



SERGIO

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

nataasha knight

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SERGIO

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

NATASHA KNIGHT

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

I'm the first born son of the mafia king. The favorite. Destined to rule, I'm a dangerous man, a ruthless one. But in my world, you have to be.

Then Natalie stumbles into my life. Wrong place. Wrong time.

Twice, fate put her in my path.

Twice, fate placed the innocent lamb at the mercy of the monster.

I gave her a chance to walk away. Told her it would be better for her if she did.

But she didn't listen.

And now it's too late.

Because I'm not good. I never wanted to be. And I won't let her go anymore. See, I'm not the hero. When I touch her, it's with dirty hands.

I know my reckoning is coming though. I know I'll burn for the things I've done, the sins I've committed. I don't deny hell is where I belong, but I want my time first. I want my time with her.

She's mine.

Forever.

No matter what.

“Darlin’

Darlin’

Darlin’

Why don’t you sleep at night?”

~ *Houndmouth*, “Darlin’ ”

LETTER FROM NATASHA

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE BEGINNING THE BOOK

Dear Reader,

Sergio's story wasn't one I ever thought I'd write. He was a secondary character in another book and that was all. At least until late in 2017.

When a story starts to form in my mind, it's usually the hero who takes shape, whose eyes I see, who slowly grows into a living, breathing person for me. It's usually his voice that first sparks the story.

In Sergio's case, this started a few months ago with a song, Darlin' by Houndmouth. From the first moment I heard it, I thought this is it. This is Sergio. This is his song. Even as I write this, I can almost feel him, feel his arms around me, his body heavy as he moves slowly to the music, his breath warm at my cheek as he sings along.

I feel like Sergio was waiting his turn. Like he was patient and watched as the Benedetti world took form and grew layers and finally, he was up. He had a story too, and it had to be told, no matter what. And this is why I'm writing this letter. There will be a second one at the end of the book. Please do not read ahead.

This book is not a traditional romance and I know it will be upsetting to some of you, but I had no magic up my sleeve for this one. No tricks. No nothing. This is the only story I could tell for Sergio and I feel like from the first second I heard his voice, as much as it broke my heart, he knew it too.

I don't want to say too much more here. I don't want to give anything away. I just want to ask that you keep an open mind.

As always, thank you so much for choosing to spend your time reading my book. I am honored and awed, still, by this. I hope you fall in love and maybe even have your heart broken a little. I hope you feel every single thing the way I felt it and maybe when you play that song, you'll feel Sergio's arms around you too.

Love,

Natasha

PROLOGUE

NATALIE

“**W**rong place, wrong time, sweetheart.”
The words echo in my head.

I’ve done this before. Twice in my life now, I’ve been at the wrong place at the wrong time. Isn’t there some sort of karmic balancing? Like isn’t it enough to witness this kind of violence just once in a lifetime?

Last time was six years ago. I was fourteen and standing in front of the freezer of the convenience store down the street from my house deciding which ice cream bar I wanted. I remember the humming of the air conditioner. Liking the cool inside on that too hot August day. It was one of the few times my parents let me go alone. We didn’t live in the best neighborhood.

The men came in so quickly, I barely registered the fact they were wearing ski masks before the first gunshot went off. I dove to the ground and shut my ears to the commands they shouted, but the man with the greasy shirt saw me. He came at me and I would have screamed if I could find my voice, but the others’ screams muted me, and when he gripped me by my hair and hauled me to my feet, I followed where he led me.

Another gunshot was followed by another scream and I swear I saw red splatter the walls.

Blood.

But when he threw me to the ground in the last aisle and I registered what he meant to do, it all became surreal.

Gunshots and fists and screams all seemed in the distance. Like they weren't part of my reality anymore because my reality was about to change. My reality came down to him and me on the floor of this forgotten shop, with blood seeping from beneath the aisle divider. Fear in the voices of the others trapped here with me. Him with his pants undone. Him with his hands in my jeans. Me watching, mute. Trying to shove him away.

I remember the bell over the door going again.

Remember the sound of footsteps.

Someone cursing.

I remember the sound of a gun being cocked. Readied. How I knew what that little click meant I'm not sure, but it's an unmistakable sound. I remember the look on the face of the one between my legs as he registered cold steel on the back of his head.

We looked up at the man in the dark suit at the same time. He wore black from head to toe, a dark angel. His pistol shone bright in the blinking fluorescent light. The angel called me to go to him. I did. I scrambled to my feet and went. He glanced down to where my jeans were undone before meeting my eyes. He pulled me to him, put one hand on the back of my head, burying my face in his belly.

He told me to keep my eyes closed. To cover my ears. Said he'd try not to get blood on me.

I didn't think. I did as he said. Put my hands over my ears. And I swear I know what a bullet tearing through flesh sounds like now.

But all that I've managed to file away. Locked up in a box until now.

It's his words that play back over and over again. The sound of his voice that I recognize as now, so many years after that terrible day, I crouch behind the decrepit machinery in this abandoned warehouse and hide.

"Wrong place, wrong time, sweetheart."

Sweetheart.

I'll never forget that voice. Never forget the casual way he called me

sweetheart. And I recognize it now. The man in the suit, my dark angel. The man who killed without flinching. The man who saved my life once. It's him. He's here.

And when he shifts his gaze in my direction, I swear he hears the pounding of my heart against my chest. Swear it'll give me away.

Except that this time, if he finds me, he won't be saving me.

SERGIO

Fuck. I hate these fucking warehouses. Dusty and always frigid.

I'm flanked by two of my men. Four more soldiers trail us with a dozen more outside. It's to make an impression. Joe and Lance Vitelli have overstepped.

Lance. Who the fuck names their kid Lance in this business? It's no wonder he's acting out. Trying to prove he's not a pussy.

Our footsteps echo off the old machinery as I follow Roman, my uncle, through the main room and to the back where the brothers are being held. There's no door to that room and the glow of the single light bulb is a contrast to the pitch black of the rest of the place.

The sound of a fist connecting with flesh is followed by a grunt. The grunt, I know, belongs to either Joe or Lance. I pick lint off my sleeve and adjust the cuff of my shirt as we near the entrance. Roman steps into the room, stands to the side, folding his hands together. He takes in what's going on, then turns to me, gives a brief nod and waits.

I walk into the room, crack my neck. Slept bad last night.

The sight that greets me is not an unfamiliar one. The offenders are sitting in straight back chairs, but they're not bound. There's a splattering of blood on Joe's white shirt. It's fresh. I guess he's the one who took the punch I heard.

"That's disgusting. Get something on his nose," I say to one of my men.

"It's fucking broke," Joe whines, taking the wad of nasty cloth someone

just shoved at him.

I go right up to him. Lean down to get my face in his. “You’re lucky *you’re* not broke. Be grateful or that’ll change.”

He breathes in a sharp breath and I know he’s biting his lip not to reply.

“Sergio,” Lance starts. Lance is the older brother. The slightly smarter one. Or the one with a healthier fear of death.

Of me.

I straighten, turn to him.

“Mr. Benedetti,” he corrects.

I wait.

“My brother screwed up, but it’s fixed. The girls are back home. No harm, no foul, right?” He attempts to smile but it fails and his lips droop.

“In whose territory do you live?” I ask. It’s been a long fucking night already and it’s not close to over. I’m tired, so I’ll get to the point.

“Yours, sir,” he answers.

“In whose territory do your families live? Mothers, sisters, wives, daughters.”

Lance’s face, which was pale when I got here, goes gray. “Yours, Mr. Benedetti. Benedetti territory.”

I nod, shift my gaze to Joe. “To whom has your father pledged your family’s loyalty, Joe?” His eyes narrow and when he doesn’t answer right away, Lance clears his throat to, but I stop him. “I’m asking your fucking brother.”

“Benedetti,” Joe says through gritted teeth.

“DeMarco’s were once loyal to us too, until they weren’t,” I remind them. What happened to that family should be enough warning. What is happening and still will happen to Lucia DeMarco, most precious daughter, should be enough. My father’s right about fear. But there’s more to it. Ruthlessness. It’s what truly gets you respect in this business.

He is ruthless.

And I am my father's son.

"You have a sister, don't you?" I ask. "Anna, right? How old is she now?"

Lance just stares back at me, his eyes wide with fear.

I may not agree with how my father is handling the DeMarco girl, but I understand it. "Lucia DeMarco's age, am I right?"

"She's only sixteen, sir," Lance says, his voice a little quieter.

"Yeah, Lucia DeMarco's age when they lost the war they started with us." I don't need to say more.

"Sergio—" Lance starts. "Mr. Benedetti—"

I raise my hand to halt him. "Let's just be clear. I'm going to give you a warning. One chance, because I know your father. He's been a friend to my family. But if you overstep again, the consequences will be more... permanent."

Lance swallows.

"Benedetti's do not deal in flesh trade. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Lance says quickly.

I look at Joe. If looks could kill, I'd be dead right now.

I grab a handful of Joe's hair and tug his head backward. "Is that fucking clear?"

One of my men cocks a gun and Lance whimpers like a fucking girl.

"You the tough one?" I ask Joe. "Sucks to always be in big brother's shadow, doesn't it?" He exhales, shifts his gaze away from mine, but not to his brother. I'm right. Like Dominic, my youngest brother, he knows he'll never be boss and it fucking kills him. "Am I fucking clear, Joe? Or do I need to make an example?" I squeeze the handful of over-gelled hair and if I twist just once in the wrong direction, I'll snap his neck. Quick and clean. No blood on my suit. And he knows it.

“Clear,” he says.

I release him, wipe my hand on my pants and decide I’m not done yet. “Now, show me your loyalty. Your gratitude for my family’s generosity in this unfortunate event.” I step backward, giving him space. He knows what I want and it’s going to kill him to do it.

But he’s going to do it.

I wait. I’m patient.

“Joe. Just fucking do it,” Lance orders his brother when a full minute passes and Joe hasn’t moved.

Joe’s face is a fiery red and his eyes are filled with rage. But soon, the leg of the chair scrapes across the concrete floor as he drops to his knees at my feet.

I look down at him. Give him more space. And my smile widens as he prostrates himself and his lips touch the toe of my shoe.

I want to kick the son-of-a-bitch, but I don’t. I’m a man of my word. I will give them one more chance.

A sound comes from the metal ramp that runs along the perimeter of the large office forming a second level. I look at it. It must have been an observation deck to oversee the plant.

I don’t know if anyone else heard it. A glance at Roman tells me he did, but the others haven’t noticed. I nod to him. He steps out of the room and two men follow.

When I return my gaze to the spectacle in front of me, I’m very aware of my periphery. I want to catch any movement because that sound was too loud for a mouse.

“Get them out of here,” I say to the two soldiers behind the brothers.

“Yes, sir.”

I watch as Joe and Lance are walked rudely out of the room. After a few moments, I turn to my men. “Let’s go,” I say loudly. They walk out. I hang back, switch out the light, listen to the footsteps echo as they vacate the

building. I reach for the handgun in its holster beneath my jacket and walk silently toward the direction from where the sound had come.

NATALIE

It's been silent for a while, but I'm too scared to move. I can't believe what I saw. What I heard. Benedetti. I know that name. And the one in the suit, the man who once saved my life, I think he heard when my boot caught the screw on the floor. Although I'm maybe overthinking it. He didn't say anything, just carried on with his business.

My knees creak when I finally dare to straighten. I've been hiding, crouched for too long. I'm holding my breath, my eyes wide. It's pitch-black here, but I'm too afraid to use the flashlight on my phone.

I take two steps, peek around the machine that shielded me from their view. The room is empty. I creep to the top of the stairs. My heart is still racing as I grip the ice-cold banister, my knees not quite steady as I make my way down. I tuck my phone into my purse. I'm at the bottom of the stairs, my foot poised to step onto the ground floor when I hear it. The cocking of a gun. Twice in my life now, I've heard a gun cocked at too close a range. It comes in the same instant as the arm that wraps around my throat, that presses my back against a chest of steel.

I scream as the light goes on and three men come into view. The older one in the suit. Two others. And the one who's got the barrel of the gun at my temple.

"Caught the mouse," he says from behind me, his voice a deep timbre.

None of the men smile. They're all looking at me. They each have a weapon in their hands.

“Warehouse is clear,” one of them says.

“Should have been swept *before* the meeting,” the one holding me says.

The arm loosens around my throat, is removed entirely, taking the gun from my temple. It’s decocked.

I gasp for breath, stumble backward. The strap of my purse slides down my arm and the contents spill to the filthy floor. I drop to my knees. The man behind me, he walks around to my front and I’m hyperventilating. I’m looking down at the ground, at the tube of lipstick rolling toward his shoe. It’s polished so perfectly I can almost see my own terrified reflection in it.

A hand fists my hair painfully and he draws me up to my feet, up on tip-toe. He drags me toward him.

“A sneaky little mouse.”

It’s him. The one in charge. Mr. Benedetti was what they’d called him. And the look in his eyes is dark.

“Sergio,” the older man says.

Sergio. That’s right.

He releases me from his gaze, but not his grip. I can’t turn my head, but I shift my eyes to look at the older man.

“You’re going to be late for the meeting. I’ll take care of this.”

Take care of this? By ‘this’ he means me?

Sergio returns his gaze to me again. He’s blurry because my eyes have filled with tears. He tilts his head to the side and narrows his eyes.

“You deal with the meeting, Uncle. I’ll deal with our mouse problem.”

The grin he gives me coincides with the tightening of his fist. It forces the tears from my eyes.

“Do you want me to leave anyone?” his uncle asks. “A cleaner?”

Cleaner?

“I’ll take care of it,” my captor says, never looking away. I get the feeling

he likes my tears.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” his uncle says, and a moment later, we’re alone as three sets of footsteps disappear out of the old warehouse.

“What’s a cleaner?” I ask, my voice barely audible. I don’t know why I ask it.

Sergio draws me into his chest. “Don’t worry about that, mouse. What’s your name and what do you think you’re doing here?”

I’m going to be sick or pee my pants or both.

He’s still studying me, his gaze is intense, like he’s gleaning information just from looking at me. Then he does something that surprises me. He takes his thumb and wipes it across my face, smears my tear across my cheek and just looks at it for a long minute.

“Well?” he asks again, when he returns his eyes to mine.

“I...I...”

“I...I...” he mimics me with a chuckle, and releases me.

I stumble backward.

“Down,” he says, his voice a low, deep command. He’s pointing to the floor.

“Wh...what?”

“Your wallet. Give it to me.”

I blink away, look at the spilled contents of my purse. I remember how the other man had dropped to his knees at his command. How he’d kissed the toe of this man’s shoe.

“Are you hard of hearing?”

I glance back up at him, confused.

He gives a shake of his head. “Your wallet. Give it to me.”

I nod. I drop to my knees because I’m having trouble standing anyway. My hands tremble as I take my wallet and hand it up to him.

He opens it, takes out my driver's license and drops the rest back on the floor.

"Natalie Gregorian." He reads the address. "Asbury Park?" his eyebrows rise. "Far from home, aren't you?"

"My parents' house," I say stupidly.

"What are you doing in Philadelphia, Natalie Gregorian?"

"I go to school here. University of Pennsylvania."

"Ah." He looks at the driver's license again, then tucks it into his pocket and returns his gaze to me. "And what are you doing at this warehouse, in the middle of nowhere, tonight of all nights?"

"I have a project." I wasn't supposed to come tonight. I decided at the last minute.

Again, his eyebrows go up.

"Architecture. I was taking pictures." I hear myself start to babble. "One of my professors opens an internship slot for one student every year and I was hoping to get his attention with this." I have to force myself to stop.

Sergio looks really confused now.

"I heard the men come in and...I got scared and...I hid." *Shut up. Shut up. Just shut up.* "No one's supposed to be here," I add on, unable to take my own advice.

"Including you. It's a condemned building."

I stare up at him and the weight of what I witnessed is slowly dawning on me. "Please don't hurt me. I didn't see anything. Not really."

"Not really?"

I shake my head. Swipe the back of my hand across my nose before rubbing the tears from my eyes.

"Where's your car?"

"I took the bus. I don't have a car."

“Bus? You took a bus out here?” He’s looking at me like it’s the most unbelievable thing anyone has ever said.

“It stops four blocks away.”

He checks his watch. “Hand me your phone,” he says.

I do.

“What’s your password?”

“0000.”

He gives me an ‘are you serious’ look.

“It’s an old phone.” Not everything works like it should.

“Huh.” He punches in the code and sits on one of the chairs. I look at him as he scrolls through my phone. My brief memories of him are nothing like the reality. He’s tall, at least 6’4” if not taller, and big. His legs are spread wide and he’s leaning forward with his elbows on his thighs. The suit he’s wearing barely contains him. It strains at his shoulders and thighs. And I guess he’s in his late twenties. Younger than I think he should be.

His gaze snaps up to mine and he turns the phone toward me. “Who’s this?”

It’s a selfie of Drew and me. Drew’s my best friend. We’ve known each other since high school.

“Drew.”

“Boyfriend?”

I shake my head, wondering why he’s asking. He turns the phone back toward himself, scrolls through more photos.

“Just taking pictures for your architecture class?” he asks, turning the screen back toward me.

It’s the single image I captured when the two men were brought in. I don’t even know why I did it.

“That was an accident.”

“How do you accidentally take that picture when you have sense enough to hide?”

I can't answer that. “You can see. There are a lot of the warehouse.” I start to rise, to go to him and show him. But he halts me by raising his hand.

“Stay.”

I do.

He drops the phone to the floor and stands up, puts his heel on the screen and crushes it.

“No!” I'm on hands and knees trying to grab it from under his shoe even as I hear it splintering.

His hand closes around my hair again and he draws me to kneel up. He crouches down so we're almost at eye level. I still have to look up, though.

“Sweetheart, you've got bigger problems than your phone right now.”

Sweetheart. He says it casually, like before.

“Please don't hurt me. I really wasn't spying. I wasn't here on purpose. I...”

“Stop blubbering,” he says, releasing me. He stands. “Get your shit together.”

I nod. I sit back and I keep nodding.

He chuckles. “I mean get your *things* together. In your bag.”

“Oh.” I look at the spilled contents. I'm gathering my things and wiping my nose as tears are dropping to the floor as I consider what's going to happen to me. I never called my mom back yesterday. She'll be worried now. I should have called her. And dad. I don't remember the last time I talked to him. Shit. What will they think happened to me? Will they even find—

“Natalie,” comes his deep voice.

He's got his hands on his hips and is looming over me.

“Please don't hurt me,” I say with a loud sob. “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

“Christ, I believe you. Wrong place, wrong time.”

I freeze. I think for a moment he remembers me, too, but I was a kid then. He couldn't. And when he speaks, I realize he doesn't.

“I don't think you'd be wearing a bright pink coat if you were trying to stay incognito. Blend and all. But you did overhear some shit.”

“I won't tell anyone. I forgot it already. I don't even know what it was—”

He shakes his head. “Get up.”

I reach for the phone, the last of my belongings.

“Leave it.”

I look at the destroyed phone. It wouldn't do me much good now anyway, so I leave it and stand.

“Let's go,” he says, taking my arm and turning me.

“Where to?”

“My house.”

“Why?” I pull back.

He looks at me. “So I can figure out what to do with you.”

SERGIO

The girl is sitting beside me wringing her hands in her lap. She's watching wide-eyed as we pass the exit into the city. She's quiet, like she promised she would be. It was either that or ride in the trunk. I didn't really intend on putting her in the trunk, but she doesn't know that.

She's scared shitless, but thing is, I believe her.

I don't think she was out there to spy. I would bet my life she doesn't even know who the Benedetti name belongs to.

My uncle suggesting a cleaner was dramatic, to say the least. But Roman is all about business. I glance over at her. If it was up to him, we probably would need that cleaner. There are some men in my business who take a sick pleasure for the job of punishing. Business is business for me. I'll do what I have to do. But soaking my hands in innocent blood doesn't get my dick hard.

I get off at my exit and Natalie sits up a little taller.

"Where is your house?"

"Chestnut Hill."

She nods. Is silent.

"Don't you have another question?"

"What are you going to do to me?"

Ah. There it is. The question that matters. Actually, I haven't decided what I'm going to do just yet. I need to make sure she doesn't talk. I need her

scared for that.

“Punish you,” I say.

“Punish me?” her voice falters.

I nod once while navigating the lonely, dark streets leading to my house. I don’t normally have to deal with a woman like this and I’m not even sure why I’m bringing her to my house.

“Here we are,” I say, pushing a button to open the tall iron gates as I turn onto the cul-de-sac where my house is one of three, each divided by a heavy stone wall. I wonder what my neighbors have to hide behind theirs.

I pull up along the circular drive and park the car. I get out, then go to her side. She’s still strapped in, staring up at the huge stone structure with its intimidating pillars and oversized, hand-carved wooden front doors. I pull her door open and she jumps. I stand back and gesture for her to get out.

When she doesn’t move, I reach over her, push the button to release her seatbelt and take her arm to encourage her out. She’s pulling back, but thing is, there’s nowhere for her to go. And still, the moment I release her and turn to the front door, she takes off. She’s running back down the drive, back the way we came. Back to the now closed gates. They’re twelve feet tall. She’s not getting out.

But here’s the thing with mice. I don’t mind chasing them. Especially the pretty ones.

And so I do.

I chase my little mouse down the driveway, over the manicured lawn. Up the hill and toward the gates. I could overtake her easily, but I don’t, not yet. I like this.

Just before she reaches the border of the property, I speed up and a moment later, I tackle her to the ground. She lands with a hard thud. It knocks the wind out of her and my weight on top of hers doesn’t help her catch her breath.

I lean up on my elbows.

“Now look what you’ve done,” I say, my voice low. “Dirtied my coat. Your clothes.”

“Please don’t hurt me!” Her voice is loud, it cuts into the night.

I look at her face. Watch her struggle. I let her. Let her tire herself out.

The ground is cold, frozen with the temperatures we’ve been having. I get up on my knees, keep her trapped with my thighs on either side of her hips. When she tries to push me off, I take her wrists and drag her arms over her head, transfer them into one of mine as I lean in close to her.

“Are you ready to do as you’re told?” I ask.

She tries to pull free. Fails.

“Natalie? Are you ready to do as you’re told?”

“If I go in there, are you going to hurt me?”

“If I were going to hurt you, don’t you think I would have done it at the warehouse?”

She stops, considers that.

“Why bring you to my house? DNA and all?”

Her eyes widen at that.

“I’m kidding. Christ. And I don’t *want* to hurt you, but I will if I have to.”

She swallows, her eyes cautious on mine.

“We’re going to go inside and get this done and if you do as I say, you’ll be home in no time. You can make it easy or you can make it hard. Up to you.”

She just keeps staring.

“Understand?” I ask.

She nods.

“Just to be clear, if you run again, that’ll be making it hard, understand?”

“Yes.”

I get to my feet and hold out my hand. She ignores it and gets up on her own and this time, when I walk up to the house, she follows.

The house is dark apart from one dim lamp in the living room and the light over the stove in the kitchen. I turn to my guest who's looking around in awe.

I guess it is an impressive house. Big, old, but completely renovated with an imposing staircase dead center, the kitchen to the left, living room taking up the back half of the house, my study on the right. All the windows are leaded, and it lends a dark, almost gothic feel to the house.

"It's pretty," she says when she turns to find me watching her.

"Thanks."

I take off my coat and hang it up then wait for her to give me hers. It's a puffer jacket and although I felt how small she was at the warehouse, she's almost petite when she's left in her Henley and jeans.

I walk into the living room and she follows. I go directly to the liquor cabinet and get the whiskey and two tumblers. She's standing at the entrance looking at everything, nervously pulling the sleeves of her shirt down to tuck her thumb through the holes at the wrists.

I carry the glasses and the bottle to the couch, sit and pour for both of us.

"Come here."

She hugs her arms, but moves toward me.

"Here." I hold one of the glasses out to her. She eyes it but doesn't reach out for it. "It'll calm you down."

"What is it?" she asks.

"Whiskey."

She takes it, drinks the smallest sip. Flinches when she swallows.

After draining mine, I pour a second glass and reach to turn on the lamp beside me. I sit back folding one ankle over my knee and stretching an arm over the back of the couch to get a good look at her. She was wearing makeup

at some point but her earlier tears have smeared mascara across her cheek. Her eyes, a pretty almond-shape, are so dark, they're almost black. Her skin has a pale olive tone and she keeps biting her lower lip so it's bleeding a little. I can't tell how long her hair is. She's bound the dark mass into a messy bun.

"What did those men do?" she asks, surprising me.

I smile. "Don't worry about that." She's standing awkwardly and I'm thinking. "Do you know who I am?" I know she would have heard my name more than once.

She lowers her lashes and I wonder if she's contemplating lying, but then she nods once.

"Who?"

"Mafia."

"My name."

"Sergio Benedetti."

"Do you know my family?"

"Not really. I've heard the name, that's all."

"Drink your drink."

She takes another sip. "I have class tomorrow," she says.

I nod. Sip. Consider.

"What are you going to do?" she asks finally.

"I'm not going to do anything. You are. Get undressed."

"What?" She begins to tremble, shrinks into herself as she hugs her arms tighter to her.

"Get undressed, Natalie."

"Why?" her voice is a squeak.

"Insurance."

"Why?" she repeats, taking a step backward.

“Because I need to make sure when I take you home later, that you’re not going to tell any of your friends what you saw or heard.” I wait. Watch her process. “It’s the only way to keep you safe,” I add on, not really sure why.

“Safe? How will that keep me safe?”

“Trust me—”

“And safe from who? You?” Her eyebrows knit together. “You said you wouldn’t hurt me.”

“I said I wouldn’t hurt you unless you made me.”

“I already told you I won’t say anything. I promise.”

She wipes fresh tears from her eyes. I finish my drink, set my glass down and get to my feet. She takes a step away from me when I come around the coffee table.

“Remember what you agreed to outside.” I reach her, take hold of her arms, rub them. “Just relax, no reason to get so upset.”

“No reason? This isn’t—”

“Now, what’s going to happen next is you’re going to do as I say and take off your clothes and I’m going to take some pictures.”

“Pictures?” She’s panicking. “Why?”

“You repeat yourself a lot, you know that?” I pause but I’m not expecting an answer. “Like I said, insurance. You talk and the photos get sent to your parents, your friends, are posted along the walls at school, etc...”

“Etcetera?”

“Trust me, this is the easiest way for me to do this.”

“What’s the alternative?” she asks as she pushes out of my grasp.

“The alternative would be...painful.”

She swallows. She’s wringing her hands. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“You’ll be fine. It’s just a few pictures.”

She shakes her head, rubs her face. “No.”

I point to the bathroom, and when she walks out of the room, I resume my seat on the couch. She doesn't come back for a full ten minutes, but when she does, her fear seems to have lessened, or at least it's well hidden behind eyes of fire.

She's pissed.

"You want dirty pictures?" she asks, spitting the words.

I casually shrug one shoulder. It's sort of funny to see her like this. I wonder about the pep talk she must have given herself to get so worked up because she's so mad she's practically shaking. "You think you're going to blackmail me?" She takes a step forward, then back again. "Huh? Pervert?"

She's bouncing from one leg to the other like a boxer. I chuckle at the image but it only makes her angrier. She finally stands still, fists her hands at her sides, her face going bright red.

"Well you can try and make me."

I lean deeper into my seat, consider her, wonder if she's realized how much more interesting she's just made this. Taking my time, I unbutton the cuffs of my shirt, roll the sleeves up to my elbow before I reply. "You sure about that, sweetheart?"

"Don't call me that."

"Are you?"

"Fuck you."

"And you seemed so sweet," I say, standing.

She spins to run from the room, but I catch her easily, my hand wrapping around her arm to halt her. I pull her into my chest. Cock my head to the side. "I was thinking I'd get a slow strip tease, but this will be much more fun."

"Let me go!"

I lean in close, inhale the scent of her. Smell the fear creeping back up to the surface. Make a point of doing so. "Just remember, you chose this. It could have gone easier."

NATALIE

He's too strong to fight off, but I try. I can't not fight. Thing is, I know he'll win. He'll get the pictures. But maybe I can hold on to one shred of dignity if he has to make me.

When I went to the bathroom, he must have taken his suit jacket off, and watching him roll up his sleeves a minute ago, seeing his thick forearms, it just made me realize how weak I am. I wonder if he expected this. Expected me to fight. Because he was ready for me.

The Henley's first. I hear it tear as he forces it from me and I stumble back when he does, hit the back of my knee on whatever's behind me. I fall backward. It's an ottoman. I fall onto the ottoman and Sergio Benedetti comes at me with that grin. It's wicked and dirty and makes his eyes shine bright. And when he drops between my legs and grips my boots, I kick at him.

He laughs. He's actually laughing.

"Stop, you're sick!"

He gets my boots off. Then kneels up, grips my wrists and twists my arms. "Sure you don't want to give me that slow strip tease?"

"Go fuck yourself!"

"I'll be honest," he says, pulling me in close. "I like this better. I like it rough."

I don't know why but I'm shocked. Why would that surprise me, though? He's got my jeans undone and I slap at him as he tugs them over my hips, down my thighs, off my feet.

“Stop!”

“No.”

He stands, pushes me backward so I’m laying on the seat of the chair behind the ottoman.

“It’s enough. You can take pictures like this.”

“No, not enough.” He reaches down and with one flick of his hand, my bra is ripped in two and hanging off my shoulders.

I cup my breasts to hide them from view. “Stop! Please stop. I’ll do it. Please!”

He leans down over me, holding me with one hand. “Too late, sweetheart,” he says as he strips my panties from me and just like that, I’m naked. I’m naked and he’s standing over me and looking at me.

I sit up. Cover myself as best I can. “You bastard. I hate you,” I spit, but my voice is weak.

“He takes out his phone and snaps a photo. Then another. “Arms at your sides. I want to see it all.”

I slide off the ottoman, but he comes at me with that stupid phone snapping away. Picture after picture.

I hit the wall, the corner. There’s nowhere for me to go. “Please stop,” I say. “Please.” I wipe my face with the back of one hand. “I’m sorry. I just needed to see the stupid warehouse and it’s not even going to matter anyway. I’m so sorry.”

He ignores me and I cower, and only when there’s no more flash do I dare look up. He’s stepped backward, just one step, but he’s still looming over me, all dark hair and blue-black eyes and danger. He can make me do whatever he wants. Anything he wants.

I’m hugging my knees, using my legs, my hair, anything, to hide myself.

He studies me, just watches me for a long time before snapping another photo.

I turn my face away simultaneously. Hide myself from him.

“Take your arms away,” he says. His tone is different. Serious.

That shift in his mood changes things. I don’t know why, but it does. I know there’s no way out of this. Only through it. I’ve known it all along.

“Do as I say, Natalie.”

And so, I do. I move my arms away and he takes a photo. I look at him. He’s not grinning anymore. That cocky expression on his face is gone. He’s not making fun of me as he does it. He’s just taking pictures. I’m actually not even sure he’s enjoying it.

“Stand up.”

I do, but I can’t look at him. Not at his eyes.

“Turn around and put your hands on the wall.” I do that too. “Higher. Good. Walk backward.”

I take two tiny steps, but it’s enough. I know what he wants. My ass.

“Now look at me.”

I shake my head once, feel my hair on my naked shoulders. Wonder when it fell out of its clip.

“Look at me,” he repeats firmly.

I glance at him over my shoulder. I wonder if he wants my tears too.

“Good.”

I see from the corner of my eye he’s aroused. This could be worse. He could demand another, different sort of payment.

Who says he won’t?

“Get on the couch. Hands and knees. Ass to me.”

I want to weep. I want the earth to open and swallow me whole.

“Do it.”

I do. But then his hand is on me, on my hip, and I jump. He slaps my ass,

snaps a picture.

“Just pictures. You said—”

“It’s just pictures.” His voice comes out hoarse, like his throat is dry.

I crane my neck to look at his hand. At the ring there—something big and ornate and old looking. There’s a dusting of dark hair on his arm and his watch is expensive. I can tell. It’s what I try to focus on until, with just the smallest tug of his thumb, he opens me. And I don’t know how or why because it makes no sense, but my belly feels strange and I’m holding my breath and when I look at his face, he’s got his eyes locked on my ass. He looks different again. He’s aroused, that’s obvious, but there’s more. There’s something darker about it.

He’s not taking pleasure in my humiliation. It’s something else now. And the second he snaps the photo, he seems to hurry to shove the phone into his pocket and get away from me.

“Get dressed. We’re done.” He walks out of the room. I hear him go into the kitchen. Open a can of something. It takes me a long minute to move. My dignity is in tatters, like my clothes. I pull my underwear and jeans on. Tuck the ruined bra into my pocket and draw the Henley over my head. There’s a hole at the seam. I finger it, try to think only of it. I don’t want to think about what just happened.

I can fix this later. Sew it back up. It’s not hard.

By the time I put my boots on, he’s back and he’s already got his coat on. He’s holding mine out to me.

I can’t look at him. I take my coat and put it on and zip it to my chin and, obediently and meekly, I follow him back outside. I get into the car when he opens the door.

“Where do you live?”

I give him the address. He starts driving and neither of us talk. Not during the drive. Not when he pulls up along my street. I live on Elfreth’s Alley, a historic street in Philadelphia. Vehicles are restricted and I’m grateful for it, especially tonight.

When I reach to open my door, he finally speaks.

“Remember what I said will happen if you talk.”

“I wasn’t ever going to talk.”

I slip out, my purse in my hand. I dig for my key in my pocket and he doesn’t drive away until I’m inside and Pepper, my fourteen-year-old German Shepherd greets me, and I’m sobbing. Sobbing on the floor of my kitchen.

SERGIO

I go straight into my study when I get home. Even though I'm alone, I close the door out of habit. I sit with just the lamp on the desk turned on and I look at the photos. I scroll through each one. Study her face in them. I see her anger. Her fear. Her humiliation. I see it in that order. I study more too. More of her. And my dick's hard.

"I wasn't ever going to talk."

I knew that. I knew it all along. She's right. I am a pervert. Sick. Only a sick person would do this, would violate an innocent like this. It wasn't necessary to do what I did. I just wanted to.

