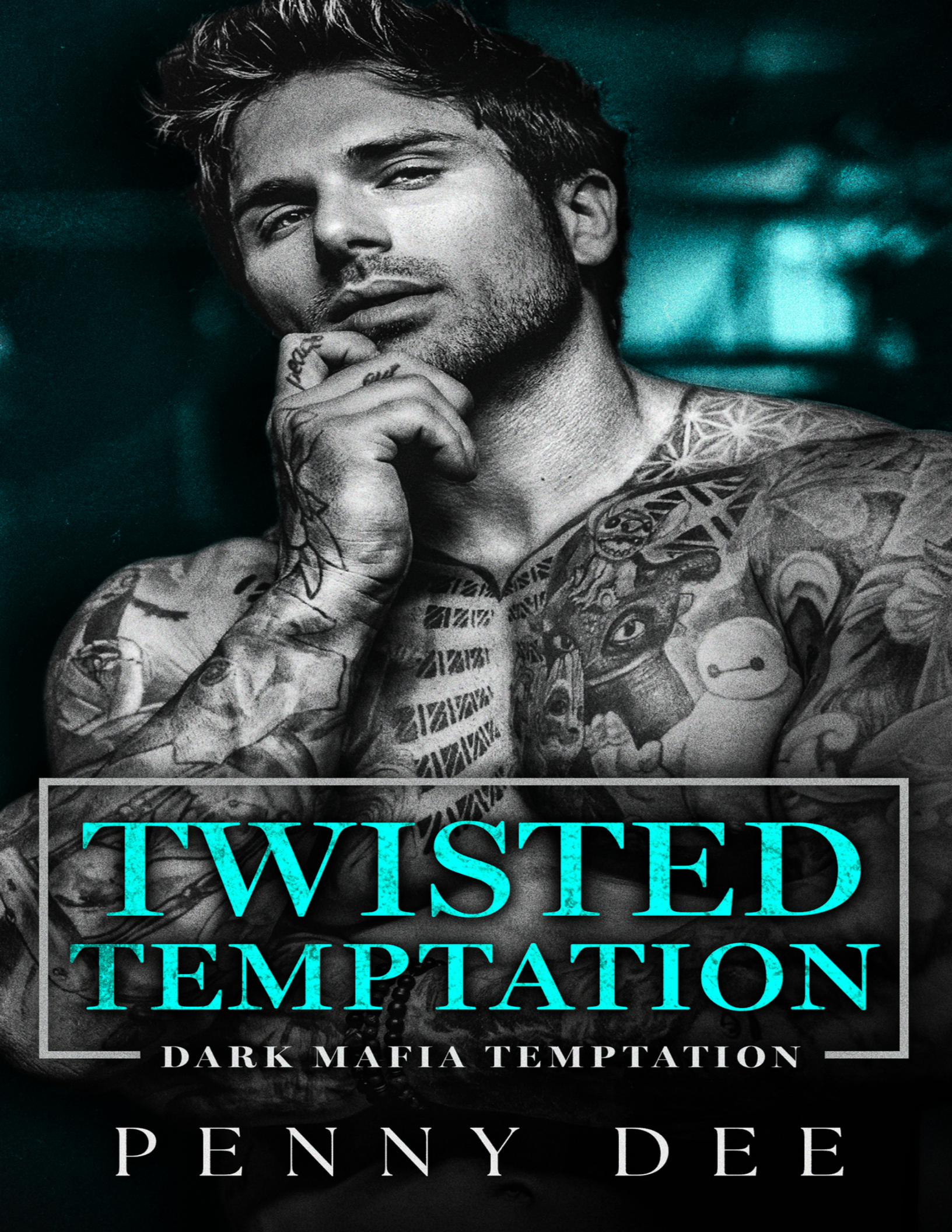

TWISTED
TEMPTATION
DARK MAFIA TEMPTATION
PENNY DEE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for picking up Twisted Temptation and stepping into Dante and Sunny's world.

This is a dark mafia romance, so please be aware that the story contains mature themes, including violence and murder, references to sexual assault, and the loss of a parent.

But at its heart, this book is all about the delicious tension of enemies to lovers—the banter, the push and pull, the chemistry, and, of course, plenty of spice.

I loved writing Dante and Sunny, and I hope you love falling into their messy, dangerous, passionate story as much as I did.

Happy reading, Penny x

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1

SUNNY

Fifteen months ago

I walk quickly through the crowded airport, dragging my suitcase behind me and trying not to attract attention. Inside my case is all I had time to grab before fleeing my apartment twenty minutes ago.

I'll hire someone to get the rest later when it's safe.

Ha, safe. There is no such thing while he's still breathing.

I catch my reflection in the windows as I make my way to the security check.

I look like I haven't slept in days.

Because I haven't slept in days.

I nervously tuck my hair behind my ears because looking unhinged draws attention, and attention is the last thing I need right now.

Calm down. Act normal.

But that is easier said than done when your heart is pounding hard against your ribs and your blood is rushing loudly in your ears.

Breathe.

The security line stretches ahead of me, and I join the back of it, gripping the handle of my carry-on so tightly that my nails bite into my palm.

You're doing okay. You're almost free.

The line shuffles forward, and I place my suitcase on the conveyor belt, and put my keys and phone into the tray beside it.

I've just put my phone beside my keys when I feel it. The prickling sensation at the back of my neck. *The sickly sensation of being watched.*

Panic flares in my gut and chest, and immediately ice floods my veins.

I casually glance over my shoulder like I'm just checking the departure board behind me, not scanning the crowd for the face that haunts my nightmares.

A man in a dark suit stands near the coffee kiosk. He's tall and broad, with dark blond hair cut short.

My heart slams against my ribs at the sight of him, and I try to swallow, but there's nothing there.

Please, no…

But then he turns, I see his face, and the relief that crashes into me is so violent my knees nearly buckle.

It's not him.

"Ma'am? You need to step through."

Crashing back to reality, I realize the security agent is staring at me with mild concern.

I force a smile and mumble, "Sorry."

Stepping through the scanner, I hold my breath until the light flashes green. On the other side, I collect my things with shaking hands and a racing heart.

A man bumps into me as he reaches for his bag on the conveyor belt, and I almost leap back in fear. Our eyes meet, and I force another smile that says *I'm sorry for being such a klutz, but I am absolutely terrified*.

My nerves are frayed, but they are the least of my worries.

Just get on your flight, and it will be okay.

I find a seat near my gate and sit down, pulling my case close like a shield.

Looking around the gate area, I search for the broad shoulders, expensive suit, and charming smile that hides the monster underneath.

But no one is watching me.

He's not here.

But he could be.

Because he has eyes everywhere.

My flight is announced over the loudspeaker, and I stand on shaky legs.

It’s not until the plane takes off that I can finally breathe.

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2

DANTE

Present Day

"You can bury your head in the sand all you like, Dante, but this marriage has to happen," John Marco says from the couch behind me.

I don't turn from where I stand at the window, staring out at the city sprawling beneath me. The twilight sky is streaked with color as the sun bleeds into the horizon.

Below my office, the casino floor hums with the steady rhythm of money, light, and sound. *My kingdom*. Built on the bones of the empire my father left behind and the ruthless decisions I've made since.

Sixty stories above me is the penthouse I rarely use because I live and breathe this casino and would sleep here if it didn’t give my brother another reason to become insufferable.

"I'm not burying my head in the sand," I say to the glass. "I'm ignoring *you*. There's a difference."

"I beg to differ."

I glance over my shoulder. John Marco is sprawled across the leather couch against the far wall, with one arm draped along the back and a glass of Macallan balanced on his knee. He's wearing a three-piece suit in a shade of lavender and custom-made Italian leather shoes.

He looks completely at ease. Which means he's about to be completely unbearable.

"John Marco."

"Dante."

"Drop it."

"Not going to happen, big brother." He takes a sip of his scotch, completely unaffected by the warning in my tone.

My twin brother is seven minutes younger than me, and our personalities are vastly different. He is wildly flamboyant and mischievous, yet he is also the most brilliant strategic mind I've ever encountered. He was blessed with a photographic memory and the ability to switch between charming and witty to cold and calculating in seconds.

I didn’t get the photographic memory. But I got the cold and calculating in abundance.

Which is exactly what you need when you rule an empire.

“This has to happen, Dante,” he says. "If you want to avoid an eventual hostile takeover, you need a bride. This organization is built from old-school mafioso values. Our family created those values and has reigned at the helm for almost a hundred years. You're expected to produce an heir."

I turn back to the window. *An heir*. The continuation of the Di Zaro bloodline. The next generation of a dynasty built on blood, loyalty, and tradition that has survived nearly a century of wars, betrayals, and federal investigations.

My father understood that code. He lived and died by it.

He married the perfect mafia wife, and my mother stood proudly beside him, loving him through his reign as the city’s most powerful man. They’re buried side by side in the cemetery now. Forever together, as they were in life.

"You know the old capos have been talking," John Marco continues. "Gambini. Di Sena. Giacomo. They respect you, Dante. But they're traditional men with traditional expectations, and a don without an heir has an expiration date. It makes them nervous. And nervous men start looking for alternatives."

"Let them look."

"You don't mean that."

He's right. I don't. Because I know exactly what happens when powerful men start looking for alternatives. They find them. And in my world,

alternatives come with bullets.

But a wife.

Fuck.

“The conundrum is simple. You pay someone to be your wife and to give you a child,” he says as if it’s the simplest thing in the world.

“I’m not paying someone to have my child.”

"A ring buys you time," John Marco says. "An heir buys you loyalty. You know they'll want both."

"A ring buys me a year."

"And after the year?"

"One problem at a time."

The thought of marrying someone twists inside me. Not because I'm opposed to the concept of marriage. I understand its strategic value. A wife is an alliance, a symbol of stability.

But I’m not someone who has ever desired a permanent attachment.

Every woman I’ve been with has been a transaction. My attention for her company. Jewelry, clothes, mind-blowing sex. Nothing deeper. Nothing permanent. But paying someone to have my child? That’s a transaction I won’t make.

Although, it might be the only option I’ve got. Because falling in love isn’t one of them. Love creates the kind of collateral your enemies won’t hesitate to use against you.

I learned that lesson young.

I was there when they brought my mother home.

I remember my father's blood-soaked shirt. The way his hands shook as he stood beside her, staring down at the woman he'd spent his entire life loving as though sheer force of will could bring her back.

I remember thinking that he looked smaller without her.

For weeks, he barely spoke. Then came the drinking. The sleepless nights. The moments when I'd find him sitting alone in the dark, staring at nothing, her wedding ring clenched so tightly in his fist that it left marks in his palm.

I watched my father become a ghost of the man he'd been. Grief slowly tore him apart piece by piece until there was almost nothing left.

And then, one day, he put a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

I was old enough to understand what he'd done.

Old enough to understand why.

And young enough for it to change me forever.

Because I learned something that day.

Love doesn't make you stronger.

It gives someone else the power to destroy you.

I won't give anyone that kind of ammunition.

"You know, there are many benefits to being married," John Marco says.

I watch the last ribbon of gold bleed out of the sky. "Name three."

I indulge him because I’m genuinely intrigued to see how my brother will sell this to me.

"One, you get the old capos off your back. They see a ring, they see a future.” I hear the soft creak of leather as he shifts on the couch. "Two, you'll always have a plus one when an invitation demands it. No more showing up to fundraisers alone and watching every socialite in the room try to claw her way onto your arm like you're a prize to take home."

I turn from the window. “And three?”

My brother grins. "There'll always be someone eager to polish your ego—and everything attached to it."

I lift an eyebrow but don’t dignify his comment with a response.

He grins and settles deeper into the couch, crossing his legs. "I'm just saying. When's the last time you had someone polish—"

"Enough."

"—your ego?"

"John Marco."

He raises his glass in surrender, but his grin doesn't falter.

He drains the last of his scotch and sets the glass down. "Right. I've depressed us both enough for one evening. Let's go to dinner. That new Italian place in the historic quarter has a lobster ravioli that’s supposed to be as good as sex. It’s a lie. Nothing is as good as sex. But I need to see what all the hoopla is about."

"I can't."

"Why?"

I remove a file from my desk. "I have something to take care of tonight."

I cross the room and drop the file on the couch beside him. He opens it, and I watch as his eyes move across the page.

"Who is Joseph Meadows?" he asks.

“An accountant who has been skimming from my casino to cover his gambling debts."

"How much has he taken?"

"Seven hundred thousand."

He closes the file and huffs. “The fool. What is your plan?”

"I'm handling it personally." I turn back to look at him. "And you're coming with me."

He lifts his brows. "I'm what?"

"You heard me."

He sits up. "You know I’m not good with that kind of thing. I'm the brains; you're the man with a gun."

"And yet."

"You know I hate the sight of blood."

I do know this about him. He’s such a pussy when it comes to blood.

But Joseph Meadows has been stealing my money, and he has to pay. It also sends a message to my capos that I can only be pushed so far before I react.

I don't enjoy what happens next, but I don't dread it either. I made peace with it the day I inherited this world. I ensure it stays standing by doing the ugly things that need doing, with nothing more than cold acceptance. The men who enjoy it get sloppy. The men who dread it get dead.

"Why do you need me there? You know I'm decorative."

"Because you'll be watching his face, reading him. Seven hundred thousand walked out of my casino while a Russian is buying my waterfront. I want to know if Joseph Meadows is a thief or an employee."

He holds my gaze and then curses under his breath. Like everyone else, he knows my word is final.

I open my office door.

"Fine." He stands and walks toward the door, then points at his shoes. "But if you get blood on these, you're buying me new ones."

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3

SUNNY

Final Notice. I stare at the number printed in bold red at the top of the page, then set it aside and pick up the next envelope. Water. Overdue. The one beneath it. Insurance. Overdue. And beneath that, more of Mom's medical bills demanding payment.

I pull my hair into a messy bun and blow out a long breath.

I'm in the back room of the house I share with my dad, and spread out in front of me is the irrefutable proof that we are drowning under a mountain of debt.

We shouldn't be. After all, my dad's accounting practice is wildly successful.

Well, it used to be.

Before his grief got on top of him.

Before he discovered gambling.

I pick up the bank letter and tear it open. My stomach drops when I read the amount owed on the mortgage. Three months behind. *Three*. I set it down, defeated and completely worn down.

Leaning my elbows on the desk in front of me, I pinch my nose and inhale a deep breath in an attempt to control another surge of overwhelm taking over me.

If we lose the house, we don't just lose four walls. We lose the last room my mom laughed in. We lose the last place she told us she loved us. We lose the smell of her that I swear still lingers in some of her favorite rooms.

Dad used to be meticulous with money. But then Mom got sick, and that version of him started to disappear.

When Mom died, he fell apart and turned to the casinos for solace.

Now six months later, all their savings are gone. That's why I've taken over paying the bills. But there is never enough to make ends meet. I don't make a lot of money at the coffee shop, and Dad has been taking on fewer and fewer clients.

To make matters worse, something is off with him lately, more than usual. He's been nervous and distracted, and when I ask him about it, he waves me off with a tired smile. If I press, he withdraws into himself.

Sometimes, I want to scream at him. I want to grab him by the collar and say *I lost her, too, Dad. I was there, too. You don't get to be the only one drowning.* But I don't. Because I know he's sick. And I know if he had the strength, he would try to save us.

I rub the nape of my neck. There's a knot there that never leaves.

As I stare at the insurance notice, trying to figure out which bill I can push another month without consequences, I hear the sudden noise of raised voices coming from my dad's home office.

Unease curls in my stomach as I listen because I can immediately hear the alarm in my dad's voice.

I push back from the desk and move toward the door. The voices are clearer now. Dad's voice is raised, and I can hear the fear in it.

Feeling uneasy in the pit of my stomach, I make my way down the hallway and into my dad's office in the front room.

Dad is standing behind his desk, his face drained of color, and his hands gripping the edge so hard his knuckles have gone white.

Two men stand across from him. Two men in tailored suits, with the same handsome face and bright blue eyes. *Twins*.

One has dark hair and a face that makes you look twice, and he stands with a stillness that tells me he doesn't need to move to be the most dangerous person in the room. He wears a black suit and a black shirt with no tie and looks immaculately lethal.

The other is leaning against the filing cabinet like he's at a cocktail party, one ankle crossed over the other. He's wearing a lavender suit and seems less intense than his twin brother, although something about his casualness makes me uneasy.

I don't know who they are, but I know they aren't here for anything good.

My eyes move back to Dad, and that is when I notice something that unsettles me far more than either of the strangers.

He's afraid.

I've seen my father frightened before. I've watched him face the possibility of losing Mom, watched him sit beside her hospital bed, trying to pretend he wasn't terrified. But this is different. Something is guarded in the way he's holding himself, as though he's trying very hard not to let these men see just how frightened he is.

I stay where I am, watching him without letting him know I'm here.

The man in black shifts his attention toward Dad, and I find myself holding my breath. There is nothing threatening in his expression, nothing I can point to, but every instinct I have tells me he is someone to be careful around.

I look at Dad again and feel a flicker of anger beneath my unease. Whatever this is, he has kept it from me. He has shut me out for months, and now I find two clearly very dangerous men standing in my home while he looks as though he’s about to pass out from fear.

I take one more step into the room.

My father sees me.

"Sunny, go back to your room." His voice is tight. I hear the tremor underneath, and it scares me more than anything else in this room. "Now."

But I don't move. "Dad, what's going on?"

"Nothing. It's a private meeting. Go back to your room, and close the door."

"It doesn't sound like nothing."

"Sunny." There’s a desperation in his eyes that I haven't seen since the night Mom died. "Please."

The man in the dark suit turns his head and looks at me, his eyes pinning me on the spot like a hand around my throat.

His eyes are a beautiful bright blue, but there is nothing warm in them.

He doesn't speak. But he doesn't need to for my heart to rattle against my ribcage.

My father has dealt with questionable people before. It comes with having powerful clients. But these men are not questionable.

They’re dangerous.

"Dad." I don’t take my eyes off them. "Tell me what's going on."

He looks at the man in the dark suit, but the man in the dark suit is looking at me.

A cold unease unfurls in my belly.

Because I know whatever my father has gotten himself into with these men, I just walked into the middle of it.

And from the way the man in the dark suit is looking at me, I have a feeling I'm not walking out of it anytime soon.

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4

DANTE

Well, things just got interesting.

The woman standing in the doorway of her father's office is quite something. Big eyes. Sweet face. Plush lips a man would never get tired of tasting. She's wearing sweatpants and a stained T-shirt, her hair piled on top of her head, and she … well, she’s fucking gorgeous.

Which is inconvenient, given I came here to put a bullet in her father's head.

I let my eyes linger on her big blue eyes.

"Dad, tell me what's going on," she pleads. And damn if I don’t like the sound of this beauty pleading.

Joseph Meadows looks at me with the desperate eyes of a man who knows exactly how this night was supposed to end.

"This is a private matter, sweetheart," he says. "Please. Just go back to your room."

But the woman doesn't move. Her eyes move between her father and me, and I watch her take in the scene and try to assess what is happening.

She steps further into the room and positions herself closer to her father. She's afraid, but she's not leaving, and I can’t help but admire how she holds back her fear.

Again, this is inconvenient.

Because now I have a witness.

And a witness is either collateral damage or leverage.

"Mr. Meadows," I say. "Introduce us."

Joseph swallows. "This is my daughter. Sunny. She has nothing to do with this. She doesn't know anything about any of this."

"Sunny." I say her name slowly. "Your father has been stealing from me."

Her big eyes snap to mine. "Excuse me?"

"Over the past two months, your father has siphoned seven hundred thousand dollars from my casino's operating accounts into accounts that don't belong to me." I keep my voice even. "Money that doesn't belong to him. Money that belongs to me."

Joseph's face has drained to gray, and his hands are shaking. He can't bring himself to look at his daughter because he's ashamed. If there were an empathetic bone in my body, I'd feel sorry for him.

Unfortunately, for him, I'm not an empathetic kind of guy.

"Dad." Sunny's voice is softer. "Is this true?"

Joseph closes his eyes. "Sunny, please, go to your room, and let me handle this."

"Is it true?" she presses.

His eyes are watery when he opens them to look at her. "I was going to pay it all back."

I watch the hurt cross Sunny's face. She looks tired. The kind of tired that burrows deep into your bones when the people you love keep letting you down.

She turns to me. "How much does he still owe you?"

"All of it. He gambled it, lost it."

She swallows. Behind those big eyes, she's trying to figure out a way to make this better. "So what do you want?"

She's direct, and I like it. No tears, no begging, no attempt to negotiate. She gets straight to the point. She's terrified, but she won't give me the satisfaction of seeing it.

This woman has spunk.

"I think you already know what I want, Miss Meadows."

Her brow creases. "We don't have any money."

"I'm not here for money."

The words hang in the air between us, then I see the moment she understands. Her lips part with a silent gasp, but her eyes remain firmly on me.

"You're here to kill him," she says.

Joseph makes a small, broken sound behind her.

"Yes," I say, because I don't see the point in lying.

"And now I've walked in and seen your face."

"Yes."

"So, I'm a problem."

"You're a complication."

She stares at me. And then she does something I genuinely don’t expect.

She laughs.

It's short and harsh and has nothing pleasant in it.

"A complication. That's great. That's really fucking great. The cherry on top of a shit sundae." She runs both hands over her face and blows out a breath. "Okay. So what happens now? You kill us both? Shoot us and drive off, job well done?"

Okay, who is this woman?

"I haven't decided yet."

"Well, take your time. We'll wait," she snaps.

Her sarcasm is so bone-dry that it catches me off-guard. Behind me, John Marco straightens because this little dynamite has just piqued his interest too.

Usually, this kind of disrespect would end with bloody consequences.

But the way she's standing there, all fury and defiance in her T-shirt and yoga pants, with big eyes burning with contempt while her hands shake at her sides ... damn, she’s got my attention.

I think she’s just reached the end of her tether. It’s written all over her face. This is the final straw.

Which only interests me more.

My eyes linger too long on her face, and her eyes narrow at me. A flush crawls up her neck, and my body appears to like that too because my cock stirs and I have a rampant desire to run my lips up her throat to her jaw.

"What do you plan to do with us?" she asks, her chin lifting a little higher.

Before I can answer, John Marco clears his throat behind me.

"I know what you *should* do with her," he says. "That little matter of you appeasing the capos."

I know exactly what he's suggesting.

No.

The refusal is instant and absolute, and very bone-deep.

"It's a time-sensitive matter," he reminds me, pushing off the filing cabinet. "And you're standing in a room with a very elegant solution."

"Choose your next words carefully."

"I've chosen these ones very carefully." He smiles at Sunny, who is looking between us like we've switched languages. "Two birds, brother. One stone."

I look at her.

And instead of dismissing it as I should, I take the proposition apart in my head.

The capos won't stop insisting their don take a wife and produce an heir. Eventually, I will run out of time and need to choose a wife quickly. And she will be a connected option, the niece or daughter of someone, a woman raised for it. Someone who will tell me what I want to hear, someone who wants to please me.

Or I could consider this woman in front of me. With her fiery eyes, plush lips, and a murderous glare that makes me want to push all her buttons just so I can see what she does next.

What John Marco is proposing is an efficient solution.

I'm still considering it, and that tells me the decision is already made. Because I know an opportunity when I see it.

I need someone who is strong. And the firecracker who is looking at me as if she could make me spontaneously combust through sheer will alone would be ideal.

I look at Sunny and realize I'm nodding.

John Marco presses. "You need a wife, Dante. Take her and put a ring on it."

Sunny blinks. "I'm sorry. You need a what?"

She looks at John Marco, then back at me.

I hold her gaze. “A wife, Miss Meadows.”

She looks confused. “And what does that have to do with me?”

“It looks like you’re it,” I say.

She scoffs. "Is that some kind of sick joke?"

"I assure you, Miss Meadows, this is no joke."

“Please, Mr. Di Zaro, please leave my daughter out of it,” Joseph begs. “This is my debt. My mistake. Sunny is a good girl. She’s not involved.”

“You should have thought about that before you stole from me.”

“I’m begging you. Do what you will with me. I deserve it. But let her go. She won’t say anything, will you, Sunny?”

“Dad, what are you saying? Let’s all just calm down.”

I lift my brows. She just entered the negotiation phase, and I can’t help but admire her optimism that this is somehow going to work out in their favor.

“I’m sure we can come to a reasonable conclusion,” she says.

“We have,” I say. “You’re going to be my wife.”

The more I look at her, the more the idea makes sense. With her sharp mouth, her refusal to cower, and her complete disinterest in impressing me, the plan clicks into place.

A connected family would give me a wife who worships me. Who fears me. Who bends every time I enter a room.

This woman just mouthed off to me while I hold her father's life in my hands.

She would convince no one that she married me for power.

Which means everyone would believe she married me for something else.

True love. Which is what I want my capos to believe.

"You want me to marry you," Sunny says, and her voice is flat with disbelief. "A complete stranger."

"Yes."

"A complete stranger who just told me he came here to murder my father."

"I appreciate the recap, but yes."

Her hands ball into fists at her sides, and I fucking like it.

"You're insane," she mutters. "I am not marrying you.”

“Is that a fact?”

She storms over to me and has to tilt her head back to maintain eye contact because I tower over her. This close, I can see that the fury in her eyes has completely eclipsed any fear she was feeling.

Christ, if she could harness all this rage and passion, she’d be unstoppable. All five-foot-two of her.

She glares up at me. “I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on Earth and the survival of the human race depended on it."

"That seems excessive."

Anyone else, and I would end the disrespect with a bullet. Or at the very least, with my hands around their throat. But verbal sparring with this firecracker is the most fun I've had in months. *Hell, years.*

"Excessive?" Her voice pitches up. "You broke into our house—"

"The door was open."

"You threatened my father—"

"Your father stole from me."

"And now you think you can just, what? Claim me? Like I'm some kind of payment? Like I'm property you can take because someone owes you money?"

"That is exactly what I think," I say.

She looks at me, dumbfounded. "You can't be serious."

"I am *deadly* serious," I say, emphasizing the word deadly. I take a step closer. "You need to understand that I am offering you and your father a get-out-of-jail card. You marry me, and your father lives. His debt disappears. And all it costs is a ring on your finger."

"All it costs." She repeats the words back to me with so much venom I can taste it. "Do you actually hear the words coming out of your mouth right now?"

"I hear them fine. You seem to be the one struggling."

"Oh, I'm not struggling. I'm very clear on what's happening here. A man on a power trip is trying to force me into a marriage I don't want as payment for a crime I didn't commit. That's not a deal. That's…" She searches for the word.

"An opportunity?" I offer.

"A hostage situation."

"Semantics."

"It's not semantics. It's a felony."

She's magnificent. The anger. The sharp tongue. The refusal to cower even though her pulse is visible at the base of her throat, and her hands haven't stopped shaking since she walked into this room.

I've met men twice her size who couldn't hold eye contact with me for more than three seconds. She hasn't looked away once.

"I'll give you a moment to think about it," I say.

"I don't need a moment. The answer is no."

"Then your father dies tonight."

The words have the exact effect on her that I intended.

She flinches and steps back. “You wouldn’t…”

I reach into my jacket and pull out my gun. The moment she sees it, her eyes widen and all the spark drains from her. Shit just got real, and she realizes I’m not here to threaten—I’m here to take payment.

I walk around the desk and press the barrel to Joseph Meadows' temple.

Joseph stumbles backward. "Please, Mr. Di Zaro, not in front of my daughter."

"*No!* Get away from him!" Sunny cries with raw, animal terror. If she didn’t believe I was going to do it before, she believes it now, and it changes everything in her. "Please. Please don't hurt him. He's all I have."

I look at her. At the tears she's fighting. At the way she's straining toward her father with every muscle in her body.

"Then say yes," I tell her.

"You can't do this," she sobs.

"I can, and I am. Say yes."

Her glare is murdering me a hundred times over, and dammit, it feels nice.

"If I say yes," she says, her voice raw with fear, "you let him go. You clear his debt. All of it. And you never come near him again."

"You're in no position to make demands, Miss Meadows."

She clenches her teeth, trying to control her emotions as she stares me down.

"Okay, I'll do it," she says. "Just don't hurt him."

"Good to see you've come to your senses."

"You didn't give me much of a choice."

"We all have choices, Miss Meadows," I say. "You marry me, and his debt is cleared."

She fights back her tears, and she’ll do whatever it takes to keep them from falling in front of me. I can see the determination in her glittering eyes.

"Is that a promise?" she asks.

“I am a man of my word.”

“Excuse me if I don’t put much stock in your integrity right now.”

God, I like this firecracker.

"You'll have the paperwork before the wedding," I say.

She bites her lower lip and nods. “Okay,” she says softly. “I will marry you.”

I hold her gaze for a long moment, then lower the gun and step away from her father. "Then we have a deal."

Joseph collapses forward over his desk. Sunny moves to him immediately, places her hands on his back, and brings her mouth close to his ear to whisper something I can't hear. Something comforting meant only for him.

When she straightens, she lets her tears spill silently down her cheeks.

"I'll marry you," she says. "But I want you to know something."

"What's that?"

"I will never forgive you for this."

I return my gun to my jacket. "I don't need your forgiveness, Miss Meadows. I need your hand."

She holds my gaze, and the hatred in her eyes is so raw and real I can almost taste it.

"You'll have it," she says. "And I hope it makes you miserable."

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5

SUNNY

He gives me two minutes to pack my entire life into one bag before I'm hustled into the back of a shiny black car and whisked off to God knows where.

The car pulls away from the curb, and I watch my father's house shrink in the side mirror until it's gone.

My hands shake, and I press my palms flat against my knees.

I don’t think these monsters are going to kill me. Not tonight anyway. But it doesn’t mean they won’t hurt me in other ways.

The silence in the car is suffocating. I'm pressed between the twins, shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh, and the heat coming off Dante's body is ridiculous. He runs hot. Which makes sense considering he comes straight from hell.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?" I ask.

I’m not just afraid. I’m terrified of this man. But I won’t give him the satisfaction of seeing it. I might have lost control of what’s happening to me, but I can control what I show him. I’m not going to give him any sign of fear because he’ll probably get off on it.

"Home," Dante says without looking at me.

"Your home?"

"*Our* home.” He turns his head to look at me, and I hate the victory in his eyes and the dark, triumphant tone of his voice. Both make me want to reach beneath his suit jacket and shoot him with his own gun.

“Because nothing says *home* like being taken from your house by a stranger with a gun,” I murmur.

He ignores me, staring straight ahead with that infuriatingly calm expression that makes me want to scream.

For two blocks, I don’t say anything. But the silence is making everything so much worse, and I can’t stand it. I’m sure they can hear my heart beating like a wild drum as we travel in silence.

Although, my fear starts to slide because this lunatic wants me to be his wife, so the chances of me dying tonight are slim.

Keeping my eyes trained ahead, I say, "I don't even know you.”

"You know my name."

"I know the name of the man who delivers my mail, and I have no interest in marrying him either."

"Your father didn’t steal seven hundred thousand dollars from your mailman."

"No, but he probably wouldn’t threaten him with a gun if he did."

"I didn't threaten your father," he says. "I gave him a choice."

"A choice between his daughter and a bullet isn't a choice. It's coercion."

"It's leverage."

"It's criminal."

"You keep using that word."

"Because it keeps applying."

Beside me, John Marco makes a noise that is close to a chuckle.

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Dante gives him a look that would burn most men to the ground. But John Marco simply gives him a dazzling smile in return, and I suspect he is the only person on Earth who is not afraid of this devil sitting next to me, his leg brushing against mine.

I turn to the window because if I keep looking at either of them, I'm going to scream cry, or say something that will get me killed. Wife or no wife.

Outside, the city slides past in a blur. City lights, traffic, and people on sidewalks going to dinners, bars, and apartments, getting on with life while I’m on my way to the scary unknown.

My thoughts return to my dad, and my stomach turns.

I know his guilt will be eating away at him, and my heart aches for him and for what he will be going through. Somehow, it makes me feel stronger and more determined to survive this.

The last thing I saw before the door closed was my father mouthing, *I'm sorry*.

I play with Mom’s locket around my neck. "How long?"

"How long what?" Dante asks.

"This arrangement. Is there an expiration date, or is it a life sentence?"

"We'll discuss the terms when we arrive."

"I'd like to discuss them now."

"And I'd like silence. It seems neither of us is getting what we want tonight."

I turn back to the window.

"For the record," I say. "I meant what I said back there. I will never forgive you for this."

"Noted."

"And I will make your life difficult."

"I don't doubt it."

"Every single day."

"I look forward to it."

I glance at him. He's staring straight ahead, but a ghost of a smile plays on his lips.

He's enjoying this. *The psycho fuck.*

John Marco leans forward slightly and peers around me at Dante.

"She's going to eat you alive, you know," he says.

Dante is unperturbed. "Perhaps."

John Marco settles back in his seat with a satisfied sigh.

"Dante Di Zaro is engaged." He lifts an imaginary glass. "Congratulations, scoundrel. May God have mercy on you both."

Mercy.

I press my hand flat over Mom's locket and watch the city lights blur past the windows.

I’m going to need it.

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6

SUNNY

The car pulls up to the curb, and Dante climbs out. Then my kidnapper-fiancé offers me his hand.

I look at the hand and ignore it, climbing out of the seat on my own.

If the snub bothers him, he doesn't show it. He just reaches back into the car, picks up my bag, and slings it over his shoulder.

I stand on the sidewalk and stare up at the building in front of me.

It goes up and up and keeps going, glass and black steel soaring into the night sky. Gold light pours out from the entrance and washes the sidewalk. Thirty feet above the doors, FORTUNE lights up the night in bright gold letters, and its glow stains the sky.

Around us, the street hums with activity. A line of town cars idles at the curb. Valets in gold-trimmed vests jog between them. A bachelorette party spills out of a limo in a shriek of sequins and perfume.

I've driven past this building my entire life, but I have never once been inside it.

Now it’s home.

I gaze up at it. "You live here?"

“I don’t just live here, Sunny. I own it.”

“All of it?” I try not to sound impressed, but this is a very impressive building.

“All of it,” he replies, leading me off the street and into the lobby of the casino’s plaza.

The moment we step inside, the plaza hits me all at once. Golden light is everywhere, gleaming off the marble and spinning through the chandeliers above us. It’s loud with all the bells and whistles of a popular casino.

People are everywhere, enjoying their evening.

Dante leads me toward a private elevator, presses the button, and the doors open immediately.

We ride in silence, me dwarfed by Dante and John Marco. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, and I suddenly feel very small and vulnerable next to them.

But it’s quickly forgotten when the elevator doors open, and I step into Dante Di Zaro’s penthouse.

Because wow.

It is stunning. I take it all in with silent awe. The dark polished floors. The floor-to-ceiling windows framing the view of the glittering city below.

I want to hate it.

Because I hate Dante and this ridiculous situation.

But this … this place is absolutely gorgeous.

The furniture is sleek and modern. Everything has sharp lines, cool surfaces, and muted tones of black, amber, and gold.

But it feels … empty. There is no love here. No laughter. No joy. *No freedom.*

I wonder what kind of man lives like this. Surrounded by millions of dollars' worth of cold perfection and not a trace of warmth anywhere.

A psychopath. That’s who. A man who doesn’t need warmth and probably sleeps in a coffin. *Or hangs upside down from a roof somewhere.*

John Marco checks his phone, and whatever he sees makes his face light up. "Well, as much as I would love to stay and witness the thrilling next chapter of this love story—"

"It's not a love story," Dante and I both say at the same time.

We look at each other. I refuse to look away. As does he.

John Marco clears his throat, and Dante’s gaze finally slides to him.

"As I was saying, I have to leave you two lovebirds to your own devices. I have a date tonight, and I have no intention of keeping him

waiting." He steps into the elevator. "Dante, try not to be a complete nightmare. And, Sunny … good luck."

He presses the elevator button, the doors close, and he's gone.

Leaving me alone with *him*.

The evil twin.

Dante walks to the bar against the far wall and pours himself a drink.

"Your room is down the hall, third door on the left," he says, his back still to me.

“And your room?” I ask, praying it’s nowhere near mine.

“Next door to it,” he says.

Of course it is.

Meaning there will only be six inches of drywall between me and this lunatic when I’m asleep.

"The kitchen is through there." He gestures without turning. "Help yourself to whatever you want. The gym is on the floor below. The pool is beside it."

He turns and leans against the bar, glass of scotch in hand. The city glows behind him, and in the dim light he looks infuriatingly handsome.

"You have free rein of the entire penthouse," he continues. "Every room. Every floor. No restrictions."

I wait. Because there is always a *but*.

"Except one."

And there it is.

"The room in the far-left corner." His eyes find mine. "It stays locked. You don't go near it. You don't try the door. You don't ask about it."

"What's in it?"

"What did I just say?"

"You said don't ask about it. But look at me, I'm asking about it."

"And I'm telling you that room is not your concern."

I wrap my arms around myself. "So, you're giving me free rein of the penthouse except the one room you're specifically forbidding me from entering. Do you realize how that sounds?"

"Like a reasonable boundary."

"Like a setup."

He pauses with his glass halfway to his lips. "And how did you come to that conclusion?"

"You drew attention to it, which piqued my curiosity. Human nature makes us want what we can’t have. You set me up."

His bright blue eyes rake over me with a heat so raw it singes my skin and sends a trail of fire down my throat and chest, coiling low in my stomach.

“Careful, Sunny. It sounds like you like how forbidden tastes.”

He cocks his eyebrow and … oh boy. That voice. That smoldering handsomeness.

Wait … is this psychopath flirting with me? In the middle of this fucking kidnapping.

Oh, the asshole.

"Is that going to be a problem?" he asks finally, taking a sip from his glass.

I cross my arms. “I guess we’ll find out.”

He sets his glass down. "Miss Meadows. Stay out of the room."

“Fine,” I say.

I am absolutely getting into that room.

Because I know that if he doesn’t want me to see it, it means he is hiding something. And I have a feeling whatever it is will tell me everything I need to know about this man.

“If this arrangement is going to work," he says, "then I need to know you understand the rules."

"The rules?"

"When we're in public, you will present yourself as my wife. Not my hostage. Not my prisoner. *My wife*. That means you smile, you stand beside me, and you give every person in the room the impression that you choose to be there."

"That's a lot of acting."

"And there will be no other men."

