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Disclaimer: No infringement intended. I don't own Twilight.

Disclaimer 2: My characters are unapologetic in this trilogy. It showcases a mob lifestyle, including some stereotypes, nothing politically correct whatsoever, sexism, little bit of racism, bigotry, and they are all "victims" of their generations. Their opinions, however, don't reflect my own.

Genres: Romance/Crime/Family/Humor/Drama/Action.

Leave your morals at the door and happy reading!

Ranks

- Boss
  - Consigliere/Advisor

- Underboss

- Capo
  - Crew
    - Soldiers/Soldat Women
  - Crew
    - Soldiers/Soldat Women

- Capo
  - Crew
    - Soldiers/Soldat Women

- Capo
  - Crew
    - Soldiers/Soldat Women

- Capo
  - Crew
    - Soldiers/Soldat Women
The Coluccis: Carlisle and Esme, and their children Felix, Emmett, and Alice. (Carlisle has two children on the side with a mistress, too. Peter and Mikey.)


The Savonas: Jasper, his son Nicola, daughter Lucia, and sister Isabella.

Las Vegas Sun ~ Saturday, Nov. 22, 1980 | 6 a.m.

"...At least ten MGM Grand Hotel guests were reported killed in a raging fire that engulfed the 2,000 room hotel shortly after 7 a.m. Friday. More than 100 injuries were initially reported but exact figures weren't available at press time. Officials said others may be dead inside the hotel.

The MGM's casino was destroyed. Damage could run into the millions of dollars, witnesses guessed. It started in the west casino basement and swept through the giant hotel, blocking off all exits.

Witnesses said at least 2,000 hotel workers and guests fought their way through smoke and flames to the MGM's roof..."
TALE
Grand

ANTHONY
ELISA
DOMINIC
EDWARD SR.
ELIZABETH

JANE
JUNIOR
ISABELLA

BRIANNA
RILEY
COLIN

CARISSLE
ESME

MRS. COPPOLETTA

MICHAEL
PETER

ALEC
KATE

NICOLA
LUCIA

MARIA

LUCA
FRANCIS

ANAGELLO

HEDI

JOSEPH
VALENTINA

FELIX
GIANNA

VICTORIA
EMMIE

ANAGELLA
ROSALIE
Las Vegas – 1975

Chapter 1

Translation:

Fanook/fanuk = Derogatory American/Italian slang word for fag/homosexual.

Cazzo = Fuck.

Madonn’ = Goddamn.

Ciccino = term of endearment like sweetheart, honey, darling, etc.

Junior's POV

When I enter Felix's club, I'm thinking another day at the office sounds pretty damn good. Only...it's night, but you know what I mean. The bunnies on the stage are looking fine, the drinks are flowing, the dough's rolling in, and I can leave my personal life behind for a while.
God knows I need it.

"You're too fuckin' tense, Junior," Felix tells me over the music with a clap on my shoulder. "Want something to take the edge off?" I nod, sighing. I could've gotten some myself, back at my own club, but I forgot. "All right. Let's go to my office. My brother should be here soon, too."

Emmett. I'm a little surprised he's not here already. It's the day we meet up to talk shipments and money, and Emmett, who can't stand his wife, is usually the first one to arrive.

Arranged marriages to bring families together or to make other alliances are too damn common.

Next week, it's my turn.

"You got some new dancers?" Alec, my younger brother, asks Felix.

Felix grins widely and jerks his chin in the direction of the stage. "Oh yeah, you should see 'em up close. I'll send some in later. We could all use some downtime."

He couldn't be more right.

Emmett arrives, and we talk business.

~oOo~

Sitting in one of Felix's leather chairs, I lean forward and snort a line of blow as he talks about next week's shipment from Miami. Drugs aren't my job; that's my brother's. Emmett's mostly in charge of the gambling, and Felix usually assign contracts to me, 'cause hits are what I do best. The desert is big, and finding bodies is impossible. Plus, I love the money. But aside from that, we all have smaller businesses we're in charge of.
I sniff and swallow a few times, suddenly not feeling so tired and melancholy anymore.

I loosen my tie.

"Ay, Junior," Emmett says. I cock a brow at him. "When does Jane's family get here?"

"Don't fucking remind me," I mutter, dragging a hand over my face. "I don't know. A couple days before the wedding, I guess."

That's the only positive thing about all this; with Jane still living in New York, I haven't been forced to be in on the wedding planning. No fake smiles, no pretending. I'll be there to say "I do", and that's it. It's business—Carlisle's way of tying the Coluccis and Maisanos together with a family full of crooked politicians.

We're all New Yorkers, but Carlisle saw big money in Vegas, so we moved out, but that doesn't mean he doesn't want to keep making scratch in New York. By having Jane's dad on our side, Carlisle will have it easier out East.

"Junior's lucky," Felix huffs, and I flip him off, 'cause I'm not. "Oh, come on, cousin! At least you won't have your in-laws here. They'll be here for the weddin', but that's it." He wipes his hands clean.

True. I only have Jane moving here, but that's enough. I don't fucking want a wife.

Emmett laughs. "You fanook. Man up, Junior; we all get married."

"Vá all'inferno." I tell him to go to hell with a flip of my hand under my chin.

"OH!" the guys shout.
I shake my head. "I'm gonna book it." I'm so fed up with this. Might as well go home if this is the talk of the evening. "Gimme my cut and I'll be on my way."

"Nuh-uh," Alec responds and pushes me down in my seat again. "Chill out, big bro. Have a few drinks, do another line, see some bunny."

Well, it has been a while since I got my dick wet.

"Alec's right," Felix says, nodding at my brother. "Wanna see one of the new ones?"

I shrug. "Send 'em in."

Soon, we have four scantily clad women walking in, ready to dance for us. The last one to walk in, the brunette, is smoking hot.

"Isabella, honey, you go show Junior over there a good time," Felix says, touching her cheek.

She nods and walks over to me, wearing some sexy getup and a seductive smile.

Now, this is what I'm talking about.

"Hey, ciccino." She smiles and straddles me. I groan under my breath, refraining from touching her. I never do until the dancer gives the green light. "You're lookin' sad."

I chuckle, my head resting on the back of my chair. This girl is not only a New Yorker, but she's got Italian in her. That's good. And I hope she'll have even more Italian in her soon.

I smirk lazily. "I'm sure you can, uh, cheer me up."

She hums.
I reach up and twirl a strand of her hair between my fingers. 'Cause I had to.

She's fucking gorgeous.

Leaning in, she drops a soft kiss on my neck. Her hips are grinding, swiveling, rolling onto my stiff cock.

She hums again, softly, and I break out in gooseflesh. It's that little sound—it does something to me. Heh, she's like a little hummingbird.

"Strip for me."

"A man who knows what he wants," she muses, eyes fuckin' twinkling. "How about we up the ante?"

I like how this girl thinks. "Private room?"

She nods.

I give her ass a smack. "Lead the way."

~oOo~

When my ass hits the couch in one of the private rooms, Isabella straddles me again, and this time I touch her. Roughly.

"Kiss me."

She obeys and kisses me forcefully as I knead her sweet ass.

She pulls my hair; I tug on hers, causing her head to tilt back. I kiss her neck, tasting her. She never stops grinding against my cock. Fuck. This is what I love about Italian women—all that fire, all that passion. I never wanted a fucking princess, which I know Jane is. She's Daddy's little girl.
I want the hotheaded crazies.

I'm fucked in the head, I know this.

"Strip."

She moans and leans back. I watch hungrily. She removes her bra, quickly followed by her panties.

Fuckin' Christ.

"Felix told me you're getting married next week." She hums and scoots closer, pushing her gloriously naked body against mine. "Is this your celebration, honey?"

Now she just needs to shut up.

I don't wanna hear a thing about next week.

After sliding my tongue up her neck, I reach her ear and whisper my next words.

"Blow me, hummingbird."

"Certamente."

With my pants pulled down, Isabella kneels on the floor between my parted legs and puts her mouth on me. I groan and guide her with my hands in her hair, my head lolling back. Fuck. The pleasure... She can suck dick.

She hums around me, causing me to both laugh and moan. It feels so damn good, but that little humming noise she makes is just too cute.

"Oh, yeah," I grunt when she tugs on my balls.

She sucks me hard and deep, making me moan some more.
But I don't want to come like this.

"Sit on my dick," I pant. She releases me with a pop, and I reach for a rubber. "Roll it on for me." Which she does. It's a smoking hot sight.

Then she sinks down on me.

"Oh, Madonna mia," I breathe out, squeezing my eyes shut. She's hot; I slide in and out with ease, and she feels so goddamn good. "Fuck, amazing." She starts moving faster. I cup her tits and enjoy the ride. She should eat more, though. She's without a doubt the sexiest chick I've ever seen, but she's on the slim side. "Kiss me again."

"Are you a kisser, ciccino?" she chuckles breathlessly and leans forward. I catch her pouty lips with mine, my hands sliding down to her ass.

And no, I'm not really a kisser. But this bunny...yeah, she's...

"Cazzo," I curse, trying to catch my breath. With our foreheads touching, we both look down to where we're joined. What a sight. In and out of her pussy. My cock is greased, slick, which makes me hate the glove, 'cause I'd like to hit it raw, but no matter. It's still good. Hot. Wet. Oh, shit. No warning. "I'm gonna come," I grit out.

My head falls back as I explode. I pull her down on me roughly, thrusting upward hard and just as rough.

Isabella cries out, grinding to take me even deeper.

I'm fucking gone.

~oOo~

A week later, I say "I do" to Jane Wilkins.

It's the third time I've ever met her.
I get wasted at the reception while Jane is with her parents.

Dad says it's for the best—this union—and that it's not like I can't get pussy elsewhere.

That makes me think of my hummingbird. I haven't seen her since that one time last week. The last thing she gave me was a big smile when I tipped her five hundred. What? She earned it.

"You fuckin' around on Ma?" I slur to my pops. I know Carlisle has a couple broads on the side—he even has two bastard kids—but my old man's always seemed devoted to Mom. I don't know. Shit like that happens. Especially when you don't marry for love. Pshh. Love. That's bull. It's all about business. Paper.

Emmett has a mistress in Reno. Rosalie doesn't know. Felix fucks one of my dancers—Heidi—twice a week at my club. His wife has no idea.

"Watch that mouth, Junior," Dad chuckles and takes my drink. "Time for you to cut the cake."

Fuck the cake.

"Ay, Felix!" I shout across the restaurant we're at. "Get on ova' hea'!"

Felix walks over, two drinks in his hands. Both his. Faccia di merda—shithead.

"How's married life, cousin?" he laughs.

He should mind his fucking business, which I tell him. "Fatti i cazzi tuo!" He takes a seat next to me, and I throw my arm around him and lean in. "Listen," I say, keeping my voice low, "remember Heidi at Dawn?" He nods. "Yeah, well, you have a dancer in your club that I like. The new one? Italian and gorgeous."
He chuckles. "Isabella?"

"Yeah." I nod. "How about a trade? You take Heidi to Twilight, and I take Isabella to Dawn."

Apparently, my voice isn't low enough for Dad to not hear, though. "The German whore, Felix? Really?"

"Stay out of it," Felix tells him, pointing a finger. "And don't call her a whore."

I laugh, I take Felix's drink, I down it, I laugh some more, my life sucks.

And Felix tells me we have a deal. He'll take Heidi, I'll take Isabella.

"We'll get that sorted next month when—you know," he adds pointedly, and I do know. I won't be in town, because Felix is sending me to Los Angeles to handle some business.

~oOo~

I don't want a damn honeymoon—I don't want to leave Vegas for that—but it'd be rude to decline my father-in-law's gift to us. Well, one of the gifts. A night at the biggest hotel in town. The MGM Grand. And that's where we are now. I'm still drunk. A little coked up, too. My brother and I snuck out earlier and did a few lines.

We also had a brotherly chat—something he needed, because he's next. At twenty-three, I'm only a year older than he is, and I know our parents won't wait long before they start searching for his future. Though, I suspect Carlisle will be just as involved in that.

"I need a drink," I sigh heavily and walk over to the bar in our suite.

I hear Jane shuffling nervously near the bed.
As I take a swig of my gin, I watch her. The wife.

I shudder.

She's pretty, I suppose, but...no. Young. Only eighteen. Blonde. Pale. Ugh. Blue eyes. So far from Italian. She's also skinny and too girlish in her appearance. I want a woman. A real one. This one hardly has tits. No ass. No hips. No goddamn curves. No cushion for the pushin'.

"You a virgin?" I ask, leaning my elbows on the bar top behind me.

"What?" she gasps and looks appalled. I just raise a brow at her. "Of course I am!"

I shrug.

"Wouldn't you..." She hesitates. "...care if I wasn't? Or was...or am..." Now she's confusing herself.

"Why the fuck would I care?" I chuckle then shake her head. "No matta'."

Soon, she's not a virgin anymore.

Hey, I told her we didn't have to do anything, but she said she wanted it.

I've made the decision not to be with her again for a long, long time, though.

She's a kid!

"Goodnight, Edward," she mumbles as I turn off the lights.

"Night," I yawn before passing out.

The next morning, I write her a note before I leave.

_I'm going away on business. Move into the house while I'm gone._
There's money in my office. Any questions, talk to Mrs. Coppoletta.

I'll be back in a few weeks,

E.M.

~oOo~

I give Peter a nod, and he orders the two men to kneel.

After three weeks of tracking down these idiots, escaping the fuzz twice, and getting all the information I needed, I'm so ready to return to Vegas. I laugh to myself, 'cause I like that desert better. This one, outside of Palm Springs... It's just not home. It will, however, be the final resting place for these guys.

"You ready, Button?" I ask Michael. He's in my crew—newbie, still wet behind the ears, hence his nickname.

Thinks he's special just because he's Carlisle's bastard. Peter's also Carlisle's kid, but he knows how to watch his fucking mouth. They're a few years younger than I am, and they have a lot to prove.

Mikey wipes sweat off his forehead, no doubt exhausted after all that digging. I could've told one of the two others to dig the pits, but I don't like Michael, so...

"Yeah, done," he pants.

I nod and take a pull from my cigarette. Eyes on the soon-to-be dead men. Let's just say Vegas is off limits. They tried to weasel themselves in, knowing that the Coluccis and the Maisanos are the biggest families in Nevada. We rule that fucking city. Now they're gonna pay.

"You shoulda stayed away from Nevada, minchioni," I tell them, raising my Smith & Wesson. Okay, so it's not really mine. I clipped it from the
man to the left. I'm not gonna get caught with my own piece here. "You had your shit in LA, but that wasn't enough for you, was it?"

I don't wait for answers.

Two shots ring out in the desert.

Two thuds as they fall to the ground.

Another job well done.

~oOo~

As soon as I return to Vegas, I stop by Twilight.

"Felix in?" I ask the bartender as he gives me a drink.

"Yeah, I think I saw him enter his office a few minutes ago."

I'm not in a rush, so I take a seat near the stage, hoping I'll get to see Isabella. It should be her last night here tonight, and then she'll work for me over at Dawn. It's just a few blocks away. Plus, I have a proposition for her.

Halfway through my drink, she finally appears on stage with two other bunnies.

I'd clearly forgotten how irresistible she is.

Men around me ogle her shamelessly, and I wonder—with anger surging through me—how many she's...entertained...since my last visit.

Ten? Twenty?

I wince.

"Cazzo, she can dip low," I mutter into my glass.
I notice that she's on the pole farther away, so I make my way across the room and find a seat near her. Right there. By the stage. Much better.

The corners of my mouth turn up when she spots me.

Her smile is seductive, and I chuckle—a fifty in my hand—'cause money just makes people come. Crawl, in her case.

"It's been a long time, stranger," she says in my ear, and before I know it, she's off the stage to straddle me. That works for me, and the complaints ringing out around me only fuel my satisfaction.

"How are ya, my little hummingbird?" I ask and nip at her neck.

My hands cup her ass.

Which earns me one of her little humming noises.

"I'm good." She rolls her hips over my hardening dick. "How's married life? Long honeymoon, ciccino?"

I laugh through my nose, shaking my head. "I was gone on business. But now..." I pull her closer and kiss her soft lips. "I'm back, and I have something I wanna ask you."

She kisses me deeply, with so much passion... "Mmm, I like where this is going."

Mary, mother of...

"Stop moving," I moan when she grinds against my erection. "Woman, I can't think when you do that."

She laughs into the crook of my neck, which makes me smile, and then she straightens—thank God—allowing for my thoughts to clear. What a woman.
"I'm listening," she says, amused. That's the first time I notice how gorgeous her eyes are. Dark, rich brown. "What's the question?"

Right. I shake my head, clearing it. "How much do you make here?"

"Not enough," she replies, not missing a beat. "I got two kids at home to support. It ain't easy. Why?"

My eyes widen. "You got kids?" Shit, she can't be older than I am. I narrow my eyes. "Quanti anni hai?" I go on, asking how old she is. Admittedly, it's also to see if she understands when I speak Italian.

To my surprise, she laughs. It's beautiful. "They're not mine, but yeah..." She soberes and bobs her head slowly. "I take care of them. They're my brother's. And... I just turned twenty-one."

I nod slowly, processing, and I figure this isn't the best place to have this conversation.

What I want is her.

So, I decide to just show what I can give her.

"Come with me."


"You won't work here after tonight," I inform her. "Didn't Felix tell you?"

The thing is, I don't want her to be a dancer at all anymore, though I still want her at my club—only, as a waitress. And I intend to make it worth her time. Over and over.

"Um, he mentioned your club—Dawn."
"Yeah, listen—" I clear my throat "—I'm just gonna have a quick talk with Felix, and then we're outta here, all right?"

"Okay."

~oOo~

"What's so special about Isabella?" Felix chuckles as I count my money.

A smile plays on my lips, and the truth is that I don't know what's so special about her. Or if there is. But I want someone who I find sexy enough to get me hard.

The ten minutes with Jane...shit, I had to think about my hummingbird in order to come, and I couldn't even kiss her. One look into Jane's eyes told me that she wants flowers and rainbows—something I can't give her. Plus, I don't think she's ready for more sex. She's too juvenile and innocent. I don't find her very attractive at all.

"There's just something..." I trail off, still not able to answer properly.

He nods. "I know what you mean. I've been thinking about setting something up for Heidi."

"That's my plan for Isabella," I say and slip the envelope with my cut into my jacket. "But first I want to know everything about her."

Name, history, family, criminal record...

Felix laughs and walks over to a cabinet, swiftly pulling out a file. "Isabella Marie Savona: twenty-one years old, parents from Sicily—both deceased. Her mother in cancer, her father had a stroke."

He sits down in his chair again, and I nod to myself as he goes on.
"She left New York last year when her older brother was incarcerated out hea'."

My eyebrows rise, but Felix gives me a dismissive wave.

"Jasper Sonny Savona: twenty-five years old, moved to Las Vegas for a job. Petty crimes, in my opinion. Some stealing..." He shrugs. "It wasn't the first time he got pinched, though, so he got two years. Anyway, there's no woman involved in his life, as far as I know, so Isabella moved out here to take care of his kids—one son and one daughter."

I nod again, listening.

"He'll be out next year—September, I think." So, eleven months from now. "And the reason I hired her on the spot—" he smirks "—aside from her amazing body, that is... The Savonas are linked to the Mallettas in Jersey. At least her father was. Not sure about Jasper."

Interesting. Carlisle's always disliked Jersey—mainly the boss, Vinny Malletta—so the few times they've done business together, Dad has been forced to let his smooth talkin' lead the way. And I happen to know that Felix has suggested doing more shit with the Mallettas, but Carlisle has shut him down each time.

"So..." Felix lets out a breath. "I'd say you've got a good thing going on...if Isabella agrees."

Oh, I definitely hope she agrees.

"I'll make sure to let Heidi know her new workplace's address," I say with a smirk of my own.

~oOo~
After settling things with Felix, I drive Isabella over to my condo. To me, this is home. The house outside of town ain't. Just the thought of that house—not to mention Jane—makes my balls shrivel.

"You want me to be your goomah—your mistress, don't you?" she asks as I open the door for her. I grin and usher her into the condo. "I'm not sure whether to be flattered or insulted."

I chuckle at her bluntness. "I'm hoping for flattered."

She sniffs, trying to look indifferent, though I see the corners of her mouth turning up. "We'll see, Juniuh. We'll see."

Hearing her accent is like being out East again. I love it.

Then she tilts her head, looking up at me with a pensive expression. "Or do you prefer I call you Edward?"

I shake my head no and touch her soft cheek. "Junior's good."

"Hmm, so far so good, yeah."

My God, this is a dangerous woman.

"Come on," I snicker, "let me show you the place."

And I do. Hand in hand, I show her the two-story condo that I'm willing to sign over in her name. Downstairs we have a large living room adjoined to the dining room, then the kitchen, a guest bath, and a room for recreational activities. Upstairs is where we have the bedrooms—four of them—and two more bathrooms.

"This—" I open the door to the master suite "—is where I want you to share my bed."
She steps in, not shy at all, and appraises the room—the big bed in cherry wood, the matching furniture, the large windows.

Then she turns to me, hands on hips, looking so mouthwatering.

"So...what's expected of me? And..." She smiles. "...what do I get in return?"

What's expected of her?

Well...

My eyes roam over her sexy body, and I feel the need to loosen my tie.

"Aside from my body, tesoro mio," she laughs softly with a wink.

*Madonn'.*

Time to get it together. "Can you cook?" I ask, clearing my throat.

I work late all the time, and I'm sick of going out. Want I want is a nice meal every now and then, some peace and quiet, and some sexy entertaining. This condo is only a few blocks away from Dawn, so I'm pretty sure I will be here often. I can always tell Jane that I'm sleeping in my office or something.

"Is the sky blue?" she shoots back, cocking a brow. "What kind of question is that, *Edward*?" She actually sneers at me. "Of course I can cook!"

*So much fire.*

I grin broadly, hands stuck in my pockets. Otherwise, I'd just attack her.

"*Mi scusi, signorina,*" I apologize politely. "What I want isn't much more. Just...you...and a home-cooked meal a few times a week. Commitment, of course." I point at her. "Don't fuck around on me." The thought of her
with another man... I'd kill that motherfucker. "I also want you to work at Dawn, but only when I'm there—I want access to you at all times—and no more dancing. You'll be a waitress from now on." I pause. "In return, I will give you what your heart desires—"

She holds up a finger. "Don't bring up my heart, ciccino." She shakes her head. "I want to be taken care of, but we know hearts have nothing to do with this."

I nod once, just a dip of my chin, because what she said sounds fair. This isn't about feelings.

Though, I can't deny that I feel a pang of disappointment. For some reason.

"You're right," I concede then get back on track. "This condo will be yours. I will make sure you and your niece and nephew are provided for. Clothes, cash, food, jewelry..."

She nods slowly, eyes downcast. "And when the arrangement doesn't work anymore?"

"If..." Jesus Christ. Anger flares inside of me, but I manage to keep it to myself. "If it doesn't work, you walk away. The condo is yours, the cash in your purse at that point, the clothes, jewelry. It's yours."

She grins at me, an eyebrow raised. "What if I decided it didn't work out next week?"

She's good.

But I'm better.

"I'll make your life difficult if you rip me off," I tell her bluntly. The warning is as clear as day. With her upbringing—in New York, no less—her
brother's activities, her father's connections... She must have at least heard of my family. Or rather, my name.

"You betta' give me a time limit," she says pointedly. "I wasn't born yesterday, Mr. Maisano. And I refuse to have you rip me off. In fact, let's get this in writing, sí?"

"The mouth on you..." I laugh, both amused and impressed. "Fair enough. You have a couple witnesses?"

"Yeah. Shouldn't be a problem." She smiles smugly. "I'm pretty close with a girl named Heidi Rügg." Okay, so she's really smart. By involving someone who Felix cares for, it's not like I can ice Heidi to make the contract void. Felix would be pissed. "There's also my friend who is currently watching my brother's children." I raise a brow, 'cause her smugness is still very much present. "I'm sure you've heard of her. Brianna Maisano?"

My eyes go wide. "You know my fucking sister?!" I shout, holding out my arms. "How is that even possible?!"

Isabella just laughs. "We're the same age." I'm aware. That doesn't explain— "We met at a party a few months ago." Oh. "That's also how I met Felix—at a party; not the same as where I met Brianna—but I was still at my old job back then and had no reason to quit..." She trails off.

Well, I'll be talking to Brianna about this, that's for sure. I need to get my facts straight. And there's no way my sister and Isabella are gonna remain close. Out of the fucking question. I'll just pay someone else to watch the kids while Isabella works.

"No matta'," I spit out, trying to clear my head again. "Heidi can sign, but we're leaving my sister outta this. We good?"

"Yes." Now her smile is sweeter than sugar. "We good, Juniuh."
Chapter 2

Junior's POV

The day after, when we sign that contract, Felix and Alec—my witnesses—call Isabella a smart cookie. I suppose she is. She's also a sin. A coveted one, on my part, and I can't wait to be with her again. We did fuck last night before she had to go pick up her niece and nephew—whom I've learned are named Nicola and Lucia—but that doesn't count because she had to leave afterward. And what I want is a routine. I want to have her all night, going to bed, waking up...she will be there when I'm there.

I've already thought of it all.

I will have weekends at the big house with the missus, which includes family dinners at my parents' house—unless I'm working, of course—and I will tell Jane that the commute will be too much. Hence my staying at the condo in town from Monday to Friday.

Felix envies me...for about five minutes...before he decides to buy a condo here in town for Heidi.

Everyone's happy, eh?

Yeah.

I grin crookedly as Isabella hands back the pen to Felix.

Our names are on there now, in ink.

"You're stuck with me now, hummingbird," I say, drawing her close. Two years. That's what I put down as time limit if she wants to walk away with the condo. I nuzzle her cheek and ignore the guys behind me. "We should celebrate. On Monday when I get back to town. All of us."
As much as I hate it, it's Friday, and I have dinner tomorrow with my parents, brother, sisters, and the wife. Carlisle, Esme, and their children will be there, too.

"I can make dinner," she offers as I kiss her neck. And that right there? Cooking dinner? Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. The way into a man's heart. *Fuck*. No hearts. Forget I said that. "That'll give me a couple of days to finish up things at my old place."

"You need any help?" I ask, standing at full height. "I can send a few guys ova'."

She shakes her head. "It's literally just some clothes, the kids' toys, and photo albums. Then cleaning."

I nod. "And you have a car?" I go on without waiting. "No matta'. You'll get a new one."

Behind me, I hear Heidi tell Felix, "You give me new car, too, yes?"

German fuckin' accent. It does something to Felix. I never saw the appeal.

Isabella smiles up at me, indicating that she wants to speak for only me to hear, so I dip down to her level. "My car works fine, you know."

I smile back and shake my head. "I want to buy you a new one."

End of discussion.

With Isabella still in my arms, I face the guys. "Dinner at Isabella's place on Monday." Then I look back to Isabella. "What time should we say?"

She shrugs. "Seven?"

And back to Felix. I raise an eyebrow, silently asking if we have anything planned. Things often come up, but usually only for Emmett and Alec. I
have my club, my legit business, and then what Felix hires me for—taking people out. Only, that isn't a weekly occurrence. Just every once in a while.

"Seven sounds good," Felix says with a nod. "And no wives."

That goes without saying. "No wives."

Which means Emmett will probably bring his girlfriend—something that explains the smile on his face right now.

Before leaving, I tell Emmett, Felix, and Alec that I'll see them for dinner tomorrow, and then I spend a few minutes outside, kissing the daylights out of Isabella.

~oOo~

By the time I arrive at the house, Jane's asleep in her bed. *Our* bed, I suppose, but I "accidentally" fall asleep on the couch in the living room after my shower. I sleep well, waking up rested and refreshed to the smell of coffee. That kinda makes me smile. Maybe, if Jane at least knows how to manage a household, I don't have to be completely miserable here on the weekends.

However, when I enter the kitchen, wearing pajama pants and an undershirt, I notice that Jane isn't there. It's Mrs. Coppoletta.

"Good morning, Edward." She greets me with a motherly smile then rushes over to pour a cup for me. "Hungry?"

I nod and accept the coffee. "*Grazie mille.* Jane's not up?" At that, she frowns and busies herself with the waffle iron. Now, I've always been good at reading people, but that's not a skill you need with Mrs. Coppoletta. Her husband used to work for Carlisle but got clipped a few years ago when we were new out here. I tracked down the killer and popped one in his
head. Since then, I've taken care of Mrs. Coppoletta. She's like a grandmother—one who wears her heart on her sleeve—and you don't ever want to see your grandmother upset. She's been around since I was a kid; I know her.

"Tell me, Carmen," I say quietly, sipping my coffee. "What's wrong?" She shakes her head, avoiding eye contact, but sighs as if she's ready to throw down the gauntlet. I repeat my question. "Che cosa?"

She sighs again, facing me slowly. Hesitating. "Your wife..."

"What of her?" I raise a brow. "Out with it."

A third sigh, this one drawn out to the point where I don't know if I'm frustrated or amused.

Maybe both.

"Jane is...very used to having everything...handed...to her, sí?"

I snort a laugh into my mug and take a slow sip as I try to come up with a polite answer.

Oh, she's used to being a princess, all right.

"How has it been?" I ask, scratching my chin. "These past weeks—has she settled in?"

Carmen huffs and places her hands on her hips, at which I grin. "She's met some friends." I nod at her, remembering that Mom promised to introduce Jane to some friends' daughters. "They've been here a lot."

"Ah-huh...? Go on."

Umpteenth sigh. "I didn't expect to be their slave." The fuck? "When they're here, they ring that little bell—"
"Whoa, whoa, whoa. What fucking bell?" I shake my head. "No matta'. You're not supposed to obey her commands." That is just ridiculous. Mrs. Coppoletta's tasks don't go beyond cleaning and cooking, and...to be honest, I expected Jane to take over the latter.

I mean...she's a woman.

"I'll talk to her," I tell her.

~oOo~

When Jane enters the kitchen, I've already eaten breakfast, showered, and dressed for the day. I was really just waiting for her, while reading the paper and drinking more coffee.

Since I married her a little over three weeks ago, this is the first time I've seen her—not counting the morning after when I took off for Los Angeles.

She still looks too young for me. Too doll-like.

"You're home," she says, surprised, then smiles widely. She doesn't approach, though, for which I'm thankful. Maybe my expression tells her not to come close. Instead she sits down across from me at the table and digs into the breakfast Carmen made her.

"You usually sleep this late?" I ask, checking my watch. It's past noon and we're supposed to drive over to my parents in two hours.

She shrugs. "Sometimes. How was work?"

"Good."

"Where were you? You only said 'out of town'..."

I nod. "That's where I was—out of town."

"Oh."
Yeah, she stops there. If there's one thing she knows, it's to shut up about work. That's how she was raised—prepared by her father. Don't ask, don't tell, and pretend you don't see or know anything.

"Listen..." I clear my throat. "We live about forty minutes outside of town, so I'm gonna stay in my old condo during the week. Then I'll be here on Friday night for the weekend."

"Um..." Judging by the look on her face, I'd say she's both relieved and disappointed. That's good. It only proves that she's not fully ready for this. "You'll be here Saturdays and Sundays, then?"

"Yes. On Saturdays we have dinner with the family, and then on Sundays we go to church before we get together at Carlisle's house."

She nods in understanding.

"Another thing," I continue, "Mrs. Coppoletta is only here to make sure the house is clean. She cooks, too, but..." I stare at her. "Can't you cook?"

She gives me the same look she did when I asked her if she was a virgin—she's appalled. "Me? Cook?" She shakes her head furiously. "Oh, no. I don't cook."

Well, isn't that just great.

"What the fuck do you do, then?" I ask impatiently.

She shrugs. Again.

I wanna shoot myself.

Or her.

~oOo~
“Edward!” Mom exclaims after opening the door. "It's been too long; get over here."

I obey and let her hug the shit out of me, and then I kiss her on the forehead, quickly followed by polite small-talk about...nothing, really. Then it's Jane's turn, and Mom gives her a light hug, asking her how she is as we remove our jackets. For Vegas, it's damn cold.

The house, as Mom ushers us into the dining room, is loud and lively. Kids running around, babies wailing—Felix and Emmett each have two children—women gossiping while setting the table, and men talking about politics. There's shouting, plates clanging, laughing, words exchanged in both English and Italian, and...I wonder how the hell Jane is ever going to fit in. Luckily, Emmett's wife—Rosalie—is also a politician's little princess.

Emmett married her five years ago, when he was twenty-one and Rosalie was nineteen. She's the daughter of a Florida Senator—a man who will soon begin his campaign for his third term. We fund his campaign and give him a small cut of the profits, and he makes sure we have smooth sailing when our shipments come in from Miami. Whenever we run into trouble with the fuzz down there, he makes it go away.

It's an alliance that has resulted in millions.

It's all business.

Speaking of business...we leave all that out on weekends. As we take our seats around the table, it's insignificant bullshit all 'round. Rosalie talks to Jane about shopping, Alice—Felix and Emmett's little sister—speaks to my sisters about school, Mom and Esme are fussing over the children... I'm not really paying attention. I barely even listen to Carlisle and Dad who are talking about the race tracks.

I tune it all out, wishing I was in town.
With a certain Italian bunny.

~oOo~

On Sunday after church... and a good meal at Carlisle and Esme's, I drive us back to our house.

Jane is silent, and so am I.

But I'm pretty certain our thoughts are aligned. At least I hope so.

Mrs. Coppoletta rarely joins my family on Saturdays, but she's there on Sundays, and today...

I sigh heavily.

The topic as we ate was children.

Carmen started it, though she definitely didn't mean for us to hurry with having kids, but Mom and Esme thought differently. They told us repeatedly that they can't wait for Jane to get pregnant. Carlisle was smiling in approval, and I'm sure he feels the same. Children would only strengthen the godforsaken union I now find myself in.

The only family members I have on my side, really, are Alice, Victoria, Brianna—the three seem to have something against Jane, which I can't fault them for—and Felix and Alec. The rest pretty much want us to start trying right away.

Technically, Jane can be pregnant, since we were together on the wedding night, but... No way. I don't want that to happen, and I have no desire to be with her again. Ever, really. But definitely not now.

I plan to avoid sex with her for as long as I can.
"I'm not ready to be a mother," Jane whispers, breaking the silence in the car. "But...I guess it's not really up to me."

No. It's up to me. I'm the man. Lucky for her, I don't want children, either. At least not with her.

"A friend of mine in New York...her husband uses condoms."

I laugh under my breath. "We're Catholic, Jane. We won't use condoms." I use condoms—well, I have in the past. But that's different.

Besides, it doesn't matter, because we won't have sex.

"I know—" she swallows audibly "—and all of my friends are Catholic, too. I wouldn't tell anyone, Edw-"

"Save it," I tell her. "We won't use anything." I give her a sideways glance and decide to be honest. "And we won't have sex. 'Cause we're not attracted to each other."

"Oh," she breathes out. "Well, I wouldn't go that far—"

"I would." I chuckle. "Hey, I can only speak for myself, but this..." I wave a hand between us. "...it's business. All right? So, let's just...forget it."

She doesn't speak again.

And that night, I go to bed in a guest room.

When I leave the house on Monday morning, there's a smile on my lips. 'Cause I'll see my hummingbird soon.

~oOo~

As soon as I arrive at Dawn, I tell my bartender to send Isabella to my office when she gets here. Then I make my way out back and spend a
couple of hours going through my books and, in my opinion, I have it easy. Whereas Alec and Emmett have countless balls in the air at the same time—scams, robberies, frauds, shipments—I don't. I have my legit business, I have a small crew—just Michael and Peter, Carlisle's bastard sons—and I have my contracts. I answer to Felix—the underboss—and that's it. No worries about the Gaming Commission, crooked higher-ups, dealers...

Knock, knock.

With a ridiculous smile on my face, I'm quick to check the mirror and run a comb through my hair.

"Yeah, come in," I say, placing my wedding band in the top drawer. And there she is, looking amazing. "Isabella." Her smile is seductive as always, and fuck, I can't wait to get inside of her tonight. "You're lookin' gorgeous."

"Grazie, ciccino," she responds softly as she rounds my desk. I push out my chair, and she ends up in my lap. She also drops a bag on the floor, and then slides her hands up my arms. "Have you eaten lunch yet?"

I shake my head, watching my hand as it moves up her body. Over her smooth thighs, across the flimsy fabric of her black little dress, up her flat stomach, and I don't stop until I cup her breast in my hand. I smile when I spot the Dawn logo on her dress. It makes her feel more...mine.

"Well, are you hungry?"

"I don't..." She nibbles on my bottom lip. "...think hummingbirds actually hum. Or...you mean the wings? Is that—do they make that noise?"

I have no idea, and I couldn't care less. The name fits her.

I shrug then deepen the kiss, pushing my tongue into her mouth. She moans quietly, spurring me on, and I let my hand disappear under her dress. *Fuck.* I reach her panties and cup her pussy, which makes her whimper. It also makes my cock throb.

*What this woman does to me...*

"I need'a fuck you," I groan, pushing her panties aside. With my thumb, I massage her clit while two fingers slip inside of her. Her breathing hitches, and I realize that things have changed. I'm not looking for a quick release at this moment. This woman does something indescribable to me, and I find myself wanting to kiss her damn feet. I want to pleasure her, make her scream, and watch her face as she comes.

I want to tie her to me.

"Get up," I say, breathing heavily. "Hands on the desk. And pull down your panties."

She obeys, giggling, and I give her ass a smack...just because I wanted to.

It's a fine fucking ass.

"We can go get some lunch across the street," I mutter, pushing down my pants and underwear, "but I need to fuck you first."

I don't put on a rubber.

Like I said: I want to tie her to me.
"No need to leave, Junior," she moans as I finger her. I spread her wetness around, simultaneously kissing her neck. "I brought lunch for you."

I moan and replace my fingers with my cock. "Fuck." I grip her hips and set a fast pace. "You cooked for me?" She nods as I pound into her from behind. "Oh, yeah? What'd you make?"

She doesn't answer my question, but that's okay. Instead she starts moaning every time my hips slap against her ass. She meets every thrust, too, which makes it all rougher. Then she starts rambling shit in Italian—shit about my cock and how good I feel. Fucking dirty talker. I love it. And if she's into that, well...

"Ti piace il mio cazzo, bella ragazza?" I groan, asking my beautiful girl if she likes my cock. "Ti piace quando ti sfondo tutta? Si che ti piace." Next, I ask if she likes it when I fuck her hard, and I know she does.

She clamps down on me—so fucking hard—and cries out my name, mixed with "yes" and "more" and "please". Crazy damn bunny. This is what I wished for, and now I have it. Maybe my life doesn't suck anymore. Looking down to see where my dick disappears into her, I decide that no...no, my life doesn't suck. At all. Cazzo. And this time there's no glove.

Without much of a warning, the pleasure builds up inside of me before exploding. At the same time, I hear Isabella choke on a gasp as she comes, too. I groan and breathe heavily, still thrusting in and out of her, though at a slower pace. Almost lazily.

"So good," I breathe out, dropping my forehead to her shoulder. "Mi fai godere così tanto." I tell her how good she feels.

"Mmm..." She shivers as I kiss her neck. "Amazing."
After a few seconds of doing...nothing, really, I pull out of her and tuck myself back into my pants. Then I just slump down in my chair, spent in the best ways.

"Aww, Juniuh," she complains, at which my eyebrows rise. "You didn't use a condom?" She pulls up her panties.

I chuckle and hold up my hands. "Slipped my mind." She clearly doesn't believe me, so I widen my arms and go for both innocence and defense. "Hey, what's with the look? I swear I forgot. It's your—your fault—" I nod and point at her "—that I forgot." My eyes widen, too. "Your body. It's a distraction."

She shakes her head, amused—a lot better than pissed off—and then she walks around the desk to sit down in one of the two chairs there. She's also carrying that bag of hers, and now that I've gotten what I first wanted, I'm damn starving. So...she got food in there or what?

"Hungry?" Her smile is teasing as she reveals a lunch box. "I made pork chops."

Oh, hell yeah.

I accept the food from her and tell her, "Go clean yourself up first. Then we'll eat."

~oOo~

That night, twenty minutes past seven, I enter the condo, and I'm met by a full house.

Felix, Heidi, Emmett, Angela, and Alec are already here. It smells fucking delicious, and I grin to myself when I hear laughing kids and a cursing Isabella.
Stealthily, I make my way to the kitchen, and I stay hidden.

They're all in there, since the kitchen is pretty big, and I hear Felix, Em, and Alec chuckling and talking about sports, whereas the women appear to be with Isabella at the stove. 'Cause I hear plates, pans, and glasses clinking and clattering. I can only assume that Nicola and Lucia are running around somewhere in the middle. I haven't met them yet, so all I know is their names and that Nicola is five and Lucia three.

"Look at them—so adorable." That's Angela. Nice woman, I guess. Lives in Reno, though I suspect Emmett will move her to Vegas soon. "Emmett, don't you want a little bambino with me?"

The guys laugh, and Emmett says, "Like I don't already have two other kids to worry about? Christ—don't be cute."

Then there's something crashing to the floor, maybe a pan.

"Stop running!" Isabella shouts. "I almost knocked you two ova'. You should go wash up. Dinner's almost ready, and Juniuh will be here any minute."

I chuckle under my breath.

"Sorry, Zia Bella," I hear a sweet voice giggle. Must be Lucia.

"Yeah, sorry, Zia Bella." And that must be Nicola.

Bella. Well, that's accurate.

Said children come running out of the kitchen then, but they don't see me by the wall. They just run past, and all I see are two heads with dark curls.

I figure my eavesdropping is done for the night and walk into the kitchen. And it's a wonderful sight. The men are sitting at the table, drinking beer
and playing cards, and the women are by the stove, doing...making...cooking and shit. Heidi's chopping vegetables, Angela's stirring something, and Isabella...God. I watch as she bends over to get something from the oven.

"Oh!" Emmett shouts. "Look what the cat dragged in!"

Everyone turns to me, happy smiles on their faces, and this moment feels perfect.

~oOo~

Madonn', Isabella can cook. Seriously, like a chef or some shit. Her lasagna? Fuck me. And her side dishes...the stuffed artichokes and mushrooms, they make my mouth water, and the homemade zucchini bread? Forget about it. Everything's delicious. She even has her own special seasoning that she makes.

We all sit around dining room table, eating, talking, drinking wine, laughing...eating some more. I have Isabella on one side—Lucia and Nicola following—then Alec on my other side. Felix is at the other head of the table, Heidi on one side, and then Em on the other with Angela between himself and Alec. Food all around. This is how it's supposed to be.

"Can I go to play now?" Nicola asks. Despite being what seems like a mischievous little kid, it's clear that he adores Isabella. He shows great respect, but he's not shy. Since I got here, I've spoken to him a little, and he's been grinning and talkative.

"Not yet, topolino." Isabella shakes her head. "You need to eat more. That goes for you, too, Lucia." She kisses the top of the girl's head. "I'm sick of seeing you two so skinny." Lucia giggles when Isabella pinches her cheeks. "No more skin and bones."
She's a mother in my eyes. She's been taking care of Nicola and Lucia for a year now. And with meager pay, since she mostly worked at Felix's club during the day. The tips aren't as good then.

"You should've told me you were having trouble before, Isabella," Felix comments, looking pretty upset, though he's hiding it well. "I would've—I would've given you a raise or better shifts..."

Felix has a thing for taking in strays and helping them get on their feet. Not for nothing, of course; he helps, and then people owe him. But I'm nodding with him, because I agree in this case.

However, Isabella shakes her head dismissively and waves him off. "It wasn't *that* bad. I just... It's better now." She gives me a quick smile, one that I return. I also squeeze her thigh under the table. "Now I can make sure everything smells like food again. I love cooking."

That sounds amazing to me.
Chapter 3

Translation:

*Mamaluke* = Italian American slang for idiot.

*Tesoro* = Treasure.

*Mannaggia, sei così bella* = Damn, you're so beautiful.

**Junior's POV**

Over the next few months, we all settle into our new routine. Basically, it's my routine. For Isabella, Nicola, and Lucia, it's more of a new life. There's always a home-cooked meal waiting, whether it's breakfast, lunch, or dinner. There are new toys, new clothes, and new bikes for the kids.

I gotta say I cracked more than a few smiles when I saw Lucia on her little tricycle. And...Isabella. I spoil her, and she spoils me in return. She doesn't ask questions, but she sees if I've had a bad day and she offers massages, sex, meals, support... Anything and everything. And I love taking her out on the town. Dinners, shows, walks...

Meanwhile, I keep up the act in front of my family on the weekends. We go to dinners, to church, to a few "social functions," and then when we get back to the big house, Jane and I part ways. No pretense. Okay, I admit, she doesn't avoid me like I avoid her, and she has been trying to engage me in simple conversations, but I'm just not interested.

She has her own life out there, plenty of friends, and she *loves* spending my money, but I don't care. I've set a limit, and God help her if she spends more than that. I'd wring her fucking neck.

Jane is a headache.

Isabella is the medication.
I live for my weekdays when I'm in town. Granted, I've had a few business trips, but it's all good. I do my job, and when I'm at the club, Isabella's waitressing until she has to pick up the kids from kindergarten or preschool.

The nights are my favorites—the nights I spend with my hummingbird.

The holidays, a couple of months ago, I dutifully spent Christmas with the family, but I was with Isabella for New Year's. Felix, Heidi, Emmett, Angela, Alec, and his bunny—Kate—were there, too. Dinner, drinking, toasting... Good times. And then when everyone had left, Isabella and I spent the entire night in bed—not sleeping.

I guess there's only one thing I never expected.

I never thought I'd fall in love with Isabella.

How wrong was I?

It's nothing I can act on; it wouldn't be fair, because I can't give her marriage—and it does suck to feel trapped and unable to fully be with the one I want—though I'm almost certain that Isabella knows already. I can't hide that shit. There's a lot I can hide, almost everything in my life, but not that. So, I may not use the words, but I show her.

~oOo~

I enter the condo quietly, mindful when I close the door. I don't switch on the lights. After the three days I just spent in Chicago chasing down some mamaluke who tried to scam Felix, I'm exhausted. I barely even had the strength to go down to Twilight and get the rest of my cut. I did it, mind you, though it sure was tempting to say "fuck it" and do it tomorrow.

Stifling a yawn, I drag my ass up the stairs and into our bedroom.
The room is dark, but the city lights still allow me to see Isabella's sleeping form in our bed.

Once I've removed my clothes, I'm quick to join her in bed. Slowly, I peel off the covers and start kissing my way up her body. She's wearing dark blue satin shorts and a matching camisole. Nothing provocative, but still more than enough to turn me on. Her new curves also help. Her hips have widened slightly, her breasts are bigger, her ass is fucking flawless now, and her stomach is slightly softer. Just a size or two make a phenomenal difference. She's healthy and so gorgeous.

"Ti amo per sempre." I whisper that I'll love her forever, knowing she's still asleep. My lips brush over her chest, and I gently nudge her legs apart.

I reach her neck and add slight pressure to my kisses, my hands roaming her body, and after a few moments, she begins to stir.

"Isabella," I murmur as I slip my hand under the fabric of her camisole. Her skin is soft and smooth under my touch. She hums, causing me to smile as I kiss her jaw. "Il mio bell'uccellino." That's what she is, my beautiful little bird.

"Mmm..." She threads her fingers through my hair. "You have an obsession with birds, tesoro?" Now she's teasing me. I chuckle quietly, lips ghosting over her mouth. "Hi."

"Hey." I kiss her pouty lips.

"You're home," she sighs softly, and it's my turn to hum—in agreement. "I have something to tell you."

I lick my lips and peck her a few times. "Oh, yeah?"
Kneeling between her parted legs, I pull her up into a sitting position and tug on the hem of her top. Lifting her arms, she lets me pull it off her, revealing her luscious tits. Then she plops back against the mattress, and I swallow a moan as I watch her breasts jiggle a little.

"What do you have to tell me?" I ask, moving on to her shorts. With another tug, I pull them down and toss them...somewhere. "Mannaggia, sei così bella."

She smiles as I cover my body with hers. I kiss her deeply, groaning when our tongues meet.

"Ciccino," she whispers, pecking my lips. "I'm pregnant."

One might think I didn't want to hear that, or that I'm shocked... Who the fuck am I kidding? I am shocked. Or maybe...yeah, surprised is more like it. I should be neither, since we haven't used protection. Regardless, I can only smile. It feels good. Better than I can explain.

"Good," I whisper back, giving her chin a little nip. I can see the relief rolling off her, so I add, "You're gonna be the best mother to our children."

That makes her laugh. "As in more than one?"

"Oh, yeah." I grin and kiss her forcefully, needing her. "Lemme have you, hummingbird."

She kisses me and nods, and then I sink into her with a low moan.

It's unhurried. We take our time—I even stop to kiss my way down her body—and I send a silent prayer to God for blessing us with a child as I kiss her belly.

The only thing missing is that I want her to feel the same I do.
But I say nothing, because it won't happen.

~oOo~

Approximately eight months later, Isabella gives birth to our son.

It's bittersweet, because I can't love them more than I already do—at least that's how it feels—but I can't give Isabella my name. Only my son has my name.

I name him Anthony Jasper Maisano—Jasper because it matters to Isabella, and I'm fine with that. He's her family. And the look in her eyes when I told her I'd honor her wish was enough to live on. So much gratitude.

I admit to shedding more than a few tears when I hold my son for the first time.

Isabella's brother, who was released from prison a few months ago, is out in the waiting room, along with Felix, Heidi, Alec, and Kate. It feels good to have them here, because they know what I'm going through. Okay, Jasper doesn't. Not really. He doesn't know that I love his sister, but the rest have figured it out.

They also know that our lives are the same. Heidi is also pregnant, and Felix hates that he'll be separating his child—it'll be his third in all, but his first with Heidi—from Heidi by name. And Alec sees his own future. Carlisle and Dad have found Alec's future wife, and it sure as hell ain't Kate.

It's some broad from Sicily—one who can't speak a word in English—but she comes from a very powerful family, and Carlisle sees a lot of scratch coming in if we form an alliance. Said family is big in heroin, and with this alliance, we will be the distributors stateside.
It's life.

Another thorn in my fucking side is the wife. She's made it abundantly clear that she wants me, and though I make the rules—therefore making it easy to make sure she keeps her distance—it's only a matter of time before my family begins to wonder why Jane isn't pregnant yet.

So...her, it's easy to push away. Carlisle—if he finds out that I'm not even being intimate with my wife? Not so much. He'd see it as a threat, as me dishonoring the alliance with Jane's family in New York. He doesn't care who I fuck on the side, of course, but he sees children as a way of strengthening bonds.

A child is a powerful pawn—his words.

It'd be my word against Jane's if my wife spoke up, and my word is what matters, but a small seed planted would be enough to make Carlisle suspicious.

"Hey." Isabella's whisper brings me back to the present. "I fell asleep?"

I smile at her then look down at Anthony who's sleeping in my arms. "It's been a long day," I chuckle quietly, looking back to Isabella. "Get some more sleep."

She shakes her head. "There are people waiting to come in, no? It's okay."

I hesitate, so protective of my loved ones. "You sure you're up for it?"

"Yes."

I relent.

Soon, we have our friends joining us in Isabella's hospital room, congratulating us.
I wouldn't admit to it out loud, but I wish my parents and my sisters were here, too.

~oOo~

After church, on the way over to Carlisle and Esme's house, it feels like God is testing my restraint.

"Edward," Jane whines.

"OH!" I shout. I slam down on the brakes, making us skid to a halt, and turn to glare at her. "Cut that shit out!"

She's been on and on about this since I got back to the house yesterday morning.

"I'm your wife, dammit!" she cries out in fury. "What husband doesn't want to be with his wife?"

My grin is sinister as I wag my finger at her. "Watch that fucking mouth of yours." I point to my temple. "A piece of advice? Don't push it, 'cause I just might snap."

It'd be so easy to just fucking backhand her.

She sniffs. "Are you seeing someone else?"

"No," I laugh.

"Oh..."

The rest of the ride is quiet, and I use the time to think about Isabella and our son.

Time passes too quickly. Anthony's already seven months old, and he does new things every day. Nicola and Lucia—who live in the condo next door with Jasper—love coming over to fuss over my boy. Which they do
often. Now that Isabella's not working anymore, she usually ends up taking care of Jasper's kids, too, especially when he's out of town.

He works for Felix now. Nothing serious yet—he has to prove himself, make his bones—but he's a good lowman, eager to work. And he's smart, too. Fast and sneaky. He doesn't talk back, but he's still fierce. I like that.

When we get to Carlisle's house, Jane is quick to leave the car and slam the door shut.

"Ungrateful brat," I mutter under my breath as I follow her. By the time I reach her, Esme opens the door to invite us in. The house doesn't smell like food yet—they left the church only ten minutes before we did—but I know that much has been prepared since earlier, so I doubt we'll have to wait long.

"Your father, Carlisle, and Felix are in the den," Esme tells me as I enter the house. "We're just waiting for a few more."

I nod in understanding and leave the hallway to seek out the men.

On my way—as I pass one of the guest rooms—I accidently hear something coming from one of my sisters. It's Brianna, and she's whispering—which definitely piques my interest—to Alice. More than that, I heard her mention Isabella's name. Since the door isn't closed completely, it's not hard to hear what they're saying.

"...remember? She took care of her niece and nephew while her brother was in prison," I hear Brianna whisper. My brows knit together. "And when she was at work, I used to babysit the children. Then one day, out of the blue, she doesn't need me anymore."

"Yeah, I remember," Alice responds quietly. "What about her?"
Brianna lowers her voice even more, but I can still hear. "I saw her last night in town. After the movie?" She pauses. "Get this, she wasn't alone."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, hoping to God Isabella wasn't with Anthony.

"Who was she with?" Alice asks.

"Some dark-haired guy—little curly, just long enough to be in a ponytail. He had a small scar next to his eye." Jasper, of course. "But there was someone else, too. A baby."

"Shit," I groan under my breath.

"And, Alice? He looked...Just. Like. Junior."

Fuck.

With a fake grin plastered on my face, I walk into the room.

They look shocked, to say the least.

"What's going on in here?" I ask, twirling my finger in a circle. Brianna knows the grin on my face—the one I put on when I'm really fucking furious. "You don't wanna be rude, do ya? I mean—talkin' about me...shouldn't you let me be here then?"

Brianna holds her hands up. "Junior—"

"Fucking save it," I hiss. "Gossipping about your own brother?" I widen my arms.

"No! We were just—just talking, a-and-"

"Non me ne frega un cazzo!" I shout, telling her that I don't give a fuck, but then I lower my voice, because I don't want to attract a goddamn crowd. "If you got something to say, Brianna, say it to me." I poke my
chest and glare at her. "Don't disrespect me and go behind my back. Capisce?"

"Oh! You wanna talk about disrespect, big brother?" She returns my glare with one of her own. "How about taking your own advice, huh? How about being honest!"

I laugh at that shit. "I don't have to answer to you, sis."

"But I have to answer to you?"

"You do if you're talking about my life!"

The little brat gets in my face—well, she tries to; she's really short—and shakes her fist at me. "Family concerns me, Junior," she practically growls. It's cute. Had I not been pissed at her, I would've kissed her on the forehead and called her adorable. God knows I love my sisters, and they have so much fire in them, but they can be annoying as hell. Not so much Victoria, but this one? I shake my head. She's way out of line, and I could just slap her. "And that little boy is your kid, isn't he?"

I don't reply. While it's none of her business, I won't deny my own son.

"He looked just like you," she whispers harshly. "Know what else? I heard Isabella calling him Anthony. That's your middle name!"

Reining in my temper, I put a sinister smile on my face and cup her cheek. "It's none of your business, Brianna. Nor is it Alice's." I jerk my chin at my quiet cousin, and Brianna slaps my hand away. "Ay! Watch it."

She huffs. "I want to meet my nephew." Then she smirks. "Or else..."

My eyebrows rise as I stare her down. "That a threat?"

"No. It's a promise." She nods and points at herself. "I'll tell Mom and Dad that you got yourself a mistress and a son."
I could laugh at her childish antics, but I don't.

Dad wouldn't care, despite what my sheltered sister seems to think. Mom would, but that doesn't matter. However, if it got back to Carlisle—Alice's fucking father—things could get ugly in the future. I can't be punished, but Carlisle could very well ruin things between Isabella and me.

He's a threat.

He's also my boss—*the* boss.

I have no say.

~oOo~

On Monday, I leave my club early, only to drive out to my parents' house to pick up Brianna and Alice.

While Brianna's beaming brighter than the sun, my lips are pressed together in a grim line as I drive us toward what I call home. Alice also looks happy, though not as much as Brianna. Alice isn't supposed to be here, but my sister insisted she come, too. Plus, since Alice knows everything, I just said "fuck it" and allowed them both to tag along.

I'll make them regret it if they talk.

"I thought you sold the condo before you married Jane," Brianna mentions pensively.

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel, hating, dreading, fearing. Now, there's not much in life I fear—I'm a killer with no qualms about it—but the life I share with Isabella and Anthony? That's everything to me. My safe haven. And the thought of mixing my two lives together...

I sigh.
I know that Brianna and Alice won't tell anyone—unless they want to suffer—but that doesn't calm my fears completely. Just the idea of someone close to Carlisle finding out about Isabella makes my blood run cold. I don't count the guys, of course, seeing as most of us lead double lives, Felix most of all.

Much like me, he can't stand the sight of his wife and has even talked to Carlisle—his own father, mind you—about a divorce. Yeah, that didn't go over very well. However, Felix already has two children with his wife, so there's not much pressure on him, other than that he has to stay with his wife. Divorce is not accepted. The mere word is a curse. Sort of like mentioning Jane's name in the condo. It doesn't happen. She doesn't exist when I'm with Isabella. We have our little bubble.

Speaking of... "No talk about Jane or family when we get there." I give both girls a look in the rearview mirror that says how serious I am. "Not a single word."

"I promise," Brianna says with a nod.

Alice follows, also nodding. "Prometto."

Still wound up and agitated, I pat my pockets for my smoke and light one up.

~oOo~

When I open the door to the condo, the first thing I do is breathe in. It's what I always do, and it always smells so damn delicious. The next thing is the smile on my face. Also automatic. Though I'm still pissed off, Isabella's presence works wonders with me. And this time it's the sound of her voice. I know that she's in the kitchen preparing dinner—most likely with Anthony on her hip—and she's singing softly to him.
"Isabella," I call, heading for the kitchen as I loosen my tie. With my sister and cousin removing their scarves and cardigans and whatnot, I figure I have a few seconds before they join us in the kitchen. 'Cause I haven't told Isabella about our company tonight.

And I was right. My hummingbird is standing by the stove, gently swaying Anthony from side to side as she adds herbs to the sauce she's making. She smiles when she sees me.

"I'm home," I say dumbly with a silly smile, walking over to them. I wrap my arms around them both, eager to have them close after the weekend I've had. "God, how I missed you two."

Anthony giggles and grabs my face, at which I make growling noises against his cheeks.

"Look at Daddy being all funny," Isabella chuckles as I pepper his cute little face with noisy kisses. "Oh, so now it's okay to smile, huh?"

"That's 'cause Daddy's home." I grin and playfully nibble on his nose. "Isn't that right, piccolo tesoro? Yeah, you're my little treasure." With a final kiss, I focus my attention on Isabella. "Has he been cranky today?" I tuck a piece of hair behind her ear.

I know that he's teething, and my boy can scream like no other. Aside from that, though, he's fucking perfect. He's mature for his young age, already crawling, pushing himself up when he has something to hold onto, and he's said "Ma-ma" several times.

This is one of the many moments throughout my day that I want to tell Isabella how much I love her. She's so amazing with Anthony, and... And nothing. Why wish for something you can't have? It's pointless.

All I can do is tell my son that I love him—something I do often.
"Understatement," Isabella responds...before stiffening in my embrace.

Right. We have company. And I'm willing to be that both Brianna and Alice are standing behind me in the doorway.

I sigh and give Isabella an apologetic smile. "I tried calling you earlier," I say quietly. "I'm—I'm sorry for the ambush. My sister saw you with Anthony—on Saturday? Here in town, and she put..." I rub the back of my neck. "She put two and two together."

"Oh," she breathes out, relaxing, if only a little. Her eyes are still trained on the two women behind me. "I see. Well, I suppose it's a good thing I always cook for a football team, huh?" She smiles, but I can see that she's nervous.

I smile and cup her cheek. "Hummingbird," I whisper, leaning down a little. "This is our home, yeah?" She nods minutely. "Good. Be yourself."

Her smile widens slightly, and I breathe out in relief when I see how she squares her shoulders—my strong and fiery girl appearing again.

With that, I scoop up Anthony—'cause I miss the little man—and then I turn around to face Brianna and Alice. Can't say I'm surprised to see my sister's eyes welling up. She's an emotional one.

"Brianna, Alice, this is Isabella, and," I chuckle as Anthony hides his face in the crook of my neck, "this is Anthony." I look down Isabella and squeeze her hand. "Isabella, this is my sister and cousin—second cousin...no matta'."

I know that Isabella and Brianna know each other already, but this feels more official.

"So nice to see you again, Isabella," Brianna gushes, and I think she surprises all of us when she comes forward and hugs Isabella tightly.
It feels good, though. Very good. The tension shifts, and by the time the greetings are over, Brianna and Alice insist on helping Isabella with dinner. They talk, start getting to know each other, and I sit back with a beer and cuddle up with my little boy.

And later that night, after making love to my hummingbird, she tells me that she's pregnant again.

Despite the…nuisances…surrounding me, everything is still good in life, and I can't wait to see Isabella's body changing with a pregnancy again.

~oOo~

In order to make calculated decisions, I'm not supposed to let moods and feelings affect me, and I'm definitely not supposed to allow them to be reasons for a decision. But Isabella brings it out of me.

Now, for instance, when she's six months pregnant with our second child and riding my cock…I want to tell her that I love her. The room is dimly lit, creating shadows. Her stomach looks more protruding, her breasts look larger than they already are, and...

I need to tell her that I love her.

"Fuck," I gasp, instinctively thrusting upward when she becomes tighter. So slick and hot, so fucking perfect. I can't take my eyes off of her. Sitting up, I crash my lips to hers. My hands knead and grope her tits, which makes her moan, whimper, and arch into me.

The week I've just had… I clipped three men, I almost got shot, I was at a sit-down that almost ended in a bloodbath, and I dodged my mother's questions about why Jane's not pregnant yet. The week has been fucking awful. But then I come home to Isabella's cookin', Anthony running into my arms while yelling for Dada, smiles… We sat down together with
Jasper, Nicola, and Lucia and had a great dinner, after which Isabella rubbed my neck and I talked to her stomach...

"Baby," I moan, shivering as her fingernails dig into my shoulder blades. I kiss her again—it's the only way to make sure I don't say those three fucking words—and then I'm suddenly close.

"Yesss," she hisses and rolls her hips. Oh Madonn', so good. "Close, ciccino. Oh...aahhh..."

I slip a hand between us to massage her clit, and it doesn't take many seconds before she's clamping down on me, a silent scream leaving her mouth. And with a strangled groan leaving mine, I follow.

*I'm going to tell her.*

Decision's made.

~oOo~

The morning after, when I've showered and dressed for the day, I find Isabella and Anthony in the kitchen.

"Dada!"

"Morning, tesoro." I grin and pick him up. With him on my hip, I walk over to Isabella plant a real one on her luscious lips. "And how are you this morning?" I kiss her nose as I rest my free hand on her baby bump. Only three months to go. "Sleep well?"

"Mmhmm," she hums, smiling. "All's good. You?"

"Molto bene—very good." I chuckle when Anthony squishes my cheeks together. "You bein' funny, little guy?"
"Take your seats, boys," Isabella laughs quietly, pointing at the table. "I'll bring you breakfast."

Before sitting down in my usual spot, I sit Anthony in his highchair. He giggles, occupying himself by banging his sippy cup on the table, and I occupy my own time by watching Isabella flit around the kitchen.

No time like the present?

"Hummingbird?" I ask, clearing my throat. And she hums, winking at me over her shoulder. It relaxes me, and...she feels the same, right? God, I hope so. "I..." I blow out a breath. I have her attention now; her eyes show curiosity. "Um. We've been—I mean..." How long has it been for us?

"A little ova' two years," I say, waving a hand between us, "since we met."

"Yeah...?" she responds slowly.

I nod. "And we have a child together."

Isabella could walk out of my life now if she wanted to—the condo, the car, jewelry worth thousands would be hers—but Anthony's not going anywhere, which means Isabella won't leave, either. If she did? I shake my head internally. I'd hunt her down.

"Is something wrong, Juniuuh?" she asks, confused, concerned.

I shake my head no. "Nothing's wrong. I just—" I stop abruptly, nervous as hell, but then I force myself to go on.

"I love you."

There. I said it.

I exhale shakily. "I'm in love with you. Have been for..." I laugh, not particularly amused—more anxious. "...for a long fucking time."
She stares at me, eyes wide, lips parted.

She loves me, too, right?
Chapter 4

Hummingbird's POV

When I was little, my mother told me that girls should always guard their hearts.

"In the world we live in, bella bambina, we need to be careful," she'd say softly while tucking me into bed. Her eyes were kind. She'd smile down at me and caress my cheek. "Love passionately, but love yourself the most—only give your heart to your children. Take care of others, but make sure to take care of yourself first."

My mother wasn't selfish; she just had life experience.

Her father—my grandfather—was a cop, but she didn't bat away Dad's advances—despite the reputation Dad had in our neighborhood. My grandfather was furious, and I'm pretty sure—to this day—that his death, which occurred around the time Mom and Dad got married, was far from accidental.

Dad wanted Mom and went after her. In turn, she embraced the life my dad gave her. He was a made man—Mom told me, and... I guess that's the only thing she did that was wrong. She didn't look the other way, and she didn't pretend to be stupid. As I grew up, Dad divulged more and more about "work" to Jasper, and Mom divulged to me. Dad prepared Jasper—Mom prepared me.

She had no right, but she did it anyway.

She always made sure that I never resented my father, but she also gave me the truth. It was just how the world—how things worked...functioned. Still does. She wasn't in love with Dad, but she cared for him deeply. She gave him everything except for her heart.
That way, when Dad lied and told Mom he was going to work when he was really going to see his other woman, she wasn't hurt. When he came home with tacky lipstick marks on his collar, she didn't break. Instead she focused solely on Jasper and me. She surrounded herself with good friends, she was kind, she managed the household, she put on music and danced with me in the kitchen, and she did things for herself.

When I got a little older, she'd also say, "Listen to what I say—I say it because I care and because it's how I feel—but you make your own decisions. What I feel might not apply to you. But listen first."

I did listen.

I learned to be happy with what I had and to not be greedy.

It keeps me content and my chest light.

Now, since my parents died a few years ago, I've formed my own opinions, but they don't stray far from Mom's. You can't help who you fall in love with, because it's nothing you can simply decide. You can, however—in my opinion—try to avoid it. And while it would be so easy to fall in love with Edward Maisano—the amazing man I've now shared my body with for two years—there are things I need in order to surrender.


Junior gives me many things, but commitment and fidelity are two things he can never promise.

I see what I have and I'm happy with it, but I still know reality. I'm not stuck in dreamland. I know that he's married, I know that his job is far from a legal one—I've sure heard of the Coluccis, and I bet he's a made man, too—and he most likely has children with his wife, as well!
How should I know? His wife's name is never uttered in our house, and I never see him wearing his wedding band. Same goes for his work. I know that he's not an upstanding citizen, but it's nothing we talk about. I know the Junior who lives here, but I don't know the Mr. Maisano he is as soon as he's out the door.

No, I have what I have, and that's it. What I don't have is what keeps me from falling in love with him, for which I'm thankful. Because I don't want a heavy heart, and I don't want feel broken.

And now he's just confessed that he loves me.

Like I said...it'd be so easy to fall for him. He's an amazing father, a perfect lover, and...a lot of things. But I can't. I just can't love him.

He's not mine.

"Can you say something, hummingbird?" he asks anxiously.

I draw a shaky breath.

I'm his mistress, his goomah, his comare.

The mother of his son.

Not his wife.

I'm here to take care of him—to make sure he's happy—and right now he obviously wants me to return his sentiment.

So, I will. Even though I don't really mean it.

"I love you, too," I whisper.

**Junior's POV**
I give her a tight-lipped smile—it's all I can muster—because it's obvious that she lied.

She doesn't feel the same.

_Fuck._

My smile becomes genuine when Anthony reaches for me, though, and I spend my morning focusing on him instead.

Well, I try.

Truth? That shit hurt—_hurts_—like a son of a bitch, but there's little I can do about it. I just need to count my blessings.

So, she doesn't love me—she still cares. Her eyes say everything, which I should've thought about before I confessed my undying love like a fucking _fanook_. In those eyes of hers, I see affection, passion, kindness, fire, compassion, strength, and...many other things.

But I don't see love.

_Counting my blessings._

She cares, she's the mother of my son—and our unborn child—she's...

Everything.

Fuck my life.

_No_. I shake my head to myself. I can't let this get me down. I'll take some time to let this settle, and then I'll move on. She, Anthony, and the little one in her belly are all I want—the goddamn light of my life.

Things are still good.

~oOo~
The first cracks in our bubble appear two years later.

Handling Jane has been easy as hell. She's developed quite a love for alcohol and pills, and I may or may not have told her that we've had sex on several occasions and that she simply doesn't remember 'cause she was too drunk.

A couple of weeks ago, for instance, I forced myself to be in the same room as her. I pretended to be nice and charming—I even sat next to her on the couch. We talked a little about Brianna giving birth—she got married last year to some lawyer. In the meantime, as we spoke, Jane was guzzling down Alabama Slammers like there was no tomorrow. And then, when she passed out, I carried her upstairs and put her to bed before I dropped my clothes on the floor then left. That way, there was evidence of my being in there.

Like I said, Jane's easy to handle. Plus, she's seriously stupid, and she has no choice but to fucking obey me.

Carlisle is another matter.

Usually, whenever he wants to see us, we meet up at Felix's club. But lately, we've met at Dawn. Isabella doesn't work there—hasn't for years—but the first time Carlisle came, he came unannounced...and I had a photo of my kids on my desk.

He saw it.

This was last month, and he said, "Well, at least we know you’re fertile, Junior."

The warning was clear.

I'm definitely allowed to keep doing what I do, but he wants a child to be born from my marriage, too.
I've always respected Carlisle and regarded him with a sense of...*this is a man I look up to*. But when he sat there and studied the photo of my son and daughter—my tough guy, Anthony, and my little goofball, Elisa—I was angry and resentful.

He's the reason I can't introduce my children to my own parents. Brianna knows, of course, but that's it, and I haven't allowed her to come by too often. A few dinners—that's it. Last week, she came by for a while to introduce Isabella to little Colin, my nephew. Alice has also been there those handful of times, but when Isabella divulged to me that Alice had taken an interest in Jasper—who happened to be at one of the dinners—I made sure it was the last dinner Alice attended.

He's still just a lowman, though he's definitely gained more respect in the past two years, but that doesn't matter. It's not a union Carlisle would approve of, and the last thing I want in my life is more family drama.

For a while now, I've paid attention to the subtle hints from Felix. He's not as devoted to his father as he once was. He has three children with Heidi now—evidently, twins run in her family—and he adores them all.

But that means shit to Carlisle.

Just a few days ago, Jane's father bribed a handful of men to make sure two of our soldiers out in New York got out of jail, charges dropped. Safe to say, there's no way Carlisle would let me divorce Jane. And Heidi? She's nothing but a common whore in Carlisle's eyes. Hell, he'd see Isabella the same way, though that would stem from Carlisle's dislike for Jersey.

Isabella's father—I'm not sure how high he ranked, but he was a made guy—was linked to the Mallettas in New Jersey. Granted, Carlisle did business with Vinny Malletta on occasion, but they often disagreed, leaving my father to act as a peacemaker. I hadn't made my bones yet at that time, so I've never been present at a sit-down with them, but I
wonder if Felix has met Isabella's father. All I know is that he died a few years ago, and seeing as Felix is five years older than I am, it's definitely possible. But again, I don't know how high up Isabella's dad was.

Anyway...

Then there's my brother... Hotheaded Alec. He's married now, too—to a woman named Maria—and though he actually fucks his wife, Carlisle—always up in our business—still isn't satisfied.

Maria's father apparently sees her as a real goddamn princess, and I don't know how often she's called him to rat Alec out. Okay, so he gets a little handsy; sometimes his temper gets the best of him. Especially if he's drunk. No matter. She calls up Daddy in Sicily, after which Daddy calls Carlisle to yell at him for how Alec behaves. In my opinion? It's not Daddy Dearest's fucking business if Alec slaps Maria around. She's Alec's wife, for fuck's sake.

But in the end, Carlisle gets in Alec's business. It's all so ridiculous. What happened to separating business from personal life? This isn't how it's supposed to be. As long as Carlisle keeps making scratch, he should just keep his mouth shut. But see, that's where it gets tricky. 'Cause our personal lives—due to our fucked-up marriages—all go hand in hand with Carlisle's business. Had Alec not been married to Maria, Carlisle wouldn't have his deal with the largest heroin distributors in Italy—Maria's family. Had I not been married to Jane, Carlisle's boys back East would be on a tighter leash. And had Emmett not been with Rosalie, our shipments down in Miami wouldn't have gone through without hassle.

It's becoming too much.

I'm losing respect for my boss, which is dangerous. That lack of respect could cloud my judgments and cause me to make bad decisions. My resentment toward him could also cause me to act out.
Emmett doesn't care. He's happy with the life he has, but Felix? Felix is different. As the underboss, he's hard and calculating, but when he's off the proverbial clock—if there was one in our world—he's a devoted father. He likes the peace and quiet, much like I do.

I don't give a fuck about family drama because it doesn't concern me, but evidently it concerns Carlisle.

He wants to control every little thing.

*Fuck it.*

~oOo~

I wake up in the middle of the night when the phone rings.

Detangling myself from Isabella, I pick up the phone on my nightstand. "Yeah," I answer gruffly, rubbing my eyes.

"It's Felix."

That woke me up. "Listening."

"I have a job for you. I'm at Twilight—you have an hour." Cradling the phone between my shoulder and cheek, I get out of bed and reach for my clothes, all while trying to make sure the cord doesn't get in the fucking way. "And don't call Petey or Michael. I only want you on this."

"Got it," I say, and he ends the call. Since Felix and I are usually more laid back toward each other—he's more of a brother than a boss when we get together—I know by the tone of his voice that he has a contract for me, and there may be problems if the target's name got out within our organization.

After dropping a kiss on Isabella's forehead, I leave our bedroom and walk into Anthony's room to kiss him, too. I'd do the same with Elisa, but that
girl is one light sleeper. Sort of like me, actually. But that's probably the only thing she got from me. At the age of two—well, almost—she's a Daddy's girl who looks like Mommy. The eyes, the nose, the mouth, the hair, the works. All of it is Isabella. Which means she's fucking perfect.

We'd have a third little one, too, but Isabella miscarried about seven months ago—she was two months pregnant, I think—and it broke her heart. She also confessed that she was afraid the miscarriage was gonna make me leave her. Stupid woman. Sure, it upset me, but it wasn't Isabella's goddamn fault.

And that right there? She was scared I'd leave her? Yeah, that makes me wonder if she really doesn't love me. I tell her sometimes—that I love her—and she always says it back. But it never feels genuine. Still, I can't help but wonder just how much she cares for me. Or why she can't fucking love me the way I love her.

"Fuck," I grunt when I almost trip over one of Anthony's toys in the kitchen. In the fridge, I grab a soda, and just as I close the door, the light comes on, revealing a sleepy Isabella in the doorway.

"Did someone call?" she asks, stifling a yawn. She looks fucking delectable in that black satin negligee. I have a thing for making sure she always has provocative lingerie. "You're dressed."

I nod and take a swig from my soda. "Gotta work." Then I wave a hand at the floor. "Clean up this mess in the morning."


I wave her off, 'cause it's not that big of a deal. She always keeps a clean house; this isn't a common thing. I just don't wanna trip over toys in the middle of the night.
"Gimme a kiss before I go," I say. She walks over to me, and I smile as I nuzzle her cheek. So fucking gorgeous, and I tell her just that. "Sei fantastica."

"Smooth talker," she whispers with a coy smile. I grin and slap her sweet ass. Fuck. It feels so good in my hands. "Always with the hands, ciccino."

I wink. "I own in—and you love it." I know she does. In our home, she acts like a lady unless I'm pounding into her. That's when she's my whore. She knows her place, but she's not a doormat. I just wish I could make her my goddamn wife.

"It's Friday today," she mentions, clearing her throat as she takes a step out of my embrace. "Will you have dinner here tonight, or are you eating with your wife?"

"Watch it," I warn quietly, grabbing her jaw. "We don't talk about her in this house. What's wit'chu?"

She shrugs and averts her eyes, though I'm still holding her jaw. "I'm just gonna miss you."

I chuckle and slide my hand up to cup her cheek. "I'll miss you, too, my hummingbird, but I'll be back as soon as I can." She nods, pouting a little, and I admit that I like it. I want her to miss me. "Kiss me."

She does, and she puts so much passion into it that I almost lose my fucking breath.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: she's a dangerous woman, who has too much of an effect on me.

After four years with Isabella, she's still the only one for me. I haven't fucked around—hell, I can't even fuck my own wife. My hummingbird is wicked. She even made me fall stupid in love with her.
And on my way to Felix, all I think about is her.

However, as soon as my ass hits the chair in his office, my head is in the right place.

~oOo~

"This doesn't leave this office," Felix tells me, sliding a photo across his desk. I lean forward and take it, only needing a quick look before I understand the situation. "Make it look like an accident." I nod in understanding. "And you have three days to get it done."

I purse my lips, my eyes flicking between the photo and Felix.

It's a shot of Marcus Ocello—one of Carlisle's capos from New York. He has three out there and three here.

"You didn't..." I clear my throat and hold up the photo. "This doesn't come from Carlisle, does it?"

'Cause I know that Carlisle likes Marcus. They're the same age—have run together since they were little shits in Brooklyn.

Felix shakes his head no, regarding me from behind his desk, and I realize that he's testing me.

Would he fuck me over?

Or is this because he wants to break free from Carlisle?

Then again, I take orders from my boss, and that is Felix.

So... "All right." I shrug. "And the bunny next to him?" In the photo, Marcus is standing with some woman who isn't his wife.

"Both of them." He nods. "She can just disappear, unless you find them in the same place, but he needs to go in an accident. Within three days. Her
I flip it over. Jessica Stanley. Then he presents a second photo. "This guy, too. I want him to disappear."

I vaguely remember the man. He's in Marcus' crew. My age, maybe a few years older.

"Is there a reason?"

He smirks. "There's always a reason, Junior."

He's not going to tell me more about it.

But then he speaks again, this time with an apprehensive expression on his face. "I'll tell you more when you get back, all right?"

I nod, confused, but pleased that he trusts me. He doesn't have to tell me anything, yet he chooses to...even if it's later and not now.

I just hope I can trust him, too.

"You're on the next flight out—use another identity," he tells me. "No family this weekend. I have your alibi covered."

After he gives me half my cut, I'm out the door, knowing that next time I see him, three people will be dead and I have more money coming my way.

~oOo~

The following night, I'm parked outside of Paul Notti's apartment building, waiting for him to come home.

Earlier today, I broke into Marcus' home and created a gas leak. It was a safe bet, what with it being Saturday and all. He's a family man on weekends, much like many others. His wife will die, too, but I called Felix earlier and it wasn't a problem.
Tomorrow I'll deal with the other woman.

*Some have issues killing women.*

I shrug to myself. We're all humans, capable of doing shit.

About two hours later, Paul finally comes home.

As he runs up the stairs, I follow calmly, quietly, as I attach the silencer to my piece.

It's when he has just unlocked his door that I shoot him in the back of his head.

Then, after making sure his apartment is empty, I drag his body inside.

Judging by the interior, I'd say he lives here alone, but I'm not taking any risks.

I tilt my head, curious about the suitcase by the door.

*Going somewhere?*

Shaking that thought away, I pull out the bandage I brought and secure it around his head. A baseball cap follows, and then he's ready to go. Down the stairs, and when I reach the outside, I pull him up to make sure he doesn't look...well, dead. His arm goes around my shoulder, and I thank God he's not bigger than he is. He's my height, but scrawnier.

Once we're at my car across the street, I sit him down in the passenger seat. He'll go in the trunk later, but not now when I can't be sure there aren't any onlookers.

When I arrive at Marcus's house, I'm satisfied to see that all the lights are out. His car is still parked in the driveway, as is his wife's. I'm not stupid, though. I get out of the car, stealthily making my way around their house.
I scale the wall, grunting a little as I push myself up, and then I can't stop the grin that forms on my lips. Marcus and the wife are sleeping soundly.

I return to my car.

"Let's create a fire," I mutter to myself. In the backseat, I reach for one of my many toys—a crossbow. Idly, I wonder if they're already dead in there. The gas has been on for several hours now...

I shrug and pop some chewing gum in my mouth.

Then I light up a smoke as I look for an appropriate spot to... "Oh, yeah," I laugh under my breath. Fucking kitty door. Excellent. And seriously? Those doors aren't safe. How idiotic is Marcus to have that shit? Che coglione—moron.

Shaking my head at his stupidity, I stick my gum to the hardwood arrow—metal would leave evidence behind—and the lit cigarette follows on the gum.

The gas from inside should linger in the cracks of the tiny opening.

"Watch how the pros do it," I tell my dead companion as I roll down my window. I place the crossbow on my arm, I aim, I fire, I smile, I grab my binoculars, I make sure the cigarette's still lit. "Perfect." Returning the crossbow to the backseat, I start the car and pull away slowly. Very slowly, because I'm not leaving until I see that house go up in flames.

If it doesn't work out, I can always throw a fucking Molotov cocktail, but I do appreciate some creativity.

"Too bad you're missing this," I chuckle, eyes on the rearview mirror.

This is better than doing blow. The high is indescribable.

And boom.
The entire house is engulfed in flames.

Two down—not counting the wife—one to go. But first, I gotta make this one disappear.

~oOo~

In upstate New York, I bury Paul Notti in the middle of the woods—far away from hiking trails and roads.

Six feet under.

When that's done, I'm all but dead on my feet.

Ha.

"Dead on my feet." I snicker to myself and start the car again. "I'm a funny guy."

Truth? I need a shower and a few hours of sleep.

Which I get at a small motel outside the city, and when I wake up, I'm ready to track down this Jessica Stanley. It shouldn't be too hard since I have her address. I also know where she works as a waitress in Brooklyn.

~oOo~

Sitting at the café across the street from where Ms. Stanley works in a diner, I keep my eyes on the little TV in the corner.

The fire from last night is all over the news.

Gas leak. Tragic accident. Two dead.

I sip my coffee. I think about my children. I wait. I follow Jessica when she takes her lunch. While she's meeting some friend in a salad bar, I make a mental note to pick up a gift for Isabella before I go home. I
follow Jessica back to the diner, though I wait in my car this time. Then, when she's off the clock, I follow her home and give her the same treatment I gave Paul.

Before I know it, I'm on my way back to Las Vegas.

Yet another job well done.

~oOo~

While the waitress hands us our drinks, Felix and I stay quiet, but as soon as she leaves the office, we're back to talking about the past weekend.

"Dad and I are flying out for the wake," he tells me. "Mom and my wife, too. Alice is gonna watch the kids."

I nod, figuring they'd go. "And what was my alibi?"

"You were in LA—contract. Nothing out of the ordinary." He pulls out a file from the top drawer. "I sent a buddy of mine—California local—and he took care of a problem. If it gets back to Carlisle, it was you who were in Cali. Simple as that." He wipes his hands clean. "Now..." He takes a swig of his drink then asks, "Any other questions?"

"Will you answer them?" I grin to show him that I'm teasing. We're still talking business, meaning I can't get out of line. "'Cause yeah, I have questions up hea'." I tap my temple.

He chuckles. "Go ahead. We'll just see if I have answers."

All right. With a slow nod, I choose my words. The fewer words the better. "Why Marcus?"

He stares at me, unsurprised by the question, but not sure whether to answer me or not.
I'm really starting to wonder if he's flipping on his own dad.

"Marcus is—well, that's not right," he laughs, leaning forward. "Marcus was the capo my old man trusted the most back East." He lowers his voice, still watching me closely. "Since we moved out here, Marcus became sort of the, uh..." He waves a hand. "...underboss—out there."

My eyebrows rise. "So, it's personal? You—you wanna be the only one or some shit?"

"Nah," he chuckles with a shake of his head. He also leans back in his chair again. "Couldn't give a rat's ass about that, but..." He purses his lips and tilts his head. "...when he orders someone to kill one of the capos, my capos...out here—it doesn't sit well with me." Now my brows knit together. "I wasn't supposed to know—your sister came to me."

"The fuck you say?" I splutter. My spine goes rigid. "Which one? Brianna?"

He nods. "She overheard something when she visited Alice last week."
Chapter 5

Junior's POV

I nod for him to go on.

He does. "Brianna stood outside my dad's office when he made a call to Marcus." Ah, that nosy little brat. She's gonna get herself killed one day. "She didn't fully understand; Dad spoke in riddles." Of course. Over the phone, you don't exactly tell someone to whack another person. "But Brianna's a smart cookie." He nods and points to his temple. "She's been around—she has ears. And when Dad told Marcus to order someone to take Alec fishing, your sister grew suspicious." I grit my teeth. "Brianna didn't get the feeling they were talking about some sunny day trip out on Lake Mead, if you know what I mean." He shrugs. "Your sister was just worried about your brother, so she came to me about it. I haven't told her anything about afterward."

I rub my jaw as I try to rein in my temper, though it doesn't work very well. Leaning forward, I seethe, "Why the fuck would Carlisle take out Alec?" Then I explode. I'm out of the chair, pacing in Felix's office. I laugh humorlessly and wag my finger at him. "You know...your father is beginning to lose his goddamn mind." I widen my arms. "He's not the fucking Don—he's the mother hen!" My guess is that Alec did something to Maria, which pissed off Maria's father. "Family bullshit," I spit out. "It's none of Carlisle's business!"

"Lower your voice and sit down," he commands, pointing at the chair. I stare at him, livid. I get that we're supposed to separate family from business, but Carlisle's doing the opposite, and...Alec's my fucking brother. "Sit. Down, Junior."

I obey. With a curse, I slump down in the chair, and then I down my drink.
"Listen," he says, "there are gonna be changes around here. The only thing I need to know is if you're with me."

I stare at him and ignore the question. "Why Paul?"

He sighs. "He's the one Marcus ordered to take Alec 'fishing'."

I nod, remembering the suitcase I saw in Paul's apartment. "And the—" I wave a hand "—the other one. The bitch."

"She's the one I got the information from." He shrugs. "I've used her plenty of times—she's proven to be useful and trustworthy—but it was enough now. She's a sneak, good at getting information, but her loyalty can be bought for money. I figured it was best to get rid of her before she turned on me."

"You're taking down Carlisle," I state.

"Yes."

~oOo~

**May 1980**

Over the next several months, Felix and I make our plans. We talk about who we can trust—who we can include—and who to take out first.

It's official—we're bringing Carlisle down. Felix is taking his own father out—that's how much he's grown to resent Carlisle. And I'm all for it. Partly because I don't agree with Carlisle's methods of running this family, and partly because I'm aching to make Isabella mine in every way possible. Maybe that'll make her love me. Who knows? But I'm more than willing to try.

So far, Felix and I agree that we can trust the men in his crew—Jasper included. We can also trust Alec—we had to physically restrain him when
he learned about Carlisle's hit on him. And we don't believe it will be long before Dad starts showing his real feelings toward Carlisle. It's already happening, but too subtly so far—just a few expressions when he doesn't approve, but no words. He doesn't speak up. Once he does, however, we will tell him about his supposed closest friend's order to kill Alec—my little brother, my father's youngest son.

We haven't divulged anything to anyone other than Jasper and Alec, but we will. Soon. And in the meantime, Jasper's clocking Carlisle. After all, it's only a matter of time before Carlisle orders someone else to kill for him. Which is why Alec has spent a few weekends in New York, following some of Carlisle's closest around.

One weekend in early May, irony strikes.

Isabella tells me she's pregnant again, with a due date in December; it's the reason for the silly smile on my face. And I'm about to tell Jane that she's going to pretend to be pregnant.

It will hopefully give us time, and force Carlisle to get off my back. Because if everything goes as planned, he won't be alive for much longer.

~oOo~

"You want me to pretend what?" Jane screeches. "No way! Are you fucking insane?!

I take a quick step toward her and slap her across the face with the back of my hand.

She gasps and starts crying, one hand cupping her cheek. "You—you...you hit me!"

"Lower your goddamn voice," I warn, pointing a finger at her. Even though we're alone in the kitchen, not to mention the entire house, I
won't have her raising her voice at me. "You'll do as I say, Jane, or I swear to God..." I clench my jaw.

"But I don't want to pretend, Edward," she cries. "I want it to be real."

I grin and tap a finger to my chest. "It's not my fault you're not pregnant. That's all on you. Hell," I chuckle, "you've been so fucking drunk that you can't even remember all the times we've been together." Shame floods her features, and I can't believe how easy it's been to lie to her. She really believes we've had sex, even though we haven't. "Now—" I check my watch "—we have dinner at my parents' in an hour. We'll tell them then about the pregnancy." I point to the stairs. "Go get dressed, and—fix your makeup; you look hideous."

Dealing with Isabella's hormones is one thing, but crying women in general? I hate it. They cry for nothing.

~oOo~

"A toast," Carlisle announces with a wide smile, "to Junior and Jane."

A choir of "Salute!" rings out.

Under the dining room table, I squeeze Jane's thigh. She needs to smile.

"Ow," she whimpers quietly. I give her a pointed look, and she plasters a smile on her face before I release her. "Thank you," she tells everyone. She takes a breath. "We're so excited."

"Definitely," I agree, but I'm excited for other reasons.

The rest of the dinner passes, and Carlisle seems genuinely appeased.

Before we leave, Felix and I exchange a quick look.

It's working.
While Isabella cooks dinner, I sit on the floor with Elisa in my lap, trying to get her more comfortable with the puppy I bought for us. It's a Rottweiler, and he's only nine weeks old. Anthony's over the moon, playing on all fours with the little pup, but my daughter's still apprehensive.

"Throw it, angioletto mio," I chuckle and kiss the top of Elisa's head. I give her the squeeze toy and coax her stop hiding her gorgeous little face in the crook of my neck. "Can you throw it for Daddy?" I ask softly, brushing a few brown curls behind her ear. "Anthony's waiting." I wink at my son, who has his eyes on the toy. So does the dog.

"Throw it, Elli!" Anthony cheers.

The puppy whines and huffs, tail wagging.

"Have you decided on a name for him yet?" Isabella asks, smiling down at us.

I look to Anthony. "Your choice, piccolo tesoro." And I grin as his eyes light up in excitement.

"S'gotta be something cool," he says, nodding. At almost four years old, everything has to be cool, otherwise he doesn't like it. It's his favorite word. "Mama, you know any cool names? Or you, Daddy?"

"Hmm," I hum, pensive. "What about Tito? He's gonna be huge one day, and Tito means 'giant'."

"That's a good one," Isabella agrees, grinning. "What do you say, Anthony?"

Anthony agrees, too, and then Isabella tells us that it's dinner.
I'll work on Elisa's fear of Tito later. I doubt it'll take long, 'cause whenever she thinks no one's watching, her curious eyes are on the pup.

During dinner, I'm content to sit back and just watch and listen. Anthony tells us about his day over at a friend's house and afterward when Isabella took him, Elisa, Nicola, and Lucia for ice cream. At "ice cream," Elisa wakes up and looks fucking adorable bouncing in her seat and asking for "ice cweam".

If Isabella agrees to my proposal in a few months, this will be my life soon. Even on the weekends. It's August now, and over the past few months, I've barely seen my children, or Isabella for that matter—I miss them. She's almost five months pregnant and looking so beautiful with her little baby bump. She's also smiling more. But I've missed a lot of it, 'cause ever since I ordered Jane to fake the pregnancy—back in May—we've been busy. Carlisle may be more relaxed around me these days, but in general? Forget about it. He currently thinks someone is out to get him, which is true, but he thinks it's the Chicago Outfit.

Jasper, Alec, and I take turns, going to New York to take out the people who are loyal to Carlisle, and when we're there, we drive cars with Illinois plates—anything to keep our backs clear. We can't exactly have Carlisle suspecting his own men. And speaking of men, Jasper's a made one now. Felix surprised him last month, and I was there for the ceremony. And with that thought, my eyes move to Isabella. 'Cause I'm pretty sure she knows. She saw the cut on Jasper's hand and gave him some odd look. She never asks questions, but I'm beginning to wonder just how much she's aware of and how involved she was growing up. All I know is that her father was a made guy and worked with the Mallettas in New Jersey.

"Something on your mind, ciccino?" Isabella asks softly, bringing me outta my musings.
I shake my head no and smile as I bring out a cigarette. "Nothing." I light it up and lean back in my chair, exhaling slowly. "Thanks for dinner. It was fucking delicious." It always is.

"I liked it lots, too," Anthony says and mirrors my position by leaning back in his chair. While I rest my arm on the back of Elisa's chair, Anthony tries to do the same, but on the back of Isabella's. He's just too fucking cute for words. "Fuckin' delic-cious, Mama."

"Ay!" I shout, though I'm laughing hysterically on the inside. My little tough guy. "Watch that mouth, son."

"He does anything you do," Isabella tells me then shakes her head at Anthony. "Those are words for grownups, capisce?"

My son scrunches his nose. "So, I can't say them?"

"That's right." I nod at him.

"But Nico says 'fuck' all the time," he mumbles. "And he's ten—also a kid."

"I'm not his father—Jasper is," I tell him. "You obey your parents and Nicola obeys Jasper. Understood?"

He nods.

"Good." I nod firmly. "Now, eat up. It's almost bedtime."

Since I spent the past two weeks in New York, I haven't had sex in just as long, meaning I need my hummingbird. We just gotta get the kids to bed first.

~oOo~

"I've missed you," she whispers as I hover over her. My hands and mouth go everywhere. There's urgency lacing my touches and kisses. I can't get
enough. Nudging her thighs apart, I swiftly push my cock inside of her. "Mmm...oh, yeah..."

"Fuck," I exhale in the crook of her neck. "Tell me how much you missed me."

Her belly isn't too big yet, so it's not in the way when I press into her.

"So much," she whimpers as I throw her legs over my shoulders. Then I go deep. "Cazzo, Junior!" Reaching down, I start massaging her clit, and she begins to meet each thrust. I slide in, she arches into me. "Missed—I missed everything... You..."

I moan. "Tell me, hummingbird."

"Your cock," she breathes out, and I throb inside of her.

"Check you out," I chuckle breathlessly. "Dirty fucking mouth on you."

The next time I slam in, I swivel my hips, and I groan when she clamps down on me. Sex with Isabella is always smoking hot, but when she's pregnant? It's out of this goddamn world. She's so responsive.

"I missed more than that," she admits, also out of breath. I release her legs and dip down to kiss her. I tell her to elaborate. Right now. Because I want to know it all. "Your fingers," she moans, and I add pressure to her clit. "Your tongue, ciccino." I push said tongue into her mouth and kiss her deeply, hard, relentlessly. More. She needs to give me more. "Mmm, your face." I cock a brow at that and place my elbows on the sides of her face. In and out of her. Fuck, she's wet. "So handsome and sexy," she whispers, kissing my face.

I groan and close my eyes. "Ce l'ho così duro—solo per te." I'm honest, telling her I'm hard only for her.
Her breathing hitches. "Only me?" Her eyes are smoldering, but behind all the fire, I see something else.

Fear?

"When are you gonna get it?" I ask, breathing heavily. I grind into her, feeling my insides coil. "I fucking love you, Isabella." Sweat starts to bead on my forehead, and I shiver when she reaches up to kiss me. Her hands cup my cheeks. "Tu sarai sempre l'unica per me, amore mio." I tell her she'll always be my only one. My love.

She whimpers and screws her eyes shut. "Junior...I love you, too."

I shake my head and fuck her harder. "Liar," I breathe out. At that, her eyes snap open again. "You're a goddamn liar, and I still love you." I'm a pussy for this woman, and it's beginning to infuriate me.

"Ciccino—"

I clamp my hand over her mouth. "Shut the fuck up."

Dropping my forehead to shoulder, I pound into her with anger fueling each motion.

The only things I hear are harsh breathing, skin slapping on skin, her whimpers, and my groans.

When my climax takes over, I bite down on my knuckles.

My cock pulses inside of her.

The pleasure is still mind-fucking-blowing, but I'm also pissed.

Completely drained, I only linger inside of her for a few seconds. Then I pull out and collapse on my back next to her. I stare at the ceiling, and I want to ask her—no, I want to scream at her. I want to know what the
fuck I've done wrong. I want to tell her that she's a fucking witch for making me this whipped.

"Junior?" she asks in a small voice.

"I don't wanna hear it," I snap, getting out of bed. I pull on my underwear then leave the bedroom. Fucking women. Doesn't matter how much you give them. It's still not enough.

I end up in the game room on the first floor.

The pool table, to be exact.

A few minutes later, I know that Isabella is standing in the doorway, but I pay her no mind as I sink ball after ball into the pockets.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

I lift my head and grin at her. "You're sorry," I chuckle, but then the chuckle dies. "Fuck you, Isabella."

She lets out a quiet gasp, quickly followed by her eyes welling up. And that right there only pisses me off further, 'cause it's physically painful to see her hurt. Which is her fault. I loathe being so obsessed with her, but it would've been good—perfect—if she felt the same.

"Fuck!" I shout, slamming down the pool cue on the table. Isabella flinches, and when I see her taking a step back, I'm quick to walk toward her. I don't stop until I'm right in front of her. "I gotta know. Level with me here, Isabella." I grasp her chin and force her to look up at me. "Tell me the fucking problem—why you can't love me." Just saying those words makes me feel like my balls have gone missing. "Huh? Just lay it on me."

"Junior, s-stop," she chokes out and tries to pull away. But I don't let her. Instead I back her into a wall, effectively caging her. "Please."
I shake my head no and squeeze her jaw. "I want the truth."

"I—I...please, it hurts, Edward," she whimpers.

That shit makes me laugh so hard that my eyes tear up. "Hurt? You wanna talk about what hurts, Isabella?" I guffaw. She sniffs, and it's like a flip of a switch—my humor is gone. Completely vanished, and I loosen my grip on her jaw. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I whisper and brush my lips over her cheek. "But do you wanna know what really hurts? Huh?"

I place a soft kiss on her lips then back away, grinning at her. "No matter what I do, no matter how much I fucking give you..." I chuckle and shake my head at her. "It'll never be enough, will it?" I cup both her tits and push them together roughly. "I have these, yeah? But I can never get inside here." I tap her temple. "Or here." I place a hand over her heart. Another laugh escapes me, though this one is quieter. "See what you're doin' to me? I should hate you for that."

If my guys saw me now...

"You haven't given me everything," she croaks, and my eyebrows shoot up in disbelief. "I'm sorry, I-I..." She takes a breath. "I can't love you."

I nod. "No, I got that. Believe me. And I'm starting to wonder if maybe you're just a greedy little whore."

I don't see it coming, but suddenly there's a sting on my cheek.

*She fucking slapped me.*

My eyes flash to Isabella's, and I slam her into the wall.

"That's one," I hiss in her ear and wrap my fingers around her throat. Internally, I'm struggling to keep my calm. "Slap me again, and you'll find
out if you can handle the same treatment. Am I making myself clear, cunt?"

"Yes," she wheezes out.

I go on. "And don't even think about walking away." I trail a finger down her chest. "You're mine, hummingbird, and..." I smile tearfully and touch her protruding stomach. "We're a family—we have two kids together, soon three. We belong together. You won't ever leave me. I'd rather kill us both."

"You're scaring me," she breathes out.

I frown, repeating her words in my head, then take a step back. "I don't want you to fear me," I say quietly and run a hand through my hair. "I think you know what I want. But I don't know what you want." I tilt my head. "What am I doing wrong?"

Her gaze is cold, hard. "Right now? So much."

I clench my jaw. "Watch your mouth—don't be cute. For once, give me the *fucking* truth."

I almost expect her to cower away, but she does the opposite. She squares her shoulders and looks me dead in the eye.

She's so fucking beautiful.

"I don't want to share my man," she says.

She doesn't want to share her man?

Those words take a second or two to process.

"You don't..." I shake my head, in a daze. "...want to *share* me?"
She swallows, suddenly struggling to remain confident. "That's right. I can't—not when you go home to your other family every weekend." I see pain in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Junior, but I can't."

My other family.

Then it suddenly dawns on me, and it feels like I've been punched in the gut. Or that I've punched Isabella in the gut. Which is worse. Since I've forbidden all talk concerning my wife here, it's obvious that Isabella thinks the worst—that this is my second family...instead of my first and only.

