
BENEATH THE REIGN SERIES
UNCHAINED
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LUNA MASON

UNCHAINED

A DARK MAFIA X COWBOY ROMANCE

LUNA MASON

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Want more Gianna and Colten?
Have you met the other Sterling Brothers yet?
Fancy a trip to the underworld with Luna?
Also by Luna Mason
About the Author

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AUTHORS NOTE

Unchained is a stand-alone, DARK Mafia x Cowboy Romance. It does contain content and situations that may be triggering to some readers.

Although this is a cowboy romance, the dark mafia element is still very much present. This book is explicit, intended for readers 18+.

There are references of physical abuse on the FMC by her father as a child throughout the book. In chapter 65 the FMC does get assaulted by him, please skip to protect your mental health if you need to.

Please also keep in mind that this is an MF romance with one MMF scene. Should you wish to skip that spice scene it's chapter 82-85. (Although, I don't advise as it is hot as hell)

For a full list of triggers please see my website:

www.lunamasonauthor.com

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Luna Mason is a USA TODAY and Amazon top 12 bestselling author of dark and spicy romance. If she's not writing, you'll find her with a cup of tea and binge watching her favorite shows.

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And if you want signed books, store exclusives and all the naughty art, you can purchase directly from her store: www.lunamasonbookstore.com

And for merch: www.queensofchaomerch.store

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PLAYLIST

Listen on Spotify here!

We No Speak Americano — Yolanda Be Cool, DCup
Fireball (feat. John Ryan) — Pitbull, John Ryan
Nowhere To Go — Bad Omens
Let's Get It Started - Spike Mix — Black Eyed Peas
Hotel Room Service — Pitbull
Greek Tragedy — The Wombats
Famous Last Words — My Chemical Romance
Hypersonic Missiles — Sam Fender
Swim — Chase Atlantic
Just Can't Get Enough — Black Eyed Peas
Play with Fire (feat. Yacht Money) — Sam Tinnesz, Yacht Money
Animals — Nickelback
Money Where Your Mouth Is — Lakeview, Gideon
I Feel Like I'm Drowning — Two Feet
High Water — Sleep Token
THE SHOW'S ABOUT TO START — Wage War
My Songs Know What You Did In The Dark — Fall Out Boy
Drag Me Under — Sleep Token
Dark Paradise — Lana Del Rey
Alone Together — Fall Out Boy
Gasoline — I Prevail
This Will Divide Us — PRESIDENT
The Basement — Catch Your Breath
Dethrone — Bad Omens
P*RNSTAR — Nessa Barrett
Shameless — Camila Cabello
Send for me — Liam St. John
Slow Down — Chase Atlantic
Bad Habit — The Kooks
Follow You — Bring Me The Horizon
Paradise — I Prevail, Amira Elfeky
green room — Holywatr

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This book is dedicated to all the eldest daughters who ended up with a praise kink.
It's okay to ask for help when life gets too heavy. But it's also perfectly acceptable to let a tattooed cowboy take control so you can finally let go.
Be his good girl behind closed doors.
Then put your crown back on, raise hell, and remind the rest of the fucking world that you bow to no one.
In the words of our Queen, Gianna Milano.
"I want to be a powerful woman who gets fucked like she's not."

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CHAPTER ONE



GIANNA

Song- We No Speak Americano, Yolanda Be Cool, Dcup

It’s almost as if the universe is mourning Fabio. Clouds fill the LA skies; the cemetery is silent, and yet, there isn’t a wet eye surrounding the coffin.

My brother. Fabio Milano. Older than me by three years, and didn’t I fucking know about that.

Traitor. Asshole. Not worth a single tear.

I cross my arms over my chest, already itching to get these lace sleeves off. My father instructed me to look presentable and hide my tattoos as my uncles flew in from Sicily for the funeral. Recently, they’ve spent more time in Los Angeles attending funerals than they have been in Italy.

And I agreed, because I always do. I learned that the hard way. The only way to survive in this family, the only way for me to lead the Milanos into the next generation, is to follow my father’s orders.

Dom, my youngest brother, my last surviving brother, shifts uncomfortably beside me as the dark wooden coffin is lowered. The priest begins to read a prayer, and I bite my lip to stop the smile that's threatening to appear.

Heaven. There is no way. I’ll be seeing my brother again one day, but it won’t be up there; I’ll join him in hell and find a way to kill that bastard all over again. He is responsible for the death of Max, my brother, and he will pay for that for eternity.

My father steps forward as we all get into a line. He takes the dirt, whispers something with his eyes closed, and throws it onto Fabio's coffin. My uncles do the same.

When I stop in front of the priest, I look right into his soul, dig my fingers into the bowl of dirt, and step in front of the six-foot hole. I'm looking down on Fabio, which was always his nightmare… me becoming more powerful than him.

I smile. I can't help myself. And I don't care who sees it. I toss the dirt on him, followed by the single red rose, which has my blood on it from the thorns that have been digging into my fingers this past hour. Fab would hate that I outlived him. That a woman is going to come into power. I've fought for this my entire life. I was going to succeed my father, with Max and Dom by my side. But that will never happen because Fab took that away from me. My father is the one who branched out and took the Milano family to LA, but he's doing it wrong. He's going to get us all killed if he carries on with his dated views and ways.

"Sei morto proprio come hai vissuto, da piccolo stronzo," I whisper. *You died the same way you lived, like an asshole.* My final words to Fabio.

My heels sink into the grass as I make my way over to my father. I notice his greying, slicked-back hair; he's short for a man, but he's built like a tank. Him standing next to my uncles is a true picture of the Italian mafia —the black suits, tanned skin, and gold watches you could sell to buy a house. My father glances at me for a second, then abruptly looks away, dismissing me. Tipping my chin up, I take another step forward and slip right beside him.

"Don't look so pleased with yourself," he mutters under his breath.

Dom is already next to me. Silent. Waiting to defuse the next bomb that I light.

"I did what I had to do to protect our name, Father." I whisper with a sweet smile.

His jaw tenses as he pulls out a cigar and lights it, still not looking at me. He's made it quite clear over the last few weeks that I am very much in trouble. He finally says, "You went against the Milano rule, Gianna. Daughter or not. I will be discussing your punishment with your uncles tonight."

A shiver runs down my spine, but I don't let him see my weakness; I simply nod. The rule is you don't kill your familia. But another rule is you

don’t betray them either. So I’d say Fabio and I are even now. He betrayed me, and he’s in the dirt after I stabbed him in the heart.

“I look forward to hearing about that. I’ve got work to do,” I tell him.

I politely say goodbye to my creepy ass uncles before turning and walking away with Dom following right beside me. Matteo, my bodyguard, opens up the driver's door to my Rolls-Royce.

“Thank you,” I say as I slip in behind the wheel and turn on the engine before Dom is even in the passenger seat.

“I need to get the fuck out of here, Dom,” I say, putting my foot to the floor.

His head slams back against the rest as he fumbles to put on his seatbelt. “You want to kill your last surviving brother, huh?”

I tap my hand on his arm. “Of course not, don’t be a pussy. Plus, if you die, then I’ve lost my last reason to live.”

His glare burns into the side of my head; I don’t care. Dominic is never really mad at me. He’s always been my favorite brother; he’s loyal to me. We’ve always been thick as thieves, even if my father has tried to shove him out of the family since we were kids. But it wasn’t Dom’s fault that my dad had an affair with his secretary and got her pregnant. He killed her after she gave birth and raised Dom with us. But he was never treated the same as the rest of us. Maybe that’s why I made sure to love him.

“G, what the hell did Dad mean? Are they going to punish you? You said it was all fixed? That he understood why you killed Fab.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. I may have slightly sweetened the truth here. Dom is protective of me, but he doesn’t understand that everything I do is to look out for him. He’s witnessed first hand what I’ve sacrificed to prove myself to my father. Hell, he’s been put through the wringer too.

“I took Dad’s silence as my punishment, Dom. I thought my marriage to a mafia boss dressed up as a cowboy might have been enough to keep Dad happy. I also thought the arrangement that got us in with Enzo was way more than enough to clear my name. Clearly, I was wrong.”

Enzo is the only man powerful enough to decide our family's fate. If I can get on his good side, that means the Milano family survives. If I don’t, then I’m pretty sure we will all be dead by the end of the year.

I turn the radio up as we hit the highway, opening the window, letting the wind blow through my hair. I can hear the cogs in Dom’s brain ticking,

and that’s dangerous for us both. Because Dom is always searching for a way out, that usually involves killing our entire family. And I can’t do that. Because for all of our father’s faults, without him, we wouldn’t exist. I am loyal to my family name.

“I murdered his son, Dom. I drove my blade through his chest and told him I’d see him in hell. Dad was never going to let that go lightly. I thought, perhaps, over the years, I’d done enough for him.”

Dom takes a breath, tipping his head back against the headrest. “He’s not going to—”

I hold up my hand to cut him off. “He won’t. Not after last time.”

A sharp pain radiates in my stomach, a reminder of my past. Of the things I’ve had to endure to survive the Milano family name. To prove a woman deserves her place at the head of the family.

That I am not weak.

“Where are we going?” Dom asks.

“You, my last living brother, are going to help me pick out a dress for my wedding day,” I say with a grin, changing the subject.

When there is death, there is a new hope. In my case, a wedding on a ranch in two weeks' time.

“Don’t you take girlfriends to that kind of thing?”

I slow for the red light and turn to face him. His jet-black hair slicked back, his bright blue eyes on me.

“You know I don’t have any friends here right now, except you. All I have are enemies. So, Dominic, my favorite brother, will you help me find a wedding dress that is going to save our future?”

He grins. “Gianna, you’re the only one in this family who has ever looked out for me, so yes, let's go pick a dress. One that a cowboy is going to die over.”

I bark out a laugh. I’ve met my future husband once, at a hostile meeting with his brothers on their ranch. Colten Sterling.

His dark eyes have the same turmoil I see in my own reflection. He challenged me, even in front of his family. He made my heart race, and I saw him grab his thigh under the table when I put him in his place.

Our wedding could have been entertaining. That was until my twat of a brother, Fabio, kidnapped Colten's brother, Ace, and nearly killed him and his pregnant girlfriend.

Now, I’m going to pay the price.

If the Sterlings didn’t like me before, they sure as hell are going to hate me now. And quite simply, I don’t care.

I’m Gianna Milano, and I’m going to forge my empire, and I don’t care who I have to burn in my wake. That’s what I’ve always been taught.

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CHAPTER TWO



Colten

Song- Send For Me, Liam St. John

I let the whiskey burn on the way down as I stare at the gravestones for my parents. I laid some blue forget-me-nots for my mom and cleaned their headstones because I had a dream, and they were nagging me to do it. So I did.

I pour the whiskey over the dirt on top of Dad's grave. "That better, old man?" I say.

I never expect a response; I know I'll never get to hear his voice again. But I still like to talk to them. Makes me feel better.

Taking off my hat, I sit on the dirt, resting the hat next to me, taking another mouthful of the whiskey.

In the last year, I lost one brother, Beau, which, frankly, I don't give a fuck about; that asshole deserved it. He betrayed our family, so fuck him.

I nearly lost Hunter, my eldest brother, the head of the Sterling family, and then a couple of weeks ago, Ace, our baby brother, was kidnapped in LA. I held him in my arms when he was bleeding out.

I still wake up sweating when I remember the moment I was scrubbing my own brother's blood off me.

"I wish you were here, Dad," I whisper, placing my hand on his headstone.

When I close my eyes, I can see Ace before he passed out, his last words begging me to know if his baby survived. And I can't stop seeing it.

I suck in a breath, staring at the words “loving father” carved into the stone. My blood fuckin’ boils.

“I hope you’re watching all of this.” My fingers tighten around the bottle neck. “Did you ever stop to think about what would happen to your sons? Did you ever think maybe we just wanted to be fuckin’ cowboys? We had money. We had the land. We didn’t need all this shit surrounding us. Did you see your own flesh and blood kidnap your grandson because of this mafia greed?” I shout.

And I hope he hears me, wherever he might be.

“Did it hurt watching your little baby boy, Ace, nearly die in my arms? Huh? All we did was try and make you proud of us. And this is how you repay us? By giving us an empire with a target on our backs? Sterling Ranch might be on the map, Dad. But it’s going to make all your sons join you early.”

I drink some more whiskey, trying to burn the rage inside me.

“We never asked for this life, Dad. And we’re here, protecting it with our lives, like you asked. I hope it’s damn well worth it,” I say quietly.

The guilt is already eating at me. My father made the deal with Enzo, the leader of this organization, to give us the power we needed to keep on top. It gave us more money than we’d ever spend; in return, we run the arms and drugs. We track men down. We join wars that ain’t our battles.

But recently, they’re becoming our battles. People know that Sterling Ranch ain’t just a ranch anymore.

I stand, then gaze over at my mom’s grave. “Love you, Mom. Sorry for shouting at Dad, but give him a clip round the head for me. I’m still pissed off.”

I kiss my palm and rest it on her headstone.

“I’ll save you two a seat for my wedding,” I call out as I head over to Blaze, my mustang, shove the whiskey in the saddlebags, and mount him. I know they were at Ace’s wedding in spirit; I could feel them there.

That was the happiest damn day of his life, marrying the woman he’s loved basically his entire life. He’s finally got everything he deserves. A wife. A kid on the way.

With my hat back on my head, I stare out over the canyons. Across all of our land, all one hundred and fifty thousand acres. The one thing I’ve always loved about this ranch is the animals. It’s what I’d be doing every damn day if I wasn’t so busy with everything else.

Most days, it’s worth it, and I wouldn’t trade it for the world.

And now, I’ve got to marry the devil in red lipstick as a debt to keep my brothers alive.

To keep Sterling Ranch here for our future generations. My brothers are knocking up their women quicker than I can keep up with.

And with each niece or nephew, comes more responsibility. To make sure they’re free from this shit.

I’ll make sure of it.

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CHAPTER THREE



GIANNA

“I told you, I’m not paying a dollar over three million, Robert. So either make that work or I’ll walk,” I hiss, kicking my heels up onto my desk.

I lean back in my chair while taking a drag on my cigarette, blowing the smoke up to the ceiling, while Robert, our acquisitions guy, ponders the answer that will either get him a promotion or fired by the end of the day.

“Three-one? I can probably hit that,” he counters.

I roll my eyes. “Have you had your hearing tested recently? Or have you had a hit to the head, Robert? Three million, flat, or I’ll burn down the whole street. Counter that.”

I hang up the call and stub out my cigarette.

“Do you think you’ll get it?” Dom asks, resting his foot on his knee.

I arch an eyebrow. “It’s listed at seven-three; it's the only offer they’ll take from Milano Enterprises if they want to survive the week.”

This property is one of the last remaining ones left from the Greeks—our enemies here in LA. The Milano name has ruled these streets for as long as I’ve been alive, back to our grandfather.

The Greeks have made plays for power constantly over the years. But now? They’re fucked. Figuratively and literally. All because they tried to play a game with cowboys in Arizona and got it wrong.

Nikos and Stefanos Kourakos tried to schmooze their way into the Sterling family’s graces. When that didn’t work, they helped plot a coup with one of the Sterling brothers.

After that plan failed spectacularly, they turned my own brother against our family, which also went poorly. They manipulated Fabio to take out my other brother, Max—who I loved more than life itself.

Max was nearly a couple of years older than me. He was the one who taught me how to throw a punch, but he'd also sneak into my room and read stories with me once Father was asleep.

The Greeks learned how powerful my wrath is and ran back to Greece with their tail between their legs. But it's not enough. The vengeance still burns through my veins, and it will until I have my hands around Nikos's throat and witness the blood drain from his body. And that's after he's witnessed me murder Stefanos first, so he can feel my pain for a minute before he joins him.

The phone rings, knocking me back to the present. I hit talk, putting it on speaker. "Yes, Robert."

"Three million. Deal."

I wink at Dom. "Good boy, Rob. Get the paperwork arranged for me before I leave for Arizona."

"Sure." He coughs. "Right on it, Gianna."

I cut the call and pull out another cigarette because this moment deserves one. "See? I win."

Dom nods, but has that blank expression on his handsome face that worries me.

"Spit it out, Dom."

He swallows. "Have you spoken to Dad yet?"

I suck in a breath. "No, I'm having dinner with him tonight. Why?"

I understand why Dom is worried. All of Vito's children have endured the same childhood. Except I was the only girl. I wanted to be treated like one of the boys; I wanted my father to look at me the same way he did his sons.

That's on me.

"It will be fine, slap on the wrist. Then, we're getting shipped away to Arizona to learn how to ride a pony."

I refuse to go anywhere without Dom by my side. And if I'm entering a hostile ranch, I need him next to me.

He chuckles. "You know you can't wear killer red heels on a horse, right?"

"Why not?"

His smile falters. “It’s going to be harder to keep you alive on a ranch than it is in a war zone.”

I grin. This is why I love my brother. We might not share the same mother; my father and Fabio might not have accepted him.

But I always have, so did Max. He’s got my back, and I’ve got his. And that’s sometimes all you need in life, one person who always shows up for you.

Someone who understands you without even saying a word. And I doubt I’ll ever find anyone else in this lifetime who I will trust enough to stand beside me.

“My husband may try to murder me in my sleep; how do you suggest I deal with that?”

His eyes form slits.

But something in my chest shifts. Colten is handsome. That dark hair, stubble and brown eyes that burn into your skull. Not to mention the fact he’s ripped to shreds and covered in ink. The thought of sharing a bed with him? That makes me sweat. I’ve never slept next to a man, and I think I’m horny enough to climb him like a tree and see what happens. He’s either going to try to kill me, or he might give me the night of my dreams.

“If he lays a hand on you, G, I will slit his throat and feed him to the pigs.”

I nod. “No, Dom. I’ll kill him, then we can both watch the pigs feast.”

Although I’m not sure they have pigs. From what I researched online, they’re a cattle ranch and have a shit ton of horses.

“Fine.”

I sigh, watching the email come in with the sale paperwork. I run this family and built our new generation of wealth from the ground up. Legit businesses with a purpose, not just thug work.

“The Sterling brothers saw you kill Fab. You really think they’ll have a vendetta against you? Doesn’t Harper still speak to you?”

A tight knot forms in my stomach and my heart sinks. Harper Jones. The country girl who came to me asking if I could kill the man who blackmailed her into marrying him. And I didn’t help her, which I’ll always regret.

The girl who would have died for her man.

The woman who taught me what it meant to have a friend. A real one. Not family. An actual girlfriend I could drink cocktails with.

“Not much. Although she did agree to be my bridesmaid. Sort of.”

They know Fab disobeyed my orders and went against me. But I am still a Milano. Their family's rival. They won’t trust me an inch.

My brother tried to kill Ace and smashed up their car while a pregnant Harper was inside.

My own flesh and blood did that, and I have no doubt I will pay the price.

But I need an in with Enzo Testa—the most powerful man in organized crime across the globe.

I want to prove to him we can run LA before he initiates his own plan to have one of his families wipe us out. I know it’s a ticking time bomb; I’ve heard chatter that the plans are already in motion. The only way I save everything I’ve worked and sacrificed for is by forging my own way.

Marry Colten Sterling and prove to them I am useful. That they need us. That LA is worth having only if the Milano family has it.

Or, worst case, I show them exactly who they’re messing with when they piss off Gianna Milano. I’ve trained for this since I was a kid.

I’m a woman, but I’m probably the most powerful one they’ve come up against.

And they’ll never see it coming.

But I do value my friendship with Harper. So, for once, I’d rather play nice with option one.

“What are you thinking?” Dom asks.

I blink at him and take my red lipstick out of my Chanel purse. “About world domination, brother. Nothing major.”

“And how does that look today?” he jokes.

I chew on my lip. “Well, it either looks like a one hundred and fifty-acre ranch burning down, figuratively, I mean, that would take some serious manpower. The other option is Colten and I become the ultimate power couple to ever exist.”

He arches his eyebrow. “You think the latter could actually happen in this lifetime?”

I shrug. “Stranger things have happened, Dom. I showed mercy recently, remember?”

His eyebrows shoot up his forehead. “That’s true. You cried too, seeing Harper in such a state, and when they found the baby's heartbeat.”

I swallow. “Don’t ever mention that again.”

Over the last year, I've cried twice, which is more than I can remember in my entire adult life— once when I saw Max's body and once when Harper's baby was alive.

But it's true. I do have a heart. Somewhere. Deep down. It's there. Not that I'll ever let many people be aware of that fact.

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CHAPTER FOUR



Colten

“How’s she doing?” I ask, resting my hand against the wooden beam as the vet turns to me.

“I think we’ve done enough so she can walk again.”

I nod. “Enough to be able to survive out there?”

That’s the problem: a lot of the animals that come into my wildlife sanctuary don’t have a home to go to. We can save their lives and fix them up, but that don’t mean they’ll survive a day on the outside. And that’s when we have to make the call on what's the most humane thing to do.

But in this case, this bighorn sheep has a fierce enough personality to make it out there. It pretty much damn near limped itself to me in the desert, like it knew I was the man who could fix her. And I have. We’ve done our best.

“I think so. Might need a couple of weeks with us,” the vet, James, tells me.

“That’s fine. We got the room for her.” Pushing myself upright, I walk over and stroke her head. She’s sedated for now. “Might even keep her here.”

I believe animals—the same as people—come into our lives for a reason. And hell, Hunter has a pet goat that causes mayhem; might as well add a sheep with a hell of a personality to the list too.

My phone buzzes in my pocket for the third time in the last half an hour.

“Sorry. Gotta get this,” I tell James and head out into the burning sun.

Jett’s name flashes across the screen. My cousin, the man who flips personalities like a chameleon. I accept the call and hold my breath, waiting for whatever shit is about to erupt out of his mouth.

“You’re late!” he shouts.

The wind howls around him and he blares the horn five times. “Move out of the way, you fuckin’ spider -lookin’ asshole.”

I bite back a laugh as he erupts into another fit of nonsense insults to whichever poor bastard probably cut him off.

“What is this? Your way of telling me you need me to meet you at New Falls County Jail?” I ask.

“No, dickhead. Your bachelor party. Do you ever read your texts?”

The marriage I’m dreading, and I’m intrigued by my bride. But a party hosted by Jett Lawson? This will be far worse than the wedding.

“Not really, Jett.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot, you send a message and then jump in a rocket to space by the time I fuckin’ reply.”

I laugh at that one. I ain’t the easiest man to get hold of. I’m usually either workin’ or fuckin’.

I check my watch; it isn’t even four pm.

“Where have I got to be?”

“Are you serious?! There was a group chat with everyone.”

The horn goes again. “Fuck you! And your mom!”

I blow out a breath and head towards my truck.

“Rosie’s is where we’re starting. Get your ass there now,” he orders and then cuts the call.

I guess I’ve got my orders. I won’t say no to getting shit faced in celebration of a wedding I don’t want to be the groom at.

Or maybe I do? I did jump at the chance when the offer was put on the table.

Didn’t even need a second to contemplate it.

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CHAPTER FIVE



Gianna

My father is already halfway through his steak when I walk in. For a second, I'm eight again, stomach rumbling and waiting by the door for Dad to finish eating. Back then, my punishments would be being locked in my bedroom for two days, no food, only water, so I could think about what I'd done and how I could make it up to mia famiglia.

He doesn't even look up at me as I take my seat opposite him. My food already cold.

"You're late," he says between mouthfuls.

I pick up my fork and stab the carrot with it.

"No. I'm not," I say, putting it in my mouth.

He grunts, and we eat in silence. I'm not hungry, but I know better than to leave any trace of food on my plate in his presence.

The waiter clears our meals and pours us a glass of red each before swiftly exiting. I pick up my glass and take a small sip.

Finally, my father's chestnut eyes meet mine.

"I spoke with your uncles," he tells me, in Italian. Of course. We only speak our language in this house.

"Okay. And what did you decide? I hope that you put my argument forward adequately. That Fabio was a traitor to the Milano name, and I treated him as such. He worked with the men who orchestrated Max's murder. And that I am the first person in our bloodline to get anywhere near Enzo Testa."

He scoffs. "Enzo isn't taking our territory."

I raise an eyebrow. “Oh, Father. He will. The only way we survive is by joining him, not going against him. That’s what I’ve been trying to work on for the last two years.”

Every move I’ve made, even down to investments, all had the end goal of catching Enzo’s attention. Putting us on the table for his consideration.

My father slams his fists on the table, his face reddening. This is exactly why the family needs a new leader. The way my father wants to run it, it’s as if we’re in 80’s Sicily again. We’re not. This is Los Angeles, and he can’t accept that Enzo’s organization, which spans across at least twenty states here and is only growing, could annihilate our family with one order.

We are only running LA because Enzo hasn’t made that call… yet. And I am not losing my life, or Dom’s, because my father refuses to see that he is not in control here. I’ve already lost Max.

“Watch your tongue, little girl. Or I will cut it out.”

I nod, taking another sip of my wine. I’m numb to his threats and insults. I know how far he will go to hurt me. But I also know the exact lines he won’t cross. I’ve learned when to press and when to retreat.

Being a Milano is living in a constant state of war, even in your family home.

“What is my punishment, father? I’ve got an acquisition meeting in an hour, and then I’m picking up my wedding dress.”

He sighs, and for a second, his weathered face softens. And almost, just almost, I see my father. The man who loves me. The one who would bring me candy and ice cream. Who taught me how to beat the shit out of bullies at school. Who taught me how to kill. Who held my hand when we buried our mother.

“I’m not happy you murdered Fabio, Gianna. That is against family code,” he says sternly.

“I know, Dad. I know. I did it for Max.”

And I know better than to add a ‘but’, even though there is one.

“However, I also understand you had to. To keep your peace and forge an agreement with the Sterlings. And Fabio betrayed you.”

I bite back a smile. I’m getting through to him.

“With that being said, as a family, we have decided that instead of a punishment,” he pauses, and my heart hammers. I can handle the punishments I have since I was ten years old. Although, I really could do without turning up to my own wedding beaten and bruised.

I hold my breath.

“We’ve decided that you can prove you have what it takes to take over the Milano empire, by showing us what Gianna is really made of,” he tells me with a grin.

My eyes go wide. It’s never good when he talks about ‘Gianna’ as if she, or I, am a piece of property, not a person.

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“What I’m made of? How?” I ask, tapping my black pointed nail on the wooden table.

“You took the steps in securing a wedding to Colten Sterling. You’ve already infiltrated your way into Sterling Ranch.”

I nod in agreement. That was my plan. Get us a step closer to Enzo so he sees we’re worthy of survival. That I can head up the LA organization.

“But we aren’t doing it your way. We’re doing it the Milano way. You’re going to take over Sterling Ranch, get rid of those cowboys to make it ours, and force Enzo to accept us.”

I suck in a breath and pain shoots into my chest. Surely he knows this is near impossible?

I calculate my response and say, “It’s just me and Dom going to the ranch, with a couple of bodyguards nearby? That’s a suicide mission, Dad.”

He laughs. “You’re a resourceful woman. You’re my daughter. You’ve got the Twisted Serpents on your side, based in the same state now. You will be inside the Sterling's fortress. I’d say this is an easy task for someone as smart and evil as you.”

I almost smile at his compliment, but I can’t. The Twisted Serpents are a motorcycle gang we’ve made an alliance with. They run drugs and arms for us, and take a cut. Quite a considerable cut. And Levi Thomas, their new President, is a complete and utter asshole. His second, Zach, isn’t much better. I wouldn’t trust Levi as far as I could throw him. He’s already

making enemies in Vegas, and Mikhail Volkov is the last man on this planet, aside from Enzo, you want to make enemies with.

My plan for the Milano family is to move into states that Enzo doesn't have a hold over and claim new territory. Yet my father and Levi don't understand the power they're up against. I know damn well Enzo's organization only lets you believe you're in front for a while, until it swoops in and kills every last person. Which is what I'm trying to avoid.

"So to clarify, in order for me to take over this family, and for you to step down, all I need to do is take down the Sterling family?"

"Yes, sweetheart. Remove them, show Enzo how powerful we are, and then take over LA," he demands with a smug grin.

I swallow the lump in my throat. Anyone else, I wouldn't think twice. But the Sterlings? Harper, and her baby.

When I met and fought alongside them, they didn't seem like most of the asshole's in the mafia I've come across before. They would tear down the world for each other, quite literally. Those cowboys have a heart, and they'll do anything to protect the ones they love.

"And if I don't?" I ask quietly.

His eyes form slits, and the true Vito Milano appears. "Then Dominic will be digging your grave beside Fabio's tomorrow."

I shrug, playing it off, pretending that isn't a knife through the heart coming from my own father's mouth.

"Fine. I'll do it," I tell him as I stand and round the table. I drop a kiss on his cheek.

"I have all faith you'll make our family proud, Piccola."

Nothing about this sits right with me. I'm probably walking into my own death whichever way I choose.

"I'll do my best," I whisper. And then leave, with my head held high, nodding to the maid as I go.

By the time I'm in my car, my fingers are trembling. I hit dial to the only person in the world who actually has my back and understands my world.

"G, how did it go?" Dom asks, the concern clear in his voice.

I pull out of the drive, open the windows to let in some air. "I'm alive, which is a start. But I'm not sure for how long. Meet me at our spot."

I don't trust that our lines haven't been tampered with. I don't trust anyone or anything except Dom with my life.

“You got it. Be there in twenty,” he tells me.

And I smile. Because, maybe, just maybe, it’s time for the two Milano heirs to force the changes that should have happened when we were kids.

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CHAPTER SIX



Colten

Song- Fireball, Pitbull ft John Ryan

The bar is packed, and yet I can still hear Jett's awful rendition of whatever song this is blaring over the hum of the crowd and even the speakers.

The door slams behind me, and I scan the room. The usual suspects are all where I'd expect them. Hunter is leaning against the bar, nursing a whiskey, probably the only one he will have tonight because he's got a newborn and is getting about one hour's sleep.

Jett has decided to forgo his usual favorite flamingo shirt for something arguably more abhorrent. A shirt entirely formed of little versions of Gary the Goat's face. Tate, his brother, is dancing beside him, because after he's had two whiskeys, he becomes just as unhinged as Jett. It's nice to see him like this, because he's been a sullen asshole the last few years.

And finally, I spot my little brother, Ace. Harper is nestled into his side, gazing up at him, laughing. His hand is on her bump, as if the rest of the room doesn't damn well exist. Because, to them, it doesn't. Hence why he's brought his wife to my bachelor party.

As I head to the bar, I clock Jett out of the corner of my eye, darting towards me so fast his hat tips off his head. Tate laughs and picks it up behind him.

"Late to your own party," Jett says, stepping in line.

I stop, watching as Jett nods to the bartender, and I close my eyes. Please god no.

The room falls silent, and the music shuts off. I glance at Ace, who is biting back a grin, while Hunter is doing the same.

“What have you done?” I ask Jett under my breath.

I nearly jump out of my skin when the room erupts with explosions of confetti. After a second, music starts blaring again and everyone cheers. I clench my fists as a banner falls from the ceiling beams that reads: Mr. & Mrs. Sterling.

I blink at the sign, and everyone fucking mocking me as Tate shoves a bottle of whiskey in my hand.

“You might need this,” he says.

I clear my throat and down the contents.

“It gets better,” Jett says under his breath as he leans in. I’m hoping he doesn’t have another version of that shirt for me to wear.

I run a hand over my stubble. “How could it possibly get any better than this?”

The door that leads to the offices opens, and a string of absolutely drop-dead gorgeous women in sparkly underwear and heels strut out. There must be thirty of them, and they’re walking right towards me.

“For you, cuz,” Jett says with a cackle.

“You hired me thirty strippers?” I ask, before drinking more whiskey. “That’s a lot, even for me.”

He nods, looking awfully pleased with himself as the women disperse around the room. One is already straddling a guy in the booth, and he appears to have died and gone to heaven. Hunter and Ace are now hiding in the corner of the bar with Harper, too scared to go anywhere near one of these women for fear they’ll get their dicks chopped off. Lola would absolutely kill Hunter if he got a dance. And I’m pretty sure Ace bought Harper here to protect him against Jett's insane plans.

And well, Ace, he wouldn’t anyway. His dick only works for Harper—actual words from his mouth.

“Why don’t you get a dance, Jett? I’ll call Violet so she can watch?” I say, turning to him with a grin.

His eyes go wide. “You wouldn’t dare.”

I arch a brow, pulling out my phone. “Wouldn’t I? I thought she was just your friend.”

The worst kept secret on Sterling Ranch is that Jett is obsessed with Violet. And I think she is the same about him too. The man dropped

everything to be at the birth of her son recently. And he ain’t even the father.

“She is my best friend, Colt. And she’s hormonal as hell. Please don’t upset her.”

Jett Lawson has gone as pale as a ghost over upsetting his *friend*. That makes me pause. We love Violet. We took her in as one of our own. We’re glad she has Jett to look out for her.

“I’m fuckin’ with you, Jett.” I laugh, resting my hand on his shoulder and leaning in. “But if you ever try and throw me a surprise party again, I’ll tie you down and make you watch me fuck one of them,” I say under my breath.

He bites his lip, with a frown, as if he’s debating something philosophical.

“That would be a punishment?” he finally retorts.

I roll my eyes. “You want to watch your cousin fuck a girl?”

“No. I wouldn’t be lookin’ at you, Colt. I’d be watching her. Don’t make it weird.”

The second I feel a hand on my back, I find the handle of my gun and slowly turn around. A rich sandalwood scent fills my nostrils, and I know exactly who it belongs to.

I turn to face him. His dark brown eyes, his black hair. He licks his lips as I face him, his eyes tracking up my body.

“Romeo.” I nod.

“Mr. Sterling. Congratulations on your engagement,” he says, his Italian accent thick.

He holds out his hand, and I go to shake it, but instead drag him in closer so he’s flush against me, slapping my hand on his back.

“You didn’t tell me you were coming to New Falls,” I mutter.

His breath catches. “I was the real surprise.”

I release him, and he goes to straighten his tie, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows.

“Are you here for work or pleasure?” I ask, tilting my head.

He bites his lip, his eyes zoning in on my hands. “Both.”

I nod. “Then you know what to do, Rome,” I tell him, then I walk away and join my brothers at the bar. Romeo follows behind me and gets straight into business talk with Hunter.

The bartender slides me a shot of vodka, and I rest my back against the bar.

“This is your worst nightmare brought to life, isn’t it?” Harper asks beside me, while Ace chuckles in response.

“Yep. But Jett’s heart is in the right place, so I forgive him.”

That crazy motherfucker will throw a party over anything if it means he can unleash his feral side.

One of the girls, a cute blonde in a pink sequin bra and thong, catches my eye. I run my finger across my lips as her eyes land on me. I tip my hat, and she blushes instantly, making her way over.

“I might have found a way to make this less painful, though,” I tell them, standing straight as she stops in front of me.

Her hands drag up my chest. “You’re the groom, right, handsome?” she purrs.

I press my hand over hers and lean in. “I am. You wanna show me what I’m missin’ out on for the rest of my life, huh?”

She giggles and nods. “Yes, sir.”

She takes my hand in hers and leads me over to an empty booth. I drag the table out of the way; somehow, we’ve made Rosie’s bar into a functional strip club, and I ain’t complaining. Maybe this is exactly what I need to get my mind off the fact I’m marrying a lunatic mafia princess.

I take a seat and spread my legs, resting my arms on the back of the chairs. She spins, her ass in my face as she bends over; I can’t help but groan.

When I glance over at my brothers, Romeo is beside them, hands in pockets, jaw so tight it might snap, glaring at me like he wants to be the one between my legs. I’d be good with it if that were the case.

Romeo is guaranteed no strings attached sex.

So I wink.

Jett really did throw me the perfect party to celebrate the end of my life as I know it, because I have no doubt Gianna is about to explode my existence into pieces.

My bachelor party went far better than I thought it would; I managed to sneak off around midnight. There's only so much socializing I can do in a day.

Now, I'm spread out on the couch, beer in hand. Waiting for the knock at my door.

But that doesn't happen; he breezes through my front door and straight past me to the kitchen. Romeo left after my second dance with the girl, Candy. I thought I wouldn't be seeing him again. Because despite the fact that he and I are strictly sex and no feelings, Romeo does get jealous when he's horny. And in New Falls, he's got no one else to fuck him except me.

"Another drink?" Romeo calls out.

I run a hand through my hair, putting my beer down on the coffee table.

"No. I'm done for the night."

He laughs, already pouring his vodka. "Big day tomorrow, hmm?" he mutters and then joins me, sitting down on the sofa opposite me, in his pristine white shirt, designer watch, and loafers. His dark hair is slicked back, and his brown eyes are locked on mine.

"Yeah, got a busy day lined up. Gotta get my suit, meet with the minister," I mutter.

My wedding is two days away. The day before is to make sure everything is ready.

He nods, knocking back his drink in one and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "You seem stressed, Colt."

I shrug. I am. It's not the fact I'm getting married. It's who I'm marrying.

The woman that I witnessed drive a blade through her own brother's heart.

The same woman I wanted to bend over a table a few weeks before and spank the brat out of.

Those deep red lips. The power suit. The way she walked onto our ranch ready for war and didn't even blink.

If I'd dreamt up a woman, it would be Gianna Milano. My cock is getting hard at the thought. Her curves, the ink covering her skin. The way she'd fall apart under my touch.

All her power would be stripped the second she set foot in my bedroom, and maybe, she'd finally be free.

And yet, her family betrayed us, tried to kill my brother. They'll do anything to save themselves, including harming my own family.

I can never trust her.

I clench my fist, taking a breath. "I'm fine," I grit out.

Romeo stands. I don't look up, until I hear his belt buckle rattle.

He takes a step forward, between my legs, and drops to his knees. "Let me help, Colt," he murmurs, running his hand along my thigh.

I lean back, resting my arms on the back of the sofa. "Rome, it's late, and I'm about to get married."

His hand rests over my dick, and I drag my teeth across my bottom lip. "Yet, you're hard for me, sir."

I clear my throat.

Wrong.

I'm hard thinking about Gianna's ass and coming all over her face.

"I don't think my fianceé will appreciate me fucking you," I say.

She's the kind of woman who might slit my throat in my sleep. But I've only met her twice, maybe she's the kind of woman who wants to share. Maybe it's more dicks the merrier.

"Gianna isn't going to give a fuck about you, Colten," Romeo says.

I shoot upright to stand. He follows, and I tower over him.

My hand snatches out, and I grab him by the throat, shoving him against the wall so hard the pictures rattle.

"Don't walk in my house and make assumptions about my wedding and life, just because I fuck you from time to time," I growl.

His lip twitches into a grin, his fingers slide up my abs. "Fuck, I love it when you get like this."

I squeeze his neck tighter. Inching closer, so close our lips nearly touch.

"Don't tell me you're getting soft about a woman like your brothers. This is Gianna Milano, Colten. Not some country girl that you usually go after. She's dangerous, and she's out to claim her empire. This wedding isn't real. If you fuck me tonight, you can still fuck me tomorrow, and the next night. It isn't cheating if your marriage is a sham."

I smirk, pressing him harder against the wall.

"Rome, the second I marry Gianna, I won't be fucking anyone else except my wife. Not you. Not the girls from the bar. Until I'm divorced, I ain't giving her a reason to defy me."

He swallows, and I loosen my grip.

Fuck, he’s hot when he goes against me; it makes me want to shove him on his knees and fuck his mouth until he chokes on my cock.

That’s all it is. All it’s ever been with anyone. Sex. No strings. No anything. Just the mission of coming as hard and as fast with consensual adults that can submit to me and take the pain.

Romeo knows the deal. He needed a release, and I gave it to him.

“Fuck me, Colt.”

I almost snap. Almost. But instead I drop my hand and step back, remembering exactly who Romeo is. Enzo’s second-in-command.

And I can’t have him or anyone believing they have power over me.

Not my wife.

Not the guy I fuck when he’s in town.

Not the women who call me when they’re bored and want to be thrown around the room.

No one will stand in the way of me protecting my family.

“I meant what I said, Romeo. This can’t happen again.”

He runs his hand over his stubble. “Okay. Then your hand is going to be busy, because Gianna won’t fall for you. She isn’t the woman you’re going to ride off into the sunset with.”

I laugh. “I know that. Doesn’t mean I need her having ammunition over me.”

He nods. “You think I’d use it? When I came here because I want your huge cock in my ass? I’m not particularly thrilled about this; none of the guys in Chicago have a dick like yours.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m sure you’ll survive. It’s been what, five times?”

He grins. “Six.”

I’ve always been pretty fluid on who I sleep with. I’ve never had a girlfriend, or a boyfriend for that matter. I fuck whoever I have a connection with. Simple as that.

But when I picture my future, I envision a wife and kids.

Most of the time though, I’m with women. Nothing beats eating pussy first thing in the morning. Or the way their bodies shake when they fall apart, whimpering my name. But recently, I seem to be entangled with Romeo. He likes what I give him and our limits match.

I walk to the door and open it. “See you on Saturday.”

“Yeah. Good luck, big guy,” he says, slapping my back.

I shut the door and head back to the sofa, unbuckle my belt, and take my aching dick in my hand.

And again, for the seventh day in a row, I picture Gianna fucking Milano.

My rival. The woman I should despise as much as the dead fucking brother she buried.

But instead, I stroke my cock and picture her bent over my bed, legs spread, pulling her ass apart for me.

“Fuuuuuuuck,” I groan.

Fuck indeed.

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CHAPTER SEVEN



Gianna

“Miss, are you ready?” Matteo calls from the door. I rest my back against the wall and stare out the window. My dream home; I worked with an architect for months to create it. Every single aspect is perfect. Even down to the one-of-a-kind gothic wallpaper and handcrafted candle holders.

My father calls my home depressing. I call it peace. My home has always been dark, except this time, I got to create something beautiful.

And now I have to leave it behind and potentially never come back.

“Give me a few minutes,” I brush him off.

The door closes behind him. The furniture is all staying. Everything is staying exactly as it is, because I’ll be coming home soon. All I need to take to Sterling Ranch is the simple necessities. Clothes, shoes, my red lipstick, and my weapon collection. I run my fingers along the dining table, crafted from onyx with a deep maroon resin, and roll out the tension away in my shoulders.

I know Dominic is waiting outside for me in the Rolls. I know I have to leave. This is going to war, for my family. That used to excite me. Except now, all it does is fill me with dread.

Because up until now, I believed we could win.

I pull out the last cigarette in the packet and light it, grabbing my emerald Chanel purse from the side, my head held high. My heels click against the wooden flooring as I make my way to the door. Matteo nods and falls in line behind me. Dom’s already in the passenger seat of my car. All

of our stuff is being driven by Matteo in a van. He's one of the handful of guards we've got staying in New Falls on rotation.

I stop as Tomasso puts his hand on my car. I flick my cigarette on the ground beside his sparking loafers and blow my smoke straight into his face.

This son of a bitch was Fabio's best friend, and I have no doubt he was in on helping Fabio betray me. Even if Father can't see it. I can. I've seen through this little asshole since I was sixteen.

His lips curl into a grin, and I clench my fist as he leans in.

"Good riddance to the witch," he sneers.

I don't react; I hold eye contact as I run my hand down my side to the hem of my dress.

"I'm sorry, Tomasso, I didn't realize you had authority to speak in my presence. You are still aware of how the food chain goes, right? Me, right up here." I lift my right arm up above my head to distract him.

"And you. Right down here." I point to the ground.

He chuckles. "Of course, Your Highness," he says with a bow.

"Mighty full of yourself for a man only here by the skin of his teeth. Fabio isn't here to protect you anymore," I say calmly.

He glances at Dom, only for a fraction of a second, and I laugh.

"You think because he puts his dick in you that you have some sort of way up the family ladder? You really have fewer brain cells than I thought."

His eyes form slits, his jaw tensing.

I stick out my bottom lip. "Aw. Tomasso thought Dominic was in love with him? How foolish. You should know by now the Milano family doesn't fall in love. You are simply an asshole, figuratively and literally."

His fists clench by his side, and he steps closer. I hold up my hand, pushing it into his chest.

"Take one more fucking step, I dare you. It will be the last thing you do," I spit.

He sucks in a breath. "You're a jealous little virgin who can't even beg a man to fuck her. No one wants you, Gianna. Have you ever thought about that? How all these men surround you your entire life, and not one makes a move. Not one man wants to have sex with a creature as vile as you, let alone fall in love."

My hands shake by my side, but I don't let him see any reaction. I don't let him know the nerve he hit. He doesn't know the reality of my situation.

The orders that surround me and control every aspect of my life.

I draw the blade from my thigh strap and shove it straight into his groin, glaring right into his blue eyes as I do. He cries out, clutching at the handle, stumbling back against my car.

“Move.” I usher him away. “I don’t want your blood on my Rolls; it’s worth more than your life.”

“Help!” he cries to Matteo.

Dom moves as if he’s going to Tomasso’s aid, and I hold out my hand. “Don’t,” I mouth to him.

Maybe if Dom kept it in his fucking pants for once, we wouldn’t be in this situation. I’ve always been jealous that my brothers could do who and what they wanted. While I was trapped away, saved for a special occasion. A bargaining chip. But everything I do is for a purpose. For the bigger picture that I see, that I’m so fucking close to having.

Just a bunch of cowboys stand in my way.

Tomasso falls to the ground as Matteo moves him away from my car; I open up the driver's door.

“If either of you mentions this to my father, I’ll come back and kill you both. Do you understand?” I say to them before I get behind the wheel.

They both nod, even if Tomasso is now turning grey. I can smell their fear. And they know I will, without hesitation, find a way to ensure they don’t wake up again. The only reason he’s still breathing is that my father specifically told me not to murder him.

I get into the leather seat and turn on the ignition, pulling away, not even glancing back in the rearview mirror.

“You really have to stop fucking Tomasso, Dom. He’s a problem. And a traitor.”

He runs a hand over his stubble. “It was a one-time thing.”

I side-eye him as I come to the stop sign. “Once? Once that I walked in on. Don’t lie to me.”

He taps his fingers against his thigh, like he always does when he’s lying. “Fine. Once a week for the last four months.”

I blow out a breath.

“His asshole must really be tight,” I mutter.

Dom laughs. “Yeah. He also sucks cock like a fucking whore.”

I choke on spit as I laugh. At least I get to live vicariously through Dom and his sexcapades.

“Elaborate. How does one suck cock like a whore?”

I need to be able to sleep with Colten without embarrassing myself in the process. I refuse to let him see me as vulnerable. So, I’ve researched. I’m a woman who likes to be prepared, and I will not let Colten use this against me. I might be a virgin bride, but there is nothing innocent about me.

“Gianna. No. Absolutely not. We are not having this conversation again.”

I roll my eyes. “Light me a cigarette.”

“No. You need to quit.”

I hold out my hand, flexing my fingers. “You think smoking is going to put me in a grave before the cowboy does?”

“Don’t say that,” he snaps.

Fucking hell, this is going to be the longest drive of my life. I’m only driving because I don’t trust the Sterlings not to send up a rocket launcher on my jet as we land.

And I love my car. It’s coming with me.

“It’s the truth. Now light me a cigarette or tell me how to suck dick like a whore. I gotta do something to make my husband not kill me.”

That earns me half a laugh. “Okay. Well, yeah, if you get that right, chances are he will keep you just for that.”

“Great. Exactly what I aspired to be, a pet on a ranch.”

I grip the steering wheel. That’s the constant battle as a woman: no matter how powerful you are, there will always be a man out there who thinks he can outplay you, can belittle you, just because he has a dick.

That isn’t me. That isn’t to say I won’t use their own fucked up mentality against them.

“Read more of those romance books I told you about; they’re pretty much an instruction manual, G. And much less awkward for me.”

I grin. “Those were pretty insightful.”

I withhold the fact that I’ve been reading a whole smutty book a night for the last year and learning all kinds of things about myself in the process. At the fine old age of thirty, I’ve been horny for the last ten years of my life.

Books are way better than porn.

Way better than fumbling around with a guy who has no clue what he’s doing and is petrified that my dad is about to walk in and blow his brains out.

We drive in silence for the next half hour. My brain is ticking over all the plans I have in my head, none of which I can act on until I get to Sterling Ranch and assess the situation.

“Are you nervous? About getting married?” Dom asks quietly beside me.

“No. I don’t get nervous, Dom.”

He nods and is clever enough not to continue with that line of questioning. Instead, he says, “Is Tomasso going to live? Where did you stab him?”

I shoot him a glare. “Probably. Although his groin area isn’t going to look pretty for a while.”

“What did he say?”

My body tenses up. Partly because he was right. No man wants to touch me. Because everyone who knows my name knows the price on their heads if they do.

I could walk into a room of my father’s men naked, and they would all look at the floor. No matter what I wear. Nothing makes me attractive enough for someone to make a move. To risk anything.

And I only want a man who is willing to risk their life for me. Just like Ace did for Harper. That man ran into a war zone to save his girl and nearly died in the process.

I want that. A man who will walk through flames for me. The same as I would for him. But I don’t have time for that.

All I have to do is survive, take over the empire that I’ve spent my entire life working towards, and see who stands beside me when it’s over.

“He said something incredibly dumb, Dom,” I mutter and turn the volume up on the radio. I need something that isn’t my thoughts for a while.



The gravel crunches under my tires as we pull into the long driveway of Sterling Ranch. This better not fuck up my tires.

“Home sweet home,” I whisper.

Dom stays silent. This is his idea of hell. No luxury restaurants or spas. The mud on his five thousand dollar shoes might make him age ten years by

the end of the week.

“Are they expecting us to work?” he asks.

I shrug, following the track to the main house, Hunter’s house, like Harper instructed me. Colten hasn’t reached out to me, and I haven’t to him. That gives me a good insight into how our marriage is going to go. He stays on his side, and I stay on mine. Which doesn’t particularly help me with the mission my father has sent me on. But I’m resourceful. I have a certain charm that might work on Colten. Or I suck his dick like a whore and hope for the best.

“I doubt it. I doubt they want us anywhere near what's theirs, Dom.”

These cowboys are smart. A lot smarter than I anticipated. And ruthless. They’re everything a mafia family is, but with more heart. Because when they say family, they mean it with love.

“Then what are we meant to do all day? Sit and watch the sky? Feed some cows?” Dom asks.

I glance over at him. “We both have businesses to run… virtually. And we have an empire to infiltrate. I think we will keep busy enough. If not, we can binge-watch as many shows as possible to see us through to the next life. This could be like a vacation.”

He laughs, but it’s not real. He knows, as well as I do, that the chances of going back to LA are slim. This is as far from a vacation as it gets; this is more like walking into a thriller movie.

“I’d look hot in a cowboy hat, though. Don’t you think?” Dom says with a chuckle.

I pull up next to a red truck and kill the engine. “Yeah, I’m sure you can find people to keep yourself entertained with. Plenty of rowdy bars we can visit.”

His face drops. “I doubt there's anyone here for me, G.”

I rest my hand over his. Dom is openly gay. Well, open to me. Came out when he was seventeen. My father doesn’t have a clue; it’s not something that would be accepted in our family, and Dom knows that when the time comes, our father will marry him off too, to a woman. But New Falls doesn’t give the impression it’s quite as open as LA.

“We’ve got this, little bro,” I tell him.

He runs his thumb over mine. “We have no other choice, G.”

“But we’ve got each other. Always have,” I tell him. And I mean it. It’s us against the world, always has been, always will be.

The front door opens, and Harper's golden blonde hair flows over her shoulders; she’s glowing. I smile, for real. This is the happiness this girl deserves.

“Show time,” I mutter, opening up the door and getting out.

She closes the distance between us, but stops right in front of me, like I might bite. I know she wants to hug me, despite the fact that I am totally *not* a hugger. She’s the only person outside of blood relations who can get away with it.

“Have you missed me?” I say.

She chews on her lip. “Weirdly, yes.”

A smile beams on her face, and she wraps her arms around me. I hold her. She’s the only girl I’ve ever had as a friend. The first time I felt some sense of a normal life. I want to show her that I’m not the evil bitch she thinks I am. Well, I am. Just not to her. Not to the people I care about.

“Let me show you to your house.” She pauses, glancing down at my dress, then back up to my face, holding back her laughter. “And then you’re going to need to get changed. I already packed your closet full of more appropriate clothes for a ranch.”

I close my eyes for a second. Harper Sterling has style. A beautiful style for her. A cute country girl with a silver nose ring and blonde curls.

“Don’t worry, the majority of it is black and silver. Just… less LA, more Arizona. Trust me,” she says with a sweet smile.

I nod. She turns to Dom. “Sorry, I didn’t grab you anything; I wasn’t sure on sizes or style. But I can ask Ace if he’s got anything spare.”

Dom grins. He’s like me and hates everyone on first sight, except Harper.

“I’m good, Harper. I went shopping before we came; I have everything that the internet told me I needed.”

“Oh, good. Let’s go. It’s not far from the main house.”

We follow behind her, and Ace steps out of Hunter’s house, his face like thunder as he approaches. I keep my mouth firmly shut.

He nods at me and then to Dom. Doesn’t say a word. Not even a thank you for saving his life and killing my own brother. Dom frowns, but we walk in silence as Ace slides his hand into Harper's.

“Have you got your dress?” Harper asks.

“Yeah, it’s in my car; I’ll unpack it when I do everything else,” I tell her.

A couple of minutes later, we stop outside a wooden ranch house. It's beautiful. Big enough for Dom and me. Harper and Ace turn to face us; she nudges his side.

"Thank you, Harper," I tell her, and I mean it.

She smiles, and Ace sighs. "Gianna, look, all I'm asking is don't hurt my brother. I can forget what happened; everything ended up fine in the end. But don't make me regret forgiving you."

I swallow. Because I know the lie that's about to slip from my mouth. That his forgiveness is stupid and that he's only doing this for his wife.

"I won't," I tell him. "I'm here to bring change, for peace, not for war. I told you all from the start I wanted to work with you, not against you. You didn't listen to me the first time."

He nods, tipping his hat. "Then have a fantastic stay on Sterling Ranch, Ma'am."

I almost laugh.

"Is there booze in here?" I ask, pointing to the house.

"Yep. Plenty," Ace says.

"Great."

"I'll be here in the morning to help you get ready," Harper tells me.

"Thanks."

I really wish they'd stop being nice to me. It would be easier if they hated me and treated me like I was the devil for me to go through with the plan my father wants me to execute.

It's not possible. I know that. I've never gone against my father's orders before in my life, but this time, I'm going to play the long game. I'm going to offer my father an alternative that will keep Harper and everyone on this ranch alive. I need to figure out what the hell I can offer him.

I lean in to Dom as Harper and Ace leave. "You get our luggage; I'll scope the place for cameras and bugs."

Trust no one. Certainly not the rival mafia family you're marrying into.

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CHAPTER EIGHT



Colten

I thought taking Blaze for a midnight ride might clear my head; Blaze is one of my more calmer horses. Sometimes it works. It’s something Dad used to make us do when we were kids. Every natural remedy to all of life's problems can be found on this ranch. And stress is resolved by ridin’ a horse until the problem ain’t one anymore.

Except, I’ve come to a stop right outside my problem's house. And I can’t seem to make Blaze move. The lights are on. I know I should go back home, drink a whiskey, and sleep.

I’m getting married tomorrow.

My future wife is thirty feet away from me behind that door.

Fuck it. I wanna see the real Gianna. The one behind the red lipstick and killer heels, smoking a cigarette.

I want to watch the woman who might be plotting my murder right now.

Jumping down off Blaze, I tie him up to the fence post, rubbing his nose. “I’ll be back in a minute, boy.”

Keeping my steps light, I head over to the porch. I know the light doesn’t work anymore. I was meant to fix it last week, but didn’t. And now I’m glad about that.

I stop by the window and peer in, enough to glimpse inside, but not enough for them to notice me.

My body jolts when my eyes land on her. Both tattooed hands cradling a cup of steaming coffee, I think. Both feet up on the couch in black pajamas. Not a scrap of makeup on her face, her jet-black hair pulled into a ponytail.

She gasps at the TV and then hits her brother's arm. “I told you it was him!”

I frown, leaning in closer, and my heart slams.

Of course she’s watching a murder documentary. My gaze diverts right back to her; she leans forward, literally on the edge of her seat, engrossed in the television.

I bite back a grin.

Everything about her is sexy. That’s the problem. The first time I saw her, my cock sprang to life, in a meeting surrounded by my brothers, in a particularly hostile environment. I took one look at her and envisioned a hundred different ways to fuck her by the time she’d introduced herself.

She is, without a doubt, one hell of a woman. Gianna Milano is ruthless. Some would say evil. But she’s clever. She’s fearless. And now I also know she laughs at murder documentaries with little eye patches on. There is something human about her.

I take a step back and retreat down the steps with a smile on my face.

On the plus side, that shows me there are layers to Gianna. Even if it is something as simple as laughing while watching TV. That tells me under that hard exterior, there is something softer.

Which, if I need to, I can exploit to protect my family, to protect this ranch.

On the minus, Gianna Milano is arguably even more gorgeous when she’s relaxed in her pajamas. So, there isn’t a version of her that doesn’t turn me on.

And the fact that we’re enemies? That I’m being forced into this marriage because she demanded it to save my brother's life?

That means she needs to be punished. Gianna might think she’s the most powerful one in the room. And in LA, she may well be.

But she’s on my property now. She’s about to have my last name. She’s about to become *mine*.

So she’s going to learn exactly what it means when you piss off a cowboy and come after the only thing he loves… his family.

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CHAPTER NINE



Gianna

Harper adds the final curl to my hair, then runs the brush through it, smiling as she does. Despite the red lipstick and ink-covered skin, the hair is making me appear more classy. Bridal style, I suppose. My father will be pleased with that.

"Did you have a bachelorette party?" Harper asks, grabbing the hairspray.

"I told you before, I don't have friends back home. Nor time to party. So no, I didn't."

She frowns before spraying enough hairspray to make me cough.

"I didn't have one either."

I arch an eyebrow at her in the mirror. "Harper, you're pregnant. I don't think you need one last blow-out; he already blew right into you."

She bursts into laughter, her hands holding her belly.

"Okay. True. Maybe we should grab dinner, a post-wedding bachelorette?" Harper suggests.

I hide my smile. "I could use a tour of New Falls."

What I mean is, I'd love that. I want to get to know the rest of the girls here.

She scowls. "So, you're using me as a tour guide?"

Now I grin. "Harper, I recall you once telling me that I only use people, including yourself."

She glances down at the floor; I roll my shoulders. She isn't wrong, in all honesty. I use people for my own gain. It's how I've been taught to

survive.

“I still think deep down you’re a good person, G,” she says quietly.

My breath catches. She sees something no one else has. And that terrifies me. I can’t be a woman who looks weak. Who seems friendly, especially not here. My life quite literally depends on being ruthless.

“Then it appears I have fooled you.”

She shakes her head as I stand.

“So, dinner? Tomorrow?” she says, completely ignoring my last statement. I’ll give it to her; she really does have balls.

“I’m sure I can fit you into my newly empty schedule,” I tease.

She starts packing away her make-up into the bag as I head over to my dress hanging up on the back of the door. I run my fingers over the delicate lace around the waist. Tiny little black diamonds are stitched into the belt.

“Did Colten have a bachelor party?” I ask, keeping my eyes on the fabric.

“Yeah, he did, a couple of nights ago. Jett surprised him, and it was quite the event. Full Jett chaos.”

I frown. I’ve met Jett; he’s the fun one that I assume most people underestimate. He even made me laugh. But I see that darkness behind his eyes. That crazy lack of fear that makes him far more dangerous than most. That was the first thing I noticed about him. Insane but lethal. So I need to keep my distance from him.

“So, a few strippers and booze, I assume?” I ask, seeing if my assessment of Jett, and well, men in general, is correct.

She laughs. “Yeah. Although, not a few, a whole bar packed full; Ace didn’t know where to look.”

That makes me laugh; I can imagine him like a deer in headlights, not wanting to upset Harper.

“Wait, you were there?” I ask as I turn to face her.

She nods. “Don’t ask. There was a communication mix-up. Ace was told family party, not bar turned strip club.”

I chew on my lip. “And how did my future husband react?”

If I had to guess, having met him twice, both in very stressful circumstances, I’d say Colten Sterling despises being the center of attention; therefore, surprise parties are a no-go. I’d say he would slap on a smile for his family and drink.

And I get the impression he’d have more than one dance.

“Uh. He wasn’t too amused at the start. Parties aren’t his thing. But he, uh… got into the spirit eventually.”

I arch a brow. “You mean he got hard looking at the women dancing for him?”

Her eyes go wide. “Ew. That’s my brother-in-law. I don’t wanna know what gets him going. But I’m not sure it was those girls.”

I swallow. This is the one area of reading people I am bad at. I’ve fooled around. I’ve got close. But I know my place and what it means to my father.

Harper glances behind me, as someone knocks on the door. Three heavy raps.

My stomach sinks. “My father is here; I’ll meet you at the church.”

She smiles and then brushes past me, nodding to my father before running down the stairs.

“You’re not ready,” he states, walking in and closing the door with a soft thud.

“I have to put my dress on.”

His eyes track over me, stopping on the tattoos on my collarbones. He hates them, every single one. It’s probably the only thing I’ve ever done to defy him, and continue to do. I own my skin. I like the pain. So I take the punishment for it.

“Have they not created some make-up to cover those?” he grimaces.

“No.”

Silence fills the room. “This is where you’ll be living? What is there, two bedrooms?”

“Three, technically. One is an office.”

He chuckles. “This is punishment in itself. Let alone marrying in the wrong church.”

I sigh. “You know full well it’s easier for me to marry in his church than him in ours. It’s all a deal, father.”

The vein in his forehead pops. “Your mother would turn in her grave.”

“Hmm.” Is all I can muster.

I bite my tongue. My mother would turn in her grave over him and who he became after she died. Me marrying in a non-catholic church is the least of her worries.

I put on a smile. “When I get married, for real, I’ll do it right. Just for you. Let me marry and divorce first.”

He huffs. “Divorce? You mean widow.”

A chill runs through me; I don’t flinch. I don’t even understand why I care about being a widow at thirty.

I don’t think this reaction is about me.

“Get ready. I’ll see you in church, assuming we don’t go up in flames stepping foot in there.”

I don’t respond. There is no savior for what we do, although my father truly believes there is.

“See you soon,” I whisper.

He doesn’t look back. Doesn’t give me a kiss. Doesn’t wish me luck. Nothing. Which means I’m still very much in his bad books. I only get the loving version of my father when I behave. When I earn his love.

I sit on the edge of the bed with a huff.

I don’t even notice Dom walking in; I’m staring at one single diamond on my dress.

“Do you think Colten will be pissed about the black dress choice?” he asks, taking a seat beside me.

I shrug. “I don’t give a shit what he thinks, Dom.”

“Fair. But it’s a bit of a red flag.”

I turn to face him. “Red flag? Have you been watching those shitty reality programs again? The fuck do you mean by a red flag? What color should I be?”

He laughs, leaning back on his hand.

“I think Colten will need a white flag.”

“Whatever. I’m marrying him regardless; I doubt he cares what the hell I wear. The dress is the least of his concerns.”

“I wonder what he’s going to wear. At least you’re marrying a guy that’s hot as fuck.”

I slap his arm. “Don’t fantasize over my husband.”

He tilts his head. “Or what? Maybe your husband wants me. Hmm? I caught his friend, Romeo, eye fucking him over the laptop on more than one occasion during that meeting we had a while back.”

To be fair, I also caught that. But Colten was too busy watching me. So, I’m not worried.

“If anything, Colten looks like he will give you the ride of your life, sis.”

I close my eyes, trying to compose myself, before I punch him in the jaw. Today is not the day. I’ve got a lot lined up. I have to marry a cowboy

and convince him to take my virginity. The moment I've been waiting for for years. I get to experience dick. It's a shame that it's attached to a man who doesn't seem to like me much. But I'll get over that.

"Stop talking, Dom. Go downstairs and let me get ready in peace."

He blinks at me, and then nods as he stands. He knows when to push and when to stop.

And then I'm back in silence. Just me and my wedding dress.

As part of the deal, I have to get Colten to fuck me. I have to. Hurdle one is how to get a man who most likely despises me to consummate a marriage he doesn't even want to be in.

I have no idea, but I've got about five hours to figure it out

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CHAPTER TEN



Colten

“Why the fuck are you stacking coke into a trailer when you’ve got a wedding to get ready for?” Hunter says from behind me.

I wipe the sweat from my head and drop the hay bale I’m using to disguise the drugs with a thud, but I don’t turn around.

“I’ve got three hours, Hunter. And this shit has to get done; Mikhail needs this load,” I grunt.

“That’s bullshit, Colt. Remember who you’re talkin’ to.”

I turn, my fists clenched. “Yeah. I know who I’m talking to, Hunt. My big brother. The one who signed the deal that married me off.”

His face doesn’t change. He looks at me, just like Dad used to. Hunter is the boss; he oversees the ranch and the mafia. Me and Ace do the legwork that keeps it running. Have since the day Dad died. Poured everything into this damn ranch and protecting my family.

“Yeah. I agreed to the deal, but if I remember correctly, I was going to tell Gianna to fuck off; you are the one who told me to fuckin’ take it. So don’t come at me like I’m shipping you off like an innocent goddamn bride, Colten.”

I open my mouth to respond, but can’t. Instead, I laugh.

“Do I really sound like a little bitch?” I ask.

A grin twitches at his lips. “Yeah. A bit. You’ve been in a grump since we got Ace back. I thought you were processing. I thought the wedding wasn’t bothering you.”

I take a breath. The truth is, for the first time in my damn life, when Ace was kidnapped, I was scared. I was petrified I was going to lose him. We already lost one brother; I can't lose Ace or Hunter.

But getting married? To a woman whose family tried to tear mine apart? I can't shake this feeling I'm inviting the devil into our safe space.

This land is sacred. This is our life; everything is to protect it. Hunter and Lola, their kids. Ace and Harper, expectin' a baby. I'm surrounded by love. By growing families. Hell, even the weird as shit relationship Violet and Jett have. Tate has an on-and-off girlfriend who seems to hate his guts —I'm not sure I'd want that last option.

And then there's me, fuckin' around with anything that moves to try and feel something. Ain't had a serious girlfriend. Ain't ever been in love.

But, deep down, I hoped I'd meet a girl, and I'd fall so hard she'd bring me to my knees. And we'd bring up our own family here, alongside my brothers.

Instead? I'm marrying a woman I don't trust. A woman who could bring me to my knees, only to slit my throat the second I blink.

"It ain't the idea of marriage I had in my head, Hunter. We're already lookin' over our shoulder every two seconds, waiting for the next bomb to drop, and now I gotta live with my own fucking grenade of a woman."

He chuckles, taking a step closer. "You ain't gotta live with her. It's a marriage on paper for a deal. She's going to be busy planning world domination back in LA. Your life isn't going to drastically change. You can still fuck who you want. Work all the hours God gives. And then, once Enzo makes his moves, the Milano family won't even exist, and you can pretend this never happened. We're using her as much as she thinks she's using us."

I swallow. I don't like the sound of this. Gianna is not a woman you walk over and get away with it.

"Yeah? Then why did I get a call from Harper telling me that she and Dominic will be residing on Sterling Ranch for the foreseeable future after the wedding?"

Hunter frowns.

I pick up the bale of hay. "That's why I'm shoving coke in a trailer; I don't want her nosing on our business."

"And you didn't think to mention this?"

I sigh. "Hunter, you're busy with Willow and Wyatt. Ace is building his dream home. I told you I'll handle this, didn't I? That the shipments, the

mafia bullshit we have to deal with, that falls on me for a while, Gianna included. If I think something warrants a family discussion, I'll tell you. But we've got Jett and Tate now, their ranch right next door. We've got the manpower. We're good."

Hunter takes the hay from me. "I haven't disappeared on you, Colt."

"I know. I need to keep busy, alright? So, help me load this shit up, so I have time to shower before I see my bride."

Hunter snickers. "That's the spirit. You know she's here already? Have you seen her?"

My heart races way more than it should. I shake my head. "Bad luck, isn't it?"

I withhold the fact that I was spying on her last night.

His eyebrow arches. "I think we've had enough of that."

"Exactly my thought."

For some reason, Ace's sweet wife, Harper, sees some sort of good in Gianna. Enough to call her a friend. Which makes me think perhaps she isn't the viper I assume… all of the time.

Hunter nods.

I'm that fuckin' stressed I wish I did take Romeo up on his offer; I bet I'd feel a hell of a lot better if I had.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN



GIANNA

Song- Nowhere to go- Bad Omens

"You good, sis?" Dom whispers as I link my arm through his.

We're standing at the gates of the church. Everyone else is inside, waiting. Colten definitely picked this church knowing it would make my father's skin crawl as a Catholic. And honestly, I like that level of petty. I know damn well Harper got married on Sterling Ranch, so we could have done that, yet here I am.

"Do we have time for a smoke?" I ask, tapping my fingers against the stems of my red rose bouquet.

Dom checks his watch and shrugs. "Yeah, fuck it. I think it's pretty standard for a bride to be late anyway."

My eyes form slits. "That isn't who I am. I'm not being late."

"Okay…"

My fingers start to shake, and my body is vibrating as I shift my weight between my feet in these killer heels. Gianna Milano does not get nervous.

"I've known my entire life that one day I'd have to do this, marry for power. Dad always said that's what I had to do for the family. I thought I was okay with it," I say quietly.

Dom looks at me, and for a second, I'm thrown back to us being kids. And it's one of my nightmares playing out in front of me. My little brother with pity in his eyes.

"You're not fine with it? G, what the hell is happening? Are you having some sort of episode?"

I scoff. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m… standing outside a church in fucking Arizona about to marry a cowboy. It isn’t quite what I expected.”

Dom runs his tongue along his bottom lip. “A hot cowboy. A really rich and powerful one. Just think, it could have been a sixty-year-old Italian guy with a gut the size of Milan.”

I laugh, resting my head against his arm.

“Put the mask back on, G. Be the girl Dad taught you to be to survive. We’ve got this. And then you know what, once we’re back at the top of the chain, we can take everything. Like we promised Max.”

I peer up at him. We were ten years old, and I’d had my first beating from a guard for putting on some of my mom’s make-up. And Max, Dom and I pinky promised that one day, we’d work together to take over the family business.

“I think that day is getting closer,” I say.

And I half believe it. No one in this world frightens me… except my own father.

“Let's get this over with,” I mutter as I drag Dom towards the church. My heels click on the stone as we head up the steps and the doors open.

“Fuck me, I thought the spirits opened the doors.” Dom laughs to himself as we’re greeted by two clergymen.

My breath hitches as they open the second bolted doors.

“You’re armed, right?” I ask.

“Yeah. You?”

I nod. I don’t go anywhere without at least my thigh strap and a gun in my purse. “Only a knife, though,” I tell him.

“I got you, G. We got men here, tons of them, and surrounding the church.”

“Yeah. So have they, Dom.”

I scan the rows. None of their kids are here. Not that I expected it; they don’t trust us. Harper turns in the front row; Ace has his arm over her shoulder. She gives me a little wave as the organ begins to play.

My father is in the front row on the other side, surrounded by my uncles. I didn’t want him walking me down the aisle. Dom is the one I’m safe beside. I swallow hard. Ignoring how fast my heart is racing. Towards the back of the church, I spot Romeo, and next to him, Enzo fucking Testa.

A smile twitches on my lips. My plan is working. That is the man I have to get to. The one I have to show I can do this. That I’m worth keeping alive

and heading up LA.

My eyes finally dart to the end of the aisle as we step through the doors.

Black suit. Black tie. White shirt. Dark brown hair groomed perfectly. Rugged stubble. His hands clasped in front of him.

My heart almost stops. He doesn't even look at me. His eyes fixed on the floor.

My legs keep walking, even though my brain is short-circuiting.

When I reach the second-to-final row, his head snaps up. His dark eyes lock on mine, completely void of expression.

And then this mother fucker grins, dead at me.

Shit.

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CHAPTER TWELVE



Colten

Lord fuckin’ help me. My wife is single-handedly the most beautiful creature I’ve ever laid eyes on.

The tight lace dress is elegant in all the right ways, a perfect wedding dress. Except for the fact that it’s jet black, like she’s walking towards a coffin, not her husband.

That striking red lipstick has me focused on her lips.

I don’t believe in all that shit, but if it turns out Gianna is sent from the underworld, I can’t say I’d be shocked.

A darkness follows her like a shadow. She stops in front of me, slamming her red rose bouquet into her brother's chest, and he falls back in line to sit with his family to my right.

I don’t say a single word as she steps in front of me.

“Did you wear that to your brother's funeral too?” I lean in and ask.

She stills beside me. Before brushing her lips against my ear.

“I killed him to save yours. So I’d watch your mouth, cowboy. Because you’re close enough for me to do the same thing to you,” she hisses.

I bite back a smile and stand, putting some distance between us. That distinct amber smell she has invades my nostrils and its divine, maybe there is something holy about my wife-to-be.

I clasp my hands in front of my crotch again, subconsciously to protect myself.

The minister begins his speech; I told him to keep it short and sweet, get this circus over with. But part of me almost asked him to make it the

longest ceremony he could possibly muster, to keep our Italian guests sweating in this church. But I think my wife might see right through that play.

Every few seconds, my gaze draws back to her. And every single time, her eyes are locked on mine.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the presence of these witnesses, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony. Marriage is an honorable estate, instituted by God, and is to be entered into reverently and advisedly.”

She doesn’t break her stare.

“Please take each other's hands and repeat after me,” the minister says.

I snatch her hand and squeeze it tight, and she repays the favor by digging those pointed black nails into my skin.

Jett clears his throat from the first row, catching the attention of the entire room. “Aren’t you going to ask if anyone here objects?” Jett asks.

The minister frowns, glancing at me and back to Jett, still in his cowboy hat.

“Uh. If any person here present can show just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together, let them now speak, or else hereafter forever hold their peace.”

Hunter rubs his hand over his face, looking like he wants the ground to open up and swallow him whole.

Jett scans the room, waiting to see if anyone objects, then leans back on the bench, spreading his arms to either side. “Seems like you’re good to carry on,” he tells the minister. Dead serious.

Gianna turns back to me, an eyebrow arched, and I can’t work out if she finds it amusing or if his ridiculous nature pisses her off. Could be either.

“Please, carry on,” I tell the Minister.

“Colten Rex Sterling, will you take Gianna Milano to be your wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as you both shall live?”

I bite back a grin, tilting my head to look at my wife. “Oh, ‘till death do us part. I do.”

“I’ll wear this dress to your funeral,” she whispers back.

I almost laugh. “Your turn,” I mouth to her with a wink. Purely for my own amusement. All I know about Gianna so far is that she isn’t a fan of nicknames or anything cute in general. I never said I was going to make this easy on her.

In fact, I want to make her regret every choice she's made that led her to this moment.

“Gianna, will you have this man to be your wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as you both shall live?"

Her eyes drag down my body, and she takes a step forward. I tilt my head down, our noses almost touching.

“I do,” she breathes out.

Fuck.

I lean down, my lips brushing her ear. “I’m going to make sure you regret this for the rest of your life, wife.”

