



TAKEN

by a sinner

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MICHELLE HEARD

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Dedication

To all the badass women out there who don't back down.

A huge thank you to Nicoleta Evangelou for assisting with the
Greek translations. You were a godsend.

Songlist

Click here - [*Spotify*](#)

Quiet – MILCK

Hero – Supergirl, RAIGN

Can't Knock Me Down – Pretty Panther, Anna Mae

Easy On Me – Adele

Courage to Change – Sia

Set Fire to the Rain – Adele

Out of Control – Oshins, Rosi Golan

Biblical – Calum Scott

Love is just a word – Jasmine Thompson, Calum Scott

Middle Of The Night – Elley Duhé

Synopsis

Drowning in the murky waters of the mafia, I'm determined to find a way out. I have my sights set on becoming a film producer and won't let anything or anyone stand in my way.

Then my mother marries a retired mafia Godfather, and I get the head of the Greek mafia as a stepbrother.

Nikolas Stathoulis is set on ruining my well-laid plans. His ruthless reputation has me running for the safety of my apartment.

But he's always there. On campus. In my apartment. Expecting me to play by his rules.

If only I can ignore his godlike features and stop my heart from doing cartwheels at the sight of him.

Greek God? *Pretty much.*

But he's rude, demanding, and hell-bent on making my life a misery.

Two can play this game... Right?

Taken By A Sinner

*Mafia / Organized Crime / Suspense
Romance*

STANDALONE in The Sinners Series

Book 1

Authors Note:

This book contains subject matter that may be sensitive for
some readers.

There is triggering content related to abuse and violence.

18+ only.

Please read responsibly.

Priesthood:

*A gathering of Mafia dons that was in effect
a convocation of the nation's priesthood of
organized crime*

*“Fear is the most valuable commodity in
the universe.”*

— Max Brooks

Chapter 1

Tessa

Nikolas; 36. Tessa; 21.

An armed guard opens the engraved wooden door, and with a curt nod, he steps to the side so I can enter the house. It's only my second time visiting the Stathoulis' home, so the place is still foreign and intimidating. I'll never get used to all the guards littered over the property.

A couple of weeks ago, my mother got engaged to the retired Godfather of the Greek mafia. We're having our first family dinner tonight, and needless to say, I'm feeling anxious about meeting Nikolas and Athina, Peter's children.

The couple of times I've talked to Peter, it always ended with me fidgeting like a little girl. The man has a serious set of eyebrows that makes him look threatening and short-tempered. Even though he's never been hostile toward me, it always feels like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Mom's assured me he's sweet and caring, and I have nothing to worry about. As much as I don't like the idea of my mother marrying Peter Stathoulis, it's her choice to make. She deserves to be happy.

My dad died during a skiing accident when I was eight, and my mom spent all her time raising me. She only resumed

socializing after I started classes at the Vancouver Film School.

If Peter makes her happy, I'll do my best to support their relationship. But I want no part of the mafia. After Dad died, we didn't associate with the mafia that much. Not that Dad played a very active role in the mafia. He was just one of their bookkeepers and never took part in the violent side of things.

It's Mom's choice, though. Me on the other hand, I'm going to continue focusing on my studies, and once I graduate, I'll pursue a career as a producer.

Like a deer waiting to be pounced on, I cautiously glance around the entrance hall with its impressive staircase and sparkling gold chandelier, wondering which way I should go. The last time I was here, I came with Mom. I think the dining room is to my right. Even though the lights are on, everything feels dark and foreboding.

The apprehensiveness is mainly because I dread meeting Nikolas in person. I might not have anything to do with the mafia, but I've heard Nikolas is brutal and merciless. Whenever his name's brought up, it's always in fear.

"Theresa, *agápi mou*." Hearing Mom call me 'my love,' my head swivels to the left, and a relieved smile splits across my face. She looks beautiful in a mermaid dress that looks like it's been spun from pure gold.

"Mamá," I grin as I move closer for a hug. I press a soft kiss on her cheek. "Wow, you look gorgeous." Standing back, I make a show of taking in the dress.

“Tonight’s important.” Her gaze sweeps over my off-shoulder, cream satin dress, and she brushes the styled strands away from my bare shoulder. “We match. Good.”

I already feel uncomfortable in the dress because I’m not the skinniest and have struggled with my weight all my life, so when Mom’s eyes lock on the slit that ends mid-thigh, and it looks like she’s going to disapprove, I start fidgeting.

Before she can make a remark, Peter comes down the sweeping stairs. “Theresa,” he smiles. “Welcome.”

I force a polite smile to my face. “Thank you, Mr. Stathoulis.”

“Soon, we’ll be family. Call me Peter.”

The front door opens, and I glance over my shoulder.

“Really, Nikolas? Look at the mess,” a woman scolds, then a beauty in her early thirties breezes into the house like a queen. She must be Athina, Peter’s daughter. She makes a beeline for Peter, a smile chasing the scowl from her face. “*Mpampà mou*, sorry we’re late.”

A man follows after Athina, chuckling, “Glad I’m not the one in the hot seat tonight.” I’m assuming he’s Basil, Athina’s husband. He has a friendly face that can easily set a person at ease.

“What happened?” Peter asks his daughter just as Nikolas walks into the house.

My eyes zoom in on the blood staining the sleeves of the formal white shirt he’s unbuttoning, exposing a chest I can only describe as *holy freaking shit*. Golden skin spans tightly

over muscle that looks like it's been carved from precious metal.

He's the tallest in the room, with the magnificence of a fallen angel. A firm jaw covered in a dusting of dark bristles, high cheekbones, and sharp eyes – the color of sinful nights – rob me of the ability to breathe. I take in every way-too-handsome inch of him in a split second.

A grim expression darkens his features, giving me the impression of a vengeful God out for every drop of blood he can get his hands on.

His already bloody hands.

Instinctively, I inch closer to my mother.

Nikolas might easily be the most attractive man I've ever laid eyes on, but knowing he's the Godfather of the Greek mafia, every nerve ending in my body tenses with apprehension.

Shit, I can't believe this man is going to be my stepbrother soon. It's crazy just thinking about it.

The most feared man in Canada, and I have to associate with him. Pure madness.

Just laying eyes on him is enough to make fear trickle through my veins. The ruthless air radiating from him in waves has me swallowing hard, wishing I could find a spot to hide.

Peter's dark, bushy eyebrows draw together, making him look like an eagle that's ready to swoop down on its prey. "Nikolas?"

My eyes dart back to Nikolas, who only spares his father a pissed-off look before he heads up the stairs.

Peter sets off after his son, then a super awkward atmosphere falls over the entrance hall that has me itching to run for the safety of my apartment.

Athina turns to my mother. “I’m sorry, Theía Helena.”

Mom waves a careless hand as if the head of the mafia didn’t just storm by us with someone’s blood staining his shirt and hands. She gives Athina’s cheek an air kiss then turns to me.

A still stunned out of my mind me.

“This is my Theresa,” Mom introduces me.

“I’m Athina.” She takes in my shocked expression, then says, “Sorry for my brother. It’s not always this crazy at family gatherings.”

If you say so.

She tugs the other man closer. “This is my husband. Basil.”

“Nice to meet you both,” I say, my voice strung tight. Where Mom’s a social butterfly, I take after my late father. I’m an introvert who feels most at home behind a camera and screenplays, so tonight will definitely be exhausting.

I give Mom a look, clearly saying I don’t like this one bit.

Ignoring me, Mom says, “Let’s move to the dining room while we wait for the men.”

She places her hand on my back, nudging me hard so I’ll start walking. Leaning into her, I whisper, “Seriously, Mamá?”

“Hush!”

Unlike the rectangular table we have at our house, the Stathoulis family has a round dining table. I’m shoved into a chair, then Mom takes the seat to my right.

The awkward atmosphere follows us from the entrance hall, hanging thickly over our heads. All my muscles are tense as if my body is ready to flee at the first sign of danger.

Then again, I should’ve made a run for it when Nikolas walked into the house covered in blood. Tonight is going to be torturously long, that’s for sure.

Mom and Athina talk about the upcoming wedding while the harsh reality sinks in – there’s a real possibility Nikolas killed, or at the very least, tortured someone right before coming here.

God, what was Mom thinking? Out of all the men she could’ve chosen, she had to pick the retired Godfather of the mafia.

Honestly, although I grew up in the mafia, I don’t know much about it. Mom always sheltered me, especially after Dad passed away. Most of the things I’ve heard were from my friends at school who were mafia princesses and my hateful cousin, Irene, who swooned over the man every chance she got. Some of my friends were madly in love with Nikolas as well, but the rest feared him as if he were death itself. Not wanting to find out for myself what kind of man he is, I kept myself separate from the murky waters of the mafia.

And I plan on keeping it that way.

Athina gives me a rueful smile while Basil's busy on his phone. She notices and grabs the device from her husband's hand. "No phones at the table." Then she turns her attention back to me. "You're studying film production, right?"

"Ah... yeah." I clear my throat.

"I think it's interesting. I've never met someone in that field," Athina replies, her tone friendly and genuine interest shining in her dark brown eyes.

Now that I actually get to look at her, I have to admit she's gorgeous. She has plush lips and the same high cheekbones as Nikolas. If I'm not mistaken, Athina is eleven years older than me. The age difference alone sets us apart, never mind the fact she's a mafia princess, and I'm... I'm the farthest thing from one.

"Unless you want more bodies delivered to your doorstep, you'll get out of my fucking city," Nikolas' voice carries on a dangerous growl into the dining room. My eyes snap to the entrance, and an icy fear slithers down my spine when I watch him end whatever call he was on as he comes into the room.

Holy shit. This is really happening. I have to actually be social with a man who just threatened someone – a man who seriously looks like hell incarnate.

God help me.

He takes a deep breath then presses a kiss to the top of Athina's head. "It won't happen again."

"Better not," she mutters, but there's no bite to her tone.

Nikolas walks to Mom and air kisses her cheek. "Sorry about the blood, Helena."

Mom pats his arm as if it was nothing, making my lips part and my eyebrows draw together.

How can she just pretend it's an everyday occurrence and nothing to worry about? My God, he probably killed someone right before coming here and threatened another person right in front of us!

Peter comes in, taking a seat next to Mom, but I can't tear my eyes away from Nikolas as he stops by my chair.

Oh, God.

My heart instantly scampers off at a crazy beat, and a chill spreads over my skin, making me feel cold even though it's a warm spring evening.

Feeling smaller than a speck of dust about to face off with the winds of a category five hurricane, I somehow manage to stand up, my legs numb and threatening to give way beneath me.

Nikolas' sharp and merciless gaze sweeps over the length of my body, then his eyes lock with mine. Definitely sinful nights swirling in those irises. Not the sexy kind but the ruthless and painful kind. I suddenly have the urge to swallow hard.

"I apologize for the first impression I made." It doesn't sound like an apology but more like a threat, his voice deep and dangerous.

Somehow, I remember my manners. I introduce myself, the tightness in my voice giving away that I'm scared, "Theresa Drakatos. I prefer to be called Tess."

He lifts his hand, and remembering the blood that coated his skin only minutes ago, I stare at it as if it's a snake.

Yeah, no. That's a hard pass for me. I don't need that kind of bad karma in my life.

My gaze cautiously lifts to his, and I watch as those dark brown irises become even darker. Something akin to amusement flashes through them like a bolt of lightning. The kind of amusement a cat has while playing with a mouse.

He pulls his hand back. "Seeing as we'll be family soon, let's forgo the formalities." Before I can take another breath, his hands grip hold of my bare shoulders, and I'm tugged against his solid chest. Instead of air kissing my cheeks, his lips singe my skin.

Rich and woody with notes of spice, raw masculinity, mystery... and something edgy, his scent fills my nostrils.

Probably the scent of blood.

The scent of power.

I'm so caught off guard I can't process what's happening until his mouth finds my ear. Goosebumps explode over my skin. "That's the last time you'll disrespect me. Next time you take my fucking hand."

God, the threatening whisper sounds like velvet and thorns, causing a shiver of intense fear to rush through me.

Just as quickly as he took hold of me, he lets go, a menacing smirk plastered on his face. As if he didn't just threaten me, he takes the seat to my left even though there are other seats available.

I don't do confrontations. Ever. Because of how my cousin, Irene, tortured me, I struggle with anxiety and hence avoid any kind of volatile situation. Nikolas is as volatile as they come, though.

God, this is not going to end well for me. I can just feel it.

Dropping back down in my chair, I glance at Mom to check if she saw what just happened, but she's too busy staring lovingly at her fiancé.

"Everything okay, Tess?" Athina asks, her eyes jumping between her brother and me.

Not wanting to start a fight with Nikolas and ruin Mom's evening, I force my lips to curve up. "Yes." She doesn't look convinced, so I add, "It's just overwhelming meeting everyone."

Overwhelming is the understatement of the year! Holy shit.

Just sitting next to Nikolas, it feels like the air is vibrating as if every molecule is terrified of him.

"By the end of dinner, we'll be one big happy family," Peter says, but it sounds more like an order. A server comes in to fill our glasses with champagne, then Peter lifts his. "To new family."

My soon-to-be stepbrother already threatened me, and I've only known him for a couple of minutes.

Yeah, I'm dead sure I want no part of the Stathoulis family.

Still, like the good girl I'm expected to be, I raise my glass to the toast, hoping to God I make it through the dinner in one piece.

Chapter 2

Nikolas

Rage still simmers in my veins from dealing with the Sicilian bastard who dared to sell heroin on my streets.

Stupid fucker.

Usually, I'd let my men deal with the scum, but I wanted to send a clear message of what will happen to the rest of the Sicilian mafia if they don't get the fuck out of Vancouver.

I down half the glass of champagne but the sweet bubbles only sour my mood further. My eyes flick to the server, who instantly scurries to my side. "Whiskey," I order, and a minute later, the tumbler's set down in front of me.

After the burning liquid soothes my temper a little, I glance at the girl who'll soon be my stepsister. The thought makes my lips curl in distaste.

Theresa Drakatos.

Her body is slightly turned away from me, not enough to draw attention, but enough to give me the cold shoulder.

I know everything there is to know about her, seeing as she'll be my problem soon enough. As the head of the family, Tess will be my responsibility. The lack of respect she showed me is a clear indication that she'll be a handful – one I don't have the patience or time for.

She's twenty-one and of marrying age. The quicker I arrange a marriage for her, the sooner I can hand her over to another man. The last thing I have energy for is a spoiled little girl that's fifteen years my junior.

My thoughts turn to the disgusted way she glared at my hand, and I almost let out an amused chuckle. Got to hand it to her, that was brave. Fucking stupid, but brave nonetheless.

"Nikolas, have you heard from Christos?" Athina asks, drawing me out of my thoughts.

"Yes, he'll be at the wedding."

"Where will he stay?" Father asks.

"Seeing as his family, I assume he'll stay here," I mutter. I have nothing to do with any of the wedding arrangements. I just know my cousin is attending because we were on a business call earlier.

Athina lets out a sigh. "I'll check with him."

"Where's the restroom again?" Tess whispers to Helena.

"Down the hallway, second door to your right."

Tess scoots the chair back, and getting up, she actually takes the long way around the table instead of just passing by me, making a show of keeping her back to me.

My eyes drift over her body before they get stuck on **her curvy ass that's clearly been made for spanking**. My palm itches at the thought.

I find my gaze stuck on the doorway, and annoyed with myself, I force my attention back to my family, but the second

Tess returns to the dining room, my eyes lock on her like a heat-seeking missile.

I take in her creamy skin and rich chocolate hair feathered to frame her face. She doesn't have the same aristocratic nose and eyebrows as her mother, but instead, her features are delicate.

Unlike most socialites Tess' age, who are all skinny as fuck, her body fills the dress perfectly. I can't help but appreciate her full, healthy curves.

She catches me staring at her, then narrows her eyes.

Like I said, brave but stupid.

We share a glare that stokes the embers of my temper. Everyone who knows me is fully aware it doesn't take much to anger me. Being the head of the mafia, I have to be brutal and unforgiving, so my enemies will know not to fuck with me.

In my world, fear is the most valuable commodity, and it's something this girl will learn soon enough. Those who are feared rule the world. Those who fear are nothing more than pawns.

Make no mistake, she will be a pawn.

When Tess takes her seat, I'm hit with a light feminine fragrance. Something fresh with hints of blossoms and vanilla. She smells like beauty and youth... ready to be corrupted.

My phone beeps, and digging it out of my pocket, I check the message from Andreas, my best friend and right-hand man. Growing up together, the man is like a brother to me and one of the few people I trust.

Looks like the message was received. The streets are quiet.

The corner of my mouth lifts as I type my response.

Good news.

Seconds later, the device vibrates in my hand.

Don't forget the meeting with the Priesthood. I'll pick you up in an hour for your flight.

I tuck the phone back in my pocket and take another sip of the whiskey, which has the server hurrying closer again to refill my glass.

My thoughts turn to the meeting with the Priesthood. We're the five heads of the most prominent crime families who rule the world. We only have one rule – we don't fuck with each other's businesses or families – the rest of the world is fair game.

Relaxing back in my chair, I twirl the tumbler, my eyes focused on the amber liquid swirling as my thoughts revolve around the other four members of the Priesthood.

Liam Byrne, head of the Irish mafia. Gabriel Demir, head of the Turkish mafia. Luca Cotroni, Don of the Italian mafia, and Viktor Vetrov, who's in charge of the bratva. Luca and Viktor are close like brothers, and I quickly learned how valuable an alliance with the two men is. With their joint forces, pissing either one off would be stupid as fuck.

The Priesthood meets in LA every three months to touch base and keep things civil between us. It's to avoid a war that will bring the world to its knees.

A plate is set down before me, drawing my attention back to the dinner. The corner of my mouth lifts slightly when I notice we're having moussaka. It's dad's favorite. Athina once tried to make it but only managed to burn it to a black crisp. Needless to say, my sister's not a good cook.

I glance at Dad and Helena and watch as he presses a kiss to her hand in thanks for preparing the meal.

When Dad first told me he was thinking of marrying again, I was unhappy as fuck. Our mother passed away two years ago, and no one will ever take her place. She was the most loving and perfect mother, and everyone else will always pale in comparison to her.

But seeing him happy and knowing Helena is good for him, I've accepted my father's wishes. If he wants a new wife at the age of seventy-two, who am I to stop him?

The conversation keeps revolving around the wedding while we enjoy the meal. Not interested, my thoughts return to business.

I took over from my father twelve years ago and have since expanded our operations with an iron fist by not only owning every square inch of Greece and Cyprus but Canada as well. Dad only left Greece after Mom's death, whereas Athina and I made Vancouver our home over a decade ago.

The Sicilian mafia, trying to move in on my territory, is the first resistance I've met. Sure there have been complications over the years, but nothing like this. The Sicilians have been coming in waves during the past three months, like a pest that just won't die out, and I get a feeling it's because Liam's

tightening his hold on Chicago. I'll find out at the meeting tonight.

Once dessert is brought to the table, I notice Tess is just as quiet as me, only listening but not participating in the conversation. When the bridesmaids' dresses are discussed, she scrunches her nose as if she hates the idea of wearing a yellow gown.

"You don't agree?" I murmur softly so the others won't hear.

Tess visibly startles before her gaze snaps to my face. "I didn't say anything."

The corner of my mouth lifts. "You didn't have to. The expression on your face spoke volumes."

Even though fear for me dances in her irises, she frowns slightly. "You're an expert at reading facial expressions?"

"Yes." It's one of the things that makes me so damn good at my job.

She rolls her eyes before focusing her attention on the baklava, making my right eyebrow lift dangerously. Leaning my head to the right, so I'm closer to her, I whisper, "*Pas gyrévontas Gia mpeládes.*"

Her gaze slants toward me again, irritation making golden flecks spark to life in her irises. "My Greek is rusty. Care to translate?"

The corner of my mouth lifts higher. "You're looking for trouble."

Tess keeps eye contact for a moment longer before fear tightens her features. “Is this how things are going to be? You’re going to threaten me every chance you get?”

This time I give her a full-blown smile. She blinks a couple of times before a frown mars her forehead.

“Stop disrespecting me, then I’ll stop with the threats.” Tess doesn’t seem to understand how lucky she is right now. I’ve killed men for less.

Her eyes flit over my face, then she says, “Luckily, we won’t have to see each other after the wedding, so there shouldn’t be a problem. Let’s just agree to ignore each other until then.”

A chuckle escapes me, making my family’s attention turn to me because it’s not something I do often. Rising to my feet, I look down at Tess as I adjust my cuffs and jacket. “As amusing as this has been, I have a meeting to attend.” My gaze moves to my father’s, then back to Tess. “I’ll let our parents explain how things will work once they’re married so there won’t be any unpleasant misunderstandings.”

Nodding at Dad and Helena, I walk out of the dining room, wishing I could stay to watch Tess’ reaction to the bomb that’s about to be dropped on her.

Chapter 3

Tess

Mom gives me a pleading look, silently asking me to understand, then Peter says, “Not a lot will change.”

Nikolas doesn't seem to think so.

Peter gives me an overly patient smile that doesn't do anything to lessen the dark expression in his eyes. “You'll be expected to accompany Nikolas, Athina, and Basil to social events, so the family shows a united front.”

Ahh... I don't do social events. At all. I'm a homebody, not a social butterfly. Besides, spending time with Nikolas is something I want to avoid at all costs.

Before I can try to explain myself, Peter continues, “Every Sunday, you'll be expected to attend lunch with us.”

What happens if I'm busy with exams?

This time I open my mouth, but Peter keeps going. “And you'll have two guards with you at all times.”

My eyebrow darts up. My jaw goes slack. For a moment, I can only shake my head like an idiot that's lost the ability to speak.

Shit.

This is how it all starts. They're expecting me to become a mafia princess. I've seen what that entails.

No freedom. Arranged marriages. Abuse.

My chest tightens, and I feel claustrophobic because I know the demands will keep coming until I have zero control left over my life.

Until I'm swallowed whole by the mafia.

Finally, I find my voice. "What if I don't have time for social events? My studies take up all of my free time, and I'll only get busier as exams approach." I suck in a breath of air, hoping I can negotiate my way out of this. "And I'm either at home or on campus, so I really think guards won't be needed."

Peter scoots his chair back, and as he rises to his feet, his eyes are filled with disapproval and warning. "It's not negotiable, Theresa. You'll do as you're told."

I'm gaping as he leaves the dining room, with Basil following short on his heels, which leaves Athina, Mom, and me at the table.

Slowly, I turn my shocked gaze to my mother. She gives me an encouraging smile. The kind I used to get whenever Irene hurt me and Mom thought I broke an arm or rib because I was clumsy. It's not Mom's fault for thinking that, seeing as I didn't dare tell anyone what Irene was doing to me.

It has the memories I fought hard to bury creeping through the cracks, and for a moment, I'm thrown off balance. It threatens to drag me back to the past, to a dark time where sorrow and fear were my only companions.

Taking a couple of deep breaths, I try to ignore the cold sweat breaking out over my body and the tremor in my hands. I just need to get this conversation over with so I can go back to my apartment.

“Mamá.” Shaking my head, I fist my hands on either side of the plate of uneaten baklava, so Mom won’t notice they’re trembling.

“We’re not asking a lot, *agápi mou*,” Mom says, her tone gentler.

“I can do Sunday lunches every other weekend,” I try to find some middle ground. “But guards twenty-four-seven? Social events?”

“Stop, Theresa!” Two spots of pink stain her cheeks. “You’re embarrassing me.”

I blink a couple of times, my eyes dancing over Mom’s face as I try to bring my point across. “You know how busy I am with my studies, and I don’t do well with social events. Never mind having two strange men following me around like shadows and being in my personal space.”

“It won’t be that bad,” Athina adds her two cents. “At most, we usually only attend one social event a month.”

Oh.

Some relief trickles into my chest. I can manage one event a month. I’ll just stick to Athina’s side and use her as a buffer between Nikolas and me.

She gives me a comforting smile. “You don’t have to socialize with people, Tess. We’ll just make an appearance.”

“You’ll grow accustomed to it. After a while, it won’t be disruptive anymore.” Mom rises from her chair, and I have to tilt my head back to look up at her. “Soon, we’ll be a part of the Stathoulis family. It’s the way things are done.”

Mom has always supported my independence. If anything, she’s encouraged it. Now she’s starting to take it away from me?

Once I give in, they’ll just expect more and more of me until I have nothing left to give. That’s how the mafia works.

Gripping hold of my shoulders, Mom pulls me up into a quick hug. “It won’t be as bad as you think. Try to be accommodating for me.”

Like I had to be accommodating when we lived with Uncle Kostas and Irene for years because Mom couldn’t stand on her own two feet? It almost killed me back then, and I’m sure it will definitely kill me if I’m sucked into the mafia.

I have to think about this bomb that’s been dropped on me. Acting irrationally won’t help me one bit.

“I have to work on the screenplay we’ve been given to write.” Pressing a kiss to Mom’s cheek, I force a compliant smile to my face. “Thank you for dinner. Are we still on for our spa date next week?”

“Of course! I need to get my nails done for the wedding.”

Glancing at Athina, I keep the smile in place. “It was nice meeting you.”

Walking out of the dining room, I force my chin up. I hear Peter and Basil’s voices drifting from somewhere in the house, and not bothering to say goodbye, I make a beeline for the

front door. I climb into the back of the SUV that was sent to collect me from my apartment.

As the driver steers the vehicle through the heavy iron gates, I fist my hands on my lap, staring at my fingers that are white around the knuckles.

Before tonight, I didn't like Mom marrying Peter, but now I hate it.

I've seen what happened to my friends from school, and a couple of my cousins, who were raised as mafia princesses. They were nothing but puppets. Social butterflies used to decorate the arm of whatever man they were forced to marry. Every single one of them is stuck in an abusive and unhappy marriage with a man they don't love.

God, no. That's no life at all.

They're going to take away my independence. I just know it. I'll be expected to obey every command from them and will no longer have a say over my life.

I'll have to give up my dreams.

I need to do something. I can't just become another mafia princess.

I focus on taking deep breaths as the SUV takes me to the other side of the city.

As soon as the SUV stops in front of my building, I dart out of the car. I don't wait to see what the driver does, and skipping the elevator, I rush up the stairs. Only when I shut the front door behind me, do I stop to suck in deep breaths.

Calm down. It's probably not as bad as you think.

The relief of finally being in my own private space washes soothingly through my veins.

That's better. No use overreacting.

It's just Sunday lunches and one event a month. It's doable.

But the guards?

I flick on the light and glance over my sanctuary. Everything is decorated in white and light blue. No spaces are cluttered. The only additions to the actual furniture are potted plants, lending a natural feel to the tranquil ambience.

I purchased the apartment and furnished it with the money I received from my share of the inheritance. I also paid for my studies with the money my father left for me.

Mom only pays for my monthly living expenses.

But what will happen once she's married to Peter Stathoulis? Will he take control of her finances and use my monthly expenses as a way to control me?

God, what if Nikolas is given control over my expenses? Over my every move?

That would be a nightmare!

I need to find a job to make sure that doesn't happen. As soon as possible.

The need to keep a tight control over my life has me darting away from the front door. I quickly change into a pair of leggings and a t-shirt, tie my hair back in a ponytail, then sit down on the plush couch with my laptop.

As I start creating a resume and search through the job listings, I find my equilibrium again.

Chapter 4

Nikolas

It's almost eleven p.m. when I walk into the private room at the high-end bar reserved for the meeting. It smells like leather, cigars, wealth, and power.

I notice Liam and Gabriel are already seated at the table. Liam's the oldest of the group, where Gabriel's the same age as me. Luca's only five years my junior, and Viktor's the youngest at twenty-five.

Not that age matters when it comes to power.

"Gentlemen," I murmur as I take a seat. We're all dressed in crisp *Armani* suits.

My greeting is returned with curt nods.

We might not be best friends, but there's a vow of loyalty that makes us the most dangerous group of men on Earth. Fuck with one, and you have to face off with the Priesthood.

It makes us invincible.

We all took a blood oath when we were sworn in, and the only way out is death.

As a server comes to take my drink order, Luca and Viktor stride into the room with the potency of the entire Italian mafia and bratva in every single step.

No one says a word until we all have something to drink, and the server shuts the door behind him. Tension vibrates in the air.

As always, Luca takes a sip of his bourbon then makes eye contact with each of us before settling his gaze on me. “I hear you’re having trouble with the Sicilians.”

“They’re trying to move into my territory.” My eyes move to Liam. “Do you know anything about it?”

Liam takes a slow sip of his drink, his unwavering gaze locking with mine. “I’ve driven them out of my city.”

And now they’re my problem. Just fucking great.

“What can you tell me about them?”

“Antonio Manno’s the head,” Liam mutters, hatred for the scum brimming in his voice.

I already know that bit of info.

Luca settles comfortably back in his chair. “He’s not part of the Cosa Nostra.”

That’s good to hear.

“It’s taken me eight years to drive them out of Chicago.” Liam gives me a look of warning. “You better get rid of them before they set down roots.”

“I plan on doing that.”

Viktor, whose father is a custodian for the best assassin alive and previous head of the bratva, offers me a grin. “Just say if you need Manno eliminated.”

I need to take care of this problem on my own, or it will take a bite out of the power I hold in the Priesthood. You never let other men fight your battles for you. It's the greatest show of weakness. I'll only ask them to back me when there's no other way.

"I'll take care of the problem."

Viktor nods then falls silent again as Luca proceeds with the meeting. We discuss incoming shipments and pending deals for the next two hours, and as the evening draws to a close, Luca grins at me. "Almost time for the wedding."

Everyone at this table will be at the wedding. It will be a show of strength to our enemies. Hopefully, it will serve as encouragement for the Sicilians to not fuck with me.

"Yes. Less than two weeks." Tess flashes through my thoughts, and I wonder how she handled the news.

She probably threw a fit.

I almost chuckle at the thought but catch myself in time.

"We're looking forward to it," Luca says, drawing my attention back to him. "I haven't seen Peter in years."

I had to up the security with the five families attending the wedding. If anything goes wrong, it will be my head on the chopping block.

"Send me a list of your security details so I can have them cleared," I tell the group. "I want to know exactly who will be at the wedding."

Each man nods. Viktor rises to his feet, effectively ending the meeting, and Luca follows.

Victor might be the youngest, but he sure as fuck is the most dangerous out of all of us. If the Sicilian problem gets out of hand, I might just have to hire him to take them out.

The thought doesn't sit well with me as I get up and straighten my jacket.

The past two weeks have been a total whirlwind, arranging security for the wedding and killing the damn Sicilians whenever they dared to walk my streets. I have men stationed on the grounds, in the house, and scattered around the neighborhood.

Andreas is keeping an eye on everything, which gives me a sliver of peace of mind.

Dressed in a black tuxedo and with my Glock tucked safely behind my back, I make my way down the grand stairway to join the guests attending the wedding.

Flowers take up every available space, and soft instrumental music fills the air. Servers rush around like ants, and there's a constant hum of voices blending with the background music.

When I step out onto the veranda, all eyes turn to me. Some are filled with reverence, others with poorly veiled hate. One thing every gaze holds? Some level of fear.

"Nikolas, so good to see you," Spiros Doukas says, his voice overly friendly. Our family has done business together, and the man never stops groveling for another opportunity.

We shake hands, and before he can bring up a topic of conversation that will bore me to death, I walk away from him. I head toward the members of the Priesthood, who are gathered and watching the other guests as if they're in a den of vipers and not at a wedding.

Reaching them, I shake their hands and smile. "Thank you for coming."

Liam lets out a low whistle as his gaze sweeps over the grounds, draped in white and yellow décor, a stupid amount of flowers, and the best linen. "This must've cost you a pretty penny."

"You have no idea," I sigh. Signaling a server closer, I order drinks for us. "You'd think with it being my father's second wedding, they would've scaled down, but Helena's a socialite."

"Do you get along with your soon-to-be stepmother?" Gabriel asks. He's not a people person at all, and it's clear as day as he glares at the other guests.

"She's good for my father." Just then, my sister catches my eye. Athina steps out onto the veranda with Tess right behind her. When my sister spots me, she heads in my direction.

My gaze gets stuck on Tess, who's turning heads with every step she takes closer to me. Noticing how much attention she's getting, a frown forms on my forehead.

"Any of you looking for a bride?"

Luca's eyebrow lifts. "Who are you trying to marry off?"

I nod in the direction of the women. "My stepsister. Theresa Dracatos."

“The girl with Athina?” Liam asks.

Suddenly Viktor lets out a low chuckle. “If glares could kill, you’d be six feet under, Nikolas. I take it you don’t get along with her.”

Glancing back at the women, who are almost by us, it’s to find Tess’ eyes on me, the frown on her forehead doing nothing to diminish her beauty.

She’s probably still pissed off because of the changes being made to her life.

“Gentlemen.” Athina stops next to me, a perfect smile on her face.

I lean down and press a kiss to my sister’s temple. “You look beautiful.” My eyes sweep over the grounds. “Where’s Basil?”

“With Dad.” She rolls her eyes. “They’ll probably be drunk before the ceremony starts.”

Basil’s never been involved in the mafia, which in hindsight is a good thing. The family needs his laidback attitude to break the tension.

Knowing I can’t ignore Tess, I step to the side, and placing my hand on her lower back, I push her closer so the men can get a good look at her.

She’s actually the perfect bargaining chip to solidify bonds even more between the Priesthood and me.

“Theresa Drakatos,” I introduce her.

I watch the men closely, but they all have their poker faces on as they greet her.

As soon as the introductions are over, Tess tries to step back to extract herself from the group, and it has me slipping my arm around her to keep her in place. The server brings our drinks, and reaching for a tumbler, my body turns into Tess'. She fits perfectly against my side, the top of her head just shy of reaching my shoulder.

Her innocent scent dances seductively around me, making me aware of her as a woman and not just future family.

Athina's striking up a conversation with Luca, and the other men discuss the socialites in attendance, avoiding talk of business in front of the women.

Leaning down, so I'm closer to Tess, I murmur, "You weren't at lunch on Sunday."

She leans away and tugs against my hold on her before flicking her eyes up to me. "I had a project I needed to complete. I explained it to my mom."

My eyes take hers captive. "I expect the courtesy of a phone call if you can't attend a lunch or event."

"I wasn't aware I had to report to you," she replies with thinly veiled resentment.

Christ help me, this little girl is seriously looking for trouble.

I move my hand to her elbow, grip her in a tight hold, then drag her over the lawn, through the throng of guests, and into the house. Reaching the study, I shove her inside before shutting the door behind me.

My eyes find hers with barely controlled anger. I take in the way she's gasping for air, her face pale with surprise and

fear.

“Do you have a death wish, Theresa?” I bite out as I take a threatening step closer to her.

She quickly shakes her head. Her hair shines like satin, the strands brushing against her smooth skin. Then her tongue darts out, and she nervously wets her lips, drawing my attention to her mouth that’s been made to be wrapped around a cock.

The unwelcome thought has desire trickling into my veins, but needing to make myself clear, I slowly stalk closer, my muscles wound tight, my fingers itching to strangle her pretty little neck. I only stop when Tess is forced to tilt her head back so she can keep eye contact.

“This stops now,” I warn her, my tone low and dark as fuck. I will not tolerate her disrespectful behavior. “You will follow every fucking order I give you. You will never disrespect me again, or God help you, it will be the last thing you do.”

Her eyes tremble with fear, which isn’t something I witness a lot. It usually only happens right before I end some fucker’s life, and he’s grasping a dying breath where he’s lying in a puddle of his own piss and blood.

It’s only then I realize Tess is fucking terrified of me.

Yet, she still gives me attitude?

A frown settles on my forehead as I try to figure out the woman in front of me.

She’s scared but feisty. Stupid but brave.

A total contradiction.

And fuck if that doesn't make me curious.

Chapter 5

Tess

I'm struggling to keep my breathing under control as my stomach bottoms out. My skin grows clammy, my body a trembling mess from Nikolas' threat.

I can't tear my eyes away from his.

Swallowing hard, I try to think of something to say. Something to do. But there's only a buzz of fear for brain activity.

My breaths keep coming faster, a sure sign of the impending anxiety attack.

Which I can't let him see.

"Understood," I force the hoarse word over my dry lips to end this confrontation.

Nikolas slowly tilts his head to the side, his unwavering and dark gaze locked on my face. It's unnerving, like facing off with a wolf that's about to pounce and rip me to shreds.

Needing to defuse the bomb, I repeat, "I understand."

"Do you really?" His voice is so low and deep, filled with immense danger, it sends a shiver down my spine. He lifts a hand between us, and I instinctively take a step back. Not missing a thing, his eyes sharpen even more on me before he

adjusts his jacket. "I'm the head of the family, the head of the fucking mafia."

Two things I'm well aware of.

Nikolas sweeps an intimidating gaze over me, my skin prickling with apprehension. "And you will obey every single command from me."

Even though I'm shaking with fear and my heart is dangerously close to bursting from my tight chest, I still manage to say, "I don't want to be a mafia princess." I wet my dry lips. "I'm only here for my mother. I don't want any part of the mafia or your family."

Nikolas narrows his eyes on me before he closes the distance between us at the speed of light. I stumble backward, slam into a desk, then he's looming over me like a thunderous cloud.

Oh. God.

Grabbing hold of the desk to keep my balance, I gasp, but the air is quickly cut off when his fingers clamp around my throat. The tight grip gives me a preview of the brutality that comes so naturally to him.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

My heartbeat is nothing more than a frantic mess in my chest that's too tight, making it hard to suck in a deep breath. Short bursts of air flutter over my lips, drying them out even more.

"In an hour, you'll be part of the fucking family, whether you like it or not." The timbre of his voice is rough, his anger making him seem impossibly powerful. His hold on my throat

turns surprisingly gentle, then his fingertips brush over my jaw until his palm engulfs my flaming cheek.

It feels way too intimate, making a new fear flare to life.

The pad of his thumb brushes over my lips, his eyes devouring every inch of my face before settling on the breaths racing from me.

God, he's relishing in my fear. It's as if he feeds off it.

"You'll be a good little girl and do as you're told, or your life will become a living hell." His teeth tug at his bottom lip, giving me the impression it's taking all his restraint to not bite me. "Got it?"

When I nod, my cheek brushes against his palm, heating my skin.

He steps back and adjusts his jacket again. "If you're not sure what's expected from you, just follow Athina's lead. She has it down to an art form." His tone is normal again, all the bite and brutality gone. It gives me whiplash, my mind racing to catch up.

I watch as he pulls his phone from his pocket. "Take my number so you can let me know if plans change in the future."

With trembling hands, I dig my own phone out of my bag, but I must take too long because Nikolas rips the device out of my hold. While he's programming his number into my phone, I turn away from him and take a Xanax from my bag. I quickly place the pill beneath my tongue then close my eyes while focusing on taking deep breaths.

Don't lose your shit until after he's left. Keep it together.

Suddenly his chest presses against my back. A squeak escapes me, every muscle in my body tightening. My phone appears in front of me while his breath fans over my ear. “I trust this is the last altercation we’ll have?”

Taking the device from him, I nod.

“Good,” he almost growls like a beast.

I feel his heat leave my back, and seconds later, the door opens and shuts.

All the strength flows from my body, and I sag down to the floor. I cover my thundering heart with a trembling hand as a fresh wave of cold sweat breaks out over my skin.

Shit.

I close my eyes as the impact of what just happened fully hits. My anxiety spikes dangerously high, the traumatic memories of what Irene did to me threatening to take hold and drag me down the hole stuffed full of my nightmares.

It takes long minutes before the pill kicks in, forcing my anxiety levels down until they’re manageable. Only then am I able to process what happened.

Nikolas will force me to bend to his will, and if I keep fighting him, it will probably lead to my death. It’s as simple as that.

I don’t have a choice.

I have to play the role of a dutiful mafia princess.

God help me.

I had to take another Xanax after the ceremony because I'm seated next to Nikolas. Since the confrontation in the office, he's been glued to my damn side, his presence unbearably unnerving.

At least Irene couldn't make the celebration, or I'd be screwed today. I overheard my aunt telling Mom that Irene is traveling Europe. *Silver linings*. With her halfway across the world, I have one less monster to deal with.

As the celebration is in full swing, my plate lies untouched before me, which is rare. It takes a lot for me to lose my appetite.

My gaze is locked on the flower arrangement, and I'm overly aware of every single movement Nikolas makes next to me.

My nerves are frazzled, and when he reaches for his tumbler of whiskey, I can't stop myself from flinching. The tumbler appears in front of me, then there's a low murmur from him. "Take a sip. It will help."

With zero strength to argue, I take the glass from him. The amber liquid sloshes against the sides and taking a small sip, my breath is stolen as the fluid burns down my throat.