"You're not sharing me," I admit in a rush, nauseated. "Jesus fucking Christ." I fist my hair and look up at the ceiling, and then back at Isabella, who's looking a little lost. "Hummingbird...I don't love my wife. It's the opposite—I never had a choice about her. Arranged marriage, you know?" She frowns, and I grasp her biceps, making sure to keep it gentle this time. "We don't have children, either." I bend a little to be at her level. "I only have one family—with you."

"But..." Her brows knit together, and she licks her lips. "I don't..." She's in thought, puzzling the pieces together, maybe. What the fuck do I know? "I don't get it," she says quietly, making eye contact. "Okay, so you don't have children, but you're still married to her."

I nod. She does, too, and adds a sardonic grin. "And you still fuck her. And who knows how many others you stick that dick into—"

"Ay!" I shout. I take a step back, caught off guard by the venom in her voice. I narrow my eyes at her, and I'm back in her face. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" I widen my arms. "I don't get it! You've known all along that I have a wife."
"And you've known all along that we'd leave our hearts out of this!" she shouts back.

I grind my teeth together, fighting the urge to raise my hand to her. I don't want to be violent with her—ever—but I hate how vulnerable this woman makes me. And it sure as hell doesn't help that she's right. We said from the beginning it had nothing to do with feelings. Evidently, feelings change, but...only for me in this case.

"Touché." I nod with a dip of my chin. "For the record, though?" I cock a brow at her. "I'm not fucking her. We consummated our marriage on the wedding night, but that's it, and there're no others. Not a single one."

The first thing I see in Isabella's eyes is shock, followed by...hope? Then she settles for skepticism.

"Sure," she mutters and averts her eyes. "Come ti pare, Juniuh."

Whatever I say?

My eyes widen in disbelief, and anger surges through me. I can't believe this! I punch the wall—right next to Isabella—causing her to jump. "You—" I can barely go on. I shake my head and point a finger to my chest. "You think I'm lying?" No response. "Aw, this is just great!" I laugh sarcastically. "You say you don't wanna share your man; I admit that you're not sharing me, and..." I laugh harder. "...you don't believe me!"

"Please stop," she hisses. "You're gonna wake up the kids."

My laughing ceases. "I don't give a fuck about that right now," I seethe. Once again, I have her caged in. "I wanna get to the bottom of this—right now." I search her eyes. "You say you can't love a man who you share with another woman. Well, I'm your man, and you have me all to yourself, so..."
She suddenly looks exhausted, wary, and vulnerable. "Don't do this, Junior. I beg you. Don't feed me lies—it'll break me."

She just doesn't get it. "I'm not lying—I have no reason to!"

"You're a man," she spits out. "Don't come here and tell me that one pussy is enough for you. I know the world we live in—I'm not stupid."

And then I'm just too tired to argue. She won't believe me, no matter what I say. I'm a man, and therefore she thinks I fuck around. I get it. It's what many do—not all men, mind you, but it's common—and maybe I'm an ass for not seeing what else is out there, but it is what it is. All I see is Isabella.

"Believe what you want," I say tiredly, taking a step back. "You're the only one—" I stop there and shake my head. It's not worth it if she's just going to ignore the fucking truth. I jerk my head in the direction of the door. "Go to bed. I'm sleeping on the couch tonight." She doesn't move—she just stares at me, eyes welling up again. So, I point to the door. "I said go. Now."

She whimpers. "Ciccino—"

"Fucking get!"

She goes.

~oOo~

October rolls around, and Isabella and I aren't as close anymore. But I do believe my words had some effect on her. Sometimes, I find her watching me, especially when I'm with Anthony and Elisa. I don't know what it's about, but I'm willing to give her time. Plus, I'm still too tired to argue with her. I miss her, but I can barely look at her? Maybe that doesn't
make sense though it's what I feel. I also feel wounded, which pisses me off. I laid everything out for her, and she didn't accept shit.

I guess it's both a blessing and a curse that I've been forced to stay away from home so much. First there was dealing with Jane's "miscarriage" about six or seven weeks ago, and I had to stay in the big house for a week to show how supportive I am. Something like that.

Thankfully, Carlisle didn't react too strongly, but it's a good thing Felix and I are almost done with the final stage of our plan. Okay, not the final one, because that's actually killing Carlisle, but the shit before that. Which leads to the other stuff I've been busy doing these past two months. Hits. Jasper, Alec, and I have taken out a handful of Carlisle's men in New York. The media is going insane, and every day brings a new headline about the ongoing "mafia war." Fingers are pointed, accusations are thrown out, rumors are being spread, and the Feds are losing it with all the leads going nowhere.

Carlisle himself never leaves the house without two men flanking him, and he has upped the security around his house. That's all fine by me, because we won't kill him there.

When November arrives, all I can think is that it's been a shitty first year of this new decade. Last year, Isabella and I had celebrated New Year's with Felix, Heidi, their three children, Jasper and his two kids, and it'd been fucking great. And at the stroke of midnight, we'd toasted to 1980 and the ten years that would follow.

All right, I admit that it's mostly my recent fallout with Isabella that has caused this bitterness, but come on. Something's gotta give. All I want is for us to be a real family, for her to believe in me, and for Carlisle to go to hell.

Is that so much?
I sigh to myself and look over at the photos I have on my desk. There are three of them now. One photo of Anthony and Elisa, one of Isabella—it was taken right before we had that big fight—and though her gorgeous belly shows in this picture, her stomach is even more protruding right now. She's all belly, and I'm willing to bet we're having another boy.

Lastly, the third picture. It's of Isabella and the kids.

I don't have them up when I have associates coming in, but when I'm alone, I need them there. They help me separate things. Right outside my office door, I run a popular strip club, but in here—

An ear-shattering scream from the other side of the door interrupts my thoughts, and I'm out of my chair in a flash.

As soon as I exit my office, one of the strippers almost runs into me, and I gather that she's the screamer. For a second, I wonder if something's gone bad in one of the private rooms, so I grab her bicep and prevent her from running away.

"Mr. Maisano!" she gasps between sobs. "I saw—I saw..." She points at something down the hall. "I was just—smoke break," she stutters, eyes wide in fear. "Out back, and, and—" She breaks down.

Without really comprehending, I walk down the dimly lit hall, the girl—whose name I can't remember—still in my grasp. She said she'd seen something on her smoke break out back, and my guess is she saw something she shouldn't have seen. That's why I'm dragging her along.

We pass all the private rooms, and then we reach the door that leads to the back alley behind the club. Once I've pulled out my piece, I kick the door open, ready for anything. And what I see is my brother sitting on the ground next to a couple of Dumpsters. Petey and Mikey are also there, and as I walk closer, I see that Alec's hands and shirt are bloodied.
"What the fuck happened?" I ask, using the barrel of the gun to scratch my forehead. I'd use my other hand, but Blondie's struggling to get free and we can't have that. Not until I know what she's witnessed.

As Petey speaks, I notice that my little brother is crying. "Another fire—a restaurant." I nod. We've had a few fires in Vegas recently, but I don't understand what it has to do with Alec. "Alec was there with his girl." Ah, Kate. "They got out just fine, but when they got to the car—boom." He makes his hands widen to demonstrate an explosion. "Kate didn't make it."

"Fuck," I mutter.

Michael's next. "Alec called us from the nearest payphone—we cleaned up the mess." I nod again. "Then when we got back here, this one—" he jerks his head at Blondie "—heard us talking. I guess she saw the blood on Alec, too, and freaked out."

I raise a brow. "And you didn't think it was a good idea to follow her? She was screaming like a banshee in there!" I shout. Then I shake my head in disappointment. "You should be lucky I got her before she passed my office."

"I was just on my way," Petey defends, holding his palms up. "That door—it locks when it closes, so I was gonna go around—"

"No matta'. Take this and—" I push the girl toward Petey "—make her disappear."

"Go on—get outta hea'. I'll take care of Alec."

Mike and Petey leave with Blondie, and I crouch down in front of my brother.
"You okay?" I ask quietly. He didn't have the same relationship with Kate that I have with Isabella, but I know he cared for her. It was mutual, too. No deep love or shit like that, but still.

"I wanna know who did this, bro," he croaks, looking up at me. His eyes are red and brimming with tears. It's not often a man cries, and hardly within our, uh...profession. No room for emotions. But if you lose someone you care for? Or when you hold your newborn child for the first time? Yeah.

"Can you tell me exactly what happened?" I ask, tucking away my piece. I light up a smoke and sit down next to him. "You were out eating—then what?"

He sighs heavily and scrubs his hands over his face. "Nothing out of the ordinary. Just dinner, and then—it all happened so fucking fast. There was a fire in the kitchen, and everyone ran out. I don't fucking know." His shoulders slump. "We got to the parking lot and," he chuckles bitterly, "I remember seeing some man running away. But I was too concerned about just gettin' outta there, so I didn't stop to think." He taps his temple. "Now, though..."

"You think it could've been the one who rigged your car," I finish for him, and he nods tiredly. Well, that probably means the fire in the restaurant had nothing to do with the bomb in my brother's car. Whoever did this obviously thought he had more time. "All right. And next?" I hold out my pack of smokes for him. Then a lighter.

He replies after taking his first pull. "I was driving my new Mustang. Kate wanted to give it a test drive. I let her."

I nod, thinking. "Did it explode once she turned on the ignition or later?"
I'm not an expert in explosives—I'm more of a gun nut, or I just use my hands, or a wire...whichever, really. I'm not picky, but explosives? Not usually my cup of tea or whatever the saying is.

Anyway...I know some people who are into blowing things up, and I know a thing or two about signatures. One of Felix's friends, for instance, is a sadistic motherfucker. He draws out the "experience." First, the radio will crackle, and then the engine will start failing, and then...boom. Personally, I call that stupid. He basically gives his victim a warning. If you know bombs, you have a shot at jumping out of the car as soon as the radio acts up. If you don't know, however? Yeah, you're dead.

"As soon as she started the car," Alec chokes out, and then he smiles sadly at the ground. "I was thinking of my goddamn car—I didn't want her to fucking crash it—so I..." He lets out a labored breath. "I stood to the side to make sure nothing was in the way when she backed out."

I squeeze his shoulder, missing my hummingbird like crazy. We've bitched a little in the past, raised our voices, of course, but we've never been like this. Months of stilted conversation unless it involves our children. And now, listening to Alec...it feels like I've been wasting my time, holding this grudge for petty bullshit.

"It wasn't a big explosion—Mike was able to tow the car," he adds quietly, palming his face. "And with the fire at the restaurant, no one noticed what went down in the parking lot. Fuck, I screamed, you know? For help." He shakes his head. "No one heard."

"So you chose to make it look like nothing happened?" I guess, flicking some ash onto the ground.

He shrugs. "It was the easiest."
We're quiet for a while, and I try to come up with ways of how to find the idiot who did this. We have so much to do as it is, but if it were Isabella—God forbid—no one would've been able to stop me.

I fear that it was Carlisle. He's already tried to take out my brother once before, and I don't fucking understand why.

"We'll figure it out," I tell him. "Now, go clean yourself up—no one should see you this way. I'll talk to Felix, all right?"

He nods with a dip of his chin. "Thanks, bro."
Chapter 6

Junior's POV

Translation:

La tua fica è così calda e stretta = Your pussy is so warm and tight

~oOo~

When I get home that night, I kiss my sleeping children before making my way to the bedroom, though I don't go to bed. Instead I sit down in the chair on Isabella's side of the bed, and I just watch her sleeping form as countless scenarios run through my head. Again, God forbid if something happened to her. Or our kids. I'd show mercy to no one, and then I'd probably die out of misery.

All that's left to do before we take out Carlisle is picking out a good location to end him, and then I'll work on making Isabella mine—officially. I won't let her refuse me. I'm a selfish bastard like that. But Carlisle's death needs to look like an accident, which takes time to plan, so I gotta have patience. Especially since we don't want to kill Esme or Alice in the process—both of whom are often with him these days. He's paranoid, and I'm guessing he keeps them around as human shields? I don't know, but if he loved them, he would send them away. On a vacation or something.

We'd also like to know if we have Emmett on our side, though Felix doubts it. We'll just have to see. At least I know my dad won't be too upset. He's getting sick of Carlisle's way of running the organization, and both Felix and I have noticed a tension between the two at family dinners. See, Dad's always said, "This thing of ours—these friends of ours...they don't go hand in hand with what we have at home. There's family and there's family. Keep 'em separated."

And Carlisle's done the opposite.
Right now, he's on a mission to find a suitable husband for Alice, and it needs to be someone he can benefit from.

Things will probably heat up around here soon, and I wonder if I should send Isabella and the kids to a safe place for now. Just 'til things cool down.

Watching my own back is enough as it is. Watching Isabella and the children, too...

I sigh and rest my elbows on my knees, eyes still focused on my hummingbird.

As if sensing my stare, her eyes flutter open.

"Hey, baby," I whisper.

"H—" She clears her throat from sleep. "Hi."

Madonn', she's gorgeous.

"Is something wrong?" she asks hesitantly and sits up in bed.

I shake my head no. Yeah, a few things are completely fucked up, but it's all gonna work out.

"You're so beautiful when you're asleep," I murmur. "You always are," I wave a hand and chuckle awkwardly, "you know what I mean." I rub the back of my neck.

"Ciccino," she breathes out, followed by her eyes welling up. "I miss you."

And I cover her body with mine in an instant.

"I miss you, too, hummingbird," I groan as we kiss hungrily. The urgency and sheer need almost take my fucking breath away, but instead of
slowing down, we both go rougher and harder. I need to taste her—taste all of her, which I tell her. "Voglio assaggiarti tutta."

"Junior," she moans as I pull down her panties. I kiss my way down her flawless body, her full tits, her swollen stomach, her curvy hips... "Mmm, ciccino..."

Getting comfortable between her legs, I lower my mouth to her pussy. I lick her greedily and hard, making her whimper and cry out. She fists my hair, guiding me, and I groan in pleasure. Her taste, her scent, her desperation—I crave it all, and she gives it to me. For some reason, it feels like we're on the same page or some shit. I don't fucking know.

When I suck on her clit and finger-fuck her deeply, she starts convulsing. She also gets louder. This is how she always is, but there's still something that makes it even better when she's pregnant. Everything is intensified.

"Madonna mia," she cries out. I moan against her soaked flesh. "Sto venendo!"

Like some teenager, I almost lose my shit. Her voice, that tenor, the pitch...it's rich yet breathy...and it makes my cock impossibly harder.

Her orgasm hits her hard, and I lick up the drops of arousal that trickle down from her pussy. I don't stop until she tugs on my hair, which always means the same—time to push my dick in her. And I do. After crawling up her body again, I shove my cock deep inside of her. Unfortunately, it's not enough for either of us. Her belly is in the way, so we roll over, and then she starts riding me.

Sitting up, I kiss, lick, and nip at her luscious tits. "La tua fica è così calda e stretta," I moan, telling her that her pussy is so warm and tight.

She hums and covers my mouth with hers. Her fingers go to my hair again, pulling, twisting, as she continues to move over my cock. My own
fingers dig into her hips. *Fuck*. Deeper and harder. Long strokes. She's so fucking wet for me.

Our breathing becomes labored, and after a few minutes it can't really be called kissing. Our lips touch, but it's more about exchanging breaths than anything, and it's smoking hot. I taste and feel her everywhere, which makes my abs tense and insides coil. That's just what she does to me. And then more—she swivels her hips and constricts around me. At the same time, her noises become lighter and more hurried. *Fuck*, I'm close.

"That's it," I groan breathlessly and slam her down on me. "Come on my cock, *bell'uccellino*."

"Yes!" Her head falls back, and she starts trembling and tensing. I suck hard on her neck. "*God*, *ciccino*. Only you—*solo tu...ahhh*!"

Only me? I can't help but wonder how deep that goes—how much she means that. But before I can ponder further, Isabella falls apart above me, taking me with her. The climax surges through me, rendering me stupid, breathless, and speechless. I grit my teeth together, still coming, and my eyes are squeezed shut.

In the end, we're a tangled mess of limbs on the bed, and the only thing you can hear is our panting.

Then I ignore the exhaustion and push myself up. It's been a while since I gave her stomach attention, and it's all I want now. I kiss it, I pray for another healthy little one, and much like I did when Isabella was pregnant with Anthony and Elisa, I promise the baby in there that I'll do my best at being a father. I might not be the most affectionate man in my everyday life, but I love my children with all my heart.

"You're so sweet, Junior," Isabella whispers, and I look up at her. "What are you doing to me, huh?" It doesn't sound like a question she expects
an answer to, and that's good, 'cause I don't know. "I promised myself—fought to keep myself from..." She trails off, her head landing on her pillow again.

I don't know what the fuck she's on about, so I return to kissing her stomach.

And then, the next day—after I've talked things over with Felix—we send our women and children to live at the MGM Grand for a while. Just 'til this shit has blown over. No one followed us over there, so it should be safe. We also ordered Jasper to watch them. His own kids are there, too.

~oOo~

**November 20th 1980**

A Thursday, a couple weeks later, the capos and a few out-of-town friends of ours meet up with Felix at Twilight to talk money, shipments, and other shit. Well, the capos talk. Out-of-towners come to pay tribute, and then they leave. It's what we've done for years now, though we usually do it on Tuesdays. But it was Carlisle's order to have it done today instead—two days later. Otherwise, Tuesday is now the day I always come home late. Because I don't just linger for the shit that only concerns me anymore. Instead I've turned into Felix's right-hand man, and I stay as long as he does. I'm also tagging along tomorrow for breakfast when Felix hands Carlisle his money for this week.

"Good week," Felix comments when it's just Emmett, Alec, and me left in Felix's office. "But we should probably let the money from Jared's heist circulate for a while." I nod at that. Jared—a guy who's closest to Emmett—is a risktaker, and this week he robbed a money transport outside of Reno. The money could be marked.
"You're meeting Dad tomorrow at eight, right?" Emmett asks his big brother.

"As always," Felix responds as he hands me an envelope. I know the deal; I don't let the money circulate in places we own. Casinos are good places, which is why he hands Emmett an envelope, too. Gambling is his thing.

"He asked me to be there, too," Emmett mentions before taking a swig of his scotch. Felix and I exchange a look. 'Cause...why would Emmett be there? "Don't ask me why." He shrugs. "Probably just paranoia."

It could be that, yeah. Carlisle never meets up with anyone nowadays unless he has several guys with him, but...this is Felix—his own son. Does that mean Carlisle suspects something?

Feels like it.

"Well, we'll see you guys tomorrow morning, then," Felix finally says, locking eyes with Emmett.

"We?" he questions.

Felix nods. "Junior, too."

Emmett looks to me but says nothing.

I think it's clear that we wouldn't—won't—have Emmett's support in taking care of Carlisle.

I guess it's a good thing Felix and I won't tell him anything.

An hour later, I make my way back to the very empty condo. I'd go over to the MGM, but it's three in the morning, so... Plus, I gotta feed Tito.

~oOo~

**November 20th 1980**
Hummingbird's POV

"Stop it," I tell the boys for the hundredth time. I knew a sleepover wasn't the best idea, but Heidi and I wanted to spend some time together tonight, so here they all are—Heidi and Felix's three, Jasper's two, and Junior's and my two. Oh, and let's not forget the kicker inside of me.

Elisa and Lucia are asleep, but the boys? Forget about it.

"If you don't pipe down, I'll call your father," I warn Anthony, and his crooked grin is wiped off his face. Oh yeah, he knows that Junior is one hell of a disciplinarian. He loves our kids something fierce—which he shows—but he's not one to back down when Anthony or Elisa act out.

"Same goes for the rest of you!" Heidi shouts from the living room area here in my suite. "Francis, Luca, and Angelo, do you hear me!"

Another three grins are gone.

"You too, Nico," I tell my nephew. As much as I love the guy, he's also getting on my nerves. He's ten years old, and none of the rest is older than four. The shit he can teach them... "Jasper is just two doors down. Want me to get him?"

He shakes his head.

With a firm nod, I leave the master suite and join Heidi, who has two Long Island Iced Teas waiting for us.


She lights up a cigarette, a wry smile on her lips. "I pray a lot."
I laugh. "Can you imagine?" My eyes widen. "Juniuh wants one more right after this one." I place a hand on my belly. I refrain from adding that I adore children and want more myself. 'Cause sometimes I'm in a bitchy vent mood. This is one of those moments—moments where everything is the men's fault. "But he's not the one who hauls them all over the city when he runs into trouble." I shake my head and give the ceiling a quick glance. "God knows what they're up to now."

"I think it has something to do with Felix's dad," she whispers.

I nod, having heard of Carlisle Colucci plenty of times, especially growing up. Dad didn't like him. Jasper doesn't either, but he's loyal to Junior, and so am I.

"Does Felix ever tell you anything?" I ask and take a sip from my drink. *Madonna mia*, so good. "About—" I lean in a little and keep my voice low "—about work."

I'm not stupid; I know Junior is a made man—so is Jasper—and I know my brother works for Junior. Or Felix. I also know that the "business trips" Junior and Jasper go on—sometimes Alec, too—aren't for promoting the clubs they own here.

"Not really. He keeps everything separated." She exhales some smoke then smiles a small smile. "He did let me meet his sister last week, though."

I know. Junior told me. "Alice, right?" She nods, and I do, too. "She's nice. Had a crush on my brother—so Junior made sure she stopped coming around. Something about Carlisle not approving. Brianna comes sometimes," I rant. "Not often—a few dinners every once in a while. I like her. She's sweet. She had a little boy last year—so cute."
Brianna even expressed that she wanted me to be Colin's godmother, but we both knew Junior wouldn't allow it, so...

"Haven't met them," Heidi mutters, looking a little wary. I know she is—we both are—but we brush it off as best we can. We won't be part of their closest family—it is what it is. We're there on the side. In the background.

I think I have it better than Heidi, though. Junior told me only has kids with me, and I think I believe him. But we know that Felix has two children with his wife.

"Junior told me he doesn't sleep with his wife!" I blurt out.

It's something that has been eating at me for months now.

Heidi looks at me like I've gone insane.

I fear she's right.

She stares at me, eyebrows raised.

"Am I nuts for wondering if he's telling the truth?" I ask anxiously. Then I take a big swig of my drink, followed by Heidi offering me a cigarette. I take it. I need it. "It's been five years." I pause to light the smoke. "Five years. Haven't felt a thing for him—okay, é una stronzata." I laugh nervously, admitting that's bullshit. "I care for him—I have cared for him, but now?" Fuck. I take a deep drag and let it out slowly. "I'm in love with him." I tap my temple. "Which is fucked up."

Junior, after our big fight, set some shit in motion, I think. I watched him after that, and I wanted...want...to believe him. That I'm the only one for him. That he only loves me, fucks me, kisses me. And then...the way he is with our children? So sweet and amazing. He's both loving and strict, giving and demanding. Elisa has him wrapped around her little pinky, but when she throws a fit, he takes care of it.
Sure, he sometimes just hands her over to me, but not always. And when Anthony puts on his tough-guy act, Junior takes him down a peg or two. Our son idolizes both Junior and Nico—he forgets that he's only four years old. But Junior knows. He's a good dad.

"I'm in love with Felix, too." Heidi shrugs. "You can't help who you fall for, sweetie."

I chuckle bitterly. "My heart wasn't supposed to belong to him, but then—then he says shit like that?" I place a hand over my heart. "How can I not fall? He promises what I crave: devotion, fidelity, love." My lip quivers, and I hate it. "But I'm afraid to believe him—fuck!" I take another pull from my cigarette, and I don't really smoke. What a mess this is. Stupid feelings. Stupid emotions. "Questa é una fottuta pazzia." It really is; its fucking crazy. I'm losing it. Dammit. "L'amore e cieco: Love is blind," I laugh humorlessly. "My mother—God rest her soul—" I do the Sign of the Cross "—would laugh at that crap."

Heidi looks amused.

"What?" I ask, irritated.

She laughs. "You know I don't understand what you say, right?"

Right. She's German. Ugh. "Doesn't matta'," I say, waving it off. "I'm just rambling."

"That, I know." She grins. "But be serious, Bella—"

"Junior doesn't call me that," I mention for no reason at all. "He calls me Isabella. I like it. Love it. Love him." I palm my face and peek through my fingers. "I'm going nuts!"

"Good God. Now—" she gives me an impatient look "—have you told him you love him?"
"Hell no!" I shout then clamp a hand over my mouth. "Sorry." I put out the cigarette. "No. I haven't told him." And I start another rant. "Well, I have, but he knows I've been lying—smart fucking man," I mutter. "He told me when I was about six months pregnant with Elisa, and I said it back, but—" I shrug "—he saw through me, I guess. And now..." My shoulders slump. "Now I know that I really am in love with him, and—and I'm terrified."

She cocks a brow. "Ah-huh, and why?"

"Because I'm twenty-six years old—" I place a hand on my chest "—and I'm already so tied to Junior. Two kids, another on the way—only three weeks to go—and he just...owns me. In just five years, I've gone from stripper slash fucking whore—"

"You were never a whore!"

"Who you tryin'a fool, hon?" I retort. Just in the few weeks between meeting—and fucking—Junior for the first time and then to when he made me his goomah, I entertained several of Felix's customers.

Heidi was no different. Then we got snatched up by our men. Our men—what a joke. Not that I give a shit about what I did before, but...eh.

"No matta'." I wave her off. "What I'm saying is that in just five years, so much has happened. I was a twenty-one-year-old nobody, and now I'm Junior's supposed big love? And we're a family. Come on. How much more does he need?"

"I don't get it." She lights up another cigarette. "So what if you're a family? You're both in love—embrace it."

I shake my head. "He'll break my heart. If, in five years, he can take so much of me, how will it be in another five years?" I hold out my glass as
she pours herself another. "It's only a matter of time." I smile in thanks and take a sip from my refilled drink.

Ugh, my back is killing me. Don't even get me started on my feet.

"Only a matter of time before what?" she huffs. "You're acting like things won't work out."

Obviously. Growing up, I learned that men aren't satisfied with just one woman. And if I give in to Junior, if I tell him that I'm devastatingly in love with him, he will have everything. Then when he's had his fill and moves on, I will be crushed.

"For God's sake, Bella!" she cries out. "Stop being a brat—let the man love you."

"I'm not being a brat," I say defensively.

She nods. "Oh yes, you are. Look at you." She waves a hand at me. "You sit there in that expensive dress—Junior only makes you buy the nicest brands. You have a purse full of cash. And the jewelry he gives you? Please, girl." I look down at myself, at what I'm wearing. A simple black cotton dress—the kind that sort of wraps around you? It's a thin material. 'Cause I'm pregnant and sweating like a pig. And my jewelry...the gold bracelet, the diamond necklace, the earrings... "On top of all that, he tells you you're the only one, Bella. You're acting like a brat."

"It's not about the fucking money," I hiss, shaking my fist at her. And, for the record, Heidi wears the same kind of expensive clothing. "It's about whether or not I can trust him. Do you trust Felix? Huh? Do you trust that you're the only one he puts his dick in?"

"Yes. He told me, and I trust him."

"Well..." I scoff and lean back in my seat. "Must be nice to be you."
She sighs. "You've told me about your mother—how she grew up, what she believed was right... And maybe it was the truth for her, but it doesn't have to apply to you. Or Junior. Just because your father fucked around..." She trails off.

I feel drained, weary, and weak. I hate weak.

Luckily, I catch a break when there's a knock on the door. Since it's past midnight, I assume it's my brother.

And it is.

"You should be in bed," is the first thing Jasper says when I've opened the door for him.

I roll my eyes. "Yes, Father."

"Cute." He jerks his chin at me. "And stop with the eye-rolls, sis." Then he lets himself in. "My kids asleep?"

"Yeah." I follow him back to the living room. "Lucia went out a while ago, and Nico maybe half an hour ago. They've all been hopped up on sugar."

He chuckles and gets a beer and some macadamia nuts from the bar. "Well, if you stopped spoiling them with candy..." He lets out a sigh in contentment as he sits down on the couch across from Heidi and me, where we sit in two chairs. He nods at my stomach. "How's my niece or nephew?"

"Good," I say, smiling. "And the kids, they need sugar." I shrug. "I don't want them to be skin and bones."

God, how I miss cooking. After weeks living in a hotel, no matter how fancy it is, it gets to be too much. All I want is to go home, cook a nice meal, and put my kids to bed—their own beds.
I don't ever wanna go through what we did, starting when my parents died. Things suddenly got tough, and then Jasper was arrested out here...I moved, too, and supported Nicola and Lucia on a bullshit salary. We don't come from a wealthy family, but we still had what we needed. And then it just wasn't there anymore. Hospital bills from when Mom and Dad were sick...paying off the house, the cars... Plus, Dad had some gambling problem we didn't know about, and Jasper had to settle the debt after we buried our father.

As a result, I've been spoiling my niece and nephew—and my own kids, of course—ever since Junior walked into my life.

Besides, Jasper spoils them, too.

His children's mother—Mary, that stupid cunt, I hope she rots in hell—got herself killed when Lucia was five months old. Well, the official story is that she disappeared. The unofficial story—the truth—is that she was a pill popper who didn't care for her children.

One day, when my brother came home after a weekend out of town, she was passed out in the bedroom...while Nico and Lucia were in the next room...crying their eyes out. They hadn't been fed, changed, or anything. They were also dehydrated. So, Jasper lost it. Once Mary was released from the hospital, she went missing.

I'm pretty sure my brother killed her.

"I spoke to Felix earlier—he's staying at the condo tonight." Jasper tells Heidi then looks to me again. "Junior's probably staying back, too."

I nod. "Okay."

"So..." Jasper makes a bubble face and pats his stomach. "Anything to eat around hea'?"
Suddenly tired, I accidently yawn as I respond. "No—sorry. There's always room service, though."

He nods. "Go to bed. Juniuh doesn't like seeing you tired—he'd want you to get your rest." He nods again, this time seemingly to himself. "He's good for you, sis—treats you well." He looks down. "I wish he could make you his wife, though."

Yeah. Wife. Like that'll happen.

Regardless, I believe I have a lot to think through. Am I being smart, or am I being a brat?

I don't fucking know. All I know is that I don't want to get hurt.

After all, Junior hasn't promised me a future. I'm his secret. That's it. Pardon me for being cautious.

Then again...*Chi non risica, non rosica*. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

But it's a hard decision to make.

What I don't know right now...is that my decision will be made tomorrow morning when I wake up and we're trapped up here.

How ironic, death surrounding me will make me appreciate life.

~oOo~

**The morning of the fire...**

**Junior's POV**

At a little before seven the next morning, Felix and I drive out of town to meet up with Carlisle for breakfast at his house.
The ride is silent, but we don't need to discuss anything. We know that the air will probably be thick with animosity when we arrive, but we also know that nothing will happen in their house. Not with Esme, and probably Alice, so close.

The only thing we don't know is how much Carlisle suspects. It can't be more than suspicion, though, because Felix and I have been so careful. We haven't even included my father yet, which was what we had planned to do. But in the end we decided to leave him out of it. So, it's just four people who know. Felix, me, Alec, and Jasper. It's three too many in my opinion, but at least they're people I trust with this. And whenever we've been out of town, we've had our alibis covered.

"Here we go," Felix mutters as I drive onto Carlisle's street. "You think he brought more than Em?"

I shrug and flick some ash from my smoke out the window. "Probably Nick, Tony, and Frank?" They're his usual guys when it comes to security. Always nearby—always ready. Their car should be here somewhere. Even if they're not in the house, they're not far away. "Yeah, over there." I point straight ahead, seeing their black Cadillac.

Felix nods, and I stop the car when we reach the gates.

Some guy lets us through, but with the intercom crackling, I couldn't quite hear, though it might've been Emmett.

"I don't think Emmett knows a lot," Felix says thoughtfully as I park, and that's the last thing he says before leaving the car.

Esme greets us with a beaming smile when she opens the door for us.

"Carlisle told me you were both coming," she says, holding her arms out for Felix. "Come here; give your mother a hug. I don't see you often enough."
Felix smiles and hugs Esme, and then it's my turn. 

"You too, Edward—not often enough." She gives me a squeeze before letting go. "I've set up breakfast in Carlisle's office—he's waiting for you."

Carlisle, Emmett, and a guy I don't recognize are there when we enter the office.

"There you two are!" Carlisle's grin is way too wide and forced. "Come in, come in. Let's eat."

Oh, he's certainly up to something.

"Joe was just leaving," he adds, motioning at the stranger.

And without a word, Joe leaves.

"How are the kids, son?" Carlisle asks Felix as we take our seats around the large table. "How many kids do you have now—five?"

A couple of forks clatter and everyone goes silent.

One of Carlisle's rules has always been not to mention certain things in his house. The names of goomahs and bastard children to name a few. He doesn't even bring up Michael and Petey in this house, even if they're part of my crew—meaning they're involved in the organization.

And Felix only has two children with his wife—Gianna—yet Carlisle mentioned five.

"Everyone's good," Felix says casually, and I mirror his stance.

I lean back in my chair, acting as if I don't have a care in the world, and take a sip of my coffee.

"Molto bene." Carlisle claps his hands together, still with a grin on his face, then turns to me. "And you, Junior, how're the kids?"
I stare at him blankly. "All good, Carlisle."

"Good! Glad to hear it. Children—a beautiful thing." He nods to himself and digs into breakfast. "You have one of each, yes?"

Narrowing my eyes, I study him for...I don't know what. But this isn't my game. I hate beating around the bush, and I don't do well with fake bullshit.

"Yes," I eventually answer, and he nods for me to go on. I suppress a sigh. "Anthony's four, Elisa's almost three."

His smile widens. "And you have another on the way?"

I grit my teeth together, anger making my pulse quicken.

"Hey, Pops, what's this all about?" Emmett chuckles nervously, which makes me smile internally. Either he really doesn't know—like Felix said—or he's just...I don't know.

This is all fucked up.

"Nothing in particular," Carlisle answers Emmett. I want to wipe the smirk off his face. "Just...catching up a bit."

*Catching up. Right. Go fuck yourself.*

"Speaking of family..." Carlisle clears his throat. "Jane visited Esme last week, and then Esme came to me."

I remain calm. "Oh, yeah? What'd she have to say?"

I'm honestly curious. By now, Jane has to know that if she opens her mouth about certain things, I will give her the mother of all beatdowns. Hell, I'll fucking kill her.
"She confessed to Esme that she was never pregnant in the first place," he says lightly. My blood runs cold. "Imagine my surprise, huh?" Aside from his fake amusement, the room is silent. "At first, I didn't believe her. I'm not blind or stupid." He points to his temple. "I've noticed her little problem with alcohol."

"Pills too," I hear myself saying. "But then you believed her? Her word mattered more than mine?" I smirk. "Nice."

And his smile is gone. "What are you insinuating, Junior?"

I hold up my hands. "Just sayin'."

He stares at me for a long while, and in my periphery, I can see Emmett squirming in his seat. It leads me to believe that Felix was right; Emmett doesn't know anything. He's on his father's side so far, but he's not involved in the current plans that are most likely running around in Carlisle's head.

"Hmm." Carlisle hums. "Well, it's done with now." He points his fork in my direction. "Don't lay a hand on Jane. If she's gone, so is our arrangement with her family—I won't have that."

"He won't touch Jane," Felix lies, knowing very well that I'm going to kill her.

She disrespected me by going to Esme about that crap. Plus, divorces are a drag. I want her gone. *Pronto*. Which will be possible the second Carlisle dies. I will also make sure we still have Jane's father in our pocket.

Carlisle laughs. "Oh, I want him to touch her!" Sick son of a bitch. "But no harm comes to that woman."

*Or else?*
Then there's a knock on the door, and once Carlisle has told whoever it is to enter, Esme appears.

"What is it, amore mio?" Carlisle asks her.

Esme looks torn and a bit shaken. "In the kitchen—I was listening to the radio..." I frown when I see tears in her eyes, but then again, both Esme and my mother are emotional people—even for women. "It's all over the news—another fire."

I calm down some at that, 'cause that's not news to me anymore. I don't know what the fuck is going on, but there have been several fires in this state over the past couple of months. They seem too random, though, and no one has been targeted. No one from our family has even been close to being harmed, unless we count Alec. There was a fire at the restaurant he was at, but with his car being rigged at the same time, it seemed as if the fire wasn't planned but the bomb was? Something like that. I rarely believe in coincidences, but in this case it's just too far-fetched.

We're watching our backs, especially Alec, but we don't think the fires are linked to us. Besides, a fire like that isn't a sure way of killing anyone.

"Where is it this time?" Emmett asks as he starts slicing an apple.

"The MGM Grand."
Chapter 7

Junior's POV

All air leaves me in a whoosh, and nausea hits me like a wrecking ball. I also feel like I've been punched repeatedly in my gut...all while someone's been stomping on my chest.

"The G-Grand?" Felix chokes out.

"Oh no, that's a travesty," Carlisle mutters. "Such a beautiful hotel."

I blink.

I can't fucking breathe.

Slowly, I turn to Felix as Esme goes on about the fire that is currently raging over at the Grand, and I vaguely register that my hands are shaking. In my head, three names go on a loop. Over and over. Isabella. Anthony. Elisa. Isabella. Anthony. Elisa.

"We need to—" My throat closes up and I jerk my chin at the door.

Felix nods silently, eyes wide.

"Wait—what's wrong, boys?" Esme asks, concerned.

I shake my head and stand up. My knees almost buckle, and I don't know how the fuck Felix and I are going to drive the forty minutes to town. Oh, God. Fuck. No, she's okay. I shake my head again. She has to be. They're all fine. Maybe Esme's exaggerating. The fire could be small. The media could be blowing this up.

"Emmett," I grit out, refusing to break down when I know nothing. "Can you—" I release a breath. "Can you drive us?"

He frowns in confusion. "Where? Now?"
"I don't understand—what's going on?" Carlisle asks.

And I explode. "My fucking kids are there!" I scream, panicking. I fist my hair, easily ignoring Esme's loud gasp. "Isabella, I have to—I have to get to her." With panic comes action, and I can finally move. "God forbid, God forbid." I run out from the room, Felix following. "Emmett!" I shout. My hands are still shaking, and it feels like everything is crawling inside of me, ready to burst through my skin.

"They're fine, they're okay, we're worrying for nothing," Felix rants to himself. "Oh God, they have to be okay."

Emmett runs out, too, and then we drive away in his car.

~oOo~

On the way into town, we listen to the radio, and if I was panicking before, it's nothing compared to now. We listen as they report of fire throughout the casino on the second floor—something about restaurants, too—and that the fire has trapped everybody inside.

Right now, there are helicopters evacuating people from the roof, and I pray to God that Isabella and our babies are three of them. Or that they're already out. Yeah. And not a hair out of place. Oh, fuck. I palm my face, scared shitless for the first time in my life.

Then there's Jasper and his kids. Jasper. "Jasper's there," I croak, nodding to myself. "He'll get them out—fuck!" I punch the seat. "I should be there, I should get them out! They shouldn't have been there in the first place!" I swallow down a sob. I press my knuckles to my mouth.

Emmett floors it, and when I look out the window, I can fucking see the smoke coming from the Grand.
"They're okay," Felix says firmly, but his voice breaks at the end. "They're okay."

"Five minutes," Emmett says quietly.

Patting my pockets, I quickly locate my smokes and light one up. It takes a while, 'cause my fucking hand can't stop shaking, but... "Cazzo," I exhale shakily. I take drag after drag, and my eyes are glued to the pillar of smoke in the distance. I can't see any fire, 'cause there's shit in the way.

By the time my cigarette is gone, Emmett pulls over. The entire block has been closed off, so we're on foot now.

"Emmett," I say, getting out of the car. "Go find a phone; I want Alec at Dawn—tell him to call all the hospitals..." I swallow thickly. "We'll contact him there—at Dawn." I run a hand through my hair.

After a quick goodbye, we split up. Felix and I run toward the hotel and casino, and Emmett heads to the nearest payphone.

~oOo~

Two hours pass without answers, and I almost get arrested for assaulting a cop, but Felix manages to pull me back. It's damn infuriating, 'cause no one offers answers. We stand there, looking like complete idiots, and we feel useless, helpless, and powerless. Not that we can get too close, but close enough to see the smoke, to hear the sirens, to smell the destruction...

I can't say that I'm close to breaking down right now, but I am, however, ready to slit some throats in exchange for some fucking answers!

And whenever we call Alec from a payphone, he has no news.
"Let's call your brother again," Felix sighs heavily, and we have nothing better to do, so I don't argue...even though we called him twenty minutes ago.

We enter a soda shop, and Felix pays the girl behind the counter a twenty for letting us use their phone.

Alec answers on the first ring.

"Anything?" I ask, both weary and ready to explode. Felix leans in to listen, too.

"Just got off the phone," he says in a rush, and I tense. "Jasper called here—Elisa's been admitted to the hospital—"

"Oh, God. Elisa, piccola mia—sta bene—is she okay? Is Isabella there? Anthony?" My free hand flies to my mouth, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Devi dirmi tutti, Alec!" I scream, demand that he tells me everything, and punch the wall next to me.

~oOo~

I'm in a daze as Emmett drives me to the hospital. There's no word on Heidi and the three boys yet, so Felix is sticking around, waiting, hoping, going fucking crazy. Alec's at his beck and call. And right now, the only thing I have to keep me sane are Alec's words about my family being okay. Elisa's coughing and rasping after inhaling so much smoke from the fire, but she's stable. It's just a precaution that she's there, but it's still enough to bring me to my knees.

When Emmett finally pulls in to the hospital, I'm out of the car and running toward the entrance.

After a minor shout-fest, I get clearance, and then I run again. The elevator is too slow—too many people—so I take the stairs.
Each step brings me closer, but each step is also a chink in my armor. I feel weaker and weaker, and the thoughts running through me are the worst kind. Thoughts of what could've happened...they almost fucking cripple me.

I finally get to Elisa's room, and right before I push the door open, I have to take a second to calm down. But then I know it's not gonna happen. I swallow convulsively and give the door a push, and as soon as I spot my family, my eyes well up. Elisa's in the hospital bed with a some fucking mask covering her gorgeous little face, and Isabella's sitting in a chair next to the bed—she's crying silently—Anthony in her lap.

I see grime and soot all over their clothes and skin.

"Daddy!" Anthony sees me first, and he squirms down from Isabella and runs to me. That's when I break. Tears spill over, and I catch my son as he jumps.

I hug him to me so tight, crying openly when I smell the smoke on him. His hair is greasy, his clothes are smudged—it's his pajamas, I notice—and I can't believe how close I got to losing them today.

With Anthony clinging to me, I walk over to Isabella. I kneel down on the floor, between her slightly parted legs, and snake my free arm around her. Then I pull her to me, effectively burying my face in her stomach, and I start sobbing like a baby.

"Ciccino," Isabella cries. "I-I..."

I squeeze them both harder. "You're okay," I croak, looking up at her. "I love you—God—you're okay." I cup her cheek and brush my thumb under her eye. Shit, the soot, the grime. "God forbid." I hold on to her as I start peppering kisses on Anthony's face. "Mio piccolo tesoro. I love you—ti amo tanto."
He whimpers and tightens his hold on my neck, and I look up to Isabella again. I almost lost them. I almost lost them.

"You—" I choke up again and shake my head. "The doctors—have you...?" I palm her protruding stomach. "Is everything okay?" Then I press my knuckles to my mouth and look over my shoulder where Elisa's sleeping in the hospital bed. She looks so tiny and fragile. "Oh, angioletto mio." I look to Isabella once more, pleading with my eyes. "She's okay—t-tell me she's all right."

She nods. "She's fine—we're fine, thank God," she whimpers and cups my cheeks. "Junior...you're here." She throws her arms around both Anthony and me. "I was so scared."

I can't even imagine. "I'm here, baby." I kiss her hair. "My hummingbird—I love you."

She releases a breath and sinks further into my embrace. "I love you, too. So much."

I shake my head, slowly backing away a little. "Isabella..." Not today. I don't want that lie thrown in my face today. "Please just...don't."

"Oh, ciccino!" she gasps and cups my cheeks again. "I'm not lying, I'm not lying." She shakes her head furiously, tears streaming down. "And this isn't something—just... Not because of the fire. I love you. I know—I've known for weeks. I'm sorry." She gulps, and my vision gets blurry once more. "I think—I don't know. Maybe for longer, but since the fight? You got under my skin." Her face crumples. "I can't deny it, and—I talked to Heidi last night. Heidi!" She starts crying, sobbing. "She has to be okay. We were supposed to meet for breakfast!" She does the Sign of the Cross, and I swallow hard. "She has to be okay—and the boys. Oh, God."

"Hummingbird," I beg.
As important as Heidi and the boys are, I'm a selfish prick, and I need for her to get back on the fucking track.

"Right, right." She nods and nods and nods, and then laughs through her tears. "I love you, Juniuh. I told Heidi—asked for advice, or I vented. No matta'." I can't help but grin; she sounded so much like me there. "I was scared to tell you," she admits in a whisper. My humor is gone. "You'd have all of me—you do have all of me. And now you know it. Just...don't break me," she pleads. "Anything you want from me—it's yours. I'll take whatever you offer. But don't..." She looks so sad that my fucking heart hurts. "Don't leave me behind."

Admittedly, I understand her fear, but she has nothing to worry about.

"I'm so fucking yours that it's not even funny, hummingbird," I chuckle through my own tears. I can feel a huge weight lifting off of my shoulders, and I know why. To know—to see it in her eyes—that she loves me. Finally. At last. There are no words.

"I won't ever take you for granted," I promise, holding her hand to my heart. "I love only you, Isabella, and our children, and..." I take a breath. "You'll be my wife. Say you will."

She stares at me, not saying a word.

Then...

"I won't take your wife's place," she whispers, shaking her head.

My eyes widen. "No!" I'm shaking my head, too. "Never, Isabella. My one and only, okay? We'll get a new place—a house, not too far from town. You'll see me every day—every night I will be there. Not when I'm outta town, but you know. You're my only one, and my wife won't be an issue much longer," I rant, and Anthony starts fussing in my arms.
He reaches up for Isabella, and she takes him, all while watching me with apprehension and doubt written over her features. I can't blame her.

"I will prove it, bell'uccellino. Ti amo tanto, tantissimo—so much—solo tu, only you. We'll be a real family—I'll give you my name, my everything."

She's still hesitating, and again, I can't fault her for that. It only means she's smart. After all, she's been my mistress for five years now, knowing that I have a wife. But I will prove it to her. Now that Carlisle's days are numbered, nothing can stop me from getting rid of Jane. I admit, she is a victim here, but I don't care.

"It's the five of us," I say, nodding. "You, me, Anthony, Elisa, and this little guy." I splay my hand over her belly, wishing I had Elisa in my arms, too. "And any other children we'll have—God willing."

She sniffs and chuckles a little, though I can still see wariness. But I will get her to say yes to me soon. "It could be a girl, you know."

I shake my head. "You looked just like this when you had this one." I kiss Anthony's cheek. "I know." I point to my temple. "No one knows your body like I do. You'll see."

"Okay, we'll see," she giggles then sniffs some more. We sober at the same time, and I kiss her softly on the lips. "Ti amo."

"Fuck, that feels so good." I sigh contentedly. "Say it again."

She smiles. "Ti amo. Il mio cuore è tuo." I steal another kiss, feeling so happy. "Now." She grins and points behind me. "Go to Elisa. I know you're dying to."

I laugh through my nose and stand up. "You know me well." And with two more kisses—one for Isabella, one for Anthony—I walk over to Elisa's bed. She's still asleep, but it can't be any deep sleep. I know my little angel,
and when she's not still, she's about to wake up. "Bimba mia bella," I murmur, brushing a piece of hair from her forehead. "Does she need this crap?" I ask, worried, and point to the mask. And suddenly, more questions rush out. "I need to know everything—can you tell me?" I look to Isabella. "Where's Jasper? Nico and Lucia? What happened—how close where you? Heidi and the boys—Felix is losing his mind—fuck!" I need to call him, or call Alec. Shit. "Everyone's okay, right?"

She tells me. She tells me everything. How Jasper busted the door, waking them up, and told them there was a fire. The front desk had called him and said he had a message he needed to come down and get right away. It was urgent or something. But the fire started when he got there, so he went up again to warn them. "There was smoke everywhere, and so much screaming," she cries quietly. "At first—I thought the fire was close."

And she goes on to tell me about the smoke billowing out from the stairwells, even the fucking elevator shafts. They were literally trapped for a long time, and they hid in Isabella's suite. They were in the bedroom, soaked bath towels on the floor, by the door, to make sure smoke didn't get in.

"And Jasper went in and out, trying to find Heidi and the boys."

My eyes well up, and I'm thankful that Anthony has fallen asleep in Isabella's arms. They lived through it, and I can barely hear about it? Fuck.

"They were supposed to be with us—we had a sleepover. Well, the kids did. Heidi went to her suite around two." Then she continues and says that the boys weren't there when Jasper woke them up the next morning—this morning. "I don't know how long we were in there—me, Anthony, Elisa, Nicola, and Lucia. And the crying...God, we were so scared, but I refused to let it show—I couldn't. We prayed. Then Jasper came back
again—said that there were firefighters who were gonna help us get to the roof."

"Christ," I whisper thickly and look down at Elisa.

"Jasper took Lucia and Elisa—carried them both—and I held Nico's hand." She breaks down and sobs. I tell her to pause, to breathe, to relax, to wait, but she shakes her head and goes on. "A firefighter carried Anthony, and we went up... There was so much smoke—hysteria. Crying and screaming, everyone tried to run up. The firefighters were cursing and yelling—something about the elevator shafts and stairwells basically coaxing the smoke to travel up." She breathes. "We ran into more firefighters, and they had masks for us. Then we continued—we reached the roof."

I remember they said on the radio, something about helicopters evacuating people.

"Then we were rushed here," she croaks, wiping her cheeks. She also pauses to hug our sleeping boy to her. "Elisa was coughing so much—" She chokes up, and I feel myself doing the same. "She was crying and coughing, which made it hard for her to breathe."

Leaning down, I press gentle kisses to our daughter's forehead as I blink back tears.

"She's okay now?" I ask, eyeing the oxygen mask.

"Yeah," she exhales shakily. "They're going to check her again when she wakes up—she should wake soon—and then we'll probably be discharged right away. The doctor said it got worse because she was crying—like she was panicking?" I nod. "But it's better now."

"Good." I nod again. "That's so good." I kiss Elisa's forehead again.
A few minutes later, Elisa wakes up, and we call the doctor to get in here.

"Daddy," she rasps softly, and I lift off her mask.

"Hey, you," I murmur and caress her cheek. "How's my little angel?"

She gives me a toothy grin that relieves me. "Good. Where's Tito?" She coughs a little.

I shake my head, both amused and overwhelmed. "I remember when you were so scared of him, and now he's the first one you ask for?"

"No, nevuh scared." She pouts and shakes her head. "I wanna go home—not the hotel." Her lip quivers. "Was a big, big fire," she whispers, and my heart just breaks. "I didn't like it."

"You're not going back there—I promise." I lift her hand to kiss it. "How's your—does it hurt? Anywhere?" My finger ghosts over her throat, which probably tickles because she giggles...before she coughs, and I feel like an ass. "Fuck, I'm sorry, piccolina!" I help her up and rub her back while she coughs. "I'm such an—" I groan and look to Isabella. "Dammi una mano, per piacere. Non voglio che stia male." I ask Isabella for help because I don't want Elisa to be in pain. Fuck, I'm such an idiot, which I say next. "Sono un maledetto idiota." Then I face Elisa again, relieved that her coughing has ceased. "Daddy's so sorry," I whisper.

"S'okay," she rasps, smiling. Her eyes are shining, too. I sigh and slump down again. "Daddy?"

"Yeah?"

She gives me another pout. "Can I have new puppy? Tito always wiv Anthony. And Tito—no puppy now. He's big." She holds her arms out wide. "This big."
And that's how I know Elisa's gonna be okay.

I let out a breathy chuckle. "Check you out." I playfully nudge my fist to her chin. "You know I won't say no, don't you?"

She shrugs, still grinning.

Shortly after that, the doctor comes in, and I step back while he gives Elisa a checkup.

In the meantime, I speak quietly with Isabella, again asking where Jasper and his kids are. And she tells me that he took them out for ice cream. Apparently, that's good for their throats—ice cream and tea—so I decide to do that, too, later when we're outta here. But before that...

"So, no word on Heidi?" I whisper.

Isabella shakes her head sadly, tears spilling over. "Jasper tried finding them... God, they have to be okay, Junior. I hope they're in another hospital."

I hope so, too. Christ, Felix has to be freaking out.

~oOo~

A week later, without giving Brianna a reason, I ask her to watch Anthony and Elisa at one of the apartments Felix owns here in Vegas. She's not allowed to tell anyone where she is—not even her husband—and I picked her up before, making sure no one followed us.

Then I attend a funeral with Isabella.

Heidi, Luca, and Angelo didn't make it.

Francis was found, and he's miraculously okay, but the rest...
They died of carbon monoxide poisoning—smoke inhalation. That same shit killed seventy-five people. Eighty-five in total died.

We guess that Heidi and the boys were on their way down to The Deli—which happens to be the restaurant where the fire started—for breakfast.

I hug Isabella to me as she cries.

We're so much closer now—closer than ever before. I opened up to her about my marriage and told her that I was forced, that I was never attracted to Jane, and that I didn't have the choice to divorce her. I think Isabella believes me. I hope so. And I told her once again that I want her to be my wife, at which she asked why I can suddenly divorce Jane. I clammed up for a while, not really knowing how to answer. Then I just told her that things were changing and left it at that.

I will get her to say yes soon. I need my family. I want us together, sharing the same last name, and I want to introduce her to my parents.

I can and I will, but one man won't ever have that opportunity.

Felix stands stoic, holding his crying four-year-old son in his arms. Francis lost his twin brothers and mother. Felix lost the woman he loved and two sons.

I know he's looking for someone to blame—hell, so am I. It makes everything easier, but I'm not sure there is a guilty party. We'll look, but...

After the funeral, we hold a small wake at a restaurant—one that a guy in Alec's crew owns—and Felix remains silent. The women, Isabella, Angela, and a few others, share memories. They also take care of the few children who are here. The men, Emmett, Alec, Jasper, Mike, Petey, a couple others, and I talk about nothing. Insignificant bullshit.

Felix says nothing.
Until we're ready to leave.

As I straighten out my jacket, outside the restaurant, he leans in and whispers in my ear.

"My father did this."

I stare at him.

He nods. "Meet me at Twilight tomorrow—we'll talk."

~oOo~

Around nine PM the next night, I walk into Twilight and head straight for Felix's office.

It's funny how being a father sometimes takes it out of me more than whacking a fella. With my being a little paranoid and more than a little protective, I won't allow Isabella to take the kids back to the condo. It's not safe—not until we have all the answers and we know if there was a fucking mark on them. I still doubt it, but you never know. So...we're all cramped up in that little apartment—in which building Felix owns—and I make sure no one knows where we are.

The kids get bored easily, hence my being drained, but at least they're alive. Francis has been staying with us, though, so at least Anthony's happy. They're the same age—my son is only a couple months older—and he's been able to distract Francis. Elisa is another story. She can't wait for her new puppy to get here—yeah, I caved; no fucking surprise there—and I think, while she's waiting for the pup, she wants everyone to be as miserable as she is.

With a shake my head, I get rid of those thoughts for now.

As soon as Felix lets me in, I take a seat across from him.
He doesn't waste time. "Jasper was the target at the Grand. Our families—collateral damage." He shrugs, eyes dead. It's like he's shut off. As he speaks, my mind spins. "You remember that man who was at my father's house—the man who left when we got there?" I nod, frowning. "I've done my homework." He pulls open a drawer and reveals a small stack of paper. "The day before yesterday, I broke into Dad's office."

"Damn," I mutter, surprised.

He shrugs again. "I was there anyway—Mom had us over for dinner. When we left, I—I didn't really leave. I snuck back in. Easy." I nod for him to go on. "Right. Well, I found this in his office." He slides one piece of paper toward me, and I pick it up. It's a photo. "His name is Joe Ricci. And he's from Jersey."

I raise a brow. "Affiliated?"

"Sort of like Jasper—he is, but he isn't? Joe's dad ran with Jasper's dad and so on. Anyway, I did some digging—I also asked Jasper for confirmation..." He releases a breath. "Jasper knows of Joe, but Joe was in prison back then, so neither was close. Long fucking story, but to make it short... Jasper got married at eighteen to Joe's half sister."

"Shit."

I don't know what else to say.

"Yeah, and Jasper's ex-wife isn't exactly someone we know of."

I purse my lips. I do know. But only a little. "Isabella told me that whatsherface disappeared." And I know very well that the word "disappear" means something else entirely. "Mary, I think her name was."

Felix nods. "And Joe got outta prison last year—has looked for Jasper ever since."
All right, a fucking vendetta. I see it. "And he found Jasper through Carlisle, or...?" I scratch my nose. "That doesn't make sense. Carlisle hates Jersey."

"Ah, but see, Joe hates Jersey now, too." He smirks. "Joe went to Vinny—the Jersey boss—and wanted the 'okay' to ice Jasper. Vinny said no, 'cause he's not sure he believes that Jasper killed this Mary, and... Thing is, Jasper's only done a few things for his father—that's it. So, Vinny hardly knows Jasper—he was never really in. But Vinny was supposedly pretty close with Jasper's dad, so Vinny wants Joe to let it go—it happened more than eight years ago."

"So, Joe flipped," I say flatly. "He turned to Carlisle."

Felix nods. "My guess? Joe contacts my father, tells him some bullshit story about Jasper really working for Jersey—and we know my old man is a paranoid fuck—bam, Dad believes that shit and has a reason for wanting Jasper gone."

I purse my lips, thinking, letting things settle.

The timing fits. If Joe recently got out of prison...and Carlisle has never had an issue with Jasper before... 'Cause Carlisle hasn't known about Jasper's link to Jersey. We haven't had a reason for telling Carlisle, 'cause it would've only had caused unnecessary drama. Jasper's father's dead—the only real link between the Savonas and Jersey—but Felix and I both know that Carlisle wouldn't have looked past that. He's a petty man.

So, Joe divulges about Jasper to Carlisle.

One question, though. "How did Joe find Jasper out here? How does he know Jasper works for us—Carlisle?" Okay, two questions. "And why would Joe show his face at Carlisle's when we were there?" Make that three.
I get *why* Joe came to Carlisle; when he found out Jasper's with us... Yeah, Joe doesn't want trouble. He just wants Jasper. And killing him without Carlisle's permission—or whatever I'm going to call it—might've caused him...well, death. So, he feeds Carlisle lies, and in return, Carlisle hands over Jasper on a silver platter.

I don't fucking know.

And I wonder if Vinny knows that Jasper's with us.

"Jasper hasn't exactly been hiding." Felix shrugs. "Doesn't take a genius to find people. And we've had the girls at the Grand for a while. A small mistake is all it takes... Joe finds out and starts clocking him."

True. "But why would Carlisle get involved? There's gotta be something in it for him—more than getting rid of Jasper." I get up from my chair and start pacing. "And to start a big fire like that? Granted, Carlisle doesn't give a fuck about how many die, but still." I shake my head. "It's too big. Huge hotel... And again," I stress, "why would your father get his own hands dirty? If I were him—" I point to my chest "—I would've just sent Jasper on a fake gig and have Joe waiting for him—pop one in his head—that's that." I wipe my hands clean.

Felix looks pensive. "You're right. A fire like that—it's too much for just one person."

I'm already shaking my head, 'cause I know what he's thinking. "As fucked in the head as your father is, I don't think he put out hits on not only Isabella and Heidi, but seven *kids*—also counting Jasper's two. Sorry, but I don't see it. He wants me to fuck my wife—well, fuck him. But he wouldn't kill my *comare*. Or yours, for that matter."

It's practically a rule: we don't go after children.

"But we agree that Jasper's the target?"
I nod. "That makes sense." I snap my fingers, just remembering something. "Fuck yeah, Jasper was called to the front desk right before the fire started. An urgent message was waiting for him. Isabella told me. He was down there and rushed up, so..." My mind starts spinning again, as does my pacing. "That could be it. Maybe they didn't mean for the fire to cause such destruction." I fish out my smokes and light one up. "We read the papers the days that followed—remember? That stuff about the elevator shafts and stairwells practically being a fucking freeway for the smoke. And it was smoke inhalation that killed most people—not the actual fire. So..." I blow out some smoke. "Technically, the fire wasn't huge. And it's a smart idea—if you think about it." I tap my temple and nod. "There have been several fires in Nevada the past couple of months. This could be just another one. Nobody would think this one is different from the others. Carlisle would get away with it and everyone would think the fire was an accident."

Smart idea, like I said, but again, a fire like this isn't a sure way to take care of the one you have your eyes on.

Felix nods slowly, his fingers tenting on the desk.

"And like you said," I continue, anger running through me, "our families could be collateral damage. Not real targets, but..." I shrug.

"Madonn'," he curses. "I've had it. Screw making it look like an accident—I'm ready to whack him right now."

I smile.

"Looks like we have work to do," I muse.

My trigger-happy finger twitches.

"Dad and Joe—who else?"
I nod and think for a moment. "We have to do it soon. Joe might try with Jasper again soon—which reminds me: maybe we should send him away for a while. As for others..." I puff out my cheeks before exhaling. "I'm not sure there are that many. You have most guys in your pocket already." It's the truth. I can't think of anyone who wouldn't follow Felix when he steps up. "There are a few old-timers, but...I don't know. We've cleaned up the shit back East—those who worshipped the ground Carlisle walks on."

He nods. "Jane?"

I smirk. "I have plans for her."
Chapter 8

Junior's POV

It's past four in the morning when I finally return to the apartment, and I'm fucking exhausted.

We've made our plans, though, so it's all good.

Jasper will be here tomorrow morning to drop off his kids, and then he's off to Florida for a job.

Passing the living room where all the kids sleep, I make my way to the little bedroom down the hall.

"Isabella," I whisper as I remove my clothes. I usually don't wake her up when I come home late, especially not when she's pregnant, but nowadays she often asks me to let her know when I get here. I love that.

As soon as I'm naked, I sneak under the covers and kiss my way up her body. "Hummingbird." I kiss her soft thighs, squeezing them a little. I just can't get enough of her curvy body. After two kids and one on the way, she's even more perfect than she was before. "Damn," I groan under my breath when I reach her panties. Red lace—she's trying to kill me, I'm sure of it. I'm also sure that she's awake, because as I tug on the skimpy lace, she lifts her hips an inch or two.

All I want to do now is eat her pussy.

And then fuck the shit outta her.

She lets out a sleepy giggle when I toss her panties somewhere around me, and it's quickly followed by that humming noise I love so much. Then it's a moan when I bury my face in her pussy.

"You're lucky I'm always so fucking horny. Insatiable man."
"Oh, yeah," I breathe out, nuzzling her wet clit. "Only for you."

Both her previous pregnancies have been very similar when it comes to her sexual appetite. The first two months are a no-go, and she gives me blowjobs instead. She just doesn't feel it, but it's okay, 'cause she turns into a freak after that, which lasts 'til the homestretch. Right now, with only two weeks to go, she's horny but uncomfortable. So, as long as I make it comfortable for her, she's all for it. Hell, she demands it.

Soon she won't let me go near her for a while, but again, it's okay, because she still satisfies me with her mouth. Not that I demand head when she's waddling all over the place; she gives it anyway. I stopped demanding shit when I fell stupid in love with her, yet she's acted as my mistress—the woman who always puts out.

I hope that shit changes when I make her my wife.

Okay, not the putting out. The rest of it, though. I want her opinions. She has a choice. Within reason.

"Quanto amo la tua fica." I tell her I love her pussy and suck her clit into my mouth, then slam two fingers inside of her. She gasps when I curl them upward. "Right there? Ti piace così, amore mio?"

"Yes! Ah, non ti fermare—non...non fermarti mai... Ungh...yes!" she cries out, begging for me not to stop.

I moan and lick her hard. Fuck, how I love her taste. She doesn't have to tell me not to stop, 'cause I'm going anywhere 'til I'm done. Needing more, I slip my tongue inside of her, groaning. My fingers rub her clit.

"Junior...oh, God...I'm gonna...gonna..."

She stiffens, and I speed up and add pressure.
More moans and groans follow from both of us as she rides out her orgasm, and I'm eager to lick it all up.

By the time she relaxes, my cock is ready to drill a hole through the goddamn mattress.

I kneel on the bed, one hand stroking myself. "All fours, hummingbird," I say huskily, wiping my chin. Jesus. I watch her positioning herself for me, and the sight of her... "Gorgeous—so sexy," I whisper. My hands slide up her thighs, over her perfect ass, and then I give her ass a smack.

She hums. "Mmm, fuck me, ciccino."


I go rough, fast, and I hear how my hips slap against her ass cheeks. I also hear how wet she is, which is another thing about Isabella being pregnant. She's always so fucking drenched. She's usually slick and hot for me, but this...this is more. Arousal trickles down, a drop or two every once in a while, whenever I hit a particular sweet spot inside of her.

"I love you—fuck, so much," I moan, looking down to where my cock disappears into her.

"Damn, you too," she whimpers and pushes back. "Love—love you. I love you."

I'll never get tired of hearing that.

Sitting back on my heels, I pull her with me. This is a position we both love. She bounces up and down my cock while I rub her lower back with one hand—the other reaches around her to palm a breast.

"Oh, yes," she groans.
Goddamn. I start panting into her neck. She feels so good. And her tits...those sensitive nipples... I moan and buck my hips, meeting her when she slams down. Close.

"I'm there, baby," I grit out. Desperate and wanting her to come once more, I slide my hand over her stomach and down to her pussy. "Fuck—so wet." I rub her hard with my middle finger, pausing once or twice to stroke her pussy lips. She digs that, and fuck, I do too. Her skin is smooth and warm, neat, with soft curls. "Oh, Isabella, I need you to-" I grunt and fight back my orgasm but, thankfully—before I explode—she stiffens above me and cries out.

With a low groan, I let go and follow. I thrust lazily, head tilted back, eyes partly closed, jaw slack, and cock pulsing inside of her.

"Oh, my God," she breathes out.

"Yeah," I pant then swallow. "Fuck."

We both collapse on the bed, legs and arms tangled together.

It's the best way to fall asleep.

~oOo~

"Lucia, nooo!" Elisa screams. "My puppy, my puppy!" She pushes her cousin away, or she tries. "Go!"

I chuckle and sip my coffee, eyes on the gazillion kids who are playing on the kitchen floor. Okay, so they're not playing so much as they are trying to get the new puppy's attention. I brought the little guy home early this morning—a Jack Russell—and Elisa's ecstatic...if only she wasn't surrounded by aforementioned gazillion kids.
Jasper dropped off Nico and Lucia around six before he left for Florida, and Francis is here, too. Felix should be here soon for lunch.

Isabella is preparing said lunch, and this kitchen is pretty tiny, meaning she almost falls over every once in a while when the children get too close.

Speaking of...

"Ay!" I shout, watching as Anthony and Lucia nearly ram into Isabella. For Christ's sake... "Watch what you're doing!" I point to Isabella. "You want her to fall and hurt herself, huh? Apologize."

"Sorry, Bella," Lucia whispers.

"Sorry, Mama," Anthony mumbles.

Isabella winks at them. "It's all right, sweethearts." Then she blows me a kiss.

I smile.

She's too good to them all. Sure, she raises her voice and yells at them sometimes, but she lets them get away with too much.

"Go bother Nicola instead," I tell them, pointing to the door.

"I heard that, Zio Eddie!" Nico shouts from the living room.

"Good!" I respond, chuckling. Kid's always watching TV. That shit didn't exist when I was little. And even if there's nothing on, Nico's glued to the damn thing.

"Go, go!" Elisa shoos both Anthony and Lucia out of the kitchen, looking so fucking cute. "Only Francis and I play with Lucy."
I can't help but laugh. Since Elisa got the puppy, she's changed its name ten times.

"Lucy is a girl's name, angioletto." I grin at her. "The puppy is a boy."

"Oh..." She frowns at the dog. Tiny little thing. It fits in my hand, really. Those dogs are always small, but as a puppy? Forget about it. It's more like a rat. But it's cute, though, and perfect for Elisa.

"Daddy, I need boy name." She pouts and walks over to me. "Help me?"

Picking her up, I place her on my lap, and one of her hands goes to the hair on the back of my neck.

"Mama's good with names, too," I say, kissing her cheek. "She had a dog when she was little." Looking over at Isabella, I ask, "What was his name, again?" I only remember that she and Jasper named their dog after the town in Sicily their mom comes from.

"Milazzo," she chuckles, but then she winces and rubs her belly. It's weird how I both hate and love that. My son is a wild one, and I love touching her stomach when he kicks, but he also has the tendency to plant his foot to her ribs.

"You okay, hummingbird?" I ask, worried. "Maybe you should sit down."

Twelve or eleven days 'til due date, I think.

She smiles. "No biggie." She waves it off. "Where does your family come from? I only know my mother's family—Milazzo. That's it. We still have some family left there, but most fled to America after Mussolini sent Mori to clean up Sicily." I nod, having heard many stories of that kind from Mrs. Coppoletta, not to mention my own grandparents before they died. "I know my father was Sicilian, too, but...not the town his family's from."
"Mil-zo!" Elisa cheers.

I laugh and kiss her noisily. "Molto bene!" My girl is good. "God, I love you, baby."

"Love you," she sings. "Mm-to-bene!"

This girl cracks me up. "Means very good."

"M'tay, I wanna play wiv Lucy now." And she jumps down...to play with Lucy, the boy dog.

Isabella just shakes her head in amusement.

I return my attention to Isabella's question. "My mother's family's from Sorrento. They came here at the turn of the century, so they've been here a while." I hum, trying to remember where Dad's family is from. This is new between Isabella and me—we've never discussed family before. But now is different. In the past week or so, we've opened up about pretty much everything—everything that I'm allowed to discuss, that is. "My father's family came here from Sicily the year he was born." My brows knit together. Something about...Adrana, Adrio... "They're from...Adrano? Not sure."

She nods and gets something from the fridge. "There's a small town near Etna—it's called Adrano."

"Daddy!" Elisa's screech has my attention once more. "Boy name!"

I suck my teeth. "So demanding. Can you ask nicely?"

Ah, the pout again. "Boy name for Lucy, pwlease?"

"Better." I nod. Since we have Tito, which means "giant", I'm about to suggest "piccolo" or something else equivalent for "little", but there are
four rapid knocks on the door, indicating that Felix is here. "That's your father, Francis." I smile at him and stand up.

"Up, up!" Elisa holds her arms out for me, so I pick her up again and take her with me.

Tito and...um, Lucy...follow.

I was right. It's Felix. Only, he's not alone.

My dad is standing there, too.

I've known for a while that Dad's aware I have children, but it's nothing we talk about. Ever. Whenever our guys have brought girlfriends and mistresses to various clubs—and Pops has been there—I haven't brought Isabella. She and my children have always been my safe haven—my secret. It's the way I've wanted it, needed it, in order to cope with all the bullshit that otherwise fills my everyday life.

"Good to see you, son." Dad smiles carefully, eyes flicking between Elisa and me. "So, this is your daughter?"

I nod with a dip of my chin, a bit happy that Elisa's hiding her face against my neck—something she always does around strangers.

"And what're you doing here?" I ask.

"He knows everything now," Felix replies pointedly. "He came to me this morning..."

"I'm just done," Dad says tiredly. "Victoria's next." I know he's talking about more matchmaking. "And Carlisle's found a husband for Alice in Kansas City. He wants to expand even more."
"Shit," I mutter. That means Alice is moving. We'll put a stop to that, though. "All right, so you told him?" I look to Felix, and he nods. "Okay. Come on in. Lunch is almost ready."

As they shrug out of their coats in the hallway, I lean in to my father. "Isabella is going to be my wife," I say quietly. 

*She just has to say yes first.*

He surprises me by smiling. "Don't worry." He clasps my shoulder. "I will treat her with respect. And I already know—Felix told me about Jane."

Well, that's not really Felix's business to get involved in.

"I asked him for advice," Felix explains, keeping his voice low. "He is the *consigliere*, after all, Junior. And I want Jane's father to still be with us after this."

"That won't be a problem," I assure them both. "But let's talk about this another time."

They both nod their consent, and I head straight for the kitchen, knowing that this is another occasion I won't have enough time to prepare Isabella for meeting parts of my family.

"Felix hea'?" she asks, smiling.

"And my father," I add, walking over to her. She stiffens, just like I expected, and I repeat the same words I once used when it was Brianna and Alice coming over. "I didn't know he'd be here. But you're going to be yourself, yeah?" I kiss her cheeks. "I only want you, hummingbird, so be yourself."

"Okay," she breathes out. "But I'm not dressed for—"
I cut her off. "You look perfect." Heavily pregnant, she often complains about heat no one else feels, so she's wearing a black cotton dress. But it's modest and classy, sleeves ending at her elbows, skirt reaching her knees, and a subtle cleavage. She looks exquisite.

"I love you." I kiss her nose. "Want Elisa?"

She nods and holds out her hands. "I love you, too." Then she smiles and looks me in the eye, and I see confidence, for which I'm glad. "Come here, piccolina." She hugs Elisa to her just as Felix and Pops enter the kitchen.

"Isabella," I give her a wink, "this is my father—Edward Senior. And, Pop, this is my Isabella."

"E' un piacere conoscerla, Signor Maisano," Isabella greets him politely.

"Oh, look at that," my father says to no one. His smile is wide. "Such a beautiful young lady, Isabella." He cups her cheeks. "And call me Ed. I hear we'll be family soon."

Isabella blushed—something I've never seen her do before.

"All right, Pops," I chuckle. "Let the woman go. I'll introduce you to Anthony."

My chest feels light as I take the lead to the living room.

Felix stays behind in the kitchen to be with Francis.

"Now that I know who she is—cazzo—she looks just like her mother," Dad comments, which makes me come to a halt. "Renee—God rest her soul." He does the Sign of the Cross, and I stare at him, shocked.

"What'd you just say?" I whisper in disbelief.
Standing there in the hallway between the kitchen and the living room, Dad explains everything in a hushed voice. He tells me that Felix has filled him in on Jasper and Isabella—mostly Jasper since we believe he was the target at the Grand—and when Felix mentioned Jasper's ties to Jersey, Dad asked curiously how he was linked to them. In turn, Felix told him about Jasper's dad and that Charlie Savona worked for one of Vinny Malletta's capos—something Jasper has divulged only recently. And that's when my father had pieced it together, 'cause he grew up with a woman named Renee, who later got married to a Charlie.

"Renee left Brooklyn in middle school—I'm a few years older," Dad whispers. "Moved to Jersey with her family for a bit. After that, I heard it through the grapevine—she got married to a connected guy out there...Charlie. I just didn't remember his last name."

I'm still stunned, but then again, if you're born in the same neighborhood, you know each other. That's just how it is. Your neighborhood is your world, basically.

He continues. "The few times Carlisle conducted business with the Mallettas, I was there—fucking had to be, to smooth things over." I snicker, knowing very well that while Carlisle hates Jersey, Dad never had issues with them. "I even met Renee once at some restaurant. She was pregnant...must've been with Jasper—I get that now." He chuckles under his breath, wistful. "I hear they moved around a lot—between Jersey and New York."

I'm kinda eager to tell Isabella all this. Shit, had it not been for her mother leaving Brooklyn, maybe I would've known Isabella growing up. Then again, we moved to Manhattan when I was only five years old and then out here to Vegas when I was nineteen.
"What a small world," he muses. "I can't believe Jasper, who's been in Felix's crew for years now...it's the same Jasper! And Isabella...gorgeous girl." He nods. "You're lucky, son. She'll make an excellent wife."

I smile wryly. "You said that about Jane."

"Now, that's a lie." He wags his finger at me. "I said the union would be beneficial for the family—never said she'd be perfect for you." Okay, that's true. "And I apologize, son." He shakes his head, looking solemn. "I should've put my foot down a long time ago—"

"And then Carlisle would've made sure you ended up in a ditch," I finish.

Carlisle demands loyalty, but he's not exactly loyal himself.

We know that now.

"I'm ready to leave all that behind me." I run a hand through my hair. "Hell—I've been ready to do that for years."

He nods. "You love her very much."

"I do. She's my world."

"Good! I'm glad you'll have what I have with your mother."

I don't comment, but I'm glad to hear it nonetheless.

"Speaking of your mother..." He grimaces a little. "Esme managed to spill to her about your children before Carlisle and I could tell her to keep that to herself."

I'm not too surprised; she and my mother are very close. And that dreadful morning, when I screamed out that I had children at the MGM Grand, I didn't exactly give a fuck that Esme heard me.
"I take it Mom wants to meet my children." I give him a tight-lipped smile. It's not that I don't want the same, I'm just afraid Mom won't approve of Isabella. My mother would never voice her opinions, out of respect, but there's no hiding the fact that Isabella has been my goomah.

"She wants to meet Isabella, too."

"Can't wait," I say sarcastically. "But it'll have to wait 'til all this blows ova'. Not now."

With that out of the way, I usher my father into the living room where Nico's watching TV and Anthony and Lucia are trying to teach Tito new tricks. That's Isabella's smart thinking. 'Cause when "Lucy" arrived, Tito was abandoned for a few hours...until Isabella told our son that the puppy was too young to learn tricks, whereas Tito wasn't. So, now Tito's the coolest ever again in Anthony's eyes.

"Madonna mia, he looks just like you, Junior," Dad whispers. "But his hair is darker."

That's true. Anthony looks so much like me, but his hair has darkened a few shades, meaning he has his mother's hair now.

I smile. "Anthony, c'mea."

He looks up and grins crookedly, though it fades a little when he sees my father.

"Who's that, Daddy?" he asks, holding out his arms for me.

I take the hint and pick him up. "This—this is my dad."

"I'm your grandfather—your nonno," Dad says, actually looking emotional. His eyes are shining as he places his hands on my son's cheeks. "Che bel giovanotto che sei—so handsome." He looks at me. "Give Isabella our
name," he says firmly and lets go of Anthony. "This is something to celebrate."

I grin, relieved and agreeing.

~oOo~

Lunch is fun, a welcome break in our now somewhat uprooted life. While I'm sure Anthony will one day have questions as to why he hasn't met my pops until now, I'm not too worried about it. We'll deal with it when the time comes.

Aside from Heidi's death, which is written all over Felix and Francis, we talk, shout, laugh, and act carefree. Anthony seems to like my dad, and I'd say Isabella thinks the same. He's a sly fucker, my old man, and he loves to flirt—innocently, of course. That was never me. I'm not nice enough, nor do I care. The only one I've wanted to pursue or be nice to is Isabella, and after five years I've finally claimed all of her. I'm not going anywhere. I'm set for life. Done.

Dad, on the other hand, charms the shit outta Isabella, making her giggle and blush.

It's amusing. And a little frustrating...but I let that crap go.

She's happy—happy on a whole new level—and that's what matters.

After lunch, Isabella tells the kids to stay with her in the kitchen, which means I have privacy with Dad and Felix in the living room. We speak quietly, in hushed whispers, about our new plan, which will be executed in exactly four days. It won't be an accident. There's no time for that.

Before, we didn't know when, but with my old man in on the plan, we do know. He's Carlisle's closest, and he can guarantee what we need—a time and place.
Carlisle won't go down in an original way.

Like many before him, his closest will take him out.

~oOo~

Translation:

Sei scimunito = Are you stupid?

yak, blow = slang for cocaine

c-note = hundred-dollar bill

Reference to Alec's joke: from The Godfather, "Leave the gun. Take the cannoli."

~oOo~

Three days later, Jasper returns from Florida.

Tomorrow, Carlisle will be gone.

And right now, close to midnight, Jasper, Alec, and I are in a private garage outside city limits. It's where we're keeping the car Jasper brought with him from Florida. A car he stole—as ordered—from a few Cubans who are fucking with our business down in Miami. Nothing major—nothing we can't handle. Two of the mentioned guys are here, too. Very dead. In the trunk.

"How'd you clip 'em?" I ask curiously, looking down at the two bodies. There are no marks of them whatsoever. Alec moves to touch one of them, so I smack the back of his head. "Ay! Sei scimunito? Back off."

Alec scowls and backs away. There's a reason he ain't a hitman. Every day, the Feds get better at finding evidence, and Alec doesn't know how
to be careful. He's killed before, obviously, but I wouldn't exactly trust him with the cleaning.

Jasper smirks and pulls out a bag of...ah, coke...from the chest pocket in his leather jacket. "I held them at gunpoint and made them snort line after line. Then I got bored—they kept passing out, so I suffocated them." He shrugs.

I point to the bag. "Good shit?"

"I should hope so!" he laughs. "It's ours—so yeah, it betta' be good."

"Oh, it's good," Alec huffs and points his thumb at his chest. "I only get us the best products. Pure—very little laxative."

"Okay." I laugh through my nose and jerk my chin at the blow. "Wanna do a line?"

It's been a while since I hit the yak, and I could go for some. In fact, it's been more than a year. I've done it every now and then when Jane's been a particular pain in my ass. Whenever she's bitched about something, I've smacked her on the mouth then gone to my guest room where I've kept a small stash hidden. But lately, a phone call to Isabella and the kids has helped more. And even more recently, I've barely even seen Jane, so...

"Sounds good." Jasper nods. "So, what've I missed—anything new?" On the hood of the car, he prepares six lines. "My kids good?"

I nod. "They all met my pops a few days ago. Went well."

"Yeah? He liked Bella?"

"Definitely," I chuckle. "He knows I intend to marry her."

"Good. Good." He points at me. "She deserves the best."
"I know—and get that fucking finga' outta my face." What's with people nowadays? The nerve... "You know I love her," I tell him. "Have I given you reason to doubt me?" I widen my arms.

He holds up his hands. "No disrespect. My mistake. Still..."

And I nod, 'cause I know where he's coming from. Isabella's his little sister—I get it.

"She's my only one," I admit, rolling up a c-note. "Unlike you—how many bunnies do you have?" I chuckle. With a dismissive wave, I wordlessly tell him to take a step back, and he does. "Alec." I jerk my chin at him. He goes first.

"A few." Jasper grins. "Gotta keep my mind occupied until I get a chance with your cousin again."

I don't respond.

It's up to Felix, or even my father, if they approve of Jasper for Alice.

A few years ago, I interrupted shit before they could even start, but Isabella told me that their attraction was mutual. Not that I give a fuck—ain't my business. But I knew Carlisle wasn't gonna like it, so... Eh, no matter now.

Jasper does the next hit, and then I follow and snort my first line.

"Ah, cazzo." I swallow convulsively and tilt my head back. I sniffle, too, and try not to cough. Alec was right; this is good shit. It's like the best wake-up call—not counting Isabella sliding down on my cock or putting her mouth on me, of course. Now, that's a good way to wake up in the morning.

"We spending the night here?" my brother asks.
"Yeah." I lean back against the car. "I booked us rooms at the motel down the road—I've already checked in. And Felix will call me tomorrow morning from Twilight when he gets the green light from Pops."

Felix will meet us on the way, coming from the opposite direction, and he will have Michael and Petey with him, too.

"Mannaggia, I'm starving," Alec mutters and rubs his stomach.

That makes me think of Isabella's ravioli from last night.

I groan under my breath.

"What?" Jasper asks.

I chuckle. "Thinking about Isabella's cooking. Her ravioli?" I kiss the tips of my fingers.

"My favorite is her lasagna," he replies.

I nod. "Also a winner. Everyday, it seems, it's something new. And it's more than dinners. Side dishes, desserts, drinks..." I palm my face, suddenly aching for my family. "Her fucking biscotti? Jesus Christ!" I kick a tire. "I can't get enough."

"Her chocolate/orange cannoli," Alec supplies with a faraway look on his face. Then he laughs. "That's something to leave the gun behind for!"

I snicker. "She uses the orange peels—then dark chocolate—" I groan again.

This isn't how I imagined our night would go, but we spend the next few hours doing blow and talking about my hummingbird's cooking skills.

It's like we're women.

Fuck.
The next morning, Felix calls to tell me that everything is still on for eleven AM.

After that, I wake up Alec and Jasper. We eat, we bullshit for a while, and then we get ready.

We may not get all the answers to our questions, but we will kill that son of a bitch today. That's what matters the most.

Before we leave, I stand in the bathroom and stare at myself in the mirror.

There's a sinister grin on my face—one that I hope Isabella or my children never see. And it's weird, because...because I'm so fucking aware of it all. I know when I lose it. I know when I distance myself from feelings. There's still some semblance of control left in me. But the thing is, in this case, I'm not distancing myself. I want to feel this. I want to be the last one Carlisle sees in life. It makes me feel good. Which means I'm so fucked in the head. I'm not a good person.

It is what it is.

Although, I'm pretty sure Felix will be the last one he sees in life.

With my eyes still on the mirror, I straighten out my jacket. I fix my tie. I run a comb through my hair. I check my jaw, making sure I didn't miss anything when I shaved earlier. I attach my watch to my wrist. I stare down at my open palm, thinking back on when I got my button eight years ago.

"You've always made me proud, Junior," Carlisle told me after the ceremony. "You and my oldest—you and Felix... You're both made for this life."
He was right.

Felix and I are made for this life, which now means it's the end of Carlisle's.

Ten minutes later, Jasper, Alec, and I reach the garage.

"You drive," I tell my brother, tossing him the keys. "Jasper—in the back, behind me."

And we're off.

Chapter 9

Carlisle's POV

After receiving that phone call from Ed, I let Esme know that I'm heading out for a bit.

Tony and Nick go with me and Frank stays behind.

I rarely leave the house unless it's necessary, but Ed insisted that I come down to Twilight, and he couldn't divulge more over the phone.

It better not be more trouble, because I have enough of that as it is.

My biggest headaches are Jasper Savona and Alec.

Joe, the wiseguy from Jersey, contacted me and told me all about that Savona.

Jasper thinks he can snake his way into my family and then kill me? I shake my head. He will get his. Soon, hopefully, and Joe better not fuck up this time. Everything was supposed to be taken care of in that fucking fire at the Grand, and then I was gonna take care of Joe. I'd tell Felix or Junior to do it for me—say that the associate in my office that morning was here on business and flipped on us or something.
Junior with his love for guns wouldn't hesitate.

But that didn't happen.

Instead my son's comare and two children died. That wasn't the plan. I can't say that I care too much, but it still wasn't the plan. I knew Junior's whore lived there—who happens to be Jasper's little sister—and she...yeah, she can die for all I care. Ever since Junior took her in as a mistress, he's been softer, and I can't have that.

That's why I've tried to take out Alec. Twice. He's trying to get out—leave our thing—and escape. I just know it. I've seen it in his eyes at family dinners—Alec doesn't want this. But again, things didn't go down as I planned, and instead I ended up with a pile of bodies back East. Marcus died, Jim died, Notti died... And the last time I tried to take Alec out, only his whore died.


It's clear that someone is out to kill me, and I have two suspects. Either it's Chicago...or it's Junior and Alec.

I pray it's Chicago.

With a sigh, I try to clear my head and enjoy the ride for a while. Since I'm going down to Twilight, maybe I'll have time to see Mina—one of the whores I've visited a few times in the past year. Because I won't ever take a goomah again. The last one became a headache. First, she gave me two bastard children, and as if that wasn't enough, she was always complaining about something. Oh, and she wanted me to leave my wife.

I laugh under my breath at that absurdity.

In the end, I made her disappear, and after that, I've stuck to faceless pussy.
"What's that?" I hear Nick ask from the passenger seat.

Looking up, I try to see...anything, something. We're in the middle of nowhere, desert surrounding us, so it shouldn't be too hard to spot something that stands out—Wait. I squint.

The road is blocked by two cars.

"Turn around!" I shout, and Tony slams down on the brakes. The cars are still far away, so we should be able to get away.

As Tony skids the car around, I reach for my heat. Just in case.

My heart starts pounding.

Tony revs the engine, and we're off again.

And that's when I see another car coming toward us.

Not only that, but it's close. We're boxed in.

"What the hell?" Nick shouts. "Drive, drive, drive!" Now we have two cars behind, and one in front of us. Shit. "Out there!" He points at nothing—the desert. "Make the turn!"

I grit my teeth, making sure my gun's loaded. It's been a while since I've used a gun, but that doesn't mean I don't know how it works. At one time, I had to make my bones, too.

Tony floors it, and we're not on the road anymore. "Fuck," he spits out. "Non posso andare più veloce di così!" He claims he can't go any faster.

With guns ready, all we can do is bide our time.

This can't be it, can it?
Looking over my shoulder, I try to see the two cars closing in. Two, not three. I don't know why the third car stays behind. Correction: I try to see who's in them. But I can't get a good look, and when I see the cars parting, it doesn't matter who they are anymore. What matters is that they're catching up…and that they're trying to trap us.

Closer.

Closer.

Closer.

Panic sets in.

We're fucked.

The sound disappears. I no longer register the bumpy ground or Nick's and Tony's shouting.

It feels like everything is in slow motion as I turn to my left.

In that car, I see Felix and two men from his crew. I see my son's cold eyes.

Turning to the right, I see Junior, Alec, and Jasper.

Junior's smirking and holding up his piece.

**Junior's POV**

Just as I aim for the front tire, Tony raises his gun and pulls the trigger. Luckily, with the cars skidding, it's not easy for him to hit a damn target.

"Jasper, get the tires!" I bark out, and then I aim for Tony. "Fuck!" I miss the first shot, getting the windshield. But my second shot hits Tony in the neck. With him gone, I aim for Nick, who's firing at Felix's car.
"Felix!" I hear Carlisle scream. "Don't!"

"The front fucking tire, Junior!" Jasper shouts. "Alec—eyes on the road!"

Several shots ring out, and Nick almost gets me.

"Son of a bitch!" I yell, enraged, and then I fire again.

The car—our car—swerves.

"Finish it!" Alec shouts.

Another shot and Nick is dead.

I take a quick glance back to see that Carlisle has been shot. Good. Then I remember what Jasper said and fire off a few shots at the tire closest to me, which makes the middle car finally come to a stop.

My chest feels light.

Felix is the first one to get out of the cars, but I'm a quick second. Carlisle, who's been shot in the shoulder and neck, is coughing up blood in the backseat. I smile when I see his gun on the floor—out of reach for him.

"May I?" I ask Felix.

He purses his lips. "Jasper and Alec, too."

A minute later, the four of us point our guns to Carlisle's head and fire.

"That's that," Felix says. "At last—dead."

"Che peccato," I chuckle, saying whatta pity, wiping my forehead with my sleeve.

He grins in return.
"Should I go get the car?" Alec asks, referring to the third car we have, which is parked on the road...a couple miles away. Shit. I hate walking.

So, I nod. "Yeah—go get it."

The thought was for Mike and Petey to be here, too, but apparently Felix changed his mind. His half-brothers are gone, along with Joe. Chopped up. Out of mind. The past. My pops helped him early this morning.

"All they wanted was my old man's approval. With Dad gone, I can't trust them," Felix had told me. Instead he chose to bring Jimmy Buck—earned his nick because he'll do almost anything for a buck—and Marco from his crew.

No matter.

Popping the trunk of the Florida car, Jasper gives Felix a saccharine smile. "I'm sorry for your loss."

I snicker and shrug out of my jacket. This is fun and all, but we have a job to finish.

Once I've rolled up my sleeves, I get started with one of the Cubans. 'Cause the thing is, we only have about twenty minutes to be done and be gone. After that, the three pigs Felix has on his payroll will open up the road again. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that a lot of traffic has been stopped. But right now, unknowing people believe there's been an accident out here.

"Jimmy!" I jerk my chin at the other dead guy. "I want Cuban number two in the passenger seat."

He nods and gets to it, while Jasper pours gasoline on Carlisle's car.
"Fat fuck," I grunt and haul Cuban number one to the driver's seat. With Marco's help, we manage to get him behind the wheel, though. When all this is done, we'll have two Cubans in a car from Florida…and the car Carlisle rode in.

Everyone in our family—who isn't here—will think the people in Florida we have a minor issue with drove up here to ice Carlisle.

"We ready?" Felix asks as Alec pulls over in the third car.

I nod at Felix.

A few minutes later, we set the Florida car and Carlisle's car on fire. That will take care of any fingerprints we've left behind.

Then we pile in to the other two cars and drive away.

Time to book it.

We're splitting up. I will go to Jane, Felix will be with his wife, Pops is working, Jasper will help Isabella move back into our condo, and Alec's gonna hang out at our folks' home.

Now it's basically a waiting game.

Just waiting...to get that call saying that Carlisle Colucci has been killed.

~oOo~

When Felix has dropped me off at the big house, I sneak in without alerting Jane or Mrs. Coppoletta to my presence. The idea is to create an alibi, and I won't have that if I stomp in. So, as stealthily as possible, I make my way upstairs to the guest room I call mine.

I grab a quick shower, and then I do nothing.

I fall asleep on the bed. That's it.
And I'm woken a few hours later by Mrs. Coppoletta shaking me. "Edward, wake up."

I crack one eye open. "Hey," I yawn, actually eager to get back to sleep, though I know that won't happen. Not when I see the tears in her eyes.

I guess good news travel fast.

"When did you get home?" she asks, sniffing.

I sit up and rub the sleep outta my eyes. "Um, around noon?" I lie. Truth is that I came home around two or three. "Late night—went to bed as soon as I got here." I jerk my chin at her. "What is it?"

She wipes her cheeks and draws a shaky breath. "I just got off the phone with your mother." I raise a brow, playing stupid. "Carlisle's been murdered."

"No," I gasp, getting out of bed. I fist my hair. "You're kidding."

She shakes her head sadly. "Ed and Liz are on their way over to Esme." She frowns. "You really came home around noon?"

"Yeah." I nod and reach for my button-down. "I should go over there—God. He's dead? I...I can't believe it." I speak as I get dressed. "Have Felix or Dad said anything? Do they know...? What'd the police say?"

"I don't know—you should ask your father," she cries quietly. "Oh, poor Esme."

Poor Esme? I almost snort at that. She'll have it better now.

~oOo~

Carlisle's funeral six days later is an odd affair. It's business. The only ones truly grieving are Esme, Emmett, and Alice. My mother and my
youngest sister—Victoria—are a little upset, too, though it's mostly for show. The rest of us pay our respects, but we know this is more about Felix's first appearance as the Colucci family's new boss.

I stand beside him as people from all over the country come to kiss Felix's cheeks and hand.

Pops is on the other side of Felix.

Jane's parents are here, too, and it's easy to see that Mr. Wilkins is more than a little uncomfortable. Obviously, he wants to make sure our business relationship is still intact, despite Carlisle's death. Not that he has anything to worry about. He helps us back East, and we pay him well for it. Why would we end that?

He should, however, worry about his daughter.

When I knocked on her door this morning, she didn't answer, and I went in and found her both drunk and hopped up on pills. She was wearing her swimsuit, and my guess is that Mrs. Coppoletta helped her up the stairs last night. That's all she—Jane—does these days, it seems. She stays by the pool, sometimes her friends come over, and then she passes out.

She will pass out tonight, too, but I'll be different this time, 'cause she won't wake up again.

"Edward," Mr. Wilkins says, coming up to me. "Again, I'm sorry for your loss. I'll see you tonight at your house."

I nod, knowing that I have to suffer through dinner with the in-laws before I, well, become a widower.

Mr. Wilkins moves on to Felix, and I'm itching to get home to my family.
I saw them yesterday; I go home as often as I can, but I haven't been able to spend the night in a while, which I loathe. And the baby is due any day now. But it will all be over soon. To pass time, I've been on the phone a lot with my Realtor, and I hope Isabella will be happy when I show her our new house.

~oOo~

"This is delicious," Mrs. Wilkins compliments with a careful smile.

Dinner is uncomfortable.

I, personally, don't give a shit, and it's obvious that my very drunk wife feels the same.

"I'll make sure to tell Carmen," I say, reaching for my wine glass. Mrs. Coppoletta left, conveniently, before dinner, because she's been spending a lot of time with Esme and my mother the past week.

"Edward wanted me to cook when we first got married," Jane giggles, swaying in her seat. "I guess that's what you become when you ma-arr-y a wop: a chef. Not that he succeeded with me." She looks proud. "Grease-balls, the bunch of 'em."

I clench my jaw and let go of my glass, for fear that I'd crush it. Leaning forward and placing my elbows on the table, I stare at her silently.

She's lost her fucking mind if she thinks she can disrespect me this way.

"Jane, go upstairs." I jerk my chin in the direction of the stairs. "Now."

With everything up in the air—with Carlisle being dead—Mr. Wilkins doesn't have the balls to defend his daughter.

"But we're having dinner-er," she slurs, smiling sweetly.
It feels like the vein in my forehead is about to pop.

"We should—we should go back to the hotel," Mr. Wilkins decides, hesitantly standing up. "Thank you for dinner. Jane, we'll see you for lunch—tomorrow."

I remain seated and keep my cold gaze on Jane.

With a huff, she leaves the table and stomps away.

As soon as the Wilkins are gone, I throw down my napkin on the table and follow Jane.

~oOo~

Upon entering Jane's bedroom, I see her sitting on the bed. I also see a bottle of vodka on the nightstand.

"Wanna make love to your wife?" she asks with a sarcastic smile.

I grin and walk toward and slowly. "No, I'm good." I slip a hand under her pillow. She thinks I'm stupid—that I don't know where she hides that shit. She probably also don't know that I'm fully aware of who her provider is—Felix's wife, Gianna. She happens to be a pillhead, too, though she knows her boundaries.

"Gimme those!" She huffs and holds out her hand. I raise a brow, wishing I could beat the shit outta her, but that would leave marks. "They're for my migraine."

I chuckle. "I'm sure."

Christ, she looks horrible. While I've never been attracted to her, there was still some sense of...I don't know, but she at least she wasn't ugly before. Now I doubt a blind man would fuck her. Her cheeks have hollowed, her eyes look sunken in, her skin is dry in some places and full
of blemishes in others. She's lost more weight—and Jane was always skinny.

"Give them to me!" she screams, and then she jumps up. Unfortunately, with how drunk she is, she only stumbles back onto the bed. "I hate you, Edward!" She keeps screaming, and I know that this is it. When she successfully gets off the bed and tries to reach for the pill bottle, I push her back forcefully. "Stop!"

I let out a humorless laugh as join her on the bed. She tries to claw at me, slap me, fight me off, but her movements are way too slow.

"You never just obey, do you?" I grit out, grasping her left wrist as she swings at me. Then she tries with her right hand, and I grasp that one, too. "You couldn't just keep your mouth shut—you had to go to Esme." I grip both her hands together with one of mine, and my free hand goes to her jaw. I squeeze hard.

"S-stop!" she whimpers. "It hurts!"

I grin and look up the bed, spotting a pillow, then look back to Jane again. "You know, if you'd only behaved, I would've let you go." That's probably the truth, too. I fucking told her from the beginning that our marriage was business. All she had to do was keep her mouth shut and play along. She had friends, she could go shopping whenever she wanted, she had a nice house, my family treated her with respect...

But all that wasn't enough, was it?

Reaching for the pillow, realization dawns on Jane.

"Look at it this way," I grunt. "You'll never see me again." There's not an ounce of remorse in me—my heart is reserved for only my immediate family—but I don't need a heart to know that Jane is innocent here. Well, aside from disrespecting me and talking back.

Regardless, there's probably a place in heaven for Jane.

For me? Not so much.

That's why I want to make the most of my life on earth.

With that thought, I press down the pillow over her face.

I hear her muffled screams, and I feel her body squirming, her legs kicking, but her attempts are futile.

Soon enough, she goes limp.

I check her pulse, satisfied when I feel nothing.

Afterward, I throw the vodka bottle on the bed, followed by more pill bottles. I also make sure Jane's fingers are the last to touch the stuff.

It's a clear case of suicide, and with my being her husband, I'll make sure there won't be an autopsy.

Locating the camera downstairs, I run up again and snap off a few shots.

Then it's done.

As I leave Jane's room, the phone rings, and it's ironic, because it's Felix who calls to tell me that Jasper just took Isabella to the hospital.

My hummingbird is in labor.

One life ends and another begins...
Before I open the door to Isabella's hospital room, I take a moment to just watch them through the little window in the door. Them...Isabella, Anthony, Elisa...they're all on the bed, and Isabella's holding a small bundle in her arms. My vision blurs.

Jasper, he's standing to the side with the camera I bought for Isabella last Christmas. And I swear to myself that this is the last time I miss the birth of one of my children. In my defense, this is also the first time I missed it, but it's still one too many.

Drawing a shaky breath, I finally push the door open.

"Daddy!" Anthony grins widely and waves for me to come closer, whereas Elisa jumps down and runs toward me.

"Mama's got new baby!" she squeals. I laugh as I pick her up, and then I drop noisy and sloppy smooches on her face. "C'mon!" she giggles. "See the new baby—what'sa mattuh, Daddy?" She tilts her head and touches my cheek. "You sad?"

