Ashes

AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE MAFIA ROMANCE

EVELYN FERRAS
I GRIP THE BOW AND close my eyes. The chilly air breezes around me, but in my mind, I’m somewhere else.

I’m with my brother.
A smile spreads across his lips, and his dark brown eyes observe me from under a mop of black hair.

I smile too as he touches my arm to correct my posture.
When I open my eyes, I let the arrow fly.
I’m alone again.
The arrow hits the target, and I wish Alex were here to hug me and tell me I was doing great.
But he’s not here.
He’s never going to be here again.
The roar of car engines catches my attention, and I look in the direction of the noise.
My father.
He’s back home early.
There’s no one else who’d be able to find our estate in the middle of nowhere, and if someone were here to attack us, the guards would’ve already sounded the alarm.

I race back into the house, my heart drumming in my chest.
When my brother was still alive, my father was away very often for long periods of time. It gave us plenty of time to breathe and plenty of time for Alex to teach me things that he wasn’t supposed to.

But unlike my father, Alex actually loved me.
I quickly hide the bow and my arrows in a big ornamented chest that my brother made and that my father never pays any attention to, and then I rush to get to my room to change into a dress.

My father must think that I’m a robot.
Since I’m a mafia princess, he expects me to behave and talk in a certain way. The delusional bubble in his narrow little mind just refuses to burst.
He expects that all mafia princesses are the same and that everyone will always do what he wants them to.

It’s pathetic.
It disgusts me more than anything else.
But until I can find a way to do something about my situation, I have to bite my tongue and bide my time.

Be the stupid, silly thing he expects me to be.
Even if I want to fill his body with arrows.
Too bad there are so many guards.
I slam the door of my room closed, and I can already picture my mother’s exasperated sigh because I’m not supposed to slam doors or make any noise.
I’m supposed to be a nice little plant.
A fragile, pretty flower.
I grab the pale pink dress I left on the bed.
While I’m trying to zip the damn thing up, I hear footsteps in the hallway.
“Paola!” my mom yells. “Your father wants to see you. Come! Hurry!”
He snaps his fingers, and just like that, his puppets have to move.
I let out a growl from the back of my throat as I stride to the door.
“Living room,” my mom says once I’m in the hallway, and I can see the judgment in her hazel eyes as she looks me up and down.
Everyone always finds something to hate about me.
I guess I exist to piss people off.
At least in my world.

Four guards stand in front of the door and regard me carefully.
I force my lips into a fake smile as I enter the living room. My father faces the window, his back to me. A servant is in the corner, pouring him a glass of whiskey.
Once the servant is gone, my father turns to me. His cold light blue eyes instantly narrow. He approaches me and roughly grasps my chin.
I glare at him, gritting my teeth.
“You’re flushed,” he says. “What were you doing?”
“Just hurrying here because you summoned me.”
He lets go of me, his lip curling in disgust. After picking up his glass, he takes a gulp of his whiskey.
“You’re to be married,” he says, his gaze meeting mine.
My jaw hits the floor.
Married?
No.
No fucking way.
But maybe it’ll be easier to get rid of my husband than my father.
“Everything’s been arranged. The wedding will be held next week,” he says. “I expect you to be on your best behavior. You will obey your husband and be a proper wife. Don’t embarrass me. You were born for this sole purpose, and I hope your mother taught you everything you need to know. I don’t like disappointments, and neither does Victor Santarossa.”
I stare at him as if someone just spilled a bucket of freezing water all over me.
No, it can’t be true.
I must’ve heard it wrong. There’s no way my father would marry me off to that family. Our biggest enemy and rival.

“What?” I say. “Santarossa?”

Annoyance flashes through my father’s eyes. “Yes.”

“But you can’t!” I curl my fingers into fists, shooting him a glare as rage courses through my veins.

“That family is the reason why Alex is dead! You can’t possibly want to—”

“Quiet!” my father snaps.

“No! I’m not marrying a Santarossa!” I raise my voice. “I’m not!”

He crosses the distance between us and slaps me hard across the face. His fingers wind into my hair, gripping tightly.

“You will do as I say,” he hisses. “Santarossa and I have reached an agreement. We’ve been enemies for too long. It’s hurting our business. A peace treaty will change everything for the better. You may not be able to understand it, but it’s a wise decision.”

“It’s only been three years! How can you do that to Alex? How can you do that to your son?”

“Alex is dead. Now get out of my sight and go to your room! My decision is final. You won’t ruin this. I won’t let you. And next time you open your mouth, it will only be to say I do.” He shoves me toward the door.

It’s pointless to argue with him, and I’m so angry I can barely think, so I storm out of there.

My mother waits in front of the door to my room. Her head is bowed, a photo in her hand. She could stand like that for hours and not show any discomfort.

She looks up at me.

“Do you know?” I ask. “He wants me to marry—”

“I understand you’re worried, but you don’t have to be. Your father knows what’s best for our family, and if you do exactly what I taught you, I’m sure you won’t have any trouble with your husband. He’s not going to hurt you.”

Yes, because him hurting me is the only fucking problem here.

I despise that family.

I want them all to die.

And Victor...

I want to rip his heart out of his chest.

“Here,” my mother says, handing me the photo. “Your future husband is very handsome.”

I stare at her. “But Alex—”

“Alex’s gone, honey.” She gives me a sad look. “We all miss him, but I’m sure he’d want you to do this. Peace is what matters, and we need to forgive our enemies. We can’t be angry forever. It would destroy us.”

Oh yes, we can be fucking angry forever, and if it destroys us, so what? It doesn’t matter as long as we take our enemy down with us.

I glance at Victor’s photo.

His dark brown eyes stare back at me. His face is expressionless, his full lips pressed together. His short messy dark brown hair looks as if he just ran his hand through it when he got out of bed.

Handsome, yes, but cold, cruel, and unfeeling too.

A monster.

I scrunch up the photo and throw it to the floor.

“No,” I say. “I won’t marry him.”
My mom licks her lips. She hates arguing, or even raising her voice.
"Things could be much worse," she says. "He’s only twenty-three. I’m sure you’ll learn how to
love and take care of each other."
Like my father takes care of you?
Yeah, I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy.
So I should be happy that I’m supposed to marry someone who’s only three years older than me
and not some disgusting old pervert? Even if that guy is the most vile creature on the planet?
"Don’t you think it would be much, much better if I got to choose who I marry?" I ask.
"We can’t always get what we want, and we all must make sacrifices in this life."
I roll my eyes and brush past her.
If I keep talking to her, I’ll get nowhere.
She’ll never be on my side.
No one will.
I storm into my room, closing the door behind me, and then I let myself slide to the floor. It’s
impossible to control all the emotions that are coursing through me.
I want to scream.
I want to burn down the whole world.
I want to kill Victor and his family.
Without thinking, I sink my teeth into my bare arm. The pain helps me focus.
There’s only one thing I want now.
Revenge.
The Santarossas will pay for what they did to my brother.
Even if it’s the last thing I’ll do.
Chapter 2

THE GUY SCREAMS AS I punch him in the nose, blood spraying everywhere.
“Please,” he cries, his dark eyes pleading with me. “Please stop!”
I don’t know what his name is. I never bothered to ask. It doesn’t even matter.
My father’s men have caught him spying, and I volunteered to interrogate him to find out who he works for.
I regard him with disinterest. “Tell me what I want to know, and I’ll let you go.”
I’m getting bored.
He hasn’t said anything useful, and he has to be in a lot of pain. His begging and crying grates on my nerves.
I suspect he has no idea who hired him. Someone must’ve approached him and offered him money, and the dumb guy accepted without even knowing anything about my family.
“I swear I don’t know,” he chokes out. “It was some guy. Tall. Dark eyes. He was wearing a green hoodie.”
I cock my head at him. “Was that so hard?”
I think I know who he’s talking about. The hoodie guy is a member of the Ruffino gang that operates very close to our territory.
They’re going to pay for this little failed attempt at doing who knows what. It’s not like some pathetic gang can do something against us.
“Will you let me go now?” he asks.
“Yes. Yes, I will.” I pull out my gun and put a bullet between his eyes.
Free like a bird.
Or a ghost.
“Sir!”
I turn toward the man in a black suit who’s spoken.
“Your father requests your immediate presence,” he says.
“All right. Take care of the body. Have someone place a bomb in the Ruffino gang’s hideout. That bar they love to frequent.”

That should be enough to get rid of them and their silly plans. They won’t try to mess with us again.

“Yes, sir. But—”

I raise an eyebrow at him.

The guy presses his lips together and inclines his head.

That’s better.

I head to my car. If my father wants to see me so urgently, then it has to be because he wants to talk about something important.

Maybe something interesting finally happens.

“YOU WANTED TO SEE ME,” I say to my father as I enter his office.

“Yes,” my father says, lifting his dark eyes to me, as he runs his hand through his graying brown hair. “I found you a wife.”

He slides a photo across his desk as I take a seat in the chair opposite him.

A beautiful girl with straight long black hair and piercing blue eyes stares back at me from the photo.

And then I jerk back.

Wait, I know her.

She looks older now, but I know who she is.

Paola Esposito.

The only daughter of our biggest enemy.

“You want me to marry Esposito’s daughter?” This is definitely interesting.

Unexpected.

“Yes, her father and I struck a deal. It’s time to put our differences behind us. We’ve lost millions because of our feud with them. Esposito is aware of that.”

I nod.

He’s right.

If you want to be successful, you can’t let emotions rule your decisions.

I have my role to play in this world, just like everyone else.

If my father thinks marrying Paola is a good thing, then I’ll do it. He always wants me to keep my head clear, no matter what.

Except, that sneaky little bitch is one of the reasons why my brother is dead.

I want to make her pay.

And I don’t care if my father agrees or disagrees with it. She’ll be mine to do with as I please.

“Do I have to keep her alive?” I ask, keeping my face expressionless.

If I let even a tiny bit of anger show, my father would see it as a weakness.

“At least for a few years, yes. She’ll belong to you, and you can do whatever you want with her. But don’t ruin her pretty face because we might need her to appear in public with you from time to time, and we don’t want her father to change his mind about our deal.”

That’s perfectly fine with me.

Paola will regret even leaving the house on that damn night that changed everything.
“Do we get anything else?” I ask.
Not having to waste our time and resources fighting each other is a good thing, but I suspect there’s more. With my father, there’s always something more.
“We do. We have a common enemy. I’m sure you know who I’m talking about.”
“Beltran,” I say. “He’s in your way, and in the Espositos’ way too.”
“Yes, Esposito and I are going to attack together. We can defeat him, and once we have his territory, we’re going to divide it between us. That territory will provide us with a safe and more direct route for our shipments.”
“Okay. If you need me to do anything, let me know.”
My father inclines his head, and I get to my feet.
MY WEDDING DAY COMES all too soon, and I have a plan.
   I’m going to kill my husband.
   So, when no one’s looking, I snatch a knife and slide it into the sheath strapped to my thigh under
my white gown.
   My mother chose the dress, and I’m glad the veil and the skirt aren’t too big and won’t get in my
way.
   I just finish lowering my dress when the door opens and my mother enters my room. Her gaze falls
on my arm, and it takes me a moment to realize what she’s looking at.
   Ah yes, the bite marks.
   “What happened to your arm?” she asks.
   “It was an accident,” I say.
   “I’ll get some makeup to cover it up.” She hurries out of the room.
   Cover it up.
   Right.
   The only thing that ever matters is that no one can see how you really feel or what you really
think.
   So yeah, cover it up with clothes and makeup, and put up a facade.
   Don’t let the pain out.
   Never.
   My mother never likes to talk about anything with me. I guess she doesn’t care how I feel because
she knows my opinions and feelings don’t matter.
   I hate that so fucking much.
   But at least I’ll be out of this house.
   Away from my parents.
I GRIT MY TEETH AND grip a bouquet of flowers in my hand as my father leads me down the aisle. Victor is waiting for me at the end, his face expressionless, but he looks as handsome as ever in his black suit.

Monsters shouldn’t be pretty like that.
He looks like an ordinary bad boy.
Someone you might meet at college or in a club.
The one who whispers sweet things in your ear, fucks you, and then disappears.
The one who can’t remember your name in the morning.
Or doesn’t even bother to remember it.
But his looks don’t matter to me. I want him dead. And as soon as I get a chance, I’ll make my move.