My mind hasn't stopped racing since the fight with Nikolas, trying to come up with a way to escape my inevitable, grim future.

A joyful sound draws my attention, and I watch as Mom laughs at something her new husband said. She's so caught up

in her blissful day she probably wouldn't even notice if Nikolas decided to snap my neck right here.

There's an intense pang of loss in my chest because it feels like I've lost my mother. I'm no longer the most important person in her life. Peter Stathoulis has taken over that spot.

Nikolas takes the tumbler from my numb fingers, and my eyes dart to the rim of the glass as he takes a sip, his lips touching where mine were less than a minute ago.

Seemingly relaxed, he casually rests his arm on the back of my chair. My body tenses and arches to put some distance between us, but then his arm wraps around me, and I'm tugged against his side. He lets out a chuckle. "Tell me, *little sister*, how are your studies going?"

Like you care.

I clear my throat, my gaze jumping to his handsome face, where there's no sign of malice, before lowering to the black vest complimenting his solid chest.

"Good," I whisper. I try to pull away, but it only has Nikolas tightening his hold on my shoulders.

When my eyes dart to his again, I feel his thumb brush against my skin. The touch sends a streak of nervous energy through me.

"You'll be done by June?" he asks, his demeanor still casual, giving the impression to the other guests that we're comfortable in each other's company, which couldn't be further from the truth. I've never felt more unsettled around another human being before.

"Yes."

A smile tugs at his lips, changing him from looking like the grim reaper to sinfully attractive. “Good. The sooner I arrange a marriage for you, the better.” His words shudder through me, then he sweeps his other hand over the hall. “Is there anyone here who catches your eye? If I start negotiations now, we can have you married by the end of July.”

What. The. Hell?

“I’m not getting married,” I object, my tone weak instead of filled with the strength I seem to lack whenever I’m in his presence. It’s as if he drains it from me only to use it against me.

The man is a damn strength vampire.

Nikolas’ gaze locks with mine, dark and brooding. He’s probably planning my demise.

“You are. The sooner I can hand you over to another man, the sooner you won’t be my problem.”

Thank God for the two calming pills and sip of whiskey, or I’d lose my shit.

“Why can’t you just ignore my existence?”

The corner of his mouth twitches again. “You represent the Stathoulis family, Tess. Your actions will either reflect poorly or favorably on me.” Tilting his head slightly, the smirk on his face grows with potency. It’s hot and terrifying. The devil is the most beautiful sinner, and being the arrogant asshole he is, he freaking knows it. “It would be in your best interest to try and gain my favor.”

“How would I do that? Sign my life over to you, give up on every dream I’ve ever had, get married, and squeeze out

two kids?” Either it’s the medication, or I’m braver than I feel.

“Hmm.” The sound from deep in his throat sends goosebumps scattering over my skin, making me feel more alive than I’ve ever felt in my entire existence. “I like the idea of you signing your life over to me.”

Shaking my head, my eyebrows draw together as I take in the monster that’s now my stepbrother. Surely he has a heart somewhere in that chest of his? He can’t be all evil. “Don’t you care at all?”

Maybe he’s cut from the same cloth as Irene, soulless and cruel?

His expression grows serious again. “You haven’t given me anything to care about. Change your attitude and show me you’re an asset to the family, and I might start to care whether you’re happy or not.” He leans forward, holding my eyes prisoner with a brutal look. “Piss me off, and I’ll hand you over to the oldest fucker willing to marry you.”

My stomach revolts at the thought, and it seriously puts the fear of God in me. “I’d rather die.”

“That can be arranged.”

My mouth dries up so severely I reach for his tumbler of whiskey and down the rest of the fiery liquid.

Knowing I’m stuck with the devil for a stepbrother, and it spells nothing good for me, my shoulders sag beneath the weight of his arm.

He pulls me into a sideways hug. “Obey me, and we’ll get along just fine.”

Yeah right.

I need to figure out a way to beat Nikolas at his own game before he destroys my entire life.

Chapter 6

Nikolas

Forcing Tess to bend to my will shouldn't fill my veins with a need to break her until I have her on her knees and eating out of my hand. But fuck, it does.

Every tremble. Every fearful glance. It's like a drug, making the addiction I wasn't aware I had grow.

Besides the age gap and the minor fact that we're stepsiblings, Tess is actually a wet dream. Her silky hair has me wondering how it would feel in my fist while I use it as a leash to control her.

Then there's the constant fear trembling in her innocent eyes that burns a hot path straight to my cock.

Jesus.

The earlier altercation wasn't planned, but damn if I didn't get hard from having her body pressed against mine, feeling every soft curve. The attraction was sudden and totally caught me off guard.

It's still fucking simmering in my veins.

I've watched her the entire afternoon, still trying to figure her out. Talking with other people, she had a polite smile plastered to her face, but the damn thing disappeared faster than mist before the sun whenever she looked at me. It's then I

realized she's never smiled at me. Right from the beginning, she's had her claws out.

I'll have to dull them before she tries to scratch out my eyes.

Amusement trickles through my veins. Tess is the first person to blatantly disrespect me, and for some unknown reason, I want her to keep fighting. I don't want her to fold like the many before her.

I want to see just what this girl is made of.

Plate after plate has left the table untouched by Tess. She's only had the whiskey and a sip of champagne. The last thing I need is her drunk at our parents' wedding, and it has me reaching for a bottle of water. Tess startles, her whole body flinching.

I pour her a glass of water and nudge it closer to her. "Drink."

"I'm not thirsty," she stubbornly declines.

"It's an order."

She lets out a huff of air but obeys. I watch as her throat works the liquid down, and a weird satisfaction rushes through me.

The sensation, along with Tess' wet lips, stirs something primal deep in my chest.

I want this girl on her knees.

Begging for my...

Rising from the chair, I shun the thoughts as fast as they came. I leave the table and the girl that's becoming an enigma

I care too much to solve.

Reaching my father and Helena, I smile politely. “Can I steal Helena for a dance?”

A pleased expression settles on Dad’s face, and he hands his bride over to me. The music selection for today is classical and relaxed.

“Enjoying your day?” I ask as I slowly steer Helena over the floor.

“Yes. Thank you.” Even though she always smiles at me, I pick up on the tension around the corners of her mouth. She tries to pretend it doesn’t bother her that I’m the head of the mafia, but it does.

“About Theresa,” I get right to the point. “I assume you’ve been handling her expenses.”

“Yes.” There’s a hesitant tone to her voice.

“I’ll take over from today,” I state.

Helena’s manicured eyebrow darts up. “Oh... It’s not a lot. I don’t mind handling it.”

My gaze settles on Helena’s, and I stare for a moment to drive my words across. “It wasn’t a question.”

An apprehensive expression flutters over her features. “Of course. I’ll email everything to you before we leave for our honeymoon.”

A smile curves my lips. “Good.”

As the song comes to an end, I lead Helena back to the bridal table and seat her next to my father. Stopping next to

Tess, I hold my hand out to her, a daring look plastered over my face. “Dance with me.”

Tess looks up at me, defiance and fear warring in her eyes, but then she gives in and places her slender hand in mine. As my fingers wrap around hers, and I tug her up from the chair, I become aware of how small her hand feels in mine.

With her soft palm pressed firmly against mine, I lead her to the dance floor before pulling her into my arms. Tess does her damndest to keep a modest space between our bodies before I press hard against her lower back, forcing her right against me. Her eyes snap up to mine, a new fear bleeding into her irises.

“Don’t you dare make a fucking scene,” I warn her.

“This is inappropriate,” she grinds out between clenched teeth.

Fuck my life if I don’t want to do more inappropriate things to her.

“You think I care?” I chuckle. “The sooner you realize I now fucking own you, just like I own every square inch of Vancouver and every person here, the better.”

My eyes drift over her face, once again realizing just how exquisite she is. It’s as if every time I look at her, there’s something new to admire.

It also makes me realize she must be popular with men, and it has me asking, “Are you a virgin?”

Tess’ lips part in a gasp, her eyes widening on me before they begin to burn with anger. “How dare you ask me that?”

“I need to know for your future husband, *koritsáki*.”

“Don’t call me little girl,” she bites out as she yanks her body out of my hold. “And you can go to hell.”

I watch her rush out of the hall with her head held high, then the need to see just how hard I can push her has me going after her.

Chapter 7

Tess

I'm offended, well past the point of upset, and so damn anxious my muscles are starting to ache from all the trembling.

This is madness. Pure freaking madness.

Fleeing to the guest restroom, I'm just about to shut the door behind me when a hand slams against it. Nikolas steps inside, using his body to force me back before closing the door.

Shit. Not again.

He's like a dog with a bone today, determined to drive it home that I'm practically his bitch to do with whatever he wants.

Knowing I can't handle another confrontation and I've reached my limit, I resort to pleading, "Can you just give me a minute before taking another swing at me?"

The restroom is small, and it doesn't give me much space to move when Nikolas takes a threatening step closer to me. His unnerving gaze burns on me, his jaw locked so tight it makes him look intimidating as hell.

Reaching behind me, I feel for the wall, then another step forward from Nikolas has my back pressing against the light peach tiles.

He doesn't stop until his chest brushes against mine, and I'm forced to turn my face to the side in an attempt to avoid him. He lifts a hand and slowly twirls my hair around his finger.

The trembling in my body grows, and I pinch my eyes shut as the new fear that he might want more than just control over my life grows at a rapid pace. I might find the man physically attractive, but I hate everything he stands for, and it leaves me unsure of how to handle him.

He leans down until I'm engulfed by him, his breath warming my skin. Nervous energy rushes through my veins, accompanied by something else I've never felt before and can't quite place.

"Should I sample you so I can tell your future husband exactly what he'll be getting?" The threat is so low it vibrates in the air and right through my body.

I start to shake my head, but then his other hand flies up, and gripping my jaw tightly, he forces me to look at him. "Then answer my fucking question."

"I'm not," the words burst from me.

He tilts his head, his eyes narrowing, my answer clearly angering him. "How many men?"

For real? This is absolutely insane!

I lick my lips nervously, then instantly regret it when his eyes flick down to my mouth. When they stay locked on my lips, flaming up with something close to desire, I blurt out, "One. Only one!"

Nikolas brings his gaze back to mine then a deadly smirk forms on his features. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?” His grip lessens on my jaw, and just like earlier, he brushes a finger over my lips, leaving a rush of tingles behind I’m not comfortable feeling.

Suddenly he leans down until I feel his breath on my mouth. My breathing stalls, my heart lurches to my throat, and as my eyes snap shut, my hands fly up, pressing hard against his chest.

I become overly aware of the manliness radiating from his body and the feel of his solid muscle beneath my palms. I’ve interacted with my fair share of men but never had to deal with a man so powerful, and it leaves me defenseless and stunned out of my mind.

Before I can protest, he whispers darkly, “I’m starting to enjoy this, Theresa.” His nose skims my cheek, and when he speaks again, his lips brush against mine. It’s so soft, but it packs one hell of a punch, sending an explosion of tingles flooding my body. “I love a good fight. Keep it up, and I might want to find out if you’re just as feisty in bed.”

Grabbing at the only thing I have in my arsenal, I say, “You’re my stepbrother. We’re family.”

His fingers find my chin again, then he snaps, “Open your fucking eyes.”

They snap open, and I’m met with an up-close and way too personal view of Nikolas. His attractive features are so tense it looks like his self-control is a second away from snapping.

Every dangerous inch of him crowds me. I've never felt so small before.

"What makes you think a title that's less than a day old will bear any weight with me?"

I feel exactly the same, so I have no answer for him.

"Just because our parents are married doesn't mean a fucking thing. If you want me to be a doting big brother, treat me like one. But if you keep making me the enemy, I sure as fuck will force you to your knees." He lets out a hot breath, coating my lips with the warning. "I've killed men for less. Don't think just because you're a woman, you'll get off with a lighter sentence."

Shit. I'm in way over my head.

Submitting, whatever defiance I have left drains from me. "I understand." Fear trembles in the whisper as I swallow hard on my pride. "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

Nikolas slightly pulls back, a satisfied smirk on his face. His hands move to the sides of my neck, then I'm stunned out of my ever-loving mind as he presses a kiss to my forehead, murmuring, "Good girl."

Feeling like I just lost the most crucial battle of my life, I cautiously watch as he leaves the restroom. My body sags against the wall, and unable to stop my anxiety from spiraling out of control, a sob breaks free. Covering my face with my hands, I smother the sounds as the anxiety attack hits hard, dragging my butt down to the floor. Curling in a helpless bundle, I struggle for air as the walls of my new life close in around me.

'Dead bitches can't snitch,' Irene's threat haunts me.

With my defenses down, the murky shadows of my past and how Irene hurt me creep through the cracks, forcing me to face the monster, who, much like Nikolas, was hell-bent on destroying me.

'I'll kill you.'

'Fat ass.'

'I'll cut out your tongue and feed it to the dog across the road.'

I'm taunted to within an inch of my sanity before the Xanax takes effect, forcing my past trauma back down into the dark corners of my mind.

I focus on taking deep breaths and calming my thundering heart. Once I feel a little better, I quickly rinse my face and use a couple of tissues to pat my skin dry.

It's been years since I had such a bad anxiety attack. Two years, to be exact. This is why a calm routine is so important to me, and Nikolas just blew it all to pieces.

Opening my purse, I apply some lipgloss and check my mascara to make sure it didn't streak before I suck in a fortifying breath and leave the restroom.

As soon as I enter the hall, I head straight for my mother, where she's sitting at the bridal table next to Peter. As I reach her, it's only to notice Nikolas walking in our direction.

Probably to make sure I don't tell my mother what happened. Asshole.

“*Agápi mou*, are you enjoying yourself?” Mom asks with a happy smile. Her eyes dart over my face, her smile vanishes, and concerned, she gets up and takes hold of my arm. “What happened? An anxiety attack?”

Mom thinks my anxiety problems resulted from losing my father at such a young age.

I never told anyone the real reason.

At first, it was because of fear, but with time I couldn’t bring myself to tell Mom what happened to me while I was at my most vulnerable.

Knowing Nikolas is within hearing distance, I force a smile to my face. “No, I had some whiskey, and it’s made me feel sick. Is it okay if I leave?”

“On no, you shouldn’t have drank something so strong,” Mom chastises me.

“I’m sorry.” I lean in and press a kiss on her cheek. “Enjoy the honeymoon and send me lots of photos.”

Mom’s face softens, and I’m pulled into a tight hug. “Nikolas will watch over you while I’m gone.”

God help me.

Pulling apart, Mom smiles lovingly at me. “Don’t study too hard, *Agápi mou*.”

“I won’t.” I turn my attention to Peter, and not sure what to do, I just focus on keeping the smile in place as I say, “It was a lovely wedding. I hope you have safe travels.”

He moves closer, and air kisses my cheek. “Thank you, Theresa. Your support means a lot to us.”

My spine stiffens when I turn around to face the damn devil lurking behind me. As I say goodnight to Athina and Basil, Nikolas takes hold of my elbow. His touch unnervingly seers my skin. The instant I'm done with my goodbyes, he leads me out of the great hall where the reception is still in full swing.

"Is it okay if I leave?" I think to ask, not wanting another fight with him.

"Yes." He gestures at two men waiting by the front door. "James and Grant will be your personal guards from tonight. You go nowhere without them."

Shit. I forgot about the guards.

It's on the tip of my tongue to argue when Nikolas pulls me to a stop, and his eyes lock with mine. There's a clear dare in his dark irises as he waits for me to defy his order.

When I keep quiet, a triumphant smile stretches over his stupidly attractive face.

Nikolas takes a step closer and presses a kiss to my forehead. I've seen him do the same with Athina, but still, it feels sinful, sending another rush of totally unwanted tingles racing over my skin. Then the asshole moves his mouth to my ear and whispers, "Much better, *koritsáki*."

The way he says little girl makes it sound like there's a deeper meaning.

Pulling back, he adds, "I'll see you for lunch tomorrow."

The word 'but' forms on my lips. One sharp look from Nikolas has me swallowing it.

I freaking hate you.

As if he can read my thoughts, he says, “You’ll learn to love me soon enough, little sister.”

Instead of telling him that will never happen, I take a step back. “Goodnight, Nikolas.”

“Sweet dreams.” The reply is filled with a world of taunting, and I swear I hear him chuckle as I leave the mansion with the two guards in tow.

Chapter 8

Tess

After my advanced cinematography class, where I got to touch a new state-of-the-art digital camera with prime lenses, I leave the bustling campus, trying to ignore the two guards behind me.

I can't even relish the amazing lecture I just had.

It sucks.

Glancing over my shoulder, I scowl at the guards wishing they'd disappear.

I haven't heard from or seen Nikolas since lunch on Sunday, and I'm hoping it's a good sign that I'll only have to deal with him on Sundays.

One can hope.

Letting out a sigh, I head in the opposite direction of my apartment, hoping to get more shots of the city and people for the screenplay I'm producing.

Reaching the David Lam park, I set my backpack down and dig my digital camera out. When I feel James and Grant breathing down my neck, I shoot a scowl their way. "Do you mind? I need some space."

James takes a couple of steps back, but Grant gives me a glare filled with warning before he joins his partner.

Jerk.

I haven't spoken to them much and don't plan to. They work for Nikolas, and that's the end of the story.

Adjusting the lens, I get into position. When I have the perfect view in my sights, I press record and slowly sweep the lens over the green lawn, and some ducks slipping into the water. I record the water rippling against the smooth rocks for a couple of minutes, so I can speed it up for a good effect.

I move, one with the camera, getting a shot of blossoms drifting from a tree before focusing on the city buildings framing the park.

I stop recording, then replay the clip, a smile spreading over my face.

Perfect.

Turning to the path, I press record again, focusing on the paving before swooping the lens up toward... ugh. James and Grant.

I don't stop recording but get a good shot of them in a serious conversation, giving off heavy mafia vibes.

I can use that for the danger aspect of my screenplay.

Who would've thought the guards would come in handy.

I move to get a better shot of the path and focus on a pair of shiny black shoes walking toward me. The person's steps are confident. Then, ever so slowly, I bring the lens up the person's legs. Black suit pants. A crisp white shirt and jacket.

Apprehension trickles through my veins as I start to realize who I have in my sights. Still, I keep recording until I have a full view of Nikolas, all fire and brimstone, heading right for me with a group of guards flaring out behind him as if they are his wings.

I quickly end the scene by slanting the camera and getting a shot of the blue sky dotted with fluffy clouds. Just as I press stop, Nikolas comes to a halt in front of me. He glances at the camera in my hand before hitting me with the full impact of his intense gaze.

I've always struggled with being social, but with Nikolas, it's a million times worse, and I can't think of a thing to say.

"How was school?" he asks.

"Good." Then I think to ask, "How did you know I was here?"

He gestures to the guards.

Right.

His eyes lower to my camera again. "Did you record me?"

I wet my already dry lips. "By accident."

"Show me."

Shit. It was a good shot, and I'd hate to lose it.

Reluctantly, I rewind and turn the screen so Nikolas can see. He moves to my side, way too close, and I quickly press play to get it over with.

Damn, it's really a good shot. He embodies everything the mafia stands for, and it definitely doesn't hurt that he's so damn attractive.

There's a low humming sound from deep in his chest. My eyes fly up to his face, and I try to read his expression. Not giving a single damn thing away, he mutters, "Show me what else you've recorded."

A frown forms on my forehead as I rewind to the first clip. Again I watch for his reaction but get nothing while he views my work.

When the footage comes to an end, I nervously fidget with the camera.

"Not bad. What will it be used for?"

I frown again, not understanding where this sudden interest is coming from. "Ah... It's for a screenplay I wrote."

"About?"

He's probably going to laugh. "A girl questioning her purpose in an uncaring world."

"Will it be used just for school?"

I nod quickly. "Yes."

Nikolas' eyes lock on my face, and he seems deep in thought. Then the corner of his mouth lifts in a hot smirk that probably gets him laid a hell of a lot. "I'd like to see the final piece."

Huh?

I tilt my head, my confusion growing, and unable to stop myself even though I know better, I ask, "Why the sudden interest in my life?"

"We're family," he states as if it should mean something.

But it doesn't. It never will.

For a moment, the sounds of the park fill the silence between us as Nikolas glances toward the shore. "It's peaceful out here."

My eyes dart to his face, and seeing how he admires our surroundings, I wonder if his life is just filled with death and crime. Not knowing beauty and peace. That's actually sad if it's the case.

Getting a deeper glimpse of Nikolas makes me want to know more.

"You don't get to spend time in nature?" I ask, hoping he'll answer and not shut me down.

Letting out a deep breath, he turns his attention back to me. He takes an envelope out of the inside pocket of his jacket and holds it out to me. "The paperwork explains your new finances."

What?

With shock shuddering through me, I take the envelope. "Why new finances?"

His gaze turns hard, warning flashing in his dark brown irises. "So I can control your income and expenses."

My lips part and I gape at him. Even though I knew it might happen, I hoped it wouldn't.

Nikolas has taken complete control of my life.

Against my better judgment, anger burns through my veins. "Seriously? I now have to ask you if I need something?" I slap the envelope back against his chest. "Hell no."

Instead of taking the envelope, Nikolas grabs hold of my wrist and yanks me right against his body. The sudden movement has my precious camera slipping from my grip. Not giving a single fuck about Nikolas' wrath, I rip free from his hold and shove at him before crouching by my camera.

"Asshole! Look what you've done." A piece broke right off, and the sight instantly has tears pushing up my throat. The camera is my most prized possession, not because of monetary value, but because it's given me so much joy.

I gather the pieces, making sure not to leave anything behind in the hopes that I can get it repaired, and rush over to my bag. I carefully place the pieces inside, shrug the straps over my back, and not sparing Nikolas a glance, I head for the main road.

Hurt blooms in my chest with every step I take, hating Nikolas even more.

The asshole.

Arrogant, egotistical, freaking monster.

God, I wish I could slap him.

Suddenly he grabs hold of my arm, and I'm swung around. I land with a thud against his chest, his fingers grip hold of my chin, and my head is forced back. His raw masculine scent wraps around me. Our angry gazes lock, making something foreign and new spark to life.

"Did you just call me an asshole?" Even though he looks like he's a second away from completely losing his temper, his tone sounds incredulous.

I won't be surprised if no one has had the guts to curse him, and if that's the case, I'm glad to be the first.

"Among other things," I grit out between my clenched teeth. "You broke the one thing that meant the world to me."

"I didn't do shit," he bites back. His presence grows darker, threatening to swallow me whole. "If you didn't throw a fucking tantrum and took the envelope, none of it would've happened."

"Tantrum?" I gasp, my own temper completely spiraling out of control. "You expect me to roll over and play nice while you take control of every single aspect of my life?"

"I expect you to obey."

My eyes flit over his features, and again I'm left wondering if he has no heart at all.

"I tried, but you make it impossible." I hate the quivering in my voice. I hate that I can't control my emotions around him. I hate how he makes me feel. *Terrified but curious*. "Why do you have to control my life? Why can't you just let me be?"

His eyes narrow slightly, and looking like a predator ready to pounce on its prey, he replies in a low tone, "At first it was because it was my damn job, but now..." He leans closer until I feel his breath on my lips. "It's because I'm enjoying this thing between us. The more you fight, the harder I'll strike."

Somehow I keep eye contact as I whisper, "You're evil."

"Never claimed not to be." He lets go of me, shoves the envelope in my hand, and gives me a final look of warning. "The next time you disobey me, you won't like what I'll do."

With nothing more than the ominous warning, he stalks away, leaving me with James and Grant.

My chest fills with hopelessness as I stare at his broad back.

God, what am I going to do?

Chapter 9

Nikolas

With anger simmering in my chest, I shake my head as I slip into the backseat of the armored SUV.

The satisfaction I had after our previous altercations is nowhere to be found. Instead, I feel something foreign and totally unwanted.

Guilt.

I didn't mean for her camera to break. Especially not after seeing how good the footage was.

It's not my fault she has butterfingers.

"Where to, boss?"

"The office," I grumble as I unbutton my suit jacket and take out my phone. The SUV pulls away while I open my emails. I check the first one, but my thoughts churn around the fight instead of focusing on the words.

Letting out a sigh, I glance out of the window. The SUV stops at traffic lights, then I see Tess crossing the road with James and Grant right behind her. She tucks some hair behind her ear, sadness drawing her features tight. Ducking her head low, she wraps her arms protectively around her midsection.

It's a different sight from her usual feistiness, hitting me square in the chest.

Christé mou.

A man, coming from the opposite direction, bumps into Tess. James darts forward, grabbing hold of her shoulders to keep her from losing her balance while Grant shoves the man against the front of a cab.

Instantly there's a flare of rage in my chest. Flooded with a possessive feeling I've never felt before, my fingers tighten into a fist around my phone.

It's one thing for me to threaten Tess but watching a fucking overgrown ape almost knock her off her feet fills me with protectiveness toward her.

Dialing James' number, I bring the device to my ear.

"Boss?"

"I'm at the traffic light to your right. Bring Tess to me."

I watch as James takes hold of her arm and starts to drag her back in the direction of the SUV. Tess rears away from James, and when Grant snaps something at her, she shakes her head and makes a scene right in the middle of the street.

It looks like she's being fucking kidnapped.

I swear... this woman!

The light turns green, but Gregory knows to wait even as horns start blaring behind us.

The backdoor opens, and Grant shoves Tess inside. Shutting the door behind her, the two guards head to the other SUV holding my own personal guards.

The vehicle starts to move, and when Tess gapes at me with a mixture of anger and trepidation, I lean into her and pull the seat belt over her chest. Clipping it in place, I settle back against the seat, and finally able to focus, I check my emails.

“What the hell?” she gasps.

“Shhh!” A frown mars my forehead as I reread a sentence.

She huffs next to me, then shrugs her backpack off. Placing it on her lap, she wraps her arms around it.

‘You broke the one thing that meant the world to me.’

Fuck, this guilt has no business swirling in my chest. “Gregory, stop at the nearest camera store,” I order.

“Yes, boss.”

I can feel Tess’ eyes on me but continue ignoring her as I check one email after the other. Not that I’ll remember a fucking thing I’m reading. The woman is distracting as fuck.

Gregory pulls up to a curb. “We’re here, boss.”

Tucking the phone into my pocket, I shove the door open and climb out. My eyes scan over our surroundings for any threats as I stalk around the back of the SUV. Tess doesn’t move, and when I open her door, she shoots me a cautious glare.

“Get out,” I bark.

Fuck, it’s hard being nice to her.

Tess grips her bag tighter as she climbs out of the vehicle, and before she can try to run away, I take hold of her elbow and tug her into the store. Stopping in front of the nearest shop assistant, I say, “Where are your best cameras?”

“Digital,” Tess mutters.

“This way,” the shop assistant answers, his eyes darting between Tess and me.

We’re taken to the left side, where different cameras and equipment line the shelves. Before the assistant can say anything, Tess pulls free from me and makes a beeline for a specific camera. She carefully sets her bag down by her feet, and lifting the camera off the shelf, wonder spreads over her face.

“Is that the one you want?” I ask, stepping closer to her.

For the first time since we met, Tess hits me with the full-blown power of her smile as she looks up at me. It transforms her features from beautiful to otherworldly, making that annoying unknown emotion tug at my heart.

Her smile wavers, then she lifts her chin in defiance. “I’m only letting you buy it because you broke my camera. I’ll take it as an apology.”

The little minx.

Glaring down at her, I cross my arms over my chest, so I don’t end up strangling her in the middle of the store where there are witnesses. “This is not an apology.”

The smile returns to her face, but this time there’s something seductive dancing around the edges of her lips. Fuck if it doesn’t make me harden for her.

“Either this camera is an apology, or I’m not taking it.”

My eyes narrow as my temper flares hotter. Turning around, I walk to the counter while barking at the assistant.

“We’ll take the fucking camera.”

The guy glances between Tess and me as she comes to the counter. She doesn’t stop smiling, then the assistant looks at her for a second, too long. Before I can stop myself, I wrap my arm around Tess’ shoulders, tug her to my side, and leaning forward, I growl, “Unless you want to lose your fucking eyesight, you’ll stop looking at her.”

He bristles and quickly finishes the purchase. After I’m done paying, I grab the bag, give him a parting look filled with a world of warning, and practically shove Tess out of the store.

Christé mou.

I feel rattled, my heart beating too fast, my skin growing clammy.

I don’t fucking like this at all.

Why did I threaten the guy for just looking at Tess?

Why do I even fucking care whether she has a camera?

Annoyed as fuck, I shove the bag into her arms and stalk around the SUV to get into the backseat.

Strapping on my seat belt, I bark out the order, “Theresa’s apartment.”

The source of my anger and impatience sits next to me, grinning from ear to fucking ear as she reads every damn word on the box.

Her excitement fills the air, and the moment I slant my eyes in her direction, she smiles at me. “Thank you.”

It catches me totally off guard, rattling me even more. My eyes snap to the window, and refusing to look deeper at the

meaning of all the unwanted emotions, I rather focus on my anger.

“You better fucking pass this course with flying colors,” I warn her, my tone tight from all the tension.

“That’s my plan.”

Glancing back at her, I watch as she practically drools over the camera. With eyes sparkling and happiness flirting around her full lips, you’d swear I bought her the world.

To her, it is.

The thought hits hard, and for the first time, I start to see Tess for who she is and not the socialite I expected before I got to know her a little.

She has passion and dreams, and damn does she fight for them.

“This is important to you?” I ask the question before I can stop myself. I shouldn’t give a fuck what’s important to her.

Tess’ gaze lifts to mine and searches my face. “If I say yes are you going to threaten to take it away from me?”

Dealing out threats is second nature to me, and out of habit, I mutter, “If you continue giving me shit, yes.”

Tess’ eyebrows draw together, a flash of panic and sadness in her gaze. I don’t like it one fucking bit and want the smile and happiness immediately back on her face.

Gregory brings the SUV to a stop in front of the apartment building. I’m still taking off my seat belt when Tess throws the door open, shooting out of the backseat. “Bye!”

Fuck, this woman. I swear I’m going to throttle her.

Getting out of the SUV, I set after her in time to see her dart up the stairs. I take the steps two at a time and catch up to her around the second floor. “You could’ve taken the damn elevator,” I grumble.

“A little exercise never killed anyone.” Tess gives me a questioning look. “Don’t you have work to attend to?”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing,” I grit out from between my teeth.

On the fourth floor, Tess stops in front of a door. “What work?”

I gesture for her to open, and letting out an irritated huff, she obeys. I follow her into her home and glance around the living space.

It’s not what I expected. It feels cozy but not cluttered. The same peaceful feeling I got at the park drifts around me. The only colors are white and blue, giving it a Mediterranean vibe.

Tess sets the box and backpack down on the table then turns to me with a raised eyebrow.

“Watch yourself, *Koritsáki*. We’re alone now,” I warn her. “No witnesses around to see me strangle you.”

Her bravery falters, and she moves to put the table between us. A chuckle escapes me as I shake my head, and pulling out a chair, I take a seat. I gesture at nothing specific. “Where’s the envelope?”

“In my bag,” she mutters.

I nod in the direction of the damn bag. “Take it out.”

Tess pulls the bag closer and scrummages around in it before removing the crumpled envelope. God only knows what else she has in that bag.

“Read it,” I order, my eyes sharpening on her so I don’t miss a thing.

With another annoyed huff, she opens it and pulls the papers out. Her eyes dance over the words, and soon a frown darkens her forehead.

Chapter 10

Tess

I only took the camera because Nikolas broke mine. And I really wanted a Blackmagic URSA Mini Pro 12K camera.

Also, it didn't escape my attention that Nikolas was protective of me. The fact that he snapped at the guy who assisted us spoke volumes. I'm totally ignoring how it made my stomach flutter.

He's not all evil.

Maybe there's hope.

That's what I thought until my eyes dart over at all my expenses neatly printed on Stathoulis company stationery. Then my sight focuses on the allowance I'll be given and the instructions on how I have to spend every cent.

I shake my head vehemently. "What's this?" I say as I toss the papers on the table.

"I thought you could read," he replies drily.

"That's a hundred times more than the allowance I used to get. I know how much my father left us, and the amount on the page would deplete my mother's savings within a year."

Nikolas picks up the papers and glances over them before looking up at me. His indifferent expression grows dark, then

he orders, “Sit, Theresa.”

I slump down in a chair then continue glaring at him.

As if he’s talking to a toddler, he explains, “You’ll be seen in public with me. I expect you to dress the part of a mafia princess. You’re a Stathoulis now.”

Anger explodes through me, and I dart back to my feet. Stalking up and down the small space between the kitchen and the living room, I shake my head. “I’m not a Stathoulis, and I sure as hell am not a mafia princess. I don’t want your money!”

Nikolas shoots up from the chair, his arm darts out, and grabbing hold of the back of my neck, he yanks me right against him. The glimmer of human I saw earlier is gone, and the devil is back in all his glory.

And damn, if I’m not starting to find it hot. Scary, but hot, nonetheless.

“It is not negotiable. You’ll take the fucking money and play your part,” he orders, his tone filled with the warning of certain death should I disobey.

My hand flies up and grabbing hold of his wrist, I swallow hard in his tight grip. It feels threatening, intense, and... and... “Let go of me,” I demand, not wanting to think of the heat flooding my abdomen.

Instead of listening, he tugs me closer still. “I’m done playing games for the day. You’ll fucking obey me or pay the consequences.” The underlying threat in his voice, along with the darkness swirling in his eyes, has me backing down, not

wanting to find out what the consequences will be if I keep fighting.

He must see the submission on my face because he reigns in his explosive temper, loosening his hold on my neck.

Control freak.

Straightening his jacket, he looks at me like he's a god and I'm nothing but a mere servant. "The first event is this Friday. My assistant will send you the details. Be there at seven p.m."

With the order hanging in the air, he walks to the front door and lets himself out.

Taking a couple of steps forward, I sink down on the chair he was sitting on and suck in deep breaths of air.

That was unsettling. Nikolas might still be terrifying as hell, but things are changing in a way I can't quite place.

Am I really attracted to him?

No.

Surely...

Ugh.

It's just because he's so damn attractive. Unfortunately, the rest of him still sucks.

Lifting a hand, I take hold of the papers and look at them again.

Fifty thousand dollars.

My. God.

I shake my head again, not even able to fathom the amount. What does Nikolas want in return for all this money?

It's certainly not out of the goodness of his heart.

There's no way I can just accept it. It's not about it being blood money. Hell, the inheritance my father left us came from the mafia.

I just don't want Nikolas' money. Shit, I need to get a job fast. I just wish I had more time in the day. My schedule is already overflowing with my studies.

I keep reading, taking in the list of specific clothing stores, jewelry stores, hairdressers, and various places I have to shop at.

This is really insane.

Digging my phone out of the bag with the full intention of calling my mother, I open the screen only to see a message from her. Opening it, I'm bombarded with a dozen photos, all of them showing her happy smile.

Shit, I don't want to ruin her honeymoon.

I keep looking at the photos of her and Peter at the beach, at an opera house, having dinner at some classy restaurant.

Mom looks really happy.

My shoulders sag as I realize I won't be able to run to my mother whenever Nikolas gives me hell. I'll have to deal with him myself.

My mind starts to race, trying to come up with a solution to this new problem.

I'll have to spend some of the funds to get new dresses for the damn events, but other than that, I'll continue using my usual monthly allowance.

I can donate some of the money.

A smile starts to tug at my lips.

I can also save a portion for Mom.

With a satisfied grin forming on my face, I pull my laptop out to search for non-profit organizations I can support.

Two can play this game, Nikolas.

I spend twenty minutes checking the various organizations and decide to support Greenpeace and Doctors Without Borders.

Checking my bank account, it's to see a whopping fifty thousand, eight hundred and twenty-three dollars.

"Greenpeace and Doctors Without Borders, thank you for your support, Nikolas," I mutter as I add their banking details to my beneficiary list.

I transfer fifteen thousand to each of the organizations and open a savings account where I place fifteen thousand for mom.

That leaves me with five thousand to pad my closet with dresses, and I'm only doing it, so I don't embarrass Mom when I represent her at events.

It's definitely not for Nikolas.

Feeling better, I glance at my bag. My heart sinks as I tug it closer, and taking the pieces of my camera out, I remove the memory card and insert it into my laptop. When I see the footage hasn't been ruined, the corner of my mouth lifts.

Ten minutes later, I realize I'm watching the footage of Nikolas on repeat. I slam the laptop shut and keep myself busy

by placing the broken camera in the box after removing the new one. I'll take it in for repairs tomorrow.

I fiddle with the new one, getting to know the feel of it and every function. Hours pass, and only when my stomach growls do I realize time's run away with me.

Getting up, I head into the kitchen and take out ingredients to fix myself a turkey sandwich. I pour a glass of orange juice to wash the food down, and leaning back against the counter, I stand and eat, my eyes dancing over the camera.

At least something good came from today.

Chapter 11

Nikolas

Temptation, wrapped in black silk, floats down the stairs, and every fucking pair of male eyes lock onto her.

The itch to rip my gun out and go to town on every fucker who dares to ogle Tess crawls beneath my skin.

This is fucking ridiculous.

Tossing the tumbler back, I down the whiskey, hoping it will calm the desire flooding my body.

The way Tess moves makes the silk shimmer beneath the electric lights. Her hair is styled straight, the tips flirting with her bare shoulders, the thin straps barely visible. The damn slit of the dress exposes too much of her leg, stopping short of being indecent.

She stays next to Athina, who stops to greet Olga, a socialite who grew up in our circle. When Tess turns to glance around the room, my mouth goes dry.

Jesus.

Her back is exposed, the silk nestled right above her ass. *Fuck that ass.* There's too much skin, and her ass is fucking perfect.

Then Tess, looking like a fucking wet dream, smiles at Olga as they're introduced.

My gaze flits around the room, and a possessive rage burns in my chest when I see the other men practically salivating at the mouth for her.

Work has kept me busy, and it will only get busier with the Sicilians crawling out of the gutters and slithering onto my streets. I don't have fucking time for this.

What the fuck was she thinking, wearing a dress like that?

I set the empty tumbler down on the table and stalk toward Tess. When her eyes land on me, they widen, and she moves in behind Athina.

As if she can fucking hide from me.

Reaching the women, I press a kiss to Athina's temple. "Hi. Where's Basil?"

My sister glances around the room then gestures to the stairs. "Probably still talking with Spiros. They ran into each other at the entrance."

Without having to look, I reach for Tess and slipping a hand over her smooth skin just above her porn-worthy ass, I tug her to me. Her skin feels so soft it makes my desire spike dangerously high.

My eyes blaze over her face, which is covered with just the right amount of make-up to compliment her natural beauty. I lean down, and pressing a kiss to her forehead, her innocent scent fills my lungs.

Christ, this woman.

“We need to talk,” I mutter, and before she can argue, I push her toward the hallway leading to the restroom.

We’re attending the birthday party of our oldest member, Yiannis, who just turned eighty-one. It’s boring as fuck, but the man has been loyal to the mafia his entire life.

It’s the only reason I’m not dragging Tess home and stripping her out of the fucking dress.

The moment I shove Tess into the restroom, she mutters, “God, not again. What did I do now?”

I shut the door behind me and let my eyes rove over every delectable inch of her. I struggle to keep from showing her what will happen if she ever dares to wear something so provocative again.

Somehow I keep control over my temper as I level her with a dark glare. “What the fuck made you think it’s okay to wear this dress?”

A frown mars her forehead. “Athina helped me pick it. I’ve never attended events like this, and I called her for help, so if you have a problem with what I’m wearing, take it up with your sister.”

What the fuck was Athina thinking?

Shrugging out of my jacket, I wrap it around Tess’ shoulders so it will cover her ass, back, and shoulders. My actions have Tess giving me a what the fuck look.

“Just keep the fucking jacket on. I don’t need every man in a mile radius drooling over you.”

Tess tilts her head to the side, and with an unamused expression, she states, “It’s hot.”

Damn right, it’s fucking hot. Tess. Not the temperature. I don’t give a fuck if she dies of heatstroke. She’s keeping the jacket on.

I’m fucking rattled again. This is not good.

Scowling down at the girl that’s seriously becoming a thorn in my side, I mutter, “Don’t you dare take the jacket off. I swear I’ll bend you over my knee and spank you.”

Tess’ eyes widen, and her lips part in shock. “Don’t you think you’re overreacting? And crossing a line by saying that to me?”

Overreacting? *Maybe, and I don’t care to find out why. Denial is bliss.*

Crossing a line? *Who the fuck cares.*

“Let’s get one thing straight, Theresa.” I take a step closer, the heat from her body calling to mine. “I don’t care about rules and fucking lines. If I say a dress is inappropriate, then it’s fucking inappropriate. If I tell you to do something, then you fucking do it.”