I chuckle and sniffle. "No—God—angioletto mio, I'm so happy." Walking over to Isabella's bed, I dip down and kiss her deeply. "I'm sorry I missed it," I choke out against her lips. I take a breath. "Ti amo. Fuck, how I love you."

"Don't worry about it," she croaks. She looks both happy and exhausted—something I remember from her previous births. Her eyes are glistening, her smile is wide, but she's so drained. "I love you—you're here now. And you were right." That said, she looks down, and I do the same. "You said it was a boy."
I grin and blink back tears as I gaze at my newborn son. In the meantime, Elisa squirms out of my embrace and cuddles up on the bed against Isabella's leg.

"Mama wouldn't say his name 'til you gots here," Anthony whines.

"Really?" I look at Isabella and kiss her lips again. "Mi hai aspettato?"

She nods, smiling widely. "Of course I waited. So...will you do the honors?" She holds up the bundle for me. "Jasper's also curious."

I hear Jasper chuckle behind me.

"Christ," I breathe out, holding my newborn for the first time. "I love you so much, baby." Curiosity gets the best of me, so I lift the little cap he's wearing, and I smile so wide when I see the dark brown tuffs of hair.

"Christ?" Anthony asks. "Um, Daddy...that's Jesus's last name."

I look at him, momentarily speechless, and then I break down in laughter.

Jasper and Isabella do, too, and unfortunately this wakes up the little one in my arms. But it definitely doesn't erase any happiness. Hell, I feel drunk on happy.

"Oh, topolino," Isabella whimpers through giggles, and Anthony crawls over to her.

"Be careful," I tell him softly. I'm not really excited about having both Elisa and Anthony on the bed—not when Isabella's so fragile—but...I know there's no arguing about that right now.

"The name?" Jasper asks.
"Right." I nod and look down at my youngest again. He's asleep, but when I touch his hand, he still grips my finger. It feels...sensational, phenomenal, indescribable...

"Dominic Edward Maisano."

Isabella decided Anthony's middle name—Jasper—as well as Elisa's middle name—Renee. And I told her she could pick Dominic's first name, but she just shook her head and said it was my job, my honor. So, she picked the middle name for this one, too.

Dominic was my grandfather's name.

"S'hard to say, Daddy," Elisa complains.

I lift my head and wink at my baby girl. "Then you gotta practice, huh?"

She huffs and pouts.

God, I love my family.

~oOo~

Since Jasper left Nico and Lucia with a babysitter, he leaves pretty early, but that's fine with me. And once he's gone, it doesn't take more than a few minutes for Anthony and Elisa to fall asleep. Then it's just Isabella and me who are awake. Dominic just fell asleep, though we know he'll wake up soon enough again.

Sitting in the chair next to the bed, I hold my sleeping newborn in my arms.

"He looks like you," I muse quietly. Just like Elisa, Dominic has inherited many of Isabella's features. "So beautiful."

"Who will we ask to be his godmother?" she whispers in return.
I sigh, having no idea. Felix and Heidi are godparents to Anthony, and Jasper and one of Isabella's friends—Sandy—are godparents to Elisa. The thought was for Felix and Heidi to be godparents to Dominic, too, but...

"I've gotten pretty close with Angela," she offers softly.

Unfortunately, I have to shake my head no at that one. If I get my way, which I tend to do, Isabella will soon be my wife. She can't socialize with goomahs any more then. I don't want that.

"What about Alice?" I suggest. "She's dying to meet you again—and the children."

She smiles gently and nods minutely. "I'm up for a few changes, aren't I?"

My own smile is both rueful and wistful. "Does that mean you'll agree to be my wife?"

"Will you ever wear your wedding band?"

*Again with the dodging.*

"I will *always* wear my—"

She cuts me off. "Not that one. Your current one. Will you wear it again?"

Oh. No, I won't—Well... I will have to wear it at the funeral. "Is that it?" I tilt my head at her. "Once there's nothing in the way..." She shrugs and nods then averts her eyes. I nod, too. "A week, then." Her eyes find mine again, and I give her a wry grin. "She's dead."

"What?" she gasps.

I look down at Dominic. "She killed herself. After her funeral, I hope you'll say yes to my proposal."
"It'll be your first one," she points out dryly. I narrow my eyes at her, and now it's her turn to grin wryly. "You haven't exactly proposed, Juniuh. You've said, told, assumed, hoped... You haven't asked me."

Touché.

"And don't bullshit me," she continues. "Your wife just happened to kill herself? Please." She rolls her eyes. "First Carlisle and now your wife..."

"Watch that mouth, Isabella," I warn quietly. I love her beyond words and I'd give her the world if I could, but she won't be talking back at me. I admit that I have a soft spot for Isabella's fire. I love how strong and passionate she is, but there are limits.

Speaking of fire...

"No, Edward, you listen to me now." She points at her chest. "You want me to be your wife? Here are my demands."

~oOo~

**Translation:**

*Signora Savona...ti amo così tanto—tu e la tua bocca. Il tuo cuore, la tua mente* = Ms. Savona...I love you so much—you and your mouth. Your heart, your mind, everything.

*Adulatore* = Smooth talker.

~oOo~

I'm amused, stupid in love, and angry when she basically tells me to shut up.

But I don't want to fight her right now, so I just nod my consent.
She takes a breath. "I realize that I can't demand fidelity, although it is what I need—"

"I only want you, hummingbird!" I'm not mad at her—I'm pleading for her to believe me. "Please, baby..." I sigh. "I want you to trust me."

She stares at me. "May I continue now?"

I stifle a growl. "By all means..."

"First of all—" she holds up a finger "—trust comes with time. Second, I want a real proposal." She smirks, which lightens the tension a little. I manage a small smile, but for some reason I'm nervous. "Third, don't eva' lie to me." She wags a finger at me, and her eyes are once more full of fire.

I suck my teeth.

*Lying sort of comes with the job description, sweetheart.*

"If you can't tell me the truth, don't say anything at all," she says with a firm nod. *That* I can agree to, and I find myself exhaling in relief. "I am not stupid, Junior, and I was not born yesterday. I know who you are and who your 'family' is, okay?"

I raise my brow, neither denying nor confirming. It's all I will offer. At least 'til we're married.

"Okay, I've lost count on my—no matta'." She waves it off. "I won't ask about your job, I will take care of the children, I will cook, clean, cherish you, love you... I will respect you, ciccino, but I expect you to treat me with respect, too. No lying, no deceiving—I deserve better than that." She pokes her chest. "A happy wife means a happy life, capisce?" She twirls her finger in a circle. "What goes around comes around."
By now, I'm just grinning like a lunatic.

My little ball-buster.

Picking up her hand, I kiss the top of it. "Signora Savona...ti amo così tanto—tu e la tua bocca. Il tuo cuore, la tua mente."

"Adulatore," she responds with narrowed eyes. She's trying to remain serious, but I see her mouth twitching. "Do you agree to my terms?"

I withhold my chuckle, because what I'm about to say is serious and truthful.

"I agree, Isabella."

~oOo~

Jane's funeral is my last charade.

Her parents are devastated, but I don't give a fuck. Felix is quick to whisk Mr. Wilkins away afterward, and I know he's showing him the pictures I took of his daughter—pictures I'm sure the mighty politician doesn't want to become public.

It doesn't matter if Wilkins doesn't believe Jane committed suicide—as long as we have something against him. And we do. Our relationship will remain intact; we will have protection in New York if any of our friends get pinched, and Mr. Wilkins will get his money.

Now, that's business. Without a fucking marriage. I'm sure we'd be able to press it further and deny him money—what with us having those disgraceful photos of his dead daughter and all—but that'd be too much.

We need him to be satisfied, to want this relationship. If he doesn't, he could get sloppy.
A few weeks later, when Isabella is comfortable enough to leave Dominic behind for a few hours, we let Brianna watch our kids. Then I take my hummingbird out on the town. Dinner and a show—Frank Sinatra, is all I'm saying—and at the end of the night, I give Isabella the proposal and the ring she deserves.

I promise to be faithful, to respect her, to love her, and to cherish her.

She finally gives me her yes. Many times over, actually.

At last.

And I don't waste time. The day after that, I show her our new house.

"Oh, my goodness, Juniuh!" She throws herself at me. "When can we move in—gah! There's a pool!" She starts peppering my face with kisses, making me laugh. "Ai ragazzi piacerà da impazzire!"

She's right, the kids will go nuts.

And later that night, I introduce my fiancée and children to my parents, my cousins, Esme, and Carmen. Felix, Alec, Emmett, and Brianna—even Pops and Alice, really—are no strangers to Isabella, but the rest... Mom, Esme, and Rosalie are a bit guarded, which I expected.

Carmen is happy for me, as are the rest, and everyone treats Isabella and our children with respect. It doesn't matter what past we have—I demand that they make my future wife feel welcomed.

Truth be told, my mother and Esme relax pretty quickly. Because the drama Felix brought to dinner turned out to be bigger. Yeah, he has Francis with him...and his wife...and his legitimate children.
It's not my business, so I make sure not to get involved, but it's clear that my mother and Esme disapprove. Not to mention Gianna—she's seething. Which I can understand, of course. Felix is basically throwing his affair with Heidi in Gianna's face. But then...Francis is just a small child. He needs a family, and Felix wants to include him. Again, I get it.

But I thank God it's not my business.

"So, when are you two getting married?" Alice asks us when dessert is served.

I smirk and place my arm on the back of Isabella's chair. "As soon as possible."

"My brother will be there," Isabella adds with a sly wink.

My cousin blushes.

I laugh.

Felix has already given Jasper the green light, so...

"I'd say that a toast is in order," Pops declares with a wide smile. "To Junior and Isabella!"

Raising my glass, I dip down and kiss my hummingbird.

"Salute!"
Epilogue

December 1990

Junior's POV

"You remember our friend in Buffalo—the guy who likes to sing?" Felix asks over the phone.

Looking up, I make sure the door to my study is closed. "Yeah, I remember," I chuckle, scratching my eyebrow. I'm glad this two-bit fucker has been found. The guy gave us a tip that happened to lead straight to the fucking Feds. Goddamn rat. Luckily, our guys got off scot-free.

Buffalo, I write down on a notepad.

"Yeah, I was thinking you could take him to dinner this Tuesday—show him around a little."

I nod to myself, knowing that dinner is our word for disappear.

"Got it," I say. "And what abou—" I'm cut off there by the doorbell. "Shit, hold on a second." I'm about to call out for Isabella, but then I remember it's Saturday and she's at her restaurant 'til four. And we don't let the kids open the door by themselves. "Hey, Felix, Isabella's not home. Can I call you back?"

"Sounds good." He disconnects the call, and I leave my study.

About six years ago, I handed over Dawn to Jasper. It was around the same time Felix made him a capo. My brother-in-law got his own crew and his own place. It was my idea to give him Dawn, 'cause I wanted to try something new, which my hummingbird was the inspiration for.
Her fucking cooking! *Madonna mia.* So, now Isabella has her own restaurant. Okay, not really, but almost. Since it's a front for illegal activity, the business is in my name, but I named it with her in mind and the chef follows her orders. They're my wife's recipes. She goes down there twice a week—once a week to talk to the chef about the menu and once to sample the food.

She's my star, hence naming the place *Stella Mia.*

Anyway...she's talking to the chef now, so that's why she's not home.

As far as I know, only Julia and Dominic are home. My two youngest, God bless them, love to bust my fucking balls. Dominic, who'll be ten in a couple of weeks, is such a smartass. He's testing my limits, checking to see what he can get away with. Anthony was the same way at that age. And Julia, my little princess who just turned eight a few months ago...she's dangerous. She has this dimpled smile and innocent eyes, but she's as wicked as her mother, that one.

I never thought having girls would be that difficult. Hell, it wasn't difficult until Julia came along. 'Cause Elisa's an angel. She's gonna become a doctor or something one day, mark my words.

Now, the boys...I can handle those. The girls? Forget about it. I ground them, I threaten them, I send them to their rooms, but one smile and I'm dead. Thank God Isabella's immune to that shit.

I shake my head, clearing it, and open the door.

I sigh.

It's Officer Crowley; he's on the books, so I'm not worried, but it's getting annoying.
"What did he do this time?" I ask, eyeing my oldest who stands next to Crowley.

"Caught him as he attacked a Cadillac with a crowbar," Tyler tells me, chuckling. I shake my head at Anthony. Since I'm only wearing a tank and sleep pants, I don't have my wallet here. "He was with Nicola and Francis—drove them home before I came here. I had to bring Nicola in, though—he's twenty..."

I nod as Crowley uncuffs my son. "Gimme a minute—I'll be right back." With that said, I head back to my study, open the safe, and pull out a wad of cash. Then I return to the hallway, and I smirk when I see Anthony massaging his wrists.

*Thinks he's so tough.*

"Wait for me in the kitchen," I tell him and wait 'til he's gone. Then I slip Crowley some cash. "Thanks for not taking him in." He never does, which reminds me... "Next time, though? Let him see the inside of a holding cell before you call me—scare him a little bit."

He knows not to call Isabella. My wife would have a heart attack if one of her precious boys fucked up so badly that they got "arrested." Instead, Crowley calls the line in my study whenever Anthony's in trouble. And had Isabella opened the door right now, Tyler would've come up with some bullshit story about breaking up a fight and then giving Anthony a ride home. He saves the truth for me.

He grins. "You got it. Have a good day, Maisano."

"You, too." I close the door and head for the kitchen, where I find Anthony waiting. He's not jittery or anxious anymore when he has fucked up—he just waits and takes it.
"It's my day off, you know," I mutter and reach for the smokes next to the coffeemaker. "And then I gotta deal with this shit from you?" I light up a cigarette and lean back against the counter. "All right, lay it on me—tell me what happened."

He finally looks up. "Nico told me not to tell."

"I don't give a fuck about what your cousin told you," I chuckle. I point to my chest. "You obey me, so spill it already."

And Nicola? He fucking knows better than to run with Anthony and Francis. They're fourteen years old—Nico's twenty. I get that my son looks up to his cousin, but if mentioned cousin wants to make it someday, he better stop hanging around with kids. He should be here, kissing my ass.

"Fine—this car...it belongs to some fucko who's stalking Lucia," Anthony tells me, speaking with his hands. "She doesn't want anything to do with this guy, so Francis and I offered to tag along when Nico said he wanted to pay this guy a visit." He shrugs. "Went over to the arcade where this guy usually hangs out..."

I look out the window, and then back to Anthony with an incredulous expression on my face. "In broad daylight?" I widen my arms. "What the fuck is the matta' wit'chu?" I shout. "Huh? What's the matta' wit'chu? Think about it." I tap my temple.

I'd go to hell and back for my kids, but Anthony knows the neighborhood cops hang out around the arcade after school hours and on weekends. It's petty bullshit, but it is what it is, and I can't believe Anthony agreed to do this. Or Nicola, for that matter. But I guess Nico acted with anger fueling him, which means he has a lot to learn. You gotta think before you act, dammit.

"Nothing happened!" he argues. "We got away, didn't we?"
"OH!" I shout, slamming down my fist on the counter. "Don't raise your goddamn voice at me, capisce?"

"Sorry," he mumbles. "But it's true; we did get away."

I take a drag before answering. "You got away because I pay the police." I shake my head, disappointed. "What if your mother found out? You'd break her fucking heart."

The Isabella card always works, and Anthony looks away, ashamed.

"Listen, tesoro," I say, calm now, and lean forward to rest my elbows on the kitchen island. "You can't keep doing this shit. I get that you wanted to protect Lucia—defend her—but you gotta use your head. These things you've been doing... Stealing, fighting, gambling, smoking..." I straighten up and flick some ash in the sink. To be honest, I don't know what to tell him. I did the same thing when I was a kid—that was how I started, how most of us started.

Anthony's insanely smart, like, his IQ...it's high. He gets good grades and he treats his mother and sisters well, but he's also too naïve. He counts on me to bail him out, which I won't be able to do forever. Neighborhood cops are one thing—that's nothing—but what happens when he gets older and acts irrationally and gets pinched for real? There's no guarantee I can help him then.

I don't feel comfortable taking him under my own wing, either, just like Jasper doesn't want to deal with Nicola. Nico has made shit clear—he wants in—but Jasper refuses to do it himself. So, Nico has done some shit for me, and some for my brother.

"You should get a job," I say, thinking out loud. His head snaps up. "On the weekends or over breaks—something like that. Christmas break's coming up soon. When I was your age, I worked in my nonno's grocery
store." I nod, liking this idea more and more. "Start at the bottom, and then when you got some scratch, I'll help you turn it into more."

"What do you think I should do?" he asks.

I smile and take a last pull before putting out the smoke in the sink. Then I walk around the kitchen island and sit down on a stool next to my boy. "You can help out at your mother's restaurant." I laugh and ruffle his hair. "Starting at the bottom? Be a busboy. I don't fucking know, but I wanna get you off the damn streets. There are better ways to make money than hustling like some mamaluke. Or you can help Zio Alec in his shop. Eh? All the cold cuts you can eat." I wink.

Honestly, I was a little surprised when Alec opened a deli last year, but he's damn good at it. He still has his club, but he keeps his drug business in the basement of the deli now.

"I think Mom's restaurant is better." Anthony snickers. "Hey, I can help her sample the food!"

I laugh through my nose. "First of all, you do that every night at dinner. Second, sampling ain't what I'd call a job."

I wanna start over with him, help him use his brain. He's too good for the streets. Now, street smarts—you need that...but he can wait a little longer. And in the meantime, I can help him move up with the money he earns legitimately.

"All right. How do you make your money, Pops?" he asks with a glint in his eye.

I smirk and playfully punch him in the chin. "I'm a businessman—you know that."

He snorts. "Right. The word on the street is that you—"
I smack the back of his head. "Fuck the word on the street, you hear me?"
I point a finger at him. "Fuck the street, period."

He nods. "Yes, sir."

"Good." I give him a smooch on the forehead. "Your mother will be home
any minute to start dinner—go wash up." He nods again and gets up from
his seat. "I love you, son. You know that, right?"

He grins. "You too, Pops."

"Ah, get outta hea'." I chuckle and wave him off. Kid thinks he's too cool
to say those three words nowadays. But as long as he says them to
Isabella, it's all good.

Alone in the kitchen, I pour a glass of wine and decide to enjoy the silence
for a while—

"DADDY!"

I spoke too soon.

Julia.

My shoulders slump. "So much for silence." I take a sip of my wine then
put the glass down. "What?" I shout back. Our house is big, but our
mouths are bigger.

The kids all have their bedrooms upstairs, along with a rec room and two
bathrooms—one for Elisa and Julia, one for Anthony and Dominic—and
then everything else down here. Kitchen, living room, dining room,
Isabella and my bedroom, my study, laundry room, one guest room, and
two more baths.

I fucking love our house.
Then we have a big pool in the back, a large patio, and plenty of space for the dogs to run. We don't have old Tito anymore, but we have Lucy—oh yeah, that name stuck, regardless of how many boy names I suggested. We also have a Doberman that Dominic named Duke, and a French Bulldog that Isabella and Julia named Duchess.

Fucking circus around here.

Gotta love it, though.

"DADDYYY!"

"Jesus Christ," I groan under my breath. "What is it, Julia?!" I shout. "Got something to say, come down here!"

And soon I hear stomp, stomp, stomp as she, well, stomps down the stairs.

Sometimes I wonder how my hummingbird deals with this every day without losing her fucking mind, but I'm thankful she does deal with it.

"Oh, Daddy, you gotta hear this!" Julia exclaims, storming into the kitchen.

Fuck, she's too cute for words. Now, the day she was born? Jesus and his mother...what a day that was. It was almost worse than that fire at the Grand ten years ago. Isabella lost blood...a lot of it—she couldn't breathe—and it was touch and go for a while.

I still thank God every day she made it—that they both made it. I wasn't even upset she couldn't have more children after that. We're so blessed to have our four babies, and I don't take shit for granted. Ever. And hey, four's a perfect number in my book.
"What do I gotta hear, principessa?" I laugh. She tugs on my hand and waves me down, so I squat to be at her level. "Che cosa?"

Did she punch another teacher? Nah, we would've heard from school. Last year when she nut-punched a priest, I thought I was gonna piss my pants laughing. But on the outside, I was a strict father...until we came home and Isabella had to take over. That was the last of Catholic school for Julia.

She said she didn’t wanna be nunified...

"Listen," she whispers in my ear. "I found your beer in Dominic's room."

"Oh, for the love of all that is holy," I whine and stand up again.

When the fuck is Isabella coming? She was supposed to be here by now.

"Should I not have told you, Daddy?" she asks sweetly.

I'm torn. Yes, no, yes, maybe, I don't fucking know.

I sigh.

"Yeah, you should've—you did good." I squat down again. "Gimme a kiss." I pucker my lips.

She giggles and gives a kiss, and then she runs off again.

"Don't tell Mama, Julia—when she gets home!" I holler.

"I won't!" she shouts back, long gone.

"And tell Dominic to get his ass down here!"

"Okay!"

Madonn'. I'm glad we don't have any problems with Elisa.
"And don't forget," I say as I put on my coat. It's mink. Junior gave it to me last month—sweet, sweet man. "Sugar in the sauce—works wonders. Just like salt does when you bake a cake."

"You got it."

"And not too much garlic." I pick up my purse, spotting Elisa by the hostess' booth. "All right." I sigh and smile at my chef. "Have a good night, Enzo."

He smiles back. "You too, hon."

With that, I leave the kitchen, and my red heels make clicking noises as I walk through the empty restaurant.

"You're in trouble again, aren't you?" I ask, reaching my daughter.

She's too much like me, this one. She's a girl, a lady, in the company of family, but when she's with her friends? Forget about it. Junior thinks she's heaven on earth. She's not.

Elisa's favorite pastime is to gamble with the boys at her school. They think, since she's a girl, that she doesn't know shit. It's basically their downfall, 'cause Elisa knew poker before Go Fish. Doesn't matter that she's only twelve—well, she will be thirteen next week. Dice, cards, no matter, she's all for it.

And...sometimes when she has robbed the poor kids of their lunch money or their allowances, they get pissed and Elisa runs over to Stella Mia to hide out for a little bit. I'm pretty sure either Anthony or Francis helps her if she needs it. God knows she doesn't take it to her parents. I should know...since I'm one of them.
"I don't know what you're talking about, Mom." She winks.

I chuckle and kiss her cheek. "Okay, let's go home. We're already late."

Outside, we wait for Sal—my driver—to arrive. My husband and the rest of the men have had some trouble lately, so all the wives have drivers for now. Which reminds me...

"Where's Joseph, sweetheart?" Joseph is Felix's oldest, and he's Elisa's shadow.

"I got rid of him." She shrugs. "He's probably still at the mall. He makes my stomach feel weird."

I shake my head. "What if your father knew this side of you, huh? You'd break his heart."

"But you won't tell, Mom." She smiles sweetly and links arms with me. Damn girl is only a couple inches shorter than me. Though, in heels I have a few extra on her. The same does not apply to Anthony. He grew taller than me when he was twelve. "It's best he doesn't find out."

"You wanna talk what's best?" I face her. "What's best is that you stop this crap. Focus on school—do your father proud."

She stares at me. "I won four hundred bucks today."

"No!" My eyes widen.

Elisa nods with a giddy smile. "Some guys at the mall were taking bets on—"

"Ah, mi stai facendo diventare matta!" I palm my forehead, telling her she's driving me crazy. Oh God, I'm a horrible mother. Is that shit in the blood or something? If I did something like this growing up, does that mean my kids are gonna do the same? "Questa è tutta colpa di tuo zio
"Jasper." I blame Jasper for teaching me that shit and point a finger at her. "Mannaggia a quel bastardo—mannaggia a me!" I curse both my brother and myself.

"Mom—Mom." She grasps my arms. "Calm down."

I'm shaking with anger as Sal pulls up, and I end up dragging Elisa with me and into the car.

"I should never have kept this from Juniuh," I mutter to myself. "Elisa, mia bella bambina—" I cup her cheeks "—I have to tell your father."

"No, Mom!" she pleads, and my God, she looks just like I did at that age. It was the age I knew nothing, the age I thought it was so cool when Jasper taught me funny tricks. "Don't tell him!"

I release a heavy breath and slump back in my seat. "I thought Anthony—or even Dominic—were gonna cause problems, and..." I laugh without humor. "Then it turns out that you—Daddy's angel—do this." Anthony doesn't wear a halo, but at least he's not doing anything illegal. He acts older than his age, but I blame Joseph, Nicola, and Emmett Junior for that. Those three are in their twenties; Anthony and Francis look up to them.

"Okay," Elisa laughs quietly, "whatever helps you sleep at night."

I narrow my eyes at her. "What's that suppos'ta mean?"

"Nothing."

~oOo~

Translation:

Dannazione, mi sei mancata oggi. = Damn, I've missed you today.
Who the hell dares interrupt me from fucking my wife?

Whatever you say, whatever you say.

As soon as I open the door to our house, I call out for Junior. "Ciccino! I'm home!"

It's awfully quiet. Not a good sign.

"You need any help with dinner?" Elisa asks.

I shake my head and smile. "No, thank you." I shrug out of my coat. "Go check on your brothers and sister, all right?"

"Sure thing." And she's gone.

But she doesn't go far, because I hear her around the corner. With Junior.

"Oh hey, Daddy."

"Angioletto mio, how are you today?" I hear Junior ask just as I round the corner, too. He's cupping her cheeks, a wide smile on his face.

"Good. How are you?" She's so polite now.

"Bene, bene." Junior kisses her cheeks then looks up to see me here. His smile widens further. Oh, how I adore this man. He speaks to Elisa, though his eyes remain glued to mine. "Angioletto, go upstairs to Julia. She wants to talk to you." And Elisa walks away. "You're late," he tells me with a glare. But I know he's only teasing. He has his tells.

I suck my teeth.

He advances slowly. "It's half past four. You said you'd be home at four."
I fold my arms over my chest and cock a brow.

Another step or two. "You should've started dinner by now. We always eat early on Saturdays."

*Gah, I love playing with him like this!*

Despite being thirty-eight, it's like his soul has gotten younger with the years. He's more carefree and casual nowadays. Always looking proper and lethal outside the house, of course, but at home he's a husband and a father. Not a...whatever he is for Felix.

"Oh, yeah? Whatta'ya gonna do aboudi?" I jut my chin.

He smirks just as he reaches me. "Hmm, I don't know." He nuzzles my jaw, 'causing a shiver to run through me. "But I do know that I'll be extra hungry later, so..." He drops a soft kiss below my ear. "Maybe I need a serving of your pussy tonight."

"Jesus," I breathe out, and then his mouth covers mine.

Kissing me deeply and hungrily, he backs me into a wall and lets his hands roam my body. He's rough and greedy, yet there's something in his touch that makes me feel...I don't know...but it's as if he thinks I'm fragile. Which I'm certainly not, and God knows Junior's capable of fucking me into oblivion. All over the house.

"Dannazione, mi sei mancata oggi," he moans into my mouth as he palms my breasts. He pushes them together and kisses his way down to them.

"Ti amo, bell'uccellino."

"Please, ciccino," I whimper and tilt my head back. "Your office."

He grunts. "Fuck, yes—"

And then we're interrupted by the doorbell.
"Cazzo!" he curses.

I place a hand over my heaving chest, my breaths coming out in pants.

"Chi diavolo osa interrompermi mentre sto per scoparmi mia moglie?" he mutters, and I use my thumb to erase any lipstick around his mouth. It earns me a wink before he heads for the door. He gives me a chin-nod before he opens it. "Straighten your clothes, hummingbird."

I nod and turn to the mirror, making sure to fix my hair, as well. Junior opens the door, but I'm partly hidden behind is, so I take the opportunity to reapply my lipstick, too.

"What the fuck do you want?" he asks...whoever.

After fluffing my hair a little more, I join Junior and see that it's Joseph and Emmett Junior.

"Hey, boys!" I smile. "Don't you two look dapper." I'm glad they've taken their fathers' advice and started wearing suits. Gianna, Alice, Brianna, and I went shopping for them a few weeks back. I was out buying Junior a few new silk suits anyway, so I offered to help out with these two, as well as Nicola.

"Hello, Mrs. Maisano," they both say, at which I snicker. Around my husband, they're kissing ass. When the man next to me isn't close by, though, I'm Bella.

"Yeah, yeah, what do ya want?" Junior asks impatiently. "And, EJ? Stop staring at my wife. You got a death wish?"

I refrain from rolling my eyes. The hubby doesn't appreciate eye-rolls.

He always thinks someone's staring at me, the crazy man.

"I-I wasn't—" Emmett Junior starts to stutter, but Joseph cuts him off.
"I'm sorry, Mr. Maisano, but we're just here to make sure Elisa got home—"

My turn to cut him off. "She's fine," I assure him. I don't want him to say another word, 'cause then Junior will find out that our soon-to-be thirteen-year-old daughter shook off her security. It will earn Joseph a beating from my husband, and Elisa will get grounded. I'll probably ground her no matter what, but she's Junior's angel; I want her to remain that way. "I picked her up," I add, lying. "Sal and I did—she was safe the whole time—so..." I nod. "I should really get started on dinner, boys, but thanks for stopping by. Tell Rosalie and Gianna I said hi."

With that out of the way, I make my way to the kitchen.

Approximately five minutes later, Junior comes into the kitchen while I'm preparing the stuffing for the ravioli.

"How's your Saturday so far, ciccino?" I ask as I start chopping the spinach.

"Um, good." He pours us some wine. "Julia woke me up at nine, and I woke up Dominic. We had breakfast—the waffles you left us." He smiles and snatches up an olive. "And then I had some calls to take care of..." He pauses to take a sip of his wine, and I reach for the sundried tomatoes. "We took out the dogs for a little bit...we had lunch—the leftovers from Thursday... That's pretty much it." In my periphery, I see him shrugging a little. "Lazy day."

I grin. "Hence the sleepwear at four thirty in the afternoon?"

"Hey, this is the latest fashion," he teases.

"Come ti pare, come ti pare," I chuckle.
"So, uh, listen..." He clears his throat; the humor is gone. And I have a feeling he's going to bring up work. "I have to go on a business trip soon. It's just two days, though..."

I nod slowly, focusing on the stuffing. I never ask what he does on these trips, but I'm not blind. It comes and goes, but some things are constant. Safes full of cash, guns in the house, "emergency" meetings, secrecy, speaking in code over the phone, and don't ask me how many times I've heard the sentence, "It fell off a truck" coming from my husband.

And then there have been a few times when bigger things have gone down. Twice, the Feds have shown up to search the house, and four times, Junior has sent us on vacation in the Bahamas...for instance. Now, a vacation sounds good, but not when you know it's because someone's out to get you. Or your husband.

Not only is Junior in the mafia, but he ranks pretty high, too.

I grew up around this, though, so I'm used to it. I know about made men, associates, soldiers, capos, "friends of ours"...all that crap. And our kids aren't stupid, either. Or at least our oldest. 'Cause earlier this year when the movie GoodFellas came out, Anthony suddenly had a million questions for his father.

Fun day for Junior.

That was sarcasm.

But I take my vows seriously, both the ones I took when we got married, and the ones I told Junior in order for me to agree to be his wife. I don't ask questions, I don't get involved, I don't snoop around. And in return, Junior shows his gratitude. He trusts me with his life, he shows me his appreciation, and he's home whenever he can be. This is where he wants
to be, and he both shows it and says it. Granted, he tells me a few things sometimes, but not a lot, and I'm fine with that.

I trust him.

But that doesn't mean I don't worry. Hell, I've cried myself to sleep countless times over the years. I'm worried sick each time he goes out of town on "business". I'm worried that he won't come back...or that he does, but with a fucking tag on his toe.

"May I ask where you'll be?" I ask softly, quietly, holding my breath.

He cups my cheek and makes me face him. His eyes are soft, so I'm not too worried right now. "I'll be in Buffalo," he murmurs and brushes his thumb over my lip. "Just two days—nothing to worry about. You know me, honey. You know when I'm frustrated, anxious, angry, jittery...you know my tells, right?" I nod quickly. "Good. And do I look any of those things right now?"

I blow out a breath. "No." But it doesn't matter. There will still me a rock in the pit of my stomach until he returns.

I'm just lucky these trips don't come too often—maybe once a month, if that... It all depends, really. At times, there's evidently a lot going on, so he's gone more, but more often than not, things are good. And in his everyday life, he goes to work around noon and comes home around nine or ten. He spends most days at the restaurant doing God knows what. Except for Tuesdays—that's the day he doesn't stumble into bed until dawn. And he usually sleeps 'til two or three the following day.

Have I worried about infidelity? Of course. Especially in the beginning. I was afraid he'd go out and find a new hummingbird. I even followed him one time, and things did get a little ugly when he caught me outside of Felix's club that Tuesday. Then he took pity on me, or showed me mercy—
whichever you prefer—and told me that Tuesday is the day Felix meets with all his "business partners" and that he pretty much is Felix's right-hand man, not counting Ed Senior.

With time, Junior's shown me how devoted he is to me, to us, and I'm so happy we don't have to go through the crap some of our close ones do.

I won't even go into all that now.

Too depressing.

"Smile," my husband tells me softly.

I try and fail.

He sighs and kisses my nose. "Everything will be—everything is okay. Two days, that's it. Stop with the pout; it's not becoming."

Right. Two days. "Change of topic, please? How's Anthony—is he home yet?"

"Uh..." He nods. "Yeah—got back a little while ago."

"Okay." I release a breath and shake off the previous subject. "Everything is good with him? He wasn't up this morning when I left, so I haven't seen him."

"Yep. All's good." He takes a sip from his wine, and I do the same. "He was out with his buddies earlier..." He shrugs. "How's Elisa? She was wit'chu?"

I nod and take out the flour, followed by eggs. "She was at the mall close to the restaurant, so we picked her up afterward. And Dominic?"
He chuckles. "I'm a little surprised he hasn't barged in here yet. He's usually so eager to get to Mama." He grins and pops another olive in his mouth. "He's good, by the way. Julia, too."

All right, then. "I love you." I smile and pucker my lips.

"I love you, too." He dips down and kisses me. "My gorgeous hummingbird."

I hum, as if on cue. "My sexy Juniuh."

A comfortable silence follows, and I cook while Junior insists on sampling each and every little thing...several times.

Overall, I love my life. There are several thorns, but when I have this to come home to, this to call mine? I'm blessed.

As for the thorns—not counting my worry for Junior's work—it's all petty.

Oh, but there is one thing, though... "Rosalie mentioned something to me a few days ago," I say pensively. Rosalie is often fighting with Emmett, so I tend to tune out a bit after a while, but this stuck with me, and I know why. All those years ago, I knew in my gut that the coincidences were too many. Carlisle Colucci is murdered and then on the same day as his funeral, Junior's ex-wife happens to drop dead, too? Yeah, I don't think so. "She told me that Emmett has this idea he can't get rid of. It started when he came home from Miami a couple months ago."

He tilts his head. "Ah-huh?"

I nod as I roll out the dough for the ravioli. "According to Rosalie, Emmett doesn't believe the Cubans killed Carlisle." I give my husband a sideways glance. Aside from a slight stiffening of his shoulders, there's nothing. "Can you believe that?"
And it's Junior's turn to hum. "Hmm. How about that?"

Yeah, *how about that.*

**The End**
Chapter 1

Translation:

Magari sarebbe meglio se smettessi di dimagrire = Maybe it would be better if you stopped losing weight

Perché é nella nostra stanza? = Why's she in our room?

Scusa! Scusa! = I'm sorry! I'm sorry!

Non é la stessa cosa = That's not the same thing.

Non ti sento = I can't hear you.

Vado a fare due chiacchiere con tuo zio. = I'm just gonna catch up with your uncle.

May 1993

Hummingbird's POV

I shake my head, definitely disagreeing with Gianna. She doesn't see that our husbands protect us; she thinks they're controlling us. Granted, Junior
always wants to know what I'm doing, and his reasons are hardly always about my well-being, but the fact remains: if they think we need our security, we should be thankful. Hell, it's the least they can do when their work puts us in danger.

"Of course you don't think the same, Bella." Gianna scoffs at me as she adjusts her bikini top. "You do whatever Junior tells you."

I give her the finger and then take sip from my Bloody Mary. Rose, Brianna, Alice, and Maria chuckle. It's nothing new that Gianna and I are butting heads. She and Maria usually disagree with whatever I say. They're not particularly fond of Alice or Brianna, either. Rose stands somewhere in the middle. Still, regardless of our bitching, we meet up at my house several times a week. Now, for instance, we're lounging by our pool.

"I just want to get away from all this," Gianna complains.

I roll my eyes behind my sunglasses. "Felix will never grant you a divorce."

"I have my own rights!" she argues.

Sitting up in my lounger, I face her with an incredulous expression on my face. "What world do you live in?"

That shuts her up.

Crazy talk.

Felix would kill her before he divorced her.

"Bella's right, Gianna," Alice sighs contentedly, relaxing in her own chair. Although, I gotta admit she doesn't look too comfortable. She's been pretty quiet today. "You're too negative."
True, and if Gianna wasn't such a bitch to Felix, maybe he would smile when he got home at night.

"Some don't have what you three have, though," Rose points out, waving a hand at Brianna, Alice, and myself. "I don't know the last time I saw Emmett look at me the way your husbands look at you. Besides," she mutters, "he's barely home at all."

"When was the last time you did the same, Rosalie?" Brianna shoots back. I nod, agreeing with her. "You just expect Emmett to adore you when your face is locked in that bitter expression? Please." She huffs and sits back, pulling down her sunglasses from her hair.

"Magari sarebbe meglio se smettessi di dimagrire," I mumble under my breath, telling her maybe it'd be better if she wasn't constantly trying to lose weight. Only Brianna and Alice heard me, since they're sitting next to me.

"Yeah, and someone please tell her vodka isn't the breakfast of champions," Brianna whispers.

I can't help but laugh at that, and it's the truth. Rosalie, Gianna, and Maria seem to believe the less they eat, the sexier they become. So, they exchange meals for alcohol. Dumb broads. Don't they know that a real man loves a real woman? Junior would force-feed me if I lost my curves. He says, "I need cushion for the pushin'."

Plus, if I lost weight, little wrinkles would appear since the skin doesn't catch up as easily at our age. We're not twenty anymore. I'm months from thirty-nine, but I look good because I take care of my body. Rose, Gianna, and Maria are skinny and bony, and their skin looks looser.

God gave us women curves; we shouldn't struggle to erase them.

"Ma, I'm home!" I hear Anthony shout from inside. "And I'm starving!"
What else is new? My boys are always starving.

Before I can respond, I hear Junior's loud voice, too. Huh. He's home early. "So goddamn demanding! Go kiss your mother first." A smack follows, which means my son will probably be rubbing the back of his head when he comes out.

Turns out I'm right. Anthony comes out, nursing the spot Junior smacked, and my handsome husband follows, grinning from ear to ear when he sees me.

After casually greeting the ladies around me, Anthony walks over. "Hey, Ma." He smiles sheepishly and dips down to kiss my cheek.

"Hey, baby." I smile and remove my shades. "How was school?"

I'm so proud of Anthony. He's not even seventeen yet, but he's graduating from high school in a couple of weeks. As far as I know, he's not going to college, but that's okay. I think he wants to work at the restaurant.

"Boring." He shrugs and rubs his belly. "Is there anything to eat around here?"

"Isn't there always?" I cock a brow at him. "We'll eat around six, but you can grab some leftovers from yesterday if you want." He gives me another kiss and then starts to leave. "Don't touch anything on the third shelf!" I holler after him. That's for my brother's birthday this weekend. Jasper's turning forty-three, and we're having a barbecue for him here.

Anthony waves a hand, acknowledging that he heard me, and then I have my husband in front of me, kissing me hello.

"I'm just here to pick something up in my office," he murmurs before nibbling a little on my bottom lip. "Fuck—you look good. New bikini?" I
nod as he stands up fully. I bought it yesterday when I was out shopping with Alice and Brianna. Simple, black, and does wonders for my tits. "Very sexy." He smirks. "So, dinner—I might be late."

"I'll save you a plate. Be careful, ciccino."

"Always am. Are all the kids home?"

"Dominic's probably in his room, and Julia's watching a movie in our bedroom. Elisa should be home any minute."

He frowns. "Perché é nella nostra stanza?" He asks why she's in our room.

"You don't wanna know," I say wryly and reach for my drink. I take a sip, noticing Junior's raised eyebrow; he does want to know. "She broke the TV in the living room." I wave a hand.

And Julia doesn't like the TV in the kids' rec room. She says it's too small.

Brianna snickers next to me. "She got mad at the remote and took it out on the TV."

Yeah. The remote didn't work—probably needed new batteries or something—so she screamed and threw it at the TV. Now there's a huge crack in the thick glass. How she even managed that, I don't know.

"That doesn't make sense," Junior says, giving his sister a glance before facing me again. "I'll go talk to her. Could you get Dominic for me? I need a word with him, too."

I stand up, wondering what's wrong. I can usually read my husband very well, but there's no denying that he's a skillful liar. However, when it comes to our children, there's often a crease between his eyebrows, and it alerts me if something's up.

"Something you wanna tell me?" I ask, touching his arm.
He shakes his head no. "Not yet. After I've spoken to Dominic." Then he smacks my ass, making me giggle. "Make me a sandwich, too—before I go?" I nod and reach up to kiss his lips. Feeding my men is something I love. "Grazie, bell'uccellino."

"Prego," I chuckle, walking away.

When I get upstairs, I pass Elisa's room, Julia's room, their bathroom, the rec room, and the boys' bathroom before I stop in front of Dominic's door. Anthony's room is the next one, and the reason for putting him farthest down the hall is because he likes to sneak in girls after hours. But with all his siblings' rooms in the way, it has become increasingly harder for him to succeed without waking anyone up. And my two youngest are tattletales. They love barging into Junior and my bedroom downstairs to rat their brother out about the girls he brings home.

Giving Dominic's door one knock, I twist the knob and open the door. "Topolino, your father—oh, my God!" I cry out and cover my eyes.

"Mom!" he shrieks.

"Scusa! Scusa!" I apologize, quickly slamming the door shut with a loud bang. What I expected to see was him doing his homework or something—not, not...masturbating on his bed with a magazine covering his...boy bits. "Fuck," I breathe out and fan my face.

Then I scream. "JUNIUH!"

Dios, my baby is only twelve! And he's in there...jacking it.

"What's wrong?!" Junior whispers frantically, running toward me with his gun drawn.

Shit.
Junior's POV

After watching Isabella's ass jiggle as she heads upstairs, I talk to Julia and tell her to stop ruining our fucking furniture. Then...I hear my wife's scream, which leads me to believe we're under a goddamn attack or something, and I run up the stairs as fast as I can, pulling out my piece as I go...only to find out that my youngest son is jerking off?

"You scared me to death," I hiss, tucking my gun away into my waistband again. "For Christ's sake, Isabella..."

I blow out a breath, still trying to calm my fucking heart. My hands go to my hips; I stare down my wife, waiting for a response. 'Cause I want a damn apology...or at least an explanation for her screaming. While I never lose my shit on a job, my family is an entirely different matter.

"I'm sorry, ciccino," she whispers, cupping her cheeks. "I just freaked out. That's—that's our baby in here!" She points at Dominic's door.

My bet is that he's currently hiding under his covers, beyond mortified.

Half amused, I replace her hands with my own and smirk. "He'll be thirteen this December. You know that, right?" Fuck, when I was thirteen, I always I had a hand stuck down my pants. Isabella pouts. "Stop that," I chuckle and lean down to kiss that pout. "Maybe it's time I give Dominic the talk I gave Anthony."

She takes a step back and glares at me. "You will not tell Dominic to 'use a glove or you'll have eighteen years of baby love'. Can I tell Elisa the same thing, huh?"

I suck my teeth and tell my wife that's different. "Non é la stessa cosa. Elisa's my angel—my baby." Isabella scoffs and shakes her head. "Quit it—she's not having sex until there's a ring on her fucking finga'."
Elisa—God bless her—is innocent and perfect. She's going to college, and I won't settle for some two-bit scumbag for her. Her husband needs to be perfect, too.

"Elisa will be sixteen this December. You know that, right?" Isabella retorts, mocking me. "You're such a hypocrite, Juniuh."

"I won't fight with you over this. I'll talk to Dominic—end of discussion." I take a step toward our youngest son's door. "Go downstairs; start dinner or something." I smack her ass, because it's mine and looking all delectable in that tiny bathing suit. Madonn'. It earns me another glare, but she doesn't say anything and walks away. "I love you!" I shout after her, grinning. I love it when she's mad. It means the claws will come out when I fuck her tonight.

Opening Dominic's door, I see that my previous thought was pretty spot-on. He's on his bed, on his stomach, with his head buried in his pillow. Such a fucking cutie. My baby boy's growing up. Which is also why I have beef with him, 'cause I'm sick of hearing about him on the street.

Like I said, he's growing up, and I think he feels as if he has something to prove. Today, for instance, when I was in my office at Stella Mia, Milo—Dominic and Julia's driver—called me from a payphone and said that Dominic's skipping school to smoke cigarettes behind the bleachers.

"Mama's gone," I inform him and sit down on the edge of his bed. "Quit hiding." I slap his ass. "We need to talk."

He groans and flips over. "What is it?" He huffs. I want to grin when I see his reddened cheeks. "I don't wanna talk about—whatever just happened."
"You mean Mama catching you?" I smirk. That causes him to groan and turn over again, but I manage to stop him, all while laughing. "Aw, don't be embarrassed, baby!"

"Dad!" he grits out. "Just say what you wanna say and go!"

"Ay!" I shout. "This is my fucking house." I point to my chest. "I can stay here for as long as I want. Capisce?"

"Fine," he whispers.

I cup my ear, saying I didn’t hear him. "Non ti sento."

"I said fine! Your house, your rules, you do what you want. Happy?"

I nod. "And lose the attitude. Now, talk to me." That's one thing I love about my sons—they actually come to me for advice. Anthony comes sooner than Dominic but, in the end, they both turn to me of all people. Not friends, not Isabella... Me. My daughters are different, but I understand that. "What you were doing in here—" I wave a hand "—it's nothing to be ashamed of. Every guy does it, Dee. So, talk." I figured if I used the nickname his friends and siblings use, it'd be more casual? I don't fucking know.

He's still mortified and redder than a tomato, but I can see he wants to ask questions.

"You do it?" he asks, his voice cracking a little.

Okay, not the question I expected, but no matter. "No," I admit. "I have a wife for that." A married man shouldn't have to use his fucking hand, and if your wife is a good one, she does it for you. Hands, mouth, pussy...

"Gross, Dad," he complains. "That's my mom."
'First and foremost—my wife." I shrug. "Have you had sex yet?" In all honestly, twelve is way too young, and I doubt he'll say yes to that. I know Anthony first had sex when he was fifteen—much better age. But I asked to cover all the bases.

"No!" he cries out. I grin. "Jesus!"

I shrug again. "Had to ask. How far have you gone with a girl?"

"Gone?" He scrunches his nose, looking so much like his mother.

I cock a brow at him. "You kissed a broad yet?"

Blushing, he shakes his head no.

I breathe out a sigh of relief. It means all is good.

"Please don't have the sex talk with me, Pops," he whispers, throwing an arm over his eyes.

"You gotta learn—"

"Anthony told me," he rushes out. He gulps, still not facing me. "I already know, okay?"

I nod even though he can't see me. "About the risks?"

"Yeah." He releases a breath. "This is so embarrassing."

"Go on," I urge, not giving a fuck if he hates this. That just proves how opposite of ready he is. When Anthony came to me—Jesus Christ—he wouldn't stop asking questions. He didn't blush, either.

Dominic starts stuttering. "When you h-have, um, sex, y-you need to use a c- condom. Or you'll get sick—or you'll have a kid."

Gotta love my Anthony. He's saved me some trouble here.
"Your brother's right. And you know how sick you could get?" I ask, stifling a smile.

"No? Anthony didn't say."

"Your dick could fall off," I say, all solemn and shit. The look on Dominic's face is priceless. Fucking with my kids this way—simply hilarious. It's the only time I allow Isabella to give me a whack in the back of my head. If she finds out I'm doing this, that is. 'Cause I know it's dumb, but—fuck—so fun.

"Are you kidding me?" he squeaks out.

I shake my head no. "The next topic is ditching classes. Are you fucking stupid?"

He stares at me, wide-eyed, and I wonder if he really thought it wouldn't come back to me. Seriously, I have eyes all over Vegas.

"I couldn't care less if you go off to college or not, but you will graduate high school." I point a finger at him, frustrated and pissed. I'm being truthful; college is nothing I care about.

The only reason I want my Elisa to go to college is because it would probably delay her next step, which is getting married and popping out kids. But if she goes to college and maybe becomes something—like a doctor, maybe—it would put her other crap on hold. Plus, she likes science and math and shit like that.

"Anthony skips classes, too," he argues petulantly.

I smirk. "His grades are still perfect—he's even graduating early. Will you do the same, and are your grades good?" I don't give him a chance to reply. Hungry and in a hurry to leave, I stand up. "Focus on school. Are
we clear? I swear...if I catch you ditching one more *fucking* class..." I make a choking motion with my hands.

He gulps. "Yes, sir."

I nod and tell him good. "Bene. I gotta go back to the restaurant. Love you, *tesoro.*"

When I get back downstairs and walk into the kitchen, I sigh to myself and grab the sandwich Isabella's made me. I'm a little surprised Duchess and Duke—our two dogs—aren't sniffing about.

Yeah, only two dogs left. The Doberman and the French Bulldog. Lucy died last year. It almost broke my Elisa's heart, which in turn made me wanna pull my hair out.

God knows I love my children—my family is everything to me—but they all know how to turn my hair gray. Mostly the kids, but Isabella's fiery temper has probably caused a hair or two to go gray, too. Yeah, there are a few along my temples. Aging sucks. I'll be forty-one soon.

And I can't hide it, either. Isabella goes to the salon every few weeks, and she's meticulous about her body, so she's more beautiful than ever. Me, on the other hand? Forget about it. I may be fit and healthy—Isabella's fine cooking sees to that—but I sure as hell don't feel twenty-five anymore. In my youth, it was all about fucking my hummingbird 'til she couldn't walk, making paper, starting our family, having fun, hitting the yak... Now, though? A quiet evening with the wife, catching up with my kids, maybe taking Isabella dancing or sampling her cooking, hanging out by the pool, talking shit...

At the same time, I'm a little bored. No, not bored. Restless. Things are too easy.
Especially for me. The restaurant is my front, and then I have two men on my crew—Nicola, that's Jasper's kid, and Enzo, the head chef at *Stella*. That's it. I follow Felix around at times, since he likes having me and my pops with him, but other than that, I only have my contracts, and they don't exactly take up all my time.

At first, we thought Emmett was gonna give us trouble when I found out through Isabella that he was spending some time down in Florida. He was questioning whether or not the Cubans iced Carlisle, and as soon as Isabella had told me this, I told Felix. But nothing happened. Emmett never came to us; he never voiced his doubts.

Still, whenever he goes to Florida, we tail him. As it turns out, though, he has a goomah down there—one he doesn't see too often but still takes care of—so nothing has come from following him.

"Pops?"

Turning around and leaning against the counter, I see Anthony approaching. He has a sandwich in his hand, too, and if I know my wife—which I do—Isabella made one for him, too.

"Can I come with you to *Stella*?" he asks.

I shrug. "Sure. But ask your mother first. I'm leaving in five."

"Cool—I'll be right back." He turns around again and heads toward the backyard.

Vinny—the boss in Jersey—and his wife are coming out for Jasper's birthday this weekend, and we're having a sit-down tomorrow at the restaurant, so that's why I'm heading back there now. I gotta make sure everything is taken care of so I don't get interrupted tomorrow. We usually have bigger sit-downs at *Stella Mia*, but with things running so smoothly, there hasn't been one in a while.
Ever since Carlisle died and Felix took over, our family and the one in New Jersey do more together. Our family has expanded, yet we've lost New York. You win some and you lose some.

It's all good, and we still make a lotta paper with Jersey. But the big money's out west. The drugs are pouring in from South America, which is why we've focused more on California and Mexico. Other than that, we also do business in Kansas City, Miami, and St. Louis.

My youngest sister—Victoria—actually lives in Kansas City now. She's married to a judge. Although, behind closed doors, he's as crooked as I am. He's in Felix's pocket.

Just as I've finished my sandwich, Anthony returns to the kitchen with a grin on his face. It tells me that Isabella has given him the green light to come with me. If she knew why Anthony wanted to go, she wouldn't be as compliant.

'Cause he's running errands for Jasper now.

~oOo~

After making sure everything's set for tomorrow at Stella, Anthony and I drive over Dawn—Jasper's club that used to be mine. It's also my son's playground. The first time I told one of Jasper's girls to dance for Anthony...damn, I almost had to physically force him to come home.

"Cazzo," he hisses quietly, watching the stage where two girls are performing. "Pops, how can you stay away from that?"

Easily. "I have your mother at home," I chuckle, making my way toward Jasper's office. If only my kids knew their mother used to rock this stage like no other. Anthony is crazy protective of his mother; if a man so much as looks at her, he lets me know. I'm very grateful. It's actually why my son hates Emmett Jr.—or EJ as he's called. That kid can't stop gawking at
Isabella. Disrespectful fucking kid. Sneaky, too; he never does it when I'm around anymore. But I ain't stupid.

"I'm glad you feel that way, really." He nods, eyes glued to the stage as we walk. "Still." He bites down on his knuckles when a broad dips low and then rubs her ass against the pole. "*Madonna mia*, that ass!"

I laugh and slap his shoulder. Meanwhile, I'm not sure I have his attention at all. His eyes never leave the stage. "Feel free to stay out here. *Vado a fare due chiacchiere con tuo zio.*" I tell him I'mma catch up with his uncle.

"Yeah, okay." He makes a beeline for the stage.

That's my son, all right. He's all about tits and ass—just like I am. I can't fucking decide what's best, but why would you have to when you have both? Right?

With another chuckle, I knock on Jasper's door as I watch Anthony plop his ass into a chair near the stage. And shit...I remember that. I remember how close I had to sit when it was Isabella working here. I had to see her. I had to be the closest. Even back then, I wanted to be the only one. Which I became quickly. It may have taken me a while to get her to fall in love with me, but the woman was still mine from jump. I made sure of that.

"*Come in!*" I hear Jasper shout.

I let myself into the office, a grin on my face, and it doesn't waver when I see Jasper holding his gun.

"Oh, it's you." He tucks away his piece again.

I smirk and sit down across from him at his desk. "No need to sound so disappointed." Immediately, I notice how tired he looks. There are dark circles under his eyes, and I'm willing to bet he hasn't shaved in a few
days. Odd. I hope he's not meeting associates in that fucking state. "You okay?" I jerk my chin at him.

He waves me off. "It is what it is."

"What is?" I light up at smoke, feeling nosy. Isabella and Alice spend time together several times a week, and no matter how little how I care about inconsequential bullshit, something tells me this ain't trivial. But since our wives see each other that often, it feels like I would've heard something, 'cause my wife adores that crap—gossiping and sharing. She's so cute, gets so giddy—over pretty much nothing.

"Alice kicked me out," he suddenly says and pulls at his hair. "I've slept here for the past three days."

I frown. "It's your house." I don't get that shit. No matter what it's about, it's Jasper who works and brings home the money. How the hell can a wife ever kick out the man?

"She thinks I'm cheating on her."

Oh, come on. Jasper, Riley, Enzo, and I are in the same boat. We're all stupid in love with our wives. Goomahs, random broads...they don't exist for us; nothing can top what we go home to. My father's the same. He can only see my mother. In my opinion, that's actually good. Isabella once said it, and it's the truth: a happy wife means a happy life. As long as I keep my hummingbird happy, the rest will follow. She's attentive, giving, nurturing, almost always smiling, and she satisfies my every sexual need. Isabella has a strong will, but she also knows when to fall in line.

If Isabella kicked me out of my own bed... Ha! I'd never allow it. Simple as that. She pulled it off a few times before we got married, but...

"That's fucking crazy," I chuckle, twirling a finger at my temple. "Is there even a reason for her to doubt you?" Unlike me, Jasper works late every
night. He has four clubs in Nevada—two in Vegas, one in Reno, and one in Carson City. He also has a crew to run, tribute to collect and pay, and other investments to keep track of. J

asper is a busy man—busier than I am. Still, he's been with Alice for what—almost fifteen years now? No, thirteen. Thirteen years. That's a long time. Something new must've happened for my cousin—second cousin; no matter—to think Jasper has a piece on the side.

"I don't know," he admits to my surprise. I almost choke before I exhale some smoke through my nose. He looks to me, wary and hesitant. "I haven't done anything—I just..." He sucks his teeth. "I don't know. Sometimes." He waves a hand.

"It's not worth it." I shake my head then place a hand on my chest. "But that's my opinion." I lean forward in my seat. "Over the years, yeah, maybe you wonder, but..." No.

The few times I've looked at another woman, wondering what it'd be like to fuck her and then go home to my wife... Damn—just thinking about it hurts. Honest to God, I've never considered it for a moment, but since it's so common—it's everywhere—you sometimes try to put yourself in another man's shoes—a man who has a comare or whatever. My chest gets all fucked up, and there's guilt. Imagine walking around with that weighing you down? Fuck that. And then when Isabella found out—'cause it'd just be a matter of when—you'd know how heartbroken she'd be whenever you looked into her eyes.

God forbid—if Isabella ever had the same thoughts about other men.

"Cazzo." I rub my chest and grimace. "You're depressing me, you muthafucka'."
What Jasper does, that's his business. Sometimes I get sucked into gossip; I can't fucking help it. I blame my wife. But deep down, I don't want to know. I worry about my family and my pockets—that's it. It can be fun when it's about the never-ending drama in Felix's, Emmett's, and Alec's lives. 'Cause their wives...Jesus Christ. However, in Felix's case, it actually does concern me.

Gianna hates Francis—Felix's youngest son—and often shows it by favoring her own two kids. Over the years, it has lead to Francis often sleeping at my house. There's a pull-out couch in Anthony's room just for that reason. Francis is innocent; he can't help who his mother was. Heidi, God rest her soul, should never have died in that fire at the MGM thirteen years ago. Same goes for Francis's two brothers. Their deaths have made huge impact on how Felix is today.

Francis was still so young at the time, but I know he still remembers some of his mother. Anyway, the animosity between Felix and Gianna is still there—understandable, I guess—but for Gianna to take it out on Francis? That's not okay.

"I am deeply sorry for making you mushed," Jasper says sarcastically. I flip him off. "I wouldn't want to disturb you in your perfect world."

I can't help but laugh at that. "You think my life is perfect?" That's ridiculous. I'd die for my four children—my four cockblockers—but they don't exactly make my life easy. There's always something wrong.

Julia and her tantrums, Dominic and his newfound love for breaking our rules, Elisa's way of attracting boys, and Anthony...don't get me started on Anthony. He's too much like me. He doesn't have a conscience, and his heart only goes out to immediate family. It makes him lethal. If he continues doing what he does now, it won't be many years before Felix initiates him. And that scares me a little. Now, while he's on Jasper's crew,
his little lowman, it's still petty. Anthony doesn't do too much, but to get that button—to take the oath—you gotta leave petty behind.

Then we have Isabella... Shit. She knows how to bust my fucking balls. Like Elisa and Julia, she has me wrapped around her pinky, though I'm good at hiding it.

I'm the fucking man; you can't run a house if you have a pussy.

This is all just family stuff. In all honesty, I have no complaints. What I do to be able to afford the luxury I surround my family with is another matter. Not that I feel bad or any lame shit like that, but it's not a fucking piece of cake.

Flicking some ash into the ashtray on Jasper's desk, and I look to him and catch his bitchy pout as he stares into space. The man looks close to tears.

I shake my head, ready to get out of here. "Just don't bring your troubles to my house. They end up being my problems—I don't want that." I put out my smoke and then lean back in my seat again. "Now, the reason I'm here. How's my son doin'?"

I'm Anthony's father; I can't be his boss. Felix manages well with Joseph—his oldest—but I prefer to keep my own son at arm's length at work. Jasper's the same with Nico.

"He's..." He nods pensively, tenting his fingers on the desk. "He's learning. He's wiser than most sixteen-year-olds. He's smart—calculating and sharp." He taps his temple. "Good with money. Like, investments and shit. All this—fuck, it's a new world, you know? And he's good with all this computer stuff." He laughs a little, and I join in, too. When we grew up, that crap didn't exist. Now, though...it's fucking insane. The world is running on computers. I can barely use a remote control without getting
annoyed and confused, but my children, they ace all that. Isabella says I'm stuck in the past. "I told Anthony it was better in the old days, right?" I nod, listening. "And he says that the digital world could actually benefit us." He widens his arms. "How the fuck do I scam a robot?! Now, that's—that's stupid. Otherwise, yeah, he's smart as hell."

I laugh.

Anthony gave me the same speech a couple weeks ago.

But he's gotta lot to learn. Technology—it'll be our downfall.

"We're getting old, Maisano," Jasper sighs, chuckling a little. "One day, our sons will take over."

I purse my lips, pondering. Yeah, we're aging, getting older, but we're not old. He's right with his other statement, though. One day, our kids will take over.

Jasper's oldest—Nicola—is married at the age of twenty-two, and he has his first child on the way. His wife, a catty little thing, thinks he's the manager of one of Jasper's clubs. He's not. He's one of the two men on my crew, lethal and with a trigger-happy finger. He travels to Carson City and Jasper's club there every once in a while to keep up appearances, but his money comes from doing my bidding.

Then we have Joseph, Felix's firstborn, who is twenty-four and on his last year of law school. He both studies and works for his dad. It started with driving around Elisa, and now he handles Felix's books.

Lastly, there's EJ—though, he can never be one of us. Rosalie's not Italian, and thank fucking God for that.

EJ's twenty-two years old and is basically his father's shadow. He wants to be in the casino business, just like Emmett, but—personally—I don't think
he's up to the task. He has no patience, he's hotheaded, and he's openly hostile whenever the Gaming Commission is brought up in conversation. He's not very business-savvy.

Frowning, I sorta wonder who'll take over as boss. It won't happen for years—God willing—but right now I'm finding it difficult to see either of our sons ever being ready to fill Felix's shoes.

And I know Felix would never agree to Emmett stepping in. Which would leave Jasper, Alec, and me, and neither of us wants to.

Ugh. Fuck this. I came here to ask Jasper about Anthony, and now I have.

Done.
Chapter 2

Translation

*Mmm, la mia fica.* = Mmm, my pussy.

*Molto divertente, vecchio* = Very funny, old man.

**Hummingbird's POV**

Humming to myself, I take out the lasagna from the oven. Then I put in the second lasagna. It's Saturday today, and we're hosting my brother's birthday party here in a few hours. Since we're having a barbecue and Jasper's favorite dish of mine is lasagna, I figured I could make him one to take home. The second one is for the lunches I sometimes bring to Junior at work. Or when the kids come home and are hungry before dinner.

"We havin' lasagna, Ma?" Anthony asks from behind me.

I smile at him over my shoulder. "No, this is for your uncle."

"What's for his uncle?" Junior joins us in the kitchen. He walks up behind me, snaking his arms around my waist, and drops a kiss on my neck. I laugh and squirm as he tickles my side a little. "Ah, the lasagna. Yeah, Jasper's still obsessed with that thing. Did you make for me, too?"

"Of course I did." Silly question.

He gives my ass a squeeze. "*Madonn'." He leans in to whisper in my ear, "People aren't showing up for another two hours."

"I'm very aware, Juniuuh," I chuckle wryly.

He groans quietly, nibbling on my ear. His proximity also allows me to feel his erection poking my back. "C'mon, hummingbird. You and me—the laundry room."
"Christ, stop molesting my mother!" Anthony complains.

"Stai zitto." Junior tells our son to shut up, and when I turn around, I see that he's wearing that sinister grin of his. "Go check on your siblings; they're by the pool."

I can see that Anthony wants to flip off his father, but I subtly shake my head no. It would do him no good, and he'd probably show up at the barbecue with a black eye.

Junior and Anthony very rarely argue, but when they do, it's pretty huge. Our son is trying to prove that he's a man now, and that means not backing down so easily. Meanwhile, this is Junior's house, and what he says goes. My husband has zero tolerance for disrespect.

Once Anthony has left the room, Junior and I leave the kitchen for the laundry room. It's right next to our bedroom down here, but he knows I have a thing for sitting on the washing machine.

"What do you want, ciccino?" I ask with a seductive smile as he closes the door behind us.

I know he had a sit-down with Vinny yesterday, and he didn't come home until three in the morning. At least that's what he said, since I was asleep. Anyway, that meant no sex last night. Not that we have sex every day, but with Junior's libido, it's close enough.

"I want you to sit on that." He points to the washing machine, which is running. "And then I want your pussy on my face."

I squeal internally and hike up my dress before I sit on top of the washer. These last few days, the husband has been all about licking my pussy. It comes and goes after more than seventeen years together. Sometimes he's obsessed with blowjobs, sometimes it's slow lovemaking, sometimes it's rough and fast...and now he's evidently on a pussy streak.
You won't find me complaining.

When I spread my legs, showing the damp spot on my red satin panties, Junior groans and presses his fist to his mouth. Slowly, like a predator, he walks toward me and then kneels before me. His hands slide up my smooth legs, causing a shiver to run through me. His eyes, so smoldering, make my breathing hitch.

"Fuck, I love this pussy," he murmurs huskily, pushing my panties to the side. Then he grazes his nose over my slit. "Mmm, la mia fica."

A bead of sweat slowly trickles down my neck since the laundry room is so hot.

"Oh, yeah," I moan breathily and thread my fingers through his hair. With my long fingernails, I scrape his scalp; he loves that. I love it, too, because it makes him groan against my flesh.

Before I know it, he presses his face to my pussy and starts eating me out. Two fingers fuck me while he sucks on my clit.

Then he switches, slipping his tongue inside of me while his fingers rub my clit.

At the same time, the spin cycle begins.

"Oh, God—oh, baby," I gasp, fisting his hair harder.

I feel how his tongue slips in and out of me, softly caressing my inner walls. It's driving me nuts. Same goes for his ministrations on my clit. Rubbing, pressing, circling, pinching gently.

Junior groans. "Cazzo, hai un sapore dannatamente delizioso, amore mio." He tells me I taste so goddamn good.

He devours me.
My head tilts back as I feel the orgasm starting to wash over me. It starts in my belly, a tingling sensation spreading throughout my body. And then I explode; I hold my breath, and it's like I'm on fire. My entire being vibrates.

It's too much, and I scream.

By the time I come down from my high, Junior is standing before me, his chest heaving as he unzips his slacks. Oh God, I'm going to get it good now. With a feral look on his face, he pulls me to the edge of the washer and wraps my legs around him. Then he grips his hard cock and slides it between my wet lips.

"I love it when you're loud," he admits, out of breath.

He has worked me up to such a frenzy that I attack.

My mouth goes everywhere, but mainly around his mouth. I love it when we get down and dirty like this, and I know Junior loves it, too. He gets so turned on when I kiss him, tasting myself, and go, "Fuck breathing; he's more important."

My husband wants to be my number one—always—and I make sure to show it. It's what many wives forget when we start popping out kids. We forget our husbands, but not me. I refuse. If he's happy, I am happy, too.

Do my kids come before Junior? In my heart, yes. Always. A mother's love—it doesn't get any stronger than that. But many men don't understand this, so I shower my man with as much attention as I do our children.

"Fuck me, ciccino," I whimper, clawing at his chest. He shudders and pushes the tip of him into me. "Please—I need you."

Crashing his mouth to mine, he finally shoves his cock deep inside of me.
He swallows my loud moan.

"I love it when you need the cock, too," he pants, setting a fast pace. With open-mouthed kisses, he leaves a moist trail from my mouth down to my collarbone. I know what he wants, so I slide down the straps of my dress to reveal my breasts. "Christ, these are—fucking spectacular. My tits."

"Yours," I breathe out, again tilting my head back. "Ti amo cosi tanto." I tell him I love him so much.

He moans and wraps his lips around my left nipple, sucking it hard into his mouth.

The pleasure spikes through me, leaving me gasping for air.

Meanwhile, his cock pounds in and out of my pussy, and I can hear how wet I am.

"Baby, I'm close," he grits out and captures my mouth again. "Are you—can you—"

I shake my head. It feels so good, but I just came. I can't orgasm again this soon after. "Come, ciccino," I whimper, urging him to go faster by pressing my heels into his ass.

With a guttural moan, he lets go, thrusting lazily and erratically as he releases into me.

To make his climax last longer, I clench down on his as hard as I can.

"God, Isabella!" he groans.

I grin, loving my view.

"So good," he exhales and kisses me softly. Pressing my hand to his heart, I feel how it beats furiously. "Maybe now I can focus out there."
I chuckle, confused and still a bit out of breath. "Focus?"

"Without attacking you." He nods and then pulls out of me. "All day..." He chuckles. "I've been watching you in the kitchen." I laugh and get a kiss on my nose. My Junior can be so freaking sweet.

"Speaking of the kitchen—I need to get back to it." I hop down from the washer and fix my dress. "Alec should be here with the meat for the barbecue soon."

Having a brother-in-law who owns a deli is nice.

"I'm hungry." Junior rubs his stomach. "Is there anything I can eat right now?"

Chuckling, I reach up at pat his cheek. "I'm sure there's something you can sample."

His smile in return is so boyish.

**Junior's POV**

A few hours later, my backyard is full of people. There are kids in the pool, teenagers doing their shit, women gossiping, men standing by the grill, and dogs running around on the lawn. I estimate there are about fifty guests here, so when I say that my backyard is full, I fucking mean it.

Not half of these were invited. My kids wanted to bring some classmates, a few friends of ours wanted to bring dates, a couple of nephews and nieces asked if they could bring more friends...no matta'.

Soon, we're doing this all over again for my forty-first birthday.

*Maybe we can just host a dinner at Stella Mia.*
I'll talk to Isabella. She's in charge of all that.

"Look at my girl," Vinny says, nodding at Julia who's in the pool with a million other kids. "She can swim well."

I nod and take a sip from my beer, eyes glued to Julia. She is a great swimmer, but she usually still sticks to the shallow end of the kidney-shaped pool. Now, however, she's cautiously swimming toward Dominic at the deep end.

She used to be afraid of the water—her only fear as far as I know—which is why Isabella hasn't been able to teach her how to swim until now. But my little princess is conquering her fear. I'm proud of her, as is Vinny, her godfather. Though, since Vinny's the same age as my father, Julia calls him Nonno Vin. She's actually named after Vinny's wife—Giuliana. Well, sorta. Vinny and Giuliana often fly out to visit; we're all pretty close, especially Vinny and my father.

"And Elisa," he sighs, "such a beautiful young woman. Maybe next time, Emilio will come out here, too."

I offer him a tight-lipped smile at that, knowing all too well he wants to introduce Elisa to his son and only child. They had him very late, so Emilio isn't more than twenty, but that's still four—almost five—years older than my daughter.

I don't fucking think so.

Vinny could pester Felix instead. Valentina, Felix's only daughter, is twenty-two. Or there's Lucia—Jasper's daughter. She's twenty-one.

"Don't give Junior here a heart attack, Vinny," my little brother chuckles as he checks the sausages on the grill. "Elisa is his little angel."

"Damn right she is," I tell Alec.
"I can already see the vein in his forehead bulging," Riley adds, snickering.

I flip my brother-in-law off.

"All right, I can take a hint," Vinny laughs, slapping me on my shoulder. And that hint? Well, it wasn't very subtle, so if he wouldn't be able to "take" it, I'd be worried.

Felix and Pops chuckle next to me. Jasper doesn't, because he's glaring at Alice, who is standing by the patio with my wife as they set the kids' table. Giuliana, Mom, Esme, and Brianna are standing by another table—a bigger one—where the adults will eat.

I sigh, hoping to God Jasper and Alice's problems won't become mine.

"Daddy!" I hear a little voice call, and I look to my left to see Jasper's youngest running toward him. After Jasper and Alice were married, they only had one more, and that's Sophia. She's eight years old, cute as hell, and Isabella and my goddaughter. "I'm hungry—when's dinner?"

Jasper smiles for the first time today—his own birthday—and focuses on Sophia instead.

Following Jasper's lead, I give my attention to my kids for a while, too. Elisa's sitting by the loungers with a few of her friends and cousins, so I pretty quickly understand that I'm not welcome there. Basically, I ask her if everything is okay, she tells me it is, and then I walk away again. Both Julia and Dominic are in the pool, along with more cousins—we're all fucking related, it feels like—so there's not much I can do there. That leaves Anthony.

Scanning the backyard, I eventually see him standing near the makeshift bar. Isabella's there now, too.
She's wearing a beautiful dress in dark purple—some shiny fabric—and the gold and diamond jewelry set I gave her last week, including a necklace, bracelet, and earrings.

Beer bottle still in hand, I walk over to them.

"Ma, stop," Anthony whines as Isabella straightens his tie. I can't help but chuckle; she's always fussing over our children. "I'm not a kid."

"Yet, you whine like one," I pipe in, stopping next to my wife.

"Molto divertente, vecchio," he mutters, patting the pockets of his slacks. For his cigarettes, I assume. "Why do I gotta be all dressed up when all the others are in their bathing suits?"

"All the other kids," Isabella corrects. "You just said you aren't one." She points out at the backyard. "You see any adults dressed in bathing suits, huh?" She pinches his cheeks, much to my amusement. "Now, I saw you looking at Elisa's friend over there. You need to make a good impression. Simona, she's a good girl—a good Italian girl. Go make Mama proud." She pulls him down, plants a loud kiss on his cheek, and then wipes away the lipstick she left behind.

I cock a brow at her, 'cause I know Isabella hates Simona's family. Our daughters are in the same grade, and whenever we run into her parents, I have to drag Isabella away before she bitch slaps either of them. She thinks Simona is sweet, but her folks? Forget about it. Simona's father is a cop, and her mother teaches Sunday school. Her mother also seems to think my wife is a bad mother for our children, which couldn't be further away from the truth.

"How good of a girl?" Anthony asks, batting Isabella's hands away from his hair. "She's—" He kisses the tips of his fingers. "Madonn'. No words. But that's all I know."
I laugh through my nose and drink my beer, content to just watch.

"She can't wait to get married," Isabella gushes, and I finally see through her plan. She's practically telling our son all the things he hates about girls. At his age, he's hardly looking for a good girl. He wants to have fun. "Can you imagine, topolino? You and Simona will have the cutest little babies."

Anthony pales. "Cutest—uh, I-I," he stammers, pulling at his tie. "Mom... Oh, cazzo." And with that said, he turns to leave.

Before he walks off, I step forward and give his forehead a big smooch. In return, his cheeks flame red, and he curses under his breath as he hurries away.

Not in Simona's direction.

"I love you, tesoro!" I shout at his retreating form. "You go get her!"

"Jesus Christ!" he hisses.

Grinning down at my hummingbird, I draw her close to me. "You're evil. Fucking genius, but evil."

She smiles innocently. "You love me anyway."

"No." I kiss her temple. "I love you because of it. Well, at least it's one of the reasons."

"I love you, too." She lets out a little giggle. "And you know what I've got?" I shake my head. Her eyes light up like the sun, I swear. "Gossip!" she squeals behind her hand. "It's..." She pulls me down to whisper in my ear, and I try to ignore the fact that a part of me gets excited for trivial bullshit. "It's about my brother and Alice."
I groan and straighten up. I do not want to hear about that. "It's not our business," I whisper. "Let it go."

She purses her lips, peering up at me with a pensive expression. "Did Jasper come to you? Did he tell you anything?"

I shake my head no.

"You're lying." She sucks her teeth. "I can tell."

"I'm not lying. He hasn't told me a thing," I say, gathering her in my arms. "Cool it." I kiss her on the forehead. "Look, the food is almost done. Let's take our seats, okay?"

She huffs. "Fine."

I give her ass a smack. "Attitude."

"Oh relax, Juniuh." She hugs my midsection. "Lighten up—it's a party."

She winks at me before walking toward Alec and the grill. Two grills, actually. "Save me a seat, ciccino!" she calls over her shoulder.

I grin as she gives me a little shimmy.

**Anthony's POV**

By the time it's dark outside and all those twinkly lights light up the backyard, pretty much every grown-up is drunk. They're all sitting at the massive table I helped my pop put together this morning. And all the people my age—plus or minus a few years—have gathered around the kids' table. I'd say there're about ten of us at this table, including Elisa, Valentina, Lucia, Francis, EJ, Colin, and a few others. But several of our friends went home after dinner. Now it's mostly cousins and siblings left.

Aside from the twinkle lights in the trees, there are also small torches stuck in the ground around the patio. Oh, and the pool is lit up, which is
where many of the little ones are playing around, with the occasional adult walking over to make sure everything's okay.

"Anthony, can't you go grab another wine bottle for us?" Elisa asks too sweetly, sitting across from me at the long table. "We're thirsty." She giggles with her two friends flanking her. Gabriella, Elisa's best friend and Enzo's daughter, should also be here somewhere.

I shake my head and lean back in my seat. Duke's sitting on the ground next to me; he goes to me when Dee's not near. "You really think Mom and Dad would notice?" I chuckle, reaching for my smokes next to my soda. I'd love to throw down a drink or two, but Pops asked me to act as chauffeur later for those who are too hammered to drive themselves and don't have drivers. "Go get a fucking bottle from the bar." I point to it. "The grownups are too drunk to give a shit."

She sticks out her tongue at me. "Dad's got, like, a freaking built-in radar when it comes to me."

True.

"Not my problem." I grin and take a pull from my smoke.

"I can go," Francis offers. He's sitting right next to me but stands up; anything for my baby sister. Dad and Felix say nothing about Francis's crush on Elisa, because they think it's harmless. And that's because we're like third cousins or something—though, perhaps not by blood. Our fathers are second cousins, so that makes Elisa and Francis third, right? I don't fucking know. Anyway, I wouldn't call it harmless, 'cause the relation isn't really there.

"Thank you," Elisa replies, batting her lashes a little. "You're so nice, Francis."
I roll my eyes as Francis walks away; he looks like he just won the fucking lottery. That guy needs to get his shit greased.

Colin, Valentina, and Lucia laugh.

Then, all of a sudden, I have a little thing on my lap.

*Julia.*

"Hi!" She kisses my cheek, and I compose my face, which was just in a grimace. 'Cause she's soaking wet from the pool. "What'cha doin'?" She reaches down to pat Duke's head. That dog is pretty huge, but he's lying down now.

"Nothing much," I say. Running my hand up her arm, I notice how cold she is. "Piccolina, you're gonna get sick." I reach behind and take the blazer I hung on my chair earlier and throw it around my sister. "Better?"

She nods and is about to say something, but I hear my father's loud voice then. "JULIA!"

I look over to the adults' table and see him standing up. "She's here with me!" I shout back.

He squints to see clearer and nods. "Yeah, all right." Then he sits down next to my mother again and drapes an arm around her.

"You're so sweet for taking care of your sister like that," a girl giggles. I turn to look at one of Elisa's friends. Sarah, I think her name was. I'm not sure. There's only a year between Elisa and me, but since I'm graduating a year early, you could say there are two years instead of one. So, my sister and I don't exactly run in the same crowds at school.
This Sarah broad's decent, though. Brown hair, blue eyes. She's actually hotter than Simona, who thankfully left early. Cazzo, Mom really helped me dodge that bullet.

"Sweet, huh?" I throw her that crooked smirk my pops uses to reel in my mother. Works every time. "I don't think I've ever heard that." Unless it's my parents saying it to me.

"Oh, yeah?" She leans forward a little. "What have you heard, then?"

I laugh quietly. "You want me to write a list?"

This girl could be mine within twenty minutes. However, high school chicks usually don't do it for me—I rarely even look at 'em. They were good when I was new in the game. Get a hand job in a janitor's closet, get a blowjob behind the bleachers, lose your virginity at some prom. Whatever. Now it's different.

I'll be seventeen in a few months. I'm a grown man, for fuck's sake.

"God—stop hitting on my brother, Sarah," Elisa bitches.

Sarah. Confirmed.

I send my sister a wink before I face Sarah again. "I'd rather take a list from you. Words you would use for me."

Sarah grins instead of ducking her head, which I'm used to when I'm being forward. Again, when it comes to high school girls. But maybe this one isn't shy.

Now that I think of it, maybe that's why Gabriella isn't at the table. She's a good girl—through and through—and she'd never go near a glass of wine or ask for it. She and my sister are completely different, yet they're so close.
"I can write a list," Julia mumbles sleepily, reminding me of her presence.

I chuckle. "I'm sure you can." For good measure, I kiss the top of her head.

Sarah notices and beams at me. Nice. "Aww, so cute!"

"Che Casanova che sei," EJ laughs, calling me a Casanova, a player.

I flip him off, not giving a shit about that douche. He's always gawking at my mother. Creepy fuck.

"What did he say?" Sarah asks me curiously, glancing at EJ.

Most of us around this table are fluent in Italian, but Sarah ain't.

"Nothing important," I answer her. "Hey, I should probably put my sister to bed. You wanna come with?" I'm not one to beat around the bush. If she's down for a fuck—that's perfect. If not, then I have no reason to linger.

"Sure," she replies, quickly standing up. "After you."

Score.

I smirk at Elisa—at which she glares—before I carry a half-asleep Julia toward the patio.

"You taking Julia to bed, topolino?" Mom asks. She giggles at something, maybe at whatever Dad's doing under the table. Or the fact that he has his face buried in her neck. Jesus Christ, he's like a Band-Aid on her.

I nod. "Is Dee asleep, too?"

She shakes her head and points to the pool. Ah, he's there with a few other kids. "Look at Ant-Anthony, ciccino," she tells Dad, grinning. She's
definitely drunk. "Don't we have the best son? So handsome—so helpful with his sister."

Dad chuckles. "Oh yeah, no ulterior motives with that one." He glances between me and Sarah. "You're right, hummingbird. He's just the best."

My mother doesn't catch the sarcasm in his voice or the amusement in his eyes, for which I'm fucking thankful. 'Cause she thinks I'm this angel.

"Let the boy go!" Nonno shouts at my parents, seated a few chairs down from them. I think that's what my father will look like in twenty-five years or so. Those two, my dad and grandfather, can go at it, let me tell ya. "Can't you see he's gotta girl with him?" He makes a shooing motion at me. "Go—before your mother decides to kiss you for the fuck of it."

He's a good man.

"Come here, Isabella," he goes on, waving her to him. "Give me that kiss instead."

"OH!" Dad shouts, hugging my giggling mom tightly. "No more alcohol for you, Pop!"

Nonno sucks his teeth and holds up his glass. "It's just wine. Good for my heart. You—you, and your siblings—all the gray hairs you've given me. You should cut your old man some slack."

Ma and Nonna laugh at their men.

I take the opportunity to get the fuck outta there.

Jerking my chin at Sarah, I take the lead and head inside.

As soon as we reach the second floor, it gets pretty quiet. The music from the living room downstairs is just there in the background—easily ignored.
Our first stop is Julia's room, where I position her on her bed. Then remember what she's wearing, so I wake her up just so she can change out of her bathing suit and into pajamas. After that, she's out like a light.

"My room is down the hall," I whisper to Sarah as I close Julia's door.

She nods, actually looking a little nervous, and starts walking. That nervousness—I'm gonna have to do something about that.

When we pass Dominic's room, I can hear moaning coming from inside. But it sure as shit ain't my brother. He may be jacking it twenty-four-seven, but that's about it.

"Oh, Jasper. Please—harder!"

"Yeah? You like it hard, gorgeous? Cazzo."

I grin down at Sarah. I guess my uncle is getting some from Alice.

"Come on, pretty girl," I chuckle quietly, ushering Sarah into my room.
Chapter 3

Translation

Davvero? = Really?

E' un bambinone. = He's a child.

Hummingbird's POV

When Alice reemerges from wherever she was inside the house, she walks over to the pool to check on the kids.

I take the opportunity to follow, 'cause finding privacy isn't the easiest when you have a gazillion people in your backyard.

Duchess, our little French Bulldog, trails after me.

"You okay?" I ask her, though my eyes are on Dominic.

"No," she chuckles humorlessly.

I sigh and face her fully. As giddy as I was about the gossip she told me earlier, I'm still concerned. Jasper's my brother, and Alice is one of my best friends.

She's sure that my brother's cheating on her. Meanwhile, I can't really believe it.

"Would he ever even have a reason to cheat?" I whisper. "Jasper—he's crazy about you, Alice."

She sniffs and is quick to wipe away a stray tear. "He doesn't want sex from me," she says, more tears running down. "He doesn't even ask for it anymore."

I frown. "What—you've been on a dry spell? I don't get it."
Dry spells don't exist in Junior's house. Unless I'm sick. He's really doting and understanding when I'm sick, but that's about it.

"I don't know." She shrugs dejectedly. "I mean, I said no a few times. So what? That was about six fucking months ago. Now it's like, whenever we go to bed together—which doesn't happen often—we go to sleep right away."

"Why did you say no?" I blurt out. Sorry, I can't help myself. Rosalie, Maria, and Gianna have pointed out to me several times that my views on marriage are fucked up. But it's how I was raised. The wife puts out—simple as that.

"I wasn't feeling it," she says, irritated. "Is that a crime?"

I don't reply.

I know it's not a crime, but...

Up until the Coluccis and Maisanos moved to Las Vegas, Alice was a Manhattan princess.

I'm from Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. Okay, I grew up in both Jersey and Brooklyn; my folks moved a lot, but still. I didn't get fairy tales and watered-down versions of what marriage was. My mother was blunt and told me exactly what was expected of me to keep my husband satisfied. But Alice...she was so sheltered. Same goes for Brianna—Junior's sister—but she has embraced the shit that comes outta my mouth. Victoria, Junior's other sister, is like Alice, too.

"Say what you wanna say," she whispers, now pleading with her eyes. "I actually want to know."

I offer her a small smile. "You know how I think."
"You always say yes," she states and gives me a dubious look.

I shrug. "Yeah."

"You always want it," she presses.

At that, I laugh. "Hell no!" I put my hand over my mouth to stifle my laughs. "That's ridiculous." I snort. "Of course I don't."

She looks incredulous. "But you go along with it? Junior tells you to spread your legs and you do it—" she snaps her fingers "—just like that?"

I shrug again. "It keeps him happy. Why argue over it? I remember— cazzo, when I was pregnant. Do you understand how fucking whiny my husband is when he doesn't get pussy on regular basis?" My eyes widen. "I'd rather stick it out for ten minutes while he gets his than have to listen to his complaining." I'm not lying, either. Men really are like children. "It's called faking, honey." I pat her arm. "And if you put on a good show, it's over much quicker. To me—" I place a hand on my chest "—ten or fifteen minutes of fucking are a whole lot better than hours of bitching and moaning."

"Hunh." She purses her lips. "How often do you fake it?"

"Depends. But if Junior wants sex five times a week, maybe I want three."

"So, twice a week? Davvero?"

I smile sweetly. "But look at my husband." I point toward the table. Junior's currently laughing his ass off at whatever Ed or Riley has said. Those three, along with Felix, Alec, and Jasper are always close. Vinny, too, now that he's here in Vegas. "Doesn't he look happy?"

Alice scowls at the ground.
Sparing a glance at the pool, I catch Dominic and Colin splashing water on two of Elisa's friends. One of them is Gabriella, Enzo's daughter. Such a sweet girl. The other one...Amanda, I think her name is, is in Elisa's class.

"Boys!" I shout. Their heads whip around, eyes widening when they see me. "Cut that shit out!" Dominic can be a hell raiser—occasionally—but Colin, Brianna and Riley's boy, is usually sweeter than sugar. "Apologize to the girls." I point.

"It's okay, Mrs. Maisano," Amanda giggles.

I keep staring at Dominic and Colin.

"Dai retta a tua zia, Colin!" Riley shouts across the yard, telling Colin to listen to me, his aunt.

"Sorry, Bella," Colin mumbles, most definitely embarrassed. At the age of almost fourteen, the last thing he wants is to be told what to do.

He's so fucking cute that I just wanna pinch his cheeks.

"Sorry, Mom," Dominic follows with a grumble.

"I didn't tell you to apologize to me." I point to my chest.

Still mumbling and grumbling, they apologize to the two giggling girls, and that's that. The boys leave the pool and start playing football farther away.

Shaking my head, I refocus on Alice, who is looking pensive.

Maybe my views on marriage are old-fashioned, but I don't give a fuck. Junior and I are happy. I treat him like a fucking king and, in return, he treats me like a queen.

Brianna and I are on the same page. We think alike.
"So, you're saying that it's my fault Jasper strays?"

"First of all—" I hold up a finger "—you don't know for sure he's cheatin' on you. Second—" another finger comes up "—no, it's definitely not your fault—if he's fucking around. I think that if a man wants to cheat, he will do so no matter how much his wife spreads her legs. But—" I stress "—for my own peace of mind, I want to know that I've done everything I could to make him happy. And men..." I chuckle darkly. "Men care about three things. Money, sex, and food. They also get jealous of their own kids if they get more attention."

Alice nods. "Jasper tells me I care too much about Sophia."

"Well, my brother's a fucking idiot," I say wryly. "But Juniuh's the same. If I dote on our children, I gotta make sure to do the same with him. Don't get me wrong, he'd die and kill for our babies. They mean the world to him, but he wants attention, too. That's just how it is."

"ISABELLA!"

Looking over my shoulder, I see Junior standing by the door to the living room.

"We gotta change this fucking noise!" He's referring to the music. He doesn't like what our kids listen to.

"What's keeping you, ciccino?!" I shout back, grinning.

"The fucking CD player—that's what!" He punches his palm. "The remote doesn't work!"

I turn to Alice again and roll my eyes. "See what I mean? E' un bambinone. He's also stuck in the seventies." I widen my arms. "He bought the damn stereo for the kids, but he hates it—he only wants to play records. Why did he even buy it?"
Alice giggles. "Jasper's the same. We gotta have all the new stuff, but can he work it? No!"

"I can help you, Daddy!" Elisa volunteers from the kids' table.

And Junior melts. "Grazie, angioletto."

I sigh, amused, and face Alice once more. "He's so fooled by that girl—thinks she's an angel."

"Just like you're fooled by Anthony?" She snorts a laugh.

My brows furrow. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Anthony—God bless him—may not be perfect, but he's still a good boy. Aside from minor issues—some fighting, gambling, drinking—he hasn't done much.

"I hear he often hangs out at Dawn," she whispers. "Lucia heard it from Nico."

No way. "My son wouldn't—" I palm my forehead. Oh, who am I kidding? I can't lie to myself. Anthony's growing up; of course he'd get a kick outta naked women on a stage. "Never mind." I wave my hand tiredly. "As long as that's all it is."

Alice is about to say something, but the first tunes of Frank Sinatra's I've Got You Under My Skin filter through the air, which stills all conversation. I look toward the door, smiling widely when I see an overjoyed Junior coming back out. Elisa trails after, rolling her eyes, but she's amused.

"Isn't that the song you danced to at your wedding?" Alice asks.

I nod, eyes still locked with my husband's. "He's so sappy when he's drunk—I love it. Sometimes," I lower my voice to a whisper, "I give him a few glasses of wine—just 'cause he gets so romantic."
Junior does have a romantic side of him, and he's not afraid to show it, but when he's had a couple drinks too many, he gets even sweeter.

"Get ova' hea', bell'uccellino," he says, wearing a silly grin. "Dance with me."

"Go." Alice gives me a gentle push. "Dance with your husband. I'm gonna track down Jasper. I haven't seen him in a while."

**Anthony's POV**

Okay, so I didn't get laid, but I did get my dick sucked.

Saving herself for marriage, Sarah said before she got down on her knees.

*No matter.*

My mom always says that broads who do more kneeling for guys than they do in church aren't worth an engagement ring.

"Um..." Sarah gets off the floor and wipes her mouth. In the meantime, I tuck myself back into my pants. "You wanna fool around for a while?"

*That'd be a no.*

Still, my father taught me to be polite, and...I don't know how the fuck to tell this girl to scram—to tell her that I've already gotten what I wanted...without sounding like a prick.

Running a hand through my hair, I look behind me, to my bed, and think...*ah, fuck it.* "Sure," I eventually mutter, hoping to come off as at least a little enthusiastic. I take her hand and pull her to me; her breathing stutters.

I smirk and drop a couple soft kisses along her jaw.
"So," she whispers, "is it true what they say about your family?" I straighten up and glare at her with my brows furrowed. "You know—the Coluccis and the Maisanos."

I frown. "Excuse me?" I thought she wanted to fool around...

"Oh, you know," she giggles and slides both hands up my chest. I guess she's going for sexy? "Um, some of my friends say that your father and uncles—that you're in the mob?" At that, my eyebrows shoot up. I ain't dumb; I know the rumors, but for Sarah to come out and say it... "You can tell me anything," she says in a rush. "I won't tell a soul."

I wanna laugh. Holy shit, I really wanna fucking laugh.

Instead, I see a window to get the fuck out. Or rather, to get Sarah the fuck out.

"You think my family's some—that it's run by mobsters?" I ask incredulously, taking a step back. "You're in my house." I point to my chest. "And you come here and insult me?"

"N-no, I didn't—I mean," she stammers and looks scared. "No, I didn't mean that."

I arch a brow. "What did you mean, then?"

When she only offers some more jumbled stuttering, I suggest that she leave. I tell her, while I show her out the door, that I'm deeply offended by her implication.

Then I shut the door.

*That was too fucking easy.* I chuckle to myself, about to go back outside to join the party, but that's when I hear someone stumbling down the
stairs. And as I leave the foyer, pass the kitchen, and look up the stairs, I see that it's Milo's girlfriend—Milo is Dee and Julia's driver.

Thinking fast, I take a few steps back and hide out in the kitchen. Only the light in the window is lit, so I'm pretty hidden in the shadows as she stops to look at herself in the mirror by the stairs. She fixes her hair and makeup, smiling to herself, and then she walks into the living room—on her way back to the terrace, I assume.

My gut instinct tells me to stick around for moment, 'cause I'm pretty fucking sure Uncle Jasper will be next to walk down...

About two minutes later, I see that I'm right.

_He wasn't screwing Zia Alice in Dee's bedroom._

Zio Jasper's technically my boss; he's the one I go to for direction and advice, but I can't exactly take this to him, now can I?

"Pops it is," I whisper to myself. It's been a minute or so since Jasper walked out, so I deem it's safe to follow. And I find my dad talking to Mom and my grandparents by the grill. They're also keeping an eye on the kids in the pool.

"There's my baby!" Mom cries out when she spots me. "Daddy told me you had a girl in your room." She looks so fucking happy, but then there's a pout on her lips. "Oh, wait. That didn't take long."

Dad gives me an I-understand-you smile. "Don't worry, tesoro. You're young. Stamina... These things—it gets better with age."

"What're you talkin' about?" I ask and bring out my smokes. Nonno hands me a lighter before I can use my own, and then he goes back to puffing on his cigar.
"Nothing." Mom grabs my attention by squeezing my hand. "Don't listen to Daddy. Look at you—so handsome." She fixes my tie. "You should've been here a few minutes ago." She makes goo-goo eyes at Dad. "Your father is the best dancer."

"Right." I can't say that I care about dancing to Frank Sinatra, who is my parents' favorite singer. "Actually, Pop, can I have a word? In private." I smile apologetically to my mother and grandparents.

Dad, who is on the drunk side, is not far away from jumping Mom—his own parents watching be damned.

"You can talk to me, too, honey," Mom says, looking concerned.

I grin and dip down to kiss her cheek. "I know, Ma. It's just something I wanna discuss with Dad—no big deal."

Nonno distracts her by taking the wine bottle from the side table next to the grill and refilling Mom's glass. And, thankfully, my father has snapped outta his "hummingbird" haze and tells me we can talk in his office.

I put out my smoke and follow him inside.

Once we're there, he closes the door behind us. "So, you and that little thing..." He walks over and faces me, curiosity in his eyes. "You two...?" He punches the air, causing me to laugh. "Ah, come on, son. Tell me!"

Yeah, I tell him everything, 'cause Pops and I are close, and he loves this shit. When I tell him about Sarah's assumption—about us being in the mafia—and how I turned it around, pretending to be insulted, Dad cracks the fuck up.

"Beautiful, beautiful!" he laughs and cups my cheeks. "Just beautiful. You sly little fuck." I grin as he gives each of my cheeks a kiss. "Now—" he
leans back, half-sitting on his desk "—what did you wanna talk to me about?"

The humor is gone, and I puff out my cheeks, thinking about how to say this...or if I should. I know all about the code of silence, and my father is big on respect and only minding your own business. Still...didn't my uncle kinda make it our business by doing this shit here—in my father's house?

"Zio Jasper..." I hesitate and avert my eyes. "He was up in Dee's room a while ago..."

"Chin up," Pops says, and I look to him. He nods. "Always look me in the eye when you speak." He waves for me to go on. "Jasper was in Dominic's room...and?"

"He got his shit greased," I blurt out, then add, "And Zia Alice was nowhere near."

**Junior's POV**

"You're still my sweet boys," Mom gushes, one hand on my left cheek and the other hand on Alec's right cheek. "I will see you for church next Sunday?"

"Certamente," I promise and kiss her on the forehead. I also reach over to kiss Esme's cheek. "Youse take care now." We don't go to church every Sunday anymore, much to my mother's dismay, but I just don't have the time. So, we're not going tomorrow. But Isabella promised Mom and Esme we'd go next week. It's also so my wife can put flowers on Mrs. Coppoletta's grave. Next week, it'll be two years since cancer took her.

"We'll be there, Ma," Alec says.

"I'll see you two on Thursday," Pop tells us.
We nod in understanding, and after a few more kisses and hugs, we say goodbye to our parents and Esme. The barbecue's winding down and not many guests are left.

Making our way back to the backyard, I see Felix and Gianna preparing to leave, too. They're standing by the pool talking to Emmett and Rosalie, but there's one thing I gotta do before saying goodbye to them.

Jasper's sitting with Nico and another few friends of ours as I reach him.

"Can I have a word wit'chu, Jasper?" I jerk my chin toward the living room. "I haven't given you my birthday gift yet."

He chuckles and stands up, straightening his suit before he follows me back inside. Through the living room, down the hall to the right, past Isabella and my bedroom...then we reach my office.

Without missing a beat, I walk behind my desk and sit down. In the top drawer, I find the envelope of cash and hand it over to Jasper just as he sits down across from me.

"Grazie, amico mio," he says with a smirk.

"You're welcome." I lean back in my chair. "You've had a good day—a nice birthday?"

He nods, also getting comfortable. "Absolutely. Isabella's cooking..." He kisses the tips of his fingers.

"Yeah, you can't really get enough of that, can ya?" I sigh contentedly, thinking about getting another piece of cake once I'm done here. Isabella made it; she's good with all of it. Food, pastries... And this cake—Madonn'—chocolate, strawberries...rich and creamy.
"Our mother—God rest her soul—" he does the Sign of the Cross "—she taught Isabella everything she knew."

I know. "E I tuoi ragazza...si sono divertiti anche loro oggi?" I ask if his kids had a good time today, too.

With so much going on today, I haven't really paid attention to the younger adults, including Nico, Lucia, Valentina, EJ, Joseph, Anna... There are just too many to keep track of, and the younger ones, they need our attention more. Well, unless we want them in the deep end of the pool without supervision. There are my own water monsters, Dominic and Julia, to keep my eyes on, and then there's Alec and Maria's one and only, AJ—he's nine... There's Theresa, Emmett and Rosalie's five-year-old...Brianna and Riley's own five-year-old is Olivia... Too many, and I didn't even mention half of 'em.

"Oh yeah, definitely." Jasper grins. "Sophia, my little baby...she's growing up too quickly. She'll be like Lucia soon, and then I won't be able to keep an eye on her."

I nod, fearing that part, too. While I want Elisa to go to college, like Lucia's doing in Los Angeles, I don't want her far away. I hope she'll find something close. 'Cause only seeing Lucia on a few weekends here and there...Jasper doesn't like it one bit, and I know I'd hate it, too.

"And you and Alice, you good?"

Jasper doesn't look happy, though he's trying to hide it. He's still angry at Alice for...something. "I thought you didn't wanna know."

"Consider tonight an exception. Go on." I'm not really asking.

After listening to what my Anthony had to say, I'm rather fucking pissed, but I'm hiding it behind a smile.
Jasper grimaces. "I'd actually prefer to keep it to myself."

I nod, pretending to accept that, and stand up. "Well, I'm glad you've had a good time tonight. Let's join the others again." Walking around my desk, I button my suit jacket. Jasper's just about to open the door when I stop him. "Just one thing."

"What?" He faces me fully.

"Whatever you do—" I pick invisible lint off his shoulder "—do not let this reach Felix and Emmett. That's their baby sister you're doing dirty. Am I wrong?"