But I came to terms with this darker part of me a long time ago. And I'm not psychoanalyzing it now.

The last picture, the one with my hand on her hip, has my attention. The Benedetti family ring is prominent on my finger, my hand big, masculine and rough on her softly curving hip. It's not even the gleaming pink of her pussy that's got my eye. It's how she's looking at me. Watching me with those dark eyes through that veil of hair. Like she's seeing me. Really seeing me.

I stare at them. I can't look away. What I see, it's not what I expect. Not hate. Not even fear. Something else. It has me curious. It's almost as if there's something familiar about her.

I can still smell her if I try. Was she aroused or is that just my sick brain at work? Making something up that wasn't there. I wonder if she's thinking about it now. If she's lying in bed with her fingers between her legs

remembering my hands on her. My eyes on her. She'd hate herself for it, I know.

I scroll back to the first image. The one of her sitting on the floor, knees pulled up, hands covering as much of herself as she can. Her chin is bowed into her chest, her hair like a curtain hiding her face from me. But if I look close, I see her accusing eyes through that fall of hair.

There's something about this girl that I can't put my finger on. Something that's got me thinking about her long after I should forget.

"Insurance," I say to myself, standing. I turn on the printer and send all the photos to it. Listen to the slow hum and buzz as each one prints. Watch Natalie's face as each slowly slides out, stacks on top of the last. When they've all printed, I put them in a locked drawer of my desk before going upstairs to jerk off.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, I GO TO HER HOUSE. IT'S A LITTLE AFTER FOUR AND the shadows are already growing long. Winter days are short. I don't mind them like most people do, though. I like the dark.

There's no doorbell so I knock on the crooked wooden door, peeking in through the lace curtains of the window beside it. The kitchen is empty but there's a light on deeper in the house. I knock again, louder this time.

"Hold your horses," she calls out as the lock turns and she pulls the door open. She gasps, and the instant she sees me, she goes to slam the door shut.

I grip it, stopping her.

"Pepper!" she calls out.

I'm confused for a moment until I hear a lone, tired bark and the sound of a dog's nails clicking against hardwood floors. Pepper barks again, sticks her wet nose into the narrow opening of the door. She's old and not very ferocious from what I see.

"What do you want?" she asks. She's got her back to the door so I can't see her face, but feel her weight against it.

“I have something for you.”

“I don’t want anything from you.”

“Let me in, Natalie.”

“Why? So you can take more pictures? Freak.”

“That’s done,” I say. “Let me in. Last time I’ll ask nicely.”

“I said no—”

Before she can finish her sentence, I give a shove and hear her small, surprised yelp as she stumbles forward. I step inside. The dog wags her tail and I get a look at the tiny, ancient kitchen, then at Natalie’s startled face.

“You should close the door,” I say to her, unbuttoning my jacket. “You’re letting the heat out.”

“What do you want?”

I reach into my pocket, put the box on the table. It’s a brand-new iPhone.

“Here,” I say. “Upgraded to the latest model.”

She looks at it, confused, then angry. “I don’t need you to give me a phone. I need you to get out.”

She’s wearing an ugly, oversized sweater and jeans. She doesn’t have shoes on and her hair’s wet like she just had a shower.

“I said get out!” she repeats, holding the door wider.

“Truce, Nat.”

“Don’t call me Nat. We are not friends.”

“For Christ’s sake,” I say, taking the door and closing it myself. She backs toward the coat rack beneath the cabinets and reaches behind the array of coats, and a moment later, she’s waving a wooden baseball bat at me.

“What do you want? Why are you here?”

“You’re going to hurt yourself with that,” I say, one eye on the bat while I pet the dog who’s sitting beside me watching the spectacle. “Good girl,” I say to her. “Not like your owner.” I try not to laugh outright at Natalie with the

bat, Natalie who has so obviously never had to confront someone like this before.

“She’s not mine. I’m dog-sitting. And get out,” Natalie says.

“Put the bat down, Nat.”

“Fuck you.”

“You told me that last night too. If you’re not careful, I’m going to think it’s an invitation.”

Her mouth falls open and she has no response. I take the opportunity to reach for the bat. She tries to swing, but I catch it, tug it and her toward me, relieve her of the thing but keep hold of her.

“Truce,” I say. “I’m just here to replace your phone.”

“Why?”

“Because I broke yours and figured you might need a new one.”

“I can buy my own phone.”

“You always this stubborn when someone gives you a gift?”

“It’s not a gift when you’re replacing something you broke on purpose.”

“You know why I had to.”

“I needed those pictures.”

“I’ll take you to get new ones.”

She stops. Gives a little shake of her head. “What are you doing here, really?”

I shrug a shoulder, release her and peek into the next room. “I’ve always wanted to see the inside of these houses,” I lie. I could give a fuck.

I’m here to see her.

NATALIE

“**Y**ou’re here for a tour of the house?”

Sergio Benedetti, looking like a giant in my tiny kitchen, shrugs a shoulder.

I am so freaking confused. Yesterday he stripped me naked and took dirty pictures of me to essentially blackmail me into keeping silent, and today, he’s here giving me a gift of a brand-new iPhone and he wants a tour of the house?

“I don’t believe you.”

“All right, a tour and coffee,” he says.

“Is this a joke to you?”

“I’m not much for joking.”

“What, you want more pictures?” I cock my head to the side, fold my arms across my chest. “Not enough material to jerk off to?”

He chuckles. “Plenty, actually.” He winks, his eyes are practically glowing, the look inside them telling me he means exactly what he said.

I clear my throat and look away, embarrassed.

He mistakes my silence for an invitation and next thing I know, he’s hanging his coat up beside all the others.

“You have a lot of coats,” he says, looking through the collection.

“They’re not mine. I’m house-sitting for friends of my parents while they spend the winter in Florida.”

“Ah. Makes sense. I didn’t imagine a university student could afford one of these houses.”

“What I can or can’t afford isn’t any of your business.”

He holds up his hands in mock surrender. “I didn’t mean to offend you. Just an observation.”

“Are you really not going to go until I give you a tour?”

“And coffee.”

“Why?”

“I’m thirsty and I want to see the house.”

He can’t be serious. “That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“No strings?”

“No strings.”

A voice in my head tells me that’s not quite right. That there are strings. That there will always be strings with him. But I shove that voice aside. There’s something about Sergio Benedetti. It’s not that I like him. I don’t. You can’t like someone after they do what he did to me. I don’t know what it is, though. I don’t know why I’m not really scared he’ll hurt me, even though I know who he is. He won’t. And there’s something else. Something about him that makes me want him to stay, as little sense as that makes. I wonder if it has to do with before, with the robbery. When he was the hero, not the villain.

“I want the pictures back,” I say, knowing it’s a long shot.

He shakes his head. “Can’t do that.”

“You can’t ever share them. It’ll hurt my parents if they ever thought—”

“Keep your end of the bargain and you have my word no one will see them.” He picks up the phone. “Just a tour and a cup of coffee. No tricks. No hidden agenda.”

I need the phone. I can't afford to buy a new one right now.

"Okay."

He puts the phone on the table and slides it toward me.

"This is the kitchen." I'll keep it short. I walk past him, my shoulder brushing against his arm when I do, feeling the solid mass of muscle. It makes my belly flutter. Makes me remember the feel of his hand on my bare hip last night. Makes me think of how he looked at me, and I swallow hard, feeling my face flush, grateful my back is to him.

"Come on, Pepper," I say, although she's not much of a guard dog when it comes to him from the way she's nudging her head against his leg.

Pepper, the German Shepherd who came with the property, lopes toward me. She's so old, she can barely see, but she's usually good about barking at strangers.

"She's quite the guard dog," Sergio comments, probably aware why I called her.

"Her sense of smell must be off if she likes you."

I catch his smile when I glance behind me.

"Living room," I say, pointing out the obvious. I love this house, love the charm, the creaks and even the ghosts I imagine on dark nights, but it is small and Sergio makes it look that much smaller.

"This is great," he says, touching the bookshelf, obviously appreciating the old wood and antiques. "How old is the house?"

I tell him, just talk to him like he's not who he is. Like last night didn't happen. It's awkward, but I try to ignore it. It'll be over soon. Coffee and a tour. He'll be gone in fifteen minutes.

He follows me through the living room, and I point out the bathroom downstairs before climbing the narrow staircase up to the second floor. Pepper stays at the bottom of the stairs watching us.

"She's too old to climb anymore," I say.

He nods. "Low ceilings." He has to duck his head.

"It's got more space than you'd think," I say, pointing out the two bedrooms. "This one's mine." I open the door to my messy room, walk in ahead of him and kick some clothes under the bed, close the dresser drawer that's still open and turn to him. He's checking out the fireplace.

"Can you use this?"

"I think so. I don't."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to burn down the neighborhood. You could say I'm accident prone." As if to demonstrate, I trip over a shoe on the floor.

"You're messy. That's why you're accident prone."

"You don't know anything about me."

He stands there watching me, and I see the shadow behind that light-hearted, entertained look on his face, in his eyes. He's dark. At his core, no matter how he tries to mask it on the surface, there's a darkness to him.

I shudder. Tell myself I have to remember this.

"I know you from somewhere," he says. Does he remember that convenience store robbery?

"Is that the real reason you're here?" I ask. I know he isn't interested in a tour or coffee.

Before he can respond, I hear the buzzing of a cell phone announcing a message. Sergio reaches into his pocket, reads the screen. He types something back then returns his gaze to me. His eyes, last night I'd thought they were black, but I see now they're midnight blue with specks of gold in them. Like stars. Like a clear night sky with stars.

I take a deep breath in. He's so close I can smell his aftershave.

Fuck. What the hell is wrong with me?

"Do I?" he asks.

He's studying me and my heart is racing. I wonder if he can hear it. But then he's reading another message. He's preoccupied. His phone buzzes a third time. After reading that message, he mutters a curse under his breath. Texts something. Pushes his suit jacket back to tuck his hand into his pants pocket.

That's when I see something glint, shiny and black in its holster under his arm.

"Do you have a gun with you?"

He doesn't reply, just narrows one eye, weighing how to answer my question perhaps. Or trying to steal my memory, to know why he feels a familiarity.

"Did you bring a gun into my house?" I ask again.

"It's not your house, remember?"

"Did you?"

"Would it scare you if I said yes?"

"You put one to my head yesterday."

"Before I realized you were...you."

"You scared me," I admit.

He pauses. Wrinkles form around his eyes for a moment as if this is a revelation to him. "Do I scare you now?"

I don't have to think about it. I shake my head. "No."

"Good. Besides, guns are more part of your life than you think."

"What do you mean?"

His phone buzzes again. It's irritating to have him read his messages while he's talking to me. He types a quick reply before giving me his attention, but I can see he's distracted.

"Second amendment, sweetheart. The world you live in is a violent one. You're just blissfully unaware."

“Maybe that’s true for you, but not for me. I don’t deal with guns or the mob.”

“You’d be surprised.” He steps back. “I have to go.”

“Oh.” I’m oddly disappointed when he gestures to the bedroom door.

“I’ll take a raincheck on the coffee though.”

My shoulder brushes against his hard chest when I walk past him and out the door. I don’t look back as I descend the stairs, my heart still beating fast. In the kitchen, I look at the box containing the brand-new phone, wondering yet again how, twice in less than twenty-four hours, I find myself in a wholly surreal situation with Sergio Benedetti in the driver’s seat.

He opens the front door and a cold gust of wind blows in.

“You have good locks on these doors, Natalie?” he asks, twisting the doorknobs, testing the lock.

“That’s a strange question.”

He turns back to me. “You’re an attractive, young girl living alone in the city.”

“Woman. Not girl. And I can take care of myself.” His face tells me he believes otherwise, and I get that. Because last night didn’t exactly make my case.

“The locks?” he asks again, ignoring my comment.

“They’re fine.”

He walks out of the house but turns back like he’s about to say something. His phone rings this time and he steps out, but before answering, he mouths for me to lock the door.

MY MIND IS STILL IN A DAZE WHEN I GET TO THE COFFEE SHOP TO MEET DREW the next afternoon. I walk inside to find him waiting for me at our usual table. He makes a show of checking his watch and I do the same on my new phone.

“I’m barely seven minutes late,” I say, setting my purse down and pulling

out a chair.

“Oh, nice,” he says, taking the phone from me and looking at it. “What happened to your old one?” He sets it down. The phone, a rose gold, came ready to go and had one phone number programmed in it. Sergio Benedetti’s.

No strings my ass.

“Long story,” I say, not wanting to lie. Drew’s my best friend. I’ve known him since I was a kid and we even dated through senior year of high school. But he was always more into boys than girls. Him coming out to me was the same day we broke up and I just remember feeling so happy for him that he knew, really knew, and was deciding to no longer hide it.

He was supposed to go to the warehouse with me, but canceled at the last minute. I’m glad now that he wasn’t there.

“Rough night?” he asks.

“Is it obvious?” I wave to Mandy at the bar. I work here, and I pretty much never deviate from my double shot cappuccino, so she gives me a nod to let me know she’s already working on it.

“Only because I know you. You went to that warehouse, didn’t you? I told you to wait for me.”

“I don’t really want to talk about it.” And I don’t want to think about how things could have gone if he was there.

“Did something happen?”

Mandy calls out my name and I go to the coffee bar, grab my drink and hand her a \$5 bill. “Thanks.” Back at the table, I take a sip. “Can I ask you a question?”

His eyebrows rise. “Sounds serious.”

“It is. Do you know a man named Sergio Benedetti?”

Drew all but spits out his coffee. “Benedetti?” he asks too loudly.

I glance at all the faces suddenly turned in our direction, and lower my voice. “Can you say it any louder?”

“As in son of Franco Benedetti? Next in line to take over the family business?”

“That’s him.”

“Why?”

“I kind of ran into him last night.”

“You kind of ran into him? How do you kind of run into a man like that?”

“That’s the long story.”

“Nat—”

“Don’t push. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You mean at the warehouse?” His eyes go huge.

“Let’s just say he was there conducting business.”

“Nat—”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” I’m not fine though.

Drew eyes my new phone. I should have scratched it up or something. He knows I could never afford a brand new, latest model iPhone.

“What exactly happened?” Drew asks.

“I really can’t say, Drew. Please don’t push me.”

“Did you see—”

“Listen, I just want to know about his family. I tried to Google, but I can’t find much about him. I know you hear stuff.” Drew works at a gentlemen’s club. It’s a high-end strip joint and he’s mentioned the clientele sometimes includes men from the local crime families.

“So you want to know about Sergio in particular, not the family.”

I nod, bite the inside of my cheek.

He gives me a little history. “But this is where his story gets juicy.”

“It’s already juicy.”

“Ever hear of the DeMarco family?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“Crime family. They were loyal to the Benedetti family, but then they weren’t. Franco Benedetti, Sergio’s father, took Lucia DeMarco, the youngest daughter, and essentially has her locked away at some nunnery until she’s old enough to be *given* to Sergio.”

“What?” My heart sinks into my belly. “What are you talking about?”

“It sounds Medieval, right? He took DeMarco’s daughter to punish him. Make him pay for rising up against the Benedetti family.”

“I don’t understand. Who is Lucia DeMarco? What nunnery? And what do you mean she’s to be *given* to Sergio?”

“She was sixteen when it all happened. That was two years ago. He literally had her sent to the nuns in some private school or something. She’ll be a gift for Sergio.” Drew looks almost mystified.

“What year is this? That’s not legal.”

“Tell that to Franco Benedetti.”

“Will he marry her or something?” I almost choke on the word and can’t figure out why I’m so bothered.

“He’ll own her. I don’t think finding a bride for his son was what Franco was going for.” Drew waggles his eyebrows.

I feel a shudder run along my spine. Drew’s phone rings and he gives me an apologetic look before answering. I’m too caught up in what I’ve just learned to care though. To do much of anything but digest this piece of information.

He hangs up. “Shit, totally forgot my meeting with the counselor.” He stands, finishes the last of his coffee and stuffs his text book into his backpack. Drew attends University of Pennsylvania with me. “Speaking of, did you decide what you’ll do with the Dayton internship?”

This is the reason I was at the warehouse to begin with. Professor Dayton owns Dayton Architecture, a leading firm in the Philadelphia area. I had a shot at a spot there for the summer, and ignored the stories about him being

handsy with the interns. At least until I got a taste of it last week in a private meeting.

“Well, I’m not going to sleep with him for an internship and since I couldn’t get the photos I wanted to work on, I’m guessing it’s off the table.”

“Prick.” He zips his backpack, looks at me. “You can report—”

“Who’d believe me? He’s too well connected. Besides, I’ll find something else.”

“I disagree, but it’s up to you. You going to be okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I wave him off. “Don’t worry about me.”

He leans down to give me a hug, but I catch his sleeve when he’s about to go.

“Drew, is that all for real?” I ask. “The story about the girl?”

He looks at me for a minute, his expression becoming worried. “Nat, real or not, you can’t get involved with someone like that.”

I shrug a shoulder, break eye contact. “I’m not. It’s just a strange story.”

“I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Okay.”

I finish the last of my coffee and get up to leave. It’s already dark out and the weather report had mentioned snow, which I really hoped would just be rain, but no such luck. I put my hood up and shove my hands into my pockets to walk the six blocks home all the while thinking about what Drew told me.

The story seems ridiculous, unbelievable and old-fashioned.

Would someone really do that? Lock away a girl of sixteen? *Own* her? What the hell does that even mean?

Flurries quickly turning into large, fluffy flakes blanket the ground. It would be beautiful except that right now, my brain’s busy processing. I feel kind of stupid. Drew’s right. I have no business thinking anything about a guy like Sergio Benedetti. I shouldn’t even let him in if he comes back for that cup of coffee.

I'm not paying attention as I near Elfreth's Alley. The snow's coming down hard now and I'm rushing to stay dry. I'm digging my key out of my pocket when I turn the corner and bump right into someone.

"Oh! I'm sorry!" I think it's one of my neighbors but whoever it is rushes past me without an apology or even an acknowledgement. I turn to watch him go. I know it's a him because he's pretty big. "Jerk." I look down for my key, which slipped out of my hand. I need to get a keychain for it. It takes me a minute to find it in the rapidly accumulating snow and by the time I let myself into the house, my fingers are numb from the cold.

Pepper barks twice, lopes into the kitchen. "Hey Pepper." I pet her, remember what Sergio asked about the locks, then force him from my mind. "Want dinner?" I ask Pepper as I take off my coat and boots. I drape my coat over the radiator, and leave my wet boots on the mat by the door. I'm just finishing scooping out her food when there's a knock on my door.

I try to shove the first thought that pops into my head—the hope that it's him—out. It takes me a moment to get to the door and the knocking comes again before I pull it open.

Sergio Benedetti is standing outside my door, handsome and formidable.

His smile fades when I don't invite him in right away. "It's snowing out here."

I look around, let go of the doorknob and step back. The story Drew told me circles my brain.

I watch him stomp snow off his boots before stepping inside and closing the door to look me over. I look too. I'm wearing a sweater and an old pair of ripped jeans and thick wool socks.

"Weatherman was right for the first time in his career," Sergio says. He's studying me. He always seems to be doing that.

My mind is busy, too caught up processing what I learned today. "Are you going to keep showing up at my door like this?"

Pepper's nails glide along the floor and I know she'll go to him like she did last time.

He pets Pepper's head, but his eyes are on me. "You should wear a hat," he says, ignoring my remark.

I touch my hair, realize it's wet from my walk home.

"Why are you here?"

"Coffee."

"What?"

"Coffee. Remember?"

"Now?"

He looks at me like it's the most normal thing in the world that he showed up here for coffee.

"What's wrong with now? Besides, we never finished talking."

"I didn't realize we had anything to talk about. You said no strings, remember?"

"Make me some coffee, Natalie."

"Are you used to giving orders and having them obeyed?"

He stops, seems to consider this, then answers with a grin. "Yeah, I am."

I guess it was a stupid question. "I have a question first," I dare.

He cocks his head to the side. "You're a strange one, you know that?"

I ignore his taunt. "Who's Lucia DeMarco?"

SERGIO

“**A**h.” I watch her. I’m curious about her. She’s torn, wanting to tell me to go to hell, but at the same time, drawn to me. “What did you do, Google the Benedetti family’s sordid history?”

“I don’t have to Google. Everyone knows.”

“You didn’t know until today.” I step toward her, lift her hair off her shoulder, push it behind her ear before cupping her chin to tilt it up. Her mouth opens, and her eyes grow wider. “And who’s everyone?”

She pulls back, turning her face the second she realizes she shouldn’t have said that. “I didn’t tell anyone about...the warehouse. I just said I’d run into you.” She clears her throat, doesn’t quite look at me as she answers and steps backward to put space between us. “I guess I want to know how you can own another human being.” She folds her arms across her chest. Tries to look confident.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I know about Lucia. I know she was only sixteen when you locked her up.”

“That so?” I ask. I look her over, walk a slow circle around her. I don’t speak until I’m facing her again. “You know, you should really tell me right now to go to hell. To get out and never come here again,” I say, I’m not one to mince words. Not one to play stupid games. Time is too valuable for that so I’m going to get this shit on the table. “Because you know I lied earlier.

About the strings.” I’m standing so close to her that she’s trapped with me on one side, the wall on the other. She’s not wearing any makeup and yet she’s fucking beautiful. I wonder if she even knows how beautiful. I lean my face close to hers. “With men like me, there are always strings, Natalie.”

She runs a hand through her hair, looks anywhere but at me.

“But you don’t want to, do you?” I ask. “For some reason, you want me to be here,” I say. “You liked that it was me when you opened the door.”

“No.”

“Huh.” I scrape my lower lip with my teeth. Her gaze falls to my mouth momentarily. “So instead of asking me to leave, you want to know about Lucia DeMarco? You sure about that?”

She gives me one short nod.

“Okay.” I step away, take off my coat and drape it over the back of a chair before sitting down. “Make me that cup of coffee.”

She sighs. The table’s too big for this space and she has to maneuver around it. I watch her fill the stove-top espresso machine with water and scoop out two heaping spoons of coffee. She stands with her back to me while the coffee brews. I wonder if she feels awkward but I don’t mind the quiet. I like being here in this house. I like being with her.

When the coffee steams, she switches off the burner, pours two tiny cups of espresso out and sets one in front of me. She then pulls out a chair and sits.

“Thank you,” I say, taking a sip. It’s good. “Lucia DeMarco is my father’s personal vendetta. For the record, I don’t like what he’s doing with her, but in order to punish the DeMarco family for their betrayal, he demanded something precious. The most precious things DeMarco has are his daughters, so...” I pause. “He took one.”

“He just took one?”

I nod.

“People aren’t things.”

I shrug a shoulder.

“He took her for you?” she asks and I know this is what’s got her wound up and I like it.

“Does that bother you?”

“What? No.”

“You sure?” She opens her mouth, but I continue. “On her twenty-first birthday, she’ll belong to my family.”

“That’s not legal. It can’t be.”

I give her a minute to think about that statement.

“But—”

“Shut up, Natalie. Just listen.” Amazingly, she shuts up. “You want me to tell you Lucia DeMarco has nothing to do with me?”

She watches me, answers my question with her own. “What must she be going through? What’s this like for her?”

“That isn’t a question I can answer or even care to consider. There are consequences to actions. A price to be paid. That’s all. And you shouldn’t romanticize it.”

“I’m not romanticizing it but she is locked away in a tower, isn’t she?”

“She’s at an excellent girl’s school getting an excellent education. And I think that’s enough on the DeMarco topic.”

She stands abruptly, takes her cup to the sink. “What happened to your hand?” she asks with her back to me.

I look at it, notice the bruise forming there. “Nothing.”

“Business?”

I have to admit, she’s observant. When I’d had to leave so abruptly last time it was because of news about that idiot Joe Vitelli. Roman had thought I’d been too lenient. I’ve always known my uncle has a taste for blood. But this time, he’d been right. My talk with the brothers didn’t quite set the younger one straight. Because Joe had a meeting I’m pretty sure his brother wasn’t aware of with a family who is a very clear enemy of ours.

After my visit with the younger Vitelli brother this morning, though, he's not going to be talking to anyone for a while. In fact, he'll be lucky if he ever talks again.

The chair scrapes the floor when I push back. I'm behind her before she can turn. I reach around her, set my cup in the sink, and I look at her, turn her to face me. She grips the counter behind her.

"You asked me why I was here earlier. Well, I'm here because I want to see you."

Her eyes go wide, nervously searching mine.

"There's something about you that keeps drawing me back, so here I am. And I think you feel the same."

"I—"

"Now about the hand, do you want me to lie to you?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

"You know who I am. Who my family is."

"I need to remember it."

When she won't look at me, I make her. "I'm just a man, Natalie." She's silent. "Flesh and bone." I snake one hand up along her spine to cup the back of her head, curl my fingers into her hair and tug her head backward. "And you make me want."

Her throat works when she licks her lips. Swallows. "Wrong place, wrong time."

"What?"

"There was a convenience store robbery in my neighborhood six years ago. I was fourteen. You said that after you shot the man who would have raped me."

I study her. Search her eyes. And slowly, it comes together.

I don't remember much about that day. Literally, I'd stumbled on the robbery. I'd needed to take a piss after a rough night of partying. Hell, I may

have still been drunk. The two perps were stoned. Idiots. But when I saw the asshole trying to get the kid's jeans off, I lost it. Told her to shut her eyes and shot the fucker so he'd never be fucking anyone ever again.

I walked away before the cops came. Took that piss and left.

"You have a bad habit, then, of being in the wrong place at the wrong time." I lean down, touch my lips to hers. They're soft. And she doesn't push me away. I don't close my eyes when I kiss her. Take her lip between mine and taste her.

"You taste good. I knew you would."

She doesn't know what to say. I bring my mouth to her ear and inhale, touching the scruff of my jaw to her smooth cheek as I take in her scent. Smell her want. And when I lean my face down and push her sweater aside to kiss the delicate curve of her neck, she gasps, sets her hands flat to my chest, but again, she doesn't push me away.

I draw back. My dick is hard. She sees it pressing against my pants and swallows when she returns her dark eyes to mine, blacker now with her pupils dilated. Before she can say anything, I pull her sweater over her head and lift her up to set her on the counter. With my hands on her thighs, I push her legs wide and stand between them.

"I liked looking at you that night," I say. She's almost at eye level now. Just has to tilt her head up a little.

"What?" her voice wavers when she asks it.

"I liked it. Liked you naked. I liked opening you. Seeing you. All of you. And after I brought you home, I looked at your pictures. Memorized them."

I draw her closer, so her legs are dangling off the counter and she can feel me between them. Her bra is lace and not padded so I can see her pebbled nipples. I bring my mouth to one small mound, rub the scruff of my jaw against it, suck the nipple, liking the rough of the lace against the softness of her skin.

Her hands are on my shoulders. "I—"

She swallows whatever she was about to say when I pull back, touch my fingers to her chest, over her breasts, her nipples. Slowly, I lift her breasts out of the cups, tuck the lace beneath each and look at her. Meet her eyes again as I lift her off the counter and she stands before me. I slide one hand down over her belly, undo the buttons of her jeans, the zipper. I slip my hand inside, into her panties, and I cup her sex and when I do, she closes her eyes and sucks in a breath and she's wet and I smell her and I want her.

"Stop." It's a whisper.

I slide a finger inside her, feel her warmth. I watch her when I do. Her mouth is open, her eyes locked on mine. Desire burns inside them. The musky scent of it hangs heavy in the room between us.

"You're wet," I say, rubbing the hard nub of her clit between thumb and forefinger.

She closes her eyes, bites her lip. Presses her hands against me. "No."

I take that hard, little button and tease it and she's leaning the top of her head into my chest, one hand fisted there, the other pushing against me. Her breathing is coming in gasps and I think she'll come soon and I want to see her come. It's what I want most in the world right now.

She looks up at me. I grip her pussy, tug her toward me. I rub her clit again, watch her eyes when I do.

But then she moves her hands underneath my jacket and she's feeling my chest, and I know the instant she touches the cold steel of my gun because she freezes.

Fuck.

I watch her. She blinks and that desire is turning into something else.

I clear my throat. "You should tell me to go," I tell her again, my voice hoarse. It's the right thing to do. I know it. She knows it.

I slide my hand out of her panties, my fingers wet with her.

She takes hold of either side of my jacket and pushes it back just off my shoulders and looks at the holstered gun, but she doesn't speak. Instead, she

touches it. I watch her tentative fingers, delicate and fragile. But when she closes her hand over the handle, I take hold of her wrist and pull her hand off and push her away, turn my back to her as I lean against the counter, holding her at arm's length, needing a moment. Needing many moments. I adjust the crotch of my pants and when I finally look at her again she's watching me.

This time it's me who doesn't speak. Instead, I release her wrist. I adjust the cups of her bra and take one more look at her before I turn, pick up my coat. I don't bother to put it on before I open the door, even though it's icy out, and I walk out of the house without a goodbye.

NATALIE

I lay awake for a long time after he left and kept waking up throughout the night, remembering. It's the first thing I think of this morning.

He didn't say goodbye. And I didn't get a chance to say a word before he was gone. The door closed behind him and he vanished. Disappeared into the night like a ghost. Like he wasn't here at all.

And it's the strangest thing. The most unsettling feeling—something I can't put my finger on—but it's almost a premonition. Sergio here, then gone.

Just like that.

Like a ghost.

Pepper's barking alerts me that there's someone at the door. The doorbell's been broken forever. I get up, pull a hoodie on, and glance out the window. I know it's not Sergio. Pepper wouldn't have barked at him.

Three men are standing outside, two in black jackets with a logo I can't read at the back, and one in a long dark coat. The guy in the coat looks up, catches my eye in the window. He opens his arms as if to say 'hey, answer the door'.

I go downstairs, keep a hand on Pepper's collar when I open the door. I don't know these men.

"Good morning," the one in the coat says. He introduces himself. I only catch his first name. "Sergio sent me."

I'm confused. "What? Why? It's seven in the morning." I have class in an

hour but still. I read the logo on the uniform of one of the men behind him. He's a locksmith.

"He said you need new locks. We'll get it done as fast as possible and be out of your way. Gentlemen." He puts his hand on the door to push it open, gesturing for the two men to enter.

"Hold on. You can't just barge in here and—"

"Miss, if you don't mind my saying so, these locks wouldn't keep a third-rate bum out."

My mouth falls open and he digs his phone out of his pocket, says a few words then holds it out to me.

"Here."

"What?"

"For you."

I am so confused. I take the phone.

"Good morning," Sergio says before I can say a word. I can almost hear the grin on his face.

"Are you responsible for this?"

"Yes. I realize it's early—"

"You can't just send someone to my house to change my locks. I don't even know you. It's not even my house. What's next, the windows?"

"Maybe. If you need it."

"No. I'm joking!"

"The owners will appreciate the better locks, Natalie. I guarantee that. I can break into your house with one hand tied behind my back."

"No one's trying to break into my house."

He doesn't speak for a minute and I think back to the man last night, the one who almost plowed me down on his way out of the street.

No one has tried. Yet.

“I just want to keep you safe. Young *woman* living alone and all. Want to make sure you’re protected.”

Woman. So he heard what I said.

“Nat?”

“I don’t like people calling me that,” I say.

“Natalie?” he amends. “Just do this for me and I’ll get rid of the pictures I took.”

“You will?”

“Yes.”

“How will I know you did it?”

“You’ll have to trust me.”

“I’m confused.”

“About trusting me?”

“About everything.”

“We can talk about it later if you want, when I take you to get photos of the warehouse.”

“I don’t need those anymore.”

“Why not? I thought they were for school.”

“They are. Were.” I shake my head. “I’m not taking the internship. The professor’s weird anyway. He has a bunch of us volunteering at his firm and he’ll choose one for the summer spot.”

“What do you mean, weird?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

He’s quiet but I know he wants to push. “Sergio?” I ask. I have a more pressing question.

“Yes?”

“Am I in danger?”

“What? No. No, nothing like that. Those are just shitty locks. Let me do this one thing for you.”

“They’re old, that’s all.”

“Right. We’ll update them. A gift to the owners.”

“Okay. But next time you talk to me first.”

“I did. I told you they were shitty.”

“I didn’t think that meant you were going to replace them.” I look at the clock. “Shit. I’m going to be late for classes.”

“Eric will take care of everything. Go to school.”

“Um, okay, thanks, I guess.”

“Tell me about this professor.”

“No. It’s nothing.” I’m worried suddenly. Sergio’s not taking baby steps into my life. He’s charging in and I have a feeling he’ll shove anything he needs to shove out of his way without a second thought. “I have to go,” I say.

SERGIO

It took all I had to walk away last night.

What I wanted, what I would have done with any other woman, was strip her bare, bend her over the kitchen counter, and fuck her raw. Take her to bed. Fuck her again. Then again.

And then I would walk away. Out the door never to return. Never to give a second thought.

With her though, it's different. With her, everything is different.

Wrong place. Wrong time.

Twice she's been put in my path.

I finish my coffee. Head out to the car. Sending Eric to take care of the locks means I won't have a bodyguard this morning. My father will have words with me when he finds out, which he always does. I need a bodyguard. We have enemies. All things I know.

Which brings me to Natalie.

If I'm not careful, she will become a target. And I feel very protective of her.

Those locks needed to be changed. They wouldn't keep anyone out and that dog's too old to protect her.

This professor she mentioned, I don't like the sound of him.

My phone rings when I get in the car. I check the display. It's my father.

“It’s early for you, isn’t it?”

“Heard the Vitelli boy is in the hospital.”

“That’s right.” I glance at the bruise on my knuckle. I don’t mind doing the physical work myself. Never want to be one of those men who’s afraid to get his hands dirty.

“He’ll be lucky if he can talk again,” he says.

“My initial meeting didn’t make the impression I hoped.”

“Roman thinks it’ll push old man Vitelli.”

“Roman needs to learn his place.”

“He was right before.”

“I’m meeting with Vitelli Sr. today. He’ll show gratitude for my restraint. My plan is not to incite another uprising like the DeMarco one. It’s to garner respect and, perhaps more importantly, obedience.”

“Power corrupts,” he says.

