

b o u n d
b y d u t y

*She's determined to get his attention and desire,
even if his heart still belongs to his dead wife.*

Cora Reilly

Bound by Duty

(Born in Blood Mafia Chronicles, #2)

Cora Reilly

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PROLOGUE

“Don’t turn your back on me. Look at me. I think I deserve at least that small decency, Dante.”

Tension radiated off of him when he turned around to me. He didn’t move closer but he was looking at me. For once, he didn’t pretend I was invisible. His blue eyes wandered over my exposed body.

My nipples hardened in the cool air of his office but I didn’t close my silk bathrobe, despite the overwhelming urge to cover myself against Dante’s cold scrutiny. His gaze lingered on the apex of my thighs slightly longer than on the rest of my body and a small burst of hope filled me. “Am I your wife?”

His blond brows drew together. “Of course, you are.” There was the hint of something I couldn’t place in his voice.

“Then claim your rights, Dante. Make me yours.”

He didn’t move, but his eyes slid down to my erect nipples. His gaze was almost something physical, like a ghost touch on my naked skin.

I wasn’t above begging. I knew I almost had him. I wanted to have sex tonight. “I have needs too. Would you prefer if I found a lover who relieved you of the burden to touch me?” I wasn’t sure I could go through with it. No, I knew I couldn’t go through with it, but this act of provocation was my last option. If Dante didn’t react to that, then I didn’t know what else to do.

“No,” he said sharply, something angry and possessive breaking through his perfect mask. He pressed his lips together, jaw locked, and walked toward me. I shivered with need and excitement when he stopped in front of me. He didn’t reach for me but I thought I detected the hint of desire in his eyes. It wasn’t much, but enough to embolden me. I

bridged the remaining distance between us and curled my fingers over his strong shoulders, pressing my naked body against his front. The rough material of his business suit rubbed deliciously against my sensitive nipples and I let out a small moan. The pressure between my legs was almost unbearable. Dante's eyes flashed as he looked down at me. Slowly he wrapped an arm around me and rested his palm flat against my lower back.

Triumph flooded me. He wasn't ignoring me now.

CHAPTER ONE

Of course I'd known it would happen. My father had made his standpoint clear the moment my first husband Antonio had been buried. I was too young to stay unmarried. But I hadn't expected my father to find a new husband for me so quickly, and I definitely hadn't expected my new husband to be Dante – The Boss – Cavallaro.

Antonio's funeral had taken place only nine months ago, which made my new engagement teeter on the brink of inappropriateness. Mother was usually among the first to pounce on anyone who committed a social faux-pas and yet she couldn't see anything wrong with the fact that today, less than a year after saying good-bye to Antonio, I was going to meet my next husband. I'd never loved Antonio as a woman loved a man, even if I'd believed it at one time, and our marriage had never been real, but I'd hoped to get more time before I was forced into another union, especially as I didn't even get to choose for myself this time.

"You are so lucky Dante Cavallaro agreed to marry you. It came as a surprise for many that he decided to take a woman who has already been married. He could have chosen from a line of eager young women after all," my mother said as she brushed my dark-brown hair. She didn't mean to hurt my feelings; she was only stating the obvious. I knew it was true. Everyone did.

A man in Dante's position didn't have to content himself with the leftovers of another, a lesser man. That's what most people probably thought, and yet I was supposed to marry him. I, who didn't even want to marry someone as powerful and cunning as Dante Cavallaro. I, who wished to stay alone, if only to protect Antonio's secret. How was I supposed to keep up the lie? Dante was known as a man who always knew when someone was lying.

“He’ll be the Boss of the Outfit in two months, and when you’ll marry him you’ll be the most influential woman in Chicago and the Midwest. And if you keep up your good friendship with Aria, you’ll have connections to New York as well.”

As usual my mother was way ahead, already planning world domination, while I was still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that I was supposed to marry The Boss. This was too dangerous. I wasn’t a bad liar. In the years of my marriage to Antonio I’d improved my skills continuously, but there was a big difference between lying to the outside world and lying to your husband. Anger toward Antonio resurfaced as it had so often in the past months. He’d forced me into this situation.

Mamma stepped back, admiring her work. My dark hair fell in soft glossy curls over my shoulders and back. I pushed to my feet. For the occasion, I’d chosen a cream-colored pencil skirt and a plum blouse that was tugged into my waistband, as well as black modest heels. I was one of the tallest women in the Outfit with five foot eight and naturally my mother worried Dante would be put off if I wore high-heels. I didn’t bother to point out that Dante was still at least five inches taller than me; I wouldn’t have been taller than him even with high heels. And this wasn’t the first time he saw me anyway. We’d met a couple of times on mafia functions and had even shared a brief dance at Aria’s wedding in August three months ago. But we’d never exchanged more than the expected pleasantries and I’d certainly never gotten the impression that Dante was even remotely interested in me, but he was known for being closed-off, so who knew what was really going on in that head of his?

“Has he dated since his wife died?” I asked. Usually that kind of gossip spread quickly in our circles but maybe I missed it. The older women of the family often knew about the dirty laundry of others first. To be honest, gossiping was the main occupation for most of them.

Mamma smiled sadly. “Not officially. Rumor has it he couldn’t let go of his wife, but it’s been more than three years and now that he’s about to become the Boss of the Outfit he can’t hang onto the memory of a dead woman. He needs to move on and

produce a heir.” She put her hands on my shoulders and beamed at me. “And you’ll be the one to give him a beautiful son, sweetheart.”

My stomach dropped. “Not today.”

My mother shook her head with a laugh. “Soon enough. The wedding is in two months.” If it were up to Mamma and Papà, the marriage would have taken place weeks ago. They were probably worried Dante might change his mind about me.

“Valentina! Livia! Dante’s car pulled just up.”

Mamma clapped her hands, then winked. “Let’s make him forget his wife.”

I hoped she wouldn’t say something that tasteless when Dante was around. I followed her downstairs and tried to put on my most sophisticated expression. Papà opened the door. I couldn’t remember the last time he’d actually *answered the door*. Usually he let mother or me do it, or our maid, but even I could tell that he was practically bouncing with eagerness. Did he really have to make it so obvious that he was desperate to marry me off again? It made me feel like the last puppy of a litter that the pet shop couldn’t wait to get rid off.

Dante’s blond hair appeared in the doorway as my mother and I stopped in the middle of our lobby. It was snowing outside and the soft veil of snowflakes on Dante’s head made his hair look almost golden. I got why some people had been frustrated about Aria’s marriage to Luca. Dante and she would have been the golden couple.

Papà opened the door wider with a broad smile. Dante shook my father’s hand and they exchanged a few low words. Mamma was practically bouncing on her feet beside me. She turned on her thousand-watt smile when Dante and Papà finally headed our way. I forced my own lips into a smile that was far less radiant.

As was tradition, Dante greeted my mother first, with a bow and a hand kiss, before facing me. He gave me a curt smile that didn’t reach his blue eyes, then kissed my hand. “Valentina,” he said in his smooth, emotionless voice.

From a solely physical standpoint, I found Dante more than a little attractive. He was tall and slightly muscled, impeccably dressed in a dark gray three-piece suit, white shirt and light blue tie, and had full, blond hair that was loosely combed back. But everyone called him a cold fish, and from our short encounters I knew they were right.

“It’s wonderful to meet you again,” I said with a small tilt of my head.

Dante let go of my hand. “Yes, it is.” He turned his blank gaze toward my father. “I’d like to talk to Valentina alone.” No pleasantries were wasted as usual.

“Of course,” Papà said eagerly, taking my mother’s arm and already leading her away. If I hadn’t been married before, they would never have let me alone with a man, but as it was they thought they didn’t have to protect my virtue anymore. And I couldn’t tell them that Antonio and I had never consummated our marriage. I couldn’t tell anyone, least of all Dante.

When Mamma and Papà had disappeared into my father’s office, Dante turned to me. “This is acceptable for you, I assume.”

He seemed so restrained and controlled, as if his emotions were bottled up so deep inside, not even he could reach them. I wondered how much of it was the result of his wife’s death and how much was his natural disposition.

“Yes,” I said, hoping he couldn’t see how nervous I was. I gestured toward a door to our left. “Would you like to sit down for our talk?”

Dante nodded and I led him into the living room. I sank down on the sofa, and Dante took the armchair across from me. I’d have thought he’d sit beside me, but he seemed content to keep as much space between us as was acceptable. Apart from the brief hand kiss, he made sure not to touch me. He probably found it inappropriate as long as we weren’t married. That’s what I hoped at least.

“I assume your father told you that our wedding is planned for January 5th.”

I searched for a flicker of sadness or wistfulness in his voice, but there was nothing. I rested my hands in my lap, linking my fingers. There was less chance of Dante notice my trembling that way. “Yes. He told me a few days ago.”

“I realize that’s less than a year after your husband’s funeral, but my father retires at the end of the year and it’s expected of me to be married when I take over his place.”

I lowered my eyes as my chest tightened with buried emotions. Antonio hadn’t been a good husband, he hadn’t been any kind of husband, but he’d been my friend and I’d known him all my life, which was why I’d agreed to marry him. Of course, I’d been naïve, hadn’t realized what it would really mean to marry a man who wasn’t interested in me, or women in general. I’d wanted to help him. Being gay wasn’t something that was tolerated in the mafia. If someone had found out Antonio liked men that way, they would have killed him. When he’d asked for my help, I’d jumped at the chance, had secretly hoped I could win him over. I’d thought he could decide not to be gay anymore, I’d thought we could have a real marriage at some point, but that hope was quickly shattered. That’s why a nasty, selfish part of me had been relieved when Antonio had died. I’d thought I was finally free to find a man who loved me, or at least desired me. Thankfully, it was only a very small part, and I felt guilty whenever I was reminded of it. And yet, maybe this was my chance. Maybe my second marriage would finally provide me with a husband who saw me as more than a necessary evil.

Dante seemed to misunderstand my silence. “If it’s too soon for you, we can still cancel our arrangements.”

Mamma would kill me, and Papà would probably suffer a stroke. “No,” I said quickly. “It’s okay. I was lost in memories for a moment.” I gave him a smile. He didn’t return it, only regarded me with cold scrutiny.

“Very well,” he said eventually. “I’d like to discuss the preparations as well as the time leading up to the event with you. Two months isn’t a long time, but since this wedding isn’t going to be a big affair we should be fine.”

I nodded. Part of me was sad that this wedding was going to be a quiet affair, but so fast after Antonio's death anything bigger would have been in bad taste, and since it was the second marriage for both Dante and me, for me to insist on a splendid feast would have been ridiculous.

"Why did you choose me? I'm sure there were many other viable options." I'd been wondering about this ever since Papà had told me about his agreement with Dante. I knew it was a question I wasn't supposed to ask. Mamma would have thrown a fit if she were present.

Dante's expression didn't change. "Of course. My father suggested your cousin Gianna, but I didn't want a wife who's barely of age. Unfortunately, most women in their twenties are already married, and most widows are older than me or have children, both unacceptable for a man in my position as you will probably understand."

I nodded. There were so many rules of etiquette when it came to finding the right spouse, especially for a man in Dante's position, which was why so many were shocked when I was announced as his future wife. Dante had stepped on many toes with that decision.

"So you were the only logical choice. You are, of course, still quite young, but that can't be changed."

For a moment I was stunned into silence by his emotionless reasoning. I wasn't as naïve as I used to be, but I'd hoped at least part of the reason why Dante had chosen me was that he was attracted to me, found me pretty, or at least fascinating to some extent, but this cold explanation destroyed that small flicker of hope.

"I'm twenty-three," I said in a surprisingly calm voice. Maybe Dante's aloofness rubbed off on me. If so, I would be known as the ice queen in no time. "That's not young by our marriage standards."

"Twelve-years younger than me. That's more than I would have liked." His deceased wife had been only two years younger than him and they'd been married for almost twelve years before she'd died from cancer. Still the way he said it

made it sound as if I'd forced him into a marriage with me. Most men in our world took on young mistresses once their wives got older, and yet Dante was displeased that I was too young.

"Then maybe you should look for another wife. I didn't ask you to marry me." The moment the words were out, I clamped a hand over my mouth, then met Dante's gaze. He didn't look angry, he didn't look *anything*. His face was as it always was. Stoic and emotionless. "I'm sorry. That was very rude. I shouldn't have said that."

Dante shook his head. Not a single hair moved out of line. There wasn't even a speck of dirt on his trouser legs, despite the snowy November weather. "It's alright. I didn't mean to offend you."

I wished he didn't sound so blasé, but there was nothing I could do about it, at least not until we were married. "You didn't. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you."

"Let's get back on track. There are a few more things we need to discuss and unfortunately I have a meeting scheduled for tonight and an early flight tomorrow morning."

"You're heading to New York for the engagement of Matteo and Gianna." My family hadn't gotten an invitation. As with Aria's engagement party, only the closest family and the respective heads of the New York and Chicago mob had been invited. I was actually glad. It would have been the first social even after my betrothal to Dante had been made public. Gossip and curious glances would have followed me everywhere.

A hint of surprise flickered in his eyes, but then it was gone. "Yes, indeed." He reached into his jacket pocket and held out a small velvet box. I took it from him and opened it. A diamond engagement ring was inside. Only a few weeks ago, I'd taken off the wedding ring and engagement ring that Antonio had gotten for me. They'd never meant much to me anyway.

"I hope you like the design."

"Yes, thank you." After a moment of hesitation, I took the ring out and put it on my finger. Dante hadn't given any indication

that he wanted to do it for me. My gaze flickered toward his right hand and my stomach plummeted. He was still wearing his old wedding ring. Another strange burst of disappointment filled me. If he wore it after all this time, he must still be in love with his dead wife, or was it a simple matter of habit?

He noticed my gaze and for the first time his stoic mask slipped but it was gone so quickly that I wasn't sure I'd actually seen it. He didn't give me an explanation or an apology, but I hadn't expected one from a man like him.

"Your father requests that we do a social outing before the actual wedding. As we all agreed that an actual engagement party is unnecessary..." I'd never been asked, but I wasn't even surprised. "...I suggest we attend the annual Christmas party of the Scuderi family together."

For as long as I could remember, my family had been at the Scuderi house on the first Sunday in advent. "That sounds like a reasonable idea."

Dante gave me a cool smile. "Then that's settled. I'll let your father know when I'll pick you up."

"You can tell me. I have a phone and am capable of operating it."

Dante stared. There was a flicker of something like amusement on his face for a second. "Of course. If that's what you prefer." He pulled his phone out of his pocket. "What's your number?"

I needed a moment to suppress an unladylike snort of laughter before I could give it to him.

When he was done typing, he stuffed his phone back into his jacket, then he straightened without another word. I rose as well and took my time smoothing out the nonexistent wrinkles in my skirt to mask my annoyance behind schooled pleasantness.

"Thank you for your time," he said formally. I really hoped he'd loosen up after our wedding. He wasn't always so restrained. I'd heard the stories about how he'd established his position as the heir to his father's title and how efficient he

was when it came to dealing with traitors and enemies. There was something dark and feral behind his ice prince demeanor.

“You’re welcome.” I walked toward the door but Dante beat me to it and held it open for me. I said a quick thanks before I stepped into our lobby. “I’ll get my parents so they can say goodbye.”

“Actually, I would like to have a word with your father in private before I leave.”

It was futile trying to get any information from his expression, so I didn’t bother. Instead I strode to the end of the corridor and knocked at my father’s office door. The voices inside died down and a moment later, my father opened the door. Mamma stood directly behind him. From the look on her face I could tell that she was eager to bombard me with questions, but Dante was close behind me.

“Dante would like to have a word with you,” I said, then turned around to Dante. “Until the Christmas party.” I considered brushing his cheeks with my lips but discarded that idea immediately. Instead I tilted my head with a smile before walking away. My mother’s heels clacked behind me, then she fell into step beside me. She linked our arms. “How did it go? Dante didn’t look too pleased. Did you do something that offended him?”

I gave her a look. “Of course not. Dante’s face is frozen in one expression.”

“Shhh.” Mamma looked behind us. “What if he hears you?”

I didn’t think he’d care.

Mamma scanned my face. “You should be happy, Valentina. You won the husband lottery, and I’m sure there’s a passionate lover hidden beneath Dante’s cold exterior.”

“Mamma, please.” I’d suffered through two sex talks with my mother in my life so far: the one where she tried to tell me about the birds and the bees when I was fifteen and already well aware of the mechanics of sex. Even in a catholic girls school that information got around at some point. And the

second, shortly before my wedding to Antonio. I didn't think I'd survive a third one.

But I hoped she was right. Thanks to Antonio's disinterest in women, I'd never had the chance to enjoy a passionate lover, or any lover really. I was more than ready to finally be rid of my virginity, even if that would pose the risk of Dante finding out my first marriage had been for show, but I'd cross that bridge when I came to it.

CHAPTER TWO

Dante picked me up at quarter to six as promised. Not a minute too late or too soon. I hadn't expected anything else. My parents had already left a few minutes ago. As the future head of the Outfit, Dante couldn't arrive too early to the party.

He was wearing another three-piece suit in navy blue with light blue pinstripes and a matching tie. I froze for a moment when I saw him. My dress was navy too. People would think we'd done it on purpose, but there was nothing to be done about it now. I'd followed a strict detox diet for three days to fit into the tight backless dress; I wasn't going to wear something else. Despite its long pencil skirt reaching my calves, the slit up to my thigh allowed me to walk stairs without too much trouble.

Dante's eyes did a quick scan. "You look beautiful, Valentina." He was being polite. There was absolutely no sign that he actually found me attractive.

"Thank you." I smiled and stepped up to him. He touched my lower back to lead me toward his black Porsche parked at the curb and tensed as his palm came into contact with my naked skin. I wasn't sure but I thought I heard him release a rushed breath, and the thought that he might be affected by me, coupled with the feel of his touch sent a shiver of delight down my spine. He planted his hand lightly on my back and gave no further indication that I'd taken him by surprise with my partial nakedness as he guided me toward the passenger door and held it open for me. I slid in, almost giddy with triumph over the fact that I'd managed to get a reaction out of the iceman. Once we were married, I'd try to do it more often.

The other guests had already arrived when we pulled up in front of the Scuderi mansion. We could have walked, if it

weren't for the four inches of snow, safety concerns and my high heels. Dante hadn't bothered with small talk during our drive. His mind seemed far away anyway. When Dante put his hand on my naked back this time, there was no outward reaction.

Ludevica Scuderi opened the door for us. Her husband Rocco, the current Consigliere to Dante's father, hovered behind her, his hands on her shoulders. They both smiled brightly as they ushered us into the pleasantly warm foyer. An eight-foot Christmas tree, decorated with red and silver baubles, dominated the space.

"We're delighted that you could make it," Ludevica said warmly.

Rocco shook Dante's hand. "I have to congratulate you on your excellent taste. Your future wife looks marvelous, Dante."

It was obvious that they were going out of their way to be nice. Although it was desirable for a new Capo to keep the Consigliere of his predecessor, it wasn't tradition, so Dante could nominate a new Cosigliere when he took over from his father.

Dante inclined his head and returned his hand to my back. "That she is," he said simply while all I could do was smile.

Ludevica clutched my hands. "We were pleased when we found out Dante had chosen you. After all you've gone through, it's only fair that fate makes it up to you."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. Maybe she was being sincere. It was hard to tell. After all, they'd originally tried to marry Gianna off to Dante. "Thank you. That's very kind of you."

"Come on in. The party isn't happening in our foyer," Rocco said, gesturing for us to head for the living room. Laughter and voices were coming from inside.

"Aria is very excited to see you again," Ludovica said as we entered the living room. I had no time to express my surprise at Aria's presence because the moment we were spotted by the crowd, people flocked around us to congratulate us to our

betrothal and upcoming wedding. In between shaking hands, I scanned the room. Aria stood at the other end of the vast room next to another massive Christmas tree and her not less massive husband Luca who had a possessive hand on her waist. I didn't see Gianna and her fiancé Matteo anywhere. If my mother's gossip was to be believed the Scuderis were concerned their middle daughter might cause a scene.

Dante moved his thumb over my back, startling me. My eyes snapped to him, then to the couple in front of us, whom I'd completely ignored because of my staring. I gave my brightest smile and pulled Bibiana in a hug. "How are you?" I whispered. She squeezed me briefly, then drew back with her forced smile. That was as much of an answer as I would get in the presence of other people.

Her husband Tommaso, who was thirty years her senior, bald and overweight, kissed my hand, which would have been fine except for the look in his eyes. Leery was the best word to describe it. Dante's fingers on my back tensed and I risked a peek at him, but his expression was the same aloof mask as usual. He fixed Tommaso with his eyes and the man quickly took off with Bibiana.

A waiter carrying a tray of drinks stopped beside us, and Dante gripped a glass of Champagne for me and a Scotch for himself. Now that the onslaught of well-wishers had finally abated, Luca and Aria crossed the room toward us. Dante's demeanor changed ever so slightly like a tiger that got wind of another predator in his territory. Instead of tensing, he relaxed as if to show that he wasn't concerned, but his eyes were alert and calculating.

Luca and Dante shook hands, both with those unnerving shark-smiles on their faces. Ignoring them, I grinned at Aria, honestly happy to see her again. It had been months. She looked much more relaxed than at her wedding. "You look amazing," I told her as I embraced her. She was wearing a dark red dress that set off her blond hair and pale skin beautifully. No wonder Luca couldn't stop glancing her way.

"You too," she said as she stepped back. "Can I see the back?"

I turned around for her.

“Wow. Doesn’t she look amazing?”

That question was directed at Luca and led to an awkward pause in which the tension skyrocketed. Dante wrapped his arm around my waist, his cold eyes on Luca, who took Aria’s hand, kissed it and said in a low voice. “I have only eyes for you.”

Aria gave me an embarrassed smile. “I need to look for Gianna, but I’d love to talk to you later?”

“Okay,” I said, glad when she and Luca walked off. With the men around, Aria and I wouldn’t be able to talk anyway.

I turned to Dante. “You don’t like him.”

“It’s not a matter of like. It’s about self-preservation and a healthy dose of suspicion.”

“That’s the Christmas spirit,” I said, not trying to hide my sarcasm.

Again a hint of amusement made the corners of Dante’s mouth twitch, then it was gone. “Would you like to grab something to eat?”

“Definitely.” After the last few days of torturous diet, I was starving. As we made our way through the crowd, I noticed that the current head of the Outfit wasn’t present. “Where’s your father?”

“He didn’t want to steal the show from us. Now that he’s as good as retired he prefers to stay out of the public eye,” Dante said wryly.

“Understandable.” These social functions were exhausting. You had to be careful what you said and did, even more so as the head of the Outfit. From the hard looks that some of the women were throwing my way, I knew I was currently their favorite topic. I knew what they were saying behind their hands: Why had Dante Cavallaro chosen a *widow* instead of a young innocent bride?

I glimpsed up into his emotionless face, the hard angles of his cheekbones, the calculation and vigilance in his eyes, and

found myself wishing once more that the answer to that question were something else than pure logic.

The buffet was loaded with Italian delicacies. I took a slice of Panettone for myself as I was in desperate need of some sugary treats. As usual it tasted like heaven. I'd made it a few times but it had never been as good as the one from Ludevica Scuderi.

"Dante," came a pleasant female voice from behind us.

Dante and I turned at the same time. His sister Ines, with whom I'd exchanged only a few words over the years as we were nine years apart, stood in front of us. She was pregnant, probably third trimester if my guess was correct. Across the room, her twins, a boy and girl, were busy playing with Fabiano Scuderi who was their age. Ines had the same fair hair as Dante and she carried herself with the same cold aloofness, but as her eyes settled on me, they were, not necessarily warm, but friendly. "And Valentina. It's good to see you."

"Ines," I said with a smile. "You look radiant."

She touched her belly. "Thank you. It's been a challenge finding nice dresses that fit me with my belly. Maybe you can help me go shopping for one for your wedding?"

"I'd love to. And if you don't mind, I'd be delighted if you would join me when I go looking for a wedding dress."

Her blue eyes grew wide. "You don't have one yet?"

I shrugged. Of course I still had the one from my last wedding, but I didn't intend to wear it again. That would mean bad luck. "Not yet, but I'll go looking for one next week, so if you're free?"

"Count me in," she said. Her eyes had become much warmer. She looked much younger than thirty-two and even though she was pregnant she didn't seem to have gained an ounce of weight. I wondered how she did it. Maybe good genes. I definitely hadn't been blessed with those. Without the occasional detox day or week, and regular workouts, I'd be gaining weight in no time.

“Wonderful.” From the corner of my eye, I saw Dante watching us with mild interest. I hoped he was happy that his sister and I got along. I knew his deceased wife and Ines had been friends. I’d often seen them laughing together at social events.

“Where’s your husband?” he asked eventually.

“Oh, Pietro went outside for a smoke with Rocco Scuderi. They didn’t want to disturb you and your future wife.”

A muscle in Dante’s cheek flexed.

“You can go after them, if you have business to settle,” I said quickly. “I’ll be fine on my own. I should probably talk to Aria. Maybe you’d like to join me, Ines?”

Ines shook her head, her eyes on her twins who were in a heated argument with each other. “I need to break this up or there will be tears and bloody noses.” She gave me a quick smile, then rushed off toward her arguing kids.

Dante hadn’t moved from my side yet. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “I’ll be back soon.” I watched him head toward the terrace door and disappear outside. Now that he was gone, I could see that several women turned their attention more openly to me. I had to find Aria or Bibiana quickly before one of them engaged me in an awkward conversation. I meandered through the other guests, sparing them only the briefest smile. Eventually I found both Aria and Bibiana in the lobby in a quiet corner. “There you are,” I said, not trying to hide my relief.

“What’s wrong?” Aria asked with a frown.

“I feel as if everyone’s talking about me and Dante. Tell me I’m imagining things.”

Bibiana shook her head. “You don’t. Most widows aren’t as lucky as you are.”

“I know, but still. I wish they wouldn’t act quite so shocked about my engagement.”

“It’ll pass,” Aria said, then grimaced. “Soon Gianna will be back on the prime spot of daily gossip.”

“Sorry. I heard there was a scene at Gianna’s engagement party.”

Aria nodded. “Yeah. Gianna has trouble hiding her unwillingness to marry.”

“Is that why Matteo Vitiello isn’t here?” Bibiana asked. I’d wondered that as well, but I didn’t want to be nosy.

“No. But since Salvatore Vitiello’s death, Matteo is second in charge and he has to stay in New York when Luca isn’t there.” I searched her face for a sign of the tension I’d heard in her voice, but she’d learned to hide her emotions. Was Luca having trouble in New York? He was young for a Capo. Maybe some forces in New York were trying to mutiny. Once Aria might have told me, but now that I was the fiancée of the future Boss of the Chicago Outfit, she’d have to be careful what she let slip. Maybe we were trying to work together, but New York and Chicago definitely weren’t friends.

“That makes sense,” I said. Bibiana gave me a look. She too must have picked up on the strain in Aria’s words.

Aria’s blue eyes widened. “You didn’t even show me your engagement ring yet!”

I held my hand out.

“It’s beautiful,” Aria said.

“It is. Dante chose it for me.” My second engagement ring, and the second time that it wasn’t a sign of love. “How long will you be staying in Chicago? Do you have time to come over for a coffee?”

“We’ll be leaving tomorrow morning. Luca wants to return to New York. But we’re coming over to your wedding a few days early so maybe we could meet for coffee then, unless you’ll be too busy?”

“No, it won’t be a big celebration, so I’ll have time to meet you for coffee. Give me a call when you know more.”

“I’ll do that.”

“What about you Bibiana, do you have time to come over tomorrow? We haven’t had the chance to talk in a while as well.”

Bibiana bit her lip. “I think I can. Now that you’re as good as the wife of the Boss, Tommaso can hardly say no.”

“Exactly,” I said before turning to Aria again. “Where’s Luca?”

Aria looked around. “He wanted to talk to my parents about Matteo’s wedding to Gianna. It’s taking longer than expected.”

Would they cancel the engagement? That would be the gossip of the year. I couldn’t imagine they’d risk it, no matter how unwilling Gianna was.

Dante appeared in the doorway to the living room, eyes settling on me.

“I think I need to leave,” I said. I hugged Aria and Bibiana before I moved toward Dante. I stopped in front of him. “Are we leaving?”

Dante looked incredibly tense. “Yes. But if you want to stay, you can drive with your parents.”

That would lead to more gossip. You couldn’t appear at a party with your fiancé and leave without him. “I don’t think that would be wise.”

Understanding settled on Dante’s face. “Of course.”

Back in the car, I asked. “Is everything okay?” Now that we were engaged, I thought it was okay for me to ask him.

His fingers around the steering wheel tensed. “The Russians are giving us more trouble than usual, and it certainly doesn’t help that Salvatore Vitiello died at this critical time and New York has to deal with a new Capo.”

I stared at him, surprised. When I’d asked him, I hadn’t expected a detailed reply. Most men didn’t like to talk about business with their wife, and I wasn’t even married to Dante yet.

Dante's eyes snapped toward me. "You look surprised."

"I am," I admitted. "Thank you for giving me an honest answer."

"I think honesty is the key to a functioning marriage."

"Not in the marriages I know," I said wryly.

Dante tilted his head. "True."

"So you don't think Luca is a good Capo?"

"He is a good Capo, or he will be once he's weeded out his adversaries."

He'd said it clinically. As if weeding out didn't mean killing other people because they were uncomfortable or a risk to one's power.

"Is that what you are going to do once you become the Boss of the Outfit?"

"Yes, if necessary, but I've proven my claim to leadership in the last few years. I'm considerably older than Luca."

But still the youngest Boss in the history of the Outfit. People would test him too.

Dante pulled up in front of my parents' house. He killed the engine, got out and walked around the hood of the car before opening my door. I took his hand and stood, bringing our bodies so close for a moment that it would have been easy to kiss him. Then he took a step back, reestablishing the proper distance between us before he led me toward the door. I turned to face him. "I never see you with a bodyguard. Isn't it risky to be outside on your own?"

Dante smiled darkly. "I'm armed, and if someone wants to take me by surprise, let them try."

"You are the best shot in the Outfit."

"Among the best, yes."

"Good, I suppose then I can feel safe." It was meant as a joke, but Dante looked deathly serious. "You are safe."

I hesitated. Wouldn't he try to kiss me? We would marry in four weeks. It wasn't as if we needed to stay away from each other for decorum's sake. When it became clear that Dante wouldn't make the first move, I stepped up to him and kissed his cheek. I didn't dare look at his face, instead I unlocked the door, slipped in and let it fall shut behind me. I waited a few moments before I peered through the window beside the door. Dante's car pulled away. I wondered why he hadn't tried to kiss me. Was it because we weren't married yet? Maybe he thought it wasn't appropriate for us to get close physically before our wedding. Or maybe he was still in love with his wife? I hadn't even looked at his hand to see if he had taken off his old wedding ring. Was that why people had talked about me today?

CHAPTER THREE

Bibiana came over the next afternoon, her eyes red from crying. I ushered her into the library and made her settle down on the leather sofa. “What happened?”

“Tommaso is angry that I’m not pregnant yet. He wants me to go to a doctor to see what’s wrong.”

They’d been married for almost four years now, but Bibiana had been taking contraceptives in secret. “Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to get pregnant. If you have a baby, you’d have someone to love and who loves you back.” I wrapped my arm around her. The last few years of seeing Bibiana growing more and more depressed because of her marriage to Tommaso had been heartbreaking. I wished there was something I could do for her.

“Maybe you’re right. And maybe Tommaso won’t touch me if I have a big belly.” She shook her head. “Let’s not talk about this. I want to forget about my troubles for a bit. So what about you? How are the wedding preparations going?”

I shrugged. “My mother booked a ballroom in a hotel. The only thing I need to do is buy a wedding gown.”

“Will you get a white dress again?”

“I don’t think so. My mother doesn’t think it’s appropriate. Maybe cream colored. That should be fine.”

Bibiana huffed. “I think it’s ridiculous that you can’t wear a white dress only because you’ve been married before. It’s not like it was a real marriage.”

“Shhh,” I hissed, my eyes darting to the closed door of the library. I’d told Bibiana about the true nature of my marriage to Antonio a while ago. “You know nobody can know.”

“I don’t understand why you’re trying to protect him. He’s dead. And he used you as a means to an end. You should look out for yourself now.”

“I am looking out for myself. I’ve helped Antonio betray the Outfit. Being gay is a crime, you know that.”

“It’s ridiculous.”

“I know, but the mob won’t change any time soon, no matter how much we want it to.”

“If you don’t want to tell Dante about it, then what are you going to do about your wedding night? Aren’t you worried he’s going to realize you never consummated your marriage with Antonio?”

“Maybe he won’t notice.”

“If it’s anything like my first time, then he will notice.”

“Tommasio treated you horribly. You didn’t want it, so of course you bled. I’m still so mad when I think about it.”

Bibiana swallowed. “What’s done is done. I really wish I’d have been married to a gay man.” She laughed bitterly. I took her hand. “Maybe you’re lucky and Tommasio has a heart attack or gets shot down by the Russians.” It wasn’t even a joke. I wanted Bibiana to be free of that man.

Bibiana grinned. “How sad is it that I’m actually hoping for that to happen?”

“Of course you want him gone. I get it. Everyone would.”

She scanned my face. “So what about you? You want to sleep with Dante?”

“Definitely. I can’t wait.” My cheeks grew warm, but it was the truth and I did see nothing wrong with wanting to have sex with your soon-to-be husband. Dante was an attractive man after all.

“Then maybe you should take preparations that ensure Dante doesn’t realize your first marriage was for show.”

“What? Find a guy to sleep with? I won’t cheat on Dante. I think sex belongs in marriage.” Despite my best intentions not

to take everything my mother taught me by heart and not to let the strict words of my catholic teachers worm their way into my brain, I couldn't imagine being close to someone I wasn't committed to.

Bibiana let out a choked laugh. "That's not what I meant." She lowered her voice, her skin turning red. "I thought you could use a dildo."

For a moment I didn't know what to say. I'd never considered something like that. "Where would I get a dildo? I can hardly ask my father's bodyguards to take me to a sex shop. My mother would die of embarrassment if she found out." And I would most likely die from embarrassment when I entered said shop.

"I wish I could get it for you, but if Tommaso found out, he'd be furious." The bruises on Bibiana's cheekbones from Tommaso's last outburst hadn't quite faded yet.

"It's probably for the best. I don't like the idea of having sex with an inanimate object anyway. I'll figure it out."

"Dante will probably be too wrapped up in his own needs to notice anyway. Men are like that."

That wasn't much of a comfort. I hoped Dante would be concerned about my needs too.

When January 5th, my wedding day finally rolled around, I felt a flicker of nervousness; not only because of my wedding night. I knew this was my second chance at a happy marriage. Most people in our world didn't get that. They lived their lives in miserable unions until death finally separated them.

As I walked down the aisle in my cream sequins dress, I felt more hopeful than I had in a long time. Dante looked sophisticated in his black suit and vest. His eyes never left me, and as my father handed me over to him, I was sure I saw a hint of approval and appreciation in his expression. His hand was warm around mine and the small smile he gave me before the priest started his sermon made me want to stand on my toes and kiss him.

My mother was crying loudly in the first row. She looked like she couldn't be happier, and my father was practically beaming with pride. Only my brother Orazio, who'd arrived only two hours ago from Cleveland where he had work to do for the Outfit, looked like he couldn't wait to leave. I preferred the sight of Bibiana's and Aria's encouraging smiles. While the priest spoke, I kept throwing glances at Dante and what I saw on his face tore at my heart. Every so often sorrow marred his expression. We had both lost someone, but for Dante the person had been the love of his life, if rumors could be believed. Could I ever compete with that?

When it was time for our kiss, Dante bent down without hesitation and pressed his warm lips against mine. He definitely didn't feel like an iceman. Mamma's words popped into my mind and a thrill of excitement rushed through me. Maybe I couldn't make Dante forget his first wife, and I didn't want to, but I could help him move on.

After church, we all drove to the hotel for the following celebrations. It was the first moment of privacy Dante and I got as a married couple. He didn't hold my hand as he drove but he probably wasn't the touchy-feely kind of guy. What worried me more were the tension in his jaw and the steel in his eyes.

"I think it went well, don't you think?" I said when the silence got too oppressive.

Dante's eyes snapped to me. "Yes, the priest did a good job."

"I wished my mother hadn't been crying so much. Usually she's better at composing herself."

Dante smiled tensely. "She's happy for you."

"I know." I paused. "Are you happy?" I knew it was a risky question.

His face closed off visibly. "Of course I'm happy with this union."

I waited for something more but the rest of the drive passed in silence. I didn't want to start our marriage with a fight, so I let

it drop.

When we got out of the car and headed toward the entrance, Dante touched my back. “You look very beautiful, Valentina.” I peered up at him, but his gaze was directed straight ahead. Maybe he’d realized how cold he’d been acting in the car and had felt guilty.

The ballroom of the hotel was beautifully decorated with pink and white roses. Dante kept his hand on my lower back as we made our way to our table under the cheers of our guests. Most of them had arrived before us and had already settled at their tables. We shared a table with my parents and brother, and Dante’s parents as well as his sister and her husband. I hadn’t talked to Dante’s parents, except for a few occasions of smalltalk. They’d been nice enough though. My brother Orazio pretended he was busy with something on his iPhone, but I knew he was only trying to avoid our father’s questions.

Aria and Luca, and Matteo and Gianna, as well as the Scuderi family occupied the table to our right. Aria gave me a smile before she returned her watchful gaze to her sister and Matteo who seemed on the verge of an argument. Those two would have one hell of a marriage. Matteo didn’t seem to mind the glowers Gianna was sending his way.

“You look beautiful together,” Ines said, drawing my attention back to our table.

Dante regarded me with an unreadable expression.

The servers chose that moment to enter the ballroom with plates.

After the four-course dinner, it was finally time for our dance. Dante led me toward the dance floor and pulled me against his chest. I smiled up at him. He felt warm and strong, and was a good dancer. He smelled perfect like a warm summer breeze and something very masculine. I couldn’t wait to share a bed with him, to see what he hid beneath the fabric of his expensive suit. If we had been alone, I would have rested my cheek against his shoulder, but everyone was watching us, and I didn’t think Dante liked to show intimacy in public.

Of course our guests didn't care. Soon they started calling. "Bacio, bacio!"

Dante peered down at me with one cocked eyebrow. "Do we honor their wishes, or ignore them?"

"I think we should honor their wishes." I really really wanted to honor their wishes.

Dante tightened his hold on my back and firmly pressed his lips against mine. His blue eyes were fixed on me and for a moment I was sure I saw something like warmth in them. But then the guests flooded the dancefloor to join in the dancing and our kiss was over. Shortly after, Fiore Cavallaro asked me to dance and Dante had to dance with his mother. I smiled at my father-in-law, unsure how to act around him. He had the same cold aloofness going as Dante. "My wife and I had hoped Dante would choose someone who wasn't married before."

The smile on my face became difficult to maintain, but I didn't want people to realize that Fiore had said something that hurt me. "I understand," I said quietly.

"But his reasoning convinced us. Dante needs a heir soon and someone not quite as young might prove a better mother to our grandchildren."

I nodded. Their cold logic was something I hated with every ounce of my being. Not that I could tell him that.

"I don't intend to sound cruel, but this is a marriage of convenience, and I'm sure you know what's expected of you."

"I do. And I'm looking forward to having children with Dante." It was true. I'd always wanted children. I'd even considered in-vitro fertilization when I'd still been married to Antonio, but I wanted the chance to get to know Dante better before I tried to get pregnant. Naturally, I couldn't tell his father that either. My brother took over from Fiore as was expected. "I'm glad you could come," I told him as I looked up at him. He had my dark green eyes and almost black hair but those were the only similarities between us. We'd never been close, not for lack of trying on my part however. I wasn't

sure if that would ever change. He resented our father for coddling me, and sometimes I thought he resented me for having had it easier than him.

“I can’t stay long,” he said simply. I nodded, having expected nothing else. Orazio avoided our father as much as possible.

I was glad when Pietro, Ines’ husband, asked me to dance. He was a quiet man and didn’t step on my feet, so I wouldn’t have minded to dance with him until the end of the evening to avoid awkward conversation. Of course that would have been beyond inappropriate. After my dance with Pietro, hospitality dictated that I had to dance with the head of New York. While Aria looked perfectly comfortable around Luca now, I definitely wasn’t. Nevertheless, I accepted his hand when he held it out for me. He wasn’t smiling. I’d only ever seen glimpses of a real smile when he looked at Aria. Dante was tall and muscled, but with Luca even I had to tilt my head back to maintain eye-contact. I knew people were watching us as we danced. Especially Dante’s steely gaze followed every move we made, even though he was dancing with Aria. Not that Luca seemed much happier about the fact that Dante was embracing Aria. Men in our world were possessive. Men like Dante and Luca were something else entirely.

When one song ended and the next began, I could hardly hide my relief. Luca had a knowing expression on his face. He was probably used to people being uncomfortable in his presence. My next dance partner was Matteo. I didn’t know him very well, but I’d heard about his temper and his skill with the knife.

“May I?” he asked with an exaggerated bow.

I curtsied mockingly in turn. “Of course.”

Surprise flashed in his eyes. He pulled me against him with a shark-grin. Closer than Luca had risked. Closer than any sane man would risk.

“I think I saw your husband twitch a little just now,” he murmured. “That’s the equivalent of an emotional outburst for a cold fish like him, I suppose.”

I exhaled, trying to stifle laughter. “You don’t like to beat around the bush, do you?”

His dark eyes twinkled with mirth. “Oh, I like bushes well enough, don’t worry.”

I burst out laughing. And not a ladylike restrained chuckle. It was high-pitched laughter. “I’m pretty sure that was inappropriate.”

I could feel a few heads turning our way, but I couldn’t restrain myself.

“You’re right. I was warned to behave myself around the wife of The Boss as not to cause a rift between New York and Chicago,” he said lightly.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell on you.”

Matteo winked. “I fear it’s too late for that.”

“I think it’s my turn again,” Dante said, appearing beside us, his hard glare fixed on Matteo, who seemed thoroughly unperturbed.

Matteo took a step back. “Of course. Who could stay away from such dark beauty for long?” He bent over my hand and kissed it. I stiffened, not because of the kiss, but because of the look in Dante’s eyes. I slipped my hand into his quickly and squeezed, and suddenly Aria was at our side. “Matteo, you should dance with me now.” He did and Aria cleverly moved them away from Dante and me.

“I thought you wanted to dance with me?” I said in a forced casual tone, peering up at Dante’s hard face.

His blue eyes settled on me. He wrapped his arm around me and started to move us to the rhythm of the music. I wasn’t sure what had been the source of his anger: jealousy, or Matteo’s disrespect. “What did he say?” Dante asked eventually.

“Hm?”

“What made you laugh?”

Maybe jealousy was the major driving force after all. That made me unreasonably happy. “He made a joke about bushes.”

Realization filled Dante’s face. “He should be more careful.” The threat was obvious. Good thing Matteo and Luca hadn’t heard it.

“I think he’s a bit tense because of the problems between Gianna and him.”

“From what I hear, he’s always been volatile, even before his engagement to the Scuderi girl.”

“Not everyone is as controlled as you are,” I said pointedly.

He raised his eyebrows but didn’t say anything in return.

Shortly after midnight, Dante and I excused ourselves. The hotel had offered us their biggest suite for the night, but Dante preferred to return home and I was actually glad. I was eager to finally move into Dante’s house. Although, I was also worried since he’d shared it with deceased wife. It was probably filled with many memories. Bibiana crossed her fingers as I walked past her and I couldn’t help but smile.

CHAPTER FOUR

I was glad it was time for our wedding night. My first real wedding night. I'd waited too long.

On the drive to Dante's mansion at Chicago's Goldcoast, neither of us spoke. It seemed to become a loathsome tradition for us. I busied myself watching traffic through the passenger window while I desperately tried to hide my rising nervousness. Was it possible to feel excitement and dread at the same time?

Dante slowed as we approached a huge light-brown three-story mansion. Wrought iron gates swung open when Dante pressed a button in the dashboard and we drove through, then headed for the double garage. My family's mansion wasn't too far away. It was smaller than Dante's home, as was to be expected. The Underboss couldn't have a bigger house than his Capo.