His eyes widen.

I cock a brow, wondering why the fuck people get so surprised that I always find out what's going on—sooner or later. How many times am I gonna have to tell people, huh? *I. Have. Eyes. All. Over. Vegas.* One way or another, I find out.

"I love Alice—"

"Wrong answer."

"What goes on in my marriage—"

I cut him off again, nodding. "Is your business. Still." I point to my temple. "If it was my little sister..." I chuckle darkly, thinking about Brianna and Victoria. "What would you do if I cheated on Isabella?" His jaw clenches, fury clear in his eyes. "Exactly." I lean a little closer to make sure he understands his position. "We's been family for what—eighteen years now?"

Jasper may be a couple years older than I am, but he still entered our family long after I did. I was born into this—I'm a fucking Maisano.
"Now, you run your crew, I run mine... But remember who you're dealing with here, Savona." I grind my teeth together, struggling to remain calm. "That desk you sit behind at Dawn, it used to be mine." I take a small step back and smooth down the collar of his button-down. "You wanna fuck around on Alice? Do it where I can't see—where Felix and Emmett can't see. You don't come into my house and stick your shit into my kids' driver's girlfriend. You get what I'm saying?"

I could go on and on. He has no business fucking anybody where my wife can see, where my fucking son can see... but I don't want Jasper to think Anthony's the one who came to me about this.

"I get it," he responds, anger behind his calm façade.

I nod. "Bene." Still pissed, I give his shoulder a squeeze hard enough to make him wince, but he's smart enough to keep his mouth shut. "Now we can go."
Chapter 4

Translation

Se sospetta del suo stesso fratello... sarebbe un bello scimunito a venire a dirtelo in faccia. = If he suspects his own brother... he'd be pretty fucking dumb to come out and say that to your face.

Junior's POV

A couple weeks later, I find myself in Felix's office at his club; it's just Pop and me here with him.

"Va tutto bene?" I ask if everything's good and slap my hand to Felix's, then sit down in the chair next to my father. "You sounded weird on the phone." Leaning back in my seat, I unbutton my suit jacket and get comfortable.

Felix holds up a finger, silently telling me to wait, and a waitress comes in to give us our drinks. I nod in thanks and take a sip from my vodka.

Soon we're alone again, and Felix begins. "Emmett came to me yesterday." He gives Pop and me a pointed look, to which I curse and my father sighs heavily.

"Well, we figured this day was coming," Dad mutters and re-lights half a cigar.

I tilt my head at Felix. "What'd he say?"

"He told me he's got doubts the Cubans iced our father." He shrugs. "I listened to him, showed concern. What the fuck was I supposed to say? That you and I took care of him?" he chuckles, and I crack a grin. "Nah. I don't know. I told him I'd look into it, ask around. And I asked him if he had his own thoughts on the matta'."
"Does he?" Pop arches a brow. "Se sospetta del suo stesso fratello...sarebbe un bello scimunito a venire a dirtelo in faccia."

I nod slowly, agreeing with that. If Emmett suspects Felix is behind Carlisle's death, then he has to know that if Felix can ice his own father, he can pretty much also make his brother disappear. Blood relation means jack-shit if disloyalty comes into play.

"Honestly?" Felix sighs and sways a little in his desk chair. "I..." He looks pensive. "It's a possibility that he does suspect me, yeah. But he didn't say anything."

"So, what—" Whatever my dad was about to say is interrupted by Felix's phone ringing.

"Colucci," Felix barks into the receiver. His face softens a little at whomever's on the other line. "Well, hello, Mrs. Maisano." Since he glances at me at that, I assume it's Isabella calling and not my mother. He chuckles. "Yeah, you tracked him down—what's with the yelling in the background?"

I frown. Pressing my fingertips together, I wag them lightly toward my chest and mouth, "What's going on?" to Felix.

His brows knit together as he listens to whatever my wife says. Or more correctly, what she's shouting. That much I can hear; I just can't hear the exact words.

He purses his lips. "I get it, Isabella, but I'd still like it if you'd tell me." He pauses to listen; meanwhile, I'm growing impatient and worried. "Cazzo—is EJ there now?"

I lean forward in my seat and tap my foot against the floor.

Blowing out a breath, I bring the phone to my ear and try to will my heart to slow the fuck down. "Hummingbird?"

Unfortunately, I'm met with shouting, though it's not directed at me. "No, the dark blue one!" I have no idea where she is or what she's yelling about—or to whom. "Anthony—Christ! It's your high school graduation, not a funeral!" Okay, I remember. She's taking our oldest to get a new suit for his graduation in a few days, so I'm guessing they're at the tailor's right now. "Ciccino, you there?"

I nod even though she can't see me. "What's going on?"

"I'm two minutes away from fallin' apart hea', Juniuh," she says quickly, and I can hear a tremor in her voice. "Anthony—I don't know if I wanna slap him or hug him." And before I can tell her both of those options are fine by me, she goes on. "He got into a fight with EJ, and he won't tell me why—just some bullshit about sending a message? I don't know. I just wish—I just wish you'd fucking tell me, Anthony!" Now she's shouting at our son again.

"Are you okay? Is Anthony all right?" I ask, and Isabella tells me they are, aside from a small cut on Anthony's left eyebrow. Again, I nod even though she can't see me. "Put him on, baby. Lemme talk to him."

"Love you." She sniffs.

"Don't cry," I tell her, turning my body away from Felix and Pop. "You hear me, hummingbird? Ti amo."

"Yeah, okay." I picture her nodding and holding her forehead. "Anthony! Get ova' hea'—you father wans'ta talk to you."
When Anthony takes the phone, I ask him how he is.

"I'm fine," he insists in a tone that tells me he's been asked about his well-being a lot in the past hour or...no matta'. "Look, I saw EJ over by the Dunes. Mom picked me up there so we could come over here for this damn suit. I..." He lets out a breath in frustration. "The, uh, reception sucks." I can hear him just fine, but I know what he's trying to say; he can't discuss this over the phone. "I'm gonna finish up here with Mom, and then I need to hand in that extra school project about Chicago." At that, my eyebrows shoot up, and I meet Felix's gaze; he's staring right back at me. Anthony certainly doesn't have a fucking school project to hand in this close to graduation, which means he's talking about the Outfit—the mafia in Chicago. "Can we talk later?"

"Absolutely, tesoro," I promise. "We'll talk at home. You stay around Mom now, you hear?" Not really knowing what's going on, I want him to make sure Isabella's safe. I make a mental note to tell Sal—my wife's driver—to be more alert.

"I will."

After disconnecting the call, I hand over the phone to Felix and ask, "Was Chicago mentioned when you spoke to Isabella?"

He nods. "She said something about it real quick while Anthony was shouting in the background. Does she know a lot? In general."

"More than I care to admit." I reach for my drink. "She grew up around this—her mother was a little too honest, if you know what I mean." It's both a blessing and a curse to have a perceptive wife. "I never give her details, but she's picked up a lot over the years, and I do share some stuff with her." It's my prerogative to do so, but regardless of how much or little I share, Isabella always knows a bit more than what I say, and that's all on her childhood. "She's sharp." I tap my temple, both proud and
resigned. "Let's just say..." I huff a chuckle. "Speaking in code around her doesn't always work."

Felix laughs. "Well, thank fucking God my wife ain't all that bright."

I smile but say nothing, eager to get back on track now.

Thankfully, we do get back on track, and we agree to keep an eye on Emmett and his son for now. We'll talk more after we've sat down with my son, but one thing is sure: we don't wanna hear Emmett's name and the mention of the Outfit—the mafia in Chicago—in the same fucking sentence.

"Come over for dinner tonight," I suggest to Felix as we wrap up. I'd ask Pops, but he always says no, followed with a long spiel about how old he's getting. "It's been a while since only you and Francis stopped by."

"Vorrei se potessi." Felix squeezes my shoulder, saying he would if he could. "I'll be over in a couple hours—we can talk to Anthony." I nod. "But then I gotta show my face at home. Gianna's naggin'...fuck. Hey, ask your wife if she's got any more of those, uh—" scrambling for a word, he makes a small circle with the tips of his index finger and thumb pressed together "—what'd she call 'em? With the chocolate and the lemon icing."

I chuckle, nodding. "Ah, pignolata." A favorite of mine, too. "I'm sure she'll be happy to make them."

"Yeah, that's the name. Madonn'—you should have those at Stella Mia. I'd never leave the place."

"And then Gianna would miss your ugly face even more," I joke as we exit the office.

"A guy can never win!" he exclaims, slapping his hand to mine. "All right. Get outta hea'."
"See ya later," I respond, snickering.

**Hummingbird's POV**

When I leave the bathroom after my shower, I see that Junior's already in bed. Leaning back against the headboard, he watches the news on our 19-inch at the same time as he's got two newspapers on the bed—the *Las Vegas Sun* and the *New York Times*.

"How was your day today, *ciccino*?" I ask as I walk over to our closet. We never got to talk before dinner because Felix stopped by, and they—Anthony, too—disappeared into my husband's office. And then dinner...well, Julia and Dominic took care of conversation. With summer break only days away, it's like they're hyperaware and hyperactive.

"It was good," he responds from behind me. "*Togli l'asciugamano.*" He tells me to drop the towel.

I chuckle and obey, seeing as I was about to drop the towel anyway. For good measure, I bend over and take extra long to pick out panties and a top. Hearing Junior's groan makes me smile. Finally, when I've chosen a pair of black silk panties and a matching camisole, I straighten up and get dressed.

"Um, so how was your day?"

"Stressful but okay," I say and walk over to the bed. Junior's already clearing it of various newspaper sections. "I took Julia to the dentist this morning—she needs braces." I sigh contentedly as I lean back against the headboard.

"What? That's fucking crazy." He scoffs. "Julia's got beautiful teeth. C'mea'—" he scoots down to the foot of the bed and pats the spot in front of him "—gimme your feet."
"Aw, you're so sweet, ciccino." I giggle and place my feet near his hands. Then I go for the small jar of night cream on my nightstand, and I can't help but moan when my husband starts to rub my left foot. Now, I'm not stupid. While Edward Anthony Maisano Junior can certainly do things just because he loves me, I still have a feeling this is one of his many ways to ask, "Can you suck me off after?" Or something like that. It's happened many times before. But if his question comes with a foot rub, I'm more than happy to oblige.

"Back to the dentist thing." Junior twirls a finger.

I nod and begin to work the too-expensive night cream into my face. But hey, it smells delicious, and it works. That's what matters. "She has that small gap between her two front teeth. You know that. And the dentist said it's gotten a little bigger—oh, God." My eyes nearly roll back when he cups my heel and applies pressure.

"Mi sembra tanto una stronzata." He says that sounds like bullshit to his ears. "I want a second opinion."

I suck my teeth. "This is the second opinion, remember? I took her three weeks ago; that dentist said the same thing, and you called bullshit—you demanded a second opinion. Well, this is it."

"Huh." He frowns, moving on to my other foot. "And you took her to a new guy?"

"Of course."

He grunts, which means he doesn't wanna admit shit.

"What's so wrong with it, anyway?" I gotta ask. "It's just braces."

He doesn't reply.
With a roll of my eyes, I let it go and ask, "What did Felix want earlier?" I only ask since Anthony was involved.

"That was nothing." He seems dismissive. "EJ's raising a lotta hell, and Felix wans'ta help."

"Just like that?" I cock a brow and return the night cream to my nightstand. "That doesn't sound like the Felix I know." Felix has a heart, mind you, but he rarely helps without wanting anything in return. The way of the fucking wiseguy. So, I can't really help but be suspicious. It's in my nature.

"Did Anthony get that suit?" Wow, he changed the topic fast, didn't he?

"Juniuh." I give him a look.

He grins and shakes his head no. "Quit it, baby."

I laugh when he dips down and bites my big toe, but I won't let this go so easily. Not when our son is involved. "Stop that, ciccino. Please—be straight with me now. Why does Felix care?" I narrow my eyes. "You're not getting our son into all that, are you? That thing—your fucking thing. Not Anthony's, capisce?"

"Hummingbird." His eyes soften. "You really think—come on." He kisses the top of my feet. "Gimme more credit than that."

I stare at him, pouting a little. "Promise?"

"Listen, we're only sick of EJ running his mouth," he explains. "Anthony saw some shit today before you picked him up. He told us about it. That's it." Kneeling up on the bed, he wipes his hand clean. "Okay?" He crawls up my body. "You've got nothin' to worry about." I hum as he slides his nose along my cleavage, my fingers weaving through his soft hair.
"Mamma mia, these gorgeous tits—look at 'em." He makes me giggle when he buries his face between them. "I love you."

I grin and say nothing. Until he looks up, then I say, "Oh, I thought you was talking to my tits."

He chuckles and dives for my breasts again. "Now she's being all funny, that wife of mine."

"Hey," I say softly, not wanting to get caught up in this before we're finished. "Today freaked me out, Junior." It really did. Sal and I pulled up at the Dunes—where we were picking up Anthony—right as the fists began to fly. My son and EJ were just going at it, right outside the hotel, and I had no idea what was going on. "Can you please reassure me a bit more? Is Anthony okay?" While our boy has no issue talking to me, he still prefers to talk to his father. And I definitely don't mind; the boys have their bond. I have mine with the girls. So, when Anthony told me he was okay—and I asked a lot—my plan was to go to Junior about it anyway. I gotta hear it from both of them.

"It's fine, hummingbird," he replies gently, looking into my eyes. "You know how those two are." I do. For some reason, EJ and Anthony hate each other, and I refuse to believe I'm the reason. Sure, EJ's eyes wander a lot, but come on. There's gotta be more to it. "Felix and I calmed him down, and you know he's okay physically."

Fine... "But what's this about Chicago then, huh?"

Anthony mentioned Chicago more than once, and he spoke in code over the phone when he was talking to Junior. Now, I'm well aware that our son knows about Junior's "job"—well, the gist of it; definitely not details. Hell, neither do I. So, Anthony knows all about the importance of not bringing up certain shit on the phone; however, as soon as Chicago was brought up, I got even more curious. And since he and EJ had been
fighting outside the Dunes, of all places... Everyone knows that the Dunes used to "belong" to the Chicago Outfit. But then Steve Wynn bought the place earlier this year. Now it's just standing there—empty.

"I'm leaving you outta that," he says and kisses my nose. "Don't worry—I'm leaving Anthony out of it, too."

Well, as long as Anthony's not involved...

"Okay," I sigh, maybe a little reluctantly, but I know Junior's more than ready to close this subject. "Basta parlare." Enough talking, I decide.

"Thank God!" he laughs and presses his body against mine.

I squeal when he starts to suck on my neck. "Wait!" I suddenly remember something. The husband groans and rolls over onto his back, an arm thrown over his eyes. It makes me giggle. "It's nothing serious, ciccino." I lean over him and kiss his chin. "Just before I forget it. I need money for Anthony's graduation present. Leave me some before you go to Stella tomorrow?"

"Oh! You shakin' me down, Isabella?" With a grin, he uncovers his face and throws that arm around my waist instead. "You want my money, huh?" He growls playfully and tries to roll me over, to which I slap his chest and laugh. My husband can be such a fucking goof. "You got it," he chuckles and flops back against the mattress. "What're we getting him? We gotta show we're proud of him—something big. And adult. He's a man now."

I answer while I straddle his sexy body. "A gold watch." My eyes roam his chest, his abs, and down...

My mouth follows.
"Good—that's...that's good." He groans when I tug on his sleep pants.
Lifting his hips, I pull them down. His underwear, too. "Oh yeah, so good.
Cazzo, bell'uccellino." I smile and kiss the base of his thick cock, teasing
him a little. It doesn't take many seconds before he threads his fingers
through my hair to guide my head down on him. "Suck me, baby."

Oh, you got it.

Taking his cock—warm, smooth, and heavy—in my hand, I lower my
mouth on him, humming all the way down. It's the way he loves it. I get
him all wet, too, letting my tongue swirl around the head.

"That's it," he moans and bucks his hips. "So deep—fuck."

And when I cup his balls, twist them a little and squeeze, I have him
panting in no time.

My free hand slides up his stomach to his chest, and I feel his muscles
clanching and unclenching under my touch. I give his left nipple a small
flick, to which he groans and digs his head back in the pillow. My blood-
red nails scrape his skin; I hum around him again, and I watch as his
chest heaves with each breath.

Every now and then, I suck out small drops of arousal from him, his salty
flavor spreading in my mouth.

"Jesus Christ!" He fists the sheets as I speed up. "Oh, baby."

I see the muscles in his neck straining.

I suck him harder, tightening my lips around his cock.

And his balls... Cup, twist, tug, caress.

Humming.
He spits out a curse.

Another few flicks over his nipples.

"There, Isabella," he grits out in warning. "I'm there...ungh..." And he starts coming, the first stream sliding down my throat quicker than the second one. A third, a smaller one, trickles down last.

He collapses, each muscle relaxing. "Fuck!" he gasps.

With a satisfied smile on my lips, I kiss my way up his body. He's wearing one of those lazy grins, though he's still a bit outta breath, and he's so fucking cute. Not that I'd ever say that to his face. Shit, he'd accuse me of emasculating him or something.

"Madonn', mio bell'uccellino." He palms my ass. "That was some..."

"Yeah?" I settle next to him, under the covers, and stifle a yawn.

"Yeah. Hell, yeah." He kisses my temple. "You want...?" A hand trails up my thigh.

Too tired, I respond, "No, tonight was about you, ciccino."

"Mmm." He hugs me tight to him. "Night, hummingbird."

I smile sleepily and snuggle closer. "Good night, Juniuh."
Chapter 5

Anthony's POV

Sipping on my Coke, I keep my eyes on the broad giving me a lap dance—courtesy of my father. The stripper. Not the Coke. It was his personal gift for me after graduating high school today with straight A's. Make no mistake, the gold watch Mom and Dad gave me earlier...I really fucking appreciate it and love it, but this... Let's just say Pops knows me. And he's currently sitting in a booth over...somewhere...chilling and drinking with Felix, Alec, Jasper, and Emmett. I can hear their laughs, but I can't for the fucking life of me see 'em.

Maybe 'cause I got a set of tits in my face.

"Hey, you wanna go to a private room?" the broad asks breathily in my ear.

I shake my head no.

On any other night, sure. But tonight I just wanna chill with my family.

My parents threw me a huge party at home earlier—for Elisa, Dee, and Julia, too—and then shit got a little ugly between Uncle Jasper and Aunt Alice, so Mom suggested we all split up. Pops brought me here, and a bunch of the guys followed, and Mom is back at the house with the women. Gossiping and whatnot.

After slipping the stripper a fifty—today's given me plenty of envelopes, if you know what I mean—I stand up, adjust my cock, my suit, and then I walk over to where the guys are. Nico, Joseph, and Francis are there now, too, though they've pulled out chairs, so there's still room in the booth.

"Oh!" Dad grins as he spots me. "Look who's back." He claps me on the shoulder once I've slid in next to him. "Ti va un goccetto, figliolo?" He
asks if I want a drink but doesn't wait for a reply; he just pours me a shot of vodka, which means he's had a few himself. 'Cause Mom told him not to let me drink more tonight. I've already had a few at home, and my mother didn't want me too wasted. "Just don't tell your mother," he chuckles.

I snicker as he hands out shots to all the guys.

"To my Anthony!" Pops declares with his glass raised. "Not only did he graduate a year early, but he did it with straight fuckin' A's!"

"Salute!"

"To Anthony!"

I'm kinda glad the club's so dark, 'cause I swear my cheeks feel all warm and shit. "Christ," I hiss, feeling the booze burn in my throat.

"So, what's next, kid?" Felix asks me. "You goin' to college like my Joseph ova' hea'?"

I glance over at Joseph, knowing how much he's hated law school. But he's done now. "Nah," I say and shake my head. "I think I'm going into the restaurant business." I'm actually looking forward to that. I'm good with numbers, and one of Dad's guys is gonna teach me the ropes over at Stella.

"You should move to Kansas City with me, cuz." Nico smirks.

I grin, shaking my head again. I was born and raised in the fucking desert. I like it here. But Nico's taking his wife and unborn child to settle down in Missouri. I don't really know what his job out there's gonna be; Pops hasn't said anything, so as far as I know, Nico's still in his crew. But I do know our family sometimes gets together with the Civellas in Kansas City.
"Fuck that." Dad points at Nico. "My son stays right hea'."

"You're taking my grandchild from me," Zio Jasper grumbles as he shoots Nico a bitchy look.

"We need him in Missouri," Felix chuckles and squeezes Jasper's shoulder.

My uncle's a bit bitter these days. First Lucia decides to move permanently to LA, and now Nico's moving to Kansas City. Then, of course, there's that shit between him and Zia Alice. I don't think she knows what he's up to, but she sure as hell suspects.

To be honest, I think something big is going down soon. 'Cause Nico's not the only one getting outta Vegas. Zia Brianna and Zio Riley left for San Francisco yesterday, taking Colin and Olivia with them—some impromptu vacation. And Dad's saying that Mom is itching to visit Vinny and Giuliana out in Jersey, which I haven't heard her say anything about.

"We should probably think about headin' home, son," Dad says. "We's got Nonna's birthday party tomorrow." I nod, remembering.

Next week, there's also my father's birthday. Shit, with the size of our family, it feels like there's always a birthday party to attend. Although, Nonna's been feeling a bit ill over the past week, so tomorrow's just gonna be a small affair.

"Alec—" Pop slaps his hand to my uncle's "—I'll see you tomorrow at Mom and Dad's."

After goodbyes and several more congratulations on graduating, Pops and I leave Dawn, and Carmine—Dad's new driver—drives us home. And that's another thing; my father usually drives himself. Only Mom, Elisa, Dee, and Julia have drivers. But I remember a couple times when I was a kid and the Feds searched our house... And there was one time when one of Felix's capos disappeared... Dad had a driver then, too.
We both grimace when we pull in to our driveway, 'cause we see too many cars for our liking. Aunt Alice is still here, and so is Esme, which I think is weird. She usually leaves with Nonno and Nonna since they all live outside of town.

"Here." Dad slips me some chewing gum before we enter the house. I grin and shove it into my mouth. "Don't give me that look." He's bitching with me now. "Your mother can be scary. Fucking excuse me if I don't want her to know I gave you vodka."

I'd laugh, but he would kick my ass. It's still true, though. If there's anyone my father fears, it's my mother when she's really pissed off.

"All right—let's see if we can get these ladies to get the fuck outta here," Dad mutters and wipes off his shoes on the welcome mat. Duke and Duchess come running, but they grow bored by the mere sight of us and mosey into the living room instead. "Isabella!"

"In the kitchen, ciccino!" she hollers.

So, we head to the kitchen, and I take off my suit jacket as we go, but we kinda stop short when we get there only to see my aunt crying her eyes out. Ma and Esme are on either side of Alice, all three at the kitchen island, and two empty wine bottles next to them. Now, I don't do tears. One, they annoy me. Two, it breaks my heart a little.

I avert my eyes, not wanting to see that shit. I already know what it's about anyway.

"What's wrong?" My father walks over to Mom; I can see 'em in my peripheral vision. He kisses her cheek, but his focus is sorta on Zia Alice.
"My daughter here still believes Jasper's cheating on her," Esme says, stroking Alice's hair.

"I tell her she's wrong," Mom adds, but when I look up for a second, she doesn't seem too sure. "My brother loves you, Alice."

"Isabella's right," Dad states and touches Aunt Alice's cheek. "What'sa matta', huh? Where do you even get this shit from, hon? Jasper's a pussy for you—all he talks about." How my dad can lie so easily, I don't know. I fucking need that experience, that skill, 'cause right now I gotta look away.

Alice sniffs and shakes her head. "Lui si vede con qualcuno." She says he's seeing someone. "I know it. He's never home—"

Pops interrupts. "You know his work hours," he points out. "He's got all those clubs to worry about. That ain't easy."

"Do you ever see him with anyone, Juniuh?" Mom looks up at Dad.

And Dad laughs. "You kiddin' me? Like he's got time for broads? Fuck that. He's always holed up in his office down at Dawn—or he's traveling to his spots in Reno and Carson City." He speaks to my aunt again, "You know what I think you should do? I think you should go home, take a bath or whatever, and calm down before Jasper gets home."

"Non hai niente di cui preoccuparti, cara," Esme soothes her daughter, assuring her she's got nothin'a worry about.

It takes a few more minutes, but in the end, Esme and Alice get ready to leave. Mom calls down Elisa, who appears with Sophia, Alice's daughter, and then we say goodbye to them.
"Jesus Christ," Pops groans when it's just the three of us again. Elisa went to bed a minute ago, and I think my father's itching to do the same, but Mom's got other plans.

As she cuts up some cake for us, she asks me, "So, how was it at Dawn? You there a lot?"

I exchange a look with Dad and then ask, "What do you mean?" It's always best to make sure what the other person's really referring to before I give answers.

She shrugs. "Just something that was mentioned to me. That you hang out at that club a lot." There may be shrugging involved, but something tells me she's anything but calm.

"Easy, baby." Dad pats her hand before digging into his cake. "Retract the claws."

"I just wanna know," Mom says defensively. She gives me a look. "You gonna tell me, or what?"

"Tell you what?" I play dumb.

"Oh!" She raises her hand as if to slap me, although she never does. This is just her way. What was once terrifying is now almost cute. Almost, 'cause I still respect her. Dad's not completely off when he says my mother can be scary. "Check you out." She scoffs. "You're acting like half a wiseguy."

"Isabella," Pops chuckles darkly and wipes his mouth with a napkin. "Don't start that shit. He's almost seventeen—"

"I know! Who do you think gave birth to him?!" she shouts, throwing up her hands. "Jesus Christ! I just wanna know if my son spends all his free time in a fucking strip club!"
"Ma—" I reach over to squeeze her hand; she needs to calm down "—I'm there sometimes, aight? Chill."

She huffs a breath in frustration and makes a choking motion with her hands. "Don't tell me to chill, you goddamn wackadoo."

I purse my lips, stifling my grin, and I can see that Dad's torn between anger and amusement as he stares at his plate.

"Are you done?" Pops asks her, cocking a brow.

She points at her chest. "Not until my dying breath!" With that, she storms out of the kitchen, muttering and cursing to herself. "High school graduate, straight A's, and lap dances... Juniuh's little juniuh...always with the strip clubs... Like father, like son..."

Smirking at my father, I say, "I don't think she sees me as her little angel no more."

"No shit." He snorts a laugh. "And this—" he points his fork to the cake we had earlier at the party "—is good fucking cake."

Trust my pops to have the last word.

Trust my pops to make sure it's about food.

**Junior's POV**

A little over a week later, I find myself in Felix's office at Twilight, anticipation running through my veins.

"I want you to follow him," he says.

I nod, eyes on the photo of Emmett in my hand. "Who took this? Riley?"

"Yes."
Makes sense. While most people think several of us are heading on vacations or moving, that couldn't be further from the truth. Brianna is in the Bahamas with the kids, but Riley's not there. He's been tailing Emmett for a month now, and Nico's on EJ's ass while Nico's wife is in Seattle. It's true; Nico and his wife will settle down in Kansas City soon, but not yet.

If this escalates, which I now firmly believe it will, Isabella and the kids are on the first flight to New York. Vinny and our guys out there will keep them safe. Or maybe, if she bitches a fit, I'll consider sending her off to the Bahamas, too. 'Cause I don't know how long this'll last, and I guess she'll appreciate Brianna's company.

"You shouldn't go alone," he advises.

"I know." I blow out a breath, thinking about my possibilities. Whomever I choose to bring...it's gonna be someone easily replaced—someone disposable. Felix only wants his closest to know about this—that includes my father and me—which is understandable, but it limits my options. Unless... "Can I bring my brother?" I arch a brow. Alec's nearly as close to Felix as I am; we can trust him—I trust my brother with my life. But Felix is still a careful man.

Thankfully, though, he agrees this time.

~oOo~

When I get home, almost just in time for dinner, I find Isabella and Elisa in the kitchen. And once I've kissed and felt up my wife hello, I move on to say hello to Elisa, having missed her.

"Mio angioletto." I cup her cheeks. "Always so busy. Everything good?"

It may be summer now, but I feel like I hardly see her. Which is because she's in summer school. After watching her brother graduate a year early, Elisa now wants to do the same.
"It's all good." She smiles. "I'm doing this big paper on the American economy—so boring, but..." She shrugs a little, still with that gorgeous Isabella smile on her lips. "I'm good."

"Bene, bene." I kiss both cheeks before letting go. "Where's my princess?"

"Out by the pool," Isabella answers, flitting back and forth between the stove and fridge. "Your mother's here, too." She gives me a quick smile before starting to chop up some fresh...I think it's oregano. "I'm so happy she's feeling better. She really gave us a scare."

I nod and walk over to take a sip from Isabella's wine glass. "I talked to Pop earlier." He'd been in Alec's deli when I stopped by after my meeting with Felix. "Ma's just gotta stop worrying about every little thing in this world."

The day after my birthday dinner at Stella Mia a few days ago, my father took my mother to the emergency room 'cause she was having chest pains. It really freaked me the fuck out, and I know my dad was scared outta his mind. The doctor said it was stress-related or some shit.

Now my wife is fussing over my mother, sending home meals and whatnot with my father whenever he stops by. Truth be told, I don't think Ma appreciates the cooking, though. Well, not the cooking per se; my wife is a goddess in the kitchen, but the fact that Isabella is taking over Mom's duties. However, she humors Isabella, because they have a great relationship, and I also think my mother likes it when she's at our house. After having four kids of her own, Mom misses the noise. And here she gets it and then some.

"Elisa baby, could you get Julia and Nonna for me?" I ask. I kinda need a minute alone to tell Isabella I'm going away for a few days.
"Sure thing, Daddy." She sets down the knife from slicing the mozzarella and then walks out with some weird skip in her step. Like she's cheery beyond words or something.

"What's up with her?" I lean my ass against the counter and refill the wine glass.

"Aw, pensa di essere innamorata." The wife is being all swoony; meanwhile, a scowl forms on my face. Elisa's too young to "think she's in love." Fuck that forever. "It's so cute, dontcha think?"

"Not really," I grunt, anger boiling in my chest. "Who the fuck should I kill?"

She sucks her teeth and lets her knife come down a little harder over the herbs. "Like I'd tell you. Please."

I glare at her. "Tell me, Isabella."

"Fuhgeddaboudit!"

"OH!" I slam my fist down on the counter. "Watch it," I grit out.

"I'm not saying a fucking word," she whispers menacingly and puts down the knife. "Jesus Christ, Juniuoh. Give it a rest before we have to take you to the hospital for chest pains."

"What the fuck did you just say?" I take a step toward her; she backs away, but I follow. Until I have her caged in in a corner. "Dillo ancora." I dare her to repeat that.

"You're pushing it, Edward." She sneers at me. "Don't I always tell you everything, huh?" She pokes my chest, but I'm quick to grip both her wrists. Tightly. "Stop being so obnoxious."

I grin sinisterly. "Now I'm obnoxious?"
"Yes," she spits out as I grip her wrists even harder. "Ow! It's just a fucking crush—give it a rest!"

My chest heaves as I stare her down; I'm completely in her face, our noses nearly touching.

"Ciccino," she whispers, her gaze suddenly softening. "What's the matta' wit'chu? You're wound so tight."

My brows knit together, and some of the anger fades away. It causes me to let go of her wrists, and when she slides her hands up my chest, I see the red marks from my hold.

I frown, feeling bad.

"Is everything all right with work?" she asks, still keeping it hushed and soft. Fuck, the way only she can make me relax... "Is there anything I can do?" My eyes close as she starts dropping little kisses on my jaw, my mouth. I take a shuddering breath. "Baby..."

Not ready to talk, I gather her wrists in my hands and kiss them, eyes still closed.

Maybe I am wound tight—I don't fucking know. Isabella knows my temper, my emotions, better than I do. I don't read into that shit. I'm smart, but I'd still consider myself a man of action instead of a thinker. So, I haven't really read into all this with Emmett and his son.

Felix gives me an order; I execute. But...earlier, in his office at his club, I was goddamn enraged. I hid it well, and maybe it didn't even register—no matta'. Still, to see Emmett in that photo, talking to some guy from Chicago... It's like a flip of a switch; he's no longer family.

I don't know if this guy in the picture with Emmett really is from Chicago, but he did drive a car with Illinois plates. And when Emmett told Felix a
couple days ago he'd be heading to Florida this weekend, it only made sense for us to follow, which I will with my brother. We'll just have to see if we do end up in Florida, or if we'll follow him to, say...Chicago.

"I'm sorry I was a prick," I sigh, resting my forehead to hers. "I overreacted."

I make a mental note to buy her some jewelry.

"No shit." She grins. "But you're my prick."

I huff a chuckle.

"Seriously, is everything okay, though?"

I hesitate, which she sees.

"Ciccino...?"

"It's just a precaution," I start by saying, "but I might need to send you and kids on a vacation after the weekend."

There's panic, fear, anger, determination, resignation—all in that order—flashing in her eyes. "Is it worth arguing about?" she asks tightly.

I shake my head no.

"Is that what Brianna—I mean...are they on the same kind of vacation?"

"Yes," I admit. She releases a breath as I let go of her wrists. I stay close, though. "I'll find out more after the weekend."

Her eyes catch a little fire again. "You're going away on business," she states.

I nod. "But you've got nothing to—"
"Non osare dirmi di non preoccuparmi," she warns and points a finger at me. I cock a brow; she lowers it and huffs. "Don't tell me not to worry," she repeats. "You're my fucking husband—of course I worry!"

I nod again, accepting that, even though I doubt something bad'll happen. "I get it." I cup her cheeks and kiss her on the lips. "We'll talk more later, all right?" 'Cause I can hear my mother and two daughters in the living room.

"Fine. When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow."

**Anthony's POV**

"Too early," Mom yawns, resting her head on Dad's chest.

Kinda hard to keep my eyes open...

_Honest, my bed is calling me._

And when Dad gets all touchy-feely with Ma, I don't _want_ to keep my eyes open. At one point, I swear I see his hand slipping inside her robe, this red silky thing that makes my Dad lose his shit.

_Vomit._

But then I'm saved by the doorbell...

"Go get the door," Dad says, jerking his chin at me. "It's Alec."

I yawn and walk out of the kitchen, scratching my balls as I go, and wish could get the fuck back to sleep. I mean, come on. It's four in the morning. It's not normal to get up at this hour.

Opening the door, I see a tracksuit-wearing Alec standing there, looking like he's just as tired as I am.
"Hey, kid." He kisses my cheek. "What the fuck're you doin' up, huh?"

"Pop wants a word wit' me before you go." I shrug; then we walk back to the kitchen. And Julia happens to be there now, too. Not that I'm surprised. She wakes up from the littlest noise, and now she's on Dad's lap, seated at the kitchen island.

Mom is, also unsurprisingly, more covered up. She's still in her robe, but it sure ain't loose on her now; Dad makes sure of that. God forbid if anyone saw an inch too much skin of his hummingbird.

"Morning," Alec says, shaking Dad's hand. My little sister is a second away from falling asleep in his lap, but she goes wherever life is. I know she won't go back to bed until Dad and Uncle Alec leave.

"Good morning," Dad returns.

After kissing Ma's cheek, Alec sits down across from Pops. I sit down next to Alec.

"I spoke to Riley—we're good on time." He's referring to Zio Emmett's house, I think. Maybe that it's still dark—no lights on.

Yesterday, my father filled me in a bit more on what's going on.

I just hope he won't send me off on a vacation. I'd rather stay behind and help out. I'm a man now, for Christ's sake.

"Bene." Dad's being all sweet, playing with Julia's messy hair and kissing her forehead.

"Espresso, Alec?" Mom offers.

"Oh—please." My uncle looks like he's ready to beg.
Pops chuckles and holds up his own cup. "My third one so far. Before I go, I want my heart racing."

"Daddyyyy," Julia whines. "Get back to it." She places his hand on the top of her head. I can't help but grin, and Dad, so whipped, obeys my piccolina.

"Here you go." Ma gives them espresso. "I made breakfast and lunch for you two. Will you please bring it?"

"Certamente. Grazie mille, mio bell'uccellino."

"Don't have to twist my arm, hon." Uncle Alec smirks.

And then my mother and uncle start talking about food for a little while. Madonn', the way those two can go at it. Just 'cause Ma's got Stella and Alec's got the best deli in Vegas... They scoff about Americans butchering the food the Italians brought to this country. Beverages, too, like coffee. Even Dad tunes out. He eats the food and drinks the coffee; he doesn't talk about it.

In the end, though, Dad announces it's time to go. With a slap to Julia's butt, he sends her off to bed again, and then he stands up, ready to leave.

When we're all standing in the driveway, he squeezes Mom to him, and she stays strong. She threatens his balls if he doesn't come back. How that works, I don't know, but it does for them, I guess. Or her.

Ma's gonna do what she always does when Pops goes away on business and she doesn't know for sure when he'll return. She's gonna clean, fuss over her children extra much, and go to church. She'll clear out all our closets and donate the clothes to less fortunate, in an attempt to be a better citizen or some shit, and then when Dad comes home, she's going
to complain that we don't have any clothes, which leads to a major shopping spree.

It's her routine unless she knows for sure when he's expected to be back.

Dad thinks it's cute and often leaves extra wads of cash in her purse.

I find it annoying, 'cause he's not here when Mom goes nuts. And it's like his name suddenly will get longer. Whenever he's mentioned and he's outta town, it comes with a "God bless him". And don't get me started on how many times she does the Sign of the Cross.

She never cries, her smile doesn't falter, and there's not a hair outta place when Dad's gone. But there's still something lacking in her eyes or whatever.

I think she saves the drama for when Pops gets home.

Regardless, this isn't a big thing. It happens occasionally, maybe once or twice a month. So, after some more kissing and cursing, Mom goes back inside, and Alec gets behind the wheel of his car.

Dad, always dressed in a suit, brings out a comb and quickly runs it through his hair. "You know what this means, son?" He stands close and cups my neck.

I nod. "Yes, sir. I'll look out for her—them. I promise."

He nods, too. "Little by little, I'm letting you in."

Elation courses through my body, though I remain stone-faced.

"You'll have Carmine, Sal, and Milo here, too," he says, speaking of our drivers. "And Nonno, Zio Jasper, and Felix will stop by—say hello, check in, no Matta'. I'm trusting you."
"Okay."

"And you know your way around my office." He gives me a pointed look.

I swallow and nod, knowing what he means. I know where there're unregistered guns. And money if I need it.

"Eccellente." He smiles kisses my cheeks. "Be good—I love you, tesoro."

Another nod from me. "You too."

His smile widens, and with a light slap on my cheek, he turns and walks toward Uncle Alec's car.

I watch them drive away, feeling a big responsibility beginning to weigh down on my shoulders; however, I like it. I wanna earn it all.
Chapter 6

Mob Trivia:

The bit about the Civellas, the crime family in Kansas City, is true.

*Junior: The acting boss of the Kansas City crime family is Willie—William Cammisano, Sr.—but everyone knows Tony Civella's running the show. It's just that he's doing a bid now for reselling stolen goods.*

Translation:

*Non fare lo spiritoso con me, ragazzo* = Don't get smart with me, son

*Ma stai zitto* = Shut up

*Dillo a Mammina* = Talk to Mommy

*Posso sempre uscire e parlargli* = I can always go out and talk to him

Junior’s POV

"Finally!" My fist comes down on the dashboard when we at last see Emmett's car pull out of his driveway. We were beginning to wonder if we'd missed him, 'cause it's seven AM now, which means I've been holed up in this car for almost three hours already.

Alec starts our car to follow, and we pass Riley first. His job is done—well, once he's reported to Felix that Emmett took off alone.

"Aw, what'd you do that for?" Alec complains.

Confused, I tilt my head in his direction but keep wiping off crumbs from my suit. Yeah, that breakfast and lunch Isabella sent with us—gone. And the box of pastries is half-empty.

"This is a new car, Junior!"
I snort and wave him off. "You bought it only to sell it. Chill." Reaching into my inner pocket, I pull out my smokes and light one up. "Or are ya gonna drive a car which Emmett can be all, 'Yo, didn't I see that one in Chicago?' Think about it, little brother." I tap my temple.

"Still," he grumbles. "You just lowered the fucking value by eating like a pig."

"Oh!" I shout, wanting to laugh. My brother's being a cunt. "Here—" I bring out a c-note from my wallet "—have it cleaned. Jesus Christ."

I'd like to say this'll be the first and last bitch fit my brother throws while we're on the road together, but that'd be a lie. We just happen to bring out the worst in each other, and yeah, maybe I bitch at him, too. God bless our mother for putting up with us when we were kids.

"If he's really heading for Florida, he should take the next exit," I muse a while later.

Only, Emmett doesn't.

After several hours on the road and a couple stops for gas and food, it's abundantly clear that our second cousin is on his way to Chicago. And since he's told everyone he'd be in Florida... *Talk about raising suspicion.*

Taking a pull from my smoke, I watch as he changes cars again.

Alec and I have done the same. One car per state, basically.

We talk briefly about why he didn't just take a flight, but our guesses are as good as any. Perhaps he simply doesn't want a single trace, and then a car is the way to go. But if I were him? I'd drive toward Florida until I reached, I don't fucking know, maybe New Mexico. And then I'd use fake papers to get a flight from there to Chicago.
Unless he's got something in his trunk...

When we reach Lincoln, Nebraska, after a whopping fourteen motherfucking hours on the road, Emmett finally pulls in to a motel.

"I think it's safe to say he's in a hurry to get to Illinois," I mutter as I get out of the car. My back pops and my knees protest, reminding me that I'm not in my fucking twenties anymore. Shit, I'm forty-one now. "Get us a room, Alec." A yawn slips out. "I'm gonna go over there—" I point to a pay phone "—and give Felix a call."

"You got it."

~oOo~

"You're already halfway?" Felix asks incredulously.

I shrug to myself, keeping an eye out. "He didn't stop until now," I yawn and put another couple dimes into the machine.

Judging by Emmett's anxiousness to reach Chicago, I'd even go so far as to say we'll leave here soon, too. My brother and I will sleep in shifts, and as soon as Emmett goes, we go.

"Has he met anyone along the way?"

"No. Not even a phone call."

"Huh..."

"Listen, I'm gonna check in with my family," I say, scrubbing a hand over my face. "I'll call as soon as I have news." Felix disconnects the call; I dial my house. And I'm glad to hear Anthony answering the phone. "Is everything okay, tesoro?"
"Yeah," he says casually. "EJ stopped by for dinner." I tense up, hoping my son can explain as much as possible over the phone. "He was looking for you—needed to talk to you."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. That EJ comes over isn't unusual; we're all family. And he loves Isabella—a bit too much. However, he rarely comes to see me. Since he's not a full-blooded Italian, it's not like he'll get his button one day, so Emmett's taking care of him. EJ's a lowman, a fucking nobody, although Emmett keeps him close. Too close.

"What'd you tell him?" I ask calmly.

He keeps his tone casual, and I'm damn proud of him. He's got nerves of steel. "That you're on your way to Nico—like you are." Which means Kansas City. That's good. "Felix was here, too."

I nod, knowing that Felix will clear our story with Tony and Willie down in Missouri. The acting boss of the Kansas City crime family is Willie—William Cammisano, Sr.—but everyone knows Tony Civella's running the show. It's just that he's doing a bid now for reselling stolen goods. I reckon he'll be out in a few years.

"And how's Mom?"

Anthony groans. "Dad, she's killing me. It's like she don't have all her marbles—"

"Ay! That's your mother you're talking about!" I shout furiously. "Non fare lo spiritoso con me, ragazzo." I tell him not to get smart with me. "Am I getting through to you, huh?" Disrespectful little fucker!

"You're not here," he whispers. "I'm telling you—she's a hurricane when you're gone. It hasn't even been twenty-four hours and she's already donated all our clothes to charity."
I chuckle darkly. "Fucking humor her. You hear me?" I could've ended up with a wife who whined and threw tantrums. I'm counting my goddamn blessings here. "If it'll keep her busy... Just let her do her shit, all right?"

"Fine," he grumbles. "I just wish she wasn't so fucking—"

"Another goddamn word outta you..." I trail off in my warning, seething. "I swear to Christ, Anthony. Wise up."

"Okay, okay—I'm sorry." Now he's all sullen, reminding me that he's not a full-grown adult just yet.

I smirk and light up a smoke. "No, but you will be when I give Sal the day off, and you get to drive your motha'round to buy new clothes."

He doesn't respond, finally knowing what's best for him.

~oOo~

Alec and I reach Chicago late the next afternoon.

"I think he'd heading for the docks," Alec mutters, maneuvering us through the traffic. "Look—" he points "—he's following every sign."

I think he's right.

"Take us as close as possible," I say, opening the glove box to take out the camera. I doubt Felix will need them, the photos; the fact that Emmett is here speaks volumes. Especially since he told everyone he'd be in Florida.

"What did Felix say earlier, by the way? That was him you spoke to this morning, right?"

I nod slowly, eyes focused on Emmett's car. "He said that if Emmett went fishing up here, he might as well spend some extra time in the lake." Felix
and I have already discussed this, back in Vegas, and if Alec and I get evidence of Emmett dealing with the Chicago mafia—the Outfit—Felix doesn't want his brother to make it back. "He wants Emmett to be found, but not yet." And if we dump Emmett's body in Lake Michigan, we will make it home long before he's found.

Fingers won't be pointed our way since no one knows we're here.

And a Colucci in Chicago... The authorities will assume the Outfit's behind it. Makes sense. Plus, if we kill Emmett in Vegas, there's a bigger chance of our guys getting antsy, wondering if there's beef within the family, or if another family's moving in. When the management is shaky, the rest will grow unstable, too.

"Another fucking funeral to go to," Alec grumbles, being a bitch. "It's only been months since our friend in St. Louis died and we all had to go pay our respects."

I roll my eyes, though I can't help but chuckle. I remember when my hummingbird told me there's one thing a wiseguy's wife can't have too many of, and that's black dresses.

"You're as dramatic as Isabella," I say wryly. "No—actually, you're fucking worse. You must've gotten that from Ma."

"Ma stai zitto!" He tells me to shut up.

"OH!" I laugh and nod. "Snappy comeback."

Little brothers, huh?

**Hummingbird's POV**

"Can I go now, Mama?" Dominic asks, dumping his plate in the sink.
I suck my teeth, fearing my kids will be the death of my china. "Yeah, just go."

He's being all pissy just 'cause I did a good deed and donated some clothes.

Turning back to Giuliana, I say, "Juniiuh—God bless him—would kick his ass if he was here." Dominic hears this and comes over to kiss my cheek, tell me he loves me, before he leaves. "Nice try, topolino." I smirk and watch as he hightails it outta the kitchen. Now I know he's scared I'm gonna call his father and rat him out about the lack of respect.

"My son was the same at that age," Giuliana chuckles.

She flew in this morning unannounced, and then Felix came over and told me that Vinny's having some issues in Jersey, hence shipping off the wife. I definitely don't mind; Giuliana's very nice, like an older sister even though she's closer to Elizabeth and Esme in age.

"Hey, Mom?" Elisa enters the kitchen. "Can I sleep over at Amanda's house tonight?"

I shake my head no and refill my wine glass. "We have church tomorrow, baby. Then, afterwards, we'll have lunch hea'."

She pouts, sighs, slumps her shoulders, and sits down next to me by the kitchen island. Giuliana smiles at her, seated on the other side of the island, and I've already told her about Elisa's crush on Junior's driver. Giuliana and I think it's so cute, and if Elisa wasn't here right now, I'm sure we would've talked more about it.

"Why so blue?" I rub her back. "Something wrong?"

She shrugs dejectedly. "I dunno. Just trying to get away from the house as much as possible?"
Giuliana and I exchange knowing looks and smirks.

"Oh, honey." I pout. "Dillo a Mammina—Tell me what's bothering you exactly. Maybe Giuliana and I can help."

"You already know what it is." She reaches for the snack plate and stabs an olive with a toothpick. "He's so hot, I could just die."

"Carmine?" I smile, already knowing the answer. She nods and juts out her bottom lip. "Did something happen? I mean, you were so happy earlier." Still rubbing Elisa's back, I face Giuliana. "You remember those times? When a crush was like—more important than spitting on Mussolini's body?" My nonno's brother actually did that.

Giuliana laughs. "Oh, I sure remember. Your heart was racing—so much anxiety. Over just a boy."

I take a sip from my wine, remembering my first crush. If only I could remember his name! "You know my parents moved a lot." She nods. "Well, one of the times we lived in Brooklyn, I was out with my friends raising hell and being up to no good." I sigh dreamily at the memory of his godly looks. "We were in Bay Ridge—" I nod to myself "—and I saw this guy. Mannaggia, he was so handsome..."

"What was his name?" Elisa asks, intrigued.

I chuckle and place a hand on my chest. "I wish I remembered! His last name..." I chew on my lip, frowning. I cannot believe I've forgotten. Then, suddenly, his last name comes to me. "Cullen!" I nod, nod, nod. "He always ran with that Misone guy—attached to the hip."

"Marcus Misone?" Giuliana grins wryly and rolls her eyes.

Yeah, the irony. I know Misone is the reason Giuliana is here. Marcus Misone controls New York now—according to my husband—and he
apparently hates Jersey, which means Vinny. I don't get involved. That's just the little bit Junior's told me.

Honestly, Junior isn't all that invested, either. He doesn't like Marcus' way of running things—I don't know. Sometimes my husband just mumbles stuff to me, like he wants to get it out, and then when I look like a question mark or offer the normal, "Is there anything I can do?" he just grins, shakes his head, and says, "No matta', hummingbird."

"Time flies," I sigh, thinking about the old days again. Then I giggle, feeling like some teenager. "He winked at me once. Cullen, not Misone." Last I heard, Cullen's married and has two young boys about Julia's age. "I wonder if Marcus ever settled down," I muse. "When I was young, he was still shaking down pizzerias and taking bets." Good times.

"He's married." Giuliana nods. "He's got a baby girl, too."

"Huh." I purse my lips...and then grin. "He was handsome, too, but he was no Cullen! I swear—" my fist comes down on the table "—had Juniiuh not been hotter, I mighta been on the next flight to New York." I burst out in giggles again, and maybe I've had enough wine.

"Mom—you're so cute and silly." Elisa grins and pinches my cheek.

I laugh and bat her away. "Shut up. We got off track. Now you go." I point to her. "Did Cawmine do something to leave you with that sad face you had earlier?" I cock a brow. "Posso sempre uscire e parlargli." I offer to speak to Carmine.

"No!" she shouts, horrified. "Jesus, Mom! Don't ever—God, don't talk to him. Promise me you won't."

"I'll promise no such thing." I know exactly what's on boys' minds. Carmine's a good-looking kid, and he's only nineteen years old. My Elisa is too good for him unless he wants to do right by her.
"I just..." She huffs. "We kissed, all right?"

"No!" My eyes widen and I cup my cheeks.

"Yeah," she grumbles, "and it was—I saw stars. But then he ruined it by saying that he wasn'ta talk to Daddy about dating me."

"Oh, but that's so good!" I exclaim. Maybe this means Carmine's one of the good ones. "I'm so happy for you," I gush, feeling a bit emotional. Waving a hand in front of my face, I take a huge gulp of my wine and try to settle down. "Look at my baby girl, Giuliana." I grip Elisa's chin. "She's growing up."

"Christ—don't you see?" Elisa hisses. "Dad's gonna kill Carmine."

Oh. Yeah, I nod solemnly. "I can see that happening." No, I can't. But he will rough the boy up. Thoroughly. With a long list of threats. And he won't approve—he'll say Elisa's too young. "Well..." I kiss Elisa's forehead. "God gave you my eyes—use them on Daddy. You're his angioletto."

I can see hope in her eyes and she's about to say something, but Anthony walks into the kitchen. And that means we shut up. I've come to realize just how much of a hero Junior is in Anthony's eyes, and that evidently entails telling his father everything he hears around here—in detail.

"Ma, have you seen my suit—the Prada one?" He scratches his nose and opens the fridge.

"I donated it." It's not like he uses it all that often. Besides, it was almost too small.

"Of course you did," he mutters behind the fridge door.

"What was that?" I cup my ear, annoyed. "Do you have a problem or something?"
Here I am, trying to be a good citizen, a good American, a good Catholic, and all I get is this?

"Nope, no problem." He gives me a sweet smile that looks strained and kisses my cheek. "I'm gonna head over to Stella. Felix and Nonno want to talk to me."

I narrow my eyes.

Why would they need to talk to my son, huh?

At Stella, no less.

"Carmine and Sal are still around—right outside," Anthony adds. "I'll be back for dinner."

I look to Giuliana, and she seems to understand what I'm thinking.

"What's wrong, Mom?" Elisa asks.

I frown, deciding to keep quiet for now. I could just be reading into things too much. Besides, Junior promised me he wouldn't involve our children in his business.

"Nothing." I put a smile on my face. "Nothing's wrong." I hope.

Luckily, Alice shows up, and that means I get the distraction I need.

She looks happy for once. Actually, she looks beaming.

"I was in the neighborhood," she explains as I bring out a new bottle of wine and a glass for her. "Thought I'd stop by." She shrugs with a smile.

"Can I also have some wine, please?" Elisa bats her lashes at me.

I wave a hand. "One glass." Then I turn to Alice again, beyond curious about this turn of events. "You look so happy." I squeeze her hand.
She nods, eyes lighting up. "You have no idea."

"So, tell us!" Giuliana looks like she's ready to burst, too.

"Did you and Jasper work things out?" I ask, hopeful.

To be perfectly honest, I've doubted my brother. Junior swears Jasper hasn't strayed, but I don't know. My husband knows that if he told me Jasper's been cheating, I would go nuts. It may be common in our world, but I would still be so incredibly disappointed in him. So, I get that Junior keeps quiet, regardless of what the truth really is. 'Cause he hates drama, and this doesn't really concern me.

"Oh yeah, that too." Alice nods. "We're good, I guess."

I stare at her. "What's that supposed to mean? 'That, too.' Is there something else?"

"Huh?" She looks dazed. "Oh! Um, no...that's it." She's nodding too much for that to be true. "I'm just excited Jasper and I are good again."

"You're lying," Giuliana states, and I nod to that.

"I'm not!" Alice defends. "Jasper and I worked things out, and now I'm back in the game—happy."

I give her a dubious look. She really does seem happy, more than that, actually, but I think there's something else. It was just the way she phrased herself in the beginning.

"Mrs. Savona." Alice's driver comes in to the kitchen. "Sorry, Mrs. Maisano—your son let me in."

"Oh, don't apologize, Tommy," I say with a smile. "Are you hungry?" It's my standard question.
He shakes his head, acting like he's scared to look us in the eye. I can only imagine what our husbands tell our drivers. "Thank you, but I only came to drop this off. Mrs. Savona, you left it in the car." He leaves a small paper bag on the counter. "Would you like me to wait outside?"

Alice grins. "No, that's okay, Tommy. I'll call you when I'm ready to leave."

Tommy nods, and then he gets out.

I don't miss how Alice watches his ass, so I can't help but smirk.

"Damn, he's fine," Giuliana mutters, to which Elisa and I crack up. "I'm serious! You got lucky with that one, Alice. Vinny only assign these old and fat men to me." She makes a farting noise with her mouth.

"How much wine have you two had already?" Alice giggles at us. "Looks like I've got some catching up to do!"

"Well, let's take this out to the patio instead," I suggest. I can hear Julia stomping around upstairs, and my guess is that she's done with her movie. She can only sit still for a small amount of time before she wants to do something else. The pool is her favorite, so this'll be good. She can swim, and I can keep an eye on her.

Soon, we're all gathered outside, and I love this. It all keeps me from going insane when my husband is away.

I do the Sign of the Cross for good measure.

"Thinking about Daddy again?" Elisa asks knowingly.

I nod and touch her cheek. "I love you." I won't cry.

"You always get mushy when he's not home," she chuckles. "But I love you, too."
I roll my eyes, though I can't hide my smile. "Glad to hear it. Okay. Distract me, ladies. Gimme some juicy gossip!"
Chapter 7

Anthony's POV

Parking behind Stella, I see EJ, that fuck, smoking a cigarette by the back door to the restaurant. He's also chatting up Gabriella, Enzo Sindone's daughter and my sister's best friend, and it doesn't look like she's enjoying it. She's a year younger than I am, which means she's six, almost seven, years younger than EJ.

"Yo!" I jerk my chin at them and approach after locking up my car. Safe to say, EJ's annoyed I showed up. He probably thinks Gabriella would give him the time of day, but he couldn't be more wrong. She's one the good ones—the good little girls. Cute, short, chubby, quiet. She's Enzo's angel—like Elisa's my father's. Only, Gabriella doesn't pull shit behind her father's back. Instead she comes here to bring Enzo lunch, dinner—whatever her mother tells her to.

"What'chu doin' here?" EJ asks, sneering.

Flinching toward him, I smirk when I see him shrink back in an automatic response. Make no mistake, he can throw a mean punch, and he's not just fucking around. But...instinct still tells him I'd be the one who ends on top.

I ignore him and turn to Gabriella instead. "You okay, hon?" She's looking down, so I tilt up her chin and raise my brow in question.

"Um, y-yes," she stammers, blushing. "Emmett Junior was just—"

I cut her off, knowing she's going to defend him—make up some excuse. "You don't have to explain." I smile and take a step back.

"I offered her a smoke," EJ says with a smirk.

Yeah, like Gabriella smokes. Please.
"Smoke this." I grab my junk. "What the fuck're you doing here, anyway? You takin' a break from running Daddy's errands—counting his chips?"

I've lost count of the hotels and casinos Emmett dips his fingers into, running scams, but I do know he's a top earner.

"Fuck you," he spits out. "My uncle's here—he wants to talk to me." He's speaking about Felix.

"I-I should—" Gabriella points to the door, and I had forgotten she was still here. "Um."

"Right." I open the door for her. As she scurries past me, I gently grip her elbow and lean down, keeping my voice low. "Sorry you had to see that, by the way." I grew up with this girl; our parents are pretty close. If this gets back to my mother—about how I acted in front of Gabriella...

"It's okay," she whispers in a rush, staring into my eyes like she's in some daze. She pushes some of her dark, loose curls away from her face, completely flustered and fumbling.

My brows furrow, and I kinda wonder if she's always had those flecks of gold in her brown eyes. Or those freckles on her nose.

Or...shit, those are new. Um, her tits.

I avert my eyes, totally caught off guard. I've never checked her out before—fuck. Why the hell would I? She's always been the clumsy little chubby girl who lives a few streets away from me. She's friends with Elisa—has spent a shitload of time at our house over the years. But I mean...why check out cute and wholesome when you've got naked and willing at Dawn, right?

Right.

Fuck this.
I give her a smirk and walk into the restaurant, shaking my head at myself.

She's still all those things I mentioned. Only now she's got a set of big tits and a gorgeous face. Whatever. I don't go after good girls. That's what my father did. He's told me Mom was a good girl. Not that I'd think so, 'cause she's a ball-buster now. But I guess that's Pops' doing.

Brushing the past five minutes off me, I walk briskly through the halls, passing the kitchen, Pops' office, all the storage rooms, and finally end up in the main dining area. This is usually where I find our guys unless there's a sit-down. There's a smaller, more private dining room for that.

"Anthony!" Felix grins; he's seated in a booth with Joseph—his oldest—and my grandfather. "You didn't see my nephew by any chance?"

I nod. "I saw him." Leaning down, I kiss Nonno's cheek and then shake Felix's hand. "He's out back," I add as I slide in next to Joseph. "'Sup?"

We bump fists. "All good—you?"

"Can't complain." I face Felix and Nonno again. "So..." I kinda wanna get back to the house as soon as possible. Dad told me to keep an eye on things while he's gone, and while I trust Sal and Carmine, they're not the ones who got the order.

"There's no rush, kid," Felix chuckles, waving over a waitress. "Your mother dropped off a new recipe here a couple days ago. You tried the clams yet?"

"Of course he has," Nonno laughs. "Anthony and Junior get front-row seats to Isabella's cooking. My precious daughter-in-law—God bless her for putting up with youse."

I just smile.
Truth is, it's a big fucking deal to be meeting with Felix like this. At home, when it's someone's birthday...whatever, that's nothing. But this—I'm just a lowman, and to meet with the boss? Yeah, that doesn't happen to everyone.

"How is it working for your father instead of Jasper?" Felix asks me once we've all placed our orders. "Is there any difference?"

"Yeah, there are differences." I nod slowly. I was mainly Uncle Jasper's errand boy, but with Dad...I'm on security detail, I like to call it. He wouldn't trust just anybody with the girls in his life, so it matters a lot that he puts so much faith in me—even though I'm technically far from alone. Sal, Milo, and Carmine are there, too. "I like it, though."

"That's good," he comments as the waitress brings our drinks. I don't miss how Felix eyes the woman, and I think they have a relationship; I've seen her come and go over at Felix's club. My father always tells me to keep my eyes open and mouth shut. I study, I learn. You can't learn if your mouth is running—gotta keep focus and all that.

Once the waitress is gone, Felix turns to me and smiles. "Would you like to work for me instead?"

It's not really a question. When the boss asks you to do something, you agree. "Ne sarei onorato." It's the truth—it is an honor. Even if I get some shitty position, working under Felix is a promotion. And, truth be told, since Felix and my dad are so close, it wouldn't surprise me if the two have already talked this over.

"Eccellente! Allora è deciso." He says it's settled. He tips his scotch in my direction before taking a sip. In my periphery, I see EJ walking in—at last. "And here's my nephew!"
Joseph gives me a small nudge with his elbow. "Pop wants you to pay attention now," he whispers.

I nod with a dip of my chin, never looking in his direction.

EJ pulls over a chair and sits down at the head of the table after greeting Felix and Nonno, and some insignificant chit-chat follows. Felix asks about Rosalie, Teresa—Rosalie and Emmett’s five-year-old—and Anna, their oldest. And then he asks the question that ends the bullshit. "I hear you've made some new friends in town, too." Okay, so it wasn't exactly a question.

EJ frowns. "New friends?"

"Something I heard from Chicago." He waves a hand, and that was a lie. It's just that he's not giving me away. Before EJ can even begin to suspect me, Felix has given a source. "Just—just be careful." Now he's painting himself as the one who gives a shit, basically, which might cause EJ to doubt whatever he's doing with the Outfit boys. "When your father comes back from Florida, maybe we should all sit down and talk." Felix is good, covering all bases, since he knows very well Emmett's not in Florida, and now I know what I'm allowed to talk about.

EJ doesn't reply.

"Next topic?" Nonno suggests.

Felix nods. "Yeah, I bet you're wondering why you're both here." He looks between EJ and me. But I already know his game. His work is done, but now he can play off his previous words as "friendly advice" instead of what it really was: a warning—it was to let EJ know that Felix knows everything that goes on in his town. That friendly advice was also to plant doubt and confusion in EJ's head. And now...now Felix will probably bring up some
insignificant bullshit story that will explain why we're both here, EJ and me.

And it turns out I'm right. Felix tells us our fighting has to stop. Enough is enough. EJ and I are family and we're supposed to have each other's back. I listen, knowing Felix is just saying this to have something to discuss, and EJ nods, just as reluctant as I am to make peace.

By the time we're done eating, it's almost eight o'clock, and I've missed dinner at home. Not that I'm hungry, but I told Mom I'd be there. Which reminds me of another thing Dad has advised me: don't make promises you can't keep. When he makes promises to Mom and he doesn't deliver, she makes him suffer. Because she worries. So...Dad tries to never promise anything. Just that he'll be careful and that he'll be home as soon as he can.

"Mr. Colucci," Enzo says, appearing at our table, dressed like the chef he is. Off the record, he's also on my father's crew. Along with Nico. "Sorry to bother you, but Junior left you a message. The sit-down in Kansas City has been postponed 'til tomorrow."

Outwardly, I show nothing, but my mind spins, and I can't help but wonder what my dad is doing in Chicago that is so secret. As far as I know, there's only a handful of people who know he's there—Felix, Nonno, Zio Alec, and me. Everyone else thinks he's visiting Nico in Kansas City.

"Grazie, Enzo," Felix responds with a tight-lipped smile.

**Junior's POV**

It goes without saying that we follow Emmett once he's done with whatever he did down by the docks.

"Too fucking public," Alec mutters as we watch Emmett pull in at a fancy hotel. And my brother's right. There's not a lot we can do here. Too many
people around. Security, cameras, nosy hotel staff. It ain't like some motel in Nevada, that's for sure. "What's the plan?"

"We wait." The meeting he had with whomever down by the docks earlier...I doubt that's the end of it—call it a gut feeling. I think he's going back tomorrow, so my hope is that we can intercept him between now and then and take care of him. "I'm gonna go across the street and call Felix. Keep your eyes open."

"Bet."

~oOo~

Early next morning, I'm in a foul fucking mood, and when we see Emmett exiting the hotel, I have a feeling I'm gonna take out all my frustrations on him. 'Cause sleeping in a car...fuck.

Well, it's technically a van now. Alec got it for us a few hours ago while I kept my eye on a dead hotel.

"He's walking," Alec yawns, starting the vehicle.

"That's actually good." I scrub my hands over my face, grimacing at the feel of it. I need a shower, a fucking shave. "I wanna get this over with." More than that, I wanna go home. Thank God we have fake papers, 'cause I ain't driving back. I'm sitting my ass on a flight, end of story.

Following slowly, we watch as Emmett enters a diner, and it won't get better or easier than this. He's still close to the hotel, so my guess is that he's only going for breakfast here.

"You wanna take him here?" my brother asks.
I scratch my nose and nod. "Park right outside." The windows are tinted and this side street is pretty empty. It shouldn't be too hard to get him into the van. It's not like I haven't done this before.

No longer in a suit, I take advantage of the sweatshirt I'm wearing and pull up the hood. Alec does the same, and I tell him to keep the car running. Then I'm out, tucking my hand into the front pocket of my hoodie where I have my nine. Keeping my head low, I pull open the sliding door at the side of van, and then I just wait outside the diner.

I could've made Alec do this, but where's the fun in that? Nowadays, Nico and Enzo do the dirty work for me. When I travel, it's usually just to pop someone in the head and leave them behind to be found. No cleanup—just in and out.

Vinny wants to utilize me and my crew in the beef he has with New York, but Felix ain't that stupid—he'd never agree to start a war. Thank God—I'm too old for that shit.

That'd be a suicide mission if there ever was one. I remember back in the day...Cullen's pretty cool, but Marcus Misone? I don't fucking think so. Hopefully, he'll never have a son—a son who will run with the Misone genes. I think Cullen's got two boys, though—maybe one of them them can take over instead when that day comes.

The door to the diner opens and closes a few times, but it's not Emmett.

Another ten minutes later, I'm ready to check the back, but the door opens again, and I see Emmett walk out, wiping his hands on a napkin.

Taking a deep breath, I walk up right behind him and push the barrel of my gun into his side. "Your brother wants a word wit'chu," I lie as he stiffens. "Keep walking." His head goes from side to side, looking for an escape, though he's trying to be subtle about it. He knows he's fucked up,
but if Felix is around—his own brother—he might not be scared for his life yet. Then again, if he's hell-bent on believing that Felix had something to do with their pops' death, he's gotta be aware that he's not safe.

Ten feet later, I push him into the back of the van and follow, quickly sliding the door shut. My piece is still aimed at Emmett when I give Alec the OK to drive.

"What the fuck is going on?" Emmett spits out, straightening his suit.

I get comfortable, leaning back against the part that separates the cab of the van from the back. "You makin' friends in Chicago, huh?" I scratch my jaw. "I wonder what Felix might say."

He glares at me. "Where is he? You said..."

"Yeah, I'm taking you to him." Another lie, but I want him calm in the fucking car. Plus, I think the possibility of us taking Emmett to see Felix is the only thing stopping him from pulling out his own piece. And I ain't turning this into a Mexican fuckin' stand-off.

This will give me a minute to talk to Emmett, too. He's no longer family to me, but he used to be. We grew up together, Isabella and I are godparents to his youngest daughter, and he makes mad money for our family.

"You followed me?" Emmett asks, clenching his jaw.

I don't answer; it's pretty obvious we did.

"So, now what?" He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I gotta beg my own brother to spare my life? Give me a pass? What?"

I ignore that. "How's EJ doing?"
He stares at me, probably wondering how much I know. Wondering if we'd go after his son, wondering if he could already be dead...maybe. I'm no mind reader.

There's no response from him.

So, I ask the next question. "What're you doing here in Chicago?"

Now he smirks. "I fail to see how that's your business." He lets out a laugh. "You're my brother's bitch—doing his bidding. His little cocksucker. You think you're so important, huh? Non sei niente, Maisano." He says I'm nothing—a nobody. "Felix wouldn't hesitate to have you clipped."

I smile. "Whatever helps you sleep at night."

~oOo~

When the van finally comes to a stop, we've been on the road for an hour or so.

Alec's wearing a grin as he opens the door, and the first thing that hits me is the smell of water—Lake Michigan.

We're in the middle of nowhere. High grass, water, sound of seagulls, gray sky.

"Let's go, cousin," I say and get out. When he doesn't move, I jerk my chin at him. "Time's a wastin'. I don't have all fucking day." I smile darkly, having trouble keeping my temper in check.

For all I know, his plan was to get help from the Outfit to take us out. Emmett's fucking my shit up, and regardless of his impending death, I still gotta send my family on vacation. 'Cause who knows? Maybe Emmett has already put out hits and given people here money. If an order has been
issued, it doesn't matter if the man who placed said order is alive or dead. And I don't fucking want a mark on my back.

If we're lucky, Emmett hasn't gone through with anything yet, but I'm not taking chances.

"Felix isn't coming, is he?" Emmett's voice is flat.

I shake my head no.

He smiles, though his eyes are empty and glassy. "Family loyalty, huh? You kill my father, I want revenge, and then you ice me?"

"Oh!" I throw my head back and laugh. "Check him out, bro." I nudge Alec with my elbow. "We's got a storyteller on our hands."

Alec chuckles. "Get the fuck outta hea' wid'at shit already."

"Gimme a fucking break," Emmett snaps. "You think I'm stupid?"

I sober and tilt my head. "What does your stupidity hafta do with anythin'?"

Emmett grits his teeth. "I know youse iced my pops, Junior."

"Oh—" I nod, curious "—and how would you know that? Your friends down in Florida tell you that?" I chuckle. "Fine—if you wanna listen to those monkeys running around down there without a fuckin' clue..." I shrug.

"There's no need for you to keep up a charade," he says flatly.

I chuckle again. "Yeah, well..."

Raising my nine, I pop one in his chest and then one in his head.

Emmett Colucci falls to the ground.
I widen my eyes, actually impressed at myself—I managed to be so calm throughout his bullshit. "He was getting on my last fucking nerve," I tell my brother. "Fat muthafucka'." Grunting, Alec and I carry Emmett's body over to the water. "Felix wants him found."

"No cement shoes, then?" he chuckles, a bit outta breath.

"Funny." I snicker, and then with some final efforts, we dump the body in the water. I reckon he'll be found in a few weeks. It's really remote out here, so... "Let's check out his hotel room back in the city before we get outta here."

~oOo~

In Emmett's room, we find two briefcases full of money, which gives us hope that he never followed through with whatever he was doing here. Still, I'm sending Isabella and the kids to either New York or the Bahamas. Alec's doing the same with Maria and their little AJ.

"Does this mean we're driving back to Vegas?" Alec sighs.

I smirk and clap him on the shoulder. "You are. I'm not." My plan is to check in at some hotel near the airport, shower, change clothes, eat, and then fly home. I wanna be home by dinner—a late dinner, but dinner nonetheless. Actually, I gotta get going, 'cause I'm flying to LA. From there, I'll drive.

"You're kidding me," Alec spits out.

"'Fraid not, little brother. You drive back with the dough—I send our families on vacation."

That makes him perk up. Anything to stay away from his wife. In fact, I'm sure he'll stay with his goomah while Maria and AJ are gone. I've only met his bunny a few times, but I know Alec would rather stay with her. Had it
not been for his son, I'm sure he'd spend as much time at home as I did when I was married to Jane. Fuck, I rarely even saw her. If I could help it, I was with Isabella and our children.

Speaking of Isabella, I better call her soon and tell her I'm on my way home.

**Hummingbird's POV**

"Why are you so restless, baby?" I ask Anthony, swiping a rag down the counter. Junior will be home in a few hours; I want the house spotless and smelling of his favorite food when he gets here. But it's kinda hard to be productive when I have Anthony following me around like a lost little puppy. Which he's been doing for the past hour.

"I'm bored," he mumbles.

Walking over to him, I reach up and cup his cheek. "You sure that's it, *topolino*? It looks like there's something bothering you."

He grimaces. "Why does Elisa gotta be here with her friends all the time, huh?" He speaks with his hands. "I wanted to do a few laps—whatever, and...then I go out there—" he points in the direction of the living room, therefore the backyard and the pool "—and all I see are Elisa's friends!"

I cock a brow. "Since when was that ever a problem for you?" He's ridiculous, for Christ's sake. The last couple years, when Elisa's friends started growing breasts, Anthony's been a happy camper in the backyard whenever Elisa brings girls over. Hell, even Dominic's the same now. He's out there this very moment, most likely with a magazine covering his crotch.

Nasty little fucker. God bless him.
"It's not!" Now he looks upset, angry...and something I haven't figured out yet. But it's a new look on Anthony. "It's not a problem—just... Fuck!"

"Hey!" I smack the back of his head. "What's the matter wit'chu, huh? Manners, Anthony. Fucking manners." Shaking my head, I leave him to his bitching. From the fridge I gather sodas and pastries, and then I walk through the living room and out the patio door. "Girls!" I shout; they're all in the pool—Elisa, Amanda, Gabriella, and two I don't remember the names of.

"Mom, can I have some, too?" Dominic asks, sitting a few feet away on a lounger.

I smirk and eye the towel on his lap. "Sure. C'mere and get it."

"Um." He fidgets.

I snort.

They're Junior's kids. What can I say?

Elisa and her friends soon come running across the lawn, all dressed in their bikinis or bathing suits, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out that Dominic can't get up. Well...

"Thanks, Mom." Elisa plops down in her own lounger and runs a towel through her hair, the sun making the water beads on her skin glisten. She's so gorgeous, my little girl. Only, she's not so little anymore.

"Eat." I set the tray on the side table between Elisa and Amanda. "All'a youse." I give Gabriella a look. She thinks she's fat; I say she's beyond beautiful.

She's got meat on her bones, something I'm trying to make Elisa understand is a good thing. Healthy. My daughter's not skinny, mind you,
but she could use a few more pounds. Amanda and the other two are a lost cause, though. I'm afraid I'd snap them like twigs if I hugged them.

"Thank you, Mrs. Maisano," Amanda says sweetly.

"No problem." I smile and then face Gabriella. "You stayin' the night, hon?" If I remember correctly, she and Elisa were talking about a movie night earlier.

"If it's okay," she responds softly and quietly. "Um, my mom wants me home for dinner, but then..."

"Of course!" I nod. "Just holler if you want anything, girls." With that said, I make my way inside again, noticing a grumbling Anthony trudging up the stairs. I shake my head, wondering what's up with that boy today. He's usually acting like the big man—like an adult—and now he's...not.

Ah, well. Time to start dinner.

~oOo~

"I love you, I love you, I love you!" I kiss his cheeks, his nose, his eyes, his lips, all while he chuckles tiredly and squeezes my ass. Behind us, here in the hallway, I can hear Julia and Elisa giggling. Not that I care. And they know I go nuts when their father's been away for a few days. Like now, when I'm all over Junior. Arms and legs wrapped around him. "Dio—mi hai fatto preoccupare!" I glare at him, saying he had me so worried, and slap his shoulder. Then I crash my mouth to his again.

"Mom, it's my turn now!" Julia whines, sounding like a five-year-old instead of an almost eleven-year-old. But she gets away with it, 'cause she's the baby of the family. "Daddy! Did you buy me something on your trip?"
"Mom's almost done. Wait a sec, picollina," Anthony mutters, and I can almost hear his eye-roll.

Grinning, I stare into Junior's amused eyes. "Ti amo."

"Ti amo, mio bell'uccellino," he whispers and kisses me softly.

That'll have to do for now. We'll continue our reunion later tonight. Behind closed doors.

"Okay, kids—give Daddy your hugs and kisses," I say, both feet back on the ground. "Dinner's almost ready."

~oOo~

Once I've set the table in the kitchen, everyone takes their place—Junior and I at opposite heads, Anthony and Julia on either side of Junior, and Elisa and Dominic next to me. As always—well, when my husband is home—he says grace before we dig in.

And in true Junior spirit, he asks all kids what they've been up to while he was gone. It doesn't matter that he looks exhausted beyond words; he has this need to know.

"I swam ten laps in the pool without stopping," Julia says proudly before guzzling down some milk. "I'm gonna do more tomorrow as soon as I wake up."

Junior reaches over to kiss her on the forehead. "You're so good, baby. I'll watch tomorrow."

I beam at that, glad to have him home for a day.

Next is Dominic, and he tells his father this and that about what he and Colin have been up to. Then it's Anthony's turn; he's still looking sullen and moody. And aside from the meeting he had with Felix at Stella Mia—
which I'm relieved to hear was only about EJ and his fighting too much—he has nothing to share. Lastly, it's Elisa, and she speaks about summer school and how she can't wait to be done with it all.

"So, what're the plans for next week?" Junior asks, adding more gravy to his pork chop.

"I need clothes!" Julia shouts.

"So do I," Dominic adds.

"Me too." Anthony nods.

"Yeah, Mom." Elisa gives me a look.

"Oh, hummingbird," Junior chuckles. "Do I need clothes, too?"

I stare down at my plate and hum.

"Yeah, so it's Rosalie's birthday next week—she's turning forty-three," I comment, ignoring their eyes on me. I admit it; I sometimes go overboard, but I can't help it. It's one thing if my husband tells me he'll be gone for two days—even a week, whatever. It's the not knowing at all that kills me. This time, Junior couldn't tell me, and when that happens, I want to make sure I'm in God's good graces. And if I'm on His good side, maybe I can get my husband there, too. I'm pretty good at convincing. "She was talking about hosting a dinner at Stella—like you did, ciccino."

I'm so ridiculous, actually speaking to my plate. "And Giuliana will still be here then, so..." Right now she's at her hotel, though I suspect she's more accurately in the hotel casino. She likes to gamble.

"Isabella?" Junior drags out the sound of my name.

"What?" I snap a little and look up. They're all staring at me, smirking, grinning, about to giggle—the last one is Julia. "Mother of Christ! I'm
sorry, okay? I'll take youse shopping this week. Don't worry, Juniuuh, I'll handle your shopping. We good?" I look to all of them.

They laugh at me.

Lovely.

"Actually..." Junior shifts in his seat a little, the laughter dying down. "I asked about next week, 'cause, uh..." He hesitates and gives me a wary look.

My face falls before I compose it again. Nodding in understanding, I reel in my temper and plaster a fake smile on my lips. "We're going on vacation," I state tightly.

Julia and Dominic go straight to cheering, and Elisa's happy too, but she's got questions.

"Where are we going? How long are gonna be away?" She's bouncing in her seat, eyes flicking between Junior and me. "Can I bring a friend?"

I wave a hand at my husband; he can answer. I'm too annoyed to.

"A few weeks," Junior says, clearing his throat. He wears a smile for our children's sake. "Um, you'll be visiting Zia Brianna and your cousins in the Bahamas, and you're leaving tomorrow night. And no, I'm afraid you can't bring a friend this time, angioletto. I've already booked the tickets..."

Despite the fact that I've completely lost my appetite, I push some food into my mouth just to have something to do.

"I'm not going, though, right?" Anthony looks to Junior.

"Of course you are." He frowns. "Why wouldn't you?"

That's what I'd like to know.
"Dad..." Our son looks like he's ready to beg Junior. "You can't—I mean...I'm a grown man!"

I roll my eyes and take a big gulp of my wine.

"You're going." Junior points his fork to Anthony. "I don't wanna hear another word about it, capisce?"

"But—"

"ENOUGH!" Junior shouts, eyes murderous.

Anthony shuts up.
Chapter 8

September 1st 1993

Junior's POV

"Cazzo—right there." I grit my teeth together, grabbing at Isabella roughly as I push into her over and over.

She's definitely gained a few pounds while on vacation, and now I'm acting like a fucking teenager. I'm all hands—grabby as fuck. Sweat starts to bead on my forehead, and my chest is heaving, but I don't stop—I can't stop. For Christ's sake, it's been ages now since I had my wife. Almost two months, in fact—an extreme even in our world.

They came home from the Bahamas this morning after weeks in the sun, and since it happens to be Julia's birthday—my sweet princess turned eleven today—our house was packed with people until I sorta threw them out two hours ago. Only a couple of Elisa's friends are still here—some sleepover, no matta'.

And this is round two with my hummingbird. Round one was in the shower, just a quick fuck, but it was needed. Now...in bed...Christ, she's spectacular, clawing at me, meeting my thrusts, kissing me all over, humming and moaning...

"Ciccino," she cries out, throwing her head back against the pillow.

"Fuck yeah, so good," I groan, hitching her leg over my hip. Then I drive in deeper, harder, and she's soaked for me, causing these wet sounds...After almost nineteen years with Isabella, she still amazes me. The man I was fifteen years ago was crazy in love with her, too, but he didn't see the future like this. Love fades, passion disappears, and that flame diminishes. At least that's how it usually goes, but...not with my wife. I see my friends with goomahs, random broads, and I fucking pity them. Jasper's hooking
up with his dancers to left and right nowadays, Felix has a few on the side, Alec has one... As far as I know, only Riley, Pop, Enzo, and I have hit the jackpots with our wives.

"I'm—I'm, fuck...almost there," she whimpers.

I grin, digging deeper, grinding. "Don't I fucking know it, hummingbird," I pant, feeling her clamping down on my cock. I rub her clit in tight little circles and dip down to suck a nipple into my mouth. With the birthday party today, I've been reminiscing a little, something I tend to do from time to time, especially around a birthday, and...I remember all those times when Isabella was pregnant, how we fucked like crazy. And I remember something that drove me mad when we were expecting Julia. It was the fucking breast milk, I'm tellin' ya. The way the flavor of a couple drops would explode in my mouth as we fucked, fucked, fucked. Just the memory of it makes me groan, my thighs clench, and balls tighten. "Squeeze me harder." I swallow a moan and keep lavishing her tits with kisses, nips, and licks. "Holy mother of—" I gasp as she tenses around me.

We both come without warning. My eyes screw shut, my body trembles, I shudder violently, my cock releases into her slick, hot pussy. Under me, Isabella cries out, quakes, whimpers, and...shit, when it's been so long since I hit it, it feels like one of those times where you say it was the best goddamn fuck ever.

"Jesus Christ!" I collapse next to her, trying to catch my breath. I blink and stare up at the ceiling, and I swallow, my mouth too dry. "Oh, Isabella..."

My wife sits up and puts on her skimpy little whatchamacallit—she surprised me with it before. Short, black, lacy, see-through, the death of me. "That was amazing." She hums and cuddles into my side. I pull her
closer and manage a grunt in agreement. Mannaggia, I wish I wasn't so spent. "I've really missed you, ciccino."

"You too." A yawn slips out, and I give her a good squeeze, 'cause I can't fucking use words yet. "Let's sleep, hummingbird..."

"But we haven't talked yet," she whines a little. "Please, Juniuuh. I have so many questions."

I keep my eyes closed and bury my face in her hair; the last thing I wanna do is talk.

'Cause Isabella's not the only one who's tired after not only a birthday party but traveling, too. After weeks of being on constant alert, nothing happened. We've been at a standstill, not knowing what to do. We waited for the Outfit to strike, yet that didn't happen. However, we needed insurance before we allowed our families to come home, so Felix, Pops, Alec, and I went out to New York and had a sit-down with Marcus Misone.

Felix explained our problems, and we eventually got their support. New York ended up with even more power, but it matters little to me when I have my back clear. After that, we went to Chicago, and Felix told the boss that if they move in on us in Nevada, they'll have to answer to New York, too—the biggest crime family in the States. Safe to say, the boss in Chicago was more than willing to forget about everything—to even forget Emmett's name and his business with them.

Done deal.

We went home again, called back our families, and here we are now...

There's still cleanup; it's only a matter or time before Emmett's body is found, and then we have to keep an eye on EJ. We just hope it won't come to anything. EJ has no business with Chicago people anymore, and his hero is gone. Right now, he's testy as fuck, waiting for Emmett to
come home, but we doubt he'll actually do something. I mean...he's no one, essentially, and without his father's backup...

"Don't fall asleep on me, ciccino," Isabella murmurs with a pout in her voice. "For weeks, we've only had phone conversations."

I chuckle groggily and tighten my hold on her. "We can talk tomorrow, baby."

"Hmph." She pinches my side. "Well, can you at least tell me what crawled up Giuliana's ass and died?" I stiffen. "'Cause she won't take my calls, and when her son answered at one point, he told me to talk to you—then he just hung up! Disrespectful little bastard."

Tired as fuck, and, admittedly, a little annoyed, I scrub a hand over my face, realizing I gotta give this to her now. She deserves to know this, at least, and I hope she won't hate me for it.

"You can forget about Giuliana and Vinny, bell'uccellino," I sigh, a bit saddened by this development. "There's been some changes out East, and Vinny cut our ties." His loss. Though, if Vinny hadn't done it, Felix would've eventually. We can't be on both sides—New York's and Jersey's. Especially not when they're constantly going at each other. Sometimes it's small, sometimes it's major. Staten Island can look like a war zone at times, since men from both sides reside there.

"Wait, what?" Isabella lifts her head to look me in the eye. "The fuck're you talkin' about, Juniu? They're godparents to Julia. Why the hell would they cut ties with us?"

I purse my lips, thinking about what to say—if I should go with the truth or if I should just silence it. Regardless, it's not gonna change anything. We're through with Jersey. Granted, it didn't have to be as severe as it is now. I personally don't see anything wrong with having our wives talking.
They don't know enough to share shit that shouldn't be shared anyway, but...no matta'. It is what it is. If Vinny has told Giuliana she can't talk to my wife, then...

"I don't know the entire story," I lie and push some hair from her beautiful face. "Felix has conducted business that Vinny didn't like—something that didn't even involve Jersey, so..." I shrug with one shoulder. "Vinny got all pissed." The lies roll off my tongue easily. It's for the best. I'd rather have my wife angry at Vinny than have her be all sad. And pissed at me or Felix.

"So, he's told Giuliana she can't call me?" she asks incredulously.

"Basically."

"Quel bastardo di un panzone!" she spits out, calling Vinny a fat bastard.

"Oh-ho!" I chuckle. "Christ, Isabella." I squeeze her when she tries to get up. "Cool it." I kiss her temple. "There's nothin' we can do abouddit."

"Giuliana's my friend," she argues. "Not to mention she's close to your mother and Esme. That Vinny—" she waves her fist "—he's got some balls. Actually," she scoffs, "he fucking doesn't. Being all bitchy—a pussy—and telling Giuliana she can't see us."

I smirk. "Are you done?" I grab her right tit, which was peeking outta her smoking hot lingerie.

"No, I'm not," she snarls. "Sono così incazzata!" She says she's so mad.

I laugh and roll us over, covering her body with mine. "You know, I can always shut you up with my cock."

"You do what you gotta do." She sniffs. "I'm still mad at them."

Yeah, so I get my shit greased for the third time.
I'd call that a *spectacular* fucking day.

**Anthony's POV**

Waking up in the middle of the night because I hear giggles down the hall isn't my idea of fun. It just pisses me off, and after today I really need my fucking sleep. Hell, I was tired the minute we came home after the vacation in the Bahamas, but then there was a goddamn party for my baby sis that I had to be there for, and...yeah, I'm moody as fuck now.

I try to fall asleep again, but I hear more giggles...

And then I suddenly need to take a piss, too, so I throw off my covers and trudge outta my room, wearing only my pajama bottoms.

Dee can sleep through anything, but Julia is the opposite, and our rec room is right across the hall from Julia's and Dee's rooms. And if *I* can hear Elisa and her friends in the rec room... A part of me kinda wants Julia to wake up, 'cause I know she will go downstairs and complain to our parents, and then Dad will fly up here and bring Elisa to tears.

See, while he can shout at my brother and me for nothing, there are only three things that will make him treat Elisa and Julia the same way. One, don't ever disrupt his sleep. Two, don't talk about boys. Three, don't disturb him when he's, um, you know, with Mom.

With a sleepy smirk on my face, I wash my hands in my bathroom—the one I share with Dee—and decide not to remind my sister to keep it down.

Standing outside the rec room, I press my ear to the door and hear more of those giggles. Earlier, I went to bed as soon as I could, so I don't know for sure who's in there. I can hear Elisa and Amanda, and if there's a third person, it's usually Gabriella.

I fucking hope it's not her.
She fucked up my entire vacation, and she wasn't even there.

Before we left for the Bahamas, there was a weird feeling in my gut when I saw Gabriella at our house the day after I'd seen her at Stella. I don't fucking know what it was, and I don't read into things. It bothered me—still does—and it followed me to the Bahamas. I mean...I bagged a couple broads there, but then, like—in the shower, I'd jerk off, and whose fucking body pops up? Gabriella's of all people! Madonn'. And it just wouldn't quit, either. In my head, I'd see her big tits, her round ass...I'd imagine her full figure.

At our house, when she and Elisa are in the pool, she's never in a bikini. Always a modest swimsuit, but still, I'm not fucking blind. And my imagination is spectacular.

I wanna beat off on her tits, see my come smeared out on them.

I groan internally, feeling my dick wake up in my sleep pants.

Looking down at myself, I think about what has turned out to be worse than jerking off to the thought of her, and that was when I'd go to bed while on vacation. That's when I'd see her face. Those dark eyes with flecks of gold. Those loose curls that always get in her face. The barely-there freckles on her nose. Her mouth...

I grimace and shake my head at myself.

Going back to sleep right now would be even more impossible.

"Jesus Christ," I sigh, and with defeat in my step, I walk downstairs. Maybe a sandwich and some milk will do the trick.

Duke and Duchess greet me downstairs and follow me to the kitchen, but when they notice I ain't in a giving mood, they mosey away again. I make my sandwich in silence, going to town on the meats Zio Alec brought over
earlier for the party. And when all is done, I sit down on one of the stools by the kitchen island and dig in.

It's maybe five minutes later that I hear someone coming down the stairs. The sound of plates and silverware clanking quietly make me believe it's Elisa coming down to leave the dirty dishes before they go to sleep or whatever. *Pity.* I guess Julia won't wake up, then.

"Get the fuck outta hea'," I mutter when Duchess sniffs on my foot. "That you, sis?" I look over my shoulder, but fuck me...no. That's not Elisa. That's Gabriella. The surprise of seeing her causes me to literally inhale the food in my mouth, so I end up coughing. *Fuck.* I cringe and rub my chest.

"I'm s-sorry! Are you okay?" She rushes over and sets the tray of dirty dishes on the counter. In her haste, she drops a fork on the floor. "I didn't mean to scare you."

I wave her off, coughing into my hand. *Jesus Christ.* Then a groan gets thrown into the mix when she bends over to pick up the fork. Believe me, I've seen hotter outfits than that, but for some reason her light blue sleep shorts and matching t-shirt just work. Aside from the shorts ending mid-thigh, her clothes are modest. The t-shirt isn't tight by any means, so why the fuck am I even looking?

"Are you sure you're okay?" she asks timidly, shifting her weight from foot to foot. She's biting down on her plump bottom lip, too, and she refuses to look me in the eye.

"I'm fine." I clear my throat and take a sip from my milk.

"All right." She wrings her hands together. "Um, I should..." She points toward the doorway. "Goodnight, Anthony." Her voice is so soft.
"Wait." I stand up. "I'm gonna head up, too." I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, but I'm not ready to let her go just yet. After dumping my plate in the sink, I gesture for her to go first. Mamma mia. I bite down on my knuckles as I follow her up the stairs, my eyes solely trained on her bubble ass. "Are you sleeping in Elisa's room or the rec room?" I ask when we get to the landing. I already know they're staying in the rec room, but I'm stalling.

"In here." She looks up at me with a nervous smile as we stop outside of the rec room. But she's quick to avert her gaze again, and I realize what an idiot I am when I remember that I'm not wearing a shirt. No wonder she's avoiding looking at me—I probably make her uncomfortable.

"Right..." I take a small step toward her, suddenly feeling like I'm on the prowl. It's dark up here, but the single light from the staircase allows me to see Gabriella's features, mainly her flushing cheeks. Her lips are slightly parted, too, and I can see her chest moving rapidly with her small, shallow breaths. And I gotta wonder why she hasn't made a move to open the door yet.

Standing right before her, I let my knuckles brush against her arm, sliding upward. It's what finally makes her look up, and her eyes widen when she sees just how close we are. I should stop, back off, but I don't want to.

She smells amazing—like some sweet candy. Toffee or fudge or...

"Um..." She swallows and drops her gaze to my chest. "I, uh...what..."

"Gabriella?" Gently gripping her chin, I tilt it up, and I'm fucking stuck again. What the hell is it with her eyes? One look and it's like my heart starts racing.

She gulps. "What—what're you doing?"
My eyes flick from hers to her mouth, and... "Can I kiss you?" I look her in the eyes again and let my thumb ghost over her bottom lip. She's so fucking soft. I'm dying to get my hands on her, feel more than...this, I don't know.

"What?" she squeaks, eyes widening. "Why?"

The right corner of my mouth quirks up. "Because I want to? Because..." I release a breath and take one more step. "Because you're fucking gorgeous," I admit.

"Oh," she mouths.

"That's right—oh," I chuckle quietly and place my free hand on her hip. Bending just a little at the knees, we're face-to-face, and I lean in a bit farther, almost touching her nose with mine. "Lemme kiss you," I whisper.

She swallows. "Um, I...okay."

Elation courses through my body, and I close the distance between us, softly brushing my lips to hers. My eyes close. I can feel her every breath, smelling like toothpaste, and all I wanna do is push, push, push...

I wanna taste her. At first, she just lets me kiss her without really kissing me back, but then she goes with it. She applies pressure, and her hands tentatively come to my stomach, causing my abs to clench. Backing her into the wall, I deepen the kiss and suck her bottom lip into my mouth. She likes that, 'cause she whimpers and gives me more.

The way she's kissing me, I honestly doubt I'm her first kiss. That upsets me for about two seconds before her hands come up my chest and she locks them around my neck. I groan and push my tongue into her mouth, now hopeful I might get further than first fuckin' base.
"Fuck, baby," I moan, feeling her hands in my hair. Pressing against her, I know she can feel my cock between us. But if anything, she seems turned on and willing. Our tongues slide together, and I finally let my hands roam free. Well, pretty free. She may have kissed before, but I doubt she's done much more than that. Regardless, I move my hands down her body, feeling her softness. And then up again, past her belly, up her ribcage... The pads of my thumbs swipe over the undersides of her tits.

"Anthony," she pants as I kiss her jaw, down to her neck. She fists my hair and holds me in place while I taste the skin behind her ear. Her sweet scent and soft skin elicit moans from me. "We shouldn't..." Fuck, she's ending it. "I mean, Elisa's—"

"Don't mention my sister—" I crash my mouth to hers "—when I'm rubbing my cock on you." I nip at her bottom lip and pull her impossibly closer just so she can feel how hard she makes me.

"Oh, God." She literally throws herself at me, shocking the hell outta me, but fuck me if I'm gonna stop her. "Can we at least go to your room?"

"Christ, yes," I groan.

It only takes a few seconds for us to get into my room and have the door locked, but that's all I need to calm down, and now I wonder what the hell Gabriella's up to. This isn't the girl I grew up with. She's not this forward.

"I'm not having sex with you," she blurts out, standing by my bed. My eyebrows shoot up; she's looking all nervous again. "I'm—I'm sorry if that's what I made you believe." She looks down.

I'm actually relieved, however weird that sounds.

Gabriella's different. She's not a quick fuck. As my dad would say...she's the kind of girl you marry, and...I sure as hell don't want that kinda girl to just give it up like that. Besides, I'm still reeling from this new shit going
on with me—inside of me, whatever. I need time. I need to think. But what I need even more than that is just to feel her. I want her body close to mine—fuck, it's what I've been fantasizing about for weeks now.

I walk over to her and tilt up her chin. "Hey..." I kiss her on the forehead. "Spend the night with me. Not having sex." I grin a little and tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. "I'm down with cuddling, too." Well, I am with her.

She giggles. "Davvero? Non lo avrei mai pensato." She says she would've have thought that.

Shit. "What's that supposed to mean?" I'm not being defensive or anything. I just don't want her to think...ah, fuck it. I know what people, especially girls, say about me.

"Um, your Uncle Jasper's barbecue?" She chews on her lip, looking to my bed. "You took Sarah up here, right?"

"Who?" I frown, thinking back. Then I nod, remembering bits and pieces. I think she was blond. No, she was...um. "Never mind." I take her hands in mine. "She didn't touch this bed, I'll tell ya that. I didn't even have..." sex with her. Yeah, not what I wanna fucking talk about. "Listen—" I dip down to face her fully "—I like you, okay? I like you in a way I've never liked another girl." She blushes and tries to look down, but I don't let her. "I honestly don't know what the fuck I'm doing, Gabriella, but..." Cazzo. I blow out a breath, at a loss.

"It's okay," she rushes out. "I-I don't care about the past, um...as long—I'm sorry. I have no business tellin'—"

I think I know what she was gonna say, so I cut her off. "The past is the past, all right?" I give her hands a squeeze. "Don't ask me about the future, 'cause hell if I know, but I wanna try..." Try what? Be her boyfriend? Ask Enzo for permission to date his daughter? We all know
what that's gonna lead to. This may be the '90s, but my parents and Gabriella's parents are old school; they'll see marriage.

"I don't wanna pressure you," she says nervously and stubbornly averts her gaze. "You're young, and..." She lets out a shaky laugh. "You're Anthony Maisano—you don't wanna be tied down." My brows knit together. "I'm not saying I gotta wait 'til I'm married to have sex, but I need it to be with a guy I'm serious about. More than that, I need the guy to be serious about me, too." She swallows, and the crease between her brows makes her look sad, which I don't fucking like. "I think I've had a crush on you for, like, a year," she whispers. "But what girl doesn't?" She shrugs dejectedly.

"Hey," I murmur.

I'm confused, anxious, nervous. But I'm also happy about her confession, although I don't approve of her talking down about herself like that. It wasn't so much her words as it's her posture—like, a crush on me is to be expected, but it's not like it's gonna do shit for her? And she couldn't be more wrong about that one. After all, who the fuck am I here with?

"Look at me," I coax softly, and she finally obeys. "I didn't expect this—anything—tonight. But you're here now, and..." Christ, am I really gonna do this? Yeah. I fucking am. Two months of obsessing over her...I gotta know where this might go. "Like I said, I don't know about the future, but right now? I want you. And I'm not talking about a fucking night or whatever." Shit, I suck at this. "I wanna try this—" I wave a finger between us "—this, us, you and me."

"Yeah?" She looks both shy and hopeful.

I smile and touch her cheek. "Yeah." I hope we're done with the heavy now.
"But what about other girls?" She cringes.

"What about them?" I chuckle and widen my arms. "You have no idea what you're doin' to me, Gabriella." I let out a quiet laugh and shake my head. "There's no other fuckin' girl, all right?" I cup her cheeks. "When I'm wit'chu, there's only you."

"Okay." Her face breaks out in a gorgeous smile.

"Good." I kiss her nose. "We done now? 'Cause..." I lick my lips. "I wanna get on that bed—" I point next to us, my eyes never leaving hers "—and I wanna feel you next to me." I kiss her chin, her jaw. "I wanna kiss you some more." I get her on the lips. "And I wanna sleep." That last word may have come out as a whine. Gabriella's giggle makes me smile and hug her close. "E come ultima cosa, voglio che ti metta la mia maglietta." I tell her I want her in my shirt. It's one of the things I've dreamed about, her in my clothes.

"Your shirt?"

I nod and walk over to my closet. In there, I quickly locate a black t-shirt, and then I join her again. "Put this on. For me?"

She grins. "You're weird."

I give the hem of her own shirt a tug.

"Fine!" she laughs and twirls a finger. "Turn around."

I suck my teeth, having hoped to get a look at her spectacular tits—Christ, they're really big—but I guess not.

"That's not playing fair," I tell her and turn around.

She doesn't reply, but I hear her turning around, too, so yeah, I look over my shoulder, and fuuuck. Her entire back is exposed to me as she drops
her light blue shirt on the floor. No bra... And when I bend a little to the side, I can totally see the outline of one of her breasts. Jesus and his mother, when I get my hands on those bad boys, I doubt I'll ever let go.

When my shirt is on her body, I turn around again and try to calm the fuck down.