My father lets go of me and I face Victor, lifting my veil.
He regards me with a cold, impassive gaze.
The priest starts the ceremony, and all I can think about is that my brother is counting on me to do this right.
Till death do us part.
Hell yeah.
“You may kiss the bride,” the priest says.
Victor catches my chin, pulling me to him, and I’m actually looking forward to it. Our lips collide, and I bite his lower lip so hard I can taste blood.
He pulls away with a gasp, a hint of surprise in his eyes that quickly vanishes, and a chilling smile that doesn’t reach his eyes spreads across his lips.
He catches my arm, tugging me to him.
“I’ll destroy you,” he whispers into my ear, his hot breath sending a shiver down my spine. “You belong to me now.”
I hiss at him, glaring at him.
He grips my hand as we go through a crowd of people who congratulate us as if we were actually a happy couple in love.
It’s ridiculous.
I guess what my family and Victor’s are really celebrating is the deal that just became official.
Money and power.
Those are the only two things that matter to them.
“Son, won’t you stay for the party?” Victor’s father asks.
“All right then.” His father claps him on the back.
I’m glad we’ll be out of here sooner rather than later.
I glance at my mother and father. My father is grinning as he’s talking to one of the guests. I don’t even know many of the people who are here.
My mother smiles next to him, like a perfect little prop.
It’s nauseating.
Victor says something to his guards that I don’t catch because I’m too busy staring at my mother as she briefly catches my gaze and bows her head again.
Victor takes me outside, to the parking lot.
He lets go of my hand as he searches for his car keys in his pockets.
I slow down, falling behind him. When I glance around, the guards are too far away and going to their own cars.
No one’s watching.
I quickly lift my dress and pull the knife from its sheath.
My fingers tighten around the hilt, and I hurry after Victor.
I raise my hand, but Victor spins around so fast that my breath catches. His fingers curl around my wrist.
He tugs me to him, so my back ends up pressed against his front. His fingers squeeze my wrist so hard that I yelp, and my grip on the knife loosens.
He yanks it out of my hand.
Only a moment later, he has the knife pressed to my throat.
“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he hisses.
I grind my teeth together.
I failed.
I fucking failed.
But if Victor doesn’t kill me right now, there’ll be another opportunity.
I’ll find one.
For Alex.
Victor tosses away the knife, and then he grabs my wrists and captures them behind my back. I feel him tying something around them as I futilely struggle against him.
He squeezes it so tightly that I groan.
Is the silky but strong material his tie?
“Come, wife.” He drags me with him to the car.
I narrow my eyes at him as he shoves me into the back seat.
I’ll kill him, even if it’s the last thing I do.
THE LOOK PAOLA GIVES me as I bring her to my house is one of pure hatred.
The feeling is completely mutual.
Even if she’s hot, especially when she glares at me with so much passion in her eyes.
It’s fascinating and a little intriguing.
All the other women from mafia families I’ve had a chance to meet weren’t like this. Not even close.
And the women I fucked were willing to do pretty much anything I asked of them.
Everyone always wanted to please me, but Paola tried to kill me.
Nothing about her is innocent.
Now I don’t think it was her family who forced her to act and lure my brother into a trap.
No, it was all her.
And for that, I’m going to make her pay.
She doesn’t say anything as I lead her down the hallway, my grip on her arm tight.
I open the door to a room that’s been prepared for her, and I shove her inside. As I close and lock the door, I wonder if she’ll manage to free herself.
Probably.
She may try something again, but she’ll fail.
She’s too emotional.
She lets her feelings overtake her.
Her anger is clearly shown on her face, like an open book.
It’s a weakness, even if she doesn’t realize it yet.
After a few days in this room, she’s going to be begging and crying.
And then, I’ll have some fun with her.
I’ll break her.
I’ll make her life as miserable as possible.
I take a deep breath to relax as I climb to my feet, but it’s impossible to let go of my fury. Wiggling my wrists, I try to get the damn tie off. The pain almost feels good. I can’t believe I failed. Everything was so damn perfect. I was inches away from burying my knife into Victor’s throat. But he was too fast, and I was too slow. Again. It seems like I can never do things fast enough. I was late to save Alex too. After some struggling, I manage to free my wrists. My skin is red as I rub it, my fingers tingling. I stare at Victor’s tie in disgust. Maybe I can use it to strangle him, but he’s too strong. I already got a taste of his muscular arms around me, and I know I can’t easily defeat him. As I look around the spacious room, I search for something that I could use. It’s a nice room, with a king-sized bed and a huge closet. I see a door that leads to a private bathroom too. There’s no TV, or any books, or a phone. No weapons either, which isn’t a surprise. I go closer to the windows. They’re covered with bars. It’s getting darker outside, and I curl my fingers into fists when I realize my father is partying and celebrating my wedding right now. Everyone’s so happy that I’m miserable, and no one cares about what my husband might do to me. I look up at the ceiling. “I’m sorry, Alex,” I whisper, tears filling the corners of my eyes. “But I promise I’ll do better.” If Victor thinks he’ll just stroll in here tonight and have his way with me, he’s wrong. I’d rather die than let him touch me.
I stride to the closet and open it wide. It’s filled with clothes, mostly dresses. Because, hey, what else would a mafia princess wear, right?

Ugh.

People and their stupid preconceptions.

I highly doubt Victor bought the clothes himself.

It had to be someone else.

A servant, probably.

I finally find a pair of black pants and a black top.

There’s a mirror in the bathroom.

Maybe I can smash it and use a sharp piece to kill Victor.

After I change my clothes, I throw the dress into the trash can. It doesn’t really fit, so it’s spilling everywhere, but I don’t give a damn.

Just as I come out of the bathroom and eye the chair that’s in front of the desk so I could use it to break the mirror, I hear the door click.

Victor opens it.

I rush to the nightstand and snatch a lamp off it. Victor ducks as I chuck it at him. As I look for something else to throw at him, he lunges at me.

His arms wind around me from behind, and I throw my head back, hitting him hard in the face.

He briefly lets go of me with a hiss as I spin around. His fingers come away with blood, and his face darkens.

He catches my wrists, shoving me hard against the wall and trapping me with his body. I thrash against him, but it’s like trying to move a mountain.

“Calm the fuck down,” he says.

“Why? So you can fuck me?” I shout as I keep struggling. “If you think I’m going to sleep with my brother’s killer, you’re wrong!”

His gaze narrows at me. “Don’t forget your part in all of it. Your brother killed mine first with your help!”

“What?” Is he on something? “What the fuck are you talking about? You killed my brother! I didn’t do anything!”

His brow furrows. “My father killed Alex because Alex killed Rodrigo first. It was payback! And you know it. Because you helped Alex lure Rodrigo into a trap.”

I let out a laugh. “Stop fucking lying! I know it was you! Everyone does!”

“You’re fucking crazy,” he says. “I know what I did and didn’t do. But clearly, you don’t.”

I blink at him in confusion as he lets go of me and storms to the door.

This conversation was just surreal.

Why would he deny what he did? Does he think that will make me more agreeable?

Well, his attempt at gaslighting me isn’t going to work.

He killed Alex.

If Alex had to kill Rodrigo first, it was because he was defending himself.

I’m sure of it.

I know Alex.

My brother would never risk starting a war, no matter what happened, and he wouldn’t lose his temper.

Rodrigo came after him first, and Alex had no choice.

Then, once Victor found out his brother was dead, he went after Alex.
I don’t know why he’s trying to deny it now.
The Santarossas are all fucking crazy.
But at least I got Victor to leave.
There’s no way I’m going to let him touch me.
I’ll kill him first.
PAOLA IS FUCKING INSANE.

Why would she accuse me of killing her brother when it was my father who did it? And what does it even matter?
Why would she deny her role in everything? She should be glad she’s not dead too, and that my father only killed Alex and not her too.
Maybe she’s truly crazy and delusional, and her mind is coming up with things that don’t make any sense.
Unless the woman who was with Alex that night wasn’t her.
I suppose it wouldn’t make a difference, but I want to make sure, so I go find my father. He knows what happened.
“I didn’t expect to see you so soon,” my father says as he looks up at me from his desk. “Is there a problem with your wife?”
“Actually, yes.” I take a seat.
“She wasn’t a virgin?” My father’s gaze narrows.
“It’s not that. She said something. About the night Rodrigo died.”
He’s giving me nothing, just staring at me with an impassive look in his eyes.
“She claims she wasn’t with Alex, and she thinks it was me who killed him.”
His eyebrows rise. “Why are you wasting both mine and your time with this? Women are unreasonable. Who cares what she thinks? You need her to give you heirs, not her opinion. What’s gotten into you?”
“Nothing, Father. I just wonder if maybe you saw some other woman with Alex that night. Maybe it wasn’t Paola. I ask because if it wasn’t her, we have to find that woman and punish her for her part in everything.”
“It was Paola. I’m sure of it. She was there with Alex. You know what happened. She pretended her car broke down just at the edge of our territory because Alex knew Rodrigo would pass through.
that area. You know how crazy Rodrigo was after women. One just had to bat her eyelashes at him, and he was done for. I was working on fixing his weakness, but he stopped to help because he didn’t recognize her. Alex then jumped out and killed him, and they both ran away. I questioned a witness myself, and then I found them. They were together. When I confronted Alex, Paola ran away. I let her. She was just a silly child. Not of any consequence.”

Paola might have been seventeen then, but I doubt she was only doing what her brother told her. My father thinks she’s innocent, but I don’t.

“It was a good thing I found them and that I let her go. A life for a life. If I killed her too, we wouldn’t have this deal that we have now. We wouldn’t be able to let go of the past and focus on bigger things,” he says. “If it weren’t for that poker game, things would’ve been different. But that’s all in the past. Don’t listen to your wife’s ramblings. She should keep her mouth shut and only speak when you ask her a question.”

I’ve always thought the poker game thing was a little suspicious. Apparently, Alex and Rodrigo were at a private club playing poker, and Alex lost. He couldn’t handle it, so he prepared a trap for my brother.

It sounds like a stupid reason, but there were witnesses.
And my father questioned them all.
Still, I don’t trust anyone other than myself. People lie all the time when it suits them.
Maybe Paola’s lying.
That’s the most likely option.
Or maybe the witnesses lied for some reason.
Maybe to pit the Santarossas and the Espositos against each other for their own benefit.
But I doubt my father would be careless when it came to figuring out the truth.
Paola has to be lying.
Maybe she thinks it’ll save her from me.
Maybe she thinks if she acts crazy, I’ll leave her alone.
I can almost admire her for coming up with that plan.
But it’s not going to work.
I’m not going to fall for it.
I can pretend I’m giving her exactly what she wants. After some time in that room, she’s going to truly lose her mind, and then she’ll be willing to do just about anything to get out.

Anything I ask of her.
That’s going to be fun.
I’m looking forward to it.
I CAN’T STOP THINKING about that brief moment of surprise on Victor’s face. Or at least I think it was surprise.

What if he’s not the one who killed Alex?
What if someone else did it?
Maybe it doesn’t even matter. The Santarossas are responsible for what happened. No matter what story they came up with.

I swore on Alex’s grave that I would kill the person who ended his life.
My father told me Victor had done it as soon as he found out Rodrigo was dead. I could never understand why my father didn’t want to retaliate, especially because there’s no way Alex started the whole thing like the Santarossas claim.

But my father never tells me much, so it’s possible he knows something that I don’t. I don’t know why he’d lie about Victor.
If one of the Santarossas’ men did it, my father would’ve told me.
The Santarossas are all guilty, and I hate them more than anything in the world.
But if someone else pulled the trigger and ended my brother’s life, I need to know who it was.
Except, who’s going to tell me?
Victor claims his father did it, but I know that’s not true.
So who else is there to blame?
Victor’s father is the head of the Santarossa family. Rodrigo is dead, so there’s only Victor.
If it’s not Victor, then it has to be one of the Santarossa men.
But how am I going to find out which one?
I don’t care if he was just following orders.
I made a promise to my brother, and I’m going to fulfill it.
Except, if I want to figure something out, I need to get out of this room. Victor won’t cooperate or help me.
I don’t even know where he is, but I’m glad he hasn’t come to see me.
There was only a woman who brought me food.
At least there’s a clock on the wall, so I know what time it is, but I don’t know if that’s going to help me.
I haven’t shattered the mirror yet. Maybe I could use a sharp piece of glass as a weapon.
But I need a better way out.
Something more permanent.
Getting out of this room isn’t going to get me far because there are too many guards everywhere. Even if I threatened the maid, I wouldn’t get far.
No, I have to come up with something better.
I stared at the clock and tilted my head.
Maybe I know exactly what I have to do.
The servants have to be working on a schedule. If I can figure out at what time someone’s supposed to bring me breakfast, lunch, or dinner, then I can come up with a plan too.
A smile spreads across my lips.
And if my plan fails, oh well.
At least I tried.
I can’t be trapped in this room or in this house.
I’m never going to be Victor’s wife.
Better dead than living like this.
Maybe Alex will forgive me, even if I fail yet again.
IT’S BEEN A FEW DAYS, and the maid that brings Paola food every day told me that she appeared calm and collected.

Maybe it’s finally time to pay another visit to my wife.
It’s almost dinner time.
I could surprise her and see if she’s willing to behave.
If not, I have all the time in the world.
She’ll see that fighting and defying me is pointless, and it’s better if she does exactly as I say.
I’ll see if her story about the day Rodrigo died changes too. Maybe she’ll confess she lied to me.
I unlock the door and push it open, half expecting to find Paola glaring at me and throwing something at me.

Just because she was calm with the maid doesn’t mean she’ll do the same with me.
But when my gaze finds her, I’m rooted to the spot.
She’s lying in the middle of the floor, a piece of broken glass in her bloody fingers. Her wrists are coated with blood, and there’s blood on the floor too.
My heart rate accelerates, and for a moment, I wonder if I’m trapped in a memory instead of reality.
But when I blink, it’s not my mother that’s on the floor in a pool of blood.
It’s definitely Paola.
Fuck!
I race to her, crouching next to her. When I press my finger against her neck, I can still feel her pulse.
I yell for help, picking her up in my arms.
Goddammit, Paola.
Why?
I PACE UP AND DOWN the hospital hallway.