I blink. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. No dates. No drinks. No flirtations. If a man puts his hand on the small of your back at a party, you step away. If one of them starts to believe you're interested, you correct him." His voice stays level, but his expression does something else entirely. It turns possessive. "You will not so much as smile at another man in a way that could be mistaken for an invitation."

"That is all very specific."

"My capos need to believe my wife is completely devoted to me. One sighting of you laughing with the wrong man in the wrong bar and the entire arrangement collapses. So no, Miss Meadows. No other men. Or there will be consequences."

Consequences. The way he says it sends a shiver through me.

Although, the explanation makes sense. It's cold and strategic and exactly the kind of logic this man deals in.

But for one unnerving second, I get the distinct impression that if some poor man did put his hand on the small of my back, the consequences wouldn't be mine.

"And in private?" I ask.

"In private, you can think whatever you want about me. But you follow the rules of this house. You don't leave the penthouse unless you ask me first, and I can arrange a security detail. You don't discuss our arrangement with anyone, and you don't disobey me."

I stare at him. "Disobey you?"

Oh boy, I hate this man.

"Yes."

Because I'm sure he isn't going to kill me tonight, I let my resentment get the better of me.

Using my fingers, I hold an imaginary phone to my ear. "Hey, Dante? Yeah, it's 1952 calling. They want their misogyny back."

His jaw tightens.

"Are you finished?" he asks.

"No. How long do I have to endure this arrangement?"

"Twelve months," he says.

"That is a very long time."

"Seven hundred thousand is a lot of money," he says. "Think of it as paying me back in monthly installments."

He pushes off the counter and walks toward me. My heart rate picks up, but I stand my ground and don't step back. He stops close enough that I have to tip my chin up to meet his gaze because he towers over me.

"I'm going to give you an opportunity," he says. "Right here, right now. Say whatever you need to say. Get it out. Every insult, every complaint, every colorful opinion you've been holding on to since I walked into your father's office. Say it now. Because after tonight, we move forward. If this is going to work, I need to know you can fall in line when it matters."

“Fall in line?”

“You heard me.”

This close, I can see the small scar near his left eyebrow that I didn’t notice before.

“Fine,” I say. “You want me to get it all out? Here it is. You are a bully. A thug in an expensive suit who thinks his power gives him the right to treat people however the hell he likes. You put a gun to my father’s head and brought me here to this soulless penthouse, where you expect me to play house like I’m a doll in a dollhouse. But I’m not a doll. I’m a human being with feelings. And while I’m sure this is a foreign concept to you, this is a hell of a lot for me to take in right now.”

He doesn’t move. In fact, he doesn’t react at all. He is completely expressionless, which makes everything so much worse.

“So no,” I continue, “I will not fall in line. But I will attend your events. I will wear your ring. I will do what I agreed to do because I love my father, and he is the only reason I’m standing here right now. But I will not pretend to be happy about it. And I will not pretend that you are anything other than what you are.”

“Which is?”

“A man who has to buy a wife because no one in their right mind would choose to marry him.”

He holds my gaze for a long time. The air between us is thick, and my pulse is dancing wildly in my neck. The anger is hot and ferocious in my chest, but it’s also tangled up with something else. Something that has to do with how close he’s standing, the way his eyes keep dropping to my mouth, and the stupid, traitorous warmth spreading through my body.

“You have a sharp tongue,” he says.

“And you have a gun. Looks like we’ve both got our weapons.”

I can almost see the steam coming out of his ears.

I annoy and intrigue him at the same time.

I decide to use it to my advantage.

“Counterproposal,” I say.

“And if I don’t agree?”

“Then I’ll be the most inconvenient wife in the history of forced marriages, and trust me when I tell you, I have the stamina for it.”

His gaze roams my face. His expression remains neutral. “Fine, what is your counterproposal?”

"One. You said my father’s debt is cleared. I want that in writing before we marry."

"Already agreed to."

"I'm reminding you."

"I don’t need reminding."

"Two. I want to be able to contact my father. You took my phone. But I want the ability to call him whenever I want."

"You'll get a phone. But the phone will be monitored."

"Monitored?"

"For your safety."

"For your control, you mean."

"Both."

I hate that he's honest about it. It's harder to fight someone who doesn't pretend to be decent.

"Three. I am not sharing a bed with you. You can have my fake adoration in public, but once we’re home, all falsities stop."

His gaze drops to my mouth for half a second. Then slowly makes its way back up my face.

"Agreed," he says. His voice is a fraction lower than it was a moment ago.

“And while you wear a wedding ring, you don’t touch anyone else either.”

One perfect dark eyebrow shoots up. “Is that jealousy, Miss Meadows?”

“No, it is a very clear expectation that I won’t be made a fool of any more than I am now.”

“You have my word. There will be no other women.”

"Four. I get to keep working."

His eyebrows lift. "Working?"

"I have a job at a coffee shop, and I don’t want to give it up just because of this."

"You want to continue working at a coffee shop."

"Is there something wrong with working at a coffee shop?"

"You're about to become the wife of one of the wealthiest men in this city."

"And I'd like to maintain the one thread of normalcy I have left, if it's all the same to you."

Silence stretches between us as he considers it, and I become aware that we've moved closer during this conversation.

“No,” he says, looking down at me. “And I swear to God, if 1952 calls again to tell me I’m a chauvinist pig, I might actually lose my mind.”

“You’ve already lost your mind. Why can’t I return to the coffee shop?”

“Because it will leave you exposed to my enemies.” His voice lowers. “Having a wife gives them something to use against me.”

It doesn’t surprise me that this man has enemies.

Boy, he’s just the gift that keeps on giving.

“That’s unfair,” I say.

“Life is unfair, Miss Meadows.”

I have to bite my tongue.

“Any more demands?” he asks wearily.

“Yes.” I hold out my hand. “We shake on the deal, and after that, you don’t touch me. Ever.”

His gaze drops to my hand before he reaches for it. His palm is warm against mine, his skin rougher than I’d expect from a man who looks so immaculate. His fingers close around my smaller hand, long and strong enough to completely envelop it, and a strange buzz tingles beneath my skin.

It lasts only a second, but I feel it all the way to my fingertips.

His eyes darken as he looks at me, and I’m suddenly far too aware of how close we’re standing.

“I won’t touch you.” He uses my hand to pull me closer, bending his head until his lips brush the curve of my ear. The fine hairs along my neck stir in his breath. “Unless you ask me to.”

Something in the way he says it sends another little shiver through me, but I refuse to let him see it. I pull my hand back and step away from him.

“Good, because that will never happen,” I say, my voice steadier than I feel. “Then we have a deal.”

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7

DANTE

The door to my bedroom clicks shut behind me, and I walk to the windows, ripping off my tie and undoing the top button of my shirt as I stare out at the skyline.

What the fuck have I done?

Oh, I know exactly what I've done. I've landed myself a bride.

And now she's in my home.

In my space.

A fiancée with wild eyes, a smart mouth, and lips I want to ruin.

A fiancée who has every intention of making my life hell.

I turn from the window and walk toward the bathroom, pulling my shirt over my head and tossing it onto the bed as I pass.

My gut tells me Sunny isn't the solution I think she will be.

She's more like a fucking complication than anything.

A complication with luscious curves, plush lips, and a raw, unfiltered wildfire burning in her big blue eyes.

I'm a hot-blooded man. I'm not as inhuman as my men and associates think I am.

I lust. I crave. I want. I need.

And right now, my body is telling me I need a lot of things.

Like those pillowy lips wrapped around my cock.

Like sinking into her sweet pussy and losing myself in fucking her.

I run a frustrated hand through my hair.

I am usually more in control than this.

If I need to come, I use my hand in the shower or in my bed until the urge is gone.

If I need the touch of a woman, I usually find one in my casino or at one of the exclusive bars and clubs I belong to, and spend the night making us both moan.

But it’s been weeks. Hell, more likely months.

I remove the rest of my clothes and step into the shower. My cock is already hard, but I refuse to pay attention to it. I’m not about to make myself come while thinking about the woman who will soon be my wife, but who I have no intention of becoming attached to.

I’ve left her alone to think about what we’ve just discussed.

Am I worried she’ll run?

No, she knows what is at stake. Running will only make things worse for her and her father.

Which she despises me for.

But Sunny Meadows can hate me all she likes. She can fight me and insult me and call me every name she can think of.

She will wear my ring. She'll stand at my side. And when my capos look at us, they'll see exactly what I need them to see.

My wife.

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8

SUNNY

Just like that, our conversation is over, and he’s gone, leaving me standing in the middle of his beautiful penthouse wondering how much life just flipped on its ass in the last two hours.

I turn in a slow circle to take in my surroundings without Dante's suffocating presence warping every molecule of air around him.

No photos on the walls. No books on the coffee table. No shoes by the door. No half-drunk mug of coffee left on the counter. No evidence whatsoever that a living, breathing human inhabits this space.

My gaze drifts to the glass of scotch he left sitting on the kitchen counter across the room.

I walk over and pick it up. There is still scotch left in the bottom of the tumbler.

I smell it, and my nose wrinkles. It smells like smoke and something sharp, with a darkly sweet undertone. Usually, I’m not a big drinker, but tonight seems like a good night to take it up.

I take a sip, and it hits my tongue like liquid fire, sliding down my throat in a trail of smoke and flames.

I cough, and my eyes water as my throat burns. But the moment it hits my chest, I feel the delicious warmth spread through me and my nerves start to loosen.

I take another sip. And then another.

My muscles start to relax, which is a godsend because they've been clenched tight since Dante Di Zaro stepped into my life and blew it up.

The image of him holding a gun to my father's head hits me, and I grimace.

Oh, Dad. What have you done?

Seven hundred thousand dollars.

Stolen from a soulless man who probably made that in the last five minutes.

And now I'm paying for it.

I take another sip of scotch. I'm getting used to the burn. Or maybe I'm just going numb.

I eye the elevator and briefly consider fleeing. But it would be a stupid idea. Dante would find me before I even got to my father.

And I don't know who Dante Di Zaro is, but I get the feeling he plays to win. It's why he used the gun to get what he wanted tonight.

Besides, I've fled a situation before, and I know firsthand that it doesn't always make you feel safe. I still look over my shoulder in public. Still wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, wondering if he will find me and hurt me again.

At least the nightmare from my past would have to get through this lunatic to hurt me again.

And it's fucked up how that thought makes me feel safer than I have felt for a very long time.

Not that I'm the same woman I was when I fled the monster fifteen months ago. My fear no longer comes with obedience. I will not make myself small for another man in the hope he will leave me alone.

I did everything right last time, and it still didn't help me. This time I won't be so accommodating.

I drain the last of the scotch. The warmth has settled into my bloodstream, softening the edges just enough for my hands to stop shaking and for me to feel less stabby toward my fiancé.

I decide to get some sleep because maybe things will look better tomorrow.

Carrying my bag of belongings, I make my way down the hallway to the bedroom Dante said was mine, then push the door open.

The room is beautiful, with a king-sized bed dressed in crisp white linen and wall sconces casting a warm glow across the room.

An en suite bathroom is visible through an open door, with a walk-in closet to the left of it. It feels like I've entered a five-star hotel suite.

It's the nicest room I've ever been in.

I walk in, close the door behind me, and lock it.

Not that a lock would keep Dante out if he wanted in.

Because let's face it, if he wanted in this room, he'd get in.

Not that I think he would. Dante looks at me like I'm a problem to solve, rather than a woman he wants to touch.

Dumping my bags on the floor, I sit on the edge of the bed and look around the room for any trace of personality, anything that suggests someone has stayed here before. A forgotten earring. A book on the nightstand. A hair tie accidentally dropped on the carpet.

But there is nothing. This room is as empty and void of life as the rest of the penthouse.

He probably doesn't do a lot of sleepovers.

After changing into a T-shirt and a pair of yoga pants from my bag, I pull back the bed covers and slide in. The sheets are Egyptian cotton and so damn soft I let out a sigh.

It's like being held by a cloud. But the cold truth seeps in because I am not being held by a cloud. I'm being held by an unhinged psychopath who is probably in his room, planning all the evil things he is going to do tomorrow.

Thankfully, the scotch has made me sleepy, and I drift off almost immediately.

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9

DANTE

Joseph Meadows cries in the back seat of my car. He's not crying loudly. We passed *loud* three hours ago when Deno put him in a chair, and I explained what happens next to a man who takes from Dante Di Zaro. Now it's an empty cry. The kind that's given up.

I don't look at him, I watch the exit signs on the highway out of the city.

His daughter is asleep in my penthouse.

Tonight, Sunny looked at me across the kitchen like she would put a knife in me if she could reach the block, and I'm not going to lie, I like her more for that than I've liked anyone in a long time.

Which is a problem.

But that's a problem for tomorrow.

Tonight is for her father.

"Where are you taking me?" he asks shakily.

"Somewhere you can't run away from and steal another seven hundred thousand dollars," I say.

"I wouldn't run. I swear to God. I'm done with gambling."

"I'm taking the opportunity away from you."

He's quiet for a moment. "Please don't hurt my daughter. Do what you will to me, but Sunny is a good girl. Tell me what you want me to do, and I will do it. Just … don't hurt her."

I turn to look at him. "You're not in any position to ask anything of me."

We reach our destination thirty minutes later, and Deno pulls down the private road. The large gate opens, then closes behind us as we pull up to our destination.

I've brought people here before. This is the bottom of the barrel.

Deno kills the engine.

"Out," I say to Joseph.

He can barely stand. He knows what's coming next.

Two men wait on the steps for us. As we reach them, I nod to them, and they take his phone, his belt, and anything else he could use to escape what's coming next.

"Does Sunny know what's about to happen to me?" Joseph asks.

"She'll know what I want her to know," I say.

He looks defeated, his eyes full of remorse.

"Please, bury me next to my wife," he says softly.

I don't reply.

The men let him inside, and I follow.

Ten minutes later, I leave.

It's done.

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10

SUNNY

There's a man in the penthouse.

At first, I think I’m hallucinating because I didn’t get much sleep last night and I’m probably delirious.

He appears as I stand in the kitchen, still dressed in the yoga pants I slept in, with a piece of toast halfway to my mouth and jam on my fingers.

He’s tall, trim, and dressed immaculately in a charcoal suit. He’s somewhere in his mid-fifties with silver-streaked hair and impeccable grooming.

We stare at each other across the room.

Honestly, if this is the part where he’s come to kill me, I’m too fucking tired to care.

"You must be Miss Meadows,” he says in a clipped British accent.

"The one and only," I say. “And you would be…?”

"Charles Harrington. I manage Mr. Di Zaro's household and personal affairs." His eyes travel from my hair to my bare feet and back up. "The others will be here soon."

“Others?”

He sets a leather folio on the dining table and unclips a pen from his breast pocket. "Mr. Di Zaro has requested a complete wardrobe. Day wear, evening wear, items for formal events, others for casual. Shoes, accessories, outerwear. I’ve taken the liberty of passing on certain necessities to your

personal shopper, and she will have all the items sent over this afternoon. So, it’s just your seamstress who will be joining us this morning."

"A complete wardrobe?" I put down my toast and wipe the crumbs from my fingers on my yoga pants. “For me?”

"Unless there's another future Mrs. Di Zaro behind the sofa, yes, you."

I really, really wish there was another Mrs. Di Zaro hiding behind the sofa.

"I don't need a designer wardrobe,” I say. “I'm a jeans and boots girl."

"And it’s charming, I’m sure." His face is so straight I can't tell if he's mocking me. “But Mr. Di Zaro has certain expectations.”

“Is that right? Well…” I pick up my toast and take a savage bite out of it. “If Mr. Di Zaro wants to waste his money on clothes I’ll never wear, then he can go right ahead.”

“Of course.” He smiles despite the fact that I’m talking with my mouth full, which I get the feeling would horrify him. “But first, we need to organize the dress.”

“The dress?” I ask.

“Yes, your bridal gown.”

I stop chewing to stare at him.

“For the wedding. You and Mr. Di Zaro. Getting married. Why are you looking at me like I’m speaking a different language?”

I swallow the toast despite my throat suddenly becoming dry.

“When is the wedding?”

“Tonight, of course.”

I cough. “Tonight?”

I drop my toast onto the plate.

“He can’t be serious,” I whisper with disbelief.

"I assure you, Mr. Di Zaro is many things. But *unserious* is not among them."

I let out a breath as my brain scrambles to make sense of what is about to happen.

Maybe Charles got it wrong.

“Are you sure he meant tonight?"

Charles looks miffed that I would even suggest he might’ve gotten it wrong. “As the sky is blue, Miss Meadows.”

“But how is that even possible?”

“With me, Miss Meadows. I make that possible.”

I turn toward the kitchen counter. “Oh God, how is this my life? It’s too quick. And what about my father—”

“Miss Meadows—”

“I don’t even know where he is—"

"Miss Meadows."

I press my palms flat on the counter and take a deep breath.

I pick up the water and drink it all.

"Miss Meadows."

"Sunny," I say. "You should probably call me Sunny."

"Miss Meadows. There is much to do.”

“And I don’t want to do any of it. He knows that. I should demand more time or something. Surely he can’t be serious about marrying me tonight.” I turn to look at him. “Charles, what do I do?”

He can see I am out of my depth and seems to take pity on me.

“May I offer you one piece of advice, Miss Meadows?"

"Please," I say desperately.

"Don't try to win the battle. You'll exhaust yourself fighting skirmishes that don't matter. Aim higher." His eyes find mine, and they’re kind. "Win the war."

“And how do I do that?” I ask.

“You start with a really good dress.”

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11

SUNNY

The woman blows into the penthouse like a tornado. She's small, sharp, somewhere north of sixty, and wears all black with a measuring tape draped around her neck.

She’s followed by a frayed-looking young woman wearing tortoiseshell glasses and clutching a notepad and pen.

"I am Irina," she declares in a heavy Russian accent. “You are Sunny. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Yes, hello…”

She circles me, then loops her hands around my waist. "Don't suck in. I hate when they suck in. The number lies, and then the dress lies, and then we are all liars." She glances up at me. "You are not sucking in."

"No?"

"No. Good. Beautiful. Arms up."

My arms go up.

"Yellow," Irina says to no one.

"Sorry?"

"For the gala." She wraps the tape around my hips as she rattles off some numbers to her assistant. "There is a charity. You will attend with Mr. Di Zaro. You will wear yellow. Not lemon. Not mustard. I am thinking sunshine. In soft silk. It moves when you move." She steps back to get another angle of me. "You walk into a room, and the room thinks the sun came inside. That is the dress."

"That's a lot of pressure to put on a dress."

"It is a lot of dress." She gives me a small, dangerous smile. "You will be fine. You have the shoulders for it."

She spins me by one hip, and the tape wraps around my thigh. Higher than I'm expecting.

"Um. That's pretty far up."

"Yes." She mutters another number over her shoulder, and her ghost writes it down. "This is for another dress, one that is shorter. A little dress that insists on a bit of fun." She looks at me over the top of her glasses and winks. "Every woman should own one dress her mother would not approve of."

"My mother's dead."

It comes out before I can stop it, flat and stupid, and I want to swallow my tongue.

But Irina doesn't flinch. She simply gives me a quick nod.

"Then she will not approve from very far away," she says. "Even better. More commute for the disapproval."

I can’t help it, I laugh.

Because how is this my life?

"Okay. I’m sold. Give me the fun dress."

"Of course it is sold. I am very good." She moves on. “Now for the wedding dress…”

Right. The wedding.

The one that didn’t exist until last night.

"I haven't really thought about—"

"Good. Do not think. Thinking ruins more dresses than weather." She steps close, lifts my chin with one finger, and turns my face left, then right. "It will be simple," she announces. "Elegant. No fuss. Your beauty will do the heavy lifting. The dress is just frosting on an already deliciously baked cake. It is decided. We are done."

And just like that, the storm reverses, and Irina and her ghost move toward the elevator.

Irina pauses at the doors and looks back at me over her shoulder.

"I shall make you a beautiful wedding dress," she says. "You will have it by six o’clock tonight."

Without another word, she disappears into the elevator and the doors close behind her.

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12

DANTE

In my office above the casino floor, I stare at my laptop screen on my desk.

I've spent the last four hours staring at photographs of Sunny Meadows and at the dossier my private investigator, Pete Salerno, compiled for me.

I'm trying to figure her out. Who she is. What makes her tick.

I click through the information again. Pete is thorough. He's ex-FBI and has a talent for digging into people's pasts and coming up with the goods.

Sunny Meadows. Twenty-six. Only child. Grew up here in the city with her mother, a schoolteacher, and her father, an accountant from whom my casino contracts accountancy work.

In high school, she was on the honor roll, served on the yearbook committee, and was voted *"Most Likely to Make Everyone Smile."*

I stare at the line.

Most Likely to Make Everyone Smile.

And I put a gun to her father's head.

I read it again and fight the regret it evokes.

I take a sip of scotch and keep reading.

College in California. Landed a job at a major tech company in San Francisco as a Content Strategist. She was on a fast track. Manager within two years. Glowing performance reviews.

Then she quit out of nowhere. No notice. No forwarding address. Just gone.

That was fifteen months ago.

Her mom’s cancer wasn't diagnosed until seven months ago.

So what made a woman at the top of her game abandon everything to run home to her parents?

I pull up her socials. Sunny had been a regular poster. Then, fifteen months ago, they stopped abruptly.

It’s like she vanished off the face of the Earth.

Something happened in California, and it was bad enough to make her run.

I pick up my phone and call Pete. He answers on the second ring.

"Is this all you have on Sunny Meadows?" I ask.

“That’s the best you’re going to get in the timeframe you gave me.”

“Dig deeper. I want everything. Roommates, coworkers, anyone she dated, and anyone she filed complaints against or who filed complaints against her. Hospital visits. Police reports. Don’t leave a stone unturned."

"That'll take me a couple of weeks."

"Do it. I want to know why she fled California."

“In my experience, it’s usually because of someone else.”

“It’s always because of someone else.”

I hang up, set the phone on the desk, and take another sip of scotch.

Who are you, Sunny Meadows? *Most Likely to Make Everyone Smile.*

My phone buzzes. It’s John Marco.

Are you ready?

I stand and collect my suit jacket from the back of my chair.

After shrugging it on, I text John Marco back.

Let’s get this over with.

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13

SUNNY

The dress is absolutely breathtaking.

It’s a simple sheath of white Italian silk that falls from my shoulders to the floor, skimming my curves without clinging and is absolutely stunning.

This morning, this dress didn’t exist. But I have a feeling Charles and Irina can make anything happen.

I’m standing in the room that is now my bedroom, looking at my reflection in the full-length mirror.

There is a knock at the door. “Come in if you’re good-looking,” I joke in a miserable attempt to keep this moment as light as I can because I don’t feel light. I feel nervous and scared and barely keeping it together.

But then Charles appears in the doorway, and the moment he sees me, his face softens. I don’t know why, but it makes me less afraid of what is about to happen.

“Do you like it?” I ask as he steps into the room.

“You look very beautiful, Miss Meadows,” he says with a clipped nod.

Charles moves around the room to restore order to the mess I’ve made. He folds tissue paper, gathers garment bags, and collects the many teacups I've abandoned on three separate surfaces.

"Charles, what’s Dante like?" I ask.

"Mr. Di Zaro is a very private man,” he says, picking up the garment bag the dress arrived in.

"That doesn’t tell me much,” I say.

"I didn’t intend it to."

“Can you tell me anything? Give me some insight into the man I’m marrying. Does he have hobbies? Interests? Does he watch TV? Does he cook?”

“He reads.”

“He reads,” I repeat. “That’s it?”

“He reads extensively.” He folds up tissue paper into a neat pile. “And he is very particular about his coffee.”

“Reads books. Likes coffee. Anything else?”

“He doesn’t suffer fools.”

“You mean he doesn’t like to be called out when he’s being an ass.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You don’t have to. I think I have a very good idea of what kind of man he is.”

“Which is?”

“A bully.”

“Mr. Di Zaro is a very complex man,” he says, leaving the room with an armful of tissue paper.

“Which is a nice way to say he’s a bully,” I call out to him.

I hear him in the kitchen, putting the trash down the garbage chute.

When he reappears, I try again. “Has he been married before?”

“No.”

“Engaged?”

“No.”

“Girlfriend? Significant other?”

“Mr. Di Zaro does not form attachments,” he says, taking a shoe box off the dresser and bringing it over to me.

“Thank God for small mercies,” I mutter.

Charles kneels and opens the shoe box. Inside are a gorgeous pair of heels, and he holds one out.

“I can put on my own shoes,” I say.

“You can. But I’m down here now, and I’m a fifty-nine-year-old man with bad knees. Humor me.” He taps the shoe against his palm. “Foot.”

I hold onto the dresser and lift my foot, and he slides the heel on. Then the other.

When he stands, he pauses, looks at me in the mirror, and I see the pride on his face. An unexpected warmth hits me.

He reaches for a velvet box on the dresser.

“One final touch,” he says, lifting out a necklace. It’s a chain of tiny diamonds with a teardrop pendant.

It is stunning. Probably the most beautiful piece of jewelry I’ve ever seen.

Charles moves behind me to fasten it, and his fingers brush the chain already around my neck.

“If you could remove—”

“No.” My hand flies to my mother’s locket.

Our eyes meet in the mirror because the word comes out harsher than I mean it to.

“I mean, I’d really prefer if the locket stays,” I say with an apologetic smile. “It was my mom’s, and I don’t take it off.”

He gives me a gentle nod.

“Some things are worth more than diamonds,” he says quietly.

He closes the velvet box and sets it back on the dresser without a word.

I decide I adore Charles. Despite everything, he seems to be in my corner, and right now, I need someone.

“Charles.”

“Yes.”

“Is he going to hurt me?”

He pauses as he hangs the empty garment bag in the closet.

“No,” he says. “He is not.”

I want to believe him, so I decide that, for right now, his word is enough. For some crazy reason, I feel like I can trust Charles. Even if my situation suggests I shouldn’t.

“It’s time,” Charles says, looking at his watch.

My stomach drops.

But then I think of my dad. Of the fear on his face and the gun my fiancé put against his temple.

And my apprehension turns to determination.

A determination to make sure this unhinged lunatic of a man regrets forcing this marriage on me.

I hold onto that thought because in this instance, anger is going to serve me better than fear ever will.

Charles picks up my bouquet from the dresser. Three calla lilies with soft green ribbon tied around their stems.

“You can do this,” he says, placing the bouquet in my hands.

My throat tightens, and I nod, unsure what to say.

I am about to dive into the scary unknown, and my body seems to have gone into shock.

But Charles offers me his arm, and somehow, I’m able to walk out of the room.

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14

SUNNY

The penthouse living room glows with the soft light of twilight when we walk in.

Two men wait for me by the windows overlooking the glittering city. John Marco sees me first, and his face breaks into a grin.

Then he steps aside, and my eyes collide with Dante’s.

He stands in front of the dying sky in a black suit. He’s not wearing a tie, and the top button of his white shirt is open enough to see the edge of dark ink on his chest.

It's offensive how handsome he is. How sharp his jaw is.

How blue his eyes are.

It seems grossly unfair that a man with a heart that black gets a face like that.

He watches me cross the room the way a wolf watches its prey step out of the tree line, and my skin pebbles under his gaze.

When I stop in front of him, he doesn't smile or offer me his hand. He simply looks at me like I’m something he's already won.

The celebrant is a small, nervous man with sweat shining on his upper lip, looking like he'd rather be literally anywhere else on earth.

That makes two of us, buddy.

"Where is my father?" I ask, looking up at Dante.

"He’s otherwise detained. But he sends his regards."

Alarm shoots up my spine. "What have you done with him?"

"Nothing." He holds my gaze. "Yet."

"What do you mean, yet?"

"Well." His voice is low. "That depends entirely on you, doesn't it, Miss Meadows."

Fury blooms through my chest, so hot I feel it in my fingertips. I grip the calla lilies hard enough to bend the stems.

I want to slap him. I want to shove this bouquet down his throat, ride the elevator sixty floors down, and never look back.

But sixty floors down doesn't exist for me anymore. There is only this man, and the gun he's still holding to my father’s head.

I lift my chin. “What about the contract relinquishing him of his debt?”

He removes a folded piece of paper from his breast pocket and hands it to me.

I open it and read every word to make sure he’s keeping up his end of the bargain.

Two paragraphs relinquish my father of his debt and the crime of appropriation of funds, and the signature at the bottom tells me it is Dante Di Zaro’s.

I refold it and lift my gaze to him.

"Glad to see you’re holding up your end of the deal."

Something flickers in his eyes because he just won, and he knows it.

“And now it’s time for you to do the same.” He turns to the officiant. “Shall we?”

Thankfully, the vows are brief, and I get through mine by pretending none of this is real. That one day it will all be a distant, blurry memory of that time I was kidnapped by a handsome man with a gun.

My words come out quickly, with barely any inflection. I don’t look at Dante for longer than I must.

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Then it’s his turn.

He says the first words slowly, his voice deep and steady, and when I finally look at him, his eyes are already on mine.

They don’t waver.

He recites the vows like he means every word, his gaze fixed on me with an intensity that makes something uncomfortable twist low in my stomach.

It’s a performance. I know it is.

He has to convince everyone watching that this is exactly what he wants. That I’m his bride and he’s a man madly in love with me.

But he’s playing the part too well.

I glance away, but I can still feel his gaze on me until the final words leave his mouth.

The celebrant asks for the rings, and John Marco steps forward and offers them over. They’re simple platinum bands that slide on easily.

When I push Dante’s ring over his knuckle, his skin is warm, and his hands are strong. I feel an unwanted jolt of electricity when I think about what those hands are capable of.

I look up.

His eyes are still on me.

And somehow, the look on his face feels more dangerous than the gun ever could.

"By the power vested in me ... I pronounce you man and wife," the celebrant says. "You may kiss the bride."

Dante turns to me, his blue eyes drop to my mouth, and my whole body braces as he lowers his head.

He doesn’t touch me with his hands. But I know he’s going to kiss me.

And I hate that my lips part.

That my pulse picks up.

That my breath catches on an inhale as his mouth comes closer.

But at the last second, his mouth veers off course, and his lips graze the shell of my ear, making goosebumps zip down my neck like a lit fuse.

"I don't kiss on command," he murmurs, so low only I can hear. "When my mouth takes yours, Mrs. Di Zaro ... you'll be begging for it."

I push my hand into his chest. “Except I don’t beg.”

He pulls back, and with an assured smile, slowly drags his thumb along my jaw. “We’ll see.”

His hand drops, and he turns to the celebrant like he didn't just detonate a bomb in the middle of my chest.

And just like that, I am Mrs. Sunny Di Zaro.

I stand there with my hammering pulse and a burning fury left behind by his taunt.

Who does he think he is, suggesting I'll beg for him?

I'd rather scoop my brains out with a blunt toothpick than beg for this monster.

But I bite my tongue.

Because I have a plan.

I'm going to win the war.

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15

DANTE

It's done. *I'm married.*

The capos got what they wanted.

After witnessing the signing of the marriage certificate, everyone makes themselves scarce, leaving me alone with my bride.

She hasn't moved since the ceremony ended.

She's still standing in front of the windows overlooking the city like she's waiting for the executioner.

I go to the bar, pour two drinks, and carry both glasses across the room.

When I hold out the glass, she takes it, and our fingers brush. She pulls her hand back so fast she nearly spills the drink.

"Relax," I say.

"Nothing about this is relaxing."

Which is a fair statement.

She takes a sip of her drink and coughs through the burn.

"What happens now?" she asks, wiping her chin with the back of her hand.

I take a step closer to her, and she steps back, a flicker of uncertainty crossing her face.

No, not uncertainty.

Fear.

She thinks I'm going to touch her. She thinks this is the part where the monster collects.

She trembles, and her eyes flick around the room like she's looking for something to arm herself with.

"I'm not having sex with you," she says suddenly. "And if you try to force me, I'll stab you with one of those knives you have in the kitchen."

There is a little too much panic in her voice. Like she needs me to believe she will hurt me if I touch her. *Like she has had to before.*

She points across the room to the Wüsthof set on the kitchen counter, which was a gift from John Marco two Christmases ago.

I look at the knife block, then back at her. She's a mere five-foot-two, and she just threatened to stab a six-foot-four man who once killed someone with a corkscrew.

"Which knife?" I ask.

She's caught off-guard. "What?"

"Which knife would you use?"

She searches my face, then her eyes narrow.

"The big one," she says.

The chef's knife.

"Good choice," I say.

She frowns. "You're unhinged."

"Yes, I suppose I am."

Our gazes remain locked on one another, then she adds, "I repeat, I am not having sex with you. I'd rather sew up my vagina with steel wool than sleep with you."

"That's quite the description."

"It's true."

I step closer. Close enough that she has to tilt her head back to see my face, and I can see the rapid flutter of her pulse in her throat.

"I take what I want, Sunny." My voice is low. "But I will never take that from you."

Her lips part on a breath she didn't mean to let out.

I hold her gaze for one more second. Then I step back and head for the door.

"You're leaving?" she asks, surprised.

"I have work to do."

"Tonight?"

"And every night. I'm very rarely in the penthouse. You might want to find a hobby. Goodnight, Sunny."

I don’t look back.

I take the elevator down to my office, close the door, and sit at my desk.

I pull open a file and start reading. The words blur. I read the same line four times but retain nothing.

I hope the fucking capos are happy.

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16

SUNNY

He's gone. *Again*.

My husband has a habit of walking out mid-conversation. I should be happy, but it's infuriating, especially when I want to yell at him.

Noticing the bottle of champagne on ice on the kitchen counter, I pick it up and work the cork with both thumbs until it pops.

I drink straight from the bottle, one hand pressed against the counter and the other holding it to my lips as I chug.

The bubbles fizz into my sinuses, and I cough as champagne dribbles down my chin.

It's a welcome change from the liquid fire Dante poured me.

Kicking off my shoes, I walk to the windows and take another pull from the bottle as I gaze out at the glittering city below.

The sky is almost gone now. The last streak of pink has dissolved into the dark blue, and the city lights have taken over, turning the windows into a wall of glitter.

I press my forehead against the cold window, and my breath fogs a small circle on the glass. Feeling numb and confused, I draw a smiley face in the fog with my finger.

Two days ago, I was Sunny Meadows.

Now I'm Mrs. Di Zaro.

And I have no idea what that means.

I take another chug of champagne. The bottle is a third empty, and my head is starting to float.

My other hand finds the locket at my throat.

My mom would have hated all of this. The penthouse, the forced marriage to the rich casino owner who takes whatever he wants just because he can.

She would have stormed in here, grabbed me by the arm, dragged me out, and told Dante Di Zaro exactly where he could shove his arrangement.

I grip the locket tight.

“I’m okay, Mom,” I whisper to the glass. “I’m okay.”

I’m not going to cry.

I am done crying over things that men do to me.

I take another long pull from the bottle.

The smiley face on the window has faded. I draw another.

But this time I give it horns.

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17

DANTE

An hour after leaving my bride so I could mindlessly stare at documents on my desk, John Marco appears in my doorway.

He's standing with his hands in his pockets and his jaw set in a way that makes him look exactly like our father.

His face is somber, so I know what he’s about to tell me is serious.

"What happened?" I say.

He steps inside and closes the door quietly behind him. And John Marco never does things quietly.

"Katie Vaughn. One of the servers on the floor."

“What about her?” I ask.

"She finished her shift around three this morning," he says. "A customer had been removed earlier in the night. Got aggressive with her on the floor. Handsy. Security threw him out."

"And?"

"He waited for her." His voice is flat, darkness crawling into his blue eyes. This is the version of John Marco that makes dangerous men nervous. "In the parking garage. Near her car."

Deep in my chest, a low, dark thing uncurls, stretches, and starts to breathe.

"He dragged her behind the east stairwell,” my twin continues. "Where he raped and strangled her unconscious, then left her for dead."

The darkness inside me goes very still, like a wild animal right before it strikes.

"Where is she now?" I say.

"Hospital. Private room. Caruso arranged it. She's in a bad way, Dante."

I look down at my desk. "Footage?"

"Garage cameras caught everything." He pauses. "Do you want to see it?"

"Yes."

He pulls his phone from his inside pocket and crosses the room. He sets it on the desk in front of me, then presses play.

I watch it all the way through.

Every depraved second.

The drunk stumbling back into the garage after security tossed him. The way he crouches behind a concrete pillar like the coward he is. The way Katie walks to her car, her bag over her shoulder and her phone in her hand, tired, distracted, and completely unaware of the predator ten feet behind her.

My stomach twists, but I keep watching.

Then he lunges. His hand clamps over her mouth, and he drags her backward into the shadows.

My teeth are clenched so hard my jaw aches.

I force myself to keep watching.

Every second.

Every fucking second.

By the time the footage ends, fury is burning through me so hot I can barely think.

I am a monster to plenty of people.

I’ve earned that reputation.

But I have never hurt a woman. I never will.

And anyone who puts their hands on a woman like that, anyone who uses fear or violence to violate her, forfeits whatever mercy I might otherwise have offered.

I look at the frozen screen.

My stomach revolts again.

“Find him.”

"Deno and Caruso picked him up an hour ago." John Marco's eyes meet mine. "He's downstairs."

I push back from my desk and stand. “Then that’s where I’m going.”

"Right," he says quietly, and steps aside to hold the door open for me.

“Have the police been called?” I ask.

“No.”

“Good.”

I don’t need them hanging around with what I have in mind for this asshole. He’ll be easier to dispose of without police presence.

Riding the elevator down to the basement, anticipation buzzes beneath my fury. These are the moments when I enjoy unleashing the monster and letting it out to play.

When the elevator doors open, Caruso and Deno are waiting for us.

Beyond them is a room with a single fluorescent light overhead, and a drain set into the concrete floor.

Not many men walk out of this room alive. If they do, they’re usually missing body parts.

"I want an update on Katie," I say to Caruso.

"I’ll call Dr. Falcone."

"Does she have family?"

"Single mom. One kid."

"We take care of Katie and her kid, whatever they need. Accommodation. Medical care. Fucking anything."

"Consider it done."

I move past him to the room.

A man is zip-tied to a steel chair in the center of it. He’s unremarkable. Expensive shirt, neat hair, polished shoes. The kind of man you’d never look twice at in a crowd.

I notice the wedding band. *Asshole*.

He's crying. They always cry, once they're sober and know it’s time to pay.

