

LIES OF THE
Underworld

VIRTUOUS
Lies

HALEY JENNER

VIRTUOUS LIES

A LIES OF THE UNDERWORLD NOVEL

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HALEY JENNER



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to the good girls...

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ONE



Holding my head high, I walk from the apartment. One high-heeled foot in front of the other moves me toward the elevator. The silence is deafening. The plush carpet mutes the sound of my heel. No music plays through the hallway speakers. Even the lift moves silently.

The dress I meticulously chose from my closet—the sexiest one I own—brushes my upper thighs as I step into the elevator. Anxiety rushes over my skin, but I force myself to stop fidgeting. I push my shoulders back in a posture that screams confidence.

My racing heart pounds against my rib cage. I’m convinced I’m only moments away from a heart attack. At eighteen.

My eyes move to the digital read on the elevator, the metal cage moving closer and closer to the ground floor with every second that passes. My body wills to shake, to tremble with dread. I refuse to let it, holding it in. It inverts, my organs rocked by tremors that make me nauseous.

Life changes so fast. You blink, and your world turns inside out. Six weeks ago, I was told I would marry Salvatore Bianchi in a peace deal brokered between our family and the Chicago Outfit. I wasn’t surprised, certainly apprehensive, but I hid my hesitation well—as would have been expected. Salvatore was due to arrive in the coming weeks. I was of age,

having just celebrated my eighteenth birthday, which meant by my family standard, I was ready to belong to a man I was yet to meet.

I know the basic facts about my future husband. Thirty years old and boss of the Chicago Outfit. Never formally married. Mama assures me he's handsome, but she'd say anything to make me agreeable. Honestly, I couldn't care less if he had two heads. I just wanted to know whether he'd hurt me. Mama tells me that men can't hurt us if we don't let them infiltrate our hearts. I told her I meant physically. She told me to learn to disassociate. Inspiring, no?

On the same day I was told of my union with Salvatore, Caterina was told of hers with Roberto Ferrari. An act to preserve power *within* the family.

Caterina and I knew this was our path. *This* being the accepting mafioso women who we were, we'd accept our fate. Only, I couldn't acquiesce my sister's.

Caterina Rossi would never belong to the consigliere of Cosa Nostra. Not if I had anything to do with it.

I pretend I can't see myself in the reflection of the elevator doors. My lipstick is smeared, but I don't fix it. My hair has lost the neat silk of the wave I'd styled it into, the strains a messy resemblance of what they were a simple hour before.

The elevator comes to a stop with a delicate jerk, and I take a fortifying breath, relaxing my face into what I imagine an eighteen-year-old woman stupidly in love would look like.

I adjust my dress purposely as I step from the open doors, the resounding click of my heel against marble loud enough to steel my nerves. The black Town Car parked curbside is impossible to miss, and I'm both elated and petrified at the sight of it.

My brother, Tony, eyes me warily as I exit the building with balletic strides. He stuffs his hands into his black dress pants. The leather of his gun

holster is visible, his jacket haphazardly thrown open, and I eye the concealed weapon with trepidation.

God, if he makes Tony kill me.

My brother dips his chin inconspicuously enough that if you blinked, you would miss it. I return the indecipherable gesture. The success of a scheme coming together without issue passed through silent conversation between siblings.

Tony was surprisingly agreeable when I came to him with my plan. Our sister is naïve and amorous. Traits that wouldn't fare well in the possession of a monster. Our father had no issue with pushing her into the lion's den. Mother would stand by idly and watch the carnage. I would not, and Tony wasn't convinced he could close his eyes to the slaughter of Caterina's soul either.

Tony steps forward when I'm mere steps away from the car, grabbing my upper arm roughly. "Well done," he whispers, his face a contradiction to his praise, twisted in disapproval to make my father believe he's reprimanding me.

He pushes me forward unexpectedly, and I stumble on my stilettos, falling against the car roughly. I scowl at him, my reaction one-hundred-percent real. "Ow."

I straighten myself, retreating onto the sidewalk and adjusting my hair. Normally, a driver would be waiting, car door held open for me to slide into the sanctuary of my father's presence. Not today. Today, I'm forced to remain outside, waiting for a punishment I had hoped for.

Bile twists itself in my stomach, and I'm thankful for the heat New York City slathers my skin with. The sweat grasping my upper lip will be mistaken for the humidity in lieu of what's actually causing it—crippling nerves.

He could kill me.

Men have died for less.

The dishonor I've drenched my father with is a scandal my family has not had to overcome for generations.

I was the golden child.

The swan in a gilded cage.

I was my father's most prized possession.

The key to the expansion in the business.

And I've just fucked it all.

There will be blood on my hands. The loss of life resting heavily on my shoulders for eternity. But I can't find it in me to care. My hands might forever be bathed in red, but I would wear it proudly. If only to myself.

The back door of the Town Car opens slowly, and my heart skips a beat. I avoid Tony's eyes, afraid of the panic my older brother will be unable to hide.

Armando Rossi moves torturously slow, and I consider he does it purposely. I refuse to look at the buffed leather of his loafers as he steps out, my eyes kept forward as my father—all six-foot-two of him—unfolds from the car.

He straightens the cuffs of his pressed shirt.

He adjusts his collar.

He spins his wedding band three times.

He does all this before taking a single step. Before even looking at me.

The fury in his breath coats my face in warmth, and it takes everything within me not to grimace in repulsion.

I want to apologize, but I refrain.

I want to swallow, yet I clench my jaw to abstain.

"Look at me."

My chin longs to wobble, the fear in my throat like acid. But I do as I am told.

The back of his hand scores across my face before I register he's lifted it. The slap is hard enough the metal of his wedding band rips into my skin

in a caress of reproach.

“Let it bleed,” he grates out when I lift my hand.

Fist clenched, I drop it to my side, my eyes watering unintentionally at the feel of blood trickling down my cheek and onto my neck.

“Tony,” he murmurs, refusing to take his eyes from me.

Tony moves toward the glass doors of the building without delay, and I send a prayer to anyone who will listen that he’ll be safe.

“No, Daddy,” I cry. “Please.” I throw myself toward him, grabbing the lapels of his jacket. “Don’t hurt him.”

He pushes me back with a disregard and disgust that pierces my heart in a way I wasn’t expecting.

“Get in the car before I’m forced to kill you.”

I swallow. It was always a possibility, but hearing the words fall from my father’s mouth with such ease slices me open and makes my heart stutter in pain.

I scramble toward the car, attempting to be seen as a dutiful daughter when, in fact, I’d just blown his entire world apart.

He waits long enough for me to swipe at my tears before following me into the car. His stare burns a hole into the forefront of my head, where a bullet would lodge itself right between my eyes.

“I love him,” I lie, massaging my hands in my lap. My eyes are cast downward, afraid my deception will shine through.

He snorts in disgust. “You know *nothing* of love. What of loyalty, Bianca?”

“I’ll do anything you ask of me.”

“Anything I ask?” he bellows. “It was implied, Bianca. You are *given*. You are promised to another. To the *boss* of the Outfit.” The veins in his head pulsate so fiercely that I fear his head will explode.

“And I will remain dutiful to him.”

“He will not want you,” he sneers. “You are no longer pure. What will Lorenzo tell him? The disrespect is unforgivable.”

My father is a beautiful man. Tall and muscular. A strong jawline and thick lips. Brown eyes the color of cognac. Women throw themselves at him. I’d love to say that he only has eyes for my mother—as beautiful as she is—but I’d be lying. He takes advantage of his beauty.

While he remains respectful of my mother, which is the Cosa Nostra way, he’s kept a *goomah* for many years. Even then, he enjoys the women the family has on the payroll when it suits him.

I want to hate him for it. It’s not uncommon for made men to cheat on their wives, and it’s not frowned upon. The women accept it. My mother tells me my father does it respectfully. How does one *respectfully* commit adultery? He does it discreetly, yes. But respectfully? There is no such thing.

My father is a capo, and while he has never outwardly vocalized his charge, I know he’s responsible for the underworld prostitution ring run by the family. It should make me sick, but I’ve met some of the women under his charge, and they’re happy. As happy as you can be sucking cock for money. But their vocation lets them live a life they’re comfortable with. They’re protected, to a degree, by the family, and I can’t begrudge them that.

“Why is it okay for you to have mistresses but not okay for women to live the same?” I stupidly spit. “Were you a virgin when you married Mama?”

“Watch your mouth.” His mouth doesn’t open as he threatens me. The clench in his teeth so tight, the words are scarcely audible. “You honor and you respect the old ways, Bianca. I am a capo, for fuck’s sake. What do I tell Lorenzo? Huh? His key to peace with the Outfit has been blown up because you fucked his *consigliere*? His closest advisor?” he screams, shaking the windows of his Town Car.

I can't swallow. I try, but my throat has tightened. An invisible palm having closed itself around my neck. I didn't think about what Lorenzo would do.

Tony jumps into the passenger seat, startling us both. "Go," he urges my father's driver.

Twisting in his seat, Tony looks ready to combust. "Did you fucking kill him?"

"What?" My mouth falls open.

"Did. You. Kill. Him?" he snarls, his face twisted with unease.

"Wh—No. Of course, not."

Looking at our father, he shakes his head. "Roberto already had a serious fucking headache when I got up there."

"A headache?" I repeat dumbly.

"A gunshot wound to the *goddamn* head, B."

"Who else was with you?" My father grabs my wrist, and I cry out from the pain.

"No one. I swear. It was just Berto and me."

TWO



“*T*hey’ve been meeting for a long time.”

I grab Caterina’s hand. She’s shaking. Her small hand damp with sweat.

“That’s a good thing.” My mother paces the length of my bedroom, her thumbnail caught between her teeth. “We’re lucky Lorenzo didn’t just demand you be put to ground. Salvatore Bianchi may demand it.”

She prays quietly, shaking her head, rejecting the thought of my impending death.

“You know they call him *Joker*?”

I’ve heard stories, but I keep my silence, knowing her question was rhetorical.

“He’s happy and friendly *until* you cross him, Bianca. Then he’ll slit you from ear to ear, forcing you to smile as he watches you bleed out.”

Caterina’s gasp has me tightening my grip on her hand, and I force an exaggerated eye roll in her direction. My sixteen-year-old sister shouldn’t have to be concerned with matters of life and death. She should be worrying about boys from school and her cheerleading team.

“*Mama*,” Tony chides.

Mama whirls on me, and it takes everything I have in me not to scramble up the bed in fear. My father may be formidable, but my mother is

no less threatening. “What were you thinking, you stupid girl?”

Caterina snuggles closer.

“That I wanted to feel loved by a man the *right* way before I was given, against my will, to another.” I lower my voice, afraid that if I speak louder, my lie will be written in my inflection.

“Your sister’s future husband?” she screeches. “Of *all* the men. Let’s be thankful you’re already on contraception or...” She shakes her head, unwilling to finish her insult.

Bile rushes up my throat at the thought that Caterina would have been married to that man.

Roberto Ferrari was a rapist. He was a man who harmed women and did so with a smile. The romantic in my sister would have been eaten alive by such a monster. She still believes in love. Even knowing she’ll be promised to another, she believes they will fall in love. I want to shake her and make her see. That falling in love with your captor isn’t anything but a coping mechanism.

“Mama, that’s enough.” Tony steps up, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Bianca is frightened enough and heartbroken”—he looks at me with wide eyes—“that Berto is dead.”

I drop my face, playing my part by sniffing softly.

“I don’t know what she expected to happen.” My mother speaks as though I’m no longer present. As though I’m not five feet away, listening to her. “Opening her legs for a man who’s not intended for her.” She swears under her breath, making the sign of the cross.

“We’ll wait downstairs.”

I nod at Tony, and he steers my mother from the room.

The door has barely closed when Cat throws herself at me. “What if they kill you?” She sobs.

“It’ll be worth it.”

“Not for your life.”

I push her back. “For yours, yes, it is. He was a horrible man, Cat. You wouldn’t have survived by his side.”

“He’ll just promise me to another.”

I swallow my sigh. “Anyone has to be better than Roberto Ferrari.”

“Oh, B. If they hurt you—”

“Stop.” I cut her off, pushing off the bed to take up my mother’s pacing. “I don’t want to worry about my death until I’m certain it’s imminent.”

A knock on the door has me sucking in a quick breath.

“B,” Tony tests, popping his head through the crack he makes. “Father has requested you fix yourself up. You’ll be requested downstairs in half an hour. Be presentable.”

“For what?” I move toward him. “Death?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I’m a soldier, Bianca. They don’t tell me shit.” He closes the door, and I turn to Cat.

“Presentable? For what?”

She swallows. “When we were told of our pairings with Salvatore and Roberto, Father told us we’d have to dress nicely for our initial meetings. He promised Mama would take us shopping.”

“Surely, Salvatore still doesn’t want me?”

Cat shrugs. “You’re beautiful. What’s not to want, Bianca? You’re the prize of the family. Maybe his attraction to you is deep enough for forgiveness.”

It’s stupid that beauty can hold such high esteem. I’m beautiful and, therefore, a prized possession of Cosa Nostra.

“Let’s make you look as beautiful as we can,” Cat blurts. “Maybe if he’s driven crazy with lust, he’ll be more forgiving.”

“Unlikely. Wait? You don’t think he’s *here*?”

“I don’t know. Your appearance is all we’ve got up our sleeve right now.” Cat climbs off the bed, moving into my closet. “Shower. Let’s remove any reminder of Roberto from you.”

“I have none of Roberto on me.”

“They don’t know that.”

I do as she says. Scrubbing my skin to free it of Roberto’s touch. It’s true that Roberto didn’t fuck me. But his hands felt along my body, and his hideous lips tasted my skin. The thought makes me want to vomit.

“I’ll fix your hair while you put some makeup on,” Cat tells me as I climb from the shower. “We’ll leave it down. It makes you look less severe.”

“*Thanks.*”

“I’m trying here, Bianca. I’m scared.”

I grab her shoulders. “I know. I’m sorry. What dress did you choose?”

“A cream one. Not white or pure but demure enough to look the part.”

Twenty minutes later, Cat and I have done our best to make me look innocently enticing. It’s a farce. Lorenzo Caruso thinks I let his advisor fuck me. A betrayal punishable by death.

I make my way down the stairs on shaky legs. My feet are slippery, my nerves seeping through me and dampening my entire body. I dab at my upper lip, trying to rid myself of the physical giveaway of my hysteria before I come face-to-face with my devil.

My father’s office is off-limits to us. We do not enter unless strictly invited, which is never. Unless, like me, you’ve just signed your own execution order. I stand at the closed door, eyes shut as I steel my nerves. Glancing over my shoulder, my mother turns away quickly, unable to meet my eye. I don’t look at Cat, knowing her panic will only exacerbate mine. Instead, I look at Tony. His fear is potent enough, but he dips his chin in reassurance. His emotions are a contradiction that do nothing but quicken the beat of my heart.

I knock, a soft rap of my knuckles against the heavy wood.

“Come,” my father calls through the door, and hand to the handle, I send off a prayer to anyone who will listen to grant me mercy.

I duck my head toward Lorenzo as I enter the room, in a show of respect that I hope he reads well enough. From the second our eyes meet, my heart regulates. He doesn't look angered. Frankly, he looks bored.

Salvatore is noticeably missing. *Thank fuck*. But Leo and Vincent are present, which sets off a new melody of alarm bells.

Leo Caruso. *Underboss* of New York City and Lorenzo's younger brother.

Vincent Ferrari. Roberto's brother and *enforcer* for Cosa Nostra.

Fuck.

Sitting on the chair beside his brother, Leo slides his index finger across his bottom lip. He watches me carefully with a puzzled pull to his brows. Younger than Lorenzo by at least five years, he's remarkably handsome, and his schoolboy charm has not yet washed off with his years as a Mafia underboss. You'd be forgiven for thinking he'd be the agreeable brother, harmless to an extent. You'd be wrong. Leonardo Caruso is as dangerous as they come. His threat more potent due to the wholesome front you're sucked into believing.

Vincent doesn't even look at me. His focus is on the street outside, hand cupping a glass of whiskey that I'm tempted to remove from his hand and swallow in one fell swoop to calm my nerves.

My palms sweat, but I refrain from wiping them on my dress.

"Bianca."

"You wanted to see me, Papa?"

Quiet encases the room, and I'm uncertain of what to do. I'm surrounded by some of the highest-ranking members of our *family*, yet I feel anything but safe.

"Lorenzo, I'm—"

"Don't speak unless you're spoken to," Leo cuts through my pitiful apology, and I duck my head immediately.

I'm trembling, and I bite the insides of my cheeks to focus on anything but the way my breath comes only in short, sharp bursts.

"For your betrayal, I could kill you."

I swallow audibly at the bite in Lorenzo's voice. I open my mouth to speak but think better of it, closing it again.

"I could force your father to have you work for him."

"Work for him?" I squeak out, the sound of my voice both embarrassing and broken.

"As a whore," he tells me proudly, his voice carrying around the room.

"Oh."

"*Oh*," Leo echoes, laughing at me.

"Would you do that, Bianca?" Lorenzo asks, mirth threading through his question. "Would you spread your legs for the family as an occupation like you did for Roberto?"

I release a shaky breath. I work to meet my father's eyes, but he keeps them lowered, refusing to acknowledge the disrespect his boss is lacing me with.

The sound of a glass being placed forcefully on a table pulls my attention, and I look at Vincent. The harshness in his stare has me wanting to look away, but I can't. His eyes are so blue you could mistake them for silver. The color of a wolf, ready to rip you apart.

He's angered, and I can appreciate that. His brother has just been murdered.

"No," Lorenzo speaks again, breaking the trance Vincent and I were caught in. "It's a waste, though. You'd earn us good money." He smirks. "But while you disrespect me *and* your father, I wouldn't do the same to him."

"Th—"

Leo holds up a finger to silence me, and I eat my words.

“Salvatore will not have you,” Lorenzo tells me with an exaggerated sigh. “I wouldn’t disrespect him by even asking. But you will be married.”

“I will?”

“Mm,” he answers, his gaze lazy as it tracks over my body in appreciation.

Lorenzo came to power early. Not yet thirty and already the ruthless leader of the New York family. A mere ten years older than me, yet in his presence, I feel like a child.

“You are of no value to me anymore, Bianca.” He pouts. “Lucky for you, Vincent was gracious enough to agree to a union with you.”

I startle, my eyes seeking Vincent’s once again.

“What? No.”

“No?” Lorenzo echoes, the cut in his voice as sharp as a knife. “You fucked one *consigliere*, so why not his replacement?”

I look at Vincent in shock. He’s looking every bit of the enforcer that he is. A man dedicated to violence; one who bends others to his will through threats and beatings.

“You have no choice, Bianca. You’re a whore, or you are Vincent’s wife.”

Leo laughs. “Sounds the same to me.”

Vincent *almost* smirks, his lips twisting, and I want to spit at his feet. I’m supposed to be his future wife, and he *smirks* at the thought of me as a whore.

“Papa?” I rush forward.

Vincent is no better than his brother. From the rumors, he’s worse.

Vincent *Necktie* Ferrari.

A killer, one who garrottes his victims.

“You will do as you are told, Bianca.”

“And what of Caterina?”

My father stands abruptly. “You have no right to ask questions.”

I stumble backward straight into Vincent's hard chest. He steadies me, palms to my upper arms, and I skitter forward, escaping his granite body.

Our eyes snare, and I drop my gaze immediately, but not quick enough to miss the amused arch of his eyebrow at my panic.

"Your sister will take your place. She will be offered to Salvatore. Let's hope like fuck he accepts." Lorenzo stands.

He takes a step toward the door, pausing to turn back to me. "Did you do it?"

Lorenzo Caruso shouldn't be this frightening. He's a man closer to my age than he is my father's. A firstborn son forced into power after the untimely demise of his father. Yet he's more merciless than his father ever was. Giorgio held a warmth to him and embraced the family within our unit. A black hole long ago replaced Lorenzo's heart, making him cruel and ruthless.

"Did I do what?"

Hand cupping his jaw, he rubs it down his face. "Kill Roberto?"

I'm not quick enough to school my shock. "*Kill him?* No."

His gaze moves above me to the intimidating heat of Vincent, now a step too close to my back. "That's right. You and Berto were in love. Right?" He smiles.

I lift my chin. "That's right."

"My condolences then."

The men laugh, and my fists clench without permission. I want to stab each and every one of them. My father included. I want to take a knife and carve out their hearts. I want to slice out their tongues for the disrespect they feel it is their right to dress me with.

The burn of Vincent's stare fires at my back, and my rage consumes me. I signed my own death warrant only to be forced into a living hell.

Vincent Ferrari is not a kind man. He's a monster.

I whirl around, my temper catching me off guard. “I’m not a virgin,” I blurt out.

The tic in my father’s jaw does not go unnoticed. The other men have the decency to drop their heads, an act of respect to show they heard nothing of my confession. As though it was a secret to begin with. I’m only in this predicament because of my defiled nature.

Vincent, unperturbed by my outburst, takes a step forward, and it takes everything within me not to flinch. My breath holds as he moves toward me, his face as unreadable as ever.

I turn my face as he steps into me. I can feel the freshness of his breath fanning across my profile.

He leans down, lips brushing the shell of my ear. “I’m sure at least one of your orifices retains its virginal status. I’ll take pleasure in deflowering that.”

My eyes widen, and I pull in a sharp breath.

He smiles against my ear, and I’m glad that his face is tucked into my neck to hide the gesture. I’ve never seen Vincent smile, nor do I want to. His unhinged nature does not complement a smile.

His lips move away from my ear, touching the soft underside. He places the most tender kiss I could ever imagine receiving there.

He steps back, his impassive mask back in place.

Gaze sliding down my body, he frowns. Reaching out, he brushes the back of his fingers over my upper arm. They’re adorned with black and silver rings that caress my skin with the cold touch of metal.

Pulling my scrutiny from his face, I look at where his touch meets my skin, the bruise of Tony’s fingers staining my bicep in blue and purple stripes.

“Who did this?” he asks.

I cover the bruise, choosing silence.

“Roberto?” he tests.

Roberto was a pig, but he wasn't aggressive.

"No," he murmurs. "Your father?"

My father moves to speak, but Vincent lifts a hand, stopping him.

"No," I defend.

His bottom lip tips out. "Your brother?"

A fleeting glance of confirmation must make itself visible on my face because Vincent's eyes darken.

"Armando," he rasps, the menace in his voice sucking the oxygen from the room. "Tell your son that if he marks what is mine again, if he *touches* what is mine," he corrects. "I'll take to his throat with barbed wire."

His fingers flick at my hand, and I let it fall away. The pad of his thumb brushes the discoloration.

"Am I understood?" He speaks again when my father keeps his silence.

"He was furious at her indiscretion."

"Am I understood?" Vincent repeats.

"Of course," my father answers, the irritation in his tone palpable.

Without sparing me another glance, Vincent brushes past me, and they all exit the room. When I'm certain they're gone, I rush from the room, needing to escape the suffocating space.

THREE



“Other orifice? Was he threatening to take your anal virginity?”
Caterina whispers the word, her face twisted in disgust.

“What else could he have meant?”

She considers my question, her face scrunched in disgust. “Your mouth?”

“Yeah, maybe he meant that.” I swallow my trepidation.

We look at one another skeptically, knowing Vincent was definitely not referring to my mouth.

“Is that expected?” Cat asks after a long pause. “Anal sex?” She shifts on the bed, pushing her backside firmly into the mattress.

I shrug, throwing myself back onto my bed. “I think you’re expected to do whatever the fuck they say. They give zero fucks on whether you want it or not.”

Her face blanches. “That’s rape.”

My sixteen-year-old sister is blissfully ignorant. I used to think she was naïve, a byproduct of her sheltered upbringing. I’ve come to realize that she chooses her ignorance. She thinks on a scale of light and dark, refusing to contemplate the shadows between. She romanticizes life in all its ugly glory. It’s never annoyed me until this very moment. I want to shake her. I want to make her see that we were *born* in the shadows and don’t have a

choice. Our father is a career criminal, and whether we want it or not, we're cast in the same way. The men in our family don't abide by society's rules of wrong and right. They've created their own laws, and they're binding to all within the faction.

"I'm sure they're not all like that." I don't shake her. I appease her.

Her head moves up and down quickly, swallowing my lie eagerly. "Maybe Vincent won't be like that."

Fat chance of Vincent Ferrari having any consideration for my feelings whatsoever, but I don't tell Cat that. I smile in reassurance. "Yeah, he's probably just doing Lorenzo a favor. Maybe he won't even want to touch me."

Cat smiles happily. "Did they say anything about me? About what will happen now that Roberto is dead?"

I've been waiting for this. She let the conversation stay with Vincent and our impending nuptials for the last hour. But I knew it was eating at her.

Your sister will take your place. She will be offered to Salvatore.

He's happy and friendly until you cross him, Bianca. Then he'll slit you from ear to ear, forcing you to smile as he watches you bleed out.

"No," I lie, hating myself as the single syllable falls from my lips. "They were too consumed with threatening me."

"Of course." Guilt passes over her features, and I feel even worse. But I can't save her from Salvatore. Not without putting a bullet to her head and removing the promise of *her* from this earth.

"Let's watch a movie. Distract me from the disaster of the day."

Caterina forces a smile. "Sounds good. You choose."

Halfway through the film, my mother walks into my bedroom without knocking. "You've had a package delivered."

"Me?" I ask dumbly, sitting up. "Who from?"

She sighs, her exasperation palpable. "I don't know, Bianca." She hands me the small box with little finesse. "Well"—she hurries me when I make

no move to open it—"let us see."

I look at the box and then back at her. "What if I don't want it? What if it's a finger?"

Fingers pinching the bridge of her nose, my mother groans. "Who would send you severed body parts, child?"

"I don't know," I argue defensively. "Maybe my new fiancé?"

"Ew," Cat complains.

I rip away the packaging and peek inside.

"Well?" My mother strains to see.

"It's nothing." I hold it in my lap.

"Nothing?" she repeats.

"A face cream I ordered online." Up until today, I never held back on the truth. I had no need to. But now I can't seem to stop. My lies fall from my mouth as easily as I breathe.

Sliding off my bed, I place the box on my dresser, forcing a yawn. "I'm actually pretty tired. I'm ready to crash." I look at my mother and sister pointedly.

Caterina leaves without argument, kissing my cheek before traipsing off to her bedroom.

"Why doesn't it have the sender's details on it?" My mother pauses at the door.

I mumble incoherently. "I'll be sure to send them an email and ask."

I rush toward the bedroom door the moment she leaves, closing it behind her. I click the lock quietly into place, plastering my back against the wood.

Rushing back toward my dresser, the ring box mocks me from the tissue paper it's stuffed within. Pulling the card out first, I let my gaze track over Vincent's severe writing.

"I'm confident you'll find this to your liking."

“I’m confident you’ll find this to your liking,” I mimic petulantly. “Asshat.”

I reach for the ring box as though it’s covered in lava. Afraid it will burn me. The remnants of Vincent’s evil nature pouring through, cursing me for an eternity. Instead, the blue velvet is smooth under my fingers, and I rub the material. It soothes something within me, creating a layer of ease inside my stomach with the tranquility of touch.

Opening the small box, I want to laugh at the absurdity of me opening my own ring box. No proposal, just the delivery of a ring in discreet packaging.

Am I supposed to slide it onto my own fucking finger, too?

I gasp aloud, my hand cupping my mouth to stop the sound.

Inside sits one of the prettiest rings I’ve ever seen, both delicate and timeless. A pavé-set halo surrounding a princess-cut diamond. It’s ornate and everything I would choose for myself. It’s expensive too—more than some people earn in an entire year expensive.

I’m afraid to touch it. The absurdity of this being mine makes me feel like a child playing dress-up.

Pulling it from the security of the cushioning, I hold the band between my thumb and forefinger, bringing it close to my face. It glitters and shines, and I gulp down the lump in my throat. This must have cost a fortune. Considering the way in which Vincent was forced to marry me, I hadn’t even contemplated an engagement ring.

Glancing around my room, my anxiety convincing me my mother is hiding in the shadows, I slide the perfection of the ring onto my finger, biting into my bottom lip at how exquisite it looks.

I turn my hand this way and that, taking in the way the diamond catches different forms of light.

My phone beeps, and I startle at the sound. Yanking the ring off my finger, I tuck it back into the box. Scrambling to my feet, I place the box on

my bedside table and retrieve my phone.

Unknown: Sufficient?

Sufficient?

Bianca: Sufficient would have been actually being asked.

Unknown: Do you like it or not?

I type out that it's beautiful, then delete the words almost immediately.

A new message pops up when I don't respond.

Unknown: I expect you to wear it moving forward.

Bianca: I will wear it when my fiancé slides it onto my finger.

I turn off my phone. I'm annoyed that he now has a direct line of contact with me, which is a level of stupidity even I can acknowledge, considering we'll soon be married, and he'll have a direct line to a lot more than my phone.

Moving into my bathroom, I drop my clothes as I walk, stepping into the shower and letting the shock of the cold water rid my mind of conscious thought while it heats.

I spend longer than necessary washing my long hair, afraid of the ring that taunts me from my bedside table.

I expect you to wear it moving forward.

Up until today, I was never interested in pushing boundaries. I knew what was expected of me, and I played the part of a mafioso daughter. But the moment Cat was threatened, something in me snapped. My obedience became obsolete because protecting my inexperienced sister was of the utmost importance. But that's now done. I've succeeded in my goal, and now without something to work toward, I don't really know who I am. In mere days, I'll be married, so my role of dutiful daughter no longer fits. Does Vincent expect a dutiful wife? Can I give him that?

Walking from my bathroom, I squeeze the ends of my hair into my towel, drying the thick and unruly locks.

Vincent sits on my bed, the epitome of calm, ring box held in his hand. He sits as though he belongs, exuding a lazy confidence when, in reality, he's invaded my personal sanctuary without an invitation.

I look at my bedroom door, then back at him, thankful I'd thrown on my nightie before exiting the bathroom. "My door was locked."

"Was it?" The bored indifference in his tone wraps itself around my spine, and I scowl.

The jacket and waistcoat he was wearing earlier are now missing. His white dress shirt remains tucked neatly into his pants, the sleeves pushed up his muscular forearms. A thick tendril of hair hangs loosely over his forehead. He brushes it away, his fingers combing his dark mane back. Only it falls back into place almost immediately.

"We are not married yet. You have no right to invade my private space."

Lips clamped into a thin line, the rich color of his mouth fades. "We're engaged."

I roll my eyes. "Are we? I don't remember you asking."

His silver eyes don't quite narrow, but they change shape as he considers me. Confusion mars his features, and he cracks his knuckles, finger by finger, his super-focused gaze never wavering. "I won't get on my knees."

I scoff. "We have that in common then."

He catches his bottom lip between his teeth, but the mirth in his eyes is impossible to ignore.

Pushing himself up from my bed, he moves toward me, his strides long and purposeful. He towers over my five-foot-four frame, liquid eyes burning with lust and irritation and a heavy dose of amusement.

Taking the ring from its cushion, he slides the empty box into his pocket. "Do you like it?"

"Yes," I answer before I can stop myself.

He dips his chin in approval.

I gasp as his fingers slide along the side of my left hand, but I refrain from pulling from his touch. His eyes remain on mine, and as much as I want to look away, the intensity in his gaze has me pinned in place.

He's a handsome man. Haunting in his attractiveness. Silver eyes that look at you a little *too* close. A long nose that sits heavily on his face, high cut cheekbones, and facial hair that covers his jaw and upper lip; thick enough to be purposeful but not long enough to be disheveled. A wide scar cuts through his right eyebrow, and I long to reach out and touch it, to ask him how it happened. It's his lips that force my mind from homicidal thoughts to fantasies I've only let myself wonder about over the last hour. A beautiful color of blush, they're thick, and it takes everything I have within me not to push my lips against them. I want to feel how soft they are; I want to discover they're a ruse. A siren of lust to pull you in only to disappoint you in the end.

The cold touch of the ring hits my finger, and I pull my gaze from him, watching as my life sentence slides onto my finger, forever holding me to a man I never considered a possibility.

"You're mine now, Bianca."

His vow adds the weight of the world onto the diamond now nestled snugly onto the ring finger of my left hand.

Mine.

The word reverberates within the cavity of my chest.

"Mine," I echo the sentiment, tasting the word on my tongue. "Does that make you mine, too?" I look up at him, refusing to cower under the violent possessiveness in his eyes.

Yesterday, Vincent and I were strangers.

Two individuals who may have brushed shoulders at family celebrations a time or two.

Today, we are engaged.

In mere days, we will be wed.

We will belong to one another under an oath of God and a promise of sacrifice.

“Hm.” His bottom lip tips out. “You can’t own a monster, *dolcezza*. It may seem that way because they’re always with you. Close enough to haunt you. In here”—he draws a love heart in the very center of my chest—“in here”—he runs a finger down my temple—“down here”—his finger moves between my breasts, tracking down my stomach but stopping just before he reaches my apex. “But it’s important to remember you belong to your monster, not the other way around.”

“I’m not a possession.”

He lifts a shoulder. “What is a wife if not the property of her husband?”

I move to yank my hand away, but he holds it steady in his grasp.

“Equals,” I spit.

He laughs, a bitter and resentful sound that flushes my cheeks with embarrassment. “Trust me, Bianca. You don’t want to be my equal. That would mean dancing with the devil, and you’re too pure for that.”

My chest heaves with angered breaths.

“This”—he lifts my hand, forcing me to look at the diamond he’s now cursed me with—“puts you under my protection. Do you understand that?”

“Seems the only person I need protecting from is you.”

He kisses the ring, his lips not made of steel like I’d hoped, more the texture of how I imagine a cloud, billowy and accommodating. “Bianca, do not test me on this. You wear this ring like goddamn fucking armor, do you understand?”

I yank my hand away, but he pulls me in closer, his free hand grabbing my jaw. “Tell me you understand.”

I swallow. “I understand.”

His lips touch mine, and my mouth opens in shock, the gentleness of the kiss a stark contrast to the cruel grip he has on my jaw.

He pulls away, dropping my hand and taking a step backward.

“Two days, *dolcezza*. I have business to attend to in the meantime. Pack your bags; you will move into my home following our nuptials.”

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FOUR



“*H*ey, girl.”

I close the door behind me, turning the sign over in the window to read closed to the outside world.

The salon is empty, the majority of the space cast in darkness, but we plan it that way. Scheduling me for the last available appointment ensures the other stylists are finished with their day and ready to head home.

“Hey, Trix.” I kiss her cheek.

Andre, my driver, waits in the car. He sits there comfortably for the few hours Trixie and I spend talking crap. He’s never complained, but then, he doesn’t get paid to gripe.

“What’s new?” I ask, sliding into the seat she gestures to.

Flicking out a black cape, she wraps it around me, clipping it in place at the back of my neck. “Same old. Same old. Sucking cock, fixing hair.”

I laugh.

Trixie is five-foot-nothing with a severe blond bob and could run a marathon in six-inch stilettos and still win. She’s a hairdresser by day, working at one of the salons the family uses for money laundering, and finishes her evenings under the care of my father; as she so poetically put it, sucking cock.

She's also, unbeknownst to my family, my best friend. Befriending a paid girl would be beneath my standing. Trixie and I both know it, so we pretend we are hairdresser and client. I have my hair styled numerous times a week, and she takes her sweet-ass time blow-drying my thick waves to give us as much time as possible.

Running her fingers through my hair, Trixie leans down. "Okay, fill me in. What happened?"

"Well, he's dead." I meet her eyes in the mirror.

"I know that part, bitch. He hasn't come in for a blowy in days. Rumors are flying like wildfire among the other girls. But I'm talking about the fact that you're still alive. Are they still making you marry Salvatore?"

"No." I shake my head. "Trix, I was the last person to see Berto alive."

"Before Tony killed him?"

I drop my eyes. "Tony went up after I came down. Berto was already dead when he arrived."

I cautiously bring my eyes back up, seeking her gaze. A split second passes when doubt hits her eyes. She shakes it away, but I see it. The consideration of whether I had it in me to kill Roberto Ferrari.

"Does Lorenzo know what happened? That is fucked up, Bianca."

"No one else was there," I assure her. "Or if they were, I didn't see them. But Trix, if someone else was there—"

"They'd know that you didn't sleep with Roberto. They'd know that you weren't in love with him and were there to undermine the family."

I nod.

Tony and I haven't even spoken of this. We've both ignored the reality that someone else could know intimate details of our plan. That our scheme to sabotage Lorenzo's direct orders could be used against us and cost us our lives.

Hands to my shoulders, she stares at my reflection, worry creasing her made-up face. "You look positively wrecked. Understandably. What is their

plan with you if not Salvatore?"

"I'm now promised to Vincent."

She grimaces. "Roberto's brother? The enforcer?"

"Consigliere now," I confirm. "He's moved into Roberto's role."

"*Bianca*," she voices with worry. "What if he finds out you set a plan in motion to have his brother killed? Whether it came to fruition or not, you aimed to push his brother into death."

"I know." I close my eyes, letting the panic of the past twenty-four hours release on a shaky exhale. "Papa is so fucking mad at me. The only reason I was allowed to keep this appointment is because I'm getting married tomorrow."

Trixie looks ready to cry, and I feel tears well up in my eyes.

"Berto was worse," she laments, her small hands squeezing my shoulders in an offer of reassurance.

"It doesn't matter which one is worse. They were brothers, and I had plans to have one of them killed." I whisper the words as quietly as I can.

I twist the engagement band on my finger, squeezing my hand closed to force the stone to cut into my palm.

Trixie ushers me over to the basin, making sure I'm comfortable before thoroughly soaking my hair.

"What's he like?" I ask, the fear in my voice cracking along each word. "You know, at the club?"

She pauses. "I wouldn't know. He doesn't pay for sex, not through Caruso's club anyway."

Shock slices through me. "I didn't pick that."

"Fuck knows who is fucking that scary-ass motherfucker for free, but she must be some kind of sadist."

I let the way her long fingers run through my hair loosen the tension in my body as she shampoos it. She looks thoughtful.

"Caterina has now been promised to Salvatore."

“They’re moving Cat to Chicago? *Fuck.*”

“My father told her this morning. She seems calm about it,” I say.

Trix nods. “Like I told you,” she says, “Salvatore is a total player, but with the sheer amount of pussy he keeps on the side, she probably won’t have to warm his bed too often.”

I breathe a sigh of relief for my sister.

Trixie’s fingers work their way over my scalp, massaging conditioner into my hair. I close my eyes, enjoying the feeling. Pretending as though my life isn’t about to come to a crashing halt.

“Did he give you a ring?”

I lift my hand, twisting the diamond back around to show her the ridiculously large rock.

She whistles. “Guy has decent taste.”

I shrug.

“Where is the wedding?”

“At home.”

Her hands stop. “What the fuck?”

“Because I’ve dishonored the family, it’ll be a small affair. A simple business transaction involving a priest who’ll authorize the execution of my soul.”

“Babe,” she says.

“It’s okay. We always knew this would happen. You can’t pick your family.”

“True that, baby. True that.”

“How’s the new trainee going?” I ask.

She lifts a single shoulder. “She’s all right. She has no fucking idea what she’s gotten herself into. She flirts with every fucking mafioso who comes in the door. Poor thing is dead set on breaking her own heart.”

We walk back to the salon chair, and I take my seat.

“Tony and I had another fight.”

I want to shake her. Speaking about being dead set on breaking her own heart, Trixie Madden is hopelessly in love with my brother. A man who will never have permission to marry her. “Trix.”

“I know.” She plugs in her blow dryer. “You know he fucked Amity?”

“What?”

She shakes her head, dryer tucked under her armpit as she sections my hair.

She’s quiet for a time, her focus on the round brush she uses to dry my hair. Switching off the dryer, she sighs. “I couldn’t believe it. I just wanted him to stay the night. He refused me, obviously. Who wants to spend the night with a whore?”

My heart aches for her. She doesn’t hate her occupation—it gives her the freedom to live the way she wants to—but I see the regret in her eyes sometimes. The truth is, whether she’s paid to fuck people or not, Antonio will never be hers. She’s not Italian; she’s not a part of the family the way she needs to be.

“I told him to fuck off. That I didn’t want to see him again.”

“That’s fair.”

“I turned up at work the next night to see his cock in Amity’s mouth. *Asshole.*”

I hate my brother a little bit at that moment. He wanted to hurt Trixie. For what? He hurts her every day by being a Rossi. Surely, he doesn’t need to cause her any more undue pain.

“I’m sorry.”

“Eh.” She turns the dryer on again, silence sitting heavily between us as she finishes my hair.



“HAIR LOOKS NICE, MISS ROSSI.”

I smile into the rearview mirror. It shows only Andre's eyes, but I can tell he's smiling. "How many times do I have to tell you to call me Bianca?"

"You'll only be a Rossi for one more day," he slays me by saying. "I'd like to finish off my time with you by remembering you that way."

I want to cry. Andre has been my dedicated driver for as long as I can remember. He's watched me grow up. He's been present for every teary-eyed (me, not him) first day of school, dance recitals, music lessons, teenage tantrums—he's seen it all. Not quite my father's age, but not as young as my soon-to-be husband, he'll forever be someone I've been able to count on.

"Would you be okay if I requested that Vincent employ you as my driver when I move in with him? I won't be offended if you would prefer to stay under the employment of my father, though."