“Absolute power corrupts absolutely,” I say. “Where do we, the Benedetti family, fall in that? Or do we have no reckoning?”

There’s a pause. “Just make sure you take Eric and at least two more soldiers with you. Roman too.”

“I’ll take the security, but my uncle can stay home this time.”

My father would normally have handled this himself, but I’ve taken over some of the things he would do because with mom’s illness, he’s been preoccupied. As much as I trust Roman’s loyalty to him and to our family, there are moments where he’s ambitious, too much so. He’s not a Benedetti. He’s my mother’s brother. He may be consigliere, but I am my father’s son and successor.

“Sergio—”

“Is mom’s appointment at Dr. Shelby’s office?” I ask, even though I know. Instantly, I feel the shift in mood. Today’s an important day. We find out if my mom’s chemo worked. I know dad’s scared shitless. It’s actually the

only time I've ever known my father to be scared.

"Yeah. At the hospital."

"All right. I'll see you then."

"One more thing before you go. I want Eric with you 24/7. It's why I pay him. You want to go fuck some girl, go fuck her, but he stays. I don't care where or how, but he stays, understand?"

The way he says 'some girl' grates on my nerves. "Relax, dad." I hear a door close on my father's side.

"Relax, he tells me," Dad says, but he's not talking to me. "Your uncle just walked in. Twenty-four fucking seven, Sergio. I'm not budging on that."

"Fine."

I ARRIVE EARLY AT THE RESTAURANT WHERE I'M MEETING VITELLI. MY MEN have already checked the place and I'm on my second espresso when Vitelli and two of his men walk in. I haven't seen him since a wedding eight months ago, but he hasn't changed much. Maybe a few more gray hairs, but he's got the same look on his face as always, the one that says he's owed something simply for the sake of a shared history, and I don't like it.

After my men are done searching them, Vitelli approaches the table alone.

"Sergio," he says in greeting.

We don't shake hands.

"Sit down." I signal the lone waiter. "What would you like?"

He looks at my espresso and orders the same.

"How's Joe?" I ask. It's unspoken who did the damage, but we all know.

"Recovering." His tone is flat. "Although it'll be slow."

I nod. Sip the last of my espresso as he gets his. Silence drags out, but it doesn't bother me. I want him to start.

"Look, Sergio, our families go way back. We were neighbors in

Calabria.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Yes, but we have history. Shared roots. My boys,” he focuses his attention on the little espresso cup, and I see his mouth harden, see the rage behind it.

Violent men. It’s what we are. He and I both.

He looks up at me. “My boys fucked up, Sergio.”

“Yeah, they did. And Joe fucked up twice.”

“My youngest is sitting in a fucking hospital bed with his face sewn together.”

I study him, my expression even. Give him a minute to compose himself.

“You played together when you were little, for Christ’s sake!”

“Like I said, that was a long time ago. I know you were unaware of their dealings, but I’m not sure that’s an excuse. If you’re unable to control your family...” I let my words trail off.

His shoulders visibly tense up and a moment later, he clears his throat. “It was an oversight,” he acknowledges, knowing where I’m going. Knowing he can easily be replaced. Am I surprised he values his position over loyalty to his own sons?

“Will it happen again?”

“No.”

“Because if it does, someone will be in a box rather than a hospital bed. Am I clear?”

His youngest got his eyes from him. The same arrogance fills them.

“You’re clear, Sergio.” He makes to stand, but stops halfway up. “How’s your mother?”

I feel my eyes narrow, feel hate move through me.

“Your uncle mentioned she’s finished with her treatments.”

My uncle did what? He must see my surprise because I see that minuscule hint of victory in his eyes.

“Wish her well from my family.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Vitelli.”

I watch him leave, rage boiling inside me. How dare my uncle discuss our family’s private affairs with anyone? Especially this.

Checking my watch, I get up and walk to the back door. Eric’s beside the car. I get in, preoccupied now. This meeting didn’t go as planned. As I expected. I’m distracted as we drive to the hospital but when we pull up and I climb out, I take a breath in, compose myself. I’ll deal with Roman later. Right now, I need to be here for my mother.

When I arrive at the doctor’s office, they’re waiting for me. My mother and father sitting across from the doctor, my mom’s head wrapped in a teal blue scarf. Roman is standing off to the side.

“Sergio,” she says when she sees me. “There you are.”

“Mom.” She stands and I hug her, feel how much weight she’s lost. And I think I already know what the doctor’s going to tell us. I think she does too when she pulls back and gives me a weak smile. I wonder if all of this, if it isn’t for our sake. If she isn’t humoring us. Giving my father hope because she knows what will happen to him without it.

Another moment later, the door opens and my brothers, Salvatore and Dominic step inside. Salvatore spots me first, greets me, then our mother. Dominic goes directly to her and when everyone’s said hello, she pats the chair beside her for Dominic to take. She keeps one of his hands in both of hers.

Dominic is different than Salvatore. Salvatore, I get. He and I are close. But Dominic has anger inside him. Rage even. Jealousy rules him and in a way, I understand. He’s third born. If anything happened to me, Salvatore is next in line to rule. And to rule, to be king, is what my little brother wants most of all. I sometimes wonder at what cost.

Once we’re all gathered, the doctor puts his glasses on and opens a folder

on his desk. And from there, he delivers his news.

NATALIE

I haven't seen or heard from Sergio in three days. I'm confused, not sure what I should be feeling. Not sure I should be feeling anything at all.

If he's gone, it's for the best. Drew's right. I can't get involved with someone like him. What the hell am I even thinking? But why did he go without a goodbye? I don't understand.

It's past eleven at night when there's a knock on my door. I'm in the living room studying for a test. For a quick moment, I'm glad about the new locks on the doors, but shake myself out of it.

The knocking comes again, harder this time.

"Just a minute," I call out, zipping up my hoody. A damp chill clings to the walls of the house on these wet winter days. I understand why the owners leave until spring.

I look through the window beside the door and if he didn't have his face turned up to the streetlamp, I wouldn't have opened the door, but it's him.

I unlock and open the door. His hand is mid-air, ready to bang against the door, and I see right away he's in bad shape.

"Sergio?"

He looks at me like he's almost surprised to see me. He scratches his head. His coat is open and he's not wearing gloves, hat or scarf. His face is red like it's been whipped by the wind that hasn't stopped howling for the last hour.

“I was walking,” he says. I can smell whiskey on him.

“It’s freezing. You went walking tonight? Here?”

He makes some sound, looks beyond me into the house.

“Are you drunk?” I ask.

He returns his gaze to me, shakes his head, but I’m not convinced. He steps inside without waiting for an invitation. I close the door, shuddering at the cold.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Long day.” He stops, looks off in the distance, shakes his head. “Long fucking week. You have something to drink?”

“Coffee?” I ask, not surprised when he shakes his head.

“Something stronger.”

“Um.” I walk into the living room. He follows me. I don’t drink whiskey, which I think is what he’s looking for, but the owners have a stash of it. I open the cabinet, look at the various bottles, feel Sergio step close behind me. I turn to him, study his face. He’s scanning the selection and a moment later, chooses a bottle from the back. He doesn’t bother to pour it into a glass but drinks directly from it.

“Are you okay?” I ask carefully.

He looks at me, his eyes fierce in the dimly lit room. He drinks another swallow, sways on his feet. “I have a key,” he says, producing a ring of keys from his pocket.

“Good for you,” I say, not quite following. I reach for the bottle in his hand. “Maybe you’ve had enough.”

He draws it back and shoves his keys back into his pocket. Drinks again. When he takes a step to the side, he knocks his shin right into the coffee table, and mutters a curse.

“Why don’t you sit down,” I say, taking his shoulders, turning him toward the couch. “And give me your coat.” He reluctantly lets me take the bottle for

the moment it takes him to slide his coat off. He flops onto the couch, taking the whiskey back from me to drink another swallow.

“What were you doing?” He picks up my notebook.

“Nothing.” I take the whiskey from him, push the lid back on.

“Tell me about the professor.”

“What? Oh.” He means Professor Dayton. “Nothing.”

“Tell me.”

“Just he’s another one of those men who thinks with their dicks. That’s all. No big deal, nothing I can’t handle.”

“Did he touch you?”

“It’s fine.”

“Did he fucking touch you?”

“He stuck his hand up my skirt.”

Sergio’s hand fists. I watch him, study his eyes. This is dangerous ground. Dangerous for Professor Dayton. “Just forget it. It stopped at that. And I’m not taking the internship anyway. I’m leaving, in fact.”

“Nat—”

“Please.”

His eyes narrow, like he’s thinking, and when he nods, I’m surprised.

“Did something happen tonight?”

He takes a deep breath in, then out, looks at me, takes my hands and holds them for a long minute. “Life is short, huh?” He releases me, runs both hands through his hair and leans back on the couch. For a moment, it’s like he’s drifted out of here, he looks so lost in thought. Then he returns his gaze to mine and just watches me for a long time. When he stands, he’s steady on his feet, and he’s got that same look in his eyes as the other night. My body understands it before my mind processes.

“Too short to waste,” he says. He takes the zipper of my hoodie between

two fingers and slides it down, pushes it off me and lets it drop to the floor. “Natalie,” he says my name and stops, searching my face before his gaze moves to my bared shoulders and arms. “You’re so beautiful, you know that?” He’s slurring his words, swaying on his feet.

I watch him, and it’s strange, the way he’s looking at me. Intense and dark.

He takes the hem of my tank and draws it over my head.

“I want to see you. All of you.”

“Sergio, you’re drunk.” I try to push his hands away.

“No, sweetheart, not that drunk. Hell, never that drunk.” With a finger at my bare belly, he walks me backward.

“Wait, Sergio—”

“Shh.” He touches my lips. “I just want to see.” He leans in and kisses me, pressing my back to the wall, his cock is a thick rod between us. His eyes are burning when he pulls away.

Gripping my sweats with both hands, he slowly lowers to his knees, then drags my pants down over my thighs, off my feet. My socks are next so I’m barefoot, wearing only bra and panties. He gives me one glance before hooking his fingers into the waistband of the panties and dragging them off. I step out and when I do, he grips my thighs and forces them wider. Then he looks at me. Just looks at my bared sex.

My clit throbs beneath his gaze and he gives me a hooded glance before placing his thumbs on either side of my slit and opening me.

“Sergio.”

“Quiet.” He leans in, inhales deeply, then licks the length of me.

My gasp is a swallow of breath.

“I want you,” he says, dipping his head low, licking me again, forcing my legs wider as he dips his tongue inside me before coming back to my clit and taking it between his lips to suck.

“Oh, fuck.” I’m gripping him, his arms, his head and he lifts one leg up over his shoulder and devours me and when he takes my clit between his lips again and sucks hard, I fist his hair and grind against him and I come. I come so fucking hard I can’t stand without him holding me. Without his hand on my belly pressing me to the wall, his other hand around my hip keeping me upright.

When I’m limp and gasping for breath, Sergio rises to stand, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth, a smile on his lips, a darkness in his eyes. He kisses me hard, mashing his lips against mine, lifting me in his arms and carrying me up the stairs. In my room, he flips the light switch and the dim lamps on either side of my bed go on. He sets me on the bed. When I try to sit up, he shakes his head, pushes me back down and draws my legs wide to stand between them. He leans down, grips my bra in both hands and rips it in two, arranging the pieces to either side of me, laying me out, displaying me, like he did the other night. He looks me over, up and down, keeping my legs wide with his between them, and draws his sweater over his head.

I catch my breath at the heavily tattooed arms and shoulders. I’d only seen the hint of ink on his forearms that first night. He’s thickly muscled, his stomach ripped, and when he grips his belt to open it, my eyes travel to the trail of dark hair disappearing into his pants. I lick my lips and wait for him to push his pants and briefs down and off and I look at him, at his thick cock, the head already glistening. He lets me take him in and I want him, want more than his tongue on me. Inside me.

“You’re soaked,” he says, lifting my thighs, pressing my knees up, looking at me, at all of me. “You’re fucking dripping.”

I gasp when he touches his cock to me. When he smears himself over my sex.

“Sergio.” Condom. We need a condom.

“Shh. I just want to feel you, be inside you. Just for one second.” He slides into me unprotected and I suck in a breath and he stills and closes his eyes, and he lets out a long, deep moan and for a moment, I just watch his face and hold him inside me and it’s not just about sex. Not just about

coming. Not right now.

“We can’t...condom,” I force myself to say, even though all I want right now is him like this, warm inside me, and close, so fucking close.

He pulls out, leans down to kiss me, laying his weight on me for a moment before drawing away, keeping hold of my legs, keeping me spread for a moment longer before flipping me over and that intimacy, it’s gone. It’s sex now. It’s about coming now.

“Up, Natalie. Elbows and knees.”

I obey. Fuck, I want him. I want him to look at me. Want him to touch me. To lick me. To be inside me.

“Good girl,” he says. “Now put your face down on the bed. “I want to see all of you.” He takes my clit between two fingers when he gives the order and all I can do is moan and bury my face in the sheets. I feel his hands on me then, on my ass, spreading me wider, and then his mouth is on me again, closed over my pussy, licking and dipping inside me before sliding up toward my asshole.

I gasp. Tense up.

“Relax,” he growls. His hand is on the back of my head keeping me down. “I want all of you, Natalie. Everything.” I find myself arching my back then as he licks my ass, circling his tongue there, before dipping back to my pussy, devouring me, making me whimper as I come again. Come for a second time with his mouth on me.

I collapse on the bed when he flips me back over, climbing between my legs. He lays his full weight on me and kisses me.

“I like your pussy,” he says against my ear. “And I like your ass. And I love watching you come. And hearing you come. It’s the best fucking thing in the world.”

I close my eyes, holding him to me, pushing his face into my neck so he doesn’t see me. I’m embarrassed. I’ve never had anyone do what he just did to me. I’ve never come as hard as I do with him.

He draws back and pushes my legs wide again, and all I can think is I want him inside me again. I want to feel his heat, his hardness, his want. And when he slides into me, stretching me, it's exactly right, so fucking right. He lets out a groan and closes his eyes for a moment, an instant, seating himself deep inside me, opening his eyes again to lock gazes with me before he slides out of me.

He straightens, reaches into the pocket of his discarded pants and takes out his wallet. From inside, he retrieves a condom, unwraps it, sheaths his thick cock, then enters me. I close my eyes and arch my back as he stretches me.

I've never fucked with the lights on before. I've never fucked like this, faces inches apart, eyes wide open, the room filled with the sounds of our fucking, with the smell of it. Sergio's elbows close around my arms and he holds my face and he kisses me, just barely taking my lip between his before releasing it, neither of us blinking, not once. Our breathing is shallow, just gulps of air.

He makes a sound, something from deep in his chest, it's raw and base and I feel him thicken even more and I'm going to come. I'm going to come again and when he thrusts one final time, watching me, letting me watch him, I do. As he throbs inside me and I feel him come, I come too and everything about this moment feels so right. So fucking perfect.

And it scares the fucking shit out of me.

I close my eyes and feel, lose myself in sensation, in ecstasy. And when it's done, I'm spent. Empty and weightless. I blink my eyes open to find Sergio's still on me. His expression is strange, unreadable and I don't realize I'm crying until he touches his thumb to my face, wipes away a tear, smears it across my cheek.

He did that the first night too. At the warehouse. It's like he's mesmerized by my tears.

It's quiet, absolutely still, and he's still between my legs, still inside me. Still looking at me.

“Did I hurt you?”

I give my head a shake. It’s all I can manage because right now, I can’t speak. Can’t form words.

But it’s not that. He didn’t hurt me. It was perfect. Right.

And too much.

He gets up, walks into the bathroom. I hear the water go on a few minutes later and he comes back wiping his hands on a towel. I draw the blanket over myself and sit up as he gets dressed. He looks at me all the while.

“You can stay. It’s late.”

He shakes his head and I can see from his expression he has something on his mind. “Why were you crying?” he asks, putting on his shoes before coming to sit on the edge of the bed.

“It’s just a lot.” I shake it off. I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t even think I can, not until I figure out what the hell is going on inside my head.

He studies me a little while longer, then stands, lays me down, takes the blankets and draws them up to my chin. He leans down and kisses my forehead before walking to the door.

“Why were you upset when you got here?” I ask when he reaches to switch off the lights.

He stops but doesn’t turn around. He drops his head. “My mom’s sick and she’s not going to get better.” He switches off the lights then turns to face me. I can just make out his face from the streetlamp outside my window. “I knew, but I guess I was hoping.”

I sit up, holding the blanket to myself. “I’m sorry.”

He rubs the back of his neck, nods, turns. He’s lost in thought again, like he’s right back to where he was before he got here tonight. I hear his steps as he descends the stairs. Hear the front door open and close. I don’t get up to watch him go this time. I don’t want to. The other night’s departure still lingers in my mind and it makes me shudder.

It’s an omen.

A bad one.

SERGIO

I walk in the door of my house, drop the keys on the side table, take off my coat and let it fall to the floor. I should have stayed with her. What I want more than anything right now is to lie down beside her and watch her sleep. Listen to her breathe. Hold this tangible, living thing. Hold it so fucking tight it won't vanish like everything does.

From the living room, I pick up a bottle of whiskey and a crystal tumbler. The lights are still off and I don't switch them on but make my way into my study instead. This house is so quiet. So still. The curtains in the study are always drawn. This is the darkest room of the house.

I move behind my desk and switch on the lamp. From underneath the desk, I take out the large, rolled up sheet of what looks to be ancient parchment. It's not. Just made to look that way. I unroll it, smoothing down the edges, looking at the black and white boxes, the gray, worn areas where I've erased and redrawn and erased and redrawn too many times. Where I've worn a small hole in one of those boxes.

This is why I came home. There's work to be done.

Without paying attention, I pour a glass of whiskey and set the bottle on one corner of the sheet, sipping as I move around to the next. I slide another edge beneath the table lamp. The paperweight flattens another corner as I take my seat. One more sip and my tumbler rests on the final edge and the parchment is laid out before me.

I don't have to look away to open the drawer and take out my pencils. Charcoal, for sketching. The callous on my middle finger is still dark from all

the times I've held these.

The Benedetti family tree is all here before me from generations past. I wonder if anyone will continue to do this when I'm gone. When I'm one of the boxes that needs to be erased. Redrawn. The dates entered, finally.

I can't find the eraser right away and turn to rummage through the drawer. It had slid to the back. Taking it and my ruler, I erase the already smudged line around a cousin's box. I want it perfect.

No one's seen this little project of mine, not even Salvatore. It's morbid, I know. But it takes up so much of my mind, more and more as each day passes.

When I'm finished redrawing the box, I retrace the dates. This cousin was seventeen when he was killed. A car crash, not mob violence. Just too much alcohol and stupidity. We have those too. Life. Normal. Death.

When that's done, I drag my gaze to my father's box. Then my mother's. I touch hers with the tip of my finger. It won't be long before I add a date here.

I suck in a deep breath, rub the scruff of my jaw. If I don't shave soon, it'll be a fucking beard. I look away, look down at my brothers' boxes. My own. Funny, I've drawn theirs with connected empty boxes beside for their eventual wives. Their families.

I told Natalie time was a luxury, but so is family. Children. A fucking wife.

I swallow all that shit down, swallow the choking lump in my throat, bury it deep in my gut. I steel myself, look at my own name there. I'll be the boss of this family one day. It'll be when I've added a date to my father's box. It's not that I don't want it. I do. And it's not that I feel guilt over what I do. I don't. I'm very comfortable with who I am. It's just—it's always bittersweet, everything.

Someone always has to fucking die.

I line up the ruler, almost draw the link, almost add a box, but I stop. I can't do that because if I do, I'll be condemning her.

Instead, I take out a blank sheet of the same type of paper. This one's letter sized. I have it specially made—vanity, I suppose. I like nice things.

I set the sheet on top of the family map—our graveyard—and pick up the tumbler, swallow the rest of my whiskey. I pour another glass and get to work.

From memory, I start with her eyes. Almond shaped and so dark, they're almost black. Eyes are the hardest. Inside them is the soul. And I want to see her soul. I want it more than anything else right now.

It takes time, but I've got all night. My hands turn gray with charcoal as I smudge and erase and redraw again and again and again. I want to draw her like she was tonight. When she came. Soft and open and surrendered. Surrendered to me.

She didn't realize she was crying until I wiped away a tear. It's the strangest feeling, I have no word for it and I don't want to forget that, not ever. Memory is so fucking fragile.

When I finish with the eyes, I sit back and look at my work. I breathe from high in my chest, I've been holding my breath and didn't realize it. My hand reaches to find my glass but it's empty, so I drag my gaze away, stand to reach for the bottle, refill, splashing a few drops onto the family tree. I wipe them away with my sleeve and drink the burning liquid in one swallow. I wish it numbed me like it used to, but it takes a lot these days.

I push the sketch aside and look back at my box on the family tree, look at the line I started to draw to add a box, to link it to mine, and for one moment, I let myself imagine. I let myself dream the impossible.

And then I sit and I make myself remember.

Make myself count.

Make myself say aloud the name of every person here where a date had to be written in. Something that wouldn't be erased again. A box. A life. Another, different, sort of box. I count each one.

I do this every time I take this sheet out. Every time I feel sorry for myself because I have no right to. I'm not a good person. Salvatore, he has a

conscience. I know his struggle. Dominic, not so much. He's a mean son of a bitch. But so am I. The only difference between my little brother and me is that I'm going to get everything I want and he's going to get nothing. That's my saving grace.

Although I'm not sure the word grace should be uttered by someone like me.

I sit. I run my thumb softly over the edge of Natalie's eye. Smudge it. I smear charcoal across the sheet of paper, like I smeared the teardrop across her cheek earlier.

I reach in my pocket for my cell phone and maybe I am a little drunk when my brother's groggy voice comes on the line and I look at the time. It's almost four in the morning.

"Sergio?" Salvatore asks, then with more urgency, "Is everything okay?" He must just realize the time.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's fine."

Pause. "You sure?"

I grunt. I can't drag my eyes from hers as I reach for the bottle and drink straight from it.

"Sergio. What the fuck? It's four in the morning."

"Listen." I don't recognize my own voice, it's so low. So quiet. So broken.

He hears it too, I know from the emptiness in the line. "I'm listening," he finally says.

"There's a girl," I start.

"A girl?"

"If anything happens to me, you'll have to make sure she's okay."

"What the fuck are you talking about? Nothing's going to happen to you."

"Just listen."

“Are you fucking drunk?”

“No. Yeah. Maybe a little. Doesn’t matter.” I smear charcoal on my fingertip. Smear it to Natalie’s temple, create a shadow.

“Where are you?” he asks.

“Home.”

“Alone?”

“Yeah. Alone.”

“You need me to come over?”

“No, I’m fine. I just need you to shut the fuck up and listen now.”

“Okay. Tell me about the girl.”

I close my eyes, give my head a shake. What am I going to tell him? What can I say that will make any sense?

“Just make sure she’s okay.” Fuck. I’m definitely drunk.

“I’m coming over. You can make me fucking breakfast because it’s not even the ass crack of dawn.”

I chuckle. “No, it’s fine. Salvatore, it’s fine. I’m okay.” I take a deep, sobering breath.

“Then tell me about the girl. What’s her name?”

“Natalie. Natalie Gregorian.”

He repeats the name, then chuckles. “Dad’s going to give you shit she’s not Italian.”

“Yeah, well, fuck that.”

“How long have you known her?”

“A couple of days.”

He laughs. “She got you good, huh?”

“I like her, that’s all. Just if anything happens—”

“Nothing’s going to fucking happen to you so shut the fuck up. Don’t be a

goddamned ass.”

I smile.

“Natalie Gregorian,” he says seriously, and I know that’s his way of telling me yes, he’ll make sure she’s okay if anything happens to me. “Why don’t you get some sleep now, brother.”

“Yeah.” I get to my feet. “Listen, sorry I woke you. I know you need your beauty rest.”

“Fuck you.”

“Hey, the stuff with mom—”

“She’s getting another opinion. Dad’s calling in some specialist from Germany.”

“Of course, he is.” He’s desperate. “It’s shitty.”

“Yeah it’s fucking shitty. Listen, you can’t think about it. You need to go have some fun. Take Natalie away for a weekend or something. Somewhere hot and sunny. You can’t always be in this shit, you know? Not you, Sergio. You need a fucking break.”

I know what he means, why he’s saying this. I’ve got the family graveyard laid out in front of me. Drawn over years. This darkness, it’s a part of me. And it’s not that it belongs to me. No. *I* belong to *it*. Always have.

“I’ll think about it.”

“All right. Get some sleep.”

“Good night.” I hang up, set the phone down. I slide the large sheet out from under my new sketch and roll it up, put it away. I give Natalie’s sketch one long look before switching off the lights and going upstairs to try and sleep, hoping for just a few hours of oblivion.

God, what I’d give.

SERGIO

Roman lives about an hour out of the city. We're not supposed to meet until this afternoon, but I want the element of surprise.

"Sergio," he checks his watch. "Did I confuse the time?"

"No, Uncle. I'm early."

"You didn't have to come all the way out here."

"I don't mind." I look around the elaborately decorated house. It's an older structure and dark, with wood everywhere. Not my style, but it's what he likes. "I have some business out this way anyway." It's a busy fucking day for me.

We walk directly into his study. Roman takes the seat behind his desk. I remain on my feet, studying the paintings along the walls. "This new?" I ask about a watercolor I haven't seen before.

"Yes. Bought it at auction a few weeks ago, actually."

"It's very nice." And quite expensive, I'm sure.

"Thank you. How are you holding up after the hospital?"

I face him, lean my back against the wall and fold my arms across my chest. I purposely don't take the seat before the desk. Before him.

"It's shitty news."

"Yes. Your father's very upset."

"Understandable."

“There are some meetings coming up that I’m not sure he’ll be able to attend.”

I nod. “I’ll take his place.”

“I can sit in as necessary.”

“As his son and eventual successor, I’ll take his place.”

“As you wish.”

“How did old man Vitelli know about mom, Uncle?”

Roman has been with my father for longer than I’ve been around. He has learned well to conceal any emotion. Mastered the art. It’s not that I mistrust him, but there’s something that’s always niggled at the back of my mind with him.

“When we were talking about Joe’s situation, it came up.”

“Why were you talking to him about his son’s situation?”

“I’ve known him a long time, Sergio. He had nothing to do with what his sons were arranging.”

“It sounds like you’re friends.”

“You know as well as I there are no friends in this business.”

“Does he know you would have dealt a harsher punishment than I had it been up to you?”

At that, there’s a brief narrowing of his right eye. I only notice it because I’ve trained myself to watch people closely.

“What are you saying, Sergio?” he finally asks.

“I’m saying loyalty is of utmost importance, Uncle. Equal to family. Perhaps surpassing it.”

“Are you questioning mine?” He’s direct. We all are, I guess. “I’m your mother’s brother, remember. Your godfather. Are you questioning my loyalty to you or your family?”

“Explain to me how it came up.”

He raises his eyebrows. The chair creaks as he leans back. “I don’t think the Benedetti family needs another war. Not right now.”

I agree with him on that. The DeMarco war damaged us, at least a little. We won, but between that and my mother’s illness, Roman is right. This is not the time for war. Vitelli—hell, any ambitious family—would use my mother’s illness, see it as a weakness, an opportunity.

“I gave a little, to gain a little,” he says. “I apologize if I overstepped.”

“I don’t like being caught off guard.”

“And it wasn’t my intention that you should be.” He rises, walks around his desk and comes toward me. “Sergio, you’re my nephew. My blood. And when the time comes, I hope I’ll be of service to you as I am to your father.” He gives a brief bow of his head.

I watch him do this, know what it takes to do what he’s doing. He’s right that we’re blood. And to have to bow to a man almost thirty years his junior, whose only privilege is birth, must burn a little.

I nod, check my watch. “Anything new from the Vitelli boys?”

“No. Quiet as can be.”

“Which we both know is not really a good sign.” Silence always precedes an ambush. A deafening, deadly stillness.

“Yes, we do.” He moves back behind his desk. Sits. “I’ll keep my eyes on Vitelli.”

“Do. I want to be kept up to date on any happenings. Let’s keep my father out of this for now.”

“I agree with that.”

“Are you coming to Dominic’s birthday dinner?” I ask to change the subject.

“Of course.”

“I’ll see you then,” I say.

“You don’t want to stay? Have something to eat?”

“No, thank you. I have some personal business to take care of.”

“All right. I’ll walk you out.”

When I’m done at my uncle’s, Eric drives me to my next destination, the Dayton Architecture offices. As in Professor Harry Dayton, the prick. He touched her, expecting her to fuck him for a fucking internship. Fucking asshole. I’m about to do this town a service.

As we near the offices, I wonder how she gets out here because she doesn’t own a car. There’s a bus stop a few blocks down. I’m guessing she takes the bus and although this isn’t a bad neighborhood, the opposite, in fact, I don’t like the thought of her walking on her own or waiting in the dark at the bus stop.

The office is a mansion that’s been converted to serve as the Dayton Architecture firm. I admit, it’s beautifully done. I’ve heard of the firm, too. When I bought my house, they were one of the ones I considered to do the job of renovating.

Eric and I walk up to the front doors together. I don’t have anyone else with me, but I don’t think I’ll need much man power. When we walk inside, a pretty, young girl looks up from the receptionist desk.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen. How can I help you?” she asks, a smile on her lips.

“We’re here to see Harry Dayton,” I say, glancing around. There’s a woman in the waiting room who’s stopped flipping through the magazine on her lap to watch us and someone else peers up from her desk in an office at the back.

It’s not like we stand out though, Eric and me. We’re dressed well. Dark suits. Clean cut. But maybe we do. Maybe they can feel the aggression coming off us.

“Do you have an appointment?” she asks.

“Tell him Mr. Benedetti’s here to see him.”

“Professor Dayton’s very busy, Mr. Benedetti.” She pushes a few keys on

her keyboard. “And I don’t see you listed here.”

“Upstairs?” I ask, ignoring her. “That his office?” Double doors at the top of the winding, elaborate staircase lead me to believe it is. Like a fucking king, he sits up there. Fucking pervert. “We’ll see ourselves up.”

“Sir! You can’t go up there—”

Eric and I take the steps up at a brisk pace. I unbutton my suit jacket as I reach the first-floor landing and don’t bother to knock but push the door open to find a very surprised, balding middle-aged man sitting behind a massive desk.

“What the—”

The girl from downstairs comes running into the room. “Professor, I’m so sorry—”

“That’s alright, honey,” Eric says behind me. I know he’s urging her out. “We’ll take it from here.”

The door closes.

Dayton looks me over, rises to his feet, his face red with rage. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Eric walks toward the desk, then around it. He glances at the computer screen and chuckles as he puts his hands on Dayton’s shoulders and pushes him to sit.

“We’ll let you get back to your porn in a few minutes,” he says. “This is Mr. Benedetti.”

I sit, cross my ankle over my knee. Look around.

“Mr. Benedetti,” Dayton says. From the look on his face, he knows who I am.

“I’m here about Natalie Gregorian,” I say.

Color drains from his face.

“Recognize the name?”

“I...uh...she’s a student of mine.”

“You touch her?”

“I—”

“Did you fucking touch her?”

“She...no. What are you inferring?”

“You offer a coveted internship spot, don’t you? You have special requirements for pretty, young students?”

He just stares at me.

“Let’s make this simple. If she wants that goddamned internship, it’s hers. The hours she’s here, you won’t be. If you happen to cross her path, you’ll turn and walk—no, you’ll fucking run—the other way.”

“I...I...she’s in my class.”

“Then she better get straight fucking A’s.”

I stand, slap my hands on his desk. Dayton jumps, but Eric’s hands on his shoulders keep him rooted in his chair and when I lean toward him, he shrinks back.

“Did you hear me?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Y...y....”

Eric smacks him upside the head.

“Yes sir, Mr. Benedetti.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere. But just to be sure.” I straighten, button my jacket, give Eric a nod and turn to walk toward the door. It only takes Eric a few minutes to make sure we’re understood. He rejoins me by the time I’m halfway down the stairs, messaging Natalie that I’ll pick her up for a late dinner.

NATALIE

I am fuming. It's late and I'm sitting on the bus and can't even see straight, I'm so mad.

My phone rings. It's Sergio again. He's been calling me for the last half hour. This time, I switch it off altogether.

I didn't get a look at Professor Dayton myself because he was gone by the time I got to the office, but the looks I got from everyone else told me his spur of the moment vacation plans had something to do with me. I'd gone in to let him know I was no longer interested in the internship. That I was withdrawing my application and no longer would be available to volunteer. But that didn't happen.

Lisa, the airhead receptionist, told me two men had come in to see Professor Dayton. That they'd been wearing suits and were good looking in a bad-boy, dirty kind of way. She'd sighed after saying it. She'd actually sighed. Of course, she couldn't remember their names. I'm surprised she remembers her own some days.

I knew exactly who she was talking about and texted Sergio that dinner was off. Told him I knew what he did.

I should never have mentioned the internship or the professor. I just didn't think it was a possibility he'd hurt him. But he must have had it on his mind all that time because he went behind my back and did what he wanted anyway completely ignoring what I said.

The bus pulls up to my stop about thirty minutes later. I get out, cursing

the high heels I'm wearing. I had a presentation at school today, but I'd much rather be in an old pair of jeans, a huge sweater and comfy boots. Carrying my large, cumbersome portfolio along with my backpack and the few things I'd left at the office in a plastic bag, I walk the six blocks home. The streets are busy, it's the dinner hour, but for some reason, I find myself looking over my shoulder more than once, unable to shake the feeling I'm being followed. That's got to be Sergio's influence on my life. He's a mobster. What he does he proved tonight. He beats people up. Hurts them. It's what he knows.

Is it all he knows? With me, he's been so gentle. So generous.

I shake my head. Trying to reconcile these two sides of him is giving me a headache.

Elftreth's Alley is empty. No reason to be here unless you live here. The tourists usually come by during the day, not at night, at least not during the winter months. I dig my new key out of my pocket. The fact that I have these new locks—courtesy of Sergio who steamrolls to get his way—irritates me. I unlock the door and step inside. The first thing I do is slip off my shoes, leaving them as I walk to the kitchen table to set down the portfolio. I realize it's strange Pepper didn't greet me tonight. I'm later than usual and she's probably hungry.