However, as much as I'd love to just...drill my cock into her soft, sweet, tight pussy—

"Fuck me," I mouth to myself and squeeze my eyes shut.

As much as I'd love that...I think this is good. For the first time in my life, I wanna get to know a girl, make her smile, fucking dote on her. Like Dad does with Mom, basically.

"I'm done," she says softly.

Releasing a breath, I face her with a sheepish smile.

Yeah, she smirks when she looks down.

There's just no hiding a boner.

"You looked, didn't you?" she accuses playfully.

I shrug and hug her to me. "Can you blame me?" My mouth goes to her neck. "I can't keep my fucking hands off you."

"Jesus, Anthony," she gasps. "Do I really—I mean, I really have that effect on you?"

With a smirk, I grab her hips and pull her closer so she can feel my cock against her belly. "What do you think? Come on." I take her hand and lead her to my bed. "It's been a long-ass day."
Once the lights are out and we're both under the covers, I'm hit with both
exhaustion and lust. It feels like I've never wanted a girl as much as I
want Gabriella, and now she's in my damn bed. If only I hadn't traveled
for ages and then spent countless hours at Julia's birthday party...

"This is nice," she sighs contentedly and snuggles closer.

"Nice is an understatement," I murmur, hitching her leg over my hip. In
the dark, I can barely see her, but that's okay for now. "Is this okay?" I
slide my hand up the backside of her thigh, just grazing her ass under her
shorts. I know I gotta take it slow, but her ass and tits are calling me, I
swear.

"Okay is an understatement," she mimics with a giggle.

I grin and palm her ass, dipping down to kiss her at the same t
time. I
groan against her lips. Her ass is outta this world, soft, round, smooth,
and Gabriella lets me squeeze and grope like the teenager I am until we
fall asleep in a tangled mess.

~oOo~

"I think we need to get up, Anthony..."

"Fuck that," I grumble, pulling the covers over our heads. "Too..." I yawn
and bury my face in her hair and grope her tits some. "Too early." Julia's
been up for a while, and now I can hear Dee and Elisa, too, which means
Mom and Dad will be up soon, but I don't give a shit. "You smell good." I
sniff her neck and decide to just stay here all day. In this exact position.
"Like butterscotch, fudge...whadeva'de fuck..."

"Um," she giggles sleepily, "it's my lotion."

I inhale deeply and give her luscious ass a firm squeeze. For good
measure and all.
"Anthony!" she laughs. "Elisa and Amanda are gonna wonder where I am, you know." She weaves her fingers through my hair.

I hum, a shiver running through me. "Another thing I don't care about. Mannaggia—keep doing that, baby. So...good... G'night..."

Unfortunately, I don't fall asleep again, because there's some goddamn commotion from downstairs. Screaming, sobbing...which ruins my mood and kills my morning wood. And this isn't like when Elisa begs Dad for more money or when Julia has broken a piece of furniture and our parents are scolding her. No, this is bigger.

"Who is that?" Gabriella asks as I reluctantly get outta bed. She gets up, too, looking all gorgeous with her messy hair and sleepy eyes. "Is it your mom?"

I shake my head and walk over to my closet. "No, it sounds like..." I don't know, but it's no one in my family. Maybe Alice or Brianna? No, this is shriller. Gianna? Rosalie? Maria? Grabbing a t-shirt, I pull it over my head, and then I locate a pair of grey sweats for Gabriella. "Here—" I toss them to her "—put 'em on." They'll be too big on her, just like my t-shirt, but the drawstrings are there for a reason.

"I'm wearing my shorts," she says, smiling curiously.

I chuckle and close the distance between us. Then I slide my hands over the backside of her thick thighs, and no, there's not a chance in hell she's going downstairs this way. "And you're showin' an awful lotta skin," I point out gruffly and give those pouty lips a kiss. "I'm the only one who gets to see you like this now." Taking a step back, I jerk my chin at the sweats in her hands. "Put 'em on."

"Bossy," she teases and puts them on. "Just 'cause you're my boyfriend now?"
I point to my chest. "I'm your man."

And she looks hot as fuck in my clothes. All I gotta do now is go over to Gabriella's house and tell Enzo I wanna take out his baby girl—his angel. I doubt there'll be trouble, though. As long as I respect his daughter, of course. I expect Pop will give me some speech, too. They've never seen me with a girlfriend...

Elisa will bitch at me. Mom will probably cry and ask for grandbabies. She's nuts like that. Doesn't matter I'm only seventeen and got years before I'll even think about that. Okay, I'll be seventeen in a week—whatever. Dad will calm her down. He does that.

"You ready?" I hold out my hand.

She smiles crookedly, flashing a cute dimple. "Just like that? Your family's gonna see us..."

"Just like that." I nod and she threads our fingers together. "I don't want you to act like I'm about to run, you know."

"I know. It's just—dammit, pinch me." She looks up at me with wide eyes.

My eyebrows shoot up. "What?"

"Pinch me," she insists and holds up our joined hands. "I gotta know if I'm dreaming."

"Oh..." I start laughing. "Too fucking cute." I give her a loud kiss on the lips, and then I usher her outta the room.

By the sound of it, upstairs is empty, and we walk down the stairs without seeing anybody. Downstairs is another matter; a shitload of noise is coming from the kitchen.
"I said now, Elisa." That's Dad; he's in the kitchen, too. "Take Julia wit'chu."

Rounding the last corner, Gabriella and I almost walk into my sisters who are coming outta the kitchen.

"There you are!" Elisa exclaims, eyes on Gabriella. "I've been looking all over for—" She sees our joined hands. When her furious glare comes my way, I'm smiling. "You've got to be freaking kidding me, Anthony!"

"What's shakin', bacon?" Julia wriggles her butt, and she grabs my other hand. "Dad told us we're not allowed in the kitchen. Zia Rosalie's crying a lot, and so is Teresa." She speaks of Rosalie and Emmett's youngest daughter. Hell, I can hear 'em both. "Hey, you're holding Gabby's hand! Hi, Gabby." She smiles up at my girl.

"Hey, Julia," Gabriella chuckles quietly. Like I am ignoring Elisa, Gabriella's doing the same, it seems.

"Anthony." Elisa taps her foot.

I kiss the top of Julia's head. "Go upstairs—watch a movie. Have you had breakfast yet?" She shakes her head no. "All right. Um, lemme talk to Dad, and then I can take youse out?"

I have a feeling my parents want privacy, especially when I hear a few words from Mom and Rosalie. Something about "ballistic", "trashing the house", and "he just left."

"Can we get pancakes?" Julia jumps up and down, tugging on my hand. It makes me chuckle. "Please, please?"

"Sure, piccolina," I agree. Facing Elisa, I suggest, "You help her get ready?"
"Can we talk later?" she counters.

I roll my eyes. "Yeah—whateva'."

Elisa and Julia disappear upstairs, and I spot Dee in the living room, so that should leave my parents, Rosalie, and Teresa in the kitchen.

"Maybe I should wait here," Gabriella says, apprehensive.

I nod, thinking that's a good idea. "I'll be right back." After stealing a quick kiss, I enter the kitchen and see Dad at the table and Mom, Rosalie, and Teresa at the kitchen island. While Dad seems frustrated and tired, Rosalie is obviously devastated about something. Mom's just trying to comfort Rosalie.

"Che succede?" I walk over to Pops, asking what's going on.

He puffs out his cheeks and scrubs his hands over his face. Like me, he's still in his sleepwear. "I don't even know where to begin." He stifles a yawn, and I sit down beside him. "And you look like you just got pussy."

"Dad—Jesus!" I hiss. Do I have a fucking sign on my forehead or what? For the record, I sure as hell didn't get pussy. I don't know, maybe I got something better...

He smirks wryly and cups my neck, bringing me a bit closer. "Don't forget who changed your diapers, tesoro. I know my own son."

I cock a brow. "Ma changed my diapers."

"Touché." He grins and sits back again, stretching his arms above his head. Another yawn follows.

"Seriously." I lean forward and rest my elbows on the table. "What's up with Rosalie?" Looking over my shoulder, I see her snot-sobbing and talking gibberish through wails.
"She got some bad news this morning."

I look to him in question.

He sighs. "Emmett—he was found dead last night outside'a Chicago."

My mouth opens then I close it again. My father's face is unreadable, almost casual, not wearing a particular expression at all. Somber, but...still like it's any other day. And I can't help but wonder...

The only thing Pop ever told me a those weeks ago was to tell people he was in Kansas City when he was really in Chicago. And then there was the time Felix and Dad asked me all those questions about Emmett and EJ and Chicago, and about what I'd seen... On three occasions, I saw Emmett and EJ meet with Chicago people in seedy places. The first time was just an accident; I was out with Francis, and the two of us saw Emmett pull in at a motel way off the Strip. He met with some guy there in the parking lot, exchanged envelopes, and then drove off. The only thing that made me even notice something was outta place was the Illinois plates on the other guy's car. The other two times was EJ, the last time being when I confronted him outside the Dunes.

"Um..." I shift in my seat, wanting to ask more about it.

"Don't, son," he says softly, always perceptive. "Keep it to yourself—don't ask."

Pursing my lips together, I nod with a dip of my chin.

 Fuck.

"So...what about EJ?" I ask hesitantly.

"That's why Rosalie's here," he answers, also resting his elbows on the table. "Apparently, EJ went nuts—lost it, and started trashing the house
after they found out about Emmett. Freaked her out. Anna's visiting Rosalie's family in Florida, so...after EJ took off, Rosalie came here with Teresa."

I don't know what to say.

I don't know what to think.

"Felix wants to talk to you soon—in a couple days," he tells me, keeping his voice low. "Nonno and I will be there, too."

My brows knit together. "What's it about?"

"You'll see."

Chapter 9

Translation:

*Bella micina/mia bella micina* = Beautiful kitten/my beautiful kitten

*Tu maledetto stronzo!* = You fucking bastard!

*Nient'altro che schifosa monnezza—ecco quello che sei!* Nothing but fucking scum—that's what you are!

*Datti una cazzo di calmata!* = Fucking cool it!

Hummingbird's POV

"Elisa!" I call as I place the container into a tote bag. Outside the kitchen window, I can see Sal and Carmine smoking and talking; I couldn't have done it better even if I'd planned it.

"Yeah?" she responds, walking into the kitchen.
I turn and smile at her. "Can you take this casserole over to Rosalie's?" I slide the tote across the kitchen island. In my periphery, I can see Junior paying attention, though he hides it well by focusing on his newspaper.

"Mom, her house is full of casseroles," Elisa sighs. "And you've already left four—one each day since..." She trails off, a sad look on her face.

Yeah. One each day since they found Emmett's body washed up somewhere at Lake Michigan.

Junior says it's probably the Chicago Outfit that killed him.

I'm sure he's right. I wouldn't know.

"Please just do me this favor," I say and walk around the island to hug her to me. Death is natural, and frequent in our family, but this close? It's not often we have to say goodbye to a family member this close. "Go out to Carmine." I wink at her. Maybe she can "console" Carmine. He's sporting a black eye after a fight at Dawn, and I know Elisa's dying to see him again. Carmine, not Anthony. No, it's the opposite with her brother. There's some beef there, and they refuse to tell me what it is. "He'll drive you."

She blushes and takes the casserole.

"No, he won't," Junior chuckles, eyes still on his paper. I frown at him, willing him to look up, but he doesn't. "That was cute, hummingbird. It's not gonna happen, but it was cute."

"What're you talking about?" I ask innocently.

Finally, he faces me. Oh, that smirk. "You didn't know? Carmine came to me—wans'ta take out my little angel." He points to his chest, and his smirk is replaced by his sinister smile. "Ova' my dead fuckin' body." I
glare at him, and this time he points out the window. "Angioletto, Sal will drive you to Rosalie's. End'a discussion."

"But, Daddy—"

"Don't test me," he snaps.

Elisa gives me a pleading look, but there's little I can do. Obviously, I will try to talk to him, but it's still Junior's decision.

With tears welling up in her eyes, our daughter stomps out of the kitchen with the food for Rosalie. Shortly after, the door is slammed shut.

I give my husband a look.

"What?!" he shouts and widens his arms.

"She likes him," I tell him, placing my hands on the island top. "I don't see the harm—"


"Juniuh, he came to you—respected you enough, and in this day and age..." I chuckle darkly, thinking about the guys who are so much worse, just waiting to exploit our baby girl.

"Respected me enough?" He smiles. "One might wonder where that respect was when he shoved his tongue down our daughter's throat."

I bite my tongue; I didn't know my husband was that well-informed.

"He's lucky to be alive," he says flatly and pushes away the paper. "I don't wanna hear another word on the matta'." He wipes his hands clean. "It's done, and Carmine has already been reassigned to your brother."
Looking out the window and then back to my husband, I connect the pieces. "Jesus Christ! Carmine wasn't in a fight at Dawn, was he? You hit him."

No response—just that stony expression.

"Can you please just explain it to me?" I beg.

His eyes soften, and I know he's coming around—Thank God. Not to the idea of Elisa and Carmine, but at least he's about to give an inch, explain to me.

"Hummingbird..." Reaching across the island, he takes my hands in his and gives them a squeeze. "I don't want our baby near any of this. Firstly, she is too young to think about guys."

I bite my tongue again, wanting to point out that Anthony was younger than Elisa is now when he first started with the girls. Now? Who knows how many broads he's been with? He's probably over at Dawn right now. I mean, I've barely seen him in the past few days.

"Secondly," he says, lowering his voice, "I refuse to have her marry a connected guy." Oh... "It won't happen, love. You know enough—why you're pushing for this is beyond me. But there's more than that—than what you see. And I don't want that for Elisa."

I nod slowly, processing, and sit down on a stool. With the past I have...yeah, I know a lot more than most women in this lifestyle. I was a goomah myself once, and I met others who were just like me. Emmett—I remember Angela, one of his mistresses. Heidi, of course—God rest her soul. The glint in Felix's eye never returned after she died, and I sincerely doubt he's faithful to Gianna now. They hate each other, for fuck's sake.
Most wiseguys have pieces on the side. Pieces like me and Heidi—what we once were. Strippers—there to pleasure Felix's guys. Junior happened to be my guy.

There's more, too. The late hours, the worrying, the never knowing, the secrecy, the lies...

It ain't easy being married to a made man, that's for sure. And...I don't want that for my Elisa. I'm lucky to have Junior, but he's a rare one. There's no way to guarantee Elisa will be as lucky.

"You get what I'm saying?" he murmurs.

I nod again; I do get it.

"She's better off. Less drama, no headaches..." He stares off into space, a small crease between his eyebrows. "The shit I deal with..."

I can't help but smile, 'cause this is one of those times when he mutters stuff to himself, and when I ask what he's talking about, he'll just say his regular "No matta', hummingbird."

Gently slipping free from his grasp, I go about my day and start writing a list of things I need to get from the store. Emmett's funeral is only a few days away, and just the day before, we have Anthony's seventeenth birthday, too. Emmett would've been in the ground by now if it hadn't been for the Chicago PD delaying it all.

"I mean, they're all really the same." The husband keeps muttering, much to my amusement, and I list off Anthony's favorite foods. I gotta take the opportunity to go shopping while Dominic and Julia are visiting with their grandparents. "Don't matter how often I say it—mind yo' fuckin' business, and yet... Always ends up in my lap."
Tapping the pen against my chin, I try to come up with why our oldest son has been acting all weird lately.

"Back in the day? I had to deal with Alec's comare when she blew up."

He's wearing this smile that never really leaves. Anthony, I mean. And I hope—God, I hope—it has nothing to do with the cheap women at Dawn. But what else could it be?

"Then Gianna's petty bullshit about Francis—that poor kid..."

Our son is hardly a guy to settle for one girl. No, that would make Mommy happy. Giving her grays is much more fun. I roll my eyes. Thank heavens for hair dye.

"Now Jasper's crap?"

I frown and tilt my head.

"Felix ain't happy, but what's he gonna do? They're married. Alice is Jasper's to deal with—regardless of who he fucks."

I stiffen, certainly paying attention now.

"Jesus Christ. If I hafta get in the middle, I'mma end up shootin' someone. Muthafuckin' drama."

"Ciccino." I smile sweetly as my husband looks up.

"Hmm?"

"I'm just gonna go to the store and pick up a few things for Anthony's party," I say softly, though I'm boiling underneath it all. "Anything I can get you?"

"Huh? Oh, uh...no." He gives me a quick smile and stands up. "I'll be in my office. Tell Carmine to drive you, by the way."
I nod and kiss his cheek. "See you later, Juniuh."

He disappears down the hall, calling a "Ti amo" over his shoulder.

I'm too furious to respond.

Knowing that Carmine and Sal won't drive us to any of the clubs our family owns, I call Alice and ask if Jasper's there. He isn't, so I call him at Dawn and tell him I have something important to discuss with him at his house.

"I'm busy, Bella," Jasper groans.

I smile darkly. "I'm not asking, Jasper," I sing. "Get home. Don't deny your little sister this." With that, I slam the phone down and storm outta the house, my hands balling into fists.

Mind your business, my husband always says...

Well.

**Anthony's POV**

As soon as I leave Enzo's kitchen, I feel like a huge weight has lifted off my shoulders, and I gotta wipe my clammy hands on my thighs. Jesus Christ. He's been away on business, so I couldn't talk to him until now, and had I shown up all over the place with Gabriella, it would've gotten back to him. I've essentially acted like Carmine—gone behind Enzo's back to be with his daughter. However, I lucked out whereas Carmine didn't. Thank God. I don't want that prick to touch my sister.

Enzo told me I was welcome to date his daughter as long as I treat her with respect and honor our relationship. Like my father, honor and respect are huge.
"How'd it go?" Gabriella asks me, meeting me outside Dad's office. She looks nervous, although I told her before she didn't have to be.

"Good." I touch her cheek. "You ready to go?" Gabriella sometimes pitches in as a waitress or she's her father's helper in the kitchen. "We could get some pizza." I have a few hours before I gotta be at Felix's house. I'm his new driver.

"I thought you were gonna talk to Elisa," she says, giving my palm a kiss.

I suck my teeth. "You had to remind me, huh?" I chuckle and wrap my arms around her shoulders, and she buries her face in my armpit, the little weirdo. Truth is, my sister's been more than compliant. I told her my plan was to talk to Gabriella's father before we announced Gabriella and my relationship. Yeah, at first I was basically ready to just face the world or whatever. But then I used the head on my shoulders and figured it was best that Enzo found out first. So...Gabriella and I have both avoided my house, and Elisa's bitching with me because I'm "stealing her friend."

"She's being difficult wid'me," she huffs, snaking her arms around my middle. "I told her she's still my friend—that not everything will be about you when I come over. She doesn't believe me."

I grin into her hair. "What'chu talking about? Everything will be about me. Don't think any different. Just dump my sister."

She giggles and playfully slaps my chest. "Funny you. I'm serious hea', Anthony. We actually fought yesterday, and I don't like causing a rift between youse. Oh, and she called me a pushova' for 'giving in to your advances.' Some shit like that." Now she looks mad, like an adorable little kitten. "Can you believe her?"
"How did you respond?" I laugh, enjoying this side of her. Gabriella is usually soft-spoken and sweet, pretty shy too, but I'm beginning to see another side as well. She's got balls. She's feisty.

A couple days ago, one of the new waitresses hit on me, but my girl set her straight. It was a cute sight, not to mention fucking hot. She was all, "Stop lookin' at my man." *Madonn',* she knows how to make my cock hard.

"I just called her a brat and walked away." She sighs and drops her forehead to my chest.

"I'll talk to her tonight after dinner," I murmur. I tilt up her face and kiss her on the lips. *Bella micina.* She takes on a dazed expression, and I nudge her into my pops' office for some privacy. Once the door is closed, I press her up against it and lock the door with a quiet *snick.* "That's you, baby—" I kiss her fingers "—*mia bella micina.*" It's fitting, calling her my kitten.

Dipping down, I claim her mouth, sliding my tongue against hers, while my hands grab onto her luscious ass.

"Fuck." I groan. "Can I touch you?" Since we've been lying low, I haven't exactly had the chance to be alone with her a lot—especially not in a bed—and my balls will explode if I don't get my hands on her soon. "You gotta tell me how far I'm allowed to go." I squeeze her ass and grind my dick against her stomach.

"Anthony, I'm not completely innocent—you can touch me," she moans into the kiss. "I want you to."

But I fucking stop. Breathing heavily, I grab her jaw and break away from her. I stare down at her, mind spinning. "What's that suppos'ta mean—not completely innocent." My jaw clenches at the thought of other
motherfuckers touching what's mine. Kissing—fuck, I can accept that, I guess, and I've already drawn that conclusion, that she's kissed before. But more than that? What the fuck?

"Oh, um." Her cheeks flush, visible even with her natural tan, and she bites down on her lip. "There was one guy..."

"Who?" Internally, I'm seething. And consider my hard-on dead. "And what did'ju do?"

"Anthony." She gives me a look. "You wanna talk about past conquests? Really?"

I chuckle darkly. "Don't be cute." Unlike girls, guys fuck with one goal—to get off. That's it. Girls want hearts. "That's different." My past doesn't mean a fucking thing. But if Gabriella's been with some other dude, feelings must've been involved.

She rolls her eyes. "It was one guy last fall. We kissed—touched a little. So what?"

I nod and take a step back. "How little?"

"Jesus Christ." She runs a hand through her hair and scoffs. "He took me on a couple dates—we kissed, he used his fing—um." She blushes more, looks more flustered.

"He finger-fucked you?" I keep my voice low and bend down slightly to be at her level. "That's it, though?" At this point, I don't trust myself to touch her. Possessiveness like I've never felt blazes through me like a fucking wildfire.

She nods and averts her eyes.
"Did you come?" I gotta know. I also gotta know who it was. "Who was it?"

"No, I didn't," she whispers, still looking away. "And I'm not telling you who it was. You'll do something—I know it."

Damn fucking straight, I will. "I won’t. But I need to know." Call me a goddamn masochist.

She shoots me a glare. "It was Jacob in my calculus class, okay?" she snaps. "He wanted more; I didn't, so I called it off."

I look down and rub my jaw, thinking. This bothers me more than I thought it could. 'Cause she's mine. Growing up, I heard how perfect Mom was for Dad—that she was a good girl and waited for my father. Pop really can't stop talking about her. And since I hit my teens, Ma's been on my ass to settle for one of the good ones.

"Anthony—"

She's cut off when the phone rings.

Blowing out a breath in frustration, I tear myself away and pick up the phone on Dad's desk. "Edward Maisano's office," I bark out.

"Thank God!" It's Dad. "I need you to drive over to Jasper and Alice's. I'm on my way, too, but you're closer."

"What's up?" I scowl. He's being all snappy and pissed.

"Your mother's fists—that's what!" he shouts. "Alice called me and asked why Isabella's demanding Jasper to get there, and then I remembered what I accidently told—fuck it! Just hurry ova' there! Fucking women, man!" He hangs up.
"Fuck," I spit out and slam down the phone again. "I gotta go." I move toward the door.

"Wait, Anthony!" She puts a hand on my chest. Eyes pleading. "You can't just leave. I mean, is this it? Are we over? You're mad—"

I laugh, even though I feel like punching a wall. "Yeah, I'm fucking mad, Gabriella." My next words come out as a threat instead of a promise. "But no, we're not over. We'll never be over."

~oOo~

I pull into Jasper and Alice's driveway only seconds after Jasper does, and my mom's waiting for him. She and Alice both stand near the house, but as Jasper pulls over to the side, my mother starts walking toward him.

Frowning, I park a few spaces behind Jasper and get out, wondering what's up. But then I figure it's best to ask questions later, 'cause Mom takes off in a run. With fury flashing in her eyes. Toward Jasper, who, judging by his stance, is confused. Even wearing a dress and high heels, Ma's goddamn fast.

"Tu maledetto stronzo!" She calls him a fucking bastard as she reaches him and smacks the side of his head. Hard. "How could you?!"

"Oh, shit." I take off, too. Though, not fast enough. Mom whacks Jasper wherever she can, while he's covering his head and shouting at her to stop. "Mom! What the fuck?!"

"Think you're so slick!" Mom actually spits on Jasper. Then she removes one of her heels and throws it at my uncle's head. "Nient'altro che schifosa monnezza—eccio quello che sei!" Now he's nothing but scum, she says.

"Bella!" he yells angrily. "Goddammit!"
"Mom!" I reach them as Mom's going for her other shoe, and it's high in the air when I slide an arm around her waist to pull her back.

"No! You let me go, Anthony!" She throws the shoe, hitting Jasper in the groin. "Cheating motherfucker!"

He groans and doubles over in pain.

"Jesus." I'm in disbelief. "What the fuck is the matter wit'chu?" I shout at her. Cazzo, she's a strong little shit! She struggles against me, clawing at air to get to her big brother. "Mom! Datti una cazzo di calmata!" I tell her to fucking cool it.

"I'm calm!" she snarls in reply. With a labored, huffed breath, she goes slack in my arms. "Lemme go."

And I make the rookie mistake of loosening my hold...

I'm so fucking dumb.

"Two-bit scumbag!" she screams, charging at Jasper once more. With her small fists, she pounds on his back and sides. "Don't you remember Mom and Dad?! You hated the shit he pulled on her!" She manages to knee him in the balls before I pull her back again. I grunt, both arms around Mom's middle. "Yeah, I'd like to see you work that needledick now, punk!"

"Quit it, for fuck's sake!" I shout.

"You're—" Jasper coughs and kneels down on the pavement, cupping his crotch "—you're lucky you're Junior's wife, Bella."

"OH!" I glare at him. "You threatening your own sister?!"

Mom spits in his direction. "You sicken me!"
When I look up at the house, I see that Alice is just standing there. Arms folded across her chest. A blank expression.

Just then, the sound of wheels screeching against pavement alerts us to Dad's arrival. He looks furious as he slams the car door shut and stalks toward us. Or Mom, more correctly. And for once in his life, he's not in a suit. Dad in a black tracksuit is a fucking sight. Had I not been shocked, beyond confused, and pissed, I woulda laughed.

"You okay?" He jerks his chin at me.

I nod.

Mom's fury simmers right below the surface as Dad grasps her arm and pulls her to him. "Did he touch you?" he asks tightly. She shakes her head no, and I see a flash of countless emotions flit over Dad's features. He's pissed at Mom—that much is clear—or fucking livid, but I think he's also relieved she wasn't harmed. But yeah, I expect there will be some shouting at home later.

'Cause my father doesn't tolerate sticking your nose in someone else's business.

"Get in the goddamn car." He points in the right direction, and when she opens her mouth to speak, he grits out, "You wanna know what's best for you—don't fucking argue with me." His jaw ticks.

She picks up her shoes, shakes her fist at Dad behind his back, and walks toward the car.

I stifle my grin.

My mom's fucking badass.
"We cool?" Dad gives Zio Jasper a hand and helps him up. "She got you good, huh?"

Jasper doesn't say anything; I think he's too murderous and in too much pain.

It's humiliating to take a beating from a woman.

He just nods with a dip of his chin and then looks toward the house. Just as Alice turns around and disappears inside. Like nothing's happened.

"How about we meet up at Dawn?" Dad looks to him, maybe reading his face. I don't fucking know.

"Nah, I'm good." Jasper brushes off some dirt from his pants, wincing. "I'll have a talk with my wife—"

"Let me rephrase. We're going to Dawn." Dad scratches his eyebrow with his car key. "You won't step a foot in that house and take out your anger on Alice."

Other than Jasper gritting his teeth, there's no response.

Dad lets out a whistle, catching my attention, and I face him. He tosses me his keys. "Drive Mom home. I'll take your car."

I nod and hand over my own keys. "Yo, where's Sal?" It just hit me—he must've driven Ma here.

"Carmine drove her," he answers. "And I bet Mom told him to scram until she needed him."

"And that kid is gonna be my new driver?" Jasper mutters.

Dad ignores him, and I'm dismissed.

So, I drive Mom home.
She's quiet until we're almost home. Silently stewing, wringing her hands in her lap, it's as if she's miles away.

"Can you do me a favor, topolino?" she whispers, looking out the window.

I nod even though she's not facing me. "What?"

"When you get married, please don't cheat on your wife."

I frown and make the last turn, getting onto our street.

"I know it's common..." She lets out a soft breath. "But it destroys the good in a marriage."

Pulling up on our driveway, I side-eye her, hesitating. "Has... Has Dad ever...?"

"No." She shakes her head, and I'm beyond fucking relieved for some reason. Not "some"—I know why, but...in the past, I can't say I've given a shit. "I trust your father. He's one of the good ones—he shows it constantly."

*One of the good ones.*

Yeah, I've heard that before. In other conversations.

"Respect your wife and she will respect you in return." She nods firmly. "A happy wife makes a happy life."

I've heard her say that before, too.

"I won't betray her," I say quietly, killing the engine. I'm still green in the business, but I'm not fucking stupid. There's an unspoken law—what goes on outside the home...there are simply things we don't talk about. There's a reason wives and girlfriends aren't allowed near the clubs our family owns. What happens there doesn't belong at home. And what men do...
I snort, grinning a little to myself. "She'd kill me." Looking down at my lap, I think about Gabriella—how hurt she'd be if... "I don't want to, anyway."

I mean, I'm too young to speak about the future like that, but growing up in my parents' house has still offered me an insight, I guess. And I've seen the difference between our house and, for example, Felix's house. He's nothing like Dad is with Mom. Gianna and Felix are always bitter. Same goes for Rose and...Emmett. Well, he's dead now. I wonder if Rose is secretly happy about that or...eh, I have no fucking clue. What I do know is that I've had a good childhood.

"You talk like you already know your future wife, hon."

Oh, shit. "Uh..." I chuckle awkwardly and get outta the car. Mom follows, now staring at me intently. Fuck. "What?" I wave her off, walking up the two stone steps, and dig out my house keys. "Me—getting married? Get outta here with that shit, Ma."

She hums, entering the house first. "You're not good at lying, baby."

I'm not fucking lying. Gabriella's only been on my radar for a couple months. Come on. Way too soon to even speak about it.

*Keep telling yourself that, man.*

"Who is she?" Mom faces me full-on in the foyer, hands on her hips.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Then I have her shaking fist in my face. "Don't bullshit me, son." She huffs, being all cute. "Why you gotta lie to me, huh?" She points to her chest. "Tell Mommy."
I grin, kiss her on the forehead, and walk farther into the house, aiming for the kitchen. 'Cause I'm fucking starving. "You're so nosy," I laugh. "You can make me something to eat instead." I walk backward, smiling innocently.

She cocks a brow, following. "If you tell me who she is."

I suck my teeth. "Maybe it's a stripper at Dawn or Twilight—" I dodge her hand, laughing my ass off. "Oh! What's with the violence lately?"

"What's with turning my hair gray?!" she shoots back.

"Your hair's not gray." My brows knit together and I come to a stop by the kitchen island. "What're you talking about?" She's nuts.

"It's called hair dye," she says dryly and opens the fridge. "Now, I can either make you a nice meal with this delicious entrecôte I picked up at your uncle's deli—" she holds up a meat packet with Alec's deli's logo on the white wrapping paper on it "—or you can make your own damn food."

I grimace. "That's harsh."

"Deal with it." She juts out her chin. "All I want is a name."


"Your girl's name, you wackadoo!"

I laugh.

"Topolino," she whines. Then there's the pout. "Tell me. Do you really have a girlfriend? Is that why you've been on cloud nine these past few days?"

Fuck me. My cheeks heat up and I avert my eyes, wondering if she's serious. Cloud nine? Have I acted differently?
"You do have a girlfriend!" Mom's voice is accusatory, but when I look her in the eye, I see hope. And a beaming smile. "Please, please tell me!"
Closing the fridge, she walks over to me and grasps my hands. "Is it someone I know? Oh, don't tell me it's Amanda—Elisa's friend. She's cute and nice and all, but..." She scrunches her nose. "You need a good, Italian girl."

"It's not her." I shake my head and sigh, then look up at the ceiling for a moment. As if I'll find answers there. As if God will spare me. "Christ." I look to Ma again and admit, "Fine—yeah, it's someone you know. A'ight?"

"Her name."

I roll my eyes.

"Anthony..."


Her mouth pops open, followed by her eyes widening.

"Gabriella?" she whispers, astonished. "Gabriella Sindone? Enzo's—"

"Yeah." I interrupt, rolling my eyes. "You know any other Gabriella?"

"Oh, but—" She gasps, and then her beaming smile is back. "This is fucking amazing, topolino! Gah!" She hugs me tight, and I can't help but laugh. She, on the other hand, starts crying. "I think she can be perfect for you!" There's a squeal mixed with the tears. "She's such a sweetheart. And a good girl." She takes a step back, looks up at me, and nods with lips pursed. "Yeah, a good girl for my Anthony." She carefully swipes her fingers under her eyes and laughs a little. "Oh, you just made my day, honey."
I clear my throat. "Right. She's...she's just the best." Sarcasm laces my voice; I keep thinking about what she told me earlier. I mean...what if she lied? What if there's more? More dudes, more...whatever. "Her last boyfriend probably thinks the same." I smile darkly.

Motherfucker finger-banged my girl. Yeah, shit's just peachy.

"What?" My mother frowns. "What's with that face?" She points to mine.

"Nuthin'." I shrug it off and go to the fridge, wanting a soda. "Just didn't know she got around—whatever."

"You mean Jacob Vitarelli—the boy she dated last year?"

"Oh—" I nod, instantly pissed. "—so you know, huh? Is that common fuckin' knowledge? Any other cat I should be lookin' out for?"

She scoffs, tears long gone. "Jesus Christ. Is that what this is about—that's she's had a boyfriend before you?"

I don't reply, anger boiling. Instead I fish out my smokes and open the kitchen window.

"If you end things with her because of that, it's your loss, son," she says matter-of-factly. "Now, I know Dad's filled you with a bunch of crap about good girls and—"

"And you haven't, Ma?" I chuckle humorlessly and take a drag from my smoke. "It's all I heard growing up—gotta marry a good girl."

She nods, conceding. "You're right. But my definition of a good girl isn't the same as your father's." She cocks her head. "You know all those times he's told you how good I was?"

"Like I could forget," I say dryly.
"Well." She smirks and arches a brow. "What if I told you I was really a stripper at Dawn before he snatched me up?"
Chapter 10

Mog trivia / truths in this chapter:

Steve Wynn did buy the Dunes—today, it's where the Bellagio stands.

Circus Circus, a hotel and casino in Vegas, opened the Grand Slam Canyon on August 23rd in '93. It's a huge indoor amusement park, and today it's known as the Adventuredome.

What you'll read about Circus Circus being controlled by the Chicago Outfit is also true. Same goes for the piece about Anthony "The Ant" Spilotro.

Lastly, hotels and casinos known for their involvement with the Outfit: the Stardust, the Dunes, Circus Circus, the Riviera, and the Tropicana—most of these, though not all, way back, between the '50s and '70s. Or even earlier.

Translation:

*Moulinyans* = derogatory slang for African Americans.

*Pazzi* = slang for crazy, loony, nuts.

*I giovani di oggi* = Youngsters these days.

Junior's POV

While my hummingbird cries into her tissue, I use mine to wipe sweat off my forehead. It's ridiculously hot out, and the last thing I want to be at is a fucking funeral. But the priest goes on and on about Emmett...

Rosalie puts on a good show; she wails and sobs and cries for her dead husband. Meanwhile, when he was alive, she couldn't stop hating him.

Felix and EJ comfort her—EJ who looks too stoic, too stone-faced.
Anna and Teresa, Rosalie's daughters, cry to themselves—more genuine.

"Bro," Alec whispers, nudging me. "Over there." I follow his gaze to the trees over by the edge of the cemetery, expecting to see Feds, but that's not it. "Isn't that...?"

I nod subtly. It's Angela—Emmett's old goomah from back in the '70s and '80s. Truth be told, I thought Emmett ended things with her. And maybe he did, but why the fuck is she here? It's disrespectful toward Rosalie.

Angela's far away, but I recognize her. And if I do, so will my wife.

A few days ago, when she whacked the shit outta Jasper, I tore her a new one as soon as we were alone that night. Personally, I don't really give a fuck, but I gotta draw the line somewhere. And I've fucking told her—if it's not our business, we stay the hell away from it. Still, my fiery wife says she don't regret it. I screamed at her, but the only thing she apologized for was embarrassing me. And...I don't know—I guess I don't care enough about this particular matter, 'cause I wasn't embarrassed.

I was just pissed she went against my word. But no matter, it's all good now. We celebrated our son's seventeenth birthday the other day and it was all smiles. However, if Isabella spots Angela now—a woman she was close with back in the day—I'll have another fight, more fucking drama, on my hands, and that's the last thing I want. It ain't fucking happening.

"Get her out of here," I bitch quietly. I'd go over myself, but Isabella would notice, then she'd follow me, and she'd want to be buddy-buddy with Angela again. "And make sure she goes silently."

Without a sound, my brother slips away and heads toward the tree line.

And I return my focus to the funeral that's lasting a fucking eternity.
"This is awful, Juniuh." Isabella sniffles, whimpers, blows her nose, and leans against me. "Just awful." I hand her a new tissue and kiss her temple. "Grazie, ciccino. I mean, Rose is gonna let herself go completely." Some sniveling. "At least when Emmett—God rest his soul—" she does the Sign of the Cross "—at least when he was alive, Rose made sure there was food on the table. But now?" She becomes weepy again. "Poor babies."

Yeah, that's why she's sad. My wife, bless her, fears Rosalie will spend less time cooking.

"We'll help, Mom," Elisa comforts softly, standing on the other side of Isabella. My angioletto's all teary-eyed, too. "I'll tell Rosalie I can babysit Teresa—any time. Okay?" I give Elisa an approving nod, 'cause her words are helping. "And, if you think about it...I mean, Anna and EJ don't even live at home anymore. Anna has her own life in Carson City, and EJ..."

Sighing, I glance around me—at all the people who showed up—and then take a peek over my shoulder; my little brother's currently speaking to Angela.

Looks like he's handling it.

Taking another glance around me, I spot Anthony, who appears to be as bored as I feel. But he's also anxious to talk to his girl. Every now and then, he looks over to where Gabriella stands with her family, and... Heh, I chuckle under my breath. Whenever he looks away, it's Gabriella's turn to stare. I shake my head at the youngsters. I giovani di oggi. Gotta be so fucking coy.

There's been some beef between 'em, but then my wife talked them down or something—I don't get involved in that shit; I don't know what it was about—but Anthony's been busy, beyond that, so they haven't talked shit out yet.
The dark circles under Anthony's eyes tell me how exhausted he is, but Felix and I won't relent. He's been assigned a job, and he's gonna carry it out. It's time to toughen him up a little. Being Felix's driver and watchdog is a good start. Isabella's asked why he hasn't been home in the past few days, but he handled that well—said he was with Francis, who covered for him.

His only break came when he turned seventeen and we held a birthday dinner for him at Stella. It was a small affair since it was so close to Emmett's funeral. It was only our immediate family and my parents; we'll have a party for him in a few weeks when this has settled.

But when we get outta here today, I'm sure my son will corner Gabriella to fix whatever's been wrong.

He thinks he's so smooth—that I don't know Gabriella spent the night in his room after Julia's birthday party. Good thing Enzo don't know that about his daughter, though. Hell, if Elisa had spent the night at some guy's house...

*Forget about it.*

~oOo~

Afterward, we all gather at Rosalie's house—mainly, I think, so the women can gossip.

Most men head outside to the backyard, and that's where I sit now with my father. We found a corner in the shadows, two loungers, drinks...I ain't moving until it's time to go home.

"You read this, son?" Dad gives the paper in his hands a look as I loosen my tie. "That fuckin' Jew, Steve Wynn—worse than the goddamn moulinyans." He flips his hand under his chin and then takes a puff on his cigar. "He's takin' over Vegas."
I huff a chuckle and stab an artichoke heart with a toothpick and shove it in my mouth. My antipasto plate's full—great stuff from Stella and my brother's deli.

Dad goes on. "He thinks Americanizing his last name will change everything? Now the Dunes will go down in a few weeks, fuckin' spectacle—and he's already got the Mirage! God knows what he'll buy next. Bet he won't stop until he owns the Strip."

"Yo, Pops!" Anthony walks over, saving me from my dad's racist mutterings. I couldn't give two shits about it. "The Sindones just took off." I wipe my mouth with the napkin tucked into my shirt and give him a look to go on. "Any chance I can leave, too? I gotta talk to, um...yeah."

"To, um...yeah." I laugh and retrieve my smokes from the chest pocket of my suit jacket. But I don't light one up. "Why you say it like that—the Sindones." I smirk up at him and lean back against the lounger. "There's only one Sindone you care about—ain't that right, tesoro?"

My baby boy fucking blushes.

"So, can I go?" he asks impatiently, fidgeting with his cufflinks. "Too fuckin' hot for a suit—Madonn'." I open my mouth to speak, but Anthony beats me to it. "Yeah, yeah, I know. If you want respect, you gotta wear a suit. I know, Dad. You don't hafta tell me. Again."

I shake my head. "You're missing the point. You can get respect wearing a fucking garbage bag." My pop nods next to me. "It's about making respect look good."

"Listen to your father, Anthony," Dad says. "'Cause the day wiseguys conduct business looking like street corner hustlers..." He shakes his head and returns to his paper. "What is the world coming to..."
"Fine," Anthony sighs. Twirling a finger, he adds, "Back to my question—can I go?"

"Did'ju talk to Felix?" I cock a brow.

"Um, yeah." He looks around as if to see if anyone can hear. Then he closes the distance and leans down. "He gave me a new gig," he says quietly. I nod for him to go on. "Joseph and I are gonna follow EJ 'round for a while."

I figured that was coming. Like I said earlier, EJ's stone-faced. He hasn't said shit about Emmett dying since the day he found out and had his tantrum, and his face tells no tales, either. And that's bothering us. Felix telling his son and Anthony to keep an eye out is good.

"Joseph's starting now," he says. "And I'mma start tomorrow morning, take over."

"You got a new car for that?" If he's gonna follow EJ, it wouldn't be safe if Anthony drove his little '92 Miata. Too conspicuous and unsafe for that job.

"Felix's hooking me up." He takes another peek over his shoulder. "And when I get home tonight, can I talk to you about somethin'? It's about—I saw some shit yesterday."

I purse my lips and point to my chest. "Does it concern me?"

He groans in frustration and sits down at the end of the lounger. "No—mother of Christ, why's it always this way wit'chu? Just because it's got nothing to do with you don't mean it's not important for you to know."

"Is this something I need to know, then?" I tilt my head, tryin'a get a better read on him. Whatever he's seen... I don't know. He will see plenty
as a driver. There will always be something. But he can't come running to me each time and ask for advice on what to do.

When he caught Jasper fucking Milo's Carlotta—my youngest kids' driver's girlfriend—it concerned me. I also told Anthony afterward that I only wanna know if it's my business or about business.

"It's about Felix," he whispers.

I make sure my expression gives away nothing. "Private affairs or business?"

In my periphery, I can see I've got my father's attention.

Anthony clears his throat and chuckles nervously. "Very fucking private, I hope—"

"Then you keep it to yourself, tesoro." I keep my voice quiet, not too strict. "If it doesn't interfere with my family or my business, you don't come to me." I reach forward and squeeze his neck. "And if this is about Felix's personal life, then you take it to your grave. Capisce?" I smack his cheek, getting a grin from him.

He nods. "All right." Blowing out a breath, he stands up and smooths down his suit jacket. "Thank you." Leaning over, he kisses my cheek. "So, I can go now?" He walks over to Dad, and I nod. "Okay." After kissing his nonno's cheek too, he gives a wave and heads for the door, presumably to say goodbye to Isabella.

"He's a good kid, son."

I sigh and light up the cigarette I pulled out earlier. "Yeah..." I couldn't agree more, really. But I'm glad we've got plenty of time before he's gotta prove himself. Time I'll use to make sure he understands how you stay on top of things. Listen, learn. Always expect another person to have a
hidden agenda. In our world, it's about getting ahead. Which we don't fucking do by asking nicely.

Lowmen gotta fight and show their worth.

Men in my position or higher gotta watch their backs.

"Felix has plans for him, you know."

I do know. And I'm both proud and resigned. Joseph—Felix's oldest—will probably one day hold my father's position as consigliere. And Anthony...

Mere weeks ago, I had no clue what the future looked like. I still don't, but the picture is getting clearer. Who other than Anthony, anyway? Joseph will make a great lawyer, but he's got no street smarts. He doesn't have that hunger for power, either. And there are no other Coluccis. EJ don't count—fucking piece of shit. Francis...good kid, but half-German.

That leaves a Maisano—part of the Colucci family for generations. My great-grandfather was actually boss before Carlisle. It's been our two families since back in the boot.

"Daddy-o!" That'd be Julia running over. She's a little outta breath by the time she plops down on my lounger, nearly knocking over my plate. I move it to the side table and stub out my smoke in the ashtray. "Hi, Nonno. What's shakin', bacon?"

I chuckle and brush some hair away from her face. Like my hair, hers is a couple shades lighter than Isabella's. "That your new catchphrase, princess? You say that whenever I see you now."

Dominic and Julia are the only two of my children who actually enjoy being kids. Anthony and Elisa are in a hurry to become adults, but my youngest—God bless 'em. Even at eleven, Julia's the same weirdo she was when she was seven. The fact that she's so tiny helps me see her as my
little princess—the one she's been since she was born. And though Dominic loves to copy his big brother, I can count on him being a kid a while longer. He'd rather read his comics and...well, the dirty mags under his bed.

"I say it 'cause it's funny," she says matter-of-factly. "But everyone's so boring today." She sticks out her tongue at the people in the yard. "Dee and I wanna watch a movie or go in Zia Rose's pool, but Mom said no."

"Youse better listen to Mama, then." I nod, thinking Isabella's right.

She sulks and steals a slice of marinated mozzarella off my plate. "Did you try the cake? It's better than this." She pops it into her mouth.

"I will. Or you could get it for me." I grin and take her hand, kissing her fingers. "Maybe a cup of coffee, too?"

"So, that's why you had kids," she giggles.

I playfully punch her chin. "How did you get so smart, huh?"

"Mama says God gave me a smart mother and that's why."

I bark out a laugh. "Oh, she said that, did she?" My fucking wife. Gotta love the woman. "You know what—you're a little ball-buster just like her, too."

She nods and widens her eyes. "Anthony said that to me befoah—that I got some set'a balls."

Dad cracks up. "He said what?"

"Why did he say that?" I chuckle.

She shrugs. "Cuz I took his soda. But he wasn't mad—can't stay mad at me." Now she looks proud.
"That's because you're his piccolina." I give one of her pigtails a tug. "How about that coffee and cake now?"

To my luck, she nods and runs off. Which can only mean one thing: she's really fucking bored. 'Cause what eleven-year-old hurries to do their parent's bidding otherwise?

"Ah, some peace and quiet." I sigh and lean back once more.

Dad snorts. "You're too young to want that much peace and quiet."

"Shut up," I laugh. "And gimme some'a that." I hold out my hand for his cigar. He makes a face and hands it over. "Cuban. Nice." I take a puff, appreciating the flavor. I prefer cigarettes, but I enjoy a cigar here and there, usually provided by my father. "If there's one thing the Cubans can get right..." I trail off, and Dad nods.

Unfortunately, the peace and quiet don't last that long.

Next to trail over is my brother. Julia returns too, with my cake and coffee, and then she's off again.

"Did you try the shaved prosciutto, bro?" He sits on the lounger next to me. "Perfect, ain't it?"

I nod in reply then get to the point. "What did Angela want?" I shovel some cake into my mouth, easily recognizing one of my wife's countless recipes after almost twenty years. Fucking delicious. This is some strawberry chocolate version. Three layers and a whole lotta buttercream.

"She just wanted to pay her respects," Alec answers and lights up a smoke. I arch a brow at what he said, and he smirks. "I know. I told her she had no fucking right—wife's territory, not an old goomah's. So, she told me she wasn't some 'old goomah.' Says Emmett never ended things with her."
I roll my eyes and take a sip of my coffee. "So what, she wants money now?" Wouldn't surprise me. But it's not our responsibility. That's all Emmett.

"No, Emmett set her up—she's good." He pauses. "You know they had kids?"

"Nope. Don't know, don't care." Having kids with your mistress isn't exactly rare. Hell, I had three with Isabella. Only Julia was born within our marriage. "Unless they're like EJ. We don't need more pazzi like him."

Alec chuckles. "Nah, two daughters—both under ten."

Good. That means less trouble.

Speaking of daughters...Elisa walks over, and I wonder if I'm gonna eat my statement—that daughters mean less trouble. 'Cause...as my wife has noticed that Anthony is far from the sweetheart she first thought, I've noticed the same with my angel. Elisa, still an angel, but there's a fucking devil on her shoulder.

"What's up, angioletto?" I squint up at her, the evening sun having found our shaded spot.

She gives me her sweetest smile, which can only mean one thing. "Daddy, you know I love you, right?"

I fish out my wallet. "How much?"

"Two hundred?" She looks hopeful.

I twirl a finger. "Try again."

"Ugh." She pouts. "A hundred and fifty?"
"Lemme save us some time." I slap a fifty in her outstretched hand. "And you're giving me a smooch, too."

"Thanks, Dad." She smiles and kisses my cheek. "But you know I kiss you for free, right?"

"OH!" Dad and Alec laugh.

And I give Elisa another fifty for that.

"You're so easy, Juniuh!" Isabella shouts from across the yard. "You even ask what she's doing with the money?"

I grasp Elisa's wrist and narrow my eyes at her. "What's Mom talking about?"

Elisa groans. "I'm going out with a few friends—that's it!"

"God, you're such a little liar!" Isabella hurries over and takes the money from our daughter's hand. Behind her, my sister's laughing with Maria, Alec's wife. "Tell Daddy who you're going out with and what you'll be doing."

"And this is why I only have one kid." Alec laughs and gets up to leave.

I give Elisa a look. *Start talkin'.*

"Fine!" She stomps her foot. "Francis got us tickets to the Grand Slam Canyon."

My brows knit together and my eyes flick between Elisa and Isabella. "The new amusement park at Circus Circus that opened a couple weeks ago?"

Isabella nods, knowing too fucking much about business. She knows we don't like it when our kids go near that hotel and casino, mainly because it's still run by the Chicago Outfit. They're deep into it, hiding under other
names, but we're not stupid. It's the one hotel and casino in Vegas that Chicago still has their claws in—all starting back in the '60s when Anthony Spilotro, otherwise known as The Ant, a famous mobster from the Outfit, got involved. Now, he's been six feet under since '86, but there are still others.

After having lost the Stardust back in '85 to Sam Boyd and now the Dunes to Steve Wynn, the Outfit is desperate when it comes to Vegas. Skimming money at Circus Circus is all they've got left, and with the Gaming Commission after 'em, it won't be long until the last piece'a shit outta Chicago books it. But until then, we're careful. And especially with Emmett's recent dealings with the Outfit.

"Also, it's only gonna be Francis and Elisa." Isabella juts out her chin. "But I didn't see Francis asking you for permission, ciccino."

I chuckle—this shit again... "Francis and Elisa are cousins, hummingbird—"

"Third cousins with no blood relation! That's nothing." She turns to Elisa. "Are you gonna tell me it's not a date, huh?"

Oh, forget about it. Cousins can't date—they're just friends! Family!

My wife's being a nut.

I wave it all off and pull out two new fifties for my angel. "Elisa baby, you can go, but Milo will be wit'chu." Dominic and Julia's driver can chill in the background. Sal's getting old; guarding two kids is too much, and Carmine, that fuck, don't work for me any longer.

"Thank you, Daddy," Elisa sings, and after sliding her mother a look that says "I win," she skips off.

Isabella scoffs and folds her arms over her chest. "You're gonna regret this one day, Juniu—mark my words."
"Sure, honey." I humor her.

While she storms off, being all cute, my brother returns, leans down, and whispers something in my ear.

I look up to him in question, lips pursed.

"What do you say?" he asks quietly. "It'll take an hour—tops."

I nod slowly and glance in the direction Anthony took off minutes ago.

"He still here?" I ask.

"Yeah." He lets out a chuckle. "Mom won't stop talking about the old days."

Poor Anthony. When my mother gets going, there's no stopping her. Where they live, out in Henderson, it's pretty quiet. So, when Dad brings Mom in to town, she talks everyone's ears off.

"Yeah, all right." I blow out a breath and nod. "It'll be good for him. And give him a little something—" I subtly rub my fingertips together, indicating money. No fucking drugs, which my brother would've assumed had I only gone with "something." That's his business. Alec controls the majority of the drug trade in Vegas. "Encourage him—but make no fucking mistake." I point a finger to him. "Money's one thing—"

"I get it, I get it. What do you take me for?" He widens his arms.

Good. We don't get our own people involved in that shit. Better leave it to the desperate scumbags on welfare—they do the actual dealing. It's nothing Alec touches. The merchandise goes from him to his soldiers, and they spread it all over the city.

"If he does well, I'll include him at the next high-roller game," I think out loud, nodding. Now that Emmett's six feet under, his business has to be
divided. As far as I know, Felix is giving Riley more to do. And Riley's good with gambling, casinos and shit. But I'm gonna take over Emmett's weekly poker games. It's good money, ten Gs just to sit in, but it can get a little heated when the players run outta dough. It'll be good to see how Anthony would handle that.

"Okay, I'll catch him before he leaves." Alec takes a step back. "I'll call you later."

"All right." I watch him go inside, wondering if Dominic is next to come over. After all, three of my four kids have. And I kinda miss the little fucker. It's been a while since the two of us hung out.

"Anthony will prove himself useful," Dad says pensively.

I nod once. "I know."
Chapter 11

Translation

*Cugine* = young gangster/soldier hoping to get made.

*Ciccioleone* = Term of endearment—mix between "ciccio" and "leone" which translates to cute lion.

Anthony's POV

There's always some shit coming up when I got plans.

Before I leave Rosalie's house, Zio Alec corners me and asks me to step out with him for a bit to take care of something.

That crap turns out to be that we're gonna put some, uh...*pressure*...on one of his dealers. Show'im we mean business.

Nothing outta the ordinary.

The gig I run with my cousin Nico, even when he's in Kansas City, involves a lot of *pressure*, too. 'Cause...while being Felix's driver is a fucking honor, it doesn't exactly pay the big bucks. So, Nico and I run our own little thing on the side, although we do kick up—pay tribute—to my dad. Nico's getting settled, establishing himself, in Kansas City, but he's still on Pop's crew. So am I, aside from being Felix's driver.

It's pretty easy. We get our hands on alcohol and cigarettes, and we're talking truckloads sometimes—when we get that kind of information—and then we sell it to hotel restaurants, clubs, and even little corner shops.

When we first started, we robbed truck drivers, which got the job done, but it was all small-scale and temporary. We never really knew what goods we were stumbling onto. But now...Nico and I have done this for a while, so we know people higher up—in the management of different
shipping companies and so on. And there's always some greedy fat man who wants to add a little something to his paycheck. So, we bribe them for information on what's going in and outta Vegas, and then we know exactly what kind of trucks to wait for.

There's an abundance of booze coming into this town, so we have several deals with establishments both on and off the Strip. Stella Mia is one of those places, and my dad is always happy when I find another way to shave off expenses.

Nico does this in Kansas City, and I do it here—we split the earnings and pay a percentage to Dad, simple as that.

And now I suppose my father wants me to learn even more by riding with my uncle...

"Drugs is a tricky business," he tells me as we make our way north. "You wanna control it, reap the benefits. You don't wanna get sucked into it or let it drag you down. So, you keep a distance—close enough to get the money." He winks. I chuckle. "And close enough to hear the word on the street. Now, for instance, it's all opioids—synthetic drugs, and we tell our dealers to get their asses to the clubs. Been like that since mid-eighties, really. Kids wanna get all euphoric," he laughs.

I know this already—well, I know what I hear about the clubbing and the kind of drugs. Coke, even with its ever-present demand, has taken a backseat to ecstasy.

My uncle goes on about the developing—how they alter chemical makeups to avoid drug laws.

I listen with one ear, eager to get this done so I can get to Gabriella.

I even have a gift for her—help plead my case or whatever.
'Cause I've been a fucking tool—I know. Ever since Ma spoke to me... Jesus Christ! She was a **stripper**. Not only that, but she was Dad's goomah for **years** while he was married to someone else. *Fucking bizarre.* I mean...I remember when I was little and how my dad was gone a _lot_...but to think that he was married to someone else? *Madonn*! I don't even know what to say—what to **think**.

*I choke on nothing, staring at her wide-eyed.*

"*That's right.*" She folds her arms across her chest. "*I moved out here and became a stripper so I could take care of Nico and Lucia.*"

"*You were WHAT?!*" I shout, even though I heard her clearly. Both times. "*Jesus Christ, Mom! A stripper?!*"

"*Don't you dare judge me!*" She waves her fist in my face; she's always good at that. "*I worked hard—*

"*Dad, he said you, you—*" I splutter, not knowing what to say. *Fuck! I'm in shock.* And...cazzo! A stripper?! "*He said you left Brooklyn because Nonno wanted you to meet Dad! And you wanted to live closer to Zio Jasper and my cousins!*"

And Mom barks out a laugh. "*Lies, topolino. All lies. Daddy wants me to look like an angel, but I'm not. Now, make no mistake—*" she wags a finger at me "—he's not ashamed of my past, but he can be a cynical bastard—God bless him. He told me he didn't think you and your siblings would take the truth well."

"*I can't fucking breathe!*" I slam my fist down on the counter, causing my smoke to fizzle out in the sink. "*How's that for 'well'?!*"

"*Oh, please.*" She waves me off. "*You can be a dramatic little prick—just like your father.*"
"All right, all right." I put up my hands in caution and take several breaths to calm down. I twirl a finger. "Re-fucking-wind. Start at the beginning."

Obviously, Mom was quick to clear my father's name, that he only loved her, not his first wife, and how he was only, um...with...Mom, and not that other one. Apparently it was a marriage of convenience, and I've heard of that.

It was a thing back in the day, "making a marriage," to bring families together or gain power some other way—in this case it was to pocket a politician from New York, or so Mom told me.

Anyway...

I wouldn't say all this gave me a new perspective, but it did explain a lot; my parents want me to find some girl who won't bring me the bullshit they went through. At least that's what Mom says, and she's thrilled about me and Gabriella being together.

Everything she revealed to me...it was in many ways too much information, but I'm still glad I know now. And I promised Mom to keep this to myself—that Dad can go on with his stories about how perfect Mama is. Shit like that makes him happy.

"So, whattaya gonna give your mother for her birthday next week, cugine?"

"Huh?" I turn my head in his direction. "Oh. Uh, I don't know." I shrug and look out the window again. Shit, I'd forgotten my mom's birthday. I think she's turning thirty-nine. I'd ask Dad for advice on a gift, but he always gives her the same things: jewelry and a vacation for just the two of them. And if we ask him what we can do, he says something along the lines of, "Be a good kid, draw her a picture, don't give her heartache."

Drawing her a picture worked when I was seven.
Whatever—I’ll think of something. I got too much on my mind to worry about that now. Mainly this shit with Gabriella, but also what I overheard and saw earlier. Fuckin' Felix and Rosalie, man...

Yesterday, I came over to Felix’s house to pick him up, and Rosalie was there. Gianna was out—her car was gone, and her driver too, obviously—so I thought it was weird when I saw Rosalie's car. And I didn't wanna stick my nose where it didn't belong, so I didn't ring the doorbell. But the kitchen window was open, and I heard their hushed voices.

"You shouldn't have come here, Rose," Felix says quietly, sounding frustrated. "Where's Carlo?" That'd be Rosalie's driver.

Looking over my shoulder, I make sure I'm alone. I remain near my car, even though I want to go closer; it's like I’m pulled in two directions. Like...mini versions of my parents sitting on my shoulders, Dad saying I should get the fuck outta Dodge, and Mom bouncing in her seat, looking all excited for gossip.

Busy in my internal struggle, I miss what Rosalie says next, but then I catch the end of the following sentence—something about letting Carlo go.

"I need help, Felix—a reason to stay," she says next. "What else do I have out here? Emmett's countless mistresses?" A scoff...then a sigh. "Maybe I should just move back to Florida—be with my parents."

There's a pause before, "Yeah. Maybe you should." And Rosalie gasps, like she hadn't expected him to say that. "Look, Anthony's gonna be here any minute—I suggest you stop talking in riddles and get it over with."

"I wonder what Bella would think about Anthony—her precious son—being your new driver."

I stiffen and narrow my eyes at nothing. Not that I'm worried about Rosalie outing me, but because she's got a lotta balls to say that to Felix.
I know it's only a matter of time before my mother finds out my intentions—that I'm joining the family—and Pop has already told me to take it as it comes. It's the way it is, and he'll be there for me when she finds out.

"Is that a threat, Rose?"

He must've had some warning look or dangerous expression despite his soft voice, 'cause Rosalie quickly replies, "No. Of course not. I'm sorry."

"Good call. Now, tell me why the fuck you're here."

"You know why," she spits out. "You really want me to spell it out?"

I frown, having no fucking clue.

But Felix obviously does, and he laughs. "Nah, I guess it's all right. You're looking for a fucking sponsor."

No reply from Rosalie.

Giving my surroundings another check, I rack my brain trying to remember if I've heard that before—sponsor. I don't think I have, not in this matter of speaking.

"We've gone down that road before," Rose points out.

"That was a mistake. One fucking time—had nothing to do with money or protection."

"A mistake that resulted in pregnancy!"

"We don't know that. Teresa looks like Emmett."

I nearly drop my fucking jaw.
"Emmett was your brother, Felix!" Rosalie hisses. "Of course Teresa would look like both of you."

Okay. Okay, that's it. That's fucking it. I can't hear about this any more. Dad wins—this is none of my goddamn business.

Getting back into my car, I calm the fuck down for a few beats before I honk the horn. And when Felix gets out here, I won't put on some blank expression or be the picture of calm. I'll be the cheery little fucker I usually am now that I'm finally getting into the business.

With a shake of my head, I pull myself back to the present, and I got questions maybe my uncle can answer. I can be vague enough. I think.

"Yo, can I ask you a question?"

He chuckles and stops at a red light. "Yeah, yo. You can, yo. Fuckin' kids."

I refrain from rolling my eyes and push forward. "Do you know what a sponsor is?"

Humor gone, he knits his brows together and tilts his head in my direction. "Depends. In what case?"

I purse my lips, carefully phrasing my words. "Say a woman wants a wiseguy to be her sponsor—"

"Who, Anthony?" The light turns green and he drives off again, but he keeps an eye on me in his periphery. "Who asked? I assume this ain't hypothetical."

I don't reply. My urge to just shut my fucking mouth is so instinctual.

"Christ, kid," he suddenly laughs. "If there was any doubt about who your father was, it'd be gone now." He shakes his head in amusement. "You'll make Junior proud, Anthony. Your pop and I...we're old school—Felix,
Riley...all of us in our generation, but my brother—and Felix—take the prize. If you can take the code of silence seriously, you'll go far." He nods, looking pensive. "You know what he used to tell me when we were kids?"

"No." But I'm sure it was more than one thing. My dad's got a thing for tales.

"He said he didn't want the big seat—that capos live longer." He taps his nose. "But you, you'll go farther, I think. And you'll keep it old school."

"Dad isn't a capo any longer, though. Right?" Because he's so close to Felix, always at his side with Nonno.

Alec shrugs in an *eh-whattaya-gonna-do?* way. "It's not official, but you're right. Junior's more the underboss now. He told you that, didn't he?"

Kinda. In his words, it's been implied. He meets up with the capos every week and collects tribute; they come to him at the restaurant, where he conducts most of his business. Then he does his own thing on the side. He hasn't been straight with me, but I can read between the lines, and I'm pretty sure contracts are his thing—clipping people. And now he's got Emmett's high-roller poker games, too.

"All right. Here we are." He makes a sharp turn, and we end up on a parking lot for a motel and some seedy club. "And the sponsor thing? In this case..." He shrugs and kills the engine. "It's the same thing as keeping a mistress—a comare. Only, it's a bit colder, more about money. The bunny wants sponsoring, juicing, cash to keep afloat, and in return she'll, you know—" At the height of his chest, he makes an outward punch with his fist, elbow out, and he grins like some teenager. "Win-win situation to some."

Right. So, Rosalie wanted this—to literally be Felix's whore. *Madonn'.* It's not like she don't have money. The house she lives in is worth a solid mil,
and Emmett was a top earner; he brought home plenty. She's being greedy.

Then all that shit with Teresa and who might or might not be her father?

_Fuhgeddaboudit._

Not my business—I ain't touchin' that one. Like my father advises...I'll take it to my grave.

"So, what do you want me to do hea'?" I ask and get outta the car.

"We're meeting with my boy Paulie," he answers, referring to one of the guys in his crew. Then he stops and places a hand on my chest. "You come heavy?"

I nod, confused. "Always." I usually carry the small caliber Felix gave me, but Dad got me this cool .357 Magnum for my birthday—fuckin' gangster-style handgun. He said he had one back in the day, and I like the revolver kind. They're still popular, but semi-automatics sell more these days.

"Bene." He gestures for us to walk again. "I doubt we'll get to that, but you know." I nod for him to go on. "Yeah, Paulie—he's been having issues with this black kid who deals here. Won't pay up at all, or he's short. So, I'mma show my face. We'll leave him a message. _Capisce_?"

I nod with a dip of my chin. "_Capisce._"

Inside the smoky club, it doesn't take long for us to locate the douchebag. He tries to make a run for it, but that guy, Paulie, and I, we catch him quickly and drag him out to the alley between the club and the motel.

He looks to be my age.

"Where's my money, you piece'a shit?" Alec asks as Paulie and I hold him up. "That's two large you owe me now."
The black dude sputters apologies, useless excuses about his baby mama needing money for doctor's visits—whatever. Alec doesn't give a shit, and when he nods for me and Paulie, our fists connect with the dealer.

~oOo~

Afterward, Alec drops me off at Twilight where my new Cadillac waits for me—it's a dark red beauty, the latest one in the de Ville series. Inconspicuous but still classy, sleek. It's the car I'll use when I work for Felix.

"Thanks for the help, kid. Just took a little longer than I planned." Zio Alec slaps his hand to mine, and I grin, feeling the paper. "You gotta mean right hook—you know that?"

I smirk and smooth down my jacket, pocketing the cash, too. "Dad taught me good." I slap the top of his car. "Have a good night, unc."

"You too, Anthony."

He drives off and I jog over to the doorman to get the keys to my new car, anxious to get to Gabriella's house. It's getting late, past eleven, but I refuse to wait. Fuck it—I've already waited too long. Gotta make shit right.

However, the doorman tells me Tommy's here—he's Zia Alice's driver—and wants a word with me when I've got time. And I check my watch again, deliberating. I know Tommy's been looking for me, but I've been too busy. I still am, but...

"Fuck it," I mutter. "He's at the bar?"

The doorman nods, and I enter the strip club, heading straight for Tommy at the far end of the bar. He's a few years older than me, but he's greener than a fucking mick on St. Patrick's Day.
"Maisano!" He grins when he sees me and slaps his hand to mine, warm in his greeting. My name does that. "I was hoping I'd run into you soon. I saw you at the funeral, of course, but I figured it wasn't the best time to approach you."

*No shit.*

I nod and scratch my nose, giving the club a quick glance. "What's up?" I ain't conducting business out here, and it's not like I can borrow Felix's office—I hope Tommy knows that.

"I got something coming up," he says, leaning close. "Could be a gold mine." I stare at him flatly, leaning casually at the bar. "Invoices."

I nod, getting it. He doesn't have to say anything else. Sending out fake invoices to small companies usually gives some good dough, but it also comes with a risk. You gotta set up a front, a fake business, and you gotta have contact information—to make things look legit—that, even though you don't use it, can be tracked down to you. Then again, everything in our business comes with a risk.

"What's it got to do with me?" I point to my chest.

He grimaces and takes a sip from his beer. "I need funding."

Like I said, I won't conduct business here, but I *am* interested. "Find me when I'm at Stella." I tap the bartop, noticing my bruised knuckles. "We'll talk, but I gotta go." The look of relief on Tommy's face is the last thing I see before I leave.

I'll talk to Dad about this, 'cause I've never had anyone working for me, so to speak. This would involve my money; would front him. Therefore, I would get something out of it as well, but I wanna keep my back clear.
Once I reach my car, I get in and check the rearview mirror. I run a comb through my hair, and I locate a small packet of tissues in the glove box; that'll do for now with the blood on my knuckles. Next I get rid of my tie and jacket, then I turn the keys in the ignition and speed off.

Fifteen minutes later, I park outside the Sindones' house—a few streets away from mine—and walk up the driveway. On the way over, I paged Gabriella, so I only knock softly, knowing her family's probably asleep—not counting Enzo. At this point, it's almost midnight.

Gabriella opens after a few seconds, looking all gorgeous in indecently short pajama shorts, one of my fucking t-shirts, and her sleep-tousled hair.

Jesus fucking Christ, I think I might love this girl. My heart squeezes in some weird-ass way, and it's like I need to get close. Not want, but actually need. It's a relief to see her even though I saw her a few hours ago.

"You—" I clear my throat and take a step forward, giving the hem of that t-shirt a little tug. "You make this shirt look good."

In the gloom of the porch light, I see a slight blush grazing her cheeks and her mouth quirk upward, but she's still holding onto the anger she feels toward me. And I don't blame her. In fact, she's got all the right to be mad. My mother told me Gabriella should give me a chase.

"You've ignored me for days—now you wanna talk about your shirt?" Her voice is soft and quiet, yet strong. "You come here in the middle of the night, Anthony..."

"Because I couldn't wait." I close the distance some more, and I can feel the heat of her body and smell that butterscotch or toffee lotion she told me she uses. "And I didn't ignore you; I told you at the funeral—"
She nods. "You told me that you've been working. Working with what, though?" She peers up at me. "You haven't been at Stella Mia, and word on the street..."

"Fuck the word on the street, micina," I chuckle, and I'm hit with a sense of déjà vu. I think Dad has told me those exact words in the past, sans micina. "I'm helping my father and Felix with some stuff." I shrug. "Will you let me apologize now?" I tilt up her chin, brushing my thumb over her soft cheek. "I should've called you, and I—I had no right to get pissed when you said that about..." the fucking Jacob douche that I still plan to pay a visit. It's a hard fucking pill to swallow, but I can't help it—I wanna be the only fucker Gabriella sees. "I wanna make it up to you, baby," I murmur, not sure I like the pleading in my own voice. "Please?" Christ, now I'm begging, too?

Dad did warn me, though. This morning, he smirked and welcomed me to the "club" as we got ready for the funeral. He said, "Maybe you've found the one person on Earth who you'll get on your knees for. Time will tell."

"I miss you," I admit, tucking a few strands of hair behind her ear. She lets out a soft breath and her shoulders lose some of their tension. "Please let me make things up to you." Lowering my face, I rest my forehead to hers.

"How?" she whispers.

"Lemme take you places—dates...stuff." I smile nervously, 'cause I've never actually dated before. But I bet my pops can help out; he often takes my mother out. "I promise to call you from now on—if I get held up." Then I remember what Mom told me. "And my ma asked me to bring you to the house—officially, like, introduce you as my girlfriend."

Her smile is small. "She called me earlier."
Oh, fuck. "Yeah? My mother called you?"

She nods. "She said she was happy for us, but she was crying."

I'm not surprised. "She does that. What else did she say?"

Now there's a grin on her face. "She told me to break your balls."

"Christ!" I chuckle and shake my head. One glance up at the sky—*Dear fucking God, save me from my mother.* "She really adores me, doesn't she?"

"You know she does." She smiles a little bigger.

And yeah, I do know. "So, what did you tell her?" Sticking a hand in my pocket, I feel the bracelet I got for Gabriella.

"That I'd break your balls when I deemed it necessary."

"Oh-ho!" I pull her to me give her cheek a loud smooch, some laughs slipping through my lips. "I'm looking forward to that." I smirk, keeping the bracelet hidden in my closed hand. "'Cause...if you wanna break my balls, you gotta stay close—you know, within reach."

She giggles and punches my bicep. "You're such a guy, *ciccioleone.*"

My gaze softens. "Say that again."

"What?" She smiles, curious. "*Ciccioleone?*

"That's the one. I like it." Hesitantly, I dip down and brush my lips over hers. I swallow hard. My hands move to her hips, and I feel the soft skin there, so fucking smooth. But my right hand is still closed over the bracelet, so I figure it's time to give it to her. "I got something for you." *Cazzo,* now I'm a little nervous again. I open my hand, revealing the thin gold chain in my palm—there's a small gold charm dangling from the clasp
that's shaped like a sitting cat. Not only that, but on the chest of the cat, there's a tiny diamond. I figured the cat was fitting, since Gabriella's my micina, my kitten.

"Oh, my God," Gabriella gasps softly. Her fingers caress the gold. "It's so beautiful, Anthony." Relieved, I smile and motion to help her put it on. Her own smile is wide and gorgeous, and she holds out her wrist for me.

"I can't believe this—you're so sweet. But wasn't it expensive? It looks expensive."

It probably would've been—if I'd paid for it.

On the morning of my birthday, I drove Felix to a jeweler; he was picking up a gift for his mother—it's Esme's birthday soon—and I think there's a past between the jeweler and Felix, 'cause the old man was fucking terrified. So, once a smiling Felix had paid for Esme's gift, the old man pulled out a display of gold bracelets and said he wanted to treat us to something "extra." Even me—for only one reason: I was there with Felix.

Felix picked something for his goomah, I think, and I went with this for Gabriella.

"Don't worry about it," I murmur and kiss the inside of her wrist. "So...will you please forgive me, Gabriella?"

"Yeah," she whispers and snakes her arms around my neck. She's on her tiptoes, and all I wanna do is pick her up and— "I'll give you a pass. How could I not?"

I grin, beyond relieved. "You won't regret it, I promise." I'm too fucking elated for words; instead I crash my mouth to hers and kiss her deeply, moaning at the feel of her body melting into mine. "Christ, I missed you." I kiss her all over, my hands roaming. Mine. All fucking mine. Pushing her gently up against the wall of the house, I palm her tits, feeling the weight
of them in my hands, and I swear to God, it's feels like coming home. "So goddamn perfect, bella micina," I mumble breathlessly, incoherently, as if I'm completely lost. I groan and slip one hand under her t-shirt, or mine as it is, and feel the softness of her belly. "You're all mine, baby."

"Yes..." She clenches under my touch, a whimper escaping. She kisses me harder. Her fingers knot in my hair, pulling, twisting. "Oh God—Anthony. I want more."

"Cazzo." I hiss through gritted teeth and grind my dick against her. She's not the only one who wants more. "Spend the night with me," I murmur huskily. "Pack a bag and come home with me."

I'm sure Enzo will allow it since my parents are home. Plus, we can always say Gabriella will sleep in Elisa's room.

"Okay." She nods, breathing heavily, and I touch her thoroughly-kissed lips before I peck them a little. "Give me ten."

~oOo~

It's when I back out of the Sindones' driveway that Gabriella sees my bruised knuckles.

I know, because I hear her gasp and follow her gaze, but she doesn't say anything and the silence grows slightly uncomfortable. 'Cause I'm waiting for her to ask what happened.

And I need to lie...

Yet, she stays quiet. In my periphery, I watch as she looks out the window and chews on her lip.

I frown, wishing I were a mind reader.
"Couple fanooks tried to mug me," I chuckle as I unbutton the top button of my shirt. "Can you believe that shit?"

To my surprise, she smirks. She keeps it to herself, but I see her reflection in the window whenever we pass a streetlamp.

And not a word.

My frown deepens.

"You not gonna say nothin'?" I ask.

She shakes her head no.

That frown of mine turns into a scowl, and I wonder if she doesn't give a shit that, um, I almost got mugged.

Halfway to my house, she sighs softly. "I'm not blind, Anthony."

"What?" I turn my head in her direction. "What do you mean?"

She faces me, that smirk tugging at the corners of her lips. "I grew up in my father's house. I've heard all the stories in the book. You can spare me."

I press my lips together and focus on the road. Truth be told, I don't know what to say. I know what I could say, but since I'm aware of what she's talking about, would it matter?

"I'm not putting you on the spot," she goes on softly. "If anything, I'm giving you an out. You don't have to come up with stories. In fact, I prefer you didn't. I won't ask any questions, 'cause I've already made up my mind."

Shit.
"What do you mean?" I repeat, slowing down the car. Pulling up behind some Chevy, I stop altogether and face my girl fully. We're officially on my street, but I wanna hear this before I go further. "Made up your mind?"

She sighs and mirrors my position, a rueful smile on her lips. "For the past couple years, I've seen the crowd you've run in. I've also heard enough to make up my mind about you. You can say whatever you want about what your work is, but I know what I believe."

I stare at her intently, wanting her to say more before I open my mouth, but I need to know one thing first. "And what's that—what is it that you believe?"

Her mood kinda frustrates me, or rather her expression. If she'd been my mother, she'd been shouting and gesturing wildly by now. But Gabriella...I think she might be different, though there's still a whole lotta fire in her.

"I believe, Anthony..." She leans toward me, if only a little, "...that you've got a bit more in common with my dad than being in the restaurant business."

She's basically saying she thinks I'm in the mob.

"Really," I reply flatly.

She chuckles and sits back again. "Really." A firm nod. "And you don't have to say anything. I know you won't—which I'm fine with. I won't bug you with questions."

Huh. I sit back too, and I'm a little stunned.

A broad who won't ask me questions about where I've been?

That's gotta be new.
Dad has told me plenty; I know I'll be allowed to tell certain things once I'm married. A wife doesn't have to testify. And so on and so on. But I don't plan on telling a woman—ever—what I'm doing. Dad doesn't—he says that's for pussies, wiseguys who run home and tell their wives everything. Granted, my mom knows things and Pop tells her some shit, but it's rarely, if ever, in detail, or...hell, even the truth. No specifics. And it's to protect Ma—not to be a prick to her.

"Just keep business and family separated," Dad has told me. "Simple as that. All your wife will need to know is that you're working—never with what. Regular joes might give a hand and the missus will take the whole fucking arm. We...give a finger, and nothing more. If you need to spill to your wife, or if your wife makes you spill...then what's to say a cop won't do the same? Don't be weak—and don't burden your wife with that shit. Our job; our headache. Capisce?"

Dad's right. Mom's more carefree because she doesn't know much. She doesn't know Dad was in Chicago, for instance, when Emmett got clipped. She doesn't know EJ may or may not be against our family. She doesn't know for certain where a lot of our stuff comes from. Bringing home a new TV or something, my pop might say, "It fell off a truck."

That's giving a finger. He doesn't share details.

"You're thinking too hard, Anthony," Gabriella whispers, once more leaning toward me. Closer this time. She cups my cheek, and my brows furrow as I look into her eyes. Those gold flecks in the dark brown always do it for me. "I told you this to give you less to think about." She drops a soft kiss at the corner of my mouth. "What I'm saying is, don't feel the need to feed me lies, just..." She gives my knuckles a glance. "Just let me tend to the wounds? Only me?"

I shudder and capture her mouth with mine. "Only you, micina." That's the confirmation I can give her, speaking of everything.
I'm about to say fuck it and just suggest we take this to the next level right here in the car, but two cars drive by at a speed that belongs on the highway, not a quiet street lined with millionaires' estates.

Problem is, when I look farther up the street, I see that the two cars continue up the driveway to my fucking house.

"Shit," I mutter and start the car. Getting outta my spot, I rev the engine, the wheels skidding on the pavement, and I take off in a hurry. "Shit, shit, shit." As I get closer, I see the tinted windows on the two black cars. Which makes me think it's Feds.

"Oh Dio Santo, che sta succedendo?!" Gabriella wonders anxiously what's going on. "Are those—"

"Feds," I spit out and park behind Dad's car.

Just as Gabriella and I get out, the front door opens and I hear my mom shouting up a storm. Two Feds escort my father down the stone steps, and he's dressed in a suit, sans jacket—hardly anything odd, but at this hour? He's usually in more comfortable clothing around the house. Even my mom's dressed impeccably—still in her black dress from the funeral. But her hair's wet, like she's showered.

"No fucking respect, you motherless bastards!" Mom shouts, flipping off a Fed behind his back. "You come in to my house—"

"It's all right, Isabella," Dad barks out over his shoulder. "Everything will be okay—just call my father." He spots me and Gabriella right before he's guided into one of the cars. "Take care'a your mother, tesoro. I'll be home before breakfast."

I nod quickly, knowing the procedure.

"Cocky statement, Maisano," a Fed, fucking gangbuster, chuckles.
"Daddy!" Shit, that's Julia. My *piccolina*. Appearing next to Mom in the doorway, she looks like she just woke up, all disheveled in her pajamas. "Dad—Mom, where's Dad going?!"

Dad's jaw tenses, but he doesn't say a word. I can practically read his mind; Mom and I seeing this is one thing, but Julia? Jesus Christ.

If I look even a little bit suspect...I don't fucking know, but I don't want the Feds searching me seeing as I'm carrying my piece, so I pretend to be confused. "What the hell is going on, Dad? Mom?" Actually, I *am* confused. I have no fucking clue what the cause of this is, but I do know what follows.

"Go into the kitchen, *bambina*." Mom nudges Julia inside. "I'll be there in a second—have some cake."

Next to me, Gabriella comes to life. "I'll go with her, Bella." She jogs up to Julia, who's always adored her, and grabs her hand. "*Vieni qui, dolcezza—ti aiuto io.*" She offers to help Julia.

"Thank you, hon." Mom squeezes Gabriella's shoulder affectionately before going back to shouting at the Feds. Meanwhile, Dad's inside one of the cars and it drives off while another one, a bigger one, pulls up.

Having been through this before, I know a warranted search is next.

*Looks like this night just got longer.*

**Chapter 12**

**Translation:**

"*Ho bisogno del tuo grosso cazzone—solo il tuo.*" = I need that thick cock—only yours.

"*Che Dio ce ne scampi.*" = God save us all.
Junior's POV

"I'll be fucking damned." I scowl. "This ain't right, tesoro." My twelve-year-old son is not supposed to beat me in poker. "Dimmi come hai imbrogliato!" I slam my fist down on the patio table, demanding he tells me how he cheated.

Dominic laughs and shuffles the cards. "I didn't cheat, Dad."

"Bullshit!" I lean back in my seat and light up a smoke, both pissed and proud.

I thought for sure I was gonna win with three motherfucking aces, but then he caught a full house on the river. He won when he dealt, he won when I dealt, he fucking won when I forced Isabella to come out here on the patio and deal. Then she'd left us, 'cause she wanted to call the Sindones for some reason. She said she was also gonna feed the dogs.

"All right," I grumble and fish out my wallet, "how much do I owe you?"

"Count 'em and weep." He grins and pushes his chips toward me.

"Count 'em and weep," I mimic, counting quickly. "Listen to him—thinks he's so cool."

"Who are you talking to when you do that?" he chuckles.

"Myself!" I shoot him a glare and pull out two hundred bucks. "I'm my own best listener." I throw the money over the table. "That's your little sister's braces—part of it. Now we won't be able to afford them."

Since the summer got away from us, Isabella's taking Julia to the dentist soon, which I still don't fucking understand. She's got beautiful teeth.
"Sure, like I believe that." He smirks and cocks a brow, looking like a younger version of the man he's named after—my grandfather. "But, uh, you're a little short, Pop."

I smirk right back, glad he passed the test. "Good boy." I fish out another fifty and take a drag from my smoke. That's when Isabella comes out on the patio and serves drinks and homemade sweets. "Grazie, bell'uccellino." I pull her to me and slip my hand under her dress to palm her luscious ass. No fucking panties—whatta tease. Maybe it's time for the kids to go to bed. Well, Julia's already in bed, but...

"Did you win, topolino?" Isabella asks our son, leaning into me.

"Yep." He grins and pockets his money. "Dad says I cheated, but I didn't."

"He's just a sore loser," she giggles.

I pinch her ass.

But as much as I'd like to be alone with the wife, it's been a while since I spent some alone time with Dominic, so I let her go. "Gimme a kiss." She leans down for a smooch, which she hums into, and then I say, "You can go check in on Elisa. Page her—Milo will call back."

She nods, and I can see she's anxious for our daughter to come home. But for other reasons than I am. I worry about Circus Circus; Isabella worries about Francis taking advantage...of his cousin.

When it's just me and Dominic again, I take a sip from my scotch and ask him about school—he recently went back after summer break. It's his last year before he starts high school.

"Do I still gotta have Milo driving me when I go to high school?" he asks.
"Why wouldn't you?" I stub out my smoke then lean back again and unbutton my shirt a little. "You're still our baby."

"Anthony didn't have one at my age," he points out.

I shrug. Back then, it was calmer. "Milo will drive you until you get your own license. End'a discussion. Now, tell me more about school." Fuckin' private school—my kids better like it. "You like your teachers?"

~oOo~

An hour later, Dominic's gone up to his room to play on his Game Boy and I'm letting this long-as-fuck day settle by diving into the pool. Fuck changing into swimwear—my black briefs are just fine.

Resurfacing, I push back my hair and yell for Isabella to join me and bring towels.

By now, it's completely dark out, so when Isabella's silhouette emerges from the lit-up house wearing nothing but a black bikini... *Madonn', her tits are all pushed together*...she looks like a fucking angel. A sinful one, but an angel nonetheless.

"Get in hea', hot mama." I swim over to the edge and offer her a hand, 'cause unlike men, women gotta use the ladder. The wife also feels the need to get all nice for the pool. She's put on more lipstick and done her hair thing—fluffing and shit. Which is hot as hell, but unnecessary. Then again, I dig that she takes time to get even sexier for me—even after all these years. "Julia and Dominic still upstairs?" I gather her in my arms and chuckle when she complains how cold her crotch is. "That's why you jump—not use the steps." I bite her chin, reminding her, "The kids?"

"Yeah, upstairs—Don't get my hair wet. I just went to the salon the other day." She clings to me as I wade toward the deep end. "Elisa should be
home soon, too. Don't know about Anthony, though. That boy's never home these days."

"Friends are more important than his parents at his age." I nip at her jaw, about to reach her mouth, but she stops me.

"Just a sec." She takes some rubber band thing off her wrist and pulls up her hair in a high, messy bun. "Okay—" she smiles all wide "—you were sayin'?"

I shake my head, amused, but say nothing.

Then I tilt my head and kiss her hard, pulling her closer to me. For a moment I ponder walking us over to the edge, but the middle of the pool works just fine. Isabella is all but weightless in my arms, and no wall means my hands can go wherever.

With her feet locked behind my back, I grind my hardening dick against her pussy, my hands grabbing at her soft, round ass. I groan, loving that fucking thing.

"Ciccino," she moans breathily, "Elisa will be home any minute." I grunt in response and slip a hand between us, finding her hot and slick underneath her bikini bottoms. "God, really? Here?"

I tug down my briefs and push her bottoms aside, then grab my cock and say, "Lemme stick it in there," and thrust forward. "Oh, Christ." I hiss, moving her over me and shifting my hips at the same time. "We gotta fuck in the pool more often."

She giggles then cups my face and gives me a bruising kiss, like she's fucking desperate.

I'm known to fuel her like this, and I never fail to deliver.
"Damn," I pant, "you're fucking intense, baby. Move with me."

She hums and digs her heels into my ass, rolling with me, and she takes me so goddamn deep. And in the meantime, I play with her ass, never getting enough of it. Cocks don't fucking belong in there, but my fingers are drawn to it like magnets. I wanna consume her, crawl under her skin, and set up camp.

"So good," she whimpers, throwing her head back. A low groan rumbles in my chest, and I lower my mouth to her exposed neck, sucking and biting at her flesh. The water splashes around us, so I take a few steps toward the shallower end. Then her big tits are above the surface, teasing me, making my mouth water. "Cazzo, I want more, Juniuh."

I spit out a curse, needing more, too. "Let's go over there." I jerk my chin to the ladder by the shallow end and lose my briefs completely. "I want you from behind."

She squeals and gets all excited and playful, so I chase my woman over there. But the wife is slow since she doesn't wanna get her hair wet. Ducking below the surface, I slide up her body and bite her ass. I laugh, almost choking, and I hear her shriek even though I'm underwater.

"JUNIUH!" is what I hear when I resurface. There's fire in her eyes as she rubs her ass, the spot I'd sunk my teeth into.

"Don't even try to look pissed," I laugh, pressing her against the wall near the ladder. Here, the water is only thigh-high. "Drop the bottoms—the top, too." She does, and I throw them somewhere behind us. Picking her up, I tell her to place her elbows and forearms on the smooth edge; her breasts rest there, too, and when I look, I just wanna stick my cock between them. All smashed together and big—mamma mia. "And this fucking ass." I knead it roughly and slap my cock across it. "All mine. We clear on that?" She nods and looks to me, over her shoulder. "You want
me to fuck you? You need it good?" Giving my cock a few hard strokes, I squeeze out some pre-cum and smear it over the wet cheeks of her ass. "Fucking hell—look at that. Love my come on you."

"Jesus, ciccino," she whines. "Give it to me."

"Beg me."

I grip my dick and tease the entrance of her pussy. In response, she pushes her ass up higher, standing on her toes. Perfetto.

"I said beg, hummingbird. Beg your husband to fuck you—to give you cock."

"Oh God," she breathes out, trembling. "Please, Juniuh. Please fuck me. Ho bisogno del tuo grosso cazzo—solo il tuo."

I groan and drive into her with a swift push of my hips. Gripping her hips, I hold her up; her feet aren't even touching the bottom of the pool. She hooks them around my calves instead, and then I pound into her roughly.

Over and over, I watch as my dick disappears into her. She clenches around me, only making things better—tighter. And her moans... Outta this fucking world.

"Perfect fucking pussy," I mutter breathlessly. Still close to weightless in the water, I snake my arm around her waist and hold her up without much effort, then I use my free hand to rub her clit, needing to feel her come on me.

I love her pleading moans.

Next, I fuck her slowly. Because...ironically, that will get her off faster. And I'm already close. Rolling my hips, I grind into her and reach spots that
make her quiver and shake. Inch by inch, my slicked-up cock moves in her. Had it been light out, I woulda seen every vein on my dick glistening with water and her juices.

"Oh, my—" She chokes on a gasp, and that's it. Her pussy tightens throughout her orgasm, and it almost feels like she's sucking me in. Yet, I keep the same tempo. Fucking her slowly. Deeply. Not stopping.

Until I explode myself.

Holding my breath, I deliver a few more thrusts and let go, spilling into her jerkily. I get goose bumps, my breathing's all heavy, and I groan and groan and groan, addicted to the wife's pussy.

The way she always makes me crave her...

"Madonn'," I pant, dropping my forehead to her spine. "This shit just doesn't get old."

Isabella laughs, outta breath too, and turns to face me. Which means my dick is now in cold water. "Well, that's a relief to hear."

I huff a chuckle and draw her close. "You know what I mean." I kiss her on the forehead, a bit chilly now. "So...you, me, a bottle of wine, some Sinatra...?" Judging by the way her eyes light up, I'd say she's good to go. I smile and pop another kiss—on her cheek this time. "You go inside—I'll turn on the heaters on the patio." It's not really necessary; well, not for long. Las Vegas is still hot in September. But at this point, I need heat. My balls need heat.

"Okay, I'll hurry." She's quick to get outta the pool, and I groan and bite down on my knuckles, seeing her naked body like that.

Unfortunately, she covers herself up with a towel too soon. Then she disappears inside.
Taking my time, I jump out of the pool too, and walk over to the loungers where my clothes and another towel wait for me. I just wrap the towel around my hips, then switch on the heaters lined up along the patio.

As soon as the first notes of "I've Got You Under My Skin" filter through the air, Isabella joins me outside and we end up on one of the loungers together. While she pours the wine, I pull a blanket she brought with her over our lower bodies.

"I preferred it when you were naked," I murmur, brushing my knuckles down her bare arm. She's in some purple cotton dress now, and while there's plenty of cleavage... Can't really blame a bastard for wanting it all, right?

She ignores that comment and says, "I love having you home."

"I'm always home nowadays," I laugh, leaning over her to grab my wine. She's crazy. If I'm home even more, she'll get sick of my face. "I hound you for each meal of the day." All right, maybe that's a stretch. I'm not always home for dinner, but that's about it. I leave the house around after lunch, get home around seven on slow days and three in the morning on busy days. Slow days and busy days...I'd say they're split even.

I'm always at one of three or four places: Felix's office at Twilight, though I'm more often at my own office at Stella, home...and the occasional trip outta town. Soon I'll also spend some time in a hotel room at the Flamingo every week where I'll be taking over Emmett's poker games.

It's good money. Especially when the players' money runs out and they need to borrow more...

"If I could, I'd keep you in my pocket all day." I wink at her and take a sip of my wine. Sometimes I gotta reassure the wife a little, and that's fine. In moments of doubt, she wonders if I hang around Felix's club to watch
strippers all day, which couldn't be farther from the truth. Isabella's voluptuous body's all I need, can handle, and want.

Like watching strippers would pay for this house, the jewelry I give my wife, the clothes she buys for us, and the vacations we take.

"You speak such bullshit, Juniuh," she giggles and snuggles against my chest. "Could you imagine having me in your office when you meet with...associates?"

I snort a laugh. "You'd fuss over them, tuck napkins in their shirts, and force feed them since you think everyone in this world is malnourished and skinny." I nuzzle her damp hair, grinning to myself.

But in truth, it'd be a disaster. Isabella doesn't know the guy I am outside the house. Here...I can be a married man, a father, one who dotes on the family, but out there? Forget about it.

When some people—pussies, in my opinion—say sappy shit like they leave their hearts with their women, they say it to be romantic. Definitely not to be manly, that's for certain. But if I were to say that? I'd actually mean it. My heart goes out for my immediate family—and I leave it behind when I go out. That's it. No romance about that what-so-fucking-ever. I haven't been called a cold-hearted motherfucker for nothing.

I didn't get to where I am today—business-wise—by being pleasant.

"I could be your partner," she jokes.

I smirk and say nothing, knowing her claws would come out if I said the truth.

A crime family run by women? *Che Dio ce ne scampi.*
I know it happens; there are exceptions. Especially in Italy. There are the "sisters of omertà"—women, usually relatives, who mafiosi trust to take care of things while they're either on the run or they're imprisoned. But that doesn't mean I agree with it—neither do Sicilians like me. If you go to Naples, women are more common, sadly. But you can't compare the Camorra, the mafia in Naples, and Cosa Nostra, the Sicilian one. There's more structure and order in Cosa Nostra. And no fucking matriarchy.

My dad actually used to joke about my mother's stubbornness and feistiness since her mother's family is from Sorrento, a town close to Naples. My nonna on Ma's side later met a Sicilian and they moved to America.

History shows that some women can be as ruthless as men—not to mention more protective of what's theirs—but those are rare cases. In my opinion, it's only a matter of time before they cave and maybe even bring down their families by becoming pentiti—rats, state witnesses.

Isabella would fight 'til her dying breath for our kids—and me—but what she'd do if any of us was harmed is what you call a crime of passion. Nothing calculated about it.

Women belong at home, where they can do what they do best: take care of the family.

"Drink your wine, hummingbird," I chuckle, and then remember... "Hey, where the hell is Elisa?"

"Oh." Isabella's cheeks actually flush—something that doesn't happen often, if ever. Maybe that's where Anthony's gotten it from, though it only happens when I tease him about his girl. "Um, when I went inside earlier, I saw her bag in the foyer. She must've come home while we..."

That shit cracks me up. "Our poor baby girl."
Still…it wouldn't kill Elisa to come down now and say hello. The music playing in the living room must've tipped her off that we've left the pool.

"I went up and knocked on her door—wanted to say hi and ask how her night's been with Francis..." She sighs and twists her mouth in a small grimace. "She said she didn't wanna talk to gross people."

My amusement is fucking gone. "She did not say that." I set down my glass. "She didn't use those words."

*Disrespectful motherfucking brat!*

"She did." Isabella nods, frowning down at her own glass. Then a one-shouldered shrug. "Whattaya gonna do? She's a teenager. Nobody wans'ta see their parents like that—not that she did; she said she just heard us."

I scoff and shake my head. "Fuck that. I understand the escape to her room, but what she said?" Un-fucking-acceptable. Had I said something like that to my parents when I was a kid, my pop woulda punched me in the face. "I'm grounding her ass tomorrow. End'a story." I make a swift sweeping motion with my hand.

"We could always use some help at *Stella*. Some waitressing...?" The wife smirks.

I nod, liking that. "Free labor—good thinking, *bell'uccellino*.

"Oh!" She sits up straight. "Did'ju hear that? The phone's ringing."

I watch as she runs inside, and I snicker 'cause that is just so Isabella. God forbid she misses out on some gossip by not hearing the phone go off. Though, I don't know who it could be at this hour.

Soon enough, Isabella returns—with the cordless. She's turned down the music, too.
I raise a brow in question.

She shrugs and says, "Your brother." And gives me the phone.

"What's up?" I cradle the phone between my shoulder and cheek.

"Called to catch up a bit," Alec says—too flatly for a social call. "You remember back in the day when I took my girl to that restaurant—you met up with me afterward?" My brows knit together, and while I get that he's speaking in code, nothing rings a bell just yet. "Kate, that was her name." Okay. Okay. Now I'm with him. Kate died—car bomb outside a restaurant. Then...he showed up at Dawn, back when it was my club. "I just drove by—where you met up with me." Dawn. "Did'ju know they've got a new owner?" Jasper. Not that he's new.

"Yeah, what abouddit?" I ask casually.

"Looks like he's got problems. When I drove by—fucking pigs took him for all he's worth."

I frown. Took him for all he's worth... Took him... Pigs— And it hits me. "Can't fucking believe this," I spit out, instantly furious. Pigs = cops. Or maybe Feds in this case, I don't fucking know. "You sure they're not just roughing him up a bit before leaving?" As in, bringing Jasper in for questioning. That's a helluva lot more common than making an actual arrest.

"Nope—I'm sure. Just giving you a heads up." Alec sounds impatient, so I have a feeling he's gonna head over to his deli and...well, clean up. In case someone should stop by.

"Thanks for calling, little bro," I sigh and hang up.

Isabella's watching me with an eyebrow raised.
I massage my forehead, knowing the authorities might show up here next. God only knows what they could've taken Jasper in for, but those goddamn Feds tend to bring in every known wiseguy just because they can.

"You was talkin' in code," the wife says, daring me to defy her with that look in her eye. "What did Alec say?"

I want her to focus on us, so I don't mention the fact that her brother's been arrested. Instead I say, "Feds're at it again. They might come over to search the house." Gathering my clothes, I discard the towel and pull my pants on, then my shirt. "Go put something else on." I point at the patio door. My wife ain't showing that much cleavage around people.

Suddenly in a hurry, I go inside and head to my office. There's only one thing I need to hide in case of a search, and I need to deal with that stat.

~oOo~

Twenty minutes later, I'm in the kitchen washing dirt outta my fingernails and Isabella's muttering about her "poor flowerbeds" in the backyard.

"What did you hide, anyway?" She scowls and opens the fridge.

While I was outside, the wife showered and got dressed—I think it's the dress she wore at the funeral today, or maybe a similar one. Regardless, it's more modest, so that's good.

"Don't ask, hummingbird," I say and dry my hands. I have a regular hiding spot for a small safety box when I need it, and it happens to be between two rose bushes in the yard. "Go talk to the children; tell them to stay in their rooms. I'm gonna turn on the sprinklers." That way, the soil where I've hidden the safety box won't look like I've just dug through there. "But don't wake Julia."
She gives me a look.

I dismiss her with a wave of my hand, though I know my last comment was stupid. As if she doesn't know what's best for our kids. But Isabella's gonna hafta excuse me—I'm on edge. Hell, so is she. She masks her fear by acting annoyed, and I get moody as fuck, short and terse.

My night had been so fucking perfect, and then the Feds gotta ruin it for me.

And as predicted, the Feds do show up...

They haul me in for questioning.

**Hummingbird's POV**

It's only a matter of time before Elisa and Dominic hear the Feds rummaging around in my house, so we all gather in the kitchen and try to play it cool.

Anthony looks pissed; he's pacing near the wide doorway. It's all he's done since he called Ed Sr. to help Junior.

Duke and Duchess get restless too, Duke occasionally growling and baring his teeth toward the hallway.

Gabriella, God bless her, distracts Julia, both seated at the kitchen table.

Elisa probably remembers last time the Feds searched our house and one of them accidentally tipped over her cassette collection, which would explain the expression of disgust she's rocking like a champ.

Dominic appears curious—like, his eyes are taking it all in, and I can see questions piling up. He's been through this before, but he was so young and Junior and I could explain it all away. Now, not so much. I expect my husband will sit down with him after this.
And I'm drumming my red-painted fingernails against the smooth surface of the kitchen island—while I really just wanna follow the Feds around and make sure they don't break anything.