"Whatever you like, Miss Rossi."

I nod my head once, making a mental note to speak with Vincent next time I see him about Andre.

The drive home feels worlds away from the countless times before. The next time I see Trixie, I'll be Mrs. Ferrari.

Bianca Ferrari.

Wife to the new consigliere of the New York family.

Our friendship is dangerous enough already. We trust one another more than we likely should. I could have had her killed for the secrets she's entrusted me with. She could have brought me the same fate with the things she knows I've done. And that was as a clueless daughter with limited knowledge of the family business. I'll be scrutinized more heavily under Vincent's watchful eye. He doesn't strike me as a man who would remain comfortably oblivious to the goings-on in his wife's life. My friendship with Trixie, among a hundred other things, will change. My life will be less of mine and more of his. I've been insensible to the displacement in my life

following my marriage, but as the hours tick by, I find myself mourning the loss of Bianca Rossi and the freedom I held in my youth.

Trixie shares the intimate details of things she sees through the salon and the club. She was how I knew about Roberto. How I knew that he raped women and enjoyed decorating their skin in shades of purple and blue. *She* was the reason I betrayed my family and found myself in the line of fire with Vincent. Trixie helped me save my sister.

I often consider how selfish I am in keeping our friendship. The truth is, if the family knew the things we spoke of, she'd be killed first. Her life would mean nothing to the men of Cosa Nostra. She'd be a mere pawn in protecting their Outfit. I don't surmise I'd survive much better, but my chances would be greater than hers.

FIVE



My wedding was uneventful. It was not lavish or a celebration by any means. Due to my perceived betrayal, it was presided over by a priest with only immediate family in attendance. I stood in my father's office like a fool in a white dress. Vincent stood beside me, the picture of quiet composure in his pressed tux. I wanted to cry the entire time—not with happiness or love, but with the sacrifice of my heart to a man who I'm certain will never appreciate or likely acknowledge it.

Following the ceremony, my packed bags were piled into a car, and Vincent and I drove off to our new life of marital bliss.

Vincent is quiet as he drives. The soft sound of the radio provides some interference to the pounding of my heart. I sneak glances at him as inconspicuously as I can, making sure to look away almost immediately to ensure he doesn't catch my curious gaze.

"You look beautiful today." He breaks the silence.

"Oh, thank you."

"With the clinicalness of the day, I'm not sure if anyone told you," he murmurs, not moving his focus from the road. "Every bride should be made aware they're beautiful on their wedding day."

The affection in his compliment dissipates almost immediately. He didn't necessarily think I looked beautiful. He just felt that I should hear the

words.

“That came out wrong.” He corrects himself, jaw tensing in irritation.

I choose silence over speaking, unsure of what he expects me to say.

Five minutes pass before he speaks again. “You’re beautiful. You look beautiful.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, toying with the tulle of my skirt.

“You’re welcome.”

I feel every bit of my eighteen years in comparison to Vincent's thirty. He’s a *man*, and unsure of how to hold myself, I epitomize a clueless teenager.

Brushing my hand over my ponytail, I twirl the ends of my hair around my finger.

“I like your hair like that.”

“Hm?”

He clears his throat. “Your hair,” he repeats. “I like it up like that.”

I touch my pearl headband absently. “Thank you.”

“You have a habit of hiding under your hair,” he tells me. “This removes that problem for me.”

“I don’t hide,” I argue quietly. “You’re intense... sometimes *too* intense.”

“Exactly,” he states. “You duck your face and hide behind your curtain of hair.”

“Well, don’t get used to this,” I bite out. “I plan on hiding from you forever.”

He smirks, and I hate how much I want to taste his smile. He didn’t kiss me the way I expected him to when the priest pronounced us man and wife. He tapped a chaste kiss on my lips, and that was it. Now I’ve been left wanting something from him I never imagined I would.

Intimacy.

“Why didn’t you kiss me?”

His head turns toward me slowly, his dark brows pulling heavily over his eyes.

“This may have been a business transaction for you, but that farce back there was my wedding. The only one I will have. I didn’t get to dance or celebrate the way I should have. You could have at least kissed me like you could stand my presence.”

He pulls into the undercover parking lot of a flashy building on Park Avenue, and when he doesn’t respond, I turn to look out the window, watching as we move farther and farther underground.

It seems fitting. I’ve married a form of the devil. Driving into the depths of hell is a given.

“Will you employ Andre as my driver?”

“No.”

I sigh, not in the least bit surprised at his curt response.

He parks and exits the car within seconds. I follow his lead, leaning back into the open door when he comes over to my side. He looks at the open door and then at me.

“Moving forward, I’d like to open your door for you.”

I look at him skeptically. “Why?”

“I don’t need to divulge my reasons. Is it something you’re comfortable with?”

I close the door, resting against it. “That’s fine.”

He dips his chin in approval, and I curse myself internally for preening under his silent praise.

“I’ll have someone collect most of your things tomorrow. Which bags will you need tonight?”

“The two white ones.”

Moving through the parking lot, we step into the elevator in silence. Vincent stands in one corner of the metal box, and unsure what to do with

myself, I choose the other. He frowns at me, fists clenching around my two bags.

An older woman joins us on the next floor, smiling at us widely. Her eyes track the flow of my dress in dreamy appreciation.

I smile awkwardly back. Vincent ignores her.

“You look stunning.” The older woman turns to me, and I force another smile.

“Thank you.”

“Bet this one can’t keep his hands off you.” She winks.

“Oh, he’s insatiable,” I say when, in truth, I want to ask her if she’s senile. We couldn’t look further from the fantasy of newlyweds in love if we tried.

But she grins, oblivious to the shadowing of my heart. “I remember when I married my husband. He’s dead now, God rest his soul, but we were all hands and lips. It must have been a sight for anyone in the vicinity.” She laughs.

My smile morphs into one of genuine joy, the love this woman holds for her late husband palpable. But as soon as the feeling catches me, regret and longing take its place. I glance at Vincent, saddened by the knowledge that we’ll never be consumed with one another enough to let lust blind us in the confines of an elevator with an audience.

“What floor are you on?”

The woman looks at Vincent, shifting in discomfort at his harsh tone. “Oh, umm, two more to go.”

“Bianca,” he murmurs. “Come here.”

The lady gives me an encouraging smile, and I take the few steps over to my husband. He shifts both of my bags into one hand, his free hand circling my waist and pulling me into his side. My chest rested against the side of his, I tentatively lay my hand along his stomach, fingers itching to

trace the divots of muscle beneath his shirt. He looks down at my hand, considering it for a moment before lifting his head.

“Your floor,” he says to the woman without looking at her.

The doors slide open, and she steps through. “Congratulations!” she yells out as the doors close again.

I expect Vincent to remove his touch, but he holds me close. Encouraged by his outward display of affection, however small it may be, I shift my hand to his chest, enjoying the feel of his pounding heartbeat.

The elevator stops on his floor, and he lets me go. I mourn the loss of his touch but hide the disappointment by grabbing at my dress. Stepping forward, he braces his palm over the door. “After you.”

I cross the threshold of the elevator into the penthouse.

“That lady seemed nice.” I don’t know why I need to fill the uncomfortable silence with wearisome small talk, but I can’t stop myself.

“She was nosy.”

“Hardly. She congratulated us.”

He grunts in disapproval. “And made you feel inferior because my tongue wasn’t down your throat.”

He knew that? Is that why he called me over? In an attempt to soothe my battered ego?

My eyes scan over his space eagerly. It’s large, but you’d expect that from a penthouse. It’s minimal in its furnishings. Enough to be comfortable but sparse enough to ward off the fairy tale of a home.

“Not what you were expecting?”

“No,” I answer honestly.

He raises a single dark brow.

“I expected something more Gothic. Big and cavernous.”

He side-eyes me, the slightest eye roll catching me off guard. “Follow me.”

“Do you want me to take my shoes off?” I lift the hem of my dress, leaning down to unstrap my heels.

“No.”

I drop my skirt, hurrying after him. He walks up the stairs, his muscles visible through the material of his shirt. He’s not a bulky man. But he’s fit, his strength clear with visibly svelte muscle.

He gestures to a room, waiting for me to enter before following me. I walk in on tentative steps, my head turning left and right, soaking up the dark tones of the quiet room.

I watch as he drops my bags in the closet.

Standing in the middle of the room, I stared at him. When I stepped inside, the space felt vast, but now that we both stand within it, the walls seem to close in with every second that passes.

“Where’s your room?”

Leaning against the jamb of the walk-in closet, he tucks his hands into his pockets. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Will this be my room?”

“Yes.”

“Where will you sleep?”

His eyes flick to the king-size bed.

“Oh.”

“We’re married, Bianca.”

“Yes, of course.” I hate the way my cheeks shade. My embarrassment an insight into my lack of experience.

I feel his eyes on me as I focus on the large bed; imagining us sleeping side by side.

How many women has he had in this bed? How many have come before me?

“You’re the first.” He reads my thoughts. “Women aren’t invited into my inner sanctum, Bianca.”

“And me?”

“You’re my wife.”

I lift my chin. “Ah, yes, the coveted possession.”

He plays with his wedding band, turning it around over and over again.

“I guess I should remove my dress.”

He stops his ministrations, his fingers pausing on his wedding band. He lifts a single shoulder. “I can’t imagine sleeping in it would be terribly comfortable.”

I almost want to, suddenly afraid of him seeing me naked.

“Will you undo my buttons, please?”

I feel like a gazelle, standing in an open plain, waiting for a lion to attack as he walks toward me. His gait lazy, I shift on my feet.

“Turn around,” he commands, and there’s no mistaking the roughness in his voice.

Fingers at the very top button on the nape of my neck, I shiver at his gentle touch against my skin. His fingertips are ridged, calloused from years of doing work I have no business knowing about. He flicks each button with precision, never faltering as more of my skin becomes visible with each simple movement. With my bodice now undone, he skates his thumb just under the line of my bra. My skin pebbles at the touch, and he does it again.

His nose brushes along the side of my neck, and I inhale sharply. My head tips on its own accord, and he takes the invitation, his tongue following the same path. I whimper. The heat of his body is pressed in against mine, and I detest the heaviness of my wedding dress, wanting to feel *more*.

He leaves a soft, wet kiss where my neck meets my collarbone, and I whisper his name.

Circling me, he stands in front of me, index finger lifting my chin. “Such pretty, lust-filled eyes.”

I wet my lips, my throat dry, and my heart racing too fast to count beats.

“I didn’t kiss you, *dolcezza*, because I wasn’t certain I’d be able to stop.”

Why didn’t you kiss me?

He leans in, lifting my chin higher, and I move easily, eager for his kiss. A kiss I shouldn’t want. A kiss I should be repulsed at the thought of. A kiss I feel I’ll die if I don’t receive.

He caresses the bow of my top lip first, a teasing touch that only makes me crave him more. His tongue dips out, flicking the same spot, and my breathing stutters. His lips push against mine, and I meld into him.

The first touch of his tongue has me opening my mouth to welcome him inside. He tastes like nothing I’ve ever sampled before; mint and forbidden thoughts and a touch of the unknown. It makes me feel dangerous, and I slide my tongue against his, wanting more. He groans into my mouth, a soft rumble that vibrates against my tongue and causes my nipples to harden.

We kiss for what feels like hours, tongues exploring, lips clashing, and my heart—my poor, inexperienced heart—searches to find a rhythm with his.

“*Vincent*,” I plead, my hands moving up his chest.

He pulls back, pupils blown out in carnal need. He steps back, and I step forward.

“No.”

“No?” I ask dumbly.

“No,” he says again.

“But...”

“I don’t fuck scared little girls.”

I recoil like he’s slapped me, the fire of lust in my stomach flushed out with the tsunami of his rejection.

I don’t know what to say. Arms wrapping around my waist, I look at the carpet, the tulle of my wedding dress mocking me in a fantasy I should’ve

known would never be mine.

“I hate you,” I whisper.

“Good.”

He leaves the room without another word, and the strangled sob I was holding escapes.

How dare he humiliate me so significantly. How dare he make me feel so unworthy. I’m his fucking *wife*.

I want to scream and not just out of embarrassment. My heart aches. He reeled me in. He read me in the elevator and chose to protect my dignity. He showed me honesty and set it alight with the greatest kiss I could ever imagine receiving. He offered me kindness only to throw me away when I took it too far.

I feel ripped in two. My heart claimed only to be discarded on the floor like yesterday’s trash. I was ready to give him everything. My body would have been his and only his, whether he knew that or not.

I’m stupid. And while I might not be scared, he’s right. I’m a little girl playing games with a monster. I may be his wife, but to Vincent Ferrari, that means less than nothing. He didn’t even touch me anywhere else—just a single finger lifting my chin to his mouth while the other hand hung loosely at his side.

I shimmy out of my dress, stomping on the expensive lace and obnoxious amount of tulle as it flutters around my high heels. Not satisfied with that, I pick it up, ripping the white fabric with angered grunts of regret. I scream. I curse. I yell. My voice echoes against the walls, throwing my insults back at me, encouraging my anger.

Wedding dress in ribbons over the bedroom floor, my chest heaves. I leave the remnants of the stupid union splayed over the carpet as I move toward my bathroom. Hoping it will stay as a reminder of how heavily I need to protect myself against the threat of my husband and how easily he could break me.

Removing my undergarments and shoes, I glance at myself in the mirror. Mascara lines my cheeks, my already billowy lips swollen from my time spent kissing the enemy. My skin shines with angry blotches of red. My nose runs.

Pulling the pearl headband from my hair, I throw it in the trash by the vanity. I yank my hair from its ponytail, grunting at the pain, vowing never to wear my hair like that again.

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SIX



He didn't come to bed last night. I slept alone in the sterile space of his king-size bed, his smell engulfing me, making my predicament even more pathetic.

Sliding my hand over to his side of the bed just to make sure, I find it as cold as his heart and pull my hand back immediately. I should be thankful for his absence. I can't embarrass myself any more than I already have with his avoidance. However, the frigid reality of my future only magnifies. This is how my life will move forward, *alone*. Dwarfed by a king-size bed and a husband repulsed at the thought of touching me.

It had to be my kiss. A fumbling attempt to make him want me as much as I wanted him.

I didn't kiss you, dolcezza, because I wasn't certain I'd be able to stop.

His words play over in my mind. He wanted me until we kissed, then he made certain to cut me down and shame me for my inexperience.

I don't fuck scared little girls.

I'm so humiliated, and I hate him for making me feel that way. Moreover, I hate myself for giving him the power to do so.

I stare up at the ceiling, annoyed at the silk touch of his sheets against my skin. I blow out a long breath.

"Unsatisfying sleep?"

I roll my eyes at the lazy drawl in his tone.

I don't bother to sit up, choosing to ignore him completely.

"I have some things I need to attend to today."

I huff. *Things.*

"Be sure to head to confession afterward to cleanse your soul."

"Who said I had a soul?"

My jaw sets tight at the derisive lilt in the timbre of his voice.

Sitting up, I turn to slide my legs off the bed and tuck my feet into the slippers I'd left by my side of the bed the night before. Standing, I retrieve my robe and glide it over my shoulders, securing the silk around my waist before looking at him.

"No one," I say. "No one has ever considered you to have a soul, Vincent."

Dark bruises lay heavily along his eye sockets, and I take joy in the fact that he's deprived of sleep.

"You look terrible. You should fix yourself up. You don't want to actually look like death while killing people."

I walk from the room without a backward glance, holding my shoulders higher than the reality of my confidence.

Coffee in hand half an hour later, I stare out the window, watching people rush about their morning with determination. What it would be like to feel that, to feel as though you had a purpose. Taking care of Caterina gave me that. Not that she was neglected or uncared for. She was just never supposed to be born into our family. Her heart is too sweet, her mind too trusting, her spirit too fragile.

"The housekeeper comes four days a week."

I turn slowly, hoping like hell my face shows a bored indifference. My heart almost leaped from my chest when he spoke, his ability to appear without noise as disconcerting as it is frightening.

Freshly showered, Vincent looks like a magazine spread's wet dream come to life. Dark hair combed back, a wet lock has fallen out of place, brushing along his forehead. Focusing on his cuff links, I watch his thick fingers thread them dexterously through the double-cuff of his shirt. His shirt is black today, a coordination of attire with the shadowed shade of his heart. The three-piece suit he's dressed in has been tailor-made to fit his body, and he looks every bit of the mafioso he is.

"Something wrong?" He pauses, fingers at the button of his jacket, ready to secure it in place.

I'm just wondering how the blackest of souls can be wrapped in the prettiest of packages. "No," I answer quickly.

"Heather will prepare meals when she is here. If you hold no objections, I would ask that we dine together on those four evenings."

"And on the other three?"

His forehead creases, pulling his eyebrows low over his eyes. "I have prior engagements."

My top lip curls involuntarily. "Women?" I ask before I can stop myself.

My spite amuses him, his thick lips quirking up into the barest hint of a smirk. "No, wife, not women. Not that it would be any of your business if it were."

I scowl.

"So angry," he murmurs, stepping closer. "You were so much more pliant last night."

My cheeks heat at the memory of his rejection, and I bow my head, hating myself the moment I do.

I gave him weakness. I gave him my submission.

He *tsks*. "No need to be embarrassed, Bianca. You wouldn't have been the first woman to throw herself at me."

Bile rushes up my throat, but I swallow it back down, grimacing at the acidity of my jealousy. "I did *not* throw myself at you."

“No?” he asks, that stupid, single index finger sliding under my chin once again. “So if I were to kiss you now”—he lifts my face, stealing access to my gaze—“you wouldn’t melt into me like you did last night?”

The freshness of his breath brushes over my face, and I close my eyes, trying to ignore the way my body responds to how he humiliates me.

“You wouldn’t moan into my mouth, eager to slide your inexperienced little tongue against mine?”

Inexperienced.

I pull my head back, taking a sizable step away from him. “Shaming me for my lack of experience with men is a level of pathetic I imagined would be beneath you.”

I meant for my words to come out harsh, but they lacked the fight I was hoping they’d find. Instead, they sound as wounded as I feel, as innocent and inept as he claimed I was.

“I wasn’t shaming you, *dolcezza*.” His tongue rolls over the endearment, and tucking his hands into his pockets, he takes a step toward me.

I step back, and he lifts an eyebrow in warning. He steps forward again. This time, I remain where I stand.

“Your lack of experience turns me on.”

My eyes drop to his crotch without permission, the swell of his erection obvious in the gray dress pants it’s confined within.

“I thought you didn’t fuck scared little girls.” My face reddens.

He steps closer enough that the heat of his body brushes up against mine.

“I don’t,” he whispers, leaning down to touch his lips to my ear. “Doesn’t mean you don’t make my dick hard.” His lips meet the soft spot under my ear, kissing it softly before he moves away.

I stand frozen in shock.

“Your driver will be situated outside the front door should you need to go out today.”

The elevator door closes behind him, and I stand there for what feels like an eternity staring after his absent form.

Doesn't mean you don't make my dick hard.

I don't venture out throughout the day. I explore Vincent's home. *My* home. I check through drawers I know I'm not meant to be looking in. I rifle through his office to see if I can locate any incriminating information about him—just in case—but I find nothing. Vincent has his shit locked up tight.

There are no photos in the house. Not a single memory captured in a frame for him to look upon fondly. I unpack my things in the walk-in closet, rearranging his clothes and accessories to fit mine. I make our bed. I leave the ripped-up tulle of my wedding dress strewn across our floor, making certain he knows what I think about our nuptials.

I eat dinner alone, as he promised I would. I miss the raucous of my family home. The bickering between Tony and Cat. The loud sounds from the kitchen, and Mama's constant fluttering.

Though I want to call Cat, I'm afraid she'll hear the loneliness in my voice. I'm worried she'll ask me questions I won't *know*. She'll know I'm lost and unsure, and it'll frighten her, and I'm not at home to ease her trepidation.

I shower and climb into bed by eight o'clock, falling into a restless sleep.

It's still dark when my eyes open, my body on alert. My heart races in my chest, and I keep as still as possible. I strain to listen for whatever has woken me so sharply.

I hold my breath. My ears are ringing.

"Why are you holding your breath?"

I exhale in relief.

"Why are you sitting in my room in the dark?"

"*Our* room," he corrects. "I didn't want to wake you."

“Just for future reference, it’s super creepy to sit in the dark and listen to me sleep.”

He remains silent for long enough that I think I’ve offended him. “Do you hate it?” He finally speaks, genuine curiosity in his tone.

“It’s creepy.”

He sighs. “So you said. But that’s not what I asked. I asked if you hated me in the room?”

I consider lying. But I know he’ll stop coming, and these snippets of time make me feel as though we could make it. Maybe we could be more than strangers. Maybe the dark could bring us together enough to find one another in the light.

“No,” I answer truthfully.

“Your honesty is admirable, Bianca. It’s one of the many things I like about you.”

I’m glad for the darkness. Thankful he can’t see the guilt and shame on my face. He can’t read the truth of his brother’s demise in my inability to meet his eyes.

“Promise me that you’ll always be truthful with me?” he asks.

I clear my throat. “What would I have to lie about?” I sit upright, my eyes seeking his shadow in the dark.

“I don’t know,” he says. “But if you have secrets, *dolcezza*, I’ll find them. Best you always be up front to save us the turmoil lies can cause.”

I swallow heavily.

“We have to go away for a little while.”

“Go away?” I ask dumbly, still reeling from his promise to dig into my soul and discover my secrets.

“Hm,” he answers, the tap of a ring against glass echoing as he sips on his whiskey.

“Where?” I lean over, switching on the bedside lamp.

My eyes take seconds to adjust to the invasion of light.

“Does it matter? *Away.*”

I pull my knees to my chest. “Why?”

“I’m certain you never asked your father this many questions.”

He’s sitting in the large armchair in the corner of the room. The one place that has an unfiltered view of the bed. He’s pushed his dress shirtsleeves haphazardly up his arms and left the top buttons of his shirt undone. His hair sits messily on his head, hands having run through it too many times and forcing it to stick out in different directions. Worry lines the sides of his mouth, lips turned down in a bothered glower.

“My father isn’t my husband,” I speak softly, quietly concerned by the disheveled man in front of me. “His business doesn’t dictate my life. Yours does.”

He watches me for a drawn-out beat, his mind working tirelessly behind his pained eyes.

“We gotta go on the lam for a while.” His voice slurs, words pushing together in rushed justification. “Just until the heat dies down on some business.”

“For how long?” I move to the side of the bed. “Why do I have to go? Can’t you just go?”

His eyes hold more than he’s letting on, and I don’t know whether to despise him for keeping it from me or be thankful he’ll never share with me.

“You need to calm down.” He attempts to placate me. “It’ll all blow over once certain people tie up some loose ends.”

I scowl, my lips turning down in disgust.

Loose ends.

“When are we supposed to leave?”

“Now.”

“What?” I yell.

He shushes me, and I want to grab the whiskey glass in his hand and smash it right over his head.

“Sleep, Bianca. I need to organize some of my life’s complications. I’ll pack some things and make some calls. I’ll wake you when it’s time to go.”

“I don’t want to go,” I argue.

Standing, he downs the rest of his whiskey, holding the empty glass with the grip of his fingertips. “Trust me when I tell you that you do. The alternative is not an option.”

“Alternative? I’d like to hear the alternative.”

“Sleep,” he repeats.

“*Vincent*,” I call after his retreating form, but he closes the bedroom door, silencing my panic.

Living at home, I was entirely shut off from Papa’s business. We knew nothing of his dealings and the trouble that followed him. My mother was aware. Of course she was.

On recollection, blocks of time would pass when we didn’t see our father. He locked himself away in his office, his numerous phones a consistent melody of ringtones. He’d yell. He’d scream. He’d talk for hours. He wouldn’t sleep. He’d drink. And drink. And drink. Lorenzo’s father would come by, and when he died, Lorenzo would be there in his place. Business that was none of our concern.

He and Mama would fight. She’d leave his office with bruises on her face and pretend she wasn’t dying inside. She protected him. We never asked her about the marks, and she never brought attention to them. She went on being a dutiful wife, though she’d often flinch when he got too close.

I never considered that Vincent might be similar. That his mood could turn on me. What’s interesting is that he might very well be one of the most frightening people I’ve met, yet he doesn’t make me feel unsafe. I’m not certain I should take that as a relief or a warning. But in the few days we’ve

spent as husband and wife, he's been preoccupied and distracted, yet his mood hasn't affected me. He hasn't turned his temper toward me. In fact, if anything, he seems to gravitate toward me as a calming mechanism.

It's laughable that I have chosen to take comfort in the fact that my husband hasn't used his fists on me.

I can't sleep as he demanded I do. I get up and make our bed instead, even though Heather is due to come by after the sun breaks. I search our closet for a bag, but when I can't find one, I pile a selection of clothes on the bed, ready to be packed.

I shower and dress.

Vincent is in our room when I exit the bathroom. "I came to wake you."

His eyes scan my body over the oversized gray sweats and crop top I'm wearing, down to the white sneakers on my feet.

"I couldn't sleep," I offer unnecessarily. "I only grabbed some comfy clothes. I imagine we won't be dining out. Or that I'll need anything fancy."

"No."

"I couldn't find a bag." I hate the way my voice shakes.

"Bianca." Vincent steps closer. "You don't need to worry, baby." He eases the frown on my forehead with a gentle push of his thumb. "I told you. I'll protect you."

"I'm fine," I lie, lips pressing down into a thin line.

"Lying won't make you feel better."

No, I want to agree, *but showing you any weakness will only give you more power.*

"Will I need a jacket?"

He sighs. "Yes."

I turn away, grabbing a puffer jacket from the closet and throwing it on the bed with the rest of my clothes.

His lips move to speak, but I cut him off.

"I'm going to make coffee. Would you like some?"

“Please,” he answers quietly. “Bianca,” he calls as I make it to the door. I pause but don’t turn around.

“As much as your torn-up wedding dress is a wonderful addition to our bedroom floor and obviously brings you a sense of pride at the tantrum you so effectively threw by tearing it into pieces, it makes a mockery of our union.”

My shoulders jolt with a snort of laughter. “It would seem it’s perfectly in place then.” I walk away without waiting for him to respond.

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SEVEN



We were on the road within half an hour.

We took his G63, the extravagance in the SUV a reminder of the fact that Cosa Nostra has more money than I could imagine.

“Nice car.”

He glances at me, reading the sarcasm in my voice with an impassive side-eye. “My father had money. I inherited well.”

“You and Berto.”

“And then I inherited from Roberto.”

“Convenient,” I snipe, regretting it the moment I say it.

He turns the radio up, ignoring my biting comment.

“Is it new?” I turn the radio down.

“No.” He turns it back up.

I turn it off. “It smells new.”

“I don’t drive it often.” He turns it back on.

“How wasteful,” I chide, but he ignores me.

We drive for hours. Vincent rejects every request I make to stop for food. My stomach growls angrily between us. I push a hand against the vocal organ, embarrassed at the ferocity of the sound.

“I need to pee.”

His eyes close in irritation. “Are you a toddler? You should’ve gone before we left.”

“I did.” I roll my eyes. “We’ve been driving for *hours*, Vincent. Please.”

“No.” He doesn’t even consider my request.

“You are such an asshole.”

“We can’t risk being seen,” he tells me quietly, stretching his neck back and forth. It cracks, and I frown.

“What did you do?” I bite out.

“Nothing.”

“Yeah, *okay*.” I retort sarcastically, turning away to stare out the window.

The trees pass in a blur. I imagine opening the door and throwing myself onto the asphalt. Maybe I’d die. Maybe I wouldn’t. If I lived, I wouldn’t escape. He’d catch me. Then he’d probably kill me.

The truth is, I don’t want to die.

I don’t want to live like this.

But I definitely don’t want to die.

“We’ll arrive at our destination in about twenty minutes. Or I can pull over, and you can relieve yourself on the side of the road.”

I scowl at my reflection in the window.

Relieve myself on the side of the road? Is this asshole for real?

“You would let your wife pee on the side of the road?”

“To keep you safe? Yes,” he answers easily.

“How are you keeping me safe?” I screech. “This has nothing to *fucking* do with me.”

“Watch your mouth, Bianca.”

“Fuck you, Vincent.”

“*Bianca*,” he warns.

“What are you going to do?” I push his shoulder, my anger claiming me. “Hit me?”

“What?” he breathes. “Why would I fucking hit you?”

“Isn't that what's done? When we step out of line?”

“The enfeeble way your father deals with the grievances he has with your mother has nothing to do with me.” His hand clenches the steering wheel. “I prefer to use more inventive forms of punishment.”

I swallow the comeback on my tongue, my brain consumed with thoughts I shouldn't have and definitely shouldn't want.

“You're repulsive.”

He barks out an unimpressed laugh. “Tell that to the lust in your eyes and the hard clench of your thighs.”

I relax the tension in my thighs, the clench I didn't realize I was holding.

I move to speak, to refute his claim and deny what he so obviously knows, but I'd only embarrass myself further. So I shut my mouth, turning my body to give him my back, and resume staring out the window.

“I would never hurt you, Bianca. Not like that.”

Not like that.

“I don't even know what that means.”

His fingers stretch outward before clutching the steering wheel once again. “Physically. I would never hurt you physically.”

I should feel reassured, but he just freely admitted that maiming my heart wasn't off-limits.

“It shouldn't even have to be something you needed to reassure me.”

“I needed you to know,” he combats. “My reputation does what it needs to for work. I don't need that fear filtering into my marriage.”

“So you wouldn't kill me?”

He turns his head slowly, the distaste in his eyes evident. “Bianca, don't be fooled by any kindness I show you. If you betray me, I will kill you, and I won't feel fucking bad about it.”

He looks away quickly.

“I disagree.”

“Which part?”

“I don’t doubt you’d kill me,” I assure him. “But you’d feel bad about it.”

“Loyalty and honesty are of the utmost importance to me. Don’t ever forget that.” The harsh warning in his tone has me shifting uncomfortably in my seat. “You break my trust, and any affection I feel for you will disappear. I’d slit your throat without a beat of hesitation and sleep peacefully knowing I removed a threat to my freedom and my family.”

I swallow. The movement thick enough to be heard through the quiet car.

“And who said romance was dead?” I joke, hating the lilt of danger in his tone.

He ignores the silly remark, keeping his eyes focused on the winding road. I follow his lead, turning my attention to the tree-lined road, watching them flash by in blurs of greens and browns.

Am I stupid to fixate on the offhanded comment he made about holding affection for me? Have I already fallen into a blinded sense of fairy tale? Pleased that the monster beside me admitted he felt something for me? Or maybe I should be more grateful. When I look deeper, Vincent saved my life. From what I can gather, he wasn’t forced into marrying me. He chose to do so. But why?

“I would never betray you.”

He doesn’t respond.

“Why did you marry me?”

He doesn’t answer.

I clear my throat, hating how meek my words sound. The leather of the seat sticks to my skin, my body clammy. He can threaten me with death, and my heart rate increases, but I question his feelings, and it feels ready to

commit suicide by launching from my chest and throwing itself out the window into moving traffic.

“I am no one to you. Lorenzo could’ve killed me, and you wouldn’t have the burden of me in your life. My question is why? Why me when you could have kept your freedom?”

His right hand lifts from the steering wheel, his index finger rubbing at the thick metal band on his thumb. He leans away from me, his left elbow resting on the line of his window. “I don’t see our marriage as a lack of freedom.” Tongue darting out to wet his lips, he falls quiet again.

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“I admire you,” he murmurs, low enough that I barely hear the words.

“You don’t know me.” My head tilts to the side, my lips pursed.

“I know enough.”

I open my mouth to speak, but I can’t think of anything to say. I close it again with a soft shake of my head.

“I never imagined I’d marry.” He speaks again, and I listen intently. “I was an enforcer. What woman in their right mind would want to be linked to me?”

“Daughters of the Mafia have no choice.”

“That is true,” he agrees. “But still, I felt it wasn’t for me. When Lorenzo offered me a different life, my options broadened. I needed a strong woman. Someone who was and who will always remain loyal. A partner who would put their life on the line for what they deemed important.”

“You?” I test quietly.

“Me,” he confirms. “If I am to lay down my life for someone, is it wrong to want the same thing in return?”

“No.” I watch him, his focus on the road and worlds away from me. “How do you know I’m that person?”

“Am I wrong?” He looks at me then, and the fire in his eyes forces my gaze to avert from his to my lap.

“For the people I love, I’m exactly who you describe.”

“For the people you love,” he echoes, tasting the insult on his tongue. “Maybe my hope is that one day you’ll love me.”

“Would you love me back?” I ask after taking a steadying breath, pleased my voice doesn’t shake.

He doesn’t speak for a long time. Long enough that I resign myself to the fact he’s chosen to ignore me. But then he speaks, and my heart feels something for him I never imagined it would. *Pity*.

“I don’t think the darkness within my heart would ever allow space for love, *dolcezza*. Monsters are more afraid of the light than angels are of the dark.”

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EIGHT



The tires of Vincent's car crack over sticks and dried leaves, an echo of nature I haven't heard in a very long time. The dirt road winds around curves I can't see beyond, but I stretch my neck all the same. The sun struggles to peek through the canopy of trees, and I remove my sunglasses. I shiver. The coolness in the damp outside air is enough for Vincent to switch the air-conditioning off, the loss of the constant fan heightening the sound of silence between us.

A cabin comes into focus on the last bend, and I gasp at its beauty. "Wow."

It's small, sure, but it holds a rustic ruggedness that welcomes you in a warm embrace. Three steps lead the way to a porch just big enough for two. It's been built from old logs; stained and well-kept.

"It's lovely," I breathe out.

"You thought we were going to hide away in a shack?"

I shrug. "I guess so."

"It's not luxurious by any stretch, but it's clean and will fit what we need it for."

I can live with that. "Does it have a fireplace?"

"Yes."

I clap, feeling silly, but not enough to stop myself.

“Can you wait in the car for a minute?” He switches off the engine. “I just want to check it through.”

“For what?” I eye him warily. “Intruders?”

“I just want to make sure it’s safe.”

I lower my voice. “What happens if someone is waiting in the woods?”

He sighs, rubbing a hand down his face.

“Okay, okay,” I concede, removing my seat belt.

He leans over me and opens the glove compartment to pull out a handgun.

“*Jesus.*”

He smirks. “Just in case.”

He enters the cabin and returns within minutes to open my door. He holds my hand as I climb from the car, and my heart flutters at the basic show of intimacy.

“Go in. I’ll grab the bags.”



HE’S BEEN LOCKED AWAY IN THE SMALL OFFICE FOR HOURS. WHEN WE arrived, he dropped our bags into the only bedroom and closed himself away.

I’ve kept myself busy by snooping. I’ve explored every nook and cranny. *Twice.* I’ve sniffed the sheets, expecting a musty smell to meet me. But they’ve been freshly washed and are crisp to the touch. The fridge is stocked, and the cupboards are full. Nothing sits in the wardrobe but spare blankets and pillows.

I unpack my bag. I look at Vincent’s but think better of it, leaving it untouched where he left it at the foot of the bed.

I make myself a cup of coffee and sit on the porch, staring out at the lake surrounding us. It would be quite peaceful had I not been taken here

against my will. If my new husband had brought me here for a romantic getaway and not to hide out until whatever crime he's committed has been covered up.

I haven't spoken to Caterina since my wedding. I haven't had a chance to reassure her that I'm safe, and I know she'll be worried. I'd hope that our father would alleviate her fears, but I know better than to trust Papa. He'd tell her to stop worrying, that I wasn't their concern. That I was now Vincent's.

I wander back into the cabin, moving toward the office. I tap on the door.

"Yes."

I turn the handle slowly, popping my head through the crack in the door.

"Was just checking in."

He places a phone down. A dinosaur of a gadget that was probably the sought-after phone when I was born.

"Do you need something?"

He hasn't slept in almost two days, and it shows. His eyes are bloodshot, his clothes crinkled, and his voice slurs over certain words in exhaustion.

"Do *you*? Food? Sleep maybe?"

A small grin plays on his lips. "I have too much to do. But I should be finished by dinner."

"Okay. I'll make us something."

I wait.

He stares at me.

"Have you spoken to my father?" I gesture to the phone.

"Why?"

I step into the office uninvited. "Does Cat know I'm okay?"

He doesn't seem perturbed by my presence, so I move farther into the room. "I didn't ask your father. I've had more important things to sort out."

Yeah, like keeping yourself out of jail.

Quiet descends between us.

“Bianca,” he warns, his chest deflating on a prolonged sigh.

“*Please*, Vincent. It’s safe. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be using it. Thirty seconds. I just want to assure her that I’m safe.” I’m aware that I’m begging and pleading with my husband for access to my own family.

His head tips back.

“I’ll do anything.”

I’m now standing directly in front of his desk, palms pressed against the wood.

He shakes his head. “Don’t cheapen yourself by offering yourself as payment.”

“I—” I stutter.

“You have thirty seconds,” he warns. “Not a millisecond more, Bianca. Do not test me.”

“Thank you.” I smile wide.

I grab the phone eagerly from his hand, pushing the numbers quickly. My breaths come easier the moment the dial tone hits my ears.

“Hello?”

“Cat,” I breathe out.

“Bianca, oh my god, are you somewhere safe?”

“Yes, I’m at—”

Vincent clears his throat, and I stop myself. “I’m safe.”

“Bianca, the FBI has been here looking for you.”

“*Me?*” I choke out the word, shock lacerating my spine.

“You’re wanted for questioning in relation to Roberto’s death,” she divulges quietly. “I overheard Papa talking to Mama. You’ve been identified as the last person to see him alive.”

“What?” Bile rushes up my throat. “How? I didn’t... That’s not what happened. I...”

“Lorenzo has told the authorities that you’re on your honeymoon and that you and Vincent are non-contactable.”

“Say goodbye.” So caught up in what Caterina was telling me, I didn’t feel Vincent’s approach. His hand cups mine over the phone, his chest pressed against my back.

“I have to go,” I lament.

“Don’t call, Bianca,” Cat instructs. “Papa told Mama that Vincent is keeping you safe. This will blow over. You know it will.”

“Yeah,” I agree absently. “I love you.”

Vincent hangs up before I can hear Cat say it back.

We stand in that position—his chest pressed into my back—long enough for my breathing to even out.

“You let me accuse you of this being all your fault.”

He doesn’t answer.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“And worry you unnecessarily?” The burr of his words claw along the nape of my neck, and I shiver.

“I didn’t kill him,” I assure him. “I didn’t kill your brother.”

“Shhhh,” he soothes. “I know.”

I swallow the excess saliva forming in my throat. “Will I go to prison?”

He lifts my left hand, thumb brushing over the ring on my finger. “I told you this was a promise to protect you. I don’t make declarations like that lightly. I mean it.”

He’s protecting me when he should want me dead. Guilt washes over me, and I turn, tipping my head back to see his face. “Why? You didn’t want to marry me. Lorenzo made you do it. This is your way out.”

Using his thumb, he turns my head away, dropping a soft kiss on my jawline. “Don’t disturb me again.”

“Vinnie,” I scratch out, but he ignores me, and I’m grateful he does because I don’t know what to say.

He lifts a single brow at my affectionate utterance, but he says nothing.
We're here to protect me.

Not him.

"I'll make dinner," I say weakly, feeling hideously stupid.

He nods, dismissing me silently, and I take my exit, pressing my back against his door when I close it behind me.



WE ATE IN SILENCE. I COULDN'T FIND ANY WORDS TO FILL THE CAVERNOUS silence. He looked comfortable in the quiet. He consumed the dinner I prepared, complimented me on my cooking, and cleared the table. We cleaned side by side in complete and utter silence. He washed, I dried, and it seemed ridiculous. Vincent Ferrari, feared mafia enforcer, now advisor to the boss, washing dishes.

"I could've done this." I finally gave in, tortured by the quiet.

"You cooked," he said.

When the kitchen was clean, he brushed a hand over my shoulder and disappeared back into his office without another word.

Stepping into the shower, I scrub my body harder than necessary.

We're here to protect me.

He's not sleeping *to protect me*.

Vincent Ferrari confuses me. He says he admires me, but he doesn't know me. He thinks I'm impure but agrees to marry me. I thought him a monster, never once considering he'd be my savior.

The hate I held in my heart for him, simply for being who he is, thaws with every second we spend together. He's unexpected, and I don't know how to plan for someone who has caught me so undeniably off guard.

Lying in bed, I toss and turn. He's not beside me, and I'm irritated by the fact that since we became husband and wife, he has refused to share my

bed.

I throw the blankets off, walking through the cabin on soft feet.

His silhouette is as intimidating as he is in the light of day. But he beckons me, the darkness surrounding him calling me closer, and I go without argument.

He sits in a plush armchair with the light of the moon cast over half his face and his eyes closed in rest. He's not asleep. His body is too alert, too stiff for him to be unconscious.

I let my eyes wander over him, taking in the formidable man who is my husband.

"Go to bed, Bianca."

The breeze from the window flutters my negligée around my upper thighs.

"*Vincent.*"

Eyes opening slowly, he looks from his glass of whiskey to me, eyes darkening when they focus on the hard cut of my nipples. Pebbled from not only the cool air but also the heat in his hooded eyes.

"*Dolcezza,*" he murmurs, the word pained, an endearment growled from the very depths of his throat. "Not tonight."