After Dante had parked next to a Mercedes SUV, he got out. He walked around the car and opened my door for me, then held out his hand and helped me out of the car, which was difficult with my dress. His hand was warm and steady. I was always surprised not to find his skin ice-cold as his persona. He released me the moment I stood, and I almost reached for his hand but stopped myself. I didn't want to push him. Maybe he could only ever let loose behind closed doors.

He led me through a side door into the lobby of the mansion. The floor and the staircase were dark hardwood and a chandelier cast a soft glow down on us. It was strangely quiet. I knew Dante had a maid and a cook, who handled the household for him.

"I gave Zita and Gaby the day off," he said off-handedly. Could he read me that easily?

“That’s good,” I said, then cringed at how that might have sounded. It wasn’t as if I thought we’d entertain the entire house with our bedroom noises, but I preferred to have total privacy for our first night together.

Dante headed straight for the staircase, then stopped with a hand on the banister to look back at me. I’d halted in the middle of the lobby but quickly rushed toward him and followed him upstairs. My stomach fluttered with nerves.

This was my second wedding night, but I was almost as inexperienced as I’d been all those years ago, something I really hoped would change tonight. Antonio and I had kissed occasionally at the beginning of our marriage, and he’d even touched my breasts through my nightgown a few times, but when it became clear to me that he wasn’t into it, we abandoned those futile attempts at intimacy.

I wanted to become a real wife, a real woman, and unlike Antonio, I knew Dante was perfectly capable of consuming our marriage. But that was also my problem. What if Dante noticed I was a virgin? Could I hide it from him? Maybe if I asked him to extinguish the lights, I could hide my discomfort or blame it on nerves over being with someone other than Antonio. But what if he felt my hymen? What would I tell him then? I should have used a vibrator to get rid of it, but the romantic part didn’t want to lose my virginity to a device. It was ridiculous.

My thoughts were interrupted when Dante opened the door to the master bedroom and made an inviting gesture for me to go in. I walked past him, my wedding dress swooshing gently with the movement. I flashed him a quick glance in passing to gauge his mood, but as usual his expression was unreadable. The king sized bed was black wood with black satin covers. For a moment I wondered if he’d kept it black since his wife’s death. And then a worse thought took its place: was it the same bed he’d shared with his first wife?

“The bathroom is through that door,” Dante said with a nod toward a dark wood door to my right.

I hesitated. Did he want me to freshen up? He closed the bedroom door and started loosening his tie. Didn't he want to undress me? He headed toward the window and looked out, his back to me. I got the hint. Disappointed, I walked into the marble bathroom. It was black marble, so maybe Dante simply liked black. I strode toward the window that faced the same direction as the one in the bedroom, wondering if Dante saw the same view I did; the boisterous lake, the black clouds dotting the night-blue sky and blotting out the full moon, or was he far away, lost in memories? The idea made me uncomfortable and so I turned away from the window and began to undress before I took a quick shower. I'd waxed my legs in preparation for the wedding as was tradition, so I didn't need to shave. After I'd dried off, I put on the plum satin nightgown I'd bought for the occasion and brushed out my hair. My stomach fluttered again with nerves and excitement. I took a few moments to gather myself, to look all the way the experienced woman I was supposed to be; then I stepped back into the bedroom. Dante hadn't moved from his spot at the window. I allowed myself a moment to admire him in his black suit. He looked strong and sophisticated, untouchable, with his hands pushed into his pockets. An iceman, cold, emotionless, controlled.

I cleared my throat nervously and he turned toward me. His cold blue eyes scanned my body briefly but his expression didn't change. There wasn't even the flicker of desire. There was nothing. He might as well have been carved from stone. Antonio had at least complimented me on my beauty on our wedding night. He'd even kissed me, had tried to pretend he could desire me, but it had become obvious pretty quickly that the kiss had done nothing for him.

But what stopped Dante? I deflated inwardly at his reaction. I knew many men found me pleasant to look at and they had never seen me this scantily dressed, but Dante didn't seem to be interested in me. I knew his wife hadn't looked anything like me. Where I was tall and dark, she'd been petite with light brown hair.

"You can lie down. I'll grab a shower," he said. His gaze shifted for the barest moment but then he stalked into the

bathroom and closed the door after him.

Trying to fight my frustration, I walked up to the bed and slid under the covers. With Antonio, I'd known that he wouldn't react to my body the way I wanted him to, but I'd thought it would be different with Dante. Maybe he needed a moment to gather his thoughts. It couldn't have been easy for him today. He'd loved his wife and marrying again must have been really tough for him. Maybe he needed a shower to prepare himself mentally for the wedding night.

The shower ran for a long time and eventually my eyelids became heavy. I tried to fight the tiredness but at some point I must have dozed off because I jerked awake when the bed dipped. My eyes darted to the side where Dante was stretching out. His chest was naked and I wanted nothing more than to run my hands over his slightly tanned, firm stomach and chest. His cool eyes settled on me. It was impossible to say what he was thinking. Would he reach out for me now?

I lay on my back, waiting for him to do something, nervous and excited and scared. I had to stop myself from making the first move. That would have been too forward.

"I have an early day tomorrow," he said simply and then he turned the light off and rolled away from me. I was glad the darkness hid my shock and disappointment. I waited for a few more minutes for him to change his mind, to claim his rights, but he didn't. He lay beside me quiet and unmoving, his back a few inches from my arm.

Hurt welled in me and I rolled over, away from him. Dante was into women, so why didn't he want to sleep with me? What was wrong with me that after two wedding nights I was still as untouched as the virgin snow? I wasn't sure I could go through this again. I wanted to experience lust, wanted to be desired. With Antonio, I'd known trying to seduce him was a losing battle from the start, but with Dante I had to try at least. Even if he still loved his wife, he was a man. He had desires and I was perfectly capable of giving him what he physically needed, even if he kept his emotions locked away.

I listened to his calm breathing. Although we weren't touching, I could feel the heat radiating off of him. He wasn't an iceman. There had to be a way to crack his mask.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dante wasn't in bed when I woke the next morning. His side of the bed was cold as I pressed my palm against it. Forcing my anger down, I made sure the door was closed before I slipped my hand into my panties. Over the years with Antonio, I'd learned to give myself pleasure with my fingers. I buried my face in Dante's pillow, inhaling his musky scent and imagined he was touching me as I stroked myself to an orgasm. Afterward, I lay on my back for a while, staring at the ceiling, wanting to cry and laugh at the same time.

I slipped out of bed and headed into the bathroom and took my time making myself presentable. I chose a form-fitting brown dress that ended above my knees and a cute red cashmere cardigan. Even if Dante didn't care, I felt more comfortable if I put an effort into my outfits. I left the bedroom, hesitated and looked down the long corridor, wondering what hid behind the other doors. I'd have to explore at another time. Instead I headed down the staircase. I wasn't sure if I was expected downstairs for breakfast. I didn't know my new home, didn't know the people who worked here, and worst of all: didn't know the master of the house, my husband.

The double doors were ajar and I approached them, then lingered in front of them for a moment before I walked inside. I'd expected Dante to be gone already and was surprised when I found him sitting at the dining table in the vast living and dining room. As with the rest of the house, the floor was dark wood, the walls light beige, and the furniture dark and imposing.

The newspaper hid Dante's face but he lowered it when he heard me entering. My brown heels clicked on the hardwood floor as I approached the table slowly, unsure of how to act around him. Antonio had been my friend first, and then my

husband, but there was nothing between Dante and me. We were strangers.

The table was set for two people, but my plate wasn't next to Dante, instead it had been set at the other end of the table. I stared at the distance between Dante and me, considering to ignore the set-up and to sit beside Dante, but then I lost courage and took my seat at the end of the table.

"I hope you slept well?" Dante asked in his smooth voice. He hadn't put down the newspaper, still held onto it, and I had a feeling it would come up as a barrier between us again soon.

Was he being serious? "Too well," I said, not able to stop the jibe. Didn't he realize I'd expected a bit more from our first night together?

"I still have to prepare for a meeting with Luca. He'll be here soon as he heads back to New York tonight, but I told him you'd be delighted to keep Aria company while we discuss business."

I doubted Aria was in need of my company. She had her family here. This was a way to keep me occupied, nothing else. If he'd wanted a naïve wife, maybe he should have agreed to marry someone younger. But I liked Aria and it would have been rude to retract the invitation, so I smiled tightly. "That's very considerate of you." Sarcasm tinged my words. Now that we were married, it would be more difficult to keep up the polite mask.

Dante met my gaze, and there was something in them that made me lower my eyes and grab a Croissant. I wasn't hungry, but it was better than doing nothing. The rustling of paper drew my attention back to the other end of the table. As expected, Dante had disappeared behind his newspaper. Was this how he wanted our marriage to go? He hadn't even showed me around the house yet. "Will you give me a tour of the premises? I can hardly host guests without knowing my way around the house."

Dante lowered his newspaper again and folded it on the table. I felt the unreasonable urge to rip it into shreds. "You are right."

Excitement bubbled up in me but quickly dissipated at his next words. “Gaby!”

A moment later a door half hidden behind a massive cupboard opened and a short teenage girl entered the room and headed toward Dante. “Yes, sir, how can I help you?”

I had trouble masking my surprise. Gaby looked like she belonged in high school. How could she be the maid in this house?

“My wife,” Dante said with a nod in my direction. Gaby turned toward me briefly with a shy smile. “Would like to get a tour of the house. I’m busy, so please show her around.”

Gaby nodded and walked toward me. “Would you like to go now?” Her voice was hesitant, but I could see curiosity in her eyes. I swallowed the last crumb of my Croissant and poured coffee into my mug. “Yes, please. I’m going to take my coffee with me if that’s okay?”

Gaby’s eyes grew wide and she darted a look toward Dante, who was back to reading his newspaper. He didn’t look busy to me. If he had time to read the news why couldn’t he show me around? But I wouldn’t cause a scene in front of Gaby. Dante must have felt Gaby and me watching him expectantly because he raised his eyes. “This is your home now, Valentina. You can do whatever you want.”

So he had been listening to our conversation. And I wondered if what he said was really the case. I wished I were more courageous so I could test the theory. I turned back to Gaby and cradled my mug in my hands. “Then let’s go.”

She nodded and led me toward the door she’d come through earlier. “We could start in the kitchen and staff room?”

“Do whatever you think is best,” I said. “You know the house better than I do.”

Again a shy smile flitted across her face. Behind the door was a narrow corridor, which led into a vast kitchen. Potts hung from hooks attached to the ceiling. Everything was stainless steel and it reminded me more of a canteen kitchen than a place where family meals were prepared. A round older

woman stood at the oven and checked the temperature. Inside what looked like a lamb roast was cooking. I assumed this was the cook, Zita. She turned around as she heard us enter and wiped her hands on her white apron. Her black hair had gray streaks in it and was secured in a hair net atop her head. I guessed she was in her mid-fifties.

“I’m giving our mistress a tour of the house,” Gaby said excitedly. I startled at the use of mistress. That sounded like I was a whip wielding dominatrix. Maybe Dante was comfortable being called ‘Sir’, but I definitely couldn’t live with ‘mistress’.

“Please call me Valentina,” I said quickly. “Both of you.” I smiled at Zita but she didn’t return the gesture. Her lips were pursed and she was scanning me from head to toe with a look of disapproval on her face.

“It would have been nice to meet you before the wedding,” Zita said haughtily.

I forced my face to remain calm even if I didn’t like her tone. I didn’t want to start off on the wrong foot with the service personnel in the house. “Dante never invited me, and I didn’t think it appropriate to invite myself.”

She huffed. “He introduced Mistress Carla to us before the wedding.”

I stiffened at the mentioning of Dante’s first wife, couldn’t help it. I could hear the judgment in her voice. She thought me less worthy than Carla. I had a feeling she wouldn’t let me forget it. I wasn’t looking forward to a battle of wills with her, and I definitely didn’t have the patience for it today. I looked around the kitchen instead, trying to pretend I wasn’t bothered by her comment. “So did Carla cook here often?”

Zita gave me a shocked look. “Of course not. She was the mistress of the house. She didn’t cook or clean. That’s what I and Febe did, before Gaby took Febe’s place.”

Gaby shifted nervously. It was clear that she didn’t know what to do.

“Well, you can expect me in the kitchen often. I love to cook,” I said.

Zita straightened her shoulders. “I don’t know if Master Dante will allow it.”

I took a sip from my coffee, returning her gaze steadily. “Dante told me I could do whatever I want.” She looked away from me with a frown. I knew it wasn’t over yet.

“Why don’t you show me the rest of the house, Gaby? I need to make sure I’m ready when Aria arrives.”

Gaby bobbed her head quickly. “Of course, Mis...Valentina.”

She led me into the room behind the kitchen. It seemed to be a sort of common room for the staff. There were two cots, a small TV and a couch. No chairs or table, but I assumed the staff usually gathered around the wooden table in the kitchen, since it obviously wasn’t used for Dante’s meals. There was also a small bathroom with a shower behind a white door. “Is this where you and Zita spend your time when you don’t work?”

Gaby shook her head. “We stay in the kitchen. This is mostly for the guards because they spend the nights.”

“Where are they now?” I hadn’t seen any guards so far.

“They are outside. Either patrolling the grounds or in their guardhouse.”

“Are there security cameras?”

“Oh no, Mr. Cavallaro didn’t want them. He’s a very private man.” No surprise there.

She headed toward another door. “This way.” We stepped into the back part of the lobby. Gaby pointed at the two doors in the hall. “This is Mr. Cavallaro’s office, and that’s the library. Mr. Cavallaro doesn’t like to be disturbed when he’s in his office.” She flushed. “By us, I mean. He’s probably happy to be disturbed by you.” She bit her lip.

I touched her shoulder. “I understand. So are there other rooms on this floor?”

“Only the living and dining room, and the guest bathroom.”

As Gaby led me upstairs, I asked. “How old are you?”

“I’m seventeen.”

“Shouldn’t you still be going to school?” I sounded like my mother, but Gaby’s shy nature brought out my motherly side even though she was only six years younger than me.”

“I’ve been working for Mr. Cavallaro for three years. I came into this house shortly after his wife died. I never met her but Zita really misses her, that’s why she was rude to you.”

My eyes grew wide. “For three years? That’s horrible.”

“Oh no,” Gaby said quickly. “I’m thankful. Without Mr. Cavallaro I’d probably be dead, or worse.” She shuddered, a dark look passing in her eyes. I could tell that she didn’t want to talk about it. I’d have to talk to Dante about her later. She quickened her pace and pointed at doors on this floor. “These are guest bedrooms. And beside your Master bedroom, there’s a room you could use for your own purposes. The nursery and two additional rooms are on the third floor.”

My eyes rested on a door at the end of the corridor that Gaby had ignored. I headed in its direction. “What about this one?”

Gaby gripped my arm before I could turn the handle. “That’s where Mr. Cavallaro keeps his first wife’s things.”

I had trouble keeping a straight face. “Of course,” I said instead. It couldn’t be locked or Gaby wouldn’t have stopped me from opening it. I’d have to return alone, and find out more about the woman who was casting such a huge shadow on my marriage.

One hour later I showed Aria into the living room. It felt strange to act like the mistress of the house; as if I was an impostor. Aria looked tired when she sank down on the sofa beside me. Dark shadows spread under her eyes. I supposed she had a longer night than I did.

“Coffee?” I asked her. Gaby had set up a pot on the table, as well as assorted cookies.

“God yes,” Aria said, then smiled apologetically. “I didn’t even ask you about your night. You probably got less sleep than me.”

I poured her coffee and handed her the cup as I tried to come up with a reply. “I slept okay,” I said evasively.

Aria watched me curiously but she didn’t push the matter. “So have you and Dante had the chance to get to know each other better?”

“Not yet. There wasn’t any time.”

“Because of us?” Aria asked worriedly. “Luca and your husband have to discuss a few things regarding Matteo’s and Gianna’s wedding.” I could hear the strain in her voice.

“Gianna’s still not happy about it.”

Aria laughed into her cup. “That’s an understatement.”

“Maybe she just needs a bit more time. I remember how scared you were before your marriage to Luca and now you two seem to get along just fine.” Of course I knew that appearances were deceiving. I didn’t know what went on behind closed doors.

“I know, but both Luca and I wanted to make it work. Right now, I think Gianna’s main goal is to make Matteo so sick of her that he cancels the wedding.”

“Not every couple works well together,” I said quietly.

“I’m sure you and Dante will make it work. You are both always so poised and controlled.”

I snorted. “I’m not nearly as poised as Dante.”

Aria smiled. “He is a bit cold on the outside, but as long as he thaws when he’s around you, everything’s alright.”

“So Luca isn’t always this scary?” I joked.

Aria’s cheeks tinged red. “No, he isn’t.”

Seeing Aria’s happiness gave me hope. If she could make it work with someone like Luca, then I could make it work with Dante.

Luca's and Dante's conversation lasted longer than expected and I was starting to worry. They weren't exactly friends, but eventually they emerged and we decided to have lunch together. That's why Zita had prepared a lamb roast after all.

We settled down at the table. Unlike this morning, Dante didn't sit at the head of the table. Instead he and I sat on one side while Luca and Aria took the seats across from us. The tension between Dante and Luca was palpable, and I started to wonder if lunch was really the best idea. Fortunately, Zita served food only moments after we'd sat down, so we were busy enjoying the lamb, which lifted the spirits at least for a short while, but the moment our plates were empty things went downhill quickly.

Dante's face was even colder than usual. He looked as if it had been carved out of marble. Luca didn't look much happier, but the hardness of his mouth was accompanied by a fiery fire in his eyes. I glanced between them, but it was obvious that they didn't have anything else to say to each other beyond what had been discussed during their meeting.

Aria gave me a beseeching look.

As the hostess, it was my job to salvage the situation. "So when's the wedding?"

Dante made a dismissive sound. "If things progress as they do now, never."

"If things progress as they do now, there will be a red wedding," Luca said sharply.

My eyebrows shot up, and Gaby who'd come in with a new bottle of wine froze.

"There won't be a red wedding," Aria said. She turned to Dante. "You could give Matteo another bride from the Outfit."

I almost choked.

"Aria," Luca said in warning. "Matteo won't accept another bride. It's either Gianna or no one." He turned his hard gaze on Dante, who looked unimpressed. "I'm sure the Boss has enough control over his Familia to make sure Gianna complies."

I waved Gaby toward the table. Maybe wine would distract the men from ripping into each other.

“I’m not concerned about the extent of my control. There are no members of the Outfit trying to overthrow *me*.” He bared his teeth in a smile that sent a shiver down my back. The two men looked like they were seconds away from pulling guns. I wasn’t sure who’d go out as the winner in such a fight. They’d probably both die, and plunge the Outfit and the New York Familia back into open war with each other.

Luca rose, pushing back his chair in the process. Gaby, who had been about to fill his glass, yelped and dropped the wine bottle, her hands raised protectively in front of her face. For a moment, nobody moved. Dante stood as well. Only Aria and I were still sitting, almost frozen on our chairs.

“Don’t worry about New York. Just make sure you hold up your part of the bargain,” Luca snarled. He held out a hand and Aria took it, rising from her chair. “We need to catch a flight.” She gave me an apologetic smile.

I straightened, then glanced at Gabi. She still stood paralyzed beside the table, red wine pooling around her shoes. “I’ll show you out,” I said to Luca and Aria. As I led them into the lobby, Dante followed close behind as if he was worried Luca would do something to me, which was highly unlikely.

Dante and Luca didn’t shake hands, but I hugged Aria tightly. I wouldn’t let our husband’s fighting get in the way of our friendship. Or at least I’d try. If things really went downhill between Chicago and New York, I wouldn’t even be allowed to talk to Aria anymore. I watched them drive off, then I turned around to Dante who was still standing behind me. “What was that all about?”

Dante shook his head. “My father should never have agreed to marry the second Scuderi daughter off to New York. This won’t end well.”

“But things between Aria and Luca seem to be going well, and the Outfit has worked together peacefully with New York for years now.”

“Theirs was a marriage of convenience, but Matteo Vitiello wants Gianna Scuderi because he’s gotten it in his head that he needs to have her. That’s not a good base for a decision. Emotions are a liability in our world.”

I blinked. Again his cool reasoning. “Have you never wanted something so badly you would have done anything to have it?” I knew it was the wrong question the moment the words left my mouth but I couldn’t take it back.

His cool eyes met mine. “Yes. But we don’t always get what we want.” He was talking about his wife. He wanted her back.

I swallowed hard and nodded. “I should call Bibiana. I want to meet her tomorrow.”

I turned around and headed up the stairs, feeling Dante’s gaze on me the entire time. I was glad he couldn’t see my face.

CHAPTER SIX

After my short call with Bibiana, I'd retired into the library. It was stocked mainly with non-fiction and old classics, nothing I was usually drawn to, but I didn't want to go in search for Dante, nor did I want to ask my mother if she wanted to come over. She would have thought something was wrong, and even though that was probably the case, I didn't want her to find out. She'd been so happy since she found out I was going to be Dante's wife. I didn't want to ruin it for her by admitting that Dante couldn't care less about my presence.

I grabbed a book that taught basic Russian. The only languages I spoke were Italian and English. I might as well get familiar with the language our enemies spoke, and it would keep me occupied in the hours Dante was busy ignoring me.

Eventually, the growling of my stomach lured me in the direction of the kitchen. It was already almost seven but nobody had called me for dinner. As I entered the kitchen, I found Zita, Gaby and two men gathered around the wooden table, eating dinner together.

I hesitated in the doorway, unsure if I should enter, but then Zita glanced my way and I couldn't back out anymore. I slipped inside, feeling acutely overdressed in my sleek brown dress. Everyone turned my way, and the two men rose immediately. They wore gun and knife holsters over their black shirts. Both were in their late thirties, and probably the guards.

"The Master has already had dinner in his office," Zita informed me.

"I was busy reading anyway," I said, hoping I sounded indifferent. I focused on the two men still standing and watching me. "We haven't met yet."

I strode toward them and I extended my hand to the taller man with a buzz cut and a scar in his eyebrow. "I'm Valentina."

"Enzo," he said.

"Taft," said the other man. He was a couple of inches smaller but much bulkier.

"Can I join you for a quick dinner?" I might just as well try to get familiar with the people I would see every day in the next few years, maybe longer.

Both men agreed at once. Gaby, too, seemed excited about the prospect of my presence; only Zita had trouble hiding her disapproval. "Are you sure this is what you want?" She gestured at the spread of cheeses, the Parma ham and the lovely Italian bread.

"I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't," I said as I took the seat beside Taft. He held up a bottle of wine. I nodded and took one of the rustic wine glasses from a tray at the end of the table. The wine was delicious and so was the food. I kept my eyes on Gaby, who thankfully wasn't drinking wine. Taft and Enzo didn't look at her in any way that would suggest they were interested in her, which calmed me further, but I couldn't forget the look of fear on her face when Luca had jumped to his feet. Of course he was a scary guy on the best of days, but there had been more. I had a feeling that Gaby had learned to fear men. I only needed to find out why. Taft and Enzo stopped after their second glass of wine; they still had guard duty until the morning and could hardly do their job drunk, but Zita and I emptied the bottle. With alcohol in her bloodstream, Zita seemed much nicer. Or maybe my own tipsiness made me blind to her rudeness. Either way, I enjoyed myself thoroughly. The men knew how to tell dirty jokes, and soon forgot that I was practically their boss.

After another particularly lewd joke that had Gaby hiding her face in her hands and me laughing like I hadn't laughed in a long time, the door to the kitchen opened and Dante stepped in. His eyes did a quick scan of the room until they settled on his men, then me. His jaw tensed as he glowered at Taft and

Enzo. “Shouldn’t you be outside keeping guard?” Dante asked in a dangerously quiet voice.

Both men stood at once. They fled the kitchen without another word.

“Gaby and I should head home too. We’ll clean the kitchen tomorrow,” Zita said as she grabbed her coat and put it on. “Come on, Gaby.” Gaby shot me an apologetic look, although she’d done nothing wrong.

Two minutes later, Dante and I were alone in the kitchen. I had done nothing forbidden, so I had no intention of apologizing. I emptied my red wine, my eyes on Dante, who seemed to become perfectly still as he watched me. Preparing to pounce, it shot through my head. I rose from my chair. In a standing position, at least, I didn’t have to tilt my head all the way back to look Dante in the eyes.

“Why did you eat with Enzo and Taft?”

I almost laughed. “Gaby and Zita were there too.” Was he jealous? Or did he think I was distracting the men from work?

“You could have eaten in the dining room.”

“Alone?” I asked in a challenging tone.

Dante advanced on me, and despite my best intentions I froze. “I don’t play games, Valentina. If there’s something you don’t like, then say it and don’t try to provoke me.”

He stood so close, the spicy scent of his aftershave flooded my nose. I had to fight the urge to grab him by his lapels and pull him in for a kiss.

“I wasn’t trying to provoke you,” I said matter-of-factly. “I was hungry and I didn’t want to eat by myself, so I decided to eat in the kitchen.”

“You should keep your distance to the guards. I don’t want people to misconstrue your friendliness with something else.”

I took a step back. “Are you accusing me of flirting with your men?”

“No,” he said simply. “We would have a different kind of conversation if I thought you were flirting with them.”

I raised my chin, unwilling to let him intimidate me, no matter how intimidating he was. “I won’t eat alone.”

“Would you prefer we have dinner together every night?”

“Of course, I do,” I said exasperatedly. There were many things I wanted to do together with him at night. “We are married. Isn’t that what married people do?”

“Did you and Antonio eat together?”

“Yes, unless he was away for work.” Or had a date with his lover Frank.

Dante nodded, as if he was filing away the information. I’d heard someone once say that he had a photographic memory, which made him a difficult opponent to outsmart, but I wasn’t sure if it was true.

I softened my voice. “What about you and your first wife? Did you eat together?”

I could practically see his defenses coming up. A veil of cold emotionlessness seemed to slide over his face. He pushed up his sleeve, revealing his gold watch. “It’s late. I have an early morning with meetings in our casinos.”

“Oh, sure.”

“You don’t have to go to bed if you’re not tired.”

“No, the wine’s making me sleepy.” We both walked out of the kitchen and headed upstairs. This time Dante disappeared in the bathroom first. I rummaged in my drawer for a skimpy satin camisole and matching panties that barely covered my butt. Maybe that would get Dante’s cold blood boiling.

I nervously paced the bedroom, wondering if tonight would be the night. Maybe yesterday had been a sort of grace period. The door of the bathroom opened and Dante stepped back into the bedroom. Like yesterday he was naked from the waist up. I allowed myself a few moments to admire his body. Even the scars didn’t make him any less gorgeous. If possible they

added to his sexiness. Dante paused and I quickly tore my eyes away and rushed into the bathroom.

I took a quick shower and brushed my teeth before I slipped into my lingerie. *Showtime*. I stepped out of the bathroom. Dante was already in bed, his iPad in hand and back propped up against the headboard. He looked up, eyes wandering the length of my body, lingering on all the right places. Anticipation mixed with nerves filled me as I slowly walked toward the bed, making sure Dante got a good look at me. He hadn't looked away yet, but he hadn't put down his iPad either. I stretched out beside him, my back against the headboard. I didn't bother pulling the covers up. I wanted Dante to see as much of me as possible.

I met his gaze. As usual his eyes were unreadable, but they weren't quite as cool as usual. He set the iPad down on his nightstand and I almost sighed with relief, but then he shifted and lay down. Confused, I did the same, but I rolled onto my side, facing his way. He hadn't turned the lights out yet. That had to be a good sign, and I knew he kept glancing toward my breasts. If I was more experienced, I would have initiated things, but I worried about revealing my inexperience to Dante if I risked it. If he made the first move, I could go along with him and would hopefully appear like the experienced woman I was supposed to be.

Dante tore his gaze away, closed his eyes and crossed his arms in front of his stomach. His jaw was locked tightly. Was he angry? He looked like he was on the verge of bursting. Maybe he didn't like that I was being so forward and practically shoving my breasts into his face. Maybe he preferred his women demure and scared of their own shadow.

Frustrated, I rolled onto my back as well. "What happened to Gaby?" If we didn't have sex, we might as well talk. Anything was better than the awkward silence.

Dante kept his eyes closed. "What do you mean?"

"She said she's been working for you for three years, but she's only seventeen. Shouldn't she be going to school?"

Dante's eyes peeled open, cool and blue, and firmly focused on the ceiling. "Three years ago we attacked two Russian clubs as retribution. They're making the majority of their money with human trafficking. The women in their clubs are mostly sex slaves. Women and girls who were kidnapped and then forced into prostitution. When we took over the two clubs, we had to figure out what to do with the women. We couldn't let them run around Chicago after what they'd witnessed."

My stomach turned. "You killed them?"

Dante didn't even twitch. "Most of them were illegals. We sent them back into the Ukraine or Russia. The others were relocated. Those who wanted to work in our clubs, we kept."

"So what about Gaby?"

"She was a child. The younger girls we found were sent to families, where they could work as maids or cooks."

"Or become mistresses," I said, because I had no doubt that some Made Men couldn't let their hands off a helpless girl under their roof.

Dante frowned. "Even among Made Men, pedophilia isn't tolerated, Valentina."

"I know, but Gaby doesn't exactly look like a child anymore, nor do the other girls you captured, I presume."

Dante fixed me with a hard glare. "Are you suggesting I touched Gaby?"

"She almost died from fear today when Luca moved. Maybe one of your men..."

"No," Dante said firmly. "She hasn't been abused in any way since she came into this house. She's under my protection. My men know that."

"Okay." I believed him, and I also believed that none of his men dared to go against Dante's direct orders. If Gaby was under his protection, she was safe. "I bet those girls would have made you a lot of money. There's a reason why the Russians kidnap young girls. Why the qualms? It's not like the

Outfit hasn't its own clubs with prostitutes, and it's not like those women can just stop working for the mob whenever they want." I was honestly curious. Dante was a killer after all.

"The Outfit isn't in the business of sex slaves. The women in our clubs start working for us on their own free will and they know that they'll be bound to us forever. We make enough money with our casinos and drugs, we don't need sex slaves or illegal racing like the Russians and the Familia in Las Vegas."

"What about New York, do they deal in sex slaves?"

"No. That's really only the Vegas Familia. I'm not saying that there aren't voices in the Outfit who would like to change that, but as long as I'm Capo that won't happen."

"That's good," I said.

Dante's eyes softened for a moment but then he turned away and extinguished the lights.

"Good night," I whispered. I was still disappointed that Dante didn't touch me, but at least he'd talked to me as if we were equals, not like I was a brainless woman who didn't need to know anything about the business.

"Good night, Valentina," Dante said into the dark. There was something in his voice I couldn't identify and I was too tired to try.

CHAPTER SEVEN

If I'd thought last night's chat with Dante would make him reconsider our seating arrangements during breakfast or even make him want to talk to me, I'd been horribly wrong. Like yesterday he disappeared behind his newspaper after a quick greeting. I wasn't in the mood to fight for his attention. I was too confused and hurt by his continued disinterest in me. I only picked some fruit and drank a cup of coffee before I decided to excuse myself. Dante didn't even look up from his newspaper when I walked out.

Usually I would have asked him if he wanted me to take one of his men as guard with me to Bibiana's house, but I was too angry. I had a driver's license. Antonio had wanted me to get one after we married, which sadly wasn't the norm for men in our world. After I'd put on a coat and grabbed my purse, I walked into the garage. Dante had given me keys for the house and the garage. Of the three cars parked in the garage, the Mercedes GL was the least attention-grabbing. I took the car keys from a hook at the wall and slipped into the car. It took me a moment to find the button in the dashboard that opened the garage, but finally I steered the car outside and down the driveway. A guard I didn't know patrolled the fence but didn't try to stop me when I opened the gate with a press of another button. I drove off the premises and the gate closed automatically behind me.

It felt good to drive again, even if I didn't like Chicago traffic, but it had been too long since I had been allowed to drive by myself. My parents had been too determined to keep me under their watch after Antonio's death to let me go out alone. I knew the way to Bibiana's home by heart, had driven it countless times over the years, and it took me only ten minutes from Dante's mansion.

Bibiana's and Tommaso's house was much smaller than that of Dante and of my parents. They didn't have a long driveway where I could have parked. Instead I had to leave my car in the street. Not that I was worried someone might steal it. Streets where mob members lived were usually quite safe, unless you counted the risk of attacks from the Bratva or Triad. I walked up to their front door, noticing one of Tommaso's men sitting in a car on the other side of the street and watching the house. Tommaso wasn't as highly ranked as the men in my family or the Scuderis, but he wasn't a simple soldier either. He always kept a guard near the house to watch over Bibiana, or what I suspected: to make sure she didn't run away.

He didn't stop me, only tilted his head in a gesture of respect. I rang the bell. Bibiana opened the door, then glimpsed behind me. "Where are your guards?"

I shrugged. "I didn't take any. Dante never said I had to take guards."

"Won't you get in trouble?" she asked as she closed the door and led me into their living room. As usual her husband wasn't home. Bibiana of course didn't mind. She'd gained a couple of pounds since Tommaso had been forced to work long hours. Now she didn't look quite as emaciated anymore.

"Why would I?" I said. I wasn't even sure if Dante cared if I left the house without protection. He seemed too busy with God knows what.

Bibiana gave me a worried look. "You should be careful. Dante is a dangerous man. He always looks so calm and in control, but Tommaso told me Dante doesn't tolerate disobedience."

That didn't really come as a surprise, but I couldn't really disobey him if he didn't give me an order in the first place. "I'm not one of his soldiers."

I sank down on the sofa. Bibiana took a seat beside me, curiosity filling her face. "So how was your wedding night?"

My lips twisted. "I slept well," I said sarcastically.

Bibiana blinked at me. "Huh? That's not what I meant."

“I know what you meant,” I said, frustrated. “Nothing happened. Dante gave me the cold shoulder.”

“He didn’t try to sleep with you? What about last night?” I wished Bibiana didn’t sound so stunned; it made me feel even worse. As if somehow it was my fault that I hadn’t managed to make Dante want me. I knew she didn’t mean it that way.

“He didn’t even kiss me. He just lay down beside me and said he had an early day, and then he turned off the light and fell asleep. What kind of wedding night is that?” I leaned my head against the backrest. “I don’t get it.”

“Maybe he was really tired,” Bibiana said tentatively.

I gave her a look. “Do you really believe that? He looked fit enough to me. And what about yesterday? Was he tired then too?” I bit my lip. “Do you think it’s still because of his wife?”

Bibiana twisted a strand of her brown hair around her finger nervously. “Maybe. I hear he adored her. They were the dream couple in Chicago.”

I’d never paid much attention to Dante and his wife in the past, but I remembered seeing them together at social gatherings. I remembered thinking they looked like they belonged together. There were few couples in our world who looked like they were together because they loved each other. Most of them married for convenience, but with Dante and his wife Carla you had seen that they were meant to be together. Fate was cruel for ripping them apart, and even crueler for throwing me into the arms of a man who’d already found the love of his life once. “Maybe he hasn’t been with a woman since his wife died. That could be the reason why he didn’t try to consummate our marriage.”

Bibiana avoided my gaze and reached for a macaron on the silver étagère on the table in front of us. She shoved it into her mouth and chewed as if it afforded all of her concentration. Dread filled my stomach. “Bibi?”

Her eyes darted to me, then they were gone again. She swallowed and reached for another sweet, but I grabbed her

wrist, stopping her. “You know something. Did Dante have a lover since his wife’s death?”

Bibiana sighed. “I didn’t want to tell you.”

The words hollowed me out. “Didn’t want to tell me what?”

What if Dante had a steady lover? Someone he couldn’t marry for social and political reasons. Maybe that’s why he chose me, a widow, because he didn’t want to screw over a poor innocent girl like that. My head started spinning.

Bibiana gripped my hand tightly. “Hey, it’s not that bad. Calm down. You look like you’re going to pass out any moment.”

I reached for a green macaron and stuffed it into my mouth. The sweet taste of pistachio spread on my tongue and I relaxed slightly. “So spill before I come up with more horrible scenarios.” I could tell Bibiana wanted to ask what kind of scenarios had popped into my mind, but thankfully she didn’t. Bibiana knew me well enough to guess anyway. We’d been friends since we could both walk. She was the cousin closest in age to me and we’d always spend every free minute together. Even in school we’d been inseparable, except for the classes that we didn’t share because I was a year ahead. But it was difficult to make friends among normal people, so we’d stuck together. That hadn’t changed after we’d married. If possible we’d gotten even closer because we both could share our marriage troubles with each other without having to worry that anything would get out.

“My husband told me Dante frequented Club Palermo for a while.”

I froze. Club Palermo was a mob-owned night club with pole dancing, striptease and prostitution. Bibiana’s husband was the manager of the club. “What do you mean?”

Bibiana’s cheeks turned red. She looked like she regretted ever having brought it up. “He used prostitutes for sex.”

I pressed my lips together, trying to figure out why this hurt so much. Only last night we’d talked about prostitution, why hadn’t he mentioned something? I could almost see how that conversation would have gone. “Not anymore, right?”

“Oh no, it happened a while ago. About a year after his wife’s death, he had a rough stretch and came into the Club a couple of times per week to ‘let off some steam’, as Tommaso put it.”

It had been way before our marriage, and yet the knowledge that Dante had slept with prostitutes, but hadn’t even tried to kiss me hurt a lot. “So he has no problem sleeping with other women, he just doesn’t want to sleep with me.”

“No, that’s not true. And like I said, he hasn’t visited Club Palermo in a long time.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t change the fact that he didn’t want to sleep with me. With Antonio, I could deal with it. I knew it was nothing personal. He wasn’t into me, because he wasn’t into women, but what is the reason for Dante’s disinterest? Maybe he doesn’t find me attractive.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Val. You’re gorgeous. He’d have to be blind not to be into you. Maybe he didn’t want to push you? You lost your husband less than a year ago and Dante doesn’t know that you and Antonio were never a real couple.”

“It’s not like I don’t miss, Antonio,” I said defensively. “I miss our conversations, and that he confided in me.”

“I know you do, but you don’t miss him physically. Maybe Dante thinks you’re not ready to get physical with another man.”

I pondered that. It seemed like a logical explanation, and Dante was nothing if not a logical man. On the other hand, Dante was a Made Man and they usually didn’t suffer from excessive sensitivity. “How many men do you know who would care about that?”

Bibiana grimaced. “Tommaso definitely wouldn’t.”

“See,” I said, feeling even more miserable. “It’s unlikely that Dante’s conscience is keeping him from sleeping with me. He’s a killer, and a skilled one at that. He’s the Boss for a reason.”

“That doesn’t mean that he doesn’t have some scruples. I know that he strongly disapproves of rape.”

I snorted. “He disapproves?”

Bibiana gave me a stern look. “I’m serious. Dante told his men that he’d castrate anyone who would use rape as a form of torture, punishment or entertainment. Tommaso hates it because he thinks he should be allowed to do whatever he wants with the women in Club Palermo.”

I didn’t doubt that for one second. I’d lost count of the times he’d raped Bibiana. Of course, nobody called it rape in our world because she was his wife and her body belonged to him. Thinking about it made me sick. “Okay, so he has qualms about a couple of things.” It made sense after what he’d said about Gabi yesterday. Maybe he really didn’t want to initiate anything with me because he thought I was still mourning Antonio.

“Maybe you should make the first move?” Bibiana said.

“I pranced around him half-naked yesterday, what else can I do?”

“You could kiss him. Touch him.”

I knew how to kiss. Antonio had kissed me a few times. It had been nice. For me at least, so kissing Dante was definitely something I could do. “Touch him? Do you mean his you know what?”

Bibiana flushed. “I guess so? I never initiated anything with Tommaso but he always wants me to touch him there and blow him.” Bibiana took another macaron. I knew she hated talking about sex with Tommaso. Who wouldn’t?

“Touching him can’t be too hard.”

“Oh, it’ll be hard.”

I laughed. “Dirty jokes already? The macarons really get you going.”

Bibiana giggled and shook her head. “You will be fine. Even if you blow him, you can’t do anything wrong. Use no teeth and you should swallow, that are the two most important things.”

I had to hide a grimace. I wasn’t so much disgusted by the idea of giving Dante a blowjob, but the image of Bibiana having to

swallow Tommaso's stuff made me want to hurl.

"The good thing about blowjobs is that most men love them, so if you're not into the actual sex, then you can keep them happy that way."

I really hoped it didn't come to that. I knew the only orgasm Bibiana's ever experienced was by her own hand, but I really didn't want to share her fate.

"I'll give it a try tonight," I said, suddenly feeling more hopeful.

"Call me tomorrow. I want to know how it went."

"Don't worry, you'll be the first to know if something exciting happens."

That night when Dante joined me in bed I gathered all my courage, scooted over to him and touched his naked chest. It was warm and firm. Dante stilled under my touch, his brows drawn together as he watched me. I leaned forward and pressed my lips against his. Dante deepened the kiss immediately, his tongue slipping into my mouth. This kiss was unlike the ones I'd experienced with Antonio. Dante claimed my mouth, making me tremble with the need for more. I let my hand slide lower, down his stomach. He drew back and gripped my hand, stopping its descend. He shook his head, his eyes alight with something dark and angry. "You should sleep now, Valentina."

I stared at him, uncomprehending. What had just happened? He'd kissed me as if he wanted to devour me and then he stopped without an explanation. I snatched my hand out of his grasp, fighting the tears of anger rising into my eyes. Without a word, I rolled around, my back to Dante, and closed my eyes.

"I know you went to Bibiana without protection today. That won't happen again. You can go wherever you want. You can even drive yourself, but from now on I want one of the guards at your side when you leave this house. It's too dangerous for

you outside these walls,” he said as if he hadn’t just kissed me, as if he wasn’t the slightest bit affected by what we’d done.

I pressed my lips tightly together. I wanted to scream in frustration, but instead more tears pooled in my eyes.

“Understood?” Dante asked after a while.

I had to bite back a scathing comment. “Yes, understood.”

We both fell silent again, not touching, as if we were two strangers forced into the same bed by accident. And that was actually too close to reality than I liked. The throbbing between my legs was almost unbearable, but it was clear that Dante wouldn’t do anything about it. I wasn’t sure what to do anymore.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dante was a very private man. That's what everyone always told me, which is why I knew how wrong it was for me to breach his privacy. But I needed to see the things Dante kept hidden behind the door Gaby had showed me. Maybe it would help me understand him better.

It was early afternoon, and Dante had left for a meeting at one of the Outfit's underground casinos. I wasn't sure when he'd be back but if the last two days since my embarrassing attempt at seduction were any indication, probably not before eight. It was silent in the house. Today was Gaby's day off, and as usual Zita was busy in the kitchen and avoiding me.

I pushed down the handle and stepped into the room where Dante kept his dead wife's memorabilia. The curtains were drawn, casting the room in darkness. I fumbled for the light switch but when I pressed it, nothing happened. I switched it back and forth a few more times until I decided that it was futile. After a moment of guilt-induced hesitation, I carefully felt my way toward the window and pulled the curtains apart. Coughing from a billow of dust from the heavy fabric, I blinked against the sudden light, my eyes tearing up. I wiped them quickly before I dared to look around.

There wasn't a lamp attached to the ceiling, only a string of abandoned wires. No wonder the switch didn't do anything. Dust particles danced in the air and a musty smell penetrated my nose. A fine layer of dust had gathered on every surface and even the ground. My footsteps were clearly visible. Briefly, panic threatened to overwhelm me. There was no way I could hide my presence in the room if my footprints were all over the floor, but the way the room looked nobody had set foot inside in a long time, not even Dante, so he'd never find out.

The room was cluttered with furniture and cardboard boxes. There was a dark wood wardrobe, two dressers and a king sized four-poster bed. Slowly realization dawned on me. This must have been the master bedroom Dante and his wife had shared before her death. At least, I wasn't sleeping in the same bed where Dante had made love to his dead wife. I tiptoed toward the wardrobe. I wasn't even sure why I was trying to be quiet but it felt almost sacrilegious to be in this room. I opened the wardrobe and was hit by the smell of disuse and old clothes. Two dozen dresses hung from padded pink hangers, everything from long ball gowns, over pretty cocktail dresses to casual summer dresses. Some of them looked like they might have belonged in my wardrobe, but of course they were too small for me.