Even though fear shimmers in her eyes, Tess still scowls at me. “Do you talk to Athina like this? Or is it just me?”

“Athina fucking listens,” I almost bark.

“She chose the dress,” Tess reminds me. “Are you going to drag her into this restroom and give her an earful?”

No.

Fuck.

I don't like being called out, and not knowing how to handle Tess, seeing as she's actually innocent in this mess, I let out a frustrated breath.

Retaliating, I give her a final warning, "Never wear anything like this again. You make sure you're fucking covered."

Grabbing hold of her hand, I open the door and drag her ass back to the hall where the guests are gathered. I head straight for Athina, who lifts an eyebrow when she notices us approaching.

Stopping in front of my sister, I snap, "Don't ever dress her like a fucking porn star again."

The temper we both inherited from our father flares in Athina's eyes. Lifting her chin, she gives me a chilling smile. "There's nothing wrong with the dress. Tess looks stunning."

Stunning. Yes.

Still.

"Don't push me, Athina."

My sister must see I'm close to losing my shit and wisely backs down. "I'm sorry, Nikolas. It won't happen again."

With the issue settled, I pull Tess behind me as I make my way to the bar. I order a whiskey for myself, then glare down at the little minx who's quickly turning my life upside down. "What do you want to drink?"

"If you're going to drag me all over the place, I'll definitely need water." A curious expression flutters over her features, chasing away some of the usual fear I've come to

expect when she looks at me. I see the questions mulling in her head, but instead of asking why I'm acting like this, she asks, "You're aware I'm wearing heels? If I had known I'd be running after you, I would've worn my sneakers."

For some reason, her smart mouth doesn't stoke my temper but instead eases the tension in my body.

And it makes me want to kiss her.

Fuck.

"Water. In a glass," I order. Then, checking with Tess, I ask, "Ice and lemon?"

"Please," she smiles at the bartender.

I almost snap at her not to smile at the fucking man, but bite the order back.

This is really fucking ridiculous.

Unable to avoid my emotions any longer, I look deeper. Why the fuck am I losing my mind over this woman?

While we wait for the drinks, my eyes drift over her sinful body and settle on my fingers wrapped around hers. Inappropriate or not, my fingers flex, and I move to link them with hers.

Tess' gaze darts down, her lips parting slightly.

Lifting our joined hands, I take in how delicate hers seems in mine. "You have small hands."

"Uh-huh."

My eyes lift to her beautiful, innocent face.

What is it about this woman that makes me act irrational?

Not able to put my finger on it, I turn my attention to the drinks as the bartender nudges them closer to us. Picking up the tumbler, I drink half, letting the alcohol soothe the confused emotions that have taken up residence in my chest.

Glancing over the room, I notice Yiannis has joined the party, and with Tess' hand firmly in my grip, I walk toward the man to congratulate him.

"Nikolas," Yiannis smiles, his face already red from celebrating a little too hard. "Thank you for coming."

"Happy Birthday, Yiannis. My father regrets not being able to attend and sends his regards."

Yiannis waves a hand in the air. "Is he enjoying his honeymoon?"

"I assume he is."

His eyes flick to Tess, then down to where I'm gripping her hand tightly. He was at the wedding, so he should know precisely who she is.

"Have you met Theresa?" I ask, softly tugging her closer to me.

Yiannis smiles between us. "Yes, Peter introduced us. Your stepsister." There's an amused tone to his voice.

I hate that fucking word. I'll never think of Theresa as my stepsister.

Chapter 12

Tess

Dressed in a pair of jeans and a baggy t-shirt, I grab my camera bag and shrug it over my shoulder. Opening the window in my bedroom, I climb through and, using the fire escape, I sneak out of my apartment like a damn thief.

Hey, a girl's got to do what a girl's got to do to avoid the damn guards.

After the intense night, I had to spend glued to Nikolas' side, I need some alone time. I also want to get more footage for my project without the two men hovering behind me like flies.

The fire escape ladder stops just shy of the ground, and I jump down. Walking to the corner of the building, I peek around the side. I see James leaning against the hood of the SUV, reading a newspaper, while Grant seems to be fast asleep in the driver's seat.

Tess; one. Guards; zero.

Walking in the direction of the David Lam park where Nikolas interrupted me, my steps feel light and free. The streets aren't as busy yet, a couple of joggers out on the pavements and early risers who are probably on their way to work.

This is exactly what I needed. The whole Saturday just to myself.

Stopping at a Starbucks, I get an iced chai tea latte. I sip on the beverage, my eyes scouring the city for anything I can use in my project.

When I reach the crossing that leads to the park, I finish the beverage and discard the cup. I wait for the traffic lights to turn red, then walk across, thinking back to when Nikolas practically kidnapped me.

My thoughts start to revolve around Nikolas, and entering the park, I drop my bag in the shade of a tree.

The man confuses me. Sure, he's intimidating, and I still don't doubt he fully intends on making my life a living hell.

But...

The attraction bothers me. A lot.

Nikolas is fifteen years older than me. He's my stepbrother. The head of the mafia.

He's ruthless and clearly doesn't care about anything but his orders being obeyed.

Still...

I never thought of myself as a person who's impressed by good looks, so why does the attraction keep growing when the man has given me every reason to hate him?

Shrugging, I let out a sigh, accepting I'll never be able to figure him out.

I remove my camera from the bag and fiddle with the settings. Concentrating on a view of the park, I adjust the lens'

focus.

When I begin recording footage for my project, time slips away. I spend hours watching the shadows move across the grass, sailboats leave and come back, and ducks scouring the park for food and bathing in the warm sun.

When the sun starts to set, I record the colors streaking across the sky, and only when it's dark do I pack up and call it a day.

I'll do the night shoot during the week or next weekend. I have a ton of footage to keep me busy until then.

Happy with the work I've done, I stop at Burger King to grab some food. I order the biggest burger and fries, along with a coke.

After dinner, I plan on soaking in my tub.

A happy smile curves my lips until I wonder if the guards found out I snuck away from them.

I'm sure Nikolas would've been breathing down my neck, so I'm probably in the clear.

"Tess, I thought we could go shopping next Saturday? Do you have time?" Athina asks.

The Sunday lunch isn't too bad. Nikolas is grumpy as hell, but at least he hasn't bitten my head off.

Smiling at Athina, I nod. "Sure. Let me know what time suits you."

When we went shopping for a dress on Friday, it turned out to be a pleasant experience. I'm still getting to know Athina, but I like her and Basil.

"Nine o'clock," she replies. "The earlier we start, the better. Afterward, we can grab some lunch."

"Sounds great. I'm looking forward to it." I glance at Nikolas, who's hardly touched his food. There's a storm cloud brewing on his face, and he seems to be deep in thought about something that's clearly upsetting him as he twirls the tumbler of whiskey around and around.

It must be hard carrying the weight of the mafia on his shoulders.

There's a glimmer of pity in my heart before I focus on the plate of food in front of me. As the lunch draws to a close, the air keeps tensing, Nikolas' expression growing grimmer.

The second the servers clear the table, I get up. With a smile around my lips, I say, "Enjoy the rest of your day."

I rush out of the dining room, and I almost make it to the front door before Nikolas grabs hold of my arm, and I'm dragged to his study.

Shit.

Did he find out I escaped the guards? Damn, maybe he found out I donated the bulk of the funds he gave me to charity?

Ugh, just my luck.

As soon as I'm shoved into the study and the door slams shut, my heart lurches to my throat.

Oh, God. I'm in deep trouble.

Turning to face Nikolas, terrifying brutality lurks in his eyes. It makes my lips go dry, and I nervously lick them.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Tilting his head, his eyes lock on my face with the intensity of a nuclear bomb. “Do you think this is a game, Theresa?” The thinly veiled rage lowers his voice, so it’s deep and predatory.

A shiver races down my spine. I quickly shake my head, and assuming the confrontation is related to yesterday’s great escape, I try to explain, “I just needed some alone time. It’s not like I’m in any kind of danger. The guards are really unne—”

My sentence cuts off when Nikolas darts forward like a lightning bolt. His fingers wrap around my throat, and my head is forced back to look up at him. Seeing the full potency of his rage darkening his eyes to midnight black, I almost whimper.

My anxiety spikes dangerously high, which it hasn’t done since the wedding. Nikolas has been taking it easy on me, and it let me lower my guard. My right hand clutches my bag holding my calming pills, and my left darts up to wrap around his wrist.

“I’m the one who fucking decides whether you’re in danger or not!” he snaps. There’s no control over his rage, telling me just how volatile the situation is.

I pushed too hard.

God.

“I’m sorry,” I whimper.

“You’re linked to me, Theresa. It makes you a target by default. My enemies will use any of my loved ones against me. Do you fucking get it?”

But I’m not really family. I’m not a loved one.

Then again, when it comes to the mafia, it doesn’t matter how I feel about things.

“I understand,” I whisper, my mouth too dry to say anything else.

Nikolas keeps staring at me as if he’s going to kill me any second. My fear amps up, anxiety tightening my stomach into a hard knot.

‘*Dead bitches can’t snitch,*’ Irene’s voice haunts me, making everything a million times worse because Nikolas can kill me. Just like Irene, he can hurt me.

He leans down, his breath skimming over my jaw until it’s hot on my ear. “What did I say about disobeying me?”

“T-that t-there will be c-consequences,” I stammer, unable to hide how much he scares me right now.

There’s a rumble deep in his chest, the sound sending shivers racing over my skin.

For the most unnerving minute of my life, Nikolas keeps perfectly still, his breath warming my ear, his fingers imprinting themselves around my throat. Just when the tension becomes unbearable, and a sob builds in my chest, he moves.

“You fucking drive me insane,” he growls. It’s fast, and nothing could prepare me as his mouth slams down on mine.

My brain seizes all activity, my lungs unable to function, my heart slamming to a dead stop.

Nikolas brings his other hand to the side of my head, his fingers gripping a fistful of my hair to keep me in place. His tongue breaches my lips, and then all I can do is feel as he brands me with a cruel and searing kiss.

I don't know what I expected he'd do, but kissing was definitely not at the top of the list of punishments.

Emotions burst in my chest, all in stark contrast with each other. Shame, hurt, confusion, then heat floods my body, and desire joins in the chaos.

His tongue massages mine possessively, his breaths giving air to my lungs.

It's wrong. It's a tool to control me.

But...

Nikolas seems to lose his mind, the kiss turning wild as he claims every inch of my mouth. Tingles spark to life beneath my skin, my abdomen clenches hard, and a need I never thought was possible to feel fills me.

A need for more from the man I despise.

Holy shit.

My handbag drops to the floor with a dull thud, my hand numbly finds his bicep, and I hold on for dear life as he ravages me.

I don't push him away. I don't put up a fight.

This does not escape my attention.

Instead, I lift onto my tiptoes, pushing closer to him because the kiss is overwhelmingly hot, the best I've ever experienced, and nothing in me wants to stop it.

Crazy. I know.

His scent fills the air I'm desperately trying to breathe. A needy moan escapes me, a shock to my ears. I return the kiss, and our tongues start to fight for control.

Ha, who am I kidding? I'll never have any control where this man is concerned.

Nikolas' kiss breaks down my resistance. It obliterates it.

I begin to feel dizzy from the lack of air, or maybe it's from the all-consuming force he's taking me with. The fear takes a back seat to the desire filling my veins.

I feel him everywhere as I'm overwhelmed. His mouth devouring mine, his hard muscle beneath my fingers, his solid body pressed against me.

And God help me, it's absolute madness... but... I want more.

Chapter 13

Tess

I lose control until I'm just emotions, sensations, and need.

Trying to make sense of what's happening is no longer an option. I don't think of him as the head of the mafia, my stepbrother, the age gap.

All I can process is how good this man feels and tastes. *So so good.*

When his grip around my throat loosens, and the kiss becomes downright dirty, my hands move to his chest. I drink in the feel of the hard planes I got to see the first time we met.

Nikolas pushes both hands into my hair, his body presses against mine as if he's trying to envelop me in all of him. It makes my desire grow, loving the feel of his power and his unnerving intensity swallowing me whole.

One of his hands leaves my hair, then his fingers burn a hot path over my collar bone and further down. His palm takes the weight of my breast, and he squeezes so hard, I whimper against his mouth. My lips tingle from all the friction, but I can't get enough of the dark and predatory taste of him.

I've lost my mind.

Nikolas' other hand drops down to my bottom, and as his fingers dig into my buttcheek, he lets go of my breast. His

palm burns over my curves before slipping between my legs. He cups me through the light summer dress I'm wearing, a satisfied groan rumbling from deep in his chest.

Lifting my hands to the sides of his jaw, I get drunk on the feel of the bristles beneath my fingers.

God, this man.

Our breaths are ragged, and all I can do is gasp. Suddenly he tears his mouth away from mine, then he licks the sensitive skin over my racing pulse before biting down.

A needy whimper leaves me, my eyes almost rolling back in my head from how deliriously good it feels.

His palm starts to massage me between my legs, and well past the point of reasoning, my hips swivel, and I press down against his touch.

"Fuck," he snaps, urgency lacing the harsh word. Lifting my dress, Nikolas shoves his hand past the lace of my panties. Feeling him touch me in such an intimate way has my abdomen clenching unbelievably hard.

His finger thrusts inside me, ripping another groan from him. "Jesus, you're soaked."

My cheeks flame, but before I can start to feel self-conscious, his mouth crushes against mine again. I'm swept away on a cloud of pleasure. Whimpers and gasps are my only way of communicating how good it feels.

He moves with force, his palm kneading me relentlessly, his finger plunging in and out of me until my body tenses, and an orgasm – so intense it robs me of all my other senses – seizes me in its electrifying hold.

I cry into Nikolas' mouth, my nails scraping over his jaw while my body convulses against his. He forces me to ride the orgasm until the last drop of strength is drained from me.

Lifting his head, we gasp for air. My eyes open in time to see unbridled lust tightening his features.

It takes a moment for us to realize what just happened. Nikolas pulls his hand from my panties, and taking a step back, his face sets in an unreadable mask.

Long seconds tick by, the realization that I just let Nikolas kiss and touch me, shuddering through me.

I let him make me come.

Holy fuck.

Why did I let it happen?

I don't get time to process anything. Nikolas' eyes drift over my body, then he looks down at the finger he just had inside me.

Lifting his eyes back to my face, there's only brutality in his dark gaze. "Leave."

What?

When I don't react, he barks, "Get out, Theresa!"

My heart lurches painfully, and crouching, I pick up my handbag before running out of the office.

I make it to the SUV and even strap on my seat belt before a hard tremor rocks my body. All the emotions I suppressed rush back like a tidal wave.

Shame.

Confusion.

Anger.

My anxiety spirals into chaos and digging in my bag, I grab the bottle of Xanax. I quickly place the pill beneath my tongue, and closing my eyes, I try to breathe through the harsh reality.

Nikolas kissed me and made me orgasm as punishment.

Seriously? Is that really the reason?

Is he so cruel that he'd humiliate me just to make a point?

My emotions become a whirlpool of destruction, sucking my heart into a dark hole.

But...

Did he enjoy it because he desired me or because he just wanted to exert his power over me?

By the time the SUV stops in front of my apartment building, the Xanax has kicked in, and all that remains is a world of hurt and confusion.

My legs are numb as I take the stairs to the fourth floor, and when I reach my front door, the first tear falls. I go inside and throw my bag on the table before locking up behind me. Leaning back against the door, I slide down until my butt hits the floor. I wrap my arms around my shins and press my face against my knees.

I can't believe he would be so cruel. I understand there's no love lost between us, but to use sex as an instrument to control me is crossing the line.

But it felt like he really wanted me. The way he kissed me was like I was his next breath.

Lifting my head, I begin to frown.

Maybe he lost control, and afterward, he was just as shocked as me? Maybe he didn't intend for it to happen, and he didn't try to use it as a tool to force me to abide by his rules?

What if the physical attraction is two-sided?

My eyebrows lift as I consider the possibility. Surely, he would've reveled in the fact if he had meant to hurt me? If there's one thing I know, Nikolas won't let the opportunity pass him by to put me in my place.

Holy shit.

That means...

The attraction is mutual, and he wanted me as much as I wanted him.

Hate set aside, we both enjoyed it.

Holy. Shit.

Does that mean I actually have some power in this twisted game?

Chapter 14

Nikolas

I was a second away from stripping her naked, bending her over the desk, and fucking her raw.

What the hell was I thinking?

Oh, that's right, I wasn't.

My anger spirals as I sweep a hand across my desk, sending the papers, stationery, and laptop flying.

Christé mou.

Breathe.

I suck in a breath, then let it out just as fast. I have to suppress the urge to roar like a fucking beast.

What the actual fucking fuck?

I've never lost control like this before. Yes, I have a quick temper, and if I want something, I take it. But...

Oh. Fuck.

The truth slams hard into my gut.

Lifting a hand to the back of my neck, I try to focus on calming down so I can think clearly.

Instead of finding my bearings, the memory of Tess' swollen lips, the sound of her moans and whimpers, the feel of

her heat clamping around my finger – it all bombards me.

She tasted like innocence... until she didn't, and she melted on my tongue like a sinful prayer, rubbed against my hand, and rode my finger like a fucking pro.

My arm falls to my side. I breathe in and out, then admit what I've been doing my best to deny – **I want her.**

The thought of her putting herself in danger drove me insane. When James let me know she was missing, I almost lost my goddamn mind. I couldn't do shit because I was elbows deep in Sicilian blood and guts until late last night.

James let me know when they found her at the park, and I told them to keep a safe distance. I wanted Tess to think she got away with her little escape stunt while my anger brewed, and I thought about the ways I would punish her.

None of them involved kissing her or making her come on my finger.

Fuck.

I don't know what it is about the woman, but since the first day we met, she's had a hold on me I can't shake.

Her defiance that used to anger me now turns me on. I want to corrupt her innocence, want to see her on her knees as I feed her my cock.

Jesus.

I want Tess like I've never wanted anything in my life.

Placing my hands on the edge of the desk, I lean forward as I try to make sense of my feelings. Jealousy, possessiveness,

overprotectiveness – they’re all new emotions I haven’t felt before, and they rattle me.

Fuck do they rattle me.

But there’s the small problem of family. I can’t just fuck Tess out of my system and discard her like yesterday’s trash.

Not because I’m worried about how the rest of the family would react. I couldn’t care less. It’s because I’d have to face Tess after I’m done using her, and that’s just something I’d rather avoid.

The solution is simple. She’s off-limits. At some point, we’ll have to talk about what happened, or maybe I’ll be lucky, and she’ll behave herself from here on out and avoid me.

The thought doesn’t sit well with me at all. I don’t want Tess avoiding me.

Fuck.

A knock at the door has my eyes snapping to it as I straighten up. “What!”

Andreas comes in, a smirk plastered to his face. “You decent?”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

He gives me an amused look. “I came to knock earlier and heard you were busy.”

Worry slithers through my veins. “Athina and Basil?”

“They left before things got heated in here.”

Thank fuck.

Looking at the mess I made when I swiped everything off the desk, Andreas wags his eyebrows at me. “So you and Tess? When you said she’s driving you insane, I didn’t think you meant you wanted to fuck her.”

“I didn’t fuck her,” I grumble as I walk to the door.

“Sure sounded like you did,” he mutters behind me.

I hate that Andreas heard the sounds Tess made, and it has me instantly feeling aggressive. “Unless you want to die today, you’ll shut the fuck up,” I threaten my friend.

He brings his hands up in the universal gesture for surrender. “My lips are sealed.” Following me out of the office, he reminds me, “We have one meeting, then you can take the rest of the day off and get some rest.”

I almost laugh. “Me? Rest? Look who decided to be a comedian today.”

A frown forms on Andreas’ face. “You need some time off, Nikolas. When did you last get more than three hours sleep?”

“Sleep is for the dead.” Taking my phone from my pocket, I dial James’ number.

“Boss?”

“You don’t let her out of your fucking sight.”

“Yes, boss.”

Worrying about the state Tess is in after the... altercation in the study, I ask, “Is she home?”

“Yes.”

The words cling to my tongue, fighting not to leave my mouth. It feels unnatural asking, “Is she okay?”

“Okay?” James asks, not understanding.

“Emotionally!” I bark. “What state was she in when she got home?” Fucking hell! Anger vibrates beneath my skin.

“Ah... she seemed... okay,” he answers carefully.

Ending the call, I grumble, “If I hear the word okay one more time today, I’m killing someone.”

“Okay,” Andreas fucking pipes up as we climb into the armored SUV.

Leaning back against the wall, I pull my phone from my pocket to take a photo of the fucker we’re torturing.

“Smile,” I smirk at the Sicilian bastard. He just gives me a glare, but the exhaustion and pain seep through in his gaze. Taking the photo, I send it to Manno’s number with a message.

Someone will talk. It’s only a matter of time before I’m on your doorstep.

I take in the broken state of the man, wearing nothing but his underwear. I have to hand it to the Sicilians; they’re loyal to a fault.

Tilting my head, I stare harder at the man, wondering what it will take to break him. Removing fingernails and pulling teeth sure didn’t make him spill his guts.

Letting out a sigh, I tuck the phone back in my pocket and push away from the wall. Coming to a stop in front of the Sicilian, I tilt my head and lock eyes with him.

“You ready to talk?”

“Fuck... you,” he grits out from between the teeth he has left.

Signaling to Elias, I order, “String him up.”

Elias and Craig untie the Sicilian, and dragging him over to the noose, they tie it around his neck. After they position a crate beneath his feet, his toes barely able to find their footing, I swipe a knife off the table and walk closer.

“The sooner you talk, the sooner I’ll put you out of your misery,” I warn him. “It’s up to you what happens next.”

He just gives me a dead stare, seemingly already resigned to his fate.

“So be it.” Slowly, I stalk around my prey. “There are a couple of spots on the human body that can make a grown man weep.” Stopping behind him, I press the blade to his Achilles tendon, and painstakingly slowly, I slice into his flesh.

His body tenses, and he does his damndest to keep the cry back, but eventually, it echoes in the room. He lets out a frustrated roar as he struggles to keep his footing from the blood spilling down his heel.

“You don’t want to die, but you won’t talk,” I observe. “One hell of a predicament you find yourself in.”

“Fuck...” he sucks in a strangled breath, the noose tight around his throat, “you.”

Pressing the blade to the back of his knee, I slash through the skin and muscle, rendering his left leg useless. His roar fills the air, leaving the stale taste of impending death on the back of my tongue.

Taking a step back, I let my eyes drift over the Sicilian. “Where is Manno holed up?”

His lips part, and I slowly shake my head in a silent warning for him to think twice before he answers me.

Still, he sticks to his guns. “Fu... ck... you.”

I watch as he tries to keep himself from hanging, his right foot struggling to take his full weight.

The fucker manages to evade death for almost five minutes before his foot slips from all the blood. In his panic, he kicks the crate over, his legs trash, his arms strain against the zip ties. Gasping, his face turns purple.

It takes another two minutes before the fucker’s body jerks through his last futile gasps for air.

“Drop him in the alley where you found him,” I order. Setting the knife down, I walk out of the room.

I didn’t become as powerful as I am by showing mercy. Mercy is for the weak.

Chapter 15

Tess

Standing in the green room, I let out a sigh of relief when Jake, another student, calls, “End scene.” He grins at me. “Tess, if production doesn’t work out, you should go into acting. That was really an awesome scene.”

Walking to where he’s standing behind the camera, I wait for him to rewind, and as I watch the footage, I try to look from a third person’s perspective. “I hate watching myself,” I mutter.

“We all do,” Annette adds, scrunching her nose as she comes to watch as well. “But Jake’s right. You’re good. With all the footage you got of the city, the final product is going to be awesome.”

“Will you be okay processing today’s recording with the footage we have?” I ask her. “I have a program that should do the trick and can make some time to help.”

Everyone has their part to do for the project. I wrote the screenplay with their input and had to get footage of the city. Annette will put it all together, with our input of course, and Jake will add the sound.

Annette’s face flushes with excitement. “I’ll work on it this weekend. Oh, I wanted to show you the final product of the

footage you sent me.” We all head to where she pulls her laptop out of her bag, and when I see what a good job she’s done, especially with the water scene, I grin from ear to ear. “Damn, that’s awesome.”

“I had great footage to work with,” she passes the compliment back to me, then a curious expression flutters over her features. “By the way, who’s the man?”

“What man?”

Annette fast forwards to the scene of Nikolas, then lifts an eyebrow at me.

Damn.

“He’s... family.”

I watch as her curiosity morphs into interest. “Single?”

“No,” the word pops from me before I can even think of something to answer. Going with the lie, I add, “Married. Three kids.”

Then it hits that I don’t actually know whether Nikolas is in a relationship.

God, what if he is?

Worry gnaws at me because I seriously don’t like the idea that I kissed another woman’s man. I need to find out if Nikolas is single or if he’s seeing someone, just to soothe my conscience, of course.

“Shoot,” Annette mutters. “His wife is one lucky duck.”

“Are we calling it a day?” Jake asks.

“Sure. I have to get ready for a function anyway,” I mention as I gather my bag and place the strap over my shoulder. “Same time, Monday?”

“Yeah,” Annetta agrees. “What function are you going to?”

I have no idea. I just know I have to be there at seven p.m. “A family thing.”

So much for these events only being once a month.

Walking out of the green room, we head toward the exit. I see James hovering down the hall and suppress a sigh. Whenever people at school ask why I have guards, I never know how to answer.

When Grant comes into view, Jake takes hold of my arm. “Have a good weekend, Annette.” She grins at us as if she knows something I don’t, then Jake looks at me and asks, “Do you have some time free this weekend?”

“I planned on recording some more footage tomorrow. Why?”

He grins at me. “Want some company? A fresh eye might help.”

“Ahh...” Why does it feel like he’s offering more than just help? Not wanting to make things awkward, I shrug. “Sure. We can meet at Boba Run. They make the best bubble tea.”

I feel James and Grant hover behind me, and their presence must bother Jake as well, because he asks, “Will they come along?”

Letting out a huff, I mutter, “Yep. I’m kinda stuck with them.”

“Okay, so nine a.m. tomorrow?” Jake asks, only then letting go of my arm.

“Yes.” Giving him a smile filled with platonic friendship, which I hope gets through to him, I walk away.

James and Grant breathe down my neck as I walk down the street toward my apartment. My thoughts turn to Nikolas, wondering how the atmosphere will be between us tonight.

I haven’t seen him for the past twelve days. He missed lunch last Sunday because he was away on business. With the time passing since the kiss in his office, it’s made things feel awkward.

Part of me isn’t looking forward to the event at all, but there’s a small piece of me that’s a little excited to see Nikolas again.



Wearing a silver pencil dress that stops beneath my knees, the sleeves off-the-shoulder in a classy way, my toes wiggle uncomfortably in the matching heels.

Tonight I have my hair tied in a sleek ponytail because I was too lazy to wash it.

I’ve been following Athina around like a lost puppy for the last hour, greeting whoever she introduces to me. My eyes keep scouring the hall, though, for a specific someone.

Just as I’m about to give up and think Nikolas isn’t going to show, the girl we’re talking to, I think her name is Natali,

gasps. An alluring smile spreads over her face.

A firm hand settles on my lower back, my spine stiffens, and instant heat floods every inch of me.

Nikolas pushes between Athina and me, presses a kiss to her temple, then turns his head my way. Our eyes lock, but there's zero emotion in them before he presses a quick kiss to my forehead.

"Ladies," he murmurs, "You both look beautiful."

He sounds exhausted.

My eyes dart over his face, the tired lines around his eyes and mouth doing nothing to diminish his power or attractiveness.

"Nikolas, so good of you to make an appearance," Natali says, her eyes practically devouring him.

Nikolas only gives her a curt nod. His hand slips further around my waist, settling on my side with a tight grip that has my stomach flip-flopping like a fish out of water.

"I need a word with Tess," is all he says in warning, then I'm pushed to the side by his body. With Nikolas gluing himself to my back and breathing down my neck, I once again find myself being steered toward a hallway.

We're having this talk now?

My stomach bunches tightly with nerves, my mouth drying up.

Unlike before, I'm not cornered in a restroom. Nikolas tugs me to a stop in the middle of the hallway, his hand flirts with my bottom, then he takes a step back. Turning around to

face him, there's zero patience in his gaze, which takes mine prisoner.

"You have a date tomorrow?"

My mind does a double-take, and I shake my head.
"Date?"

"James said you're meeting some clown from school?"

Oh.

"To work on a project," I explain. "Jake is just a friend." I don't know why I added the last part.

Nikolas' eyes drift over my face. The intensity of having his full attention focused on me makes me feel nervous, and I fidget with the thin strap of my purse.

"You'll cancel," he demands.

"Why? It's for school." There's zero determination in my voice because I *am* worried Jake might think it's an actual date.

Nikolas lets out a tired sigh. "Not tonight, Theresa. Just do as I say."

I have the sudden urge to wrap my arms around Nikolas, to hug him tight, to give him the strength I don't have. Instead, I grip my purse tighter. "Okay."

Nikolas stares at me until my skin prickles with the need for more than just his eyes on me.

"We'll talk about what happened when I'm not so busy."

I nod, my tongue nervously darting out because I'm not sure I'm looking forward to *that* talk.

He lifts his hand to the side of my neck, the touch only increasing my need to be physically closer to him. When he leans into me, I desperately suck in a deep breath of his scent. My eyes drift shut when his lips press to my forehead.

We stand still for the longest moment. The attraction I feel toward him grows into something so powerful I wouldn't stop him if he tried for more. I'd let him fuck me right here.

Nikolas lets go of me, and without another word, he walks away.

My gaze drinks in the wide expanse of his back, his firm shoulders, his confident stride.

That was... different.

He didn't bite my head off. Still bossy and demanding, but not aggressive.

Don't get your hopes up, Tess. It could just be because he was too tired to fight with you.

Chapter 16

Nikolas

With the Sicilians growing braver and more of them out on my streets, I'm tired as fuck.

There's a war coming. It's just a matter of time.

I've only managed to get my hands on soldiers, no one high up the food chain that will make Manno squirm. It's frustrating as hell.

"Arrange extra guards for Athina and Tess," I instruct Andreas. "I want them protected twenty-four-seven."

"Got it." Andreas gets up from the chair to carry out the order but pauses to ask, "What about your father and Helena?"

"I'll take care of them." As Andreas leaves the office, I pick up my phone and dial my father's number."

"Nikolas," Dad answers.

"How's the honeymoon?" I ask, my eyes flicking over the security cameras I had set up outside Athina and Basil's home, as well as Tess' apartment building.

"Good. You sound tired," he states.

"The Sicilians aren't backing down. How many guards do you have with you?"

“That bad, eh?” I hear him sigh over the line. “We have enough. I’ll keep my guard up.”

“You’ll be back in two weeks, right?”

“Yes, but we can return sooner if you need me.”

I shake my head. “No. Enjoy the honeymoon. If I need help, I’ll call on the Priesthood.”

“Keep me up to date if things get out of control.”

“They won’t. Don’t worry.”

Ending the call, I lean back in my chair and wipe tiredly over my jaw.

Fucking Sicilians.

My phone beeps, and letting out a sigh, I open the message. A photo comes through from the number I’ve been contacting Manno on.

Finger for a finger. Tooth for a tooth. Life for a life.

Christé mou.

Darting up, I storm out of the office. When I burst out of the building and into the parking area, Andreas’ head snaps up. “What’s wrong?”

“The fuckers have Gregory!” I growl angrily, and even though I see the photo of my driver tied to a chair and beaten severely, I still search for the SUV, hoping to find him.

I hand Andreas my phone, and looking at the photo, he grimaces. “Fuck. I’ll issue a high alert among the soldiers.”

Needing to avenge Gregory because I know his body will be delivered to me before the end of the day, I bite out, “Bring

me the first Sicilian you can get your hands on.”

Andreas rounds up a couple of men, and as I watch them pile into SUVs and drive off the grounds, my fear for my family’s safety intensifies.

It’s only a matter of time before the fuckers will try to go after those closest to me.

Dialing Athina’s number, I wait for her to answer, then say, “You need to be on guard. Don’t go anywhere without your guards.”

“I know the drill, Nikolas. What’s going on?”

“Nothing for you to worry about. Just be extra cautious. Tell Basil to watch his back as well.”

“I will.” Athina pauses for a moment. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

She lets out a sigh. “You sound tired. When’s the last time you slept?”

Andreas has been riding my fucking ass about getting some rest, and now Athina as well. “I’m fine. Just don’t do anything stupid and be safe.”

“I will.” There’s another pause. “Take care of your health, Nikolas. We need you.”

The weight of the family bears down on my shoulders, and I end the call.

I’m scrolling to James’ number when his name starts flashing on the screen.

“What?” I bark.

“We lost Tess in the subway,” he advises me with fear coating every word.

“You lost her,” I grind the words out through clenched teeth. “You fucking lost Theresa?”

No. Not now. Not when war itself is on my doorstep.

“I’m sorry, boss. It’s the late afternoon rush. The subway’s packed with people. One second she was in front of us, and the next, there’s no sign of her.”

“You better find her,” I warn him, my tone grim and merciless. “And pray she’s in one piece, or I’ll fucking kill the both of you.”

“Yes, boss.”

The call ends while the edges of my vision darken with rage.

Tess better not have evaded her guards on purpose, or there will be hell to pay. Then again, if she escaped James and Grant, there’s a good chance it wasn’t the Sicilians behind her disappearance.

Please, not the Sicilians. Not Tess.

As the thoughts start to take root, my heartbeat speeds up and fear, unlike anything I’ve felt before, spreads through my body.

If the Sicilians took her, if they harm a single fucking hair on her body, I will eradicate them from the face of the planet.

Bringing up Tess’ number, I press dial, praying she answers. It rings for way too long, and I’m bracing myself that

she won't answer at all when suddenly her voice comes over the line. "Shit. Nikolas. It—"

The line cuts out, stealing the breath from my lungs. I try her number again, but it goes straight to voicemail.

My hands start to tremble with rage and worry, my muscles tense up, ready to pounce – ready to fucking destroy Vancouver.

Tess.

Chapter 17

Tess

Exhausted from ending up on the other side of the damn city after I got swept up in a rush of people and pushed into the wrong train, I finally reach my apartment building.

James and Grant give me the evil eye. “Where the fuck have you been?”

“It’s not my fault you can’t keep up,” I snap back at them. Walking into the building, I ignore the stupid guards.

At least I got more footage, otherwise today would’ve been a total waste of time.

Taking the stairs up to the fourth floor, I dig my keys out of my bag. I’m going to shower and sleep like the dead.

Oh, and I need to charge my phone, so I can call Nikolas and tell him it wasn’t my fault, or he’ll probably kill me at lunch tomorrow.

Opening the door, I let myself in. I make sure to lock behind me and drop my bag on the table. I remove the dead phone and plug it into the charger, then head to the bathroom.

I’m sure James or Grant will tell Nikolas I’m home, so he won’t worry.

He’s still going to fry your ass over hot coals.

Opening the faucets in the shower, I strip out of my clothes. I brush my teeth quickly, then stepping beneath the spray, I groan as the warm water pelts my skin.

What a crazy day.

First, Jake was upset when I canceled with him. I'll probably have to deal with the backlash on Monday at school. Then I got shoved onto the wrong train. My phone died. No doubt Nikolas is planning ways to kill me.

Ugh.

I wash my hair, and while I let the conditioner soak into the strands, I quickly scrub my body. After rinsing my hair, I turn off the faucets. I grab a towel and wrap it around my body, then reach for another towel to scrunch my hair dry.

So much better.

As I walk into my bedroom, apprehensiveness crawls over my skin, but before I can even glance around for the source, I'm grabbed from behind.

Strong arms lift me off my feet, tearing a terrified scream from my lungs. I'm thrown onto my bed, face first, and unable to push myself up in time, a solid body shoves me down against the mattress with brute strength.

I scream again, my mind still stunned by the sudden attack.

No. No. No.

I fight back against my attacker, but it's no use. He grabs a fistful of my hair, and my head is snapped back, the barrel of a gun imprinting into my temple.

“No,” I manage to gasp through the raw fear numbing my senses.

God, no. I don't want to die.

Hot air hits my cheek and ear. “Three seconds was all it took.” Hearing Nikolas’ hoarse voice, a weird mixture of relief and anger flood me. “I have you pinned. I can fuck you raw, put a bullet in your head, and leave your body to rot, and no one will know until tomorrow.”

What?

“That’s how fucking easy you make it for my enemies to get to you.”

Now that I know it’s Nikolas and not some random attacker, I strain against his hold on me. “It wasn’t my fault!”

The more I wiggle beneath him, the more I become aware of his body on top of mine. There’s only a towel covering me, and it’s slipping loose from all my struggling to get free.

“My phone died. I got stuck—” My words are cut off with a shriek when he yanks at my hair, some strands tearing loose. I’m still highly conscious of the gun pressed to my temple.

“Three fucking hours I spent looking for you,” he growls in my ear, danger and rage brimming darkly in his voice. “I fucking lost my mind with worry.”

His ruthless presence fills every inch of my room, and even though I’m scared, it doesn’t stop my stupid desire for the man from flaring to life.

Heart pounding in my chest and blood whooshing in my ears, I try to focus on my anger. “So you jumped me? Get the

gun away from me!”

Instead of listening - which, let's face it, is something Nikolas never does – his weight bears down on me, pressing me harder into the mattress.

The heat from his body seeps through his clothes, the towel, and into my skin. Every fiber of me comes alive with tingles, with awareness, with need.

“I fucking warned you, and you choose to disobey me every chance you get.” The threat in his voice pours hotly through my abdomen, desire dimming the fear I always feel when I'm near him.

“Are you going to punish me?” It comes out sounding like a dare instead of a question. The impossible desire I feel for Nikolas has me growing braver. “Are you going to fuck me to teach me a lesson or shoot me?”

With his harsh breaths on my ear, his body covering mine, I find myself hoping he does decide to punish me.

Still wanting to keep hold of the little pride I have left, I struggle beneath him even though I know there's no way I'm getting out from under his body unless he wants me to.

And. I. Love. It.

I love the power this man has. The strength in every muscle. The brutality of his hands on my skin. God help me, but it's a turn-on which is weird considering my past trauma.

Nikolas moves, and just as disappointment slithers into my chest, his hand comes down on my butt. Hard. The sting is sharp, making me cry out. I have no idea what happened to the gun.

Smack.

My eyebrows fly up, my mouth drops open on a startled gasp.

Smack.

My left buttcheek's on fire after the third slap.

Smack.

He's freaking spanking me?

Grabbing hold of the covers, I begin to struggle in earnest, but my efforts only earn me two more slaps on my butt.

There's shame, because God help me, I love him spanking me, and that just all kinds of wrong, right? And there's arousal, a hell of a lot. The two emotions blur, making tears jump to my eyes. "Get off me!" I shriek angrily.

Nicolas kicks my legs wide apart with one of his while his hand slips over my flaming buttcheek and between my legs.

"Fuck, *moró*." fuck babe

Hearing him call me *babe* in Greek has a needy whimper slipping over my lips.

"So wet for me," he groans.

Clinging to the remnants of my pride while his fingers stroke around my entrance, causing more desire to flood my body, I whisper, "I still hate you."

"You can hate me all you want, ^{babe} *moró*." I hear his belt unbuckle, and my abdomen clenches hard with anticipation. "It won't save you from being fucked raw."

I hardly get to relish the feel of his hardness pressing against my opening when he roughly surges inside me. He stretches me until it's painful. Then, with a desperate grunt, he pulls out, and entering me harder and even deeper than before, I realize he's too big for me.

Holy shit.

I bite into the covers, letting out a muffled whimper as he takes me with a relentless and all-consuming pace.

^{babe}
"That's it, *moró*. Take every inch of me," he growls breathlessly when he's finally all the way inside me.

His fist tightens in my hair, and my head's yanked back again, the covers ripped from my teeth. His mouth finds my racing pulse, his teeth and lips branding my skin with his mark.

I feel impossibly full, his hard length stroking me ruthlessly. My abdomen clenches so tight, and it's the only warning I get before an orgasm tears through me. The first by a man's cock and not my vibrator.

Whimpers and sobs pour from me, the ecstasy as overwhelming as Nikolas is.

He doesn't let up on his harsh pace, and I swear he's determined to make me spontaneously combust with all the friction between my legs.

I didn't lie to him when I said I've only been with one man, and that happened my senior year of school. This... Nikolas... it's so intense and wild, I can't think straight.

"Too much," I whimper, a sob strangling the words.