He looks ready to drop. Not just tired but utterly depleted. Bluish pockets frame his eyes from lack of sleep. He looks ill at ease, which is realms away from the confident and detached man I married. Vincent is a quiet man, but there's quiet, and then there's ruminative silence, and that on the man in front of me is uncomfortable.

I step forward, pausing when his nostrils flare.

Hand pushing into his hair, he pulls at the dark locks roughly. "You can't give me what I need tonight."

My nerves push my chest forward. A feigned confidence dying to settle whatever storm seems to have claimed him. "Try me."

Glass to his lips, he sips slowly, his gaze hard on me over the rim of the crystal. I can't read him. He's a master at hiding his deepest thoughts. He's an enigma, and I long to solve him like an intricate puzzle.

The tip of his tongue drags along the line of his bottom lip, soaking up the remnants of whiskey before sucking it back into his mouth.

He looks bored, breathing unchanged and eyes just as empty. I'm certain he's going to reject me. To tell me to leave him be as he did just moments ago.

"Take your clothes off."

His words shock me, his voice deeper than I'm used to.

My skin ripples with need. A potent mixture of fear and lust drives me to act on an ache I in no way understand.

Dropping the thin straps of my silk nightie, they fall easily, skating across my sensitive skin. Even that silken caress has me wanting to moan, and I know, deep down, it has more to do with the withdrawn gaze of my husband than it does the touch of silk on my skin. Something about the way nothing affects him has me wanting to strip away that indifference and see the unrestrained man beneath the mask.

I pull my nightie down farther, over one elbow at a time, freeing my breasts from the soft material. My already hard nipples ache as the air touches the needy peaks. I long to squeeze them, to offer them some much-needed relief, but I refrain, giving in to brushing them lightly with my wrists.

The move doesn't go unnoticed, a soft arch in Vincent's brow lifting.

I push the silk down my waist and over my hips.

Completely naked with my negligée pooled at my feet, I slide it away, letting Vincent's gaze track leisurely over my figure. He takes his time, eyes greedy in the way they eat me up.

"You have a body men would kill to touch, Bianca. Do you know that?"

I shake my head.

“Men will fantasize about you. About grabbing the thick sway of your hips. They will think about all the ways they would like to fuck you. They will crave the feel of your pretty nipples on their tongue. They will envisage you with their cock lodged down your throat.”

I remain unmoving.

“It makes me murderous,” he hums. “How do I make sure they don’t think of you like that? How do I ensure you exist only in *my* fantasies?”

“I—”

“Don’t speak,” he cuts me off. “Your voice is too much of a temptation. Can I ban you from speaking to anyone but me moving forward? Can I save that voice for only me?”

“*Vincent*,” I whisper.

“Like that,” he growls. “You sound like sex, Bianca. Your words are so soft. Throaty and scratched. You sound like you’ve just had your organs rearranged from the kind of fucking saved for whores.”

A flicker of excitement flutters between my thighs, and I close my eyes to stop them from widening in shock.

“Open your eyes.”

I do as he asks.

Sliding his empty glass onto the small table beside him, he grips the armrest of his chair. “On your knees, wife.”

I move to step forward, but he shakes his head. “There.” He dips his chin, motioning to the floor, and I gulp down my uncertainty. Following his instruction, I drop to my knees.

His index finger rubs along his bottom lip, and I long to touch the same spot with my lips. To feel the soft cushion against my mouth.

As my knees kiss the deep red of the Persian rug beneath me, he makes me wait. His attention on my face doesn’t wane. He holds my stare, and as much as I long to drop my head and free myself from the intensity of his gaze, I can’t look away.

“Crawl.”

My eyes widen.

Crawl?

He waits patiently, tongue ducking out to moisten his lips.

I could get up and leave. I could lock myself in our room and forget what I offered. He told me I couldn't give him what he needed. He dared me to leave, and I chose to push against it.

He wants to degrade me. He enjoys the thrill of knowing how I am at his mercy. He wants power.

And unnervingly, I want to give it to him.

My hands touch the floor, and wetness pools between my thighs at the way his nostrils flare.

My naked body moves toward him slowly. One hand in front of the other as I let him watch me approach on all fours.

His legs widen, his hips lifting slightly, his growing erection obvious within the confines of his dress pants. My mouth waters. The fired need in his silver eyes sends fireworks off in my stomach's very pit, pulling even lower.

“You're so fucking beautiful.”

I whimper, refusing to hide my need.

I would never have imagined submitting to something so debasing would be a turn-on. But I can feel the slickness working its way from my pussy onto my thighs.

“Such a good girl,” he praises, his large hand cupping my cheek when I reach him. *“You want to please me, don't you, wife?”*

I rub my face against the calloused touch of his palm in confirmation. His thumb brushes over my bottom lip, pulling it down roughly. *“Have you ever had a cock in your mouth?”*

Looking at him through my lashes, I inhale sharply. *“No.”*

He hums his approval. *“Good.”*

“An untouched orifice,” I throw out, using his disgusting words against him.

His eyes narrow, and his fingers grab at my jaw painfully. I refuse to look away. Even as my eyes water, I’m unwilling to look ashamed.

“Don’t ever bring up my brother touching you again.”

His grasp is so strong that I struggle to nod my head. He feels it, though, and loosens his hold.

“You’re my wife.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll protect you. I’ll care for you.”

Naked backside on the balls of my feet, I look up at him, listening intently.

“When I touch you, though, Bianca, I’ll treat you like the dirty little whore I know you to be.”

My pussy clenches, and I struggle to reconcile the vile word on his lips.

Whore.

“My whore.” He vibrates with need and appreciation. “To please. To fuck. To touch. To use.”

Please.

Fuck.

Touch.

Use.

I wish he’d please me now. I wish he’d put me out of my misery and touch me until I come.

My hands move to my thighs. He catches the movement but says nothing. I slide them higher, longing to bring myself much-needed relief.

“Whose whore are you?”

My mouth is dry. “Yours.”

“Only mine. Now, be a good little whore and take my cock out,” he commands before I reach my apex, and I want to cry at the loss of an

orgasm I was only seconds away from. But I oblige without argument, my fingers pulling at his zipper to free the sizable bulge from his pants.

Like the rest of him, Vincent's cock is beautiful. Long and thick. Smooth skin stretched over the heavy length.

"Like what you see?" He fists the base of his cock, sliding his hand up once, twice, both our eyes fixated on the bead of cum decorating his tip.

I edge closer.

"I asked if you like what you see?"

"Yes," I say, the word barely audible over the way it cracks with need.

"You want a taste?"

I nod my head.

"Ask nicely."

"Please, Vincent."

"Vinnie," he corrects. "*Please*, what?"

My thighs clench, my clit throbbing at the play of power he's exhibiting.

"Vinnie, please let me taste your cock."

He groans, the sound rolling through his throat like a growl. His fingers tighten around his base, and he pushes the head of his dick toward me.

Eyes on him, I wrap my hand around his length, my hand sitting just above his, our fingers touching. My tongue darts out, flicking along the small slit to collect the droplets of his excitement in my mouth. I moan at his taste. The warm and salty touch explodes on my tongue in a fire of lust I didn't know existed.

Collecting my saliva on the tip of my tongue, I dip it out, balancing it on the head of his cock, watching my spit slide onto his flared tip.

His hips thrust upward, a feral snarl echoing the kiss of his cock against my tongue.

"Such a dirty little girl."

I swirl my tongue over his wet head, relishing in the heat of his smooth skin. I flatten my tongue at the base of his tip, my lips engulfing him. I suck, and he moans, eyes closed.

I drop down farther, taking more of him into my mouth. He hisses, his hand coming up, fingers running through my hair to hold my crown. I expect him to push me down, to force me to swallow more of him, but he doesn't. He just massages his fingers into my scalp, rough sounds escaping his throat as I lap at his cock.

Something deep within me pulls, a tension curling itself into the depths of my pussy. My clit aches for attention, and I'm more than a little shocked to realize that sucking Vincent's cock, I'm turned on. I may be on my knees and completely at his mercy, but I feel powerful. I feel sexier than I ever have before. Pleasing him fires my lust, and that realization chips away at the walls I forced between us.

Intimacy has stripped away Vincent's chilling demeanor. He's by no means open, but a slice of his vulnerability shows through, and I want more of it.

I take his lead, listening to the sounds he makes.

I flick my tongue against the slit in his head, and his breath catches.

I squeeze my hand around him roughly, sucking his knob eagerly, and his grasp on my hair tightens.

I swallow him deeper down my throat, twisting my hand in an upward motion, and he snarls, small thrusts of his hips following the sound.

"Throbbing," he says, but I don't think he even realizes he's spoken.

I hum at the words, pride shooting through me, knowing I did that. *I* made his cock throb.

I move to take him deeper again, but he rips me back, pulling me from his length. I inch forward, but he growls, and I pause. His dick just out of reach, I look up at him, inhaling the dangerous look in his eye.

"Open."

I open my mouth, and jerking himself, he lets thick ribbons of cum spill onto my open lips. He swirls it over my mouth, letting his release spurt over my chin and cheeks.

“Leave it,” he hisses as I move to wipe at his cum dripping along my chin.

I let my hands fall, and his eyes darken.

He stands, towering over my kneeling form. His semi-erect cock is mere inches away from my face, and I expect him to command me to open my mouth again. Instead, he holds out his hand, and I slide my palm into his.

“Stand.”

My naked body pushed against his, his desirous gaze snares on mine. I can feel his release drying on my face.

He twists us. “Sit in the chair, Bianca.”

I follow his instruction. Once I’m settled, he kneels in front of me, and the power in his frame forces me to clench my thighs. He smirks at me, and I want to throw myself to the ground in front of him. I want to kiss his lips and demand he look at me like that for eternity. He’s scary and beautiful and so unquestionably *mine*. I’ve never held an avaricious need to hold something as a possession. But here, with my husband, I’m fiery with the overwhelming sense of ownership of his heart and body.

Hands to my right foot, he lifts it, and I let him. Knee to my chest, he rests the heel of my foot on the cushion. He does the same with my left foot. My thighs are flush with my stomach and chest. My ankles are pressed against my butt. My pussy is completely exposed.

“I knew you’d be a good little whore.”

A needy sound escapes my throat. I should be embarrassed, but I’m not. I’m needy. I’m turned on. And I want to come.

“You should see your glistening pussy.” He talks directly to the very part of my body he’s praising. “All swollen and slippery.”

I tip my hips back, searching for any kind of relief.

“What do you need?”

I cry out. “You.”

“Me? I’m here, *dolcezza*.”

“Touch me,” I beg.

“Where?” He blows softly against my center, and I whimper in need.

“You want me to touch your perfect whore nipples? Pretty and pink peaks. You want me to suck them, Bianca?”

I moan. The sound is loud enough to make my body shake.

“Or your cunt?” he whispers.

“Yesss,” I hiss.

“Mm,” he groans. “Ask nicely, baby. Say *Vinnie, kiss my cunt*.”

My body shakes with an orgasm building so heavily within me that I can scarcely breathe.

“Say it,” he growls.

“Please, Vinnie. Kiss my cunt.”

I haven’t even finished my sentence when his tongue connects, drinking up my juices from hole to clit.

My hands fly to my tits, squeezing my nipples roughly. I groan long and loud, the sound stuttered and rough.

Offering a kiss to my clit so tender, I barely feel the push of his lips.

“Vinnie,” I beg. “*Tesoro*.”

Tongue sharp, he skates it over my clit, figure eights carving into my most sensitive flesh. I want to watch him. I want to be able to meet his eyes as he slays me so thoroughly. But the pleasure coursing through my body is so heavy that my eyes struggle to open.

I can feel my excitement dripping down, dampening the cushion beneath me and dripping between my ass cheeks. I’m soaked. My flesh is addicted to his torture.

He deviates between licking and sucking, being able to read my needs before I know them myself. He builds me higher and higher. My cries are

unabashed. My pussy throbs. It pulsates in time with my heartbeat, racing toward a release I'm positive will kill me.

"Come on my face, Bianca," he hums against me. "Be a good little slut and dirty me up."

I come on a loud shout, his lecherous words tipping me over the edge, and I do exactly as he asked. I come against his face. My release incapacitates me, and I fall against the armchair, chest heaving, soft moans following every aftershock.

My world is spinning, and I don't register that I'm in his arms until he places me back on my feet in the bathroom. He turns on the shower and holds his hand under the spray until he's comfortable it's warm enough. I watch him through lust-filled eyes, my legs still shaky.

"Hop in, *dolcezza*," he murmurs.

The warm rain of water touches my skin, and I groan aloud. I close my eyes, letting the water wash over me, only opening them when I feel his touch.

He stands just outside the shower, washcloth in his hand, wiping delicately over my face, removing the dried remnants of his climax from my skin.

I watch him intently. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he says, eyes never leaving his task.

He washes my entire body, fully clothed, unperturbed by the splashes of water that dampen his clothes.

"Turn off the shower," he instructs, and I do as he says.

Wrapping me in a towel, he dries my body. I'm both confused and elated at the disparity in his character and the gentle touch he approaches me with.

Confident I'm dry, he throws the towel over the shower screen. "Hop into bed, Bianca. Sleep. I have work to do."

I want to argue. I want to ask him to join me. I want his touch. But I follow his command, crawling into bed, my eyes closing almost immediately in blissful exhaustion.

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NINE



I stretch awake, groaning at the relief in my body as my muscles extend.

“Good sleep?”

I grunt in surprise. “You have got to stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

I move up onto my elbows, the sheet dancing precariously over my boobs. Vincent sits in the heavy armchair in the corner of the room, his right hand cupping a steaming mug of coffee.

Three of his five fingers sport heavy metal rings. I’ve never seen him without them. Each ring is thick, intricately designed, and a stark contrast to the olive touch of his skin.

He’s shirtless, and I take my time soaking up the view. It’s the first time I’ve seen him in anything but a suit, and my mouth runs dry.

He’s perfect. Tanned skin and defined muscles. A scattering of hair brushes his upper chest. The lines of his abdominal muscles are visible even as he sits, and a dark line of hair trails from his belly button into his pants. The sculpted curve of his pectorals are finished with small red nipples. I’ve never seen anything quite like him. A magazine spread come to life; open for my perusal, and the claim of *husband* shooting through my body in possessiveness.

The shadow of dark ink is scattered along his side, and I twist my head, working to see better. "You have a tattoo," I say.

He takes a sip of coffee.

"What is it?"

"Barbed wire," he says.

I let my eyes drift over the grooves of his arms, pausing over the arresting veins of his forearms. I pull my perusal back to his face. "Barbed wire," I repeat, wishing he had removed his shirt last night so I could've felt the heat of his skin.

"Twenty-three barbs in total."

I blink twice. "Why twenty-three?"

"A reminder of the lives I've taken."

The lives I've taken.

"Oh." My bottom lip tips out, and I tilt my head, looking at the ink once again.

"Does that scare you?"

He speaks of death and murder like he would the weather. There is no caution to his tone or halting of words. They touch his tongue as his breath does, part of him.

I hold the sheet to my chest, sitting up, my back straight. "When did you get the last one?"

He sips his coffee again, turning away from me briefly to place his empty cup on the small table to his side. He sits in pajamas the way he does a suit. Legs splayed, arms resting along the sides of the chair he's dwarfing. He's a vision, one I shouldn't want to carve into my memory for always.

"Two days before we were married."

I think back. "The day you gave me this?" I lift my left hand.

"*Right* before I gave you that."

I gulp. "How soon after killing someone do you have the tattoo done?"

"I didn't see any tattoos on your body." He ignores me.

“I don’t have any.”

“Clean skin.”

“Yes.”

We stare at one another, and I wish he’d come to me. I wish he’d put me out of my misery and kiss me. I should feel ashamed that the souls lost are forever immortalized on his body, but I can think only of touching that very skin. Running my hands over his shoulders and arms. Dragging my fingertips over the indents of his abs. Feeling the heat of his body against my palms.

“When you look at me like that,” he whispers. “The thoughts that run through my mind, Bianca... the things I think about doing to you. It makes me think you want them too.”

I’ve come to learn that his voice drops when he’s turned on. His voice just whispered words brushing along the most sensitive parts of my body.

I close my knees, trapping the sheet between my thighs.

“Will you...”

“Will I what?” he asks.

“I...”

He closes his eyes in disappointment, and I want to beg him to stay. I don’t understand myself. I can’t reconcile how much I want him with the hesitation in my will to ask. I fear his rejection more than his wrath, and I know how foolish that is, but his anger I can steel myself against. His disinterest would cut away my confidence and leave it forever lost.

Vincent stands, and the indents of his hips drop sinfully into his black sleep pants.

I long to reach out and touch him.

He approaches the end of the bed and my breath catches, hope firing in my stomach.

He leans toward me, fists pressed into the mattress. I try to concentrate on his words, but his body is close enough to touch. His muscles protrude

with the effort of holding his upper body up over the bed. My breathing changes, and my face feels hot. “I’ll give you what you want when you give me what I want.”

I lean toward him without conscious thought. “What do you want?”

“Honesty.” He stands abruptly, towering over me.

I frown. “*Honesty?*”

“Tell me the truth about you and Roberto.”

Guilt punches me in the stomach, and fear twists the pain of the assault. I pull the sheet up higher, sitting back to put as much distance between us as I can. “You know the truth.” My tone is defensive and curt, and I want to kick myself at how obvious my lie is.

He cocks his head. “Do I?”

“Yes.” I swallow, clamping my lips shut, hoping I’m exuding the attitude I’m fighting for and not the panic I’m consumed by.

“You were in love?” he tests, stretching the fingers of his right hand purposely before closing it in a fist. I watch the movement, my nostrils flaring. He tucks his hands into his pockets. His pants drop lower, the veins of his pubic bone now visible.

I close my eyes, annoyed at the way my body betrays my mind. I never considered my lack of sexual experience would buckle my resolve and turn me into a quivering mess of longing with a simple glance at a man’s body, but here we are. “I thought so, yes.”

“You let him *fuck* you?” he pushes, and I’m unable to meet his gaze. “He took your innocence?”

“Yes.” The word is barely a breath.

“*Hm,*” he says.

My shoulders sag in relief as his footsteps move away from me.

“I’d like to go for a walk.” He stops at the bedroom door. “Fresh air will do us good.”

I take a steadying breath and nod. “Okay. I’ll get dressed.”

He doesn't hear me, though, having already left the confines of the bedroom.



“I’VE HAD A NICE DAY WITH YOU.”

We’re sitting in the living area, the fire burning in front of us, the heat reddening my cheeks. I stare at the flames, my eyes blurring at the intensity. I close them, holding them that way for a drawn-out second before turning my focus to my husband.

We spent the day exploring the surroundings of the cabin. We walked for hours. We spoke very little, consumed with our own thoughts and letting our eyes dance across the beauty of the brush to ease our overactive minds.

He looks contemplative, eyes snared on the shot of whiskey in his glass. “Good.”

“May I ask you something?” I blurt out, the two glasses of wine I’ve consumed having traveled straight to my head.

“You may. It doesn’t necessarily mean I’ll answer.”

I raise an eyebrow, and his body jolts with visible laughter.

“What is it about virgins that are so coveted?”

He wasn’t expecting the question, holding the sip of whiskey uncomfortably in his mouth before swallowing to clear his throat.

I wait patiently, lifting my glass of wine to my lips and sipping.

“Think of the most valuable thing you hold.”

I move to speak, lifting the hand that holds the engagement ring he placed on my finger, but he shakes his head. “Not dollar-wise. *Valuable*,” he stresses, tapping two fingers against his heart.

“The love of my sister and my brother,” I answer without hesitation.

He breathes in through his nostrils, and if I was better at reading people, I’d surmise his feelings were hurt.

“Now imagine if before they loved you, they loved another.”

I shrug, my bottom lip tipping out in confusion.

“Now imagine that love had been taken from their lives *before* you. Would you think their love was *all* yours?”

I consider his question, my mouth opening to say yes, of course they would love me with everything, even if they’d loved and lost before me. But I refrain.

“It’s like that,” he continues. “You have this person, this soul, this heart, this *body*”—his eyes flash with lust—“that you want to be yours. You want to love them completely and have them love you in the same way.”

“I know they’d love me completely no matter who may have come before me.”

He sips from his glass. “And maybe a little bit of you would always wonder if they preferred the sibling who came before you. Would they give you up to have them back?”

“Okay,” I agree, reluctantly.

“Sex triggers a lot of things, Bianca. Memories, feelings, ecstasy, *pain*. Men want to know that when they’re fucking their wife, memories of another aren’t infiltrating. They want to know their cock is the only one that has ever brought them pleasure. That when you think salacious thoughts, it’s your husband you’re thinking of.”

He speaks with such vehemence. The belief in his statement a part of who he is.

“Not all men,” I argue.

“I can only speak for myself.”

“Except that’s *not* you,” I say.

His eyebrows pull together. “Says who?”

“*You*,” I press. “You said so yourself.”

His head pushes back, a slight shake of his head adding to his confusion.

“*I don’t fuck scared little girls.*” I repeat his words, ignoring the way they slice into my heart.

He shrugs. “There is no connection.”

“I’m confused.” I shift in my seat, crossing my legs on the sofa.

“Being a virgin doesn’t make you a scared little girl.”

“Oh.” I drop my eyes to my lap, my confidence waning. “So you *wish* I was a virgin?”

He lets go of a heavy exhale. “Do you know the reason I won’t fuck you, *dolcezza*?”

“Because—”

“Don’t say his name,” he snarls. “It’s because you can’t even look at me when you speak about sex. *That* makes you scared. Not your virginal status, or lack thereof,” he adds as an afterthought.

I lift my head, ignoring the way my cheeks heat.

“And it doesn’t matter what I want. You’re not a virgin, so it’s a moot point. Isn’t that right, wife?”

I clear my throat. “Right.”

He stares at me, and I hate the way his eyes pry into my soul, attempting to steal my secrets.

“Last night,” I start but stop myself, unsure how to continue.

“Last night,” he echoes when my words stall.

“I wasn’t scared last night.”

Arm thrown over the back of the couch, he lets his eyes travel up and down my body. “Last night, you let your lust guide you. Your inhibitions were pushed away. You wanted to feel something *more*, and you wanted me to feel the same.”

“I liked it.”

“I bet you did,” he murmurs, words dripped in sex, eyes promising the same.

I silently beg for him to speak again. To give me what I'm too scared to vocalize.

"Be a good little whore and come and sit on my lap."

Relief and lust and carnal need rush through my body like a tsunami. I stand abruptly, afraid I'll second-guess myself if I think too hard.

My legs feel weak as I walk toward him, nerves pushed aside in place of excitement. I'm eager. Almost *too* eager. But I don't care. I liked, no, *loved* what Vincent gave me last night. I've thought of nothing else but what we shared. Maybe he's right; maybe that's the allure to a virgin. Vincent gave me my first ever sexual experience, and I know, for the rest of my life, it will play on a loop in my mind.

Dropping his knees apart, he looks up at me, waiting for me to sit. "Face the window," he says. "Knees bracketing mine."

I follow his instruction, turning to place myself delicately upon his lap. Arm circling my waist, he pulls me roughly against him. "Knees."

I open my legs, stretching them to bracket his, opening myself up to him completely. I may be dressed, but I'm at his mercy. Splayed open, ready for him to ruin me.

I can feel his heartbeat against my back, and I let my head fall back onto his shoulder.

"Such a good girl when you want your pussy played with."

My whole body shudders, and he hums his approval into my neck, licking against my pulse.

Chin rested on my shoulder, he watches as his left hand slides my dress up my thighs, revealing inches of my skin to his eager eyes.

"Fuck, if only you knew how I wanted to mark you, Bianca. I want to carve my name into your skin. I want to make sure that every time you think about touching your cunt, you feel my name between your thighs."

I whimper, and he growls deep in his throat.

Dress pushed up to my stomach, he drops his glass to the carpet, not caring at the way it sloshes his whiskey over the overpriced rug. Hands gripping the edge of my panties, he rips them without warning, without permission, and my nipples harden.

His right hand slides over my pussy, and I thrust upward, needing *more*.

His hand, his big, thick fingers and intricate rings, press roughly against my delicate flesh.

He smiles into my neck, and I turn my face to him, wanting to taste it. Needing his approval and pleasure on my tongue. He gives it to me, our lips colliding in a messy kiss.

He slaps three fingers against my clit, the gentle tap sending fireworks into the pit of my stomach.

He uses two calloused fingers to rub circles over my sensitive nub, and I moan into his mouth, begging him for more with just the whispered syllables of his name.

“You know only I can bring you this level of pleasure.”

“Yes,” I moan.

“Say it, say *yes, Vinnie, only you.*”

“Vinnie. You. Only you. *Tesoro.*” I splinter, my body already quaking with an impending orgasm. My breathing is harsh, pressed against his lips, hips working in vain for him to move faster.

“I need—”

Lightening his touch, he rubs faster. “I know what you need. Now be a good little slut and come against my fingers.”

I grab my tits, squeezing them roughly to push myself over the edge. My head falls back, his name a wanton cry from my lips.

Seconds. He made me come in *seconds*.

“Stand up,” he whispers.

I slide off his lap, my legs shaky and my eyes blurry. I turn to face him.

He's the epitome of sex. A man seemingly unaffected by carnal touch, *if* you couldn't read the fire in his eyes. He sits lazily upon his throne, chest surging with restrained energy. He has not a hair out of place, but one look at him, and you know he's been doing impure things.

"You've made a mess of my pants, my sweet, little whore."

I cast my eyes to the ground, but he *tsks* me. I lift them immediately.

"Lick it off."

I gulp.

"Bianca," he warns. "Be a good girl and get on your knees."

I drop quickly, grunting at the sharp pain that shoots up my legs at the heaviness with which I do so.

"Lick your cum off my pants."

Moving toward the crotch of his pants, the wet patch of my climax sits to the side of his zipper. I can see the outline of his hard cock nestled heavily against the material, and I'm embarrassed to admit how much my mouth waters.

"Don't be shy."

Tongue out, I drag it up the material, tasting the salty evidence of my excitement.

His cock jerks at the feeling, and I whimper, my hands reaching for his zipper. "No."

"No?" I question, taken aback by his rejection.

"I can't be certain I'd be able to control myself tonight."

"Control yourself?" I ask dumbly.

He stares at me, and I stare back, my hands held tightly to his knees.

"I want to fuck you in a way that will leave bruises, and I won't allow that."

I swallow down my apprehension, shocked at the excitement that skates under my skin once I move past my shock and uncertainty.

“Won’t allow that?” I repeat his words, the broken whisper clouded by lust.

“Not the first time,” he murmurs. “You deserve more than that.”

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TEN



The cabin is dark as I make my way through it. Tree branches tap the windows, the wind blowing loud enough to whistle through the darkened space and echo off the glass. Shards of moonlight light my path as I tiptoe on bare feet, afraid of disturbing the nocturnal sounds of nature. It's after two in the morning, Vincent hasn't come to bed, and the cabin shows no sign of human life. We've been married for just under two weeks, and he's never slept beside me. I find slumber before he does and wake after him. His side of the bed remains made no matter the time of night, so while he's finding rest in some shape or form, it's not beside me.

The room he's claimed as his office for our time here is cast in darkness, but I push the door open anyway.

He sits behind his desk, body turned in his chair to face the window. He'd only see a silhouette of his own reflection, yet he stares. His body present but his mind elsewhere.

"Will you ever sleep in our bed?"

He doesn't startle at the sound of my voice, but he looks away from the window, eyes scanning over my body. The moonlight shows the way his eyes fire with lust, but his face remains passive. "It's not our bed."

I arch an eyebrow. "Will you ever sleep next to me?"

His right shoulder lifts lazily.

“If you don’t want to share a bed,” I murmur. “I can sleep on the couch.”

“No.” He shakes his head, his forehead creased. “It’s not that. I don’t sleep much.”

“But you *do* sleep,” I argue softly.

“I’m not a vampire if that’s what you’re asking.”

I roll my eyes. “You gained access to my bedroom without an invitation.” I lean against the doorframe. “So I gathered that much.”

His tongue brushes over his canines. “You don’t own the house, *dolcezza*. Your father does.”

“I thought you were convincing me you *weren’t* a vampire.”

“I’ll drink your blood if you haven’t matured past your *Twilight* fantasies.”

“You know, I don’t even think you’re joking.”

He laughs lightly. “I’m not.”

I lose myself in the thought of bleeding on Vincent’s tongue. Concerned for my mental well-being at how much the image of his teeth stained red makes him murderously attractive.

His phone rings, and he looks at the outdated cell, breaking the bind of my fantasy.

He hits a button, sitting back in his chair lazily. “Enzo.”

“Your wife killed you yet?” There is a camaraderie in the way Enzo and Vincent interact. They’re not *related*, but they’re very rarely apart. I recall the scandal following Giorgio Caruso’s death. Hand forced to the throne earlier than expected, the family anticipated Vincent would be appointed the position of second-in-command, or at the very least, consigliere. When he was overlooked for both, whispers of a falling out fluttered their way through the ranks. No one ever really knew *why* Lorenzo chose Leo and Roberto over Vincent, but my assumption is that the decision was likely made between the two of them.

Vincent smirks up at me, beckoning me over with two fingers.

“Close,” Vincent rasps.

I move toward him slowly, unsure of the situation. Vincent is on the phone with his boss, a conversation I shouldn’t be privy to, yet he beckons me closer.

“You fucked her yet?”

Vincent growls, the sound unfurling deep in his throat. “Don’t fucking speak about my wife like that.”

Lorenzo laughs. “*Touchy*. I’m still intrigued as to why you asked for her to be yours. You could have had your pick.”

My feet pause mere steps away, brows furrowed.

You asked for her to be yours.

“I took my pick.” Vincent doesn’t look away when he speaks.

His large hands rub along his thighs, tongue darting out to wet his lips. My eyes drop to his crotch of their own accord, and there is no missing the thick bulge constrained to his pants.

Vincent is turned on, and I want nothing more than to please him.

I step forward, close enough for my husband to reach me. Linking his fingers through the tie of my robe, he pulls me closer still.

Eyes closed, he skates his nose along the silk covering my breasts, breathing me in.

My heart flutters against my breastbone at the open show of intimacy.

He looks up at me, eyes darkening with lust, lids hooded. He looks dangerous, and I’d give everything for him to destroy me.

“You’re my undoing,” he whispers, low enough that Lorenzo can’t hear.

And you’re my peace.

Sliding his phone to the side, he grabs my waist, lifting me effortlessly onto the heavy wooden desk.

I stare down at him, but his gaze is fixed on my knees. Specifically, the way they’re glued together.

He rubs his bottom lip between his teeth.

“Any update on when I’ll be able to stop keeping Bianca captive?”
Hands to my knees, he glides them apart.

I gasp audibly, and he pauses. Lifting his head, he shakes it once, a languid movement one way and then the other. A warning. He lifts a finger, touching it against his lips in a cautionary command to be quiet.

“I thought you’d be into keeping her caged.” Lorenzo laughs, and Vincent echoes the sentiment.

“Keeping her to myself holds its perks.”

“I bet it fucking does,” Lorenzo burrs. “She’s a pretty fucking piece.”

My knees spread, my husband flicks the material of my robe away, baring me completely. “You have no idea.”

Tongue pointed, Vincent wastes no time in skating it delicately over my clit without warning. I want to cry out, but I swallow the sound down, heeding his warning.

“Anyway, it’s about done,” Lorenzo says. “I’ll let you know over the next twenty-four hours when you can head home.”

“Do I want to know how?” He kisses my clit as he speaks his last word, and my hips thrust upward, needing more.

He raises a brow, large palms finding my hips to push them back down.

Vincent Ferrari might very well be the most handsome man I’ve ever seen, and I can’t believe I never noticed it. In all the times our paths crossed, I never spared him a second glance. Now, I can’t imagine *how* I missed it. He’s more enticing than any man I’ve ever seen. He’s dangerous, but in the way you need him to be; *protectively*. He’s closed off to the world around him, but to me, he’s *Vinnie*. Possessive and controlling and seductive and giving. It’s obvious that he wants to own me, and for the first time in my life, being a possession doesn’t seem so enslaving. It’s freeing. This man before me seemingly wants parts of me even I never knew existed. The parts that will get a woman on her knees to please her man.

The parts that make her want to submit, to strip away the powers of control in her partner.

Lorenzo has been speaking, but I haven't heard a single word. My thoughts have been centered around the pleasure Vincent is offering with expert swipes of his tongue.

I'm so turned on. My excitement is dripping from my body, sliding between my ass cheeks and onto the thick mahogany of his desk.

Lips glued to my pussy; Vinnie sucks and licks, and my whole body quakes.

I want to scream out his name. He reads my needs well enough, lifting a hand and sliding it sideways between my lips.

I bite down, and the lust in his eyes explodes like fireworks before me.

"How's the other situation?" he asks tightly.

His boss groans in frustration, and Vincent slides his tongue deep into my pussy. I grab his wrist, pushing his hand farther into my mouth, hoping like hell it muffles the sound of my pleasure.

Using his free hand, he uses two fingers to push my pussy lips apart, his tongue working my clit in quick, soft strokes.

I'm close.

So fucking close.

"I'm ready to put *it* to ground as well."

Vincent growls at Lorenzo's words, the sounds vibrating against my pussy and making me shake.

"Calm down." Lorenzo sighs, oblivious to the world splintering around me. "Your pet is safe and sound. *For now.*"

"I gotta go." Vincent ends the call without pause. "Say my name when you come."

He knew. Without me telling him, he knew I was there. He knew that my body was building to a climax I could no longer control.

"*Vinnie!*" I scream into the small room. "Vinnie. Baby. Yesss."

I fall against the desk, my body slick with sweat. My chest heaves with heavy inhales and soft exhales.

His thumb trails up my slit, and I shiver at the soft touch.

"Baby," I whisper, coming up onto my elbows.

I watch as he focuses on his thumb, my cum glistening against the tan of his skin. He collects his whiskey glass wordlessly, sliding my release along the rim, watching it coat the crystal. "Your cum and whiskey," he murmurs, licking the remnants of my orgasm from his thumb. "I'll spend my life drunk on you."

This man.

Fuck.

This. Man.

"Vinnie."

I want him to fuck me.

He knows this.

But he denies me.

Again.

"I've got to finish that call with Enzo. You go to bed."

"Vinnie," I repeat.

"Bed, Bianca."

I stand, the move bringing my breasts flush to his face. He kisses my nipples.

"You could kill me, *dolcezza*, and I'd swear I was claimed by a fucking angel."

I swallow.

"Kiss me and go to bed."

I lean down, pushing my mouth against his. I can taste myself on his lips, and I slide my tongue into his mouth, wanting more.

"Naughty little whore," he groans, letting my tongue explore his mouth.

I pull back from the kiss as I move into desperation. I'm not above begging, but only when he demands I do so.

"Night."

He leans back in his chair.

Stepping through the door, he calls my name. Glancing over my shoulder, I watch as his tongue touches his whiskey glass, tasting me.

"Sweet dreams, *dolcezza*."

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ELEVEN



Walking into my mother and father's house for the first time since I was married is surreal. After just a few short weeks, it no longer feels like home. I'm a guest, and by the strain in my father's smile, an unwanted one.

"Bianca," he greets curtly. "Vincent." He puffs his chest as he speaks to my husband, and I have to forcefully stop my top lip from curling up in disgust.

I thought his disdain would affect me more. I've spent my life being held in higher esteem than my brother and sister. I was, after all, his greatest possession. An invaluable diamond he planned on using to further his reputation. I took his affections as love. I acted my part and was rewarded with anything my heart desired. Within reason of course. I was on show, always smiling dutifully and placed on a pedestal for family and foes to admire. I was unattainable. Our biological linkage offered him power that I'm only now just understanding is the most important asset in Father's eyes.

Our relationship was a lie and not an honest one. I believed my father loved me unconditionally. I knew my actions would disappoint him, but I never imagined they would've wielded the power to extinguish his love. But then again, *that* was his lie. What Armando Rossi felt for me was not

love and affection. It was greed and the promise of admiration from his peers.

I was betrayed by the one person I wholeheartedly believed was bound to protect me.

“Papa.” I kiss his cheek, my lips not actually meeting his skin before stepping back. “Mama.”

My mother hugs me, genuinely happy to see me. “Oh, Bianca. Are you well?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Vincent, my daughter’s behavior has cost—”

“My wife’s behavior is no longer your concern, Armando. I’ll have you refrain from speaking ill of it moving forward.” Vincent meets my father’s eyes lazily.

Watching my father morph from a man of power—shoulders pushed back, chest forward—to that of a child reprimanded for poor manners eased the pain he’d ushered into my chest. And for that, I want to hug Vincent.

I hesitate for only a moment before linking my arm through his and leaning into his side in gratitude.

My father clocks the movement, an indiscriminate scowl forming between his eyebrows.

I smile in response.

Vincent places a chaste kiss on my head. “*Dolcezza*, your father and I have business to discuss. Visit with your mother and sister, and I’ll find you when I’m ready to leave.”

I look up at him. “Okay.” I wait, eyes trained on his.

The corner of his mouth tips up in a smirk, and he leans down, brushing his lips against mine in a kiss soft enough to make my eyelids flutter.

Lips apart, our gaze catches. I never imagined lust would be so potent you could see it in someone’s eyes. *Windows of the soul* always felt farfetched. But Vincent’s stare could burn down villages. The usual ice in

his eyes has been replaced with fire; flames of longing and carnality dancing for me in promises he is yet to keep.

“Go,” he whispers, and I break our connection, stepping toward my mother.

Arm linked through mine, she moves us with purpose to the kitchen. “*Bianca*. You and Vincent?” she marvels.

“Me and Vincent, what?”

Letting me go as she steps into the kitchen, she places her hands on her wide hips. “You’re having sex.”

“Mama!”

“Well?” She moves around her kitchen with ease, hands fluttering this way and that as she prepares coffee.

“We’re married.” I refrain from telling her the truth. That Vincent may be eager to bring me pleasure, but sex has been placed out of reach for reasons I struggle to understand.

She sighs. “There is having relations out of obligation, and there’s having sex. There is no obligation in your interactions.”

“Not on my part, no.”

“Or on his.”

Her statement causes my heart to beat. “You think so?” My eagerness is obvious to my mother, her feet pausing as she sighs at me in a way that tells me she thinks I’m too naïve to be greedy for Vincent’s affection.

“*Bianca*, sweetheart, there is a limit to the obligation a man like Vincent Ferrari will endure when it comes to his betrothed. He chastised your father in *front* of his family. He kissed you with salacious intent. That man is acting on heart, not duty.”

I duck my face to hide the pleasure in my smile. “If you say so.”

“*Bianca!*”

I turn toward Caterina’s voice and watch as she takes the stairs two at a time, rushing toward me.

“Cat!”

She throws herself into my arms, and we squeeze one another tight. I may not have missed the house I grew up in, but I missed my sister. I missed her eternal optimism and her unwavering love.

The truth about my father and his feelings for me may have been an unpleasant surprise, but I’ve never had to question Cat’s motivations. She loves me as much as I do her. My brother thinks his affections are as solid as ours, but I know he’d choose the family if push really came to shove. He’d struggle with it, but his duty would win out. He is a soldier, after all. It was the way he was raised. He may have helped me save my sister, but he knew the ramifications for me would have always been worse than the fallout to Cosa Nostra. My mother is similar. She loves her children with everything she holds inside. But she is a dutiful Mafia wife. Her allegiance is to her husband first and foremost. I can’t condemn her for that. My feelings mirror hers when I think of Vincent. I’d lay down my life to protect him, and I can’t even say I love him. *Yet.*

“I like your hair like this.” Caterina flicks my ponytail.

“You don’t think I look too *severe*?”

She rolls her eyes. “You never wear your hair up,” she comments, watching me curiously.

I like your hair like that. You have a habit of hiding under your hair. This removes that problem for me.

On our wedding night, I vowed to myself that I would never wear my hair up again, convinced I hated Vincent Ferrari and everything he stood for. I wanted to hide from him. The less he knew about me, the better.

Now, I pull it back from my face most of the time. I give him something seemingly small but costs me a lot. *Me.* He has complete access to every emotion that crosses my face.

“Vincent likes my hair up,” I murmur.

“You’re a dutiful Mafia wife after all,” my brother comments lazily as he steps into the kitchen, but there is an accusation under his tone, a disappointment in his generalization.

“Tony,” I ignore his rumble, moving to kiss both of his cheeks.

“Don’t tell me you’ve fallen under some disillusion that *Necktie* will be as dutiful to you as you are to him?”

I lift my chin, my eyebrows pulling together over my eyes. “My marriage is none of your concern.”

He shrugs. “It doesn’t seem much of yours either.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I bite out, irritated at the scorn my brother is lacing me with for making the best out of a situation I had no say in.

“It means that you don’t know your husband.”

“*Tony*,” my mother chides.

“And you do?” I cross my arms over my chest.

“No, he doesn’t.” Vincent’s voice carries over the wide expanse of the kitchen.

Tony has the good sense to duck his head. “Meant no disrespect.”

“I think you did.” Linking a finger into the loop of my high-waisted jeans, Vincent pulls me back into his body.

“Just want my sister to remain vigilant.”

Vincent laughs. “Of what? *Me*? My senses tell me it’s *you* who doesn’t always have your sister’s best interests at heart. Not this one, anyway.” He strokes his hand over my ponytail. “Interesting that her *indiscretion* moved you into number one place for your father, wouldn’t you say?”