"Mr. Di Zaro—please—it was a misunderstanding. I swear to God, I'd had too much to—"

I don't answer.

I take off my jacket and hand it to John Marco, then roll my sleeves to the elbows, watching the piece of shit as I do it.

I crouch to his eye level.

"I want to tell you something about myself," I say, my voice dangerously low. "I have done things that would turn your hair white. Bad

things. Bloody things. Things so bad that most men would be afraid to do them because of what they would make them. Dark, monstrous things. You would think I would have trouble sleeping; after all, I'm not a psychopath. I have a conscience. But you know, I have slept like a newborn every single night since. You know why? Because things always fall into two categories. The things I tolerate. And the things I don't. That is all that matters to me in this world."

He nods like nodding might save him.

"And when things fall into the category I don't tolerate, I don't feel one ounce of remorse or emotion about what I do next. Because the things I don't tolerate are vile and nefarious, and let's just face it, the cunts who do it are asking for it. They deserve what comes next."

"Please … she was into it… She wanted it… It was just a bit of fun…"

My rage spikes with a hot surge.

"Shut the fuck up. Or the next word out of your mouth will be your last. I've seen the footage." I run my tongue over my teeth. "Now, I will ask one last time. Can you guess which category your behavior falls into?"

"I-I … I was drunk… I didn't …"

"I … I … I…" I grab his right hand and press it flat against the chair's armrest. "You know what I don't tolerate. Men who decide a woman's body is theirs because they want it to be." I close my hand over his fingers. "Those men, I take apart. And I always start with the part that started the taking."

He starts to sob. "Oh God, no… I didn't do anything."

"You touched her with these. You tried to strangle her to death with these."

"Don't do this… She wanted it... She's lying … please." He sobs harder, tears and sweat carving trails down his cheeks.

"So, I am going to take these first."

Caruso sets the cutters in my open palm, and the raping cunt in front of me starts to blubber incoherently.

When the cutters pinch the skin around his pinky finger, he starts to really panic. When they slice into his finger and pop the bone in two, he screams.

It goes on for a while as I take each finger and thumb from both hands.

By the time I've taken all ten digits, puke and spit and blood dribble down his chin.

I stand and survey my work. Blood runs from the finger stumps onto the concrete, spilling over the severed digits still lying where they fell.

Caruso appears at my side and whispers in my ear, “Spoke with Falcone. She was eight weeks pregnant, but she’s lost the baby.”

I turn away from him and rub the nape of my neck.

She was *my* employee. She was walking to her car in *my* parking garage, somewhere she should’ve been safe.

I let the realization settle and wait for the rage to burrow deep where I can control it.

Then I turn back to the dead man in the chair.

I crouch again. Lower this time.

"The fingers were for grabbing her," I tell him, very quietly. Then I grab him by the balls. "And these are for what you did in that underground garage."

He passes out before I begin.

Which is fine.

I don’t need him awake to cut off his cock and balls.

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18

SUNNY

My husband is asleep, and I can't stop staring at his mouth.

It's utterly ridiculous, given the situation, and I figure I must still be drunk from last night's champagne.

Ten minutes ago, I woke up to an empty penthouse and a hangover. Thinking I was alone, I went looking for paracetamol. Then I saw the door to his den was open.

Now I'm standing in Dante's office doorway watching him sleep in an armchair.

He's still wearing his shirt from last night. It's wrinkled and half-unbuttoned, and his sleeves are shoved up past his forearms, where dark tattoos disappear beneath the white fabric.

I creep closer to get a better look.

He looks younger like this. Less monster and more man.

"Maybe he *is* human," I whisper.

My gaze drops to his open collar and to the edge of the inked writing across his chest.

I follow the line of his neck to his jaw, then his jaw to his mouth, and I stop there because his lips really are beautiful.

"See something you like?" he says without opening his eyes.

I take a sharp step back, and a blast of heat hits my cheeks.

"Not at all," I say.

His eyes open, and they’re dark, heavy-lidded, and lazy. The corner of his mouth kicks up, and I want to smack it right off his stupidly handsome face.

“You like what you see, *little rose?*”

“Little rose?” I ask.

His eyes shift to the small rose tattoo on my hip, the result of an impulsive teenage rebellion.

I ignore the nickname because I don’t like the flutter I feel in my stomach at the huskiness of his voice. “I was checking to see if you were alive.”

“And?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

He smiles, and two very sexy dimples appear, one on either side of his mouth. "I plan on divorcing you in twelve months, not making you a widow."

"I don't suppose we could skip ahead to the divorce now and avoid the inconvenience of a marriage?" I ask.

His gaze finds mine and holds it. "Nice try, wife. But that’s not happening."

Wife.

The word twists inside me. The meaning had always been something sacred to me, but he’s tarnished it.

His eyes drift down my body, and I suddenly become aware of what I'm wearing.

Or more accurately, what I'm not wearing.

My T-shirt barely reaches my belly button, and my panties are tiny. I’m not even wearing a bra. Just cotton and skin, a whole lot of bare skin on full display.

I didn’t exactly think I’d run into my husband when I climbed out of bed. The penthouse was quiet and still. A T-shirt and panties seemed like a safe bet.

His gaze drops down my legs and back up again, and I don't miss the flex of his jaw. Or the slow curl of his fingers around the armrest of his chair. Or the way his throat moves when he swallows.

Or how that slow gaze makes my skin feel warm and flushed and … good.

“Well, now that I know you’re not dead, I will leave you in peace,” I say, backing out of the room.

He smiles, and those dimples reappear. “Your concern for my welfare is touching.”

“It’s not concern. If you die, someone worse will probably take over, and I’m really not in the mood to break in another husband.”

I notice a spot of blood on his shirt sleeve, and a cold rush pebbles my skin.

For a second, I thought I saw something almost human in him.

But that blood reminds me of who I am married to.

A monster capable of terrible things.

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19

DANTE

I give her a five-second head start.

Then I follow.

I have a full day ahead of me. A visit to Katie at the private clinic we're paying for, added security presence to ensure no other woman is harmed in my casino, and a mafia wannabe eyeing off my territory.

But instead of tending to these priorities, I follow my barefoot wife through the penthouse to the kitchen.

She pads across the marble without looking back, and I don't even try not to look at her luscious legs and all that skin.

She reaches the kitchen and starts opening cupboards, searching for coffee mugs. She's annoyed with me and is taking it out on my cabinetry.

I pull out a stool at the island and sit.

"Above the espresso machine," I say.

She opens the cupboard and reaches up for a mug. The movement elongates her beautiful body, and I get a good look at her luscious curves and all that exposed skin.

But my wife is only five foot nothing and can't reach them, and because I'm not a complete asshole, I cross the kitchen to help her. I reach over her to retrieve the mugs and hear her small gasp when my chest brushes against her back.

I hand them to her. This close, I can feel the heat of her body and smell her soft scent.

My blood goes south so fast that I have to sit back down at the kitchen counter before she can see and adjust the front of my pants like a teenager.

She sets the mug down and squares up to the espresso machine. It's commercial-grade, imported from Milan, and it has humbled every person who has attempted to use it.

Except, apparently, my wife.

She starts making coffee like she's used it a thousand times before.

And there is something very sexy about it.

"Where's my dad?" she asks, her back still to me.

The edge is gone from her voice, but it’s impossible to miss the emotion beneath it.

"He's fine," I say. "Unharmed, like I promised."

"Then why wasn't he at the wedding?" She looks at me over her shoulder. "His only daughter's wedding."

"He was out of town."

She turns fully around, and panic is right there in those big eyes. "Where?"

I have no intention of telling her.

The less she knows, the more she complies. It’s basic leverage 101, and I've built an empire on basic leverage.

"You don't need to know."

"Don't need to know? I'm out of my mind with worry, Dante."

It’s the first time she’s said my name since the ceremony, and the sound of it finds its way into my gut and stays there.

I should let her worry. Worried people are compliant people. It's the smart play, and I always make the smart play.

"You don't have to worry," I hear myself say instead. "He's safe. You have my word."

"Your word." She laughs, and there's nothing happy in it. "Forgive me if I don't trust your word so easily."

She turns back to the machine and continues making coffee. If she’s worried about me seeing her almost naked, she doesn’t show it. She’s too pissed at me to care. Which is good, because I can't help but watch how she moves as she makes coffee effortlessly. The fact that she isn't trying to tempt me makes it infinitely more intriguing.

Which, I’m not going to lie, is a problem.

Right now, I should be anywhere but sitting in my own kitchen watching my wife make coffee in a T-shirt and barely-there panties while my body responds like I'm sixteen.

But still I don't move.

She crosses to the island and sets a small cup in front of me. It’s an espresso with no sugar.

Exactly how I like it.

“How did you know?” I ask, taking a sip and enjoying the taste.

“Know what?”

“How I take my coffee.”

“I didn’t. It’s how I take mine. So that’s what you get.”

I can’t help but smile as I take another sip.

"Don't read into it," she says. "The machine makes two shots. It would've gone to waste."

"Of course."

Her eyes narrow like my agreement is worse than an argument.

She picks up her cup and leans back against the counter, putting the island between us.

I change the subject to distract myself from noticing her nipples pressing tight against her T-shirt.

"We have a dinner," I say. "A week from Friday. With some … *business associates*.”

My wife doesn’t know who she married. And I don’t intend to reveal too much too soon. For now, I’m just an asshole billionaire who owns a casino and a gun.

“I expect you to attend." I hold her gaze over the cup. "As my wife."

She lifts an eyebrow. "Your *adoring* wife."

"Dutiful," I say. "And adoring. Yes."

She holds my stare over the rim of her cup, and I can see her deciding how much of a fight she wants to pick before breakfast.

She takes a long sip instead.

When she lowers the cup, there's a drop of coffee at the corner of her mouth.

Before I can stop myself, I reach up and drag my thumb across the corner of her mouth. Her lips part, her eyes widen, and a soft gasp escapes her lips. A sweet, gentle sound that I feel all the way down to my cock.

When I pull my thumb away and put it in my mouth, her breath rushes out.

“You said you wouldn’t touch me,” she whispers, her eyes transfixed on mine.

“I said I had no *intention* of touching you. Intentions change.”

She swallows thickly, and I have to fight the urge to take her face in my hands and claim her glossy mouth with mine.

"But don’t worry," I say, and my voice comes out raspier than I intend. "It won’t happen again."

She blinks, and her cheeks are flushed.

I walk away.

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20

SUNNY

My body is a traitor.

Why? Because my kidnapper-husband touched the corner of my mouth with his thumb, then put that thumb between his lips and tasted it. *Tasted it*. And instead of kneeing him somewhere useful, I stood there with my mouth parted and a throb pounding between my thighs.

I throw the dish towel at the sink and miss.

Although, he did slip up.

It was only for a second, but I saw it. When he stood in my space with his thumb on my mouth, I could see on his face that he wasn't in control like he usually is. His eyes flared and his voice came out lower than he meant it to, and even if it was only for a second, it still means something big.

The evil twin actually *feels things*.

Which means it's time to rethink my approach.

I've been fighting him ever since we met. Yet he simply absorbs all of it like it's nothing.

Worse, I have a feeling he likes it.

And now he expects it from me.

But what if I give him something else.

Something he isn't expecting.

Sunshine.

He can handle my hate. Hate is clearly his mother tongue. And a wife who spits fire is a wife he can predict.

But a wife who cooks his dinner? Who wears a smile, says his name sweetly, and acts like she's happy to be here? It might actually drive him crazy.

Because I'm pretty sure he's like a vampire. Too much sunshine and he'll spontaneously combust.

Inspired and ready to make plans, I push away from the counter and consider the steps I need to take next.

A dinner. A smile. Something sexy to wear.

The dinner is a problem because I can't cook.

Not that it really matters. The food isn't the point.

It's the performance that counts.

I pick up my new phone and call Charles. He answers on the second ring.

"Mrs. Di Zaro."

"Charles. I need groceries."

He pauses, then says, "An unexpected development."

"Cannelloni tubes. Ricotta. Canned tomatoes. Basil. Garlic. An onion. Parmesan. And a bag of salad."

"May I ask what you're planning, madam?"

"Dinner."

"For Mr. Di Zaro?"

"For my husband," I say sweetly. "I'm being a good wife, Charles."

There's another pause, and I swear I can hear him smiling down the line.

"Winning the war, Mrs. Di Zaro?"

"Winning the war, Charles."

"The groceries will be up within the hour."

I hang up.

Right, next I need a costume.

Because I am not doing this in yoga pants.

Something that says *I'm yours*.

And nothing says that quite like wearing your man's shirt.

I walk down the hallway, stop outside Dante's bedroom, and push the door open.

He never said this room was off-limits.

His room is dark and immaculate, and oh God, it smells so sexy.

The closet is a wall of black suits and white shirts hanging in rows.

I take one shirt off its hanger and resist the urge to smell it.

Okay. I smell it once.

For the purpose of the mission.

Tonight, my husband will come home to a hot meal, a warm smile, and a wife *delighted* to see him.

He'll never know what hit him.

I practice my smile in his bathroom mirror.

Sweet.

Warm.

And absolutely weaponized.

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DANTE

I'm in my office when my phone buzzes. Deno.

"Boss, Sal's here."

"Send him up."

Two minutes later, Sal Mancini walks in. Mid-sixties, silver hair, fresh suit. He's been my underboss for eleven years and my father's for twenty before that. There is no man alive I trust more. Except John Marco, of course.

I take a seat behind my desk while he sits in the chair across from me.

He reaches into his jacket and slides a folded newspaper across my desk.

On the front page is a rendering of a casino, accompanied by the headlines: THE GRAZALOV. A NEW STANDARD IN LUXURY GAMING.

I study it like it's news to me.

But it isn't.

I saw this coming eighteen months ago, when Anton Grazalov started buying up waterfront land through three layers of shell companies and a trust.

Anton Grazalov. The new pakhan to the Grazalov Bratva. Young, dumb, and trying too hard to be the kind of man his father was.

Viktor Grazalov … now there's someone who knew how to do business. How to rule an empire and make those sitting across the desk from him

shake.

Anton Grazalov couldn’t make a blade of grass shake.

He’s a bedazzled wannabe, an entitled prick playing dress-up in his father’s shoes.

Since learning about his plans to build a casino near mine, I've put things in motion against him. I have people in city hall who take my call before they take his money. The same goes for construction crews and other contacts that mean the difference between a casino being built and not.

It's useful to have people in high places.

"Grazalov requested a meeting," Sal adds.

"No."

"You're not curious what he wants?"

"I know what he wants." I lean back. "He wants a casino that rivals Fortune, but he’s not going to get one.”

“It might be worth playing nice to keep our enemies closer.”

"I don’t play nice with a man who makes money trafficking women and then decides to dip his toe into luxury gaming because he feels like it. He doesn't get a meeting with me. He gets told to go fuck himself."

Sal's brows lift a fraction. “Sounds like you have everything under control.”

He stands and walks to the door, but pauses with his hand on the doorframe.

"Your wife," he says. "I’m looking forward to meeting her on Friday."

“She is looking forward to it too,” I lie.

“I heard she’s a firecracker.”

John Marco.

"She's a handful."

"Good. You could use a handful." He smiles. "Your father had one too. It kept him human."

He leaves before I can answer, which I think was the entire point.

I look at the newspaper on my desk.

Kept him human.

My father loved my mother enough to die of it. They put her in the ground, and the grief carved him out from the inside until he finished the job himself, with his own gun in his mouth.

That's what love does where I come from. It doesn't soften you.

It just shows your enemies exactly where to aim.

And I have no intention of giving them that chance.

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22

DANTE

For someone who usually spends most of his time in the casino and very little in his penthouse, I'm not sure why I am riding the elevator home at only seven p.m.

I tell myself it's to check on the wife I acquired overnight.

Although, I'm not quite sure it's for the reasons it should be.

I hear music as the private elevator approaches the penthouse.

It's Mel Tormé's *Comin' Home Baby.*

What the hell?

The elevator opens, and I don't just hear the loud music, I also smell garlic.

I pause in the doorway because garlic means cooking, and cooking means Sunny is in my kitchen. Sunny doing anything voluntarily in my penthouse is cause for suspicion.

Loosening my tie, I step inside, and as I approach the kitchen, I come to a sudden halt when I see the juiciest ass in a tiny pair of panties bent over, moving in time to the beat of the music.

It's my wife and fuck … she's wearing one of my shirts.

She's rummaging through a bottom drawer completely unaware that I am there.

She keeps swinging her luscious ass in time to the music, and every cell in my body flips in on itself as all my blood goes straight to my cock.

Fuck me. This little devil is going to be the death of me.

Which I am certain is her plan.

Retrieving a large salad bowl from the back of the drawer, she straightens and turns around.

“Oh,” she says, surprised to see me. Her hair is twisted into a messy knot with loose strands falling around her face.

She flashes me a big sunny smile, which only makes me more suspicious.

Only days ago, this woman called me a bully, a thug, and a monster. She told me I was misogynistic and informed me I would need to buy a wife because no sane person would volunteer for the position.

Now she's in my kitchen looking like she’s happy to be here.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Cooking."

"Why?"

"Because it's dinnertime." She places the salad bowl on the counter. "I’m making cannelloni."

I walk into the kitchen and am met with a disaster.

Open boxes of cannelloni tubes, spice packets, and jars of sauce clutter the counter. In the sink is a stack of unwashed bowls, and a cutting board covered with chopped onion, tomato, and bell peppers.

Through the oven glass door, a baking dish glows, and the whole penthouse smells like garlic, pasta, and tomatoes.

My kitchen has never smelled like anything because I don't cook. When I eat here, it's something delivered or something cold.

"You cooked," I say.

"I did."

"For me?"

"Of course." She glances at me over her shoulder as she rips open a bag of salad. "Why wouldn’t I?"

I lean against the island and fold my arms. "Yesterday you told me you hoped this marriage would make me miserable."

"I did say that."

"And today you're making me dinner."

"I’m not a predictable woman, Dante." She gives me another smile as she tips a bag of lettuce leaves into the salad bowl.

I cock an eyebrow in her direction. “And that is what scares me.”

This woman fought me on every word last night. Every single syllable was a battlefield. Now she's making me cannelloni and saying my name so sweetly that my cock just got a little harder.

What the hell has gotten into her?

The combative Sunny, I can predict.

But this Sunny? The one wearing nothing but my shirt and cooking my dinner, she’s unpredictable, and that is a problem.

She pulls a bottle of wine from the counter and uncorks it with a confidence that suggests she has no idea she's holding a two-thousand-dollar bottle in her hand. She pours two glasses and hands me one.

I look at the glass.

She raises an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

"I didn't say anything."

"You're looking at the wine like it might kill you."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

She arches an eyebrow. "You think I poisoned the wine?"

"I think you spent last night telling me you'd make my life difficult, and now you're serving me a home-cooked meal with a two-thousand-dollar bottle of wine. Things don’t quite add up."

“Two thousand…” She holds up the bottle to look at the label. “That is insane. Who pays two thousand dollars for a bottle of wine?”

“The same man who paid sixty-nine for one.”

She gives me a pointed look. “You paid sixty-nine thousand for a bottle of wine?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the best. And I expect the best.”

She picks up her glass, holds my gaze, then takes a long, slow mouthful.

The wine stains her lips a shade darker, and she licks the corner of her mouth when she sets the glass down.

"Satisfied?" she asks.

No.

I am far from satisfied. Her lips look luscious when they’re wet with wine, and my shirt slipping off one shoulder makes me want to rip the rest of it off her and devour the naked skin beneath it with my mouth and tongue until she’s begging me for more.

Which absolutely wasn’t on my bingo card tonight.

The look on her face is a dark, seductive challenge. *She's daring me*. She thinks she has the upper hand, and she might be right.

So I am going to take it from her. Because I'll be damned if those *I fucking dare you* eyes are going to win.

Holding her smug gaze, I pick up the glass, slowly turn it to where her lips touched the rim, then slide my lips over the same place and watch her as I drink.

The wine is good. It's thick and tastes like grapes and berries with dark notes of oak and chocolate.

And I down it all in three large swallows.

Her gaze drops to my throat as I swallow the wine, and her lips part. I set the empty glass on the counter, and when I lick my lips, her eyes track the movement, and I see the flutter of her pulse in her neck.

So, my little captive isn't as immune to me as she thinks.

"Now, I'm satisfied." I lean forward into her personal space. "What about you, wife? Are you satisfied?"

She clears her throat, but not before I hear a slight inhale of air through those plush lips. A gasp. Because I'm close. *Too close*. And she likes it.

She pats my chest. "See, nobody's poisoned. Now sit at the table, and I'll bring the food."

I move to the dining table. The one that seats twelve and has never been used for a meal. She's set two places at one end, close together, and laid out plates, silverware, and napkins. She even found candles somewhere.

"Sit down," she says, giving me orders in my own home. "It's almost ready."

I sit down.

Christ.

She brings the baking dish to the table and sets it down.

"Cannelloni alla Meadows," she announces. "Enjoy."

She serves me first. The cannelloni slides out of the dish and slops onto my plate in a soupy mess. It looks like the cannelloni gave up halfway through the baking process and decided to become soup.

She serves herself and sits across from me.

"Dig in," she says.

I take a bite, and it is without question the worst cannelloni I have ever eaten.

The ricotta filling has the texture of wallpaper paste, and the entire thing tastes of nothing.

Across from me, Sunny takes her first bite, and I watch her face for her reaction.

Her chewing slows. Her eyes go slightly distant, and I see the exact moment the lack of flavor hits her taste buds.

Her nostrils flare a fraction, and she forces herself to swallow.

Then she does something I don’t expect.

She moans.

"Mmm." She closes her eyes. "Oh, that's good."

It is not good. She knows it. I know it. The cannelloni knows it.

But the sound she makes. That low, soft moan of fake pleasure, and the way her lips press together like she's savoring something worth savoring … *fuck*.

My cock punches against my zipper.

"Delicious," I say.

Her eyes open. She searches my face for the lie. "It really is, isn’t it?"

She’s daring me to say something.

"The best."

I take another bite. Force myself to chew. Force myself to swallow. The texture is worse the second time because now I know what's coming.

Sunny takes another bite and makes that sound again. Softer this time, a tiny "mmm" in the back of her throat, and I bite back a groan because that sound is going to be a problem for me.

A significant, ongoing, below-the-belt problem.

"You should try it with the salad," she says, punching salad onto her fork. "The acidity really brings out the flavors."

There are no flavors.

She takes another bite, closes her eyes, and moans again. This time she goes for it with her head tilted and her lips pressed together.

"So good," she whispers.

My hands tighten on my knife and fork because now I’m imagining her kneeling in front me with my cock in her mouth as she makes those sounds.

She opens her eyes and catches me watching her, and a flicker of victory crosses her face, the tiniest pull at the corner of her mouth.

She knows exactly what those sounds are doing to me, and she's using them against me.

Fine.

I cut a large piece, put it in my mouth, and groan. From my chest. A deep, primal groan. My eyes close, and I hold the sound longer than I need to.

When I open my eyes, a flush on her neck matches the pink of her cheeks.

She punches her fork into the soupy cannelloni, then leans closer and spreads her thighs wider on the chair. The blood pounds so hard through my cock I can feel my pulse in it.

Sauce drips down her lips, and her tongue slides across them to lick it off.

I swallow hard.

"More wine?" she asks.

"No."

"More cannelloni?"

"No."

“More—”

“It’s not going to work,” I say.

She sets down her fork, and I set down mine. Across the table, our gazes remain locked in battle.

“Exactly what isn’t going to work?” she asks.

“You cooking for me. Wearing my shirt. Trying to make me crazy with moans.”

“I don’t have to try to make you crazy, Dante. You clearly already are.”

I smile and sit back in my chair. “Maybe, maybe not.”

“There is no maybe about it. You’re unhinged.”

Keeping eye contact, I stand, walk around the table, and stop beside her chair. I place one hand on the back of her chair and lean down, my mouth at her ear.

"Fake those sounds again," I say. "And I'll drag the real ones out of you right here on this table."

Her soft gasp falls between us.

I turn and walk toward the hallway, my cock straining against my zipper so hard that every step is a punishment.

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23

SUNNY

Fake those sounds again, and I'll drag the real ones out of you right here on this table.

I lie in bed for hours with his voice on repeat in my head.

Turning on my side, I force my eyes closed. But he's right there, whispering his dark promise in my ear.

Jesus, why is it so hot in here?

I kick off the sheets because I'm sure someone has turned the heat up.

The nerve of him saying those things to me.

I punch my pillow into six different shapes, but sleep still eludes me. The problem isn't the pillow or the room temperature. It's the six-foot-four man sleeping on the other side of the wall.

Frustrated, I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling. He called my bluff, and now he thinks he's won.

But I'm going to show him he's only stoked the fire.

Thankfully, sometime after midnight I fall asleep. When I wake, the penthouse is silent and still, and Dante is nowhere to be seen.

Which is fine because I don't want to face him without coffee.

I need to somehow drown out the salacious words I can still feel whispered against my ear, so when he comes home I can play the dutiful wife and kill him with kindness.

But he doesn't come home.

The hours tick by with excruciating slowness as I wait. Thankfully, Dante has every streaming service available, which is odd for a man who says he is rarely home. I binge-watch the first two seasons of Yellowstone while emptying his pantry of chocolate chip cookies and a bag of popcorn.

By seven p.m. I've already drunk two glasses of wine, and I'm bored out of my mind.

I need something to do.

Remembering there is a whole world sixty floors down, I decide to check it out.

Rule number two: never leave the penthouse without letting him know.

But he's not here to tell, right?

Which is a delicious loophole.

Besides, technically, it's still attached to the penthouse, so I'm not smashing the rule completely.

Buzzing with delinquent joy, I ride the elevator down to the casino. When the doors open and the Fortune Casino hits me all at once, I grin from ear to ear.

It's like stepping into another universe. Thousands of lights turn the night into day, and the sound is a symphony of gaming tables, slot machines, and the hum of money, music, and murmured conversation.

I've been in casinos before. But this is something else.

This is like a city within a city.

Chance, hope, and possibility vibrate in the dazzling lights, and I stand at the edge of it in my T-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops, unable to help feeling alive with the energy.

I start walking because it's like there's a beam of light pulling me forward and deeper into this glittering world.

And for the first time in days, I feel free and…

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me," I whisper to myself.

Because there he is.

The man I now call my husband.

He's up ahead, but a good distance away so he won't see me.

He's dressed in his usual black shirt and pants, moving through the room with the confidence of a king.

I duck behind a slot machine so he doesn't see me, and peer around the edge to watch him move through his world.

People turn to look at him, but he doesn't acknowledge any of them. He doesn’t need their admiration to make him feel powerful because he is powerful. It radiates outward like heat from a fire, filling every corner of this room and touching every person in it.

This is his kingdom.

And he is every inch the king.

He stops to speak with a man near the baccarat tables. The man is older and says something brief. Dante listens then smiles, and I hate that my stomach flips.

He turns slightly, and the light catches his jaw. I remember what that jaw looked like an inch from my face last night when he faked moaning over bad cannelloni. I remember the heat of his breath on my neck and the dark rumble of his voice against my ear.

Fake those sounds again, and I'll drag the real ones out of you right here on this table.

A pulse of heat shoots between my legs so hard my hand grabs the slot machine for balance.

"Can I help you? Are you lost?"

I nearly jump out of my skin at the voice.

I turn to see a woman standing behind me. She’s in her late twenties, with her long dark hair pulled into a sleek ponytail and a bright, warm, professional smile on her pretty face.

"No," I say a little too fast. "No, I'm not lost. I'm just … I was looking at the, um…" I gesture vaguely at the slot machine. "The machine. I was thinking about playing it."

She looks at the machine, then back at me in my flip-flops and messy bun.

And I think it’s obvious I’m lying.

"Of course," she says, without a flicker of judgment. "It's a great machine. Very popular."

Settle in with a love story.

Head to Lokepub for more romance novels.

My gaze drifts to Dante across the room, and she notices. Her smile softens into playful conspiracy.

"Ah, yes. Mr. Di Zaro." She lowers her voice. "He's a hottie, isn’t he. Unfortunately, he's married."

"Yeah," I say. "I know."

I hold up my left hand, and my platinum wedding band catches the light.

Her eyes go wide when she sees it, then even wider when she realizes who I am.

"Oh my God," she breathes. "You’re Mrs. Di Zaro."

"Guilty."

Her professionalism snaps back into place. "I am so sorry. I shouldn't have called him a hottie; I don’t know what I was thinking."

"Why?" My eyes slide to Dante across the room. He's moved to the bar now and is leaning against the onyx counter, listening to a man in a gray suit. "You weren't lying. He is a hottie."

She lets out a startled laugh, then slaps her hand over her mouth. I can’t help it, I chuckle because I like her immediately.

"Can I get you a drink?" she asks, recovering fast. "Or I can escort you to the VIP lounge; it's really gorgeous up there."

I keep my eyes trained on my husband and shake my head.

"What's he like?" I ask. "As a boss?"

She thinks for a moment, then says, "One of the best. He’s demanding, but fair. He knows everyone's name. He doesn't yell, but he doesn't need to. You just..." She shrugs. "You don't want to disappoint him."

"Does anyone?"

"Not twice."

I can imagine.

She leans closer and whispers, "He fired a floor manager once for making a cocktail waitress cry. Fired him right there on the spot. Made him shake in his boots without even raising his voice."

I stare at her. "He did?"

“It was kind of hot,” she says, then realizes what she’s said. “Oh my goodness … I’m so sorry. I don’t know what’s gotten into me tonight.”

I laugh. “Don’t apologize, please. Talking with you has made my day. Thank you.”

She gives me a relieved smile.

I look back across the floor at my husband. He's still at the bar. The man in the gray suit is laughing at something he said.

Who would've thought my infuriatingly bossy husband would be a decent boss, or one with a sense of humor? Because the man in the gray suit is laughing again.

"I should go," I say, feeling suddenly tired from the wine.

"Of course." She gives me that warm smile again. "It was really nice to meet you, Mrs. Di Zaro."

"Sunny."

"Sunny." Her smile widens. "I'm Trixie."

"It was nice to meet you. Look, if you speak to my husband, don't tell him you saw me."

Her smile grows bigger. "Of course, it'll be our secret."

I clasp her hands. "You're a dream, thank you."

When I start to walk away, she calls out, "He's a lucky man, Sunny."

I snort. "Tell him that."

Keeping my head down, I make my way back across the floor, weaving between tables and slot machines, trying not to draw attention to myself.

When I reach the elevator, I press the button, but nothing happens.

I press it again, this time harder.

But still nothing. There is no movement, noise, or any indication at all that it's working.

I notice the small panel below the button. It's a keycard reader.

Damn it.

You clearly need a key to open it.

I press the button six more times in rapid succession, like a woman who has never encountered a keycard system before. *Why does this have to be so hard?*

"You absolute piece of shit." I smack the panel with my palm. "Damn you."

Someone clears their throat behind me, and every muscle in my body freezes.

Because I know exactly who is standing behind me.

I turn around slowly, and there he is.

My husband.

He's standing three feet away with his hands in his pockets, those dimples on either side of his amused lips.

He raises an eyebrow. "What exactly do you think you're doing, *little rose?*"

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24

DANTE

My wife broke out of the penthouse to spy on me and then couldn't break back in.

Damn, why does that make me smile when it should make me furious?

We stand side by side in the elevator as it climbs toward the penthouse, but she says nothing. Her arms are crossed, her eyes are downcast, and her ears are an adorable shade of pink.

She bites her lip in that distracting way, and I watch it silently for the first ten floors.

"So," I say.

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Whatever smug thing you're about to say. Don't waste your breath."

"Yeah, not going to happen. I want to know what you were doing in my casino when I explicitly told you to stay in the penthouse."

"Exploring."

"Exploring?"

"Yes, I was bored. The penthouse is very big and very quiet. There are only so many glasses of wine I can drink and episodes of TV I can watch."

"You could have asked Charles to arrange something."

"I didn't want Charles to arrange something. I wanted to walk around."

"You can't leave the penthouse without talking to me first," I say.

Her head turns. "That was a serious request?"

"It's not a request. I need to organize a security detail if you want to go out."

"You leave the penthouse without security."

"Yes."

"So why can't I?"

"Because I carry a gun."

"Then give me a gun."

"A big gun," I clarify. "I carry a very big gun."

"Fine, give me a very big gun."

"So you can use it against me? I don’t think so."

"Why would I do that?" She turns to face me fully. "Do I need to remind you that you're worth more to me alive than dead? If you die, the deal dies with you and my father's debt will be inherited by whoever takes your place. You may be a complete nightmare, but you are better than the unknown."

What she says is true. If I go down, there’ll be a fight for power, and the next man will not care about honoring a debt arrangement with a gambling addict and his daughter.

"So you see," she says, "keeping you alive is actually in my best interest. So give me a gun."

I almost smile, but force it from my lips as the elevator continues to climb.

"Do you even know how to shoot?" I ask.

"I could learn," she says.

"You've never held a firearm."

"Never. But I'm a fast learner."

"This isn't making espresso, Sunny."

"No. It's pointing a thing and pulling a trigger."

"That thing kills people."

“That’s why I need to learn how to use one properly.”

The elevator opens into the penthouse, and she steps out ahead of me.

I tell myself not to do it.

That she doesn’t need a gun because I’ll assign a personal bodyguard to escort her wherever she wants to go.

But still, I find myself opening my mouth before I’ve got the sense to close it.

"Put on shoes," I say.

She turns around. "What?"

"Shoes. Something closed-toe. You have five minutes."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to teach you how to use a firearm."

Her eyes brighten with surprise. "Really?”

"Really."

She smiles mischievously. "Did I just win an argument, Mr. Di Zaro?"

"Put on shoes, *little rose*."

She gives me a sunny smile, then sprints down the hall to her room. I’m slightly unnerved by how that bright smile made me feel.

It’s like something warm slowly moving through my body.

Up until now, I’ve seen Angry Sunny, Feisty Sunny, Exhausted Sunny, and Sarcastic Sunny. Now I’ve seen Happy Sunny, and suddenly it makes sense why she was voted *Most Likely to Make Everyone Smile.*

For the first time, I understand it.

And, inexplicably, I like knowing I’m the one who put that smile on her face.

While I wait for her, I pull my phone from my pocket and call Caruso.

He answers immediately. “Boss?”

“Open the range. A private session for two.”

“Consider it done.”

Ending the call, I look down the hallway to where Sunny disappeared. I can hear her in her room, opening drawers and the muffled thud of shoes hitting the floor.

Teaching Sunny how to shoot and carry a firearm isn’t as crazy as it sounds.

Because the truth is, a wife who can't defend herself is a liability.

And in my world, liabilities don't survive.

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25

SUNNY

The firing range is in the basement of Fortune. Dante holds the door open to it, and I walk in ahead of him.

Six lanes line the windowless galley, with paper targets hanging at the far end of each.

He walks to the counter and opens one of the cases. Inside is a handgun.

Lifting it out, he checks something on the side of it, then sets it on the counter.

"This is a Glock," he says. "It’s good for beginners."

"I'm not a beginner. I'm a *never*."

"That's why we're here."

He picks up the gun and holds it out to me, grip first.

When I take it, I turn toward the paper target at the end of the lane.

I’ve thought about owning a gun before. Back in California, I had every reason in the world to protect myself. But things moved fast, and I never had the chance to learn before I had to flee for my life.

Dante steps behind me. "Place your feet shoulder-width apart."

I adjust my stance.

"Wider." His foot taps the inside of my right ankle, nudging it outward another inch. The contact sends a jolt up my leg that ends up right behind my navel.

"Now raise the gun with both hands, keeping a firm grip with your right hand and supporting with the left."

I lift the gun.

"Relax your shoulders."

I try.

"You're tense."

"I'm holding a gun for the first time. Tense feels like the correct emotion."

He steps closer, and I feel his heat before I feel his hands. His chest touches my back, and his hands come around me and close over mine on the gun. They’re big and warm and completely dwarf mine.

Heat coils between my legs when he wraps his strong fingers around my knuckles and repositions my grip.

"Like this," he says, his mouth next to my ear. He’s close enough that his breath brushes my skin when he talks.

Fake those sounds again, and I'll drag the real ones out of you right here on this table.

I shiver against him, and his fingers tighten over mine.

"Focus," he says.

I try to focus, but his chest is pressed against my back, and I can feel every breath he takes.

"Breathe," he says quietly. "In through the nose. Out through the mouth. Squeeze the trigger on the exhale."

I control my breathing, and my finger finds the trigger.

"Not yet." His hands leave the gun and slide down my body to my waist, settling on my hips.

I stop breathing entirely.

"Square your hips," he murmurs.

I can't think. Because I can feel everything.

His breath on my neck.

His hands on my hips.

And lower. The hard, thick length of him, and damn, he isn’t small.

My eyes close, and I have to bite down on my lower lip to keep from moaning because every cell in me wants what he is not even attempting to hide from me.

The gun lowers an inch.

"Eyes open," he says, his voice rough.

I forget I’m holding a gun and arch into him, my body aching for the closeness.

The side of his face brushes my cheek, and I feel his mouth close to my throat, not touching but close enough for his breath to skate across my skin.

Oh God, I want him to touch me.

I lower the gun and melt into him more.

His hand slides to my stomach, pulling me against him, and my head tips back as my eyes half close. I am one second from putting this gun on the counter, turning around, and taking what my body is begging me to take.

Until the door opens.

"Boss, I —"

We fly apart.

Or I fly apart. Dante steps back with the calm control of a man who has spent his entire life not flinching.

"Caruso," Dante says, his voice icy.

"Sorry, boss. Didn't realize you were… I'll come back."

"Wait outside."

"Yes, sir."

The door shuts, and silence rushes back in.

I stare at the target with my face on fire.

I raise the gun, line up the target, and fire six rapid shots. Each one punches through the silence, the tension, and the target.

I lower the gun, and Dante hits the button on the wall that brings the target gliding toward us.

The results are impressive. Two in the chest. One in the shoulder. One in the throat. Two in the face.

"Not bad," he says. "For a never."

I put the gun on the counter and turn to face him.

"I told you," I say. "I'm a fast learner."

His gaze drops to my mouth.

"Yes," he says. "You are."

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26

DANTE

My wife is a natural with a gun. She put six holes in a paper man, two of them in the face, and it turns me on more than it should.

Now I’m hard as fuck, and that is a fucking complication.