She pulls back, a fake smile plastered on her face as the minister places the ring in my hand.

“Colten, repeat after me. With this ring, I thee wed, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

I repeat word for word as I slide the diamond-encrusted band on her slender, tattooed finger on top of the ginormous black engagement ring she’s gifted herself. We bought our own rings, because we haven’t even had a conversation, let alone talked about ring sizes.

Gianna takes her turn, sliding the black platinum ring on mine. And I swear to god it burns my skin.

The room is silent as I take a deep breath.

“By the power vested in me, I now pronounce that you are husband and wife.” He pauses. “You may kiss your bride.”

I don’t hesitate. She wanted this circus. She can have it. I take a step forward, grip her by the throat, tipping her back so I can lean over.

My lips hover over hers. Her chestnut eyes scalding into mine. Neither of us moves, like we’re suspended in time.

“What are you waiting for? Kiss the bride. Or are you too much of a pussy? ” she mutters.

A growl erupts out of me.

I slam my mouth over hers, and I swear someone in the crowd gasps. One hand is digging into her waist, while the other is choking her. On center stage for God to view, this woman, this devil in red heels, is now my wife.

My tongue dances with hers, her fingers yanking at my hair. And I'm fighting every part of me not to get an erection in church.

"Get a fuckin' room. Jesus is watching, dickhead," Jett calls out.

Slowly, I pull back; her hot little breaths beat against my skin, her cheeks flushed. She wipes the lipstick from my face, and I swear her fingers are trembling as I help her stand upright.

I brush down my suit, cross my arms, and take a step away.

Nope. That was nothing. That shooting electric jolt into my chest wasn't some sort of religious sign that she's mine.

It's probably telling me she's going to give me a heart attack. Or worse, stab me through the heart like she did to her brother.

"You're a good kisser," she says under her breath.

"Thanks," I grunt. "You too."

I take her hand, and we walk back down the aisle, through the doors. The second the sunlight hits my face, I pull out my emergency packet of cigarettes. I take one and offer her the packet.

"None of these are laced with poison?" she asks.

"Nah. But that's a good idea; I'll store that for later."

She grins, taking one. I light hers, then my own, resting against the stone wall.

"What now?" she asks after she exhales.

I take a drag, studying her. Trying to work out her true motive. I have a few thoughts. Potentially, she could be trying to knock us out of Enzo's organization and take it for herself. But I don't believe she's dumb enough to try. Her father, on the other hand, possibly.

I personally am edging toward the theory that she's here to prove her worth, to try and prove to Enzo and Romeo she's worthy of running LA. I'm a pawn in her game.

I'll find out in time which answer is right, but knowing Gianna, it's probably a third option no one has considered until it's too late.

"Well, I already had a house built for us. I thought we could start trying for a baby tomorrow? I mean, tonight if you want? Ideally, I'd like you knocked up before the week is over. I'm thinking four kids, total? We need

more hands on the ranch eventually. You can quit your job. Stay-at-home mom would suit you. I like steak for when I'm done with my day. Then a blow job."

She nods along.

"If you're lucky, I'll give you one orgasm a week. But I'll probably be busy elsewhere most of the time," I say, ready to gauge her reaction.

Nope. Nothing.

"And then, we live happily ever after until one of us dies. I'm assuming I'll go first, but the amount you smoke? Might be you."

She takes another drag on her cigarette. "Are you finished? Or is there more to this wonderful romance novel you've got brewing, Colten?"

I rub at my stubble. "I think that's it. Sound good?"

"Yes. Wonderful. I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you, sweetie."

My nose scrunches up. "Don't call me that."

"Okay, Polpetta," she says sweetly, yet it's still laced with venom.

I have no clue what that translates to; I'm not sure I want to know either.

I push myself upright, towering over her.

"Why don't you tell me how you think this marriage is going to end up?" I ask, my voice low.

She clears her throat. "I guess we have to wait and see what the universe has planned for us."

I nod. "Okay, darlin'. How about you stay the fuck out of my way from here on out."

She takes a step back. And another. "Two steps ahead of you, dickhead." She winks as the doors open. Her brother is then behind her, her father and family behind him. She blows me a kiss. "See you later, husband."

I laugh; I can't help myself. This entire situation is ridiculous, and she almost seems pleased with herself about all of it.

"Aren't you forgetting our wedding reception, wife?"

She tilts her head, taking her lips between her teeth. "Don't you want to see my party dress?"

I clear my throat. "No. Not really," I say flatly, trying to hide any emotion from her. I know as soon as I show her anything, she will use it against me. This woman is calculated. Way more so than I am.

But my God, I'll sit and watch her try on any outfit she wants to for me.

She tuts, hand on hip. “I’m sure someone else will enjoy the view even if you don’t.”

And with that, she walks to her Rolls, gets in, and doesn’t even glance back.

Her father beelines towards me, extending out his hand. I take it and give him a firm handshake.

“If you hurt my daughter,” he warns.

“Then what?” I snap.

This fucking family.

He chuckles, pulling his hand back. “This was her attempt at peace, Mr. Sterling. It’s on you if you break the alliance. My daughter is important to our family.”

I let that sink in. He ain’t talking about her like a daughter; he’s talking about her like an asset.

“I’ll see you at the reception,” I say, defusing the situation before I put my fist through his jaw.

I head straight over to my family crowded around the trucks.

“Congrats,” Ace says, almost cheerily.

“Glad it’s over. Now, I need a whiskey. The entire bottle,” I say.

Hunter laughs, slapping me on the back. “Big night ahead of you, bro.”

I’ve daydreamed about bending Gianna over my desk and fucking her since the first time I laid eyes on her.

But it’s a bad idea. Because one kiss had me almost losing my shit at the altar. I don’t want to find out what actually sinking inside her would do to me.

Or how that could potentially fuck me in the ass with a cactus later.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Gianna

One outfit change later and a couple of shots of vodka, and I can just about deal with being in a cowboy bar surrounded by people that hate my family. I thought this would be a small gathering, the same faces from the ceremony.

Wrong.

This looks like an excuse for the Sterlings to party, and I'm the prop that none of them speak to, not even my husband.

"Rosies… I wonder who she is. Must be someone interesting to name a bar after her?" Dom ponders beside me.

"Why don't you go and investigate that further?" I tell him.

I stir the straw in my drink, watching the ice clink together. My father clears his throat behind me, and a shiver runs down my spine. Dom's jaw tenses, like it does whenever our father is within reaching distance of us.

"Gianna, I need to speak to you," my father commands.

I fling the straw out of my drink and down the contents of whatever sickly cocktail I ordered by mistake. And then I follow my father outside into the parking lot.

"What the hell are you wearing?" he seethes, looking me directly in the eyes.

"A dress."

He grunts. "You call that a dress? It's an embarrassment. You might as well lay yourself out naked on the bar and ask everyone to take a turn. You

only need to sleep with one man tonight, and he sure as hell isn't going to want you dressed like this."

I screw my nose up. I thought this was hot; it was more *me* than a wedding dress, and something to perhaps catch the attention of the man I married.

"Isn't that what you need, father? I kept my virginity for this exact reason; I need my husband to find me attractive to consummate this marriage, remember? You drilled those rules into my head since I was fourteen," I whisper-hiss in case anyone is listening.

His nostrils flare. "You make it sound like punishment. I was keeping you pure, away from men that don't deserve you."

I choke on a laugh. "And you think that man in there deserves me?"

His face starts to redden. "If by marrying him, we secure our power. Then yes. It's worth the payment in blood."

My eyes go wide. "My body isn't a payment."

He chuckles, holding onto his stomach. "Stop acting like a child, Gianna. And stop dressing like a whore, it doesn't suit you."

I hug my arms around my waist, and my skin sticks to the black leather dress I have on.

He takes a step forward, and I flinch, closing my eyes.

"You represent our family name. You will let your husband do as he wishes to you to seal the deal. And you will act accordingly to survive here until I give you orders otherwise. Do you understand me, Gianna?"

I suck in a breath. "Yes. I understand, Father."

He takes a step back, and my body tenses up even further. Only him. Only my own father can shrink me back down to a petrified child thinking her own flesh and blood might kill her. I don't know if it's the tone, or the nightmares that flash into the forefront of my mind, but I physically cannot retaliate. I can't seem to use the word no.

His voice, his demeanor, everything about him triggers something in my brain that's like a switch, and I don't know how to turn it off.

He says jump, and I say how high. Every single time. Like a robot he created for himself.

Even when I want to fight back, my body won't. Even when I want to scream in his face and lash out, that little girl's voice in the back of my head says, don't do it. He will hurt you. He will take it out on Dominic. He will take everything you've built away from you.

His hand reaches for his tie, and I flinch backward, stumbling into the trunk of a car.

“Go and get changed and come back. Make yourself look more presentable for Colten, because if he doesn’t want to consummate the marriage, this deal is over.”

My shoulders sag as I nod.

He smiles, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. I don’t breathe for the few seconds he touches me. Because even a wrong breath can end in a punishment.

And I don’t have time for that right now.

“Good. See, it’s always easier when you listen. That’s how you will succeed, Gianna, by listening to your father.”

I swallow past the lump in my throat as he walks away.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Colten

Song- Famous Last Words, My Chemical Romance

"Shouldn't you be dancing with your bride?" the blonde asks as she runs her hands up my chest, hips swaying to the beat of Tate's karaoke choice. I think her name is Elsa or Ella? Regardless, she's hot.

"Nah. My bride is fine," I say, pulling her closer, hands on her waist.

I glance up, and my eyes meet Dom's and the empty seat beside him. He looks less than impressed with me. He blinks slowly, drinking his bourbon.

I haven't failed to notice my wife's outfit. A skin-tight leather number that just about covers her ass with a corset top and red lace on the back. She's got boots that could stomp on heads. And I got to see more of the ink, spanning down her tanned legs, crawling up her chest.

Basically, she's everything I never knew I wanted.

Badass. Fierce. Sexy yet scary. And she ain't here to even entertain my little show.

I lean in, brushing my lips against Elsa's cheek. "Excuse me, I have to go check on something," I tell her and pull away, adjusting my hat.

Dom nods to the back doors, and I head there. I already know where she is. I saw her and her father go outside a few minutes ago.

I push through the doors, but stop at the second set, waiting by the window. I pause, my fists clenching as her father steps into her space.

Her face pales. She stares at the ground. She shrinks herself near him.

And like that, he's storming back towards the door. I open it for him with a smile, and he stops in his tracks. Gianna now has her back to us, cigarette smoke pooling above her head.

"Everything alright?" I ask, glaring at him.

"Never better. Gianna is heading home to get changed. She knows better than to dress like that in public. I apologize for her," he mutters.

That ignites a rage deep inside of me that I didn't know existed. This wave of possessiveness I cannot stop.

I step into his space, not disguising the rage he's triggered. "Excuse me?"

"My daughter doesn't dress like a whore. I won't allow her to strut around here soiling our family name."

I laugh, a deep-bellied laugh. And he mistakenly joins in. So I stop abruptly.

Gianna looks incredible.

"You're forgetting a very important fact here, Vito," I say.

He cocks his head.

"Gianna no longer represents *your* family name. She is a Sterling. And we like our women to express who they really are. You see, we live in the current century where we believe women are as powerful as men." I pause, letting the words digest in his small brain. "So, Mr. Milano… if you could refrain from commenting on what my wife wears, otherwise there will be consequences to pay. Remember?"

He shakes his head. "She will always be my daughter, regardless of last name," he seethes.

I grin, running my tongue along my bottom lip. "I don't believe Gianna belongs to anyone."

"Then you don't know her."

I step to the side, letting him pass. "I think it's best if you and your family leave, Vito. I promised my brother I wouldn't shoot any of you today."

"Likewise," he mutters, strolling past me.

This is going well, the exact conversation a man envisions with his father-in-law on his wedding day.

I step through the door, keeping my footsteps light as I approach my wife.

She turns before I reach her, a smirk on her face, cigarette by her lips. I can't help my eyes dragging down her figure. The way it pinches in at the waist, the curves of her hips. Her breasts that perfectly fill her dress. Fuck.

I hate that she's this attractive. I hate that I can't stop staring.

"Can I help you?" she says, flicking ash right on my boot.

"I'm making sure my new wife isn't bleeding out in the parking lot."

She scoffs. "Why? Who has the balls in there to murder me?"

I roll my shoulders. "Probably a few."

"Cool. I do have some anger I need to release. Send them out," she says, nodding to the door.

"What did your father say to you?" I ask, ignoring her statement.

Her jaw twitches, and she takes another drag, averting her gaze. "Nothing interesting," she dismisses me.

I get the impression her walls are as high as, if not higher than, my own.

I nod. "Alright."

Her gaze drifts to my jaw, and my hand instinctively lands there.

"You've got some lipstick. Usually it goes on your lips, not the jawline. You know, in case that is your thing," she tells me, eyebrow arched.

I wipe it away, the light red smudges on my fingers. "Noted. I'll do better next time."

She tosses her cigarette on the ground, stubbing it out with her boot, violently. "I'm heading home. I'll be back. I've got some calls to make."

I take a step closer, and her breath hitches.

"No. You aren't leaving," I tell her.

She tips her chin, and I dip my head, my eyes drawn to those deep red lips.

"You don't get to tell me what to do, Colten."

My eyes form slits. "No. I doubt I do. But no one else does either, Gianna," I say, letting the words settle.

Her deep brown eyes go wide.

I lean in, so I'm right by her ear that's covered in silver rings and diamonds. "That dress is spectacular on you. If you go and change it, I'll rip it off you in front of everyone."

She leans back, assessing me with a deviant sparkle in her eyes. "If you do that, then I'll slit your throat in front of everyone."

A grin twitches at my lips. "Now that sounds like a party, Gianna."

With that, I pull back and clear my throat. And for a second, we stand in silence.

“I’m being serious about the dress,” I say, breaking the silence.

She swallows, but her expression doesn’t change. Her cheeks don’t flush. I get nothing back. “And I’m being serious about murdering you if you threaten me again.”

This should not turn me on.

Shouldn't, but does.

“Okay, sweetheart, I’ll take note of that.”

“I thought I told you once already; I don’t do cute nicknames. And I certainly am not a sweetheart.”

I chuckle, shoving a hand in my pocket. “Alright, viper.”

“I’ll accept that one, polpetto.”

I wink. I already searched that term; she’s calling me a meatball, which *technically* is a term of endearment. Very loose on the technicalities.

“I’ll see you in there,” I tell her, backing away towards the door.

The strangest part is, she’s ready to slit my throat for telling her not to get changed, yet backed away from her father.

Now that looks like a group therapy session is needed.

But something in my gut is telling me it’s deeper. And I gotta keep scratching at the surface to figure this girl out.

Is she here to kill me? Or is her plan bigger than anything we’d expect?

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Gianna

I spend a few minutes battling the two voices in my head—my father, telling me I look like a whore, and Colten, telling me he'd rip off any other dress I put on.

And the one voice who doesn't seem to get heard is my own, in my own damn head. Running my fingers through my hair, I let out a huff. I want to scream sometimes. Just go deep into a forest and drop to my knees and let the universe hear it.

Instead, I hurt people. I scheme. I kill. All because ten-year-old Gianna decided to beg her father to treat her like a son. To let her rule the empire one day.

If only I'd have known what that meant.

I tug the hem of my dress down a little, and hold my head high as I stomp back into the bar. I'm not letting a man tell me on my wedding day what to wear, or what not to. The dress is staying on.

Ignoring the screeching that's coming from the karaoke, which appears to be Jett and his brother, I don't even acknowledge Colten as I breeze past him. I feel him watching me. Romeo is in my seat next to Dom, so I tap him on the back. He turns to face me, tequila shot in hand, which I pluck right from his fingers.

"You're in my seat," I say.

He doesn't move. So, I finish his shot and slam it down on the bar.

"Move. I'd like to speak to my brother."

Smugly, he slides off the barstool, giving one last glance at Dom. Interesting. But, right now, I have bigger fish to fry. So, I take my rightful place next to my brother.

“Well, did you find out who Rosie is?” I ask.

“Uh. No. Bigger problem, G, Dad went home; they all did. He looked furious after Colten followed you guys out.”

I freeze.

Colten must have heard what my father said. But how much did he hear? Slowly, I turn my head to Colt at the other end of the bar, arms folded.

“Yeah, Dad called me a whore and told me to change my dress.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Dom mutters under his breath.

“You know what he’s like, Dom. I shouldn’t have worn it. Not in front of our uncles.”

He blows out a breath. “You know what I think of them.”

Our uncles run the business in Italy, except they always have their damn nose in ours.

I order another round of drinks and sit back, surveying the room. Romeo still has his eyes on my brother.

Now that my family is gone, I can relax. Not completely, though. I know I’m currently in the lion's den, surrounded by men who can’t quite work me out.

And that’s exactly where I want to be. I don’t need anyone working out who or what I am. That’s something perhaps I don’t even understand.

Ace and Harper are dancing away, smiling at each other, and for a split second I almost regret telling him that love is a man's greatest weakness. I could be wrong about him specifically, though. Those two are enough to make me believe that the ridiculous concept of soulmates exists.

Colten is dragged on the dance floor by a pretty blonde girl. She couldn’t be more opposite to me in every way. A sweet country-girl smile. Porcelain skin without a single trace of ink. Natural makeup, cowgirl boots, and a tied-up shirt.

Colt pulls her closer, their hips in sync. I squeeze my hand around the glass tighter. It nearly shatters when he looks directly at me with a smug grin. His hand on her ass, whispering something in her ear.

“I want a divorce,” I mutter, making Dom nearly spit out his drink.

“You’ve been married a few hours, G.”

“I’m well aware of that. But do you think I’m going to let a fucking cowboy make a mockery out of me on my wedding day?” I snap.

My blood fucking boils, and it has no real reason to.

“Gianna,” Dominic warns. “Do not make a scene.”

Jealousy is a new flavor for me, I have to admit.

“A scene? It’s like you don’t know me at all.”

I don’t cause drama. But I make sure it hurts in all the right places, just at the right time, so they don’t ever forget they’ve wronged me.

“It’s a dance, Gianna. He’s dancing with another girl, that’s it. He’s not finger blasting her on the dance floor.”

I shoot my brother a look. The girl spins, backing up against Colten, her ass grinding over his crotch.

“Yeah. He might as well be fucking her,” I say.

Dom tuts. As another girl joins them, she runs her tongue along his throat. This has to be a joke. I understand this isn’t a real marriage. That his ideal scenario is us staying the hell away from each other.

But part of me hoped he’d be somewhat interested in me. That I wasn’t as revolting as Tomasso made out.

“What, did someone hire strippers for a wedding party?” I mutter, crossing one leg over the other.

“They look like the same girls that were here for the bachelor party,” the bartender tells me quietly.

My brow arches.

Did this motherfucker invite them to his wedding to try and piss me off? I take a deep breath, slamming my drink down on the bar.

“I’m going. Fuck this. Fucking cowboys,” I say, sliding off the barstool.

Dom hurries down his whiskey and follows behind me. I pull out my keys and hand them to Dom. “How many drinks have you had?” I ask, dangling the keys between us.

“I’ve nursed that one; I assumed I was the designated driver.”

“Very good. We can ditch the car at the ranch, and somehow get a taxi into somewhere more interesting. I need a drink, and I need to be the hell away from these people.”

He snatches the keys, unlocks the car, and gets behind the wheel of my Rolls. I thought this was my way in. But the Sterlings are good at keeping people out.

And it appears that I’m getting played by my new husband, and he just found my trigger point.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Colten

The engine of the Rolls roars to life, and Gianna is walking around to the passenger side.

"Wait!" I call out.

She stops. She turns. And she looks pissed. Beyond pissed.

Good. I found one button. Jealousy.

"Wait for what? You want me to watch you fuck another woman? I'm not really into that, Colten," she says, her voice flat.

"Watching? Or joining?" I counter with a grin.

She steps forward, closing the distance. "Neither. I don't want you. I don't want them. Actually, I don't need anyone."

There we are; the walls are going back up, brick by brick.

"No? You don't want me?" I ask, leaning down.

Which is a mistake on my part. Her hand wraps around my throat, her pointed nails dig into my skin, and her knee smashes into my stomach.

I grunt out in response, and her grip tightens.

"You squeeze any tighter, viper, and I might come in my pants," I growl.

"You don't tell me what to do," she whispers in my ear callously.

I grit my teeth. "Let go of me, Gianna," I warn.

She does, and I rub at my throat. She's got a good grip and a killer knee. Fuck.

"I'm going to fuck those girls tonight," I tell her. I'm only messing with her; I want to see if that gets me a reaction. I need to work out fast what

makes my wife tick and if jealousy is a button. She's a hard read, though. In reality, I'm not interested in anyone except my wife tonight.

She doesn't flinch. "Great. I'm sure they'll be disappointed."

I bite my lip. "And I'm disappointed my wife is running out on me."

"You told me, explicitly, to stay the fuck out of your way, cowboy. So, I'm doing just that. Way out of your way… and perhaps I'll find a man who isn't going to disappoint me."

I don't know what comes over me. She turns, and I reach out to wrap my fingers around her wrist. Already bracing for the impact of whatever she's about to do to retaliate.

Her hand lands on my chest as I hold her by her wrist. "You ain't fucking another man, Gianna," I growl.

Her eyes darken, a slow grin spreads across her lips. "Do you have memory retention issues, Colten?"

I feel the sharp prick at the side of my neck, and I hiss out a breath. My wife has a blade to my throat. And I've never been more turned on in my life.

"Go ahead, roll your eyes; you might find that last remaining brain cell back there," she sasses.

Fuck. Me.

I wrap my hand around her throat. "You have no idea what you're doing with me, viper."

Her fingers drag up my thigh, the knife still firmly against my throat. "I have a pretty good clue."

There is no way either of us is going to survive if this is how we behave around each other on day one of our marriage.

"I have a proposition for you, wife."

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

"I'm listening…"

I tighten my grip and her pulse picks up against my palm; the warm trickle of blood rolls down the side of my neck. That sets me on fire for her.

“We need to fuck,” I say bluntly. “We need to get whatever this weird fuckin’ energy is around us out of our systems so we can carry on with our lives.”

She swallows.

“One night. One wild wedding night where we fuck like husband and wife. Or enemies. I don’t care. Because I haven’t stopped thinking about sinking inside your tight cunt since the first time I laid eyes on you, Gianna.”

I release my grip on her neck, watching her calculate her options, squeezing her thighs together.

“One full night? I’m not some chick after a quickie in the back of a truck, Colten. I have standards.”

She lowers the blade and jabs the point into her index finger, spinning it. She is insane. And hot. Insanely fuckin’ hot. This could be the most incredible sexual experience of my life.

I tip my hat. “I’ll take you back to my place, tie you to the bed, and eat you out like I’m fuckin’ starved. That’s foreplay.”

Her cheeks flush a deep crimson and my dick aches.

“And then what?”

I let out a laugh. “Now that, my dear wife, you find out when you come home with me,” I tell her, holding out my hand.

Her glance flicks between my hand, my crotch, and my eyes.

“Fine,” she huffs. “I’ll come.”

“Fuck yeah you will.”

She shoots me a pointed stare. “I agree, this sexual tension we have is distracting. One and done.”

I salute her. “One and done.”

Her tattooed hand lands in mine and a spark of electricity shoots through me, right into my damn chest. I shake my head, trying to stop whatever the hell that was.

“To clarify,” I pull her closer. “One night, not one round.”

She rolls her eyes, so I arch an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me you’re searching for your last remaining brain cell too?” I tease.

“You’re really fucking annoying, Colten. I hope you fuck with your mouth shut.”

I blink at her. I have never, ever been spoken to like this before. And never been more turned on in my thirty-four years on this planet.

“Be a good girl, tell your brother you’ll see him tomorrow.”

She hitches up her dress an inch and slides her blade in its leather thigh strap; I have to bite on my hand to stop the groan from ripping out of me.

I tap her firm ass as she walks away.

I’m not happy about being married. But I’m ecstatic about fucking my wife. You win some, you lose some, I guess.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



GIANNA

Song- Slow Down, Chase Atlantic

The sun is starting to set behind the mountains. Harper was right; this is one of the most beautiful sights in the world.

"You know, there ain't anything wrong with a fuck in the truck," Colten tells me as he taps on the steering wheel.

"I'm sure it's great. Real wild," I say flatly.

He glances over at me as he slows for the "traffic", which I'm sure is a cow that's loose.

"You want to try it?"

"I'm not l—" I snap my mouth shut. I almost said I'm not losing my virginity in a truck. I cannot tell this man I am a virgin. Yeah, I've fooled around. I've bent the rules as much as possible with the few men who couldn't stop themselves, even if it meant dying if my father found out.

But I have kept that one rule. I have never had a dick inside me. And finally, finally, I get to break the rule I've been desperate to. I've tried a very extensive selection of sex toys; none I imagine are quite as good as the real deal, but it's got me through this long.

The last thing I need is him finding out my weakness. A trigger he can pull. I don't want him to treat me differently either. Fuck the candles and the sweet making love. I want what I read about. I want to be fucked so damn hard I cry.

I need him to hurt me. To make me feel something. That's the only way I know how. And he won't do that if he knows the truth.

“You’re not, what?” he asks, shaking me from my thoughts.

I cross my arms over my chest. “I meant no.”

His eyes narrow, and then his hand slides over the center console and rests on my thigh, which makes my entire body freeze yet flood with heat.

“Spread your legs, Gianna.”

I suck in a deep breath, keeping my eyes on the road; I can’t bring myself to look at him for fear I’ll give my inexperience away. I do as he says, enough for his hand to slip between them and his thick finger to rub along my silk panties.

A deep chuckle rips out of his chest. “You give me all this attitude and yet, you’re already soaking through your panties for me, viper.”

I glare at him, squeezing my legs shut and trapping his hand there. A tiny moan slips from me with the pressure that puts on my clit, making me squirm in my seat.

“Says the man who said he was going to come in his boxers when I grabbed your neck?”

He smirks and starts to gently rub his fingers along my panties.

“Colt,” I warn.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“I’m not having an orgasm in this truck, did you not hear me?” I mutter.

He slips under my panties and my legs open, just a touch, giving him access. Damn traitors.

“I recall you saying you won’t fuck in here, nothing about a finger fuck.”

My mouth drops open. “Don’t ever call it that again.”

He circles my clit lightly, and I tip my head back, closing my eyes.

“Do you always fight back on everything?” he asks, picking up the pace with his fingers.

“Y-yes. Usually.”

He tuts as he runs his fingers along my pussy and slides one gently inside, making me gasp. “Are you gonna let me take what I want from you tonight? Or are you going to keep fighting me, wife?”

All the air leaves my lungs as he inserts another finger, the sound of my wetness filling the cab.

“I don’t behave for anyone, Colt,” I breathe out.

He retracts his hand and taps my thigh, and all I can do is stare at him, wide-eyed, open-mouthed, as he takes his fingers and sucks them clean.

“You taste as fuckin’ sweet as I expected, viper. I can’t wait to get my head between your legs.”

I blink at him. My body is bouncing with adrenaline, and it’s taking everything I possess not to jump on him while he’s driving.

His hand lands back on my thigh, and I’m already squirming in my seat. Relief washes over me as we approach the sign for Sterling Ranch.

“You are going to behave for your husband, Gianna. I think all that pent-up rage you got is cause you ain’t being fucked right.”

I roll my shoulders. He might be right. He’s possibly onto something, but I am not admitting anything. “I’ll cut you a deal, Colten.”

He taps on my skin, making my breath stutter.

“I’m listening…”

“I’m not going to behave because you *tell* me to. But if you can make me, then I might comply better.”

He nods slowly, and then a cocky grin tugs at his lip. “That’s a deal I’ll accept. I knew we should have taken you up on your offer the first time.”

I shrug, picking up his hand and shoving it back on his own lap. “I told you, I’m better to have as a friend than as an enemy, Colt. You and your brothers didn’t listen to me.”

He chews on the inside of his mouth and stretches his neck as the truck bumps along on the gravel. “Yeah,” he grunts. “Well, I’m good with making a deal with the enemy today.”

I smile. “I never was your enemy, Colt. Don’t blame me for something my idiotic brother did to you. Remember what I did to him,” I say, letting the words land as brutally as I intended.

That is what I do when I’m hurt. I hurt them back ten times harder without blinking.

“I bet you had to pay your therapist triple to deal with that one. Killing your own brother in cold blood?” he says, but I hear the layer underneath his voice.

He’s impressed I had the balls to do it.

“I heard you guys killed one of your own recently?” I counter.

“Beau did the same thing to us.”

I tilt my head to the side. “Looks like we aren’t too dissimilar after all, hmm.”

He doesn’t reply; instead, he parks up outside his house. It’s a hell of a lot bigger than the ranch house they’ve stuck me in. This one is more like a

mansion. It’s beautiful. Dark wood, a porch with a swing. Almost like a cute family home.

Except, it’s for a lone cowboy.

“Do you have a dog?” I ask as he unclips my seatbelt.

“Yeah, I got a couple. Although they’ll be roaming around the land at the moment.”

“I want to learn to ride a horse,” I blurt out.

He laughs. “Yeah, and I want to fuck your brains out, Gianna. Let’s tackle one bucket list item at a time.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “I was on your bucket list?”

“Damn right. As soon as you turned up here in that power suit and sat across from me makin’ demands, all I could think about was bending you over my brother's dining table and fuckin’ that attitude right out of you.”

My heart rate kicks up a notch as he leans in, his hungry eyes on my lips. His hand wraps around my throat so tight I can feel my pulse in my head.

“Shut up and kiss me, wife,” he growls.

For a split second, time stands still. His dark brown eyes burn into mine, and there’s only one thing left to say…

“Fuck it,” I whisper, as my lips seize his. My fingers tangle in his hair, dragging him closer.

I had one assignment to complete today that solidifies this marriage to my family… getting my husband to rail me.

But as his hands cup my cheeks and his tongue slides into my mouth, I realize that this isn’t about doing what I’ve been asked.

For the first time in my life, I’m taking what I want, for me.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Colten

She doesn’t just kiss me. She absolutely consumes me. Our teeth clatter as I slide my hand down her side and grip her waist.

“I’m seconds away from fucking you in here, Gianna,” I grunt.

I yank her over the console, and she straddles my lap.

“Shut up, Colt,” she whispers.

“I swear to fuckin’ God,” I hiss, opening the driver's door as I crash my lips over hers. With one hand on the back of her head, she wraps her legs around my waist and squeezes, and I maneuver us both out of the truck.

The entire way to my front door, my tongue is pretty much down her throat. I press her back against the front door as I fumble getting the key in the lock. I don’t waste a second; I need to be inside her. I need to taste her.

Her moans vibrate against my lips as I head up the stairs, straight to my bedroom, and flick on the lights before throwing her onto the bed.

Her eyes meet mine as she sits up on her elbows; I hold up my finger and command, “Don’t move.”

Her eyebrow arches; she’s fighting herself not to talk back. I approach the foot of the bed, grab her ankle, and drag her towards me.

Her eyes sparkle as I run my hands up her smooth legs, stopping at the thigh strap. I grin, removing the blade, holding it up in front of my face.

Her breath stutters as my eyes drag down her body. With my other hand, I lift her boot and unlace it, pulling it off and tossing it on the ground with a thud.

I do the same with the other, and lean down, gripping her by the throat.

“Does this do it for you, Gianna?” I drawl out as I run the tip of the blade gently along her cheek.

She doesn’t move. She doesn’t breathe. Slowly, I drag the blade across her bottom lip, watching the darkness take over her pupils.

I continue moving down her body, letting the cool flat side of the blade glide over her skin, over her collarbones, down her arm.

“You’re a sick fuck, cowboy,” she whispers.

I nod as I snake my arm around her waist and cut at the ribbon holding the corset part of her dress together.

She hisses out a breath on the first cut. By the seventh, she’s biting her lip, waiting. Everything around us buzzes. Once I’m finished, I toss the knife onto the mattress, shoving her onto her back beside it.

And I stand there, staring at the woman I married, spread out on my bed, waiting for me with a hunger in her eyes that I ain’t ever seen before. Something so raw, so fucking hot.

“What are you waiting for?” she asks, tilting her head.

“Admiring the view,” I tell her.

“Careful, cowboy; you almost sound like you like me when you say shit like that.”

Grabbing the side of her dress, I peel it off her. She even lifts her hips to help me. I nearly choke on air when I see what's underneath.

Her ink covers her entire stomach, a diamond above her belly button. A deep red see-through bra, with a cross over her nipples, and matching panties.

I run my finger across the moth inked into her skin just below her ribs.

“You like what you see, huh?” she purrs, slipping her fingers under the hem of the lace of her panties.

I clear my throat. Yeah. I think I like it too damn much. She’s like every fuckin’ wet dream I’ve had since I was a teenager.

If I could find a technology to create my perfect woman, it would be this scene right in front of me.

Except for the attitude and the fact that her family almost had my brother killed and forced me to marry her. Tiny details that my dick does not give a single shit about.

“I really, really need to fuck you,” I tell her desperately.

Moving her hands out of the way, I peel down her panties, spreading her legs as wide as they’ll go. Her pussy is glistening for me. “But, first, I gotta

taste you,” I murmur as I drop to my knees, dragging her right to the edge of my bed.

I don’t waste a single second. I dive two fingers inside her and suck on her clit. She cries out, tugging at my hair.

Within no time, she’s shaking violently around me. I look up at her from between her legs, her eyes squeezed closed, holding her breath so hard she’s going red in the face.

“Look at me, G,” I command.

Nothing. She fucking ignores me. I slap the inside of her thigh hard, bringing her back to me. Her glassy eyes lock on mine.

“Eyes on me, wife. Watch carefully, you’ll be thinking about this every time you touch yourself for the rest of your life.”

I twist my fingers and thrust deeper, her juices soaking my hand as I lower my mouth, this time teasing her with the tip of my tongue.

Her mouth falls open, her breaths coming in short, sharp bursts.

“Good fuckin’ girl,” I murmur.

Her hips rock against my face, chasing a quick release that I ain’t giving her. I push her thighs back, spreadin’ her nice and wide, and I fucking devour her. With my tongue flat against her throbbing pussy, I eat her like I’m starving. Which I am; I’ve waited weeks for a taste of the infamous Gianna Milano. And now she’s *mine*.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN



GIANNA

Song- Sun Killer, Spiritbox

My fists squeeze around the blanket as I fight every nerve in my body that is threatening to come way too fast. With his dark eyes burning into mine, I nearly lose it. I nearly forget who I am and melt against this man. My husband.

“I-I, Colt. Fuck. I’m going to,” I cry out.

Waves of pleasure wash over me as I push myself closer against his mouth. More. I need more. This feels so good I can’t even explain it.

His fingers dig into my ass, and he growls against me, “No. You’re not.”

He pulls back and stands, ripping off his shirt, which sends the buttons flying across the room. My eyes go wide. He is ripped to shreds. His arm muscles have muscles, I swear.

I spend most of my time surrounded by attractive men. But Colten? He blows them out of the damn water. Ink covers his arms and across his chest. He unbuckles his belt, pushing down his pants and boxers, kicking them to the side, as his hand wraps around his rock-hard cock.

He’s huge. My legs instinctively close, and I shuffle back on the bed.

“You scared of a big dick?” he asks with a smug grin.

Shaking my head. “I’ve seen bigger,” I lie.

He strides towards me, crawling onto the bed and yanking open my legs. He brushes my hair away from my face and then grips my throat.

“Liar,” he breathes out before slamming his lips over mine.

He pinches my nipple through the sheer material of my bra, and I cry out. My back arches into the kiss, and I wrap my arms around his neck as he drags his dick along my pussy. A moan slips out of me as he presses against my entrance.

“Fuck,” he hisses. “So tight. Damn.”

“More,” I beg.

“Atta girl.”

He thrusts inside me, all the way in, and I can’t help the scream that rips from my lungs. It stings so bad, tears well in my eyes, and I suck in a breath.

But the pain is nothing compared to the shit I’ve endured in my life. So I breathe through the sting until it feels better than good; it’s pure fucking bliss.

He stops, pulls back, and grips my chin, forcing me to look at him.

“You good?”

I nod, trying to hide the way my body is shaking.

“I said, are you good, Gianna?”

“Y-yes.”

He frowns, scanning my face. I don’t want him to stop. I want to feel it. All of it. The pain and the pleasure. So I don’t give him time to second-guess. I tug him towards me, and I kiss him, rolling my hips, feeling the way I stretch around him.

Fuck. I really have been missing out.

He starts off slow for a few strokes before letting loose. Thrusting into me until I can’t even see straight. Over and over.

“Such a good fucking whore for me,” he mutters against my lips.

That sends bolts of electricity right through me. I don’t know when it happens, but I feel the ice-cold metal of the blade against my throat, against my burning skin.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I whisper, another surge of pleasure rushing over me.

He kisses the other side of my neck and sucks on the skin. “Repaying the favor. Don’t ever put a knife to me again,” he tells me.

I swallow. He’s still rocking inside me.

“You think that scares me?” I ask.

He pulls back, looking right into my eyes. “No. I don’t. I think it turns you on.”

He presses it a touch harder against my skin.

I wrap my hand around his on the handle, and he places it in my hand with a smirk.

“Turns me on too,” he tells me.

As he leans back, sitting upright, I stretch out my hand and run the blade along his six-pack. A groan rips out of him, and he closes his eyes, tipping his head back.

I trace along his hip and up his side, and add a little pressure. His head snaps back, his eyes on me. “If you wanted to stab me, you’d have done it already. I ain’t concerned.”

He carefully takes the knife and leans over me, his lips just a breath from mine as he stabs the blade through the mattress.

“Oh, fuck,” I moan as he thrusts deeper.

The pain has subsided into pure pleasure, coiling low in my tummy. I grab hold of him, pulling him closer as his lips claim mine.

“You feel so fuckin’ good, G,” he murmurs against me.

His fingers close around my throat and my back arches. “Let me hear how much you love my cock.”

My moans grow louder as fireworks burst through my veins. I can’t hold them back. He growls against my cheek as I come so violently my vision starts to blur. My head is almost spinning, and he fucks me through it. Every single wave, totally consumed by him. Until I’m fighting for breath.

“Did I say you could come?” he grunts.

I grab both sides of his face. “Shouldn’t you take that as a compliment? You actually made a girl come. Congratulations,” I say, biting back a grin.

His expression doesn’t change; he presses two fingers against my lips. “I’m going to fuck that sassy little mouth of yours next.”

My eyes go wide. I can’t say it’s a challenge that I’d turn down. Wrapping my legs around his waist, I tug him closer, feeling myself squeeze around his dick.

“Fuck,” he groans.

I smile, seeing a tiny bit of what I can do to this man only turns me on more.

“Now you need to come, Colten. Part of the deal.”

He tuts before kissing the life out of me and letting go of any restraints like a wild animal, pounding into me so hard I nearly see stars. Until his

entire body tenses up and he’s moaning out my name against my lips. He abruptly pulls back and grabs his dick, keeping his eyes locked on mine as he sprays warm ribbons of white all over my stomach.

My eyes travel down to his cock, and I suck in a harsh breath as my stomach sinks.

Oh, fuck…

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CHAPTER TWENTY



Colten

Her face pales as I paint a pretty picture of cum all over her gorgeous body. Fuck, that'll make me hard again.

I follow her gaze down to my dick, and my heart jumps in my goddamn throat. Bright red streaks all over my shaft. I take a breath, trying to formulate a thought. There ain't no fuckin' way…

"I better have fucked you hard enough to start your period," I say.

Her face scrunches up, and she glances away. I grab her chin, forcing her to look me in the eye. "Gianna, tell me I didn't take your virginity at fucking knife point."

She opens her mouth. Closes it.

"Gianna," I warn.

"Wait. That wasn't your first time too?"

My eye twitches. It settles like a betrayal. Like she used me to take her virginity to report back that she consummated the marriage.

That she didn't want me. She just wanted a husband to fuck her to get some praise from her father for doing her job.

"Fuck off with that," I snap, the anger bubbling inside me.

"What difference does it make if I was or wasn't? Was it bad?" she whispers.

My heart beats so fast it's like it's going to tear out of my chest. "We both know it wasn't bad. I want the truth. You can manage that, right?"

"Yes. Colten. I'm a virgin. There. Said it. Does that make you feel better?"

“Not really,” I grunt.

I shake my head. This has to be some sort of nightmare. There is no way a woman as fierce and beautiful as her has never had sex. Although, perhaps that’s why she’s got so much pent-up rage.

But I feel like I stole something I wasn’t meant to take. I don’t care who she is, or what her family has done to mine; it seems like another trick. Even though the thought is making my dick ache that no one else has had her, except me.

“It’s not a big deal, Colt.”

I arch an eyebrow. “I shouldn’t have fucked you that hard. You should have lost it to someone that respected you more.”

“Says who? Didn’t realize you made the universal rules about a woman losing her virginity?”

I blink at her as she shuffles back, sitting up, my cum spilling onto her thighs.

Glancing down at the blood on my dick, my jaw twitches. That fury returning. I’m always some part of a fucking game that I didn’t ask to play. “You want me to take a picture of that and send it to your father? Prove you did your end of the deal?”

She swallows. “No, you don’t need to, but you can if you want.”

“I don’t want to know if you’re fucking serious, Gianna.”

I climb off the bed and grab a box of tissues from the side, tossing them beside her.

She huffs, snatching them. “This is the twenty-first century; not every woman wants to lose it with rose petals and candles,” she mutters.

I laugh. This is a joke. It has to be some sort of prank.

“You are hearing yourself? Right? You admitted you kept your virginity so your father could sell you off to be a bride? What the fuck is that? It ain’t normal, Gianna, and I don’t want to be a part of that kind of fucked up shit.”

Her face falls, only for a split second. I see that mask of hers slip, and I *almost* feel bad for her.

“It’s how our family does it. Tradition.”

I shake my head. “No. Tradition is baking cookies on a Sunday. Not deceiving me into taking your virginity.”

Did she really want to have sex with me?

Her eyes form slits. “Did you not enjoy yourself, Colten?”

I clear my throat. “You know I did,” I tell her, nodding at my cum all over her.

She hums, kicking her legs over the side of the bed. “So, your issue is what? I thought guys high-fived over taking virginities?”

I frown. For someone so smart, she seems to be lacking in other areas. “So all of that, back at the bar? That was all a performance to get me to fuck you?”

I try to hide the disappointment in my voice.

She shrugs, padding over and picking up her dress, tossing the cum soaked tissues on the floor next to me. “Depends how you look at it, Colten.”

That's what Gianna is good at. Working people out before they even work themselves out. And I walked right into her trap. She knew I wanted her. She knew I was winding her up with those other women.

And she knew I’d run after her if she walked out.

Checkmate.

Well, I’ve also assessed Gianna. And I know exactly how to hurt her too.

“Are you a virgin because your dad made you, or because no one else has ever wanted to fuck you? I can imagine the whole mafia princess on a power trip isn’t a turn-on for most guys,” I hiss through gritted teeth.

She looks at me like I’ve just slapped her across the face, and I instantly regret my words.

Her hand hurtles towards my cheek, and I don’t bother to stop it. My head jolts to the side on impact, and it stings like fuck.

I roll my shoulders, slowly tilting my head back to look at her. I deserved that one; I’ll give her that.

“You should be thanking me that I gave you something so precious of myself. That I wanted to even marry you in the first place. You’re a lonely cowboy with no substance. And you ruined your chance of creating something great with me. Asshole,” she spits.

She shimmies into her dress and has to hold it up to cover herself because the lace no longer ties up. I’m just left with my mouth open, watching her. Half in awe, half with fury.

She shoves her finger into my chest, and I grab her wrist as she glares up at me.

“You thought I was a bitch before. Just you wait, Mr. Sterling,” she whispers. Then, yanks her hand free and pulls her blade free from the mattress. “Fuck you. Fuck this hell hole of a ranch. And fuck this marriage,” she says, flipping me off as she stomps towards the door, picking up her boots from the floor and then slams it shut so hard the pictures on the wall rattle.

I glance down at my dick that’s twitching with excitement, still stained in her blood. I glance toward the sheets, where a tiny red patch stains them. And I run my hand over my face, smelling her sweet scent on my fingers.

Jesus. Christ. I messed that up.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Gianna

I almost kick my front door off its hinges. Dom jumps out of the chair he's sitting in as I storm through the living room, into the kitchen, and grab the closest bottle of booze, without even looking, pouring it straight down my throat.

How dare he. No other man wants to fuck me because of who I am?

I smash the bottle onto the counter and grip the sides. Tomasso got a knife in the groin for saying something along those lines; Colten deserves the same, husband or not.

"Are you okay?" Dom asks cautiously.

"Fine. Great," I huff.

I'm not. I can see the disgust on Colten's face when he realized he took my virginity. I have an ache in my chest because he is right.

I did use him. Although I did want to have sex with him, too. I've wanted him since the first time I sat across from him. Hence why I demanded this damn marriage. And now I'm pissed off that somehow I feel bad. I shouldn't. Colten Sterling is nothing to me except a marriage on paper to save my family.

I shiver, still feeling his hands on my skin. The way he kissed me. How, even for a few minutes, that man managed to turn my brain off and take control. There was no pressure from anyone else to be something I'm not.

I was just Gianna, enjoying myself and letting go. Even when he had a knife to my throat.

“I’m going for a shower, then I’m going to bed,” I say, without looking at him.

Because Dom knows me well enough to know I’m not okay. I don’t talk about my feelings. And I’ll never admit Colten’s words hurt me.

Words shouldn’t hurt me. I’ve been trained better than that. Even a knife wound wouldn’t hurt me.

But what he said, it touched something so deep inside me that I can’t help it. It solidified all the thoughts I’d had about myself for years. That I’m not someone who is desired. I’m just to be feared. And that I’m going to spend the rest of my life alone.

By the time I get upstairs, I’ve texted my father to tell him the deed is done and the marriage is official.

I peel off what remains of my dress and turn on the shower, leaning against the sink while I wait for it to warm up. The diamond on my wedding ring catches the light, and for the first time all day, I study it properly.

A black gem in the middle, surrounded by tiny rubies, and then a diamond band. I close my eyes, pushing any emotions back. It’s perfect. It’s me. I chose it for myself, because I’m here, marrying that asshole, for me. To prove to my father I am smart enough, powerful enough, to run the family. So, Colt can fuck off. I finally got dicked down, just as hot as the stuff I read, and that’s a win for me. And now, I can take back control and go after what I really want.

I’m a Sterling now. I’m stuck on a ranch in Arizona when my life is in LA. And somehow, I have to figure out a way to prove to Enzo that the Milano family is worthy of power. That’s what my focus needs to be. Like it always is.

Survival. And once I’ve done that.

Power.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Gianna

By some miracle, Colten has left me the hell alone since the failed wedding night. My father and my uncles have gone home, and I'm cooped up in a ranch house with my brother. One minute, I'm plotting my revenge against Colten. The next, I'm trying to figure out how I can avoid betraying his family and keep my father happy.

Dom's been getting into the spirit of things. Ace took him out to feed the horses, and he came back quite happy with himself. And I've had Harper knocking on my door every day; I think she's checking on me to make sure I'm okay. Who knows what she knows. Colt doesn't seem the type to gossip, though.

But by day three of my hiding, she was dragging me straight out of my pit. She took me out in her truck to show me some of the ranch. Then we went to town, which was pretty cool. It's the polar opposite of LA, but that isn't a bad thing. Everyone knows each other by name. But I didn't see a tattoo parlor anywhere.

"Are you coming with me? We've been invited to drinks at Hunters, remember?" Dom calls up the stairs.

I toss my phone on the bed. "Pass," I shout back.

As expected, his footsteps follow pretty damn fast. "If a mafia boss is asking you for drinks, do you decline?" he says matter-of-factly.

I cross my arms. "Yeah. If his brother is an ass."

A smile twitches on Dom's lips. "What if I told you the ass isn't coming?"

Now, that has my interest. I'm not sure if it's because I don't want to face him because I'll punch him, or if a tiny part inside of me is embarrassed. "Tell me more. And I'm proud of you for making friends."

He rolls his eyes. "Someone has to."

I glare at him in response. I did eventually tell him what happened on my wedding night, minus the actual sex details.

"Get dressed, Gianna. Think of this as work. We are here for a reason, whether we like it or not. Asshole husband or not. We've got to come up with a plan; we can't stay on the ranch forever until Dad forgets why we're here."

He has a point, so I toss off the blanket and plant my feet on the floor.

"You've got half an hour," he tells me, then he's off.

I'm going to need ten of those minutes to stare aimlessly into my closet to work out what to wear. Harper did fill it with some beautiful clothes; it's not quite my usual style. I can make it work, regardless.

By the time I straighten my hair so it falls to my waist, swipe on my signature red lip, and brush my lash extensions, I slip on my boots. Not my usual platform ones. Black cowgirl with red stitching.

Yep. I look hot. Just in case I do happen to bump into my husband.

As I head down the stairs, there's a knock at the door. Dom is already there, opening it up. I'm greeted by Harper and Lola, who has a bottle of champagne in her hand, in a cherry red dress that matches her long curls.

I slow down as I reach the final step. "What's going on?"

"Welcome to your post-wedding bachelorette." Harper squeals excitedly.

Lola starts blowing on a high-pitched whistle that makes me wince. Dom lied to me, the little traitor.

I open my mouth to try and form the words to get out of this, and then I look at Harper, smiling at me, like I'm her friend. And the words never come.

Instead, I smile and walk out the door without even saying goodbye to my brother. Harper links her arm through mine.

"I'm not letting you stay pissed off in that house for another day on your own," she tells me.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"This is my first night out since I had Willow, so I'm going to be drunk in an hour." Lola giggles as she walks ahead of us with a spring in her step.

We make our way past Colten’s house, and a shiver runs down my spine. He lives a five-minute walk from me. And he hasn't tried to talk to me. Which tells me everything I need to know.

“We’re meeting a few girl friends in town,” Harper tells me. “And we’ve got Tate coming with us as security.”

“I don’t need security, Harper.” I laugh.

It’s kind of sweet they think of that, though.

I swallow the lump in my throat. I can schmooze at charity galas. I can negotiate with billionaires. Meeting Harper's friends? Scares the shit out of me. Making small talk? Makes me want to jump in my Rolls and drive back to LA.

At least there, I know what’s coming every day. There aren’t really any surprises. If I behave, I live my life as I please. If I don’t, then I pick from the punishment menu.

“How many friends?” I ask, cautiously.

How many of them have fucked my husband is what I mean. How many of them will hate me because I’ve “taken” him off the market.

Why can’t I stop thinking about this damn man and his giant penis?



The bar is packed, even if it is a Thursday. I’ve got an espresso martini in my hand, and I’m happy, or perhaps tipsy after the six other cocktails I drank in quick succession. Lola and Harper’s friends seem okay. One is a hairdresser and is desperate to give my hair a treatment, and I’m not sure if I should take offense. My stylist in LA costs a fortune; my hair should not be dry.

“Is V okay?” Harper asks Lola across the table.

She nods, but her smile doesn’t follow. “I’m finding motherhood hard, even with Hunter, who is probably the best dad in the world. She’s finding it hard on her own.”

“Where’s the baby daddy?” I ask.

“He said he wants nothing to do with the kid,” Harper tells me quietly.

“And he’s still alive?” I blurt out.

Lola’s eyes go wide, glancing between her friends on either side of her. Oh… these friends don’t know what really goes on at Sterling Ranch.

“I was joking,” I confirm. It’s a lie.

“So, tell us, how is married life going?” Lola asks, stirring her cocktail.

I choke on my drink. “Painful.”

Both Harper and Lola laugh. “He’s grumpy, but deep down, he’s actually funny. Gotta peel back those layers like an onion,” Lola tells me.

“I’m not into peeling onions. Gets under my nails,” I joke, holding up my killer pointed nails.

“Are you planning on staying here for long?” Harper asks.

I shrug in response. “I don’t know. My whole life, I’ve had a plan for everything. This? I’m winging it.”

Glancing down at the martini and back to Harper, I revealed far too much about myself. They don’t need to know that Colten has thrown me off and I don’t have a plan anymore.

“I want to take over my father's…” I pause, clocking their friends watching me. “Business.”

“I love your tattoos!” the brunette girl, I think her name was Delilah, or Daisy, blurts out.

Rubbing my hand over my arm, right over the shark tattoo. “Thank you,” I say.

“Did they hurt?” she asks.

I frown. In comparison to the beatings I've taken, a tattoo is nothing. “No. I have a high pain threshold.”

Lola finishes her drink and hiccups, singing to herself as she sways to the music on her chair. The next minute, she’s up, dragging her two friends onto the dance floor.

“Want to dance?” Harper asks, one hand on her growing bump.

My eyes lock onto Tate’s across the room. He’s nursing a water, next to another huge guy in a booth. It’s crazy; he looks like Jett, yet I couldn’t get a damn word out of him the whole ride here. Jett, on the other hand, I’m not sure I’ve seen him shut up yet.

“I’ll get another round of drinks.”

“You’ve already had ten,” she giggles.

I blink at her. “Six? I’ve counted six.”

She shakes her head. “Ten. And four shots. Hence why Lola is stumbling around the dance floor. She’s going to throw up in about ten

minutes.”

Where the hell did the time go? We’ve literally been sat in a bar, chatting about nothing, for hours.

“How long have we been here?”

This isn’t like me. I never lose track of time. Or my surroundings. Nor do I get drunk in public places without my own bodyguards or Dom. I trust no one.

“Four hours, G.”

I frown, grabbing my martini and finishing what's left. Maybe this is what happens when you have fun? Time actually does fly.

“Well, looks like I need lucky eleven,” I say, holding up my empty glass.

“You don’t throw up when you’re drunk, too? I can’t hold both of your hair back,” Harper jokes.

“I don’t throw up. I do sometimes get in fights.”

That makes her laugh. “You and Ace would get on like a house on fire.”

“Maybe one day,” I say quietly.

I pretend I can walk in a straight line to the bar, but when I glance back, Harper is half carrying Lola to the ladies' room. Tate’s huge friend is right on their tail.

“Can I help you, miss?” the bartender asks.

“An espresso martini and four waters, please,” I order, handing him my black Amex.

He nods and gets busy making my drinks, just as a cowboy takes a seat right next to me. I keep my face forward, aimlessly staring at the drinks on the wall.

“You seem a little lost there, darlin’,” the guy mutters beside me.

I ignore him.

“I said—”

I snap my face to his, holding up a finger. “I heard what you said the first time, and I chose to ignore it. Take the hint.”

He holds up his hands with a shit-eating grin. “A fiery one.”

I grit my teeth. Do not bite, Gianna. Take a deep breath.

“Are you lookin’ for someone to keep you company tonight?” he asks, leaning in close enough I can smell the cheap whiskey on his breath.

Visions play in my head where I lean over the bar, grab a bottle, and smash it over his dumb head. And then I’d kick him off his bar stool and

stomp on his throat.

The bartender passes me my drink, and I take a sip, letting the buzz go straight into my veins. I've not been drunk in a long time.

As I place my hand down on the bar, the cowboy rests his over mine. My blood runs cold.

"I'll be waitin' for you, gorgeous," he drawls out, almost like a threat.

"I wouldn't." I warn.

Taking the drinks over to the table, I laugh to myself as I pull out my phone.

Harper sits opposite me, and I slide Lola her water.

"Feel better?" I ask.

She hiccups, drinks the water like a fish. "Yep. Good enough for a vodka."

"That'a girl."

She stumbles off to the bar. I keep my eyes on her, because that jackass cowboy would probably try it with her. And I don't get the impression Lola is the girl who will kill him. Her husband will, though. I need to prove myself to the Sterlings, whether I like it or not.

So, nothing will happen to Lola or Harper when they're with me.

"You've got that menacing sparkle in your eyes, Gianna," Harper says.

"Who? Me? Never."

My brain ticks. I was coming up blank on revenge plans for Colten. I think I got an idea, a drunk one, so it must be revolutionary.

"Can I have my husband's number?"

"You don't have it?" Harper looks shocked.

I arch an eyebrow. "No. Harper. I do not. But I think it's about time he started performing husband duties for me."

Harper gives me a mischievous grin and slides her phone across the table. "I think you'll fit in just fine round here, Gianna," she tells me.

And that makes my heart race. This is something I've never had. Friends, going out, drinking, and laughing. It feels so… normal. I always thought normal was boring, or so I was led to believe. I think I got that wrong.

Okay. The numbers are a little fuzzy. I am slightly more drunk than I first thought. Isn't that the best time to text your husband, who you currently hate?

I think so.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Colten

I stare down at the text one more time.

UNKNOWN: This is your wife. Please come and help me.

Glancing up at Hunter, who is currently battling Gary the goat to get him out of the living room.

“Gianna is out with the girls tonight?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he grunts, slamming the door shut.

Looks like Gary is sleeping outside tonight. I dare not ask what he’s eaten this time.

“G sent me a text asking for help. And she said, *please.”*

He frowns. “Tate is there. Lola hasn’t said anything, although I bet she’s too drunk to even form a sentence right now.”

I tap my finger on my jeans. I can’t ignore it. Because if this is real and something happens to her, I don’t care how pissed off she is at me; I can’t let that happen.

But, at the same time, this is Gianna Milano. There ain’t no shit she can’t get herself out of. That could also be the problem. She might be about to burn a bar down. Which I also can’t let happen in my town.

So, I’m up, grabbing the keys to my truck.

“Make sure my girl is okay,” Hunter calls out.

“Yeah. Will do.”

I’m in the truck and on the road in minutes; I try calling her. She doesn’t answer. So I call Tate. He does answer, hard to hear over the music in the

bar, though.

“You got eyes on my wife?” I ask, keeping it simple.

“Yep. She’s twelve martinis deep, Colt. Approach with caution.”

“Alright.”

I cut the call and pull up in a parking space nearby. Pushing open the doors, despite it being nearly midnight, the place is full to the rafters. It takes me a second to find her jet-black hair at the bar.

Very much alive and well. Drink in one hand. A smile on her beautiful face as she talks to someone. My eyes follow who she’s speaking to, and my fists clench.

Oh, my wife really wanted to fuck with me.

She wants to play? Fine.

I lost the first game; I don’t plan on losing a second time.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



GIANNA

I catch sight of my darling husband the second his huge frame enters the room.

“That’s a nice wedding band you got on, darlin’. Isn’t the husband going to mind me taking a ride on you tonight?” the cowboy from earlier asks.

He wasn’t joking, he is waiting for me, but I don’t think he’s going to enjoy the ride as much as I am.

His name is Dave. Dave the dickhead. And I’m pretty sure if I looked away from my glass long enough, he’d roofie me.

Batting my lashes, I give him a sultry smile. “You can ask him yourself if you’d like,” I say, nodding towards the door.

Colten is pissed. Tense jaw. Dark eyes zoned in on me. Fists clenched by his side. His face red as if he’s gone past stressed. Wonderful. Payback is a bitch. Hiding my grin behind the rim of my glass, I drink the rest of the martini just as Colten stops between me and Dickhead Dave.

“Dave, meet Colten Sterling,” I introduce, holding my hand out to Colten.

Dickhead Dave appears as if he’s seen a ghost.

“Dave, didn’t you want to ask my husband if it was okay to take a ride on me later?” I purr, running my fingers along Colten's chest.

“I-I—” Dave’s blue eyes flash with rage.

“You what? Forgot how to form sentences?” I finish for him.

Colt crosses his arms over his chest, and my eyes can’t help but scan him. That tight black T-shirt shows off how muscular he is. The black

cowboy hat, that’d look great on me.

“You want to fuck my wife?” Colten grits out.

Colt’s dark eyes hit mine and my breath stammers, for a split second, before his attention is back on the cowering Dave.

“I’m good. I don’t want no trouble, Colten. I had no idea she was yours.”

I bark out a laugh. “Here we go again, David. Big problem for me. Why do you keep talking about me like I’m a man's property? Do you know who I am? Would you like to find out?” I hiss, leaning closer to him.

“Half a million, she’s yours for the night,” Colten cuts in with a smug grin on his face.

Dave’s face drops with pure confusion. And to be honest, mine probably mirrors his.

“Excuse me?” I snap, directly at my husband.

“I’m negotiatin’, sweetheart.”

“Ain’t no pussy worth that much, Colt. Your wife or not.”

Colten nods, as if he’s contemplating his words, and shoves his hand in his pocket.

“Alright,” Colt adds, tapping his other hand on the bar between me and Dave.

“How about you come and talk to me out the back? We can discuss a new price. Something more reasonable. You’ve got some horses I’ve got my eye on; we should be able to cut a deal.”

My heart slams against my ribs as Dave slides off his seat, licking his lips as he gazes up my legs.

Colten nods to the back exit.

“So I’m worth a prize horse now?” I ask.

He leans in, brushing his lips along my ear. “You’re my damn wife, Gianna. Now do you want to watch what happens when someone tries to take you from me? Ain’t that why you summoned me here?”

My eyes go wide. Now we’re talking.

“Let’s go,” he grunts, cracking his neck.

The second my hand connects with his and he helps me out of the chair, electricity bolts up my arm.

As we head to the exit, Harper and Lola are watching us with their mouths wide open. So, I give them a little wave goodbye.

“Just to warn you, I’m drunk as hell,” I mutter, knocking into his side.

He loops his arm around my waist and laughs. “I gathered.”

“Why did you come?” I ask out of interest.

“You texted that you needed my help, Gianna. The most concerning part was that you used the word please.”

I swallow hard as he pushes open the door, the fresh air bringing a wave of nausea over me.

“Next time, make sure it’s a real emergency when you text me shit like that,” he mutters.

He lets go of my hand, and within a blink of an eye, he’s squaring up to Dave, grabbing his face and throwing him head first into the window of a truck.

I clench my thighs together. He throws him on the floor, and smashes his fists into his face repeatedly. Enough to not just leave a scar, but reconstruct the man's face.

“Come near my wife again, I’ll string you up and let you bleed out like a damn pig,” Colten spits, pushing himself back up to stand.

I nod in appreciation as Colt wipes his hands on his jeans and strides towards me. A yelp slips from me as he bends down, picks me up, and shoves me over his shoulder.

“If I throw up on your back, this is on you, cowboy.”

“You do realize every man you let flirt with you during the time we’re married will end up this way or worse. Be very careful, Gianna. I know you want a war, but think about the consequences.”

I roll my eyes, my body bouncing as he walks to the truck. “Oh, you don’t want me, so no one else can have me either?”

“Never said I didn’t want you, G.”

He sets me down on my feet, and I turn to face him with a grin, hiding how sick I feel. I need my bed. Some water. And some drugs to cure the headache before it even forms.

He stares at me in complete silence.

“If I slit your throat from here—” I drag my finger across his neck. “To here. How long do you think it would take for a man your size to bleed out?”

He wraps his fingers around my wrist. “Why don’t you do it and find out?”

I hiccup in response. Because I’m too drunk to do it properly, and then I’ll be in big trouble.

“Why did you text me, G? I know you don’t need me to fight your battles.”

I stare into his eyes, and my brain short-circuits. Drunk Gianna is about to spill the truth. “I’m smart enough to know not to pick fights on your territory. And that asshole needed a beating before he drugged some girl who can’t fight back like I can. So, I was telling the truth, I did need you.”

“To do your dirty work?”

I shrug. “To stop a predator walking the streets in your town, Colt. I was thinking about Lola actually.”

I tap his cheek, and his eyes blow wide. “Next time, do I have permission to slice a man's throat in these circumstances?”

He runs his thumb across his lip. “There won’t be a next time here. No one will be so much as brushing their hand against you by accident in this town.”

That makes me laugh. He has no idea the shit I have to deal with at home.

“What’s so funny?”

I shake my head, letting out a yawn, and I step back, resting my hand on the truck. “I need my bed, cowboy.”

He opens up the door, and I climb inside, resting my head on the cool window the second he closes the door for me.

By the time he starts the engine, my eyes are heavy.

“Does tonight get me back in your good books?” he asks, his voice husky.

I look over at his beat-up knuckles and smile.

“Nope. Try harder.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Colten

I’ve not seen my wife in two days. Not since I carried her drunk and unconscious body into her house and laid her down on the bed. I made sure she had water and painkillers on the side table waiting for her hangover. Dom said she hasn’t been drunk like this in years. Last night, I almost gave in and stood outside her house like a lovesick teenager. And then I remembered who she is. She’s not a woman who wants sympathy. I’m not sure what she wants. But I know it ain’t that.

Gianna wants me to jump through hoops to get back in her good books, and I’m ready to try.

“What's up your ass?” Jett asks as he jumps up onto the fence.

My stallion, Tippy, named by Wyatt, stomps his foot.

“Nothing is up my ass, Jett. I tend not to shove stuff up there where it don’t belong,” I tell him, nudging Tippy forward so I’m closer to him.

“Did you know we have a G-spot up there?” he asks.

“Yeah. You did anatomy in school, right?”

He shrugs. “Didn’t listen much. I was too busy trying to get Martha to have sex with me.”

I laugh. I remember that. She ended up becoming a vet. I’ve actually called her in a few times to help with my shelter.

“Why don’t you ask Violet to peg you?” I suggest, keeping my face straight.

His eyes almost bulge out of his head. “No. God. No. I don’t want to. I was just saying. Making conversation.”

I nod.

His eyebrows pinch together. “Have you?” He can’t hide the shock in his voice.

“Have I what, Jett?”

“Had a dick up your ass?”

I don’t respond immediately; I want to let him stew on this one. “I usually prefer to shove a cactus up there.”

His face physically goes gray, and I can’t hold in my laughter.

“I’m fuckin’ with you. Look, I’m trying to get this horse I spent nearly a million dollars on to do sliding stops that will actually win us some money back. Do you need me?” I ask.

He rubs a hand over his face. “Hold on. You’ve thrown my entire thought process off.”

“You started it. Don’t ask a man what’s up his ass.”

He holds up his hands, almost falling backward off the fence post. “Yeah. No. I know why I’m here. Hunter told me we’ve got a family meeting in an hour. He texted you, but you didn’t answer.”

I stroke my fingers through Tippy’s black mane. “I’m on a fuckin’ horse, Jett.”

I swear to God, I can’t get shit done around this place without being interrupted. “I’ll be there,” I add.

He nods, but I can tell he ain’t done yapping yet.

“Anything else?” I ask.

“Where is your wife? It’s been very quiet around here. I heard you took her home from the bar.”

I drag my teeth across my bottom lip. “It’s a marriage on paper. A deal, Jett. I don’t care what she’s doing.”

I say the words out loud, and it sits wrong in my gut. I do fuckin’ care. When I think about her watching me beat that guy up, with a hunger in her eyes I’ve never seen before, I have to fight myself not to go to her.

Jett frowns. I know it’s not worth pressing, but I do enjoy his thought processes.

“What?” I ask.

“Okay, this is a hot take.”

“A fucking what?”

“Hot take? Do you ever use the internet, grandpa?” He looks me in the eye but fidgets with his Stetson.

I suck in a breath, trying to calm the rage only Jett Lawson can bring out in me. “Right. What is your hot take? And this is the last time you ever use that term in a sentence.”

He laughs, ignoring that.

“That you and Gianna are a perfect couple. She’s exactly what you need. Powerful. Hot. Sassy. Just imagine you two in combat together, ruling an empire.”

Something tightens in my chest, causing me to clear my throat to make sure I’m not having a heart attack. “I beg to differ. We’re opposites in every way. Her family tried to kill Ace and Harper. I can’t trust her. And I think she would slit my throat in my sleep if I pissed her off.”

Jett grins. “But ain’t that what makes life exciting? She’d eat Ace alive. But you? You’re a good match. And that kiss at the altar? Fuck me.”

“I’m going to need you to shut the fuck up now, Jett.”

He jumps down from the fence, adjusting his hat, before asking, “Have you had sex with her yet?”

“Fuck off,” I scoff.

I can hear his laugh echoing as he heads back towards Hunter’s house. Until this marriage is over, I’m not going to hear the end of this.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



GIANNA

"Aren't you going to say hello to your husband?" Dom asks as we walk past the fenced-off area. Colt is inside on a monster-sized horse, doing some kind of skidding thing. I've been watching him for a few minutes from a distance.

He is hot as hell doing it. His biceps tensed. That man is built out of pure muscle, which I can appreciate. Shame the muscles are attached to a complete dick.

"No. I'd rather not," I mutter.

Dom grumbles something beside me. I've decided to embrace some of the outfits Harper bought for me. I'm sporting a pair of cut-off denim shorts and a frilled, low-cut top with an open back. Although I opted for my own boots instead of the country ones.

"We've been stuck inside for days, G. We need to make friends."

I roll my eyes, crossing my arms. "Since when? And we went to that diner yesterday? And I bought an apartment block right on the beach back in LA yesterday. It's been productive."

"Yeah. And yet, none of it has got us any closer to going back home."

I tap his arm. "It's going to take time. You know that. And we've already been invited into a meeting with Hunter; that's a good sign."

We carry on walking, and I try not to glance too many times at Colt. I don't want to make eye contact.

"How many snakes do you think are here?" Dom asks as we approach Hunter's.

I shrug. “Not a clue. Tend not to ponder too much on everything that wants me dead.”

Dom follows behind me as I knock on the door. I’m greeted by a smiling Lola, holding a tiny baby Willow in her arms.

“Hi,” she says, flustered.

“How was the hangover?” I ask.

She ushers us inside. “Disgusting. I still feel awful now, G. Next time, shall we book a spa?”

I’ve never relaxed a day in my life properly, but fuck it. “A massage is exactly what I need.”

I smile. But that soon drops as a goat charges at me head down. “What in the hell!” I shriek. Dom is laughing his damn head off behind me as the goat smashes his head into my legs.

“Get off!!” I try to shoo him.

He doesn’t let up, making the strangest noises I’ve ever heard as Lola tries to drag him away with one hand.

Another kid comes charging out from one of the rooms. This must be Wyatt. “Gary!! Stop!” he shouts.

He can’t be any older than seven. Spitting image of Hunter. He’s got that Sterling look—strong genetics, clearly. My brothers all had really similar features too.

Then Wyatt grabs the goat and pulls him back. “Gary, we don’t headbutt new people. Just Daddy.”

I scan the room. It’s pretty. Very ranch house but also extremely grand. I’m used to home that aren’t really lived in, this is a true family home.

“I’m so sorry, G. Gary is a lot,” Lola whispers.

I brush my hands over my legs. “I’ve been attacked by a few people in my life, never a goat,” I tell her.

She laughs awkwardly. The room falls silent, and the atmosphere turns to ice. I don’t turn. I don’t react. But I know damn well my husband is now behind me.

Gary, the traitor goat, trots past me to go and greet Colten.

The kid also runs up to Colt and says, “Uncle Colt, Gary attacked your girlfriend.”

Colten laughs, sending a shiver down my spine. “She’s my wife, Wyatt. Meet your new Auntie Gianna. And good boy, Gary.”

I spin to face him with a huff. “Really?” I snap.

He smiles. That stupidly hot lopsided grin. “Gary is a very good boy.”

“No. He ain’t. This is the one time I’ll side with Gianna,” Hunter’s voice booms from behind me.

He stops beside me. “Don’t worry, I think Gary just doesn’t like people with power.”

I nod as Colten stares at me.

“Odd choice of a house pet,” I say.

“Trust me, it’s not my choice,” Hunter returns. “Now, let's go. Gary, you stay here.”

Hunter heads off while Lola ushers Gary out of the house with Wyatt, and Dom follows behind Hunter. Leaving Colten and me staring at each other in the doorway.

“Making a good impression with the animals here.” Colt helpfully cuts the silence.

“The girls like me. I’ll win Gary over; he will prefer me over you by next week,” I tell him smugly, with absolutely no qualifications to back that statement up.

“Yeah. Yeah. You here for the meeting?” he asks, taking a small step closer.

“No. I thought I’d gate-crash a family meeting,” I deadpan.

“I’m sure it wouldn’t be your first,” he mutters, his eyes drifting from my face, slowly tracking down my body, making me internally burst into flames.

“Why were you trying to skid a horse across dirt?” I ask, changing the subject.

He frowns. “It’s called reining, sweetheart. It makes us a lot of money.”

“Oh, are you actually good at it?”

Must not think of his muscles. Must definitely not think of him on top of me. Or… riding me.

“Pretty decent.”

I cross my arms.

“Anything else you’d like to know about me?” he whispers, leaning closer.

“Can you find someone to teach me how to ride?”

If I’m going to get the animals here to like me, or even slightly fit in here, I need to learn.

His eyebrow arches. “If that's the position you wanna do next, just say the word.”

I scoff. “Find me a cowboy who isn’t an asshole, and I might take them for a ride.”

Dragging my finger up his chest, his breath hitches.

“You see, now that you took my virginity, the deal I had with my father is now over, and I’m a free woman, Colten. I can do what I want, when I want, with who I want,” I say sweetly.

Yet, for some reason, I absolutely want to get the full Colt experience. The first time ended far too quick, and I need to see what else he can do.

He swallows as I trace the line of his chiseled jaw.

“Because now, I have to prove to my husband that men do, in fact, want to fuck me,” I challenge, tipping up my chin.

His nostrils flare, and his eyes darken. I can’t hide my smile knowing that I’m getting to him.

I step back; his eyes drag over my outfit. “Do you think this will get me laid here?” I ask, and then do a little twirl to show him the ink on my back.

He groans under his breath but recomposes himself. “Do you think I care if you fuck someone else, Gianna?”

I shake my head, closing the distance again. “I don’t think, hubby. I know. I know because you regret what you said the second it flew out of your mouth. And I know that you came to my door last night and debated apologizing to me. That’s also why you ran to that bar after I sent one pathetic little text.”

I pause, watching the irritation grow on his face and enjoying every minute.

“You promised me a night of fun and delivered nothing. And then insulted me and my family. But you do want me, don’t you, Colt?” I breathe out, lightly brushing my hand over his hardening cock.

It’s good to let it out, but part of me wants to take it back. Because without realizing, I’ve just admitted far too much. And it all is laced with hurt.

“We’ve got a meeting to go to,” he says, voice low, stepping aside.

I laugh as I follow him down the hallway into the meeting. The men are all talking but fall silent when we arrive. I take my place beside Dom, like we did at our first meeting here. Opposite my husband.

“Nice of you two to join us,” Hunter says, tapping his fingers on the wood.

“Were you fuckin’?” Jett blurts out beside Colten.

Ace erupts into laughter. “Don’t beat around the bush.”

Colt doesn’t react, and neither do I.

In his dreams. Or mine? I don’t know anymore. Colten has my brain scrambled.

“No. I was asking Colten if he knows of anywhere I can go dancing.”

“Rosie’s is safest for you round here,” Jett tells me instantly.

I nod along. “Safest?”

“We own it,” Colt confirms, crossing his arms, making his biceps look huge.

He licks his lips, his eyes burning into mine. I am loving every second of this. I’m alive here, even if I am winding my husband up into a frenzy. It’s good to be free. Not having to worry about what my father thinks about my every move.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Colten

Hunter clears his throat as the room falls silent. Gianna is glaring at me, and I'm refusing to even glance her way. She's got me right where she wants me. She knew I wanted to apologize. She knew I was at her door. She doesn't miss a trick.