It's late—really fucking late—and I can't help but wonder why they would come here at this hour. Dinnertime, sure; they've done that before. Midday when only I'm home—that's happened, too. But in the middle of the goddamn night? Christ no!

Leaning over the countertop slightly, I glare at the man outside the kitchen who's standing dangerously close to a vase Junior's parents gave us. It's a fairly empty space; it's where the foyer meets doorways to both the living room and the kitchen, where the staircase begins, and where the hall toward our bedroom, Junior's office, and a guestroom starts...yet this bastard chooses to almost walk into the only piece of furniture there—a side table with that vase on it.

"Watch it!" I snap at him. "Do you see any hiding spots there, huh? Do you? Or are ya gonna break up the floor? Maybe there's guns and drugs and money under the tiles!" I widen my eyes in mock-horror.

I saw that marble tile floor in a magazine, and my Junior imported it for me from Italy. I'll be damned if I'm gonna sit here and let these idiots tramp all over it and walk into vases...and shit.

"I apologize, Mrs. Maisano." The Fed offers a forced smile, his politeness all bullshit, and continues into the living room where a few other agents are up to no good.

I pretend to spit at his retreating form, almost wishing he'd destroyed that vase so I could've shown him what I'm really made of.

Soon, another agent approaches. "Mrs. Maisano, where do you turn off the sprinklers? We'd like to check the yard."
I give him a bored stare then inspect my nails. "I don't know," I lie. "My husband takes care'a that." I raise a brow at him. "If you hadn't taken him, he woulda been able to help. But you Feds don't think that far ahead, do you?"

Dominic snickers.

The agent looks annoyed. "I don't expect you to understand, but it's in your best interest to—"

"Don't talk to my mother like that," Anthony says, and his voice sounds just like Junior's. Soft, eerie, full of warning and ice.

The resemblance causes me to shudder a little. It's a fact that my husband is more lethal when he's quiet. If he's shouting and gesturing, it's all good. But when he lowers his voice, gets that sinister look in his eyes, and speaks softly, warningly...that's when you run. There might even be a smile on his lips, but you'll see it in his eyes—the coldness, the freaking monster barely kept at bay.

And my son isn't done; he takes a step toward the agent and brushes some invisible lint off the man's shoulder. "You don't get to come in here and belittle her by telling her what she might or might not understand. You get what I'm sayin'?"

I swallow, for the first time seeing this side in Anthony. He's not facing me, but if his voice matches his father's, his expression might, too.

The Fed grits his teeth, wisely keeping his mouth shut, and then leaves the kitchen. Because as much as he could've taken things further, the agents are usually ordered to keep wives and kids out of it.

~oOo~

Some time later, the Feds are finally done.
A couple guys are soaked, having walked through the yard with the sprinklers on, and had I not been too annoyed about the state of my house, I would've laughed. But all I can think of now is how I gotta clean my entire house tomorrow—all for nothing. They haven't found anything.

My house isn't my only worry, though. As always, I'm worried sick about Junior.

He says he doesn't get sloppy—that he doesn't make mistakes and that there's nothing to worry about—but what wife would actually calm down and relax? What good wife.

In the living room, I walk over to the liquor cabinet and take out a bottle of Amaretto, pouring myself a drink in one of Junior's scotch glasses—the crystal ones I gave him for his birthday a couple years ago. And with that drink in my hand, I sit down on one of the couches, too exhausted and weary for conversation.

"Whatta fuckin' night." Anthony plops down next to me with a grunt, and the other children follow, sitting down here and there. "You okay, Ma?"

"Uh-huh." I take a big sip of the amber liquid in my glass, savoring the slight, bitter burn combined with rich sweetness. But...am I really okay? And shouldn't I be the one to ask my son that? It's not his job to be the adult and make sure everyone's all right.

"Hey." He leans closer and drapes an arm around my shoulders. "Dad said it himself—he'll be home before breakfast. You got nothing to worry about." He kisses my temple. "He'd be pissed if he knew you got all sad."

Yeah...

I feel like things have shifted—my oldest son has taken on the role of protector. At least while Junior's not here. I'm not sure how I feel about that.
"I'm fine." I pull myself together. I know this—I've done this before. The smile feels a little tight at first, but then I get it. "Julia baby, you need to sleep." I stand up and smooth down my dress, thinking I can finish my drink once the kids are in bed. "Elisa, will you please help her—"

"Mom, I can go to bed myself." Julia yawns, grins tiredly, and pushes off the couch. "I'm not a baby anymore."

"Don't say that," I whisper. I suddenly feel emotional—all my children are growing up, and I don't like it. We've been able to count on Julia being our baby; she loves being a kid, so for her to say that... "And don't you ever say it near Daddy. You'll break his heart."

She pouts and comes over to squeeze my hand. "Fine. I'll pretend for you."

"Good." I hug her to me so tight, realizing she's grown taller this summer. Another six inches and we'll be the same height. "All right—" I give her a smooch on the forehead and then let go "—time for bed." I eye the kids one by one, Gabriella included. "All'a youse. And, Gabriella honey, you can sleep in Elisa's room."

*Consider this mommy a cockblocker.*

I won't get on my son's ass about grandchildren until there's a ring on Gabriella's finger. She deserves that.

There's some bitching from Anthony, but I think he can sense I'm not in the mood, so he drops it quickly. And for all I know, he'll sneak Gabriella into his room the minute Elisa's asleep.

*Whataya gonna do abouddit?*

As soon as they've all disappeared upstairs, I head to the kitchen. I can't go to bed when the house looks like this—pillow cushions flipped over,
cabinets opened, carpets askew, grass from the yard near the patio door, some mud too… I also can't sleep when I don't know for sure what my husband's going through, so I grab the phone first, thinking I can either call Riley, Alec, Felix, Junior's mother—since Senior's most likely busy being a lawyer… I can call my brother, too, if it comes to that. I'm still mad at him for cheating on Alice, but it is what it is.

Opening the phonebook on the counter where we charge the cordless, I dial Riley and Brianna's house first.

Unsurprisingly, Junior's sister answers. "Brianna Bienati."

"It's Bella," I sigh. "You sound as tired as I feel."

"Oh, Bella! I was just about to call you. It's been crazy."

I nod even though she can't see me. "So, they grabbed Riley, too?"

"Yes, and Dad called me—said they'd also brought in Felix, Jasper, Junior, and Alec. But Dad and Joseph will get them out soon."

"Joseph too, huh?" I sit down on a stool, reminding myself that Felix's oldest isn't a kid anymore. He's a grown man, and apparently he's closer to Felix's business than I thought. A few years ago, he was this little punk who ran with EJ—they were drivers and doing shit for kicks. But with Joseph becoming a lawyer, I'd hoped his future looked different—that he wasn't following in Felix's footsteps.

"Yeah..." Brianna sighs heavily. "I wonder what's happening. It—it feels like it's big. Doesn't it?"

I hadn't thought about it, but maybe. It's nothing we can discuss over the phone, anyway.

"Juniuh told me not to worry," I say, swallowing my emotions. "But..."
"I know," she replies softly.

God—right now, I hate not knowing what's going on.
Chapter 13

Translation:

CW = Cooperating witness. It's an FBI term.

Babysitter = In this case, it's a bodyguard.

Witsec = the Federal Witness Protection Program.

Anthony's POV

"I should probably sneak back into Elisa's room." Gabriella yawns.

I shake my head no and kiss her neck, my morning wood perfectly lined up with her ass. "Not yet." Slipping a hand under her t-shirt, I palm one of her tits and groan at the heaviness. "Lemme feel you." My voice is all thick with sleep. Last night, or rather this morning, we dropped quickly, too tired for anything else. But now... "Can I touch you?"

She sucks in a breath and nods.

_Fucking finally._

If Gabriella had cockblocked me, it woulda been one thing. But to know she's ready for more and then be cockblocked by others...that's fucking worse. More tempting.

Flipping her over, I end up kneeling between her parted legs, and I push away the covers to get a good look at my girl. And fuck me if she ain't stunning.

"Clothes off," I say gruffly, tugging on the boxer shorts she's borrowed to sleep in. On my nightstand, my clock radio goes off, but before it can piss me off, I listen to the song that comes on just then, and... I chuckle.

Fucking perfect. Gabriella smirks, like she's reading my mind. "What?" I
widen my arms and grin. "We should listen to H-Town. They know what's up."

Knockin’ Da Boots is a sexy song with this seductive beat, and I wouldn't mind getting down to it with Gabriella.

I tense my jaw, watching as my girl sits up and pulls the shirt over her head, exposing her front fully to me. And when she gets started on the shorts, I gotta bite down on my knuckles, afraid I'mma lose it before I even...what? Get inside her? Touch her? I'm not sure just how far she's willing to go right now, but...whatever it is, it's going to be a test of my restraint.

The second she's completely fucking naked before me, she drops back against the mattress, causing her tits to jiggle, and I'm fucking speechless. 'Cause this is the first time I've seen her this way.

"You're s-staring," she whispers nervously.

She's about to cover herself up, but I stop her with a fierce look. Don't you fucking dare, baby.

"Look what'chu do to me." I point to my hard dick, tenting in my pajama bottoms, and shake my head. "You got nothin' to be nervous about." Without shame, I tug down my pants and throw them somewhere on the floor, and then I return to staring. But this time, my hands join. "Christ, you're gorgeous..." I stroke her thick thighs; they're so goddamn smooth and soft. Her whole body is. "I'm a lucky bastard." I chuckle under my breath, a little surprised that I've landed this one. More possessiveness surges through me, like a steady current that ain't going away. "Tutta mia adesso." I tell her she's all mine now.

I lower myself, covering her body with mine, and kiss the valley between her tits.
"Anthony," she whimpers and weaves her fingers in my hair.

I kiss and nuzzle, meeting her neck. "I'm gonna get to know all of this..." I nip at her earlobe while my right hand goes for her breasts. And I got big fucking hands, yet they still don't cover all of her. "...Every dip and curve..." I groan as my cock nestles against her pussy, all warm and damp with soft curls.

"We can," she gasps and arches into me when I pluck at her nipple, "we can, um...make love—if-if you want." She gulps.

I spit out a low curse and drop some of my weight on her. Propped up on my left elbow, I peer down at her face, but I don't know what the fuck I thought I'd see there. There's lust, but there's also a whole lotta nerves, so I can't be sure if she's really ready.

"I'm sure, ciccioleone." Her dark eyes soften and she gently pushes some hair away from my forehead. "You know I'm yours."

I take a deep breath and nod, suddenly feeling nervous myself. Maybe 'cause this is different than the nameless chicks before her. Because this time I care about making it good for not only myself, but her too. I gotta remind myself it's not just about getting off. There's pressure—to perform well. And fuck, I'm seventeen...and unexpectedly feeling less experienced than I am.

"I'll go slow," I promise in some husky voice. Nuzzling her neck again, where her natural scent combined with that toffee lotion is the strongest, I slide my free hand down her body, needing to make her feel good before I even think about sticking my cock in her. I'm not fucking minute-man, but it's not like I can go on forever. "Hold on to me." I notice the way she's fisting the sheets and trying to get comfortable.
When I gently cup her pussy, she gasps and her hands fly to my shoulders.

"Oh, cazzo—" She gasps and instinctively bucks her hips into my touch.

"You like that, baby?" I slowly slip my middle finger between her slippery lips and slide the tip down to her tight hole. At the same time, the pad of my thumb presses down where her clit is, and I nearly moan at how fucking badly I want her right now.

"Yeah—yessss," she hisses, squeezing her eyes shut. Fuck, I love how she clings to me, too. Like I'm holding her together. Adding pressure on her clit, I cautiously push my middle finger inside her. But though she's tight as fuck, I can tell she's already ready for more. "So good." She lets out a small, breathy moan that makes my dick painfully hard, the skin around it so tight.

With two fingers inside her and my thumb playing with her clit, I stop staring at her face for a while to suck on her tits. Simultaneously, I look down at where my fingers disappear into her, and I see how they glisten whenever I pull out.

*That'll be my dick soon.*

Christ.

She lifts her hips, moving with me, and I speed up.

"More," she breathes out, "oh, yes!"

I've never really given a fuck about a broad's pleasure before, but now that I do, I find it a little disappointing when Gabriella starts to tremble beneath me so quickly, the first sign of her orgasm. 'Cause it feels like I coulda gone on forever, just watching her so out of it—so sexy, beautiful, and so dependent on me. But then I remind myself that this is only the
first time; and it also means it's almost my turn. Cazzo, how many times have I jerked off to the thoughts of fucking her?

"That's it, baby," I whisper, feeling my breathing pick up. Covering her mouth with mine, I swallow her moans and finger-fuck her faster, harder, now desperate to see her fall apart. "Come for me—come around my fingers. Squeeze them." My dick leaks of pre-cum on her thigh. "So fucking hot."

Throughout her orgasm, she whimpers and sighs and bites down on my shoulder, her fingernails digging into my back. It's a weird pain that only fuels me—I get hornier and fucking hornier.

She's completely rigid, only small tremors running through her. Shakes and quivers.

It's not until she collapses, melting into the mattress, that I slowly withdraw my fingers from her pussy. Unable to resist, I suck them into my mouth, and my eyes nearly roll back inside my head. Jesus, I gotta taste her from the motherfucking source someday—soon. I've never done that before, but how difficult can it be?

My need too great, I begin to kiss her like I'm ravaging her, barely letting her catch her breath, and I guide my cock to her soaked pussy.

"I need to fuck you." I shudder, pressing the head of me against her tight opening. "Fuck, tell me—tell me I can." Right now before I fucking lose it.

"Yeah," she pants, "but wait, Anthony—condom..."

"No," I say almost pleadingly and cup her flushed cheek. "I've never gone without one before, but I fucking need to feel all of you." God, she's so wet and hot and tight; I gotta have more, push deeper into— "Please, micina." I kiss her softly on the lips, exchanging breaths with her. "Just this once. One time."
I'm aware of the risks, but Jesus fucking Christ, just...one time.

"Anthony..." She squirms, and indecision is written all over her.

"One time," I repeat, honestly not sure why I'm so desperate for it. Ah, fuck it. I know why. I just...I need to—to get her, physically. Claim her. Sink into her so deeply and mark her as mine. "You got me begging, Gabriella." I continue to kiss her; it seems to loosen her up, those soft sighs proof of that.

She groans and shoots me a weak glare. "Fine, but—"

"No buts, baby." I give her a hard smooch. "Just trust me."

Trying to be careful, I push into her in slowly, inch by inch, my eyes never leaving hers.

"You okay?" I ask in a strained voice. She nods jerkily, all tense and not breathing. "Take a breath for me."

She does, and when she exhales, I swiftly bury the rest of my cock in her pussy.

"Fuck," she gasps.

"I'm sorry." I drop my forehead to her neck, my breathing coming in choppy pants. She feels too fucking good—I'm not gonna last long. "I'm sorry, micina. Are you okay? Does it hurt?"

"I'm fine." I hear the grimace in her voice. "Just burns a little—like, soreness. I swear. You—you can move."

I do, but I do it even slower than before, and I make sure to coax her into a more relaxed state. By kissing her and touching her and whispering stuff to her, she soon moves with me, albeit shyly and hesitantly. One lift of
her hips causes me to drive deeper into her, and I moan loudly against her cheek.

"So fucking amazing," I mumble, outta breath. Finding her lips, I kiss her deeply, mingling my tongue with hers. At the same time, my hard dick slides in and out of her, with more resistance going in than out. And her hot slickness feels indescribable coating my cock.

The second I almost blurt out that I love her, I bite down on my lip, groan, and tighten every grip I have on her.

I feel all raw inside, exposed and vulnerable, which I don't fucking like. Even if it's Gabriella I'm stripped bare to, I don't want it. I need to be in control—be in charge. So, I push harder. I regain control and own her body with my movements. It's up there, high on fucking pleasure, everything unleashed, that I top her best. By not holding back, I become more aware, though I don't understand how.

Close, close, close.

"Your turn, Anthony," she whispers, kissing my face. I close my eyes and groan at the sensations—her hands and mouth on me do it. And, fuck, her pussy. "Come." She exhales shakily. "Vieni dentro di me." She gives me permission to come in her.

"Christ," I hiss and thrust harder. Everything coils up inside me, and I hitch her legs over my hips to reach the deepest spots. Suddenly it feels like I'm underwater or some shit—it's ringing and buzzing in my ears, and I start coming so goddamn hard.

In-fucking-tense.

I groan and rock, releasing into her, and slip a hand under her to grab on to her ass.
Anything to stay where I am.

~oOo~

Eventually, time gets away from us, and by the time we resurface from my room, I can hear Elisa, Dee, and Julia in the rec room. But I'm kinda worried about Mom, so I grab Gabriella's hand and walk downstairs instead.

I'm not surprised to be greeted by a spotless house, no trace of the Feds being here last night.

"No, stay here with me." I chuckle and growl playfully against Gabriella's neck, keeping her in front of me. She giggles and squirms, but I have her trapped, my arms encircling her upper body so she can't move her own arms. "Or maybe I should tie you to my bed and keep you there."
Wrapping my fingers around one of her wrists, I bring the inside of it to my lips and kiss the clasp of the bracelet I gave her last night. "I think that sounds good, don't you?"

She laughs and is about to answer, but then we reach the kitchen and Gabriella's playfulness is gone. So is mine, but my girl reacts faster.

"Go." She pushes me in Mom's direction, looking concerned. "I'll go back upstairs. And call me if you need me to help out with anything."

I nod, thinking my girl is a sweetheart, and steal a quick kiss and smack her ass before I turn to Mom.

"You been up all night?" I join her by the kitchen island, eyeing the glass of wine in front of her. She's still in that dress, too—the one from yesterday.

She shrugs and peers down in her glass. "Couldn't stand the house looking like a war zone."
While I know that's partly true, she would've dealt with the house today if Dad hadn't been taken last night.

"Little early for wine, don't you think?" I gently remove it from her grasp and drape an arm around her shoulders. My mom thinks she's gotta be so tough all the time.

"Not if I haven't gone to bed yet," she bitches. "Stop acting like you're my guardian or some shit."

"Easy." I give her a squeeze. "I'm just trying to look out for you until Pop comes home."

"Well," she huffs, "you should go shower, 'cause you smell like sex."

I cringe and back away.

"Yeah..." She gives me the stink-eye, an expression my sisters have perfected over the years. "Go shower, get dressed, and—" she shrugs, and there's a smirk tugging at her lips "—then, who knows, maybe you can start looking for a ring."

I point to my chest. "Seventeen."

She points to her chest, too. "Very aware. I pushed you outta my—"

"Oh!" I shout. "I didn't come down here for this." I shake my head and start walking out. "Christ."

"Wait!" Mom runs after me, and then I have her crashing into my body from behind, her arms packing some mean strength despite how small she is. "I'm sorry, baby!" She hugs my midsection, and I barely manage to twist around in her grip. "I didn't mean to be a bitch."

"I know." I roll my eyes and kiss the top of her head. "It's cool, Ma. I know you get like this when Dad's..." not here and you don't know when
he's coming back. "Look, do you want me and Gabriella to take the others out for breakfast? You can rest, wait for Dad...or you could come with us."

We could probably drive over to Stella and lock up and heat up some moan-worthy leftovers. Sometimes, Enzo makes sandwiches with the stuff left from the night before, and it's always so fucking good. Maybe not as good as my mom's, but her cooking is pretty hard to top.

"No, it's okay." Mom sniffles. "We'll eat, but..." She glances at the clock on the stove, "...Daddy's not home yet. He said he'd be back before breakfast." She looks up at me, and I brush my thumbs under her eyes to wipe away some tears. "Why isn't he back?" But as soon as the words have left her mouth, we hear a car pull up outside.

Mom runs.

Then when the door opens, all I hear is a squeal. And Dad's "oomph" as Mom most likely jumps into his arms.

Walking out in the foyer, joined by our dogs, I see Dad comforting Mom in the open doorway.

He looks worn in his rumpled suit, but his eyes are alert. Though, upon a closer inspection, I see that he's not fully awake without...assistance, if you will. My guess is coke, and I wouldn't be surprised if Zio Alec's supplied him. Maybe Dad's not even sticking around—maybe he's gotta work or...something.

"Come on, hummingbird," he murmurs in her hair. "I can see you haven't slept. Let's go to bed."

I raise a brow in question when his eyes meet mine, and he mouths, "Wait for me."

I nod and walk back to the kitchen.
My parents disappear down the hall and into their bedroom.

Hungry as fuck, I start pulling out a bunch of food, figuring my siblings will be hungry, too, when they eventually come down. But right now, it's just me, Mom's zucchini bread, some shaved prosciutto, mozzarella, and tomato slices. *Best. Fucking. Breakfast.* Had Mom been in charge, it would've been pancakes, muffins, scrambled eggs, bacon, French toast...the whole shebang, but if I gotta make my own food, there's no way I'm slaving away like that.

Why cook when the freezer and the fridge are full of Tupperware, anyway? There's always *something.*

Half an hour later, Dad reappears, and I make a face when I see him zipping up his pants and tucking in his shirt. *Gross.* It's not even a new suit, so it doesn't take a genius to figure out what they've done.

He just smirks and says, "What? She missed me. Or a part of me."

I know better than to say that's disgusting—like I wanna hear about my mother on her knees? Or whatever they did. I shudder.

"I thought you were going to bed?" I didn't really, but I need a fucking change of topic.

He shrugs and opens the fridge, pulling out the pitcher of freshly squeezed orange juice. "She would've fussed over me—refused to sleep." After grabbing a glass, he sits down at the island and reaches for the prosciutto with fingers that've been God knows where. "I told her I was taking a shower and promised I'd join her in a minute. So, I gave her a Xanax and she crashed." He chuckles. "I told her you'd take care of your siblings, by the way."

"Sure. And you're going out?" I ask.
He nods. "Gotta meet up with Felix, Nonno, and Alec."

"At Tw—"

He cuts me off with a look and then gives the kitchen a pointed glance.

And I get it. Dad's gonna have the house swept for bugs that the Feds might've left behind.

"I'll be back before dinner." He pauses to chug his juice. "Mom wants to get to know Gabriella some more, and I'd like to see her now, too—now that she's your girl." He wipes his mouth on a napkin and stands up. "I trust that you'll ask her to stay for dinner tonight?"

"Got it." I do, somewhat. Gabriella's been a part of our life since I was two shits high; my parents know her. But maybe it's different just because she's my little woman now? I don't know. "But, um...is everything okay?"

He smiles, smacks my cheek, and kisses my forehead loudly, like I'm some baby. "Why wouldn't it be, tesoro?"

Right. Why wouldn't it be...

"I'm gonna take a shower—" he tilts his head, studying me, then huffs a laugh "—which you should, too. And then I'mma head out." He starts to walk outta the kitchen. "You've got Milo and Sal here today, but I want you to stay at home and take care'a your siblings."

"What was with that look?" I call to his retreating form.

He laughs, somewhere down the hall. "It says 'I got pussy' on your forehead, baby boy!"

Stupidly, I palm my forehead, then scowl at nothing.
Junior's POV

Felix, my dad, Alec, and I sit by the bar at Twilight while we wait for Felix's guy to finish in the office. The Feds haven't searched this place, but we're not taking any chances. It's too easy to hide a bug, and it takes no time.

Once that's done, we all take our drinks and disappear for privacy, and though we're all exhausted, having been awake for about twenty-four hours now, we get down to business right away.

Dad goes first since he's got the most info, being our lawyer and all, and Alec divides a few lines of blow.

"I'm afraid Jasper's going away for a while." Dad sighs and unbuttons his suit, then leans back in his seat and pulls out a cigar. "They got him on racketeering, drug possession, and money laundering." We all curse, but Dad goes on, looking at me now. "They had a plant at Dawn."

"I thought it was gonna be EJ who sang," Alec says and slides the tray with coke my way. "I have two boys looking for him—Riley's sending out some, too."

I grab the rolled-up C-note and snort a line, thinking EJ can still be involved. In fact, I'm pretty sure. Jasper sweeps his office as often as the rest of us do, and there's no way he'd discuss business with an outsider nearby. Drug possession and laundering...that's most likely taken place at Dawn, hence arresting him there. And whoever they planted at Dawn to get evidence...he or she coulda seen something. But heard something? Forget about it.

And racketeering...I know Jasper's into a lotta protection; he has his boys roughing up store owners, vandalizing and shit, and then he sends somebody else on his crew to offer protection. For the right price, of
course. But none of this takes place at Dawn, and like the rest of us, he doesn't conduct business outside'a his office.

"There's more than a fucking plant," I finally say, putting in my two cents. I swallow a few times and wipe my nose. Next, I share my thoughts on the racketeering charges, and I'm not surprised to see Pop nodding pensively; Felix and Alec agree, too.

"First, let's discuss Jasper." Felix pauses to do two lines that wake him up in seconds. "As much as I'd like to clip him for hurting my baby sister, he's still a man I trust—business-wise." I nod, thinking the same. Jasper's old school. Maybe he's a bit more careless than the rest of us, but he takes the code of silence as seriously as it's supposed to. I trust him, too. He's not CW-material, nor is he a rat. "Ed, you'll try to make him a deal—" Felix waves a hand "—whatever it is you do. But you know for sure he's gonna do time?"

Dad nods and takes a puff from his cigar. "He's looking at years." With those charges, we're not surprised. Felix just asked to make sure, 'cause we ain't the lawyers. Dad is. "Unless we can buy a juror, or maybe make a witness go away...there's little we can do."

"And he won't do anything stupid like tryin'a cut a deal on his own." Felix eyes us all, as if waiting for us to disagree, but we won't. "All right, nothing more we can do about that now, then." He raises his glass, and we drink to Jasper. "Next topic..." He twirls a finger. "The questioning."

My knee bouncing slightly, I go on and tell'im about the bullshit the Feds tried to sell me—that one of my soldiers were singing like a canary about me. But had the Feds known their shit, they wouldn't have gone that route with me. 'Cause I only have two guys working for me, not counting my son who works for both me and Felix, and that'd be Enzo and Nico.
Enzo...that's fucking ridiculous. Firstly, the Feds wouldn't make him a deal for ratting, 'cause he's guilty of too much. Well, unless it's a life sentence instead of lethal injection. But no matta'—Enzo's reliable; besides, the crap the Feds spewed out about my activities and whereabouts on specific dates was all terribly made up—pure goddamn fiction. And Nico? Come on. He's in Kansas City. How on earth would he even know anything about what I do? He reports to me, kicks up to me, not the other way around.

Alec is next, and he chuckles his way through the night he spent in a room with two Feds.

My brother is my opposite when the Feds bring us in. He laughs and spins tales, talking shit, which in the end pisses the Feds off and they let him go. Meanwhile, I sit there and smoke cigarettes and roll my thumbs—coolly plead the Fifth and any other amendment I can pull outta my ass, until they're bored with me. One time, I used the Fourteenth amendment; they got mad as fuck, and I'd been amused when they started yelling about how "fair" and "civil" they were with me.

"And all that outta the way..." Dad trails off when we're done discussing the past twenty-four hours.

Felix nods. "EJ." He stabs the desk he's sitting behind with a finger. "I'm done with him. I want him found, and..." We know the rest of that sentence.

"If he's working with the authorities—" Pop clears his throat "—there's a big chance he's either got a babysitter or...he's in Witsec already. But my guess?" He points to his chest. "The Feds got him in a safehouse somewhere. They're not done with him. And if he's somehow involved with Jasper's arrest, he might testify, too. However, EJ could also be out, hiding on his own somewhere." He shrugs. "Unless the Feds have something on him, it's not like they can detain him. For all we know, he sent an anonymous tip to the authorities that led to evidence."
Alec speaks up next. "Say EJ's involved—what's his beef with Jasper?"

"My nephew isn't thinking clearly." Felix taps his temple. "I believe it's safe to assume my little brother shared a lot more with EJ than he should've. And we've all found out just how loyal Emmett was to our family. In other words, if EJ's gonna treat this like his personal vendetta, then he's probably gonna try to take down as many as possible."

I can't help but chuckle. "All this trouble—from a little kid!" I slap my thigh.

Still, kid or no kid, his days are numbered. He's unpredictable, a loose cannon, and all it'd take is a stray bullet...

"Well, we're gonna hafta deal with it." Felix's words are final.

~oOo~

I get home a few hours later, and with the coke still doing its job, I'm too alert to rest, but I'm mellow enough to grab a beer and sit down in the yard for a while. I can hear all the kids out there, and maybe they can tire me out; that way, I'll be ready to go to bed right after dinner. And I swear to Christ, I ain't getting up for at least twelve hours.

Before I step out on the patio, I sneak into our bedroom quickly to change outta my suit. Isabella, that adorable thing, is asleep, curled into a little ball around my pillow. I brush some hair away from her face, loving that peaceful expression. And even in her sleep, she hums and gravitates toward my touch. I love it. Just like I loved the glorious fucking blowjob she gave me when I got home this morning.

_Madonn'._ The wife's got amazing cocksucking lips.

But I shake that thought for now. I go with a pair of gray sweats and a black beater, and then I pad out barefoot with my beer and tuck my gold
cross on my chain underneath the fabric, 'cause it'll burn in the sun otherwise. And burn my skin afterward.

Anthony and Gabriella are in the pool with Julia and Dominic, and looking to my left, to the loungers, I see Elisa in one of them, reading some magazine.

"DADDY!" Julia's the first one to spot me, and she jumps outta the pool and sprints toward me like a little lunatic. "You're finally HOME!"

"What's shakin', bacon?" I chuckle and hug her pool-soaked, tiny self to me. "Hmmm, my princess." I kiss her wet hair, smelling the chlorine.

"That's my line!" She giggles madly and squints up at me. "So, you gonna tell me now what the police did here, huh?"

"It was a mistake." I tug on a piece of her hair. "They thought I was a bad guy—that'd I'd done something wrong."

"Oh." She huffs. "I hope they apologized."

"I made them apologize." I wink down at her and she grins. "Get that butt back in the pool—I wanna see how many laps you can do."

"Okay!" She runs off again, all excited, and I jerk my chin in hello to Anthony, Dominic, and Gabriella, to which I get two chin-jerks and one tentative wave in return. Guess who did what.

Sitting down with my cold beer on the lounger next to Elisa's, I peer out over the pool, thinking it's a good thing Anthony's got that Sindone girl. She'll be good for him.

"I don't get a hello from you, angioletto?" I sit sideways so I'm facing her, unlike her; she's lying down, sunglasses on, and she's put away the
magazine. "Ah, lemme guess." I smirk and pop open my beer. "Mom told you I'm grounding you, didn't she?"

Elisa responds, all snark, but she doesn't move. "As a matter of fact, she did. Well, she said you're both grounding me—told me as soon as I woke up and came downstairs."

That could explain Elisa not being downstairs when I got home this morning.

I shrug even though she can't see me, and I take a sip from my beer before setting it on the table between our loungers. I hope she won't blow this up, 'cause I wanna ask her how it was at Circus Circus, which reminds me: I gotta talk to Milo, too. He was there with her and Francis, after all.

"Don't be so fucking disrespectful and we won't ground you."

"Just because I called youse gross?" She scoffs. "Puh-lease. Who wans'ta see their parents screwing? Gag."

"Ay!" I shoot up from my seat and tower over her; the first thing I do is rip off her shades and throw them on the ground. And now, yeah, now Elisa looks scared. About fucking time. "Che cazzo di problema hai?" I get a grip on her arm, asking what the fuck is wrong with her. Truth be told, her attitude is breaking my heart. "Since when do you speak like that to us, huh? You want me to shake the fuckin' brat outta you? Trust me—" I let go of her and sit down again "—it'd be no goddamn problem."

"God, Dad! You're—you're so strict! Too strict!" She sits up straighter, looking like she's torn between fear and fury. "I mean, come on! You barely even let me wear makeup!"

_Speaking of?_
But I roll with it, and I nod and steal one of Anthony's smokes from the side table. "That's 'cause you don't need it." I light it up and take a drag, trying to calm down. "And I don't want you lookin' like that one friend'a yours—Amanda? She looks like a baby whore!"

"Oh, my God." Her lip quivers, and here come the dramatics. "That's such a mean thing to say!"

I ignore that. "And for the record, I didn't give a shit about you running up to your room last night." I seethe, "It was what you said to your motha'."

Next, I start ticking off things on my fingers. "She gave birth to you, cooks for you every day, makes sure you get the best clothes, protects you when you're up to no good—yeah, you think I didn't know about that?" I laugh, though nothing is funny.

I admit it; I caught on late when it came to Elisa. I saw her as this angel who could do no wrong. I was wrong there. But I'm on to her now.

"Then you call her gross—in her own house? Un-fucking-acceptable, Elisa." I point to her. "I was gonna ground you for a day or two and give you a couple shifts at Stella, but the attitude you're giving me now?" I shake my head, disappointed. "Make that a week. And you're gonna apologize to Mom."

When Elisa storms off, sobbing and wailing about how much I suck and don't understand how hard her life is, I just let her go, too pissed to even deal with her at this point.

_How hard her life is?_

"Jesus Christ," I mutter and lean back, getting comfortable. "The brat doesn't know how good she has it."

"You talkin' to yourself again, Dad?!" Dominic shouts, laughing, from the pool.
I chuckle tiredly and wave him off. Yeah, *tiredly*. Guess all it takes to get coke outta your system is one pissy daughter.

"Dad!" And that's Julia; she's panting, clinging to the edge of the deep end of the pool. "Did you count the laps?! Was I good?!"

"Too good, princess!" I holler back. "I lost count—there was too many!" I hold out my arms.

She gets all giddy and proud, fist-pumping the air.

And I wonder how the hell I'mma be able to stay awake much longer.
Chapter 14

Translation:

Quanto pensa che costi il gelato? = How expensive does he think ice cream is?

Junior's POV

October 26th

Taking a sip of my beer, I flip the steaks on the grill, side-eyeing Anthony in amusement. Enzo, standing on the other side of me, is just as amused.

I nudge my son with my elbow. "I've already told you what the secret is."

Jewelry. If you piss off your woman, you drag your ass to the jeweler. If it's warranted, that is. But before there's a ring on Gabriella's finger, Anthony's gotta watch himself.

"I don't see why I gotta do that," Anthony grumbles and lights up a smoke. "With all due respect," he adds for Enzo's sake.

"My daughter is stubborn," Enzo says, placing a hand over his heart. "She gets it from her mother. You might as well learn that from the get."

"Don't I fuckin' know it." Anthony scrubs a hand over his face, and I chuckle, seeing his bruised knuckles. "But I ain't gonna apologize for this."

And "this" is about the beating Anthony gave a boy in Gabriella's class. Jacob...something...who apparently took Gabriella on a few dates last year. And my son wanted to make shit clear—that Jacob has no business even looking at Gabriella now.

Enzo and I get it, but today's women are all about being independent and shit like that.
Gabriella came over yesterday, was all waving fists and cursing in Italian, because Jacob now treats her as if there's a restraining order on him. He gives her a wide berth, doesn't look at her, and is sporting two black eyes.

And that makes it difficult since Gabriella wants good grades and she and Jacob are partners in their chem class, or whatever it was.

To me and Enzo, this is like a break. We can come home after shit that gives us headaches and listen to teenagers and their problems. We get a good laugh and so on.

"Oh, maybe Mom can talk sense into her." Anthony jerks his chin at the patio where Isabella's setting the table with Carm—Enzo's wife—and I know my hummingbird. It's only a matter of time before she'll take Gabriella aside to give her the ins and outs of our son.

In the meantime, I suppose Anthony and Gabriella will shoot each other glares with the backyard as a distance between them. We're here by the grill, and Gabriella's with Elisa by the loungers.

I think my son should count his fucking blessings, because of the way he rants and bitches about his girl... I'm just saying that if Elisa had a boyfriend and he was being a cunt about her and I was standing close enough to hear? Forget about it.

But I know Enzo's priorities. He approves of Anthony's intentions. No matter what, my boy will keep Gabriella protected, provided for, and he will be loyal to her.

Even though marriage isn't on the table just yet, Anthony's already stepped forward to show he can take care of Gabriella, and I dig that. So does Enzo.

"Cristo santo, fai solo pace con lei!" I give Anthony a look after the umpteenth glare he sends across the yard to his girl, telling him he should
just go make peace with her. "You know, Mom was like that, too."
Actually, Isabella was even more of a hothead, like a pistol needing a silencer. "Back when I first dated her, I mean. You gotta let them get their shit out before you show them who's boss." I nod. "Women like Isabella and Gabriella need a firm hand, 'cause they're strong, but you can't silence them right away. You'll get the cold shoulder forever."
"Carm's like that, too." Enzo nods. "You gotta learn to pick your battles. But now you gotta stick with this—you've jumped into this, so stand your ground. Otherwise, Gabby will walk all over you."

Sound advice.

"I thought Mom was an angel when you dated her, Pop." Anthony smirks at me.

"She was." I furrow my brows. "But you know your own mother, don't you? Fuckin' temper on that one." Which is one of the things I love most about my wife. But Enzo's right: strong women like that need a firm hand. "But I tamed her." I point to my chest. "I give her wiggle room because she needs it, but at the end of the day, she knows her place." I check the steaks and put the sausages on the grill. "I also spoil her."

For her birthday last month, I gave Isabella what I always give her—jewelry and a vacation. We just got home from ten days in Italy a week and a half ago.

"And as long as I keep Mom happy, she has no business complaining where I fall short. Work hours, for instance." I give Anthony a pointed look, and he nods with a dip of his chin. "Like Enzo said, stand your ground this time, 'cause you don't wanna make her think you cave, but then...? Christ, don't fight about every little thing. Let her get away with some shit. Don't smother the poor girl. And don't ruin tomorrow with
bitching," I add in warning. "Dominic and Julia's been looking forward to this for weeks."

The north tower of the Dunes, also known as the Diamond, will be imploded tomorrow, and it's gonna be a huge fucking spectacle. My parents are boycotting it because it means another old landmark in Vegas will give room to some new monstrosity.

While I'd like to pretend it's just another day, my two youngest want us to go, and the wife suggested a night for the family. So, it'll be dinner at Stella and then we'll walk over to the Dunes for the implosion.

My sister is also joining with her family, as well as the Sindones.

If nothing else, an ironclad alibi is fixed for tomorrow.

We're all looking for EJ at this point, but since we received confirmation that he was involved in Jasper's arrest—Dad managed to bribe a Fed for information—we have our soldiers doing all the dirty work. Alec, Riley, me, Felix, and my father make sure to move around in public, and there's always someone to vouch for our whereabouts. Had EJ worked alone, we wouldn't've gone to such lengths, but the Feds are keeping an eye on us all.

We know EJ is out there somewhere, 'cause the Feds are looking for him, too, and Elisa has actually spotted him. And surprise, surprise...she and Francis saw him at Circus Circus—a casino previously run by the Chicago Outfit. We think the Outfit is still involved, but the Gaming Commission is hounding them ruthlessly. Just this month, there's been four arrests on Chicago associates.

Yeah, no, my baby girl ain't allowed there anymore. Neither is Francis—even when Milo's with 'em. The first time, they didn't see anything, 'cause they were only at that fuckin' amusement park at Circus, but then...like
mother, like daughter…Elisa likes to shop. So, the second time they went, Francis had taken her to the shops around the hotel, and they'd spotted EJ.

Without EJ's testimony, the racketeering charges won't stick on Jasper, and like I said, that little shit has gone underground.

My guess is that EJ is smart enough to know that Feds can be bought, and therefore, he doesn't trust them to keep him safe. Either he's backing out completely, or he'll resurface when Jasper's trial begins. And that could also explain why it hasn't started yet; those fucking Feds are stalling, trying to find more evidence and questioning people. Obviously I get it can take a long time to build a case, but for fuck's sake, the case is already there. Evidence and all—when we're talking drug possession and laundering, anyway.

I want to get all this over with, 'cause right now everything is too fucking unsettled and up in the air. My wife, despite her resentment toward her brother's infidelity, loves Jasper, and she was an inconsolable mess the day I told her about Jasper's arrest. And to add to that, we've found out Alice is three months pregnant, Rose has fled Nevada with her youngest daughter and moved back to Florida, Nico and Lucia are thinking about moving back to support their dad, and Maria caught Alec with his goomah a few weeks ago, so it's all kinds of fucking crazy around here.

Everyone who knows me is waiting for me to explode since I just love drama. And the only one who seems to give a shit is my wife. Isabella is aware of the stiffness in my shoulders, the headaches I sometimes get, and my short fuse. So, she's extra attentive. If Elisa starts with her teenage drama queen bullshit, Isabella silences it immediately. If Julia breaks a piece of furniture, Isabella is there to curse her out and ground her. If Anthony's being a cunt about insignificant shit, Isabella drags him up to his room by his fucking ear.
She's indecently sexy when she gets going, when she ensures that the house is quiet for me, when she spoils me with attention.

Meanwhile, I know she's running ragged, too. She's tired as hell after running interference around the house, being there for Alice, listening to Maria's rants over the phone, taking care of the household, creating new recipes for Stella, and...I make a mental note to get my shit together soon. Maybe take her on another vacation when all this has settled—she's talked about wanting to visit Greece, one place we've never been.

**Hummingbird's POV**

"No, you stay put. Gabriella can help me." Once dinner is over, Gabriella and I start clearing the table. Carm wants to help, but I wink at her so she understands. And she does. She knows I need alone time with her daughter. She's actually the one who's asked me to talk to Gabriella, which I've been doing for a while now. "Julia, quit bouncing." I swear, the girl's on crack or something.

"Can I go swim?" She pleads with her eyes.

I shake my head no and grab Junior's plate. "Wait half an hour. Go watch a movie." Grabbing Elisa's plate, I tell her, "You've got that Spanish test soon. Go study. And, Dominic, you got that presentation—I'll come up later to listen."

With our arms full, Gabriella and I head to the kitchen, and while she goes out for the second round, I grab the wooden box Junior's father brought over earlier. I put on the coffeemaker next and pull out the tiramisu cheesecake from the fridge.

"Just a little bit left." Gabriella grins as we pass each other in the living room.
"Thanks, hon." I nod and step out, walking to Junior's end of the table. Dipping down, I brush a kiss on his cheek and set the box in front of him. He smiles curiously and moves to grab me, but I giggle and clear the rest of the table—napkins, a few glasses, the barbecue sauce, and an empty wine bottle.

When I come out a third time, it's with Junior's scotch and two glasses for him and Enzo.

"Coffee will be ready soon, too," I add as Junior wraps an arm around my ass. "What's up, ciccino?"

"What's up?" he chuckles. Pulling me closer, he drops a kiss on my stomach. "How about you explain these?" He holds up the cigar in his other hand. Already lit. Enzo's got one, too.

I smirk and weave my fingers through Junior's hair. "A guy owed me a favor." I mimic the words I've heard too many times over the years.

"Oh-ho!" my husband laughs. "Check out this one, Enzo." He presses his face to my stomach again, looking both tired and happy. "You my little wiseguy, bell'uccellino?" I chuckle and drag my nails across his neck, making him shudder and squeeze the back of my thigh. "Mmmm, let's go with the truth instead."

"Your father's my dealer. I figured you'd like your own since Ed always says you take his." I grin and kiss the top of his head. "Now, lemme go. I gotta prepare the dessert."

He nods and tilts up his head, puckering his lips.

I kiss him.

"Grazie." He gives me another squeeze. "Seriously, hummingbird—thank you."
"Of course." I smile and head back inside again, finding Gabriella in the kitchen where she's taking out plates for the cheesecake. "Finally—" I plop down on a stool at the kitchen island and release a breath "—five minutes of peace and quiet." I pat the stool next to me. "Have a seat, honey." I reach for the bottle of wine she must've taken out; it's already been opened, and there's also four new glasses for us adults. "Do you want a glass?"

I get it, she's only sixteen, but...eh. Wine is good for your heart.

"Um. Sure?" She blushes. "Thank you."

Such a sweetheart.

I pour her a glass and slide it over to her. "You still makin' Anthony suffer?"

"Yes. You said until tomorrow, right?"

"That's right." I nod. "He needs to learn he can't get away with every little thing." Junior's the same—I have experience. "Anthony only sought out Jacob because he's protective of you. But there are limits. Jacob isn't a threat—my son is just bein' a possessive asshole. But God bless him—he loves you so much, Gabriella."

Her smile is shy. "He hasn't said it yet, but, um...he sometimes talks in his sleep?"

I squeal into my hand, trying not to cry. "And you love him, too?"

"Only since forever," she giggles.

I squeeze her hand and take a big swig of my wine; Christ, I need to calm down. But I can't help it. I just love these two together. So much that I'm
not even gonna mention that she just gave away the fact that they sneak around to spend nights together.

Hey, if he knocks her up, they'll get married sooner. Though, I hope they're being safe.

Regardless, it won't be long until they do get married. Gabriella's one of us; she knows we don't live in the '90s. The calendar might say '93, but we don't act like it in our house. Junior is old school—hell, so am I. And everyone else we know. My husband might be worse, stuck in the '50s where he was born, but still, we value old traditions.

And that's why Gabriella is perfect for Anthony, because she gets it. Today, when you go to the store, you hear mothers ask their children what they want for dinner. It's a question that has changed, because in the past, they asked their children what they thought Daddy wanted for dinner.

"Anthony sometimes talks about the future—like what we'll do," she admits, eyes twinkling with happiness. "But I don't think he's aware of what he's confessing, you know?"

I wave a hand. "Juniuh was like that, too. They're way ahead up hea'." I tap my temple. "When you and Anthony are married, maybe my son will tell you the truth about me and Juniuh, and if he does, you will understand when I say that Anthony's father worked fast to make sure we were settled."

After all, he knocked me up within a few months, and we lived as a family in that little condo. Now that I know his first wife was essentially no one, it's clear that Junior wanted us settled partly because he didn't want me to leave, and partly to have a place to call home. He didn't feel at home in that big house in Henderson he shared with Jane.
"Juniuh grew up with three siblings," I continue. "A home with me wouldn't be complete until there was just as much noise around him. He basically copied what he had when he was a kid." Of course, it's a coincidence that he grew up in a family with two sons and two daughters just like we ended up with two of each, but it wasn't a coincidence that Junior wanted plenty of children. We'd most likely have more if there hadn't been complications when I had Julia. "Anthony will probably want what he grew up with." I sigh, both nervous and hopeful. I have so much faith in Gabriella, but the Maisano men are not easy to live with, and I tell her as much.

"But Mr. Maisano looks at you like the sun revolves around you," she argues with a smile. "You know what you're doing."

I laugh, amused by how sweet and naïve she is. "Oh, honey. I've been with my husband for eighteen years, and I'm still learning things about that man. And hasn't he told you to call him Juniuh?" I grin.

My husband might come off as an asshole to many, but around kids and puppies and young love, he's a big ol' softy—he just doesn't show it as much. But he loves Gabriella and Anthony together as much as I do, and I'm not the only one who already considers her family.

"No matta'." I wave a hand again, moving on. "There's a lot you need to know, but if you got the three most important things down, you're good to go." And I've already told her what those three things are. Food, sex, and attention. Like my mother prepared me, I have every intention of doing the same for Gabriella, no matter how embarrassing it might be. "All men in our family suffer from a god complex, so it takes a strong woman to deal with that. Attention is important."

Gabriella nods, chewing on her lip. "Anthony sometimes gets annoyed when I spend time with Elisa."
"You keep spending time with Elisa—your best friend, for Christ's sake." I cover her hand with mine. "Anthony will just have to learn. And then when you're with Anthony again, you'll give him some extra attention. I promise, that will make his bitchface melt away." I nod. "You'll see. And at least Anthony's easy to please when it comes to food," I chuckle.

"Yeah, what is up with that?" Gabriella laughs and widens her eyes. "All he ever wants are sandwiches."

I grin and shrug. "He's a sandwich guy. Juniuh loves his steak, and he lives for side dishes and dessert. But Anthony? Give him a sandwich and he's golden." Granted, it can't be some simple ham and cheese; it's gotta be fancy. But it's still easier than cooked meals. "Both Juniuh and Anthony have the night munchies, too. That's when Juniuh will either heat up leftovers or go for the cake. Christ, I think we go through two cakes a week in this house." I shake my head and sip my wine. "E' quel che è—it is what it is. But speaking of dessert, I think it's time we bring out the cheesecake and the coffee. We's got men waiting. And could you call down Elisa, Dominic, and Julia again?"

**Dominic's POV**

*October 27th*

"Christ," I hiss, wiping at my cheek. Dad kissing it is one thing, but it's not all right when he's not done chewing. Now I got marinara all-fucking-over. But it's okay, right? It's okay to embarrass the kid in the family. And it's apparently even more fun to do it when we're at a restaurant surrounded by family. And strangers.

"Here you go, piccolo tesoro." Dad tucks a bill in my hand. "You and Julia can go buy ice cream later." Then he returns to eating and pawing at Mom under the table, and I grumble under my breath, walking back to my own table. 'Cause God forbid I sit with the adults. Instead I'm stuck with my
sisters and cousins. Even Anthony and Gabriella are sitting with our parents and hers. And Zio Riley and Zia Brianna, too.

*Piccolo tesoro* this, baby boy that. When’re they gonna learn I'm growing up? I'm almost thirteen, man!

Elisa chuckles and drapes an arm around my shoulders as I sit down at the kids' table, but it's not that easy for her to do so anymore. Over the summer, I've shot up a few inches, and I'm actually taller than Elisa now. Not that it takes a lot to be taller than her and Mom. They're like midgets.

"You could've just asked me for money, you know," she tells me, and I already know. She's got a hidden stash of money—money either Dad has given her or she's won herself. She likes to gamble with the kids at school.

I shrug and stab a meatball with my fork. "No offense, but Dad just gave me a hundred for ice cream." I laugh, widening my eyes, and shake my head. "*Quanto pensa che costi il gelato?*

"I heard you were gonna share it with me," Julia says, seated across from me.

I cross my eyes at her and scratch my eyebrow with my middle finger.

We all got our favorites in our family. Anthony and Julia are tight. But for me, it's Elisa. We're close. Julia? Forget about it! She's like a damn hurricane.

"I'm gonna tell Daddy you gave me the finger." Julia flips her hair over her shoulder.

"Oh yeah?" I smirk. "Then maybe I'll tell him that you've broken the jewelry box in your room—the one Nonna gave you."
That shuts her up. She purses her lips and scowls down at her plate, and now she doesn't have Anthony protecting her.

I got plans for that money, anyway. One of Zio Alec's boys—he's old, like nineteen, I think—sells me weed cheap just because he's scared of my name, and then I make a few bucks when I sell it at school.

I like it, making money my own way. Even if my parents rarely deny me, no grown-up people beg Mommy and Daddy for cash.

My parents think they're so slick, like, Dad's job is just owning this restaurant—Stella Mia—and being part owner of Dawn? Yeah, right. I wasn't born yesterday, and if you're only a restaurant owner, you don't need guns around the house, and you don't need to hide wads of cash everywhere. Plus, I've seen some stuff. I'm not stupid.

And if Zio Jasper was really only working at Dawn, then why was he arrested? Huh?

Not so stealthy, my family.

Dad says he always finds out sooner or later, but I don't know. He hasn't caught me yet.

I think the only one who's on to me is my brother. But he was doing the same shit at my age, so he won't rat me out. He's good like that. He also gives me advice and stuff, tells me not to smoke what I sell. 'Cause it'd be like a fat guy selling candy and eating it all for himself.

Anyway, Zio Alec's guy is here tonight, over by the bar having a drink with his honey, and I hope to corner him soon.

If you're looking for someone, anyone, you can always show up at Stella, 'cause everyone winds up here at some point during the day.
An hour or so later, after dinner and dessert, Dad and Enzo go outside to smoke, and I walk over to the bar.

"How you doin', kid?" one of the Michaels who works here asks. I think there are three.

"Can't complain." I tap my fingers on the bar. "Um, a 7 Up." Side-eyeing Mario next to me, I give a subtle nod and hear him tell his girl he forgot something in his car.

I sip my soda while Mario walks out, and then I start to follow, always feeling a little nervous.

I'm at the front door when I hear the sound of screeching tires outside. My heart starts beating mad fast as a gun with a silencer pops off two shots. It's muted and soft, but I hear it, so it must be right outside. Grasping the door handle, I'm about to open the door when a hand clamps over my mouth.

"Sometimes you really are a fucking kid," a voice hisses, and it's my brother. "You don't even know what you're walking into, Dee." He shoves me outta the way and pulls out a gun, motioning for me to be quiet.

I'm frozen in place, eyes wide, and he opens the door a few inches. I hope the frosted glass of the door is enough to shield us.

"You're going down with the Diamond, Maisano," we hear someone growl outside.

Anthony spits out a low curse, peering out the door, and a second later there're tires screeching again.

"Remember when I took you driving out in the desert?" my brother asks quickly, dragging me with him outside.
A black van drives away.

I nod in a daze, seeing a body on the sidewalk in a pool of blood.

"Oh, fuck," I breathe out. "It's—it's..." Mr. Sindone.


He runs, takes off in the direction the van sped off in, and I snap into action, nearly pissing my pants as I run around to the back of the restaurant where the parking lot is.

"Hey..." Mario frowns. "I thought—"

"Not now," I rush out, unlocking Anthony's car. Getting in behind the wheel, my fingers tremble as I stick in the key and turn the ignition. *Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me.* I've only driven a car like three times. And never in traffic. "FUCK!" I can't do this! I slam my hands down on the wheel, hating this.

Just as I open the car door again, ready to run inside to get Zio Riley, Mario is there.

"Scoot over," he orders, and I comply. "A thirteen-year-old driving? Come on. What's going on, kid?" He senses my panic, so he backs out quickly and drives toward the front of the restaurant.

"My b-brother's chasing—" I stammer. "Down this street." I point. "You didn't hear the shots going off?" He shakes his head no and pulls out a gun from his waistband, placing it in his lap. "Someone drove past and shot—um, Gabriella's dad, and...and..." Fuck, my dad. Something about
going down with the Diamond. "Um, they've got my dad and Anthony's running after—" I close my mouth, feeling nauseated.

_Don't cry. Don't you fucking cry._

Since our plan was to see the Dunes implosion, we had dinner at _Stella_ early, so it's not dark yet. The traffic is heavy, and Mario and I keep our eyes open for any sign of Anthony.

"Did you see who took Mr. Maisano?" Mario asks. "Did you hear anythin'? What did the car look like?"

"Um." I swallow and exhale shakily. "It was a black van. I didn't see anybody, but a dude said my dad, uh, something like, 'You're going down with the Diamond.' I don't know what that means."

Mario nods in thought, and then makes a sharp turn toward the Strip. "I think I know where we can find Anthony."
Chapter 15

Translation:

Pezzo di merda! = Piece of shit!

Anthony's POV

"It's your funeral, kid," a security shithead mutters after letting me inside the hotel. He's three hundred bucks richer—all the cash I had on me—and I didn't hafta waste a bullet on him. Trust, I would've. If he hadn't let me in.

Panting like a madman, I run through the empty lobby and toward the stairs, having seen EJ enter here just a few minutes prior. The security guard I bribed couldn't have been the same—if EJ also bribed his way in—'cause the one I "spoke" to looked at me as if I was insane. And maybe I am, but fuck, my dad's in here somewhere.

It's easy to see, anyway. Small favors and all. The entire hotel is lit up, and outside the "No Vacancy" sign is switched on, too.

When I reach the stairwell, I look up—The Miracle in the Desert, my fine Italian ass. It's a fucking devil's workout. But I don't got any time to waste, so I start running again, my mouth dry from the exertion. Though I can't see anyone, I can hear the sounds of feet stomping upward.

I'd spied EJ outside the hotel with a fucker I didn't recognize, but since there's already a crowd forming for the show later, I couldn't open fire right there. Security's too tight and there's media everywhere. Regardless, it's EJ and one other guy, and together they've got my father, who didn't look conscious earlier.

Dealing drugs, robbing truckers, fronting money for a fake-invoice business, delivering messages, committing fraud, acting as security for
Dad's poker games, collecting tribute, and being a fucking driver…it's all nothing when you realize you're probably minutes away from using the gun you've been trained to use since you were fourteen.

Waving a .357 around to be tough is one thing, but to actually put it to use means you gotta have balls and a heart of stone.

I'm ready, though. I know what family's about, and if this ain't a good reason for icing a fucker, I don't know what is.

Getting to the fifth floor, I bend over and breathe heavily, sweat trickling down my temples. I shrug off my suit jacket and throw it in the corridor of a floor with deserted rooms. Then I'm back in the stairwell and running. I loosen my tie, stopping for just a second 'cause I could've sworn I heard my brother...

I blink away a few beads of sweat, heart stuck in my throat, and I look down the narrow slip of air, but I see nothing.

Then I do; it's Dee, and he's whisper-yelling my name.

Jesus fucking Christ. Telling him to follow me from Stella was a good idea—at the time—when I wasn't thinking and never thought he'd actually do it. Now that the shit's hit the fan, I regret it—the dangers of our world suddenly feeling like a ton of bricks sitting on my shoulders, knowing he's not ready.

Peering down once more, I catch sight of my baby brother, and I motion for him to shut the fuck up. So far, we haven't been spotted, but now I don't know how far up EJ and his little helper are with Dad.

Another head appears at the ground floor, and when I squint my eyes—I think that's Mario, a buddy of mine. He's the only dude in Alec's crew I'd trust to sell weed to Dee. I orchestrated that whole thing when I saw my brother looking for ways to make money. Like I had Nico keeping track of
my ass when I was greener than I am now—well, before Dad was onto me—I'm gonna keep my eyes on Dee.

Knowing that Mario's here, I return to climbing stairs, and I don't stop until I'm not sure if EJ's higher up. I leave the stairwell, making sure the door's open a few inches. I'll wait until Mario and Dee are here, and then I'm pretty sure we gotta wait some more. Checking my watch, I see that the implosion ain't for another couple hours, and this can go several ways. Either EJ will kill my dad and then find a quick escape—though, I doubt that'll happen. If he was after a speedy fuckin' killing, he woulda just popped a bullet in my dad's head like some gangster drive-by outside'a Stella. Or he'll drop Dad in a room, *some-fucking-where*, and leave.

That would go with his line earlier, about how Dad will go down with the Diamond. Really, when I think about it, the only question is how long EJ will linger. This hotel will go down in flames; it's just a matter of hours, and my cousin ain't known for being brave. He's vindictive, but I don't see him staying here and twiddling his thumbs.

My heart hasn't calmed down yet by the time I see Mario and Dee, and I'm pretty sure I'm in shock. I'm blank, just worrying about following this through, but I'm not arrogant or stupid enough to think I won't cry my eyes out and want my mom to hug me later. Cazzo. I roll my eyes and wipe at my forehead, then nod at Mario and Dee.

"Get in here." I hold open the door, and they run past me in the doorway, panting too. I stay where I am, now ready to keep watch. Sooner or later, EJ and his whoever-the-fuck will run down again, and that's when we'll start searching the floors.

"Who—what...?" Dee pants out.
I wipe my forehead and ignore him, instead facing Mario who's watching me patiently, wanting whatever info I've got. "EJ," I say, swallowing. My mouth is still too dry. "He and someone I didn't recognize."

Mario nods silently and shrugs outta his leather jacket.

"EJ?" My brother is surprised. "Our cousin?"

"He's not our fucking cousin," I spit out, clenching my fists. "I ain't getting into all that now—there's a lotta shit you don't know, bro." Letting out a breath, I lean back against the wall, and cock my head to listen for sounds in the stairwell.

"You gonna clip him?" Mario keeps his voice low.

I spare a quick glance to my brother, who looks stunned, but I don't exactly have time to comfort him or explain now.

"If I get a clean shot," I answer irritably and peek out the door. Whatever I do, I can't risk Dee's life. Fuck it—I'm not risking my own, either. Mom and Gabriella would bring me back to life, only to kill me again. Which sorta makes me smile a little to myself, though it dies quickly. By now, I guess my girl has found out her dad's dead. I mean, he was shot in the head, not moving, and there was too much blood where he was lying on the sidewalk... And I won't be there for her.

I frown and look down, my gut twisting.

"Um." Dee breathes out shakily and pushes back his hair. "Do—do you think Dad's...?"

I glare at the floor and quickly shake my head no. "Fuck that." Dad's fine.

He has to be.

~oOo~
An hour and a half later, I'm pacing in panic and impatience.

We've managed to quietly search two floors, all while keeping an eye on the stairwell, but no success. EJ is still up there somewhere—only two more floors left to go through, though we can't go higher up at this point without facing greater risks.

"Dee, run back down and get outta here," I snap, pointing to the door to the stairwell.

Thirty minutes to show time. Thirty minutes before Steve Wynn has this entire hotel in flames.

"I'm staying," my brother grits out, eyes glistening with tears. "I can help, Anthony."

Rushing over to him in the corridor, I push him up against a wall and glare at him furiously. "You gotta death wish, ragazzino?" I seethe. I fist his shirt and barely refrain from shaking some sense into him; meanwhile, I'm scared outta my fucking mind. "Think about Mom." I lower my voice, not afraid to play that card. "Think about our sisters."

He smashes his lips together and glares back, too fucking stubborn for his own good. He knows there's nothing we can do unless we're all ready to put our lives on the line, but the time hasn't run out just yet.

We could go get help—alert the authorities and put a stop to all this, but then EJ would be arrested. He'd be behind bars instead of facing my gun.

We all gotta earn our wings, right? Get our button and shit, take the oath, become a man of honor. And while I'm still years away—at least I guess so—I'm dead set on being the one who takes down EJ.

But not with my baby brother here. He's gotta get his ass to safety.
"Come on." I release him and back away, returning to the door. I hold it open wider for him. "Get fucking going, Dominic." I speak through clenched teeth, sweat burning in my eyes, and jerk my chin at the stairwell.

"Scordatelo!" He says I can forget it, widening his arms. "You don't think I know you, huh?" He advances, sounding older than his twelve years. "The minute I'm gone, you'll go up there and chase him." He squares his jaw. "You're not gonna try'n be some hero."

I roll my eyes, pretending to be unaffected. "Does it look like I'm suicidal?" I point to my chest. "I just wanna—"

My sentence gets cut short when we suddenly hear shouting from one or two floors above. Which means the door to the stairwell wherever EJ is must be open.

Mario jumps to life, Dee's eyes widen, and I quickly close the door a couple feet. Thing is, that was definitely Dad's voice, and soon we hear more, accompanied by the sound of EJ's laughter.

Unnecessarily motioning for Dee and Mario to be quiet, I lean forward to hear better, and I grab my piece from my waistband.

"I thought you was a man, EJ!" I hear Dad shout in a raspy voice. "Get the fuck back hea' and face me like one, ya fuckin' cuntbag! Or you gotta run out and go buy tampons?!

"For fuck's sake, stop goading him," I mumble, turning to Mario and Dee. Then I frown, seeing Mario handing my brother a gun. I raise a brow at him. "Yo, he's twelve."

Mario shrugs. "Better leave him with something to defend himself with, right?"
I'd usually agree, and I know Dee's used one, but...Jesus Christ, he's my little brother.

Shaking my head, I stay outta that and refocus on the door. It doesn't take long before we begin to hear EJ and his buddy's descent. They're still laughing, and Dad's still shouting at them to get back up there.

I open the door one final time, and Mario nods at me. I nod back, the two of us taking up the doorway. Guns raised, and I say, "EJ's mine. Take down his friend."

"Got it, Maisano." Mario smirks faintly and moves his finger to the trigger.

When EJ appears on the landing, just a fifteen or so steps above this floor, I get my finger on the trigger, too, and I ignore my heart tryin'a pound its way outta my ribcage.

EJ's friend follows right after, and when both are fully visible, their laughter cuts off as they spot us.

Mario fires, and before EJ can even recover from his shock, I aim at his shoulder and pull the trigger. It echoes loudly in the stairwell, along with two screams, causing my ears to ring, but I don't let the in-fucking-sane sounds piercing my eardrums distract me. Aiming once more, I shoot EJ in the thigh, and he cries out as his knees buckle.

"Shit," I breathe out, rushing into action. Two circles of blood grow larger and larger from EJ's friend's chest, and I jump over his body to get to EJ. His eyes widen; I grab him by the collar of his shirt and shove his head down against the edge of one step. "You thought you's gonna get away, didn't you?" I keep him pushed down as I search his pockets for weapons, and I find a piece tucked down in his pants. Throwing that aside, I place a hand on his throat, squeezing him. "Looks like your dick's as small as your brain." I spit in his face and press the barrel of the gun against his cheek.
"Stop—" He chokes and his eyes bug out, his face turning red and purple from lack of oxygen.

I chuckle darkly, not feeling like myself. This fucking douche has raised too much hell around here. And coming after my family?

"Finish it, Maisano," Mario says behind me, impatient. "We don't gotta lotta time."

I smile at EJ, at the fear swimming in his eyes. "Too bad I can't draw this out." That said, I release EJ's throat and fire my gun. "Pezzo di merda!" I don't even hear my own words for the sound of the shot. Blood splatters on the wall next to us, and I get it on my face and chest, too.

Standing up, I look at the blood on my hands—I'm all dazed and...not really here. I don't fucking know. Feels weird, though.

"Anthony." My brother gulps as my head snaps up and I face him.

I stare, kinda unseeinglly, not moving a muscle. "What?" I ask.

He shakes his head slowly, lookin' scared.

"Come on." Mario walks past, upward. "We gotta find your pops and get the fuck outta here."

I nod and look down; yeah, we gotta find Dad.

Turning, I follow Mario, and I hear my brother tagging along, too.

But before I even reach the landing, another shot rings out, and all air leaves my lungs.

There's a scream.

It's like time stops, and I'm so frozen in place I can't even feel anything. Regardless, I look down my front, but I see nothing wrong.
"Fuck!" Mario growls, pushing me to the side. I bump into the wall, still in shock, and watch as he raises his gun and shoots EJ's friend again. This time in the head. **Oh. So...he didn't die before?**

I think I remember Dad and Felix saying something about always aiming for the head, though. Not the chest...

I shake my head and try to clear it, but it's fucking impossible.

"Shit, Dominic." Mario rushes over to my brother next, getting down on one knee before him, and I frown, wondering what's going on. "Maisano, I gotta get your brother out." Mario doesn't turn to me; he keeps facing my brother, also blocking my view.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because he's been shot!" Mario yells.

That snaps me back to reality, and I almost stumble over myself as I hurry over.

"Dee," I choke out.

He's shaking, going into shock, and is only standing because Mario's holding him up. Then I see the blood dripping from his side, quickly coloring his shirt.

"Get him to the nearest hospital," I order, my voice wavering. "Dee—" I cup his cheek, trying to make him face me, but when he does, it's like he's not even there. "Dominic. You'll be fine. All right?"

He says nothing, and I rise from the floor. "Get him to a hospital," I repeat.

Mario nods and picks up my little brother. "I ain't facin' Mrs. Maisano alone, so you better get out alive."
I stand quietly in the stairwell with two bloody bodies a few minutes after Mario has gone down with Dee.

I pull at my hair, suddenly breathing too fast. I wanna claw at my fucking face, but instead I direct the anger away from me; I use it to climb stairs.

"Dad?" I call out hoarsely, holding onto the railing.

There's a beat of silence, then Dad's voice that betrays disbelief, anger, and relief. "Anthony?"

"Dad!" I run faster, following his voice up to the top floor.

"Jesus Christ, Anthony!"

**Junior's POV**

"You're outta your fucking mind, Anthony," I croak, pushing down a sob. Squeezing my eyes shut, I let him untie my hands behind my back, and then my feet that are tied to the chair I'm sitting in. "Outta your fucking mind."

I can't think. Yeah, there's one thing. Two things. The shots I heard a moment ago...my son being up here...I think about that. Having my son too close to danger—in a building that's about to explode. Implose. No matta'.

"You'd already given up, hadn't you?" he accuses, almost finished with the last rope.

I don't reply. Wiseguys don't usually get many options. History speaks volumes and men my rank either get clipped or end up in prison. Obviously some die of old age—Christ, I even hope it's a majority, but...

"You didn't come alone, did you?" I ask instead, and I ignore the throbbing pain in my thigh that's causing dizziness, nausea, and blurry
vision. I frown, pretty sure I've lost a lot of blood. And I know the bullet's still in there.

That fuckin' piece'a shit, EJ.

What a goddamn day. I'd like to say I'm quick on my feet, but I ain't quicker than a fucking bullet. Enzo and I were just shooting the shit and smoking a cigarette after dinner. Then outta nowhere this van pulled up; EJ and a buddy of his came out, and they put bullets in us before we could even drop our smokes. Enzo got one in the head, and I got hit in my upper thigh. I remember the pain blazing through me like I was on fire, and the shock made it worse. But the pain itself is fucking worse right now. Could be the broken rib, too. At least I think it's broken. 'Cause once EJ had shoved me into the van, he kicked me in the gut 'til I blacked out. The last words I remember hearing were his accusations of me clipping his dad.

Then I woke up here. In a hallway at the Dunes.

"Come on." Anthony slides an arm around my middle and helps me up. I wince at the shooting pain and spit out a curse. "We don't have a lotta time."

"You d-didn't answer my q-question." I cough and blink, a dizzy spell washing over me. "Cazzo."

We begin to slowly make our way to the stairwell.

"Mario from Zio Alec's crew and Dee," he whispers.

"Oh, Jesus." I choke, putting my fist to my mouth. Coming to a stop, I turn to Anthony and cup his jaw in one hand. His eyes...they're both dead and crazed. There's a storm in there, but his expression is flat. "Anthony..." It fucking kills me to see my baby boy this way, and to find out my twelve-year-old was...or is...here, too? "What happened?" Every
other pain pushed aside, my gut twists up, hurting me even more. I dread hearing his answer. "The shots," I whisper.

He swallows and urges me to walk again. "I killed EJ. Mario shot at the other fucker—we thought he was dead." His eyes well up, and he clears his throat. I watch him, even more dread creeping up. "He wasn't, and I-I didn't check. I didn't make sure."

"Anthony," I grit out, blinking back tears.

There's a lot of crap I can handle, but not seeing my kids in pain. And I need to know...

"Dee's fine—I think, but..." His bottom lip quivers. Then he forces a blank expression on to his face again. He's stony and closed off. "EJ's friend shot Dee in the side—Mario's taken him to the hospital."

I nod jerkily, unwilling to process what he's said. As we reach the stairwell and begin our descent, all I can see are the faces of my family. My wife's gotta be sick with worry, especially with Dee at the hosp—

"Fuck," I rasp, the pain nearly blinding me. We pass two bodies a couple floors down, and I try to hold back my emotions when I see all the blood; I can't help but wonder how much of it belongs to my youngest son.

I very rarely get emotional, and it's even more rare that I show it. That's for behind closed doors, if anything.

But all bets are off when it's my children...

"Starà bene." I rasp out that he'll be okay, even when I know nothing about how hurt Dominic really is. He fucking has to be okay. "He'll be fine."

"I should've checked—"
"Shut up," I spit out. "It's not your fuckin' fault, tesoro." I don't play the goddamn blame game, because in the end, it all comes back to me. "Get that outta your head—shit." I wince and place a palm over my ribs, the spot where it hurts the most. I almost wanna climb up and kill EJ all over again. But since it hurts to breathe and the implosion's not far away, I let my son keep guiding me down.

"Only ten minutes left."

I nod and gnash my teeth together, then I suck it up and try to pick up the pace. My thigh throbs, blood steadily oozing out of the bullet wound, my ribs ache with each breath, the mother of all headaches settles in, I gasp for air, sweat and tears burn in my eyes, I'm on the verge of puking my guts out, and in the back of my head, questions start to pile up.

How did Anthony find me? How did Dominic and Mario get involved? Did that bullet really kill Enzo? Was EJ's friend involved with the Outfit?

Lastly, did the shit EJ spew out before he left the top floor really happen?

Pacing around me as I began to wake up earlier, EJ had been grinning at me, bragging about how he'd gone to Felix's place before heading to Stella. He told me he'd clipped his uncle—that Felix was dead. He also admitted, fuckin' gleefully, how he'd gathered evidence against Jasper to have him arrested.

We should've put a stop to him long before Anthony—Christ, I still can't believe my son had the balls to do it. So far, he's excelled in most tasks he's been given. He's wet behind the ears, and he often asks for advice, but he, much like me, is fucking made for this life. But, no matta', killing a man is different. Yet he did it. And I thought he'd have a couple more years before he had to get into all that.
When we finally reach the lobby, we can hear the insane crowd outside the hotel. Anthony and I exchange a quick look, then we move toward the reception area, 'cause there's gotta be another exit. With only a few minutes to spare, we pick up more speed, ignoring any aches, and jog through a corridor behind the front desk.

At fucking last, just when I think my leg is about to give out, we see an emergency exit. Anthony tries it first, but it's gotta be locked from the outside. It doesn't surprise us, though. No one's got business in here at this point.

"Stand back," he instructs quietly and aims his gun.

I watch as he fires, destroying the hinges, and with a few shoves we manage to push it open. Taking gulps of fresh air, I hear the countdown being shouted through the crowd on the front of the hotel. I grab Anthony's arm, running solely on adrenaline, and we start running away from the hotel. The entire area is sealed off, and there's security here and there, but we don't give a fuck. We keep running, making turns in one alley, staying near the Dumpsters in another, ducking our heads near some trees and bushes, and I send a small thanks that it's dark enough to keep us fairly shielded.

We get to a nearby low-rise building just as an ear-shattering rumble drowns out all other sounds.

"Madonn'," Anthony pants, standing next to me.

Leaning back against a wall, I keep my eyes glued on the imploding building. Gray smoke, flames...fireworks light up the sky, and the ground trembles with the massive destruction.

As the haze I've been in begins to clear, I drape an arm around Anthony's shoulders and pull him close. Despite being almost my height, he feels
small in my arms. Screwing my eyes shut, I kiss the side of his head, only tightening my hold on him when he starts to shake with silent cries.

"You saved me," I whisper thickly, feeling the edges of my vision blacken. *Fuck*. I don't have a lot of strength left. A small breeze causes a violent shudder to run through me. I feel cold as fuck. "I think you need to take your old man to the hospital." I swallow hard, my leg at last failing me. Slowly, I slide down the wall, too dizzy and nauseous to get back up.

"Stay awake, Dad." Anthony's back in business. I hear the rawness of his voice, but he's alert. "I'll get help!"
Chapter 16

Hummingbird's POV

"Okay, Anthony. I feel like slapping you again, so you can go." I wave away my son and stir some cream into my coffee.

He chuckles, kisses my temple, and gets up to leave the cafeteria. "I'll drive over to the Sindones for a bit, a'ight?"

I nod absently, then remember. "Stop by our house and grab one of the casseroles in the freezer!"

Poor Carm and Gabriella. I still can't believe Enzo's dead—God rest his soul.

Once Anthony has left, it's just me, Brianna, and Victoria—Junior's youngest sister who flew in from Kansas City yesterday. Oh, and the cunt of a cafeteria lady who glares at us every now and then because we brought our own food from Stella. Alec dropped it off earlier.

I won't be caught alive with hospital food.

I've got standards.

"How're you feelin', hon?" Victoria asks, concerned.

I offer a tight-lipped smile. "I'll be fine." Truth is, the past two days have been an emotional rollercoaster. I already knew something was terribly wrong when Junior, Dominic, and Anthony never returned to the restaurant, and the second Riley stepped outside to see if Junior and Enzo were still out there... I can't even describe it. We worried for what felt like an eternity, and then, eventually, I learned that my youngest boy was in the hospital with a gunshot wound.
At the same time, in that damn mess, we all found out that Felix had been taken to the hospital for the same fucking reason.

As if all that wasn't enough, Junior was admitted an hour or so later, and guess what! He'd been shot.

Nobody, and by that I mean the men in our family, will tell me anything. Not Felix, not Ed, not Riley, not Alec, not that Mario kid who brought Dominic to the hospital. Not even my oldest son who I've been acting like a mental case to; he won't open that goddamn mouth of his! Madonn', I could just strangle the fucker!

The police are just as irritated with Anthony, 'cause he's got answers, but he told one officer, and I quote, "Yo, unless you take me in, I got nothing to say. And if you do slap those fuckin' cuffs on me, I'll wait for my lawyer to get there before I even open my mouth. We clear? You'll hafta wait 'til my father wakes up."

I remember standing in the hall with him, completely stunned.

And you know, it clicked for me. He knows too much. All the little things in the past, and now how he's suddenly got more money—Stella doesn't pay that well, and he says he's too old for allowance. And like I said, he knows too much. He knows his rights, and I don't see why a seventeen-year-old would be aware of all that unless...

So, once I understood he's got more common with my husband than I ever wanted, I've been even more of a nut job. I confronted him; he didn't deny it. He just pursed his lips and that was that.

It's clear that Anthony saved his father from whatever, so one second I'm all over him, kissing him and thanking him for being so brave and wonderful and strong. Then the next second I'm there to smack him upside the head.
I'm so... I'm so fucking mad—furious, that he's joined the family business.

I'm also angry with myself for not seeing it sooner, for not preventing it, and don't get me started on Junior. Mother of Christ, I just wanna wring his goddamn neck. All this is connected somehow, and I demand to know how my twelve-year-old son got shot, nearly rupturing his spleen.

Praise Jesus no vital organs were damaged. I don't know if I'd be able to take it.

"Honey—" Brianna puts her hands over mine. I've killed my napkin; it's in shreds. "Junior and Dominic will be fine."

I nod and take a breath.

"Our brother is too stubborn to die," Victoria says with a firm nod.

"Questo lo vedremo dopo che avrò finito con lui," I spit out, saying we'll see about that when I'm done with him.

But who am I kidding? We all know I won't say much. Junior's a wiseguy, and I fucking knew that when I met him. I knew it when he ignored condoms, and I knew it when I gave birth to our children. I knew the world we were giving them. I can blame my husband for being who he is, I can blame myself for wanting him, I can blame Anthony for not choosing his own path, another path...

"I want to blame someone," I whisper, wiping a stray tear away from my cheek. "I want to know why my baby boy is being treated for a fucking gunshot wound." I choke up and cover my mouth with a hand, Brianna immediately coming over to my side of the table to comfort me. "Why won't Anthony tell me?" I sniffle. "He knows I won't tell a damn soul. The thought is fucking ridiculous." And more than a little insulting. I raised that little shit, and just because he's a man and happens to be a foot taller than me... it ain't got shit on this—I'm his fucking mother!
"You know why, Bella." Brianna places an arm around me. "Anyone could be listening."

I sigh and grab a new napkin to wipe under my eyes.

"And you refuse to leave the hospital," Victoria adds gently.

I scoff. "Well, I'm not leaving now." They're taking Junior off the sedatives as we speak, and they're waking up our son tomorrow. Dominic is stable too, thank God, but the doctors said they wanted to keep him in a medically-induced coma for another day to recover from his surgery.

"It will still be a few hours 'til Junior wakes up, though," Brianna reasons, wanting me to go home. "Everyone will be back tonight, anyway."

I know. Elisa and Julia are out in Henderson with Junior's parents, though they'll all be here tomorrow morning. Gianna's at home, cleaning up the mess someone left behind after shooting Felix. I don't really know a lot about them other than Felix is fine; it was just a graze at the side of his head. He's already been discharged, and I bet he's at Twilight now. That's where Riley and Alec are, too.

Alice has stopped by, but she's got Nico, Lucia, and Sophia to entertain now. Esme has been staying with her since my brother was arrested.

Rose...well, she's outta our lives. She and Theresa live in Florida, and I don't know if EJ has plans to move there, too. But Anna's staying in Carson City, as far as I know.

"Any'a youse heard from Maria?" I ask, needing a topic change. It's been quiet from Alec's wife ever since she caught him with his goomah. I hope she's all right, but I honestly can't find it in me to care too much at this point. Mainly, I hope they'll be okay since they've got AJ, and he's too young to suffer through a divorce. Not that I think Alec will ever grant Maria one.
"She went to visit her parents in Sicily for a while," Brianna answers.

"Huh," is all I've got to say. Checking my watch, I wonder if Junior could do me a favor and just wake up already. He needs to answer my questions, and he needs to give me a damn good reason for lying.

I remember back in the day, I made Junior promise never to lie to me. I told him that keeping his mouth shut and refusing to answer me was one thing, 'cause I know too well about the family business and that it's not for a wife's ears. But it was an empty promise, and not only on my husband's end. I've lied to him, too.

Hell, we lie to each other all the time, but for Christ's sake, it's little white lies. They're about work, about shielding our children, about...about small things. I make him believe I'm always hungry for him, because I want him to feel wanted and desired. Trust me, he is desired, but after a long day of taking care of the children, the house...I don't always have to be horny, do I?

But I push all that aside if Junior wants to get some. 'Cause it's what my mother taught me; what I won't do, some other bitch will. So, I fucking do it. Juniu's my man—I take care'a him. Besides, it makes me feel better about myself. I get to please my husband, and I know that I do my best at all times. And Junior gets his shit greased.

Elisa has been a little rebel growing up, and while I tried to keep her in check, Junior would've silenced her immediately. There's no way his baby girl should act any way other than the angel he wants her to be. So, I lied for Elisa's sake—so that she could explore and spread her wings a bit, too.

Junior has done the same with Anthony. He has protected our son.

I get it. To an extent. With me looking the other way, blind as a bat, Anthony became a regular at Dawn to watch those girls... Yet, he
remained my precious little boy for a while longer. Junior made it possible for me to baby Anthony.

Those are the kinds of lies I can live with. They're sorta innocent.

But when it comes to *lives* of our children? If they're in *danger*?

It wasn't long ago Junior told me to give him some credit—he asked, "What do you take me for?" when I'd pleaded with him not to involve Anthony in his professional life. That I even suspected Junior of involving Anthony was ridiculous—it was so implied in his words.

But it wasn't ridiculous at all. It was a blatant lie: a big, fat one. Right in my fucking face.

Now...who knows how deep into it Anthony is? Well, Junior knows. Anthony knows. But they won't fucking tell me!

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. Despite my shower in Junior's room this morning, it feels dirty and messy. With a grimace, I slide off the rubber band around my wrist and yank my hair back in a high ponytail.

"What're you thinking?" Victoria asks softly.

I purse my lips and shake my head. "I always thought I handled this life well. I'm a damned good wife and a great mother. But..."

"No buts." Brianna frowns. "You *are* all that."

"I wanna punch Juniuh in the fucking balls," I seethe.

Brianna and Victoria wince, chuckling.

"At the same time..." I let out a noise of disgust and then a sigh. "At the same time, I want him to wake up so I can hug him, kiss him, see for myself that he's okay... Still, I honestly don't know how I can get past this
kind of lying. I mean, he's let our seventeen-year-old son work for him. Or whatever." I wave a hand, having no clue about the details. "Anthony's in the business now, and it kills me."

"I hear ya, hon." Brianna nods. "If I ever find out that Riley's been letting Colin into that goddamn life, I'll..."

"You'll what, sis?" Victoria smiles ruefully. "What can you really do?"

We grow quiet, all knowing the answer.

There's nothing we can do, except for letting our disappointment and dismay show. We can fight our husbands to hell and back, but then? Nothing. *Non cambia una singola cosa.*

"I'm gonna guilt-trip the *shit* outta Juniuh," I say with a sneer. It's my safest best, 'cause he deserves to get a taste of the misery I've lived through these past couple of days. Releasing a breath, I stand and zip up my thin, hooded sweatshirt. "I'm gonna go out for a smoke, and then I'll walk over to the chapel for a bit." I rarely smoke these days, but I need one now.

~oOo~

The minute the doctors tell me Junior's waking up, I kiss Dominic on the forehead and promise to be back soon. I'd like to think he can feel my presence even if he's not awake.

When I get to my husband's room, I nod at his sisters who're standing outside. Brianna tells me she's gonna give their mother a call, and I think they'll call everyone we know to say Junior's awake.

"Tell my girls I love them," I request, and Brianna nods. It wasn't my choice for Elisa and Julia to go out to Henderson, and it sure wasn't my daughters' choice, either. But we couldn't have them at the hospital,
'cause they were too upset. Elisa's super close to Dominic, and Julia isn't reassured when the doctors say everything will be fine. She's too young to push back emotions. Besides, Elizabeth needed a distraction, a job, before she worried herself to death over her son.

Speaking of that son...I open the door to Junior's room just as the doctor is explaining my husband's injuries.

Not caring about the medical terms flying outta the doc's mouth, I rush over to Junior's side and pull the chair as close as I can before sitting down.

"Bell'uccellino," Junior rasps, reaching for my hand.

My eyes fill up with tears rapidly, and I ignore deciphering the storm building inside me. There's relief, there's anger. It is what it is. I'll deal with it in time. Right now I'm just happy to see him alive.

Instead of speaking, knowing my voice will fail, I bring our clasped hands to my face and kiss the top of his. I shake my head minutely, tears falling down, and I can't say a single word.

"I'll give you some privacy," the doctor murmurs. "Remember, Mr. Maisano: try not to use your voice yet." Then he makes his exit.

And my husband ignores the doctor's advice.

"How—how's Dominic?" Junior breathes out as his own eyes well up. I press my lips together; it's one of those times where you know you'll wail and sob if you so much as open your mouth. He tries to clear his throat and winces in obvious pain. "Will he b-be okay?"

I manage a small nod at that.
"They're waking him up tomorrow," I choke out, my bottom lip trembling. Tears continue to fall freely. "They'll hold youse for a while." I take a shaky breath. "Dominic will stay here longer."

Junior nods faintly and screws his eyes shut. "Anthony...okay?"

"Yeah." I blow out a breath, my oldest son's name bringing forth such a crazy mix of emotions. The fury helps me keep my sobs at bay. "How do you feel?" I eye the IV, the machines, and the various tubes attached to my husband. "Maybe you should listen to the doctor."

He waves it off tiredly with his free hand. "Headache, sore throat—nothin'a worry about," he rasps in a whisper.

We fall silent.

At this point, his fingers caressing mine is the only contact I want. It makes me feel horrible, but the image of my son in a hospital bed is enough to make me wanna scream.

"I would never intentionally..." He pauses to catch his breath, and I tell him to stay quiet and keep calm, but he waves me off again. "...never put them in d-danger, Isabella," he croaks, a couple tears rolling down his cheeks. He lies still, facing the ceiling. My heart stutters. "Never—"

"I know, ciccino. I know that." I squeeze his hand. I hear the exhaustion in my voice. "You're a damn good father."

He smiles; it's a little sad, a little bitter, a lot hollow. "But—you resent me." He looks haunted and tortured as his eyes meet mine. "I can see it." He touches my cheek before letting his hand drop.

I go with honesty. "I resent myself, too." I swallow and look down. "I'll get over it. I just need time. You focus on getting better—"
"Ah, stop that shit," he groans, then coughs and clears his throat. "I-I don't give a fuck about—" He squeezes his eyes shut again. "Jesus. You gonna hate me now? I mean...fuck, that's what I can't deal with."

"Don't get into this now, Juniuh," I warn quietly. "I am trying my hardest to give you space—time to heal and recover. You're tired, you're in pain, and you're all drugged up. Trust me, I will ask my questions, and I will do everything in my power to get my answers, but not now. It won't be pretty. Not for all the lying you've done."

His eyes that had been narrowed during most of my rant widen slightly before he frowns deeply, seemingly confused. "Wh-what?" He clears his throat for the umpteenth time. "What'chu talkin' 'bout?"

I barely manage to keep my anger bottled up. "About our son, maybe?" I cock a brow and cross one leg over the other as I lean back in my seat. A big part of me still wants to cling to Junior, or at the very least grasp his hand again, but...I can't. "About Anthony, Juniuh," I seethe, leaning forward just a few inches. "He works for you—" He opens his mouth to speak, but I hold up a hand. "I ain't talkin' about Stella, so save the bullshit for someone who believes it." Then I scoff, mad at myself once more—or even more than I was before. "I used to be that person." I grit my teeth and look down at my lap, at my fingernails. "You played me like a fucking fool."

I can handle many lies, because I can see the big picture, but there are limits.

My husband's lies about Anthony...right in my face, he lied...I feel betrayed. So fucking betrayed.

"He told you?" he whispers.
I shake my head no, keeping my eyes averted. "I figured it out. When I confronted him, he didn't deny it."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I." I chuckle without humor. "So am I, Juniuh."

"Baby..." His tears are back. "I'm sorry—cazzo, I really am. You have no idea."

"No." I don't touch him. Not now. "Go to sleep or whatevuh." I wave a hand. Fuck. Why did he have to bring this up now? I told him to wait. Goddammit. "I'll be hea'." I always will be. But he can't get away with this with just a slap on the wrist.

We grow quiet, silent tears rolling down, and when I feel my anger boiling up again, I leave the room for a while. He just woke up. I need to give him breathing room. So, I figure it's best to stay away while he rests up.

I've never been this torn between two emotions before—the need to love him, hold him protectively, and the need to curse him out, fucking hurt him.

I get smiles in concern from the women in our family. Pats on the back, murmurs of comfort, whispers of support and understanding.

From the men, I get the hugs and the "There, there—this will blow over."

*Gimme a gun and I'll show them how it can blow over!*

**Junior's POV**

"I love you so much," I choke out, kissing Dominic's hand. I hold it in both mine, refusing to let go. "I'm so fucking sorry, baby."

"Dad..." He groans.
By now, he's embarrassed by the display of affection—like I give a fuck. I don't think I've ever been this scared in my life. Well, the fire at the MGM all those years ago would be it. Or when Isabella gave birth to Julia.

Fucking hell, everything's a mess. My wife will barely talk to me, my youngest son just woke up a few hours ago, Anthony's trying to avoid Isabella's bitch slaps while also being there for Gabriella who just lost her father, and then Felix's run-in with EJ, my own goddamn injuries...it's too much to deal with at once.

Isabella's sitting on the other side of Dominic's hospital bed, yet it feels like she's miles away.

To top it all off, the police want statements—today—and I need to get my sons alone before I can open my mouth.

We need to settle on a story to stick to.

"Is there anything I can get you, topolino?" Isabella asks Dominic and wipes her cheeks.

"I'm fine," he rasps. "Thirsty..."

"Elisa will be here soon with ice chips," Isabella says, crying silently.

I swallow my own emotions, wishing she'd let me comfort her. One second I'm mad at her for pushing me away, then the next...I know I deserve it. It physically hurts—*it motherfucking aches*—but I had this coming. My wife is already so damn accepting and giving; I shouldn't've taken shit this far. I should've told Anthony to come clean to his mother—not about details, obviously—or I should've told her myself.

The thing is, I'm gonna lie to her again. I *have* to.
I can promise her to be more forthcoming when it's Dominic's turn to join
the family, 'cause I know that day is coming. But I cannot tell Isabella
how our youngest son was hurt a few days ago. That's one truth I want to
protect her from. It would kill her if she knew. She'd go crazy with the
"what if"s.

Yesterday, when Isabella left my room to be with Dominic, I spoke briefly
with Pops. There wasn't much we could say in my hospital room, but I do
know the police already have proof of me and Anthony being at the
Dunes. I think one of the security guys talked.

But they don't know Dominic and Mario were there.

I intend to keep it that way.

"Dad, shouldn't—you rest?" Dominic croaks.

I shake my head. There's no way I can leave my son. "Not yet." I tried to
fight the doctor about the fucking wheelchair, but one look from Isabella
shut me up. Regardless, I'm on too many painkillers to be in physical
pain. There's a whole lotta ache, my head, my ribs, my throat, my
goddamn thigh...but it's dull at the moment.

He hums and glances between me and Isabella. "Are youse fightin'?"

"No," Isabella says right away. "We're just focusing on you, honey."

I don't add anything to that.

"You're lyin'," Dominic mumbles sleepily, closing his eyes.

I let out a breath and drop my forehead to his hand, still holding on to it.

And I pray to God that everything will be okay between me and my wife. I
pray that Dominic will recover quickly. I pray that I will be able to stick
closer to the truth when Isabella asks, and I pray I can make things up to her.

Chapter 17

Anthony's POV

Since Dee and Pop were in the hospital, they missed Enzo's funeral. Now, a week and a half later, we've just had dinner at Stella in his honor—well, we're about to wrap up dessert.

Almost everyone in the family is here, including everyone in the younger generation who has left Vegas for college and whatnot. Only, Rosalie's part of the family doesn't really count anymore. EJ's dead, Emmett's dead, and Rosalie lives with Teresa in Florida. Her oldest, Anna, lives with her fiancé in Carson City.

Zio Jasper is obviously not here, either.

It's freaky how easy it is to tune them all out, though. Focus lands on my girl.

"You okay, micina?" I murmur, placing an arm on the back of Gabriella's chair. She's dressed impeccably in some gorgeous purple dress, not a hair outta place, and just a little makeup, but behind all that perfection is a sorrow that I wish I could take away for her.

Ever since Enzo was killed, I've been staying with Gabriella and her mother. Carm's a mess, too, and I'm glad she's decided to go visit her parents in Philly for a while. She leaves tomorrow, and my girl thankfully decided to stay behind.
"Hangin' in there," she sighs softly with a weak smile. "Have I thanked you yet for everything you've done?"

"Countless times." I pick up her hand and kiss the inside of her wrist, where the charm on her bracelet lingers. "Don't worry about it. I just want you to feel better."

"I'll be fine." She releases a breath and rests her head on my shoulder. "I think it will be easier once all this blows over." I hum and kiss her hair, and she turns her head and buries it in my armpit. She's still my weirdo. "I love you so much, Anthony."

That shit right there will never get old. The first time she said it was after her dad's funeral, so I was a little scared she'd only said it because her emotions were all over the fucking place. But I said it back, 'cause it's the truth, and later she admitted that she's felt that way about me for a long time.

"I love you, too." Tilting up her chin, I kiss her on the lips. "You've got that look in your eyes again—stop it." Every once in a while, she gets this haunted expression 'cause she's thinking about what I went through at the Dunes. She doesn't know the details, but I told her another version—the one we told the cops. "I'm not going anywhere, a'ight?"

Gabriella smiles tightly. "Do you know when you're comin' over later?"

"Okay, that was...weird." I clear my throat, avert my eyes, and loosen my tie. I mean...I only know of one other woman who can change the subject that fast and plaster a smile on her face, and that woman is my fucking mother. It's how she silences Dad before there can be a fight. "You gotta stop spending so much time with my mom," I tell her, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. "You're starting to act like her."

"She's taught me a lot."
I nod, getting that, but... "Still. It's you I'm in love with. Not..." I make a face and turn back to my forgotten cake. I shovel some into my mouth and say, "I'll hurry back to you tonight. I promise."

I can't fucking wait 'til we get our own place. Just gotta get some shit fixed first.

"Bene," she purrs, dropping a sensual kiss on my neck. My fork clanks against the plate. *Holy fuck.* I feel her hand gliding up my thigh. "I'll be waiting, *ciccioleone.*"

I nod dumbly.

**Junior's POV**

Alice, Esme, Sophia, and Lucia are the first to leave *Stella.* Nicola's wife and newborn son follow, and then Carm and Gabriella.

Next is Isabella who wants to let Dominic rest. He's eager to go home, too, but not 'cause he's tired. He hates the wheelchair, probably as much as I hate my cane, but it is what it is. It's not forever. However, he doesn't *have* to use the chair like I gotta use the cane. The doc said he's good for walking, as long as he doesn't overdo it and rests a lot. But Isabella being Isabella, she insisted on a wheelchair since we were leaving the house.

Dominic agreed when Isabella threw in a new video game as a bribe.

"Do you want me to help you?" I ask her, keeping my voice low. "I don't have to go right away."

With everything up in the air around us, tonight will be the first night we're all gathered—Felix, Pops, me, Riley, and Alec. Nico, Joseph, Anthony, and Mario are coming, too.
"It's okay." She offers a tight-lipped smile. "You have fun at the *strip club.*" She said that all condescendingly.

"What the...?"

I grasp her wrist, angry, when she starts to walk away, and I usher her into my office in the back of the restaurant.

"Juniuh," she protests when I lock the door behind us, "I don't want to keep Dominic waiting. He needs to rest."

"He can wait five fucking minutes," I snap. "Now, explain that little comment back there." She knows what I'm talking about. It's Twilight—yeah, a strip club, but the way she said it... "Why'd you say it like that?"

"What?" She widens her eyes. "It *is* a strip club, isn't it? I just told you to have fun."

I smile darkly, beyond pissed. I mean...after all these years, she decides to doubt me now. Just because everything's not sunshine and roses between us.

"We've talked business at Twilight for the past twenty years," I say. "If I didn't care about our vows, don't you think I woulda stepped out on you already?" She flinches as if I've slapped her, and I close the distance between us. "Give me one reason I should cheat on you." I grab her jaw, forcing her to look me in the eye. "Have I ever made you believe I would?"

"No, but..." She averts her eyes as they well up. "We're fighting."

I shake my head slowly. "You're ignoring me. I'm on my fucking knees for you." Metaphorically. I've begged, pleaded. She has no idea how much I miss her. Or how sorry I am. I keep telling her, but one look at Anthony or Dominic and she bursts into tears. "That's not a fight."
I make no excuses; I believe I deserve this, too, but to even think that I'd step out on her? Jesus Christ, that's cold. She's been the only woman for me since the day I trapped her as my goomah.

"I'm not ignoring you," she spits out. "I'm just trying to get over this."

"I get it!" I growl. When she tries to move away, I follow and squeeze her jaw. "Stop tryin'a get away from me." Hit with a wave of fury and possessiveness, I back her into a wall and drop the goddamn cane on the floor. "Now—" I nuzzle the soft skin of her cheek and groan "—this is better, dontcha think?" I breathe her in, pained about the fact that I gotta force her to be close to me. This is the closest I've been in days. "You smell good," I murmur huskily. To show her just how much I desire her, I press my stiffening cock against her stomach. "Feel what you do to me, baby?" My hand slides down so my fingers curl around her throat. "That's all you—all yours."

Unlike some other men I know, I wouldn't sink my cock into the first pussy that comes my way just because my wife is pissed at me. There's only one I want, and that's the one between my wife's thighs.

"Juniuh," she chokes out, pushing against my chest. "Please don't do this. Please, please, please."

I chuckle humorlessly, dying a little bit inside. "You don't want me no more, huh?" Hating myself for frightening her, I drop my forehead to her shoulder and bury my face in her silky hair. It's home—the same scent I've come home to for almost two decades. "You know I'll never give you a divorce, right?"

"I'm not asking for one," she cries. "I just want some space. Please—you're scaring me."
"I love you," I say thickly. Tears burn behind my closed lids, but I'm sick of showing weakness. I've cried too much already. "Tell me what to do to make it better instead."

I know I've betrayed her. When Anthony was little, I promised Isabella we would try to steer our sons in another direction than the one I chose. I promised we would encourage him to go to college. I promised we would warn him of the dangers that came with my job.

Not only did I fail at that—I didn't even try—but I didn't give my wife a chance to try, either. I withheld the truth, letting her believe Anthony wanted to be in the restaurant business. And while she knew of the risks, that it was a possibility our son would choose my lifestyle anyway, she trusted me when I promised we'd at least attempt to give him other options.

She didn't ask for much. A simple fucking try.

"I'm sorry," I utter in a strangled voice. "I'm so sorry, bell'uccellino. Forgive me." When I realize I'm still grasping her throat, albeit loosely, I let go and pepper kisses on her face. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Ti prego perdonami, Isabella." I plead for her forgiveness.

"You know I will! I told you from the beginning." She wipes angrily at her tear-stained cheeks. "Just—Christ, just back off a bit. Lemme breathe."

I obey and take a step back.

"God, you infuriate me, Juniuh." She glares up at me. "How many times do I gotta tell you? I'm mad at myself, too. I'm so fucking conflicted. If it weren't for your deceiving me and making Anthony your little mini-Juniuh, I wouldn't have you here today." She starts crying again. "I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I lost you. But, but—" she lets out a sob "—I hate the dangers you've added to his life—a life that's already not the
safest." She shakes her head, looking as miserable as I feel. "All I want is time to let this settle. Please give me that. You've known for a long time—remember that. But I just found out that my son is a fucking gangster."

I nod and look away, discreetly blinking back my emotions.

"But I apologize for what I said out there," she says, sounding more put-together now. "It wasn't right. You've always been faithful, and I love you even more for it. I got spooked 'cause I haven't been the wife I usually—"

"You're perfect," I cut in, meaning every word. "Sei sempre stata perfetta per me." I tell her she's always been perfect for me.

She smiles sadly. "It goes both ways, ciccino. You're all I want, but I swear to Christ—" fire flashes in her eyes and she points a finger at me "—if you don't give me a heads up about Dominic..."

I swallow hard, feeling guilty as fuck. As far as she knows, Dominic, Mario, Enzo, and I were involved in a drive-by shooting just outside'a Stella. While Enzo was murdered and I was taken, Mario managed to drag Dominic away.

The rest of the story we're sticking to—and have told the cops—is that Anthony stepped outside the restaurant just as the van pulled away, and therefore he was able to follow and track me down.