A sharp slap stings my butt again, and while I shriek, Nikolas groans with pleasure, and hell, if it's not the hottest sound I've ever heard.

"My woman..." *Thrust*. "...likes being spanked..."
Thrust. "No wonder..." *Spank*. "...you keep testing me."

Instead of telling him to go to hell, I moan, and my arousal makes me slick for him.

I think it's safe to say I never stood a chance at winning this fight.

"So fucking tight and wet," Nikolas' voice rumbles, satisfaction warming the words. "Doesn't feel like you hate me, ^{babe} *moró*. Not the way your pussy sucks me in, the way your arousal coats my balls."

Holy. Shit.

His dirty words have more heat crashing through me like a tsunami.

His lips find my ear. "You fucking love this, don't you?"

Unable to deny him, I nod while trying to salvage whatever pride I have left. "Still hate you."

With savage thrusts, he creates a second heartbeat between my legs. "Oh, but you love my cock."

Another orgasm tears through me, more potent than the first. I cry into the covers while my body spasms uncontrollably. Nikolas pulls out of me, and even though I've been fucked ruthlessly, I still mourn the loss of him inside me. But then I'm flipped onto my back, the towel's yanked away

from my body, and as my eyes focus on Nikolas' dark towering body, he slams back inside me.

With his teeth bared, his hands burning into my skin as he squeezes my breasts, I almost drool from how freaking hot he looks with desire carved into every line on his way-too-handsome face.

Damn, the man has me naked while he's still fully dressed.

My God.

"You want this as much as I do," he demands, then wrapping a hand around the back of my neck, I'm yanked up against his chest and seated on his lap, so I'm straddling him. His thrusts become torturously slow and deep. Eye to eye with him, I'm totally overwhelmed and imprisoned in his brute strength.

"You want me," he growls.

I do. God, I do.

"I hate you," I manage to moan, dead set on not giving him what he wants.

His mouth crashes against mine, his tongue invades and conquers me until all I can do is hold onto his shoulders for dear life as he forces me toward another orgasm.

I'm achy and needy, moans and whimpers spilling from my mouth to his, and he drinks each one like a man dying of thirst.

Like he can't get enough of me.

Chapter 18

Nikolas

Her moans. Her whimpers. Her cries.

Fuck, the things they do to me. I feel savage in my desire to claim Tess, to fuck her raw, to own every inch of her.

Breaking the kiss, I drink in the ecstasy on her face, illuminated by the light falling into the bedroom from the open bathroom door. I relish in the feel of her soft curves, my hand sliding down to find her sexy as fuck ass.

She might hate me, but her pussy fucking loves me.

My fingers dig into her asscheek, and she clamps hard around my cock, her body taken over by another orgasm. Her lips part, her eyelashes half-mast, the moans and needy sobs – it's fucking intoxicating.

“Nikolas,” she gasps, so much fucking desperation in my name as if she's praying to me to make her come.

I've never been so ravenous for a woman before, and no matter how hard I take her, how deep I bury myself inside her, it's not enough.

It will never be enough.

When her climax reaches its peak, pure and unadulterated pleasure streaks down my spine, tightens my balls, and makes

me swell even more. I erupt with a growl, and using all my strength, I pound into the woman who's turned me into a feral animal.

My forehead drops to her shoulder, my arms clamp around her, pressing her bare breasts to my chest, and I fucking come so hard, I lose all sense of my surroundings.

There's only Tess. Her body. Her scent. Her sounds.

Jesus.

I throb inside her until every drop has been spilled, and the need to tear her apart creeps back into the dark corners.

Sucking in desperate breaths of air, I hold her so tight it has to hurt, but I can't bring myself to let go. Not yet.

Dragging my nose over her soft skin, I inhale deeply, savoring the fresh scent of her body wash mixing with her sweat. She smells like sex. Like us.

My teeth scrape over her still fluttering pulse, and I love that it's racing because of me.

Lifting my head, I lock eyes with Tess. With her pussy still wrapped tightly around me and her naked body in my firm hold, I watch as she becomes uncomfortable. Now that our desires have been satisfied and reality creeps back in, she struggles to face me.

My lips curve up. "You love my cock so fucking much you came three times."

Her cheeks flush with an innocent, pink tinge, and her eyes lower to my neck.

"Look at me," I demand.

Reluctantly she obeys, her gaze finding mine.

“Admit you loved me fucking you,” I order, determined to hear the words from her.

“You’re an asshole.” She tries to push away from me, and my cock slips out. I shove her back onto the mattress, and crowding her with my body, I glance down between us, a smirk forming on my face from knowing it’s my cum coating her inner thighs.

Reaching down, I swipe up our joint arousal and bring my finger to her mouth. When she clamps her lips together, I coat them, a low satisfied hum rippling from my chest. “Unless you want me to fuck your mouth, admit it.”

Frustration and something similar to shame tighten her features. “I loved you fucking me.” Whether it’s to tease me or defy me, I’ll never know, but when Tess’ tongue darts out and she licks our arousal off her lips, I start to fear I’ll never be able to get her out of my system.

Christ, help me.

Pushing away from her, I stalk to the bathroom and slam the door shut behind me.

I strip out of my suit, and opening the faucets, I step beneath the spray. I use the little minx’ body wash, something flowery, and scrub the day’s worry from my skin.

It only takes me a couple of minutes to shower, and when I step out of the bathroom with only a towel wrapped around my waist, Tess’ eyes lock on my chest.

Instantly, desire floods her gaze, and her breathing speeds up. She clearly likes what she sees from where she’s sitting on

the side of the bed, already dressed in a pair of skimpy shorts and a t-shirt that does nothing to hide her hard nipples.

Jesus. Just like that, I'm hard again.

Instead of fucking her mouth like I want to, I stalk to the other side of the bed and fall back onto the mattress. I take hold of my gun and shove it beneath the pillow, then throwing an arm across my face, I let out a tired sigh.

“Are we going to talk?” Tess asks. I hear her move but couldn't be bothered to open my eyes.

“No. I'm going to nap, and you're going to keep quiet.”

I feel her lie down beside me. “Will we ever talk about this?”

Not if I can help it. “Later.”

“When you wake up,” she demands, which is really cute. She thinks she can tell me what to do.

Blindly searching for her hand, I take hold and pull it to my chest. I flatten her palm over my heart and slowly take a deep breath.

Her touch is so fucking soothing, I fall asleep before I can try to process what she's doing to me and how I'm going to handle it.

Waking up in Tess' bed, the sun's already starting to rise.

Fuck.

I shoot up and glance around the room before looking at the sleeping woman beside me. Tess is curled up on her side, and she looks peaceful and not like the goddess of mischief and defiance she really is.

Checking the time, I calculate that I slept a total of nine hours.

This has never happened.

What. The. Fuck.

Slipping off the bed, I discard the towel and quickly get dressed in my suit. As I button my shirt, I stand and watch Tess, wondering what I'm going to do with the little problem.

I didn't plan on fucking her last night. I just wanted to scare the shit out of her so she'd fucking listen.

But instead, you were balls deep inside her.

Christ, I've slept with my fair share of women, but none of them can hold a candle to Tess. She was exquisite.

I shrug on my jacket and step into my shoes. Adjusting my cuffs, my eyes find the sleeping siren again.

What am I going to do with her?

We can't do this again. She's a distraction I seriously can't afford with the Sicilians breathing down my neck.

I walk closer until I'm right next to the bed, and placing my hands on either side of her head, I lean down and press a kiss to her forehead. My eyes drift shut, and I take a deep breath of her. She still smells like us.

Like me deep inside her.

Tipping my face down, I press a kiss to her lips, savoring the softness of them, then I grab my gun from beneath the pillow, and pulling away, I stalk out of the bedroom.

Last night I came in through the fire escape. It was way too easy. I need to have more security added to Tess' apartment.

Leaving the building, I glare at James and Grant. "If you lose her again, you're fucking dead."

"Yes, boss," James answers while Grant just stares at me.

"I'm sending over two more men. Arthur and Michael."

"Yes, boss."

Walking to my SUV and seeing Loukas instead of Gregory, guilt threatens to slither its way into my chest. Andreas is standing by the other SUV with my guards.

Gregory's probably dead by now.

When I reach Andreas, he gives me a stupid fucking grin.

"Shut up," I warn him.

"You look rested," the fucker remarks anyway.

"Any word on Gregory," I pop his bubble, his face instantly becoming somber.

"Yeah, he was dropped off at the office just shy of midnight."

Nodding, I let out a sigh. "We'll bury him." My eyes rake over the quiet street. "Then it's fucking war."

Heading to my SUV, I climb into the backseat. "The office."

"Yes, boss."

As I'm driven to the other side of the city, my thoughts return to Tess. I have to do something about her. Like I said earlier, she's a distraction I can't afford.

A muscle starts to jump in my jaw as the realization of what I have to do settles bitter in my stomach.

I have to arrange a marriage for her. Christos, my cousin, would be the best option, and it would put Tess on a different continent.

Where I can't get my hands on her.

Where she'll be safe.

Closing my eyes, I rub over my forehead, still tired as fuck even though I had a good night's rest.

I'm going to arrange a marriage for Tess, and that will be the end of it.

Chapter 19

Tess

I wake up to an empty bed, the only sign that Nikolas was here, the ache between my legs. Thank God I have an IUD, or I'd have to get a morning-after pill.

My whimpers and moans cling to the walls, driving me out of my apartment and to the nearest Starbucks for coffee.

I notice two new guards but don't bother with them because I'm too consumed with what happened last night.

Nikolas and I.

What does it mean? I'm not stupid enough to think he cares about me. It's just physical attraction. Right?

After ordering a coffee, I take a seat at one of the empty tables in the corner. I keep replaying the hot sex over and over in my mind. I can still feel him thrusting inside me. I can still hear his low growls, his breaths.

Damn, my buttcheek's still sensitive from all the spanking.

Just the thoughts are enough to make me squirm in my chair.

Shit. You can't get turned on in public. Get a hold of yourself.

Setting the physical aspect aside, I turn my attention to my jumbled emotions.

I don't like him. Nope, not one bit.

Still...

I love how powerful he is. I love how he never backs down but takes what he wants.

I love how much he wants me.

It makes me feel special... like I'm one of a kind. Like I'm not overweight but desirable.

Before the emotions can take root, I shove them down, finish the beverage and leave Starbucks.

With the two new guards in front of me, and James and Grant behind me, I head back to my apartment, so I can get in some work before it's time to head over to the Stathoulis' house for lunch.

Honestly, I'm not looking forward to lunch. It's one thing giving into your desires in the dark of night, but facing Nikolas in the light of day is a whole different story.

Shame threatens to trickle into my chest while I try to focus on my work. It's useless, though. I can't concentrate on anything but Nikolas and what happened between us.

With lunchtime approaching fast, I get ready, putting on a light summer dress and sandals. With my hair a mess because I didn't blow dry it last night, I tie it back in a ponytail.

The entire ride to the Stathoulis' mansion is spent playing out various scenarios in my head. Hopefully, we'll get to talk about this thing between us and put it to rest.

I'm let into the house by a guard and head in the direction of the dining room, where I hear Athina chuckling.

"Theresa," Nikolas' voice brings me to a stop. I glance over my shoulder to where he's standing by the study. "Come here."

I change direction, figuring it's best we get the *talk* out of the way. When I step into the study and see Christos, Nikolas and Athina's cousin, sitting in one of the chairs, a frown forms on my forehead.

Okay, so we're not talking about what happened.

"Sit," Nikolas instructs while he shuts the door.

I give Christos a pleasant smile, sitting down in the other chair.

Once Nikolas takes his seat across from us, his eyes move slowly from Christos to me.

Apprehension slithers into my veins like a poisonous snake.

Nikolas locks eyes with me. There's zero emotion on his face, his features cut from stone. "Christos has agreed to marry you."

My entire world comes to a shuddering stop.

"He has to leave for Greece soon, seeing as his business is almost completed in Vancouver. The wedding will take place next Saturday."

No.

I begin to rise from the chair, but my legs are too numb, and I slump back.

No, this isn't happening.

I shake my head, my dry lips parting. My eyes dart from Nikolas to Christos, who gives me an encouraging smile, then back to Nikolas' harsh features. Finally, I manage to whisper, "What?"

"You'll marry Christos in a week, Theresa." It's an order.

With my mind stunned, I struggle to think straight. "My studies..." I begin lamely.

That's the least of your problems right now!

"No," I gasp, this time darting to my feet and taking three steps away from the men. "No!"

Nikolas gets up and slams his fists on the desk, anger detonating from him and sucking the air out of the office. "You will obey. The deal's been made, and you'll honor it."

Shaking my head wildly, there's a claustrophobic hold on my chest, making it hard to breathe. Not able to process the disastrous turn my life just took, I spin around and rush out of the study.

"Theresa!" Nikolas roars behind me.

I break out into a run and escape the house. I almost make it to the SUV before he grabs hold of my arm. I'm spun around and shoved back against the SUV. Nikolas towers over me like a thunderous cloud about to rain hellfire down on me.

"No," I gasp, angry and hopeless tears pushing up my throat. I rip my one arm free and slap him across the face. My palm stings as I spit out, "You're such an asshole! There's no way I'm marrying that man."

Nikolas grips hold of my chin, and we find ourselves back in the familiar position where hate and rage are the only emotions whirling between us.

“You will do as you’re told.”

I try to shake my head, and even though anger pulses through me, desperation makes me plead, “Don’t do this to me. Please.”

Nikolas lets go of me, and taking a step back, he sucks in a deep breath. “Christos is a good man. He’ll be good to you.”

“I don’t care! What about my life? What about what I want?”

The meager space between us vanishes in a heartbeat as Nikolas takes a step forward again. “This is for your safety, Theresa! I’m doing what’s best for you.”

Humorless laughter bubbles over my dry lips. “Oh, spare me! You couldn’t give two shits about me.” Rage implodes inside of me, leaving only devastation behind in its wake. “This is because you’re physically attracted to me and because you can’t man up and face it, you’re shipping me off.”

Our eyes lock, a full-blown war raging between us.

An angry muscle ticks in his jaw, his breaths just as fast as mine. “You’re right, Theresa,” he growls. “You were a good fuck, but at the end of the day, that’s all you’re good for.” He lets out a burst of incredulous laughter. “Did you think I actually cared? Surely, you’re not that naïve?” With danger darkening his eyes, he sneers, “I’m done with you, and you can count your fucking blessings that I’m not handing you over to some old fucker, but Christos.”

I suck in a desperate breath as his words rain down on me like acid, flaying me to the bone. Shoving against his chest with all my might, I turn away from the monster that's still dead set on ruining my life, the monster I freaking slept with. I yank the back door open and climb into the SUV.

Giving Nikolas a scalding glare, I lift my chin, and with ice coating every word, I say, "You can go fuck yourself, Nikolas."

I manage to keep my shit together until the SUV drives out through the iron gates. Scrummaging in my bag, I pull the Xanax bottle from it. I struggle to open it, my hands trembling too much.

James takes the bottle from me and, removing a pill, he hands it to me. I quickly place it beneath my tongue, shutting my eyes tightly as wave after wave of devastation rocks the entire foundation my life's been built on.

Tears spiral down my cheeks, a sob building thickly in my throat.

I can't believe it.

He arranged a marriage for me?

What the ever-loving hell?

This isn't happening. It's just a bad dream. Nikolas can't be so cruel to sleep with me only to discard me like trash the very next day.

'You were a good fuck, but at the end of the day, that's all you're good for.'

That's exactly what's happening. I'm just a problem he's getting rid of. He got what he wanted from me.

'I'm done with you.'

My anger keeps growing, and being disappointed in myself for giving in to my desires makes everything a million times worse. I try to ignore the intense ache in my chest from the cruel things he said.

Determined to put a stop to Nikolas' plan, I dig my phone out of my bag and dial my mother's number.

"*Agápi mou*," Mom answers.

"Mamá," a sob cuts off my voice.

"What's wrong?"

"Nikolas," I gasp. "He's arranging... a marriage for me."

There's a moment of silence, then I hear Mom moving. "Peter!" she calls out. "Is Nikolas arranging a marriage for Theresa?"

"I haven't spoken to him, but she's of marrying age," I hear Peter answer.

"You have to stop him," I plead with Mom.

"We'll come home right away," Mom coos. "Don't worry. I'll get to the bottom of this."

Hiccupping through another sob, my voice is strained as I say, "Okay."

We end the call, and with the hope that Mom will put a stop to Nikolas' ridiculous plan, I sink back against the seat, feeling completely drained.

Only when some semblance of calm returns to my chaotic emotions do I realize I feel heartbroken.

I shake my head, shunning the unwanted emotion.

There's nothing to be heartbroken over. You hate Nikolas Stathoulis. It's not like you were falling for the asshole because that's just absurd.

There's not a single thing about the man you like.

You're just hurt because he used you.

Chapter 20

Tess

Mom's stalking up and down in the living room while Peter sits like a king on his throne, bushy eyebrows drawn in a tight pinch.

My knee bounces nervously, my hands in tight fists on my lap.

The moment Nikolas walks into the living room with Christos and another man right behind him, I struggle not to dart up and lay into him.

"What's—"

Peter holds up a hand, silencing Mom. Rising from the chair, he looks at his son. "Explain why you arranged a marriage between Christos and Theresa."

Nikolas meets his father's gaze with zero fear. Right now, the current head of the Greek mafia is facing off with the retired Godfather.

My stomach sinks into my shoes.

"The deal has been made." Nikolas' voice is grim, leaving no space for argument. "Christos will be good to Theresa." His eyes snap to me. "She should be thankful. I could've chosen a much worse suitor for her."

The... asshole.

“Why the sudden rush?” Mom asks, a hand on her neck and confusion whirling on her face.

Nikolas takes a deep breath like he’s struggling to hold onto his meager patience. Turning his attention to our parents, his voice is tense as hell as he explains, “Gregory’s been killed. The Sicilians declared war. If Theresa goes to Greece, she’ll be out of harm’s way.”

Peter’s features go slack, and when Mom opens her mouth to say something, he snaps, “Nikolas’ word is final. Theresa will marry Christos this coming Saturday.”

What?

I dart to my feet, but I’m pinned to the spot by way too many dark eyes burning on me. It’s Peter who says, “This is what’s best for you, Theresa. You’re of marrying age.”

I shake my head, and before I can argue, Peter leaves the living room. Nikolas and the other man follow after Peter, but Christos stays behind.

“Mamá?” I can’t bring myself to say more, the walls of my world closing in on me.

With a hand fluttering over her hair, Mom gives me an encouraging look. “Let’s not be rude.” She gestures for Christos to sit.

“I know this is sudden,” Christos says. His eyes settle on me, and no matter how hard I look, I can’t find any sign of anger or harshness. On the contrary, his gaze is warm, understanding even.

I shake my head, slumping back in the chair.

This is really happening. God.

“Theresa,” Christos says as he comes to take a seat next to me. “I’ll give you time to get used to the idea, and you’ll still be able to live your own life. I don’t expect you to change for me, but to at least try to make the marriage work.”

He sounds so reasonable, I almost laugh.

Understanding shines from his eyes, and it makes tears well in my throat.

Lifting a hand, he gives my shoulder a squeeze. “I’ll do my best to be a good husband.”

Oh, God.

Breathe.

I suck in desperate breaths, overwhelmed by everything that’s happening but also how gentle Christos is.

“My studies,” I manage to squeeze out.

“You can complete them before joining me in Greece. Like I said, I want you to live your own life. You can still become a producer. We’ll come to Vancouver often, and your Mom can visit us in Greece.”

My eyes lock with Christos. “I don’t know you.”

A smile curves his lips. “You’ll get to know me.” He’s in total contrast to Nikolas. Where Nikolas is all anger, brimstone, and sharp edges, Christos is soft, almost like a teddy bear, his words kind, his eyes warm.

Still, I don’t know this man, and there’s no attraction.

Christos takes hold of my hand, his warmth chasing some of the chill from mine. “All I ask is that you give me the same respect I give you. Successful marriages have been built on less.”

Like any other woman, I want to marry the man of my choosing. I don’t want a marriage of convenience or one I’m forced into against my will.

Mom wipes a tear from her cheek, and she actually looks emotional and impressed by Christos.

Knowing he just won my mother over with a couple of words, my shoulders sag, and all the fight drains from me.

I’m pulled into a hug, and it takes strength I didn’t know I had to keep from ugly crying on my future husband’s shoulder.

May Karma take revenge on Nikolas for me.

I’ve thrown myself completely into my studies because my life’s become nothing more than a whirlwind of madness. I don’t even have the energy to try and clear things up with Jake, who’s been sulking like a two-year-old and being downright rude to me since I canceled the so-called *date* with him.

Every day, I’m bombarded with pictures of dresses, flowers, and cakes from Mom and Athina.

I’m due for a fitting later this afternoon, which I’m dreading to my very core.

I still can't believe this is happening. It's too fast, not even giving me time to process anything.

Right now, I'm dead set on saying no at the damn altar. No one can force me to marry Christos.

Guilt sneaks into my chest like a thief in the night because Christos has been nothing short of kind. He took me to dinner, so we could talk about things and get to know each other.

He's a nice person. I should count my blessings.

But...

I don't love him, and I don't know if I'll ever be able to.

One thing I'm sure of? I hate Nikolas with the intensity of a thousand burning suns. May he rot in hell.

"Whoa, who stepped on your toes?" Annette asks when I shove my laptop into my bag. "It looks like you want to kill someone."

Letting out an emotionally exhausted sigh, I shrug the backpack onto my shoulder. "Family problems. I'll see you tomorrow."

Without waiting for Annette or Jake to reply, I walk out of the studio and make my way down the hallway. A girl is flirting with James, but he cuts it short the second he lays eyes on me. Falling into step next to me, he takes my backpack.

Grant, Arthur, and Michael follow behind us.

Since the big fight with Nikolas in full view of my guards, James has been nice to me. At least there's that.

"I have to go for a dress fitting," I mention to him.

“I’m aware.” We continue to walk toward my apartment, then he says, “Christos is a good man.”

“So I’ve been told,” I mutter.

“Did you hope to marry a man you love?” he asks, his tone not mocking me like Grant’s would.

“I just...” I sigh and lift my eyes to James, taking in his ruffled brown hair and boyish good looks. “I wanted it to be my choice.”

He nods and lets out an understanding sigh.

Curiosity gets the better of me. “Why are you in the mafia?”

“I was born into it.” His answer is short and to the point.

“You didn’t have other dreams for yourself?” I ask as we approach my apartment building.

“Dreams don’t keep you alive in our world.” Like the past couple of days, the other guards wait by the SUV while James walks me up to search my apartment.

When he’s happy there are no threats, he gives me a smile. “See you downstairs at four.”

He shuts the front door behind him. I unpack my bag on the table, and when I see more messages from Athina regarding wedding décor, I feel like screaming.

Walking into my bedroom, I fall across the bed and bury my face in the covers, and like the days before, I have a good scream before crying, ridding myself of some of the frustration, anger, and hurt.

Hurt because, even though I hate Nikolas, he still managed to rip my heart out of my chest.

Before he showed me the real monster lurking beneath his skin, I thought there was a possibility he could actually have a beating heart in his chest. He was possessive and protective of me. He made it feel like he was worshipping my body while giving me pleasure I never knew existed.

He made me hope things could change, only to throw me to the dogs.

Not that Christos is a dog.

Ugh.

Pushing up from the bed, I feel drained of my will to live as I get ready for the fitting.

Chapter 21

Nikolas

“We’ve lost eight men!” I shout, the anger that’s been taking over my life, spiraling into a dark, turbulent storm, threatening to destroy everything in my path.

“You think I’m not aware?” Andreas shouts back. “Theo was a good friend. We all feel the loss.”

Our anger and grief swirl thick in the air.

Andreas shakes his head, his concerned eyes drifting over my face. “What do we do next?”

“We have to find out where Manno’s hiding.” So I can fucking rip his spine out through his throat.

“How? None of the Sicilians are talking.”

There’s only one way left, and as much as I hate it, I pick up my phone and dial Viktor’s number.

A chuckle sounds over the line. “Nikolas. I’m not surprised.”

I take a deep breath, and with my sights set on the end goal, I admit, “I need your help.”

Victor chuckles again, but the sound is far from friendly. “I’ll text you Manno’s address.”

There's another burst of rage in my chest. "You have it already?"

"Of course. Information is money, after all."

The man's just like his fucking father and uncle.

"How much?" I ask, knowing the price is going to be steep.

"For a friend," Viktor lets out a deep breath, "it's for free."

Nothing's for free in our world, which means he'll call on me for help one day, and I'll have to give it, no questions asked.

"Thank you," I murmur.

"I hear you managed to find a husband for your stepsister. Just got the wedding invitation. Short notice, though."

"I'll understand if you can't make it but would appreciate it if you can find the time to attend," I reply automatically, the rage swirling in my chest growing darker and thicker with each word.

Whenever Tess is brought up, I want to fucking lose my shit. The sooner she's married...

My thoughts refuse to go any further.

"I'll see what I can do," Viktor replies.

The call ends, and Andreas lifts his eyebrows at me. "What did he say?"

"He has Manno's address." My phone beeps, and opening the message from Viktor, I turn the screen for Andreas to see.

A satisfied smile spreads over my friend's face, then he takes in my scowl. "This is a good thing. Why aren't you happy?"

Because...

"I'll be happy when Manno's a burning corpse," I growl.

Andreas tilts his head, his eyes searching my face. "You know you can still call it off."

"There's no calling off the war," I bark.

"The wedding, Nikolas," he corrects me.

Narrowing my eyes at him, my voice drops dangerously low as I ask, "Why the fuck would I do that?"

Andreas stands up, shaking his head at me. "You're stubborn. We all know that. But fuck, Nikolas, you've never been one to lie to yourself."

Rising to my feet, warning darkens on my face. "What the fuck does that mean?"

Andreas locks eyes with me, not bristling before my anger. "It means you're fucking living in denial if you think you don't care about Tess and you can just hand her off to Christos. You're making a mistake." He walks to the door, and opening it, he glares back at me. "One you might regret for the rest of your life."

"Get out!" I bark unnecessarily because the fucker's already shutting the door behind his ass.

I slump back in my chair, and grabbing the phone, I stare at Manno's address while doing my fucking best to ignore Andreas' words taunting me like a haunting echo.

Manno's not even in fucking Vancouver. The fucker's in Toronto.

That's fine. I'll take this fucking war right to his doorstep. After the wedding.

The wedding.

An overpowering emotion rocks me to my core, just like yesterday, and the day before, and every other fucking day since I arranged the marriage.

Thinking of Tess becoming Christos' wife... It must be done. For my sanity and for her safety.

This wedding will happen.

I refuse to look deeper, refuse to dissect the emotions, refuse to think of her naked body beneath another man.

The wedding has to happen. There's no room for doubts.

You don't even care about the woman, so fucking forget about her already.

You have more pressing matters that need your full attention.

Focus, Nikolas.

Chapter 22

Tess

Mom smooths the silk over my hips and arranges the short train behind me. “I wish your father could see you,” she croons, swept up in the emotions of the day.

My wedding day.

God, how did it come to this?

I still haven’t been able to make sense of the past two weeks. Too much has happened.

Tears threaten to overwhelm me, but once again, I manage to swallow them back with the help of the two Xanax pills I’ve already taken.

At this rate, I might overdose before the reception is over, seeing as there’s a chance Irene might attend the celebrations. God help me if that’s the case. There’s no way I’d survive it. Not today.

“Agápi mou, you look breathtaking.”

I don’t feel beautiful. I hate the white dress, the flowers, the makeup. I’d much rather wear black.

“Smile,” Mom chastises me.

I don’t even try to hide how upset I am, because even though Christos seems to be a good man, I don’t feel anything

for him. “Why should I smile? I’m being traded like a horse.”

“Hush!” Mom gasps. “Your husband will take good care of you.”

Refusing to look at my reflection in the mirror, I keep my eyes lowered. I don’t want to see the white satin mermaid dress hugging my curves. I don’t want to see the bride staring back at me.

“This is not just your day, Theresa,” Mom continues to chastise me. “Think of the guests, of Peter, of me.”

The way you all thought of me?

Mom covers my face with the veil, sealing my fate.

Don’t cry.

Chin up.

They wanted a mafia princess, so give them one.

I try to gather enough strength to stand up for myself, seeing as no one else will.

I’m led through a corridor, and we stop behind closed doors. Pachelbel Canon in D starts to play, and the doors open, revealing the aisle that leads to my waiting groom.

Panic floods my veins with every step Mom pulls me down the red carpet. Hushed murmurs float from the guests until it sounds like a buzzing in my ears.

I keep my eyes focused on the bouquet in my hand, refusing to look at all the guests in fear of seeing Nikolas smirking at me because he won.

He can take your freedom but not your pride.

Don't break in front of them. Keep it together.

Still, a sob builds, and this time, I can't stop it from escaping my lips. The fragile sound takes flight, blending with the music and murmurs.

My heart shrivels into a dark hole. My stomach tightens into a hard knot. Silent tears spill over my cheeks, my breaths speeding up.

Mom pulls me to a stop, and lifting the veil, she presses a kiss on my cheek. "Take the pill." A Xanax is shoved into my hand. "You can do this."

I can't, Mamá. Don't make me do this!

Mom leaves me standing at the altar to take her seat next to Peter. My eyes snap the pill lying in my palm while I suck in a deep breath, gathering all the strength I have.

My fingers close around the pill, then I think an anxiety attack is the best thing that can happen right now. It might stop the wedding. My fingers open, and I let the pill fall to the red carpet.

Polished black shoes come into view, and Christos takes hold of my hand, slipping it through the crook of his arm. I'm turned to face the priest.

Everything inside me dies, and a deadly calmness washes through my veins.

"Dearly beloved, we're gathered here today to celebrate the holy union of Nikolas Peter Ares Stathoulis and Theresa Maria Drakatos."

There's a buzzing in my ears. I see the priest's lips move but can't hear a word he's saying.

He keeps talking and talking as the last seconds of my freedom slip through my fingers.

Like a puppet, I'm turned to face my groom, his finger nudges beneath my chin, forcing my head up, but he's a blur through the tears.

Then I blink, and my sight focuses on the man in front of me.

Not Christos.

OH. MY. GOD.

Nikolas.

A hard shudder rakes through my body. My breathing stalls, my heartbeat coming to a dead stop.

I stare at Nikolas, not sure what's going on, then the priest says, "Nikolas, repeat after me."

I watch in absolute stunned stupor as Nikolas' lips part. "I, Nikolas Peter Ares Stathoulis, take thee, Theresa Maria Drakatos, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward..."

Holy shit.

I can't process this. Is it better or worse?

What do I do?

Breathe, Tess. You need to breathe.

"...for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part."

“Theresa, repeat after me,” the priest instructs.

No. Wait.

I’m still staring at Nikolas as if he’s a ghost. What the ever-loving hell is happening? What happened to Christos?

I should slap Nikolas and run as fast as I can, but my satin-wrapped heels stay glued to the carpet.

Why didn’t anyone tell me? Why didn’t Mom say anything?

What the hell is going on here?

As if I’m under some evil spell, my lips part, and I recite the words.

The corner of Nikolas’ mouth lifts in a triumphant smirk when I end with, “Till death do us part.”

“Nikolas, do you take Theresa Maria Drakatos as your wife?”

There’s zero hesitation, and a shit ton of arrogance as Nikolas says, “I do.”

Finally, anger burns through me, drying the tears right off my cheeks.

I’m going to make your life a living hell, Nikolas. I promise you this. I will repay you for everything you’ve done to me.

“Theresa, do you take Nikolas Peter Ares Stathoulis as your husband?”

Until death do us part, and God help me, it will be his death.

“I do.”

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Nikolas takes a step forward, his hands find my shoulders, and as he lowers his head, I whisper, “You better sleep with one eye open.”

He lets out a chuckle, then his mouth is hot and hard on mine. Not caring that we’re in church or about the guests, his arm wraps around my lower back, and I’m tugged hard against his solid body. His tongue invades my mouth, and instantly my hatred for the man wars with the physical attraction I thought I was done with.

I’m kissed thoroughly and possessively before Nikolas frees my mouth. When we turn to the guests, and I see the cathedral is packed, threatening to burst at the seams, it hits.

Like a ten-ton hammer.

I just married Nikolas.

The asshole’s hand grips mine tightly, his fingers weave with mine, and I’m pulled to where we have to sign the register while the guests file out of the church.

Mom and Peter are signing as witnesses, and when Mom won’t meet my eyes, I know she knew I was marrying Nikolas and not Christos.

Did Nikolas threaten her with death to not tell me?

After we’re done signing the register, Mom pulls me into a hug. “Give it a fair chance, *agápi mou*.”

“Why didn’t you warn me?” I ask, my voice tight from the anger, disappointment, and loss because, after today, I’ll never trust my mother again.

“Nikolas’ word is the law. I didn’t have a choice.”

Crap! You had a choice. You just didn’t choose me.

There’s a crack right down the middle of my heart, and I swear it’s so loud in my ears I expect to feel the ground quake beneath my feet.

Peter takes Mom’s hand, and they walk to the exit.

“Time for the reception,” Nikolas says, his hand wrapping around mine again.

This time I yank away, and turning a scalding glare on him, I snap, “Don’t touch me.”

The corner of his mouth lifts, and just like earlier, it’s filled with triumph and arrogance. “Or what? You’re my wife, Theresa. There’s not a single person on this planet that can save you from me.”

“There is,” I hiss. I start to feel feverish from all the anger brimming like a volcano inside me. “Me.”

He lets out a bark of amused laughter. “Can’t wait to see you try.”

When he reaches for my hand again, I yank away and step backward and out of his reach. “Is this funny to you?”

“Not in the least.” He takes a threatening step forward.

“Why did you marry me?” I demand. “Why the whole show with Christos?”

“You were going to marry him.” His mouth curves down as if the mere thought leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. “But then I changed my mind.”

“Why?” I’m so freaking close to losing my shit.

Nikolas darts forward, his hand wraps around the back of my neck, and I’m yanked flush with his body. With the unnervingly intense look I used to fear tightening his features, he growls, “Because no other man will hear you fucking whimper and cry for his cock.”

“Neither will you,” I hiss.

Again the corner of his mouth lifts. “I love a good challenge, my wife.” Quickly the amused expression is replaced with a serious one. “You’ll act the part of a happy bride in front of the guests. Once we get home, we can continue this.”

Lifting my chin with pride, I force a smile to my face. “Once we get home, you better hide because I’m grabbing the first sharp object and stabbing you.” This time I’m the one to hook my hand through his arm. “But until then, I’ll act the part of a mafia princess.”

my baby

“Not princess, *Moró mou*. Queen.”

As we walk to the exit, two things hit. First, the word *babe* was said the way you’d address a lover you care about and not just someone you’re fucking, and second... I’m the Greek mafia queen.

Chapter 23

Nikolas

By the time I finally get to take my seat at the bridal table, I'm ready to go home.

With my bride.

My eyes move to Tess, who looks exquisite in her wedding gown. The tears she cried earlier did nothing to ruin the makeup. Her anger, Christ, it makes her look like a true queen.

My queen.

I didn't get any work done yesterday, unable to focus on anything but Tess... getting married. It was too late to cancel, and with every passing minute, I felt more caged... out of control.

Until I was forced to face my true feelings and admit the unmistakable truth to myself. I wanted Tess. Her fear, her passion, her feistiness. I wanted it all to myself because I've fucking fallen in love with her.

I didn't recognize the emotions, because I've never loved a woman before.

It was sobering, coming to terms with the real reason I was trying to get rid of her. She has power over me no one's ever had. She can break me.

I've been taught to keep my friends close but my enemies closer. The same goes for Tess. I need to keep the only weakness I have right by my side and protect it with my life.

If Tess falls, I fall.

If she dies, I die.

No amount of whiskey could bury the realization, and thirty minutes before the wedding was set to take place, I spoke with Christos and my father. They couldn't argue. One of the benefits of being the head of the mafia.

I'll find a suitable wife for Christos, but Theresa is mine.

I'm still adjusting to the emotions I finally allowed to take root in my chest. Mostly, they make me feel like I'm going to lose my mind. The only thing keeping the chaos at bay is Tess.

It's fucking crazy. The person responsible for the turbulent emotions in my chest is also the only one who can calm them. I'm like a rabid dog who becomes nothing more than a helpless puppy around his master – Tess.

I'm so fucked.

But at least she's mine.

Andreas comes to the table, and I rise to my feet to hug my friend.

"You're welcome," he mutters, his voice thick with amusement.

"Fuck off."

We chuckle as we pull apart, and I turn to my wife. "Tess, I want you to meet someone very important to me."

She does nothing to hide her true feelings as she shoots me a glare while rising to her feet, then as if she's flipping a switch, a smile sparkles on her face. It's for Andreas, not me.

"This is Andreas Deroukakis. He's my second in charge and best friend." And one of the few men I'll trust with Tess' life.

"Pleasure to meet you," Tess says.

When Andreas holds his hand out, I push it away. "You don't have to touch her to greet her."

My friend lets out a bark of laughter, then turns his attention to Tess. "You look beautiful, Tess. Congratulations on the wedding."

"Thank you." With her duty done, Tess drops down in the chair beside me, letting out a tired groan.

Andreas leans closer, murmuring softly, "Your bride doesn't look too happy."

"Of course not. She hates me," I state the obvious.

"Still, she said yes." Andreas pulls back, and his eyes lock with mine. "Something to think about."

I watch him walk away, thinking about what he just said. Tess could've made a scene, but instead, she said her vows.

Sitting down, I let my eyes drift over her face.

Sure she's angry, but she doesn't look like someone who thinks her life ended today.

"Why did you say yes?" I ask.

Tess doesn't even bother looking at me. "It's easier to kill you in your sleep."

The corner of my mouth curves up, and I let out an amused chuckle. I wrap my arm around her shoulders, and leaning into her, I whisper, "I think you said yes because you can't get enough of my cock."

I expect her to rip free from my hold, but instead, she lifts a hand to my jaw and brushes her fingers over the stubble like a loving wife would. "Just because I hate Asshole senior doesn't mean I have to hate Asshole junior. How does it feel knowing the only need I'll have for you is your cock?"

Bravo.

The Tess from the first day we met would've cowered in my presence and flinched at a fly, but the woman sitting next to me has become a true mafia queen. She's learned to stand up for herself.

And fuck, if it's not a turn-on.

I want to make her so fucking strong even my enemies will cower before her.

Frowning at me, she asks, "What's that look for?"

"What look?"

Her eyes narrow. "You actually look proud right now."

"That's because I am." Lifting my hand to the side of her neck, my thumb caresses her skin as I press a kiss to her mouth. "All things set aside, I'm proud that you're finally fighting for yourself, Theresa."

Her face goes slack, her lips parting as she does a double-take, clearly not expecting my praise.

“The stronger you are, the more power it gives me.”

Tess’ eyes flit over my face, searching for something. “You want me to be strong?”

“Of course. Your feistiness might drive me insane, but it’s the one thing I’ll never try to suppress. You’re a queen now. You need to be feared. It’s the most valuable commodity in our world.”

Confusion flutters over her features. “What about my dreams?”

“What about them?”

“Will you allow me to live out my dreams or try to control me?”

The corner of my mouth lifts again, my fingers gently tucking a curl into place while my gaze drifts over every inch of her exquisite beauty. “You can do anything you want to, little dreamer. As long as you do it by my side.”

A frown forms on her forehead, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. “I find that hard to believe, considering you’ve done everything in your power to control my life.” Pulling away from me, she leans back in her chair. “I’ll never trust a word from your lying mouth.” Giving me a sardonic smirk, she adds, “After all, I’m not that *naïve*.”

Well, at least our marriage won’t be boring. With time I’ll conquer Tess’ heart. I’ll drive her as insane as she drives me.

The speeches begin, my father first, then followed by Andreas. One person after the other spills their advice and jokes into the microphone until it's time to open the dance floor.

The opening song is the only thing I had changed for today, and as *Biblical* by Callum Scott begins to fill the air, I pull Tess into my arms.

My eyes lock on hers as the words weave a spell around us, or at least, around me.

A slight frown settles between her eyes as she listens to the lyrics, then she mutters, "Seriously, who picked the song?"

"I did."

Her frown deepens, then she lets out a sardonic chuckle. "Yeah, right."

Lifting my hands to the sides of her head, I lean down and take her mouth, wanting her to keep quiet so I can have this moment.

Just like the kiss after we said our vows, Tess doesn't try to stop it but instead gives herself over to me. I drown in her addictive innocence that I somehow haven't yet corrupted.

If only she knew the power she held over me. I'd be truly fucked then.

Fear slithers into my heart, wrapping tightly around the emotions I have for this woman.