Why would Paola do that?
Did she expect someone would find her?
Does she know about what my mother did?
My father always says my mother was weak, and that was why she did what she did.
But Paola’s completely different.
She’s full of fire.
Strong.
Vicious.
I thought she’d try to escape, but not this way.
I try not to remember the things I buried deep into a dark corner of my mind, but I can’t stop the memories.
As I close my eyes, I can see my mother’s body on the floor, her empty eyes staring at the ceiling.
And then the image changes, and I see Paola.
The images flash back and forth.
I open my eyes and drive my fist into a nearby wall.
I let out a hiss, glancing down at my bloody knuckles.
Fuck!
I don’t lose control like this.
I don’t let my emotions get the better of me.
I don’t want to feel any of this.
I don’t want to remember.
But Paola fucked everything up.
I hate her more than ever.
Maybe that’s been her intention all along.
As I turn, I spot the Espositos coming toward me.
I quickly wipe all emotion off my face and lower my hand.
“I’m sorry this has happened,” Esposito says with a grave face.
His wife stands next to him, her eyes trained on the floor.
“I will take care of everything,” Paola’s father adds.
I furrow my brow because I have no clue what he’s talking about.
“The bills,” he says. “And to make sure word of this doesn’t get out.”
“All right.” I realize he doesn’t even know if his daughter is alive or dead, but I suppose he doesn’t care.
Our deal wouldn’t be affected if Paola died by her own hand.
“Is she alive?” he finally asks.
“Yes.”
“Hmm.” He pulls his wife with him down the hallway.
Once the doctor comes out, he approaches the Espositos. I can’t hear what they’re saying, but they go through a door that he indicates.
I decide to go after them.
Maybe Paola is awake.
I carefully open the door.
It’s not a room.
It’s a small hallway with multiple rooms.
They’re all empty, except for the one at the end.
I inch closer to the door that’s cracked open.
“What were you thinking?” Paola’s father yells. “How dare you embarrass me like this?”
“You said Victor killed Alex. Is that true?” she asks.
“Yes, but I told you that was in the past. You can’t behave like this! You’re a disappointment and
an embarrassment. You will beg your husband for forgiveness. Do you understand me? You’ll cry and
beg if you have to!”
What the fuck?
I didn’t kill Alex.
Where did they all get that idea?
“Victor says he didn’t do it,” Paola says. “He says his father did it, but I know that’s not true.”
“What does it matter? What is wrong with you?” her father says. “Your husband is clearly trying
to be nicer to you than you deserve, so he lied to protect your feelings. He’s smart and wants your
marriage to be successful. Even if it wasn’t him, it doesn’t make a difference.”
“It matters! How can you expect me to live with the man who murdered your only son?! Your
heir!”
“I have a replacement in mind. Don’t worry about that.”
“Are you saying I have a half-brother somewhere out there? In front of my mother?”
“That’s none of your business.”
“You’re fucking insane!” Paola screams.
“Language.” Her mother speaks for the first time.
“Yes, Mother. I know you’re afraid of words, and I don’t give a shit.”
“You will stop with this childish behavior,” her father says. “If you don’t, you’ll only make things
worse for yourself. Don’t forget that.”
Footsteps sound, and I move away from the door and slip into one of the empty rooms, waiting for
everyone to leave.
Once they’re gone, I head to Paola’s room.
I find her on her feet and trying to get the hospital gown off her.
“You’re not going anywhere,” I say.
She spins toward me and growls. As she tries to start toward me, she sways on her feet and has to
catch herself on the bed.
“Lie down,” I command. “Was that your little plan? To escape?”
Her nose crunches as she sits down on the bed.
Yeah, it was her plan.
Even if there was a huge risk of her dying in the process.
She’s either recklessly brave or completely insane.
“You lied to me,” she says, lifting her chin up. “My father confirmed that you killed Alex.”
“I heard that, but it’s not true.”
“Why would my father lie?”
“I don’t know. It was my father who killed your brother. He told me that himself.”
“No.” She shakes her head. “I saw your father while I was looking for my brother that night. He
was in a different part of town. I don’t think it was physically possible for him to get to Alex before I
did because there’s only one road leading to that spot, and Alex was still breathing when I found
I observe her face.
I don’t think she’s lying.
"Why would my father lie?" I ask.
She shrugs. "I don’t know. Maybe he wanted it to be a Santarossa who killed my brother instead of a random soldier."
"That doesn’t make sense."
"Yeah, and neither do our fathers’ stories. Because there’s clearly more than one story."
"If there was something they were covering up, they’d make sure their stories matched. And why would they do that? Why would they lie to their own family?"
"Maybe there was someone else involved. My father just implied I have a half-brother, so who knows what else he’s hiding." She presses her lips into a tight line. "Or maybe their stories are different because I told my father I saw yours, so he could’ve altered his story because he didn’t think you and I would ever talk about it. Hell, maybe you have a half-brother out there too, and your father is lying to protect that secret from you so you wouldn’t know you can easily be replaced."
Fire burns in Paola’s eyes.
"So you weren’t with Alex and lured my brother into a trap? You weren’t there with him? My father swears you were and that he let you run away."
"I wasn’t there. I’d never just run. I’d fight for my brother or die trying. I was looking for him and I found him too late." Her eyes fill with tears. "He died in my arms."
I don’t think she’s lying, and now, I don’t think she’d run either.
"That would mean both our fathers are lying," I say. "But why? It makes zero sense."
"I don’t know. Maybe they’re playing some game. Was your father happy with Rodrigo taking over after him? Because my father and Alex didn’t get along all that well."
I think about it for a few moments.
"My father and my brother had their differences, but nothing too significant or too much of a problem." That I know of.
"What if there’s someone else? Someone who knows our fathers’ secrets? Their secret children or something else?" she asks. "What if that person killed our brothers and then found a way to blackmail our fathers? We both know there’s bigger fish out there. I mean, sure. Why lie to your own family? Lie to everyone else, right? But I know my father doesn’t trust me. I don’t know about yours. If we knew the truth, we could’ve become a liability."
She’s right that our fathers’ stories are full of holes, but the whole thing seems stupid.
Only, I don’t trust my father either.
But Paola and I could talk, like we’re doing now.
So if there was a cover-up, it would’ve fallen apart.
Unless everyone expected Paola would grow up to be a quiet and obedient wife, and I would never ask anything because my father never expects anyone to question him.
Plus, why would I believe anything Paola said?
If I haven’t heard her father say it, I probably wouldn’t have.
There’s something wrong about all this.
I never thought about it too much because it was easier not to.
I miss Rodrigo.
VICTOR’S FACE IS PENSIVE.
I already know what he’s going to do.
He’ll just do what everyone does.
Ignore me.
Despite hearing my father say it, Victor will come up with a story to explain everything away. I’m just a silly girl who knows nothing and can’t possibly comprehend anything.
“Tell me what you believe happened that night,” he says.
My lips part in surprise.
But our fathers are clearly lying to us for some reason, and they didn’t expect we’d ever talk about it, which really isn’t a surprise.
Why would I believe Victor, and why would he believe me?
If I acted the way my father wanted me to, the conversation wouldn’t even have come up.
“It was getting late. Alex promised he’d come home so we could watch a movie together, but he didn’t show up. I kept texting and calling him, but he didn’t answer. I got worried. I knew my father wouldn’t do anything about it, and he wasn’t home either. But I remembered Alex was supposed to be at this private club for men, so I got on my bicycle and went there. I couldn’t see his car in the parking lot, so I kept going. I saw your father about three blocks away, so I hurried in the opposite direction. Then I remembered Alex liked to grab some food at one restaurant on his way back home. It was in the same direction I was going and just out of town. It’s a small place for people to grab something while they’re passing through. I finally spotted his car on the side of the road.”
My throat constricts as the images play in front of my eyes.
“I was worried because there was a huge field and a lot of trees, and it was dark. I called for him and I stumbled around. And then I saw him lying in the grass. I ran to him. He’d been shot. There was a lot of blood. He looked at me, and he tried to say something, but then he just... He was gone.”
Victor watches me carefully, and I hate that his face is so damn expressionless.
“What’s your story?” I ask.

Will he even bother to tell me now that he found out what he wanted to know?

“I only know what I was told. I was away on a mission. I was actually just on my way back when my father called me. He said that Rodrigo and Alex were at the club, and that they played a poker game. Alex lost and he was really upset about it. Then you and Alex waited for Rodrigo on his way home. You pretended your car broke down and that you needed help. My brother could never resist helping pretty women, so he stopped to give you a hand. Alex jumped out and killed him. You two then ran. But someone saw you. They called my father. When my father found out, he chased after you. He killed Alex and let you run away.”

“And he swears it was me he saw?”

Victor nods. “It’s possible there was some other girl who looked like you. I don’t know why he believes it was you, especially if it was dark. But he’d never admit he was wrong.”

“But there wasn’t anyone with Alex when I found him, and the girl definitely wasn’t me. Who was the witness? They have to know more, right?”

“I don’t know. My father never told me.”

“And you didn’t ask?”

“Why would I? It was one of the rare things I didn’t think he’d be lying about. And I lost my brother, so I didn’t even think there was anything wrong with the story. Rodrigo was dead anyway, and my father said he took care of his killer. There was nothing more to do.”

“Why would he let me live, if he really thought the girl was me?”

“It was a life for a life. Killing you would’ve started an even bigger war. If you think what happened between our families was bad, it would’ve been much worse if your father had lost both of his children that night. My father never lets his emotions get the better of him. He got vengeance to make things right, and he knew when to stop.”

“Who knows?” I flash him a smile I don’t feel. “Maybe my father has a replacement daughter somewhere too. But I don’t believe my brother started anything. I think he was defending himself, and that if he killed Rodrigo, it was in self-defense.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“What if the mystery girl had something to do with it? Why would your father let her go? And how did he manage to teleport? There’s only one road leading to that place where I found my brother. I don’t think he was just lying there and dying for a long time. His wounds were... They looked bad. I think I narrowly missed the killer. But if someone else killed Alex, why would your father cover for them? Is my father doing the same? Or does he even know?”

“We both agree on one thing,” he says.

“And what’s that?” I tilt my head at him.

“Both Rodrigo and Alex were at that club before they died.”

“Yeah, I think that part of the story is true. But were they alone or was the mystery girl with them?”

“Rodrigo had a girlfriend, but he wasn’t with her that night. I know because I was the one who had to tell her he died. She had a family thing she had to attend.”

“Ale...
Fuck.
My plan to escape didn’t work, and now I have no idea what to do.
My brother’s killer is still out there somewhere, and I don’t know who they are.
And Victor is probably going to go investigate on his own, and it’s doubtful if he’s even going to bother telling me anything.
I’m going back to my prison.
At least until I find another way, because I don’t intend to give up.
I NEED TO FIND OUT the truth. I could confront my father, but if he insists on a lie, it’s not going to do me any good.

No, I can’t trust my father, and I can’t trust Paola either. Her story makes sense, but for now, it’s just a story.

She and her father may have plotted something to confuse me and turn me against my family. Maybe she’s trying to manipulate me.

I need to find at least one of the witnesses who saw Rodrigo that night, but I can’t ask my father because if I bring the matter up again, he’s going to get suspicious. And if he’s hiding something, he’ll make sure all the evidence goes away.

The private club where Rodrigo and Alex were that night still exists, so I head there.

I wait in the parking lot and watch the people come and go.

Until I see a familiar face.

A dark-haired, dark-eyed guy.

Landon Rowley, my brother’s friend.

I get out of the car.

“Victor, hey man!” Landon flashes me a smile. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“I heard you got married. Congrats.”

“Thanks.”

“What are you doing here?” He glances over his shoulder toward the club. “Wait, are you thinking about becoming a member?”

“Maybe.” I shrug.

“That would be awesome. You’re going to love it!”

“Hey, do you remember the night Rodrigo died?”

“Yeah.” His smile fades. “I miss him so much.”
“Was there anything else aside from that poker game that angered Alex Esposito?”

Landon looks away, scratching the back of his head. “Um, no. I don’t think so. But I don’t know. I was drunk.”

“So you didn’t see Alex flipping over his chair after he lost and threatening Rodrigo?”

“Not really. Why do you ask?”

Because my father said to me that Landon was the one who told him about what happened at the club.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“I know you miss him too, but you should leave the past in the past. Bringing it up is not going to help. And you’re married to the Esposito girl.”

“I know. Forget I asked. It was just a random thought.” I give him a smile. “I miss Rodrigo, and I’m always looking for an excuse to talk about him. And since you were one of his best friends—”

“I understand. We can have a drink sometime and talk about him as much as you want. But maybe about some happier times.”

“Yes, of course.”

“It was good to see you, but I gotta run.” He waves and strides to his car.

Lies, lies, and more lies.

How haven’t I seen any of it before?

