hand around my stiff, aching cock.

Is he getting impatient? Is he squirming and grumbling about how long I've been in the shower? Is he working to convince himself that storming in here would be a power move and not exactly what I'm hoping for?

I work my hand slowly up and down my shaft, picturing the fire in my Angioletto's eyes, the strength and determination that's written in every curl of his fists and sway of his hips, the vulnerability hidden in the trembles he hopes I don't notice every time I touch him. I let out a moan, loud enough that I'm sure he'll hear it if he's listening. And then another. Come on, little angel, I'm ready to play if you are .

The bathroom door swings open, and I roll my hips, fucking into my fist, putting on a show for my soon-to-be-husband. I grunt and sigh, then look over my shoulder with my hand still moving over my cock. He's obscured slightly by the steam on the shower door, but I can see him stripped down to nothing but a pair of dark briefs, standing in the doorway.

"Take a shower, suck my cock." He ticks the two items off on his fingers. "Nowhere on that list did I tell you to spend half an hour in here jerking off."

"I'm sorry, Angioletto," I purr, pushing open the shower door with my free hand, not

pausing my steady strokes with the other. “Did you want this?”

I widen my stance just a little, angling my hips towards him so he has a full view of my dark, swollen dick, my foreskin swallowing my cockhead and then rolling back again, my balls swinging heavily. Dante’s lips part and the unmistakable shape of his erection stiffens and twitches in the confines of his silky black briefs.

“All you have to do is beg for it, and it’s yours.”

His eyes snap up to meet mine, just as defiant as always even though we both know there’s no hiding his reaction to me. What will it take for Dante to let himself submit?

“You have that the wrong way around, baby girl.” He palms his cock through his briefs and his eyelashes flutter.

I chuckle and finally shut off the water. “You think so?”

I pluck a towel off the rack next to the shower and wrap it around my waist. The sudden chill has my nipples tightening but doesn’t do a damn thing to dampen the pulsing excitement between my legs. Water droplets cling to my skin and drip from my hair to run down the back of my neck. I step out of the shower, leaving wet footprints behind me as I stalk towards Dante. He holds his ground, pushing off the doorframe to straighten himself up to full height.

“You want me to trade you my body for your protection? Fine, I agreed to that. But it’ll be on my terms.” He grabs my wrist and places my hand on his cock. His briefs are even silkier than they look, expensive if I had to guess, and I can feel every ridge and throbbing vein of his shaft through them, his heat pulsing in my palm.

I wrap my fingers around his length and press myself closer to him, bringing my mouth near enough to taste the sweetness of his breath.

“I don’t think that’s what I said, Angel.” I squeeze his cock and watch his eyelids flutter. “But if that’s the way you need to frame it, I’m fine with that for now.” I brush my lips over his—not quite a kiss, more of a tease—and grin when Dante chases the touch and then scowls when he realizes what he’s doing. “However, I will have to insist on the begging.”

I sink my teeth into his bottom lip and he gasps, his cock jerking in my hand.

“In your fucking dreams,” he growls, tangling his fingers in my wet hair and biting me right back. The sting of his teeth tearing into my bottom lip and the coppery flavor of blood on my tongue make me grunt.

It’s a challenge as much as it’s a kiss, raw and savage and dripping with the same desperation I see in Dante’s eyes every time he snarls and rages. He’s terrified that if he stops swinging even for a second to catch his breath, everyone might see how tired he is of keeping his guard up. He’s afraid that if he lets himself be vulnerable, he won’t be safe anymore. But that’s the beauty of marrying a monster. He can rest, and I can scare all of his other nightmares away.

Our tongues tangle and he uses his grip on my hair to drag me into the bedroom. Since the bed is exactly where I want him, I let him savor his last few seconds of control. His lips are bruisingly rough against mine, his growls and groans vibrating around my tongue, his hips thrusting to grind his cock into my hand. He backs himself right up into the bed and then breaks the kiss, nibbling along my stubbled chin.

“Suck. My. Cock.” He punctuates each word with a graze of his teeth.

I stop stroking him through his briefs, hooking my fingers in his waistband so I can drag them down. My knuckles brush over his smooth, hairless skin, and his cock springs free. Wild isn’t full nude, so I’ve never seen him this naked before. Well,

except for the strip search last night, but that was different. There wasn't much light, and I didn't have any plans to touch him. Not like this.

His underwear slips down around his feet and he kicks them off, his cock bobbing with the movement, the barbells through his nipples and belly button begging for my tongue while another piercing of his draws my attention for the first time. A short barbell through his frenulum, right below the head of his cock, previously hidden by his foreskin.

"Beg for it," I say again.

"Never," he snarls, baring his teeth.

"Fuck, I do love a challenge," I growl, sliding my hands around to his perky ass cheeks and lifting him up to toss him onto the bed.

My towel comes loose and pools on the floor around my feet. He doesn't even have time to protest, but that doesn't stop him from glaring at me as I crawl onto the bed to kneel over him. Where's the fun in submission if you don't have to earn it? Maybe that's why I've gotten bored with all the kink clubs in Wildcliff. Not only are the subs there too sweet and compliant, but most of them also know exactly who I am, and it's obvious how much time they spend reading Mafia romance and casting me in their fantasies.

The head of my cock drags against Dante's as I lean over him to lave my tongue over his nipple, rolling the barbell and then flicking the tight little bud. He hisses and arches his hips, our shafts colliding and his balls bouncing against mine.

"I'm not playing. Suck my dick or get off of me." He shoves at my chest, but not hard. Considering how willing he is to break bones when he doesn't want to be touched, I don't believe for a second that his protest is real.

“We should probably have a safeword, Angel. That way you can protest and argue with me as long as you need to.” I trace the shape of the butterfly tattoo on his pecs with my tongue then zero in on his other nipple. “Keep it simple—red if you really want me to stop.”

“And what about if I want you to just do what I say and suck me?” He squirms and pants as I roll my hips slowly, stroking his cock with mine.

“I already told you,” I remind him, licking and nibbling my way across his collarbone, then along the column of his throat. “Beg.” His Adam’s apple bobs with a heavy swallow and a hot, wet dribble of precum smears between us. “I’m feeling generous with our wedding day being only a handful of hours away. A simple ‘Please suck me, Sir’ will be enough this time.”

I move lower again, indulging in the fantasy of tasting every inch of his smooth golden skin that I’ve had since the first time Dante stepped out under those bright stage lights with rage in his eyes and started to dance like nothing I’d ever seen before. He moved like the music was his god and dance was the only way he knew how to worship. I wanted to know where he learned to move like that, I wanted to know how he’d ended up stripping in Wildcliff instead of dancing for a company, and I wanted to lick every droplet of sweat off his body while he told me his life story.

“You’re infuriating,” he rasps, still squirming, hoping I won’t notice the way he arches into every drag of my tongue, still glaring so I won’t notice the reddening of his skin or his shallow breaths.

“And you’re stunning,” I murmur, sliding down his body to tease my tongue around the rim of his belly button, his eager cock bumping against my neck, leaving streaks of precum sticky on my skin.

“I don’t get off on submitting,” he growls, tangling his fingers in my hair again and

thrusting his cock towards my mouth.

I part my lips and let his cockhead drag over them, holding his gaze. I flick my tongue out to catch the warm metal of the short barbell, salty and sweet just like the rest of his skin.

“Maybe you’ve just never found anyone worth submitting to before.” I mouth at his foreskin, my own cock throbbing at the silky slide of it over his steel-hard shaft.

“I should’ve known you’d be an arrogant, overconfident blowhard.” Rage and lust war in his eyes and he tries again to angle his cock into my mouth. This is my favorite part of taming a brat. He wants to prove to himself that I can’t be trusted, that if he hits the right nerve I’ll turn into a violent, greedy abuser just like he always knew I was.

“Is that what I am, Angioletto? An overconfident blowhard?” I purr, running my lips up and down his shaft and cupping his hot sac in my hand. His balls tighten and shift against my palm with every shuddering breath he thinks he’s hiding from me.

“You’re an annoying asshole who won’t just suck my dick,” he snarls.

I chuckle and Dante makes a sound like a yowling cat.

“You know the magic word. Four words, actually. Just say them and I’ll have this pretty cock of yours buried in my throat in a heartbeat. You’d be doing me a favor. You have no idea how long I’ve wanted this.”

“What? To own me and make me beg?” The disdain dripping from his words doesn’t hide the throb that pulses through his cock when he talks about begging.

“To be the one responsible for all of your pleasure from now on.” I lap at his piercing

again, and he bites back a sob.

“Please,” he mumbles.

“What was that, Angel?” I lick a long, slow stripe up his shaft, following the shape of his veins.

“Please,” he whispers just a little louder. “Please, suck my cock.”

I won’t insist on the ‘Sir’ this time. The shiver that racks his body and the whimper at the end of his words that I’m sure he hopes I don’t hear are enough for now.

“Good, Angioletto,” I praise him before opening my mouth and swallowing him down like a dying man finding water in the desert.

The weight of his cock on my tongue makes my balls tighten and the base of my cock throb. The arch of his back and the raw cry that comes from deep in his chest etch themselves into my memory instantly. Dante might not fully realize it yet, but I’m the last person who will ever wrap their mouth around his cock. His gasps and moans belong to me now. The way his body trembles and jerks with pleasure is all mine. I’ll kill anyone else who even tries.

I push his hips into the mattress, taking him deep into my throat, my nose buried against the dark thatch of his pubic hair, and stroke him with my tongue at the same time.

“Sal,” he groans, trying to buck against my weight and failing.

I bob my head up and down, leaving his cock glistening with saliva and precum before I swallow it again, over and over. He starts to stiffen even more between my lips, and I slow down, keeping him on edge. Fantasies of flipping him over and

feasting on his pretty little hole dance through my mind, of getting him nice and soft with my tongue until he begs for something else, begs for my cock like his life depends on it. There's time for all that though. A lifetime, actually.

I take him deep into my throat again and lay my forearm across his hips to keep him in place, slipping my free hand beneath myself. The brush of my fingertips over my eager cock has my eyes rolling back and a moan working its way through my throat to vibrate around Dante's throbbing shaft. I hold his cock in my mouth and start to stroke myself.

He breathes harder, his eyes locked on mine, his cock twitching between my lips, needy little cries accompanying every exhale. I suck him, working my jaw and tongue while I jerk myself faster, grunting and growling with my mouth full, watching the flush darken his cheeks, his pupils getting wider and his trembling getting too intense for him to even try to hide.

"Please, Sal, please. Oh god, I need... Please," he wails, thrashing his head and trying again to buck out of my hold so he can fuck my mouth the way he wants to. I wasn't going to hold out for an honorific this time, but I think I'm getting close. Is it too much to hope for?

I shuffle onto my knees without losing my leverage, forcing his cock even deeper down my throat in the process. My cock is dripping precum, leaking over my fingers with every wild stroke. I huff through my nose, bringing myself closer and closer to the edge. Dante pulses against my tongue, stiffening and swelling.

"Sir," he shouts, pleading and frustration mingling in his needy groan.

That word on his lips is fucking ecstasy, drawing my pleasure out with another muffled moan around his cock. I pull back and as soon as I swallow him down again, he screams my name and his cock starts to spasm between my lips, splattering my

tongue and the back of my throat with hot, salty ropes of cum. I shudder as my own orgasm crashes through me in waves, painting the sheets and his thighs with my release. I rub my oversensitive cockhead against the soft skin of his inner thigh and dribble out a few more spurts of cum, still sucking his cock, lapping at his slit to coax out every last drop.

My lungs are burning for air when I finally pull off of his softening cock and rest my forehead on his belly. I press a kiss right above his belly button and then tilt my head so I can look at him. I can't read his expression. Annoyed that I made him beg? Confused by how much he liked it? Maybe terrified of what I might do to hurt him now that he's let his mask of control slip for just a few minutes.

"Do you need something to drink, Angioletto?" I peel myself off of him reluctantly.

Dante shakes his head. "Just tired."

Now that I'm not holding him down, he rolls onto his side, facing the wall.

"Let me get a rag to clean you up, at least." I snag my towel off the floor on my way to the bathroom so I can hang it up. I take a minute to splash some cool water on my face and then get a damp washcloth.

It can't be more than two minutes, but by the time I step into the bedroom again, Dante's eyes are closed and he's either asleep or pretending to be. I'll give him some time to process, but he's not going to hide from me forever. After our wedding he's going to tell me who he's so afraid of, and I'm going to take care of it. I'll show him that he doesn't have to be afraid anymore, not in my bed or anywhere else.

I gently wipe my cum off his thighs and pull the blankets over him so he won't get cold. Then, I slip out of the bedroom and close the door behind me. Dante didn't leave me much time to organize our big day. Luckily, with enough money and the

right amount of intimidation, there's no limit to what you can get done.

Only the best for my Angioletto.

Chapter 9

DANTE

I wish I could say I lay awake for hours, pissed that Salvatore managed to trick me into begging after all, unsettled by how disturbingly safe he made me feel for just a few minutes. I pretended to be asleep when he came back to clean me up, just so I wouldn't have to admit to his smug, handsome face that maybe I enjoyed myself a teeny, tiny, minuscule amount. But after he gently wiped the cum off my thighs and fucking tucked me in —seriously, who does that? He's a vicious criminal for fuck's sake—I passed out and slept like the dead. I'm sure it had more to do with being in a different state where no one could possibly have followed me and not how hard Salvatore made me come.

The morning sun peeks through the curtains and the existential crisis I avoided last night is all cued up and ready to go. Because clearly on the morning I'm getting married to a mafioso in order to avoid retribution from the scumbag pedo I put in prison, my biggest problem is why I got off so hard on submitting last night. I'm making too big a deal out of this. Plenty of people are switches. Hell, I'm bisexual and vers, so clearly, I'm comfortable swinging wildly any which way that pleases me in the moment. Adding the occasional desire to submit to my sexual resumé shouldn't be an issue. So why does it make me feel so twitchy and exposed?

I need coffee. Lots and lots of coffee. I slip out of bed and glance around the room in search of my panties. The memory of Salvatore's hands on my skin as he slid them off, the growl in his voice when he told me to beg, makes me shiver. They're not on the floor where I left them, so I grab one of the white satin robes hanging in the closet

and wrap it around myself. It's very bridal, which I suppose makes sense since this is the honeymoon suite. Maybe I should wear this for our wedding. It's either the robe or the alien-themed tourist crap I insisted on buying yesterday to annoy Sal.

I turn towards the bed where he's still fast asleep, splayed out on his stomach with the blankets only covering half of him, mostly tugged over to my side of the bed, one bare ass cheek on full display. The urge to bite it just to hear him yelp and startle awake is strong.

Dammit, maybe he's right, maybe I am a brat.

I shake my head at myself and slip out of the bedroom, quietly closing the door behind me. I didn't properly look at the suite last night, and I'm glad I didn't. It would have made me feel like I had even more to prove. Large windows give a view of the sprawling, gaudy city and the mountains in the distance. Aside from my stint in an out-of-state prison, this is the first time I've been outside of Wildcliff. Maybe that was my mistake—waiting around for Don's sentence to be up so he'd know right where to find me. I could stay here. I'm sure there's no shortage of strip clubs. In a city like Los Vespar, maybe they'd even be able to overlook my record and I could get a job dancing with my clothes on instead.

I try to picture myself here, dressed in a glittery leotard and massive tail feathers, the desert sun beating down on me three hundred and sixty-five days a year. I shudder and turn away from the view. Wildcliff is home, and over my dead body will I let Don chase me away. Or over his dead body. Actually I'd prefer it that way.

I have to admit, I feel extremely posh in this robe, the satin caressing my bare skin, the way it flows as I flit around the living room. I should come up with a dance routine for a robe like this. It would look fabulous on stage. I shrug it off my shoulders and let it fall open just enough to show off the tattoos on my collarbone and chest, and with music playing in my head, I start to dance, paying particular attention

to the way the white satin billows around me with every movement. A pair of red panties underneath would be stunning to flash at just the right moments. I do a high kick, imagining how that would play under the lights with the red panties underneath. I let the movement flow through me, getting lost in it the way I always have, for as long as I can remember.

I spin and draw up short, almost stumbling over the length of the robe but catching myself at the last second. Salvatore stands in the doorway with bedhead and pillow lines still on his cheek, unabashedly naked, watching me. I pull my robe tighter around myself, feeling every bit like a Victorian woman trying to hide her virtue. I'm not sure what I'm hiding. He's seen me naked; everyone has. I let go of the robe, letting it fall slightly open again, held together by the cinch around my waist.

"Don't stop on my account." He rakes his eyes over me slowly and his soft cock visibly thickens.

"I'm not. I was done," I lie. "I need coffee. Do you want anything from room service?"

I pick up the menu from beside the room phone. Before I even get the chance to flip it open, there's a knock at the door.

"Room service," someone announces.

"Damn, this place is good," I mutter, and Salvatore chuckles. "Why don't you go put some pants on." I make a shooing motion.

"Feeling possessive, husband? Want to keep my nudity for your eyes only?" Instead of going away, he comes closer, sliding his hand along my jaw and grinning at me.

His warm breath tickles my lips, and he tilts my face towards his, bringing his mouth

closer to mine. I swallow and try to summon the violent urge to get his hands off of me, but all I manage to do is melt into him and part my lips in an unmistakable invitation that Salvatore is all too happy to take. He slips his tongue into my mouth with a rumbling sigh that makes my cock harden instantly, his grip on my jaw tightening in sharp contrast to the teasing softness of the kiss.

“And you’re accusing me of being a brat?” I mutter when he breaks the kiss. “Now we’re both too indecent to open the door.”

He smirks again and gropes my stiff cock refusing to be contained behind the delicate fabric of the robe.

“You can leave everything there in the hallway,” he calls out without taking his eyes off of mine.

“Yes, sir,” the person on the other side of the door says, and after a few seconds, footsteps echo back down the hallway and the elevator dings faintly in the distance.

SALVATORE

“Sit.” I give Dante a nudge towards the sofa.

I’m expecting the glare I get in return. What I’m not expecting is how much sexier it looks when his lips are kiss swollen and his pretty cock is still sticking out from between the folds of the robe. More shocking still, he actually listens, striding over and sitting down with a defiant little huff. Once he’s seated, he gathers his billowing robe into his lap to hide his erection and then he waves towards the door like royalty making a demand.

“Be good and fetch breakfast for me.”

I rumble a laugh. “You’re asking for it, Angel,” I warn, coming up with a dozen ways to show him how much more fun he’ll have if he lets me be the Dom he’s desperate for on my way to the door.

The room service cart is parked right outside, and a pair of garment bags are hanging from the door. Good, I won’t have to hurt any of the hotel staff.

“What’s all this?” Dante eyes the garment bags curiously as I bring everything inside and nudge the door closed with my foot.

“I ordered room service before I went to sleep last night. I wasn’t sure what you liked, so I ordered a little bit of everything.” I roll the cart over to him and start pulling the covers off each plate.

“No, what’s that?” He nods at the bags.

“You didn’t think I was going to stand up on our wedding day in a wrinkled suit or anything with a UFO printed on it, did you?” I tsk.

“You got me an outfit?” His face lights up. Not with rage or lust, but with genuine excitement. What else could I do to make him smile like that? He pushes the cart aside and jumps up, grabbing for the nearest garment bag and unzipping it in a frenzy like a child on Christmas. “What...?” His expression turns to shock and my stomach sinks.

“If it’s not what you want, we can go shopping before the wedding. There’s plenty of time.”

“No, it’s perfect.” He shakes his head slowly, looking dazed. “How did you know?”

He rubs the soft white lace between his fingers and gently touches the pearl beading.

The white slacks that go with it are more traditional than the top, but I thought they would go together nicely. And, of course, a pair of red heels to finish the look. There's nothing like the air of confidence my angel has when he's wearing a pair of stilettos.

"Sparrow texted me a picture of the top the other day. He said you were looking at it but that he thought you didn't buy it because of the cost. I remembered it last night and they have the same store here, which luckily had it in stock in your size." I unzip my own garment bag to check on the suit I bought. I had to buy off the rack, obviously, with so little time to plan, so I decided to stick with a simple black suit.

"Why? I mean, why would Sparrow text you that?" His eyes darken and he drops the outfit onto the couch. "Did you have him following me?" Dante hisses, drawing himself up to his full height to get in my face.

"No, Angioletto, I don't have anyone following you."

"So why would he be reporting back to you about clothes I want but can't afford?"

"If I had to guess, it's because he knows how I feel about you, and underneath his murderous exterior, he's secretly a hopeless romantic." I'm sure he would pull a knife on me for suggesting such a thing, but all evidence points to him having a small soft spot for my crush on Dante.

"How you feel about me?" His eyebrows pull together and he frowns.

"I told you last night," I remind him, putting a hand on his hip and backing him up towards the couch. When the backs of his knees hit it, I give him a nudge and he topples down. I lean over him, bracing my hands on the back of the couch. "I've wanted you since the first time I saw you on stage."

“You and every other gay man in Wildcliff.” Dante’s eyes harden and his jaw ticks. “I hate to ruin the illusion and everything, but that’s the point of strippers. We take off our clothes and shake our asses so your dick gets hard, and you throw money at us. That funny feeling in your pants isn’t love, it’s just business.”

It wasn’t his clothes coming off that made it impossible to look away from him. Sure, I liked the way his hips moved and how the lights danced over his bare skin, but that wasn’t what kept me coming back night after night for years. He’s not ready to believe that I fell in love with his rage and his painfully sharp tongue, not his body.

“You’re wrong,” I whisper, pressing a hard kiss to his mouth.

Dante sinks his teeth into my bottom lip and I groan, licking into his mouth with the aching need to devour him, to tear through every ounce of stubborn resistance he has and make him see the truth.

Patience , I remind myself. I have a lifetime to prove to him that I’m not like the men who have made him feel like nothing but a piece of meat.

“Now, say ‘thank you, Sir.’”

He bristles. “Thanks.”

I chuckle. “What am I going to do with you, Angioletto?”

“Marry me to save my ass and probably live to regret it thanks to my shitty attitude and inability to play nice with anyone?”

I hum, my lips twitching with another grin. “At least it’s a nice ass.”

“Fuck you. Pour me some coffee.” There’s a lightness in the bratty demand that

almost makes me laugh again.

“Keep pushing me, and you’ll find out how I prefer to handle brats,” I warn, picking up both garment bags and carrying them into the bedroom to hang.

I pull on the other robe and when I step back into the living room, I notice two steaming mugs of coffee, one in front of Dante, the other on the coffee table. I round the couch, and he watches me over the rim of his mug as he takes a sip, like he’s daring me to comment on the fact that he poured us both a cup.

Shame. I was kind of hoping he’d keep testing me.

Chapter 10

DANTE

I've never bothered to imagine what my wedding might look like. Mostly because I never planned to get married. I assumed marrying someone would have to mean I had lost my goddamn mind enough to trust someone. I shudder at the thought. I guess I just wasn't thinking creatively enough since I hadn't considered this possibility. A chapel with a waiting room, a gun tucked into the back of my white silk pants, and a 'fiancé' who's clearly even less mentally stable than I am because I keep seeing him smile when he thinks I'm not looking.

Insane or not, Salvatore is wearing the hell out of the black three-piece suit and burgundy shirt. He puts his hand between my shoulder blades, the warmth of his touch spreading through me instantly thanks to the weightless lacy fabric of my top, which does nothing to blunt the feeling of his fingers tracing down my spine. Another shiver runs through me. I keep my eyes trained on the chapel doors, waiting for them to swing open to signal that it's our turn. Obnoxiously romantic songs like Etta James's "At Last" keep playing through the overhead speakers and I swear all the creepy, smiling people in the photos hanging on the walls are staring at me. I tap my foot and smooth my hands needlessly over my unwrinkled pants.

"I hope you're not getting cold feet, Angioletto." Salvatore slides his hand up to the back of my neck. His touch stays light, but the way his fingers rest around my nape feels unmistakably possessive. "Having second thoughts about marrying a man with so much blood on his hands?"

I huff out a laugh, the sound laced with all the darkness that tainted my soul years ago.

“There are worse places for bloodstains than a man’s hands, believe me,” I mutter.

His hand tightens around the back of my neck. He tugs me to face him, his expression full of thunder and rage that should probably confirm my worst thoughts about him and everyone else, but instead it just makes me feel... safe .

“Tell me who hurt you, Angioletto, and the last thing he’ll ever feel is the cold metal of my gun barrel gagging him as he tries to choke out his last words,” he growls, and all the nervous energy that was building up inside me a minute ago evaporates.

I put my hand on his cheek, dragging my fingertips along the roughness of his two days’ worth of stubble.

“If having your last name isn’t enough to scare him off, I’ll take you up on that.” I press my lips to his other cheek, leaving a faint imprint with my lipstick. Salvatore managed to order the perfect shade to match the shoes he picked out for me. Say what you will about the man, but he has an eye for style.

The doors swing open, and a happy couple comes bursting out, a bubble machine creating iridescent bubbles that surround them and stick to their clothes while the wedding march plays loudly. Once they’re gone, a short, stocky man in a white suit—thankfully not attempting any kind of Elvis cosplay—waves us in with a smile.

“After you.” Sal gestures for me to go ahead and I eye him skeptically.

“You’re not about to make a last-minute run for it, are you?”

His lips twitch with a smile. “Of course not. You still have the gun. I always assumed

I would die in a hail of bullets, but not fleeing from my own wedding.”

I snort a laugh and then head into the chapel with Salvatore right behind me.

The man—minister? Officiant?—tells us to call him Larry then starts to explain the process with the rapid efficiency of someone who’s done this a hundred times and knows how to keep things moving.

“Here’s the marriage license for you to sign.” He sets the paperwork on the small wooden table just inside the doors to the chapel. “I’ll need to make a copy of your ID to send into the state. And finally, an affidavit stating that neither of you are already legally married and that this marriage is not being done under duress. No shotgun weddings allowed.” He laughs at his own joke. “And that you aren’t biologically related.”

I shift uncomfortably. No shotgun weddings, but what about a pistol wedding? Sal doesn’t hesitate though, picking up the pen and signing in the proper spot on each form before handing it over to me. My fingers tremble and I clench the pen tighter to keep it from visibly shaking. It’s fine, this is temporary. He’s calm because he knows this doesn’t mean anything.

I jot my signature on each line.

“Perfect.” Larry gathers up the paperwork and takes our IDs, then disappears for a minute to make copies. When he returns, he leads us to the flowered arch at the front of the small chapel. “Do you want traditional vows, a particular religion, or did you write your own?”

I try not to laugh. Imagine if we’d written our own.

Do you, Dante, take this mafioso to be your wedded murder deterrent, to argue and to

fight for dominance, from this day forward until the threat has passed and it's safe to divorce, for better or worse, in violence and rage, until death or a prison sentence parts you?

I do, I really, and truly do. Cue the tears for such a lovely ceremony.

"Traditional is fine," Salvatore answers.

Larry nods. "Face each other and join hands."

His hands are larger than mine, warm and surprisingly soft. He looks into my eyes, and I try not to squirm under the intensity in his gaze.

"Salvatore first. Repeat after me," Larry instructs. "I, Salvatore Moretti, take you, Dante Torres, to be my wedded spouse."

His eyes stay locked on mine as he repeats the words, his voice steady and certain, just like it always is.

"To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health," Larry goes on.

Salvatore's grip on my hands tightens as he echoes the vows, like he's afraid I'm the one who's going to run out of here if given half a chance.

"To love and cherish, until death do us part," Larry finishes.

"To love and cherish—" Salvatore's voice is as firm as ever. "—until death do us part." The low growl at the end almost sounds like a threat. Or maybe a promise.

I swallow hard and then take my turn, repeating the vows with a clumsy tongue and

my pulse pounding so loudly in my ears I can barely hear myself.

“Do you have rings?” Larry asks once I’m done stumbling through the words.

“No.”

“Yes,” Sal contradicts, letting go of my hands and reaching into his pocket to pull out a small black velvet bag. He dumps two matching gold bands into his palm. “They’re nothing fancy, but I figured they would do on short notice.”

He flashes me an apologetic smile and I shake my head, stunned that he thought of all of this late last night while I was asleep. The outfits, the rings... I was just going to march him in here at gunpoint wearing UFO t-shirts.

There’s more parroting of Larry’s words as we slide the rings onto each other’s fingers.

“I now pronounce you married. You may kiss,” he declares gleefully, like any of this matters to him. Like somehow after performing a thousand marriages, eighty percent of which likely ended in divorce, he still believes this is a fairytale happily ever after for us.

Salvatore hooks his hand behind my neck and drags me forward to claim my lips. My mouth softens instinctively. Out of pure relief for having pulled this crazy plan off, I hum a happy sigh that he swallows down as he kisses me deeper, snaking his tongue into my mouth until Larry clears his throat and laughs.

“Congratulations and remember to tell your friends about Larry’s Chapel.” He pats us on the shoulders, then stuffs a business card into Sal’s hand and leads us back out to the lobby.

“So, I guess we should go back to the hotel to get our stuff and head back to Wildcliff. It’s a long drive,” I say once we’re on the sidewalk.

The sun is already starting to set, the city lights replacing the sunshine with an artificial glow. There’s music and chatter coming from all directions, reminding me that Los Vespar isn’t anything like Wildcliff. No one shouldering past us lives here; they’re all on vacation from their boring jobs and mundane existence, ready to shed their responsibility for a few days of debauchery.

A smile spreads slowly over Salvatore’s face and his hand finds its way onto the nape of my neck again. This time I can feel the brush of the smooth metal ring on his finger, reminding me of what we just did.

“One night in Sin City before we head home couldn’t hurt,” he says, and to my surprise, a flutter of excitement sparks in my chest.

“Okay. Show me how Salvatore Moretti lets loose.”

SALVATORE

Dante’s words from earlier play on a loop in the back of my mind.

There are worse places for bloodstains than a man’s hands.