She can never know how I feel, not until she loves me, or she'll use it to destroy me.

Breaking the kiss, my eyes drift over her face, my thumb brushing her bottom lip.

“I live in the land of confusion,” she whispers, still trying to make sense of everything that’s happened today.

That makes two of us, kardiá mou. my heart

Realizing I just referred to her as *my heart*, I pull away and sigh in relief when Dad and Helena come toward us.

Dancing with my mother-in-law, the air is tense between us.

“I’ll take care of her,” I say to set Helena at ease.

“I know.”

Fuck, can this wedding be over already?

Chapter 24

Tess

Weird doesn't begin to describe today. From the insane wedding to Nikolas actually looking happy, it's all crazy.

Trying to get ahead of this wave, I sit next to Nikolas in the back of an SUV. Thankfully, there'll be no honeymoon, and as far as I'm aware, I can continue with my studies.

My routine doesn't have to change much. *Hopefully.*

When we don't head in the direction of the Stathoulis' mansion, or my apartment, I glance at the buildings wooshing past us, asking, "Where are we going?"

"Home."

Letting out a sigh, I roll my eyes before looking at Nikolas. "Whose home? Where?"

"Mine, and you'll find out soon enough." He doesn't take his eyes off his phone, typing out one message after the other.

I almost take a page out of Athina's book and rip the device out of his hand, saying no phones are allowed on our wedding night, but I suppress the urge and turn my attention to the window.

Wedding night.

Nikolas is in for one hell of a surprise if he thinks I'm just going to become a dutiful wife who warms his bed and prepares his meals.

The SUV turns into an underground parking lot, and when it comes to a standstill, Nikolas shoves his door open and gets out. He doesn't wait for me and stalks toward a set of elevators.

Loukas, the driver, opens the door for me. I get out and thank him, then walk to where James is waiting. Having his familiar face here makes everything feel less foreign.

As we begin to walk, he murmurs, "I've moved all your clothes over to the penthouse. Let me know if you need anything else, and I'll have it brought over."

I don't like the idea of a man packing my clothes, but thankful that I'll have my personal belongings, I say, "Thank you, James."

He stops walking and gestures to the elevator where Nikolas is already inside, leaning back against a panel, still on his phone.

Taking a deep breath, I step inside. None of the guards joins us. Nikolas presses a button, and the door slides shut before me.

We climb the floors in absolute silence, and when the elevator opens, I'm greeted with a sleek and modern entrance hall. Everything is glass, chrome, and dark gray furnishings.

Stepping out of the elevator and into the penthouse, I glance around, overwhelmed by the sheer size of the place and all the luxury.

“This is your home?” I walk deeper into the living room, admiring the dark gray leather sofas and a massive entertainment system complimented by a glass sculpture of Hades and his three-headed hound.

The god of the underworld. I’m not surprised Nikolas found a kinship with him.

“It’s *our* home.” Without any further explanation, Nikolas heads up a swirling chrome and glass staircase.

Setting after him, I say, “I thought you lived at the Stathoulis’ mansion.”

“I don’t plan on fucking you with our parents in hearing distance,” comes his dry remark.

“Ha!” I scowl at his back and damn if the man doesn’t fill the tuxedo perfectly. “You’ll be so lucky.”

We walk down a hallway, closed doors on either side. I’ll explore later. Right now, Nikolas and I have a conversation to finish.

I follow him into the master suite and stop in the middle of the room. To my right is a king-size bed draped in dark gray silk bedding. Darkened windows span the entire wall.

To my left is an ensuite bathroom, and in front of me is a walk-in closet the size of my entire bedroom at my apartment.

Nikolas shrugs out of his jacket then rips the bowtie from around his neck. He unbuttons the cuffs of his crisp white shirt before starting on the buttons running down his chest.

My eyebrow lifts. “You said we’d finish the talk tonight.”

Letting out a sigh, he doesn't even glance in my direction. "I'm tired, Theresa."

"I don't care," I bite out. "What the hell happened today? Last week you fucked me only to discard me like trash, and today you married me? Have you lost your mind?"

"Something like that," he mutters, stepping out of his suit pants.

My other eyebrow lifts as well when Nikolas strips his boxers off.

It's the first time I see him naked, and it has me blinking as if my mind is short-circuiting.

Golden skin covers one hell of a firm body. I can see his strength rippling in every muscle as he turns and walks toward me. The man has zero self-consciousness, confidence radiating from him.

My eyes drop lower, and I tilt my head.

Wow, no wonder it hurt.

"Be glad I didn't ship you off, Theresa. I expect you to fulfill all your duties as my wife."

"Enlighten me," I mutter as I drag my eyes up to his abs and defined chest. "What are those?"

"You'll accompany me to events and spread your legs whenever I say so."

I let out a chuckle, my gaze finally meeting his. "So nothing's changing, then." I haven't allowed myself to look at the ring on my finger. Not until now. Lifting my hand, my

gaze drops to the massive diamond sparkling in the electric light. “Hey, at least I get a diamond for all the trouble.”

“That’s my mother’s ring. Show some respect,” he chastises me.

His mother’s ring?

I look at it again and see the intricate leaf pattern woven into the band. Sticking to my guns, I give Nikolas an indifferent look. “I’ll show some respect the day you treat me as more than just a piece of ass.”

Pushing past the asshole, I walk into the closet. My clothes hang on the left side, not even filling a quarter of the huge space.

I hear the shower running, but then Nikolas says, “I expected more clothes.”

I don’t bother replying while I struggle to reach the zipper so I can get out of the damn wedding dress. Nikolas’ hands nudge mine away and tugs the zipper down. His warm breath fans over my neck. “What did you do with the money I transferred to your account?”

I let out a chuckle. “I donated it.”

He grabs hold of my shoulders, and my stomach hits the gold and glass island of drawers where all his watches, ties, belts, and cufflinks are on display. I’m forcefully bent over the golden frame, my palms slapping against the glass.

“You did what?” he growls in my ear.

“I donated the money.”

When his hand connects with my butt, I let out a chuckle instead of a shriek. Today, something in me snapped, and it changed me irrevocably.

I no longer fear Nikolas. By marrying me, he showed me I matter to him. The action spoke a million words even though his demeanor is still cold and ruthless.

The head of the mafia wouldn't do anything he doesn't want to.

He couldn't let me marry Christos, and that can only be because he wants me.

A smirk forms on my face when he spanks me again. "God," I moan. "Enough with the foreplay."

My dress is ripped down my body, the satin tearing. My panties bite into my skin, then they're torn away.

Just like a week ago, Nikolas enters me with zero tenderness and a whole lot of aggression. The thrusts that follow are savage and unrestrained, filling me completely, and then some.

I whimper against the glass, my fingers leaving smudges as I claw for grip. His breaths are ragged, his body moving like a violent force set on destroying me.

"Nikolas," I gasp, the pain fading and unadulterated desire taking its place. "Harder. I want to feel all your power."

His hand wraps around the back of my neck, pressing me hard to the glass, my breasts squashed beneath me. With a brutal grip on me, he hammers into me until I'm delirious.

A hard slap to my buttcheek has pleasure splintering inside me. The sharp edges cut, allowing the ecstasy to seep into my veins. It's so potent I can't breathe, a whimpering cry the only sound I can make.

So so good.

Nikolas yanks me up, my back hitting his bare chest. He buries himself deep inside of me with a harsh breath. His forehead presses against my shoulder, his arms wrapping around my front and gripping me in a painfully tight hold.

As my husband comes inside me, taking his pleasure from my body while holding me with all his strength, the corner of my mouth lifts in triumph.

Tess; 1. Nikolas; 0

Chapter 25

Nikolas

Looking in the mirror that fills the entire wall at the back of the closet and seeing the smirk on Tess' face, I lift her off her feet and carry her to the bed.

I plan on fucking that smirk right off her face.

I throw her onto the covers and crawl over her body, nudging her legs open with a knee. "You like this game?"

She nods, triumph making her eyes shine like polished stones.

Slipping my hand between her legs, I pinch her clit, drawing a cry from her. Her back arches, and she tries to swat my hand away, but I grab hold of her wrist and pin it to the bed. "Ah-ah-ah. You don't get to be in control."

She tries to close her legs, but I force them open with my shoulders. Dragging my nose through her trimmed curls, I take a deep breath of her arousal and let go of her clit, only for my teeth to bite down on her.

Tess begins to struggle against me, but her efforts are futile. I free her wrist, so I can grab hold of her hips, and keeping her in place, I start to suck her hard, not soothing her with my tongue.

I keep up the relentless pace until her hands fist painfully in my hair, and her body convulses as if I'm electrocuting her.

As she orgasms, a scream tears from her, pure fucking music to my ears. Only then do I ease up on her, gently massaging her clit with my fingers.

When I lift my head and take in her flushed cheeks and the tear spiraling over her temple, my mouth curves up in satisfaction. "That makes us even now."

If I thought I managed to put her in her place, I'm wrong. Tess sits up, and moving onto her knees, she shoves at my chest. "I'm not done yet."

Anger still simmers in her eyes, and just because I want to see how far she'll take this, I lie down on my back, getting comfortable against the pillows.

For a moment, Tess looks unsure about what to do, but then she wraps her fingers around my cock. When she can't close her fist around my width, her other hand joins in. I almost chuckle, but she tightens her grip and pumps me hard, making me instantly harden for her again.

Her eyebrows shoot up, and she watches with fascination as I grow to my full length and width.

"Fuck," I groan, and nothing in this world can prepare me for what's next.

Tess settles between my thighs, then her lips part, and she takes me as deep as she can into her mouth.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

Mother of God.

A pleasure-filled groan rumbles from me. I reach for her hair, pull out the pins keeping the curls trapped, and toss them to the floor.

my baby
“That’s it, *moró mou*,” I praise her.

Her head bobs up and down, her tongue twirling around the sensitive head.

“Jesus. Suck harder,” I order.

As if greedy for the knowledge of how to satisfy me, Tess obeys, her gaze lifting to my face.

I watch myself get sucked into her mouth and almost shoot my load at the sight of her sparkling eyes and her lips wrapped tightly around my cock.

Holy fuck.

She fucking wins again as she obliterates my self-restraint. My fingers fist in her soft hair, and I force her to take all of me as I thrust up, our eyes locked. Her throat clamps around my cock, resisting the intrusion, and it’s fucking nirvana.

She gags and tears up, but she takes all of me like a good girl.

“Jesus, Tess,” I groan, my thrusts growing relentless. Her teeth come out to play, scraping over every sensitive inch of me, and I’m done for. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” My body tenses right before a powerful orgasm surges through me, melting my muscles from my bones and draining me of all my strength.

Tess swallows every drop then sets me free as she sits up between my thighs. With a pat on my thigh, she smiles. “Tess; two. Nikolas; One. You’ll have to up your game.”

Scooting off the bed, and with her sexy ass on full display, the little minx walks into the bathroom. “Thank you for turning on the shower for me.” Then the door slams shut behind her.

An impressed grin forms around my mouth. She’s really upped her game.

I thought I knew Tess, that I had her all figured out, but I was wrong. I don’t even think Tess knows what she’s fully capable of.

It’s going to be fun seeing her become a mafia queen.

Just as fascinated as Tess was with me growing hard for her, I find myself following her every movement as she settles into my space.

Her scent hangs in the air, making the place feel like home for the first time since I purchased it.

I lean my shoulder against the wall, crossing my arms over my chest. After showering, I only put on a pair of sweatpants. Tess seems to like this, seeing as her eyes keep darting to my abs.

She rearranges her side of the closet, not that there’s much to move around.

Which reminds me.

“How much did you donate?”

Tess shrugs. “Thirty thousand.”

Jesus.

“And the rest?”

“I placed fifteen thousand in a savings account for my mom.” She pauses, a frown forming on her forehead, then she scowls at me. “Did you threaten my mom not to tell me you’d be at the altar?”

It’s my turn to shrug. “Unlike you, other people actually listen to me when I give an order.”

“Asshole,” she mutters, turning her attention back to her clothes.

“You’ll stop calling me that.” My tone is unforgiving, so she’ll know I’m dead serious.

Tess turns to face me. “Why? You don’t get to ruin my life and then demand respect from me.”

Closing the distance between us, I take hold of her jaw, tilting her head back so she’ll look up at me. It’s a power move. “Just what did I ruin, Theresa? You can still study, still pursue a career as a producer, still see your mother and friends. What is it that I ruined?”

Doubt flashes through her eyes. “You forced me—”

“I didn’t see a gun to your head when you *willingly* said I do.” Leaning down until our breaths mingle, I add, “I didn’t hear the word no before I sunk balls deep inside you.” My lips brush against hers. “Instead, you fucking moaned and begged for my cock.”

Irritation tightens her features because she knows I’m right.

“Tess; two. Nikolas; two. We’re even again,” I taunt her, rubbing the pad of my thumb over her bottom lip. “Christ, I love this game.”

“My life isn’t a game,” she grinds out between clenched teeth.

“You’re the one who started it, Theresa. Next time you’ll think twice before going up against me.”

Pulling her jaw free from my hold, she glares at me. “Remember to sleep with one eye open.”

I chuckle as she shoves past me. My eyes fall on her meager collection of clothing. “Tomorrow, you’ll fill this closet with items fit for a queen.”

When I walk into the bedroom, Tess turns her back to me, snuggling into the covers as she tries to find a comfortable spot in the foreign bed.

I crawl over the mattress until I reach her, take hold of her jaw again, and turn her face to me. I press a kiss to her mouth, my teeth tugging at her bottom lip before I let go. “Good night, wife.”

She lets out a disgruntled sound and tugs the covers up past her shoulder. “Sweet dreams,” she taunts me, earning a slap to her ass from me.

Climbing off the bed, I leave the room to turn off all the lights. I stop in the living room and turn on the TV, selecting the security footage screen. Making sure all the guards are at their stations, I switch off everything before heading back upstairs.

When I walk into the bedroom and see Tess safely in my bed, the corner of my mouth lifts. Tomorrow she'll fight me again when she learns her group of guards just tripled.

Slipping my arms beneath Tess, I lift her up.

"What the hell, Nikolas!"

"Shhh." I set her down on the right side so I'll be between her and the door, should something happen.

Tess seems to realize this as I lie down on the spot her body warmed.

"You could've just told me to move," she mumbles, but I don't miss how her eyes soften, the anger no longer as potent.

I lift my arm, giving her a pointed look. Even though she narrows her eyes, she still scoots closer to snuggle against my side. When her cheek rests on my chest, I press my mouth to her hair and close my eyes.

God, don't let my actions of today place her life in danger. I hope I did the right thing and that the safest place for Tess is by my side.

Chapter 26

Tess

“You’ll be escorted by eleven guards. Three in the same SUV as you, four stationed in front of you, and four at your back.” Nikolas lifts his eyes to me, pausing where he’s securing a cufflink. “Do you understand, Theresa?”

“Why so many?” I ask before biting into a slice of toast.

“Because you’ve just become target number one to my enemies,” he mutters, fixing his jacket.

Slipping off the stool, I walk to him and straighten his tie. “Do you ever not wear a suit?”

“Yes, when I’m fucking you or sleeping.”

Letting out a huff, I shake my head. “How many enemies do you have?”

Nikolas lifts his hand to my chin, and instead of his touch being forceful as he nudges my face up, it’s tender. “Right now, I’m at war with the Sicilians.”

Crap, right. He mentioned that the other day.

His features tighten with concern. “Only leave the penthouse when you really have to.”

This is a side of Nikolas I haven’t seen before. Him concerned about me.

His eyes dart over my face. “Don’t defy me on this. The Sicilians have already killed thirteen of my men. They will try to get to you.”

Holy shit. Fear slithers into my chest because if it’s one thing I know, the mafia doesn’t screw around when they’re at war.

My tongue darts out, nervously wetting my lips. “Then why did you marry me? Why not let me go with Christos like you wanted at first?”

“Because I’m selfish,” he admits, much to my surprise. When he lowers his head and his mouth takes mine, I don’t hold back. I might not get along with the man, but I sure as hell desire him.

Lifting my hands to his jaw, pleasure fills me when he deepens the kiss. Nikolas wraps an arm around me, then I’m tugged hard against his body, my toes barely touching the floor.

My fingers slip into his hair, the passion between us igniting a fire that never seems to quite die out. There are always embers, ready to be stoked by the slightest provocation.

Nikolas breaks the kiss, and I moan, not wanting him to go to work but stay in bed with me. Not that I’ll ever admit that out loud to him.

“Order the clothes online,” he instructs, handing me a black credit card. Giving me a no-nonsense look, he adds, “And stay home.”

Home.

It's going to take a while before I can think of the penthouse as home.

When I don't reply, Nikolas' features tighten with warning. "Tell me you understand, Theresa."

"Yeah, okay. I hear you."

He shakes his head at me before walking to the counter. I watch as he drinks half my coffee and steals the rest of my toast, then he heads to the elevator. "I'll be back for lunch." Before the doors shut behind him, Nikolas winks at me as he bites into my breakfast.

As soon as I'm alone, I allow myself to smile because as much as I want to hate Nikolas, the past twenty-four hours haven't been absolute hell.

On the contrary, it's been the opposite.

Staring at my laptop's screen where clothes are on display, I don't take in any of the items. My thoughts revolve around Nikolas and everything that happened in the past twenty-four hours.

God, the past week. It's still crazy and hard for me to wrap my mind around.

Am I still angry? *Yes.*

For the past seven days, I've been in absolute turmoil, only to end up married to Nikolas.

I frown, trying to make sense of how things escalated between us. We went from strangers to enemies to... I'm not sure what we are now. Well, besides married.

My eyebrow darts up when the thought crosses my mind that I married my stepbrother. Then, shaking my head, I dismiss it quickly. He was never my stepbrother. Our parents being married doesn't count.

At least I don't have to move to Greece. If I'm really honest with myself, I'm relieved I didn't have to marry Christos. Rather the devil you know, than the devil you don't know... or something like that.

And the sex is mind-blowingly hot. That's a bonus.

I shift into a more comfortable position on the couch, then lean my head back and stare up at the ceiling.

I'm married to Nikolas. Holy shit.

The realization keeps hitting me at the most random moments.

Lifting my head, I look at the wedding ring on my finger. I feel a strange twinge in my chest, thinking I'm wearing his mother's ring.

That must mean he's serious about this marriage, right?

Nikolas has managed to evade getting married for years. He's thirty-six and could have his pick of any woman.

Yet, his ring's on my finger.

My mind goes down a dark path, leading to nothing good. Will he be faithful? Is this just his way of controlling me?

Still, I'm allowed to continue my studies and pursue a career.

Confused from trying to figure out what happened and what it all means for my future, I suck in a deep breath and focus on the laptop's screen.

Finding a boutique that houses a selection I like, I pick up my phone and dial Athina's number.

"Morning," she answers cheerfully. "How was your wedding night?" It only takes two seconds before she says, "No, don't tell me. I don't want to know. What's up?"

"I need help. Nikolas told me to fill my side of the closet. I found—"

"I'll be right over."

"I'm at his penthouse."

"Give me thirty minutes."

"Okay."

Ending the call, I save the boutique's homepage on my laptop and shut the device. I get up and head upstairs to change out of my sleeping shorts and t-shirt. Changing into a pair of leggings and an oversized shirt, I decide to make the bed.

When I'm done straightening things in the bedroom, I take a moment to be nosy, pulling open drawers and checking Nikolas' side of the closet. Getting a whiff of his cologne, I stand and sniff the air like a lunatic, then make my way to the bathroom. I can't find anything weird and giving up, I go back downstairs and place a couple of dishes in the dishwasher.

With nothing else to do, I go stand in front of the impressive floor-to-ceiling windows and stare out over the city.

The view is beautiful.

Soon enough, my thoughts return to Nikolas. The way he touches me, the sounds he makes, his body moving against mine – it makes me wonder if it's all just physical.

When he orgasms, he always holds me as if he can't bear the thought of letting go.

He used to be extremely harsh with me, but lately... he's still firm with his demands, but the bite is gone.

Maybe...

No, there's no way he loves me. That's the most ridiculous thought ever.

Shaking my head at myself, I turn away from the window just as the elevator opens.

"I'm here," Athina calls out as she steps into the entrance portal.

"Hi." I meet her in the middle of the living room, and we do the whole air kiss thing. "Thanks for coming over." As always, she's dressed in a classy outfit, exuding the power of a mafia princess.

Yep, she was the right person to call in for help.

She checks the time on her wristwatch. "The boutique where I normally shop will bring over a bunch of outfits for you to try on. Let's have some coffee while we wait."

I walk to the kitchen, and while Athina takes a seat on one of the stools by the breakfast nook, I prepare the coffees.

“You don’t look like you want to kill Nikolas,” she mentions, her eyes scouring my face. “Dare I hope you talked things out with him?”

I let out a burst of laughter as I set a cup down in front of her. Leaning back against the counter, I reply, “We didn’t talk much.”

She scrunches her nose. “You might be my sister-in-law, and I’ve grown really fond of you, but I don’t want to know about my brother’s sex life.”

Raising my eyebrows, I shake my head. “Don’t worry. That’s one thing I’ll never share with you.”

What happens in the bedroom stays in the bedroom.

Hoping to get some information out of Athina, I say, “I’m still getting to know Nikolas. I only know what makes him angry.” *Me.*

Athina gives me an encouraging look. “I know he can be... demanding, for lack of a better word, but he means well, Tess. He has a lot on his shoulders, and he just wants to keep us all safe.”

“I understand.” I set my cup down on the counter. “Does he ever relax?”

Concern flashes over her face. “Not so much.”

Digging deeper, I ask, “Has he ever been in love?”

She shakes her head. “Not that I know of. He’s never brought a woman home for us to meet.”

My eyebrows lift again. “That’s interesting.”

Athina nods. “Yes, so you can imagine my surprise when he declared he’s marrying you.”

“When did you find out?”

She shrugs. “Literally as I got to the church. I was just as shocked as you.”

Wow, he really waited until the last minute.

Athina drinks the last of the coffee then smiles at me. “He wouldn’t have married you if he didn’t want to, Tess. I don’t know if he loves you, but I’m confident he cares. I’ve never seen Nikolas so rattled before.”

I give her a thankful smile because she really didn’t have to answer my questions. “Thanks, Athina.”

“Nikolas might be demanding, but he’s just as giving.” Rising to her feet, her eyes lock with mine. “And if there’s one thing my brother respects, it’s the sanctity of marriage. So don’t break your vows. Nikolas meant it when he said until death do you part.”

A chill creeps down my spine because it feels like the words carry a double meaning. Still, I ask, “Does that mean he’ll be faithful?”

“Yes, and he expects the same in return.”

“Got it.”

Relief unfurls in my chest, and Athina must see it on my face because she adds, “Also, he’s never lifted a hand against a woman. It’s not his style.”

Thankful for all the information I really needed to know, I step closer to Athina and hug her. “I needed to hear that.”

“I know.” She pulls back and smiles warmly at me. “Please... will you try to make Nikolas happy?”

I can see how important it is to Athina, and not wanting to disappoint her, I nod. “I’ll try my best.”

“That’s all I ask for.”

“There might be bumps in the road, though,” I warn her. “He’s not the easiest person.”

But I won’t try to kill him in his sleep.

It’s a start, but it’s going to take a while for me to work through my anger. There’s a lot that’s happened between Nikolas and me, Athina doesn’t know about.

Chapter 27

Nikolas

I walk into the penthouse for lunch but come to a dead stop in the entrance hall.

Fuck.

I take in the rows and rows of clothes, the people, the voices and instantly take a step backward.

“Nikolas! You’re home. Good,” Athina calls out before I can make my escape. “Tess and I can’t decide, so we need your opinion.”

My sister grabs hold of my arm, and I’m dragged into the living room. A man with purple hair zooms past me, a cashmere coat almost slapping me in the face.

Athina shoves me down on a sofa, then calls out, “Tess, put on the gold dress again.”

“What?” Tess yells back from the guest restroom.

“Put on the gold dress again,” Athina shouts at the top of her lungs.

Fuck my life.

I start to get up, but my sister shoves me back down then gives me a look of warning. “You’ll sit and give your opinion.

Tess has gone through a lot of effort, trying on one outfit after the other. Support her.”

I lift an eyebrow at my brave sister, and I’m just about to tell her I have more important things to take care of when the restroom’s door opens, and Tess steps out.

I suck in a deep breath, my eyes drinking in the sight of her. The dress is short as fuck, hardly covering her sexy ass.

“Hell fucking no,” I bark out. I point at the restroom. “Take that off immediately.”

“I told you,” Tess scowls at Athina before disappearing into the restroom.

Turning my gaze to my sister, I shake my head hard. “Stop with the revealing dresses.”

“But Tess has killer legs and a butt I’d pay good money to have.”

“I know.” Rising to my feet, I unbutton my jacket and shrug it off. “I don’t need all the men in Vancouver drooling over my wife.”

A sneaky smile forms on Athina’s face. “Aww... you’re jealous.”

“Fucking right, I am,” I huff, not even bothering to deny it as I sit down and make myself comfortable.

Someone has to make sure the clothes Tess gets are decent.

The restroom door opens again, and Tess comes out wearing semi-suitable pants, still too tight, and a silk blouse. My eyes narrow as she twirls because her ass is on full display again.

“Isn’t there anything baggier?” I ask, the irritation clear in my tone.

Tess’ shoulders sag. “Do you want me wearing trash bags instead?”

There’s an idea.

My gaze drifts over my new wife. Fuck, not even a trash bag will hide her beauty. At least she’s covered.

“The outfit will do,” I mutter. Before she can dart back into the restroom, I order, “Come here.”

Tess lets out a sigh but obeys and comes to stand in front of me. With a crooked finger, I gesture for her to lean down. This time she rolls her eyes while she does as I say. When she’s in reaching distance, I wrap my fingers behind her neck and tug her closer so I can kiss her. I keep it decent.

When I pull back and get one hell of a view of her cleavage from the silk blouse dipping too low, I growl, “Hell no to the top.”

Tess narrows her eyes at me as she straightens up. “Don’t you have work to do?”

“It’s Sunday,” I remind her. “By the way, what do you want to eat for lunch?”

She thinks for a moment, then asks, “Are we ordering in?”

“Yes.” I don’t have the energy to go out.

“Sushi?”

Nodding, I gesture for her to return to fitting on clothes so we can get it done and over with.

It takes four hours before the penthouse clears out, and everything returns to normal.

Needless to say, I'm exhausted just from watching Tess fit on one outfit after the other.

She slumps down next to me, letting out a sigh. "It feels like I went to the gym."

Turning my body sideways so I'm facing her, I rest my arm on the back of the couch. "Are you happy with everything you got?"

Tess glances at me, her gaze slowly drifting over my face. "The question is, are you? I didn't have much of a say."

The corner of my mouth lifts. "I don't share." I wave my other hand over the length of her body. "Every inch of you belongs to me."

She lets out a chuckle, but sadness flickers in her eyes.

Tilting my head, I ask, "You don't agree?"

She looks away toward the windows. "Just would've liked being appreciated for my personality and everything else I have to offer and not just a piece of meat."

Her words grate against my gut, my hand shoots out, and grabbing hold of her chin, I force her to look at me again. "You're not a piece of meat. Trust me, I'd get my fill and move on if that were the case."

Tess' fingers wrap around my wrist, but she doesn't pull my hand away from her face. She stares at me for a long moment, then says, "Since we met, it's been a crazy whirlwind. We don't get along. Why marry me?"

I lower my hand to the side of her neck, and feeling her pulse, I lock eyes with her and wait. Soon enough, her heartbeat speeds up, and once it's fluttering against my fingers, I murmur, "All it takes is one look from me to get your heart racing." I take hold of her hand and press it to my chest so she can feel she has the same effect on me. "This is why I married you. Just by breathing, you make my heart beat faster."

Confusion flutters over Tess' face, her tongue nervously darting out to wet her lips, then she asks, "Do you even like me, Nikolas?"

More than is good for you to know.

Letting go of Tess, I get up and walk to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water. "Are you asking me if I care about you?" My eyes flick to her, and when she nods, I answer honestly, "I do."

She gets up and comes to the kitchen while I open the bottle and take a sip.

"So you think a marriage between us can work? We won't end up killing each other?"

Setting the bottle down on the counter, I place a hand on Tess' hip and tug her against me. "Only time will tell." Needing her to understand my stance on marriage, I add, "But there will never be threats of divorce. We will remain loyal to our vows, no matter what."

Wrapping my arms around her, my hands find her ass, and I grip her tightly.

Desire flares to life in her eyes, and framing my jaw with her hands, she stands on her tiptoes to press a kiss to my mouth. “So we’re really doing this?”

“Definitely,” I murmur. My teeth tug at her bottom lip, then I deepen the kiss, my tongue stroking hers.

Before I can lose myself in her body, Tess pulls back. “Then I suppose we actually have to get to know each other.” She removes her body from my hold, picks up my bottle of water, and takes a sip. Leaning against the counter opposite me, she asks, “Why do you have such a short temper?”

I let out a chuckle. “Patience only gives people the opportunity to fuck with me. A short temper keeps them on a short leash.”

She seems to think about what I just said, then cautiously admits, “I don’t do well with conflict.”

“You seem to be holding your own when it comes to me,” I remark because it’s taken a lot of intimidation for her to submit. Well, more than I usually use on my family.

Tess wets her lips again, and it looks like she wants to say something but then decides against it.

“Say it,” I encourage her, not wanting her to hold back.

She shakes her head then takes a deep breath, asking another question instead, “Just so we’re clear, I can continue with my normal routine?”

“Just be vigilant when you’re out in public and stick with your guards.”

“And at...” she scrunches her nose in a cute way, “home? What about my apartment? My belongings?”

Shrugging, I cross my legs at the ankles and lean back against the counter. “Bring your stuff over, and what you do with your apartment is up to you.”

“So I can keep it?”

“Of course.”

“And scatter my *stuff* all over your place?”

It doesn’t escape my attention that this is the longest we’ve had a *normal* conversation.

“The penthouse is your home, now. As long as I don’t trip over your belongings and the place remains neat, you can add whatever you want.”

Our eyes lock, and when the air begins to heat up between us, Tess raises her eyebrows, letting out a slow breath. “Wow, we’re really doing this.”

“We are.” Pushing away from the counter, I close the distance between us and lift my hands to frame her face. “Do you have any more questions?”

Her gaze jumps over my features. “Not right now.”

“Good,” I grumble. I take her mouth, devouring every delectable inch.

Chapter 28

Tess

The past two weeks have been... pleasant, dare I say.

Nikolas hasn't bitten my head off. Well, the only biting he's been doing is when we're naked. The man has one hell of a sexual appetite, but I'm getting used to keeping up with him.

Even though it feels ridiculous going to school with an entourage of guards, I tolerate them because the last thing I want is to end up dead in a ditch. Nikolas doesn't talk much about work, and I don't ask questions, not wanting to know about the dark side of the mafia.

I haven't told Annette or Jake I got married. I don't know why. But until they notice the ring on my finger, I'm not saying a word.

If I'm honest, it's because it still feels surreal.

Me living with Nikolas. Him coming home to me. Us having dinner together, sharing a bed.

It's all starting to grow on me, though, and it's slowly chipping away at the anger I felt.

God, who would've thought Nikolas would actually grow on me?

Sometimes it all feels insane, but then there are times where it feels natural as if this is the way things were meant to be.

Like I said, it's weird.

Looking at my reflection in the mirror, my gaze drifts over the chiffon dress. The light pink fabric bunches around my shoulders then takes the form of a pencil dress, stopping beneath my knees. I'm wearing black heels, a black obsidian necklace, and earrings to round off the look, and my hair's pinned up in a messy bun.

The corners of my mouth lift. "Not bad, Tess."

"Not bad at all," Nikolas suddenly murmurs behind me.

My eyes find him in the mirror, and I watch as he stops at my back, his hands settling on my hips. With his gaze locked on mine, he leans down and presses a kiss to my bare shoulder. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," I whisper, caught off guard by how intimate the moment feels.

The way Nikolas looks at me... there's so much intensity as if I'm actually precious to him. It builds up my self-confidence, which took one hell of a beating during my first seventeen years of life.

A breath trembles over my lips, the moment tugging at my heart. It makes me feel vulnerable and has me whispering, "Don't look at me like that if you don't mean it."

I'm tugged back, his chest pressing against my shoulder blades. He takes a deep breath of my hair, then says, "Theresa, I never do anything I don't mean."

God.

My heart clenches, and a kaleidoscope of butterflies erupts in my stomach. My breath hitches, and panic slithers through me.

What will this man do if I fall in love with him? Will he use it to control me? Will he break my heart?

With the questions swirling in my mind, I pick up my black clutch and force a smile onto my face. “I’m ready when you are.”

“Are you?” he asks, his words carrying a double meaning.

“For Athina’s birthday party,” I add.

Slowly, Nikolas nods, then he steps back so I can leave the walk-in closet.

Well, that was unexpectedly intense.

When we step into the elevator, Nikolas comes to stand slightly behind me, his chest touching my arm. I glance up at him from over my shoulder. When his eyes flick to me, I quickly look in front of me. The moment the doors slide open again, he smacks my ass. “After you, *kardiá mou.*” my heart

My jaw goes slack, surprise stunning me. Somehow I manage to walk, my heartbeat speeding up.

My heart?

Did he really just call me that?

My insides flutter, and I start to feel even more nervous. Not in a bad way. It’s more like I’m standing on the edge of a cliff, not sure whether Nikolas will bother catching me should I jump.

He said he cares about you.

He hasn't been as aggressive as when you first met.

Girl, the man treats you like a queen.

Maybe it won't be the worst thing to fall in love with him.
I mean, we're married.

Still, giving my heart to Nikolas is a huge risk. He can crush it in his fist or treasure it. God only knows what he'll do with it.

After climbing into the back of the SUV, Nikolas leans over to fasten my seatbelt and presses a kiss to the corner of my mouth before settling back against the seat.

I grip my clutch tighter, trying to focus on the night ahead. It's Athena's birthday party and the first time Nikolas and I will make an appearance as a married couple.

"What's expected of me?" I ask so I don't screw things up.

"What do you mean?" He turns his gaze to me while reaching for my hand. The moment he pries my fingers away from my purse, he links his with mine.

"Do you expect me to stick to your side? Should I mingle?" I make an awkward face. "Not that I know how to mingle."

Lifting my hand, Nikolas presses a tender kiss to the back of it. "It's a party, Tess. Enjoy yourself. Lavish Athina with attention. She'll love that."

"Okay." That I can do.

Loukas brings the SUV to a stop, and I look at all the lights shining on the Stathoulis' estate. It makes the mansion

look more impressive than ever. As we step out of the vehicle, we follow the red carpet into the entrance hall.

“Wow, they went full out,” I murmur, admiring the royal blue and gold décor.

“Remember, my father will expect you to call him *mpampà*,” Nikolas informs me.

That’s not going to be awkward at all. The last time I uttered those words, my dad was alive.

With my hand in Nikolas’ tight grip, we walk into the entertainment room, where classical music fills the air and people are already gathered.

A burst of sharp laughter sends an apprehensive shiver racing down my spine, and instinctively my muscles tense. Wildly my eyes dart around until I find *her*.

Irene. My cousin.

No.

What is she doing here? I thought she extended her trip to Europe after she couldn’t make it to my and Nikolas’ wedding.

A fearful hand grips my chest as the past threatens to resurface.

Not tonight.

Shit.

With my gaze locked on my worst nightmare, my breathing starts to speed up, the walls closing in on me.

‘I’ll cut out your tongue...’

“What’s wrong?” Nikolas asks, tugging me to a stop and turning me to face him.

Somehow I manage to force a smile to my tight lips. “Nothing. Just a lot of people.”

He leans into me, and when his lips brush against my forehead, I suck in a deep breath of him, trying to siphon off some of his strength so I can get through tonight.

It’s one thing having dealt with my past, but coming face to face with the monster responsible for my trauma is the last thing I expected tonight.

God, I haven’t seen her in two years, and they’ve been blissful. Why couldn’t she just stay away?

Irene’s high-pitch laugh sounds closer, and I can’t stop myself from moving as close to Nikolas as I can get.

Please don’t let her notice me. Please. Please. Please.

My mind races with ways to get out of the predicament, but before I can come up with a solid plan, I hear, “Well, if it isn’t Theresa.”

No.

God.

My stomach becomes a hard knot of nerves. Unable to smile, because it’s taking everything I have to turn around and face her, my heart hammers against my ribs. When I lift my eyes to Irene’s, who’s easily a head taller than me, and twice my size, my mouth dries right up.

‘Tell your mom, and I’ll cut out your lying tongue and feed it to the dog across the road. I dare you.’ Her fingers tighten

around my neck until it's hard to breathe. 'Even better. I'll break your neck. Dead bitches can't snitch.'

Breathe, Tess. Breathe.

“Sorry I couldn’t make your wedding. It was such short notice,” Irene says snidely. Then she turns her attention to Nikolas, and a seductive smile spreads over her hateful face. “Nikolas, I hope you’ve been well.”

He hardly looks at her, glancing at the other guests before looking down at me. He must feel the trembling in my hand because a frown forms on his forehead, his eyes narrowing on me before they flick to Irene. “Refresh my memory. Who are you?”

She holds out her hand to him. “Irene Drakatos. Theresa’s cousin. The last time we saw each other was at your thirtieth birthday party.” Her eyes fall on me with disapproval for a second, then she looks at Nikolas again. “Quite the surprise, you marrying a Drakatos. I thought none of us were good enough for you.”

Holy shit.

Ignoring Irene’s hand, Nikolas tugs me slightly behind him as he takes a threatening step closer to her. “None of you were until I laid eyes on Theresa. *Imagine my surprise* when I saw the Drakatos bloodline actually managed to birth a queen.”

The corner of my mouth lifts a fraction, and right now, I feel one hell of a bond with Nikolas... even a burst of affection.

Suddenly we’re moving, leaving a gapping Irene in our wake.

“I can’t believe she’s related to you. One of you must’ve been adopted,” Nikolas mutters, then a smile spreads over his face as we reach Athina.

It’s only when I’m congratulating Athina on her birthday that I realize I didn’t take a Xanax, where in the past I’d pass out from anxiety when coming face to face with Irene.

My fingers tighten around Nikolas’ hand, and I rest my other palm against his bicep as I step closer to him.

He leans down, pressing a kiss to my temple, then whispers, “Everything okay?”

I nod, suppressing the urge to crawl into his arms where I know Irene won’t be able to hurt me.

“I knew you’d look gorgeous in the chiffon dress,” Athina compliments me.

I focus on keeping a smile on my face. “Not half as stunning as you.”

Her gaze drifts over Nikolas and me. “The two of you seem to be getting along better. Dare I hope a peace treaty’s been signed?”

While I laugh, Nikolas looks down at me with warmth softening his eyes. “We’re making an effort,” is all he replies to Athina.

Since saying my vows, tonight is the first time I feel like his wife.

The realization hits hard, causing a wave of emotion to wash through me.

Nikolas makes me feel stronger, and damn... I'm falling for him.

Chapter 29

Nikolas

Tess seems to relax a little while we talk with Athina and Basil. That's until my father and Helena walk toward us.

“*Mpampà mou*, Helena, good to see you,” I greet them, leaning closer to air kiss Helena's cheek.

I keep hold of Tess' hand while she hugs her mom, then she gives my father an uncomfortable look. “Hi, Pe... ah... *mpampà mou*.”

He's not the easiest person to get along with, so I don't blame her.

“Theresa,” Dad greets her with a nod.

“How's married life?” Helena asks, a cautious expression on her face as if she's expecting bad news.

“Ah... good,” Tess answers.

“We're settling in,” I add, then Andreas catches my eyes, signaling he needs a moment. “Excuse me.” Letting go of Tess' hand, I quickly walk toward Andreas.

“Sorry for the interruption. A couple of Sicilians were seen scouting the area,” he informs me, worry etched onto his face.

“Fuck.” I glance over all the guests before leaving the entertainment hall so we can talk in private. “Driveby's?”

Following me into the study, he nods. “It was just one car. They’re probably reporting your comings and goings to Manno.”

“I’m not surprised. Any word from our scouts?”

“Yeah, there’s not much movement at the address we got from Viktor. No sign of Manno.”

“I’ll check with Viktor.” Taking my phone from my pocket, I dial the Russian’s number. I don’t wait long for him to answer.

“Nikolas, to what do I owe the honor?” Music blares over the line. “Give me a second. It’s Mariya’s birthday.”

Mariya’s the retired head of the bratva’s daughter and like a sister to Viktor.

I let out a chuckle. “I’m at Athina’s party, so I feel your pain.”