It’s not like my father hasn’t lied to me more than once.

Maybe those few times when he said he was meeting someone in a certain place and then I’d see the person he was supposedly with somewhere else, he’d been plotting something.

But what? Why hide it from me?

I’ve never managed to catch the person he was really meeting with, and I was busy grieving my brother, so I didn’t think about it.

I should have.

But I know who might have the key to the mystery about what happened at the club.

The club’s owner.

The elusive Gianni Torre.

I head to the front door.

Four men are there, guarding it.

“I need to speak to your boss,” I say.

“Are you a member of the club, sir?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Then I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do,” the man says with a pleasant smile.

“Can I schedule a meeting? It’s important.”

“I’m afraid not, sir. But if you want to apply for membership—”

I groan.

Rodrigo told me once that a mafia boss was upset because Gianni wouldn’t let him into his club. The guy got angry and attacked the club.

His mauled body was found hanging upside down from the window of his own house. No one ever found out what happened to the guy’s men or how Gianni defeated him.

But the club remained untouched, and no one could connect the guy’s death with Gianni.

Getting to Gianni isn’t easy, and there are rumors that he’s hired assassins to watch him too and kill anyone who gets too close.

The only way someone can get to Gianni is through his club.
“Yes, I’d like to apply,” I say.
My brother spent his last hours in this damn place.
Maybe I could find out something.
But my father is going to be a problem.
He can’t know what I’m doing.
I can use Landon as an excuse for becoming a member, but I also need an ally once I’m inside.
I already know I need a woman with me to get into the club. It’s a requirement so everyone would bring their own entertainment.
I’ll need someone who’s not going to tell my father anything.
Someone he’s not going to trust or believe.
But can I trust her?
I guess I’ll find out.
VICTOR’S MEN TIED MY arm to the headboard of the bed, and no matter how much I try, I can’t get free.

I growl as I yank at my restraints once again. Waiting for someone to get here to free me so I could go to the bathroom seems like an eternity.

I’ll have to find a way to stay free once that happens, but I don’t know how I’m going to fight the four men who come for me.

I doubt Victor will tell them to ease up on the security.
My wrists and my arm hurt, and I embrace the pain.
It reminds me that I failed, but that I can’t give up now either.
When the door opens, Victor strolls in.
His face is expressionless, but something shifts in his eyes when his gaze lands on me. His eyes linger on the white bandages on my wrists.

“I’m going to find out what really happened,” he says, taking a seat on the edge of the bed next to me. “And if you behave, maybe I’ll tell you about it.”
I glare at him. “What are you going to do?”

“Become a member of that club Rodrigo and Alex frequented. I’ll find a way to get a meeting with the owner, Gianni. I’m going to check our fathers’ stories, including yours, from the very beginning to their end and see which version is the real one.”

“You need a woman to accompany you. I know the rules. Alex told me,” I say. “Are you sure there’s a woman out there you can trust with this? Someone who’s not going to run to your father?”

“That’s none of your business. I’ll hire someone. Money is a powerful motivator.”

“And she can betray you as soon as someone pays her more. Is that what you want?”

“Do I have a choice?” There’s something in his eyes. Something conniving.
He’s up to something.
I can tell.
But I don’t know what it is.
“Take me with you,” I say, sure that I’m going to regret my decision, but I want out of this room and this house, and I want to know what happened to my brother.
“You?” He lets out a laugh. “That would be a disaster. Do you even know what happens in that club? Do you know that women there are no more than slaves? If you had one of your temper tantrums there, we’d be kicked out forever. I’m not stupid enough to take that risk.”
I press my lips into a tight line.
Yes, I know that club sucks.
I don’t know why Alex even liked to go there.
But I’d like to find out.
No matter what it takes.
I was willing to die to get out of here. How is going to that club any more dangerous?
It’s not.
Can I trust Victor with my safety?
Probably not.
But it’s the only way.
I can find a way to escape and figure things out on my own.
Anything’s better than being stuck in this room and waiting for Victor’s mercy that will never come.
“I want to go,” I say. “I won’t do anything stupid. This is important to me. You know that.”
“You’re inexperienced. That’s not very entertaining. We won’t catch Gianni’s eye like that.”
“You don’t know me. You think I’m just a regular mafia princess. But Alex and I... He helped me sneak out of the house. I had a boyfriend when I was sixteen.”
Victor’s brow furrows. “A boyfriend?”
I nod. “I know what to do, okay?”
“Just because you had a boyfriend doesn’t mean you’re ready for the club. You’ll have to be naked in front of others and do—”
“I’m ready.” I meet his gaze. “Please. I promise I won’t do anything to put our mission at risk. You need me.”
He just watches me for a few long, long moments.
“All right,” he finally says. “But one wrong move, and you’re out. If you try to escape or attack me again, you’re going to regret it.”
“Are you sure your application is going to get accepted? You know the club has a special vetting process.”
A smile stretches across his lips. “Don’t worry about that. It’s not going to be a problem, but we’ll both have to get tested for STDs. And we need to find some sexy lingerie for you.”
His gaze lowers to my black tank top.
I roll my eyes.
This plan better work, or I’m going to be so pissed off.
I STARE AT THE BLACK lace lingerie I’m wearing and bite down on my lip. Victor had his men bring in a huge mirror so I could get ready.

Maybe this is a bad idea.
I don’t know if I’ll be okay with what I’ll have to do at the club. I don’t know if I’ll be okay with everyone watching me.
I feel someone’s gaze on me and turn around.
For a few seconds, I catch Victor’s eyes traveling my body, his lips parted. For once, it seems like the mask he always keeps on his face is gone.
I can see desire clearly in his eyes, but it’s all gone a second later when his gaze lifts to mine.
“You can still back out,” he says.
“No.” I don’t want to back out.
I need to know what happened to Alex.
Maybe if there was really a woman with him, he’d met her at that damn club.
“Okay, but we’ll just explore and observe for our first time. We don’t have to participate because we’re new,” he says.
“Great.”
Victor brings me a long black coat and helps me shrug it on. I tie the coat tightly around myself.
“Don’t forget what we agreed on,” he says. “No bullshit. No trying to run away.”
“Yeah, fine.”
I glance once again at my reflection in the mirror.
Maybe it’s weird, but a part of me is excited.
It’s been a long time since I’ve done anything interesting.
Ever since Alex died.
I have no idea if this will be fun or the worst experience in my life, or maybe something in between.
I HOLD ONTO VICTOR’S arm with an iron grip as we enter the club.

Everything is in black and red tones, and we’re led down a dim red hallway to a big door. Two men are in front of it.

“Your coat, miss,” one of the men says.

I let go of Victor and shrug out of my coat. The men leer at me as one of them takes it.

Victor steps closer to me and winds his arm around my waist, pressing me to his warm body and making me shiver.

It’s not really cold in here.
It’s nicely warm, actually.

But as we step into a spacious room that’s filled with dim red light, all eyes turn toward us.

Victor takes me to an empty sofa in the back.

I keep looking around, but I don’t see any familiar faces, which isn’t a surprise.

A man is watching me, a glass in his hand, while a naked woman who’s kneeling between his legs gives him a blow job.

Everyone in here is in various states of undress. Some are just drinking and talking. Some are having sex.

A tingle surges through my core as I watch a naked couple making out.

As Victor and I take a seat, everyone’s attention turns to something else.

Maybe this isn’t as bad as I thought it’d be.

“Hello. Welcome to Gianni’s Pleasures,” a man says as he places a bottle on the table in front of us. “Since you’re new here, I think you might be interested in our special event.”

The man hands Victor a flyer.

I lean closer to Victor so I can see what it says, and he glances at me.

“There’s going to be a competition,” he says. “It’s like some kind of game. We have to do something, and each performance is rated by everyone who’s participating. The winner gets a special membership and access to the VIP area.”

“Does that include a meeting with Gianni?”

“Apparently, yes, but it’s intended to be a business opportunity.” His gaze lifts to mine.

“That’s exactly what we need, isn’t it?” I keep my voice low, so I have to lean even closer to him because the music is loud and there are so many other sounds.

“What will we have to do?” I ask.

“It doesn’t say.” He hands me the flyer and I take a closer look.

It’s a competition that includes more than one task.

Actually, it stretches over a few visits and not just one.

Shit.

How are we going to win?

We can’t even prepare for it because we don’t know what to expect.

It’s not going to be easy, but at least we can try.

I want to ask Victor if there’s a way to find out what we’ll have to do, but his gaze is trained on a couple across the room.

His jaw is clenched.

Something’s wrong.

I watch the guy Victor is staring at as he fucks a woman who’s bent over the arm of a sofa. He...
holds her hands trapped behind her.
   But then my gaze lowers to her face.
   Blank.
   Her gaze is focused somewhere far, far away, and I don’t know if it’s because she’s drunk or high—I saw someone snort cocaine too as Victor and I passed them by.
   Or because she’s not here willingly.
   The thought chills me to the bone.
   Victor’s fingers clench, his gaze still on the couple.
   His whole body is tense.
   “Hey,” I say softly, placing my hand over his.
   He blinks at me, and as he stares into my eyes, I feel him relax.
   I want to ask him what’s going on, but I decide to wait.
   We can’t talk about stuff like that in here.
“I CAN’T BELIEVE ALEX liked that place,” Paola says once we’re in the car.
I can’t believe Rodrigo liked it either.
No matter how much I try to shake the images out of my head, I can’t.
It makes me want to go back inside, find the asshole who clearly brought his sex slave to the club,
and punch him to a bloody pulp.
“Are you okay?” Paola asks.
It distracts me from my thoughts.
“Yeah, why?”
“I’m just asking, because you seemed a little... tense in there.”
I watch her carefully.
No one ever notices.
How did she?
But I can’t tell her what bothers me.
There’s no need.
Why would I tell her that I was stuck having flashbacks again?
That, as a boy, I stumbled upon my father fucking my mother while she was crying and begging him to stop.
Except, he didn’t stop.
“Are all those women in the club there willingly?” Paola asks.
“They’re supposed to be.”
“But?”
“But we both know many dangerous people don’t like to play by the rules.”
“Right.” She sighs.
“We need to agree on something else. If you want to come back.”
“Of course I do. We need to win that stupid competition or whatever it is, and then we’ll talk to
Gianni. Do you think he’s secretly recording everything? And where’s the poker room? I didn’t see anyone playing.”

“We’re new, so we were only allowed access to one of the rooms. And if Gianni’s smart, he’ll be collecting information and use it when it suits him. But he has to be careful too because he’s messing with a lot of men who’d want his blood if their secrets leaked out. He’s good at protecting himself, but everyone has weaknesses, including him.”

“What did you want us to agree on?”

“When we return, everyone will expect us to do something, especially if we want to participate in that competition. But if there’s something you don’t want to do, you might not be able to tell me, so I need you to come up with a signal. Something you’ll easily remember. Something you can use even if you can’t speak. Once you use that signal, we’re done.”

Surprise flickers through her eyes.

“And I don’t care if we lose this opportunity. There’ll be another one, but you have to promise me you’ll signal to me if you ever get uncomfortable with something we’re doing. All right?”

“Yeah.” She lifts her hand, crossing her fingers. “How about this?”

“Sure. That’ll work.”

As I start the car, she’s still looking at me, as if she’s trying to figure out my secrets. When I glance at her, she looks away.

Yeah, she’s nowhere near an ordinary mafia princess.

She’s something else.

And I’d like to find out what exactly she’s hiding.

It’s a surprise she hasn’t tried to escape, but maybe she didn’t lie to me and she truly wants to figure out what happened to Alex.
VICTOR DOESN’T STOP surprising me.

I’m no longer confined to my room, and I can do whatever I want, as long as I don’t leave the house.

There are too many guards, so getting away wouldn’t be easy. And I can’t get into that club alone, even if I manage to escape, so I decide to think about escaping some other time.

For now, the only thing that matters is figuring out what happened to Alex.

I don’t care about anything else.

I hope all of us who will participate in the competition will do so willingly because I don’t know how I’ll be able to go through any of it if I see someone else suffering.

And Victor...

Maybe he’s not that much of a monster as I believed him to be.

But I still don’t know anything about him.

Maybe he only doesn’t want me to mess up our plan, so he’s trying to play nice.

Except, I don’t think that’s it.

I’m curious about him, but he’s not my target.

I believe that he didn’t kill Alex because he wouldn’t be going through all this trouble to figure out what happened if he did it.

This time, when we enter the club, we’re taken to a completely different part of the three-story building.

All the hallways look identical, so it’s hard to keep track of them.

Victor’s grip on me tightens when a man passes us by while gawking at me.

I don’t know why, but I don’t feel in danger here.

Maybe I should.

Maybe Victor will change his mind, or I’ll have to do something that’s too much for me.

I hope we’ll both get lucky because I really want this to work.
The room we enter is smaller and much brighter. I don’t know if I should be relieved or worried that the couple from last time isn’t here. Who knows what happened to that poor woman?

We settle on a sofa, and I watch the faces around us as a man explains the rules of the game we’re about to play.

There’s a box filled with small envelopes. Each envelope contains a different task. We have to pull out one and then do whatever it says inside the envelope.