"Pepper, I'm home. Sorry I'm late. You wouldn't believe my day." I walk around the table to open the cabinet under the sink and get her food. "Come on, honey. Dinner."

Nothing. Not even when she must hear the sound of food filling her bowl.

I stop. "Pepper?" My heart races. Shit. She's so old. What if...

I straighten, thinking the worst, and turn to head into the living room. I switch on the light and let out a scream because I'm not alone.

Sergio's here. Sitting in the middle of the couch, arms spread wide, eyes hard.

And right now, he looks like a fucking Godfather.

Pepper's on the floor, her head on his shoe, sleeping.

“I fed her.” He’s pissed, I can hear it in his voice, feel it coming off him. There’s a half empty bottle of whiskey on the coffee table.

“What are you doing here? How did you get in?”

“She was hungry.”

“How did you get inside?” I repeat. I can match his anger.

“I told you I had a key.”

Fuck. That’s what he’d meant last night. “You can’t have a key. I never gave you one.”

“You switched off your phone.”

I walk over to Pepper, squat down to pet her. I don’t look at him when I answer. “Because I didn’t want to talk to you.”

“When I call you, you answer.”

“Doesn’t work that way.” I say, standing, spinning on my heel. I’m about to walk away when he captures my wrist, his grip firm, more firm than he’s ever been with me. I make a sound, try to pull free, but he tugs on my arm, kicks my feet out from under me so I fall face down onto his lap. “What are you—”

He slaps my ass hard ten times in succession.

I’m gasping, instinctively reaching back to cover the spot. He captures my wrist, so he has both now, and holds them in one of his hands. I crane my neck to look up at him. He keeps his eyes locked on mine and rubs one hand over my ass, then spanks it again, ten more times on the other cheek.

“Stop!” It fucking hurts.

“When I call you, you answer, Natalie.”

I tug at my arms, but his grip is vice-like.

“Do you understand?” he asks.

“Let me go.”

“Do you fucking understand?”

“Yes!”

He gives me one more hard smack before releasing me, and I stumble to my feet. I feel hot, embarrassed, and I’m clutching my ass.

“I just want you safe.” He gets to his feet.

I step backward.

He’s wearing a suit, the jacket of which is hanging over the back of a chair. He gently moves Pepper’s head off his foot before he walks toward me.

I’m mute as he approaches. There’s a darkness to Sergio Benedetti. It clings to him, like a shadow. It’s the one thing that scares me about him because I trust that he won’t hurt me. And I believe that he wants me safe. I may not understand it, but I believe it.

But this shadow, it’s not one he casts. The opposite. It seems to cast itself over him. To have a claim on him. Some strange, powerful hold over him.

“You shouldn’t have hurt him,” I say when my back’s against the wall and he’s standing inches from me.

“You couldn’t protect yourself so I did it for you. Besides, this isn’t important. That idiot isn’t important.”

“No, it doesn’t work that way. I didn’t want—”

“How does it work?” he asks, one corner of his mouth curling upward. He looks me over, leans his forearms against the wall on either side of my head. “Huh?” He dips his head closer, inhales, touches the scruff of his jaw against my cheek. “Explain to me how it works.”

I look up at him, at his midnight eyes. I smell his aftershave, remember what we did last night. My body remembers too.

“How does it work, Nat?”

I hate the nickname. Always have.

“Huh?” he continues. “I stand back while some asshole intimidates you into his bed?”

“I didn’t. I wouldn’t. I’m not fucking stupid. And I don’t need someone to

protect me. I don't need some knight in shining armor and I'm not looking for a hero." Tears warm my eyes. I hate them, hate the weakness. But what I've said has made him stop. Confused him almost.

Then he laughs. "You think I'm trying to be the hero?" A moment later, he drops his head. His forehead creases and he's looking down for a long time before he shifts his gaze back up to mine, searching mine as if it holds the answers. "I'm not the hero, sweetheart. I'm the fucking monster."

When I don't reply, he grins. It's a sad, one sided thing.

"What do you think of that? Makes more sense, right?"

I push against him, but it's like trying to move a wall, and the look in his eyes, the dark desperation in his words, his voice, it scares me. "Let me go."

"No." He takes my wrists in one of his hands, draws them over my head, pins them to the wall. His other hand grips my skirt, yanks it up. "You're good. You're the only good in my life, you know that?" His eyes skim my bared legs, the stockings that reach mid-thigh. "And I want what I want," he finishes, dragging his gaze back to mine. "I should let you go. It's the right thing to do, I know."

I can't process what he's saying—it's almost like he's not talking to me but to himself. Like he's been thinking and thinking and he's just saying it out loud now.

He touches my face, my cheek. His thumb presses against my lower lip, forces my mouth open. "But I can't," he says finally.

"You have a key to my house." It's all I can say and fuck, he's so close and when he presses against me, against my clit, it takes all I have to not wrap my legs around him. Rub myself against him. Hump him like some animal. Because I do want this. Want him. It's not just that part of me, either. It's all of me. Even though I know my heart will shatter when it's finished. When he's gone.

He kisses me hard, not waiting for me to kiss him back. His fingers curl into the crotch of my panties, push them aside, roughly rub my clit.

"You're wet."

“This is too fast. We don’t even know each other. Don’t you see how strange this is? How not normal?” I’m just talking though. I don’t want him to go. To walk away. Even if it is wrong.

Keeping me pinned to the wall, he undoes his belt, the buttons of his pants. He pushes them down and the smooth skin of his cock makes me moan as he rubs against my clit, between my folds.

“You should make me stop,” he whispers into my ear, then bites my earlobe. It’s like neither of us is listening to the other, though, because we’re saying the same thing but we’re both powerless to do it.

When he puts his mouth to mine, I open for him, our kiss wet, his tongue dipping inside my mouth as he sets my hands on his shoulders and lifts me up by my hips.

“Say no and I’ll stop,” he says, biting my lip, making me taste the metal of blood. “Say no, Natalie. Make me go. Make me walk away.” He pauses, looks at me. “I’ll let you in on a little secret.” He whispers the next part: “It’s better for you if you do.”

He thrusts inside me, making me grunt, making me suck in breath. His thick cock stretches me and when he slides out a little, it’s only to thrust in harder. He’s watching me, eyes black but for the narrow ring of midnight, pupils dilated. He kisses me, but our eyes remain open. He’s sucking my lower lip. I know he tastes blood. He must.

Again, he slides out a little, only to punish me with another thrust.

“Say it,” he demands, a threat in his tone. “Say it now. Tell me to stop, this is your chance. Save yourself.” He thrusts painfully and when I don’t say what he wants me to say, when he speaks again, there’s a violence to his words. “Tell me to fucking stop.”

I gasp, cling to him.

“You know who I am. What I do,” he continues.

It hurts, the wall at my back, his too thick cock driving into me, deeper and deeper, tearing me in two, tearing through to my core, piercing my heart.

“If you don’t tell me to stop now, I won’t. Not now. Not ever.”

He stops moving, and I’m impaled. He takes my jaw in his hand again, makes me look up at him.

“Say it now. Tell me to stop. Tell me to go. It’s your last chance.”

I shake my head as much as I can with him gripping my face. Fuck. I’m going to come. I’m so fucking close, I just need...just one more thrust.

He smiles. He’s got his answer. And that smile turns into a wicked grin a moment later.

“You want to come?” His voice is low, the words drawn out.

I make a sound, but I can’t say the word.

“Say it.”

I’m pressing against him, trying to grind against him. This isn’t me. But he does something to me. Makes me something different. Makes me someone I don’t recognize.

“Fucking say it.”

“Make me come. Please!” I want him, and I can’t get close enough. I want to be filled up by him. Possessed by him. Fucking owned by him.

“Good girl,” he says, kissing me, grinning wide, drawing farther out than before and thrusting so hard, I cry out. “Come, Natalie. Come on my dick. Come all over me.”

That’s all it takes, his command, his cock inside me, his eyes on me, watching me, seeing me, seeing me splinter and break. Seeing everything.

I squeeze my eyes shut and I come. I come so fucking hard I can’t breathe, I can’t think, and if he didn’t have me, I wouldn’t be able to stand. It’s like an explosion, orgasm claiming my body as Sergio claims my everything, and when I feel him come, when I feel him throb inside me, feel him release inside me, I open my eyes and I watch him, clinging to him, wanting him, wanting it all.

My hands wrap around his shoulders, nails digging into his shirt, his back

and he's coming inside me and I've never seen a more beautiful sight than Sergio's glistening midnight eyes. Sergio lost in bliss. In ecstasy.

I ADJUST THE CROTCH OF MY PANTIES, STRAIGHTEN MY SKIRT.

"We should have used a condom," I say, because in my head, I'm counting days.

"I like coming inside you. I like knowing part of me is inside you." He zips and buttons his pants and buckles his belt.

"Sergio—"

"I'm clean, Natalie," he says.

"I'm clean too, but there are other things."

He seems surprised for the first time since I've known him. "You're not protected?"

I shake my head.

"Where are you—"

"I should be okay." I think. My period ended eight days ago. I still have a few days. "But we can't do that again. I mean without a condom."

He's deep in thought, suddenly. Not angry, just concentrated. Like something's just occurred to him. Something he's never thought of before. It's strange, the look in his eye. Unsettling.

"Our conversation isn't over," I say, simply to break into whatever is happening in his head.

"It's not?"

"You can't just hurt people in the name of protecting me."

He walks into the kitchen. "That prick deserved to be punished."

"That wasn't up to you." I follow him but he's not paying attention to me. He's opening a cabinet, taking out the coffee. "Sergio, I mean it." He's busy opening drawers, closing them, looking for a spoon, I assume. "Hey." I pull

on his arm, make him stop. He does, turns to me, walks me backward until he's got me backed up against the refrigerator.

"Natalie."

I'm looking up at him, at his dark eyes. I smell aftershave and sex.

"I'm not going to let anyone hurt you. This bastard isn't important. We're wasting words. Wasting time."

I push against him. "This is too much. Too fast."

He studies me but doesn't reply. Doesn't budge.

"You have a key to my house. You beat up my professor. For what? An internship I wouldn't even take."

"What do you mean you wouldn't take?"

"I told you I didn't want it. You didn't think I'd work for him knowing what he'd expect, did you?"

"You withdrew willingly?"

"What would you do if I said no? That he disqualified me."

"That fucking—" he's suddenly so angry, that the shift in his mood is startling.

"See. This is what I mean! No, I withdrew. He wasn't even there when I got to the office. But see what I mean? You can't just beat up every guy who's an idiot."

"Why not?"

"I can handle myself."

"Nat—"

I put my hands on his face, wanting to make him hear me. "I can handle myself."

It takes him a moment, but he nods once.

"We're moving too fast." I say it because I feel like I have to. Not because I want to stop.

“No, we’re not.”

I blink, open my mouth, close it again. I’m not expecting that answer.

“I know what I want, Natalie. Do you?”

When he looks at me, his eyes are alive, searching and wanting more. More than I think I can give.

“I’ve never thought,” he starts, speaking slowly, like he’s choosing each word carefully. Purposefully. Darkness casts its shadow over him and he looks away, shakes his head, exhales before meeting my gaze again. “I’ve lost a lot of friends. Cousins. Uncles. Many of them too early. Most of them too early.” He steps backward, releases me. “Time is a luxury, Natalie. One I don’t think will be afforded me.”

There’s a sadness in his words. In his eyes. And that shadow, it seems to swell behind him. Always there. Ever present.

Ready to swallow him up and carry him away.

I shudder. “Sergio—”

“I won’t waste it,” he says. He steps closer again, this time, taking my jaw in his hand, tilting my face upward. He looks at me, my eyes and mouth, and then he kisses me. It’s hard, there’s nothing tender in this kiss. He doesn’t slip his tongue between my lips. He isn’t tasting me. He’s laying claim to me.

When he breaks the kiss, he doesn’t pull back. Instead, with eyes locked on mine, he reaches under my skirt, smears his hand over the cum drying on my thigh, slips his fingers inside my panties.

“I want my cum on you. I want it inside you. I want it to mark you.” He rubs me, and somehow, feeling as raw as I do after that fucking, I’m aroused again. I want him again.

He grins. He knows it. He pinches my clit. It hurts and he knows that too, I can see it on his face, but he takes a minute to pull his hand out from under my skirt.

When he releases me, I have to grip him to remain standing because my knees are wobbling.

He wraps his hands around my arms. It takes me a minute to get my breathing under control. To straighten my legs. To process his words. To try to understand what he's saying.

I look up at him, but am unable to speak.

"It's not too fast. There's no such thing. I don't want to stop what's happening between us," he says, searching my face. "If I were a good person, I'd walk away, but I'm not. I'm not. I've done bad things. My hands are so fucking dirty. You need to know that. You do, don't you? You know that?"

I nod.

"Do you know what you want?" he asks.

I know this is important. I know he's important. But I can't say that. I'm still caught on his other words.

"Do you?" he repeats.

"What do you mean that time won't be afforded you?"

"I think you understand."

We look at each other for a long while, the only sound is that of Pepper's soft snores coming from the other room.

"Do you want me to go?" he finally asks. "I'll ask this exactly once so think hard."

I swallow, every hair on my body standing on end. Every nerve alive.

"Do you, Natalie? Do you want me to go?"

My mind is whirling, so much is happening so fast. I look away, down at my feet, at the cracked, old tile beneath them.

He squeezes my arms. "Answer my question."

"No."

SERGIO

We are moving fast but what I said to her is true. And even more true, more urgent, since I've met her. This feeling I've always had that my life would be a short one, it's on my mind more and more and I can't shake it like I could before. Maybe it's because of what's happening with my mother. The reality of the fragility of human life. My own mortality staring me in the fucking face. It's like everything is going at warp speed. Like what I said to my father a few nights ago about a reckoning—it's coming. It's coming for me.

My hands are dirty.

No, not dirty. That's too easy.

They're blood soaked.

Maybe that's why she draws me? She says she knows, but she doesn't, not really.

I think back to the night of the convenience store robbery. I remember telling her to close her eyes. She did without question, trusting me, a man—a stranger—with a gun. A man who leaves destruction in his wake. To whom darkness clings. She didn't see me take aim at the asshole who would have raped her. Didn't see me shoot, point blank, the terror in his eyes only fueling me. Giving me power.

No, I don't think she can imagine this. She may think she knows, but she cannot fathom the depths of the darkness that is my life. I am a monster. It's the beast I've created and fed.

Maybe in some way, I hope her innocence will absolve me. Even as I know that for someone like me, there is no absolution. I'm hell bound. I will burn for what I've done, for the sins I've committed. And I don't deny that's where I belong. But I want my time first. I want my time with her even though I know it's selfish. Even though I know I should walk away now before things get more confused.

Because they're already confused as fuck.

And when she mentioned the *other things*, the lack of birth control, I don't know what I was thinking. What I did before I left—rubbing my cum into her—in a way, what she said, the fact that a child is a possibility?

Fuck.

I don't even know what I'm thinking. What I'm doing. What do I want? To put a baby inside her? What the fuck is wrong with me? She's still in school. She's got her whole life ahead of her. And what if I'm right? What if I'm not around for long? What the fuck am I doing to her? How much more selfish can I be?

FOR THE LAST FEW NIGHTS, I'VE BEEN DETERMINED TO HAVE 'NORMAL' TIME with Natalie. Drinks, dinner and sex. A lot of sex. Tonight, I'm picking her up and bringing her to my house.

I park at my usual spot at a lot two blocks away, tipping the attendant generously. I get a text from my father.

"Why the fuck is it so hard for you to do me this one goddamned favor?"

I roll my eyes. I know what he's talking about and I'm going to have to talk to Eric. I realize he's on my father's payroll, but still.

I stop to text him back. *"I'm a big boy. I can take care of myself."*

My phone rings a moment later.

"You make sure Eric drives you. I don't like you out there on your own. We have enemies, Sergio. You fucking know this."

"Fine. Christ."

“Good. I’d hate to have to fire Eric. He’s got a family to feed.”

“I’ll make sure he earns his money. I have to go.”

“I mean it, Sergio.”

“Me too, dad.”

When I get to the tiny house, which I love but which I also know is something that is so not possible given who I am, I peek in the kitchen window. The lace curtains are open and I can see straight inside. I wonder if she realizes how much of her life is lived on display, with people always looking in. This is one of those things that gives me pause because I’m stealing that ease from her simply by showing up here, by inserting myself into her life. Because my enemies will become her enemies. And she doesn’t even have a clue.

Without knocking, I unlock the door and go inside. At least she’s good about keeping it locked.

“Nat?” I call out, walking through the kitchen, not bothering to take off my coat since we’ll be leaving.

“You know I don’t like anyone calling me that.” Her voice comes from upstairs.

I smile, but before I can reply, a hairdryer goes on. There’s a strange scent in the house today. It’s familiar but I can’t quite place it. It doesn’t fit here and it leaves me with an uncomfortable feeling.

Pepper’s lying on the floor beside the couch and her tail makes a thudding sound against the hardwood as she wags it when I approach. “Hey Pepper.” I pet her, and she lays her head back down. She looks tired and I wonder how much longer she’ll be around.

The blow dryer switches off and I hear heels click at the top of the stairs. “Hey, the bathroom window’s stuck. Can you see if you can open it for me?” Natalie asks.

“Sure.” I climb up the stairs. She’s in her bedroom applying mascara. “You know you don’t need that.” I walk to her, meet her eyes in the mirror.

“I like it,” she says, straightening, closing the tube.

That’s when I realize what the smell is. Why it makes me so uncomfortable.

“What’s that?” I ask, pointing to the chipped vase on the nightstand that holds a small bouquet of lilies. The flowers are pink and white and for as beautiful as they are, I can’t fucking stand them or their stink.

“Oh,” she glances at the flowers, then at me. “It was on my doorstep when I got here.”

I go to it, and I’m holding my breath. “On your doorstep?”

“Yeah. I think it was Drew. He can be dramatic. I’m assuming they symbolize the death of the internship.”

I glance at her as she rolls her eyes and returns her attention to her reflection, picking up a tube of lip gloss.

“So, no note?”

“Nope.”

“Who’s Drew again?” I vaguely remember the name.

She puts the gloss down and looks at me. “My best friend since we were kids,” she says matter-of-factly.

“Did he tell you they were from him?”

“Is this a big deal? Are you jealous? He and I aren’t a thing. I mean, we were once, but we’re friends, that’s all. Besides, he’s gay.”

I could give a fuck. “Did he tell you, Natalie?” I ask again, trying to keep the edge from my voice.

She picks up her phone. “Not yet. I texted him a little bit ago, but he hasn’t read my message yet. Sergio, are you jealous?”

I’m not jealous, no. I glance out the window, look up and down the street. I should have put a man on her because I have a feeling these aren’t from her friend. “I just don’t like the stink of these.”

“Most people don’t.”

“Throw them away. They’ll smell up the house,” I say, turning to her. “I want you to stay over tonight anyway.”

Dominic’s birthday is this weekend. I’m supposed to head up to the house in the Adirondacks tomorrow but suddenly realize I can’t leave her here alone.

“Actually,” I start, turning to her, deciding on the spot. “Come with me.” She knows about the weekend, but I hadn’t wanted to invite her before. I don’t want her around my father, my youngest brother. Not yet.

“What?”

“My mom, she doesn’t have much time.” I shrug a shoulder and I’m not lying, I do want her to meet my mom. But that’s not the reason I want to take her with me. “What do you think?”

“Isn’t it a family thing?” She’s obviously anxious about it.

“Yeah, but it’s fine.” I go to her, wrap my arms around her. “I really want you to come with me.”

“Okay. I guess I can go. I’ll ask someone to cover my shift at the coffee shop tomorrow.”

“Good.” I won’t have to force her, then. “Do you have a duffel bag or something?” I open the closet, which is stuffed with clothes. “You’re a mess, Natalie.” I like things neat and organized and this drives me insane. From the top shelf, I grab a backpack. “This’ll do.”

“What about Pepper? She’s so old, I worry—”

“We’ll bring her too. She can stay at my house and someone will watch her.”

“I can ask Drew maybe.”

“Come on, I want to spend the night with you.” I go to her, take her hands, draw her to me. “I haven’t fucked you in my bed yet.”

She grins, her eyes brightening.

I kiss her, then let her go. “Just toss what you need in there and let’s go. I’ll wait for you downstairs.”

“Um, okay. I guess.”

I take the vase with the flowers and head to the stairs.

“Wait, don’t throw them away.”

“The whole place will stink by the time you’re back.” No way this thing is staying inside her house. I fucked up. Shit, I hope I’m overreacting. Hope this Drew guy left them.

When I’m sure she can’t hear me, I take my phone and call Eric. I tell him I want a man on her. One at her house tonight.

By the time Natalie comes downstairs, Pepper’s waiting by the door and the flowers have been tossed into a neighbor’s trash bin, vase and all.

“You’re anxious,” she says, setting the backpack down to get her coat.

I notice what she’s wearing for the first time, a pretty wool dress that hugs her tight. It comes to just below her knees and pointy-toed shoes finish it off.

“You look nice,” I say.

“Thanks.”

I take her coat, she slips it on and we leave a few minutes later. I’m pretty sure she doesn’t notice that I’m watching every person who passes us, memorizing their faces, looking for anything out of the ordinary. I don’t want to bring up the flowers again, not until she gets confirmation from her friend. I’m hoping I’m wrong about them even though my gut tells me I’m not.

“Oh,” Natalie says. She’s reading a text message when I get into the driver’s seat after settling Pepper in the back.

“What is it?” I ask, starting the engine and pulling out.

She types something back before turning to me. “Drew didn’t know what I was talking about.”

I nod, keep my eyes on the road. I want to be out of the city. Want to have her behind the gates of my property, safely locked away in her own tower.

“Maybe they were left there by accident,” she says. “I wonder if they were for someone else.”

Her phone dings and she looks at it again, shakes her head.

“Sergio, you were weird about the flowers.”

I nod.

“Am I missing something?”

I glance at her, don’t want to worry her, so I lie. “I just really don’t like the smell. They remind me of funerals.”

“That’s cryptic.”

“Death is.” I merge onto the highway.

A weight settles alongside us in the car and the silence feels heavy. She’ll see through my lie. I know it. But I don’t want to have the discussion about the flowers. Not yet.

“Sergio,” she finally says once we pull through the gates of my house. “Is there something about the flowers that I should know?”

I park the car, kill the engine. I climb out and the front door of the house opens as Natalie steps out of the car.

She looks at Eric and the man standing beside him, then at me.

“What’s going on?”

I meet her worried gaze, shift my attention to opening the back door, lifting Pepper out and setting her on the ground. The dog’s too old to hop out of the car on her own. “Let’s get her settled.” I take a step toward the house but she puts a hand on my arm.

“Sergio?”

I take a deep breath in, turn to her. “I don’t think the flowers were left by accident.”

NATALIE

“What are you talking about?”

I’m forcing in every breath I take, trying to stay calm.

“Let’s go in,” Sergio says, his eyes dark on mine when he takes my arm and walks us up the stairs to the front door.

I glance over my shoulder at the tall iron gates in the distance.

“In, Natalie. Now.”

“Are we in danger?” I ask, Pepper loping beside us.

He doesn’t answer but greets the men when we get inside. “Natalie, you know Eric. This is Ricco.”

I glance at Ricco. He’s big, kind of brutish looking, and he nods at me in greeting. I shift my gaze back to Sergio.

He’s watching me, and I know he’s weighing his words. “Ricco’s going to keep an eye on you while you’re at school.”

I pull my arm free, step backward. Pepper’s fur brushes against the backs of my legs. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Another man will be stationed at your house.”

“What—”

“What that means is I intend to keep you safe.” He turns to the men. “Eric, there’s a bag of dog food in the trunk. I need you to get that. I’ll meet you in the study in a few minutes.”

“Wait,” I start, but the two simply do as they’re told and Sergio turns to me, and all of a sudden, he looks different. Bigger. Scarier.

“Nat.” He takes my arm again.

“I told you I don’t like being called that.” But it doesn’t matter. I don’t care what he calls me right now.

“Come on,” he says, tipping his head to the side, forcing a smile that doesn’t quite make it. “Let’s get you a drink.”

“I don’t want a drink,” I snap, freeing my arm again. Or I try to, at least.

“Natalie.”

“What’s happening?” I hear how I sound, feel panic bubbling inside me, making goose bumps rise all along my body.

“Calm down. You’re safe.”

“Why would I not be safe?”

He studies me, wraps his arm around me, pulls me toward him. I plant my hands on his chest.

“Sergio, why—”

I stop because his fingers move up along my spine and his hand closes around the back of my neck. His eyes search my face. “You’re with me now. Things are different. You knew that.”

I glance away, shake my head. “I don’t—”

“A drink, Natalie. Even if you don’t want one, I need one.” Without waiting for a reply, he walks me into the kitchen. He spins a stool at the counter and gestures for me to sit. I do.

From a cabinet, he gets a bottle of whiskey and two tall glasses. He brings them over to the counter and turns the stool beside mine toward me and sits. I watch as he sets the bottle and glasses down, then pours about three fingers full into each glass. He closes his hand around one, pushes the other toward me with the knuckles of the same hand. His eyes never leave mine and when I raise my hand to the glass, it’s trembling. Sergio sees it too.

“The flowers,” I say, looking at the liquid, knowing it will burn when it goes down. “Were they a sign?” I pick up the whiskey, bring it to my lips, force a swallow. I hate this stuff but I take another sip because I need it right now. When I look up at him, he’s still watching me. “You said they’re funeral flowers.” I’m processing my own words as I say them. But I’ve known this all along, haven’t I? That knowing him, being with him, it puts me in danger.

He doesn’t answer for a long time, just watches me like he’s reading my thoughts, reading me.

Pepper lets out a bark from nearby and we both turn to her.

Sergio sets his glass down, gets up and opens a drawer, gets a bowl and fills it with water, sets it down in one corner and puts a second, empty one beside it.

“Why don’t you get her fed. I’ll be back in a few minutes. I’ll cook us dinner then.”

“I’m not hungry,” I say, swallowing the rest of the whiskey and setting my glass down before getting to my feet, walking over to where Pepper’s drinking the water. I kneel beside her, my back to Sergio, and pet her. She’s so old, her skin and fur feel oily. I don’t want to think about how much longer she’ll be around.

Sergio sighs, but then he walks out of the kitchen and I assume he’s gone to his study to meet with those men when I hear a door close.

I take a deep breath when he’s gone, then get back up. Taking the bowl, I get Pepper’s dinner then walk back to the counter, take the bottle of whiskey he left behind and pour myself some more. I drink and make my way to the living room.

Tonight, I feel like I have some rights here. Some authority. Because I’m realizing something. Something I’ve been processing since I met him. Something I still don’t quite understand.

I haven’t yet made the connection with what mafia life truly means. Not in the terms of real life. Of *my* life.

My mind wanders to what might have happened if Sergio hadn’t changed

the locks on my borrowed house. Would whoever left the lilies there have broken in? Would someone have been waiting for me inside when I got home? Waiting to do me harm?

No, that's not it. I don't think they meant to hurt me. I think they meant to send a message to Sergio.

I'm studying the photos in the living room when I hear the study door open. Sergio's saying something in Italian. I didn't realize he spoke Italian, but of course he does. A few minutes later, the two men leave, and Sergio walks into the living room. I turn to face him.

"It was a message for you, wasn't it? I don't matter. I'm just a vehicle to get to you, aren't I?"

He walks toward me but I halt him.

"Answer me, Sergio."

He considers for a moment, then answers. "Yes."

"Who did it?"

"That doesn't matter."

"Oh, I think it might matter."

His eyes harden a little. "I'll take care of it."

"Like you did Professor Dayton?"

He takes a deep breath in, lets it out slowly, and closes the space between us. I don't step back, but I want to. He takes the glass out of my hand and sets it aside. "I said I'll take care of it."

"Don't you think I have a right to know?"

He shifts his attention to my hand, takes it in his. He turns it over and pushes the three-quarter sleeve of my dress to my elbow. He studies the skin of my wrist, traces a vein up the inside of my arm. His touch sends shivers along my spine.

"These are my enemies, Natalie. Not yours."

“But if they’re at *my* house, leaving *me* funeral flowers, they’re *my* enemies too.”

“I said I’ll take care of it and I will.”

“How?” Why am I asking? How much of this do I want to know?

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll fix it.”

I shake my head, look down at his hand, at his fingertips light as a feather as they tickle my skin. He’s watching too. Holding my small wrist in his big hand. It makes me feel vulnerable. Makes me think how easily it could be snapped. By whose enemies hardly matters. It would break all the same.

It’s strange what I’m feeling for this man whom I’ve known for only weeks. Who is dangerous. Whom I know I should run from. But thing is, I can’t imagine walking away. Can’t imagine not having him in my life.

But I’m being stupid. I can’t disregard what happened tonight, even if he ‘fixes’ it. I pull my hand free of his. “What about the next time? I’m guessing you have more than one enemy.”

I reach for my whiskey, but he recaptures my wrist and takes my glass, swallows its’ contents.

“Is this normal for you, Sergio? Normal life? Nothing out of the ordinary in someone leaving funeral flowers at your doorstep?”

He rubs the scruff of his jaw, the back of his neck. He’s looking at me but he’s in his head. I see him struggling with something. Maybe it’s the same thing I’m battling.

It takes him a long time to speak. “I have many enemies. And I don’t want it to be your normal. I’m a dangerous man. It’s dangerous for you to be with me.”

“What are you saying?”

His eyes burn. There’s so much inside them, conflict and rage and an intense darkness. An almost palpable violence.

He finally turns away, then answers. “Nothing. It doesn’t matter.”

I go to him, touch his shoulder. “You want me to leave? Walk away? Is that what you’re telling me?”

He faces me, gives me a small smile, exhales loudly as he brushes a strand of hair behind my ear. “It’s too late for that, sweetheart. I won’t let you go. That’s been the problem from day one.”

“I don’t want some man following me. I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“You don’t have a choice,” he says. “Not on this one.”

“I do. I have to. This is my life. I get a say.”

“Not when it comes to your safety,” he says, his tone harder, his eyes darker. “Don’t be naïve. You don’t know this life. This is non-negotiable.”

I try to pull free, but this time, he tugs me to him, making me bounce against his chest.

“Let me go.” I try to push him off.

“No.”

“You don’t listen to anything I say when it doesn’t suit you.”

He cocks his head to the side.

“You didn’t when you beat up my professor. Not when you changed the locks on my house without my permission, and now you’re not listening either.”

“Aren’t you glad that I did change those locks?”

I stare up at him, and before I can answer, he puts the flat of one hand in the middle of my chest and walks me backward until my back hits the wall.

“I’m a modern man, Natalie, but I have my limits, and when it comes to your safety, I decide.”

“And what, I do as I’m told?”

“That’s ideal.” He’s trying to make light of it.

I try to push his hands off but can’t. “Let me go.”

“No. I already told you, I’m not letting you go.”

“You don’t get to decide for me.”

“I won’t leave you unprotected.”

“I wouldn’t be in danger if it wasn’t for you being who you are.”

“Enough!” He slams his fist into the wall.

I let out a small scream, and freeze.

There’s an anger that’s barely controlled when he next speaks, his voice low, a warning. “You went into this with both eyes wide open. You know it and I know it.”

I shudder.

Is he right? I didn’t know it, though, not like this.

But isn’t that bullshit? And does it even matter? I won’t leave anyway. That, I know.

He grips my jaw and tips it up, makes me look at him. “The first time we met, I had a gun aimed at the asshole hurting you. The second time, I had that gun pointed at your head. You’ve known from day one who I was. I’ve told you to stop me, to make me go. Told you I would if you told me to. But you didn’t, did you? The other night when I fucked you , when I told you to tell me to leave, you didn’t. Again. You. Did. Not. Well, it’s too fucking late now, Natalie.”

“I didn’t intend...” I shake my head, try to clear it.

“What? You didn’t intend what?”

But the words that come into my head make no sense.

“What?” he growls, this time slapping both hands flat on the wall on either side of my head, making me wince and cower, caging me in.

He must see my terror because he exhales, rubs his face with his hands. “Fuck.” It takes him a few minutes but when he speaks again, his voice is controlled. “What didn’t you intend?”

Someone clears their throat. Sergio takes a deep breath in, clearly irritated, and turns to Eric who’s standing beneath the arched entry.

“You need to see something,” he says, then adds something on in Italian.

Sergio walks over to him, and they both look at Eric’s phone.

“Fucking bastard,” Sergio mutters. “Give me a minute.” Eric leaves and Sergio comes to me. “I have to go.”

“Where?”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Are you fixing it? Is this you *fixing* it? Will you come back with another bruise on your knuckles? Maybe blood on your shirt this time?”

His eyes narrow and when he steps closer, I take two steps back. “Don’t fucking test me. Not now.”

I swallow. He’s warning me and for the first time since I’ve known him, I realize I don’t know the lengths this man will go to, the violence he’s used to. The violence he’s caused. I thought I did, but I was wrong. To think you know something but then to really understand it, to feel it, those are two very different things.

He clears his throat. “Natalie—”

I look away, fold my arms across my chest. “Just go.”

“There’s some food—”

“I’m not hungry. Just go. Go fucking fix it.”

“Trust me, Natalie.”

I walk away. I don’t want to hear anymore. I need to get Pepper settled. I find her in the kitchen eating the last of her dinner, oblivious to the shit storm in the other room. I don’t turn around when I hear the two men speaking in hushed tones in the hallway. The front door opens and closes, and I hear a car’s engine start. Pepper licks my face when I sit on the floor beside her. I don’t know if I’m angry or hurt or scared or what. Sergio takes liberties, assumes things, and thing is, I know that’s him. I know this is how it will be with him. Tonight is just a preview of what I’m signing up for.

Irritated with myself, I get up, take Pepper by the collar.

“Come on, let’s find ourselves a bedroom.” Because I’m not sleeping in his.