I brushed my fingers over the fabric. It was strange to think that the person who had worn them was long gone, buried in cold dark earth. With a shudder, I closed the door and stepped back, but my curiosity wasn't sated yet. I opened one of the drawers of the cupboard beside the wardrobe and found it stacked with underwear. I quickly closed it. That definitely felt too personal. I couldn't rummage in the lingerie of a dead woman, even if it might tell me something about Dante's preferences. Hesitantly, I approached the second dresser. I opened the top drawer. It was empty except for two photo albums. I had a feeling the drawer had once belonged to Dante, stacked with his socks and briefs a long time ago. When he'd changed bedrooms, he'd left everything behind, even his own dresser.

Ignoring my qualms, I picked up the two albums and carried them over to the bed. A dark red duvet was spread out over it, which was also covered in a thin layer of dust. After a futile glance around in search for another option, I sat down on its edge with the albums in my lap. The first album was white except for the image of two entwined gold rings. With trepidation, I opened the album.

A much younger Dante and a young, small woman in a wedding dress were in the first photo. Dante wasn't looking into the camera. His sole attention belonged to his bride, and the adoration plainly visible in his eyes made a lump rise into

my throat. The cold calculation and emotionless sophistication were absent in his face. Maybe because he was still young, but I had a feeling it had just as much to do with the woman at his side.

It was a simple picture and yet it conveyed everything a wedding should mean: love, devotion, happiness.

I hadn't seen the photos of our wedding yet, but I knew what I wouldn't find in them. I swallowed the rising emotion. I browsed the other photos, childishly hoping to find Dante with a look of the same indifference he always showed me. But even though his expression became more guarded and controlled in later photos, his feelings for his wife were hard to miss. They'd been married for almost twelve years, but they'd never had kids. I knew his wife Carla had fought cancer in the last three years of her life, but I wondered why it hadn't worked before then. I'd never seen her with a baby bump, or heard rumors of a miscarriage. Not that it was my business.

Maybe I should count myself lucky that Dante didn't have kids with Carla or I'd have them here to despise me as well. I hated the bitterness of that thought and quickly abandoned it. I didn't want to get petty, or act jealous toward a dead woman. She'd never done anything to me and it was horrible that she had died so soon.

I picked up the second album. At its end, there were a few photos that showed Carla with a wig and no eyebrows. Dante's arm was wrapped protectively around his thin pale wife. Sorrow washed over me. How was it to lose someone you loved so much?

I had loved Antonio as a friend, but it didn't even come close to what Dante and Carla must have had, and if I was being honest I'd often resented Antonio in the end for keeping me in a loveless golden cage so he could hide that he was gay.

The door flew open, making me jump, and Dante stepped in, his expression thunderous. Before I could move, he was in front of me and ripped the photo album from my hand. He flung it onto the bed, his furious eyes burning into me. "What are you doing here?"

He grabbed my arm and pulled me to my feet, bringing us so close our lips were almost touching. "This room is none of your business."

I squirmed in his hold. "Dante, you're hurting me."

He released me, some of the anger replaced by cold disapproval. "You shouldn't have come here." His eyes darted to the album that lay open on the bed with the photo of his sick wife and him. He took a step back from me, the last of his fury gone and replaced by scary calm. "Leave."

I didn't need to be told twice. I quickly rushed into the corridor, scared by Dante's outburst, but honestly terrified by the odd calm that had taken over his face at the end. Dante stepped out of the room and closed the door. He didn't look at me again. I watched his back as he walked away and headed down the stairs. Wrapping my arms around myself, I closed my eyes. I didn't like to give up on things. I was stubborn, too stubborn as my mother always pointed out, but I seriously considered accepting that the marriage between Dante and me wouldn't work. There was only so much rejection I could take.

We hardly spoke during dinner, and when we did it was about current news that were the last thing on my mind. Dante didn't mention what happened, and I definitely wouldn't. After Zita had cleared away our plates with a too curious glance in my direction, Dante stood. "I have more work to do."

Of course he had. I nodded mutely and headed toward the library. If things kept progressing the same way they did now, I'd speak Russian in no time, I thought bitterly as I picked up the textbook. I couldn't focus. The letters swam before my eyes and eventually I gave up. I left the room and cast a glance in the direction of Dante's office. There wasn't any light spilling out from under the door. Maybe he had gone to bed?

I headed toward the staircase but stopped when I saw movement from the corner of my eye. The door to the living room was open, giving me a clear view of Dante who sat in the wide armchair in front of the dark fireplace, drinking what looked like whiskey. I considered going to him and

apologizing, but his brooding expression made me decide against it. Instead I quietly ascended the staircase and slipped into the bedroom.

Under the warm stream of the shower, my fingers found their way between my legs again, but I wasn't really into it and eventually abandoned my attempt to find release. Seeing those old photos had ripped open old wounds and created new ones. They had reminded me of the few times in the beginning of our marriage that Antonio had brought his lover Frank into our home to have sex with him. It was one of the safest places for them to meet, but despite my best attempts to be okay with it, I'd suffered because Antonio's interaction with Frank spoke of the love and desire he could never give me. Seeing Dante with his wife today had felt the same way. I hadn't stood a chance against Frank back then, and I was increasingly sure that I didn't stand a chance against a dead wife either.

Bibiana had advised me to leave Dante alone for now and hope for the best, and during our call that had actually seemed like a decent solution, but after a day of crushing silence I couldn't take it anymore.

When I saw Dante sitting in front of the unlit fireplace that evening, drinking his whiskey, something snapped in me.

My first husband hadn't wanted me because he preferred men, and my second because he couldn't let go of a dead wife and because he preferred to brood over a glass of whiskey. I knew Dante had had sex with other women after his wife's death. Bibiana had confirmed that he'd frequented her husband's club for a while, so why didn't he want to have sex with me? Maybe something about me repulsed men. That was the only logical explanation, and if that was the case I needed to know and stop wasting my time on foolish hope and ludicrous seduction plans.

I stepped into the living room, making sure my heels made an audible sound on the hardwood floor. Dante kept his gaze on the dark fireplace. Of course, he ignored me. He almost always did.

My arms started to shake from restrained anger. “Is it true that you frequented Club Palermo?”

Dante frowned. He swirled the whiskey around in his glass, not looking up. “It belongs to the Familia, but that was a long time before our marriage.”

Bibiana had said the same, but his casual tone and dismissive body language were too much. He acted as if none of this was my business.

Anger burned through my veins. I could feel my temper bursting out of its cage, but I was too shaken to reign it in. “So you didn’t mind the company of prostitutes but you can’t take your own wife’s virginity?”

That got his attention and now I wished it hadn’t. His blue eyes shot up. I wished I could shove the words back into my mouth, wished he’d return his gaze to his whiskey. Maybe there was even a flicker of confusion on his face for a millisecond before the schooled mask of calm slipped back on.

I turned around without another word, shocked by what I’d said, terrified of the consequences my outburst might bring down on me. The clink of a glass being set down on mahogany sounded behind me, followed by the creak of the armchair. My throat closed up, iciness filling my chest. My fingers clutched the banister as I made my way upstairs. His steps followed after me, calm and measured. I suppressed the desire to look back or even run. Dante couldn’t see how shaken I was. What was I going to do?

He’d demand answers. Answers I couldn’t give him, promised never to give anyone. But Dante was The Boss. Nobody got to that position without knowing how to acquire information. He wasn’t going to torture me, or even raise a hand to me. But I was sure he didn’t need to.

I slipped into the bedroom, then stopped in front of the window overlooking the premises. There was nowhere else to run. The bed was looming in the corner of my eye. I closed my eyes when I heard Dante enter the room and close the door behind him. His tall form appeared behind me in the reflection of the window. I lowered my gaze to my fingers, which were

tracing the cool marble of the window sill. Sometimes I felt like I could handle everything, like I was the sophisticated, controlled woman Dante probably wanted, but in moments like this I felt like a stupid girl.

“Virginity?” he said without a hint of emotion. The gift of all men in the Familia. If you grew up with violence and death, you learned to seal your heart off from the world. Why didn’t they teach the same to the women of the Familia? “You and Antonio were married for four years.”

I didn’t turn around, didn’t even dare to breathe. How could I have let that slip? My mistake could ruin Antonio’s reputation, and mine for agreeing to his plan. Being gay was a punishable crime in the mafia, and I’d pretty much helped Antonio committing it. I focused on breathing, on the feel of the marble against my fingertips, on the trees bowing down to the wind outside.

“Valentina.” This time a faint hint of strain carried in the word.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” I whispered. “It was just a figure of speech. I didn’t mean it in the literal sense.” I was a good liar, didn’t have a choice but to become one. “As you said, Antonio and I were married for four years. Of course I’m not a virgin.”

His hand touched my hip and I practically jerked forward a foot, colliding with the window sill. I gasped in pain, then bit down on my lip to swallow the sound. I’d been longing for Dante to touch me for days and now that he did I wished he’d go back to ignoring me.

Dante was watching me in the window. “Turn around,” he said in a low voice. I didn’t even hesitate. His voice, even without menace and danger in it, carried too much authority for me to resist. I steeled myself as I faced him. I focused on the buttons of his white dress shirt. His eyes would undo me. Every muscle in my body was tense like a bowstring. He put a finger below my chin and lifted it, forcing me to meet his gaze. Again the touch. Why would he touch me now while before he’d gone out of his way to keep distance between us?

I swallowed. Be strong, Valentina. The wish of a dead man is sacred. Don't break your promise.

And it wasn't only Antonio I was protecting. I'd lived a lie, had as good as lied to Dante himself since our first encounter, had led him to believe one thing while the other was true. I wished there was emotion on Dante's face, even anger; I could have dealt with that, but he gave nothing away. Always the iceman.

"So your words downstairs were simply meant to provoke?" He sounded calm and curious, but I didn't let that fool me. I had all his attention.

I couldn't say anything. The way he'd worded it made it seem really bad. What was he thinking? I wished I had the slightest hint if he was in a good or bad mood.

He won't hurt you, Valentina.

He hadn't done anything to me so far, but we hadn't exactly interacted all that much in the few days of our marriage. And two days ago he'd been scary as hell when he'd found me with the photo albums.

The tension became too much and a tear slid out of my right eye, trailed down my cheek and caught on Dante's finger that was still pushing my chin up. He frowned, releasing my chin. I immediately tore my gaze away from him and took a step back.

"Why are you crying?"

"Because you scare me!" It burst out of me.

"Until today you never seemed scared of me." He was right. Except for a few brief occasions, I hadn't been scared of him, but I knew with a man like him I should be scared.

"Then maybe I'm a good actress."

"You have no reason to be scared of me, Valentina," he said calmly. "What are you hiding?"

"Nothing," I said quickly.

He closed his fingers around my wrist loosely. “You are lying about something. And as your husband I want to know what it is.”

Anger flared up. This time it was quicker than caution. “You mean as the Boss you want to know, because so far you haven’t exactly been acting like my husband.”

He tilted his head, scrutinizing every inch of my face. “Why would you still be a virgin?”

“I told you I’m not!” I said desperately, trying to slip out of his hold, but he tightened his fingers slightly, only so I couldn’t escape. He pulled me against him, my chest pressed against his. Air left my lungs in a rush as I looked up at him. My heart pounded in my chest, my temples, my veins. And he felt it. That was why he was holding my wrist.

“So,” he said in a curious tone. “If I were to take you toward our bed right now.” He took a step, forcing me closer to the huge four-poster bed. “And would make you mine, I wouldn’t find out that you lied to me just now.”

I’d wanted nothing more than for him to want to finally bed me, and now that he used it as a threat to find out the truth, I wished I’d never wanted anything from him in the first place. Would he feel that I had never slept with a man? I’d only talked with other women about their experiences, but I didn’t know if men could feel if a woman was a virgin.

“You wouldn’t because you won’t take me to that bed now.”

“I won’t?” He raised one blond eyebrow.

“No, because you wouldn’t take me against my will. You disapprove of rape.” The words Bibiana had used still sounded strange from my lips, and it wouldn’t even be against my will. I’d thrown myself at Dante for days now; he must have known that I wanted him. Still wanted him despite everything. My body was practically humming with longing for his touch.

He chuckled. I’d never heard him laugh. It sounded empty. “That’s what you hear?”

“Yes,” I said more firmly. “You gave the Underbosses direct orders to tell their men you’d castrate anyone who used rape as

a way of revenge or torture.”

“I did. I think a woman should never have to submit to anyone but her husband. But you are my wife.”

“But still.” My words were a bare whisper, filled with uncertainty.

He nodded once. “Yes, still.” He let go of my wrist. Relief flooded me. “Now I want you to tell me the truth. I’ll always treat you with respect, but I expect the same from you. I don’t tolerate lies. And eventually, we will share a bed and then, Valentina, I’ll know the truth.”

“When will we ever share a bed like husband and wife, and not just sleep beside each other? Will that ever happen?” I snapped. My stupid mouth, always running free.

His expression flickered with something I couldn’t place. “The truth,” he said simply, but with authority. “And remember I will know eventually.”

I lowered my face. Would the truth make things worse between Dante and me? It would definitely be much worse if he found out I’d openly lied to him if we ever consummated our marriage.

“Valentina,” Dante said tersely.

“What I said in the living room was the truth.” I was relieved and terrified when the words were out of my mouth. How much longer could I have kept up the lie anyway?

Dante nodded, a strange look on his face. “That’s what I thought, but now I ask why?”

“Why is it such a surprising thought that Antonio didn’t want me? Maybe he didn’t find me attractive. You obviously don’t, or you wouldn’t spend most evenings in your office and your nights with your back to me. We both know that if you wanted me, if you found me at all desirable, I’d have lost my virginity in our wedding night.”

“I thought we agreed on the fact that I wouldn’t force you,” he said. I searched his eyes because there had been a trace of anger in his voice.

“But you wouldn’t have to force me. You are my husband and I want to be with you.” Heat flooded my cheeks. “I’ve practically thrown myself at you for days now and you didn’t even notice my body. If you found me attractive, you would have showed some kind of reaction. I guess I’m just lucky to always end up with husbands who find me repulsive.”

“You aren’t repulsive to me,” he said firmly. “Trust me, I find you attractive.”

I must have looked doubtful, because he closed the distance between us. “I do. Do not doubt my words. Whenever I catch a glimpse of the creamy white skin of your thighs.” He traced my thigh through the high slit of my nightgown. I had to stifle a surprised gasp at his sudden proximity. Goosebumps erupted all over my body. “Or when I see the outline of your breasts through the little nothings you wear to bed.” He ran his finger gently over the lacy edge of my nightgown right above my breasts. “I want to throw you onto our bed and bury myself in you.” He dropped his hand, back to not touching me again.

My eyes widened. “You do? Then why—”

He cut me off with a finger against my lips. “It’s my turn to ask questions and you promise not to lie.” I stared at him, nodding. Had he said the truth? Did he want me?

“Why did Antonio not sleep with you?” Dante asked, still standing so close that his warmth flooded my body. I could hardly focus.

“I promised him not to tell anyone ever.”

“Antonio is dead,” Dante said. He didn’t sound sorry. “I’m your husband now and your promise to me is more important.”

I averted my eyes. He was right, but I’d carried the truth with me for so long, it had almost become a part of me. Dante would probably figure it out eventually.

“Valentina?”

“Antonio was gay,” I blurted. Finally the burden of Antonio’s lie didn’t rest on my shoulders anymore. It felt freeing.

Dante seemed stunned for a moment. “I never suspected anything. Are you sure?”

I rolled my eyes. “He brought his lover home sometimes.”

“Why didn’t he sleep with you to create offspring? That would have fended off possible suspicions.”

I hesitated. “I don’t think that would have worked. You know...” I gestured in the general direction of Dante’s groin.

“He was infertile?”

I flushed. “No, he mentioned once that he couldn’t get one up with women.” The words rushed out of me.

“Who was his lover?” he asked casually, but I knew better than to trust his outward disinterest. His eyes revealed a hint of his fervor to get an answer from me. I had a feeling that he was trying to use my emotional state against me but I wasn’t that easily thrown off my guard.

I shook my head. Frank was still alive and still very much not a member of the Familia. If Dante found out that Antonio had dated an outsider... I didn’t even want to consider the consequences. He wouldn’t stop until he found the person and I knew exactly what would happen to Frank then.

“I can’t tell you. Please don’t make me.”

Dante touched my upper arms without any pressure. “If it’s someone from the Familia I need to know, and if he isn’t...the Familia comes first. I need to protect all those setting their trust in me.”

He would kill Frank, and maybe even have him tortured first to make sure Frank gave away the names of all the people who knew about Antonio.

I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if that happened. I wanted to close my eyes against Dante’s piercing gaze but I knew it would have been a bad idea. “I can’t tell you. I won’t. I’m sorry, Dante, but no matter what you do, I won’t give you a name.”

Anger flashed across Dante’s face, fiercer than yesterday. This was real fury and for the first time it was directed at me. What

had Bibiana said? Dante didn't tolerate disobedience. "You've lived a sheltered life, Valentina. I've had hardened men say the same to me, and in the end they gave up all their secrets."

"Then do what you have to do," I snapped, pulling away. "Cut off my toes and feed them to me. Beat me, burn me, cut me, but I'd rather die than be responsible for the death of an innocent man."

"So he's an outsider."

I stared at him agape. That's what he gathered from my outburst? God, he was good at this. He hadn't even hurt as much as a hair on my head and had already got information out of me. "I didn't say that."

But it was too late. Dante smirked. "You didn't have to." His eyes were keen and eager. He looked like someone on the hunt. "If Antonio took his lover home, I assume you've met him and know his name and can describe him to me."

I pressed my lips together, glowering at him. Not in one million years would I tell him what he wanted to know. I'd already said too much. I'd have to be more vigilant in the future.

Dante came closer again. He touched my hips and despite everything, the simple touch sent tongues of fire through my belly. I wanted him, maybe more than ever before. What was it that made dangerous men so irresistible?

"Aren't you loyal to me?" he murmured. "Don't you think you owe me the truth? Don't you think it's your duty? Not only because I'm the Boss of the Outfit but because I'm your husband."

"And you owe me a decent wedding night. As my husband it should be your duty to take care of my needs. I suppose we both will have to live with the disappointment."

His mask cracked. Without warning, he gripped me and whirled me around so my back was pressed against his chest.

"I'm a patient hunter, Valentina," Dante said in a low voice that I could feel all the way to my core. "You will tell me what I want to know eventually." His hand slid down my side to my

thigh, lingering there for a moment, making me hold my breath in anticipation and confusion. He pushed up my nightgown as he stroked his way up to my panties. I shivered and pressed myself even harder against his chest. The crisp fabric of his shirt rustled at the contact. It was a strangely erotic sound. Dante slipped a finger under the lacy fabric of my panties and brushed my folds. I whimpered, already wet and aching from our argument and his closeness. I wasn't sure why he was suddenly touching me or what had brought on that change of mind, and I didn't care as long as he kept touching me. He dipped his fingers between my lower lips and his breathing deepened. "You want this?"

"Yes," I hissed, rubbing myself shamelessly against his hand, but his other arm came around my waist and held me fast. "I want you, Dante."

"Tell me what I want to know." He stroked his fingers slowly back and forth. The slow sensual assault was making me breathe heavily. I was already so close. My body had waited too long for this. My legs started to shake and I threw my head back against Dante's shoulders. "Don't you want me?" I panted, instead of what he wanted to hear. His finger brushed my clit as if in answer, and I came apart with a small cry as ecstasy exploded through me. Dante's arm around my waist kept me upright, strong and unyielding, as I trembled under my climax.

"I do. That's the problem," he growled. Suddenly, he let me go and stepped back. I gripped the window sill to stop myself from falling to the floor. I whirled around, my pulse still pounding in my veins, but Dante was already on his way out of the room.

What had just happened?

CHAPTER NINE

Dante didn't come to bed that night. I waited for a long time, unable to fall asleep, too confused by what had happened. He'd admitted he wanted me, had touched me, but then he'd pulled back. Why? When I woke the next morning, his side of the bed was untouched, and when I walked into the dining room thirty minutes later, his newspaper lay discarded beside a clean plate.

Worried, I approached his office. It was silent behind the door but that didn't mean anything. I knocked, then entered without waiting for a reply. I didn't want to give Dante the chance to put up his defenses. Maybe if I caught him by surprise again we'd get somewhere. Dante sat behind a black wood desk and narrowed his eyes when I entered his office for the first time. Maybe he felt like I'd encroached on his personal space again by entering.

My eyes settled on the silver picture frame on his desk. A picture of his smiling first wife. It sat in the middle of the desk as if he'd hastily put it down when I'd opened the door. There weren't any other photos in the room.

My stomach lurched violently. Trying to hide my hurt, I met his disapproving gaze. "What are you doing here?"

"This is my home too, isn't it?"

"Of course it is, but this is my office and I need to work."

"You always do. I wanted to see if you were alright."

He raised his eyebrows. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Why? Because you acted very strange yesterday. One moment you're touching me and the next you can't get away fast enough from me."

"You don't know anything about me, Valentina."

I interrupted him. "I know, and I want to change that, but you keep pushing me away."

Dante stood and ran a hand through his hair. "I never wanted to get married again. For good reason." Again he made it sound as if this marriage had been my idea, as if I had had any say in the matter.

"I didn't ask you to marry me!" I had enough. I turned on my heel and stormed out of his office, making sure I slammed the door as hard as possible. It was a childish thing to do. I could hear it open again and Dante's steps behind me. He caught up with me and grabbed my wrist, pulling me to a stop.

"You have an impossible temper," he growled.

I glared at him. "That's your fault."

"This marriage has always been for logical reasons. I told you that."

"But that doesn't mean we can't try to make it a real marriage. There are no logical reasons why we shouldn't sleep with each other. You slept with prostitutes, so why can't you sleep with me?"

"Because I was angry and I wanted to fuck someone. I wanted it rough and hard. I wasn't looking for closeness or tenderness or whatever it is you want. I took whatever pleasure I wanted, and then I left. What you're looking for, I can't give you. The part that was capable of it died with my wife, and it won't come back."

"You don't know what I want. Maybe we want the same thing." My voice was a bare whisper.

He scoffed. "I can see in your eyes that it's not true. You want to make love, but I can't give you that. I do want to possess you, want to own every part of you, but not for the reasons you want me to. I'm a heartless bastard, Valentina. Don't try to see anything else in me. The business suit and emotionless face is the thin layer covering up the fucking abyss that's my soul and heart. Don't try to glimpse beneath it, you won't like what you find."

I was too stunned for a comeback. Instead I watched him return to his office.

I spent the rest of the day considering my options. Dante didn't want emotional attachment. He didn't even want tenderness. Rough and hard, that were the words he used for the sex he'd sought from prostitutes. He was right. It wasn't what I wanted, but over the years I'd learned that sometimes you had to settle for the lesser evil to reach some form of happiness. I wanted to have sex with Dante, maybe not the same way Dante did, but who said I wouldn't like it? And he hadn't exactly said that he'd be rough with me. He'd only said that I shouldn't expect fluff and loving gestures from him. I could live with that, couldn't I?

I wanted to be desired by him. Maybe that would be as good as being loved by him.

It was almost time for dinner but I was hungry for something else as I undressed quickly in our bedroom before I could change my mind and slipped a bathrobe on. I couldn't walk naked through the house.

My stomach fluttering with nerves, I headed downstairs and toward Dante's office. I knocked, and this time I waited for him to call me in as I didn't want to start this seduction attempt with a fight, even if our argument in the bedroom yesterday had been a huge turn-on for me. He opened the door without a word. His cool eyes slid over my body. I wondered if he could tell that I was naked beneath the thin material of my bathrobe.

"Can I come in?"

He stepped back and I walked in. I could hear the door close and then Dante strode past me and turned to me with an inquiring expression. "What's going on?"

"I made up my mind."

"About what?"

I opened my bathrobe. "About us. About sex."

Dante's eyes darkened. Clenching his jaw, he shook his head and began to turn away. "You should leave."

"Don't turn your back on me. Look at me. I think I deserve at least that small decency, Dante."

Tension radiated off of him when he turned around to me. He didn't move closer but he was looking at me. For once, he didn't pretend I was invisible. His blue eyes wandered over my exposed body.

My nipples hardened in the cool air of his office but I didn't close my silk bathrobe, despite the overwhelming urge to cover myself against Dante's cold scrutiny. His gaze lingered on the apex of my thighs slightly longer than on the rest of my body and a small burst of hope filled me. How much control did he have? "Am I your wife?"

His brows drew together. "Of course, you are." There was the hint of something I couldn't place in his voice.

"Then claim your rights, Dante. Make me yours."

He didn't move, but his eyes slid down to my erect nipples. His gaze was almost something physical, like a ghost touch on my naked skin, but it wasn't nearly enough. I wanted to feel his fingers between my legs again, wanted to feel them on every inch of my body, wanted to come until I lost track of all my problems.

I wasn't above begging. I knew I almost had him, could see in the tight set of his shoulders, in the unhinged look in his eyes. I wanted to have sex tonight. "I have needs too. Would you prefer if I found a lover who relieved you of the burden to touch me?" I wasn't sure I could go through with it. No, *I knew* I couldn't go through with it, but this act of provocation was my last option. If Dante didn't react to that, then I didn't know what else to do.

"No," he said sharply, something angry and possessive breaking through his perfect mask. He pressed his lips together, jaw locked, and walked toward me. I shivered with need and excitement when he stopped in front of me. He didn't reach for me but I thought I detected the hint of desire

in his eyes. It wasn't much, but enough to embolden me. I bridged the remaining distance between us and curled my fingers over his strong shoulders, pressing my naked body against his front. The rough material of his business suit rubbed deliciously against my sensitive nipples and I let out a small moan. The pressure between my legs was almost unbearable. Dante's eyes flashed as he looked down at me. Slowly he wrapped an arm around me and rested his palm flat against my lower back. I wished he'd move it lower. I didn't think I'd ever been so desperate for someone else's touch, not even when I had to listen to Antonio fuck Frank in the room next door.

Sweet triumph flooded me. Dante wasn't ignoring me now.

I tilted my head up to look into his face. Whatever desire I'd thought I'd seen was gone, his walls up and impenetrable. I stood on my tiptoes, desperate for a real kiss, but Dante's hand on my back tightened and he didn't angle his face down, making it impossible for me to brush my lips against his. He didn't want me to kiss him. I couldn't take this anymore. I'd thrown myself at him naked, had offered him my body and myself, and still he refused me. I wrenched away from him, feeling dirty and cheap. Avoiding his eyes, I whirled around, clutched my bathrobe closed and hurried out of his office. I crossed the lobby and ran up the stairs. This was it. I wouldn't try again. I'd have to accept that Dante didn't desire me enough, that he wouldn't sleep with me for whatever silly reasons he'd listed until it was absolutely necessary to produce an heir.

I stumbled into the bedroom and flung myself on the bed. For a moment, a rush of despair and sadness gripped my body, but I didn't let it win. I'd survived a marriage with Antonio. I could survive a loveless marriage with Dante. Some day I would have beautiful children I could love and who would love me back and until then I could deal. I wasn't the first woman in our world who had to live with a cold bastard as a husband, and I definitely wouldn't be the last. At least, I didn't have an abusive asshole like Tommaso as a husband. That had to count for something.

And I would just have to take care of my other needs as I had done in the last few years. I rolled onto my back. I was still angry, still embarrassed and disappointment, but I was also still aroused. I closed my eyes and slipped my hand down my body and between my legs. I began stroking myself, imagining it were Dante's fingers teasing me again, remembering the brief flicker of desire in his eyes that I'd probably imagined. My breathing came faster as I caressed my sensitive nub. I was getting closer. A moan slipped out of my lips, and there was a sharp intake of breath.

My eyes flew open and I stared at Dante; he stood in the doorway, hand on the door handle and eyes on me. For once they didn't look cold. God, how long had he been watching me?

I jerked my hand out between my legs, mortification slamming through me like a wrecking ball. I clutched my bathrobe against my chest and scrambled for the edge of the bed. I couldn't stay in a room with Dante, not after what he'd just seen. I'd embarrassed myself enough today, but Dante barred my way, suddenly in front of me. His tall form loomed over me. I threw my head back to meet his gaze. They were more animated than I'd ever seen them. He looked almost angry. "No," he said quietly.

I wasn't quite sure what he meant. Then he leaned over me until I lay flat on my back again and he towered above me. His jacket fell open and encased me to both sides like a soft prison. I searched his face. I could feel myself getting more aroused from his proximity and the look on his face. He braced himself on one arm and brought one knee between my legs, forcing them apart.

My heart pounded in my chest. Would he finally do what I'd been waiting for? For a long time he only glared down at me, and I almost expected him to pull away again but instead he cupped my breast and I arched my back up with a needy moan. His eyes slid down to his hand, and he pinched my nipple, harder than I'd anticipated. Pleasure cursed like lightning through my body all the way down to my center. I needed him to touch me there, needed it more than food, than water, than

air. Dante pinched and tugged my nipple, his eyes dark and intent as he watched me. I'd caressed my breasts a few times over the years, but it had never done much for me, but Dante's firm touch sent sweet tingles through my core. He leaned down, the rough fabric of his jacket brushing my side, and captured my nipple between his lips.

I arched up with a mewl, pressing my breasts against his face, but Dante's hand gripped my hip and held me down. He sucked my nipple hard again, making arousal pool between my legs. I squirmed, tried to rub myself against his knee still wedged between my thighs, but his hand kept me in place. Not being able to move as I wanted to wasn't something I'd ever considered something I'd find sexy, but boy had a I been wrong.

Dante bit down lightly on my nipple, his teeth lightly scraping my sensitive skin, and I almost came. I'd already been so close before. He released my nipple, which was red and hard from his attention. His eyes on my face, he trailed his hand down my side. I couldn't look away from his beautiful cold face, mesmerized by the heat in his eyes. There was something dark and feral and angry in them. He hooked his fingers under my thigh and pulled my legs further apart. I trembled with anticipation. "Tell me now if you want this," he said in a low voice. How could he even doubt my desire for him?

"I want this."

"Good." He drew my other nipple into his mouth with a dark smile and flicked his tongue over it as he slid two fingers over my mound and pressed down on my clit. Spears of pleasure shot from my core and through my entire body. It felt as if I was coming apart at the seams as my orgasm rocked through me. I rocked my hips desperately. Dante watched me calmly as I shivered beneath him, his fingers still pressed against my sensitive nub. Slowly I came down from my high. I was embarrassed that I'd come this fast, when he'd barely touched me, but I lifted my chin defiantly despite my embarrassment. If he hadn't let me wait for so long, I wouldn't be this easily aroused.

Dante released a long breath through his nose, his jaw flexing. Then he eased his fingers between my folds. His nostrils flared as he slowly pushed two fingers into me. My muscles tightened around him and I sucked in a quick breath at the foreign intrusion. It wasn't painful, only slightly uncomfortable. I'd occasionally put one finger into me but never understood the appeal. This however was amazing. Dante lowered his gaze and watched his fingers as they moved in and out of me. It felt incredible, better than I had ever made myself feel. His steady motion made me pant.

"You are incredibly tight. I can't wait to be inside you," he said roughly. I wished he'd keep talking in that sexy growl, but all I managed to bring out of my lips were whimpers and sighs.

I was close to a second orgasm, could feel it building deep in my core, could feel the familiar spikes of pleasure echoing through my body. Dante quickened his thrusting and flicked his thumb over my nub, and I dug my heels into the mattress as my climax hit me, this one even stronger than my first. I was still enjoying the last waves of my orgasm when Dante pulled out his fingers. I made a sound of protest but Dante straightened with a look of utter want in his eyes. I was startled by the intensity, by the resignation and darkness mingling on his face. He looked like a man who'd lost a battle with himself. He stood tall and regal, motionless except for the rise and fall of his chest as his eyes took in my naked body. Then he reached up and removed his jacket. It slid to the ground with a soft rustling. He didn't get rid of his vest and shirt though. He unbuckled his belt with practiced ease, the movement drawing my eyes to his ground and something I hadn't thought I would ever evoke in a man. My eyes were frozen on the bulge in his pants. Surprise washed over me, followed by intense triumph. "You're hard," I whispered.

Dante's gaze flickered to me and he paused with his hands on his fly. "I'm capable of getting an erection. I'm not impotent." There was a hint of amusement in his voice, but it was almost drowned out by the raspy desire in it.

“That’s not what I meant. But I thought you weren’t attracted by my body.”

Dante gave me a strange look. “Don’t worry. Your body would leave few members of the male species unaffected.”

Still so in control, so poised, and yet...I glanced at his crotch. Dante unzipped his fly and pushed down his pants. His black boxers did little to hide the impressive bulge. I wanted to reach out and touch him, but I held back and watched instead as my nerves slowly started to rise. I’d waited so long for this. Finally, he pulled down his boxers. His cock was fully erect, thick and long, and a strange sense of satisfaction filled me. After years of being ignored first by Antonio and then by Dante I finally got a reaction from the latter at least.

“Scoot up,” Dante said in his Boss voice, a voice that brooked no argument, not that I would have dreamed of protesting. I crawled back immediately and slid my arms out of my bathrobe, then I lay completely naked in front of Dante. He made no move to remove his shirt and vest. He climbed on the bed and moved between my legs, pushing them apart, spreading me open for him. I wondered why he didn’t undress fully. Was it some sort of barrier he wanted to keep between us? Or was I overthinking? He looked more than a little sexy in his vest, but still...

Any thought fled my mind when Dante guided his erection toward my center and nudged my opening. He felt hard and big, but I’d been waiting long enough for this. I was ready. Dante propped himself up on his arms, then shifted his hips and slid in a few inches until I tensed and cried out. I squeezed my eyes shut, and drew in a few harsh breaths through my nose to calm my racing pulse. The pain was already fading but he wasn’t all the way in yet. After another deep breath, I opened my eyes and found Dante staring down at me. His jaw was tight. For once he didn’t seem quite so calm and in control. I could tell how much he was struggling to keep still. I raised my arms and grabbed his shoulders, then I gave a small nod. Dante rocked his hips and pushed all the way in. I arched up, clamping my mouth shut to keep any sound in. I breathed out through my nose, as I forced my body to relax.

Dante peered down at me, his brows drawn together and a muscle in his cheek twitching. "Tell me when I can move," he gritted out, surprising me with that show of compassion.

I wiggled, impatient, desperate to have Dante move in me. There was still a slight discomfort but that too was getting better. "It's okay."

He nodded, then pulled almost all the way out before sliding back in. My muscles gripped his cock tightly, still trying to get used to the invasion, but I could feel a hint of pleasure behind the soreness as Dante fell into a slow rhythm. I wished he would come down on his forearms so we could be closer but he braced himself on his palms. I guessed I shouldn't have expected anything else. He'd warned me, but at least he was careful and hadn't pounced on me.

I let out a small moan as he hit a delicious spot deep inside me. Dante sped up, his thrusts becoming more forceful. His face was filled with concentration. He didn't make loud noises, but his panting was coming quicker. I loved watching him, loves seeing the small twitches and flickers in his cold mask when his pleasure spiked.

"It's been a while for me," he warned in a rough voice. "I don't know how long I can last." I was surprised by his admittance. I didn't think he was a man who readily admitted to anything resembling weakness in his mind. I was glad for that small flicker of humanness.

"It's okay." It wasn't as if I was going to come again. I could tell that I was close to the limit of what I could take.

His movements became even faster and less restrained, almost jerky and unhinged. And then he finally lowered himself to his forearms, bringing us closer than we'd ever been, our bodies pressed against each other as if we were one, and he really started to pound into me, hard and fast, and my soreness turned into an insistent twinge, but I didn't even care. I could feel his heat through his clothes. His vest rubbed my sensitive nipples, and yet I wished I could have felt his skin, but even that wasn't important right now. All that mattered was that Dante was finally making me a woman, finally allowing

closeness. Maybe this was a new beginning, the real start of our marriage. I clung to his back and buried my face in the crook of his neck as Dante thrust into me a few more times.

He groaned, his body tensing and then I felt his erection expand in me, followed by the strange sensation of him coming in me. I pulled back, wanting to see his face. For once the mask was gone. He looked disheveled, approachable, less unforgiving somehow. He shuddered once more before he lowered his face and brushed his lips against mine, his tongue sliding over my lips lightly. I eagerly opened my mouth for him. Our tongues met and I was in heaven. I'd waited for our first real kiss for so long and now it was happening. He tasted perfect, and I loved the feeling of his weight on top of me, and the sensation of his softening cock inside me. Maybe everything would change now. I slipped my hands under his shirt and ran them up and down his back, my fingers finding every scar, mapping his body. He felt so warm and strong. He felt like he was mine.

Dante stopped kissing me, and our eyes met, and suddenly his walls went back up. I could see it happening. Like the curtains closing at the end of a play. He raised himself up to his palms. "Are you okay?" he asked, already pulling out of me in a swift motion. I gasped at the brief pain and Dante hovered over me for a moment, a hint of hesitation in his expression, but it was gone quickly and he straightened, holding up his shirt so it didn't get dirty. "I need to get cleaned up," he said matter-of-factly as if he was telling me the weather forecast, as if we hadn't just slept together. He watched me an instant longer, then he disappeared in the bathroom. A couple of minutes later, the water started running.

I didn't move from my spot in the middle of the bed, desperately trying to sort out my emotions. There was relief over finally having gotten rid of my virginity, but there was also a strange sense of sadness. I wasn't someone who needed to be coddled but I wished Dante would have stayed with me a bit longer after he was done.

Disappointment washed over me and I closed my eyes against the rising emotion. I wasn't sure how long I lay like that but I

was startled by Dante's cool voice above me. "Here."

My eyes fluttered open. He stood beside the bed, already dressed in his briefs again and was holding a washcloth out for me.

I took it from him and pressed it against my sore flesh, ignoring the blush that crept up into my face. Wouldn't he lie down with me for a little while at least? I really wanted him to hold me, even if he had to pretend to care for me, but I couldn't bring myself to ask him.

"Would you like me to touch you, so you can come too?"

I stared at him. He sounded so matter-of-fact. I shook my head. I wanted his closeness, but not like this, not now. He nodded and grabbed the pants from the ground, then put them on. "I have some more work to do and I need to visit another of our casinos. I'll be home late. You don't need to wait up for me."

I nodded, couldn't have said a word if I'd tried.

After another lingering glance at my naked body, Dante walked out of the room. I listened to his retreating steps. When I couldn't hear him anymore, I sat up, and winced at the twinge between my legs. I stared down at the washcloth in my hand, which had a few pink spots on it, and a silly sense of accomplishment filled me. It banished the disappointment over Dante's coldness. For now I wanted to be happy. I'd finally gotten what I wanted. Now that Dante had given in once, I was sure he would have a much harder time holding himself back. And I was determined to make it as hard as possible for him. I'd gotten my first real taste of pleasure; from now on I wanted to experience it over and over again.

CHAPTER TEN

I didn't even notice Dante slip into bed that night, but his side was rumpled, so he must have slept in it. I spent a few more minutes in bed, feeling somehow lighter now that I'd ripped down one barrier between Dante and me, but I wasn't kidding myself into believing that sex would change our relationship fundamentally. I didn't think Dante would suddenly act like the loving and caring husband I'd wanted when I was younger. It was strange. While Antonio had never been able to give me what I physically needed, he'd been my friend and confidante. We'd spent time together when he wasn't busy and I'd never felt overly lonely in our marriage. I had a feeling the same wouldn't be true in my second marriage. Even if Dante now satisfied my sexual needs, it would take some time before we'd become partners.

After I'd showered and dressed in my favorite plum pencil skirt and a white blouse, I headed into one of the guestrooms that now harbored a few of my moving boxes that I hadn't unpacked yet. It took me a few minutes of rummaging before I found what I was looking for, a wooden case where I kept a few things from Antonio. Inside were our wedding bands, which I'd never much cared about. The most important thing in the case was a thin photo album that held mostly pictures of the time before Antonio and I had married. Back then we'd only been friends without the added weight of having to pretend to be more. Antonio looked nothing like Dante. He had dark hair and dark eyes, and wasn't very tall. He'd never wanted me to wear heels so I wasn't taller than him. But appearances weren't the biggest difference between my first and my second husband; that was their aura. Where Antonio had been open and friendly, someone people perceived as a likeable albeit ordinary buddy type, Dante oozed power and cold. Nobody would mistake him for a follower. If Dante

hadn't been born into our world, he'd probably be a governor or senator. He would have done well in that world. But as with all of us, our birth determined our fate. We were all bound to the mob. I glanced down at a photo of Antonio and me on a horse. It had been the first time for me. We both looked young and happy, hopeful. Antonio hadn't been inducted into the mafia back then, had still thought he could find a way out of his duty.

I put the wooden case back down before I could dive deeper into sad memories. I straightened, took a deep breath and left the guest bedroom. There was no going back, but it wasn't always easy to move forward, especially if you didn't know which way to go. But I needed something that gave my life meaning and structure, something I could put my energy into, as long Dante didn't let me into his life.

I missed having a purpose, a daily task. I wasn't someone who could sit at home all day, or spent our going over the newest piece of juicy gossip. I wanted a job, but even during my time with Antonio, people had found it strange that he'd allowed his wife to work. I worried that it would be a scandal Dante wasn't willing to risk.

My steps slowed as I headed toward the door he hid behind almost all the time. I wasn't only nervous because I wanted to ask Dante for a job. What if things would be awkward and strained between us now that we'd slept together? Though I really wasn't sure how our relationship could take a further nosedive down. We were already barely being civil to each other. Apart from throwing dishes at each other's heads and bickering constantly there really was no way our interactions could change for the worse. And to be honest, I wasn't even sure if I wouldn't prefer heated fights to the cold ignorance I was getting now.

Gathering my courage, I knocked at his door.

"Come in," Dante called after a moment.

I entered his office. My eyes immediately darted to the spot on the desk where the photo of his first wife had been, but he'd removed it. I didn't think he'd thrown it out. It was probably

hidden away in one of the drawers in his desk, and I didn't expect him to forget her, to throw away every piece that reminded him of her, to banish her memory from his heart; I only wished he'd leave a little room in his heart for me.

Dante looked up from a pile of papers. "What do you need?" He didn't say it in an unfriendly way, but it was obvious that he was busy. His demeanor toward me hadn't changed at all, despite what we'd done yesterday. As my eyes took in his dark gray vest, my body remembered the way it had rubbed against my nipples yesterday and I almost crossed the room and threw myself at Dante again. But I didn't want to appear too needy. Our next sex would have to be initiated by Dante. Of course, maybe he'd go back to not touching me again. I pushed that worrisome thought aside as I closed the door after me and walked closer to the desk. "I have something I'd like to discuss with you."

Dante scanned my face. "Go on."

"I want to work. When I was married to Antonio I helped him run his family restaurants too." They'd always only been a way to launder money, but I'd enjoyed the task. I'd greeted guests and organized arrangements when someone booked a wedding in our restaurants. After his death, his younger brother had taken over. A woman alone couldn't possibly handle the task. That's what our men thought anyway.

Dante leaned back in his desk chair with a frown. "Work? What did you have in mind?"

I was glad he was open to the idea and didn't shoot it down immediately. Emboldened by this, I walked around the desk and settled on its edge. Dante's eyes flitted to my legs but too quickly they returned to my face. "I'm good at organizing and event planning. I'm also very good with people." I was also good at leading people but I kept that to myself. Made Men didn't like women who enjoyed being in charge. Somehow most of them couldn't get it in their heads that a strong woman at their side didn't make them less of a man.

Dante nodded. "I need someone for one of our casinos."

I tried to curb my excitement. I didn't even know what Dante had in mind for me yet. "Riverboat or underground?" The casinos on land weren't official of course. It was still illegal to run a casino in Chicago that wasn't situated on a riverboat, but the mob and Dante in particular were working to change that. He could be very convincing, and it certainly didn't hurt that a few senators were regular customers in the Outfit's casinos and brothels. Not that legalization would mean that the Outfit would make their secret casinos public. They'd lose too much money if they did.

"Underground. I don't want you in the public eye."

That made sense. People knew I was Dante's wife. It would attract too much attention if I worked in one of the Riverboat casinos. "I know a little about gambling, and I'm sure I can learn everything else I need to know very quickly." Actually, the only knowledge about gambling I had were the rules of Texas hold'em that Antonio had taught me, but Dante didn't need to know that.

There was a knowing glint in Dante's eyes. "The only thing you need to know about gambling is that the bank always wins."