When the man with the box comes to us and offers the box to Victor, Victor nods toward me, and the man turns the box to me. I reach inside, my pulse speeding up. When I pull out a red envelope, I open it. I let out a sigh of relief. A spanking. It’s nothing I shouldn’t be able to survive. I hand the envelope to Victor. His gaze meets mine, and I give him a small nod as I get to my feet. Everyone’s watching us, but I focus on Victor. He catches my hand when I come closer, tugging me forward. I fall over his lap with a little gasp. He traps my hand against the small of my back and leans forward to whisper into my ear. “Remember what we talked about?” “Yes,” I whisper.

I can move my fingers just fine, and he can see them. His hand rests on my bottom, caressing, and warmth starts filling my insides. I’m momentarily confused by the sensation, but then he brings his palm down hard on my ass, making me jump. A flurry of smacks makes me yelp, but my insides tingle with something strong. Powerful. Needy. Victor’s fingers hook into the waistband of my panties, and he yanks them down my legs, exposing me to him and everyone else in the room. I gasp, and I want to be embarrassed, but my arousal only gets more intense. I don’t know why, but when Victor’s palm collides with my bare flesh, I’m throbbing with a need for release. Something pokes against my stomach. I guess I’m not the only one who’s affected by this. His firm spanks set my bottom on fire, and I wiggle on his lap, but his grip on me is strong. I think about all the people watching us, and my pussy clenches. Oh fuck. When Victor stops, I feel like a bubble full of energy ready to burst. I want him to keep touching me. To help me alleviate this pressure between my legs. But Victor pulls me up, so I end up sitting on his lap, my tender flesh brushing against his erection. Oh hell.
I shift my hips, and Victor lets out a hiss, holding me in a tight embrace. What the hell is wrong with me? I can’t possibly want him. That’s crazy. Just because he didn’t kill my brother doesn’t mean I want to have anything to do with him. Yeah, we have to work together if we want to do this, and maybe we’ll end up having sex too, but that’s more like... business or something, right? Not pleasure. Or maybe it can be both. I don’t have to like Victor to enjoy myself. I think.
I WATCH PAOLA AS SHE leans back on the sofa.

Ever since the last time we were here at the club, I can’t stop thinking about her.

She’s too fucking hot.
I want her.
I want her too much.
And the way she rubbed herself against my cock tells me that she was very into what we were doing.
I wouldn’t mind running my fingers all over her skin and seeing just what it takes to make her moan in pleasure.
I want to see her body bend and break under mine.
I want her lips around my cock.
My balls tighten.
I don’t know what we’re going to have to do today, but I’m looking forward to it.
I know I shouldn’t. Paola shouldn’t be affecting me like this, even if she had nothing to do with Rodrigo’s death.
When it’s our turn to pull an envelope from the box, I let Paola do it again.
She bites down on her lip when she opens it.
I don’t know what it says until she hands it to me.
A blow job.
Fuck.
I lift my gaze to hers as she makes her way toward me.
My cock strains against my pants as she lowers herself to her knees between my legs.
Her eyes find mine as she unbucks my belt and unzips my pants.
I’m already rock hard when she frees my cock and wraps her fingers around me.
Double fuck.
She shouldn’t have this effect on me.
I don’t know what’s wrong with me.
She strokes me before taking me into her sweet, hot mouth. I groan as her tongue dances up and down my shaft.
She licks and sucks, and when her eyes find mine again, it takes all my willpower not to lift my hips and drive myself deeper into her mouth.
My fingers wind in her hair as I keep my eyes on her hand.
I tightly grip her hair as she struggles to take me all in.
And then I can’t take it anymore.
I spill myself down her throat.
Her neck moves as she swallows, her gaze on me.
I pull her up on the sofa next to me, and I don’t know why, but I want to kiss her.
Maybe I should.
Even if it’s not a good idea.
I place my hand on her cheek, aware that everyone’s still watching us, but I don’t care.
I pull her closer.
Her eyes are on mine, and I lean closer, my lips hovering over hers.
I wait for her to pull away, but she doesn’t.
Instead, our lips collide.
Our kiss is hard and deep and hungry.
Wanting more.
When I touch her, it’s like I can’t remember anything else.
Nothing else exists.
She overtakes everything.
And I don’t know how she’s doing it.
When we break apart, confusion flickers through her eyes, her lips still parted.
I tell myself this is all for show.
How else are we going to get a shot at winning?
We need to do something that makes us more entertaining than the rest. The fact that she’s my wife and not my mistress or a slave should be a potentially interesting factor, but I don’t know if it’ll be enough.
But maybe it doesn’t matter.
Paola and I will have fun anyway, and even if we don’t win, we’ll still move up and get closer and closer to Gianni.
I SUCKED MY ENEMY’S cock and I liked it.
I want to shake my head at myself. Who the hell does that?
Sucking their enemy’s cock, I mean. Not shaking their head at themselves.
Victor has me so damn confused.
And the worst part is, I wanted more, especially when he kissed me like that.
Stuff like that shouldn’t be happening.
We may be married, but we’re not even friends, let alone lovers.
We’re more like business partners, I guess.
We shouldn’t be doing anything other than we’re supposed to do to complete our mission.
But what if we want something more?
Even if it doesn’t make any sense.

As Victor and I make our way to his car, I spot the couple we saw last time.
The woman is sobbing in the parking lot as the man has her pressed against the hood of his car.
He grabs her chin, his fingers digging into her skin as she cries harder.
“Wait for me in the car,” Victor says to me.
I don’t have the time to ask him what he’s going to do because he’s already striding toward the couple, his hands curled into fists.
“Hey, asshole,” he says.
When the man turns toward him, letting go of the woman, Victor punches him in the face so hard that the man stumbles back.
Victor doesn’t stop.
He’s on top of him in an instant, and he keeps punching as he says something I can’t hear. The woman pushes herself up and just stares at them as she rubs her arms, tears streaming down her face.
“If you do something like that again, I’ll find you and I will kill you. Do you understand?” Victor says loud and clear.
The man nods, his hands up. There’s blood all over his face.

Victor turns to the woman and pulls something out of his wallet. He hands it to her, and her eyes are wide as she takes it.

A few moments later, she breaks into a run.

Victor waits until she’s gone and then glances at the man, who’s still on the ground.

I get in the car.

Victor reaches it only a moment later.

“Do you know who they are?” I ask, wondering if it’s something personal.

Maybe he knows the guy.

“No idea,” he says. “But I had it with him and his bullshit. He should be man enough to find himself a woman who actually wants him. And if he can’t find one, he can pay for one. He doesn’t have to kidnap some innocent girl.”

“He kidnapped her?”

“Yeah, she said so. I sent her to someone I know who can help. She’ll have to disappear so he doesn’t find her.”

“Why would you do that for a stranger?” I eye him carefully.

“Because my father did that to my mother, and I was too young to even understand what was going on. He hurt her until he destroyed her. She couldn’t take it anymore, so she took her own life.” His gaze finds mine. “I couldn’t do anything for her, but that doesn’t mean I’ll stand back and let it happen to someone else.”

“My mother is trapped too,” I say. “But she was raised to serve her future husband, and she doesn’t see anything wrong with it. If someone tried to help her, I think she’d refuse.”

“And you?”

“Well, I’m stuck being your wife, aren’t I? I guess you believe me when I say I didn’t help kill your brother.” I search his eyes for something, and I’m not even sure what.

He’s quiet for a few moments. “I do. I believe you.”

“But you didn’t before.”

He shakes his head. “No, I didn’t.”

“What would you have done to me?” I’m asking something I don’t know I want the answer to.

“I would’ve made you pay.” His face darkens. “I would’ve made you beg me to have mercy on you. I would’ve driven you crazy.”

“Great.” I make a face.

“You tried to kill me, so I guess I know what you would’ve tried.”

I only offer him a smile. “We’re only sort of friends until we figure out what happened to Alex and Rodrigo, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And then what?”

“We’ll see.”

“Did your brother tell you more about what he was doing at the club?” I don’t want to discuss some future I know nothing about.

“Not really. He only said it was fun.” He presses his lips together, and I think it bothers him.

“And you never went with him?”

“I had no interest to go, and he didn’t even try to convince me.”

“Do you think he told your father what he was doing there? What if Rodrigo had a reason to go there? Maybe for business? To spy on someone or make a deal? Not anyone can get into that club.”
He sighs. “I don’t know. Maybe. My father was preparing him to take over, so they spent more
time together.”
“But he didn’t tell you?”
“No!” he snaps.
“Okay, you don’t have to get upset about it. No one ever told me anything either.”
“You—”
“What? I’m a woman? Is that it? So no one should ever tell me anything?”
“I’m not saying that, but it’s how things usually work. I was the second born, and I got excluded
from a lot of things too because no one expected Rodrigo would die so young.”
“It’s all just stupid tradition, don’t you think? Why have only one heir and male, at that? Why not
divide everything among your children, both male and female?”
“Because no one ever tries to change the system that benefits them.”
“Do you ever feel like your family never listens to you? I mean, it’s like they hear you, but they
don’t care.” Why the hell did I just say that?
It’s like I’m talking to Alex, not to Victor.
I don’t know why I got so comfortable around him.
He snorts. “All the fucking time. But it doesn’t matter because I usually do my own thing anyway
and tell my father about it later.”
I grin. “Yeah, that’s a good plan. Alex and I always made sure my father didn’t find out what I
was up to. It was a good thing he was away a lot.”
Victor finally starts the car.
Having someone to talk to again feels good, actually.
Even if it’s Victor.
I’M ON MY WAY TO SEE Paola when one of my men approaches me.

“Your father wants to see you, sir,” he says the words that I hate hearing.

Shit.

I wanted to share a potential theory with Paola, but I guess that will have to wait. Maybe this is a divine sign that I shouldn’t trust her.

I don’t know why I do, but I don’t think she’s lying to me. Still, just because she’s hot and I’d like to fuck her, doesn’t mean I have to hang out with her.

Although, if I don’t talk to her, then I can only discuss my theory with myself, since no one else is supposed to know. And it’s not like I trust anyone with my secrets.

But I’ve already spent too much time talking to my beautiful wife. It’s always better not to let anyone too close to you because as soon as they detect your weakness, they use it against you.

If Paola got a chance to take me down, she’d do it.

The only reason she seems to have calmed down and isn’t actively trying to kill me is because she knows she needs me to get into Gianni’s club.

No women on their own are allowed in there, and someone else wouldn’t be so nice to her as I am.

It doesn’t take me long to get to my father.

As soon as he lifts his gaze to me, I can see he’s displeased. The only sign of that are the lines around his eyes. They’re more prominent and tighter.

“Why the fuck did you attack Nick Monti?” he asks.

“I don’t know who that is.” And I don’t.

Never heard of the guy.

“You attacked him in the parking lot of Gianni’s club. Does that ring any bells?”

“Ah, yes. It does.”

“And? What’s your explanation?”
“It’s personal.”

“Personal?” He rises to his feet and strides toward me.
I give him an impassive look. “Yes.”

“Do you know what attacking a member of the Monti family can mean for us? Do you want to ruin everything that I do and work hard for?”

“As far as I’m aware, nothing will happen. Unless you know something that I don’t, in which case, you should have told me.” I regard him carefully.

His eyes narrow. “Why didn’t you ask for my permission first?”

“I didn’t see a reason to do that. The guy insulted me, and I made him pay. Do you really expect me to tell him to wait so I can call my father to ask if I can punch him? Don’t be ridiculous, Father.”

“You’re not the boss. I am.”

Tell me something I don’t already know.

“I’m not Rodrigo,” I say.

“No, you’re not. And you still have a lot to learn. Do you know I hated my father? He was a tough son of a bitch. But I always listened to him because he knew what was best for our family. I wasn’t trying to cause him trouble.”

He strides past me to the door.

I close my eyes for a moment.

“You do not attack anyone without my permission, do you understand?” he says.

I turn around.

I don’t say anything because I know what he’s about to do.

He motions to the guards who are outside in the hallway.

“You will learn,” my father says.

Six of his guards start toward me.

I already know I can’t take all of them down.

Not when they attack me all together.

But I try anyway.

Nothing to lose.

Nothing to gain.

Except, piss off my father some more.

I try to stay on my feet for as long as possible and get in as many punches as I can.

Even if none of it will be enough.
I PACE UP AND DOWN the foyer.

Victor and I are supposed to go to the club soon, but he’s still not here. I don’t know where he went, or when and if he’s coming back.

When I hear a car pulling over, I rush to the window.

It’s him.

I let out a breath of relief.

But when he walks through the door, a gasp escapes my throat. He looks like he’s been through hell.

There’s blood in the corner of his mouth and a bruise forming on his jaw. He’s holding his hand over his chest, but as soon as he sees me, he straightens his shoulders.

“What happened to you?” I ask.

His gaze lifts to the clock on the wall. “Fuck. Are we going to be late?”

“Maybe, but we need to get you cleaned up first.” He can’t go anywhere looking like this, and I need to find out what happened. “I think I saw a first aid kit in the cabinet—”

“There’s no need. I’ll just change and then we can go.”

“No.”