As the background noise fades, Viktor laughs then says, “What can I help with?”

“There’s no sign of Manno at the address you gave me.”

“Trust me,” he says, his Russian accent slipping through, “he’s there. I confirmed it on a satellite image.”

“Was it just as quiet at the address when you checked?”

“Yes. He’s laying low, letting his soldiers do all the dirty work. Fucker.”

I have no reason not to trust Viktor, and he’s damn good at his job. “Okay, I’m going to take your word for it.”

“Do you plan on attacking?” Viktor asks.

“Yes.”

“Do you need backup? I can do with some action,” he offers.

I let out a chuckle. “I’ll never say no. I’ll keep you updated.”

“Let me get back to the party before Mariya kicks my ass.”

“Enjoy.” Ending the call, I turn my attention to Andreas. “Viktor is dead sure Manno’s at the address he gave us. I want to know who goes in and out of that house.”

“On it.” Andreas tilts his head, a smile tugging at his mouth. “Married life seems to agree with you. You look happy.”

It’s only been two weeks, but Tess has obeyed every order. I look forward to going home, knowing there’s a plate of food waiting, and I get to lose myself in her hot body.

With every passing day, my protectiveness and possessiveness of her keep growing. I’m becoming obsessed with the woman and find myself constantly having to touch her.

She’s mine.

My mind and heart realized this the day of the wedding, and my soul is quickly becoming aware of the fact that Theresa is the reason for its existence.

I just need her to love me back, or I’m fucked.

Realizing I haven’t answered Andreas yet, I reply, “I can’t complain.”

“Yeah, I bet you can’t,” he jokes as he walks out of the office.

I use the privacy of the study to check a couple of messages I got.

“Here you are,” I hear Irene’s voice.

It instantly annoys the fuck out of me, and I turn my back to her to make a point that I don’t have time for her. “What do you want?”

Fake, incredulous laughter bubbles over her lips like cheap champagne. “Wow, is that how you talk to family?”

“I don’t consider you family.”

Irene’s not bad looking, but the snake slithering beneath her skin can be seen a mile away. It’s because of her kind I remained a bachelor for so long. *Socialites*.

“Ouch, now that just hurts my feelings,” she replies behind me. “Relax, I wanted to congratulate you.” I feel her move closer to me and lock my phone, so she won’t see any of my messages. “I really think you deserve better, though. A real queen by your side.”

My eyes narrow, and I glance at the woman as she stops next to me. When I remain quiet, Irene reaches out, trailing a finger down my bicep.

Grabbing hold of her wrist, it takes a lot to not lose my shit. My breathing slows down, my muscles tightening. “Leave,” I growl in her face, my tone low with warning. “Now.”

A malicious smile spreads over her face, and she leans into me. “I just thought someone should inform you, you didn’t exactly marry the best the Drakatos family has to offer.”

Christ, help me.

My fingers itch to snap her neck, my eyes burning with rage on her as I shove her hand away from me. “You better leave before I kill you,” I give her one last warning.

Irene tugs her bottom lip between her teeth, then hums, “I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

In one quick action, I remove my gun from behind my back and train it on her. “NOW!” I shout, my rage exploding from me.

Chapter 30

Tess

Nikolas has been gone a while, and with everyone getting ready for the speeches, I go look for him.

I hear soft murmuring from the study and peeking inside through the half-open door, shock shudders through me when I see Irene and Nikolas. Alone.

“Relax, I just wanted to congratulate you,” I hear Irene murmur, her voice husky with desire. She sidles up to Nikolas’ side, and when he doesn’t step away, my heart starts beating faster.

Seeing the person I fear most, the one responsible for years of agony, so close to the man I was starting to love, rips a hole through my heart.

“I really think you deserve better, though. A real queen by your side.”

It all becomes too much when she trails her finger seductively down his arm. Then her eyes flick to me, her smile growing with triumph.

Swinging around, I rush to the hallway, and only when I shut the restroom’s door behind me do I gasp for air.

My anxiety spikes, and digging in my clutch, I take out the Xanax bottle and quickly place a pill beneath my tongue. As I

wait for the medication to take its effect, my mind's bombarded with dark memories.

Irene shoving me down the stairs. I broke my arm, but it was blamed on me being clumsy. Everyone believed her, and I was too scared to set things straight.

Irene kicking me until I had three broken ribs. I told Mom I fell out of a tree, my fear for Irene a living, breathing thing after endless months of being slapped around by her.

After my dad died, we lived with Uncle Kostas, dad's brother. Irene was forced to share a room with me, and her being ten years older than me meant she was a lot stronger. I was only eight. I didn't know how to protect myself.

And she was cruel. Always so cruel.

Irene took every chance she could get to slap me around, kick me, shove me.

She was a nightmare.

Closing my eyes, I focus on my breaths, trying to shove the traumatic memories back down into the pit of despair I keep them locked in.

Irene's just trying to hurt me. Again.

Breathe.

Nikolas won't cheat on me.

Only when I feel some semblance of calm returning do I quickly check my makeup so I can go back to the party.

I take another deep breath as I open the door, but it stalls in my throat at the sight of Irene.

Oh, God.

No.

Her lips curve up into a sneer, her eyes drifting over me with apparent disdain. “If it isn’t the cunt who shouldn’t be a queen. Wow, you really squeezed all your fat into that dress? A bit tight, don’t you think?”

This isn’t happening.

My muscles freeze for a precious second, and it’s all it takes for Irene to lurch at me. Her hand connects with the side of my head, and I’m slammed against the mirror.

Glass splinters.

My scalp burns and stings.

The door shuts, and the air’s sucked out of the small space, my lungs instantly seizing to work.

Disorientated from the sudden attack, Irene has the upper hand as she fists my hair and slams the side of my head against the broken mirror again.

Warmth floods the right side of my face as I slump to the floor, then a kick collides with ribs, sending a wave of excruciating pain through my chest.

Somehow I manage to curl up against the wall, my mind fuzzy, the world spinning in and out of focus.

Apprehension and terror overwhelm me, making it impossible to think. Only one word comes to mind – *Nikolas*.

There’s another brutal kick to my lower back, and all I can do is whimper, years of conditioning keeping me imprisoned to the floor.

“You think you’re better than me because you married Nikolas Stathoulis?” Irene laughs manically. “Think again, cunt. He’ll grow bored of you soon enough and then look for a real woman, one who’s not fat as fuck.”

Her words cut through me, airing all my insecurities and pain.

I don’t even realize Irene leaves, my strangled breaths are the only sound I can hear. Flashes of the past mix with the present, forming an endless loop of horror.

My insecurities and trauma form a thick cloud around me, making it even harder to breathe.

I was fat, but after my growth spurt, I was left with a curvy body – one I accepted. Nikolas made me feel like a real woman, one he desired and couldn’t get enough of, and it made me learn to love myself.

And Irene just obliterated it all.

Now I feel stupid for thinking I could look anything more than ridiculous in a tight dress.

A pain-filled groan escapes me as I try to lean back against the wall. My breaths are still coming too fast, and I struggle to reach for my purse, my left side, lower back, and head aching with an all too familiar pain. Finally, I manage to take the Xanax bottle out but opening the lid, the pills scatter over the floor from the intense trembling in my hands.

It feels like my lungs fall flat, my heart threatening to hammer right through my ribs.

Instinctively, I curl into a small ball, sobs strangling the little air I have left from me. Nauseating dizziness spins in my

head, making it hard to focus.

The door slams open, missing my head by an inch.

“She’s here!”

Andreas is a blur, then he moves out of the way, and Nikolas appears. After that, everything becomes flashes as my mind keeps checking out of reality.

Nikolas’ enraged face.

“Who did this to you?”

He drops to his knees in front of me.

My sight focus on his chest, and using the little strength I have left, I grab hold of his jacket and pull myself against him. I curl into him, and then horrible sobs tear through me.

It’s okay. Calm down.

Nikolas is here.

You’re safe.

Calm down.

Try to breathe.

“Tess... Theresa... Baby.”

Chapter 31

Nikolas

The moment I lay eyes on Tess, and I take in the blood on the right side of her face, the broken mirror, her in a small bundle – murderous rage rips the air from my lungs.

Jesus Christ.

I dart forward, dropping to my knees in front of her. “Who did this to you?” is all I can think to ask, wanting to kill whoever dared touch my wife.

Tess’ breaths are too fast, some strangled by sobs, then she grabs hold of my jacket and pulls her body up against mine. When she buries her face against my chest, her sobs turn to agonizing cries, her body jerking uncontrollably.

Something shifts inside me.

It’s dark and lethal.

I wrap my arms around her, but her breathing grows too shallow. “Tess.” Taking hold of her chin, some blood smearing on my fingers, I try to look at her face. She’s so fucking pale, her eyes drifting shut and hiding the unadulterated terror. “Theresa!” I snap, panic flooding my veins. She loses consciousness, and a hellish fear explodes in my chest. Pushing my arms beneath her body, I lift her to my chest as I

climb to my feet. “Baby,” I groan, holding her as close to me as I can while rushing out of the restroom.

Andreas shoots past me, his features tight with worry.

Guests spill out of the entrance hall.

I hear Helena’s concerned questions.

But I don’t stop. I run out the front door, my wife’s limp body in my arms, sending fresh waves of fear through me with every step I take.

Andreas has the backdoor to the SUV open, and careful not to hurt Tess, I climb inside with her firmly in my hold. I settle her on my lap and freeing my one arm, I’m able to brush some hair from her ghostly pale face.

“Tess, can you hear me?” She remains unresponsive as Andreas climbs behind the steering wheel. Soon we’re racing down the driveway.

“Is she okay?” Andreas asks, his eyes darting between the road ahead and the rearview mirror.

“I...” I shake my head, crippling dread darkening my life. “I don’t know. Faster!”

Andreas floors the gas. Tess’ head lolls to the side, her bloody cheek coming to a rest against my shoulder. Her eyelashes flutter, and hope pours into me, causing me to feel dizzy.

“Baby.” I lean closer, using my fingers to wipe some of the blood away from her cheek, but I only make a bigger mess. “Can you hear me?”

She lets out a disorientated groan, her eyes finally opening.

“I’ve got you. We’ll be at the hospital soon.”

“Two minutes,” Andreas adds.

Tess keeps her eyes on me, her breaths steady, but there’s no expression on her face. She just stares at me, and it makes my worry explode into absolute chaos.

“Can you hear me?” I ask again, needing some kind of response from her.

Tess blinks... blinks... fucking blinks.

“Baby,” I groan. It’s unbearable seeing the woman I love more than life itself covered in blood and fucking unresponsive.

Christ, help me.

I’m going to kill whoever hurt her. Their days are numbered.

The SUV comes to a screeching stop in front of the emergency room. Andreas jumps out then hurries to open the door for us. He helps me maneuver Tess so I can get out, and once he’s sure I have a firm hold of her, he runs inside to get help.

I carry Tess inside, then as the emergency staff gestures for me to place her on a bed, I press a quick kiss to her forehead. I’m careful as I set my entire heart down on a stark white sheet. It takes all my strength to let go of her so the doctors and nurses can get to work.

“What happened?” A nurse asks.

“I...”

When I can't focus long enough to form a coherent sentence, Andreas answers, "We found her like that in a restroom."

"Do you know if she has insurance?"

"We'll pay for everything," Andreas again answers for me.

"No matter what," I say, my voice strained, "give her the best care. A private room."

Only the best for my wife.

"What's your relation to the patient?"

"She's my wife. Theresa Stathoulis." My eyes don't leave Tess, and when the nurse tries to nudge me backward, I level her with a threatening glare. "I'm staying."

"Sir, we need you to wait in the waiting room. There will also be paperwork to fill out."

This time Andreas takes hold of my arm. "Come. We're in the way."

My eyes find the doctor. "You do every fucking scan and test on her. Money's not a problem. You give my wife the best care and fucking fix her."

I don't want them missing a thing because they took shortcuts.

Andreas pulls me out of the emergency ward, and I blindly follow him to a waiting room. I can't bring myself to take a seat, and instead, pace up and down.

"Find out what happened," I order my friend as I strip out of my jacket, throwing it on a chair.

“Already on it. James is looking at the security footage in the house.”

“I want the person taken to the office.” Rolling up my sleeves, I stop to lock eyes with Andreas. “Strung up and ready for me.”

He nods, then his phone rings. “James? Did you find anything?” Andreas listens, his eyebrows draw sharply down, then his gaze flicks to mine. “Are you sure? ... Fuck ... Take her to the office and hand her over to Elias and Craig ... yes, after that, you come here with your team. We need the security.”

When he cuts the call, I bark, “Who was it? Who fucking dared to hurt Tess?”

There’s confusion on Andreas’ face as he says, “Irene Drakatos.” He shakes his head. “But why?”

Irene. The fucking snake.

I knew there was something off about how Tess tensed up around her cousin. How she fucking trembled.

I fucking knew and should’ve taken Tess aside and found out why she was reacting that way.

“Tell Elias and Craig to string her up. No food. Only water to keep the bitch alive until I can deal with her.”

“You sure?” Andreas asks, questioning my order for the first time. “She’s family.”

“She’s no fucking family of mine. She gets treated the same as any enemy.”

Andreas nods then makes the call to Elias.

Knowing the fucker responsible for hurting Tess has been found, I walk out of the waiting room, only to be stopped by a nurse.

She holds out a stack of papers to me. “Can you please complete these?”

Needing to get this shit done and over with, I grab the papers from her hand. I take a pen from the breast pocket of my dress shirt and fill out Tess’ details. When I get to a section where it asks if she’s on any medication, I remember the pills scattered over the restroom’s floor.

Yanking my phone out of my pocket, I dial Helena’s number.

“Nikolas? What happened? Is Tess okay? Where are you?”

“Is Tess on any kind of medication?” I bark the question out.

“Ah... Xanax for anxiety.”

What the fuck?

I write the information down, hand the papers to the nurse, then pay attention to the call I’m on. “I’m at the hospital. They’re working on Tess. Irene attacked her.”

“What?” Helena gasps. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m fucking sure!”

“*Theè mou... Theè mou... Theè mou...*,” she repeatedly rambles *God*, shock evident in her tone.

“Why is Theresa on medication for anxiety? For how long?” I demand. I wasn’t even aware of this, and it doesn’t sit well with me.

There should be no secrets between us.

“After her father passed, Theresa had some problems dealing with the loss. It led to anxiety attacks. She also can’t handle confrontations, so the medication helps keep her calm.”

Jesus.

All the times I threatened Tess flash through my mind. How many of those fucking pills did she take because of me?

Every time she flinched away from me...

When she tensed up...

The fear in her eyes when she looked at me...

Guilt rears its ugly head.

“I’ll be in touch,” I mutter before ending the call.

Standing in the middle of a hall in the fucking hospital, I realize there’s a lot about Theresa I don’t know. She never opened up to me, which means the hope I had of her falling in love with me was... just fucking hope. During the past weeks, when I hopelessly lost my heart to her, she kept a firm grip on her own, refusing to let me in.

Fuck.

And I can’t blame her after the way I treated her.

I suck in a breath of air, an itchiness spreading beneath my skin.

I was the only one under the false illusion that we were happily married the past two weeks.

Chapter 32

Nikolas

The waiting is killing me. It's the worst form of torture I've ever endured.

Andreas is sipping on shitty hospital coffee. He glances at me, then murmurs, "I'm sure she'll be okay."

"She better be," I grumble, the need to take revenge and end Irene warring with my need to stay close to Tess. I just need to talk to the doctor and see Tess, then I'll deal with Irene.

When a doctor walks into the waiting room, I shoot up from the chair I was sitting in. "How's my wife?"

He gestures for me to follow him. "We have Mrs. Stathoulis comfortable in a private room. Even though she took a hard blow to the head, it doesn't look like there's any brain injury. The wounds will take some time to heal, though, and we'll only be sure she's okay once she regains consciousness."

I'm led into the private room, and seeing Tess between stark white sheets and an IV inserted in the back of her hand, my heart constricts painfully.

Jesus.

As always, the need to touch her overwhelms me. Coming to a stop next to the bed, I lean over Tess and press a tender kiss on her cheek. There's a bandage around her head, her skin clear of all the blood.

"There were blows to Mrs. Stathoulis's left side and lower back, but no bones were broken. The bruising will fade, but she might feel tender for a couple of days."

What?

My eyes flick to the doctor as he comes to stand on the other side of the bed. "Due to the nature of Mrs. Stathoulis' injuries, we had to call the police." He looks over the papers in his hands. "The scans showed multiple healed fractures. It looks like there's a history of abuse."

"What?" I manage to ask, struggling to process what I'm hearing. "What do you mean... a history?"

"There are healed fractures on her arm and ribs."

Just then, Helena rushes into the hospital room, and my dark glare falls on her. She comes to a stop near the doctor, glancing between us. "*Theè mou*, my baby. How's Theresa? Is she okay?" She looks at her daughter then takes a trembling breath. Pushing past the doctor, she brushes her fingers over Tess' bandaged forehead. "I can't believe Irene would do this."

"She didn't," I grind the words out because the last thing I need is the doctor getting the information and him passing it onto the police. When Helena's lips part, I snap, "Shut up."

The doctor glances between us, and I turn my attention back to him. "What else?"

“Besides the old fractures and the fresh wounds, Mrs. Stathoulis should make a full recovery with a lot of rest.”

Nodding, I say, “Thank you.” When he hangs around, I add, “You can leave.”

Looking uncomfortable, he starts to walk to the door. “Call the nurses if you need anything.”

As soon as he’s out of the room, Dad comes in.

“Shut the door,” I order, then I look at Helena. “The doctor said there’s a history of abuse. Broken bones.” I struggle to control the rage swamping me. “What the fuck happened to Theresa as a child?”

“N-nothing,” Helena stammers. “She was clumsy and once broke her arm. Another time she fell out of a tree and broke a couple of ribs. But that’s it.”

That’s not it.

The way Tess trembled when Irene was near tells me there’s more to the story. My gut screams at me to get to the bottom of this.

“Could Irene have hurt Tess?”

Helena frowns, clearly confused. “I thought you said it wasn’t her?”

“Did Irene have access to Tess? Was she there when Tess got hurt as a child?” I shout, making Helena flinch. She moves to Dad’s side as if he can protect her from me.

“Yes. We were living with Kostas, my brother-in-law, up until he passed away four years ago.”

My tone drops low, murder coating the words as I hiss, “And not once you thought your daughter was being abused?”

Helena starts to shake her head, her eyes jump between Tess and me, then she begins to pale. “*Theè mou...* I didn’t know. Theresa never said anything.”

“Because she was probably fucking terrified!”

“Nikolas,” Dad says my name in a way that’s meant to calm me, but I shake my head at him.

What did Theresa endure at the hands of Irene? How old was she? Eight?

“How old was Tess when her father died?”

“Eight,” Helena answers immediately.

She was subjected to that fucking evil bitch from age eight to seventeen.

Christé mou.

My heart.

Sinking down on a chair, I carefully pick up Tess’ hand and press it to my forehead as I focus on breathing.

I was a fucking asshole when we met. I threatened her, and even fucking enjoyed it. I relished in her fear.

Christé mou.

My guilt thickens until it threatens to suffocate me.

Tess’ tears. Her pleading with me to stop. It all becomes crystal clear in my mind.

She’ll never be able to love me, not after everything I did to her.

I fucking capitalized on Tess' weakness – the fear instilled by Irene.

“Nikolas?” Dad asks.

“Leave me alone with my wife,” I whisper, too consumed with my own guilt and need for revenge to be concerned with them.

The moment they leave and I'm finally alone with Tess, I lift my head, my eyes drifting over her pale face. “I'm so fucking sorry. Will you ever forgive me?”

Her eyes flutter, and when they open, confusion tightens her features, followed by pain. When she looks at me, and I see recognition in her irises, I move to sit on the side of the bed. Gripping her hand to my chest, I use my free one to gently brush over her cheek.

“Hey, baby, you scared the living hell out of me,” I whisper as if speaking too loud might cause her more pain.

Tess' tongue darts out to wet her lips, then she asks, “Where am I?”

“The hospital.”

“Oh...” Panic flares to life in her eyes. “Oh... right... I lost my balance. It was so stu—”

I shake my head hard, wondering how many times she had to lie while terrified for her life. “You don't have to lie to me. I know what happened.”

Tess' eyes widen. “You do?”

“Irene attacked you.” My fingers keep brushing over her cheek. “She'll pay for hurting you.”

Tess shakes her head, pain flickers over her face, then she sucks in a deep breath, her features crumbling beneath the weight of all the hell she was forced to endure.

Leaning forward, I brace my forearm beside her head and press a kiss to her trembling lips. “It will never happen again, *kardiá mou*. I promise.”

my heart

Tess begins to cry, and whether it’s because of relief or trauma, I’ll never know.

Careful not to hurt her, I wrap my arms around her. I support the back of her head, and when she buries her face against my neck, I hold *my wife* as she breaks down.

I realize just how strong Tess’ has been to face me, to cope with Irene tormenting her for fucking years.

“I’m so fucking sorry for the times I threatened you,” I whisper, my voice hoarse with regret. “I’m sorry for manhandling you and forcing you to obey me. I didn’t know about the anxiety or the abuse.”

Christ, am I sorry.

“Please forgive me.” I press a kiss to the bandage, the pungent smell of antiseptic fluid filling my nostrils. “If you can’t, I don’t know what I’ll fucking do.”

It takes minutes before Tess calms enough to whisper, “As long as you don’t do it again.”

“Never.” I pull back, carefully setting her head down on the pillow. “I promise.”

Her tongue darts nervously out. “How did you find out?”

“Security footage. I haven’t seen what happened yet.” I still keep a tight grip on her hand, unable to let go of her. “Tell me everything.”

“I was in the restroom...”

I shake my head. “No, Tess. Start at the beginning. When you were eight.”

Her forehead furrows, fresh tears jumping to her eyes. “Irene hated me. I don’t know why. From the moment we moved in with them, she just... hated me. I think some people are just born evil, and she was one of them.”

I wait patiently for her to continue, knowing this can’t be easy for her.

“S-she would slap me, shove me around... and she loved it.”

As Tess opens up about her past, and one horror story after the other spills over her lips, hatred, unlike anything I’ve felt before, fills my chest. My fucking heart breaks, thinking how vulnerable she was, and no one fucking helped her.

As much as I love Tess, I hate Irene.

When I hear voices outside the room, I press a finger to Tess’ lips to silence her. “Don’t say a word about Irene to the police. She’s mine to deal with. Stick with the story that you lost your balance.”

Just as the door opens and two police officers come into the room, Tess nods.

There’s no place for law enforcement when it comes to the mafia. We deal with our own.

Always have. Always will.

Chapter 33

Tess

The first day is a confusing mess. I sleep more than I'm awake.

After telling the police it was my fault, Nikolas dealt with them.

He hasn't left my side. Unless it's to use the restroom, he's at my bedside, watching over me like an avenging angel.

The scruff on his jaw is dark, thickening by the hour. Today he looks thirty-six, the past forty-eight hours taking their toll on him.

"You need to get some rest," I say, wiggling my fingers in his tight grip. "And I need some blood circulation in my hand."

He lets go, only to place his hand on my thigh. Looking at me, he blinks a couple of times, then asks, "Why didn't you tell me about Irene?"

I shrug, the old familiar fear slithering through my veins. "It was what it was."

"Theresa." His tone is tight and not negotiable. "Why didn't you tell me about the Xanax? Why did you keep so many secrets from me?"

I shrug again. "I didn't think you needed to know."

Nikolas shakes his head, his features tightening with something akin to heartache. "How could you think that? I need to know everything about you, Theresa." Moving his hand up to my stomach, his expression turns tender. "It's time you realize you're the most important thing in my life."

My heart kicks in my chest then sets off at a fast pace.

His other hand brushes softly over the bandages around my head. "I married you because I fell in love with you."

Holy shit. Really?

With my eyes wide on Nikolas, I don't know what to say. Warmth spreads through my chest as I stare at the man who used to make my life hell.

"I love you," he admits again, then he chuckles, giving me an incredulous look. "One minute, I still wanted to strangle your pretty little neck, and the next," he shakes his head, "I found myself in uncharted waters. Madly, deeply, obsessively in love with you."

I'm struggling to process his confession. "Why?"

"Why did I fall in love with you?" Nikolas gets up and moves to sit on the side of the bed. Resting a hand beside my hip, he leans closer. "From the moment we met, you had a hold on me I couldn't shake. And now that I know how much it must've taken for you to stand your ground against me, Christ, it just makes me love you even more. You're so fucking brave and strong, Tess."

My insecurities creep in. After the blow Irene dealt me, I haven't been able to push them back into the dark hole.

“But...” I suck in a breath of air, lowering my eyes from his, “Why do you find me physically attractive?” I feel stupid for asking the question, but I desperately need to hear his answer.

The corner of Nikolas’ mouth lifts in a hot smirk. “For one, your sexy-as-fuck, pornstar-worthy ass. It’s my undoing.” His teeth tug at his bottom lip, and my ovaries threaten to spontaneously combust. “You’re fucking exquisite, Theresa. There’s not an inch of you that doesn’t do it for me.”

Seeing the desire in his eyes, hearing the heat in his voice acts as a soothing balm to my bruised soul.

The door opens, and Athina comes in, carrying an overnight bag. “Hi.” She smiles at her brother before looking at me. “How do you feel?”

“Better.” I start to sit up, and it has Nikolas pulling me into a sitting position. He rests me against his chest, fluffs out and arranges my pillows, then carefully leans me back.

This man.

He’s been so careful and loving, it’s blown my mind.

“I brought you some of your own clothes,” Athina says, then gesturing to the restroom, she asks, “Want me to help you shower and change?”

“I’ll do it,” Nikolas immediately jumps up. He pushes his arms beneath me, then I have to grab hold of his neck as he lifts me off to bed and to his chest – princess style.

I’m carried into the restroom and placed down on the toilet. Unable to not smile, I watch as Nikolas opens the faucets then goes to get the bag from a grinning Athina.

“I’ll get some coffee,” she says before leaving the room.

Nikolas comes into the restroom, and shutting the door behind him, he sets the bag down.

I can’t stop staring at him as he opens the bag, removing my personal belongings. I notice Athina packed some of his clothes as well.

The head of the mafia, the most feared man I know, is currently fussing over me.

“Careful,” I say, my smile widening, “you’ll ruin your badass reputation if someone had to see you fussing over me like this.”

Nikolas sets my brush and toiletry bag on the counter then turns to look at me. “I don’t give a fuck what people think. I’ll make a fucking fuss over my wife whenever I want to.”

My heart. It melts into a pile of goo at my feet.

This is a side of Nikolas people hardly ever see. *Loving.*

I stare at him until he asks, “What’s that look for?”

Slowly, I shake my head. “Just getting to know my husband.”

His mouth curves up, and leaning down, he presses a kiss to my mouth. “Let’s get you out of the hospital gown,” he mutters as he pulls back.

Instantly I feel self-conscious, which is stupid, seeing as I’ve been naked in front of Nikolas many times before. I swallow past my insecurities and allow him to help me get the gown off.

When I'm naked, I look everywhere but at Nikolas. He helps me stand, then his fingers whisper over my bruised side. "Does it hurt?"

I shake my head, keeping my eyes on his shirt, which disappears when he strips it off. When he's naked, he maneuvers me into the shower and turns the showerhead, so the spray hits my body and not the bandage around my head.

I watch as he quirts some shower gel onto my loofah, then he proceeds to wash every inch of me.

When he reaches my stomach, I instinctively push his hand away. My face flames up with embarrassment.

Nikolas' eyes snap to my face, then he frowns, "What's wrong?"

I shake my head, stepping back until I'm pressed against the tiles. "I'm... it's stupid."

Moving closer, he lifts a hand to my chin, nudging my face up. "What's stupid?"

"I'm just self-conscious," I admit, finding it easier to talk to him since I laid my darkest demons at his feet yesterday.

A frown darkens his forehead. "About?"

"My body."

He glances down, then says, "The bruising on your ribs will fade."

"It's not that." I wet my lips, then admit, "I'm not the skinniest."

Nikolas' head snaps back, and instantly anger tightens his features. "Where the fuck is this coming from?" Then he

realizes something. “Is this Irene’s doing? Did she say something about your body?”

I nod, feeling miserable that I’m even letting it get to me.

Nikolas takes a step back from me. “Eyes on my cock, Tess. I want you to see what the sight of your body does to me.”

My gaze lowers, and I watch as he grows hard until his manhood juts toward me, looking all angry and hungry, and... damn, I love the sight of my man hard for me.

Nikolas closes the distance between us until his hard length presses against my stomach. Pre-cum beads on the head, making me wish I wasn’t injured.

“If you weren’t in the fucking hospital with a head injury, I’d fuck you until all the shit that evil bitch spewed were erased from your mind.” He wraps an arm around me, his hand gripping my left asscheek. “Your body is a masterpiece. It fucking drives me insane. Understand?”

My eyes lock with his. “Yes.”

“Say it, Theresa!”

“My body is a masterpiece.”

“And?” he questions me with a raised eyebrow.

“It fucking drives you insane.”

A satisfied smile spreads over his face. “It’s hot hearing you curse.”

“Yeah?” I whisper as I press closer to him. “I want you to fuck me.”

“Christ, baby, wish I could.” His mouth nips at mine.
“Fuck, I wish I could.” Reluctantly, he pulls away from me.
“Let’s get out before I forget you were beaten to within an inch
of your life.”

With a disgruntled look on my face, I do as he says.

The bruises better heal fast.

Chapter 34

Nikolas

Tess had to spend two fucking long days in the hospital, but I finally get to take her home.

With how vulnerable Tess has been since the attack, I've been reduced to a protective and possessive fucking pitbull. I can't stop hovering around her and bark at anyone who dares to come near her.

Ushering her into the penthouse, I keep an arm around her as I lead her up the stairs and straight to bed. I throw the covers back, then order, "Shoes off and get in."

"I'm tired of lying down," she complains.

"Tolerate me for one more day," I say. Once she's comfortably leaning back against the pillows, I set the overnight bag down.

I've been putting off dealing with Irene, needing to first take care of Tess. But now that she's home, we have to talk about what will happen.

Sitting down on the side of the bed, I lift a hand and tuck some of her hair behind her ear, then admit, "I'm glad you're home."

Tess' mouth curves up. "Me too." Reaching for my hand, she links our fingers. "You probably have to get back to

work.”

“Yes.” I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I have to deal with Irene.”

Her eyes widen. “By deal, you mean...?”

Our eyes lock. “I’m going to kill her.”

Tess’ lips part, her face going slack with shock. “W-what?”

“It’s the way of the mafia, Theresa. I can’t let someone get away with hurting you,” I spell it out for her. “You’re my only weakness, and if I don’t protect you...” I shake my head hard. “If someone touches you, they die. It doesn’t matter who they are.”

“But... but,” Tess struggles to process what I’m saying. “She’s a woman.”

“So?” I frown, not understanding what she’s getting at.

“You can’t kill a woman.”

My frown darkens. “Yes, I can, and I will.” Needing Tess to understand, I explain, “The sex of our enemies doesn’t matter. If someone attacks us, there’s only death as repayment. It’s how things are done.” I pull my hand free from hers, then frame her face. “No one fucking hurts my wife and lives. No one. Do you understand?”

Tess nods in my hands.

“That woman hurt you, baby. She could’ve killed you.” I shake my head again. “I can’t let her live.”

Tess nods again, then the strength that’s been missing since the attack begins to shine in her eyes. “I understand.”

“I’d expect you to do the same for me,” I tell her. “If I’m taken out, it’s up to you to make the person pay.”

Her lips part, and heartache bleeds over her beautiful face. “Don’t say that. Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

It doesn’t escape my attention that Tess isn’t opposed to avenging my death. However, it hurts her to think of losing me.

That’s good.

Fuck.

Leaning forward, I take her mouth. I kiss her with every ounce of my love, my wild passion – my heart and fucking soul. I claim the emotions she’s starting to feel for me, wanting them to grow until they’re as overpowering as mine are for her.

Only when she moans, and I get to breathe the sound in, do I break the kiss. Pressing my forehead to hers, I’m breathless as I say, “It’s you and me from here on out. Together we’ll rule, and together we’ll fall.”

Her eyes brim with tears. “We’ll have to make sure we never fall.”

“That’s my girl.” I brush the pad of my thumb over her bottom lip then lock eyes with her. “I have to deal with Irene, and you need to be there.”

“Why?” I can see she doesn’t like the idea one bit.

“Because you’re a mafia queen, Theresa. Someone fucked with you. You need to take a stand of power and show our enemies you’re not to be fucked with.” Wanting to offer her

some comfort, I add, “You won’t be the one pulling the trigger, but you need to be there. My men have to see you take your rightful place beside me so they’ll respect you.”

Her shoulders sag. “Okay.”

“And you need to learn how to fight and handle a gun.” Getting up from the bed, I add, “If I weren’t so busy, I’d take you to St. Monarch’s in Switzerland. That’s the best place for you to learn.”

Tess scrunches her nose, but interest flickers in her eyes. “There’s an actual place where you learn how to fight and shoot guns?”

At some point, I need to tell Tess that if anything bad happens, she needs to go to St. Monarch’s. It’s the only patch of earth on the goddamn planet that’s neutral ground for people like us. But not today. I’ll tell her once she’s healed.

“Amongst other things,” I answer vaguely because St. Monarch’s offers everything from training to the best safety money can buy. Leaning down, I give my wife another kiss. “Get some rest while I fix you something to eat.”

Her eyebrows dart up. “You’re going to make food... for me?”

Letting out a chuckle, I walk to the doorway. “Sleep, *kardiá mou*. I’ll wake you when it’s time to eat.”

Heading downstairs, I roll my sleeves up, determined to feed my wife. While throwing a Greek salad together, I put my phone on speaker as I dial Andreas’ number.

“You back home?” he asks the instant he answers.

“Yes. Tess is in bed. Update me with what’s happening.”

“We’ve identified one of the people going in and out of the house as Manno’s nephew. I have men tailing him. If we can get him, Manno might crawl out of the hole.”

“That’s good,” I mutter as I toss a couple of black olives into the bowl.

“What are we going to do about Irene?”

“Nothing yet. I’ll be in tomorrow to deal with her.”

“Still only on a water diet?”

“Yes, I just need her alive enough to know she’s going to die when I put a gun to her head.”

What else goes in a salad?

“The other men coming from Athens will land tomorrow.”

“How many?” Shit, where’s the feta cheese? I dig around in the fridge, then sigh when I can’t find any.

“Ten. What’s the sigh for?”

“I’m trying to make a salad. We’re out of feta,” I inform my friend.

Instantly laughter bursts over the line. “You’re making a salad? Are you shitting me right now?”

“Fuck off,” I grumble. “Bring me some feta and fresh bread.”

“Now I’m doing your grocery shopping?”

“Unless you want to lose your job, you are.”

Again Andreas chuckles. “Only if I can stay for lunch. It’s not every day I’ll get to see you in the kitchen.”

“Do you want to die?” I ask, and letting out a huff, I shut the fridge’s door.

“No, but food poisoning is worth the risk.” The fucker ends the call before I can say another word.

While waiting for Andreas, I get busy slicing up a tomato.

I’m worried the salad’s going to wilt by the time Andreas finally waltzes into the penthouse. He sets the paper bag down, and removing the french loaf from it, he side-eyes the salad. “Wow, miracles do happen.”

I grab the knife and wave it in front of his face. “Keep talking shit.”

I take the feta cheese out of the bag and add some to the salad. When I’m done, I inspect my handy work. “That’s everything, right?”

“Fuck if I know.” Andreas comes to stand next to me, already chewing on a slice of bread. “Yeah, looks right.”

When I turn to the stairs, it’s to see Tess sitting on the bottom one, a happy smile on her face from watching us.

Christ, I’ve missed that smile.

“Are you spying on us?” I ask as I walk closer.

“Yep, and I have to admit, that’s the best entertainment I’ve had in a long time.” She grins at me until I try to pick her up. Swatting my hands away, she scowls, “I can walk. Stop carrying me everywhere.”

“Oooh, the boss has spoken. You better listen, Nikolas,”
Andreas taunts me.

While Tess walks to the dining room table, I point at her.
“She can get away with murder,” I point at my friend, “but
you’re on thin ice. Keep pushing your luck.”

He holds his hands up in the universal gesture for
surrender.

Taking the butter from the fridge, I set it on the counter
and quickly cut a couple of slices off the french loaf. Placing
everything on a serving tray, walk around the counter.

Andreas lets out a snort which has me grabbing a slice and
throwing it at him. The fucker catches it and proceeds to take a
huge bite.

“Make yourself useful and bring three glasses of water to
the table,” I grumble, even though there’s no threat in my tone.
I’m too fucking happy Tess is home to really get upset.

I carry the salad and bread to the table, then wonder what’s
missing.

“The oil, salt, and oregano,” Tess reminds me, her eyes
sparkling with life.

“You heard Tess,” I tell Andreas while I take a seat at the
head of the table.

Once Andreas places the condiments and glasses of water
down, he takes a seat to my left.

I load Tess’ plate with salad, then butter two slices of
bread for her. As thanks, she gives me a grin. “I could get used
to this.”

Nodding to her plate, I say, “Eat. Everything.”

Since Tess told me about her self-esteem issues, I’ve been trying to figure out how I’m going to reverse the damage Irene has done.

I want my wife comfortable in the skin I love so much. Also, I’d lose my fucking shit if she suddenly decides she wants to lose weight.

I’ll just have to make sure she eats and keep working to build up her confidence again.

“Let’s pray he doesn’t give us food poisoning.” Andreas winks at Tess.

I slap him upside the head, then give him a glare.

Gesturing to me, Andreas looks at Tess with wide eyes. “You see this? The abuse I have to deal with?”

My blood turns to ice in my veins, and my eyes snap to Tess. Instead of Andreas’ stupid comment triggering her, she smiles as she nods at him, then she catches me staring and quickly start shaking her head. “Nope. Sorry. Didn’t see a thing.”

You okay?

Tess reaches for my arm, giving it a comforting squeeze. “Can’t wait to dig in. Thank you for making lunch for us.”

“For you.” I scowl at Andreas, who has a mouth full of salad and bread. “He invited himself.”

Chapter 35

Tess

Since the attack, Nikolas has been so attentive it leaves my mind blown half the time.

I've realized something significant. Where Nikolas was merciless when we first met, he's now loving and gentle. Once Nikolas loves, he becomes a different person.

And he loves me. It's clear as day in every affectionate look, every tender touch, every soulful kiss.

There's no doubt in my mind I'm the most important thing to him, and it helps build my confidence back up. I might be chubby or even fat to some, but to Nikolas, I'm perfect. I feel desired when his eyes burn on me. I feel like I'm enough – *woman enough* – for him.

Without even trying, he's undoing the damage done by Irene, and it's only been three days.

Nikolas makes me stronger.

So much stronger.

Even though the attack was horrible and traumatizing, I feel closer to Nikolas since it happened. *Silver linings*.

God, who would've thought the man who terrified me would become the one to save me from my demons, to love

me like I've never been loved before.

I'm falling for him. My husband. He might've once been my enemy, but now he's my lover.

Wow. Like I said, mind blown.

Wanting to look the part of a mafia queen, I'm wearing a sleek tailored jacket and pants suit, with a silk camisole and black heels to complete the look. I have my hair in a soft braid, still careful with the cuts after the bandage was removed this morning.

My makeup gives me a fresh and healthy glow, which I need because my nerves are shot to hell from what lies ahead for today. Nikolas will kill Irene, and I'll have a front-row seat.

Part of me wants to hide from the dark side of the mafia, but I know that's not possible. I need to take my place by Nikolas' side and be the queen he needs.

Still, I've never seen anyone die before. I'm not sure I'm ready or if I'll ever be prepared for something like that.

It's Irene. She's made your life a living hell.

Like Nikolas pointed out, she could've killed you.

She wouldn't hesitate if the tables were turned.

Our enemies don't deserve second chances.

"Ready?" Nikolas asks as he comes to stand behind me. Just like before we left for the party that turned into a nightmare, he places his hands on my hips, and leaning in, presses a kiss to the side of my neck.

“No, but it has to be done,” I answer honestly. I’m done hiding things from Nikolas. He’s proven to me that my secrets and feelings are safe with him.

I turn around, and his hands instantly move to my bottom. *The man really has a thing for my butt.*

His eyes drift lovingly over my face, giving me the courage I need to get through today, then he whispers, “Talk to me.”

“I’ve never seen anyone die before,” I admit. “I’m not sure... whether I can handle it.”

He nods, understanding warming his dark brown irises. “The first time isn’t easy. But with the life we live, it’s necessary. If we’re under attack, I need to know you won’t freeze or become hysterical, but stand your ground next to me.”