I walk her out of the range to where Caruso is waiting for us by the elevator. “What did you need me for?” I ask.

“One of Grazalov’s men was spotted on the casino floor tonight.”

I look at Sunny. She’d been walking around the casino alone tonight. No protection. No security. If one of Grazalov’s men had been there, bold enough to make a move, she could have been hurt before anyone knew what was happening.

The thought sends a cold edge through me.

“Take Mrs. Di Zaro up to the penthouse,” I say to Caruso.

Sunny turns, surprised. "You're not coming?"

Her cheeks are still flushed, and her eyes are bright and sparkling. I keep my hands in my pockets where they can't do anything stupid, like take her by the hand, ride the elevator all the way to the penthouse, and spend the rest of the night making us both moan.

"I have business."

Her gaze lingers on my face. Probably because my tone was sharper than I’d intended.

"Well," she says, a little softer. "Thanks for the lesson."

I don’t miss the disappointment in her tone, and I don’t like the way it tightens a knot in my chest.

"You’re welcome."

The elevator doors open, but she pauses.

"Does that mean I get a gun now?" she asks with a sunshiny smile.

“We’ll discuss it later.”

“You mean we’ll argue about it later.”

“That too.”

Mischief sparkles in her beautiful eyes. “And I will win, and you will give me a gun. So let’s skip over you pretending you’re not going to give me one and just give me one already.”

"Goodnight, Sunny."

The doors close, and I’m left alone in the corridor. But I don’t move because I’m trying to process whatever the fuck is going on with me.

When I stood close to Sunny and felt her soft skin under my palms, not only did I have a violent urge to peel those yoga pants off her and take her against the wall, but something warm and unusual poured into my chest.

Something achy and soft. And, Jesus, what the fuck is wrong with me?

Whatever it is, I need to get a grip and put a stop to it.

My phone vibrates in my pocket.

It’s John Marco.

"Grazalov's man was on the casino floor tonight,” he says when I answer.

“So I’ve heard.”

“The idiot thought I was you. He said his boss wanted a talk and to consider it an official invitation."

“And what did you tell the asshole?”

“To consider this an official invitation to go fuck himself.”

The corners of my mouth lift. “Well said.”

I end the call and go back down to my office because Grazalov is a problem I know how to solve. Men who want what's mine get handled. There's a protocol for that.

But there is no protocol for whatever the hell happened in that firing range.

The memory of her body against mine still burns hot in my veins. I can still feel her soft curves pressed against my chest and the heat of her body seeping through my clothes.

It made me hard then. And it’s keeping me hard now.

And no matter how much I want to deny it, I can’t.

I want to taste her.

I want to drop to my knees and bury my mouth between her thighs until I know exactly how sweet that pussy is. I want to sink my cock into her, deep and slow, and fuck the ache out of both of us.

But I have no intention of crossing that line. The deal is for twelve months, and then we divorce. One taste of her would ruin everything.

So to avoid doing that, I do what I do best. I work. And by the time I’m finished, it’s well after two in the morning when I finally ride the elevator up to the penthouse.

I strip off in my bedroom and stand under a hot shower until my skin stings, my shoulders loosen, and I slowly start to relax.

But the annoying throb in my gut doesn't go away. It reminds me that on the other side of the wall, Sunny is probably stretched out on her bed wearing those tiny bed shorts and T-shirt.

Fuck.

Deciding a nightcap might knock me out, I dry off and pull on my underwear, then head for the kitchen.

And stop dead.

Because Sunny isn’t in her bedroom. She’s in the kitchen wearing nothing but her T-shirt and a tiny pair of panties, filling a glass with water in the dark.

My cock hardens behind the thin fabric of my underwear at the sight of her.

She hasn't seen me yet.

I could walk away.

Avoid the disaster waiting to happen.

But I don't.

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27

SUNNY

I'd awakened gasping in the dark from another nightmare. Thankfully, they're not as frequent as they once were, but when they hit, they make it impossible to fall back asleep.

Which is why I'm at the sink, filling a glass with water, when the back of my neck prickles.

Goosebumps sweep down my arms, lifting every hair on my body like the air pressure in the room just changed.

I turn off the water and lift my head.

I can't hear anything, but I feel him.

Oh God, get a grip.

I head toward my room with my glass of water but walk smack into a half-naked wall of muscle.

I freeze.

He freezes.

We stand in the dark kitchen with our bodies mere inches from each other, and neither of us moves.

He's dressed in nothing but boxer shorts that cling to his body and do nothing to hide his size.

"I'm sorry if I woke you. I just wanted a drink of water," I say, looking up at him.

One half of his face is lit by the moonlight, the other half swallowed by shadow, and the effect is devastating.

My mouth goes dry.

I nervously lick my lips, and his gaze drops to them.

The movement is so slight that I could almost convince myself I imagined it.

My heart gives a hard, painful beat.

Neither of us moves.

I can feel his warmth against me now. I can smell him. I'm suddenly conscious of my own breathing, of how shallow it has become, and I wonder if he can hear the frantic rhythm of my heart.

His eyes lift to mine again.

Something in that look makes every thought in my head scatter.

It feels as though his mouth is already on mine, even though inches of darkness separate us.

I want to close them.

The thought arrives so quickly and so intensely that it frightens me.

I want to close those inches.

I want him to do it.

I want...

He raises his hand.

My breath catches.

His fingers brush a strand of hair from my face and tuck it gently behind my ear. The tenderness of the gesture affects me more than it should. I go completely still beneath his touch, afraid that even the slightest movement will break whatever this is between us.

His fingertips linger against my skin. I feel their warmth long after he moves them, trailing slowly along the side of my neck.

A shiver travels through me.

His touch is barely there, but every nerve in my body seems to have gathered beneath his fingers.

His gaze drops to my mouth again.

This time, I know I didn't imagine it.

My lips part, but I can't seem to make myself breathe.

He leans closer, but only slightly.

Though it's enough to make my entire body respond. I find myself tipping my face toward his before I can stop myself, closing a fraction of that impossible distance.

For one suspended moment, I'm certain he's going to kiss me.

I can almost feel it.

My eyes fall closed.

Kiss me.

The words are silent, but the plea feels enormous inside me.

His fingers slide once more along my neck, and I wait for the warmth of his mouth.

I wait.

And then his hand falls away.

The loss of his touch is immediate and startling.

I open my eyes.

He has already stepped back.

The sudden space between us feels cold.

I stare at him, trying to understand what just happened, my heart still racing from a kiss that never came.

His jaw tightens. His eyes remain on mine for one long, unbearable second.

Then he looks away.

“Good night, Sunny.”

He walks away, leaving me standing in the dark with my glass of water forgotten and the ghost of his touch burning against my skin.

I hurry back to my room and climb into bed, but only end up staring at the ceiling, replaying my encounter with Dante. About the way the moonlight looked on his nearly naked body and the feral look in his eyes. I can still smell him, that warm, masculine scent that seems to trigger a carnal response in me whenever I’m around it.

I haven’t wanted a man to touch me in a very long time, and I was starting to worry I never would, despite my therapist assuring me someday I would.

Am I crazy for wanting it to be Dante?

Because I do want it to be him.

My whole body wants it to be him.

Right now, every nerve is a lit fuse, and the ache between my legs is so intense it almost hurts.

I slide my hand beneath my panties where I’m soaked.

I tell myself not to think about him, but it’s useless because he’s all I’m thinking about as I tease my clit.

I think about us at the firing range.

About his hands and the way his strong fingers dragged across my skin.

About his mouth an inch from my ear and the gravel in his voice when he spoke.

My fingers move faster, and my free hand grips the sheet when a loud moan escapes me. Then another. And another.

I’m not worried about him hearing because these rooms are probably soundproof.

So I moan loudly because I'm right there, right at the edge.

When I come, my thighs clamp around my hand, and a raw, primal sound tears from me. Because all I can see, hear, and feel is his body claiming mine, and his mouth devouring me alive. *“Oh fuck…”*

When I come back down, I huff out a breath.

Somewhere down the hall, behind a closed door, is a man who might actually be the devil.

And I came harder thinking about him than I ever have with someone touching me.

I pull the covers up, curl onto my side, and press my face into the pillow.

I'm in so much trouble.

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28

DANTE

What. The. Fuck.

Was that a moan?

Or did I imagine it because I’m so fucking hard and I wanted to hear it.

Another sound comes through the wall. It’s faint, but it’s definitely a moan.

I don't move. Don’t breathe.

Then I hear another one.

Then another.

She’s touching herself.

Fuck me.

I sit on the edge of the bed with my elbows on my knees my head in my hands, trying not to think about what she is doing and what she looks like doing it.

It was hard enough to walk away from her in the kitchen. Seeing her eyes close and her lips part, silently begging me to kiss her, took everything I had to step away.

My cock has been hard since, and now it’s begging for relief as I think about her touching herself on the other side of the wall.

There’s silence, then another gasp that breaks apart in the middle and becomes a desperate whimper.

My hand grips the edge of the mattress.

Don't.

Through the wall, I hear another long moan.

Don't do this.

I get up and begin to pace. But somehow, I end up at the wall that separates our rooms. I rest my forehead against it. She's right on the other side, touching her sweet pussy, and it is pure torture.

Move away.

But another moan stops me, this one so much closer. I press my palm against the wall as if I can reach out and touch her.

Don't do this.

With my other hand, I push my underwear down, and my cock springs free, thick and hard enough to hurt.

Don't.

I wrap my hand around the base and start to stroke.

I close my eyes, and I see her. On the other side of the wall, her back arched, her lips parted in a moan, her hand beneath her panties.

I keep stroking. Harder. *Tighter*.

Tension builds, and my hips begin to move. Precum pools at the tip, and I drag it up and down my length as I stroke.

All I can think about is her. Six inches away, touching herself as I touch myself.

My palm moves faster over my cock, and my breath quickens.

Then her cry comes through the wall, tearing through me. I come hard with a full-body shudder, my cum spilling over my fist as I disappear under waves of rolling pleasure.

Closing my eyes, I tremble through the aftershocks and the waning pleasure, telling myself this was a one-time thing. My body needed the release, and it's only natural I'd think about the gorgeous woman wearing tiny panties I just saw in my kitchen.

But I don't move. I keep my forehead on the wall as my breathing slowly returns to normal. Reality sinks in. She's a mere six inches away, but it might as well be six miles because this means nothing. Our marriage means nothing.

In the bathroom, I wash my hands, then look at my reflection in the mirror, trying to take stock of the situation.

Jerking off to my wife touching herself is not an admission of anything. She is my wife in name only.

And that won’t change.

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29

SUNNY

I wake up to an empty penthouse again.

After pulling on a robe, I pad along the marble floor to the kitchen, where I start making coffee, and that's when I see it.

A phone sitting on the kitchen counter.

A small white card sits behind it. I pick up the card.

There is no signature or message. Just a pin number.

PIN: 0712

The phone is the latest model iPhone. Picking it up, I press the power button and enter the PIN.

The home screen is clean. Default wallpaper. No apps except the basics, and in contacts there are only four entries.

Dante.

Charles.

John Marco.

Joseph.

My heart stops.

Dad.

My thumb is on his name before I even think about it.

A woman answers in a warm, professional voice.

"Good morning, Montrose House. How may I direct your call?"

Thinking I must have the wrong number somehow, I pull the phone away from my ear to look at the screen. But this is the number under my

father’s name.

"Hello?" the woman says.

"Hi. Sorry. I … what is this place?"

"This is Montrose House. We're a private residential clinic specializing in addiction recovery. Gambling, substance dependency, and related compulsive disorders. How can I help you?"

Addiction recovery.

Little tingles start at the base of my spine.

"I'm looking for a patient. Joseph Meadows. My … he's my father."

“And your name?”

“Sunny Mead … I mean, Sunny Di Zaro.”

“Ah yes, Mrs. Di Zaro, your husband mentioned you would be calling. Please wait one moment while I put you through to his room.”

His room?

She puts me on hold, and I hear classical piano.

A private clinic for gambling addiction.

Is my father getting help?

The hold music stops, and then I hear a voice I would recognize anywhere on this Earth.

"Sunny?"

I burst into tears. "Dad?"

"Oh, sweetheart. Sunny, love. I'm here. I'm right here."

"Are you okay?" I manage between sobs. "Dad, are you okay? Are you safe?"

"I'm fine, honey. I'm fine. I promise. I'm good. Better than I've been in a long time, actually."

His voice sounds so clear and strong. Not like the defeated man who had retreated into himself the last few months.

"How long have you been there?" I wipe my face with the back of my hand.

"Since the night you…" He pauses. "After you left."

The night Dante took me from my father's house and locked me in his penthouse.

"A man comes to play chess with me," Dad says. "One of the counselors. He's terrible at it, but he tries. I’ve made friends. Everyone is so lovely here."

I laugh through my tears, and it comes out sounding like a hiccup.

"Dante has come by twice now. He told me you were safe and well. Are you? Tell me the truth."

Dante has been visiting him?

"I'm okay, Dad. I promise. He's..." I press my fingers to my eyes. "He's treating me fine."

"He seems like a serious man."

"That's one word for it."

I lean against the counter and close my eyes.

Dad continues. "I'm getting better, Sunny. I can feel it. I only wish I had done this sooner. Before I…" His voice catches. "Before I lost everything that mattered."

"You didn't lose me, Dad."

"No." He lets out a long breath. " And I count my blessings every day."

We're both quiet for a moment.

"I love you, Dad."

"I love you too, sweetheart. I know I've made a mess of things. But I'm going to do better. That's why I'm here. I'm going to make it up to you."

"I know you will."

"You call me again soon, okay."

"Can I come see you?"

He pauses. "I miss you, sweetheart. But I don't want you to see me here, like this. Just give me a couple of weeks."

It hurts that I can't see him. I can hear the shame in his voice, and I wish he knew he didn't need to be. But I respect what he is asking.

"Then I will call you every day."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"I love you, kiddo."

"I love you too, Dad."

I hang up, and tears of relief stream down my face.

My father is safe.

And not just safe. He's getting the help he so desperately needs.

And Dante is the one who ensured that.

Gratitude is a strange thing to feel toward the man who blackmailed you into marriage. But it's there, adding another layer to a situation that is already a mindfuck.

Who is this man?

Maybe he’s not the monster I thought he was.

Wondering just how far Dante’s generosity goes, I look up the bank that holds our mortgage to see if they have foreclosed on our house yet. But I find it has been paid in full. Not just the three months in arrears. *All of it.*

Not only that, but I also call my mom’s medical insurance company and learn that it’s been paid too.

Dante has cleared all our debt.

The urge rises fast and fierce in me, so fast I start moving before the idea has fully formed.

I want to thank him, which is insane because this whole situation is crazy.

But I want to do something to show him that I am grateful for what he is doing for my father.

I pick up the phone and scroll to Charles.

"Mrs. Di Zaro,” he says in that clipped British accent when he answers. "Good morning."

I lean against the counter.

"Charles. What are you up to today?"

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DANTE

It's after midnight when I arrive home, and when the elevator doors open, the penthouse is dark and quiet.

Sunny must be in bed.

A note sits on the kitchen counter.

Dante,

Dinner's in the fridge.

— S

I stare at the note. The last time she cooked for me, the cannelloni was as appetizing as a biohazard. I can only imagine what abomination she has conjured up tonight.

Still, it’s been hours since I’ve eaten, so I walk to the fridge. Inside, is a full baking dish covered in foil sitting on the middle shelf.

I peel back the corner. *Lasagna*. The top layer is golden brown with crisp edges and looks nothing like the soggy cannelloni.

In fact, it looks really good.

Taking a fork from the drawer, I carve off a mouthful and am surprised to taste actual flavors like salt, garlic, and a rich meat sauce.

I take another bite, then another, then give up on mouthfuls and cut off a massive slice to reheat it in the microwave.

My wife either bought it from a restaurant and is trying to pass it off as her own creation, or she’s had someone make it for her.

But she did not make it herself.

I don’t need a wife who cooks. But I do appreciate the gesture. Enough that I’m seconds away from licking the plate.

"I see you like my lasagna."

I look up.

She's standing at the edge of the hallway, barefoot, with her hair loose around her shoulders. She’s wearing little cotton shorts that barely reach mid-thigh and a ribbed tank top that clings to every curve.

My gaze drifts to the hard peaks pressing through the thin cotton of her top, and my body immediately makes a series of deeply unhelpful executive decisions.

My cock stirs.

My mouth waters.

And all my blood rushes south like it’s late for an appointment.

Christ.

"I do," I say, forcing my eyes to settle on her face. "It’s very good."

She walks to the counter and leans against it.

"I had help," she says.

"Help?"

"Charles came over."

My brows lift. "Charles cooked in my kitchen?"

"Charles cooked in my kitchen." She grins wickedly. "In an apron. Over his three-piece suit."

She’s cute when she’s being cute.

She unfolds her arms and drops her hands to the counter's edge behind her. The shift pulls the tank top tight across her chest, and I can see the shape of her full, round breasts and those stiff peaks pressing into the fabric.

I want to put my mouth on them, both of them. I want to suck one nipple through the fabric and feel her arch against me the way she did at the shooting range.

I want to hear the sounds she makes right against my ear. Moans, whimpers, and the word please as she writhes beneath me.

I clear my throat to stop myself from groaning.

"And to what do I owe such special attention?" I ask.

The playfulness on her face softens.

"It’s to say thank you for the phone," she says.

"It’s a necessity, not a gift."

"It's a phone with my father's number in it." She gives me a soft smile, her plush lips gleaming. "And my father's number goes to a private addiction clinic in the country where he's been receiving treatment since the night you took me."

I hold her gaze, but remain silent. She's softer tonight. Her armor is gone, and beneath it she's warm, open, and earnest. The girl next door. The sunshine that lives inside her name. She's looking at me like I'm the opposite of the man who ruined her life, and deep inside I acknowledge I've wanted that for far longer than I care to admit. To not be the villain in her story.

"You put him there," she says. "You admitted him the same night you brought me here. And you've been visiting him."

"His recovery is in my interest. A relapsed debtor is a liability."

"Is that why you pull up a chair and sit with him?" Her voice is soft. "Is that why you reassured him his daughter was safe?"

I don't answer. Instead, I walk to the bar and pour myself a drink. I've never felt as weak toward my wife as I do right now. Her questions are pulling me apart, unraveling the tapestry I'm trying desperately to keep together. And they are questions I don't have answers for.

"He sounded good, Dante."

"Good." Is all I manage.

I turn the scotch in my hand and let the moment stretch out.

"Tomorrow night," I say. "We have the dinner."

She blinks at the sudden change of subject but goes with it. "The one with your business associates?"

Business associates. I can't help but smile at her innocence.

"Yes. This will be your introduction as my wife."

"That sounds pretty formal."

"I expect you to uphold your end of the deal. Now that you can see I have upheld mine."

Her brow furrows, as if my mentioning the deal brought her back to reality with a jolt. But she nods. "What should I wear?"

"Something classy. Elegant."

"Okay," she says, her expression unreadable. "Classy and elegant. I can do that."

"I know you can."

She catches her lower lip between her teeth, then releases it, and it comes back flushed, full, and wet.

Swallowing thickly, I squeeze my fingers hard around the glass in my hand because I want to taste those lips. And if she does it one more time, I'm going to lose my goddamn mind.

She does it again.

I put my glass on the kitchen counter with a louder clunk than I intended, and she looks up, startled.

"Goodnight," I say. "The lasagna was excellent."

I walk away before she can respond and don't look back. In the bedroom, I close my door and lean against it, dropping my head back and closing my eyes.

I need a fucking ice-cold shower.

The kind of cold that kills desire dead.

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31

SUNNY

The following morning, Charles arrives at nine armed with a garment rack.

"Good morning, Mrs. Di Zaro," he says, wheeling it into the living room. "I've taken the liberty of selecting some options for this evening."

Tonight is the dinner with Dante's business associates.

The big deal where I'm expected to play the dutiful wife, and I'd be lying if I wasn't feeling anxious about it.

Charles unzips the first bag. Inside is a deep emerald gown with a slit that would show most of my left leg. He hangs it on the rack and moves to the next, a sexy off-the-shoulder gown in shimmering midnight blue.

The third is a black sheath, backless and long-sleeved.

Three stunning reminders of who I need to pretend to be. Feeling even more nervous, I stare at the rack.

"Charles."

"Mrs. Di Zaro?"

"What if I screw this up?"

He folds his hands behind his back and looks at me.

"I have worked for this family for twenty-three years. I have watched men twice your size and half your intelligence walk into rooms full of very dangerous people and hold their own on nothing but bravado and cologne."

He straightens the emerald gown on its hanger. "You have something far more useful than either."

"What?"

"You're likeable." He gives me a wink. "They won't know what hit them."

I give him a sunny smile. “How do you know exactly what to say and when to say it?”

“This isn’t my first rodeo, Sunny.”

My smile turns into a broad grin. “You just called me Sunny. And you can’t take it back. We’re friends now.”

He gives me an unimpressed look. But he doesn’t mean a second of it.

“I will leave you to it.”

He shows himself out, and I pick up the pair of headphones I found by the TV, put on a playlist on my phone, and crank it up loud.

It’s an ’80s song. A fun song that keeps the anxiety out and the confidence in. By track four, I’m feeling excited for the night ahead and dancing around the kitchen as I make popcorn.

Putting the popcorn in the microwave, I dance and spin … and freeze.

Because there's a strange woman standing in my living room.

She's leaning against the back of the sofa with one hip cocked, watching me with a look that makes my stomach drop.

"Can I help you?" I ask, pulling off my headphones.

She doesn't move from the sofa. Instead, she gives me a small, polished smile that makes my spine tingle.

"You must be the wife."

The wife.

I hear the snark in her tone, the contempt radiating off her in waves.

"And you are?"

"Chantelle." She pushes off the sofa and walks toward the kitchen. She's wearing a fitted black dress that hugs every curve and a gold chain around her waist that catches the light. "I'm the housekeeper."

I look at her dress, the heels, and the full face of makeup.

Housekeeper. My ass.

I cock an eyebrow. "The housekeeper?"

"I take care of the penthouse. Have done for the past three months. But Dante and I go way back."

Her eyes flash at me, and my stomach tightens with a hot, ugly knot that burns.

"I usually come on Fridays," she says, trailing a manicured finger along the edge of the counter as she walks through the kitchen. "Dante likes me to come on Fridays."

She smiles and lets the sentence hang between us, and I feel the sting.

An ugly twist of jealousy burns in my stomach, and for one crazy, irrational moment, I want to scratch this woman's eyes out. Who the fuck does she think she is, walking into my home and talking about my husband that way?

I cross my arms.

Okay, honey. I get it. You fuck my husband.

"I know this place inside out," she continues as she moves around the room like a predator getting ready to pounce. "Every room. Every corner." She glances at me over her shoulder. "The bedroom has the best view; don't you think?"

The knot in my stomach twists tighter. I hate that it's there because it feels a lot like jealousy, and I have no right to be jealous of a man who kidnapped me, forced me into marriage, and keeps me locked away like Rapunzel in his ivory tower.

But I am.

I take in her dark brown hair, red lips, and the heavy, smoky eyes that shine with smug glee.

"The sheets are Egyptian cotton," she says. "Fifteen hundred thread count. He's very particular about his sheets." She tilts her head. "I'm very particular about them too."

Enough.

"Get out," I snap.

Her polished smile falters for half a second. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Get out of my penthouse."

"*Your* penthouse?"

"Yes, mine. *The wife*. Now leave."

Her eyes narrow, and I see something cold and sharp and mean in them.

"I was just introducing myself."

"You were just marking your territory." I walk to the elevator and stab the button, and the doors open immediately. "Fridays are canceled. Now get the fuck out."

She smirks as she sashays past me.

At the elevator doors, she stops. "He'll get bored, sweetheart. Men like him always do."

She steps into the elevator, and I jab the button to close the doors. "Don’t let the door hit you in the ass on the way out, *sweetheart*."

As the elevator starts to descend, I stand there with my heart hammering and fire raging through my veins.

I’m not a jealous person, and I don’t think of women as competition.

I’m very much a *women straighten other women’s crowns* type of girl.

But that … oh boy, that was something.

Obviously, Dante fucks her.

I feel sick.

Is he still fucking her?

I look at the couch and wonder if he’s fucked her on it. And the kitchen counter. And then I think about his head between her thighs as she sits on the edge of his bed, and my temperature is positively feverish.

I stalk over to the garment rack and look at the three elegant dresses supposed to help me make a good impression on Dante’s business colleagues.

I stare at them for a long time and feel the fire burn through me.

He lied to me.

He told me there would be no other women while we were married.

But Chantelle wasn’t here to vacuum and wash floors. She was here to polish something else entirely. *My husband’s cock.*

I stalk past the rack of dresses and into my bedroom.

He wants a wife tonight? Fine. He can have a wife.

But she won’t be the one he asked for.

She's going to be the one he deserves.

I walk into the walk-in closet, yank through the dresses Charles sent over the other day, and pull out the one I have in mind.

Then I pick up the phone and call Charles.

"I need boots," I say. "Thigh-high. Black. With heels tall enough to make a statement."

He pauses. "What kind of statement?"

"The kind that starts a war."

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DANTE

She's late.

Fifteen fucking minutes late, to be precise.

I check my phone again.

Around the table, seventeen of my highest-ranking men sit in their chairs, drinking my wine and eating my food, pretending not to notice the empty seat beside me.

The table seats twenty. I'm at the head. John Marco is on my right. The empty chair is on my left, and it might as well have a spotlight on it.

These are not men who miss details.

Most of them are old school. Men who grew up with mafia tradition, who understand that a don's wife is not a decoration, she's a direct reflection of her husband’s life away from the syndicate. She tells the room whether his house is in order.

And right now, my house has an empty chair.

I take a sip of wine, then check my phone again.

Seventeen minutes late.

I text my driver, Deno. “Where the fuck is she?”

He had specific instructions to have her here at eight.

I had business on the other side of the city or else I would’ve brought her here myself.

"Relax," John Marco murmurs beside me. "She'll be here."

"I am relaxed."

"You've checked your phone three times in two minutes."

"I'm monitoring a situation."

"Yeah. The situation of your wife not showing up."

I give him a look that makes most men think twice about opening their mouths again. But my twin only takes a sip of his wine and grins wider.

When she arrives, Sunny and I will have a very direct conversation about punctuality.

About respect.

About what it means when a room full of men who kill for a living are sitting at a table questioning my ability to control my own household because my wife is late.

I will be calm, and I will explain, clearly and without emotion, that when I say dinner is at eight, I mean eight.

The doors open, and every head turns to look at my wife standing in the doorway.

Suddenly, her punctuality becomes the least of my problems.

Because my wife crosses the threshold like an EF5 tornado in sparkles and red lipstick, and the room falls quiet.

Dead quiet.

Her dress is a galaxy of silver, clinging to her body like it was sewn on. The back plunges to the base of her spine, and the hem is so short it's probably going to be the death of me.

My gaze drops to her legs. They’re clad in thigh-high black boots, and all I can think about is how those thighs would look wrapped around my head.

She's left her hair down, and it spills down her shoulders in thick blonde waves, the kind of hair made for a man's fist.

She swings her hips as she enters the room. Nothing about her is elegant. Everything about her is deadly. She's a weapon in stiletto boots, walking into a room full of killers, and every single one of them is staring.

And she knows it.

"Holy shit," John Marco says under his breath.

Sunny smiles a thousand-watt smile as she sashays in.

"Hi, everyone! I am so sorry I'm late. Time completely got away from me."

She moves along the side of the table, stops beside Danny the Shoes, and puts her hand on his shoulder. "I'm Sunny. You must be one of Dante's

friends."

Danny is a man who has personally disposed of eleven bodies, but right now he turns pink. "Danny, ma'am. It’s a pleasure."

"Danny! Great name. Love the tie."

She moves on, touching Bobby Bianchi's arm as she passes. "That cologne is incredible. What is it?" She doesn't wait for the answer and keeps moving, brushing her fingers along the backs of the chairs as she passes.

When she passes Garza, he openly stares at the strip of skin between her boots and her dress, and I decide I am going to burn this restaurant to the ground with every man who looks at her in it.

Arriving beside me, she looks at the empty chair on my left.

Then sits on my lap.

"Hi, baby," she says loud enough for the table to hear. "Sorry I'm late. I couldn't decide what to wear."

Baby.

My defiant, *wants-to-kill-me-wife* called me baby.

She looks at the table, eyes wide, and gestures down at her legs. "And then I couldn't find my stockings." She lifts one booted leg and slowly turns her ankle, letting every man at the table follow the line of leather from her heel to her thigh. I feel my blood pressure hit the roof. “But then I realized I don’t need to wear any with these boots.”

John Marco makes a strangled noise into his wine glass, while a growl rumbles in my throat.

I see what she's doing.

This is not a woman who forgot to be elegant or misunderstood my instructions.

This is a woman who knew the instructions but decided to crumple them into a ball and set them on fire.

But why?

What has made my wife so mad that she’s ready to declare war on me?

Yesterday, she was letting down her armor and making me lasagna. Tonight, she is itching for a fight.

Then I remember it’s Friday, and a smile tugs at my lips because Friday means one thing.

Chantelle.

Clearly, my ex-housekeeper ignored the message I sent her two days ago, telling her I no longer need her services, and decided to show up

anyway.

And whatever she said to Sunny lit the fuse I'm now sitting under.

Sunny is jealous.

And she’s jealous enough to put on thigh-high boots, slip into a plunging dress, march into a room of armed criminals, sit on my lap, and call me baby.

Well, goddamn.

Jealousy means she cares. And caring means I've gotten under her skin the same way she's gotten under mine. *And damn, that feels nice.*

She winds her arms around my neck and kisses me. No doubt for the benefit of every man in this room. A performance designed to send a message. That she can’t be controlled.

But two can play that game.

So I kiss her back.

Not soft. Not tender. I grab the back of her neck, pulling her into me and kissing her like I've been thinking about nothing else for twenty-four hours.

I kiss her hard and deep. My tongue pushes past her lips, and she moans, which tells me she wasn't expecting this.

Or my cock.

Which is directly beneath her ass and hardening so fast it's almost painful, and I know there is no way she can't feel it.

But she recovers fast, and her fingers slide into the hair at the back of my head as she kisses me back.

I pull back. Not far. Just enough to see her face.

Her eyes are dilated, her cheeks are flushed, and she's looking at me like she forgot where she was.

"Don't apologize for being late, baby," I say. "You're worth the wait."

She tries to stand.

But I close my arm around her waist and hold her in place.

"No, *baby*," I say, my mouth close to her ear. "You can stay right there."

I shift my hips just enough to press my hard length against the thin fabric between her thighs, and my hands slide to her hips so I can hold her where I want her.

Which is right on my hard cock.

She gasps, and her fingers grip her outer thighs.

"Dante," she breathes.

I shift again, and she bites down on her lip.

"Smile, *little rose*," I murmur against her ear. "Your audience is watching."

Her smile is strained and furious; her eyes promise murder.

She came to this dinner to make a point. She walked in dressed to kill to punish me for Chantelle.

She took a shot, but she missed.

Now I’m going to make her wish it killed me.

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33

SUNNY

Jmiscalculated.

I walked into this room like a sparkly grenade, and now I'm the one who is about to explode.

Because his cock is pressed against me through the thin fabric of my underwear, and I can feel every subtle movement rub against my clit.

To the table, it probably looks like a man holding his wife on his lap at a dinner party. Affectionate and normal.

But beneath table level, he has me trapped on top of the hard ridge of his cock, and I can feel the tight coil begin to unwind between my legs.

Not that anyone is paying attention. The table has moved on. Conversations have resumed now that the storm has passed, and everyone’s attention turned away the moment Dante kissed me.

The show's over, except if they looked closely, they’d see it was far from over. Because Dante slides his hand between my naked thighs beneath the table.

John Marco leaves to take a phone call, and farther down the table, a handsome older gentleman holds everyone’s attention as he tells a story.

Dante leans close to my ear. His breath is warm. His voice is barely a murmur.

"That was quite an entrance."

I stare straight ahead. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"The dress. The boots. Sitting on my lap. Calling me baby." His thumb draws a lazy circle on my inner thigh. "You wanted a reaction."

"I wanted to make a point."

"You made one. Just not the one you intended."

His hips shift, the change of angle hitting directly on my clit, and the pressure is almost too much to bear. I have to swallow the moan.

"I know what you were doing," he says, still with that low murmur. "You met Chantelle."

I say nothing.

"She's a housekeeper, Sunny. Nothing more."

"She seemed to think she was more."

"She was wrong. She was fired a few days ago."

I swallow to hide my relief.

“Are you sure? Because she seemed to think it was an ongoing thing.”

“She was a favor to a friend.”

“I suggest you make that make sense.”

He shifts again, and my teeth bite into my lip because my body wants to grind against him so bad.

"So you put on a dress that barely covers your ass," he continues, his mouth grazing the shell of my ear, "and boots designed to stop traffic, and you walked into a room full of my men, looking like every fantasy I've had in the last week, all because a woman you just met implied something that wasn't true."

"I didn't do it because of Chantelle. And I didn’t do it for you."

"You sat on my lap. That was very much for me. I’m enjoying it very much as I’m sure you can feel."

"It was a strategic decision."

"Was kissing me strategic?"

"You kissed me first."

"And you kissed me back." His lips brush the shell of my ear, and the pressure between my thighs intensifies. *Oh boy, I am in trouble*. "Your tongue was in my mouth, *little rose*."

“Stop calling me that,” I whisper.

He traces an invisible line across the fabric of my dress above my tattoo.

I am going to kill him. I am going to murder this man with my bare hands at his own dinner table.

"You took a shot." His voice is barely a whisper. "Now make the most of it."

His hand returns to between my legs. An insistent pressure against the place where I'm wet, aching, and desperate for friction.

“Feel how hard I am for you right now?"

Oh, I can feel it.

I've been feeling it since I sat down.

Now my clit is positively aching for release, wanting me to find the angle that would make the ache stop.

My brain is barely holding me back.

"Don't be afraid." His lips drag past the shell of my ear to press a kiss on my temple. "I want to watch you unravel on my cock in front of my men."

I bite down on my lip again.

"I know how frustrated you are," he says.

"I'm not … frust … rated…"

“You’ve been frustrated for days.”

“No … I…” I can’t find the words because he has put both hands between my thighs to push them wider apart, letting the outline of his cock do the teasing.

"I heard you." His voice drops lower. "Through the wall. Touching yourself."

My entire body goes still.

"I heard every sound you made. Every moan. Every whimper." He nips my ear. "I was in my room listening to my wife make herself come."

Oh God.

"Do you want to know what it did to me?"

No. Yes. No.

"It made me so hard I couldn't see straight,” he murmurs. "I had to make myself come listening to you. The sounds you made were the filthiest, most desperate sounds I have ever heard, and they made me want you so bad.”

He shifts beneath me again, and I nearly come undone because I’m almost straddling him, my back to his chest, and the ridged outline of his cock is right against my clit.

“Oh…”

The ache between my legs is unbearable, and I’m desperate to squeeze them together for some relief. But he is holding my legs apart.

I start to subtly move against him, my brain having no part in the decision. My body decides it’s getting friction one way or another, and the fact that we’re in the middle of a restaurant and could get caught at any second somehow makes me even more turned on.

Someone could see us.

And the thrill makes me bite down harder on my lip.

“You can get off my lap anytime you like. I won’t stop you. I certainly won’t force you to stay,” he murmurs. "Or you can take what you want. No one's watching. One small movement. You're right there. I can feel how close you are."

He’s right. I am so freaking close.

I try to resist, but he shifts again. It’s subtle, and the movement grinds the thick length of him against the exact spot I need it to be, and my body clenches so hard my vision blurs.

"Let go, *little rose*," he whispers. "No one will know; it’s just you and me."

His hands take hold of my hips and rock me against him. Back and forth, over and over, his cock hitting the same spot through the fabric.

“Dante…” I whisper shakily.

His mouth finds my ear again. "Be a good girl and come on my cock."

My orgasm hits fast and hard. A silent, violent implosion that starts where his body meets mine and explodes outward.

My entire body goes rigid, and I have to swallow the sound trying to claw its way out of my throat as I come.

Waves of rolling pleasure last forever, and it is torture trying to keep my reaction locked inside when all I want to do is cry out.

I feel his grip tighten on me, and his ragged exhale against my neck. He keeps rubbing me against him until I feel him let himself go.

His growl rumbles against my ear, and his body locks beneath me. His cock pulses hard against me as he comes inside his pants.

"Fuck." The word tears out of him, and he presses it hard against my throat.

The last wave rolls through me and slowly fades, and one by one my muscles soften.

The table chatters on, unaware that Dante just made me come right in front of them.

The afterglow evaporates quickly. What replaces it is cold and hard, crawling along my skin as I realize what has just happened.

Dante didn't just do that to make me feel good.

He did it because I walked in here tonight and took a shot at his control, and he couldn't let that stand.

He wanted to win.

He wanted to show me that whatever I do, however I fight him, he will always come out the winner.

The realization stings like a slap.

I sat on his lap to prove a point.

So he made us both come to prove a bigger one.

And like an idiot, I fell for it.

I stand on shaky legs, my earlier confidence drained.

Dante reaches for my hand.

"Don't," I say, my voice sharp.

His hand stops.

I smooth my dress down, straighten the hem, and take my place in the seat beside him, refusing to make eye contact with him.

My underwear is soaked. My thighs are still trembling.

I decide I’ve never hated him as much as I hate him now.

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34

DANTE

The car ride home is silent. Sunny sits beside me, pressed against the door, as far from me as possible.

Her arms are crossed as she glares out the window, and the ice coming off her is so thick I can almost see my breath.

The city passes by as we head back to the penthouse, but she doesn’t look at me once.

We pull into the casino’s underground garage, and when Deno opens her door, she gets out and walks off.

She only waits for me at the private elevator because she doesn’t have her key.

Inside the elevator, she stares straight ahead as the elevator climbs. I let her have her silence, for now.

When we reach the penthouse, the doors open and she storms out.

"Sunny."

My hand closes on her wrist.

"Let go of me," she demands.

"We need to talk."

"I don’t want to talk."

"Too bad. We're having a conversation."

She turns, and there’s wildfire raging in her eyes.

"You manipulated me," she says.