I have no intention of waiting to see if whoever he’s afraid of backs off. I’m going to find him and I’m going to make him beg for death. And I’ll savor every second of it.

But I can’t do that tonight. So, for now, I’ll focus on celebrating with my new husband and save the vengeance for next week. I steer Dante into a dimly lit piano bar. There are several open tables near the stage, and people lingering near the bar with martini glasses, sharing murmured conversations. I zero in on a booth in a

shadowy corner and slip my fingers between Dante's.

"There are people sitting there," he points out when he realizes where we're headed.

"Very few problems in life can't be solved, Angioletto. In fact, I haven't met one yet that can't be remedied with either money or violence."

He huffs and tugs his hand, not hard enough to make me think he's actually trying to break free from my grasp, just enough to let me know he's protesting.

"You going to threaten to shoot them if they don't give us the table?" he mutters.

I chuckle and reach up with my free hand to smooth out my tie. "Of course not. You still have my gun."

We reach the table, and he yanks on our joined hands again. I let him go this time, putting my arm around him instead. He's nearly my height in his red heels, but he still fits nicely under my arm, slender and delicate but not breakable. Never breakable.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but my new husband and I are celebrating tonight and I'm worried that the spotlight near the stage will set off one of his migraines. We'd be extremely grateful if you'd let us have your booth," I say smoothly, giving the couple my most charming smile as I reach into my pocket to pull out my wallet and set a hundred-dollar bill on the table.

They exchange a brief look, then the woman snatches up the bill and they scramble out of their seats.

"Congratulations on your wedding," the man calls over his shoulder as they make their way to a different table.

I nudge Dante and he rolls his eyes before sliding into the booth.

“You know, I’ve heard Orion arguing with Elio before, calling him a spoiled brat who’s never heard the word ‘no’ in his life. I think he might be right about you Morettis. You’re entitled.”

“That wasn’t arguing, that was foreplay.” I chuckle and slide in beside him, unbuttoning my suit jacket and loosening my tie.

“It doesn’t make it any less true.”

I put a hand on his thigh under the table and lean in close. “I think you’re looking for reasons to snarl and snap at me, Angel.” I nuzzle his earlobe, then nip at it gently, drawing a quiet gasp from his pretty, red lips. “That’s okay, I don’t mind. It’ll give me a chance to show you how I tame a brat, like I promised earlier.”

He inhales sharply again and then tries to cover it with an irritated grumble in the back of his throat.

“Are we back on this? Just because brats make your dick hard, sweetheart, doesn’t make me one.” He squirms under my grasp, making my hand slip up his thigh.

I can feel the heat of his skin through the silk.

“Have you Dommed a brat before?” I ask conversationally, teasing my fingers along the inseam between his thighs, inches from the swell of his balls.

“A few times,” he says, squeezing his thighs together, clenching them around my hand, then relaxing again. Relaxing his body, anyway, but his eyes are full of an exciting challenge as he stares at me in the shadows.

“Tell me about brats, Angioletto,” I command.

His jaw ticks and his eyes darken another shade. “Do you practice being this irritating or does it come naturally?”

I ignore the barb and wait in patient silence. It only takes a minute before he squirms again, the hard shape of his cock bumping my fingertips.

“Brats want to submit, but they don’t want to make it easy. They want to end up on their knees, but they want to be forced there.” He swallows hard, his throat bobbing and his voice dropping lower. “They want to battle for dominance, but ultimately, they want to lose. They want the Dom to earn their submission.”

I hum in agreement, sliding my hand higher to cup his cock, stiff and swollen, probably throbbing even if he refuses to admit just how much this conversation is turning him on. I drag my thumb in slow circles around the head of his cock and his jaw ticks like he’s clinging to every last thread of control he has to keep from moaning for me like the pretty slut he’s afraid to be.

“Some brats are so committed to that battle for dominance that they don’t even want to admit that’s what they are.” I drag my nose along the shell of his ear again and inhale, imagining how good he’ll smell with the scent of my soaps and lotions on his skin instead of the generic hotel brand.

“Fuck you,” he murmurs quietly, more of a whimper really.

“Sorry to interrupt, but can I get you anything to drink?”

Dante startles and his cock jerks in my hand. He tries to scramble away, but I tighten my grip on him. Between the table and the shadows, for all the waitress knows, I have my hand on his knee. And what a perfect way to show Dante what it feels like to

give in and trust me.

“Two martinis, please,” I say, one hand resting casually on the table, the other still around his cock, my thumb pressed up against the barbell through his frenulum.

Dante tries not to squirm, holding himself still and barely breathing as he nods in agreement with the order.

“Coming right up,” the waitress says before turning on her heel and walking away again.

Dante slumps and lets out a quiet whine, snapping his hips as soon as we’re alone to grind his piercing against the press of my thumb.

“You’re an ass.” His breathing is shaky; maybe that’s why he was holding it while the waitress was here.

“Do you want me to make you come, Angioletto?” I purr.

His eyes widen and he glances around at all of the people paying absolutely zero attention to us.

“What? No,” he hisses.

I drag my thumb up to his cockhead, feeling the dampness of his precum leaking through two layers of silk.

“Safeword then.”

Dante scoffs and grabs my wrist like he’s going to try to wrestle me off instead of doing the simple thing and muttering one single word. That’s all it would take. One

word and my hands would be off of him instantly.

“You’re not going to jerk me off under the table at a fancy piano bar,” he whispers.

I arch an eyebrow. “That sounds like a challenge.”

“There’s something wrong with you.” His fingers dig into my wrist, but he doesn’t say the one word that would stop everything. And we both know that if he really didn’t want my hands on him, my fingers would already be broken. I’ve certainly seen him send men to the hospital for less.

Silk is a wonderful fabric for something like this, slick and soft as it slides over his shaft, soaking up the dribble of his precum and warming to match the heat of his body. He grips the edge of the table with his free hand, his cheeks darkening and his gaze hardening.

“Salvatore,” he says through gritted teeth, his breaths coming even faster as I work my hand up and down his hard shaft, feeling the throb of his veins through the thin barrier, the needy twitch as his balls pull tighter and his thighs start to tremble.

“Yes, Angel?” I ask in a growl, dragging my tongue along the edge of his jaw to taste the sweetness of his skin.

“You can’t...” He gasps and then snaps his hips to grind into my palm.

“It’s not wise to tell me things I can’t do, it just makes it that much more fun to do them anyway.” I squeeze his cock and it spasms in response. “Now, stop fighting me and come, baby girl,” I murmur the pet name he tried to humiliate me with last night, and with a shudder and a choked gasp, I feel him start to pulse, flooding his pants with the wetness of his release as he swallows back whimpers and jerks his hips again and again.

Dante slumps in the booth, spent and breathless, the defiance momentarily gone from his features, replaced by a clouded, relaxed expression that fills me with a sense of accomplishment more satisfying than any orgasm could ever be. My own cock throbs in disagreement, but I ignore it. There will be time for that once we get back to the hotel.

I drag my momentarily compliant husband closer to me and put my arm around him again. He sighs and leans into me, resting his head on my shoulder in a way I'm sure he'll deny later. The waitress returns with our drinks, and I pick them both up, handing one to Dante.

“To wedded bliss,” I toast.

He snorts and rolls his eyes but taps his glass against mine before taking a sip.

Chapter 11

SALVATORE

Dante pulls my suit jacket around himself to hide the stain on his pants, and everything about it makes me want to beat my chest like a caveman. My jacket around him, my mouth leaving his lipstick smeared and stained, my hands and growled words in his ear creating the dazed look that's still lingering in his eyes hours later. The only thing that could make it any better would be if it was my cum all over him instead of his own. But I'm hoping to remedy that in just a few minutes.

His heels click noisily against the polished floor of the hotel lobby. He doesn't try to shrug off my hand on the back of his neck, but I'm not under the illusion that one semi-exhibitionist handjob is enough to tame my angel brat. It's intoxicating to see him subdued by my touch even for a few hours though.

We step onto the empty elevator and once the doors slide closed, Dante reaches back and untucks my pistol from his pants.

"Here." He hands it to me.

The familiar weight of it in my hand feels like having a missing limb reattached.

"Generous of you, Angioletto." I tuck it into my own waistband for now. "And my phone?" I arch an eyebrow.

"I guess I don't have to worry about you calling in backup to rescue you and take me

out now.” He pulls my phone out of his pocket and hands that over too.

The elevator doors slide open, and Dante turns another glare on me.

“If you try to pick me up and carry me into the room again, I’ll knee you in the balls,” he warns.

I tug him closer and slowly drag my tongue along the seam of his lips, tasting the lingering flavor of his martini.

“I love when you talk dirty to me.” I walk him backward out of the elevator, towards our room. Before I can even fish the room key out of my pocket, my phone starts to vibrate with an incoming call. “Maybe I shouldn’t have asked for my phone back yet after all.”

He chuckles and reaches into my pocket for the key while I check my phone. Lorenzo’s number lights up the screen. Real life kicking down the door of this fantasy honeymoon I was hoping to live in for a few more hours at least. I sigh and hit the button to accept the call.

“Hello,” I answer, following Dante into our room. He doesn’t waste any time, shrugging off my jacket and leaving it in a heap on the floor. His top comes off next, with more care as he struts through the suite towards the bedroom, my eyes eagerly devouring the slender lines of his bare back and the sway of his hips.

“Where the fuck are you?” Lorenzo’s voice in my ear reluctantly forces my attention away from the private strip show for just a second before I follow my new husband into the bedroom.

“Alessio didn’t tell you?” I’m sure he can hear the distraction in my voice as I lean against the doorway and watch Dante shimmy out of his ruined pants with his back to

me. The white silk underwear underneath clings to his round, perky ass cheeks sinfully. As he bends over to take off his shoes, I entertain the fantasy of pressing him down onto the bed and licking him through the panties, soaking them with my saliva as I tease his hole.

“Salvatore,” Lorenzo’s growl snaps me back to the phone call again.

“Sorry, boss, I’m a little distracted. I told Alessio to let you know I was going out of town for a few days.” I drag my hand over my mouth to wipe away the smile that’s already forming. “I’m in Los Vespar with Dante. We got married.”

Lorenzo is absolutely silent on the other side of the line for several long seconds.

“I thought Alessio was being a smartass,” he admits with a sigh that’s the equivalent of an emotional outburst for him. He’s quiet for another minute and then he clears his throat. “Was it... Dante wanted this, right?”

I bark out a laugh and my Angioletto looks over his shoulder at me with a raised eyebrow as he pulls his stupid ‘beam me up, Space Daddy’ shorts on. They’re almost as distracting as the panties, leaving the bottom swell of his ass cheeks hanging out.

“What, do you think I drugged him, kidnapped him, and then threatened to shoot him if he didn’t cooperate and marry me?”

Dante flips me his middle finger and I chuckle.

“Did you?” Lorenzo asks seriously.

“Relax, boss, the whole thing was his idea. He’s obsessed with me.” I smirk and wink at Dante, who rolls his eyes.

“Fine, I don’t have the energy to figure out which parts of that were bullshit. I hate to interrupt your honeymoon, but I need you back here.”

I rub the back of my neck. “It’s, like, a sixteen-hour drive.”

“Perfect, then I’ll see you at our five o’clock meeting tomorrow.”

Good thing I only had one martini. It’s going to be a long fucking night.

“Sure thing, Enz, I’ll be there.”

“Good. And congratulations.”

I grin again even though Lorenzo can’t see me. “Thanks, boss.”

DANTE

“I guess I can see why you’ve never bothered to take a vacation if Lorenzo’s just going to call you back at the drop of a hat anyway.” I adjust my seat and reach into the bag of snacks I insisted on before we left the city to pull out a package of Twizzlers.

“It’s not exactly a nine-to-five job.”

I roll my window down a few inches and recline with my bare feet on the dashboard and the desert breeze whipping through my hair.

“Probably makes relationships hard.” I bite into a Twizzler and chew it slowly, closing my eyes and relaxing into the feeling of the car’s vibrations.

“More like impossible,” he mutters in agreement. “But if you’re worried about

getting enough of my time and attention, Angel, I promise I've never had a better excuse to find some work-life balance than knowing I'll be coming home to you at night."

I inhale sharply, a chunk of candy getting stuck in my throat. I sputter a cough to dislodge it.

"I have my own apartment, Sal," I remind him, tossing the Twizzlers back into the bag at my feet so I don't accidentally choke on another one.

"I'm sure you'll find your landlord to be extremely accommodating when you tell him you're breaking your lease," he says with a dry confidence.

"Why would I break my lease?" Although, come to think of it, the thought of living there knowing Don's henchman has already stalked me and broken in isn't exactly appealing.

"Because my place is bigger, and I own it instead of renting. If you'd rather get a house outside the city, we can talk about that long term."

"Long term?" I echo. "Did you hit your head or something?"

He chuckles but doesn't respond. Instead, he changes the subject again. "We have a long, quiet drive ahead of us. Seems like the perfect time for you to tell me about this stalker of yours."

My stomach clenches and my muscles tighten instantly, my fingers curling reflexively into fists.

"I don't want to get into it."

“You came to me for protection, but you won’t tell me who I’m protecting you from?” He tightens his grip on the steering wheel, frustration dripping from his usually patient voice. “You can see where you’re making this difficult for me, right, Angel?”

I turn my face towards the window and focus on the dark outline of the mountains in the distance, and the blanket of stars overhead. For years I hoped that by never speaking his name out loud or talking about what happened, it would all just fade away, that it would turn into a foggy nightmare you can’t quite remember.

“His name is Don Moreno. He’s currently in prison, set for release in two and a half weeks. I don’t know who he got to take those pictures and break into my apartment. That’s all I’m going to say about it.”

“Has he hurt you, Angioletto? Did he touch you?” Salvatore’s question is guttural, raising goose bumps on my skin and, strangely, settling the quiver in my stomach. He doesn’t just want to protect me, he wants to avenge me. Something warm and almost affectionate swells inside me and, without looking, I reach over to put my hand on his thigh.

Lies from years past burn on my tongue. Half-truths that created every bit of the situation I’m in, but that I can’t find it in myself to regret for one second. I did what I had to do, and I would do it again. My knuckles ache with the memory of justice only partially delivered. I guess if I had one regret about what happened, it would be that I left him breathing at all.

“No,” I answer.

The silence is filled with questions I know Salvatore wants to ask. But he keeps them to himself, and I like him a little bit more for not pushing, for respecting that I don’t want to dredge up the past any more than I have to.

“You’re going to have to make space in your closet for my clothes,” I murmur, still looking out the window. “I have a lot.”

He laughs and it sounds like agreement, and he drives a little faster down the dark desert road towards home.

Chapter 12

SALVATORE

Half a day spent driving and barely enough time for a brief nap and a change of clothes has the music and lights of the club feeling like some kind of disorienting dream. I'm sure it's too much to hope that this meeting will be short, and I'll be able to head home to crawl into bed with my new husband while the night is young. A heavy feeling of need settles in my gut, and I glance towards the stage automatically, even though I know I won't see Dante there. I didn't have time to call anyone over to guard him, but there's no way Don or anyone else could know where he is right now. Tomorrow I'll work out a schedule to have someone with him at all times. Tonight, he should be safe at my apartment. Our apartment.

My chest swells with satisfaction and I bite back a grin as I approach our usual table, close to the main stage but not obnoxiously so.

"Damn, you're really back in one piece," Alessio says, eyeing me up and down like he's double checking that I am in fact all here.

"Was there some doubt about that?" I pull out my usual chair and unbutton my suit jacket as I take a seat.

"There might have been a betting pool going about whether Dante had actually killed you and was scrambling to find some way to cover it up," Elio admits while Alessio puts his feet up on the table and nods.

“The fact that I spoke to Lorenzo last night didn’t tip you off?”

“The brilliant idea of an AI voice copying yours was thrown around,” Xaviaro says dryly.

I snort a laugh.

“Shit, the wedding thing was real?” Alessio notices my ring and drops his feet to sit forward so he can get a better look.

Another swell of pride fills my chest. “Jealous?” I taunt, straightening my tie and smirking.

“Confused, if I’m being honest.” He shrugs.

“Why don’t we save planning the seating arrangements at the wedding shower for later,” Lorenzo says. “I have some news about the Fitzpatricks that’s slightly more urgent than speculation as to how Salvatore managed to put a ring on Dante’s finger without getting any of his broken.”

We all quiet immediately. Of course the Fitzpatricks are the reason my honeymoon was cut short. If I get the chance, I’ll be sure to find a way to thank Declan personally. I crack my neck and try to control my scowl.

“Cian Fitzpatrick, Declan’s younger brother.” Lorenzo pulls out his tablet, turning the screen so we can all see it. There are photos of a smug looking ginger fucker with tattoo sleeves down both arms and a cigarette between his lips in almost every picture.

“What about him?” I ask, resting my elbows on the table and tapping the screen to scan through the photos. Pictures of Cian coming and going from Declan’s place,

meeting with other known members of the Fitzpatrick organization, and general surveillance.

“He showed up at Declan’s a couple of weeks ago, clearly staying there, so I dug into him a little deeper,” he explains.

Alessio smirks. “Were you worried he was Declan’s boyfriend?”

Enzo’s only response is a deadly look that would have anyone else shitting themselves.

“If Declan is the brains of the family, Cian is the balls.” Enzo goes on as if Les didn’t interrupt at all. “It turns out he just got out of prison. He did ten years for a series of assaults. They tried to tie him to several car bombings, but the witness refused to testify at the last minute, and they ended up having to drop the charges.”

I whistle and lean back in my seat.

“So he’s a bit of a wildcard, is that it?”

“That might be all he is,” Enzo agrees coolly. “But we’re teetering right on the edge of a war and Cian could be the spark that lights it. If he’s in his brother’s head, pushing Declan to act just as recklessly, things won’t end well for the Fitzpatricks.”

“So? Let’s go to war then and get those freckled fucks out of our business once and for all,” Alessio says flippantly.

Again, Lorenzo acts like Les hasn’t said a thing and just keeps talking. “Giovanni’s been watching Declan’s place, and he says Cian has a habit of slipping out at random times and disappearing for hours, sometimes late at night, sometimes gone for days. He might be up to something.”

“Or he might be a guy who just got out of prison going out to get laid,” Elio says with a shrug.

“Maybe,” Lorenzo concedes.

“Okay, so maybe you need to have a meeting with Declan, feel him out, see if his brother is stirring up any trouble or planting the idea in his head to expand their territory into Wildcliff,” I suggest.

“No.” His answer is immediate, and his tone is so icy that a shiver runs down my spine. “If I sit down with him, I’ll have to admit I’m having him followed. Besides, I don’t need Declan thinking his brother, or anyone else in his ragtag family of petty criminals, has the power to make the Morettis nervous.”

“What if I tail Cian when he’s away from Declan’s place and see if I can find a way to casually run into him?” Xaviaro suggests.

Lorenzo picks up the glass of whiskey in front of himself and swirls it silently for a moment, his brow furrowed with thought and his fingers drumming against the table.

“Alright, let’s give that a shot. But I don’t want you to tell him who you are, just find out where he’s going and if there’s an opportunity to run into him and strike up a casual conversation to get a sense of what he’s all about, then do that.”

Xaviaro nods.

“Glad I hauled ass all the way back from Los Vespar for this,” I mutter.

“I need you to meet with every one of your guys, find out if anyone has been getting friendly with the Fitzpatricks,” Lorenzo says. “That goes for you too, Les.”

“You got it, boss.” Alessio gives a flippant little salute, but we both know he’s going to give each and every one of his soldiers a rectal exam if he has to, to ensure their loyalty to The Family.

“I’ll get started on that first thing tomorrow,” I assure him, pushing my chair back and making a move to stand. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get home to my hus—”

“You boys need any refills?”

I whip around at the sound of the familiar voice over the sultry bass of the music.

An hour ago, I left Dante safely in my apartment. In hindsight, the fact that he didn’t argue or sass me about having to run out to a meeting and leave him at home should’ve been a red flag. He’s wearing the same red lipstick I bought in Los Vespar for him, and a pair of silk panties paired with one of my white dress shirts, unbuttoned with nothing underneath. That primal, possessive feeling pounds at my chest again.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

He rolls his eyes, but a little smile twitches at the corners of his lush lips.

“Taking drink orders, sweetness.”

DANTE

Salvatore’s expression wars between amusement and something stern that absolutely doesn’t make my dick hard.

“You know that’s not what I meant, Angioletto.” He steps closer to me and lowers his

voice, talking only to me in a room full of a hundred drunk, horny people.

My nipples harden but I refuse to shiver or squirm.

“After you left, I got a text from Damnation saying he twisted his ankle on stage earlier and was hoping I could cover the last couple hours of his shift.” I lick my lips and let a slow, teasing smile spread across them. “You're not going to give me some bullshit about not wanting your husband to shake his ass on stage for money? Some macho, possessive line about how I belong to you now?”

A deep, husky laugh bursts from Salvatore's lips, and I wish it didn't make my heart beat just a little faster.

“No. I'd warn any man who tries to put a hand on you that he'll end up with his fingers broken, but I think you've already got that covered.” He cups my jaw and drags his thumb over the rough stubble I haven't had the chance to shave yet. “My problem is that you haven't slept in two days and your stalker might be here.”

His grip on my jaw tightens a fraction and he glances away from me to look around the club, like he's expecting to see someone holding up a camera and wearing a t-shirt that says “I heart stalking” sitting two tables over.

“That's the point.”

Salvatore's eyes are back on mine, dark and intense. My pulse stutters again, but I shake off the weird feeling that this shit I'm dealing with might actually matter to him.

“What's the point, Angioletto?” he asks, sounding tired.

Even though I just mentally mocked him for it, I glance over my shoulder and let my

attention roam around for a minute, hoping to spot anyone who looks like they might be here with the sole purpose of watching me. And not in the ‘hand down their pants’ way. It’s impossible to tell though. Salvatore’s thumb drags absently along my jaw again and I look back at him.

“That he might be here. Then he can take another picture and send this one to Don.” Hell, if I’m lucky, he’ll frame the photo so Lorenzo and the rest of his Mafia cronies are all in the shot. These guys, with their expensive Italian suits and air of self-importance, might as well have a flashing sign over their head that says Mafia.

In my high heels I’m tall enough to just lean forward and meet Salvatore’s lips. A possessive growl rumbles in his chest, and he slides one hand under my open shirt to loop it around my waist, deepening the kiss. His tongue sweeps over mine, reminding me of the way he laid me out on the bed and licked my body until I was trembling and horny enough to beg him like he wanted.

I bite down on his lower lip and he hisses into my mouth. His fingers dig in harder and his hard cock nudges against mine. His lips are bruisingly rough against mine, demanding my submission, the heat building between us every time I bite or teasingly pull back instead of giving in. Is it a power struggle or is this just foreplay? The fact that I’m not sure makes my adrenaline spike and my heart beat faster.

“Unless you want him to get a picture of me bending you over the nearest table, I think that’ll have to do, Angel,” he murmurs, holding my chin and panting out a few unsteady breaths before he pulls himself back into the calm, collected Sal I’m used to.

“Picture...?” I shake my head, dazed by the flashing lights and lack of sleep, not from the kiss. “Right, a picture of us kissing to send to Don.” I swallow and nod, pulling myself together just as quickly as he managed to. “So, drinks? Who needs a refill?” I wipe my chin, sure Sal smeared my lipstick everywhere. I’m even more sure when I see him staring at my mouth with the same intense look in his eyes that he had when

he saw me wearing his shirt. I fight the urge to roll my eyes at him again. Such a caveman. His dick gets hard at the idea of marking his territory. I swear to fuck, if he tries to pee on me, I'll shoot him with his own gun.

“Be honest, is he blackmailing you into this or what?” Alessio asks, putting his feet up on the table and rocking back in his chair, more like a misbehaving kid than a mafioso. I'm tempted to kick the legs out from under him just to be a brat—er, wait, no, not a brat... something else, something that wouldn't mean Salvatore is right about me.

“Nope, madly in love, bluebirds sing every time I look at him, yada, yada.” I wave my hand and then put them both on my hips. “Now, drinks or not? Because I've got a lot of tables to check in on.”

“I think I'm done for the night,” Lorenzo says, standing up and buttoning his jacket. Elio and Xaviaro follow suit on either side of him, but Alessio stays seated and Salvatore pulls his own chair out to sit back down.

“I'll have my usual,” Sal orders. “Actually, make it a club soda with a lime instead.”

From the look he gives me and the dip of his tone, I hear the implication that he wants to stay sober and sharp in case there's any trouble. Maybe I should actually get this stupid fluttering heart thing checked out. It could be a serious medical issue.

“Coming right up.”

“Another for me,” Alessio calls after me.

“Nope, you're cut off.”

“Why?” he complains.

I can't tell him it's just because Salvatore is making it too hard to fuck with him, and I need an outlet somewhere, so I just turn and give him a level look that I hope he takes as some kind of knowing. I'm sure he's done something to earn my wrath, even if I don't know about it.

I weave through the crowd, making my way to the bar, on high alert every second. Whoever's working for Don, they could be lurking anywhere. But if they think they're going to get the jump on me, they're dreaming. Showing their hand by leaving those photos was their mistake. I'm not scared, I'm pissed, and if they make another move, they'll learn the difference.

I can feel Salvatore's eyes on me, and unlike the unsettling feeling I had when I thought I was being followed, knowing he's watching makes me feel safe.

Even if it's temporary and barely more than a business arrangement, it's more than I've ever had before.

Chapter 13

DANTE

At some point during my shift, I managed to get past the point of exhaustion to a wired state that leaves me jittery and wound too tight. Since I only covered part of Damnation's shift, I didn't get any stage time, just a few hours slinging drinks and dodging groping hands. That's probably half the reason I'm tense; I haven't danced in days. That itchy, restless feeling under my skin begs me to slip on my baggy clothes and my bloodstained brass knuckles and go for a walk.

The gentle pressure of Salvatore's hand on my lower back as we ride the elevator up to his apartment is an irritating reminder that I can't go out. At least not without having to answer a lot of questions first and agreeing to let him go with me to protect me. I grind my teeth, a headache immediately blooming at the base of my skull.

I stare at myself in the reflective surface of the elevator doors, waiting for its painfully slow ascent to the top floor to end. I look like an absolute mess, still wearing Sal's shirt, sloppily misbuttoned on my way out of the club, with my unwashed jeans that still have sand in them from the desert. My lipstick is smeared again, leaving my chin stained a shade of pink. I reapplied it twice, but every time I did, Salvatore ruined it all over again until I gave up and spent the last hour of my shift with my lips half-naked with uneven red splotches.

The doors finally slide open, and he pulls his keys out of his pocket to unlock the apartment door. He frowns as soon as he slides the key into the lock.

“Oh shit, sorry, I couldn’t lock up when I left. I don’t have a key.” I did pause to worry about that for half a second on my way out, but honestly, locking up felt less important than getting the hell out of this quiet apartment where I was all alone with my thoughts. He slides the key back into his pocket and then reaches inside his jacket to pull out his gun.

“Shooting me seems like a bit of an overreaction,” I deadpan, eyeing the pistol in his hand.

“Relax, Angioletto, I’ll have a key made for you tomorrow. Wait here while I check the apartment.”

“There’s no way whoever is following me had time to see us kissing at Wild, figure out where you live, and break in over the last three hours.” I reach for the doorknob, but he loops his non-gun-wielding arm around me to spin me away from the door.

“Unlikely, but not impossible,” he argues. “Besides, you aren’t the only one with enemies.”

His voice is low and dangerous, but disturbingly casual considering he’s talking about someone potentially breaking into his apartment to kill him. Obviously, it’s not news to me that he’s in the Mafia or that his lifestyle is risky, but I don’t think the reality of all of it sank in until right now. I left his apartment unlocked, there could be someone inside who wants to kill him, and Salvatore is more than willing to kill that person first.

I swallow hard, but he doesn’t pause. He kisses my cheek, nudges me off to the side so I’m not near the door, then cocks his gun before he enters the apartment. My stomach knots and I swallow down the manic sort-of laugh that bubbles in my throat. I think I’m a badass because I skulk around the streets at night and beat up assholes who never saw it coming, but I’ve never killed anyone. Could I do it if I had to? I’d

like to think so. A familiar feeling of rage and hatred churns in my gut, solidifying my resolve. If it's between me and Don, yeah, I'll fucking kill him.

Salvatore returns a minute later without his gun.

"All clear."

His apartment is exactly what I would have imagined if I'd ever bothered wondering. It's minimalist and modern, masculine, with lots of dark wood and shiny steel. I slip out of my shoes, so the heels won't scuff the wood floors, and leave them by the door while he locks the deadbolt and arms the alarm system. He gave me the tour earlier before he had to run off for his meeting. He was right, his place is twice as big as mine with a much better view and newer appliances. It doesn't feel homey though. I just can't imagine curling up on a leather couch to unwind with my needlepoint. But it's fine. I don't have to feel at home here because it's not my home. I'll be back in my own place with absolutely no one taking my picture or threatening me in no time.

"Are you hungry?" he asks, loosening his tie and shrugging out of his suit jacket.

I shake my head. I raided his fridge and made myself a sandwich before I went to work. Besides, when I'm keyed up and jittery like this, food is the last thing on my mind.

He rolls up his sleeves and I watch with mild fascination. Aside from seeing him naked, this is the most casual I've ever seen him. For some reason I get the feeling that more people have seen him naked than have seen him with his tie loose and his sleeves rolled up.

"Drink?" he offers next, and I shake my head again.

"I don't drink much. That martini at the piano bar was basically my limit for the

month.”

His lips quirk into a half-smile and his eyes spark with interest. “See, now if I’d known that, your trick with the flask wouldn’t have worked.”

“Damn, now I’ll have to come up with a different plan the next time I decide to kidnap you.” I’m just giving him a hard time like I always do, so why do I get the strangest feeling that I might be flirting with him? I shake my head a little harder, this time with the hope of setting my wandering thoughts straight. I don’t like Salvatore, he’s just my husband.