But the thought of her takin' another man home makes my skin crawl.

"I thought this information might also interest you, Gianna," Hunter says.

Her eyes light up as she turns her attention to him.

"We have some intel that Nikos and Stafanos Kourakos are in Mykonos. They have some family fronting a restaurant on the coast. After everything they've done, we can't let them sit back and regroup. We have to end them."

She rubs her hands together like an excited little kitten. "I'll happily take a vacation to Greece and get it done," Gianna confirms.

My mouth acts before my brain can catch up. "We," I cut in.

All eyes are on me.

"I can manage with Dom just fine, Colt. You guys are plenty busy here on the ranch. I wouldn't want to take you away from that. I'll fly out, slit their throats, and be on my merry way home," she says almost sweetly.

I chuckle, running a hand through my hair. "No deal. You think I trust you out there on your own?"

She scowls at me. "What do you think I'm going to go join forces with the assholes who have tried to kill me, murdered my brother, and want to

take my family's organization?" She cackles out a laugh. "I've spent the last few weeks purchasing every piece of property they own in LA to ensure they can never come back and hide anywhere. You honestly believe I'd let those mother fuckers live?"

I shift in my seat; that fire, the way she snaps back at me, it should not turn me on.

"Might be a family trait switching sides," I say coolly.

She scoffs, waving her hand. "Then you are dumber than I thought, Colten, if you can't make simple observations about me."

I frown. "Enlighten me?"

Jett is vibrating with excitement in the seat beside me; I don't know how or when it happened, but he pops open a bag of popcorn and shoves a heapful into his mouth. The excessively loud chewing makes my eye twitch.

"I forced you into a marriage with me because I wanted to align with your family. Why the fuck would I put myself through this ordeal with *you* if I intended to side with the Greeks? That makes little to no sense."

I suck in a breath. "So you're telling me we can trust you? Seriously?"

She shrugs. "Your brothers can. You? That's up for debate, but it depends what kind of trust we're talking about."

"Ooooh, burn," Jett whispers as he throws popcorn directly at my head.

I fire him a look that tells him to knock it off. He diverts his attention back to his food.

"And you think you can come in here and make demands, Gianna?" I ask, my voice low.

"I offered my services to kill two men in Greece for you. You should be thanking me? Why are you always getting this wrong?" she snaps.

"And I'm saying, I'll come with you."

She glances at her nails, almost zoning out of this entire conversation, and the room hollows around me. She then casually says, "Well, I'll accept this as the honeymoon you never delivered. I'll leave you to book the villa, somewhere on the beach. Private jet only. And toys. I need toys."

I nearly choke on my spit. "Toys?"

She rolls her eyes. "Get your brain out of the gutter. Weapons. Guns. Knifes. You know, the real adult toys."

Settle in with a love story.

Head to Lokepub for more romance novels.

That's all it takes. Jett is laughing so hard he has tears streaming down his cheeks, and Ace isn't far off that either; he's now joining in on stuffing his face with popcorn too. Hunter isn't saying a single word.

"When do we leave?" she asks Hunter.

"Tonight? Jet is ready and waiting," he offers.

Gianna's dark eyes land on me. "I'll go pack, make sure the villa has at least two bedrooms and a pool."

I bite my tongue to stop myself from speaking. The more I say, the more ammo she fires back at me.

"This ain't a vacation," I add.

Gianna taps her nail against her lip. "Not everything in life is work, Colt. You have to play. Relax. Take a vacation. You never know; you might find a personality under all those tense muscles you've got."

My mouth falls open, and that's enough for Jett to roll out of his seat, land with a thud on the floor, laughing to the point he's wheezing.

She's right. I need a damn break from this place. Last time I took a vacation, I was a kid. Every day since I turned sixteen, I've worked. I don't know how to relax, even if it slapped me in the face as hard as Gianna did on our wedding night.

Hunter responds, "Gianna, you go; I'll send over all the intel we have to Colten."

She nods and stands. "Thank you, Hunter," she says, and then she's gone, without even a second look at me, Dom following behind her.

I'm starting to gather that Dom is the only one Gianna truly trusts. Her family dynamic… is a big contrast to my own; I can't really work that out yet. But Dom, it's clear she loves him, and that's why he's here.

Once the door closes, I let out an exhale and grip the table. She drives me in-fucking-sane. Still want to bend her over this table though.

"What the fuck is going on between you?" Hunter hisses.

I tip my head back and groan. "It's a long story."

"How? It's been what? A week? Man, she is not a fan of you," Ace says.

“She’s… difficult. Okay?”

“You think you can work with her? It sounds like you two will kill each other, not the Greeks,” Hunter points out.

“Nah. She doesn’t mean it. Not really,” I say, although I’m not sure how far from the truth he is.

“Why did you give her this job?” I ask Hunter.

“A test, Colten. I need to make sure she isn’t the same as her brother.”

I swallow. That is the crux of all my issues with her. She is a Milano.

“Fair enough. Well, if I make it back alive and the Greeks die, then I guess we have a better answer.”

“Looks like you need to find a villa to impress her,” Jett adds helpfully.

I sigh. “I suppose I best hunt down our contacts in Greece.”

Enzo and Romeo are bound to have people who most likely own mansions I can use. I’m sure I’ll find something to my wife's liking. I’ll give her the honeymoon that makes up for the disaster I created on our wedding night.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



GIANNA

“Here, let me,” Colten murmurs behind me, sending a wave shooting through my spine. The thought of being trapped on a small jet, with this beast of a man who is causing my pussy and my brain to go to war, is going to be hell.

It’s so many hours to Greece. And I know Colten wants to see which buttons of mine he can find and press.

“I’ve got it!” I snap, blowing my hair out of my face.

He laughs as I try to unsuccessfully shove my luggage in the overhead bin. “It’s getting jammed on the wheel.”

He leans over me, his chest pressing against me as he maneuvers the bag in.

“I’m taller, not stronger,” he says.

I huff, and he moves around me to take his seat. I glance around the empty jet. My eyes settle on the seats right at the back, but as I take a step, his fingers close around my wrist.

“Sit with me? We can work out our attack plan?”

My breath catches as I turn to him, and he releases his hold instantly.

“Fine,” I say, keeping my voice level. Ignoring the way my heart is almost galloping out of my chest. I squeeze past, with my back towards him, as he’s sprawled out in his chair. I swear to God he groans under his breath.

I settle in the seat beside him, staring out at the tarmac, tapping my nails on the arm of the chair. “You’ve vetted your pilot, right? He’s not insane?”

Colten laughs. “He’s not insane, no. He’s a family friend, has been for many years.”

I turn to face him. “How old is he?”

“Sixty, maybe sixty-five?”

“Per l’amor di Dio, moriremo—*For the love of God, we’re going to die*,” I mutter. I have a strict no-under-forties pilot rule; I can’t have one of them having a heart attack mid-flight.

“Fuck, it’s sexy when you speak Italian.”

I grin. “It’s perfect you don’t understand what I’m saying.”

He crosses his arms, getting comfortable. I wish I could be this relaxed when I fly. I’m on high alert, prepared to parachute at any moment. And being next to Colten, it’s raising all my senses to the max level.

“I know you called me meatball, and technically it’s a term of endearment in Italian.”

I pat his arm gently. “Nothing that comes out of my mouth should ever be taken as endearing, Colten. I told you already, I don’t do sweet.”

His eyebrow arches. “You taste sweet though.”

The jet jolts forward, and I instinctively grab onto his forearm, squeezing my eyes shut.

“Can I smoke?” I ask, refusing to open my eyes.

“No, Gianna. You cannot smoke on a plane.”

“Stupid rules. What’s the point in a private jet?”

He leans in, his warm breath gliding over my cheek. “I can think of a few ways to distract you, viper.”

“Keep dreaming, cowboy.” I tell him as I slowly open my eyes, staring right into his. “Tell me what scares you, Colten.”

He pulls back, studying me intently. “Losing my family,” he says.

I nod. I know how it feels. Losing Max was the equivalent of losing an arm or a leg. It hurts every damn day. My brother was shot down in the middle of the street on his way to propose to his girlfriend. He had everything to live for, and it was gone before he even had time to register what had happened.

And now, I’m on my way to finally end the men who called that order. But revenge will never bring him back. Will never close this gaping hole in my chest. I’m not even convinced it will make me feel better.

But it does mean they can never come after Dom. No one is ever going to hurt my baby brother as long as I’m alive and fighting.

“What about you?” Colt asks, shaking me from my thoughts.

“Planes and bugs,” I respond before my brain catches up. I gave him one more thing to hold against me.

We taxi towards the runway and everything around us hums. I chew on my lip, keeping my eyes closed.

“Are you sure you don’t want to take me up on the distraction techniques, Gianna?”

I shake my head. “What, so you can take another jab about how inexperienced I am? Or psychoanalyze the why?”

I need to work on this damn trigger point. It should mean nothing to me, in the scheme of the shit life has handed to me. And it’s gone. I lost my virginity. Done. Dusted. Just like I was supposed to.

“Do you honestly believe I’m turned off by the fact that I’m the first man to fuck you?”

“Sure as hell sounded like it,” I say through gritted teeth.

The jet hurtles off down the runway, and I hold my breath. His muscular arm snakes around my neck and he drags my head against his chest, holding me tight. I don’t move an inch. His steady heart should comfort me, but I’m actually thinking about how psychotic he is being—this calm when we’re in a tin can in the sky.

A few minutes pass, and the plane seems to settle into a smooth glide through the clouds, and I finally breathe again.

“I’m kind of glad you have a fear,” he whispers against my hair.

Why aren’t I moving out of his hold?

“What, so every time I piss you off, you’ll drug me and shove me on here?”

He chuckles, and it vibrates through his chest against my ear. “I like the idea. But no. It’s just nice to know something real about you, is all.”

I pull back and brush my fingers through my curls. “I’m not a robot, Colten. I do have some emotions.”

I have lots of emotions; I just know how to compartmentalize them well. But I’m realizing pretty fast that I’m lacking a lot in the way I live my life. I never made friends before Harper. I never had spa breaks or girly drinks. I never had anyone to confide in that isn’t a brother.

He bites back a grin. “Sure. It’s just, I’ve never seen a woman drive a knife through her brother's chest and not even flinch. And I’m pretty damn sure I heard you call him a little bitch as he died.”

My cheeks heat. He was watching me murder my brother and doesn't sound horrified by it. "He betrayed me. He killed Max, Colten. And I've vowed to haunt him through every lifetime. I take revenge serious. That's what happens when you do that to me."

"And that is fair enough, viper." His eyes dip to my lips, and then back to my eyes. "So tell me, best case scenario, what kind of kill do you want to do on Nikos? Just so I can make sure we have everything we need."

A grin twitches on my lips. Now we're talking. "We need a notepad and pen. Let's figure out the most painful way to kill a man."

He blinks at me. "Do I look like I carry them? I've got a gun and cigarettes."

I purse my lips. "Phone notes it is. Where all good plans are made."

I snatch my phone from my purse and open the app, titling the note *'honeymoon activities'* with a smile. I can sense Colten watching my every reaction.

"Sex," he blurts out. "First on the list."

"Jesus Christ, Colten. If you're going to bring another woman back to our villa, do it when I'm unconscious, or I won't be able to stop myself from making it the most awkward sexual encounter of your life."

He snickers. "You'd come and watch, huh?"

There are things I've researched in the past that intrigued me. I don't want to be shared. I don't want to compete with another woman in the bedroom. But I went down a rabbit hole where two guys get each other off, and the woman watches. That… I'd like to live out. I think. Although, I don't think Colten is the type to share, not after what he did at the bar. Nor has he given me any reason to believe he's into guys.

I snap my mouth shut. I can't say that out loud. So, I blurt out something far worse. "No. I'd run in and pretend that I've got a terrible stomach bug, and proceed to throw a bowl of melted chocolate mushy stuff over you both and pretend it's shit."

His eyebrows knit together. "That's… disgusting."

"I know. I grew up with three brothers; we used to prank each other all the time. So, keep that in mind."

Back before Fabio was a dick, even he would join in on the prank wars. It was maybe one of my only happy memories as a kid.

He swallows. "I was talking more about us. Not bringing another woman back."

My heart flutters, and I move away just an inch, but he notices. “I think that ship sailed when you all but threw me out of your bed after taking my virginity,” I say, pretending it’s a joke. It’s not.

Dammit. Why won’t my mouth stop? Why can’t I shelve this away and forget it ever happened?

“It threw me off. I felt…”

“Like I used you?” I finish for him.

He shrugs. “No. I felt like a dick for how I took it.”

I place my hand on his thigh and his breath hitches. “I wanted it, Colt. Exactly how you did it. I’m not made of glass. You know exactly who I am and what I’m capable of, so go figure.”

He holds out his hand in front of me. “Truce? At least for this trip?”

I slide my hand in his and squeeze, making sure my nails dig into his skin. I need to stop letting my mask slip with him. “Truce…”

“But?” he asks with a smirk.

“You pissed me off, so I will have to get you back. I’m very strict on revenge.”

He licks his lips. “Oh, I’m ready for you, G. Bring it on.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Colten

Song- Let's Get It Started, Black Eyed Peas

The villa is spectacular, the kind of luxury I can imagine Gianna is accustomed to in LA. I can sleep anywhere; I don't care much for luxuries. The sun is glistening, the flowers around the archway are blooming in purples and blues, and the waves are crashing against the beach.

This would be the perfect honeymoon location, tucked away by the sea—complete and total privacy. I could walk around the pool butt naked and not a soul would see.

"How long were you expecting this trip to take us?" I call out to G, who is already acquainted with the coffee machine.

I drag her humongous suitcase and carry-on behind me through to the master bedroom. She needs the biggest room for all the stuff she's carried. She must have done one hell of a shop for this trip.

I set her bag next to the bed and open up the double doors that lead to the patio, letting the sea breeze blow in. As I enter the kitchen, she's holding two mugs of steaming coffee and hands one to me.

"Oh, thank you."

"You're welcome. I thought caffeine was a good pre-drink before I crack open the red wine."

"I put your bags in the bedroom," I tell her as she props herself up on the bar stool.

"And your bags are where, Mr. Sterling?"

I rest my elbows on the counter. “One bag,” I correct her. “Because I packed for a three-day trip, not three weeks. And I left it by the front door so I could drag your dead body through the house.”

The second we got off the plane, Gianna entered vacation mode. Her shoulders dropped, and her smile beamed. She told me she tries to vacation two to three times a year to get away from the crazy and figure out a way to relax. And I’m kinda jealous. I don’t know how many years it’s been since I unclenched my jaw. I never even think about just… disappearing to try to relax. Although, I can see the appeal.

She barks out a laugh. “I needed outfit options, Colten. It’s standard procedure for a woman. Do you know what else is?” she asks with a mischievous grin.

I bite my lip. I want to say orgasm, but I’m not about to press her buttons again on that. But I’d throw her across this counter and fuck her if she asked me nicely. It’s all I can damn well think about. She fell asleep resting against my arm on the plane, so I cuddled her. I cuddled this woman, had her in my arms, and my body melted against the chair. Fight or flight disappeared in me for a few hours.

“Nope. Enlighten me, viper,” I say, taking a sip of my coffee.

I cough as I swallow it. “Damn, how many espressos are in here?” I croak.

“Three?”

I swallow again; fuck, it burns. Should coffee burn?

“Anyway, carry on.”

“I’m going to spend the entire afternoon on a sun lounger, smothered in oil, and take the longest damn nap of my life. And I need you, sir, to wake me up when it’s time for me to get ready to scope out the restaurant.”

Sir. One word that triggers me like saying “walkies” to a dog.

“Oh, so I’m your personal assistant today. Should I also provide refreshments?” I tease.

She runs her tongue along her perfectly white teeth, tapping her black nail on her lips. Gianna loves everything in black. Her clothes, her nails, her wedding ring.

“If you could, that would be perfect, cowboy. Do you know how to make an espresso martini?"

“Yeah… Do we have the martini?” I ask.

Never made one in my life.

“Go check the dead body suitcase, Colt. I brought supplies.” She winks.

I laugh; this fucking woman. The fact that she can make me laugh, for no good reason, makes me think about what Jett said, about how she is good for me. “Of course you did. You pack enough cigarettes too?”

She starts counting on her fingers. “Ten packs enough?”

“For us both?” I ask.

She scowls. “I don’t share, Colten. Those things keep me alive.”

“Can’t argue with that logic.” Probably isn’t far off. Cigarettes ain’t going to kill us before another person does. So why not?

“Exactly. I made it to thirty; I’m good, Colt,” she hums.

And I’m sure as shit there is a hint of regret in her tone.

She fascinates me, frustrates me, and turns me on like no one else ever could. I’m starting to wonder if it’s because she seriously doesn’t like me.

Do I like the chase of wanting someone I can’t have?

Fuck knows, but I’m going to have fun figuring it out. I’m Vacation Mode Colten now; I’m embracing this new circus my life is. Which ain’t something I do often. Most of my time is spent working and putting out fires trying to destroy everyone I love.

Gianna is showing me there may be more to life outside Sterling Ranch.

“How's your coffee?” she asks.

I snap my attention to her. “Strong, but good. Thanks.”

It’s so fucking bitter I have to control my facial expressions not to cringe every time I swallow. But she made it for me it, so I’ll drink it.

“Well, if you, for some reason—” She pauses, looking around the villa, shaking her head. “And by reason, I mean the world is exploding—need me, I’ll be out there getting a tan and napping.”

I salute her as she heads off into her bedroom. As soon as the door closes, I let out a breath and finish my coffee in silence.

Something I haven’t heard in years. I could get used to this. It’s moments like this you realize how noisy life can get, and maybe I do need to take breaks before I end up in the ground. I don’t want to be buried next to my parents yet. I ain’t lived enough. I haven’t traveled. I haven’t… laughed enough either.

I finish my coffee and spread out the blueprints of the restaurant we’re scoping out tonight. From what I've seen online, it seems pretty popular and lively. It’s a Greek restaurant that turns into a bar with karaoke in the evening. Small parking lot. Only three exits. We need a table right by the

kitchen because if Nikos or Stefanos are connected to these men, I just need to figure out which one will lead me to them.

A flash of heat covers my face and spreads down my throat, making sweat pool on my forehead. I grip the counter, staring at the blueprints, and wipe it away.

The fuck is going on?

It's like my head is trapped in a vice, pressure building right behind my eyes.

"Fuck," I hiss. I pour a glass of water and chug it back until the burning in my face subsides.

My heart is racing, the same way it did when Ace rode on the back of Gravedigger, the bull that nearly killed two guys before him.

"G!" I shout. I'm pretty sure I'm having some kind of medical emergency. Maybe the sexual frustration of being around my wife is about to give me a heart attack.

Or stress from my daily fucking life.

She struts in front of the double doors leading to the pool, in a black string bikini… that barely covers any of her. I can nearly see her damn nipples. My hand covers my crotch and my dick gets painfully reactive.

She leans against the doorframe, popping out a hip. Holy fuckin' shit. The oil on her skin reflects against the sun. Those damn curves in that barely there bikini. My mouth waters and my cock is about to explode out of my pants.

She pushes her oversized sunglasses on top of her head, and that devious glint in her eye takes my breath away.

"Everything okay, Colten?" she purrs.

Her gaze darts to the coffee and then to my hand over my aching dick. And all the puzzle pieces fit together.

"You didn't," I hiss.

She laughs. "I didn't what, husband?"

Her tongue runs along her red lips, and I almost cry out, in pain and pleasure.

"G." I sound desperate, like I'm pleading. Maybe I am. "Did you drug me?"

"Maybe." She shrugs.

I grip the counter tighter. "What with?"

“A little Viagra, Colten. Nothing that’ll kill you. Welcome to prank wars with your wife.”

My heart races way too fast to be normal, and my dick is pulsating against my hand. If she did this back home, I’d be furious. Vacation Colten is pissed, but I can appreciate the effort.

She shakes her head, backing away. “Go lay down, Colten. Think about your actions. Maybe replay our night together in your head, over and over. That might help, right? Just like you said. I did promise you I’d get you back; perhaps after today, you’ll make it back in my good books.”

I grit my teeth. “Do you realize how dangerous it is giving probably one of the horniest men on this planet a viagra while alone in a villa with you?”

She rolls her eyes, and I squeeze my dick over my pants.

Please no. Please don’t come simply by looking at her.

“Dangerous? No. Funny. Yes,” she says with a giggle.

She takes a step forward, and I have to fight every primal urge in my body not to go to her. I can’t.

She wants to test me. To punish me. Fine. Whatever.

“Make sure you think of me when you come, cowboy. And let me know how many times you manage; I’m intrigued.”

“You’re going to pay for this, viper.”

She laughs. “You’ve got a few hours to think about how to get me back.”

She winks and blows me a kiss. Then she turns, and her ass is on full display; a groan rips out of me.

My eyes go wide, and the vein in my forehead nearly pops out. I open my mouth to respond, but I can’t. Instead, I run away from her, into the spare bedroom, and rip off my pants.

It’s a relief that cools my body down when my hand wraps around my shaft. My back against the wall, head tipped back.

And just like she said, I picture her on her knees, sucking me off with that feisty little mouth. Within seconds, I’m spilling come all over my hands and the floor.

And it makes no goddamn difference. My cock is like iron. And I’ve got a few hours of this before I can leave my room and punish her for it.

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CHAPTER THIRTY



GIANNA

I peer through the door of his bedroom and hold my breath. I need to check if he's alive. I stole the drug from Dom’s bag before we left; it wasn’t in English or Italian, but an online search told me it’s a liquid form of viagra. I guessed the measurement. Colt’s a big guy; I assumed he could take it.

But then I texted Dom to double check, and he was down right horrified at how much I’d given him.

Relief washes over me when I see his chest rise and fall normally. He’s completely buck-ass naked, sprawled out on top of the bed.

Eyes shut. Dick in hand. I have to squeeze my thighs because he is insanely hot, and I wish I were a fly on the wall so I could have watched the last hour of him jacking off. Although simply hearing him across the villa was good enough for me.

“Unless you want to jump on top and help a man out, I suggest you fuck off, Gianna,” he growls, his voice all croaky. Oops.

“Do you want some water?” I ask.

He opens one eye and huffs. “The only time I’ll accept a drink you make me ever again is if you spit it directly into my mouth.”

Okay. That’s hot. But not a helpful suggestion.

He flops his arm over his head. “Please, G. Go away. You’re not helping the situation. I just got him to go down, and the sight of you is making me hard again. I’m gonna have friction burn on my cock if I carry on like this.”

I do everything I possibly can to not laugh; it’s hurting my cheeks holding it in. I got him good.

“You think I’m sexy?”

He groans loudly. “Right now I think you’re the devil. But hot as fuck, yes. Now get out.” He points to the door.

I hold up my hands and retreat, leaving the door slightly open. I get far enough away that he can’t see me, but I can hear him, even if he is trying to be quiet. That also means… he could hear me. And I like to play with fire, especially when that flame is a six foot three, tatted cowboy.

Heat creeps up my throat as his climax nears; he’s getting louder, his voice more gruff.

“Fuck. Gianna,” he cries out.

My mouth drops open, and I’m frozen on the spot. Part of me nearly turns back and offers to help. But the stronger half of me remembers why he deserves to be punished.

The venom he spat after taking my virginity. I am not letting him get away with it. He needs to learn his lesson.

With my back against the wall, my eyes flutter closed, and I spread my legs, letting my hand slip under my bathing suit. Picturing him behind this wall. Oh well, if he’s getting off on me, I can use him too.

Because as soon as he’s feeling better, I’m going to have to have my guard up for the rest of this trip, because I know Colten isn’t going to let this go.

I let my moans out freely, my whimpers still loud enough for him, as I picture him on his knees, eating me out. I circle my clit a few times, and I’m already trembling, fighting for breath.

It takes me all of two minutes for a climax to rock through me, and I make sure he hears every moment of me falling apart. And the second I’m done, I carry on walking back out to my lounger on shaking legs, pick up my martini, and let the sun beam on my face.

For the first time in a very, very long time, I can feel my muscles relax. My brain goes quiet. Not silent, because Colten’s moans barrel around in there. How it felt having his hands on my skin. The way he took control, how free that felt.

The pain. The pleasure. His commands.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Colten

Four hours later and three cold showers, I'm as ready as I can be to have dinner with my wife. So long as she doesn't speak or look at me with any glint in her eye, I should be able to control my dick. I check my phone before I leave my room.

I know I wasn't hearing things. She got herself off outside my damn door like a siren trying to tempt me into destruction with her beautiful songs. I don't know how I didn't rip the door off its hinges to get to her, but I didn't. I behaved. Because I'm now playing this game.

ACE: How's it going?

I don't have the energy to lie.

ME: She drugged me with Viagra and left me alone to deal with it.

It takes all of one minute for Jett's message to appear. I forgot it's a family group chat.

TRIPOD: Avoid booze. Do something seriously boring like math. Don't think any dirty thoughts. You should be fine. Or find someone hot to fuck all night. Any of those options work; trust me, I've accidentally taken this a few times.

ACE: How long did it last?

I run a hand over my stubble. Replying to them both at the same time. Although my brain keeps pondering over how Jett has ‘accidentally’ drugged himself on more than one occasion.

ME: Ace, I really don’t think you need to be trying this out on Harper while she’s pregnant. And Jett… the fuck you mean a few times? Actually, both of you fuck off. I’ve got work to do.

My phone buzzes again, but I shove it in the pocket of my shorts and head out into the kitchen. My first instinct is to pour myself a stiff drink, but Jett’s message relays in my head. Instead, I stick to water.

But then the problem arrives. Gianna’s door opens, and all the blood rushes right down south again. And I can’t even blame it. She is beautiful in a sleek deep red dress that hugs her curves. A halterneck that is cut out so I can see her breasts. Black killer heels, emphasizing her slender legs smothered in tattoos.

I would honestly drop to my knees right this second for her.

“Am I safe to enter the room?” she asks, snapping me back into this universe.

I clear my throat. “I don’t know, G. You might have to go get changed into something… less beautiful.”

She tips her head back and laughs. My fists clench. I wanna grab her throat. I want to kiss her, but instead I take a deep breath, calming myself.

“I don’t do unattractive, Colten,” she says as she sways her hips, walking into the kitchen.

I squeeze the counter, swallowing hard. Anything to stop myself from exploding in my boxers. She stops in front of me, her gaze dragging down my body with a grin. “You’re looking good, cowboy.”

I’m in jean shorts, a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves, and sneakers. Ain’t nothing special. “I feel underdressed looking at you.”

She smiles, and it seems genuine this time. “Nope. You’ll be perfect beside me.”

As she takes a step closer, that fresh vanilla scent hits me. “How angry are you?” she asks.

I bark out a laugh. “Very.”

She chews on the inside of her mouth. I don’t even believe my own answer.

“But I can appreciate a prank,” I add.

“Cool. Good to know I married someone with a sense of humor.” Her eyes gleam with thoughts that make me worry about my future.

She seems to bring out this side of me, without even trying. And I don’t fight it coming out either. And I don’t mind this less uptight version of myself either. My head has never been clearer, despite the fact that my dick fuckin’ hurts.

My jaw twitches, and against my better judgment, I lean in closer, close enough to feel the heat of her against my skin. “You started a war, sweetheart. And you have no idea when I’m going to strike back.”

I pull away before I do something I’ll regret. Me and Jett used to play stupid ass pranks on each other as kids, nothing like this. But I’m always prepared for the unexpected, and I’ve got some time on my hands to get plotting back.

I can’t piss my wife off too much, though. She will stab me in my sleep if I cross a line.

Her breath catches before she says, “Game on, cowboy.” That twinkle in her eye will be my undoing. “I’ve got a Glock and a knife. That's enough for tonight's adventures?”

Oh, she’s perfect. “Yeah, viper. I got you anyway.”

She rolls her eyes at me.

Hell. I think I’m in hell.

But I’m having the best time of my life down here.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



GIANNA

Song- Greek Tragedy, The Wombats

Coming here to eat in plain sight is a risk; we both understand that, but neither of us cared when we built this plan on the jet.

Hiding in plain sight adds to the thrill. So, here we are, in a quaint Greek restaurant, where the pillars have climbing ivy and my glass of wine is so chilled the glass is dripping. And the food is some of the most delicious meat I've ever had in my mouth.

Colt slides his hand to the middle of the table, palm up.

"You want a cigarette?" I ask, forcing in another mouthful of bread. Assuming that's what he wants by putting his hand there.

"I want my wife to hold my damn hand."

I nearly choke on my food, staring at his hand like it just grew a head.

"We're newly weds, remember? On our honeymoon." He tells me.

I'm trying to ignore the coil in my tummy as I place my hand in his, and he rubs his thumb over my wedding rings.

"Is this sweet enough for you, sir?"

He swallows as I drag my heel along his shin. I retrieve my hand before I combust at the table, and go back to poking food around my plate. I'm stuffed. I've eaten more in one sitting than I usually eat in a day.

"You don't have to finish it all if you're full, G. It's not going to get better the more you shove a potato around a plate," Colt tells me.

"I'm hoping the potato grows legs the more I prod it and runs off." I joke, but I'm weirdly serious.

The candle flickers between us as I set my cutlery down on the plate. My dad always reinforced that we have to finish every bite of our meals. Even now, as grown-ass adults in his house, we can't leave the table until every last scrap is gone, no matter the portion size.

Colten pours me another glass of white wine; I smile but avert my gaze.

The waitress comes over and takes our plate, and I wait for her to have some sort of reaction to me leaving a quarter of the plate of food. I almost brace myself, but nothing comes. She doesn't give a single shit. Once she's gone, I roll my shoulders and try to relax.

"You wanna tell me why you're attempting to force-feed yourself until you throw up?" Colten asks, his voice gentle.

I drink some of the wine and set it down. "Just a thing growing up. We were taught never to leave food someone else has cooked for you."

He hums, eyes landing directly on mine. "But you're paying for the food. You could eat nothing and no one would care."

I shrug. "I guess. Yeah."

That does make me feel somewhat better. "Wait. I'm paying?" I gasp, placing a hand over my chest.

He grins. "You're my wife; it's on me."

I cross my arms. "Is being nice to me an attempt to throw me off the scent of your revenge plan?"

This is the first time I'll be sleeping in the same house as my husband. And I'm concerned that I might like that too much. I'm more worried about that than I am about him sneaking into my room to smother me in my sleep.

His eyes darken, but his expression doesn't change. "Maybe. Maybe not. You'll never know."

The energy shifts in the room; the waiters all freeze, their eyes darting to the entrance. Colten's eyes are already there; I turn slowly to catch a glimpse.

"Recognize them?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

"Me neither."

But we both know they're exactly who we're looking for just by the energy they give off. The way they command and change a room.

"I'll go investigate," I say, standing up. Before I can walk away, he catches my wrist and drags me back towards him, making me bend over him.

His lips brush against my cheek. “You’ve got two minutes before I come and get you. Understand, G?”

I turn to face him, our noses touching. “Yes, hubby. Loud and clear.”

He releases my wrist, and I stroke my hand along his stubble. “People are watching; we have to look like this is a real honeymoon.”

He licks his lips as I back away towards the bathroom corridor where the two men just went and push it open. The kitchen is on my left, and the steam coming from there makes me cough. I press my hand over my mouth and rest against the wall.

Two guys at the back in suits are talking to one of the chefs; a lot of grand hand movements are going on. It’s like watching my brothers when they used to argue. I pull out my phone, snap a quick picture, zoom in, and send it straight to Colten.

“Are you okay, miss?” a young waitress asks behind me.

“Oh.” I pretend to be flustered. “Yes. Sorry. I was looking for the bathrooms and got distracted by how absolutely fascinating it is watching them cook,” I lie.

She smiles, pressing her hand against my back, making me coil up inside. Physical touch by a stranger? People have lost fingers for that. “Ladies' room is down the end of the hall on the right,” she says.

I nod politely. “Thank you.”

She stays where she is, and I know she’s watching me as I make my way down the hallway. Once I’m inside the bathroom, I send Colt a text.

ME: I’d bet 200k they are who we need.

He replies fast.

COLTEN STERLING: They’re leaving. I’ve noted the registration on the car. My guys are looking into it now. Come and have dessert.

This is exactly why we need to be in Enzo’s organization. It’s worldwide. No one is safe against him. All it takes is one sighting, and you’re fucked. They can hack into anything. Find out whatever they need on just about anyone. That is exactly the power we need behind us. Not the fucking motorcycle club my father keeps getting us involved in.

We don’t need manpower; we need brains.

After flushing the toilet and washing my hands, I head back out to the table. Colten is tapping away on his phone, but the second I come into view, it’s back in his pocket, and his attention is entirely on me.

For once, it’s nice to be the center of someone's attention, not out of fear, but lust.

“I ordered us something sweet,” he tells me as I take a seat.

“Oh? I’m stuffed; I can’t eat anything else.”

His smile fades. “Did you get in trouble much as a kid?”

I swallow the lump forming in my throat. Trouble doesn’t even begin to describe what would happen if I upset my father.

“Sometimes.” Is the best answer I can muster.

He doesn’t respond.

“Do yourself a favor, Colten. Don’t psychoanalyze me; it’s not worth it. I am who I am. Shit happened to me. I dealt with it. I moved on. It made me stronger,” I say with a fake smile.

My father made me who I am. But moving away from him is making me see things differently. A way of life I didn’t know existed a few weeks ago. Children running around a ranch, free, protected. Not punished. I thought the version my dad molded me into was my strongest power, but I was always missing something. Perhaps my true power I’ll find on this journey with Colten.

Placing my hand over his, his eyes snap to mine, and I do the one thing I’m programmed to do—push any kind of emotional connection, friendship, whatever the hell it may be, away.

Because I can’t trust anyone except Dom, and it’s foolish of me to believe otherwise. I can’t ever trust my father. I know that. Even if it hurts me. But I do want to prove myself to him. I want to show him that everything he put me through made me powerful enough to take the empire from him.

Even if I have laughed more today than I have in ten years. Which leads me to believe that I like my husband. And that makes me shudder in my seat.

“Remember who I am, cowboy. I’m the woman who forced you into a marriage using your brother's kidnapping to do so. I murdered my brother to prove a point to your brother. I lied to Harper. I spiked your coffee because I thought it would be funny. I tricked you into taking my virginity so my

father would approve our marriage.” I brush him off, in an attempt to shut this down.

He snatches his hand from under mine and then presses it back on top, glaring at me. “You can keep listing atrocious things you’ve done in your life, Gianna. And I don’t know what kind of people you’ve been around, but trust me, I ain’t similar to any of them. You pushed the marriage, but guess what, viper, I’m the one who jumped at the chance. Don’t think you’ve got one up on me; you haven’t yet.”

The air rushes out of my lungs as he leans back in his chair, nodding to the waiter.

“Admit you don’t hate me as much as you thought you would,” Colten says flatly.

I bite back a grin. “No.”

A huge slice of chocolate cake is placed between us with whipped cream, strawberries, and two spoons. Congratulations is written in chocolate sauce.

“Congratulations on your wedding,” the man says with a huge grin.

“Thanks,” I mutter, picking up a spoon.

I stab it into the middle of the cake, take a huge scoop, and shove it in my mouth.

“Holy shit,” I mumble.

Colt laughs, watching me almost orgasm over chocolate cake.

“First time eating cake?” he asks, getting his own mouthful.

“It’s been a while. Like I said, I don’t do sweet.”

He arches a brow, putting more on his fork and swiping it through the cream. He holds it out in front of my lips. “I don’t know; the near foodgasm tells a different story, my sweet wife.”

I glare at him, but can’t resist the cake. It melts in my mouth, bursting with sweetness. “No more. I won’t be able to wear the leather dress tomorrow,” I say, patting my tummy.

“Don’t do that,” he tells me sternly.

“Do what?”

“It doesn’t matter what you eat. Nothing is going to change how stunning you’ll look in a leather dress.”

Heat floods my cheeks, and I glance away, only for Colten to take my chin between his fingers and bring me back to him. “Gianna, I mean it.”

He leaves no room for argument. It’s funny, the one man who I assumed would never, ever see anything other than the bitch version of me is peeling back the layers faster than anyone in my life ever has. Not that many have tried; I don’t let them close enough.

“Open,” he commands.

He brings the cake back, tapping my lips. I open for him, and he slips it into my mouth.

Just like that, I’m taking orders from a man and getting wet about it.

Learning something new about myself every day.

“You’re allowed to enjoy life, G. I know it might not seem like it with the world we live in, but my mom always taught us to make the most of the days we have. Eat the cake. Have as much sex as possible. Drink the beer. Smoke the cigarettes. Save the animals. I might work myself to death, but I still understand the rules and what matters.”

I frown. “Save the animals?”

“I’ll show you when we’re home.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Colten

In the short time I've got to know Gianna, I've seen enough to know there is a bucket load of childhood trauma festering inside her.

Not leaving any of her meals. Her father bullying her into what she should wear. Not eating sweet treats. The way she shuts down in any conversation about her life growing up. She doesn't just avoid it; she shuts down completely.

Everything starts to make sense, and it makes me fucking sick to my stomach.

He created probably one of the most ruthless and powerful women in the world, yet inside she's one of the most wounded people I've ever come across.

And that's what makes her so deadly. Everything she does is for his approval. The wedding, the alliance with Enzo, and us. Keeping her goddamn virginity so her father can sell her off like a prize fucking mare.

It makes me want to put a bullet between his eyes, but I don't think she'd ever forgive me, because that man, whether I like it or not, is her father. And for some reason I'll never fully comprehend, I'm guessing she's doing all of this to prove she's worthy of the empire.

"What's the plan?" she asks, leaning back in her chair. "Because after all that food, I really, really want a cigarette."

A woman after my own heart.

"I'm waiting on some addresses of the guys that came in earlier. We can either sit tight here, or go back to the villa?"

Her eyes light up. “Villa. Too many people in this place; my skin is starting to crawl.”

My gaze drifts over her tattooed skin. “What’s the shark ink for?” I ask. It’s right under the eyeball and above a rose on her forearm.

She looks down, rubbing her finger over it. “It’s a fascinating story, Colten. I went to my tattoo artist, Liam, and he was drawing a shark on a piece of paper, and I said, fuck the paper, put it on me. And as if by magic, I walked out with a great white shark on my arm.”

I smile; she’s pretty much a female version of me. “None of mine mean shit either. Some I was drunk. Others I thought would look cool,” I tell her.

I wonder what tattoo she’d get for me? A meatball? I’d get her name. Plain and simple, there in ink on my skin for the world to see. But that’s gettin’ ahead of myself. She’s just about holding a conversation with me; I don’t think we’re quite at couples tattoos yet.

“You mean you aren’t a fallen angel, and those wings on your back don’t represent that?” she says with a smirk.

“You’re a mean woman, Gianna.”

She presses her hand to her chest, pouting. “Mean? I’m terrible. I’m vicious. Use a stronger fucking word than *mean.”*

“Fine. You’re a bitch.”

She blinks and then scowls. “Too far, cowboy. Too far.”

I rub my hand over my stubble. “I’m in a lose-lose situation here.”

Not that I mind. Sparring with Gianna lights a fire inside me.

“Look. You pay for dinner. I need to actually use the ladies' room, and I’ll meet you back at the car. Then all is forgiven.”

She stands, tugging down her dress while I admire every single inch of her. And like that, my dick is raring to go again, and this time, I don’t think it’s the drugs she spiked me with. It’s *her.*

“Stop staring at me, you fucking creep,” she says teasingly.

I tut. “Keep talking to me like that, and I’ll rip that dress off you in here and fuck you on this table.”

A crimson flush spreads over her chest. “And get us arrested, great start,” she snaps.

I stand, closing the distance between us, towering over her. “Worth. Every. Second,” I whisper, leaning in closer. “Just think of all the things I can do to you while you’re in handcuffs.”

“I prefer you to use rope,” she says casually.

I need to leave before I bend her over this table.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



GIANNA

Fuck me. I need to spray myself with cold water before I go back out to Colten. All I can see when I close my eyes is him tying me up. The amount of pent-up sexual frustration flowing through me should be studied.

A few days ago, I was a virgin. Now? Sex is at the forefront of my thoughts, and I can't stop it. Is this how men feel all the time? Brain dead except for thoughts of fucking? Oddly, I've also never been so calm. Maybe I haven't been giving them enough credit.

I'm not worrying about my father's empire. I'm not securing loans on properties. I'm not plotting anyone's death. Well, the last one is a lie. I am, but it doesn't feel like work.

I almost, and I hate to say it, feel normal. Or as close to it as I think it means. I lock myself in the bathroom stall and sit on the toilet, ready to do my business when the main door opens. My instincts run on overdrive when I hear heavy footsteps. They aren't women's steps. Shit. I really need to pee. So I do, and sing to myself to hide any noise while I'm drawing the blade from my purse.

I flush the toilet, pull down my dress, and unlock the door. Keeping the knife hidden behind me.

"Can I help you?" I ask, aiming it right at him.

He grins, and I grimace at his missing front tooth.

"Sir, I don't know why you're wasting your time here when you should be at the dentist."

Colten has good teeth. It's always the first thing I look at when I talk to someone, and why I'm so obsessed with my own dental health. Even as a smoker, my teeth are always sparkling white, and that won't ever change.

He taps his gun against his thigh, leaning against the sink. His dark eyes drag down my body, settling on my breasts.

"You need to leave," I say calmly.

He shakes his head. "No, I need to see the picture you took earlier."

So, he doesn't know who I am. That's good. He thinks he's intimidating a woman alone in a bathroom.

"Why? I haven't done anything wrong." I give him a sweet, innocent smile.

"You need to delete it," he demands.

Then he steps closer, right into my space.

"And you need to fuck off," I hiss.

His arm raises, and he points the gun directly at my chest. He isn't the first man to do this, and sure as hell won't be the last.

"Delete the picture, and we won't have a problem. No one needs to get hurt."

I laugh. "Are you sure there isn't another way we could resolve this misunderstanding? You can pretend you never saw me do anything," I purr.

He drags his lip between his teeth. Or, remaining teeth. He must be in his forties. Tattoos creep up his neck under his collar.

"For a slut like you, I'm sure I can think of a few things," he mutters.

"A slut like me," I repeat, taking a step closer.

Just like my father spat at me on my wedding day about my dress. Telling me what to wear. How to behave. When to have sex. Never to cry. Always to fight. It's always a damn man.

His hand clamps over his crotch, and he shifts. "Hmm. Yes. You'd be a good fuck."

And this is why men will never win. Distracted by a bit of boob and the thought of sex. As soon as he glances at my tits again, I grab hold of his wrist and smash the gun out of his hand, letting it clatter against the floor. I need that piece, as it's got a silencer on it.

Then I drive my blade through his gut.

"Fuck," he hisses, pushing me back against the wall. His hand locks around my throat, and I see red.

Worse than red. I see death.

I kick this asshole so hard in the balls, forcing him to stumble backward, and I rip my blade out of him. I don't give him a chance to catch his breath; I smash my fist, covered in rings, into his jaw. I have a lot of rage to let out, and he becomes my perfect punch bag.

When he pathetically swings, I duck out of the way and jab him in the knife wound, giving me a window of opportunity to snatch his gun from the floor while he cries out in agony. Pussy.

"Now the roles have reversed into the correct position; you can tell me who the fuck you work for," I seethe, blowing my hair from my face.

"Nikos. We work for Nikos Kourakos, and if you pull that trigger, he will skin you alive. Trust me, little girl."

I nod slowly, as if I'm contemplating his threat. When in reality, I'm admiring the silencer on this Glock. Perfect for a busy restaurant.

"What do you think Nikos would do to me if I killed everyone who works for him? All those men in the kitchen earlier?"

He erupts into laughter, clutching at his stomach. "He'd send thirty men to rape you, torture you, and then he'd send body parts to your family. Piece by piece, until you finally die with tears streaming down your beautiful face."

I smile. "Aw. That's very kind of you."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Colten

I stub out my cigarette under my sneaker and check my watch. Five minutes. That's too long in my book. I head back in through the back exit. My blood turns to ice when the crack of a gunshot goes off.

I pull out my own piece tucked in the back of my shorts, sprint towards the women's bathrooms, and kick the door open.

Blood splatters up the white tiles and the room tilts around me.

“Gianna!” I shout.

For a split second, the worst-case scenario makes me feel physically sick. I don’t have time to rationalize why losing my wife would be one of the worst things to ever happen to me.

A man groans as I turn the corner, slumped on the floor, clutching his side. Crimson pours from his gut through his fingers. “Please!” he croaks.

“Shut up,” Gianna hisses, kicking her heel right into his chest.

She grabs him by the hair and slams his face into the tiles, making him truly stop talking this time. “There, more teeth missing, no one would even notice,” she mumbles, kicking him one more time.

I don’t know if I’m about to get a hard on or pass out. Single-handedly the hottest thing I’ve ever seen, but also, my heart is still palpitating from seeing the blood and thinking it was hers. I stride over to her, ignoring the slumped guy bleeding out, and grip her shoulders. I scan every inch of her for injuries. Nothing. Just a small red mark on her wrist.

And then my eyes meet hers, and she sucks in a breath. I pull her against me and wrap my arms around her. And to my surprise, she hugs me

back, nuzzling her head against my chest.

“What did he do to you?” I whisper.

“He wanted me to delete the pictures I took earlier in the kitchen. He then pointed a gun at me, told me he was going to fuck me, and shoved me against the wall, so I beat the shit out of him and stabbed him,” she says it so matter-of-factly.

I pull back. “Good girl.”

Her cheeks flush red as she peers up at me through her lashes. That alone makes my chest tighten. I need this woman, a lot fuckin’ more than I ever anticipated.

She sits up on the counter between the sinks, tapping her gun against her thigh, glancing down at her victim. “He’s passed out, and he’s one of Nikos’ men. What shall we do with him?” she asks.

“Well, we either kill him now, or we take him for further interrogation.”

As I’m speaking, I’m clocking how much she’s fidgeting. How her breathing is becoming more erratic. She’s like a grenade that’s about to blow.

“G. What’s the matter?”

She pouts, clenching and unclenching her fist. “I’m severely pissed off, Colten,” she says. And then proceeds to shoot the man between the eyes.

“Okay. That’s this problem solved,” she mutters.

I nod. “What do you need from me?”

Why the hell am I even asking this? At what point did Gianna’s feelings hold such weight over me? I can’t deny this possessive force inside of me that needs her. That wants her.

She thinks for a second, then instead of stepping over the man, she uses him as a step down and calmly states, “The rest of his friends dead. That’s what we need to do.”

I don’t hesitate. I drag the dead weight of the Greek into one of the stalls.

“Give me one of those hair clips,” I say, holding out my hand. She does, placing the black pin in my hand.

For my plan, I need this cunt locked in here until I can come back later. Opening the pin, I shove it in the lock until it clicks. That might give us some time.

She’s already rummaging through the cupboards, pulling out some bleach and a cloth.

“Throw it here,” I tell her, holding out my hand.

I ain’t having my wife cleaning up blood when she’s dressed like a damn goddess. Catching the bottle of bleach that flies at my head, I snatch the cloth from her and do a quick wipe-down of the blood, then shove the cloth into the trash.

“That’ll buy us some time.”

“They aren’t going to call the cops if they’re mafia,” she says bluntly.

“But a civilian might,” I counter. And the place is heaving with them.

I’m going to make sure Nikos knows there's a bullet with his name on it.

She shrugs, her eyes darting around the hallway. I follow her line of vision to the emergency fire button.

“How do you feel about sending a message with me, Colten?” she challenges.

Music to my damn ears. I know damn well my wife is thinking what I am. Because the universe brought us together, maybe because we’re two of the fuckin’ same.

I wrap my hand around her throat and push her against the wall, making her breath hitch. “I want to go back in there and tear that motherfuckers hands off. So, I’m open to ideas.”

“What if we wait for the restaurant to empty out? We all know the main guys aren’t going to leave here, and he certainly isn’t getting out…” She nods to the bathrooms behind me.

“Are you suggesting we burn this place down, Gianna?”

She nods, and I press my nose against hers. “Then we best go find some gasoline,” I mutter against her lips.

“You pour, I’ll light it,” she whispers.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



GIANNA

Song- Bad Habit, The Kooks

When I told Colten that I had a plan. I meant a very rough plan. Turns out, Greek restaurants stay open a lot later than I thought. So now we're sitting on crates of booze in a dingy cellar waiting for close time.

"Well, we got enough booze down here to set the street alight," Colt jokes.

Sweat is dripping down my forehead. "Yeah, they could have air-conditioned this dungeon for us."

He leans over and squeezes my thigh. "Want me to find you some water? There's gotta be some down here."

I shake my head, trying to ignore the way his touch is setting my skin on fire. "I'm good."

This is probably still better than my father's underground prisons. The tunnels under LA have interrogation rooms and prison cells. I've spent some time down there, earning my right to be a Milano.

"We could find the vodka, though?" I suggest, wiggling my eyebrows.

"I'm off booze today after being drugged."

I giggle in response. "Vodka for me then."

Distant voices carrying down the hallway make me snap my mouth shut. Colt snatches my hand and drags me up on my feet, leading me behind the wooden crates in the corner. We duck behind them, crouching down until my thighs burn.

Squatting in heels is not for the weak.

I peer between the crates as two men appear, talking in Greek. One grabs a box of apple juice, the other grabs two bottles of vodka. The cheap stuff. And then they disappear.

“Would you rather fuck a man, or only ever get blow jobs from women who bite when they suck dick?” I ask.

“Fuck a guy,” he says without hesitating.

That does nothing to help the fantasies that float around in my brain when I’m bored.

“Would you rather give up cigarettes or never have sex with me again?” he asks.

I turn to face him, keeping my expression neutral. “Do you honestly believe you could ever come between me and my cigarettes?”

He hisses in a breath, holding his hand over his heart. “You really know how to hurt a man, Gianna.”

“Speaking of,” I pause, digging around in my purse, pulling out a fresh packet. “Would you care to share one with me? That I can offer.”

He plucks the pack from my hand, rips it open, and slides one out, digging around in his pocket for a lighter.

“So, this is what you prefer over sex with me, hmm?” he teases, holding the cigarette up to his face, like it’s his mortal enemy.

I bite back a grin. “Cigarettes don’t insult me.”

He pops it into his mouth and lights it. I lied. I’d give them up if it meant Colten would keep me distracted enough to not worry about nicotine.

He sucks in a drag and blows it right into my face.

“I’d give these up in a heartbeat to taste you again, G,” he says quietly.

And I forget how to damn breathe when he holds the burning cigarette out in front of me.

I take it, ignoring the tiny tremble in my fingers. We could. Right here. Right now.

By the time I finish my drag, the music above abruptly stops.

“Looks like we have work to do in a minute, viper.”

“What if Nikos finds out it’s us that burnt his place down?” I ask.

It’s an eventuality I have thought about, and personally, it means I find him quicker. But we are in his territory right now. Enzo has some guys in the area tracking him down, so we have backup if we need it.

But this is a risk. All for the sake of a dumb guy who cornered me in the ladies room.

“Then we kill him quicker. Enzo owns the villa; ain’t no way in hell Nikos has the capabilities to track that down. We just need to make sure no one walks out of here alive who saw us do it.”

A devious grin forms on my lips as I pass him back the cigarette.

“To sex, cigarettes, and burning shit down,” I say.

He tuts. “No sex, remember?”

“And no blow jobs with teeth.”

He chuckles. “I can teach you how to give blowjobs without biting a man's dick off, if that’s what you’re worried about?”

My eyes go wide. “It was something that popped into my head to fill the silence. Don’t overthink it. I’m not concerned about my future ability to suck a cock, Colten.”

He intakes a sharp breath, looking not at me, past me, at nothing. He opens his mouth, but clearly decides against whatever was next and stands.

“You start getting the strongest booze together that you can find. I’ll go see what’s going on upstairs,” he says abruptly.

Then he’s gone.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



Colten

Song- Gasoline, I Prevail

I had to get away from her before I said everything that was on my mind. Things I have no right to say. Like, I don't want to teach you so you can use it with other guys. I want to keep you to myself. I want to learn how to eat you out in ways that'll make you scream.

Fuck.

I stomp towards the end of the corridor. The parking lot is pretty much empty. Outside I hear the chatter of drunken tourists staggering along the bumpy sidewalk.

Keeping my steps light, I head back towards the restaurant doors, peering through the glass. It's one group of men at a table, counting cash and smoking. The same two guys that came in to visit the chefs earlier.

Bingo. We've got an empty restaurant with Nikos' men. As I turn around, Gianna's holding a bottle under one arm, the other above her head, pouring a trail of clear liquid.

"Absinthe. This is about to go boom." She cackles.

"Shh," I whisper, nodding behind me to the doors.

That earns me a naughty grin from her. She holds out the second bottle, and I take it as she opens the bathroom door, where our dead Greek is locked in, and begins covering the place in fuel.

When she reappears, she stops right in front of me.

"If we light this here, whoever is left in the restaurant is going to bolt or put it out. How many are there?" she says, her face filled with

concentration.

“Five. The two guys who came in to see the chefs earlier. One of the waiters. One chef. And another guy; I can’t see his face.”

She tabs her nail on the palm of her hand, then hikes up her dress, pulling out a blade from her thigh strap. I have to tense my entire body not to groan in response.

“I have a plan…” she mutters.

“Tell me.”

“You’ve got one Glock with a silencer. You go in there, take as many out as you can, and I'll clean up with this,” she says proudly, holding up her sharp knife to the light, still covered in her last victim's blood.

“If they’re dead, they burn in here. No witnesses left. Gives us time before Nikos works out who really did it. And by that stage, the asshole will be dead anyway.”

I roll my shoulders, doing something, anything, to disguise how impressed and fuckin’ turned on I am by her. She thinks like me. The consequences are thought about, yet still absolute chaos prevails.

“Well? We haven’t got much time to negotiate this particular point,” she presses, tapping the knife on my bicep.

“Fuck it. Let’s do this.”

Before we get to the door, I push her behind me as I open it. They’re sitting ducks at a round table. Easy work.

I aim and shoot. Once. Twice. Right in the head. By the third, I manage to catch him in the cheek as he’s ducking out the way.

The fourth pulls out a gun, but he’s too slow; my bullet is tearing right through his chest.

But the fifth. That prick is making a dash for the door. I stride towards him and pull the trigger, hitting him in the left shoulder blade. Gianna’s heels click on the marble floor behind me.

I saved this one for her. She deserves one kill out of this. She drives the blade right into the side of his throat and pulls it out, the blood falling from his neck as he chokes out his final breath. We stand and watch, surrounded by bodies.

“Nice shot,” she praises, nudging into my side.

I wrap my hand around her shoulder, resting my head on top of hers.

“Feel better now?” I whisper.

“That was just what I needed. Now, let's make this place burn.”

I’ve never fuckin’ experienced whatever the hell tonight has been. Pure thrill. That’s left me half turned on, half pent up. That seems to be the typical experience of standing beside Gianna.

But with her cuddled up beside me, a calmness washes over me that I didn’t know existed.

She seems to have tapped into a whole new side of myself, and I think I’m fucked.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



GIANNA

"Okay. I think we make a pretty good team," I say, staring at the flames engulfing the restaurant from the safety of our car parked down the street.

Colten chuckles. "I've got Enzo's guys on monitoring flights. We will know if Nikos and Stefanos try to flee."

Fuck. In all the excitement, I almost forgot the real reason why I'm here. To kill those bastards. I'm so distracted by all things Colten, I'm actually having fun even while working. Even if we are murdering together, it's more like couples bonding.

"In good news, we've got eyes on the men we identified earlier. I think by sunrise we will have a location on Nikos and Stefanos," he tells me.

I jab my fist into his bicep. "Good job." Pulling another drag of my cigarette, I blow it out of the window. "Do you feel bad for what we did?"

"No. It's the price you pay for this line of business."

I smile; that's the truth. The hard truth. "Have you ever killed someone and regretted it?"

He turns to look at me. "Once. You?"

"No. I'm a horrible bitch, remember?"

He laughs, tipping his head back against the rest. "I don't believe that, G. You dragged Harper out of a burning car and saved her life. You don't like seeing people get hurt that don't deserve it."

I swallow and stare at the flames out of the window. The destruction that was caused by my hands. I chose this way of life, and I know what my fate will be one day. But Harper, she never signed up for this. She's pure

and sweet and everything that needs protecting. And I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

"Okay. You got me. I hate it when people get caught up in our mess. We choose to live one way; we all know the consequences and are happy to die for them. But everyone else? They didn't make that choice, and I don't believe it's up to us to play God with them."

He rests his hand on my thigh and warmth spreads through my body. What in the hell is happening to me, and why am I telling him this shit? It's totally normal to get horny after a murder spree this exciting, but this is the first time I've ever had anyone beside me I could actually do anything with.

"Do we even have a choice?" he says.

I don't respond; the question sits inside my chest and festers. I don't know the answer anymore. I thought everything up until this moment was my choice. That I'd forced my dad to forge me into this woman, a leader. But the longer I spend away from him, the more I'm seeing the manipulation. The way he talks to me like I'm a possession, not a person. Am I just the next person in line to rule the empire, but no better than a puppet, with him always pulling the strings?

Is that really what I want? To die for an empire that has made me miserable?

"I-I don't know," I mutter.

He turns on the engine, flicks the cigarette out the window, and slowly pulls away. "I guess this is a pretty decent reminder that no one gets to touch my wife," he says, all proud of himself.

I roll my eyes. "It was my idea, douche."

"Our idea, sweetie."

I jab my nail into his side.

He side-eyes me. "Those things are a weapon in themselves."

"I'd like to get into bed and pass out," I tell him as he helps me into the car.

"Whatever you want, viper."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



Colten

Gianna is already fast asleep; she managed half a glass of wine, and she could barely keep her eyes open, meaning I had to carry her into bed and tuck her in.

I didn't have to do either, but I wanted to. She, of course, relented the entire time, but melted against my chest. I'll take that as a win.

And now, I'm staring up at the moon shimmering in the dark sky, the waves still crashing against the shore.

So, I call my older brother. Because I don't know if I need a hit back to reality.

"What time is it?" Hunter asks.

"Two in the morning," I tell him. "Hello."

He laughs. "What do you need, bro? All good?"

"Uh, depends how you define good. I've got trackers on two guys I believe to be linked to Nikos. And we burned down a restaurant after one of their guys tried to assault Gianna in the bathroom. Now, we're waiting on a location from Enzo," I tell him, resting my feet on the table.

"Wait. Hold up. Rewind. You burned down a restaurant? With people inside? Have you lost your mind?"

"Do you think I'm a complete monster? We waited till it was closed, then we shot Nikos' guys, and we let it burn."

As I say the words, I'm grinning. It was damn epic pulling off tonight's events with Gianna.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Colt. You're meant to be the responsible one."

I rest my phone against my ear with my shoulder and pick up my whiskey. It’s been long enough that the boner pills are out of my system and I need this drink. “Yeah, well, maybe I’m getting bored of being that person.”

That’s probably the most truthful thing I’ve said in years. I was bored. I am busy, but I ain’t fulfilled by constantly working, even if it's to protect my family.

There's a silence on the line. Which is never good when it comes to Hunter. “Just make sure you don’t put yourself in the firing line, especially when it comes to Gianna. You’re the one who told me outright we can’t trust her.”

I swallow hard. I’m starting to work Gianna out, and she’s far more complex than I gave her credit for at the start. Yes, she’s all the things I thought she was. Ruthless, powerful, a complete spitfire. But there is so much more. She’s fun. She’s sassy. She’s strangely calming to be around, even if I do slightly fear for my life.

Do I trust her? I trust her not to betray me. I don’t believe she’s here to hurt my family. “Yeah. Well. I might have to reassess my judgment there.”

Another pause.

“What? Spit it out, Hunter.”

He chuckles. “Almost sounds romantic.”

I groan. “Not this again. You already played matchmaker with Ace, remember how that went?”

It ended up with Jett accidentally kidnapping Harper.

“In my defense, it worked; they’re married with a kid on the way. So that argument isn’t valid,” he counters.

And he has a point.

“I’m not in love with the woman, Hunter. I’m just… not hating being around her. She’s funny.”

“Funny? Gianna Milano? Funny? The woman who scares most men by walking into a room? Are you sure it was Viagra she spiked you with, not something else?” he asks in disbelief.

I laugh, shaking my head.

“I mean, who the fuck does that? It is kinda funny. And I plan on getting her back.”

I’ve got a few ideas up my sleeve. I might start with the classics, replacing some of her potion products in the bathroom. Trick her into

skinny-dipping and hide her clothes. I'll probably never be able to be as brutal as she is to me.

"Look, Colt. Be careful. We both know she wanted you to marry her, so she could get to Enzo. She has an empire to build, and I don't want her burning you to do it."

A pain shoots through my chest because Hunter could well be right. This could all be a game, and whatever assessment I make of Gianna could be wrong.

"Once the Greeks are dead, does that mean all this shit is over?" I ask.

It's been a year of hell. I know we're going to have battles on our hands to protect our ranch for the rest of the time I'm walking this earth; that's to be expected. But what I can't deal with is people coming after us to get to Enzo. I'm done with this shit.

"For now, yeah. We need to make sure Gianna's family doesn't make any moves. Other than that, unless Enzo starts a war somewhere, we're in the clear."

I press my fingers against the bridge of my nose. "We both know Enzo is going to start something. Whoever he's searchin' for ain't been found, and we're all in the firing line until he finds them."

And it's true. Every single person in his organization knows he has an ulterior motive; it wouldn't surprise me if this world domination plan he has is for one purpose. To find them.

But who? That's the mystery. And I don't care enough to dig any deeper, but I bet Romeo knows.

I hope Enzo hurries up and finds them before we all die in the process.

"I'll let you know when it's done. I'm going to get some sleep; today wiped me out."

Hunter laughs. "Yeah, jacking off a hundred times will do that to a man."

I groan. "Don't. It was so fucking painful. And having her walking around in basically no clothes. Ridiculous."

"Sweet dreams," Hunter jokes.

"Fuck you," I say as I hang up.

I'm going to be dreaming of Gianna, and I hope she's dreamin' about me too.

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CHAPTER FORTY



Gianna

Song- Famous Last Words, My Chemical Romance

"Breakfast is served," Colten says with a grin, two plates in his hand. I stop short of the kitchen island.

I don't trust him not to start his prank revenge. I had to check my face in the mirror when I woke up to make sure he hadn't drawn a dick on my head. I let him carry me to bed and tuck me in like a damn princess. I was sure I needed to sleep with one eye open, but my exhaustion overruled that.

"I'm sorry, I can't eat that; I didn't witness you cook it." I keep walking, straight past him, and grab a bottle of water. The plates clatter down on the side, and his hand is on my waist, spinning me around, before both of his arms land on either side of me, trapping me.

"I'm sorry, did it sound like I was asking you a question, Gianna?" He pauses, eyes dropping to my lips. "Let me rephrase it: your doting husband has made you a delicious breakfast, and he's going to watch you eat it." His mouth curves up into a grin.

"And if I don't?"

He pushes himself back up straight, clapping his hands together. "Then I'll never cook for you again."

I glance over at the food. Fluffy pancakes stacked with fruits and syrups. Dad never let us eat anything sweet for breakfast; he said it wasn't healthy and that if we wanted to live long enough to survive him, we had to be fit. Hence why I never smoke around him. But it does smell divine. But I like winding him up more than I like eating.

“Oh no, how will I ever survive without a man cooking for me?” I say, batting my lashes.

“I swear on my parents' graves, I didn’t poison it,” he says, taking the bottle of water from my hands and finishing it.

“How do I know you didn’t bottle up all the cum from yesterday and use it for the pancake batter?”

That’s totally something Max would have done. He was disgusting sometimes.

He spits the water out and erupts into a coughing fit. “Your brain is warped, G. Warped.”

Grabbing his plate and silverware, he heads outside to the patio without me. Leaving me staring at a plate of food. “Fine,” I mutter, following behind him.

He doesn’t even look up when I sit opposite him. Ignoring him, I take a bite and a moan slips from my lips.

My eyes go wide as his gaze locks onto mine. “That’a girl.” He winks.

I hold up my fork. “This is a pretty good weapon, cowboy.”

That’s the moment my eyes drift down, and I’m almost salivating at this man’s six-pack.

“Each minute you stare, you owe me one hundred dollars,” he says dryly.

“You think you’re worth a hundred a minute. Wow.”

We both know he is worth that. Probably more. He’s fuckin’ hot. But I’d rather pay him the hundred than tell him to his face.

He drops his fork, and I snatch in a breath. “Just to look, yeah. You want more, we’re talking a starting point of five figures.”

A grin twitches at my lips. “So, if I wanted you to get on your knees and lick my pussy for breakfast, how much would we be talking?” I ask.

He rolls his shoulders. “First taste is free. Anything after that, ten thousand a go.”

“Okay. So, what price are we talking to explore taking my ass for the first time? Millions, right?”

I don’t know what possessed me to say that, but I did. I’ve never had this conversation with anyone. But around Colten, I blurt out things before my brain catches up. Maybe I’m comfortable around him… maybe I’d also be able to explore more with him.

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. I pop another mouthful of pancake in, trying to keep my expression neutral. I don’t know how well I’m playing this off.

I’ve sat in negotiations for billions of dollars worth of property and not broken a sweat. Yet this? This has me melting.

“Because you’re my wife, I’ll do you a deal. The full platinum service. You get to order me around, use me and my dick however you please. Any hole you want. Nine hundred thousand for the day.”

I nod slowly, tapping my fork against the plate. “I’ll consider your proposal, Mr. Sterling. If I do decide to invest, I’ll let you know.”

He bites into his strawberry. “You’ve got twenty-four hours. Otherwise, the price doubles.”

“Noted.”

We sit and finish our food in comfortable silence; I manage to defeat two of the three pancakes before giving up.

“Good girl,” he praises as he picks up my plate.

I frown. What the hell…

As he walks away and I’m fixated on the muscles in his back, it clicks into place. He cooked me a meal; I didn’t eat it all, and I didn’t even try to.

I smile so hard my cheeks hurt.

That bastard. He’s getting to me. And I don’t hate it.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



Colten

Song- Swim, Chase Atlantic

"Hey, G?" I say, looking over at her on the sun lounger next to me. Her huge sunglasses are on, her mouth is open.

And then she snores.

I was about to tell her we've got a couple of hours until Enzo sends over the intel. I know they're close to cracking it, so we should have Nikos' location soon.

But now… I have a whole new venture to focus on. Payback starts now.

I hold my breath as I sit up and place my phone on the floor, and with every muscle tensed in my six-foot-three frame, I stand up. And I tiptoe. I fucking tiptoe like a cartoon from my lounger to hers.

There are probably three feet between her and the pool. I can do this. She's unarmed, well, unless she carries something between her ass cheeks, because other than that, there is minimal fabric on her body.

Bending down, I slide my hand under her back, and the same way you'd deal with an alligator, I snatch her up into my arms and hold her tight against my chest.

"Colten!!" she squeals.

Ignoring her protests, I sprint to the edge of the pool and throw her in.

"Fuck!!!!" she screams.

The water splashes against my legs as she descends under the surface, and I let out a laugh. She's going to be furious. But hearing her squeal is worth it.

I step closer as she thrashes around under the water. “I can’t swim!”

I laugh. “Don’t lie,” I shout back.

Her body sinks under the surface, and I lean over the water. She’s fuckin’ with me. She has to be. Although I haven’t seen her swimming in the pool since we got here.

What the fuck? Why isn’t she coming up?

Time stands still.

Bubbles cover the surface, and she floats to the top, completely limp. My heart sinks into my stomach. Fuck. No.

She wasn’t joking?

The cool water smothers me as I dive in and take her in my arms, flipping her over the right way and pushing her long black hair out of her face.

I tap her face. “Gianna. G,” I say, keeping the panic out of my voice.

I hold my breath as I lean in, my ear over her mouth, listening, praying to hear her. “Please don’t die on me, G,” I demand, holding her tighter.

Moving towards the edge of the pool, my entire body is in panic mode. Just like it was when Ace was lifeless in my arms.

“You’re going to be fine, baby,” I tell her. I go to lift her out; she flips in my arms like some sort of possessed creature, grabs my head, and my legs slip from underneath me as she shoves me underwater.

Her legs wrap around my head, her pussy in front of my face as she pushes down any attempt I have to get back up.

Not that I put much effort into it. I’m happy down here. I’ll let her have her minute of power over me.

Her cackling is penetrating through the water. After a minute, my lungs are burning, so I push up from my thighs and propel her across the water. The second I’m up, I take in a deep breath and wipe the water out of my face.

I wonder how far she would have gone?

Only to find her a foot away from me, glaring. Black makeup smudged down her cheeks like she’s about to audition for a horror movie.

I push my body through the water to get to her; she doesn’t move. The adrenaline courses through my veins with every step.

I thought I’d killed her. And for that split second, I was prepared to make a deal with death to keep her alive.

A wicked grin spreads across her lips as I stop in front of her. “So, you do care if I die, big man?”

I tip her chin up with force and grip her face. “Only because I didn’t want to be the one who killed you.”

“The panic in your voice tells a different story, Colten.”

I walk her backward until she hits the tiles. “Shut up and kiss me, viper,” I mutter against her lips.

She wraps her legs around my waist, snaking her arms around my neck, and she kisses me.

And she absolutely consumes me. No holding back, it’s messy and desperate, and neither of us pulls away.

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



GIANNA

Song- I Feel Like I'm Drowning, Two Feet

His cock presses against me, and I pull him even closer to me, his tongue sliding between my lips as I rock my hips against him. He swallows my moans, sliding his hand behind my back and untying my bikini top.

He starts with the bow behind my neck and then the one on my back and rips it clean off me, throwing it behind him to float on top of the water.

His hand moves south, resting on my hip.

"Tell me what you want, G," he gruffs against my cheek.

"I don't know, Colt. You're more experienced at this than I am." I say, playing it coy.

I know exactly what I want. And I plan to get it.

He smiles against my skin and then nips at my jaw. "I want to be an expert in all things Gianna Sterling. So, tell me. What do you need from me?"

I swallow, pulling back to look at him. I run my fingers through his wet hair. Gianna Sterling. I like that. It's not just a name; it's not said in a way that makes me feel like a possession. It's said with hunger. With a power behind it. "Colt. I don't want to think. I don't want to make decisions. I want you to do all that for me and make me feel good."

He nods. "I can do that. Anything you think you won't like?"

His other hand slips down my throat, and he tightens his grip, putting pressure on either side while his other hand cups my pussy.

"I'll tell you to fuck off if I don't like something. How's that?"

He groans, squeezing my neck. “That’ll work for now, viper.”

He pulls back, studying me, and for a second, I don’t feel like myself. He sees me, which scares me, but also excites me.

“I owe you a redo,” he says.

I frown. “A redo?”

“I took your virginity far too quickly. So let me explore you, this time, the right way.” His eyes scan down my body as if he’s ready to worship every inch of me.

“I don’t expect there's much to explore that you haven’t experienced already,” I half-joke.

I’m starting to hate this part of myself. In every aspect of my life, I want to be the best. And this? I’m starting right from the beginning. I don’t know about my sexuality, my wants, or desires. The only thing I’ve been focused on is taking over an empire and making men petrified when I walk into a room.

But I don’t want to feel like that with Colten. I don’t want to have him kissing my feet and ordering him around. I want to switch off the part of my brain that works a million miles an hour.

I want to be a powerful woman who gets fucked like she’s not.

“Gianna, eyes on me,” he orders.

And I do. Which makes my entire body shiver.

“There is no one on this planet quite like you. So no, you’re so damn wrong. I’ve never slept with a woman who infuriates me and turns me on like you do. I’ve never been with anyone who makes me want to forget the rest of the world. I’ve never been so desperate to eat pussy that I’d be willing to beg for it. I’ve never been a little bit scared of a woman. You’re completely unique, viper.”

I let the words settle. I don’t believe anyone has ever said anything so nice to me before. Even if it was laced with a few negative qualities. But even then, he sees the good in them.

“That was meant to be a compliment?” I tease.

He crashes his lips over mine. “Infuriating,” he mutters between kisses.

“Arms on the sides, hold yourself up,” he orders.

The heat of the concrete bites into my wet skin as I rest them there. He unties my bikini bottoms on either side of my hips and pulls them away, letting it float away in the water.

“I want you to close your eyes and relax. Just focus on how I make you feel; let yourself enjoy all the sensations. When you’re with me, you’re not a Milano. You’re a Sterling. My wife. And you’ll do as I say when I say it. Okay?”

I nod my head slowly; he dips his head towards my neck, and I lean back, giving him better access.

His teeth sink into my sensitive skin. “Do you understand me, Gianna? You’re mine.”

“Prove it,” I pant.

His mouth moves down my body, his tongue running along my chest. He takes my nipple in his mouth and sucks.

I grab his head, my back arching against him. His fingers dig into my ass, hard enough to leave marks. “More,” I breathe out.

He travels to the other breast and repeats.

“You’re not the one in control this time, baby. I’ll take my time,” he mutters, working his way down my body, peppering fervent kisses, until his head is completely underwater and he’s spreading my legs apart. My arms anchor my body. I wrap my legs around his shoulders. The second his tongue connects with my pussy, I scream out in pure pleasure.

Closing my eyes, I do as he asked; I focus on him. The way his tongue circles my clit. The stretch that stings when he thrusts his fingers inside of me.

My hips rock against his mouth of their own accord, and with every second the pleasure mounts. My arms are tingling, and heat rushes through me. I tip my head back, and he really goes to town. Biting and sucking on my aching pussy, taking over all of my senses, until I crumble in his hold. My body shakes like a leaf as I come apart so violently for him.

It rolls over me in waves as I cry out his name, and he doesn’t let up until the final one washes over me, leaving me breathless and sweating.

He pushes himself above the water and takes a deep breath, wiping his hands over his face. “Fuck, G,” he pants.

He steps between my legs, hooks his arms under mine, and presses me against his soaking chest. His hand cups my face as he leans in, kissing me. I can taste my sweetness on his lips. “I’m going to need to stop smoking if I wanna keep eating your pussy underwater. My lungs are burning,” he jokes.

I tug him closer with my legs around his waist. He spins us around, so he’s leaning against the tiles, and he pushes his swim trunks down. His cock

rests against my entrance.

“Ride me, G. I want to fill you up with my come and mark you from the fuckin’ inside.”

My breath catches, the heat soaring inside me. “I’m not on any contraception, Colt. You really wanna be my baby daddy?”

He bites his lip, his eyes darkening. “I’m fucking desperate for you. Do you like taking risks, Gianna?” he growls.

My heart rate spikes. We already did this once with no protection, but he pulled out. That should be fine? “You know I do. But this is a big one.”

He lines his dick up, thrusting inside me just a touch; a moan slips from my lips. I’m so desperate for more, I push down. Fuck it.

I tip my head back as I stretch around him. His mouth finds my throat, and he whimpers against my skin when I hit the base.