The word hits me hard, and I feel it all the way down to my marrow. I manipulate judges and officials and law enforcement. I’m not the guy who manipulates a woman into coming on his lap.

"You went there dressed like a goddamn siren to embarrass me in front of my business colleagues," I seethe, angry at the suggestion.

"I went there to prove a point."

"Which was?"

"That you can't boss me around."

Wrong. I want to say it. I want to remind her whose ring is on her finger. But she is a blazing fire, and even I know that’s when you should tread lightly.

Her eyes lock on mine. "Just because you had to force me at gunpoint to marry you, it doesn't mean you get to tell me what I can and can’t do."

I clench my teeth. "I think you'll find that I do."

Her eyes flash.

"You don't own me, Dante. You bought a signature on a piece of paper and performances in public. You don’t get to manipulate me into having an orgasm in public.”

"I didn't have to do much manipulating."

Which is the wrong answer. I see the fury in her eyes the moment my words leave my big mouth.

But I'm in it now. And I don't retreat.

I take a step closer. "You’re pissed because you started something, and I ended it.”

"You tried to humiliate me."

Humiliate? No.

What happened at that table was the closest I’ve come to losing my mind in my entire life, and she thinks it was a power play. She has no idea how it felt coming undone beneath her while she rubbed herself against my cock.

"I wanted to make my wife come," I say, stepping closer. "Not humiliate her."

“You tried to embarrass me because you can’t stand the idea of not having control.”

“Listen to me—"

"Don't tell me what I should do," she snaps, her eyes wild. “You fucking dry humped me in public and made me come in front of your businessmen.”

"And you should know it was one of the sexiest things I have ever seen."

“Stop trying to make this something it wasn’t.”

I step closer. “Seeing you let go. Feeling how good you felt. Remember, I felt it too.”

"You didn't do it to make me feel good," she snaps. "You did it to win."

She pulls her wrist from my grip and steps back.

I go still because she is half right. And the half she’s right about is ugly. I did need to win. I’ve needed to win in every situation since I took over this empire. But what she doesn’t know is that somewhere between her sitting on my lap and her coming apart in my arms, winning stopped being the point.

“Tell me the real reason you walked in there and declared war on me,” I say.

“I just told you.”

I take a step toward her. “That isn’t what detonated the bomb. You were jealous.”

Her eyes widen with fury. “I was not jealous.”

“You met Chantelle.”

“Yeah, I met your fuck buddy.”

“She’s not my fuck buddy. She’s tried, but I’m not interested.”

“Then why did you keep her here?”

“She is the daughter of a business associate. She’s had some troubles. I offered her work. She’s a terrible housekeeper, but I was helping the kid out.”

She scoffs. “You expect me to believe that? You really think I’m that stupid.”

“No, I don’t. It’s the truth.”

Something inside me twists at how easily she thinks the worst of me. But then I shut it down, because I put a gun to her father’s head and forced her to marry me. Of course, she is going to think the worst. I gave her every reason to believe she should.

She shakes her head. "The lasagna was a mistake. Don't expect another one."

She disappears down the hall and into her bedroom. The door closes and the lock clicks.

I close my eyes.

Down the hall, behind a locked door, my wife hates me.
I realize it’s probably better that way.

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SUNNY

All bets are off.

That's what I decide the following morning, standing at the kitchen counter, drinking my coffee in peace because Dante has already left.

If he wants to play dirty, then challenge accepted.

I'm angry and frustrated, and because I obviously know nothing about the man I'm married to, how could I possibly know for sure which parts of last night were him and which were the point he was making?

Which means if I'm going to survive this marriage, I need to understand who I'm dealing with.

And I know a good place to start looking for answers.

The forbidden room.

I put down my coffee, and before I can tell myself it’s a bad idea, I'm standing in front of the door.

I check the handle, but it's locked.

So I reach up and pull two bobby pins from my hair.

This is absolutely not a good idea.

But fuck good ideas.

I need information.

I bend the pins and insert them. I know how to pick a lock thanks to Matthew Dean, who taught me in the back of his mother's Camry when I was fifteen and thought bad boys were cool.

Clearly, I've had a type this whole time.

I move the pins around until something inside the mechanism clicks into place, giving me access to the forbidden room.

Except the door doesn't open into a room. It opens into a magnificent library.

Oh my god.

I stand in the doorway, my breath leaving in a rush as I try to take it all in.

The space is enormous. High ceilings. Vast wooden floors. Every wall is lined with bookshelves, their deep shelves crammed with thousands of books.

I step inside and gaze around me in awe. No windows and no other doors makes the room feel sealed off from the rest of the world. It also feels vastly different from the rest of the penthouse, which feels cold and unlived in. This room is warm and inviting, almost magical.

This room feels lived in.

I walk to the fireplace across the room, where the mantel is lined with framed photographs.

The first photograph is of a woman with dark hair and dark eyes. She's beautiful. The kind of beauty that doesn't need makeup, lighting, or a filter.

In the second photograph, she's standing next to a man, and I see the resemblance in him immediately. He has Dante's jaw and eyes, and he's looking at her with a face full of affection.

They have to be Dante's parents.

The third photo shows the same woman sitting on a bench in a garden with two boys, one on either side of her. Dark-haired, blue-eyed twins, maybe seven or eight years old. One is serious, staring at the camera with an intensity no child should possess. The other is grinning, missing a front tooth, his arm hooked around his mother's neck.

Dante and John Marco.

The fourth and final photo is smaller. It's a close-up of the woman, her head thrown back in laughter. Around her neck is a fine gold chain with a pendant that spells her name.

Eileen.

Dante's mother's name was Eileen.

My common sense tells me to leave, lock the door behind me, and pretend I never got in. I realize I’ve just invaded Dante’s most personal

space, and I don’t think he’ll be very happy with me if he finds out.

Besides, I need to remain furious with him, because furious is easy. Knowing about this room and who it makes him makes it harder to be mad at him.

I move toward the door, but curiosity gets the better of me, and instead of leaving, I start looking at the bookshelves.

A shelf at knee height grabs my attention because it is full of children's books. Battered ones, their covers frayed at the corners, some of the spines so worn they are almost disintegrating.

I pull one out and open it, and inside the front cover, someone has written a dedication in flowing handwriting.

For my boys. Read to each other. — Mamma

It’s from Dante’s mom.

Seeing it reminds me he was a little boy once. A little boy who loved his mom. This room tells me he carries that loss with him. That beneath the ruthlessness is a heartbroken man and not a monster.

I slide the book back into its place on the shelf and turn toward the leather armchair in front of the fireplace. I sit down and sigh because the leather is butter-soft and comfy. In fact, this whole room feels cozy and warm.

On the side table beside it are an empty wine glass and an empty bottle of red wine. Next to them is a gold necklace, the chain coiled like it's been looked at and then put down.

The Eileen necklace.

I pick it up and stare at the intimate piece of jewelry that used to grace his mom’s throat. The pendant is small and delicate, the letters carved in a flowing script.

Dante keeps it here. Next to his reading chair where he can see it.

That's when I realize this room isn't where he hides things. It's where he protects them. Everything that is precious to him. Safe from the outside world and its prying eyes.

I set the necklace down.

I came in here for ammunition against my monster of a husband. But what I found was overwhelming evidence that he has a whole different version of himself that he hides in here.

Away from the world. Away from me.

Because they mean so much to him.

I feel a surge of warmth. No, empathy. But I immediately try to push it away; after all, this man blew my life apart because he could.

Yet, I've seen the other side of Dante. Glimpses of emotion and warmth, and now this room with all its precious memories and trinkets from the past.

Dante Di Zaro isn't quite the person I believed him to be. Oh, he's a growly monster, but beneath his tough outer shell is a man who feels things deeply.

And I can't help but be curious about him. He's capable of love; I can see that in this room. But what about outside of here? And what does that mean for me?

Tired, I yawn and drape the throw blanket resting on the armrest across my legs, taking a moment to process everything I've seen and how it reconciles with the man who made me marry him. But it just doesn't.

My eyelids grow heavy, and I let them close for a moment.

Just for a minute.

Just until I work out what I'm going to say to Dante when he comes home tonight.

But then I fall asleep.

Deeply.

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DANTE

She's in the one room I specifically told her not to enter.

And now she's asleep in the armchair where I like to read and force the noise of my life to stop for the precious free time I get in here.

Standing in the doorway, I watch her sleeping. The lock on the door is picked. I can see the scratch marks on the brass and the bobby pins still sticking out of it.

My little lock cracker.

I should be furious. *I am furious.* Because this room is the only space in this penthouse that belongs to the man and not the don.

And she broke into it with goddamn bobby pins.

But it's hard to be furious at her when I also admire her tenacity.

I lean against the doorframe, cross my arms, and continue watching her.

She's sound asleep with her hair spilling over the armrest in loose waves. Her lips are parted and slightly quiver with every soft inhale of her breath.

I clear my throat.

Startled, her eyes fly open, and she looks dazed and confused as she tries to get her bearings.

Then she remembers where she is. And who I am. And what she did to get in here.

"Dante," she breathes my name, and it really shouldn't sound as good to me as it does.

"You picked my lock."

She sits up and pushes the hair out of her face.

"It was pretty simple."

"That's not the point."

"No, I don't suppose it is," she says softly.

I step into the room. "I told you this room was off-limits."

"I know." She stands, and the blanket falls to the floor. She's wearing an oversized T-shirt and not much else. "But after last night, I needed to know."

"You needed to know what?"

She comes toward me. "If you are human."

I tell myself to ignore the fact that every time she takes a step closer, I get a flash of her tiny panties. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I need to know if you are capable of feeling anything. And to do that, I needed to know more about you."

"And so you thought you'd just pick a lock and break into my library," I growl.

"I wanted to know who I married," she says. "I wanted to know if there's an actual person behind the ice-cold walls."

"And?"

"And I found this room."

She's infuriating.

"You had no right," I say.

I take another step forward.

"You gave me no choice."

She takes another.

"And that makes it right?"

My voice is rough and strained. I’m tense and wound tight. I have been ever since she came undone on my cock and made me come in my dress pants. Because I want more.

And now she's standing here in nothing but a T-shirt with her nipples pressing against the fabric, and I'm about to lose my goddamn mind.

"Maybe breaking in here was wrong," she says. "But I did it anyway because I deserve to know who my husband is."

"You think breaking into my private space gives you some kind of power?" I keep my voice even, but it’s raspy with need. "You think seeing my books and my family photographs means you know me?"

"I think it means you're not the monster you want me to believe you are."

"I am exactly the monster I want you to believe I am."

"No." She shakes her head. "I don't think you are."

"Then you're not paying attention."

"I'm paying plenty of attention." She takes another step, and now there's barely a foot between us. "This room doesn’t belong to a monster."

"You don't know me."

"But I'm trying to. Why can't you see that?”

“If you knew what was good for you, you’d stop.”

“I have no intention of stopping.” She looks up at me. “Why won’t you let me in?"

Reaching for the back of her neck, I pull her mouth to mine and swallow whatever she was about to say next, because if I go one more second without touching her, I'm going to come apart.

I kiss her. It's a fierce and rough kiss that tells her exactly how long I've been holding myself back.

She doesn’t fight me. Her mouth opens to let me in, and I drive my tongue into her sweet mouth, rewarded with a whimpering moan that undoes any lingering doubts about crossing this line.

I push her back until her back hits the wall, pinning her there with my body.

I yank her T-shirt up and pull it over her head. She's not wearing a bra, and God her breasts are beautiful. She’s beautiful. I drop my mouth to her throat and drag it down until my mouth closes over her nipple.

She gasps so hard her whole body shudders. When I suck harder, her head falls back against the wall, and a moan rips from her luscious lips.

She pulls at my belt buckle with determined fingers.

"I want you…” she rasps desperately.

But I grab her hand to stop.

"You broke in to find out if I am human and capable of feeling anything." I drag her hand slowly down my stomach, over my buckle, and lower so she feels every inch of what she's done to me. "Now ask me again."

Her palm flattens over the rigid outline, and her eyes flare with carnal heat.

I don't look away, and neither does she. I unbuckle one-handed, then unzip my jeans and push them down. Next, I push down my black trunks so I’m naked and standing very erect and thick in front of her.

But the whole time she keeps her eyes on mine like she's daring me to make her look.

I take her wrist and put her hand on my cock. Her fingers close around me, skin to skin, and her face softens with the surge of pleasure she feels.

The desire written all over her face undoes me. The same with the way her mouth falls open and the way her eyes become hooded and glazed. How she crushes her teeth into her lip.

I close my hand over hers, and we start to stroke my cock.

She watches me watching her, that wild desire rampant on her face. She licks her lips without breaking eye contact as we move our hands up and down my shaft.

"See what you do to me." I’m barely holding it together. "Feel what you do to me."

I lean in until my forehead is nearly against hers.

"See how much I want you."

Pleasure gathers hot in my belly, and I have to bite it back or I’m going to come. Because she’s soft and gentle and so fucking sweet, just one touch is enough to unravel me.

"You're going to make me come," I tell her.

Her thumb slides over the slippery head of my cock, sending a tremor rolling through me.

"Then come," she whispers.

A novel for your next quiet moment.

Find something to read on Lokepub.

“No,” I say, stopping our hands.

I pull her hand off me.

"Not like that." I cup my hands around her face. "The next time I come with you, I'm going to be inside you."

She looks up at me, cheeks flushed and eyes wide, and I kiss her again.

I know the complications I'm creating. I know crossing this line creates vulnerability. I know that my father loved my mother, and it killed them both, and if I’m on the same trajectory then I’m fucked.

But right now, I would walk through hell on my knees to be inside Sunny.

Reaching between us, I grip the drenched cotton of her panties and rip them off her, and she moans into my mouth.

My fingers sink into her wetness, and she pulls away from the kiss.

"Now," she breathes. "I need you inside me, now."

She hooks a thigh around my waist, and I push inside her in one hard thrust and fuck … she's so tight my eyes glaze over, and everything turns hazy.

She looks at me through her lashes, her lips parted, her expression pure carnal need.

I start moving slowly, easing almost all the way out and then pushing back in with excruciating slowness.

Her head falls back to the wall.

"Harder," she whispers.

I thrust hard into her and am rewarded with a surge of pleasure and a long moan from her sweet lips.

Picking up speed, I grip her jaw with one hand, kissing her hard and wild while I fuck her against the wall of my library.

It’s hard and fast because it’s what we both need.

"Dante … I’m going to … oh God …"

Her orgasm hits like a tidal wave. My name rasps from her throat as she unravels completely and comes on my cock.

I can't hold on.

The pleasure erupts in me like a bomb. A roaring, full-body annihilation, and for a moment I see nothing but a galaxy of stars as I come completely undone.

Slowly, the world comes back in hazy pieces.

I lift my head and press my forehead to hers. We stay there, breathing each other in.

I pull out of her slowly, and my cum slides down her inner thigh. Something primal and possessive in me growls its approval at the sight. I drag my thumb through it and press it back into her, kissing her fiercely.

"What now?" she whispers.

I don't have an answer because I don’t know what crossing this line means. Not yet.

I take her face in my hands and kiss her slow and long, and I fall deep for the soft whimper that escapes her.

The sudden shrill of my fucking phone breaks the spell, and we both groan.

I ignore it and kiss her harder because I’m not ready for this moment to end, and eventually the phone stops.

I start to think about burying myself deep inside her again, this time in my bed, where I can take my time with her and learn all the things that make her whimper and all the things that make her beg.

But then my goddamn phone rings again.

"You should get that," she murmurs against my mouth.

"No."

"It might be important."

"It can wait."

I want to spend the night taking every indecent thought I’ve had about her and making them come true.

The phone rings again.

Damnit.

Very reluctantly, I pull back from her mouth, pick my crumpled pants off the floor, and fish the phone out of the pocket.

John Marco.

"Brother," I say with a low rasp.

"The Grazalov Bratva hit the waterfront warehouse twenty minutes ago."

I’ve been waiting for this call. But now that it’s here, I feel a fresh wave of fury.

The waterfront warehouse. Forty million in product.

Forty million in product that Anton Grazalov thinks he can take from me because I’ve roadblocked every permit, every inspection, and every palm he's tried to grease since the day he decided he wanted to build a casino in my city.

"They torched it," he adds.

“I’ll be there in ten.”

I hang up, and when I turn around, Sunny is holding her T-shirt against her chest, watching me with wide eyes.

"You have to go," she says.

"Yes."

"Is someone hurt?"

“I don’t know yet.”

For a moment I don't move because standing there, I feel the two halves of my life grind against each other like complete opposites.

The man and the don.

One of them just made love to his wife.

The other one is about to go to war.

“Will you get hurt?” she asks.

I cup her face in both hands. Her skin is still warm and flushed, and there’s a mark on her throat I put there when I was claiming her against the wall.

"I'll be back," I say.

"That doesn’t answer my question."

No. It doesn’t.

I kiss her hard. It’s a promise that this isn't over. Nothing will stop me from coming back here to claim what’s mine, again, and again, and again.

"We're not done," I tell her, dragging my thumb across her bottom lip. "Not even close. Do you understand?"

She nods.

“Stay in here, if you like. Curl up in my chair. I will be home as soon as I can.”

I let her go, and it's the hardest thing I've done in years.

When I walk out of the library, I don’t look back.

Because if I look back, I won't leave.

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SUNNY

I head straight to the jar of peanut butter in the kitchen. After I shove a spoonful into my mouth, I close my eyes and try to organize my thoughts into something that isn't a looping highlight reel of Dante’s hands on my body and the sound he made when he pushed inside me.

Oh God.

We crossed a big fucking line, and I don’t know what it means or where it leaves us. And I don't know how to feel.

I pick up my phone and scroll through my contacts. But there is no one to call. No one to talk to about this.

I haven’t had friends since I fled California, but I desperately need one now.

I focus on one name.

Charles.

My thumb hovers and then I press call before I can talk myself out of it.

Charles sounds suspicious when he answers. "Mrs. Di Zaro. Is everything all right?"

"I just did something, and I don't know how to feel about it."

There is a pause.

"So you rang me."

"You're the closest thing I have to a BFF."

The next pause is longer.

"A BFF."

"Best friend forever."

"I'm aware of the acronym. I'm simply processing the sheer randomness of being selected."

I ignore him. "Can you come over?"

Another pause, and then, "I shall be there in thirty minutes."

He walks through the door twenty-five minutes later and finds me sitting cross-legged on the kitchen island, eating peanut butter out of the jar with a spoon.

"Thank you for coming."

He sets his keys down. "Mr. Di Zaro isn't here?"

"He got called away."

"Tell me what happened."

“You don’t want to know,” I say, sucking the peanut butter off the spoon.

"I didn’t take two subway stops and a ten-minute walk to hear nothing. Now spill it."

"Are you sure you want to hear?"

"Unless it involves body parts.”

When I don’t answer, he looks visibly traumatized at what might come next. “Oh dear, it’s going to be one of those conversations.”

“I slept with him. Well, not slept. In fact, it was against the wall of the—”

He holds up his hand. “I don’t need details, Mrs. Di Zaro.” He sighs. “So what is the problem? Last week you were a bit iffy about him. But now iffy seems to have left the building.”

“That’s the problem. He’s a monster. He forces me into this ridiculous marriage and then…”

“Then what?”

I suck on a spoonful of peanut butter as I consider the question.

“Well, he…”

Put my father in an addiction clinic and is covering the cost.

Bought me a wardrobe of designer dresses and accessories.

Makes me want for nothing.

Taught me how to shoot.

Gave me a delicious orgasm against the wall of his library.

But do they cancel out his putting a gun to my father’s head and forcing me into marriage?

“I’m still confused about Chantelle,” I say.

“Mr. Di Zaro hiring Chantelle was a favor to her father and a catastrophe with a mop. Nothing more.”

Charles steps closer and rests his hands on the back of a stool like he’s about to address the nation.

"May I ask you something, and would you consider answering it honestly?"

I make an affirmative sound around the spoon in my mouth.

"What are you actually afraid of?" he asks.

"That I'm married to a man who owns half this city and doesn't blink when somebody gets in his way."

"Mm, nice try." He doesn't move. "Try again."

"That he put a gun to my father's head, and I'm wearing his ring because of it."

"He did. That's true, and it's appalling, and I've no intention of passing any kind of judgment on it." He narrows his focus. "But that’s not why you are sitting on a bench top eating peanut butter out of a jar with a spoon."

The spoon stops halfway to my mouth.

I haven’t told anyone about California, and I’ve carried the weight of it alone for a long time. The only people I confided in were my parents. And the law enforcement that dismissed it because some monsters have more money than God.

But looking at Charles now, I think it might help.

I return the spoon to the jar in my lap.

"I trusted someone once," I say, my voice softer. "Back in California. Someone powerful. And I learned the hard way how my trust was very misplaced. Because he turned out to be someone who knew what no meant but didn’t care.”

“Mrs. Di Zaro—”

“Please, Charles. Let me get this out.” I look down to collect my words because I need to let them out. They are a heavy weight in my chest, and I’m tired of carrying this all by myself. “This man used his power against me. He used it to destroy my life. He took from me and kept taking because he could. Even when I was crying. Even when…. My words break up because of the fear I feel when I say them. “…even when I begged him to stop.”

"That man is a monster," Charles says in a voice that is as close to a growl as I imagine Charles could manage.

“You couldn’t imagine,” I whisper, tears forming in my eyes. I look down at the jar in my lap. "Dante's not going to hurt me like that. I know he isn't. He would think that is vile."

“And you would be correct.”

“And he has never been rough with me. Unkind even, which is a crazy thing to say, but it’s true.”

"Then what?"

"I've spent fifteen months making sure nobody could get close enough to do any damage. Because I put my trust in the wrong person and got hurt. I got hurt in the worst way. Then Dante comes along, plunging me into this ridiculous scenario, and instead of fighting him … I can feel myself handing my trust over again. Trust I have kept so close to my chest for the last fifteen months. To a man I have no business trusting. Or wanting."

Charles is quiet for a moment.

"I've worked for your husband for eleven years," he says. "I don't pretend to know the whole of what he is. I doubt anybody does, including him. He straddles a line more often than he'd ever admit to, and I've seen him break bones. I've seen him break faces. But I've never once seen him break a heart."

I like that.

“No?” I ask softly.

He shakes his head. “Truth be told, he would think it was vulgar too. I know you won’t believe me when I say it, but I think Mr. Di Zaro is a diehard romantic who would rather break his own heart than break yours.”

“Really?” I want to believe him.

“Really.”

And a slow smile grows on my lips.

"See?" I point the spoon at him again. "You’re a great BFF."

A smile twitches on his lips, and for one glorious second I think I've broken his stiff exterior. But it vanishes just as quickly. "I shall pretend this conversation never occurred."

"Too late. You're locked in."

“Locked in?”

“We’re BFFs now.”

He turns and walks toward the elevator, but not before I see the corners of his mouth turn upward.

He’s a step away from the doors when I call out to him. "Charles, where did Dante go tonight?"

He stops but doesn't turn around.

“Why would someone burn down a warehouse belonging to a casino owner?” I ask.

“That’s a conversation you would need to have with your husband,” he says, continuing on to the elevator and pressing the button.

“But it’s a conversation I’m trying to have with you.” There’s a slight edge to my voice because I have a feeling everyone is keeping something from me.

The elevator doors open, and he steps inside.

"Good night, Sunny."

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DANTE

The warehouse is still burning when I arrive. Orange flames and black smoke fill up the night sky.

The police haven't arrived yet, and they won't for another twenty minutes. When they do, they'll find nothing that connects this building to the Di Zaro family.

Deno pulls the car to the curb two blocks out.

I step out of the car and join John Marco and Caruso at the perimeter. My brother looks furious, the kind of fury that lives beneath the flamboyance and surfaces at times like this.

"How long?" I ask.

"Fire started at eleven forty-two." Caruso reads from his phone. "Security cameras went dark six minutes before ignition. They cut the feeds remotely."

"Of course they did," John Marco says.

Caruso glances up. "Could be an inside job. Someone with access to security."

"Not one of ours," John Marco says.

Caruso frowns at the certainty in his voice. "You sound sure."

"Grazalov hires out," I say. "Tech mercenaries. Cyber thugs paid to break into the security system and override it. Tell our tech to start with contractors."

Caruso nods. "Our team is already on it. We'll know exactly who and how they did it."

I don't reply. He knows I expect nothing less. I know who is behind this, but I want to know who helped him, and by morning they'll be dust.

I look at the scene. At the towering flames consuming the warehouse where forty million in product is housed.

By the morning it will be a smoldering pile of ash.

Because Grazalov wanted to send a message.

Message received, asshole.

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

Although, the message was received a lot earlier than Grazalov is aware.

That's why I had the product moved days ago.

Because I am always one step ahead.

John Marco's eyes find mine over Caruso's head, and we share a look that confirms Grazalov has pulled the trigger and declared war.

He turns back to the fire and scans the scene, absorbing everything into that photographic mind of his. "He wanted it hot, and he wanted it fast. This was never meant to look like an accident."

No. It wasn't.

This is theatre. Grazalov doesn't just want to hurt me; he wants me to know he can.

He wants the humiliation and the spectacle.

He wants me so angry I make a sloppy move.

And I am going to disappoint him in every way.

Caruso looks at me, waiting for a reaction. "What do you want to do, boss?"

I watch the flames. A section of roof collapses inward and sends a column of sparks spiraling into the sky.

"We wait," I say.

Caruso looks confused. "Wait?"

"We don't retaliate, not yet."

Grazalov expects a reaction. He burned our warehouse, knowing exactly what would come next. A war that bleeds us and leaves us exposed and vulnerable to our rivals.

"Then what do we do?" Caruso asks.

I turn back to the burning building. "We wait and give Grazalov enough rope to hang himself."

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SUNNY

When I wake up the next morning, I'm still alone. Dante didn't come home last night, and when I realize it, my spine tingles.

I reach for my phone on the nightstand, but there is no message.

I don't know if he's okay or what's going on. All I know is that something big happened last night. Big enough to keep him out all night.

As if he's a mind reader, my phone buzzes in my hand, and excitement surges inside me when I see his name appear on the screen.

> Good morning, my little lock cracker. I won't see you until the gala tonight. Charles will escort you.

A grin spreads across my face.
He's safe.
And hello … *my little lock cracker?*
Him calling me that shouldn't make me this damn giddy. But it does.
He sends another message.

> And after the gala, I'm taking you home, peeling your clothes off you, and spending the rest of the night with my mouth between your thighs. I want you screaming my name by midnight. Consider yourself warned.

Heat floods through me so fast I have to clench my thighs together.

Oh.

Okay then.

I read the message again, then a third time because now all I can feel is his head between my legs and his tongue doing torturous things to me.

God, all I want is for him to drag me into his enormous bed and claim me so thoroughly I forget my name.

And I've never wanted to be claimed by anyone, let alone an unhinged mafia man who turned my entire life upside down yet somehow has me craving the chaos.

But here I am, my body on fire and an unrelenting ache for him between my legs.

We haven't talked about what happened in the library. What crossing that line means or if he regrets it. I push that thought away. He doesn't regret it. Not according to his text messages anyway.

I quickly send a reply.



The hours between now and tonight are going to go agonizingly slow, and I know I am going to go crazy waiting.

I can't sit around waiting and feeling so giddy and lovesick; I need to move.

Deciding to hit the plaza shops for some window shopping, I climb out of bed and get ready.

I pull my hair into a ponytail, slip on my jeans and boots, and take the keycard he gave me down to the plaza.

I'm not supposed to leave the penthouse without speaking to Dante, but whatever is happening today is big, and I'm not about to have him pull a security person off the job so he can watch me stare at handbags.

Besides, I'm in the middle of the mafia king's casino. If there's one place in this city where nothing can touch me, it's here.

The elevator doors open onto Fortune's bustling plaza, and I step into the impressive lobby.

Above me, a chandelier the size of a bus hangs from the center of a massive gold-leafed dome, dripping spangles of light onto cream-and-gold marble.

Across from the casino entrance, a row of designer stores runs the length of the wall, one flawless thing glowing in each window.

Passing the jewelry store, I stop to take in a dazzling display.

There are no prices on anything, and I realize it’s one of those stores where if you have to ask, you can't afford it.

In one of the display windows is a spectacular necklace. The center stone is the size of a half dollar and is surrounded by a river of diamonds.

I lean in close to the glass.

"It is vulgar, no?"

The accented voice comes from my right.

I turn to see a man standing beside me, looking very pleased with himself. Somewhere in his twenties or thirties, he has slicked-back hair, a sharp face, and pale eyes that feel unnerving.

He seems friendly enough, though. Although my body seems to have other ideas because the skin on my arms tightens with goosebumps.

Without thinking, I take a step back.

A second man is with him. He’s younger with a nicer face, and he hangs back a few feet. He looks at me once, then looks away, and I can't read a single thing about him. But he isn't watching me the way the accented man is. He's watching everything else going on around us in the plaza.

"Forgive me. I did not mean to startle you."

He smiles, and it should put me at ease, but it doesn’t. For one strange second, I feel like I’m not in the safety of the plaza anymore. I remember what it felt like when danger entered the room before I could see it. My skin would prickle, and my stomach would knot. Both are happening now.

He nods at the display of diamonds in the window. "A great deal of money spent so that everyone can see it has been spent. Where I am from, real wealth is quiet."

"It's a casino," I say. "I don’t think quiet is the expectation."

He laughs, and the sound slides over my skin like something damp and cold.

"Touché, Mrs. Di Zaro."

My stomach drops because I don't know this man, and I never told him my name.

"I'm sorry. Do I know you?"

"No. But I know your husband. And it is a pleasure to meet his new bride." He studies me, and the back of my neck prickles. "Out in the wild. All alone." He pauses, then adds darkly, "With no bodyguard."

His tone sends a sharp stab of fear into my chest.

He knows I should have someone with me, knows I don't, and wants me to know he knows. This isn't a chance meeting at a jewelry window. This man was waiting for me.

“You have me at a disadvantage, Mr....?”

“Anton Grazalov. And that is my man, Flynn Lemar.”

He says it with an air of inflated self-importance.

His man doesn’t look over. But I have a feeling he’s listening.

"Do you know Dante well?" My voice is calm despite my pulse roaring in my ears.

"Unfortunately, not as well as I would like." His smile widens, and there's something viperish in it. "But I intend to."

He takes my hand, and before I can pull it away, he presses a kiss to my knuckles. It takes everything in me not to rip it back and scrub it down my jeans. His lips are cool and dry, and I stand there and let him do it because some animal part of my brain understands that running would be worse.

"Tell your husband I said hello."

His eyes stay locked on mine way too long to be friendly.

“I will,” I say, forcing my voice to stay even.

When he turns, *his man* peels away from the window to fall into step beside him. As they pass me, the younger one's gaze skims over me once more before he looks away.

I watch them cross the gleaming floor to the exit. My hand is still tingling where Anton’s mouth touched it, and I rub it against my thigh hard enough to make it burn.

Men like him are obviously the reason Dante wants me to have a bodyguard.

He's going to be so angry if he finds out about this.

I didn’t take his warning seriously enough, but now … now I’m calling security anytime I want to step through those elevator doors.

Abandoning my window-shopping plans, I flee to the elevator and hurriedly press the buttons, relieved when the doors open and I step inside. I ride the elevator up with my arms wrapped around myself, and when the penthouse doors close securely behind me, I sink onto the couch and will my heartbeat to settle.

Every instinct tells me I just looked evil in the face.

I blow out a shaky breath.

Who the hell did I marry?

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SUNNY

A few hours later, Charles appears in the penthouse with a hairdresser and makeup artist in tow.

"Mrs. Di Zaro, this is Marigold, and this is Benny. They will be helping you get ready for this evening's gala."

A whirlwind of activity begins to take place in the living room as silver cases the size of small refrigerators open to reveal all kinds of brushes, makeup palettes, and an entire salon of hair products.

Charles sets a cup of tea on the table beside me. "You look pale, Mrs. Di Zaro. Sit down and drink your tea, and let Marigold and Benny work their magic."

I don't know how he does it, but Charles just knows things. He's obviously picked up that I'm jittery, but he would never pry to ask why. Instead, he tries to help me in his own way, which is with a cup of tea and a wink to let me know everything is okay.

I sit and drink my tea while Marigold does my makeup, and Benny lifts sections of my hair, making small, wounded noises when he sees my split ends.

"When was your last trim?" Benny asks, horrified.

"Define trim."

"Oh, honey."

Charles drinks tea as he supervises from a respectful distance, occasionally issuing instructions. *Softer around the eyes. Leave her hair*

loose, Mr. Di Zaro prefers it down.

The last one makes me feel warm and stupid in my chest.

With enormous rollers in my hair and my face half done, I see my reflection in the mirror and start laughing.

"What?" Charles says.

I gesture to the style chaos around us with my teacup. "I'm literally Cinderella."

"You are considerably better dressed than Cinderella," Charles says. "Her gown was the work of rodents. Yours is couture."

I grin over my teacup. "So in a way, you're like my fairy godfather?"

“If I must be,” he says with fake weariness.

I give him a soft smile. “Thanks for doing this for me.”

"Of course, Mrs. Di Zaro." Not a single muscle in his face moves. "Isn’t this what any bff would do?"

I stand in front of the full-length mirror and fall hopelessly in love with the dress Irina made me for tonight. It is the softest yellow, like the color of early morning light, and it slides down my body like liquid sunlight.

The back is plunging, the bust line simple, and it is without a doubt the most elegant dress I've ever seen.

I do a half-turn in front of the mirror.

Marigold and Benny have created magic, transforming me into a princess. My blonde hair falls in waves down my back, and my makeup makes me look like I’m photoshopped.

I take a moment to breathe in the quiet of my bedroom before I see Dante. I don’t know what to call it, but things are changing between him and me, and it makes me feel like I’m freefalling toward something wild and reckless and so damn exciting.

There’s a knock on the bedroom door. “Mrs. Di Zaro? I’m beginning to wonder if you’ve escaped through a window.”

Laughing, I cross the room and open the door.

When Charles sees me, his face lights up in a way I've never seen before.

"Mrs. Di Zaro," he says quietly. "You are a beauty."

"Thank you, Charles," I say.

His eyes hold mine for another moment, and something about the warmth in them makes my chest squeeze.

“You know, I’ve grown rather fond of you,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Awww, Charles…”

“Now don’t go making a big deal out of it.”

I chuckle. “Too late. I’m going to treasure this moment forever.”

“I feared you might.”

I reach out and squeeze his hand. “I’m rather fond of you, too, Charles.”

His fingers close briefly around mine.

“I never had a daughter,” he says. “But if I had, I’d like to think she might’ve turned out a little like you.”

His words make me warm and fuzzy, and I know beneath his crisp exterior he probably is too.

“Yes, well.” He clears his throat. “Let’s not make a thing of it.”

I smile. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Good. I do have a reputation to maintain.”

I wink at him. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

“I sincerely doubt that, Mrs. Di Zaro.”

He looks at his watch. “We need to go. Mr. Di Zaro is waiting for us.”

He offers me his arm, and I slip my arm through it.

“I’m so pleased you’re coming with us, Charles,” I say. “The gala won’t seem nearly as scary with you there.”

“I will accompany you to the venue and then leave.”

“You could stay,” I say. “Have a dance.”

“I don’t dance.”

He checks his watch again.

"That's the millionth time you've checked your watch. What are you up to?"

He smiles warmly. “In good time, Mrs. Di Zaro.”

Something is going on.

And I think I am about to find out.

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SUNNY

Charles leads me to the elevator and presses a button. But instead of going down, the elevator moves upward.

"We're going up? I didn't know there even was an up. I thought the penthouse was the end of the ride."

"Mr. Di Zaro has a private rooftop garden."

The elevator climbs, and my heart climbs with it.

Because the grumpy casino boss has a private rooftop garden, and not only did he just become more human, but I'm about to see him, and it feels like someone has let a box of butterflies loose in my stomach.

The doors open, and I step out into a different world.

Everywhere I look I see roses of every kind.

The rooftop sky garden is without a doubt the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

I follow the stone path lit by string lights through the trellises, and when the path opens up I see him. Dante.

God, he's so beautiful.

He's dressed in a black shirt and black suit, with his hair pushed back from his face. The sharp angles of his jaw and cheekbones catch the lights hanging above him, and the effect is so devastatingly beautiful that my feet stop moving.

My body can't walk and process this at the same time.

His eyes find me across the garden, and I feel them slowly travel down the yellow silk of my dress, and I see the shimmer of emotion on his face. It’s as if he’s seeing all of me for the first time, and I feel that look so deeply it brings tears to my eyes.

I turn back to Charles, who is standing by the elevator with his hands clasped in front of him. “Go on, Mrs. Di Zaro. Your husband is waiting for you.”

He gives me a small, encouraging nod before stepping into the elevator and disappearing.

I turn back to Dante. Now it’s just me and my husband, with the magical sky garden twinkling around us.

I walk toward him, my heart pounding like a drum and those butterflies soaring in my belly.

"You look beautiful," he says when I stop in front of him.

His voice is low, stripped of command, control, and all the sharp edges I'm used to.

"So do you," I say.

And I mean it. He looks so good it hurts.

Handing me a glass of champagne, our fingers brush, and I feel the electricity roar through me.

"What should we make a toast to?" I ask.

He considers. "To you. Breaking into my library."

My chest flutters, and I smile as we clink our glasses. “To disobeying my husband.”

He smiles. Nothing on this earth is as attractive as Dante Di Zaro’s smile.

I'm falling. I know I'm falling. Every day I tell myself to slow down, to remember what he is, to remember that it’s all very new and I should proceed with caution, but every day he comes home early and undoes all my common sense with his mouth and his tongue that know no limits.

As I sip the cold champagne, the night darkens around us, and the roses become silhouettes.

“I was worried about you,” I say.

He brushes his thumb across my cheek. "Baby, nothing out there is more dangerous than what I'd become if it tried to keep me from you."

Emotion swirls around us. It feels like some imaginary wall between us has tumbled. I’m getting carried away, but I don’t care. I don’t care if I’m

falling in love with a monster. All I care about is this moment right here, with the roses and the stars and the way Dante is looking at me right now.

I don't want to leave.

But we have a gala to get to, and the world will want him back soon.

But damn it, I don’t want to give him back.

"I have something for you," he says.

He removes a velvet box from his breast pocket and opens it.

Inside is a diamond cuff bracelet. Rows of flawless diamonds set in white gold, blazing with so much fire they look alive.