My eyes widen, not that Vincent can see them.

Tony looks at me cautiously, ducking his head away. “I had no idea Berto and Bianca were involved. I would’ve killed that piece of shit had he not already been dead,” he mumbles.

“As you’ve said. Come, Bianca. I have something I need to take care of. I’ll drop you home first.”

I consider telling him that I want to stay, that I want more time with my sister and my mother, but Tony has put me on edge. I never considered his easy compliance with my plan. Was that his real motivation? Moving up the ranks as the favored Rossi child? We agreed our plan was for the protection of Caterina. But with Tony refusing to meet my eyes, I can’t help but wonder if our younger sister’s safety bothered him at all. I knew he was faithful to Cosa Nostra. I just never knew, like my father, that it meant more to him than anything else.

“Of course,” I whisper, moving forward to kiss my family goodbye.

Tony hugs me tightly. “How does he know of my involvement?”

I step back. “He doesn’t,” I assure him, concern licking up my spine.

Tony looks at Vincent, then back at me, dipping his chin in reluctant acceptance.

Back in the car, my mind works a million miles an hour.

“You’re frowning,” Vincent observes.

I relax my face. “I didn’t realize.”

“What your brother said upset you.” A statement of fact, one he expects me to confirm.

What you said also upset me.

Vincent alluding to the fact that Tony was aware of my indiscretion hints that he knows more than I think he does. My *affair* with Roberto was presented as illicit. Only Berto and I were involved, but my husband seems to think differently.

“He was very rude.”

Vincent shrugs. “It’s hard for soldiers at times. They’re kept out of certain... *business* they would like to be privy to. Some don’t cope well with that. He has to earn his place.”

Earn his place.

“With barbs of wire tattooed on his skin?”

His jaw ticks, the muscle in his cheek throbbing with irritation. “Why do you attack when you are not told what you want to hear?”

I huff. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Please, Bianca, don’t treat me as though I can’t read you.”

I flip him off. “Read that.”

He pulls over on the side of the road with a screech of wheels that has me grasping at the grab handles in the car. The car behind us beeps, flying past with the sound of the horn lost within seconds. “What the hell?”

“How long do you think it would take you to walk home?” Vincent doesn’t look at me. He stares through the windshield, chin tipped up in contemplation.

My eyes drop into slits. “You wouldn’t dare.”

He moves his gaze to me slowly. “On the contrary, wife, I very much would. I reward you when you’re good. You recall the ways I reward you, don’t you?”

My cheeks shade without my permission.

“So it makes sense that I’d punish you for bad behavior.”

“Bad behavior.” I roll my eyes.

“Dolcezza, your fiery little attitude I accept because it turns me on. Complete disrespect will not be tolerated.”

“I’m not a fucking child.”

His eyebrows raise. “No.”

“And I’m not a fucking pet.”

Pet.

Your pet is safe and sound. For now.

My brow furrows, and my thighs clench.

Vincent using his fingers to separate the lips of my pussy, stroking me with his tongue.

Enzo talking about business. About a pet of Vincent’s.

“Do we have a dog?” I ask abruptly.

He frowns at the blunt change in conversation.

“A cat?” I push.

“No.”

“A fish. Bird. Turtle. Rabbit. Ferret?”

“What?” He shakes his head. “No.”

“Enzo said your *pet* was safe. What did he mean by that?”

A calculating smile slides onto Vincent’s face, and I inch back in my seat, my head tapping my window with a thud. “Listening to conversations that you have no business in, Bianca, will only cause problems you don’t want. Trust me,” he breathes. “I know.”

I blink.

“Now apologize about flipping me off before I make you walk home.”

I stare at him for a second longer than necessary, watching his devious smile drop.

Grabbing my clutch, I open my car door.

“Bianca,” he warns.

I have no intention of walking the distance into Manhattan. Fuck, in these boots, I’d leave the soles in Brooklyn. But Vincent doesn’t need to know that.

I slam the door, pulling my phone from my bag and opening my Uber app.

Vincent winds down the window. “I suggest you get back in my car.”

“I suggest you don’t make threats you clearly have no intention of keeping. I’m not apologizing, *husband*. I’ll find my own way home.”

His hand twists on the leather of his steering wheel, his ringed fingers clenching until his knuckles turn white. I pretend not to notice. “Get back in the car,” he grits.

I duck my head into the window. “Marco will be here in two minutes.” I hold my phone up triumphantly.

“Get in Marco’s car, and I’ll kill him.”

I pout. “Poor Marco. The problem is I’d be the last one to see him alive, so I’d likely go to jail.”

“Have you learned nothing, *dolcezza*? I make problems like that go away.”

I stand to full height, watching the blue Honda pull up behind Vincent’s Mercedes. “That’s my ride.” I ignore his insufferably true comment.

“Bianca!” he yells, climbing out of his car.

I ignore my husband and the bristling fury visible in the way his mouth thins into a line of contempt. His eyes darken against the setting sun as he strides toward me.

I duck my head as I climb into the Uber.

“Who is that?” My driver lifts his chin at Vincent, who stands at the back of his Mercedes, shooting daggers of warning and reprimand into the 2018 sedan I’m sitting in.

I shake my head dismissively. “My previous Uber driver, the guy was a dick.”

The young guy pulls away from the curb cautiously, eyeing Vincent. “Your Uber driver rolls around in a G-class?”

“*Glorified* Uber driver.”

We drive past Vincent, and he fits his hands to his hips.

“*Wait*. Was that a gun? Was that guy carrying? What the hell? *Who are you?*”

“No one.”

He readjusts his rearview mirror. “No one? The angry Uber driver is following us. Is he gonna kill me?” He balks. “Seriously, lady, I am *not* giving you five stars.”

I smile. “He’s harmless. *I think*,” I add as an afterthought.

“She thinks,” he mutters. “Great.”

“Relax, he’s just making sure you don’t kidnap me. Definitely don’t do that,” I tell him seriously. “He’ll definitely kill you then. He’s a little possessive.”

“If I could pull over right now, I would. I’ve also considered just kicking you out of my car, but something tells me that would piss the crazy dude behind me off just as much.”

“Probably more,” I agree.

Marco checks the rearview mirror over and over as we drive. He shifts in his seat every time his eyes meet Vincent’s, and I turn away to hide my smile.

The car drops me at the front of our building, and I watch Vincent’s car speed past us, avoiding our dip into the parking lot completely.

“Thanks, Marco,” I say absently, watching the Mercedes disappear from sight.

“Whatever, lady. We won’t cross paths again. I’ll one star you to make sure of that.”

“You’re so kind.” I smile sarcastically, slamming the door.

I feel a little triumphant as I walk into our apartment. A pride seeps into my bones that makes me feel more powerful than it likely should. I drop my clutch onto the entryway table, smelling the beautiful arrangement of flowers Heather had collected this morning as per my request. The exuberant array of red roses makes me smile, and I run my fingers over the petals tenderly.

I move gingerly to the kitchen, plucking a bowl of freshly washed strawberries from my fridge. The sweet taste bursts over my tongue when I bite into one, and I close my eyes, savoring the flavor. The juice runs along my chin, and I wipe it away.

Vincent returns as I finish my last strawberry, a second set of footsteps echoing his. I tip my head from the kitchen, standing upright when I see Andre trailing my husband.

“Vincent?” I question.

“You will never, under any fucking circumstance, get into a vehicle with someone I do not know,” he yells. “Am I understood?” A vein on his forehead pulses heavily enough that I think it’s about to explode.

I’m shocked into silence.

“I can’t keep you safe if you go against every fucking safety measure I put in place.”

“Vinnie,” I murmur, guilt leaking in at his outburst.

“We have enemies, Bianca. You know that. You have a fucking driver for a reason.”

“He doesn’t tail us for moments you piss me off and threaten to kick me out of your car,” I argue.

“You wanted Andre? You’ve got him. If I am not driving you, he is, am I understood?”

I consider it for a moment, glancing at Andre, who drops his face in discomfort.

I nod once.

“You can go,” he speaks to Andre, refusing to pull his eyes away from me.

“Mr. Ferrari. Bianca.”

“You’re her driver, not her fucking friend,” Vincent spits. “You refer to her as Mrs. Ferrari.”

Andre smirks at me behind Vincent’s back, and it takes everything within me not to return it.

“Understood, sir.” He leaves without another word.

The front door clicks closed, and Vincent cracks his neck back and forth. “Don’t take this as a reward for your tantrum, Bianca.”

I raise an eyebrow, and he steps closer.

“This way, I can keep you safe even when you’re acting like a fucking child.”

I scowl. “Don’t piss me off, and I won’t act out.”

His gaze drops to his feet. A smile crawls onto his face, and he waits until it’s fully fledged before lifting his head. “I was wrong with my threat today. I will find new ways to punish you, *dolcezza*.”

“And I’ll find new ways to defy you.”

His eyes flash with lust, but his lips twist in frustration. “I’m going out.” He moves toward the front door.

I follow, my fight pushed down with intrigue. “Where?”

“To attend to a *pet*.”

My nostrils flare, and the soft sound of his laughter echoes through our apartment on his exit. I pick up the glass vase I was only minutes ago admiring, throwing it against the elevator doors with a deafening crash. Water, crystal, and dampened rose petals shower the tiles in the broken shards of my anger.

TWELVE



Now that we're back at home, I'm bored. Boredom at the cabin didn't feel so suffocating. Vincent was always with me, even locked away in his office. I could hear the murmur of his voice. He'd eat lunch and dinner with me. He'd watch me while I slept. He'd *touch* me. Here, in the cold and sterile walls of his apartment, I have no one.

I have few friends. I can't socialize with Trixie; she's not Cosa Nostra, and she's what my family would respectfully refer to as a *whore*. I'm the wife of the *consigliere*. It's a hard no without even considering it. Even the thought of seeing Cat regularly doesn't appeal to me.

I want Vincent.

I apply my night serum to my face, rubbing it into my skin in soft circles. I stare at myself in the mirror, trying to imagine what Vincent sees. I think he finds me attractive. He looks at me with lust in his eyes. He touches my lips before he kisses them, nostrils flaring in longing before he claims my mouth each and every time.

Picking up my rose quartz roller, I massage my face, watching myself as I do. Loneliness is a funny thing. I live in a beautiful, albeit barren apartment with an attractive man. A man who is powerful and respected and who finds joy in my pleasure. Yet something holds him back from giving himself to me completely. I am married, yet I remain a virgin.

I'm an eighteen-year-old *married* virgin.

He's openly sexual. He kisses me. He uses his hands and mouth to bring me to orgasm. He enjoys it when I use my mouth and my hands to bring him pleasure. But he won't make love to me. He won't fuck me. He won't take a virginity he doesn't know exists, and I can't for the life of me figure out why. At first, I thought it was Roberto. He thinks I slept with his brother, and who would want their sibling's sloppy seconds? But it's not that. It can't be. What is sex when you're intimate in every other way?

I sigh, dropping my facial roller into the top drawer in my bathroom. I close the drawer with my hip, running my hands through my hair as I exit the bathroom.

The shreds of my wedding dress were nowhere to be found when we returned from the cabin. Our bedroom sat as though it was untouched. Untainted by horrible words and maiming insults. I wanted so badly to bring attention to the fact that *he* gave in by removing what he affectionately referred to as our mockery, but the stern look on his face when I noticed the bare carpet was enough for me to refrain.

Vincent sits in the large armchair in our bedroom, hooded eyes muted by the darkness in the room. I hadn't even heard him come home.

I walk toward him without speaking, stopping only when my knees touch his.

"*Dolcezza*," he hums. "Tell me why you seem so sad."

"I thought you were working." I climb onto his lap, the move brazen enough to startle him into silence.

Hands lifting, I'm certain he's about to reject me. *Again*. But he surprises me, catching me around the waist to bring me closer.

"Do you have a *pet*?" I ask, holding his face in my hand to keep his gaze.

"Only you," he answers without hesitation.

My eyebrows pull down.

To attend to my pet.

“I was being facetious.”

I look for a lie in his wolf-like eyes. I search for deception in the grasp of his hands.

“Tell me why you’re sad,” he repeats.

“So many things,” I whisper, fitting my apex to his crotch.

“Tell me.”

I take a breath to speak, but he stops me by pushing a single finger against my lips. “Things I can actually help you with,” he warns.

I undulate my hips, and his eyes flutter closed before opening a shade darker than a second past. “This doesn’t feel like my home.”

He frowns.

“It’s cold. It’s an apartment, not a home.”

His hands slide down to my legs, rubbing soft circles on the skin of my upper thighs. “We’ll call an interior designer in the morning. You’ll work with them to make it what you want.”

“Thank you.” I lean down, kissing him tenderly.

“What else?” he pushes, his tongue ducking out to lick my top lip.

“I’m lonely.”

“How so?”

“Friends are hard to come by when you’re associated with the Mafia.”

“Cat—”

“Doesn’t understand my life,” I cut him off, biting his bottom lip and pulling at it, eliciting a rough groan from deep in his throat.

“I’ll make some calls. A few capos have younger wives. Maybe you’d like them?”

“I want a dog.”

He cups my jaw tightly. “Are you using your body to manipulate me, wife?”

“Yes,” I answer honestly.

The corner of his mouth twitches with mirth, a small grin transforming the severity of his face instantly. "I'll think about it. Would you like me to make you come?"

I kiss him, my lips and tongue caressing his mouth in a kiss that screams for more. "Will you fuck me?"

"No."

I pull back, sliding backward off his lap. He lets me go without resistance, dropping his hands from my face and body.

"Then no, I don't want you to make me come."

He watches as I tighten the silk of my robe around my body, lifting my chin in defiance. A challenging smile stretches across his lips, and I hate how turned on a vindictive Vincent makes me.

"Very well. I have work to do." He stands, stepping closer, not attempting to hide the bulge in his pants. "Sweet dreams, *dolcezza*." He kisses my cheek gently, dragging his fingers over the silk on my stomach before exiting our bedroom without a backward glance.

I drop down onto the armchair he just vacated, a frustrated growl puffing from my well-kissed lips.

My nipples are hard, and my pussy is wet. I wanted relief, and I was stupid to refuse Vincent because he declined my request to fuck me. I growl in frustration.

I sit for a minute. The lamp-lit room is supposed to be a beacon of desire. Our private space. One that encourages affection and intimacy. I want it. So fucking bad. I want Vincent to touch me. I want my husband to drive me wild with lust the way he does. But I want him to take it past the edge he balances on so confidently. I want him to tip over, maddened by the need to slam his cock inside me.

I open my robe, shrugging it off my shoulders and letting it pool around my hips.

Sliding my fingers over my mound, I suck in a sharp breath, eyelids fluttering closed in satisfaction. My fingertips are damp with my desire, and I lift them, circling them over the hardened peaks of my right nipple. I moan softly, enjoying my tentative touch. I slide my hand back down, rubbing my index and middle finger over my clit, my body trembling at the gentle caress.

I move between my pussy and my nipples, enjoying myself too much to let myself come too fast. I could do this for hours. Tease my nipples and clit, make them throb with the need for relief.

“You won’t let me make you come, but you’ll do it yourself?”

His voice makes me moan, and I open my eyes, enjoying the lazy way he leans against the doorframe, whiskey in hand, the ring on his index finger tapping the glass every so often.

“Mm,” I respond, letting myself slide my fingers deep into my pussy.

“I noticed you before you ever did me.” His voice tastes like honey on my tongue, smoky and just the right amount of sweet. “Did you know that?”

“Nuh-uh,” I breathe out.

His eyes fixate on my hand, currently fingering my pussy. “I’d watch you at family parties, and I’d fantasize about all the ways I’d bruise you.”

“Tell me,” I beg, my back arching as I push my fingers deeper into my pussy.

I’m swollen and soaked, my excitement building up with the rough addition of his voice in our room.

“You’d laugh, and I’d want to swallow the sound with my mouth.” He vibrates with need. “I wanted to bite your lips until I drew blood. I wanted to turn your laugh into a gasp of shock, into a surprised moan of pleasure.”

“Vinnie.” I pull my fingers back, finding the uneven swell within me, rubbing it softly with the pads of my fingers. “Oh, god.”

“That should be my hand,” he growls, stepping closer.

“No.”

“No?” he questions, tipping the contents of his glass into his mouth before throwing the empty glass on our bed.

“No touching.”

“No touching?” he repeats.

“Until you’re ready to fuck me.”

“You ready to show me your soul?”

I look at him through heavy-lidded eyes, shaking my head.

“I imagined stripping you naked in front of everyone.” He comes to a stop in front of me, dropping to his knees with the finesse of a man entirely in control of his body. “I’d dream about spraying my cum over your beautiful face and sinful body so everyone knew you were mine to possess, to control, to please, to *love*.”

My body convulses.

“*Vinnie*,” I moan.

“That’s it, baby. Fuck that tight little cunt. Curl your fingers in tighter, Bianca. Rub harder.”

I do as he says, crying out in pleasure.

My hips thrust upward, seeking pressure for my clit. It rubs against my palm, and everything within me tightens.

“Fuck. You’re so fucking wet. Pull your fingers in and out so I can hear it better.”

I slide my fingers out of my body, rubbing along my clit before pushing them back inside.

“Like that,” he murmurs, his face mere inches from my pussy. “Fuck. I can smell you. My little whore is dripping. Let me taste you.”

“No,” I groan out, my fingers exiting my body once again to massage my clit.

“Evil,” he growls, more to himself than me. “Say my name when you come.”

Pushing my palm against myself, I dip my fingers into my pussy, deep enough to make me cry out. “*Vinnie*. Baby.”

I fall into the armchair, my body sweaty, my breathing ragged.

My hand retracts from my body, but Vincent grabs it before I can wipe my cum on my thigh. He moves my arm, positioning my hand to my lips. Tracing my lips with my fingers, he watches as he drags my climax over my skin. My orgasm clings to the open pout of my mouth, and my pussy throbs at the carnal way he looks at me. Arching over my body, he claims my mouth. His tongue meets my lips first, collecting my cum with a wet caress. His lips crash to mine, and I meet his frenzied kiss with the desperation of a sated woman. Vincent consumes me, and I give him everything, letting everything I want and need to bleed into our kiss.

He pulls back roughly, running a rough hand through his hair. His lips tip up in a sexy half-grin, a small shake of his head following a cough of laughter. “Hurry up and give yourself to me, Bianca.”

“I’m here.”

His nostrils flare in resentment. He stands, adjusting his erection with a grunt of discomfort. “You’re welcome,” he snarls.

“I made myself come.”

“Tell yourself what you want.” He walks away. “It might not have been my hand, but you imagined it was. It was my voice coaxing that orgasm out of you, Bianca. It was my name on your whore lips when you came apart.”

He stops at the door, glancing over his shoulder. “This whole house has cameras, Bianca. Remember that. Remember every orgasm you give in to is *mine*. No matter where you are, I’ll be watching, and that’ll be the thought that pushes you over the edge. *Me*.”

THIRTEEN



“*H*i.”

Vincent remains at the threshold of the elevator into our apartment. He stares at me in a way that makes my feet pause. The lock of hair that always seems to escape order has curled over his forehead. His eyes close over, lines of violence creasing at the edges.

I hold the napkin I was ready to lay on the table tightly in my hand. “Is everything okay?”

“Don’t bother setting a place for me.” His voice cuts across the room with warning, and I swallow.

I glance at the already made table. His seat presses into my hip, his cutlery and placemat already laid out.

“Are you going out?”

His fist clenches around his keys. I want to step closer, but his mood urges me not to.

A quick shake of his head. “No.”

“Have you already eaten?” Nerves claw their way up my throat.

“I’ve lost my appetite.” His top lip curls up, baring his teeth.

My stomach twists with panic. “Something you can’t talk to me about?”
I test.

His brows hang over his eyes dramatically, a potent mixture of disappointment and anger and, if I'm not mistaken, *hurt* scrutinizing me. "You're just going to stand there and play dumb?"

"Play dumb?" My hands drop to my sides.

"*Fuck*," he spits, slamming a fist against our entryway table.

Wrapping my arms around my midsection, Vincent's attention skates over my attire, nostrils flaring when he realizes I'm virtually naked. A sheer robe draped over my shoulders is tied loosely around my waist. Nipples, now hardened in uncertainty, are clearly visible through the see-through material.

"What are you wearing?"

"I thought—" I start, but stop myself, my plan to seduce my husband having lost its appeal or more, its importance with the seemingly imminent eruption of his anger.

"You thought what, Bianca?"

He steps closer, and I tighten my robe, unsure of what to do with my hands.

"You thought what?" he yells, and I step back at the timbre in his voice. "You thought you'd push your whore friend on me and then dress like a fucking siren to push me over the edge?"

"Whore friend? What?" I stumble. "Who?"

He laughs, the sound void of any humor. "Your little whore hairdresser." He moves closer again. "You had her throw herself at me for what?" He lifts his shoulders. "So you could accuse me of cheating? You're so fixated on this stupid notion of me fucking other women."

"Trixie?" I frown.

"Whatever her name is." He flicks a hand dismissively in front of my face, my eyes catching on the black and silver of his rings.

"Trixie tried to fuck you?" I turn my attention back to his face.

“Your innocent act infuriates me.” His hands are in front of my face, fingers clenching into a half fist of frustration. “So many fucking lies.”

“She tried to fuck you?” I repeat, something I in no way understand wrapping itself around the very base of my spine, gripping its way up my vertebrae and forcing my chest to heave. “Did you *do* it?”

He glowers at me.

Throwing the napkin on the table, I step forward. “Did you *fuck* her, Vincent? While you hold yourself out of reach for me, did you give in to the promise of *experienced* pussy?”

“You’d like it if I did, wouldn’t you, wife?” he sneers.

“I’d fucking kill you if you did.” I lift my chin.

His eyelids lower, confusion setting itself into a straight line of his face. “You want me to believe you didn’t put her up to it?”

“Put her up to it?” I scream loud enough to make my voice crack. “Why the fuck would I do that?”

“I don’t know,” he bellows. “To stop me from wanting you.”

“Wanting me?” I open my arms out wide. “Why would I want to stop you from wanting me? I want you to fuck *me*, not her. It’s *you* who keeps denying *me*.”

“Because you’re a liar.”

I open my robe, my naked body no longer hidden by the sheer material. It’s free for his eyes to roam, to take in the part of me he still has yet to claim.

My body.

“Is this a lie? Is me serving you fucking dinner naked screaming at you that I don’t want you?”

“I know I could have your body, Bianca,” he condemns, making me feel cheap and unwanted. “It’s not enough.”

I slap him, his face slicing to the right from the force.

Turning back to me slowly, he runs his tongue over the top of his teeth. It's frightening in the same way it turns me on.

I no longer know who I am. Or, more fittingly, who I *was*. Originally, the thought of marrying Vincent frightened me. But the second we found ourselves alone, a peace settled inside me, a sense of home claiming me.

"Stop tempting me," he says, the threat rumbling through his throat as he reads the lust correctly in my eyes.

I growl, my body dying for release. "Stop denying me."

"Give me what I want." The color in his eyes has blown out, pupils expanding against the predatory haunt consuming me.

"What more could you want?" I yell. "You have my heart. I'm begging you to take my body. What else do you fucking want?" I screech, my whole body shaking.

"Your soul, Bianca." He places a palm gently over my neck, closing it around my throat. "I want the truth, so I own your fucking soul."

"You have the truth," I whisper.

"You lie."

He's so close now. Close enough that I can smell his cologne. Close enough that I can see the way his pupils dilate with lust.

"I don't."

He takes a final step, gluing our bodies together.

"Look me in the eye"—he brushes a lock of hair from my face with his free hand—"and tell me you let my brother touch you." He squeezes my neck. "Look me in the eye and tell me you let him fuck you."

"I—" My heart stops in my chest.

"You can't." He smiles, enjoying the way my pulse races against his palm. "You're a liar."

I inhale heavily through my nose. "You can't know that." I lick the dryness in my lips, panic settling into my bones.

His gaze falls to my lips, tracking the way my tongue wets them. The thick line of his throat moves.

“I fucking know it.”

“The only way you could know for sure is if you were there.”

He lifts his eyes, our secrets laid bare, and I suck in a sharp breath.

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FOURTEEN

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VINCENT
(BEFORE)



The walls of Enzo's office close in as we sit in silence, entranced by the footage playing out before us. My vision blurs, and my jaw aches with the force it wires itself shut. Every nerve ending in my body pulses with the need to inflict pain, and I'm torn between my relief at being right and my rage for the same reason. Carnage rushes my sight; fantasies of bruised skin, blood-filled eyes, and the self-inflicted scratches ripped into one's neck in a pathetic attempt at self-preservation vibrate my insides in longing.

Leo smiles at the camera, his hands held above his head in surrender. His nefarious grin taunts the officers surrounding him. He lacks self-control, the basic human instinct of protection lost to his need to provoke anyone who stands against him.

Enzo flinches beside me when the FBI agent patting Leo down kicks him in the back of the knees, watching him fall to the concrete floor. His grin dissipates, lost to a snarl of contempt. They cuff him unnecessarily, the smug smile on the agent's face growing as he lifts the duffel bags Leo had entered the building with onto the singular table sitting in the warehouse.

"Fuck, I wish I was in that fucking room to watch that smile die," Enzo murmurs, the malicious intent in his words dripping in threat.

I don't respond. I can't. I'm too consumed with my appetite for pain. My hands itch with an urgency to slit open the delicate skin of a neck and watch it bleed with retribution.

Not just any neck, though.

Robert Ferrari.

Consigliere.

Traitor.

Brother.

"Vin."

I look up at the boss.

"You okay?" He closes the computer.

"What happened?" I lift my chin to the closed laptop.

"They arrested him without cause. I've texted the lawyer, and he'll meet Leonardo at the station. He'll be out within the hour," he explains quietly.

"Answer my question."

I stand, cracking my knuckles individually.

"I can—" he starts.

"No," I cut him off. "Don't insult me like that. It's my duty and mine alone."

"I would never ask that of you." His voice strains.

Lorenzo Caruso is ruthless. He has to be. He came into power too young to be anything *but* formidable. Any weakness would have had us hunted down and killed, one by one. Enzo wouldn't allow that. He knew the cost of his father's death wasn't merely emotional. He forfeited his grief at the cost of his soul. A debt he paid graciously, content in the power it offered him in return. But beneath the cage of callousness, he remains my best friend, the brother I deserve. Holding that position, he should know me well enough to know the death of my traitorous brother will cause me no regret.

I bite my lip hard enough to make it bleed. "I'll never forgive you if you take this away from me. His life is mine."

Enzo nods once, picking up his cell.

“Berto,” he says into the phone. “Call me back. Leo’s been arrested. Need you on deck.” He ends the call, throwing his cell onto his desk.

Business as usual. Roberto needs to think he’s in the clear, that Lorenzo remains oblivious to his betrayal.

“I fucking hate that you were right about him.” Enzo palms his eye sockets. “I knew he was a cunt, but I didn’t realize he was a treacherous one.”

Staring out at the city from the full glass window in Enzo’s office, I shrug. “I thought by keeping him close, we’d stop him from abusing power and causing shit for the family. I never imagined he’d be so fucked in the head that he’d cross us.”

I turn. Dragging my thumb across my bottom lip, I inhale sharply. “Enzo.”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he bites out. “Don’t you dare apologize for that piece of shit. He might share your blood, Vin, but you don’t take ownership of his sins.”

His phone rings, and he retrieves it lazily, waiting until I nod before answering it through the speakerphone. “Cosimo.”

“One of my runners has been arrested,” he greets.

“I’m aware,” Enzo responds. “So has Leo.”

“Leo? What the fuck was he doing at a drop?” Cosimo struggles to hold on to his respect. The bite in his tone makes Enzo smirk.

“You weren’t overlooked, Cosimo. Leo was fed information at the last minute that the FBI was gonna make an appearance.”

“Fuck,” Cosimo spits.

“Nothing to worry about. The bags were empty; your product is safe. Feds have nothing on Leo or your guy.”

Cosimo harrumphs into the line.

The older capo respects Lorenzo enough, but he's made it clear on more than one occasion that he struggles with taking orders from a boss who's younger than his own son. Cosimo Greco has headed up our drug business since he was thirty. He knew the business inside out once upon a time, but times change, and he's losing his touch. He's a geriatric in a young man's game, and it's no secret that Enzo is pushing for Cosimo's son, Diego, to take the reins.

"Leads me to my next question, Cosimo. Your runner, how trustworthy is he? You know the feds will feed him lies to have him turn. Is he stupid enough to fall for it?"

Cosimo sighs. "Yeah, he's stupid enough to turn."

"I'll speak to my guys on the inside. He'll be hanging from a rope within the hour. Choose your runners better next time, or I'll have Diego do it for you." He ends the call without another word.

"I can kill him if you want." I stuff my hands into my pockets.

He laughs. "You joke, but I'm not far off planting a bullet between his eyes myself. *Fuck*. I need Diego. Who hires fucking runners that'll turn at the slightest pressure?"

I say nothing, but he doesn't need me to.

"Today?" Enzo questions, bringing us back to the matter of my recreant brother.

I nod. "Now."



OPENING THE DOOR, ROBERTO LIFTS HIS CHIN. "HEY."

My younger brother has never been one to appreciate the need to look orderly. Even as consigliere to the boss of Cosa Nostra, he flits around in torn jeans and threadbare T-shirts. He hides behind the fact that he's stupid enough to spend hundreds of dollars on the mass-produced items targeted at

teens. He's lucky he's attractive enough that people look past his poor choice of clothing, distracted by the devious smile and eyes that belong to our late mother.

"Why don't you ever clean your apartment?" I close his front door behind me as I enter.

"My cleaner quit." He kicks dirty clothes out of his way as he moves back toward his living area.

Stuffing my hands into my pockets, I drift my gaze over his apartment and the empty take-out containers left strewn over his coffee table. "Why?"

He shrugs, dropping onto his couch. "She was a bitch."

"You tried to fuck her," I surmise.

He smirks, something vile passing through his eyes. "I didn't *try* anything."

Anger bubbles under my skin, and I wrap my fist around the coil of wire in my pocket. I force myself to let it go, angered at my lack of self-control with needing to bring it with me. I had myself convinced that I wouldn't be tempted, but right now, I want nothing more than to wrap it around his throat and watch blood rush into his eyes with the pressure, consequences be damned.

The problem with making a name for yourself in the underworld is that when you need to conduct business inconspicuously, you can't let your demons take over the way you need them to.

I drag my thumb over the wire one last time, removing my hands from my pockets.

"Clean it yourself," I scold.

He scoffs. "What do you want, Vincent?" he bites out, scowling at me. "I'm guessin' you didn't drop by to ridicule the cleanliness of my apartment."

"*Lack* of cleanliness," I correct, stepping farther into the apartment, my lips twisting in distaste as the smell of old food drifts under my nostrils.

“Warehouse drop was raided today.”

He won’t meet my eyes. “Shit.”

“Lorenzo has been trying to call you.” I massage the knuckles on my hands.

He lifts a shoulder. “Been busy.”

I fucking despise the lack of respect my younger brother holds. His position in the family has filled his head with a romantic notion that he’s important. Lorenzo pushed him into consigliere with the hope we could keep a closer eye on him. It was a mistake. The power climbed into his stupid fucking head.

I step into his line of sight, kicking at his foot. “Roberto.”

He looks up at me. “What?”

He glares at me with murder in his eyes. I imagine his thoughts of pain and death mirror mine. There is no love lost between us. Roberto’s problem is that I’m male, and he saves his fury for women. He’s a gutless villain with the face of Prince Charming. I should’ve killed him years ago.

“We were fucking raided. *Again*. That doesn’t concern you?” I push, working to get *any* kind of reaction from him. I want him to confess. I want him to at least *act* as though he gives a flying fuck.

“What do you want me to do about it?” he growls, lifting a cushion on his sofa to retrieve a packet of cigarettes.

“We have a rat,” I declare, watching the way his hand folds over the feeble packaging of his smokes, crushing it in his white-knuckled grip.

The advantage of being related to a sniveling, lying piece of shit is that I’ve been forced into spending enough time with him to decipher his tells. The micro movements in his face give his traitorous ass away. It’s how I knew he was double-crossing us. Too many fuckups pointed in his direction. Enzo and Leo didn’t want to believe it, but I knew. One look at his canary face, and I knew he was singing to save himself.

“Feds raid criminals. It happens. You’re reaching.” Roberto sighs, but his feign of disinterest is lost to the way his pupils expand. He holds my eyes for a second longer than necessary. He doesn’t blink, and his voice raises an octave. His body doesn’t move, and I can count his breaths with the up and down movement of his chest.

I crack my knuckles. I may not be able to strangle him, but no one said anything about leaving his face the way I found it. I’m readying myself to enjoy the blood I’m about to spill, but a knock sounds at his front door, thwarting my plan.

Locked in a stare, neither one of us strays from our trance of reproach.

The knock comes again, louder this time.

I pull my gaze away, ready to strangle the person on the other side of the door for interrupting Roberto’s unsuspecting atonement.

“Expecting someone?” I move toward the door.

Roberto stays put. “No.”

I lean toward the peephole, frowning immediately. “What the fuck is Bianca Rossi doing here?”

I’m tempted to push through the door and drag her from the building by her arm for dancing with the temptation of the devil. Why the fuck would she willingly stand in a room, *alone*, with Roberto? His character is well-known through the family, his lawless and disgusting treatment of women a beacon of warning to every female who crosses his path. Or so I thought.

Roberto sits up straight, a grin forming on his face. “Fuck if I know, but you can bet your pompous ass I’m gonna find out. Maybe daddy’s little diamond wants to get dirty. Fuck off outta sight.” He runs his hands through his hair.

It takes everything within me not to kill him right then and there. “Get rid of her,” I say, teeth clenched. “We haven’t finished talking.”

Standing at his front door, he waves me off, and I slide into his bathroom, making certain I don’t touch anything.

Bianca Rossi.

The woman who consumes every fucking salacious fantasy in my fucked-up head.

At only eighteen, she sparks something within me I thought nonexistent; infatuation and affection. Emotions I had happily avoided until her untimely arrival in my life. I'm a thirty-year-old man with orgiastic thoughts of a fucking teenager. I crave her to the point of obsession. She smiles, and I want to kill every man and woman in the vicinity for witnessing something she should save solely for me. I'm consumed by desire and bloodlust all at once, and I don't know what the fuck to do about it.

I left the bathroom door open a crack, but the sliver of space doesn't offer me the view of Bianca that I crave, yet I hold my ear to the gap, listening intently.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" my brother purrs, and I could imagine his slimy fingers sliding across her cheek in a caress that should cost him his hand.

"I want you to tell Lorenzo that you don't want Caterina." Her voice is strong, and if her request wasn't so absurd, pride would expand in my chest at her courage.

She's here to save her sister. *Fuck*. I'm consumed enough by her beauty. I don't need her integrity to possess me further.

Roberto's thick roll of laughter twists in my gut.

Armando Rossi came to Lorenzo, requesting a union between his youngest daughter and Roberto. The capo would lick Enzo's asshole if he demanded it, too eager to please, dignity be damned. Like many of the older family members, he believes Enzo and Roberto to be close based on my brother's position. Too consumed with Lorenzo's rise to power to consider Roberto as the burden he's always been. Lorenzo had agreed to Rossi's request, knowing that Bianca was being promised to Salvatore, keeping strength in our family was a priority. Armando cares very little for

Caterina's welfare. Roberto's nature isn't a secret; he's a predator, and Armando had delivered him a lamb on a silver fucking platter.

"I'll do anything," Bianca pleads.

She's begging for charity from a man who prides himself in malice. Her desperation will do nothing but entertain my younger brother. Weakness is his currency of choice, and Bianca has just dangled it in front of him in promise. He'll play with her for an eternity, enjoying watching her crack day by day as he strips the life from her sister with the ease of peeling an apple. Her romantic notion of safeguarding her sister has done nothing but solidify Caterina's life of hell.

"*Anything?*" Roberto rasps, reveling in the desperate lilt in the elder Rossi sister's voice.

"Yes," she answers, and it takes everything inside me not to barge into the room and kill Roberto for even hearing her offer of innocence.

"I *could* fuck you," Roberto threatens. "But while the family sees you as a prized possession, to me, the death of Caterina's soul is just *too* tempting of a gift to reject."

"*Please,*" she says, and even if Roberto hadn't betrayed the family, I'd kill him for making Bianca's voice weak when she is anything but.

"Maybe I'll have you both," he hums. "I'll slam inside you so *fucking* hard you'll bleed, your virgin cunt will cry rivers of red, Bianca, and then I'll use your innocence to lubricate my cock into your sister's virtuous pussy."

A soft cry falls from Bianca's mouth, and my stomach churns. I grind my teeth to stop the roar lodged in my throat from escaping. My palms are slick with sweat, and my head pounds.

"You're a pig," Bianca says. "You can have me *in place* of Caterina."

"No," Roberto answers.

She likely doesn't understand, but Bianca has made herself unappealing based on her willingness. My brother feeds off pain, and Caterina's will be

greater than her sister's.

"I'll tell everyone you fucked me anyway." Bianca shocks me by menacing. "I'll tell everyone we're in love. They'll kill you for deflowering me when I'm promised to the boss of the Outfit. Your betrayal will be unforgivable."

Roberto laughs. "You're a little girl. Don't fucking threaten me. Lorenzo isn't a fucking fool. He'll know the truth."

"Will he, though?" Bianca tests. "You have a *reputation*. Are you willing to bet your life on it?"

Silence ensues for a drawn-out beat, and hand to the door, I'm seconds away from leaving the confines of the bathroom, concerned for Bianca's safety, when I hear my brother's voice again.

"You're a cunt, and you bore me," Roberto bites. "Take your little games and find some other fucking mafioso to play with before I tell Lorenzo about your plan and have *you* killed. I'm a consigliere, and you're a sweet piece of pussy. You're replaceable, nothing but a pretty hole to fuck."

"When Lorenzo kills you." She sounds farther away, and I hold my breath, begging her to leave the fucking apartment before I'm forced to bring her into my plan for vengeance and have her witness one brother kill another. "I'll stand over your casket and spit on your face."

The apartment door slams, and my shoulders slump in relief. With a heavy exhale, I push my forehead against the doorjamb and pull my gun from its holster.

I exit the bathroom, my heart the picture of calm in the face of death.

Roberto is sitting back on the sofa. "Can you believe that cunt?" he says when he hears my approach.

I could shoot him in the back of the head. Avoid the need to look into his cold eyes ever again in life. I'd stare into them in death and let the relief of his departed soul feed my black heart for an eternity.

He turns when I don't speak, oblivious to the weapon in my hand. Red lipstick stains his mouth. My muscles tighten. He tasted her. He fucking *tasted* her.

"Fuck the raid on the warehouse," he spits. "Wait until Enzo hears about that cunt and her plan to undermine us all."

"Do you think he'll believe you?" I ask, moving around the sofa to face him.

Shooting him from behind no longer holds its shine. His eyes are already dead, and I long to see the fear on his face when he realizes his demise is imminent and at my hand, no less.

He opens his mouth to speak, but I lift a hand, pulling a silencer from my inner jacket pocket and securing it on my pistol.

Confusion pulls his eyebrows together. "Wh—"

"Will he believe you, *a rat*? Or, Bianca, the promise of peace with Chicago."

Understanding crosses his face. He doesn't move. "I had *no* choice."

"You always have a choice." I take aim.

"And this is yours?" He has the audacity to let a look of betrayal cross his face.

"No," I say. "My choice would be to strangle you and force you to suffer through a slow and painful death."

Roberto's jaw clenches, his Adam's apple moving with purpose.

"My choice would be to enjoy watching the capillaries in your eyes burst and fill with blood. I'd smile at the way your neck would discolor with the pressure of my bare fucking hands. I'd take you to the precipice of death and then let you breathe. You'd beg me to kill you. You'd cry for mercy, and I wouldn't fucking give it to you."

"Go on, then," he taunts. "Big, bad, *Necktie* Ferrari doesn't shoot people."

“This will have to satisfy my fantasies,” I respond, refusing to bite at his taunt. “Looking into your eyes as your life blinks away the moment my bullet pierces your skull.”

“We’re family.” He lifts his chin.

“You don’t know the meaning of the *fucking* word.” I pull the trigger, the bullet sailing through the air so fast I’ve barely registered the shot before he lays slumped on his sofa. Blood seeps from his forehead, and I walk away without a backward glance, climbing from the window and onto the fire escape, content that I eliminated a threat to my family, but with a new goal in mind.

“Is it done?” Enzo answers my call.

I jog down the stairs, holding my cell between my shoulder and ear as I reach the final ladder.

“Of course.” I readjust my suit as I jump down from the final rung of the ladder. “Second point of business, Bianca Rossi.”

“What about her?” he asks.

“I have a way to kill her union with Bianchi,” I tell him.

He coughs to clear his throat. “Why the fuck would I want to do that?”

“Because she’s mine.”

FIFTEEN



“You were there,” I accuse.
His palm cups my hip, sliding around to span my lower back.

“You killed Roberto.” My voice is soft under the pressure of his palm at my throat.

Panic is often defined with words such as fear and threat and harm. Panic wraps its claws around my heart, yet I don’t feel threatened, and I would bet the body Vincent holds tightly in his hands that he means no harm to me. If Vincent killed Roberto, that means he was there through my entire interaction with Roberto. He wouldn’t have had time to enter between me leaving and Tony arriving. He knows I’m a fraud. He has known this whole time. He heard me call his brother a rapist. He heard me threaten the very life he then chose to take. But why?