“If I get pregnant with a baby cowboy, I will make sure to be the most annoying baby momma in the history of the world,” I tell him, eyes closed.

He rocks his hips, and I almost forget my train of thought. “I’d be the best daddy though.”

I dig my nails into his back as he grabs my throat and kisses me. And every doubt and worry about the future fades away.

It’s him and me.

I ride him without even second-guessing myself. His hand on my ass helps guide me. His hips meet my rhythm.

“This feels too good,” I whisper.

The water splashes around us.

He grunts. “Way too good. We should do this more often.”

He drags my lips to his and takes over the pace, fucking me so hard I almost see stars. “Come all over my cock, G. Nice and hard.”

I squeeze myself tight around him, my body tensing as I fall apart in his arms. He follows me over the edge, tensing beneath me as he spills himself inside of me.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuuccck,” he cries out.

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



Colten

Grabbing either side of her face, I force her pretty eyes on mine.

She's looking at me, with her cheeks flushed, like I found everything I ever wanted in this lifetime. And then she opens her mouth, and I know she's about to ruin it.

"Don't fall in love with me," she blurts out.

I blink at her. Yep. That'll burst my bubble. "I'm going to let this slide as a post-climax high."

She laughs, attempting to pull herself off me. I shake my head and hold her by her waist, keeping my dick throbbing inside her.

"Stop it," I warn her.

Her eyes flash with anger. "Stop what?"

"Bein' scared. It doesn't suit you."

"I'm not scared," she hisses.

I run my thumb along her jaw. "And now, you're a liar."

Her cheeks flush, and she tries to look away, but I don't let her. I ain't letting her run from this. I know I ain't the only one feeling this. Whatever *this* is.

I also ain't giving it up either. I never have been someone to run away when it gets hard or real.

"You enjoyed that, correct?" I ask.

"I did. Very much, cowboy."

I nod. "And you'd like to continue exploring this with me? There are so many things I can show you, G. It would be a shame to miss out."

She sucks in a breath. “Yes. I agree.”

Leaning in a fraction, she meets me and tries to kiss me, but I pull back with a grin. “Let me hear you say it…”

She huffs. “I want to keep fucking you, Colten.”

“Please,” I whisper, knowing it will piss her off, but unable to stop myself.

“You are not fucking serious,” she hisses.

I arch an eyebrow.

“Fine,” she huffs. “Please, daddy.”

I nearly choke on a cough, my cock responding instantly by hardening inside her.

“Well, I didn’t know that was a thing for me,” I grumble. “See, we’re both learning something new about ourselves.”

She taps my cheek with a menacing grin. “Well, some would argue I do have daddy issues, so this kinda figures.”

I groan, tipping my head back. “Gianna, you’re killin’ me here. You’re powerful. Drop-dead gorgeous. Covered in tattoos. Have a pussy to die for, *and* you have daddy issues. Did you fall from heaven right onto my cock?”

She bursts into laughter so hard tears stream down her cheek, and she gasps for air.

“We both know I didn’t fall from anywhere; I came up through the flames.”

I hug her tighter, as she vibrates against me. I can’t help but join her in this madness.

Maybe Gianna is my fallen angel of sorts.

“I never had you down as funny, Colten.”

I kiss her throat in response. I don’t show many people the less grumpy side of myself. I reserve it for those who deserve my time. And Gianna is worth every second.

Why would I waste comedy gold on assholes?

“Do you think you can hold your breath long enough to make me come down your throat?” I mutter against her neck.

“I’ll give it my best shot.” She smiles. “Daddy.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



GIANNA

Blowing my hair out of my face, I continue on my rampage through my luggage to find an outfit appropriate for tonight's activities. See, I thought it was going to be a simple kill him in his sleep job that didn't require quite the glam that has now been thrust upon me.

Our sex education morning was rudely interrupted by Romeo and his intel. But now I'm excited for more reasons than Colten's dick… we have an exact location for not just Nikos, but his brother and cousins.

Turns out, Nikos is forty today, and those dumbasses have planned an exclusive event on the pier. It's invite-only. But I've always enjoyed being where I don't belong, and Nikos is about to have a birthday he will never forget.

We've switched from sex mode to coordinated attack mode. There's a knock on my bedroom door, so I spin round and find Colten, shirtless, leaning against the frame. "One of Enzo's guys is going to drop off some better weapons and provide backup should we need it."

"Hmm, okay," I mutter, tossing another dress onto the bed. Hand on hip, I stare at it. Too… boring.

Colt's eyes drag down my body, as if he's ready to bend me over the bed. It's probably the matching panties and bra set I have on.

"What's the matter, viper?" Colt asks behind me.

I want to make a scene. I want Nikos to know I dressed for the occasion.

"I don't know what to wear to a murder party, Colten."

He chuckles, and then he's right behind me, breath against my neck.

“Option one… you could wear some sexy beach outfit; all the men are going to die anyway, so that is acceptable.”

I scoff as his arms wrap around my waist.

“Option two… there’s a mall a few minutes down the road. We’ve got a few hours before we need to leave.”

I lean my head back against his shoulder. “Do you have a suit?”

“You honestly believe that I packed a suit?”

I smile. “You looked so handsome on our wedding day.”

I’ve known for a long time that my future would involve being married off at my father's wishes. I haven’t stopped to think about what my ideal man would be. I kinda assumed I’d one day murder my husband and then find the man of my dreams. But, in this case, Colten *is* the man I’d want. My ideal. I guess it’s lucky I’m already married to him.

His hand slides up my sides. “I’m glad you approved.”

He rummages around in his pocket and slides a black card into my mouth. I spit it out into my hand. His black Amex stares back at me.

“Aw. Colt, do you think I’m poor?” I say, pouting my bottom lip.

“I’m treatin’ my wife like any good husband should.”

I grin. “Don’t I owe you nearly a million dollars for all the sex we’ve had today? Wasn’t that the agreed price?”

His eyes shift away from me. “We never shook on that; I’ll let today slide.”

I dramatically blow out a breath. “Thank god, you were about to bankrupt me.”

He chuckles, and my heart skips a beat. “Take the card, buy whatever your heart desires; I’ll wait here for our deliveries. And then…” He pauses, spinning me to face him, gripping my waist.

“You’re going to choke on my dick in the shower to say thank you.”

My body ignites from his words.

“No spend limit?” I tease.

This man is insane if he thinks I’ll go lightly on his card. I’m about to try and bankrupt him.

He shrugs. “Do your worst, viper.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



GIANNA

I found the perfect shopping outlet; everything is high-end, and they've even got a store that sells real estate and yachts. But I'm staring through a window at a jewelry shop.

I've already bought Colten more clothes, because quite frankly, that man did not pack enough, and I'm sick of looking at those same T-shirts. Yes. He's delicious in them, better without, but some variety is required here.

Picking out a dress was the easy part. Simple. Red. Will give Colten a hard-on. Mission accomplished.

What might make our outfit complete, though, is buying Colt a wedding ring, that I choose for him.

Or is that too much? Too forward? We picked our own rings because we didn't even know each other's sizes. Or speak before the wedding.

But now? I want to show him that maybe there is more to us than a piece of paper. That I am listening. I am starting to understand him and see him for who he is.

I like Colten Sterling. But what the hell would a guy think about a woman buying him a new ring?

So, I pull out my phone and call the one man who can give me the answer, and despite it being the middle of the night, he answers.

"Sis. The world better be on fire," Dom croaks.

I laugh, ignoring the nerves swirling around in my tummy. I'm about to sound ridiculous. "No, I need a male opinion, and you are the only male I

can ask.”

He groans. “You have a whole ass husband in your time zone.”

“It’s about him. Come on, Dom. I know you have a brain in there somewhere.”

He laughs. “Go on then.”

“I want to buy him another wedding ring.” I pause as my eyes zone in on the perfect one. It’s black platinum, with a silver snake engraved on it. He calls me viper. It. Is. Perfect.

“You two already have rings? I’m confused.”

I blow out a breath. “Yes, Dominic. I know I’m wearing my rings.”

I’m fidgeting with them on my finger as I speak.

“But I didn’t pick his. He did. I thought perhaps I could get him a wedding ring… from me. As a gift.”

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The asshole gasps. Dramatically. “Gianna Milano. Have you caught feelings for this cowboy? Tell me.”

I rub my temple. “I like him. It was an idea. Forget about it.”

He sighs. “G, you remember what Dad asked you to do to him, right? That we’re on Sterling Ranch to try and ruin it to take it for our father. Have you found a way around this?”

My stomach drops. No, I haven’t. But I will. I’m not doing what my father demands when it comes to the Sterlings.

I knew that before I left. The second he gave me my instructions, I knew I’d never see it through. That isn’t an option. It wasn’t before; it certainly isn’t now.

And the more time I spend with Colten, the more I’m realizing that perhaps I shouldn’t be waiting for my father to hand over the reins.

I need to take the goddamn kingdom if I want it.

“I haven’t yet. But I will, Dom. We are not destroying their ranch, and we are not giving in to our father on this one.”

“You want to go up against Dad? Now?”

I tap my nail on the window, zoning in on the ring for Colt. “If I have to, I will. I’ve had a taste of freedom, Dom. I want more.”

“Then buy the ring. Do you know his size?” he asks.

I’m going to do an educated guess by remembering how they felt inside me. “Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

“And I hear you’re going after Nikos today. Be careful, Gianna,” he warns.

I laugh in response. “Don’t you start telling me what to do, Dom.”

“The difference is, I love you, and I’m saying it because I need you to come home.”

I rub at my chest. Maybe there is a way out; Dom deserves better than our father. And I think… so do I.

After we say goodbye, I push through the glass door to the jewelers. I’m going to buy this ring for my husband.

And then, I’m going to give him a few more surprises, to see which one gets him hard, and which one will send him into a cardiac arrest.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



Colten

I’ve now got enough automatic weapons and explosives to take down every person on the coast of Mykonos if I wanted to. I’m sitting here under the AC, feet up on the table, watching money drain out of my bank account with a smile on my face.

Gianna seems to be having fun with my card. A lot of fun. And every transaction only makes me harder for her.

My eyes nearly pop out of my head when I see an incoming transaction. From Gianna. That menace must have used my card details to find my account information.

$500,000 inbound transfer from Gianna Milano. Payment details: There was no anal, so the price has been reduced to reflect missing services. Thank you.

I chuckle. Knowing my wife, she’s probably sent that with the goal to either get me in trouble with the law or get my damn bank account shut down. Within a few seconds, Richard, my financial advisor's name, is flashing on my screen. I answer on speaker and tip my head back. “Richard, I know what you’re about to say.”

“Colten. Why the fuck is a woman sending you money referring to anal? I can work a lot of magic for you with your business ventures, but prostitution? Really?”

I laugh. Only my wife could land me in the shit for selling my body for sex.

“Gianna is my wife, Richard,” I say flatly.

There's silence on the line, just as the front door opens and Gianna drifts past me with both arms full of shopping bags.

“Since when did you get married? And why is she sending you money? And why the hell has almost a million dollars come out of your account in the last hour?”

I grin.

“It gets worse, Colt.”

I lock eyes with my wife, who is smiling innocently as she sets the bags down.

“Did you make a purchase of eight hundred thousand on a yacht in Mykonos? Sail Away Enterprises? An hour ago?”

“Give me a minute, Rich,” I say, putting him on hold.

“Baby, did you buy us a yacht?”

She takes a seat opposite me and spreads her legs open. My breath catches when I see her glistening pussy staring back at me.

“Yes. And you should be grateful I went for the cheapest one. The one my heart truly desired was eight million. I wasn’t sure how cash-rich my husband is,” she says.

I swallow and adjust my dick in my shorts, unmuting the call. I’d spend eight million for her if it meant she never wore panties again.

“Yes. I did, in fact, purchase a yacht today. Please make sure the payment goes through. Paperwork to me in the names of Colten and Gianna Sterling. Got it?”

He clears his throat. “Sir, are you being threatened? Are you in danger? I can call Hunter.”

I laugh, eyes on my wife as she lights a cigarette. “I’m not in any danger that I don’t wanna be in, Rich. Approve the transaction. I ain’t selling my dick for cash. My wife thought she was being funny, and I’d like my yacht ready to collect in an hour.”

“I need a raise,” he mutters.

“Call Hunter,” I snap and cut the call.

I toss the phone beside me on the couch and hold out my hand, motioning with two fingers for her to come to me.

She stands, lips tight, eyes on me.

“Looks like I need to earn that extra four hundred thousand to pay for the yacht we own. So… I’m ready to fuck your ass now, wife,” I growl.

Her eyes go wide. “We need a yacht… I thought we could enter the party tonight in style.”

A grin twitches on my lips. “I do like your vision.”

“Show me what you bought,” I say, nodding to the mountain of shopping bags.

She picks up most of them until only one remains on the floor, and drops them next to my feet.

“These are actually all for you,” she says.

I frown. “What?”

“I’m not a fan of repeating myself.”

She steps forward, pushing my thighs apart and settling in between them. “I got you a suit for tonight, and shoes, and a Rolex. I also got you a huge lingerie collection.”

I arch a brow. “You bought me lingerie? I don’t wear them…” I joke.

She tips my chin up, and honestly, I feel like a lapdog. I’d even bark for her if she asked nicely.

“It will go on my body, but it’s for your benefit.”

“I like that. What else?”

More than like. I’m desperate to see her in everything she’s bought. And then I want to rip them all off and buy her more.

“Condoms.”

“Uh. Really?” That’s disappointing; she feels too good to wear rubber. But I’ll do what she wants.

She glares at me, and I snap my mouth shut.

“Fine. Fine. It will be good for your ass anyway.”

She tuts and then picks up a smaller bag, placing it in my hand.

“So this one, I splurged on, but when I saw it, I knew…”

“Splurged? What about the damn yacht?”

I pull out a small black box and open it. A black band, engraved with a snake, and tiny engraving on the inside. Pulling it out, I laugh when I read it, but my chest fucking hurts because this is cute.

“Daddy? You got me a ring engraved with daddy?”

That might be funny, but the thought behind it nearly brings me to my knees. This ain’t just a ring. This is a statement. She’s giving me a real wedding ring, one from the heart. And that means more to me than I can explain.

It makes this real. So I pull off my existing ring and replace it with this one.

She licks her lips and drops to her knees. “It’s your new wedding ring. One your wife actually picked for you.” Her hands slide up my thighs and settle on my hard-on.

“And clearly… you like it.”

I rub my hands over my face. I’m now the proud owner of a yacht, a suit, a Rolex, and a ring engraved with the word ‘daddy’. But, most importantly, Gianna gave me a little piece of her heart, and that is my favorite gift of all.

Grabbing her by the throat, I pull her onto my lap, her legs straddling me. I don’t kiss her. I hold her in place and push three fingers inside her. “Already soaking my palm, viper.”

She nods, whimpers escaping her pretty lips.

“I told you to go shopping for yourself. Why are you buying me stuff?” I ask.

Her eyes squeeze shut as she fights her release.

“Look at me, G. Why?”

Her eyes open, her pupils blown. “Because I got the impression that you don’t ever let people spoil you, the same way I don’t. So, I saw the opportunity and took it. Although the yacht was more of a joint venture.”

I drag her lips to mine and kiss her. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

I don’t know what else to say. She sees past what most people do, and I think as much as we’d both deny it, we are similar. We’re both fighting our way through life to survive and never stopping to live… until we found each other.

“I don’t do cute, remember,” she whispers.

“Me neither,” I counter, sliding my hand through her silky locks.

Pulling my other hand from her dripping pussy, I push her onto the floor on her knees and undo my pants, freeing my dick for her.

Gianna wants to be worshiped, but not in the way that’s roses and sweet talk. My wife needs more.

With my eyes locked on hers, my hand stroking my dick, I let the anticipation build for a moment. And then I motion her towards me with two fingers.

“Does my little slut want to choke on my cock now? Is that what you’re so patiently waiting for?”

She nods and licks her lips. “Teach me how you like it, daddy,” she purrs.

And I swear, this time, I think I’m close to a cardiac arrest when her hands slide up my legs, and she parts her lips, taking my dick to the back of her throat.

Threading my hands in her hair to hold her in place, I thrust my hips up, making her gag.

Her eyes water as I fuck her throat, and I wipe the tears away with my thumb.

“I love it when you cry for me, wife,” I grunt.

Her nails dig into my thigh, almost breaking skin and I tip my head back against the chair. I’ve died and gone to heaven.

I let up and give her a sliver of control, and she sucks and licks perfectly. I watch every damn second.

“Perfect, G. That’s exactly how daddy likes it,” I praise her.

I tighten my grip in her hair. “I’m going to come in your mouth. When I’m done, I want you to show me before you swallow every last drop. Okay?”

She nods, my cock still in her mouth. With a few final thrusts, her name on my lips as I come hard for her. When she sucks me clean, my body fucking vibrates.

Then she sits back on her heels, hands on her thighs, and opens her mouth, showing me exactly what I want to see.

I bite my lip. I’ve never in my damn life wanted anyone the way I want Gianna. Perfect for me, in every way I didn’t think was possible.

“Good girl. You can swallow now,” I tell her.

She closes her mouth, dark eyes on me as she swallows. I drop to my knees because I can’t take another second of not touching her, and I kiss her.

“You really are treatin’ your husband today,” I mutter against her lips.

“I know damn well you’ll return the favor, cowboy.”

I kiss her again. “I want to give you everything, G.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



GIANNA

I do a twirl in front of the mirror to make sure the dress is doing all the work for me. I opted for a tight yet stretchy red material, with a cut-out back held together by chains. A slit that runs all the way up to my thigh, just in case I need to make a run for it. I slip on my boots with a slight heel and red soles.

"I've loaded up the car," Colt calls out from outside my door.

I grab my purse and double-check my signature red lipstick in the mirror one last time. Heading out of my room, I stop in my tracks when Colt turns around. The black suit, white shirt, and black tie combo make my panties melt.

His stubble is now neat. His hair styled. He resembles a damn model on one of my books. But the part that catches me, that steals my breath, is seeing him with the black wedding ring on. That's my husband. And I'm proud to have him beside me. Not only for the mission tonight; I want to keep doing this.

He's doing the same thing as me, his eyes tracking all of me. "Holy shit, G," he breathes.

"You like?" I ask.

"It's going to be a shame to rip that dress off you later."

I close the distance, pressing my hand against his chest. "Don't you dare."

He chuckles, pulling a box of cigarettes out of his back pocket. "One before we commit mass murder? Enzo's guys scoped out the event; we're

up against ten men and two guards.”

Those numbers don’t sound great. But we have the advantage of them being relaxed. They don’t expect us to have snipers surrounding them.

“It’s a completely private area, so we don’t have to worry about that.”

Sitting ducks. Perfect. “See, the yacht was a perfect idea.”

His arm snakes around my waist and he leads me out to the car.

“You do know how to drive a boat, right?” I ask as I get in the passenger seat.

My husband responds with, “Can’t say I have any experience. But I can deal with heavy machinery, cars, trucks, trailers; I’m sure it’ll be easy.”

I roll my eyes. This does work well; he’s got a lot of skills I don’t have. All the years of being a cowboy, and I can make up for any areas he might lack, like parking a yacht. “You’re lucky I know what I’m doing. I’ll give you a crash course before we anchor.”

He smirks. “I’m a lucky man, yeah…”

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CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



Colten

It’s been years since I’ve been on a boat, and I forgot how much I dislike the rocking sensation. The plan of a sniper on a yacht perhaps wasn’t one of our best; however, I’m a good shot, so it doesn’t matter.

“You good, viper?” I ask into the comms.

“I’m approaching now. You got eyes on the prize?”

I zero in on the scope. “Yeah. Of course I do.”

Ten guys. Two guards. As expected. And a crazy wife that’s about to walk in the middle of them. I tried to talk her out of this, but she isn’t letting Nikos off lightly, and, according to Gianna, a bullet he doesn’t see coming is a reward, not a punishment.

My wife wants to watch the life drain from his eyes as he begs for forgiveness. And you know what? If he’d murdered my brother, I’d feel exactly the same way. So, reluctantly, I agreed with her plan. She’s more than capable. We’ve got men surrounding the area in case she needs them.

“We have eyes. Just say the word,” Arias, one of Enzo’s contacts, says through the speakers.

I move my scope, watching Gianna as she walks up to the two bodyguards that tower over her. Not a single ounce of fear on her face.

We’ve got three snipers dotted around their party. All waiting for Gianna’s word. And I’m trying to ignore the bile rising up my throat, which I’m not sure if it’s from the boat rocking or her walking into a mass slaughter in a dress I’m itching to rip off her.

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CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



GIANNA

I slide the bodyguard a wad of cash with a seductive smile. “This is for you to turn a blind eye. I’ve been hired by Nikos’ girlfriend to surprise him. Chloe knows he has a soft spot for a tattooed woman, and it is his fortieth birthday after all. We’re friends; we go way back,” I say softly.

The guy frowns, glancing at his friend. “I’ve already shown you inside my purse; I’ve got nothing other than cigarettes and condoms,” I whisper innocently.

The other guy coughs, and I set my focus on the one who clearly has a weak spot for me.

“He’s going to have the time of his life, trust me,” I say, batting my lashes.

He glances down at my tits, his gaze lingering a second too long, and I fight every instinct that’s screaming at me to stab him in the neck.

“It’s one dance, well, and maybe a threesome later.” I wink. Stepping closer, I wrap my hand around his tie and drag him down, my lip brushing his ear.

“Or, I could forget about them and take you home later?” I whisper.

He sucks in a sharp breath, and I smile, pulling away.

“Fine. One dance, and then you come to me after. Deal?”

I slide my hand in his and shake. “Deal.”

He lifts the red rope and lets me through. I keep my head down and go straight to the bar. The twinkling festoon lights that hang on either side of

the pier make my eyes shimmer. The sound of Nikos' deep laugh sends a rage through me.

Gripping the marble counter, I fluff my curls with my fingers, tapping the earpiece. "Now," I order.

I turn to face Nikos for the first time since he ordered Max's death, and I smile.

Bullets whizz past me, and the laughter begins to fade, almost in slow motion as they each drop. One by one. Man by man.

No dramatics. No screaming. Because it's too fast. Before they can move, they're snipered in the head.

Until one man remains.

The barman slides me the Glock across the bar without saying a word. One of Enzo's men tracked him down this morning and bribed him.

I aim it at Nikos.

His pale face, his bloodshot eyes. The fear that radiates off him. Nothing will bring my brother back.

"Gianna," he croaks, glancing at his brother, Stefanos' corpse beside him.

"Yes. Asshole. I've been waiting a long time for this moment," I tell him, taking another step closer, my aim trained on him.

"Just shoot me. Get it over with."

I laugh as the body I walk over twitches.

"How many bullets did that special ops guy you hired put in my brother, Nikos?" I ask through gritted teeth.

He shakes his head, his body vibrating. His hand slides up his thigh.

"Don't," I warn him. "I will shoot you in the dick if you even try."

He holds both hands beside his head in surrender.

"Get on your knees and beg for your life, Nikos."

A single tear streams down his cheek, and like a lapdog, he drops to the ground. Fucking pathetic.

He clasps his hands in front of his chest, his green eyes on me. "Please, Gianna. I'm begging you. Let me live. Chloe's pregnant; I want to be a dad. I want to see my baby grow up. I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry I put the hit on your brother. I'm sorry I tried to take over your territory. I promise, it's over. We aren't coming back to America."

I tilt my head and my neck cracks. "God, I really need a massage," I mutter.

He frowns.

“Please, Gianna. For my baby.”

I scoff. “And what about Max? He was on his way to propose to his girlfriend. He had a life, and you stripped him of that. Rules are rules; we all live by them, and we die by them.”

He swallows hard, sinking back onto his heels and dropping his head.

“Do you want to be this monster for the rest of your life, Gianna? A woman that—”

I don’t let him finish the sentence. I pull the trigger, and his skull shatters as he slumps onto the ground.

A monster.

He thinks that’s all I am. All I want to be.

And maybe, he is right.

I tap the comms as I back away to the bar.

“Vodka, please,” I hiss at the bartender, who, with shaking hands, passes me the bottle.

Grabbing the last wad of cash from my bra, I toss it at him.

“Thank you,” I say, and make my way past the dead bodyguards and continue down the pier to the meet spot for Colten.

Flicking the lid off the vodka, I toss it back, letting it burn its way down my throat.

A monster.

I laugh. Maybe I am. But I got my revenge. Peering up at the stars in the sky, the moon shines so bright it lights up the end of the dock.

“This one is for you, Maxy. I miss you,” I whisper, letting the tears burn at the corner of my eyes.

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CHAPTER FIFTY



Colten

Song- High Water, Sleep Token

The breeze blows through Gianna's curls, and she hasn't taken her eyes off the star-filled sky the whole boat ride back to our dock.

"Do you want to drive?" I ask, easing off the gas as we approach.

"No."

Oh, this is a new version of my wife. The grumpy one.

"Okay… Well, can you give me verbal instructions on parking an eight-hundred-grand yacht? I don't want to scratch your new baby" I ask in a playful tone, trying to coax a reaction from her.

She half-laughs, but it's blunt. Void of emotions. I heard every word she said to Nikos on the comms. The part that broke a piece of me was when she spoke about Max. How he was on his way to propose to his girlfriend when he was shot down. The pain in her voice—it gutted me. She's mourning someone she loved, and I can't fix that for her. But I know how loss feels, and I want to help her.

She stands and heads over to me, which makes my heart flutter. "Move." She waves me away with her hand.

Now isn't a time to challenge her, so I do as she says, letting her line up the yacht.

"Toss the rope at the bow to the man at the dock," she commands, pointing forward.

I hesitate for a split second. The what? What man? Oh. I see him.

"The damn front of the boat, Colten," she snaps.

I stride past her. “Watch your tone with me, G,” I say under my breath as I pass her.

Nothing. Not even a sassy quip back.

I hop out of the boat onto the quay, turning to hold my hand out to help her. Reluctantly, she takes it.

I hand the guy some cash, and we head towards the parking lot in silence. As we reach the car, she grabs the handle of the passenger door, but I don’t unlock it.

Instead, I follow her there, push her against the metal, and lace my fingers around her neck.

“Talk to me, G,” I implore, pressing my nose against hers, almost tasting the vodka on her breath.

She lets out a shaky breath. “I thought that would feel better. That I’d feel somewhat lighter about Max after I’d killed Nikos.” She pauses. “But I don’t. If anything, it’s made it hurt worse. Because it reminds me death is the end and Max is never coming back.”

I close my eyes, resting my forehead against hers. “I’m sorry, baby. I’m so fucking sorry,” I murmur.

She shakes her head. “I don’t want pity, Colten. I want it to not feel like I have a gaping hole in my chest that I can’t fill. How do I do that?”

She sniffles, and I swear my own chest cracks in two. Wiping away her tears with my thumb, I press a kiss to her temple.

“You don’t fill the hole, viper. Not yet, anyway. You have to let it hurt. Let it exist inside you. If you shut it out, it only festers and gets bigger. Embrace the pain, the grief, all the bad shit.”

She hiccups, and I tip her chin up.

“Don’t you dare ever tell a soul that I cried, Colten. I mean it. Gianna Milano does not cry.”

“Unless the tears are from my big dick fucking your mouth. Right?” I whisper.

She giggles in response. So I lean in, brushing my lips over hers. “You’re Gianna Sterling now. And she is allowed to feel things. This is the time you finally get to decide who you really want to be. It’s part of the vows,” I tell her.

My hand slides up the base of her skull, and I take her hair in my fingers and tug her head back, making her hiss out. “See, pain. Feel it,” I say, my voice low.

“Pain ain’t always a bad thing, sweetheart.”

Her eyes shimmer in the dim lighting. “Show me how to do that, Colten.”

I shake my head. “Sex ain’t going to fill that void either. Neither is booze. Or drugs. Or cigarettes.”

She blinks at me. “So what will? If you say time, I’ll punch you in the gut.”

Fucking hell, this woman.

“We’re going to go grocery shopping, we’re going to cook together back at the villa, and then we’re going to sit outside and watch the stars. You can tell me everything about Max. You can cry. You can scream. You can do whatever the hell you want. And then we’ll fuck.”

A small smile spreads on her lips. “You want to cook with me?”

I nod. “I do. And I want to listen. And I want to have my cock inside you.”

She bursts out into laughter.

“There she is,” I murmur, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

She stares into my eyes, and everything around me fades away.

“Do you think I’m a monster?” she asks quietly.

“No, Gianna. The world is riddled with evil, and that doesn’t include you. You and I, we’re pretty similar. So if you are, then so am I, and who the fuck cares?”

She chews on her lip.

“What made you so knowledgeable about feelings?” she asks.

“My parents died. My little brother nearly bled out in my arms. You either push past it and find a way to carry on, or you let it drown you. And I don’t like water enough to willingly sink.”

She slides her hand up my chest. “There might be some hot mermaids down there, though?”

“I don’t need to search the oceans to find the woman of my dreams; I have her right in front of me.”

Her eyes glaze over, but she holds it back, and tonight, I’ve got another key to the locks of Gianna. She hates vulnerability. She doesn’t want to feel anything other than powerful. But inside, it’s starting to crumble. I know that feeling; I’ve been there. You can only maintain being emotionally numb for so long.

Now, I have to figure out how the hell I stop this woman from burning everything down around her in fury before she takes me with her.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE



GIANNA

"Aw, il mio polpettino. *My little meatball,*" I tease as Colten drops the last meatball into the bubbling tomato sauce.

"I knew it was an endearing term," he mutters. The concentration on his face is a picture as he pops the lid over the pan.

When I lean against the counter, he turns to face me.

"Is it cute or is it sarcastic? That's the real question here, cowboy."

He tuts, wiping his hands over his abs. Of course he had to cook shirtless, and there are absolutely no complaints from me.

"I think it's cute."

I smile. He's right, I think…

"I used to have to make these damn meatballs for Max at least once a week when we were living at home," I tell him.

I might not have been the eldest of the siblings, but I behaved like it.

He crosses his arms over his chest and stands opposite me. "So, you cared for your brothers? What about your mom?"

I suck in a breath. "She died, Colt. When we were really young. I don't even remember her voice anymore."

I remember what she looked like. I remember she'd kiss my forehead when she put me into bed. And then, one day, she never came home after going out to buy more ingredients to bake cookies with Max and me. Just like that, my world was tipped upside down. I do wonder what I'd be like now if Mom hadn't been murdered. Would I have begged for my father's love by wanting to become the same as my brothers?

Probably not.

He leans forward, running his finger along my cheek. “Losing your mom is one of the worst possible pains you can go through, especially as a kid.”

“God. Do I need to buy one of those little violins?” I try to deflect.

He chuckles. “If you want? Add it to my card alongside the yacht and everything else.”

I glance down at his ring that I had engraved; it makes my tummy flutter. “Yes, daddy.”

He licks his lips and hooks his fingers under my dress, tugging me forward. “Stop trying to distract me, viper.”

I look up at him through my lashes. “But you’re so easy to distract.”

“Yes, because obviously you put a spell on me when we said our vows, and now I’m obsessed with you.”

My eyes go wide and my heart hammers.

He studies my face. “What exactly do you think is going on between us, Gianna?” he asks.

I swallow the lump in my throat. I’m so far out of my depth. I’ve never been given love; I’ve had to earn it. Work for it. Is this love? It can’t be. But it’s something. It’s powerful. But if I let him know that, it shows him I’m weak. That I’m just another woman who’ll fall in line for him.

“I don’t know. An alliance?”

He laughs. “You think I fuck everyone I have an alliance with?”

I tilt my head and shrug. “I assumed you would fuck anything with a pulse?”

His rough fingers brush along my jaw, and he grips my chin. “Try again.”

“We’re kind of friends who fuck?” I say.

He blinks slowly. “I’m not having sex with a friend. You’re my wife.”

A shiver runs down my spine. He’s not backing down, and I need that. Someone who is ready to fight against me.

“Colten… I basically bullied you into marrying me for an alliance. I tricked you into taking my virginity. I took your card and bought a yacht.”

“Hot. I like a woman who goes after what she wants.”

The meatballs start to bubble over the saucepan, and I step away from him. My father wants me to ruin his family's empire. That’s the only way I

get my place back. I need to figure out who I am. Who I want to be. What I'm prepared to do for that empire.

"Stop trying to wind me up, Colt," I huff and slide past him to stir the food.

I lower the heat on the stove and put the lid back on. My heart is in my throat as I turn back to Colt.

"I'll drop it, okay?" he says.

"I'm going to get changed; the food will be another twenty minutes." As I walk past him, he grabs the back of my dress and pulls me flush against his chest.

"The only way that dress is coming off is when I rip it off. Do you hear me, Gianna?" he murmurs against my shoulder.

My cheeks instantly flush with heat. My mouth opens to argue, but the words don't follow. He got it wrong. He put the spell on me, because when do I listen to what a man has to say?

"No. I'm taking it off, and I'll put on one of the sets I bought for you today?" I breathe out.

He bends me over; my face slams against the counter, his fingers pulling at my hair.

"Do you want to know the truth about what I think is happening here?" he asks.

"Not really."

"Tough. I think as much as we pretend to fight each other, we're both obsessed. I think we're two of the same."

"What, so we're trauma bonding? Just like I always dreamed."

He smacks my ass, hard, and I cry out.

"No, you wanted to marry me because you were drawn to me, like I was to you. I believe you have an ulterior motive for moving in on Sterling Ranch." He pauses.

I feel sick.

"And I don't give a fuck. I know you can't hurt us, no matter what you try. Because deep down, you want this with me as much as I do. We aren't friends who fuck. This isn't just me teaching you how to explore your desires so you can go jump on the next dick that takes your fancy."

His hands slip under my panties, tugging them to the side, and my body vibrates.

“This is me claiming you as my goddamn wife and giving you what you need. Getting you out of your own head. Making you understand that you are your own person.”

“Doesn’t seem like it. I can’t even take my dress off without your approval.”

He pushes his hard cock against my ass. “And you know I’d stop the second you tell me to. All you’d have to do is say the word, and I’d let you go. But you haven’t. Why is that?”

Holy fuck. I never knew you could be *this* turned on. “Because I want you,” I whisper.

“Louder, Gianna. More.”

“Because I fucking want you, Colten. And that scares me,” I admit.

He bends over me, pressing a soft kiss on the back of my neck. “Good girl,” he growls in my ear.

“You’re an asshole,” I hiss.

“I know. But I got you out of your mood, didn’t I?”

I smile. He’s right. Of course he is.

“Are you going to do anything about how wet I am?” I ask.

He nips at my throat. “Nope. Not a single thing,” he whispers, swiping his fingers along my pussy, and a moan slips from my lips.

“Please,” I cry.

“Nope. We’re going to eat. We’re going to sit under the stars. And you can think about the fact that you tried to tell me I’m your friend who fucks you. And once I feel you’ve contemplated that for long enough, I might put you out of your misery.”

My stomach sinks. “Evil,” I mutter.

“You’re going to learn an important lesson tonight, Gianna. Embrace it.”

He releases me, and I stand, tugging down my dress. “I need to pee.”

He smirks. “I’ll know if you get yourself off, G. Don’t even bother trying to find a loophole with me.”

I flip him off and stomp to my room, slamming the door shut. I need a minute away from that man and his spell over me.

I grab my phone from the bed and see three missed calls from Dom since I spoke to him earlier, so I call him back.

“Hey, sis,” he says cheerily.

Which is very unlike him.

“Dom… Are you good?”

“Yeah. So, you’re back tomorrow, right?” he asks.

I flop down on the bed. “Yes. Why?”

“Levi wants to meet us. I went out to get some groceries, and the motherfucker followed me there and squared up to me in the parking lot.”

I rub my hands over my face. Why the hell are the Twisted Serpents after us now? I can’t see there being a pressing issue with the drug lines they run that would make their president demand my attention. “What does he want?”

“Our father told him we would work with him to get them the route between LA, Arizona, and Vegas for their MC.”

Fuck. I told them months ago to lay off Vegas. Everyone knows not to go near the Volkov’s territory, and Arizona? There is no way in hell the Sterlings will let them in. All it will do is make me look like a dick if I even suggest it.

“I don’t want that slimy bastard anywhere near us. Dad should have never started working with a motorcycle club.”

“There is no way Mikhail Volkov is going to let some bikers take over his routes into Vegas,” Dom tells me.

“Yeah, I know. Mikhail doesn’t work with anyone outside of Enzo’s organization. He kills anyone who even tries. Shit.”

Why the fuck would my father tell Levi that? It’s like he wants me to fail, or end up dead… It means my father is putting pressure on me. This is his way of showing me that I am failing him and the biker gang needs to step up to make up for my shortcomings. I need them to get off my back. And I need them to stop going after the Sterlings.

“Right, let me think about it. We need to find a way to spin it to make them think they’re walking away with a deal that means absolutely nothing.”

Dom doesn’t reply right away.

“What if you speak to Colten? I bet they’d be open to moving more product? We could try to get them in LA and Arizona? That might shut our father up?”

“Colten isn’t going to agree,” I say, way too fast.

There is no way Colten will agree to letting a random MC club in on his drug runs. The Sterlings don’t need more product or money. And they trust no one.

“So, the issue is, G… They’ve already moved into Arizona. It’s only a matter of time before Hunter finds out. And we both know Levi is going to open his disgusting mouth and put us in the shit.”

I nod, even though he can’t see me.

“We need to speak to Dad. Let’s meet with Levi tomorrow, get him off our backs, and put that motherfucker in his place. Okay? I’m not having some slimy biker gang thinking they’ve got one over on us. They don’t make moves until we tell them.”

“I like that plan,” Dom says.

Dom likes any plan that involves violence.

“Get a few of our guards to meet us there.”

“On it, G. Also, there is something else, and I’m not sure whether to tell you now or wait.”

I roll my eyes. “Just tell me.”

“So, Colten ordered everything of yours to be moved out of our house, and now all your stuff is at his.”

I almost drop the phone, my mouth hanging open. “What? When?”

“This morning.”

I’m not sure whether to laugh or scream.

“Do you want me to try to get it all back? I assumed you’d fallen in love on your honeymoon.” Dom laughs as he says it.

I bark out a laugh. “Love? Are we even capable of such things?”

He sighs. “Gianna, you love me. You loved Max. So, I’d say you’re capable.”

“That’s different,” I say, but my breath falters.

That is true. But what I feel for Colt is different from anything I’ve experienced.

“I understand that, but it means you have a heart.” He clears his throat. “So, do you want me to talk to Hunter? Get it moved back?”

I pick at the skin around my nails. “No. Leave it.”

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CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO



Colten

I dish up the meatballs onto a plate and head outside. She doesn't tear her eyes from her phone when I approach. She's flipped a switch and turned off from me.

"I think you are meant to say thank you," I say as I drop her plate in front of her.

She glances up, her eyes hollow, a stress rash creeping up her throat. "Thank you, Colt."

We eat in silence, her phone constantly buzzing beside her. She ignores every single message. Doesn't look at me either. Her mind is spinning so loud I'm pretty sure I'll be able to hear her thoughts soon.

"What's going on?" I ask, dropping my silverware.

She's been quiet since she came out of her bedroom, but this is worse than quiet.

"Just remembering who I really am, cowboy." She sighs, shuffling in her chair.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

This is not good.

She crosses her arms, which pushes her breasts up, distracting me.

"It means, put all my stuff back in my house, Colten Sterling."

I want her in my house. I want to be with her. It was meant to be a surprise, and I didn't think it would piss her off this much.

"Nope."

"I'm not moving in with you."

“Give me three good reasons, Gianna. Just three,” I tell her, cutting into my meatball.

“I need space. Privacy.”

I laugh. “And living in a small house with your brother gives you that?”

She scowls in response.

“We aren’t ready to live with each other yet,” she shoots back.

I arch an eyebrow. “We’re married,” I counter.

She pinches the bridge of her nose. “This.” She points between us. “This needs to stop. Let’s leave it in Greece and go back to ignoring each other.”

I pop the meatball in my mouth; it’s so good I almost moan. I let the silence sit between us while I eat. When I’m done, I say, “Do you always run when you’re scared, Gianna? When things get too real? When the robot starts to develop any kind of feelings?”

It’s a pattern, an obvious one. Any emotional talk, or talk about the future, she shuts down. And I can see she tries to fight it, but she can’t. So, I have to keep going.

“No. I don’t run. I make smart decisions to protect myself.”

“You’re protecting yourself from me, hmm?”

That hurts more than I’d like it to. I never want to hurt her.

She nods. “Or perhaps I’m protecting you from me?”

I don’t respond. I’m not going to argue with her over this. She needs to figure it out by herself.

We finish our meal in silence, which is a shame, because it’s some of the best damn food I’ve ever eaten.

“Have you ever considered partnering with an outside organization to run your product?” she asks, crossing one leg over the other.

“Why would I do that? We ain’t looking to expand. I trust the men I work with now; it works seamlessly.”

I pull out a cigarette and light it. She’s got something playing on her; there’s a real question beneath all this bullshit. And for some reason, she ain’t being direct.

“Why?” I ask.

“I’ve got a client interested in moving drugs for us from LA through the West Coast.”

I nod. “Then you tell them to stay the fuck out of Arizona. Do I make myself clear?”

She swallows. She’s not nervous. She’s not scheming. I think she’s been thrown in the middle of this and she’s trying to navigate it without pissing me off. So, I’ll play along.

“Would you not be interested in hearing what they could offer? You could get some time back to yourself, let them do the risky work that could land them in jail.”

My jaw twitches. “No. I don’t want to hear it. If I want new runners, I’ll speak to Enzo.”

She simply nods, like I’m some sort of client sat at her desk.

“Yeah. I thought so. I’ll deal with it,” she mutters, picking up her phone.

I lean over, grabbing the leg of her chair and dragging it towards me.

“Are you trying to fuck me over, viper?” I whisper.

I know in my heart she ain’t. I wanna hear it.

She shakes her head. “No. I thought that would be your answer; I just wanted to make sure. I said I’ll deal with it.”

I wrap my hand around her throat gently, tugging her towards me, our lips almost brushing.

“We will deal with it. If it concerns my family, my organization, I want in. We’re a partnership now, G. Don’t take the weight of everything on your own; it’s what I’m here for. This was an alliance; let's make something fucking epic with it together. Because I think we can.”

She smiles against my lips. “Only if you let me take charge, polpettino.”

I kiss her, threading my fingers into her hair. “I enjoy watching you work, so I’ll be your second-in-command. If…” I pause.

Her eyes shimmer. “If what?”

“You agree to move in with me.”

She bites my lip, hard enough for me to start tasting copper.

“I was hoping you’d say that; that’s why I already told my brother to leave my stuff in your house,” she whispers.

I growl, pulling her onto my lap. She played me… again. And I’m not even mad.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE



GIANNA

The next day…

It sucked leaving Greece. I'd vote to stay there longer. But we have new issues to deal with. Like a stupid ass biker gang.

"So… which one is my room?" I ask as I follow Colten up the stairs.

He ignores me and turns to face me when he reaches the top.

"My wife sleeps beside me in my bed," he says, pointing to the room on the far left.

I breeze past him and strut down the hallway. I'm already in love with his house. It's ten times the size of the one he put Dom and me in. The high wooden ceilings, the cobbled stone. It's very rancher, but also homely. I was too murderous after the wedding night to pay attention to architecture.

I pause when I reach for the handle.

"Wait… So our wedding night, you didn't even fuck me in *your* bed?"

He glances away, and I cackle. "You're a dick, Colten Sterling."

"I know," he admits.

And I appreciate that more than he'll know.

"Am I about to walk into some kind of sex dungeon?" I ask.

He stops right behind me, my back against his chest, and says, "I don't know, viper. Open it and find out."

Holding my breath, I do as he says, only to find a normal-looking bedroom. A four-poster bed in the middle. Views of the the mountains. A TV on the wall. Behind that, a bathroom that's the same size as the bedroom, with a hot tub bath and a walk-in rainfall shower.

“Okay. I like this,” I mutter.

“Good.”

“What does your place look like in LA?” he asks.

I spin to face him, resting my back against the wall. “Like a gothic paradise.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Let me guess: gold-framed art, skeleton hands on the walls. Black paint everywhere?”

I bite back a grin. “Kinda. I did throw in a splash of emerald green for ambiance.”

He takes a step forward. “Candles?”

I nod.

“So… it sounds like you’re more likely to have a sex dungeon?” he asks, wiggling his eyebrows.

I scoff. “Yes. It’s called the virgins of hell.”

He chuckles. “Has a ring to it. A very, very exclusive membership, right?”

I glance down at his crotch, and as expected, he’s getting hard. I seem to be able to do this to him at any time of the day. Perhaps I have cursed him.

“I only offer memberships to men who *really* work for it.”

He runs a hand over his stubble. “Men? You mean one man.”

I smile, tipping my head back as his hands settle on my waist. “So… does that mean we’re an exclusive couple then, cowboy? You do realize that also means no other pussy for you? Are you sure you can deal with that?”

He clears his throat. “Shouldn’t be an issue.”

His lips brush over mine, and I thread my fingers into his hair.

“Shouldn’t or isn’t?” I question. I’m not sure what unhealed part of me is controlling my brain, but I have to know the answer.

“Isn’t,” he confirms.

My stomach does a flip, and it shouldn’t. It really shouldn’t. Because this wasn’t what our marriage was for. This isn’t what I was meant to do. And how the hell would this work if we’re ruling empires in completely different states?

He’s not going to want to move to LA.

“I’m joking, Colten,” I blurt out.

He shakes his head. “You’re driving me insane, Gianna. In-fucking-sane.”

He kisses me again.

“That’s part of the problem, cowboy.”

“Nope. I never said I didn’t like you driving me crazy. It’s actually part of the appeal.”

I roll my eyes as he pulls back. In return, he squeezes my throat tighter, making me yelp.

“We’ve got work to do, right?” he asks.

I groan. “I wanna go back on vacation. Work, work, work. Greece was fun.”

“We can go back. Our new rule can be: every time we get work done, we book a vacation as a reward,” he says with a smile.

And that sounds like heaven. Another step towards the version of myself I want to be.

I gave him the lowdown on the Twisted Serpents on the flight back home this morning. Well, as much information as I could without dropping my father into shit. I’m ingrained to protect him, but my want to do that is slipping every day. I don’t agree with my father's actions.

And now, Colt knows they’re in Arizona, and he is neither happy nor prepared to negotiate any of the shipment routes with them.

Dom thinks Colten coming with us is a good idea; it sends a message back to my father that I’ve got Colten on our side.

But something in my gut is telling me I don’t want that to go back to my father. Telling Colt the truth and asking for his involvement actually wasn’t to please my father. It’s because I wanted his help. Because, actually, I think he has my back. And we both want the same goal here: Levi the fuck out of here.

I don’t trust him. I know at the first opportunity, he will fuck us over. I’d rather he was gone; the only reason Dom and I haven’t killed him yet is because of my father. That’s his guy. If Levi died, it screws up my father’s drug operations, and honestly, that money is what is keeping the Milano name afloat.

“Yes. Please don’t distract me while I’m working, Colt. Men already have trouble taking me seriously because I’m a woman. The last thing I need is him thinking I need you to protect me,” I tell him, giving him another piece of myself.

His jaw twitches. “I thought I was the one easy to distract?”

“You are,” I purr, my hand sliding down his chest and landing on his dick.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR



Colten

“Okay, a Rolls is nice. But a truck is much better suited to these roads,” I tell Gianna as she indicates left down the track. It’s an old abandoned barn that we often use for interrogations or hiding people.

“Well, you could have walked,” she shoots back.

“Do you think I have a problem with my cardio levels?”

“Can we please remember that I’m in the back. And I am her brother. I do not need to listen to this,” Dom groans behind us.

I like Dom. He’s blending in well on the ranch, getting his hands dirty with work. He’s a lot more relaxed than Gianna.

“Sorry, bud,” I chuckle.

She parks up next to a blacked-out Mercedes that holds some of her people. I’ve got some of my guys surrounding the area discreetly too. But I ain’t bothered about a poxy gang that thinks they’ve got big dicks because they ride a bike.

We’ve had a few flow through New Falls over the years, and they never last long.

She kills the engine, and I get out, rounding the front of the car to open her door. I hold out my hand as she shoves her sunglasses to the top of her head.

“You don’t need to be doing this shit for me, Colt. I’m not a princess.”

I lean down and snatch her hand, dragging her up to stand. “And I ain’t no prince, viper. But I am a gentleman, and a gentleman always opens his woman's doors.”

Her cheeks blush, and I lean in and kiss her cheek. Her men jump out of the Mercedes, all displaying their weapons like this is some kind of showdown.

She glances over and glares at the guy with black hair. And I mean death glare. It's like I can hear her thoughts of wanting to slit his throat.

"Dom, why the fuck is Tomasso here?" she hisses.

"He's head of security. Why wouldn't he be here?" Dom replies calmly, but he's shifting on his feet.

Nervous. Why?

She tuts. "Because the last time I saw him, I shoved a knife in his crotch? Isn't that a clear indication I don't want that asshole near me?"

My eyes go wide. There it is. "What did he do?" I ask.

She flicks her attention back to me. "He was Fabio's best friend. I believe he was in on the plan to throw me out, although my father believes Fabio worked alone. The last time I saw him, he made a comment I didn't appreciate, so I let him know."

I tuck her hair behind her ear. "I can kill him if you want?"

She chews on her lip. "Oh no, cowboy. If he's going to die, I'm going to be the one to do it."

I smile; I can't help it. "Alright."

I follow behind her to her guards; Tomasso doesn't even look at her.

"Surprised you can still walk," she says, pure disgust on her face.

He doesn't respond. Still doesn't even make eye contact.

"She's talking to you. You work for her. Therefore, you can fucking use your words to speak," I tell him.

He glares at me, and I smile before he spits out, "And who the fuck do you think you're talking to? You fuckin' country trash."

I clench my fist; Gianna's palm lands on my chest, pushing me back.

"Speak to my husband like that again and next time, I won't fucking miss. I'll hack your dick off with a saw and make you eat it. Do I make myself fucking clear?" Her voice is disturbingly calm.

Tomasso nods.

"Words, last time I saw you, you had plenty of them stored in that pea-sized brain of yours."

I have to fight back the urge to laugh. I love her fire.

"Yes. Gianna."

She flicks the safety off her Glock and presses it against his temple. He closes his eyes. “Now, apologize.”

“I’m sorry,” Tomasso whispers, staring down at the ground.

She smiles and taps his cheek. “Good boy. It isn’t so hard not to be a cunt, is it?”

He shakes his head.

“Now, get inside, scope it out and then position yourself somewhere out of my sight, because the longer I look at you, the harder it’s getting not to pull the trigger,” she spits.

Her security detail all tail off behind Tomasso, leaving me staring at my wife in awe. Her ability to shut a man down is impressive. She was born to lead.

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

“Dom, go in there and make sure your lover boy isn’t setting up a bomb or something ridiculous to try and kill me. Why does father keep sending him?”

Dom’s eyes snap to mine, then his sister. Her eyes go wide. “Oh, shit. I’m sorry, Dom.”

Okay. I did not see that coming. Dom was, or is, with Tomasso. And Gianna thinks I might have an issue with that?

“You’re good, I ain’t got a problem with anyone's preferences,” I tell him with a nod.

He glares at his sister.

“What? It slipped. A bit like how your dick slipped into Tomasso’s ass?”

I cover my face with my hands, but it doesn’t hide my laughter.

Dom heads towards the barn.

“Did you think I’d have an issue with your brother being gay?”

She opens her mouth. Snaps it shut. I’m nervous about her answer. Because what will she think about me if she knew my past?

“No. I hadn’t thought about it like that. Dom just… isn’t out yet. To my father, anyway. So we have to keep it that way.”

I nod. “Secret is safe with me.”

The rumble of the motorcycle engines fills the air, and on cue, my guys surround the barn. All heavily armed. All looking like they’d kill anyone in front of them.

“I brought us a little extra protection,” I lean down and whisper.

“A little?”

“Always remember, G. I’m a very resourceful man, and I do anything to keep people I care about safe,” I explain, losing myself in her dark eyes.

She nods as the bikes approach. The guy at the front with the big dick motorcycle stops first, kicks out the stand, and takes off his helmet, shaking out his blonde, greasy long hair.

The rest follow, but he’s already on his way to Gianna, boots crunching on the gravel.

“Levi,” she greets him.

“Gianna Milano,” he drawls out, his eyes scanning her curves.

My fists clench in response.

“Gianna Sterling, actually,” she corrects him, and my heart jumps. A possessiveness crashes through me.

That was a fuckin’ statement. And I’ve never been more proud to hear my last name.

He turns his attention to me. “And you… You’re a Sterling, right? You’ve all got that look about you.”

“Colten,” I grunt.

This guy seems like a money grabbing shit bag. We get them hovering around us all the time.

He glances back at Gianna and nods. “Well, this is quite a change of play, Gianna,” he says, looking up at the sky.

“You want to discuss drug routes in Arizona and Vegas? I brought you a man that actually has authority to speak on the matter.”

His nostrils flare. “That—” He stops himself, glaring at me.

I scoff. “That wasn’t part of the plan, was it? You wanted to try and get Gianna to help you take my routes, not negotiate on them. Am I right?”

He scratches his beard. “I ain’t gotta admit nothing to you.”

“Hmm. Well, can we end this discussion now? I’ll go back to my bosses and tell them there's a threat that has to be squashed. Will be the end of all

of this," I say flatly.

Enzo would flatten this biker club in less than a day. And I'm sure Mikhail would get great joy in stringing them up in Vegas.

He grits his teeth. "Let's talk."

"Thought so," I mutter.

As we head inside the barn, I nod to Xavier. Since Paulie died, Xavier has taken over most of the work on the ranch, leading the guys, just like Paulie did.

There is no deal to make, but now I'm aware of what could be our next enemy, and I can size them up and work out how to eliminate them before they become an issue.

All thanks to my wife being honest.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE



GIANNA

I've yet to see fear in Levi's eyes until Colten threatened to end him. And that threat was real. The Sterlings have that power. Anyone in the crime world knows that.

We stand on our side, the bikers the other, and quite frankly, I can still smell their sweaty body odor from here.

I nudge Colten's side, and he looks down at me.

"You think they could have stopped off for a shower somewhere?" I whisper.

He grins. "Heat and leathers ain't a good mix."

Levi clears his throat, stepping forward. "So, who is in charge here?" he asks.

Colt pushes me forward. He's going to pay for that later.

"You wanted a meeting with me, so that's what you've got. Colten is here to listen," I assert.

Levi nods. "Alright. Your father told me you could get me in with the cowboys. I'm shipping your drugs from LA to Oregon and Washington. But the cut ain't big enough. I either need more money, or more areas to cover. You promised me expansion, and in two years I ain't seen shit except you lot being murdered."

My fist clenches at my side. "You should be lucky my father partners with you at all. Who do you think you are making demands to expand?"

He grins, shoving a hand through his greasy hair. "I want Vegas."

Colten laughs behind me, and Levi's eyes snap to him.

“Then go to Vegas, Levi. See what happens.” I shrug, taking a step forward. “If you want Vegas, then you go speak to Mikhail Volkov and see whether you come out with your head still attached to your shoulders. I’d place my wager on them using it as a basketball.”

He stomps to me, closing the distance, squaring up to me like he’s some sort of threat. “I’ll tell your father you’re defying him,” he says under his breath.

“Could you brush your teeth before you make the call?”

His hand flies towards my neck, and I grab his wrist, twisting it until he’s crying out in agony. That’s Colt’s favorite place to grab, and only he is allowed to do it. So I press my gun to his throat.

Goosebumps erupt over my skin when Colten steps behind me.

“Go to touch me again, and you’ll lose both hands, Levi. I took this meeting on my father's orders, but let me make it clear: I never wanted to work with you, and I will not be backing your expansion in Vegas, nor Arizona. And you won’t tell my father a word, because if you do, I’ll tell him you tried to touch his only daughter, and not only will you lose your contracts with him, you’ll die,” I hiss.

I push him back towards his buddies.

He lets out a wicked laugh. “You think you’re better than us now because you’re married into Enzo’s organization. You think they won’t chew you up and spit you out too like they do with everyone when they become not useful? You’re just pussy to them. Pussy with a vicious temper. And from what I’ve heard, you don’t even put out.”

“Fuck this,” Colten mutters behind me. I don’t have a chance to stop him; he’s already grabbed Levi by the throat and thrown him into the wall behind.

Colt’s fist cracks against his jaw, over and over. “You’re on my fucking land, talking to my wife. No one speaks to her like that. Not you. Not your friends. Not even my family,” he spits.

He drags him by the scruff of the neck and lifts him into the air. Holy shit, this is hot. “Let me make this very simple for you. Under no circumstances do you sell your drugs here. Arizona is ours.”

He drops Levi to the floor. “To clarify, we are not open to expansion opportunities here in New Falls. Unless you come to us with a solid offer, we ain’t even open to discussions.”

Levi claws at his neck, coughing. “You’re going to regret this.”

Colten spits on the floor beside him. “Nah. I don’t think I will. You’re lucky I ain’t emptying my gun in your chest.”

We filter out of the door in silence and head to the Rolls. Colten stays behind to talk to his guys.

“What the fuck was that?” Dom whispers beside me.

“I think that was Colten saying no.”

And I thoroughly enjoyed witnessing Colt lay into Levi like that.

“Dad is going to lose his shit. This doesn’t look good for you. It’s going to seem like you’re siding with them over him.”

I close my eyes and take a breath. “I’ll go home. I’ll speak to him. I never wanted to destroy the Sterlings. I always wanted an alliance. I need Dad to understand that.”

Dom rests his hand on my shoulder. “I’m coming with you, G. I’m not letting you speak to him alone.”

I swallow past the lump in my throat. Those few days away in Greece, I was free. The second I landed back home in America, it went to shit, and the weight of the world was on my back again.

I need to make it stop. I want to go back to being the woman I was while I was there. “Dad isn’t going to kill me. He’s trying to punish me to see how I behave. It’s always a test.”

“And you’re failing it, G.” Dom doesn’t bother mincing his words.

I rest my back against the Rolls, watching Colten as he speaks to his guys. I think about the way I’ve never known what safe feels like until I let him take control.

I might not be capable of love, or the kind of love they describe for most people.

But I know myself enough to know there has to be another way. One that doesn’t involve me screwing over the only person other than my brothers who made me feel.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX



Colten

Gianna headed back to Dom's ranch house to, in her words, plan how to deal with her father. I was hoping she meant kill him, but no, she meant talk to him about cutting Levi out of their organization and stop pushing them into Arizona where they ain't welcome.

It only makes me respect her more. She could have tried to sneak off and make a deal behind my back. Instead, she told me outright who was coming after us, and let me in on the fun.

But I caught a glimpse of Dom and her talking by the car after the meeting, and Gianna went pale. Something goes on in that family that I can't quite put my finger on. It turns the fiercest woman I've met into a shell of herself.

"Earth to Colten," Ace says, waving his hand in front of my face.

"Sorry. Was thinking."

About the nerves Gianna tried to hide from me as she kissed me goodbye. I can't shake that. Gianna Sterling is not anxious, yet talking to her father, that hits a nerve inside her. I don't like it.

"Now that is dangerous, brother." Hunter chuckles, holding up his beer.

I recline back in my seat, staring up at the sun.

"We should all be working right now," I mutter.

Ace laughs. "That's what we pay our hands a fuck load of cash for, Colt. I thought you got into this whole relaxing thing in Greece."

I nod. It's true. We can't run the ranch all day and night and organize the other bullshit. There ain't enough hours in the day. But I relaxed in Greece

because I had Gianna beside me. Now she ain't; I'm all pent up again.

"Don't you guys miss it, being just cowboys?" I ask. Because I do. I miss when my life was waking up, going for a ride, checking on the animals, repairing fences. Hell, even branding season.

"Yeah. Once everything dies down, we can go back to it," Hunter says.

"So not in this lifetime?" I joke.

Ace rolls his shoulders. "I think it would be good for our kids if Sterling Ranch was that by the time they bury us. I don't want my daughter dealing with this. And Wyatt? You want him to become a drug lord?" he says, looking at Hunter.

"Fuck no."

"Then how do we stop it? We can't," I say, because it's true. You don't decide you're no longer in the mafia.

I already told them about the biker gang, and we're tightening up security, especially around our shipments coming in and out.

"What's got you thinking this?" Hunter asks, concern on his face.

I glance at Ace and think about how a few weeks ago I was covered in his blood and how limp he went in my arms. "Just thinking about my future, I guess. Isn't that supposed to happen when you're married?"

Ace laughs. "Yeah, a real marriage."

I frown. "I did marry Gianna… for real."

The entire energy shifts.

"Yeah, but you don't love her? You don't even like her?" Ace says, confused.

"I like her. We've kissed and made up."

Pretty sure I fell headfirst into love with her, if I'm being honest with myself. I ain't saying that out loud to my brothers; I won't live that shit down. Especially when the woman I'm obsessed with keeps attempting to push me away at every conversation that involves an emotion.

Hunter's mouth drops. "What are you saying?"

I shrug. "I don't know yet. It's early. Really fuckin' early. But we're exclusive, I think."

Ace coughs.

"You said we couldn't trust her?" Hunter says.

"And I've never been wrong before?"

I get it; it ain't often.

Ace laughs. "That's true."

I rub my hands along my jeans. “I can’t stop thinking about her. I haven’t been able to for weeks, ever since we had that meeting with her. There’s something about her, and the more I see her, properly see her, the more I want her. I know it’s not a good idea. I know who her family is, but I can’t fuckin’ help it. It’s like an addiction.”

Ace punches me in the arm. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“I ain’t confessing my undying love. I’m just saying…” I pause, thinking of the word.

“You like fucking her?” Hunter finishes for me.

“No. More than that. Although, that’s out of this world.”

“Nice,” Ace adds.

God, I would have missed my little shit of a brother if he died.

“So what are you going to do about it?” Hunter asks before finishing his beer.

“Not a goddamn clue. She’s the most insufferable, unpredictable woman I’ve ever met. And yet, I can’t get enough.”

Both of my brothers smile as I light a cigarette.

“I’ll bring her to family dinner tonight. Show her what it’s like to be a Sterling.”

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CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN



GIANNA

Nervous isn’t usually a word I’d align with who I am, unless it involves my father, except it’s the only one that fits for this moment.

Colten invited me to a family dinner. They do it every week. Booze and good food is how he sold it to me. But, honestly, it feels like I’m walking into an interrogation.

Being married on paper is one thing; they all accepted that for what it was. But him inviting me and bringing me into the family out of choice? Everyone knows that's different and moving into a whole new territory that I’m not sure I’m ready for.

“I’m going back to LA tomorrow,” I blurt out before we reach Hunter’s door.

He stops, turns to face me, and shoves me up against the wooden pillar.

“And you’re telling me this now? Not two hours ago?”

“Two hours ago you had your face between my legs, and after that, I couldn’t really talk with your dick in my mouth.”

He grins. “Good point. But there were opportunities. Like the shower?”

“The shower where you bent me over and fucked me from behind?”

“Good point. We had coffee together first?”

I bite my lip. “I was admiring your abs most of the time, being totally honest.”

His hand frames my face. “How long are you going for?”

“A day, two max. I need to speak to my father after that shitshow with Levi.”

“A phone call isn’t sufficient?”

“No. That’s not how he works. He doesn’t quite understand how the world now actually works. He’s stuck in the mindset of thirty years ago.” I rest my hands on his chest. “Colt, I’m not in his good books right now after what I did to Fabio. If I push him too far, I lose everything I’ve worked for. I have to tread carefully, which is why in person is better; he respects that more.”

His jaw twitches. “Everything you worked for? His empire?”

I frown. “I’m next in line to take it over, you know that. I have to prove to him I’m worthy. That’s what I’ve been doing since I was ten years old, Colt.”

He gives me a stiff nod. “And that’s your future? That’s what you want? To rule over LA?”

“Well, yeah. That’s always been the goal.”

He releases me and steps back, shoving his hand in his pocket. Why is he being so weird about this? I literally married him for this exact reason; I’ve never hidden it. I am learning that there may be a better way of obtaining this goal without losing myself.

“And what happens if he doesn’t give you the empire?” he asks.

“That isn’t an option, cowboy.”

“Well, I guess you gotta go home then,” he mutters before walking to the front door. He opens it for me and ushers me through, his hand on the small of my back guiding me to Hunter’s backyard.

The barbecue is smoking, and the evil goat and Wyatt are running around. Everyone is sitting around a ginormous wooden table, already filled with food.

“Uncle Colt!!” Wyatt screeches, making me wince as he runs into him at full pelt.

Colten laughs, picking him up.

“Daddy said you’d take me to the sanctuary tomorrow. Can you, please?”

“The sanctuary?” I ask.

“It’s basically an animal hospital. We take in animals, wild or not, and try to get them back to full health.”

“Oh, cool. Can I come?” I ask.

I want to learn more about him and his passions, outside of going down on me.

“You’re busy tomorrow, aren’t you?” he asks, eyebrow raised.

“I can leave after.”

He nods, placing Wyatt back down. “Then sure, the three of us can go.”

I slide my hand in his, and he glances down before heading over to the table.

Harper gives me a little wave; her bump is getting bigger each time I see her. Violet is fussing with her baby at the end of the table, and Jett, who is wearing another monstrosity of a shirt with peacocks on, is doing his best to help her, although it seems like he has no idea what to do. And Tate, Jett's brother, is doing exactly what I am, examining the room in silence. I’ve not seen Tate enough to even begin to figure him out.

Colt hands me a cold bottle of beer and pulls me out of a chair. His hands land on my shoulder, and he bends down. “It’s crazy here, but you get used to it,” he whispers.

I rest my head against his chest. “I’m used to crazy, don’t worry.”

It reminds me of growing up, when Mom was alive. She would host huge family parties, cousins, cousins of cousins, people off the street. Enough food to feed a village. It was the best time.

And when we lost her, we lost all the fun in our lives.

Hunter gives us a nod, and Romeo follows his line of sight. He looks at me, then at Colten without a flicker of emotion. Like I’ve pissed him off by being here. I didn’t realize he was part of the family either. I don’t know why the hell I keep seeing him here. Something keeps dragging him back; I assumed Enzo would be keeping him busy elsewhere by now.

I grab Colten's collar and drag him back down.

“What’s Romeo’s deal?” I ask.

He clears his throat. “Not a lot. Probably here to discuss business with Hunter.”

“Hmm.”

I know that out of everyone, he will be the one pushing for me to leave. He made it quite clear Enzo doesn’t make alliances with people like me in the last meeting. Enzo wants an LA without the Milano family, and I’m the one standing in his way. That’s what I’ve heard through the grapevine.

Harper comes and sits next to me while Colt helps Ace with the food. “How was Greece?” she asks.

“Beautiful and productive,” I tell her.

We've been texting since the girls' night; I'm actually in the group chat with her, Lola, and Violet now. Not that I've seen Violet much around. I want to make an effort to get to know her too.

"And how is it with Colten?" she whispers.

I smile. "What exactly do you want to know, Harper?"

"Well, it's cute he's bringing you to family day. So that's a good sign."

There it is again, that word, cute.

"I don't know, he's got a weird obsession with making sure I eat. He might be dragging me here to watch me have dinner," I joke.

I have noticed him watching me, but my relationship with food is fine; I have the little triggers about leaving my plate.

Harper's face drops. "You don't eat?"

"Long story. But, yes, I do eat."

I feel Romeo's stare at the side of my head, so I turn to face him to confirm. He matches my stare.

"Did you want to talk to me, Romeo?" I ask, loud enough for the whole yard to hear.

He smirks. "Ti sto guardando." *I'm watching you.*

I grin sweetly in response. "Vuoi che metta in scena uno spettacolo?" *Would you like me to put on a show?*

He clenches his jaw as the table falls silent.

"So offrire uno spettacolo migliore con tuo marito; chiediglielo." *I can put on a better show with your husband; ask him.*

As if on cue, Colten places down a tray of meat in the middle of the table. Romeo looks right at him, then back at me and winks.

All the blood drains from my face. No. Fucking. Way.

"What did Romeo say to you?" Harper whispers in my ear.

"I-I need to pee," I rush the words out and stand, almost throwing the chair on the floor as I stumble back.

I race back inside, find the first bathroom, and slam it shut and lock it.

Colten and Romeo?

My husband is gay? Is all of this a big setup to make me fall for him so they can ruin my family?

There's a light knock at the door, and I ignore it.

Gianna Milano does not cry. And she certainly doesn't let a man upset her. And Lord help Colt if I find out this is all an act.

"G, let me in." Harper's sweet voice carries through the door.

Reluctantly, I unlock it, and she walks in, sitting on the closed toilet seat, hands on her bump. “Gianna, what did Romeo say?”

My fingers are shaking as I grip the sink. I say, “That my husband likes dick. Romeo’s dick, to be specific.”

Harper’s cheeks go bright red, and now I know Romeo wasn’t bullshitting.

“Harper, I need you to tell me the truth. Is Colten in a relationship with Romeo behind my back? Is he pretending to like me to screw me over? I need to know so I can get out of this mess.”

She blinks at me, shaking her head. “N-no. That last bit isn’t true? What do you mean?”

I run my hands through my hair. God, I need a cigarette. Or twenty. Maybe even a joint.

“So they are together?”

“No. They were never a real couple, G. From what Ace told me, Colten is—I think he described it as sexually free.”

“What in the fuck does that mean?”

“He fucks women… and men sometimes.”

“So, he’s bisexual?”

She laughs nervously. “Yeah.”

He failed to mention that to me. Now it makes sense why he answered my question in the Greek cellar so easily. Of course he’d fuck a guy. He already does.

I blow out a breath, gripping the edge of the sink and tipping my head down. Am I some kind of laughing stock to them all?

I’ve hurt Harper, and although she says she forgives me, she’s always going to side with them over me.

I’m back to square one. All I have is Dom.

“Are you okay, G?” Harper asks cautiously.

I want to smash this mirror off the wall is how I want to answer.

“Yeah.” I snap my head up, looking at my dark eyes in the mirror. “I’m fine,” I repeat it to make it true.

“I’ll meet you back out there; I need to pee,” I tell her, opening the door.

She wraps her arm around my shoulder and rests her head against me.

“You don’t have to pretend with me, G. It’s a shock, but I promise on my life that as far as I’m aware, Colten and Romeo are nothing but sex. He’s not conspiring against you.”

I swallow and nod my head, forcing a smile at her through the mirror. That's why Romeo is always lingering around the ranch. It's not business. He's after my husband. "It's fine. Colten can fuck who he wants; it doesn't matter."

She pulls away. "You like him, don't you?"

"Maybe I liked the idea of him, Harper. But I'm better off alone; no one can stab me in the back then."

She glances down at the ground, then back at me. "I think you're wrong. But why don't you ask him for the truth? He can explain himself better than I can."

I don't respond. I let her leave and lock the door behind her. I need two minutes to recompose myself and bring back the real Gianna.

Shaking my head, I try to push out the thoughts of Colten and Romeo together. I squeeze my thighs as an overwhelming heat burns through me. I should not be turned on thinking about my husband fucking another guy, because let's face it, I know exactly how it goes.

Romeo is like me. He wants to escape his own head. And Colten provides that.

I need to figure out if whatever it is between them is more than sex. And I need to find out now before I spiral and end up murdering my own husband.

I will not be made a fool of. I'm already a pawn in my father's game; I won't be in Colten's.

His past is his past; I don't care. What I do care about is why Romeo felt the need to do this to me at a family party. Jealousy means feelings. Feelings are more than sex. And where the fuck does that leave me?

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CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT



Colten

Song- Money Where Your Mouth Is, Lakeview, Gideon

Harper storms right past me; Ace shrugs when I look at him for any idea of what just happened.

Whatever was said between Gianna and Romeo wasn't good.

"Is G coming back?" I ask Harper.

Romeo's eyes snap to mine, and that's when I see it: fucking remorse.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. He's always made it clear he doesn't want Gianna in Enzo's organization, and I think he told her enough to press her buttons.

I rub my hands over my face and head towards the back door. My heart drops through my chest, and I have to get to her. I have to explain. Because the thought of ruining whatever the hell we've managed to build in Greece feels like cutting off a damn limb.

"Colt. Wait. Maybe give her a minute." Harper rushes behind me.

I stop. Turn to face her. "How furious is she?"

Harper blinks at me and shakes her head. "She's not angry, Colt. It's worse."

My heart hammers. "What are you saying?"

"She seemed sad, and I've not seen Gianna sad. Ever. Period."

It takes everything in me not to storm over to Romeo and punch him in the head until he can't ever speak again. What the hell is he playing at?

Is he jealous? Being spiteful isn't him. He knows it was never anything deeper than sex.

This isn't about me. This is about trying to rattle Gianna.

The back door opens, and all the air is sucked out of my lungs. Her eyes hit me like daggers, but she plasters on a smile good enough to fool everyone else around us, but not me. Without a word, she closes the distance between us, grabs me by the throat so hard the points of her nails draw blood, and tugs me down to slam her lips over mine. My arms loop around her waist, tugging her flush against me.

If I can do anything right now, it's showing her that there's only one person for me.

Only one person who has my attention.

We stumble backward until her back hits the fence. I don't break the kiss; I don't dare.

She's putting on a show, not just that she's mine, but the control she has over me. This is a power play. And she's sure as hell winning.

I break the kiss and glance to the side. Hunter has his hands over Wyatt's eyes, glaring at me like he's going to punch me in the jaw. Well, I'd rather that than Gianna being mad at me; that's for goddamn sure.

"Let's go inside," I whisper against her lips.

"Why? Do you not want anyone to see how much you want your wife?"

I cup her cheek. "Gianna. I don't give a fuck which adult watches us make out; however, Wyatt doesn't need to."

Her eyes go wide. "Shit. I'm sorry."

"It's a kiss, G. He sees Hunter and Lola madly in love every day; it ain't new to the boy. The issue is, if you keep kissing me like that, I'm gonna get hard, and that's a step over the line."

I lift her into my arms, her legs around my waist.

"I need a few minutes with my wife. I'll be back," I tell my brothers, and anyone that's listening.

"A few minutes, is that it?" Ace calls out.

"Coming from a bull rider who also lasted eight seconds with his girl?" I retort.

That'll shut him up. He was stupid enough to tell Jett that his first time with Harper, after being celibate for six years, he came eating her out. And now, it's the perfect comeback.

"Don't you dare pick on our Acey Baby!" Jett shouts back.

I chuckle, carrying G in my arms through the door. I don't get far; I shove her back against the first available wall.

"You wanted to talk?" she asks.

“Yeah. I do. But I need more of this first,” I tell her, taking her lips and devouring her. My own fucked up way of showing her exactly what she is to me, the only way I really know how to.

I pull back and study her. Harper is right. I can see the way her eyes have dulled. That spark she carries is a little bit dimmer than normal.

“Tell me what you’re thinking, viper.”

She sighs. “Was any of this real? Or was this some kind of scam where you make me fall for you, only to betray me, ruin my empire, and run back to your boyfriend?”