“How do you usually like to unwind at the end of the night?” he asks, leaning against the back of the couch, a strand of his well-coiffed hair falling over his forehead, his unbuttoned shirt falling open just enough for me to see a hint of his dark chest hair.

“Yeah, I’m not going to tell you that.” I chuckle.

“Come on, Angioletto, you’re not going to shock me. Drugs? Sex?” That blaze of curiosity and interest is still lighting up his eyes, which are fixed on me like I’ve somehow tricked him into thinking I’m the most interesting person alive.

I fiddle with the buttons on my shirt and waffle for a minute. What could it really hurt to tell him? It’s not like he’s going to turn me in to the police. If anything, he’ll probably think my favorite hobby is adorably tame compared to his day-to-day.

“I’ve never told anyone this before,” I hedge, and his eyes shine even brighter. “When I have extra energy that I need to burn off, I put on clothes that make me look small and young, and I go for a walk in a bad neighborhood.” His whole expression darkens instantly, his shoulders tensing and his jaw ticking. I’m not sure when I got so close to him, but without thinking, I put my hands on his chest to soothe him before he decides to start lecturing me about safety or demanding to know who’s hurt

me so he can whip his gun out and wave it around again. “And when someone takes the bait, I beat the hell out of them to teach them a lesson.”

The smoldering ember of worry and rage in his eyes ignites into a look so full of heat it threatens to burn me alive.

“Hell, Angel, that might be the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard.” He groans, the deep sound going straight to my cock. “You know you can’t go out like that until this threat has been dealt with though, right?”

I sigh. I fucking knew he was going to say that, but it doesn’t lessen the frustration.

“What am I supposed to do to relax then?” Sure, I enjoy needlepoint, but it’s not active enough to scratch this particular itch.

His hand finds its way onto my ass, and he pulls me fully against him. Without my shoes on, I have to tilt my head to look at him.

“I can think of a couple of ideas,” he murmurs. His stiff cock nudges at my belly. I squirm in his grip and glare at him.

“Sex doesn’t relax me,” I grit out, wriggling harder in his tightening grip, my own cock betraying me by thickening against his thigh. Why am I fighting this? My body wants it, I might even be willing to admit I enjoyed it before.

Maybe because he keeps stubbornly insisting I’m a brat. Or maybe it’s the fucking entitlement. He demanded sex in exchange for protection, and I don’t want it to be that easy for him. I don’t want him to think he owns me just because I was desperate enough to ask for help.

“You mean Domming someone doesn’t relax you.” He slides his hands up my back,

underneath my shirt. The touch is unnervingly tender. It makes me want to bite him, to squirm harder, to fight him just enough to make this something rough, at least.

“You are the most stubborn asshole I’ve met in my life,” I mutter, shoving at his chest.

He chuckles and, to my surprise, lets go of me.

“There’s my brat.” He moves to cup my chin, but I bat his hand away and he just grins wider.

“Stop trying to make this something it’s not,” I growl. “You want my ass, it’s legally yours. So why don’t we cut through the bullshit. Bend me over the couch and take what I already promised you.”

“It’s cute that you think I’m the one twisting this into something it’s not.” He smirks and slips his tie off, then starts down the hallway.

Is he seriously walking away from me right now? Outrage pulses through me, going straight to my cock. Like hell is he getting the last word.

“What the fuck does that mean?” I say, trailing him into the bedroom and darting my hand out to keep him from closing the door when he steps into the attached bathroom.

He tosses his tie into the hamper in the corner and turns on the shower so it can start heating up.

“If I’m forcing this, Angioletto, then why haven’t you used your safeword?” he asks, ignoring my question to turn this around on me while he unbuttons his shirt and adds it to the hamper.

“You made me agree to have sex with you in exchange for protection.” I step into his space just to make myself a nuisance while he undoes his belt and takes off his pants since I don’t have much power here aside from annoying him.

“Did I?” He arches an eyebrow, and I make a frustrated noise.

“You are so fucking infuriating.” My fingers have a mind of their own, undoing the buttons of my shirt while I rage at him. “I’m the pretty prize, the dancer everyone wants to fuck. So, get it over with. Fuck me, use me, take what you’re entitled to now that your ring is on my finger.”

My chest heaves with uneven breaths as I toss the last of my clothes into the hamper with his. Salvatore is just as naked as I am, except his breathing is even and his face isn’t showing anything other than serene amusement. His body tells a slightly different story though, his cock hard and heavy just like mine as we stand facing each other with only a few inches of space between us.

“I love your rage, Angel, but I hate whoever gave it to you,” he murmurs, turning and sliding the glass shower door aside so he can step in.

Still moving on autopilot, I’m right behind him. The hot water pelts me from multiple angles, and I immediately shake my head to clear my vision. Salvatore’s hands wrap around my forearms like a vice, and before I can react, he spins me around towards the wall. My hands fly up to brace myself and my breath catches. He presses himself against me from behind, his thick cock nestling between my ass cheeks.

“I’m not going to pretend I don’t want this perky ass of yours, Dante,” he growls. For some reason my name on his lips instead of that stupid nickname jolts me.

I squirm against him. The teasing slide of his shaft over my hole and the weight of his body holding me in place sends tendrils of heat through me. He drags his tongue

along the curve of my neck, and I swallow down a whimper.

“But I’m not going to take it until you beg me,” he murmurs. “And I don’t mean the kind of half-assed begging I settled for in Los Vespar.”

He wraps one hand around my wrists and pins them to the wall just above my head, then snakes his other arm around me.

“Fuck you.” Do I sound breathless or pissed off? Hard to say.

“Now that’s a different negotiation altogether, Angioletto,” he purrs, kissing along the same path he licked just a minute ago while he rolls his hips slowly, grinding between my ass cheeks. “Let’s focus on one thing at a time.”

Hot water rains down between us, making our skin slick without doing anything to ease the friction as he rolls his hips again and sucks a bruise right onto the crook of my neck. He slides his free hand along my belly, no doubt feeling the unintentional quiver as I hold back another throaty, needy sound. My cock spasms against the warm tile wall.

“Just so there’s no misunderstanding, I want you flushed and trembling, your cock twitching impatiently. I want you gasping my name and pleading with me to fill this sweet hole of yours.” His cockhead catches against my rim on his next thrust and I brace myself for him to immediately contradict everything he’s saying and force his way inside me anyway. “And, most importantly, I don’t want there to be even a sliver of a doubt that you want it just as much as I do.”

He pinches my nipple, and I can’t stop myself from moaning this time, arching to push my ass out and letting my head fall back against his shoulder.

“Don’t hold your breath.” My taunt is undermined by the twitch of my hips as I grind

myself against him shamelessly.

His head catches on my rim again and I gasp out loud, my cock stiffening and my balls tightening.

“I’m a patient man.” He laves his tongue along the shell of my ear and teases my other nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

“Right, you’re going to be happy to just keep jerking me off and sucking me. You have a limit, Salvatore. Eventually you’ll force me to my knees and take what you want.”

He makes a dangerous sound in his throat and spins me around again, pressing me right back against the wall with my hands still pinned over my head. But we’re face to face now. His hot lips find mine and he bends his knees so that his next thrust has our cocks dragging against each other.

“If you think I’m not getting anything out of this, Angel, you’re deluding yourself even more than I thought,” he rumbles, and then dives in for another tongue-heavy kiss, lifting me onto my tiptoes with every thrust.

I can’t quite wrap my head around the fact that he didn’t fuck me when he had me pinned and helpless just a minute ago. It’s like I’m trying to add two plus two and keep coming up with five. But even though I can’t make it make sense, it still unravels some of the resistance inside of me. Instead of fighting and scratching and screaming to release all the tension built up inside me, I give in to the feeling of his hands around my wrists and his cock grinding against mine. I let myself focus on the feeling of his thighs between mine, the swing of his sac, and the heat of his tongue in my mouth. For just a few minutes, I let all of the tight, knotted things inside of me relax and I test out what it feels like to trust Salvatore. Not forever, not real trust, but even temporary is more than I’ve ever given anyone before.

As if he can feel the shift inside me, he groans into my mouth and deepens the kiss. Precum dribbles from my slit, mixing with the hot water running down our shafts. Our muffled grunts and moans echo off the tiles. He lets go of my wrists and hoists me into his arms without breaking the kiss. I'm happy just to let him manhandle me, wrapping my legs loosely around his waist and trusting him to hold me up. He presses my back to the wall again and his thrusts get faster and more urgent. His cockhead catches against my frenulum piercing with every roll of his hips, sending sparks of pleasure down my shaft and all the way to my toes.

His kiss gets rougher, nipping at my lips and demanding more, like he wants to devour me. And I give in to all of it, moaning shamelessly, letting him take what he wants because some stupid, naive part of me actually believes he won't take more than I'm willing to give. And he doesn't. His cock is desperately hard and leaking against mine with every thrust, and it would be so easy for him to lift me a little higher and sink inside me, but he doesn't.

"I love the fire in your eyes when you dance, Angioletto," he murmurs, as breathless as I am now. "I live to see that spark of violence in your face just before you lash out at anyone who tries to touch you."

How does he have the ability to form words right now? All I can do is gasp his name and dig my fingers into his slick, warm skin. I can feel his wedding ring biting into my thigh as he tightens his grip on me, fucking me against the wall faster, harder, his thrusts becoming wild and as desperate as I feel. I rake my fingernails down his back, hoping he'll feel the sting tomorrow and think of me.

Salvatore groans and his cock stiffens against mine. The hot splash of his cum on my skin has my eyes rolling back and my toes curling. Another rope of his release lands on the sensitive, throbbing head of my cock and I'm done for. I let my head fall back against the wall with a soft thud and he buries his face in my throat, kissing and nibbling my Adam's apple as I cry out. My cock pulses against his, throbbing and

twitching, my cum joining his, dripping down our shafts and slicking the way as he continues to grind against me, chasing every wave of our orgasms until our balls are drained and my whole body feels limp.

“Feeling relaxed?”

It’s hard to feel annoyed by the smugness in Salvatore’s question. Even harder when he presses a few more kisses along the edge of my jaw and then reaches for the bodywash without waiting for my answer. And if my knees weren’t feeling so weak and too many hours without sleep weren’t catching up with me, I would absolutely slap him for filling his hands with soap like he’s going to bathe me or something equally ridiculous.

As it is, I am delirious with exhaustion, so I just close my eyes, lean against him, and let his big, strong hands wash me.

Chapter 14

SALVATORE

Sleep is a distant memory at this point, my eyelids weighing more with every steady exhale, but I can't make myself look away from my angel. Shadows dance across his soft, tan skin and his eyelids flutter with the phantom movements of his dreams. I can't stop replaying the moment he relaxed in my arms, the brief few minutes he trusted me with his weight and his pleasure. I'm not optimistic enough or naive enough to think that this is our turning point, that he'll trust me now and stop fighting the things he's so afraid to feel. He still thinks this is about sex, about power, about control. My guarded Angioletto with his mouth full of sharp teeth and fists aching to bruise flesh in order to protect himself. He'll see eventually though.

I take a chance, reaching out and gently dragging my fingers along the grooves of his spine, following the curve of his back, mesmerized by his deep, slumbering breaths. He doesn't stir, doesn't flinch, just keeps sleeping peacefully, safe in my bed where he belongs.

There's a darker feeling living right beside the awe and devotion in my chest, growing just as rapidly and as urgently as my love for Dante. The need to protect him. My pulse spikes, chasing my exhaustion back a little further, keeping me from sinking down beside him and surrendering to the heaviness of my limbs just yet.

I slip out of bed carefully, grabbing my phone off of the nightstand and pulling the door shut quietly behind me on my way out. I don't bother to check the time. It's the middle of the night, but whether it's midnight or almost dawn, I don't have the

foggiest idea, and I couldn't give less of a fuck. There are more important things than a solid night's sleep and Dante's safety is at the top of the list. Anyone who wants to complain to me about it is welcome to do so to my face.

I send out a few texts to my guys about meetings tomorrow first. I don't think any of them are getting friendly with the Fitzpatricks, but I'm happy to rattle them all a little and see if anything falls out if it will keep Lorenzo in that sunshiny mood of his we all love so much. My nephew, Luca, is next. Instead of a text, I hit the call button. It rings a few times before he answers in a sleep-rough voice.

"Yeah?" I can practically hear him shaking himself into consciousness, sheets rustling and his bed creaking on the other end of the phone.

"Hey, I need you to come by my place first thing, okay?"

"Sure, yeah, of course. Is everything okay? Do you need me now?"

A surge of affection goes through me again for the kid and I chuckle.

"No, morning is fine. I have a job for you for the next few weeks or so." I drag my free hand through my hair and lean against the kitchen counter, my heart rate kicking up again. For some reason telling Luca makes it feel more official, even though I know he knows better than to go running his mouth to my sister or anyone else about things. Still, he's family and telling him is a big deal. "I need someone guarding my husband while I'm working."

"Your..." He sounds dazed and then he laughs. "Auguri, Uncle Sal. I didn't even know you were seeing anyone. That's fantastic, I can't wait to meet him."

I glance back at my closed bedroom door and grin. "You say that now, just wait until you piss him off and he breaks one of your bones."

“Uh... what?”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll get along just fine.” I grin to myself. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

We end the call, and I have just one more to make before I can rest easy for the night. I do actually hesitate for half a second over whether it’s worth it to risk waking him, but I know I won’t sleep until I at least have the ball rolling on this, so I take my chances and hit the call button.

“If this is a call for help because your new husband has your balls in a vice or a gun to your head, I’m across town and can’t help you.” I guess I shouldn’t have worried at all. Sparrow is clearly wide awake, the sound of traffic in the background and a little puff to his breathing like he’s been exerting himself.

“Busy hunting down Reapers?” I take a guess, not that it’s much of a gamble considering stalking and picking off members of the lowlife motorcycle gang is all the little vigilante has done since he found his way to Wildcliff a year and a half ago.

“Not tonight.” I can hear a smile in his voice. “And if Xav manages to lose me just because you called and distracted me, I’m going to be extremely annoyed and sexually frustrated. So make it quick. What’s up?”

Who answers their phone during a kinky stalking game? I shake my head.

“Don Moreno. I need you to dig up everything you can on him.”

“Is this for Dante?” I hear the metallic rattle of a fire escape and Sparrow breathes a little harder.

“It’s about Dante, but it’s for me.” I growl just a little, tightening my grip on the

phone.

“Consider it done. Gotta go.” The call ends abruptly, and I let out a small sigh, letting my shoulders relax and some of the tension ease out of me. That’s all I can do for tonight to keep Dante safe. And I can’t imagine anywhere he’ll be more secure than fast asleep in my arms.

I slip back into the bedroom and crawl into bed. Dante makes an annoyed grunting sound in his sleep as I drag him closer and wrap my arms around him before settling into a peaceful slumber again. With his back steadily rising and falling against my chest and his hair tickling my nose, I close my eyes and drift off too.

DANTE

There’s a delicious ache in my muscles and joints, from sleeping so hard or from the rough way Salvatore sank his fingers into my thighs and pressed me against the wall last night, or maybe a combination of the two. I bury my face in my pillow, fighting against the tide of consciousness dragging me out of peaceful sleep against my will. Memories from last night all fight for the prime spot at the forefront of my mind. The rasp of his stubble against my skin, the sound of our moans, the wild, animal way he pinned me and humped me, and worse, the way I gave in to it.

I squeeze my eyes shut tighter, waiting for shame or embarrassment to sour the warm feeling in my stomach, but it doesn’t come. I search for a hint, a single moment when Salvatore made me feel weak or pathetic for giving up the fight and letting him be the one in control for a little while. I’m coming up blank though. I’ve never thought anything gross or demeaning like that about the subs I’ve played with, so I’m not sure why I’m so afraid he will. Maybe the problem is more about the way I see myself.

I groan, rolling over and blindly chucking my pillow at the nearest wall just for the small moment of destructive, chaotic control. This is way too much psychosexual

analysis before coffee.

What the fuck time is it anyway? Has Sal left for work already? I yawn and stretch, wondering what his day-to-day life looks like. The entirety of my knowledge about the Mafia is from watching *The Sopranos*, but there are way too many queer mafiosos around here for me to put all my faith in what I learned from Tony Soprano. I know they make money illegally, just like most corporations. Three cheers for capitalism. And they kill people if they have to, but I'm pretty sure it's mostly just other criminals, so it's hard for me to get too worked up over that either. I don't know why I'm bothering to think about all of this now. I guess because we're technically married, which makes me at least complicit in the crimes he commits.

Eh, so what? Who among us hasn't committed a few felonies? We're all just getting through this fucked up thing we call life however we can.

With another yawn, I fling the covers off and roll out of bed. I really need to go to my apartment today and get some of my stuff. I wipe the sleep gunk from the corners of my eyes and open Salvatore's closet. I was in a hurry last night, so all I did was grab the first shirt I laid my hands on, but now I step inside the luxurious walk-in and take a few minutes to look through his wardrobe. I never bothered to think about the kind of person I would want to settle down with, but if I had, someone who could share my passion for style would've been at the top of my list. Not that I'm settling down with Sal, obviously, but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate the thought of my temporary husband with one of these corsets under his designer suits.

I thumb through them until I land on a black and gold vest with corset boning and a lace-up back. I slide it on and tighten it until it fits properly. I borrow a pair of his briefs and a lovely pair of crimson Versace pants too. They fit too loose, but that's easily fixed with a belt. I check myself in the floor-length mirror. None of it is my style, but it'll do for now. I imagine the heated look in Salvatore's eyes when he sees me in his clothes again and my cock swells just a little.

I can hear the faint sound of someone in the apartment as I step out of the bedroom and make my way down the short hall to the living room.

“I need to go to my place and get—” I stop short, the words dying on my tongue.

It’s not Sal sitting on the leather sofa, and I don’t think he would appreciate the dirty pair of boots kicked up on the coffee table.

“Sure thing, Angel ,” Sparrow purrs Sal’s nickname for me and shoots me a smirk. He sweeps his eyes over me and grins wider, as if he’s not wearing the same ratty jeans and leather jacket he always does. “Looking good.”

“What are you doing here?” I ask, ignoring the teasing. “Oh god, don’t tell me you’re supposed to be my bodyguard.” I groan. “You probably weigh even less than I do.”

He snorts. “Want to compare body counts?”

Okay, he’s got me there. I bristle and cross my arms. Maybe that’s why Sparrow makes me feel so prickly and defensive, because a small part of me, like microscopic, wants to be more like him. Sure, I beat up perverts in the dead of night, but he’s been singlehandedly taking out the Sleepless Reapers one by one.

“Actually,” another voice I don’t recognize says from the kitchen, “I’m your bodyguard.” A second later, a man who looks like a younger version of Salvatore steps into the living room wearing a cheaper version of the kind of Italian suits the rest of the guys all wear and holding two steaming mugs in one hand and a plate of pastries in the other.

I look him up and down. There’s eager puppy energy radiating off of him in waves.

“Oh good. Let me guess, if you manage to keep me alive, you’ll get that promotion to

second tier loafer licker you've been angling for?"

Sparrow sputters a laugh and my overeager bodyguard frowns.

"Jeez, Uncle Sal warned me you might break my hand, he didn't tell me I needed to protect my balls too," he mutters, setting the pastries on the coffee table, just a few inches from where Sparrow still has his dirty boots propped up, along with one of the mugs. "I'm Luca, by the way."

He starts to offer me his hand and then seems to think better of it and tucks it into his pocket instead. I don't bother to fight the grin spreading across my face or the warm feeling in my chest.

"Salvatore said I might injure you?" Oh god, I sound like a middle schooler right now, on the verge of asking what else my crush said about me. Not that I have a crush on Sal. Ugh, I need coffee.

I pick up the mug off of the table and one of the flaky, fruit filled pastries and plop down on the couch next to Sparrow.

"That man is obsessed with you," Sparrow says in a sing-song voice while scrolling through his phone.

I take a sip of my coffee and roll my eyes. "Please, he only thinks he likes me because I'm a challenge and because watching me dance makes his dick hard."

Luca frowns again, standing next to the couch like he's taking this whole guardian thing extremely seriously, and sips his own coffee.

"He's your husband," he points out, glancing at the ring on my finger.

“Oh, you sweet summer child. Marriage is just a contract, and in this case it’s a very practical way to let certain people know that I’m protected and can’t be fucked with.”

Sparrow grabs one of the pastries off the plate and bites into it, crust flaking onto his jacket as he chews. Once he’s done, he gives me another shit-eating kind of look and cocks his head.

“Why’d you choose Sal? Alessio would have done it. It sounds like you’re just being practical, so you must have had a reason, right?”

I glare at him as I take a bite of my own pastry, surprised to find that it’s pineapple, which is my favorite.

“I did have a reason. I had many reasons, and they were all extremely well thought out. But I don’t see why I would need to justify them to you.” I’m sure I come off as haughty rather than defensive. And I’m pretty sure I did have reasons, I just can’t remember them right this second with both of them staring at me. “Shut up and let me drink my coffee in peace.”

Sparrow chuckles again but at least he stops taunting me. I turn my attention to Luca with another glare.

“And you, sit the hell down, you’re making me nervous with your hovering.”

He immediately sinks down to sit on the arm of the couch. Strangely, it catches my attention that his obedience satisfies me, but it doesn’t thrill me or turn me on. Is this how I’ve always felt or is Salvatore getting in my head about this whole Dom-brat thing? I contemplate that while I drink my coffee in silence, and once I’m finished, Luca gives me the new key Salvatore left for me and sets the alarm as we all head out to my apartment.

It's only a few blocks, and it's a beautiful morning, so I'm assuming we're going to walk, but Luca catches my arm and steers me towards his car.

"Dude, no touching." I shrug his hand off. "Only one warning, next time I'll break something."

He holds his hands up in surrender and opens the car door for me.

"A bunch of mafiosos scared of a couple of twinkies. It's the kind of thing I never thought to aspire to." Sparrow sighs happily as he slides into the back seat next to me.

"I did," I murmur, settling into my seat. "I wanted to be the thing that gives monsters nightmares."

I swallow down the sting of realizing that when my monster peeked his head back out, the first thing I did was run to Salvatore to protect me.

I give Luca directions to my apartment, and he pulls away from the curb. It's a short drive and as soon as we get inside, I feel like I'm having the worst kind of Déjà vu.

"Mother fucker," I growl. My door is ajar again. I haven't been home in days; who knows how long it's been sitting open.

Luca puts his arm out to block me from getting any closer and pulls out his gun.

"Wait here," he says, cocking it and slipping inside.

"Think someone robbed you or is this about that Don asshole?" Sparrow asks, leaning his shoulder casually against the wall next to the door and picking at one of his fingernails.

“How...?” I shake my head. Sal must have mentioned Don. Fucking hell. “This is a nice neighborhood, no one robbed me.”

He nods and then looks up when Luca comes back out.

“All clear, but they did a number on it,” he says with a grimace.

“Fucking fantastic,” I grumble, shoving past him to step inside.

He wasn’t lying. My place is trashed. Furniture is flipped over, my refrigerator door is hanging open, causing the vague smell of warm, rotting food to fill the place. More photos of me are scattered all over the floor, along with most of my stuff.

Sparrow picks up one of my finished needlepoints, one that says “all men are cremated equal” and snorts a laugh. I snatch it away from him and step over the remains of my stuff in a stupor. I only just posted on my social media last night about the wedding, so chances are Don’s goonie trashed the place before I put this whole plan into motion. That makes me feel mildly less queasy, at least.

“Listen, I don’t think we need to tell Salvatore or anyone else about this right now. It probably happened before the wedding anyway, so there’s nothing for him to get worked up about.”

Luca makes a nervous sound and tugs on the collar of his shirt, still holding his gun, but loosely by his side now, with the safety on.

“Yeah, sorry, but I’m not going to risk Salvatore killing me over something like this if he finds out I didn’t tell him.”

I huff with frustration. “Fine, at least let me tell him?”

Luca rubs the back of his neck and then nods. “Sure, but I’m telling him tomorrow if you haven’t.”

“Fine,” I grumble again. “It’s fine.” I don’t know if I’m trying to convince them or myself. I let out a long breath and hold my head high. No fucking way am I going to let this be the thing that breaks me. Fine, I ran to Sal for protection, but that doesn’t mean I’m fragile or that Don is going to win. He’s not going to rattle me.

I beat his ass bloody and put him in jail the last time. And I would have been fine leaving it at that. But he wants to go a second round with me, and this time, he’s not going to be so lucky.

Chapter 15

DANTE

I step over shards of brown and green glass littering the pavement just outside the employee entrance. Dancers or bouncers having a few drinks and acting like hooligans before or after their shifts? Maybe. Or a drunk, delusional customer having a few more while he waited for a dancer he was sure was madly in love with him. Also very possible.

“I’ve got it from here, Kevin Costner.” I give Luca a little wave with one hand and reach for the door handle with my other.

“Who?” He reaches over my head and pulls the door open wider, ruining my plan to slip in through the gap and quickly close it behind me. Not that it would keep my bodyguard from following me. It’s not like Wild is the Pentagon, the back door stays unlocked any time the club is open. It’s the social conditioning of the Employee Entrance sign that keeps most people out.

“Kevin Costner,” I repeat, stepping into the hallway that’s only lit by the green glow of the exit sign, the smell of cigarettes and body spray burning my nose before I’m anywhere near the dressing room. “The Bodyguard.” I glance over my shoulder and see absolutely no recognition on Luca’s face. I roll my eyes. “It’s a movie from the nineties.”

“Huh,” he hums, only a step behind me.

“Seriously, are you going to hover over me while I change and do my makeup?” I arch an eyebrow.

For all the mess my intruder caused, my makeup bag was dumped out but mostly intact, and some of my clothes were trashed, but mainly they were just torn off the hangers and left strewn around my bedroom. Between the three of us, it didn’t take long to clean up and for me to pack a bag to take to Salvatore’s. By the afternoon, Sparrow had other places to be, but Luca has remained firmly lodged up my ass the entire day.

“Yeah, the whole point of a bodyguard is staying close to guard you.”

Lucifer stops rubbing bronzer into his pale thighs and looks up with a smirk.

“Get tired of breaking bones and decide to hire out for it?”

I give him the finger and a toothy grin in response. “Nah, just saving my energy for the most irritating cunts I can find.”

“Hold up.” Sin grabs my wrist, my middle finger still proudly erect.

“Back up,” Luca barks, reaching for his gun.

Sin pulls his hand back immediately and holds them both up in surrender.

“Jesus, chill,” he huffs. “I was just going to ask about his ring.”

“Yeah, you’ve gotta take it down a few notches, sugar.” I pat Luca’s chest. “If you start waving a pistol around back here it’s going to ruin the whole vibe.”

‘The vibe’ of course being a baffling combination of weed, blow, and boner pills.

“You think we’re going to attack him or something?” Lucifer asks with a throaty laugh.

“I got orders to make sure no one lays a hand on him, that’s all I know,” Luca says with a crease in his forehead and a frown on his lips, one hand still hovering near his gun like he’s not quite sure yet that this very dangerous situation is resolved.

“Well, he’s fine back here with us,” Sin assures him.

“Yeah, go find Sal and relax. No one is going to do shit to me while I’m here.” I make a shooing motion, and he hesitates for a few seconds before he huffs and leaves to make his way to the front of the club.

Lucifer and Sin watch him go and then turn back to me.

“So, seriously, what’s the deal?” Sin eyes my ring again.

The instinctual urge to tell them it’s none of their fucking business rises in my throat like bile, burning my tongue. Except, the whole point of marrying Salvatore was to spread the word and use my association with the Morettis as a shield.

I roll my shoulders and turn towards the mirrors, feeling their eyes on my back is a hell of a lot easier than looking at their faces and waiting for a reaction.

“I married Salvatore Moretti.”

The bass from the music pounds in my chest and I can hear the muffled sounds of the crowd on the other side of a couple of curtains and doors, but the silence that falls for a few seconds in response to my announcement feels deafening.

“Ho-ly shit,” Lucifer mutters after a minute.

“That explains the jumpy bodyguard. If Salvatore finds anyone else’s fingerprints on you, is he going to shoot the kid?” Sin chuckles, and I snort.

“Maybe. The bodyguard thing is just temporary though.” As is the marriage, but I’m not about to tell them that.

“Well, good luck with all that.” I glance in the mirror to see Sin shuddering dramatically. “You couldn’t pay me enough to get mixed up in that Mafia shit.”

A slow, devious smile spreads over Lucifer’s face. “I don’t know, Alessio is pretty fucking hot.”

Alessio? Please. I don’t know how you could notice anyone else with Salvatore sitting at that table with his designer suits and calm, take-no-shit energy. Of course, if any of them so much as look at him, I’ll fucking cut them. The thought startles me and I pull the eyeliner pencil away from my eye for a beat. I definitely mean it though. The thought of anyone else even breathing the same air as Sal has my fingers twitching into fists and my pulse spiking.

I shake my head and re-focus on my makeup. It’s been a long fucking week and it’s messing with my head, that’s all.

The conversation around me devolves into white noise as I tune it out and get dressed in a black lace thong, fishnet stockings, and a red corset that has been gathering dust in the back of my closet for months. That asshole who broke in thought he was intimidating me; he was just helping me make the most out of my wardrobe. Dumb fucker.

The music changes and I hear my cue. It’s only been a week since I’ve been onstage, but it feels like a lifetime ago. The last time I stepped out under these glaring, hot lights, I was blissfully unaware I was being followed. I was still sure that Don

wouldn't have the guts to do anything more than send a stupid letter just to get under my skin. I was still Dante Torres instead of Dante Moretti.

My heels click against the stage, both the lights and the music starting low and slowly building, just like the existential panic in my chest. It's not just my last name, I'm not sure I know who I am anymore. Confident, feisty stripper, raging vigilante with bloody knuckles, bored, sexually unsatisfied Dom, dangerous, violent, unafraid...