I raised my eyebrows. "Really. What kind of job do you have in mind that requires next to no knowledge about the workings of a casino?" I assumed Dante wouldn't let his wife be one of the girls behind the bar that encouraged men to drink more.

"I want you to manage one of the smaller casinos of the Outfit. The man who's been in charge for the last three years was laid off yesterday."

Was that what Dante had done after he'd slept with me? For a few moments, Dante and I stared at each other as if we'd been thinking the same thing, but now wasn't the moment to bring up sex. "Laid off?" I echoed his words, which I was fairly sure were an euphemism for something else, since it was hard to be fired from a position in the mob. If you messed up in one mob business, it was unlikely that you'd get a position somewhere else, unless you were someone's son, nephew etc. And if you weren't...

Dante watched me closely when he said his next words. “I found out that he filled his pockets with Outfit money.”

“So you killed him,” I finished for him. I knew how things worked in our world. Maybe I’d never been allowed in the midst of it, but I heard the stories.

Dante nodded. “I did. And if you want you can have his job.”

“I never managed a casino before. Why are you giving such an important position to me?”

“The assistant manager can do the main work in the background. I need someone to make the high rollers feel welcome.”

I stiffened. Dante of course picked up on it. “I think you misunderstand me.” He stood and stepped in front of me. He rested his hands lightly on my thighs, making my skin tingle even through my tights. “You are mine, Valentina.”

I had to bite back a smile at the possessiveness in his voice. “So what exactly am I supposed to do?”

He removed his hands and strode over to the window, hands in his pockets. “I want you to welcome the high rollers. Show them to their table. Introduce them to our complimentary girls.”

“Complimentary girls, really?”

Dante turned. “Gambling and prostitution are our main businesses, and both can easily be combined.”

“Okay. I can do that.” Even if the word complimentary girls made me want to tear my hair out. “That doesn’t sound like a lot though.”

“Also you organize special events. We have event nights once a month, and I think a female touch might make them more appealing. You also make sure that everything goes smoothly. I want you to be my eyes. I have a feeling I haven’t weeded out all the rotten fruit yet.”

“You want me to spy on your employees.”

“Yes. I want you to keep your eyes open.”

“Is it because you think they’ll be less cautious around me or because you don’t have anyone else you trust with the task?”

“I have enough men I trust. But you are right, I think many men will underestimate you and be less vigilant around you.” He leaned against the window sill. “I don’t trust anyone unconditionally.”

“Not even me?” It was said in a teasing voice, but Dante’s eyes became cool. “You haven’t given me reason to. You lied to me about your marriage to Antonio and you refuse to give me the name of an outsider who might be privy to compromising information about the Outfit.”

The way he worded it made me sound like a notorious liar. “I didn’t lie to you about the marriage. I told you that I’ve never been with Antonio.”

“Yes, you did, but it was a truth I suspect you gave up only because you feared I’d uncover it eventually.”

Of course he hit the nail on the head. I couldn’t deny it. He would have known I lied and that wouldn’t really have helped my situation. “Does it matter why I decided to tell you the truth?”

“It matters greatly, Valentina. Because I don’t know if you’ll be as forthcoming with future truths if you don’t feel cornered. If I counted every coerced truth as redeeming, I would have to spare every traitor who gives away his knowledge under duress.”

Under duress, what a mild word for what the Outfit did to traitors. “I know what you do to traitors, and that’s exactly why I won’t give you the name of Antonio’s lover.”

“You realize that by aiding Antonio in his deceit you became his accomplice and thus a traitor to the Outfit, and that you keep betraying the Outfit and me by withholding information.”

I pushed off the desk, unable to sit still any longer. “I know. But no matter what you think of me, I am loyal to those I care about. I was loyal to Antonio. If he were still alive, I would have taken his secret to the grave with me to protect him.”

Dante shook his head. "That's something you can't say for sure. You've never suffered through excruciating pain. Torture is a powerful motivator."

"I guess we'll never know, unless you intend to test the theory on me and try to coerce the name of Antonio's lover out of me," I said insolently.

Dante fixed me with a hard look. "Because you are my wife and because you are a woman, you are safe. You know that very well."

Because I was his wife, not because he liked me or even cared for me. "I know," I said, then because I couldn't bear the tension between us I added. "If you had a secret you needed to hide, I would keep it for you. I would try to brave torture, pain and death to hide it for you."

Dante didn't say anything, didn't even bridge the distance between us, only gazed at me with his unreadable eyes. I decided to take my exit before I said something sentimental, or before Dante could send me out. Dante didn't stop me, but I could feel his eyes on my back.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After a dinner of almost silence, except for the few snippets of conversation about my visit to the casino tomorrow, Dante had returned into his office and I had gone to the library as was becoming habit. Instead of choosing the Russian textbook, I decided to read one of the books on gambling and casinos that crowded the shelves but was distracted by the sound of male voices through the walls. They didn't sound like Enzo and Taft, so I assumed Dante was having a meeting with other members of the Outfit.

When I went to bed hours later, the halls were dark and Dante was still in his office. I guessed that meant another late night. Would Dante really make me ask for a second time of sex?

Much later, I was woken by a hand on my hip. My eyes shot open but I stared into near blackness. The curtains were drawn and allowed only a sliver of moonlight to penetrate the room. My gaze found the pale glow of the alarm clock on the nightstand. It was almost midnight. I had been asleep for less than one hour. What was wrong?

I realized Dante was pressed up against my back, his fingers stroking my hip. "Dante?" I whispered, twisting my head to peer over my shoulder, but his face was covered by shadows. He was close though. His breath fanned over my shoulder, raising the little hairs on my arms. "What's the—"

He silenced me with a fierce kiss that made me gasp. He didn't hesitate; his tongue claimed my mouth. I tried to roll over so I was facing his way, but Dante's firm chest against my back and his tight grip on my hip kept me immobilized. His kiss sent waves of arousal down my center but eventually I pulled back to draw in a deep breath. He pressed his erection against

my butt. I exhaled audibly. “Tell me you’re not sore,” he rumbled against my shoulder before he bit down lightly.

I trembled. “Not sore,” was all I managed, and it wasn’t even the truth, but I’d be damned if I stopped Dante from having his way with me.

“Good,” Dante growled before licking my throat. “Tell me to stop, or I won’t.”

I whimpered only in response because Dante had dug his cock into my butt again. I couldn’t wait to get out of my clothes and really feel him against me. I shoved my ass back for additional friction but again Dante’s hand on my hip stopped me. “No.”

“Dante, I really want to—”

His lips swallowed my words again and his fingers tightened in warning. “I want you to be silent now unless you want to tell me to stop.” He nibbled my neck. “You do what I tell you, Valentina, or you tell me to stop. There are only these two options.”

I nodded, and he must have felt it because he couldn’t possibly have seen it in the dark. I was glad Dante didn’t know how turned on I was by his commanding tone.

“Very good,” he said quietly. “You’re still going to be very tight today; that’s why we’re going to go slow and take our time making you really wet.”

I couldn’t believe the same restrained and cold Dante I knew by day was saying those things to me. I wanted to ask him why he’d changed his mind. Did one time make such a difference? Maybe he’d accepted that I knew what I wanted. “I want you to undress now.”

There was only an instant of disappointment that Dante wasn’t going to do it himself but then excitement drowned it out. He released my hip and I quickly sat up and tugged my nightgown over my head, then slid down my panties. I could feel Dante’s eyes on me. I turned to him, wondering if I was supposed to give him some sort of sign and that idea almost made me giggle, but then the bed shifted and I could see Dante getting out of bed and start to undress. Everything was in shadows but

I could make out his impressive hard-on. “Sit on the edge of the bed.”

I scooted over to his side of the bed and perched on the edge, nervous and curious and excited, and almost bursting with lust. Dante moved closer until he stood in front of me, his erection on eyelevel with me. I gasped before I could swallow the sound, realizing what he wanted to do. Bibiana’s advice shot through my mind but I wasn’t sure if Dante wanted me to act on my own accord. He cupped my cheek, his palm warm and slightly rough against my skin. “How far have you gone before me?”

I hesitated a moment, but I supposed he wanted me to answer, so I said, “I kissed Antonio a few times and he touched my breasts a few times, but that’s all I’ve ever done before you.”

Silence filled the dark room. My heartbeat accelerated, the thud-thud becoming seemingly louder by the second. I could hear Dante’s rhythmic breathing, no sign that he was sexually aroused; except for the proof straining to attention before my face. “I want you to suck my cock, Valentina.”

His thumb brushed my lips, then slipped between them, parting them slightly. He waited, and I nudged his thumb with my finger before sucking on it lightly, hoping he’d take it as the confirmation that it was. He moved even closer until his tip grazed my lips. Dante’s thumb stroked my chin, his palm still cupping my cheek. “Lick around the tip.” I darted my tongue out and trailed it around his head. Dante’s breathing hitched but that was the only sign that my actions had an effect on him. “Now lick up to the top and dip your tongue into the slit.”

I followed his orders and was rewarded by the quickening of Dante’s breathing. His thumb on my chin tightened. “Open your mouth.” I parted my lips without hesitation. I was glad for Dante’s orders. That way at least I wasn’t left to fumble around and embarrass myself. He slid the head of his cock into my mouth, so it rested lightly on my tongue. “Close your lips around me and suck lightly.”

I did as he said and he stroked my chin, then trailed his thumb up until it brushed the spot where his cock disappeared

between my lips. "I like my cock in your mouth," he said in a low voice. "And I love that it's the only cock you've ever sucked." He slid deeper into my mouth, but still not very far. "Let's see how much of me you can take." He eased himself into me inch by inch until he hit the back of my throat and I gagged. I reached out for his erection. There were still a couple of inches of him that I couldn't fit into my mouth. Dante pulled back slightly, then thrust a few times into me, his palm on my face keeping me steady. "With some practice maybe you can take all of me into your mouth, but for now this is enough." I quivered with arousal. Could someone come from giving someone else a blowjob?

Dante withdrew his erection from my mouth and stroked my lips with his thumb again. "Lie back." I let myself fall back on the mattress. Dante knelt down and wedged his hands between my knees, then pushed my legs as far apart as they would go. "Put your heels on the edge of the bed."

God, I knew what he was going to do. I'd read so many things about it, but I couldn't even imagine how it would feel.

I was glad for the dark. That way I didn't feel quite so exposed. He eased his palms under my butt and lifted me slightly. I stopped breathing when I felt his warm breath on my wet folds. Dante licked around my outer lips slowly. I bucked my hips but Dante ignored my silent pleading and kept up his torturous teasing. "Dante," I said pleadingly.

He squeezed my butt and pulled back. "No."

I pressed my lips together and then finally he trailed his tongue along me slit in one long stroke. I moaned, not caring if that counted as speaking or not. He alternated between quick and light strokes, and firm but slow licks until I was panting and on the verge of climax. My hands shot out and buried in Dante's hair, wanting to press him tighter against me. Dante resisted. His thumbs trailed up my folds and parted them. With the tip of his tongue he lightly circled my clit until I started shaking, seconds away from tumbling over the edge. He sat back without warning. It took all my self-control to stay silent.

"Turn around and get on your knees."

My eyes grew wide with surprise, but I rolled over and knelt on the bed.

“Lower yourself to your elbows.”

I did. Now my butt was raised into the air. The position felt strange, and even more exposing than the one before. Dante nudged my legs apart until I could feel the cold air on my opening from behind, and then his lips were back on my center. I cried out with pleasure as Dante dipped his tongue into me and started fucking me at a leisurely pace. I could feel every move of him in me, the slight roughness of his tongue, the way he curled the tip when he was deep in me. I dropped my face into the sheets to stop more embarrassing noises from escaping my lips, but when Dante slipped a hand around my front and began teasing my clit with his fingers, even the sheets couldn't stifle my moans and gasps. I juttied out my butt even more, my fingers scratching over the mattress as my orgasm exploded outward from my core, numbing and heightening my senses seemingly at the same time. I sucked in ragged breaths. My skin was damp with perspiration and my heart was beating frantically in my chest. I lifted my head to breathe more easily.

Dante was gone from behind me but before I could glimpse over my shoulder to see what he was doing, his fingers grasped my hips and pulled me closer to the edge of the bed. Then his erection pushed against my entrance and my body seized up with surprise and nerves.

I'd read that doggy-style allowed men to go deeper than in other positions. I was still slightly sore, and the lack of intimacy this position allowed, made it even less desirable for me. I wanted Dante's chest pressed against mine.

Dante stilled behind me, not trying to enter me. His hands slid to my butt and massaged it gently. I relaxed slightly but was still tight. I could feel how clamped up my inner muscles were. Dante bent over me and wrapped an arm around my waist before he pulled me up against his chest. I was still kneeling but now my upper body was upright and Dante held me in his arms. He snuck one hand between my legs and started teasing me again while the other found my breasts and kneaded them

lightly. I hung my head back against his shoulder, my breathing slowing. I was still tense but in Dante's embrace, I could slowly feel my muscles softening. Dante leaned forward with me a bit and guided his tip to my opening. I still clamped up, but not as badly as before. "What's the problem?" he murmured against my ear. He didn't sound impatient or frustrated, merely curious.

Embarrassment twisted my stomach. My seduction skills were obviously lacking, if I couldn't even do it doggy-style for my husband. "I don't know," I admitted quietly. "Can't you just push in?"

"Of course I can, but you're tight anyway and as tense as you're now, it'll be painful." His voice was calm, neutral even, no hint to what he was thinking about my suggestion. Dante's fingers were still between my legs, stroking and pinching lightly.

"Don't tell me you have a problem with causing other people pain," I teased in a breathy whisper as tingles of pleasure spread through my core.

"I don't," he said simply. I could feel the tension building as his fingers worked their magic between my legs. He increased the pressure on my opening, the tip of his cock sliding in, and at the same time I came hard, my muscles squeezing Dante's cock tightly. Dante leaned forward a bit more, pressing me down and my arms shot out to support my body on the bed while I was still recovering from my climax.

Dante bit my neck. "But I don't want to cause you pain." He pinched my nipple, then pushed a couple more inches into me, making me quaver from the sensations of slight pain and pleasure. "At least not more than you enjoy."

He sheathed himself completely in me, then paused a couple of heartbeats before he started to thrust into me slowly. His movements became gradually faster until I had no choice but to lower myself to my elbows or my arms would have given in. Dante straightened, robbing me of the warmth of his chest, and grabbed my hips. "Valentina, touch yourself," he demanded.

It took me a moment to understand what he meant. I brought an arm under myself and found my clit. I rubbed frantically as Dante's movements turned more forceful. He pulled out as far as he could go and slammed into me again, making me cry out his name and my fingers press down on my nub even harder. Sometimes my fingertips grazed his cock, slick with my juices, and he moaned every time they did. Encouraged by this, I angled my hand so I could stroke myself and brush his cock at the same time. As my muscles seized up under my release, Dante tumbled over the edge too with a loud groan.

He stilled behind me as his cock twitched in me a few more times, and I buried my face in the sheets. My forearms ached from propping myself up. The moment Dante pulled out of me, I rolled onto my back, my chest heaving. I could see Dante move away from the bed like he'd done last time, and then the light in the bathroom came on and he disappeared inside. He didn't close the door though. I scooted off the bed and quickly followed after him. He stood in front of the shower and turned the water on. "Are you taking a shower?" I asked hesitantly.

Dante glanced over his shoulder at me. I didn't bother covering my body. He'd seen it all. Dante didn't seem to be ashamed of his nakedness. "Yes. You can join me if you want."

Relieved, I hurried over to him. He held the glass door of the shower open for me and I slipped under the warm spray of the rain shower. Dante joined me after a moment. I took my time admiring his body. It was the first time I really got a good look at him without clothes on, and he was a sight to behold. His chest and stomach were lightly sculpted and a fine trail of dark blond hair led down to his pelvis. Dante dipped his head under the water, then turned his back to me to reach for the shower gel. There was a tattoo on his shoulder. I was surprised to find him inked at all. Somehow Dante didn't seem the type. "There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil. For to thee is this world given," I read the quote written in cursive on his skin aloud. Dante faced me, an unreadable expression on his face.

“Isn’t that a bit of a bleak outlook on life?” I asked.

He handed me the shower gel. A barrier had come up between us again now that we were no longer in bed and I wasn’t sure how to tear it down. I could see that Dante wouldn’t allow it. “I’m a man of sin, Valentina. My experience taught me that good seldom wins. If there is a devil, he’s certainly the patron of the Outfit.”

I leaned against the shower wall, frowning. “Nothing’s holding you back from being a better man.”

That cold smile was back. “Yes, my nature.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

My mother called me early the next morning to invite me over for brunch. I knew she was eager to interrogate me about my marriage with Dante. I was actually surprised that it had taken her so long to contact me. Maybe she'd wanted to give Dante and me some alone time to get to know each other. I told her I couldn't make it to brunch but would be there for teatime. I wasn't sure how long my visit to the casino would take. I chose a chic beige costume and modest heels for the occasion. I didn't want to look too sexy for my first impression. I had a feeling I would have trouble getting everyone's respect even without flashing my legs.

When I came down the staircase, Dante was already waiting in the entrance hall. As usual he was dressed impeccably in a dark brown three-piece suite and matching oxfords. His gaze flickered to me and I hoped he'd approve of my clothes. "Is this okay?" I gestured at my body.

"You look like a business woman. That's the right choice for today," Dante said with a nod. I stepped up to him. I didn't try to take his hand or kiss him, even though I wanted to.

"Only for today?"

"When you welcome our high rollers, you can dress more casually. Most of them are traditionalists, so a dress or skirt would be a wise choice."

My eyebrows shot up. "I thought you didn't choose me for the job because of my looks."

Dante's eyes traveled the length of my body. "Valentina, only a blind man wouldn't notice you. It's always good to charm up the high rollers as you would entertain guests who were invited to a party in our house. They know who you are. They know you are mine, and you taking your time to welcome

them and tell them about our newest amenities will make them feel special. Nobody will mistake your hospitality for inappropriate flirting.”

I gave him a doubtful look, but I wasn’t going to argue with him. I was too grateful that he’d allow me to work at all. I didn’t have to listen to the rumors to know exactly what they would be saying about me once people found out the wife of the Boss wasn’t satisfied with being a trophy wife.

We took Dante’s Mercedes for our ride to the industrial parts of Chicago because a snow storm made the streets impassable for the Porsche. After thirty minutes, in which Dante explained what kind of gambling was most popular in our casinos and who the most important high rollers were, we pulled up in front of a gate barring the way down into an underground garage. Behind it loomed a massive storehouse with dirt covered windows and graffiti-sprayed walls. A guard in a small cabin greeted Dante and opened the gate for us. We drove down the slope into a nondescript parking garage. Nothing hinted to the presence of a casino, but of course it made sense that the Outfit had to hide their illegal gambling endeavors. A few other cars were already parked in the garage. Dante steered the Mercedes into the spot between a sleek black BMW and a pretentious red Mustang with snow chains around its massive tires. I had a feeling I knew to whom the latter belonged.

Dante and I got out of the car. To my surprise, Dante put his hand on the small of my back as he led me toward a rusty elevator at the other end of the garage.

“Is it safe?” I asked suspiciously. That thing looked as if it was in desperate need of service.

Dante chuckled. “This is all make-believe.” For a moment, his eyes met mine and unexpected warmth filled me. Dante pushed a small black button and the elevator doors slid open. The inside wasn’t much better than the outside. This was a freight elevator with bare steel walls and scratched up floor. Dante took a keycard from his pocket and eased it into a slit I

hadn't even noticed before. It wasn't anywhere near the obvious buttons of the elevator. Dante noticed my curious look. "We've never had a visit from Feds, but if they ever check the storehouse, this will make it more difficult for them to find out what's below us."

The moment Dante had inserted the card, the elevator started moving down. The ride was quick and when the doors finally glided open, I gasped.

We stepped into a vast underground area with plush red and gold carpets, chandeliers and dozens of massive tables for poker games, blackjack, roulette and whatever else was played down here. Flatscreen-TVs on one wall of the casino showed everything from the Africa Soccer Cup over a darts championship in Scotland, camel racing in Dubai to Skiing tournaments in the Alps. Sofas were arranged around the wall for people who wanted to watch the athletes or teams they'd put a bet on. At the end of the room, was a bar that took up almost the entire width of the room with hundreds of bottles of liquors, wines and champagne.

Right now the casino was deserted except for two cleaning ladies who vacuumed the carpet. Several doors led to what I assumed were private rooms for VIP guests.

"In the back are the offices as well as a welcome area for high rollers," Dante explained as he led me across the room toward a dark wood door next to the bar.

"Do I work daily?"

Dante gave me a strange look. "You can work whenever you want. Nobody will force you to work at all. But you'll always get notified when a high roller is expected so you can decide if you're going to be there to welcome them."

"Okay. You said there were special events. Is anything set up in the next few weeks. For Valentine's day for example?" The day was still four weeks away but setting up an event took time.

Dante stroked my back lightly, surprising me with the gesture. I wasn't even sure he'd noticed what he'd done, since his face

was still distant except for the wry smile directed at me. “Valentine’s day isn’t really something the men coming here are interested in. Even if they’re married, their wives probably don’t know they’re coming here. As I said, we always have at least a dozen prostitutes in the bar area and the bedrooms in the back are never empty.”

“So I’m not just going to manage a casino, I’ll also be a bordello queen.”

Dante laughed. A real laugh. I slanted him a look to make sure my ears weren’t playing a trick on me, but the smile was already disappearing from his face. “You aren’t their pimp. You can introduce our high rollers to their complimentary girls but apart from that, the prostitution part of the casino is in Raffaele’s hand.

Raffaele was Aria’s cousin. He wasn’t related to me though. With satisfaction, I realized my guess about the car had been right. I’d heard rumors about his swanky persona. “Isn’t he the one who got his finger cut off for gawking at Aria?” Everyone knew that tidbit of information, but I was curious about Dante’s feelings toward the incident. I still remembered the huge stir it had caused years ago.

Dante’s lips thinned. “That’s him. Rocco Scuderi allowed Luca to punish Raffaele.”

We stopped in front of the door. “But you wouldn’t have?”

“I wouldn’t have let someone from New York dish out punishment in my territory,” he said in a relentless tone. I wasn’t sure why but my body reacted immediately to Dante’s steely fierceness, yearning to be alone with him, to let him have his way with me like last night.

Ignoring my body’s needs, I said, “So you don’t think Raffaele deserved it.” Personally, I thought it was a bit extreme to cut someone’s finger off for staring, but Luca was known for his cold-bloodedness, even in the Outfit.

“I didn’t say that. But I would have insisted on punishing him myself, seeing as he is my responsibility. But what’s done is done.”

“So is Raffaele the assistant manager?”

“No, he’s responsible for the hookers. He makes sure we have enough of them available at all times. He works together with Tommaso for that purpose.”

My nose wrinkled, my standard reaction to hearing his name. Dante cocked one blond eyebrow. “Is this because of the prostitution, or because of Tommaso? I thought you were friends with his wife Bibiana.”

“Bibiana is my best friend, which is why I can’t stand that man. I don’t suppose there’s any chance that Tommaso might be a traitor, so you can get rid of him?”

Dante scanned my face. “You are being serious.”

“Yes. He’s been treating Bibiana like dirt since they married. I wouldn’t shed a single tear if you put a bullet in his head.”

For a couple of heartbeats, our eyes locked and I got the impression that Dante wouldn’t have minded a moment of privacy with me either, but then the moment was gone. “He’s a loyal soldier. He’s never given me any reason to doubt him. There’s nothing I can do about him.”

“Not even if I tell you that he’s raping Bibiana?” I knew Bibiana didn’t want people to know but maybe Dante could help. It wasn’t as if he would tell others about it.

He put his hand on the door handle, his eyes bleak. “She’s his wife.”

“That doesn’t mean he can rape her,” I hissed.

“I know, but I can’t tell my men how they’re supposed to treat their wives. Even a Capo can’t interfere in a marriage. My decision to forbid rape as punishment or entertainment was already met with resentment.”

I looked away to hide how emotional this topic made me. Sometimes it was easy to forget the horrible things happening in the Outfit.

“Are you ready to go in? Raffaele and Leo, the assistant manager, are waiting in your office to meet you.”

I took a deep breath, then I nodded.

Dante opened the door, and his hand still pressed against my back, he led me into a long corridor with five more doors.

“I assume these aren’t for the public eye unlike the doors branching off the main floor?”

“Yes. This is only for you and the other employees. The doors outside lead into several rooms that the prostitutes can use with their customers.”

I nodded. It was surreal that I would soon work here.

Dante steered me toward the door at the end of the hallway and opened it. Behind it was a spacious windowless office with a desk, a meeting table with six chairs, a sofa, and two chairs facing the desk. Raffaele, who was a couple of years younger than me, and a middle-aged man with a mustache occupied the chairs. Both rose when Dante and I entered. My eyes were immediately drawn to Raffaele’s hand. His finger had been re-attached by the Outfit doctor but it stuck out and was obviously stiff.

“Raffaele, Leo,” Dante said coolly, dropping his hand from my back to shake their hands. Then he gestured toward me. “This is my wife, Valentina. As I told you yesterday, she’ll be taking Dino’s place.” I assumed that was the guy who’d filled his pockets with Outfit money.

I tilted my head, hoping to appear self-confident. I shook first Leo’s hand, who was a few inches smaller than me, then Raffaele’s. Both men greeted me friendly but I could see in their eyes that they were unhappy with Dante’s choice to involve me in Outfit business. They couldn’t possibly like having a woman as their boss, even if Leo would still do most of the management work.

“Why don’t you show Valentina around? You know the ins and outs of this place better than I do,” Dante said to Leo, who nodded before facing me with a stiff smile. “This way,” he said as he walked out of the room and headed back to the main floor. “Our opening hours are from six in the evening until six in the morning. Of course sometimes a group of high rollers

wants to book the place for a different time slot. Then we open for them.”

It wasn't even noon yet, so there was still plenty of time before the casino opened its doors. That explained why everything was still deserted. I pointed toward a booth. “Is that where customers exchange their money for chips?”

Leo nodded. “Yes. If a customer doesn't have any money, we offer them credits.”

“At fair interest rates, I'm sure,” I joked.

“Of course,” Leo agreed with a toothless smile.

“And if they don't pay back our money, who takes care of it then?”

“The same soldiers who collect all of our money,” Dante said. He was trailing behind us. I wasn't sure if he was making sure that the men were acting civilized or if he wanted to see how I was handling myself.

“I assume this is an by-invitation-only place, so how does word get around? Do customers have to sign some kind of non-disclosure clause?”

Raffaele snorted, but fell silent when Dante shot him a glower.

“We don't need non-disclosure clauses. We tell customers that they can't tell people about this unless they ask us for permission in advance and we do a background check on the person. Our customers know to keep their mouths shut.”

“Nobody wants to mess with us unless they have a death wish,” Raffaele said proudly.

Raffaele was starting to grate on my nerves. He was a bit too sure of himself. Losing a finger didn't seem to have diminished his self-esteem. “And you are responsible for the girls?”

“I make sure the whores make our customers happy. And I choose the sluts who sit at the bar to get the men horny and I also decide who's going to be one of the complimentary girls. I test all of them to make sure they know how to suck a cock

and can take it up their asses. Anal is a must. Most poor bastards don't get that at home."

Dante's eyes were burning with anger but he wasn't interfering. Maybe he thought it would make me look weak. I was going to be the head of this casino after all. "I hope you don't talk like that around customers," I said to Raffaele.

Raffaele's throat turned red, from anger or embarrassment I couldn't tell. Probably a little from both. He opened his mouth then closed it after a glance at Dante. I had a feeling that Raffaele would give me more trouble than Leo.

"Are any of the girls in already? I'd like to talk to them."

Raffaele's eyes darted between Leo and Dante, as if he needed their approval before he could answer a simple question. "Most of them work in Club Palermo until five and then come over here after that."

The girls who worked here were from Club Palermo? Had any of them slept with Dante? I had to ask Bibiana if she knew the names of the women Dante chose when he frequented the club. "Then I'll talk to them tomorrow. Make sure they come in early so I can have a word with them before our doors open."

"What is there to talk about? They are brainless whores, nothing more than three-hole sluts."

"Raffaele, that is enough. I don't tolerate you talking to my wife like that," Dante said in a dangerously low voice.

Raffaele lowered his head but not before sending me a scathing look. I decided to ignore him for now. "Are any important high rollers visiting today?"

Leo shook his head. "No. But tomorrow two senators and a few of their friends are coming in. They don't gamble that much. They mostly spend the nights with the girls."

"So we humor them because we want them to protect our interests in Senate?"

"Exactly," Leo said, surprised, as if he couldn't believe a woman could come to such a conclusion by herself. Men in

our world would be surprised how much their wives and daughters knew about the life they're trying to protect them from. You can't grow up in a mob family and not figure out most of what's going on.

Dante nodded his head in approval and a strange sense of pride filled me.

"Okay, then I'll be there tomorrow to introduce myself to them, and meet the rest of our employees. I hope we're going to work well together."

Leo nodded, but Raffaele obviously didn't think we would. Dante put his hand on my back and we headed back to our car.

"So what do you think?" he asked as he started the car.

"I think Raffaele will give me trouble. He obviously doesn't like me."

"He doesn't do well with women in general, unless they are prostitutes and have to do what he says. Don't take it personal."

"I don't. I couldn't care less what he thinks of me."

"No," Dante disagreed. "He should respect you."

"Because it would reflect badly on you if he didn't."

"That, and because you are his boss. You are going to make sure everything runs smoothly. Leo will hopefully help you."

"He seemed okay. But you don't trust him?"

"I don't trust either of them."

I nodded. "They seemed surprised when I said something clever. It really annoyed me."

"Most men prefer to think of their woman as ignorant and clueless. I know the same men who disapproved of my ruling against rape will disapprove of you working in our casino."

"I think the mob should stop underestimating women."

Dante gave me a sideways glance. "Maybe you can convince them."

Did he really believe that? A question burnt on the tip of my tongue. “Did your first wife work?”

His expression darkened. “No. She kept busy with social engagements as most women in our world do.”

“Oh, of course.” I wondered if despite having offered me a job in the casino, he was unhappy with my desire to work. Would he prefer a trophy wife? Someone who looked good at parties, who warmed his bed and who kept the staff in check? I decided to change the topic. “My mother invited me over. I assume you have work to do?”

“Yes, I do. But I can drive you to your parents’ house if you want. It’s on the way. I can tell Enzo or Taft to pick you up when you’re done.”

“My mother will be delighted,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Would you rather we drive home and you drive to your parents without me?”

“No,” I said quickly. “I wasn’t joking. My mother will be giddy with pleasure over seeing you again.”

“Your father in one of my underbosses. It’s not like your mother hasn’t met me countless times.”

“But not as her son-in-law. I’ve never seen her happier than when she found out you were stooping to marry me.”

Dante’s brows drew together. “Because you were married before?”

“Of course. I was damaged goods by our standards. Not a pure innocent girl like Gianna or the many other girls fawning over you at parties.”

“Believe me, I’m more than happy that I didn’t agree to marry Gianna. She’s a troublemaker. I don’t have the patience for someone like her. And I don’t pay much attention to girls on parties.”

I huffed. “You are a man. How can you not notice their smoldering glances?”

“Smoldering?” Dante asked with a hint of amusement. “And I didn’t say I didn’t notice. I make sure to always be aware of everything going on in a room around me, but I’m not interested in their silly attempts at flirting. They fawn over an image they have of me, but I’m not that man.”

“I don’t know. Girls think you’re sexy because you are powerful and aloof. The iceprince whose heart they want to melt.”

Dante shook his head, then something changed on his face and he slanted me another glance. “So your mother didn’t know you never consummated your first marriage?”

“Of course not. I don’t talk to her about things like that. And believe me, she would have found a way to tell you about my virginity because it would have increased my worth. She’d die from happiness if she found out you are the man who took my virtue.” I froze. “You’re not going to tell anyone about Antonio, are you?”

Dante narrowed his eyes in thought. “I don’t see how that would help anyone. Of course, it would make my search for Antonio’s lover easier if I could involve my men.”

“I’m not going to tell you his name,” I interjected, knowing where this was going, and really hoping he wouldn’t get angry again.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dante pulled up in front of my old home and turned off the engine before he faced me. “I assumed as much. I still don’t understand why. That man you’re protecting, he’s not your blood and from what I gather you were never close, after all he stole your husband, so why do you insist on choosing him over me?”

“I don’t choose him over you,” I said, honestly shocked. “But I know what you’re going to do to him, what you *have to do* to protect the Outfit, and I can’t condemn him to death. If you swear that he won’t come to any harm, then I might change my mind.”

“You know as well as I do that I can’t swear it. There are rules for a reason. We have to protect the secrets of the Outfit. If details about our structures, our business, or traditions went public, many people you know would go to jail, me and your father included.”

“He would never tell anyone about the Outfit. Antonio told him about our oaths.”

“But he isn’t bound by it. We all keep the silence because we’re bound by honor and duty, and because we would all pay the price if we didn’t, but that man has no reason to keep our secrets now that Antonio is dead. Not everyone honors a dead man’s wish as much as you do.”

“But he loved Antonio.”

“How can you know that? But even if it were the case, wouldn’t that make him hate our world even more?”

“What do you mean?”

“Because of the rules of the Outfit, Antonio couldn’t live his sexuality openly. He had to hide his desires and his lover, and

ultimately he died because he was a Made Men. The Russians killed him because he was one of us. You see, the man you're protecting has a lot of reasons to despise our world and want it gone."

I'd never considered it from that standpoint, and was seriously freaked. What if Dante was right? I hadn't seen Frank since I'd told him about Antonio's death a year ago. He'd left quickly, silent and out-of-it. He hadn't tried to contact me, and I had only known his mobile number, but that had stopped working shortly after the funeral. I'd simply assumed Frank had wanted to cut off anything that linked him to the mob. Had he talked to anyone about Antonio? About the Outfit? I didn't want to believe it. He had reason to detest the Outfit and its ways. Not only had he been forced to hide his relationship to Antonio but he didn't even get the chance to say goodbye to him. Neither had I. All that had been left of Antonio was a burned corpse. I'd never seen it. Father had forbidden me from doing it. He'd said there was nothing left for me to recognize. The Russians had even cut his head off before they'd set him on fire. The Outfit never found it.

Dante watched me closely. Or was he trying to manipulate me? Even so, what he'd said was the truth.

"Will you come to the door to say hi to my mother? She'll be disappointed if you stay in the car," I said to distract him.

Dante had a knowing look but didn't try to push the topic of Antonio's lover. He got out of the Mercedes, walked around the hood and opened my door for me. His hand found its usual spot on my lower back as we walked to the front door. I'd barely rung the bell when the door was already opened and my mother beamed at us. She'd probably been spying on us through the windows.

"Dante, I didn't expect you to come. How wonderful of you to pay us a visit," she said with a wide smile. She pulled Dante into an embrace. He remained stiff but briefly patted her back. At least he was against public displays of affection in general and not just with me.

“I’m only here to drop Valentina off. I don’t have time to stay. There’s still much work to do.” He straightened and Mamma had no choice but to release him.

Her face fell. “Of course. Now that you’re Capo, you have many responsibilities. How wonderful of you to take time out of your busy schedule to drive Valentina around town.” Mamma smiled at me. “You got yourself a gentleman.”

I gave Dante an I-told-you-so-look. A flicker of something softer filled his eyes before he excused himself and headed back to his car. The moment he’d driven off, Mamma closed the door, gripped my arm and practically dragged me into the living room. “Giovanni! Valentina is here!” she screamed.

“Papà is here?”

“I told him you’d be coming over. He wanted to have a word with you as well.”

I groaned.

“Don’t be like that. Your father and I are worried about your wellbeing. We want to know if married life is treating you well.”

“You mean you want to make sure I’m not messing up with Dante.”

Mamma pursed her lips. “You are twisting my words in my mouth today.”

Papà came into the living room, closing his cufflinks, his checkered jacket slung over his shoulder. “I don’t have much time. I’m actually having a meeting with the Consigliere and your husband later. So how are things between you and the Boss?”

“If you’re meeting my husband anyway, then you could ask Dante how my marriage is going so far and if he’s satisfied with me,” I said in an overly sweet voice.

“Sometimes I think I wasn’t strict enough with you. Your insolence was much more endearing when you were a little girl,” he said affectionately. I stood and wrapped my arms around his middle. He pressed a kiss against my temple. I

knew as Underboss Papà was almost as ruthless as Dante and probably had killed more men than I had fingers, but for me he'd always be the man who'd carried me on his shoulders when I was younger.

"Things are going well between Dante and me, don't worry," I said as I pulled back. "I think he's still not over his first wife though."

Papà exchanged a look with Mamma. "It took Fiore a long time to convince Dante to marry at all. I'm glad he chose you. Don't push him."

"Listen to your father, Valentina. Men don't like pushy women."

"What is it that I hear you convinced Dante to give you a job?" Papà asked.

"Don't pretend you don't already know everything about it. I bet half of the Outfit is already ranting about it."

"What do you expect? A woman of your status isn't supposed to work," Mamma said.

"Some people think women aren't supposed to interrupt their husbands either and you do that all the time."

Mamma huffed. "I don't interrupt your father."

"You don't?" Papà said in mock surprise. Their marriage hadn't always been for love. Like Dante and I, they'd married for convenience, but over time they'd grown fond of each other. When I saw them, it gave me new hope for my own marriage.

I couldn't hold back a smile. "Dante doesn't mind me working. I think he likes that I want to do something useful."

"What could be more useful than raising beautiful children? When are we going to become grandparents?"

I sent Papà a pleading look but he shrugged. "Fiore really wants a heir to his name. Dante has responsibilities. What if he got killed without having a son to inherit his title?"

“Don’t say that. Nobody’s going to get killed. I lost one husband already, I won’t lose a second,” I said desperately.

Papà patted my cheek. “Dante knows how to take care of himself, but what’s wrong with having children?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it. I want children, but not because it’s my duty to produce an heir. I want children because I want something to love and that loves me back unconditionally.” God, when had this conversation turned so horribly emotional?

“Val,” Papà said carefully. “Did Dante do something?”

I gave him a shaky smile, grateful for his concern but knowing it was useless. Even if Dante had done something and I told my father about, there was hardly anything he could do. He wouldn’t go against his Capo, not even for me. “No, he’s a gentleman.” Outside of the bedroom, I added silently. Not that I minded. “He’s only really closed off. I feel lonely, but working will keep me busy, so that should make it better.”

“Give him time,” Papà said. I could tell he was getting increasingly uncomfortable with my emotionality. Why were Made Men cowards when it came to expressing feelings but didn’t bat an eye when confronted with death? He glanced at his Rolex, then grimaced. “I really need to go.” He pressed a kiss against my temple before he bent down to give my mother a proper kiss. Then he was gone. Mamma patted the spot on the sofa beside her. I plopped down with a sigh. “I really need cake right now.”

Mamma rang a bell and our maid entered the living room with a tray full of pastries and Italian macarons. I bet she’d been waiting in front of the door since I’d arrived. For as long as I could remember she’d always been a bit too nosy. She gave me a quick smile, set the tray down and then disappeared again. I grabbed a delicacy made of marzipan, chocolate and puff pastry, and took a big bite. Mamma poured me coffee, never taking her eyes off me. “Careful with these. They are full of fat and calories. You have to make sure you take care of your body. Men don’t like plump women.”

I made a show out of finishing the rest of my pastry, then washed it down with coffee. “Maybe you should write a book

about what men want since you seem to know all about it.” I opened my eyes wide to lessen the impact of my snippy words.

Mamma shook her head before taking a pastry for herself. “Your father is right. We should have been stricter with you.”

“You were strict with Orazio and it didn’t help.”

“He’s a boy. They are all boisterous. And he’s really shaping up nicely. He said he’s even thinking about settling down.” I doubted that. He’d probably only said it to get my mother off his back. And given that he didn’t live in Chicago but helped keeping our business in line in Detroit and Cleveland, our parents didn’t often get the chance to bother him. And he was a man of course. Nobody cared if he slept with a new girl every night, as long as he didn’t tell them who he really was.

“I’ve never gone against your wishes, so I don’t know why you complain. After all, I married Dante because you wanted it.”

Mamma looked offended. “He’s the best catch we could hope for. Who wouldn’t marry a man like him?”

I drank my coffee, not bothering to reply. It was a rhetorical question anyway.

“Does Dante seek you out at night?”

I almost spit out what was in my mouth. “I’m not going to talk to you *about that*, Mamma.” My cheeks burned up from embarrassment and Mamma gave me a knowing smile.

I loved her, but she was the most infuriating woman on this planet.

Enzo picked me up in the SUV. Except for a bit of smalltalk, we didn’t speak during the short ride. When we drove past Bibiana’s street, I said, “Wait. Turn the corner. I want to pay Bibiana Bonello a visit.” I’d promised her I’d tell her how things between Dante and me had progressed. She’d hopefully be happy to see me.

Enzo didn't argue. He steered the car toward Bibi's house and parked at the curb. "Do you want me to wait?"

I hesitated. "If you don't mind?"

Enzo shook his head. "That's my job. He reached behind his seat and pulled out a magazine about Oldtimers.

"It won't take long," I said even though Bibiana and I could spend hours chatting.

I climbed out of the car and strode toward the front door. I rang the bell, then waited. Nothing happened for a while and I was about to return to the car when the door opened.

Tommaso stood in front of me. My eyes widened in surprise, then worry. "Hello Tommaso," I said, forcing my voice to be pleasant. "I hope I didn't come at a bad time. I wanted to talk to Bibiana. Is she there?" Is she okay was the question that I really wanted to ask. Tommaso was sweaty, his skin red and his fly was still open. A feeling of dread cursed through me.

Tommaso bared his teeth in a wide smile. He took my hand in both of his. "She'll be down in a moment. We have always time for Dante's wife."

I fought the urge to pull away. His skin was clammy with perspiration and the thought that the reason for his rumpled appearance had something to do with what he'd been doing with Bibiana made me want to scrub my palms raw until no trace of him was left on me. "Bibiana, hurry up. Valentina Cavallaro is here." As if Bibiana didn't know who I was.

I gingerly pulled my hands out of his grip.

"I hear you're taking over the casino," Tommaso said curiously, his small beetle eyes keen as they watched me.

"Did Raffaele tell you that?"

Tommaso guffawed. "He didn't have to. Everyone's talking about it. I wouldn't allow Bibiana to work, but Dante has been trying to change things up in the Outfit for a while now, even before Fiore retired."

I tried to figure out if I could construe his words as traitorous, but sadly they were only mildly critical. Nothing that would

cause Dante to put a bullet in Tommaso's head. "Even the Outfit has to keep up with the times," I said neutrally.

Bibiana appeared at the top of the stairs, her hair all over the place, her blouse dress buttoned wrongly and she didn't wear shoes. Tommaso winked at me. "Please excuse me. I have a meeting with Raffaele to discuss tomorrow night's girls."

Keeping up the smile was almost painful and the moment he was out of sight, I dropped the charade and hurried toward Bibiana who'd come down the stairs. "Hey, everything okay?"

She swallowed. "Can we talk upstairs? I really need to shower."

"Of course," I said quickly. She gave me a tiny smile. I followed her silently upstairs, trying to suppress my fury toward Tommaso. I was already looking for ways to make Dante kill him and that wasn't something I should ever consider. I'd never been responsible for someone's death. Even if Tommaso was the lowest scum on earth, I shouldn't want him dead.

Bibiana led me into their bedroom. I pretended I didn't notice the ruffled sheets as I followed her into the adjoining bathroom. Bibiana and I had seen each other naked before, especially when we were younger, so I wasn't surprised when she got undressed in my presence. I perched on the edge of the bathtub.

"If I'd known Tommaso was home, I wouldn't have come over."

"No," Bibiana said. "I'm glad you're here. That way, at least, Tommaso won't go for a second round right away." My eyes flitted over the bruises on her hips, inner thighs and upper arms. I lowered my gaze to my lap and blinked away angry tears. Bibiana stepped into the shower and turned the water on. "Val?"

I stood and approached the shower stall. Bibiana's expression was imploring. "I know I shouldn't ask you this, but is there anything you can do?"

“Is he doing anything that goes against Dante or the Outfit? Anything at all?”

Bibi shook her head as the water plastered her dark hair against her forehead. “He’s loyal to the Cavallaros.”