What the fuck. I don’t know how she’s jumped into that spiral, but I need to put a stop to it. I’d never betray her like that. “No, G. I promise that ain’t it.”

Her eyes lock onto mine, like she’s staring into my soul, before she says, “And how could you possibly prove it to me?”

My mind spins. I don’t know. So I say the first thing that comes to my head. “You want me to prove that I’m not secretly in love with Romeo?”

“Yep.”

I swallow. “It was only ever sex. No feelings. No relationship. Just a fuck when he was in town.”

“Why him? Do you normally sleep with women, or guys?”

“Both. Mainly women. I’ve been with a few guys. I’ve been with both at the same time.”

Her face remains expressionless. It makes me feel like shit. I can’t change my past; I wish like fuck I could. Hell, I wish I was a virgin until I met her.

“So, why him? Power? Does he get you closer to Enzo? Or does he fuck you good?”

I choke on a laugh. “Sweetheart, no one fucks me. I fuck them. Haven’t you worked that out about me yet? With Romeo, it’s a quick, hard fuck. He likes it rough, so I don’t have to be gentle. I don’t have to worry about him and what he can take. I don’t have to check on him the next day. I give him what he wants. It’s a mutual understanding between us.”

“How long?” she asks.

“Started probably six months ago.”

She nods. “How many times?”

“Six or seven?”

“When was the last time?”

“Ace’s wedding night.”

She scoffs. “Do you want to fuck him again?”

“No,” I answer without even hesitating.

“I can’t give you what he can, Colten. I have a pussy. But I do like it rough. Am I enough for you?”

Before, I was finding her pushing points to use against her, but now, she’s given me one of her most vulnerable moments, and I’ll never use that against her. I don’t want her to feel like she did today, ever again.

I grab her face, pressing my nose against hers. “It was never about me needing dick, Gianna. Don’t get who I am confused. I told you that I’m obsessed with you. I want you. Not just for sex, for everything.”

“For now,” she mutters.

I swallow. There is only one way I can think of to truly show this woman where my head is. “I can prove it to you.”

“How?”

I pull my gun from its holster and press it against her throat. Her eyes light up, her pupils darken. And this is why I’m so addicted.

“I’ll walk out there, drag him to the barn, and I’ll shoot him in the fucking head. You give me the order, I’ll show you that there was nothing emotional between us. He upset you; he deserves it.”

A wicked smile appears on her plump red lips. “Answer this again. Was any of this real? Because you have one chance to admit the truth, because if I find out you’re lying, you won't live to see the next sunrise, Colten.”

She’s the one with a gun pressed to her throat, yet she’s confidently telling me I won’t live to see tomorrow. It’s like I’ve already died and gone to heaven.

“Everything is real between us, Gianna,” I say, my voice raw.

“Then Romeo can survive another day. I don’t have the patience to deal with a war right now.” She pauses, wrapping her hand over mine on the gun. “But if I find out I’ve been lied to. If there was more to it, I’ll kill you. I mean it. You don’t get to hurt me, Colten Sterling.”

“Then you agree not to hurt me either, G.”

She drags me closer, claiming my lips. “Then don’t give me your heart, cowboy.”

My chest almost caves in because, honestly, her claws have already ripped through my ribcage; it’s only a matter of time before her nails dig into my heart.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE



GIANNA

I break the kiss before I demand he drag me into one of Hunter's spare bedrooms. "Shall we go and join your family for the rest of the meal? It's rude to disappear," I sass.

"If we must, I suppose." He rests his forehead against mine, his fingers digging into my ass. "I'm sorry you found out about my past like that. He had no right."

I tap his cheek. "Would you have ever told me yourself?"

I wonder if he's ashamed? Like Dom sometimes struggles with, especially when he's been around my father too much.

"If you'd asked about my past… relations. Then yes, I would have been open."

"Okay. Any other skeletons in your closet, Mr. Sterling?" I ask as he puts my feet back on the ground.

"My skeletons have their own graveyard, G. Much like yours. But nothing that is going to make you question who I am."

He slides his hand in mine and squeezes. I stop us before he opens the door. "Colt… I want you to know that I'm not judging you. Actually, it's hot thinking about you with another guy. That wasn't what I was mad about. It was the who. Him specifically. And where your head is at with me."

He grins. "You're cute, viper."

I let out a groan. "What is it with this family and the word cute?"

He leans in, nudging his shoulder against me. "Because I know it winds you up, G."

“Oh, so after your ex-lover drops a bomb over a tray of meat, you think now is the appropriate time to wind me up? Really?”

He laughs. “In hindsight, maybe not. I can’t help it.”

I don’t fight the smile. I don’t remember the last time I actually smiled this much; the muscles in my face will need Botox soon with all this use they’re getting.

“Also, Dom said Romeo was eyefucking him at the meeting a while back. This all makes so much sense now,” I say as the pieces click together.

“Romeo is always looking to fuck, Gianna.”

Jealousy races through me, making my skin crawl. “Well, he can take his dick, and shove it elsewhere,” I mutter.

We rejoin the rest of the family, who don’t even acknowledge our return because they’re too busy eating and trying to stop the kids from causing a scene.

Wyatt grins at us as we return, the goat standing behind his chair. “Do you want some steak?” he asks me, pointing at the plate in front of him. He wipes the sauce that’s smothering his face with the back of his hand.

“I’d love some,” I tell him.

Colten steps in and dishes mine up, grabbing me some salad and fries. As he places it down in front of me, he presses a kiss to the side of my head.

And just like that, everything is back to normal. Romeo minds his own business at the other end of the table with Hunter. Colten devours his plate like he didn’t already eat a lunch that could have fed me for the entire week.

I sit back and watch, nestled against Colten's side as Wyatt plays with his action figures. He makes them jump like superheroes from one glass to another. I hold my breath, watching through one eye, waiting for this to turn from fun into him being told off.

And as expected, the toy bounces from one drink to another, and the glass topples off the table, smashing onto the floor, sending water flying all over him.

His eyes go wide, and I brace myself as Hunter stands. It sends me back to when I was his age, and how hard my father's palm would have slapped across my cheek.

The bruises I’d try to hide with my mom's makeup.

All over some spilled water and broken glass. Once, when I was ten, he made me pick up all the shards piece by piece with my fingers, until the

pool of my blood was bigger than the water I knocked over.

I frown as Hunter walks over, wraps his arm around Wyatt, and pulls him to one side. He checks him over, making sure there's no glass, and lifts him into his arms as Ace starts picking up the mess from the floor.

Not a single raised voice.

Hunter ruffles Wyatt's hair and kisses him on the head.

I shake my head, looking up at Colt. "So, Wyatt won't get in trouble for knocking the glass over?"

His eyebrows pinch together, and he rubs his hand along my arm. "It was an accident, G. He was just playin'. Who gives a shit about a broken glass?"

I blow out a breath. Just playing. Like kids should be allowed to do. Resting my head against his chest, I don't say another word.

Every now and again, Colt presses a kiss to the top of my head. I like listening to them all interact. They're funny. Jett saying ridiculous shit that I'm not even sure is English to Ace getting constantly bullied by his brothers.

Lola and Violet have their hands full with their babies, but they seem so happy. Well, Violet less so; I can feel her exhaustion from here.

Her little boy starts screaming, and I mean enough to make me wince-level.

"Do you want kids?" I ask Colt, still watching Violet pacing around the table, rocking the newborn.

"Yeah. I do," he mutters.

"Hmm."

"Do you?" he whispers.

"Hadn't had time to think about that, Colt," I answer honestly. If I could guarantee my kids grew up with a life like this, here on this ranch, then yeah, I think it would be pretty cool to watch something I created grow up. But I don't even know if I'm going to see the end of the damn year with the way it's going with my father.

My existence is about survival, not creating new life.

He gives me a look before saying, "Then we probably need to get you in to see a doctor to get you the pill."

I whack his chest. "Or you could not be a caveman and use a condom," I counter.

He lifts me from my seat and sets me on his lap, wrapping his arms around my waist. “Then how am I supposed to eat my cum out of you later?”

The heat radiates off my chest, and I close my eyes. “I’m going to kill you, cowboy. Stop it,” I hiss.

He presses me harder against his crotch and his dick presses against me. “You want that?”

I nod discreetly. But then I notice Violet takes herself off to the back fenceline of the yard, looking out over the mountains.

“Give me a minute,” I tell Colt, and hop off his lap; he can deal with hiding his erection.

Jett stands and is about to run after Violet, but I press my hand on his arm. Now might be a good opportunity to see if I actually like kids.

“Are you okay if I speak to her? You both could probably do with a break,” I tell him; the dark circles under his eyes tell me that man needs to sleep.

And probably explains why he’s twenty percent quieter today than any other day I’ve seen him.

I pad across the grass; with each step, the baby's screams get louder.

“Violet,” I say softly.

She turns to face me and sniffles, tears streaking down her cheeks. Is this what being a new mom does to you? That’s a tick in the no category.

I hold out my arms. “Would you like me to take him for a little bit? You go and eat your food, relax.”

“Do I look that awful?” She half-laughs.

“No. You look great, Violet. You’re doing an amazing job.”

I have no clue if I’m doing the right thing here. But Lola and Harper are awesome, and they love Violet, so my math means she must be cool too.

“Have you ever held a baby before?” she asks.

I laugh. “Nope. Never. This would be my first.”

“I-I don’t know why he’s crying; nothing I do seems to stop it,” she says quietly.

She places the tiny baby in my arms, and every muscle I have tenses. “He’s precious,” I tell her. “Now, go eat something.”

I nod over to the table, and Violet looks down at her boots. “Thank you, G. I know you hardly even know me, but thank you.”

I sway gently and add in a few bounces. “What’s his name?”

“Noah.”

“Cute.” The word drops from my mouth.

I grit my teeth. I used the word *cute* and meant it. What is this damn family doing to me?

I watch as she heads back to the table, sitting beside Jett. He squeezes her shoulder, and I smile. I’m not sure if they’re an item. Is he the father of this kid?

“Hey, Noah,” I coo.

The kid has so much black hair; there is no doubt he’s a mirror of his mom.

After another minute of screaming, he seems to settle, his eyes growing heavy. I keep doing exactly what I’m doing in the same rhythm. Rock, rock, sway until my shoulders ache. But he’s sound asleep. And now I’m too frightened to move.

Colten heads over, and relief washes over me. I have no clue what to do other than stand here. “He’s asleep, so whisper.”

Colt bites his lip. “Are you trying to give me a breeding kink, G?”

Trying to give? I think he’s already got one. Lunatic. And I'm crazy for letting him come inside me. I can’t help it; it’s hot, and my horny brain gets scrambled. I have to hope and pray my cycle tracking app works.

I close my eyes. “Not now, cowboy. I am out of my depth here.”

“No, you aren’t. You can do anything, viper. Whether that’s killing a man in cold blood, or cuddling a friend's baby because she’s struggling. You’ve got a very versatile set of skills.”

I look up at him through my lashes, taking a step closer. “Tell me more about this breeding kink.”

His finger trails along my cheekbone. “It means lots more of my come inside you.”

I suck in a breath, and Noah jumps. My heart starts to race as I gently rock him again. He’s so damn cute. Exactly what the word was meant for. Maybe… having one of my own one day wouldn’t be so bad.

“Okay. Change the subject.” I swallow. “Is Jett the father?”

Colten glances over his shoulder, then back at me. “Nah. He’s not.”

My mouth forms an ‘o’.

Interesting.

“It’s a long story. They’re just friends, so they say,” he continues.

Colt wraps his arm around my shoulder and turns us to face the mountains.

“Beautiful, ain’t it?” he mutters.

“It is. I have to say, it beats LA.”

The peace here is perfect.

“And yet you’re running back there tomorrow.”

I roll my eyes. “My life is there, Colt. I have responsibilities that I can’t ignore.”

He hums in response as the sun starts to disappear behind the rocks.

I know what’s waiting for me back in LA, and I'd rather be here watching the sunsets as the hot breeze hits against my skin. My stomach drops when I think about tomorrow.

But that isn’t the life I was given.

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CHAPTER SIXTY



Colten

Gianna heads back to my house with her brother to pack up her car for tomorrow, while I help Ace tidy up the mess left by the dinner party. And G was right: when Dom came in to collect his sister, Romeo was totally eye fucking him.

"What happened earlier?" Ace quizzes.

I shove the trays into the trash, glancing over at Romeo on his phone still at the table. "She knows. Romeo told her."

His mouth drops open. "Oh, fuck. But you ain't still…"

"No," I snap. "That stopped before I even married G."

"Then, it is what it is, bro." He shrugs, like it's nothing.

"He had no right to tell her like that," I reply.

Romeo looks up from his phone, and I shake my head, my anger returning. Heading over to the table, I grip the back of the chair opposite him. "You need to keep your damn mouth shut, Rome."

"It was a joke, Colt."

I grit my teeth. "That ain't funny. Don't play with Gianna. I mean it."

He scoffs. "You want me to be nice to your fake wife?"

"There isn't anything fake about it."

I know he might find it hard to believe; he doesn't believe in romantic relationships or staying with one person. And that is fine for him; it doesn't mean he gets to mess with my wife.

He runs a hand through his black hair. "Right. Then I apologize. But don't come back to me when this shoots you in the ass. You cannot trust

her.”

“You don’t know her.”

I don’t think anyone does the way I do.

“Neither do you, Colten. I have no interest in your relationships; what we had was fun, but it meant nothing. But Enzo’s empire does mean something to me, and I will not allow anyone to sink their claws in where they don’t belong,” he huffs, checking his watch like he’s bored.

I clear my throat. “Perhaps you should give her a shot. You want a family to run LA? Then why can’t it be her? She has my vote.”

He lets out a laugh. “It isn’t a voting system, Colten. It’s Enzo’s decision. And until her father is out of the picture, that is who he is basing his assessment on. And Vito Milano is vermin.”

I chew on the inside of my mouth. “And what if I got rid of him? What if Gianna became head of the family officially? Would you take her seriously then?”

He shrugs. “If Gianna kills her own father, Enzo will take her seriously. LA is hers.”

I swallow, blood pumping in my ears. I don’t want Gianna to leave to head to LA, but it’s selfish of me to take that away from her. We can figure it out. I can help her. Doesn’t mean I’ll like her not being in my bed every morning. I want her to be happy.

“And if she doesn’t?” I ask.

“Then Vito will die regardless, but Enzo will fill the space with someone else, and Gianna… well, I guess what happens to her is her own choice. If she fights against it, then she is the enemy.”

“You know she’s going to fight against bringing in another family onto her territory,” I spit.

Rage floods through me.

“Then, you should probably give her the options if she wishes to survive, Colten. She thought an alliance through marriage would get her in, but all it’s doing is keeping her alive.” He pauses. “For now.”

The last part plays on loop in my head.

“No one touches my wife,” I growl. “Not you. Not Enzo. So long as she remains married to me, nothing will happen to her. And if it does, do you think the other families would agree with me? Do you not think they’d also fear for their loved ones if Enzo suddenly gave orders to kill our wives?”

Romeo's nostrils flare because he knows I'm right. And he knows how fiercely the men will protect their women. If Enzo hurts mine, that's a message he doesn't want out in the world. Because that goes against everything we stand for.

"No matter what happens in LA, Gianna is safe. Give me your word," I demand.

"I'll speak to Enzo."

"You've got three days; otherwise, I'll be taking a trip to see Declan Quinn and Mikhail Volkov, and then perhaps on my travels, I'll see Frankie Falcone, too. Get their take on this."

Romeo pushes himself up to stand. "You'd do that for her? Put yourself on the line for a bit of pussy?"

"Yeah. I fuckin' would." I round the table and stop in front of him. "Call her that again, and I'll put my fist through your jaw."

He smirks in response. "You know I like it rough, Colten. Stop flirting with me."

"Oh, fuck off."

I back away before I really do kill him. Snatching the bag of trash, I shove it in a pile with the rest.

"Ace, I gotta go. You good to finish up?"

"Yeah, bro."

I always knew fucking Romeo would be a risk. That was probably part of the appeal in the first place. But I'm starting to regret my past decisions, especially when it's creeping into my future.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE



Gianna

I hold in a yawn, following behind Colten, who has Wyatt on his shoulders as we approach his animal shelter on the ranch.

Colt was furious when he got home last night after clearing up from the party. He apologized another five times, and then proved until the early hours of the morning just how obsessed with me he is. I came so many times that I pretty much passed out by the end of it.

I believe him. I am enough for him.

“Do you have any more goats?” Wyatt asks.

“No, buddy. We have a sheep. Some snakes. A couple of horses and some cattle here at the moment.”

I follow in behind them, and the smell of the farmyard hits me first.

Wyatt looks down at me and asks, “What’s your favorite animal, Gianna?”

I pause. I don’t know if I have one. “Well, I’ve never had any pets or lived anywhere as cool as this before. So, I’d say my favorite animal is probably a dog.”

He gives me a cheeky grin. “You’ve never had any pets? Why?”

Okay, new lesson: kids are very inquisitive little beasts. “My dad doesn’t like mess. He’s very particular about the house being sparkling.”

He frowns, and so does Colten. “I think you should get a pet for her, Uncle Colt.”

I hold up my hand. “I don’t think that's necessary. I’m too busy to look after one.”

Colten huffs, “No such thing as too busy to care for animals, G.”

I glance down at the ground. “What’s your favorite animal then, Wyatt?” I ask, avoiding Colten’s statement.

“Easy. Goats. Then horses.”

“And you?” I ask, raising an eyebrow at Colt.

“Ever heard of a Gila Monster?” he returns.

“Nope. Never in my life. How big are they?”

I’m intrigued to see if they deserve the term monster in their name.

“Not big. But they’re venomous.”

I grin. “Could it kill someone?”

“That’s very rare. Hurts like hell, though.”

Ah. A torture technique. “Do you have any?”

He chuckles, putting Wyatt back on the ground. “Not right now. Occasionally we have had them in here, injured ones that need help.”

“Uncle Colt gets loads of cool animals in here. And he saves so many of them!” Wyatt adds, beaming with a grin.

“So this is like a hospital?” I ask, glancing round.

I get the feeling this place is his sanctuary too. He loves animals; that’s his purpose. And I love the fact I get to see this side of him.

“Yeah, essentially. For the animals on the ranch, but sometimes people bring in wild animals they’ve found that need help.”

I brush my hand along the beam and approach the huge white horse slowly. “Will it bite?” I ask.

“Hopefully,” Colten jokes.

I hold out my hand and the horse sniffs and lets out a huff, turning away from me. Don’t animals pick up on energy? Maybe mine is bad.

“It always helps if you have food, G.”

“Oh.”

I keep walking past the animals; most of them are resting. “It’s really cool you do this, Colt.”

He’s right on my tail as I meet Wyatt next to the pen for the sheep. I drop to my knees and she, or I assume she, hobbles over. When I hold out my hand, she rubs her soft face against it.

And I smile. I can’t help myself. “I know nothing about animals, cowboy,” I say, looking up at him.

He’s grinning, his eyes sparkling in a way I can only describe as admiration. “I can teach ya.”

“I can’t even ride a horse.”

He takes off his hat, placing it on my head, and runs a hand through his dark hair. “Again, same answer.”

I run my fingers along the rim. I’ve had my eye on this one for a while, but I never dared to touch it. Colten is very possessive of his hats, keeps them lined up, always clean, even after work. It kind of seems like an extension of him, and now I’ve got it.

“Uncle Colten, can I take this sheep home?” Wyatt asks from beside me.

“No. Your dad will lose his mind. Gary is quite enough for now.”

I run my fingers in the sheep's coarse hair, and she lets out a baa. “Gorgeous girl, aren’t you?” I tell her.

My boots in the hay, a cowboy hat on my head, talking to a sheep. What have I become?

“You wearin’ my hat is by far the most gorgeous view, viper,” Colten says, his voice low.

I sink my teeth into my lip, my fingers brushing the rim of the hat to tip it for him. “Oh, yeah? Maybe I’ll wear it later,” I say with a wink.

Wyatt grabs Colt's hand and drags him off to another stall, so I stay with the injured sheep.

“What happened to you, girl? Did someone hurt you?” I whisper.

She lies down beside me, resting her head right on my knee. And I stroke her gently. Colten is giving her a second chance; I bet most people would have put her down. They don’t see the value in anything weak.

That’s what I was taught. You can’t be weak. You can’t be injured, even if you’re hurt or have been beaten to shit by two guards when you’re sixteen. You carry on as if nothing happened.

I never had anyone to help me heal. To look after my injuries. I think honestly, if I was useless to my father, he’d eventually put me in the ground.

“I won’t let anything happen to you, ever again,” I tell her.

Colt returns, this time without Wyatt, who is climbing up to see into a pen with a baby cow.

As I stand, the sheep makes another noise, and I pout. “Could we keep her?” I ask, turning to Colt.

He tugs me closer by the waist, tipping my chin up. “You could ask me to do anything wearin’ that, and I’d agree.”

“I’m serious. Can we keep her?”

He glances past me at the sheep, then back to me. “You want to bring her home? Keep her as a pet? That ain’t what she was bred for, G.”

My eyes go wide. “You are not sending her anywhere to be slaughtered, Colten. Don’t you dare.”

He laughs. “Baby, you know how farms work, right?”

I snap my mouth shut. “Then that’s it. I’m never eating meat again.”

I’d never thought about where my food came from, the sacrifices made to keep my belly full. And now I’ve fallen in love with a sheep; I can’t unsee it. “I’m deadly serious, Colten.”

“I don’t doubt you are, sweetheart. You think I spent a fortune on vet bills to keep her walkin’ if I intended to kill her?”

I grab the collar of his shirt and drag his face down to mine. “Let me keep the sheep, and I’ll wear the hat and nothing else the second we get home.”

“Deal. Sheep is all yours.”

“Ours,” I correct him. “Remember, I don’t have a clue how to care for animals, let alone livestock.”

His lips graze my jaw. “Maybe you should have asked for a puppy first, then, G.”

“Nope. Your wife needs this sheep. And maybe more of them.”

“Hey!” Wyatt calls out behind us. “How come she gets to keep the sheep and I can’t? That’s not fair.”

Colten straightens up and walks over to Wyatt, bending down to his level. “You can come and visit the sheep at my house, maybe help Gianna learn how to care for her. How does that sound?” he says gently.

Wyatt's eyes light up. “For real?”

“Yes. For real,” Colten tells him.

Wyatt jumps in the air with excitement, making the sheep back away.

“What shall I name her?” I ask, resting my hands on the railing.

“Sally the sheep?” Wyatt suggests.

“Sally,” I repeat. “I guess that works.” I shrug, turning my attention to my new sheep. “Preziosa, *Precious*, what do you think? Do you like Sally?”

Nothing. No response. But with how excited Wyatt is, I can’t say no to him. But I’ll call her Preziosa.

“So that’s settled. Once the vet has cleared her, we can bring her home,” Colten says.

“Thank you.” I rest my head on his arm, running my hands up his muscled forearm.

“You’re welcome. Perhaps we can take her out on the yacht soon?”

I burst out laughing. “I’m sure she’d love it.”

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CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO



Colten

It’s only been five hours since Gianna left for LA, but already I’m on a private jet flying to see her.

She wasn’t able to make good on her promise to me about wearing nothin’ but my hat. Her dad called asking when she would be over, so she started her road trip back.

The second she left Sterling Ranch, I didn’t know what to do with myself. I had a bad feeling about her leaving, but I ignored it in favor of helping Xander out on the ranch, the way I used to before Dad died. Makin’ sure the animals all had feed, checking none of them needed to be looked over by the vet. Secured some fence line.

Hard work didn’t help the feeling go away, though. It kept nagging at me. The dread on her face when she got the phone call. Which is why my whipped ass called Hunter and got the jet ready for an impromptu flight to California.

Never in a million years did I think I’d miss having Gianna around me. Even if she does leave her side of the bedroom like a damn pigsty. Clothes all over the floor, makeup on the bedside tables.

I pull up her contact and text her…

Me: Did you arrive safely? Or have you had your fingers cut off already?

I sit on the edge of the bed in the plane, waiting for her to read it. And she does, pretty damn fast.

Wifey: I’m here, and still have all ten fingers. Why?

Me: Well, I assumed there must have been a dramatic reason for you not to have texted your husband to let him know you arrived safely.

I can already picture her rolling her eyes.

Wifey: Dear God, you’re dramatic, cowboy.

Me: Caring about you makes me dramatic?

Wifey: Caring about me will make you weak, Colten.

I tut. She always finds a way to push back, but that is part of the appeal. I know deep down, she don’t mean it. I wanted to check on her because I could tell she was dreading going home. After what went down with Levi, I doubt her father is going to be happy. And I’m not too sure how a man like Vito behaves when he’s angry. That, and the way her face paled when she spoke to him this morning. Which is exactly why I’m thirty-eight thousand feet in the sky right now.

Me: Nothing about you makes me weak, viper.

I wait for the sassy quip to pop up, but it doesn’t. So I lay down on the bed; I’ve still got forty-five minutes left on this flight before I land. I’ve got her and Vito’s addresses loaded up on my maps and a car waiting for me at the private airstrip.

Something in my gut told me I had to be there, that it wasn’t right letting her go do this alone, even if it is her father.

After how he behaved at our wedding, I don’t trust him around my wife, and I don’t like the person he makes her. I’ve seen the Gianna that’s hiding under the surface, and when she comes out to play, that woman can take on the world. I’ve seen how much she's changed in the short time she's lived on Sterling Ranch. Give her freedom, and she’s amazing. It’s her father who is holding her down, and once she realizes this, she’s going to be unstoppable.

Gianna needs to learn pretty damn fast that she doesn’t have to carry this all on her own. And if what Romeo said is true, then I can’t let G be around her father.

I have to do worse than that; I have to persuade her to kill him.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE



GIANNA

"What's got you smiling at your phone?" Dom asks from the passenger seat.

I've parked up around the corner from Dad's mansion, replaying the script in my head of what I'm going to say to him. I have to get him to tell Levi to back the fuck off Sterling Ranch.

A rock settles in my gut.

My father wants the Sterlings gone. And I know that isn't going to work. My father doesn't understand the scale of Enzo's world. If he keeps pushing, using assholes like Levi, he's going to get us all killed.

I chew on my lip as my chest squeezes. I know it's more than that. The thought of anything happening to that ranch wakes me up in a cold sweat at night.

Thinking about Wyatt, Harper, and the kids all on that ranch. About Colten, and the way he makes everything seem that little bit brighter in my life without even trying.

I was living in a storm, and now that I've started to see the other side, I'm not sure I want to go back to where it's cold and dark. I can't seem to figure out a way to live in the middle. Where I have both.

With how my father is reigning, I don't believe it's an option anymore.

"Colten asked if I had my fingers chopped off," I tell Dom.

"And may I ask what prompted that?"

I toss my phone in the center console. "I didn't text him to tell him I got to LA."

He blows out a breath. “He’s got it baaaad for you, sis.”

I punch him hard in the arm with my ringed fingers, making him cry out. “He does not. He’s just…”

“Protective? Obsessed?” he finishes for me.

“Dramatic,” I joke.

Dom rolls his eyes. I’m sure I taught him how to do that before he even turned three.

“He’s being all hot and possessive over you.”

I swallow, glancing out of the window at the tiny clouds passing by. “I found out last night he was sleeping with Romeo,” I say under my breath.

“What! I fucking knew Romeo was gay.”

“Yep.”

“Is that an issue for you? His past?”

I turn to face Dom as he runs a hand through his black hair to slick it back. “It’s not an issue if it’s in his past.”

“But…” Dom presses.

I hug an arm around my stomach. “What if it’s not in the past? What if all of this is for show with me? And him and Romeo are conspiring against us to take LA?”

Dom rapidly blinks at me. “You sound like our father, G. Not everything and everyone is plotting your demise.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Really? Because, so far, it seems that way.”

“You like Colten, don’t you?”

I swallow. “No.”

“You’re a terrible liar, G.”

“Fine. Yes. I like the cowboy,” I admit, trying to hide my smile, but the heat creeping up my neck is going to give me away.

“Then, why don’t you maybe let your guard down? Not all the way. Just a little? Get to know Colten more. Explore it with him; you’ve been locked away from men, relationships, sex, all of it. You have to have fun, and Colten seems to be providing that; you’re fucking glowing, sis.”

For Dom to say this, he has to mean it.

“I don’t glow; I’m not a vampire.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “You’re incredibly stressful, Gianna.”

“But you love me anyway,” I tease.

“I do. Now, let's get this circus of hell over with.” He nods towards Dad’s road.

I tap my nails on the steering wheel. “You stay in the car, Dom,” I tell him.

“Not a fucking chance, G. Not a chance.”

I hold up my hand and lock eyes with him. “Little brother, that was an order, not a question. This is my mistake, my consequences to deal with, and I’m not letting him take his anger out on you again.”

He slams his fist into the dash of my beautiful Rolls.

“Dominic,” I seethe. “Get it together. I’m going to need you to drive me home, look after me, and feed Colten some bullshit about why I can’t come home until my bruises go down. I need you to not be in a hospital being fed from a tube again. We both know he doesn’t go as hard on me. I have to take this one.”

His eyes glass over, and I do everything in my power to stop my own tears from falling.

“This madness has to end, Gianna. We can’t keep playing rock, paper, scissors over who gets beat the worst this time.”

I draw in a sharp breath. “I know; that’s why we’re doing what we’re doing at Sterling Ranch, Dom. We’re forming alliances with families that will help us. We’re close.”

I stretch out my pinky finger to him. “I promise, little bro. Just like I always have, we will get out of this, and we will reign over this empire soon.”

He wraps his little finger around mine.

I kill the engine and toss Dom the keys, opening the driver's door. “If I’m not back here in an hour, come and get me.”

He drops his head. I know this kills him inside that he can’t fix this for me. But this is all we know. Punishments mean power.

“G, remember what he does isn’t out of love,” he mutters.

I slide out of the car, holding onto the metal frame. “It’s the only way he knows how, Dom. And it might be fine. He might understand.”

Or, that’s what I’ve told myself since I was a kid. This is how we get stronger, how I stand up against men twice my size. If my father didn’t treat me like this, I wouldn’t be who I am today.

With my head held high, my heels click along the pavement as I round the corner to Dad’s complex and jab in the security code next to the iron gates.

If hell were a place, I think it would feel like this.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR



Colten

I stopped by Gianna’s place first, and her car wasn’t there, so I’m five minutes out from the second address, Vito’s. That nagging feeling in my gut has me pressing my boot down on the gas pedal.

I call her cell one more time, listening to it until it rings out. So instead, I call Hunter, who picks up within five seconds.

“You’re in LA?” he asks.

He must have gotten the flight information sent over.

“Yeah… I am. And I got a bad feelin’, bro.”

“Jesus Christ. Did you not learn from the last time we went to LA? Bad shit happens to us there, Colt. Gianna is a grown-up, the heir to a mafia throne; she doesn’t need you to babysit her.”

“I ain’t doing that,” I snap.

Hunter doesn’t understand. He hasn’t seen what I have. The way she asked me if Wyatt is going to get punished for spilling water. The way she force-feeds herself to finish a meal until she looks like she might vomit.

Behind all that strength is a scared little girl who has had no one to save her. And that narrative is about to change.

“Then why did you run after her?” Hunter asks, calming his tone.

“Because I think some fucked up shit goes on in her family, Hunter. And after what went down with Levi, Gianna needs me.”

Hunter sighs. “Are you sure you ain’t creating a story that means you can get her to agree to Romeo's offer? Do you want Vito to be the bad guy so Gianna kills him? Is that it?”

I frown. “What the fuck, no? I’m trustin’ my gut, like you always tell me to do, big bro.”

“Then fine. Do you need backup?”

I spot Gianna’s Rolls parked and slam on the brakes. Dom turns to face me, his eyes blowing wide.

“Nah. Just keep your phone close by,” I tell Hunter before cutting the call and rolling down the windows.

“Dom, you’re going to get your ass out of Gianna’s car, and you’re going to get me into your father's house,” I say, coolly.

The fear in his eyes tells me everything I need to know. I liked Dom until he let my wife walk into the dragon’s den alone.

He nods.

“And then you’re going to tell me why the fuck you aren’t in there with her,” I spit.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE



GIANNA

Song- This Will Divide Us, PRESIDENT

"Fabio would have never disappointed me like this." His spit lands on my cheek, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

I don't move a muscle. I don't breathe. Because the slightest movement will only bring more pain.

"Look at me, you ungrateful bitch!" my father bellows.

I open my eyes; his blotchy red face is right in front of mine. The whiskey on his breath beats against my skin.

"I'm sorry, Dad. Levi threatened me, so I had to show him that the Milanos are in charge. We can't work with those street rats if we want to expand our empire. Don't you see? Everything I'm doing is to save us."

He laughs, tipping his head back, holding his bulging stomach. "Saving us," he mutters.

Then his bloodshot eyes land on mine, darkening.

"Saving us," he says, this time louder. His hand flies out, his palm smacking across my cheek so hard stars float in my vision as my head whips sideways, making me stumble.

Ignoring the stinging radiating from my face, I straighten up. I don't say another word.

"You really believe you're saving this family? You murdered your brother. You didn't protect Max. And now, you're married to a fucking cowboy on a farm and telling me that's going to save us, when all you're

doing is being a little disgusting whore. Just like your mother was." He shouts, throwing his arms in the air.

My heart pounds, my body braced for impact as he grabs me by the hair so hard that I scream out in agony.

With all of his force, he throws me against the wall, face first, so hard my nose cracks. Blood pours over my mouth as he tosses me to the floor.

"I told you and Dom to work with Levi! And all you do is give me a headache. You will never be ready to rule our empire like this. You're becoming weak."

I bring my knees to my chest and hug them, closing my eyes and trying to picture a happy memory. Take myself out of my body, like I learned to do when I was a kid.

Except this time, I'm not playing with my dolls with my mom; I'm lying next to Colten. He's running his fingers through my hair, smiling down at me. And I'm powerful. He's telling me to fight back, that he knows I can do this without my father.

He's telling me that he will stand beside me. That I am strong enough. That he's going to be here no matter what, and everything my father has put me through has to stop.

He has to be stopped. Because if I let this continue, that isn't strength. He isn't making me a leader. He's making me weak.

The impact of my father's foot connecting with my back sends a burning sensation through my chest. I press my lips together to stop the sobs erupting out of me.

If I cry. If I show him how pathetic I am, this goes on longer. But how long does this really go on for? Another twenty years? I can't. I cannot let this man hurt me anymore. Father or not. If I've learned anything about myself in the last few weeks, it's that he isn't making me stronger, he's beating me to be his puppet.

Normally, I have to wait until he's got all of his rage out on me and calms down. Only then will he listen. And apologize. And tell me he didn't mean it; he's doing this to make me a leader.

And until I set foot on Sterling Ranch, I would have believed him. I would have set my sights back on the goal of taking over the family and moved on, doing everything my father asks of me.

But now that I've seen how real families work in this world, with my own damn eyes. I've seen mafia leaders cuddle their children, praise them,

and let them have pet goats that run around the house.

It puts my whole life into perspective.

My father was never making me a leader; I was a pawn in his game and an outlet for his fury.

And I am nothing but the weak little bitch he always said I was, because I'm still not fighting back.

For some fucked up reason, I thought I loved my father. But this isn't love. Instead of regret. Instead of sitting and taking his beatings. Rage fuels me. I've got Colten's voice telling me that I don't lie down and take anything from any man.

Before his foot can land again, I roll away, pushing myself onto all fours.

"I'm not done with you, Gianna. Get the fuck back down," he bellows.

I spit blood onto his glistening white floor and stand. "No. If you want to hurt me, you earn it, Father."

He laughs, and it hurts somewhere deep inside my soul. And then he swings. I duck out of the way and return the favor, smashing my fist into his ribs. As he lunges back at me, I grab the crystal decanter from the side table.

"Fuck you!" I scream, smashing it into the side of his head.

It doesn't smash, but the thud from his skull makes him stop in his tracks, his eyes wide, not with anger. With something much worse.

Hatred.

I drop the glass, and it crashes against the floor, sending shards flying, and his hand shoots out, grabbing me by the throat so hard I can't breathe.

He shoves me against the wall with force strong enough to shake the pictures.

"You don't get to fight back, Gianna," he hisses. "You're my little pet, and you'll take your beatings to learn your lesson."

I shake my head. "I hate you, and I'm going to take everything from you, *Dad*."

"Little bitch!" he bellows, tossing me across the room like a rag doll, sending me skidding across the sparkling marble tiles.

I fought back. For the first time in my life, I stood up to him. Even if he damn well kills me, I can die happy knowing I finally did it.

I found the real Gianna.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX



Colten

Song- The Basement, Catch Your Breath

My world tilts as I push open the door. Vito's foot hurtles towards her ribs. My Gianna, balled up on the floor, blood smeared on her cheek. Before his kick lands, she lets out a scream as she shoves some sort of glass into his thigh.

He stumbles backward. A red-hot anger floods me as I run at him, tackling him to the ground before he can hurt her again.

I don't waste a second; I can't even see straight as I roll him onto his side and hold him down with my weight, and let my fists slam into his face over and over.

Bone crunches beneath my hands, blood spraying from his nose.

His feeble attempts to push me off do nothing. Each hit is harder than the last.

"Stop! Colten! You're going to kill him!" Gianna screams, yanking at the back of my shirt.

"Good," I grunt, punching him in the jaw.

That's exactly what he deserves.

She puts me in a headlock and squeezes tight enough to make me wheeze.

"Get off me," I choke out.

"If anyone is killing him, it's going to be me!" she shouts.

My heart stops as I contemplate her words. I take a deep fucking breath, trying to calm my rage, and then I glance at the state of her father's face,

and I feel better. Although all I want to do is kill this evil motherfucker for laying a hand on my wife.

Pushing myself back up to stand, I shake out the pain in my hands, and when I turn to face her, my heart splinters into a million pieces.

Reaching out, I brush my hand along her bruised cheek, streaked with blood. “Why, Gianna? Why do you let him do this to you?” I whisper. “This isn’t you.”

She recoils from my touch.

Dom walks into the room, his head down, and I snap my head up to look at him and point to the dining table.

“Sit your fucking ass down, Dom,” I say through gritted teeth.

He’s her brother. He should be the one taking the goddamn beating if anyone has to. He knew what was going on in this house, and he’s just as much to blame as her father.

Gianna grabs my shirt, forcing me back to her. “Don’t be mad at Dom. He takes orders from me, remember?”

I swallow the bile rising in my throat. This family is all kinds of fucked up.

Her father groans on the floor, his consciousness coming back, and I slam my boot on his chest, glaring down at him. “Don’t you fucking move. Don’t you dare speak. Or I will put a bullet through your skull, which is less than what you deserve.”

Turning my attention back to my wife, I don’t say a word. I don’t even know what to say.

“Is this what he’s always done to you, G?” I ask quietly, trying to hide the despair in my voice thinking about what she’s been through.

“This is how it was, Colt. This is what made me who I am. I used to think it made me strong enough to lead. But it doesn’t. I get that now. You helped me realize it.”

I nod my head, tracking the blood running from her nose that she keeps trying to wipe away. The way her back is bent over because it hurts her too damn much to even stand up straight.

“He made me believe that if I wanted to run LA; I had to pay the consequences for my actions,” she whispers.

Hell. No.

“Would you let this happen to Wyatt? To our future children?”

She pulls back, flinching. “No. Colten. I’d never. I promise.”

I rest my hands on her shoulders, trying to ground her. “Would you let the man who hurt our children live? What would you do to him?”

An unfiltered rage flashes across her eyes. “I’d torture them until they begged me for death.”

I nod slowly. This man has to die, and I think the only person who rightfully deserves this kill is her.

“He’s manipulated you for a long time, Gianna. And I understand, baby. I do. He’s your dad, and you felt like you didn’t have a choice. But that’s gotta stop now. You have to take the control back before it’s too late.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. I had my suspicions; I hoped I was wrong. That it wasn’t this fuckin’ bad.

“I don’t care what bullshit he’s told you to make you think it’s okay in the past, but I’m telling you right now, it isn’t. And I think you know that now. Men don’t treat women like this, powerful ones or not. Nor kids. That doesn’t make you weak, G. I promise you,” I tell her, pressing my hand over my heart.

“If I kill him, I could lose everything I worked for? I have no guarantee right now that I’ll get the empire, not if he’s dead.”

I lean in, pressing my forehead against hers. It’s now or never. Romeo’s words echo in my head.

It’s kill or be killed in this world, and Gianna is holding the key to her own survival. And I want to be the man who stands beside her when she finally rules her empire.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN



GIANNA

Song- Dethrone, Bad Omens

I glance down at my father, who lets out a groan. I'm going to fucking end this. I might not be able to go back and help the little girl who was manipulated by her father for so long. But I can stop this now. I can make her proud. And then I'll live with the regret that I stayed. I didn't fight back sooner.

"I'm not telling you to walk away. I'm telling you to fucking take it. You end him and the empire is yours with Enzo's backing, you ain't on your own anymore. You've waited long enough and endured enough. You can end this and get everything you wanted."

My chest constricts; I know what Colten is saying. I understand the meaning beneath his words. It doesn't matter how strong you are; it doesn't take away from the fact that I am my father's victim.

"If I take it, that changes everything," I say.

His hands carefully grip my cheeks, and he pulls me back to him, searching my eyes.

"Enzo's coming for this territory; he's going to kill your father and anyone who stands beside him, if you're the one who kills him, everything becomes yours, that's his deal, baby," he says.

I shake my head. "That isn't what I meant."

Everything I've worked for is waiting right there for me, that light at the end of the tunnel. And yet, it still feels miles away. And looking at my

father, this empire, is that what I want? To live hundreds of miles from Colten and be chained to a throne that is created to break everyone.

His thumb brushes my jaw. “G, I’m going to stand right beside you wherever you are. Whatever you decide to do.” He nods, face filled with disgust at my father bleeding out.

“Prove yourself to Enzo. Your father is your abuser, Gianna. That ain’t no dad. He’s going to die whether it’s by your bullet or not. Don’t let him drag you down, baby. Let him make one last worthy act as a parent and sacrifice himself for you. It’s the least that he owes you.”

He pulls a Glock from his holster and places it in my palm. I shift my gaze to the silver metal, and emptiness fills me.

“Why would you be stupid enough to put a gun in my hand, Colt?” I ask, my voice shaking.

I could easily shoot him, get my father out of here, and try to find a way to stop Enzo from taking everything from us. That’s probably what I would have done before I married this cowboy. I believed what my father told me, and I acted on his orders.

Not anymore. The deep pain in my ribs throbs from where my dad kicked me. But the scars run deep and can't be seen by anyone else… except Colt.

He grins, taking my hand and pressing the tip against his chest. “Because I know deep down, you feel this between us too. That no matter what, you’re the most powerful woman I know.”

“And what if you’re wrong? What if I’m like him?” I ask.

He bites his lip. “Then I’ll die being wrong for the first time in my life.”

I let out a defeated laugh, closing my eyes. I promised Dom a way out. Flicking off the safety, that part of me—the one I need to survive, not the girl who was being beaten on the floor—sparks back to life.

“I’m prepared to die if it means you’ll finally see the truth about your life. I ain’t your enemy, G. I never was,” he murmurs.

“How do I know you aren’t lying to me? For all I know, you could be tricking me into murdering my father to get him out of the way for Enzo’s men to storm in here.”

He closes his eyes. “You’re so fucking infuriating, Gianna. My god,” he huffs, running a hand over his face.

“I ain’t like these parasites in your life, and it’s kinda hurtful that you’re even putting me in this bracket. I want you, G. I want to stand beside you

and watch you rule. I can’t think of anything hotter than watching you put other men in their place. If I could have hand-picked a woman for myself, I swear to fucking God, it would have been you.”

My heart flutters and my hands begin to tremble. “Even when I’m being infuriating? Or insufferable?” I ask.

“Especially then.” His hand wraps around my throat. “You told me you wanted to reign over LA, and I handed you the keys to everything on a platter; all you gotta do is pull that trigger one more time. That’s it, G, one more time. And if I'm lying, I give you full permission to shoot me too. I give you my word, I’m telling the truth. But I can’t stand by and watch that man hurt you again. So if you don’t do it, I fucking will, G. I’ll do it for you and give you the credit. I don’t give a fuck, I need you, and I can’t let that man drag you down.”

I drop my hand from his chest and rest my head there, listening to his heart pound against my ear.

His arms close in around me, holding me tight.

“I asked for this, Colten,” I say quietly. “I begged my father to make me a leader, to treat me like my brothers. I thought it was making me stronger by letting him lock me up and letting his guards beat the shit out of me. Isn’t that insane?” I almost laugh.

Saying it out loud is beyond insane. It’s ridiculous. And I let it happen.

He hugs me tighter. “No. G. You didn’t ask for this. None of you needed to be beaten to become leaders. Do you hear me?”

I know. And I think deep down, I’ve always known it was wrong. But he was my father, and I never knew any different. And he wouldn’t hesitate to kill me if it meant he would survive. So, maybe he did teach me something valuable after all.

I pull back, glancing over at Dom, his face completely stoic. “Dom…”

“Do it, G. Get us out of this, please.” His voice cracks.

It was only last year that I was visiting him in a hospital bed after Dad beat him so badly. I should have stopped him then, but every time I found the courage to try, it’s like he managed to rewire my brain. Dangle another carrot in front of me so I’d comply. I’d wait patiently, even when everything I loved was dying a slow death around me.

I drag in a shaky breath and take a step back. My father’s eyes follow me; his limp hand claws at Colten’s jeans.

“Please don’t,” he chokes out. “He’s lying.”

I shake my head and crouch down, even if my body screams at me for doing so. I have enough anger inside of me to push past any pain. I'm vibrating with spite, yet it's mixed with anger, sadness, and everything else in between.

"Did you ever love me, Dad?" I ask, watching the trickle of blood fall down from his eyebrow.

My husband did that. For me. I never realized how much I needed saving, not just from my family, but from myself.

"Principessa, you know I love you," my father whispers.

I fall back onto my butt, tapping my nails against the tiled floor. All I see is the hatred in his eyes when he came for me.

One more kill and the empire is mine.

My mom would tell me to save myself. So would Max. And now Dom is telling me to end this.

"This isn't how you love your kids, Dad. This is how you've controlled me. Max's death wasn't my fault; it was yours. You ruined Fabio. You're the one who started the war with the Greeks; I told you we were getting weak. We didn't have the manpower to fight them on our own. And you went ahead and did it anyway. That's what killed my brother. And Fab, why did he turn? Because he didn't believe in you either. You created monsters for your own benefit, but I'm done being your puppet, Dad."

Every word kills me; it's the truth, but it's a tough pill to swallow. I've lived a lie my whole life. I was never strong, only brave enough to stand a beating by grown men. Or to withstand being imprisoned in my own home until my punishment was served.

He did this to me. And my father doesn't deserve a quick death with a bullet.

He shakes his head feebly; there is no love in his eyes. Just fear. Because the monster he created is turning on him.

"Se mi ami allora mi perdonerai." *If you love me, then you'll forgive me.*

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CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT



Colten

Without a single word spoken, Dom strides over, handing a sharp blade to Gianna. He leans in and whispers something to his father in Italian as he grabs his dad's hands and holds them above his head.

I keep my foot on his chest. I've knocked all of the wind out of the man already; he can't fight back, and he knows it.

"I'll see you in another lifetime, Vito," Gianna whispers.

She's fighting back the tears, smearing into the blood drying on her skin, and she cuts hard and fast along his throat.

I don't believe she's crying for her father. I think she's crying for herself. Realizing she's been a victim of his abuse. But her power is her own. It was never his. And I'll do everything I can to make her see it.

The knife clatters to the ground as she shuffles back while her father chokes to death and bleeds out all over the floor.

I wonder how many times he's had to clean his daughter's blood from this very floor.

He goes limp beneath me, and I rush to her, dropping to my knees and taking her in my hold. I don't say a word; I rest my head on hers and close my eyes. "You fought back, G. You did it, and I'm so fucking proud of you."

She erupts into a full-blown sob, and all I want to do is shield her from the world. These cries aren't for the adult Gianna. This is all the years she's lost because of this man.

"I've got you, sweetheart. I've always got you," I whisper into her hair.

I let her have this moment, while the doors are shut and no one except Dom and me can witness this. Because I know she will hate anyone seeing her ‘weakness’.

And when her body begins to calm, I sit back, framing her face with my hands.

“I swear, I’ve only started crying since I met you, Colten. I’m starting to think you’re a bad omen.”

“You know that ain’t true.”

She wipes her tears ferociously away from her face and lets out a growl under her breath. “What the fuck do I do now, cowboy?”

I take her hands in mine. “You rule over LA. That’s what you do. You’ve earned your spot on the top and no one can take that from you now.”

She frowns, her glassy eyes searching mine. “Not today, I don’t. I can’t be here. I want to go home.”

I nod, wiping away her tears with my thumb. “I’ll drive you back to your place; Dom can take your car.”

She shakes her head, squeezing my hand. “No. *Home,”* she breathes out.

My heart gallops into my throat as the meaning settles. Relief washes over me. I thought giving Gianna her dream would mean that, in the process, I lost her. That she didn’t need me anymore because she got everything she wanted out of our marriage.

“To Sterling Ranch?”

She rolls her eyes.

“Jesus. Do you need me to spell it out? S—”

Grabbing the back of her head, I slam my mouth over hers to stop her from talking. I break away. “We can go home, regroup, and figure out what this all means. Okay? Together?”

“I like the sound of that.”

Dom clears his throat from behind us, and she looks up at her brother, leans over me, and takes something from him.

She holds her father's gold signet ring between her fingers.

“This was always meant to be mine,” she says, staring at it. “This is the key to the throne, Colten.”

She squeezes it in her fist and pushes herself off the ground, wincing as she stands. “Dom, I’m heading back to Arizona. I need you to speak to our

uncles, tell them about his death and that I am now in charge as next in line." She takes a deep breath.

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I stand beside her, and she leans some of her weight into my side.

"My first order is to fire that bastard Tomasso. And anyone else you think worked with Fabio. I only want the ones we trust. I've got a red book in my nightstand back at my house of everyone we work with or have ties to. Sever the ones highlighted."

I bite back a grin; of course she already has an extensive war plan. Her father's empire would have crumbled years ago without Gianna.

She was always the key to this.

"Tomasso isn't going to take this well," Dom mutters.

She huffs. "I don't give a fuck. Pay him the usual amount and take his keys and phones. All of it. Change all the security codes, and I'll get some guys in from my company to take over that. If he kicks up a fuss, kill him."

"Or kill him anyway, if you don't trust him?" I add.

G chews on her lip, contemplating it. "I need to let the dust settle. I sliced the leader's throat. We have some formalities to deal with, then once that's in place with my uncles, I can do what I want. So, then we can kill the asshole."

Dom shoves his hands in his pockets and nods. "Anything else?" he asks.

Gianna freezes as she looks down at her father's body. "You're going to want to call our uncles and see what they want to do with his body, he isn't being buried with Mom and Max. And I'll get rid of Levi and his street rats," she says, coolly.

She peers up at me, that glimmer in her dark eyes returning.

"Okay. I got it. When will you be back?" Dom mutters.

"I've got some things to figure out. I need to speak to Enzo. Then we can go from there." She orders.

Can we do this? Keep this, whatever it is, between us, when we're living nearly four hundred miles apart? It didn't work for Ace and Harper. It fucking broke them.

When she left me for not even half a day, I missed her. I'm starting to resemble my love-sick brothers.

She slides her hand into mine, her nails digging into my skin. "Before I demolish this fucking house, do you want to see where I grew up? And I also need a shower before we ride home."

I'm not sure I want to see this prison where he kept his kids. But she obviously wants me to; otherwise she wouldn't have asked. "Yeah, baby. I'd like that."

She tugs me forward, and I follow behind her up the grand staircase. Stopping after two steps, she slowly turns to face me with a devious grin. She has blood smeared over her face, a bruise already forming on her cheek, and she's never looked more perfect. "I need you to use your strong arms, cowboy."

I don't miss a beat; I scoop her up and hold her against my chest. I'll take any moment of vulnerability from her.

"Better?" I ask as I climb the rest of the stairs.

"Much. I don't need to pretend with you that I'm not hurting, cause I am. My back is killing me."

I grit my teeth, trying to swallow down the anger. His own daughter. His flesh and blood. How the fuck can anyone lay hands on their kids?

"I've got you, viper. You know that," I tell her, pressing a kiss in her hair.

When I reach the top of the stairs, I pause. There must be at least ten closed white doors up here.

"Four doors down, on the right," she says.

I count the doors as I pass, wondering what happened behind each of them over the years. I want to get her out of here, as far as damn possible, but instead I gave her the keys not just to return here, but to rule it. And I'm not sure how that sits with me.

She's better than the Milano family. I know she is. And I'm right here, however she needs me to burn this place down and create something that's hers.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE



GIANNA

Colt sits down on the edge of the bed, still holding me in his arms. I watch the way his jaw tenses as he scans the room.

It's exactly how I left it when I moved out twelve years ago. White walls. White bed. White furniture. That way Dad could see any mess we'd made.

"This can't be your childhood bedroom," he says quietly.

"Don't you think it's cute?" I joke. Using my favorite new word. This was my life; no wonder I recoiled at the thought of anything sweet. It didn't exist to me. That's why I made my mansion into a gothic paradise, but I have to say, I am coming round to the country chic too.

He frowns. "You didn't have a window?"

I chew on my lip; to be honest, I hadn't ever considered that. This was my room, and it was all I knew.

"I guess Dad didn't want me to escape in the middle of the night and run off to my boyfriend."

Colt lets out a breath, rubbing his hands softly along my arm. "Yeah. Maybe, G."

His eyes land on the bedside table, the picture in a gold frame, and he studies it. I can't even look at it. I know exactly what it is.

"Is that all of you?" he asks.

"Yeah. Dom is on my left, Max on my right, and Fab beside him. Mom behind us." I don't even recognize my cracked voice.

He leans backward and grabs it from the side, placing it face down beside us.

“G, I can’t spend another minute in this house. If I hold in this rage any longer, I’m going to go down and skin your father so that he can be sent to your uncles. Then I might charter the flight to Italy and kill those bastards too.”

I wince as I reach to touch his jaw, stroking my thumb over his stubble. “It is what it is, Colt. Some days it was fine. Other days, it wasn’t. I can’t change it. It made me who I am; I doubt if I’d been brought up any other way that I’d even be alive. Mom didn’t survive this life being nice.”

He closes his eyes, resting his forehead against mine. “How are you feeling?” he asks.

I burst out into laughter that pulls on my ribcage. “Cowboy, you can be many things for me, but a therapist is not one.”

He pulls back, his face softening. “Alright. Do you think maybe you’d see a professional?”

My laughter fades instantly, being replaced by something way more angry. “You think I’m crazy? Are you seriously asking a woman who murdered her own father if she will go to therapy? Are you insane, Colten? Do you want me in jail?”

He mutters something I can’t quite catch under his breath, and before I can continue my rampage, his lips crash over mine.

And like that, he doesn’t just shut me up; he makes all the bad shit in my head fade away.

“There’s a shower on the jet and a bed,” he mutters against my lips.

“Fine. Take me to your fancy jet, cowboy. Whisk me away like the princess I am.”

To be honest, it’s exactly what I want right now. I don’t have to keep doing this alone. Not when I have Colt to help hold me up when I need it. That strength I need, it’s always been inside me, but I needed this man to give me a safe space to help me find her.

He shakes his head. “Not a princess, you’re a queen now.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTY



Colten

Hunter and Ace are leaning against the fence post as I pull up beside their trucks. Gianna has spent the car ride over here with her nose in her phone, typing away ferociously.

I'm worried about her. I don't care how many times she says to my face she's fine; I know her better than that.

"I told Levi he's done," she says as I kill the engine.

"Good girl."

She grins, shoving her phone back in her bag. "He isn't going to take this well. I'm expecting repercussions. I've got a new security detail heading over to Dom."

I rest my hand on her bouncing leg. "Do you want to borrow some of our guys? We have enough to go over to LA. People we can trust."

I know how important Dom is to her, and for her sanity, I gotta make sure nothing happens to him.

She sucks in a breath. "Yes please, Colt."

"And you? Do you want your own extra security?" I question.

Her eyebrows pinch together, her eyes dragging over my body. "Why would I need that? I'm surrounded by a bunch of heavily armed cowboys."

I lean in, tucking her hair behind her ear. "You're married to the worst one," I whisper.

She shivers against my touch. "If you send men to LA, does that leave enough to protect the Ranch?"

I cup her cheek. “Yes, sweetheart. We’ve got our own army here, and what’s mine is yours, remember? I can bring in the guys from Vegas if I need to.”

She licks her lips. “Then we’re good.”

“But,” I cut in, “if you leave Sterling Ranch, you either take me or one of my brothers with you. And you aren’t going back to LA on your own.”

“Do you realize who you’re talking to?” she fires back.

I chuckle. “Gianna Sterling, I know exactly who you are. You’re my wife. And this ain’t up for negotiation. If you ain’t with my family or me, you will have an entire army behind you. People will be out for your blood now; they’re going to come out of the woodwork to overthrow you, or try to. This is where our alliance comes into play.”

She swallows, her gaze drifting over my shoulder and out onto the ranch. “Yeah. The alliance,” she repeats.

“Yes. The alliance you so desperately wanted will help you rule Los Angeles, exactly how you wanted this to go. Use it.”

She taps her nails on her thigh in slow, monotonous movements. And when she pulls back, her eyes are blank of emotion. “I’m going to go back to ours, and I’d like a few hours on my own,” she tells me.

It ain’t a question.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“I’m, what was it? Crazy. Yeah. I need a little processing time on my own. I’ll text you when you can come back.”

“So you’re banishing me from my own house?”

She reaches for the door handle. “Yes, polpettino. I’ve got some shit to deal with the only way I know how. On my own.”

I shove the ignition back on and slam it into reverse, backing out of the space. This again. Every damn time. She pushes me away, and each time it is a harder kick to the gut. How do I make her see that I don’t want to leave her alone?

“Well, you’re in no fit state to walk from here. I’ll drop you by the door, Your Highness.”

She doesn’t say a word in response, and I mull over our entire conversation to see where the hell I fucked that up to make her switch off from me.

I need to learn, and fast, because I can’t lose her. I won’t survive it.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE



GIANNA

Song- Drag Me Under, Sleep Token

After slamming the front door so hard it nearly rattles the mirror off the wall, I make a coffee and then stare at the wooden walls. I'm hoping that I'm about to have some kind of epiphany about my future.

My brain completely shut down when Colten started talking about our alliance. How he's going to protect me because of that. Not because he cares. Not because he wants me. All I heard was alliance, and I went numb from the inside.

Everything I thought I wanted, all the years I've killed myself to please my father, and now I have it, but in that second, I'd have traded it all to have Colten say something different to me.

A fucking alliance.

Something that didn't make me feel like a deal, a pawn in a game. Because that is all I have been to anyone.

I had to keep my virginity to be used as a bride.

I had to be locked in a prison cell for days to learn my lessons.

I had to get my ass beat by guards to show my father I was tough enough to fight.

Today was the first time I ever fought back. One time. In thirty years on this Earth, I fought back once.

The tears fall down my face, dropping onto my chest, and I stand here, frozen in time, replaying the moment I dragged a blade across his throat.

The relief I felt at that moment.

But for every tortuous memory of my father, I have a happy one. The cake he bought for me after I shot my first target in the head.

The celebration he hosted for my first kill.

Every training session I had to fight, he was there. Every birthday. Every Christmas. Those days he was the dad I always wanted.

Now all I'm left with is guilt. I stayed loyal to my father even when he did all this shit to me, maybe even because he treated me like that. I thought I deserved it. That I needed it to become powerful. I don't think that's true anymore. My father could have loved me like a daughter, and I would have still become the woman I am today.

Nothing good he did will ever make up for the terrors he put my brothers and me through.

And I did nothing to stop it. I let it carry on, which is why Max is dead and why I killed Fabio. I'm just like him. Exactly how he conditioned me. I killed him so I could steal his empire, exactly what he would have done in the same circumstances.

Everything I've bottled up for the last thirty years bubbles to the surface. My hands tremble as I hold on to the counter, my legs turning to jelly.

If I fought back years ago, if I killed him back then, Max would still be alive. That's the worst part of it. It's too late for this to be meaningful. I wasn't strong enough to fight.

My brain is making me weak, and I can't stop it. The fucking slideshow of my life in my head is flicking past my eyes. Even when I close them, I can't stop watching. When my chest feels like it's caving in, I gasp for breath.

"Get it together, Gianna," I hiss.

What the hell is happening to me? This isn't who I am. Unless I'm dying and this really is it. Karma must have worked lightning speed on me.

I know Colt is sitting outside in his damn truck. He never left. So if I am dying, I know all I have to do is crawl to the door, and that man will fix everything.

The thought of relying on someone else to survive a few weeks ago would have made me vomit, but it brings me comfort now. Not everything is on my head.

Then one word springs to mind. One memory that doesn't burn me. Cantucci. My grandmother taught me how to bake them when I was five.

And when she died, I inherited her recipe book, which is locked down safer than my gold.

The chances of a meat-loving cowboy having everything I need to bake them are slim, but not none. So I get to work hunting.

After sourcing the flour, sugar, and eggs, I am on a winning streak of ingredients. In the far-left cupboard, I find my gold mine. Almonds and honey. Once I shove everything in a pile on the counter, I dig out the scales and a tin that looks good enough to bake it in.

I'd personally have used better quality sugar. But the freshly laid eggs might make up for that. And I always like adding orange zest with the lemon, but I can't be picky here.

I start weighing out the ingredients and cracking the eggs to separate the yolk from the whites. That emptiness in my chest is starting to rebuild itself.

Maybe this was why every time something shit happened, the next day I always found myself baking. It wasn't because I was bored. It was something inside of me that needed to heal, and the only time I remember being happy was with my mom and grandma in the kitchen, making a mess and not getting told off for it.

As I'm pressing the lemon against the grater to zest it, I press too hard, and it slips, catching my finger against the metal. The sting is instant, and I shove the cut in my mouth to stop the bleeding.

It's nothing compared to the aches in my body from my father's boot.

My other hand squeezes around the lemon. Within that second, anything good I felt fizzles, replaced with the guilt, the anger, the embarrassment of realizing my life is a lie.

The first thing to get thrown across the room is the lemon. Then another from the side. I pick up the entire bowl of fruit and toss it against the wall.

I see red. I can taste my own blood. And pure rage filters through me.

The grater goes next. Anything in my eyeline is picked up and thrown. The knife flies through the air and lands in the wooden beam. Next, my coffee mug shatters into pieces against the wall.

My tears are free-falling, and I fall to my knees, staring at the mess I've made. The mess I've made of *his* house. The man I've hopelessly fallen for, and I don't know what to do about it. Because every time I feel too much for him, I shut him out.

How long is he going to put up with me when I can't love?

Can I ever give him what he actually needs? I'm not sure.

With my head bowed, my hands on the floor. I let it out until my chest hurts and my throat is dry. Maybe I was never powerful; that was a lie too. Maybe I am fucking weak.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO



Colten

She asked for time, not space. I am giving her that, but I ain't leaving her alone to deal with this. She can try and hide the fact she's struggling, but no one on this planet with a heart can murder their own father and be okay about that.

Even if he was a fucking asshole. She believed for a long time that she loved him, no matter what he did to her.

That man manipulated her for her entire life. And now she has to unravel all of that. I'm no shrink, never claimed to be one, but I sure as shit know that isn't going to be an easy task. Which is why I'm lighting my third cigarette, sittin' in my truck outside my house, waiting for her to open that front door and let me back in.

Because she will. Whether she likes it or not, she knows I've got her, even when she thinks she can do it alone. Even when I can hear her smashing up my home. I don't give a fuck. There is nothing material that matters to me. Never has. If she needs an outlet for her rage, then so fuckin' be it.

Enzo's name flashes up on my screen as something shatters. It's like a punch to the gut, knowing she's hurting and doesn't want me.

I hit accept on the call.

"She did it?" Enzo questions. Not even a hello today.

"Yep. Slit his throat. Dom has evidence should you require it, but I saw it with my own eyes, Enzo."

He doesn't reply right away, so I take another drag.

“Then I’ll stick to my word. Gianna can head up LA under our organization,” he tells me.

I blow my smoke out of the window. That knife twisting in my chest again.

I don’t want her to leave here. I don’t want her to leave *me*. I never intended to fall for my wife; I didn’t even contemplate it as a possibility.

But I can’t deny it. I need her more than I need fucking air.

“Great,” I huff out.

I can’t even hide my disappointment. I want this for her, I really do. I believe she deserves it. After everything she’s done to get this far, she deserves to be the Queen in LA.

“I’ll fly in tomorrow. I’d like to set some rules with her and properly introduce her to our world. Should I come to the ranch or LA?”

I swallow. “Here. She’s here with me.”

Silence fills the air, and my gut twists. If she’s not smashing my house up anymore… I can only imagine what has come next in her process, which means she needs me.

“Okay. Then I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I gotta go, Enzo,” I tell him and cut the call. I’m out of the truck in a split second and striding towards the house. I don’t hesitate; I fly through the door and glass crunches under my boot.

I can’t see her, but I can hear her. Those tiny sobs she’s trying to hide with her hand.

“Gianna,” I say carefully.

Nothing.

I head to the back into the kitchen, but as I turn the corner, I come to a stop. She’s on the floor, back against the cupboards. Her arms wrapped around her knees, her body vibrating as she cries. Rushing to her, I sit down beside her, pulling her onto my lap.

“Ever since I met you, all I’ve done is cry,” she whispers and nuzzles her face against my shoulder.

I can’t disagree. I believe coming to Sterling Ranch and being married to me has unlocked a lot of shit inside her that has never seen the light before. And I ain’t mad about that. Gianna is human. Always has been, even if her father has trained her otherwise.

“Not true. You’ve also screamed and come so hard you can’t see straight. You’ve laughed. You’ve spiked me with Viagra. You’ve relaxed. It

ain’t all bad,” I say.

I rub my hands in small circles on her back. I need to comfort her and figure out exactly what it is she needs from me. “You did the right thing, G.”

She pushes herself back and stares right into my eyes, making my heart almost stop. “It isn’t just that, Colt.”

I frown.

“I mean, a big part of this whole breakdown is my father. I’m pissed that I didn’t see what a monster he was before this. That I could have saved Max if I just… realized earlier. If I realized and fought back, ended him years ago when I should have, our territory wouldn’t have been so fucked, and the Greeks wouldn’t have even had the foothold to have Max shot.”

Sobs erupt from her, and I hold her tight. It’s going to take her time to come to terms with the fact that she perhaps isn’t who she thought she was. That the manipulation was real.

That she is a victim of abuse. She’s going to hate it. And I need to make sure I can be her voice on the hard days, reminding her that she is strong. She is powerful. And it’s okay. It’s okay that she stayed. That she didn’t kill her father sooner. That was part of her father's manipulation plan.

I wipe away her tears with my thumb. “You can’t fix the past, G. You saved yourself and probably Dom. That’s enough. You are always going to be enough, no matter what.”

She nods.

“What else was it?” I ask.

She tries to look away, but then shakes her head and brings those beautiful dark eyes back to me. “I was—” She pauses, taking a deep, shaky breath. “I was annoyed that you spoke about me like I was just an arrangement. Everything came back to the alliance, and I—”

“What?” I say quietly.

“I wanted you to say something else. Anything else.”

My eyes go wide; I can’t help it. I’m disgusted with myself for saying it, even if I didn’t mean it. I was talking about practicalities. About running an organization. I wanted to help her. That ain’t what she needed. She needed to be reassured.

She needs to feel loved.

“I didn’t mean it like that, Gianna,” I tell her, running my hands up her tattooed arms, resting them on her shoulders.

“You want to know my truth?” I ask.

She half-laughs. “I mean, seeing as we’re becoming emotional people who share feelings, go ahead, cowboy.”

I bite back a grin, then put out my biggest fear at the moment. “The way I feel for you, Gianna, it scares me. It’s so deep.” I tap my chest. “It’s right in here. You consume me, my every damn thought, all day long. I’m now terrified of things I didn’t think possible.”

“Like what?” she whispers.

“You leaving me to go back to LA. Losing us. Waking up without you in my arms. I want you to take the empire, G. You deserve it, and I think you will be the best damn leader out there. But I can’t lose you in the process, sweetheart.”

The shock on her face is a true picture, one I’d hang over my bed.

“Why do you think I wanted to come back here rather than stay in LA with Dom?”

I shrug. “Because you needed to get away from what had happened?”

“Nope.”

I grin. “Do I have to keep guessing?”

Her nails graze up my chest. “I wanted to come here because you’re here, Colten. Because when I’m with you, I don’t feel like I’m taking on the world on my own anymore. But I also don’t feel less powerful because I need someone else. Actually, I’ve never felt stronger than I do when I’m with you. It’s not just you who is afraid; if I lose you, I lose something far more important than my empire. I’ll lose my heart.”

My breath hitches, and my eyes start to burn. I wasn’t sure I’d see the day when she actually voiced her feelings. But I’m here for every second of it. Everything I can get, I’ll take and I’ll cherish.

“I’m kinda hoping you feel the same way?” she asks.

I brush away her hair from her face and cup her cheek. “I’ve never felt more alive standing beside you, Gianna Sterling.”

I lean forward, resting my forehead against hers.

“So, what do we do now?” she says quietly.

We need to speak to Hunter and prepare for Enzo’s meeting tomorrow. Gianna needs to orchestrate an entire takeover of LA and be ready for any possible power plays by others. That can all damn well wait. Because Gianna is more important than anything else.

And I want to prove to her that I'm here for her. The alliance means nothing compared to my feelings for her.

"I'm going to teach you how to ride," I tell her.

She pulls back a touch, an inquisitive look on her gorgeous face. "I can ride a cowboy; that's good enough."

The bruising on her cheek is starting to turn purple, and inside, I'm murderous. I'd kill him again for touching my woman. My wife.

"And the natural next step is to then learn to ride a horse, once you've mastered the cowboy."

She asked me before, and I never actually took her. Instead I made it all about sex. Something else I need to work on: showing her with real things how I feel.

She smiles, and the world stops turning. I'm fucking whipped for this woman, and I don't care. I want to share something special with her, so I say, "See, when I feel like the world is closing in on me, the first thing I do is ride. It's the best way to clear your head, to reset. To realize the world carries on, no matter how shit it may be at that moment. I wanna show you the beauty here, G. I want to give you a slice of freedom."

My hands run down her sides, and she winces. Only a tiny bit, enough for me to pause. "How bad do you hurt, G? Don't shrug it off. I need the truth. I ain't putting you on a horse if you're in agony."

She rolls her eyes. I'll let this one slide today.

"It's a little bit of bruising; I'm good. I've had worse; I can still ride a horse, Colt." She stops and places her hand on my cheek.

"Do you want to hear me beg? I will. I need to do something to stop my brain exploding in my skull." The desperation is in her voice.

I chuckle. "Save the begging for my cock later."

"Oh, I can do that."

Dipping my head in, I claim her lips softly. Within a second, her fingers are in my hair, and she's pulling me closer, her tongue slipping in my mouth. Her moans vibrating against me.

"Can you promise me something, Colt?"

"Anything," I gruff out.

"That you won't stop trying with me. I'm aware that I'm fucked up." She taps her temple. "I don't know how to do this. But I want to. I truly do. I kinda like you, cowboy."

I grin. "Kinda?"

She nods, biting her lip. “Kinda a lot.”

“I promise, viper.”

Truest promise I’ve ever said.

Her eyes glass over, and I pull her closer, her face resting on my throat. “But I don’t have to try, G. Whatever this is between us, it’s not something I have to force. Wanting you is the easiest thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

I rest my head on top of hers, feeling the way her body melts against mine. And we sit here, on my kitchen floor with utter destruction and cookie fixings around us, in silence, cuddling. And that is one of the best moments of my life.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE



GIANNA

I ended up falling asleep on Colten's chest for half an hour before he carried me up to bed. And now we're tangled up in the sheets, his fingers running through my hair as I listen to the steady beat of his heart against my ear.

"You're awake," he murmurs. He sounds like he had some sleep himself.

"Yeah. How long was I out?"

I feel like I jumped in front of a bus; the deep ache in my ribs makes me flinch as I reach my arm over his abs.

"G, it's eight a.m."

I blink. "Of the next day?"

He chuckles, gently running his fingers along my thigh. "Yes. Of the next day."

"Wow. I don't know the last time I slept that long," I mutter.

He rolls over to face me, and I turn away. "I haven't brushed my teeth, Colt. Do not come near me."

He tuts, carefully moving me back to look at him, kisses me, then says, "I don't give a shit, G. You could smell like a pigsty, and I'd still be down."

"That is utterly disgusting, cowboy."

I push at his chest, but he holds me in place.

"We've got a meeting with Enzo this afternoon, but I've cleared my morning. I've got Xander doing my work on the ranch, so I'm all yours."

He lifts my leg over his hip, and his cock presses against me.

"I need to text Dom, tell him to get his ass here for the meeting," I say.

He kisses my jaw. “Already done, sweetheart. He’ll be here.”

Running my fingers through his hair, I hold his gaze. “So, you said you’re all mine, hmm?”

He nods. “I promise.”

I slide my hand between us and wrap my fingers around his dick. A groan rips from his chest, which sends flutters to my pussy.

I stroke him slow. “I want to watch you come, Colt.”

He rips off the blankets and tosses them on the floor before shooting back, “And I want you to sit on my face, G.”

My mind flashes with images of Colt. Me sitting on his face so he can devour me while another guy sucks his dick. Not Romeo, though; he can fuck off. My cheeks heat immediately in response.

He pulls back, a questioning look on his face. “What is it?” he asks.

My mouth drops open. Should I tell him? Should I even want that? Even once? I have so much to experience, and that just became top of my list. I keep stroking his shaft, trying to find the words.

“G, if you want something from me, all you gotta do is ask. I take control, but it doesn’t always have to be that way. You’ve got a lot to explore.” He pauses. “No, *we* have a lot to explore together.”

I smile. “I have some ideas. Would you ever let me take control of you?”

He rolls me over onto my back, pinning my arms above my head. “Yeah. I’d be into that. You can use me like your own fuck toy.”

My back arches as he leans in to kiss my throat; his fingers dip beneath my panties.

“The thought of being in charge really gets you this wet? Hmm?”

I nod, squeezing my eyes shut. It does, but also the thought of watching him get sucked off by another guy does too. Or me being in charge of both of them.

Fuck. Colten is mine. I am his. I don’t want another guy for myself. I only want my husband's hands on me. I only want his dick inside me.

“I think so,” I breathe out.

He sinks his fingers inside me, and I spread my legs wider. “Good fuckin’ girl,” he growls.

Right now, I don’t have the energy to be in charge. I want to lay here and let him do what he does best… make me feel safe.

“Not right now, though,” I say quietly.

I feel him smile against my neck. “I know, baby. I know. And I’ve got you, always. Okay?”