I don't feel like I'm any of those things now.

Just as my heart starts to race and my knees start to quake, the spotlight lands on me. The swell of the music reaches its peak and breaks into a fast, energetic rhythm. There's one thing Don didn't manage to quietly strip from me this week, so I start to dance.

My body moves to the rhythm automatically, as natural and simple as breathing. I don't have to tell myself to dance, I don't even have to consciously remember the moves, I just have to give in to the surge in my muscles that knows exactly what to do.

I shimmy and strut, turning my back to the crowd to show off the fishnets cutting a diamond pattern over my bare ass and give them the tempting jiggle they're looking for. The whistles and cheers are as hollow to me as they've ever been. I spin around and my eyes move automatically to the Morettis' usual table. Luca's there, but he's alone.

Annoyingly, my heart sinks, but I'm not sure why I care. Salvatore is a busy man. Just because he's been sitting at that table with his eyes glued to me every night I've worked for years doesn't mean he doesn't have better things to do. Watching me dance was only exciting because he couldn't have me, just like the rest of these slobbering jackals. Now I have his ring on my finger and his last name crossing out

my own, where's the thrill in watching me spin around a pole? By the time this is all sorted out, he'll be more eager than I am to sign the divorce papers so he can go find the next flashy, new thing to amuse himself with for a while.

I dance faster, the music raging the same way my mood is, pounding with the injustice and rejection I've woven together in my head into some kind of beast I can bare my teeth at and snarl. My corset comes off, but I don't toss it into the crowd, it's too expensive to become someone's jerk-off rag. I toss it farther back on the stage, towards the curtains so I can grab it when I'm finished, and I spin towards the edge, towards the crowd, so I can entice them to open their wallets for me.

As always, there's at least one idiot in the club who doesn't know my reputation or can't read the 'no touching' signs, or both. A hand reaches out and I raise my heel, ready to deliver the small amount of justice that he deserves, but before I get the chance, the hand disappears. I drop to my knees for the part of the dance where I writhe around on the stage, and my gaze cuts through the crowd to the man who tried to grab me. His eyes are wide with fear as he stumbles away with both hands raised in surrender. Huh, usually that doesn't happen until after I've broken a finger or two.

And then I see him. Not at his usual table, but right there in the throng of bodies near the stage, in a royal blue suit with a dangerous scowl on his face as he watches my would-be-groper back away.

Salvatore .

SALVATORE

It's been a long goddamn day away from my Angioletto. Leaving him asleep in my bed this morning was almost unbearable when I could think of a hundred different ways I wanted to make him moan in a sleep-rough voice. But here he is now, within touching distance but still untouchable for a few more hours of delicious fucking

torture. I don't think the spark of heat and something sweeter in his eyes when they land on me is wishful thinking, but it's gone too fast for me to know for sure.

He arches his back and slinks across the stage on his hands and knees, drawing horny groans and cheers from the men around me. One of them clearly didn't learn the lesson I just finished imparting to the last asshole who tried to put his hands on my angel, reaching out with the clear intent to get a handful of Dante's ass cheek.

Dante turns a snarl on the man at the same time I reach him, wrapping my fist around the collar of his shirt and yanking him back roughly. The man yelps, barely audible over the music, and Dante blinks in surprise. Like he's not used to being able to count on anyone. Like he can't believe I want to spend my night making sure no one touches him so he can focus on the thing he loves, the reason he's on that stage to begin with. Dance.

"The 'no touching' signs aren't there for decoration," I growl in the man's ear. "And I'd hate for something terrible to happen to you if you were to ignore them and make the mistake of touching Dante Moretti."

"Mor—" He swallows hard. "I didn't know."

"Now you do," I say coolly, and, just like the last one, he scurries off like the spineless mouse he is, disappearing into the crowd as I turn my attention back to my husband.

His eyes are on me again, still down on all fours, somehow managing to look graceful even on his hands and knees. He's a goddamn wet dream in those fishnet stockings, the lights dancing over his skin, that lace thong delicate enough to tear apart with my teeth if I wanted to. I'm expecting to see frustration, maybe rage in his expression. I can hear the tongue lashing he gave me a week ago still echoing in my ears, the words "I can take care of myself" hanging between us. But he doesn't look pissed, he

looks... confused. His lips soften and I want to drag him right to the edge of the stage, shove my tongue into his hot, sweet mouth, and tell him that he can uncurl his fists and lower his shields.

I'm here to protect him now.

He rises to his feet again in a fluid movement that I can't take my eyes off of. Bills litter the stage at his feet, but over and over again his eyes come back to me as he dances, like he can't look anywhere else even when he tries. A greedy, possessive feeling beats like a drum inside my chest. I lose track of time watching him dance, memorizing the way his muscles move and salivating for the beads of sweat that glisten on his bare skin.

When his stage time ends, he stoops to gather up the cash cluttering the stage. Most of the crowd moves away, ready to refill their drinks or take a piss before the next dancer arrives, but I stay close, keeping an eye out for anyone whose attention is lingering too long, anyone who looks suspicious enough to be involved with Don.

Dante kneels down and crooks his finger, beckoning me to lean closer. Heat radiates and underneath the faint scent of cigarettes, I can still smell my expensive bodywash on his skin from last night. My cock hardens and I grip the edge of the stage to keep myself from giving in to the urge to drag him into my arms and put my greedy hands all over him while he's working.

"Meet me upstairs in ten minutes," he says, then he winks, stands up, and struts off stage, leaving me with my mouth hanging open and my cock hardening rapidly.

He might just want to tell me off for interfering with his customers, but he usually prefers an audience when he's chewing me out, so I don't think that's it. I adjust my tie and back away from the stage, a grin tugging at the corners of my lips as I turn and head for my usual table where I know Luca has been sitting for the last half hour.

“How did things go today? Did he give you much trouble?” I ask when I reach him.

“He’s feisty,” he says with a chuckle.

With Dante that could mean a lot of things, from giving Luca a hard time to bodily harm. But I don’t see any visible injuries, so I’m guessing my Angioletto behaved himself.

“He is,” I agree, not bothering to suppress my grin. “You can take off for the night. I’ve got him from here.”

Luca nods and moves to stand, then hesitates. “There was just one thing. He wanted to tell you himself, but...”

“What?” I bark, my heart rate spiking instantly.

“Nothing major.” Luca puts his hands up and takes a step back, realizing a second too late that there’s a chair behind him. It topples and he swallows hard.

“Relax,” I say, letting out a breath. “What happened?”

“We went by his apartment to get his clothes and stuff, and someone had broken in again. They trashed the place and left photos of him, like surveillance photos. He said they were all older, from the past few weeks, and that the break-in probably happened while you guys were in Los Vespar. But I figured you’d want to know anyway.”

I want to fucking end whoever’s been following Dante and trying to intimidate him. I want him to be right, for my name alone to be enough to make these pieces of shit turn tail and run, but I’m not as optimistic about that as he is.

I nod and pat Luca on the shoulder.

“Thanks. Now go. Get some sleep, get laid, whatever you do to recharge. I’ll see you in the morning at my place again.”

“You got it, Uncle Sal.”

There’s nothing I can do about the break-in or the pictures tonight, and I already have Sparrow digging into Don, so I’m not going to dwell on it right now. I take another breath, shake the tension out of my shoulders, and let it go for now.

Luca disappears into the crowd, and I make my way towards the stairs that lead to the private rooms on the second floor. Does my little angel want to fight, or does he want to fuck? I can’t wait to find out.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:53 am

Chapter 16

DANTE

I don't know what I was thinking telling Salvatore to meet me upstairs, except that I feel like I'm spinning and for some reason he's the only still point.

"I'm taking my thirty before I start picking up tables," I call out to no one in particular after I put my red corset back on and apply a fresh coat of lipstick in the same shade of crimson.

No one will miss me for a little while. Besides, what's Cyrus going to do? Fire me? I chuckle at the thought of the manager calling me into his office to tell me he's sick of my shit and that taking an unauthorized break is the last straw, and the look on his face when I flash him the ring on my finger and tell him who my new husband is. It might be worth finding some way to piss Cyrus off just for the chance to give him a fucking stroke.

My amusement fades just as quickly as it came. Is this who I am now? Instead of the badass, unhinged twink who's not afraid to throw an elbow or break a few bones, now I'm a wilting flower wielding my husband's name as a shield so I don't have to fight my own battles. If I met this version of myself, I'd think he was fucking pathetic.

Fury and disgust roil in my gut as I make my way up the stairs, half tempted to turn around and walk the hell out of here, away from Salvatore, away from this whole fucking mess, to start fresh somewhere new. Who would that Dante be? I reach the

top of the stairs and my eyes land immediately on my mafioso in his blue suit, leaning against the railing that overlooks the club below.

The wildfire of emotions raging inside of me finds a fresh piece of kindling to devour. Salvatore . Violence heats my skin, so similar to lust it's almost impossible to tell the difference, and my cock seems to be just as confused as my brain is, swelling against the soft, delicate lace of my thong.

He pushes off of the railing and turns around like he can hear my footsteps over the music, or the shift in my breathing as the flames of my anger crackle and pop inside me, or maybe he can just feel my eyes, the way I always seem to be able to feel his from across the room.

“Angioletto,” he purrs, sweeping his gaze over me slowly, from my spiked heels all the way up to the smoldering rage in my eyes. “Fighting then,” he murmurs, the corners of his lips curling into a smirk.

“What?” I don't wait for him to explain though, grabbing him by the lapel and dragging him towards the closest private room with the sign on the door flipped to Vacant.

I raise my knee to chest height and kick the door open, taking a small amount of satisfaction in the sound of the cheap wood splintering where my heel connects and the way it rattles on its hinges as it flies open. Apparently, the sign was a lie, which makes the startled yelp the man on the couch with his dick out lets out really not my fault. Genesis stops swinging his hips in the man's face and turns a glare on me.

“What the fuck, Dante?”

“Get the fuck out.” I'm not in any mood to play nice. I'm in the mood to scream and thrash and burn the world down just to find some balance with the chaos going on

inside my head. Maybe Genesis sees it in my eyes, or maybe he's perfectly fine with the excuse to end the private dance early since he's already been paid. He just shrugs and saunters out while the guy zips up, muttering under his breath about the interruption, then hurries out behind him.

I swing the door shut forcefully behind them and then spin towards Salvatore. I'm practically vibrating, seething for reasons I don't completely understand, and he's as relaxed as ever, loosening his tie before taking a seat on the far end of the leather couch, nowhere near where the other man had been sitting.

"What's the matter, Angel? Is this about the break-in at your place?" He rests one arm casually along the back of the couch and spreads his legs to make himself comfortable.

My eyes are drawn to the hard bulge between his thighs and my body remembers how it felt last night to have him pressing me against the shower wall, his cock dragging ruthlessly against mine, my body melting with surrender. And then his words sink in, and I snap my eyes back to his.

"It's not about the break-in. I could give a fuck about the soon-to-be-dead prick who can't seem to stay the hell out of my apartment," I growl, and Sal's lips twitch with a heated smile. "And fuck your nephew, by the way."

"He's not stupid, Angioletto, he had to tell me." He leans forward, putting his elbows on his thighs. "Do you just need something sturdy to rage at, or did I actually do something to piss you off?"

"You fucking ruined me." I try to snarl at him, but the sound comes out too strangled, halfway desperate like an animal caught in a trap. "Or, I don't know, Don ruined me. I ruined myself." I feel like everything is spinning again, like I'm gasping for a breath I can't quite catch. "This isn't me. I don't want this to be me. My husband fending off

men who try to touch me like I can't handle them myself," I spit the words and stomp closer to Salvatore without meaning to.

He leans back again, looking up at me with warm, lustful, confusing things dancing in his dark eyes. He puts his hand on my thigh, tracing the shape of the wide holes in the fishnets with his thumb.

"I thought it would give you the chance to dance without having to worry. You didn't like it?"

I grit my teeth and sway another step closer, putting myself right between his spread legs. My achingly hard cock strains against my underwear right at his eye level. There's no way to hide the way my body has learned to react to him, and I don't bother to try.

"I did like it," I growl.

He arches an eyebrow and leans forward, holding my eyes as he drags his tongue in a slow circle over the bare skin of my lower belly, just below the edge of my corset.

"You're mad at me because you liked feeling taken care of?" He licks another slow circle. "Defended?" He nips at the wet spot left by his tongue, drawing a gasp from my throat and making my cock twitch eagerly. "Protected?"

"I can protect myself. I always have." I shove against his shoulder—at least that's what my intent is, but somehow, I end up with my fingers digging into the soft fabric of his jacket, feeling the sturdiness of his shoulder underneath.

Both of Salvatore's hands land on my ass cheeks, bare except for the open weave of the fishnets. The lacy strip of fabric wedged into my crease rubs teasingly against my hole and all the untouched parts of me throb.

“Can and have to aren’t the same thing, sweetness. Something tells me you’ve been fighting for too long already. It’s okay to rest and let me go a few rounds for you.” He drags his lips over the head of my cock as he murmurs the words and my knees quake.

“I ran to you instead of even trying to deal with Don myself,” I counter, my protests sounding weaker as my anger starts to get lost with every kneading grasp of his hands and every teasing brush of his lips.

His eyes flare and he grabs me harder, burying his face against the hard, pulsing length of my cock. The lace doesn’t do anything to blunt the heat of his breath or the wetness of his lips.

“Because you knew I’d protect you. There’s nothing weak or wrong about that. A smart man uses any weapon at his disposal. There’s no honor among monsters, all that matters is who comes out on top.” It sounds so simple when he puts it that way. Don wouldn’t hesitate to use the Mafia to come after me if he had the chance, so why should I feel bad about it?

I swallow hard and my knees wobble again.

“I don’t know who I am anymore though. If I stop swinging my fists at every threat, if I let you fight for me instead, then I’m just a devastatingly hot guy with no clue what to do with himself.”

Salvatore barks out a laugh.

“You’ll still be the same fiery, violent, unhinged little angel you’ve always been. You’ll just be less tired.”

My shoulders sag a little. I have to admit, that sounds nice. But it also sounds like a

hopeful, empty promise. I can let him fight for me, but I can't get too used to it. That's a fair compromise to make with myself, isn't it?

"Salvatore?" I cant my hips and rasp his name.

"Yes, Angioletto?"

"Make me suck your cock."

SALVATORE

I've been kneading his soft, perky ass cheeks, but my hands go still and my cock throbs.

"You want me to force you to your knees and make you feel helpless, Angel?" I scrape my teeth over the lace covering his swollen, aching cock and it jerks eagerly. "You want to choke on how out of my mind horny I've been for you since the first time I watched you grab a man by the wrist and bring him to his knees with fire in your eyes and a snarl on your beautiful lips?"

He nods slowly, the heat in his eyes smoldering and his cock spasming again while the rest of his expression sets into that mask of defiance I've jerked off to so many times I've lost count. Maybe some people wouldn't understand how Dante could go from being on the verge of a panic attack over his own perceived weakness to wanting to be forced to submit, but I get it. There's no weakness in choosing to submit, but he has to see that for himself.

"Oh, and we only have, like, fifteen minutes before my break is technically over, so hurry up or you're going to spend the rest of my shift with blue balls." He gives me a cheeky smile and starts to take a step back.

I'm out of my seat in a flash, tangling my fingers in his hair and yanking him back roughly. His head jerks and a breathy gasp parts his crimson lips.

"You remember your safeword?" I know he does, but the reminder never hurts, especially before getting a little rough. I drag my free hand down the length of his corset, imagining stripping it off of him later and spreading him out stark naked in my bed. When I reach his cock, I wrap my fingers around it a little too tightly. He rewards me with a whimper. He tries to nod, but I tighten my grip. "Words, Angel. Say, 'yes, Sir.'"

I snake my tongue along the warm, wet seam of his parted lips and he snaps his teeth, grazing the tip of my tongue.

"Fuck you," he hisses, gnashing his teeth again.

I pull back in time to avoid another bite, the taste of copper lingering in my mouth from the first one, and my heart races with excitement.

"The only thing getting fucked tonight is that bratty mouth of yours. I'm sure it'll be a hardship for you to be too busy choking on my cock to spew any of those charming insults and profanities."

He squirms against the hold I have on him, and I let a slow smirk pull across my lips. I take my hand off of his cock and wrap it around his throat instead, loosely, just enough to feel every swallow and the vibration of his quiet gasping sounds against my palm.

"Don't touch me." Dante shoves lightly against my chest, stumbling over his own feet as I spin towards the couch.

"You can't fool me, Angioletto. You've wanted this as long as I have."

The click of his tongue against his teeth isn't part of the roleplay at all. Even with his cock drooling in his panties and his eyes begging me to be even rougher with him, he still wants to pretend that this is one-sided. Beautiful, infuriating, stubborn brat.

“Lie to yourself all you want.” I walk him backward until the backs of his legs hit the couch, and I sink my teeth into his earlobe. “But I know the signs of a brat begging for attention. Did you ever go home after a shift and wrap your hand around your lonely cock, imagining what it would feel like if I finally had enough of your mouthing off?”

He nods and then catches himself and shakes his head. I chuckle, kissing and biting my way along his jaw. His skin is nice and smooth now, the stubble from the last few days gone, leaving the minty scent of my aftershave in its place.

“Were you hoping I'd spank you to put you in your place?” I shake my head before he even responds. “No, that's not what you were looking for.” I move my grip from his throat to his jaw, turning his head towards me so I can look in his eyes, so I can see those pouty, snarling lips of his. “This is what you wanted, you just couldn't admit it, even to yourself. You want to pretend that you don't want it to take your power back from all the men who've made you feel like you're nothing but a fuck toy.”

“Is a psychology lecture about my twisted kink supposed to be a punishment or are you trying to run out the clock because you're afraid you won't be able to perform when you're under so much pressure?”

Laughter rumbles in my throat and I push Dante onto the couch. The sounds of the club are muffled by the door, easy to ignore over his ragged breathing and the clank of my belt buckle as I undo it with one hand. I slip my other hand down the front of Dante's top to tease a pierced nipple between my fingers, tugging and pinching, watching the tick of his jaw and the rebellion in his eyes as he fights against the

pleasured moans and whimpers building inside of him.

I pull my cock free, my eyes locking on his pursed lips. My base throbs and pulses with the building pressure of wanting to be buried deep inside of him. I want to feel his surrender in the way his mouth goes slack around me, in the strokes of his tongue along the thick veins lining my shaft.

“It’s okay to admit you want it,” I taunt him, squeezing just below the head of my cock and dragging it over his lips like lipstick, leaving streaks of my precum glistening against the velvety red. “I can see how hard you are, Angel.”

His hands are balled into fists at his sides, his cock visibly straining in those pretty panties of his. He narrows his eyes in a challenging glare, refusing to say a word. I pinch his nipple harder, twisting the barbell just a little, and his lips part on a gasp. I shove my cock between them with a triumphant moan. For a second, he seems to forget our game, forget that he wants to pretend not to like it. His eyelashes flutter and the tension in his face goes slack, his tongue laving hungrily over my cockhead. He makes a muffled sound that vibrates down my shaft and settles in my heavy, tightening balls, and he sinks down another few inches, sucking me into the wet heat of his mouth.

“Now there’s a good boy,” I groan, letting my head loll back and snapping my hips forward.

Dante sputters, the muscles of his throat constricting around me. Blinding pleasure rushes through me at the tightness, the fluttering spasm as he tries to adjust to my cock filling his throat. I pull back out and his lipstick smears down the wet length. His nostrils flare and he meets my eyes, his eyelashes damp with tears. His glare stays in place another few seconds, the tip of my cock resting on his tongue, and then he lets out a shuddering breath. The tension he’s been holding on to—always ready for a fight, his hackles always up—melts away.

“Good, Angel,” I praise him again, hoping he can hear the satisfaction and pride filling my chest and seeping into the dark, cracked parts of my soul that I always knew Dante could fill. “It’s okay to like it. It’s okay to feel good,” I murmur, thrusting between his lips again, savoring the drag of them over my length and the hot, wet pleasure of his throat engulfing me over and over.

He’s not pretending to fight anymore. His hands groping, hips twitching, his eyes pleading, staying latched onto mine as I fuck his mouth harder and faster.

I’m not worried about the time limit, but the urgency is part of the thrill. Someone could knock on the door at any minute, demanding to know where Dante is. All they would hear are his muffled, gagging moans and my panting as I watch my cock slide in and out of his pretty mouth.

“Touch your cock,” I growl. “Let me see.”

He whines around my next thrust, lifting his hips off the couch and wiggling his tights and underwear down just enough for his hard, flushed cock to spring free.

“Time’s almost up, Angel,” I warn, filling his throat again and again, my balls tight and aching, insistent, eager heat pooling in my gut. “Hurry up and make yourself come, or you’ll be suffering with blue balls until the end of your shift.”

The echo of his earlier taunt earns me a glare that only lasts a fraction of a second before I thrust deep again and his eyes roll back as he wraps his hand around his cock like I told him to. He strokes himself fast, the muffled moans around my cock getting deeper and longer, tears flowing freely down his cheeks and lipstick colored spit staining his chin, his hips lifting off the couch in desperate, unrhythmic thrusts.

“Dante,” I groan, slamming my hips against his face one more time and burying my cock deep in his throat. The choked, body racking sob he lets out as my cock swells

and my orgasm explodes through me might be my new favorite sound. Or maybe it's the strangled moan that accompanies the ropes of his cum splattering across that pretty corset of his, his eyes wide and his whole body shaking as he swallows down the endless volleys of my release and then laps at my slit like he's afraid to miss a drop.

"Angel," I sigh, cupping his chin and easing out of his mouth when I'm too sensitive to let him lick and suck my softening cock anymore. A trickle of spit and cum dribbles from the corner of his ruined lips and dark streaks of mascara stain his cheeks. "You're so fucking beautiful."

He blinks, stunned for a second, then shakes his head. "I... um... should get back to work."

He seems dazed, his hands shaking as he stuffs his spent cock away and looks down at the streaks of cum on his corset.

"Hold on," I say firmly, tucking my own cock away and sitting down on the couch next to him.

"I have to—" he starts to say again.

I grab his bicep and tug him down before he can go anywhere. He squirms and fights me for a second before giving in and sinking against me.

"There. Just relax. They won't miss you for five more minutes." I stroke my fingers along the curve of his shoulder, up and down in a soothing motion, and reach into my pocket with my free hand.

I've always found the concept of a handkerchief outdated and, frankly, disgusting. But sometimes it goes with my suit, and I'm not about to argue with style. I pull out

the unused handkerchief and tilt Dante's face up so I can get a better look at the mess I made. A possessive growl rumbles in my throat as I wipe the lipstick off of his chin.

His lips twist into a smile.

"You're such a fucking caveman," he mutters, tilting his chin up a little more to give me better access.

"And you're a fucking brat," I say with grin.

"Are you staying until the end of my shift?" he asks, holding still while I dab the smeared mascara off of his cheeks.

"What do you think, Angioletto?"

Chapter 17

DANTE

I press my fingertips into the mouth shaped bruise on my collarbone and shiver. A week's worth of filthy memories assault my brain and make my skin feel too hot and tight stretched over my body. I'm still having mixed feelings about my choices, about the ring on my finger and using the Moretti name as a shield instead of facing all this down by myself, but it's getting easier and easier to convince myself that Salvatore was right. The smartest fighters use whatever tools are available to win, and that's what I did.

Whoever was following me for Don hasn't had the guts to make any more moves, so I guess my plan is working. Salvatore has even had people keeping an eye on my apartment in case they come back. Not gonna lie, I was hoping they'd be dumb enough to do it. At least that would be one less person to worry about, and with Don's release date creeping closer, I could use the win.

And if I enjoy the perks of this marriage in the meantime, there's no harm in that, right?

I stop prodding the bruise and turn on the sink to splash some cold water on my face. The faint smell of coffee tickles my nose as soon as I step out of the bedroom. As annoying as having Luca as my constant shadow is, the man brews a damn good cup of coffee. If he ever decides to leave the Mafia and go legit, he has a real future as a barista.

I'm focused on my mission, not even glancing towards the living room as I shuffle into the kitchen. I hate that the marble countertops and all the stainless steel are starting to feel more comfortable and homey. I'll never be able to afford an apartment like this myself unless I start actually being nice to the grabby perverts at Wild, so getting used to it is only going to make me resent my own apartment later. I'm already starting to think my ceilings are too low now I've spent a week here.

I grab a mug out of the cupboard. Luca is really slacking this morning. Usually, there's a cup already made for me by the time I drag my zombie ass into the kitchen, but today he couldn't even be bothered to get a mug out for me? Maybe I said something to offend him. I think back over all of our interactions this week. I called him an overeager puppy, threatened him with bodily harm if he didn't back up a few inches to give me some fucking space, and never missed a chance to make a bodyguard joke... I can't see where any of that would cause him to revoke my barista privileges.

I pour myself a cup and add a little bit of half and half, then take a sip. I sputter as soon as the first drop hits my tongue. This shit is strong enough to strip a driveway, and it's missing the little hint of cinnamon I've gotten used to Luca adding.

"What the fuck, Luca? Did I do something to piss—" I spin around with the mug in my hand, my face still wrinkled with disgust. The words die momentarily on my tongue when my gaze lands on the man sitting on the couch. "Who the fuck are you?"

The dude is wearing what I've been thinking of as the Official Moretti Uniform, a dark suit and expensive Italian shoes, but he's definitely not Luca. He's lounging on the couch with his feet up on the coffee table, some finance channel playing on the TV. It takes him a long second to look away from the screen and lazily turn his head in my direction, like I'm some kind of inconvenience.

He drags his gaze over the part of me that's not hidden behind the island counter with

a dismissive flicker, his lips twisting into a hint of a snarl.

“Antonio. I drew the short straw,” he says.

I arch an eyebrow and, without thinking, bring the cup to my lips again to take another sip. I cringe again and set the mug down on the counter more forcefully than I need to, coffee sloshing over the rim to make a ring on the counter.

“What the hell does that mean? Where’s Luca? By the way, you make vile coffee.”

He scoffs. The sound is as dismissive as his look was, making my hackles rise defensively.

“Luca had somewhere else he had to be today. And apparently I did something to piss someone off since I was ordered to waste the day babysitting Salvatore’s stripper whore husband .” He doesn’t have to physically make air quotes around the word husband for me to hear them.

I rear back like his insult is a physical slap right across my face.

“Fucking excuse you?” My hand twitches towards the coffee mug again. Is it hot enough to scald him if I march in there and throw it in his face? Maybe it would be worth it to ruin his suit anyway, even if I can’t leave him with any serious burns.

“Don’t need to be excused, sweetheart. This whole thing is a fucking joke and I’m not going to pretend to take it seriously. But boss told me to get my ass over here and make sure nothing happens to his pet, so here I am. Now, shut the fuck up.” He turns the volume up on the TV as an extra ‘fuck off.’

My body flushes with a rush of fury, my fingers curling instinctively into fists and my heart pounding so loudly in my ears I can barely hear the man on the TV droning on

about stock prices. I have no doubt this prick is strapped. The question is, can I vault over the counter and beat him to death before he can pull his gun? I don't like my odds.

If I called Salvatore and repeated the insults Antonio just spewed at me, would he leave whatever meeting or shady dealing he's currently in the middle of to race home and rip him to shreds for me? However I feel about fighting my own battles, the thought is pleasantly warm and comforting, like a hug. It's enough to keep me from testing Antonio's quick-draw skills... for now, anyway.

But if he thinks he's going to sit on his ass all day and I'll "shut the fuck up" and make this easy on him, then clearly no one warned him about me. My rage slowly rearranges itself into a delightfully spiteful feeling instead, and a smirk curls on my lips. I'm going to drag this asshole all over the city and make him hold my goddamn shopping bags. Make me feel small, and I'll make you feel even smaller, bitch.

I dump the coffee down the sink and head back into the bedroom to get dressed. While I pick out clothes and get ready to go out for the day, I amuse myself with fantasies of wrapping Antonio's tie around his throat until his face starts to turn purple and his eyes get all glassy and bloodshot.

My phone vibrates with a text from Salvatore.

SALVATORE: Morning, Angioletto. I'm thinking about you. How's your morning going?

It's not the first time he's sent me an annoyingly sweet good morning text this week, and my body reacts the same way it has all the other mornings. My heart races and my stomach flutters and twists with too many confusing feelings to sort out. It almost feels like he thinks this is real, like he's actually my husband, adoring me and not afraid for me to know it. I swallow hard and stare at the text for a few seconds,

entertaining the idea of ratting on Antonio while also wondering what it would be like if I responded to Salvatore as if it was real too.

I missed you in bed this morning. I can't wait to have your hands and mouth all over me again tonight. I'm starting to crave the way your stubble drags over my skin when you kiss the insides of my thighs.

My throat tightens and I wheeze out a laugh. Even all alone in the bedroom with the TV blaring too loudly for Antonio to hear me, I'm embarrassed by how anxious the sound is, high and tight and full of a thousand insecurities I don't want to put words to.

I tug down the collar of my shirt and snap a picture of the bruise and send it without any words in response. My cock swells a little, thinking about his reaction to the photo. I know there's a primal part of him that wants to mark me up, as if physical evidence of his claim will chase away anyone stupid enough to try to fuck with me. Another hot shiver runs through me. Maybe that's why I like the bruise too.

SALVATORE: Are you trying to get my dick hard while I'm working?

I chew on my lip, screwing up my courage, then type a reply.

DANTE: Seemed like the bratty thing to do.

SALVATORE: Brats do it to get attention. Is that what you want, Angel? My attention?

My hands tremble and my cock gets even harder. I think... maybe I do want his attention. Yes, I need his help, and this marriage is for practical reasons, but both things can be true, can't they? I can need him and want him, can't I? I'm only human and he is Salvatore . Gorgeous, confident, well-dressed, dangerous in exactly the right

ways...