IT’S FOUR IN THE MORNING WHEN I ABRUPTLY WAKE UP, BOLTING UPRIGHT IN the strange bed, gasping for breath.

The nightmare is gone as soon as my eyes open but it takes me a moment to remember where I am. Why I’m here.

Pepper’s snore comes from the foot of the bed. I draw the covers back and get up. I don’t want to sleep again. I don’t want to go back to that dream.

Quietly, I walk out the door and into the hallway. It’s dark, and I wonder if he’s back yet. If I’m alone in this big, strange house. But when I reach the top of the stairs, I hear a sound. Music. It’s muted, like it’s coming from far away.

Barefoot, I walk down the stairs without switching on any lights. It’s eerie this time of night. Old houses always are.

The music grows louder as I near the bottom of the stairs. It’s coming from his study. I go to it and stop, and I hear him. He’s singing along with the music.

“It’s cold. It’s dark. It’s deep and it’s wet. And you ain’t gonna make it if you don’t let someone in.”

I feel like I’m intruding on something very private so I knock once, quietly, before opening the door.

Sergio’s sitting behind his desk. His jacket’s off and his shirt’s unbuttoned half way down, the sleeves rolled up to the elbow. His hair’s ruffled, like he’s been running his hands through it, and his eyes are bloodshot. I know why. The bottle on the corner of the desk is almost empty.

“You’re back,” I say, when he just sits there and looks at me. I realize the song is on repeat because it dies down then starts up again.

Without waiting for an invitation, I step inside and close the door behind me. It smells like him in here. Like his aftershave and whiskey.

I look down at what's on the desk. At the large parchment that spans the entire surface. He's holding two pencils in his hand. Charcoal. His white shirt has smears of it and so do his hands and forearms. The triangle wedge of a worn eraser sits near his glass.

He doesn't get up when I go to the desk. When I look down at the large sheet. It takes me a moment to realize it's a family tree.

I begin to read the names, the dates. There are symbols next to some of them—a small cross. It's the only thing that's not charcoal, but red marker. The crosses are the only permanent things, I realize. All the rest can be erased.

Sergio watches me as I study his lineage, follow the line from great-grandfather, to grandfather, to his father, Franco Benedetti. To his mother. To Sergio.

His brothers' names are beside his. Alongside those, I see lines drawn, boxes prepared for a second name. But next to his, where there was a line, it's now just smudged, erased. Just his birthday beneath with a dash. An eerie emptiness on the other side of that dash. A sort of permanence.

When I look up, I find him watching me. "Did you draw this?"

He pushes his chair back, rises to his feet, gestures for me to come to his side. I do and he takes my hand, draws me closer, stands me between himself and the desk so I'm facing the desk.

Sergio closes his hands over the backs of mine, takes the pointer finger of my right one and traces a line up to his father, to another name I don't know. Presses it over the red cross—it's shaped like a cross from the days of the crusades. Gothic almost. Like he spent time shaping each one. Outlining each with darkest black, colored each in deepest red.

"The cross is a mob killing," he says. And, without a word, we trace ever single macabre cross on the sheet, he and I. I don't count. I lose track. I feel him behind me, feel the weight of his silence. The meaning of it.

When we get to his name, he traces the erased line. He's standing so close, I feel the heat of his body behind mine, the tickle of his warm whiskey-

breath on the nape of my neck. The light kisses there.

“You know what I didn’t intend?” he asks, picking up our earlier conversation, just before he’d abruptly left. “I didn’t intend on falling in love with you.”

The song begins again, the tone dark and heavy.

I ain’t got a kiss left to give you,

Cuz you weren’t good to me...

It makes me shudder, makes an icy chill run the length of my spine.

I should be happy, right? Aren’t these words every girl wants to hear?

Why does it feel like a cement brick has just landed in my belly?

“This one,” he starts, releasing my left hand, wrapping his around my middle, pulling me to him, while using our right hands to point to the remnants of an erased box connected to his. “It’s for you.” His hand snakes up to cup my breast, squeeze it, then wrap around my throat, fingers gripping my jaw just a little too hard, like he wants me to look, to really see.

A moment later, he extends my right arm out, forcing us both to bend forward as he wraps my fingers around the edge of the desk, releasing my throat and taking my left arm to stretch it to the opposite side.

He pushes my hair off to the side and I lay my cheek on the drawing, knowing it’ll come away smeared with charcoal. Maybe a little red, too.

“Stay,” he says, his breath warm on my ear, lips soft when he kisses my cheek. He straightens, and I see him in my periphery, watch him loom over me, watching me. It’s so dark, he’s almost a shadow wrapped within a shadow.

His eyes glisten, and when the next part of the song plays, he sings along: “It’s cold. It’s dark. It’s deep and it’s wet.”

I hear him open a drawer, take something out, but I can’t see what it is. His hands are on my back. Sliding down over my hips. Raising the oversized T-shirt I’m wearing high on my back.

Blood surges to my sex and I crane my neck to watch him. His focus is intent on his work as he drags my panties down over my hips, my thighs. Let's them slide to the floor and waits until I step out of them to stand between my legs. To take my ass in his hands to splay me open.

I swallow. He's watching me there, and a moment later, his thumb comes to rest against my asshole, presses lightly there.

When I tense, and begin to straighten, he squeezes his hands over my hips.

"I said stay."

I lay back down. He pushes the tip of his finger inside me. I realize what he took out of the drawer a moment later when I feel the cool drops fall on the cleft of my ass.

"Sergio," I start.

"I've been struggling ever since I met you," he says, beginning to rub the cream into me. It feels strange. Different, but good. "I know what being with me will mean for you and part of me is screaming to let you go. Not to condemn you to this life."

When he slides the fingers of his other hand to my clit, I suck in a breath. He keeps rubbing, and I hear the wet sounds of my arousal, hear his own breath coming shorter. And when he pushes a finger slowly inside me, I let out a moan.

"Natalie," he says, and I hear him unbuckling his belt, unzipping his pants.

I can't answer though, not when he's touching me like that.

"I need to be inside you. To come inside you."

I'm not protected. He can't come inside my pussy.

He's rubbing his cock between my folds, dipping into my wet pussy as a second finger penetrates my ass. It hurts, but it feels good too, and I want him inside me. I want him to come inside me. He's not the only one who needs this. Needs to be this close.

“Darlin’, darlin’, darlin’, why don’t you sleep at night?” he sings louder in time with the music and he pulls out of my pussy and I look back, watch him pumping his cock with his hand, smearing cream all over it, watching me as he sings along, glancing away only for a moment to draw his fingers out and line his cock up to my asshole and when he pushes in, I gasp, and tense and arch my back and grip the edges of the desk hard.

It hurts, he’s so thick, but he rubs my back, takes his time, stretches me slowly. When he strokes my clit, I find myself lifting to him, wanting him, and the sounds in the room, I think they’re coming from me, short gasps, moans, and fuck I’m going to come and he’s pushing deeper and deeper inside me and a moment later, I’m coming and he’s watching me, burying his cock inside me, moving slow and deep until it’s over, until the wave passes.

That’s when he grips my hips and fucks me. That’s when he really fucks me, drawing all the way out, thrusting back inside, the base sounds of an animal rutting coming from him, from his chest.

I know the moment he’s going to release, to explode inside me and when he thrusts one final time, laying his full weight over me, his chest and face wet with sweat and his cock throbs and I feel him release and empty and we’re so close, so fucking close. Closer than we’ve ever been. And when he stretches his arms over mine and intertwines his fingers with my own and he’s still throbbing inside me, I think I don’t want this to end. I don’t want to ever be apart from him. I don’t want for him to ever go away. For us to ever leave this room. Because here, we’re safe. Here, he’s safe.

Sweat mixes with tears and when he finally pulls out of me, I’m spent. I have nothing left. My knees buckle and he lifts me in his arms and I just cling to him.

It’s a long while later when we’re upstairs and he’s bathed me and put me in his bed when I ask him:

“Why, Sergio?”

It’s that song, the melody haunting me now. He had it on repeat. I don’t know how many times I heard it. Don’t know how many times he’d heard it before I got there.

“Why don’t you sleep at night?” I ask.

He looks away from me. Rolls over on his back and stares up at the ceiling.

“Sergio?”

He turns his head. Studies me for a long moment before answering.

“Because time is running out.”

SERGIO

Eric had managed to get video footage from a neighbor's security camera that showed the man who'd left the flowers on Natalie's doorstep. But people aren't stupid. He'd had on a hoodie with a baseball cap underneath, the rim pulled low over his face. It could be anyone and I didn't really expect whoever had done it to be waving their fucking hand in the air. This was to let me know they'd found a weakness. That they are not above using that weakness, hurting it—hurting her—to hurt me.

This is mafia life. No one is safe, not if you're the fucking boss, not if you're a foot soldier. Not if you have any connection to any of us. Because it's what I would have done, too. I'm not above exploiting my enemies' weaknesses, no matter how fucking innocent.

Karma. What goes around comes around. I guess it's coming for me.

And that's fucking fine. Me. Not her, though. She's clean. She's not part of this.

"Why are you so quiet?" Natalie asks. She's sitting beside me and we're driving up to my father's house for Dominic's birthday. I'm planning on spending the week up there, but Natalie needs to be back by Monday for classes.

"Nothing. Just preparing myself for the visit."

"You're making me nervous and I'm already a little anxious. Nauseous even."

Things are happening at break-neck speed for us. I know she's feeling a

little swept up. And there's nothing I'd like more than to slow down time for a little while. Maybe take that trip Salvatore suggested, go away with her. Somewhere warm and quiet. Somewhere where it's just us.

Because time *is* running out.

Last night in the study with Natalie, that music, her, us together, it's haunting me. My own words keep repeating in my mind and I can't help but feel their warning. It takes all I have to keep it from dampening everything. From stealing the joy from everything.

It's dark when we arrive at the foreboding gates of the Benedetti family home a little before seven at night. They open as we approach, closing only once we turn onto the long drive leading to the mansion looming in the distance.

I glance at her, squeeze her knee. She's staring wide-eyed at the house. "Ready?"

She nods.

"Don't look so worried. I told my dad he'd better be nice to you." I wink, but she pales. "I'm kidding. Relax."

"I don't know why I'm so nervous. It's stupid."

"You're with me. Don't be nervous," I try to reassure her. "Oh, there is one thing. Dominic can sometimes be a dick. Just ignore him."

"Aren't we here for his birthday?"

"Yeah, more for my mom than anything else, though. And he's her baby. I know parents don't technically have favorites, but they do." As I open the car door she puts her hand on my arm.

"Sergio?"

One leg is already out of the car when I look back at her.

"How long does she have?"

I take a deep breath. "Hard to say. Months. She won't survive the year." I try not to feel anything when I say it, but that's impossible. "Come on, let's

go in.”

She opens her door and by the time she climbs out, I’m at her side, our bags on my shoulder. I take her hand and turn to the large wooden doors illuminated softly by the old-fashioned lanterns on either side. I love this house. Always have. And one day, it’ll be mine.

The doors open as we approach and my father stands at the entrance. He barely glances at me. He’s been waiting to see Natalie ever since I told him this morning that I was bringing her.

“Dad,” I say as we climb the stairs. “Were you watching out the window?” I give him a hug and he pats my back.

“First girl you bring home? Yeah, I’m watching out the window.”

Natalie stands tense beside me. My dad’s not hiding the fact that he’s looking her over from head to toe—taking her measure. He’s gauging whether or not she’s worthy of me. The real question is are *we* worthy of *her*.

“This is Natalie Gregorian,” I say. “Let’s try and not scare her off before she’s inside, okay?”

My father’s eyes are on hers and he lifts his chin a little. There’s a moment of awkward silence before he extends a hand to her.

“Welcome, Natalie Gregorian.”

I swear I hear Natalie swallow. My father can be overbearing, and that’s putting it mildly.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Benedetti,” Natalie says, sliding her hand into his. He doesn’t quite shake it, just holds it in his and I swear he hasn’t blinked.

I look at him, try to see him as she is seeing him. Not like his son. His favorite son.

Dominic may be my mom’s favorite, but I’ve always been my dad’s. I almost feel sorry for Salvatore.

Not for the first time in my life, I see a coldness in my father’s eyes. A ruthlessness. Is that what she sees? I wonder how much like him I am. Wonder if I should feel anything about that, because I don’t.

Natalie finally drops her gaze and clears her throat.

“It’s cold,” she says to me.

I get the feeling she doesn’t mean the weather. “Let’s go in.”

As the door closes behind us, voices come from around the corner. Salvatore and my mom. I’m doing the same thing now. Seeing them the way she must see them. My mom is the opposite of my dad. Warm and welcoming, her smile authentic and immediate.

Salvatore looks like a giant beside her, she’s lost so much weight. He’s a big guy, big as me, but that’s not why she looks so small.

I shift my gaze to my brother, wonder what Natalie’s seeing. If she recognizes the darkness that clings to him. That shadow of somberness. But maybe that’s because it’s hard not to think about the fact that this may be the last time we’re here like this. With mom alive. Not in a goddamned box.

“Sergio,” my mom says. I take her in my arms, feel the flesh and bone she’s become. Curse the fucking cancer that’s raging a war inside her.

“Mom. You look good.” She’s wearing a light pink headscarf.

“No, I don’t, kiddo.”

No, she doesn’t. What I told Natalie is right. She won’t last the year. She has months and I’m unprepared.

“Mom, this is Natalie. Natalie, this is my mom.”

She shifts her gaze to Natalie, takes her outstretched hand in both of hers. “Natalie,” she says, then pulls her in for a hug. “It’s so good to meet you. We’re glad to have you here with us.”

The warmth of her reception is so opposite my father’s.

“It’s good to meet you too, Mrs. Benedetti.”

“Sergio’s never brought a girl home,” she says, winking, pulling back to look Natalie over. She cocks her head to the side and studies her eyes for a moment longer than is comfortable. But then she gives her a nod. “I see what he sees in you.”

I glance at Natalie, see her blush.

Dominic clears his throat and walks around the corner. My cocky younger brother is tucking his phone into his pocket and devouring Natalie with his eyes.

“This is my brother, Salvatore,” I say, ignoring Dominic, knowing it’ll piss him off to be introduced last.

“Nice to meet you,” Natalie says as she and Salvatore shake hands.

“Finally, a girl who can stand my brother,” he says.

Dominic clears his throat. “And I’m Dominic,” he says.

I step closer to her, wrap my hand around the back of her neck. “My baby brother,” I add on.

I see Dominic bristle at the introduction. He’s so damn easy to fuck with.

“Go get Natalie settled. I’ll see you in my study,” my dad says before turning to walk away. “We have some business to discuss.”

“Franco, I said no business,” my mom starts.

But dad waves off her comment.

“It’s okay, mom. I’ll make sure he keeps it short.”

I watch him go but I have to force the smile on my face.

“Your mom and Salvatore seem really nice,” Natalie says once we’re out of earshot.

I chuckle. “My dad’s okay too. You just have to get to know him. This is my room.”

We walk into my bedroom and I close the door. It’s a spacious room, lavishly decorated in dark grays and blacks.

“Did you grow up here?” she asks.

“Here and in Philadelphia. My mom wants to be here now. It’s her favorite place.”

“It’s a beautiful house.”

“Thanks.” I walk into the closet, switch on the lights to make sure the dress I ordered at the last minute is here. I didn’t see anything in her closet for tonight’s dinner. It is and it’s perfect for Natalie. I switch out the light and return to the bedroom. “You okay?”

She nods. “My stomach just feels funny.”

“Nerves. Why don’t you relax. Have a bath if you want. Dinner isn’t until nine. I’ll go see what my dad wants, and I’ll be up to get you.”

“Okay.”

“There’s a dress in the closet for you. Wear it tonight.”

“A dress?”

I smile, walk to the door.

“Sergio?” She asks when my hand is on the doorknob.

I turn. “Yes?”

“Um...It’s nothing. Never mind.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah, just a long drive. I’ll go have a bath.”

I nod. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.” I walk out, close the door behind me and don’t like the feeling of leaving her alone. But I have to get this meeting with my dad over with. He doesn’t know about the flowers at Natalie’s house. I didn’t tell him because it’ll only worry him that someone would get that close to me. But I wonder if that’s what he wants to talk about anyway. If it isn’t the Lucia DeMarco situation he’s more interested in discussing. In getting my acquiescence once and for all, especially now that Natalie’s in the picture.

“Dad,” I say, entering his study without knocking.

He’s sitting behind his desk. “Pretty girl,” he says, resting his arms on his desk and looking at me. “Close the door.”

NATALIE

My phone rings a moment after Sergio walks out of the room. I pick up my purse which I'd tossed on the bed and dig inside for my phone. It's Drew so I answer.

"Hey Drew."

"Hey. You there? At *the house*?"

I smile. "Yes." I plop down on the bed. "Weirdo."

"Well, what's it like?"

"Huge. Lavish. I wonder if it's haunted."

"Ha. Did you meet Franco Benedetti?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And nothing. He's just like you'd expect. Cold. Sergio's mom's nice though. And one of his brothers seems okay."

"Yeah, well, what did *you* expect? I still can't believe you're with him."

"I know." I know Drew doesn't approve. He thinks I'm going to get hurt and I can see how he'd think that, especially given what just happened. I lied to him for the first time since I've known him, too. I told him the flowers were from Sergio. But I force that worrying thought from my mind. "How's Pepper?" He took Pepper for the weekend.

"She's fine, you don't need to worry about her."

“Thanks again for taking her on such short notice.”

“Don’t worry about it. Hey, I heard something about Professor Dayton taking a few weeks off.”

Shit. “Is he?” I play dumb.

“Heard your boyfriend paid him a visit.”

“Drew—”

“Just be careful, okay? These are dangerous people.”

“He told me he loved me.”

My comment is greeted by silence on the other end of the phone. “Did you tell him?” he finally asks.

“Not yet. But...”

“Nat, I’m worried about you.”

“Don’t be. He won’t hurt me.”

“It’s not him hurting you that worries me. It’s you knowing him putting you in danger.”

I know this already. “I have to go.”

“Shit. I’m sorry, I actually called to tell you to have fun. I don’t want to be a shitty friend.”

“You’re not. You never could be.”

“So go have fun.”

I chuckle.

“And call me ASAP with any gossip!” he adds on, making me smile.

“You’re worse than a woman.”

“I know. Love you.”

“Love you.”

After slipping my phone back into my purse, I open the closet door, and walk in. There, hanging between several suits, is the most beautiful red dress I

have ever seen. Beneath it on the floor is a pair of matching red pumps.

I touch the dress, feel the silky material, rise up on tip-toe to lift the hanger off the rack. The tags are still on the label, and I don't recognize the name of the boutique but I do know the Italian designer. I don't want to think about how much it cost.

I carry it back into the bedroom and walk to the ornate, full length mirror standing in one corner. I hold the dress up to myself. The long, layered skirts fall to mid-calf, and thick straps leave a wholly exposed back. The color is perfect, a deep, rich crimson. I love it.

Laying it on the bed, I walk into the bathroom. It, too, is large, and old-fashioned with a clawfoot tub set in the middle of the room boasting copper fixtures. I plug the drain and turn on the water, adjust the temperature and let it fill up as I wind my hair on top of my head and check out the soaps, shampoos and bath oils. I choose one that smells of jasmine, drop a few droplets into the rapidly filling tub and stand back to watch as I undress. I then climb in, letting the splash of water tickle my toes as I look out the window onto the dark, starry night.

This is why I don't mind the cold. The skies are clear then and out here, a million stars dot the midnight sky.

Midnight.

Like Sergio's eyes.

I close mine, and take a deep breath in and slowly sink deeper into the tub as I switch off the water with my foot. The scent of jasmine steams upward and I let myself relax, listening to the drip of the last few drops from the tap.

This weekend is important to Sergio for his mother's sake. I get the feeling this will be one of the last times they'll all be together and that she'll be healthy enough not to be confined to a bed.

I open my eyes and look up at the ceiling, follow the intricate pattern of the crown molding along the edges, around the light fixture. It's a mini-chandelier. I have to smile, shaking my head, wondering just how much money the Benedetti family has. It's a kind of wealth I don't think I can

grasp.

But then I think of how they earn that money.

That thought sobers me. Reminds me where I am. And with whom.

I shouldn't get too comfortable. I can't forget what the last few days have brought. What it means for me. What Sergio Benedetti loving me means. Because he's right, I did walk into this—eyes wide open. And I'm not naïve enough to think Sergio's hands are clean.

I push those thoughts away and pull the plug on the drain. Water pours off me as I stand, grab a thick towel off the stack nearby and wrap myself up. I walk to the mirror, glance at my reflection, wonder how I got here, wonder how much I'm willing to ignore to be here.

Wonder who I am.

I'M DRESSED BUT BAREFOOT AND SITTING ON THE FLOOR IN FRONT OF THE mirror braiding my hair when Sergio walks in a little before nine. I meet his gaze in the mirror, but my smile falters. He looks strange, like he's got something on his mind, and in his hand, he's holding a tumbler of whiskey. He closes the door, stands just inside and watches me as he takes a sip of his drink and I wonder if it's his first. It doesn't look like it.

"Hey," I say quietly, returning my attention to braiding my hair, feeling my fingers disappear in the thick mass as I create a long, intricate pattern.

Sergio moves, he pulls a chair up behind me and sits, takes another sip of his drink before setting it down. His legs are on either side of my shoulders.

"Okay?" I ask.

He nods. "You look good."

I finish the braid, but I don't get a chance to tie the end of it together before he puts his hands on the thick straps of the dress and pushes them off my shoulders. I look at myself, at the dress as it slips down to my waist. Look at my bared breasts. At how the braid is already beginning to unravel.

"Don't you want to get changed for dinner?" I ask.

Sergio reaches down and cups my breasts. Draws his fingernails over them. He takes the already hardened nipples between thumb and forefinger and rubs.

I swallow, my eyes locked on his in the mirror. "We're going to be late," I say weakly.

"Turn around," he says.

I kneel up, put my hands on his thighs and face him so I'm kneeling between his widespread legs. He touches his thumb to my lips, then smears the dark red lipstick across my cheek.

"What are you doing?" I ask quietly, beginning to rise as I touch the corner of my mouth. But he takes my hands and shakes his head.

"I want to mess up your face," he says, undoing his belt, the buttons of his jeans.

I watch, my heartbeat picking up when he pushes them down, takes his already thick cock into his fist.

"I want to bruise your perfect lips when I fuck your mouth. I want to come all over your pretty face."

He wraps one hand around the back of my head and draws me to him, ruining the braid as he pushes himself into my mouth. I open for him but it's not wide enough and when I try to draw back, he stands up, his fingers curling into my hair, fisting a handful of it.

"Just open," he says.

I'm looking up at him because he's got my head tilted upward. He bites his lip and I rise up on my knees, wrap my hands around his powerful legs.

"Good girl. Like that. Just open and let me fuck your face."

I want to slide my hand under my skirt but he's moving too fast, and I can't breathe when he pushes so deep, so I push against his thighs, try to pull back, but he won't let me.

"Shh. Relax, Natalie." He's not coaxing me. It's a command. "Look up. Look at me."

I do, and he nods his head and pulls out a little, lets me gulp in a breath, then slides his length back into my mouth.

“That’s it, like that. I’m going to go deeper now. I want to watch you take my cock. Want to watch your face when I come down your throat.”

He starts to pump and I panic when I can’t breathe but he leans down and pets my hair and now he’s coaxing me. Whispering something over and over again.

“Trust me, Natalie. Trust me.”

I do. I trust him. And when I relax my mouth, my throat, he grips me so hard that I can’t move, and thrusts in deep and I know he’s going to come. I feel him grow even thicker and his eyes get that glow, that sheen, and a moment later, I feel the throbbing, feel his release, see it on his face as he empties down my throat and I swallow. I swallow and when he pulls out, I cover my mouth, but he doesn’t release me. Instead, he crouches down.

“Natalie.” He smiles at me, kisses me softly. “Sweet, pretty Natalie.” He touches the scruff of his jaw to my temple. “You have to learn to swallow it all,” he whispers, and smears what I couldn’t swallow across my cheek, over the ruined lipstick, and kisses me, kisses me hard, his tongue where his cock just was, tasting his own cum, messing up my face, like he said he would.

“I love you,” he says, holding me close, so close with his hand wrapped around the base of my skull, keeping me against him. “I love you and you’re it for me. Mine. No matter what. Understand?”

I don’t know how much he drank, but I taste whiskey on his breath and the way he’s talking, the way he’s holding me, it’s strange. Too much. Too dark.

“Did something happen?” I dare to whisper. I don’t want to pull away, to interrupt this intimacy. Because what he’s saying, it’s true. I’m his. I know it and I want it.

He draws back, his face an inch from me.

“Mine, Natalie. Always. No matter what.”

NATALIE

Sergio and I are the last to walk into the dining room. Everyone is already seated, his whole family, and one other man who's reading something on his phone. I feel myself tense when he looks up and our eyes meet.

Franco makes a point of checking his watch as a waiter pours wine into his glass.

"Sorry we're late, mom," Sergio says, ignoring his father. "Natalie, this is my uncle, Roman."

Roman stands, extends his hand to me. I pause. Sergio rubs my back and I try to stop my hand from shaking when I extend it to his. Roman is the man from the night at the warehouse. The one who asked if Sergio needed a cleaner.

His uncle smiles. It's strange, like that night never happened. "Nice to meet you, Natalie," he says cordially, sounding very different from how he'd sounded at the warehouse.

I don't like him. I don't like him even one little bit.

Sergio pulls out my chair and I sit down. He squeezes my hand under the table.

"You look beautiful, dear," Sergio's mom says.

"Thank you, Mrs. Benedetti."

Mr. and Mrs. Benedetti are sitting across from me. Roman is on Franco's

right and Dominic is beside his mother. Salvatore is the cushion between me and Dominic and I'm grateful for it. There's something about Dominic that makes me incredibly uncomfortable. Salvatore seems different. Franco and Roman outright terrify me.

Franco rings a bell and I'm startled to see a line of servants appear carrying dish after dish, and, beginning with Franco, serving him, then moving around the table.

Sergio gives me a wink when I glance at him, my eyebrows raised at this formality.

"My father can be elaborate. This is the first course so pace yourself," he whispers in my ear.

I suddenly look at the place settings, wonder if I'm going to be expected to know which fork goes with which dish. When it's my turn, I lean away as the servers fill my plate with a pasta dish that makes my mouth water.

It seems they all start talking at once then, Franco with Roman, Dominic with his mom, Salvatore and Sergio with each other as I sink backward in my seat. My stomach growls as I pick up my fork and am grateful for the fact that they're so loud that no one would have heard.

I'm trying to participate but I'm engrossed just watching them so when Mrs. Benedetti asks me a question, the table goes quiet before I realize she's talking to me.

"I'm sorry?" I set my fork down and wipe my mouth.

"Sergio tells me you're studying architecture."

"Oh. Yes. I'm at the University of Pennsylvania."

"I majored in architecture way back when," she says and smiles. I notice she's barely eaten a bite of her food.

I smile back. "I love it, love houses, especially older homes like Sergio's or this one."

"You know, the family has some contacts, if you need help finding work," Dominic says, shoving a huge mouthful of pasta into his mouth and watching

me as he chews.

I feel like this is a test.

My gaze shifts to Franco, who's also watching me.

Sergio clears his throat. "I'm sure Natalie will have no problem finding a job on her own," he says, wrapping his hand around the back of my neck. He did it earlier too, when I first met Dominic. "If she needs anything, I'll take care of it."

He'll *take care of it*. He takes care of everything.

"I'm sure you will. Just want her to know her options, if she's becoming part of the family, I mean."

Mrs. Benedetti gives him a sideways glance and Dominic looks back innocently, raising his eyebrows, grinning, shoving more pasta into his big mouth.

Franco, who's now leaning in his seat, drops his fork on his plate and rings the bell. Servers return to the dining room and clear the table, pour a different wine into a second glass, even though mine is still full. Although a drink would calm my nerves, I feel like I should stay alert.

"Ignore him," Sergio says.

"Dominic, thought you were bringing a girlfriend," Salvatore goads his brother.

Dominic's face hardens. "We can't all be as lucky as Sergio, can we, Salvatore?"

The rivalry between the brothers is palpable.

Franco says something in Italian. Whatever it is has Dominic snort and Sergio tense. When Roman picks up the conversation, Sergio clears his throat. "Natalie doesn't understand Italian. Why don't we keep to English tonight?"

"It's rude, Franco," Mrs. Benedetti admonishes in a whisper.

I wish Sergio hadn't said anything because it feels like everyone is staring at me.

The awkward silence drags on until I clear my throat and speak.

“So that wallpaper is interesting,” I say. It’s strange, actually. Alice in Wonderland. Not a version you’d find in a child’s room either. It’s too dark for that.

Mrs. Benedetti glances behind her then she and Franco look at each other. “Franco had that done for me. And he absolutely hates it.” She pats his back. He smiles and for the first time, there’s a glimmer of tenderness in his eyes.

But I don’t dwell on that because the smell of what the servers bring out next has me holding my breath. It’s fish. Salmon. I love salmon, but tonight, I feel like I’m going to be sick.

“You okay?” Sergio whispers. “You’re a little pale.”

The server comes to my side then, and the large serving dish is practically under my nose. “Oh, just a little. Please.” I don’t think I can refuse it. I’ll have to force it down.

“Hey,” Sergio presses.

I turn to him. I wonder if I’m coming down with a bug or something. This isn’t like me. “I’m fine.” I force a smile. “Excuse me for a moment,” I say, standing the instant the server steps away, touching my napkin to my mouth. “Where’s the bathroom?” I ask Sergio, who’s instantly on his feet.

He puts his hand on my low back. “Just go ahead,” he tells his family and walks me quickly away. Instead of taking me to a bathroom downstairs, he practically carries me to his room, and the moment I’m in the bathroom, I just make it to the toilet and drop to my knees to throw up.

Sergio’s beside me in a flash. I push my hair away as another wave comes. Sergio’s hands pull the thick braid back.

“Go away,” I groan, humiliated, sick to my stomach. “You don’t need to see this.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Another wave and I think I’d rather die than puke. “I’m so sorry,” I say, reaching up to flush the toilet, sitting back. “I think it’s over.”

“You don’t need to be sorry.”

“I must be coming down with something. I’ve been feeling funny for a couple of days.”

“Come on, I’ll get you in bed.”

He’s about to pick me up but I wave him away, stumble out of my shoes. I go to the sink to splash water on my face and brush my teeth. I don’t do more than glance at my reflection.

Sergio hands me a towel. I take it, wipe my face. “Go back to your dinner. I don’t want to ruin it.”

“You’re not ruining anything.” He ignores my protests and picks me up, carries me to the bed where he strips off the dress, slides the T-shirt he discarded earlier when he changed over my head and lays me beneath the covers.

The nausea is gone, but I let him take care of me.

“If it’s a bug or flu, I probably shouldn’t be around your mom.”

From the look on his face, he’s already thought about this. “We’ll figure it out.” He tucks me in and sits on the bed. “Why don’t you get some sleep.”

“Please tell them I’m sorry. I’m so embarrassed.”

He kisses my forehead. “Nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Go back to dinner, Sergio. I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. I’m just going lie here.”

“Okay. I’ll be back to check on you.”

I watch him go, and shut my eyes, feeling so tired suddenly that all I can do is sleep.

WHEN I WAKE UP, THE ROOM IS BATHED IN BRIGHT SUNLIGHT. I REMEMBER where I am, remember the embarrassment of last night, and although the other

side of the bed is empty, I can see that Sergio had slept there. I don't even remember him coming back into the room.

It's almost ten in the morning and I get up. I feel better. Maybe it was a twenty-four-hour thing. But when I stand up, that nausea returns and I run to the bathroom, but nothing comes. It's just a dry heave, and it's gone. I splash cold water on my face and look at my reflection. I'm pale as a ghost.

With a groan, I turn away, and switch on the shower, strip off the T-shirt and panties and step under the flow. I shampoo and condition my hair, but don't spend too long in the shower. I feel better again, hungry even, so I get dressed in a pair of jeans and a sweater and step out into the hallway.

At the same moment, Dominic comes out of the room next door.

"Well, good morning," he says. His hair is wet from a shower and I find it strange how different he looks than his brothers. He's blond where they're dark, and although he's powerfully built, he's leaner than they are.

"Good morning," I say, knowing there's no way to avoid talking to him.

"You feel better? You look better," he gives me a smile.

"Yeah, it must have been a twenty-four-hour thing. I hope I didn't ruin your birthday dinner," I add on.

He shrugs a shoulder. "We're not really here for my birthday. We're here for mom and I know she's glad she met you."

I nod, thinking maybe I misjudged him. He's going to lose his mother soon. I open my mouth to say something, but he goes first.

"You know, a friend of mine had the same thing you had last night. The second she smelled fish, she turned green."

"What?"

"Turned out it wasn't a bug."

I'm confused, and I'm about to ask what he means but his cell phone rings and he fishes it out of his pocket, looks at the screen.

"What do you mean?" I ask as he swipes his finger across the screen and

is about to walk away to answer the call.

He gives me a grin, starts talking in Italian into the phone, and pokes a finger in my belly. I feel my mouth fall open. Dominic's grin widens, he gives me a wink, turns and walks away, laughing at what the person on the other end is saying.

For a long minute, I stand in the empty hallway dumbfounded.

It's a bug. Just a bug.

I walk back into Sergio's room. I don't even close the door behind me but sit on the bed and I'm counting. But it's not possible. We've had unprotected sex once. We've been really careful. So careful.

No. Of course that's not it. I feel fine now. Dominic is just fucking with me. Sergio said he would.

I go back out into the hallway. I want to find Sergio. And get some coffee. Apologize to his mom for last night. I hear Dominic talking from what I assume is his bedroom. He must still be on the phone. Apart from that, the house is quiet as I soundlessly make my way down the stairs. I can't help feeling like a trespasser.

The large living room is empty, although soft music is playing from an ancient looking record player. Across the way is the dining room where we ate last night. It looks like there's a breakfast buffet arranged on the sideboard, but I bypass it.