His brow furrows.

“Come on. Let me at least take a look. I know what I’m doing. I took care of my brother when he came home wounded after a fight and whatever thing he had to do with my father.”

He just watches me for a few moments, but then he nods. “Okay. But let’s go to my room. It’s closer.”

“Sure.”

“The kit is in that closet over there.” He points at it.

“All right.” I go to the closet, which is almost identical to the one in my room. Actually, everything is similar, except a little bigger.
He has more shelves and closets. I open the closet. The kit is right there, so I grab it. When I turn around, Victor is shirtless. I stop dead in my tracks, staring at his strong, bruised chest. Blinking, I force my feet to move. Victor sits down on the bed, and I settle next to him. He has a cut on his shoulder, so I focus on it first.

"Were you in a fight?" I ask, hoping he’ll tell me.
"I guess you could say that." He sighs.
"What happened?"
"My father."
"What?" My eyebrows shoot up. "What do you mean?"
"Remember the asshole from the club? The one I forced to release his sex slave?"
"How could I forget?"
"Well, he complained to my father about it."
"Wow. What a loser."
"Yeah." He lets out a laugh. "My father wasn’t happy about it for some reason, and when he’s not happy, he makes his six favorite guards deal with the person who pissed him off. Meaning, me."
"What?" I gape at him. "He had his guards beat you up?"
"It’s what he does. He used to do it himself, but then I grew up, and he knew I’d fight back. He never goes anywhere without his guards. They’re always close by."
"That’s messed up."
"He doesn’t think it is. He thinks that because he’s boss he’s always doing what’s best for everyone."
"Being boss doesn’t make him a god."
He snorts. "Try telling him that."
"Can’t you just... um, take over?"
"It’s not that easy. His men are loyal to him. They’d do anything for him. And I still prefer to have my freedom. It’s a lot of responsibility to take care of everything and a lot of work. I don’t know yet if I’m ready. I want to do it right."

I place my hand over his, and the mask on his face cracks a little. When his gaze meets mine, I’m looking at the real him. Someone who’s capable of feeling a lot of things. Someone human.

"I’m going to bring some makeup," I say. "I’ll cover your bruises, and then we can go to the club."
"Sounds like a good plan." His fingers briefly intertwine with mine before he lets me go. I have no idea what the hell we’re doing here, but I like it. I like it a little too much.

ONCE WE’RE AT THE CLUB, I dread pulling out an envelope from the box. Victor has to be in pain, even if he doesn’t show it, and I’ve already seen people do things I’m not too fond of.
As I watch a man attach nipple clamps to a woman’s breasts, I wince and have an urge to cover my chest.

The clamps may not seem like a big thing, but my skin crawls at the idea of something like that pinching my nipples.

When the man with the box approaches, I steel myself and take a deep breath.
I pull out an envelope.
You choose.
That’s all it says.
My eyebrows lift up.
Wow, really?
I show it to Victor, and a smile spreads across his lips.
He leans toward me. “Let me do something for you.”
I watch him for a few moments.
Is that a good idea?
My stomach is already clenching with anticipation, and it’s actually a good feeling.
I decide to trust him, so I give him a nod.
“Lie back,” he says. “And spread your legs.”
I obey.
A shudder of delight rushes through me as he shifts closer, resting his hands on my knees. He traces his fingers up and down my thighs, and I can already feel the heat building inside me.

Why does his touch feel so damn good?
He rubs his fingers over my already wet panties, and then he pulls them down my legs. I’m completely exposed to him as he lowers himself between my legs.

His gaze finds mine. He smiles, and then his mouth brushes my center.
I let out a groan as he gives me a long lick, his tongue parting my folds. He toys with me and teases me, and his every lick increases the pressure inside me.

I tip my head back as he focuses his attention on my clit, sucking gently, while one of his fingers slides into my opening.

His finger pushes in and out, faster and faster, as his tongue dances across my clit.
My moans are so loud that I feel as if they’re echoing through the whole room, but I don’t care as Victor keeps flicking his tongue over my clit.
He pushes another finger inside me, and I buck my hips, unable to stay still.
He hits all the right spots, and then he spills me over the edge.
I cry out, my whole body throbbing and tingling with so much pleasure I can barely think.
When he looks up at me with my juices coating his lips, I’m aroused again.
Ah fuck, what is happening to me?
“ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT us to do this?” Victor asks as he stares at the envelope I picked out this time.
    I nod.
    We’re getting closer to the end, and I want to give this our best shot. Even if we don’t win, we might catch Gianni’s attention, which would be enough to get a meeting with him and find out what he knows.
    “If you want me to stop, you know what to do,” he says as he picks up a cane.
    I glance at it, but it’s not fear that makes me shudder.
    It’s excitement.
    Everyone’s watching me as I take off my bra and panties since I’m supposed to be completely naked for this one.
    I bend over a table that’s in the middle of the room and brace myself for what’s about to come. Victor taps the cane against my ass, and then he lets it swish through the air. When it collides with my skin, it hurts so much that I yelp, my whole body jerking forward. But the pain only adds to the throbbing between my legs. The cane viciously bites into my skin, and I briefly close my eyes, letting out a moan. The next stroke feels like fire, and I wiggle my hips. Victor runs his fingers over my heated flesh, rubbing gently. And then he brings the cane across my cheeks again. And again. I gasp for breath when he finally stops. Pain mixes with pleasure when his hand caresses my sore bottom and moves between my legs. His fingers slip inside me. I’m already dripping wet as his fingers push in and out of me. When he trails his finger over my clit, I can barely think.
But I know I want him.
I want more.
I hear him unzip his pants, and a few moments later, his thick length presses against my opening.
He catches my wrists, pinning them against the small of my back, and then he pulls out, only to dive back inside.
I’m unable to stay quiet as he pumps in and out of me, hard and fast.
His grip on my hands is tight, and his powerful thrusts make my whole body quiver.
I turn my head, looking at our audience.
I don’t really understand why, but the fact they’re watching us makes me clench around Victor as excitement courses through me.
He grunts as he drives himself even deeper inside me, and soon, I can’t take it any longer.
My release hits me like a wave, leaving me completely breathless.
Victor groans, and I feel him throb inside me.
He presses himself against me, enveloping me like a blanket as our bodies tremble with pleasure.
It feels like it’ll never end.
And I don’t want it to.
Maybe we had to do this to get what we want, but I have zero regrets.

WHEN I GET OUT OF THE shower and stroll into my room with just a towel on, I stop in surprise because Victor is sitting on my bed.
“Remove the towel and lie down on your stomach.”
There’s something commanding in his voice that I do as he says without even thinking about it.
My bottom still aches, and I still have marks on my skin.
Something cold drips onto my ass, and I flinch.
But then I feel Victor’s hand as he gently massages my sore cheeks.
“This is going to help your skin heal faster,” he says softly as his fingers keep caressing me while he spreads what has to be some kind of lotion over my skin.
It feels so damn good that I lean into his touch.
“Have you ever thought about what you’d like to do if you were free to choose?” he asks.
“When my brother was alive, I actually had a plan.” A smile tilts my lips. “Alex promised that once he was in charge, he’d let me do whatever I wanted. We were hoping that would be sooner rather than later. He thought I might want to go to college, and I believed I wanted it too, but then I realized I wanted something else.”
“What was it?”
“I wanted to be my own boss. Alex agreed. He said we could both rule. We wanted to divide our family territory between us. First, he’d teach me everything I needed to know, and then, I’d take over, and we’d grow stronger and more powerful as we worked together.”
“And after he was gone?”
I should just stop talking, but I don’t want to. “Now, I only want to find the person who killed him and end their miserable existence.”
“Once you do that, then what?”
“I haven’t really thought about it,” I admit. “I guess I never really thought I’d survive after that. Either my father would kill me for what I did or someone else would.”
“If you survived through all that, would you still like to rule?”
“If I had anything to rule, then yes. I guess I would like that.” But it’s a silly dream. Nothing else.
“What about you?” I ask. “What was your plan?”
“I was supposed to be helping my father and then my brother,” he says.
“And now?”
“And now I know what I want. I’ll take over one day. I just have to decide when that will be.”
“Have you ever thought about doing something else? When I was a kid, I wanted to be a teacher because I had this wonderful teacher who would come to my house. She was really nice.”
“Yes. I wanted to play soccer. I was just a kid, and I thought that I was free to choose and that it was easy to leave this life.”
“Would you still like to do that?” I push myself up and look over my shoulder at him.
“Not really. I haven’t played in years.”
“I don’t want to be a teacher either anymore. I don’t even like kids.”
We both burst into laughter.
When we’re like this, I’m almost... happy, I guess.
It’s the strangest of feelings.
I haven’t felt this light since I lost my brother.
But Victor isn’t a replacement for Alex.
He’s something else.
And maybe, just maybe, I could like him for who he is.
“WAIT, WHAT DID THEY say that we have to do?” Paola furrows her brow.
“They sent me a text saying that we have to prepare a special performance for the next time.”
“And they haven’t given us any instructions or rules?”
“No. I guess we can do whatever we want. It just has to be sexy and probably end up with sex. Or maybe not.”
“Okay.” She cocks her head. “How about we do a dance?”
“A dance? I don’t know.” I’ve never been much of a dancer.
“Yeah. I can teach you the moves.” She grins.
When she smiles like that it’s almost impossible to tell her no.
I have no idea what’s happening to me.
“Come on.” She catches my hand and I let her pull me to the middle of the room.
“Like this,” she says as she places my hand on her hip.
Okay, I like this already, especially as she presses herself against me and her arms wind around my neck.
“You can undress me. Can I wear a dress? Always wearing lingerie is boring.”
“I think so.” If there are no rules, we can make up our own.
And even if there are, who the fuck cares?
Paola stares deep into my eyes, and her lips are so damn close to mine that I do the only thing that makes sense.
I kiss her.
She kisses me back, her lips moving against mine with so much passion we can barely catch our breaths.
A knock on the door forces us apart.
“Come in,” I say.
One of my men pokes his head inside.
“I’m sorry to interrupt, sir,” he says. “Are you still planning to take care of the mole? Your father is getting impatient.”

I frown.
What mole?
“What are you talking about?”
“Um, we talked about it this morning, sir.”
Ah, yes.
“Right.” I forgot all about it.
I glance at Paola.
It’s so weird.
Before, I was looking forward to going on missions and catching moles. It was my only way to feel something and do something that seemed fun.
But now...
Now I’d rather be with Paola, and that’s disturbing.
“I’m coming,” I say.
Paola crosses her arms.
“We’ll practice later,” I tell her.
She just gives me a nod, but she’s disappointed.
I can see it in her eyes, and I don’t like it.
But I have to stop thinking about her so much.
I have to get my head back in the game.
I stride to the door, and it almost feels like I’m running away.

I POINT MY GUN AT THE blond guy with blue eyes who’s tied to a chair.
I should just pull the trigger.
It’s what my father wants.
Even if the guy swears he didn’t do anything, it doesn’t matter.
Someone has to die.
Someone has to pay and serve as a reminder to everyone that no one plays with a Santarossa.
But my thoughts fly back to Paola.
I thought she was guilty, and I wanted to take my anger out on her.
And now I know she’s not.
I don’t want to kill an innocent man now. It would be a waste.
I can feel the rest of the men in the room watching us with worried gazes. They care about the guy.
He’s their friend.
Don’t we at least owe it to him to find out the truth?
I lower the gun.
“There has to be some proof,” I say. “If he says he didn’t do it, then maybe he didn’t. Fucking find something so I know if he’s lying or not.”
If they want to save their friend, they’ll at least try, and if he’s really guilty, oh well.
Nothing will save him then.
I don’t know why my father thinks it’s this guy who told our enemy where our stash house was so they could attack and steal from us.
If I asked, he’d just flip out because I was questioning his orders once again when he expected me to blindly follow.

But that’s stupid, and I refuse to do it.

I sit in an empty chair and wait.

It takes a while, but finally someone comes running toward me.

“Sir, you have to see this!” the guy says as he hands me a tablet.

“What am I looking at?”

“It’s the footage from a security camera. I’ve been checking everything. It’s Marcus who’s talking to our enemy.”

“Where the fuck is Marcus?”

“I don’t know. At home, I think. He’s off duty.”

“Then find him and take care of him.” I don’t feel like doing it myself because Paola is waiting for me.

I tell myself it’s because I want to win that damn competition, but I’m not so sure anymore.

“What about Sean?” The guy looks at the blond guy.

“Release him.”

As soon as I say those words, the guy’s face lights up.

The whole room suddenly feels different too, as if everyone released their collective breath they’ve been holding for a while.

“Thank you, sir!” the guy says.

And then I realize something.

Maybe I know exactly how to dethrone my father and build loyalty.

He always talks about rules and tradition and blind obedience, but maybe these people need something else.

A better leader.

Someone who’ll take care of them too and not just demand, demand, and demand.
DANCING WITH VICTOR feels strangely liberating. We practiced a lot, and now that we’re in front of an audience, it feels even better.

His lips brush my shoulder as he slides the strap of my red dress down my arm. Everyone’s eyes are glued to us as we keep dancing.