He pulls me into him. “You didn’t let Roberto touch you.”

My body feels like nothing. *Air*. Floating under Vincent’s fingers, unsure of the reality.

“No.” There is no point in lying further. He knows.

“You’re untouched.” His fingers flex at my back when he says these words.

“Yes.”

He groans. “You’ll be mine in every way.” His forehead presses into mine, and he breathes me in.

“Yes.”

“I told you,” he whispers. “I told you I would own you. Mind. Body. Soul. I told you that your darkest secrets would be mine.”

I cup his cheeks. “It seems you always had them.”

“But I needed you to *want* me to have them.” He releases my neck, dragging his palm down my sternum. “Only then would you belong to me the way I need you to.”

“How do I need to belong to you, *tesoro*?”

“Willingly.”

His lips crash to mine, and I cry into his mouth, the desperate need in his kiss enough to have me clawing at his shoulders, needing more.

My husband has just claimed ownership over my entire being, but I’ve never felt more free. I wed Vincent *without* secrets weighing me down. He knew them, and he chose me despite them. He saved my life even knowing I was lying to him.

“I’m fucking starving, *dolcezza*. Only I have no intention of eating what you’ve prepared. I’m going to feast on you. I’m going to lay you down on this table and lick your cunt until you scream for me to stop. Only then will I bury my cock inside you and claim you the way I’ve fantasized about for years.”

“*Vinnie*,” I breathe. “I love you.”

“You fucking better, Bianca, because every inch of you belongs to me, and I plan to keep you forever.”

Hand to the nape of my neck, he bends, sliding an arm under my ass to lift me. I go willingly, wrapping my legs around his waist. Sliding his free arm along the concrete table—the plates, glasses, and cutlery I had carefully laid out fly to the floor in a shatter of impatience.

My ass to the table, he pushes me down with his body, lips never leaving mine as he plasters my back against the solidity of the structure.

He leaves soft kisses over my jaw and down my neck. He licks my nipples and bites the soft touch of my stomach. He inhales when he drags his nose down my center, dropping to his knees with a vulgar growl.

He doesn't hesitate to kiss my clit, sucking it between his lips and letting it go with a small *pop*.

Index and middle finger sliding over my slit, he pushes my lips apart, humming against my clit in appreciation. Now on show, he licks her over and over again with soft strokes that have me swelling beneath his tongue. My hips lift from the table, seeking greater contact. Vincent hums his approval as I undulate my hips, pushing myself farther into his face.

"Vinnie, you feel so good."

"Taste like the only heaven I'll ever have access to." He slides a hand up my chest, pinching my right nipple.

He slides two fingers inside me, and I pull my hips back at the unexpected intrusion.

He growls, and I push back.

"Good girl. Fuck my fingers while I wrap my tongue around your clit."

He stretches me, thick fingers curving upward to massage my inner walls, tongue dragging across my clit in slow, tantalizing strokes that have my hips rolling.

He sucks on my clit, sliding his fingers out before adding a third to glide back in. I whimper at how full I feel.

"Baby, if you think three fingers are thick, wait until I'm opening you up with my cock."

I stretch my legs wider, my hand fisting in Vincent's hair. He growls against me, and I lift my ass, pushing my center against his face.

He hums his praise. "Be a good little whore, Bianca. Come on my face and fingers, let's get that sweet cunt ready for my cock."

I tip over the edge of ecstasy. I scream out his name, every muscle in my body tensing as fireworks explode within me.

His lips are on mine before I've realized his hands and mouth are no longer on my pussy, and I welcome the warm touch of his tongue. Hands holding him close, I'm overcome with need, with lust, with *passion*. Every part of me aches for *more*.

More Vincent.

My vision is blurry, my body is shaking, my heart is racing, and with his body pressed against mine, Vincent only seems to intensify the feeling.

"Vinnie," I beg. "Let me see you." I drag my fingers over his abdomen, pulling at the buttons of his dress shirt impatiently.

His hands leave my body, gripping his shirt in the middle and tearing it open without a breath of hesitation. Buttons scatter to the floor, and my breathing catches.

"As much as I'm going to fucking cherish this moment, I cannot wait until I can fuck you hard, baby. I'll leave your body bruised and used, and you'll love every fucking second of it."

Crossing my ankles around his back, I pull him in closer.

One hand working his belt, he rests the other above my pussy, his thumb drawing soft circles over my clit, making my body jerk with the need for more.

"*Fuck*, she's pretty, baby. Swollen and glistening, she's *begging* for me."

"Yes," I moan.

He pushes at his pants and boxers, freeing the part of his body I've been craving inside me. His dick stands long and hard, thick veins coursing underneath the smooth line of skin leading up to his flared tip.

I've tasted him in my mouth and held him in my hand, but I've craved the kiss of him deep inside me since the day we wed.

His thumb continues its ministrations as he edges the head of his cock closer to my entrance.

I imagined losing my virginity would be this huge moment. I expected to feel nervous and apprehensive. I wholeheartedly believed I'd have no feelings for my husband and that I would close my eyes to grin and bear the pain. This moment with Vincent is so much more. There's no pressure, just two consenting adults whose attraction has manifested into an unbridled need to touch. It isn't a planned-out event drenched in expectation. I love the man above me, muscles tense with coiled need. He cares about my pleasure. More, he seems to *crave* it.

"The way you look at me, Bianca, you make me feel like a good man, a deserving man."

"You are," I tell him, reaching for him.

He comes willingly, and I kiss his lips.

"You're the best man I know."

He groans.

"You're honorable and loyal. More than I ever could have wished for."

"Bianca." He kisses me again, pushing inside me. "You have no idea how many times I've thought of this moment."

He stretches me, pausing whenever I tense to kiss me. He kisses me until I melt into him, my body relaxing enough for him to continue forward. When he's fully sheathed, I can feel the ache of how he's spreading me open, my body unaccustomed to such an intrusion. But it's not as agonizing as others have warned me. It's pleasurable, the dull throb only adding another layer of sensation.

"Fuck, baby, you're so goddamn tight." There's a rapture in his tone that lets me know he likes it, that he's delirious with the snug fit of my untouched pussy.

"You feel so good," I tell him.

“Mm,” he moans, drawing out of me slowly and pushing back in unhurriedly.

Hands to my inner thighs, he pushes them down, opening me up and watching where we connect. Eyes fixated on the way his cock pulls in and out of my body. “Fuck, that looks good. My dick coated in you. *In and out.*”

“*Vinnie,*” I whimper.

He looks up, eyes half mast, the corner of his lips tipped up in a sexy smirk. Everything inside me clenches.

“Good, wife?”

My back arches in response.

I never imagined it to be this way. Vincent holds me open, driving into me both animalistic and tender. The corded lines of his neck are intricate with the restraint he’s imposing on himself. He wants to let go, but the considerate lover in him refrains.

He watches himself move in and out of my body with worship and delirium. Eyes hooded, he bites his bottom lip, removing a rough hand from one of my thighs to thumb my clit. He rubs it in slow circles in time with his thrusts.

“Fuck,” he grunts softly. “Baby,” he grinds. “Perfect,” he praises.

“*Vinnie,*” I call out, his name trailing a surprised moan.

He looks up, pupils dilated so deeply I’m lost in the wolffish gray of his eyes.

“I love you.”

He slams his hips forward, pulling me onto his cock in one final thrust as he explodes inside me. I feel him throb, and I clench, wanting to hold on to the feeling.

“*Fuck,*” he snarls, the single syllable and guttural breath he lets go of easily.

He rolls his hips, completely sheathed by my heat, and I arch into the bite of pain the small movement causes.

I'm floating. Soaring through the waves of pleasure and peace wracking my body.

Leaning over me, still buried inside, Vincent kisses me softly. "Next time, you'll come with me inside."

I smile into his kiss.

"Let's shower," he murmurs, dropping tender, chaste kisses on my lips.

I shake my head.

He pulls back, watching me curiously.

"I've waited so long for you to take me like that. I want to sleep with your cum inside me."

He jerks inside me, and I moan.

"*Fuck*, Bianca." His eyes close, jaw tensing.

"That upsets you?"

"*Fuck* no." He pulls me up until our chests are pressed together, our hearts beating as one. "It makes me *need* to fuck you again, and you're sore."

SIXTEEN



My eyes flash open, and I blink, adjusting to the dark. My hand reaches out automatically. Vincent isn't beside me, but his side of the bed is warm to the touch.

We fell asleep with tangled limbs what feels like only minutes ago.

We didn't speak of the grenade that exploded between us before Vincent claimed me completely.

Vincent was there the day I visited his brother.

Vincent killed his brother.

The knowledge should repulse and frighten me, but it doesn't. In fact, something is hauntingly poetic about the reality we both were aiming for his brother. We were a pair before we realized it.

I pull my hand under the comforter, cupping myself in the privacy of the bed. I clench my pelvic floor, the tender jolt of pain forcing my teeth into my lip in recollection.

Wow.

My first time was everything I could have wished for. It was unexpected and passionate and shared with someone I *love*. The words tumbled out of my mouth last night, and I didn't want to take them back. They were real, and they belonged with him, not kept within the uncertain crevices of my mind. He didn't say it back, but I hadn't expected him to.

The soft rumble of his voice forces me up onto my elbows, and I listen intently, trying to hear him.

He's speaking quietly, and I shift farther down the bed. He speaks again, but his distance muffles the words. I press my feet to the plush carpet, standing as silently as I can. I step slowly toward the bedroom door.

"Gabriella"—Vincent sighs—"sweetheart, I'll work it out. My life is complicated at the moment. I just need you to stop causing problems. I'm doing the best I can. Stop forcing my hand."

Gabriella. Sweetheart.

He's on his phone, that much I can gather. A feminine voice is scarcely audible as *Gabriella* speaks.

"I'm not keeping you a secret. Fuck. It was all unexpected and caught me off guard. I'm not sure what to feel about it all."

What was unexpected? Me?

"I'll see you tomorrow, okay? We'll have lunch. Somewhere quiet and just the two of us. You need to get some sleep."

His feet move toward the bedroom door, padding up the stairs with lazy intent.

"I know what I promised you, and I meant every word. Always, Gabriella."

I tiptoe toward the bathroom, spinning on my heel at the door to shuffle back toward the bed as he pushes open the door, cell halfway from his ear as he disconnects.

He pauses on the threshold of the room. "What are you doing?"

"Peeing." I move toward the bed, dragging my feet more than necessary for emphasis. "Why are you awake?"

His gaze tracks over my naked body, eyes hooded with lust. "Work phone call." He lifts his cell.

I could press him for the truth. I could yell and cuss and demand he confess who *Gabriella* is and *why* he has promised to see her tomorrow. But

he would lie. I know that. He expects honesty, and up until this moment, I believe he has returned it to the best of his ability. He assured me there was no one else. He looked me in the eye and promised me there were no other women. Catching him in his lie will be the only way I'll pry the truth from him.

"Mm." I yawn. "Always on call. I guess I should take comfort in the fact that you're an advisor now. No need to run out on me at all hours to bloody your hands."

"I have no problem getting my hands bloody, Bianca."

A snort of laughter puffs from my nostrils as I settle back into bed, pulling Vincent's pillow into my body.

He moves toward the armchair in our room.

"What did you have Heather do with my wedding dress?"

"Nothing," he answers easily.

"What did you do with my wedding dress?" I try again.

He waits a beat before speaking. "I threw most of it in the trash. If you think so little of it, why should I treat it with any respect?"

I roll my eyes to myself. "Most of it?" I test.

"Mm."

I sigh. "Care to enlighten me on where you keep *the rest of it*?"

He taps a ringed finger against the buttons of the armchair. "I keep it in my office."

"For what purpose?"

A soft growl rolls up his throat, and I feel it right between my thighs.

"For the purpose of wrapping around my cock when I fuck my own hand thinking about you."

I was *not* expecting that.

"*What?*" I breathe.

"I wouldn't let myself fuck you for months. I needed the reprieve," he rasps. "I'd think about all the ways I wanted to violate you in that pretty

dress. The ways I'd dishonor you with my dirty fucking. The sinful ways I'd make you cry my name."

"Oh."

He laughs lightly. "Does that make your pussy wet?"

Yes, I want to scream, *even though you're a lying, cheating asshole.*

"You're not tired?" I murmur, inhaling his scent and ignoring the depressive reality that even if Vincent is unfaithful, I have no choice but to accept the farce that my marriage is. I'm a Mafia wife. Divorcing your husband isn't achievable.

But I won't accept his infidelity lying down.

I'll fight. He holds affection for me. He may not love me, but he'll treat me with respect. I'll demand it.

I want to cry at the realization that my mother was right. Will my only option be to request he cheat respectfully?

"Come sit on my cock, Bianca."

My eyes widen, shock flipping me onto my back. "What?"

"You heard me. Let me show you how good riding my hard cock feels."

Every thought powering through my mind ceases immediately, lust consuming me in a way that has me sitting up.

He groans quietly, tipping his head back, the rough sound catching in his throat. "*Fuck*. You're always so eager. Promise me you'll stay that way forever, hungry for my cock like the greedy little whore I need you to be."

The way he speaks to me. I push my ass into the mattress, the pressure relieving the buildup pooling below my stomach.

"Don't fuck the bed. *Fuck me.*"

I push myself upward, my feet moving quickly, removing the space between us. His cock is out, grasped tightly in his hand. I watch him pump it, his eyes set on mine. "You're as obsessed with my cock as I am with your cunt."

I nod, caught in the trance of the upward drag of his large palm.

“Straddle me.”

I do as he says, planting my knees on either side of his legs.

“Lower yourself onto my cock.”

I drop down, unable to rip my gaze from his.

His erection nudges my entrance, and I suck in a sharp breath.

“You’ll be so wet inside, my cum still stuffed inside you.”

My stomach clenches, and I dip down farther, swallowing his crown into my body.

He hisses, hand releasing the base of his cock to grab both of my hips.

“Slide down slowly,” he instructs, and I follow his direction, whimpering at the way he spreads me open.

Pussy flush with his pelvis, he groans with gratification. “Do that again. Up slowly. Down slowly.”

I push up, thighs shaking with the effort to keep a lazy pace.

His fingertips press into my hips. I move to lift again, but he stops me. Instead, he pulls my hips forward and then pulls them back.

I copy the movement.

“Roll them, *yeah*,” he hums. “Like that.” A thick groan rolls through his body. “*Good girl.*”

Our lips don’t touch, but I feel his softly spoken praise whispered against my mouth, and I swallow it all eagerly.

“Mix it up,” he guides. “Fuck me, baby. Use my body. Make yourself feel good.”

Planting my hands on his shoulders, I circle my hips, my body rolling in tender waves. He licks at my nipples when they move toward his mouth.

I hate him. I love him. I never want to let him go.

“You fuck good, little whore.”

I move a hand to the side of his throat, nails digging in at his nape.

His breathing is jagged with sharp exhales that trail off on thick restrained groans of pleasure.

I stare into his eyes, and he stares back. I demand his secrets with the undulation of my hips, but he denies me with hard upward thrusts every time I hit where we both need it most.

“Your pussy is throbbing,” he tells me. “You ready to come for me?”

I moan. “Yes.”

“Good girl. Come on me, and I’ll fill you up.”

My hips move faster, racing toward the finish line with a desperate need to shatter.

“I’m close, Bianca,” Vincent slurs, his climax claiming him easily.

“*Vinnie*,” I cry, his name drawn out, my body trembling with the intensity of my orgasm.

Vincent follows moments after, pulling me tightly to his body, groaning my name on his release.

I fall against his body, face tucked into his neck, my body slick with sweat.

He releases my hips, sliding his hands over my lower back and onto my ass, pulling my hips closer still.

I whimper, and he hums, the sound blissfully satisfied.

“Are you on birth control?” he asks, trailing his fingers up and down my spine.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“You don’t want kids?”

His fingers pause. “I’ve never thought about it.”

“Any possibility of an illegitimate child that will come knocking?”

He laughs. “No, Bianca.”

Okay, so scratch Gabriella being a child he was hiding from the world.

“Do you want kids?” he asks curiously.

I sit back, twirling the stray lock of hair over his forehead around my finger. “I do. But only if I can bring them into a happy, faithful marriage.”

He lifts a brow, a smile mixed with amusement and confusion tipping the right side of his mouth upward. “Maybe we should try the dog first.”

I pull my hand from his hair, disappointed in his response. “Mm,” I agree distractedly. “Maybe.”

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SEVENTEEN



The next morning, I wake early. I wash my hair, blowing it out and straightening it into a sleek line down my back. I apply my makeup with purpose, painting my lips bright red. Running my tongue over my teeth, I smile at myself in the mirror, appreciating my handiwork.

I walk from my bathroom, my chin high with determination. The dress I had chosen earlier lays on my bed, and I pull it up my body. The tight-fitting maxi fits my body like a glove, gripping my curves with salacious intent. I readjust my breasts, plumping them enough to showcase my cleavage. Brushing the curtain of my hair back over my shoulders, I look at myself in the mirror, smirking. Sliding my feet into a similarly colored pump, I grab my apple green trench coat and whisk from my room.

“Dolcezza,” Vincent purrs. “You better be wearing that fucking dress for me and no one else.”

I kiss his lips, a drawn-out push of my mouth against his in promise. “I’ll take that as you telling me I look beautiful.”

He looks down at me with his wolf-like eyes on guard. “You always look beautiful. You’re a fucking temptress right now. Where are you going?” He drags a hand over my backside, squeezing it in appreciation.

“I thought we could have lunch together today. You never take me out.”

His hand drops away from my body.

“What?” I ask innocently.

“I can’t today. What about dinner?”

I let my shoulders deflate. “But I got all dressed up for you.”

His eyes trail over my body, nostrils flaring with desire. “I can appreciate that any way you like before I leave.”

I frown. “Vinnie.”

“It’s important, baby.”

“Work?” I test.

“Hm.”

“I can’t come with you?”

His eyebrows pull together. “It’s at the club. Best you don’t come there.”

Trix has never mentioned a Gabriella in our conversations. I haven’t seen her in months, though. My temper flares at the thought of Trixie, and I swallow my animosity, my focus on his lies.

“Okay.” I step from his touch. “I’ll call Cat and see if she’s free.”

Whoever Gabriella is, she’s more important than me, and I hate the way that cuts into my heart.

“Baby, don’t look so hurt.” He cups my cheek, and it takes everything within me not to push him away.

I shake my head, forcing a smile. “I’m not hurt. I understand.”

He steps into me, lifting my chin. “Dinner tonight?” He kisses me softly.

“Okay.”

“Good girl. Make sure Andre is with you wherever you go.”

I nod. “Of course.”

“And wear that fucking coat. I don’t want to have to shoot someone today for looking at you,” he yells over his shoulder as he exits our apartment.

I stare at the elevator, thinking of all the ways that I'd like to cause him bodily harm. *Fucking liar.*

Texting Andre, I ask him to pick me up in half an hour, busying myself by making coffee while I wait.

I hand Andre a coffee as I fold into the car.

"Ah, Mrs. Ferrari, you're too kind to me."

"Andre," I sigh. "Please. Vincent isn't here. Call me Bianca."

He smirks. "If you say so, Mrs. Ferrari. Where to today?"

I shoot off the address, and Andre turns in his seat, coffee half-forgotten at his lips. "Bianca?"

"Yes?"

"I don't know if that's a good idea."

"I didn't ask your opinion, Andre."

He's taken aback by the bite in my tone, but I don't apologize.

"Mr. Ferrari will have my head."

"As he will if I'm forced to call an Uber."

He breathes through his nostrils. "You fight dirty, Mrs. Ferrari." He pulls the car away from the curb.

Pulling outside my father's *club*, I scowl at the inconspicuous building.

"It's not too late to change your mind."

I look at Andre, panic carved into his face.

"It's fine, Andre. Calm down. I just need to check something, and then I'll be back. Can you see Vincent's car?"

He shakes his head. "His car was parked in the lot when I picked you up."

I fall back into my seat, a huff of surprise escaping. "It was? He left before me."

"Maybe he was picked up?" he suggests. "What are you looking for in there?" He lifts his chin in the direction of the building.

I shrug. “I don’t know, but I don’t like being lied to, Andre. I may have been forced into marriage, but I won’t be made a fool of.”

He drops his eyes, but I catch the slice of pride that cuts through them. “I’ll be here.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, opening the car door to step onto the sidewalk.

Steadying my breath, I tighten my coat around my waist, stuffing my shaking hands into my pockets.

The club is dark inside, the entryway lined with large framed pictures of the naked silhouette of women. A soft thrum of music fills the space. It smells of a dirty touch of vanilla and excess cleaning products, and my nose pinches in distaste.

“Honey, we’re closed.”

I look at the tiny woman flicking papers at the front desk, her eyes casting me a look of curiosity before focusing back on her paperwork.

I walk past her. “Not to me, you’re not.”

She chases after me, a snort of disbelief hitting my back. “*Excuse me.*”

I push open the door into the actual club to a sight I’d like to bleach from my eyeballs. A naked woman—not much older than me—gyrating her hips on my father’s lap, his face in her tits.

“Stop!” the girl from the front yells, pulling my father’s attention.

“Bianca,” he bellows, tapping the dancer’s ass for her to move. She does so without delay. “What are you doing here?”

He looks incredulous but not in the least bit embarrassed or concerned that I caught him mid lap dance at ten in the morning.

“Where’s Vincent?” I keep walking, looking around the room for signs of my lying husband.

“He’s not here.”

I roll my eyes. “Because you’d really tell me if he were.” I move toward the back, where the private rooms are.

My father grabs my arm, and I whirl on him, my temper on high alert.

“Leave,” he snarls.

I yank at my arm, but he holds it tight. I don’t let the discomfort of his touch show. “I suggest you let go of my arm before I tell my *husband* you put your hands on me,” I threaten.

His eyes bulge with rage, but he lets me go, and I continue down the hallway.

“I’m calling your husband. He can put his fucking hands on you for being so blatantly disrespectful,” my father yells, and his threat gives me pause. Why would he call Vincent if he isn’t here?

I push open the doors to the private rooms anyway, not trusting my father not to lie, finding them empty. It’s early, so most of the girls have not yet arrived for their shifts. Except my father’s pet of course.

I barge into the main office, finding Leo sitting at my father’s desk, legs splayed open as a woman, dressed only in a thong and stilettos, sucks his dick.

“Oh.” I startle at the sight, my cheeks heating instantaneously.

I take a step back, and Leo smirks at me. “Bianca,” he greets. “I’d offer you to join in, but I’d like to save my throat from the damage *Necktie* would inflict if I did.”

Movement in the corner of the room forces my gaze away from the sight before me, and I’m equal parts thankful and embarrassed, both emotions lost to shock as I watch a man, bound, gagged, and tied to a chair, struggle against his restraints. Blood covers most of his face, bruising covering the slivers of skin not yet stained by blood. He yells and screams through the rag tied over his mouth.

“Umm...” I look at the ground, exhaling deeply.

The woman on her knees doesn’t even pause in her efforts, the wet slurp of her tongue piercing the air.

I forced my way into the club with intention. I had a goal, but the scene playing out before me has me flailing in powerful channels of uncertainty

and unease. My motive is dying, and I roll my shoulders, attempting to erase my thoughts and claim it back.

I glance at the man in the corner again. He mumbles something inaudible, likely a plea for help, but I ignore him. He is not my problem.

Leo groans in pleasure, and I grimace. “Beau here thought he could paint Crystal’s skin black and blue. He’s a weak piece of shit. Isn’t that right, Beau?”

Beau remains silent, and my fists clench in unrest, knowing, without prior experience, that silence is the wrong answer.

Beau drops his head, further disrespecting the underboss. Leo lifts his gun, taking aim at his captive’s crown. “Lift your head, *pompinara*.”

Cocksucker.

Leo slurs his words, from pleasure or anger, I can’t tell. Likely both.

The man lifts his head.

“Answer me.” Leo thrusts his hips upward. “You’re a weak piece of shit, correct?”

Beau nods, and Leo smiles.

“It’s important for me to teach men like this a lesson,” Leo tells me. “We take care of our girls, isn’t that right, baby?”

Crystal hums around Leo’s cock, and I look at the ceiling.

“A lesson?” I ask, regretting my decision to speak immediately.

“Beau here *was* Crystal’s boyfriend, but he doesn’t like the word no.” Leo’s eyes spark with mirth when I look at him again.

My scowl turns on the bloodied man in the room.

“Before he dies,” Leo continues, “I thought he should be gifted the vision of his girl swallowing my cock to take with him into hell.”

I’m shocked into silence, my thoughts having deserted me and my body frozen in place.

“Crystal, honey, I’m gonna blow. Pull back so I can spray it over Beau’s face. It’s only right that he has a memorable last meal.”

Crystal does as instructed, and I duck my head as Leo moves toward Beau, his hand running over his hard cock in quick movements.

“Rot in hell, asshole,” he groans, and my curiosity gets the better of me. I lift my head, watching as Leo grabs Beau's hair, forcing his head into position as he ejaculates over his bloodied face with a devilish smile.

My mouth falls open in shock.

“Crystal, head outta here, honey. He won't bother you again.” Leo pushes Beau's face away, and the man begins to cry.

“Thanks, Leo,” Crystal whispers, pushing past me and disappearing out of sight.

Tucking himself back into his pants, Leo fastens his belt. “You're outta line being here, Bianca.” He turns his attention to me, moving back toward the desk to retrieve his gun. “Vincent isn't here, but he'll be raging that you are.”

I turn on my heel and walk away before I can bear witness to what I have no doubt is about to ensue, ignoring Leo's veiled threat.

In the main room, my father sits on a stool, wearing a scowl on his face. “You stupid girl.”

A single gunshot echoes through the club, and I force my face to remain unaffected. “Tell me where Vincent is,” I demand, ignoring the fact that I just witnessed something I'd very much like to remove from my memory bank.

“Bianca?”

I turn toward Trixie's voice, her feet slowing as she moves into the room with uncertain steps.

I see red. Hate and anger and betrayal consume every inch of my body. She was supposed to be my friend. She was supposed to protect me the best she could.

She wasn't supposed to try to fuck my husband.

“You fucking bitch,” I spit, and before I can even consider what I’m doing, I launch myself at her, pushing her to the ground.

“What?” she breathes, grunting in pain as her back hits the ground with a heavy thud.

“You fucking lying, whore bitch,” I scream, straddling her hips to pin her to the ground.

Every frustration I hold within me manifests itself in a need to harm this woman for her and Vincent’s disloyalty. I can’t punish him, but I can her. “You tried to fuck him.”

“I—”

“My brother isn’t enough for you?” I pull at her hair, making her yelp in pain. “You needed my husband too? What about my dad? Have you tried to fuck him too?” I grab her head, slamming it into the seedy carpet.

She chokes on her own spit, grabbing at my wrists. “I did it for *you*.”

“For me?” I screech, slapping her face.

She’s stronger than I thought, arching her leg and flipping me onto my back in one easy movement.

I cough at the impact.

“I wanted to make sure he wasn’t going to hurt you.”

“Hurt me? Hurt me?” I scream, kicking my legs and wriggling in an attempt to free myself.

“Calm down,” she cries.

“In what world would fucking my husband help me?” I scratch her face. “You fucking slut. I could kill you. *He’s mine*. You don’t touch him. You don’t fucking touch him,” I shriek.

She slaps me, infuriating me further. Forearm to my neck, she pushes me down. “Bianca, I did—” She screams out in shock, flying backward by the bristling anger of my husband.

Vincent helps me up, and I yank my hand from his the moment I’m on my feet.

I charge at Trixie again, but Vincent steps into my path, and I fall into his chest with a grunt.

“Stop,” he growls, the sound bristling with an anger that clenches his teeth.

I wipe at my face, blood trickling from the corner of my lip from the force in which she slapped me.

Vincent watches me until he’s certain I’m not going to attack again.

My chest heaves as I glance around the room; Leo, Enzo, Andre, my father, and Trixie caught in the space of unease.

Turning to Trixie, Vincent points at the door. “You’re fired. Grab your shit and leave.”

“What?” Trixie breathes.

“You slapped my wife. You’re lucky I don’t shoot you right where you fucking stand,” he grits out, his threat one-hundred-percent real.

“*She attacked me,*” she balks.

“I don’t give a fuck if she carved your heart out with fucking witnesses. You do not touch my fucking wife,” he bellows, neck corded in a rage so potent, I take a step back.

“Armando.” She turns to my father.

“You were told to leave.” Enzo leans lazily against the bar, eyes watching on in bored indifference.

Trixie waits only a beat longer, grabbing her bag from the ground with a mumbled curse and storming toward the exit.

“If I ever hear you’re running your mouth,” Enzo calls after her. “I’ll let Leo here loose with his knife, am I understood?”

“Crystal,” she bites, pushing from the room with the click of her heels echoing in the entryway before they disappear completely.

I stand among the scariest men I know. Men who would kill a man and shoot them again for the inconvenience of splattering blood on their tailored suits. I duck my head, suddenly unsure of my actions. Vincent is carving

out a new side to me, one I don't necessarily hate, but I fear it will find me more trouble than pleasure.

Leather loafers slide into my view of the carpet. My eyes remain downcast.

"You are lucky I hold such respect for your husband," Enzo burrs. "You are pushing me too far, Bianca. You have disrespected my authority twice now. I would kill another for the same indiscretions without pausing to breathe. Next time, my gun chamber will have one less bullet. Am I understood?"

I nod. "Yes."

"Vincent—" Enzo says, but Vincent cuts him off.

"It'll be dealt with."

Enzo watches me for a beat before turning away. He lifts his chin in the direction of the office, Leo and my father following his exit.

Vincent waits until they're out of sight before turning to me. His chest heaves with angered breaths.

"Come here," he speaks over my shoulder, and I move to step forward, but he places a hand up at me, stopping me.

Andre ambles past me, and I suck in a sharp breath.

"Don't," Vincent warns, eyes slicing to me in warning.

I cross my arms around my waist, adding enough pressure to stop my insides from attempting to exit my stomach cavity.

"I want to kill you for bringing her here," Vincent ponders, the lethal touch of his voice making my jaw shake. "But, if it weren't you, she would've defied me further by climbing into a fucking Uber. Next time, you call me. Am I understood?"

I hadn't considered the ramifications for Andre, and guilt twists in my stomach.

"Yes, sir," Andre answers.

"My wife is hurt because of something you had a hand in."

Andre nods, and within a blink, Vincent's fist meets Andre's nose with a deafening crunch.

I gasp in horror.

"Next time, I will kill you. Now leave."

Andre walks from the club, winking at me in assurance as he passes me.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, watching him leave.

Alone with Vincent, I refuse to look at him.

"Hiding behind your hair again."

I lift my head.

"Ah, there she is." He steps closer. He grabs my jaw, squeezing it. "I'm so fucking mad at you."

"I'm mad at you."

His lips twist. "Why are you here, Bianca?"

"Looking for you."

His eyes close over in irritation. "I told you I was working."

"You lied."

He squeezes my cheeks, my lips pushing forward. "Enzo thinks I can't control you." He kisses my lips.

"I can't be controlled."

"You made me look like a fucking fool, Bianca," he grits through the clench of his jaw.

"You're *making* me a fool," I retort.

He frowns.

"Who is Gabriella?"

His hands fall away from my face, curling into a fist. "No one."

"You lie."

He doesn't respond.

"Are you fucking her?"

His head shakes with an exasperated sigh. "No."

"Why should I believe you?"

“Because I’m telling you the fucking truth.”

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EIGHTEEN



“*Y*ou’re still mad.”

He shifts in his seat.

My lip has stopped bleeding, but I dart my tongue out, running it across the small cut, tasting the dried blood. “*How* mad?”

He ignores me.

“You and Enzo are close.” I try a different tactic.

“You should be grateful. You’d be worm food otherwise.” His jaw tics. “He’s the brother I never had.”

“Why didn’t he make you second-in-command?”

He clears his throat. “It would’ve been disrespectful to Leonardo.”

“Why not make you consigliere then?”

He sighs. “Roberto could not be trusted. As an enforcer, he would have too much freedom for pain. He would have been our undoing. As Lorenzo’s advisor, we could watch him closely.”

Roberto could not be trusted.

“Will you tell me why you killed Roberto?”

“Jesus, *fuck*,” he breathes.

We left the club in silence, but the same sound in the confines of his car rings in my ears enough to steal my breath. “After last night, I thought maybe you’d volunteer the information yourself, but you haven’t and...”

He rubs the base of one of his rings on his steering wheel, checking his blind spot before changing lanes. We're only minutes from home, and he still hasn't told me who Gabriella is.

"We need to get some ice on your face. She hit you pretty hard."

I shrug. "I don't care."

"I do."

"You were there when I was speaking with Roberto?" I try again.

He pulls into our parking garage. "Yes."

"Where?"

"The bathroom," he answers quietly.

"Did Roberto know you were there?"

"Yes," he answers.

"Were you there to kill him?"

"Yes."

I sigh in irritation. "While I appreciate the one-word fucking responses over being ignored completely, I'd like *answers*."

"You don't demand answers from me, *dolcezza*."

He parks, and I open my car door, watching his irritation flare. "Why are you allowed to own all my secrets and I none of yours?"

Climbing from his car, he follows me to the elevator, three steps behind me, hands stuffed into his pockets as we walk. He holds the elevator door with an open palm, waiting until I'm inside before stepping in after me. He edges past, brushing his shoulder against mine.

Standing in the corner of the suffocating box, he watches me intently in the reflection.

I stare back.

Everything about the way I feel for Vincent Ferrari is nonsensical. From the sexual needs he's birthed into life, to a want, a *need* to please him, to the possessive way in which I want to claim his heart and soul, to the way he's claimed mine.

The elevator doors open, and caught in my thoughts, I don't move. Vincent steps forward, his chest flush against my back, his palm reaching out to hold the door from closing. "Move, Bianca."

Walking into our apartment, I stand at the threshold of our living room, watching him expectantly.

He shucks his jacket, tossing it over the back of the couch. Hands in his pocket, his eyes travel over my face, stopping at my lip where it throbs. "You were never supposed to know I was there."

He moves into the kitchen, pulling a bag of peas from the freezer. I go to him.

Placing the bag gently against my lip, he sighs. "But I wouldn't take you before you admitted you'd never touched my brother. I wanted what we shared to be real. I wanted you to know that everything you had to offer was mine and *only* mine. But you wouldn't fucking admit it. You're even stronger than I thought you to be."

"You told me your darkest secret so you could fuck me?" My hand drops from my face, the bag of peas hanging loosely at my side.

He lifts my arm, placing the frozen bag against my face once again. "I didn't tell you, you assumed."

I scoff.

Confident that my hand has hold of the peas, he drops his. "Do you know how hard it was to deny you time and time again? Every time you begged me to fuck you, I was so close to giving in, to claiming your virginity, pretending I didn't know it was mine."

He moves me toward the living area, and I go without resistance.

"Sit."

I drop down onto the sofa.

He kneels before me, pulling my heels from my feet and placing them neatly beside me. "*Months* I waited. Fucking months where I'd sit in our

room fantasizing about fucking you into consciousness and then fucking you back to sleep when I'd had my fill."

He tucks my hair behind my ears.

"It made me fucking furious that you even *claimed* he touched you. That fucking evil little snake. I was so fired up with rage when you turned up at his home."

I can't speak. I can't find words as he confesses his soul to me, letting me claim him in a way I never imagined he would.

"Do you know what would've happened if I hadn't been there, Bianca? Do you know what he would have *done* to you?"

I gulp. "I was willing to live with those consequences. For Cat."

He looks pained by my confession. The hypothetical consequence was too much for him to bear.

"I'd always wanted you. *Privately*. Before you had spared me a second glance. I craved you in my darkest thoughts, but that day, I knew I had to have you. I knew you would never belong to Salvatore because you were already mine."

"*Vinnie*." I never imagined being who I was that I'd ever be worshipped the way Vincent so clearly does. He wanted me before he knew me. He placed me on a pedestal before I knew I'd already claimed his heart.

"I would have started an all-out war for you with the Outfit if I had to. I would have killed Salvatore to stop him from claiming you."

My eyes water.

"I went to Roberto's with the knowledge that he'd die. I didn't realize I'd want so badly to look him in the eye when I took his life."

I place the bag of peas on the couch.

"You were so brave. So fierce in the eye of danger. He could have killed you. Your plan could have failed. What were you thinking?"

"If Roberto took my innocence, Tony would have killed him. That was our plan. Tony would have protected my *honor*, and I would claim Berto

and I were in love,” I spit, the lie sour on my tongue. “I’d save Cat. I was confident she would be the one to take my place with Salvatore. I had to do it,” I implore. “Cat’s safety was more important.”

“Than yours?” he beseeches.

“Yes,” I answer easily.

“Not to me.”

“Why did you kill him?” I ask.

“He touched you.”

I remember the way his brother’s hands had felt along my body. The bitter taste of his breath on my face. The acid touch of his lips on mine. I was certain he would take what I was offering. I was certain I had fed myself to the lion’s den, which was the plan all along. But standing there, knowing the way Roberto was going to hurt me, everything within screamed at me to run.

I didn’t need to, though. Unbeknownst to me, Vincent was there protecting me without either of us knowing it. I left, but it was still enough for people to believe. I was certain of it. I’d been alone with him. In his apartment. It was soaked in scandal, and my plan had worked without the suicide of my soul.

“He betrayed the family,” he tells me. “He was a rat, Bianca. He was selling us all down the fucking river.”

My hands fly up to cup my mouth.

“Enzo had suspected for a time that we had a rat. He trusted only Leo and me with the suspicion.”

“Why not Roberto? Why not his consigliere?”

“Leo is his brother, and I would be the person tasked with sorting out the problem.”

Sorting out the problem.

“A lot of things pointed toward my *brother*.” He spits the word like it’s acid on his tongue. “Enzo set a trap. The feds showed up.”

“Roberto was working with the *FBI*? But why?”

He shrugs. “Who fucking knows? Who fucking cares? Likely caught up in a case that would’ve seen him do jail time. Flipped quicker than a dog in heat to save himself. Pathetic piece of shit he was.”

“You had to kill your own brother,” I murmur.

“He was no brother of mine.” He dismisses the sadness in my statement. “I told you, Bianca. You cross me, and I’ll kill you without an iota of guilt or hesitation.”

Lost in my thoughts, I sit quietly. “Enzo knows I didn’t sleep with Roberto.”

“As does Leo.”

“He knows I planned to undermine him. He knows I falsely hijacked his plan at peace with the Outfit.”

He smirks. “He wasn’t happy about it.”

“If he knew I was untouched, why not still send me to Salvatore?”

“Because I wanted you.”

My face softens.

“I don’t ask for a lot in life, *dolcezza*. But I asked for you.”

“I don’t understand.”

He sighs, dropping from his haunches to his ass. “I heard you arrive. I heard Berto and his crude remarks about being alone with him dressed the way you were. You asked him to tell Enzo that he didn’t want Cat, and he laughed in your face.”

I swallow at the hideous memory. The evil bite in Roberto’s laugh as I begged him to leave my sister be.

“You didn’t back down. You offered yourself when he refused to decline a union with Caterina. He threatened to take you both.”

He was disgusting. He menaced that he’d fuck me and use the blood of my virginity—because he promised to make me bleed—as lubrication to defile Caterina on their wedding night. I almost vomited the moment he

spoke the words. Instead, he kissed me, assaulting my lips with the poison of his words merely a bitter introduction to the hideousness within him.

“Your lipstick was smeared near his chin. I’d never felt rage like I did right then. I breathe fury, Bianca. It was my fucking job to eliminate threats. I used the poison of mania and violence to carry out every hit I’ve been tasked with. But knowing he had *touched* you, knowing he had touched something I knew to be *mine*”—he stabs at his chest—“I was the *embodiment* of wrath. Roberto had to die. He’d tasted something too pure to survive.”

I’ve forgotten how to breathe. Or my breath has left my body. I’m shocked into stillness when all I want to do is throw myself into his arms.

“Tony—” I start.

“I was gone before Tony arrived. It was over in seconds. I didn’t even know he’d been there until your father called Enzo.”

“Does my father know?”

He shakes his head. “No. We can’t risk the knowledge about his betrayal surfacing. I know it would make your life easier—”

I place a finger against his lips. “I’m glad he doesn’t. My value in my father’s life was revealed when he thought the worst. I’d prefer not to hold on to his lies of love and affection.”

I’m empty and full all at once. My secrets have dissipated, and their heaviness no longer resides within me. In their place sits a flame of acceptance, one of appreciation, and one of connection. They burn with love and freedom and a knowledge that Vincent’s vow to protect me has never wavered.

Sliding a thumb over my eye socket, he drags it down the contour of my cheek, moving toward my lips. Pausing in the center of my lips, he watches heatedly as he tugs my bottom lip down, clenching his hand into a fist when it falls from my chin.

“I need to put my cock in your mouth, Bianca.”

I look up at him through the curtain of my lashes.

“You scared me. You angered me. I want to punish you for your insolence.”

I nod, the gesture too eager for the threat in his words.

“I need to show you how weak you make me, *dolcezza*.”

“You make me weak, too.”

He hums in the back of his throat. “Stick your tongue out.”