I type and delete a reply three times, unable to make myself send one simple word. Yes . Because if I do, everything changes. Another message comes through while I'm fighting with myself.

SALVATORE: I can practically hear you seething from here. Tell you what, I'll tie you up tonight and make you come until you're so drained and oversensitive you're begging me to stop, and we can pretend like you're only doing it to keep me happy.

My mouth goes dry, and I swallow down a needy whimper, even though no one else would hear it anyway. I reach for my stiff cock with my free hand just as another text comes through.

SALVATORE: Hands off your pretty cock. That's mine.

DANTE: Do you have cameras in the apartment or something? That's an invasion of privacy.

SALVATORE: haha, no cameras, I just know my husband.

I gape at the text for another minute or two and then send an eye roll emoji and stuff my phone into my back pocket.

With my head held high and a fresh sense of confidence bolstering me, I stomp into the living room and grab the remote off of the coffee table before Antonio has the chance to reach for it.

"Get up, asshole, we're going out." I click off the TV.

"Nope." He crosses one ankle over the other on the table like he's making himself

more comfortable and sinks a little deeper onto the couch.

“Fine.” I toss the remote at him forcefully, taking satisfaction in the thunk it makes when it bounces off his head. “I’m going out, you can stay here. I’m sure Salvatore, my husband, won’t mind at all when I tell him later that you didn’t think it was necessary to actually guard me.”

I hear him muttering more unflattering things about me as he scrambles off the couch right as I reach the door. I could be the bigger person here, but where would be the fun in that?

“Good puppy.” I pat his cheek and give him the most sugary smile I can manage.

Several hours and a dozen stores later, I hate Antonio even more. His sulking and bitching are starting to give me a fucking migraine. He was even rude to the barista at the coffee place, which we only had to stop at because he was incompetent at the challenging two-step process of putting ground beans and water into a machine and pressing the start button. The new clothes I’ve bought aren’t even enough compensation for having to spend the day with this miserable asshole.

“Alright, you’ve had your fun, now we’re going home,” he says on our way out of the store, his voice ruining the one second of euphoria I managed to feel about the new shoes I bought.

My petty plan isn’t working as well as I hoped, and at least at home I can lock myself in the bedroom and not look at him again until Salvatore gets home and sends him away. But there’s no fucking way on this planet or any other that I’m going to give him the satisfaction of obedience or even compliance.

“No.” I ignore him, turning back towards where we parked the car, and I keep walking.

“It wasn’t a question,” he calls after me. “You think Salvatore won’t believe me if I tell him I had safety concerns, and you ignored them? Maybe I tell him you got away from me on purpose, almost like you had someone you needed to meet that you didn’t want me to know about. Wouldn’t be the first time a rat tried to join The Family.”

I stop in my tracks. Would Salvatore believe him over me? Would he take Antonio’s word over mine just because Antonio is in The Family? A surprising amount of certainty fills my gut. I turn halfway back around, just so he can see the relaxed smile on my face as I shrug.

“Tell him and find out.”

People move around us on the sidewalk, unaware of our silent stand-off that lasts less than a minute.

“I’m serious, get in the car or I’m leaving you here alone,” he growls.

“No,” I say again.

Antonio huffs through his nose, then rounds the car to the driver’s side, gets in, and screeches away from the curb, nearly hitting another car in the process and leaving the smell of burning rubber and exhaust in his wake.

“Fucking asshole,” I mutter.

I’m definitely not going back to the apartment while he’s still there. I could take a taxi to my place. The thought makes me shudder immediately though. Fuck, I really am going to have to break the lease and find a new place once all of this is over, aren’t I? Even once Don and his little helper are long gone, that apartment is still going to feel tainted. I consider the idea of texting Sparrow to see if he wants to get lunch or something. Dammit, is this who I am now? Mafia wife spending the day

shopping and lunching with other Mafia wives? Gag.

Honestly, after hours with that condescending prick, what I really want to do is hit something... or preferably some one .

The people around me thin out as I get farther away from the shopping district, not really walking anywhere in particular. At least I stuck Antonio with all my bags, so they're not weighing me down. A few hours just wandering around the city until Salvatore gets home isn't the worst idea. Definitely better than going back to the apartment and beating Antonio to death with whatever heavy object I manage to get my hands on.

It takes a few blocks before I realize there's a distinct sound of footsteps a few paces behind me. Huh. Ask and you shall receive, apparently. I pick up my pace a little to check, and sure enough, the footsteps speed up at exactly the same rate. It's broad daylight though. No one would be stupid enough to try to grab someone off the street in the middle of the day, would they?

The blood in my veins turns icy. Maybe it's Don's friend, the one who broke into my apartment and took all the pictures of me. I make a left turn down another street, residential this time, and the footsteps follow. My heart beats faster and my muscles start to tense and tick, trained through the years to react with fight when a predator stalks behind me, thinking they're stealthier than they really are.

There's hardly anyone out on this street, everyone away at work in the middle of the day. All the traffic sounds are coming from the shopping district a few blocks behind me now. I reach an alley between two apartment buildings and make a quick turn into it. I take a few steps, holding my breath against the stench of the dumpsters as I pass them, listening for the crafty predator sneaking up behind me. It only takes a few seconds before I hear his footsteps again, a crunch on the gravel, and a low laugh like he thinks he has me now.

“I guess Don didn’t warn you about me, did he?” I taunt, spinning around with my fist already cocked, a move I’ve done so many times it’s pure muscle memory.

“Actually, he did.”

He catches my fist before it can connect with his face and uses the leverage of my movement to wrench my arm behind my back, spinning me around too quickly to get a good look at his face. A flash of auburn is all I see before he has me pinned to the wall, the rough brick abrading my cheek.

“Get the fuck off of me,” I yowl, kicking and squirming, ignoring the sharp pain in my shoulder.

The man tuts and tugs on my arm harder, sending a radiating jolt of pain from my shoulder through the rest of my body.

“You’ve been a naughty little liar, Dante. Don just wants the truth to come out.”

“Oh, is he ready to confess to what he actually did? Because what I managed to send him down for was a fucking fraction of what he deserved.” I stop struggling and give in to the weight of my attacker’s elbow in my back, his sweaty hand wrapped tightly around my wrist. “Is he really prepared to go up against the Morettis just to expose my half-truths?”

He chuckles and the heat of his breath makes my skin crawl.

“That was cute actually, he got a kick out of it, and you made a few things a lot easier for me with your little wedding stunt too. So thanks for that.” He wrenches my arm harder again, but eases up the pressure between my shoulder blades, shifting his weight. “Now, just hold still for one second.”

“Fuck the fuck off you cunt-ass piece of shit.” I start to buck again, clenching my teeth against the scream of pain that threatens to explode from my lips every time I try to tug my arm free.

He just chuckles again, and I hear the hiss of a lighter. I barely have time to wonder what he’s doing before searing pain lances through my forearm. Not just the pain of being burned, but of metal searing against my skin, making my flesh boil and melt. I do scream this time. A rage-filled, indignant shriek from deep in my gut as I finally figure out a way to get some leverage, shoving my knee up and using it to push myself off of the wall. He’s startled enough by the move that we stumble back, and he curses as he falls. Another nauseating jolt of pain explodes from my shoulder as we crash to the ground. I can’t fight him with a dislocated shoulder and no weapon.

So, as much as it hurts my pride, I run.

Chapter 18

SALVATORE

“See, something isn’t adding up.” Alessio points to the lines where somehow we ended up with more money than there’s supposed to be in one of our business accounts.

“Well, too much money has to be a better discrepancy than missing money.” I drag my hand absently along my jaw as I try to puzzle out how we could end up with an extra ten thousand dollars in this account without any of the others coming up short.

“Sure, but it’s weird, right?” he insists.

I sit forward and reach for the papers so I can take a closer look at everything. The money didn’t come from nowhere, so the answer has to be in there, we’re just not seeing it at first glance. My phone starts to buzz in my pocket, drawing my attention away from the accounts before I even dig into them.

I’m still scanning the papers in front of me as I reach for my phone.

“Hoping it’s your husband sending you dick pics while you’re at work?” Alessio smirks.

He’s trying to goad me, but all he manages to do is make me grin like the lovesick fool I am. There’s no way it’s a dick pic from Dante, but that doesn’t mean I’m not hoping it’s a snarky, bratty text from my mouthy little angel.

I finally tear my eyes off the accounts and look at my phone. It's a call, not a text. Dante's name lights up the screen as my phone continues to vibrate in my hand. My pulse stutters.

"Everything alright, Angioletto?" I answer instead of wasting time with hellos. If he's calling me in the middle of the day, it's not a social call.

The harsh sound of panting breath sends a confused reaction of lust and terror coursing through me. I push away from the table, throwing Alessio an apologetic look, and press the phone closer to my ear as I move into the other room and drop my voice so Les won't listen in.

"Angel, if this is meant to be an obscene phone call, please tell me now before I get the wrong idea and tear out of here to get to you." I try to keep my tone light, but it's nothing but the cold, hard steel of controlled panic.

Another gust of white noise as the phone crackles with more heavy breaths, and then a quiet, almost inaudible whimper.

"Sal," Dante whispers, and it's anything but sexy.

"Where are you, Angel?" Telling Alessio I have to go is the last thing on my mind. I'm not sure I even close his door behind me on my way out. I have one hand in my pocket fishing out my keys and the other clutching the phone so tight to my ear I think I hear the damn thing crack under my grip. "Angel?" I say again, trying to keep my voice gentle in the face of the panicked rage already rising in my chest.

If anyone so much as laid a finger on him, they're already fucking dead.

"Um, the, uh, corner of Fourth and Washington," he finally says, a quiver in his voice.

“Where’s Antonio? Is he with you?” The call switches to Bluetooth as soon as I’m in my car, but I can’t make myself let go of the phone.

Dante scoffs. It’s barely more than a huff of breath, but he manages to lace it with his signature scathing snark. It sets me at ease just a little. Whatever happened, he’s still my brave, strong Angioletto, full of rage and venom to defend himself.

“Are you coming?” he asks instead of answering the question.

I ignore the red light ahead and the blaring of horns that follows. “Of course I am, Angel.”

His breathing slows and evens out. Maybe he’s just catching his breath, but I want to believe that knowing I’m on my way gives him the peace and comfort he needs. No one will hurt you again, Angioletto. No one.

I blow through another light, rounding the corner onto Washington, and spot Dante standing on the corner of the bustling street. At first glance, nothing looks out of place. He just looks like a man out for a day of shopping, waiting for a rideshare or a friend. Having my eyes on him, seeing him standing and breathing and in one piece calms my racing pulse down to normal again. Whatever scared him enough to call me like that can be dealt with.

I pull to a stop. He darts looks over his shoulder like he’s expecting someone to materialize and pounce on him. When his gaze finally lands on me, I notice a glassy, faraway look in his eyes. It takes another second before he jolts forward, reaching to open the car door. He winces and shuffles his whole body back to pull the door open instead of just tugging it with his arm.

He slides into the passenger seat, and all the things that weren’t noticeable while he was standing on the street corner are like neon signs now. There’s a raw abrasion on

his cheek, the collar of his shirt is torn, and he moves stiffly as he buckles himself in and then gingerly pulls his hands into his lap.

“What the fuck happened?” I ask through clenched teeth, brushing my thumb gently over his cheek, feeling the swell of the bruise and smearing the droplets of blood that haven’t quite scabbed over yet.

“Can you just drive?” He doesn’t look over his shoulder at the sidewalk, but the way he stiffens for a second makes me think he wants to. I narrow my eyes and scan the street. Is there anyone lingering? Anyone watching? Not that I can see. “I’ll tell you what happened, just go first.”

I lean back into my seat. As much as I want to jump out of the car and hunt down whoever hurt him, my first priority is making sure he’s okay. Revenge will wait, and it will only get sweeter. I pull away from the curb, stealing glances at Dante as I follow the traffic laws this time.

“Injuries first, Angioletto. Do I need to take you straight to the hospital?” It’s never been hard finding the right level of detachment. It’s necessary in this line of work when anyone you know could end up dead without warning. But right now, the only thing that keeps the quiver out of my voice is the years of practice I’ve had staying steady and even in fucked up situations.

“I’m fine.” He wraps his hand around his forearm but manages to match my feigned cool detachment.

“Bullshit,” I bark. Dante winces again and I grit my teeth, taking a deep breath. “Angel, I’m trying to help you, but I can’t do that if you won’t be honest with me. Now, tell me where you’re hurt before I pull the car over and spank it out of you.”

His breath hitches. “I really don’t need the hospital. I have a couple of scrapes and

bruises. My shoulder was dislocated, but I already set it. And I have a... um... burn.” He squeezes his hand around his forearm again. “All I need is some ice and painkillers, and I’ll be fine.”

I grind my teeth again, causing a headache to bloom behind my eyes. Gripping the steering wheel tighter, I count a couple of slow breaths to calm myself down and then I press the dashboard smart screen to bring up my contacts and press to call the first one on my favorites list.

The sound of a phone ringing fills the car and Dante shifts in his seat. I’m going to get the rest of the story out of him, but I need to prioritize.

“Salvatore,” a familiar, smooth voice answers after only two rings. He’s lucky I’m not Lorenzo; he’d ream him out for not picking up on the first one. “What can I do for you?”

“I’ve got a situation. I need you to come to my apartment.”

He’s quiet for a fraction of a second. I’m sure he wants to ask what to expect, but he knows better than to do that over the phone. “I’ll be there.”

We hang up without bothering with any goodbyes.

“Who was that?” Dante asks as I turn down my street and our apartment comes into view.

“Biaggio,” I answer. “He’s the family doctor.”

I hit the button to raise the gate to the underground parking garage and head for my assigned space. There’s a second one marked with my apartment number that sits empty. I wonder what kind of fit Dante would throw if I bought him a car. He would

probably get up in my face, hissing about not needing to be taken care of or not wanting to be bought, then pretend to fight me as I bend him over the hood and make him scream my name. I enjoy the fantasy for half a second before turning off the engine and shifting in my seat to get a better look at him.

My eyes land on his swollen cheek and the fantasy evaporates. My attention for the last few minutes has been on getting Dante home where he's safe, but now that we're here, the bigger picture comes back into focus.

"Where's Antonio?" My voice is low, but there's no mistaking the venom dripping from the question. Dante was supposed to have protection, so where the fuck is Antonio?

DANTE

Fucking Antonio. Was it a coincidence that I was attacked right after he left? Maybe the ginger asshole who jumped me was watching all day, just waiting for me to be alone so he could have his chance. Or maybe there was more to it than that. I can't be sure, but I want the chance to find out.

"Promise me you won't kill him." Not that he wouldn't deserve it. And fuck, okay, it would be stupidly hot to see Salvatore shoot someone in the head for disrespecting me. In spite of the throbbing pain in my shoulder and in my forearm where that guy burned me, my cock twitches in agreement.

Salvatore's nostrils flare and the controlled mask he had in place when he picked me up slips, letting all his thunderous rage shine through.

"Why would I need to kill him?" he growls, baiting me to tell him what happened, why I was out on the street alone and who attacked me.

Antonio's threat to make him think I'm a traitor rings in my ears again. I've been honest with Sal about what this is, but that doesn't mean I haven't left room for doubt. As far as he knows, I could have made up the whole thing about needing protection as a way to lower his defenses and slip easily into the Morettis' world. I could be feeding information to the feds or any other enemies they have. The only reason he has to trust me is my word versus Antonio's.

It shouldn't matter. This marriage is only temporary, and from what that dickhead in the alley said, the Moretti name isn't doing much to protect me right now anyway. But it does matter. I need to know that he trusts me.

Instead of answering that question, I answer the original one. "As far as I know, he's upstairs in the apartment."

I lick my dry lips, feeling the slight twinge in my cheek. It's nothing compared to the throbbing in my arm. Part of me wants to blurt out my side of the story first, but I swallow any more words and reach for the door handle. Let Antonio spin lies and bullshit. At least if Salvatore believes them, I'll have the bone deep satisfaction of my righteous rage to keep me warm at night again. I've spent most of my life believing the worst in everyone. It has the benefit of being familiar, even if it's lonely as hell.

Salvatore catches up with me as we reach the elevator and rests his hand gently on the back of my neck. I lean into his touch, letting it settle the trembling in my muscles and the queasy feeling in my gut from the adrenaline and the pain.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?" he asks, waving his magnetic key card in front of the scanner and then pressing the button for the right floor.

"If you still want to hear it after you talk to Antonio."

I lean into him with my good side and let my head fall on his shoulder for the short

ride. A terrifying part of me clings to the gut-deep certainty I have that Salvatore will believe me, that he'll trust me no matter what. The doors slide open with a ding and my heart leaps into my throat. It really shouldn't matter. I can just leave. We can file the divorce papers tomorrow if he wants to. I still have my apartment, my job, my life, as small and violent as it is. So why does it feel like my whole world is teetering on the edge of destruction?

I dart my good hand out to grab his lapel, catching him mid-step, and drag him around to face me.

"Kiss me," I whisper, hoping he can't hear the desperation bleeding into my voice.

His eyebrows pull together in worried confusion, but he doesn't hesitate, cupping my face delicately, like I'm made of something precious and fragile. It should piss me off to be treated like I'm breakable, but it makes me ache inside instead.

Don't break me.

Don't break me.

Don't break me.

Salvatore's lips brush mine, barely there at first, and then more firmly. Am I imagining the tremble in his hands? Our lips move together, and for once I don't feel the need to challenge him. I just need comfort for a minute, even if I'll feel silly and pathetic for it later.

"Thank you, Angioletto, I needed that," he murmurs, sliding his hand back into place at the nape of my neck. "I had some pretty fucking dark thoughts when I heard you hurt and panting on the other end of the phone. Don't expect me to be able to stop touching you until I manage to convince myself you're actually okay."

I let out a trembling laugh. “Well, I’m not in any condition to break your hand right now, so I guess I’ll have to live with it.”

He kisses my bruised cheek then leads me out of the elevator.

“One last chance to tell me what happened before I ask Antonio,” he says, hovering with his key near the lock.

I shake my head. “After.”

The TV is playing loudly again, but I can hardly hear it over the drumbeat of my pulse in my ears. Salvatore’s hand stays firmly on the back of my neck, and he reaches under his jacket with the other to pull out his pistol.

Bodyguard of the fucking year, he doesn’t even react to the sound of our footsteps. Salvatore marches us right up to the back of the couch and uses the muzzle of his gun to tap Antonio on the shoulder. He starts to turn his head, then startles, jumping out of his seat and holding his hands up in surrender. I roll my eyes so hard I’m surprised I don’t sprain something. I can’t believe I let this fucking idiot make me feel small, even for a second.

“Hey, Tonio, how’s it going, champ?” The overly friendly tone has me swallowing down a laugh as Antonio’s eyes go wide. Is he surprised to see that I’m hurt or surprised that I’m still alive? I can’t tell.

“Salvatore, hey.” He darts a glance at me and then back at the gun. “You found Dante, that’s great.”

“I did.” His friendly tone slips into a slight growl. “Funny thing though, I could have sworn I left him with protection. Any idea why he was all alone on a street corner, covered in bruises?”

“I wish I could tell you, boss. He spent the morning bitching and moaning about wanting to go out and get some air. At first, I thought he was just giving me a hard time, but the more insistent he got, the more I started to wonder if he had an ulterior motive, like maybe he was supposed to be meeting with someone. So, I agreed to take him out. I figured I could see for myself what was so important that he had to get out of the apartment. But as soon as we were downtown, he took the hell off. He lost me in a crowd on Washington street and just kept running. That was a couple of hours ago, so god only knows where he went after that.”

I hold my breath. Will Salvatore believe him?

His gun doesn't waver, but he takes his eyes off of Antonio to look at me.

“What really happened, Angioletto?”

“I wanted to go out shopping, Antonio got tired of it, but I wasn't ready to come home yet. He insisted and I dug in my heels and called his bluff. He left and I kept walking. That's when I realized someone was following me. I thought I could catch them off guard and fight them off myself, but they already knew my playbook and they were expecting it.” I manage to relay it with detachment, all the feelings of shame and fear locked up tight for now.

I tighten my grip around the burn on my forearm and bite the inside of my cheek against the flare of pain that rushes through me. When the doctor comes and they both see the burn, I'm going to have to explain it. I can't think about that right now though.

Salvatore's eyes fill with the exact kind of danger I was hoping for when I decided marrying him was the only way to protect myself from Don. He swings his attention back towards Antonio.

“What part of ‘guard him’ don’t you understand?” He cocks his gun. “And then you have the fucking balls to lie about my husband just to top off your fucking incompetence. Give me one good reason I should let you take one more fucking breath.”

He believes me. No hesitation, no need to think about it, he believes my version, no questions asked. My heart pounds so hard I can barely catch my breath, and for a few seconds all of the pain in my body is replaced with the overwhelming urge to kiss him again.

“Don’t kill him,” I gasp. I’m still not sure if he had anything to do with my attack, but I don’t want his blood on my hands just because he’s a condescending prick.

Sal’s jaw ticks and he lowers the gun, but only a few inches. A resounding pop rings in my ears. Antonio’s face contorts and he stumbles back. The smell of hot metal and blood mixed with the churning adrenaline in my stomach makes bile rise in my throat.

“You fucking shot me,” Antonio shouts, pressing his hand to his thigh.

“Thank Dante that you’re still breathing,” Salvatore says coolly.

Antonio’s face turns bright red for a second before flushing to an unnaturally pale color.

“You heard the man.” I let a savage, toothy smile spread over my face. “Thank me.”

He makes an indignant sound in his throat, but then his eyes land on Salvatore’s pistol again, his finger still hovering over the trigger. He swallows hard.

“Thank you, Dante,” he says through clenched teeth.

Salvatore wrinkles his nose. "You're bleeding all over the floor."

The buzzer sounds from the hallway, muffled by the ringing still reverberating in my ears.

"That must be Biaggio. Wait here." He tucks his gun away and strides out of the room, leaving Antonio and me alone.

"If you're working with Don, you should know that he has a way of fucking everyone else over to save himself. If you had anything to do with what happened today, Salvatore will find out, and nothing will stop him from putting the next bullet right between your eyes." I keep my voice low enough that Salvatore won't overhear me.

"You think you're smart?" he scoffs, still surprisingly cocky for a man bent over with both hands covered in his own blood.

"Smarter than you," I mutter. Not the best comeback I've ever managed, but at least I got the last word in before two pairs of footsteps announce Salvatore's return, this time with Doctor Biaggio in tow.

Sal tosses a kitchen rag to Antonio. It flutters to the floor at his feet, and he staggers to grab it, wadding it up in his bloody hands and pressing it to his wounded thigh.

"I don't need a whole damn puddle of blood to clean up in my living room. Go to the bathroom." He jerks his chin towards the guest bathroom.

Antonio hobbles away, and the doctor makes a move to follow him. Salvatore catches his arm and shakes his head.

"I need you to check on Dante first. He had a dislocated shoulder that he set himself, a number of scrapes and bruises, and possibly a burn."

“You realize there’s a major artery in the thigh and Tonio might bleed out in your bathroom?” Doctor Biaggio asks in a conversational tone. Does he work in the ER and he’s so used to life-or-death situations that they don’t even faze him, or has he just been working for the Morettis that long? He doesn’t look much older than Salvatore, and the same hazel eyes and jawline make me think he must be blood family, not just crime family.

“If all Dante had was a hangnail, I’d still insist you treat him first.” Sal squeezes the doctor’s shoulder and waves for me to sit down on the couch.

Biaggio sighs. “Fine, but I don’t do body removal.”

“Understood,” Salvatore assures him.

The doctor comes around the couch with a leather bag in his hand. He perches himself on the coffee table right in front of me and sets his bag down. He looks perfectly at ease, like he’s been here a hundred times patching Salvatore up.

“I told him I’m fine. All I need is a couple of ice packs and some painkillers,” I grumble.

Biaggio gives me a soft smile and reaches into his bag, pulling out one of those lights doctors love to blind you with.

“He’s your husband, it’s his job to fuss over you. Now, keep your head still and follow the light. I’m assessing for signs of a concussion.”

Salvatore hovers right behind me. It should be unnerving to feel his looming presence, but it’s strangely comforting.

“Who told? Was it Luca?” he asks.

Biaggio chuckles. “Alessio. I can’t believe my own brother didn’t tell me though.” He gives Salvatore a pointed look.

Brother? Well, that explains the resemblance.

“Fucking Alessio,” Salvatore mutters.

The doctor switches from blinding me to gently prodding my neck.

“Why is it a big secret?”

“It’s not, it just all happened fast.” The caution in Sal’s voice creates a pool of guilt in my stomach.

He doesn’t want to tell them because then he’ll have to lie when we get divorced. I never bothered to think about him having to lie to his family about this whole thing. I don’t think it would have stopped me even if it had crossed my mind, but I wish there was a way I could protect him from the shame of it.

“No concussion as far as I can tell,” Biaggio says.

“See? I told you I’m fine. Thanks for coming, Doctor Biaggio, now if you wouldn’t mind leaving me with some kick-ass pain pills, that would be great.”

He chuckles again. “You can call me Gio. Here, something to take the edge off while I finish my exam.” He pulls a bottle of pills out of his bag and shakes two into his palm.

I snatch them out of his hand and swallow them dry.

The two of them continue to chat while he checks my shoulder, telling Salvatore I’ll

need a sling. He orders one from the pharmacy down the street for express delivery while my head swims, knowing I'm going to have to uncover the burn soon.

"You're not looking too bad, Dante. Rest that shoulder for a month, and nothing too strenuous for six months, and you should be fine."

"Wait, does that mean I can't dance?"

"Dance?" Gio repeats, glancing up at Sal.

"I think you can dance again in a few weeks. Just no fancy pole tricks until you're a hundred percent," Salvatore answers.

I bristle, waiting for Gio to have the same reaction Antonio did to learning I'm a stripper. But his placid, easy smile never slips, and I don't notice any judgment in his eyes.

"Oh, and Salvatore mentioned a burn?" He sweeps his gaze over me and zeroes in on my hand, still clutched tightly over my forearm.

My heart races. I don't have an explanation, not a good one anyway. And for some reason, I don't feel like I can outright lie to Salvatore. But I can't refuse to show them either without raising the same questions. I slowly unwrap my fingers one by one, wincing at the sting of the air against the fresh brand seared into my flesh. The word Liar is scalded into my forearm in raised pink burns that will eventually scar, leaving me marked for life with a complicated truth.

"What the fuck is that?" Salvatore growls, the rage in his voice raising goose bumps along the back of my neck.

I thought having him ask Antonio first was a test of his trust in me, but maybe this is

the real test. I swallow hard, but Gio answers before I can.

“It looks like a brand. Your attacker clearly came prepared, this wasn’t a random mugging.”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Did you get a look at him?” Salvatore asks.

“No,” I say again. “It all happened too fast. He’s got red hair, but that’s all I know.”

“Red hair?” Gio repeats, casting a meaningful look at Salvatore.

“The Fitzpatricks?” Salvatore guesses darkly.

I shake my head again. “I don’t know who that is, but this has to do with Don.”

They both go quiet, and to my surprise, they don’t ask any follow-up questions. Gio digs back into his magic medicine bag until he pulls out a tube of ointment and a bandage. He treats and wraps the burn, and by the time he’s done, I’m starting to feel the effects of the pills he gave me. Maybe my arms still hurts, it probably does, but I can’t feel it. I can’t even feel the couch under my ass.

I giggle and sway in my seat.

“Well, he should be fine for the rest of the night.” Gio’s voice sounds like it’s coming from down a long tunnel.

“I’m fine,” I agree, the words frustratingly unwieldy on my tongue. “Thanks Doc BeeGee.” I blow him a kiss and giggle again.

He awkwardly pretends to catch the kiss and tuck it into his pocket, then stands back up and gathers his things back into his bag. I slump sideways onto the couch and the two of them talk for another minute or two before Gio's footsteps fade away. A door opens and closes, and I vaguely remember that Antonio is bleeding to death in our bathroom.

"M not exposing Tonio's body either," I mumble, hoping Salvatore can hear me.

"I hope you mean dis posing." He laughs quietly as he comes around the couch and carefully lifts my feet, putting them in his lap as he sits down.

"That too." I nod, but it makes the room spin. Everything is hazy and distorted, but I manage to focus on Salvatore. His stubbled jaw and full lips, those hazel eyes so fucking intense it feels like they can pin me in place no matter where I am. I let out a sigh. "You're so fucking sexy, I can't believe you're my husband."

He arches an eyebrow and his lips twitch with a smile. "Maybe I should be recording this to show you when you're sober again in the morning."

"Shh, no, don't tell Sal I said that." I try to cover his mouth with my hand, but it's really hard to do because he won't stop spinning, and also there are two of him.

"It'll be our little secret," he promises, sliding his hand up and down my leg like he's petting me.

Guilt boils in my gut again at the mention of a secret.

"I lied," I whisper, my lips feeling numb with the words.

His eyes darken and his hand stills. "To Don?"

“Sometimes you have to lie to protect someone,” I murmur, my eyelids feeling heavy now the pain and adrenaline have faded. “It’s not like it’s the worst thing I’ve done.”

“It doesn’t matter, Angioletto. I’ll protect you no matter what you did. You’re mine, that’s all that matters.”

Maybe it’s the drugs, but the way he growls the word ‘mine’ makes me believe. It makes me want this to be real.

Chapter 19

DANTE

Goddamn do Doc Gio's pills pack a punch. Waking up in bed, tangled up in silky sheets, wearing an oversized t-shirt from a college I didn't go to and a shoulder sling, I can't remember anything after the doctor gave me those pills. I'm guessing Salvatore put me to bed? Through the haze of adrenaline and pain pills, a lot of yesterday is a blur. Lucky for me, I have the ache in my shoulder and the bandage on my arm to bring certain moments into sharp focus.

I shift and my shoulder gives another sharp twinge. The memory of my attacker's hot breath on the back of my neck makes my stomach roil, while the ghost of his words echoes in my ears.