I nod. “I understand.”

This is the life I chose when I married Nikolas. I knew what it entailed, and trying to back out now is not an option.

Especially now that I’m falling in love with him.

“I know it will be hard for you to face Irene, but I’ll be by your side every step of the way. Nothing can touch you.” It sounds like a vow.

Needing to be closer to him, I lean into him, resting my cheek against his chest and wrapping my arms around his waist.

Nikolas presses a kiss to my hair. “You’re so fucking strong, Theresa. I know you have it in you to face her. Make

her pay for what she's done."

I nod, then tilt my head back. Looking up at the head of the Greek mafia, I know I'll have to become as merciless as he is to survive our enemies.

"You'll teach me?" My tongue darts out to nervously wet my lips. "How to become the queen you need me to be."

The corner of Nikolas' mouth lifts, his fingers lovingly tucking some loose strands behind my ear. "You're already the queen I need, *kardiá mou*." my heart

His head lowers, and he claims my mouth in the way only he can – hot, consuming, and with a hunger so profound, I feel it in my bones.

This man who rules the Greek mafia, who's feared by all, loves me. *Me*. God, I don't know what I did to make him fall for me, but I'm so damn thankful.

When Nikolas ends the kiss, we're both breathless, intense desire darkening his gaze. "Christ, you need to heal faster," he mutters as he pulls away from me. Taking my hand, he links our fingers and leads me out of the walk-in closet.

Time to face my enemy.

Shit.

Be strong, Tess.

Just like every other time we go out, Nikolas stays by my side. I keep glancing at him, noticing how his gaze scans every shadow and person, fully on guard.

His features settle into the grim lines I used to fear as his role of husband takes a back seat to him being the head of the

mafia.

Once we're in the SUV, Nikolas straps me in, the action now warming my heart. He holds my hand, his thumb brushing softly over my skin, and again I fall a little deeper in love.

When we stop at the front of an impressive skyscraper, I frown. I expected a warehouse or building in the rough part of town.

"This is where you work?" I ask, my eyes dancing over all the steel and glass.

"Yes."

I'm helped out of the car even though I can manage on my own. I've given up telling Nikolas otherwise. The man never listens and does only what he wants.

As we walk into the office building, I feel power radiating from Nikolas, his steps confident and fearless.

Borrowing some of his strength, I lift my chin, forcing my face to become expressionless.

You can do this.

You're Nikolas Stathoulis' wife.

You have to do this.

We ride the elevator up to the sixth floor, and I'm led down a hallway. Two men guard a door, and just the sight of them makes my heartbeat speed up, and my mouth dries out.

Nikolas tugs me to a stop, and turning me to face him, his hands frame the sides of my head. His expression doesn't

soften as he looks down at me. I see the rage, his craving for blood, the ruthless devil.

“She’s nothing,” he growls, his voice laced with vengeance and brutality. When I nod in his hold, he continues, “You’re my queen, Theresa. Those who are against us die.”

I nod again.

“No mercy.”

“Okay,” I whisper, my hands fisting at my sides.

Nikolas stares me down until there’s an echo of the fear I used to feel for him, but instead of cowering, I lift my chin higher. My tone is unforgiving when I say, “I’m ready.”

The corner of his mouth twitches, then we’re moving again. One of the guards opens the door, and nothing could prepare me for what I find inside.

Chapter 36

Tess

It's a big room, almost the size of our living room. There are buckets of water, and a table lined with all kinds of knives and pliers. There are also crates... are those jumper cables attached to a battery?

Horror threatens to ripple through me at the sight of all the equipment that's clearly here for torture.

Then my gaze locks on Irene, where she has a noose around her neck, her toes barely perched on a crate.

HOLY SHIT.

God.

I come to a dead stop, taking in her worn state. Her hair's no longer styled but hangs disheveled in her face. Her skin's pale, almost gray, her lips cracked. The orange satin dress she wore to the party is stained with... God, I don't want to know.

She looks like shit.

Her eyes lift, and the second they lock on me, she starts to cry. "Theresa, help! You have to help me."

Nikolas lets go of my hand, and I watch as he slowly stalks around Irene, who starts to squirm with fear. He looks like a predator stalking his prey.

Just like Irene looked whenever she hurt me.

I lift my chin higher, reminding myself of the monster she is.

She laughed while I bled.

She relished in my pain when she broke my bones.

When I cried for my dad, mourning his death, she was there to make it a million times worse.

When I fell in love for the first time, Irene taunted me until I believed I'd never be good enough for anyone.

Every time I tried to build myself up, she would slam me back down. She shattered me every chance she got.

My hatred flares up, suffocating the life out of the fear I always felt for her.

I take a step closer and let my gaze drift over Irene. I feel Nikolas' power become a second heartbeat in my chest.

"You tortured me." My voice is low and deadly as my husband comes to stand next to me. It's only then I realize how stupid Irene is. She actually believed she could get away with hurting Nikolas Stathoulis' wife.

Insane.

Nikolas pulls a gun from behind his back and trains it on Irene. His fingers are firm around the weapon, his hold steady.

She instantly starts to sob, her always smug and hateful face crumbling.

Where are the sneers now? Where's the evil gleam I used to see before pain followed?

“Untie her,” I order.

One of the guards looks at Nikolas to see if he should obey, and it has me snapping, “I said untie her!”

He moves quickly, another guard joining in to help him.

“God,” Irene sighs with relief as the noose is removed from her neck and she’s helped off the crate.

“Kneel,” I demand. “Kneel and admit what you did to me.”

“What?” she blinks at me, clearly caught off guard.

“Kneel.” My tone is low and deadly, just like I’ve heard Nikolas’ voice many times before.

Hesitantly, she lowers to her knees, and when she looks up at me, I remind her, “Admit what you did.”

“I-I hurt you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t –”

Nikolas takes the safety off his gun, and it has Irene changing her mind about lying. “I... it made me feel powerful.”

I just stare at her, thinking I went through so much hell so she could feel better about herself.

Bitch.

Rage and hatred swirl in my chest, making me crave vengeance for the first time in my life. “Beg me to spare you.”

“Please, There –”

Shaking my head, I begin to smirk.

“I’m so sorry. Please don’t do this. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

I turn my head, looking at Nikolas, then nod.

Without hesitation, the shot rings in the air, making me jerk. There’s a sharp wounded sound from Irene.

Not sparing her another glance, I turn and walk out of the room. More shots sound up, and I don’t know how many are in a clip, but it’s clear Nikolas is emptying his gun.

It’s done.

It’s over.

Intense relief wars with the guilt rearing up.

It had to be done.

I find an empty office, and digging in my handbag, I search for the bottle of Xanax. I struggle to open it as my breaths begin to speed up. Suddenly Nikolas appears in front of me, and taking the bottle from me, he shakes a pill out onto his palm. He offers it to me, but then I look up. Our eyes lock, and... I find strength in him.

Slowly, my breaths return to normal, my heartbeat finding its regular pace.

I keep eye contact with him until calmness washes through me, then I whisper, “I don’t need it.”

He’s so strong, not even my anxiety stands a chance against him.

Nikolas’ mouth curves into a smile, then his body hits mine. His lips take mine in a punishing kiss as I’m pushed back until I’m pressed against one of the walls.

Too soon, he frees my mouth, only to drop to his knees in front of me. Nikolas undoes my belt and strips my pants and panties down my legs. I barely manage to step out of the clothes, my heels still on, when he hauls my left leg over his shoulder, and his mouth finds my clit.

Oh, God.

I instantly reach for his hair, and gripping fistfuls, I hold on for dear life as he goes down on me. His tongue is punishing, his teeth brutal. He sucks so hard, I swear I see stars as my chin drops to my chest, my lips parting on moans and needy whimpers.

Then Nikolas looks up, his eyes burning with the intensity of his love and desire for me. I watch as he licks, bites, and sucks my clit until I'm swollen and aching for my release.

It's so hot and downright dirty. A turn-on like I've never felt before.

"Make me come," I try to demand, but every word is drowned in lust, and there's zero authority.

He pushes his middle finger inside me, and when my hips start to swivel, he adds another finger. I clench around him, trying to suck his fingers deeper, and it makes him groan against my sensitive clit. I feel the vibrations all the way to my womb and move faster against his mouth and hand.

"Nikolas... God... yes," I moan, my body already tensing with the impending release just out of my reach. "Yes, Nikolas... Yes." I curl forward, my calf and foot pressing against his shoulder and back to hold him to me, my fingers

digging harder in his hair, my lips forming a silent O. “Oh God, yes.”

Nikolas bites down on my clit, his fingers pumping mercilessly in and out of me.

I’m going to pass out if I don’t come soon. “Please,” I beg, the need brimming in the single word.

Instead of making me come, Nikolas lets go of my clit, pulls his fingers out, and rises to his full height.

“Noooo,” I groan, ready to force him back down so he can finish what he started.

Then he unbuckles his belt, the zipper goes down, and he frees his impressive length. He grabs hold of my butt, and I’m lifted against his body. He pins me to the wall, and eye to eye, and breathless as hell, he surges into me on one long and unforgiving thrust while I’m still trying to wrap my legs around his waist.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

I explode, my vision fading to black, my head spinning.

“That’s it, baby,” he groans. “Take every inch of me.”

He slams into me, deeper and harder, making my orgasm spiral out of control until I can only whimper from the all-consuming intensity of my release.

Nikolas presses his mouth to mine, breathing in my whimpers as they turn to sobs. His hips move at a relentless pace, his hard length creating a second heartbeat in my cervix and abdomen.

I feel every large inch of him, stretching me, stroking me, claiming me.

So good. Oh, God, so good.

I only manage to come down from the impossible high, all the strength flowing from my body, when Nikolas buries himself as deep as he can and shudders against me.

His arms form steel bands around me, and I'm crushed to his chest as he empties himself inside me. He lowers his head to the crook of my neck and takes greedy breaths of me.

In Nikolas' arms, with him still buried deep inside me, I realize one thing – Nikolas isn't the most powerful person any longer.

I am.

Chapter 37

Nikolas

Back at work, I have a shit ton of work to catch up on. I'm checking a shipment of Heckler & Koch P30L handguns and Heckler & Koch MP5K submachine guns that came in from Luca. All the weapons are hidden in aircon units.

"That's everything, right?" I ask Andreas when we're done working our way through the shipment.

"Yeah."

"Have the men take the aircon units to a scrapyard. They can keep the money they make off the metal."

"Will do." Andreas walks over to the men, already waiting for further instructions.

Taking my phone out of my pocket, I dial Luca's number as I head back into the building.

"I trust everything is in order?" he answers.

"Yes. Thank you." I stop by an elevator. "I know it's short notice, but can you put an order of incendiary grenades together for me?"

"When do you need it, and how many?"

"As many as you can get your hands on, as soon as possible," I state, pressing the button for the elevator.

Luca lets out a chuckle. “Viktor says he’s joining in the fun. When will the attack go down?”

“Probably next week.” The doors ping open, but unable to end the call, I let them slide shut again.

“Manno’s fucked with both you and Liam. We’ll all be there to back you. Give us the exact date and time.”

“I’ll let you know before the end of the day.”

“Good. I’ll have the shipment leave first thing tomorrow.”

“Thank you.” When I joined the Priesthood, it was to keep the peace, but with the other men backing me in this war, it’s solidifying the bond between us.

Manno’s as good as dead.

As I end the call, it’s to see Grant standing to my left. Frowning at him, I ask, “Why aren’t you guarding Tess?”

With a thumb over his shoulder, he gestures to the entrance. “She’s here.”

My eyebrow lifts, and just then, Tess walks into the building with James next to her and the other guards flanking her.

Today she’s wearing her usual jeans and t-shirt, looking like a carefree student again.

It’s been a week since I killed Irene, and instead of crumbling, Tess has dealt with what happened like a true queen.

My eyes flick to Grant. “Then you should be by her fucking side.” I’m going to fire his ass, and by fire, I mean kill.

I walk toward Tess, who grins at me. She holds up a container. “I’m on my way to school and thought I’d bring you lunch.”

A smile spreads across my face, and when she’s in reaching distance, I take hold of her hip and tug her against me. Lowering my head, I press a kiss to her lips, then tease her, “Yeah? Look at you being the perfect wife.”

Her gaze turns seductive, making my cock twitch. “My man needs his strength...” she winks at me, “for later.”

I let out a chuckle as I take the container from her. “What do you have planned for later?”

Tess tugs her bottom lip between her teeth, her eyes filling with desire, and fuck if I don’t harden at the speed of light. “You’ll see. Don’t keep me waiting in bed.” Then the temptress turns around and gives me a mouthwatering view of her sexy ass as she walks out of the building.

“Christ, she’ll be the end of me,” I mutter as I turn to head back to the elevators. Noticing Grant hanging around like a fucking fly, I bark, “Why the fuck are you still here?”

He darts away, running after Tess.

“Who are you yelling at?” Andreas asks, giving me a curious look.

“Fucking Grant. Put someone else in his place. The fucker will get Tess killed.”

“On it.”

Finally, I get to head up to my office. It’s on the top floor with a scenic view of the city. I had it decorated, much the

same as the penthouse, all chrome and dark gray furnishings.

I take a seat at my desk, and setting the container down, I peel the lid off. Andreas leans over the desk, way too eager to see what I'm having for lunch, then he tilts his head, laughter threatening to explode from him. "Is that...?"

"Fuck off," I mutter, quickly closing the lid over the container. "Go do your work."

I wait for my friend to leave my office, his chuckling making me smile, before I open the container again.

Looking down at the little note tucked in between two sandwiches that have been cut in circles and a banana forming a smiley face, I shake my head.

Cute.

I take the note out and fold it open.

I'm falling in love with you.

Please don't break my heart.

xxx

Tess.

The smile drops from my face, my heartbeat erupting in a happy thumping against my ribs.

Christ, finally!

Unadulterated elation washes through me, making me feel fucking emotional.

I read the words over and over until every swirl and curve of her handwriting is imprinted in my mind.

Never have words meant more to me than these.

Tess is falling in love with me. Finally.

Grinning like an idiot who just won the jackpot, I pick up one of the sandwiches and bite into it. The bread is fresh, the ham and cheese a perfect blend to hit the empty spot in my stomach.

Fuck, I can get used to this.

Pulling my phone out, I dial my wife's number.

"Hi," her bubbly voice comes over the line. "Enjoying your lunch?"

"I am," I swallow, then look at the note again. "I read your note."

"And?" I hear endless laughter in the single word, and it warms my chest.

"I want to hear you say it," I demand.

There's a moment where Tess remains silent, and it makes me start to worry.

"I'm falling in love with you, Nikolas." I hear her emotions for me trembling in her voice. "Please don't break my heart."

"I won't," I vow. "I'll never break the one thing that means the most to me."

"Wow, this is getting really emotional," Tess mutters. I hear her sniff. "Just got to school. I need to go in, or I'll be late."

"Say it again," I order before I'll let her go.

"I'm in love with you, Nikolas," she obeys.

I groan, hating that she's on the other side of the city. "It's so fucking good to finally hear those words."

"*Zoi mou*, I need to go," she reminds me.

My life.

It's on the tip of my tongue to order her to skip class and meet me at home, but knowing she needs to work on her project, I reluctantly say, "Be safe. I'll see you at home."

"Bye."

The call ends, and I slump back in my chair, not at all in the mood to work.

Andreas walks into my office, and not wanting him to get his hands on the rest of my lunch, I close the container and place it in my drawer.

"Where do you want me to put Grant?"

"Have him stationed with Elias and Craig. They'll get him back in line."

The fucker was growing too comfortable in his position as Tess' guard, and I can't have that.

With that taken care of, I turn my attention to my emails. "When do you think would be best to attack?" I ask Andreas before he can leave.

He takes a seat across from me. "A Sunday. People see it as a day of peace and rest. I think we'll catch them off guard."

Impressed by my friend, I nod. "We're attacking next Sunday."

Chapter 38

Tess

Walking into the studio where the bar scene will be recorded, I smile at Jake and Annette.

It's time.

I set my bag down and walk to where they're setting up the camera gear.

"I have something to tell you," I say.

"Oh, hopefully, it's good news," Annette mentions as she turns her attention to me.

It takes Jake a little longer to glance in my direction.

"I got married."

Jake does a double-take, his head snapping so fast to me he almost risks spraining his neck.

Annette's mouth drops open, then she mutters, "You're kidding, right?"

I hold out my left hand so they can see the ring, that I've grown quite attached to, sparkling on my finger.

"You're not kidding?" Annette's eyes widen, then she grabs my hand, and I'm yanked closer. "Holy shit! Nice diamond, but you're only twenty-one. Who the hell did you marry? When did all of this go down?"

Jake points to Annette, a dark frown on his face. “What she said.”

I shrug, pulling my hand free from her tight grip. “Ah... it happened a month ago.”

“What?” Annette shrieks. “And you’re only telling us now?”

I shrug again. “I wanted to get used to it before telling you.” My tongue darts nervously over my lips, then I remember who I am. My chin lifts. “I married Nikolas.”

Again shock ripples over their faces. “You did what?” Annette mutters. “Your step-brother? Are we talking about the Nikolas you hate?”

A smile spreads over my face. “Hated. Past tense. And don’t call him my step-brother.”

“Come to think of it...” Annette taps a finger against her chin as if she’s trying to recall something, “you haven’t complained about him for a while.”

“He’s changed,” I stand up for Nikolas. “When he’s with me, he’s a different person now.”

“So you seriously married a man you only knew a couple of months, but you couldn’t go on a date with me?” Jake finally adds his thoughts while shaking his head at me. “Wow, you work quick.”

My eyes snap to him. “Stop being sour, Jake. It makes you look pathetic.” Only after the words are out do I realize what I said. It’s on the tip of my tongue to apologize, but I swallow the urge, refusing to bend the knee.

“Wait,” Annette jumps in before things can turn ugly, then she levels me with a pointed look. “You said he was married with three kids.”

A smile spreads over my face. “I lied. Sorry.” Shrugging, I add, “He’s married now.”

She gives me a playful glare. “Kept the hot one for yourself. I see what you did there.”

“Let’s get to work,” Jake mutters, clearly upset by the news and what I said.

There’s an uncomfortable tension in the air while we set up and shoot the scene, but I grin and bear it, actually not caring about what Jake thinks. Six months from now he won’t even be a part of my life anymore, so his opinion doesn’t matter.

When we’re finally done, I quickly help pack up then make a beeline for a door. Reaching James at the end of the hall, I let out a relieved sigh.

“That bad?” he asks, his eyes darting over my head and down the hallway. Over the past month, James has become more than just my bodyguard. Now he’s a friend who’s come to mean a lot to me.

“Yep. Annette seems okay with the news, but Jake made a snide remark.”

“Sore loser,” James mutters as we walk to where the SUV is parked. “Are we still going to the Stathoulis mansion?”

“Yes.”

He opens the door and gets in beside me. “Seat belt.”

I strap myself in, then wait for Michael and Arthur to get into the vehicle as well. Arthur starts the engine, then I look at James, asking, “How’s your girlfriend?”

Instantly a smile spreads over his face. “Nicoleta is flying in at the end of the month. I can’t wait. I’m never letting her travel again.”

A burst of laughter escapes me. “Ooh, you better put a ring on her finger if you want to keep her close.”

He pins me with a serious expression. “I was thinking the same thing. We’ve been together four years.”

My eyebrows fly up. “Are you actually going to propose?”

Slowly, he nods before glancing behind us and checking for any signs of threats, then he replies, “Yes. But I first need to get the ring.”

My smile widens. “I’m available for ring shopping if you need a sidekick.”

“Thanks, I was hoping you’d offer.”

When Arthur stops the SUV in front of the mansion, I climb out then glance at the other vehicles. Not seeing Grant, I ask, “Where’s Grant?”

“He’s being replaced. Stephen will be joining us from tomorrow,” James informs me.

A smile splits over my face. “That’s unexpected good news.” It’s no secret I never liked Grant.

James escorts me into the house, and only when Mom comes down the stairs, and he’s happy there’s no ambush waiting for me, he steps back.

“*Agápi mou.*” Mom pulls me into a tight hug. “It feels like forever since I last saw you.”

To be honest, I’ve avoided coming over, not ready to talk about Irene and what she did to me.

I’m the one who has to pull away and end the hug, then Mom says, “Let’s sit out on the veranda. It’s such a nice day out.”

I follow Mom through the stuffy living room, and once outside, I take a seat on one of the lounge chairs.

“You look so much better, *agápi mou*,” Mom says, emotion trembling in her voice. She reaches for my hand, and gripping it tightly, her eyebrows draw together. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I suck in a deep breath, wishing Nikolas was here. Everything is so much easier when he’s by my side, his strength feeding my own.

I glance over the manicured gardens, taking in the flowers and trimmed bushes. “At first, you were so caught up in your own grief of losing Dad, the world could’ve ended, and you wouldn’t have noticed.”

Mom pulls her hand back, pressing it to her neck as her lips part.

I quickly continue, “In hindsight, I know I should’ve told you the first time Irene hurt me. It’s my fault for keeping quiet. I don’t blame you.”

“Still, Theresa, I hate that you felt you couldn’t come to me,” Mom says, her tone heavy with heartache.

“We were both drowning in our loss, and Irene capitalized on that.”

“Why would she hurt you, though?” Mom asks, probably still trying to figure out why some people are just evil.

“A power trip.” I shrug and let out a sigh. “Some people just get off on hurting others, I guess.”

Mom shakes her head, still unable to come to terms with what happened. “Tell me everything.”

I shake my head, not wanting to relive any of it. “No. There’s no reason to delve into the past. It’s over and done with.”

“Is it really over and done with?” Mom questions, not looking so sure.

“Yes.” A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. “Nikolas helped me deal with everything.”

An eyebrow lifts on Mom’s face. “How are things between the two of you? I know the wedding was... ah... sudden and quite the shock.”

“You should’ve warned me,” I tell her, needing to get it off my chest. “You should’ve put me first and told me what was happening.”

Regret tightens her features until she truly looks remorseful. “I’m sorry, *agápi mou*. Nikolas can be so intimidating, but you’re right, I should’ve warned you.”

Letting bygones be bygones, I give Mom’s knee a squeeze then smile at her. “I’m happy.”

Her regretful expression turns to one of hope. “Really?”

I nod, my smile growing. “I’ve learned to love Nikolas, and he loves me too. Actually,” I let out a chuckle, “he worships the ground I walk on. I couldn’t have asked for a better husband.”

Mom throws her arms wide open, happiness and relief bubbling over her lips as she laughs. “That’s so good to hear. My heart can rest now.” When I hug Mom, she lets out a sob. “I’m so happy.”

“It all turned out for the best,” I murmur, emotion welling in my chest, now that we got to clear the air between us.

A server brings two ice teas, and we pull apart. I take huge gulps to quench my thirst before Mom starts talking about the event she’s hosting for her group of friends.

We spend the rest of the afternoon catching up with each other’s lives, and honestly, as much as I dreaded it, I actually enjoy visiting with Mom.

Chapter 39

Nikolas

By the time I get home, it's already past one a.m.

Unhappy that I didn't get to spend dinner with Tess, I yank off my tie as I take the stairs up.

We managed to get another Sicilian soldier, and it took way too fucking long to get some information out of him. But eventually, he broke and confirmed the man we've been watching is Manno's nephew and second in charge.

When I walk into the bedroom and see Tess fast asleep in bed, I let out a sigh. I head straight for the shower, needing to wash the fucking day away. I hurry through my nightly routine and hardly take time to dry myself off before walking naked out of the bathroom.

Crawling onto the bed, I pull the covers away from Tess. She stirs, and opening her sleepy eyes, a lazy grin forms on her beautiful face. "Hey, you're home. Finally. What time is it?"

"Just after one," I reply as I take hold of her shorts and panties. Dragging the clothes down her legs, I throw them to the floor. I place my hands on her thighs and push her legs open while ordering, "Take off the shirt, Theresa. I need you naked."

She obeys, and as she tosses the fabric somewhere on the floor, I position myself at her entrance and thrust hard, sinking to the hilt inside my wife. A satisfied groan rumbles from my chest, and I lie down on top of her, covering every inch of her body with mine.

Finally, I'm home.

Tess wraps her legs around the back of my thighs, her hands finding my jaw so she can drag her fingers through the stubble she loves so much.

Our eyes lock and seeing the affection in hers, my chest almost explodes. “Christ, Tess, I need you to love me more than my next breath.” I frame her face with my hands, my chest pressing hard against her breasts. “I fucking live for you.”

“I know,” she whispers, her voice soft and warm. “I know, *zoí mou*.”

Hearing her call me her life, once again, a smile forms on my face. I pull out of her, only to slowly sink deep inside her body again, the way she stretches around my girth, fucking addictive.

“I need to hear the words again,” I whisper against her mouth as I slowly thrust inside her, relishing every second I get to be with her.

With our eyes glued to each other, Tess looks at me as if I'm her entire world. “I'm falling for you, Nikolas.”

My eyes drift shut, the words settling in the deepest part of my heart, branding themselves on my soul, shuddering through my body.

As if possessed, my body begins to move against hers. The pace becomes frenzied as I claim her mouth, wanting to taste the echo of the words on her tongue. I fuck my wife with all my strength until she's a sobbing mess, begging for her release.

My hands feast on her soft skin and curves until they find her ass. Gripping handfuls of her asscheeks, I continue to pound into her, the sound of our bodies becoming one filling the room.

"Jesus, you have..." Thrust. "no idea..." Thrust. "what you do..." Thrust. "to me."

"Nikolas," she breathes my name like the holiest of prayers, her breaths sweet on my lips.

As Tess' release hits, and my own zips down my spine, my heart opens like it never has before – and I fall so fucking hard for her – I know I won't be able to breathe without her in my life.

Without her, life is just existing without reason or rhyme.

I savor her heat wrapped around me while our breaths return to normal, then looking deep into her eyes, I whisper, "I love you, Theresa. So fucking much it's driving me insane."

Her fingers caress my jaw, a soft smile flirting with her lips. She keeps staring at me, then finally lifts her head, pressing a tender kiss to my mouth.

I've never shared an intimate moment like this with anyone in my life. It feels as if we're locked in our own little bubble of happiness.

It washes the blood from my hands.

It erases the screams of pain from my ears.

It removes the stain death has left on my soul.

“I love you, Nikolas.”

Everything in me stills, and like a violent storm finally dying out, I find a moment of peace.

In the most cherished moment of my life, my weakness becomes my strength.

Pulling out of Tess, I start to worship her body with my mouth and hands, my lips and teeth tasting her throat, her breasts, and feasting on her nipples until they're hard against the tip of my tongue.

My palms and fingers caress every inch of her soft skin, and already dying to be inside her again, I sit back, kneeling between her thighs. Slowly pushing against her entrance, I watch as the head of my cock stretches her until she's wrapped tightly around me.

As if in a trance, I can't stop watching as I continue to slowly move in and out of her, absolutely captivated by how our bodies come together and how unbelievably hot it looks.

When I feel the pleasure building in my abdomen, I pull Tess up until she's straddling me, and like the first night I fucked her, I lock eyes with my wife, our rushed breaths creating an inferno of heat between us as I make her come.

Her inner walls grip me in a tight hold, squeezing so fucking hard and forcing a powerful orgasm to rip through me.

With my heart pounding in my chest, and never having felt more alive than in this moment, I brush the strands of hair

away from her face.

“Say it again,” I order.

“I love you, Nikolas.”

I wrap my arms around her, and burying my face in her neck, I suck in deep breaths of her scent. Minutes pass, and dawn creeps closer, but I can't bring myself to let go, finding more rest holding Tess, than I would if I slept an entire night.

Chapter 40

Tess

I thought a routine was what I needed to have a balanced life, to cope and just be happy.

Turns out I was wrong. With the right people in my life, I'm actually enjoying going out and being social.

Who would've thought that was possible?

Smiling at Athina as I reach the table in a cozy Greek restaurant, I take the seat opposite her.

"How did you find this place?" I ask as I glance around at the Mediterranean décor.

"Mýthos?" She shrugs. "It's been a favorite since I moved to Vancouver. I was homesick and searched for anything Greek I could find for a taste of home."

A waitress comes to hand us menus with a welcoming smile.

Athina orders *papoutsákia*, roasted eggplant filled with beef mince and topped with feta and béchamel sauce.

My eyes rove over all the dishes, and it takes me a good five minutes to decide on *souvl á kia*, skewers of meat served with a side of fries, tzatziki, and pita bread.

Glancing around the restaurant, I see James sitting with Yiorgos, Athina's head guard. The other guards are scattered outside the establishment.

"I actually got used to having the guards around," I admit to Athina.

She gives me a warm smile. "That's good to hear. How are things at home?"

"Good." I grin at her, adding, "Things are perfect between Nikolas and me."

Her smile widens, relief in her eyes. "It makes me happy to hear that. Not many people understand Nikolas, but if you give him time, you'll see the real him."

I nod, a burst of love hitting me square in the chest. "He's a totally different person from when we first met."

Athina lets out a chuckle, widening her eyes. "Until you piss him off."

"Right?" I agree. "His temper is something else, but luckily, I've managed to avoid being in the line of fire since the wedding."

We both laugh, then I ask, "How is Basil? I haven't seen him in a while."

"Oh, he's in Athens for work. As much as the man works on my nerves, I miss him when he's away on business trips."

"How long have you been married?"

A warm smile settles on my sister-in-law's face. "Eleven years. I was the same age as you when Nikolas arranged the marriage."

My eyebrows fly up. “Nikolas arranged it? Were you okay with it?”

“Nope.” She pulls a disgruntled face. “At first, I kicked and screamed, but after the wedding...” her features soften with love, “Basil won me over with his easygoing nature. I couldn’t have asked for a better husband.”

Our food’s set down on the table, and without wasting another minute, I pop a piece of meat in my mouth. Savory bliss bursts on my tongue.

“Good, right?” Athina asks before taking a bite of her lunch.

“Delicious,” I mumble around a mouthful.

We eat half our food before Athina asks, “Have you decided what to do with your apartment?”

I take a sip of my coke, then reply, “I’m going to rent it out, but I want to move my belongings over to the penthouse so it will have more of a cozy feel.”

“Redecorating?” she asks, interest flickering in her eyes.

“Something tells me you love decorating,” I tease her.

“It’s a hobby,” she admits.

“I’d love your help.”

Just as her smile widens, arms lock around me. I’m yanked off the chair and thrown to the floor while Yiorgos tackles Athina to the ground. The impact shudders through my bones, my mind dazed.

Glass shatters. Screams fill the air.

I pinch my eyes shut as a sudden wave of terror hits. James covers me, his voice tense. “Keep your head down. Don’t move.”

I cling to my friend and bodyguard for dear life as bullets spray the entire restaurant. I feel James move, then hear, “We’re taking fire! Mýthos. Send backup.”

I hope to God he called Nikolas.

More horrifying cries echo around us. More bullets tearing through tables, walls, and people. There’s absolute mayhem as patrons and staff try to run and take cover.

Dear God.

My mind struggles to catch up as my heart hammers in my chest, adrenaline surging through my body. Trying to see if Athina’s okay, I turn my head to the right but come face to face with James’ gun, his fingers gripping the weapon tightly.

The gunfire gains momentum, like a crescendo of death and destruction.

Unable to stop myself, a terrified cry leaves me, and I cringe as close to James as I can get.

A gunshot sounds up, much closer.

No. No. No.

The gunman’s in the restaurant.

My eyes dart around, and as they land on a masked man dressed in black, he points the gun right at us. Goosebumps erupt on my skin, prickling with frightening dread. The bang is so loud, there’s a hissing in my ears.

I don't know when I make the decision, where the strength comes from, but as James' body jerks, I pry the gun from his hand, point, and pull the trigger.

And I keep pulling the trigger.

Some bullets fly to God only knows where, but some hit their mark, making the gunman stagger back before he drops to the floor.

My entire body's trembling like a leaf in a shitstorm, but the adrenaline in my veins has me reacting fast. I roll James off me and feverishly glance around, my fingers flexing around the gun.

"Fuck," James grinds out through clenched teeth, and it's only then I see the blood blossoming on his dress shirt.

He presses a hand to the wound then pulls himself up into a sitting position, leaning back against an overturned table. Then, looking for something in his pocket, he pulls another clip out and holds it to me. "Put it in. Quick!"

I struggle, but with James' talking me through the process, I manage to reload the clip, then he takes the gun from me.

Our eyes meet for a moment, and not seeing any fear on my friend's face, it gives me the strength I need to get through this nightmare.

"Down, Tess!" His arm flies up as I cover my head and duck, almost becoming one with the floor by James' side.

Every single shot makes my entire body jerk, and I taste a mixture of gunpowder and terror on the back of my tongue.

Suddenly the crescendo builds again, but all the action seems to be outside.

“The calvary’s here,” James sighs with relief, then he lets out a weird-sounding chuckle.

I sit up, and glancing through the shot-up window frames, it’s to see Andreas firing a machine gun. Then my eyes land on Nikolas, and holy shit, he looks like the God of war as he takes out one masked man after the other while running toward the restaurant.

Just as quickly, silence drops like a dead weight around us. Slowly, I turn my head back to James. My lips part, intense worry numbing my tongue and sending pins and needles scattering over my skin.

“James?” I whisper, dread pouring through me. I press my hand over his, covering the bloody stain on his side. “James!”

Slowly, he opens his eyes, then a grin spreads over his face. “I’m... okay.”

I suck in a desperate breath of air, dizzying relief washing through me.

“Theresa!” Nikolas shouts, his voice tense with worry and rage. “Tess!”

“Here,” I call out. Instead of getting up, I crawl to where Yiorgos is still covering Athina and pat his shoulder. “It’s safe.”

Athina lets out a grief-stricken sob. “He’s gone.”

Once again, pins and needles spread over me, but before I can react, hands grip my shoulders, and I’m yanked to my feet.

I see Andreas taking hold of Yiorgos' body then I'm crushed against a solid chest.

"Jesus Christ." Nikolas' voice is hoarse with relief.

The impact of what happened knocks my feet from under me. All the strength leaves my body instantaneously, and I slump against Nikolas.

He lifts me up in his arms, and as I wrap my arms tightly around his neck, I get a glimpse of the devastation of the attack. Bodies are scattered everywhere, pools of blood on the white tiled floor. Trays, food, plates, glasses, cutlery. Broken chairs and overturned tables.

A woman and a little boy still hide behind a pillar, her eyes wide with shock on a dead man lying by her feet.

"I've got Athina," I hear Andreas say, then Nikolas maneuvers his way through the bodies.

"James," I croak as I hide my face against Nikolas' neck, not wanting to see any more of the devastation.

"We've got him." He presses a kiss to my forehead. "He'll be okay."

My body starts jerking as the shock sets in, and unable to control my chaotic emotions, I begin to cry, my anxiety spiking dangerously high. Bile churns in my stomach, a tense ache setting into my muscles.

"I've got you, baby," Nikolas says, rage still coating his words.

He doesn't let go of me as he climbs into the backseat of an SUV, and I only cling tighter to him, needing his strength

more than ever.

Chapter 41

Nikolas

There are no words to describe the uncontainable wrath vibrating in my chest.

They fucking tried to kill my wife and sister.

Cowards.

Motherfucking bastards.

I'll kill every fucking Sicilian.

Walking into the penthouse, I set Tess down on a couch, then check every fucking inch of her body for wounds. She's shaking uncontrollably, her face paler than death.

"Baby." I try to soften my voice, but every ounce of rage spills into the word.

Tess' head snaps up, shallow breaths bursting over her lips. "James." She swallows hard as if she's going to puke. "Where's James? Is he okay?"

Andreas brings Athina into the penthouse, and the instant Tess lays eyes on my sister, she darts up from the couch. The two women fall into each other's arms.

The two women who are more precious to me than life.

And the fuckers tried to kill them.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I dial Luca's number.

"Did –"

"There was a hit on Theresa and Athina. The fuckers tried to kill my wife and sister!" I roar, unable to control the chaotic rage that keeps building and fucking building.

"I'll be there in two hours," Luca bites out. "Get everything ready."

The call ends, and my eyes find Andreas. He's making one call after the other, and when he sees me staring, he says, "James is at the hospital in surgery. We lost Yiorgos, Arthur, Michael, Stephen, Nico..." He shakes his head hard, the weight of his grief for the men we lost bearing down on his shoulders. "Both security details have been wiped out."

For the first time in my life, my body starts to tremble, my vision tunnels, my breaths coming faster.

My men.

Deep sorrow etches itself in my bones. My rage becomes a living, breathing thing with a will of its own.

A will to destroy.

"Luca's on his way. As soon as the Priesthood arrives, we leave to retaliate." There's no life in my voice. Only the promise of death. "Gather all the men we have and get the weapons loaded onto the jet."

Andreas nods, and without question, he continues making calls as he walks to the elevator to take care of business.

My phone starts ringing, and checking the screen, it's to see Dad's name flashing on it.

“Mpampà mou,” I answer, assuming he heard of the attack.

“We... were hit.”

The words shudder through me.

“They breached... the house.” Only then do I hear the exhaustion in my father’s voice and something else that sends a horrible shiver down my spine.

My voice is hoarse as fear crawls beneath my skin. “Are you okay? Helena?”

Athina and Tess pull apart, and both look at me with wide eyes.

“Nik...” Dad gasps, and my entire body’s submerged in ice.

No.

“I’m... sorry... son.”

No.

Jesus.

No.

My eyes lock with Athina’s, and she must see the fear in mine because she darts to my side and tries to take the phone from me. I quickly put the call on speaker. It’s just in time to hear Dad breathe, “Look... after... Athina.”

I stagger back from the invisible blow to the core of my entire being as my father’s final breath drifts over the line.

Athina drops to the floor with a harrowing cry.

Tess takes the phone from me, and cutting the call, she dials a number for emergency services, then rambles, “There’s

been a shooting.” She gives the address, urging them to hurry, then makes another call, whispering, “Answer, Mamá. Please... Answer...”

Her other hand covers her mouth as she dials the number again and again until I take the phone from her. Wrapping my arm around her, I hold her to my chest, unable to find words right now.

The darkness of the day creeps out of the shadows and surrounds us all. Sorrow dulls the shine from the light spilling through the windows.

Somehow I manage to move, forcing Tess to sit on the couch. I take hold of Athina, and pulling her up, I make her sit next to Tess, who quickly grabs hold of her hand.

Standing in front of my wife and sister, the full impact of the day hits.

The Sicilians hit where I would feel it most. They killed my father and probably Helena as well. They killed my men, most of them good friends I’ve known all my life.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, using all my strength to force the grief and shock down.

I’m the head of the mafia.

There’s no time to weep. No time to mourn.

There’s only avenging my fallen loved ones.

I will bring hell to Manno’s doorstep.

Clearing my throat, I look at Tess and Athina. “Pack a bag, Tess. You and Athina are leaving in two hours for Switzerland.”

Tess shakes her head, still dazed by all that's happened. "W-what?" she sobs.

Athina just starts shaking her head.

"You will both leave for St. Monarch's. Basil will meet you there," I order, already bringing up the number for Carson Koslov, who's in charge of St. Monarch's.

"Koslov," he answers.

"It's Nikolas Stathoulis. My wife, sister, and brother-in-law will be arriving within the next twelve hours for safekeeping."

"Payment is expected before they arrive," Carson advises me, his tone professional as always.

I end the call, and opening my banking app, I quickly transfer one point five million euros to St. Monarch's bank account.

A minute later, my phone vibrates with a message from Carson.

Payment received.

Tess stares at me, then blinks. A frown forms on her forehead, and rising to her feet, she shakes her head. "I'm not leaving your side."

"I need you safe." My voice is low, with zero tolerance for negotiations. "You will pack a bag."

Her eyebrows draw together. "Come with us. Please."

Lifting a hand, I caress her cheek before pulling her against my chest. I press a kiss to her forehead, filling my

lungs with her scent. “I have to finish this war. Don’t defy me on this, Theresa.”

Athina stands up, tears still spilling over her cheeks. I wrap my other arm around my sister’s shoulders and pull her closer. “I need the two of you safe, so I can focus on my job. Okay?”

They nod, and I hold them as tight as I can.

The elevator doors open, and Andreas comes in, followed by Elias and Craig.

“The men are loading the weapons,” Andreas advises me. “And James is out of surgery. I had to threaten him with death to get him to stay in the hospital.”

Pulling away from the women, I say, “If he’s okay to check out, let him. He can escort Tess and Athina to Switzerland.” I’m aware of how close James and Tess are, and having her friend with her might help keep her calm.

“Please,” Tess blurts out, a little color returning to her face.