I don’t hesitate to do as he says.

Moving his face close to mine, he pulls his lips together, a heavy drop of spit falling from his mouth onto my tongue.

My eyes widen in shock, and I’m caught between my need to wipe it away in disgust and my longing to wait for further instruction.

“Good girl,” he murmurs when I remain. “Now you’re gonna use that to suck my cock. Understood?”

My eyes close with a tsunami of yearning that catches me off guard after this morning's events.

Standing, Vincent towers over me. My eyes still closed, his shadow casts me in a position of submission I want to remain in for an eternity. The unmistakable sound of his belt being undone has me wanting to swallow, but I keep my tongue balanced outside my mouth.

“Watch when I take my cock out for you, little whore.”

My eyes open slowly, caught between the need to meet his eyes and the want to see how hard he is.

“Such a dilemma.” He reads the constant flicker of my eyes without issue. “Watch my dick while I pull it out, then your eyes are to remain on mine while you beg to drink my cum.”

I struggle to moan, the broken sound desperate without the use of my tongue.

He undresses his cock slowly. Unzipping his pants, he grabs his erection over the black fabric of his boxers. I clench my thighs. Hand in his boxers,

he strokes himself out of sight. My nipples harden. Using the hard line of his dick, he pushes his boxers down, and my eyelids flutter in gratitude.

Hands moving without permission, I grab his pants at the hips and pull them down to free him completely.

“Greedy,” he murmurs.

Pointing my tongue, I inch forward, teasing the slit of his head with tender flicks of my tongue. He slides a hand against the side of my neck, moving up from the nape into the fall of my hair, twisting his fingers through the locks firmly.

Massaging my tongue against the underside of his head, he groans, pushing me forward. I go easily, swallowing more of him down. His cock is wet, and it’s messy; our spit comes together, a lubricant formed through desire.

Wrapping a hand around the thick line of his base, I hold his head against the roof of my mouth, my head stationary as I caress his length with an up and down drag of my tongue.

My eyes never leave his. His hooded lids flutter closed every few seconds, a thick groan following the involuntary movement.

I cup his balls. He hisses when my fingers roll them over my palm. Held in my hand, I push two fingers against the rough skin of his perineum.

“*Fuck*,” he snarls, stumbling forward. He arches over me with a strangled cry, and I pull my head back, sucking on his head, circling the velvet touch of skin with my tongue.

My fingers tease his back end, palm gripping his balls tenderly, my mouth loving his cock.

“Take it in your mouth, baby,” he pleads, the desperation garbling his words. “Swallow my cum.”

Sliding his cock into my mouth, I lap at him with my tongue. He throbs.

“Pull it,” he growls.

My hand moves in time with my tongue, and he stands to full height, head thrown back on a long groan.

Thick ribbons of cum fill my mouth, and I let it fall down my throat, drinking him in.

I lick his cock clean, and he watches on with eyes veiled with lust.

My tongue drags over my lips. “I don’t really feel punished.”

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NINETEEN



I make my way through the lobby of our building, booted feet rushing across the marble tile. I told Andre to pick me up twenty minutes ago, and I wrestled my hair into a ponytail no less than eight times before I was happy enough to leave it.

Mama and Caterina are coming for lunch, and I wanted to fit in a nail appointment before they arrived at my place.

I make it to the glass doors of the foyer before skidding to a halt. I spin quickly, approaching the front desk as fast as I passed it. Tapping impatiently on the counter, Lydia, the hotel clerk, talks quietly into the phone. Her head is cast downward, thumb and forefinger pinched against the bridge of her nose in exasperation.

I check my watch.

“Miss Gabbi, I understand your frustration.”

I look at the glass doors. Andre waits patiently, hands in the pockets of his jeans, eyes moving up and down the street in lazy curiosity.

“Please don’t do that,” Lydia speaks again, pulling my attention. “I assure you that Mr. Ferrari has assured me he’ll have someone look at it today.”

I lift my hands slowly from the counter.

“I’ll be sure to tell him when he arrives home.” She pauses. “Yes, Miss Gabbi.”

She hangs the phone up, sighing to herself. Plastering a smile on her face, it drops the moment she turns. “Good mor—” She clears her throat, trying again. “Good morning, Mrs. Ferrari. How can I help you?”

Her eyes flicker nervously to the phone, then back to me. Her mind works overtime, no doubt recalling the conversation she just had in her head and trying to determine how much I heard.

“Good morning, Lydia.” I smile sweetly. “My mother and sister will be coming for lunch today. I’m heading out, but on their arrival, can you escort them to the penthouse, please?”

She dips her chin. “Of course.”

I take a step away. Pausing, I look over my shoulder. “Gabiella causing problems?”

Lydia pauses long enough to blink slowly three times. “I... uh...” She glances down at the phone, to the elevators, and then back to me.

I step back to the counter. “She’s been causing a raucous for Vincent and me as well,” I whisper with an exaggerated roll of my eyes, hoping like hell she believes the honeyed layer of my lie. “Anything I can help with today?”

“I wasn’t aware... I didn’t realize...” she stumbles.

I force a huff of laughter. “Lydia, I may be young, but I’m not stupid. I was aware of Gabiella the moment Vincent and I were married.”

Bile rolls in my gut. Vincent keeps this woman—whoever she may be—in the same apartment he keeps me.

“Of course, Mrs. Ferrari. Miss Gabriella’s hot water is not working. I spoke to Mr. Ferrari about it this morning as he left. He didn’t want me to arrange for someone to fix it. He wanted someone he knew and trusted.”

He wanted someone who wouldn’t ask questions. He wanted someone who would keep his dirty little secret.

“I’ll go up and grab Gabriella. She can use our apartment.” I turn back to the elevator. “I don’t have the key to her floor on me,” I ponder aloud. “Will you give me one? I’ll return it on my way out.”

“Of course,” Lydia agrees easily, relieved the issue of the problematic guest will no longer be hers to manage.

She hands me the key card.

“Vincent spoke about moving her? Or is she still on—”

“Sub-penthouse,” Lydia cuts me off.

“Thank you.” I smile.

I am going to kill that motherfucking lying piece-of-shit husband of mine.

I punch at the button to the sub-penthouse with more force than necessary, swearing under my breath.

He keeps his whore on the floor below mine. All the nights he runs off for *business*, he’s likely traveling downstairs to fuck his mistress before coming home and doing the same to me.

My chest is heaving.

Pulling my phone from my bag, I shoot Cat a text telling her I have a migraine and cancel lunch. Next, I text Andre and tell him the same.

The elevator opens, and I step into *Gabriella’s* apartment. It’s nice. Display-home nice. Sparse of personal items and decorated with minimalist furniture. Not unlike Vincent’s. Not unlike *mine*.

“Thank fuck,” a voice groans. “Seriously, Vincent, I need a fucking shower—” Her feet come to an abrupt halt as she steps into the room. “Who the fuck are you?” she asks rudely.

“Who the fuck are you?” I retort.

She crosses her arms over her chest. “I asked you first.”

She looks younger than me, and I frown. She’s beautiful, and not just in a way that would force a double take if you passed her on the street. You’d be bewitched into staring. She’d steal your breath. Desire aroused by a

simple meeting of eyes. She's exquisite, and I hate the way envy reduces my self-worth almost immediately.

Are you fucking her?

No.

Technicality, I guess. He'll wait until she's of age.

"Whoever you are," she speaks again. "You shouldn't be here." There's a hint of panic in her tone. One that erases her abruptness.

"Shouldn't I? My husband is *keeping* you."

Her shoulders drop in an outward show of relief. "You're Bianca."

I laugh, the sound more sneering than jovial. "Well, at least he talks to you."

Another stab of jealousy, one that slices deeper than the thought of him fucking her brought. She means more to him than I do. Enough that he'll *talk* to her. In reality, *I'm* the whore. He fucks me and shares his thoughts with her. My hands shake. I wish I never came up here. I wish my need to break my own fucking heart for knowledge I knew I didn't want wasn't so fucking strong.

"Fuck him and his disrespect for keeping his *goomah* in the same fucking building as his wife."

"I don't know what that word means."

I growl in frustration. "It means mistress, Gabriella. His side piece."

Her lip twists in distaste.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Is that word not savory enough for you?"

Maybe I'd be nicer if I thought she was as oblivious to my existence as I originally was to hers. But she knows who I am. She knows Vincent has a wife, and that's an act not in the slightest deserving of forgiveness. For her or him.

"No, it's not," she responds with scorn. "It's fucking offensive."

"That's offensive." I laugh. Loudly. "*That's* offensive," I scream. "Not the fact that my husband keeps an underage girl as his fucking *whore*."

“Enough.”

I startle at the cold tone of Vincent’s voice.

When I spin on my heel, the insult I had balancing on my tongue drops away, the sheer amount of blood decorating his clothes enough to erase my envy and replace it with panic. “You’re bleeding.”

He looks down at his white dress shirt, now stained with blotches and splatters of red.

He breathes heavily through his nostrils. “Not my blood.”

I grimace.

“What are you doing here, Bianca?”

I fall back a step in shock. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Gabriella,” he starts.

“Don’t you speak to her before me.” I step into his line of sight. “You’ve lied. You’ve cheated.” I throw a hand back toward the beauty behind me. “You’ve disrespected me enough.”

His eyes cut to me. “I will not be spoken to with such blatant disrespect. You are laughably misaligned in your accusations. Go upstairs and wait for me.”

“No.”

He arches an eyebrow. “No?”

“That’s what I said. *No.*”

He growls in his throat, cursing under his breath. “Gabriella, I will deal with you later.”

Grabbing at my hand, I pull it back, but his grip is too strong.

“Let me go,” I grit. “You’re covered in blood.”

He drags me from the sub-penthouse and into the elevator with long strides.

“Let me go, you fucking asshole.”

Confident I’m contained in the metal box, he lets go of my hand, his bloodstained hand cupping his jaw roughly.

“I *cannot* believe you.” Pushing my back against the wall, I keep as much distance as possible, staring at my husband's reflection in disgust. “You repulse me.”

A snort of laughter sounds from his nose. “I could have you naked and begging me in mere fucking seconds, wife. Don’t embarrass yourself with empty statements.”

I scowl.

The elevator doors open, and for the first time in our few months of marriage, Vincent doesn’t hold the elevator door to let me exit in front of him. He storms into our apartment.

I glance at the elevator buttons.

“Think about running, and I will wreak havoc on this fucking city looking for you. I will find you, Bianca. There is nowhere in this world you can hide from me.”

Knowing he’s right, I step into the apartment.

“She can be smart,” he quips.

I throw my clutch at his head. It misses the mark, flying past his shoulder and onto the floor, mere steps in front of him.

Looking over his shoulder, fury sparks in his eyes.

I expect him to threaten me. I expect him to yell.

He doesn’t do either. He simply turns back toward the stairs and makes his way to our bedroom.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I follow him, booted feet chasing his path. “Who the fuck *is* that? Do you think so little of me to keep a goomah—one you assured me you didn’t have—in our building?”

“I’m not fucking Gabriella,” he maintains, undoing the buttons of his shirt with rough flicks of his fingers.

“I don’t believe you.”

He shrugs out of his shirt, discarding it on the floor like trash. He kicks off his shoes, leaning down to pull off his socks. Next, he shucks off his

pants and boxers, leaving him completely naked. “Your distrust in me is your problem, Bianca. Not mine.”

He’s hard, his erection pointing angrily at me. I glance down, swallowing my lust and lifting my eyes.

“Seems your jealousy turns me on. You’re the only woman I crave to fuck, *dolcezza*.”

My lower stomach pulls.

His bloodied clothing lay by his feet, and I consider we’ll need to burn them to remove any evidence of his accountability in the murder of a lost and soon-to-be forgotten soul. “Whose blood is that?”

I look up when he doesn’t answer.

“Did you kill him?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says easily.

“Who?” I whisper.

If he’s maddened by my questions, he doesn’t let on. “None of your concern.”

My hands find my hips. “My husband just killed a man. You don’t think I deserve to know the details?”

“No.” He grabs his cock, sliding his hand up and down in languid strokes. “But if you’re so hungry for information.” His voice has changed, a murderous edge sliding over his words in threat. “A drug dealer sliding his dirty hands into our profits. You know the rules, Bianca. Don’t fuck with my family, or you’ll pay with your life. The lowlife fucked with our business, and he disrespected my family. Cosimo doesn’t like getting his hands dirty. He needed my”—his head tilts to the side—“*expertise*.”

“Expertise?”

He grins. “Mm. You want to know that I killed him, wife? I did. I took a coil of wire, wrapped it around my fists, and tied it around his throat like a...”

“*Necktie*,” I whisper.

His grin grows into a full-fledged smile, his teeth on show in malicious intent. “Mm. The wire pierced his skin, strangling and slitting his throat all at once.” He’s reminiscing, his eyes no longer present, lost to a memory he’s frighteningly attached to.

He sighs. “But the asshole had the audacity to fight, so he bled all over my favorite suit.”

“How selfish of him,” I murmur.

His nostrils flare, his hand moving faster on the straining length of his cock. It takes everything I have in me not to drop my gaze and watch.

He’s turned on by bloodshed, and it should repulse me, but there’s something about the dangerous and unhinged bite to his posture and voice that has me clenching my thighs.

“I was quite enjoying the panic in his eyes when he realized he was going to die, so imagine my surprise and disappointment when I received an alert that my *wife*, of all people, had entered Gabriella’s apartment.”

I narrow my eyes, death forgotten and betrayal back in my sights. “Who is she?” I ask again.

He drops his cock on a growl, lips thinning in irritation. He steps into the spray of the shower, cleaning the touch of death off his skin. “I left Leo with the cleanup. I’m now indebted to him, and Bianca,” he warns. “I despise being beholden to another.”

I ignore his threat. “Vincent,” I push. “*Who* is she?”

He washes his hair, ignoring me.

I move closer to the glass. “Who is she?”

He tips his face up to the rain of water.

“Who the fuck is she?” I yell, slamming my fist against the glass wall that shields him from me.

“My sister!” he yells back.

My chin drops. “What?”

He slams off the water, grabbing his towel and drying himself. “She’s my fucking sister, Bianca.”

“But it was only you and Roberto.”

“Apparently not.” He throws his towel on a hook, moving into our bedroom and tugging on a pair of boxers.

“I don’t understand.”

He sighs. “She turned up days before we were married. My father had an affair with the wife of another capo.”

I suck in a sharp breath. “Who?”

“Rita Romano,” he answers.

“Big Joey’s wife?” I clarify. “I thought she died.”

He shrugs. “Rita got pregnant. My father knew the ramifications. Both of them would’ve been killed. You don’t fuck someone else’s wife. He helped her run away and then went about his life like nothing was amiss.”

“I didn’t know.”

“No one did. My father isn’t alive to confirm or deny, and her mother is dead.”

My eyebrows pull together. “Are you certain?”

“DNA test. We’re related.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me?”

He drops onto our bed. “Enzo, Leo, and I are the only ones aware of her existence right now. We don’t know what this means for Gabriella. We’re trying to work out how to protect her and how to pull her into the family without questions being raised.”

“If they’re both dead, does it matter?”

He falls backward into the mattress. “She’s also related to Dante and Luna. I’d need to tell them first.”

I wait for him to continue.

He sighs. “But when I do that, they’ll realize their mother had an affair with my father, and Big Joey is still alive. He’s a vengeful prick, and that

will cause issues for Gabriella.”

“And you,” I guess.

“I can take care of myself. Big Joey never moved past his wife leaving him. Plus, Rita technically chose Gabriella over Luna and Dante. How can I be certain they won’t hold it against her?”

“You can’t,” I agree.

“Come here, *dolcezza*.” He pats his lap, and I go willingly. “Stop accusing me of fucking other women,” he mumbles. “My dick only gets hard for you.”

Pulling at my skirt, I edge it to my waist, letting my thighs spread wide enough to fit his hardness to my core.

“See.”

“The thought of you with someone else—”

“Isn’t a reality. My dirty, little whore, you give me everything I need.” He thrust his hips upward, and I moan.

“God. I want to brand you.” I grab his face, kissing his lips. “I want everyone to know you’re mine.”

His hands find my ass, moving it back and forth over the rigid strain of his cock. “So possessive.”

“Mm.”

I kiss him once more before climbing off his lap. “You need to go and talk with your sister. Actually, she has no hot water. Bring her back to our apartment so the poor girl can shower.”

“I want to fuck you, not talk about Gabriella.”

“Too bad,” I sing, walking from the room.



GABRIELLA WALKS INTO THE APARTMENT CAUTIOUSLY.

“Hi.”

She smirks.

“I’m really sorry for calling you a whore and accusing you of fucking Vincent.”

“It was *beyond* disgusting,” she retorts.

“Yeah.” I bite my lip.

We’re alone, which I didn’t expect. I expected Vincent to play interference and strip away the awkwardness of my insults. “Where is Vincent?” I look past her toward the entryway.

She follows my gaze. “He said he had something to take care of. But he said you were cool with me using your hot water.”

“Yes.” I smile wide. “Follow me.”

She follows me to the guest bathroom.

“I’m really sorry your life is chaotic right now,” I offer.

“No different to yours, I guess,” she ponders. “Being made to marry someone you don’t know.”

I shrug. “It worked out. I love Vincent.”

“I can see that. He seems as equally as obsessed with you.”

“You think so?”

She arches a dark brow. “Didn’t peg you for the insecure type. Jealous, for sure, insecure, not so much.”

I duck my head, hating the way my cheeks shade. “Vincent isn’t big with words. I can only read what I see, and sometimes I’m worried I’ve convinced myself that something is there when it really isn’t.”

She places her bag on the vanity. “It’s there.”

I want to hug her, but I refrain. “I’ll leave you to it,” I murmur, leaning her in the bathroom.

She showered for almost forty minutes, walking from the bathroom with a dreamy smile on her face.

“Hot water is a luxury I never care to go without. I’m spoiled, but whatever.”

“Would you like some lunch?” I stand from the couch, gesturing toward the kitchen. “I’m not the greatest cook, but Heather, our—”

“Rain check?” she cuts in. “I think I’m just going to go home and take some self-care time. I can’t remember the last time I actually dried and styled my hair.”

I smile to hide my disappointment. “Of course.”

She moves toward the elevator.

“Gabriella?” I call, and she turns. “I really am sorry. I called you some horrible things because of my own fears, and I’m really ashamed. I’m hoping we can be friends.”

She smiles, the gesture one-hundred-percent genuine. “You’re forgiven. I imagine if I found the man I loved keeping another woman, I would react similarly. I’d like us to be friends, too. I don’t have too many of those.”

“Me either,” I confess quietly.

I stand in the quiet living room for minutes after she leaves, hating how alone I feel. Sighing, I make myself a cup of coffee and nestle into the couch. I scroll through my phone, checking social media mindlessly.

The hum of the elevator pulls my attention, and Vincent walks into the apartment with a large bandage—impossible to miss—stuck to his neck.

“What happened?” I slide my coffee onto the table in front of me, rushing toward him.

Wrapping his arms around my lower back, he pulls me into his body. “Nothing I didn’t ask for.”

Hands on his chest, I push back, staring at him quizzically.

“You said you wanted me branded.”

My eyes narrow.

“Take the bandage off, wife.”

With gentle fingers, I pull at the bandage. Cursive writing has been inked vertically into his neck, the skin red and angry around it.

“Vincent,” I gasp, wanting to reach out and touch the inscription of my name on his skin.

“You like?”

“Yes. Very much.”

Hands sliding to my ass, he bites the corner of his bottom lip. “I’m not convinced.”

“I do love it.” I track each letter slowly. “But a tattoo is *you* giving *me* something.”

“And?”

“*I* want to give *you* something. No,” I correct. “I want to *take* something. A brand will ensure you’re scarred with my love.”

Understanding crosses his face, and he hums in approval. “Then do it. Spill my blood, Bianca. Watch me bleed for you.”

I swallow at the fight in his words.

Leaning down, he lifts the leg of his trousers, pulling a knife—sheathed at his ankle—free. Flipping it easily in his hand, he passes it to me, handle out.

I grab it. “Where?”

He drags me over to the couch, removing his jacket before sitting down. “Wherever you want.”

“Your heart.”

“My heart it is.” He pulls his black shirt over his head, throwing it onto the couch.

I straddle his lap, my eyes on his. Lust twists their color, darkening them in a way that makes me nervous. But not nervous enough to stop.

I drop my gaze to his chest, trailing my fingers over his left pec. I kiss the skin above his nipple. Lifting the knife, I run it gently over his skin, and he pulls a breath through his nose heavy enough to make me smile. Tip pointed at his skin, I push, watching a pebble of blood bead beneath the blade.

“That’s it, baby,” he praises.

I slide the blade down slowly, cutting into his skin in a straight line right over his heart. Happy with my work, I lift the blade, moving it to the top of the bleeding line. I carve two semi-circles against it, forming a large B directly over his heart.

Dropping the knife to the couch, I wipe at the cut, transferring more of his blood to our skin.

“You’re crazy and obsessive, and it turns my dick to stone.”

I slam my lips to his, groaning into his mouth at the fervor in which he kisses me back. His appetite for my lust curls his hands into my hair, and he pushes my mouth more harshly against his. He bites my bottom lip, dragging it back. I whimper as he lets it go. My tongue moves out of my mouth, and he mirrors the movement. Our tongues meet between us, slow licks dancing freely, letting us taste our fused desire.

“I’m gonna fuck you so hard, little whore. I’m gonna bend you over and fuck you so deep you’ll swear you can feel me stabbing at your heart.”

“*Vinnie.*” The word is nothing but a violent plea.

Retrieving the bloodstained knife from the couch, he smirks. “Hope you’re not too fond of this dress.” Holding the neckline, he drags the knife easily down the fabric, splitting it without resistance. The knife slides against my skin in a gentle kiss, not hard enough to draw blood but firm enough to leave his blood trailing over my skin. “Fuck, that’s hot,” he hums in his throat.

Left only in my lacy thong, Vincent looks up at me, eyes heavy-lidded. Flicking the knife at my hip, my thong rips away. He repeats the move on the other hip until my underwear bears no resemblance to what they once were.

“Turn your ass in the air for me. Let me fuck you like I own you.”

I stand. “You do own me.”

He growls. The sound travels from the very pit of his stomach, forcing its way through his lips.

Smiling, I turn, dropping my knees to the carpet. Glancing over my shoulder, I smirk before lowering my elbows to the floor. Sliding my arms out, I drag my tits along the carpet, tickling my nipples in a jagged caress.

His heat hits behind me. His rough fingers drag down my spine.

“Such a pretty little whore,” he muses. “So pretty. But so fucking filthy.”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t say speak,” he warns, a large palm coming up to grab my ass. “You’ll only make noise when I tell you to.”

I nod.

“Now you say yes.”

“Yes,” I agree easily.

He laughs softly, his hand moving underneath me to drag along my slit. “My hands are bloody, and your pussy is wet.”

I bite my tongue, attempting to hide the shuddering breath wanting to escape.

He hears my struggle. “Good girl.”

Sliding his cock between my ass cheeks, he uses both hands to push my globes together, his hips moving back and forth.

“Maybe I should just let your gorgeous fucking ass jerk me off... How would you feel about that? No relief. No dick in your cunt. No fingers tickling your clit.”

I want to cry out in protest, but I rock my body forward and then back in a silent plea.

“It feels so good, though, little whore. Your sweet ass jerking me.” He groans long and loud.

I want to beg. I want to plead with him to slam inside me. My pussy *aches*. It throbs with the need to *feel*.

Separating my cheeks, Vincent sighs. “Your swollen pussy is crying for me, though,” he murmurs to himself. “She’s slick with how greedy she is for my cock.”

Yes, I want to scream. *So greedy.*

He pulls away, and within seconds, he buries himself inside me with one hard thrust.

My mouth opens in a silent scream. Wrist to my mouth, I bite down, stopping myself from making anything but a muffled groan of relief.

Ass cheeks still wide apart, a wet drop hits my tight hole. Turning my head to look over my shoulder, Vincent’s eyes are focused on where we’re connected, watching the way his cock moves in and out of my body. Thick lines protrude from his neck, and my eyes roll back in ecstasy. He spits again, the thick drop hitting the same spot. Hand moving inward, he rubs the pad of his thumb over my untouched entrance.

“Tensing in resistance or pleasure?”

I remain quiet.

“Speak.”

“Plea-sure,” I stutter.

He hums in approval, adding pressure with his thumb, his hips never stopping the way they move his cock in and around my body.

I choke on a hushed moan, everything within my body tensing.

“When and *only* when you come, you scream my fucking name, Bianca.”

I nod, bucking to force his thumb deeper and hips to move faster.

He groans. “So fucking greedy. That’s it, baby. Take it.”

“Vinnie!” I shout, my body convulsing with gratification. Relishing the indulgence of my husband using my body for *his* pleasure while tearing mine apart with the same feeling.

Thumb pushed as deep as it will go in my ass, Vincent’s other hand grips my hip with malicious need. He powers inside me, the undeniable

sound of slapping skin, the salacious echo to his jagged grunts.

He comes with a wicked roar, my name breaking from his lips like the animal he is.

“*Fuck*,” he hisses, pulling out of me and falling onto the carpet beside me.

Sliding onto my stomach, I watch the way his chest heaves. “I love you.”

He looks over at me. “It’d kill anything or anyone who threatened to take you from me.”

Though he didn’t use the actual words, I can read my husband well enough to know he just told me he loved me back.

I lift my hand, cupping his cheek. “I don’t doubt it for a second, *tesoro*.”

He pulls my wrist to his mouth, kissing it softly.

We stay like that until my body cools, and I shiver.

“Your mother invited us for dinner.”

I groan in reluctance. “Do we have to go?”

“You don’t want to see Cat?”

I huff. “You’re right. Fine, I’ll go shower.”

“No.” He rolls over, pinning me to the carpet.

I take comfort in the warmth his body provides. “No?”

He stares into my eyes. “No. When your father makes you feel like shit tonight, I want you to know my cum and blood stain your skin. I *own* you, which makes you beyond fucking powerful, Bianca.”

“How does *you* owning *me* make me powerful?”

“You still don’t get it.” He shakes his head. “I may own you, Bianca. But I *belong* to you. I own you because of who I am. I belong to you because you’re my only weakness in this world.”

I blink rapidly, stunned by his declaration.

“Your father fears me, which means he fears you.”

Something potent settles itself within my stomach. A recognition of what he's just said. We're powerful because we're together. An unbreakable force. Vincent and I are invincible to the judgment, pain, and threats of the outside world.

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TWENTY



“You totally should have bought that dress,” Gabriella scolds me for the hundredth time.

I nudge her with my shoulder, pushing her into the glass windows of *Louis Vuitton*. “It was five thousand dollars,” I balk.

She shrugs. “Vincent would’ve paid for it. Didn’t he give you his AMEX?”

We’ve been shopping for hours. After Gabriella asked for a rain check on our lunch, she messaged me the next morning asking if I wanted to go shopping and have lunch. I jumped at the opportunity. One, I wanted to make up for my poor behavior the day before. Second, Cat aside, friends were scarce. Not long ago, I thought of Trixie as my friend, but the bitterness of her betrayal still burns me into fury. My marriage was sacred to me, even if she thought it was a farce. She crossed a line I could never forgive her for. I wouldn’t *want* to forgive her.

“Are you ready for lunch?” I ask. “I’m starving.”

“Tommy Bahama?” Gabriella suggests.

I nod.

I hook my arm through hers, and we walk arm in arm, a spark of friendship already having solidified between us. She isn’t far off eighteen,

only a few months younger than me, and she holds a connection to Vincent I want to nurture.

“Bianca!”

I stop walking, my body taking a step backward in shock when Trixie steps into my path.

“Leave me alone.”

Gabriella looks back and forth between us before grabbing my hand. “Let’s go.”

“I’m sorry,” Trixie cries, following me as we walk away.

“It’s not good enough.” I shake my head, looking over the road, afraid Vincent is close enough to see us. “You should go. He’ll kill you if he thinks you’re harassing me.”

“You don’t think anything is wrong with that?” She grabs me, turning me to her completely.

“Of course there is,” I bite. “But there is nothing I can do about it. Leave me alone.”

“Girlfriend, you heard her,” Gabriella steps in.

“We’re friends.” Trixie stares at Gabriella for a second longer than makes me comfortable, so I step in front of her.

“Are we? Because I can’t imagine a friend I’d like to call mine who would be so willing to fuck my husband.”

Shame forces her eyes down. “You asked me what he was like... I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“I asked you that before he was *mine*,” I yell, closing my eyes in embarrassment at my outburst.

“Yours? Vincent doesn’t belong to you, Bianca. Surely you know that? He’s a criminal.”

Something about the woman in front of me was different from the one I counted as a friend. Her voice holds a desperation that has unease coursing

over my skin in a ripple of anxiety. It tells me to run. Her appearance is messy. Her eyes move over the street skittishly.

“Don’t speak about things you don’t understand.”

She laughs, the sound in no way humorous. “I understand more than you ever will.”

I frown. “I’m going now.”

“You can’t trust him,” she yells at my back.

“I can’t trust you either.” I tug on Gabriella’s hand. “Gabbi, come.”

“You can trust me,” Trixie assures me, but I shake my head. “I *need* that job, Bianca.”

I hate that she went there. Preying on my kindness to force me into speaking to her.

“No, you don’t. You’re a hairdresser, Trixie. You can work anywhere.”

“I’m also a whore,” she bites out.

I walk away. “You can try to fuck people’s husbands anywhere.”

Gabriella jogs to catch up. “Bitch has some nerve.”

I don’t answer, fuming at Trixie’s audacity to tear down my husband when only weeks ago she threw herself at him.

“Mrs. Ferrari, are you okay?”

I force a smile at Andre. “Yes.”

“I ducked into the bathroom, and I only made it back to the car to see you walking away from her.”

I touch his shoulder. “Andre, it’s fine. She only tried to speak with me.”

“I should call Mr. Ferrari.”

“Please don’t,” I beg. “Gabriella and I are having a wonderful time, and we’re not ready to leave.”

He considers my request, uncertainty worrying at his eyes enough to cause lines at their crease. “I have to call him. But I’ll wait until you’ve started eating.”

“Thank you,” I concede, pulling Gabriella into the restaurant.

Seated at our table, I sigh loudly.

“She looked really familiar,” Gabriella comments.

“Who? The maître d'?”

“Trixie,” she corrects.

I push out my bottom lip.

“Has she been on TV?”

“Not that I know of. I’m going to get the shrimp salad.”

“Ahi tuna bowl for me,” Gabriella responds. “Too bad we’re too young to order a martini.”

I sit back in my chair. “Vincent is going to be murderous enough with Trixie accosting me in the street.”

She laughs. “Maybe he’ll understand *why* you need a drink.”

A server takes our order, sparkling water included, and leaves us alone again.

“How long ago did your mom die?”

Gabriella’s eyebrows disappear behind her dark fringe. “Wow. That got deep fast.”

“Sorry,” I apologize. “Forgive me.”

“It’s fine.” She waits for the server to place our sparkling water and glasses on the table before speaking again. “About six months ago.”

“*Gabriella*,” I whisper.

Pursing her lips, she nods. “Yeah, it’s still pretty raw.”

“Did you always know about Vincent and the family?”

She shakes her head. “No. Mom only told me in the days before she died. She told me that Vincent was my safest option if I needed anything. She told me not to go anywhere near Big Joey. She said that her mistakes would kill me,” she whispers.

Our salads are delivered to our table, and we sit quietly, smiling our thanks at the young server before she saunters off.

“I did my research. Clearly not enough, though.” She forks her salad, leaning over her bowl to take it into her mouth.

I wait until she’s finished chewing before speaking again. “What do you mean?”

I eat while she speaks. “I watched Vincent for about a week, trying to work up the courage to approach him. He’s a little intimidating.”

I laugh. “Just a little.”

“I fucked up when I did finally speak to him.”

“How so?”

“He was having lunch with Enzo. I didn’t realize he was the fucking boss.”

I grimace.

“Yeah.” She rolls her eyes. “Asshole made me confess my life story with him there. He refused to fucking leave.”

I stab a shrimp, holding it over my bowl. “Not many people would be brave enough to call Enzo an asshole.”

She shrugs. “The way I look at it now, I don’t think Vincent would ever have kept my existence from Enzo anyway. They’re really close. Big Joey could kill me if he found me. I’m seventeen. I didn’t want to live on the streets or be forced into foster care. If the family had killed me for my mother’s wrongdoings, at least I fucking tried, you know?”

I drop my fork, reaching out to grab her hand. “I’m glad you’re here.”

She smiles. “Me too.”

“Isn’t this sweet?”

So consumed with Gabriella’s story, I didn’t even see Vincent approach. “Hi, baby,” I greet.

He kisses me. “No sign of Trixie,” he tells me.

I shrug. “Lucky for her, I’m guessing.”

Vincent picks up my glass, takes a sip, grimaces and spits the water back into my glass. Pulling a chair from the table behind us, he sits down,

picking up my fork to stab at my salad. I stare at him in shock, the domestically mundane action such a stark contrast to the bristling and intimidating man I'd married.

"What?" he speaks around the salad.

"Nothing."

"I'm concerned about Trixie's motive," he shares, wiping his mouth with my napkin.

"What do you mean?"

He chews his food. "How did she know you were shopping on Fifth Avenue?"

I hadn't considered that. "Coincidence," I suggest lamely.

He gestures for the server. She walks over, shaking her hips more than she did for Gabriella and me.

I scowl, but Vincent seems oblivious to her megawatt smile. "Macallan. Neat."

I kick his leg.

"Please," he adds.

"Sure thing, sir." She blinks twice, and while I can't blame the look of appreciation in her eyes, it pisses me off.

"She's following you," he tells me as the server retreats. "But why?"

I shrug. "We were friends."

"Please," Gabriella interjects. "I don't have many friends, but surely stalking isn't something you do, even if you are trying to make amends."

Vincent nods. "Has she reached out any other way?"

I shake my head. "I have blocked her phone number and her social media profiles, so I wouldn't know."

"I think she's done porn."

Vincent coughs. "What?"

Gabriella lifts her shoulders. "I know her from somewhere."

He stares at his younger sister. “You’re seventeen. Why the fuck are you watching porn?”

She opens her mouth, but he holds a hand up.

“Don’t answer that.”

The server places his whiskey down, and he slings it back in one swallow. “I’m placing security on you for the time being until I can be sure she doesn’t mean you harm.”

“Vincent.” I sigh.

“Non-negotiable,” he argues.

“Would you like another, sir?” The server, who hasn’t left our table, touches his shoulder.

He looks at her touch, then back at her eyes.

I have to commend her audacity. Vincent is beautiful to the eye, but corruption oozes from every inch of his three-piece suit. A single glance is enough for you to know that whatever he does, it doesn’t fit within the confines of the law. He’s immoral, he’s dangerous, and some women are foolish to consider his lawlessness attractive.

It’s me.

I’m women.

As is this bitch with her hand on my man.

“I’ll ask you to take your hands off my husband.” I draw her attention.

She glances at Vincent, then me. “Sorry, I thought you were his daughter.”

Rage hits me in the chest. Vincent grabs my knee.

“That’s more offensive to me than it is to her.” He speaks before I can. “My wife is right, though. Don’t ever touch me without permission.”

The server steps back. “I’m sorry.”

“You will be if you attempt to flirt with my husband again,” I mumble under my breath.

She moves away, and Gabriella laughs.

“We’re getting you that fucking dog.” He cups my cheek, pulling me into a kiss. “I need something to occupy your time so you don’t attack everyone you think wants to fuck me.”

“Think?” I murmur against his lips.

“Mm,” he agrees, kissing me tenderly.

“I’d like to see your reaction to random men coming onto me.”

“I’d kill them,” he declares easily, and I don’t doubt for a second he’d follow through on his threat. “I want to kill at least five men in this restaurant alone that have looked at you for a second longer than they should be allowed.”

I let him kiss me again.

“Okay. That’s enough. Family member sitting at the same table.”

Vincent turns to look at her. “Lower your tone talking about family when we’re in public. Ears are everywhere.”

She rolls her eyes.

“Enzo and I have been speaking,” he speaks quietly across the table.

Gabriella adjusts her hair unnecessarily. “Oh.”

“My protection won’t be enough when we tell the family about you.”

She blinks, uncertainty coiling itself within her posture. Her shoulders round in, arms crossing her chest defensively.

“You’re eighteen in a few months.”

“And?”

“Vincent,” I warn.

He ignores me. “I’ll need you to marry.”

“What?” she balks.

“We’ll talk about this when fewer people are around,” he grounds out.

“We’ll talk about it now,” she demands. “You’re the one who brought it up. How can I not be old enough to order alcohol but be old enough to sign my life away to an outdated institution?”

“Lower your voice,” he cautions his sister, but it does little to keep her anger in check.

“I’m not a fucking possession. I won’t be a mindless doll who agrees to marry a man she doesn’t know.”

I suck in a sharp breath.

“Sorry.” Shame forces her face downward.

“We’ll talk about this later,” he repeats.

“Who?” she pushes. “What old sicko am I supposed to marry?”

Sitting back in his seat, Vincent pulls at his shirt cuffs. “Enzo suggested Leo.”

Pain etches itself across her face, but too consumed with his irritation, my husband doesn’t notice. “*Enzo* suggested his brother?”

“He’s a good fit. He’s second-in-command, Gabriella. No one in their right mind would cause an issue with your existence if you were linked to the *boss*.”

She swallows indignantly. “Why not Enzo then?”

Vincent frowns. “You’re too young for him.”

“He’s younger than you,” she disputes. “I’m the same age as Bianca.”

He shrugs. “Bianca’s and my relationship is none of your concern. You will marry Leo.”

“I don’t want Leo.”

“I didn’t want your brother to begin with,” I comfort her.

Vincent growls.

“But I love him now. If you open yourself up to it—”

“I will never *open* myself up to Leo,” she snarks. “Enzo and his ideas can get fucked.”

“Charming,” Enzo startles Gabriella and she scowls.

I duck my head in greeting.

Enzo sits down without an invitation. “Have we located the whore?”

“Apparently, she’s right here,” Gabriella bites, gesturing to herself.
“Sold off to the first willing bachelor.”

Enzo smirks. “I wouldn’t exactly call Leo willing.”

Gabriella’s eyes narrow. “Well, that makes two of us.”

“Leo is popular with women. He’ll please you.”

My eyes widen. Gabriella’s turn to slits. “Are you thinking about your brother fucking me?” she snarls, leaning into the *boss* of the family.

I want to scream at her to watch her mouth. Enzo despises disrespect. He’d be ruthless enough to marry her off to Big Joey instead.

“Are you thinking about him making me come?” she whispers.

Something fierce crosses Enzo’s face. A look of regret and misery, a dash of *jealousy* twisting his lips and hooding his eyes.

Vincent slams a fist into the table, an uncommon public outburst of aggression hushing the noise in the restaurant. Gabriella looks ready to burst into tears. Instead, she jumps to her feet, grabbing her bag and running for the door.

I stand. “I’m going with her.”

Vincent dips his chin. “Have Andre drop you both home. I’ll be there shortly.”

TWENTY-ONE



I text Gabriella again.

After yesterday's bombshell, she'd locked herself in her apartment and had refused to let me in.

My phone chimes in my hand, and I almost drop it in shock. Vincent stirs beside me, and I turn my phone on silent, dimming the screen so I don't wake him.

He rarely sleeps.

He'll come to bed with me and fuck me in whatever way he pleases.

When he's had a trying or violent day, the sex will be rough. He'll fuck me hard enough that I could swear he's still inside me the next morning, my body stretched and used in a way that makes me ache.

After he's had a day of meetings and conversations about things I'm not privy to caught in his head, he's tired. He'll pull me on top, my knees straddling his waist while he drinks whiskey and watches me as *I* fuck him. Fuck, he looks good on those nights. I may be in control, but the power he oozes from merely sitting in a chair while I gyrate on his lap brings me to orgasm in next to no time.

If he's working in his home office, I'll play with myself on our bed, knowing he's watching. I'll pinch my nipples and moan his name, and

within seconds, he's inside me, calling me filthy names that make my pussy throb.

I look at him, sleeping soundly on his back, arm thrown over his eyes, his soft breathing making his chest rise and deflate.

He's had an extra knot of barbed wire inked onto his side since the cabin. Twenty-four lives forever marked into his skin as a reminder. I can't decide if he wears them as a badge of honor or if they're a form of punishment.

I slide my phone onto the bedside table without reading Gabriella's text.

I climb over my husband, leaning down to trail my lips over the grayscale tattoo on the side of his ribs. They're lives lost, sure, but Vincent doesn't kill innocent people for fun. He's not a psychopath who finds sexual gratification in murder. To me, these barbs represent moments in time when his choice was stripped away. He's loyal, likely to his own detriment. Threaten the family, and in Vincent's complicated psyche, that equals death.

"Hope you plan on moving those lips lower, wife."

His voice is hoarse with sleep, and I hum. Every part of me tingles with the anticipation of an orgasm or two.

"Nope. Not these lips." I kiss him again.

He groans.

Moving up his body, I fit my already slick pussy over the underside of his morning erection.

Pulling his arm from his eyes, face creased in sleep, he smirks. "I haven't even done anything, and your pussy is leaking for me," he burrs.