“Don just wants the truth to come out.”

What good would it do now? It won't give him the last ten years of his life back. If I could go back in time and change anything, I'd make sure he got a longer sentence. It's what he deserves. He doesn't care about the truth, he just wants his power back, but he's not going to get it from me. The fear I felt yesterday twists and pulses inside me, turning into the fury I'm comfortable with. Don can't break me. I won't let him.

It's weird how the new sense of resolve dulls the pain in my shoulder to something almost manageable. I shift to put all my weight on my good arm and push myself into a sitting position. I must have slept for at least twelve hours, but I still feel exhausted. Even the thought of dragging myself out of bed to take a piss and get some coffee

sounds like a goddamn marathon. Is Luca back today? If he is, I'm about to grill his ass about what the fuck Antonio's problem is. Assuming Antonio isn't dead in the guest bathroom, of course. Again though, getting out of bed to harass Luca sounds like a lot of fucking work right now. If I shout for Luca, will he scurry in here with some coffee for me like the sweet barista puppy that he is?

Only one way to find out.

"Luca!" His name is barely out of my mouth before the bedroom door creaks open. It's not my eager young bodyguard on the other side though.

I almost don't recognize Salvatore for a second. Instead of a tailored suit or even an expensive silk robe, he's wearing a ratty t-shirt similar to the one I have on and a pair of gray sweatpants, dick print included. He's holding a steaming mug, and he quirks an eyebrow at me.

"I don't love hearing you scream another man's name, Angioletto." His words trigger a foggy memory from last night, more of a feeling than anything concrete; the word mine sinking deep into my bones and making me feel... safe.

He nears the bed, the smell of fresh coffee with a hint of cinnamon tickles my nose and immediately improves my mood.

"What do I have to scream to get that coffee from you?" I groan, reaching out with my good hand.

A smirk twists on his lips, and he holds the mug just out of my reach.

"I was planning to be nice and pamper you this morning, but now that you mention it, I'd love to hear you beg for it." There's a husky rumble in his throat and I can't keep my eyes from wandering down to the shape of his cock pressed against the fabric of

his gray sweats, thick and only half-hard.

I don't know what he's done to me, but just hearing the teasing command to beg makes my cock start to swell in spite of the general achiness in my body. Maybe he was right all along, not that I'll ever tell him that. Maybe I wanted to see myself as a Dom because it was safer. I've never trusted anyone enough to be vulnerable or to risk feeling weak... I've never trusted anyone at all, if I'm being honest. Another fuzzy memory from last night surfaces.

“ I lied. ”

“ To Don? ”

Even after what Antonio said, after someone literally branded me a liar for the world to see, Salvatore's first thought was that I lied to someone else, not to him. I barely understand the feelings churning inside me; soft and sweet and too chaotic to grab on to, but I understand the playful, teasing smile on Sal's face, and that's somewhere for me to start.

I lick my lips with a slow drag of my tongue, holding his gaze and softening my expression.

“Please, please let me put that hot coffee in my mouth,” I plead with an exaggerated breathlessness.

He lets out a low growl and his cock visibly jerks. Every good Dom knows that the sub holds the real power, but knowing it and feeling it firsthand are two different things. Salvatore would do anything for me, to protect me, to make me happy. I'm just not quite ready to think about why.

“How you can manage to be a brat even when you're begging is beyond me.” He

shakes his head, the smile still firmly on his lips, and sets the coffee down on the nightstand. Then, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out two different pill bottles. “How are you feeling? I have the good shit Gio gave you last night or extra strength over-the-counter stuff.”

“It hurts, but I don’t want to spend the whole day high as a kite again,” I answer, pointing at the bottle of over-the-counter pills. He shakes a few into his hand and holds them out for me. “Why aren’t you working?” I ask, tossing the pills into my mouth before taking the coffee Salvatore finally hands me to swallow them down.

He gives me a flat look in answer to my question. A look that says don’t be stupid. Of course I’m home when you need me. That feeling flutters inside me again and I duck my head to take another sip of my coffee.

“Is Antonio dead?” I ask.

His expression darkens at the mention of Antonio’s name.

“Not yet, as far as I know. Gio patched him up and got him out of here after you passed out. It’s pretty fucking convenient that you were attacked right after he left.”

So he caught that too? I guess I’m not surprised, this is his world after all, and I’m sure he’s used to keeping an eye out for rats. I nod in agreement and consider asking what he’s going to do to Antonio now. Will he be followed? Have his phone tapped? Will one of the Morettis simply torture the truth out of him before they kill him? I’m not sure I really care. I didn’t want to watch him die, and I didn’t want it to be my fault, but if he’s been working with Don or doing anything to betray the Morettis, then I’m not going to lose any sleep over it either.

“Luca taught you about the cinnamon in the coffee,” I say instead, taking another sip.

His expression darkens again, but in a more playful way this time. “I taught Luca,” he corrects me. “Are you just baiting me or do you have a little crush on my nephew?” He takes the empty coffee cup from me and sets it back on the nightstand.

I sputter a laugh. “On Luca? Hell no. He’s adorable and all, but he’s way too sub—” I bite down on my tongue to stop the rest of that word from coming out, but it’s too late.

Salvatore’s lips curl into a wicked smile. “Too submissive for you?” He leans over the bed, bracing his hands on the mattress and bringing his face close to mine. “Are you finally ready to admit how much you love knowing that I’m going to take care of everything? Your pleasure, your safety, whatever you need, Angel, you just ask sweetly, beg for it, and it’s yours.”

My whole body relaxes with his words, that steady, commanding tone of his voice that dares me to question the promises he’s making. I sway towards him, my lips brushing his. He pulls back an inch, teasing me with a grin.

“Anything?” I chase his lips, but he pulls back again, making me be the one to work for it for a change. “Fuck me.” The words startle me as they fall off my tongue, but my cock hardens and a wave of heat licks at my skin, making it impossible for me to take them back or play it off as a joke.

“That’s what you want? With your arm in a sling and everything that happened yesterday still fresh?” He cups my chin gently and looks into my eyes.

I bite my lip and nod. I want to erase the memory of a stranger’s hands and putrid breath on my skin with this instead. I want to hurt in ways I ask for. I won’t wallow in feeling weak and scared.

“Then you know what you have to do, Angioletto.” His voice is a low rasp, his cock

fully straining against his sweatpants now, stiff enough that I can see the fabric molding around his thick mushroom head and his swollen length.

I swallow hard, pushing away the vulnerability and shame I've always attached to admitting that I want someone, to letting myself feel anything other than rage. I reach out with my good arm and grab a fistful of the front of his shirt.

"Please, Salvatore, fuck me. Fill me up with your cock, make me forget that my body can feel anything other than pleasure. Please," I whisper the last word less than an inch from his lips, the minty flavor of his toothpaste puffing against my mouth with every one of his exhales.

"I thought you'd never ask," he growls, finally crashing his lips into mine.

He sweeps his tongue into my mouth like he owns me, and I whimper around it, shedding another few tendrils of fear with the sound. He wants me like this, needy and eager and trusting him to be all the things he promised. I'm not sure I could give him all of this if I weren't so sure that he likes all the other parts of me too. He doesn't want to break me or force me to be his submissive pet, he just wants me to know I can be as desperate and horny and shameless as I want to be, and he'll never think less of me.

Salvatore swallows my whimpers and trades them for deep, rumbling moans of his own that vibrate around my tongue as he crawls onto the bed and hovers over me, his hands braced on the pillow, his thighs pinning me down. He breaks the kiss and brings one hand to my jaw, caressing my skin with the pad of his thumb and holding my gaze.

"I don't want to hurt you, so you're going to have to behave. Understand?"

I bob my head eagerly, canting my hips to drag my hard, needy cock against his

through our clothes.

“Please, please, please,” I murmur. The word isn’t even hard to say anymore. Not when his eyes are dark with lust and his mouth is red and damp from kissing me.

“First test, Angioletto. Let’s see if you can manage to follow directions,” he purrs. “Don’t move.”

“Where am I going to go? Out for a leisurely brunch in my underwear with my cock about to put someone’s eye out?” I huff.

Salvatore chuckles, then he lets go of my face and sits up, straddling my waist but holding himself carefully so he doesn’t put too much weight on me.

“Hey,” I complain, reaching for him again.

He arches an eyebrow and looks pointedly at my outstretched hand. “I said, don’t move . Want to try it again?”

I narrow my eyes then set my hand back down, right over my cock with a challenging smirk.

“Move again before I say so, and we’re done for this morning. Say, ‘yes, Sir.’”

“Fuck off, Sir .”

His eyes flash and his grin widens. “We’re getting closer, Angel.”

I roll my eyes. That doesn’t count as moving, does it? Apparently not because he doesn’t scold me again, but he does shift his weight slowly then climb off the bed. I make a disgruntled noise, but I manage to hold still this time. Salvatore strips his shirt

over his head and tosses it aside. The man looks like a snack in those suits of his, but he's a whole-ass meal naked. His chest and belly are covered in dark hair and lean, defined muscles. If I hadn't spent the last week determined to prove to both of us that sex was his demand and not something I wanted, I could have spent some time rubbing my face all over the soft hair on his chest and tonguing the hard buds of his dark nipples, I could have mapped his body with my mouth the way he's done with mine countless nights.

If I'm brave enough to admit it next time, maybe he'll let me.

My cock twitches under my hand as he shoves his pants down and kicks them off, leaving his dick hard and swinging between his thighs. I've never worked harder to not move in my life, my muscles twitching with the effort, the defiant part of my brain tempting me to wiggle just to call his bluff. He saunters across the room, keeping one eye always trained on me, and opens the top drawer on his dresser to pull out a bottle of lube.

I swear he's walking at half speed just to test me, taking his sweet time making his way back around to my side of the bed.

"That's good, sweetheart." He rewards me with soft praise and an even softer kiss.

His touch is so gentle it aches. I sink my teeth into his bottom lip, but all he does is hiss. He doesn't kiss me any harder, doesn't grab my jaw with bruising fingers, doesn't even scold me. Weirdly, that soothes me a little. He's a sturdy structure in a raging storm—it doesn't matter how hard I batter against the outside, I won't shake him.

Salvatore hooks his fingers in the waistband of my briefs and leans over the bed to drag kisses along the inside of my thighs as he tugs them down. He tosses them aside just like he did with his own clothes. He leaves my shirt on, since my sling is in the

way, but pushes it up a few inches, teasing his tongue around the rim of my belly button, his stubble abrading my sensitive skin. My cock bobs untouched and drools a strand of sticky precum onto my stomach, and Salvatore laps it up with a groan like it's the best thing he's ever tasted.

"Can I move yet?" I whine, digging my teeth into my bottom lip, my thighs trembling with the urge to thrust, to search for his hot mouth with my cock.

"Yes, but only to shuffle over here. I'd move you myself, but I think there's more risk I'll hurt your shoulder that way." He shows me where he wants me.

I roll my eyes again and sit up. "I'm not that fragile."

"I'll decide that for today. Unless you're done playing?"

I bristle and then relax. He doesn't think I'm weak, he just... cares. The realization hits me with a wave of confusion and more chaotic emotions. And, fine, maybe scooting my ass over to the side of the bed does hurt more than I want to admit out loud.

"Lay down, head towards me," he commands, patting the spot he wants me in again.

I gingerly shuffle into place. "What are you—" As soon as I lie down, his cock fills my vision, swaying just over my face as my head hangs off the bed. "Oh."

Salvatore wraps his hand around the base of his cock and drags the tip of it over my lips.

"Open wide for me, Angioletto. You're going to keep my cock nice and warm and wet while I get your tight little hole ready. And you're going to stay still and behave."

My insides give an empty, needy ache and saliva pools in my mouth.

“Yes,” I gasp, nodding eagerly before opening my mouth wide.

SALVATORE

I couldn't come up with a wet dream this perfect if I tried. My Angel with his legs spread and his hard cock drooling, his mouth open in invitation and his eyes drifting closed with a blissful look of relaxation. If I didn't know better, I'd wonder if I gave him the wrong pills, or maybe that he's still a little stoned from the ones he took last night. But I think he's just starting to realize he's safe with me. I'll never be a white knight, but I'll fucking kill anyone who tries to hurt him. It doesn't get safer than that, does it?

I tease the tip of my cock around his lips again, watching the even, calm breaths that move through his chest, and it crashes over me again how fucking close I came to losing him yesterday. I can't. I won't.

But my rage and anxiety aren't what Dante needs right now. He needs to feel good. He needs me to help him let go. He needs his husband, not a Moretti this morning, and that's what he's going to get.

I fit my cock between his lips, my balls tightening instantly at the slippery heat that surrounds me, the long, stretched column of his throat bobbing with a swallow as I ease inside. I wrap one hand gently around his throat so I can feel the bulge of his Adam's apple as my cock slips past the soft, fleshy place at the back of his tongue that constricts and flutters with every swallow and gag. A moan rumbles through me and my cock spasms.

“Can you breathe like this, Angel?” I check, my voice husky and strained. Dante's nostrils flare and his chest expands. “Good,” I groan.

I reach for the bottle of lube I set on the bed, my cock shifting inside his throat, sending licks of electricity and heat through me. I click it open and pour a generous amount onto my fingers.

“Bend your knees,” I command, giving in to the undeniable urge to roll my hips and bury my cock another inch deeper before I force myself to hold still again.

He makes muffled sounds as he bends his knees and spreads his legs a little wider, each one vibrating down my shaft and settling in my balls. Leaning forward shifts my cock inside his throat again, and I brace one hand on the bed and slide my slicked fingers into the warm crease between his ass cheeks. I can’t see what I’m doing from this position, but the tight pucker of his hole isn’t hard to find.

“Do you know how long I’ve been dreaming about feeling you stretched around my cock, Angel?” I growl, circling his rim with the pads of two fingers. Unlike most of the rest of his body, his hole isn’t waxed or shaved, there’s a soft little whorl of hair that clings to my fingers. Because unlike the rest of his body, it’s a part he doesn’t let the world see.

A possessive, primal sound rumbles in my throat. Dante’s cock twitches and weeps against his trembling belly and his hole flutters under my fingertips. His throat squeezes around my cock with a swallow and my fingers jerk, the tips slipping into his tight entrance. We both groan, his mixed with a gag and mine full of the same guttural sense of ownership and need as the last sound I made.

I’m sure if his mouth wasn’t full, he would remind me that I don’t have to be careful with him, that he can take it rough, without all of the lube and slow, torturous fingering. But his mouth is full, and even if it wasn’t, I’m in charge. I slide my fingers deeper, his inner muscles gripping around them before relaxing. I could live the rest of my life right here, with my cock throbbing in the sleeve of Dante’s throat and my fingers buried in his ass. I lean forward a little more to press an open-

mouthed kiss to his smooth thigh as I work my fingers in the last inch.

“Have you ever been edged, Angel?” I murmur, kissing back and forth across the small expanse of his thigh I can reach in this position, pumping my fingers excruciatingly slowly in and out. “I think I might spend all morning playing with your hole until you’re so wild for me that you explode the second you have my cock inside you.”

I groan again at the thought of Dante sinking down onto my cock, his head lolling back and his cum spurting out in a fountain of sticky ropes before I’m even all the way inside of him. I fist the sheets to keep myself from fucking his mouth and chasing the pleasure I’m right on the edge of too.

He whimpers and the sound around my cock is almost enough to end things.

“No one’s ever taken so much time with your pleasure, have they?” I shove my fingers deeper, pressing my palm against his taut, hot sac just hard enough to drag another gagging whine from him. “That’s why you’re such a brat, isn’t it, sweetheart? You’re just weeding out all the weak men who don’t know how to give you what you need.”

I plunge my fingers in and out in a steady rhythm, watching the flush of his cock and the dribble of his precum. His thighs start to tremble, and his cock stiffens a little more. Closer, closer, closer . Just when he starts to pant around my cock, I pull my fingers out so only the tips are tugging at his rim again.

Dante’s body sags and quakes, his chest heaving and his throat tightening around me with every pant and swallow. When he settles, I slide my fingers deep and start all over again, torturing both of us, riding the razor’s edge of pleasure until the air in the bedroom is humid from our sweat and heavy breathing, and our skin is slick.

Again and again, I finger him right up to the edge. And every time, he gets there a little quicker, until even with my fingertips resting on his rim, I can still feel the twitch and pulse of his hovering orgasm, feel the vibration of his needy whines in his throat. My cock throbs right along with him, twitching against his tongue, my balls painfully heavy and tight.

It's almost impossible to make myself pull out. Just the drag of his tongue and lips as I ease out of his mouth is almost enough to set me off. His bottom lip tugs at the wrinkle of my foreskin and a shudder racks my body. Dante's chin is soaked with his own saliva and his eyes are glassy and faraway when he slowly blinks them open.

"Please," he croaks. "Please, Salvatore, I need your cock. Oh god, I need it so bad. I can't... I need... please ." He whimpers and moans, his lips swollen and voice raw from having my cock buried in his throat for so long.

"It's yours, Angel. Come here." He scrambles clumsily to sit up and turn himself around.

I grab his hips and drag him right to the edge of the bed.

"You're mine," I growl, digging my fingers into his hips as he wraps his legs around me. "Say it, Angioletto. Tell me you're mine."

He lets out a little sob as my cock notches against his soft, wet, fluttering hole.

"Yours," he gasps. "I'm yours, Salvatore." He swallows hard. "Sir."

That one word rocks my body. I slam my lips into his, tasting the salty sweetness of my precum on his lips and the sweat on his face as I thrust into him in one long, deep stroke. It's just like I imagined, better than I imagined. His inner muscles give way, wrapping around me and dragging me inside, and before I'm even fully seated, he lets

out a strangled cry and starts to pulse around me. Thick stripes of his cum paint my belly and soak into his shirt as I pull back and fill him again, growling against his lips as I fuck him through every tugging, squeezing, fucking perfect wave of pleasure before giving in to my own. Our mouths bump together in a not-quite kiss, sharing breath and trading gut-deep moans of pleasure as my thrusts stutter and the heat that's been building in my gut finally explodes.

I rock into him, moaning with every spurt of cum I fill him with, marking him, claiming him, consummating this marriage that he still hasn't figured out is real. He'll understand eventually that I'm never letting him go.

I bury my face in the crook of his neck and pull his body against me carefully, matching the tremors that rock him as we both catch our breath and ride out the lingering aftershocks of our orgasms. Dante presses kisses along the side of my neck and across my jaw, with surprisingly little teeth.

If I tell him I love him, will he believe me? He'll probably think I'm only saying it because of what happened yesterday, or that I'm too cum-drunk to mean it.

"Fuck," he mutters, and I chuckle, easing my softening dick out of the vice grip of his hole with a groan. "Oh god, I really have to pee."

I laugh again. Dante pushes against my chest to get me to move, but instead, I carefully sweep him up into my arms.

"My shoulder's fucked up, my legs are just fine," he reminds me, but he doesn't bother to squirm in my arms.

"Are they?" I ask, setting him on his feet in front of the toilet. Unsurprisingly after a fuck like that, his knees buckle. I wrap my arms around him to keep him from stumbling and grin at the death glare I get in return.

His injured arm jerks, and he frowns like he's only just remembering that he doesn't have full use of it.

"Here." I kiss the back of his neck and reach around him to wrap my hand around his soft cock, streaks of his cum still clinging to the tip. "Go ahead."

Dante's breath catches, and for a second, I expect him to argue again, but then he relaxes, letting his body sag back against mine, and he does what we came in here to do. He lets out a little sigh of relief when he's finished. I give his dick a quick shake, and he laughs.

"I can't believe you just held my dick while I pissed." He shakes his head, steady enough on his feet now that I'm able to let go of him and wash my hands.

"Haven't you figured it out yet, Angioletto?" I ask, a smile tugging at my lips as I look at him through the mirror.

He cocks his head. "What?"

"I would do anything for you."

Chapter 20

SALVATORE

My eyes are on the dancer spinning around the pole, but I'm not really watching him. Being at Wild without Dante up on the stage feels all kinds of wrong. It's only been a week of the month-long strict rest Biaggio ordered, and my angel is already climbing the walls. I don't like to see him bored and frustrated, but I'm more than happy to know he's safe at home with Luca keeping a close eye on him when I can't until the Don issue is resolved.

Alessio tosses a newspaper onto the table and drags his chair out, flipping it around so he can straddle it.

"That your work, Sparrow?" He taps the headline on the front page.

Third Body Found in Apparent Motorcycle Club Killing Spree

The accompanying photo is of an unfortunate looking man on a Harley with a scowl on his grizzled face. Sparrow leans over the table to get a closer look while Xaviaro silently takes his seat, his face the usual impassive mask I've come to expect from Lorenzo's trigger man and best friend.

Sparrow rakes his fingers through his hair and then shakes his head.

"You think I'd be sloppy enough to leave my kills just laying around like that?"

Xaviaro snorts, but his expression doesn't so much as twitch. "Never."

A devilish grin spreads over Sparrow's face, and he shrugs, sharing a lingering look with his man for several seconds before turning his attention back to Alessio.

"I'd love to buy the guy a drink though. Whoever he is."

"They're calling him The Ghost in the papers," Alessio says. "There are some interesting theories about him on the online forums."

"The online forums?" I echo. "Since when are you a true crime junkie?"

Alessio ducks his head, but not before I see a flicker of a grin on his face. "What, Xaviaro is the only one who's allowed to be fascinated by the vicious little vigilantes in this city?"

Xav rumbles another sound that's almost a laugh. Sparrow plops himself down right on the hitman's lap and Alessio folds the newspaper up, tucking it inside his jacket just as Lorenzo and Elio join us. They take their usual seats, and Lorenzo meets my gaze with a nod of acknowledgment.

"How's Dante?"

"Healing. The swelling and pain are getting better every day."

"Glad to hear it." His tone is brusque, but that he even cared to ask about Dante means a lot. Lorenzo turns his attention towards Alessio. Apparently, he can sense the boss's mood too, because he straightens up in his backward seat. "What did you manage to figure out?"

"Not much." Alessio's lips twist in an apologetic grimace and he pulls out the same

reports we were looking through the other day before I got the call from Dante. “I found the spot where the discrepancies happened, but I can’t explain them.” He flips through the pages, pointing out a few places to Lorenzo, and Elio leans in to get a better look too. “There’s been money transferred into this account from an unknown account every few weeks for the past three months. I don’t know where it’s coming from or why and neither does Sal.” Alessio looks to me for confirmation, and I nod.

“No one other than the people at this table have access to this account, so if we don’t know where it’s coming from, that raises some red flags,” I add, even though I’m sure Lorenzo and Elio have already come to that conclusion themselves.

“I don’t like it,” Lorenzo agrees.

“Should we shut down the account?” Elio asks, looking at Lorenzo, who’s still glaring at the reports with a furrowed brow.

“Not to step on your dick or anything,” Sparrow says, leaning across the table with his hair falling over his forehead and his usual ballsy bravado, “but if you shut down the account, you won’t find out who hacked you or why.”

Lorenzo’s frown deepens. “You think you can find out where the transfer originated from?”

Sparrow shrugs. “Shouldn’t be that hard. Give me a few days?”

“A few days,” Lorenzo agrees with a hard edge of finality.

Sparrow gives him a lazy salute and sits back.

With a tired sigh that I’m not sure anyone else notices, Lorenzo passes the reports across the table to Sparrow and straightens his tie.

“Next order of business. Xaviaro, anything to report on Cian?”

“Not much.” There’s a reluctant twist in his expression as he answers. “He’s careful. Too careful. He never goes anywhere alone, sticks to noisy public places, buys rounds of drinks for the whole bar when he goes out. It’s almost like he’s trying to make sure he always has an alibi. If I had to bet on it, he’s definitely up to something, but I haven’t been able to get anything concrete.”

“Dante’s attacker had red hair,” I say when Xaviaro finishes.

Lorenzo’s eyebrows inch up his forehead. “You think it could have been Cian?”

“It’s possible. Or any one of the two dozen gingers running around doing Declan Fitzpatrick’s bidding.” I rub my hand along my jaw and bounce my knee under the table.

The icy chill that ripples through everyone at the table is almost palpable.

“If the Fitzpatricks are directly attacking our people, that’s a declaration of war.” Elio has always been the easygoing younger brother and second-in-command, but right now he sounds just like Lorenzo.

“Settle,” Lorenzo says firmly, his voice so low I almost can’t hear it over the din of the club. “We don’t know anything yet, and we’re not going to rush in guns blazing like a bunch of impulsive idiots. It is possible that there are people in Wildcliff with red hair who have no association with the Fitzpatricks, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Elio mutters, and Lorenzo gives a brief nod of satisfaction.

“I agree, the connection is suspicious. We’ll get to the bottom of it,” he says definitively, then looks at Xaviaro. “And we’ll start with Antonio. I trust you can

incentivize him to share what he knows about Dante's attack."

"No problem. I'll pick him up when we're done here and have a little chat with him." Xaviaro rolls his head from side to side like he's limbering up and the wicked grin returns to Sparrow's lips.

Lorenzo shifts the meeting to standard reporting and regular business, but my knee continues to bounce under the table. There are too many missing pieces of this puzzle still, but something is itching at the back of my brain, telling me it's all connected. Keeping secrets from Enzo is only going to come back to bite me in the ass. By the time the meeting draws to an end, I know what I have to do.

Sparrow kisses Xaviaro on the cheek. "I have to deal with something first, then I'll come meet you."

Xav grunts and nods, playfully swatting Sparrow on the ass as he walks away.

"Lorenzo," I call out as everyone else starts to disperse. "Do you have a minute?"

He doesn't hesitate to pull his chair back out and gesture to the one Elio just left empty.

"What can I do for you?"

I take Elio's seat, hoping it's not obvious that I'm starting to sweat. With so much uncertainty and bullshit going on right now, Lorenzo could easily think that Dante is everything Antonio tried to imply. But if Don is somehow all tangled up with the Fitzpatricks, it'll only look worse for Dante and for me when it comes out.

"I haven't been completely honest with you, but I want to change that right now." I hold his gaze so he can see the truth in my eyes. I'm not here to bullshit him, I'm here

to set things straight.

His brow creases. “Go on,” he says coolly.

I clear my throat. “The impromptu marriage in Los Vespar... there’s more to the story.”

He lets out a sigh and pinches the bridge of his nose. “For the love of fuck, Sal, if you tell me you forced that man into a marriage he didn’t want, I really will shoot you.”

I huff out a laugh. “No,ENZ, it’s not like that. He... uh... came to me and told me he needed help.” Honesty doesn’t have to include the part where Dante drugged me, as far as I’m concerned. “I still don’t know all the details, he wasn’t ready to share them, but someone’s coming after him and he thought being married to a Moretti would be enough to scare them off. So I agreed to help him out.”

“ Help him out ,” he mutters, shaking his head. “Any idiot can see you’ve been in love with him for years. How do you know he isn’t setting you up? Setting us up?”

“He’s not,” I growl, filled with the same certainty I’ve had from the start. Dante is a lot of things, but I’d bet my life he couldn’t have faked the fear in his eyes when he told me he was in trouble. “He was attacked. That’s proof, isn’t it?”

“Or it’s the perfect way to make his story look real,” Lorenzo counters.

“He didn’t dislocate his own shoulder or brand himself,” I argue through clenched teeth. “He’s telling the truth.”

Lorenzo is silent for several long seconds while my heart pounds.

“I hope so,” he says with an air of finality, and I don’t have to ask to know what it

means. If I'm wrong, it won't matter that we're family, I'll just become another liability.

I nod, my certainty not wavering for a second. I might not know the whole story yet, but I know Dante is everything he says he is. I'm willing to bet my life on it.

DANTE

"I'm bored," I sigh, slumping down on the couch. "Take me somewhere." I already know the answer, but needling Luca is the only entertainment I have around here.

"Absolutely not. If you're bored, we can watch a movie."

"We've already watched a thousand movies, and they all sucked," I grumble. "Are you afraid of Salvatore?" I taunt.

"Yeah." He nods earnestly. "Who do you think had to mop up Antonio's blood a few days ago?"

I roll my eyes. "He's still alive... I think."

There's a knock at the door. I sit up so fast a jolt of pain radiates from my shoulder. I clench my teeth to keep from gasping. Luca heaves himself off of the couch and pulls his gun out of its holster.

I arch an eyebrow at him. "You think someone who wants to attack me is going to come to the apartment and politely knock at the door?"

He shrugs. "Better safe than sorry. Wait here."

He disappears down the hall, and I listen to the faint sound of beeps as he disarms the

alarm and then opens the door. The clomp of boots is the only clue I need to know who came to visit.

“I never thought I’d say this, but I’m so fucking glad you’re here. I was about to die of boredom,” I call out, earning a faint laugh in return.

Sparrow steps around the corner into the living room with Luca right behind him.

“Sorry, bestie, this isn’t a social call.”

My gaze falls on the folder in his hand.

“What’s that?”

He looks over his shoulder at Luca. “Give us a couple of minutes?”

Luca’s thick eyebrows pull together and he frowns.

“Yeah, go.” I wave him off, my eyes still fixed on the folder, my heart beating faster with every passing second. Sparrow wouldn’t have... would he? I’ve seen his hacking skills, they’re almost as good as mine, so I know he could. Most of it is public record anyway.

Luca hesitates another second before pointing towards the balcony. “I’ll be right out there. Five minutes.”

Neither of us say anything as he crosses the living room and steps outside. As soon as we’re alone, Sparrow closes the last few feet of space between us and tosses the folder onto the cushion next to me, then braces his hands on the back of the couch.

“Salvatore asked me to dig up whatever I could about Don. He didn’t give me any

details at the time, just a name.”

The fear pounding in my chest quickly morphs into throbbing rage. I spring off of the couch faster than I should have. Refusing to let Sparrow see me wince in pain, I snarl at him instead.

“How fucking dare you. This is my private business. If I want Salvatore to know, then I’ll tell him. You have no goddamn right.”