That’s what I’d suspected. “Dante won’t act unless he’s a traitor, but maybe we can set him up.”

Bibiana’s eyes became huge. “You would trick Dante if we did that. You can’t go against him, Val. I can’t ask that of you.” She put on a brave smile. “I’m being overdramatic. Women have been going through this for centuries and they all survived.”

Maybe, but that didn’t mean Bibiana should suffer through it.

She stepped out of the shower and I handed her a towel. “Let’s talk about something else. How are things going with Dante and you? Have you?”

I nodded, a blush heating my cheeks. “Twice.”

“And? Was it bad?”

“No, actually it was...” I trailed off, realizing what I was doing. I couldn’t talk about how much I’d enjoyed being with Dante when Bibi had just been mounted by her pig of a husband. “...okay,” I finished halfheartedly.

Bibi gave me a look. “I know you Val. I can tell that you’re lying. You don’t have to hold back because of me. I know that there are women who enjoy sex.”

“It was good,” I said.

Bibi took my hand and squeezed. “That’s good. You deserve some fun after the years with Antonio.”

I wanted to throw my arms around her and hold her, wanted to have Tommaso killed for her, but instead I merely squeezed back. “One day Tommaso will be gone and then it’s your turn.”

She nodded, but the hopelessness in her eyes gutted me. “He’s 52. With my luck, he’ll live another thirty years. I’ll be old and bitter then.”

Twenty minutes later, I was back in the car with Enzo heading home.

As we pulled up in front of the gate to the premises, my eyes were drawn to a man standing on the other side of the street and I jerked in surprise. It was Frank.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Frank? I'd recognize his red hair and lanky stature anywhere. Enzo shot me a look but I quickly tore my eyes away from Antonio's former lover before Enzo followed my gaze. What was Frank doing here? He should know better than to creep around the house of a mob member, especially the Boss of the Outfit. But then, Frank probably didn't know that's what Dante was unless Antonio had revealed more to his lover than I was aware of.

I tried to keep a passive face as we pulled up the driveway, but I wasn't sure I was succeeding. Enzo definitely had picked up that something was wrong and kept looking my way. "Thanks for picking me up," I said and slipped out of the car the moment we came to a stop in the garage. Once inside the house, I strode upstairs into one of the guest bedrooms facing the street but when I peered out of the window, Frank was already gone.

I had to figure out a way to contact him to find out what he wanted. But how?

I wasn't supposed to leave the house unguarded anymore. And I didn't even know where Frank lived, but I had a feeling he'd show up again soon. There must be something he needed to talk to me about. What if he wanted to blackmail me?

Great, now Dante's manipulation was making me paranoid. Next time Frank was around I'd simply have to find a way to sneak out of the house to talk to him.

A knock made me jump. The door was ajar and Gaby poked her head in. "Dinner's ready," she said shyly. "Mr. Cavallaro is waiting for you."

"Couldn't he have told me that himself?"

Gaby flushed. "I'm sorry. He sent me to get you."

I touched her shoulder as I walked past her. “Don’t worry. I’m not blaming you.”

She followed a few steps behind me as we headed downstairs. Before I entered the living room, I turned to her. “You don’t have to trail behind me. We can walk side by side, Gaby.”

She nodded before she disappeared through the door leading into the staff area. With a sigh, I stepped into the living room. Dante was sitting in his usual spot at the end of the table. I crossed the living area and headed for him. My plate was placed at the other end of the table as it had been the other evenings. Somehow this made me unreasonably angry today. I stopped next to my chair, but didn’t sit down. “Why am I supposed to sit so far away from you?”

Dante lifted an eyebrow. “Are you angry?”

“Of course I’m angry. I don’t want to go through meals as if we’re strangers. You never try to keep that much distance between us when you fuck me.” The word made my skin crawl with discomfort but I stood my ground.

Dante’s eyes narrowed a fraction, always so cool and calculating. “I wasn’t the one who insisted we have sex. If I recall, you were quite adamant about it.”

I couldn’t believe he acted as if he didn’t enjoy it. Maybe I wasn’t experienced but I knew that he’d enjoyed himself tremendously. I grabbed my plate and cutlery and carried them over to the place beside Dante where I sat them down with a bit too much force, making them clank loudly. I lowered myself into the chair, then stared at Dante defiantly.

“Please tell Zita to set the table like this from now on.”

“If that’s what you want,” he said indifferently.

Zita walked in and I didn’t get the chance to say something else. Her eyes flitted from Dante to me and a smile crossed her face. I really wanted to scream. She set down our plates. Homemade sweet potato gnocchi, sage butter and veal cutlets. She took her sweet time before she left again.

I speared a gnocchi and slid it into my mouth, then almost sighed because it was so delicious, but I didn’t want Dante to

think I'd already gotten over my anger toward him.

Dante cut his veal without hurry. My eyes took in his strong hands, remembering how they felt on my skin, and hating myself for wanting to feel them again, despite his frustrating behavior.

"How was the visit with your parents?" Dante asked eventually. He sounded so blasé, I couldn't even count the question as an attempt at making up for his rudeness.

"Didn't my father give you a report?"

Dante slid a piece of veal into his mouth before he leveled his gaze on me. "We talk about business in our meetings," he said, then a bit sharper. "I don't know why you're acting like a petulant child. If I wanted a wife who did that, then I would have chosen Gianna."

I dropped my fork with a clang. "Then maybe you should ask her. I'll marry Matteo. At least I hear he isn't a cold fish."

"Cold fish, hm? That's what people call me?"

"They call you many things, but that's the most accurate description of your character I've come across so far."

"So are you interested in Matteo?"

"Excuse me?" The sudden question threw me off.

"You danced with him at our wedding and you seemed to enjoy yourself more than usual."

"Are you jealous of Matteo?"

"I'm not jealous, no. I'm merely trying to protect what's mine."

That sounded an awful lot like jealousy to me. "I don't know why you even care. You don't seem to be interested in me outside of the bedroom, and even that was initiated by me as you pointed out so helpfully. Right now, I think you'd probably give me one of your cold looks if you ever caught me in bed with Matteo, and then go back to work." I wasn't even sure why Matteo was even a topic. I'd never been interested in him. He'd always been too unpredictable for my taste.

“I’d go back to work, yes,” he said with a predatory smile. “After gutting Matteo and watching him bleed to death.” He took a sip of his white wine.

I gave up. It was obviously not possible to talk to Dante like husband and wife. We ate the rest of our dinner in silence, only broken by the scratching of our knives on the plates and the occasional thud when we set out glasses down on the table.

I was half asleep when Dante came into bed. The mattress dipped and then his warm body pressed up against me. I didn’t stir. Dante brushed my hair off my back and pressed a hot kiss against my neck, then followed it with a gentle bite. I was glad I lay on my stomach and could stifle my gasp in the pillow. I didn’t want him to know how much his touch affected me, how much my body craved his ministrations. I was still mad at him for his words during dinner, but my body had a mind of its own.

Dante didn’t seem too put off by my unresponsiveness. He trailed his tongue over my shoulder blade, then along the bumps of my spine until the nightgown was in his way. He made his way back up and sucked the skin over my pulse point into his mouth, then left soft kisses up to my ear. He moved even closer, so I could feel his erection through the fabric of his pajama pants. It took all my self-control not to reach out and curl my fingers around his hard-on. His breathing was hot against my ear as he licked my earlobe, making me shiver with desire.

He brushed my neck with his knuckles, then moved lower until he reached the dip above my butt. My breathing was coming faster and I could feel my panties sticking to my center from arousal but I still didn’t move. This time I wouldn’t be the one initiating anything.

Dante slid his hand over my butt before dipping between my legs. He groaned when his fingers brushed my panties. It took all my willpower not to press myself against his hand for some friction. His mouth found my ear. “I know you’re ignoring me,

but you should learn to control your body if you want to succeed in doing so.”

That infuriating bastard.

Dante sat up and pushed my nightgown up before hooking his fingers under the waistband of my panties and sliding them down my legs. I lifted my face from the pillow and glimpsed over my shoulder. It was too dark in the room to make out much. The silvery moonlight streaming through the windows cast Dante into shadows, but I was certain he was watching me. Then his hands were back on me. He massaged my calves, slowly working his way up higher. His breathing was deep and calm in the dark. He slipped his hand between my legs and pushed them apart. I buried my face back in the pillow when his fingers found my folds and started stroking my clit. He shifted and then his lips were on my butt. He bit my cheek lightly, then soothed the spot with his tongue and lips. I almost came right then. Instead I sank my teeth into my lower lip to hold on longer. This was too good to be over so soon. Dante repeated the motions until he'd worked his way back up to my throat and I was a boneless heap of desire.

I parted my legs even further for him, not caring that only hours ago I'd sworn myself to ignore him until he stopped treating me with cold detachment outside of the bedroom, but as he rubbed my clit need overtook my reasoning. He spread my wetness, then slid two fingers into me. I arched my butt up to give him better access to my opening. He started moving his fingers in and out slowly while his lips kept up their ministrations on my throat and shoulder, always alternating between nibbling, licking and kissing. He was panting too. This was affecting him. I moved my hand to the bulge in his pants and started rubbing it through the fabric. He released a harsh breath into my ear. “Every moment of the day I think of the things I want to do with you, catch myself remembering your taste, your smell. Sometimes I think I'll go insane if I don't bury myself in you.”

I whimpered. Why couldn't he show me that during the day? Why did he have to act like I was nothing but a needy wife? He thrust his fingers faster into me and I moved my hips

against them, wanting him deeper. He hit a sweet spot deep in me; fire licked my belly and core, making me cry out as pleasure rippled through me. Dante kept pumping into me as I bucked my hips desperately, riding the waves of my orgasm. I slumped against the mattress, not enough energy in me to keep my butt raised. Dante's fingers were still buried in me, but they were moving slowly, almost tenderly in and out of me.

I sucked in a few deep breaths, trying to calm my racing heart, but Dante had other plans. He shifted and there was the rustling of clothes, then he was back beside me. He bent down and rasped into my ear. "I want to feel your hot mouth again."

I shivered. I twisted and braced myself on my elbows. In the shadows I could see Dante's outline as he knelt on the bed next to me. His cock was inches from my face, long and hard, and waiting for me. Dante tangled his hands in my hair and gently pushed me closer to his erection. He smelled clean, of soap, spicy and fresh. His erection brushed my lips and I parted them, and took him into my mouth, tasting the saltiness of pre-cum on his tip. It spiked my own arousal. The iceman was eager for me. I swirled my tongue around his cock, then dipped my tip into the small slit in his head. Dante's fingers in my hair tightened as he made a sound deep in his throat. His grip wasn't painful and oddly erotic. Dante pushed slowly into me, and I took him deeper and deeper into my mouth until I almost gagged, then let him slide all the way out. Soon Dante seemed to want to take control of the situation and started thrusting in and out of my mouth slowly at first, then faster. His hand in my hair kept me in place as he took my mouth. I hummed in approval. This was far hotter than I could have imagined. Having Dante fuck my mouth, having him above me, guiding my head the way he wanted it was a huge turn-on, and I began moving my pussy against the sheets, hoping for some friction.

Dante's hand came down on my butt, keeping it in place. "Don't," he said roughly, squeezing my cheek. I made a sound of protest, though it was difficult with his cock in my mouth.

Dante pulled out abruptly, hissing when my teeth graced his cock. He gripped a pillow and shoved it under my pelvis. Then

he was behind me. He gripped my ass cheeks and his tip nudged my opening. "Fuck. You're so wet, Valentina." Without a warning, he slapped all the way into me, filling me completely. I gasped, arching up as pleasure and a trickle of pain shot through me. Dante stilled for a moment as he rubbed my butt and lower back. He leaned down until his chest was pressed against my back, pinning me beneath his weight. He braced himself on his elbows to either side of me. I could feel every inch of him. I couldn't have moved even if I wanted to. I tilted my head to the side and found Dante's lips for a hard kiss. He slid out of me slowly until only his tip was inside before thrusting back into me. Soon he established a fast hard rhythm. Every thrust of his cock made my nipples slide over the sheets, making me gasp from the added friction. His balls slapped my folds, sending lightning bolts of pleasure up to my clit.

Dante's pants came faster. His chest was slick against my back. The sound of his thighs hitting my butt with every thrust filled the darkness, and mingled with my desperate moans and whimpers as I spiraled toward my second orgasm. I tried to hold it back, but Dante snuck his hand under me and flicked his thumb over my clit. "Come for me," he whispered in my ear.

I shattered as pleasure shot through me in a torrent. Dante raised himself on his arm and really started pounding into me, harder and faster than ever before. I clawed at the sheets. He clamped his hands down on my hips and raised my butt higher as he thrust into me, his fingers digging almost painfully into my skin. I sunk my teeth into the pillow as I felt the treacherous signs of another orgasm rippling through me.

Dante thrust into me hard and let out a low groan, his fingers tensing against my hips. His erection expanded in my channel as he spilled into me and the fire in my belly raged through my body as I tumbled over the edge again. Dante collapsed on top of me, leaving open-mouthed kisses on my shoulder and neck as he whispered words too low for me to hear. I closed my eyes as my chest was trying to hammer its way out of my ribcage. I'd probably be sore tomorrow, but it had been worth it. I didn't even care anymore that I hadn't kept my promise to

myself. Why should I deprave myself of a good time to punish Dante? I'd only be punishing myself.

Dante was getting heavy. I turned my head, hoping to breathe easier that way. I could ask him to get off me, but I knew the moment I did, he'd pull away again as he always did. I wanted to relish in our closeness for a little longer, even if it meant being crushed by his weight. He felt hot and strong, and pressed up like that it was hard to say where his body began and mine ended.

Dante raised his head and our lips met for another kiss, languid and unhurried, almost sweet, but then he rolled off of me. I turned around so I was facing him. He was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. It was too dark to make out his expression. I cautiously moved closer and rested my head on his chest. He tensed and I braced myself for his rejection. My own body stiffened in anticipation of the rebuke, but it never came. He relaxed, wrapped an arm around my shoulder and I finally dared to snuggle closer against him. I drew in a deep breath relishing in his warm scent that was becoming increasingly familiar; it was mixed with the musky aroma of sex. My hand came up to his stomach and I stroked him lightly. Was it the dark that made him more approachable? That made him forget who he was, who he wanted to be?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I wasn't sure what woke me but when I opened my eyes, the sun hadn't risen yet. The sky was already lightning in the distance and provided enough light to make out my surroundings but that was it. Dante was pressed up against my back, his face half buried in my shoulder, his breath warm against my skin. It was uncomfortably warm but I didn't move away. This was the first time I woke with Dante still in bed and he was actually holding me in his arms. Maybe his subconscious had accepted what he couldn't; that he wanted to be close to me.

I kept my breathing even, tried to appear asleep, so I wouldn't wake him. I must have dozed off again because I startled awake when Dante shifted away from me. I listened carefully, but he wasn't getting out of bed. He'd rolled away from me in sleep if his rhythmic breathing was any indication. I slowly turned on my other side, so I could see him. He lay on his back, an arm thrown up over his face. The sheets were pushed down to the delicious V of his hips. I propped myself up on one arm, careful not to make any sound. My fingers itched to stroke his blond hair back, to tickle the ridges of his taut stomach, to follow the trail of fine hair down to his erection.

I reached out hesitantly and lightly brushed my fingers over his hair. Dante's hand shot out lightning fast, gripping my wrist in a crushing grip. At the same time he sat up and his eyes met mine. I pressed my lips together. He released my wrist in a jerk. I rubbed it, lowering my eyes to the bruises already forming. Dante touched my naked waist, his hand warm and light on my skin. "Did I hurt you?" There was real concern in his voice.

I peered up, surprised. "It's okay. I startled you."

He grasped my hand and inspected the marks his tight grip had left on my wrist. His thumb brushed over my skin in a feather-light touch. "I'm not used to waking up beside someone anymore."

It was the most personal thing he'd ever shared with me. I had to stop myself from digging deeper, from wanting more. "I know. It's okay. You'll get used to it."

He lifted his gaze, but his fingers kept up their light stroking on my wrist. "Did you and Antonio share a bed?"

"In the beginning, yes. It was for appearance's sake mostly. We still had a maid then and we didn't want her to get suspicious. At first it was like having a sleepover with a friend, but eventually it got awkward, especially when he came home smelling like his lover, so he fired the maid and we started sleeping in separate rooms."

His eyes lingered on my exposed breasts. "I can't imagine a man looking at you and not wanting to have you for himself."

I flushed with happiness, but I decided to keep the mood light, worried a more emotional response would make Dante retreat again. "I think Antonio would have said the same about you. I think you might have been his type."

Dante laughed and his entire face transformed. "That's not something I want to think about."

I smiled. "I imagine you don't." I paused, curious. "What would you do if one of your men came to you and admitted that he was gay?"

"I would tell him to keep his disposition a secret and to fight it."

"It's not like people choose to be gay. They are gay or they aren't. You'd force your men to live a lie."

"They can live a lie, or they will have to live with the consequences."

"You would kill someone for who they love."

"Society may have come a long way but the mafia is built on traditions, Valentina. The moment I declared I'd accept Made

Men to be gay, all hell would break loose in the Outfit. That would be one change I wouldn't be able to push through. I wouldn't kill someone for confiding in me, as long as they kept it a secret. I don't doubt that there are soldiers in the Outfit who are attracted to men but who've learned to restrain themselves. They are probably married and live a lie, but as long as they do, they are safe."

We were still sitting close together, actually talking in bright daylight. I reached for Dante's chest, lightly brushing my fingertips over a long scar there. Dante gripped my wrist, gently this time and pulled my hand away. He slid his legs out of bed and stood. I watched as he headed for the bathroom, completely naked, and yet covered by hundreds of invisible layers I could never penetrate.

I dropped my hand in my lap. With a sigh, I got out of bed as well. There was no sense in lying back down alone. I had a busy day. My first day in the casino without Dante. I was anxious and excited at the same time. After a quick shower, I took a ridiculous long time trying on different outfits. I didn't want to look too sexy, but I also didn't want to hide my femininity. I knew those men, especially Raffaele, didn't like that a woman was now working with them, and worse: their boss, and I had no intention of making this easier for them. They had to learn to deal with strong women, and if they couldn't, that was their problem. I chose a knee-length dark-blue pencil skirt, matching slingback heels and a white blouse with a round neck and long puff sleeves. After I'd tugged the hem of the blouse into my waistband, I put my hair up in a bun, letting a few wayward strands hang down.

When I entered the dining room, it was deserted. I stopped in the doorway, letting my eyes rest on Dante's usual place. His newspaper was folded beside his empty plate. With a sigh, I headed for my own chair. The door opened and Gaby walked in, carrying a carafe with fresh orange juice and a coffee pot. She smiled brightly at me. "Good morning, Mis...Valentina." She gave an apologetic look but I only smiled, happy to see a friendly face in the morning. "I hope you slept well?"

My cheeks warmed unwantedly. "Yes, thank you."

She poured me coffee and orange juice. “Would you like some eggs or pancakes?”

“No, I’ll only have a croissant and some fruit.” I gestured at the array of pastries and fruit in front of me.

Gaby turned to leave. “Wait,” I blurted, then flushed at how desperate I’d sounded. Gaby faced me with wide eyes, as if she worried she’d done something to offend me and would be punished. “Why don’t you keep me company?”

Gaby froze.

“Only if you want to. I’d like to get to know you better.”

A shy grin spread on her face, but she didn’t sit down.

“You don’t have to stand. Sit.” I pulled out the chair beside mine. Gaby put down the carafe and the coffee pot before she lowered herself gingerly in the chair.

“Have you had breakfast yet?”

Gaby hesitated, then shook her head.

“Then have a Danish. There’s more than enough food for the two of us.” I grabbed the basket and pushed it over to her. She took a chocolate croissant with a mumbled thanks, her cheeks turning red.

I grabbed one for myself, took a bite, then followed it with a hot gulp of coffee. I wanted to give Gaby some time to get past her nervousness. “Where do you live? I’ve been wondering about this since you told me your story.”

“Oh, I live with Zita and her husband. They took me in shortly after I started working for Mr. Cavallaro.”

“Are they treating you well?” Whenever I saw Zita, she was glowering or frowning. She didn’t seem like someone who should take care of a girl like Gaby, who’d gone through hell as a teen.

Gaby nodded her head vehemently. “Yes. Zita is strict but she treats me like family.” She put the last crumb of croissant into her mouth and swallowed before saying half embarrassed.

“She’s starting to warm to you. Zita always needs some time to get used to new people.”

“Really? She doesn’t look like she’s liking me any better.”

Gaby gave a small shrug. “I’m sure she’ll change her mind soon.”

I couldn’t help but like Gaby. She was kind. I peered at the watch around my wrist. “I need to leave now. I want to be early on my first day at work.”

“Good luck,” Gaby said, rising from her chair. “I think it’s great that you want to work. You’re the only woman of your status who doesn’t only stay at home. I mean, there’s nothing wrong with being only a wife.”

I briefly touched her shoulder to show her I wasn’t offended, then followed her back into the staff area where Enzo was drinking coffee. He got up at once when he saw me. “You can finish your coffee. There’s no rush,” I told him. Despite my words, he picked up his cup and downed it in one swallow. Zita was throwing disapproving glances my way. I definitely couldn’t see her warming up to me. She hadn’t said anything yet except for a curt ‘good morning’ but I could tell that she wanted to.

“In my time, the wife of a Capo would never have deemed to work,” she muttered as she wiped the counters, which were already spotless.

“Times change,” I said simply.

“The deceased Mistress, may God rest her soul, was happy with the role of mistress of the house. She spent her days trying to make her husband happy and make sure he had a beautiful home.”

“Zita,” Enzo said sharply. “That’s enough.”

Zita pointed a finger at him. “Don’t talk to me like that.”

“Maybe we should head out now,” I said to Enzo. I didn’t want them to fight because of me. He nodded, grabbed his gun holster from the chair, and we walked in silence toward the garage.

“Thank you for speaking up for me,” I said as we sat in the car.

“Zita should show you respect. You are the Capo’s wife. He wouldn’t approve of anyone treating you like that.” Would he really care? “You should tell him.”

I shook my head. “No. I can handle myself, but thank you.”

Enzo inclined his head and the rest of the drive passed in silence. To my surprise, Enzo didn’t just drop me off at the casino. He followed me inside and didn’t budge from my side. I had a feeling Dante might have told him to keep an eye on me. I wondered if it was because he didn’t trust his men to treat me decently or if he didn’t trust me not to mess up. Neither option made me feel better.

Leo seemed surprised when he spotted me. “I didn’t expect you yet. Raffaele and the girls aren’t there yet. There’s not much to do right now.”

I headed straight toward the back where the offices were located. “I know, but I want to read up on our high rollers. I assume you have documents and statistics about them?”

Leo’s eyes darted between me and Enzo, who had his arms crossed over his barrel chest, looking like he was waiting for a chance to crush Leo’s head. No friendship seemed to be lost between them. “Yes, we do. Let me get them for you.”

I settled in the plush chair behind my desk, feeling out of place, but when Leo returned with folders full of papers, I held my head high and gestured at him to put them on my desk. “I’ll read them. Please let me know when Raffaele and the girls arrive so I can talk to them.”

Leo nodded and left without another word. Enzo hesitated, then he too walked out and closed the door behind him. I slumped in the chair, and let my eyes take in my windowless office. I grabbed the first folder, determined to learn everything I needed to know to do a good job. I didn’t want to disappoint Dante. I knew he was risking the wrath of many Made Men by letting a woman work this job.

My eyes were burning from the dry air-conditioned air, and I'd only gotten through two folders, when a knock sounded at my door. "Come in," I called hoarsely. I cleared my throat as the door opened and Enzo poked his head in. "Raffaele is here. Should I let him in?"

I stifled a smile. Was Enzo now acting as my secretary? "Yes, thank you."

Enzo held the door wide open. Raffaele strode in with a scathing look in Enzo's direction, who returned it with the same fervor. He closed the door and stood in front of it, arms crossed and hard eyes on Raffaele. "Can't you talk to me without your watchdog?" he asked with a nasty smile.

I straightened. With my high heels I was as tall as him and immediately felt more at ease. "I could, but I won't," I said, making it sound as if it was actually my decision, and not Dante's order.

Raffaele seemed taken aback, but he recovered quickly. "You wanted to talk to the whores. They are getting ready in their dressing room."

"Good. Lead the way."

Raffaele walked out without a word and headed toward one of the doors leading away from the main floor. Enzo was close behind us. Raffaele didn't bother knocking, he just ripped open the door. A few of the girls let out surprised gasps, but when they saw who it was they quieted. Apparently they were used to that kind of behavior from him. Raffaele made a mock sweeping gesture, inviting me inside the dressing room. "Careful," Enzo hissed, bringing his face very close to Raffaele's. "Or do you want to lose another finger? Dante won't let you stitch it back on."

Raffaele turned red but he didn't dare retort something nasty, though it was obvious from his expression that he wanted to.

I took a step into the dressing room, then stopped. "Is it okay if I talk to you for a moment?" I asked the gathered girls. There were ten of them, varying in age from their late teens – that's what I hoped at least – to their late twenties. Some of them

catered to the girl-next-door, cheerleader taste, while others were more exotic. Almost all of them were sporting silicon breasts. Their expressions ranged from suspicious over worried to outright scared. As if choreographed, their gazes sought Raffaele, silently looking for his permission. I could tell by the self-satisfied grin and the way he seemed to get bigger how much he enjoyed it.

“I want to have a word alone with the girls,” I told him firmly.

“But—”

“No but,” I said at the same time as Enzo gripped Raffaele by the collar and shoved him outside, then followed after him and closed the door so I was alone with the girls. I turned my full attention to the girls who’d all stopped what they were doing and were watching me. “Maybe you can introduce yourself. Name, age, how long you’ve been working for the Outfit.”

I pointed at a petite Asian girl in the corner when it became clear that none of them wanted to start. After that, they all seemed to relax and gave me their information without much prodding. To my relief, the youngest girl was already twenty, unless she was lying about her age.

“How are you being treated?”

Again silence.

“The Outfit treats us very well,” a girl named Amanda said.

“I want the truth. Does Raffaele treat you with respect?”

A few of the girls exchanged amused expressions, and finally one of them said. “We’re whores. Hardly anyone treats us with respect. Raffaele is no exemption.”

“He’s not the worst.”

“That’s your opinion, not mine.”

“Oh shut up.”

I raised my arms and the girls fell silent. “Okay. Who’s worse than Raffaele?”

“A few of the customers are into beating us up. And Tommaso wants some nasty stuff too.” That didn’t come as a surprise.

Bibi didn't tell me everything but the few things she'd shared with me about her sex life with Tommaso had made my stomach turn.

"I like it rough."

"You like everything, but I don't."

"Oh get over yourself. They buy your body so they decide what to do with it."

"You sound like Raffaele."

"Okay, okay," I said slowly. "What exactly is Raffaele doing?"

"He's like our pimp. He tests us before he decides if we're good enough to work here. And he makes sure we make the customers happy. And if we don't, he punishes us."

"I assume tests mean he's sleeping with you?"

"Fucking us however he likes is more like it."

"And what exactly does he do to punish you?" I asked, but the bruises the girls had been about to cover up with make-up before I entered gave me a good idea.

"He slaps us, or fucks us really hard. Or he sends us to one of the whorehouses at the outskirts of town."

"The johns there are the worst. They are drunk, and brutal, and fat."

I took a deep breath. "Okay. Any good things you can tell me?"

"The money is great. I can buy nice clothes and rent an amazing apartment. That's something I could never do without this job."

Many girls nodded, and I tried to take comfort in it. They all had started working as prostitutes on their own free will and they earned more money than most people with a college degree. I talked to them a bit more and asked them to tell me when a customer was too brutal. They promised to do it but I wasn't sure if they were only saying it to get me off their backs. I'd have to talk to Leo and Raffaele about the situation.

When I stepped out of the dressing room, Enzo was waiting for me. “Where’s Raffaele?”

Enzo nodded in the direction of the bar. “He’s gone off to sulk. That boy would have been removed from the Outfit a long time ago if it weren’t for his father. Useless fucker.” He shut his mouth. “I apologize for the crude language.”

“No need. I’ve heard worse.”

Surprise crossed his face. Happy that I was making progress with Dante’s men, I headed toward Raffaele. He was perched on one of the bar stools, drinking what looked like a martini. “Isn’t it a bit early to start with the alcohol?”

Raffaele emptied his glass. “We’re the mob, not a convent.”

“I’d still appreciate it if everyone stayed lucid during work.”

“Maybe one glass is enough to get you drunk, but I know how to hold my liquor. I’m not a pampered woman.”

“Raffaele,” Dante’s voice sliced through the room like a knife. I whirled around as Dante walked toward us, his body brimming with angry energy. His cold eyes were focused on Raffaele who quickly slipped off the bar stool and stood, a flicker of nervousness replacing that self-satisfied arrogance. Enzo was grinning menacingly. I had a feeling he had kept Dante updated about the way things had been going so far.

Dante stopped right in front of Raffaele, fixing him with an expression of stark brutality. “If I hear one more word of disrespect from your mouth, I’m going to chop you into tiny pieces and feed you to your father’s dogs. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Boss,” Raffaele said hastily. He turned to me. “I’m sorry if I offended you.” He sounded sincere but there was something vengeful and bitter in his eyes.

Dante finally leveled his gaze on me. “I’d like to have a word with you.”

I fell into step beside him as we headed toward my office and stepped inside. Dante closed the door. Before he could say anything, I muttered, “Did Enzo call you?”

“Enzo didn’t have to call me. I’d intended on checking on you all along. I want to make sure your first day went well.”

I gave him a doubtful look.

“Why are you so surprised?”

“Because so far you didn’t strike me as the caring type of husband.”

Dante didn’t say anything, only watched me with that unnervingly cool gaze.

“I didn’t need you to defend me. I can handle myself,” I said when it became clear that he wouldn’t say anything.

Dante narrowed his eyes. “This is my territory. These are my men, and it’s my job to keep them in line. If they show disrespect toward you it’s only a small step until they dare to disrespect me as well. I won’t allow it.”

“You made me look incapable of doing my job. Raffaele will think I’m weak because I need you to protect me.”

Dante came very close, engulfing me with his aftershave. “Valentina, the only reason why these men respect you is that you’re my wife. I know you don’t like it. I know you are strong, but you can’t exact dominance over these men like I do because you don’t have the same weapons as I do.”

“What weapons?”

“Cruelness, brutality, and the utter determination to kill anyone who disputes my claim of power.”

I held my breath. “What makes you think I wouldn’t kill someone if I had to? Maybe I’m capable of the same brutality as you.”

Dante smiled a joyless smile. “Maybe, but I doubt it.” He traced a finger down my throat. “Maybe you would have had the potential to survive in the Outfit, if you’d been brought up the same way boys are raised in our world. My father had me kill my first man on his orders when I was fourteen. A traitor that my father had tortured in front of me before I put a bullet in his head. After that, my father had one of his soldiers torture me to see how long I could stand the pain until I broke down

and pleaded him to stop. I lasted less than thirty minutes. The second time I already lasted almost two hours. The tenth time my father had to stop the soldier or I would have died. I didn't beg, not even to save my life. Be glad that you never got the chance to built your cruelty, Valentina."

I had to swallow twice before I could speak. "That's barbaric. How can you not hate your father for what he did to you?"

Dante's finger lingered on the swell of my breast. The fabric of my blouse might as well not have been there, it felt as if he was touching bare skin. "I hate him. But I respect him too. Fear, hatred and respect are the three most important feelings a Capo must instill in other people."

"In your wife as well?"

Dante pulled away his hand. "Hatred and fear have no place in a marriage." He stepped away from me and casually walked over to my desk, which was piled with the folders I intended to read. "I see you're trying to familiarize yourself with our high rollers."

I had trouble to handle the sudden topic change. My mind was still reeling from the horrible things Dante had told me about his youth. No wonder he was so good at shutting himself off after the cruelty his father had subjected him to. I wondered how many of the scars marring his body were the result from those torture sessions and how many the result of an enemy's attack. "Yes. I want to memorize their faces, names and quirks."

"I thought I should stay until the high rollers arrive and introduce you to them. That way it'll appear more official. I had Leo sent them invites for an early reception. You'll have the chance to talk to them without the usual chaos of the casino and they get the chance to gamble in private for a while."

I was grateful to Dante for making sure things went smoothly for me. Of course I knew at least part of it was because he liked things to be in his control. "Thank you."

He inclined his head, then looked at me for a moment longer before he checked his watch. “Why don’t you prepare yourself some more? The first high rollers should arrive in one hour. I’ll talk to Leo and make sure everything is set up for the reception.”

When he tried to walk past me, I put my hand on his arm to stop him. Then I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek before I strode toward my desk and picked up a folder. After a moment, I heard the door open and close.

Fifteen minutes before the reception was supposed to start, I headed toward the main floor where a few tables with glasses and ice buckets filled with Champagne bottles had been set up. There was also a small buffet of canapées. Dante made his way toward me the moment he saw me. His presence set me at ease.

Soon the first high rollers arrived. Most of them were at least in their fifties. Old, rich men with expensive designer suits, tans from too many hours spent on the golf course, and smiles that spoke of overconfidence. These men thought the world was theirs for the taking. And yet I didn’t miss the look of respect that crossed their eyes when they faced Dante. The way they shook his hand, you could tell they were trying to pay him deference. Dante always quickly turned their attention to me, introducing me as the new manager and his wife. The last part always led to a wave of respectful praises of my beauty. While I certainly didn’t mind being praised for my appearance, it wasn’t something that would help me keep the casino staff in check. I steered the conversation away from my looks and involved the men in smalltalk. Luckily they let me, only too eager to share their stories about tricking the IRS, their achievements on the golf course, or the selection in their wine cellars, and it was obvious they were used to women hanging on their every word.

I led them toward the roulette table, all smiles, and soon they began to throw away money with hardly a notice, too busy bragging and impressing me. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Dante talking to Enzo before leaving the casino. I knew he was busy but I wished he’d stayed a little longer. I

didn't have much time for that thought however; I had to be the perfect hostess for another group of high rollers eager to schmooze the wife of the Capo.

It was past midnight when things had progressed enough for me to take my leave. Several of the high rollers had disappeared into back rooms with girls, or were too immersed in gambling to need my attention. I was exhausted, more exhausted than a few hours of talking and listening should make a person.

After I'd slipped into the passenger seat, I let out a quiet sigh of relief to be finally off my feet. My legs ached from standing for so long, especially in my uncomfortable heels. Men had it easier. They could wear their oxfords or Budapest shoes, and not squeeze their toes into pointy shoes.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I remembered was Enzo turning off the engine in the garage. I sat up, embarrassed. "I'm sorry I fell asleep. That was rude."

Enzo shook his head. "I don't mind."

I was too tired to analyze that statement. I made my way into the house, my eyes sliding toward the door to Dante's office, wondering if he was still in there. Deciding I was too exhausted to give him a recount of the evening's event, I headed upstairs, wincing every time my feet hit the floor. I needed to get out of my heels as soon as possible or I'd go crazy. I walked into the bedroom and froze. Dante was in bed, reading something on his tablet. As usual his upper body was naked, but now as my eyes raked over the scars marring his skin, I couldn't help but imagine Dante with fourteen being tortured by his father to toughen him up.

"Did everything go well after I left?" Dante asked, barely glancing up from whatever he was reading.

"Yes, the high rollers lost quite a bit of money." I slipped out of my heels and could have wept from relief. "I'm going to grab a quick shower." Dante only nodded distractedly. I was too exhausted to care about it. After the shower, I put on a satin chemise and matching panties, and returned to the bedroom where I sat down on the edge of the bed, my back to

Dante. I wasn't in the mood to make an effort. I lifted my foot and started massaging it. Maybe next time I should switch to ballet flats. They would still look elegant but not hurt as much. The mattress shifted and then Dante's voice was at my ear. "Let me."

Before I could protest he made me lie back and put my feet in his lap. His fingers started rubbing my tired feet and calves with just the right amount of pressure.

"Tonight was an exemption. The high rollers needed to get to know you. You don't have to stay that long in the future. Just make an appearance, greet them, make them feel welcome and then leave. Leo is a capable man."

I hummed, my eyes closed as I relaxed under his massage. Now and then Dante's finger strayed higher, stroking my knees or even thighs, and my breathing deepened. Dante, too, wasn't unaffected. I could feel his erection pressing against my feet still resting in his lap. "Turn around," Dante ordered.

I rolled over so I was lying on my stomach, knowing exactly what Dante wanted. Tonight I wasn't even bothered by the fact that he never wanted to look at my face. I raised my butt when his fingers hooked under the waistband of my panties and slid them down my legs. Sighing into the pillow, I let Dante awaken my exhausted body with his touch.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dante was right. The next few weeks I made sure to be out of the casino by ten at the latest. I enjoyed the time I spent talking to the girls, the bartenders or the croupiers, but listening to most of the customers was strenuous. At least, Raffaele had made sure to stay away from me, which was a huge plus.

When Enzo took me home at night, I always checked the street for a sign of Frank, but the only person I saw regularly on the sidewalk was an elderly woman walking her Yorkshire Terrier. By now, I'd almost convinced myself that I'd imagined seeing him. Maybe my mind was unconsciously missing Antonio, and conjuring up Frank had been a way to cope with it. Dante wasn't the presence I wanted him to be in my life. He took me every night, mostly in the dark, and always with my back to him, sometimes kneeling, sometimes lying flat on my stomach. Not that I was complaining. He always made sure I came at least once while he was in me, but I was starting to long for something else. This felt too much like mere fucking, almost like I was nothing more to him than a way to relief tension, but whenever Dante's hand slipped between my legs at night, I promised myself to talk to him next time, too desperate for his touch.

As usual my eyes wandered over the sidewalk when Enzo steered the car through the gates to the house. But tonight I saw him again. Frank was strolling along the sidewalk across the street, trying to look as if he was only trying to catch some fresh air. He wasn't succeeding. He looked suspicious to me, so I didn't dare to think how he would appear to Dante's guards. I would have to find a way to send him away. It was too risky. I headed straight up to the guest bedroom that allowed me to view the street, but like last time, Frank seemed to have disappeared.

My phone rang and for a moment I was sure it was Frank but he knew better than to call me. There was no saying who was tracking my calls after all, and I'd changed my number a few months ago. The screen flashed with Bibiana's name. I picked up. "Hey Bibi."

"Val," Bibi said in a whisper. Her voice was shaking. She sounded terrified. "Can you come over?"

I tensed, turning my back to the window. "What's wrong?"

"Tommaso, he..." She sniffed. "He was in a foul mood today."

"What did he do? Is he still there?"

"No, he left because of a meeting with Raffaele, but he'll be back soon. Can you come over? I'm scared of what he'll do when he comes back." My eyes darted to the clock that said it was almost nine.

"I'll be there in ten minutes, Bibi."

I rushed out of the guest bedroom and down the stairs. I wasn't sure where Enzo was. It probably would have been easy to find him, but I wasn't in the mood to explain myself. Instead I grabbed the keys from the hook in the garage and took the SUV. Before the doors had glided up all the way, I pressed the gas and shot out of the garage, the car roof missing the bottom of the door by inches. I slowed only as I waited for gate to part for me. Dante would be furious.

As I turned around the corner at the end of the street, I spotted a familiar back and hit the breaks. Frank jumped, and threw a panicked look over his shoulder. He had his phone pressed against his ear but ended the call when he saw me. I checked our surroundings before I rolled down the window and gestured for him to come closer. "What are you doing here?"

He crept closer, eyes darting around nervously. I understood his anxiety only too well. He was risking too much by being here. "I need to talk to you in private."

I frowned. "About what?"

"About Antonio, about the Outfit, about everything."

I checked the rearview mirror again. "I can't talk right now. Meet me tomorrow around 5:30." I explained the way to the street where the storehouse was that hid the casino, but didn't tell him about it.

"That's where one of the underground casinos is, right?"

I stared. Antonio had told him? Damn it. Why couldn't Frank have stayed away? "We'll talk tomorrow." I let the window slide back up and pulled away. Nobody seemed to have followed me, or at least I didn't see anyone. I hoped I could sneak out of the casino tomorrow undetected. I needed to clear things up with Frank. But what if he really wanted to blackmail me somehow? I knew he'd leave me no choice but to tell Dante about it if he did.

Why did today have to turn into such a mess?

It took me less than ten minutes to arrive at Bibi's house. As always a guard was sitting in a car in front of it. He gave me a curt nod when he saw me getting out of the car. I almost ran toward the door. Bibi opened it before I even got the chance to ring the bell. I had to stifle a gasp when I saw her face. Her lower lip was busted open and dried blood stuck to her lower chin and her shirt. A bruise was already forming on her left cheek and the eye above it was starting to swell shut. She ushered me in, then quickly shut the door. Before I had time to say something, she threw herself into my arms. I embraced her but she winced when I touched her ribs and I loosened my hold on her. I pulled back to look at her face. "Why did he beat you up?"

Bibi shrugged, then winced. I didn't even want to know what her body looked like under her clothes. Finger marks bloomed bluish-red on her throat and her collarbone. "He's been in a foul mood all day and when I told him I still wasn't pregnant he lost it." Something tickled at the back of my mind but I pushed it aside for now.

"Maybe it's his fault. Maybe the old fool is infertile," I muttered. I didn't like the word 'hate' or the sentiment behind it. Hate always only led to more hate, but I definitely hated

Tommaso. Dante wasn't sure I was capable of taking another person's life, but I did.

"He can't be. He got a few of the whores in Club Palermo pregnant."

My eyes widened. Bibi had never told me. "So he's got children with other women?"

"No, he forced them to get an abortion. Nobody wants to fuck a pregnant whore, that's what he said."

"I'm so sorry, Bibi."

"I feel so bad for calling you away from Dante on Valentine's Day."

I'd completely forgotten about that. Not that Dante had given any indication that today was special during our breakfast together.

"Don't be ridiculous. You know I'm always there for you. What can I do?"

A small sob escaped her and she clapped her hand over her mouth, her eyes huge and full of fear. She lowered her hand. "I don't know. I just don't know, but I was so scared and didn't know who else to call. You are the only one who seems to care."

"I do care, Bibi. You know that."

"I'm scared of when he returns. He told me it wasn't over. And he's always more brutal after he spent time with Raffaele. They are both disgusting sadists. Oh, Val, the things Tommaso sometimes does to me, the things he forces me to do, I can't even tell you."

I grabbed her hand. "Come. Spend the night at my place."

"I can't run away from him. You know they'd never let me. They'll always force me to return to him no matter what he does."

I knew. How could I have felt self-pity for my loveless marriage when Bibi had it so much worse? "I know, and I didn't mean that you should move out. But you could spend

the night with us so Tommaso has some time to cool off, and tomorrow after breakfast I'll take you back home."

Bibi nodded slowly. "Are you sure Dante won't mind? I don't want to impose on your time together."

I almost laughed. "He won't mind, don't worry," I said. "Do you want to leave now?"

She shivered, her thin arms coming up to wrap around her middle. There were bruises on her wrists too. If my fury alone could have killed Tommaso, he'd be dead now.

I helped Bibi pack a few things before I led her out of the house. The guard looked up, then started, obviously unsure of what to do. Tommaso had probably told him Bibi wasn't allowed to leave the house, but I was the wife of the Capo, who was his main boss. Bibi tensed in my arm but didn't stop walking. Not even when he picked up his phone and called someone, undoubtedly Tommaso. I felt the childish urge to give him the finger rise in me, but I'd passed the age where I would have considered acting on it. Bibi plopped down into the passenger seat and I slipped behind the steering wheel. "You are without a guard?"

I shrugged. "I didn't want to waste time looking for Enzo or Taft."

"I don't want you to get in trouble because of me," she said miserably.

I started the car and pulled away from the curb. Bibi's guard didn't try to follow us. He knew where we were going anyway. "I won't."

"Does Dante ever beat you or force himself on you?"

"No. He's not violent. Well, at least not in our marriage. Of course I know that he's perfectly capable of atrocious acts. He told me he doesn't believe fear or hatred belong in a marriage. That's probably why."

"He's a good man."

"I wouldn't say that. If you want a good man, you have to go looking outside of the Outfit."

“Remember when we were young and dreamed about finding our Prince Charming and marrying him? I was obsessed with Disney princes. They were all so gallant and good.”