"You're very attractive when you're unconscious," I tease, sliding myself up and down the underside of his cock.

"Put my dick inside you."

I shake my head, loving the way his flared head kisses my clit on every upward slide. "When I'm about to come, you can bury yourself inside. I'm enjoying myself."

I lean back, hands to his knees, my hips rolling, my pussy jerking him off with a slippery finesse.

“*Fuck*,” he grates. “When you hit my tip...”

“So good,” I moan.

My body is stretched out. His remains half in slumber.

Eyes drunk with lust, he watches the way I bring myself pleasure.

“*Jesus*. The way you use my body, Bianca. I used to fuck my hand imagining moments like this. Fuck, I’d come so hard.”

I speed up, my stomach tightening and my clit pulsing in time with the race of my heartbeat.

I’m panting. I want him inside. I don’t want him to move. I want him to play with my nipples. I want him to grip my hips. I want him to tell me he loves me. I want him to call me a whore. I want...

“You’re about to come,” he growls, hand to the nape of my neck to pull me down.

I go easily, my body floating, ready to explode.

I slide over his tip, my body trembling. Before I can slip back down, he grabs his cock and angles it toward my entrance.

“Down.”

I do as I’m told, impaling myself on the rigidity of his cock in one quick drop.

I come. A scream rips from my throat so loud it echoes off the walls in our bedroom.

Vincent rolls us over in one swift movement. On my back, he hitches one of my legs over his shoulder, opening me in a way that makes me moan.

“The way your cunt chokes me after you come. *Fuck*, baby.”

He lifts up, my hips moving off the bed, my shoulders pushed into the mattress.

He slams inside me, relentlessly chasing his release.

“Such a tight little cunt.”

He drags a nipple through his teeth.

“My tight little cunt.”

I arch farther into him.

“*Fuck*. You’re throbbing.”

His fingers press into my ass, bruising my skin.

“You have another one for me,” he states.

The familiar feeling tugs low in my pelvis.

“Come, baby.”

I do so without warning. My body buckles before my muscles give out, and everything within me goes limp.

Two more powerful thrusts and Vincent buries himself deep, shouting my name on a growl that ripples through us both, making the aftershocks of my second orgasm tremble through me.

His body weight drops, pinning me to the bed. Face tucked into my neck, Vincent kisses just below my ear. I rub my fingers through his hair, enjoying the rare occasions when he’s sluggishly affectionate. Mornings spent like today are a rarity. His limited sleep pattern has me waking to an empty bed most mornings, so this is a treat.

“Coffee, *dolcezza*?”

“Please.”

He pulls back, kissing my lips before sitting on the edge of the bed.

“You added to your barbed wire.”

He glances over his shoulder.

“Hm?”

I point. “Your rib cage. There is a new barb.”

The corner of his lips turns up. “Same night I got this.” He drags his fingers down his neck where my name sits proudly.

I stare at his ribs.

“It upsets you.”

“Not at all,” I combat. “Taking a life isn’t something to take lightly. If you ever want to talk...”

His smirk grows into a fully fledged grin. “*Dolcezza*, what have I told you? If someone threatens my freedom or family in any way, their death means nothing to me. I have no heaviness on my conscience for the things I do; for the people I hurt or the lives I take.”

Staring at him, I know he’s telling the truth. His statement contains no hint of uncertainty or untruth. Eliminating threats *calms* him.

“Okay.”

He moves to the bathroom without another word, the tight muscles of his naked ass capturing my attention until he disappears from sight. Stopping in our closet on the way back to our room, he pulls on a pair of boxers, much to my disappointment.

I pick up my phone.

Gabbi: he kissed me.

I stare at her text, trying to decipher its meaning.

Bianca: Who kissed you? When? I’m confused.

Gabbi: Lorenzo. When you and Vincent were at the cabin. Vincent forced me to stay with him. Shit got hectic. He kissed me. And now he’s marrying me off to his brother.

Bianca: Gabbi. I don’t know what to say.

Gabbi: There is nothing TO say. I thought. I don’t know what I thought...

“Why do you look so upset?” Vincent walks up beside me.

I lock my phone. “What?”

He hands me my coffee. “Bianca.”

“I was looking at animal shelters and how many dogs are waiting to be adopted, which makes me sad.”

Not a lie. I’d spent time trolling the Animal Care Center’s website last night, my heart breaking at the sheer number of dogs looking for homes.

I'm lying by omission. I know it's wrong. But Gabriella confided in me, and in truth, I don't know how Vincent would react to the thought of his *seventeen-year-old* sister sharing saliva with the *boss*.

"We'll adopt one from the shelter then."

"Really?"

He slides into bed beside me. "Of course."

"Are you working today?"

He sips his black coffee. "Nothing pressing. Did you pick out a dog last night in your research?"

I nod. "One spoke to me."

"Spoke to you?"

"Mm. To my heart. We're going to be best friends."

"Show me," he says, finishing his coffee.

I bring up the website on my phone, finding the black and white fluffy dog I know to be mine.

"This is Panda. He's three."

He stares at my phone. "It's as big as my hand."

"I know." I grin.

"Bianca," he groans. "Where are the Dobermans or Shepherds? Something that could actually *protect* you."

I frown. "I don't want Panda to protect me. I want to snuggle with him on the couch."

"*Jesus fucking Christ*. Baby. Dogs aren't built for cuddling. They're predators. They're protectors."

"I have a predator already." I nudge him. "Panda is built for cuddling."

"Oh, yeah?" he challenges.

"Yeah, he *spoke* to me, remember?"

"Put your coffee and phone down. I'm gonna try to fuck some sense into you."

I laugh, doing as he says.

“You can fuck me, but Panda is our new baby. You can’t take him from me.”

He pins himself to my back when I roll toward my nightstand. His dick is already hard, and I push my ass back into him.

“You have too many clothes on,” I whine, attempting to turn in his arms.

“I’m gonna fuck you like this. Nice and slow. I’m gonna make you come for a third time today, and then we’ll call the center and adopt your new teddy bear.”

I open my mouth to throw an attitude, my words lost to a long moan when he slides inside me without warning, doing exactly as he promised.

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TWENTY-TWO



“*H*ow did you rope me into this?”

I adjust my sunglasses. “Rope you into what?”

“This.” He gestures at our dog. “Why the fuck do we have a leash on a cat?”

I gasp in horror. “Don’t be rude. Don’t listen to him, Panda.” The small dog turns at his name, panting. “You’re a beautiful dog.”

We picked up Panda two days ago. The adoption process was relatively easy. I filed my application online, and they called me soon after. After an hour or so of more paperwork when we arrived at the shelter, the fluffy pup was ours. *Or mine*, as per Vincent’s insistence.

“You didn’t have to come with us.” I quicken my pace.

Vincent’s strides meet mine easily. “You asked me to come.”

“I *invited* you to come. There’s a difference.”

“You wouldn’t have *invited* me to come if you didn’t *want* me to come.”

I laugh. “Stop complaining and just walk with us.”

“People are looking at how ridiculous our dog is, and I want to shoot them.”

I stop walking. “You did *not* bring your gun.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Of course, I brought my fucking gun.”

I take in his three-piece suit. “They’re looking because you’re in a full suit walking your dog.”

“We’re strolling, not walking, and I have a meeting after this.”

I roll my eyes.

Throwing an arm over my shoulders, he pulls me into his body and I go willingly. His lips meet my temple and I smile.

“Oh, pretzel stand.” I point.

Vincent checks his watch. “It’s nine in the morning.”

“And?”

He sighs. “Want anything aside from the pretzel?”

I shake my head. “Thank you,” I sing.

He mumbles under his breath, moving to stand in the line.

People watch him, but he’s oblivious to their stares. He exudes a power that pulls attention everywhere we go. How could he not? Three-piece suit, dark hair styled effortlessly, wolf-like eyes that can see into your soul. Vincent Ferrari looks every bit of the made man he is. The danger that slides off him in waves should repel attention, only it doesn’t. If anything, people *want* to be caught staring. They want to smile or dip their chins. They don’t know who he is or what he stands for, but they long to show him respect.

He moves back toward me with long strides, one hand tucked into his pocket, the other clasped around a pretzel that should look bigger but is dwarfed by the masculinity in his stature.

I reach for the pretzel, but he holds it out of reach.

“Say thank you, wife.”

I smirk. “Thank you.”

He arches an unimpressed eyebrow.

“We’re in public.”

He lifts a single shoulder. “Do I look like I give a single fuck about what anyone thinks? I’d fuck you right here like the good little whore you

are, and the only complaining you'd do would be to beg me to go harder and faster."

My cheeks flame red.

"Now, lean in and kiss me."

I step forward, and the hand that was only moments ago tucked into his pocket snakes around to my lower back, yanking me forward.

His tongue ducks out obscenely, tasting the bow of my top lip.

I gasp in shock, and he takes the opportunity to slide his tongue inside my mouth.

I moan into him.

He hums in approval, sucking my tongue into his mouth.

I should be embarrassed by the carnal display we're putting on for the public, but the snare of Vincent's affection, however indecent it may be, isn't something I'd ever pass up. He was right, he could fuck me here, in this very spot, and I'd let him. Because even though I'd be on show, I'd be protected by someone who would kill for me. He'd dress me down like a whore, while he safeguarded me like his queen.

He pulls from our kiss first, and my eyes take a moment to open, wanting to savor the violence in his devotion for a second longer.

"Now, every motherfucker in his godforsaken park has seen me fuck your mouth with my tongue. They want to dip their chin in respect, they can show it by keeping their greedy fucking eyes off my wife."

He thrusts my pretzel into my hand, and I take it, my mouth hanging open.

"Come," he prompts when I don't follow immediately.

I move to follow him, jogging to catch up. Panda's little legs race to keep pace.

"You're evil," I smite.

"And you're turned on."

I gesture to the noticeable bulge in his pants. "So are you."

“I’m always fucking hard when I’m with you.”

I bite my bottom lip, working to camouflage my triumphant grin.

“*Fuck*,” he growls. “Pussy would be so slick right now,” he mumbles to himself.

Tucking my arm around his, I pull myself into his body, resting my head on his shoulder as we *stroll*. Taking a large bite of my pretzel, I chew around a happy smile. My life is as close to perfect as I ever imagined it could be. At eighteen, I can deduce that most people would consider me delusional. I’m married to a mobster whose life is entwined with crimes I want no business knowing about. He hurts people; he executes people like others would file reports. Many people would look into Vincent’s life and see a felon, a sinner who deserves comeuppance. But evil deeds don’t define the inner workings of his heart. His sins haven’t and will not strip away his virtue. Wicked actions played out in defense of family and honor will be viewed as heroic by those he loves and as immoral by those who don’t understand.

We pass people as we wander, paying them no mind until a blond woman who has a small baby strapped to her chest approaches with a smile.

“Morning, Zoe,” Vincent murmurs.

“Hey.” She drops down to her haunches. “Cute dog.” She pets Panda. “Though, I think my cat could eat him.” She laughs lightly.

“You have caused irrevocable damage by that very innocent comment.” I smile at her. “Hi. I’m Bianca, Vincent’s wife, and this is Panda.”

She stands, stuffing her hands in her pocket. “Nice to meet you. I’m Zoe. Vincent comes into the coffee shop where I work most days.”

“Who is this?” I step closer, keeping my hand wrapped around the crook of Vincent’s elbow, peeking at the sleeping baby.

“This is Bodhi. Bodhi doesn’t like to sleep at night. Only during the day.”

I grin. “Lucky Bodhi is very cute.”

“Mm,” she agrees.

“I haven’t seen Tripp around lately,” Vincent comments, his voice quiet. He keeps his distance, a step back from where Zoe and I stand near Panda.

Zoe crouches back down to pat the dog. “He’s out of town for a case. He’ll be back tomorrow,” she comments absently. “Tripp is my husband.” Zoe looks up at me, including me in the conversation.

“You could’ve put a leash on your cat and joined us in walking ours,” Vincent teases.

Zoe laughs. “That’s funny. You’re funny.” She sighs, standing. “Potter is a terrible companion. He wouldn’t walk. I’d be forced to carry him the entire way, and he’d scratch me in protest for removing him from the comfort of our apartment. Plus, I’m not walking.” She gestures to the large bag held in her hand. “I was drawing for a book I’m illustrating. I needed inspiration, and Bodhi would only sleep on me. Two birds, one stone.”

“You illustrate books?”

She nods. “I make coffee a few days a week to get out of the house, but, yeah, children’s books mostly.”

“That’s really cool,” I comment.

She smiles. “I should get going. See you soon, Vincent. You should come into Caffeine Coma, Bianca. I make exceptional coffee.”

“I will,” I tell her, knowing my promise isn’t empty.

“Bye, Panda.” She scratches under his chin before walking away with a farewell smile.

“She’s nice,” I say.

Vincent watches her retreat for a beat longer. “She’s come out of her shell a lot over the past few years. When I first met her, she was a ghost.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

He starts walking, taking the lead from my hand.

I follow.

“She was petrified of everything. She spoke to no one. She made coffee, *good* coffee,” he corrects. “But something awful was going on in her life.”

I glance back. “She talks to you.”

“Now she does. She slowly started opening up. I would see her in the coffee shop with a bunch of people talking about books or something, and then I started seeing her with Tripp too.”

“I like that. Do you know Tripp?”

“As well as I know Zoe. He’s at the coffee shop whenever she is. He’s chatty.”

We stop walking, watching Panda stand still while some other dog sniffs his butt. “Have you spoken to Gabriella?”

“A little. She’s still hurt about the whole Leo saga.”

He rolls his eyes. “It’s not a saga, Bianca. It’s a way to keep her safe.”

We continue walking. Vincent pulls me into his body, an arm slung over my shoulder.

“You did kind of throw it on her. She hasn’t grown up the way we have. We’ve known from a young age that we’d be told who to marry for the sake of the family. She hasn’t been able to come to terms with it.”

“Are you still coming to terms with me?”

I dig my elbow into his side. “You know I love you, Vincent.”

He leans down, kissing my lips.

It’s not lost on me that he has never explicitly told me he loves me. I *feel* it. He says things that allude to the depth of feeling he has for me. He shows me whether he means to or not. His actions and the way he protects and pleases me bleed with implicit love and affection. He watches me closely, the closed-off shadow now lost to the devotion and passion in his eyes.

But I want to hear the words. More than anything, I want him to confess that the heart he was certain didn’t have the capacity for love, *did*, if only

for me. Just once. I'd hold them with me forever. He'd never have to live through the reality of sharing his greatest weakness ever again.

"Why do you think Enzo chose Leo?"

He looks at me quizzically. "Leo is the obvious choice."

I clear my throat, hoping I can disguise any eager curiosity in my tone. "Enzo seems the obvious choice to me."

"How so?"

"You're worried about Big Joey and Dante too, I imagine. She's your sister. She's safest with Lorenzo," I surmise. "Big Joey would never cross the boss, and Dante will listen to his dad."

Vincent's phone chimes.

"Enzo himself said Leo was reluctant," I push.

"Leo is reluctant to settle down, period," he says distractedly.

"Why force your sister into a life of misery with a man who doesn't want her?"

He frowns at me but doesn't reply.

"What's wrong?"

He looks back at his phone. "I just got a notification of entry to Gabriella's apartment."

"Enzo?" I ask, the hopeful uptick in my tone making his lips turn down.

"No. Trixie."

"What?" I move closer to his phone, watching Trixie enter Gabriella's apartment.

Swiping from the camera app, Vincent hands me Panda's lead. "Andre, where are you?" He waits for a second. "You're closer than me. I need you to go to our apartment building. Trixie has just entered Gabriella's apartment."

He hangs up. "Let's move." He moves swiftly, and I jog to keep up.

"Why would Trixie be with Gabriella?"

“I don’t know,” he answers me, putting his phone to his ear again. “Enzo,” he bites down the line. “Trixie has just entered Gabriella’s apartment.” His brow furrows. “No. I’m not at fucking home. If I was, I’d be calling to tell you we have a working girl with a serious fucking headache. I’m on my way. I’ll meet you there.”

We arrive back at our building in twelve minutes. I gave up forcing Panda to keep up with the pace we were moving. I picked him up, tucked him into my arms, and jogged to keep up with Vincent’s full body strides.

“Did Gabriella leave through the front of the building?” Vincent calls out to Lydia as we enter the lobby.

“No, sir,” she rushes out. “But she and another woman set off the emergency exit alarm on the first floor.”

“Did she look injured?” He hits the button to call the elevator.

“Not noticeably.”

We step into the elevator, Lydia watching after us.

“Andre isn’t answering,” Vincent tells me. “I want you to go to our apartm—”

“Absolutely not,” I cut him off. “Andre is my friend. Gabriella is my sister-in-law. Trixie was someone I thought I could trust. Whatever this is, it involves me.”

“Bian—”

“Don’t.” I hold up a hand. “Please, don’t.”

The elevator doors open onto the sub-penthouse, and my breath leaves me.

“Andre!” I scurry forward, dropping to my knees next to his too-still body. I place Panda behind me, and he stays put, pushed up against my back nervously.

Blood surrounds Andre in messy smears. It stains his parted lips and has dried in a river from his forehead over the bridge of his nose.

Vincent drops to his haunches beside me. His ringed fingers push against his pulse. He watches me while he waits.

“Baby...” he starts, but the elevator sounds, and he lifts a gun I didn’t even realize he was holding, aiming it at the entryway.

“Just us.” Enzo’s voice meets my back. “What the fuck happened? Where is Gabbi?”

Vincent stands. “Andre’s dead.”

“What?” I flinch. “No,” I refute his statement. “Someone call an ambulance. He’ll be fine. He’ll be fine,” I repeat.

“Where’s Gabbi?” Enzo presses.

“Baby”—Vincent ignores his boss—“two bullets hit him. One in the heart, one in the head. He’s gone,” he finishes tenderly.

I shake my head. My chin wobbles, and I look at my husband, begging him to do more without finding the strength to actually speak.

Vincent picks up the dog, keeping him away from Andre’s blood.

“Cute,” Leo teases, and I scowl at him.

“*Vincent*,” I plead, my voice so soft it drops like a pin in the room, the smell of death and hopelessness haunting me.

“You can grieve your driver another time. Someone answer my fucking question. Where is Gabbi?” Enzo yells.

“Andre,” I grit.

“What?” he bites.

“His name is Andre.”

Enzo’s nostrils flare.

“Trixie and Gabriella left through the emergency exit on level one,” Vincent answers, cutting into the tension. “No noticeable injuries for Gabriella as per the clerk working the front desk.”

Enzo rubs his jaw. “What the fuck does a whore want with your sister?”

I cringe at the term.

Leo moves away from where we're all congregated around Andre's body, the soft burr of his voice echoing from the open-space kitchen.

I saw Andre this morning as we left for our walk. He smiled at me. I hadn't even stopped to say hello. I assumed I would see him later today. *Alive*. I was certain we'd have more time. We were supposed to have more time.

"Who is Krista Delaney?" Leo yells out, a piece of paper held loosely in his hand.

Enzo and Vincent shake their heads.

"Bianca?" he tests.

I sniff. "No idea."

He turns the mouthpiece of his phone back, listening quietly before ending the call. He moves back toward us. "Contact at the FBI says Gabriella was in wit sec with her mom up until Rita's death."

"Rita was talking to the feds?" Enzo asks. "How did our contacts overlook that?"

"Possibly," Leo answers. "My guy is looking into it. Likely a need-to-know basis that our guys didn't have access to."

My eyes haven't left Andre. I move around his body, confirming what Vincent said for myself. Two fatal shots. Head and heart. I reach out to touch his face but pull my hand back, afraid to be left with only a reminder of what he felt like in death.

"*Dolcezza*." Vincent touches my shoulder. "Let's go to our apartment."

I shake my head. "I'm not going to leave him by himself."

Leo speaks before Vincent can. "Bianca, Andre ain't here anymore, honey. This was just the vessel. Remember him the way you loved him. Not this empty version."

A simple statement. One the three of them no doubt live by. I can't separate the two. Andre is right here, in front of me. His soul *lived* here for forty-plus years. Even in death, parts of him are ingrained in the very

makeup of his physical body. His eyes are open, their kindness not quite yet lost by the severance of his heartbeat.

“He’s here,” I mumble, more to convince myself.

“Bianca,” Vincent pushes.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I snap.

I know deep in my heart that if the situation was reversed, Andre wouldn’t leave me alone in the first hours of death. He’d know I’d be afraid. He’d know I’d want someone who loved me by my side as I found my way to the other side.

“I’ll stay right here until his body is removed. I won’t leave him.”

Vincent sighs. “Leo, do me a favor and take Panda up to the penthouse.”

“Do I look like a fucking lap dog?”

“Take the fucking dog,” Enzo orders. Leo curses under his breath, snatching Panda from Vincent and storming toward the elevator.

The elevator doors close, and quiet settles between us.

“Gabbi recognized her.”

“Huh?” Enzo steps closer.

“Gabbi, when Trixie approached me on the street, she said she recognized her from somewhere. She couldn’t place it, though.”

“She mentioned it at lunch,” Vincent echoes.

I nod. “Trixie looked at her funny, too. Stared for a few seconds longer than comfortable. I didn’t think anything of it at the time. I assumed it was because Gabbi got in her face. But now that I think about it, there was something deeper to it.”

“You think they were friends?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“What then?”

I scowl at Enzo, the bluntness in his tone flaring my temper. “I don’t fucking know. I’m just telling you what I observed.”

Vincent moves between us. Enzo opens his mouth to speak, but the elevator doors open, and they both lift their guns.

“Fuck,” Leo startles. “Stop aiming your fucking guns at me.”

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TWENTY-THREE



“Who was the Delaney bitch you were asking about?” Enzo asks, his voice carrying up the stairs.

Andre’s body was collected. Zipped into a black bag that signified an ending he didn’t deserve. My legs gave out, and I sobbed so hard that I couldn’t see. Enzo and Leo made themselves scarce while Vincent attempted to console me. In the end, he gave up on words. He picked me up, cradled me to his chest, and took us back to our apartment. In our bedroom, he laid me on our bed and told me to rest. I don’t know how he expected me to sleep when I was being choked by guilt. Closing my eyes would only welcome nightmares of Andre’s dead body. The promise of life in his eyes making me want to believe he was still alive. As if Andre’s death wasn’t traumatic enough, I couldn’t wipe the footage of Gabriella being dragged out of the building by a gun-wielding liar.

After endless discussions, Enzo, Leo, and Vincent all agreed to pull the police into searching for Gabriella. The more people who looked for her, the more likely they were to find her. Evidently, certain information was held back on a need-to-know basis. Namely *who* Gabriella is to the family.

I’d showered in the hope of removing the stench and culpability of death from my skin. It was in vain. The more I scrubbed, the more exposed I felt. I cried until I was so dehydrated my eyes ached with aridity.

I pulled on a pair of sweats and a bulky hoodie, wanting to disappear into the cumbersome material. I couldn't bring myself to crawl back into bed, so I moved to the stairs leading down to our living room.

Vincent, Leo, and Enzo are standing between our dining table and the lounge. I can't see them, but I can hear them well enough. Likely, my presence is known, but no one has commented on my eavesdropping.

"Gabriella had her name scribbled down by her phone," Leo answers. "My guy is looking into it."

A phone rings. "That might be him now," Leo murmurs. "Mikey," he greets. "You're on speaker."

"Okay. This shit was a fucking maze to sort out. Don't rush me as I speak, got it? I'm only telling you shit of substance."

"Understood."

I shift closer to the banister, arching my neck to move my ear closer to listen.

"Krista Delaney is a detective working in organized crime. She also assisted in moving Rita Romano into witness protection. Rita maintained her silence on the child's paternity. It's still unknown. Krista was a fucking pit bull with the situation, pushing Rita to testify against her husband, Joey Romano. With me?"

"Mm," Leo confirms.

"I've sent you a picture of Delaney. Look at it."

I stand, moving down the stairs, not caring that I'm overstepping.

Leo slides his thumb over his screen, pulling up his messages.

"Trixie," Vincent curses.

"What?" I push past, taking Leo's phone.

I stare at the photo of Trixie. *Krista*. Her official FBI photo staring up at me with intention and drive.

"One and the same," Mikey responds. "When Rita wouldn't give in to Delaney's demands to sell her ex-husband down the river, she went

undercover. Enter Trixie Castlemaine.”

I thrust Leo’s phone back into his hand, stepping back from the three men.

“Why has she got such a hard-on for the family?” Enzo muses.

“Nothing of significance I can locate,” Mikey responds. “Honestly, from what information I’ve been able to gather, it’s all about career progression.”

Career progression. She lied and manipulated me and killed a good man for *career progression*?

“How long has she been under?” Vincent asks.

“Four years,” Mikey answers.

Vincent massages the bridge of his nose.

“She had one confirmed CI in the family. Roberto Ferrari, which you already knew. We knew he was working with the FBI. The file was locked down pretty tight, so I had no information on Trixie, or Krista,” he corrects. “Until now.”

I watch Vincent’s nostrils flare with fury.

“Her relationship with Ferrari assisted in numerous drug busts and the imprisonment of at least four family members.”

“Anything else?” Vincent cuts out.

“She claims she had another informant, but her superior's notes lead me to believe it wasn’t legitimate.”

“Name,” Enzo demands.

“Bianca Rossi.”

“What?” I balk. “I... no. I... absolutely *not*.” My heart stops beating completely.

You break my trust, and any affection I feel for you will disappear. I’d slit your throat without a beat of hesitation and sleep peacefully, knowing I removed a threat to my freedom and family.

“Vincent.” I grab his arm. “I wasn’t an informant. I didn’t know she was the police. She was my hairdresser. She—”

He lifts a single finger to his lips, telling me to be quiet.

Mikey continues. “Her superiors also had reason to believe she was involved with a soldier.”

“Tony Rossi,” I whisper.

“Correct,” Mikey affirms. “In every report Delaney filed, Antonio Rossi was noticeably missing. It raised red flags. Especially when security cameras caught him leaving the building in which Roberto Ferrari was found dead. Delaney’s report insisted his sister, Bianca, was the last one to see Roberto alive.”

I frown. “*What?*”

“She was going off-book,” Enzo comments.

“After Bianca married Vincent, we knew Bianca’s cooperation—if there was any, to begin with—was unlikely to move forward. Her CI was dead, and she was too close to Antonio Rossi. She was pulled from the case.”

“When?” the three men ask at the same time.

“Six months or so.”

“*Fuck,*” Vincent spits.

“She asked for a leave of absence after losing her mind following her removal. She maintained her cover was safe. She was convinced she could turn Bianca into a reliable CI.”

“No,” I breathe, my skin hot to the touch. I scratch at my neck.

“Her superiors were not convinced, and she attacked her superior officers, demanding they rescind their instructions. Her leave of absence was granted indefinitely.”

I believed this woman was my *friend*. My mind is a haze of muddled interactions. I trek our encounters, working to find any hint of the lies she lived. Am I that stupid? I loved her and was convinced that I could trust her. I shared my biggest fears and darkest thoughts, and she was playing me the

whole time, reporting back to law enforcement that I was a gullible brat who would help her destroy my family.

“She’s off-fucking-grid,” Leo surmises.

“It would seem so,” Mikey agrees. “The feds have been pulled into the murder of Andre Greco and the abduction of Gabriella Smith.”

“Call through updates as you receive them,” Leo says before ending the call.

“Smith,” Enzo snorts. “Inventive.”

“I swear to God, Vinnie, I was not an informant.” I move into his line of sight. “I didn’t know who she was. She did my hair, we were friends, she told me about Tony, and I told her... about marrying you,” I finish quietly.

“Vinnie?” Leo snorts.

Vincent whirls on him, his anger full bridled. “Say it again, and I’ll happily wrap barbed wire around your neck and smile as you fucking bleed.”

“No one thinks you’re an informant, Bianca,” Enzo interrupts with an irritated sigh. “We knew you were friends with her. You can’t do anything without us knowing. Calm the fuck down.”

I step back, shoulders curling in, head dropping in embarrassment.

“Leo, have Tony meet us here fucking ASAP,” Enzo demands. “Let’s see if he knows where his bitch in blue is.”

“Does this mean Roberto knew about Gabbi?”

All three men look at me.

“Roberto wouldn’t have known he and Gabbi were related,” Leo surmises. “If he did know of her existence, he was holding it as a trump card. Dickhead died with it too.”

Tony arrives within fifteen minutes, confusion muddling his features when he enters Vincent’s and my apartment.

“Sit,” Enzo instructs. “Talk to me about your whore.”

Tony sits cautiously. “Whore?” He glances at me, then back at the boss.

“Trixie, the bitch you were fucking on the regular. *Outside* work hours.”

“I—”

“Don’t lie,” Leo cuts in. “We’re a little pressed for time.”

Tony slides his hands over his trousers. “I fucked her. She wanted more. I strung her along. May’ve told her I loved her a few times but that we couldn’t be together.”

“Did you?” Enzo slides his forefinger across his bottom lip. “Love her?”

Tony shakes his head. “No.”

“Hm. She’s taken something of mine, of *ours*,” he corrects. “And if she hurts a hair on her head, I will force you to scalp her while I watch.”

The color seeps from Tony’s face.

“Where would she go if she were hiding?”

Panic seizes Tony’s ability to speak. “I... I don’t *know*.”

Vincent growls, stepping closer. I long to reach out and soothe him, but I keep my distance, afraid for myself because of my stupidity.

“Where did she take you, Antonio?” I ask. “Did you take her anywhere?”

He struggles to pull his gaze away from Enzo, fear monopolizing his attention. “My place. Her place.”

“Addresses,” Leo demands.

Tony recites them absently.

I want Vincent’s attention. I want to know that he *knows* I would never betray him. I want, *need*, that reassurance.

“I want everyone to be activated in this search.” Enzo stands. “Leo, send it down the line. Forward the picture of Trixie, and I’ll send you one of Gabriella. Get it to every capo and their soldiers. They’re to pull in every favor they know. Find this bitch. Dead or alive. I don’t give a shit. But if a hair on Gabriella’s head is missing, I’ll kill anyone responsible. Am I clear?”

Leo nods, pulling out his phone.

“How the fuck are you gonna explain Gabriella?” Vincent snarls. “We’ll save her only to force her straight into a family fucking grave.”

Enzo’s eyes narrow. “I meant what I fucking said. Anyone threatens her, and I’ll rip them limb from fucking limb.”

Vincent steps closer. “*Why?*”

Enzo smirks. “Don’t ask me questions you don’t want answers to.”

“Vincent,” I call out.

“Go back to the fucking room, Bianca.”

“I’m gonna stay right here.”

He whirls on me. “Why don’t you follow my fucking demands? I need to know you’re fucking safe. I can’t concentrate on saving her if I’m worried about you too,” he bellows.

“Being down here instead of the bedroom doesn’t diminish my safety,” I placate. “I love Gabriella. I want to be useful, and I don’t want to be alone.”

Vincent’s eyes soften.

Leo ignores us all. “Dante checked Tony’s place, and Cosimo turned over Trixie’s apartment. No sign of her or Gabbi.”

“Has someone checked the salon or the club? She had friends in both places. She might reach out. The girls need to know she’s not to be trusted,” I murmur.

“You heard her, Rossi.” Enzo keeps his eyes trained on me. “Your father knows we’re searching for Trixie. He fucks enough whores to know their weaknesses, slit their Achilles, make someone talk.”

My lips twist in distaste.

“Yes, boss.” Tony leaves without another word.

“You don’t think she’ll hurt her, do you?” I turn to Vincent. “She’s a police officer. She swore an oath to serve and protect. Why hurt an innocent girl?”

Vincent doesn’t answer, but Enzo does.

“When you corner a wild animal, Bianca, they panic. They’ll do anything to protect themselves. Even hurt the innocent.”

Tears well in my eyes, but I refuse to let Enzo see them.

“I should be doing something,” Vincent growls, pacing back and forth.

“What could you do, Necktie? We wouldn’t even know whose throat you could sever.”

Vincent’s gaze slices toward me, but I keep my face passive.

“Fucking dumb bitch,” Leo barks, a loud laugh transforming his face and grabbing everyone’s attention. “Delaney has reached out to an agent in her unit.”

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TWENTY-FOUR

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GABRIELLA



She paces back and forth, thumb of one hand caught between her teeth, the other hand gripping her gun in unrestrained panic.

I'm so mad I didn't place her face the day she accosted Bianca on the street. Granted, she's changed her appearance a lot since I last saw her.

Her mousy brown hair is now thick waves of blond extensions. They now hang unkempt around her face. She's skinnier than I remember, the strength in her frame lost, having given way to visible bones. Her skin is a shade or two darker than the porcelain I remember. It's an artificial change, like the extensions, keeping her the character she seems to have lost herself in.

"Must be a fall from grace being a decorated detective to sucking sleazy cock for a dodgy lead."

Her hand drops from her mouth. "I'll be a fucking hero after this." She doesn't quite believe her statement, the shake in her voice too poignant to ignore.

"That so?"

"I'll take down Cosa Nostra. *Me*." She stabs her finger at her chest.

I scoff, turning away dismissively. "My mom saw you for the snake you were." I speak to the peeling wallpaper of the cheap motel she's holed us up in. "Even protecting me, she refused to give up the family."

The room smells like stale cigarette smoke, cheap sex, a stagnant taste of mold, and the right amount of desperation to eat away at your soul the moment you step inside.

“She was weak.” She moves the stained curtain of the single window aside, peeking out.

My lip twists up in distaste. “On the contrary, she was the strongest woman I’ve ever known.”

Krista Delaney hounded my mother for years. *Years*. She begged, she pleaded, she threatened. But Rita Romano held steady. She knew the consequences of giving in to Krista’s demands. She might have been unfaithful, but she was no turncoat.

Her face scrunches up in confusion. “She had the opportunity to take down one of the biggest crime syndicates in the country.”

“What’s your point?” I provoke.

A task once set by her employer has grown into an obsession. She’s no longer thinking straight. Blinded by her end goal, the world around her is creeping in, forcing her to make mistakes.

She inhales deeply, her frustration heightening with every second that passes.

“I’d say my mother was loyal. Trustworthy,” I declare, knowing that’s exactly who my mother was.

“Yet,” she mocks, “she fucked another man to have a bastard child.”

Bitch.

I swallow the animosity her insult brings.

“You can’t help who you love. You should know that better than anyone,” I sneer. “Tony Rossi know you’re the enemy?”

Her fists clench.

“Also, you’re one to talk.” I pull my hand forward, attempting to dislodge the cuff it’s caught within. “You tried to fuck Vincent when you knew he was married.”

“Married?” She laughs. “Forcing a child into matrimony hardly counts as a happy marriage.”

“Vincent and Bianca are happy.”

She rolls her eyes. “She’s brainwashed.”

I can’t deny I thought the same thing when my mother explained how weddings in the family take place. But seeing Vincent and Bianca, there is a fierce love between them. It’s not forced. It blossomed from mutual trust and respect.

“It’ll happen to you too, you know that, right?”

I scowl.

“They’ll tie you to some criminal who will give zero fucking shits about you.”

What old sicko am I supposed to marry?

Enzo suggested Leo.

Enzo. Suggested. Leo.

Lorenzo’s face pops into my head, and I close my eyes, ridding the smirk in his eyes from the forefront of my mind.

“You call them criminals,” I say, pulling her attention. “Yet you murdered Andre in cold blood. He was innocent.”

My voice is haunted. The image of Krista shooting Bianca’s driver in the chest without a beat of hesitation, heavy enough to make my throat thicken with emotion.

“I didn’t mean for that to happen.” She pleads with me to believe her, but I don’t.

“What about the second time you shot him?” I condemn. “In the head after he was bleeding out on the floor?”

Shame turns her face away.

“You’ve lied, manipulated, cheated, stolen, threatened, kidnapped, *killed*. All in the name of justice.” Krista turns back to me, jaw wired shut, nostrils flaring, eyes glazing over in anger or remorse, I couldn’t be sure.

“How does your moral compass differ from theirs, Detective Delaney? What makes their actions criminal and yours heroic?”

She swallows audibly.

“You’re as much a criminal as the men you have fantastical ideals about ridding from society. Only you’re more dangerous because you break the law under the guise of being one of the good guys.”

“I *am* one of the good guys,” she implores, the gun waving by the side of her face making me believe anything but.

“Why take me hostage at gunpoint then? Why keep me shackled”—I shake the arm handcuffed to the headboard—“against my will?”

She moves quickly, sitting on the edge of the bed. “You don’t know these people, Gabriella.” Her eyes have lost focus, and her hands shake with a maniacal impetuosity. “You’re right. Your mom *was* a good person. She got you away from them.”

She’s flipped within seconds. First, my mom was weak. Now, she’s a fucking hero.

“I can keep you safe.” She smiles, and the gesture is more frightening than reassuring.

It’s scary being in the presence of another as their mind gives up reality. Krista’s mental health is wilting right before my eyes. I want to help her, but I’m not sure I can. She’s lost to her fantasies, ready to be swallowed by imminent death.

She wraps a cold palm around my ankle. “I promise I can.”

She believes her statement, and I want to slap the stupid out of her.

“If you agree to become an informant, we can rid the stench of their criminal activity from Manhattan. Gabriella, we can do something good. *Together.*”

I kick my leg, removing her touch from my skin.

“I don’t want to help *you.*”

She growls in frustration, standing from the bed. “Why? Because you think Vincent *cares* about you?”

Vincent. Enzo. Bianca.

“He does,” I declare quietly. “He’s my brother.”

She laughs. “He has you in hiding because he can’t be certain he can keep you safe.”

My eyebrows pull together.

“Anyone can fucking see that, Gabriella,” she yells at me. “He doesn’t trust Joey Romano not to kill you. He’ll keep you a secret, locked away with no life. *I* can offer you more.”

It’s as if she forced her fingers directly into my brain and pulled out my worst fear. Vincent is no closer to introducing me to the family than he was the first day I approached him.

I push my arm upward, relieving the cut of the cuffs on my wrist.

“Your *more* means moving back into witness protection, pretending I’m someone else, constantly looking over my shoulder. I’ll be alone. Forever. What future is one where you can’t let anyone in?”

“One that’s safe.”

“Yet the only time I’ve ever felt danger is here, at this moment, with you.”

“I’m sorry,” she apologizes. “I truly am. I couldn’t have you unraveling everything I’ve built. I saw the recognition on your face. It was only a matter of time before you placed me. I had to make sure you didn’t tell anyone.”

My legs ache from lying in one spot for too long. I shift, pulling my knees up. “How do you know I already haven’t told everyone?”

That gives her pause, and she checks out the window once again. Pulling the curtain back into place, she shakes her head. “I’d be dead already. They wouldn’t have left you alone.”

She's not wrong. *If* I had remembered earlier. Unfortunately, my memory had only triggered moments before Krista turned up at my apartment. I'd managed to scribble her name down messily before Andre was dead, and she was waving a gun in my face.

I'm certain Vincent would've seen her name by now. He already knew she was in my apartment. There was no other reason for Andre's presence. Andre died trying to protect me. The moment he realized he'd been shot slides into my mind with the recognition of his name, the split second of fear that pierced his eyes when he accepted his fate. I close my eyes, but it only strengthens the memory, and I open them again, hating the way they sting. Andre was innocent. He wasn't embroiled in the lawlessness of the family. Fuck, he was a driver.

"Why are you crying?"

I wipe away my tears with the hand not cuffed. "I'm handcuffed to a bed by a police detective with a hero complex who is holding me hostage after she shot a man in cold blood. I'm fucking scared."

"I don't want to hurt you."

I blow out an angry breath. "Tell that to Andre's corpse."

She uses the butt of the gun to rub her chin. "I panicked."

Voices echo from the parking lot outside, and I consider screaming for help. I'd have seconds before she reached me. I could yell loud enough to alert the outside world of my presence. But she'd *panic*, and I don't plan on dying at seventeen with matching bullet wounds to Andre.

"Who are you looking for?"

"I reached out to an agent in my unit," she answers absently.

This chick is next-level stupid. "Krista, there is no outcome here where you walk away free. You know that, right? You'll either be arrested or shot. It just depends on who arrives first."

She closes her eyes tightly. "No. *I did right*. I am *not* leaving empty-handed. I gave four years of my fucking life to these criminals. I *have* to

win.”

“I think you’ve already lost,” I whisper. “Look at yourself. Is this who you want to be?”

“Shut up,” she bites out.

Quick taps on the front door startle us both, and I attempt to shift higher up the bed. “Krista, unlock me. Please.”

“Shhh.”

Another tap.

“Delaney, it’s Danny.”

Her shoulders sag with relief, and she moves toward the door. Cracking it open, she peeks out, then closes it over again, rushing to unlock it and allow her friend Danny access.

He steps into the room with another man close on his heels.

“No.” Krista lifts her gun, stepping back. “I told you to come alone.”

Danny lifts his hands in surrender. “This is Mikey.” He gestures to the man behind him. “He’s good police, Delaney.”

She eyes the young cop, Mikey. He holds her stare.

Her gaze flicks back to Danny in indecision.

Mikey’s eyes cut to me, and I divert my face, not wanting to witness any potential carnage; mine, hers, or theirs. I send off a prayer, hoping my mom’s watching me and keeping me safe like she promised she would.

“She’s not injured?” Danny questions.

“Of course not,” she answers.

“You said she was willing, Krista.” He steps closer to the bed.

I lift my head. “Please let me go,” I plead softly.