It's the most beautiful piece of jewelry I've ever seen.

He lifts it from the velvet and clasps it around my wrist.

"It’s so beautiful," I murmur. “Thank you.”

I look down at the cuff. The diamonds catch every flicker of light and scatter them across my skin in tiny bursts of white fire.

"None of this feels real," I whisper.

He lifts his hand to my face, and his thumb traces my cheekbone.

"It's real," he says. "Every single second of it."

He kisses me, and this kiss is nothing like the ones before it. This one is slow and deep, so damn perfect it makes me weak in the knees.

He slides one hand to the small of my back and pulls me flush against him until there's no space left between us, and I can feel exactly how much he wants this.

I melt into him, my fingers curling into his lapels as the kiss deepens and turns hungrier.

He tears his mouth from mine with a rough groan.

"If we don’t go now, I’m going to tear that dress off you right here. But I want to show you off tonight. I want everyone to see my beautiful wife.”

The way he says it sends those butterflies soaring again.

“Then lead the way,” I say with a giddy smile.

He leans in, his lips brushing my ear as he murmurs, “But know that later that dress is coming off with my teeth, and I'm going to take my time ruining you. By sunrise you won't remember your own name. Just mine screamed into your pillow so many times the whole building will know who you belong to."

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DANTE

I've never felt as happy as I do when we arrive at The Lioncourt Hotel for the gala. Tonight it is packed with more than six hundred guests, all dressed in black tie, angling to get something out of being here. Connections. Notoriety. Validation.

The ballroom hums with chatter and obscene wealth when we walk in.

I know every face here, but tonight I don't focus on a single one of them because Sunny is on my arm, looking like every man's fantasy, and every head in the room turns when she passes.

A woman near the bar leans into her husband, murmuring something behind her champagne flute. A socialite further along gives my wife a slow, appraising once-over, then whispers to her friend beside her. People turn to watch us move through the crowd, and I can read the room. They want to know who she is, where she came from.

I found her in a contract to pay off a gambling debt.

And that thought now burns in my chest. An ember that I'm afraid will catch light and destroy what is growing.

We move through the room, and I introduce her to everyone who stops to greet us. My wife, Sunny Di Zaro. She shakes hands and smiles, and she's warm in a way these people aren't used to. I watch them respond to her like plants turning toward the sun.

The orchestra starts a slow waltz, and I take her hand.

"Dance with me."

She smiles. "You dance?"

I lean in and rasp, "I do many things you haven't discovered yet."

I lead her onto the dance floor and pull her close, wrapping her fingers in mine as we start to move.

"Do people always watch you?" she asks.

“Always. Because I’m so handsome and powerful.”

“Not to mention modest.”

I smile because it’s easy to do with her. “They’re not looking at me, little rose. They’re looking at you.”

“Nope, I’m pretty sure they all stared as you walked past.”

"If they did, it was because they were wondering how the hell I got the most beautiful woman in the world on my arm."

She laughs. “Oh, that was smooth.”

We both laugh.

But then neither of us looks away. The laughing fades, and what is left are two people looking at each other as they fall toward something.

The room turns around us in a blur of crystal and candlelight because all that exists is her.

And for the first time in my life, I feel powerless against the feelings I have spent a lifetime avoiding. If I’m honest, this isn’t me falling. I fell days ago. I just haven’t had the balls to admit it to myself. I swore I would never do this, never fall for someone, never love someone I feel like I’m living just to see them smile. But since Sunny, that’s all changed, and falling in love has become the one thing I have no control over.

Her eyes sparkle up at me, and I know she feels it too, and it does something warm and happy in my chest.

It is John Marco who breaks the spell when he decides to cut in.

I’m about to warn him off, but my phone vibrates against my chest.

I slide it out far enough to see the screen, and when I see the number, I know I have to take this call without exception.

"Excuse me," I tell Sunny, pressing a kiss to her temple. "Two minutes. Put John Marco out of his misery and dance with him. Although, watch your toes."

"Should I be worried?"

"Terrified. He’s all feet and no grace."

John Marco takes her hand. “He’s just jealous because I have better moves than him.”

She laughs and lets my brother sweep her away as I walk to the quiet end of the terrace with my phone to my ear.

"Talk."

The voice on the other end is low and fast, and what it tells me almost blows my head off my shoulders.

This morning, in my casino plaza, Anton Grazalov and Flynn Lemar approached my wife.

I don't say anything; I just listen, my jaw locked tight with rage as I hear about the encounter in front of the jewelry store.

Grazalov approached my wife with the sole intention of intimidating her to get a reaction out of me.

Then he fucking put his lips on the top of her hand, and every molecule of my body vibrates with the need to rip those lips from his face with my bare hands.

I end the call without another word said because the rage is blinding. Grazalov just crossed the fucking line.

For one second, I consider crossing this city and ripping Anton’s pulse from his neck with my bare hands.

But that would only bring war to my doorstep.

From now on, Sunny gets a shadow. Freddie. Ex-military, a seven-foot-tall wall of muscle and might. I make the arrangements with two texts before I step back inside.

I force myself to breathe. To push the physical rage away. I will not lose control here with six hundred witnesses. I don’t let people see me bleed. It exposes your weak points and tells them where to aim.

Composing myself, I step back into the gala and scan the ballroom looking for Sunny. She's still dancing with John Marco and laughing at something John Marco said. Her head is tipped back, and she looks like sunshine as she laughs.

Obviously, she had no idea who she stood across from this morning and how much danger she was in.

But why didn’t she tell me about it?

Why didn’t she come to me?

Anton must’ve come in his pants like an excited teenager when he saw my wife out in public with no protection.

I push the rage away because I refuse to touch my wife with hands that feel murderous.

I let out a rough breath, then go get my wife.

John Marco reads my face across the ballroom before I've taken five steps inside, and his eyebrow lifts a fraction. *Later*, I tell him with a look as I approach. He spins Sunny and delivers her to me with a bow.

"Your husband dances better than me," he tells her. "But I'm prettier. Remember that."

He melts into the crowd, and I take her in my arms as the music begins again and we move.

"What's wrong?" she says.

"Nothing's wrong."

Her eyes move over my face. "Something happened. Just now, on that phone call."

I turn us slowly through the dancers and bring my mouth close to her ear.

"This morning," I say quietly. "Out the front of the jewelry store."

Her step falters only a fraction, but enough to show she knows what I'm talking about.

"You know about that?" she whispers.

"I know about that," I say softly, pulling back enough to see her face. "And I know my wife said nothing to me."

She lifts her chin. "Are you angry with me?"

"No."

"You look angry."

"My anger belongs to the man who cornered you. Not to you. Never to you." I keep my voice as gentle as I can make it. "But I need to understand why you didn't tell me."

She looks at my collar.

"Because I knew what would happen," she says. "The walls of my world would close in tighter, just like they have before, and I would be even more trapped than I am now."

The word *trapped* guts me. But it's true. I have trapped her in so many ways, and it's starting to weigh on me.

But something else gets my attention. *Just like they have before.*

"What do you mean, just like they have before?"

Her eyes widen a little, then she composes herself. "I simply meant that my world was bigger than what it is now. Since the night you—"

I cup her jaw. I don’t want to hear her say it. The night I took her from her home and made her marry me.

Because that crime feels so much bigger now.

And less forgivable.

“I’m sorry I’ve made you afraid of me,” I say. “But you can tell me anything, *little rose*.”

She lifts her gaze. "Maybe I would’ve told you. Maybe I wouldn’t have. But I didn’t want to ruin tonight by thinking about it, let alone bring it up."

"Okay," I say.

"Okay?"

"You're right. I am overprotective. My first instinct is to protect, but that has only caged you."

She stares at me like I've started speaking Latin.

"Who are you, and what have you done with my husband?"

"He's still here. He'd currently like to burn down a city block. But he's listening. He hears you."

She melts closer to me.

"Thank you," she whispers.

"But don’t think I’m going to compromise on your safety,” I warn her softly. “As of this minute, you have a personal bodyguard you’re taking everywhere with you. His name is Freddie. And before you say it, he's not a leash. He's the wall of protection I need you to have wherever you go." I tuck a loose lock of hair behind her ear. "You'll like him. I promise."

"Freddie," she says.

"Freddie."

"And the man from this morning? Who was he?"

He's no one.

It would be easy to brush her off with the lie.

But I've just told her I'm listening, and I can't say it and then hand her a lie in the same breath.

"Anton Grazalov," I say. "He runs the bratva in this city. And I run the family he's trying to take it from."

I watch her face. Waiting for her to understand what I’m saying.

She goes very still against me. “*You’re* the head of the family?”

“Yes.”

She swallows. “The big boss?”

“The big boss,” I say with a smile. I lean in. “And feel free to call me that anytime you like.”

She laughs happily, and I know I want to hear that sound every day for the rest of my life.

But then fierce protectiveness swoops in, and I think about Anton and want to burn his world to the ground.

"If you see him again," I say, "you don't wait to tell me. You run, and then you tell me. Understood?"

She nods. "Understood."

Despite feeling a hot rage moving slowly and quietly in my veins, I smile. "That’s my girl."

She slides her hand from my shoulder to the back of my neck.

"You know," she murmurs, "for a blackmailing kidnapper, you're turning out to be a pretty decent husband."

"That’s high praise coming from my lock-cracking shirt thief."

"Don't let it go to your head."

"Too late." My mouth grazes her ear. "It went somewhere else entirely."

Her fingers curl into my hair. "Dante."

"Wife."

"How long do we have to stay?"

"I'm Dante Di Zaro. I can do whatever I want."

"Then take me home," she says.

I lead her off the floor and out the front door without saying goodbye to anyone.

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DANTE

The plan was to get to the car before I started kissing her.

That plan lasts about four seconds.

We barely make it to the parking garage, let alone to the car where Deno is waiting.

I kiss her throughout the car ride home. I kiss her during the elevator ride up to the penthouse.

Then I kiss her all the way to the bedroom where I slowly remove her dress.

After removing my clothes, I kiss her again.

I pull her against me, and the soft sound she makes against my lips sends a bolt of electricity straight down my spine.

But then I slow the kiss down.

I don't want this to be the library. The library was hunger and fury, weeks of confusing desire detonating all at once. *It was fucking*. Two people colliding because they couldn't stand not fucking each other for one more second.

But this is something else entirely.

I pull back and cup her face in both hands, and she looks up at me with glazed eyes.

"I want you slow tonight," I say. “I want to savor every second I make love to you.”

Her whole body softens against me.

"I like the sound of that," she whispers.

I exhale, and it comes out ragged and rough because I want this so badly.

I lower her onto the bed, and she lies back, her hair fanning across the pillow in golden waves. She looks up at me as I crawl over her, those big eyes following every move, her breath quickening.

Every cell in my body is screaming at me to rush. To bury myself in her tight pussy and lose myself the way I did in the library last night. It takes everything not to.

Instead, I settle between her legs, kiss her again, and take my goddamn time.

My cock presses against her drenched pussy, and she squirms beneath me, trying to line herself up.

"Squirm all you want. I've thought about this moment too many times to rush it now. And, baby, I'm a very patient man."

I drag my lips lower. Down her throat. Across her collarbone. I close my mouth over one nipple, and her fingers twist into my hair. The sound she makes is fucking everything.

I want to hear another one. I want to hear a hundred more. I graze her with my teeth and get exactly what I'm after.

"Dante." My name comes out ragged.

That's it, baby. Say it again.

I move to her other breast and take my time.

Her fingers tighten in my hair, trying to steer me lower, and I smile against her skin.

Impatient little thing.

I've thought about this every night for weeks. The taste of her. The weight of her thighs on my shoulders. I'm not rushing a single second of it.

"Please," she breathes.

I lift my head and look up the length of her body, flushed and wrecked already, and I've barely started.

"Please what?" I say. "Use your words, baby. Tell me exactly where you want my mouth."

She doesn't answer with words.

She grabs my wrist and drags my hand down her stomach, putting it between her thighs.

"There," she whispers.

I let out a low curse in Italian and oblige my wife.

Going lower, I press a kiss to the inside of her knee. Another one higher. By the third, she’s moving her hips and seeking my lips.

"Dante, if you keep teasing me, I will actually kill you."

I laugh against her skin. My *little rose,* threatening a mafia don in his own bed.

"No, you won't," I say, and drop my mouth to her drenched pussy.

The first taste of her pulls a groan from me. She moans, and her thighs clamp around my head. But I grip them and spread them wide, holding her open as I devour her with my tongue, mouth, and fingers.

Her hands find my hair again and pull hard enough to sting.

Yes, *little rose*. Pull hard. I want the sting. I want you to leave marks.

"Don't stop," she pants. "Please, don’t stop.”

I wasn't planning on it. I work her up until her whole body coils tight and my name becomes a ragged cry on her lips as she comes.

I don't stop until her whimpers soften and her body jerks from the sensitivity.

I kiss my way back up her body and hover over her. Her eyes are glassy, and her face is flushed. *Christ, she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.*

"That's one," I say.

Her eyes widen. "One?"

"I told you, baby. I’m a patient man, and I’m only getting started."

She wraps her legs around me, her heels pressing into the small of my back.

"Now," she whispers. "Please."

I reach between us, place myself at her entrance, and slowly push in.

It’s so slow it's agony. But I want her to feel every slow inch sliding into her.

Her lips part. Her eyes hold mine.

And when I'm all the way inside her, I stop and my eyes close with pleasure.

This is the part I never knew existed.

Being inside a woman I am falling in love with and feeling everything that comes with it.

Opening my eyes, I start to move with a slow rhythm, watching her face and the way her lips part with each stroke of my cock. The way her brow

creases. The way her whimpers spill between us. And I fucking fall in love with that too.

I thrust deeper, and she gasps. Her legs tighten around me and her hips rise to meet mine, and we find an unhurried rhythm together.

"Dante…" Her voice breaks. “This is crazy how it feels…”

I swallow her words with a kiss.

Because I feel it too. The terrifying gravitational pull of falling into someone.

I pick up the pace and thrust harder and deeper, enough to unravel her again.

Her breathing fractures, and her pussy clamps tightly around my cock, almost bringing me undone.

"Come for me," I whisper against her mouth. "I want to feel it."

She does. But this time it’s quiet. Her mouth opens in a silent gasp, and her body arches into mine as she comes around me in long, deep, rolling waves that I feel everywhere.

And I follow.

The wave rolls through me, emptying me into her. I press my face into her neck, breathe her name into her skin, and know something has changed in me forever.

I stay inside her. I don't pull out. I hold her against me and wait until our breathing comes back to us.

"You should know something," I murmur into her hair. "You just took everything from me."

I close my eyes and smile.

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44

SUNNY

We haven’t left the apartment for more than twenty-four hours and have made love a disproportionate number of times. I’m surprised I can still walk.

We have barely left the bedroom, only to make food, like the cheese toastie I’m making right now.

Dante hoists himself up onto the counter behind me and sits there with his bare feet dangling. He’s shirtless in a pair of sweatpants, his perfect six-pack on display as he watches me flip the toasties in the hot pan.

"You seem remarkably confident for a woman who murders food with no conscience," he says.

"Cannelloni has layers. This is bread, cheese, butter, heat. Even I can't screw this up." I shrug.

"Cheese toasties are iconic. You’re setting yourself up for failure."

I pull the toasties off the heat and cut them on the chopping board.

"Here, taste," I say, handing him one.

I hear the golden crunch as he takes a bite and his eyes close. “Damn, that’s good.”

"See?" I point the spatula at him. "I’m a genius."

"So I can see."

He takes another bite.

“Now, apologize to your wife and tell me how good I am.”

"Eeh…"

"Say the words."

"Busy eating," he says around a mouthful of cheese toastie.

"Say it's the best cheese toastie you've ever had."

He swallows. "I will say it is ... adequate."

"You are the worst husband ever."

"And yet." He gestures between us with the rest of the toastie. "Here we are."

Yes, here we are.

Still sitting on the counter, he sets down his empty plate and wraps his ankles around the back of my knees to pull me to him. His knees close against my hips to hold me in place.

He looks down at me, eyes bright with all the carnal things he wants to do next.

I lean in to kiss him, the kiss light at first. But the kiss deepens, and his tongue moves against mine as the heat roars into a burning flame.

His legs tighten around me, and my hand drifts up his thigh and finds the hard outline of him.

I glance down.

Oh.

His sweatpants are tented between his legs, and the sight of it sends a jolt of heat through my stomach so fast that my fingers dig into his thigh.

He follows my gaze, then looks back at me.

"You did that," he says, his voice husky.

He slides off the counter.

His bare feet hit the marble, and he stands in front of me all bare-chested and hard.

A reckless hunger takes hold of me, and I drop to my knees.

Looking up at him, I hold his gaze as I pull his sweatpants down.

His cock springs free and hits thick and hard against his abs.

I wrap my hand around the base, and his head drops back as a groan rolls out of his chest at the first contact of skin on skin.

I lean in and lick the tip, flattening my tongue across the broad tip and slowly dragging it down his shaft before taking him into my mouth.

"Fuck," he chokes out, and his hips jerk forward.

I go deeper, then pull back slowly before finding a seductive rhythm.

His breathing is ragged, and his hand finds my hair with a deep groan.

I pull off long enough to look up at him.

His face is slack, his eyes heavy, his chest heaving.

"Don't hold back," I say.

"You keep doing that, *little rose*, and I'm going to lose it."

"Don't. Hold. Back. I want you to come in my mouth."

He groans, and his eyes lose focus.

I take him in my mouth again, his cock hitting the back of my throat as he rocks into me, fucking my mouth with short, urgent strokes. His hand fists in my hair, and sounds come out of his mouth I've never heard from him.

God, I love those sounds because they are the sounds of the sexiest man in the world coming apart, and it's me who's doing the undoing.

His abs lock. His fingers tighten in my hair. "Baby, I'm going to come…"

And he does.

He comes hard.

His whole body jerks, and a raw primal growl tears out of him as ropes of cum slap across my tongue and chin.

I look up at him from the floor, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

He watches me with heavy-lidded eyes, his breathing fast, his teeth sunk into his lip.

"Hi, baby," I say.

With a smile that makes me throb between my legs, he pulls me to my feet and lifts me onto the counter.

"Hey, baby," he says back, stepping between my legs.

I wind my arms around his neck. "I'm ready for you to fuck me now."

He chuckles. "You know, I think you're going to be the death of me."

I kiss the corner of his jaw. "At least you'll die happy."

He laughs again.

I know without a doubt I have fallen in love with him.

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DANTE

“I’m going to need you to repeat that,” I say into my phone, an edge to my voice.

On the other end of the line, Councilman Cross clears his throat like he does when he’s nervous.

“The liquor license for the Grazalov development was cleared this morning. Dante, my hands are tied on this one. There are no procedural grounds to—"

“Cross.”

He stops talking.

“Do I need to remind you about the unpleasantness at the Albany Hotel?” I ask calmly.

Cross is quiet.

“Because I remember it,” I say. “I remember it in considerable detail. Especially the photographs. And I remember what it cost to make sure no one else would ever remember them. It was no trouble. After all, friends do these things for friends.” I pause. “How is Mrs. Cross? Well, I hope.”

I don’t need to say anything more. That’s the beauty of leverage. Thirty-one years of marriage wouldn’t survive what happened that weekend. Him and a few male escorts. The drugs. The photographs. The blackmail that followed, and him turning to me to clean it all up.

Which I did, of course.

“Come to think of it,” he says. “There may be a zoning review I overlooked. These things can throw a real spanner in the works, especially in complicated cases.”

“It sounds complicated to me.”

“It’s starting to look that way, yes.”

“You’ve always been thorough, which is why I admire you, Cross.”

He doesn’t bother with the pleasantries of goodbye.

That’s okay; I don’t need him to like me. I just need him to fucking do what I need him to do, and that is to help me stop Anton Grazalov from building his casino in my city.

I’m not opposed to opposition. In fact, I welcome competition. It keeps me on my toes and makes me feel energized.

What I can’t tolerate is a sex-trafficking gangster wannabe trying to muscle in on my territory and risk him giving us all a bad name. The casino he wants to build will give him more opportunities to traffic in the back rooms. And I’m not having that shit in my town.

I leave my desk and walk to the mezzanine overlooking the casino floor. Tonight it is full, and I can feel the energy through the glass.

My phone rings against my chest. Pete Salerno.

"Talk to me."

"Just an update, nothing solid yet." Pete's voice has its working flatness, the tone he uses when he's mid-dig. "Your girl's California years. I'm onto something, but it's buried under a lot of red tape. Sealed court documents. Records that should exist but don't. Somebody with money went to real trouble to make a stretch of her life disappear."

The hum of my casino fades out under me.

People don't spend money erasing happy stories. Whatever is under that red tape is why Sunny deleted herself from the face of the earth.

She was scared before I ever met her.

And then I made her even more afraid.

That slams into my gut like a right hook.

"Get onto it," I say. "Whatever it costs, whoever you have to buy. I want to know everything."

I put the phone away and stand above my glittering, singing kingdom, and for the first time in my life, it isn't the thing I'm most afraid of losing.

Two hours later, Deno knocks and puts his head around my office door. “Boss, Katie’s downstairs, asking if you have a minute.”

Across from me, John Marco looks up from his phone.

“Send her up,” I say.

Katie comes into my office quietly. She’s lost weight, but her injuries have healed, and her eyes are clear. I can see there is strength in her straight back and shoulders.

“Mr. Di Zaro.” She smiles cautiously. “I won’t take up much of your time. I just wanted to thank you in person. Thank you for what you did for me and my son. The hospital. The therapist. My son’s school fees. The money so I can take time off.” She stops and steadies herself. “I could never repay you.”

“And you never need to.”

She nods and then glances once at John Marco, then back to me, dropping her voice.

“And thank you for taking care of the other matter.”

She doesn’t need to say it out loud. I know what she means. I hold her gaze and acknowledge what she said with a nod.

“I couldn’t bear the idea of him being out there,” she says, her voice shaking now. “Walking around. Being fine. Before I knew he was gone, I thought I’d have to look over my shoulder all the time. But now I don’t have to. You gave me that, and I want you to know how grateful I am.”

“You owe me nothing, Katie,” I say. “Your job is here when you feel ready to return. In the meantime, be with your son and heal.”

She nods self-consciously. “Well, thanks again.”

She turns to go, but then spins back and hugs me. Her arms wrap around my ribs, her cheek presses against my chest, and I stand there for a moment with my hands in the air like I’m being robbed.

Then I put one hand on her back, then the other, and I hug her.

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When she steps back, she wipes her eyes. “God bless you, Mr. Di Zaro.”

She leaves, and the office is suddenly very quiet.

John Marco is staring at me with both eyebrows somewhere near his hairline.

“What?” I ask.

“You let her hug you.”

“Don’t start.”

He puts his hand over his heart like he’s witnessed a miracle. “Ladies and gentlemen, it’s *alive*.”

He grins and rises to his feet.

“It’s a good thing,” he says.

I’m going to hear about this for the rest of my life.

“Don’t you have somewhere else to be?”

“Plenty, but nowhere is as entertaining as standing in my brother’s office and teasing him.”

I walk around my desk and sit. “Goodbye, John Marco.”

He walks toward the door but pauses in the doorway.

"Keep sleeping with your wife. You're less of an asshole when you're getting laid."

“Who said I was sleeping with her?”

John Marco looks at me like I’m a lost cause. “Oh, big brother, you’re an expert in so many terrifying things, yet such a greenhorn when it comes to matters of the heart. It’s written all over your face. I saw it at the gala, and I’m seeing it now. You’re not just sleeping with her. You’re in love with her.”

I keep my expression neutral. “Weren’t you leaving?”

He grins. “It’s a good thing, Dante. Don’t fuck this up.”

When he’s gone, I pick up the phone and call Sunny. She answers on the third ring.

“What are you wearing?” she asks into the phone like a prank caller.

I can’t help but grin. “You, in about twenty minutes.”

“You’re on your way home? It’s early.”

I can hear the smile in her voice, and it makes me warm.

“Well, I’ve got plans,” I say.

“You do? What are they?”

“You, Mrs. Di Zaro. You. And brace yourself. I’ve got stamina.”

She chuckles, and I like the sound of it in my ear. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

I laugh and hang up.

My wife has no idea just how much stamina I have.

But tonight I intend to show her over and over and over until neither of us can walk.

The penthouse is quiet when I walk in.

I drop my keys on the dining table and shrug out of my jacket, throwing it on top of them. "Sunny?"

Her voice floats down the hallway from the master bathroom. "In here."

I make my way toward the bathroom and push the door open. Sunny is in the oversized bathtub surrounded by bubbles, her wet, soapy tits sitting just above the water line.

She's leaning back against the curved edge with her hair twisted into a messy knot, smiling seductively at me.

"Want to join me?" she asks huskily.

I’m already undoing my shirt before she can finish, and I get undressed faster than I ever have until everything is in a pile on the floor.

Her eyes drop to where I’m already hard.

I have been since I walked through the door and saw wet skin and steam, and those fuck me eyes looking up at me.

I cross the bathroom toward the tub, my cock heavy and hard.

Seeing my wife in the bath with her gorgeous body all soapy and wet is my new favorite way to finish my day.

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SUNNY

Holy shit.

He walks toward me naked, and I forget how to breathe.

I've seen him naked before, but this is different. This is Dante moving through steam, with water vapor clinging to his skin, and the bathroom light catching every angle of his magnificent body.

His cock is huge. And I mean huge. It’s thick, wide, and hard, hitting his abs with each stride toward the bathtub.

When he steps into the tub, I get a good look at it and lick my lips, thinking about all the things I’m going to do to it tonight.

He lowers himself into the water across from me, and his legs slide against mine beneath the bubbles.

My foot finds his calf and slides up slowly.

"Bad day?" I ask.

"It just got significantly better."

My foot keeps climbing. Up past his knee to the inside of his thigh, my toes brushing the length of his cock. His hand shoots under the water and grabs my ankle.

"Problem?" I say with a grin.

"You know exactly what you're doing."

"I'm taking a bath, Dante. You're the one who got in."

"You invited me."

"You took off your clothes in four seconds," I tease, flexing my foot and pressing my toes against him again.

His fingers tighten around my ankle, pulling me through the water until I'm on his lap, with my knees on either side of his hips and my hands on his shoulders. Bubbles spill over the rim and slosh to the floor.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi."

"You're tense."

"I'm not tense."

I trace his jawline with a wet finger. "This thing right here gives you away every time. You clench when you're stressed. Or turned on." I stop at his chin. "Which one is it right now?"

"Take a guess."

I slightly adjust my hips, and the movement drags my pussy along the length of his cock; the friction is enough to make my breath stutter.

"Hmm," I say. "I think you're stressed."

"Wrong."

"Really?" I roll my hips again, this time slower. "How about now?"

His eyes glaze over, and his groan is rough as he reaches for my hips underwater. "Even less so."

I lean forward, my lips brushing his ear as I grind down on him. "How about now?"

His hand grabs the back of my neck, and his mouth crashes into mine, kissing me hard and wet and deep until I'm moaning against his lips.

Under the soapy water, he takes his cock in his hand and positions himself right where I want him. "Take it," he rasps.

I slowly sink onto his cock, stopping when he's thick and hard inside me to the hilt.

I clench around him, throbbing but still, wanting to torture us both.

"Move, baby…" His voice comes out broken. "Baby, please…"

His cock flinches inside me, begging me to move, but I remain motionless.

Because this is intense torture and beautiful agony.

"Little rose … I'm begging you…"

"Begging looks good on you," I whisper. "I should keep you like this."

"Careful." His fingers dig into my hips. "I'm not a patient man."

"Mm, and here I thought you were a very patient man."

"Not tonight." His mouth drags along my jaw. "Move, or I'll flip you over and empty half this water onto the floor."

I smile against his temple. "Promises, promises."

"Three seconds, little rose."

"Or what?"

"One."

I don't make it to two. I rise until I almost lose him, then sink back down in a slow, torturous descent that sends a wave of water lapping over the rim.

We both groan, and I start to rock, water sloshing with every roll of my hips.

Dante pushes his hands into my hair and pulls my mouth down to his, kissing me while I ride him.

"Look at you," he breathes against my lips. "Riding what's yours."

I swallow his words because I am close, and he can tell. He plants his feet against the tub and drives up into me, and my moans grow faster and louder.

"That's it," he growls. "Let me hear you coming on my cock."

His name rips from my lips, and I come violently on his cock, shaking and clenching around him. He follows with a deep, vibrating groan into my neck, his arms crushing me to his chest.

For a long moment neither of us moves.

Lifting my head, I look around and laugh.

The bathroom looks like a tidal wave hit it.

Water and bubbles are all over the floor. The bathmat is soaked through. There are even soap suds sliding down the mirror over the sink.

Dante gives me one of his beautiful smiles, then leans his head back against the edge of the tub and closes his eyes. His broad inked chest rises and falls, and his expression is that of a very content, happy man.

I let my body soften against his and rest my head against his shoulder. The water is starting to cool around us, but I don't want to move. I don't want to break this closeness and the feeling of him still inside me.

With his arms around me, he presses his lips to the top of my head and keeps them there.

I close my eyes and listen to his heartbeat under my ear, and think about how strange this is.

Because I was forced to be here.

And now I'm sitting in a bathtub with the man who took me, and I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else in the world.

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DANTE

Sunny is stretched out on top of me, her cheek resting on my chest, and her fingers drawing lazy shapes on my shoulder. The water is lukewarm, but her whole slippery length is pressed against my body, and I don't want to break the contact of skin on skin. Because there is nothing on Earth like a naked Sunny lying on top of me in the bath.

I could stay here forever and always be content.

"Tell me about your mom and your dad," she murmurs.

I run my fingers up and down her wet back. "It was an arranged marriage between two powerful families."

She lifts her head to look at me. "An arranged marriage?"

I nod. "They met on the day they were married."

She returns her cheek to my chest. "Like us," she whispers.

"They fell crazy in love with each other. He was a hard man. A man to be afraid of. But when my mom walked into the room, he went stupid. He would forget what he was saying. I look at all the photos of them together and how crazy in love they look in every photo."

Sunny's fingers stop moving. "What happened to her?"

I inhale a rough breath. "My father had enemies, and one of them decided the best way to get to my father was through her."

I swallow thickly, and Sunny feels it.

"You don't need to tell me if you don't want to," she says softly.

“I want you to know. I should talk about her more.” I keep my voice flat, trying to control the emotion I feel when I think about that day. How my world broke apart. “They took her from outside the church where she was volunteering. My father paid what they asked. But they sent her back to him without a pulse.”

Sunny doesn’t say anything, but she slides her arms around my ribs and squeezes softly.

“I’m so sorry,” she murmurs against my chest.

“My father never got over it. He withdrew into himself. He was ruthless and savage toward his enemies. He annihilated them until there was no one left. Then six years later, when he was sure John Marco and I could continue his legacy without him, he put a gun in his mouth.”

She shifts her head to look at me, but I can’t look at her. Instead, I look up at the ceiling.

“His grief never left him; instead, it ate him from the inside out. He didn’t want to live in a world without her. And I vowed that I would never end up that way.” I have to stop talking to swallow, and then add, “I figured not loving someone was one less way your enemies could hurt you.”

She’s quiet for a while, and the only sound in the room is the gentle drip of the tap.

“So that’s why,” she says softly.

“Why what?” I ask, finally looking at her.

“Why you don’t form attachments. You watched the strongest man you know get hurt by it.” Her voice is gentle. “So you don’t want to give your enemies anything to aim at.”

“It’s a good rule,” I say.

“It’s a terrible rule.”

She pushes up onto her elbows so she’s looking down at me, her wet hair dripping onto my chest.

“I would rather love someone and lose them than never love at all.”

“Why?”

“Because there is nothing more powerful in the world than love,” she says, looking beautiful in the candlelight.

“Love wasn’t what put the gun in his mouth. That was grief. Love kept it out of his mouth for six years. Loving you and John Marco was the only reason he didn’t give up earlier. He chose you because he loves you. It’s not a cost. It’s what love does.”

I look up into her beautiful eyes and sweet face, and I feel her sunshine warm my entire body.

Most likely to make everyone smile.

"My mom's been gone three months. The love didn't go anywhere; she did."

"I like the way you look at things, Sunny Di Zaro."

"I'm very smart and wise. You're very lucky to be married to me."

"Luck had nothing to do with it. I kidnapped you, remember?"

Her mouth twitches. "Don't ruin this."

"I'm not ruining anything."

She runs a wet finger along my lips, and I see the affection in her eyes. We don't need words. We know how we feel.

I pull her down, and she comes easily, settling her cheek over my heart.

For a long time neither of us moves because the moment we do, the world will come back in, but in here it's just the two of us.

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DANTE

She screams in her sleep, and I'm awake before my brain even knows why.

Having enemies has trained my nervous system to go from unconscious to alert in under a second, and I'm sitting up, my hand reaching for the gun on my nightstand before I realize what is going on.

I look at Sunny. She’s twisted in the sheets beside me.

"No…” Her voice is shredded. "Please … you don’t have to do this … please…”

I reach for her shoulder. "Sunny."

Her hand flies up in a desperate swing at something that isn’t here.

"Sunny. Wake up."

Her legs kick at the sheets, the sounds coming out of her are guttural and tortured, and my insides are shredding at the fear I hear in them.

I've heard fear before. But this … this is something else.

"Jeremy—"

The name rips from her throat in a sob.

"Jeremy, stop—"

My blood goes cold.

Who the fuck is Jeremy?

"Sunny. You're dreaming. Wake up. Wake up, baby."

Her eyes fly open.

She’s disoriented and stares through me at something that isn't here. She’s panting, and her skin is drenched in sweat.

"You're okay," I say. "You're with me. You're safe. It was a dream."

She blinks with confusion.

"I'm here," I reassure her.

Her breathing is ragged, and she looks dazed.

"Breathe," I say. "Just breathe, baby."

I pull her upright against my chest, and she presses her face into my neck. I feel her tears against my skin.

I hold her tighter, and minutes pass before the shaking eases and her grip on my arms loosens.

She pulls back, and I see her face is tear-streaked. But it’s the haunted look in her eyes that I feel all the way into my soul.

She’s terrified.

"Sorry," she whispers. "I didn't mean to wake you."

“Don’t apologize.”

She lifts her beautiful eyes to me. She’s calm now and gives me a small smile. “I must’ve had a nightmare.”

"Who's Jeremy?" I ask, feeling something tighten in my gut. Every instinct in me tells me I am not going to like the answer.

But the change in her is instantaneous. If I thought I was going to get an answer, I was wrong.

She slides her gaze away. “Who?”

“Jeremy.”

She swallows thickly. "I don’t...” She shrugs.

"You were screaming his name."

"I don't remember."

She remembers.

"Sunny."

"It was just a nightmare. I get them sometimes." She pulls free from me. "I'm fine."

She's not fine. She was sobbing thirty seconds ago. And the fear and panic I heard in her voice will live inside my skull for a very long time.

But I know emotional walls because I've built enough of them. Pushing against this one right now will only make it higher.

She needs to feel safe and cared for.

And it kills me to know that she doesn’t feel that with me. Not enough to confide in me.

But I understand it. For the past few weeks, I’ve been her nightmare. It’s only fair that she needs more time to trust me.

"Lie down," I say.

"I should go back to my room."

"Lie down, Sunny."

She looks at me, then softens and lies down.

I pull the sheets over her and settle behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist, drawing her against my chest.

“This is your room now,” I whisper.

She nods softly and relaxes into the embrace, and within minutes she’s asleep.

But I couldn’t fall asleep if my life depended on it.

Because I have questions running riot in my head as we lay in the dark.

Who hurt her?

What did they do?

And who the fuck is Jeremy?

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SUNNY

"Repeat after me," Dante says, holding out the credit card.

He stands by the kitchen island in a charcoal suit, espresso in one hand, and the card pinched between two fingers of the other, extended toward me but not quite close enough to grab.

"I will only use this for good."

"I will only use this for good," I say, reaching for the card.

He pulls it back an inch.

"And not for evil."

"I'm pretty sure you're the evil one," I say.

He pulls the card further out of reach, and one eyebrow lifts.

"And not for evil," I add quickly.

He holds my gaze for another second, then hands me the card.

It’s a credit card with my name on the front. Sunny Di Zaro. Printed in silver letters.

"What's the limit?" I ask.

"There isn't one."

I look up. "What do you mean there isn't one?"

"I mean the card has no spending limit."

I blink at him.

"You mean it is limitless?"

"Yes."

"So I could buy a diamond-encrusted Bentley."

His espresso pauses halfway to his mouth. "Yes, theoretically. You could buy a diamond-encrusted Bentley."

"Interesting."

"Sunny."

"Just exploring the parameters."

"Do not," he says, setting his espresso down, "buy a diamond-encrusted Bentley."

"What about a regular Bentley?"

"No."

"A diamond-encrusted Fiat?"

"No."

"You said limitless. That implies no limits. I feel like there's a false advertising issue here."

His jaw flexes the way it does when I drive him to distraction. But his eyes are warm, and the corner of his mouth is fighting a losing battle against a smile.

I rise on my toes and kiss him. A brief kiss with my lips against his for just a second.

"Killjoy," I murmur against his mouth before stepping away.

His hand catches my waist and he pulls me in. His mouth finds mine again, and this time there is nothing quick about it. This kiss is slow, deep, and thorough. His tongue slides against mine, and he tastes like espresso and heat. I grab the lapels of his suit jacket because my knees just stopped working, and I need something solid to hold onto.

His other hand slides under my T-shirt, his palm flat and warm against my bare skin, and my body melts into his like we didn't spend half the night tangled together.

He tips my head back with his hand on my jaw and kisses me like he has nowhere to be.

A wild ache pounds between my legs, making my fingers tighten in his hair and my hips press forward against his.

He groans, and it’s the deep groan of a man who knows he has to stop and hates it.

God, I like that sound.

He pulls back, his breathing uneven.

"I have things I can’t reschedule this morning," he says, his voice raspy. "John Marco is meeting me at eight."

"Go," I say against his lips. “Be a casino magnate. Do casino magnate things. But don’t be late for dinner. I’m ordering pad thai and if you stand me up, I'm eating all the pad thai and I will not feel bad about it."

"I would never expect you to feel bad about pad thai."

He kisses my forehead and pauses there. I wonder if he's thinking about the nightmare I had last night and how I brushed it off.