I smiled at the memory. “We were young and stupid. I’d give everything to be that clueless again, if only for a few hours.”

“Yeah.”

It was almost ten when we finally stepped into my home. “Do you want to grab something to eat or would you like to try to get some sleep?”

“I’m not really hungry,” Bibi said hesitantly. “But I don’t think I can fall asleep right now.”

“We could sit in the library and talk a bit. Or I could run you a bath so you can relax.”

“I think I’d rather talk. I don’t want to be alone.”

“Okay, I...” I trailed off when I saw Dante heading our way. Bibi stiffened beside me, her terrified gaze darting to me. I wasn’t sure why but I positioned myself between Dante and Bibi. He noticed of course and gave me a searching look. “Good evening, Bibiana,” he said politely.

“Evening,” she said quietly. Dante’s cool blue eyes scanned her bruised face and arms briefly before they fixed on me. “Tommaso called me to ask if his wife was here. He said you’d picked her up at their house without his permission.”

“His permission?” I hissed. “She’s not a dog. I don’t need to ask him permission for anything.”

“That’s what I told him,” Dante said calmly, startling me.

“You did?”

Bibi watched us with wide eyes.

“Of course, you are my wife. If you want to have a word with one of the wives of my soldiers, you have every right to do so.”

We both knew that wasn’t the reason why Bibi was here. Dante wasn’t blind. I hoped he could see how grateful I was for his support. “So he’s okay with her staying the night?”

“I didn’t know that’s what you’d planned as you didn’t inform me,” he said simply. I could hear the hint of a reprimand in his tone. He knew I’d left without a guard – *again*.

“I didn’t have the time,” I said. “But I think Bibi should stay here, so Tommaso can calm down.”

“If he comes here and asks for her, it would be against our traditions to deny him. She is his wife.”

Bibi nodded. “He’s right. I shouldn’t have come.” The defeat in her eyes and voice almost brought me to my knees. I shot Dante a pleading look.

Dante pulled his phone from his pocket and pressed it against his ear. After two rings, I could hear a deep voice on the other end but I couldn’t hear the words.

“Yes, Tommaso. I want you to accompany Raffaele when he checks out the new goods. I trust your judgment, and Club Palermo could use fresh blood. I want your report tomorrow.” Dante listened to something Tommaso said. “My wife and Bibiana have plans. Don’t worry. She’s safe here. I’ll have my driver take her home tomorrow.” Dante lowered the phone and put it back in his pocket.

“Thank you,” Bibi said in a shaky voice. I stayed silent, overwhelmed by Dante’s kindness.

“You realize I sent your husband out to sleep with our new prostitutes, but I suppose you don’t mind.”

“No, I don’t. I’m waiting for the day when he finally finds a mistress he prefers to me.”

Dante inclined his head to show he understood. Then his eyes found mine. I tried to send him all the gratitude I was capable of with that one gaze. I was quite sure he could see it. “I’ll return to my work. I’m sure you and Bibiana have a lot to talk about.”

He turned around and strode back to his office, disappearing from our view. I linked arms with Bibi who was gaping at me. “I can’t believe he did that for you. He must really care about you.”

“He tried to help you. He saw your bruises.”

Bibi laughed. “He did it for you. It was written all over his face.” She paused, then quickly added. “Not that I mind. I’m just glad that he got rid of Tommaso for now.”

“Come on, let’s go into the living room. I’ll put in a movie and we’ll have a glass of wine. You deserve it. Do you need some Tylenol with it?”

Bibi grimaced. “Yes, please. I feel sore. I think Tommaso bruised my ribs.”

That was the last mentioning of what had happened with Tommaso today. We spent the rest of the night remembering our childhood and teenage years, laughing, and getting drunk.

The next day I regretted last night’s wine when a splitting headache woke me from sleep. I sat up, groaning. Pressing a palm against my forehead, I took a few deep breath, hoping it would help with the nausea. Something red caught my eye. A small parcel lay on Dante’s side of the bed. I snatched the card propped up against the parcel.

‘I would have given this to you last night but I didn’t want to wake you’ was written in neat script on the card. Delighted, I grabbed the present and unwrapped it. Inside the small velvet box rested a delicate whitegold necklace with an emerald pendant. I stumbled out of bed and hurried toward my vanity, holding it up against my eyes. The emerald had almost exactly the same color. That couldn’t have been a coincidence. I sank down on the chair and fastened the necklace around my neck with shaking hands.

I probably wouldn’t have gone to work at all that day – Leo could take care of everything without me – if I hadn’t told Frank to meet me there.

After we’d dropped Bibiana off at her home and I’d made her promise to call me the moment Tommaso was home, Enzo drove us to the casino and we went inside as we always did. Luckily for me Raffaele was screaming at one of the girls,

which wasn't a one time thing either, but today it was the distraction I needed. I turned to Enzo. "Could you please have a private word with Raffaele and make it clear that I don't appreciate him manhandling our girls?" Enzo looked only too eager to comply.

He headed straight for Raffaele and shoved him into one of the private rooms. Leo was making a beeline for me but I shook my head and told him that I was busy. He seemed confused but didn't try to stop me when I stepped into the elevator. Guilt almost stopped me in my tracks a couple of times. My secret meeting with Frank could be construed as a betrayal of Dante's trust. After this morning's considerate gift, the idea of going against him like that made me feel even worse. He seemed willing to try, and I was risking it all because of Frank.

Three minutes later, I hastened away from the storehouse. I glanced around my surroundings nervously; not only because I worried about being followed but also because this was a deserted and creepy area. It was already getting dark, which didn't help my anxiety at all. At least I was wearing ballet flats so I could have run if someone attacked me. In the distance, leaning against the wall of another empty warehouse, I could make out a tall figure. I hurried toward it, then slowed because it was hard to make out much. "Frank?" I whispered. "Is that you?"

He took a step away from the wall, looking as nervous as I felt. "Hey Valentina."

I bridged the remaining distance between us. "What's going on? Why do you keep showing up in front of my home? Do you want the Outfit to find out about you?"

Frank rubbed his hair, his eyes darting around. "Of course not." His obvious nervousness was making me nervous in turn. "I need to talk to you."

"Then talk. I don't have much time. Don't you realize what kind of risk we're taking by talking right now?"

"I think it's dangerous that you agreed to marry Dante Cavallaro."

I was taken aback. That wasn't what I'd expected when he'd told me he wanted to talk. "Why do you care? Your connection to the Outfit died with Antonio." I realized a moment too late how insensitive that sounded, but Frank didn't seem to notice. He was busy checking our surroundings, especially the darkness spreading out behind us.

"Can you stop that?" I asked impatiently. "You're making me nervous."

"Sorry. I'm not used to sneaking around in dark alleys. That's Antonio's thing."

Was he still not over him? His words made me believe it. Maybe that was why he was here. Maybe he couldn't let go of his former life and I was the only connection he had to it. "It wasn't my decision to marry Dante. You should know that marriages are often decided by other people for reasons of power or strategy."

"You don't love him."

"I'm not going to discuss my feelings with you, Frank. What do you want?"

"Did you tell Cavallaro about Antonio and me?"

"I told him that Antonio was gay."

"Why did you do that?" Frank asked angrily, taking a few steps in my direction, startling me with his outburst, but not enough to back away. I was used to other kinds of men. Frank really wasn't scary enough.

"That's none of your business."

"But you promised Antonio to keep his secret!"

"I know, but he's dead, Frank, and I'm trying to move on. If Antonio were still alive, I'd take his secret into my grave, but the truth can't hurt him anymore. And Dante won't tell anyone in the Outfit anyway."

"He won't?" Frank asked hopefully. "What about me? You didn't tell him my name?" The anxiety returned to his face with full force.

“No. I won’t. You are safe, but for it to stay that way, you need to stop hanging around in our street. It’s only stupid luck that none of Dante’s men has noticed you yet. And when they do, you’ll be in huge trouble. So do us both a favor and move on.”

“I can’t,” Frank said quietly. “Don’t you miss him? Don’t you want him back? Wouldn’t you do anything to have him back?”

“You should really leave. This doesn’t get us anywhere. I promise you are safe.”

Frank gripped my arm stopping me from walking away. “Valentina—”

“Hands off,” a cool voice drawled from the shadows and I let out a scream. Frank whirled around and tried to run away but Enzo was there and pulled him into a headlock. Dante appeared beside me and grasped my arm in a steely grip.

He nodded toward the door to the warehouse. Enzo dragged Frank toward it, despite his struggling.

Dante glared at me. “So this is what you do when I’m not around? Meeting with other men?”

“No!” I protested, horrified that he would think that. “It’s not like you think.”

“He’s been lurking around the house twice now, Boss,” Enzo said, then grunted when Frank’s knee hit him in the groin.

“Explain,” Dante snarled. Enzo was still trying to stop Frank from kicking him. Frank was putting up a surprisingly good fight.

“It’s Frank,” I said quickly, self-preservation overriding my desire to protect Frank.

Dante’s grip on my arm loosened. “Antonio’s lover.”

That caught Enzo’s attention. He knew Antonio. The Outfit wasn’t that big of an organization that Made Men didn’t know each other.

Suddenly shots rang out from somewhere. Enzo cried out and clutched his arm, releasing Frank in the process. More shots rang out. One hit the wall two feet above my head. Dante

pushed me to the ground and crouched in front of me, his own weapon drawn and fired into the direction where the shots were coming from. Enzo pulled his own gun but his right hand was useless and it was obvious that he wasn't used to shooting with his left hand. Frank was running as fast as his legs could carry him away from us toward the shadows. Dante pointed his gun at him. I jerked his hand away when he pulled the trigger and the bullet hit the ground, instead of Frank. "Valentina," Dante snarled, taking aim again, but Frank had disappeared into the darkness. Dante glanced at Enzo, who was clutching his bleeding arm, muttering under his breath.

"What the fuck was that?" Dante asked, eyes blazing with fury as they held my own.

"I don't know! I thought he was alone. Frank doesn't even know anyone who can shoot a gun."

"You should have let me shoot him. Never interfere like that again."

"He's innocent. He doesn't deserve death."

"Bullshit. That guy lay a trap and you fucking walked into it," Enzo muttered.

"What do you mean?" I asked carefully. Dante shook his head. "Haven't you wondered why he wanted to meet you? Maybe he's been approached by the Russians and agreed to help them. They'd love to kill you."

"Frank wouldn't do that."

"Are you sure?" No, I wasn't. "The Bratva can be very convincing. Or maybe they offered him a substantial amount of money. Money makes sinners out of most saints."

Enzo held up his phone. "Called reinforcement."

"Come on," Dante said, straightening up and holding out his hand for me. I took it and let him pull me to my feet.

"Do you really think it was a trap? I got the feeling Frank was lonely and wanted to talk to someone about Antonio."

"Someone shot at us," Dante said simply. I couldn't argue with that. And Frank had definitely run in the direction of the

shooters. Slowly I was starting to understand why Dante didn't trust anyone.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly, but Dante wasn't looking my way. More of his men were running toward us from the direction of the casino. He barked orders at them and they spread out in the area to search for our attackers.

"Take Enzo to see our Doc," Dante told another man, despite Enzo's protests. Then Dante turned to me. "We're going home now."

I shivered at the anger in his voice. Dante urged me forward with a hand against my lower back. He didn't talk as he led me toward the car, nor during the ride home. I kept glancing his way, trying to decide in how much trouble I was. "I'm really sorry."

He ignored me, but a muscle in his jaw twitched. I turned back toward the passenger window. Dante parked the car in our garage and got out immediately. I followed him into the house. I could practically feel his fury burning my back as he walked behind me. I stepped into the bedroom.

"I'm really sorry," I tried again, then gasped when Dante threw the door shut and pressed me against it. I was sandwiched between his muscled body and the door. I was startled and confused but not scared. Dante was obviously careful not to hurt me.

"Why do you keep disobeying me, Valentina?" He shoved up my skirt and pulled my butt roughly against his groin, and his rock-hard erection. Wetness pooled between my legs. "I don't know," I said, trying to hide my excitement.

"That's the wrong answer." Dante pushed my panties – I wasn't wearing tights, only suspenders – aside and slipped two fingers into me. Before I had time to articulate another answer, Dante replaced his fingers with his cock, slamming into me in one fierce stroke before he started to fuck me against the door. I was pretty sure he realized that was as far from a punishment as it could possibly get.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I quickly figured out that Dante fucking me against the door wasn't his idea of punishment. That came in the days that followed. Dante treated me even colder than before and I barely got to see him because he was too busy looking for Frank and his accomplices. He didn't even seek me out at night anymore, and even though I was too proud to admit it to him, my body longed for him to touch me again.

One afternoon, about one week after my messed up meeting with Frank, I encountered Rocco Scuderi in the lobby of our house. "Valentina, good to see you," he said on his way to the front door.

I smiled, although I was surprised. Scuderi always treated me with politeness and respect, but I didn't have a personal relationship to him like I had with his wife, or with Aria.

"I have a favor to ask of you," he said.

"Of course." It was unusual for a Consigliere to approach the wife of his Boss and ask her for a favor, but he was also my uncle, so maybe that changed things.

"You know my daughter Gianna is supposed to marry Matteo Vitiello, but she's still a bit hesitant about the marriage."

From what I heard, hesitant wasn't even beginning to cover Gianna's feelings about her wedding to Matteo, but I nodded anyway.

"I thought maybe you could talk to her?"

I'd never been very close to Gianna so the request surprised me. "Wouldn't it be better if Aria talked to Gianna? After all she's married to another Vitiello?"

“Gianna won’t listen to her sister. I think someone who isn’t immediate family might have a better chance to get through to her.” I was Gianna’s cousin, but of course he had a point.

“I can try, of course, but I can’t promise that she’ll listen to what I have to say.”

“Try is all you can do,” he said, looking almost resigned.

“Is there anything in particular you’d like me to address?”

“Maybe you can tell her that marriage doesn’t mean she’ll be trapped in a golden cage? I mean, look at you, you’re even allowed to work.”

I did, but I was the huge exemption. Gianna would know that as well. And even if Dante started pushing his men to let their wives work, that wouldn’t help Gianna. She’d be living under the Vitiello’s rule in New York. “I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you.”

“Why don’t you and your family come to dinner tomorrow?”

“That’s a great idea. That way Gianna won’t get suspicious and you can breach the subject casually.” We made out a time before he inclined his head in thanks once more and walked out.

I closed the door and headed toward the kitchen. Zita was preparing dinner – Canneloni filled with ricotta from the looks of it – when I stepped in. Gaby was ironing Dante’s shirts in a corner of the kitchen, far enough from the cooking that there was no risk of the fabric absorbing the smell.

“Zita, I invited the Scuderis for dinner tomorrow.”

Zita pursed her lips. “A bit more time to prepare would have been nice. I need to go grocery shopping, figure out a menu and then cook everything.”

“I know, but you won’t be cooking.”

Zita’s lips parted but no word came out. Gaby had stopped ironing to stare at me as well.

“I’m going to take care of everything. I used to cook frequently in my first marriage and I want to prepare dinner

for our guests.”

“Are you sure that’s wise? They expect a certain standard.”

“Don’t worry. I know what I’m doing.”

“And what are you going to cook?” Zita asked skeptically.

I smiled. “That’s a surprise. Now I’ll let you get back to your work.” With a wink toward Gaby who was openly gawking, I left the kitchen and headed for Dante’s office and knocked.

“Come in.”

I slipped inside. Dante was busy cleaning his guns. They were arranged on a towel on his desk. “I invited Rocco Scuderi and his family for dinner for tomorrow night. I hope that’s alright with you?”

He barely spared me a look. He was obviously still angry with me. “I assume this is so you can talk with his daughter Gianna?”

“He asked you first, didn’t he?”

“I’m your husband. Rocco wanted to make sure it was okay to approach you.”

Sometimes their unwritten rules and traditions drove me up the walls. “Of course.”

“Don’t forget to tell Zita and Gaby, so they can prepare everything for our guests.” He rubbed a spot of grease at the barrel of his gun.

“I already did. But I will cook dinner myself.”

That made him raise his eyes, surprise flickering across his face. “You can cook?”

“Yes. I used to cook often in my first marriage,” I said, and that was obviously the wrong thing to say because Dante’s expression darkened again. “You haven’t found Frank yet?”

“No. We haven’t. He’s probably gone into hiding if he has any sense.”

I nodded, then hovered next to the door. I could tell the discussion was over for Dante but I hated how strained things

had become between us. I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but then I lost my nerve and left without another word.

I hadn't even realized how much I missed cooking until I stood behind the stove again. Zita was a constant presence at my back, hawk-eyes watching my every move, but I was confident in what I was doing. I had cooked every part of today's meal countless times. Vitello Tonnato for starters, followed by Saltimbocca with homemade gnocchi and a green salad, and at last, Tiramisu. As I worked in silence beside Gaby and Zita, I could occasionally glimpse the hint of approval in the older woman's expression. I mixed everything for the sauce that accompanied the cooked veal for the starter before turning to Zita. "Would you try it? I'd like to know if it's good."

I *knew* it was how it was supposed to be but I wanted to show Zita that I appreciated her input. She stopped chopping the endive for the salad and walked over to me, wiping her hands on her apron. I took a step back as she dipped a spoon into the tuna sauce. She nodded slowly before leveling her brown eyes on me. "Good." I knew then that things would turn out okay between us. I smiled and chanced a quick glance at the clock. "I have to change. I can't welcome our guests in stained clothes."

"We'll take care of the rest," Gaby assured me.

"Thanks," I said as I hurried upstairs, feeling better than I had in a while.

The Scuderis arrived forty minutes later. My aunt Ludovica stood in the front with her husband Rocco who had a hand on nine-year-old Fabiano's shoulder. I greeted his parents before I turned to him. "You've gotten so tall."

He beamed up at me, straightening his shoulders even more. His father gave him a look that made the smile slip right off his face. Why did Made Men have to be so strict to their sons?

My father had always coddled me, but my brother had never heard a word of praise from him. I ushered them inside as it had started snowing again. I couldn't wait for winter to be over. The darkness and cold made it even harder to be upbeat about my marriage.

"Girls, greet the wife of the Capo," Ludovica said sternly.

"I'm still their cousin. They don't have to treat me any different now that I'm married to Dante." I hugged Gianna who looked gorgeous with her red hair that twinkled with stray snowflakes, then her younger sister Lily, who was getting more lovely by the day as well.

Dante chose that moment to join us. He shook hands with Rocco, then patted Fabiano's shoulder with one of his kinder smiles before he kissed the hands of Ludovica, Gianna and Lily. The latter blushed furiously while Gianna looked like she wanted to be anywhere but here. Dante walked ahead with Fabiano and Rocco. I hung back with the women of the family as we made our way to the dining room table.

During dinner, one topic wasn't mentioned: Gianna's wedding to Matteo. It should have been the focus of attention under normal circumstances, seeing that it was less than six months away, but I had a feeling the Scuderis were desperate to avoid a scene. After I'd received my fair share of praise for the first two courses, I rose and turned to Gianna, who was staring down at the table with a frown. "Will you help me with dessert, Gianna?"

Her head shot up, suspicion written plainly across her face, but she knew that manners dictated she agreed. She rose from her chair, sent a scathing look toward her mother, and then followed me through the door to our left. "Mother asked you to talk sense into me, didn't she?" she muttered as we headed toward the kitchen.

"No, it was your father."

"Wow. Shouldn't you have lied to me? That's what most people do."

I shrugged. "I think it's easier if you know the truth."

We stepped into the kitchen. Zita was cutting the Tiramisu into squares and setting them on plates while Gaby decorated them with fruit. “We’ll take over from here,” I told them. They seemed to understand. With a small bow toward Gianna, they slipped away toward their staff room. I grabbed the spatula and heaved another piece of Tiramisu on a plate, then motioned at Gianna to spread raspberries, strawberries, slices of mango and star fruit around it. “So talk,” Gianna said.

“I know you don’t want to marry Matteo.”

Gianna snorted. “I’d rather chop my fingers off and eat them.”

I gave her a look. “All women in our world face the same problem as you do. Very few are lucky enough to choose their husband. An arranged marriage doesn’t necessarily have to be a bad thing.”

“Why? Because love can grow over time?” Gianna said in what I assumed was an imitation of her mother’s voice.

“Yes, that’s an option.”

Gianna glared. “Come on. I’m not blind. Don’t tell me there’s love between you and Dante. You act like fucking strangers.” She snapped her mouth shut. “That was rude.”

It was, but I couldn’t blame her for speaking her mind, and the truth. “We haven’t been married for very long.”

“Shouldn’t two months be enough to know if you can stand someone or not? I knew after my first encounter with Matteo that I didn’t like that arrogant asshole.”

I put down the spatula and leaned against the counter. “What about Aria and Luca? She seems happy with her arranged marriage.”

“Aria is a pushover. If it had been me who had to marry Luca, either he or I would be dead by now. And Matteo is just as bad.”

“Aria made the best out of a situation she couldn’t escape. That’s all we can do.”

“No, it’s not. She could have escaped, if she’d been braver.”

I paused. Was she saying what I think she was saying?
“Nobody escapes the mob.”

Gianny shrugged. “Maybe nobody really tried.”

“Oh, there have been enough people who tried, but eventually your past always catches up with you.”

“I know,” she said softly, then she pointed at the plates.
“Shouldn’t we serve dessert now?”

“Yes, you’re right.” We loaded our arms with plates and returned to the dining room. Gianna’s parents cast hopeful glances my way. Dante eyed Gianna, then met my gaze. He seemed to know what the Scuderis didn’t: nobody could get through to Gianna. Her words about Dante and me kept bothering me the rest of the evening. It made me realize just how far my marriage with Dante was from the relationship I longed for.

That evening I decided to help Gaby and Zita wash the dishes, desperate to keep busy. We were almost done when Dante walked in, eyes taking in the scene before him emotionlessly. I was up to my elbows in dishwater. “You can go home,” he told Zita and Gaby who didn’t need to be told twice. They quickly took their leave. I withdrew my arms from the washwater and took the dishtowel Dante held out to me. “Thank you.”

“You are a great cook.”

I chanced a glance at him, wondering if he’d come here to tell me that. “I’m glad you enjoyed dinner.”

He nodded. I blew a strand of hair out of my face, then stretched my tired muscles. Dante’s eyes scanned my body. I became acutely aware of how close we were and how long it had been since we’d had sex. Had he changed his mind?

“I take it your conversation with Gianna didn’t go well.”

I sighed. “Of course it didn’t. How can I possibly convince Gianna that an arranged marriage won’t make her miserable? I’m the least person she would listen to.”

Dante smiled tersely. “You are right.” He took a step. “I’ll get back to work then.”

I didn't try to stop him. Maybe a few weeks ago I would have made an attempt at seduction but today I lacked the energy. I slumped against the counter as I watched Dante stride out of the kitchen.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I peered at the clock again. It was past midnight but I couldn't sleep. I longed for Dante's closeness, for his touch. It had been more than a week since the dinner with the Scuderis, and two weeks since Frank had run off and Dante had fucked me. God, and I missed him.

I slipped out of bed and left the room, not bothering to put on a bathrobe. It was dark in the corridor. I felt my way toward the staircase, then slowly descended it. At the end of the hall, light spilled out from under Dante's office door. I knocked, then entered without waiting for a reply. Tonight I would take what I wanted. The silent treatment was over.

Dante sat in his leather chair behind the desk. His hair was disheveled as if he'd run his hand through it repeatedly. He'd thrown his jacket and vest over the sofa, unbuttoned the top two buttons of his white shirt and rolled up the sleeves, revealing his strong arms. He hadn't bothered to remove his gun holster. He was staring at something on his laptop but glanced up when I stepped in.

He looked tired. "Is something wrong?" His voice was gravelly from disuse, almost growly, and made me even more determined to distract him from his work and lure him upstairs. His blue eyes took in my skimpy silk nightgown as I walked toward him. "I was just wondering when you'd come to bed," I said casually as I walked around his desk and stopped beside him.

He leaned back in his chair, eyes flitting between my naked legs and my face. A couple of months ago I wouldn't have recognized the look in his eyes, but now I knew it was desire. Maybe he shut himself off emotionally, but my body definitely got his attention. I must have caught him at a good time: too tired to keep up his disinterested act.

“Las Vegas contacted me. They want a meeting.”

I nodded, but I had something very different in mind than a conversation about mob business. I reached out for his laptop and shut it.

Dante raised his eyebrows. “Valentina, I really need to...” He trailed off when I leaned over him and slowly knelt down, running my hands over his thighs. I began massaging them as I looked up at Dante with big eyes. “Can’t the work wait?”

Dante’s eyes darkened with lust. A bulge was slowly forming in his black pants as he regarded me, and I had to stifle a smile. “What do you have in mind?” he asked matter-of-factly, trying to appear unaffected. The hard-on straining against his pants betrayed him of course.

I cupped his erection through the fabric. “I don’t know.”

Dante smiled darkly. “I doubt that.” He reached for his zipper and dragged it down, then he pulled out his hard cock. He stroked it a few times, running his thumb over the tip already leaking pre-cum before he traced my mouth with his thumb. I licked my lips, tasting him on me, and Dante let out a low breath. “Stop teasing me, Valentina.”

I leaned forward and licked his shaft slowly from the base to the tip before I dipped my tongue into the tiny opening. Dante gripped the back of my head and gently held me in place as I trailed my tongue around his tip over and over again, barely touching him.

His fingers in my hair twitched and he nudged me slightly forward. “Suck my cock, Val.” It was the first time he’d called me by my nickname. I cupped his tip with my lips and began sucking, making sure to run my tongue around the rim now and then. Dante watched me through hooded eyes as he massaged my scalp.

I took him deeper and then started bobbing my head up and down how he liked it. Dante’s eyes never left me. He started bucking his hips and tightened his grip on my head as I sucked him harder. “I’m coming,” he said in warning. I felt him tense as his climax overwhelmed him. His cock jerked and he

erupted in my mouth. I tried to swallow while keeping up my sucking. Dante groaned, still rocking his hips and his hooded eyes fixed on me. These were the moment he allowed me the occasional glimpse behind his guarded mask.

I could feel him softening in my mouth and I released him from my lips. A defiant part in me wanted to ask him if that meant he'd forgiven me for the mess with Frank, but the reasonable side of me won.

Dante dropped his hand from my head and went limp, squeezing his eyes shut. I quickly wiped my mouth as long as he wasn't watching and checked my décolleté for stains. My own arousal was a throbbing between my legs. Dante shifted, drawing my attention back to him. He stared at me with an unreadable expression and I was starting to feel self-conscious. I stood but Dante did the same, towering over me in his posh white dress shirt, gun holster and half-open dress pants. I searched his eyes but as usual I couldn't read him.

He cupped my neck and crashed his mouth against mine. I gasped in surprise and his tongue slid in. He used his body to back me up until my legs bumped into the edge of his desk. He gripped my hips and hoisted me on top of the cool surface, stepped between my legs, still possessing me with his mouth and tongue, making my legs go numb and my heart slam against my ribcage. God, Dante could kiss. I wished he'd do it more often.

He grasped my shoulders, stopped kissing me and eased me down until I lay flat on his desk. I stared up at him, forcing myself to lay still and let him admire me, when all I wanted to do was rip the buttons off his shirt and have him inside me. Dante seemed to know what I wanted. The dark smile was back and the cool sophistication had been replaced by something feral and hot. I bit my lip and spread my legs even wider, making my nightgown ride up.

I knew Dante could see what was below it: nothing. I wasn't wearing panties.

He released a harsh breath, but he still wasn't touching me and it was driving me to the brink of despair. I tried to grab his

shirt but he stepped out of my reach. “No,” he said with authority. The voice he only ever used when he was giving orders to his soldiers. It was the sexiest sound in the world, but I was burning up with need. “Touch me.”

“I’m still angry with you. Sex won’t change that. You disobeyed my direct order.”

He couldn’t be serious. If this was another form of punishment, I’d lose it.

“Let’s see if you learned your lesson. You will obey me now, won’t you?”

I almost moaned at the timbre of his voice and look in his eyes. “Yes,” I said quickly.

He took another step back, his eyes meeting mine. “Spread your legs wider.”

I didn’t hesitate. The air in his office felt cool against my heated flesh but it did nothing to alleviate the burning need. Dante unfastened his gun holster without hurry, never taking his eyes off me. “Touch yourself.”

My eyes widened, but again I complied. When he used that voice, I had a hard time resisting. I slid my hand down my body and between my legs. Part of me was embarrassed. That definitely wasn’t something a respectable wife did according to my mother. But the bigger part enjoyed the way Dante’s eyes darkened as he watched my fingers slip between my folds and the way his lips parted. He let the gun holster drop to the floor with a clunk. He was growing hard again as he watched my fingers draw small circles over my clit.

“Put a finger into your pussy.”

I shook with arousal as I followed his order. I dipped my index finger into my hot core. A muscle in Dante’s cheek flexed and his cock was straining against its prison again. I could see how much he wanted to touch me, to fuck me, but Dante was nothing if not in control of himself and others. He stepped between my legs, gripped my wrists, and I slid my finger out of my tight channel, hoping he’d do it for me now.

“No,” he growled. “Keep fucking yourself with your finger.”

How could he sound so dangerous and sexy at the same time? How could that cold man say such naughty things with utmost authority? I pushed my finger back into myself, even though my clit practically screamed for attention. Dante stared down at me, his jaw tense. He pushed the top of my nightgown down, revealing my breasts. My nipples hardened from the cold and Dante's piercing gaze. He took my nipples between his forefingers and thumb, and started rolling them back and forth. I arched my back, but didn't stop fingering myself.

I reached for Dante's shirt, but he pinched my nipples in warning. "No," he rasped. I bucked my hips at the sensations rocking through my body, the sensual pain I started to enjoy more than I ever thought I could. Dante's fingers twisted and rolled my nipples relentlessly. My core quivered with the need to come. "Dante, please."

He fixed me with a stare, then he released one of my breasts and gripped my arm, stopping me from touching myself further. He pulled my hand away and put it beside me on the desk. He pushed my nightgown up so my pussy was bare to his eyes. "Don't come," he warned.

"What?" I gasped, but the sound turned into a moan when he slid his two middle fingers into me. My muscles clenched around him, gripping his fingers in an iron grip. He started fucking me slowly, his warning gaze on me. "Don't, Valentina."

I dug my nails into my palms, trying to fight off the climax. Dante pushed his fingers deep into me and kept them in place while his thumb brushed my clit. I gritted my teeth, my body starting to spasm.

"Do not come," Dante said huskily.

"Dante..." I shook my head back and forth, sure I was going to burst any moment. Dante curled his fingers in me and pressed down hard on my clit. "Now," he ordered harshly, and my release crashed down on me with blinding force. My butt arched off the desk as I cried out my release. My hands slid over the smooth surface of the desk, searching for something to hold onto.

“That’s right,” Dante said, his eyes on me. I stilled, feeling drained and sated. Dante slowly pulled his fingers out of me, sending another spike of pleasure through me. He unbuckled his belt, the only thing keeping his open pants in place, and let them drop to the floor. His cock was hard and red and glistening. “Turn around.” I slid off the desk, and stood on unsteady legs for a moment before facing the other way and bending forward. I braced myself on my elbows and jutted my butt out. Risking a peek over my shoulder, I found Dante taking in the sight of me. He kneaded my butt cheeks before gripping his cock and guiding it to my entrance. In one swift movement, he buried himself deep in me. I exhaled and curled my fingers around the edge of the desk, trying to steady myself as Dante started pounding into me. I gasped as he drove himself deeper and deeper into me, making my nipples rub against the cold, smooth desk.

“Am I forgiven?” I gasped out.

Dante growled. He leaned over me, his fingers finding my nub. “I shouldn’t forgive you,” he said between grunts, accentuating every word with a hard thrust. “But for some reason, I can’t stay mad at you.”

A grin tugged at my lips but dropped off my face when Dante hit my g-spot and made me shatter under the force of my climax. Dante tensed behind me as his own release overcame him. My legs were seconds away from collapsing and my chest was probably sore from rubbing over the desk. Dante wrapped his arm around my chest, pulling our bodies flush together and still pumping into me as he left a trail of kisses up my shoulder. He shuddered again and licked my ear. We stayed like that for a couple of moments before Dante stepped back. I pushed myself to my feet. “Will you come upstairs with me?” I asked as I gathered my clothes.

Dante hesitated but then he nodded. I walked ahead to hide my elated expression from him. This felt like a major victory.

After we’d showered, we slipped into bed. I snuggled up to Dante’s back and slung my arm over his stomach. When I’d almost fallen asleep, his hand covered mine.

We fell into the same routine we'd established before the Frank-fiasco. Dante fucked me at night, engaged me in talk about the casino during meals and otherwise ignored me mostly. Every morning I woke alone, no matter how long Dante had kept me up the night before.

This was also the case the morning I was woken from cramps. When I sat up, a violent wave of morning sickness hit me. I stormed into the bathroom and threw up what little I had in my stomach, gasping for breath and feeling dizzy. Gradually a suspicion wormed its way into my mind. My period was overdue at least a week. But then, my menstrual cycles had always been rather volatile so I hadn't paid it much heed.

Was I pregnant? Slowly I straightened and walked toward the washbasin to rinse my face and mouth. It would be the logical explanation. Dante and I had been sleeping with each other for months without protection. When I was certain that my dizziness had passed, I took a shower before I dressed in casual chinos and a pullover, pulled my hair into a ponytail and made my way downstairs. I had to find out if I was pregnant.

I called for Taft and told him I needed to go to a pharmacy. Enzo still had his arm in a cast, so he couldn't work as my driver at the moment. Taft didn't ask why, for which I was glad. I didn't want anyone to suspect anything yet. I needed to know for sure before I told anyone. Taft waited in the car as I headed into the pharmacy and bought two pregnancy tests. Once back in the car, my purchase safely hidden in my bag, I turned to Taft. "Please drive me to Bibiana." Since I'd started working in the casino, I'd had less time for her, but this was something I wanted to share with her.

I texted her so she'd know I was coming and didn't surprise her and her husband at a bad time again. Luckily, Tommaso wasn't home when I arrived at Bibiana's. There were no visible bruises on her body, and I hoped it was because Tommaso was treating her better and not because he made sure to hide them better since Bibi had spent the night at my house. "Are you okay?" I asked as a way of greeting.

Bibi nodded. "Tommaso has been in a good mood recently." She led me into the living room. "I'm so glad to see you again. Don't you have to work?"

"I don't think I'll go today. I'll give Leo a call later to let him know."

"Has something happened?"

I pulled the pregnancy tests out of my bag.

Bibi's eyes grew wide. "You're pregnant?"

"I don't know. That's why I bought these. I wanted you to be there when I found out."

"Wow. Does Dante suspect?"

I shook my head. "I want to know for sure before I tell him."

"I understand. He'd only be disappointed if you told him and then it wasn't true." She took one of the pregnancy tests. "So do you want to do it now?"

I nodded, nerves fluttering in my stomach. Bibi led me to their guest bathroom. I walked in alone. I'd never mastered the talent to pee with other people in a room with me. Once I was done, I set both tests down on the edge of the washbasin and opened the door. Bibi wrapped her arm around my waist, as we both stared at the tests.

"I think it's time," she said after a few minutes.

"Okay." I reached for the tests and with a deep breath, stared down at them. Both were positive. "I'm pregnant."

Bibi hugged me tightly. "That's wonderful! I'm so happy for you. Dante will be so proud when he finds out. He's waited long enough for children and you're finally giving them to him. Will you tell him today?"

I considered that. "I think I should get confirmation from my gynecologist. As you said, I should be absolutely sure before I tell him." And the other reason was that I needed some time to get used to the idea myself. I'd always wanted kids, and Dante and I had never taken countermeasures, but now that I knew I

would be having a baby in less than one year, I was hit by nerves.

“I couldn’t keep it a secret. Especially since Tommaso is so desperate for me to get pregnant.”

“Maybe we’ll be pregnant together. That would be great.”

She smiled. “Go on, call your doc.”

“I will,” I said with a laugh. She looked more elated than I did.

As usual I got an appointment for the next day. My gynecologist was associated with the Outfit, so I never had to wait long.

That evening when Dante and I sat down for dinner together, the truth was on the tip of my tongue. I was still feeling nauseous and didn’t eat more than a few bites of Zita’s delicious lasagna. My glass of wine stayed untouched and I could manage only few gulps of water. Dante peered at me over his wine. “Are you alright? You’ve barely touched your food.”

“I don’t feel well. Maybe I caught the stomach flu.”

Dante’s brows crinkled. “Should I tell Zita to make you tea and chicken soup?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Thanks, but I think I’ll just go to bed early.” I stood and had to grip the edge of the table as a wave of dizziness gripped me. Dante was beside me immediately. “Should I call the doc?”

I shook my head, then regretted the movement. “No. I’ll feel better once I lie down.” Dante didn’t budge from my side as he led me upstairs, his hand resting on my hip.

I changed into my pajamas as Dante watched me. Then I slipped under the covers. “Do you want me to join you?” he asked.

I hesitated. “I don’t think I’m well enough for sex.”

Dante perched on the bed. “Valentina, that’s not what I meant. I’m not that kind of bastard.”

“I just thought...” I trailed off. “You usually approach me only when you want to sleep with me.”

Dante exhaled, then shook his head. “Would you like me to keep you company until you fall asleep?”

I didn’t want to look needy but even more than that I wanted him to stay with me. His baby was growing in my body, and if my gyn confirmed what the tests had said, I’d tell him. “I don’t want to keep you away from work.”

Dante sat back against the headrest, his legs hanging over the edge so his shoes weren’t touching the sheets. I moved closer to him and rested my head on his stomach. When his fingers started massaging my scalp, my eyes fluttered shut. Maybe a baby would bring us closer together. It had worked for some couples in the Outfit.

The next day my gynecologist confirmed my pregnancy and that I was seven weeks along.

I could barely contain my excitement and nervousness when I came home afterwards. Dante wasn’t in his office. I called Bibi and grabbed a few pieces of plain toast from the kitchen before I stretched out on the sofa, hoping that way the toast would stay in. My gyn had said my nausea could last for several weeks, but I really hoped I was among the lucky ones who suffered from morning sickness for only a very short time.

I was woken by the sound of a door being slammed shut and sat up, disoriented. It took me a moment to realize I’d fallen asleep in the living room. Heavy steps passed the living room door, then retreated to the back of the lobby. I stood, and after I’d straightened my clothes and hair, I headed toward Dante’s office. The door was closed as always. I knocked and stepped in.

Dante sat behind his desk, a thunderous expression on his face. I leaned against the doorway. He glanced up, but didn’t say anything.

“What happened? Did the Russians give you trouble?” I didn’t mention Frank, not wanting to remind Dante of my mess-up.

Dante leaned back in his chair and shook his head. “No, the Russians aren’t the problem for once,” he said coldly. “Our own people have taken up the task.”

I frowned. “What do you mean? Did one of your men betray you?”

“It looks like there’s not going to be a wedding.”

“You mean between Gianna and Matteo? Why? Did they have another fight?”

“A fight wouldn’t have detained Matteo from making the Scuderi girl his wife. He’s obsessed with her. No, the girl ran away.”

I walked into the room and perched on the edge of the desk, stunned by the news. “Gianna ran away from home? But how did she manage to escape her bodyguards?” I doubted Scuderi would have let her out of sight for a second. She was way too volatile for that.

“I had a meeting with Rocco but I don’t know all the details yet.”

“New York won’t be happy about it. Do you think it’ll lead to war between them and us again?”

Dante’s lips twisted into a wry smile. “I doubt it. Gianna ran off while she was visiting her sister Aria, so it’s as much Vitiello’s fault as ours.”

“It’s on them then. How can it be our fault if she was in their territory?”

“People are going to say Scuderi didn’t raise his girls right. Some will start to wonder how a Consigliere can control his soldiers if he can’t even control his own daughter. Few might even say it reflects badly on me that I’m taking advice from someone who lets his daughter go rampant.”

“That’s ridiculous. Gianna has always been boisterous. Her siblings are perfectly well behaved, so nobody can blame Scuderi or you.” I remembered what Gianna had said about

escape when I'd talked to her. Should I have taken that more seriously? I'd thought she was only letting off steam.

"I'm not so sure. And who says that Aria didn't help her sister escape?"

My eyes grew wide. "But Gianna's supposed to marry Aria's brother-in-law. She would have betrayed her own husband if she'd helped her sister run away."

Dante nodded, that same cold smile still on his face. "Things are going to get very unpleasant."

I rubbed my belly absentmindedly. "What will you do? Has Matteo cancelled the wedding yet?"

"Oh no. Matteo has no intention to cancel the wedding. He's determined to find Gianna. He already started searching for her." He sighed. "Scuderi is sending two of his soldiers with Matteo. The three of them should be able to track down the girl. They are professionals and she's a sheltered girl who doesn't know anything about the real world."

I could feel a new wave of sickness rising up in me, but I fought it. "Don't underestimate Gianna. If there's anyone who could do it, then it's her."

"Perhaps. But she's also hot-headed, and that will eventually lead her to making mistakes."

I sucked in a deep breath through my teeth as my stomach churned again. Dante searched my face. "You look pale. Are you still not feeling well? Maybe you should talk to the doc."

"No, I..." I didn't get to finish the sentence when another wave of nausea washed over me. I rushed out of Dante's office and toward the guest bathroom. I wouldn't make it to the master bathroom on the second floor. The moment I was bent over the toilet, I emptied what little I had eaten that morning. Bile burned in my throat. I closed my eyes for a moment as I clung to the bowl. It didn't help with the dizziness, if possible it made things even worse. My eyes popped open when I heard steps behind me and Dante's black Budapest shoes appeared in my peripheral vision. I quickly flushed the toilet and staggered

to my feet. Dante gripped my arm to steady me as I swayed. "Valentina?" His voice conveyed confusion.

I rinsed my mouth over the washbasin and washed my face. I could feel Dante's eyes on me the entire time. I faced him, smiling shakily. "I'm fine."

Dante didn't look convinced. He followed me into the lobby and then upstairs into our bedroom. I wanted to change my shirt. I couldn't help but think it smelled of vomit. I knew Dante was suspicious, but I didn't want to tell him about our baby when he was in such a bad mood because of Gianna. I'd rather keep it a secret a bit longer.

Dante touched my waist. "You know I hate it when you're keeping secrets. Don't make it a habit."

I met his gaze, and pressed my palm against my stomach. Dante followed the movement, his body turning tense.

"I'm pregnant," I said quietly, hopefully. I wasn't sure what I'd expected. I knew Dante wasn't the overly emotional type but I'd hoped for some flicker of joy at least. But there was only suspicion on his face. He took a step back, eyes hard and calculating. "Pregnant?"

"Yes. We never used protection, so I don't know why you're acting so shocked. Wasn't a heir one of the reasons why you married me?"

"That was the reason why my father wanted me to marry again."

"So you don't want kids?"

Dante's mouth was set in a tight line. "Is it mine?"

Now it was my turn to stumble away from him, shock and hurt slamming into me. I couldn't even say anything. Had he really just asked what I think he had? I was on the verge of an emotional breakdown.

"Answer my question," Dante said in a low voice.

"Of course it is your child. You're the only man I've ever slept with. How can you even ask such a question? How *dare* you?"

“I’m not keeping track of everything you do, and there are many men who frequent the casino where you work that wouldn’t say no to a night with you. You’ve made a habit out of keeping things from me. Do I have to remind you of Frank?”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I didn’t want to believe it. Tears of disappointment and fury burned in my eyes. Being pregnant hadn’t exactly helped with my temper and emotionality. “How can you even say something like that? I’ve never given you any reason to doubt me like that. I’m loyal to this marriage. There’s a difference between not telling you about Frank and between cheating on you.”

Dante still didn’t look convinced. “My first wife and I tried for years to get pregnant. It never worked. You and I have been married for less than four months and you’re already pregnant.”

“I don’t know why you act as if that’s impossible. If your first wife was infertile, then that’s your explanation. Have you never consulted with a doctor? Or did you think it was you who was infertile?”

“We never went to a doctor to find out why we couldn’t conceive. Not that it is any of your business. I won’t discuss my first marriage with you.”