I nod, a moan slipping free when he circles my clit.

He stops for a second and then whispers in my ear, “But real soon, we can work on finding out what you want. Alright?”

He peels my panties down my thighs and then moves himself south, settling his head between my legs, looking up at me.

“What if I asked you to fuck another guy?”

He frowns. “Explain.”

I take a deep breath. “What if I wanted to watch you… and another guy? And I told you both what to do?”

He tilts his head. “You want to have sex with another guy too?”

I shake my head. “No. That’s the thing. I don’t want them. I just want you. So you’d be the only man allowed to touch me. I want to watch… you. I want the power over you both.”

“So we’d put on a little show, directed by you, for you?”

I can’t quite read his face. He’s processing, I think.

I nod. I can’t believe I even asked; maybe I shouldn’t. I thought he’d be more into it. “I guess?”

He sits up, wrapping his hand around his cock. “I don’t need that, you know that, right? You are all I want, all I need. You ain’t gotta worry about me having fantasies about another guy. It doesn’t work like that. You haven’t gotta do this thinking I need it, because I don’t. I literally just want you, and more specifically, right now, I wanna eat your pussy until you’re shaking.”

My cheeks blush. “It isn’t about you. It’s something I stumbled across on my pre-Colten reading journey, and then once I found out about your past, it reignited that thought process, and I can’t stop thinking about it.”

He bites his lip. “Tell me exactly how you picture it. And then I’ll think about it.”

I’ll give this my best pitch.

“It’s something I want to try once, okay. I’m not into us looking for someone else to join us. I think it’s really hot, like you could be eating me out and having your dick sucked by a guy. I can watch. I don’t know, I haven’t thought it through; I keep seeing it in my head, and it makes me so horny. But we don’t have to.”

He nods slowly.

“Do you have someone in mind to join us?” he asks.

“No,” I snap. “I know it can’t be Romeo. I draw the line at someone you’ve had a relationship with before.”

He runs a hand over his face. “It wasn’t a relationship. But I agree. And I can’t even speak to him after how he treated you at the dinner.”

I can’t hide my grin. Good. Romeo deserves it for trying to outplay me and make me doubt Colt.

“Do… you have anyone else?” I ask, not sure if I want the answer.

“No. But there is a club in Vegas. It’s probably best if we do this there. And I mean *if* we play, it’ll be with someone professional.”

“Okay.”

“Anything else on this exploration list of yours I should know about?”

I giggle. “Not really. Things kinda spring to mind. I’ll keep you in the loop, cowboy.”

He gets back in position, lying on his front, his mouth hovering over my pussy. “Oh, please do, wife. I need to know how to keep you happy.”

His tongue laps over my clit, and I grip the sheets. “You seem to know how to do that without even trying, Colt.”

He pushes my thighs even further apart and gets to work. His fingers thrusting inside. The flat of his tongue running against me. And it takes less than three minutes for me to be a quivering mess around him.

“Please, Colt. I need to come,” I pant.

My hips grind against his face as he groans against me. Every flick of his tongue. Every time he sucks. A fresh wave washes over me. And I’m not sure I can hold myself back.

“So you want me to do this while another man sucks off your husband? You want to watch me come down his throat?” he murmurs.

My hips buck against him, my wetness gushing over his face. The image in my mind, the pleasure he’s giving me. I can’t hold back.

“Come all over my face,” he demands.

And I don’t hold back. I’m crying out his name, gripping his hair as I ride my orgasm out, until I can’t even catch my breath. And the second I’m done, he’s climbing over me, leaning on the headboard, pushing the tip of his cock against my lips.

“And I want my wife to taste me.”

I open my lips, and he pushes inside, all the way to the back of my throat. I grab his ass as he fucks my mouth. My eyes locked on his. His jaw

tenses; he tips his head back.

“Fuck, G,” he hisses.

He’s taking it easy on me, I know he’s being careful, even if he would never admit that to my face. And I respect that more than he will ever know.

I slap his ass, getting his cock as wet as I can. And when his body judders on top of me and his come slips down my throat, I swallow every single drop and suck him clean.

Before I can even take a breath, he’s moving down, his mouth over mine, his hands in my hair, kissing every last bit of air out of my lungs.

“I’ll do anything for you, G,” he whispers against my lips.

“Ditto, cowboy.”

He smiles against my mouth. “Now, let’s go shower before we really start stinkin’.”



Colten leads Penny, the cutest horse I’ve ever seen, out of her stable. I lean on the fence, watching him. I’ve dosed up on Advil and did some gentle yoga before this, so I feel more alive.

Recovering from a beating is part of my life, I’m used to the pain.

“Are you finally learning how to ride a horse?” Harper teases from behind me.

I spin to face her. She’s glowing. Her hands on her growing bump, a smile on her face.

“Well, someone else had to teach me, seeing as you went and got yourself knocked up.”

She sticks out her tongue. “Colt will be a much better teacher than I am. He has more patience.”

I arch an eyebrow. “I might be a natural.”

She assesses my outfit with a grin. “I mean, I was half expecting you to be in a leather dress and heels. So, you’re off to a good start with the boots. Skirt probably wasn’t the best option.”

“I’m getting into the whole cowgirl attire, Harper. And it’s too fucking hot for jeans. I’ll melt.”

And the fact I've got a huge bruise on my hip and I couldn't stand the thought of a tight pair of jeans on that.

This was another reason I wanted to be here, to process what happened. I'm safe here, surrounded by friends. Which I can't quite believe. I actually have friends.

She takes off her hat and places it on my head. "And now the look is complete."

I laugh, running my fingers along the brim. "The look might be complete, but now my husband will be horny and distracted."

Her eyes go wide. "I kinda forgot about that bit."

"No, you didn't."

She grins. "No, I didn't."

As Colten stops beside me, she walks over, stroking Penny's face. Colt told me earlier how this was the horse Ace bought for Harper years ago. But now she co-parents her with Wyatt. It's cute.

"Be gentle with Gianna, Penny. She's a newbie," she tells her, pressing a kiss on the side of her face.

"You two have fun; I'm going to nap," she tells us before winking at me and leaving to head back to her truck. I'm pretty sure she only stopped by to give me this damn hat.

Colten steps forward, tipping my chin up. "You can wear my hat whenever you want, G. Don't even have to ask. I'd kinda prefer it."

"If I wear the hat, I have to ride the cowboy, isn't that correct?"

The girls chat informed me of that.

He nods. "Hmm, mmm."

I wrap my hands around his waist. "Or I could take your black Amex shopping again and buy myself one."

"Does my wife's bank card no longer work in Arizona?"

I shake my head. "Oh, it works. I get a better thrill out of spending your money instead of my own."

His tongue swipes his bottom lip. "Well then, looks like we're going shopping later. You probably also need a truck to replace the Rolls?"

My mouth drops open. "No. Nothing can replace my baby. Nothing."

He chuckles before dipping his head to give me a quick kiss.

"Although, I've had my eye on a 4x4 Aston Martin for a while; is that a good compromise?"

“Absolutely not. But whatever my wife needs, my wife gets. So, I say we go and buy one, but it has to be the true Aston color.”

I squeeze my thighs together. Colten is my dream man; there is no doubt about that.

“You think I’d dream of buying it in a different color? It has to be that green.”

“Atta girl.” He winks.

“Black leather inside, though,” I continue.

He nods, tipping his hat. “Yes, ma’am. Terrible choice for Arizona heat, but aesthetically, I see your point. Now stop stalling and get that fine ass of yours on the saddle.”

I step back and swallow as he hands me the reins.

“Left foot goes in there.” He points at the stirrup. “Push up with your right, lift the leg over and sit, baby. Easy as that.”

Blowing out a breath, I do as he says as gracefully as possible. And actually, it was kind of easy. Except now I’m sitting on a horse, with no clue what to do.

“Good girl. Now let your weight sink into your heels,” he tells me.

“And what the fuck does that mean? My weight is in my ass, isn’t it?”

He laughs. “You’re lucky I taught Wyatt how to ride.”

“I’m not a child,” I hiss.

But this would be a perfect lifestyle for a kid. If we ever have them, he’d absolutely love teaching them all this.

“Sit up straighter; imagine there's a line going from your ear to your shoulder and down to your feet.”

I adjust my position carefully, all while remembering to breathe.

He moves my feet in the stirrups and steps back, hands on his hips, assessing me.

“Alright, let me grab Bowie,” he tells me as he heads back to the stable.

“Don’t leave me here!” I shout after him.

“Just don’t move and she won’t.”

My heart races; it’s like time moves in slow motion. “Okay, Penny. Stay exactly where you are and please, for the love of God, do not move an inch,” I say sweetly.

It’s not long before Colten arrives with a horse that's way bigger than Penny. A deep gold body with a black mane and tail. He straddles the horse and trots beside me.

“Now what do I do?” I ask, frozen. Everything Colten tried to tell me on the way here has been erased from my memory.

“Gently squeeze your calves. To turn, gently turn and pull the reins back toward your hip. And relax. Okay?”

I nod, squeezing my legs, and she starts to move. A smile erupts on my face.

“Just follow me; she will probably do most of the work for you. Enjoy yourself. Don’t let any thoughts into your brain. This is about you finding freedom.”

I blow him a kiss, and he chuckles, his horse in front of mine, and it doesn't take long for me to not just enjoy this, but absolutely love every single second.

He takes us past the barn and out onto the fields that go off into the horizon for miles. The sun is above the mountains in the distance, the warm air brushing across my face. And he’s right; my mind is free.

The cows are grazing in the fields. Just minding their own business. It doesn’t seem like a bad life. Not having to think about anything other than eating and sleeping.

“You good to go a bit faster?” Colt asks from ahead.

“Yeah!” I shout back.

“Firm squeeze, twice,” he reminds me.

I do that, and she starts to close the distance between Colt and me.

“This is fun!” I call out.

Colt turns his neck to look at me, and smiles so wide it makes my heart flutter. “You’re a natural, baby.”

My cheeks heat, and that’s nothing to do with the sun beaming down on us. It’s him. It always is.

A while later, we come to a stop outside the animal shelter and I can’t wait to get off Penny and see my sheep. She can’t come home yet because she needs another round of antibiotics and the vet wants to keep an eye on her. Poor girl, she’s going through it.

Colt helps me dismount Penny, which was the most ungraceful move I’ve ever pulled off, almost toppling to the ground, only saved by Colten grabbing my waist.

As soon as my feet touch the ground, I’m running through the barn doors, right to the back where my girl is. She’s up on her feet by the time I reach her pen, and I quietly open it and drop to the floor in the hay.

“Hey, beautiful girl,” I coo as she limps over to me.

“You’re going through it too, aren’t you?”

I can see the pain in her eyes. She’s struggling, a bit like I am. Just in a different way. She lies down beside me, the same way she did the first time I came here, and I rest my back against the fence.

“You’re in the perfect place to heal, girl. And so am I,” I say with a smile, my eyes burning with tears.

That’s what Sterling Ranch does. It heals. It’s what Colten does. “We’re in the right hands, aren’t we?” I half laugh, stroking the top of her head.

“You’re going to be just fine. And you know what, now that my dad is gone, I’ll be okay too. And then you can come home with me, and we can have so much fun. We can do what we want. And you can be happy. And healthy.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. I don’t know if I’m talking about her or me anymore. Both of us, perhaps?

She lets out a baa, and I close my eyes. The pain will get better. The guilt. The realization that my life is one big manipulation.

“We’re going to get better, Preziosa. I promise,” I whisper. I let the tears fall freely now. I’m done battling my emotions and pretending that everything is okay. I’m allowed to feel. Nothing bad will happen if I cry.

I am not weak.

A few minutes later, when Colten’s footsteps sound, I open my eyes. Of course he knew I needed some time alone with her, because I’m sure he knows how to help me process my feelings better than I do.

“I was having a breakdown to a sheep, nothing to see here.”

He chuckles. “Animals are good listeners, G. Nothing wrong with that.”

It does feel good letting some of it out. And maybe Colt deserves a little bit more from me.

“My dad used to lock me up in underground prisons and have the guards beat the shit out of me,” I tell him, without looking at him.

The gate to the pen opens, and he drops to the ground beside me, wrapping his arm around my shoulder. I rest my head against him.

“I’m so fucking sorry, sweetheart.”

I suck in a breath so sharp it sends a twang to my ribs. “Me too.”

“Can we go back out and ride? It really does work like you said; it clears my head.”

He presses a kiss into my hair. “Anything you want, baby.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR



Colten

I was obsessed with Gianna already. But seeing her riding Penny, on my land, with a bright smile on her beautiful face? I've gone way beyond obsession. Into something far deeper that I'm not sure I can even name.

She gave me another piece of herself in that pen. A horrible, disgusting snippet of her past, which takes every power I possess not to rage over. But that ain't what she needs. She doesn't need my anger.

It's also pissing me off that we have to cut this short to head to Hunter's before Enzo arrives. I'd rather be out here, with Gianna, ridin' horses all day than sitting in a meeting discussing who holds what power. That sounds fuckin' boring in comparison.

I bring Bowie to a stop outside the barn and watch as Gianna successfully does the same with Penny, and pride swells in my chest.

Gianna can do just about anything she puts her mind to. Whether that's killing a man for disrespecting her or riding a horse owned by a seven-year-old.

And she looks fuckin' perfect doing it all too. I'm going to buy her a horse, best one I can damn well find.

After I dismount Bowie, I grab the reins and stand beside G, holding out my arm.

"Let's try this again, but better," I tell her.

The attempt outside the animal sanctuary was atrocious.

"What do I do, fall into your arms?" she jokes.

I shrug. "Basically. I'll catch you."

She considers her options for a few seconds, and then, next thing I know, she's literally falling from Penny. I dive forward and grab her as she erupts into a fit of laughter.

"You really enjoy keeping a man on his toes, don't you?"

"Just you, cowboy."

I set her down on her feet and adjust her hat. My cock aches in my boxers; it's starting to become a problem.

Before, it was when I thought about her. Now, it's every time she damn well glances in my direction.

We lead the horses back into the stables, and I lean on the post, watching as Gianna says goodbye to Penny. The way her face lights up when she's here, she looks lighter. The same way she does when she's with her sheep. Like the world isn't weighing on her shoulders, trying to sink her into the ground.

She turns to face me. "Can we do this again tomorrow?"

I'd do this every day if she asked. "Yep. Can put you to work on the ranch if you want?"

She grins. "Why do I sense some doubt in your voice? You think I can't handle ranch work?"

I take a step towards her. "Oh, viper. I know you can handle a day here."

She tips her chin up. "So…"

"We gotta handle other business first, remember? Before we start planning any kinda future, we have to wait and see what Enzo decides our fate to be first."

I'm hoping and praying there's room for me in Gianna's plans for LA domination.

She blows out a breath. "We've got this, Colt."

I give her a half grin, trying to stay positive. I've been in this world long enough to know it ain't going to be easy. "You have to go in there and demand what you want, G."

Her hand grazes over mine. "And what if I don't exactly know what I want?"

I frown. "What do you mean? You want LA? You want to be the head of the family."

Should I be getting my hopes up that she wants to stay on Sterling Ranch with me?

“I do. But can’t a girl do both? I don’t want to be locked up in a mansion in LA. I’ve got another life to live.”

I entwine my fingers through hers. “In this life, I ain’t sure that’s possible, sweetheart.”

That defiant glint in her eye returns. “Then watch me make it possible, Colt.”

And in that moment, I believe her.

Gianna can do whatever she wants, and I know she’s gonna fight for it.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE



GIANNA

Being in a room full of intimidating men is second nature to me now. It doesn’t scare me. But walking into a room filled with men while holding my husband's hand?

Now that is the most powerful thing I’ve ever encountered. Every single pair of eyes lands on us, and silence fills the room. I nod to my brother, who has traitorously decided to sit beside Romeo.

I meet Romeo’s dark eyes; his face remains vacant as he shoves a hand through his black hair. I give him a smug smile in return as Colten pulls out my chair. I sit, and he takes his seat beside me. The second his ass hits the chair, his rough hand is on my thigh, making my breath hitch.

Next to Romeo is Enzo. The mighty Enzo that I’m here to bow down to. His blue eyes land on me, flick to Colten, and then to his watch. Shit, are we late?

“I’m going to be straight with you. I don’t have time; I have to catch my flight back in an hour,” Enzo starts.

I rest my hand over Colten’s and stroke his fingers. “I appreciate you taking the time to see me,” I say.

He nods. “You killed your father; that earns you my time.”

I shift uncomfortably in my seat, and Colt’s grip tightens on my thigh in response.

“I did what I had to do to save my family.”

And to save myself. Even if I should have done it a long time ago.

He runs his hand along his jaw, shifting his weight forward, elbows on the wooden table. “And how am I to trust a woman callous enough to murder her own father?” he asks, his voice low.

Colten straightens his spine. “That ain’t fair, and you fucking know it,” he spits.

Enzo doesn’t even glance at Colten.

I don’t flinch before saying, “My father abused me for as long as I can remember, Enzo. He beat me. He locked me in a prison. He used torture as a way to keep me as a pawn in his game. I was prepared to end my father's life before I even knew about your deal. He laid his hands on me for the last time.”

Nothing is going to take the shame out of my words. I have to own them. My past is my past, and it has to die alongside my father.

Enzo’s jaw twitches. I tear my eyes from him and look at Dom, who offers me a small smile, some sort of reassurance. If I’m going to win over Enzo and the rest of Colten’s family, I have to start with the truth, even if it hurts.

“So, unless someone under your control decides to try and hurt me, I won’t have to kill any of you. But I know you’ve seen my track record. I stabbed my brother through the heart and slit my dad's throat; blood doesn’t stop me. If anyone betrays me, that is what you will have to deal with.”

Enzo picks up the whiskey in front of him without a word. “I think that’s a fair deal. But I can assure you, any man in my organization knows never to lay hands on a woman.”

It’s interesting how the largest criminal network in the world can have such power, and yet, unlike my father, not abuse the ones around them. It is possible to be powerful without pain.

“I want to keep LA. I have the infrastructure, the money, and the contacts. The Greeks are gone, and we have enough manpower there to settle any issues with the transition from my father to me. But we need you to expand. In return, you will have access to the drug routes in LA and my suppliers. We have vacant properties that need filling. I can prove to be an asset to you,” I tell him.

Romeo clears his throat, and my attention snaps to him. I won’t let this asshole ruin my future because he’s got his dick in a twist about my husband.

“Is there something you’d like to add, Romeo?” I say, keeping my voice light and my smile plastered on my face.

He smirks. “You really do know how to put on a performance, Gianna. I’ll give you that.”

“Some of us don’t need to spend our lives performing for other people,” I counter.

His eyebrow lifts, his gaze shifting beside me, right to Colten. “Is that right? And you expect us to believe you aren’t pretending right now in front of our eyes?”

I let out a laugh. “My God, look, I understand my husband is impressive, and probably very hard to get over. But you are really going to have to move on. Colten is taken. This is not a show for anyone. And you are going to seriously have to get used to being in our presence without being a complete dick, or we will have a problem.”

Colt snickers beside me, so I elbow him in the ribs.

“You think I’m impressive?” he whispers as he leans in.

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“Very. Now shut up,” I hiss.

I turn back to Enzo. “I’m being deadly serious. I will not be disrespected by any of your men. And that includes Romeo. If I’m head of LA under this organization, that means he isn’t above me, and he will treat me with the same respect he shows Hunter.”

Enzo glares at Romeo, and he rolls up his sleeves, revealing his tattooed forearms. I can’t help but notice the script inked on his hand, right above a compass. *Anima Mia. My soul.*

Now the haunted look behind his eyes makes sense. Whoever he lost, or whoever he’s searching for, they’re the imprint on his soul.

“There will be no issues going forward, Gianna. I assure you,” Enzo tells me.

Romeo mutters something under his breath, and Dom's eyes form slits, that darkness beneath them emerging. If Romeo isn't careful, my brother will throw him head first out of the window in a minute.

"So, will you be returning back to LA?" Hunter interjects from the head of the table.

A knot forms in my stomach, my hands going clammy. "Colten and I are figuring out the logistics. I will probably split my time and have Dom stay full time in LA. When I come into power, I'm not alone; Dominic is always beside me, and that is non-negotiable."

Colt's arm wraps around my shoulder, so I nudge my chair closer to him.

"So, you're really a couple?" Jett asks. He's been suspiciously quiet this entire meeting. I'm guessing he and Ace were under strict instructions not to talk, by the way that Hunter is now glaring at Jett.

"Gianna is my wife, Jett. You were at the wedding. Did you get thrown off a bull again and hit your head?" Colt says.

Jett scoffs. "I'll hold my line of questioning for later before I get in trouble."

"That's probably a good idea," Hunter cuts in.

I have to stop myself from laughing. The dynamic between the Sterlings is hilarious. I expected to walk into a negotiation for my future. Instead, they're debating my relationship status.

Jett taps his fingers on the wood to get our attention, leaving the rest of us lost for words. "I got a new pet," Jett continues.

Colt runs a hand over his face. "Fuck me, make this stop."

"What pet is that, Jett?" Enzo asks.

Jett smirks, like a naughty kid. "His name is Gator. That's all I'm giving you. If you want to meet him, he's at the new Lawson Ranch next door."

Everyone's mouths drop open. Surely this man does not own an alligator. Can you even keep them as pets in the desert?

"If you've brought in an alligator next to where my baby is going to live, I will fucking feed you to it," Ace seethes.

Jett erupts into laughter. "You're all so serious. He won't eat you. Or me, for that matter."

Hunter shakes his head. "Enzo, before we completely lose the room. Gianna is now the head of LA with your backing; Dom is second-in-

command. We will work with them to build out LA and merge our shipments. The Milanos are one of us now?”

I hold my breath as Colten strokes my bare shoulder.

“Yes. Milanos are in. Welcome to the family,” Enzo says.

I smile as I rest my head against Colt’s chest. The rest of the room fades away into chatter. This is the moment I’ve waited for. The Milano family is on the map. We’re safe.

The empire I sold my soul for is finally all mine.

But as I look up at my husband and he smiles down at me, like he’s never been more proud, I’m starting to think that maybe the empire wasn’t what I should have been dreaming about.

And actually, I might have found something even better in the process.

A cowboy.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX



Colten

I can sense the excitement radiating off Gianna; she got exactly what she married me for. And I'm fuckin' proud of my girl.

Her takedown of Romeo was one of the most impressive moments I've witnessed. I know Romeo is going to be seething about that. He fucked with the wrong woman.

"Congratulations, baby," I whisper on the top of her head.

She rests one leg over the other, tapping her nail on her knee, and I know something's on her mind.

It's probably the same thing as mine.

That this little bubble we've created together is about to burst. Being a mafia boss isn't a part-time responsibility. It's dangerous. It's unpredictable. And those conversations we had about our future, about kids, about living here, I don't think that's on the cards.

I can't take this moment away from her. Not after I saw firsthand the shit she's been through to get here.

I place my hand on the table, remembering the first time I ever laid eyes on Gianna. And the one thought that went through my head was bending her over this damn table and spanking the brat out of her.

"We've started getting our men in order; we've had some restructuring happen. We've removed anyone we think may have been working with Fabio or could cause us problems because of their loyalties. Our uncles will be in contact soon to discuss how things will move forward with Gianna.

They have to accept her as our new leader," Dom says, turning all the attention on him.

Gianna failed to mention this. Although since she's come back here, she's hardly touched her phone. Dom has been pulling the strings for her, and I think he's doing a damn good job in the circumstances.

Gianna sits up straight. I pull out a cigarette from my pocket, light it, and hand it to her.

"Our uncles aren't a problem, Dom. If we're working under Enzo now, we don't need them or their approval anymore. Although, I'm surprised they haven't flown over under the circumstances?" She pauses, tapping her chin with her finger. "We're done with the old way of working and moving into the twenty-first century. So, when they call you can tell them there is no acceptance, they're either with us or against us; it's not a discussion," Gianna says carefully.

I bet those bastards are no different from her father. All cut from the same cloth of abusers.

"And what if they come after you for killing our father in retaliation if we push them?" Dom counters.

I catch Romeo grinning beside Dom and clench my fist.

"Then we fight back," I interject. "That's the point of these alliances; one family's war is all of our battles. You'll have men fighting in your corner from across the globe. Do you think your uncles can deal with that?"

Dom swallows. "No. They won't last a day. Unless they've made allies we don't know about?"

"There is only one person I can think of who would align with your uncles. And they wouldn't dare come into my territory," Enzo adds coolly, with such spite in his tone I swear the room chills.

"So let them come after me." Gianna shrugs. "I don't give a shit if our uncles die; they mean nothing to me."

I smile at her response.

"And Levi? Has he come back with anything?" Dom asks.

She shakes her head. "No. Nothing. Probably lying low; he knows what I'll do if he comes near me again."

A knot twists in my stomach. I didn't like the way Levi looked at her, that smug, shit-eating grin he had, as if he was one step ahead of the game.

For a small-time drug runner, he had way too much confidence. "Levi won't become an issue; he set foot into our territory, so we will deal with

him," I tell them.

"Levi?" Hunter asks.

I turn to face him at the head of the table. "Yeah. A motorcycle gang, Twisted Serpents, moved in. They wanted an in with us to move drugs into Vegas. I told him unless he wants Miki to decapitate him, then he needs to fuck off."

"He worked with my father; he's a little rat. I don't trust him," Gianna mutters.

Hunter lets out an exasperated sigh. "We got a biker gang problem?"

"Nah. Not a problem; we neutralized that before it became an issue, don't worry," I tell him.

Enzo pulls out his phone and starts typing away. "I'll pull up everything I can on all of them; better to be safe."

Gianna grins. "Any chance there will be any blackmail material in that file?"

Enzo chuckles. "I'll make sure there is dirt on all of the members."

"I like working with you already," Gianna says.

By the time the meeting wraps up, Enzo heads out first, followed by Romeo and Dom close behind. Ace is all but running out of the door because Harper felt sick this morning and he's in full panic mode, leaving me and G with Hunter, Jett, and a silent Tate.

"Colt, can I speak to you after this?" Hunter asks.

Here we go; I've been waiting for Hunter to switch into fatherly advice mode. Like I want life advice from a man who can't even decide on a name for his daughter. One minute she was Amelia Willow Sterling, and now, we all have to call her Willow.

"I'll meet you back home," G whispers.

I shake my head, trying to ignore the pang in my chest at hearing her call it home. "No. Your ass stays right here. I've got a fantasy I need to live out."

I lean back in my chair. "I need a moment with Gianna. I'll meet you in your office in fifteen."

Jett cackles from the other end of the table. "Man, we eat at this table. Don't make a mess."

I grin. "I know how to clean up after myself, Jett."

He gives a knowing nod, and Hunter looks outright disgusted. I don't care, I have a fantasy to live out.

Hunter stands, tapping the table with his fist. “Fuck it. This is your wedding present; I’ll have it moved into yours later,” he mutters as he walks past with Tate. Jett follows behind and stops before the door fully closes.

“Don’t worry about being loud, I’ll cover my ears,” he says.

“Shut the fucking door, Jett,” I hiss.

The second I hear it click shut, I stand, shoving my chair out the way. Gianna looks up at me through her lashes, her eyes tracking over my body.

Grabbing my hat from the table, I place it gently on her head. That in itself is enough to spring my cock to life.

“What’s the fantasy?” she breathes out.

I hold out my hand to her, and she takes it so I can help her to her feet. I don’t waste a second; with a grunt, I spin her and push her over the table, kicking open her legs.

Her hands splay out over the wood as I shove her skirt over her ass.

I bite down on my fist at the sight of her. The red thong against her tanned skin, surrounded by ink. And that hat. My hat.

“You. Bent over this fucking table. That was it. That was all I needed to see.”

I rub my hands over her ass, settling between her legs. She grips hold of the hat on her head.

“And the hat, Colt. I owed you this,” she breathes out.

“Oh, I fuckin’ know, baby.”

Pulling her cheeks apart, I swallow. I need her, so fuckin’ bad.

“You wanted to see? You don’t want to do anything? How disappointing, Colten.”

Lifting my right hand, I spank her. She jolts forward with a moan as I rub the small red welt already forming.

“You’re a tease, cowboy. I know you can hit harder than that,” she sasses.

Dragging one hand down her spine, I press her against the table and smack her again, this time harder, like she asked for.

“Better?” I grunt.

“Would be better if your cock was inside me.”

I’m already unbuckling my belt and freeing my dick. I tug her panties to the side and thrust inside her all the way to the hilt.

“Fuck. You feel so good, G,” I murmur.

She pushes back against me, desperate for more. Desperate for me. And that ignites something inside me.

“Is this what you need?” I ask, the table jolting as I fuck her from behind.

Her breathing gets heavier, the little moans become cries. “Y-yes.”

I smack her ass again, and a scream rips from her. I bend forward, grabbing a fistful of her hair and tugging her head back. With my free hand, I shove two fingers in her mouth. I know Jett won’t cover his damn ears and no one gets to hear what belongs to me.

Her teeth clamp down over them, and she fights against me. Her walls are strangling my cock, my own release right on the damn edge.

“You might be a goddamn mafia queen now, but to me? You’re my little slut that’s just desperate for my cock. Aren’t you?”

She nods, tipping her head back and meeting my thrusts.

Her body trembles as her orgasm rips through her, and that’s enough for me to join her. With my head tipped back and her name on my tongue, I spill deep inside her, letting her milk every last damn drop of me.

She flops against the wood as I pull out and shove my dick back in my boxers. I carefully put her panties back into place and help her to stand, spinning her to face me, my hat still securely on my head.

“You good, viper?” I ask, my voice hoarse.

She smiles up at me. “You’re dripping down my thighs, cowboy. I’m good.”

My lips crash over hers; I can’t damn well help it. That possessive side of me, that obsessed side, loves the fact that it’s me who gets to claim her.

“What got you all riled up for me?” she asks when she pulls back.

“Just listening to you talk, the way you command a conversation and know what you want. The way you put grown men in their place. And looking at you, G. I can’t help it. I’d have you every second of every day if I could.”

Her cheeks deepen with red. “Don’t start getting all mushy with me, Mr. Sterling.”

I tip her chin up. “And what possibly makes you think you could stop me?”

“Maybe I don’t wanna.”

I smile. I actually fucking smile, because my wife wants me. “I need to go speak to my brother, then… would you like to go and grab dinner with

me?”

She gasps. “Is my husband asking me out on a date?”

A laugh escapes me. “Yes, sweetheart. I’d like a date with my wife. A real one, not a fake work-related one.”

She bites her lip. “I accept. I’ll go say hi to Dom and then head back home.”

When she kisses me, I forget my train of thought completely. “See you later, baby,” I murmur.

She squeezes my ass. “Yeah. You will.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN



GIANNA

Dom isn’t answering his damn phone, so now I’m stomping my way to his home on the Ranch. I might fully live with Colt now, but it’s nice they’ll still let Dom have this place. He said he needed to grab some of his stuff to take back to LA. Instead, I pull up Harper’s number and hit dial.

She answers and sounds half asleep.

“Ace mentioned you didn’t feel well. I want to check you’re okay?” I say.

“Oh, he’s so dramatic. Yeah, I’m exhausted and have the worst heartburn I’ve ever experienced in my life.”

I blow out a breath. “But you and the baby, you’re fine, yes?”

She laughs. “Yes, G. We’re fine.”

Dom’s house comes into view.

“I have some of the best doctors in America saved on my phone. If you need me to call them, just say the word, Harper.”

I’d do anything for her; hell, I’d protect them all on this Ranch.

“G, stop worrying. We’re fine. Ace has already got me a team that is watching my every move. I want to give birth now.”

I stop in my tracks and smile as the sun beats down on me. “I can’t wait to meet her,” I say.

This whole family has clawed their way into my heart, and now I’m looking forward to being the crazy auntie who will beat the shit out of anyone's parents who upset my niece or nephew.

“I hear you became royalty,” Harper teases.

I roll my eyes, stopping before the steps to the porch. “I always was royalty, Harper. It’s just now I have the empire to go with it.”

There's a silence on the line before she asks, “Does that mean you’re leaving now? The whole wedding thing is pointless? You got what you wanted?” There’s a hint of sadness in her tone.

“Not unless Colten kicks me out and divorces me. I’m—” I stop, leaning on the wooden post. “I’m enjoying being here.”

“You seem happier here than in LA. I think that place sucks joy out of anyone.”

I nod in agreement, even though she can’t see me. “Shall we grab a coffee tomorrow?” I ask.

“Yep. I’ll call you in the morning.”

We say our goodbyes and I head up the steps and knock on Dom’s door. I swear to God I can hear thudding. He doesn’t answer. So I push open the door.

And instantly regret my decision.

My hands slam over my mouth to cover my gasp at the scene I’m witnessing. Romeo is butt naked, tied to the wooden post in the living room with fucking chains, while my brother whips him with his belt.

I stumble backward, slamming the door, and I walk faster than I’ve ever walked in my life back towards our house.

Why does my brother always have to fuck complete assholes? First Tomasso. Now Romeo. His taste in men is diabolical.

I end up back outside Hunter’s house as Colten is putting on his hat to leave. His eyes snap to mine, and his face lights up.

“You look like you’ve seen a damn ghost. You okay?” he asks, closing the distance.

“I saw something worse than the dead, Colt.”

He frowns. “What?”

I shove my hand in his jean pocket and pull out the cigarettes and a lighter, putting one in my mouth and letting it burn. “Dom… and Romeo.”

I watch for Colten’s reaction. Almost bracing for some kind of jealous response. Or hurt. I don’t know.

Instead, he laughs. “They’re actually well suited.”

My mouth drops open. “I cannot have Romeo as my future brother-in-law. He can’t have my husband, so he goes for my brother instead? I’m starting to think this man hates me.”

Colt’s fingers brush along my cheek.

“He doesn’t like you because you’re more powerful than him. He’s jealous. Especially after you impressed Enzo today. Just ignore it.”

I take another drag of my cigarette. “That really wasn’t an image I needed burned into my brain.”

He plucks the cigarette from my fingers and threads his fingers through mine as we walk back to our house.

“I’ll give you some other things to think about to replace that new core memory. How's that?”

I laugh. “Deal. But do it fast.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT



Colten

One week later…

G has headed back to LA for a few days with Dom, and I've decided to spend more money on horses. Being in Greece taught me that I need to do more things to spark joy, and horses are one of those things. I got a tip from the auction that there were some nice quarter horses up for grabs today. And with Tate and Xander getting into steer wrestling more, I could do with a couple more at the ranch.

My rodeo days are few and far between now. I spend most of my time acquiring the horses and getting them ready. But secretly, I also want to surprise G with a horse of her own. We've got the sheep she fell in love with coming home next week, so why not add another horse.

Tate heads back to his seat with two cans of beer and passes one to me.

Since Tate came back from New York a few years back, he ain't the same man. He's quiet, and arguably miserable. The complete contrast from Jett.

Once upon a time, he was the same level of unhinged and comedic. Now? He doesn't leave the house much. He spends most of his time arguing with his fiancée.

"What made you want to venture out of the house today?" I ask, watching as they bring out the horses.

I ain't interested in this lot. I've already spotted the three in the listings I've got my eye on.

"Avery is back," he says.

“I didn’t know she left?”

He tells us nothing. He’s been with Avery for six years, and I’ve probably met her three times. And his son? I can count the number of times on my hands. Which is a damn shame. But the more we press it, the further Tate gets from us. So we’re watching how this plays out, and we’ve got tabs on everywhere that little boy goes, whether his mom likes it or not.

But Avery is always trotting around the globe, and Tate lets her take Mason with her. She’s the mayor's daughter and some kind of financial advisor for big companies.

“Yeah. She moved out and went to Vegas for a bit.”

“And you let her? And Mason?”

“I can’t fight it.”

“Can’t or won't, Tate? Why don’t you tell us shit like this? We can help?”

He sighs. “It’s complicated, Colt.”

“Being miserable doesn’t have to be that complicated, Tate. You can deny it however you want; we all know you ain’t been right for a long time.”

He rubs his hands over his face. “I think maybe I need to move away again, Colt. Me and Avery don’t work here. It ain’t fair on Mason. We need a fresh start.”

I crack my knuckles. “So, you have relationship problems and want to leave a whole ranch behind?”

“Jett is more than capable of dealing with it. He did the last time I left. I was in New York for three years, and he didn’t burn the ranch to the ground. He’s fine, Colt.”

“Why don’t you call it quits with Avery?” I ask, out of genuine curiosity.

“It’s complicated. Just leave it at that.”

I won’t be leaving it. I will today. But this conversation ain’t over.

“Where do you want to go?” I ask.

The next lot of horses come out, and that’s when I see her. The Duchess. Gianna’s horse. Jet-black coat. Around fifteen hands. Absolutely perfect for her.

“I’ve got a plan brewing that involves my contacts in Nashville,” he tells me.

I grin. “You ain’t got the lungs for Nashville, Tate. You can’t fuckin’ sing.”

He laughs, and it’s almost, almost, like Tate is back. “I’m thinking more about expanding our other businesses there.”

“Now that sounds interesting.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out, knowing exactly who it is by the way my body vibrates.

Wife: I have a surprise for you.

I tilt the phone away from Tate. I had a whole-body tour of her this morning after her morning shower. I pass the paddle to Tate. All it does is make me think about using one on Gianna later. I think she’d like that.

“My max is seven fifty. The Duchess. Get me her.”

Me: I also have a surprise for you.

She’s typing back immediately.

Wife: I’ll show you mine if you show me yours?

Me: You’ll be home in a couple of days. I can wait.

Wife: No. You’ll see me in three hours.

I lean back in my chair as the hammer comes down. I got The Duchess for four hundred thousand. Ain’t bad. I’m more excited about the fact that my woman is on her way back to me early.

“Let me guess, this one is for Gianna?” Tate says, handing the paddle back to me.

“Yep.”

He smiles. “You like her, don’t you?”

“I’m not a teenager. Of course I like my wife.”

Like doesn’t even cover what I feel for my wife; the thought half panics me, but it also settles me.

I drink some of the cold beer as I stand. “You know the other two I’m after, right? For you and Xander. I’ll go sort the paperwork and money out for this one.”

He nods. “Got it, boss. But I’ll be taking the better one for myself.”

I’m suddenly far more interested in hearing all about my wife's surprise for me. With her, it could be anything.

When I head to the tables, a blacked-out Bentley parked in the dirt lot catches my eye. They hand me the forms and a pen, and I lean against the wall.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” I tell the guy.

And then I head outside, lighting a cigarette as I walk around the car, clocking the California license plate as I do. Because the second I’m back inside, I’m texting that to Hunter so he can run the plate.

This car doesn’t belong here. And I always trust my gut. It’s what’s kept me alive this long.

I find a space at the back of the dirt and rest on the fence, with my boot on the wood. Not a single soul passes by in the time it takes me to finish my cigarette.

So, I start filling out the paperwork. Still nothing.

But I know I’m being watched. Because the owner of this car ain’t inside the auction house. I’d bet the damn ranch on that.

Making my way back inside, I hand the papers back and head straight back to Tate.

“I got the first one. The horse two is up next.”

“Great,” I say, sending the license plate over to Hunter.

It takes all of thirty seconds for him to reply.

> Hunter: Belongs to a holding company in LA. Digging further now.

“Fuck,” I hiss.

“Everything alright?” Tate asks, just as they bring the next lot out onto the dirt.

I hit dial on Gianna’s number.

“Wow. You really must miss me,” she greets me.

“You know I do.”

“We’re about to take off. I’ll be back soon.”

That fills me with relief; she’s only been gone a few days and I want her back.

“I’ll pick you up from the airstrip,” I tell her.

There’s a pause. “What’s happened, Colt?”

“Black Bentley with California plates parked at the auction. I assume you haven’t sent someone to spy on me in your absence?”

She scoffs. “I wouldn’t send someone; I’d do it myself.”

A grin twitches on my lips. “My exact thoughts.”

“So, why the hell are they following you?”

I swallow. “I’m more concerned about why they ain’t even trying to hide, G. The car is registered to a holding company in LA; Hunter will send over the details. They want me to know they’re here, and that they’re watching.”

That’s what people do when they think they’re in prize position; the over confident organizations are always the ones who fail in the end.

“Send me the plates. I’ll probably recognize it if they’re one of ours. Or Dom will.”

I do as she says.

“Thanks, babe,” she says.

My eyes go wide. “I approve.”

“Approve?”

“That nickname over meatball.”

She laughs. “Aw. But I like my little meatball.”

The bids start on the last horse. I hold up my paddle and start at a hundred thousand. “I gotta go, sweetheart. I’ll call you back. I’ll see you when you land. Have a safe flight.”

“Be careful, Colt,” she warns.

I hold up the paddle again at two hundred thousand. “When am I not?”

She blows out a breath. “Um. When you keep coming inside of me with no protection?”

I nearly choke on my own spit. She doesn’t sound too pissed off about that, though.

“Fair point.”

The bids get up to two fifty.

“Talk later, cowboy,” she purrs.

I open my mouth, and three words are on my tongue, making my eyes go wide. I snap my mouth shut and take a breath as she cuts the call.

The rest of the auction goes by in a blur. I secure my horse for four hundred and fifty. But my mind is still reeling from the fact that I nearly told Gianna I loved her.

Over the phone.

I love her?

Shit.

I think I do.

“Let’s go,” I tell Tate as I stand.

“Should I prepare myself to get shot as soon as we get outside like what happened to Jett a while back?” he asks quietly.

“Aren’t you always ready for someone to try and kill you?”

He laughs. “Well… yeah. You didn’t have to nurse Jett back to health, though, Colt. Fuck me, I could never be a nurse.”

I can’t help but laugh. Jett did make a big ass deal out of getting shot.

By the time we head over to grab the next load of paperwork for the last two horses, the Bentley is gone.

They wanted me to see them, which gives me more questions than answers.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE



Gianna

Colten is leaning against his truck, hat tipped down, foot resting on the metal, waiting for me as I step off the jet.

I had planned to stay in LA for a week, but after four days I couldn't take it any longer. My house is dull in comparison to the ranch. It's dark and morbid. Yes, it's beautiful, but it no longer feels like me anymore.

The conversations are dull. There is no spark there. It's like there's a dark cloud that covers the city.

Butterflies erupt in my belly when he looks up and gives me that boyish grin.

I hated every second of it away from him. I sat through ten meetings about real estate, and I maybe listened to two sentences of conversation throughout all of them.

Dom has everything under control. My company is running smoothly in my absence, but that is the entire point of owning a business. You build it to run without you. I make the money. I have no one to prove myself to anymore. Dad is already dead.

No funeral. No goodbye. My uncles had his body flown back to Italy.

And I don't know how I feel about that. Going back to LA made my skin crawl. Getting back on that jet was the only joy I felt. And this time, I wasn't even scared, because I knew I was flying back to Colt.

How am I meant to run a mafia empire in a place that only holds my trauma?

My feet are running before my brain even catches up. My bodyguard, Matteo, will have to pick up the bag I threw on the floor.

Colt strides towards me as my heels click against the tarmac and we collide together. His arms wrap around my waist, pulling me against him as I loop my hands around his neck, and he lifts me so I can straddle him. He spins us, so my back bashes against the hot metal of the truck. “Fuck. I missed you,” he growls against my lips.

That has my heart racing. I’m glad it’s not just me. Four nights away from Colten was enough. Enough for me to realize I don’t want to keep doing that. In Arizona, I have him; I have Harper and the rest of the crazy family. I have horses, my precious baby girl sheep, and an animal shelter to keep me busy. Every day there is something different to do that doesn’t feel like work. It’s complete freedom.

LA isn’t my home; it was my prison. And now that I own the keys to it, it doesn’t mean I have to keep going back willingly.

“Keep kissing me, cowboy,” I whisper.

And he does. Hard. Enough to steal my breath away and ease every bit of tension I brought back from California.

In his arms, I’m Gianna Sterling. The girl who is obsessed with her husband. I’m not a Milano. I’m not trying to impress anyone. Well, except my handsome cowboy.

“We need to take another trip to Greece soon. Joining the mile-high club is now on my list,” I tell him as he pulls back.

“You have a list, and you haven’t shared it with me?”

Heat crawls up my neck. “Maybe.”

“It’s written down?”

I shake my head. “Nope. All in my head. It’s a growing list. I was doing some research before bed.”

His eyebrow raises. “Did my viper find out porn exists?”

I bark out a laugh. “I was a virgin when you met me, but not sheltered. I’ve killed more people than you’ve fucked, Colten.”

His eyebrows knit together. “I’m not even sure I want to do that math on that one.”

“Me neither,” I deadpan.

“Back to the list. Do you care to share? Or is it more of a guessing game where I find out your kinks as we go?”

I flash him a smile. “Oh, I’ll share the list.”

He leans in, pressing his lips to mine. “You going to tell me what my surprise is?” he mutters.

I shake my head. “Nope. All will be revealed soon.”

He sets me down on the ground and opens up the passenger door, helping me in, not before slapping my ass before I sit down. A true gentleman.

He starts the drive and turns down the radio. My guys are right behind in a van lugging the things I decided to bring back from my house. There were a few decorations I thought might look cool at our place, bring a little bit of me into the decor.

“Oh, so I got Dom to run the plates through our companies. It belongs to Cesare, one of the men who didn’t make the cut.”

Colt slides his hand into mine on my lap. “And why did he not make the cut, baby?”

“He was in my little red book of traitors.”

“What did he do?”

“He stole some money from my father years ago and lost two fingers for it. Tried to get out of it by saying his mom was dying and he needed cash for her treatment.”

“And your father bought that?”

I shake my head. “No. That’s why he’s got two fingers missing. I doubt that was all of the punishment either.”

“How long ago?” he asks.

“Maybe seven years? My father didn’t like bringing on new people, so he conditioned the ones he had. I don’t forgive as easily.”

He hums in response. “So, why would he be following me to an auction?”

I glance at him, trying not to be distracted by his chiseled jaw and stubble. Or the veins popping in his forearm as he holds the wheel. “If I had to guess, he wasn’t the brightest spark. I’d say he’s looking for me or a way to get to me to beg for his job back. Matteo is going to hunt him down once we get back home.”

“And what happens when we find him?”

I grin. “I’d like you to show me some new torture techniques. I’ve seen the way you handle rope. I know you’ve got some fucked up methods up your sleeve, cowboy.”

He chuckles. “We can get Jett to introduce him to a game of cowboy poker.”

“Which is?”

If I had to guess, it would be something ridiculous like throwing knives at each other on certain cards.

“You’ll see. It will be an entertaining watch.”

My phone buzzes in my purse. I know who it is without even looking. I was thinking about how quiet he’s been. My gut always knows. I pull it out, and there it is. Levi’s name flashing back at me.

“Why is he calling?” Colten asks.

“I’d have to answer that to find out, and I don’t plan on it.”

His jaw tenses and he grips the steering wheel harder. “Answer.”

I shrug and click accept, putting it on speaker. “I don’t have time for your bullshit, Levi,” I say, unamused.

“Always was a pretentious little princess,” Levi spits.

“Fuck off. Have you showered and brushed your teeth yet?”

I see Colt’s mouth twitch in response.

“We need to meet, Gianna. I have some information that I believe you require.”

“I don’t require any information from you,” I snap.

Levi is known to be a liar who makes a quick buck. It’s his signature move. He pretends he has intel then you pay a price, to find out the most useless piece of information known to man. And I assume business has been dry since we cut him off.

He laughs. “Trust me. You’ll want to hear this one.”

“Of course. And let me guess… this information comes at a price?”

He’s so predictable it’s painful.

“Obviously.”

“How much?” Colt cuts in.

“Half a mil should do it.”

Grabbing Colt’s bicep, I shake my head. The fact that Levi doesn’t even question Colt listening in, when Colten threatened to kill him a few weeks ago, just shows how desperate he is.

I scoff. “Get your head out of your ass, Levi. Nothing that comes out of your mouth is worth anything above ten thousand.”

“Then good luck out there, G,” he says before cutting the call.

I toss my phone back in my purse, tipping my head back against the leather headrest. “Am I going crazy, or did that sound like a threat?” I ask Colt.

What if this one time Levi does know something? He’s a rat that does hang around other rats who might want me dead.

“Yes, baby. That very much sounded like a threat.”

Running my nails along the tattoos on my thighs, I let the cogs turn in my brain. “So…” I say.

“You want to track him down and get the answers for free?” he finishes my sentence for me.

“How did you know?”

I love how he’s always on the same page as me.

He picks up my hand, brings it to his lips, and kisses each finger. “Because I know how your sadistic, beautiful mind works, viper.”

He takes a turn, and I swear to fucking god we’re going round in a circle.

“Are you about to kidnap me?” I ask.

He stops for a red light and turns to face me, tapping the wheel. “A little bit, yeah.”

“Why are we going back to the jet? And why did we even drive off?”

He lifts his arm, running his fingers through my hair. “I had a little time to kill while they refuel.” He shrugs.

“Colten Sterling. Where are we going?”

He pulls back my bottom lip. “To get a few things ticked off that kink list of yours, wife.”

I squeeze my thighs together, already shifting in my seat. “Is that my surprise?”

“One of them. The other is being delivered tomorrow. We will be home in time.”

I lean over, placing my hand over his crotch. “So, we’re flying somewhere to fuck? Then coming back for surprise two? And then… kidnapping Levi?”

He pulls up to the security gates at the private airport and opens his window.

“Sounds like a pretty good twenty-four hours to me,” he says.

“Wait, Matteo is taking my bags home. I don’t have anything?” I panic.

Colt laughs and hands some documents to the guard who opens the gate. “I’ve packed everything you need, sweetheart.”

My legs bounce with excitement. I have no idea what he’s planning, but I trust him.

And that should scare me a lot more than it does. I was always told never to trust a soul outside my family. But I think Colten is becoming my family.

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CHAPTER EIGHTY



Colten

I’m normally in and out of Vegas within an hour. We drop the drugs off to Mikhail’s warehouse, pack up some guns to bring back, and then we’re out.

The Volkovs rule over Vegas. Nearly every hotel. Every casino. Every place your boot lands, Mikhail is watching.

But the place ain’t for me. I like the quiet. The smell of dirt. Not the scent of boozed-up tourists on their third day without showering. They chase the noise, and I’m desperate for peace and quiet. But on this occasion, being in Vegas is a necessity. Because I don't trust anyone else to arrange this surprise for Gianna.

I squeeze her hand tighter as I lead her across the tarmac to the blacked-out Range Rover. The driver's door flies open, and the man who pops out grins like a crazed lunatic. He runs at us, his silver tooth reflecting in the sun.

Gianna stops in her tracks, going into defense mode, her body tensing, but I laugh.

Alexei stops in front of me. “Yeehaw, the cowboys made it to the party.” Alexei whoops, throwing up a fist.

I thought Jett was crazy, but he ain’t got nothing on this guy. I’m not sure what details Mikhail has actually told Alexei, because this is not a party. Not the kind he thinks it is anyway.

“We’re here for business, Alexei, but good to see you again,” I say, tipping my hat.

His eyes dazzle at my hat. “I need to get myself one of them; Lara will fucking love it.”

He cracks his knuckles, and for a split second, I’m half expecting him to try and knock me out to steal it. Lara must be a saint to be able to deal with a husband as crazy as Alexei.

“Next run, I’ll bring you one. How's that?”

Gianna steps beside me, and she studies him intensely. That gets Alexei’s attention.

“Is this your wife? You’re married, right? And you didn’t invite me?” he asks.

I scratch the back of my neck. “It was a small family ceremony, Alexei. Sorry.”

“Gianna. Pleasure to meet you,” she says, holding out her hand to him, diverting the attention perfectly.

Alexei looks at me for confirmation to touch my wife, and I nod.

“Do you know Frankie? He’s Italian too,” Alexei asks as he shakes her hand.

Of course, he assumes all Italians must know each other in America.

Gianna laughs. “Not personally. I’ve heard of him, though. He has quite the reputation.”

“Zara is scary as fuck,” Alexei blurts.

“Then me and her might get along,” Gianna replies.

That’s my girl.

I help Gianna into the back seat and slide in behind her, tucking my arm around her shoulder.

“Is he safe to be allowed in public?” Gianna whispers.

Alexei turns on the engine, and it roars to life. And then he’s off, my head flinging backward with the impact.

“I think they avoid any psychologists being within talking distance of him, G.”

She snickers under her breath. She hasn’t even heard the funniest bit yet.

“Hey, Alexei?” I shout.

He flicks his head up, his crazed eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror.

“How’s Sheila?”

“Is that your wife?” Gianna asks.

Alexei erupts into laughter like a hyena. Gianna is going to love his response. “No, silly goose. Lara is my darling wife. Sheila is my flamingo, and her boyfriend is Bruce. They have a load of kids too, but I gave up naming them. Too many.”

Gianna turns to face me, her eyes almost popping out of their sockets. Gianna Sterling is speechless.

She leans in closer and says, “If he calls me a silly goose again, I can’t be held responsible for my actions, Colten.”

I press a kiss to her temple. “He doesn’t mean any offense.”

I’m not entirely sure I want to fight someone this batshit crazy either.

“Do you want some flamingos to take back to your ranch?” he cuts in.

“How much?” Gianna counters.

I press my hand on her thigh. “We do not want flamingos on our ranch.”

“If Jett gets an alligator, why can’t we have flamingos? We can make things more exotic. My sheep needs friends; it’s important.”

Running my hand over my face, I let out an exasperated sigh. “There is no fuckin’ way Gator is an alligator, G.”

“Jett has an alligator as a pet?” Alexei pipes up.

I’m about to open up the door and drop roll out of this 4x4.

G crosses one leg over the other, resting her hands on her knee and leaning forward. “Alexei, how long is the drive?” she asks.

He checks the GPS as he pulls out of the airstrip. “About twenty minutes.”

“Where exactly is it we’re going?”

I shake my head, locking eyes with him in the mirror.

“I am not allowed to tell you, Mrs. Sterling. Now, tell me all about this alligator.”

She reclines back and snuggles against me.

“Good try, viper,” I whisper.

Good things come to those who wait. That’s if she even wants to go through with this; I’m leaving the ball entirely in her court.

This ain’t for me, but it’s also part of our relationship we need to move past.

If she wants this, she gets it once and once only. She’s got years of experience she’s missed out on, and I intend to let her explore any fantasy she wishes. So long as it involves me.

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE



GIANNA

Song- Play with fire- Sam Tinnesz, Yacht Money

Alexei is fascinating. I've never met anyone this deranged, which is saying something with the people I'm related to. I can see how he's an asset though. And I bet he's loyal to a fault.

We pull up outside raw iron gates that lead to a gravel track. This isn't the side of Vegas I've ever been to.

A grand mansion greets us, and Alexei parks beside the water feature.

"What the hell is this? Are we meeting someone?" I ask, fidgeting with my wedding rings.

I've never enjoyed surprises, not that I can recall any good ones.

Colten doesn't respond; instead, he gets out of the car and comes to open my door, holding out his hand.

"Have fun!" Alexei calls out. "I'll be back tomorrow morning for you."

"Is this a hotel?" I ask, taking Colt's hand.

He lifts me out and wraps an arm around my waist. "So many questions."

"Well, yes. This looks like a weird hunting estate the rich come to."

He chuckles, guiding me towards the front of the house. Before we reach the first step, the wooden doors swing open, and we're greeted by two blonde girls in tight leather dresses.

I stop.

"Welcome to Paradise Palace."

Their smiles beam, and we keep walking into the grand hallway. Guests are sitting and sipping champagne. They don't even look at us when we enter.

We follow the girls to the desk; the one on the left is eye fucking my husband. I snatch my hand from Colten's and clench my fists.

"Have you been here before? It says you're exclusive guests of Mr. Volkov," the girl says.

Blood pounds in my ears.

"No. We haven't," Colt answers.

"Would you like a tour?"

I slam my hand on the desk. "Do we need a map?" I snap, glaring at the girl who wants to eat my man.

She licks her lips, her eyes zoning in on my breasts, and I jolt back. Are they fucking high?

"Yes. We would like a tour," Colt answers.

I glance up at him; his face remains neutral as she hands him two key cards. Her fingers brush over his hand and linger for that second too long, which unleashes my wrath.

"You know what, Colt. You go on the tour. Have a blast. I'll wait outside, and maybe get an Uber back to the jet," I tell him, walking backward.

He spins to face me, standing in place. "Gianna," he barks.

"You've got your hands full there, sir," the girl purrs.

"What did you fucking say?" I hiss.

Shaking my head, I shoot Colt a glare and turn on my heel, stomping towards the door before I shoot this place up.

Jealousy is a new feeling for me. And I don't like it. At all.

I don't even get as far as the door when I'm being lifted in the air and hurled over Colten's shoulder.

"If you want to live to see tomorrow, Colt. Put. Me. Down," I seethe.

He opens up a door, and the second we're inside, he slams it shut and pushes me up against the wall. He cages me in, his arm beside my face, his nose against mine. "I need you to shut up and listen, viper. Right fucking now."

Oh, he's pissed. Makes two of us.

"Do you think I want to stay in a place where everyone in here is ready to drop their panties and bend over for you? This is ridiculous. They have

no respect for me.”

I push against his chest, glaring at him.

His hand slides down my chest, and he grips my hip.

“This is a sex club, Gianna. Everyone wants to fuck. That is the entire point. There's room for everyone here and the ultimate privacy.”

My heart races. He wants to fuck those women? Is that why he brought me here?

“Y-you want to fuck someone else?” I ask.

Well, that’s my bubble, well and truly broken. He told me I was enough for him, and I believed that.

He doesn’t answer; his eyes burn into mine.

“If you want to be with another woman, Colt, put me out of my misery and do it. Don’t string me along. I’ll move back to LA—”

He silences me with a kiss. “You’re ridiculous, Gianna,” he mutters as he pulls back.

I can’t help it. The rage bubbles over, and my hand flies and slaps across his face so hard his head snaps to the side.

He grabs my wrist, holding it beside us. He then looks me in the eye and says, “I don’t want anyone else except you. I want to explore you and all of your desires.”

My mouth drops open. “I-I can’t share you with another woman, Colt. It will end in a bloodbath.”

That isn’t a fantasy of mine I want to explore. I want to learn more with him; I know damn well my ego won’t cope with seeing a hot, very experienced woman with my husband.

He laughs. “And I can’t let another man touch you.”

His thigh nudges open my legs, and I suck in a breath.

“But there is a third option, one that my wife really, really wanted, that just this once, I’d be happy to live out for her.”

I blink at him. “What are you suggesting?”

He slides my hand up the wall, above my head, and presses his dick against me.

“I want to help you feel that power rushing through you again, G. I’m prepared to let you take charge of me, and if you want to play out that fantasy with another guy, I’ll do it.”

I swear to God, a moan slips from my lips. I have to be clear, though, so I ask, “As in, you’ll get freaky with another guy, and you’ll both do

whatever I tell you to?”

He tilts his head, studying me. “I’ll lay out some ground rules. But in a nutshell. Yes. That is what you wanted, correct?”

He hitches my leg up and presses himself closer against me.

“I think I have some rules,” I say, my voice quiet.

I never expected him to actually go through with this.

“Yeah, I hope you do. This has to be done with the care and attention it requires, G. Because if we get this wrong, we could fuck up everything we’ve been trying to build together. First, I have to know if this is something you really want. Because, hand on my heart, I’d be happy with just you for the rest of my damn life. This ain’t something I need. And you need to understand that. If we move forward as a couple, if we continue to explore, we have to trust each other first and foremost.”

I nod as he releases my hand; it slides up my arm, and he cups my cheek. I stare into his dark eyes.

I want him. I’m more than satisfied by him. And he’s right; if he were my first and only man until I die, I’d be happy. But this isn’t about me needing another man for myself.

It’s me wanting to watch Colten. Because since I found out about his past, I’ve gone beyond intrigued. I can’t stop thinking about it.

“Tell me what you’re thinkin’, sweetheart,” he whispers.

My cheeks heat. “Honest answer?”

He nods.

“I’m thinking about a ripped man on his knees sucking you off.”

His finger traces along my jaw. “And where are you?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. I’ve never been this nervous and turned on. “I’m kissing you, my hands all over your chest.”

He grins, his mouth ghosting the shell of my ear. “And where are my hands, G?”

“One in the guy's hair, the other inside me.”

He groans in response. “And who do you want to touch you, G? Do you want to feel him? Do you want his cock inside you?”

I shake my head. “N-no. I don’t. Only you.”

Something feels wrong about that. Like it wouldn’t be real, because I only have eyes for Colten Sterling.

“And how far do you want it to go with me and the other guy?” he murmurs. “Do you want to see my cock in his ass?”

My hands tremble as I nod, and he presses his lips against my cheek. “Do you want his dick inside you?” I counter.

And then I hold my breath.

He lets out a breath. “No, G. I don’t.”

“So that’s your rule?” I ask.

He pulls back, a grin on his handsome face. “Yeah, baby.”

“But you’re prepared to take orders from me?”

“Yep. One night only.” He winks.

His hand dips under my skirt and his finger slides along my aching pussy.

“Fucking hell, G. You really did want this, didn’t you?” He almost groans as he thrusts two fingers inside.

“I’m going to need some attention during this, otherwise I might explode.” I stretch around him and grab his neck to keep myself upright.

“You’re the boss, G. All you gotta do is tell me, and I’m yours. Remember that. And if you decide you don’t want it anymore, you tell me. Say stop, and it’s done.”

His lips press against mine, and my eyes flutter closed. “What did you mean, this might ruin us?” I whisper.

“I know you thought that me and Romeo were more than what it really was. I don’t want you to ever doubt who or what I want. Sex is sex to me. But what me and you have? That’s fuckin’ everything. I don’t need anyone else to complete me.”

I rest my head back against the wall. “So, why are you offering to do this?”

He brushes my hair from my face, his fingers stilling inside me.

“I don’t want you missing out on anything. You told me this would be hot, and I agree. I’m down to show you. To make you come so hard you’ll forget your own name.” He pauses, taking a breath. “And everything we do, we do it together. We’re on this kink exploration journey together.”

I grin, biting my lip. “Is there anything you want to explore with me?”

His thumb circles my clit, and I nearly lose it.

“I just want you, G. I want to know everything there is about Gianna Sterling. I want to hear you scream in every octave. I need to make you come in every position possible. That’s all I damn well need, viper.”

My eyes start to sting as his words register. “Even after I slapped you?”

“Especially after you slapped me.”

My body trembles against him, he pulls his fingers out, and I squeeze my eyes shut in pure frustration.

“The scene ain’t started, baby. I’m still in charge now, and you’re going to work for that orgasm,” he tells me, taking a step back, leaving me panting against a wall.

“Our bags will be in our room; shall we go find that?” he suggests.

“Don’t we need to go back and get the map so the girls can eye fuck you some more?” I huff.

He smirks. “I take it that adding another woman is not on this fantasy list of yours?”

Hearing him say it makes my blood boil. It’s not something I can get over. I am the only woman for him, end of discussion.

“Only if you want your cock cut off.”

He rolls his eyes and snatches my hand.

We’re doing this. We’re really fucking doing this.

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO



Colten

Song- P*RNSTAR, Nessa Barrett

We find our way to the room without any assistance or a map. I'm sitting on the edge of the bed, spinning my wedding ring as I wait for Gianna to re-emerge from the dressing room.

All the air is sucked from my lungs the second she steps back into the room.

She slides her arm up the door frame, resting her hip, which shows off her curves that are to fuckin' die for. Black lace bra with red stitching, the same shade as her lipstick, and crotchless panties to match, surrounded by her beautiful ink. Gianna Sterling is to die for. Literally.

I flop back on the mattress and clutch at my chest. "So hot my heart exploded."

She laughs, and my body electrifies as she steps closer. Her dainty hands run along my bare thighs, all the way up to my boxers. "I don't want your heart to explode, just your dick, Colt."

I bite down hard on my lip. It's going to be hard to give up control, even for a few hours. But for her? I'll do near enough about anything.

She clambers on top of me, straddling either side of me and sets her ass down on my cock.

I lift my hands to grab her hips, and she slaps them away, tutting.

"The power shifted the second I walked back out," she reminds me.

I swallow. "So it did."

She grabs each of my wrists and leans over me, placing them above my head. Her tits are hovering in my face, a breath away.

“Does that mean I get to be a little brat like you? Hmm?” I tease.

Realistically, I’m trying to distract myself from flipping her over and eating her out. I gave her my word. And I’ll stick to it, even if it kills me.

“If you are, then I’ll enjoy punishing you, cowboy.”

She slides herself back down, centering my face between her breasts. I can’t help sticking out my tongue and running it along her smooth skin.

She pushes herself upright with a menacing grin. The tip of her nail glides down my chest, and she watches intently.

We gave the girls downstairs our preference for someone to join us. The rules of this place are that they’ll find someone willing to agree to the rules we set out; they will be given a key to our room and can enter at any time during the evening.

Until then, Gianna has me however she wants me.

“All this work you do on the ranch really works wonders on your physique,” she muses as she traces the outline of my six-pack.

“I work out. You’ve sat and watched me do it while eating a bag of chips.”

She shrugs, sliding down one bra strap. “It was entertaining.”

Something catches her attention across the room, her eyes twinkling. And then she’s shuffling off me and racing to the side table. She returns with a bottle of champagne in one hand, and she’s back on top of me.

“Would you care for a drink, sir?” she purrs.

I nod. “Oh, absolutely.”

“Remember when you said you’d only accept a drink from me if I spit it in your mouth?”

A smile twitches at my lips. “Oh, I remember, baby.”

“Open up, cowboy, I’ll let you have a taste if you promise to be a good boy tonight.”

“I’ll be so good for you, baby. So good.”

She tips her head back and gulps the bubbles down, and when it leaves her lips, it spills onto my chest.

I do as she says, opening my mouth wide, and she bends down, hovering above me.

And then the menace spits the champagne into my mouth. I swallow, letting it fizz down my throat, and before I can take a breath, she crashes

her lips over mine.

“Please, G. Give me more.”

The heat from her pussy over my dick is driving me insane.

“No. I’m going to tease you until our new friend arrives.”

I groan in utter frustration. “Then call down and find out how long he’s going to be,” I hiss through gritted teeth.

She sits back upright and runs her hand over her crotchless panties, her mouth dropping open. She’s trying to kill me.

“Oh, Colt. I’m soaked.”

A growl erupts from my chest, and I clench my fists above my head. “Gianna. You might have to tie me up. I don’t know if I can do this.” My voice comes out strained.

She withdraws her fingers and slides them in my mouth. I suck them clean, her sweet juices coating my tongue.

“How do I taste?” she purrs.

“Like heaven.”

The door clicks, and her head snaps in that direction.

“And look, my prayers have been answered,” I mutter.

She slaps my chest, but I don’t bother following her eyeline. I’m watching her reaction to him. That’ll tell me all I need to know.

She tracks him from his head to his legs, and she nods with appreciation. But that’s it. There’s no fire in her eyes like she has for me.

He closes the door, and the atmosphere charges around us.

“I’m Saint.” His deep voice cuts through.

Gianna swallows, her eyes searching mine. For reassurance, I think. This is new to her. She might be one of the most ruthless and powerful women in the world outside of this space, but here, she’s new. She’s discovering herself.

So I give one simple nod. It’s why I haven’t moved an inch. She hasn’t instructed me to. She needs to know I will listen. I am hers to use.

She snaps her attention back to Saint. “You’re wearing too many clothes,” she says flatly.

“I’ll fix that, miss.”

She scrunches up her cute nose. “You can call me G.”

And he’s already acting on her command.

Turning her attention back to me, my heart pounds. “You’ve got this, sweetheart.” I wink.

She blushes in response. Her gaze darts between me, lying beneath her, and Saint standing behind me.

“Colten, I think you should make Saint feel welcome.”

I already know Saint's limits; they called up to the room and gave me a list once he accepted our terms. It pretty much aligns with what I’m into. He’s a submissive. He gives and receives. His only hard limit is fire play, which we have no intention of delving into tonight. The only time I like to play with flames is when I’m burning down restaurants with my wife.

“How would you like me to do that?” I ask.

She nibbles on her lip, tapping her fingers on my chest. “I’ll let you take the lead with Saint. I want to watch, and if I want to see something different, I’ll tell you, and you’ll listen to me.”

Fuck. I’m about to come.

Her eyes darken, flicking to Saint. “That means both of you.”

“Yes, G,” he replies automatically.

She climbs off me and sits with her back against the headboard, her legs crossed, and I sit up, the blood rushing to my head making my vision cloud for a second.

As I stand and turn, Saint stands by the window, completely naked, his cock already erect.

I close the distance without a word, stopping so I’m side on for G’s viewing.

Crocking my finger, I motion for him to come closer. He runs a hand through his blonde curls, his blue eyes on me as he does.

“Are you just going to stare at each other, or are you going to kiss?” Gianna sasses from behind.

I smirk, grabbing the back of his head, and crashing my lips over his. The kiss is fierce, but he submits easily to me, letting me control the pace.

His stubble brushes against mine, and I keep my brain on Gianna. This is for her. His cock nudges against me as I drag him closer to me. Rough hands slide down my body, stopping at my boxers. I grip his wrist.

“Have you asked my wife for permission to have my cock, Saint?” I growl.

His eyes go wide. “N-no. I didn’t.”

Craning my neck to look at my girl, I see her shake herself back to reality.

“G, could I please suck your husband's dick?” Saint asks.

I want her lips around my cock, but Saint is hot. Hell, this whole setup is smokin'.

Her eyes sparkle, zoning in on my crotch. She sits up on her knees and peels her panties down her thighs. My jaw nearly drops to the floor.

I cannot believe I insisted on a sex free flight here. I wanted her to be as horny as possible for now. But I'm kicking myself, because then I would have seen the new ink that sits over her pussy.

"Do you love it?" she asks.

My name. *Colten*. Small and discreet under her panties, in a gothic-style script. I can't tear my eyes from the tattoo. Even as she shuffles out of her panties. She nudges herself towards the edge of the bed and opens her thighs, resting her top half on her elbows.

"Yes." I almost choke out. My cock is threatening to erupt. I'm not sure how long I can deal with this.

She bites her lip, her attention snapping to Saint.

"Let me see how you suck my husband, Saint," she commands.

Fuck. Me.

He drops to his knees, pulling down my boxers. I let out a groan as his hand wraps around my cock.

My eyes, though, they're on G's glistening pussy.

Saint takes me in his mouth, and I grip his hair, thrusting to the back of his throat, making my teeth clench. He feels good. Too good.

"G, I need you, baby," I tell her.

She stands, padding over beside me. She takes my spare hand, sliding it down her toned stomach and shuffles open her legs.

"Is he doing a good job, baby?" she whispers.

I swipe my fingers over her soaking clit as Saint gags on my dick, gripping onto my ass as I fuck his throat.

She lifts her leg, resting her foot on Saint's shoulder, giving me access to thrust three fingers deep inside her.

"Fuck, baby," I groan as her walls close around me.

I lean in, taking her lips, swallowing her moans. I need to taste her. I need her.

She rips herself away, panting.

"Let Saint taste you, Colten. Be a good boy for me," she purrs, running her nails along my neck.

I glance down, and Saint’s blue eyes are on me, my cock buried down his throat. And then I see how turned on my wife is watching him. I can’t hold back.

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-THREE



GIANNA

My legs nearly give out beneath me. This is a sight I'll never forget. All six feet of Saint, packed with muscles, on his knees before my husband.

Even with Colten's fingers buried deep inside me, my own orgasm threatening to explode. I can't. Because I don't want to miss a single second.

Colt goes rigid beside me, his breathing shallowing and his hips bucking three times. The noise that tears right from his chest sends me right over the edge with him.

Before I can even recover, my skin still prickling like it's burned, Colt pulls Saint off him by the hair, turns and grabs my cheeks, kissing the last of my breath from my lungs.

"You good?" he whispers, checking with me.

"Better than good, Colt. That was so hot."

He nips my bottom lip. "Good girl," he mutters, sliding his hand down my side and grabbing my ass.

Saint is back on his feet, and his cock is about to erupt, almost painfully.

"Colt, I think you need to repay the favor. Saint deserves to come after that."

Saint's eyes light up, and Colt chuckles, running his fingers through my curls. "Yeah, baby. Saint deserves a reward."

I slap his ass and take a seat on the edge of the bed. I want to savor this. Watch every move. Listen to every sound they make.

Colt stalks towards Saint like he’s prey, pushing him against the wall behind him. Colten’s hand splays out on the brick, the other gripping his jaw as he kisses him.

Saint’s hands are in Colten’s dark hair, pulling at it like he can’t get enough. This isn’t like how Colt kisses me. It’s hot, but it’s nothing deeper than that.

This is better than I’d even imagined. These two men, both built like gods, their cocks pressed against each other, will live rent-free in my head.

Colt strokes himself, and it doesn’t take long for him to be hard. My mouth drops open when Colten turns them, so they're side on, the perfect line of vision for me as he puts their huge cocks beside each other and wraps his hand around both.

“Holy shit,” I breathe out.

Spreading my legs, I slide my hand between them, pushing two fingers in, and a gasp escapes me.

Saint’s moans grow louder, filling the room.

“You like that, huh?” Colten mutters.

“Y-yes, sir,” he pants.

My body nearly convulses with pleasure.

“I-I need to come, G. Please,” Saint begs.

I blow out a breath, sliding in a third finger, spreading my legs wider. Saint kisses Colt's jaw, but Colten’s eyes are on mine. Dark and full of a feral hunger.

“You may,” I breathe out.

Ribbons of white spray over Colt’s hand as Saint judders against him. He grabs Colt’s face and kisses him, moaning into his mouth.

I don’t let myself come. Not now. Even if I want to. I need more. So much more.

Pushing myself back onto my shaking legs, I join them. Saint tips his head back, eyes closed, trying to catch his breath. So, I run my hand along Colt’s jaw, tugging him to look at me.

“You two go clean yourselves up, and I’ll be waiting,” I whisper against his lips.

“Please tell me it involves either you sitting on my face or my cock in your pussy.”

I smile against his lips. “Both if you’re lucky. Maybe Saint would enjoy watching for a while as he recovers.”

Although I’m not sure I’m ever going to recover from this.

Colten was right. It works because we trust each other. That he’s constantly checking in on me. It’s something I can tick off. It’s a note I can store in my memory that what Colt and I have is different from anyone else he’s fucked.

It’s something far greater than either of us can even explain.

And any doubt I had nagging, even in my subconscious, begins to clear.

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-FOUR



Colten

I splash some cold water on my face as Saint steps out of the shower.

"You ready for round two?" he asks.

"Yeah. I think my wife is about to keep us pretty busy. But you get a break now. When you're done, take a seat, and you can watch."

"Cool," he says, grabbing a towel and drying himself off. I head back into the bedroom and lean against the black post of the four-poster bed.

"Bra off," I order when her eyes meet mine.

She grins. "Nope."

"Is that a hard limit?" I ask out of curiosity. She's already got her pussy out and came pretty damn hard for me, with Saint having a good view.

"Nope. I feel like not doing as I'm told," she sasses.

A growl erupts from me, and I crawl across the bed, yanking her down by the ankles and then resting them on my shoulders.