It's another lie, but I don't even wanna imagine the heartache Isabella would suffer if she knew the truth. And I didn't lie solely for her or myself. I also did it for Anthony. He's already beating himself up for including Dominic, which was just a mistake on his part—nothing I can fault him for. But if Isabella's conflicted now...think how devastated she'd be if her anger was directed at Anthony.

She'd hate herself for allowing even the smallest part of her to resent her own son. It's easier for all of us if she's just mad at me—and herself, as
she said—for a while. Because our children will always be her babies. She wants them safe and protected.

That's how all the women are in our family, which is why we've also left EJ out of the whole mess. To us men, he was a two-bit scumbag who betrayed the family—goddamn rat bastard. He was out to kill; it was a fucking vendetta, one his father started.

But to the women? EJ was the little shit who had a crush on my wife, he was Felix's nephew and godson, Alice's nephew too, Esme's grandson, a cousin to many, Emmett and Rosalie's son, Anna and Sophia's big brother...

To the police, this will be another unsolved case.

To our wives, we've said we've dealt with it—end'a story.

"Can you promise me, Edward?" she asks tightly, and it ain't often she uses my real name.

I sigh and limp closer, taking her hands in mine. "You want me to tell you what I know about Dominic? Fine." I grimace and tighten my hold on her hands, 'cause I don't want her to slap me. "He sells weed to his buddies in school. There you go." I won't rat out Anthony; oh, I fucking know that my oldest is involved there.

No matta'. Dominic is different. He's too young, anyway. Not even thirteen yet.

"Are you kidding me?" Isabella grits out, sinking her red fingernails into my hands. I cock a brow and stare her down; she lets go. "That little bastard," she seethes. "And you!" She shakes her fist at me. "God, you—" She makes a face and waves me off. "Lemme cool off. Ugh, men!" I watch as she begins to pace in front of my desk. "Youse're fuckin' impossible to live with!"
Okay, this I can deal with. Isabella's just fucking sexy when she gets going with her fiery rants. As long as she doesn't take it too far.

"When'ya gonna learn?!” she shouts. "Playing around with guns and selling drugs don't make your dicks bigger!"

No, but they pay for our house, our vacations, the jewelry...

She knows all that. My hummingbird may have a heart of gold, but she's no angel—only in my eyes, really. Ignorance is bliss. She doesn't really want to know where our money comes from—as long as it's there. She wants our kids to grow up like she didn't, and I make sure of it.

The wife is actually also a source of money, 'cause she's turned Stella Mia into one of the most popular restaurants off-Strip. Which makes it easier for Anthony to fib with the books.

No one questions the money flow at a restaurant that's successful. And less suspicion means less thorough evaluations from the health inspectors and the IRS. Nobody knows Anthony is the provider of Stella's alcohol supply—all stolen goods. Same goes for the more expensive ingredients in Isabella's recipes, like lobster, truffles, oysters, and other shit that's imported.

Who knew there was so much dough in food?

Anthony obviously did.

It pains me that we have to find a new head chef, though. Enzo was a real asset—and a good friend.

"JUNIUH!" Isabella shouts, startling me. "Are you even listenin' to me?!”

"Lower your fucking voice," I warn quietly. "Yeah, I'm listening. So is my cock." Picking up the cane, I walk over to her and crash my mouth to
"And as much as I love it when you get going—" I nip at her bottom lip "—I gotta go."

"Animal," she bitches, though there's not a lot of hostility left in her voice. I'll consider that a triumph. "Just get outta hea'."

"Tell me you love me first."

She fights a smile. "I love you a little."

"Oh!" I pull her to me again and growl against her neck. "Try again—and try betta'." Relief floods me. While she's still mad, I can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel.

"I love you a fair amount," she giggles.

_Madonn', music to my ears._

I smack her ass. "Not good enough." Cupping her cheeks, I peer down at her gorgeous face. "I need you to love me at least half as much as I love you," I murmur.

"Oh, ciccino." Her eyes glisten. "Much more than that." She bites her lip, perhaps preventing herself from saying something—maybe something that would ruin the moment.

I grin and do it for her. "But sometimes I'm a fucking bastard?"

She lets out a shaky laugh. "You said it." Then she tugs on my tie. "Okay, go. I'mma fix my makeup before I go out. But you—" she pulls me down for a kiss "—come home to me soon. There might even be cake in the fridge."

That means I'm only one level away from amazing. Next she'll offer up her pussy to me again.
"I'll hurry," I promise. With one more smooch, we part ways for now.

Outside the restaurant, Dad, Joseph, and Felix are about to hop into one car, but my father gives me a grin and a laugh—finding it so fucking hilarious that I'm walking with a cane—and then they're gone.

Maria, who came home from Sicily a couple days ago, is being ushered into another car, and Alec tells us that he's gonna drive her home and then we'll meet up at Twilight. That's when I learn that AJ, their son, is spending the night at our house; he and Dominic are gonna play video games.

"You got a ride, Junior?" Riley asks as I look for Sal, my wife's driver. He's probably pulling the car around.

"You goin' straight to the club?" I ask, eyeing my sister. But I get my answer as her driver pulls up at the curb, which means Riley isn't taking detours. "I'll ride wit'chu," I tell him. Adjusting my cufflinks, I peer down the sidewalk and spot—oh, fuck that. "Elisa!" I shout. "Get the fuck ova' hea!" That little brat needs a goddamn leash. "You too, kid!" I point to Mario, who Elisa was flirting with.

"Be easy on them, big brother," Brianna laughs and gets into her car.

I ignore her.

"What, Dad?" Elisa asks impatiently. She probably thinks I'm embarrassing her. But I wasn't put on this earth to make dating easy for my baby girls.

"You, go over to Dominic and Julia." I steer her in the direction of her brother and sister. "And you—" I cup the back of Mario's neck "—you want me to break your face?" I dust some invisible lint off his shoulder. "That's my angel over there. Consider her off-limits unless you wanna see the bottom of Lake Mead. Capisce?"
"Yes, sir." He nods quickly.

When I dismiss him, he walks over to Anthony and Nico, who're laughing at him.

I shake my head. *Fuckin' kids these days.*

"Daddy!" Julia runs over to me. "Elisa just called you a jerk."

Elisa follows with her mother's fury in her eyes. "God, you're such a—"

"Enough!" I shout, coming between them. "Christ, if I acted like youse when I was a kid, my parents woulda beat me! You know, back in the old days—"

"Oh, here he goes," Elisa drawls, then mimics me: "Back in the old days, we didn't even have shoes, blah, blah—you were born in the '50s, Dad, not the eighteen hundreds."

"Ay!" I grasp her shoulder and glare furiously at her. "Fucking manners, Elisa!" Whatta brat! "Madonn', where's Mom—"

"Right here," Isabella says behind me. "And our girls obviously don't know dick about respect."

When I look to her, I breathe out in relief and see that there's no trace of sadness left. Her hair is flawless, makeup perfect, and she can handle our daughters like it's nobody's business. Thank Christ. 'Cause I can't fucking deal with this.

"Julia, if you wanna spend the night with Nonna and Nonno, you better go over thea'—" She points to my mother's car down the street, where she's waiting and talking to her driver. "And, Elisa, Sal is right there. Get in the car." Next she walks over to Anthony, whispers something in his ear, to which he nods and kisses her cheek. Then she's back, directing Sal on
how to help Dominic into the car and fold the wheelchair. AJ's next, piling into the car, and I only stand to the side, kinda awed. And impressed. The wife knows what she's doing. Not that I ever doubted, but I probably wouldn't last a week in her shoes.

"You ready?" Riley asks.

I nod. "Gimme a sec." Walking over to Isabella, I kiss her and tell her one more time that I'll hurry home.

"Good." She smiles and wipes lipstick traces off my mouth. "And please don't put too much strain on your leg, ciccino. The doctor told you to rest for four weeks. You barely lasted four days."

"Yeah, yeah." I wave off her concern. I've got painkillers for a reason. "I'll be fine. See you at home later."

~oOo~

"Make room for my crippled son!" Dad shouts as I walk into Twilight.

I shake my head and sit down in the large booth where Felix, Dad, and Joseph are already sitting. Riley follows, and as I order my drink, Alec, Nico, Anthony, and Mario arrive, too. The last three grab chairs since the booth is full.

A few watch the strippers on stage, a few just sit around and shoot the shit.

"I always thought you'd be a little older than forty-one when the cane came out," Dad says and squeezes my shoulder. "But I love you anyway, my precious boy." He grabs my face and kisses my cheek loudly.
"You're just happy that, for once, I can't outrun you." I smirk and down a couple painkillers with my vodka. "At least I'm not lookin' into time-shares in Florida."

"Oh!" A few others crack up.

"You sayin' I am?" Pop cocks a brow.

"We're saying Mom is," Alec laughs, to which I nod and point in agreement. "Soon you'll replace Twilight for boccia tournaments and bingo nights."

"That's why Junior here was always my favorite son," Dad says, fucking with my brother, and pats his pockets, presumably to find his cigar. "And what the fuck is wrong with boccia?!" At that, everyone laughs. "And you know, in the old country, we call it bocce."

"Before this turns into a lecture about the old country, I'd like to speak to Anthony and Mario in private," Felix announces.

Anthony quickly looks to me, nervousness flashing across his features, but I shake my head, saying it's all cool. In fact, he's about to earn praise from the boss for what he did at the Dunes. Because of his bravery, he's on the fast-track on becoming a made man. Even Mario's about to climb in the ranks.

"Let's go to my office, boys." Felix takes the lead, Anthony and Mario following while fidgeting with their ties.

So fucking cute.

Joseph slides the men a pensive glance before he follows coolly.

It can take years to get your button—or you can find yourself in the middle of a shitstorm and end up on top, like my oldest son has done. In a
short period of time, he's proved he's good with money, he's innovative, and he's got balls.

"He's so smart, that boy of yours," Dad comments with pride.

I nod, definitely agreeing, and take a swig from my drink.

"I hear he's serious about his girl, too," Riley says, arching a brow.

"He is," I confirm. Won't be long now before he pops the question. "He's just like his daddy." I grin. After all, I made sure to make Isabella mine fast as hell. While I couldn't marry her right away, I knocked her up within a few months.

"God bless our beautiful Bella." Dad nods. "How she puts up with ya..."

I chuckle and then get quiet, 'cause sometimes I wonder, too. I'm a lucky son of a bitch. I coulda ended up like Alec, with a wife he doesn't love and mistresses. Not that I think he's suffering, but there's no way he can be as happy as I am. Then again, you can't miss what you've never had. I can be destroyed in ways Alec can't—he's got less to lose.

"She had practice before she met you, Zio," Nico says with a wry smirk. "I was always her favorite hell-raiser."

I snort, remembering that. "Don't forget to visit her before you go back to Kansas City," I tell him, wagging a finger. My wife's been talking about Nicola's son for weeks now. "She wans'ta see baby Michael when there's no crowd getting in her business. And bring your sister, too."

"I will." He nods. "Lucia and I are gonna go see Dad tomorrow—we can stop by after that."

"Bene. How is Jasper?" I know he was denied bail, considered a flight risk, and I know the trial has begun, 'cause Dad keeps us posted, but we've
been advised to stay away. We're not involved, and we don't wanna add proof of how close we are by lining up to visit him in jail.

"It is what it is." Nico sighs. "Whattaya gonna do?"

Nothing, that's what. Dad and Joseph have tried.

Jasper's biggest problem is that he's been in prison before. This is the third time he'll do a bid—the second time in Nevada.

"I'm actually gonna talk to Felix about coming back to Vegas," Nico admits.

Huh. Well, I can see why he'd want that. Lucia's staying in LA, but Nico was always closer to Alice than Lucia was. They're all close, make no mistake, but Lucia's a daddy's girl—and an Auntie Bella devotee. But Nico loves Alice, calls her Mom, and with Jasper in prison soon, I suppose Nicola will want to take care of Alice, the baby she's pregnant with, and Sophia.

"I doubt he'll deny you," I say with a shrug. He'll just send someone else to Kansas City. Maybe if Alice wasn't Felix's baby sister, he wouldn't give a fuck, but he'll want Alice taken care of.

"You think I'll be with you again?" he asks, avoiding the word crew. Only Felix's office is completely safe. Granted, we sweep the whole place, but with so much people moving around in the club area, we're careful out here.

"No," I answer, shaking my head. "Someone's gotta take on Dawn, and if you're coming back, it's the logical choice." Pops nods at that. "You'll probably fill your father's shoes." I take another swig of my drink and add, "You're twenty-three years old now—you're more than ready. What you've done in Missouri and with Anthony speaks for itself." Besides, we need some new blood around here.
I wouldn't say I'm slowing down, but I'm at that point where I don't want to run around anymore. I want to focus on the poker games that I host, the shit I run through Stella, and being there for Felix until someone else is ready to step up—which, now that I think of it, will likely be Nicola. One day. Hopefully soon.

He's young, but he proves himself every day, and truth be told, with the size of our small family, we don't have many options. Sure, we have a lot of lowmen running around doing our bidding, but Felix doesn't trust easily. The inner circle isn't just small—it's tiny.

Just months ago, it was impossible to see how the future would pan out. But now? It's getting clearer.

I see Felix taking Anthony under his wing, I see my dad teaching Joseph the ropes of being the consigliere, I see Nicola taking over for Jasper and climbing up so I can step down, and I see some other cugines like Tommy—Alice's driver—and Mario flanking our sons.

I was born to be a wiseguy; I take pride in it. For my wife, I will make a conscious effort to push Dominic in another direction, but the gangster in me wants him to fill my own shoes. I can't deny that. I can picture him at Stella one day, perhaps running a small crew, and making more paper than a rainforest.

For generations, the Maisanos and the Coluccis have built this organization, and it's not big—not at all—but it's strong. The money that flows in and out of this town...it's indescribable, and with the Gaming Commission running the last fuckers of the Outfit back to Chicago where they belong, we own Vegas. Completely.

Speaking of... I lean closer to my father. "Any word from Chicago?"
"It's all good." Pop takes a puff from his cigar. "With our friends out East, we's got nothin'a worry about."

I figured it was like that. Only a fool would start a war if the opponent has New York on their side. And say what you want about the Outfit, but the boss ain't dumb.

"EJ's buddy, though?" I arch a brow, referring to the motherfucker who shot my son.

"Not from Chicago," he says quietly, and I barely hear him over the loud club music. "Joseph found out who he was—" He waves a hand. "Some street-corner hustler from Reno."

Glad to hear it. It means it's really over.

~oOo~

"Look at'chu, tesoro," I chuckle, eyeing my son as he drive's me home. Reaching over, I pinch his cheek. "You can't stop smiling."

He shrugs, that silly grin still on his face. "What—it's been a good night. Am I not allowed to be happy?"

"Of course you are." I chuckle. "You gonna stay at the Sindones tonight, too?"

He's been staying there since Enzo died, unless he was at the hospital with Isabella.

"Yeah, Gabriella's expecting me." He nods.

"Oh, I bet she is," I snicker.

He cups his ear. "What was that?"

"I said I bet she is!" I shout.
"Mother of Christ!" He flinches and rubs his ear. "Why you gotta be so loud?"

"'Cause you're obviously deaf," I shoot back, watching as my house comes into view at the end of the street. "You go work on giving me grandbabies, and I'll try to get in your mom's—"

"I don't wanna know!"

I cock a brow. "Good graces, son. Good graces."

"Oh..."

I snort a laugh. "Yeah." He pulls over close to the front door, and I see Sal as I open the car door. Anthony offers to help me, but I wave that shit off. Contrary to popular belief, I'm not a fucking cripple. "Bring Gabriella over for dinner tomorrow," I tell my son. "When's Carm leaving for Philly?"

"In the morning," he says. "But Gabriella and I were planning to chill out at her house tomorrow—"

"See ya's for dinner, baby." I close the door and walk up the steps toward the front porch, then nod in hello to Sal who's smoking a cigarette. "I think you can go home, Sal."

Hopefully, we won't need the extra protection anymore.

"All right, boss." He nods and starts to walk toward his own car. "Call me if you need anything."

When I enter the house, it's peaceful and dark. But not without sign of life. Duke and Duchess meet me in the foyer, and in the kitchen, I find a pajama-dressed Elisa rummaging through the fridge.
"La mia mocciosa preferita." I call her my favorite brat with a small smile. She looks up, closes the fridge, and opens a can of soda. "Is Mom awake?"

She nods and sits down at the counter. "She's in the backyard." She bites her lip, hesitating to speak. So, I walk over, lean the damn cane against another stool, sit down across from her, and unbutton my suit jacket while she...does whatever. "I'm sorry I was disrespectful earlier," she finally says.

I nod. "Thank you, angioletto. Does that mean you don't think I'm a jerk?"

Her cheeks flush. "No, you definitely are, but I shouldn't give you crap. Mom says you can't help it."

"Oh, she said that?" I scoff. "She must really love me."

"Dad." She rolls her eyes. "She also said I gotta listen to you, 'cause you have the best intentions—or whatever." She waves a hand. "Look, I know I can behave like a spoiled brat, but you're not making it easy for me. While Anthony and Dee are allowed to do whatever they want, Julia and I gotta be all angelic and perfect."

"You're my babies," I argue, getting rid of my tie. "You're too young to date." She opens her mouth to speak, but I hold up a hand. "I'm gonna be honest with you, sweetheart. You already know a little about what I do for a living—yeah?" She nods hesitantly. I nod, too. "Then trust me when I say that you don't wanna meet a guy in my business." I shake my head, knowing it's all hypocritical, but it is what it is. I know my sons will do right by their girls, because it's how Isabella and I raised them, but I can't fucking speak for others.

She grimaces. "But Mario's really sweet. I like him."
"You don't know him," I point out, keeping my temper in check. "And to you, yeah, he's all sweet and charming—until you're outta sight and he's getting stripper dust all over."

"Ouch." Her lip trembles, and I feel like I've been punched in the gut. But this is still shit she needs to know. She can't think everyone in his world is good and genuine just 'cause they smile at her. "Is that how you are with Mom?"

"No," I say honestly. "But your mother is a witch. She put a spell on me, so I can only see her."

She presses her lips together to hide her smile. "That's not funny."

"Sometimes I think it's true, though." My mouth quirks up. "Listen to me, baby." I reach over the kitchen island and grasp her hands in mine. "I'm not saying all the guys I know cheat on their women—far from it, but I don't like the odds when it concerns you. You'd be better off going to college—in Nevada," I'm quick to add, 'cause she ain't moving cross-country like some others, "and find some golden boy there."

"What if Mom had done the same?" She arches a brow.

"I would've chased her," I say bluntly.

"What if Mario chases me?" she counters.

I grit my teeth.

_This is why Isabella handles the girls._

Eventually, I say, "Time will tell. Until then? No. You're not allowed to date him. End'a discussion."

From now on, I will keep an extra eye on that Mario kid. One single fucking lap dance from a stripper, and he can forget about my angel.
"I'm gonna go to bed," she mumbles.

When she passes me, I see that her eyes are welling up with tears, so I wrap my fingers around her wrist and pull her to me. "Don't do that to me," I tell her. "I only want what's best for you." Hugging her hard, I kiss her hair and add, "I know I treat you and your sister differently from your brothers, but it's not a bad thing." I cup her cheeks and make her look at me. "I'm more protective of you and Julia. There's shit in this world I wanna shield you from. Is that so horrible?"

"I wanna make my own mistakes, Daddy." She sniffs.

"And I won't let you, 'cause seeing you in tears breaks my fucking heart."

She huffs and wipes at her cheeks. "You mean you'd rather be the reason I cry."

"Yes." Hell to the motherfucking yes, as someone her age would say. A guy her age. Not a girl. "We's family. You gotta love me." I smile carefully.

"Right now I wish I didn't," she grumbles.

"But you do—I'll choose to focus on that." I hug her again and kiss her on the forehead. "You already look so much like your mother. One day you'll make some bastard very lucky. And it's my job to make sure he's good enough for you. But for now—" I grip her chin "—please do me a favor and focus on school and friends instead of boys. All right? You've got all the time in the world for that later."

"Fine," she mumbles. "I'm gonna go to bed."

"Okay." I let her go. "I love you."

"Love you, too."
Heaving a heavy sigh, I watch her disappear. I shrug outta my jacket and hang it over a stool. Then I walk toward the living room and the patio, unbuttoning my shirt as I go, and I see Isabella sitting in one of the loungers right outside.

The backyard is only lit up by the pool and a couple candles on the small table next to Isabella.

My leg hurts, but I'm too tired to give a fuck. Opening the French doors, I join her and feel the day washing away, like a weight coming off my shoulders.

"Hey," she says softly, making room for me. That relieves me—such a small thing. But yesterday, she woulda made me take my own lounger instead. "Long night?"

"Long day." I lie down with my good leg touching her and bring her down with me. "Mi sei mancata." I tell her I've missed her.

"You were only gone for a few hours." She tilts up her face and kisses my chin. "But I get what you mean—I've missed you, too." She hums, resting her head on my chest. "I was eavesdropping, by the way. I heard what you and Elisa talked about."

My chest rumbles with a sleepy chuckle. "Do you agree or disagree?"

"I see both your points," she whispers. "You want some wine? There's cake, too."

I shake my head no. "Are we okay?" That's really all I need to know. Whatever the world looks like, I need to know that whenever I come home, my wife is the same—that we're solid, that nothing changes between us.
"Yeah," she sighs. Lifting her head, she looks to me. "I've decided to focus on the fact that we're all okay. We're alive, and we have each other." She brushes her fingertips over my mouth, to which I kiss them. "When I think too much about what happened, I get angry. I'll try not to, but..."

"I'll practice patience," I promise, knowing her disappointment's not gonna go away overnight. "And I'll be more honest."

She smiles ruefully. "I only demand it when it's about our kids' lives, ciccino. I trust you to do what's best for our family, but you gotta let me in when it comes to Dominic. It's already too late for Anthony."

That's a promise I can keep. "I swear." I grab her hand and kiss her fingers again. "Have you spoken to Dominic?"

She snorts. "That little shit. I grounded him—told him you're gonna talk to him. He thanks you for throwing him under the bus. Oh, and he called you a rat."

I can't help but laugh. "I'll deal with it tomorrow. And I think I can live with ratting out a twelve-year-old." She makes another humming noise, and I squeeze her to me, shifting us so we're on our sides. "Bell'uccellino." I brush a kiss on her nose. "Ti amo."

"I love you, too." She smiles. "I kinda feel like celebrating now."

That shit sounds promising. My cock definitely takes notice. "Is there an anniversary I've forgotten?" I grin.

"Hmm, no. But..." She slides her hand underneath my open shirt, "I don't need an anniversary to celebrate our marriage." Fuck me. "So...whattaya say we move this into the bedroom?"

"I say fuck yeah." I nuzzle her neck, my hand finding her ass. "We could bring the cake, too."
"Oh, Juniuh." She laughs.

"Oh, hummingbird," I mimic and chase her inside.

Which looks fucking ridiculous when I can barely walk.
Epilogue

Translation:

Non credo proprio = I don't think so.

January 1st 1999

Junior's POV

Groaning and yawning, I stretch out on the bed and blindly reach for Isabella, but I don't fucking find her. Then as I listen, I hear her in the kitchen. Fuck. So much for sleeping in on New Year's Day. Or...never mind—I check the alarm clock on my nightstand and see that it's eleven already.

With another groan, I get outta bed and massage the kinks in my neck, wondering if the wife can gimme a real backrub later. 'Cause it's a fucking wonder—she's still limber and alert and always so fucking refreshed, yet I feel every year that's added. I'm only forty-six, but in the mornings I feel like sixty-six.

After pulling on a pair of sweatpants and my robe, I pad into the bathroom, take a piss, splash some water on my face, and decide I can shower and shave later. This is just supposed to be a lazy day, anyway.

As has become normal, the house is fairly quiet when I leave the bedroom. Anthony has his own house the next street over, Dominic recently bought the apartment above Stella, and Elisa hasn't moved back from Henderson where she graduated from college last spring. But the girl better move back into town soon. Sure, my parents love having her out there, but it means I only get to see her some weekends.

The only one left is Julia. She has the entire second floor to herself. Anthony's room is now Isabella's room of worship—to our kids. It's where
all trophies, diplomas, photo albums, knick-knacks, home videos, stuffed animals, baby clothes, first shoes, and report cards are gathered on shelves, in boxes, and on the walls. Dominic's and Elisa's rooms are guest rooms specially furnished for kids, which means we still have the guest room down here, and Julia's room is obviously the same—as is the rec room. Only, posters of ponies and puppies in Julia's room have been exchanged for...what was it? *NSync? Something-or-the-other, and the music is fucking awful.

Don't tell her that, though. She'll go on and on about how original they are, how they write all their songs, and how they'll be together forever.

Scratching my chest lazily, I make my way to the kitchen where it smells fucking delicious. The radio is on in the kitchen window, and my wife is definitely baking. With TJ. Which would explain why the kitchen looks like a war zone.

"Mornin', love," I yawn, plopping down on a stool at the kitchen island.

"Good morning, ciccino!" The wife might be high. No one should be this happy after consuming two bottles of wine the night before. And a handful of Long Island Iced Teas.

"Nonno! No-no-no-no-no—Nonnnnno!" TJ runs to me, wearing only a diaper, and holds out his arms as if he's an airplane.

I chuckle tiredly as he rams into my leg, then I pick him up, but this kid can't sit still. "Watch the balls!" I wince and steady him on my lap. "Gimme a smooch." I pucker my lips, and he fuckin' slobbers all over me. "Yeah, we're gonna hafta work on that, baby."

"Here you go." Isabella sets a cup of coffee, the paper, and my reading glasses in front of me. "Please use them?" She kisses my cheek before returning to the oven.
"Doubtful," I grumble and ignore the damn glasses.

"Nonna say," TJ giggles, holding up my glasses to me. And he gets them all greasy with his chubby hands. "Hea'."

"Non credo proprio." I grin and shake my head. "I don't take orders from a two-year-old."

"You'll take orders from me," Isabella says cheekily.

I smirk. "Who died and made you boss?" After taking a sip of my coffee, I ask, "How long are we gonna watch this little shit?" I ruffle TJ's dark hair.

I fucking adore our grandkids, but Isabella would have them here always if she could, and I have this problem where I can't say no to them. Well, Allegra is only four months old, so she's too young to beg me for stuff, but TJ? One look into his dark brown eyes and you're done. He looks just like Anthony did when he was little, but TJ's got his mama's coloring and her eyes.

Christ, when he was born... They announced his name—Anthony Junior—but the second someone referred to him as AJ, my nephew—Alec's son—perked up. And we couldn't have two AJs. So, after a lotta going back and forth, Isabella said TJ. Even thought Anthony's never been a Tony.

Close enough.

"Only a few hours," Isabella answers. "Anthony wanted to give Gabriella a day's rest, so he's watching Allegra, and he asked if we could watch TJ. I picked him up a couple hours ago."

"Anthony's with Allegra all by himself?" I arch a brow, both amused and concerned. Make no mistake, my son is proving to be an amazing dad, but he's scared shitless of Allegra's "girly bits." He says it's wrong to change her diaper and give her baths. Seriously, he freaks the fuck out.
We've had plenty of laughs about that, but then again, I can't really relate. I've never changed a diaper in my entire life, so what the fuck do I know? Wait. I think I've done it once or twice, actually—under my wife's supervision—and it was with Anthony or Dominic. Don't really remember.

"Oh, don't worry, honey." Isabella giggles and pulls out a tray of cupcakes from the oven. "I sent Julia over there to keep him company."

"Nonna, I'm hungwry!" TJ rubs his belly.

"They're still too hot, sweetheart, and I haven't put frosting on them yet," Isabella reasons in her nonna voice. I didn't know it existed until TJ learned to speak. "How about some yogurt and a sandwich first?"

Like that's as fun as chocolate cupcakes.

But TJ takes after Anthony there—they're both crazy about sandwiches.

"Any leftovers from yesterday?" I ask. We had a big New Year's Eve party at Stella, and Isabella knows I love dinner leftovers more than eggs and bacon.

"Yeah, I brought home plenty," she replies, half hidden behind the fridge door. "You go watch your shows, Juniuh. I'll bring the food in."

"Whattaya say, baby—" I stand up with TJ on my hip "—you wanna watch the Discovery Channel with Nonno?" Madonn', I love that channel. I've taped The FBI Files episode I missed last week, and then there're Shark Week reruns.

"Wiv'e animals?" he asks.

I nod. "Yeah, with the animals." And forensic science.

Toddlers dig that shit, don't they?
"Yeah, otay." He shrugs.

"That's the spirit." I snort and walk over to Isabella, needing a little something first. "Gimme some'a that." I grab her jaw and kiss her on the lips. "Mmm, love you."

She grins. "Love you more, ciccino. Don't forget your glasses."

I forget the glasses. But not my coffee.

TJ and I settle on the couch in the living room, but fifteen minutes into the program, he falls asleep, all sprawled out.

I'm good with that. I get to eat my breakfast in peace and quiet, watch my show, and look forward to the cupcakes coming my way soon.

A while later, Isabella tells me she needs to run to the store real quick to buy almonds and dark chocolate, so that leaves me all alone in a big house. With a sleeping child.

It's like...I mean, this never happens. There's always someone home.

I don't know if I love it or hate it.

But no matta'. When someone rings the doorbell about twenty minutes into a documentary about sharks off the coast South Africa, the silence is over. No need to ponder.

Leaving TJ sleeping on the couch, with his thumb in his mouth, I head to the foyer, not giving a rat's ass about how I look in my sweats, messy hair, and robe, and open the door.

What. The. Fuck?

It's a fucking baby. In one of those bucket-seat-thingys.

I frown.
Looking up, I try to see if there's someone around, maybe someone in the bushes who wants to prank me, but it's empty and quiet.

"Um..." I don't...I mean, what the fuck?

I squat down and look at the baby; I think it's a girl. She can't be many months older than Allegra, and there's only purple and pink, so that oughta give away the gender. Still frowning, I reach out one hand with caution—like it's a shark on the Discovery Channel ready to bite—and find a note attached to a small stuffed animal.

There's only one line written on the note, but it's enough to squeeze all the air outta my lungs.

*Her name is Lia. She belongs to Dominic Maisano. She's his problem now.*

**The End**
Chapter 1

Translation:

Mi fa girare le palle = It’s getting on my nerves.

January 1st 1999

Dominic's POV

Once I'm done in the bathroom, I return to the bedroom, making sure I don’t step on any used condoms, and reach for my jeans that were thrown over a lamp last night.

I ignore the two snoring broads in the bed.

Why are they always perfect tens when you're shitfaced?

Now they're barely sevens.

Shaking my head, I grab my black hoodie from the floor and put it on. My leather jacket follows, and I stick my feet into my construction boots. I check to make sure I have my wallet, my nine, my smokes, my keys, and my phone. Which...seems to be dead. It's also sticky—oh, cazzo. I think I remember now. My brother was calling me last night, but I was busy with
Blondie One and Blondie Two, so I threw it in a glass of rum and Coke. 
Fuckin' A...

Now I can't play Snake until I've replaced it.

"Dominic...? Come back to bed."

I wince and turn toward the bed. "I'm just gonna go out to buy breakfast."
Walking over to the sleeping broad's side of the bed, I bend over the 
nightstand and do the last line of coke on the broken mirror. "I'll—fuck." I 
sniff and swallow. "I'll be back soon."

"Mmm, a gentleman..." Blondie One goes back to sleep. "Hurry up."

"Right." I head to the door, energized and alert, and leave the motel 
room. As agreed upon, Frankie's waiting for me outside. He must've 
waited a while, though, 'cause I said I'd be out by noon, and it's almost 
one now. "'Sup?" We bump fists then get in his car. "Let's roll."

To our parents, he's still the sweet Francis who had a crush on Elisa, a 
crush that Felix and my pop will deny 'til they're blue in the faces. But 
whatever, they're also the only ones who get away with calling him by his 
given name these days. The younger generationz calls him Frankie—or 
Frankie Bat when people can't place him in a sea of Frankies.

Two years ago, he got beaten with a bat and ended up in the hospital for 
three weeks. Then, when he got out, he tracked down his four attackers 
one by one and it was their turn to go to the hospital. One of them is in a 
persistent coma, another one had his asshole torn up by a bat, one is in a 
wheelchair, and another is dead.

Felix had some cleaning up to do for his son's sake, but it's all good now.

"You look like shit." He smirks.
"Good enough to bag two strippers from Dawn." I raise a brow. "But what the fuck happened to you last night?" After the big dinner at Stella, most of us took off in different directions. My parents went home, so did Anthony, my sister-in-law, and their kids...Elisa went to Mario's place... And Frankie was supposed to join me at Dawn, but he never showed. "The place was fucking packed." I let out a low whistle. "You shoulda seen Nicola," I laugh. My cousin was buried in chicks last night.

"I was with Case," he admits.

"Ah." I nod and drum my fingers on my thighs. "Well, at least you got laid, right?" I roll down the window and pull out my smokes. "Did'ju bring the bats?" Stupid question.

"Yeah. In the back." He makes a turn; we're only a couple blocks away from the day's first gig.

I light up a smoke and take a deep pull from it, my knee bouncing in anticipation. And the fucking blow...Madonn'. I should probably slow down before I take it too far. "Shit." I scratch my nose. "When was the last time I slept?" I honestly can't remember. For some reason, that makes me laugh.

Frankie side-eyes me but says nothing.

He used to be Anthony's best friend, but over the years they drifted apart. Mainly 'cause Anthony's always busy—either with work or with his wife and kids. He's become a family man. In every aspect.

A made man, married, a father...

Now Frankie is probably my closest friend, not counting my big sister.

"Here we go," he says quietly.
Reaching behind me, I grab one of the bats—Frankie grabs the other—and then we leave the car, walking briskly toward the little convenience store on the corner. The fuckin' Turk who owns it is out on thin ice. Wafer-thin.

With my smoke dangling between my lips, I swing the bat in circles at my side a few times; then as I get to the glass door, I pull back before I hit a home run-worthy shot. The glass shatters, tiny pieces flying all over the place.

I take my smoke and walk inside, flicking some ash on the floor. "Yo! Somebody home?!

"Maybe he don’t speak English," Frankie chuckles.

"Could be." I nod, returning the smoke to my lips, and then we start swinging again.

Shelves upon shelves with goods hit the floor, everything breaking to pieces.

"Please!" I hear someone cry behind the counter.

Smirking, I walk over. I drop the bat for now and grab my nine instead. Frankie keeps trashing the place. "There you are." The little fuck is shielding his head, squatting down on the floor. "You know, I have nothing against playing peek-a-boo, but I prefer to do it with my two-year-old nephew," I tell him.

"I'll do anything!" He cautiously stands up, showing me his palms.

*Why do they only play the "anything" card when a gun is involved?*

I grin lazily. "Well, I do appreciate cooperation." I scratch my eyebrow with the barrel of my nine. "Too bad it didn’t come sooner, huh?" My smile
fades. "Nicola Savona sends his regards—says thank you for the payments."

"Busines been slow," he says, pleading with me to understand and give a fuck. "I'll get him the money!"

"Oh, you'll do more than that." I round the counter and tell him to open the cash register, which he does. "Thank you. Now, here's what you're gonna do." I take a drag from my smoke, then continue as I rob him of cash. "You know the booze you sell without a license and the smuggled cigarettes?" He nods hesitantly. "From now on, you won't buy that from your little dealer in Reno. You'll go to Stella Mia—you know the restaurant?—and you'll ask for Edward Maisano. Tell him Dominic sent you. We clear?"

My brother used to be the one who supplied Stella and several other restaurants with alcohol by hijacking trucks outside'a town. But that’s my job now since Anthony has bigger things going on. So, the booze thing is really mine, but I don’t have a fucking office. Instead I send them to Dad since he sits at Stella. Then he'll come to me with the orders.

"Y-yes," he stutters. He's a short little thing, so at my six foot two, I tower over him. "I go to Edward Maisano. I-I understand."

"Excellent." I pocket the cash and go to the other side again. "And you can drop the two Gs you owe Nicola at Dawn—plus twenty percent interest." With Frankie covering me, I pick up my bat and start walking toward the exit. "You have one week," I call over my shoulder, and I offer a one-fingered salute before exiting.

Frankie's quick to follow. "You're fucking cold, bro," he laughs.

I shrug and flick away my smoke. "What's next on the list?" Despite that Frankie can't ever get his button, what with him being half-German and
all, that don’t mean he lives like a saint. He makes some decent money doing small jobs for Nicola and Zio Alec.

That’s what I do, too—partly. My pops is also teaching me the ropes when he hosts his high-stake poker games every week, and the plan is for me to one day take over the restaurant he opened for Mom.

The only thing Anthony has at Stella these days is doing the books. He's good with numbers—I'm not. But other than that, he's now the owner of his own company.

It was a couple years ago he started a construction business, and everyone with a brain knows that’s always a rewarding venture in Nevada. It seems with each hotel that is added on the Strip, there's a handful of housing projects popping up to make the city bigger. So, he hires cheap labor—that he often pay under the table—gets his hands on stolen equipment, and finds dirt on others in the business, which leads to blackmail, which leads to other shit they steal as payment. Everything from tools and lumber to contracts and use of usually-expensive project managers.

Frankie may call me cold, but I ain't got shit on my brother. Christ—I remember laughing so hard—Anthony once had one of his boys force a successful construction business owner, who was a closet fag, fuck some twink from a gay club, and there's photos to prove it happened. With the photos in hand, Anthony milked this other cat for all he was worth. It was either that, or my brother would send the photos to the dude's wife.

~oOo~

Hours later, I find myself at Twilight. I'm furious as fuck, and I need a word with Felix.
I spoke to Nico first, and he cleared it with Felix—said it was okay I stopped at Twilight, that Felix had time to see me.

"Oh, Dominic!" Some naked broad hurries toward me. "What happened to you?"

"Go shake that ass and be useful instead," I snap, walking down the hall to Felix’s office. I cup my jaw, flex it, and cringe at the pain. "Fuck."

It was supposed to be easy. I had a deal with an owner of a trucking company, and Frankie and I knew the exact truck to stop outside city limits. It was a literal truckload of booze on its way to the Bellagio, the new casino that opened last year where the Dunes used to stand. Anyway, when we got the truck to pull over and we drew our guns on him, another car pulled up. Motherfucking wannabe gangsters from Reno.

We luckily secured the cargo in our two vans, but not before I got pistol-whipped in the fucking jaw.

Frankie is on his way to our warehouse to hide the booze, and I’m here, ready to whine like a bitch.

Knocking on the door and announcing my name, I wait for Felix to let me in. Which he does; only, it's my nonno, and that doesn’t surprise me.

"What the hell happened to you?" He frowns in concern and opens the door wider. "Come in."

I slump down in the chair next to Nonno’s, and I pull out my smokes and the bandit beanie from the back pocket of my jeans. "We gotta do something about whatever's happening in Reno," I say, lighting up a smoke. "More and more, I hear about people—here in town—striking deals with some—" I gesture with my hands, not even knowing what to call it. Group of thugs? What-the-fuck-ever. *Mi fa girare le palle.*
'Did anyone get a look at your face?' Felix tents his fingers on the desk and jerks his chin at the beanie I used today.

I shake my head no. "We got the upper hand before it could happen." While many truckers just wanna get on with their lives—too afraid to press charges—we cover our faces, 'cause it's the smartest. Obviously. I blow out a breath, trying to calm down. I already know I haven't shown the respect I should. Fuck. My dad would have my ass. "I apologize." I place a hand on my chest. "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice."

His mouth quirks up, and I hear Nonno chuckling next to me.

"That's all right, kid," Felix says, inclining his head. "You're not the first one to come to me about Reno. Alec's boys have encountered them, too." I'm aware. "I'm gonna sit down with Junior, Alec, and Nico soon."

I almost ask about Zio Riley, but then I remember he just moved to Kansas City with Zia Brianna, Colin, and Olivia.

"I assume you didn't see their faces, either?" He arches a brow.

"No, sir." I grit my teeth, which hurts. I'd been close to ripping that fucking mask off one of the idiots, but, well, I got pistol-whipped instead. "I'd like to help," I say quickly, "when we find out who they are, I mean."

I'm ready to do more.

Felix and Nonno exchange a look, then Felix just says, "I'll think about it." So, I know he's gonna talk to my dad first.

Felix may run all this, but he values Dad's opinion from time to time, especially if me or Anthony are involved.

Just a couple minutes later, I'm dismissed, and I promise to drive to my parents' house—apparently they're trying to reach me.
"Mom!" I yell, entering the house. "Dad!" Duchess runs over to me first, followed by an old Duke. I don’t think he’s got many years left. "Come te la passi, bello?" I ask how my boy’s doin’, as if he’s gonna answer, and scratch him behind his ears. Then I walk farther into the house and peer into the kitchen. Empty. "Yo, Mom! Dad!"

"Upstairs, topolino!" Mom whisper-shouts.

After shrugging outta my leather jacket, I jog up the stairs and Dad meets me on the landing.

"What's up?" I ask, thinking he looks weird. I don’t know—just something in his eyes. "Felix and Nonno said youse were tryin'a reach me."

"Uh, yeah." He clears his throat and runs a hand through his hair. "So, do you remember what I always say—use a glove or you'll have eighteen years of baby love?"

My eyebrows shoot up, and I nod slowly, my brows then knitting together. I mean, what the fuck is he talking about?

"Bene. So, you're not deaf—glad to have that cleared up." He cups my neck, guiding me down to the guest room that used to be my bedroom. Now it's all pink and frilly, full of shit for Allegra, while Elisa's old room is themed for boys. "What the fuck happened to your face, by the way?" He grabs my jaw and tilts my face, inspecting it, which fucking hurts.

"I'll tell you later." I move my head away and rub my jaw. I can sense a big bruise slowly forming. The skin there is tender and hotter.

"All right." His brows furrow in concern, but then he gets over it. For now. And we keep moving. "We had somethin' delivered to our doorstep earlier." He stops us in the doorway, and I see Mom standing over by the
crib, looking like she's been crying. The light's dimmed pretty low, though, so I can't be sure.

"Um." I frown. "Not to be a dick or anythin', but what's the emergency?"

"Oh, Dominic." Mom sighs and wipes at her cheeks. "C'mea." She waves me forward. "I am so mad at'chu right now, but I think a dose of reality will kick your ass more than I ever could."

*What the hell? What'd I do now?*

Walking over, I see Allegra in the crib—no. No. "Who the fuck is that?" I jerk my chin at the sleeping baby. Unless my niece grew that much overnight, it's not Allegra.

"Her name is Lia." She hands me a note. I look down at it and read.

*Her name is Lia. She belongs to Dominic Maisano.*

*She's his problem now.*

"What..." My stomach knots up and I instinctively take a step back. "No." I shake my head, dread washing over me.

*There's no way.*

"This was delivered a couple hours later." Dad comes up next to me and hands me an envelope. "It's her birth certificate."

"I..." I feel like throwing up.

When I look over my shoulder, toward the door, Dad's hand returns to my neck. "Don’t do anything you'll regret later, baby," he whispers, but I don’t think I'll regret bolting. "Joseph's working on it. He's not exactly in family law, but he's making calls for you. We'll get a paternity test and—"
"That’s not mine." I point.

Mom sucks her teeth. "It's a fucking she, Dominic. Not an it or that."

"I use protection," I grit out, my hands balling into fists. "She is not mine."

"Come on." Dad ushers me out again, and I'm more than willing to get the fuck outta here. I can feel I'm all pale in the face, and I'm breaking out in a cold sweat. As we walk down the stairs, I get dizzy, too.

We end up in the living room, and Dad sits down next to me on the middle couch.

"You ever heard the name Andrea Martinez?"

I shrug my shoulders and stare at nothing in front of me.

"It's the mother's name stated on the birth certificate."

"She can't be mine, Dad." I shake my head, wrapping my arms around my middle. "I just…it can't be..." I suck in a breath. "I'm not Anthony." I'm not saying I don't ever wanna have kids; it's always been there as an inevitable future. But I've never fucking thought about it. I'm only eighteen.

"He thinks you'll do great," Dad says. "But I'm not sure if he was being sarcastic."

"He knows?" I ask dully.

"We were watching TJ."

"She can't be mine," I repeat.

"If she is, you're gonna take your responsibility."
"What—put her up for adoption?" I mutter.

"Say something like that again and I'll punch you in the fucking face," Dad warns quietly. "I swear to Christ, Dominic. Wise up."

I nod and drop my face into my hands. This can't be happening. This can't be happening. What the fuck do I know about kids? It's one thing to visit my brother's house and hold Allegra for five minutes or goof around with TJ, but to be responsible for one of those? Jesus.

"Lemme look at'chu." Dad grabs my jaw, and I force my eyes open. His face hardens. "You gotta lay off the yak," he whispers. "This ain't the first time I've seen you like this. You wanna break your mother's heart?"

I break away from him and palm my face again, feeling like I could sleep through next week. "I'm fine." It's not like I'm outta control. It's just easier when I got so much to do. Sleep cuts in to my work hours. "And I've already broken her heart, remember?" I snort and scrub at my face.

"At least my conscience is clear there," he snaps. "I pushed you toward going to college, didn't it? I fucking did, so don't you dare say otherwise."

If you call three conversations about going to Kaplan pushing, then yeah, he pushed me. Truthfully, he did warn me about his lifestyle, but it wasn't shit I didn't know already. After all, I got a scar from a bullet to prove just how safe our life is.

"I think this is the first time I'll say thank God for DNA testing," Dad muses a few minutes later. "Joseph mentioned something about...CPR? No. That wasn't it. That's when you gotta breathe. PCR!" he shouts the last word. "That's the one—PCR. I don't know what it is."

I groan miserably and lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "This can't be happening," I croak. "I don't want a kid."
Dad smacks me upside the head. "Watch your mouth! That baby girl up there is fucking beautiful. If anything, I pity her—gotta be stuck wit'chu for the rest of her life." He scoffs.

*I'm feeling the love.*

"Where's Mom?" I swallow the emotions welling up. "She's better at comforting."

~oOo~

A while later, Joseph comes over with a doctor we trust, and my brother gets here, too—but not to be supportive or anything. He and Dad think this is funny.

We're gathered in the kitchen, and the doc is taking my DNA, swabbing the inside of my cheek, when Mom comes downstairs with the baby, who's awake now.

All I notice is dark hair and the bluest eyes I've ever seen, then I look away.

"She's fucking cute," I hear my brother say.

"Isn't she?" My dad's all over that shit, too. "Look at those eyes."

"How old is she?" Anthony asks.

Mom answers. "According to the birth certificate, she's ten months."

Tuning them out, I listen to the doc instead—he says that he "knows a guy who knows a guy," and the results will be in my hands in a few days instead of weeks. Joseph is next to speak, and he says something about doing a court-issued test later—if these results come back with me being the, um, dad.
"Okay, time to test the child," the doctor announces. Just then, Joseph's phone rings, so he excuses himself to take the call in Dad's office.

"I ain't never gettin' one of those," Dad swears, and he's referring to Joseph's cell phone.

"Oh, look at that smile!" Mom claps her hands. "Mamma mia, she's so precious. Yes, you are, baby girl. You're so precious." She makes the baby giggle and babble.

I squeeze my eyes shut, shoving aside every part of me that instinctively wants to look over.

"I'm gonna go call Gabriella," Anthony says.

"So much for Gabby's day off." Dad snickers.

When I cautiously open my eyes again, my father's holding the baby while the doc takes the DNA sample.

"Don't fucking choke her," he bitches.

"All done." The doc is quick to back off and stow away his samples.

"Lia wans'ta see Shark Week reruns wid' me on the Discovery Channel now." And Dad walks toward the doorway. "Say bye-bye." He waves her hand to Mom, who's all weepy now. "Bye-bye."

"Ba-ba!" the baby babbles.

"OH!" Dad shouts. "I taught her her first word! We need a fuckin' notary!" He points to Mom and the doctor. "Youse're my witnesses!" Due to his shouting, the kid starts to cry, which makes Dad cringe. "Aw, cazzo." He wears a sad face and starts ranting and fussing. "Don't cry—I can't handle it. Hummingbird, take her. Calm her down and then find me in the living room."
Mom chuckles and takes the baby. "She was probably just mimicking you, ciccino."

"She wasn't," Dad insists then taps his temple. "Nonno knows."

Nonno—that felt like a punch in the gut. To have a nonno, you gotta have a dad.

My parents are acting like it's a done deal, and I can't take it. Do they even know how many broads there are who wouldn't mind bagging a Maisano? Not to mention a Colucci or a Savona?

I always use rubber.

When Joseph returns, he does so with Dad in tow—and someone please tell the guy to put some fucking clothes on. It's dinnertime and he's still in sweats and his damn robe.

"I have some news," Joseph says. "Given your history, Dominic—" he sends my mother an apologetic look "—I thought it was a safe bet to start looking at Dawn and Twilight."

"Okay!" Mom says loudly. "I think it's playtime upstairs for Lia before I start throwing punches." With a glare shot my way, she leaves the kitchen, and I hear her stomping up the stairs. "Fuckin' whores I'm raisin'. First Anthony, now that little shit..."

I clear my throat and avert my eyes, ignoring the heating of my cheeks. Had it not been for my mother's presence, I woulda been bumping fists now, but...

"What'd I do?" Anthony comes into the kitchen, widening his arms, maybe 'cause our mother just called us whores. "I'm innocent." He places a hand on his chest.
Dad snorts. "Before you was with Gabby? Yeah, as innocent as Capone. You know, I saw this documentary about him on the Discovery—"

"Can we move on hea'?" I ask impatiently and pinch the bridge of my nose. "I got shit to do." Basically get high and forget this day ever happened.

"Actually, I'm done here, so..." The doc looks uncomfortable. "I'll just see myself out."

He leaves.

"Right." Joseph walks closer to where I'm sitting at the kitchen island. "I got this faxed over—you said you didn’t recall the name Andrea Martinez?" He slips a piece of paper in front of me, a photocopy. "Maybe you'll remember her now." I wish I didn’t. I really wish I didn’t. "She used to work at Dawn but quit around the time she got pregnant. Thankfully, Nico saves all those records."

I bite my thumbnail, for one second meeting my dad's gaze, and I'm grateful there's no sarcasm or judgment to be found right now.

"This don’t narrow it down much," I point out. "She's probably fucked twice as many people as Anthony and I have combined."

"I'd prefer we leave my ass outta this," Anthony says wryly.

"Mom's right—siete davvero dei puttanieri," Dad mutters, saying we really are whores. "And I thought I was wild when I was young, always at Dawn."

Anthony smirks at him. "If you was at Dawn so much, how did you meet Mom, who you swear was an innocent angel?"

My brows knit together, as I have no fucking idea how this is relevant.
"I went to church, too!" Dad shouts. "Now, shut the fuck up—Joseph was talking."

"Let's try this again." Joseph sighs. "You remember being with her, Dee?"

I half-shrug, half-nod. As much as I'd love to deny it, I know I fucked the brunette in the photo. But it was a long time ago, so it's not like I can pinpoint it.

"Was it maybe ten plus nine months ago?" Dad asks.

I glare at him then scrub my hands over my face. "I don't fucking know," I groan. "But even if it was...? I mean, she gets around." They all do.

"Got," Joseph corrects. "She killed herself after she dropped off the baby here." My jaw drops. "Nico sent two boys to her place as soon as we'd figured out it was her."

"Well, she's not going the heaven—poor girl," Dad mutters.

Anthony snorts. "Preach, Pops."

"Can youse be serious for one fucking second?!" I shout, widening my arms.

"Oh!" Dad shouts back. He wags a finger at me. "You shut your mouth when you talk to me, son!"

*That makes no fucking sense!*

"And I thought my family was nuts," Joseph mutters. "You know what, Dee? You'll have the results in a few days. I'll be in touch."

He takes off as if he's being chased by the devil; meanwhile, I think I might cry. And Anthony and Dad are bitching, talking about what to eat for dinner since Mom hasn't started on it, and I have a splitting headache,
I just wanna get the fuck outta here, and then Anthony announces he's gonna go get Gabriella and the kids, which leads to Dad saying we'll order food from Stella, and, and, and...I wanna scream.

Then Mom finally comes down again. "I just changed her diaper; she's good for now." She's got her coat on. "Anthony, you have a daughter—I trust that you can take care of Lia 'til I come back."

"I have two daughters," Dad argues.

"Yes, but you're getting a little rusty, ciccino. No offense, but last time we babysat Allegra, you thought it'd be cool to throw her in the pool to see if she'd sink or float."

"DAD!" Anthony looks honestly horrified.

"I was kidding!" Dad yells, throwing his hands up. "It was a joke, Isabella!" He turns to my brother. "It was a joke, Anthony. Cristo santo!"

Mom giggles and adjusts her scarf. "I know, honey. You'll both do fine. But seriously, one'a youse go up there now. She's in the playpen."

You'll both do fine. Am I invisible?

Dad frowns at her. "Where're you goin'?"

"To church." Mom grabs her purse. "I gotta pray for my whoring sons."

"Reformed hea'!" Anthony hollers from behind the fridge door.

"Oh, my love." Dad hugs her to him. "You can pray in the bedroom, and while you're down on your knees—"

Mom slaps his chest, looking like she's trying not to laugh, and heads for the door. "I'll see youse later!"

My forehead hits the countertop.
Grand Finale

Chapter 2

Translation:

Ma vaffanculo! = Fuck you!

Povera piccolina = That poor little girl.

Hummingbird's POV

"I fucking swear, bell'uccellino!" Junior shouts from the living room. "This guy will live forever! He's got a pair of brass balls, lemme tell ya."

I chuckle to myself, rolling my eyes, and add the garlic to the marinara. The ravioli should be done soon, too.

"What's he talkin' about?" Gabriella asks as she gently rocks a tired Allegra in her arms.

"The Crocodile Hunter," I say dryly. "It's his newest obsession on the Discovery Channel."

"Oh," she giggles.

As I wash my hands, I peer out the kitchen window to see if Joseph's here yet, but no. However, my oldest son pulls up. It's lunchtime, so it's a little odd he's here, but perhaps he's found Dominic?

He's been missing for the past three days—ever since we learned about Lia's existence—but I won't allow myself to break down. 'Cause if I do,
Junior will be pissed, and he'll threaten to "rearrange Dominic's face." So, I keep it all bottled up—I hide behind my smile.

I mean…I know he's...fine—Dominic, that is. But he hasn't come around, and he hasn't even been at his apartment above Stella. Instead we hear through the grapevine that he's working, partying...

It's killing me, but Junior's already so furious at him that I don't want to add to it. It's always been like that; if I cry, my husband will go out and make whomever suffer just 'cause I'm upset.

"Mom!" Anthony enters the house, shouting. "Dad!"

"Shh!" Gabriella sticks her head out of the kitchen doorway and gestures at their Allegra. "She's almost asleep."

"I didn't know you were here, micina." Anthony grins and plants a wet one on Gabriella. "And how's my little princess?" He dips down and nuzzles Allegra's cheek.

The sight is so precious, I could just cry. And it makes my heart ache, hoping Lia will have that soon, too. The little girl deserves it. She's just an innocent baby, and her mother—may God forgive her. I do the Sign of the Cross, sad for the young girl who ended her own life. There's no real explanation, either.

I begged Junior to investigate it, so he had a couple boys working on it. But all we know is that she was struggling to make ends meet; she didn't have any family, and since she had Lia to take care of, we guess she couldn't go to the college at which she'd been accepted. They'd found a letter from CCSN in her apartment. And without money for day care or a babysitter...

It's just so sad.
We would've helped her.

Now there's a baby girl in the living room with Junior, and she is so cuddly and beautiful and sweet, but she's... in limbo? She doesn't have a mother, and we're waiting to find out if Dominic's her father.

There's no way we're getting the authorities involved, so for now, Junior and I are taking care of her.

"Hey, Mom." Anthony brings me back to now, and he kisses my cheek. "I got you something." He places a box on the counter; there's an image of a cell phone on it. "I got one for Gabriella, Julia, and Elisa, too."

My mouth quirks up and I dry my hands on a towel. "Where did'ju get these from?"

He shrugs and smiles innocently. "They fell off a truck?"

"Right." I snort and shake my head, having heard that line a million times in the past. When I was little, it was my dad, then Jasper, then Junior, and now... now, it's my sons. It is what it is. "That's very sweet of you, topolino, but you know what your father thinks about cell phones."

Sure, cell phones have existed for a long time, but it's not until now more and more people are getting them. And Junior thinks the FBI is behind it, just so they can listen in on wiseguys' conversations.

"So, don't use it in the house," he says. "But you can bring it when you go out."

I bite my lip, thinking my son is awfully sweet, but... "I don't know how they work," I admit.

"I'll help you," he chuckles and drapes an arm around me. God, he's freaking tall. They all are now. Anthony and Dominic both stand at six foot
two, and my husband's only an inch taller. I feel like a midget. "This way, you know, when you're at the salon or whatevuh, you can call Zia Brianna."

"Oh." My lip quivers and I hug Anthony so hard. He's been extra attentive the past few days, 'cause he knows how difficult this is for me—with the whole Dominic thing. And I do miss my sister-in-law, who now lives in Kansas City. "Thank you, baby."

He just smiles and changes the topic to food.

"It's almost done," I say with a nod. "You stayin', or do you want me to pack a lunch?"

Gabriella huffs a chuckle. "You already ate the sandwiches I packed for you, didn't you?"

Anthony shrugs and rubs his belly. "I'm a growing boy."

"I packed two." She widens her eyes, Allegra fussing in her arms. "They were a foot long."

"Anthony and his sandwiches," I giggle and pat his cheek. "Non gli bastano mai." I say he just can't get enough.

"See, you know how it is, Ma." He winks at me before walking over to his wife. "I'mma be late tonight." Picking up Allegra, he cuddles her while he continues. "And I'll be outta town next week."

A fist grips my heart, but I push down my fears when I see the same emotions in Gabriella's eyes. I subtly shake my head at her, silently telling her to keep it inside. That's what the women in our family are here for. We support each other, bitch and whine, cry and rant. But she's gotta be strong in front of Anthony and their children.
"Be safe," she whispers eventually.

"Always am," he answers—much like his dad used to do. It's been a long time since Junior left town for business, and now it kills me that Anthony's doing it. "I'll tell you more about it tonight if you're awake when I get home." But I know he won't tell her much. Not what he's gonna do, not where he's going. "Where's TJ?"

Gabriella clears her throat, wiping away any trace of melancholy. "He needed new overalls, and Mom wanted to spend some time with him."

Anthony nods as Junior appears in the kitchen with Lia.

"She smells like shit," he states, holding Lia away from him. He's waiting for one of the women to take her. "For being so little and cute, she can drop a deuce like no other."

"Ba-ba!" Lia babbles.

I chuckle and roll my eyes, about to take her, but Gabriella steps forward instead.

"I'll take her," she offers.

Once she disappears upstairs with Lia, Anthony sits down with Allegra, and Junior leans back against the counter, snatching up olives from a snack plate near the sink.

"What'chu doin' hea', tesoro?" He jerks his chin at Anthony.

"I was in the neighborhood," Anthony answers. "And what's with you nowadays? You don't like to get dressed anymore?" He eyes his father's robe and sweatpants, to which I withhold my laugh.

Truth is, Junior's turned in to a couch potato. Around lunchtime, he'll take a swim in the pool before getting ready for work, but before then he's
always in comfy clothes. And there's an ass print that says "Junior was here" on the couch.

Junior's always started work late, so his being home at this hour isn't new. But he used to be asleep 'til noon, though that's changed. Since he only comes home late two or three nights a week now, he usually gets up around eight or nine, only to put on sweats and his robe and plant his ass in front of the Discovery Channel.

"It's my goddamn house," he bitches. "You can get the fuck out if my incredible body offends you."

"Incredible?" Anthony cracks up.

"That's enough outta both'a youse," I warn, glaring at Anthony. Fuckin' idiot, tryin'a rile up Junior. It wouldn't end up well in our son's favor, so I'd rather put a stop to it before it can begin. "Anthony, you stayin' or not?" I put my hands on my hips.

"I'll take my food to go," he decides as Junior pulls me to him. "Dad's about to start slobberin' all over you—makes me lose my appetite."

"Ma vaffanculo!" Junior spits out, and I sigh against my husband's chest. I swear, all these years I wanted them to be home more often. Now? I'm beginning to question it. "It was my love for your mother that created you. Show some fuckin' appreciation, kid!"

"Easy, ciccino," I chide, not wanting Allegra to get upset. "What's up with you two? Been a slow week?" I eye them both, thinking I might be right. And when they're bored at work, they go at each other with their bitchfaces. Hell, it's almost a good thing Dominic isn't here, then.

"It's nothing," Junior grumbles and nips at my neck. "No matta'. I'm hungry."
"Food's almost done." I nod and move away to check the ravioli. "Mario will be here soon." He's proved to be an excellent chef, and he works at Stella now. Obviously, he also works for Junior; he's keeping an eye on Mario since the boy is now allowed to date Elisa. Anyway, he's coming over to pick up a few new recipes and samples. "And Joseph..." I peer out the window again, hoping, wishing, praying...

~oOo~

Half an hour later, Anthony's left, Allegra's asleep upstairs, Junior's eating on the patio, Mario's stopped by, Carm's dropped off TJ, and Gabriella and I are in the pool with him and Lia.

We're still waiting for Joseph.

While TJ splashes around, wearing both a life vest and his floaties, Lia's a lot more cautious. She clings to me, refusing to get too wet, but she giggles like mad when I make bubbles at the surface with my mouth.

"Nonna! Lookie hea'!" TJ shouts, laughing.

"I'm looking, sweetheart," I chuckle. Pressing my lips to Lia's forehead and cheeks, I try to determine if she's cold, but I'm worrying for nothing. Junior had heaters installed when TJ was born. That way, they can use the pool year-round. I mean, it's a solid 75 degrees outside now, which is hot for January, but the pool wouldn't have been all that nice without the heaters. "Do you wanna get out, Lia?" I ask, then point to the patio and slowly move toward the edge. "You wanna get out?"

"No!" She pulls in the other direction and makes a wroom-wroom noise, which she's done every time I make bubbles. She giggles and squishes my cheeks together, being too fucking cute.

"Did she say Nonno?!" Junior shouts and gets up from his chair. He doesn't leave the patio, though.
"No!" Lia squeals. "No, no, no!"

"She's saying she doesn't wanna get out!" I holler back, laughing.

"Nonno!" TJ yells.

"What's up, baby?" Junior squints into the sun. "You wanna come out?"

"No." He grins and splashes away. "Chase me, Mama," he says. "Now!"

I suck my teeth. "Ask nicely, TJ." God, he's like his father. And uncle. And nonno. To sum it up, he's a demanding little Maisano boy. "You gotta be strict with his manners, hon," I tell Gabriella.

"I know," she sighs and swims toward him. "I'm trying, but it's like he only obeys Anthony."

"That's because you can be too nice," I say. I really don't want to butt in.

I remember hating it when Junior's mother gave advice about Anthony and Dominic when they were little, but she was right in the end. The boys in our family are headstrong and have tempers to match the devil's. From an early age, they gotta learn to respect others, and most definitely women.

But there's one thing the Maisano men can't handle. "Ignore him," I suggest. "Keep an eye on him, but ignore him. Don't obey him." When ignored, it's only a matter of time before they come crawling back.

"But he'll cry." Gabriella pouts.

"That won't kill him." I smirk. "If you always spoil him with attention, however, you will kill him when he's a teenager and can't say 'please' and 'thank you.'"
"You're evil, hummingbird." Junior walks over and sits down on the edge, his feet in the water. "But Isabella's right," he tells Gabriella. "Make sure he respects you. Or I'll tell Anthony to—"

"Don't go there," I say quickly.

When Anthony and Dominic were bad as kids...I was the lunatic who waved a wooden spoon around, but I never followed through. I raised my hand and shouted at them, but I could never lay a hand on my children. Junior with our boys was another matter.

"Don't interrupt me," he replies irritably. "Anthony and Dominic turned out just fine—" I cock a brow. "What?!" he shouts. "They did!"

I wave a hand, 'cause I don't wanna get into all that. Over the past few days, I've been doubting everything. Somewhere along the line, I must've done something wrong. Otherwise I wouldn't have a son who's doing God knows what while we're taking care of the baby girl he may or may not be the father of.

My husband keeps repeating: he's eighteen, he's eighteen—his mistakes are his own.

But I don't know...

"Listen to me—" Junior begins to say, but Duchess's barking cuts him off. While she runs inside the house, my heart jumps up into my throat, 'cause I know it's likely that Joseph's here now.

"Go," Gabriella urges us softly. "Gimme Lia. I'll get her dry."

I nod and release a shaky breath, and once Lia's with Gabriella, I swim over to the edge where Junior gives me a hand.
"Andrà tutto bene." He promises me everything will be fine and hands me my robe. He makes sure it's closed properly. "No matta' what happens..." He trails off with an eyebrow arched at me.

"I know." I swallow. "It'll be fine." I fucking hope.

With a hand on my lower back, he ushers me inside and tells me to make some fresh coffee while he gets the door.

And by the time Juni or and Joseph appear in the kitchen, I'm trembling, and I've just put on the coffeemaker.

"Joseph," I greet nervously.

"How you doin', Bella?" He kisses my cheek; meanwhile I'm watching my husband who's reading a piece of paper. Not using his new glasses. He refuses—says they're for pussies.

"Juniuh," I say in a way of asking. I need him to tell me. Is Dominic the father or not? Truth be told, I don't know what's best—for Lia or Dominic.

Junior clears his throat, and I see the glistening in his eyes, which he's quick to hide. Putting down the paper, he scrubs a hand down his face and blows out a heavy breath.

"Dominic's the father."

"Oh—" I choke up, my hand covering my mouth, and my vision blurs completely. Oh, my God. My mind spins so fast I almost get dizzy. For me, there's no suppressing the tears. They stream down as worry overtakes me. Worry for my son, who's not mature enough to take care of a little girl. Worry for Lia...heartache, 'cause she deserves love, stability, and comfort. Worry for what Junior will do.
Dominic's partying too much, working too hard, and can barely take care of himself. How's he going to do this? How's he going to be a dad?

I've begged him to slow down, but he says he can handle it.

I don't think he can. Not even Anthony was this...wild and out there.

Knowing that Julia will be home from school soon, I try to pull myself together, but it just won't happen. Junior pulls me to his body, squeezing me tight, and I let go, sobbing my heart out.

There's a small spark of hope—maybe Lia will save Dominic. Maybe she will straighten him up. Calm him down. Mature him. But...I just don't know. It's not fair. He's only eighteen—just turned in December last year, and to push a ten-month-old baby on to him...

Anthony's so different. He married Gabriella when he was eighteen; it was actually her seventeenth birthday, and they were ready for both TJ and Allegra. They have their house, a nice home, and Anthony has his life sorted out. He knows his priorities.

"We'll work it out, bell'uccellino." My husband shushes me softly, kisses my head, and hugs me harder. "We always do, don't we?"

"We—we can take c-care of her," I cry, my voice muffled by his chest.

Junior doesn't reply.

Instead, while I keep crying, I hear him asking Joseph if anyone's heard from Dominic today.

Joseph quietly says no, but that his little brother—Francis—is the one to seek out. If anyone knows where Dominic is, it's Francis. Or Frankie, as he's called now. And...in my own opinion, it could be worth giving Elisa a
call, too. She and Dominic are close—always have been, just like Anthony and Julia.

"Isabella..." Junior cups my cheeks and makes me look up, and he wipes some tears away under my eyes. "I need to go out and find him, all right?"

"Be easy on him," I plead tearfully. While the boy needs a fucking reality check, I don't want my husband to resort to violence. Dominic's just a baby. "I'm begging you." I whimper.

"I'll get back as soon as I can—with Dominic," is all he says.

**Junior's POV**

After a quick shower and getting dressed in a suit, I get into Joseph's car and run a comb through my hair.

"I called my brother," he says, pulling out from our driveway. "He's waiting for us at Dawn."

I nod and pocket my comb, then light up a smoke, needing to calm down before I explode.

A few days ago when Dominic left the house after the doc had taken his DNA, I told myself to let him be until we got the results. I told myself to stay away. But now? Forget about it. Isabella and I have both called him, and I have sent messages through others, stating that he needs to at least pick up the motherfucking phone to tell his mother he's alive. Yet, he hasn't. He's avoiding this—plain and fucking simple, and I won't tolerate it. Definitely not now when we know he's Lia's dad.

*Povera piccolina.*
As easy as it would be for me and my wife to take Lia in, it's not right. Dominic's gonna man up and take responsibility. His mother and I can help, but that's it.

Lia aside, what worries me most is Dominic's love for coke and alcohol. I've already told Alec to make sure none of his boys provide my son with any of it, but while my brother's the biggest supplier in this town, he's obviously not the only one.

When we arrive at Dawn, I get outta the car, spotting Francis by the entrance. Much like Dominic, he goes for holey jeans, boots, and a leather jacket instead of a fucking suit. Youngsters, man...

"Mr. Maisano," he greets politely, looking nervous.

I skip the bullshit. "Where is he, son?"

"Look—" he holds up his hands "—he told me doesn't wanna be disturb—"

"Now's not the fucking time," Joseph warns as I take a step closer to Francis. "Tell him where Dee is if you know."

"You should listen to your brother, Francis," I advise, adjusting the cuff links on my sleeves. "You're not the only one who can be creative with a bat." My mouth quirks up.

"Cazzo," he curses, roughly scrubbing a hand down his face. Then he pulls out a business card from a pocket. "He rents Room 16 there sometimes." He hands me the card. "I know he's there now."

Handing the card to Joseph, I close in and cup Francis's neck. "Listen," I say quietly, squeezing a little, "I admire your loyalty to Dominic, but I come first, yes?"

He nods jerkily. "Yes, sir."
"Bene." I nod and step back. Jerking my chin to the car, I tell Joseph, "Let's check out this motel."

~oOo~

As we get to the motel in a seedier part of town, Joseph and I climb the outside stairs toward Room 16, and I'm glad we don't have to bother with a fucking receptionist or anything. Pulling out the nine from my waistband, I prepare myself to see anything in that room.

We knock, but there's no response whatsoever, so I stand back while Joseph picks the lock.

And once we get in...

"Jesus Christ," I whisper, assaulted by the smell of vomit, booze, and weed. There's something else, too—fuckin'...he better not have... "What we see in here stays here." I put a hand on Joseph's arm, stopping him from walking farther in. "I'll tell Felix and Ed what's necessary. Capisce?"

"Of course." He frowns.

I nod. Leaving the small entryway, I enter the dark room. With the sun filtering through the cracks in the covered window, I see smoke from whatever he's used. And he...is right there on the bed.

I was wrong.

I wasn't prepared. Not for this.

I'd been ready to kick out doped-up sluts, but this? This breaks my fucking heart.

Walking over to the bed, I put down the gun and check Dominic's pulse. Around him, I see all the proof I need. Motherfucking heroin. He's only wearing a pair of jeans, and I can see where he's shot up in his arm.
"Oh, Dominic," I murmur thickly, placing a hand on his forehead. He stirs, a lazy smile on his lips; meanwhile, I wanna cry. And hit something. Hard.

"It can't be too pure," Joseph says quietly from somewhere behind me. "It smells too much."

I agree. The scent of vinegar is too strong, to the point where it's nauseating, but I'm not exactly an expert on heroin. I don't know where he got it from, what it's cut with, or how long he's been using. What I do know is that he's both smoked it and injected it. The needle proves the latter and the strong odor in the air explains that he's smoked it, too.

But while you create a tolerance for it quickly, it's also a more noticeable addiction. I'd like to think we would've known if this has been going on for a while.

"Help me get him down to the car," I say, clearing my throat.

~oOo~

"You okay?" Joseph asks me as I close the car door to the backseat.

I don't reply, instead just watching my baby boy through the window. Lighting up a smoke, I take deep, calming pulls, but it doesn't really work. If I don't find some privacy soon, it's gonna get ugly.

There's no way I can let my wife see him this way. Hell, I don't want her to see me this way. I know I look like a caged animal, ready to fight to the death.

"I want the room cleaned," I force out. I press a fist to my mouth, struggling to get ahold of myself. When nausea and dizziness creep forward, I move to the passenger's seat and get in. But I don't close the door. "You're gonna have to tell your father," I go on. "And mine."
Because I won't be able to. "Then I want you to book a room or
something for me..." I run a hand through my hair, thinking what I need—what Dominic will need. Seclusion. Fresh air. Privacy. There's gonna be withdrawal, even if it's just short-term use. "A cabin." I nod. "I'll drive toward Salt Lake City, and I'll call you on the way."

"Got it," he replies instantly. "You're gonna help him through detox?" I nod absently and look back to Dominic's oblivious form. It's only a matter of time before the rush is over and he wakes up. "Do you want me to call Bella? Or Anthony?"

*God. Isabella.*

"She can't know the details," I whisper. "Tell her that everything will be fine. Tell her I'm gonna be there for him for a few days while he sobers up." She already knows he's not a saint. She's seen him high and drunk. But there's a difference between weed and heroin. "Tell her I'll call her when I can." Pulling out my wallet, I note that I only have a few hundred bucks, so I decide to stop by *Stella* before we go. That way, I can pack a small bag of essentials for Dominic, too, since he lives above the restaurant. "And Anthony...tell him to be there for his mother and sisters."

It's not long before I drive Joseph's car outta Vegas, my high-off-his-ass son riding out his wave of euphoria in the backseat.
Chapter 3

Translation:

*Non capisce un cazzo* = He doesn't understand shit.

*Tale padre, tale figlio* = Like father, like son.

**Hummingbird's POV**

"Move away from the door, Anthony." I glare up at my son and put my hands on my hips. "I swear to Christ, if you don't move..."

"Let me check first, a'ight?" he says impatiently. "There might be stuff in there that you shouldn't see—"

Sick of his shielding me, I shove him aside, knowing he won't resort to physical force with his mommy. I bring out the key and unlock the door to Dominic's apartment above *Stella*.

"Mom," Anthony groans.

"Nothing in there can break my heart more than it already is," I snap and enter the hallway. *My God.* I pinch my nose and march straight into the living room and open the windows facing the street. It's not booze, but it's filth, stale air, and rotten food. Behind me, I hear Elisa directing Mario and two of his friends on where to start cleaning.

Those boys don't wanna be here one bit, they won't refuse me. Or Junior, obviously. And Mario's willing to go to great lengths to show Junior what a good boyfriend he is to Elisa.

Meanwhile, Anthony hurries down a hall that leads to the three bedrooms and the only bathroom.

"Should I start in the kitchen?" Julia scrunches her nose.
I nod and motion the roll of big, black trash bags we brought. "Just throw everything out. *Everything.*" My husband knew I was going crazy at home, so he gave me unlimited funds to redecorate Dominic's apartment. He said, "*Go nuts. Just don't fucking ruin us, hummingbird.*"

Then he'd hung up the phone to help Dominic puke his guts out.

*Mannaggia,* it hurts to think about. It hurts so bad. And...knowing my husband, he's probably holding out on me. Joseph told me Junior's somewhere with Dominic, helping him sober up, and my husband confirmed this when I spoke to him several hours later. But I'm afraid it's worse than that.

"*Non ci pensare, mamma,*" Julia whispers, saying I shouldn't think about it. She knows me too well. I nod and fan my face, then send up a quick prayer as I check my makeup in my mirror. "I'll start emptying the fridge."

"I'll go with you," Elisa says, and I can tell she's on the verge of falling apart, too. They both are, but Elisa and Dominic...they're so close.

After putting up my hair in a high ponytail, I put on a pair of rubber gloves and start throwing old food containers in a trash bag. Anthony reappears from down the hall, and he's carrying one duffle bag and one paper bag; I ask what it is, but he pretends to be on the phone while he walks out. *Little fucker.* He's probably on his way down to Junior's office at *Stella* to hide whatever he found in Dominic's rooms.

"Mikey's here with the U-haul now, Mrs. Maisano," one of Mario's friends says. "You want us to start carrying down the furniture?"

"Yes, thank you." I straighten up and blow some hair outta my face. "The couches in hea' go first." I point to the two matching leather sofas. "The coffee table, too. And...actually, everything's going."
Anthony comes in again and says, "Youse can leave the room farthest down the hall alone." I arch a brow, and he elaborates. "It's his gym, and he's got some work shit in there."

That won't do. "If there's stuff no one's allowed to see, you clear it out," I tell him, doubting that's the case. Wiseguys don't exactly make it a habit to keep paperwork around. "It'll be his bedroom when I'm done with this place."

I've been going nuts in our house since Junior left yesterday to find our son, but it's enough. Trust me, I have energy to turn this stinky bachelor pad into a nice home by the time Junior and Dominic come back. And according to my husband, I have at least four more days.

"His bedroom is the one in the middle." Anthony frowns, then steps aside as Mario and another guy carry out one of the couches. "The first one's empty."

"The middle room will be Lia's," I answer. "And the first will be Dani's." Leaning over, I return to picking up trash and filthy clothes.

"Wait, what?" Oh, I was hoping Anthony hadn't picked up on that last part. "Who the fuck is Dani?"

Well...

Last night, when Junior had arrived to... wherever he is with our son, he told us that when they get back, Dominic's gonna take responsibility and raise Lia. Which scares the ever-loving crap outta me—and I'm speaking for all mothers out there. 'Cause let's face it, Dominic is not ready to take care of another human being. It's too much for him. But since Junior refuses to give in, I made him meet me halfway.

I asked him—no, I told him that we'd hire a nanny, someone who could be there a lot. And my husband agreed, said it was reasonable.
"Daniela—Gina's cousin," I answer. Gina is Nicola's wife, and she's got a younger cousin who just moved out here. I admit, when I heard this girl is only eighteen—or rather, she turns eighteen next week—I balked. Lia needs someone with experience, but...then I met Dani last night.

Gina had been at the house with me, Gabriella, Elisa, and Julia, and we got to talking; Gina suggested Dani and called her over.

Daniela Cicero is essentially me—when I was a teenager. She's got street smarts, and she grew up looking after her younger siblings, much like I took care of Nicola and Lucia. When Gina mentioned her uncle, Dani's father, there was darkness in Gina's voice, so I think there's a story there. But I didn't push; it wasn't the time or the place.

Aside from experience with kids, Dani is tough. She's got balls. She won't take Dominic's bullshit, she won't be fooled, and she will demand respect.

"Does she even speak English?" Anthony asks incredulously, widening his arms. "It's the broad who lives with Nicola and Gina, right?" He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Look, I haven't met her yet, but didn't she get here like a few days ago?"

I roll my eyes. "Why you talking crazy? She went to high school in Queens, for Christ's sake." Yes, Dani was born and raised in Italy, just like Gina was, but they've been in this country for a few years now—Gina longer than Dani. As far as I know, Dani's siblings are now with an aunt so that Dani can get a life of her own.

After graduating high school last spring, she decided to take a year off to work. Now she's here. And she's found work.

"I don't think Dee's gonna be too happy about some girl being his roommate," Anthony says.

"Tough shit," I spit out. "He doesn't get a choice hea', so drop it."
Over the next several hours, we clear out Dominic's apartment while we try to not think about him. Impossible feat. But we do get a lot done. By dropping the Maisano name all over town, I have several people rushing here to my aid—anything to suck up to my husband—offering their services.

Two guys start ripping up the carpets in the hallway and two bedrooms; that's where I want hardwood floors. Another guy comes over to clean the carpet in the living room and the one that will be Lia's room. Then we have a few who bring over catalogues from their furniture stores. One man offers a new bathroom fifty percent off, one tells me he'll install a new kitchen in three days, one wants to gift my son new china and silverware.

Anthony listens to their hushed requests and accepts their business cards at the door...

"This isn't really like you, Mom," Elisa says, amused. "Taking advantage of our name and all."

I shrug. "I want this done quickly. I'll just donate more money at church on Sunday." It'll be fine. As long as my baby boy comes back to an apartment worthy of being called a home. "Gina and Dani should be here soon." I check my watch, seeing it's nearly dinnertime. Mario's downstairs working now, so Elisa will fetch our dinner as soon as my nephew's wife and cousin get here. "Hmm, perhaps I should give Gabriella a call." She's been an angel; aside from taking care of her own children, she's also watching over Lia today. Thankfully, Julia's on her way there now to help out. And Carm's there, too.

"You called her an hour ago," Elisa points out with a little smirk. "You gotta stop tryin'a be everywhere." Her amusement fades slightly, replaced
by concern. "Do you want me to move back home to help you some
more?"

"No, that's fine, bella bambina." I cup her cheek, thinking how much Elisa
has matured over the past few years. Gone is the brat. She's now a
beautiful young woman of twenty-one, and she's waiting for Mario to pop
the question. In the meantime, she lives with Junior's parents out in
Henderson. Which is good. Elizabeth needs the company, and Ed's getting
forgetful in his old age.

"Mom," Anthony calls, and I look to him to see that Gina and Dani are
here now.

"I think she'll be good for Dee," Elisa muses.

I agree. Dani might look innocent; she can't be taller than five foot three,
and she's got these big, beautiful light brown eyes, a dimpled smile, an
hourglass figure that she hides behind form-fitting but modest dresses—
none of that shit kids today usually wear. No miniskirts that show half
your ass or tops where you show your belly.

But she's not a weak one. I've seen the confidence in her eyes, the
purpose in her step, and heard the way she speaks. She's never been
sheltered.

"You mean she'll be good for Lia, though, right?" I tilt my head, smiling at
Gina who's introducing Dani to Anthony. Hmm. "Do you think Gina's
pregnant?" I whisper, leaning closer to Elisa. Nicola and Gina have five-
year-old Michael and two-year-old Christopher, and it looks like a third
one might be on the way.

I wish my brother could be here. Jasper would be so proud of his son. Of
course, they do see each other when Nicola visits him in prison, but that's
hardly the same. Plus, Nicola rarely brings his children.
"Maybe," Elisa says pensively, then walks over to say hi to Gina and Dani.

~oOo~

When dinner gets here, it's just Elisa, Gina, Dani, and me left. Anthony had only planned on staying for an hour tops, but then he'd ended up staying almost the entire day. So, now he had to go to work and he had to tell his wife he'll be late.

We're on the floor in the living room, food containers from *Stella* mixing with color samples and catalogues. We've already settled on pink, yellow, and white for Lia's room; Elisa's in charge of Dominic's room, and now I'm on to encouraging Dani to pick out stuff for her own room.

She says she's not comfortable spending money that isn't her own on a room...

"What about this?" I show her a spread with an Indian theme. It's got rich colors of burgundy, plum, gold, and moss green. "It says the bed frame also comes in black and silver." These days, not everyone is crazy about gold—or brass as it is with furniture.

"It is very nice," she says in her beautiful Italian accent. "But I don't have, ah...*come si dice*...a preference?" She shrugs modestly.

I wave it off. "I'll take care of it, honey. Just leave it to me." Judging by the dark purple dress she's wearing, I assume it's a color she likes. It would go very well with beige and details in silver. "I should probably go call Juniuh before it gets too late." Getting up off the floor, I walk to the kitchen where the one and only phone is. That's another thing he needs. Everyone's gotta have a fucking cordless. In the pocket of my black pants, I pull out the number Junior told me I could reach him on and dial.

He picks up at the second ring.
"Yes?" He sounds tired.

"It's me, ciccino," I say softly, my stomach knotting up. "How are you? How's Dominic?"

"I'm good. Dominic's..." He chuckles darkly. "He's wishing he never even laid eyes on a drink."

"Oh," I whimper, so damn worried. "Is he in pain?" I remember my dad when he went through withdrawals; he'd be screaming and moaning and retching. Then he'd give up and go out to drink... "He's just a baby."

"He's eighteen—this needs to hurt, Isabella," Junior replies. "And it could be worse. Better he suffers through this shit now."

"But you're nice to him, right?" I plead, sniffling. "He needs our support. He needs to know we're there for him."

"He also needs to know what he's putting his family through," he snaps. "It makes me so fucking mad—"

"Juniuh," I choke out. "Please."

I cradle the phone, needing comfort.

His next words do just that—they comfort me. For now.

"I'm being easy on him, hummingbird," he sighs. "Trust me. All I want is for him to get better."

Dominic's POV

"You're a fucking disgrace!" Dad shouts, fisting my shirt and pulling me close to his face. My upper body leaves the bathroom floor, all by his force. Through blurry vision and dizziness, my sluggish mind registers that
I've never seen him this furious. "You know what kills me right now?" He grabs my jaw roughly, squeezing hard. "That your mother cries for you."

_Fuck you!_

I flinch away from him and curl into a ball near the toilet. Despite only wearing boxers, I'm soaked in sweat—cold as fuck. With each round of nausea, I'm vomiting until I cry out in pain. The cramps...God, the fucking _cramps_. I clutch my stomach, weeping shamelessly, while Dad sits on the edge of the tub shaking his head at me.

It's been like this for hours now—ever since I woke up. Well, Dad woke me up. By punching me in the face and throwing cold water on me.

_Goddamn monster._

I wanna kill him. I swear to God. _Non capisce un cazzo_. He keeps shouting at me; meanwhile, what does he really know? Just breezing through life, swimming in money, the perfect wife who pushed out a few kids, and Christ, the way my mother spoils him, dotes on him... He don't know _shit_.

All I want is what I had...whenever, yesterday? I've lost track of time. But it'd be easy—shoot up one more time, a smaller hit, and then the withdrawal won't be so bad. Right? I mean, it makes sense. 'Cause I'd been getting high for three days straight, and before that...

Coke gives me more time. I don't need sleep; I can work more—make more dough. Simple as that. The yak keeps me alert. And the heroin...I don't fucking know, I just remember waking up, knowing the day would end with the results from the paternity test. I wasn't ready. I'm still not. So, I bought the H, having heard it gives you instant bliss—a calm where everything's all right in the world.

If Dad only had a clue, he'd get it. He'd understand.
"You still think heroin's cool?" Dad asks.

I never thought it was cool—fucking piece'a shit! I wanted to forget. That so bad? I wanted to erase the past few days from my memory, and I settled for getting high. My father seems to think I'm some low-life junkie, but it was the first goddamn time I bought H.

I groan in misery, feeling another wave of nausea rolling through me. Weakly grabbing on to the toilet seat, I try to pull myself up, but it doesn't work. Just as I collapse down again, I start to retch.

At the same time, I clench down, trying not to shit myself.

"Yeah, this really makes you look like a man," he spits out. "Throwing up all ova'. What if Mom saw you now, huh? Think she'd be proud'a you?"

"S-stop." I gag and sob at the same time, then lose whatever's left in my stomach on the tiled floor. "Fuck," I whimper. Reaching up, I wipe my mouth, wincing at the pain from the cut—courtesy of Edward Maisano.

Shaking violently, there's nothing I can do but suffer through the seizure-like cramps that twist and pull at my insides. Everything hurts—to move, to think, to cry, to fucking breathe.

I vomit, shit, and ache.

~oOo~

I don't know what time it is or how long I've been out, but when I wake up, I'm outside on some wooden patio, and it's dark.

This cabin or whatever is fucking surrounded by trees and mountains.

Feeling hot even with the crisp air, I shake off the countless blankets and sluggishly sit up in the huge Adirondack chair. Dad must've changed my clothes—they're my own, a pair of boxers and a t-shirt.
A few heaters are glowing, making it warmer than it really is. At least I guess so since I can clearly see frost on some of the trees.

*Where the fuck are we?*

"Put the fucking blankets back on." Dad bitches at me, emerging from inside the house. Dressed in tracksuit, he sits down in the chair next to me and lights up a smoke. "Joining the living again, huh?" He jerks his chin at the floor by my chair. "There's water. Drink. You had a fever earlier, and you need fluids."

"How—" I croak then clear my throat, all dry and scratchy. "How long was I asleep?" Leaning over the armrest, I grab the bottle of water and take a couple slow sips.

Nothing is comfortable. My skin's all itchy, and I can still feel nausea rolling around in my gut. I'm running both hot and cold. My head is fucking *pounding*... I feel empty and agitated.

"You wasn't asleep," he mutters, staring out at nothing. "Unless it's a habit of yours to throw up and shit yourself when you're asleep. But you was out nearly twenty-four hours. In the end, I just dropped you in the fucking tub. Wiping shit and piss is for babies. You know, I had to hose you down as if you were Duke or Duchess—*dogs*, Dominic—"

"Don't start," I whisper, closing my eyes. What he's doing now...he's humiliating me. As if I'm not humiliated enough as it is. "Where are we?"

"Just outside Salt Lake."

*Madonn*, I don't know nobody in fuckin' Utah.

I need to wake up, I need to— Okay, I don't need it; I ain't ruled by anything, but a couple lines of coke would do the trick. I'd be back to normal.
"You're gonna get cleaned up," Dad says, flicking away some ash. "When we get home, things are gonna change. You'll be with me now, and you're gonna be the father Lia deserves."


"Yeah, she's yours." His eyes meet mine. "And you're gonna take your responsibility. Capisce?"

I stare at him, my jaw clenching. The blue eyes on that kid have haunted me for days now. I gotta get away from it all. I'm too young to deal with that shit.

"Answer me, Dominic," he grits out.

"Fine," I bite out.

He cups his ear. "What was that? I couldn't hear you."

"Ho detto va bene!" I tell him I said fine. Cazzo, I hate this son of a bitch. Acts like he owns the world...

"Try again." He twirls a finger, glaring. "Respectfully this time."

Burning up with rage, I snap a blank expression into place and say, "Yes, sir. Can we go home now?"

"Like you're ready for that." He scoffs and leans back in his seat. "Maybe you've gotten through most of the detox, but you got a long road ahead'a you, son. Before we even think about going home, I wanna make sure all those toxins are outta you."

"Check you out." I snort. "Talkin' like you're a saint."

"Don't get smart with me," he threatens with a sinister smile. "I gave you life—I can take it away, too."
Thing is, he probably means it. That's how much he loves his kids...

"I believe you," I say dully. "Can I have painkillers at least?"

"No." He smirks and flicks away his smoke. "But back to that other thing. Can you promise me you'll straighten up?"

"Yeah." I barely refrain from rolling my eyes. "I swear."

It's quiet for a while, Dad staring out at the dark forest again, and I suffer in silence. Every now and then, chills run down my spine, causing my gut to tighten and churn. It feels like after an earthquake—the aftershocks. Aftershakes.

And I know how to take it all away—how to feel better.

I'm not stupid; I know it's easy to get hooked on some shit, and I should slow down, be more careful, but I'm no junkie. I've got it under control. I think...

"You have no idea how much you scared me, piccolo," Dad says thickly after a while. "The way I found you..." Scowling, I look down and fidget with the water bottle, my mouth feeling dry even though I just drank. "It broke my heart, Dominic." He clears his throat, and when I look up, he's tilting his head away from me.

I don't reply, feeling weird. He's just bullshitting me, trying with the guilt. Mom does that shit, too, but at least she's genuine.

After a while, Dad gets up and walks inside.

He returns after a few minutes, his eyes looking redder than before, and throws something at my lap—a popsicle?

I cock a brow.
"You need energy," he mutters gruffly and sits down again. "We got here the day before yesterday, and so far you've only been able to keep down water."

"You gonna kill me with a poisoned popsicle?" I chuckle mirthlessly, which makes my abs clench. And that fucking hurts. Peeling off the paper, I stare at the red popsicle, actually feeling my mouth water a bit.

"You seem to be doing a good job killing yourself on your own," he replies snidely.

Whatever.

"So, you went on a popsicle run for me—how nice of you," I laugh.

Dad sighs and leans forward on his knees, scrubbing his hands over his face. "I had Joseph make calls. The cabin was stocked up, and I remember my little brother liked them when he went through what you're going through now."

I frown and bite off a piece of the strawberry ice. It soothes my throat like nothing else. Oh, so damn good.

"It was right before we moved to Vegas." He lights up another smoke, suddenly appearing ten years older than his forty-six. "He was only a year or so older than you are." Tilting his head, he cracks a smirk at me. "You hate me right now, don't you?"

I just stare at him and bite off some more of my popsicle.

"That's all right, kid." He laughs through his nose and takes a drag from his smoke. "I'm good at handling pussies." I grit my teeth. "Alec hated our pop, too. You think I've been rough on you?" He lets out a whistle. "You shoulda seen how Nonno treated your uncle. I stood by and watched him beat the shit outta Alec while he went through withdrawals."
Finished with my popsicle, I throw the paper on the ground. "Tale padre, tale figlio," I say dryly, side-eyeing his smoke.

Dad catches it and tosses me his pack and the lighter. "But not even Alec was so fucking stupid that he tried heroin." He gives me a pointed look, fury simmering under the surface. I wanna flip him off, but he'd kick my ass. Instead I spark up a cigarette and avert my eyes. "He was coked-up and would crawl inside pill bottles if he could, but he pulled through."

"I don't got a fucking problem," I say impatiently, another headache settling in. My knee starts to bounce and my fingers twitch. My nose is also runny, and my skin feels tight—more sensitive. "I'll slow down, okay? What more do you want from me?" I widen my arms.

"Slowing down ain't enough for you anymore," he says. "It's time for you to grow up and become a man—"

"Again with the insults!" I shout. "Why you gotta break my balls?!"

"To break 'em you gotta have 'em," he laughs darkly.

I groan and slump back in my chair.

"Why do you think I'm doing this, huh?" he asks. "I could've been at home. I could've had been in bed with my wife after a delicious dinner. Instead I'm in the middle of nowhere listening to your sarcastic bullshit and pathetic excuses. Oh, poor me—my dad's bein' all mean." I think he's trying to mimic me there. "Nah, you're a tough guy, aren't'cha, Dominic? You'd rather sit in some cheap motel room and shoot up. Then when you don't got any money left, you'll drop to your fucking knees like some fanook—anything to get your next hit."

"You speaking from experience?" I smirk. "You ever suck a—"
Before I can even get the last word out, Dad flies at me and punches me in the jaw.

"Cazzo!" The pain stuns me momentarily, and I gasp for air, cupping my jaw. It's only been a week or something since that cat from Reno took a swing at me—*in the exact same spot*. Tears well up, but I refuse to let them fall.

"Grow the hell up!" Dad grabs me by my shirt, like I vaguely remember him doing in the bathroom. "What the fuck is wrong wit'chu? Huh? What's wrong wit'chu?" With a look of disgust, he lets go of me and starts pacing along the patio. "Jesus Christ!" He pulls at his hair, and I wince in pain, reaching down to get the smoke I'd dropped. "*Davvero non te ne accorgi, eh?*" He spins to face me, asking if I really don't see it. "You don't see what this is doing to the family? 'Cause it's not just Mom and me, Dominic. You shoulda heard your brother when I told him—"

"You talked to Anthony?" I groan, head swimming in dizziness.

"Damn fucking right I did," he spits out. "He's working his ass off while we're out here. He deserved to know what his little brother's up to." He laughs shakily, so angrily. "And what if I told Elisa? She's worried *sick.*"

That shuts me up, a stab of guilt hitting me squarely in the chest.

Then I whisper, "I'm not her responsibility."

"No." His shoulders slump. "She just happens to love you. Shame on her, huh?"

I swallow traitorous emotions and look away.

"I'm gonna go to bed," he says tiredly.

~oOo~
An hour or so later, Dad's asleep on the couch in the living room.

When I step inside to take a piss, I pass the room where he's sleeping and spot a set of car keys on the coffee table.

It halts me.

Dad’s wallet's on the table, too.

It would be easy...

There has to be some place that's still open. A club, a bar...

Briskly heading to the bathroom, I relieve myself, ending up taking a shit too, wash up, and then locate two duffel bags in the hallway. One with clothes in Dad's size—shit I haven't really seen before, I think—and one bag with stuff from my place. I grab a pair of jeans and pull them on; my leather jacket's there, too.

It's like my body knows what I'm up to, 'cause it stops hurting for a moment, as if it's encouraging me to go get what we want. Just a pick-me-up. Something to make me alert.

I won't ever do heroin again, I fucking swear. I admit it was a crazy move. But coke's different.

Sneaking over to the coffee table in the living room, I listen to Dad's steady breathing for a beat, then go for his wallet. I grab a few c-notes, put it back down, and soundlessly and carefully pick up the keys—

"I wouldn't do that if I was you."

My body turns to ice; I don't think I'm even breathing, but I manage to slowly turn my head to Dad...who still looks like he's sleeping—the hand on his gun that's aimed at me notwithstanding. *Fuck, fuck, fuck*. His head
is even on the pillow! His eyes are closed! But he must've had his nine under the pillow.

While I'm frozen in place, Dad takes his sweet-ass time sitting up. He yawns, puts down the gun, scratches his chest, and rubs his eyes before opening them.

He's too calm.

Truth be told, he's scaring the shit outta me.

"You looked into my eyes, and you lied to me, Dominic," he says quietly, rising from the couch. I straighten at the same time and look down. "You promised to straighten up. That was what, an hour ago?" When he's in front of me, I feel his right hand, his fingers curling high up on my throat. Right below my jaw. "But we both know you weren't planning to sightsee at this hour." He forces me to face him. I swallow hard as he grips a little harder. "You know the saying, 'a man is only as good as his word'? What do you think that means for you?" He stabs a finger to my chest, something that wouldn't hurt so much if I wasn't going through this...this...whatever. "There's no honor in a man who's full of shit."

I swallow again, sniveling, and feel more nausea creeping up. Gritting my teeth and blinking back tears—that I don't even have an explanation for—I stare right back, refusing to show weakness.

But I have a feeling Dad can see right through me. Mixed with the fury and disappointment is pity.

I fucking hate it.

"Are you in pain?"

I nod jerkily and try to step back, but he doesn't let me.
Sighing, he finally releases his hold. "Wait here." He snatches the keys from me and disappears down the hall. And when he returns, he's got two pill bottles in his hand and a bottle of water in the other. "One's for anxiety, one's for sore muscles. That's all I'll ever give you."

As I accept the pills, I'm fucking ashamed.

I face the floor, filled with self-hatred.

_I was gonna steal from my own father?_

"Aren't you gonna degrade me some more now?" I mutter hoarsely.

He grasps my chin and tilts it up. Studying me, he shakes his head slowly before letting go again. "No. This time, I think you've got that covered on your own." He smacks my cheek then sits down on the couch again.

Subtly—for some reason—I swallow down the pills with some water.

Then I just stand there, not sure what to do.

"Hungry? Tired?" he asks.

I shake my head no. Although, I could go for another popsicle...

But my stomach rolls, as if in protest.

"Well, get comfortable, son. We's got a few more days hea'."

"Oh, Christ—" I clutch my stomach "—just gotta take another shit first."

He laughs while I run down the hall.
Chapter 4

Translation:

Come si dice? = How do you say?

Dominic's POV

After a total of six days in a cabin outside'a Salt Lake City, I'm filled with trepidation as Dad gets closer and closer to the house I grew up in.

I've been promised that only Felix, Nonno, Joseph, and Anthony know the truth about what I've been doing in Salt Lake. And Dad, obviously. But everyone else just thinks I've been away for a few days to "sober up" after too much partying.

I wouldn't be able to look my mother in the eye if she knew... Same goes for my sisters.

However, Dad also promised that if I so much as go near heavy drugs again, he'll make sure everyone finds out. Plus, I'll never be a made man. Dad was blunt—told me a wiseguy needs to be trusted, and the word of someone ruled by drugs ain't worth a dime.

"You remember what you're gonna tell your mother?" Dad asks as the house comes into view at the end of the street.

"I remember," I mumble, taking out the strawberry Twizzler from my mouth. "I gotta lie to her and tell her I appreciate her running a bulldozer through my apartment."

I return the licorice to my mouth and scowl out the window, thinking back on this morning when Dad told me about what Mom's been up to these past few days. Not only has she redecorated my entire place, but I'm
getting a motherfucking roommate. It's some relative of my cousin's wife, and she's gonna be there for the kid.

I don't wanna think about it.

"You're also gonna apologize for making her worry," he reminds me. "You've got some groveling coming up, and I'mma make sure you have time."

I sigh heavily, my knee bouncing. It's not that I disagree with Dad; I know I've put Mom and my sisters through a lot, but right now I'm not in the mood to do much of anything that concerns family. I need to take my mind off coke, so I wanna hit the streets, work, get shit done—bring in money.

It's the only distraction I can think of having any kind of effect on me.

"Home, sweet home." Dad pulls into the driveway and kills the engine.

Nervous and fidgety, I step out of the car just as the door to the house is slammed open.

It's my brother—my furious brother—and I steel myself, hearing Mom's shouting in the background.

"Anthony Jasper Maisano!" she screams, following my brother. "Don't!"

I tense up, and Anthony rams me into the side of the car and punches me in the gut.

Oh, Jesus fucking Christ. I double over, gritting my teeth against the pain. In the background, I hear Dad comforting Mom, probably restraining her.