I hear noise behind the swinging door on the opposite side of the dining room. It's the sound of pots and pans, of a woman giving the order to take a sauce off the heat before it's burnt. I turn and walk down the hallway toward rooms with closed doors. I wonder if Sergio's behind one of them and suddenly panic that he's not. That something happened and he left. I don't want to be in this house without him.

The thought makes me shudder, but then as I approach the farthest door, I hear him. Something tells me not to linger, but I do. It's not on purpose. I don't mean to eavesdrop. But when I hear Franco's raised voice, make out what he's saying, I freeze.

“I told you. I don’t want the girl,” Sergio says. “I have never agreed with what you’re doing to her.”

“The DeMarco’s lost the war. This is their punishment. Consequences, son. Better get used to dishing them out, or they’ll walk all over you when you’re head of the family.”

“Punishing an innocent girl doesn’t sit right with me.”

“It’s a school. I’ll educate her, at least,” he says, leaning back. “She belongs to you. I don’t care what you do with her. You know what’s expected of you. You’re first born.”

“It’s not the fucking middle ages. Give her to Salvatore. Or hell, don’t give her to anyone!”

“No,” Franco says a little more quietly, and I swear I can almost see the tight line of his mouth.

“Salvatore already signed the contract.”

“I don’t care who signed the goddamned contract.”

“For the last time,” Sergio starts, pauses. I know this tone of his voice. It’s the one that says this is the end of the discussion. “I wash my hands of this. Of this contract. Of these particular consequences. Of Lucia DeMarco. This is finished.”

Lucia DeMarco. She belongs to Sergio—according to Franco Benedetti. The jealousy I feel shames me. Lucia is a victim, she doesn’t want anything to do with any of the Benedetti brothers, I am sure. She’s a pawn. Like I am to Sergio’s enemies.

So she and I, maybe we’re more alike than I think.

Someone slams a fist on what I assume is a desk and I jump. I know it’s Franco when I hear what he says.

“And for the last time,” Franco begins, his words and tone similar to Sergio’s and I imagine the two nose to nose, two powerful men doing battle. “Lucia DeMarco belongs to you. You’ll be the one to collect her when the time comes. It doesn’t matter who signed what and I don’t give a fuck if you

have that whore lick your floors clean day in and day fucking out. You do what you need to do with Natalie, but this is my final word. Am I fucking clear?” Franco demands.

I close my hand over my belly. I’m trying to process, to understand what the hell is going on. I mean, I do understand. But it’s too impossible.

I step backward, stumble over something that wasn’t there a moment ago. I spin as I begin to fall, see him standing there as tall as Sergio. As big as him. As menacing as Sergio can sometimes look.

Salvatore Benedetti.

He’s right behind me.

It was his foot I tripped over.

He catches me, keeps his hands wrapped around my arms even once I’m steady on my feet. My mouth falls open and I can’t look away.

He knows what I heard because he heard it too.

“Natalie,” he starts, then stops and all I can do is stand there, mute and caught. “You shouldn’t listen at closed doors. Especially with this family.”

“I wasn’t...I,” I’m stuttering. “I didn’t mean to.” I realize how big he is, how that kindness I’d perceived earlier is gone. Did I imagine it? Because something else has taken its place. Something harder. Something darker.

He studies me. His eyes are different than Sergio’s. Where Sergio’s are midnight, Salvatore’s are a cobalt blue. It’s a striking contrast to his olive skin and dark hair, and I feel like, just as his brother can, he, too, can see right through me.

“Don’t tell him,” I whisper. “Please.”

He doesn’t react, not for a long time, but then he nods once. “Go back to Sergio’s room and wait for him there.”

“I really wasn’t—”

“Natalie.” He squeezes my arms, dips his head low, eyes bore into mine from behind thick lashes. “You shouldn’t be here. You need to go. Now.”

I blink, but as much as I want to run right away from here, I'm unable to move. I'm on the verge of tears, and I don't want to cry in front of him. But I don't move. I can't. Not until the study door opens behind me. Not until Salvatore has looked away, freeing me from the trap of his gaze. And the instant he releases me, I slip away, as fast as I can, back the way I came, my heels clicking as I go, as I miraculously don't trip and fall, and stumble back into Sergio's bedroom, like I was told.

Because I don't want to see Sergio. I don't want to see his father. I don't want them to know I've heard. To know I know. Because if I had any doubt, any delusions about anything related to the Benedetti mafia family, Franco Benedetti's brutal words obliterated them.

They showed me exactly the life I'll be walking into by being with Sergio.

SERGIO

“I think I should go home,” Natalie says to me when I get up to my room. She’s dressed and throwing things into her bag.

And I know she was standing just outside the study. I know what she overheard.

“I don’t feel great,” she adds on.

I don’t bring up the fact that I saw her run up the stairs. Don’t mention that the look I exchanged with Salvatore pretty much confirmed my thinking. I could kill my father. We’ve discussed this a thousand times. He knows where I stand. I’m not changing my mind. He knows me well enough to know he can’t make me.

“I’m sorry,” Natalie is saying when I tune back in.

She’s not sick. She looks fine. A little paler than usual, but that’s not flu. That’s what she overheard.

“I’ll take you home,” I say.

She shakes her head. “No. You should stay with your mom. I can take a train.”

“You’re not taking a train. I’ll take you home.”

She stops, her back stiffening as she sucks in a deep breath, zips her bag and picks it up off the bed before facing me square on.

“Sergio, you need to stay here with your mom. I think you’re right. I don’t think you can take time with her for granted right now.”

She's choosing her words carefully. Neither of us want to say out loud what we know she means.

"I'll be fine, and besides," she clears her throat, doesn't quite meet my gaze when she says the next part: "I don't want to get her sick."

That's the first lie Natalie has told me. She isn't sick—at least not with the flu. I study her, and she can't meet my eyes. I nod. "Okay."

"Okay?" She's surprised by my response.

"With conditions."

She exhales, waits, looks like she's on the verge of tears all of a sudden.

I go to her. "Are you all right? Really?"

She nods, but her eyes glisten.

I wrap my hands around her arms and rub them before pulling her into my chest. She snuffles, and I don't say anything when I feel the warmth of tears seep through my shirt.

"Remember what I said last night?" I ask.

She nods, keeps her forehead pressed to my chest. I weave my fingers gently into her hair, cup the back of her head, hold her.

"Mine. No matter what."

I hear her suck in a deep breath. Feel her shudder with it.

She pulls away, wipes the back of her hand across her eyes, her nose. She doesn't comment on what I've just said. "Conditions," she says instead with an attempt at a smile. "I would be surprised if you didn't have any."

"You know me well. One of our drivers will take you to my house."

She shakes her head. "I want to go home. To my house. It's easier with school work and all my things, and Pepper's more comfortable."

"That last part is bullshit but fine, your house with a guard. Ricco."

"Not in the house."

"I wasn't going to station him inside, but he will do a sweep."

She nods. “Okay.”

“I’ll drive back early. Come to your place—”

“Sergio,” she cuts me off. I know what she’s going to say. I see it in her eyes. “I need time.”

I don’t speak.

“I,” she pauses, rubs her face. “I need to think.”

“I know you overheard.”

She looks down at her feet.

“Natalie, what you—”

“Please don’t.”

She turns away, puts on her coat. I bite my lip, forcing myself to remain silent as I watch her. When she’s ready, I take her downstairs where I arrange for one of my father’s men to drive her home and walk her outside. She turns to me, wraps her arms tight around me, tighter than I expect. For a long moment, she’s clinging to me.

“I love you, you know. I do,” she whispers.

There’s a sadness in her words, a sort of finality. But when I draw back, she pulls away and slips into the backseat of the sedan. I close the door, tap on the front window and watch the car drive away, down the driveway and out the gates, disappearing from view.

NATALIE

The drive back home is long and I'm grateful to be alone. I'm thinking. Counting. Over and over again, I count days. And like an echo, Sergio's father's words keep repeating in the backdrop. I'm not paying attention to the scenery, the other cars on the highway. The man driving is stone-faced and the few times I catch his eyes in the rear-view mirror, I see a hardness inside them, and I know he's more than a driver.

"Accident up ahead. We'll have to take a different exit."

They're the only words he speaks to me. I'm startled by the intrusion and confused for a moment. But as the car slows and veers off toward an exit, I nod.

"That's fine. Thanks."

The sky is strange. Heavy clouds drop rain then briefly allow the sun to shine through spectacularly only to turn over another bucketful moments later. I turn on my cell phone—I'd kept it off on purpose—but Sergio hasn't called. I scroll to Drew's number, almost hit the button to call him, but change my mind and switch it off again. Tuck it back into my purse.

First thing I need to do is pick up a test. Confirm one way or another because maybe I'm not pregnant. Maybe I'm just late. Why am I letting Dominic's strange poke at my belly upset me so much? How would he know before me? He's just a jerk, like Sergio said.

"I don't give a fuck if you have that whore lick your floors clean day in and day fucking out. You do what you need to do with Natalie, but this is my

final word.”

Shit.

The way Franco Benedetti talks about Lucia DeMarco, the way he talks about me, what does he think? What does he envision for his son? That he'd be with me and have her too? In what capacity? And how firm is his word? Is Sergio bound by it?

We slow to a stop at a red light. There are no other cars around and the traffic light is useless. I don't know this part of the city at all. It's run down. Somewhere I wouldn't want to be alone at night or in the day.

There's a gas station on the corner. I glance into the main building. A man is standing behind the register, his attention on whatever is flashing on the little TV on the counter. A row of houses stands vacant across the street, graffiti on its walls, boards on its windows and doors. Black marks the upstairs walls and part of the roof is missing. Must have been a fire.

I wonder how much longer the traffic light will be red. It's a strange place, this.

A car pulls into the gas station on the other side of the pumps. It's old and the back door is dented. Something that fits here, but would stand out anywhere else. Both driver and passenger glance our way and even through the closed windows, I smell the cigarette smoke. When he kills the engine, the music abruptly stops.

Our light turns green, but we don't move. I notice my driver's eyes in the mirror. See him stiffen, reach into his jacket. I wonder if he's armed. He must be.

It's just when I'm thinking this that a car pulls up, speeds up, slams into ours. I'm wearing my seatbelt but I'm jolted. My heart is racing. Alarm bells go off in my head. We need to drive, but I don't think we can.

It's a black sedan with heavily tinted windows. I'm thinking how it stands out here when three doors open, the passenger side and the two back doors, and men exit the sedan. One is wearing a black suit. He's the one who catches my eye. The others are more casually dressed and before I can think, before I

register what's happening, the one in the suit is pulling my door open and his hand is wrapped around my arm like a vice. He drags me out of the car and my purse falls off my lap, the contents spilling onto the floor.

My driver is scooting across the front seat, reaching for the passenger door because the driver's side door is jammed. He's got blood on his face. He must have slammed it against the steering wheel when the car hit us.

I scream and try to grab onto the back of the driver's seat, but I'm out of the car, falling to the ground. Pavement scrapes the skin of my knees open. Tires screech as a car speeds away. It's the old vehicle with the couple inside. They're hauling ass out of here, the gas tank still open, the hose ripping away, the scent of gasoline all I can smell.

The trunk pops open on the car that slammed into ours as the man in the suit drags me toward it. I'm fighting, one of my shoes is off my foot as I try to get a hold of something, anything, to stop him from taking me. The last thing I see before he hauls me up and drops me into the trunk is my driver finally stepping out, drawing a gun. But the others, they're ready for him, and one of them raises his weapon. He takes aim. Fires.

I scream again, watch as my driver hits the ground.

The man in the suit shoves me back down when I sit up and when I try to fight him off, he slaps me so hard, my head hits the edge of the trunk. I'm dazed, something warm slides over my temple, down my cheek. It takes a minute for him to come back into focus and when he does, he's grinning, and raising his fist and this time when he hits me, I don't open my eyes. I don't feel anything after the crushing pain on the side of my head. And all I smell is gasoline as he slams the trunk closed and I feel the car begin to move before I lose consciousness.

NATALIE

My head is throbbing and my eyes feel like they're glued shut. I can't move right away and I'm not sure where I am. I'm lying on my side, I know that because I feel a rough fabric on my cheek. It stinks and I want to vomit, I feel like I might. And maybe I already have. Maybe that's one of the scents I'm smelling. That and unclean bodies. Sex. The stench of it, of cigarettes and sweat and sex.

I turn my head, moan with the pain over my eye. Try to reach to touch it, but I can't. Something cold circles my wrists and they're bound up over my head. I force my eyes open and for a moment, the room spins. The threadbare blanket I'm lying on is a 1970's orange/brown combination. The walls are yellow but I think they used to be white. On top of a beat-up desk is an old-fashioned box TV and there's a jacket hanging over the back of the chair. It's the only nice thing in here. There's a can of Coke beside the TV and an ashtray full of cigarette butts. I roll onto my back and look up at the blobs of stains on the ceiling, then toward the large window with its curtains drawn shut. They match the blanket I'm lying on.

Footsteps outside, heavy ones, have me turning toward the door. My head throbs with the effort. It opens and a man I don't recognize comes inside. He's talking into a cell phone.

"Yeah. Got it." He gives me a grin and sits on the edge of the bed. "I'm not fucking stupid," he says and disconnects the phone, sets it on the nightstand. He never stops looking at me.

He's not the one in the suit. The one who grabbed me. Punched me. He's

wearing a yellow T-shirt stretched too tight over his beer belly. It's got a stain on it. Tomato sauce I think. Or blood. Mine, maybe.

When he leans in toward me, I press my back into the mattress.

"You up, pretty girl?" he asks.

I don't react and try to pull away when he reaches out a hand and presses a fat finger into my temple. I suck in a breath and he smiles, digging deeper. Warm blood slides over my ear. He's opened a cut. I guess it happened when the suited man punched me.

"That's for puking on me," he says.

He rubs his finger on his shirt and my first guess was right. The stain I saw was tomato sauce because blood is much darker.

I look up at my hands, tug at my arms to test the handcuffs that are linked through the headboard.

"You ain't goin' nowhere," the man says, standing. He's tall. Really tall. And the way he looks, the way his eyes travel over my chest, my belly, my legs, it scares me.

"What do you want with me?" I croak. My voice isn't working, my throat is dry and I know I did vomit on him. I taste it.

He shrugs a shoulder, turns his attention to the TV and switches it on.

"Nothin' much," he mutters. "You ain't my type." He sits back down on the bed and is wholly engrossed in the channels he's flipping through. A pistol is tucked into the back of his jeans. "I like tits," he adds on, picking up his coke and slurping loudly.

I try to pull myself up to a seat, but my head throbs with the effort and when he turns and grabs hold of my ankle, I freeze.

"Where you goin'? Ain't nowhere you need to be."

I guess he's not as inattentive as I assumed.

"Where am I?"

He releases my leg, returns to flipping TV channels. Settles on a black and

white cartoon. I feel like I'm caught in some time warp. Like this place is stuck in the past. A glance at the window tells me it must be nighttime, or I'd see sunshine coming around the curtains, I think. I listen, but either the room is soundproof, which I doubt, or there's absolutely no traffic outside.

"Where am I?" I ask again, a little louder this time as I manage to sit up a little, drawing my bound hands in front of me.

"Quiet."

"Can't follow the cartoon?" I ask.

He mutes the TV and turns to me and I realize how stupid that was.

"Want me to shut you up, pretty girl? I can do that right good and I'd like it," he says, getting up, walking around to my side. I cringe when he grabs my ankle and tugs me so I'm lying back down.

"I told you you ain't goin' nowhere, didn't I?"

I stare up at him, unable to answer.

"I asked you a question," he says, leaning his big face close, his stale breath on me.

"Yes," I say. "I just wanted—"

"Don't matter what you want. It matters what I want and I want you to shut the fuck up. Understand, cunt?"

I swallow. Nod my head.

He nods his, straightens, looks at me again, his eyes moving from head to toe. I watch his hand move toward me, toward that sliver of naked belly where my sweater has risen up. I make a sound when his fingers touch my skin, and when his hand fists the waistband of my jeans, I scream.

The door opens, slams against the wall and lets in a gust of cold wind. We both turn. Suit man is standing there minus his jacket. He looks pissed. Two others, these from the back of the car, flank him.

"Don't fucking touch her, fucking imbecile. You know the rules."

The man curls his hand tighter around the handful of material, lifting my

hips off the bed. Although he's bigger than the man at the door, when the one at the door takes a step into the room, he backs off, releasing me.

"I just want her to shut the fuck up so I can watch TV."

The leaner man looks at me. "You think you can shut the fuck up so he can watch his cartoon?"

I nod.

"There," he says to the big guy. "She says she'll shut up."

"What if she don't?"

The man cocks his head to the side, looks at me. "I'll let you stick your dick in her big mouth. That'd shut her up, wouldn't it?"

I feel the blood drain from my face.

When I shift my gaze away from him, I see the swell at the crotch of the fat one's pants.

"Yeah. That'd shut her up good," he says, rubbing his stiffening dick.

"Fuckin' idiot," the man mumbles with a chuckle, picking up the jacket hanging over the back of the chair. He turns to the two men who are younger than the big one. "Remember the rules or the boss will have our heads," he reminds them.

"No problem."

Suit man heads back to the door but one of the guys stops him.

"When do we get the money?"

Suit man pauses and I see evil in his eyes. He's smarter than the others. He's manipulating them. "Tomorrow morning when I come back to pick her up."

The guy nods and suit man heads out the door, closing it behind him. I hear a car start and when I know he's gone, I look back at the three men I'm left with. The two younger ones walk through a door that I notice leads to an adjoining room. Fat guy picks up the remote and gives me a disgusting grin, his hand in his pants now, rubbing his erection.

I turn away and I shut up.

SERGIO

I know something's wrong when Ricco calls me at nine o'clock to tell me she's still not there. He's been waiting at Natalie's house and she should have been home hours ago. The driver hasn't picked up a single call and I feel like a fucking idiot for letting her go alone.

"Relax. We'll find her," Salvatore says. He's sitting beside me as we take the exit where the tracker equipped in the car that took Natalie says it's parked. Two soldiers ride in the car behind ours.

"I'm a fucking idiot."

"No. You're not. She wants space. You're trying to give it to her. Considering what she overheard—"

"No, she doesn't get to have space. Not anymore. Fuck!" I slam my fist on the steering wheel for the hundredth time. "I shouldn't have brought her to that house." I shake my head at myself as I speed down the deserted street.

"There," Salvatore says, pointing to the fencing around the abandoned cluster of buildings.

I slow as I pull up, stop at the closed gates. The place has been vandalized but a heavy lock keeps the lot sealed off so I can't drive any farther.

"We'll go on foot," I say, killing the engine, getting out of the car.

Salvatore is beside me and I hear the cocking of his weapon as we walk through a narrow opening that someone made by cutting the wire.

I spot the sedan in a far corner. It's out of place here where the windows

of the buildings are broken or gone and even squatters won't occupy. The place is eerie. Haunted by the wretchedness of the people who lived and died here.

There isn't a single sound around us. If it's an ambush, they'll have us tonight. We should have brought more men. A fucking army. I've not only put Natalie in harm's way, but my brother too.

There's a low sound as we near the vehicle. I take my pistol out of its holster and exchange a look with Salvatore. While he goes around the back of the car, I move around the front to the driver's side. I hear the soft hum of music, I think it's country. The radio's on.

The driver's side window is open a crack. Although the windows are tinted, I should be able to see a form if anyone's in there and I don't. Still, I have my gun ready when I open the door. But the car's empty.

I reach in and pull out the keys, which are still in the ignition, killing the sound.

"Pop the trunk," Salvatore says, just as I peek into the backseat to find Natalie's purse on the floor, her belongings scattered. There's no blood at least. Nothing like that inside the car.

"Sergio. Pop the fucking trunk."

I glance at Salvatore whose eyes are locked on the closed trunk. I reach around, pop it and walk back at the same moment he decocks his gun.

"Fuck."

Fuck is right. The driver's body is inside. His face is bruised and there's a bullet hole between his still open eyes. On the lapel of his jacket is a note.

Keep your friends close.

Your enemies closer.

A name underneath the cryptic message. An address.

"What the—" Salvatore starts, taking it from me.

"Let's go. The address is Atlantic City."

We move quickly, driving the hour and a half to Atlantic City at breakneck speed. Salvatore is beside me. He's still studying the note, but there's nothing to learn from it.

"What the fuck does this mean?"

"It means someone's fucking with us."

"Vitelli?"

I shake my head. "No. No way. He'd be fucking stupid to after what happened with Joe."

"Then who?"

"Pick a number. We have enough enemies to choose from."

"DeMarco?"

"I don't fucking know."

Keep your friends close. Your enemies closer. It sounds like a warning.

We drive in silence, both of us thinking. If this *is* a warning, they won't hurt her. The plan was to take her. To show me they could. If it was to kill her, she'd be lying in that trunk with the driver.

It's almost five in the morning by the time we near the cheap motel outside Atlantic City limits. It's not operational and was probably looted months ago. I park the car a block away and we walk. This part of town is nearly empty. Any streetlights that once illuminated these dark streets were busted long ago. There's a traffic light flashing red about two blocks down and just past it is the motel. Twelve rooms from what I can see. The building looks like it's going to cave in any second and at the very last room, a truck is parked outside.

"She's got to be in there. You three go around back."

Salvatore nods and disappears behind the building and I walk to the last door, fury making me fist the pistol hard.

As I approach the second to last room, I know from the lights flashing through the split in the curtain that someone's watching TV in there. But they

know I'm coming. Whoever took her left the fucking address. This is too easy. It reeks.

Salvatore and the two soldiers turn the corner. I signal for them to listen at the door of the room next to the one where the TV's on. A moment later, he nods. I put up three fingers and count down: three-two-one.

Both doors splinter as they're kicked in. Natalie screams. For a moment, I'm caught. I see her lying on the bed, arms over her head, cuffed to the headboard. A huge man moves much faster than I think he should be able to considering his girth and he's got his gun pointed at me before I know it. I'm still faster though and the bullet he shoots ricochets off the wall behind my head when mine catches his gun arm. He stumbles backward, his pistol flying through the air, landing three feet from him.

More gunshots go off next door and Natalie's screaming again, climbing to her knees.

"Stay down!" I call to her as I stalk to the giant who's fallen to his knees to retrieve his weapon. It's stupid. He could take me—or try to. We'd be matched.

"Close your eyes, Natalie." Déjà vu. I've told her exactly this before. The past is repeating itself.

I cock my pistol and taking aim at the back of the big guy's knee.

I pull the trigger and he screams, falling over onto his side, clutching his shattered kneecap. Although there's a silencer on my gun, it's still deafening. The sound of a gun firing is always that.

I stand over him, put my foot on the bloody crook of his arm and press. I know this idiot isn't the one responsible for taking her. He's a hired gun. Expendable.

"Who the fuck hired you?"

He screams, blubbers like a fucking girl. I hear footsteps behind me.

"There were two in the next room. Both down," Salvatore says.

"I want to know who hired the fuckers," I spit at the man without looking

at my brother. When he doesn't answer, I cock the pistol again.

Natalie's crying. I hear her. She must know I'm readying to murder this guy.

"Watch him," I say to Salvatore, going to her. I look her over. She's messed up, a bruise at her temple, a cut that will scar. I'm getting more and more pissed off as I sit down, touch her. "Are you okay?" I say, trying to level my voice.

She shakes her head no, fresh tears starting.

"Physically. Are you okay?" I need to know. The other shit I'll deal with later. Right now, I need to know she's not physically hurt. But she just stares up at me, sobbing. "Natalie, look at me. Did he hurt you anywhere else?" I barely get the words out. "Did that fucker touch you?"

She stares at me, registers my meaning, shakes her head. "I want to go home."

I nod. Look up at her binds. I need a key. "Close your eyes," I say, cupping the back of her head and tucking it against my belly before shooting at the rung of the headboard through which her cuffs were woven. I hold her hands, cradle her.

"It's okay. You're going to be okay." I turn to one of the soldiers. "Get the car." He nods and runs out the door. "Find me the goddamned keys for these," I tell the other one, gripping the cuffs that bind Natalie.

A few minutes later, one of the men hands me the key.

Natalie turns her gaze up to Salvatore, who's standing nearby, watching. "You're safe now," he says to her.

She turns her attention to my hands which are undoing her cuffs and when they're off, I rub her wrists.

"Sergio," Salvatore says, eyeing the big guy on the floor.

I don't want her to see what's about to happen. "Give me a minute."

The soldier I sent for the car returns.

“Put her in the backseat,” I say, standing, bringing Natalie with me. She’s shivering. In shock maybe. “And stay with her.”

“No,” she says clinging to me. “No. I just want to go home. I want you to take me home. You.”

“I need you to wait in the car for me. I need to take care of this before I can take you home.”

She shakes her head, her nails dig into the back of my neck. Her eyes are saucers, her terror palpable.

“Nat.” I know she hates being called that, but she doesn’t even acknowledge it. Her gaze keeps bouncing to the man I’m going to hurt and each time, more tears well inside her eyes. “I need to take care of this. I need you to wait for me out in—”

“Do it,” she says. She locks her eyes on the man and there’s a darkness inside them that wasn’t there before.

“You don’t want—”

She shifts her gaze to mine. “I want you to do it.”

I study her. She doesn’t even blink, but returns her gaze to the man. She knows what I’m going to do.

“Look away,” I say.

“No.”

“Natalie, there are things you can’t unsee.”

“Don’t you understand?” she asks, looking up at me. “I want to see. I need to.”

Her eyes are stone.

I nod. Salvatore’s watching us. I read what he’s thinking on his face. This is fucked up.

When I walk to the brute on the floor, I take out my pistol and cock it and, without a word, I shoot his other knee. As loud as his scream is, I still hear Natalie’s over it.

She wants to see.

She wants to see what I'm capable of.

What a monster I can be.

"Sergio," Salvatore puts a hand on my shoulder. "I can finish this."

I shrug it off. "No." I crouch down next to the man. "You want to die slow or you want to die fast? Because you're dying tonight. It's just up to you how."

"Please. Please. Mr. Suit. He hired me to watch the pretty girl. I didn't touch her. I didn't touch her. It's the rules."

I know he's mentally not all there, but I don't give a fuck. See, this is what makes me a monster. I have no compassion. Not when someone takes what's mine. Not when someone hurts what's mine.

"What's his name?"

He shakes his head, confused. "Mr. Suit."

I'm losing patience. I grip his filthy T-shirt. Drag him up by the collar of it. "What the fuck is Mr. Suit's name, asshole?"

He starts crying, sobbing. "Mr. Suit," he says over and over again.

"Fuck." I stand up, turn to look at Natalie.

She's immovable, sitting on the foul bed, fisting the filthy blanket. I don't think she's blinked or taken a breath.

I turn back to the guy, take my pistol and point it between his eyebrows.

I don't hesitate.

She wants to see. She'll see.

I pull the trigger—once, twice—twin holes in his forehead, between his eyes.

Overkill. but it's quick. My form of mercy. He's dead in an instant.

"Call a fucking cleaner." I holster my gun and, with blood on my hands, gather Natalie up into my arms, and she doesn't resist. I carry her to the car,

cradle her in the backseat. Salvatore slides into the driver's seat and a moment later, we're driving away.

NATALIE

Two weeks have passed since that terrible night. My mind is in chaos but I won't stop to sort through the thoughts. To see again what I saw that night. I won't think about what happened. I won't feel the man's hands on me. Won't hear the sound of a silenced gun fired. I close my eyes against the picture of Sergio standing over the man, gun in his hand, cocked. Aimed. Fired. Not once, but twice. With perfect precision.

Did he even notice the blood that stained his coat? His hands? The blood he smeared on me when he held me.

I shudder.

The sound is strange, the silencer not quite silent enough. One millisecond and a life is snuffed out.

I don't feel sorry for that man or for the others who died that night.

I think about the driver who was killed because of me, and even him, I keep thinking that he chose this. He chose this life. Does that make me like them?

The image of Sergio that night, furious like I've never seen him, is burned into my eyelids. Cruel and lethal. So fucking lethal.

He tried to send me away. Didn't want me to see. But I wanted to see. I wanted to know exactly. Needed to.

What I heard in his father's house, it pales in comparison to what I witnessed that night.

“Miss.”

I blink. The man behind the counter looks annoyed. “Sorry.” I empty my basket of things I don’t need—magazines, candy, cold medicine—not to bring attention to the one thing I do. The pregnancy test.

I’m sure now. The test is extra. I’m late. My body feels different, more achy and tender. And I can’t keep food down morning, noon or night.

The clerk tells me the total as he bags my things and I pay him in cash, take my change and leave. I don’t even say goodbye. The drug store is two blocks from my house and Ricco and another man whose name I don’t remember are following a few paces behind me. They’re not subtle, but I manage to ignore them. Besides, I don’t think they’re meant to be subtle. Sergio wants anyone who may try to take me again to think twice.

He calls me each night but I don’t know where he is and he hasn’t tried to come over. I thought he would. I can guess what he’s doing. The damage he did the other night was only the beginning. He’ll punish whoever was responsible. Am I supposed to feel guilty about that? I don’t. And again, the same question comes up: *what does that make me?*

I told him what I could remember about the man in the suit. Told him I thought the others were set up. That the leader knew Sergio would come. Knew what he’d do. I was always meant to be rescued. Another message, a louder one than the funeral flowers left on my doorstep.

I unlock the front door, my fingers icy as I push it open. I’m wearing knitted fingerless mittens. Not a smart choice for the temperature, but I’m lucky I got shoes and a coat on before leaving the house. I haven’t brushed my hair in days. My brain is mush.

After locking the door behind me, I set everything down, give Pepper a pat and head upstairs. I don’t look at the instructions. It’s pretty self-explanatory. Pee on the stick, of which there are two in this box.

I pee on that little stick and set it on the counter. I’m looking at the image on the back of the box, the one with the two pink lines as if I need it to know what they mean. But it’s faster than I expect. It doesn’t take a full minute

before they appear on the stick.

Strange, I thought this official confirmation would feel different, but it doesn't.

I toss the test, the one I already took and the second, still wrapped one, into the trash can along with the box. I touch the dark shadows under my eyes, take out a tube of concealer and smear it on. Apply generous layers of mascara, too much so my lashes clump together. Looks like spider's legs—like the morning after a really long night. I don't care though. I drop the still open tube on the counter, watch it roll into the sink, and go into the bedroom.

There, I toss the things from the bag I'd packed for the weekend with Sergio into the laundry bin without looking at them, and put in two pairs of jeans, some sweaters and under things. A pair of running shoes. I switch the TV in the bedroom on, for Ricco's sake. From the bathroom, I get my toothbrush. I sling the bag over my shoulder and carry it downstairs, put on my coat and boots, and, taking Pepper, I walk out through the back door. Ricco and the other man are on the front side. There's no way to post a man back here unless he's in the backyard and I refused. I walk around to the neighbor's yard and through the door of our shared fence. Pepper follows easily, she's familiar.

Mrs. Robbins comes to the window of the back door before I even have a chance to knock.

"Natalie, what a nice surprise." She's about seventy years old and watches Pepper occasionally.

"Hi Mrs. Robbins, how are you doing?" I ask, walking inside. I'm attempting upbeat, but it sounds strange. Forced.

"I'm good, honey. Cold in this drafty house, but what else is new? You? You look tired, dear. Everything okay?"

I smile but it feels foreign. "Yeah, just school is busy. I was actually dropping by to ask if you'd mind watching Pepper over the weekend? I'm thinking of paying my parents a visit and Pepper doesn't do well on the longer bus trips. I know it's short notice—"

“Not at all,” she says, smiling to Pepper who’s already beside the old woman. “I’d love the company, honestly. Besides, it’ll force me to get myself out of the house and get some exercise. It takes a lot to keep all this in shape, you know.” She winks, patting her generous hip.

I smile. “Thank you so much. You have the number?”

“Sure do.” She points to the fridge where my parents’ home number and address are stuck with a magnet from the last time I went away a few months ago. “Spend as much time as you like, dear. It’s nice you still visit them.”

A pang of guilt has me shifting my gaze to Pepper.

“My boy, well, you know how boys are.” She shakes her head and I feel sorry for her. I should drop by more often. Her son has visited exactly once the whole time I’ve been next door and he lives about a ten minute car ride away.

“Thanks, Mrs. Robbins. Maybe when I’m back we can go get lunch or something.”

“I’d like that.”

I say goodbye, give Pepper a big hug and walk back out into the yard. I take the exit opposite the one to my house which leads to the alley behind our street. From there, I put my hood up and walk quickly away from the house, taking the long way to the bus station. I buy a ticket to Asbury Park, where my parents live.

The bus doesn’t leave for another hour so I order a cup of tea at the café and wait. I don’t bother to call my parents because they’re not home. They always spend this part of winter with my aunt in Arizona. The house will be empty, which is what I want.

I watch the passing cars on the drive and when I get to the bus station, I take a taxi to the house. It’s too far to walk and the drive takes twenty minutes. My parents live right on the water, it’s a beautiful small cottage they bought a few years ago. I pay the taxi driver and carry my bag around to the back of the house, unlock the kitchen door, walk inside. I set my bag down and the familiar smell washes over me and it feels safe here. It’s silent,

completely still, and I don't switch on the lights as I walk upstairs to the room I stay in when I visit. There, I turn on the lights and close the curtains looking out onto the street. I get sheets from the linen closet and make the bed and, after brushing my teeth, I lay down to close my eyes. Maybe I can finally rest. Take a reprieve from what my life has become.

Because I need to figure things out.

Because I'm pregnant with Sergio Benedetti's baby.

And as much as I love him, as much as it will hurt to walk away, how can I bring a baby into this sort of life?

I roll over onto my side, feel a tear slide over the bridge of my nose.

Am I foolish to think he'll let me go, though? He's the most possessive man I know. From day one, he owned me.

No, he won't let me go. Not if he finds out.

He can't ever learn about the baby. I can't ever see him again.

"Mine. No matter what."

I have to keep this secret from him because I will be more his than ever if he ever finds out about this baby.