He sets his jaw and glares right back at me. “That’s why I didn’t give it to him. I’m giving it to you.”

His response is so reasonable it only pisses me off more. If I can’t be angry at him, then the only thing I’m left with is this hollow feeling in my chest knowing that an entire, messy part of my life is summed up inside that folder and the knowledge that’s already been dogging me for days that Salvatore deserves to know the truth before Don is released.

“It’s more complicated than what’s in the court documents,” I mutter.

“It usually is,” he says agreeably.

I grind my back teeth and stare at the folder like it’s a living thing, a beating heart under the floorboards taunting me to unburden myself of years’ worth of secrets.

“I’ve never talked about it. Any of it. I don’t even know where to start with Salvatore,” I confess, my throat tightening at the thought of finally spewing all of this poison. What if he sees me differently once he knows?

“Start with what?” I startle at the sound of Salvatore’s voice, and surprisingly, so does Sparrow.

Sparrow meets my eyes, glances at the folder, then back to me. I can see the silent question written all over his face. He'll take the folder with him, and I don't have to tell Salvatore anything if I'm not ready. I give a small shake of my head. I can't keep running from this. Maybe it'll even feel better for someone else to know the whole story.

I pick up the folder and hold it out towards Sal, standing in the entrance to the living room with Sparrow still between us.

"Do you want—" Sparrow starts to ask, and I shake my head again.

"We're good. Thanks for bringing this." I wave the folder. He turns to leave. "If you want to hang out or anything, you can stop by another day," I call out before he's gone.

He stops and shoots me a fleeting smirk over his shoulder. "Will do."

Salvatore's hands are in his pockets and he's staring at the folder the same way I was just a few minutes ago when Sparrow showed up.

"Is that...?"

"I haven't looked inside, but I'm guessing it's the court transcripts and police reports. There's a lot more to it than what's on the official record, but I think you should read it first. Then I'll tell you why my Uncle Don is coming after me and why I had to lie."

Chapter 21

SALVATORE

His uncle? My blood boils. I already wanted to welcome this asshole home from prison with a bullet between the eyes, but knowing he's Dante's own family, his flesh and blood... now I think I want to make it hurt.

Dante thrusts the folder at me with a twist of a sad smile on his lips and then slips out onto the balcony with Luca. I stare at it in my hands for a minute. I asked Sparrow to dig this up, but I'm not sure I can handle what's inside without losing my fucking shit. Just knowing he brought it to Dante instead of me is all the proof I need that whatever is in there, it's worse than I thought. I'm already seeing red, and I haven't even cracked it open yet.

I loosen my tie and shrug off my jacket, then I toss the folder onto the coffee table and head into the kitchen to pour myself a drink. Something tells me I'm going to need it. I open the liquor cabinet and unscrew the cap on an expensive bottle of scotch, waving it under my nose before I grab a glass and pour a generous amount. The patio door opens again, and I hear Luca's muffled voice telling Dante he'll see him tomorrow, then the beep of the security system as Dante re-arms it behind him.

I take a sip from my glass, focusing on the smooth burn as it slides over my tongue and down my throat. Physical things, controllable things, that's what I need to focus on before I dive into the horrors in those court records. With the bottle in one hand and my glass in the other, I head back into the living room. Dante stands behind the couch, looking at the folder on the table like it's a rattlesnake coiled to strike. The

stiff set of his shoulders and the uneven rhythm of his breaths are more effective in snapping me out of my bullshit than a whole bottle of scotch could be.

“Come here, Angel.” I wrap my arm around him, careful of his shoulder, and pull him with me to the front of the couch and onto my lap.

It takes a little shuffling, but I manage to set the bottle down and pick the folder back up while Dante helps himself to a sip from my glass. He shifts around until he’s comfortable and then slumps against me and rests his head on my shoulder. This time it’s a hell of a lot easier to flip the folder open and face what’s inside. If he could live through it, then I can read about it. And once I know everything, I can fix it all for him. Maybe I can’t erase what happened, but I can erase the people who did it, and I can make sure no one ever hurts him again.

There are two separate police reports and court documents to go along with each one. I ease into it with the first report, filed against Dante by Don for aggravated assault. Don’s account is that Dante came to his house in the middle of the night, and when he answered the door, Dante attacked him, allegedly unprovoked. The photographs and medical report that accompany the complaint given to the police show a middle-aged man who’s been beaten black and blue, missing multiple teeth, his nose shattered and his jaw dislocated, among a laundry list of other injuries. Flipping through them fills me with deep satisfaction. I think I fell in love with Dante the minute I laid eyes on him, and this reminds me why. Every bruise, every broken bone tells the story of his strength. I don’t have to read another word to know Don deserved every blow my vengeful Angel rained down on him. For Dante’s part, he doesn’t deny any of it. There’s a brief written confession and a guilty plea in court. He was sentenced to five years in prison and was released early due to overcrowding.

I nuzzle his forehead and press a kiss there, then take another fortifying sip of my drink and flip to the second case. I tighten my arm around Dante and steady my breathing as I start to read the complaint filed by him this time, against his uncle. It’s

a detailed account of a decade of sexual abuse that goes on for pages, listing specific dates and describing escalating acts that turn my stomach. His weight on my lap as I flip the pages with shaking hands is the only thing keeping me from jumping up and upending the goddamn coffee table. His steady breathing is the only thing holding me back from going to the kitchen to find a box of matches, setting this whole file on fire, then finding Don and doing the same to him. The swollen, bloody face and shattered jaw aren't nearly enough punishment for what he did. As long as he's breathing, I won't rest.

"You said he never touched you," I growl through clenched teeth, crumpling the edges of the pages in my fist. "Was that the lie?"

Dante shakes his head. "That was the truth." He taps the court transcript that's now on top of the pile. "That's the lie."

I want to believe him, but the details, the dates, Dante's attack on Don, it all points to the same thing. Why would he lie about such vile fucking things? Even his own guilty plea makes the rest of it feel true. I can't wrap my head around it. Clearly the allegations weren't a lie to get himself out of trouble, so what were they?

I let out a slow breath and fling the folder away. Papers flutter haphazardly to the floor around our feet, and I toss back the rest of my scotch, guzzling it down in a few quick gulps before wiping the back of my hand across my mouth. Images of what he described to the police dance in my mind, making my head spin and my pulse thunder in my ears. I rear back my hand and throw my empty glass at the wall, taking satisfaction in the sound of it shattering, of the glass raining down on the wood floor and the last few drops of scotch staining my white wall with brown streaks that trickle down garishly.

The small act of destruction doesn't feel like nearly enough. After what I just read, I want to tear the entire goddamn world apart with my bare hands. I slide my hand

underneath his shirt to ground myself with the feeling of his warm skin. I drag in another shuddering breath and Dante cups my cheek with his good hand, brushing the pad of his thumb against the grain of my stubble.

“Shh,” he murmurs, leaning in slowly. “I’m okay.” His words are barely a whisper, but they’re the only thing that could possibly get through the drumbeat of my pulse in my ears.

He bumps his nose against mine and tilts his chin just a fraction of an inch, wordlessly begging for a kiss. I’ve never denied my Angioletto anything, and this is something I need even more than he does. A few seconds to remember that the only thing that’s real is what’s right in front of us, not the ghosts of the past.

I didn’t notice him crying, but as soon as our lips touch, I can taste the salt of his tears. I growl softly against his mouth and tease my tongue along the seam of his lips, lapping up every one of his tears that reach them. And when that’s not enough, I break the kiss and lick them straight off of his cheeks.

“You’re such a fucking weirdo, Sal,” he says around a laugh and then a snuffle.

“It’s weird to be obsessed with my husband?” I say, kissing away the last few stray tears. A dazed look flickers through his eyes and his breath hitches. Dante gives a quick shake of his head. I don’t know if he’s answering my question or clearing his thoughts, but when he doesn’t say anything else, I tug him back into place, resting against me, and I kiss the side of his throat. “Explain this to me, Angioletto, before I drive to the prison and kill that fucker right now.”

“All the stuff I told the police is true, just not about me.” He takes a deep breath. “That summer, my cousin Luis came to me one night crying so hard he could barely breathe. He was seventeen and I was almost twenty, but I always felt protective of him. There was just something, I don’t know, small and vulnerable about him, I

guess. When I finally got him calmed down enough to tell me what was wrong...” Dante shakes his head, and a dark cloud descends over his expression.

I rub soothing circles on his back and wait for him to go on, but I’ve already put the pieces together now. I understand what happened and it all makes complete sense. It’s exactly the Dante I know, to stand between someone who can’t fight for themselves and a monster, swinging blindly without any regard for his own safety.

He clears his throat and goes on. “You read the report, so you know what he did. Luis told me all of it and I held him while he cried through it. He said Don promised it was the last time, but he said it every time and Luis stopped believing it. He just wanted it to stop. I told him he should report it, I even offered to go with him to the police station. I put on my shoes and practically dragged him to my car, but he turned into a sobbing mess again. He said he couldn’t do it, he didn’t want to do it, he couldn’t tell anyone else what he’d told me, let alone a room full of cops or a courtroom full of people. Then, he made me promise I wouldn’t tell anyone what happened to him either.”

“Some promises are better broken, Angioletto,” I point out.

“I know, I just... You didn’t see him. He’d already been hurt so much, he was so broken and humiliated, I couldn’t do that to him. So, after I convinced him to at least spend the rest of the summer at my apartment instead of going home, I told him I’d go get his stuff and I made up a bed for him on my couch.” There’s a faraway look in Dante’s eyes, like he’s reliving that night, seeing the shadows of it right in front of him. “I felt like I was on autopilot driving to his house, I wasn’t thinking about anything, but I could feel myself getting angrier and angrier, replaying all of the disgusting, fucked up shit Luis told me. And by the time Don opened the door, I just... snapped. I’d never laid a hand on anyone before that, other than the regular roughhousing shit kids do. But it was like I was possessed, I just fucking jumped on him and started beating the ever-living fuck out of him. I wish I’d just killed him

then.”

“If you had, you’d still be locked up now. It’s better this way. He’s not going to get away with any of this, Angel. You know that, right?”

Dante nods.

“Anyway, you know the rest.” He gestures at the papers scattered around the floor, half-crumpled and in disarray. “I didn’t try to fight it when he brought charges against me, but I couldn’t let him get away with what he did to Luis either, so I just said that all of it happened to me. I wasn’t sure they’d even put him away on my word alone, but the cops found pictures too. I guess he’d been saving them over the years. He was stupid enough to think that as long as Luis’s face wasn’t in them, he’d be safe. So, I just said those were of me too, and they couldn’t really prove they weren’t. He got a pathetic ten-year sentence, and here we are.”

“What happened to your cousin?”

“He was pissed that I told his secrets, even though I pretended they were mine. My whole family turned on me. They said I was a liar, that I was just trying to cause problems, that obviously I was the crazy, unhinged, violent one if I could do all that to Don and still have the nerve to accuse him of touching me.”

I tighten my arms around him and press my face into the crook of his neck.

“I’m so sorry. You did the right thing, even if none of them could see it.”

He nods again. “I know.” His words are steel, unemotional and firm.

“I wish things were different back then, Angioletto, but you’re a Moretti now, and we take care of family. Always.”

DANTE

Salvatore's words hit places deep inside me. They reverberate and release another torrent of all of those chaotic, confusing feelings that have been chasing me for days no matter how hard I try to outrun them.

I never regretted what I did because I knew it was the right thing. Through five years behind bars and dozens of returned letters that my own parents refused to even open, I knew that if I could go back in time and take any of it back, I wouldn't. No one else was going to protect Luis, not even Luis himself, so I did what I had to. But that doesn't mean it didn't hurt.

Overnight I went from an idealistic teenager looking at the world through rose colored glasses to a jaded convict who saw things the way they really are. People do ugly, disgusting things and others sweep it under the rug because it's easier to disown their own son than it is to believe the world could be such a nasty place. Or maybe on some level they already knew what was happening and the fact that I did something about it made it too hard to face themselves, so they just... didn't.

But that's not Salvatore.

No matter how hard I've tried over the years, he refuses to become one of the dark things. Sure, he kills people, he makes money in illegal ways, and his morals are calibrated to a different scale, but that's only because he sees the world the way it is, the same way I do. I've taunted him in front of Lorenzo and the others, drugged him, held him at gunpoint, and demanded he marry me so I could feel safe, and even then, I acted like he was the one trying to force me into things I didn't want. But here he is, with his thumb drawing little circles on the back of my neck to calm me down, looking at me like... like that ... like I'm something special and precious. Like these warm, vulnerable, terrifying feelings building inside my chest might be okay.

“When we were at that diner on our way to Los Vespar, you didn’t mean sex, did you? You said the marriage had to be real and I thought you meant that you’d only do it if I let you fuck me. But that’s not what you meant, was it?”

He lets out a huff of laughter and kisses the top of my head, his breath ruffling my hair. “No, Angioletto, it’s not. Not that it hasn’t been an enjoyable benefit.”

I tilt my head, and he keeps peppering kisses down the side of my face. My heart beats even faster now than it did while I was telling him the truth about what happened. I swallow around a lump in my throat and try to breathe around the too-big feeling in my chest, shifting on his lap so I can see him better. I straddle his legs and bring my hand to his face again, resting it there and searching his eyes for any sign that he’s lying, that this is some kind of trick I’ll only feel stupid and betrayed over later. But he’s still just looking at me like I’m more than a stripper with an anger problem and a bad habit of breaking bones.

“You...” I lick my lips and measure my words. A little voice in the back of my head whispers that I could be wrong, that even if I’m right it doesn’t mean he won’t hurt me anyway. But then a louder voice drowns them out, the echo of Salvatore’s voice ringing in my ears like a shout.

“ Haven’t you figured it out yet, Angioletto? I would do anything for you. ”

I lean closer until I can feel his warm breath on my lips, and I rest my forehead against his.

“You love me,” I whisper, certainty flooding me as soon as the words leave my mouth.

He laughs again, sliding his hands up my back and under my shirt to pull me even closer until his lips are less than an inch from mine and I have no doubt he can feel

the little tremors ricocheting through my body.

“I do, Angel. I really do.”

I’m not sure if I finally close that last sliver of space between us or if he does, but the words are still reverberating on his tongue when our mouths crash together. Forget oxygen or food, forget everything, all I need to survive is Salvatore’s tongue snaking around mine, his hands on me like he owns me, and breathless moans caught between our lips.

“Fuck me,” I gasp. “Fill me up, take me apart, make me scream your name until my throat is raw and my voice is hoarse. Please, Sir, please, please, please .”

The animal sound that rumbles past his lips just before he pulls me in for another deep, tongue-heavy kiss raises goose bumps all over my heated skin and makes my cock swell and pulse with need.

“How can I deny you anything when you beg so nicely?” He nips at my chin. “Kneel facing the back of the couch,” he commands, with a little swat to my ass to get me moving.

I scramble to do what he says. I’ll be a mouthy, difficult brat again later because it’s fun and I know he likes it as much as I do, but this time, I just want to feel all of the promises he’s made that I haven’t listened to until now imprinted on my skin with every touch and kiss.

I kneel like he said, with my arms folded on the back of the couch, careful not to overextend my healing shoulder. He slides his hands under my shirt again, pushing it up, then drags a line of open-mouthed kisses down the length of my spine, leaving damp spots cooling on my skin and sparking electricity in my nerve endings by alternating sharp nips and greedy licks in an indiscernible pattern. My legs tremble

and my cock aches as he works his way down without any hint of urgency.

“I’m glad we finally understand each other, Angioletto,” he murmurs, reaching around to trail his fingers along my belly as he kisses me. “I was starting to worry that I might have to tie you to my bed to keep you from running straight to the lawyer to file for a divorce once this whole thing is settled.” He reaches my nipples with his fingers while he dips his tongue into the little dimples at the base of my spine. “And make no mistake, I had no intention of ever letting you go.”

The shiver that runs through me has as much to do with the tease of his fingertips over my peaked, aching nipples as it does the comforting bondage of his promise. I’m his... and he’s mine. He’ll fight any monsters I need him to, and he’ll love all of the beautiful, terrifying, dark parts of me for the rest of our lives. And I’ll do the same for him. Always .

His featherlight touch on my nipples turns into a sharp tug that drags a moan from my throat and makes my cock drool.

“Please,” I gasp.

His chuckle is dark and teasing this time, and I’m fucking living for it. He tugs on my nipples again and the sharp ache goes straight to my cock. There’s a sweet kind of torture in giving all of myself to Salvatore. My heart, my soul, my body, my pleasure. It’s all his now, and if he decides to break me, all I’ll do is beg for more because I know he’ll never hurt me in ways I don’t want.

A constant stream of whimpers and whines fall from my lips, my hips jerking helplessly as he takes his time teasing and pinching my nipples. By the time he draws his hands down my belly again, my nipples feel puffy and oversensitive, rubbing against my rucked-up shirt. I’m wearing the shorts I bought at that tourist trap in the desert with nothing underneath. He hums in approval as he tugs them down around

my thighs, a strand of precum clinging to them.

Without my shorts there's no friction at all on my throbbing cock, but that doesn't stop my hips from jerking in the vain hope of some relief. Salvatore nudges my legs apart, and my eyes roll back at the hot puff of his breath against my ass cheeks.

"Oh, please, Sir, lick me, get me all wet and soft with your tongue and then fuck me until I can't even remember my own name. Please," I pant, shoving my ass towards him shamelessly.

He palms my ass cheeks, parting them to let a gust of cool air hit my already twitching hole. The chill is quickly replaced with another one of his hot breaths, this time right over my sensitive pucker. I can feel the humidity of his mouth, his fingers bruisingly hard on my ass cheeks, the teasing scrape of his stubble against the sensitive skin of my crease.

"Tell me you love me." The words are quiet, but the command in them thunders in my ears.

Of course I love him. I was falling in love with him long before I was ready to let myself see it. But the bratty part of me I'm finally ready to acknowledge is dying to know how he plans to torture the information out of me if I don't answer him right away.

"Sal," I whine, wiggling my ass.

He growls and notches the dry pad of his thumb against my rim.

"If you want my tongue, beautiful, just say the words." He presses a little harder, making the sensitive skin of my hole burn with the friction of it.

“I want your tongue.” Even breathless and so horny I can hardly think, an impish laugh bursts from my lips.

Salvatore growls again. “Not those words.”

He pushes his thumb inside and I wail, clenching around the unlubed sting of the invasion while simultaneously arching my back in the hope of getting his thumb deeper. My cock bobs and dribbles, splattering droplets of precum all over the back cushion of the leather couch. He hooks his thumb on the bottom edge of my rim and tugs just a little, drawing another gasp from my throat. And then I hear the metallic clang of his belt buckle, the whirr of his zipper, the rustle of his clothes.

“If you think threatening to fuck me dry is a punishment and not an enticement, you don’t know me as well as I thought.” I clench around his thumb again.

He lets out another one of those rumbling chuckles. “Oh no, Angel. If you can’t either safeword or tell me what I already know is true, I’ll just get off myself to the pretty sight of your tight little hole around my thumb, and you can spend the night with blue balls.”

I whine and cant my hips again, managing to get his thumb to barely brush my prostate and tug at my rim a little more.

“Lick me first and then I’ll say it.”

His belt buckle rattles again, and he lets out a groan. Is he really jerking himself off?

“It’s not a negotiation.” The head of his cock bumps against the back of my thigh and I can feel the bunch of his foreskin as he strokes himself. “Last chance. Tell me what I want to hear.”

My cock spasms, threatening to get off just from the sound of Salvatore touching himself and the teasing pressure of his thumb inside me.

“Fuck, Salvatore. I love you. I loved you when I still thought you were like everyone else, I loved you when I raged at you and accused you of trying to have your way with me, and I fucking love you now.”

He groans louder and for a second I wonder if he just came with his hand on his own cock listening to my messy, imperfect declaration. But then his mouth is on me. He laps at my hole with his hot, wet tongue, thrusting his thumb deeper with his saliva easing the sting. He sucks and nibbles on my rim, then shoves his tongue inside me alongside his thumb, feasting on me, devouring me, making me sloppy with his spit running down to my balls.

“I love you,” I pant, rocking my hips to grind against his face. “I love you. I love you.”

He growls and moans, each sound vibrating against my rim and tightening around my balls. And then his tongue and his thumb are both gone, leaving me aching empty, babbling pleas and broken whimpers until I feel the press of his cockhead where I need it most.

He reaches around me and wraps his hand around my shaft.

“Oh fuck,” I groan.

“Don’t you dare come before I’m inside of you,” he warns, stroking me with one hand while he plucks at my nipples again with the other, playing me like I’m his favorite instrument, one that can only pant and beg and cry his name with the right flick of his fingers or twist of his wrist.

My whole body quakes and I clench my teeth against the orgasm that draws closer and closer to the surface. A steady stream of precum gushes from my cock with every stroke now, and Salvatore loosens his grip, slides his hand up around my crown, and gathers the slick offering into his palm. And then his hand disappears altogether and I hear the distinct wet sound of his hand on his own cock.

I moan again and before I've even finished the sound, he presses forward to fill me.

"You're mine, sweet Angel." The hoarseness in his voice is at odds with the gentleness of his words as he digs his fingers into my hips and slams home in a single deep stroke. "Mine to protect, mine to love, mine to pleasure and tease and worship." He punctuates each declaration with a jarring thrust.

I'm nothing but a deliriously blissful rag doll slumped over the back of the couch, held up by Salvatore's hands on me and animated by the hard rhythm of his cock plunging deep inside me over and over again, dragging over my prostate with each thrust, grinding against my fluttering rim again and again.

"I won't ever let you go." He kisses the back of my neck the same way he did along my spine, hot and wet and claiming.

"Never," I murmur in a daze. "Till death do us part."

"That's right, Angioletto." He grunts with satisfaction and nudges my legs even wider with his knees so he can fuck me deeper. "Till death do us part. Now come on my cock like I know you're desperate to."

As if his permission is the only thing my body needed, a violent shudder racks me and my inner muscles clench tight around him, sending shockwaves of dizzying pleasure through me. I think I scream his name, but I'm too far gone to even know. I'm nothing but sparking nerve endings and putty in Salvatore's hands, my cum

painting the couch in thick white stripes as my release goes on and on, bolstered by his stroking hands and his cock still moving inside me.

When I'm sure there isn't another drop of cum left in my balls, he groans, low and guttural, and his cock starts to pulse inside me. The hot flood of his release sets off another round of gasping, clawing pleasure as my cock spasms and jerks with nothing left to shoot. And then I slump forward, my lungs burning and my muscles nothing but jelly.

Salvatore holds me up until his cock slips out, and a gush of cum rushes down the backs of my thighs. The couch isn't exactly made for people to lie down, but that doesn't stop him from finding a way to arrange me on top of him, my softening cock against his, sweaty skin against sweaty skin, and my head on his shoulder.

There are things I still want to say to him, and I'm sure he still has questions of his own, but my eyelids get heavy, and the steady rhythm of his breaths quickly lulls me to sleep.

Chapter 22

SALVATORE

I'm not sure how long I lie with my bare ass sweating on the leather and Dante snoring on top of me. Maybe it's an hour, maybe three or four. It's enough time to sort out all the things Dante told me and then replay the throaty hitch in his voice when he moaned that he loved me over and over again while I tongued his perfect little hole.

His stomach growls loudly and he starts to stir, pulling me out of my own trancelike state of not exactly sleep, but temporary peace.

"Fuck, I'm hungry," he mumbles, trying to sit up and putting too much pressure on his injured shoulder. He winces and I grunt, sitting up and taking him with me before he can hurt himself in his groggy stupor. "What time is it?"

"Late. The Chinese place down the street should still be open though. Do you want me to order us something?"

He yawns and rubs his eyes with the palms of his hands.

"Beef lo mein, please. I need to hop in the shower. My ass cheeks are glued together with cum." He pushes himself up on wobbly legs and I let out a pleased, possessive growl thinking about my cum trickling out of him while he slept.

I watch his bare ass greedily as he saunters out of the room, then I pull out my phone

to place the order. Once that's done, I clean up the glorious mess we made, sweep up the broken glass, and gather the court transcripts and police reports into a garbage can. I put the can on the balcony so we can have a little bonfire with it later if Dante wants. By the time everything is back in order the food is here and Dante's out of the shower.

"Goddamn that smells good," he groans. His hair is still damp and he's wearing one of my overly large t-shirts from the bottom of my dresser. It covers just enough that I can't be sure whether he's wearing anything underneath.

The remnants of our earlier conversation crash over me again. Not the ugly, jagged edges of his past, but that moment his eyes sparked with wonder when he realized how I've felt about him for too damn long, and the answer on his lips when he finally stopped playing brat and said it back. Except, I don't think I actually said the words out loud. I confirmed them, but that's not quite the same.

I set the package of egg rolls on the counter and make my way towards him. I don't know if it was the confession or everything else, but the relaxed way he holds himself is totally different now. His feisty air of confidence and sass is still intact in the smirk he levels me with as I stoop to sweep him off his feet though. He squeals with surprise and wraps his legs around me.

Nope, nothing underneath the shirt. My cock stirs again, more than ready for round two. But we have a few other things to take care of first, so that will have to wait. I catch his mouth in a rough kiss.

"I love you," I growl, tugging his bottom lip between my teeth and savoring the gasp he feeds me.

"I know." He grins.

I carry him into the kitchen and set him down on the island, right next to the food I just started unpacking.

“Cold,” he gasps.

“Sorry.” I chuckle. I’m not really. He deserves a little punishment for making me beg for his words earlier, and his bare ass on the cold marble countertop seems fitting enough.

“Hey, what’s the deal with the Fitzpatricks?” he says as he takes the lo mein I hand him and a pair of chopsticks.

“What do you mean?”

“Last week when I got attacked, you said something about the Fitzpatricks, I feel like you mentioned them once before too. Who are they?”

“Irish fuckers with their own little organization just outside of Wildcliff.” I scoop some fried rice into my mouth and lick my lips, chewing before I go on. “Just seems unlikely that there’s a ginger criminal in this city that isn’t associated with them, but I can’t work out why they would have anything to do with Don, so it must be a coincidence.”

Dante waffles his head back and forth and scrunches his eyebrows, poking at his food with his chopsticks while he thinks.

“What else can you tell me about them? Maybe we’re missing something.”

I give him the quick rundown, which isn’t much. Just that they’re a thorn in our asses but Lorenzo isn’t ready to escalate things into a full-out war yet.

“Oh, and the boss, Declan, his brother just did a stint. He got out a month or so ago.”

Dante’s eyebrows shoot up. “Where?”

His line of logic isn’t hard to follow. “You think he could have met Don while they were locked up?”

“It’s not impossible, right?” He slurps a noodle through his lips noisily.

“Not impossible,” I agree. “But why? What could Don have to offer that Cian would want? He walked right out of prison to become the crown prince of a pretty well established organization, why bother helping him with petty stalking and revenge?”

“The guy who attacked me said something.” He takes another bite and chews while he puzzles again, trying to remember. “Fuck, I can’t remember exactly, but he said something like, Don wants the truth to come out, but that me marrying you only helped with his agenda.”

“His as in the redheaded fuck who branded you?” I clarify, and Dante nods. “Okay, hold on, there’s one other thing that doesn’t fit.”

I set down my food and go in search of my phone. I find it under the couch, where it must have fallen out of my pocket earlier. I pull up my contact for Sparrow and head back into the kitchen while it rings.

“If he doesn’t want to tell you, I’m not telling you,” Sparrow says.

“No, it’s not about the police records. We already cleared that up.”

“Oh, okay, what’s up?” I can hear the click-clack of keyboard keys faintly in the background.

“I know you told Enz it would take a couple of days, but I was hoping you could—”

He barks out a laugh. “Already on it. I was actually just waffling over whether the big boss man is the kind of guy who will get pissy over a one a.m. phone call.”

“Wait, you mean you already traced the bank transfers?”

Dante gestures at the phone, and I pull it away from my ear and put it on speaker while Sparrow responds.

“Yeah, it was bugging me. Who hacks an account to transfer money into it? It doesn’t make any sense. So, I decided to let Xav play with Antonio alone while I worked on this.”

“And?” Dante asks, leaning forward until he’s perched on the very edge of the counter.

“Definitely didn’t add any clarity to the ‘why,’ but it’s interesting, that’s for sure,” he says.

Dante rolls his eyes, and I choke back a laugh. “Would you stop edging us and just tell us whatever you found?”

“The IP address that I traced the activity back to came from MacFord Correctional Facility.”

“Don,” Dante says without hesitation. “Get me your laptop.” He nudges me with his foot.

“Why?”

“I’ve got some hacking of my own to do.”

“Let me know what you find, I’m invested now,” Sparrow says, then hangs up without a goodbye.

DANTE

My eyes are burning and I’m vaguely aware of night turning into dawn turning into full-blown daylight in my peripheral vision. Salvatore has been snoring softly beside me for hours now, one hand hanging off the couch and loosely clutching my foot, his fingers twitching every so often while he dreams.

“I’ve got it. Sal, wake up, I think I figured it out.”

He grunts and jerks awake, blinking against the daylight. “Shit, I’m going to pay for sleeping on the couch all night.” He groans, sitting up and slowly working out the kinks in his neck.

My muscles have been burning for hours, but that’s not as important right now as what I found.

“Listen, it took me half the night, but I got into Cian’s emails. I broke the encryption and boy do I have answers.”

His eyebrows inch up, and he shakes off his grogginess.

“You did all that in...” He looks at his wrist like he’s expecting there to be a watch there.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m amazing.” I wave him off. “You’re not going to believe what I found though.”

He nods. "Lay it on me."

"First of all, Antonio is Cian's little pet, I can show you the messages between them. But more important than that, I have dozens of emails between Declan and Cian while Cian was locked up. They're not stupid enough to say anything incriminating, obviously, but about eight months ago, Cian started mentioning that he had some 'new business ideas' for when he came home. He says he met someone with a mind for business who worked in importing for years."