I let the music overtake me.

When Victor tugs my dress down, revealing my bare breasts, I hear someone gasp.

Maybe I don’t really want to entrain all these men here, but if impressing them is what it takes to get to Gianni, then it’s worth it.

Victor kneads my breasts as I throw my head back, and then his hands go lower down my stomach before he spins me around.

I’m pressed against his chest, and his hands end up on my ass, squeezing.

My dress pools at my feet and I step out of it as I hold Victor’s hand.

He lifts me up then, just as the song is about to come to its end.

I sit on a table spreading my legs wide for the audience, and just as the song stops, Victor gives my pussy a light slap.

Someone claps.

Another guy keeps nodding his head.

I glance up at Victor, who’s smiling at me.

Maybe we can win this thing.

Or at least catch Gianni’s attention.

A man starts toward me, and he reaches out for my leg.

Victor’s fingers curl around the man’s wrist before he can touch me. The man winces, and I guess Victor’s grip is really tight.

“No one touches my wife except for me,” Victor says.

“I apologize.” The man withdraws his hand when Victor lets go of him. “You’re a lucky man.”
As the man leaves, Victor wraps his arms around me and pulls me close, shielding me from everyone.
As if they haven’t seen all of me already.
But it feels nice anyway.
We’re no longer performing.
It’s someone else’s turn now.
Victor’s lips brush the top of my head.
“We only have one more thing to do, right?” I ask.
“Yeah, I think so.”
Good.
We’re getting closer to our goal.

“THAT WAS ACTUALLY REALLY fun,” I say with a grin once we’re back home.
“Yeah.” Victor is smiling too, and it’s a beautiful sight.
It’s a genuine smile.
One that spreads across his face and fills his eyes.
It feels real.
“Victor.” A cold voice cuts through the air.
Victor’s mask falls back in place in seconds.
“Go to your room,” he says to me.
I glance at his father who’s standing in the corner of the living room with an unreadable expression on his face.
Yeah, I don’t like that man at all.
As I head to my room, I only have one wish.
I don’t want that icy cold man to take my Victor away.
“WHAT DO YOU WANT, FATHER?”

Aside from ruining my night.

“There’s an urgent matter I want to discuss with you,” he says.

I spread my arms. “All right. Then sit down and speak.”

His guards are lined up behind the sofa as he settles on it.

“What’s so urgent that it couldn’t wait?” I ask.

“You took your wife to Gianni’s club.”

“And?” I go over to the table in the corner to pour myself a glass of whiskey.

“What’s the matter with you?! You don’t take your wife to such a place! It’s for whores and mistresses. Not your wife!” Anger flashes through his eyes.

That’s a whole lot of emotion for him to show.

He must be really, really pissed off.

“Who cares?” I say.

“Do you know nothing about family and its sanctity, boy? Your wife should be at home. She’s supposed to give you heirs and not be exposed to others like some whore.”

I just watch him and take a gulp of my whiskey, because if I don’t do something, I’ll start laughing.

Family values.

Yeah, sure.

I’m supposed to protect my wife from others, but not from me.

“You’re going to find someone else to take with you. Is that clear?” He pins me with a glare.

“Yes, Father.” It’s perfectly clear, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to do it.

“Why are you even going there so much?”

I shrug. “It’s fun. I’m bored. Do you remember Rodrigo’s friend? He recommended me to join, so I did.”

“Fun?”
“Yes.”
He stares at me as if he’s trying to see through me, but I give him nothing. I’ve had plenty of practice.
Finally, he gets to his feet.
“Don’t forget what I said.” He turns to me before leaving through the door.
“I won’t.” I down the whiskey.
Once my father’s gone, I go find Paola.
I want to punch something, and I know she can make me feel better and distract me instead.
When I knock on her door, she instantly opens it.
“What happened?” she asks. “What did he want?”
“He’s horrified that I’d dare to take my wife to that vile club.”
“Well, it’s definitely scandalous,” she says as she steps away from the door.
I snort as I follow her inside.
“What now?”
“Nothing. I don’t care what my father says.”
“But he knows what we’re doing, or does he?”
“Someone reported to him. He has his spies, but I don’t think he knows why we’re really going to that club.”
“And if he somehow finds out?” Worry creases her brow.
“It doesn’t matter. I’ll deal with the consequences. I won’t let him go anywhere near you.”
“But what about you?” She tilts her head.
“What about me?”
“It’s like you have two personalities. I mean, earlier at the club, you seemed happy. More like the real you, I think. And then, with your father, it’s like you became someone else. Someone cold and emotionless. I don’t like the other guy. I don’t like the person your father turns you into.”
“He doesn’t turn me into someone else. I just... It’s better not to show what I feel around him.”
“But why? Does he think you’re supposed to be a stone or a robot?”
“Maybe.”
We sit down on her bed, and her fingers brush mine. I catch her hand, caressing her palm.
“But how do you do it? How do you just switch it all off?” she asks.
“I had to learn how to do it. When my mother died... I was inconsolable. I wouldn’t stop crying. My father thought it was a weakness, so he took me to a cell in his dungeon and left me there. Rodrigo tried to reason with him, but it didn’t work.”
Paola’s eyes widen. “What?”
“I didn’t stop crying. I was cold and hungry, but I didn’t care. I missed my mother. My father only came to yell at me and beat me. Then I stopped crying. I wanted out of that damn dark cell. But then my father showed me a photo of my mother’s dead body, and I couldn’t... At some point, my survival instincts kicked in, and I learned to lock it all away. Then he finally let me out.”
She gasps, horror written all over her face. “Your father is a monster. Who the hell doesn’t let their children grieve their mother? You can’t just snap out of something like that.”
“You’re terrible at hiding your feelings. It all shows on your face.” I grin.
“Really?” She glares at me, but the corners of her lips are twitching up. “Well, most of the time no one listens to me, so I figured I might as well show them how I feel. Not that it helped with anything, but it made me a little more satisfied.”
“But when you’re facing your enemy, it’s better not to show them anything, especially not what
you feel.”

“Okay, I can see how hiding your emotions can be a useful skill, but you can’t let it take over your life. You can’t lock everything away and throw away the key. It will all burst out at some point.”

I furrow my brow. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

I’ve never told anyone any of this before, and it does feel kind of good now that I’ve done it. It’s like she took a piece of my darkness away.

Like magic.
WHEN I LOOK AT VICTOR, I still can’t believe what he told me.  
I still can’t believe I like spending time with him.  
Or maybe I can.  
Tonight is the final task.  
The big finale.  
And after it’s done, we’re going to find out if we get to meet Gianni or not. Excitement squeezes my stomach, and I hope we’ll get lucky.  
The setup is a little different this time.  
We’re supposed to do our task in a special room with mirrors and cameras so that every single person in the audience can see what we’re doing. In detail.  
I have no idea how I feel about that.  
My pulse speeds up when the man with the box approaches me.  
I pull out an envelope.  
At least this time, we’ll have enough time to prepare.  
I open the envelope, swallowing hard.  
My eyes go wide.  
No.  
I blink, but the words don’t change.  
Nausea rises at the back of my throat.  
I can’t.  
I can’t do it.  
I don’t want to.  
Panic grips my insides and I jump to my feet. I feel Victor’s gaze on me, but I can’t talk to him right now.  
I’m completely overwhelmed as I race to the bathroom.
We’re going to fail, and all because of me.
Once again, it’s all going to be my fault.
I rush to the sinks, tears filling the corners of my eyes, and then I bury my teeth into my arm.
Why do I always fail?
Why does this always have to happen?
Why does it always have to be my fault?
It’s like I can’t do anything right.
The door opens.
I lift my gaze to the mirror.
Victor.
I turn to face him.
“What’s wrong?” he asks, and his eyes land on my arm. “What happened?”
“Nothing. It was an accident,” I say automatically.
“What?” His brow furrows. “How do you accidentally sink your teeth into your arm?”
I blink at him.
No one has ever asked me that.
Everyone just accepted my answer and moved on.
Maybe offered to help me cover it up.
“Paola.” Victor is in front of me, and he places his hands on my arms. “Are you okay? Talk to me.
What’s happening?”
I push back the tears. “I can’t do it. The task. I can’t!”
“It’s all right.” He pulls me into his arms. “It doesn’t matter. We’ll find another way.”
“No, it’s not all right! We’ll fail because of me! I never do the right thing! I couldn’t find my
brother in time. I—”
“Hey, it’s not your fault.” He pulls away and gently tips my chin up. “It’s not. None of it. Why did
you bite your arm?”
“I do that when I’m angry. When I know no one listens to me. When I know no one cares how I
feel.”
“Look at me,” he says, and I meet his gaze. “I care. Do you hear me? You can always talk to me.
About anything.”
I bob my head.
“And if you’re angry, you can punch something. Something safe.”
I raise an eyebrow at him. “Yeah, but I prefer talking.”
A smile curves his lips. “Okay. Is there anything you want to talk about? Will you at least tell me
what the task is about?”
I find the envelope and hand it to him.
I TAKE THE ENVELOPE and glance at what’s inside.

It’s a shame that we have to back out when we got so far, but I can see why Paola doesn’t feel comfortable with the task.

“If you ever feel the urge to bite yourself again, promise me you’ll come find me instead,” I say. Seeing her hurt and upset like this bothers me.

I want to make her feel better somehow.

“I promise,” she says with a small smile. “I just hate that we can’t finish what we started.”

I frown. Maybe she’s wrong. Maybe we can. But it would require me to trust her. Trust her with everything. Trust her like I never trusted anyone before.

“I think I know what we can do. If you want to. We can still complete the task,” I say. Her face pales. “No. I can’t. I don’t even like the idea of it. It’s too much.”

“It doesn’t say it has to be you. It can be me.”

“What do you mean? I don’t—” Her brow creases. “Oh.”

“It could work. If you want to try.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. I trust you.”

Her lips part in surprise. “Okay,” she says.

I take a deep breath. Maybe I’m making a mistake. Or maybe not. We’re going to find out.
I SLOWLY INHALE AS I make my way inside the special room.

Victor is waiting for me next to a table that has special straps and restraints attached to it. He’s completely naked, and a shudder of excitement runs through me.

I hesitate as I glance at all the glass and mirrors that surround us, but he gives me a small nod, a smile lifting his lips.

We have everything we need here.

Victor bends over the table, and a shiver of delight surges through my body. I step forward and suddenly feel much, much more confident.

I forget about anything else.
I forget what we’re doing.
It’s just Victor and me here.
No one else.

I tie his wrists with the straps, and then restrain his ankles to the table’s legs so that he’s unable to move or get free.

As I trace my fingers up his back, he shudders, and I lean closer to whisper into his ear.

“If you change your mind and you want this stop, just tell me,” I say as I rub gentle circles on his back.

“Don’t be afraid to enjoy it.” He winks at me.

A smile spreads across my lips.

Maybe we both actually want this, but he’s a little too tense, so I massage his shoulders, and then I let my fingers run down his back.

I trail my hands up and down his ass, and then my fingers slide between his legs, cupping him. He grows instantly hard under my touch as I stroke him, a soft groan escaping his lips.

I pick up a bottle of lube that’s on a small table next to me and I coat my fingers with it. When I press my finger against his tight opening, he tenses, and I bite down on my lip.
My insides are already tingling as I stroke his cock with my other hand while I slowly wiggle my finger inside him.
In and out.
When I think he’s ready, I pull out my finger and apply some more lube to the silicone cock strapped to my body.
I position myself behind him, slowly pushing the tip against his hole.
Once I’m past his barrier, he lets out a sigh, and I slide inside him.
I move my hips, gently at first, careful not to hurt him, but the soft noises he’s making don’t sound like he’s in any pain.
Actually, he seems to like what I’m doing.
And I like it too.
A lot, actually.
It makes me feel powerful.
In control of his pleasure.
I like how I’m making him feel as I pump in and out of him.
When I lift my gaze to one of the mirrors, I see a smile on my lips.
And I see Victor too, need and desire written all over his face.
I rock my hips faster, and when I’m sure he’s close to his peak, I pull out and remove my harness.
I cup his cock with one hand as my other hand finds its way to my dripping wet core. It only takes a couple of strokes, and then we both cry out as our releases hit us.
I hold onto him because I’m barely able to stand on my feet as waves of pleasure tingle and throb through me like never before.
As I press myself against him, leaning over him, I brush my lips against his back.
“Do you think we could do this again sometime?” I ask softly.
He lets out a laugh. “Maybe.”
ONCE VICTOR AND I DRESSED and waiting to hear the results of the competition, a man approaches us.