SERGIO

I thought Vitelli was behind Natalie's kidnapping. Either the old man or his sons. But it's not them. Too fucking obvious and they're not that stupid. The DeMarco family? They've essentially been castrated. Lucia DeMarco's father being made to watch what he watched, as sick as it was, it was effective. So who the fuck else would dare?

My father was outraged. Roman immediately started to list names. Make calls. But it's fucking killing me not to know. Not to wrap my hands around the throat of whoever ordered her kidnapping. To squeeze. To watch him gasp his last breath when I choke the life out of him with my bare hands.

I'm parked in my usual space at the garage and see Ricco sitting in the café at the end of her street. He can see her house and keep warm—weather's been icy this last week. I give him a nod as I walk past. The house is dark but for her bedroom window. I knock and slide my key in at the same time. She's been avoiding me but that's changing tonight. I want her to move into my house. I don't want her here on her own anymore. And I need to get her to talk about what happened. To tell it to me so she can get rid of it. So she can stop seeing it because I know she does every time she closes her eyes. She has to tell it to me so she can stop being afraid.

The TV's on upstairs. Not even Pepper comes to me, which is strange. But maybe she's upstairs with Natalie. I take off my coat and head up.

I call out. When she doesn't answer, I wonder if she's fallen asleep. But when I get to her bedroom, it's empty. Her bed is unmade but that's not unusual for her. The TV's on, but she's not here. I switch it off and the house

is plunged into utter silence.

“Nat?” I call out, taking my cell phone from my pocket and dialing her number as I peek into the other bedroom.

I hear her phone ring nearby and red flags go up.

The sound is from back in her bedroom and it’s on the nightstand, a book lying face down on top of it.

“Fuck!”

I disconnect and call Ricco. Tell him to get his ass over here now. I walk into the bathroom, see her makeup on the counter, the tube of mascara still open lying in the sink like she just walked away in the middle of putting some on. That’s when I notice the box in the trash can.

“Boss,” Ricco’s boots are heavy on the stairs.

I reach into the bin and take out the box. An unopened pregnancy test falls out. Falls next to the used one. My heart thuds against my chest and I reach in and pick it up. See the two little pink lines. Look at the box in my other hand to confirm what it means.

“I didn’t see her leave,” Ricco starts. “Fuck. I’ve been watching the front door all fucking day! She ran to the drug store, came back with a full bag and the TV went on. I figured she was staying in.”

I should have had Eric on her. Not this idiot.

But my mind is on what I’m holding. My eyes locked on those stripes. Pink. Delicate. Vulnerable.

I stick it into my pocket and turn to Ricco. “Where’s the dog?”

“Not here.”

“Why are you alone? Where’s the man I put with you?”

Ricco shakes his head, shift his gaze. “He had something come up.”

“Fuck that something. I’m fucking paying you imbeciles. Get his ass back here now. Get Eric here. Get a fucking army.”

I shove past him, down the stairs. He was watching the front door, which means she must have gone out the back.

The pregnancy test is burning a hole in my pocket as I step out the back door and into her tiny garden. I go to the only door in the fence, open it, hear the startled yelp of an old woman in the doorway of the house next door as a motion detector shines a light on me.

I stop, put my hands up, try to smile. Pepper gives a bark but comes to me. She was in the opposite corner of the garden doing her business. The woman exhales.

“Hey Pepper,” I say, making a show of crouching down to pat the old dog. Natalie wasn’t taken. She left. I need to find out where she went.

“Who’s there?” the old woman asks.

I look up at her. She’s wearing a long nightgown and a heavy, ragged sweater on top.

“I didn’t mean to scare you, ma’am. I’m Natalie’s friend. I wanted to drop some of her schoolwork off, but she wasn’t home. She must have forgotten I was coming.”

“Oh, that’s not like her. She’s not here. Gone for the weekend. Maybe longer. She’s sweet to still visit her parents.”

“That’s right. She mentioned she’d go see them. Shoot. I need to get the books I borrowed back to her. She needs them for a test.”

“They live clear out in Asbury Park, honey. Best to leave it all for her for when she’s back.”

“I don’t mind driving out there. You want me to take Pepper with me?”

“Oh, no. Pepper hates long drives.”

“I can’t remember the exact address of her parents’ house. You don’t happen to have it? I can call Natalie.” I take out my phone, start to press some numbers.

“I have it right here. Give me one minute.”

A moment later, I have Natalie's parents' address and am driving to Asbury Park.

She left. She clearly wanted to get away from me, but that wasn't happening before I found out she was pregnant and it's not happening now.

The sleepy town is dark when I arrive. I wonder how many residents leave in the winter. This close to the water and the weather can be icy. I do like it here though. It's charming and the quiet is so opposite my life.

Natalie's parents live on a cul-de-sac. Street lights give a dim glow to the otherwise pitch-black night. I park the car on the curb in front of her parents' house. All the houses, including this one, are perfectly dark. I get out of the car and walk to the front door of the quaint yellow house, realizing how late it is as I climb the porch steps to ring the doorbell. But nothing happens when I push the button. Not a sound. I wonder if it's broken.

I try the doorknob, expecting it to be locked, and it is.

Glancing around, I go down the porch steps and head around back. The backyard isn't fenced off and it's sandy back here. I can hear waves breaking on the beach and turn my collar up against the bitter wind.

Three steps lead up to the kitchen door. I knock on the window but no one's inside. It's dark. I jiggle the doorknob and it's locked. I don't want to break in, but seeing no alternative because I'm not about to go searching under freaking pots of plants for a spare key, I do. With my elbow, I bust the glass in one of the four panes, hear the clinking of it as it drops to the kitchen floor. I reach in, twist my arm to find the lock, turn it. I open the door and step over the glass and into the house.

No one seems to have heard my entrance. I make my way from the small but cozy kitchen to the dining room. I peek into the empty living room and turn and head up the stairs. They're wooden and I'm careful so they don't creak heavily. Four doors are closed on the landing. I open the first one to peek inside. It's the master bedroom and, to my surprise, it's empty. I push the door wider, confused. The curtains are open, the bed stripped bare, two pillows and a thick comforter folded neatly on top.

I step back out into the hallway to try the other door. It's a bathroom. Drops of water cling to the rim of the pedestal sink and a towel lies askew on the rack. A toothbrush sits on the glass shelf just below the mirror. Natalie's.

A sense of relief washes over me when I see it.

She's here.

I step back into the hallway and try the next door which is the linen closet. I pause at the final door before opening it quietly, see the shadow of a form lying in the bed, back to me. The curtain is closed but there's just enough light coming in from the split between the panels that I can make out her dark hair. I push the door wide, not caring to muffle the creak, and stand there, watch her startle awake, turn. Watch her face as she sits up, gasps, and I'm angry. So angry that I let her be afraid for a minute because she can't see my face. It's too dark where I'm standing. The pregnancy test weights heavy in my pocket and I'm fucking furious that she left, walked away, now. After everything.

I switch on the light and she blinks at the sudden brightness. The blue bruise on her temple sends a pang of guilt through me but the burn of anger dissipates that.

"Sergio."

Her black eyes are huge, her face pale, gaunt almost. Darkness shadows the skin around her eyes.

I step inside. Her breathing is labored as she watches me approach.

"You left," I say.

"What?"

I reach into my pocket. Take out the test. She watches me lay it on the nightstand before I take off my coat.

"You left," I repeat.

She blinks up at me. "I—"

"Mine. No matter what. Remember?"

She's silent. I'm angry at her for not talking to me, for shutting me out.
For leaving. For hiding the fact that she's pregnant.

For refusing to wait in the car that night.

For wanting to see.

To see me like that.

Ruthless.

Brutal.

Deadly.

I'm pissed at myself for letting her. I should have made her leave.

"I shouldn't have let you watch." I pull my sweater over my head, toss it aside. I don't take my eyes off her. I step out of my shoes, go closer to the bed. Rip the blankets away.

"Sergio—"

"That was a mistake. I shouldn't have let you see."

I look her over. She's wearing a tank top and panties. I set a knee on the bed, grip the collar of the tank. Rip it down the center.

She lets out a surprised scream.

"I shouldn't have stayed away. Hell, I never should have let you leave my father's house."

She's covering her breasts. My gaze slides down to her belly, pauses there before moving to her panties.

I shift my gaze back to hers. Push her backward on the bed.

She doesn't resist. Not then and not when I take her wrists and stretch her arms to either side of the bed and wrap her hands around the rungs of the headboard.

"Keep them there," I tell her.

I release her wrists. Look at her. It's like she's splayed out on the cross. Like a sacrifice. Like my sacrifice.

But that's not what this is. I'm not here to make an offering.

I undo my belt. "I should whip your ass. I would. You fucking deserve it."

She's watching me, mouth open, eyes like saucers. She swallows.

I rip her panties off her, look at her pussy. It's mine too. She doesn't understand that yet, though. I thought she did, but I was wrong. I hook two fingers inside her cunt.

"You're hurting me," she squeaks.

"Good."

"Sergio—"

"Who do you belong to?"

She squirms, grips my arm to pull me off.

With my free hand, I take her wrist and draw it back out to the headboard. "I told you to fucking keep your hands here. Do I need to tie you down?"

She shakes her head.

"Grip it," I say when she hasn't yet.

She obeys, silent but for her eyes. They betray her fear. But something else too. She does know. She does understand. She just can't accept it yet. I have to make her accept the fact that she no longer belongs to herself but to me.

"If you let go, I swear to God I will take my belt to your ass."

My face is stone as I undo my pants, push them and my briefs down far enough to free my cock.

She shifts her gaze to the stick I laid on the nightstand earlier.

I take hold of her ankles and spread her legs wide. Bend her knees and push them up. I've got her attention again and when I do, I look down at her cunt, the lips spread open, pink and gleaming.

My fingers dig into her legs and when she makes a sound, I don't soften my hold. I intend to hurt. To punish. I do it when I drive into her too. She's

not ready for me but I don't care.

"Look at me."

She makes a sound, her forehead is creased when her eyes meet mine.

"You don't get to fucking leave. You don't get to walk away. We established that."

I draw out and thrust hard, slap her ass when I do. The sound of flesh hurting flesh bounces off the walls.

She grunts. I pull back, twist her body a little, slap her ass again. Twice. Harder. Before I drive into her. She's turned her head away, is squeezing her eyes shut.

With my cock buried inside her, I grip her jaw, turn her to face me. "Open your fucking eyes."

She does. A tear slides from the corner of one eye.

"What did I say to you that night at my father's house? What did I tell you?"

"Stop."

"No. That's not it. What did I fucking tell you?"

Tears are coming from both eyes now.

I watch her cry. She's so fucking pretty when she cries. I can't stop looking at her. It's sick, I know, but it's like her fucking tears mesmerize me. I'm deep inside her and it's warm and wet and I slide my hands up over her arms and close my hands over hers. She's still gripping the headboard like I told her to. I pry them off, interlace my fingers with hers.

"Natalie. What did I tell you?"

"I'm yours."

"That's right. Mine." It's a savage sound. Wild and untamed. "Always. No matter what."

Our eyes are locked and I thrust twice more and she hasn't come yet and I

don't give a fuck because that's not what this is about. I bury myself inside her and throb and empty and fill her up and she's so fucking warm, all I can do is lose myself there for just a minute. In her eyes. In her cunt. In her.

NATALIE

Cum is sliding out of me and Sergio is looming over me. His gaze shifts to between my legs and he's got me trapped so I can't move, can't cover myself. He sits up. Pushes my legs wide. Watches his stuff spill out of me. Watches until it's finished before returning his gaze to mine.

"The test."

He pauses, and I wait wordlessly for him to continue.

"Is that why you left?"

I cover my face, rub my eyes. "What are we doing? What kind of world am I going to bring a baby into?"

"We," he says, his face like stone. "Not I. We."

"But that's the point."

He lies down on his side. It's like he knows what I mean. Thinks it too. "I shouldn't have found out the way I did."

"I just found out myself," I say, but it's not true. I've known. I've just been too afraid to face it.

He touches my face, turns it so I have to look at him. "I don't like it when you lie to me."

I don't deny the lie.

"How long have you known?"

“I took the test today.”

“How long have you known.”

“Since that weekend at your father’s house.”

If he’s surprised, he doesn’t let on. “How far?”

“Maybe six weeks.” It’s quiet. “I thought it was a bug. It was your brother who said something that made me wonder if it wasn’t. That made me count.”

“My brother?”

“Dominic. He caught me in the hallway. Made some comment about a friend vomiting at the smell of fish and how it turned out she was pregnant.”

“He was fucking with you.” We fall silent again. Sergio’s watching me, his midnight eyes heated. “You can’t leave, Natalie. Whatever you’re thinking, get that out of your head.”

“Your father, what he said about Lucia DeMarco...”

“My father can say what he wants. Lucia isn’t for me. Period. She belongs to Salvatore and I don’t want to hear her name again. End of that discussion, understand?”

I nod.

“Where are your parents?” he asks.

“Arizona.”

“I busted the glass on the kitchen window.”

“You broke in. Of course, you did.” I feel my face darken. He’s a criminal. A mobster.

The image of him standing over the man with the gun comes again. I close my eyes against it. I don’t want to see him like that ever again. I should have listened to him when he told me there are things you can’t unsee because that I wish I’d never seen.

He touches my cheek. I open my eyes. “You know who I am. What I’m capable of. You wanted to see and you did. You saw what I’ll do to protect

what's mine. How far I'll go when what's mine is taken. Hurt. You and the baby are mine, Natalie. I will protect you, always. I love you and I can't let you walk away, no matter what. No matter if it's wrong. I won't."

"I don't want to."

NATALIE

Two weeks later, I'm back at Franco Benedetti's house. Already, Sergio's mom looks worse. Feebler. Even as she tries to smile while pinning a veil to my hair.

"I wore it. My mother wore it. Her mother before her. It's a family tradition," Mrs. Benedetti says.

The veil is yellowing and there's a hint of something ancient that clings to it, a scent. A feel.

"We'll have a big ceremony in the winter. It's so pretty here with the snow," she prattles on, and I don't know if it's the thought that she won't make it to winter or something else that sits like a stone in my belly. But I smile back at her reflection. I refuse to let anything dampen the joy of this day.

"With a huge dress," I say.

"The biggest."

The plan is this small wedding today. And once the baby's born, we'll have a proper ceremony in a nearby chapel.

"There," she says, tucking one rebellious lock of hair behind my ear. It's pinned up with baby's breath tucked into it beneath the yellowing veil that reaches to the middle of my back. "You look beautiful. Glowing. My son is a lucky man." She squeezes my shoulder.

"He's a good man," I say. I feel like I have to say it. And when I do, her eyes darken a little, worry creeping into them.

She pulls up a chair and sits and takes my hands into hers. “This is a difficult family. A difficult life to marry into. I don’t know that you would have chosen it had you known.”

“I love Sergio.” It’s my only reply because she’s right. I would not have chosen this if I had known. Although, as I think back, did I ever really have a choice? Or were Sergio and I destined to be together? To find each other? Even the way we did. Fate put me in his path not once, but twice. That means something, doesn’t it?

“I won’t be here for very long—”

“Don’t talk like that,” I cut her off, but she squeezes my hand, continues.

“But Sergio will protect you. And so will Franco. You’ll be his son’s wife. The mother of his grandchild. And they’ll need you, too, Natalie. Once I’m gone, they’ll need you, all of them, but especially Sergio.” Her eyes are watering.

“Mrs. Benedetti—”

“I know it’s a lot to ask, but I need to know that he’ll be safe too. That you’ll protect him, too.”

“I will,” I try to reassure, but she continues.

“Whatever you do, whatever happens, don’t let him forget his humanity.” She takes in a deep breath, straightens her spine and looks taller, stronger. “He is his father’s son, Natalie.”

I watch her as she says it. She’s trying to relay a message. She wants me to understand this. And to love him in spite of it.

“I believe he’s good. I do.”

A knock comes on the door and we stand as it opens. But when Sergio peeks his head in, his mother gasps.

“It’s bad luck to see the bride before the wedding,” she walks to the door, trying to shield me from Sergio’s view.

Sergio steps inside, smiles at her, then shifts his gaze to me, looking me over from head to toe. “Silly superstition,” he says. He smiles.

I smile back.

“Your dad’s waiting at the bottom of the stairs whenever you’re ready,” he says. “I’ll seat my mom.” He walks her out, then glances back at me. Smiles wider.

When he’s gone, I take one final look at my reflection. I’m wearing a satin sheath. I was aiming for simple, but that wasn’t happening with Sergio. The dress is beautiful, soft against my body while hugging it tenderly. The back is cut seductively low, the neckline at the front straight across my collar bones. My breasts already feel swollen and the dress looks prettier for it. A white cloud of satin floats all around my sandaled feet.

I touch my belly. I’m not showing yet but everyone knows why we’re rushing this ceremony with a bigger one planned for after the baby’s birth. I was fine to wait until after, but Sergio wouldn’t have it. He wanted the baby born to us as husband as wife. Between that and his mom’s health, I didn’t fight it.

Taking one deep breath, I draw the front of the veil down over my face and pick up the bouquet of antique pink roses wrapped in a wide, pale blue ribbon. That’s my something blue. Something old, something borrowed, the veil fulfills those. Something new, my dress.

It will bring us luck. I’ve done it right. All of it. We’ll have good luck, Sergio and I.

I force my eyes from my reflection when they get watery, take a deep breath in and walk out the door and down the stairs where my father waits, still confused at this rushed ceremony, still trying to process the fact that I’m pregnant. And that I’m getting married to a man he’s only just met. Who is next in line to rule the Benedetti mafia family.

I guess we’re all trying to pretend like this is normal.

Only immediate family and Drew are gathered in the living room. Drew is sitting beside my mom. The Benedetti family is sitting across from them, Mr. and Mrs. Benedetti and Dominic. I don’t look at Dominic. I don’t need to to see the one-cornered smirk of ‘I told you so’. I also don’t look at Sergio’s

uncle. His ruthlessness terrifies me almost more than Franco Benedetti's.

What a turn of events.

Salvatore is standing beside his brother. I have no maid of honor. A priest I don't know waits, bible in hand. The pianist begins the wedding march again. I realize I missed the first cue. Sergio clears his throat when I still don't move.

I look up at him. He's not smiling. He's just watching me. Waiting.

"Mine. Always. No matter what."

And I'm doing this.

I take the first step and my father squeezes my hand and we walk down the aisle toward my destiny. My future. With this man who is as good as he is brutal. Who has killed with the same hands with which he has made love to me. This man whose baby is growing inside my belly. The man I'm bound to. Was bound to from before I ever set eyes on him.

SERGIO

For a minute, I'm not sure if she's going to do it. If she's going to take those steps down the aisle. Down to me. She's in her head and I know she's hasn't been sleeping. I see it in the shadows beneath her eyes.

I don't know what I'll do if she turns and runs.

I know I can't let her go. I won't.

But I don't want to chase her. I don't want to make her.

And a moment later, when the pianist begins the wedding march again, I'm glad I don't have to. Her lips move into a small smile, and, eyes locked on mine, she comes to me.

I've never felt relief like I do in that moment.

Does she deserve this? Me? My family? No, she deserves a hundred times better. I will live and die with that knowledge. I will live and die knowing I loved her too much to let her go. It's selfish. But I guess I'm selfish. And what I feel for her, it overwhelms me sometimes. It swells and surges and takes me under so I can't breathe.

She is breath. She is life. She is everything.

She reaches the altar and I take her flowers from her, hand them to the priest because I don't know what to do with them. I lift the veil from her face and her eyes glisten with tears. I know they're not all tears of joy and I lean close to her, touch the soft skin of her cheek and bring my mouth to her ear.

“You’re beautiful.”

With my thumb, I wipe away a tear and we just stay like that for a minute and I breathe her in and I want to make this moment last forever.

“I’m happy,” she whispers, more tears sliding down her cheeks.

I close my hand over the swell of one hip and draw back to look at her. I know happy isn’t all she is. I know she’s scared. I want to tell her not to be afraid. That I’ll protect her. That I won’t ever let anything happen to her. To us. That I’ll take care of everything. But I can’t do that. And I don’t. And all I can do is smile at her words.

Someone clears their throat. Fucking Dominic. I want to kill him. I want to kill my bastard brother. But Natalie pulls back and we turn to the priest and he begins the ceremony and, a short while later, Natalie Gregorian is Natalie Benedetti.

My wife.

SERGIO

“**I**’m going to miss being in the city,” Natalie says. We’re a few blocks from the house on Elfreth’s Alley where we just handed over the keys to a house-sitter I hired so Natalie and Pepper can move in with me.

“You’ll appreciate the quiet. Although you will have to learn how to drive a car.”

“I can drive a car. I just haven’t in a while.”

“If you always drive like you did tonight, you’re going to take some lessons.”

“I’m just rusty. And your car goes too fast. I’m not used to it.”

“Right.” I’m glad she can’t see the expression on my face. “This is my favorite Italian place in the city,” I say, changing the subject as we round the corner and I push the door to the tiny restaurant open.

“I’ve never even seen this place and I must walk by here four times a day,” she says once we’re inside.

I smile. It’s loud in the restaurant, even though there are only seven tables. Italians are loud though, and everyone here is Italian.

“It’s a well-kept secret,” I say, hanging my coat on the rack by the door before helping her get hers off.

The owner nods his greeting from behind the bar where he’s pouring two glasses of wine.

“This way,” I say, my hand at Natalie’s low back as I lead her to a table at the back corner. I pull out her chair then take mine. My back’s to the wall so I can see who comes and goes. But this place is safe.

“Do people always stare at you when you go places?” she asks. “Are they going to start staring at me now?”

“If they’re staring at you it’s because you’re fucking beautiful.”

“I wonder if you’ll still be thinking that when I get big and fat with this baby.” She picks up her menu so she’s not looking at me.

I take her hand to make her look at me. “I don’t care if you weigh four-hundred pounds. You will always be beautiful.”

She rolls her eyes but is smiling.

“I’ll order for us, if you don’t mind,” I say.

“I can decide for myself, thank you,” she says.

“It’s not an infringement on your rights, you know. It’s just dinner, especially considering—”

“No, thank you,” she says.

“Suit yourself.”

The owner walks over with an open bottle of Chianti and a bottle of water. “Sergio. It’s always good to see you here.”

“Good to see you, too. How are things?”

“Quiet. Thank you.”

I nod. He raises the bottle to pour for Natalie but she stops him. “Just water for me, please.”

He looks at me and I give him a nod so he pours a glass of wine for me and water for Natalie.

“Usual?” he asks in his broken English, setting both bottles down on the table.

“Natalie?” I say.

“Um,” she’s still looking at the menu, which by now she’s realized is in Italian and I know she can’t understand a word. “This one.” She points to something.

He reads out what she ordered and I have to grin. I can’t wait to see her face when her meal arrives. After handing her menu over, she clears her throat and sits back.

“Usual for me,” I say.

He nods and walks away.

“So, what did you order?” I ask. From the look on her face, I know she has no clue but she’s way too stubborn to admit it.

She picks up her water. “I’ll surprise you.”

“Didn’t know you read Italian,” I say, picking up my wine, holding it up. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

I drink, then put my glass down and watch her.

“Do you have to be gone for three nights?” she asks. I know it’s been on her mind. It’ll be the first time I’m away since we got married. She’s not comfortable in the house yet and she’s still fighting me over the bodyguard trailing her when she’s not home or with me.

“It’ll go by fast. Dad isn’t focused right now. Not with mom like she is.”

“Salvatore can’t go alone? Or Dominic?” She can’t say his name without making a face.

“Salvatore’s coming with me, but it has to be me. It’s important.”

“I know, it’s just I wish you didn’t have to go.”

A waiter comes to the table holding two steaming plates with the edge of a towel. He sets them down and I see from Natalie’s face she did not expect what she gets.

I can’t help my smile, but when she looks up at me, I pick up my fork and bring my full attention to my plate. I stick a fat gnocchi into my mouth and

chew, but when I look up at her, I shove another two in to keep from bursting out in laughter.

“What did I order?” she asks, her face slightly pale.

“Liver and onions,” I say with my mouth full.

“Oh my God.”

I can’t help it now. I shove my napkin to my mouth and try to swallow so I don’t spit out my mouthful when I laugh.

“You jerk. It’s not funny.”

I shake my head, wipe my eyes because I’m laughing so hard, I’m crying. “No, it is funny. Your expression is hilarious, in fact.”

She gives me a glare, sets her fork down, puts her napkin on the table. When she makes to stand, I capture her hand.

“Come on, you have to admit, you are so damn stubborn. You should have let me order for you.”

She eyes my plate, picks up her fork and pokes a gnocchi. She shoves it into her mouth and closes her eyes. “Oh wow.”

“Told you so,” I say.

She opens her eyes and sticks her tongue out at me.

I take her plate and push mine in front of her. “Eat.”

She looks down at the gnocchi. “You don’t have to do that.” But she doesn’t offer to swap back.

“It’s fine. Eat.”

I keep hold of her hand for a minute and she meets my eyes, gives me a warm smile. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

I TOOK ERIC WITH ME TO THE MEETING WHERE I SAT IN FOR MY FATHER. Salvatore was to have joined me, but he’s come down with some bug and I

didn't want Dominic there. I don't care that I'm alone. I prefer it.

This is what it will be like when my father's gone. Me in the back of the car. Me, alone. I'll leave Natalie as far out of this as possible. Keep her safe.

The baby, in a way, I hope it's a girl. I wonder if my father thought about that when mom was pregnant with me. If he wished for a daughter so as not to have to pass this legacy on to his own. I wonder if, to some extent, there's a part of us that knows that the inheritance of the first-born male is a condemnation. A daughter can't rule. Not in our family. Sexist, I know, but her husband would take control when the time came.

I'm thinking about this when Eric slows the car.

"Need to refuel," he says. The kid who was supposed to make sure the car was ready before we left the city hadn't show up. Probably hungover somewhere is my guess.

"It's fine," I say. I need to stretch my legs anyway. Meeting was in Manhattan and I've been sitting for too long.

I climb out of the car and dial Natalie. It's late, but she said she'd wait up.

"Hey." Her voice is soft.

I can hear her smiling. It makes me smile. "Hey. Were you sleeping?"

"Nope."

"Dozing?"

"Maybe."

"Did you eat dinner?"

"A grilled cheese sandwich," she says. "Two, actually. I'm trying to get to that four-hundred pounds so we can see if you still think I'm beautiful."

I chuckle.

"Are you almost home?" she asks, a note of worry creeping into her voice.

"About thirty minutes away. Go to sleep. I'll wake you when I get home."

"No, I'll wait up," she says through a yawn.

“I like waking you up,” I whisper. She knows what I mean.

“You’re dirty, Sergio Benedetti.”

“You like me dirty, Natalie Benedetti.”

She snorts, then her voice turns serious. “I miss you.”

“Me too. This was the longest three days of my life, but I’ll be home soon.” The pump clicks, and Eric takes the nozzle out. “I gotta go. I’ll see you soon.”

“You promise?”

“I promise, sweetheart.”

We disconnect.

There’s no screeching of tires as two SUVs pull into the station, their windows tinted black. There’s no rush. They just slow as they turn into the lot. I’m tucking the phone back into my pocket when it happens. When I feel something isn’t right.

Silence is supposed to precede an ambush.

Silence always comes before devastation. It’s what I’ve always believed. How I’ve always thought it would happen.

But when I hear the first round fired, it’s like slow motion. I turn and watch Eric’s body fling backwards. A dark red spot appears on the front of his shirt. It begins to spread in a perfect circle feathering along the edges like a snowflake. That’s what I think of when I see it. A fucking perfect snowflake.

He’d left his coat in the car. He doesn’t have his weapon. Not that it would do any good. They’ve come prepared.

Fuck. We shouldn’t have been out here, in the open like this. Unprotected and vulnerable.

Instinct has me gripping my weapon and I take aim and shoot at the driver’s side window, even though I can’t see for shit because even the windshield is black. I hit the driver though. I know it when the SUV speeds up, crashes into a parked car just outside the twenty-four-hour market.

The first bullet hits me at the back of my arm. It's my gun arm. But I know the sound of an automatic. There's more to come.

It's time.

My reckoning.

I know it. I'm sure of it like I'm sure of little else.

For as much as I think about death, for as aware as I am of its eternal presence, it's cold, bony fingers, like claws, shadows trailing me, clinging to me, for as much as I am aware, when it comes, when it is inevitable, it's still somehow unexpected.

I manage to turn. The cowards put a bullet in my back, below my shoulder blade. It burns. Sends me to my knees. I look at the passenger side window. It's rolled part of the way down. I can see a flash of hair, a quick glimpse of blond or gray. But the bullets are still coming. Six, I think. Seven. I'm on my back and something warm is sliding up to my neck, down over it.

And all I can think about is her.

Her face.

Her eyes.

The baby inside her.

My baby whom I'll never see.

My wife. I've had her for so short a time.

I won't keep my promise to her tonight. This will be the first time I don't keep a promise to her.

I think of the box on the family tree with my name on it. The date of birth. Who will fill in today's date underneath my name? Who will color in the red cross. Will that task fall to her? No. It can't. I can't let it. It's too heavy for her. Too dark.

There's screeching now. And sirens. One SUV is flying out of the gas station. They shoot one more bullet but this one misses. Not that it matters. One less won't make a difference. Not for me. Not anymore.

“Nat.”

It always pisses her off when I call her that and I almost smile at the memory of her face when I do.

Something gurgles up from my throat. I open my eyes for a moment to see a stranger’s face.

And then I’m watching. Just watching.

Nothing hurts. It did, the first bullet. It fucking burned. The second, too. And the one that ripped into my heart.

Now, nothing.

One leg is bent underneath me, the other stretched out. Blood pools all around me. The ambulance is here, and the sirens are fading. All noise is fading, I realize. Their screams. Their words. I hear nothing. And it’s not like I think it would be.

I want to see her again. One last time. I need to. I will myself to. To be home. To lie beside her. To touch her just once more. To brush my fingers across her cheek. To lay my hand on her belly. Hear her laugh. Feel her curl into me. Feel her breath on my cheek.

To tell her I’m sorry.

And maybe it’s my reprieve. Maybe some time in my life, I did one good thing, and this is my reward. Because I’m here with her. And she’s sleeping. She’s wearing my T-shirt. It’s so big on her. And she’s holding my pillow to her and her hair is fanned out all around her and she’s so beautiful.

I want to scream to her, but I can’t. I will the sound, but nothing comes. Nothing. I want to touch her, but I can’t feel her. I can’t fucking feel her.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I’m screaming, but there’s nothing. Nothing but silence. Utter silence.

She stirs. Blinks. I stop. And for a moment, I think she’s looking up at me. I think she sees me.

But then she closes her eyes again and rolls onto her side and she’s asleep.

Peaceful still.

She doesn't know yet. She doesn't know yet that I'm gone. That I won't be able to keep my promise. That I won't wake her tonight or any night.

She doesn't know yet that I died.

NATALIE

I haven't been inside the study in the four weeks since the night Sergio didn't come home. I've barricaded myself in this house, which I never had the chance to make my home. I wanted to. After everything, I wanted to make it a home. Our home.

I know it's too early, but I think I feel the baby moving inside me. Feel the little swell of my belly. Ever since that night, I swear I've felt it. Him. It'll be a boy. I know that too.

Sergio won't see my belly swell as his baby grows. He won't be there when his son comes into the world. Won't get to hold him. I wonder if he'll look like Sergio. In a way, I hope he doesn't because I think it will break my heart over and over again and I'm not strong enough for that.

The house is silent. All the lights are out except for the one over the stove in the kitchen. Standing at the study door, I take a deep breath in, because there's something I have to do. Something I have to finish.

I set my hand on the doorknob and turn it, hear the creak as I push the door open.

Instantly, I am overwhelmed by memories of him. By the scent of him. His aftershave. His whiskey. Overwhelmed by the weight of the life he carried. The shadow that clung to him, that kept him in its clutches. I remember all those moments when I'd felt that strange sensation that he wouldn't be with me for long. That he was a ghost. That this thing would claim him. I'd pushed those thoughts away then. They were too terrible to deal with. But the reality, it's worse because it's just that—real. And final.

The skin around my eyes is wet again, but I ignore it and walk inside, partially closing the door behind me. Make my way to the desk from memory. Switch on the lamp. His chair is pushed out like he just got up from it. I touch it, the leather cool but soft and worn and comfortable as I sink into it.

The tumbler he last drank from still sits on the desk. The half-empty bottle beside it. I wrap my hand around the heavy crystal glass and bring it to me. To my nose. I inhale. I remember. And tears slide down my face and into the glass and I bring it to my lips and drink the last swallow of whiskey and the choking sound that comes, it's my own. It's my grief and I can't swallow, my throat closes up. I want to throw up. But I don't remember the last time I ate. I have to eat for the baby. I know.

I force a deep breath. Feel myself shudder with it. Feel the whiskey burn when it does, finally, go down. It reinforces me and I steel my spine because I have work to do.

Setting the empty tumbler down, I reach beneath the desk and feel for the scroll. I pull it out, unroll it, mechanically open it on the desktop and set the bottle on one corner, tuck the other beneath the base of the desk lamp.

I survey the images, the boxes, scanning the names as I open the drawer and take out his pencils, dulled by use, the eraser worn to a nub. I rub my thumb over it. Try to feel him.

Dragging my attention from the sheet, I search deeper in the drawer for a ruler. That's when I come across the other sheet there. This one lies flat. I take it out, set it on top of the parchment so I can study it under the light of the lamp.

It's me. My face. At least a partially sketched image. I see smudges from his effort to perfect what he saw, and I swear, I see it too. Like I'm laid bare here. Like he drew my soul.

I set my thumb over the print of his bigger one and smear it across my cheek, like he has before, and the moment I do, every hair on my body stands on end and all at once, he's here. He's here with me. Behind me. Holding me. One hand closed over mine, his thumb on mine, his other arm wrapped around my middle, hand flat on my belly, and that's when that sobbing begins

again except that this time, he's holding me. He's holding me as I fall apart. As I weep loudly, with a voice not my own, with anguish that can't belong to me. That I don't want.

"It's not fair."

It's stupid, but it's all I can say. Because it's not. We were supposed to have time. We were supposed to have a little bit of time.