Andreas nods and makes the call.

I turn my attention to Elias and Craig. “You’re my best men.”

They nod, their eyes filled with the need for vengeance.

“You have to go with Tess and Athina.”

Elias instantly starts to frown.

“It’s an order.”

Reluctantly they nod, not happy missing out on the action.

“James is on his way,” Andreas informs me.

“Thank God,” Tess murmurs, wiping a tear from her cheek.

I lean closer to her and press a kiss to her temple. “Go pack a bag, baby.”

I watch as Athina goes with Tess, and once they’re out of hearing distance, I look at Elias and Craig. “If I don’t make it back, it’s up to you to protect Tess and Athina.” When they nod their understanding, I add, “Andreas’ uncle will reach out to you with further instructions.”

Because if I fall, it means Andreas falls too.

My gaze locks with my best friend’s. “But I have no intention of losing this war.”

“Damn right,” Andreas chuckles as he comes to stand next to me.

Chapter 42

Tess

My mind's still reeling, my heart shattered shards in my chest.

It's been confirmed. Mom and Peter were killed.

Mamá.

Sitting on the side of the bed with Athina next to me, we both just stare at nothing, our tears dried on our cheeks.

Mamá.

Sorrow hits hard. Again and again.

My eyes burn, my throat too tight to talk.

Mamá.

My body shudders from the weight of grief bearing down on my shoulders.

"Tess, Athina," Nikolas calls, then he walks into the room. He comes to crouch in front of us, his eyes brutal and unforgiving with the rage that seems to be burning hotter every time I look at him. "It's time to leave. Come. Get up."

I have no energy, but my body listens.

Athina gives Nikolas a hug, and without saying a word, she leaves the room.

Looking up at the man who's taught me what it truly is to love, the pieces of my heart shrivel. I try to memorize every inch of his handsome face as I reach for his hand. Holding it in both of mine, I press it to my chest.

What if he goes to war and I lose him as well?

I have to swallow hard, too much heartache filling me. "I..." My face threatens to crumble, my voice disappearing. Letting go of his hand, I throw myself against his chest, wrapping my arms around him.

Please, I can't lose Nikolas. I won't survive it.

Nikolas holds me tightly. "It's only for two days, *kardiá mou*." He kisses my hair, then my forehead, my cheeks. His mouth meets my trembling lips, and I focus so hard to imprint the taste of him in my mind.

I let my fingers brush through the stubble on his jaw, savoring the feel.

Don't die. You have to win the war and come back to me.

When he breaks the kiss and presses his forehead to mine, I force the words out through a tight throat, "I love you so much, Nikolas. Promise you'll come back to me."

His eyes find mine, and for a fleeting moment, they turn tender. "I promise."

I shake my head. It's unbearable leaving him. "You made me fall for you, and now I can't live without you."

His hands frame my face, and he presses a tender kiss to my mouth. "Forty-eight hours, and you'll be back in my arms. Okay?"

A forlorn breath drifts over my lips. "Okay."

Nikolas picks up the bag I packed, and with his other hand, he takes hold of mine, linking our fingers. I lean against his shoulder, sucking in deep breaths of his scent as we walk out of our bedroom.

Stopping suddenly, I pull my hand free and run back to the bed. I grab Nikolas' pillow, and wrapping my arms around it, I walk to where he's waiting.

"This way, I can still smell you." My voice is hoarse, and devastating emotions overflow in my chest, my eyes burning.

Nikolas wraps his arm around my shoulders, and we walk down the hallway, taking the stairs down to where a group of men waits.

Then I see James, and it becomes next to impossible not to cry. He's wearing a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, and beside the pale coloring of his skin, you wouldn't know he'd been shot earlier today.

We stop in front of James. Nikolas hands my bag to my guard, then says, "Take care of Tess."

"With my life," James answers.

A moment passes between the men, then Nikolas says, "I'll never forget what you did today."

James nods, then he reaches for my arm, pulling me away from Nikolas.

No, I don't want to leave him.

I can't stop the sob bursting from me and have to blink fast so I can look at my husband one last time.

Nikolas gives me an encouraging smile, and after our little group piles into the elevator, and the doors start to shut, he says, “*Se agapó, kardiá mou.*” i love you my heart

Athina wraps her arms around me as another sob bursts over my lips because this might be the last time I hear the words ‘I love you’ from him.

My heart. I can't.

Please don't let anything happen to Nikolas. I can't lose him as well.

The flight to Switzerland is long and tiring. To stay sane, I fuss over James and make him as comfortable as possible.

I've given Athina a Xanax and had one as well, to help take the cruel edge of what happened.

Elias and Craig are quiet until we touch down in Geneva.

“Listen up,” Elias says as he stands in the middle of the aisle. “Craig will take the lead. You stay right behind him. No one's dying on my watch.”

I help James up, and with my free hand, take hold of Athina's. When we exit the plane, we have to jog to keep up with Craig.

We all pile into an SUV, then the tires screech as Craig drives us away from the tarmac. Elias turns in the passenger seat, handing James a gun.

Even though I doubt the Sicilians managed to follow us halfway around the world, the ride is super tense, hardening the knot in my stomach.

God, it feels like I swallowed hot coals, and they're trying to burn their way through my insides.

It's not long before the SUV races through impressive iron gates, and then my lips part at the sight of the castle.

If I wasn't drowning in grief and worry, I'd be able to admire the impressive grounds of St. Monarch's.

Elias and Craig hurry us inside, where we're stopped, and our guards are relieved of all their weapons.

A man dressed in a black combat uniform addresses us. "Mr. Koslov's been waiting for your arrival. Please follow me."

The interior's luxurious, and even though there's some history hidden in the battles of old decorating the walls and ceilings, everything feels new.

We're led down a hallway, my eyebrows rising when we stop in front of a solid steel door. It looks like a vault. The man opens it, and we follow Craig into an office. Cabinets with weapons line the walls, and there's a heavy oak desk at the back of the room.

Another man with dark eyes and short black hair waits in the middle of the room, his face unsmiling and quite intimidating.

"Welcome to St. Monarch's," he says, a Russian accent lacing his words. "I'm Carson Koslov, your host."

There's something dangerous in his demeanor, and remembering who I am, I lift my chin and step forward. "I'm Theresa Stathoulis." I quickly introduce my group, then finish with, "Thank you for having us."

Carson nods, then his features soften as his eyes fall on someone behind us. "My wife," he gestures in the direction of the door, "Hayley will escort you to your suites. We only have one rule on the grounds – no killing."

Wow, did that really need to be said?

I turn around and find Hayley's totally the opposite of Carson. She's beautiful, a friendly smile on her face. "Welcome." She steps closer, then says, "I was told James is wounded?"

I place a hand on James' back. "Yes. He's had surgery, though."

Hayley nods. "While I show the rest of you to your suites, we'd like to see James in the infirmary. Mr. Stathoulis has demanded that he receives the best care."

Relief trickles through me, and I give James a nudge. "Let them take a look at your wound."

Hayley shows James where to go, and as the rest of us follow her down a hallway, I pull my phone out and dial Nikolas' number again. The last time I heard from him was when he sent me a text two hours after we left Vancouver.

When it just rings, my heart sinks to my stomach.

"No answer?" Athina asks.

As I shake my head, we hear Basil shout, “Athina, sweetheart!”

“Basil!” She breaks out into a run, and when I watch her leap into her husband’s arms, who must’ve flown from Athens to meet us here, I have to stop and breathe through the worry for my own man.

Please, Nikolas.

You promised.

Chapter 43

Nikolas

(Shortly after Tess left...)

When the elevator doors open and Luca, Viktor, Liam, and Gabriel step into the penthouse, there's a surge of energy in my veins.

The rest of the Priesthood has arrived.

Viktor comes to hug me, and even though it feels awkward as fuck, I accept it.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he mutters before pulling back, anger brimming in his voice.

"Thank you," I automatically respond. Even though violence is expected in the lives we've chosen for ourselves, it still hits like a motherfucking bitch whenever we lose a loved one. Going after the elderly, women, and children isn't condoned. You take out soldiers, men who can fucking fight.

Luca jabs his thumb over his shoulder. "We brought extra men."

I start to nod when the elevator opens again. Emotion hits hard when I see Lucian, Luca's father, stepping into the penthouse with Alexei Koslov and Demitri Vetrov, Viktor's uncle and father – aka the best killers our world has ever produced.

Lucian comes to stand in front of me, and placing his hand on my shoulder, he says, “I respected your father, Nikolas. We’re here to honor our alliance.”

Jesus.

Clenching my jaw, wishing my father was here to witness this moment, I reply, “Thank you, Mr. Cotroni.”

“Let’s drink, then we kill some motherfuckers,” Alexei chuckles darkly as he makes his way to my liquor cabinet.

Slowly, the corners of my mouth lift.

There’s no way Manno will survive this attack.

“I’ve been keeping a close eye on Manno’s house in Toronto,” Viktor says. “There’s been no movement. The last person entering the house was the nephew, Ricco.” His eyes lock with mine. “I think they’re hunkering down after attacking you.”

“Fucking cowards,” I grind out through clenched teeth, rage vibrating through me once again.

“We’ll fly to Toronto,” Luca says. “Once everyone’s there, we go straight to Manno’s house and attack.”

“We’ve dealt with this kind of attack before,” Lucian jumps in. “It would be best if we hit from two sides. We split into two groups, one striking from the back, while the other breaches from the front.”

I nod in total agreement.

“We’ll take the back,” Alexei mutters before downing a tumbler of vodka.

“Whoever gets to Manno first doesn’t kill him. He’s mine,” I state, my tone firm and commanding.

The men nod their understanding.

I take a moment to look at each of them, so fucking thankful for the alliances my father and I have formed with them over the years. “I appreciate this.”

“It’s time to finish this. Let’s go,” Viktor orders.

As we start to leave the penthouse, I send Tess one last message.

If I don’t make it, you stay fucking loyal to me until death. I love you, Theresa. Now and forever.

I know I’m asking a fuck ton, but I swear I’ll haunt her sexy ass if she ever lets another man touch her after my death.

“Checking earpieces,” Andreas says. It takes a couple of minutes for everyone to verify their earpieces are working.

I strap on an armored vest and make sure I have full clips in all my guns.

Up ahead, I see Lucian’s convoy turn right down a street to approach Manno’s place from the back.

Andreas picks up the rocket launcher, and standing up in the Jeep, he balances the weapon on his right shoulder.

“In three...” he starts to count down. “Two...” We turn the corner, Manno’s house upfront in a quiet cul-de-sac. “One.”

The Incendiary grenade launches with a whistle, and seconds later, part of the front wall and gates are blasted wide open.

I'm here motherfucker.

Manno's guards scatter like fucking rats, and the moment we drive over the rubble, breaching the front, the machine gun starts rattling in my hands.

Before Viktor can bring the Jeep to a stop, I jump over the side and crouch, spraying the left side of the grounds with bullets. With every man I hit, every body dropping, intense satisfaction fills my veins.

You killed my father, Helena, and tried to fucking take out my wife and sister. Today you'll meet your maker.

"Nikolas!" Andreas shouts over the heavy gunfire.

I glance in his direction, and when he starts moving forward, I quickly move to catch up with him.

My men pour onto Manno's grounds as we come from the left side of our motor brigade. They provide us with cover while Andreas and I pull pins from grenades, throwing them at the guards opening fire on us.

It's destruction, death, and hellish chaos as we begin to move closer to the house.

A bullet slams into the front of my armored vest, knocking the breath from my lungs, but I manage to keep my balance. The sharp pain spreading up into my chest makes it hard to breathe for a moment, but I don't stop firing.

I'm revenge.

I'm wrath.

I'm the fucking reaper.

Just as I load another clip, slamming it into the machine gun, my phone vibrates in my pocket.

Not now, baby. Your man's a little busy.

Two guards come out of the front door. Fuckers. They open fire, and Andreas and I return the fucking favor.

Running, we take cover behind the low wall surrounding the porch. I suck in a deep breath of air, my chest still tender from the shot to my vest.

I nod at Andreas, and then we're up and firing shot after shot as we move up the stairs.

"Duck," Viktor shouts. Both Andreas and I fall back and take cover behind the porch's wall again, just as there's an explosion by the front door. The one guard comes flying over the wall, dropping a couple of feet from me.

I don't even think, but just react. Launching myself on top of him as he shakes his head to catch his bearings, I bring the butt of my machine gun down on his face.

Letting out a growl, I beat the shit out of the fucker, more satisfaction flooding my veins as blood splatters and bones break.

I keep crushing the hilt of my gun against his face, his head, any fucking piece of flesh I can find. Brutal and merciless until I'm sure the fucker is dead.

Climbing to my feet, my breaths are harsh as I join Viktor, Luca, and Andreas. Liam and Gabriel move around the right

side of the house with a group of our soldiers.

Viktor grins at the dead man. “Nice job, brother.”

I let out a chuckle, then we hurry up the stairs, and climbing over the rubble, we enter the fucking house Manno’s been hiding in like a pussy.

“Law enforcement’s been taken care of,” Luca says. “They won’t be interrupting us anytime soon.”

“Good, because I’m far from done,” I mutter as I glance around the entrance hall, vigilant for the slightest sign of movement.

“We’ll take the first floor,” Viktor says, and he and Luca head up the stairs, their backs to the wall and guns raised. Andreas and I move into the living room.

Gunfire keeps rattling the air.

‘Breaching from the kitchen,’ Alexei’s voice comes over my earpiece.

“We’re in the living room,” I tell them, so they don’t fucking shoot us by accident, should we cross paths.

Shots ring from upstairs, and it has Andreas and me moving faster, on guard as we enter a study.

“Nothing,” Andreas mutters.

I motion for him to keep quiet, then point at another door. We inch our way closer, guns at shoulder level. My heart pounds in my chest as my breaths slow down.

Slowly, I reach for the doorknob. I lock eyes with Andreas, and as he nods, his gun trained on the door, I shove it open.

Both Andreas and I fire just as another shot hits my vest, this time making me stagger two steps back.

Andreas darts forward, opening fire and spraying the room with bullets, but then he takes a shot to his left thigh and drops to his knee. The sight of my friend going down tears a roar from me. I empty the clip of my machine gun, and reaching for my Glock, I continue forward until I get to the now dead body of a guard.

“Save your ammo,” Andreas snaps. “He’s dead.” He lets out a chuckle. “Fuck, it stings like a bitch.”

Unbuckling my belt, I yank it from the loops and crouch by Andreas. I quickly tie the leather around his thigh, making sure it’s tight as fuck, then wrap an arm around his back, helping him to his feet.

“You good?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“Any sign of Manno?” I ask into the earpiece as we start to move out of the room.

‘Nothing.’ The answers come one after the other.

Chapter 44

Nikolas

Just as I cautiously walk by a set of sliding doors, I see a group of men making a run for the left boundary wall of the property.

Not wasting a second, I shoot the doors open and break out into a run. “I’ve got eyes on Manno. Left side of the house,” I tell the other men, and then I open fire on the group, dropping two guards before they start returning fire.

Someone takes out three of the men, then Manno fucking trips over his feet, plowing into the lawn. Ricco aims his weapon at me, but I fire two shots, one hitting his hip, the other his right arm.

As Manno struggles to his feet, I let out an enraged chuckle, death cloaking the sound in darkness. “Finally.” I drop the machine gun, and taking hold of my Glock, I press the barrel to his head. “Why are you running, Manno? You’ll have me thinking you’re scared of me,” I taunt him.

With my men guarding my back, I nod toward the house. “Move. Back inside so we can talk.”

Manno and Ricco are disarmed and forcefully pushed back to the house. Once they’re kneeling in the living room, Viktor disappears back up the stairs while the other men of the Priesthood stand and watch what I’m about to do.

“You should’ve fled the continent, Antonio,” Liam chuckles. “Did you really think you could take on the Priesthood?”

“Fuck you,” the old man spits, hatred burning in his eyes.

“Sorry, you’re not my type,” Liam retorts.

Viktor comes back into the living room with a girl firmly in his grip. She puts up one hell of a struggle in his arms, and it gets a violent reaction from Manno.

“Don’t fucking touch her! She has nothing to do with this.”

Unable to control my anger, I kick Manno in the gut. “But you fucking tried to kill my wife and sister?”

Viktor presses the barrel of his Heckler and Koch to the girl’s head which has her stilling in his hold. With his voice filled with amusement, he asks, “What’s your name, little one?”

The girl can’t be much older than eighteen. With a vicious glare, she mutters, “Rosalie.”

Viktor takes a deep breath of her hair. “Hmm. Little Rose. You smell mouthwatering.”

“Fuck you,” she growls at Viktor, trying to headbutt him, but it only earns her a burst of laughter from him.

“I need plastic bags,” I say to no one in particular.

“On it, boss,” one of my soldiers replies, running in the direction of the kitchen.

Tucking my Glock in the back of my pants, I take the K-Bar from the holster around my thigh.

Knowing it will hurt Manno, I slowly stalk closer to Ricco. Manno makes a mistake when he allows me to see the panic in his eyes.

“I’m going to assume Ricco is not only your nephew but your right-hand man, right?” I don’t expect an answer.

“This is between you and me,” Manno tries to bargain.

I shake my head as I stop behind Ricco, and grabbing hold of his jaw, I force his head back, so he looks up at me. My eyes lock with his, then I press the blade slowly to his jugular, and as slow as I fucking can, I slice him wide open.

“Nooo,” Rosalie screams, fighting like a wildcat to get free from Viktor.

“Fuck you!” Manno starts shouting, spittle flying from his mouth. Gabriel kicks Manno in the back, and as the old man falls flat on his face, he steps on him to keep him in place. Still, Manno rages, “Fuck you. I’m going to fucking kill you.”

With my hold on Ricco’s jaw, I watch with sadistic satisfaction as he gurgles, his blood spilling from him like a fountain of death.

Dropping the corpse of Manno’s nephew to the now bloodstained carpet, I indicate for Gabriel to let Manno up.

Rosalie slumps against Viktor, her face grief-stricken just like **my Tess**’ was. Just like Athina’s was.

My eyebrow darts up when Viktor licks a tear from the girl’s cheek, then he smiles at Manno. “I’m going to enjoy her.”

“Please,” Manno begs for the first time. “She’s a child, only seventeen.”

Viktor starts backtracking to the gaping hole that used to be the front door. “I can wait until she’s eighteen. Watch her blossom like the little rose she is before making her my whore.”

“Nonno,” Rosalie shrieks, straining against Viktor.

“Please,” Manno cries. A smile spreads over my face as I watch his fear and panic multiply. “She’s just a fucking child!”

“Nonno!” I hear Rosalie scream before Viktor forces her out of the house, actually doing her a favor, so she doesn’t have to witness me torturing her grandfather.

Finally, my soldier returns with the plastic bags. “Sit his ass down on a chair,” I order. I wait for my men to force a cursing Manno into one of the chairs they brought from the dining room.

The head of the Sicilian mafia locks eyes with me. “You can kill me but let my granddaughter go.”

“You don’t get to make demands,” I remind him unnecessarily. I flick the K-Bar between my fingers as I step closer to my enemy. “You only get to bleed.”

Grabbing hold of his left arm, I pin it in place and swipe the blade over the crook of his elbow. Finally, getting to see his blood seep from him, a broad smile spreads over my face. “Look, you bleed just like the soldiers I killed. Not a God after all.”

“Just fucking do it,” Manno spits, his breaths harsh over his lips. “Get it over with.”

“That would ruin the fun.” Pressing the blade against his chest, I twist and fucking twist, slowly digging a hole through his skin, and it earns me a painful grunt from him.

“I read about *Lingchi*, a special form of torture the Asians used in the late eighteen hundreds and always wanted to try it out,” I say.

“Death by a thousand cuts,” Alexei murmurs, actually looking impressed with my choice of torture. “But I’ve heard most die after a dozen cuts.”

“Let’s see how long you can hold out,” I chuckle at Manno as I take hold of his ear.

He yanks his head away, and without having to ask, one of my soldiers grabs hold of him, keeping him firmly in place as I slowly cut it off.

This time the grunts are filled with agony.

Already growing bored, Luca checks his wristwatch. “We need to wrap this up in thirty minutes and get out of here.”

I nod at him. “That’s enough time.”

Even though I know Viktor comes from a line of men who don’t rape women, I still use it as a threat to torture Manno. “Viktor’s going to enjoy your granddaughter. I’ve heard he likes it rough.”

Just as I hoped for, the threat hits Manno hard. “Please. I’ll give you anything. Just let Rosalie go.”

“He’ll probably brand her,” I add as I cut a long streak over Manno’s chest, his shirt falling open. “And feast on her innocence. She’s a virgin, right?”

“Please,” Manno sobs. He gives me a pleading look as I stop in front of him. I pick up one of the bags, and the old fuck puts up a fight, but I get it wrapped over his head.

Knowing it’s only a matter of minutes before he suffocates, I say, “You should’ve stayed out of my territory.” I press the blade’s tip to the stretch of skin over his heart. “You shouldn’t have killed my father and stepmother, and you sure as fuck shouldn’t have attacked my wife and sister.”

I watch as he swallows his pride, his words muffled from the plastic covering his face. “I see that now. I’m... sorry. Just let... Rosalie go.”

Gabriel tightens the bag, and it gives me a clear view of Manno’s terrified face, his mouth sucking at the plastic for air.

Painstakingly slowly, I force the blade’s tip through his skin. “There’s no mercy,” I grind the words out through a clenched jaw. Pulling back, I slam the knife deep into his chest and watch as the light flickers out in his eyes.

“For my father,” I whisper, taking a deep breath as death reduces my enemy to nothing more than a corpse.

Chapter 45

Tess

The moment Elias has the door open, I dart past him and practically fly down the stairs.

My gaze lands on Nikolas as he pushes away from an SUV he was leaning against.

“Nikolas!” I scream, my happiness too overwhelming to contain after the longest two days of my life.

His arms open, and I throw myself against him, wrapping my legs around his waist. He holds me in the painfully tight way I’ve come to love, and intense relief pours dizzyingly through me.

“I missed you,” I sob, then I start to pepper his face with kisses, my fingers finding his jaw and relishing in his day-old stubble.

“Not half as much as I missed you, *kardiá mou*.” His mouth claims mine in a brutal kiss, his tongue lashing at mine as if he’s trying to familiarize himself with how I taste.

Overcome with emotion to be reunited with Nikolas, I sob against his mouth. He slows the kiss, and it becomes tender and profound, telling me he feels the same way.

When he finally frees my mouth and lifts his head, his eyes lock with mine. “The war is over.”

I nod, setting my feet back down on the ground, then I smile proudly at Nikolas. “You won.”

But we also lost.

“The funerals are tomorrow,” he says as if he read my mind, then he turns to give Athina a kiss on her forehead and shake Basil’s hand.

James is standing to the side until Nikolas says, “James, take three days off.”

“I’m okay,” my friend tries to argue.

“It’s an order.”

“Thank you, boss.”

I hug Athina quickly. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

We all pile into our respective vehicles, and I immediately snuggle up to my husband’s side, asking, “Did anyone get hurt? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” He wraps an arm around my shoulders, holding me close. “We lost good men.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, feeling a little guilty because I’m so happy Nikolas survived. Taking a deep breath of his scent, I close my eyes, sending up a prayer of thanks for sparing my husband.

As the SUV moves toward the city, my thoughts turn to the funerals, and finally, I’m able to let my grief in. The past two days, I had to be strong for Athina, but now that I’m safely back in Nikolas’ arms, the full impact of what happened hits again. “I can’t believe they’re gone,” I whisper, sadness

coating my words. “It’s hard to accept I’ll never see my mother again.”

Nikolas presses a kiss to the top of my head, then placing a finger beneath my chin, he nudges my face up. “I know it’s hard, but I’m here. Just lean on me if the loss becomes too heavy to bear.”

Not caring about a seat belt, I crawl onto Nikolas’ lap, and straddling him, I wrap my arms around his neck and bury my face against him.

He holds me as I finally get to mourn the loss I’ve suffered. His hand rubs up and down my back while he keeps pressing kisses to my hair, temple, and cheek.

Today I’ll cry my heart out because tomorrow, I’ll stand next to my husband, the head of the mafia, as we bury our parents, showing a united front.

They can come at us. They can wound us. But we won’t fall.

Together Nikolas and I will stand strong.

Rain pours down around us as if the heavens are also mourning the loss of our parents.

There’s a huge crowd, umbrellas forming a circle around the two graves. I don’t know most of the people and huddle closer to Nikolas as the priest says some final words.

Instead of listening, I'm bombarded with memories of Mom. How she used to love cooking. I'd always find her in the kitchen trying out a new recipe. Her laughter when she watched one of her favorite shows. Her obsession with the latest fashions. How she could put a party together without breaking a sweat.

My eyes drift closed as I remember the bedtime stories she read to me. Her hugs.

Regret fills my chest that I didn't hug her longer when I last saw her. I shouldn't have pulled away so soon.

Nikolas' hand rubs up and down my back before I'm tugged tighter against his side.

I draw my strength from him, and opening my eyes, I lift my chin and watch as the coffins are lowered and our parents are settled into their final resting place. Beside each other, as it should be.

My lips part and I take a trembling breath. "When our time comes, promise we'll meet death together. Like our parents."

"I promise," Nikolas murmurs. "Your final resting place will be in my arms."

I hold onto Nikolas, my strength, my life, my reason for breathing, and once the ceremony is over and people slowly leave, we keep standing by the graves, saying our goodbyes.

Exhaustion weighs a ton on my muscles as I glance at Athina and Basil. "I don't have energy for the wake."

It's being held at the Stathoulis mansion that's been cleaned up after the attack.

“That makes two of us,” Athina mutters before letting out a sigh.

Nikolas turns to search for Andreas, and because he’s standing by an SUV with crutches, we make our way to him.

“It was a nice service,” Andreas says when we reach him.

“Will you represent us at the wake? The women are tired,” Nikolas asks his friend.

“Sure.” He leans in to kiss my cheek, earning a glare from Nikolas. “Get some rest.”

While Andreas climbs into the back of the SUV so he can head to the mansion, Nikolas calls out to Athina, “Follow us to the penthouse. We’re not attending the wake.”

She gives her brother a grateful smile.

It will just be the four of us, Athina, Basil, Nikolas, and I. As it should be. No one else will fully comprehend the loss we’ve suffered.

Once we reach the penthouse, I prepare coffee for us, and curling up on a couch, I sip on the beverage, relieved that I don’t have to interact with all the strangers who attended the funeral.

I look at my family, who three months ago, I didn’t know at all.

Now they’re my world.

Chapter 46

Nikolas

One month later...

Now that Theresa has graduated, there's no stopping the woman. She's already written one screenplay and has just started with another.

"I'm not happy," I complain while scowling at the laptop on her lap. During the entire flight, she has not stopped typing on the damn thing.

"Why?" she mumbles, too deep in her work to even glance up.

"Theresa!" I snap.

"What?" Startled, her eyes fly to mine. "Are we landing?"

"Woman, have you listened to a word I said?"

She blinks at me.

"I'm. Not. Happy," I spell it out for her.

Confusion flutters over her face. "Why?"

I give the cock-blocking device a death glare, then order, "Stop working and give me attention."

Laughter bubbles over her lips, then she dares to shake her head at me. "I'm almost done with this scene." She cranes her

neck to glance out the window as if she'll be able to see where the fuck on the planet we are.

With an incredulous expression on my face, I watch as the little minx starts typing again.

Enough is enough.

Darting up from my seat, I snatch the laptop off her lap, shut the damn thing, and drop it on the table. Placing my hands on the armrests on either side of her, I lean down and corner her with a dark look. "You will give me attention. Right now."

"Geez, bossy much?" she teases me, not a speck of fear in her eyes.

"I'll finance your first film," I start to negotiate.

Tess' eyebrow pops up. "And what do I have to do in return?"

I glance down at the blue balls hidden behind the fabric of my suit pants. "Isn't it fucking obvious?" Straightening up, I unbuckle my belt, and tugging the zipper down, I free my aching cock.

Tess licks her lips, her eyes filling with desire. "What kind of finance are we looking at? Will there be a limit to how much I'm allowed to spend?"

"Depends on how good the blowjob is, baby," I murmur, my voice thick with lust.

Her fingers wrap around the base, and she strokes me once. "I'll have to give it my all then."

Jesus, it feels so good having her hand on me.

“And then some,” I mutter. Just like when we first met, this woman still drives me insane. No matter how many times I get lost in her body, it’s never enough. My hunger for her is insatiable.

Tess leans forward in her seat, her tongue darts out, and she licks the beading pre-cum off. Her fingers tighten their grip on me as her lips close around the aching head.

My head falls back, my eyes closing as her warmth wraps around me, making goosebumps spread over my skin.

“Fuck, baby,” I groan. “That’s right, take me deep.” My fingers twist in her hair, and gripping fistfuls, I start to thrust, pushing myself deeper into her throat. “Jesus.” There’s a satisfying rumble in my chest. Needing to come more than I need my next breath, my hips move faster and faster until I’m fucking my wife’s mouth with a relentless pace.

Glancing down, it’s to see her watching me with hooded eyes, desire making her look like a temptress. Her lips are swollen around the girth of my cock from all the friction, and it only has me thrusting deeper until her throat clamps around me, trying to force me back out. “*Christé mou.* Theresa,” I groan just before an orgasm tightens my muscles and shoots through me.

I watch as she swallows every drop, her throat working it down, only adding to more pleasure around the sensitive head of my cock. “Jesus, that’s so good,” I praise her, my voice hoarse from the ecstasy.

When she starts to pull back, she licks every inch of me clean, her eyes never leaving mine. Once she sits back, giving

me a triumphant look, she says, “That’s going to cost you a couple of million.”

With a satisfied smirk on my face, I tuck my cock away, then lean down, claiming her swollen lips in a searing kiss. My tongue savors the taste of me in her mouth before I break the kiss, saying, “For that blowjob, you can name your price.”

Tess chuckles against my lips. “You’re going to regret saying that.”

“Never.”

“We’re landing in ten minutes,” the hostess interrupts us.

I glance up to where she’s standing by the curtain between the cabin and kitchen, and when I see her burning cheeks, I know she heard us or maybe even saw Tess blowing me.

Not giving a single fuck, I nod so she’ll go back into the kitchen again.

I take my seat and strap myself in while Tess secures the laptop in one of the compartments. When she sits down and fastens her seat belt, she grins at me. “I can’t wait to land.”

“You looking forward to our honeymoon?” I ask, even though I know the answer.

She nods excitedly. “It’s long overdue.”

“You’ll be training as well,” I inform her.

Instantly, her face falls. “What kind of training?”

“Fighting and how to fire a gun.”

Tess crosses her arms over her breasts, making her cleavage deepen where it’s peeking from her silk blouse. “I’ll

have you know I'm quite good at firing a gun."

"Is that so?" I chuckle. "We're not talking water pistols, babe."

With the confidence of a queen, she lifts an eyebrow, then says, "Who do you think killed the guy who shot James?"

"What?" The word bursts from me as surprise ripples through me.

No way. Seriously?

"That's right. Me. I might have emptied the entire clip, but I still managed to kill him."

Holy shit.

My mouth curves up, and if we weren't starting our descent, I'd get on my knees and show my wife how proud I am of her. "My queen," I murmur, "you're just full of surprises."

"Bet your ass I am," she snips, basking in her victory.

"I'm proud of you," I praise her. "Once we've checked into St. Monarch's, I'll show you just how proud."

A smile spreads over her face. "Can't wait."

As soon as the private jet has touched down, and we take the steps down to the tarmac, Tess' face just about sparkles with excitement.

"I didn't get to see anything the last time I was here."

Lifting her hand to my mouth, I press a kiss to the back of it. "I know, baby. I'll fix that."

It's only been a month since we lost our parents, but slowly it's getting better, though it will take a lot of time before the bitter sting of grief eases to something more bearable.

The drive to St. Monarch's goes by fast because Tess keeps pointing at the scenic views passing us by. Seeing her happy after all the shit acts as a soothing balm to my soul.

This woman is life to me.

I might have suffered huge losses this year, but I've gained the most precious thing I never knew I needed until I laid eyes on her – my reason for existing. To have her love me. *Me*.

It means everything to me.

Chapter 47

Tess

The past three days in Switzerland have been absolutely magical.

In the mornings, we train, and I'm getting better at shooting. My fighting skills leave much to be desired, though, but that's only because Nikolas gets turned on every single time, and we end up cutting the practice session short for the privacy of our suite.

Then after Nikolas has had his fill of me, we leave St. Monarch's to explore some scenic parts of Switzerland. I love the mountains and the quaint little towns most.

It feels like I've stepped into a dream.

I have my husband all to myself, and we're both getting some much-needed rest. Honestly, I've never seen Nikolas so relaxed before. It makes him look younger, the lines around his eyes not as prominent any longer.

We mostly ignore the other guests currently residing at St. Monarch's. The combat instructor's Viktor Vetrov's cousin. I don't know much about who's who in our world, but I'm doing my best to learn who the important players are, and apparently, Nikolai Vetrov is one of them.

Just like Carson, the host of St. Monarch's, Nikolai gives me some seriously dangerous vibes, so I try to keep our contact to a minimum.

But if there's one thing I've learned, as long as I have Nikolas by my side, I can face anything. It feels like a lifetime has passed since Nikolas came into my life. Where I used to get anxiety attacks from a simple confrontation, I'm now able to get through it without the need for a Xanax.

Nikolas has made me strong.

With my hand in his tight grip, we walk down a pathway leading away from the back of the castle. Even though it's cold out, we try to go for a walk once a day. I've realized Nikolas loves being out in nature and getting some fresh air, and I hope once we're back home, we can continue with our daily walks.

I snuggle closer to his side as we reach a courtyard with a fountain. There's a thin layer of ice coating the water, the winter sun making it sparkle like crushed diamonds.

"So pretty," I whisper.

Nikolas takes hold of the scarf around my neck, and using it as a leash, he turns me to face him. His eyes are filled with love, softening the sharp edges of the ruthlessness always radiating from him.

I start to frown when he removes his gloves. "What are you doing? It's cold."

"I just need ten minutes," he says, a heartbreakingly hot grin tugging at his lips. He tugs my gloves off, and when he slides my wedding ring from my finger, my frown deepens.

Nikolas' eyes find mine. "I, Nikolas Peter Ares Stathoulis, take thee, Theresa Maria Drakatos, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward..."

Instantly a smile spreads over my face, and a wave of emotion washes through me.

Are we renewing our vows?

"...for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part."

Hearing the words hits me right in the feels. My throat tightens, my eyes misting up.

The first time we said those words, they didn't mean anything to me. I was too angry to think about their meaning.

My lips part, and the vow trembles in my voice as I say, "I, Theresa Maria Drakatos, take thee, Nikolas Peter Ares Stathoulis, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part."

Nikolas slips the ring back onto my finger, and lifting a hand to my cheek, his touch is still warm even though the air is icy. "I just took you as my wife. You didn't have much of a choice."

I fake a scowl. "Damn right."

"Theresa, do you take me as your husband?" he asks.

Tiny snowflakes drift down from the heavens, making this intimate moment between us nothing short of magical.

“I do.” With my whole heart in my voice, I promise, “Now and forever.”

His palm warms my cheek, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip. He looks at me as if his biggest fear is that I’ll vanish any second – and like always, Nikolas makes me feel as if I’m one of a kind – treasured.

“You still drive me insane,” he whispers as he starts to lean down.

“Yeah?”

The corners of his mouth lift into a sexy smirk. “Now and forever, *kardiá mou*.”

Our breaths mingle, creating puffs of white air right before Nikolas claims my mouth.

He brings his other hand to the side of my head, his fingers gripping a fistful of my hair to keep me in place. His tongue thrusts into my mouth, and then all I can do is feel as he pours all his love into me.

His tongue tastes mine with hard strokes, the intense possessiveness he feels for me stealing the air from my lungs.

Emotions burst in my chest – love, admiration, absolute obsession, but mostly desire.

Tingles spark to life beneath my skin, my abdomen clenches hard, and the constant need I have for this man becomes an inferno of lust.

I lift onto my tiptoes, pushing closer to him, wanting nothing more than to become one with him.

The scent of his cologne that I've grown addicted to becomes the air I breathe. A needy moan escapes me as I return the kiss with the same amount of passion he's showing me.

And like always, **Nikolas' kiss owns me.**

I feel dizzy from the overwhelming potency he's taking me with. I feel him everywhere as **I'm claimed by the man who took one look at me and decided I'm his.**

His mouth devours mine, his hard muscle beneath my fingers, his solid body pressed against mine – and I know this is the closest I'll ever get to heaven.

Because I'd rather follow my devil to hell than live a single day without him.

Epilogue

Nikolas

Fifteen years later...

Sitting in the Dolby Theatre in LA, with my queen next to me, I couldn't be more proud.

Theresa has not only given me two beautiful children but has made an enormous success of her career. Yeah, I've funded every single film she's directed, but it was all her hard work that has led us to this moment.

The Oscars.

I glance down at my exquisite wife, and noticing how she sucks in a trembling breath, and her tongue darts out to nervously wet her lips, I lift my arm and wrap it around her shoulders.

Leaning in close, I whisper, "You've got this, *kardiá mou*. No one deserves this more than you."

She gives me a thankful smile. "I wouldn't have been able to do it without you."

"It is the director..." Julianne Sparks, last year's best actress, starts, and instantly Tess grabs hold of my thigh, her nails digging for blood. "whose creative touch is imprinted on every frame." There's a round of applause, the sound almost deafening in the theatre. Julianne waits with grace, then

continues, “It is the director who works tirelessly with the crew to create a story we can get lost in. It is the director’s vision that takes an ordinary movie and turns it into a masterpiece.”

“Oh God,” Tess whispers next to me, her voice tense with nerves. “I’m going to puke.”

“No, you’re not. You’ve got this,” I try to encourage her. The camera focuses on Tess, and I instinctively hold her tighter. “Smile, *kardiá mou*.”

Honestly, it looks like she’s in pain, and I start to worry that she’s really going to vomit.

“Deep breaths, *baby*,” I order, so she can get some air into her lungs. “You’ve worked your ass off for this moment, and you’re sure as fuck not puking at the Oscars.”

“These four directors have each created their own masterpieces over the past year. Here are the nominees for best director.”

“Nikolas,” Tess whispers, her nails digging even deeper into my thigh.

I press my mouth to her temple and close my eyes, willing all my strength to her.

The screen lights up with the first nominee. “Nolan Price. The light has left your eyes.” Two more nominees are announced, followed by, “Theresa Stathoulis. *Diávolos*.”

The corners of my mouth lift, because little does the world know, the movie is based on my life as head of the mafia and aptly named Devil.

Julianne smiles brightly as she starts to open the envelope.
“And the Oscar goes to...”

Time fucking stops, and every muscle in my body tightens.

“Theresa Stathoulis.”

Tess doesn’t move, and with the camera on us, I tug her to her feet and wrap her up in a hug.

“What?” she whispers in total shock.

“You won, baby.” I press a hard kiss to her parted lips. “Go get your Oscar!”

‘This is the second nomination for Theresa Stathoulis and her first Oscar win,’ a voice fills the theatre, blending with the loud applause.

I nudge Tess into the aisle. “Just walk to the stage and smile. You’ve got this.”

Looking like a vision, dressed in a pale blue shimmering gown, the love of my life takes the stairs to the stage, tears threatening to overwhelm her.

With pride bursting from every inch of my being, I applaud the incredible creature I get to call my wife as she wraps her hand around her first Oscar.

That’s my girl.

Once the theatre settles back into their seats, Tess lets out a nervous chuckle. “I... I.” She takes a step back, and I watch as she struggles to regain control over her emotions.

Deep breaths, baby.

Three seconds pass, then my queen lifts her chin, steps up to the microphone, and smiles that sparkling smile that stole my heart. “Thank you to the Academy, to everyone in this room, and the other incredible nominees.” She sucks in a deep breath, her nerves threatening to steal the smile from her face. “Thank you to the fantastic crew who worked tirelessly to bring *Diávolos* to life.” Tess’ gaze searches mine out, and once our eyes lock, she shakes her head, still unable to believe she won. “Mostly, thank you to my own devil. My husband has single-handedly raised our beautiful two children, allowing me to pursue my dreams.” She blows me a kiss, my heart overflowing with love and pride, then she holds the Oscar up. “This is for you because you’ve been my biggest fan.” Her smile brightens. “You financed every film I set my heart on making. Thanks for that, by the way.” The attendees all laugh, giving Tess and me a moment to just stare at each other.

Once it quiets down again, Tess finishes with, “I love you, Nikolas. Now and forever.”

Through thick and thin, baby.

The End.

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