"Colten Sterling!"

I press the tip of my cock against her pussy.

"Yes, baby? Do you have a complaint?" I ask, running my finger underneath her new tattoo. It is still a little red around the edges; she must have got it done in LA.

The bed dips as Saint sits on his knees beside us.

"I thought you promised to be a good boy, for one night?" she teases.

A groan rips through me. "I'm begging you. Please let me fuck my wife."

"Hard. Colt. I need you."

She gasps as I push inside, inch by inch. It feels like home. I rest my weight on my forearm, stroking her hair from her face. “Saint wants to hear how loud you scream for me, viper.”

With each thrust, her voice gets higher and higher. Her nails clawing at my back. My lips on hers.

“Good girl,” I grunt. “Good fuckin’ girl.”

I keep her right on the edge, sinking my teeth into her neck as her pussy grips my cock.

“I’m gonna come inside you, and then you’re going to sit on my face and watch me fuck Saint while I clean you up.”

Her moans turn to screams as she clings onto me for dear life. And I don’t let up. My girl wanted it hard, and that’s exactly what she’s getting.

Her climax erupts, her body shattering beneath me, and I can’t hold back. I spill inside her, moaning out her name until my lungs burn.

She sets a fire inside me that no one else could ever put out.

Resting my forehead against hers, I close my eyes and breathe her in. She cups my face, rubbing my jaw. “You’re doing perfect, Gianna. You. Are. Perfect,” I whisper, so only she can hear.

She softly presses her lips to mine. She might not have the words for me, but I know she feels this too. Neither of us can deny it.

“Now, how about we use those wrist restraints while you sit on my face? I need to get hard again, so I need your sweet cunt smothering me,” I tell her, my voice hoarse.

I’m going to give her exactly what she wanted. All the fantasies ticked off with this dynamic. Because one thing is abundantly clear.

There is no one else for me. I’m giving her this. And I’m going to see it through and be a good boy, this one damn time in my life, for my wife.

Saint groans beside us, his hand tugging at his cock.

“Come here,” I order him, as I withdraw from my wife and sit back. He wraps his arm around my waist, and I lock our lips. “Gianna wants me to fuck your ass, Saint.”

He nods eagerly. “I want that, sir.”

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-FIVE



GIANNA

Song- Shameless, Camilla Cabello

Colt lies on his back, his legs spread and his cock painfully hard. He hands me the condom and lube with a wink.

“See, you can wear one,” I tease.

“Not a chance with you.”

Sitting beside him, I bend over and take him in my mouth. His hand fists my hair and he whimpers as my tongue runs along his shaft.

“G. I. Fuck,” he grits out.

With a satisfied grin, I suck the tip, and it pops out of my mouth. Then I get to work ripping open the packet and sliding it on his dick.

Flicking open the lube, I look at Saint, who is watching every movement I make. “How much of this do you want?” I ask.

“Your husband has a huge cock, G. Smother it.”

I blush in response and do as he requested, squirting the cold lube onto my hands and rubbing it all over Colt.

Once I’m satisfied with my work, I give Saint space. “Can you help with my restraints, Saint?” I ask.

He nods once, and I get in position, sitting on my husband's face facing his dick. Well, hovering. He doesn’t get the goods yet.

Holding out my arms in a V above my head, Saint carefully connects my wrists to the cuffs dangling from the wood of the four-poster bed. Left then right. I tug at them; I have a tiny bit of movement.

He climbs onto the bed and straddles Colt, facing me. Colt lifts his knees slightly so Saint can use it as leverage. Fuck. This is hot.

Saint takes hold of Colt's dick and lines it up with his ass. I lick my lips in response as Colt grabs Saint's hips and pushes him down onto him.

"Sit on my fucking face, G. Fuck. Sit the fuck down." Colt's words come out strained as Saint cries out.

Colt grabs my ass and drags me closer; my hips roll instinctively as his mouth connects.

Saint moans in front of me as Colt thrusts up into his ass, jerking himself off at the same time, while Colt absolutely raveshes my pussy. Sucking, biting, licking. I hold onto the leather strap attached to my cuffs to steady myself.

Colt smacks my ass, hard, and I cry out. I don't think I can last much longer. Between Saint's moans. Colten's mouth. And seeing my husband's dick fucking another man. I'm about to combust.

Colt pushes his fingers inside me, and my eyes nearly roll to the back of my head, and then he drags them back towards my ass, teasing the entrance.

"Do it. Colt. Just do it. Please!" I scream.

My body tingles with pleasure, from my toes all the way up to my head as he pushes one finger inside of me.

An orgasm rips through Saint, and I watch every moment. The way his body jerks, the cum spilling all over his hand. He's grunting and stiffening and Colten's fucking him right through it until he joins him.

That's enough for my own orgasm to make me tremble. I'm crying out Colten's name, tipping my head back, sweat beading on my forehead, to the point I don't know how to breathe properly. My head is completely fuzzy by the time I ride it out.

Saint is already removing himself from Colt and heading to the bathroom, and I try to lift myself off Colt.

"You alive down there?" I croak.

He chuckles and slaps my pussy. "You enjoyed that, didn't you? You nearly goddamn waterboarded me."

"Untie me."

He shuffles out from under me, rips off the condom, and tosses it in the trash. Instead of doing what I ask, he leaves me restrained and faces me, pressing his forehead against mine.

"I'm so fucking proud of you, G," he whispers.

Tears burn in my eyes, and I can’t explain why. My chest pulls tight, and I fight back the sob in my throat.

He softly kisses me, something deeper than we’ve done before. And then finally, he gets off the bed and gently unties my wrists.

I shake out my tingling arms, and rub at my left shoulder to try and stop the deep aching. Colt rips back the blanket, and I settle underneath it. He climbs in beside me, snaking his arm under me and pulling me into his side. I settle my head on his chest and listen to his rapid heartbeat.

My eyes become heavy, and I let out a yawn, making Colt laugh. I don’t even notice Saint stopping at the foot of the bed.

“I know you’ve paid for the entire night, but I think you got what you needed,” he says.

Colt nods as I lazily trail my fingers along his hip.

“G,” Colt strains out. “Did we do everything you wanted?”

I glance between the two men. “Thank you, Saint. Yes. I’m more than satisfied. I’d like to spend the rest of the night with my husband.”

“Do you need anything else from us?” Colt asks.

Saint grins and shakes his head. “My husband and my girlfriend are waiting for me.”

He pulls on his boxers and grabs his clothes from the chair, but stops by the door. “If you two ever want to do this again, just come back to Paradise.”

“Appreciate it, but I don’t think we will be. This was a once-in-a-lifetime deal,” Colt replies.

That makes me smile. After Saint leaves, Colt rolls over to face me. “Are you happy, G?” he asks lazily.

“I seem to always be happy when I’m with you, Colt.”

He sucks in a breath. “I feel the same with you.”

“Do you believe me now? That I only need you?”

I grab his throat and drag his lips closer. “Yes. I get it now. Thank you for showing me.”

He presses his lips against mine, and I sink into the kiss.

“Now let me take care of you, G. I’m going to run us a bath; I’m going to wash your hair. And then I’ll dry you off, carry you to bed, and then you can fall asleep in my arms.”

A tear slips down my cheek. For the first time in my life, I’m letting someone else take over. Someone else holds the weight of my feelings. I’m

trusting someone to take care of me. My parents never did that.

I was always the one looking after my brothers. And now, I have a man ready to do anything to make sure I'm safe. I can't help but say, "You're enough for me too, Colt. I know a lot of this was you wanting to prove to me that you don't need other guys or women. But I want you to know that I'll die happy having only ever slept with you. You are all I want. And I will make sure this LA takeover doesn't ruin us. I won't let it."

His eyes burn into mine, and he cups my face in both hands.

"I'm prepared to fight for this, Gianna. And I know you've got one more battle left in you. No one is taking you away from me."

"I tattooed your name on my pussy, Colt. You bet your ass I'm ready to fight for us."

His hand slips between my legs. "That means your pussy is now mine, forever."

"Well, that was kinda the symbolic meaning," I tease.

He takes my hand and places it over his heart. "So, I'll tattoo your name right here. Because this belongs to you, Gianna Sterling."

I don't need to hear the words to know they're true. There have only been four people who have told me they loved me and meant it. Dom, Max, Mom, and my nana. Every other time was a manipulation tactic.

All the pain I've suffered, I can't erase that. I can't forget it. But having Colten beside me makes the burden lighter to carry.

So he can have all of me.

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-SIX



Colten

Another picture that's going to appear in the seven minutes before I die: Gianna driving my truck onto Sterling Ranch while wearin' my hat.

"I think I've changed my mind," she mutters, heading down the gravel track.

"Changed your mind about what?"

It could be anything with Gianna.

"I might get myself a truck. Matte black. Blacked-out windows. Custom alloys."

I run my teeth over my bottom lip. "Bulletproof?"

I'm not sure what I did right in a past life to end up with this woman, but I'll forever be grateful.

She turns to me, pushing up her sunglasses on top of her head. "I mean, why not? Might need it in this climate."

"Jett texted; he said he's got Cesare and Levi tied up together in the bull pen. We'll meet them outside Hunters and then head down."

Ace gave me the rundown of how they managed it, and I'll give Jett credit here; his kidnapping skills are improving. He tracked them down with Tate and Ace and drugged them in their sleep, then dragged them back to the ranch. I'm impressed.

"Please can you grab my lipstick out of my purse? I can't go into a torture without the signature red lip, can I?"

She is so damn perfect.

I grab her purse and place it on my lap, opening it, but I don’t rummage. I hold it out to her. Mom always told me never to go through a woman's handbag. I think Mom would have liked G; she’s full of fire, like Mom was. They would have had a blast over a cocktail.

“You’ve had your hands inside me. You have permission to go in my purse, Colten.”

I scrunch my face up. “My mom always told me never to.”

“You have my consent. I need my red lipstick,” she says like it’s the most normal thing in the world for me to dig through her bag of who knows what. Knowing her, it’ll be lipstick, knives, and maybe a few spare bullets floating around the bottom.

“Fine,” I huff and dig in.

My hand hits more items inside here than I thought could even fit, and I swear to God there are bullet shells in here. “What the hell is in here?”

“Everything in case of an emergency,” she replies flatly.

I grab the box of cigarettes and pull it out, and then I frown. “Gianna, when’s the last time you had one of these?”

She would normally have one while driving.

She sucks in a breath. “I haven’t had one since I went to LA. So nearly five days?”

My eyes go wide. “Are you feeling okay?”

She laughs, snatches them out of my hand, and for a second everything goes back to normal, but then she tosses them behind her onto the back seats. “I can’t look at them. I quit.”

“You quit?” I can’t hide the surprise in my voice.

“Yes. For the things I want in my future now, I have to,” she says confidently.

Her eyes sparkle, and it takes my damn breath away.

I rest my hand on her thigh and squeeze. “What new things?”

I think I know the answer, but I want to hear her say it. I’m hoping I’m on the right track, and not that she wants to start running marathons or some shit.

“Oh, you know. I need to get my cardio better, to help on the ranch. And I might forge a career in taste testing, and need a clean palate.”

I huff out a laugh, and she leans over to tap my cheek. “Would you like the truth?” she asks.

I nod. “Lay it on me, baby.”

She takes a deep breath. “Before, I knew I was heading into a coffin, so smoking didn’t bother me. Whether that sent me there or a bullet. It didn’t matter. Something was going to kill me; why not let it be the cigarettes? But now? I went back to LA, Colt. And I hated it. I missed this place. I missed you. I want to live until I’m eighty. I want to have kids. I need to get healthier and start respecting myself more. We’ve got an empire to build and a family to make, Colt. We need to be alive for that.”

The smile on my face hurts my damn cheeks. I love the fact she said ‘we’.

“You realized you want to live?” I say, trying to stop my voice from breaking.

“I do.” She rests her dainty hand over mine.

“And you want to have my babies?”

Even if she didn’t want to have my kids eventually, that wouldn’t have changed a damn thing. I want Gianna for who she is, babies or not. But the fact that she wants that too, that she sees her future as a mirror of mine, that’s everything I ever wanted.

Her cheeks flush a bright red. “Babies, plural? I was thinking let's start with one. Violet has kind of scared me, to be honest.”

I lean over, pressing a kiss to her cheek as we pull up beside Hunter’s house. She turns off the ignition and the truck hums as she turns to face me. “The way you keep going, Mr. Sterling, I might already be pregnant.” She gives me a very pointed look.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. “That don’t scare me, sweetheart. If anything, you’ve just spurred me on to fuck you more. You gave me one hell of a breeding kink.”

“Gave? Colten, the way you fuck me, you already have a damn breeding kink.”

I pull the pack of cigarettes from my jeans and squash them with my fist. “I’ll join you. I want to live beside you for as long as I can.”

“Oh, thank fuck. Because I don’t know if I can stop myself from stabbing you if you smoke one in front of me right now. I’m trying to hide how agitated I am, but it’s bone-deep, Colt. Bone-deep rage that only nicotine can fix.”

I laugh, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Well, I can’t wait for that phase to start. What about every time you get a cigarette craving, you come to me, and I’ll fuck you real good to forget about it?”

“That might help. I think we could maybe make this a little competitive?”

I arch an eyebrow. “How?”

Although I smoke, sometimes I forget about it and don’t have one for weeks. It depends on how stressed I am. I can kick the habit if I want. I think. Now, I ain’t too sure after listening to Gianna’s review on the experience.

“So, we gotta do this cold turkey. Whoever slips and has a cigarette, the other gets to punish accordingly. Put ourselves on the line,” she suggests.

I run a hand through my hair. I know she can be mean; I’ve witnessed it firsthand with her prank wars.

“No more Viagra, though, please.”

She giggles. “I was thinking more like tying you up and making you watch me get myself off until you come in your boxers.”

I rest my head back against the rest and blow out a breath. “That might kill me.”

G frowns, turning back to the window. “Can you hear that? Are they having a party?”

Snapping my mouth closed, I listen. She’s right. In the distance, there is music and cheering.

“Not that I’m aware of; let’s go find out.” I hop out of the truck, round the front, and open the driver's door, helping her to her feet.

“They better not have started the torturing party without us, Colt. I can’t tell you how long I’ve waited to slice up Levi,” Gianna sasses.

I slide my hand in hers. “I thought you’d start with pulling out his remaining teeth.”

She flicks her hand. “His breath stinks; you think I’d want to get that close when his mouth is open?”

A laugh bursts out of me. “True.”

Excitement races through me. Torturing Cesare and Levi alongside my wife? I couldn’t think of a better way to see out my day.

There is nothing hotter than a woman who’s a little bit stabby, especially on a nicotine detox. I feel sorry for both of them.

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-SEVEN



GIANNA

You never truly know what to expect in a day on Sterling Ranch, but walking into a family line dance in the dirt outside Hunter's horse pen? That wasn't even in my top ten.

Jett is leading the dance, can of beer in hand, wearing a T-shirt covered with pictures of Gary. He kicks his leg and spins, and a heavily pregnant Harper follows behind him, bumping right into Ace, who holds her steady.

He's even got Tate joining in, a man I'm not even sure I've had a full conversation with. He's laughing next to Hunter and Lola. Lola looks like she's about to pee herself in hysterics as Wyatt does his own routine next to her.

"Come join in. Leave grumps there to watch; he never dances," Jett calls out, waving me over.

My feet stay rooted on the spot.

They're all kind of doing the same routine, just all slightly unique to them. And I don't have a clue what any of the moves are when it comes to line dancing. The most I've seen is the floor erupt into a choreographed dance when Dom and I went to the local bar when we first moved here. I honestly thought it was cult-related, because how do so many people know the same damn dance? Is there a school for this?

"I'll teach you how to do it the right way," Colt tells me, dragging me over to join the rest of them.

Jett cranks the music louder, and as he does, a goose hurtles towards his shins. "Gator! No. Down, boy," he scolds, pointing at the bird who

continues to ram his leg.

Everyone laughs, but they still keep dancing. Are they all hypnotized?

Jett shoos the bird away and wipes the sweat from his forehead, turning his attention to us. He spots Colt, grins, and bellows out, “A family throw down.”

Now we’ve entered a dance class, and Jett is our teacher. I try to follow what he’s doing. Stepping to the side. The turns. Random leg lifts. Some clapping.

“I’m not great at this,” I say to Colt, who appears to be in his element.

He nudges my side. “You’re doing great.”

The sun beats down on us, and I somehow make it through two more songs. Colten takes my hand and spins me, tugging me flush against him.

I look up at him through my lashes. “Jett said you don’t dance?” I ask.

His hands settle on my waist. “I’ll always dance with my wife.”

“Get a damn room. There's plenty here!” Jett hollers.

“Ain’t you supposed to be workin’, Jett?” Colten says back.

In the short while I’ve been here, I know there are a million jobs that need doing to keep this ranch thriving. Colt brings the animals back to health and makes a ton of money out of his horses at rodeos. Ace rides bulls. Hunter… Well, I think he’s focused on being a dad. I guess he does the general running, the finances, the big decisions.

And Jett? Not a clue. But I do know he now has two ranches with Tate. And yet, he always seems to be here.

“It isn’t like they’re going to run away? We tied ‘em up in the bull pen,” Jett answers.

“Shit,” I hiss.

Colt frowns. “What?”

“I forgot my lipstick.”

He slides his hands into his jean pocket and pulls it out. “I got you.” He winks.

I take it from him, letting it settle in my hand, as Jett dances his way over to us, shaking his hips. “Now, a game of cowboy poker was mentioned. I’m down?”

Colt appears to consider this for a moment and then nods. “I think G would like to see this one.”

Jett whoops in response, throwing up a fist and spilling his beer.

“What do you do with the bodies?” I ask, out of curiosity. With all this land. All the machinery. The opportunities are endless.

“Depends. There’s a lot of ways to get rid of a body, G,” he says almost seductively.

It’s working. Talking like this with my husband does get me going.

“Do you have pigs? I haven’t seen any. That’s gotta be the best way on a ranch, surely?”

Colt grabs my hand, and we fall in line behind Jett, Tate, and Ace, while everyone else disperses.

“We had pigs a while ago. They don’t really thrive all that well in Arizona. A lot of hassle to keep them alive. And, ain’t it a bit fuckin’ cliché having pigs chew up our victims? First place someone would look for DNA is the pig pen if they found out we’re murderin’ cowboys. And you still gotta remove their teeth, nails, and hair. Pigs won’t eat that.” He pauses, and then laughs.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

“Just never imagined my life, walking my wife into torturing two men in a bull pen, discussing whether we should be using pigs to discard bodies.”

“I mean, when you say it like that.” I roll my eyes.

He bends down, pressing a kiss to my temple. “I couldn’t have even dreamed a version as good as the reality.”

The barn doors open, and I’m greeted with quite the scene. Inside the metal railings, there's a small wooden table and four seats. Tied down to two seats are Cesare and Levi. Bound and gagged.

Two bulls are trying to fight their way out of their pens, with two ranch hands doing their best to keep them in there.

“Nice. We brought out Gravedigger to play,” Ace mutters, tipping his hat to one of the guys straddling the fence.

“Gravedigger? One of the bulls?” I ask.

Colt visibly pales. “I told that little shit not to buy that bull. Nearly gave me a heart attack last time he rode him. I’m sure he wants to put me in an early grave.”

I squeeze his hand. “He’s a big boy, Colt. Stop worrying about him. He seems to be doing fine, and Harper can do all the worrying for you now.”

I saw the devastation on Colten’s face when he held Ace’s dying body a few weeks ago. And I felt his pain right into my soul, because I resonated

with it. That agony mirrored my seeing Max in the morgue for the final time. Except Colt got his brother back. I never did. I'll never see Max's face again. All because I couldn't stand up to my father sooner. I let him manipulate me. And now, I'll never see my brother again.

I rest my head on Colten's bicep.

"Are you thinkin' about Max?" Colt asks quietly.

Tears slip from my eyes and roll down my cheek. I don't fight it. Not this time. I embrace it instead. Because, above all else, I loved Max. And that makes me human. Feeling the grief, the pain, the guilt. It's what makes me, me. And it's what's going to forge the future me into being something better.

Someone worth loving. I want to have kids. I want to be a parent who knows how to love. But I also still want to be me. Because not everything about me is bad. Being able to fight, being able to kill—it's what's kept me alive.

"I miss him. That's all," I admit.

He wraps his arm around my waist and hugs me tight against his side. "Remember, sweetheart. Feeling pain doesn't make you weak. Use it, and let's find out why that asshole followed me to an auction, and see what Levi put such a high price tag on for intel."

He taps my ass, and I snap back into the zone, wiping my cheeks. Popping off the lid to my lipstick, I pull Colt's phone out of his back pocket and jab in the code. He never told it to me, but I've seen him enter it enough times, and he's never hidden away from it.

Turning it to the front camera, I use that as a mirror to sweep the red perfectly across my lips. And once I'm done, I hand them both back to Colt. "Don't lose this; they discontinued it, so I'm going to need to take it somewhere to replicate it exactly."

He salutes me, shoving it in his pocket. "Yes. Boss."

"Now, what the fuck is cowboy poker, Colten?"

He swipes his thumb across his bottom lip. "Oh, just you fuckin' wait, baby. You wanted to see a fun torture technique; sit back and watch the cowboys do their jobs."

I physically have to squeeze my thighs together to hold off the ache between my legs. When Colt talks like this, that deep voice vibrates right through me.

“Teach me your ways, il mio polpettino,” I purr, grabbing a fistful of his black T-shirt.

“I thought we’d moved past the meatball nickname,” he murmurs.

“Nope. Never. You will always and forever be my little meatball.”

“I’ve bought Seven in; he’s good to deal with Gravedigger. You wanna handle the rope? I’ll head in the ring with Jett?” Ace asks as he approaches, ruining our moment.

Colt clears his throat. “What the fuck do you mean? You ain’t fighting off the bulls. You’ve just about recovered from a fucking stab wound.”

Ace shrugs, clearly not giving a single shit. “I know what I’m doing. And we’ve got Tate. And lasso the fuckin’ bull if it tries to kill me, bro.”

Okay. Hot. A lesson in Colt with rope.

“I am going to need you to tie me up with some rope, Colt,” I whisper as Ace heads back to Jett.

He groans in response. “Don’t do this to me when I have to go keep my brother alive.”

I tap his cheek lightly. “Go give me a show and get the answers we need. But don’t let Levi die; that asshole is mine.”

“You got it, baby. Stay this side of the fence, alright?” he says, and then kisses me so hard the room starts to spin.

“Do you honestly believe I’m dumb enough to get in there with that bull?” I tease.

“Well, I am.”

I roll my eyes. “Then that was an insult, hubby.”

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-EIGHT



Colten

Song- Animals, Nickelback

"Easy, boy," I say to settle Seven as I saddle up.

It's Ace's beast of a stallion; of course it has an attitude problem. He's probably just as concerned as I am about his owner's behavior.

Tate tosses me the rope, and I let Seven trot around the table where Levi and Cesare are wide-eyed and sweating.

I don't know if Levi's hair is slicked back with grease or gel. His body is twitching in the chair, which ain't a good sign this early on. Makes me wonder what Jett drugged him with.

Neither of them has any cuts, so it appears Jett's kidnapping etiquette is improving. Tate pulls out the chair between them and flips it, taking a seat.

"I ain't sure how long I can hold this one back!" Xander calls out from the chute.

Gravedigger thrashes against the metal, which vibrates through the room.

Bringing Seven to a stop behind Levi, he huffs and stomps his foot.

"You heard the man. We ain't got a lot of time. Now, I'm proposing a deal. I'll remove your gags, and you can both tell me what I need to know, in the fastest way you can think of. If you do that, we can get you out before Gravedigger comes out to eat his lunch," Tate explains.

He leans over and rips the material from Cesare's mouth first.

"You can go first. Why were you following Colten?" Tate asks.

The bull kicks out again.

“I was following orders.” He looks terrified as the bull's sounds grow louder.

Tate nods slowly. “And who gave the order? What exactly was the order?”

“Didn’t catch a name,” Cesare spits.

Tate stands and tosses the chair across the dirt with a thud. His fist rockets towards Cesare’s jaw. Blood sprays from his mouth and a tooth flies across the air.

“You’ve got fifteen seconds,” Tate seethes.

“Fuck you. Filthy cowboy,” Cesare responds, his Italian accent rumbling through.

Tate taps his fingers on the table. “Okay. So we have one player,” he says, turning his attention straight to Levi, removing his gag. “Your turn, sunshine. You told Gianna you had some intel and you wanted quite the bag for it. We don’t pay for that shit; we get it anyway.”

Levi spits on Tate’s boot in return. Tate grips his hair, tugging his head back aggressively, and spits right back in his face. “Cesare I understand. He has loyalty. You? You are only loyal to the one with the highest price. And what is more valuable to you than your life? Silence is only going to put a bullet through your skull, Levi.”

Levi grins. “I already sold my soul.”

Tate releases him, and I move Seven back into the far right corner, not before catching a glimpse of my wife. She’s watching on intently, with that devious sparkle in her dark eyes.

Tate gives Xander a thumbs up, tipping his head and moving to the side. Ace jumps over the fence in his padded vest, just as Xander opens the chute.

All two hundred pounds of the bull hurtles right at the table with full force, nudging his head under the wood and flipping it up.

He doesn’t bother sizing up the men; he darts straight for Cesare and rams his head right into him, tossing him into the air. A scream of pure terror rips from the man, and I laugh.

All the color drains from Levi’s face as the bull beelines for him.

“Help! Help!” he cries, and then he’s being tossed, still in his chair, over to the railings, and Tate has to launch himself out of the way.

Swinging the rope in a circular motion above my head, I kick Seven into gear, moving towards the angry bull. Aiming for Gravedigger’s head, I

release the rope. The second it catches his neck, I wrap the slack securely around the saddle horn and lead the bull back towards the gate to the chutes. Xander already has it wide open, calling him in. Jett is waiting for him, ushering him into the other pen, and I let the rope go.

We've got a few minutes until they get the other bull in position, so I dismount Seven, stroking his face before I head over to Levi.

Tate has his boot on Cesare's neck. If we take one each, one of us might get an answer.

"Do you want to play round two? We've got a lot of bulls to get through; this could go on all night until one of them kills you," I tell Levi.

He sucks in a rattling breath. That don't sound good.

"H-help me."

Blood spills from his mouth, and I crouch down to the floor, grabbing his limp head. His eyes have glazed over, his skin grey.

Scanning for injuries, I don't see shit. Unless it's internal from the impact of being thrown by Gravedigger.

This little bitch is going to die, and Gianna is going to be pissed.

I stand, running a hand through my hair. "Xander, make sure no fucking bulls get out," I shout across the barn.

Storming my way over to the metal fencing, I throw open the gate. "G, get in here," I order, nodding behind me.

She scuttles towards me, and I let her pass, following close behind.

Levi is now gasping for breath, his face screwed up. "H-heart attack," he whimpers. "Ambulance."

"Is this asshole serious? He had one last year," Gianna mutters as she approaches. "Maybe you should have stopped shoving so much coke up your nose," she shoots at him.

He's struggling to keep his eyes open. G drops onto the dirt, grabbing his neck.

"Tell me what the fuck you know, Levi. And I'll get Colten to start CPR and call an ambulance," she says softly. Completely faking being nice, because I know deep down my girl is less than remorseful about his current circumstances.

"They're coming," he whispers.

G frowns, shaking her head. "Who?"

Levi sucks in a gulp of air, his eyes closing.

“Fucking hell,” she says, and begins compressions on his chest, hard enough to likely crack his damn ribs.

Bending down on one knee, I check his pulse. Nada. “Don’t waste your time. He’s dead.”

She lets out a huff, looking at his body with true disgust. “He’s always been fucking useless.”

“Who do you think he means?” I ask.

She taps her nail in the dirt. “I need my little red book from Dom. There is quite the list of people who would probably want me dead if word got out that I’ve survived my Dad.”

Tate’s heavy footsteps get our attention. “Cesare ain’t talkin’. You want a go?” Tate asks G.

“Do we have his phone?” she asks.

Tate nods.

“Run intel on that, keep him tied up somewhere. We can keep him alive for now, but chances are, if he learned from Fabio, he’d rather die than speak. Especially if it involves trying to kill me.”

My fists clench as I stand. I hold out my hand and help G to her feet. “We knew this was likely, sweetheart. You can’t take the throne without a battle.”

Her face remains expressionless.

I continue, “You promised you had another fight left in you, and this time, you’ve got all of us beside you. Nothing's gonna happen to you, not if I can help it.”

She watches on blankly as Tate and Jett drag Cesare away. “And what if I bring them right to your doorstep, Colt? I need to go back to LA and sort this out.”

My body goes rigid. Stepping in front of her, I grip her shoulders. “I’ll say this once, and you better listen, Mrs. Sterling. That ain’t happening.”

“So what the hell do we do now?” she asks.

“We call a family meeting with Hunter, and we talk this shit through. There isn’t a problem we can’t fix together.”

She blinks at me. Almost as if she’s calculating every other option that exists where she doesn’t have to rely on me.

Because that is all Gianna has known. She’s had to have her own back. She’s had to look out for everyone else. And I’m giving her a whole new outlook on how we do this.

“Trust me, Gianna. We will figure this shit out. If they come for you, they come for all of us. And that means Arizona, New York, Vegas, Chicago, Italy, a damn chocolate factory full of Irish thugs in Pennsylvania, and Russia.”

Her face drops. “We need to get Dom. Now,” she barks.

And she’s already moving, and I’m right behind her.

“Everyone to Hunters. Now,” I command.

Ace nods. He’ll have them rounded up in a couple of minutes and ready for war.

Because I think that’s where this shit is heading.

Levi knew something. Men like that, they don’t bluff. They want money and power.

But we have the fuckin’ world at our fingertips to try and outsmart whoever is hunting her. Unless it’s already begun.

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-NINE



GIANNA

I call Dom on Colten's phone and he answers on my third attempt. "Hello," he says, his voice foggy.

Not like I haven't been having a heart attack over his whereabouts for the last minute.

"Get to Hunter's now," I command.

"I've got the jet scheduled to take off this afternoon, G. What's the rush?"

"Dom, it ain't safe for you in LA without me. Take as much security as you can with you to the jet and get your ass here to me. Don't argue with me on this. Levi's dead, and he gave me a warning," I tell him.

"Alright, G. I'll be there as soon as I can be. Be careful, sis. Don't worry about me."

I blow out a breath. Trying not to think about Max's lifeless body and how I'll fucking crumble if I have to identify Dom's body.

"I'll always worry about you, Dom."

"I love you, G," he says quietly.

My stomach sinks. He knows as well as I do this was never going to be plain sailing. We only ever say this when shit goes south.

"I love you too, Dom," I say, then cut the call and hand it back to Colt.

Just as his ranch house comes into view, Hunter is already jogging down the steps, looking stressed to the heavens. "Colt, we gotta go. Jett's warehouse down in Red Creek is on fucking fire."

The rest of the guys arrive behind us, including Jett.

“Jett, your warehouse is on fire,” Colt tells him.

“Damn. I thought today was going to be a good one,” Jett mutters, kicking the dirt. Then he’s off, following behind Hunter to the truck.

“Ace, you wait here with the girls. Get Xander and the ranch hands securing the property,” Colt orders.

Ace doesn’t need telling twice. He’s already moving with precision. When it comes to protecting Harper, there isn’t anything that man won't do. I imagine Colt would be exactly the same if it came to me.

“You better not be suggesting I stay here,” I tell Colt.

He tips my chin, taking in a breath. “Do I look like I have a death wish today?”

He moves toward his truck, and Tate jogs toward us. His silver chain swinging around his neck.

Jumping into Colt’s truck, the engine roars to life. “Red Creek is where Levi was setting up shop. That’s where the Greeks were. It’s a hot spot for criminals,” Colt tells me.

“Yeah. I heard.”

“What if they wanted to lure you away from me? What if they’re making a move on the ranch?” I ask.

Colt shakes his head. “We’ve got enough manpower surrounding this and the Lawson Ranch for them to know that’s a suicide mission.”

“You know Levi’s club; they aren’t the brightest bunch? That might be their dumb plan.”

“Then let them come. I need you beside me. Always,” he tells me, linking his fingers through mine.

We drive in silence. The Twisted Serpents are never going to believe Levi had a damn heart attack. But I don’t think they’re the ones after me. I think Levi was paid to help whoever is really behind this.

It’s not the Greeks. The only option I can think of is a rival Italian family. If they got word my father is gone, they could make a play.

“What do you keep in the warehouse?” I ask, watching the world pass by through the window.

“Drugs mainly. It’s more of an overflow center; they’d be the next batch out to Mikhail,” Colt answers.

“Why don’t you store them on the ranch?”

I’m already making a plan to streamline their process; that’s what I’m good at. Logistics.

“We ain’t storing that much; we’d get life in jail. The warehouse is run through Enzo's shell company. It don’t link to us. If it gets found, it could be anyone's."

“How much street value?”

His jaw twitches. “More than what the ranch turns over in five years, probably.”

Great. I get accepted into the organization, and the first thing that happens is I end up costing them a ton of money. I know deep down this is because of me.

“I’ll pay you back,” I say.

“I don’t need the damn money back, G. I could have nothing but my horses and a bit of land, and I’d be happy.”

“Oh.” I can’t hide the disappointment. It’s like I’ve been thrown on an emotional rollercoaster since I married Colt, and I’m not sure what the hell is going on. Before him, it was easy; I was either stressed, furious, or numb. And now? I feel joy. Happiness. Jealousy? All this stuff I’ve repressed since childhood, and I don’t know how to function with them.

Things hurt more than they should. The guilt of every decision I’ve ever made is hitting me over the head.

I’m starting to see now why people go to therapy.

“I don’t mean without you. You’re there in my ideal happy place, viper. It was more of a statement about finances. But we’re good for money, G. Don’t ever worry about that.”

“So, we can buy the big yacht?” I say the first thing that comes to my head.

He smirks. “Maybe I already treated myself to it.”

My eyes go wide as the flames come into view.

“Oh, shit,” Colten mutters.

“Colt, why the hell are there firetrucks? Aren’t they going to report this shit?”

He laughs, pulling up to park beside Hunter. “We have friends in the right places, G. Benefits of a small town.”

He reaches for the handle, but I grab his bicep. He shakes his head and says, “Stay in the truck. We’re going to haul out the drugs from the surviving warehouse into Tate’s van. You don’t need to be breaking a nail doing that.”

My stomach drops. Something's off.

I open my mouth to speak. I know the words I want to say, but I’m too chicken shit to actually say them. It’s the wrong time. He’s got a warehouse full of drugs burning. I’m overreacting; my dad always used to tell me that. That one day, it would end up getting me killed.

Instead, I unbuckle my seatbelt, lean over, and kiss my husband with such force it cracks our teeth together.

I might not be able to say I love him. But I want him to know.

He pulls back, staring into my eyes. It’s like he knows what I’m trying to say.

And then he’s gone, striding towards his brothers and the roaring flames, while I sit back and watch.

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CHAPTER NINETY



Colten

“Evan’s sending one of his men over to open up and check over the second unit. They think this one was set off with explosives,” Hunter tells me as I approach.

Perfect. Just what we needed to hear. More fire trucks incoming.

“And what happens when he finds a shit ton of coke?” I ask, shoving my hand in my pocket.

Evan is head of the fire department, and we’ve got him in our pocket, but who knows what his limit is.

“We pay Evan double,” Hunter mumbles, staring at the flames.

We follow the firefighter to the next unit, and Jett hands him the key and tries to follow, but I grab his shirt and yank him back, moving him away.

“Let him go in first, Jett,” I say under my breath

Something ain’t sitting right about this. I turn to Tate. “Go stand by my truck, make sure G is okay,” I command.

We all instinctively take a step back as Tate jogs back to Gianna. The second I heard the word explosive, I sure as hell wasn’t going in there blind.

I’m holding my breath as he opens the lock. And then he pushes it open. Nothing.

“Phew. I thought that was going to blow,” Jett says.

The firefighter walks through the door, and I let out a breath.

Before I can blink, the sound that tears from the blast knocks me sideways. My ears pop, and my chest goes tight. Hot air surrounds my skin,

burning. High-pitched ringing fills my ears, drowning out everything else, as my body slams into the ground.

I don’t know how long I’m out for. Seconds. Minutes. The world is fuckin’ tilting around me.

My body goes limp and heavy, and when I open my eyes, all I see is grey smoke and dust.

“Gianna!” I try to scream, but the air is too thick.

With all my strength, I push my body up with my arms, my heart pounding wildly as I make even the smallest movement.

Fuck. I just about make out the truck, but tires screech. Or is that my ears?

Pushing myself to my feet, I’m staggering like a zombie towards my truck, through the thick air.

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CHAPTER NINETY-ONE



GIANNA

The truck shook when the explosion went off, and I tried to make a run for it to get to Colt. Hands grabbed at me, and I couldn't shake them off.

"Shhh. Mi prenderò cura di te. *I'll take care of you*," a man's voice whispers.

I don't know how many of them are holding me down. Their weight presses down on each of my limbs when I try to thrash out. I can't see shit with this material over my head.

And with every breath, it's getting harder to fill my lungs.

Closing my eyes, I go to the calm place in my mind. I see Colten, his dark eyes and that naughty grin he does. We're on the ranch with Sally the sheep. Instantly, I calm down enough to listen and concentrate.

We're moving. I think I'm being pinned down in the back of the truck.

There's groaning beside me. Male. It's not Colt. I'd know if it was him because my body would tell me. Biting down on the gag, I try to kick them off me again. All it does is make my muscles scream.

"He warned me you were a feisty little bitch," my captor taunts.

A hand pushes down on my chest so hard that I wheeze, and there's a sharp prick on my arm.

These motherfuckers drugged me.

A gush of hot air brushes over my skin; I guess they've opened the door. The whirl of a chopper hums in the background. I can't work out their muffled voices to pinpoint which asshole took me.

Within a few seconds, my eyes droop and my body relaxes. Whoever wants me needs me in one piece. So, I don't fight the feeling of peace washing over me. I'll let them think they're winning.

But they won't.

After what I've been through, this is nothing. And perhaps it's a good thing I'm being taken away; I'd rather they inflicted whatever hell it is on me than taking it out on Colten and his family.

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CHAPTER NINETY-TWO



Colten

Hunter and Evan are rushing towards me as I stagger over to the truck.

“Where is she?” I shout. I’m not sure who to.

“Gianna!” I scream until my chest burns.

With one hand on the burning metal hood, I focus my eyes on the open door on the passenger side.

“I can’t find Tate,” Jett rushes his words out.

I don’t even have time to comprehend that as I’m running to the other side of the truck. Her purse is still on the floor.

“Gianna!” I scream.

Hunter yanks me back, and I slam the door, smashing my fist into it. “Where the fuck is she?”

“I saw a white van when I was comin’ round. It sped off down the track; I couldn’t see much, only the fact it was white. I thought I was fuckin’ hallucinating,” Evan tells me.

Jett is frantically searching through the debris, screaming out his brother's name with such ferocity it sends me sideways. Both warehouses are on fire now, and we’ve got one firefighter dead inside the second building.

“You need to get the fuck out of here,” Evan chokes out, pointing at the buildings. “I need to bring in backup before this fucking takes over.”

Hunter rests his hand on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Evan.”

He shrugs. My heart fucking sinks, and we all look up in the sky; a black helicopter passes overhead.

She’s in there. I fucking know she is.

“Where the fuck is Tate!” Jett screams, the panic clear in his voice.

I grab hold of him, even if my own chest is splitting in two. My wife. Someone took my damn wife. And I’ll scorch from here to LA if I have to to bring her and Tate home.

“We will bring him back, Jett. I’m bringing them both home, if it’s the last thing I do,” I tell him, coolly.

Sliding my phone from my pocket, I’m already moving, jumping in the truck and dialing Enzo. Jett jumps in the passenger seat.

“Hunter, get Clive. I need a chopper to meet me at the ranch, now,” I shout, slamming the truck into gear.

“Colten, what’s happening?” Enzo asks. Like he knows it’s usually bad news when one of us calls, or it seems to be that way at the moment.

“Black helicopter, took off from Red Creek, near our units. I need you to find it, track it, and tell me where the fuck it lands. I need a live stream. And then eyes don’t fucking leave Gianna and Tate. We need to know where they take them,” I say, keeping it direct.

He’s typing in the background as I press my foot to the floor, heading back to the ranch.

Enzo says, “Got it. Owned by a Fabio Milano.”

I frown, my heart racing so fast I can feel it in my throat. “He’s dead.”

That means it has to be one of the Milanos who has done this. Someone who worked for her father. I need to speak to Dom; I need to get him the fuck out of LA.

“I’m sending you the tracking. Then once they land, I’ll have to see where it is and what cameras I can hack.”

It’s not as much of a war zone as when we went there to save Ace, but I need to go to California right now. I don’t care how dangerous it is. “I’m heading to LA. I’ll connect you with my pilot; you can advise him where we need to go.”

“I’ll clear my schedule for the day,” Enzo deadpans.

That’s one thing about this man. No matter what, we ain’t alone in this. He will do anything he can to protect us. There is no one else alive who can hack and track like he can.

“I don’t know what I’m gonna be met with; I don’t know who fuckin’ has them. I need some backup. Get Romeo on it and Dom should be at the

ranch by now; we need him with us in LA to help us find them. He knows that place like the back of his hand; it's his territory."

Whoever is behind this has thought this through. They were ready to take Gianna right from me, and I don't know why. If they wanted her dead, they would have shot her, not taken her away in a chopper.

"Are you sure Dom isn't involved?" Enzo asks.

"I'd bet my ranch on the fact he ain't. But I'll still be cautious just in case."

He doesn't hesitate. "Romeo has put out a red alert; Vegas is on their way. I'll send anyone else available."

I check the rearview and notice Hunter is right on my tail.

"We won't be letting anyone take LA from us," Enzo tells me.

I don't give a shit about the territory. "I want my wife back, Enzo. That's my priority," I shoot back.

"I'm going to tear these cunts to pieces, limb by fuckin' limb," Jett fumes from the passenger seat.

Jett is going to be losing it inside; I know that. But I also know when Jett needs to be serious, there ain't nothing he can't do. He was trained for these moments in life, and although it's going to kill him until he finds Tate, he will risk his damn life to save his brother.

"Enzo, send me over the number for Zach, the VP of Twisted Serpents. Levi knew something, but died before he could tell us. Zach might know."

At this point I'll fucking try anything. I only know a small portion of the research Enzo pulled together about Zach.

"Sending through now," he says, keyboard still clacking in the background.

I toss the phone to Jett, and he's typing the number into his phone.

I'm breaking every motor vehicle law possible, weaving through traffic to make it back to the ranch. Every second I waste, she gets farther away. They're already in the damn sky.

"Zach ain't answering," Jett mutters.

I've never seen him this furious. Not even when he came off the back of a bull and ended his bull riding career a few years ago.

"Enzo, I'll call you back. I need to tell Dom and get everything loaded into the chopper."

"Okay, I'll be on standby."

Jett cuts the call, his second attempt to get Zach on the line, and instead brings up the map, tracking Gianna's helicopter. "They're definitely going to LA," Jett tells me.

I knew it.

I squeeze the steering wheel so hard my knuckles crack. I fuckin' hate that place. "We're getting them both back. And we know they can handle business if they need to. It's going to be fine," I reassure him, but I'm not sure I believe the words coming out of my mouth.

Gianna is a force to be reckoned with. But I've seen what happens in these situations. When you're taken, you ain't got the upper hand anymore. You have to fight back, or die trying.

I can't lose her.

I won't. That woman has given me a glimpse of a future that I will gladly die for.

I don't want to live in a world where Gianna doesn't exist.

The dust clouds behind us as I race down the Sterling Ranch track. Dom and Ace are already storming out of Hunter's house. Slamming the car to a stop, I'm out and on my feet, beelining for Dom.

One of her brothers has already betrayed her. I don't trust anyone she's related to. I grab him by the throat, throwing him against the fence.

Dom stood by and let Gianna take beatings from her dad. Maybe he's jealous she's in power and not him.

"Who the fuck took her? And why the fuck are they in your dead brother's chopper?" I seethe, pressing my gun against his cheek.

He squares up to me, pushing his face closer to mine. "You let someone take my sister? You're her husband; you're supposed to make sure shit like this doesn't happen to her. Don't you dare come in here accusing me of having anything to do with this. Gianna is the only person who has ever fucking accepted and loved me; I'd die to save her." Anger flashes in his eyes, his nostrils flaring.

I lower my weapon and step back. I needed to see in his damn eyes that he had nothing to do with it.

"Chopper will be here in five!" Hunter calls out. "Any idea who took her in a helicopter heading for LA?"

He runs a hand over his face. "It has to be one of our own." He tips his head back. "Fuck!"

Jett storms out of Hunter's barn with an armful of weapons, staring up at the sky, waiting. When Jett needs to be serious, he can switch it on, and you don’t fuck with him on a mission.

“Ace is staying here with the girls. I can’t let anything else happen to him in LA,” Hunter tells me as he approaches.

I nod; I agree. We nearly lost him once. Harper and their baby need him. Sterling Ranch needs him.

Standing still and waiting is killing me. If I let my brain stop, all the scenarios of what could be happening to Gianna flood my mind. And it makes me sick to my fucking stomach.

“We need enough weaponry to take down the whole city if we have to,” I tell him, rubbing my hand over my chest.

That deep-rooted ache isn’t going away. I know it won’t. Not until I get my wife back.

We’ve got to load up the chopper. A two-hour journey. And we have to pray that Enzo can track her movements after they land. They got a head start, and we can’t fuckin’ lose them.

She needs to hold on long enough for us to get there.

“Romeo asked for locations to start checking; Mikhail’s crew is already in the air, landing in forty minutes,” Dom tells me.

My eyes snap to his. “Then give him everything he needs to know. LA is going to war, Dom.”

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CHAPTER NINETY-THREE



Gianna

“Gianna,” a deep male voice calls. I recognize it, but can’t put a face to the name.

“Wake up.”

With a groan, I tip my head to the side and open my eyes. Everything is hazy; the silver bars in front of me aren’t, though. Pushing myself to sit up, I rub my hand over my face, ignoring the pounding in my head as I take stock of where I am.

No natural light. White clinical walls.

“Gianna. Here,” the voice calls again; this time it’s louder.

Turning my head to my right, there’s a prison cell joined to mine, separated by bars. Tate’s hands grip them, blood trickling down his temple.

“How long have I been out for?” I ask him, rubbing the back of my head where the pain is.

“I woke up about ten minutes ago,” he says.

I nod. This is the most I’ve spoken to Tate, and it’s too bad this will probably be the last time.

“Have you seen anyone?” I ask.

“Nope. Pretty damn sure they tranquilized me.”

I wipe the sweat from my forehead. “Well, you cowboys are beasts.”

“I remember jumping out of the car when the explosion hit, then arms grabbing me. They had masks on. I was conscious enough until I heard the helicopter. Then nothing,” I tell him.

He runs a hand through his sweaty hair. “More than I remember. I saw the place blow, then that was it.”

Running my hand up the metal bar, I take a deep breath. I know exactly where I am. My father has a few of these locations dotted around LA. I’ve been imprisoned in most of them, although I’m pretty sure this one was dedicated to holding hostages.

“We’re in LA,” I tell him.

“How do you know that? Do you know where we are? How the fuck can we get out?”

My eyes fixate on the door in the far corner of the room. I remember as a teenager, I’d sit trembling in the cell, waiting and hoping it was my dad who walked through the door, not the guards again.

Because if it was him, it meant my punishment was over. If it was the guards, it meant I was about to take another beating until I’d learned my lesson. “Because I used to be punished in places like this, Tate,” I say quietly.

His eyes widen, and he scoots closer to the railings. “Who? Who used to do that to you?”

“My father. It was his idea of punishment, of teaching me how to become a leader.” I cringe as I say it.

Now I can see how utterly fucked up it was; how the hell can you do that to a child? Let alone your own flesh and blood.

He shakes his head. I know now that to him, the concept is absurd. It’s cruel. That the Sterling family would never, ever, do shit like that to their own. Because they are the true meaning of family. And I’m lucky to have been accepted by them. Loved by them.

“And you’re totally sure your father is dead. You checked,” Tate shoots back at me.

I huff out a laugh. “Yes. My father is dead. This isn’t him.” I pause, scanning the room. “But it’s someone who worked closely enough with him to know of these places. And it’s someone who wants me gone.”

I always knew I’d be walking out of these prisons alive when my father was in charge. But now? That isn’t fact anymore. And it’s starting to settle with me who could be behind this. I now understand why my uncles didn’t kick up a fuss about me murdering their brother and simply wanted his body returned. I told Dom that was weird.

But this isn’t screaming revenge. This is something else, something more twisted.

“Colt and Jett, they’ll come for us. We need to make sure we survive that long,” Tate tells me.

Resting my head against the bars, I close my eyes. “And how do you think they’ll find us? We’re underground. My father made sure these places were hidden from the feds. It’s safer for everyone if they don’t come for us.”

“Then you clearly don’t know what we’re capable of, Gianna,” Tate hisses.

I roll my eyes and turn to him. He’s pissed, but he’s also scared. And who wouldn’t be? Drugged and captured and thrown in a cell.

“I’d rather Colten didn’t get himself killed trying to save me, Tate. Do you really want the people you love to die trying? If we can’t do it ourselves, then that’s it. You get to die beside me, underground, and then we’ll probably be thrown out in the trash.”

Tate opens his mouth, but as he does, the door swings open; I don’t bother looking. I’m not giving whoever it is the attention they so desperately crave. I’m going to fight back. I’m going to do everything I possibly can to try and get out of here. But right now is the assessment phase.

They want me alive; they want something from me. Tate is most likely collateral, or the dumb fucks thought he was Colten.

“Well, well, well. I can see why you spent so much time in a cage, G. You look damn pretty in one.”

I snap my head up. I’d recognize that jarring voice anywhere. “Tomasso. It’s good to see you do have a pair of balls,” I say with a smile.

He stops in front of the door to my cell, hands on the bars. I don’t believe for one second this idiot orchestrated this by himself. He had power, money, and resources behind him.

“You know, Gianna. My suggestion was to kill you and take Dom.”

I push myself to my feet, taking a step closer to him. “Aw. Your suggestion? So you still aren’t in charge. I knew you didn’t have the brain power.”

His hands tighten around the metal. “I could unlock this door, walk in, and slit your throat, Gianna. Watch your tone.”

I bark out a laugh, holding my belly and tipping my head back. I didn't know he was a comedian.

The room turns to ice when my eyes land on him. "So do it, Tomasso. I dare you. Unlock that door and set foot in here."

"Gianna," Tate whispers.

Tomasso doesn't move. He can't. Because his orders are to keep me alive. Because whoever wanted me here needs me.

So I close the distance and stop right in front of him. "I'm not scared of you," I say.

"You should be," he growls. His eyes dip from my face, down to my chest, and he smirks.

I don't move as his hand stretches out through the bars. I let him brush his fingers along my shoulder, and even manage to hide the disgust on my face.

"You did us all a favor by killing Vito. And now that makes you fair game to fuck."

I lean in closer and run my hand up the metal bar, biting my lip. "My husband said I'm a really good fuck too," I purr.

He sucks in a breath, and while all the blood runs from his brain to his dick, I grab hold of his tie and yank as hard as I can, pinning him to the metal.

Before he can react, I jab my pointed nail into his eye, and he screams out in pain.

"You fucking bitch!"

Before I let go of his tie, I slam my fist into his nose, hard enough to hear it crunch under my knuckles. Only then do I let him go, and he stumbles back.

"Run along and go get the person in charge, Tomasso." I wave him off.

I'm more horrified at the sight of my broken nail. This asshole was not worth that manicure.

His face reddens, his jaw tight. "You'll regret this," he spits, stomping off towards the door, slamming it behind him.

My body sags the second it's safe again. I'll never be the girl in here again who doesn't fight back.

"You throw one hell of a punch," Tate says.

Running my hands through my hair, I try to calm my racing heart. "Tate, we need a plan. Whoever Tomasso is working for, I don't think they

just want LA. I don’t even think it’s about me. I think they’re after Enzo.”

He frowns. “What do you mean?”

“I’m bait. They know taking us will drag Enzo’s army here. My father was trying to use me to take out Sterling Ranch. I think whoever is trying to take my father's place is going one step further. If this was revenge for killing my dad, they’d have shot me already.”

Tate looks at me for a few seconds before saying, “We need to get out of here. Think, G. You know these tunnels, these prisons. How do we do this?”

My stomach sinks. They’re designed down to every last detail so the prisoner doesn’t escape. I need to be clever.

“The only way we do it is by fighting, or playing their game, Tate. How far are you prepared to go to protect your family?” I ask.

“I’ll do anything.”

I swallow; this is now trial by fire to make Tate an ally. “Okay. Then let me take the lead. You might not know me that well yet, but I love Colten, Tate. I will never betray him. And I love your family.”

“And what’s waiting for us out there?” he asks, nodding to the door.

“There’s one security room. There aren’t any cameras in here because my father didn’t trust any technology. And there will be guards there to stop us from leaving. But these tunnels are all connected. We can find another way out.”

He nods, his face stern as he calculates our options. “You know Colten is going to be on his way, don’t you?”

I fight back the tears. “What if we don’t have that long? What if they didn’t make it out of the blast?” I whisper.

I’ve been refusing to even consider that option. There might not be anyone coming for us because they’re all dead.

Tate swallows. “They’re alive, G. I know it.”

I have to get out of here. And if they hurt my husband, I’ll spend the rest of my life hunting down every last one of the people involved and let them bleed for this.

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CHAPTER NINETY-FOUR



Colten

We set up in a penthouse Dom owns on the outskirts of town. Not that it seems much of a living space and more of a sex dungeon. I don't have time to question that. With each second that passes, the sicker I feel. Thinking about where Gianna is. What they're doing to her.

I promised I'd never let anyone hurt her again, and I've fucked it up already. I'd do anything to switch places with her. I'd let them torture me for days and kill me if it meant she was here, in this penthouse with her brother.

I've got Mikhail on the phone; they were first on the ground here, and we've sent them to the last location for the helicopter Gianna and Tate were in. Dom can't find anything on who took the chopper as they've kept the records clean.

"It's the middle of nowhere, Colten," Mikhail's deep Russian voice cuts through the silence in the room.

"Nowhere near anywhere that would have cameras? No houses? No businesses?"

"No. Literally nothing. They probably picked one of the only derelict spaces in LA to land. Closest point is a cemetery. Already checked there; no one," Mikhail confirms.

Dom is typing on his laptop, pulling up the coordinates Enzo sent over.

"Keep scoping out the area," I instruct Mikhail.

Dom slams his fists on the table. "Where are you, G?" he mutters to himself.

I grip the back of the chair. Jett is pacing around the room like a caged animal.

Hunter puts down the phone and storms over to Dom. “Terzo. Do you recognize that name?” Hunter asks.

“That’s one of my uncles. They’re in Italy. We flew Dad's body back to them to bury,” Dom answers.

Hunter chews on the inside of his mouth. “Well, he ain’t anymore. A private jet owned by him landed three hours ago.”

“Is Enzo tracking them?” I cut in.

Hunter nods. “The closest location we can get is Fabio’s old mansion.”

The blood drains from my head, and I have to hold myself upright. My mind goes to the darkest place. If her father treated her like he did, what the fuck are her uncles capable of?

“That’s about ten minutes out from where the chopper landed,” Dom adds. He sits back in his chair, tapping the table with his finger. “We need to get down into the tunnels. Fuck.”

He grimaces as he realizes, and the blood drains from my face.

“Miki. Did you catch that?” I ask, placing my phone on the table on speaker.

“Loud and clear. How do we enter the tunnels? How many entrances and exits? I need more intel before I send my men down into a death trap, Colt.”

I swallow. I know I ain’t going to like this answer. “Dom, what the fuck are down in the tunnels?”

“How much of our childhood did Gianna tell you?” he replies.

My body completely stiffens. “Some. I assume she missed some pieces.”

“Our father used to lock her in underground prisons. The same damn place he would torture grown men. They’d beat her nearly to death sometimes. All of our houses have links to the tunnel systems, as well as some warehouse spaces.”

What the hell do they want with Gianna? Why would they do this to her?

“How many fucking entrances, Dom?” Jett doesn’t try to keep his cool.

“Dom, get us the coordinates for all the tunnels. Enzo needs them; he can coordinate an attack with Mikahil now,” Hunter adds, phone to his ear with his line to Enzo.

Dom turns the screen to us. “Enzo, can you see my screen?” he asks.

Hunter puts him on speaker on the table, beside my phone with Mikhail on the line.

“Yes. I see.”

Dom starts moving the cursor over different locations. “Mine. Gianna’s. My father's. Max. Fabio. A warehouse here.”

How fucking far do these tunnels run under LA?

“Got it. Any more?” Enzo asks.

Dom frowns, rubbing a hand over his face. “I can’t think of any more. I haven’t been down there in ten years.”

My blood boils. “And how long since Gianna has been there?” I ask.

I need to know how bad her family has hurt her over the years. How much it’s going to take for me to help her heal.

“Probably last year? At a guess. She doesn’t always tell me,” Dom says quietly.

I snap in a breath. It makes me sick to my stomach what Gianna has had to endure and the guilt she now carries because she believes she let him do this to her.

“Do we have permission to shoot anyone who may be residing in the properties?” Mikhail’s harsh Russian accent comes through.

We all turn to Dom. His mouth doesn’t open, frozen on the spot.

I slam my fist down on the table. “Dom, you’re in fucking charge of LA right now for Gianna,” I growl. “Make the motherfucking call before I do.”

“Yes. Shoot on sight.” Dom confirms.

He has a lot to learn from his sister.

“Hunter, you and Jett take the lead on Max’s house with the guys downstairs. Mikhail, focus your men on Fabio’s and the warehouses,” I order, glancing at the map. Gianna’s father's property is the closest entrance to here. “Me and Dom will take the entrance at Vito’s.”

I don’t bother waiting for an answer; my feet are moving towards the elevator.

I’m done waiting. I need my wife back. I need her back in my arms so everything can be right in the world again. I’m getting down into those tunnels, or I’ll die trying.

And I’m going to buy her that eight-million-dollar damn yacht she wanted. Hell, I’ll get her an island and name it after her, then she can take as many vacations as she wants.

I’m never going to let her out of my sight. I’m going to make her the happiest woman on this planet, and that’s a damn promise.

No one is ever going to hurt Gianna ever again. Not even me.

I can’t let her leave this earth without telling her that I love her. That I’m petrified of ever losing her. The way she kissed me in the car, it was like she was trying to tell me she loved me without saying the words. I felt it. And I almost fucking said them.

And what if I never get the chance to tell the only woman I’ve ever loved that I love her more than life itself?

I’m jabbing the button for the private elevator. The walls feel like they’re closing in on me. The rage mixing with the pain.

Dom steps beside me. “They need her alive for something, Colt. She’s alive. They’d have killed her on sight otherwise.”

Does he seriously think that intel is going to help me?

“And what about my cousin?” I say under my breath, so Jett can’t hear. If he loses his brother, I’m not sure how he will cope.

When Tate left to forge a new career in New York years ago, Jett hated it. He was so damn miserable on his own on that ranch. That’s why he was and is always at Sterling Ranch. Because Tate didn’t come back the same man he left as.

Hunter grips my shoulder. “Don’t do anything reckless, bro. I need you to make it out of this.”

“I’ll do what it takes to get my wife back, Hunter. Same as you would for Lola,” I say, my voice low.

We all risked our lives to bring Lola back to him, and I expect the same in return. What I feel for Gianna is no less than what he feels for Lola.

We might be different. We might show our love differently. Hell, we haven’t even said the words.

Doesn’t mean it’s not there. It doesn’t mean I can even think about living without her.

I need her not to go back on her promise. She said she had a fight left in her.

Please, baby. Keep fighting.

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CHAPTER NINETY-FIVE



GIANNA

I hear the footsteps approaching down the hallway, and I poke my nail into Tate's arm to get his attention.

"Tate. I'm going to tell you what's about to happen so you're prepared." I say quietly.

He nods. I know the script down here; they've used the same one for years, and I'd bet my life they'd keep it the same to keep the psychological fuckery going on with me. But it's not going to work. I'm stronger than they think now.

"They're going to beat the ever-living shit out of one of us. Whichever one they choose, the other needs to get into position to grab the keys. The guards always have them hanging off their pants on one of the belt loops. I wouldn't recommend fighting back yet; we play it smart, the long game. Work out who the hell is really behind this. Are you in?" I ask.

He runs a hand over his face. "They better come for me, Gianna. I can't sit back and watch them beat you."

A small smile forms on my lips. "Trust me, Tate. I can handle it."

My mouth snaps shut as two guards storm in. They're masked, but their dark eyes lock on me. I don't flinch; I keep my chin held high. They stop in front of my cell and reach for their keys. Still in the same place they always were.

These two have probably kicked me until I'm unconscious before. Tate rattles the bars.

"Pick a fight with a man, fucking try me, you pussies," he grits out.

And that right there is the Sterling way. There was no way Tate was about to go down without a fight and let them hurt me.

It works; their attention is on him, and they're unlocking the door. Tate obviously goes against my instructions, and the first thing he does is slam his fist into the first guard's jaw, sending him flying against the railings. But that gives the opportunity for the second to return the favor right back to Tate.

"Fuck you." Tate lashes out against the masked guard.

Another fist lands, cracking against Tate's jaw. They throw him to the floor. One guard pinning him down, the other beating the life out of him. Kicking. Punching. Stamping.

Tate's dark eyes open, landing on me. I choke back the tears threatening to stream. Because I remember being in his position. Masked men kicking the shit out of me, and there was nothing I could do about it. Tate tried fighting back; he gave it a good go too, but it wasn't enough.

This is what my life used to look like, and I'll forever kick myself that I didn't stop it sooner. But that girl is dead now, and I am who remains.

This prison is what forged me into the person I am today. And it's going to be exactly why I get out and kill them all.

I'm getting us out of this hell.

I slam my hand over my mouth as I creep forward. Sliding my arm through the railings, I reach for the guard closest to me. There are two of them, and this one has his back to me; the other one is too busy trying to stop Tate from swinging again.

My finger brushes the set of keys. If I yank them, the guard will feel it, and then we're screwed.

I nod to Tate, then to the second guard. "Distract him," I mouth.

He somehow manages to find the strength to push out at the guard, which topples him to one side, giving me the perfect moment to snatch the keys from his belt loop in the commotion. I shove them down my bra and give Tate a thumbs up. So at least he knows we did it. Step one done.

The guard furthest away grabs Tate by the hair; it happens in slow motion as he slams his skull against the concrete floor.

"Get the fuck off him!" I scream, bashing at the railings. "Tell them to come and fucking speak to me. Tell me what they want! I'll do it!"

The guard nudges Tate, and he groans in response.

“Tell us what we need to know, Gianna,” the guard grunts. “He’s alive for now. You want to keep it that way, you talk.”

I cross my arms. “I’ll talk to the next asshole up the chain, not the fucking guards.”

The doors swing open, and the air rushes from my lungs. All I want to see is Colten. But that isn’t who I’m greeted with.

I drop down to my knees, sliding my arm into Tate’s cell and latching onto his ankle to shake him. “Tate. Wake the fuck up,” I snap.

He’s part of my family now, and I have to protect him.

His fingers twitch and blood trickles from the back of his head. Fuck.

“Gianna. Stand up,” Tomasso orders as both the masked guards leave the room.

I glare at him. “No. I don’t take orders from you. You take them from me. Just stop this fucking circus and let us out. You’ve made your point.”

Tomasso tuts, waving his finger. “Gianna, the rules have changed, pretty girl. You see, you really messed up when you slaughtered Fabio and then your father.”

“How so?” I question.

That glint in his good eye tells me this isn’t about revenge. This isn’t how a Milano retaliates. His other eye is fucking disgusting, all red and puffy from where I nearly gouged it out. I wish it popped; that would have been much more therapeutic for me.

“Fabio had a big plan to secure the Milano name, make it global, with a woman named Tatiana in Russia. He had your uncles on board, and the plan was in motion. Except the only problem was you and your silly little schemes. Enzo isn’t who we want to work with, Gianna. Your father was listening to you, and that was becoming an issue.”

I swallow. “Tatiana, whoever she is, isn’t going to overthrow Enzo. Don’t be ridiculous. Fabio didn’t know his ass from his elbow. He was looking to get out from under my father because he knew he could never compete with me.”

Tomasso’s jaw twitches. “Fabio was a great man. He was going to lead us away from this joke your father created in LA. And then you decided to get into bed, literally, with the Sterlings. You’re a problem for us, Gianna. But you know enough about Enzo that will buy us into Tatiana’s world now that Fab is dead.”

I grin. This dumbass just gave me my ticket out of here. This is why he never made it past a bodyguard. Fucking stupid. “Oh, easy as that? What is it you think I know?”

He checks his watch. “You are now in power and accepted by Enzo, correct?”

My eyes form slits. How the fuck does he know?

“If I was?” I glance down at my nails, like this isn’t a big deal. I’m still sad that one broke.

“Then you could get a meeting with Romeo and Enzo. We can feed that to Tatiana. She can then make her move.”

Holy shit, who is this woman? She’s got to be crazier than me to go after Enzo.

“Or better yet, you could offer up a sacrifice to her, your husband, perhaps?” he suggests with a smug look on his ugly face.

That hit a trigger. I don’t care how powerful this Tatiana bitch is; if she tries to take my husband, or go after the Sterlings or Dom, I’ll slice her throat and feed her to the pigs I’m going to buy.

A growl erupts from me. “Not a fucking chance.”

Tomasso laughs, pulling a blade from his pocket. Tate groans as he sits himself up, wiping the blood from the back of his head.

Good. He’s alive. But now he has Tomasso’s attention, and I don’t like the way he’s looking at him.

“I’ll get you the intel! I can do that. I won’t hurt Colten, but I’ll help you,” I blurt out, getting Tomasso to focus back on me.

“You think I’d trust you enough to take your word? When you’re married to the Sterling family? Clearly you have feelings for that stupid cowboy,” Tomasso sneers like feelings are catching.

I shrug. “You have to take my word. What other choice is there? If you want an in with Tatiana, then you know you need me. That’s why you didn’t kill me.” I take a step forward. “Because I know you really want to see me suffer.”

He smiles at me. “You’re going to prove yourself to me, and then I’ll consider taking you to your uncles. It’s not me you have to win over; I’d happily bury you. But they want you alive.”

Those bastards. I thought my dad was evil. Well, they’re worse than evil. Always have been. As a kid, it terrified me when they came to visit. I’d hide in my room until they left. Terzo, the eldest, is a creep. A violent one

who has killed five of his wives. Giuseppe was the one who would be nice to your face but stab you in the back the second you turned around. And Carlo is the quiet one who, to this day, I'm convinced had a hand in the murder of my mother, but I've never been able to prove it. Evil. All of them, right to the core.

Tate pulls himself upright using the bars, and sways. I take my eyes off Tomasso for a second, but when I look back, I'm now staring into the barrel of a gun.

"Hold up your hands. I'm going to let you out and put you in Tate's cell. You pass this test, you get to live."

I do as he says, playing the part, edging towards the door as he unlocks it. As the gate opens, he grabs me by the throat, pressing the Glock against my temple. I drag in a shaky breath, glaring into his blue eyes, trying not to stare at the red one that's starting to close.

"One wrong move from either of you and I blow your brains out, G." Tomasso walks me backward, unlocks Tate's cell, and shoves me inside. He follows in behind me, standing guard by the door.

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"Are you okay?" I mouth to Tate.

He nods, his gaze fixed on Tomasso and the gun pointed at me.

Something slides along the floor and hits my foot. I glance down and hold back my grin. A knife. This right here is my window. Tate glances down and stills.

"You want me to stab you, Tomasso? I didn't realize you were a sadist," I say, keeping my voice neutral. Slowly bending down, I retrieve the blade, squeezing the handle in my hand, my eyes locked on Tate's.

"Prove your loyalty lies with the Milanos and not the Sterlings," Tomasso presses.

I nod slowly, trying to gauge Tate's reaction.

"Just fucking do it," Tate mutters under his breath.

If I play this game, Tomasso will take me to my uncles. I can end this, and Tate did say he's prepared to do what it takes to protect his family.

"Either put that knife in him, or slit your own throat, Gianna," Tomasso demands.

I'm well aware of the gun aimed at me. Part of me debates throwing the knife at his head, making a run for the door, and unlocking it with the keys in my bra.

But that's a risk that could end up with us both dead. I need to get closer to Tomasso and take him by surprise. He has to think he's manipulating me. Because that's what these men want from me. To believe I'm the little puppet they get to dance for them.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to Tate.

Taking a step forward, I plunge the blade into the side of his thigh. Not deep enough to cause any critical damage, but enough to make him cry out in pain.

I hold my hands up in surrender, the knife still in Tate's thigh, my back to Tomasso.

"Good girl. See, you can follow orders," he praises.

The hairs on my arms stand on end, a shiver running down my spine. "Take me to my uncles," I say, flatly.

A crackle comes through his handheld radio, followed by rapid Italian, "Breach in three entrances. Sending in back up to re secure."

Colten. My heart flutters. But it's soon replaced by dread. This is my family, and I won't let them hurt another Sterling. Even though technically I did just stab one of them—it was for the greater good.

"All entrances have been compromised except the mausoleum. Armies have been dispatched to regain territory. Lock the prison down; do not let her go," the voice on the radio spits out.

I let out a breath. That entrance is the closest point to here. This is my chance.

The cell door unlocks, and I keep as still as I can. Tate is clutching at his thigh, and I swear he's putting on a show. I'm more worried about the fact that his eye has almost completely closed up and the gash on the back of his head.

Tate's dark eyes lock on mine.

"Trust me," I mouth.

Tomasso grabs the back of my neck, but before he can pull me back, I yank the knife out of Tate's leg. Tate screams out in agony as I spin, slicing it across Tomasso's throat. His gun clatters to the ground as he grabs at the wound with both hands, the crimson spilling through his fingers.

The choking noises he's making are music to my ears. He slowly slides his back down the bars, slumping onto the floor.

While he's fighting for his life, I pick up his gun and look him dead in the eyes. "I told you not to play games with me, Tomasso. I warned you."

The color drains from his face.

"You lived as you died, like Fabio did, a complete fucking pussy," I say and pull the trigger. The sound bellows through the room, making my ears ring.

Taking a deep breath, I stare at his body. At the blood trickling over his white shirt. Another one from the Milano family dead. He was never blood, but he's worked for the family since I was young. My father trusted him. I never did.

The only way LA is going to move forward is by wiping out every single asshole that ever worked for my father. None of them can be trusted. It's an empire forged on lies and theft. It has to be rebuilt, and as I stare down at the smoking gun in my hand, my chest tightens. This was my dream: to build an empire of my own.

But all I can think about is getting out of here and being with Colten. Sterling Ranch is my home, and I'm going to end this family, and then I'm shedding the poison.

I am not Gianna Milano anymore. I am Gianna Sterling.

Snatching the radio from Tomasso, I then turn my attention to a struggling Tate.

"You fucking stabbed me!" Tate grits out.

My mouth drops open when I see the blood smothering his jeans. Okay, perhaps I did go slightly deeper than I thought. "It's a scratch, you pussy. We need to go," I tell him, grabbing onto his arm.

Jesus Christ. Men.

"I can't fucking walk," he snaps.

"I think Colten has taken over the entrance points for these tunnels. Our nearest exit is two minutes away. We need to get the fuck out of here before they send more guards down. We need to help Colt."

Tate takes a deep breath, holding himself up by the bars. “Give me the knife. I’ll stay here. You go do what you have to do.”

I frown, shaking my head. “You need to come with me. I’m not weak; I can help hold you up,” I tell him, grabbing hold of his waist.

“G, we both know you got this on your own; you know where to go. You need to act fast. You’ve got someone waiting for you on the other side that needs you. I don’t,” he mutters, his eyes glazing over.

I swallow the lump forming in my throat. He’s being serious.

“You’ve got a kid? A girlfriend? Haven’t you? Come on, Tate. You gotta fight back. You’re part of the Sterling family, and you have to get back to them. How do you think Jett is going to cope? He will be a damn mess. We’re in this mess together, and I can’t leave you.”

He presses his hand against his forehead and winces in pain. “G, it ain’t the stab wound I’m worried about. I can’t fucking see straight. My ears are ringing. My head is pounding, and I think I’m about to pass out. You need to go.”

I grab his face carefully; his pupils are blown wide. I need to get him some help. “New plan, Tate,” I tell him, forcing him to look at me.

I’m resourceful. If I can get out of here, I can steal a phone and get help. At this point, I’d even call the cops if I had to.

“Your family will never forgive me if you die down here, and I won’t fucking let you. So I need you to stay alive while I get some help. Okay? Can you do that?”

His eyes glaze over, and sweat beads on his forehead. This is not good. “If I don’t make it, I need you to find someone. Her name is Miley Green. She was in New York; who knows where she is now. But I need you to tell her that I’m gone and that I’m with our baby girl now. And I’ll look after her, I promise.”

What the hell? Is he seeing things?

“Tate, I won’t let you die. You can tell her yourself.”

I help him down onto the ground, press his hand over his stab wound with some pressure, and give him the blade in his other hand.

“Sit tight. Keep pressure on there. I’ll be back. I can get out through the cemetery; it’s not far from here. Keep your strength to kill anyone who opens that door,” I whisper.

“Miley. Green. Remember that,” he chokes out.

“Don’t you dare fucking die on me, Tate,” I tell him, and he smiles.

And then I run. I run for my fucking life. And his.

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CHAPTER NINETY-SIX



Colten

The tunnels are dimly lit, kind of like an old underground rail system.

“How much further?” I ask.

Every second away from G is a lifetime. I swear I’ve been walking through these tunnels for hours.

Dom comes to an abrupt halt, turning to me with his finger to his lips. I don’t even breathe. In the distance, I hear faint footsteps.

Dom whispers, “There are three main hubs. Two you can hold prisoners; one only has one cell, that’s near Dad’s house, that is where G used to go. And then there’s the larger one, two bigger cells, plus a guard room outside. That was the interrogation room; I’m wagering they’re in there.”

I shake my head. My heart hurts for Gianna, but also for Dom. They had to live through this, and it became their normal. This should never be any kid's reality. We continue our pursuit in silence. Every so often there's a rumble from the traffic above us. The odd drip of water from a pipe.

I follow behind Dom, and as we round the corner he holds up one hand, withdrawing his gun with the other.

There’s a steel door we edge toward, and once we get there Dom heaves as he pushes it open. Brighter lights and hard flooring greet us. On the left, an empty guard station, a simple chair and small wooden table that’s in front of another door.

When that one opens, my heart beats so fast it’s all I can hear in my ears.

Blood. That’s all I can focus on first. Tate is slumped in a corner of a jail cell, beside a body bleeding out.

I rush over through the open door to his cell, kneeling beside him. I tap his face.