He knows there's something to it. Dante Di Zaro is not a fool.

But he doesn't push, and I'm grateful because I'm just not ready to talk about it.

I know I will someday soon.

Just not today.

“What are you up to today?” he asks, pulling on his suit jacket.

I hold up the card. “Buying a Bentley.”

He gives me a look that warns me that under no circumstances am I buying a Bentley.

“Okay, grumpy, that was a joke. But I am going to buy a few things.”

“Oh yeah, like what?”

“Promise you won’t laugh?”

“I promise.”

“I’m buying ingredients, and I’m going to teach myself how to bake.”

He chuckles. “Just remember where the fire extinguisher is.”

“Very funny.” I throw the dish towel at him. “You said you wouldn’t laugh.”

He comes around the kitchen island and plants another kiss on my forehead. “I look forward to whatever baked delights my wife conjures up.”

I can’t help but smile.

Why do I go weak whenever he says those two magical words?

My wife.

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DANTE

The moment I step into my office at eight a.m., my phone rings.

It’s my private investigator, Pete Salerno.

"Talk to me."

"I've got it." Pete's voice is flat. "Took longer than expected. Somebody with resources went to a lot of trouble to make this information hard to find. Court filings sealed. Police reports buried. Complaint records scrubbed from the company's HR system. Whoever this guy is, he's got reach."

I lean back in my chair. "Who."

"Jeremy Parker-Downey. CEO of Remy Media Group, a tech and media conglomerate based in San Francisco. Net worth somewhere north of three billion, depending on which index you're reading. Political donor. Golf buddy to some very powerful people.”

Jeremy, stop.

I feel the prickly heat crawl up my spine and across the nape of my neck.

I’ve never heard of Jeremy Parker-Downey.

But he’s about to become a person of extreme interest to me.

"Sunny worked for him," Pete says. "Content strategist at Remy's San Francisco office."

"And Parker-Downey."

Pete is silent for a moment. He usually delivers the facts with a cold disconnect and no hesitation.

But he is hesitating now.

"Dante, this one's ugly."

"Tell me."

"According to her statement to the police, Parker-Downey targeted her. Months of escalation. Started with comments. Compliments that crossed the line. Requests to stay late, work weekends, join him at events that had nothing to do with her job description. She documented all of it. Emails. Texts. Screenshots. The girl was careful."

“The girl is my fucking wife,” I growl because my gut is already churning, and I need to let some of it out.

My hand tightens on the armrest of my chair.

Pete understands and doesn’t take it personally. "She filed a formal complaint with Remy's HR department."

"And?"

"HR told Parker-Downey."

My blood begins to boil.

"They told him," Pete repeats. "Within forty-eight hours of her filing, someone in HR flagged it directly to the CEO's office. And then..."

He stops again.

My knuckles are white on the chair. My jaw is locked so tight I can feel my pulse in my teeth.

"Pete."

"According to her statements, he went to her apartment. Kicked in her front door." Pete's voice drops, and I can hear the uncharacteristic empathy in his tone. "He raped her, Dante."

I don't move.

I don't breathe.

My world tilts on its axis and every cell in my body vibrates with a dark frequency.

Rage.

Pure unfiltered rage.

"She went to the police," Pete continues. "Filed a report. They took her statement, ran a kit. Then the report and the evidence disappeared. Like they never existed. I had to dig hard through a big pile of bullshit to find out what happened."

"Parker-Downey." I say his name with the kind of venom that annihilates in minutes.

"His lawyers. His connections. His money. She was erased from the system."

My vision narrows. The edges of the room blur, and I see nothing except my wife being erased from the system because a raping cunt made her disappear.

My hand sweeps across my desk, sending everything crashing to the floor, and I am on my feet, my chest heaving and my vision blurred with fury.

I've known rage before, but this is something entirely different. I feel it growing in my chest. It's not hot. It's deadly cold. The temperature at the bottom of the ocean where only darkness lives.

I close my eyes.

Behind my eyelids, I see her sitting on my kitchen counter, eating peanut butter straight from the jar with her spoon. I see her sunshiny smile. I hear her sunny chuckle. And I have never felt so murderous in my life.

But then I see her standing in my library, telling me she needed to know if I was human.

Of course she did.

Because the last man who had power over her used it to destroy her.

The last man who claimed ownership of her body took it without asking.

I dragged her into another powerful man's domain without any real choice. But instead of crumbling, she looked me in the eye and asked me if I was a monster.

She needed to know if it was going to happen again.

My chest cracks open.

"Dante." Pete's voice is careful. "You still there?"

"What happened next?" I ask through gritted teeth.

"The only thing she could do. She ran. Came home."

"Is Parker-Downey looking for her?"

"Oh yeah. He's looking for her. Asshole is a narcissist, and she got away. But she's smart. She only works off the books at the coffee shop, and barely exists online."

I feel the two halves of me merge. The man and the don. The husband and the monster. What emerges is something dark and vengeful with one thing in its crosshairs.

Jeremy Parker-Downey.

The man who kicked in a door, took what wasn't his, and then did it again because he could.

"Pete. Everything you have on Parker-Downey. Finances, properties, personal security, travel patterns, vices, vulnerabilities. Every skeleton in every closet. I want to know what he eats for breakfast, who he's fucking, and which of his board members secretly hate him. Full workup. Nothing left out."

"Timeline?"

"Yesterday."

"I understand."

"And, Pete."

"Yeah?"

"This stays between us. No one else knows."

"Got it."

I hang up.

Standing in the wreckage of my desk, I vibrate with a simmering rage and think about Sunny. I think about her wondering if she'd ever feel safe again. She will. I'll make sure of it. Because she's mine to protect.

I will burn Jeremy Parker-Downey's world to the ground for what he did to her.

And then I'll make sure he knows why.

I pick up my phone.

I call Sunny.

She picks up on the second ring. "Hey." Her voice is warm, and I feel the comfort wash over me.

"Hey," I say.

“Miss me already.”

"Always."

“I’ve got a remedy for that. You could come home, and I can ease the tension I hear in your voice.”

I close my eyes. “I like the sound of that, but I can’t. It’s why I’m calling. I won’t be home until late tonight.”

There's an ache in my chest I don't know what to do with. I have to force myself to keep my voice normal.

“So no pad thai?”

“No, *little rose*, not for me tonight.”

"How late are you going to be? I’ll stay up."

"I don’t know yet." I mentally clock what lies ahead. A six-hour flight there and back. An hour on the road, two at the most. “Probably not until midnight.”

“Then I will see you at midnight.”

She chuckles softly, and it’s a comforting sound. But it only deepens my rage.

"You okay?" she asks. Her voice is light, but she knows something is up with me.

"I'm fine."

"You sound tired."

"I *am* tired."

"Come home as soon as you can, okay?"

"I will."

"Promise?"

The ache swells.

"I promise," I say.

"Good."

"I’ll see you tonight."

"Bye, baby."

The line goes dead.

Baby. The word has never sounded so good in my ear.

My thumb moves across the screen until I find my brother’s number.

John Marco picks up on the first ring.

His voice is easy. "I literally just stepped out of the elevator. I’ll be there in two seconds."

He appears in my doorway a moment later, and when he sees the look on my face, his ease vanishes.

"What's going on?" he asks.

I look out at the city. Somewhere in San Francisco, Jeremy Parker-Downey is eating his chia pudding and drinking his kombucha, thinking he got away with what he did to Sunny.

But I am going to show him that he didn’t.

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DANTE

My brother has gone very still.

I've just told him about Jeremy Parker-Downey, and I can see the rage simmering behind his eyes.

"When do we leave?" he asks.

"Now."

He stands. "I'll call the airfield. We can be wheels up in ninety minutes."

"Already done. The jet's being fueled. Deno's driving us."

"How much does she know?" he asks.

"Nothing. She thinks I'm working late."

He nods. "That's probably for the best."

Jeremy Parker-Downey's home is a love letter to his massive ego.

Ninety million dollars' worth of glass and steel perched on a hill like a middle finger aimed at the entire city.

Twelve-foot walls. Cameras on every corner. A security system that makes Jeremy Parker-Downey believe he is untouchable.

But tonight, I'm going to prove him wrong.

With my gun.

In his mouth.

And a bullet in his brain stem.

Three million dollars of security and my tech genius, Poe—a college senior who lives in his mom’s basement—gets us inside in eleven seconds.

Inside, the house is a gallery of obscene wealth. High ceilings. Glass everything. Artwork. Sculptures. A giant aquarium.

We find Jeremy in the master suite, pouring a nightcap. He’s barefoot, dressed in a black tee and gray sweatpants.

He looks like any other tech bro I’ve come across. Expensive but casual. Groomed without looking like he’s trying too hard. The kind of guy who thinks he’s charming.

When he sees us, there is no immediate reaction to the two strangers standing in his bedroom at midnight.

It appears Jeremy Parker-Downey doesn't panic.

He takes a sip of his drink.

"Well," he says. "This is a surprise."

He thinks his bodyguards are going to appear any minute, but we disposed of them on our way inside.

"Evening, Jeremy."

"You want to tell me how you got past my system? I'm genuinely curious. I designed it myself."

"Trade secret."

"Cute." He leans against the bar. "And you are?"

"Dante Di Zaro."

He sips his drink again, his mind working to figure out how he knows the name.

"Di Zaro." He gives me a slow nod. "The real deal."

"The real deal."

"I've heard stories."

"They're all true."

The temperature in the room drops, and his smile slips.

"So," he says calmly. "What brings you to my bedroom, Dante Di Zaro? Business? Because I have to say, this is a hell of an entrance."

"I'm married."

His brows lift, and he blinks. "Congratulations?"

"To Sunny Meadows."

I wait for his reaction. For my wife’s name to register. I see the second it does.

It’s a brief moment when his survival instincts tell him he should run. There is a split second when he has to choose between fight or flight. But his ego won’t let him run, and his arrogance makes him mistakenly believe he can talk his way out of this.

He takes a sip of his drink, then laughs around a mouthful of ice.

"Well," he says, crunching the ice between his teeth. "Ain't that the shit."

He puts his glass down on the mantel beside him.

"Sunny," he says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Little Sunny Meadows. She married into the mafia. Good for her.”

My jaw locks so hard my back teeth creak.

"You know why I'm here?"

"I can guess."

"Then guess."

"She told you her version," he says. "And now you're here to … what? Defend her honor? Avenge her?" He chuckles. "How romantic. Very old school. I respect it."

"Her version."

"Everyone has a version, Dante."

I step closer, and my voice drops to the tone I save for moments like these. When it is the last conversation a man will ever have.

"Let me tell you my version. The one where you abused your position and power."

He watches me without fear, and I’m starting to think this guy is either completely unaware of what I’m capable of and believes this is going to end in his favor, or he really is delusional and thinks he is untouchable.

"How you cornered her in the elevator. How you pushed her against the wall. How you raped her while she pleaded with you to stop."

His face doesn't move. He gives me nothing. Just sips his fucking drink.

If I didn’t have things to say to him first, he’d already be dead on the floor.

“How you kicked in her front door and took what wasn't yours to take. How you made sure she knew there was nowhere to go. Nobody to tell. Nothing she could do."

I lean in. Close enough to smell the whiskey on his breath.

"Did it make you hard, Jeremy? Seeing her that frightened?"

He gives me nothing. No fear. No panic. No remorse. Fucking nothing.

"Did you sit there with your pathetic cock in your hands, jerking off over her fear?"

Jeremy’s amusement vanishes, and his eyes change because I just conjured his inner demon. His darkness rises to the surface, and I know I’m staring at his monster.

The one that lives inside him and lusts for pain and power. The one that tells him he can have what he wants whenever he wants it.

"No," he says. "I jerked off over her naked body after I wrapped my fingers around her throat and she passed out."

The room tilts, and everything in me goes white-hot.

My vision narrows. My hand moves toward my gun, but I stop it.

I stop it because that's what he wants.

He wants to see me crack. This sick fuck is waiting for me to lose my composure so he can have one last moment of control before the end he already knows is coming.

Smug fucking psychopath.

He wants me to break.

But I’m not going to break.

I steady my nerves and temper my rage with a slow breath.

Then I lean closer and place my mouth near his ear.

"I want you to know," I say, "that what comes next is because of what you did to her."

I pull back.

He looks at me. That dark thing still swimming behind his eyes.

And he decides to be exactly who he is.

"I did to her what she wanted me to do," he says. "And she fucking loved it. Begging me with those fuck me eyes. Wanting to choke on my dick while on her knees— "

My gun is in his mouth before he finishes the sentence.

Steel clicks against his teeth, and his eyes go wide.

"Fucking choke on this."

But I don’t pull the trigger.

That would be too good for this predator.

I just wanted to see him piss and shit himself.

From the dark stain spreading across his sweatpants and the foul smell in the air, my task is accomplished.

Jeremy doesn’t get a quick death.

He gets to come home with me. To the basement at Fortune, where I can take my time with him.

I want to show Sunny that she doesn’t need to be afraid of him anymore.

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SUNNY

"Charles, he's clearly a ghost," I say into the phone.

"He is clearly not a ghost. He was in the mess hall eating soup in the previous scene. Ghosts do not eat soup."

"That's the whole point. He thinks he's eating soup. But he's not. He's dead. He's been dead since his plane went down at the beginning of the movie."

There's silence as I hear Charles processing this.

"That is absurd," he finally says.

"It's a paranormal movie about a haunted battleship, Charles. The whole thing is absurd. That's why it's so good."

"It is not good. The captain has made three operationally unsound decisions in the last twenty minutes alone. No commanding officer worth his weight would dream of doing that for fear of being court-martialed."

"The dead man was his brother. It's called grief, Charles."

"It's called poor seamanship."

I shove a cracker into my mouth and grin. Getting Charles to watch this movie took a lot of negotiation.

"Just keep watching," I say. "It gets better."

"It could hardly get any worse."

I laugh with a mouth full of crackers, my legs swinging off the counter, the phone tucked between my ear and shoulder. Charles is proving to be a wonderful BFF, especially on the nights when Dante has to work late.

Charles grumbles again, and I laugh, but when the elevator doors open and Dante walks in, my laugh dies in my throat.

My husband looks emotionally destroyed.

His face is tight, and his eyes burn with torment. He looks like a man who has been pulled apart and put back together wrong.

"Charles, I have to go," I say. "I'll call you back later."

I hang up and set the phone on the counter beside me.

Dante drops his keys on the coffee table and walks straight to me. He crosses the kitchen and steps between my legs where I sit on the counter. His arms go around me, and he buries his face in my neck.

I wrap my arms around his head and hold him against me as emotion pours off him. My fingers find the back of his neck and start to stroke.

"Hey," I say softly. " What's going on?"

He doesn't answer and presses his lips against my throat like he needs the contact.

"Talk to me." I cup his jaw and make him look at me.

His eyes tell me he’s just been to hell and back.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"I'm okay," he says. But his voice is rough.

He lifts his hands to my face and cups my jaw the same way I'm cupping his.

"Are you?" he asks.

The question is so quiet and so loaded that my stomach drops.

"Am I what?"

"Okay."

"I'm ... yeah. I'm okay. Dante, what’s going on?"

He kisses me.

And this kiss is nothing like any kiss that came before it.

It's gentle and shaky, like he's trying to say something he doesn't have the words for.

I pull back to look at him. His eyes look haunted. "Dante, talk to me. What happened?"

"I need you," he says. "I just need you. *Please*."

The *please* breaks me apart because Dante Di Zaro does not say please. He commands and growls and gets impatient.

But I know he needs me like this right now. Not sexually. Just like this. In his arms. Me safe and him knowing it.

"I'm here," I whisper. "I'm right here."

He lifts me off the counter, carries me through the penthouse to the bedroom, and lays me down on the bed.

"You're safe," he murmurs. His lips brush my lips. "You know that, right? You're safe here."

More emotion surges forward.

I don't know where this is coming from. I don't know what happened at work tonight, but I don’t think this is about work.

I get the feeling this is about me.

"I know," I whisper. "I know I'm safe with you."

“Good, because I need you, little rose. I need you more than I need anything else.”

My eyes burn and my throat is tight, because I can hear the emotion in every word.

"You have me," I whisper.

We lie there in silence with his face in my neck.

I don't ask what happened, what's wrong, or why he walked through the door looking like a man who'd been gutted.

He'll tell me when he's ready.

Or he won't.

But whatever it is, I'm here if he needs to.

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DANTE

The bed is empty.

I’m in that murky place between sleep and wakefulness when my hands go looking for her but find nothing but cold sheets where her body should be. My eyes flick open, and I sit up and look around the bedroom.

Rain hammers against the windows, and the skyline has disappeared behind a wall of water.

Sunny’s gone.

I pull on sweatpants and walk out into the hallway. The penthouse is dim in the early morning light as rain pours down the windows in small rivers.

I find Sunny in the living room, standing in front of the television in her T-shirt and sleep shorts, chewing her thumbnail and watching TV.

"...tech mogul Jeremy Parker-Downey is missing..."

My blood stops.

"...San Francisco police have confirmed that Parker-Downey, the CEO and founder of Remy Media Group, was last seen yesterday evening. Authorities say blood was found at the scene along with signs of a struggle, and they are treating his disappearance as foul play..."

I walk toward her.

"Sunny."

She doesn't turn around.

On the screen, a reporter is standing in front of a gated property.

"... Parker-Downey, whose net worth is estimated at over thirty billion dollars, is a prominent figure in the tech and media landscape. He serves on the boards of two major streaming platforms and is a significant political donor in California..."

"You knew," she says when she feels me behind her.

Her voice is flat.

"You knew," she says again. She's still facing the television, chewing her nail. "You knew. What he did."

"Yes."

She turns around.

Her face is pale. Her eyes hollow.

"Did you do this?" she asks.

"Maybe you should sit—"

"Did you do this? Yes or no."

I hold her gaze. I'm not going to lie to her because she deserves more than that, and because lying to her right now would be the one thing I can't come back from.

"Yes."

The word leaves my mouth. I see the moment that one word blows us apart.

She takes a step backward. I see fear in her eyes, and it guts me.

"That's what last night was about." Her voice cracks. "You coming home. The way you held me. The way you said you needed me. You knew what he did to me, and you went to California and—"

"Everything I said and did last night was true."

"Last night was a lie."

"What I said weren't lies."

"Then why didn't you tell me? Did you think I wouldn't find out? Jesus Christ, Dante, what have you done?"

"I did what needed to be done."

"You don't think the police will put two and two together? You'll go to jail."

"I'm not going to jail. Everything was done how it needed to be done to make sure this doesn't come back to haunt me or you. I know what I'm doing."

“And that frightens me the most. Who the fuck have I married, mistakenly trusted—”

I take a step forward. “You can trust me.”

"You should have talked to me!" Her voice breaks open, and what comes out is raw and furious and shaking. "It was my story, Dante. *Mine*. Not yours to investigate. Not yours to act on. Not yours to avenge without even talking to me. You didn't give me a choice. You just got on a plane and you —"

Her whole body trembles.

“Sunny—"

"I wasn't ready," she says. "I wasn't ready to tell you. I was going to. I was working up to it. But it was mine, Dante. It was the one thing I had control over … when I told you, how I told you, how much I told you. And you took that from me. Fuck, why do men think they can just take from me like it’s a God-given right?"

Her words hit me so hard I actually step back. She is comparing me to him.

"I’m nothing like him," I say quietly.

"Maybe not. But right now that's how I feel."

Rain pounds against the windows, and in the background, the news anchor drones on about Parker-Downey's disappearance, and I feel absolutely gutted that Sunny would feel that way.

She stares at me. And I watch it happen. The thing I've been dreading since the day I married her. The moment she stops seeing the man and starts seeing the monster.

"How many people have you killed?"

"Sunny, I didn’t—"

"How many?" she demands.

"That's not a question you want answered."

"You're right. I don't." She presses her hand against her mouth and holds it there for a second. "The gun at my father's head. That wasn't a performance. You would have actually killed him."

"Yes."

She flinches, and I feel it in the deep trenches of my black heart.

“And what about me? Would you have killed me, too, if you didn’t need a wife?”

“No, I’ve never killed a woman or an innocent person.”

“Oh, so you’re a nice killer. Good to know.” She turns her back on me. "I always thought you existed in this gray area, but this isn't gray. This is pitch black."

"What I’ve done, I’ve done for you."

She swings back to look at me, then steps forward and shoves me.

"You did it for you," she cries. "Because you found out what he did, and your ego couldn't handle it. Because someone touched something you think belongs to you, and you couldn't let that stand. That's not protection, Dante. That's possession."

"That is not what this is."

"Then why didn't you talk to me first? Why didn't you come home and say, ‘Sunny, I know what happened. What do you want me to do?’ Why didn't you give me a voice in the one thing that mattered more than anything?"

I don't have an answer because she's right. I sat in that office with Pete's words screaming in my head and the red haze descending, and I didn't think about what she wanted. I thought about what I needed. Which was to make the man who hurt her stop existing. I needed the world to be a place where Jeremy Parker-Downey didn't breathe the same air as my wife. I needed it with a desperation that bypassed everything else. Including her needs.

I acted on fury, but I told myself it was love.

But I need her to understand that this fury was born from love. That in some fucked up way, love was able to grow from something dark, and I’ve fallen batshit crazy in love with her.

And I want her to feel safe. I want her to take her power back from him.

I want her to know I am giving her a chance to choose what justice looks like to her.

“He’s not dead,” I say.

She looks confused. “What do you mean? What did you do with him?”

“I brought him back with me. He’s in the basement.”

Her eyes go so wide her brows disappear beneath her fringe. “You brought him … he’s here?”

“Yes.”

All the blood drains from her face.

She walks to the elevator and hits the button.

“Where are you going?”

“I can’t stay here. I have to get as far away from him as possible. You don’t understand what he did.”

“I know what he did.”

“No, you don’t. The things he said. The evil threats he made.” She impatiently stabs the button on the panel. “He’s the kind of evil that gets out of every tight corner. I’m not hanging around for when he does.”

The doors open, and she steps inside.

"Don’t leave.”

“Stop telling me what to do. I’m done with men thinking they can fucking do that.”

Her jaw is locked, her fists are clenched at her sides, and she's barefoot and wearing a T-shirt and those tiny bed shorts she likes. The doors start to close. I shove my hand between them, and they bounce open.

"Let me go," she says.

"Where are you going?"

"Out."

"It's pouring rain."

"I don't care. Just let me go, Dante. For once, just let me have a goddamn voice."

I step back and let the doors close, and she's gone.

I stare at the brushed-steel doors. Then I bolt toward the fire exit and take the stairs down.

I reach the lobby just as she leaves through the front doors of the plaza.

I follow and run through the doors behind her.

Outside, the rain hits me like a wall, and I’m drenched in seconds.

Sunny is twenty feet ahead of me, hurriedly walking through the rain, her shoulders hunched forward, her head down.

"Sunny!"

She doesn't stop.

I close the distance, my hand catching her arm and swinging her around to face me.

Her T-shirt is already soaked through and clinging to her body, her hair flattened against her skull.

"Let go of me."

"No. Not until you listen to what I have to say. "

I grip both her arms. She's shaking from the cold and the anger.

"I don't want to listen to you."

I know I only have seconds before she shoves me away again, so I rush to get all the words out.

"The idea of you being afraid kills me. When I found out what he did, I sat in my office, and I couldn't breathe, Sunny. Because the woman I'm crazy about was hurt."

Her chin is trembling. Her lips are pale. But she isn't walking away.

"And you're right," I say, rain streaming down my face and off my jaw. "You're right that I should have talked to you. You're right that it was your story. But I couldn't live in a world where that man existed and you were afraid."

She presses her closed fists against my chest.

"That's why I brought him back here." My hands move from her arms to her face, cupping her jaw. "I am giving you your choice back. You get to choose what justice looks like."

"Dante, please…"

"Because I love you." The words rip out of me. Torn from a place I didn't know existed until she broke it open. "I love you, Sunny Di Zaro. I fucking love you. And I know that doesn't fix what I've done to you. I know love doesn't excuse it. But that's the reason. Not ego. Not possession. Just you."

Rain hammers down on us. Her hair is plastered to her face, and her T-shirt is almost transparent now. Her eyes are wide and wet as they search mine for the lie.

But she won't find one because this is me cracked open wide for her to see everything.

"You can't just do things like this," she whispers. "That's not how this works."

"It's exactly how this works. It's how my world works. And you're in my world now."

"I didn't ask to be."

"No. You didn't. And I'm sorry for that too."

Her fists loosen against my chest, and her fingers flatten against my soaked T-shirt. She softens against me.

"You love me," she says.

"Yes."

"You kidnapped a man for me."

"Yes."

"I don't know what to do with that."

"I know."

Her lips tremble, the rain running down her face in rivulets.

I lean down and press my mouth to hers, and I thank God she doesn't pull away. I don’t know what I would do if she walked away. If she didn’t want me anymore.

The kiss is soft. Just my lips against hers, tasting rain, tasting the cold.

"Say it again," she whispers, and her fingers tighten in my hair.

"I love you."

I press my forehead to hers.

"Come inside," I say. "You're freezing."

"I'm still angry at you."

"I know."

"We are finishing this conversation inside."

"I know."

"You can't just say I love you and think it makes everything okay."

"I know that, too, and if I have to spend the rest of my life on my knees asking for forgiveness, I will. But let me give this to you. Let me end this god-awful chapter for you."

She stares at me through the rain and then nods.

"I love you too," she says. "And I hate that I love you right now."

"I can work with that," I say.

I pick her up. She wraps her legs around my waist, winds her arms around my neck, and buries her face against my shoulder as I carry her through the rain, through the lobby, and into the elevator.

She lifts her head from my shoulder and looks at me with red-rimmed eyes, rain-slicked hair, and swollen lips.

"I have a voice, and you need to hear it," she says.

“From now on I will. You have my word.”

I hit the button, and the elevator climbs.

And as I hold my wife, I know two things with absolute certainty.

I love her with every fiber of my being.

But I don’t think it will ever be enough for her to forgive me for the things I’ve done.

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SUNNY

The hot water hits my skin, and I moan as the warmth sinks into my muscles and my bones.

Dante steps behind me, his chest against my back, and reaches for the shampoo.

His big hands work the shampoo into my hair, and a warm calm washes over me.

He doesn’t talk. Doesn’t tell me he loves me. Just lets his touch do the talking.

He rinses the shampoo out, then reaches for the conditioner and massages it into my hair with the same slow attention.

When he’s done, he tips my head back and shields my eyes with the side of his hand so the water won't sting as he rinses it out.

And that is what undoes me.

His hand over my eyes keeping soapy water from getting in them.

Such a simple gesture, but it tells me everything I need to know right now. That I am finally safe.

Like a levee bursting, all the emotion I’ve buried since fleeing California comes pouring out of me. Everything I’ve kept buried. Every morsel of pain, fear, and hopelessness.

I turn around, melt into him, and come apart with my face pressed into his chest, letting it all pour out of me at once.

Because finally, finally, I have somewhere safe to let it out.

Dante holds me through all of it.

The sobbing. The shaking. The ugly words that belong to an ugly story.

He wraps both arms around me as he listens to every gruesome detail, holding me in the shelter of his body.

He doesn't tell me it's okay. He just stands there under the warm water with his arms around me, making himself the safe place I've needed for a very long time.

I let it all out, and he swallows every last drop of my pain like it's his now.

"So where is he?" I ask, leaning against the kitchen island, a cup of coffee warming my hands.

"Below the casino is a room."

"What kind of room?"

"The kind people don't walk out of."

I nod slowly as another piece of the puzzle that is my husband falls into place.

"You don't need to see him," Dante says. "You never have to see him again. But this choice belongs to you now. So I'm asking you what you want done to him."

For a moment I let the nightmare back in. I let myself remember because it feels safe to.

"I want him stripped of everything," I say, my anger unfurling in my chest. "The way he stripped me. I want him powerless and terrified. I want him trapped in a room where no one is coming to save him, because that is what my apartment felt like for the nine hours he had me trapped there. I want to see him bleed. I want to hear him beg."

The more I speak, the hotter my pain burns in my chest. It's not fear. It is rage and heartbreak. It is the woman who had her voice taken from her, standing up and saying no more.

"I want to see him," I say.

Dante studies my face and then holds out his hand. "I'll be beside you the whole time. Nothing in that room can hurt you."

I take his hand.

We ride the elevator down to the basement. My heart pounds against my chest, and my pulse roars in my ears. I'm about to face the man who set fire to my world. The memory comes fast. Him pushing me through the front door, the struggle that followed inside, his hand cracking across my face, the blur of pain as he overpowered me. The nine hours in my apartment that followed, where he did the things only the depraved desire.

I let the memory come, letting it fuel me.

So when I walk into the room and see him, I feel nothing but cold numbness.

Jeremy is zip-tied to a chair. One eye is swollen shut, and silver tape covers his mouth. Blood runs down his face, drying in patches over bruised skin.

He's sagging in the chair. Exhausted, hunted, and stripped down to nothing.

He looks small. And that feels best of all.

I walk toward him, and his good eye finds me. But there isn't fear or shame in it. Only the darkness that lives inside him, itching to get out.

I cross the room and rip the tape off his mouth. It pulls some of the skin from his lip, and he hisses. But then he grins at me through the blood and opens his mouth to say something.

But I slap the tape back over his mouth before he can, pressing my palm flat to seal it. Then I rip it off again, taking more skin.

He isn't fucking grinning now.

"You are always a dramatic little cunt," he growls.

I don't answer.

I just tilt my head and stare at him with unblinking eyes.

I probably look unhinged. But I am deadly calm.

"What, you got nothing to say? I thought you would have a tome of things to say to me."

I ignore him and walk over to my husband, holding out my hand for his gun. Dante's eyes study mine, then he hands it over to me. I walk back to Jeremy and press the barrel of the gun into his forehead.

"What are you gonna do? Kill me? You don't have it in you."

I tilt my head, then I smile and see the fear enter his eyes.

"Fine, you want me to apologize? I apologize."

I don't say anything, just press the barrel harder against his skull bone.

“I’m sorry. I’m a prick. I shouldn’t have done what I did. Look, there’s gotta be something I can say and do to fix this.”

He’s panicking. His voice shakes, and his words come rapidly.

“Shut the fuck up,” I say, and his mouth clamps closed.

I remove the gun from his forehead and shove it under his chin.

He winces and starts to cry.

I make eye contact, lean forward, and smile. “I win.”

He closes his eyes and waits for the bullet that doesn’t come.

Shooting him would be too easy, and he doesn’t deserve easy. I know I’m not the only one he has done this to.

I walk back to Dante and put the gun in his palm. His fingers close over mine for a moment, and our eyes meet.

“Take your time with him,” I say. “And make sure he knows exactly why it’s being done.”

My husband’s eyes gleam with darkness and reverence.

“Your wish is my command, *my love*.”

He kisses my forehead. Then he takes off his jacket, hands it to Caruso, and starts rolling up his sleeves.

I walk out of the room and down the concrete corridor to the elevator. Behind me, the screaming starts, but I don’t look back.

I win.

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DANTE

Dawn breaks along the horizon, and I close the file in front of me on the library desk.

I've signed a lot of papers in my life, but none have cost me what these will cost me this morning.

I sit back in my chair and feel its weight take hold of me. My heart feels heavy and my chest is tight.

It’s the weight of doing the right fucking thing.

I wrestled with my decision all night, through the darkness until the cold gray light of dawn, and with every second that passed, the agony of it tore me apart.

I don’t want to do it.

But this is my chance to do the right thing by the woman I have fallen irrevocably in love with.

There is a knock on the door, and my wife appears in the doorway. A heaviness settles in my chest when I see her.

She sits on the armrest of the chair, and her eyes go to the folder, then to my face. She frowns.

“Dante, what’s wrong?”

I pick up the folder and hand it to her.

She opens it, and I watch her face as she reads. I see the exact moment she realizes what I’ve just given her, because her whole body goes still.

She lifts her head. "These are divorce papers."

"Dissolution. My half is signed."

She frowns. "You're divorcing me."

"I'm letting you go."

The words come out flat because it’s the only way I can get them out at all.

"There's a car downstairs," I say. "Deno will take you anywhere. To a new city. With a new name, if you want one. I can make Sunny Meadows disappear so you can start a new life. You'll have money. Not a leash, not an allowance. Money that's yours." My jaw locks, and I have to force myself to push through it. "No one in my world will ever touch you. Not Grazalov. Not anyone. You have my word, and you've watched me long enough to know what my word is worth."

She's staring at me like I've started speaking a language she doesn't know.

"Why?" she says.

"Because it’s the right thing."

She waits. “But why now?”

“Because you were right when you said I took something from you. That I didn't give you a choice. Just like Parker-Downey didn’t give you a choice." My hand curls around the back of the chair because I need to hold on to something. "You never chose this. You never chose a gun against your father's skull. What you had was the absence of choice. But every day since, you've made the best of a cage I built around you." My voice is rough. "You've been so good at it I almost let myself believe you wanted to be here. And believing that makes me no better than the man I flew across the country to put a bullet in."

The room is quiet and still, except for the flames crackling in the fireplace.

I nod toward the papers in her hand. "Now you choose. Your father will be safe either way. I will continue paying for his treatment. You have my word. You owe me nothing. There's no debt, no contract, no obligation, no gun." I swallow hard, my throat rough with the idea of letting her go. "You can walk out of here tonight, and I will never come looking. That's not a threat, and it's not a test. It's the only honest thing I've ever offered you."

She doesn't move.

"Say something," I say.

"I'm thinking."

She looks down at my signature on the line that ends our marriage.

As I wait for her to sever us, I understand, finally and completely, why my father did what he did when they took my mom.

Because love isn't the soft thing they tell you it is.

Love is a loaded gun your worst nightmare covets.

"You'd really let me go," she says quietly.

"And it will be the hardest thing I've ever done." I hold her eyes. "Yes."

We look at each other across the room, and it feels like an eternity. I know this is what needs to be done, but each passing second takes another year off my life.

Finally, she stands, and I watch as she walks to the fireplace and feeds them into the flames.

The pages curl, blacken, and ignite, and she watches them burn with an expression of certainty I've never seen on her before.

"I'm staying." Her voice is resolute. "I'm staying because somewhere along the way I fell in love with the most annoyingly handsome man in this city, and I choose him. So consider our twelve-month contract null and void. I'm not leaving."

I almost knock over my chair as I stand, then cross the room in four strides. My hands find her face. Her cheeks are wet.

"Say it again," I tell her.

A sweet smile curves on her lips. "I choose you, you impossible, terrifying, beautiful man. Now stop looking like I just shot you and kiss your wife."

I kiss her.

And it isn't soft, and it isn't careful.

It's all the pent-up emotion I feel because she chose me.

Nobody has ever chosen me.

"Then I'm going to spend the rest of my life," I say against her mouth, "making sure you never regret it."

Outside, the sun rises. In here, the papers that would have ended us are ash in the grate, and my wife is in my arms because she wants to be. I am crazy in love with her; I can feel it in every cell of my body.

I'm not afraid of it anymore.

My world is perfect as long as she stays.

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SUNNY

Two weeks later, I'm standing in front of the refrigerator, trying to decide what meal I can murder before my husband gets home for dinner.

The past two weeks have gone by in a blur of tangled sheets, lost time, and a husband who has apparently made it his mission to defile every room in this house.

We christened the library first. Then his office, where he sat me on the edge of his desk, dropped to his knees in his fancy suit, and ruined me for at least an hour. Then the pool, his idea, which taught me that my husband can hold his breath for a genuinely alarming amount of time.

Yesterday, he took me against the kitchen counter while dinner scorched on the stove behind us, and I ruined another meal. Which, for the record, was totally his fault.

Dante no longer stays out late. He comes home early with his tie already loosened and that insatiable need written across his face.

But it's the other hours that do the real damage. The two a.m. hours, when he pulls me into his chest like he can’t bear to be far away from me, and murmurs soft words into my hair when he thinks I'm asleep. Words that promise a future and a life I never dreamed of.

Words that don’t give me a second of doubt about Dante or how I feel about him.

I’m crazy for him.

My phone buzzes while I'm making a list of groceries I will need for pasta carbonara.

I'm surprised to see it's from Irina.

> Solnyshko, I have something for you. A fabric just came in from my supplier. A rare hand-loomed silk organza with gold thread woven through it. Fit for the Di Zaro queen. Come see it before I change my mind and keep it for myself.

I grin. *The Di Zaro queen.*

Another text comes through before I can reply.

> I'm thinking something floor-length. Off the shoulder. The gold catches light like water. You'll look like a goddess. Make your husband very happy.

I tap the pen against my jaw.

She's not wrong. The last dress Irina made me literally stopped Dante when he saw me in it.

And we do have that fancy event next week.

> I'm in. When are you coming over?

A couple of minutes pass before she replies.

> You come to me. You come see where the magic happens.

I smile. I like the idea. I would love to see how she weaves her magic, and it gets me out of the penthouse for a while.

> When shall I come look?

> Today. I have the bolt here at the studio. Come this afternoon. I'll do measurements, we'll pick a silhouette, I'll have sketches by tomorrow.

> Done. See you at 4.

Deno, Freddie, and I arrive at The House of Irina Couture right on 4 p.m.

"I'll come inside with you," Freddie says.

“You can stay in the car. I’ll only be ten minutes, fifteen at the most.”

He reaches for the door handle. “Dante won’t like it if I don’t accompany you.”

“I’ll be getting in a state of undress, Freddie. I’m pretty certain Dante wouldn’t like you being in the room when that happens.”

“Then I will shade my eyes with my hands or turn my back.”

Deno’s hand moves away from his door handle. "Yeah, you go, Freddie. I’ll stay right here."

I can see Freddie is coming inside no matter what.

"Fine, just no peeking."

Freddie slides his gaze to me. "Ma'am, I've taken two bullets for this family. Peeking is how I'd earn the third."

“Freddie, my friend, you need a raise,” I say, reaching for the door handle.

Outside the car, he follows me up the steps.

When I push through the design studio’s front door, Irina greets me warmly. “Solnyshko!"

She kisses both my cheeks.

"You came fast. Good. Come, come. You have to see this fabric before I faint from looking at it."

I laugh. "It’s that good?"

"Darling, it’s better than good." She takes my hand and pulls me toward the back room. "Henri, my supplier, hand-looms this on a machine from two centuries ago. Can you imagine? And nothing compares. You can't replicate it."