I knew why he’d never consulted with a doctor. Stupid pride of Made Men. They’d rather live in ignorance than risk being told that they were shooting blanks. “Too bad. We’re discussing it now. I know why you didn’t want to find out. You didn’t want to know the truth, because you worried it would make you less of a man if it was your fault that your wife couldn’t get pregnant. But now we know it wasn’t your fault. It was Carla who was infertile.” I winced inwardly at my wording. I didn’t want to badmouth a dead woman.

Dante shook his head. “I told you I didn’t want to talk about Carla.”

“Why not? Because you still love her? Because you can’t move on?” He stiffened. “I’m sorry you lost Carla, but I’m

your wife now.” Suddenly everything I’d bottled up seemed to come to the surface.

I could see that Dante was teetering on the edge of losing control, and I wanted him to. I was so sick of his sophisticated calm, of his cold logic. “I’m so sick of you treating me like a whore. You ignore me by day and come to me at night for sex. And now you accuse me of cheating on you? Sometimes I think you hurt me on purpose to keep me at arm-length. When will you finally move on? Your wife has been dead for four years, it’s time you stop pitying yourself and realize that life goes on. When will you stop clinging to the memory of a dead woman and realize there’s someone in your life who wants to be with you?”

Dante was in front of me without a warning, his eyes flashing with fury and sorrow. “Don’t talk about her.”

I lifted my chin. “She’s dead and she won’t come back, Dante.”

He clenched his hands at his side. “Stop talking about her.” There was a hint of warning in his voice.

“Or what?” I said, even though the anger in Dante’s eyes sent a shiver of fear down my back. “Do you want to hit me? Go ahead. It can’t possibly be worse than the knife you thrust into my back by accusing me of carrying another man’s child.” It wasn’t exactly the truth. If he raised his hand against me, this marriage would be over once and for all. I knew some women in our world accepted physical abuse, many didn’t have any choice but to do it, Bibiana was one of them, but I’d sworn myself that I’d never bow down to a man like that. Stupid tears made my vision blurry, but I forced them back. I wouldn’t cry in front of Dante.

“You’re so busy honoring her memory and protecting the image of her you have in your mind that you don’t realize how badly you’re treating me. You lost your first wife through no fault of your own, but you will be losing me because you can’t let go of her.”

Dante stared at me, completely frozen. The myriad of emotions in his eyes was impossible to read, and I was too

tired to bother. I walked past him and he didn't try to stop me. He didn't move at all. "I'll move into the guest bedroom. There isn't enough room in our bedroom for me and the memories of your past. If you ever decide you want to give this marriage a chance, then you can come to me and apologize for what you said. Until then, I'm done with us."

I hurried up the staircase. Dante didn't try to follow me. The guest bedrooms were always prepared for guests. I slipped into the first, glad when the door shut behind me. I crept into bed. Maybe I'd sealed the fate of my marriage today, but I couldn't go back to how things had been. I'd rather have a clean cut. Of course I couldn't divorce Dante and he would never allow it, not that I wanted to, but we could lead completely separate lives despite being married. Many couples in our world did it. We'd go about our days like before, sleep in separate beds and play the married couple in public. We'd have to raise our children together, but most men took a backseat in these matters anyway. Eventually Dante would start frequenting Club Palermo or find a mistress like so many Made Men did, and I would focus all of my energy on taking care of our children. Many women had it worse, and yet the idea that I'd just painted my future made me sick, but I couldn't pretend Dante hadn't said those horrible things to me.

It was out of my hands now. Dante had to decide if he wanted to live in the past or move on into a future with me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Dante didn't apologize. Not the day after our fight, and not in the weeks after it. Maybe it shouldn't have come as a surprise. I went to my ten-week check-up to the gynecologist with Bibi. I didn't even tell Dante about it. If he wanted to ignore the fact that I was pregnant, that was his problem.

One week after the appointment, Dante's sister Ines and her husband Pietro came to visit us. I had only seen Ines twice since the wedding as she'd given birth to her third child four weeks ago. Zita had made dinner as I was too tired most of the time.

"Can I hold her?" I asked, when Ines lifted her daughter out of the car seat. She searched my face, then handed the baby to me, who had little spittle bubbles in front of her lips and looked too adorable for words. The twins were bickering in the background but I couldn't take my eyes of the squishy girl in my arm. I carried her into the living room, cooing to her. When I glanced up, Dante was watching me with something close to warmth in his eyes. I lowered my gaze immediately. Later after dinner, Ines and I went into the library to talk while the men and the twins stayed in the living room. Ines began nursing her daughter, then fixed me with a knowing look. "You are pregnant, aren't you?"

"How did you know? We didn't tell anybody yet." Not that I didn't want to but it was Dante's decision if he wanted to make it public.

"You didn't drink any wine during dinner and you kept touching your stomach."

I flushed. "I wasn't aware it was that obvious."

"Probably not to a man. You aren't showing yet."

“Please don’t tell your parents about it. I don’t think Dante wants people to know.”

Ines shifted her daughter because she was too fussy to latch on properly. “Why not?” It strange to think that this would be me in less than a year.

I shrugged.

“Are you two having problems? Isn’t he happy that you’re pregnant?”

“I think he needs time to get used to the idea.”

“He did something stupid, didn’t he? He’s my brother. I know he can be stubborn.”

“Stubborn doesn’t even begin to describe it. Has he ever apologized to you when he did something wrong?”

Ines laughed. “No. Sometimes I think he can’t speak the actual words. Most of the time he tries to ignore the problem until I give up and don’t expect an apology from him anymore.”

That sounded familiar.

“The anniversary of Carla’s death is in one week.”

“Oh,” I said, freezing. I’d completely forgotten about that.

“I just thought you should know. Dante is always in a particularly bad mood on that day. Maybe you should try to avoid him.”

That wouldn’t be a problem.

My morning sickness had finally stopped and physically I felt perfect. When I left the guest bedroom on June 1st, the day of Carla’s death, I expected Dante to be either out of the house or hidden away in his office. I jerked to a halt when I found the door to the room where he kept Carla’s old things ajar. I could hear rummaging. Was he in there looking at old photos of them together? I remembered what Ines had said. That I should leave Dante alone, but it had been more than five weeks since I’d moved out of our bedroom. I missed our moments of intimacy. Yet pride rooted me to the spot. The

door opened and Dante stood in the doorway, carrying a moving box.

I smiled apologetically. "Sorry. I didn't meant to..." I trailed off, not sure what to say to him.

My eyes darted to the moving box. "What are you doing?"

"I'm moving these boxes out of the house."

"All of them?"

He nodded. "Enzo and Taft are going to dismantle the furniture later and throw it away."

I swallowed. "Why?"

"We can put the room to better use. It would make a good nursery."

A lump rose into my throat. "That's true. But we don't have furniture for a nursery yet."

Dante cleared his throat. "You could go shopping in the next few weeks."

"Alone?"

"I could come with you."

I nodded. "If that's what you want."

He didn't say anything. Why couldn't he make this easier on the both of us? Did he think I'd fall on my knees from relief? He hadn't even apologized. This was the first time he acknowledged that we were going to be parents, and only indirectly. He hadn't even admitted that he was the father of my child.

"Do you need my help carrying boxes?" I nodded toward the boxes piled behind him in the room.

"No. You shouldn't carry anything heavy."

"I'm not that far along." Again silence and an expression I couldn't read. I turned around, ready to go downstairs and have breakfast. "I want you to move back into our bedroom, Val."

I stopped. It was a request worded like an order. He hadn't apologized. Despite all that, I heard myself saying, "Okay."

That evening I returned to our bedroom and when Dante's hands started rubbing my back and butt, and he whispered 'I want you', I nodded and relaxed under his touch.

A few days later, after I'd left Bibi's house, I let Enzo drive me to the pharmacy for something against my nausea that had flared up again in the last couple of days. As usual Enzo stayed in the car to give me privacy. Bibi had also asked me for a pregnancy test because she suspected she was pregnant but she didn't want Tommaso to find out; he'd only get furious when her suspicions didn't prove right. That man didn't deserve her. I strolled toward the aisle with the pregnancy tests.

"Val," someone whispered. I turned slowly, knowing that voice from somewhere.

Shock rooted me to the floor as I stared into the face of my first husband. His hair was shoulder-length, and much lighter than it used to be. He was wearing glasses that he couldn't possibly need and had gained some weight. He was almost unrecognizable, especially with the way he dressed. Like a college student who'd rolled out of bed without much thought for what he was going to wear. It was a good masquerade.

"Antonio?" I asked shakily, starting to feel faint. I couldn't believe he was actually in front of me, alive and in one piece. How was that even possible? They'd found his body; a badly burned body without a head. "Shhh," he said quickly. "Not so loud."

Antonio approached me and pulled me into a tight hug. At first I was board stiff, but then I sank into the embrace. "We need to hurry. I saw your bodyguard outside in the car. I don't want him to get suspicious and come in."

Tears burned in my eyes. I drew back, my eyes tracing the familiar lines of his face. "You are alive."

He smiled. It was slightly off. "I am."

“Does Frank know?”

“Yes, that’s why he wanted to meet with you. I sent him.”

“Why didn’t he tell me?”

“Because I wanted him to figure out your loyalties first.”

My loyalties? Had Antonio worried that I would tell Dante about him? I frowned. “Okay...why did someone try to kill me when I met with him?”

Antonio laughed. “I didn’t try to kill you. I aimed a couple of feet above your head. I had to help Frank. Dante would have killed him if I hadn’t done something.”

I still didn’t like that he’d aimed anywhere near me. The bullets had hit the wall less than two feet above my head. “So you were there the entire time and didn’t tell me?”

“Dante and his bodyguard showed up when I was about to step out. He ruined everything.”

“How did you even manage to follow me here without Enzo noticing anything?”

“I was one of them once. I could outsmart that guy any day.”

My head was spinning. I took a step back from him. “I cried at your grave! I mourned you for months.”

“I know,” he said. “But I couldn’t tell you about my plan.”

“Why not? You didn’t have a problem telling Frank.”

Antonio gave me a pleading look. “I didn’t want to involve you in this. It would have been too dangerous.”

“Who was the body they found? He had your favorite knife with him.”

“He was just a homeless stranger,” he said dismissively.

“You killed him and made it look as if the Russians killed you?”

Antonio nodded, a proud glint in his eyes. “I cut off his head so they couldn’t try to identify me through my teeth.”

I stared. "The Outfit sought revenge after they found you! They attacked the Russians and killed several of them."

"The Russians deserve death. The world is a better place without them."

The world would be a much better place without many of the people I knew. "I can't believe you didn't tell me. I married you to help you and you didn't trust me enough to involve me in your plan. Have you ever considered that maybe I wanted out of this life as well?"

"I did trust you. I still do, Val. There are few people I trust more, but I couldn't involve you in this. And how could I have taken you with me? It would have looked suspicious if we'd faked your death as well."

I couldn't see how that would have looked more suspicious. We could have staged a crime scene in our house and burned two bodies. But I wouldn't have wanted an innocent to die so I could follow Antonio. It wasn't as if I loved Antonio like I had at the beginning of our marriage.

"And be honest, would you really want to leave this life behind?"

I shook my head. This was the only life I knew. I wouldn't even know how to function in normal society. I scanned his face. "But why are you here? If you wanted to leave this life behind, meeting with me isn't exactly clever. Why are you even still in Chicago? Shouldn't you be somewhere in the Caribbean or in South America enjoying your new-found freedom from the mob?"

"I heard about your marriage to Dante Cavallaro."

I scoffed. "You didn't come back here because of that. Why would you get out of hiding for that? You were safe."

Antonio looked away. I could tell that he was reluctant to answer my question. "I tried. Frank and I tried a different life, a normal life. I had enough money to live comfortably in Mexico for a while, and then the plan was to find jobs, to live as normal people do."

"And?"

“I couldn’t do it, Val. I tried to work but it was degrading to work as if I was a nothing, to work for peanuts, to live without money. I was bored out of my mind. I tried for a while for Frank but he realized I was unhappy and so we decided to return to Chicago.”

“But why?” I asked. “You can hardly waltz into Dante’s office and tell him you’re alive. You broke your oath by leaving the Outfit. You betrayed them. They won’t welcome you with open arms.”

Antonio nodded grimly. “I know. Don’t you think I know that?”

Something dawned on me. “You want me to talk to Dante so he pardons you? You want me to come up with some crazy lie that will save your life?” I wasn’t sure there was anything I could do or say that would stop Dante from putting a bullet in Antonio’s head. He’d broken the mob’s cardinal rule. You couldn’t just leave the Outfit. It was for life.

Antonio grabbed my shoulder, eyes imploring. “If I could I would undo what I’ve done. I wouldn’t leave you behind as a widow. You know I love you, Val, right?”

I exhaled slowly. “I know, Antonio. You told me more than once that you loved me like a sister.”

Antonio brought us even closer. “Maybe I could love you more than that. Maybe if we tried again, we could be more than a fake couple.”

“What are you saying?”

“I want to return to my old life, to you. I want to try for real this time.”

I was more confused than ever before in my life. “Antonio, you have Frank. What about him? You are gay.”

Antonio avoided my eyes. “I know. But you could be the exemption. Frank wouldn’t mind if I acted as a husband should. He doesn’t mind sharing.”

I blinked, on the verge of laughter. “You want what...a love triangle?” I wasn’t even sure what else to call this. It was too

ridiculous to even consider.

Antonio gave me his most endearing smile. The one that brought back memories of our youth together, the one that had manipulated me countless times before.

“I’m married to Dante now. You aren’t even my husband anymore. You were declared dead.”

“But you can’t be married to Dante if I’m not dead, because our marriage is still valid.”

“You realize that Dante might be reluctant to agree to your insane suggestion, right?” I said. This was surreal. Maybe this conversation wasn’t happening. Maybe I was asleep and dreaming.

“Yes. He wouldn’t allow it and he would kill me if he found out I’m alive. That’s why I need your help.”

Dread settled in my bones like a leaden weight. “What kind of help?”

“I know you didn’t want to marry Dante. He’s always been a cold bastard. You can’t be happy with him.”

“Antonio,” I said imploringly. “Spit it out.”

“When I decided to return to Chicago, I contacted a couple of my former friends who aren’t too fond of the way the Cavallaros run the Outfit, especially Dante with his new rules. I told them I had faked my death because I was sick of serving under Cavallaro’s rule. They welcomed me with open arms. They want change as much as I do. Dante hasn’t been Capo for very long. This is the perfect moment to force a change.”

I swallowed, worrying where this was going. “Who are those friends?”

Antonio shook his head. “I can’t tell you, but they want what’s best for the Outfit. Once they are in power, I can safely return and be a part of the Outfit again.”

“Did you tell them you were gay?”

“Not yet, but I will eventually.”

“They won’t accept you.”

“That’s for me to worry about when the time comes. What matters is that I will get the chance to live in Chicago again, to return to you.”

“What is it you want me to do?” I asked quietly.

“It’s too risky for us to attack Dante in the open. We don’t want an open war. Once Dante is out of the way, things will fall into place. Old Fiore Cavallaro will be easier to dispose of once his son is dead. But we need you for our plan to work.” Antonio pulled a small vial out of his pocket, checked the aisle, but we were the only customers, except for an elderly lady at the counter chatting up the pharmacist. He held out the vial in front of him. “You are the only one I trust enough to ask and who has direct access to Dante.”

“What’s that?” I whispered, even though I knew.

“It’s poison, Val. All you have to do is sneak it into Dante’s drink and you’ll be rid of him.”

I backed away, out of Antonio’s hold. My stomach was churning. “You want me to kill my husband?”

“I’m your husband, Val,” Antonio grabbed my hand and pulled me toward him, eyes imploring. “Does he love you like I do? Does he even care about you? We’ve known each other all our lives.”

I couldn’t breathe. I searched Antonio’s eyes for a sign that he was joking, but found none. He held out the vial. “Take it.”

I grabbed the vial, stared at the colorless liquid inside of it.

“He won’t notice. It’s taste– and odorless, don’t worry.”

I still didn’t pocket the vial. I seemed unable to move a muscle.

“It works quickly. It’s a muscle relaxant, and causes the lung and heart to stop working. A quicker death than he deserves.”

“You really want me to kill someone?” My voice was almost toneless. “If something goes wrong and I’m found out, they’ll kill me.” Or more accurately, Dante would probably kill me himself after such a betrayal.

“You are too clever to be caught, Val. And once he’s dead, we’ll be taking over power in no time. You’ll be under my protection. Everything will be fine.” Antonio leaned down and brushed my lips lightly with his. I was too stunned to pull back. Slowly I eased the vial into my bag.

“You should do it tonight. The sooner we move, the better. I don’t want to risk staying in Chicago like this for much longer.”

“Does Frank know about all this?” I had to ask, had to know. I fought the tears that wanted to rise into my eyes.

“Yes. It was actually his suggestion. He thinks it’s safer than risking a gun fight. Dante is a damn good shot, and the bastard never lowers his guards, except when he’s home.” Antonio smiled brightly at me. I was a means to an end for him – again. Once before he’d used my feelings for him to lure me into a fake marriage and now he wanted to manipulate me into killing my husband. Maybe I should have tried to talk him out of it, but the moment I’d tried, he would have gotten suspicious, gone into hiding again and attacked Dante another time. It was too much of risk.

“I’d really feel more comfortable if I knew the names of your friends. I trust you, but what about them?”

“I trust them.”

I gave him a pleading look.

Antonio brushed a strand of hair from my face. The gesture was so tender and loving that it made me choke up with emotion. Antonio must have seen it because he nodded. “I can give you one name, but the others will stay a secret until things have settled down.”

“Okay.”

“Raffaele, you know him from the casino, right?”

Oh I knew Raffaele. And he was the last person in the Outfit who’d ever accept Antonio’s homosexuality. “Yes, I do.”

I was close to bursting into tears. To hide it from Antonio, I pretended to look at my watch. When I was sure I was in

control of my emotions, I raised my face.

“So will you do it tonight?” Antonio asked almost eagerly.
“For me, *for us?*”

I patted my bag where the vial was hidden, then I reached up and cupped Antonio’s cheek. “I’ve loved you since I was fourteen. I was so happy when we married.”

Antonio smiled, eyes brimming with satisfaction. “I know, Val. I should have been a better husband to you.”

Yes, you should have been.

“But soon things will change. And this time everything will be better.”

I nodded. *No, it won’t.*

I drew back. “I need to return to the car before Enzo gets suspicious.”

“Here’s my number. Call me once it’s done, okay?” He slipped a piece of paper into my pocket.

I nodded again.

“Say goodbye to Dante from me,” Antonio said with a wink. He was still so very confident in the power he’d once held over me, but I wasn’t the dotting naïve girl I used to be.

I turned around and slowly walked out of the pharmacy and back to the car.

Goodbye.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I twisted the vial in my hands over and over again. The tears had dried by now, and my face felt hot and sticky from crying, but my decision was made. There was only one thing I could do. Dante's step rang in the corridor and I quickly pocketed the poison. The door opened and Dante stepped in, then stopped with a surprised look on his face when he saw me standing in front of the window.

"Valentina, what are you doing here?" His gaze swept over my teary face. "Did something happen? Are you alright?"

"We need to talk."

Dante closed the door slowly, every motion deliberate and calculated. He knew something was up. I didn't have to see my face to know it gave everything away, not only because of my swollen eyes. I had never been so shaken in my life as I was today. He approached me carefully, then stopped out of reach. I searched his face for something, some kind of gentleness, but he was only alert. This was the man who'd accused me of having cheated on him, who'd rejected our unborn child because he thought it wasn't his. A man who never let me close. Would he ever love me? Would I ever find in this marriage what I so desperately wanted?

Dante's cold scrutiny was such a stark change from Antonio's tenderness and easy-going smiles. Antonio had promised me to give me what I wanted, to be a husband I deserved. Three years ago I'd have done everything to hear those words from him, even slipped poison into the glass of someone who wanted Antonio dead. But somehow in the last months of my marriage to Dante something had changed. My heart had moved on from one unattainable man to the next. Despite everything Dante had done and said, he was my husband and I

had come to love him, no matter how stupid that made me. He was the father of my child, even if he didn't want to believe it.

"Valentina?" A hint of impatience crept into Dante's voice.

"I saw Antonio today."

Dante frowned. "You went to his grave?"

"No," I said with a hysteric note. "I saw him in person. He isn't dead."

Dante became still. I could tell that he wasn't sure if he should believe me. He probably thought I was losing it. "What do you mean?"

Tears spilled out. "What I said. He isn't dead."

Dante's face hardened but he remained silent.

"That's why Frank contacted me. Antonio was there that night at the warehouse. He shot at us to save Frank. It wasn't the Russians."

"Why did you meet him without telling me after he tried to kill you once already?"

"I didn't! He followed me into the pharmacy today."

Suspicion was edged into Dante's face. "Why didn't you call Enzo? Where was he?" He didn't sound like a husband, he sounded like he was my Boss and I was one of his soldiers.

"I don't know. I was shocked. I thought Antonio was dead and then suddenly I'm staring at his face. I wanted to hear him out. He told me he faked his death to escape the Outfit and live with Frank."

"And now he's back. Does he want my forgiveness? I don't have any to give. I hope he doesn't expect me to give him a warm welcome. The only thing he can have is a quick death."

I wrapped my arms around my middle. "He doesn't want to ask for your forgiveness."

Dante searched my face.

"He wants you dead. He and a few others want you and your father gone and take over power."

Dante's jaw flexed. "Do they now? And how do they intend to do that?"

"Antonio asked me to poison you."

Dante's eyes bored into mine. "Why would he think you'd agree?"

"Because he's certain I still love him. Because he trusts me. Because it's probably obvious to everyone how unhappy I am." My hand unconsciously moved to my still mostly flat stomach. There was only the slightest bump visible when I was naked. Dante's eyes followed the movement and some of the hardness around his eyes lessened. "And what did you tell him?"

I made an exasperated sound. "Would I be telling you about all this if I wanted to kill you? It was bad enough that you accused me of cheating and didn't believe me when I told you I was pregnant with your child, although you are the only man I've ever been with. But this? Thinking I'd agree to kill you, this is too much, even for me."

Dante walked up to me and touched my upper arms lightly. "I didn't ask what you decided. I didn't think you'd kill me. I asked what you told Antonio. There's a difference."

"I pretended to agree with his plan. I worried he'd find another way to kill you."

"Probably. And I bet he would have tried to kill you too."

I sucked in a breath. "Antonio would never harm me."

"Are you sure? This is a man who goes to great lengths to get his way from what I know."

"I don't know. I don't know anything anymore."

Dante kept his hands on my arms. "Did he tell you who else is involved?"

I nodded numbly. "He mentioned Raffaele, but he didn't want to tell me the other names."

"Okay," Dante said gently. "Do you have a way to get in contact with him?"

“You are going to kill him.”

“I’m going to kill them all, Valentina. I have to.”

I stared into his determined blue eyes. No hesitation, no pity, no mercy. “I have his number.”

“You will send him a text saying you gave me the poison and now you’re panicking because you don’t know what to do with my dead body. Ask him to meet you at the warehouse again.”

A tear slid down my cheek. Dante wiped it away with his thumb. “You know what’s strange,” I whispered thickly. “At one point, I thought I could never love someone as I loved Antonio, no matter how unrequited that love was. And today I’m condemning him to his death for another man who will never love me back.”

Dante’s fingers froze against my face. His gaze flickered, and some tiny part of me hoped he’d say that he loved me. It would have made things easier. He cleared his throat. “We shouldn’t wait too long. Maybe he’ll realize it was stupid to contact you and he’ll decide to go back into hiding. We need to reach him before that.”

I drew away from his touch, and nodded. I reached into my bag for my phone, my fingers brushing the vial with the poison. I should tell Dante about it. I pulled out my phone and opened a text. I quickly typed what Dante had told me and sent it off. Afterward, I anxiously stared down at the screen. Less than a minute later, I got a reply.

Meet me in 30 minutes. Bring the body. I’ll take care of everything.

“How am I supposed to get your body into my car?”

“I suppose dragging would work,” Dante said dryly.

I laughed, then choked up. “What now? You will need reinforcements.”

Dante shook his head. “I don’t know who to trust right now. Not until I’ve talked to Antonio.”

I knew he wouldn't just talk to him and the thought sent a stab through my heart. "But what if Antonio isn't alone? Isn't it too risky for you to go alone? Maybe you should ask one of the guards. They have access to this house. If they wanted you dead, they'd probably have figured out a way to kill you by now."

"I'd rather get a picture of the situation before I involve anyone else. It's crucial that I don't look vulnerable in front of my men. I need to be in control at all times. I will handle this alone. Once I know more, I'll call my soldiers. They'll need to see what I do with traitors anyway."

I swallowed. "Can you kill Antonio quickly? You can get the information you want from Raffaele."

"Raffaele might get suspicious and disappear, or he might not know everything Antonio does. I'll have to make sure I find out exactly who's involved in this."

I touched his arm. "What if you get shot?"

"I can handle myself. I've fought many battles in my life. I wouldn't be Capo if I hadn't."

"I should come with you."

"No," Dante said immediately.

"What if Antonio doesn't come out until he sees me in my car? If they have binoculars they'll see it's you behind the steering wheel. They'll run off and we'll never find out who's behind this coup."

Dante regarded me with respect. "I won't risk your life."

"I won't get out of the car. It's bullet proof, remember? I'll be perfectly safe."

"You want to be there when I handle Antonio?"

I hesitated. That was the last thing I wanted. "No," I said honestly. "But there's no other way. Once the situation is under control and you call your men, I'll leave."

For a long time, Dante and I stared at each other. "You shouldn't risk your life for me. And it's not only your life on

the line.”

“Nothing will happen to me or our baby. I know you will protect us.”

Dante didn’t say anything. I wished he’d say he believed it was his baby, wished he’d take back the hurtful things he’d said. “Let’s go then.”

Dante hid on the backseat of the car while I drove. As we passed the gate, Enzo gave me a strange look but didn’t try to stop me. Dante had two guns strapped into his gun holder and another one in his hand. There were also knives in the legroom, and I had a gun in the glove compartment. Not that it would do me much good. I’d never handled a gun in my life.

My pulse picked up when I steered the car toward the deserted parking lot in front of the abandoned storage facility. “We’re almost there,” I said.

“When you’re in sight of Antonio, try not to speak to me unless it’s absolutely necessary. He can’t know you’re not alone.”

The meeting point came into sight. Antonio stood beside his car. From what I could make out, Frank wasn’t with him, but he wasn’t alone. My heart picked up its pace and my hands became clammy as I clutched the steering wheel tighter. There was a second car. Raffaele and two men I didn’t know were inside.

“Antonio isn’t alone,” I whispered, barely moving my lips.

“How many?”

“Three others. Raffaele, and two men I don’t recognize.”

Dante pulled out his phone and brought it to his ear. “Enzo, prepare the crew. I need to dispose of some rats. Take only the inner circle with you.” He quickly gave Enzo the address, then he hung up.

I slowed the car and forced a shaky smile onto my face when I came to a stop a few feet from where Antonio stood. He looked anxious and kept glancing toward Raffaele who was getting out the car, followed by the man from the backseat.

Why had Antonio brought Raffaele to a meeting with me? Raffaele hated me. He'd rather see me dead than see me at Antonio's side.

What if Dante was right and Antonio wanted to get rid of me too? I didn't want to believe it. I turned off the engine. After another look toward Raffaele, Antonio headed toward my car. I tensed but forced my face to give nothing away. When he'd almost reached me, his eyes settled on the backseat and he jerked to a stop. His gaze darted to me for the briefest moment before his lips opened, probably to shout a warning. It was too late. Dante pushed open the door and pointed his gun at Antonio. My stomach shriveled with sadness and guilt when the first bullet hit Antonio in the stomach, the second went straight through his right hand, which had been about to pull his gun. Antonio dropped to the ground, clutching his middle, face contorted with pain.

I clawed at the steering wheel with all my might. Part of my brain screamed at me to grab the gun from the glove compartment to have some kind of protection, but the other, the louder part was just screaming. Screaming in anguish and horror and guilt.

Dante was shielded by the bulletproof car door as he fired his next shot. The bullet tore through the throat of the man who'd gotten out of the car after Raffaele.

Raffaele was trying to reach the safety of his own car, firing bullet after bullet in our direction but none of them could burst through our protective windows.

When Raffaele dove for the passenger door of his car, Dante stepped out from behind the door which had been shielding him. My heart pounded wildly in my chest as he squared his shoulders and aimed calmly. In quick succession Dante pulled the trigger, hitting Raffaele first in his left, then in his right kneecap. Raffaele dropped to the ground, face twisted in agony. The man behind the steering wheel of the car hit the gas, not even bothering to close his passenger door, as he tried to escape and save his own life. Three other cars, Dante's reinforcement, were already heading our way at dizzying speed, but Dante didn't let the enemy car get away. He aimed

his gun at the tires and hit them one after the other, causing the man to lose control of the car, which started spinning and finally collided with the abandoned warehouse. Airbags shot open, filling the car and hiding the driver momentarily from view.

I released a harsh breath, now that silence fell over the area, and kept my eyes straight ahead. If I looked back, toward where Antonio was slowly bleeding to death, I'd lose it. He shouldn't have come to me, shouldn't have asked me to kill Dante. He should have known better. Now there was nothing I could do for him, except hope that Dante wouldn't prolong his agony for too long. Tears blurred my vision and my knuckles were stark white and hurting from my grip on the steering wheel. From the corner of my eye, I could make out Raffaele. His legs useless, he was dragging himself forward with his arms, leaving behind a streak of blood on the dusty asphalt.

The cars with Dante's reinforcement came to a halt next to me. Enzo shot me a short glance before he jogged toward Dante. I didn't know what they were saying, but Enzo walked toward Raffaele, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and yanked him upright. Of course Raffaele's legs gave away again, and Enzo started dragging him behind despite Raffaele's cries of pain. With the help of Taft, they loaded Raffaele into the car beside mine.

Dante appeared at my window. I couldn't even move to open it. My fingers, my body, my entire being seemed paralyzed. After a moment, Dante opened the door. He squatted beside me. It was an unusual enough gesture for him that my eyes settled on his face. "Valentina," Dante said carefully. "Are you capable to drive yourself home or do you want one of my men to do it?"

I want you. I need you, now more than ever. "No, I'm okay. I can drive."

Dante scrutinized me. His hair was still perfectly combed back, his suit as impeccable as ever. Nothing that indicated he'd just killed one man and wounded three others. "I'll send Taft with you," he said firmly. "It'll be a while before I'll be home." He didn't need to say more. I didn't want to hear more.

I nodded simply. Dante stood and waved Taft over, who slipped into the passenger seat without a word. He slanted me a quick look. I probably looked as if I was close to losing it. And that was exactly how I was feeling.

Dante hesitated before he shut my door and took a few steps back from the car. As if in trance, I pressed my foot down on the gas. I didn't look back, couldn't. I'd said my goodbye to Antonio this afternoon. No, actually I'd said goodbye to him a long time ago.

Taft kept looking my way. I was driving too slow, but he didn't comment. My throat was tight and I was feeling sick, not the sickness I'd experienced as part of my pregnancy. This was something that seemed to take hold of my entire body, but I fought it. I needed to keep up appearances. Dante was a proud and strong man, and I was his wife. I wouldn't throw up in front of one of his men. I wasn't sure how long it took to reach the manor, but it felt like eternity. When I finally parked the car in the garage, I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I opened my door and stepped out. As I headed for the door leading into the house, my legs buckled. Strong hands grabbed me under the arms and stopped me from hitting the floor hard. Driven by pure determination, I forced my legs to stop shaking. "Are you alright?" Taft asked. "Should I call the Boss?"

"No," I said quickly. "He's got to take care of business." Of Antonio. A new wave of sickness crashed down on me. I stepped forward, out of Taft's hold, my head high and back stiff. Barely breathing, I made my way into the house and, clutching the banister in a death grip, I dragged myself upstairs. I stumbled into the master bedroom and straight into the bathroom where I emptied my stomach into the toilet. My abdomen constricted painfully and for a moment I froze in fear, but then the sensation was gone.

I stood and slowly, shakily began undressing, letting my clothes lay strewn about on the floor. I turned the shower on and stepped under the hot water stream, closing my eyes and finally letting sobs wrack my body. I leaned against the shower stall and slowly glided down until I sat on the cold marble

floor. I pulled my legs tightly against my chest, and cried. Cried for Antonio, for the boy I'd grown up with, for the man I'd once loved, for someone I'd betrayed the Outfit for once before. But today I'd made a decision and it had been against Antonio. I'd known what it would mean for him, had known I'd signed his death warrant the moment I told Dante about the plan. And yet I hadn't even hesitated. I'd chosen Dante and I'd choose him again. He was my husband, he was the father of my unborn child, he was the man I loved even if he'd never given me reason to. I buried my face against my legs, hurting, hurting so much I couldn't stand it. There was blood on my hands now. I cried even harder.

That's how Dante found me. I wasn't sure how much time had passed, how long he'd been gone. I was shivering, skin shriveled and red from the hot water. Dante stood in the doorway for a couple of moments, watching me, before he strode toward the shower. He wasn't wearing the same clothes he'd worn when I'd last seen him. He'd changed. Had to change. My throat closed up. I stared up at him, shaking and crying silently. He reached into the shower, still fully dressed and shut the water off. His cool blue eyes settled on me as I cowered on the ground. There was concern and sympathy, riddled with something raw and dark in his face. I didn't move, couldn't.

He bent down, slid his arms under me and slowly straightened with me pressed against his chest, soaking his expensive shirt. My fingers clawed at his shoulders almost desperately. He set me carefully down, but didn't let go of me. I wasn't sure I could have stood on my own. He grabbed a towel and started drying me unhurriedly, his eyes following his hands as they rubbed the fluffy fabric over my skin. I pressed my face into the crook of his neck, soaking in his familiar scent, now mixed with gunpowder and blood. Blood. Sweet and metallic. Blood, so much blood.

"Oh God," I gasped, and gasped, and gasped but couldn't breathe. Dante lifted me into his arms again and carried me into the bedroom where he lowered me on our bed. He took

off his shoes and lay down beside me, cradling my face until my frantic gaze settled on his intense eyes. “Shh, Val. It’s okay.”

But it wasn’t, couldn’t be. “I killed him.” I squeezed my eyes shut against the images my mind created, but they were even more colorful against the black canvas of my closed eyelids. “I killed him,” I repeated over and over again, until I wasn’t sure if the words still left my lips or if it was an echo in my ears.

“Val,” Dante said firmly, his fingers on my face tightening. “Look at me.”

I peeled my eyes open, staring at the beautiful face of my husband. Beautifully cold. Not a flicker of regret.

“You did what was right.”

Did I? Sometimes it was hard to see the line between right and wrong from all the death and blood plastering the mob’s paths.

“You did what you had to do to protect me.” His fingers stroked my chin. “I won’t ever forget it. Never.”

“I told you that you could trust me,” I whispered.

“I know, and I do.”

I wanted to believe him, but he still hadn’t said anything about our child, still hadn’t admitted that it was his, that he’d been wrong to accuse me of cheating. Too proud, too stubborn. He must have known he was wrong all along, because if he’d ever really thought I had cheated on him he would have moved heaven and earth to find the man who touched me. I didn’t want to think about it, but as my mind shied away from one hurtful topic, it latched onto the next. “Did you get the names of the other traitors?”

Dante nodded grimly. “Yes. I’m fairly sure. Enzo and a few others are taking care of the less important rats right now.”

“What...what did you do to Antonio?” I knew I shouldn’t ask. It wouldn’t make things better. It would only add fuel to the fire that was my guilt.

Dante shook his head. “He’s dead, Val.”

“I know but what did you do to him.”

“If it’s any consolation for you, I focused my main attention on Raffaele. Antonio got a quicker death than any other traitor.”

Tears pooled in my eyes. “Thank you.” What kind of twisted world did we live in that I thanked my husband for killing my first husband quickly, for keeping the torture to a minimum. A world of blood and death. A world our child would be born into and grow up in, and maybe one day if he was a boy, he’d follow in Dante’s footsteps and kill and torture others to stay in power. An endless circle of blood and death.

Dante searched my eyes. “Val, you’re worrying me.”

I raised my head and pressed my tear-slick lips against Dante’s. He didn’t pull back, only watched me with furrowed brows. I drew back a couple of inches, my fingers curling in his hair, my eyes pleading. “Please,” I said quietly. “Make love to me. Just today. I know you don’t love me. Pretend, just for tonight. Hold me in your arms for once.”

Tumultuous wasn’t the right word to describe the look in Dante’s eyes, but it was the only thing that came to my mind. “God, Val.” He released a harsh breath, then he pressed his lips to mine, parting them and tasting me, tasting my tears, my sorrow, and somehow taking some of it away with every brush of his mouth. His hand ghosted over my collarbone, my arm, my side, my hip, like a whisper of a touch, barely there and yet the only thing I was aware of. He sat up and quickly unbuttoned his shirt before throwing it mindlessly to the ground and then his bare chest was pressed up against me, so warm and solid. He left cotton-soft kisses on my temple, forehead and cheek before he found my lips again for a kiss that took my breath away. His hand discovered my breast as if for the very first time, fingertips laying feather-light touches on my skin, laying claim to me without the usual burning possessiveness. I moaned against his mouth as his fingers traveled the length of my body to slip between my legs. He nudged them apart and then he lightly explored my folds, gentle and unhurried. I whimpered softly but Dante silenced me with another kiss before he nuzzled my neck and

collarbone. When his lips finally closed around my nipple, I was already panting. Dante slipped one, then two fingers into me before he got off the bed and stood. He made quick work of his remaining clothes, and then he was on the bed, gloriously naked and hard. He settled between my legs and lowered himself to his elbows, molding our bodies together like we were one. He didn't enter me. Instead his hand caressed my leg and raised it until it was curled over his back. His erection pressed against my inner thigh but Dante didn't seem in any hurry. He kissed me, his eyes dark and probing as they watched me. He lightly petted my breast, making me ache for him to finally claim me.

He must have seen the need on my face because he reached between us and lined his erection up with my entrance. His claim didn't come in one swift, hard move as so often in the past. It was a slow conquest and my walls yielded to him as they always did. I gasped when he was buried completely inside me. Dante cradled the back of my head, his forearms braced to both sides of my face and then he started to move in me. Time seemed to stand still as our bodies glided against each other. Was this love-making?

I wrapped my arms around Dante, trying to bring him even closer. Dante didn't resist. He brought his face down to mine, kissed my lips, then my cheeks until his mouth brushed my ear. "I should have made love to you before," he said in a low voice.

And I cried in response. I wasn't sure if this was part of his pretense, and I didn't care. In this moment, it felt real and that was all that mattered to me. When Dante shuddered under his release, he took me with him, and even afterward as he started to soften inside me, he didn't pull away.

He lay on top of me, still buried in me, his breathing fanning over my cheek. I knew many women in our world preferred a beautiful lie to the harsh truth any day, and for the first time, I understood. After all that had happened today, I allowed myself that weakness. Tomorrow would be the time to face reality.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When I left the house before breakfast the next morning, Dante wasn't there. I hadn't expected him to, he hadn't lain beside me when I'd woken either. Yesterday I'd forced him to let me closer than he was comfortable with and now he would be pulling away until we were barely civil again. I waved Taft over and he approached me at once. "I need you to drive me to Bibiana," I said as we walked into the garage. He grabbed the keys, slid into the car and then we were already off. Time was important. "Hurry," I added when we pulled away from the house. Taft didn't ask why.

The moment we parked in front of Bibiana's house, I got out of the car and hurried toward the entrance door. I rang the bell. I knew Tommaso was still home because there wasn't a guard sitting in a car in the street. I'd hoped for that.

I could hear Tommaso shouting angrily and then there were quick steps and Bibiana opened the door, still in her bathrobe. Her eyes widened with confusion when she saw me. "Val? Tommaso told me what happened yesterday. Are you okay?" There was a hand-shaped bruise on her cheek and it made my decision easier.

I pulled her against me in a hug and pushed the vial with poison into her palm. "Nobody knows I have this. It's poison, Bibi. If you really want to be free, then slip it into his breakfast today. Tomorrow it'll be too late. Today we can still blame it on the traitors. Nobody will ask questions." I straightened with a smile, my face the mask I'd learned from Dante. Bibi smiled back but there was surprise and incredulity and gratefulness in her eyes.

"Bibiana, what's taking you so long?" Tommaso bellowed as he trudged down the staircase. He paused when he spotted me. Bibiana quickly hid the poison vial in her bathrobe.

“I’m sorry for disturbing you,” I said. “I only wanted to make sure Bibiana knew I’m alright. I don’t have much time though. I need to get back home.”

“Dante called for a meeting of the entire Outfit. Just got the email. I suppose you can’t give me details about what went down?”

I shook my head. “I should really go.” I gave Bibiana a smile, then I turned on my heel and walked back to the car. The last thing I heard was Bibi telling Tommaso she would make him a quick breakfast before he left.

This was the second man I’d condemned to death. This time, however, there was no guilt.

“Valentina, I’d like to talk to you,” Dante said before disappearing back in his office. I hesitated. This was the first time that Dante had actually asked me into his office for a conversation. All the times before, I had to seek him out.

Worry gnawed at my insides as I stepped into his office and closed the door behind me. Dante was facing the window but turned to me. For a long time his blue eyes searched my face. “Tommaso didn’t show up at the meeting I’d called.”

I forced my face to stay expressionless. “So?”

“The men I sent over to get him found him dead in his living room. Poisoned.”

“What about Bibiana?” I asked, trying to sound worried and shocked. She hadn’t sent me a text or tried to call me. It would have been too risky anyway.

“She’s with her parents now, but I’ll have to drive over there now to question her.”

I froze. “Why?”

“Because as Capo I need to investigate when one of my men gets killed.” Dante slowly advanced on me. “Of course, I’m fairly sure I know what happened.”

I raised my chin as he stopped in front of me. “You do?” I held his gaze, anything else would have looked guilty, even if it was probably too late for that anyway.

“You are best friends with Bibiana and you wanted to help her.” I didn’t say anything but he didn’t seem to expect me to. He continued in the same quiet, smooth voice. “Antonio gave you poison when he asked you to kill me, didn’t he?”

I considered lying to him, but I needed him on my side and he wouldn’t take being lied to kindly. “Yes,” I said softly.

“You didn’t tell me about it because you knew it was your chance to help Bibiana, so you took it to her and told her to blame it on Raffaele.”

“Did she say that?”

“She mentioned Raffaele visited them yesterday when my men took her to her parents, but she was too hysterical to say much.”

Was Bibi regretting what she’d done? Or had her breakdown been for show? “So why don’t you believe it was Raffaele?”

Dante’s eyes narrowed. “Because he would have mentioned it when I interrogated him.”

I nodded. “So what now?”

Dante shook his head. “Goddamnit, Valentina. You should have come to me.”

“I came to you. I asked you if there was something you could do against Tommaso, but you said there wasn’t.”

“You asked me to kill him and I told you I couldn’t because he wasn’t a traitor.”

I scoffed. “As if that matters. You are a killer, Dante. You can kill whoever you want. Don’t tell me you’ve never killed for other reasons than protecting the Outfit.”

Dante gripped my shoulders, bringing us even closer. “Of course, I have. But I told you ‘no’ and you should have listened to me.”

“Because your word is law,” I said mockingly.

“Yes,” Dante said in a low voice. “Even for you.”

“I would do it again. I don’t regret freeing Bibi of that cruel bastard. I only regret that I had to go behind your back but you left me no choice.”

Dante’s eyes flashed. “I left you no choice? You can’t go around killing my men!”

“He deserved it. You should have seen what he did to Bibi. You should have wanted to kill him for how he treated an innocent woman, wife or not.”

“If I killed every man in the Outfit who treated women badly, I’d be left with half of my soldiers. This is a life of brutality and cruelty, and many soldiers don’t understand that as Made Men we should protect our family from it, and not unleash our anger on them. They know I don’t approve of their actions. That’s all I can do.”

“But I was handed the chance to do something and I did.”

“You helped a wife murder her husband. Some men in my position would find it unsettling to be with a woman who doesn’t hesitate to use poison.”