He groans in response, his eyes not focusing.

Dom bends down and picks up something. Whatever it is, it’s enough for him to erupt into a fit of rage, pounding his fist against the floor.

“Tate, where is Gianna?” I can’t hide the despair in my voice.

Part of me wishes, as bad as it sounds, that Gianna was the one left in the cell.

“Gone,” he croaks. “She was here, Colten. And she slit Tomasso’s throat. He was going to take her to her uncles. They’re in with Tatiana.”

Holy fuck.

I glance over, and my heart stops. He’s holding up a black pointed nail, the same one that scratches my back. That runs through my hair. And I bet she’s going to be pissed it’s missing. Tate coughs and I grip his face. “Stay with me, Tate.”

Blood is covering his hand. There’s a knife slit in his jeans and a blade in his other hand, but he’s too weak to even attempt to use it.

“Where is Gianna?” I repeat. “Tate, please.”

“Getting help.”

“On her own?”

He nods weakly.

I turn to Dom; with every second that passes, I’m becoming more helpless here. “Where would she go from here?”

Dom swallows. “She could be anywhere in the tunnels.”

A fresh wave of rage washes over me. “Think, Dom! From here, where would Gianna run? What exit would she go to?”

His eyes go wide. “The cemetery. The fucking cemetery! How could I forget!”

He paces, pulling at his hair. “We used to lay flowers on my mom's grave, and G would always disappear and run down the tunnels. There’s this mausoleum that hides it. Fuck.”

“There’s a fucking entrance we don’t have covered?” I shout.

Shit.

“We need to move,” I command.

Dom leans in, picking up Tate and lifting him over his shoulder. Gianna is alive. That's all I can focus on. I have to get to her. I'm fucking proud of my girl.

I tap the earpiece of my comms, and Hunter's voice comes through. "Update?"

"We've got Tate; he's not in a good way. Gianna got free. There is an exit from the tunnel in the cemetery. I need men moving in there now," I shout into the comms.

"Copy that."

"Fabio's house is empty, no signs of life left. I got blood on my shirt, though," Jett adds.

"Sending men towards the cemetery now," Mikhail says.

"We need eyes on her uncles. Tate said Tomasso was leading G to them, something about Tatiana," I say.

If I know my wife as well as I think I do, that's her target. She's going to go after her uncles and end this, even if she is on her own.

"Tatiana. You're certain he said that exact name?" Enzo questions immediately through the comms.

"Yeah. That name."

"I knew she wouldn't stay in hiding for long," Enzo says. I have no clue what the fuck he means or who Tatiana is.

"Mikhail, move faster. Terzo's vehicle is approaching the cemetery parking lot," Enzo tells me.

"I'm ten minutes out," Mikhail hisses.

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CHAPTER NINETY-SEVEN



GIANNA

Song- Dark Paradise, Lana Del Ray

A graveyard at night is hauntingly beautiful. I stagger out of the mausoleum. My mom is buried here, right next to Max. And Fabio is in a completely different plot. He didn't deserve to go to the afterlife and be greeted by our mother.

The first time I found this entrance to the tunnels was by accident. We were laying flowers down on my mom's grave, and I spotted one of my dad's bodyguards disappear into the mausoleum, so naturally, I snuck off and followed him. But that act is what earned me my first overnight stay in the prison. Running off was always meant to be punished.

With a gun in one hand and a radio in the other, I rest my back against the cool granite. Headlights ahead get my attention as a car pulls to a stop. The doors slam, three of them, one after the other.

"Tomasso, come in," the radio crackles. My Uncle Terzo's voice is clear.

My eyes widen, and I turn the volume down on the dial.

Flashlights shine towards me, and I race around the back of the structure, pinning my back against it and holding my breath. It doesn't take long for the low chatter of Italian accents to sweep through the air, along with heavy footsteps.

Clicking off the safety, I drop the radio to the floor. The one thing I will be grateful to my father for is that he taught me how to survive. He taught me that fear will only consume you if you let it.

Peering around the corner, three figures are moving through the shadows. I'd know their builds anywhere. First there's Terzo, the short, dumpy one. Giuseppe is to his right, with broad shoulders towering over the others. And then Carlo's to his left, walking like he has a stick shoved up his ass after a botched hip replacement.

Three of them. One of me. But knowledge is power in my case. I know these bastards need me alive to get to Tatiana. They have to offer something to her on a platter, and the only person who can do that for them is me. I'm the only link to Enzo they have, or probably will ever have, other than Dom.

And I ain't letting them turn their attention to him, or Colten.

It's not a choice. If I don't try to stop them, they'll keep coming after Colten and his family now that they know it's a way in.

I am not my father. I won't let others suffer to protect myself. That's what makes me different from him. So before my uncle's reach the structure, I walk around to the entrance and stand in the doorway. Gun raised. Chin held high. And I wait for them to close the distance.

If I die here, I die making up for all my past fuck ups.

I know they see me. And I know they don't care. To them, I'm the daughter of a man they didn't even want in charge. And I played right into their trap.

"Put the gun down, Gianna," Terzo says calmly.

"If you wanted to talk to me, you know how a phone works. You kidnapped me, so the gun stays aimed at my enemies," I snap.

I'm over being scared of my family.

Giuseppe laughs. "You always were your father's daughter."

Switching my aim to Giuseppe, I pull the trigger, letting the bullet blast through his shoulder. He yelps out in pain, but I don't so much as glance at him.

Because now I have two guns aimed at me.

"I know you're not going to kill me; you need me to get intel on Enzo," I say, matter-of-factly.

Terzo and Carlo look at each other, and promptly back to me.

"Don't you think you deserve a bullet to the shoulder like Giuseppe? Eye for an eye, remember? You followed the rules with Fabio," Carlo says.

I'm going to kill all three of them, eventually. I'm holding out hope someone out there, whether it's Colten or Dom, knows about this entrance

and they’re coming. It’s the only way out I have.

This is the first time in my life I know in my bones that I can’t do this on my own. I’m buying time. That’s it. A few months ago, this would have brought shame. I would have been fighting until my last breath. I didn’t have a reason to stay alive, not really. Only for the empire, which I was at peace with dying for.

But now? I’ve got a family. I’ve got Colten. I’ve had a glimpse of a life I never even contemplated. So now I have to play smart to protect myself. And I have to admit that I need help, that there is strength in relying on others.

“If I insult you, then you can shoot me. I am not my father's daughter; if I was, I wouldn’t be willing to offer you a deal.”

Terzo takes a step forward.

“I’ll help you stop Enzo. I’ll give you everything I know for Tatiana. All I ask in return is you leave the Sterling family out of it.”

Carlos laughs. “Did your father never give you the lesson in never falling in love, Gianna?”

I glare at him. “He must have missed that one.”

“Drop the gun, Gianna, and we’ll talk once you’re back in your cell.”

Letting out a laugh, I swear I see the faint flash of lights. It’s enough to give me hope. So I bend down slowly, placing my gun on the floor, holding up my hands.

Now I really am fucked.

Come on, Colten. Please help me. I need to tell you that I love you.

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CHAPTER NINETY-EIGHT



Colten

The cemetery exit wasn't as close as I thought it was from Dom's instructions. I'm running until my lungs burn, gun in one hand. Running to save the love of my life from her fucking deranged family.

There's too much left to say between us. She's got a sheep that needs her. I fucking need her. We all do.

Gianna didn't just come to Sterling Ranch and steal my heart; she earned the trust of all of us. She's a part of our family now.

I come to a skidding stop, and my hand flies to my chest as a boom echoes against the walls.

A fucking gunshot. My blood is running cold. I pick up the pace until the stairs to the trap door come into view.

I'm working off pure adrenaline at this point. No amount of training, no amount of trauma in your life can get you ready to lose your soulmate.

A thud vibrates against the tunnel walls, and voices travel towards me.

"I said I'm going, don't fucking touch me." Gianna's voice is music to my ears.

Pressing my back against the wall of the tunnel, I hold my breath and slip around the corner so I'm out of view. Dom and Tate are so far behind me, I don't need to worry about them.

I can't see the people outside, but I can hear them.

She's breathing. There are two, maybe three footsteps alongside hers.

"You really don't need to keep up the theatrics with a gun against my head, Terzo. I'm well aware that if I try to run, you'll shoot me," Gianna

says, this time projecting her voice, as if she’s hoping someone is down here to hear her.

Well, I am. And, fuck, she’s clever.

“You shot Giuseppe, so the gun stays,” the man snaps back.

The voices are becoming louder, cutting through the air.

“Three men against one woman,” Gianna says. “Well, two and a half, I suppose now. I still don’t like my odds. I said I’d come willingly; you don’t trust me?”

The guy laughs. “No. We don’t. You were never meant to rule LA, Gianna. Stop behaving like you do.”

Three of them stand in the way of getting my wife back. I don’t care. It could have been an entire army. I’ll take the odds.

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CHAPTER NINETY-NINE



Gianna

I don’t know if it’s wishful thinking, but my body is reacting as if Colten is here. The tingling on my skin, the racing of my heart. It’s him. This isn’t fear. Not even with a gun pressed against my temple. I’m numb to that. I am hyper-aware of my husband. I swear I got a whiff of his cologne. I’d know that scent anywhere.

It’s either that or my body is tricking me into feeling safe so I can die in peace. Either way, I’ll take it.

Coming up on my left, there’s a tunnel that goes off into another section. A tight, almost alleyway down here that would lead to one of our warehouses on the ground. My eyes can’t pull their focus from that space, so I keep talking far too loud, on the chance my gut is right and Colten is there.

“It didn’t have to go this way, Gianna. If you’d have come to us before killing your father, we could have cut you in. We might have even let you reign in LA,” Terzo, the asshole who is pushing me at gunpoint, says.

“Standing up against Enzo is a death wish, Uncle T. I might be a lot of things, but I tend to steer clear of stupidity.”

He pushes me harder, causing me to misstep and almost land on my face. He grabs my shoulder, pulling me upright. As I look up, all the air is knocked clean from my body.

Colten Sterling.

His finger pressed to his lips, crouching on the ground.

I’m putting every ounce of trust in the man that I forced to marry me. In the man that I love wholeheartedly.

A gunshot rings out. Then another. I drive my elbow as hard as I can into Terzo’s stomach and spin to face him. His age has made him slower.

Carlo is dead behind him, and Giuseppe is bleeding out from the chest, blood spilling from his mouth.

I’m staring down the barrel of my uncle's gun.

“Bitch,” Terzo hisses.

The world flips upside down in seconds.

His finger twitches on the trigger, and I’m thrown full force sideways into the ground. Gunshots blast around us as we land with a thud, Colten’s body weight squashing me.

My shaking hands grab at his face. His cheeks. His jaw. His hair. Making sure he’s real. That he’s really here and this isn’t some kind of dream.

I open my mouth to speak, but no words follow. Nothing. My body is trembling, and I can’t stop it. I’m frozen.

The ringing in my ears is deafening. Colten pushes himself off me, and I follow his line of vision. Terzo is dragging his limp body along the floor, leaving a trail of crimson behind him.

“No,” I mutter. I’m not letting any of my uncles get out of this alive. “Gun. Colten. I need your gun.”

He holds out his hand, and the second I place mine in his, sparks shoot up my arm. He lifts me to my feet, his eyes scanning my body for injuries.

“I’ve never been happier to see someone alive,” he mutters, gripping my cheeks.

“You’re an idiot,” I say with a grin.

His eyebrow arches. “How am I an idiot?”

I peel the gun from his fingers. “Give me a second, polpetto. I have a family matter to conclude,” I whisper.

He steps back, biting his lip with a hunger in his eyes. “Go get ‘em, sweetheart.”

And I do. I stride over to my struggling uncle, dragging himself through his own blood, past the bodies of his brothers. A feeble attempt to escape.

I stop beside him and slam my boot down on his back, keeping him from moving any further. “Would you like your bodies mailed to Tatiana directly? Do you have a mailing address for her? I’d like her to know

exactly what happens when you fuck with Gianna Sterling, or anyone working with Enzo."

He shakes his head. "Gianna, please. You're my niece. You don't have to keep killing your family," he pleads.

I scoff. "The people I've killed might be related to me by blood, but none of you are my family. Except Dom."

I aim the gun at his head.

"The Milano name has been dying for a long time. I tried to save it, Uncle. I really did. But it's over now. I'm going to tear down every last building we own and let Dom rebuild it however he wants. I'm going to remove every last trace of the Milano empire. And I'm going to make sure Enzo kills that bitch who thinks she can come after us," I spit.

"Don't kill our name, Gianna. Please," he begs.

And I laugh. I tip my head back and let it out.

"Too late. This is Sterling territory now. Goodbye, Uncle," I mutter, and pull the trigger.

The gun falls from my fingers as I stagger backward. There is only one place I want to be. I turn and sprint to Colten, jumping into his arms. My legs around his waist, his hands on me.

He doesn't say a word. He kisses me. And everything is right in the world again. I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

I am Gianna fucking Sterling, and today is the last day I ever let anyone lay their hands on me.

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CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED



Colten

She kisses me like she needs my lips on hers to stay alive. And I ain't arguing with that. I feel the same way. There is no one that could ever come close to Gianna. Not in my life and certainly not in my heart.

She pulls back, catching her breath, her dark eyes landing on mine. She presses the finger with the broken nail against my lips. "When I thought I was going to die, I only had one regret," she tells me.

I swallow, nodding slowly.

"I love you, Colten Sterling. I love you with everything I have in me. I love the version of me that you helped me find. I love who I am when I'm beside you. And I love everything there is to possibly love about you," she chokes on the words, but recomposes herself. "Forcing you to marry me was the best decision of my life, and I don't want to go another day without you."

My eyes burn as I fight back the tears.

"I don't want to run LA. I want to give it to Dom. This place was always my prison, and you helped me escape. What I wanted before you, that doesn't even factor in now. I want to live out the rest of my days beside you, on that ranch, with all our animals. I want to be a part of your crazy family."

She removes her finger from my lips, and I smile.

"Are you going to say anything?" she asks with a wariness in her tone.

"I wasn't sure if your speech was done, viper," I say, my voice low.

She slaps my arm, and I hold her tight to me with one arm, cupping her face with my other hand.

“Gianna, I am deliriously in love with you. I love you more than I’ve loved anything. Your smile, your heart, that devastating quick wit. I don’t just want you beside me for the rest of my life. I want to worship you until I take my last breath. I want to be worthy to stand beside you, G. I want to love you, ‘til death do us part.”

Her eyes brim with tears, and I wipe them as they begin to spill down her cheeks.

“I promised you that I’d fight for us,” she hiccups.

“I’ll fight every war I need to, to keep you safe. You’re not just my wife, you’re the other half of my soul. But you ain’t giving up LA, Gianna. You didn’t endure a life of suffering to give it over to Dom. We’re going to work this out, baby. I promise you.”

I rest my forehead against hers and breathe her in. She’s here. She’s safe and unhurt.

“I don’t want to be that woman anymore. I don’t want to be the woman my father forced me to be.”

I cup her cheek. “Then don’t be that woman. Ruling an empire doesn’t mean you have to do it the way he trained you to. Do it your own way. Burn it down and create something beautiful. I’ll be right there beside you, G.”

She closes her eyes, and I press a kiss to her forehead. “I don’t want to become my father, Colten.”

“You never will. Because you aren’t a monster like him. You’re the love of my damn life.”

She sighs. I think it’s registering. It might take time, but whatever she decides, I’m here for her.

“We really need to take my uncle's phones and see who this Tatiana hoe is they keep talking about,” she says quietly.

I chuckle. “Yeah. Good idea. Enzo didn’t seem amused that she’s back.”

I’ve heard chatter about Tatiana; Mikhail’s guys had big problems with her in Vegas a while back. Seems like she’s trying to resurface.

“Whoever she is, Colt. I’m going to hunt her down and fucking kill her in the most painful way I can come up with.”

I grin. “That’s my girl.”

Tatiana’s battle is with Enzo, yet no one knows why. I’m hoping this isn’t about to escalate. Because I’ve got my wife comin’ home with me, and

I've got big plans for us. Plans that don't involve killin'. Plans that involve peace. We both deserve it.

"Mikhail and his guys should be covering the cemetery now, so we're safe to leave," I tell G, sliding my hand into hers.

"Where is my brother, Colt?" she asks, worry laced in her voice.

"He's taken Tate back up through the exit to Fabio's. Hunter and Jett are waiting for them to go get him help."

She glances away, and I pull her back to me. "Gianna," I say sternly.

"I stabbed Tate in the leg," she blurts.

My heart races. "Why?"

"Tommaso wanted me to prove my alliance with the Milano family. I had to go along with it to get him in the cell with us. Once he did, I yanked the knife out of Tate's leg and slit his throat. That's how I escaped. But he was in a bad way; the guards beat the shit out of him. I'm sorry, Colt. I promise, I did it to keep us both alive."

She's rambling. It's cute as fuck.

I stop her by saying, "It's fine, baby. Tate will be fine. This ain't your fault."

She can't stop, though. She continues, "I promised him I wouldn't let him die. He said I have to go find some woman in New York called Miley? Did he have a daughter that died?"

I almost stumbled backward, my chest tightening. That would explain so much. The reason Tate came back a few years ago a complete shell.

Why he's so clocked out from everything.

"I-I don't know, sweetheart. He's never mentioned anything," I say.

"Hmm. Well, we can hunt her down too if he wants. Might be a nice little side quest for us," she says with a wicked grin.

"I thought you were done with this?" I question.

She taps my cheek. "I said I was done with LA. Didn't say I was done being a menace. I'll think on it all, okay?"

Dear God. This woman will put me in an early grave.

"Gianna, baby. I love you. Can we please get out of these hell tunnels?"

She wraps her arms around my neck and squeezes, almost making me choke. "I told Dom once that I'd blow these fucking tunnels up one day. And I think that day has finally come, Colt. It's over."

I hold her tighter. She's guarded a lot of what happened to her growing up; I'm not sure if I'll ever know the full extent. She can tell me when she's

good and ready, and I'll be there. I'll listen. And I'll blow up whatever the fuck she wants to blow up.

"It's over, viper. It's over, and no one is ever going to hurt you again. You hear me?"

She pulls back, wiping her tears away. "Because I've got a big, strong cowboy to push me out of the way of a bullet?"

I nod. "Yeah. And you got a whole army above ground that followed me here to bring you home. Your family might have hurt you, but now you have ones that would die for you. You're one of us, G. One of us, forever."

Her eyes flutter closed. I know she despises being vulnerable. I think crying is one of the top three things she hates. But I'd bet all my money that deep down, she needs this.

"We've taken out anyone at all the properties. The cemetery is clear. Let us know how to proceed," Mikhail says through the comms.

"I have Tate and Dom. We're heading to the hospital now," Hunter adds.

"I've got Gianna. We'll be exiting through the cemetery. I will need a ride," I say back.

"I've got an armored truck nearby. Alexei will wait for you; I apologize for him in advance," Mikhail tells me.

Oh, Gianna is going to love this. She can continue her flamingo negotiations, and today, if she wants a damn flamingo, she can have a flock of them. I do not care.

Whatever my wife wants, she gets.

"Are you hurt, G?" I ask quietly.

She's watching me intently. Almost calmly. She shakes herself out of her thoughts. "I'm fine, Colt. Except for my broken nail. Let's get the hell out of here. I've got a sheep on a ranch that needs my attention."

"Just a sheep that needs your attention, hmm?"

She drags her nail against my cheek. "And a very, very needy husband."

"Needy. Desperate. Obsessed. Madly in love," I mutter against her cheek. "All of the above."



Gianna slept through Alexei yapping all the way to the airstrip. I had to carry her exhausted body onto a private jet. She didn't wake through the whole flight or the transfer into the SUV.

I'm taking it as the highest form of compliment that she trusts me to keep her safe. That perhaps I am her safe place now.

She's spent long enough fighting; I want her to live now.

"Colt," she groans, her head in my lap as Xander drives us back to Sterling Ranch. Home.

"Yes, baby. I'm right here," I murmur, stroking her hair.

"Am I okay? Why can't I stay awake? My eyes are so heavy." She tries to hold her eyes open with her fingers and bursts out laughing.

"You've had a hell of a fuckin' day, G. Your body is fighting you to rest, so listen."

She snuggles up on my lap. "Say please."

"Please, wife. We're nearly home."

She lets out a yawn and starts drawing lazy circles on my knee. "I broke a nail; that's more devastating than seeing all my uncles dead."

I bite back a laugh. "A nail can be fixed."

She groans. "I need a new nail technician. A new tattoo artist. Someone new to wax my pussy. Colt, do you know how hard it is to find someone good at that?"

"I'll do it."

I'll take any opportunity where her pussy is involved.

Xander clears his throat from the driver's seat. He's a cowboy on a ranch; he's heard worse.

"No. Too far, cowboy. I've found my limit."

Running my index finger along her jaw, she shivers against my touch.

"Have you heard from Dom?" she asks.

"Yes, baby. They're at the hospital with Tate."

"Is he… okay?"

If anyone can break Tate out of his shell after this, Gianna could be the girl to do it. Especially if they'd formed a friendship through everything they'd just been through together.

"They've stitched him up, given him some painkillers; he's resting now. He's going to be fine; us cowboys can take a hit. Wait till you see Ace get thrown off the back of a bull."

“Why didn’t you go into bull riding?” she asks while tracing circles on my thigh.

“Because my brain developed quicker than Ace's,” I joke.

She giggles, and my chest swells.

“I was always more drawn to horses. That’s why I went into focusing on rodeos. Now, I spend more time training the horses and having them be used to represent our ranch.”

“Do you love it?” she asks.

I don’t hesitate. “Yeah. I do.”

I made a promise to myself, since unlocking Vacation Colten in Greece, that I need balance. To be able to do the shit I want to do, spend time with my wife, and not kill myself with work anymore.

She thinks for a second before asking, “Is it something I can help with? My skills are kinda restricted to real estate investment and murder.”

I laugh, but I can hear the pain in her voice.

“Not true. I bet you’re amazing at a bunch of things; you just have to find what it is that brings you to life.” I pause. “In failing that, I oversee a lot of the drug running, the shipments, storage. Perhaps you want that?”

“Maybe. I’ll assess my life's goals once I nap.” She leans her head on my shoulder.

“Whatever it is, I’ll help, sweetheart.”

And like that, she’s fast asleep again. I know whatever Gianna puts her mind to, she’ll be perfect at. Because that is exactly what Gianna is. The kind of woman who will explode into your life and make you realize everything you were missing.

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CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED ONE



GIANNA

I slept for a few days. I vaguely recall a doctor prodding me in bed at one stage. He almost went flying into a wall for touching me.

Turns out, between being drugged, kidnapped, thrown around, shot at, and killing my uncles, my body was exhausted.

Beyond exhausted, actually. Colten has been bathing me. Trying to wake me to feed me. I remember parts. I remember Dom coming to visit. I sent him back to LA with Romeo to work out how we move forward.

Dom is holding the fort for me until I figure out what to do and how to do it. I am not leaving Sterling Ranch. But Colt is right; I shouldn't give up my rights to running LA out of fear of becoming my father.

I have an opportunity to make something great. But I also want to build a life here, with him.

For the first time since the day I was born, I am happy.

Today, I woke up to the sun streaming through the bedroom window, with my personal barista, also known as my husband, whipping up another caramel latte for me.

I always claimed to hate sweet things. I didn't do cute or sweet. But damn. That caramel syrup is to die for.

The door creaks open, and I spread my arms above my head, stretching like a cat.

"Is there anywhere I could call and schedule a massage?" I ask Colten as he walks to my side of the bed and sets down the steaming glass of deliciousness.

He’s in a pair of black boxers and absolutely nothing else. This man is a thousand different versions of fine.

“I’d assume so, baby.”

Now I’m feeling better; it’s about time I put him on his toes again. He’s seen the frail side of me, but he shouldn’t get used to that whole damsel in distress act I had going on; it was a one-off.

“I’ll call around; I need a male to do it to really get his hands into those knots in my shoulder blade,” I say, biting back a grin.

He rips off the blanket and sits down on the edge of the bed. The air brushing against my body makes my traitor nipples hard for him.

“Say that again,” he orders, his eyes burning into mine.

I run my hands over my hips, arching my back a touch. “I said, Colten… I need a man to put his hands on me and work out these knots. He needs to get really deep. Lots of pressure,” I tell him in a low, sultry tone.

He clears his throat and shifts his weight. He doesn’t say a word. It’s just a look. That look. The one where I know I’m in trouble.

“Then call one up, Gianna,” he says flatly, snatching my replacement phone from the nightstand, passing it to me.

I pluck it from his fingers and unlock it, typing in *‘massages near me.’*

One pops up that's two miles away. That’ll do. I gotta see this through now I’ve started it. Hitting dial, Colten rests his rough hand on my thigh as a woman answers.

“Hi, Brows and Pamper. How can I help you today?” she greets me, far too chirpy for this time of the morning.

“Hey, I was wondering if you had any spaces available for a massage.”

“Sure. Let me take a look at the schedule.”

Colten squeezes my thigh, leaning in. “I’ll also take an appointment, G. But make sure it’s a woman. I’ve got a really, really tight muscle in my groin area,” he whispers.

I clench my fist at my side.

“We have today at half past two? Does that work?” The chirpy lady distracts me from wanting to strangle my husband.

“My husband also wants an appointment, but, you know how men are disgusting? Well, he has requested that only a woman massages him. So, actually.” I pause, taking a moment to smile at him. “He can have my appointment, and I’ll head right to the lawyer's office for a divorce.”

A gasp escapes me as he jumps on top of me.

“I’m so sorry, my wife is practicing becoming a stand-up comedian. She has a bit of work to do to perfect her routine, though. We don’t need any appointments either,” Colt says into the phone speaker.

My cheeks are now a million degrees as I cut the call and toss it over to his side of the bed. “You are insane, Colten. What the fuck?”

He cups my breasts in each hand and slowly starts to massage them. “You started it,” he says.

He pinches my nipples between his fingers and my back arches.

“I was only joking, cowboy. I don’t want anyone else's hands on me.”

“Good girl. Do you promise?”

I nod, squeezing my eyes shut. “I promise.”

“Do you want that massage?” he asks, his voice full of hunger.

“Only if I get a happy ending.”

He moves to one side and flips me onto my front in one swift movement. I like that he doesn’t treat me like I’m fragile, even after what happened.

I watch him open the bedside drawer and grab some kind of oil. “Do you do this often? Side hustle massages?” I ask, not hiding the jealousy.

He laughs, pouring it onto my back. “Would you believe me if I told you it was so I could massage an injury on my shoulder?”

I scoff. “Not really. Just get those big old hands to work, hubby.”

He massages me from my shoulders, down my sides and over my hips. Working in circular movements. It’s pure bliss.

When he moves to my ass, I moan in response. So naturally, he slaps my butt before working down my legs all the way to my feet. My instinct is to kick out when he touches the soles, but he holds them firm.

“Relax, baby. It’ll feel good.”

With one hand massaging my foot, his other slides back up the inside of my leg, stopping right before my pussy.

I wriggle against him, moving myself south, to put his fingers where I want them, making him laugh.

“Do you need something, sweetheart?” he mutters.

“What do you think, Sherlock?”

“I think we’re late for an important surprise.”

“No surprise is worth giving up your face between my legs right now, Colt,” I hiss.

With that, he spreads my legs apart, lifting my ass in the air. With his damn teeth, he moves my panties to the side, and he eats.

Soft and gentle to start. My hips rocking against his face to the same rhythm.

“More. More. More,” I pant.

A growl rips from him, and before I can catch my breath, he’s filling me up with his cock. Pinning my face down into the pillow and slapping my ass.

“This what you need, huh?”

“Yes!” My screams are muffled into the blanket. I come so hard, and almost embarrassingly fast, but I don’t care. Gripping onto the sheets, I let the waves of pleasure rock through me.

He pulls out, and I roll myself onto my back, wiping away the sweat on my forehead.

“You didn’t finish?” I ask, but it’s not really a question.

He tugs at his dick. “That was for you, not for me. We really have somewhere to be.”

I sit up, studying his handsome face. “I really don’t want to be kidnapped again, Colt. Tell me where we’re going.”

He chuckles, leaning in and running his fingers along my lips, and then shoving them into my mouth.

“You’ll always be safe with me, Gianna. Now get that perfect ass of yours out of bed and get dressed. Once I’ve shown you you’re surprises, I’ll tie you up and fill you with my cum all fuckin’ night until I get you pregnant. Deal?”

I think I just died.

I nod, and he retrieves his fingers.

“Are you negotiating with me, cowboy?” I say with a grin.

“It appears so.”

“Give me a clue.”

There’s something about that wild glint in his eye that tells me he’s up to something. It’s making me giddy.

“Nope,” he says as he climbs off the bed, his erection still rock hard. “You’ve got thirty minutes. No more laying around and sleeping.”

I open my mouth in pure shock that he’s coming at me like this. I shoot back, “I’ll kidnap you, lock you in a cage, have a gun to your head. See how you like it.”

I probably shouldn’t be licking my wounds; maybe I should be up and out ready to take on the world. I don’t want to. I have no desire to. Taking a break doesn’t make me weak. If anything, I’ll come back stronger.

Life isn’t only about power or territory; it’s about love. It’s about doing things that put you out of your comfort zone. Taking vacations. Having good sex. Scrap that—not just good, epic.

It’s about growing old beside someone who you’d die for.

“I was joking, G,” Colt says, shaking me from my thoughts.

That pained expression on his face makes me laugh.

“I’m joking, cowboy. I’ve been a lazy bitch, and I need to get out.”

He rummages through my drawers, tossing a cami and a pair of shorts at me. “Gianna, I’m really fucking excited to show you this. Please get dressed for me.”

“I like it when you say please, big man.”

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CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED TWO



Colten

I’m like an excited kid at Christmas, and I’m not the one opening the gifts. I get to watch Gianna’s reaction to her first surprise today.

With her hand in mine, I lead her through the back of the house, through the yard, and into my stables.

I’ve let out the other horses into the field, except one.

“Oh my god!” Gianna squeals. “Is this my baby girl?”

She’s running to the stall, yanking open the door, and then she’s diving on the hay.

“Preziosa,” she whispers, holding out the back of her hand.

The sheep rests its dark nose on her hand, and Gianna’s smile is something I want framed on the wall.

Leaning against the stable door, I cross my arms and watch the two of them bond.

“I’m so happy you’re home, baby girl,” Gianna tells her.

She lets out a baa in response. Gianna once asked me if I thought she was evil; animals don’t bond with the bad. They only naturally go to the good, just like my girl. Her heart is gold, and it’s mine.

“Is she staying for good? The vet is happy she’s okay now?” Gianna asks, turning to me.

“She is, sweetheart. She’s fit and healthy.”

Not every animal that passes through my sanctuary gets this kind of ending, and Preziosa nearly didn’t make it. Gianna made me fight for her.

Gianna showed me, in more ways than one, how to fight for the things I love.

“Do you want to see your other surprise?” I ask.

She pouts, stroking Preziosa’s head. “Not really, Colt. I’m happy here all day.”

I laugh, holding out my hand. “G, we really have to work on that sassy mouth of yours.”

That spark in her eyes ignites, sending a shock into my chest. “Unless you want me to choke on that big dick of yours, I’ll never stop running this mouth.”

I’m already fighting a tension headache after the blue balls I gave myself. This is worse than the Viagra experience.

“Come,” I order, leaving no room for questions.

She gives her sheep a sweet goodbye, and she follows behind me to the stable opposite.

I open up the door and pull Gianna against my side. “Every cowgirl needs her cowboy, but they also need their own horse,” I tell her, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“Shut. Up. You bought me a horse?” she squeals with excitement.

“You told me you wanted to help me on the ranch; you needed your own girl.”

“What’s her name?” G asks.

“Whatever you’d like her to be called. She’s the best of the best.”

My chest swells with pride. Seeing my girl happy with her first horse, the fact that she’s seeing her future right here with me. I could die happy.

She taps her nail against her lip. “Belleza. It means beautiful.”

“Just like you,” I whisper.

She spins in my arms, running her hands up my chest. “I never want to leave Sterling Ranch.”

“I ain’t letting you. You’re mine, wife.”

Her cheeks flush a deep red.

“If we weren’t married already, I’d propose and marry you tomorrow,” I admit.

The thought came to me while she was sleeping; I’ve had a lot of hours to myself this week. But those vows we said originally, they’re us.

I don’t want to change that, or fix who we are.

“Please don’t make me go through another wedding, Colt. I’ll re-do the honeymoon though.”

I can’t hide my grin. It’s like she read my thoughts. In the time I’ve had to think about life and what I want, I've been very productive. I promised to treat my wife like a Queen.

Before Gianna, I never took a break. It was work and protecting my family. She’s taught me to relax, that there is more to life than money and power.

“Can I take her for a ride?” she asks.

“So these are more pre-surprises. They were my original present to you, but over the last week, I’ve pulled some strings. Bought some things. Organized some stuff. And we really need to go so we don’t miss it.”

Her eyebrow raises. “What are you up to?”

“Trying to make you the happiest woman alive.”

Her arms loop around my neck, dragging me down for a kiss. “I already am, Colten. You haven’t got to keep trying.”

I lift her into my arms and carry her out of the stables. I've already packed everything she needs, and the luggage is already on the jet.

I need her to gather the essentials I may have missed, like her stacked potions of skincare or her red lipsticks.

As we head into the house, I place her down on her feet, and there’s a knock at the door. I’m not expecting anyone. They all know we’re leaving later.

Not unless it’s Xander; he might need some help on one of the pastures.

Opening up the door, I’m greeted by Tate. Without thinking, I grab hold of him and shove my arms around him. “Don’t go dying on me again, Tate.”

He laughs, pulling back, and it visibly hurts him to do so. Jett is behind him, chewing on his lip. I’ve never seen him this quiet. Tate being taken dragged back the darkest version of Jett. And I ain’t sure that’s a good thing.

“I wanted to see Gianna before you go. If she's up for visitors?” Tate says.

I open the door wider, but Gianna is already by my side. The air shifts around us; I don’t know what exactly went down in those prison cells. I saw the aftermath.

“I told you it was a scratch,” Gianna says, full of sass.

Jett's eyes go wide, and Tate bursts into laughter, holding onto the doorframe to keep him up. “If I walk with a limp for the rest of my life, do I

get to return the favor?" he asks.

"Hell fuckin' no," I answer.

G taps me on the bicep, and I step aside.

"I'm sorry, for what it's worth. I'm sorry my family put you through that, and I'm sorry I stabbed you to save our lives," Gianna says, full of sincerity.

Tate nods, taking a step closer, holding out his hand. His knuckles are cut to shit. His eye is still swollen almost shut. "Gianna, I was coming here to thank you. If you didn't do what you did, the guards would have killed me, or Tomasso would have. You kept me alive, and then you ran for help."

I swallow the lump in my throat.

She gave herself up to her uncles to try and save us all. But I don't say that; it's not my story to tell, and Gianna doesn't want the praise. She wants to forget and move forward.

To my surprise, Gianna wraps her arms carefully around Tate, and he returns the embrace.

"You're one of us, Gianna," Tate whispers, but I still hear it.

I nod to Jett, trying to gauge his headspace. Something is eating at him, and I ain't sure if it is Tate. He's got that look, staring off into the distance, which means he's thinking.

As Gianna pulls back, she places her hand on his shoulder and whispers, "I'll find the girl if you want me to."

I keep my expression neutral, pretending I heard nothing.

Tate shakes his head. "Forget I ever said her name, G."

Gianna shrugs and backs away, pressing herself to my side.

"We're organizing a big family barbecue for when you're home," Jett interjects.

"Hey, Jett. How long am I going away for?" Gianna asks mischievously.

I shoot Jett a glare, reminding him that the word *surprise* was exclusively used. Jett's face drops and he backs away down the steps, his hands in the air. "I'm going to shut my mouth," he says, making Gianna laugh.

"Dammit," she mutters.

"Good try, baby. Good try."

Just as Tate makes it down the steps, Wyatt is charging at Jett. "Jett! You didn't close the door; Gary got out, and daddy is really angry at you," he calls out.

Resting my arm over G’s shoulder, I watch on as Jett picks up my nephew. For someone so insane, he’s the one I would say would make the best dad. I’ve recently watched him with Violet's little boy, Noah. That ain’t even his flesh and blood, and he loves that boy.

He’s the same with Wyatt and Willow.

“Uncle Colt! Daddy said you’re going to—”

Jett stops the next word from coming out by putting his hand lightly over Wyatt's mouth.

“Secrets, boy. We gotta learn to keep them. Both of us, apparently,” Jett jokes.

He places Wyatt down, who then darts towards us. But in fact, bypasses me entirely and stops in front of Gianna.

“I did some drawings. Mommy said I need to show you soon. I made one especially for you to cheer you up.”

Gianna’s face lights up as she bends down. “I’d love some of your art, Wyatt. I also need your help with something else.”

Wyatt gives her a gap-toothed smile. “What with, Auntie G?”

“Well, Preziosa is home, and I was wondering if you could teach me how to look after a sheep?”

“Yes. We have to take good care of *Sally* so she doesn’t end up back at the hospital,” he tells her sternly.

“I’ll do my very best, Wyatt. I promise,” she tells him.

My heart has never been more full. Having Gianna loved by my family, not just allowing her in as a power play, means everything to me.

She is exactly where she’s meant to be, and so am I. Right by her side.

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CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED THREE



GIANNA

Plucking the hat from Colten's head with a giggle, I'm tossed into the air and thrown over his shoulder for the remainder of the walk back to our house from the stables. I wanted to spend more time with Preziosa before he whisks me away.

"I can walk you, caveman!" I say, slapping his back.

He taps my ass in response, kicking open the door. "We've got a few hours to kill before phase two of my plan, so lunch," he tells me, setting me down on my feet.

I secure the hat on my head with a huff. "I'm hungry for something," I tease, wiggling my eyebrows and glancing at his crotch.

He shakes his head. "Real food first."

I pout in response. "You promised earlier."

He chuckles, squeezing my ass as he walks past to the kitchen. "Sit," he says, pointing to the dining table, the one Hunter had delivered to ours after he bent me over it.

Apparently it's our wedding present. Resting my hands on the back of the chair, I watch him make us some sandwiches.

"G, sit, please. We need to talk."

My heart hammers. "Why? Are you breaking up with me?" I blurt out.

He carries the plates of food over with a frown. "Don't be so fucking ridiculous. I love you. I am not breaking up with you."

I eye him suspiciously as I sit. "What do you want to talk about then?" I ask, picking up my sandwich.

“Our future,” he says.

I place my food back down on my plate.

“Okay… what about it?”

He chuckles. “Gianna, you’ve got LA to run, an empire to build. We need to figure out how we make sure that runs smoothly, alongside anything else you want in life.”

I swallow. It’s been playing on my mind. I know what I want; I need to figure out how the hell I make it happen.

The best way to get everything in life is to let him in to help me. We’re more powerful together than apart.

“I want to live here, permanently. I want to be the head of LA, but it won’t be the Milano family. It will be representing the Sterling family.”

He nods. “So, you want to merge LA and Arizona? Sterling family runs both.”

I tap my nails against the table. “Could that work? Would Hunter be okay with it?”

He chews on his lip. “It’s open to discussion. Yes.”

“How do you think it will work, day-to-day?” he asks like an interview.

I lean back, crossing my arms over my chest; his eyes divert straight to my breasts.

“Dom has proven to be able to maintain the day-to-day in LA for me, he has since Dad died. I’m saying, he’s my second-in-command; he answers to me. He lives there, and he runs off our orders.”

“Our?” he cuts in.

I slide my hand across the table to him, and he takes it in his. “Yes. This is our empire, not mine. If we merge two states under one name, it’s us. Not just me. So, you guys help us in LA, you bring me in on your Arizona business too.”

“Hmmm, mmm.”

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He’s trying, and failing, to hide his smile.

“Alright. So that’s our proposal. You live here, we merge the two states. Dom is second in line. You—no, *we*—give orders. We can streamline our drug routes, work with Vegas.”

I nod in agreement. “You think Hunter will work with me? He’s the boss currently?” I ask.

It’s one thing working with Colten, but Hunter is the head of their mafia.

Colt clears his throat. “What if I told you you’re staring at the new head of the Sterling family?”

My mouth drops open. I can’t help but jump out of my chair onto the table to crawl across it to him.

He laughs in response, dragging me onto his lap to straddle him.

“Why? Hunter is stepping down?”

He tucks my hair behind my ear. “A Queen needs a King, correct?”

“What’s he going to do?” I ask.

“He’s got a newborn and Wyatt. He never wanted to deal with this crap, G. Our father gave it to us, and none of us truly wanted it. But then I met this mighty mafia princess who taught me that actually, it is kind of fun, if you do it alongside the woman you love. So, I offered to take the reins, so long as I was beside you.”

Tears burn in my eyes. “I fucking love you, Colten.”

He grabs the back of my head and kisses me. “I love you more.”

“And what about Enzo? Is he cool with our proposal?” I ask.

There seem to be more hoops we need to jump through, like it’s too good to be true. I get the empire, I get the man. I’ve got it all.

“He’s arriving in half an hour. You gotta persuade him, baby,” he tells me.

I grin. “Challenge accepted. If he agrees, we get everything, you realize that, right?”

He cups my cheek. “You promise this is what you want?”

“As long as I have you by my side, Colten, I want it. We can make LA a fucking powerhouse, just like I always knew it could be. And I get to stay here, I get to be home.”

He lets out a shaky breath.

“We can always split our time between the two?” he adds.

I shake my head. “No. I’ve lived in LA enough years to know that is not what I want in life anymore. I want to be right here, on this ranch.” I pause, taking his hand and placing it on my belly.

“I want kids, Colten. I want them to grow up here. And I want to love them in a way I never was. Let Dom and whoever else that works for us do the hard work; it’s about time we took advantage of making it to the top.”

He leans in, brushing his stubble against my jaw, making me shiver.

“You want my babies, huh?”

“I want to build a family, and a legacy with you, Mr. Sterling.”

He kisses my throat, so I tip my head back to give him better access.

“Then, I think we’re ready to put our proposal forward, don’t you?”

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CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FOUR



Colten

The second Hunter's front door opens, Lola barrels into Gianna and hugs her. “I was so worried about you,” she tells G.

Taking a step back, I let them have their moment and spot Hunter coming from the dining room, nodding to me.

I’m giving Gianna her moment. Before I whisk her away. There is a way we can have everything, and I’m damn well making sure it happens for her. Because after all the shit Gianna has had to endure in her life, she deserves to be happy.

And I will be the man who gives it to her. All of it. Every last thing she wants. For the rest of my life, that’s my mission.

Because Gianna Sterling is what makes me happy. She was the key to my life this whole time.

“You don’t need to worry about me, Lola. I always figure a way out of it.” She pauses, looking back at me. “Or my husband comes to my rescue.”

I shove my hand into my pocket. I’d fuckin’ die for her.

After they chat for a while, I lightly rest my hand on Gianna’s back and say, “Enzo is waiting for us, baby.”

She nods in response. “Let me know what date for our spa day,” she says to Lola as we head towards the dining room.

She stops in front of the door, and I frown.

“You okay, viper?”

She grabs the front of my shirt and drags me down for a kiss. When she pulls back, she’s smiling, wiping off her red lipstick from me.

“I am now.”

With that, she pushes open the door, and I follow behind her to our seats. Head of the table, next to each other.

None of this opposite-sides crap anymore. Together. Always.

Enzo to our left, Hunter to our right.

“You did good for us, Gianna. Thank you,” Enzo opens with.

“It wasn’t really much of me, Enzo. You guys saved my ass.”

Enzo smiles, which isn’t something you see all that often.

“Now, I’m here for a proposal about merging California and Arizona together. I have to say, I’m intrigued,” Enzo says, glancing at Hunter.

It might come as a shock to others, but not to me and Ace. We knew Hunter's heart wasn’t in it. It was a duty, not an honor. His heart lies with his growing family. As it should.

“Enzo, I’m going to be stepping back and giving it over to Colten to head this family,” Hunter confirms.

Enzo shrugs. “Okay. And Colten, you accept?”

“Yes. I accept.”

“And how do you propose the future merger looks? I assume Gianna is going to be going back to LA to run it for me?”

Gianna shakes her head. “No, Enzo. That isn’t our suggestion. Actually, I’d like to remain here, a true merger. I will have Dom running LA from the ground there, taking commands from myself and Colten. We can streamline our routes between Vegas, Arizona, and LA. Get new warehouses and utilize our men better. LA needs to rebuild, entirely from scratch. I need help with that; I need resources, and I need Colten.”

Enzo picks up his whiskey, eyes on my wife. “Do you think that will work, Gianna? You being here?” Enzo asks before sipping his whiskey.

I think he’s buying into this plan; it’s hard to tell with him.

“I’m confident it will. I trust Dom to be in LA. I trust him to take our orders. He’s never let me down before. We don’t want to be the Milano family. We want the Sterling family to be known as the leaders in LA. I am the head of LA. Gianna Sterling. And I’ll burn down everything my father created there in the process. The old way is done, Enzo. It’s there for us to build something great.”

“And you’d be willing to go to war for me, Gianna?” he asks.

Gianna sits back, and I rest my hand on her thigh.

“If it means protecting my family, then yes, Enzo. We will fight wars for you. For the Sterlings. And I can offer you something else too.”

Enzo leans forward, eyebrow raised. “What would that be?”

Gianna rests her elbows on the table, putting her head on her hand.

“I want to help you hunt down Tatiana. Dom has some contacts we can use, so do I. I know people in high places that you might not be able to tap into. Let us help you kill that bitch, Enzo.”

His face doesn’t change, but I see it: that quick flash in his blue eyes. My girl has him hooked.

“She wronged me. My family went after me and threw me in a prison to torture me for information on you to give to her. That declared war on me, Enzo. So, if you agree to this merger, I’ll get you more people to hunt her down.”

Enzo nods slowly. “You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into, Gianna,” he says, glancing at me.

I shrug. My wife can do whatever she wants to.

“Dom is your man for this, Enzo. You want someone found who doesn’t want to be? Send in my brother.”

“I’ll have Romeo work directly with him. He’s working on that at the moment. He’s actually stationed in California at the moment.”

After what Gianna saw with Dom and Romeo, I doubt either of them will have an issue working in close proximity. I’m assuming they’re already shacked up together in LA. Although the investigations might not get very far.

“So we have a deal? California and Arizona are now one? Me and Colten are the heads of both?”

Hunter grins, looking between me and G. I’d say he’s proud. And probably relieved I’m taking this off his plate.

Maybe my dad getting us involved in this wasn’t as bad as I first thought. His actions led me to my wife, and I can never, ever, be angry about that.

Enzo sticks out his hand to Gianna, and she shakes it firmly. And then I do the same.

“I’ll be in touch soon,” Enzo says as he stands, straightening out his suit.

Hunter joins him, following him to the door, and I let out a breath, turning to my gorgeous wife.

“We did it.” She beams.

Fuck. I love her.

“We did. Now would you like your final surprise, baby?”

She leans in, running her hand up my chest. “If it doesn’t involve you putting a baby inside of me, I’m going to fucking scream, Colten.”

A chuckle erupts from me. “You think we can deal with a newborn and merging to empires?”

I know we can. I’d never doubt it. I’d never doubt her. This woman can do anything.

“I don’t just know it; I’m confident. It’s us, Colt. We can do whatever we want.”

Threading my fingers through her black hair. “If I bend you over this desk, my brother is going to lose his shit,” I whisper.

She looks over my shoulder. “Yeah, he seems pissed already. Do you think he can hear?”

“Yes. I can hear, Colten. Don’t you fuckin’ dare,” Hunter calls from the door.

We all erupt into laughter.

“Fine,” I grunt.

I’ve got a few days of my wife all to myself. I’ll bend her over every surface available.

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CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FIVE



GIANNA

Colten really is pulling out all of the stops. We've arrived on our own private island in the Bahamas, in the most beautiful villa I've ever laid eyes on.

His hands are over my eyes as he leads me out into the yard. I honestly don't know what else he can do.

"Only a few more steps," he murmurs in my ear.

The floor wobbles beneath me, and I stop. He removes his hands, and the sunlight makes me squint. My heart pounds as I realize what I'm staring at. It's a yacht similar to the one we bought, or *he bought*, in Greece, but this one is fucking ginormous.

"I couldn't get the eight million euro one that caught your eye shipped here in time. So, I did the next best thing, bought you an even bigger one."

He slides the keys into my hand, and I'm floored. In the same font as my Colton tattoo, it reads *My Viper.* He named a damn yacht after me. He's treating me like a princess, and I love it.

"Where are we going to store a yacht in Arizona, cowboy?"

He laughs. "I was thinking perhaps we could leave it here on the private island we now own, that is exclusively for our vacations."

I spin to face him. "So my husband is cash rich, huh?"

He shrugs. "I had a few hundred thousand transferred from my wife; I topped up the rest."

I know how many millions an island here costs; I've been tempted to invest before, when I got bored of buying real estate in LA.

“Why?” I ask.

“Why what?”

“Why buy all of this when you have everything you need on the ranch?”

He twirls my dark curl around his finger. “Because when we were in that villa in Greece, I realized it was the first time I actually enjoyed being alive. I’d like to feel like that more. I think we’ve both worked hard enough to deserve some time off. Don’t you?”

“So you want me to spike you with Viagra again? Is that what you’re saying?” I joke.

That will never not be funny. And weirdly hot.

He laughs. “Even with that prank, it was still a highlight of my life.”

I shove my hand in my purse and pull out a small remote that looks like a set of keys. “I also have a surprise for you.”

He plucks them from my fingers. “Did you buy me a Rolls?”

I probably need to after his splurge for me.

“Arguably better. These are the keys to my pussy. Or more specifically, I’m giving you control of the toy I put inside myself on the jet.”

He grabs my throat, lowering his mouth to mine. “We own this island; I can fuck you anywhere, anytime, and no one will see us.”

“Rail me over the railings, cowboy,” I whisper against his lips.

He tuts, pulling back and, with a smug grin, presses the key three times. My pussy vibrates, and I try to pretend it doesn’t affect me.

“Do you know how many times I jerked off that day you gave me the Viagra?” he asks.

I do not like where this is heading. “How many? I did ask you to count.”

“Fifteen. Well, that was the last time I had the energy to count.”

I take a step back. “What are you going to do about it? Fifteen spanks? Fifteen blow jobs?”

He shakes his head. “Close. I like your thinking.”

“You’re going to come just as many times tonight. Over and over, until the only name you remember is mine.”

“Bring it on, cowboy. Bring it on.” I motion for him to come closer.

As soon as he takes a step, I turn and run towards the yacht. The thought of a night on this yacht, having the sexiest man alive make me come over and over?

I’d say that’s heaven.

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CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SIX



Colten

Song- green room, Holywatr

This yacht is even more jaw-dropping in person. I bought it after looking at a handful of pictures. I normally never splurge on anything other than horses and stables; even then we run that through the Sterling Ranch business. All my money has been stored away for years; maybe I was waiting for Gianna to steam into my life and give me a reason to spend it.

I don't bother chasing her, because I know the second she sees what I've had done on the deck, she's going to come to a skidding halt, and I'll catch her right there.

Running my hand along the solid gold staircase railings, I head up behind her. Her giggles echo around, making me smile.

"Shut the fuck up, Colten!" she shouts.

She found it. Now, that makes me run the remainder of the way until I see her. Hands over mouth. Glassy eyes. Breeze blowing through her black curls. She's surrounded by black and red roses. As many as I could get shipped in to decorate this entire deck.

I close the distance, wrapping my arms around her waist, pulling her back against me.

"I-I thought we agreed not to do another wedding?" she whispers, staring up at the black foiled balloons that spell out *'Marry me, Viper.'*

Pressing a kiss to her throat, I pull out the box in my pocket and drop to my knee. She spins to face me with her cheeks flushed a beautiful red.

“We agreed to not get married again. You never said I couldn’t propose. I never did it the first time, but I wanted to give you a ring. Because the one you bought me in Greece? That meant the goddamn world to me, G. I want you to feel special, to have the rings I chose for my wife. So, here I am, asking you to marry me the way you deserve.”

She finally moves her hands away from her mouth, revealing the biggest smile I’ve ever seen on her face. “Ask me then, cowboy.”

Opening up the box, I hope I got this right. I spent hours looking for the perfect ring.

“Gianna Sterling. You are the love of my life, and I want to spend the rest of my days beside you. Please let me worship you, stand beside you no matter what, and love you until the bitter end. Will you marry me, sweetheart?”

She takes a step forward, running her fingers through my hair.

“Get up, you silly man. I’m not marrying you again. But I promise to be yours forever, and I don’t regret a single thing.”

I bite back a grin. “Say yes.”

She shakes her head. “Nope.”

I snap the box shut, and she pouts. “I’m staying right here, down on one knee until you say yes. Then, you’ll get the rings, and we can continue on with my plans to fuck you over the railings.”

She giggles, plucking the box from my fingers.

“They’re beautiful, Colt,” she breathes, pulling out the engagement ring first. A huge red diamond sits in the middle, one of the rarest diamonds in the world. The same as Gianna. There is only one woman who exists like her.

“Is this real? Are you serious?” She gasps.

“Unfortunately for my bank account, yes, it’s real.”

Next, she takes the wedding band out, and as soon as she reads the inscription inside, a tear slips down her cheek.

“Stop making me cry, cowboy. This is getting ridiculous,” she mutters, furiously wiping it away.

Her eyes meet mine, and my heart stops.

“Yes, Colten Sterling. I’ll marry you. Please never let me go.”

I don’t hesitate; I’m up on my feet, scooping her into my arms, my lips slamming over hers.

“I love you, G,” I mutter against her lips.

Setting her down on the table, I settle between her legs. She gives me her left hand, as if she read my mind, and I slide off her original wedding rings, placing them next to her. She then gives me the new rings she was holding onto so tightly her hands have gone red.

I slide the engagement ring on first, followed by the silver wedding ring.

“How long are we here for?” she asks, looking up at me with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“Until I get you pregnant?”

I’m half joking, half serious. It’s all I can think about since she mentioned she wanted kids with me. She bursts out laughing.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Standing there staring at me isn’t going to do the job now, is it?”

A growl erupts from my chest, and I push her onto her back. The crew for the yacht isn’t coming for another hour, which means I’m free to fuck my wife right here without anyone seeing her. And I have something special planned as part of this re-do.

Pulling out a flip knife from my back pocket, I flick it out.

“I got a tattoo for you already; was that not enough? Do you want to engrave me too?” she sasses, opening her thighs for me.

I tut, hooking my finger under her panties. Her breath hitches as I run the flat edge of the blade across her thigh and then slice it through the fabric, yanking it away, revealing her pussy with a u-shaped toy nestled up to her clit while the other side goes into her cunt.

“Fuckin’ perfect, G,” I groan, snatching the keys that control the toy.

I turn it on to the highest setting and lean over her. I place the tip of the knife against her cheek. “You look so pretty like this.”

Her breathing gets heavier as I move it along her throat and down her chest. “You don’t need this dress, do you?”

She shakes her head, shaking under my touch.

“Good girl,” I mutter, and then slice all the way down the middle. It falls away from her body, leaving her completely naked.

“Colt, you need to touch me. Do something. Please,” she breathes out.

I chuckle in response, resting one hand on her tattooed hip, brushing the knife over the tattoo of my name over her pussy. That makes my breath damn hitch. Every time I look at it, my heart skips a beat.

“You’re that desperate for me, sweetheart?” I murmur.

“Desperate doesn’t even fucking cut it, Colten,” she pleads, her hands moving south towards where she needs me. I snatch her wrist.

“Don’t,” I command.

Her eyes go wide. “Please, Colten. Please. Please. I can keep going. Please.”

Sliding out the toy, I keep it on her clit but thrust three fingers inside her, I lean over, resting the knife under her jaw. “Alright, baby. Come as hard as you want, all over my fingers. But I wouldn’t move if I was you,” I tell her.

She swallows hard, pushing against the blade. Her cunt soaking my palm. I knew this would do something to her. I fuckin’ knew it.

Her back arches and she cries out, so I adjust the pressure on her neck so I don’t draw blood.

“Look at you, viper. Fuck,” I mutter against her cheek, pulling out my fingers.

Her body sags and she lets out a whine.

“Colt. I’ll take that knife and stab you with it if you don’t let me come in the next two minutes,” he hisses.

“Patience, baby. You’re going to let me in your ass tonight,” I whisper.

I took her virginity at knife point, and now I’m going to take her ass the same way. Except this time, I’m going to fucking worship her the way I should have done the first time.

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CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SEVEN



GIANNA

He doesn’t let up with the knife at my throat as his finger teases my ass. This is torture. A hot as hell version of it.

I lift my hips a touch to give him better access. I don’t even care if he cuts me, I need to come.

“Colten!” I shout, squeezing my eyes shut.

Relief washes over me when he pushes his fingers inside my ass, and then I’m crying out when he fills my pussy too.

“Jesus,” I hiss.

He laughs. “He ain’t gonna help you here, G.”

He removes the toy from my clit and tosses it on the table beside me.

I don’t even have the brain space to roll my eyes at him. I’m too full, too horny and ready to explode.

“How does it feel?” he mutters, trailing the knife down my chest, circling my hard nipples.

“Good. Really good. More.”

“You’re going to kill me,” he gruffs.

He drops the knife, gripping me by the throat and dragging me up until our lips connect. A groan rips from me when he slides his fingers out. I’m going to kill him myself in a minute.

I grab both sides of his face. “Make me come, or I am never sleeping with you again, Colten Sterling. And that is a threat.”

He responds by lifting me off the table, carrying me over to the railings. He drops me down onto shaking legs, and I grip hold of the metal bar.

“Turn around and bend over,” he orders, twirling his index finger.

I do as he says, holding my breath, the sea breeze whipping across my face. His belt buckle clicks, and I brace myself.

The belt cracks through the air and lands on my ass.

“Spread your legs wider,” he commands behind me.

I shuffle them out, lifting my ass higher in the air for him. His rough hand rubs over the burning mark.

“You don’t make commands when we’re doing this, Gianna.”

I swallow. “I’m sorry, sir.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I wait for the next spank. Instead, the floor thuds as he drops to his knees. He parts my ass with both hands, and I shoot forward when his tongue connects with my asshole.

“Colten!” I scream.

He slaps my pussy in response, and I let out a whimper.

I think I’m going to die here.

His fingers thrust inside me; this time it’s not slow. There is no teasing. I’m dripping all over his hand, shivers running through my body.

“Fuck me, Colt. Fuck me. Give me that baby you promised,” I pant.

That’s all it takes to get what I want. He stands, pushes down his pants, and thrusts his huge cock inside of me. I cry out, my body shifting forward. He grips my hips so hard to keep me in place while he fucks me.

“Come all over my cock, my filthy little whore.”

His hand slides up through my hair, and he tugs my head up, looking out to the open seas. Every smack of his hip against my ass, his dick hitting that sweet spot inside of me, driving me crazy.

“Oh my god,” I scream, as I come so hard my vision blurs.

And I feel it, him coming inside of me just as hard. And when he’s done, he pulls out, turns me to face him, and pulls me into his embrace, while his cum drips down my thighs.

“Colt,” I say through shaky breaths.

“Yes, baby?”

“Does a breeding kink mean you need to make sure all your cum stays inside of me, because… it’s not.”

He pulls back, licking his lips, and then drops back down to his knees. With one hand on the railings, the other in his hair. He lifts my shaking foot up to rest onto one of the metal bars.

I watch, biting my lip as he scoops up his cum from my thighs, and pushes it gently back inside me.

“Better, baby?” he says.

I nod. “Much.”

And then another finger gets added.

“How about now?”

His dark eyes burn into mine.

“Perfect, cowboy,” I whisper, and tip my head back.

This is the life, getting worshiped by a tall, tatted, muscly as fuck cowboy who will burn the world down beside you.

And I’ll do everything in my power to make sure I keep him smiling for as long as I get to live.

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CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED EIGHT



GIANNA

Song- Follow You, Bring Me The Horizon

Three weeks later…

Sterling Ranch has been transformed into a full country party. Hay bales for seats, wooden tables filled with delicious food. The kids are running riot, and Jett is prodding at the meat on the barbecue, wearing yet another eyesore of a T-shirt. Today, he's got a flamingo shirt with a T-shirt underneath that says, "I'm a good cook, but a great fuck."

We were supposed to spend five days on the island, but neither of us wanted to come home. So, we didn't.

Harper pulls up a chair behind me, resting her hand on her nearly popping bump. She's due in a couple of weeks, and I can't wait to meet their little girl. Any longer, I think Ace might have a heart attack. I've never seen a man more worried about his woman. At any noise that comes out of her, he's sprinting over, making sure she's okay.

"Did you ever think you'd be staying here forever?" she asks.

I bite my lip, glancing over at Colten, who is cradling Willow in his arms.

"I think fate has a funny way of leading you to your people," I tell her.

"I'm happy you're here, G," she says, resting her head on my shoulder.

Lola is opposite, with Wyatt on her lap, drawing together. She seems off, in a way I can't quite put my finger on. She keeps looking around like she's waiting for someone.

"What's the matter with Lola?" I ask Harper quietly.

She sighs. “She’s worried about Violet.”

“Why?”

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to work out Violet is struggling with a newborn. But I haven't seen her since the last family dinner.

“I don’t know. But Jett seems okay,” she says, nodding over to him. He’s whistling to himself, plating up more meat.

It’s funny, the women here, they all talk like Violet and Jett are together. But the guys, they all make it clear they’re just friends.

I pull out my phone and check my messages. Dom should be here any minute. He’s doing me proud, tearing down my father's empire and working with Enzo to make it something better. Something we can be proud of.

And I’m enjoying the peace. Merging the two states has made it easier for us.

There is plenty of business on the ranch I can get my teeth into, the good and the bad.

Hunter takes Willow from Colten, and Colt beelines straight to me. Butterflies erupt in my tummy, my heart kicking up a notch. He doesn’t sit beside me; instead, he stands behind, wrapping his arms around my shoulders.

His lips brush against my ear, and I smile. “Can I help you, cowboy?”

He kisses my cheek, and then my jaw. “Just wanted to see my wife for a minute.”

“Be careful, Colten. Your brothers will start saying you’re whipped soon.”

He chuckles. “Like they both aren’t?”

“Hey! I can hear you!” Harper cuts in.

“I’m allowed to be obsessed with my wife,” Colt replies.

The atmosphere shifts around us as the gravel churns under the wheels of a BMW. Tate and Ace are drinking beers by the fence, and Ace nearly drops his bottle.

“Colten, who is that?”

“I thought this was a fucking joke,” he mutters.

“Is that?” Harper sounds shell-shocked.

I glance at Lola; she grits her teeth, and Hunter rubs her back.

The door opens, and a pair of pink cowgirl boots emerge. The rest of the woman follows. She’s got long blonde hair that travels down her back.

“What is this, a stripper? Is someone else playing pranks?” I ask.

And then I gasp. “Colten Sterling. Was she a stripper at your bachelor party?”

He frowns, looks back at her, then to me. “I don’t think so?”

She ignores every single one of us as she passes the table and heads over to Jett. He smiles as he greets her, wrapping his arms around her waist.

I wince in response. Even I know this is a fucking awful move for him.

“I can kill her if you want?” I say out loud.

Lola’s eyes catch mine, and for a split second, I think she’s about to ask me to go ahead with that plan.

Jett links his fingers through the woman’s and brings her over to the table. Everyone remains silent. She’s more unwelcome than I was.

“This is Lacey,” he introduces her.

She runs her nails along his tattooed forearm; she’s already glaring at me. Bold move. There are knives on the table.

“We know who she is,” Ace adds. “And we told you, she ain’t welcome on Sterling land.”

Interesting. I’ll need Colt to fill me in on all these juicy details.

“I’m Gianna,” I say, trying to ease the tension. Although, secretly, this is thrilling. Talk about awkward.

“Yes, Jett told me all about you.” Her high-pitched voice goes right through my brain.

I arch an eyebrow. “Then you’d know never to glare at me like that again.”

Her mouth snaps shut.

I point to the chair opposite me. “Sit, Lacey. Tell me all about yourself, seeing as you know about me.”

I don’t leave room for discussion. She sits, obedient like a dog. “Not much to tell, Gianna. I’ve recently moved back to New Falls after my husband passed away.”

“He was eighty-seven,” Colten half-coughs.

Ah. A gold digger.

I clock all the jewelry, the expensive car, the skin that glows. And I grin.

“How did he die?” I ask, tapping my nails on the table.

“Old age.”

I nod. “So you were a carergiver, not a wife. Jett is too young for you, no?”

Everyone around the table is trying their best not to laugh.

“Do I need my dates vetted by the family now?” Jett asks, frowning.

“Apparently fucking so,” Hunter snaps.

There is more to this. I turn to Colt. “Let me guess, her father tried to screw yours over?”

“Basically. And she’s known for going after the richest ones and sleeping with the rest of the town.”

Jealousy coils in my gut.

“Did you?”

“No.”

Well, that entrance was one way to ruin the mood.

The rest of the afternoon carries on as normal. Jett and Lacey keep their distance, which is a smart move. I’ve never seen the Sterling brothers so unwelcoming.

I guess they’re trying to protect Jett, and perhaps Violet too. Family is everything here.

“Hey sis!” Dom’s smile is so wide.

He’s so much more relaxed and happier now. He’s loving working beside Romeo and helping us build out LA. Although I think I can guess what’s giving him the extra spring in his step.

“Welcome back to the Ranch,” I say, pulling him out a seat beside me and Colt.

He doesn’t hesitate; Dom grabs a burger and stuffs it in his mouth, spilling it all over his white shirt.

“Am I good to stay here for a few days?” he asks between mouthfuls.

“You’re always welcome here,” Colten replies.

“You gonna teach me how to cowboy?” Dom asks.

In an ideal world, Dom would live here too. But I can’t have everything my way. I have to let him go to set him free. He’s always going to be my brother, whether he’s in LA or here.

He’s got to find his happiness now too. Just like I found mine. Even if that means being with a guy I despise.

I slide my hand into Colten’s, resting it on his thigh, and pick up my espresso martini. I could really use a cigarette, especially with the alcohol. But I won’t. I made myself a promise to live as long as I can to be a menace for Colten. I gotta stick to that.

“This is perfect,” Colt mutters with a smile on his face.

I rest my head on his arm. “It is. It really is.”

“I love you, Gianna. I love you so damn much.”

My eyes flutter shut, and I let out a sigh. “I love you the most.”

“Cute,” he teases.

And I don’t argue. Colten Sterling made me cute. He brought out a soft side in me that I didn’t know existed, because he made me feel safe.

There is only so long you can run in survival mode before it either kills you or you let yourself accept love.

After spending my life chained to a family name, losing myself for the power, I still wouldn’t change a second of my history. Even the beatings, the neglect, the childhood I spent crying myself to sleep.

My dad was right; his version of tough love made me who I am today. It made me powerful enough to kill him, to ruin everything my family had built over years.

But Colten taught me something far more important. That it’s okay to love. That there is power in having a man beside you who will not just accept who you are; he will embrace it and help you see who you were meant to be.

Powerful, sexy, and now… cute.

So, my past is my past; without it, I’d never have ended up here. I would have never found a love that doesn’t dim my fire; it ignites it.

I’d walk through the flames all over again if it meant I’d find my way to my cowboy.

And I know he would too.

THE END.

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EPILOGUE



COLTEN

By the time I've cleared up breakfast, Gianna is nowhere to be seen. The menace is probably either plotting her next prank or in her new second home, the barn.

She's not just fallen in love with the animals; she's made it her mission to give them the best care possible. I've never had to answer so many ranching and animal questions in my damn life. Even the new ranch hands aren't this interested.

But I love it for her. She still gets to do the mafia thing beside me. She's completely overhauled our shipping system and found us new warehouses after ours burned down.

I don't bother heading upstairs; I know where to find her. Grabbing my hat, I head straight to the barn. I keep my footsteps light as I approach and gently push the door open.

She's got her hat on, a pair of cut-offs, and a little black crop top. And she's shoveling sheep shit into a wheelbarrow. At seven in the damn morning.

I bet she never imagined this is how she'd spent her life.

She knows I'm there, so she drops the shovel and wipes the sweat from her forehead.

"Oh, thank fuck. This is your job, cowboy."

I cross my arms. "I thought you specifically told me you'd be the one looking after Preziosa. That also involves the bad bits."

She pouts. "I would like to renegotiate."

I motion for her to come to me, curling two fingers. “I’ll discuss terms.”

She doesn’t hesitate; she’s walking towards me, with an extra sway in her hips. I grab the rope hanging on the wall and run it through my fingers.

“Oh. Are we playing that game again?” she asks, a darkness flashing in her eyes.

My cock aches at the thought of her tied up for me again.

“No. We got some loose cattle over in pasture seven; I thought you might want a cowboy lesson today. Watch us work?”

She nods slowly, but her gaze dips to the floor.

“Gianna,” I say sternly. “What is it?”

She swallows, twirling her wedding ring around her finger. “I need to ask you a question.”

The nerves are radiating off her, and it makes my heart beat like it wants to jump out of my chest.

“You can always ask me anything, viper,” I say, reaching out to cup her cheek.

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Gianna

I thought it was stress. But after I missed my second period, I knew it wasn't. And then this morning, I took a test on a whim. Expecting nothing to come of it. I needed to know before I booked a doctor's appointment.

But then I stared down at the word *PREGNANT.* And the floor fell from under me. I instantly regretted doing it behind Colten's back. I didn't think it would happen so soon.

But I felt like I'd taken a bit of joy from him. I meant to tell him over breakfast, but then he started talking about taking the horses for a ride this morning. Then I went online and started searching whether you can ride horses when you're pregnant. And to be honest, I got mixed answers.

And here I am, for the first time in a very long time, I'm nervous. Not about how he's going to react. More about how it might change us.

Will I even be any good at being a mom? I have nothing to go off of, other than the complete opposite of how I grew up.

We both agreed we can run an empire and have kids; we've got an entire army around us to help. Our kids will come first. Always.

"Can a pregnant woman still ride horses?" I blurt it out.

He frowns. He swallows. He sucks in a breath, and it gets stuck.

And then his eyes glass over. "You're pregnant?" he chokes out. His hand splays out over my tummy.

"Answer my question first."

He blinks at me. "I mean. Yeah, an experienced rider could, but they'd have to be really careful. But…" He pauses. "If my wife is pregnant, then she ain't getting on the back of any horses."

She runs her fingers through her hair. "Okay. Well… looks like our riding dates are no more, Colten."

He doesn't hesitate; he grabs the back of my neck and kisses me.

"I love you," he breathes against my lips. "I love you. I love you. I love you."

Giggling as I pull back, I wipe the tear rolling down his cheek.

"You love me, hmm?" I tease.

He kisses me again, this time harder.

“I love you so much, I don’t know how to show you just how much you mean to me.”

Running my fingers through his dark hair, I stare into his eyes. “You already show me, Colten. Every single day. You don’t need to do anything else, except help make sure I never turn into my parents.”

He shakes his head. “Gianna, there is no possible way that would ever happen. You aren’t them. You aren’t defined by what happened to you. Our kids are going to be loved, and that is what matters.”

When we were on the yacht in the Bahamas, I told Colt every single bad piece of my life, and he told me his.

We sat under the moon and the stars, and we gave each other the final pieces of ourselves. We cried. We laughed. We fucked. We carved out our future and healed our pasts in one night.

It’s the first time I've found out how badly Colten struggled with the mafia business and that his heart is with the ranch. He does it out of duty. Although I had an inkling. I think all of the Sterlings would be happier if it was just them on the land again.

But it’s too late to go back; they know that. And that’s where I fit in. Mafia is my way of life, and I can take those bits from them and make sure it runs seamlessly.

And he admitted it’s only since he found me that he's found his love for that side of the business. He found the fun in it.

Colten and I, we needed each other, not just to survive, but to finally be whole.

I rest my hand over his on my belly. “We’re going to be parents, Colten,” I say.

He grins. “We are.”

“So, now can you shovel the shit that I was meant to do? Please. The baby doesn’t like poop.”

He nods, giving me a suspicious look. “You’re going to abuse this, aren’t you?”

I can’t hide my smile. “Yep. And then imagine how demanding I’ll be after I birth a whole child. It’s going to be hell for you, Mr. Sterling.”

He shakes his head. “Nope. It’s going to be absolutely fucking perfect.”

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EPILOGUE TWO



Colten

Jett’s phone rings again. Violet's name flashing on the screen. We had a family meeting to discuss the plans going forward with Twisted Serpents now that Zach has taken over from Levi. They’ve been quiet since his death, but we know better than to trust silence. So, we need to act now before they do.

Gianna has cut all ties with them; any deals her father made in LA died with Levi. We have to protect our next few shipments, because that’s where they’ll attack.

“You can’t ignore her, Jett. You’re better than that,” I tell him.

I have no doubt Violet already knows Lacey was at the family party last month.

Which explains Jett’s foul mood ever since. I don’t give a shit what he says; I know he’s in love with Violet. I know what love is now, so I can comment.

“She told me to fuck off, Colten,” Jett hisses.

Finally, I got a reaction from him. “And today, she looked me dead in the face and told me to get out because she had someone coming over.”

He kinda asked for that.

“Okay. Bringing Lacey to the party was dumb as fuck, Jett. Even for you.”

He takes in a deep breath. “If Violet tells me to date people, that we’re just friends, then why can’t I?”

I chuckle. “Jett, just because she said that in the middle of an argument doesn’t mean it’s an instruction to do it.”

He huffs, snatching his beer and drinking it in one. “Well, it’s a good thing me and Violet are only friends.”

He spits out the word friend like it’s poison.

“And friends don’t ignore their calls,” I say, handing him his phone.

He chews his lip.

“Why does a woman who is five foot two scare me so damn much?”

I glance over to my wife. She’s laughing over mocktails with Lola, Tate, and Dom, like she belongs here.

And she does.

“She ain’t answering,” Jett interrupts me, admiring my wife.

“Then try again.”

Gianna blows me a kiss. Fuck. I love her.

She frowns, glancing past me at something, and as I turn, my heart goes into overdrive.

“Help me! Help me!” Violet screams, sprinting towards us.

Jett is already moving, and I’m right behind him. Her face streaked with tears; she’s sobbing so hard she can barely breathe.

Jett wraps his arm around her, and with all her strength, she pushes him off, almost knocking him to the floor. “Not you!” she screams at him. “Stay the fuck away from me, Jett.”

I shove my body between her and him, creating some distance. “Violet. What happened?” I ask calmly.

“Noah. Noah. He’s gone. I can’t find him.” She slaps her hands over her eyes and falls in a heap on the ground.

“Violet!” Lola and Gianna run over, and we lift her to her feet like a rag doll. I’ve never seen someone so fucking broken.

Gianna grabs hold of her shoulders, holding her upright, and grabs her face. “Violet. Now isn’t the time to fall apart. Tell us exactly what happened. How long has he been missing?”

Jett and Violet’s story to be continued in Unlocked…

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