"That's Don?"

"That's Don. I don't know what Don told him exactly, but clearly, he charmed the guy, convinced him he had ideas that could benefit the Fitzpatricks, probably made himself sound like some kind of fucking king pin, knowing Don. Declan's responses are pretty dismissive though. He tells Cian the business is going well, that he just wants him to focus on more important things right now, not to worry about it, stuff like that. So, eventually, Cian dropped that tactic and started bringing up the Morettis a lot in his emails instead."

Salvatore perks up and glowers. "What about us?"

"Nothing specific, but it feels like he's trying to nudge his brother to start that war you said Lorenzo isn't keen on. It almost sounds like he's trying to make him paranoid in a lot of these emails. He tells Declan to keep a close eye on the books, that someone might be stealing, things like that."

Salvatore drags his hand along his jaw and then the light bulb goes off in his eyes. "Those transfers into our accounts?"

I nod. "Bingo."

“I don’t know if Cian is trying to dethrone his brother or just create chaos, but Don knew computers. He could have given him the idea and even offered to find a back door in to make the transfers happen.”

“Fuck,” he mutters.

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Alright, I need to call Lorenzo. Save those emails or whatever you need to do, and get ready, because I’m sure he’s going to want the full rundown of everything you just found.”

“Got it.”

He heaves himself off the couch and pulls out his phone to make the call. With the adrenaline finally fading, I sway a little on my feet, exhaustion starting to catch up with me. I don’t have time for that right now though. Don is getting released in a few days, and clearly he got himself tangled in a big-ass Mafia clusterfuck.

“What if the Fitzpatricks decide to protect him?” I ask after Sal ends the call.

His expression darkens and he cups my face in both hands. “I’m taking care of this one way or another, Angel. Trust me.”

I nod and sag into him, that certainty I felt last night still as solid as ever.

“I do,” I whisper. “I trust you.”

Chapter 23

DANTE

“Whoa, it’s weird being here when it’s not open.” With regular lights illuminating Wild, no sultry music playing, and not a single horny customer in sight, I almost don’t recognize the place.

During the drive over I couldn’t help wondering if I would feel antsy being here knowing I can’t come back and dance for another couple of weeks still. But I’m not feeling much of anything about it now that we’re here. Do I even want to come back? I definitely don’t want to be some kept man, but if money isn’t a huge issue anymore, maybe I could do something else... something that wouldn’t require me to be constantly pawed at.

I push those thoughts aside for now. I have plenty of time to think about what the next chapter of my life looks like, but first I have to write the ending to this one.

“I’m surprised Enzo didn’t want to meet at one of the offices instead, but maybe he’s already anticipating the need for easy-to-clean floors,” Salvatore says darkly, eyeing the industrial tile floors, designed specifically for easy cleanup of all the spilled drinks... and most likely blood today if things play out the way we’re expecting.

“I call ‘not it’ on mopping duty,” I mutter, and he laughs.

What I’ve come to think of as Lorenzo’s inner circle are already seated around the table when we get there. An unusual tension hangs in the air, making even Alessio sit

up straight and keep his mouth shut. Salvatore drags an extra chair over for me and we take our seats between Alessio and Sparrow, directly across the table from Lorenzo, with Elio on his right side and Xaviaro on his left.

“Perfect timing. Sparrow just filled us in on what he found with the bank transfers, so why don’t you go ahead and take it from there.” There are tense lines around Lorenzo’s eyes and an air of authority in his voice that gives me goose bumps. Not the sexy kind of authority, the ‘I’m about to start blowing fucking heads off’ kind.

Salvatore nods at me to give me the floor and rests his hand on the back of my neck. The warm weight of his touch is comforting, keeping my heart from breaking into a gallop and soothing my nerves. Sure, we’re on Lorenzo’s team, but it’s not like that hasn’t turned on me before. But with the soft brush of his thumb against the side of my neck, there’s no doubt in my mind that my husband is with me. No matter what else happens, I’m not standing alone in my corner anymore.

I take a breath and then start from the beginning. We talked about it on the way over, and there is no way for me to connect all the pieces for them without the backstory between me and Don. I keep the details about my cousin sparse this time, delivering the whole explanation with a cold detachment I’ve found comfort in for the last decade.

Lorenzo’s gaze is unwavering. He doesn’t move or flinch, he hardly reacts at all as I tell them all the details from the emails, my suspicion of how Don charmed Cian, not knowing I’d have a Mafia of my own behind me, and the strained interactions between Declan and Cian. But even without a single twitch of acknowledgment, there’s no doubt in my mind that he’s listening to every word with rapt attention.

“Great, so we have to call up Declan to tell him we think his brother is a fucking menace who flipped one of our guys and set it up to look like we’re ripping them off. Oh, and by the way, can you step aside and let us pop Cian’s new bestie? Don’t

worry, this one's just personal," Alessio summarizes with a groan.

"I'm sure I can finesse the news a little better than that," Lorenzo says blandly.

Elio's eyebrows go up. "Seriously? You think calling Declan is the way to go?"

"The alternative is to skip right to taking out his brother before he becomes an even bigger problem. Don't get me wrong, we might end up at that option anyway, but let's try for a little diplomacy first and see where that gets us." Lorenzo's already pulling his phone out and making the call.

I lean closer to Salvatore and lower my voice. "Does he have this other mob boss on speed dial?"

"What, were you expecting he'd attach a formal invitation for a meeting to a severed horse's head and stick that in his bed?" He smirks, and I shrug.

"Makes more sense than fucking calling him."

"Declan," Lorenzo says into the phone, his voice full of that same dark, commanding edge. "There seems to be a problem that we need to discuss immediately. I want you to come to Wild so we can clear it up before anyone gets hurt."

It's impossible to hear Declan's words on the other end of the phone, but the deep murmur of his tone almost sounds... flirtatious? Lorenzo clears his throat and his usually carefully blank expression tightens into a scowl.

"Of course we won't be alone. This isn't a game, Fitzpatrick. Be here in an hour or I'll start considering alternative ways to resolve things myself."

Again, I can't hear Declan's response, but it almost sounds like he meows before they

both hang up.

“What the ever-loving fuck was that?” I whisper to Salvatore.

“We’re all wondering, but none of us is brave enough or suicidal enough to ask.” His lips twitch and he drags my chair closer to his, then puts his hand back where it belongs, right on the nape of my neck.

Lorenzo tucks his phone away and starts giving orders. Alessio is sent to wait at the door to escort them in when they arrive, Xaviaro is told to go get Antonio, and Salvatore starts rearranging things to make room for Declan and his men to arrive.

“Did you think being in the Mafia would be a lot more shooting and a lot less negotiating, or was that just me?” I mutter to Sparrow.

He snorts a laugh in agreement.

Right on schedule, an hour later, Alessio leads three men over to join us. I don’t know why I expected them to be dressed in high-end suits the way the Morettis always seem to be, but clearly the Fitzpatricks aren’t as bothered about their wardrobes. The ginger with a cocky smile, crooked nose, and a mass of freckles is wearing a green hoodie with a jean vest over it, a pair of jeans that are molded to his thighs, and boots that clomp with every step he takes through the mostly silent club.

I can’t decide whether I’m relieved or annoyed that neither of the two men with him match the photos I found of Cian. One of them has dark hair, green eyes, and a bored sort of scowl on his face. And the other... shit he’s basically a carbon copy of the first one. So either they’re twins or Declan is going old school Sith style, cloning an army of henchmen instead of bothering to recruit.

“Kitten,” Declan purrs, his eyes focused solely on Lorenzo as if none of the rest of us

are even in the room. “And here I was starting to get a complex that I’m always the one calling you.”

Lorenzo’s jaw ticks and he gestures to the chair across from his. The rest of our seats have been removed, leaving us to stand behind Enzo while he’s in full boss mode. Declan pulls out his chair and kicks his feet up onto the table, crossing them at the ankle.

“I don’t know how closely you watch your books, Fitzpatrick, but we’ve found a bit of a discrepancy on our end,” Lorenzo explains, keeping his tone even and unemotional.

Declan frowns, his thick eyebrows pulling together, and cocks his head.

“Come on Kitten, I know you didn’t call me here to accuse me of stealing from you.”

“I wish it were that simple,” Lorenzo says.

SALVATORE

It takes everything in me not to leap across the table, grab the front of Declan’s shirt, and demand to know where the fuck his brother gets off attacking my husband. Normally, I’m totally on board with Lorenzo’s approach to problems, but this is one time I think Dante might be onto something. Shoot first and negotiate later. But it’s not my call, so I stand behind Lorenzo, literally , and let him lay out what we know... or at least the version of it he decided would make this all go as smoothly as possible.

“Sparrow, why don’t you tell Xaviaro to bring Antonio out,” Lorenzo says before turning his attention back to Declan, who’s finally dropped the flirting routine now it’s clear that something serious is going on. “I could bore you with details all day, Fitzpatrick, but here’s the bottom line. Some opportunistic parasites have been

whispering in your brother's ear."

Declan bristles. "What do you know about my brother?"

"Enough," Lorenzo says, leveling Declan with a look that deepens the Irish boss's frown. "And here's one of those parasites now."

I look over to see Xaviaro and Sparrow pushing a bound and disheveled Antonio forward. He stumbles as he takes in the scene in front of him—Lorenzo and Declan seated at the table together. Antonio's eyes widen and he tries to back up, but Xaviaro is right there, shoving him forward one step after another.

Declan looks Antonio up and down with pure boredom, as if Lorenzo is showing off a new piece of furniture instead of a rat. Antonio's eyes land on Dante beside me, I expect to see pleading, a final, desperate bid for someone here to take mercy on him. But instead they're filled with disgust and loathing. My husband bristles and I yank him closer to me, instinctively reaching for my pistol.

"Relax, Salvatore," Lorenzo mutters.

I grind my teeth and clench my hand into a fist to hold myself back from ending Antonio before his next breath.

"Clearly one of yours," Declan says. "If he's been conspiring with Cian, how do I know you didn't put him up to it?"

Lorenzo scoffs and tilts his head towards me. "Go ahead then, Sal, show Declan here how we handle rats."

"Oh, I'm a fucking rat because I'm sick of seeing this organization run by a bunch of fucking fa—" Xaviaro slams his fist into the side of Antonio's head before he can

finish the insult.

“I fucking hate that word,” Xav grumbles.

Antonio stumbles sideways from the blow, and Sparrow grabs him by the collar to yank him upright again. I reach into my jacket and pull out my pistol, offering it to Dante.

“You want to do the honors?”

He stares at the gun in my hand for several long seconds, chewing on his bottom lip as he considers the offer. I expected him to jump at it, but after a minute, he shakes his head.

“I might be just a stripper whore, but I have standards.” His words are directed right at Antonio, and my blood boils a few degrees hotter. Stripper whore? Is that what he called my angel?

“Would someone fucking shoot him?” Lorenzo manages to sound bored and impatient at the same time.

He doesn’t have to ask twice, I already have my gun cocked. I let go of my Angioletto, Xaviaro and Sparrow both step aside, and I smirk as I point my pistol at Antonio.

“Better a faggot than a lowlife rat like you. A fanabla ,” I growl, and squeeze the trigger.

Antonio jerks like he’s going to make a run for it, but he’s not quick enough. The gunshot echoes through the empty club and blood explodes from his head, painting the floor behind him with a violent spray before he collapses, motionless.

Xav stands over him, looking down with a grunt, trying to keep the crimson river of sticky blood from touching his shoes. “I should really start laying down a drop cloth. This shit would be so much easier.”

“I hope that clears things up,” Lorenzo says, drawing Declan’s attention back to himself.

The Irish boss nods.

“My brother... he’s not going to be a problem. He can get taken in by the wrong people, but now that I know, I’ll deal with him myself.”

I grind my teeth again at the idea of Cian getting away with what he did to Dante. My Angioletto tenses and vibrates against me, holding himself back just as hard as I am. Declan isn’t going to hand his own brother over, I don’t think any of us expected him to. But this gives Lorenzo a card to play, and he takes it.

“On one condition,” Lorenzo says. “There’s one more dangerous little pest in your brother’s ear, and you’re going to let us deal with him ourselves.”

Declan scratches his stubbled chin, holding Lorenzo’s gaze for a long, silent moment.

“His new prison buddy? Don?” Declan guesses.

Dante trembles against me so hard, I have to wrap both arms around him to keep him upright.

“That’s the one,” Lorenzo says. “His release date is in two days. Give us your word you won’t alert him or Cian that we’re onto him, and stay out of the way so we can deal with him.”

Declan grunts and then snaps his fingers. His bodyguard on his right pulls a pen out of his pocket and hands it to the boss. Declan reaches across the table to pluck a napkin from the small stack next to the drink menus, and jots something down.

“One better,” he says, sliding the napkin across the table to Lorenzo. “That’s the apartment he’ll be staying at. Go camp out there for two days for all I care, just get this asshole out of the way so I can get Cian back on track and focused on the right priorities.”

Declan stands up, putting both hands on the table and leaning over a few inches towards Lorenzo. A slow grin spreads over his lips and as soon as Lorenzo looks up at him, he winks.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Kitten.”

He turns and strides out with his henchmen a step behind him.

“Cian’s the one who attacked Dante. He fucking branded his arm and tore his goddamn shoulder out of its socket. I don’t know how I’m supposed to just let that go,” I growl through clenched teeth.

“Sometimes life is a compromise. We can’t get everything we want.” Lorenzo folds the napkin and holds it out to me between two fingers. His gaze flickers in the direction Declan disappeared in even though he’s long gone, then back to me. He flattens his mouth into a line. “And something tells me you’ll get your chance at Cian sooner or later. Diplomacy can only stop a war for so long, especially when there are power hungry traitors lurking around.”

I take the napkin and stuff it into my pocket.

“Yeah, well, when the time comes, I call dibs on being the one to put a bullet between

that fucker's eyes.”

“You call... shotgun?” Sparrow chortles.

“I think that would be calling pistol,” Alessio deadpans.

Lorenzo sighs. “What do I have to call to get a fucking drink?”

“I can get you one,” Dante offers, slipping out from under my arm. He stops next to the table, chewing his lip again and shifting on his feet. “And... um... thanks, Lorenzo. For believing me and for getting Don for us.”

Enzo clears his throat again and fiddles with his tie. “Yes, well, you’re a Moretti now, and we look out for our own.”

Dante meets my eye again and a smile twitches on his lips.

“Always,” he finishes, just like I did the other night.

“Always.”

Chapter 24

DANTE

I expected to feel nervous, jittery, right on the edge of patience and sanity. But as Salvatore and I sit in the quiet, empty, blandly furnished apartment, I've never felt calmer in my life. I eye the ceiling fan and Salvatore leans in to nuzzle my ear.

"It's sturdy enough," he assures me, and for a minute or two, we both just watch the rope sway in the soft breeze from the air conditioning, biding its time just like we are.

When Salvatore offered me his gun the other day, to let me be the one to punish Antonio for what he did, my hesitation wasn't for his sake. I know I could have pulled the trigger and slept just fine knowing there was one less prick like him in the world. But there's something special to me about the idea of Don's being the only life I'll ever directly take myself. I want one name on my ledger, one single unwashable stain on my soul, and I'm saving it for Don.

My hands are steady as a rock, my heartbeat is even and unhurried. It's not even about rage anymore, and it's definitely not about fear. It's about finishing what I should have ten years ago and then washing my hands of all of this.

"He's coming," Salvatore says calmly, dismissing the alert on his phone from the camera we placed in the stairwell on our way in.

I nod and tilt my face towards his. He smiles and cups my jaw, pressing a slow kiss to my lips in a promise that I'm not alone and I never will be again.

“I love you,” I murmur.

Salvatore’s grin widens. “I know.” He throws the cheeky answer back at me, and I roll my eyes.

“Okay, now go.” I shoo him towards the bedroom and take my place on the couch, in full view of the door, and I listen to the sound of his footsteps approaching. The distinct shuffle step of his gait tugs at my memories, filling my head with thoughts of the times before . Before I knew what he was, before everything changed, before I saw the world the way it really is.

Keys rattle and then the lock clicks and the door swings open without any hesitation. Don isn’t even looking at me, absorbed by putting his keys back in his pocket and fiddling with his phone. Declan kept his word; he’s not expecting me at all.

I shift my weight to the edge of the couch and clear my throat. Don’s eyes finally snap towards me, all of his distractions forgotten. The blood drains from his face, and damn have the years taken a toll on him. His previously round face is gaunt, and when he curls his lips back in a snarl, his teeth are yellowed and cracked... the ones that aren’t missing, that is. I curl my fingers into a fist, remembering the sting of my knuckles connecting with his mouth, spit and blood flying between pained, gargling grunts.

“Uncle Donnie,” I say sweetly. “You sounded so excited for our little family reunion, I figured, why wait?” I get to my feet smoothly.

His surprise is quickly melting away, but I can see the calculations going on behind his darting eyes. He’s been sold out, betrayed, no one coming to rescue or defend him now. He lets out a hoarse laugh.

“This is perfect, kid. I thought I’d have to track your punk ass all over this city to get

a little one-on-one time with my favorite nephew.” He moves deeper into the apartment, leaving the half-open bedroom door at his back and a few feet of space still between us.

“Why would you have to do that when you’ve had your friends in the Irish mob following me for weeks?” I cock my head, sugary sweetness still dripping from every word. “I just want what you want, Don.”

He narrows his eyes. “Oh yeah, and what’s that?”

I reach back and savor the way Don braces himself as I pull the pen out of my back pocket nice and slowly. He lets out an obvious breath when he sees what I’m holding, and I jerk my chin towards the yellow pad of paper on the coffee table.

“For everyone to know the truth,” I say, the smile unwavering on my lips.

Don doesn’t hear Salvatore’s footsteps behind him, he’s too busy wheezing another laugh at me.

“Oh, are you planning to write a confession to the judge, admitting that you perjured yourself on the stand? Admitting that I never fucking touched you?”

I click my tongue against my teeth. “No, no, no, Donnie. You’re going to write a confession about what you did to your own son. And feel free to include any other last words you might want to get off your chest, other confessions weighing you down, apologies to your wife, whatever feels right. This is a suicide note, after all.”

His eyes dart to the side and he notices the rope hanging from the fan for the first time.

“Are you fucking cra—” The click of Salvatore’s gun cocking cuts off Don’s protest.

“There’s a body bag in your future, Donnie boy, one way or another. But I’d really like to make my husband happy and clear his name with those traitors you call family. So, either you can make me happy and write the fucking note like he told you to, or you can find out what happens when a man like me becomes very un happy.”

Don’s face pales again and beads of sweat form on his brow.

“Get writing.” I toss the pen down on top of the pad of paper, then bring my foot up to the edge and shove the whole table towards him.

When he doesn’t move right away, Salvatore jabs the back of his head with the muzzle of his gun. Don winces and reaches for the pen and paper.

“And hurry the fuck up,” I mutter.

I catch Salvatore’s eye and his lips twitch with a reassuring grin. The suicide note was his idea. I made peace with the fact that my family turned their backs on me years ago. If a suicide note from Don makes them see the light, they can stuff their apologies up their own asses as far as I’m concerned. But I’m petty enough to rub the truth in their face and make them sit with it for the rest of their lives.

He makes pathetic whimpering sounds as the pen scratches across the paper with his messy confession.

“Did Luis whimper like that when you hurt him?” I ask through clenched teeth.

He doesn’t answer, but I can see the flicker of something purely evil in his eyes. Even now, minutes from his own death, with a gun to his head, the memory of a child, his own fucking child, whimpering nearly makes him smile.

“You’re a sick fuck,” I hiss, resisting the urge to spit on him only because we plan to

leave the crime scene so the suicide note can make it to my aunt.

“There, it’s done,” he says, tossing the notepad at me. “Just let me go, okay? I’ll disappear, change my name, I’ll be as good as dead.”

I scan the note to make sure he actually confessed. He kept it brief, but the words are there. Dante lied in court, but the truth has been eating away at me for years. All those things he said I did... I’m so sorry... it was Luis. I didn’t mean to hurt him. I love my son. I couldn’t help myself. I’m so sorry.

I roll my eyes. It goes on like that for a few paragraphs, but I’m not going to stand here and give him editor’s notes. The truth is in there at least, so it’s good enough for me. I chuckle darkly and look up from the note to meet his eyes.

“You know what’s as good as dead, Donnie?” I drop the notebook on the table and leap up onto it. The added height has me looking down at the pathetic predator I’m cursed to share blood with. At least we don’t have to share a name anymore. And after this, we won’t share oxygen every again either. “Your lifeless body dangling from the ceiling fan.”

I raise my foot and kick him squarely in the chest. He gasps and stumbles backward, right where I wanted him. I jump off the table, landing quietly on the balls of my feet. Before he’s caught his breath, I have the noose around his neck.

“Stop, Dante, we’re family,” he pleads, clawing at the rope as it tightens around his neck.

I would love to hoist him up myself, but doctor’s orders and all, no strenuous activity for a few more weeks. Salvatore tugs the rope though, lifting Don off his feet a little at a time as he wheezes and chokes.

“We may share blood, Don,” I say darkly. “But we’re not family.”

SALVATORE

“Let me have the keys.” Dante holds his hand up expectantly as we make our way out the back entrance of Don’s apartment building.

There’s a new bounce in his step and an air of peace surrounding him, but the spark of challenge in his eyes is more than enough reassurance that my little spitfire is still in there too, daring me to argue with him about who’s going to drive.

“The last time I let you drive my car, you drugged and kidnapped me,” I remind him, biting back the teasing smirk that tugs at the corners of my mouth.

He rolls his eyes. “You’re really never going to let that go, are you?”

“Never.” I slip my hand into my pocket and jingle my keys just to goad him.

He stops in his tracks and swivels towards me. “Come on, don’t make me fight you for them. I’m still supposed to be taking it easy with my shoulder, how bad will you feel if I hurt myself trying to wrestle you for your keys?”

“That’s a low blow, Angel.” I tut, shaking my head and pulling my keys out.

The combination of sass and smugness on his face as he catches them makes my heart trip over a beat. I reach for him, but he dances backward before I can get my hands on him, his laughter echoing off the nearby buildings.

“Brat,” I mutter, picking up my pace to keep up with him as he jogs the rest of the way to where we parked the car, a few blocks down and around the corner.

“Don’t worry, there’s no way I could drag your unconscious body into the car right now anyway.” He plucks my sunglasses from the visor and slides them on.

I chuckle and adjust my seat. “I never underestimate you, Angel. If you wanted to find a way to drag my limp body around, I’m sure you would.”

“Lucky for you, the conscious version of you has grown on me just a little bit.” He flashes me a toothy grin and starts the car.

“Just a little?” I rest my hand on his thigh, because touching him is my new favorite addiction, and because I can.

He holds up his thumb and forefinger half an inch apart. “Little bit.”

Don’s apartment was in Newcrest, a lower income suburb of Wildcliff, and currently part of the Fitzpatricks’ territory. Which happens to be only a few minutes away from the overlook where I took Dante before he kidnapped me. And that’s exactly the direction we head, in the fading light of the afternoon, an intoxicating sense of closure and the excitement of what’s next making us trade smiling glances. He rolls down the windows and cranks up the music, resting his hand on top of mine on his thigh and lacing our fingers together.

When we reach the clearing, he cuts the engine and the sudden silence rings in my ears for a few seconds.

“Should I strip search you again?” I slide my hand to the back of his neck and draw him forward as much as I can with the center console still between us.

Our noses bump and I can’t stop staring at the smile on his lips, wanting to taste the joy and relief on them.

“If you want.” He flicks his tongue along the seam of my lips. “I might fight you this time though.”

My cock twitches at the fantasy of Dante playing a mouthy informant who’s afraid I’ll find the wire he’s hiding.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time, Angioletto,” I purr.

He gives my chest a little shove and nips at my bottom lip.

“Come on, we’re celebrating,” he reminds me, hopping out of the car and going around to the trunk. I slip off my jacket and leave it in the car, loosening my tie and rolling up my sleeves before I get out after him.

He pulls a bottle of champagne out of the trunk and waves it at me.

I open my mouth to tease him again, but he beats me to it.

“It’s still corked, so obviously I didn’t drug it. Seriously, you have to drop this joke already.” He groans, passing me the bottle.

“If I’d drugged and kidnapped you, would you ever let the joke go?” I arch an eyebrow at him while I uncork the champagne, quickly bringing the bottle to my lips to slurp up the bubbles that cascade over my knuckles.

“Of course I would.”

I snort. “Liar.”

I shake my sticky hand off and take a proper sip, then pass the bottle to Dante and take a seat next to him on the hood of my car, still warm from the engine and the

sunshine it spent all day basking in.

“Fine, you’re right, I’d torture you about it forever. I feel like there should be a statute of limitations though.”

“Hmm, how about ten years?” I offer.

“If we’re still married in ten years, you’ll drop the kidnap jokes?”

I growl at his choice of wording, grabbing a fistful of his shirt and dragging him close again.

“There is no if , Angioletto. I thought we were clear on that. You’re mine, now and forever.”

“Until death do us part?” His voice dips low, and there’s a flutter of hope and vulnerability in the statement... question?

I bump my nose against his again. I catch his lips in the kiss I’ve been aching for for hours now, since the moment I watched his eyes flash dangerously right before Don came home. The sweetness of a sip of champagne lingers on his lips and tongue.

“That’s right, Angel,” I murmur. “And I’m not even sure I’ll let death keep us apart.”

A puff of breath dances over my damp lips, along with the vibrations of his laughter.

“If anyone could stare death in the eye and kick its ass, it’s us.”

I chuckle along with him, sliding my fingers through his hair and kissing him deeper again, our teeth bumping with the awkward stretch of our smiling lips. I would bet on the two of us every damn time, that’s for fucking sure.

6 MONTHS LATER

DANTE

“This was dumb, I should just leave these in the car.” I stand with the passenger door open, gnawing on my bottom lip and staring at the container in my hands. “Nonna will probably be insulted that I brought dessert.”

Salvatore scoffs, wrapping his arms around me from behind and dragging me away from the car, kicking the door closed with his foot once I’m out of the way. His breath ghosts along my ear and down the exposed skin of my neck, and he nuzzles my earlobe.

“She’s going to be over the moon that you brought something. In Italian families, food is love.”

Even thinking about baking a batch of bunuelos the way my grandma taught me was harder than I expected it to be. As much as I wanted everything with Don to be the end of that chapter, it’s not always as simple as that. I spent so many years turning my back on the people who turned their backs on me first, but the more time I’ve spent around the Morettis, and especially Salvatore’s Nonna, it’s made me realize that I don’t want to forget everything about where I came from. It’s a process, and making this dessert felt like an important step to acknowledge it.

“I’m not letting you leave these in the car,” Sal says firmly.

“Fine,” I grumble, mostly because I don’t want him to know how much I appreciate

him taking the decision out of my hands.

He kisses the side of my neck and takes the container from me, then grabs my hand. He runs the pad of his thumb along the smooth, warm metal of my wedding band. I'm never even sure if he knows he's doing it, but it's a cute habit he's picked up every time he holds my left hand. My heart gives a little flutter and I don't even try to fight the smile that spreads over my face.

The door swings open before we even reach it, and Nonna greets us with a smile.

"Angioletto." She throws her arms open and pulls me in for a hug. I laugh and hug her back. I can't believe she's adopted Salvatore's nickname for me. She's such a sweet old lady, I can't even bring myself to tell her to stop. Maybe it's even a little nice to feel like I'm part of such a big, chaotic family again.

"Nonna, Dante made dessert." Sal rattles the container.

She hugs me even tighter before she lets me go. "Perfect. I think Lorenzo has already been sticking his fingers in the tiramisu anyway."

"Have not," Lorenzo calls from somewhere inside the house.

I sputter a laugh. It's hard to get over the disconnect of seeing Lorenzo at his Nonna's house for Sunday dinners. The stoic head of the Moretti Crime Family eating more green beans at his grandmother's insistence and blushing when she tells him he's too skinny.

"He has too, Nonna, I saw him do it," Sparrow tattles gleefully.

Nonna just shakes her head. "What am I going to do with you boys?"

She takes the container from Salvatore and leads us inside. As always, it's noisy and

warm, and the smell of garlic and tomatoes makes my mouth water.

“Tell me about your dance studio. Is it open yet?” she asks.

“Not yet, but soon. The renovations just finished this week, and I’ve got the schedule of classes I want to start with all set, so now I just have to launch the website and hope for the best.”

“You’ll do great,” she assures me, patting my cheek.

“Thanks, Nonna.”

Salvatore greets everyone else with hugs, all of them thumping each other’s backs as if they don’t see each other every day of the week. I think it’s different for him too to spend time with his family at Sunday dinner. Sparrow pulls me into conversation, telling me about some new ideas he had for a cover-up tattoo for the brand on my arm.

I drag my fingers over the raised word absently, tracing the letters without any thought. Maybe I will see if I can cover it up one day, or maybe I won’t. I’ve never been ashamed of protecting Luis the way I did. In a twisted way, the brand feels like a badge of honor, a reminder of how far I’m willing to go to protect the people I care about.

I look around the room full of mafiosos and Salvatore catches my eye, his gaze full of all the love and intensity I’ve learned to not only trust but crave from him. For the first time in my life, I have the kind of family that’s willing to go just as far to protect me.

I love you , I mouth, and he smiles so wide it makes my heart somersault.

“God, you turned into such a sap,” Sparrow teases.

“Don’t make me bite you just to prove I’m still feral,” I say blandly, and he throws his head back and laughs.

It’s a fucked up family to be sure, but they’re mine, and if I have to, I’ll burn the world down for every last one of them.

The End

Will the barista puppy...err, I mean Luca, find the fieristy Twink Dom of his dreams?! Find out what happens to this baby mafioso in *Desperately Delicate Viper*! Coming June 6th, preorder now!