And I feel his arms squeezing me, cradling me against his chest, holding me so tight that for a minute, I just close my eyes and imagine it's real. Imagine he's real.

"Come back," I sob.

He can't, though. I know that. I watched them put him in the ground.

The high-pitched wailing is me, I realize. And even as I feel the feather light kisses on my temple, even as the hair on the back of my neck stand on end at his touch, I wail. Because this is it. This is goodbye.

I hear his words inside my mind. The whispered "I love you." Feel one final squeeze of his arms, the flat of his hand on my belly. The scruff of his jaw on my cheek.

And when I'm able to breathe again, I whisper those words back as he slips away. Sergio gone. Sergio gone from me. Gone from this world forever.

I don't know how long I sit there in the near dark staring at nothing. My face sticky from tears. My vision empty. It's when I hear the lock of the front door open that I move. That I shift my gaze to the partially closed study door.

"Natalie."

I startle. They sound so alike.

Footsteps approach the study and a moment later, the door is pushed open and Salvatore stands in the doorway and I realize the night is over because the warm glow of the morning sun surrounds him. It's strange. Like a halo all around him.

He looks at me. I almost have to smile at what he must see. I haven't showered in days. Haven't brushed my hair in that long. I'm still wearing one

of Sergio's T-shirts I'd dug out of the laundry hamper.

Salvatore takes in the contents of the desk. Eyes the empty glass of whiskey. He steps inside.

"You don't look so good, Nat."

The way he says it, leaning against the door, taking off his gloves, one eyebrow raised and one side of his mouth quirking into a lopsided smile, it makes me smile, actually.

"Is that yours?" he asks, gesturing to the whiskey.

I shake my head. "It's his." I touch the pattern on the crystal. "Was his," I correct.

He takes off his coat, sets it and the gloves over the back of the chair.

"You're not drinking, are you? He wouldn't want that. With the baby and all."

"I'm not drinking."

"Good. When's the last time you ate?"

I shrug a shoulder.

"Called your parents? Called Drew?"

I shake my head. I don't know. I know they've called. I've seen the countless messages but I switched off my phone a few days ago.

"Drew called me this morning. Said you haven't been to school."

"I don't think school matters right now."

"Well, it does." He shifts his gaze to the parchment, steps closer to get a better look. Gives a shake of his head. "Fucking Sergio. Leave it to him to draw a fucking graveyard."

When he reaches out to touch it, I put my hand out, stop him.

He looks at me. "Have you been outside since the funeral?"

"What are you doing here? Why do you have a key?"

“Because my brother made me promise something. One thing. If anything happened.”

Fuck. I’m going to lose it again.

Salvatore sits down, and a darkness shadows his features. “He called me one night after you two had met and told me if anything happened to him that I was to take care of you. Make sure you were okay.”

“He did?”

Salvatore nods.

“I think he knew. I know he did.” I say through sobs and tears. “He told me once that time was a luxury. One that he wouldn’t have.”

“Yeah, well, you know Sergio.”

Knew. Not know. Sergio is no longer present. He can never be spoken of in the present tense again.

“He was always a little dramatic,” Salvatore continues when I don’t speak.

He’s trying to make light of it. “Yeah. I guess.”

“What are you doing in here in the dark?”

“I have to finish it.”

“Finish what?”

I point to the place below Sergio’s name. Just beneath his box. The day of his birth. The dash. The empty space.

Salvatore nods. He stands and comes around the desk. “Let me do it.”

I roll my chair away. I let him. And I watch when he takes up the pencil and writes in the date.

He stares at it for a while and I look at him. At Salvatore Benedetti.

He’ll take Sergio’s place now. Next in line to rule.

Next in line to die?

“Do you ever get scared?” I ask.

He shifts his gaze to me.

“To die. Like he did,” I add. Again, my face crumples beneath the pain and I’m struggling to breathe.

He considers this for a long time. Takes in a deep breath. “Yeah. Sometimes. But then I think don’t I deserve it? I have blood on my hands, too.”

I know he does. I know after Sergio’s murder, the Benedetti family unleashed their wrath. They took vengeance for the death of the first-born son. And what a vengeance it was. What a brutal retribution.

“Did he really do that? Call you? Tell you to take care of me?”

Salvatore nods. “Drunk in the middle of the night.” He chuckles.

The silence that follows is awkward, suddenly. I shift my gaze to the sheet. Reach over to take the red marker. To draw the cross.

“Mob killing,” I say. And somehow, I don’t cry. I draw the cross carefully. Perfectly. I color it in. I take my time because once this part is done, there’s no erasing. Not that there ever was a going back. I know that.

“What are you going to do now?” he asks.

I look up at him. “Leave. I want nothing to do with your family.” I don’t apologize for it.

He nods.

“Will he let me go? Now? With the baby?”

He knows who I mean. “If what you want is out, I’ll make sure you’re out. I’ll protect you. I gave Sergio my word and I intend on keeping it.”

“Even against your father?” Because that’s what this would be. Franco Benedetti has no intention of letting me take Sergio’s baby and disappearing.

“Even against my father.”

NATALIE*One and a Half Years Later*

IF IT WASN'T FOR SALVATORE, I WOULDN'T BE HERE, IN MY OWN HOUSE IN Asbury Park, right now. Franco was hell bent against me leaving. Against me taking his first grandchild away from him, taking that last piece of Sergio with me.

I understood something in these months and I'm glad for it. Franco mourned Sergio. He was devastated by his loss and it made me see a different side of him. A human side. Still cold. Still manipulative and all powerful, but human. This is the one thing Franco Benedetti and I have in common. We're both hurting over the loss of Sergio.

So we came to an agreement. Franco Benedetti will still be a part of my son's life, but he won't be in it, not now. Not yet. I'll deal with the future later.

I named my son Jacob Sergio Benedetti. And when he looked at me the first time, I was grateful that he did look like Sergio after all. It hurt, but it also reminded me of him. And I don't want to forget Sergio. I don't want to forget a minute of the little bit of time we had together. And the baby we made, the love I feel for him is sometimes overwhelming.

It's almost eleven at night when the doorbell rings. It's Salvatore. He usually visits once a month, but I'm not expecting him for a few weeks, and when he comes, he usually comes early in the morning to spend time with

Jacob. Although, we've become friends since Sergio's death and I like him. He struggles with the life he's now bound to lead. It's strange, he thinks of things so differently than Sergio did.

Something's up, though, because Salvatore called not twenty minutes ago to see if I was home. Asked if he could come.

"Hey, Salvatore," I say, opening the door.

He's preoccupied. It takes him a minute to even say hello back.

"Come on in," I say, opening the door wider.

"Why is it so quiet?"

"It's late. Jacob's asleep."

"Oh." It's like he didn't realize the time. He steps in, stops. Shakes his head with a snort as if he were continuing some conversation in his mind.

"What's going on?" I ask when I close the door.

He navigates around the toys to sit on the couch. "You have something to drink?"

"Sure." I get him a whiskey, take the seat beside him and pour myself a tumbler, too. I started to drink the stuff in the last few months. Just a little now and again. It still burns, but it's Sergio's favorite brand and it reminds me of him, of us sitting together while he drank a glass. The smell alone will do it, but the burn, it's what I crave some nights.

Salvatore takes a swallow then focuses his attention on swirling the amber liquid around.

"I have to claim her," he says.

"What?"

He looks at me. "Lucia DeMarco. Her time's almost up."

I just watch him. Watch the furrow between his brows. Salvatore's relationship with his father is different than Sergio's. Sergio could manage Franco. He was the favorite son. Salvatore and Franco, though, their relations are strained, at best.

He swallows the rest of his whiskey. “Not quite half a year left, and I have to take her. Show the world how powerful the Benedetti family is.” He gets up, pours himself a second, generous glass full. Drinks half of it before turning to me. “I’m to break her. Destroy her.”

“There’s no way out—”

“No.” He cuts me off with an ugly snort. “There’s no way to do anything,” he spits, finishes his drink. Pours another glass and swallows that too. “In six months’ time, I’ll own the DeMarco Mafia princess. I’ll take her from her tower, bring her to my home, and I’ll punish her for being born a DeMarco. I’ll bring her to her knees to bury her father’s nose in the dirt.”

I go to him. “Salvatore,” but what can I say? I have no advice, no comfort to offer. I know the DeMarco bargain. It’s a devil’s bargain made by Franco Benedetti, to be executed by his succeeding son. “At least it’s not Dominic,” I say.

He looks at me. Shakes his head. “Do you know what he did to her? What my father ordered when the girl was sixteen? Fucking sixteen years old. A child.”

I don’t want to know.

“He had her tied to a cold steel table. Had her legs pried apart and had a doctor confirm that her virginity was intact.”

“Christ.”

“While her own father was made to watch.”

“Salva—”

“While I stood by and did nothing,” he spits, his tone harder. “Not a goddamned thing. Fuck. I couldn’t even look at her. It made me sick. Or it should have. But you know what?” He walks away, so his back is to me. “It made me hard. It made me fucking hard.”

I watch his back, big broad shoulders, muscular arms. He’s built like Sergio. Powerful.

“I am my father’s son. A monster. Like him. Maybe worse.”

“No. No, that’s not true.” I try to take the drink from him, but he won’t let me.

“I’ll be *her* monster.”

“Salvatore, you don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do,” he says too loudly. “I do have to. That’s the point. I will take the girl. I will break the girl. It’s my duty.”

The monitor goes off then. Jacob’s fussing. He probably hears us, his room is just down the hall, and Salvatore isn’t being quiet.

“Shit,” Salvatore says, realizing. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. He’s been waking up at night,” I lie. I don’t want him to feel any worse than he already does. Jacob lets out a long cry. “I’d better go settle him down.”

Salvatore nods. I realize he hasn’t even taken his jacket off. I go to Jacob, pick him up out of his crib, cradle him, kiss the top of his perfect head, kiss the soft dark hair there.

“Shh, baby. It’s okay. Shh.”

It doesn’t take him long to fall asleep again. And when he does, I lay him back down and tuck him in, but by the time I return to the living room, Salvatore’s gone.

NATALIE

I don't dream of Sergio often. I wish I could. But the nights I do, I wake up crying. Tonight's one of them. Maybe it's because Salvatore was just here. Maybe it's what he told me. Maybe it's just the mention of Lucia DeMarco's name.

And it's strange, although I can't remember the dreams themselves, I do remember feeling safe, even with the bittersweet edge. Even knowing I'll miss him that much more the following day. Jacob keeps me busy and I'm so grateful for him. I'm not sure I'd survive this if it weren't for him.

It's four in the morning when I wake up with tears on my cheeks. I switch on the light and get up, knowing I won't be getting any more sleep tonight. I go to the dresser, open the drawer where, at the back, I keep a box. I carry it to the bed, open it. Inside are just a few things. Memories. The first is the ring. His ring. The Benedetti family crest dark and proudly displayed. I always notice it on Salvatore's finger too.

I slip it onto my finger. It's so big and heavy, I have to hold it in place to look at it.

I'm to give it to Jacob when he's sixteen. It's part of the agreement. I'm not yet sure I can, but it's what Franco expects.

But I'm not above going back on my word with Franco Benedetti. I don't want Jacob involved in this life. I don't want him to die the way his father died.

Slipping it off my finger, I set it back inside the box and smile at the next

thing I see. An 8X10 of us on our wedding day. Sergio is holding my hand and smiling so wide. And he's just whispered something into my ear that made me laugh so hard, I'm almost doubled over.

It's strange, if you look at my face, all you see is the happiest bride in the world. And I was happy in that moment. I remember the nagging feeling of something not quite right, and I know now that it was a premonition, but still, in that moment, I remember feeling happy.

I set the box down and put the expensively framed photo on the nightstand. And it feels right. Something inside me tells me this is right.

I've grieved for over a year. Sergio is gone. But I have Jacob now. And I have my memories. I'll take them. Take the bad, the sad, with the good. And in a way, time has been kind to me. Time is making me remember the good ones. Even though I never forget the sad. The feeling is always there, always along the edges of those happy moments, but it's manageable, more and more as time passes. I'll always love Sergio. He'll always be the love of my life. And I'll honor him. I'll raise his son to know him. Know his father as I knew him. Devoted and full of love.

That's what Jacob will know of Sergio.

Because that's who Sergio was.

The end.

2ND LETTER FROM NATASHA

Dear Reader,

I imagine stoning by Kindle right about now.

If this was your first book by me, know it is the only one that does not have a happily-ever-after and I hope you'll go on to read Salvatore and Dominic Benedetti's stories.

If this wasn't your first and you've already read Salvatore and Dominic, then I just want to say thanks. Thanks for walking into this eyes-wide-open. Thanks for being open to the heartbreak of Sergio's story. Thanks for trusting me to take you there.

I told you at my opening letter that Sergio had a very strong voice in my mind during the writing of the book. Well, that was true for most of it. By the time the last scenes came, he'd quieted. I know that he knew what had to happen. He went into it eyes-wide-open, too. And I think that takes courage. My heart broke to write this book. It's breaking now to write this letter. But I'm glad I did it. Sergio deserved to have his story told and I love his and Natalie's story so very much. I even love the heartbreak of it.

Thank you so much, again, for spending your time reading my book. You don't know how much that means to me.

Love,

Natasha

SALVATORE: A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE EXCERPT

Prologue

Salvatore

I signed the contract before me, pressing so hard that the track of my signature left a groove on the sheet of paper. I set the pen down and slid the pages across the table to her.

Lucia.

I could barely meet her gaze as she raised big, innocent, frightened eyes to mine.

She looked at it, at the collected, official documents that would bind her to me. That would make her mine. I wasn't sure if she was reading or simply staring, trying to make sense of what had just happened. What had been decided for her. For both of us.

She turned reddened eyes to her father. I didn't miss the questions I saw inside them. The plea. The disbelief.

But DeMarco kept his eyes lowered, his head bent in defeat. He couldn't look at his daughter, not after what he'd been made to watch.

I understood that, and I hated my own father more for making him do it.

Lucia sucked in a ragged breath. Could everyone hear it or just me? I saw the rapid pulse beating in her neck. Her hand trembled when she picked up the pen. She met my gaze once more. One final plea. I watched her struggle against the tears that threatened to spill on her already stained cheeks.

I didn't know what I felt upon seeing them. Hell, I didn't know what I felt about anything at all anymore.

"Sign."

My father's command made her turn. I watched their gazes collide.

"We don't have all day."

To call him domineering was an understatement. He was someone who made grown men tremble.

But she didn't shy away.

"Sign, Lucia," her father said quietly.

She didn't look at anyone after that. Instead, she put pen to paper and signed her name—Lucia Annalisa DeMarco—on the dotted line adjacent to mine. My family's attorney applied the seal to the sheets as soon as she finished, quickly taking them and leaving the room.

I guess it was all official, then. Decided. Done.

My father stood, gave me his signature look of displeasure, and walked out of the room. Two of his men followed.

"Do you need a minute?" I asked her. Did she want to say goodbye to her father?

"No."

She refused to look at him or at me. Instead, she pushed her chair back and stood, the now-wrinkled white skirt falling over her thighs. She fisted her hands at her sides.

"I'm ready."

I rose and gestured to one of the waiting men. She walked ahead of him as if he walked her to her execution. I glanced at her father, then at the cold examining table with the leather restraints now hanging open, useless, their victim released. The image of what had happened there just moments earlier shamed me.

But it could have been so much worse for her.

It could have gone the way my father wanted. *His* cruelty knew no bounds.

She had me to thank for saving her from that.

So why did I still feel like a monster? A beast? A pathetic, spineless puppet?

I owned Lucia DeMarco, but the thought only made me sick. She was the token, the living, breathing trophy of my family's triumph over hers.

I walked out of the room and rode the elevator down to the lobby, emptying my eyes of emotion. That was one thing I did well.

I walked out onto the stifling, noisy Manhattan sidewalk and climbed into the backseat of my waiting car. The driver knew where to take me, and twenty minutes later, I walked into the whorehouse, to a room in the back, the image of Lucia lying on that examining table, bound, struggling, her face turned away as the doctor probed her before declaring her intact, burned into my memory forever.

I'd stood beside her. I hadn't looked. Did that absolve me? Surely that meant something?

But why was my cock hard, then?

She'd cried quietly. I'd watched her tears slip off her face and fall to the floor and willed myself to be anywhere but there. Willed myself not to hear the sounds, my father's degrading words, her quiet breaths as she struggled to remain silent.

All while I'd stood by.

I was a coward. A monster. Because when I did finally meet those burning amber eyes, when I dared shift my gaze to hers, our eyes had locked, and I saw the quiet plea inside them. A silent cry for help.

In desperation, she'd sought *my* help.

And I'd looked away.

Her father's face had gone white when he'd realized the full cost he'd agreed to; the payment of the debt he'd set upon her shoulders.

Her life for his. For all of theirs.

Fucking selfish bastard didn't deserve to live. He should have died to protect her. He should never—ever—have allowed this to happen.

I sucked in a breath, heavy and wet, drowning me.

I poured myself a drink, slammed it back, and repeated. Whiskey was good. Whiskey dulled the scene replaying in my head. But it did nothing to wipe out the image of her eyes on mine. Her terrified, desperate eyes.

I threw the glass, smashing it in the corner. One of the whores came to me, knelt between my spread legs, and took my cock out of my pants. Her lips moved, saying something I didn't hear over the war raging inside my head, and fucked up as fucked up can be, she took my already hard cock into her mouth.

I gripped a handful of the bitch's hair and closed my eyes, letting her do her work, taking me deep into her throat. But I didn't want gentle, not now. I needed more. I stood, squeezed my eyes shut against the image of Lucia on that table, and fucked the whore's face until she choked and tears streamed down her cheeks. Until I finally came, emptying down her throat.

But the sexual release, like the whiskey, gave me nothing. There wasn't enough sex or alcohol in the world to burn that particular image of Lucia out of my mind, but maybe I deserved it. Deserved the guilt. I should man up and own it. I allowed it all to happen, after all. I stood by and did nothing.

And now, she was mine, and I was hers.

Her very own monster.

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DOMINIC: A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE EXCERPT

Chapter 1

Dominic

Fear has a distinct smell, something that belongs only to it. Pungent. Acidic. And at the same time, sweet. Alluring, even.

Or maybe only sweet and alluring to a sick fuck like me. Either way, the girl huddled in the corner had it coming off her in waves.

I pulled the skull mask down to cover my face. The room was dark, but I could tell she was awake. Even if she held her breath and didn't move a single muscle, I'd know. It was the scent. That fear. It gave them away every single time.

And I liked it. It was like an adrenaline rush, the anticipation of what was to come.

I liked fucking with them.

I closed the door behind me, blocking off the little bit of light I'd allowed into the small, dark, and rank bedroom. She'd been brought here yesterday to this remote cabin in the woods. So fucking cliché. Cabin in the woods. But that's what it was. That's where I did my best work. The room contained a queen-size bed equipped with restraints, a bedside table, and a locked chest holding any equipment I needed. The attached bathroom had had its door removed before my arrival. Only the bare essentials were there: a toilet, sink, and a shower/bathtub. The bathtub was truly a luxury. Or it became one at some point during the training period.

The windows of both the bedroom and the bathroom had been boarded up long ago, and only slivers of light penetrated through the slats of wood. Both rooms were always cold. Not freezing. I wasn't heartless. Well...I had as much heart as any monster could have. I just kept the rooms at about sixty degrees. Just cool enough that it wouldn't do any damage but it wouldn't be quite comfortable.

I walked over to the crouched form on the floor. She stank. I wondered how long they'd had her. If they'd washed her during that time.

I wondered what else they'd done to her, considering the rule of no fucking on this one. My various employers didn't usually give that order. They didn't give a crap who fucked the girls before auction. It's what they were there for. But this time, Leo—the liaison between the buyer and me—had made certain I understood this particular restriction.

I shoved the thought of rape aside. I didn't do that. Whatever else I did to them, I didn't do that. Some tiny little piece of my fucked-up brain held on to that, as if I were somehow honorable for it.

Honor?

Fuck.

I had no delusions on that note. Honor was a thing that had never belonged to me. Not then, not when I was Dominic Benedetti, son of a mafia king. So close, so fucking goddamned close to having it all. And it certainly didn't belong to me now. Not now that I knew who I was. Who I *really* was.

More thoughts to shove away, shove so far down they couldn't choke me anymore. Instead they sat like cement, like fucking concrete bricks in my gut.

I stepped purposefully toward the girl, my boots heavy and loud on the old and decrepit wood.

“Wakey, wakey.”

She sat with her knees pulled up to her naked chest, her bound wrists wrapped around them, and made the smallest movement, tucking her face deeper into her knees. I noticed she still wore underwear, although it was filthy. That was new. By the time they got to me, they were so used to being

buck naked they almost didn't notice anymore.

The three night-lights plugged into outlets around the bedroom allowed me to take her in. Dark hair fell over her shoulders and down her back. So dark, I wondered if it would be black after I washed the dirt and grime from it.

I nudged the toe of my boot under her hip. "You stink."

She made some small sound and dug her fingernails into the flesh of her legs, crouching farther into the corner, folding and withdrawing deeper into herself.

I squatted down, looking at what I could see of her too skinny body. I'd check her for bruises later, once I cleaned her up. Make sure there wasn't anything that needed immediate attention. No festering wounds acquired in transit.

"Did you piss yourself?"

She exhaled an angry breath.

I grinned behind my mask. There we go. That was different.

"Lift your head, so I can see your face."

Nothing.

I lay one of my hands on top of her head. She flinched but otherwise didn't move. I gently stroked her head before gripping the long thick mass of hair and turning my hand around and around, wrapping the length of it tight in my fist before tugging hard, jerking her head back, forcing her to look at me.

She cried out, the sound one of pain and anger combined. They matched the features of her face: eyes narrowed, fear just behind the rebellion in her hate-filled, gleaming green eyes. Her mouth opened when I squeezed my fingers tighter, and a tear fell from the corner of one eye.

"Get your hands off me."

Her voice sounded scratchy, low, like she hadn't spoken in a long time. I looked at her. Heart-shaped face. Full lips. Prominent cheekbones.

Pretty.

No, more than that. Aristocratic almost. Arrogant. Beautiful. Different.

Different than the usual girls.

She scanned my face. I wondered if the skull mask scared her. Fuck, it had scared me the first time I'd put it on. Nothing like death staring you in the face.

"Stand up," I said, dragging her by her hair as I straightened.

She stumbled, but I kept hold of her, tilting her head back, watching her process the pain of my fist in her hair. Teaching her.

Actions spoke louder than words. I always started my training from minute one. No sense in wasting time. She'd learn fast to do as she was told, or she'd pay. She'd learn fast that life as she knew it was over. She was no longer free. No longer human. She was a piece of fucking meat. Owned. Owned by me.

That first lesson was always hardest for them, but I was nothing if not thorough.

I guess you could say I'd found my true calling.

"You're hurting me," she muttered.

She swallowed hard and blinked even harder, maybe to stop the tears that now leaked from both eyes. This girl was a fighter. She hated weakness. I could see it. I recognized it. This battle, she warred as much with herself as she did me.

"What's the magic word?" I taunted.

She glared, her gaze searching, trying to see through the thin layer of mesh that covered even my eyes. I could tell she was trying not to focus on the mask but rather my eyes. To make me more human, less terrifying.

Fear. It was the one thing you could always count on.

"Fuck you."

She reached up with her bound hands to grab hold of the mask, but before

she could tug it off, I jerked her arms away.

“Wrong.”

I spun her around and shoved her against the wall, pressing the side of her face against it. She pushed at the cheap, dark-paneled walls with her hands, her bound wrists just in front of her chest. Her breathing came hard, harder than mine.

I looked her over. Even beneath the layers of dirt, I saw the print of a boot turning blue on her side.

I was right. This one was a fighter.

Leaning in close, I let go of her hair and pressed my body against hers, bringing my mouth to her ear. “Try again. Magic word. And remember, I don’t usually give second chances.”

“Please,” she said quickly before a sob broke out that she tried hard to suck back in.

I kept my chest to her back, holding her against the wall. I wondered if she could feel my erection. Hell, she’d have to.

“Gia,” I whispered against her ear. I knew her first name, knew it was her real name when she sucked in a breath.

That was all I knew, but I wouldn’t tell her that. It was all I wanted to know. Contrary to what my various employers thought, I didn’t like training the girls. Or selling them. I wondered if I should. It was one of the things my father had done, my real father. He was a scum-of-the-earth asshole. I’d just been trying to live up to my heritage over the last seven years. Hell, I had to make up for lost time. Twenty-eight fucking years’ worth. From the terror on the girl’s face, I was doing a good job of it.

I hated myself a little more because of it every day. But that was the point, wasn’t it? I didn’t deserve any different.

“You belong to me now. You will do as I say, or you will be punished every single time. Understand?”

She didn’t answer, but her body began to tremble. She squeezed her eyes

shut. I watched as tears rolled down her cheek.

“Understand?” I asked again, trailing my fingernails up her back and splaying them beneath the heavy veil of hair at the base of her skull, ready to grip and tug and hurt.

She nodded quickly.

“Good.”

I abruptly stepped back. She almost fell but caught herself. She remained standing as she was, her back to me, her forehead against the wall. Her hands moved, wiping her cheeks.

“Turn around.”

It took her a moment. She moved slowly, keeping as much space between us as she could, keeping her bound hands raised so they covered her breasts.

Defiant eyes met mine, the green shining bright in contrast to her dirt-smeared face. There was something about her. Not once in the dozen girls I’d trained had I ever felt anything but emptiness, a space between me and them. The girls, they weren’t even human to me. It was easier that way. They were things. A means to an end. That end being me sinking deeper into depravity, so deep I’d never see the light of day again.

I steeled myself and let my gaze roam over her. She shivered, and I knew it wasn’t the cold that made her shudder.

“Raise your arms over your head. There’s a hook there. There are many throughout the room.”

I watched as she scanned the room. Her eyes would have adjusted to the dim light, so she’d see at least the outline of what I was talking about. Chains had been fitted to the ceiling in various spots. Overkill maybe, but like I said earlier, I liked fucking with them, and imagination was often worse than reality. Attached to these chains were large hooks, like meat hooks. When I needed to, I used them to secure the girls.

“You’ll have to stand on tiptoe to slide the ring at the center of your restraints onto the hook. Do it.”

Her chest moved as her breathing came in short gasps while her gaze traveled around the room again before finally coming to rest on the one over her head.

I walked over to the locked chest and took the key from my pocket. “I already told you, I don’t like to repeat myself,” I said as I bent to unlock it. I raised the lid, taking out what I needed. This was the usual. Gia was no different than the others. They always had trouble obeying at first.

I put the lid down and held the crop close to my leg so she wouldn’t see it. When I reached her, I took one of her wrists and raised both arms to secure her on the hook.

“No.”

She immediately started trying to free herself. It was futile, but what the hell. She could wear herself out. I already knew she’d be a slow learner. The fighters always were.

“Yes,” I said, moving around her.

She tried to follow me but on tiptoe, she was slower. I wondered if she even saw the first strike come because at the sound of leather striking flesh—a sound my sick brain loved—she sucked in a breath and went stock-still.

“Do I have your attention?” She tried to turn this way and that, wriggling to lean away. I raised my arm again and this time, struck the side of her hip.

“Stop!” she cried out.

I gripped her arm, turned her to face away from me, and brought it down three more times over her still panty-clad ass.

“Please! It hurts!”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

I struck again, this time spinning her to face me and marking the fronts of her thighs.

She screamed. I wondered how much of that was shock, although the crop could sting like a motherfucker, and I wasn’t being gentle. No sense in coddling them.

“More?” I asked.

“No!”

I laid one more stripe across her thighs anyway. “No, what?”

“No, please, no!”

“Well, hell. Maybe you’re not as slow a learner as I’d pegged you to be.” I tossed the crop onto the bed and adjusted the crotch of my pants. Her mouth fell open, and her eyes widened as she watched. “Now don’t move.”

I looked her over, checking for bruises, finding several, all of which seemed to be a few days old. No fresh cuts, nothing that needed anything other than time to heal. Although time was limited.

Turning her, I touched the imprint of the shoe on her side. She hissed when I pressed. “You must have pissed someone off.” I chuckled.

“He didn’t appreciate my knee in his crotch.”

I laughed outright. “I like a girl with some fire,” I said as I slid my fingers into the waistband of her panties. “These have to go.”

She struggled violently until I smacked her ass with the flat of my hand. “I said don’t fucking move.”

“Please.”

“That won’t work every time, honey.” I tugged them off, watching them drop to the floor. Gia squeezed her legs together, clenching her ass as she tried to get away from me.

“Please,” she tried again.

I dug my fingernails into her hips to keep her still. “Do you need the crop to stop fucking moving?”

“No! Just don’t...please don’t—”

I felt her struggle to stop moving, and I knew what she was afraid of. I knew exactly what she was afraid of.

“Still.” My voice came as a low, dark warning.

She shuddered in my grasp and hung her head, her breathing loud and uneven.

That was when my thumb rubbed against a thick scabbing of skin. It was about two inches all around and when I pressed against it, she sucked in a breath. I leaned down to have a closer look. The circular scar stood on the side of her left hip. It was an intentional marking, a burn.

“What’s this?”

She just made a sound.

“What is it?” I asked again after smacking her other hip.

“He didn’t exactly bother telling me when he fucking branded me.” She swallowed a loud sobbing breath.

I straightened. It couldn’t have been more than a few days, maybe a week old. I’d see what it was once the scab healed. In the meantime, I had work to do.

When I didn’t hold her steady, she wobbled from foot to foot, unable to get any sort of a foothold considering her height. She couldn’t be more than five feet five. She’d barely come to the middle of my chest when she’d stood on flat feet. I walked around her a few times, just circling, taking my time as she tried to follow my movements, her eyes watching me closely.

“You really do stink,” I said, stopping to face her. “Did you piss yourself, or did they piss on you?” I couldn’t help it. One corner of my mouth lifted at the question. At the callousness of it.

The girl’s eyes narrowed. A brief look of shame flashed through them.

“Are you going to kill me?” she asked finally. “If you are, just do it. Just get it over with.”

She wasn’t begging for her freedom, or her life, for that matter. Hadn’t offered a single bribe—they usually did. Offered all the money they had. Their families had. They didn’t have a clue that what I’d be paid would far exceed what most families of these lost girls could earn in a year.

Lost girls. I’d come to call them that. This one, though, this Gia—she was

no lost girl. No. She was different, and I wanted to know what it was that made her so.

“You’re not here to die. You’re here to train. We only have two weeks, which is less than my usual. And given your...unpleasant disposition”—I let my gaze travel over her—“it’d take anyone else double that time.” I looked her in the eye and winked. “But I’m a professional. I’ll make it work.”

“Train?”

“Teach you how to behave—for the auction, at least. After that, you’re not my problem anymore.”

“What auction?”

“Slave auction. There’s one in two weeks. You’ll be there. Guest of honor. At least, one of the guests of honor. Let’s get you cleaned up, so I can see what I’ve got to work with.”

I reached up to free her cuffs from the hook, and she sighed in relief when her feet stood flat on the floor again. Holding her by one arm, I wrapped the other around the back of her neck and pulled her close. She planted her hands on my chest, keeping as much distance as she could between us.

“You want the cuffs off?”

She searched my masked face, focusing on my eyes, then nodded.

I reached into my pocket and took out two pills. “Open up.”

She eyed them. “What are they?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “They’ll help you relax.”

She shook her head. “No. I don’t want them.”

“I don’t recall asking you if you wanted them.”

She slowly turned her gaze up to mine and gave me a one-sided grin, then opened her mouth.

“Ahhh.”

Piece of work, this one. I would administer the sedative a different way

next time, and when I did, she'd be begging me to take it orally again. But for now, I brought my hand to her mouth and tilted it. But before the pills could slide in, she opened wide and bit hard into the flesh of my palm, breaking the skin.

"Fuck!" I yanked her off but only after she'd drawn blood. My hand automatically rose to slap her, and she cringed, cowering before me.

In the moment I hesitated, she backed up against the wall, eyes huge, hands up, palms to me.

I lowered my hand and took hold of her arm instead, shoving her to the floor. "Down!"

My blood streaked her skin where I held her. She made a sound when her knees hit the hardwood.

"Pick them up."

She whimpered, muttering something senseless. I squatted beside her and gripped the hair at the back of her neck to force her to look at me.

"Pick. Them. Up."

Her terrified eyes shifted from mine to the two pills lying on the floor and back. Holding my gaze, she felt for them and closed her fist around them.

"Hold them out to me."

She did, her hand trembling, her eyes locked on mine.

"You want to swallow these, or do you want me to shove them up your ass?" I sounded calm, as if I had full control of myself. Little did she know that was when I was at my worst. When rage owned me.

She studied me, perhaps unable to speak.

"Ass it is," I said, making to rise and dragging her with me. But by the time we were standing, those pills had disappeared down her throat, and she gripped my forearm, trying to relieve the pressure on her hair. "Open."

She did, and I turned her head this way and that to make sure she'd swallowed. She had.

I released her, and she stumbled backward.

“I owe you one,” I said, referring to a punishment, but from the look on her face, she didn’t get it. I headed to the door.

“Wait.”

I unlocked it and pulled it open. I’d bandage my hand while the pills did their work.

Gia moved toward me and then stopped.

“Go lay down,” I told her.

She’d be out soon. The dosage was probably too high. She was a little thing. I’d guess maybe 115 pounds soaking wet.

“Please let me go,” she managed.

I took her by the arm and walked her to the bed, picked her up, and placed her on top of it.

She pulled her knees into her chest, and my eyes fell again on the scab that had formed on her hip. Something about that worried me. I had a feeling I wouldn’t like what I found once the wound fully healed.

I met her gaze again. Our eyes locked, hers searching, uncertain.

She reached for the blanket, pulling it toward her. Her fingertips touched mine when I took hold of it and dragged it away.

Warmth was a privilege earned, and she had in no way earned it.

She shivered. “Please. I’m so cold.”

I looked at her and shook my head.

“Don’t fight me, Gia,” I whispered. “You won’t win.”

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