She talks fast as she leads me into the fitting room, the private space behind the showroom where she takes all her measurements. Before we disappear through the door, she puts a palm on Freddie’s chest.

“No, you wait here. This is women’s business.”

Surprisingly, Freddie listens, and I have to hold back a chuckle because Irina the Tornado is tiny next to Freddie the Tank, yet he seems terrified of her.

Inside the room, I see the fabric sitting on the table.

"Oh my god, Irina. It’s beautiful."

The silk is so fine it's almost sheer, and the gold threads woven through it catch the overhead light and scatter it in tiny sparks.

I reach out and touch it, and it’s so impossibly soft, it’s like touching water.

"Oh, I’ve never felt anything so soft."

"I know."

"This is—"

"I know." She's smiling, but it seems a little forced.

I look at her, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I can’t put my finger on it, but something doesn’t feel right. She seems distracted. *On edge.*

"Irina, are you okay?" Her eyes are glassy, and her fingers fidget with the measuring tape, twisting it into knots and then untwisting it again.

"I’m fine," she says a little too fast. "I'm fine. Here, let me take your measurements."

She gestures for me to stand on the small wooden platform. I step up and look at her in the mirror.

"You seem a little restless."

"I'm fine, solnyshko. Arms out."

I raise my arms. She wraps the tape around my bust, and I notice her hands are shaking.

"Irina."

"Hold still."

"Your hands are shaking."

She doesn't answer. In fact, she can’t meet my eyes.

My stomach drops.

"Irina. Look at me."

She won't.

Instead, she looks at the door to the back hallway.

"Irina, what’s going on?"

My gut begins to tingle, and when I hear commotion on the other side of the door, a surge of panic sweeps through my body.

The door opens, and two men step through. I recognize them immediately. Anton Grazalov and his sidekick, Flynn Lemar.

If you ever see these men again, you run.

Dante’s words come back to me, and my blood goes cold.

“Mrs. Di Zaro, we meet again,” Anton says with a slimy smile.

“I’m sorry, have we met?” I say, stepping down from the measuring platform.

My insult lands exactly where I wanted it to. Right in his ego.

His smile vanishes. “You know who I am, Sunny. Don’t pretend you don’t know.”

I shrug. “I’m at a loss, sorry.”

“You’re going to have to come with us, miss,” Flynn Lemar says in a thick Irish accent.

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

My voice comes out steadier than I expected, but I still take a step back.

"Don't make me do this the hard way," Anton says, showing me his gun.

I turn to Irina. She's standing three feet away, but she won't look at me. Tears fall silently down her cheeks.

"Irina, what have you done?"

She set me up, and the betrayal is as palpable as the fear racing up my spine.

"They have my daughter," she whispers.

Anton makes a sharp sound with his tongue, and Irina flinches and goes silent.

Oh God.

Flynn steps forward. He puts his hand on my elbow, but doesn’t grab or yank me, just guides me out of the room like he's escorting me out of a restaurant.

I could scream and threaten and bite.

But I don’t think things would work out very well for me if I did.

“Just walk,” he says.

We move through the back hallway, and that's where I see Freddie.

He’s unconscious on the floor with blood spreading across the front of his shirt.

My step falters. They killed him. And he was here because of me.

Fear and anger collide in me.

“You shot Freddie,” I snap at Flynn.

“It wasn’t me,” he says through gritted teeth.

“That would be me,” Anton says smugly.

The side door opens onto an alley, and sunlight blasts into my eyes. Flynn nudges me through and into a waiting SUV.

Flynn gets behind the wheel while Anton takes the passenger seat, and we pull out of the alley and onto the street.

I feel a thick, frenetic tension between them.

"You didn't tell me this was what we were doing," Flynn says in a voice not meant for me to hear.

Anton doesn't look at him. He's looking out the windshield, watching the traffic. "You didn't need to know."

"You took the wife of Dante Di Zaro," Flynn snaps in a low, pissed-off voice. "Do you understand what that means?"

"It means he'll negotiate."

"It means you've woken up a monster. Are you prepared for what that looks like?"

Anton finally turns to look at him, and something cold and cruel flickers across his face.

"You need to remember who you are talking to."

Ignoring the warning, Flynn shakes his head. "This is reckless, Anton. Acting on impulse is careless, not to mention dangerous. Now every soldier Dante Di Zaro has is going to be looking for this car, this woman, and you."

Anton looks away. "Dante Di Zaro won’t meet with me, so I will make him."

“You did this because he wouldn’t meet with you?”

Anton looks at Flynn. "That, and he is an arrogant sonofabitch who has cost me a lot of money by standing in the way of me and my casino. Now he's going to sit across from me and give me what I want, or he's not getting his wife back."

“Which is?”

“Fortune.”

Flynn doesn’t react. But I can tell he’s itching to.

“Jesus,” he finally mutters. “You have no idea what you’ve done.”

Flynn meets my eyes in the rearview mirror, then looks back at the road.

He doesn't say anything else.

But his hands tighten on the steering wheel.

He thinks his boss is an idiot.

“Where are you taking me?” I demand from the backseat.

“You’ll find out in due course, Mrs. Di Zaro,” Anton says, sounding proud and unhinged at the same time. “As will your husband.”

Dante.

My chest cracks.

He doesn't know yet.

But he'll know soon.

Flynn is right about one thing.
Anton isn’t ready for what's coming when he does.

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DANTE

Fortune is packed this afternoon. I stand on the mezzanine with a glass of scotch, watching the casino sing with light, money, and sound.

Ten more minutes, and I’m heading back upstairs to see my wife. And damn if that doesn’t feel fucking nice knowing she’s up there waiting for me, hopefully not cooking, and hopefully wearing very little.

My phone vibrates in my jacket. I pull it out expecting John Marco because he's running a meeting with the Calabrese family downtown and should be wrapping up.

But it’s not John Marco.

It's Deno.

"Boss."

He sounds like he's talking through pain.

No, not just pain.

Blood. He's talking through blood.

The first curl of panic unfurls in my gut. Deno is with Sunny. Deno talking through blood means something violent has happened.

"Deno."

"They knocked me out." He coughs, and then I hear him vomit. "I didn't see them." He vomits again. "They shot Freddie. He's hit bad, boss. In his chest. He's—"

"Where is my wife?"

"They took her." His voice cracks. "Boss, I'm sorry. They took her."

The glass falls from my hand, and the floor drops out from under me.

Sunny is gone.

Blood roars in my ears as the gravity of the situation hits me. My vision narrows, and the edges go dark as my hand grips the railing. My mind is already racing through what could have happened. Who took her? How am I going to find her? What the fuck am I going to do to the man responsible?

"How long ago?"

"Five minutes. Maybe six."

They have a five-minute head start.

“Tell me everything.”

"The dressmaker let Sunny in. I waited by the car and had a smoke while Freddie went inside. Next thing I know I’m hit from behind and out cold. Woke up with my face against the sidewalk. Inside, I found Freddie shot and everyone else gone. Including the dressmaker."

Irina is involved.

She called Sunny. She lured her to her shop.

I close my eyes.

"Boss? Boss, are you—"

"I’m sending someone to your location. Get Freddie to St. Vincent's. Keep me updated on his condition."

I hang up and call my cousin, Tommy, but he doesn’t answer. I call him again, and when he still doesn’t answer, I growl a message into my phone. “What the fuck is going on, Tommy? Answer my fucking call.”

My hand is shaking.

I think about Sunny.

My beautiful wife.

And then I think about someone else's hands on her, dragging her away while she screams my name, but I’m not there to save her.

The railing groans under my grip.

After organizing one of my men to pick up Deno and Freddie, I call my brother.

John Marco picks up on the first ring. "Are you checking up on me—"

"Sunny's been taken."

His silence is loud.

"Where are you?" His voice drops.

"Fortune.”

I tell him what Deno told me.

"This has Anton’s desperate hands all over it," I say.

“Have you spoken with Tommy?”

“He’s not answering.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” I can hear the stress in his voice. “Okay, I’m five minutes away.”

When I hang up with my brother, I dial one more number. The head of my security operations.

"Mobilize everyone," I say when he picks up. "Every soldier. Every contact. Every camera in this city. I want Grazalov found."

I end the call.

Then I stand here.

Vibrating with rage and more dangerous than I have ever been in my life.

Because I will do anything to get my wife back.

I will burn down the whole fucking world if I have to.

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SUNNY

They keep me in a dimly lit room with brick walls and a cold concrete floor. I sit at a small metal table, my hands shaking as I wait. I’m desperately trying not to panic, but my body remembers all too clearly what it means to be trapped with a man who has power over me.

But no matter what happens, I am surviving this. I am determined of the outcome. Because I’ve done it once, and I’ll do it again.

I know it’s true because I’m married to Dante Di Zaro, and he will come for me. I know what he is capable of, and I know he will tear this town apart to find me.

I don't know how much time passes before Anton and Flynn reappear, but it feels like hours.

Anton walks in like he is a God, while Flynn steps in quietly behind him.

Anton sits down opposite me while Flynn remains standing.

"You're comfortable?" he asks.

I stare at him.

"I can arrange food. Water. A blanket, perhaps." He says it pleasantly. "You only need to ask."

"I'd like to go home."

He smiles. "That depends on your husband."

"My husband is going to give you whatever you want," I say. "And then he's going to spend the rest of his life making sure you regret ever breathing in my direction."

Anton studies me. "You're very confident for a woman in your position."

"And you're very relaxed for a man in his."

"Your husband humiliated me," Anton says. “And I don’t take that very well.”

"You think this ends with you getting what you want?" I scoff.

"I think this ends with your husband sitting across a table from me, signing over Fortune."

"And then what? You let me go, Dante shakes your hand, and you're even?"

"Something like that."

I shake my head. "You don't know my husband at all."

Anton's expression doesn't change. "I know enough."

"No." I hold his gaze. "You don't."

He wants me to see a man who is calm and in charge.

But I see a man who just made a grave mistake.

"Your husband has been very disrespectful."

"Has he?"

"I wanted to play nice, but he made that impossible."

“Don’t take it personal, but my husband doesn’t play well with others.”

“Oh, I took it very personal.”

“So I can see.”

“Dante needs to learn that he isn’t the king he thinks he is. That when Anton Grazalov calls and requests a meeting, he fucking meets me.”

"Maybe he was busy."

"He wasn't busy. He was sending a message." Anton leans forward and pins his icy cold gaze to mine. "He was telling me that I am beneath him. That I don't deserve his time."

“Well, maybe you don’t.”

Which wasn’t the right thing to say, because he slams his palm onto the tabletop, making me jump.

The rage passes as fast as it came. He rolls his shoulders and spreads his hands. "So here we are. He wouldn't come to me. So I took something of his."

I lift my eyebrows, but don’t say anything.

"To him, you're everything. Which makes you very valuable."

My stomach turns.

"My husband is going to hurt you," I say.

The comment catches him off-guard. For a moment, he just stares at me, and I can almost see his brain working.

Then he hits me.

He cracks his palm across my cheekbone, and my head snaps to the side.

The pain is blinding, and I see stars. My ears ring, and I taste fresh blood where my teeth cut the inside of my cheek.

I turn my head back slowly.

He's watching me, and I’m sure he’s waiting for me to cry. I can see the expectation shining brightly in his ice-blue eyes.

My face feels like it is on fire. But I’m not going to give him the satisfaction of seeing my fear.

I swallow the blood in my mouth.

And I smile.

"I was wrong. He isn’t going to hurt you. He’s going to kill you."

The satisfaction dies on Anton’s face.

My cheek is screaming, and my heart is slamming hard against my ribs, but I refuse to look away.

And my smile remains on my bloody lip.

"We'll see," he says.

He stands, and I notice he is less composed.

As he passes Flynn standing at the door, he says, “Spend some time with her. Let’s send her back to her husband a changed woman.”

Fear rips through me.

He’s offering me to Flynn.

To do to me what he wants.

A lesson for my disobedience.

I shrink back. Bile rises in my throat, and my stomach is being shredded to pieces by fear. I know what happens next.

Oh God.

The door clangs shut and a bolt slides, locking me in with a man who hasn’t taken his eyes off me.

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DANTE

There's a version of me that people see.

The suits. The casino. The man who walks through his casino every night observing his empire with quiet satisfaction.

That’s the civilized version.

But that man has been dead for the past two hours, and what is left in his place is the monster. The dark thing that sleeps in the basement.

My wife is gone, and now the dark thing in the basement is awake, and it is hungry for blood and vengeance and Anton Grazalov’s head.

The room we are in is below Fortune. It’s a windowless concrete vault lined with monitors and comms equipment.

I’m leaning over the long table with a massive map of the city and outer counties.

"Four properties on the waterfront in Grazalov's name," John Marco says, pointing to each location on the map. "Two warehouses, a commercial building north of the city, and a residential building near the county line. All quiet. He's not using anything traceable."

"Shell companies."

"Already running them."

I pound my fist into the table. “Where the fuck did he take her?”

My blood roars in my ears.

My phone rings. *Unknown number.*

I answer it knowing full well who it is. "You have ten seconds to prove she's alive."

My voice doesn’t sound human, even for me.

"She's alive," Anton says.

"You wanted my attention," I say through gritted teeth. "You have it. And I want you to understand what that means, because I don't think you do. If you hurt her, let me tell you what's going to happen. I'm going to find you, Anton. And when I do, I'm going to take your hands first. Those hands that touched her. I'm going to remove them slowly enough that you feel every nerve ending separate. And then I'm going to show them to you. I want you to see them. I want you to understand that the things you used to hurt her with no longer belong to you."

"You're not going to—"

"Then I'm going to take your tongue."

“You will not get—"

"After that," I say, "I'm going to take your heart out of your chest with my bare hands. I’ll rip you open from flank to flank and crack your ribcage one rib at a fucking time. And you will watch as I do it, for every agonizing second that you have left alive. Every breath you take will be mine, every breath you suck through the bloody tidal surge in your lungs will be in a pain like you have never known—now, where the fuck is my wife?"

The room behind me is still. No one breathes.

“Sign over Fortune to me, or she dies. I’m going to send you a location. Bring the necessary documents. We sign, and we’ll put this nasty situation behind us. But I warn you, if I don’t walk out alive, she dies.” His voice has no emotion. “It’s up to you, Dante Di Zaro.”

He ends the call, and I grip my phone so hard my knuckles ache.

John Marco steps forward, his eyes locked on mine. "Whatever you’re about to do, you’re not doing it alone.”

"I am."

"Think about this.”

My phone pings with a location from Anton.

I move without hesitation.

I’m going to bring my wife home.

Because the darkness has completely taken over me.

Tonight, Anton Grazalov is going to find out what happens when you steal the only light that keeps it at bay.

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DANTE

My Maserati tears through the night. I drive fast toward the coordinates Anton sent, my eyes fixed and unblinking on the road ahead, my knuckles white from gripping the steering wheel.

My mind races through a hundred different scenarios, then lands on the memory of my mother’s death, and what losing her did to my father.

That isn’t what is happening here.

I will get Sunny back. Alive and unharmed.

Because life without my bride is not an option in this scenario.

Anton’s coordinates lead to an industrial block just outside the city limits. Old brick buildings and lots of shadows.

The building is lit from within, a yellow glow I see through the frosted windows on the second floor.

I kill the engine and step out of the car.

The night air smells like salt water and diesel, and I drag in a deep breath to settle the rage polluting my veins. If I don’t, I will kill Anton with my bare fucking hands the moment I see him.

Walking across the asphalt, I make my way toward the building’s entrance.

His soldiers tense as I approach.

They know who I am.

I stop at the door. "Your boss is expecting me."

One of them speaks into his phone, and the door opens.

Inside is what I expected. A stripped warehouse with dim lighting, concrete floors, and the lingering smell of Anton Grazalov’s desperation.

Anton Grazalov stands just inside the entrance, legs apart, hands clasped in front of him. A smug smile on his ugly face. I plan to wipe it off with my bare hands.

He’s much shorter than I imagined, and the shiny silver suit he wears does nothing but show his thin, unimpressive frame.

He stares at me.

I stare back.

He sees a man who came alone as instructed.

I see a dead man who had to kidnap a woman to get a meeting with me.

Beside him stands his right-hand man, Flynn Lemar, and another one of Anton’s soldiers.

"Where the fuck is my wife?"

"Search him," Anton says without taking his eyes off me.

Flynn steps forward. He immediately finds my firearm, ejects the magazine, checks the chamber, and holds it up for Anton to see.

Satisfied, Anton nods.

As the pat-down continues, I remain completely non-responsive. My pulse steady, my breathing even, my eyes trained on the dead man in front of me.

Flynn doesn’t check the base of the spine, which is good because my Ruger lives in that gap.

"He's clean," Flynn says.

Anton studies me.

I hold his stare with an unreadable expression, eyes burning with fury.

Because I’m looking at a man who dared to put his hands on my wife.

Every cell in my body wants to close the six feet between us and show him what a correction actually feels like.

But not yet.

"Take me to my wife."

Anton tilts his head. "No pleasantries? No discussion of terms?"

"Take me to my wife."

He watches me for a moment, a man out of his depth but kidding himself that he’s not.

“Did you bring the papers?” he asks.

I reach into my jacket pocket, remove the documents that sign Fortune over to him, and push them into his chest. “Here are your fucking papers. Now take me to my wife.”

He opens them, checks for my signature and that everything is in order, and while he does so, I have to stop myself from grabbing him by the neck and unscrewing his head from his shoulders.

“It all looks in order.” He looks up and gives me a smug smile. “A pleasure doing business with you, Dante.”

He turns and walks toward a corridor off the main floor.

I follow, and his men fall in behind me.

The corridor is narrow. Two doors. Both steel. Anton stops at the second one and produces a key.

"She hasn't been harmed," he says. "Beyond the initial ... incident."

My blood runs cold. I stop and look at Anton with death in my eyes. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Despite my rampaging fury, I remain completely still.

Anton’s smugness slips for just a second. He knows if my wife has been hurt, the streets are going to be painted with his blood.

“No need to be so testy, Dante. She hasn’t been harmed.”

I notice a look pass between him and Flynn, and I feel a prickly sensation across the nape of my neck.

He’s lying.

What the fuck was done to my wife?

"Open the door."

He opens the door.

The room is small. Concrete. A table and two chairs. A camera in the corner.

And Sunny.

Her eyes find mine.

The world that has been tilting on its axis for the past few hours clicks back into place.

"Dante."

Her voice cracks on my name as she runs straight to me. She locks her arms around my neck and buries her face against my throat.

I wrap my arms around her, pulling her into me until there is no space between us, until I can feel her heartbeat against my chest, until I can believe she is safe.

My relief hits me with a flood of warmth, and my knees almost go from under me.

"I'm here," I murmur against her hair. "I'm here."

Her breath is hot and ragged against my neck. I close my eyes and hold her, feeling her heartbeat, feeling her relax into my embrace when I kiss her hair.

"I knew you'd come," she whispers.

Hearing her say it unravels the emotion in my chest because it means she trusts me. She knows I will burn the world to get to her.

I pull back to cup her face. "Always."

That’s when I see it. Her swollen left cheekbone and the split at the corner of her mouth with dried blood in it.

Everything in me goes quiet.

And just like that, the relief and warmth leave me, vanquished by the knowledge that someone put their hands on her.

"Who did this to you?" My voice doesn't even sound like mine.

It’s cold and brittle and full of deadly promise.

Her eyes stay on me. "He did."

A cold, murderous rage rises inside me, and I can already feel Anton’s blood on my hands.

Behind me, Anton clears his throat.

I press my lips to Sunny's ear. "Close your eyes."

When I turn around to face him, I reach for the Ruger in the dead zone at the base of my spine—the spot Flynn's hands patted around when he patted me down—and aim it at Anton.

Anton doesn't flinch.

Instead, he smiles. The thin, arrogant smile of a man who thinks he’s in control.

"What do you think you're doing?" He almost sounds amused. "My men will kill you both before you get a shot away."

He’s so fucking sure that the world works the way he thinks it does.

But it doesn’t, and it hasn’t for the entire time.

The sound of a gunshot ricochets through the room, and the soldier standing beside Flynn drops dead to the floor.

Anton swings away to look and sees his soldier fall to the floor, dead, with Flynn standing beside him, gun in hand.

He looks confused. Unsure who shot his soldier. Me or Flynn.

"Flynn, fucking shoot her," he screams. "Fucking shoot them both."
Flynn doesn't move. Instead, he looks at me.
"You just couldn't help yourself, could you?" he says with an eye roll.

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SUNNY

Thirty minutes earlier

"If you touch me, I'll rip off your balls," I say to Flynn through gritted teeth.

My voice is shaking. My whole body is shaking. But I mean every word. I will go down swinging, biting, and clawing, and whatever other feral violence my five-foot-nothing frame can conjure.

I know what *teach her a lesson* means.

Flynn stops in front of me. "Darlin', I have no desire to hurt you," he says.

I blink back at him in confusion. "What?"

"Listen to me. We don't have much time, so I need you to hear what I'm saying and trust me. I work with your husband."

My brain goes still. "You work with Dante?"

"There's no time to go into detail." His voice is low and fast, and his eyes keep flicking to the camera in the corner of the room. "We're being watched, but there's no audio. I'm going to need you to look afraid."

"That won't be hard," I whisper.

"Anton is on the other side of that door, making a rather threatening phone call to your husband, and you can bet your lucky stars Dante is going to come here with all guns blazing. And I am going to make sure you are alive and safe when he does. But the only way I can do that, love, is by

maintaining my cover, which means Anton needs to think I am in here threatening you like the goddamn psycho I made him believe I am for the last eighteen months."

I stare at him as my brain buffers. The little spinning wheel goes around and around because the information coming in does not match the reality I've been living in for the past several hours.

"Okay," is all I manage to get out.

"So, here's what we're going to do." His voice drops even lower. "I need you to look like I'm threatening you."

"Why should I believe a single word coming out of your mouth?"

"Because if I wanted to hurt you, I'd have done it already." His face softens. “I’m going to get you out of here, okay?”

My heart is slamming against my ribs so hard I can feel it in my throat.

He moves to put himself between the camera and me, then crouches like a man leaning in to whisper threats. His hand goes to his ankle.

When it comes back up, there's a gun in it.

"When Dante arrives, it's going to get ugly," he says, pressing the pistol into my hands and folding my fingers around the grip. “You might need this. But it stays hidden unless you have no other choice. You understand me?"

The gun is small and heavier than it looks, and my hands, for the first time in hours, go steady around it.

"Do you know how to use it?" he asks.

I think of a paper man at fifteen yards with two holes in his head.

"My husband made sure of it," I say.

Flynn's mouth twitches. "Aye, that sounds about right." He taps the gun with one finger. "Point at the bad man, then squeeze. Now conceal it in the small of your back, under your shirt."

I reach behind me and slide the gun into my waistband and pull my shirt down over it.

He straightens and rolls his shoulders. "Now make me look like a monster."

I look at the door, then at him, and lower myself to the concrete floor. I curl into myself, pulling my knees to my chest to hug them.

"How's this?"

"You're doing good, Sunny."

I close my eyes.

The door opens.

I don't look up. I already know it's Anton.

I hear a sharp snap of fingers. "He's on his way. I need you with me. Leave her. After we've killed him, you can have her as a reward. Do what you want with her."

"Looking forward to it," Flynn says.

I hear their footsteps move away, and the door closes.

I let out a shaky breath, and to control my racing heart, I think back to the penthouse and all the memories I've made in the short time I've been there. I think about the night I made the terrible cannelloni and how my husband told me he'd turn my fake moans into real ones if I ever tried to fake them again. I think about Charles showing me how to make the perfect lasagna, and the pride I saw in his small smile when it turned out perfectly. And I think about lying in bed with Dante, naked and warm, as he strokes my hair and murmurs softly into the back of my head.

I'm going to survive this.

Because I have so much to live for, and I am not letting Anton take that away from me.

I look at the gun in my hand, knowing I am ready to use it now if I have to. Because I am no longer half in this world. I am all the way, balls to the wall, in this world now. It's where I belong.

I let out another heavy breath and brace myself.

My husband is on his way.

People are about to die.

And this time, I'm not unarmed.

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DANTE

Anton reaches inside his hideous suit jacket for his gun, but I shoot him in the kneecap before he can get to it.

The sound Anton makes isn't human as he crashes to the floor. His hands clutch his shattered kneecap, and blood pours between his fingers.

"Flynn!" he screams, saliva and sweat streaming down his face. "What the fuck are you doing? Fucking shoot them, you dumb fuck."

Flynn crouches next to him so they're eye level, and a big grin spreads across his face.

"Have you not figured it out yet, you fucking twat?" he says, his Irish accent full of amusement. He's been waiting eighteen months for this, and I'm sure he's enjoying it.

Anton's eyes bulge. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Flynn gestures with his gun toward Sunny and me. "I'm with them."

Anton shakes his head. His eyes frantic and disbelieving.

"Tommy Gallagher. At your service." Tommy's grin widens.

Anton's gray face drains of even more color. "*Mudak*."

Flynn leans closer. "Who's the dumb fuck now?"

Anton grits his teeth. "You fucking *pizda*."

"Eighteen months, Anton. And every move you made, I called in. Every deal, every meeting, every fucking plan." He leans closer. "I helped destroy you from the inside out, you evil piece of shit."

Anton looks dazed as he realizes his entire operation has been infiltrated with a Di Zaro mole this entire time.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Anton growls with pain and betrayal.

"I’m his cousin." Tommy straightens up. "On his mother's side. Gallagher blood. Di Zaro loyalty." He looks at me. "He's all yours."

When I walk toward Anton, he tries to crawl backward, but I reach him before he can and crunch my foot down on his wounded knee. He lets out a scream.

"Your father built the Grazalov name on discipline and patience. You inherited it and turned it into a trafficking pipeline. You traded in women’s misery, and then you thought you could come for my casino." I crouch so he can see my face. "You were never going to build because I was never going to let you."

Tears cut through the sweat and saliva on Anton’s face. He murmurs insults at me in Russian like I wouldn’t understand what he is saying. But I’ve dealt with scarier bratva men than this crybaby, and I’ve heard them all before.

"Your father would spit on you," I tell him. “You never had what it takes to be a pakhan. You’d never be anything but a wannabe."

Anton looks up at me with glassy eyes. "My men will be in here in two minutes, and you will die.”

“I don’t think so. My men will be in here within seconds.”

He’s holding on to the last shred of hope that this will still work out in his favor. “You’ll never get away with this.”

Gunfire rattles outside. “Hear that? I just did.”

It’s John Marco and our security team taking out the remainder of Anton’s soldiers.

I’m not foolish enough to walk into a hornet’s nest without backup. The moment I parked my car, I sent John Marco the location and told him to bring hellfire.

I just needed the head start to make sure Sunny was safe before all hell broke loose.

"But what comes next," I say quietly, "that's for putting your hands on my wife."

I lean down and press the gun to his chest.

This is not the ending I want for him. I want to kill him slowly, take my time with him for putting his hands on my wife. But my wife doesn’t need to see the kind of gruesomeness that would involve.

What she needs is the closure she’ll get from his death. Not me pulling him apart organ by organ.

I look at her over my shoulder. “Look away, baby.”

When I turn back to Anton, he opens his mouth to beg.

But I pull the trigger before the first word leaves his lips.

The sound of the gunshot echoes off the concrete walls, and Anton falls backward onto the concrete, blood spreading across his fancy silver suit.

I stare at him for a long moment. Then I lower the weapon and turn to look at Sunny.

She’s watching the scene with wide eyes.

I go to her and pull her into my arms. "It’s okay, baby, he won’t ever harm you again."

She looks up at me with big eyes, and I wait for the horror to show on her face. But it doesn’t appear.

Instead, she takes my face in both her hands and pulls me down to her so she can kiss me hard and fierce, a kiss that tells me everything I need to know.

You came for me.

You did this for me.

And I am not afraid of what you are.

Tommy Gallagher clears his throat.

"So," he says. "Who's buying dinner? I could murder a lasagna."

I pull back from Sunny and look at him.

"Welcome home, Tommy."

He winks at my wife. "Told you I'd get you out of here, sweetheart."

Tommy leaves through the door.

Sunny looks up at me through her tears. "I have so many questions."

I smile, but suddenly the world slows and the next few seconds feel like I am watching them unfold in slow motion.

Sunny’s eyes slide over my shoulder, and her body goes stiff. I feel her move. See her eyes widen. Feel her panic. Then I watch in disbelief as she reaches for the gun in her waistband, points it past me, and fires it.

I swing around in time to see Anton still on the floor, holding a gun pointed at us. But the bullet from Sunny’s gun rips into his hand, and he

drops the gun.

Letting go of Sunny, I walk over and finish him with two bullets. One center mass. The second between the eyes.

I look over at my wife. “Nice shot, little rose.”

She looks dazed but smiles. “What can I say, I had a good teacher.”

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SUNNY

“You have some explaining to do,” I say as we sit on the couch.

I’m nursing a tea, while beside me, Dante drinks scotch. Across from us, Tommy has a whiskey in his hand.

I’ve already showered and washed the last eight hours off me and changed into my pajamas, with a robe and a towel wrapped around my hair.

“So, who is going to start?” I ask.

Tommy grins at Dante. “I like her.”

"I saw Anton coming from a thousand miles away," Dante says. "He was a fuck-up long before he became a pakhan. His father was old-school bratva. Brutal, but he wouldn't cross certain lines. Human trafficking. Everyone assumed he'd name a successor with the same spine. Then he dropped dead without naming anyone, and the title fell to Anton by blood."

He takes a slow sip.

"It took him six months to run a fifty-year empire into the gutter. His father's income streams weren't clean, but they were rational. Anton wanted faster money, so he went where the desperate go. Trafficking in product with a heartbeat."

The disgust in his voice is quiet, which makes it so much worse.

"You watch a man like that." He glances at Tommy. "So I put someone inside."

"And that's where I come in. Dante sent me in to infiltrate the bratva and become Anton’s best friend. It wasn't hard. The freak had no friends

because he killed them all when they started telling him no, so by the time I arrived on the scene, he was happy to have some Irish scoundrel as a friend."

"So you were Dante's eyes and ears inside the bratva," I say.

"Yes, I am the one who fed Dante everything he needed to know to become a giant pain in Anton Grazalov's ass."

"Except you didn't tell him Anton planned to kidnap me," I say, not accusatory, more as a way to process the situation.

"The more drugs he took, the more power crazy he became, and the more impulsive and unpredictable he was. I didn't know about the kidnapping until we were on our way there. When I questioned him on the way, he lost his mind. His paranoia was wild, and he demanded my phone. When I said no, he put a gun to my head and asked if I wanted to take my chances with a game of Russian roulette. He was losing control of himself. So I handed it over and threw it out of the car on the way. Of course, he apologized to me when he calmed down. Assured me I was his trusted soldier, patronizing git. The outbursts were getting more frequent, and I knew it wouldn't be long until the next one. It's why I stepped in and stopped you and Anton from talking at the dressmaker's because I was concerned he was going to go off the deep end and hurt you. It's why I led you out of the room and into the car."

"What happened with Freddie?"

"Anton was itching for a gunfight. He shot Freddie the moment he saw the seven-foot bodyguard. Anton is an idiot with a small dick, big ego. He wanted to take down a titan."

"*Was* an idiot with a small dick, big ego," Dante reminds him darkly.

I look at Dante. "Is Freddie going to make it?"

I hate the idea of him being in hospital because of me. "Yes, I received an update earlier. His surgery was successful."

"And Irina? Oh God, you're not going to kill her, are you?"

He cocks an eyebrow. "Just how big of a monster do you think I am?"

"I have a fair idea."

"We don't hurt women or children, my love."

"That would've been handy to know earlier on," I say with raised brows.

"I've got enough human left in me to know she was acting under duress. She is now under the protection of the Di Zaro family, just not in this town.

I relocated her and her daughter.”

“Her daughter was okay?” I ask.

“Anton was keeping her drugged in his apartment, but we were able to get to her before anything happened,” Tommy says.

“So they’re both safe now?”

Dante nods.

“Somewhere nice?”

“A very nice town.” He lifts an eyebrow. “Irina’s punishment would’ve been stricter a month ago. Before you.”

I put down my tea and give him a mischievous grin. “So, what you’re saying is, I’m a good influence on you?”

He reaches over and pulls me onto his lap and kisses me.

"And that," Tommy says, downing his whiskey and standing, "is my cue to get out of here."

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"I have spent eighteen months being Anton Grazalov's best friend. Eighteen months of warm vodka, techno music, and pretending to laugh at a man who once shot a jukebox for playing ABBA." He shrugs into his jacket. "I'm going to sit in an Irish pub, order a proper pint of Guinness, and listen to 'Dancing Queen' at full volume, with tears of relief in my eyes and gratitude in my heart."

"That's your big plan? Eighteen months undercover and you want a beer and ABBA?"

"I’m thinking of other ways," he says, heading for the door. "But I'll take the beer for now." He points at Dante on his way out. "Cousin. Try not to need rescuing before Tuesday."

"Get out of my house, Tommy."

"Love you too."

He disappears out the door, and the penthouse goes quiet. It’s just me and the mafia beast I married.

I settle back against Dante's chest, and his arms come around me.

"So," I say. "The bratva's gone, the traitor was actually your cousin, and my kidnapping was resolved in under a day. Is this what married life with you is going to be like?"

"No." He presses his lips to my hair. "This was a slow week."

I laugh, and I feel his smile against the top of my head.

I settle deeper into his arms. "You know, as far as arranged marriages go, I'd give this one four stars."

"Only four?"

"You did let me get kidnapped."

"Rescued within eight hours."

"Fine. Four and a half." I tilt my head back to look at him. "Don't let it go to your head."

"Too late." He tips my chin up, and his eyes are soft in a way the rest of the world will never get to see. "You were the only deal I ever made where I got more than I paid for."

"Look at you being romantic."

"Must be your influence."

"So I am a good influence on you."

"Terrible," he murmurs against my lips. "The worst thing that ever happened to me."

And then my husband kisses me like I'm the best thing in the world.

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EPILOGUE - SUNNY

Eight months later

There are five people sitting at my dining table, and every single one of them has threatened to kill someone at some point in their life.

Except my dad.

Actually, no. My dad once threatened to kill a plumber for ripping us off, so five for five.

But this is my family.

And in the last nine months, they have become everything to me.

"Pass the bread," John Marco says, reaching across Tommy's plate like a barn animal.

"There's a basket right in front of you," Tommy says.

"Yeah, but I want that one."

"It's the same bread."

"It's a different piece."

"They were baked together. In the same oven. At the same time."

"And yet." John Marco takes the roll off Tommy's plate, bites into it, and grins. "This one tastes like victory."

Tommy looks at Dante. "I infiltrated the bratva for you people, and this is the thanks I get. Oh, the disrespect."

“Oh, here we go,” John Marco teases. “I infiltrated the bratva for you, so you owe me the last cookie. I risked my life for you, so you can’t possibly say no to me.”

Tommy’s grin is big and unapologetic. “Damn straight. It’s basically a get-out-of-jail-free card.”

Dante doesn't look up from his wine. "You knew what you were signing up for."

"I didn't sign up. I was born into it."

"Worse," Dante says. "No exit clause."

Dante smiles, and something cracks open in my chest. Those dimples. That smile. *My man.*

His hand moves higher and comes to rest on my round belly where his son is growing.

Thirty-eight weeks ago, Dante fucked me for the first time against the wall of his library and put his baby inside me.

If I thought he was protective of me before I was pregnant, now he is positively feral.

I take a sip of water and tune back in.

"— and then one of his men turns up at two in the morning," Tommy is saying, leaning back in his chair, "and I'm standing in Grazalov's kitchen stark naked eating some weird dish his cook made."

"Why were you naked?" my dad asks.

"Because who needs clothes at two a.m.?"

My dad nods slowly. "Fair enough."

I love that my dad is here. I love that he calls Dante son now. I love that he taught John Marco how to play chess, lost on purpose, and thought nobody noticed. I love that he treats Tommy like he’s known him his whole life. I love that he eats Charles' cooking and tells him it's the best meal he's ever had, every single time, and Charles pretends to be unmoved but always gives him extra.

And I love every loud, messy, dangerous, bread-throwing piece of it.

Dante's hand finds my knee under the table.

I look at him. He's not looking at me. He's watching Tommy tell the rest of the story, and his face is calm.

But his thumb is moving in slow circles on the inside of my knee.

I put my hand over his and squeeze, and he squeezes back.

God, I love this man.

This hard, ruthless beast of a man.

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He's not tame. He'll never be tame. He’s done things that would keep most people awake for the rest of their lives, yet he sleeps just fine. That's who he is. I knew it the first time I saw him, and I know it now.

But with me he's soft in all the places that matter.

While Dante talks with my father, and John Marco and Tommy engage in more cousin rivalry, I look around the table at the faces that have come to mean so much to me and feel the warmth spread through me.

This is what you don’t see in the fairy tale.

The part long after the curse breaks, when the castle fills back up with laughter and love and a new family you couldn’t imagine living without.

Charles brings more wine to the table.

“Charles, sit down and have a glass of wine with us,” I say.

“I’m working, Mrs. Di Zaro.”

“Are you denying your BFF the pleasure of your company?” I say with a mischievous grin. “Your very pregnant BFF?”

He sighs at my use of emotional blackmail, but sets down the wine bottle, and pulls out the chair beside me. “One glass, Sunny.”

I beam at him. “I knew you loved me.”

He sighs and pours himself a glass of wine. “Don’t make me regret this.”

I grin. “I love you, too, bestie.”

His mouth twitches. “Yes, well. Apparently, I’ve grown accustomed to you too.”

Smiling, I take another sip of water.

Out of nowhere, warmth floods down my thighs and I go very still.

I tap my husband on the arm to get his attention. "Dante."

"Hm?"

"Your son would like to join us for dinner."

My husband looks at me with wild eyes, his heart on the floor, and says, "Now?"

"Now."

They don't show you this part of the fairy tale either.

The part where the beast carries Beauty out of the castle, runs three red lights, and becomes a father before sunrise.

This is the part where the story doesn't end.

It just keeps getting better.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Penny Dee writes mafia and motorcycle club romance. Her stories bring the suspense, the feels, and a whole lot of heat.

She found her happily ever after with an Australian hottie who she met on a blind date.



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