“She is.” Krista’s gun hasn’t moved, held protectively in front of her and aimed at Mikey, who remains cautious of her, sticking near the entrance of the room to keep the peace.

I shake my head, denying her claim.

“Why is she handcuffed?” he pushes.

“Precaution.”

Danny’s bottom lip tips out in consideration. “They’re pushing pretty hard to find her, Krista. Every contact they have has been activated. It’s only a matter of time before they find you.”

Krista nods. “I expected as much. That’s why I called you.”

Something is off. Being surrounded by police, I should feel safe, yet my anxiety escalates with each passing second. My skin prickles with unease. My gut is screaming for me to recognize the danger I’m in, and I want to acknowledge its panic, but I’m trapped, so I push it down. I clench my fists and release. I inhale deeply through my nose, forcing myself to welcome the way my lungs inflate before releasing my breath slowly. I bend my toes in my shoes, my muscles protesting all the way up my legs before I release the tension. None of it helps. My heart rate only increases, and I begin to perspire.

I look at Krista. The small sliver of relief she had demonstrated on Danny’s arrival has vanished. The hysteria in her eyes flicks between the two men overcrowding the room. Her hand tightens around her weapon.

Danny is too calm. Too flippant with the situation. He’s not afraid. There is no urgency in his conversation or movements. He’s waiting, and he’s doing it patiently. I’m not sure I want to find out for what, though.

Maneuvering around the bed, I’m forced to meet his eyes. “You had to call me.” His words are directed at Krista, but his eyes never leave mine. The incongruity of reassurance projected from this dangerous man sends a troubling spike through my body. “*I* had to call Mikey,” he murmurs, reaching for his Glock.

Mikey hums in agreement.

I pull my attention from Danny, seeking out the quiet man by the door.

“And *I* had to call in reinforcements,” Mikey finally speaks, his voice matter-of-fact and no less assuring.

Krista swallows. “Reinforcements?”

“Yeah.” Danny smirks, but she misses it. Her stare caught on Mikey in expectation.

The motel room door flies open, the aged wood cracking against the wall in an ear-piercing clap.

I scramble into a ball, slamming my eyes shut.

“Knock, knock.” Leo’s voice filters through the room with mirth.

I know I should feel relief, but being trapped on the bed with the threat of errant bullets forces my heart into my throat.

“Move,” Enzo snaps, and I open my eyes to watch him and Vincent push into the room, guns at the ready.

Enzo’s eyes seek me out immediately, fury morphing his face from guarded to wildly reckless.

I avert my gaze immediately, seeking out my brother.

“I’ll shoot her before you do me,” Krista threatens, her gun now pointing at me. Her hand doesn’t shake, the promise in her threat one-hundred-percent real.

My teeth clank together with the tremble in my jaw. I slam it shut.

“I trusted you,” she bites out in Danny’s direction.

“You fucked up,” he tells her. “You fucked up,” he repeats. “And you put yourself here.”

Her head shakes so fast that I pull at my cuffs in panic, the clusterfuck in front of me escalating with every rushed beat of my heart.

“I would lower your gun.” Vincent’s presence engulfs the room, the quiet threat as powerful as the sound of a sailing bullet. “Because if by some miracle you walk away today—”

“You won’t,” Enzo promises.

“There isn’t a trace of land you can find in this fucked-up world where I won’t track you down to. And when I find you, I won’t just kill you. I’ll drain every last drop of blood from your traitorous body, and I’ll do that

while you're forced to watch. You'll stare at your own reflection as you die, knowing that you murdered yourself."

Krista's fingers pulse against the trigger. She sniffs, not game enough to move to wipe the tears falling over her cheeks. She blinks rapidly, her tears not allowing her to focus. She knows she's going to die. Her only decision right here is whether she takes me along with her.

I yank at the cuff. "No," I cry. "This has nothing to do with me."

The barrel of Krista's gun mocks me with frenzy, and I know she's unhinged enough to take my life.

The five men in the room taking aim at the disgraced detective do nothing to ease my fear. Even if they shoot first, there's no guarantee she won't fire a round off before her heart stops.

Danny pushes down on his trigger, and I can't help but feel a sense of pity for the woman who became consumed with something she never had a hope of surviving.

Bile rushes up my throat at the ear-piercing bang.

Krista falls to the ground, and I scream.

TWENTY-FIVE



“*Dolcezza.*”

Our bedroom is dark, our thick curtains closed to remove all traces of light.

“Is it over?” The emptiness in my voice sounds out of place with the heavy emotion sitting upon my chest.

“Yes.” The edge of our bed dips with his weight. He switches on the lamp on our bedside table, and I close my eyes against the sudden intrusion of light.

“Is Gabbi safe?”

He texted me earlier confirming this already, but a message doesn’t seem sufficient to convey the truth in his words. I want to hear him say it.

“Safe and unharmed,” he assures me.

The pressure on my chest gives slightly. “Where is she?”

He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear, but I can’t bring myself to look at him.

“In her apartment. She wanted to sleep.”

“She’s alone?”

“Enzo is there.” I ignore the spike of annoyance in his tone.

“And Tri—Krista?”

“Dead,” he says without remorse.

I feel relief and heartbreak all at once. A sob coughs from my throat, and I slam my lips shut, trying to stop another from escaping.

“*Bianca*,” he breathes.

“Will you kill me?” I wipe my nose with the sleeve of my sweater, not bothering to lift my head from my pillow.

“Why would I kill you?” His hand pauses against my cheek, my hair held limply in his fingers.

My lips hurt from the salt of my tears, and I pull them into my mouth, moistening them. “*Trixie*.” I shake my head. “Whoever she was, I thought she was my friend. I told her things.”

“What things?” Dropping my hair, he uses a thumb to dry the tears from my skin.

“I told her my plan to have Roberto killed.”

He smiles sadly. “Baby. That was your secret. Not ours.”

I sniff unceremoniously. “I told her that Roberto was dead before Tony could kill him.”

He picks up my hand, kissing my knuckles and then the inside of my wrist. “Again, baby, your secret.”

I had resigned myself to death. I was certain Lorenzo had placated me in Gabriella’s apartment earlier. Krista all but signed my death warrant by declaring me an informant. I didn’t have many friends, and the one I did let in was stringing me along with the hope I’d sell out my family. She held no affection for me. I feel stupid and unloved and frightened, but mostly, I feel sad.

“You doing okay?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Tell me how to fix it,” he rasps. The helplessness in his voice mirrors how I feel inside.

“You can’t,” I confess. “Andre was my friend. I loved him.” My voice breaks, and I let go of a shaky sob.

“I know you did.”

“It’s my fault,” I slur, my lips sticking together with the excess saliva coating my tongue. “I asked you to employ him for me. If he still worked for Papa, he’d be alive.”

“Bianca,” he soothes. “This isn’t your fault. Trixie pulled the trigger.”

“Krista,” I correct. “Trixie didn’t exist. Attributing blame to someone who has lost their life seems an insult to the dead, no matter how much she deserved it.”

“If you can’t blame her. Blame me,” he suggests easily. “*I* called Andre. I asked him to go to the apartment. He was a driver, not fucking security.”

Guilt seizes his words, and I lean into his hand. “That’s not your fault. *I* brought Andre into our lives.”

“*Bianca.*”

“He cared about me, Vinnie,” I beseech. “He was one of the few people who *really* cared about me.”

I’m showing my soul, baring my greatest weakness and most shameful flaw. I’m alone.

Vincent shakes his head. “He did care about you, but he wasn’t one of a *few.*”

I shrug. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I care about you,” he murmurs.

I pull from his touch, my already broken heart splintering further. “Care for me?” I choke out. “How significantly reassuring.”

“*Dolcezza.*”

I roll over, giving him my back. “I’d like to be left alone.”

“I won’t do that.”

“Please,” I beg.

“No.”

Stuffing my hands under my pillow, I snuggle in, trying to reconcile the fact that I’ll never see Andre again. I swallow the caustic reality that I’m so

desperate for love and connection that I fell under the spell of a woman standing on my heart to further her career. “I’m sure you have work to do. Police to corrupt to cover up Trixie’s death.”

His warmth hasn’t moved from my back, and his hand comes up, resting on my hip. “She was shot by her own people,” he confesses gently. “I don’t have to cover anything up.”

A wave of relief rolls from the crown of my head to the very tips of my toes. I don’t understand the feeling. I don’t care that Krista is dead, but I don’t know how I’d feel if my husband was the one who rid the earth of her presence.

I shift forward, shunning his touch. “Well, I’m sure you have things to work out about bringing the family into saving Gabriella.”

“Why are you trying to get me to leave?”

I want to scream at him, wishing he could understand my need to break *alone*. I want to cry into my pillow and mourn the loss of one of my only friends, and I want to do it without being reassured or soothed. I don’t want someone to tell me it’s all going to be okay because right now, it’s not.

“Why won’t you tell me you love me?” I roll back toward Vincent, my red-rimmed eyes stinging with new tears.

He has always stood by his notion that the darkness within him didn’t allow for the light of love. He *cares* for me. I just have to hope he cares enough to escape the hell of my question to save me further heartbreak for one day.

“What?”

“I tell you I love you all the time,” I push. “I was certain you loved me too. But the truth is, I don’t know what the intimate side of love feels like. You refuse to tell me, so I no longer know what to believe.”

I suck in a broken breath, shattering the sound further. I want him to leave. I want him to remove himself from the room. I want him to feel as

guilty as I do, disappointed that he can't bring himself to tell me what I need.

"Everyone has told you they have loved you all your life," he says blandly, his lips tipped down in a frown that I long to reach out and soothe. "Your father. Your mother. They told you they loved you, yet they treated you like a possession. I wasn't certain the words meant anything to you."

I flip over onto my back, surprise making my voice clear. "What?"

He shifts closer. "I'll tell you I love you every minute of every day for the rest of my life if that's what you want."

He'll give me the words, but it's not enough. "I need it to be *true*, Vinnie."

"True?" he tests, louder than I expected. "Bianca, I'm the only person in this world that has loved you the way you deserve. I know *that* to be fucking true."

I sit up, wiping my face. "I don't understand."

"Your mother and father love you because they're obligated to. They also do it because you can offer them something."

My heart knows his words to be true, but they cut me all the same.

"Your sister loves you because she *needs* to. You protect her."

I shrink away from him, my worst fear now confirmed. "You think I'm unlovable?"

He shakes his head. "*I* love you without obligation, without expectation. My love is the truest you'll ever feel, the deepest you'll ever know. I thought you knew that."

My chin wobbles. "I didn't," I whisper.

"*Sei il mio universo*," he declares. *You're my universe.* "*Sei la miglior cosa che mi sia capitata.*" *You're the best thing that ever happened to me.*

Vincent rarely speaks Italian. I've heard cuss words mumbled in our home language here or there, but never complete sentences, and never

spoken directly to another. But the urgent need in the way he talks right now has forsaken his ability to speak English. He doesn't have the words.

"I love you, Bianca." He moves onto the bed completely, cupping my face in his hands. "I love you to the point of obsession." He kisses my lips. "I saw you, and I knew. I knew that you would be mine, and I would be yours. That this world would be ours."

"I..."

"I told you I had no capacity for love, afraid you would never find it in you to love me back. I loved you before you knew I was an option. You knew I existed, but you had no idea of the way my heart longed to beat your name."

I throw myself into his arms, wrapping myself around him, securing every inch of my body to his. "*Ti amo. Il mio cuore è tuo.*"

I love you. My heart is yours.

Needing more, I pull at Vincent's clothes. He wastes no time in giving into my silent plea. Kissing me one last time, he slides off the bed, shedding his clothes with little finesse.

Inch by inch, his skin is bared for me, and I let myself drink in the perfection of the man I was forced to marry, the man I've carved out my heart for.

"You keep looking at me like that, Bianca, and I can't be held accountable for the carnage I'll cause your body."

A grin forms on my face.

He drags his bottom lip through his teeth, ringed fingers massaging the strong line of his jaw roughly.

"Get naked, Bianca," he commands. "I won't wait a second longer than necessary for your pussy to welcome my cock."

Pulling my sweater over my head, I throw it to his growing pile of clothes.

"Perfect just-ripened tits."

My eyes widen.

“You have no idea how much you turn me on, do you?”

I slide off the bed, dragging my pants over my ass and down my legs.

“Knowing your virgin cunt will only ever swallow *my* dick,” he growls. “Your untouched ass will *strangle* me until I come when I finally bury myself inside...” He drops his boxers, his cock swollen and angry and pointing directly at me. “Your lush fucking tits will only ever feel my tongue, hands, and teeth.” He squeezes the base of his cock, moaning my name. “That sweet mouth”—he climbs onto the bed—“will only ever beg for my cock and my tongue.”

I’m transfixed by the man before me.

“Every inch of you is mine, Bianca. You have only ever been mine, and for every breath you take, you will remain mine.”

Back against the headboard, hand wrapped around his impressive length, he strokes himself, watching as I crawl onto the bed toward him.

Ducking my head as I reach him, I move to take him into my mouth, but he stops me with a finger under my chin. “Not tonight, baby. I want your pussy to squeeze me while I look into your beautiful fucking eyes and tell you I love you.”

I’m overwhelmed and consumed by a love I never imagined existed. I had fantasies, sure, but none of them have come close to the crippling reality of true love. I’m lost and no longer in control of who I am as a person. Everything I am is a dedication to the man before me, and I’ve never in my life felt more alive. Vincent invigorates me and drives me to claim my power and strength with the rapt attention I hold over him.

I settle on his lap, my legs circling his waist. Hands to my hips, he moves his thumbs in soft circles over my hip bones.

“Give me your lips, baby.”

I move toward him, my mouth meeting his in an agonizingly slow caress of lips.

His legs, currently stretched out beneath me, move inward, fitting themselves under my ass. We're as close to one whole being as two people can manage, and still, I want to be closer.

Hands to the headboard, I lift myself, and he takes my silent plea, positioning himself at my entrance.

"Make it last, Bianca. Take it all and do it slowly."

My nipples brush the hard-cut frame of his chest as I sink down, swallowing every inch of him into my body. Tongue dipped out, he licks at my bow in my top lip. My tongue chases his, flicking against the eager muscle in a need to taste his love.

"So big," I moan, flexing my hips back and forth to adjust to his size.

"We know your pussy can take it," he groans. "Greedy little whore she is."

I drop down quickly, his words eliciting a heady whimper from my parted lips.

He growls. "Don't rush me, baby. I don't care if it takes hours. You won't be finished coming until I've convinced that sensitive heart and tenacious brain of yours that I'm so fucking in love with you I don't know how to breathe without your name on my lips."

I kiss him, afraid he'll see my tears.

"They better be happy fucking tears I can taste," he murmurs against my lips only moments later.

My tongue strokes inside his mouth, and my hips move in slow circles on his lap.

He groans, and I change direction.

"*Fuck*," he hisses.

"*Vinnie*," I moan.

He swallows his name, our lips fused and tongues dancing.

Thick arms snaking around my body, he pulls me in closer. I claw at his back, beautifully devastated by the tornado of feelings wreaking havoc

inside my body. My stomach bubbles with euphoria; I'm warm, heat pulsing within me. I'm weightless, *free*, my entire being a cloud of vulnerability and peacefulness. My clit throbs with obsession, a recurrent thrum in time with my pulse. *Boom. Boom. Boom.* My skin tingles with anticipation, Vincent's touch soothing me in the same way it makes me burn with longing.

He kisses me, and I want to cry with the need for it to never end. He looks into my eyes, and I beg him with my inability to blink to *never* stop. I want everything he has. I need to grab all he's offering me and bury it inside my heart for an eternity, knowing I'd live forever with the way he loves me.

A familiar tug pulls low in my body. My legs pull tighter, and Vincent's kiss deepens. My hips move faster, and a deep groan vibrates through my chest. His or mine, I can't be sure, but tears leak from my eyes, and my nails rip into his back, my need to be closer still making him bleed.

I come on a shout, our kiss breaking, my head thrown back on a strangled cry.

Vincent's lips meet my throat, licking and kissing and tasting my skin.

"My sweet," he growls, hands tightening at my hips to remind me to keep moving. "Come back to me."

I right my head, eyes unfocused and breathing ragged.

"So pretty when you come. I love you. Now kiss me."

I do as he asks, my lazy lips caressing his.

His thick fingers slide over my stomach, moving downward.

I whimper in protest.

He smiles. "I know you have more for me, wife."

I shake my head as his thumb pushes against my clit. My hips stagger to a stop, and he shakes his head. "Fuck me slowly, *dolcezza*, while I play with your pretty clit."

My eyes roll back, and I push my hips forward, then back. He keeps his thumb at my clit, and with every forward thrust, the pressure almost buckles

me.

“Vinnie,” I whimper.

“*Ti amo*. I love you.”

“I love you,” I echo.

“How much?” he groans.

I keep my hips forward, rolling my clit against his thumb over and over again. The feeling a torture I can’t stop myself from needing.

“I’d die for you,” I tell him. “I’d kill for you,” I confess, drunk on lust and high on love.

“The ultimate sacrifice.”

I cry out. “For you. Only you.”

“Good girl,” he praises. “Now come again.”

My teeth sink into his shoulder, biting hard enough that the metallic taste of blood teases my tongue.

Delirious from pleasure, I don’t even feel us move until I’m on my back. Vincent above me as he powers into my body in unrelenting thrusts.

I can scarcely breathe. My lids so heavy I look up at his face with hooded eyes. My body is weighed down by pleasure, and all I can do is lay there and take the love he gives my body.

His breathing is ragged, his gray eyes shading with salacious need. “I love you so fucking much, Bianca. You’re mine. Eternally.”

“In life and death,” I agree.

“Life and death,” he groans, dropping his head to kiss me as he explodes inside me.

EPILOGUE

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VINCENT



The incandescence of the fireplace warms her face, causing the balls of her cheeks to flush an enticing shade of red. She squints at the flames dancing before us, her mind at ease and her thoughts elsewhere.

The past two months have been stressful for her. Her relationship with Gabriella has grown into one of mutual love and friendship, but my sister has even begun testing Bianca's last sliver of patience. She complains about us *hiding* her but fights against the security of a marriage that I know can protect her. It's not even the fantastical idea of falling in love herself that has her stonewalling. I honestly just think she enjoys being a gigantic pain in my ass. She turns eighteen in two days, and she'll be marrying Leonardo days later even if I have to drag her down the aisle by her fucking hair.

Bianca and I needed a break. With everything that has transpired over the past six or so months, I haven't had time to enjoy her. I mean, I've *enjoyed* her, but not without lies or distractions or rogue FBI agents or troublesome siblings cutting into our time, *alone*, as husband and wife. The cabin seemed like the perfect place for the two of us to hide away for a few days. Gabriella was agreeable enough to take that tiny animal Bianca assures me is a dog. Thank fuck, because the minuscule creature is the ultimate cock block.

“I find it arbitrarily attractive when you sit in that chair.”

I sip my whiskey, liking the casual slur of her words. She’s only had two glasses of wine, but it doesn’t take much for her to edge over the precipice of sober into a lustful tipsy.

“I want to strip you naked and drag my tongue over every sinful inch of your body every second of every day, no matter *where* you sit.”

Her eyes narrow, but the way her teeth pull at her bottom lip tells an entirely different narrative to the one her pretty brown eyes are attempting to portray.

“Your rings are also oddly seductive.” She runs a hand absently over the high ponytail she’s pulled her hair into.

It’s done purposely to make me wild. Her beauty is incomparable no matter how she wears her hair. But when she pulls it back, showing me the entirety of her face, I can’t focus on anything else. Her seductive eyes; eternally widened with wonder and want and a violent need to be loved, the high cut of her cheekbones, her thick pink lips; forever parted in an unintended pout, and the flawless satin of her tanned skin—my wife is the fucking sun. It hurts to look at her, but I fixate on her unmeasured grace until my eyes ache and my heart is nothing but an obsessive ode to the way I need her. I’m captivated and haunted and gratefully lost to the infliction of love.

I grin, stretching my fingers out over my glass. “Your pussy is exquisite, and I’d very much like it on my face.”

Her mouth drops open. “I’m complimenting the mundane things I find attractive about you.”

I let the smoke of my whiskey dance on my tongue before swallowing it. “And I’m telling you all the ways I’d like to make you come.”

She’s dressed only in a robe, and I can see the hard cut of her nipples through the pearly silk gathered at her chest.

I remember the first moment I laid eyes on a matured Bianca Rossi. Granted, I didn't recognize it was *her*, or that she was only sixteen, so I sat at a family Christmas party, sipping whiskey and imagining all the ways I could get the brunette beauty to scream my name. Laughing and gossiping with her sister, she was oblivious to my corrupt attentions. That only made me want her more.

Enzo noticed—of course he fucking did—and took great pleasure in destroying my fantasy by enlightening me with the truth; both of her age and her promised nuptials to none other than Salvatore fucking Bianchi. I was livid, first at myself for being a seedy motherfucker, but mostly that the asshole from the Outfit would taste something that I was certain was meant for me.

I watched her bloom over the next few years, my fantasies growing darker and more depraved. I spent hours thinking about laying her out on the grand entrance of her mother and father's home—with every asshole watching—and lapping at her untouched cunt until she came on my face and begged me for more. I wanted to carve my name into the base of her spine like a vulgar stamp that promised she belonged to me and *only* me. I thought of ways to kill Salvatore, bloody and vengeful, for even *considering* touching her. I wanted to lock her away and keep her to myself, using her body in a way that would make her thank me for the privilege.

"I think you'd be a vision in this chair as well," I taunt. "Especially with my face as a cushion."

"You're so fucking dirty."

I tip the remainder of my drink into my mouth, discarding the glass roughly on the coffee table. "And you, my little whore, fucking love it."

"I do," she agrees readily.

Pushing off the armchair, I sit lazily on the floor, the armchair she finds so attractive at my back. With one leg bent upward, I rest my elbow on my knee. "Straddle my face, wife, and let me drown in your pussy."

Placing her wineglass delicately on the floor, she stands without delay, her thumbnail caught between her teeth. “Will you be able to breathe?”

I shrug. “I hope not. It kind of defeats the purpose of drowning.”

She laughs but moves closer, stopping only when she stands over me.

“I bet that cunt of yours is already nice and slick for me.”

She pulls on the tie of her robe, and it falls open, leaving her naked body on display. My mouth goes dry. She’s fucking perfection. Every inch of her skin calls to me, begging me to take ownership. I want that. She wants that.

Shrugging the silk back, she lets it slide off her shoulders and drop into a discarded pile on my lap.

“Show me how wet you are.”

She wastes no time, a hand cupping her cunt, ring and middle fingers pushing into her pussy.

She whimpers. Her fingers push in and out, but I grab her wrist. She smirks. “*Killjoy.*”

She lets me pull her fingers from her wet heat, and I move her hand to my mouth. I slide her fingers between my lips, the salty, sweet taste of her excitement coating my tongue. Savoring the taste of her, I drag her fingers reluctantly from my mouth.

Chest heaving, nipples cut like stone, she watches on with dilated pupils.

“Knees on the cushion.”

Resting the back of my head on the chair, I inhale her deeply as her pussy brushes over my face.

Knees on the chair, she adjusts once or twice to find a comfortable position.

“Now you’re gonna lower that sweet cunt to my mouth.”

Hands to the armrest, she lowers herself slowly. I grab her thighs, and she gasps. She’s close enough to my face that I can flick my tongue out to

taste her. She drops down farther at the first touch, and I smile.

Fingers bruising the soft skin of her inner thighs, I yank her down, and she yelps in surprise.

“Vinnie,” she moans out, her fight of uncertainty lost the moment her cunt secures itself against my eager mouth.

Pussy plastered against my face, my tongue laps at her clit, massaging the hardening knot. She’s so wet and so fucking soft. I drink her in. She moans and cries, and within *seconds*, her hips start moving. She rolls her pussy over my face, and I hum my approval.

“*Fuck*,” she breathes out, her hand finding my hair and pushing my head deeper into the cushion to let our eyes connect.

I suck her clit, and her movements stop, her eyes closed and mouth slack. She drives into my face ruthlessly, and I suck her harder.

“Vinnie.”

She begins grinding again like the good little whore she is. Her pussy swells beneath my lips.

My cock is so fucking hard, and I let go of her thighs, knowing she isn’t going to release the pressure of her cunt against my mouth.

I suck and lick and swallow her juices like a man fucking starved.

Hand in the waist of my sweats, I pull out my cock, groaning in relief at the cruel way I squeeze it.

I could blow. Two, maybe three quick strokes, and the way my wife rides my mouth would have me blowing ribbons of cum all over my hand.

“Oh, my *fucking* God.” Her whole body trembles above me. “Vinnie, I... *fuck*, I’m, *Jesus*...” She throws her head back with a throaty groan. “I’m gonna come. I’m... *Vinnie*.” Her weight falls onto my face, and she comes, hard and urgent. My tongue doesn’t stop. It bathes in her cum, drinking her in one sinful shudder at a time.

Eventually, she falls forward, her forehead hitting the backrest of the armchair.

I flick her clit with the tip of my tongue, and she pushes at the crown of my head. "No more."

I lick it again, just to prove a point, and she half growls, half moans, her pussy chasing my mouth.

"Greedy little whore." I kiss her clit then slide out from under her. "Don't move."

"Hm," she grinds out.

Thick beads of cum pool at my tip, begging to release in a sluice of dominance and passion.

"Bruise me, Vinnie," she mumbles against the soft material of the chair. "Fuck me like you own me."

I grunt in approval. "I *do* fucking own you."

She looks over her shoulder, eyes barely holding the ability to stay open with satisfaction. "Prove it."

A cocksure grin spears at my lips. "My filthy fucking whore." I slam inside her on a powerful drive of my hips. She screams out my name.

Wrapping the length of her ponytail around my palm, I yank her back, and she grunts in pain. Free hand to her throat, I squeeze.

"Cunt full of my dick, body at my mercy, breathing at my command." I squeeze her throat, demonstrating my power.

Her body shakes, and I want to laugh at how greedy she is for the potent combination of pain and pleasure.

"You better believe your heart can't fucking beat without my permission."

Her pussy clamps around me.

I grind my hips roughly against her ass. I pull out and slam back inside.

She struggles to swallow under my tight grip on her throat.

"Now let that pussy cry for me and make sure you say my name when she does so she knows who she fucking belongs to."

I release my hold on her neck, and she cries out, her voice hoarse, her body limp. “*Vinnie.*” Her body tightens and softens all at once. Her ability to hold herself up lost to her climax.

Arm sliding under her stomach, I hold her up, powering in and out, the chokehold she has on my dick making me grow inside her, balls drawing up, readying themselves to explode.

“*Ti amo,*” she cries softly, and it's my undoing. I slam forward one last time, emptying my soul inside her, knowing I belong to her more than she ever will to me. I'm a fucking slave for the woman before me. I'd destroy the world we live in for her and build a new one with my bare fucking hands *just* for her.

She lets go of a shuddering breath when I pull from her body.

Resting on her knees, she turns her head. “Kiss me.”

I waste no time giving in to her desperate demand. Hand to her throat, I draw her back toward me, fusing my lips to hers in a kiss that erases every last thought from my mind.

“I love you.”

Arm snaking up and around, she pulls my face deeper into hers. “I love you.”

Slowly pulling apart, I help her stand, lifting her chin with a single finger to place one last kiss on her lips.

“Another whiskey?”

The only phone with available reception rings, breaking into the harmonious atmosphere with a shrill flash of reality. “Thanks, baby,” I murmur, reaching for the phone.

“This better be a matter of life or death, or I'll have fun with a piece of barbed wire around your throat.”

“Leo's gone,” Enzo bites out.

“What do you mean *gone*?” My spine straightens.

“Sent me some half-assed text refusing to go through with marrying Gabbi, and now I can’t find him.”

I crack my neck. “I’m gonna fucking kill him.”

“You’ll wait in fucking line,” Enzo spits.

“Does Gabriella know?” I ask, watching Bianca lift my whiskey glass and sniff the amber liquid.

“No,” Enzo snaps. “I won’t give her the fucking satisfaction.”

“Enzo.”

“I fucking know,” he growls.

“We’ll come back tonight—” I sigh.

“No,” Enzo cuts me off. “I need time to fucking think, and I need to find my pansy-ass bitch of a younger brother. I’ll visit Gabriella tomorrow and let her know that her wedding may be delayed.”

“She’ll be heartbroken, I’m sure.”

Enzo grunts in irritation. “If Rita wasn’t already dead, I’d be in my right mind to shoot the bitch for dropping this dumpster fire into our laps.”

“Gabbi is innocent in all this,” I warn.

“She’s also a thorn in my fucking side. I’ve got more important shit to deal with than babysitting a teenager until I can force someone to marry her. I’ll see you in a few days.” He hangs up, and I pull the cell from my ear.

“What’s happened?” Bianca pauses at the edge of the carpet, her eyes wide with concern.

I throw my cell to the floor with a mumbled *fuck*, and drop into the armchair. “Leo’s fucking MIA. Just fucking texted Enzo saying he couldn’t go through with it.”

“Couldn’t go through with *what*?” She knows the answer already, but she forces me to say it aloud.

“He’s refusing to marry Gabriella.”

Silence storms between us, and I want to fucking tear this place apart with my bare hands.

I'd sorted this. Enzo and I, and Leo, *eventually* agreed that this was the only viable fucking solution. That little prick. If my sister is in any way threatened because of his disobedience, I'll kill him myself.

My wife watches me, her mind racing.

I don't know how else to fix this. Short of killing Big Joey and Dante for the *possible* threat they could impose, I'm fucking lost. I need Gabriella to be linked to a *boss*. Not a capo or a soldier, but someone who instills *fear* in the family. We closed ranks after the FBI agent's death, Gabriella's identity on a need-to-know basis. The hierarchy accepted it. From the rumors whispering their way through the cachet, thoughts are that she's a *goomah*. I guess that's preferable to the impending hazard the truth could uncover.

"Vinnie," Bianca tests.

I massage the bridge of my nose, and lifting my head, I watch as Bianca balances my glass to her lips, tipping it back to swallow my whiskey in one grimacing inhale.

She blinks, the uncertainty that had etched itself into her face now lost to her determination.

She kneels on the plush rug, looking up at me through the thick lashes, and I'm consumed by the desperate way I love her. She knows my frustration builds the moment a situation steps out of my control. I need the dominance of command, and she wants to give it to me.

From the first moment I saw her until now, I've wanted her and I've *loved* her. She not only understands the monster I am, but she accepts and *loves* me for it. *Fuck*, I'm forever ruined.

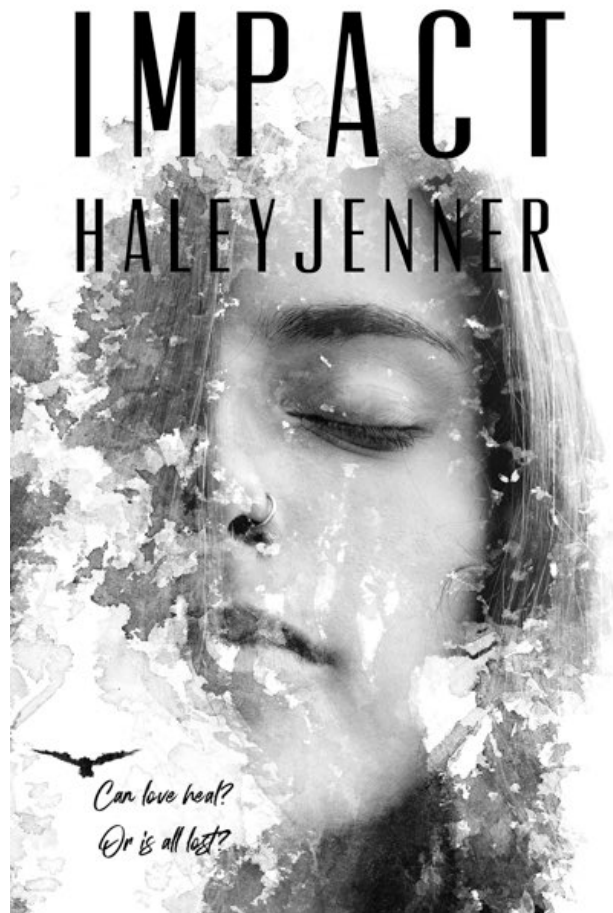
I let my tongue wet my lips, my nostrils flaring in want.

She sucks in a sharp breath, and I smile.

"*Crawl.*"



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A LOVE AFTER TRAUMA STANDALONE

Defeat. Surrender.

Varying ends of a depressing spectrum. *Polar* opposites. One signifying greater power. Strength. *Winning*. The other its counterpart. *Resignation*. A white flag waving so loudly it's a perfect symbol of your own submission.

Memories tend to be cataloged by reminders, the familiarity your senses recognize pulling past experiences back into the forefront of your mind. Voluntary or not, it doesn't matter. A smell, a taste, the feeling of touch, something you can see. They're appreciations your mind collects over time, building your life experience. Be it positive or negative.

I'd imagine most people would smell the cedar wood here in this room. The potent odor that tickles your nostrils, lingering with importance and command. For me, the smell is repugnant. *Suffocating*. One that will haunt me for the remainder of my days. So thick with my *own* defeat, with failure, I can't even manage to pull a full breath.

My ears feel hollow. Comparable to the feeling of being submerged in water, voices above nothing but a dull echo. The scrape of a chair, the clearing of a throat... all too far away, yet closer than I'd care for them to be.

Inhaling heavily through my mouth, I taste the bitterness of my own remorse. My hands shake, and I clench them tightly around the brittle sheets

of paper clasped within my damp palms.

Smoothing the crinkled lines against the podium, I blink forcibly in an attempt to focus on the scratch of blue pen marked messily along the lines.

My heart is screaming at me to stop. To walk away. Leave the chips to fall where they may. *I'm not strong enough* my heart insists. Not to continue along this path. *We just want to sleep* it says. Crawl into the warmth of my bed and *never* leave. We'll be safe there.

Safe.

But I've yet to hand over the final sliver of strength left in my mind. I'm clinging to that like a lifeline, it's letting me breathe, if just for now. I don't doubt that after today I would've used that up too. My mind henceforth as empty as my body, as my heart currently feels.

"Eight months ago." My words feel like stripped metal on my vocal cords. Jagged and useless. I clear my throat, refusing to look anywhere but at the words before me. "I had my whole life ahead of me. I was young. I was happy," I continue. "Eight months ago, my body was *mine*. My *mind* was *mine*." My voice shakes right before it cracks and I pause, clenching my teeth against the tremor in my jaw. I bite my lip, silencing the indelicate sob fighting to escape. Hints of it succeed, choking out in a stuttered breath.

"Moments of that night are faded, hazy in parts. But there are fragments, flashes, minutes that are so very clear. They're my own living nightmare, and no matter how hard I try... I can't escape."

I glance up then, seeking refuge from the judge. A middle-aged white man with hair the color of snow. My lawyer assured me his allotment to my case was a good thing. His history, his *long* history, shows a clear bias toward women's rights.

The weathered lines of his face give nothing away. Only watching on impassively as I speak, but I take solace in the kindness in his eyes, encouraging me forward.

“You took liberty on my body that wasn’t yours to take, but what I think you failed to realize, or possibly you didn’t care,” I shrug to myself, my shoulders remaining bunched near my neck in defense. “Is that in that decision, you stole the liberty of my mind. *Your* actions, *your* decision... it now controls my life.”

I pause, needing a second to gather my composure. Inhaling deeply, I roll my shoulders, releasing them from the bind of my neck.

“My life is now an ode to what you stole. First, it was my body, my right to say no. Then you murdered my dignity. I realized that more as I lay on a hospital bed, my legs open as doctors poked and prodded my already violated body.”

Images of that moment choose to flood my mind, and I choke on my breath. Bile rushes up my throat, but I swallow the acidity and the burn of the memories back down.

“You stripped away my feeling of safety. I panic in crowds, but I’m *petrified* to be alone. Which means I no longer know where I fit in this world.

“I have a scar on my inner thigh. One you gave me. A bite mark so brutal it remains imprinted in my skin like a tattoo. It’s the only reminder I’m shockingly thankful for because it led to your arrest. It’s ugly and it will likely stay that way forever. Which is fitting because it’s now how I feel as a person. Ugly. Scarred. Damaged.”

I can feel his eyes burning a hole in the side of my face. The liquid stare that wakes me every night; screaming, sweating, and confident I’m ready to die.

“I Googled how long it takes skin to regenerate. The internet says twenty-seven days. It doesn’t seem like much, but for me, it felt like an eternity before the skin that you had touched would be gone from my body. What I didn’t know was that your touch had burnt itself into my soul. So

even if I could shed my skin in the way I hoped, it wouldn't have made a difference."

I listen as the court stenographer records my statement, word for word. The soft *tap tap* of fingers bracketing my words.

"I see you in every man I come across. The mailman. The police officer who took my statement. The elderly man who walks his dog every morning and every afternoon by my house. They're all you. I fear you. I fear them. I feel unsafe. I don't leave my house. Not unless I'm forced to. My life has changed irrevocably from the moment you made the choice to enter my body without consent. I live my life alone and imagine I always will. Interaction with others is now too difficult. Can they see it? My shame. Do they know how disgusting I am? How *dirty*?"

A tear falls from my lashes and I wipe at it quickly, annoyed that he'll see me cry again.

"Eight months ago I had my whole life ahead of me." I force myself to look at him. The blink of time that our eyes connect enough to open the floodgates as my tears begin a continuous journey down my face. "Now I've pushed away every friend I've ever had. I quit my job. I ended a relationship that up until you, made me feel like the most special person in the world. Now I feel like a nobody. I have no direction because I'm lost and no matter which direction I turn, it's *you* that I come up against."

He stares at me blankly, the picture of perfection in his chair.

"Eight months ago I was young. I was happy. Now, most days I feel ready to die. My self-worth is so low I consider that the world would likely be a better place without me. Happiness is a memory I can no longer recall. I can't remember feeling anything but the emptiness I'm now consumed by. You stole my life, Miller Jacobs. You stole my life when you violated my body. You'll leave prison one day and live your life. There will be roadblocks for you, I'm sure, but I'll live in the prison of my mind for

eternity. I curse you for that, for making me both the victim and the sentenced.”

Folding my paper, I hold it in my shaking hands. Looking away from my rapist, I focus back on the judge. Knowing that I just handed over the final thread of strength I had been clinging to. I was right. From the very tips of my toes to the hairs on my head, I feel devoid, empty. Zoe Lincoln no longer exists. Not in this world. She gave the last piece of her soul in a show of strength, but it took everything from her in the process.

READ Impact HERE.

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VL PLAYLIST



- Hearts- Acoustic ~ Jessie Ware
- Haunted ~ Beyoncé
- Love Is a Bitch ~ Two Feet
- Empty Apartment ~ Shenie Fogo
- Paint It, Black ~ Ciara
- Torture (with Earl St. Claire) ~ X Ambassadors
- Play with Fire (feat. Yacht Money) ~ Sam Tinnesz
- Ready For Love ~ India.Arie
- Hit Me Baby One More Time (Acoustic) ~ J2, Blu Holliday
- Empty Space ~ James Arthur
- To Die For ~ Sam Smith
- Bad ~ James Bay

LISTEN HERE....

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

June 13 marks thirteen months exactly since we released a book. We're beyond excited to give you this one.

Our acknowledgments are always lengthy, but as you know it takes a village to release a book. We couldn't do this without our village, so please prepare yourselves for the way we're about to gush.

Our readers, be it HJ originals or first-timers. THANK YOU. As writers, you think we'd have all the words to express how deep our gratitude is. But every time we get to this part, we struggle to convey just how much each and every one of you means to us. It's simple, without you, we wouldn't be here. Every time you pick up one of our stories, you give us the drive to keep going. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

ellie. We celebrated our five-year publishing anniversary this year, which means you've been with us for FIVE years. It doesn't seem possible because I'm certain we just graduated high school, but it's true and we love you more with each year that passes. Thank you for being our OG cheerleader. You mean the world to us.

Jenny, you wonderful human. THANK YOU for putting up with our erratic asses this past year. We appreciate you so very much.

Michelle, Annette, and Megan. Never have we met three souls as supportive and as beautiful as you. You are integral parts of the HJ family

and we're beyond grateful for the support you pour into our world.

To the HJ street team. We love you. We see how much you push our books into the world and we can't thank you enough for your endless support. You are absolute rockstars.

To all our babes in Group Therapy. Our most favorite place. Our HJ home. Thank you for the love and laughs and conversations. We love you.

We hope you enjoyed Vincent and Bianca. If you have a spare second to drop an honest review for their story, it would mean the absolute world to us.

Love you.

Always.

H and J xx

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A blonde. A brunette. A tea lover. A coffee addict. Two people. One pen name. Haley Jenner is made up of friends, H and J. They're pals, besties if you will, maybe even soulmates. Consider them the ultimate in split personality, exactly the same, but completely different.

They reside on the Gold Coast in Australia's sunshine state, Queensland. They lead ultra-busy lives as working mums, but wouldn't want it any other way.

Books are a large part of their lives and they are firm believers that reading is an essential part of living. Escaping with a good story is one of their most favorite things, even to the detriment of sleep.

They love a good laugh, a strong, dominating alpha, but most importantly, know that friendships, the fierce ones, are the key to lifelong sanity and fulfilment.



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