“Mr. Torre would like to speak with you,” he says.
Victor and I exchange a look.
Can it really be?
Did we manage to catch Gianni’s attention?
“Please follow me,” the man says.
Victor takes my hand as we trail after the man. He leads us down a narrow hallway and then upstairs.
At the end of another hallway is a room.
An office, I guess.
Gianni is sitting behind a big desk. He’s wearing a suit, his dark brown hair perfectly combed. His dark eyes observe us carefully as we enter.
“Welcome,” he says as he gets to his feet. “I couldn’t wait to speak with you. Please sit.”
We settle into the black leather chairs across from him.
Gianni waves at the guards who are at the door and the man who brought us here, and they all leave, closing the door.
“I have to say your performance tonight impressed me. That was hot.” He flashes us a wide smile.
“Are you impressed enough to give us a reward?” Victor asks.
Gianni laughs. “Of course. You can have one of the VIP rooms here. They’re all equipped with everything you might need. But I think I know which room you’ll choose. It’s funny. You two look like you were made for each other. You know each other better than you even think, at least when it comes to pleasure.”
“What room do you think we’ll choose?” I ask, hoping he doesn’t expect only Victor to speak.
“Alejandro and Rodrigo’s. That’s why you’re here, right?” Gianni leans forward. “You don’t have to
worry. I know your secret, and my lips will forever be sealed if anyone else asks.”
I open my mouth to ask what he means, but Victor places his hand over mine.
“You’re right,” he says. “Can we see the room now?”
“Yes.” Gianni opens a drawer and pulls out a key, then he gets to his feet. “Follow me.”
I guess Victor doesn’t want Gianni to know that no, we don’t know what he’s talking about.
Victor and I rise and follow Gianni out.
He goes to one of the numerous doors in the hallway and unlocks it.
“Everything is exactly like it was. Untouched.” He opens the door wide for us. “I’ll leave you two alone. Let me know if you need anything else.”
“Thanks,” Victor says.
We enter a spacious room, and Victor closes the door and locks it.
My gaze falls on the framed photo on the nightstand.
I go closer, unable to look away from it.
Alex and Rodrigo.
They’re both smiling and hugging.
As if they’re friends?
Lovers?
Something more?
“Victor—” I say, picking up the photo. “Why would Alex and Rodrigo have a private room here?”
But Victor’s busy staring at a tablet he’s holding in his hand.
A few moments later, his gaze lifts to me, his eyes glassy.
“Because it was the only place where they could be together,” he says.
I stride toward him because I hear the sound of laughter coming from the tablet.
It’s Alex who’s laughing.
Tears fill my eyes.
Victor and I sit on the bed as we watch the video.
Alex is lying on this same bed and holding his phone up. Rodrigo is right next to him.
“Tell me that you love me,” Alex says as he presses himself closer to Rodrigo.
“Oh of course I love you, you dumbass.” Rodrigo laughs. “Stop recording. If someone finds it, they’re going to use it against us.”
“No one will find it. We’re safe here. No one knows.” Alex leans forward and presses his lips to Rodrigo’s.
“I wish we didn’t have to hide and do this.” Rodrigo’s smile fades. “We should run away. Somewhere far from here. To some nice beach. Far away from our families.”
“I like that idea,” Alex says. “But not yet. I can’t leave my sister. She needs me.”
I can barely see through the tears clouding my vision.
“I don’t like to wait,” Rodrigo says. “Come here.”
He pounces on Alex, pulling him into a tight embrace. Alex laughs as the phone falls out of his hand.
So happy.
I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so happy.
And I didn’t even know.
He never told me.
Why?
Why didn’t he trust me with his secret?
“Fuck,” Victor mutters.
“Did you know?” I ask.
He shakes his head.
“I didn’t either. Do you think... Do you think our fathers found out?”
His gaze meets mine. “Probably.”
“Do you think they...” I can barely say the words. “That they hired someone to kill Alex and Rodrigo? That they faked the whole thing?”
“I think they did it themselves because they didn’t want anyone to know. Involving someone else would be a problem.”
“Is that why they came up with a peace treaty so quickly and easily? Because they were already working together?”
“Probably.”
“How are we going to figure out the truth?”
“We’ll confront them and ask,” he says, determination flashing on his face. “But we need a plan.”
A part of me wants to rush out of here and find my father immediately. It’s something I would’ve done before.
But I know it wouldn’t work. Victor’s right.
We need a plan.
And if our fathers are guilty, they need to pay.
“We need to confront them when they’re together,” Victor says. “We don’t want either of them to come up with something or lie and alter the story again. And we don’t want them to do something before we can ask all the important questions. But how do we get them together? My father always has his guards with him.”
“How about we host a party? At our house? We can say we’re celebrating something. A deal, maybe. You can pretend you struck one with Gianni.”
“That’s not a bad idea.”
“We need your most trusted guards with us,” I say. “And maybe we can figure out a way so that your father doesn’t bring all his guards with him.”
Victor nods.
We’ll come up with something.
We have to.
More than ever, I need to know the truth.
IT TAKES ALL MY WILLPOWER to keep my face expressionless as my father and mother sit at the table across from me.

It took Victor and me some convincing, but my parents and his father finally agreed to come to our house to celebrate Victor’s success.

Victor found some men he trusted to guard the house.

He said something about some guy as the reason why those men would be loyal to him and not to his father, but I was too busy plotting how to get our fathers in a room together to understand what he was talking about.

It doesn’t matter.

I trust Victor, and he trusts me.

We can do this.

“I think we should discuss this. In private,” Victor says to my father with a smile.

“That’s a good idea,” my father says.

As the two of them get to their feet, Victor’s gaze briefly meets mine.

My father isn’t so attached to his guards as Victor’s is, so it’s easier to get him away.

Now I hope my part of the plan will work too.

I wait for Victor and my father to leave.

“Would you like some more wine?” I spring to my feet, grabbing the bottle.

I tip over the bottle and spill most of the wine on Victor’s father.

“Oops,” I say.

He mutters a curse, and then his gaze narrows at me as he gets to his feet. “What have you done?”

“It wasn’t on purpose. I’m sorry.” But I know I don’t look sorry at all.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see my mother open her mouth, but she doesn’t dare to say anything.

“You little bitch! Your husband needs to teach you a lesson.” He roughly grabs my arm, pulling
me with him.

“No! Let go of me!” I pretend to struggle.
His guards move as he drags me with him, but he lifts his hand to stop them.
After all, I’m just one silly little girl.
What possibly could I do to him?
“Let go of me!” I shout. “You have no right!”

“Where is your husband?” He looks into one of the rooms, but Victor and I left all the doors open on purpose so his father would know the only closed door had to be where he’d find him.
Victor’s father finds the right door and shoves it open.
Victor and my father are sitting at a small table in the corner of the room, away from the door.
“You need to control your wife!” Victor’s father snaps as he pushes me so hard that I fall to the floor.
The door closes behind us on its own.
Victor jumps to his feet. “What the fuck are you doing, Father?”
“Your stupid wife spilled wine all over me! On purpose!”
“I’m sure it was an accident,” Victor says, and I see him reach into his pocket where I know his phone is.
“No, it wasn’t, and I expect she’ll be punished for her insolence.” Victor’s father turns to leave, but when he tries the handle, he can’t open the door because Victor locked it remotely through an app on his phone. “What’s wrong with this door?”
“Ah fuck. Not again,” Victor says with a sigh. “Take a seat, Father. I’ll deal with the door. It gets stuck from time to time.”

“Why haven’t you had it fixed already then?”
“I forgot. Just take a seat and have a drink.”
Victor’s father mumbles something under his breath as he makes his way to the chair Victor vacated. I push myself to my feet, and Victor’s gaze meets mine.
He nods.
I grab the bow that I left on the cabinet next to the door and a quiver of arrows.
Victor pulls out his gun and points it at his father.
I aim an arrow at mine.
Victor’s father bursts into laughter when he sees us while my father’s eyes widen.
“Did you kill them?” Victor asks. “Father, tell me the truth. Did you kill Rodrigo?”
“Guards!” his father shouts at the top of his lungs.
“Of course I killed him! He was an abomination. Imagine if someone found out. Think about all the shame it would’ve brought to our family. I only raise men in my family. Real men. But I see I failed with you too.”
I gape at him, unable to believe he just said all that.
Without remorse.
Without even blinking.
“Lower the gun, boy. You two look ridiculous,” he says. “How did you find out?”
“How could you?” Victor spits. “How could you kill your own son? You always talked about the importance of family. You said blood was above everything else.”
“And I mean it, but Rodrigo wasn’t my son anymore. He wasn’t our family.”
I see my father reach for the gun that has to be under his suit jacket, so I let the arrow fly. He yelps
as it grazes his hand.

"Don’t move,” I say. “You killed Alex, right? You two conspired together and came up with a story, and then you killed your own sons and made it look like they got in some stupid fight. And I guess you didn’t want to kill them together and risk someone finding them like that and figuring out something was off about the whole thing.”

“I was trying to do what was best for our family,” my father says. “I see now that I was wrong.”

No, he doesn’t see it.

He’s saying what he thinks I want to hear.

He wants to survive.

But I intend to keep my promise to my brother.

I let another arrow fly.

Victor pulls the trigger.

The bullet lodges between his father’s eyes.

My arrow pierces through my father’s neck.

My father’s eyes are wide as his hands flail, trying to do something about the arrow, but it’s too late.

I watch the life drain out of his eyes.

I lower the bow and Victor pulls me into his arms, wrapping himself tightly around me.

Tears fill my eyes.

Maybe I got what I wanted, but I would prefer it a thousand times that Alex was still alive.

This, while satisfying, still feels insufficient.

But maybe, in Victor’s arms, I can find the peace that I need.
I wait for Victor to finish his speech. He’s letting his father’s men choose if they want to stay with him as their leader or leave.

As soon as my mother heard what happened, she burst into tears and ran for the door. I didn’t try to stop her or go after her.

Even though she now knows my father killed Alex and he’s dead, she probably still loves him. Maybe she even found a way to explain it all to herself.

When Victor finally dismisses his men and turns toward me, a smile spreads across his lips, and I can’t help but smile back at him.

“Hey,” he says as he winds his arms around me.

I like how natural being in his embrace feels.

But now our little mission is complete, and I’m not sure what happens now.

“Are we still doing this?” I brush my lips against his.

He kisses me so passionately that we both end up breathless.

“Yes. If you want to. I think there’s something between us,” he says. “A real connection. I don’t want to let you go now. I want you to stay with me.”

I stare deep into his eyes. “I want that too.”

We can give ourselves a chance.

Why not?

What do we have to lose?

We have all the time in the world to figure things out and get to know each other even better, but I think I already know it in my heart that I’m falling for him.

He’s not who I thought he was.

“What are you going to do about your father’s men?” he asks. “You’re an Esposito. His only child.”

I sigh. “I am, but they’re not going to accept me as their leader. I’m a Santarossa now. And who
knows? Maybe I do have a half-brother no one knows about somewhere.”

“Do you want to be their leader?”

“What does it matter what I want?”

“It does. It always will.”

“Okay then. Yes, I want it. But they don’t want me, so—”

“You can become an Esposito again.”

I furrow my brow. “How?”

“We can divorce. You claim what is yours. Some might leave, sure. But give the others a chance to stay, like I did.”

I cock my head at him. “You’d agree to that?”

“I’d agree to anything that makes you happy.”

A smile spreads across my lips. “Then I want a divorce. But I don’t want to leave you or be away from you.”

“That can be arranged.” He grins and his lips find mine again.

Can this really work?

Can we have everything we want?

I don’t know, but we can certainly try.
MY PHONE BEEPS, AND I roll over in the bed to check it.
A smile spreads across my lips.
“What is it?” Victor asks.
“Not much. Just my men telling me that another mission is complete. You know, the Tirelli job
that I told you about.”
“Ah yes.” He catches my hand and pulls me to him.
I press my lips against his. “But there’s something else that needs to be done, and I want you to
come with me. I don’t want to spend a second without you today.”
“Is that just because it’s our fifth anniversary or because you like me that much?” he teases.
“I guess I just like you that much.” I grin and kiss him again.
When we break apart, his eyes bore into mine.
“I love you, Paola,” he says, emotion written all over his face.
I like that he never hides what he feels from me.
He only goes icy cold when he has to, with our enemies. But ever since we merged our territories,
we have fewer and fewer of those.
No one is stupid enough to try to attack a Santarossa-Esposito union.
“I love you too,” I say.
His lips collide with mine, his tongue pushing past my lips.
“But we really have to go now.” I extract myself from his embrace and get to my feet so I can get
dressed.
Victor’s gaze lingers on me, his eyes full of hunger and desire.
I have to look away from him so I don’t change my mind and just stay in bed with him.
There’ll be time for that too.
I’m sure.
But now, I need to go teach someone a lesson.
I HOLD ONTO VICTOR as tightly as possible as we whiz through the city on his motorcycle. With him, I feel safe and free. I feel like I can do anything.

When he pulls over, just at the right distance from my target, I grab my bow. He helps me set an arrow on fire.

I aim toward the roof of a small stash house that belongs to my enemy who was stupid enough to underestimate me.

My men already spilled some flammable liquid all over the roof. Now the only thing missing is the big finish.

I release the arrow. It lands just where it should. A few moments later, there’s a huge fire. A smile spreads across my lips.

“Happy anniversary,” I say to Victor. “Let’s go.” “This isn’t the only stash house that’s burning tonight,” he says.

“Oh?” “No one disrespects the woman I love and gets away with it.” “Aww.” I wrap my arms around him again, and then we speed away from there.

Free as birds. Rushing to see what the future holds for us. I’m sure it’s going to be something good.
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