My eyes grew wide. “I gave Bibi a chance, a choice. That doesn’t mean I would kill you. I would fight you if you ever treated me like Tommaso did with Bibi. Tommaso preyed on Bibi’s weakness. She was given to that old bastard when she was only eighteen and she never knew how to defend herself against him. He’s had four years to be a better man, to treat her decently. He failed. Our marriage has nothing to do with theirs. You don’t need to beat and rape me to feel like a man, and I wouldn’t let you. And anyway, I’m not vengeful, or I wouldn’t have swallowed how you treated me in the last few months, how you accused me of cheating. And Bibi never loved Tommaso, so...” I trailed off, clamping my lips shut. The last part wasn’t supposed to slip out.

Dante’s fingers on my shoulders loosened. I looked away from his penetrating gaze, unable to stand it.

“I’m not worried that you’d poison me. As I said before, I trust you,” he said after a while, dropping his hands from my

shoulders. “But I’ll have to investigate Tommaso’s death.”

“You won’t punish Bibi, will you?” I asked, terrified. “Please, Dante, if you care about me at all, you’ll rule that Tommaso’s murder was related to the traitors and that Bibi is innocent. She’s gone through too much already.”

“There might be people out there who won’t believe Bibiana wasn’t involved in Tommaso’s death exactly for the reasons you stated before. She had reason to hate him. She had reason to kill him.”

“Then blame it on me. I could have done it behind Bibi’s back to help her.”

“And then what?” Dante asked quietly.

“Then you punish me and not her.”

“And what if punishment for such a crime would be death in turn? Eye for an eye, Valentina.”

I stared, tears brimming in my eyes. “Don’t hurt, Bibi. Just don’t. Without me, she would have never found a way to kill him. It was as much my fault as it was hers. I will share whatever punishment you inflict on her.”

“I fear you’re saying that because you know I won’t punish you,” Dante said, a dark smile on his lips.

“You won’t?”

Dante kissed me hard, then pulled back and lightly brushed my abdomen. Was it because of our baby? Or was I reading too much into the gesture? Or maybe he’d touched my stomach by accident. “As long as I rule the Outfit, you won’t be harmed.”

He stepped back. “I need to go talk to Bibiana now.”

“Let me go with you,” I said hastily.

“Your father and my Consigliere will be there as well, so don’t interrupt. I don’t want them to suspect you. Your father would overlook it, but I would hate to have to force Rocco into silence over this.”

It had been a while since I'd been at Bibiana's childhood home. I never liked her parents much. That hadn't changed when they'd forced Bibi into a marriage with an old man. My father and Rocco Scuderi were waiting in front of the door for us. When we walked up to them, Papà pulled me into a hug, kissed my temple and pressed his palm against my abdomen. "So how are you?"

I could feel Dante's eyes on us. Scuderi, too, was watching with hawk-eyes. I wasn't sure if he knew about my pregnancy. It wasn't public knowledge yet, but soon it would be hard to hide. A closer look was already enough to raise suspicions. "I'm good," I said in a whisper. Papà nodded, then stepped back. "Are you here to support Bibiana?"

I gave him a nod, but was distracted when the door opened and Bibiana's parents welcomed us into their house. Bibiana was in the living room, wrapped into a blanket. I rushed over to her and pulled her into a tight hug. "I did it. I really did it," she whispered into my ear.

"Shhh," I murmured, patting her back. When I pulled away, Dante, my father and Rocco Scuderi stood beside us. Bibi stiffened, eyes fearful as they darted between us. Her parents hovered in the doorway. If Bibi had been my child, I wouldn't have left her side in a moment like this.

"They're here to question you because of Tommaso's death. It's standard procedure. Everything will be fine," I told her.

Dante approached us. "It would be best if we could have a word alone with Bibiana," he said to me. Bibiana's parents left without a word of protest. I stood but didn't move. Dante's imploring gaze made me back away a few steps. Bibiana rose, then looked at Dante fearfully as he stood before her. She was practically cowering and it brought out my protective side, but Dante shot me a warning glare. He wanted me to trust him, to let him handle this, and I knew I had no choice. After an encouraging smile at Bibi, I left the living room, but I didn't go far. I pressed my ear against the door, trying to listen in on their conversation. They spoke too quietly, which would have been a good sign under normal circumstances. No raised

voices should be a positive thing but Dante was his most dangerous when he was quiet.

Fifteen minutes later, I heard steps approaching the door and quickly backed away. Papà opened the door and beckoned me in. "Everything okay," he said when he saw my worried expression. I walked in. Bibi sat on the sofa, her cheeks wet with tears, while Dante and Scuderi stood near the window, talking in quiet voices. I hurried over to her and sat. She gripped my hand immediately and I squeezed. Her parents came in when Dante turned to us. "The men most likely responsible for Tommaso's death are dead. There's no punishment to dole out, so I rule the case closed." I almost sagged with relief.

"Does that mean we are allowed to look for a new husband for our daughter? Recently the habit of waiting a year has been loosened," Bibiana's father said and was of course referring to me. That bastard. Bibiana had barely been freed from one husband they had chosen for her and they were already eager to find someone new.

Dante's answering glower made the other man lower his head. "Bibiana is pregnant with Tommaso's child."

My eyes flew to Bibi who gave me a small happy smile. "I suspected a while, but I got confirmation this morning," she whispered.

Her parents looked like they'd been punched. They could hardly marry off a pregnant widow. That would be in bad taste. Bibi met their disappointed glares head on. "I'm not going to move back in with you."

"I give you my word that your daughter will be safe in the house she shared with Tommaso," Dante said.

I had to hide a smile. Bibi's parents couldn't argue with that. After that, Dante and I drove Bibi back to her house. Although we didn't talk about what had really happened, Bibi's relieved expression left hardly any doubt. She tried to look solemn whenever she remembered herself, but most of the time her relief spoke too loud.

I was glad Dante knew the truth. He would have figured it out anyway. When Bibi had gotten out of the car and we were on our way home, I put my hand on his leg.

Dante's eyes registered surprise. I usually honored his reluctance of public displays of affection. "Thank you for helping Bibi."

"I did it for you," he said simply. That was probably as close to a declaration of what – love? Affection? I'd ever get from him.

"Thank you." I pulled my hand away again and rested it in my lap but Dante took me by surprise when he reached for my hand, brought it up to his face and pressed a kiss against my knuckles. My breath caught in my throat and immediately tears gathered in my eyes. Such a small gesture shouldn't have meant so much but it did, and pregnancy hormones didn't help. Dante didn't let go of my hand and sent me a questioning look. "Valentina? Are you alright?"

"It's the hormones. I'm sorry. Just ignore me."

Dante rested our linked hands on his thigh and drove with one hand. He didn't comment as I wiped my eyes and pressed my free hand against the small bump of my stomach.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In the weeks following after Tommaso's death, Bibiana blossomed to new life. She seemed to thrive in the solitude of her home. I wished I could handle loneliness as well. Dante was busier than ever. He wanted to make sure that the rest of his men were behind him one-hundred percent. That didn't leave much time for me, except for the nights he woke me with caresses and kisses. Since I'd asked him to make love to me after Antonio's death, he'd allowed more closeness during sex, had often held me in his arms, but I had a feeling he still preferred to be behind me as it allowed him to keep his distance.

I spent my days either working in the casino, or with Bibiana or Ines, who'd become a stronger presence in my life as my pregnancy progressed. Today Bibiana, Ines and I had agreed to go shopping together. Of course baby clothing was the number one item on our agenda for the day.

When we walked into our first baby store, Ines asked the question I knew she'd been dying to ask for hours. "So how's Dante dealing with the pregnancy?"

"He's not dealing at all," I said casually. I didn't want Ines to know how much it bothered me that he hadn't asked me about our baby directly once. He always inquired how I was and was increasingly more careful when we slept together, but he never put the word baby in his mouth. He hadn't even asked if it was a boy or girl yet. "Most of the time he pretends there is no pregnancy."

Ines eyed my protruding stomach. It still wasn't too obvious when I wore a loose-fitting blouse as I was only twenty-six weeks along but of course Dante saw it all the time. "He's being impossible. Do you want me to talk to him?"

“God, no,” I said quickly, then sent Ines an apologetic smile. “But thank you. Dante would be furious if you interfered.”

“You’re probably right. I still don’t like it. Sometimes I don’t understand men. Why can’t they admit when they messed up?”

I shrugged. It was something I’d wondered so often, but it never got me far. Bibiana held up a cute onesie with ‘Lock up your boys, my Dad owns a gun’ written across the front. “Not that anyone needs the reminder, but why not? You should get something like this.” She grinned, then sobered. “Is something wrong?”

I wasn’t sure. There was a strange twinge in my lower abdomen. Maybe my little baby was lying in an awkward position and pressing down on my kidneys. “I’m fine,” I said. I picked up the same onesie. “I don’t even know if it’s a girl.”

“I really hope it is, then our girls can play together.” Bibiana was only eighteen weeks along but she had already asked the doc about the gender. She’d been relieved when she found out it was a girl because she worried a boy might remind her too much of Tommaso.

“I want to be surprised.” That wasn’t true. I was curious. I’d been from the moment I’d found out I was pregnant, but I wanted Dante at my side when the doctor told me the sex of our baby. I wasn’t sure that was ever going to happen though.

“I don’t know how you do it. I’m way too curious,” Bibiana said.

Ines nodded. “That, and Pietro desperately wanted to know if he was getting a heir. I guess with twins we really had the perfect result for both of us.” She laughed, then quieted when she saw my face. “Did my parents bother you? I know my father is eager for Dante to have a son that can become Capo in the future. Don’t let them pressure you.”

“I don’t see them very often,” I said. “But of course they asked me about the gender. Your father didn’t seem very happy when I told him I didn’t want to know.”

“Men. I’m really surprised Dante isn’t more interested in finding out if he’ll have an heir soon. But he’s always been laid back about these things. Many men would have found a way to produce an heir elsewhere if their wife was infertile, but Dante never blamed Carla. He stood by her even when our father urged him to find a mistress to impregnate.”

“That’s horrible,” I said. There was still an odd pressure in my lower abdomen, but it seemed to get better now that we weren’t walking so much anymore.

“It is. Father suggested Dante and Carla could bring up the child as their own, but Dante refused to do it.”

“Maybe because he worried it was him who didn’t deliver,” Bibiana said quietly. I shrugged. I didn’t want to talk about this in public. Dante wouldn’t be happy if he found out. Of course, now we knew that it must have been Carla who was infertile, even if Dante and I hadn’t talked about it again since our major fight.

“So what do you say?” Bibi asked with a bright smile, still holding up that onesie with the cute quote.

I nodded with a resigned smile. “Okay. I’ll get it. Even if I’m having a boy, maybe next time it’ll be a girl, so it’s not like I’m wasting money.”

Ines touched my belly lightly. “I can’t wait. Nothing’s better than the scent of a newborn and those tiny toes and fingers.”

“True,” I said as I peered into the stroller where Ines’ little girl was sleeping deeply.

Bibi and I both bought the onesies. Then we said goodbye to Ines who headed back to her car with her own bodyguard, while Taft trailed after me and Bibi as we walked back to the Mercedes. He pretended he wasn’t there. For which I was grateful. When I was married to Antonio, I often went out of the house on my own, but that was a thing of the past now.

Taft drove us back to my house. Bibi and I wanted to spend the rest of the afternoon together, browsing books with baby names and eating the delicious Italian almond cake Zita had baked this morning.

The slight discomfort in my belly I'd felt all day increased as we walked up the few steps to the front door and entered my home. Taft excused himself quietly and would probably return to the guardhouse now that he was no longer needed. It was quiet in the house, except for the distant rumble of male voices. Dante was probably still in a meeting.

"Come on. Let's take our purchases upstairs. I want to show you the lamp I bought for the nursery," I told Bibiana.

I put my foot on the first step and froze. A sharp pain shot through my belly. I dropped the bags I'd been carrying and clutched my stomach immediately as my other hand shot out to hold onto the banister. Something warm trickled down my legs. I looked down my body in horror. My beige pants were quickly turning darker. Did my water just break? It was too soon. Way too soon. It didn't seem like enough water, but what did I know?

Bibiana let out a shocked cry. I was too stunned to utter a word. "Valentina? Talk to me."

"It's too soon," I said quietly. Fourteen weeks too soon. I began shaking as I clutched my belly.

"You're bleeding," Bibiana whispered. She was right. My pants had a light red tinge. My vision swam.

"We need an ambulance," Bibiana said. Then she shook her head. "We need to call Dante."

My legs started shaking and I had to lean against the wall or risk falling. Dante was in an important meeting. And I wasn't even sure if he wanted this child. He probably still thought I'd cheated on him to conceive. "No, Dante is busy."

Bibi gave me an incredulous look. "The hell he is. Help! Help!" she started screaming.

I was busy staying on my feet, so I didn't try to stop her. The door to Dante's office was ripped open and Dante charged out, gun in hand. My father and Rocco Scuderi were behind him, their own weapons drawn. Dante's fiery eyes settled on me, and the fury slid off his face and was replaced by worry.

“Valentina?” Dante said as he rushed toward me, already putting his gun back in his holster. “What’s happening?”

“It’s nothing. I didn’t want to disturb your meeting.”

Dante wrapped an arm around my back as my legs gave away. His gaze traveled down my wet pants. I’d never seen that look on his face. Was he really worried about me? I gasped as pain sliced through me again. My father appeared in front of me. “Valentina?”

“We need to get her to a hospital,” Bibiana said sharply.

Dante nodded and lifted me up.

“Your shirt. You’re getting it dirty.”

Dante held me even tighter and carried me outside. At once, Taft and Enzo stormed in our direction. “I want you to make up the front,” Dante ordered. The calm efficiency was replaced by something urgent in his voice. They nodded before they rushed off. My father held open the passenger door of the Mercedes and Dante gently sat me down.

“I’ll get your mother,” Father said as he touched my cheek. “We’ll be in the hospital soon.”

He closed the door, and the moment Dante slipped behind the steering wheel, he revved up the engine and we shot out of the garage and down the driveway. The car with Enzo and Taft waited at the front but shot onto the street when we’d almost reached them.

Dante drove well over the speed limit. Every bump in the street made me wince. The pain wasn’t as strong anymore, now there was only a dull ache, but what if that was a bad sign? “We should have put a towel on the seat. I’m getting it wet,” I said.

Dante glanced my way. “I don’t give a fuck about the seat, or the car, or anything right now. You are all that matters.” He reached out and took my hand, which was resting on my belly. “We’re almost there. Are you in pain?”

“It’s not as bad as before,” I whispered. Then because I just couldn’t let it drop. “It is your baby, Dante. I never cheated

and I won't."

Dante sucked in his breath. "Is that the reason for this?"

"You think my water broke because I was upset with you?"

"I don't know." There was something close to despair on his face. "I'm a fucking bastard, Val. If you lose this child..." He shook his head and focused back on the windshield as we pulled up in front of the hospital entrance. The car with our guards was already there, and so were a doctor and a nurse with a stretcher. Dante jumped out of the car and jogged around the hood to help them get me out of the car. Once I'd lain down on the stretcher, I was rolled into the hospital. Dante never left my side. And he only let go of my hand when he got in the way of the doctors and nurses.

After hours of ultrasounds, blood work and all kinds of other checkups, I was finally rolled into a room. I was tired and scared, though not as badly as before. Dante settled on the edge of the mattress and brushed a few strands of hair from my face. My eyelids were heavy but I didn't want to sleep. Dante had talked to the doctors, as I didn't feel like my brain could follow their explanations right now. "What did they say?" I asked.

"He said you had a preterm rupture of membranes. That's why you lost some of your amniotic fluid."

"What does it mean? Do they have to deliver our baby early?" Fear felt like a vice around my throat. It would be too soon. What if I lost our child?

Dante settled himself against the pillow and pulled me against his chest. "No, they don't. It didn't rupture completely, but of course there's a higher risk of an infection now, which is why you'll have to take antibiotics for a while. You didn't go into labor, so that's a plus. They hope to delay the birth until week thirty at least. You'll have to stay in bed as much as possible and aren't allowed to exert yourself in any way."

"Okay," I whispered. "I just want our baby to be safe."

“It’ll be. We won’t let anything happen to her,” Dante said in his calm, soothing voice.

I startled. “Her?”

Dante nodded. “I asked the doctor. They could see it when they did the ultrasound. It’s a girl.”

I wanted to be happy, and I was. I would love our child no matter if it was a girl or a boy, but I knew what was expected of me. I licked my dry lips, searching Dante’s eyes. “Are you angry because it isn’t a boy? I know you need an heir. Your father—”

Dante cupped my cheek, stopping me from saying more. “I’m happy. I don’t care if it’s a boy or a girl. And my father will eventually see reason.”

He sounded honest, but I knew the realities of mob life, and the need for a Made Men to have a boy who could follow in his steps, be inducted into the mafia and guarantee the success of the Outfit. A man needed a son to be fully respected by his fellow Made Men. “You don’t have to sugarcoat things for me, Dante. I know how things work in our world.”

Dante pulled back a few inches, eyebrows raised. “I’m not sugarcoating anything. I told you the truth. I’m happy that we’re having a daughter. I’ll be happy about every child we have. I’m not going to lie, many people in the Outfit will see it as something less desirable. They will only really congratulate me once you’re pregnant with a boy, but I don’t care about them. You’re still young, and we have time. We’ll have more children and maybe there’ll be a boy among them. But for now let’s be happy about our daughter.”

“Are you happy?” I asked, already getting teary again. That was the one thing I hated most about being pregnant; my loss of self control when it came to my emotions, especially my tears. “Since I told you I was pregnant you never once asked about the baby. You pretended it wasn’t there. You made me feel horrible for something that should have been cause for joy. Why did you change your mind? Because I almost lost our baby?”

“I didn’t change my mind. I’ve been happy about your pregnancy for a while now.”

I gave him a doubtful look. “That’s not what I saw.”

“I’m good at hiding my thoughts and emotions,” Dante said regretfully. “But I shouldn’t have done it in this case. You are right, I ruined your first pregnancy for you. All because I was too proud to admit I’d been wrong.”

I waited patiently for him to say more. I wasn’t ready to accept his unspoken apology yet.

Dante rested his palm lightly on my stomach. “You were right during our fight after you told me about your pregnancy. I never wanted Carla to see a doctor about her inability to conceive because I didn’t want to find out it was me who was infertile. I’m a proud man, Val. Too proud, and somehow I had convinced myself that I couldn’t become Capo if I found out I was incapable of getting my wife with child. I would have been half a man.”

“No, you wouldn’t. But I understand where you’re coming from. But if that’s the case, then why weren’t you elated when I told you I was pregnant with your child. After all, that meant you weren’t infertile. Shouldn’t you have been proud?”

Dante’s smile was solemn. “Yes, I suppose I should have.” He paused and I gave him the time he needed to figure out his next words. I had a feeling he’d share something very personal with me. “But when you told me about your pregnancy, it almost felt like an attack on Carla’s memory, as if you were blaming Carla for her inability to give me children by getting pregnant so quickly.”

“I never wanted to attack your wife,” I said horrified. “I know you loved her more than anything. I knew it before we married, and you never let me forget it in all the time we’ve been together.” The last part came out more accusatory than intended.

“I know,” Dante said, his cool blue eyes tracing my face. “I treated you badly. You did nothing to deserve it. When you gave yourself to me for the first time, I should have held you

afterward. It would have been the decent, the honorable thing to do. Instead I left. I didn't want to allow myself to be close to you. I'd allowed myself to love once and after I had to watch Carla die a slow horrible death, I'd sworn to myself that I wouldn't let a woman into my life again."

I nodded slowly. "I'm sorry for what happened to Carla. I'm sorry you had to watch her die."

Dante's eyes were distant. He wasn't crying. I didn't think he'd ever allow himself to do so in front of anyone, but there was a deep sadness in his eyes that tore at me. "I killed her."

I jerked in his embrace, my eyes wide. "You did what? But I thought she died from cancer."

"She would have, yes. The doctors said there was nothing they could do for her. She was home, drugged up most days so she wasn't in too much pain, but even the morphine eventually didn't help anymore. She asked me to help her, to free her from the horror that her life had become. She didn't want to spend more weeks bound to her bed, unable to get out and wrecked by pain." He paused, and I was openly crying, even if he couldn't. I pressed my hand against his chest, trying to show him that it was okay, that I understood. "She wanted me to shoot her because she thought it would be easier for me, less personal. I couldn't do it. Not like that. Not the same way I dealt with traitors and scum that wasn't even worth the dirt under her feet. I injected her insulin and she fell asleep in my arms and never woke up again."

"I didn't know. I was always told that she died because her organs failed in the end."

His eyes settled on me, dark and haunted. He brushed his thumb under my eyes, wiping away my tears. "That's what I wanted. I never told anyone."

I shivered against him, too overwhelmed to say anything. I buried my face in his neck, seeking his warmth and scent. His hand rubbed gentle circles on my stomach. "If I'd known, I wouldn't have pushed you so much."

“Val, you didn’t push me. When I married you I made a vow to take care of you and try to be a good husband, and I don’t take my vows lightly. I’m a man of honor, and yet I didn’t fulfill the promises I made to you.”

“Why did you ever agree to marry if you knew how hard it would be for you?”

“My father wanted me to marry, and I knew I was starting to look weak because I couldn’t move on from Carla, so I did what I thought would be best for my claim to power. You seemed like the perfect choice.”

The way he said it made it sound as if I wasn’t but I didn’t interrupt him.

“I thought you’d be reluctant to allow closeness so shortly after your first husband died.”

The mentioning of Antonio tightened my throat but I swallowed past it. “I would have if we’d been in love, or had had anything resembling a real marriage.”

“I’m not blaming you for wanting something real after how Antonio used you. Which makes it even worse that you married another man who used you for his own purposes.” He let out a low breath.

“So when you decided to marry me, you never intended to sleep with me?”

Dante laughed darkly. “I’m not that honorable. No, I thought I’d consummate our marriage and then sleep with you whenever I felt like it, without any kind of emotional attachment.”

“Then why didn’t you sleep with me on our wedding night or in the days after?”

“I wanted to. When I brought you into my bedroom on our wedding night, I wanted nothing more than to rip your gown off and bury myself in you. I was angry. I wanted to fuck you until I got that anger out of my system, but then you stepped out of the bathroom in that modest silk nightgown looking every bit the lady, and my wife, you were, and you had that

fucking hopeful and insecure look in your eyes, and I knew I couldn't use you like that."

My lips parted in surprise. "Did you suspect that I had never slept with a man?"

Dante shook his head. "No. I could tell you were unpracticed in your advances and attempts at seducing me but I guessed your first husband had been dominant in the bedroom and didn't let you take the incentive, although it didn't match up with my assessment of Antonio."

"Was I that bad at trying to seduce you?" I asked with a small, embarrassed laugh. It felt incredible talking to Dante like this, so openly, and being in his arms without him trying to pull back was even better.

Dante's lips curled into a wry smile. "I'm a man who prides himself on his self-control. Believe me, most men wouldn't have been able to resist your charm. To be honest, when I found out I would be your first I had an even harder time holding back. It's probably a male thing, but I wanted to put my claim on you."

"That sounds very animalistic."

"It is. Before I married you, I didn't want an inexperienced bride, but once I knew the truth about you, I had a hard time thinking about anything else than making you mine." Dante's eyes darted to my round belly where his hand was still resting. "And the knowledge that you're carrying my baby makes me proud, though it really isn't something that should cause that notion in me. After all, it's not a great achievement to impregnate your wife."

I shook my head with a smile that slowly died on my lips as my eyes sought out Dante's. "I love this. I love talking to you like a real husband and wife. Please don't pull back from me again. I can't go back to being lonely."

Dante cupped my cheek. "I won't. Today was the wakeup call I needed. I'll try to be the best husband I can possibly be, which probably is still much less than you deserve. I'm not an

emotional man, and I hate public displays of affection, but I won't go back to ignoring you. That I can promise."

I kissed him. "Thank you."

We lay in silence beside each other until I felt our daughter move. I quickly shifted Dante's hand so he could feel it too. He stilled.

"Do you feel her moving?"

Dante nodded. He didn't say anything but I knew this it wasn't because he was unaffected by what was happening. Smiling, I put my head back down on shoulder.

"When can I return home?"

"Tomorrow. They want to keep you over night."

"Okay." I wasn't really happy about this. I worried about being separated from Dante for that long; not because I was clingy or couldn't be alone; no, I was worried that despite his promise, Dante would find reasons to retreat from me once more if we weren't together so shortly after we'd come to an understanding.

"I'll stay with you. I won't let you alone in this place," he said as if he knew about my worries, and my heart swelled with gratefulness. "And I already told Leo that he would have to handle the casino alone for a while."

"You don't want me to work anymore?"

"The doctor said you need to stay in bed as much as possible, so you won't be able to work. Once our child is born and you're feeling well enough, we can still talk about finding you a new job."

"That's reasonable," I said, then pulled back and kissed him again. Now that he let me, I wanted to do it over and over again. Soon my breathing quickened but Dante drew back with a small shake of his head. "We shouldn't. You need rest."

"Did the doctor say something about sex?"

"Because of the rupture sex is too risky. It could lead to an infection or cause the rupture to widen."

“So we can’t have sex for three months if I’m going full-term?”

“Yes. That’s right.”

I knew some men started using mistresses when their wives got pregnant. I didn’t think Dante was the type, but it still worried me. And it wasn’t as if I didn’t enjoy sex. Three months, and possibly longer, without any kind of relief sounded like a challenge.

Dante smoothed out the furrows between my brows. “What are you thinking?”

“Will you be okay with it?”

“You mean with no sex?” he asked with a hint of amusement.

“Yes. As I said self-control isn’t my problem.”

“I hope you have enough for both of us.”

Dante kissed a spot below my ear. “I’m not saying it’s going to be easy. I always want you, Valentina. You drive me insane with want, but I won’t do anything that could endanger our child.”

“I know. Me neither.” I smiled. “I still can’t believe that we’ll have a little girl soon. When we’re back home tomorrow, I’ll have to show you something I bought today.” I couldn’t wait to see his face when he saw the onesie. I hated that something as horrible as a rupture of membranes had finally brought us closer together, but I was glad it had. Now we could look forward to the birth of our daughter together.

Dante kept his arm around my waist as he led me into our house, though I was perfectly capable of walking on my own. I felt good. Maybe the medication was helping. Or maybe our little girl had decided she liked it in my belly now that her parents had figured things out. Of course I knew I had to be careful. I couldn’t risk going into labor in the next couple of weeks. Our girl still had quite some growing to do.

Dante was about to lead me into the living room, but I shook my head. “I really want to take a shower.” Instead of guiding

me toward the staircase, he picked me up and began carrying me upstairs. I was tall and it couldn't have been easy for Dante to manage the stairs with my added weight. When he set me down at the top, I said, "You don't need to carry me. You won't always be around when I need to take the stairs."

"I don't want you to use the stairs, Valentina," he said, his voice not brooking an argument. "If I'm not around to carry you, then you'll call for one of the guards."

I could tell that he wouldn't budge on the subject and I was glad that he was trying to take care of me. "Okay. I promise."

As we stepped into our bedroom, I saw that someone, probably Gaby, had carried up the bags with my purchases and set them down on the chair in front of my vanity. With a smile, I walked toward it and pulled out the onesie I'd bought yesterday before things had taken a turn for the worse. I held it up for Dante to see. "So what do you say?" My voice brimmed with excitement. I almost felt bad for feeling so exuberant after what had happened yesterday and what could still happen to our baby girl, but I was too hopeful to let worries overshadow my other emotions. Dante raised one eyebrow. "I doubt anyone will need the reminder."

I laughed. "That's what Bibi said. But it's cute, don't you think?"

His arm snuck around my waist. "It is. I thought you didn't know if it was a girl or a boy?"

"I didn't, but Bibi wanted to buy matching onesies. She was really hoping for a girl, so her daughter and ours could be best friends. She'll be beside herself with excitement when I tell her." I paused. "Have you told your parents that it's a girl yet?"

Dante frowned slightly. "I talked to my mother last night after you fell asleep. She's excited for us."

"But your father isn't?"

"He didn't contact me yet. He's probably trying the silent treatment as a way to show me his displeasure."

“Really? It’s not like it was our choice to have a daughter. And I hate this fixation on boys anyway. A girl is worthy too.”

“You don’t have to convince me,” Dante said. “But boys are seen as something that strengthen the Outfit while girls only mean a weak link the men need to protect. It’s the way it’s always been. I can’t see it changing any time soon.”

“Do you know if there’s ever been a woman inducted into any of the Familias in North America and beyond?”

Dante smiled wryly. “That would be news to me. And it won’t happen. I wouldn’t want my daughter to be part of the Outfit. I want her safe and protected. I don’t want blood on her hands and death in her dreams.”

“But you want that for our future son?” I asked softly. Dante brushed a strand of hair back from my shoulders. “It’s the way things are, Val. I will protect all of our children for as long as I can, but eventually our son, at least, will have to brave the dangers of our world. But he’ll be strong.”

“My father always treated my brother Orazio with brutal harshness and your own father tortured you to toughen you up. Sometimes I don’t want a son because I worry that he’ll have to suffer through the same things.” I didn’t think I could stand back and watch Dante treat our son like that. Even my mother had protected Orazio occasionally when Papà had been too strict. Not that he’d ever abused Orazio as Fiore had done with Dante.

“I will have to be stricter with our son, but I won’t be like my father, I swear.”

I nodded. I believed him.

I could tell that I was starting to tire already, although I’d hardly done anything. “I should grab a shower now. I’m supposed to lie down again soon.”

Dante followed me into the bathroom, his eyes on me as I stepped out of my shoes. I reached for the zipper in the back of my dress but Dante beat me to it. His thumb traced the bumps of my spine as he pulled the zipper down, and I could feel it all the way down to my toes. The dress pooled at my feet. Now

there were only my tights. Dante eased them down my legs, then let his gaze slowly travel up my body as he knelt before me. I wanted nothing more than to fall in his arms and feel him inside me.

Licking my lips, I whispered. "This is going to be hard." Dante straightened, his expression confirming my words. "Take a shower. I'll wait here in case you feel faint."

"You could shower with me," I said.

Dante looked hesitant, then he nodded. He got out of his clothes and when he turned to me I could see he was already half erect.

"I thought you have self-control," I teased.

Dante steered me toward the shower, steadying me. "I have, or my fingers would already be delving into your wet heat."

He turned the shower on, letting the warm water rain down on us before he closed the shower stall and turned to face me, hands on my hips. "How do you know I'm wet?" I asked in a challenging tone.

Dante picked up the sponge and rubbed it lightly over my breasts and stomach. Then he leaned close until his mouth was against my ear. "Because I could see it when I knelt before you. You were wet for me."

I was. I didn't think I'd ever wanted him as much as I wanted him now that we weren't allowed to sleep with each other. We washed each other with the sponge, occasionally kissing and our breathing was coming faster with every passing moment. Dante's erection was hard and red. "Do you want me to blow you?" I whispered as I was pressed up against Dante. He groaned as my fingers curled around his shaft, but then his hand stilled my motions and he pulled my hand away from his hard-on. "No," he rasped. He didn't sound very convincing. "I'm fine."

He turned me around so my back was pressed against his chest and his erection was sandwiched between his stomach and my back. His arms came around my belly, palms pressed against

my skin and he kissed my neck lightly. "I think we should get out. You need to lie down."

I didn't protest. All the naked kissing was making it more difficult to suppress my desire for him. Dante helped me dry myself and he looked almost relieved when I was finally dressed in comfortable satin pajamas and stretched out on our bed. Dante and I would have to deal with our desires in the next few weeks. Our baby was more important than anything else.

Dante cradled me in his arms as his fingers raked through my hair. "Thank you for never giving up on me, Val."

"I knew my stubbornness would come in handy one day," I said with a small laugh.

Six weeks later the doctors decided to perform a C-section. It was still eight weeks too early but the risk of an infection had become too great. Dante didn't budge from my side as they cut open my belly. His presence, his steady gaze, the utter control and strength he emanated helped me tremendously. With Dante at my side, I knew nothing would go wrong. As if by the sheer power of his will he could make things turn out okay. Dante could make you believe that he was in control of the situation even when he wasn't.

He held my hand throughout the C-section and when the first cry sounded, he sought out my eyes before we both turned toward our daughter, wrinkled and smeared as the nurse presented her to us. I let go of Dante's hand. "Go to our daughter. Go." He seemed reluctant to leave my side but after he'd brushed a kiss against my forehead, he straightened and headed toward the end of the operating table. Dante didn't even twitch at the amount of blood, but I hadn't expected him to. If the nurses and doctors were surprised by his calm, they hid it, or maybe they believed the rumors about Dante: that he was a high-ranking mafia boss. Of course, nobody would ever confirm these suspicions. After a few moments, the nurse handed him our daughter, wrapped in a blanket. She looked tiny in Dante's arm as he peered down at her with the softest

expression I'd ever seen. There was something fierce there too, and it replaced the gentleness when he glanced up to find the nurses and doctors watching him. I knew our daughter would be safe.

Dante's eyes spoke of protectiveness, of pure determination to destroy anything and anyone that meant her harm. Turning his gaze away from the hospital staff, Dante approached me with our daughter and lowered himself to the chair beside my head so he could show me our little girl. I knew the doctor would have to take her away soon. She'd have to spend some time in the incubator before she could come home with us. "She's so beautiful," I whispered. I didn't even care that the doctors were busy stitching me back together, or that Dante and I weren't alone.

"She is, just like you," Dante said quietly. I ran a finger over her cheek. She blinked at me with her glassy eyes. Her hair was blond like Dante's, albeit still matted. She was tiny and I wanted nothing more than to protect her.

"Anna," I said, for the first time calling her by the name Dante and I had chosen only days before. "Your dad will always love you and keep you safe."

Dante kissed Anna's, then my forehead. "You and Anna, both."

I searched his eyes and the tears I'd successfully held back up till that point finally found their way out.

EPILOGUE

I lowered myself into the hot water in our bathtub with a sigh. Anna had finally fallen asleep in her crib and Gaby would spend the night with her in the nursery to make sure she was alright. Dante had a meeting with my father down in the office. Though I suspected the sudden increase in short meetings was the result of my father's eagerness to see Anna as often as possible. He definitely didn't share Fiore Cavallaro's disappointment over having gotten a granddaughter instead of a grandson. It had been only five weeks since I'd given birth to our daughter and I could already hardly imagine how it had been before her. But tonight I needed some time for me...and Dante. Luckily, Anna had hit a phase of long stretches of uninterrupted sleep. She sometimes slept for up to five hours without a hitch.

I leaned back in the tub and closed my eyes, relaxing for the first time today. My fingers itched to slip between my legs to alleviate the tension there, but I didn't. It had been months since Dante and I had been intimate and tonight I wanted that to change. Dante had been nothing but patient but I didn't miss that he always took a long time in the shower. I didn't have to guess what he was doing. Now that my scar had healed I couldn't wait to be with him again. Only this time it would be different. For the first time, I'd know he loved me while he'd make love to me, even if he'd never said the words aloud. The way he looked at me and Anna was worth more than all the spoken declarations of love in the world.

"Val?" Dante called as I heard him enter the bedroom and a moment later the bathroom. His eyes lingered on the swell of my breasts, mostly covered by bubbles. He looked devilishly handsome in his dark gray vest and pants. The top two buttons of his white shirt were open and the sleeves were rolled up, revealing lean muscle. "I checked on Anna. She's asleep. Gaby is singing to her."

“That’s great,” I said with a smile. Like Dante had suggested, we’d moved the nursery to the room he’d shared with his first wife a long time ago. Considering that it was three doors down from our bedroom, I wouldn’t have to worry that Gaby might hear us. Dante’s eyes were practically transparent with lust but he just stood in the doorway. His self-control was marvelous, and a bit frustrating.

“You look tired,” he said carefully. “Do you want to get some rest?” His body said something very different. The growing bulge in his pants was hard to miss.

I shook my head with a smile and straightened, letting water and bubbles trail down my naked body as I stood before Dante. His gaze left a scorching trail on my skin as it slid down to the apex between my thighs. My hand came up to cover the narrow but angry red C-section scar marring my lower belly. I’d always found a way to hide it from Dante’s view so far. The doctor had said it would fade to white in time but it would never go away completely.

Dante stalked toward me and gently pulled my hand away, revealing my scar to him. “Don’t hide yourself from me.”

“I wasn’t sure if you’d be turned off by the sight of my scar.”

Dante laughed, a rough sound deep in his throat. He gripped my waist, eyes hungry and possessive. “You look like a goddess, Val. Your scar doesn’t make you any less desirable for me. Or do you find my scars repulsive? I have plenty of them.”

“No, of course not. But you are a man. It’s different for women.”

Dante lightly stroked my scar. “This makes you even more beautiful to me because I know why you have it.”

I put my hands on his shoulders, soaking his shirt, but Dante didn’t seem to mind. His eyes kept roaming over my body. I leaned forward and kissed him. “I need you, Dante. I need you so much.”

Dante’s eyes flashed with desire. “Are you sure? Have you recovered enough? I don’t want to hurt you.” My heart

pounded with love for him. It meant a lot that he asked me when I could tell how much he wanted to throw me on the bed and have me. One of his hands had already found its way to my butt, stroking the globes in a gentle but very distracting way.

“You won’t,” I said. “As long as we take it slow, we should be okay.” The last thing I wanted to do was take things slow. I wanted to rip off Dante’s clothes, lick every inch of his skin and have him slam into me over and over again.

Dante didn’t say anything, but he helped me out of the tub and wrapped me into a fluffy bathrobe. He massaged me through the thick fabric until my skin was dry and my breathing was coming in quick puffs. Dante lifted me into his arms and carried me toward the bedroom where he lowered me on the bed. My toes curled in anticipation as he looked down at me. He slowly crawled on the bed and reached for the belt holding my bathrobe closed. With a tug it came apart, laying me bare to his eyes. “So beautiful,” he said roughly. “I missed your taste.”

His words alone made arousal pool between my legs and I bucked my hips in silent invitation. A smirk curled his lips before he lowered his head and kissed my breasts, first the left then the right before he kissed his way down to my stomach. I stiffened when his lips brushed my scar, not because it hurt, but Dante didn’t retreat. My flinching seemed to make him even more determined to pay special attention to this part of my body. His eyes flitted up to me as he pressed another kiss against the scar. His eyes were unrelenting until my muscles finally loosened under his lips. After another quick kiss, he moved lower, pushed my legs farther apart and then dipped his tongue between my folds. I cried out, already so close to the edge that I could feel my leg muscles tense in anticipation. After a few more strokes and gentle nibs, my release gripped me. “Dante!” I shoved my fingers into his hair, holding him against me as I succumbed to the pleasure he was giving me. Dante lifted his face and pressed a kiss against my inner thigh before sitting up. I did the same, my hands going for his vest, pushing it down his shoulders before moving on to unbuttoning his shirt with shaking hands.

“Get up,” I ordered in a breathless whisper. Dante complied, a surprised twinkle in his eyes. I half tore his pants down his legs, letting his hard length spring free. I peered up at Dante as I took him into my mouth, tasting the salty pre-cum on the back of my tongue as he slid to the back of my throat. Dante groaned. He glided in and out of my mouth a few times before he took a step back, out of my reach. “As good as that feels, I’m going to come if you keep it up. You don’t know how much I fucking want you.”

Dante held out his hand and I took it without hesitation, letting him pull me to my feet. Dante pushed the bathrobe off my shoulders; it pooled at my feet, and then I was already in Dante’s arm, pressed up against his firm, warm body. He moved us back until the back of my legs hit the bed and I fell down onto the soft mattress. Dante lowered himself beside me. My brows scrunched together in confusion as he turned me on my side. “What are you doing?”

He slid up behind me, pressing his chest against my back, his erection digging against my thigh. “We’re going to try a new position. It’ll make things easier for you, and my weight won’t rest on you.”

“Okay,” I said, my voice shaky with excitement.

“Your pill is already working?”

I nodded quickly.

Dante nuzzled my neck as his hand traveled over my breast, then trailed down my stomach until it slipped between my legs. He dipped one finger, then a second into me, making me moan.

“You’re ready,” Dante growled. I was more than ready. I needed him desperately. My entire body ached for him. Dante moved his hand along my inner thigh before hooking his palm under my knee and lifting my leg until my foot was flat on the bed and my legs opened in a wide V. He pulled me even tighter against his body, spooning me, and guided his erection toward my opening. He slowly eased his tip into me and I squeezed my eyes shut at the stretching feeling. Dante’s palm cupped my breast as his lips kissed the spot beneath my ear

and pushed inch by inch into me. My breath caught in my throat when he filled me to the brim. He let out a harsh breath. "God, you're so tight, Val."

It had been too long and my tight channel had to get used to his size again. Dante paused, our bodies merged together, his cock stretching me. He stroked my side and stomach. "Are you alright?"

I glimpsed over my shoulder at him, then claimed his lips for a kiss before pulling back and whispering. "I missed this." Dante trailed his fingers down to my folds and gently started drawing circles on my sensitive nub. "Please move," I half begged in between moans. And Dante did. He eased almost all the way out before sliding back in. When my inner muscles relaxed he settled into a slow, delicious rhythm. It felt like we were one as we moved against each other. Our breathing quickened and so did Dante's thrusting but he kept me in his embrace, his lips nibbling on my throat. I wasn't sure how long we made love like that, the pleasure slowly building until I dug my toes into the mattress, desperate for release, and when it finally claimed me, my clenching muscles took Dante right with me and he spilled into me with a hoarse cry.

Afterward he didn't immediately pull out. Instead he wrapped me even tighter in his embrace, our bodies still joined together. My breathing was slowly coming down as Dante left a trail of kisses along my neck until he cupped my earlobe between his lips. I moaned and arched against him as his fingers took up their playing between my thighs again.

"How about another round?" he said huskily. I couldn't do more than nod as his other hand tweaked my nipple and I felt his cock starting to grow hard in me again. He pulled out of me, causing me to glance at him in confusion. He rubbed my ass lightly as he sat up and opened his arms in invitation. "Another new position?" I asked excitedly. Dante's cock was so hard it rested against his firm stomach. I crawled toward him and squatted over him before I slowly eased myself down on his length. I wrapped my arms around Dante's neck, bringing our chests close together and pressed my mouth to his. Dante's hands cupped my butt and guided me up and

down his erection. "Look at me," he demanded hoarsely. My eyes flew open, meeting his heated gaze. "I love seeing your eyes when I'm in you."

We kept our gazes locked as our breathing quickened and my movements turned jerky, and even when I cried out my release, followed by Dante's own raspy groans. His gaze was all the declaration of love that I needed as we clung together, unwilling to separate even now that we were spent and satisfied.

Dante slowly lay back, taking me with him, so I was stretched out on top of him. A silly smile spread on my face as I peered down at Dante. His messy hair, the shadow of stubble, his unguarded expression. I buried my face in the crook of his neck, whispering, "I love you."

Dante's arms around me tightened and he pressed a kiss against the side of my head. I closed my eyes, listening to the cacophony of our pounding hearts.

We lay like that for a long time. I never wanted to move but eventually we slipped under the shower.

Afterwards, we crept into the nursery. Gaby was sitting in the rocking chair reading a book but quickly got up when she saw us.

"You can go," I whispered. "We're going to watch her the rest of the night."

Gaby nodded and slunk away, closing the door without a sound. Anna lay in her crib, her tiny hands curled to fists and her face peaceful. She was still small but she'd grown a lot since we'd been allowed to take her home from the hospital two weeks ago. I tiptoed toward her bed and rested my hands on the edge, itching to stroke her rosy cheek, but I didn't want to wake her. I loved watching her in these quiet moments. I never felt more peaceful. Dante came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist, leaning his head against mine. "I'll never let anything happen to you or Anna. I'll protect you until my last breath." I knew he would.

It had taken a while and we'd encountered some bumps along the road, but finally I had what I'd always wanted: a husband who cared deeply about me and a beautiful baby we both loved more than anything else in the world. It felt as if I'd finally arrived where I was supposed to be.

The End

Books in the
Born in Blood Mafia Chronicles:

Bound by Honor

(Aria & Luca)

Bound by Duty

(Valentina & Dante)

Bound by Hatred

(Gianna & Matteo)

Bound By Temptation

(Liliana & Romero)

Other Books by Cora Reilly

Voyeur Extraordinaire

Lover Extraordinaire (2015)



Not Meant To Be Broken

About the Author

Cora Reilly is the author of erotic romance and New Adult novels. She lives in Germany with too many pets and only one husband. She's a lover of good vegetarian food, wine and books, and she wants nothing more than to travel the world.