Yanking me up, Anthony pins me to the car and grabs my jaw. His eyes burn with anger, but it's the tears welling up that cause my own eyes to tear.
He leans in close and speaks quietly in my ear. "Put us through this again and I'll fucking kill you."

I guess I didn't put only my sisters through hell. Anthony, too.

He squeezes my neck with his free hand and presses his forehead to mine. "Are we clear, little brother?"

"Yeah," I choke out.

"Back off, Anthony," I hear Elisa grit out.

Anthony releases me, and I suck in a shaky breath, but before I can even let it out, my older sister steps forward and slaps me across the face.

"You fucking scared me!" she cries.

"Shit." I blink and cup my cheek.

"Elisa!" Mom shouts.

Fire spreads over my skin, the pain prickling and stinging like a son of a bitch. At this point, I'm pretty sure Julia's gonna take a swing at me, too, but when she runs out, she just throws herself at me and cries against my chest.

"I'm so mad at'chu," Elisa whispers furiously, but she seems to swallow that fury down when she's next to hug me.

I'm fucking overwhelmed.

And guilt-ridden.

**Junior's POV**

Hugging Isabella to me, I rest my cheek on the top of her head and watch as Anthony is the last to join in on the group hug ten feet away from us.
My wife weeps silently against my chest, but she's got her head tilted enough so I know she's witnessing the same thing I am.

If Dominic ever doubted his siblings' feelings, it's gone now.

Maybe now he realizes that the entire family suffers when he insists on being a fucking idiot.

"Why do they have to hit each other?" Isabella whimpers, hugging my middle. "Couldn't they go straight for the hug?"

I clear my throat and blink back my emotions, then kiss Isabella on the forehead and tilt up her face. Christ, how I've missed her. "So beautiful." I brush my thumbs under her eyes. "They needed to get that anger out," I answer as my eyes take in every little inch of her face.

The wife is one of those people who only gets more beautiful with age. Her skin is smooth and soft, some laugh lines the only evidence of being over forty. There's still a lot of youth in her eyes. In a way, she makes me feel younger. She's always active, always meticulous about her appearance, and always ready to play hostess.

"They could've yelled some," she mutters, frowning.

I smile and smooth out that frown with my thumb. "I think this worked out pretty good. A punch or a slap in the face is easier to get over than weeks of letting it stew. You think Dominic would've been able to handle a week's silent treatment from Elisa?" I cock a brow, knowing the answer is a resounding no. But Isabella's still about to argue, so I shut her up. Weaving my fingers through her long hair, I dip down and kiss her deeply. "Mi sei mancata così tanto, amore mio." I tell her I missed her so much.

She melts at that. "I missed you, too, ciccino. More than I can say." She hums contentedly, peering up at me with dazed eyes. I've still fucking got it—I still have that effect on her. "Anything I can do for you?"
Oh, a thing or two. "Your husband's hungry." Dominic and I have lived off of microwave dinners and takeout for a week. It blew. "We's got some laundry, too." I grimace, glad I threw away all the clothes that Dominic shit himself in. Mostly boxers, though, but I also threw away shirts with vomit. Jesus, detox should be enough to keep people away from growing addicted. But I know I have to keep an eye on Dominic for a while to come. "And tonight..." I nip at her nose, her jaw, her lips. "I want you to show me how much you missed me."

"That can definitely be arranged." She smiles seductively.

"Madonn'." Backing away, I adjust my cock in my tracksuit pants. "I'mma take a shower. Then I want food." With a kiss to her forehead, I add, "Go say hey to Dominic—I can see you're itching to." Then I walk inside, figuring my other kids will detach themselves from Dominic when they're ready, and that's when it's my turn. 'Cause I've missed all of them. It's rare I go a day without seeing them, Elisa being the only exception since she lives in Henderson.

**Dominic's POV**

After a while, Anthony ushers Elisa and Julia back inside the house, and then I have my mom squeezing the shit outta my midsection.

"Please don't scare us like that again, topolino." She starts crying.

I kiss the top of her head and screw my eyes shut. "I'm sorry, Mom," I mumble. "I didn't mean to worry you." It's the truth. I had no idea this was a big deal.

"I know I worry for nothing—" she lifts her head, sniffles, and wipes at her cheeks "—but this is fucking serious!" Now there's fire in her eyes and she waves a fist at me; only, any trace of anger is gone a moment later. "Is it the wine?" she whispers. "And you do love your 7 and 7."
"Um." I squint, considering, then nod slowly. "Yeah...but I'll be careful. I just needed to cool off for a few days. I'm fine." Booze has never been a vice for me.

Ma sighs and hugs me again. "I'm glad to have you home, baby. I love you so much."

I swallow hard. "Love you, too."

"Okay." She does her mom stuff: lets out a breath, checks her makeup, and fluffs her hair. "I'm gonna continue with dinner."

I kinda smile, feeling good right now. "I really do love you, Mom."

"Oh, Dominic." Her bottom lip quivers, but she pulls herself together and smiles. "My precious boy, I love you too." She pats my cheek, then grabs my hand. "Come on. Let's go inside. Wait—" She points to the Twizzler I dropped on the ground when Anthony rammed into me. "Yours?"

I pick it up and stash it in my pocket to throw out later, not in the mood to explain my sudden sweet tooth. Dad told me Alec was the same after he went through detox. He craved sugar.

"Yeah." I clear my throat, looking toward the door. "So, uh..." Now that we're heading inside, the next problem hits me. "Is the kid in there?"

Dad has told me some stuff about her, but it's hard to hear. It's hard to accept that she's...mine. Or whatever.

Mom gives me a flat stare. "You mean Allegra? No, she's with Gabriella. Or did you mean TJ? Yeah, he's inside napping."

Letting out a frustrated breath, I scrub a hand down my face. "You know that's not who I'm talking about."
"Hmm, no, I can't say I know."

"The girl, a'ight?" I say irritable. "Lia?"

"Oooohhh." She bobs her head, fucking with me. "Now I remember. But no. She's not here. She's at your place." That said, she walks inside.

I'm left confused, agitated, and...some other feeling I can't name. "Is that so wise?!" I shout after her, following. "She's what, a year old?"

"Ten months," she calls over her shoulder. "And she's not alone! Fuckin' obviously." The last words are muttered as she disappears into the kitchen.

Right. The roommate. Madonn', parts of my life really suck.

"Anthony Junior, get back here!" I hear my brother yell from the living room. "TJ! Listen to Daddy!"

"Unca Dom! Unca Dom!" TJ comes running out in the foyer, only wearing a diaper and a pajama top. His hair is all messed up from sleep. "Unca Dom!"

"L'ho preso!" I holler to my brother that I've got him as TJ crashes into my leg. "How ya doin', kid?"

He grins up at me as I ruffle his hair. "Hi!"

I chuckle and pick him up, then instantly feel weird, though I don't show it. But as I carry him back to the living room, all I can think is how natural this is, yet I can barely think one single thought about that girl...about Lia...without freaking out or feeling like I need to bolt.

Being an uncle doesn't really come with responsibilities, though. Being a father? Forget about it. I mean, TJ...I'm not even his godfather. Frankie and Elisa are. They're godparents to Allegra, too.
Anthony and Frankie may not be close anymore, but it's not like there's a rift. Job and lack of time have separated them—that's it. Besides, there are few in our family—with our family values—that Anthony would trust with his kids. Frankie happens to be one of the few.

"Daddy!" TJ flails in my arms as we enter the living room. "Unca Dom's hea'!"

Letting him down to the floor, he runs to the couch where my brother and little sister are seated. Elisa's probably in the kitchen helping Mom.

Anthony chuckles and picks up my little nephew. "I know, baby."

With a groan, I sit down in a chair, and I feel like I'm older than Nonno. At the same time, I can't shake feelings of agitation and unease.

**Junior's POV**

"Isabella!" I shout, standing in our closet. Running the towel over my dick and balls, I pick out a pair of briefs, sweatpants, a wife-beater, and a robe that's hanging on the inside of the door. But I don't put any of it on just yet.

I have tonight off to spend some time with my family, watch a few of my shows that Isabella's taped for me, and then eventually push my kids out the door so Daddy can get some action.

*Julia can hide upstairs.*

"What's up, ciccino?" The wife enters the bedroom and then appears in the doorway to the closet.

"This should be." I point to my cock. Grinning, I pull her close and nibble on her ear. "Can you blow me?" I really fucking need it. Plus, it'll give me plenty of time to regroup for later when we're alone.
"Juniuh," she laughs. "Dinner's almost done."

I ignore that and cup her face, staring at her gorgeous face. "God—I missed you." I crash my mouth to hers and let my hands slide down her body, down the soft material of her red dress. It's one of those wrap kind of dresses, so I know if I just untie that shit around her waist, I'll have her naked, not counting bra, panties, and thigh highs. And heels. God, there's an image.

Unfortunately, we don't have time for that right now. Just something quick.

"Come on, bell'uccellino." I drag my teeth over her bottom lip and rub my semi-hard cock against her belly. "Tuo marito ha bisogno di te." I tell her her husband needs her. Palming her big tits, I groan into the kiss, knowing I'm just seconds away from begging.

I don't fucking beg.

"You're impossible," she huffs, then giggles, and there's mirth in her eyes. Breaking the kiss, she gives me a seductive look and drops to her knees. Madonna'. I watch hungrily, my fist to my mouth, as she gets me hard with her hands and mouth. "You just couldn't wait, could you?" She hums.

I shake my head no and thread my fingers through her hair.

She sucks me in...

"Christ," I moan, feeling a week's worth of tension surging to my groin. With those soft, luscious lips, it won't take much to unleash it all. "That fuckin' mouth'a yours..." I grunt and thrust gently, wanting deeper. "So good, so good." I caress her hollowed-out cheeks with my thumbs as she takes all of me.
She hums with her nose buried in my crotch. Then those slurpy, wet noises...

"That's my hummingbird," I chuckle, outta breath, and push forward a bit faster now. She's already given me the green light by moving her hands to my ass. I feel her nails digging into my flesh, making me hiss andfuck her mouth harder.

My dick looks good with lipstick stains on it.

Oh yeah, getting it all in there... "Play with my balls, baby," I groan and let my head fall back. A shudder rips down my spine. The feel of my cock sliding along her tongue... "Cazzo!" As I take her mouth fast and hard, she cups my balls, squeezes gently, and rolls them in her hand. The skin around them tightens, drawing the sac higher up, and my gut tenses. "Almost," I grit out. I start panting and a couple beads of sweat trickle down my chest. "Oh, yeah." Nearly there, I pull out and stroke myself. "Keep that mouth open."

With a sexy smile that dimples her cheeks, she obeys me and suckles the tip whenever I push forward in my hand. It's all slick from her saliva, and hot, and steel-hard, and about to go off.

And when I finally explode, I groan loudly and watch through hooded eyes as my cock releases on her lips and tongue.

Heat presses to the surface of my skin, making me look all flushed and spent.

Letting out a heavy breath, I grab the towel off the floor and wipe my wife's mouth as she swallows, then I towel off my junk, too, before I pull Isabella off the floor. "C'mea', you." I kiss her fiercely, although not deeply, which always makes her giggle. "Stop that." I chuckle. "That's
nasty. I ain't tastin' that shit." Sometimes it can't be helped, but only a woman or a fag would go near that voluntarily.

"Oh, how I love you, my Juniuh." She's amused for some reason. "Take a power nap or something. I'll call you in about fifteen minutes." Then she walks into our bathroom to clean up.

I perv on her as I get dressed, ogling her soft, round ass, and watch her swollen lips in the mirror. She may hide that under lipstick, but I'll know. I'll always know exactly how those cocksucking lips got all puffy.

She winks at me in the mirror and gurgles some mouthwash, to which I laugh and shake my head.

"Think you can kiss me properly now?" she teases after spitting it out. Of course, she's gotta do some more lipstick applying now. Woman can't stand not having her makeup all perfect. Same with her hair.

"You're so fucking cute." I smile and shrug on my blue robe, the terry cloth one Julia gave me for Christmas. "Come here. Lemme feel you up a bit."

**Dominic's POV**

Later, when we're all gathered at the dinner table and Dad's saying grace, it feels weird but not...not wrong. It's just...it hasn't been only us in so long now. Anthony did say he couldn't stay long, and Elisa's gonna drive back out to Henderson soon, but for now it's the immediate family. Mom, Dad, me, and my siblings.

TJ fell asleep again, having woken up from his nap earlier when there was too much shouting.

And as has become common now, Dad's in sweats, a beater, and one of his robes. It's like he won't bother to get dressed when he's home
anymore, which I think is pretty funny. I mean, the man has always been all about suits and running that comb of his through his hair. He's always said, "You gotta make respect look good."

"This looks great, hummingbird." Dad's in a good mood as he piles up lasagna on his plate.

"Um, Mom..." Julia shifts in her seat, eyeing all the food. "Where's the rest?"

"The rest?" Mom checks the table, as if wondering if there's something she's forgotten. I doubt it. There's lasagna, salad, drinks, bread, oil with garlic and herbs to dip the bread in, and marinated artichokes. "What do you mean, hon?"

"Remember?" She looks flustered and irritated at the same time. "I'm a vegetarian now."

My eyebrows shoot up.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot." Mom bites her lip, frowning at the table. Knowing her, she's probably thinking about what she can cook for Julia; meanwhile...is this a joke?

Anthony rolls his eyes. "Piccolina..."

Dad cracks up and slaps the table. "Now, that's funny! That's funny, princess." He pinches her cheek, still chuckling. "That was funny."

Julia flushes with embarrassment and anger. "I wasn't kidding, Daddy. I'm a vegetarian. I don't wanna hurt the animals."

Anthony and I laugh out loud at that. Elisa's pursing her lips to hide her own amusement—she does the lip pursing to show solidarity; I can tell—and Dad cracks up once more.
"It's all right, topolino," Mom comforts. "It's just a phase," she tells Dad.

"Well, here." He takes a piece of lettuce from the salad bowl and drops it on Julia's plate. "That's for you, sweetheart. But if you're so against hurting animals, you probably shouldn't eat all their food." Then he points his fork to Mom and says, "You sit down. She's got salad."

Mom sits down at the other head of the table.

"Dad!" Now Julia's really upset. "I went with Mom to the store earlier; I know there're tofu burgers—"

Dad cuts her off, his humor gone. "You eat what we serve in this house! Mom and Elisa have prepared dinner for us—it's what we'll eat. End'a story!" He scoffs and digs into his food. "Fuckin' kids these days." That's the Dad thing, how he talks to himself. He says he's his own best listener. "When I was a kid—"

"I get it!" Julia shouts. "When you was a kid, you's lucky to eat dirt and you thanked Nonna for it! I get it!"

"No shouting at the dinner table!" Pops shouts.

"I love having all'a youse home," Mom says wryly and fills up her wineglass.

I grin to myself and plate up some lasagna.

~oOo~

After dinner and dessert, Dad, Anthony, and I are sitting outside on the patio smoking, and the women are inside cleaning up. Anthony and I stick to cigarettes, but nowadays Dad always goes for a cigar after a meal.

He's turning into Nonno...
"I should get going," Anthony says distractedly. He's watching TJ through the window, who's being chased around in the living room by Elisa. "I'm late. Again."

Dad hums and takes a puff from his cigar. "You've been working around the clock for the past few months. Time for a short break, tesoro. How did it go in San Diego?"

I almost forgot. Anthony just got home this morning from a trip that'd been postponed by Zio Alec. Anthony was supposed to leave earlier, but there'd been trouble at the border to Mexico. One of his dealers had been busted, and Anthony was sent down there get the goods from another source. I'm not sure—and I don't ask—but I think he was ordered to clip the dude who got caught, too. I've heard Alec say something about someone down there talking too much.

*Snitches end up in ditches.*

"Just an in-and-out." Anthony shrugs and loosens his tie. "And I got too much on my plate to take time off. I'm starting a new housing project in Whitney soon."

That's risky, but my brother knows what he's doing. Las Vegas and Henderson keep getting bigger, but ever since they built the spur route of the I-15, bypassing Whitney, things haven't been great there. Business is slow, and the market is down. However, the land is also cheap, and it's not like Anthony has a lot of expenses.

"What did you do this time?" I ask, tapping my fingers on my thigh. Sitting still isn't really an option anymore.

My brother smirks a little. "We set up a front under a fake name—full credit. It's where all the supplies are coming from. Then cheap labor from Mexico..."
"Good boy." Dad nods in approval. "Still, you should take one weekend off. Take Gabby someplace. Your mother and I will watch TJ and Allegra."

"A'ight. Thanks." Anthony nods slowly. "She's been talking about wanting to visit her mom's family in Philly. And maybe we could hit up AC."

"Atlantic City." Pop snorts. "You need advice on romantic locations. That's where you'll get laid."

"Bring me back some taffy." I smirk.

"I get laid whenever I want." Anthony scowls.

"And you never fail to knock her up," Dad laughs. "Poor girl. She's what, twenty-one? Two kids already. Not even I was that bad."

"There's something wrong wit'chu, Pop." Anthony scoffs. "You keep sayin' you want more grandkids. You've already got three."

I look out over the pool, not comfortable where this convo's going.

Three. It used to be two. Now Lia...

"I love my grandbabies," Dad bitches, "but that doesn't mean I can't feel a little bad for Gabby. But you're right—a few more wouldn't hurt."

"Um, I should probably head home," I say, clearing my throat. I stub out my smoke in the ashtray and bring out a new Twizzler. "Where do I go tomorrow?" I look to Dad since he's my new boss.

"When did Mom say she was coming over?" he asks me.

"Ten." Mom wants to talk to me about the kid. Like...how I should bond with her and shit. I don't fucking know. She's also gonna go over some crap about that broad—Daniela? Whatever. It's getting pretty late now, so I doubt I'll see much of them tonight.
Dad nods. "I have a sit-down at *Stella* tomorrow. We're gonna talk about whatever's going on in Reno." That's good. I wanna know who's stupid enough to think they can screw us over. "Meet me down at the restaurant at four. If I don't have a job for you, you'll be with me for my poker game." He points. "And you suit up for that shit. *Capisce*? We'll be at the Bellagio—I got a suite. So, none of that..." He waves a hand at my jeans and hoodie.

"I get it, I get it." I roll my eyes.

"*Bene,*" he says. "And lose the attitude." He stands up and waves a hand toward the patio door. "I'll walk you out. Your car was delivered here earlier."

"Dad—wait." Anthony jerks his chin. "The fight at the MGM next weekend?"


I nod. "Okay."

~oOo~

I don't know how long I stand in the entryway of my apartment, just looking into my living room.

It doesn't smell like my place—it doesn't *look* like it.

*Mom.*

It's pretty dark, but two small lamps by the windows in the living room are enough to show me that everything's new. The light brown carpet in the living room has obviously been cleaned. The drapes—*fucking drapes,*
**man!**—match the fluffy beige rug under the new coffee table. Everything outta fabric is light, beige... Everything outta wood is dark brown, from whatever tree that would be. Two couches...one three-seat, one two-seat...they're black—no, dark blue. Pillows without purpose—dark red, brown, and dark green, ah, no beige. Guess I spoke too soon. But beige blankets. Picture frames on my walls—those walls aren't white anymore. One is some creamy brown; the rest are beige. Fuckin' beige.

A new entertainment center in that same dark wood. New TV. Potted plants and flowers in the windows. A dark red reading chair with a matching ottoman. Okay, so dark colors...and beige.

It's gonna take some getting used to, but...it does feel kinda homey.

Shrugging outta my leather jacket, I hang it on—huh, those weren't there before. There are a bunch of hooks and knobs on the wall for jackets and whatnot. Even down at knee-level, and I realize that's for the kid's clothes.

I kick off my shoes next, not wanting to get anything dirty—which I never had to worry about before. 'Cause everything was dirty then.

To my right is the kitchen, and everything's new there, too. Of course. There's a theme. Stainless steel counters, black-painted cupboards, a fridge and freezer to match the counters, kitchen appliances in red, a table for six in that glossy black. All right, I can accept that. Nothing girly so far.

After taking a Coke from the fully-stocked fridge, I pad in to the living room and eye the photos on the wall above the biggest couch. And she's there. The kid. In several of the photos. Jesus Christ, my mother works fast.
Setting down the soda on the table behind me, I fold my arms across my chest and return to staring at the pictures. There's one where she's sleeping on her belly, and her diapered butt is all up in the air. My mouth quirks up, then I press my lips together and scowl. Moving on. She's laughing in another photo. She's also pointing at something—perhaps at whomever is taking the photo. *Too much. It's too much.* But it's...I mean, it's those eyes—that's why I can't really look away. How can they be so *fucking* blue? And round. And those chubby cheeks. And hands. And...

I groan and scrub my hands over my face.

*How the hell am I gonna do this?*

"Dominic?"

"Fuck me!" I shout, spinning around. Clutching my heart, I fall down on the couch and stare wide-eyed at the dark form standing in the doorway leading to the bedrooms. *Jesus.* My heart. As I try to calm down, I squint to see better, but the hallway's lit up now, so I can only see the silhouette of the broad I'll be rooming with.

I see short. I see a narrow waist and curvy hips and stellar tits. Long hair. Some nightgown that ends mid-thigh.

"Can you turn on the lights?" I ask.

She flicks on the spotlights in the ceiling, causing me to wince at the sudden brightness. But just as my eyes adjust, she dims it down a little. And fuck me. Does she do anything else besides babysitting? Are there any other, uh, services?

She's younger than I thought. Fuck, she's gotta be *my* age.
"You Daniela?" I jerk my chin at her and check out her legs. Very nice. And that little nightgown is some silky number that would look good on my bedroom floor.

"Who else would I be?" she asks with an Italian accent. There's a brow cocked. "Yes. I am Daniela Cicero. Most people call me Dani." Her voice is fucking sexy—soft and warm, yet she's got cockiness in her tone.

"How old are you?" I tilt my head, still checking her out, and I decide that she's definitely on my list now. Gotta get in that.

"I turn eighteen in a couple days." She juts out her chin, as if expecting an argument about her obviously young age.

So, she's a year younger than I am. Well, not really. I turned eighteen last year, but it was December. Whatever. I'm curious as to why my mom would hire someone who's clearly a hot piece of ass. It will be highly distracting for her son, is all I'm saying.

"And you're good with kids," I state as I get off the couch. I approach slowly, kinda watching her like she's my prey. But that's pretty fucking accurate.

"No. I am terrible with children." She rolls those "r"s, which is goddamn hot. "That's why your mamma hired me to take care of Lia."

"A comedian, huh?" I stop in front of her, more than a head taller than she. "What else are you good at?"

"Many things." She smirks up at me. Could it be lust darkening her beautiful eyes? Let's hope so. "I am very good at making men moan, groan, and ah, come si dice...whimper?"
I chuckle and reach up to twirl a strand of her hair between my fingers. *Soft.* My not-so-soft dick likes. "Whimper? Pretty girly sound, in my opinion."

"I can show you a trick. Would you like that?" she purrs, and I nod and step even closer. "Would you prefer my knee or hand on your balls?" She smiles seductively.

I lick my lips, close enough to smell her. Something...floral. "Hand. Definitely hand," I murmur huskily. Maybe she needs to work on her English a little.

"Ottima scelta, Dominic." She whispers it was a good choice.

I nearly groan at the sound of my name falling from her lips. Just as I'm about to dip down and claim those pouty-looking lips, she slides a hand down my abs and grabs my balls.

Hard.

*Motherfucker!*

Choking on a breath, my eyes bulge out, and the pain fucking cripples me.

"Mistake number one," she hisses, fire in her eyes, "you looked at me like I am another one of your whores. Your sisters have warned me about you."

*Oh, Jesus.* I squeeze my eyes shut and cover her hand with mine, trying to loosen her grip. Doesn't work.

"You'll regret this," I growl.

She does make me whimper. By gripping me harder.

*I'm getting her sexy ass fired tomorrow.*
"Mistake number two—" she closes in and speaks into my ear "—you thought it was more important to hit on me than go see your *bambina*.

Then she releases me and walks down the hall, disappearing into her room.

"*Mannaggia,*" I groan and cup my junk. Yep. She's definitely fired.

Moaning under my breath at the excruciating pain, I think of what a pleasure it'll be to throw her out in the morning. But I've had enough today—too many punches!—so I stumble down the hall and open the door to my own room, only to freeze in the doorway.

*What the fuck?*

It's all yellow and pink and white. But I quickly see the crib. So, this is the kid's room now. There's also a changing table, toy chests, an armoire, and a rocking chair.

I close the door quickly, quietly, and try the last room. *Mine.* Manly. Nothing frilly. I bet Elisa's helped out. There's a queen-sized bed, two nightstands, a double closet, a TV, and a corner with a desk and a chair. Everything's new. It's all gray, black, white, and blue. Dude colors, thank fuck.

Yet, I don't enter. I hesitate in the doorway and glance over at that other door—the one to the kid's room.

Dropping my forehead to the doorframe, I war with myself.

"Fuck," I mutter. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

In the end, I heave a sigh and sneak into her room, not really knowing what the fuck I'm doing. Still, my feet carry me over to her crib.

I stick my hands into the pockets of my jeans.
I watch the sleeping baby.

She's got her butt in the air again.

Even if there's just a faint nightlight in the window, I see that she's wearing pink. Is that how it's gonna be? Is everything gonna turn pink now? Her pacifier's pink, too. With...I lean over to see better...yeah, with a yellow duck on it.

I'm back to that dilemma; had this been Allegra, I wouldn't've hesitated to touch her, or even pick her up, but now? It's fucking scary.

Taking another step, I squat down so I'm eye-level with her face. Her chubby little hand sticks out through the white wooden bars. Despite being asleep, that hand is fisted, and I slowly reach out and brush a finger over it.

I hold my breath as she lets out a sigh-sounding noise and suckles a bit on her pacifier, but she doesn't move.

I exhale.

How can something so small and innocent be so terrifying?

I really have no clue about how this is gonna work out.

*We're here for you,* Mom has said.

*Be a man and do what's right,* Dad has shoved down my throat.

My eyes travel down her little form before settling on her face again.

"So...you're my kid, huh?" I say quietly.
Chapter 5

Translation:

Cucciolina = Little puppy (term of endearment)

Vuol dire che hai le palle, cara = Means you got balls, hon.

Dominic's POV

"What the fuck do you mean, I can't fire her?" I whisper-shout into the phone. With the cordless to my ear, I peer out of my bedroom and hear that Daniela broad and the kid in the living room. Or the kitchen. "She's gotta go, sis." I close the door again and walk over to sit down on my bed. Dad said four o'clock—that I was gonna meet him downstairs at four o'clock; it's only noon, and I'm already losing my mind.

Mom called earlier and said she couldn't make it; she had some shit to take care of with Zia Alice, so I went back to sleep, but now...

"You just can't," Elisa chuckles.

"Ma won't deny me," I say.

She only giggles. "I can't stop thinking about it. She actually grabbed you by the—" Her laughing increases. "She's perfect! Fucking perfect!"

So much for turning to my sister for support...

Then again, Elisa and Julia have supposedly warned Dani about my "behavior." Which makes me come off as a manwhore. And...I'm not, really. A few broads here and there don't make me a whore. It just means I know how to have a good time.

"Are you done?" I ask impatiently and pocket my wallet and car keys in my jeans. It reminds me that my dad still has my nine. I have one more,
but Anthony's hidden it in Pop's office at *Stella*—along with cash and my fake IDs and passport.

Elisa's still amused. "You know, I'm gonna drive Nonno into town soon, and Nonna, Esme, and I are going shopping. Is there any way you can call Mom and Dad later when I can be there? 'Cause I'd love to see their reactions when you tell 'em you wanna fire Dani."

I roll my eyes. "If this is how you support me now, I don't wanna know what you're gonna do when they move to Florida and you've got nothing to do with your time."

See, my sister is the golden child in the family right now, 'cause she's always taking care of our grandparents and Esme. But they're all moving to Boca in a few weeks—something Nonno once said he'd never agree to permanently. A few vacations down there have changed his mind, though.

I'm afraid Elisa's gonna become a pain in my ass, especially if she can't even side with me on this Dani bullshit.

"Oh, haven't you heard?" Elisa mentions innocently. "Mom and Dad hired me to be Stella's new hostess."

Great. Fucking great. "Awesome..." With a groan, I fall back against the bed and wonder if I should move. I adore my sister, but now she'll be right downstairs. Plus, she'll work with Mario, who's the head chef. I can hear Elisa's giggled "Oh, Mario" already. She becomes a little schoolgirl around her boyfriend.

As if that's not enough, Mario lives in the building across the street. That's close as hell, and Elisa will most likely push Dad's limits and ask if she can spend the nights with Mario. To which Dad will laugh and say, "That was funny. It's not gonna happen, but that was funny, angioletto." And Elisa will bitch and play her "I'm twenty-one" card, and Dad will shoot back
with, "I paid for your education, I pay for your car, your clothes, your fucking manicures, I'll pay your salary..."

Even with a job, Elisa won't be able to pay for her princess lifestyle. She's stuck. She has to obey our parents. For now.

"Dee, can I ask you a question?"

"Shoot," I mutter.

I'm fucking bored. And antsy. Gotta get out...

"Are you hiding in your room?"


"You totally are! Mamma mia, just go out there and apologize for trying to get into her pants!"

"Fuck that," I spit out, sitting up again. "And you say it like I'm afraid of her." That couldn't be further from the truth.

"It's either that, or you're afraid to see Lia," she says softly, knowing me too well. "Is that it, Dee?"

Not answering, I look down at my lap.

She sighs. "Look...I'm not even gonna pretend to understand what you're going through, but I do get that you feel pressured." Understatement, sis. "That said, you should pay attention to the one person who isn't demanding a single thing from you—Lia. Start slow. Start with something small. Eventually, you'll grow into the daddy role. And just ignore Dani for now. Maybe you're pissed off, but I know you, little brother. Your ego's just wounded 'cause one girl shot you down. But you and I both know Mom and Dad won't fire her."
"Christ," I mumble. "One psychology class and you're suddenly some shrink?" But I know she's right. And I'm not talking about the Daniela crap—although, I fear she's right there, too. That with Lia, though...start small, slow. It's not like the kid knows who I am.

Yet.

*I'mma ignore that and repeat: start with something small. Now, Dominic. Leave your room and go to Lia."

"Fine!" I grit out, aggravated. "Madonn', you're bossy." I shake my head and stand up, planning to do this without thinking shit through. I'll just chicken out. "I'll talk to you later." Snapping the phone shut, I pull a black t-shirt over my head and walk toward the living room.

It's where I find both Dani and Lia—on one of the couches. The kid is playing with some small stuffed animals that make noises when she squeezes them.

Daniela's still too fucking sexy, even without the sinful nightgown she wore last night. Now she's in some snug cotton pants and an equally snug hoodie.

"Very good, bambina!" Dani praises. "That's the puppy. Can you find the cat now?"

"Pup-up!" The kid claps her hands. "Pup-up!"

Feeling uncomfortable, I clear my throat to alert them to my presence, and I expect Dani to glare at me, but she doesn't. As if she's got two personalities or last night didn't happen, she offers a dimpled smile before turning back to the kid.

"Lia, Daddy is'a here now."
Jesus. That's a hard pill to swallow.

I force a small smile and approach the neighboring couch. "Hey," I say quietly, sitting down.

"Oof, oof!" Lia mimics the sound from the squeeze toy—the puppy—and waves it at me. "Oof, oof!"

"It is her favorite," Dani replies, rolling those "r"s. For being Italian, I've heard that accent too little in my life. "Lia, can you show Daddy the cat now?"

Lia squeezes the puppy again. "Pup-up."

I check my watch, wishing time could go faster.

"This is the cat—the kitten." Dani edges the cat toy closer to Lia. "What does the kitten say?"

"No." Lia shakes her head. She fiddles with the hem of her yellow onesie dress-thing, keeping the puppy close to her. "Oof!"

I snort quietly and lean back.

I guess this is how I'll spend the next few hours—watching Daniela and Lia play with squeeze toys.

"Are you hungry?" Dani bunches her fingers together and looks to me in question, to which I frown, then shrug. She purses her lips and eyes Lia for a bit. "I'll go make'a lunch—you watch Bambina."

There's barely enough time for me to protest before Dani has settled Lia next to me.

"Uh." I stare helplessly as Dani walks outta the living room, leaving me alone with—
"Pup-up!"

I sigh, getting that Dani did this shit on purpose, and shift in my seat a little to face the kid.

_Bitch_. Dani. Not Lia.

"Pup-up?" She tilts her head at me and holds out the toy.

I nod. "Yeah. It's a puppy."

She smiles widely at that, looking all pleased, and then she starts to babble and play with the toy. She mimics the puppy's sounds and walks it down my arm and across my leg, and I...I don't know what to do.

What would I have done if it were Allegra? Probably participate a bit more. Then again, Allegra's only a few months old, so she's easier. All you do is stick a hand in her face, and then she's mesmerized by moving fingers.

Reaching over to the other couch, I grab two other animals—one snake and one bear—and put them between us.

Lia studies them curiously, then looks up to me with those big blue eyes. "Pup-up, oof."

"This is a snake." I hand her the furry animal. "Squeeze it." I do it for her, and I wonder why anyone would give a baby rattlesnake to a kid. "Now you do it."

Lia grabs the snake and squeezes, eventually trying out the noise for herself. That's also around the same time she crawls up onto my lap, like it's a natural thing. But it's not. It causes me to freeze, and the first thought that jumps at me is that I'm gonna hurt her. I don't fucking know why.

"No pup-up." She shakes her head and looks to me in confirmation.
"That's right—no puppy. It's a snake," I say, squeezing the toy once more. Lia mimics it and makes a long "th" sound, unable to say "sss," which I find kinda cute. Well, it's cute until it morphs into a farting sound and I get spit all over me. "Okay, that's enough," I chuckle and return the puppy to her. "I think this is the best one for you." The safest.

"Oof, oof!" She laughs.

While she continues to play and talk in her own language, I sorta just watch her, wondering where the resemblance is. Mom said Lia's a girl version of me when I was little, aside from the eyes, but I don't know.

According to the digging Dad's done, Lia is half-Italian, from me, and from her birthmother, she's part Puerto Rican and part Norwegian. Re-fucking-gardless, she's a cute kid. Li'l chubby with the blue eyes. She doesn't have a lot of hair, but what she's got is dark and curly. And soft. Really damn soft. I trace a couple ringlets with a finger, and Lia giggles, places her hands on her head, and moves away.

"No!" She smiles and shakes her head, flashing two dimples.

"No?" The corners of my mouth slant up. "You don't like people touching your hair?"

She nods, probably having no clue about what I asked. Then she sticks the puppy in my face and tries to sound like it again. And again. And again.

I huff a chuckle. "You're more like a puppy than the puppy is." She babbles some more, and I sigh, nodding. "Uh-huh. Sure." I get it. She likes the fucking puppy. "Cucciolina—that's you." I tug on one of her locks, earning me another giggled "No!"

~oOo~
Dani can cook.

In just half an hour or something, she threw together some leftover lamb stew, rice, a salad, and little baguettes with garlic butter. All of which I’m devouring at the kitchen table right now. While avoiding Dani’s stare.

I can feel it.

She’s feeding Lia, but her eyes are on me.

"What?" I snap eventually. "I got food on my face or somethin’?"

She just smirks a little and focuses on Lia.

Earlier, Dani had announced it was lunch, and at the time, I’d been on my back trying to watch some TV, and Lia had been sitting on my stomach. Apparently that’s some big deal. Jesus Christ.

"There is hope for you yet, Dominic," she says after a while. "You were very sweet in there."

I scratch my eyebrow with my middle finger.

"You are as mature as my youngest brother," she comments dryly. "He is seven—" Her bullshit is cut off by a knock on the door.

I motion for her to be quiet and move toward the hallway, and since I don’t have a piece, I open the small closet there and grab my crowbar.

"Who is it?" I ask, racking my brain. These days, it’s most likely someone in my family, but in the past, I rarely got visitors. My home is private—my personal space; I don’t invite people over. Period.

"It’s the Crocodile Hunter." No, it’s my fucking father.

Returning the crowbar to its place, I open the door and let him in.
Dressed in a tailored suit—a far cry from his recent obsession with bathrobes—he steps inside and runs a comb through his hair. The contrast between the dark brown and the silver is made more pronounced by the gel. "How you doin', piccolo?" He kisses my cheek then grabs my jaw, probably looking to see if I'm high. I smirk wryly, to which he chuckles and gives my cheek a slap. "Bravo ragazzo." Calls me good boy and shit.

"Checkin' up on me?"

"Yeah," he says bluntly. "And Nonno's late. Plus, I wanna see Lia."

I nod awkwardly and look down the hall. "Um, I spoke to Elisa. She's driving Nonno. Come on." I head back to the kitchen with Dad in tow. "You hungry?"

"Always," Dad says, "but we're eating downstairs soon. I like this—your kitchen. Don't forget to thank your mother, maybe buy her something. Ah—you must be Daniela." He reaches out to shake her hand just as she stands up. "My wife and nephew have told me a lot about'chu."

Oh, I bet Nico's been raving about this one. He may love Gina, but he loves to appreciate other women's beauty, too.

"It is an honor to meet you, Mr. Maisano," Dani says politely and does a little head curtsy. "Would you like some coffee, at least?"

"I would. Grazie." Dad sits down next to Lia, and Dani starts clearing the table. "How's my little grandkid?" He grasps Lia's hands and kisses them, making her giggle and bounce in her highchair. "Yeah, all's right now that Nonno's hea'." He grins. "I heard I get to watch you this weekend."

I raise a brow and take my seat. "That's news to me."

Dad nods and leans back in his chair. "Your mother told me this morning."
"I called her," Dani informs me while fiddling with the coffeemaker. "Gina is taking me out for a birthday lunch, and then I have a date."

Really. For some reason, my gut tightens and I become irritated. "I thought your job was taking care of Lia."

Dad gives me a bitchy look; he's about to say something, but Dani beats him to it. "I have my own life, too, Dominic. Don't worry your pretty little head about it."

I glare at her back.

"OH!" Dad busts out laughing. "I like this one." He slaps my shoulder. "And now I realize why your mother hired her."

My glare morphs into a scowl as I face him. "Why's that?"

"She reminds me of someone," he says, picking up Lia. He settles her in his lap and wipes her mouth with her bib before taking that off. "Someone with a brass pair."

"Brass pair?" Dani questions with a curious expression. "I do not know that phrase."

Dad winks at her. "Vuol dire che hai le palle, cara. Don't let my son fuck wit'chu." He wags a finger at her.

I roll my eyes and pull out a Twizzler from my pocket. "Whatever."

Ignoring my dad, I eye Dani as she prepares the coffee, and I can't help but wonder—I mean... "Didn't you just move here?" Like, right after New Year's or something.

"Huh?" She turns to me. "Me? Yes."

I nod and smirk. "And you've already got yourself a date? Fast work."
"Dominic," Dad snaps.

I put on an innocent expression and hold up my palms. "Just sayin'." With a grin to Dani, I bite off a piece of licorice and let my silence speak for itself.

"If I want a boy, I promise I will come to you," Dani says with her own smirk, much to my fury. "In the meantime, I will enjoy a nice dinner with the man who asked me out when I was at the grocery store yesterday."

"Oh, trust me, sweetheart," I chuckle, "I'm all man."

"That's true." Dad nods, looking amused. "I saw his widdle dick when he was in diapers." He wiggles his pinky.

Dani giggles.

"For fuck's sake!" I fume.

His smile turns dark as he faces me. "Or how about a few days ago when you couldn't stop shitti—"

"Enough, Dad," I grit out.

He glares at me, his expression saying everything. I get it. He wants me to wise up, to stop harassing Daniela—and he wants to fucking emasculate me some more.

I stare back, 'cause as much as I respect him, he has no right to come into my home and run my life. Unlike my sister, I pay for everything I own—Mom's redecorating notwithstanding. I make my own money; I decide what to do with my life.

"One day you will realize why I'm doing this," he says quietly before breaking the stare.
I stew in silence for a bit as Dani serves coffee and puts a plate of cookies on the table, and Dad is busy being Nonno.

"Pup-up," Lia says, cupping her cheeks. Cute. "Pup-up?"

Dad looks confused, so I mutter, "I'll get it," and head to the living room. Once there, I grab the furry squeeze toy and return to the kitchen. At that point, Dad is playing protector and asking Dani if Nico and Gina know about the dude she's going out with. No, she answers; they don't know. So, Dad requests a name and phone number.

"Just to be safe," he says. "I'll run a check on him." But what he really wants to say is that girls Dani's age are too young to go out.

Since he's not her fucking father, he can't.

"Here you go, cucciolina." I'm about to hand Lia the puppy, but she raises her arms to be picked up. Dropping my Twizzler on the table, I comply and sit down with her on my lap.

She starts babbling and playing with the toy, occupied for the moment, so I lean back a little and take a sip of my coffee.

"What?" I notice that both Dad and Daniela are staring.

"Nothing," Dani says quickly, only to busy herself filling the dishwasher.

Dad purses his lips, sorta like Elisa did yesterday to hide her amusement when Julia came outta the closet as a fucking vegetarian. "Nothing," he eventually says and goes for his coffee. "About that guy, Daniela?"

"Certamente." Dani grabs a small notepad near the microwave and jots something down. "His name. I have his number in my purse." She walks to the hallway and says, "I appreciate your concern, Mr. Maisano, but he seemed very nice. New to Las Vegas—like me. He said he's, um, an
entrepreneur? Is that the word?" She says something else, something about how fucking nice he is—a few years older than her, blah, blah, blah...but it doesn't matter.

'Cause there's no way she's going out with him.

Dad silently slips me the note with the guy's name and raises a brow at me.

_Emilio Malletta._

"You think it's him?" I ask, keeping my voice low.

It's been years; I was just a little shit, but I obviously remember the Mallettas from Jersey. Our families used to be close, but then there was a rift between Vinny, the old Jersey boss, and Felix. It involved the Chicago Outfit and the New York family. Anyway, Emilio is Vinny's son. And I frown, 'cause...he's not a "few" years older than Dani. He's getting close to thirty, for Christ's sake.

"I had a suspicion before I came here," Dad says, just as quiet. "Carmine, Nico's guy?" I nod. "Yeah, he said he's been hearing Emilio's name for a couple weeks now. Mainly outta Reno."

"Shit," I mutter as Dani reenters the kitchen. Absently letting Lia play with my hand, I study Daniela while she hands over Emilio's number to Dad. He plays the part of a protective adult, just wanting to make sure she goes on a date with a good guy, but now I know better.

"Can you give us some privacy, hon?" Dad looks to Dani.

She nods. "Of course." She turns to me. "Do you want me to take Bambina?"
"Um." I look down at the baby girl who's oblivious to what's going on. "I...yeah, sure." I clear my throat and hand her over.

As soon as they gone, I walk over to the stove and switch on the fan above it. Then I pull out my smokes and lean back against a counter as I light one up. I toss them to Dad once I'm done, and he sparks one up, too.

"You think it's Jersey?" I ask quietly.

He taps his temple. "Makes sense if it is. We don't know yet, but we'll get our answers." He takes a sip of coffee. "If you're smart, you don't invade a country. You move in slowly and take one piece at a time."

I nod slowly, thinking ahead. I hope it means more work for me, 'cause I can already feel myself calming down. With adrenaline surging inside me, I feel centered and focused instead of jumpy. It takes my mind off coke, most importantly.

"They haven't really taken anything, though." I flick some ash into the sink and rub my jaw. "They've messed with shipments and made some things more difficult, but..."

"They got us all on edge." He shrugs. "While we're running around wondering who's fucking things up, they'll move in."

That can't be all there is. "Then why the hell would Emilio announce himself like that?"

"To see how close he can get? If they're cocky enough..." He chuckles darkly. "It'd be like sending a message."

I hum, wondering if there could be something else. I mean, this is Jersey. Since when did they have reason to be cocky? It's a small outfit—maybe not as small as ours, but New York's got them by the balls. Plus, they're
always at war. Aside from being owned by the Misone Family in New York, Jersey's gotta worry about Philly and Boston, too.

"Could they be desperate to branch out?" I ask.

Dad considers it for a bit, then nods pensively. "Could be. And Battaglia's greedier than Vinny ever was."

"That's the new boss in Jersey, right?" We don't hear from Jersey a lot, so it's not like I remember all their names. But I do know Vinny's retired, and he left the big seat to his nephew—his sister's son, I think. Now they're the Battaglia Family.

"Yeah. Phil Battaglia," Dad answers, tapping the lighter against the table. He blows out a breath. "If it is Jersey, we'll have to be prepared for a war." His eyes meet mine. "You ready to get your feet wet?"

I smirk. "My feet are pretty wet already, thank you very much." Last year, Anthony brought me along on one of his trips outta town, and I clipped a motherfucker who was trying to scam Zio Alec. Of course, Dad knows this.

"I meant more than that, baby," he murmurs. "You know how your brother got his button. End up on top in a shitstorm."

Like I could forget. I have a scar from a bullet to go along with the memory that led to his getting off the streets. He became Dad—always in a suit, and I think we were both born with trigger-happy fingers thanks to our father.

The only difference between me and my brother is that I like to get creative. He's all for swiftness—I like to have fun.

"You think there will be a war?" I arch a brow at him. As much as I want to be a made man—and I fucking do—there are girls in my life I feel protective of. Mom, my sisters...and now Lia, I guess. Dani? Eh, maybe
she's my responsibility, anyway. But whatever. It's always easier to take on a fight on somebody else's turf. If the fight comes to you, there's a bigger risk of an innocent getting caught in the crossfire.

"Some shit will go down, that's for sure." He finishes his coffee. "Whether it's attack or cleanup...time will tell. We'll have to bring in New York, too. We have them on our side. Jersey's got a lotta balls to even try."

Yeah, by coming here, Jersey's basically going against New York. We have the Misone Family's protection because some of our money goes into their pockets. It's how it is. The last thing Marcus Misone wants is for Jersey to cut his pay.

I suppose there will be a sit-down first, which will most likely take place in New York—neutral territory.

But that's getting ahead of ourselves...

"What about this Emilio shit?" There's no way Dani can go out with that motherfucker.

"I'm leaving that to you, kid." He slaps the table and stands up, buttoning his suit jacket. "We can only guess he's looking for attention, and we're gonna want a tail on him."

"We're gonna let Daniela go?" I ask incredulously.

He closes the distance and squeezes my shoulder. "How else will we find him?"

Fuck.

"And before then, I want you in Reno," he tells me. "You'll be rolling with Mario and Francis. And here—" He reaches behind him and pulls out a nine, my nine, from his waistband. "Keep an ear out for the Four
"Seasons." He shrugs. "Check with hustlers, fuckin' whores, no matta'. Shouldn't be too hard to get info. You follow?"

"Yes, sir." I nod and tuck my piece into my jeans. "Um—Four Seasons?"

"Jersey Boys." He grins a little. "They talk like men, but can they walk like 'em?"

I stare at him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

His grin is replaced by a scowl. "Eh, fuckin' kids these days." Always talking to himself... "You don't know good music even if it walked up and smacked you in the head." He waves it off and cups my cheek. "No matta'. Reno: if I hear about you doing shit you shouldn't be doing..." I hear the threat—loud and clear. I nod again, not about to fuck up. "Okay. Give Lia a kiss from me. I'll see myself out."

**Junior's POV**

On Friday night, I would rather get comfortable on the couch with the wife and watch some Discovery Channel, but instead I'm in a suit, waiting for Elisa and Mario to come over for dinner.

Julia's having a sleepover with a couple girlfriends, so she's not home.

Seeing my angel is one thing, but I know Mario. He's tried to approach me a few times lately, and I have a feeling he wants to ask for my permission to marry Elisa.

"Why are you pacing so much, *ciccino*?" Isabella asks, bending over to check whatever's in the oven.

I check out her ass and stifle a groan. Instead I lean back against the kitchen island and go with a white lie. "Haven't seen Elisa in a few days. I
miss her." What I'm really waiting for is Dominic's call. He should be home any minute since he's been with Mario, and Mario will be here soon.

For the past two days, Dominic, Francis, and Mario have done their best to confirm our suspicion about Jersey tryin'a move in.

Yesterday, Dominic had nothing on Emilio Malletta, but there's been word of Drasso. And John Drasso happens to be the Jersey mob's underboss. I doubt he's here personally, but he's got brothers. Or neither is here but they've got low-men here. Don't matter.

Tomorrow, Lia's nanny, that Daniela girl, is going to dinner with a fucker she probably doesn't know is as old as he is—who knows what lies he fed her. And we'll see how it plays out. Dominic will follow him after the date and see where he ends up.

Felix will then contact Marcus Misone, ask to broker a sit-down, and we'll hopefully straighten this shit out with Battaglia. 'Cause there's no way he's got Misone's blessing to be out here.

I hope it doesn't go so far that I have to send my wife and daughters on a vacation, but...

Then again, if there'll be a sit-down in New York, there's no reason I can't bring Isabella. Hell, Felix will probably bring Gianna, and all the wives can do whatever while we do business.

"You ever heard of Marcus Misone?" I ask, filling a glass of wine. Isabella stiffens slightly, then looks to me over her shoulder. The knife she's been slicing mozzarella with clanks mutedly against the cutting board.

"Of course." She frowns, probably confused about my bringing up work, which I never fucking do. "You mean, um..." She glances around. "From—from the New York Family?" She whispered that last word—so fucking cute.
"It's safe to talk here, hummingbird," I chuckle.

"Right." If she were twenty years younger, she'd probably blush, even though she's never been a blusher. "So...what about him?"

I bring my glass to my mouth. "What do you know about him?" Growing up, the wife moved a lot, but she spent most of her childhood in Brooklyn. Bensonhurst, to be exact, but it wouldn't surprise me if she was in Bay Ridge, too. And with Isabella's father a connected man, it also wouldn't shock me if she knew about Misone and Cullen.

"Well..." She releases a breath and wipes her hands on her apron. "I know he was a cocky little shit back in the day." She huffs a chuckle. "He ran with, um—his friend, they were always together. Cullen." For some reason, she ducks her head. "They were just kids. Raisin a lotta hell, shaking down pizzerias, taking bets...you know. And Cullen used to drive for, um...what was his name...Sposato? Yeah, Anthony Sposato." I nod, having heard of the man. "I didn't know them personally, but I had a few friends who knew them, and I went to school with one of Misone's early girlfriends. That sort of thing." She looks to me quizzically. "Why?"

"Just wondering." I keep it vague for now. "We might visit."

"Oh? Like...like, I'd go with you?"

I chuckle again and pull her close. "That's right. Anthony, too." With the plans Felix has for my oldest, there's no way he's not bringing Anthony along, too. Then it's up to my son if he's bringing Gabby or sends her on vacation with the kids.

"I'd like that." She smiles up at me.

"Me, too." Looking out the kitchen window, I see Mario's car pulling up and Elisa exiting before he can even reach her door. I give Isabella a quick but hard kiss and say, "Elisa's here now."
And ten minutes later, we're done with greetings; Elisa and Isabella tend to dinner, and I take a glass of scotch and bring it to the living room. Mario follows, of course.

Sitting down in a chair, I unbutton my jacket and eye Mario as he sits down on the couch. He's got a small cut across his jaw and a faint bruise under his right eye.

"Trouble today?" I'm a bit amused by how easily I intimidate this kid. Part of me...I mean, I'm mostly just fucking with him. Since I allowed him to date Elisa, he's been on his best behavior. And before then—hell, he's always been on his best behavior. I rarely see him at the clubs, and never with a bunny.

I'm not saying he's a fucking virgin, but there's no way he's been with another broad while he's been with my girl. I'd kill him—and I'd draw it out. He knows it, too.

Thankfully, he's not loyal because he's scared of me. He loves Elisa. It's easy to tell, but I demand more than love. You can't fucking live off of love.

"Nothing too bad," he says, shifting in his seat. He adjusts his tie; like Dominic, he's not used to dressing up. "Can I speak freely, sir?"

I incline my head and take a sip from my drink.

"We found the two guys who, uh, got in the way...that time when Dominic and Frankie were working."

I nod in understanding, remembering. It was the day we learned about Lia, and Dominic had been doing a job—hijacking a truck full of booze, and there'd been some trouble. Two idiots from Reno—or is that Jersey?—had tried to get away with the robbery.
"I assume my son is all right." I cock a brow.

He nods quickly. "Oh, yeah. Definitely. He just, uh...got carried away? He's fine, though."

I snort a laugh at that. With how fidgety and antsy Dominic's been, I'm sure he indulged in violence to forget the yak.

"And the guys from Reno?"

He smirks but kills it fast, not comfortable around me. "They're appreciating the desert scenery." From six feet under, I bet. "We took my car, so I dropped Dee off—he's home."

"Bene." I've asked Mario to keep an eye on him, so I'm happy to hear that. I've also made sure that Dominic is banned from Twilight and Dawn. "Anything else?"

He nods jerkily and looks over his shoulder—toward the kitchen—and scoots forward in his seat, leaning his elbows on his knees.

This is it. He's gonna ask.

"I, uh..." He clears his throat and wipes his forehead. Straightens. Releases a breath. I withhold a smile. "I want to ask for Elisa's hand in marriage. Sir." I open my mouth to speak, but he's not done. "I love her very much. I will always be loyal to her, and I will take care of her."

I lean back in my seat and cross one leg over the other. Giving it a thought...I'm honestly not doing it to make him squirm. I'm thinking about my daughter here—what she deserves. What she wants. Resting my arms on the armrest, I watch the amber drink swirling slowly in the glass.

Is Elisa ready for marriage? Yeah, I think she is. She says she loves Mario, and she's done being a kid. She's got a college education under her belt,
although she's not using it. But I'm fine with that. She says she's excited to start working at Stella as the new hostess. She's mellowed out a lot over the past few years, and while she's still a spoiled princess, she's also genuine, helpful, giving, and loyal. She's been an angel when it comes to my parents and Esme.

Mario...he's a good kid. In his mid-twenties now, only a few years older than Elisa's twenty-one. He's proved to be an excellent chef—head chef, and he runs my wife's kitchen at Stella flawlessly. He's also a good soldier. Like Dominic, he's coming up in rank fast, and I know Felix will give Mario his button when he decides to initiate Dominic.

All that aside...

"No," I answer.

My daughter deserves a husband who can give her a house, not an apartment near Stella, and she deserves a husband who's off the streets. Also like my son, Mario is a risk-taker. Fuck it; they're both like me—like I was at that age.

"No?" Mario tries to hide his disappointment.

"That's right." I take a swig from my drink, then add, "You're a good kid, Mario. Just not good enough yet. Come back to me when you can buy her a nice house—not far from here—and when you're off the streets."

"I have money saved up—"

"Good." I stand up. "Then it won't be long until we have this discussion again. But for now? We're done." I motion for the dining room. "Time for dinner."
Chapter 6

Translation:

Scordatelo = Forget it.

Dominic's POV

"Come on, Dominic." Dani knocks again.

*Woman, you're killing my morning wood.*

"Go away!" I groan into my pillow. Pulling the covers over my head, I try to drown out Dani's knocking and Lia's giggling. It's Saturday—let me fucking rest. Let me sleep in.

After only a few days, I've realized it's hard to say no to Lia; she's fucking cute, but right now, I need to sleep. Without chemicals in my system to keep me alert, I'll get cuntly too goddamn fast, though I really don't give a shit about it.

I have more mood swings than my mother and sisters, for fuck's sake. But people will just hafta deal.

"Lia wants to say hi to Daddy," Dani chuckles on the other side of the door. "Don't you, bambina? You want to say hi to Daddy?"

"Hi!" Lia shouts. "Hi, hi, hi!"

I curse under my breath, surrendering too easily. Dragging my ass outta bed, I pull on a pair of gray sweats, unlock the door, then flop down on the mattress again. But no matter how ready I am to blow a fucking fuse, it's kinda hard not to dig the image. Lying on my stomach, I crack one eye open as Dani walks in with Lia. The kid can't walk on her own, but she can when Dani holds her hands. She's all wobbly and careless and cute.
I might lose my balls if I use the word cute one more time...

"What time is it?" I ask in my morning voice.

Dani checks the clock on my TV in the corner and says, "Nearly eleven."

I close my eyes again and feel the bed dip as she lets Lia crawl over to me.

"Happy birthday, by the way," I yawn. *Someone's eighteen today.*

"Grazie," Dani says. "I'll be back with the first-aid kit. Watch her."

"Hi," Lia sings.

"You don't have to do that!" I call after Dani, but she's already gone. With a sigh, I roll to my side and grin sleepily at Lia. "How you doin', kid?"

She's holding that friggin' puppy toy of hers, squeezing it for all she's worth. "Why are your cheeks all pink?" I touch one, and she giggles and pulls away. "You've been outside already?" She's only wearing a onesie, a pink one—whatta surprise—but her skin's a little cold, so maybe Dani's just changed her clothes after being out.

Around New Year's, we had a small heat wave rolling in, but lately it's been pretty cold.

"You really fucking like that toy."

She babbles and shakes her head.

When Dani comes back, she rounds the bed and sits down behind me as if she owns the place. There's nothing timid about her whatsoever.

She cooks, cleans, and takes care of Lia like an expert—the way only a woman can—but she's not as demure as one. She doesn't cower away
when I get moody, and she doesn't hold grudges, either. She moves on, end of story.

"You don't have to do that," I repeat, even though I do want her hands on me. But it feels weird having her care for me. It's not her job.

Last night when I got back from another day in Reno, she'd taken charge of everything. She'd tended to my cuts and bruises.

It's really nothing, though. This one guy...he knew his minutes were numbered. We'd taken him and his friend out to the desert to finish 'em off, and he'd just dug his own grave—literally. And in a final attempt to get free, he attacked me. Like a bitch on her period, he clawed at my back, and he managed to get one kick in my gut before I hauled him off me.

After that, I made his death painful.

I hiss as Dani swipes a cotton ball with peroxide over my shoulder blades.

"Is my ink okay?" I ask, having not thought about it before now. But if that motherfucker clawed deep enough to ruin my tattoo, I just might drive out to the desert and spit on his grave.

"It is fine," she says softly, and I shiver when her fingers trace my last name on my upper back.

Safe to say, my mom was not amused when she saw it. It was last year—I think it's cool, but my parents don't appreciate body art. Whatever. I like it. My brother thought it was cool, too.

"Fuck," I grit out. The pleasure of her fingers has been replaced with more pain. "That shit stings."

"You big baby," she laughs. "Take it like a man."
That's fucking it.

Furious, I turn around and push Dani down against the mattress, pinning her with my body.

"I think I've had it with your little quips," I whisper in her ear as I grab her jaw. "A bit more goading and I'll show you just how much of a man I am." Self-disgust rolls through me as I actually get turned on. That shit's just not right. "Sono stato chiaro, Daniela?" I ask if I've made myself clear.

She sucks in a breath when I face her, and I don't even know how crazed I look—yet, I'm in full control.

"Yes," she breathes out, eyes widening. They also darken, and she licks her lips. "I understand."

I frown, wondering if I'm reading shit wrong. Her chest heaves rapidly, but instead of being completely stiff under me, she's...I don't know, almost relaxed. And fuck, her soft body feels amazing against mine.

Lia's cooing and babbling clears the haze a little, but I don't move just yet.

"Finish fixing me up," I murmur, brushing my thumb over Dani's bottom lip. "Can you do that?"

She nods, looking oddly content.

Shouldn't she be screaming and running for the hills?

"Thank you." I wanna kiss those pouty lips, but I don't. Instead I move off her and return to my previous position so she can patch up the cuts on my back. "C'mea', cucciolina." I pull Lia close to me, wanting her to be my distraction as Dani swipes more alcohol over my skin.
"Hi, pup-up," Lia says.

"Hey," I chuckle. "But I'm not pup-up."

*I'm someone else.*

Being someone's father is one thing; I've come to grips with that—sorta. But being someone's daddy? It's different. It's an active role. And I...I have no clue how to get ready—or if you just take the plunge.

"Can you say Daddy, Lia?" Dani asks.

I tense up, though I try not to show it. But I'm pretty sure Dani sees it in my back and shoulders.

"Don't push her," I say quietly.

Dani gives my shoulder a squeeze, as if in comfort. "It is not about pushing. It is just a word she hasn't really heard before now."

I sigh and reach up to poke Lia's nose.

"No!" she giggles.

"Yeah," I chuckle, "it's my nose." Leaning close, I pretend to bite it, to which she lets out squeals of laughter. "Christ, you're fucking cute." I kiss her forehead, only to wince when Dani cleans a particularly sore spot.

"Sorry," she says quickly, "I am almost done."

"It's all right," I mumble.

This is new, ain't it? I mean, usually if I have two girls in bed, it doesn't look like this. But this...fuck, a guy could get used to this.

~oOo~
"You look like someone shot your puppy." I slide into the booth, Frankie already seated across from me. And fucking puppy—like I need more reminders of Lia... I laugh under my breath and focus on Frankie again, who really does look like shit.

My dear dad has banned me from Twilight and Dawn, so we're meeting up at a diner.

He shrugs and eyes the menu.

Tugging down the hood of my sweatshirt, I run a hand through my hair and bring out my smokes. Just as I light one up, a waitress appears, looking annoyed.

"Excuse me, but you can only smoke in the designated area." She points farther down the diner. "This is a family restaurant."

"It's a ratty fucking diner," I laugh and face Frankie. "You had to pick this place? Really?"

"It's close to my apartment," he defends. But I bet my dad's told him to avoid bars when I'm around. "And we eat for free." Which means probably Nico is a li'l guilty of racketeering.

"Sir." The waitress taps her foot impatiently.

I wave her off. "Piss off, sweetheart. I'm in no mood for that shit right now."

"Well, now I ain't eatin' here," Frankie mutters. "She'll spit in our food." He turns to the waitress and points to the coffee by the register. "Get us some coffee, hon. And I'm keeping my eyes on you."

"I think you should leave before I call the—"

Frankie cuts her off. "Do that and you'll have an issue with Alec Maisano."
"It's my uncle's place?" I ask. "Huh." I didn't think that was his thing. Then again, anything to make a buck...

The waitress stomps off with a huff, and I declare her old news and refocus on Frankie.

"So, what's up?" I jerk my chin.

He called me earlier, said he wanted to talk, and since I was bored and Dani brought Lia to her birthday lunch with Gina, I didn't hesitate to leave my place.

He sighs and steals one of my smokes. "I think my dad's on to me."

Mannaggia. That can only mean one thing, and if Felix finds out... I wince.

"How would he know?"

Frankie's always been discreet—aside from one time. That's how I found out, and he's lucky I don't give a flying fuck.

There's only one person he's told voluntarily, and that's Elisa.

"After Reno yesterday, I was followed," he replies quietly. "I was on my way to Casey. I shook the tail, but then I went home anyway."

"Damn." I blow out a ring of smoke. "Probably smart you didn't go to Casey, though." I keep my mouth shut as the waitress returns with our coffee, but once she's gone, I ask, "You don't think it's possible it's Jersey?"

He shakes his head and stirs sugar into his coffee. "Pretty sure it was Louie." One of Felix's drivers; Lou's usually the one driving Gianna around.

"So..." I hesitate. "What're you gonna do?"
Truth is, I don't really like talking about this. I'd fuck someone up for wagging a finger in my face—don't get me started on what I'd do if that finger was elsewhere. But...to each his own? I know the facts; don't need the details.

Back in '93, Clinton signed that bill or whatever—the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" for the military. I'm like that. If Frankie wans'ta be with a dude, that's his choice; just keep me out of it. He's my brother, anyway.

However, we have parents who were brought up differently. Not that my upbringing encouraged anything like that, but the world has changed. My parents are stuck in the '50s, especially Dad.

Even if Frankie's my mom and dad's godson, they'd treat him like a stranger if they found out he likes both men and women. Well...I'm not sure about Mom, but Dad? Forget about it. And Felix would...I don't even know.

"What choice do I have?" Frankie chuckles, but there's defeat in his tone, and he looks haunted. "Once all this with Jersey blows over, I'll break it off with Casey, and then I'll..." A one-shouldered shrug. "I'll get a wife, a few kids, a house—isn't that what we all do?"

"Is that so bad, though?" I whisper, leaning forward. "You like chicks too, right?"


"A'ight." I nod, uncomfortable, and lean back again.

I wish I had some advice, but I really don't. He's my best friend—him and Elisa—and I'll stand by them no matter what, but I'm at a loss here. There's really nothing that can be done. Unless he skips town and starts a life someplace else. It's all about pros and cons, I guess.
I'm not judging our parents without thinking about it, either. It's just facts. Our dads...come on. We're talking old-school gangsters, Catholics, and traditionalists. The latter is my choice of word; my sister would go as far as to say "chauvinistic bastards." But it's how we grew up, and regardless of how independent Elisa sees herself, she still dreams of being Mario's little housewife and soaks up every piece of advice Mom gives her.

Shit, my own problems are fucking ridiculous in comparison to Frankie's.

I don't envy him.

~oOo~

By the time I get home, Mom is there to pick up Lia.

Dani's getting ready for her date. I fucking sneer at that word.

I'm not stupid. I know it's jealousy that tightens my gut.

"Hi, baby," Mom whispers as I enter the living room.

I raise a brow, but then I see Lia napping on the couch next to her, so I get the quiet greeting. "How are you, Ma?" I dip down and kiss her cheek.

"Very good. Sit next to Mommy." She scoots over and barely makes room for me. It'd be better if we were on the bigger couch. "Dani's in the bathroom. She told me about how sweet you've been with Lia." She squeals silently behind her hand before she hugs the shit outta my bicep. "I'm so proud of you, topolino."

"Stop making a big deal out of it." I smile even though I'm frustrated—and slightly embarrassed. I don't know why. I just wish people would let it go. "What're you doing?" I point to the Nokia 5190 on her lap.

It's the same one I have. Anthony hooked us up.
"Oh." She grins sheepishly. "You know how your father gets. He doesn't want cell phones in the house, so I keep it in my car and use it when he's not around." She looks a little proud, like she's done something sneaky and feels cool. My mom can be fucking funny sometimes. "And look—I bought a new faceplate." Yeah, it's red now. "Did you know you could change it? Technology today..." She marvels.

"I see you're playing Snake," I chuckle, eyeing the paused game. The snake is about to hit a wall. "Want me to help you out?"

"Would you?" She hands me the phone. "I panicked, so I pressed pause."

While I get her out of that mess, she goes from watching me like a dude watches a football game—as in, not silently or without gestures—to caressing Lia's cheeks, hair, and hands. Mom coos about how cute she is one second, only to whisper-shout, "Don't kill my snake!" the next. In the end, I have a new record for her.

She actually does a little fist-pump, and she says, "I'm the fucking queen of Snake!" Then she clamps a hand over her mouth, still all gleeful and proud. "Oops. Got a little excited there."

I laugh through my nose. "Definitely the queen, Ma." Draping an arm around her shoulders, I kiss her temple. And that's the moment Dani chooses to appear. *Mother of Christ.* Well, at least she's not dressed like she's begging for a fuck, but it's still provocative. It's a black dress, and while there's no obscene cleavage, it's fairly short, and fuck me, I want those legs wrapped around me as I pound into—

"Oh, that's gorgeous, Dani!" my mom gushes. "Your date is going to love it. You never told me, by the way—what's his name? Where did you meet him—"
"Uh, Mom," I interrupt her, knowing she can't hear Emilio Malletta without raising brows, suspicion, and voice. "You should probably head home, right? I'm sure Dad and Julia are waiting."

Correction: Dad's probably watching the stove at home, wondering if food will magically appear, and Julia's most likely on the phone with her friends.

"You're right, baby." She pats my hand and begins to stand up.

While she fusses over a sleeping Lia, I walk over to Dani.

"Where are you going tonight?" I purposely take a step closer to get in her personal space. There's just something about her that makes me wanna cross lines. I wanna push her—against a wall, out of her comfort zone...

She's not the cocky broad when I loom over her. Still self-assured and confident, but...demure? She also comes off as more tame and eager to please. At the same time, I feel beastly and territorial—so different from the first night when I just wanted fuck the shit out of her. Once.

"The Château?" She mentions a restaurant not far from here. "I won't be late. Um." She fidgets with her purse, and if I'm not mistaken, she seems like she wants to say something more. She's hesitating. Stalling.

"Well..." I run my knuckles down her arm, eliciting a shiver from her.

"Have fun."

*I'll be watching you.*

"Thank you." The light in her eyes dims slightly, as if she's disappointed. That sends a thrill through me, but I also get curious about her game. She's been polite but only like a friend. Unless we're talking about what happened earlier today, and I can't really get that outta my head.
I don't know what's changed, but something has.

~oOo~

After picking up Dani downstairs, Emilio drives them to a French restaurant, and they're both oblivious to me.

Emilio glances around as he ushers her into the restaurant, but I'm safe in Mikey's car—one of the waiters at Stella; I asked to borrow his in case Emilio already knew what mine looked like. And I'm pretty sure that Emilio's looking for attention, 'cause he and Dani get a table by a window.

*What wiseguy is stupid enough to do that?*

Bringing out a Twizzler, I get comfortable for a few hours of surveillance. My mind wanders, which isn't always a good thing, but in this matter I'm fucking dying to know. What made Emilio pick Daniela? She's only been in Vegas less than two weeks, and if that motherfucker wanted a real reaction, he could've gone with others.

*Oh yeah? Who?*

I frown.

Elisa's taken, Julia's too young, Gabriella's married, Lucia lives in LA, Felix's daughter—Valentina—lives in St. Louis with her husband...

All right. Never mind.

Eventually I grow bored, so I start text messaging with my brother, although I keep an eye on Dani and Doucheface. Judging by Dani's posture, she's there for dinner, nothing else. Emilio, on the other hand...fuckin' creep. He's leaning on the table, whereas Daniela sits back. He reaches over every now and then to brush hair away from her face or caress her arm.
I grit my teeth.

It puts me on edge like nothing else, and all I want to do is march in there and smash his motherfucking face in.

~oOo~

After a too-long dinner, Emilio takes Dani for ice cream on the Strip, and I grow uneasy when I see a car with Jersey plates parked nearby where Emilio and Dani are currently walking.

Every now and then, the car moves forward, only to idle until the couple has walked farther ahead.

Not only that, but Dani has started looking uncomfortable.

"Call it a fucking night already," I mutter.

A while later, it seems like Emilio and Dani are heading back to his car, and I pick that moment to call my dad's private line in his home office. From the first ring, I mentally count how long it takes him to bitch and whine about being interrupted, and then how he hauls his ass off the couch, probably pausing whatever show on the Discovery Channel he's recorded on the VCR, and stomp into his office—

"Edward Maisano," he barks out.

I grin. "Sorry to disturb your love affair with the Crocodile Hunter, Dad."

"For your information, it's a documentary about dinosaurs," he snaps.

"What do you want?"

I clear my throat and squint toward the parking space where Emilio's car is. "I've got my eye on more than one tourist," I say, speaking in code. "One is having a good time, and the other seems to checking things out."
"Call Anthony," he advises. "You're not allowed to have fun if it comes to that."

Yeah, because I'm not a made man. Anthony is. And while we don't know Emilio's status, it's safe to assume he has his button, at least. That means he's untouchable for me, a low-man—sorta, anyway. I have my own limits, but Dad's all about respecting the rules. Especially if there'll be a sit-down with New York.

"How's the company faring with the tourists?"

"Ready to go home," I grumble. Dani is definitely ready to end the date. I can tell.

"Call your brother," he says again. "And be safe, for fuck's sake."

He ends the call.

As Emilio and Dani get in the car, I follow and call Anthony on the way. I explain—in code—that Emilio's got a babysitter, that I might need his help, and to meet me near my place.

Pulling out my last Twizzler, I stick one end in my mouth and maneuver through the night traffic. I don't fucking like having the Jersey car behind me, but if Stella's the next stop, then that fucker won't park too close. Too many of our associates in there.

Turns out I'm right. Emilio makes a turn into the small parking space behind Stella; I keep driving 'til I reach the next turn, and the Jersey car continues forward. He might turn around, but he won't go too near the restaurant.

I leave Mikey's car behind at a residents' parking lot, and I jump the fence that takes me to the dark alley behind Stella. There's a steel pipe on the
ground next to a Dumpster, so I pick that up—just in case—'cause I don't have a silencer on my nine. I also have a knife...

Sticking close to the wall, I near the corner and listen as Emilio walks Dani to...the door, I assume. I can hear their shoes against the asphalt and quiet talking.

"Did I mention you look very pretty tonight?" I hear Emilio say.

I roll my eyes.

_You're gonna have to do better than that, needledick._

Daniela Cicero isn't pretty. She's fucking irresistible.

"You did," Dani answers softly. "So, this is me." She's come to a stop, so I suppose she's at the door. "Thank you for tonight."

There's some shuffling; I grind my teeth together, pretty sure Emilio's trying to make his move.

"It was my pleasure," Emilio murmurs. "Is your roommate—what was his name, Dominic Maisano? Is he home?"

Well, if any blue-eyed idiot thought Emilio was here with good intentions, that oughta do it.

"Um, I think he is home," Dani replies, sounding oddly frustrated. "His car is right over there." Oh, but annoyed or frustrated she sounds even sexier. Those rolling fucking "r"s do it for me. Big time. "You have asked many questions about Dominic's family this evening. Do you know them?"

_Many questions, huh?_
Emilio laughs. "No, pretty girl. I'm just curious." Go fuck your mutha'. "Do you know what I'm curious about now?" I peek around the corner just as he cups her cheek.

"Don't you fucking dare," I whisper under my breath.

Fury straightens my spine, and my shoulders tense up with rage.

"I am sorry, but I don't think—" Dani's cut off when Emilio tries to kiss her, though she turns so he gets her cheek. "Thank you, Emilio, but I would like to end our date here."

There's my good girl.

"Oh, come on." Emilio chuckles and pushes Dani up against a wall, causing me to go completely rigid. "You won't even invite me upstairs—to meet your roommate?"

Soundlessly placing the steel pipe on the ground, I decide to give him ten seconds to let her go before I intervene. I grab my switchblade from my pocket and eject the blade with a push of a small button on the handle.

"Stop it!" Dani says forcefully, and she shoves at him. I tighten the grip on my knife and keep watching them around the corner. "I will scream." She tries to knee him in the junk, but he traps her.

"Do that," he laughs, looking up toward the second floor where I live. "I don't mind some screaming." But before she can scream, he puts his hands on her throat. I see red. "However, you should thank me properly for the date first."

With one hand half-choking her, he uses his free hand to bunch up her dress.

And I figure...time's up, motherfucker.
If Emilio doesn't play by the rules, there's no way I'm gonna play nice, either. Button or no fucking button.

Approaching swiftly and silently, I come up behind Emilio and place my knife to his throat. He stiffens. I have a few inches on him, but he's wider. Both in muscle and fat.

"You like your hands around her throat?" I barely recognize my own voice. It's quiet, soft, eerie, yet steely. It takes me a second to realize I've heard my father talk like this. And Anthony. "Let's see how you like my knife to yours." To expose his throat more, I palm his forehead with my free hand and yank back. "Long time, no see, Malletta."

He laughs shakily and raises his hands in surrender. "How you doin', son?"

"Son?" I laugh. "If you want, I can son you all the way back to Jersey."

No wonder they're desperate to leave home, what with Jersey being a state-sized fuckin' Dumpster and all.

"Dani," I say, snapping her outta her frozen state. She sucks in a breath and nods jerkily. Her gaze seems clearer, like she's back to the present. "Do me a favor, sweetheart, and check him for guns."

She nods again and springs to action with shaky fingers.

"You know I'm not alone, right?" Emilio grits out.

I eye the nine Dani drops to the ground, followed by a boot knife. "What makes you think I am?" I ask absently. If Emilio had plans to go further with Dani, it's safe to assume his goon isn't waiting for a specific time to roll up. It's gotta be some other signal.

Dani pats him down thoroughly; if I didn't know better, I'd say she's done it before. Three weapons, a set of car keys, and one cell phone end up on
the gravel path near the door. Then she nods at me, silently saying she's done, and I tell her to fetch the pipe for me.

When she returns, I grab the pipe and shove Emilio away from me. He falls on his ass and checks his throat for blood.

"You shoulda' just killed me," he growls, getting to his feet.

I smile. Planning to do just that. "Without having a little fun first?" I widen my arms, and his gaze catches on the steel pipe.

I've pocketed my switchblade. For now.

I stand between him and the exit; he has to pass me, which he won't.

"Dani, take his shit and go upstairs," I say without taking my eyes off Emilio. "I'll be there soon."

"Scordatelo," she spits out behind me. "I want to see him get what he deserves."

Madonn'.

I guess she's no weakling. "It's not gonna be pretty."

"Good," she says.

I chuckle, digging a broad with a backbone—to some extent.

Emilio glares at me. "You don't wanna kill me, Maisano. It'll be your funeral, too."

I grin sinisterly and begin walking toward him. It gives my body a rush I love—one very similar to what coke would've given me. It's fulfilling, and I feel like a motherfucking king.

"What're you doin' in Vegas?" I ask.
"None'a your fuckin' business," he spits out. He clenches his fists at his sides.

"Now, that's a load'a shit," I laugh. "This is definitely my business."

Sensing that he's running outta time, he takes a couple steps backward and tries to come off as cocky and arrogant.

"You should let the big boys handle this instead," he says. "Why don't you run along and—"

"Why don't you shut the fuck up?" I can't believe this, but he's fucking boring. "Listening to you is worse than counting sheep. You fat fuck."

Pissed at him for ruining my buzz, I close in on him a bit faster—

And the instant he eyes his car and decides to make a run for it, relief floods me; maybe this won't suck ass, after all. Adrenaline surges through me once more. *Fuck, yes.* I swing the pipe and throw it at him, one end hitting the side of his face and the other down his ribs.

"You piece'a shit!" he shouts. Murderous rage darkens his eyes, and he's given up on the idea of escaping. He charges toward me, blood oozing down from a cut on his eyebrow, and I smirk, more than ready for him.

"The first one's free." I point to my cheek while the knife in my pocket burns with its reminder.

"Dominic!" Dani exclaims, sounding scandalized. "What are you—"

She doesn't get to finish, 'cause Emilio rams into me, sending us both to the ground, and he delivers a hard punch to my gut. All air leaves my lungs in a quick, painful groan.
Next he grabs me by my throat, cutting off my airways, and speaks quietly in my ear. "As soon as I've broken every bone in your body, I'll let you watch when I fuck Daniela's tight pussy."

Squeezing my eyes shut and gnashing my teeth together to keep from screaming out in pain, I bide my time, knowing he's back to genuine arrogance. He'll make a mistake soon. That's one thing to count on with fucking idiots. They'll screw up.

Blinding pain shoots through me as his fist connects and splits my bottom lip, but it's his last blow.

It's an odd feeling—this icy calm washing over me, combined with a slice of hysteria.

When he goes to punch me again, I roll away enough to dodge his fist; that way, he punches the ground instead, and I love the sound of knuckles crunching on asphalt. Then I'm back, and I let my elbow snap up, cracking his nose. He cries out and cups his nose; he also backs away, which gives me room. Room to send him flying with my boot to his chest.

I jump to my feet. "Only the first one was free, you greedy muthafucka'."

"Use your fucking gun, Dominic!" Dani snarls at me. "I can see it right there!"

_Hot. As. Fuck._

"Nah." I chuckle through a cough and wipe my thumb over the bloodied cut on my lip. "We don't wanna attract a crowd." And my stupid ass forgot the silencer. Pulling down my hoodie to cover the gun stuck down the waistband of my jeans, I come at Emilio again and kick him before he can get up. He'll never get up again. He grunts and groans, but I've barely gotten started.
All I see is him, his bloodied face, as I hit him repeatedly. My body's shaking, and I know there's a shitload of pain somewhere, but I can't feel a thing. What I do feel is more and more fury exploding inside me, and the memory of Emilio's hands on Dani's throat only makes it worse.

I kick him, not stopping until I hear the satisfying sound of his ribs breaking under my boot.

I spit on him, calling him a sad excuse for a man of honor.

I stomp my boot down on his crotch, sending him into a fetal position.

Emilio makes a strangled sound, his eyes swollen shut, blood everywhere...and I look down at him, my chest heaving, my hands balled into tight, roughed-up fists.

_He's still breathing._

Pulling out my knife, I eject the blade and squat down next to him. The edges of my vision are blurry, but everything else is crystal clear—as is this bastard's death.

"Have I beaten you too much, or are you just too proud to beg for your life?" I ask quietly, sliding the blade along his cheek. With just a bit of pressure, I slice through the skin, and he chokes out a cry in pain. "Not too proud to cry, I take it." I grin, feeling wild and crazed. Then I lean down to speak in his ear. "Not your best day, is it, son?"

That said, I stab him in the chest.

"I think that's enough, little brother." Anthony's voice filters through my haze.

Next I feel his hand on my shoulder, and I let him pull me back. Every movement is robotic, as if...I don't even know. I feel ready to explode.
Like...one wrong move and I'll snap. But until that moment, I'm deadly calm.

One glance at my brother and I almost do a double take; it's him, but his stance belongs to our dad. Calm and collected—and in a fucking suit.

"I took care of his friend outside," he mentions, giving Emilio a dismissive glance before pulling out his gun. With a silencer on it. He aims it, as much emotion in his eyes as if he were squishing a bug, and pulls the trigger.

My gaze catches on the slowly growing pool of blood by Emilio's head.

Fuck, yeah.

Then my brother blocks my view. "You okay?" He cups my cheek and studies me. I nod jerkily, but that's about it. He frowns, then focuses on something over my shoulder—Dani, I guess. He asks if she's okay, too, and I hear her quiet yes. "You can go upstairs, hon," he says then.

"Dominic will join you in a few—" He cuts himself off when he notices how I stiffen. She can't leave. There's just no way. I grit my teeth and clench my fists. "Never mind," he says tightly, studying me again. "Daniela, stay where you are."

I swallow against the scream lodged in my throat; I can't form a fucking sound. If I did...

"Is something wrong with him?" There's worry in Dani's voice.

Anthony sighs. "If you go, he will chase you." Yep. Sounds about right. Just don't ask me why. "You're not fucking okay, Dee," he whispers to me. "Look, I gotta deal with the body, and I don't feel comfortable leaving you alone with her—"
"I'm fine." I force out the quiet words through clenched teeth. "I just—" I close my eyes and shudder. "I need to c-calm down." But I don't know how. "Just gimme a few minutes."

My brother doesn't believe me, but he's shit outta luck. He said it—he has to deal with Emilio, 'cause there's no way I can do it for him. Not right now. I would just do something stupid, like throw his Jersey-stinkin' corpse on the roof of my car and parade him up and down the Strip.

"Regulate your fucking breathing and take a smoke while I get my car," he says irritably and throws me a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Then he starts walking toward the alley between my building and the next, but not before grabbing the shit Dani took from Emilio earlier.

Flicking the lighter, I cup my hand around the flame and spark up my smoke. It fizzles slightly as I pull a deep drag from it. My fingers tremble, and I notice how swollen my knuckles are, not to mention covered in blood.

*Deep breaths, Maisano.*

"Are you all right, Dominic?" Daniela walks closer, and I turn to face her slowly. *Madonn'.* I half-expected her to look afraid, but she doesn't. Instead she's got barely-contained...*something*...in her eyes, something I recognize. It's the same savageness I feel. Her eyes fucking sparkle, revealing a glimpse of an inner fucking freak.

*I would know.*

"Yeah," I mutter, bringing my shaking hand to my lips to take another pull from the smoke. "You?"

In my periphery, Anthony's car drives in, and he rolls down his window to ask where Emilio's car is. I point to the Toyota at the end of the lot, and my brother nods. I shift my gaze back to Daniela and wait for her answer.
"Perfectly fine," she says with a tight-lipped smile. *Lying.* She hugs herself, but I see it so clearly; it's not a defensive gesture or outta fear. She's fighting for control.

We both watch as Anthony hauls a body from the trunk of his car to Emilio's—Jersey boy's buddy. And Emilio gets the same treatment.

"I've called Mario," he tells me. "He's on his way."

"Look, I-I can help," I grit out, hating the words. I don't want to leave; I don't know if I physically *can* leave, but... No, a quick glance at Dani gives me the answer—I can't go. Letting out a frustrated sound, I run a hand through my hair and tug at the ends. "Fuck!" I need to smash something. Get rid of all this adrenaline—

"Relax and just stay where you are, bro." With a grunt, he shoves Emilio's body into the trunk. "I'm nearly done here, anyway. I'll show these fuckers the desert, and Mario's gonna hose down the lot." He eyes the area where Emilio's blood is splattered on the ground.

~oOo~

It takes me two smokes to convince my brother that I'm clear-headed enough to be left alone—and alone with a girl—before he steps off. Which means I'm a better actor than I thought. 'Cause as Dani and I enter my apartment, nothing has changed. 'Cause as Dani and I enter my apartment, nothing has changed.

I'm wound up tight, still waiting for that wrong move to set me off.

In the harsh brightness of my hallway, I let my eyes adjust as I kick off my construction boots. I move automatically, getting a black garbage bag for my boots, my hoodie, my t-shirt... I suck my teeth, remembering that my switchblade is still lodged into Emilio's chest.

I fucking loved that knife.
"Oh, Dominic." Daniela gasps and steps toward me. Her fingers ghost over my bruising ribcage, causing my abs to clench. I swallow—having her so close, so fucking close... "That fucking bastard," she whispers. She circles me while I try to remain composed. "I want him to die all over again." She traces the sore flesh of my exposed back, the ink, the lines of my muscles, the redness the gravel on the parking lot probably caused, and down to my spine. To the nine sticking outta my jeans. But she doesn't take it. Instead she comes to my front again, and she grabs my right hand and sucks in a breath at the sight of my knuckles.

"Daniela—" My voice comes out all hoarse. I snatch my hand free and keep them both clenched at my sides. Right now...all I can see is her throat. Where that motherfucker put his hands on her. Roughly.

"I am fine." She curls a hand over her throat. "But we need to clean your wounds—"

I let out a harsh laugh and scrub my hands over my face. "We—we don't gotta do shit." I wave a hand between us. She has to get away from me. Before I blow. "Get outta my sight, sweetheart. Before I..." I, what?

"Was your brother correct?" she whispers, her accent thick. "If I go, will you..." She trails off as I shoot her a murderous glare. Don't fucking tempt me. She juts out her chin, fire flashing in her eyes.

Then she bolts.

I screw my eyes shut, hating her a fuckload for a moment, before I lose control. Taking off after her, I skid to a halt just as she reaches the door to her room. Got you. I spin her around and slam her up against the wall next to the bathroom door.

"You shouldn't have done that." My chest rumbles with an animalistic growl as I pin her with my body. "Unlike before, there's no one around
now to save you." Despite the honest threat in my tone, I touch her gently, as if I'm afraid she'll break. Temple to temple, I peer down her lush little body as my fingers trail up her arms, evoking goose bumps and shivers from her. "Playing with me right now...fucking stupid."

Her chest heaves, smashing her tits against my ribcage. "Perhaps I prefer to play with a dose of reality." She speaks in a rush, and I swear I can almost smell her mix of fear and raw fucking lust. Lust. Holy shit. "Perhaps I like a little danger."

I groan and force myself to move away from her—she can't fucking mean that. I pinch the bridge of my nose.

"Are you not up for it, mimmino?" she asks softly, moving closer to the bathroom door. She opens it.

I chuckle darkly and adjust my hardening cock. "You have no idea what I'm capable of."

Her eyes twinkle with something dark and indecent. "I believe I saw plenty tonight." That said, she enters the bathroom.

Keeping each and every muscle in my body locked down, I stare at where she disappeared. My jaw ticks with tension as I fight to reel back at least one inch of control—but the second Daniela tosses out her dress, her bra, her fucking panties...all bets are off.

The shower starts running and I enter the bathroom, catching the first sight of Daniela's naked body behind the shower glass. I appreciate the sight so much—I wanna fucking drown in it—that I silently thank my mother for having a new shower as well as a bathtub installed.

She keeps her back to me, but she knows I'm here. "Are you just going to watch—"
"Shut the fuck up," I say quietly, placing my nine on the counter. "You're fucking disturbed, you know that?" She has to be, and I'm trying not to like it. Love it. Want it. But I do, and I'm beyond warning her—again. She's had her chances.

"I know." There's no hurt or defeat in her tone. She just...knows.

Sliding open the shower door, I drink in her body. All that hot water running down her soft yet defined curves. Madonn’, that ass. Round, naturally tan, with two dimples above it that I wanna lick and drag my dick over.

Without giving a shit about my jeans, I step in under the spray and turn her around. I don't waste the time with words, not yet; I let my hands get what they want instead. Splaying them over her hips, I slowly glide them up her waist. My thumbs trace the barely-there outline of her ribs. Up, up, up, until I cup her big, round tits. Jesus Christ, she's fucking perfect. She shudders, and her breathing hitches. Soon, I see little goose bumps everywhere. Her nipples tighten, and I'm willing to bet my left nut she's wet.

"Am I too...disturbed...for you?" And there—there's a hint of uncertainty.

I shake my head no and lower my mouth to her tits. "At this point, I'd be disappointed if you were an average girl-next-door kinda broad." I graze my teeth over her right nipple, pinching the other, causing her to moan and arch into me. That's what I'm talking about. "I have no interest in a good, modest girl." Cupping her pussy, I straighten up and tower over her, backing her into the wall. "And as far as I know, no modest girl waxes."

"Oh, fuck you," she chuckles breathlessly as I swirl my thumb around her clit. "Are you an expert on pussy?"
"By the end of this night, I will be an expert on yours." I grab her jaw and crash my mouth to hers, sick of talking. To make her open up for me, I nip at her bottom lip hard enough to earn a gasp from her.

She glares. "Mi fai male, testa di cazzo!" She calls me a dickhead and says that hurt.

I'd believe she was pissed if she wasn't clawing at me to get closer and get rougher. As we kiss hard and deep, she unbuttons my jeans and pushes them down my hips, including boxer briefs. With a little effort, the heavy, wet fabric soon splashes against the tiled floor.

"Are you going to show me you're all man now?"

I chuckle huskily and grind my cock against her soft stomach. "You beautiful little bitch." Gathering her wrists in one hand, I spin her to face the wall. "You keep that up—keep insulting me and I won't give you a choice." I nuzzle her neck and drag my dick between her ass cheeks. "I'll fuck you whether you want it or not." I want to scare her. Lies outta do it, right? "When you beg me to stop, I'll only fuck you harder."

"Do it," she whispers in a rush. "Take me."

I blink, the world stopping for one second. Do it. She wants me to—Christ. She's not fucking around, is she?

If I felt like an animal before, it's got nothing on this. Nudging her legs apart, I guide my cock to her soaked pussy—

She stiffens. "Protection!"

"Fuck!" I growl, slamming my fist to the wall. Pain ricochets through me, but I don't give a fuck. "Are you on the pill?" She nods, about to say something else, though I don't give her the chance. "Good enough for
me." With that, I shove my cock deep inside her and groan at the overwhelming pleasure.

Depending on my being too high, drunk, and forgetful... or the condom breaking, resulting in Lia, I can at least say this is the first time I've been inside a girl without a condom when I've been sober. And it's fucking glorious.

"Oh, Dio mio," she cries, sagging against the wall. I hold her up and begin to fuck her for all I'm worth. Inside, I grind and rotate my hips, then pull out slowly, only to slam back in fast. "Yesss..." She pushes back, wanting more.

I give it to her.

"You better be clean," she whimpers. "I never have sex without a condom."

"You do now, sweetheart." I snort a laugh and reach around her to rub her clit. "Don't worry." I've been tested more than once since I was with What'sherface—Lia's birthmother. "Now, shut up and take my dick."

With the steam from the hot water billowing around us, I surround her as physically as she consumes me in my head. Since she's got one hand on the wall, bracing herself, I don't need to hold on to her hips. So, my dick drills into her tight pussy, one arm is locked around her, right under her tits, and my other hand is on her is stimulating her clit, sometimes my palm, sometimes my fingers.

"You like this, don't you?"

She nods furiously. "Yes—oh, yes, yes, yes..."
Problem is, without drugs, I can't last as long. I can already feel all the tension coiling in my gut, slowly spreading to my groin, and it won't be much longer before I come.

"Dominic," she gasps as I roll a nipple between my fingers. Pinching it causes a more violent reaction, so I take a wild guess; she likes a bite of pain. Which just might make her my dream girl.

"I wanna feel you come," I say, breathing heavily into her neck. She clamps down on me, and I groan. "I want that pussy soaking my cock." Hell, it already is. "Dripping—" I move her wet hair to the side and kiss the spot below her ear "—drenching..." I sink my teeth into her flesh and suck.

"Dominic—oh, cazzo!"

"That's it," I grunt, hitting deep. Her entire body trembles, close to orgasm, and I pound harder and harder. I pinch, bite, twist, and rub. In return, she reaches back and grabs a fistful of my hair, pulling me impossibly closer to her. I hiss at the sting and dig my fingers into her hip. "Fuck, fuck, fuck..." I gotta be bruising her, but my climax takes over before I can give a shit.

Thrusting jerkily and roughly, my cock pulses with each release, and just as I begin to calm down, Daniela lets out a breathless wail as she comes, too. Her pussy tightens around me so much that another, smaller wave of pleasure rolls through me.

"Mother of Christ, Dani..." I pant and drop my forehead to her shoulder. It's almost too intense—everything crashes down at once. I feel like laughing and crying; I feel like collapsing.

And eventually I do. When my knees nearly buckle, I pull Daniela with me down to the floor. The hot water keeps working its way through my sore
muscles, and I'm like jelly, resting my back against the wall, Daniela between my legs.

"I can't move," she croaks, resting her head on my collarbone. But she goes against her words when she gently grabs my right hand and inspects it. At least that's what I think she's doing. She's not facing me, and my eyes are closed anyway. "Do you think it is broken?"

I flex my fingers, then wince at the pain. But no, it's not broken. "Nah. Just a little banged up." Opening my eyes again, I lean forward enough to look down her front. And as amazing as her tits are to gawk at, I'm more interested in her throat right now. "Does it hurt?" I murmur, softly brushing my fingers over the darkening bruises. I honestly didn't know that motherfucker had been that rough.

"Only tender," she sighs. "We should get cleaned up."

"Yeah..." But I don't move yet.
Chapter 7

Translation:

Mi farò venire in mente qualcosa = I'll figure something out.

Dominic's POV

"Fuck, that feels good..." I sigh and close my eyes, letting Dani move the ice pack over my knuckles. "Is there any more bacon?"

"Mmhmm." Still straddling me on my bed, she leans over to the nightstand where a plate of breakfast is. Leftovers, really. We've already eaten. Who knew waking up with Dani would get me breakfast in bed? "Open." She dangles a piece of bacon over my face.

I chuckle and open my mouth, and...oh, yeah. That's the stuff. Funny how crispy bacon tastes even better with a naked broad sitting on me. She stole one of my t-shirts earlier when she left to make breakfast, but I made sure she took it off when she returned. With the sheets pooling around her waist, I shift my hands off her thighs, at which point the ice pack slides down her leg and she gasps at the cold, then I palm those bad boys.

"What is it with you and my breasts?" she giggles.

I shrug and pull her down on me. "I like big tits and I cannot lie?"

I offer a silly grin before I latch onto a nipple and suck it into my mouth. But it's only a matter of seconds before I want more. Last night, she'd been on her way to her own room after our shower, but I corrected that shit. Then I fucked her once more before we crashed, and now I want round three.
Rolling her over, I pin her to the mattress. Then I slip a hand between us and smile into the kiss when I find her wet already.

"Are you not even going to ask me?" She smirks, then squirms when I flick her clit with my thumb.

I shake my head no, having figured out that Daniela doesn't want to give permission for certain things. For being such a strong girl emotionally, there seem to be things she wants taken from her.

"Perhaps I should hurt your balls again." There's amusement in her eyes.

"You won't," I murmur. Gripping the base of my cock, I guide it to her pussy and push in. "Cazzo."

Let's just say that when you're used to banging strippers, some of whom have already popped out a kid or two, it's a whole new world to be with someone who...well, what the hell do I know about Dani's past experience? But, regardless, she's tight as fuck. And slick.

"What makes you so sure?" She lets out a shaky breath as I begin to move. "Mannaggia, you feel so good."

"I think—" I grit my teeth, her pussy feeling too good. "I think you know my intentions have changed. From the first night."

I just don't know what my intentions have changed into. No, she's not a simple fuck anymore, but I'm not ready to think beyond tomorrow, either. Hopefully, she doesn't need a goddamn commitment right now. 'Cause I agree with my parents; focus is on Lia. And work. And staying outta trouble—the wrong kind of trouble, that is.

"Jesus!" I hiss in pain when Daniela digs her fingernails into my lower back. In response, my cock throbs and leaks inside her, slicking her up
further. "Is that it?" I whisper harshly in her ear. "Pain and fear—è questo che ti eccita?" I ask if that's what excites her.

"I'm sorry," she gasps.

"No." I move her hands above her head and tighten my grip. "It was the same last night."

She wanted harder and rougher. I remember the lust in her eyes when I scared her. Eyeing my nine on the nightstand, I smirk and grab it.

"Better?" I place it on her chest, making sure she can feel it aiming at her.

She whimpers, and there's no hiding the rush of pussy juices coating my cock. "I'm sorry," she repeats. I don't want her fucking apologies, though. I find it goddamn sexy. "Non è sempre così." She groans, saying not always, as I grind deep into her. "But yesterday..."

"I know." More than she realizes, I know what she's talking about. I've used sex as a physical outlet many times to come down from the kind of high my work sometimes brings me. But for the first time ever, last night gave me sense of satisfaction that went deeper than the physical. It was intense and...I can't even explain it. "Trust me," I murmur against her soft lips, "I know what you're talking about, tesorina."

Which makes me a little curious about Daniela's life—what she's been through, how she grew up.

Wanting her to go nuts on me, I grind my pelvis against her clit with each thrust, leaving one hand free to trail the gun on her skin. Her breathing hitches—hell, so does mine—and we both watch how I play with her.

"Fight me," I whisper. "Struggle." I grip her hands even harder than I already was, serving her a little pain, but I don't go near the trigger in
case she manages to jostle me. "Just say done or enough—anything that means stop, and I'll stop."

"And if I stay stop?" She moans and digs her head deeper into the pillow.

I graze my teeth along her neck. "I'll continue."

She cries out at that, and I feel her pussy squeezing me.

Fucking her hard as hell, I take whatever I want from her. She pleads for me to stop, but with each no, no, no, no, please stop, she also claws at me—wants me closer, wants more.

When I get close, I pull out and move higher up on her body, the gun forgotten.

"Suck it." I fist her hair and yank her toward my dick.

She gasps and opens her mouth right away, eager to suck. And she does it sloppily, greedily, and leaves trails of saliva between us.

"Fuck!" I groan and thrust shallowly. Quick strokes, I fuck her mouth and try to hold back my orgasm. "If you bite, I'll fucking choke you," I warn, wondering if I'm getting a bit too into character.

But Dani seems to go nuts for it, so whatever. I'm still confident I'll stop the second she tells me to; it's all good. She hums and applies more suction, hollowing out those soft cheeks of hers.

"Ah, yeah." I moan, heating up all over. "Now, where should I come?" I pinch her tits, then slide my index finger between them, making a trail down to her belly, her pussy...before I slip it inside. "I think I wanna come right here." I give her pussy a light slap. "Get on all fours."

"No!" She turns her head away. "Stop it!"
I laugh darkly and use force to flip her over. I'm quick to get behind her, and I fist her hair again, then shove my cock back inside her. Too good, too good, too good.

"God, you're fucking nasty," I grunt. "I love it." I hammer into her, fucking her into the mattress, and the instant I slip a hand under her to massage her clit, she starts to spasm and tense up. "You're gonna come all over my cock, and..." I chuckle shallowly, "you ever heard of a creampie?"

"Please don't!" she moans breathlessly.

"Shut up!" I growl, panting against her neck. "Shut the fuck up!" With a few more passes over her wet, swollen clit, she falls apart with a hoarse scream.

It's my undoing.

Gritting my teeth, I back up a little and look down. I grip the base of my cock and jack it hard, watching through hooded eyes as the first stream of come lands on her pussy. Then I push the head inside her, still coming, my hand still stroking. It's possessiveness that makes me smear my release all over. Over her clit—I fucking rub it in, soak her—between her pussy lips, inside her, along the crack of her ass.

One final stream trickles down my cock, and I catch sight of some wetness seeping out of Dani's pussy, down her thighs, before I collapse next to her.

"Can't...breathe..." I swallow against the dryness in my throat, my heart racing furiously. Fuck, my lungs are burning. "Oh, Madonna'..." I throw an arm over my face.

Dani giggles, completely outta breath too, and curls her delectable body around me. "That was...amazing, best ever..."

"You okay, though?" I pull her even closer, despite not really enjoying the mess between us. But with how fucking rough I was, I gotta make sure...

Uncovering my face, I grasp her chin and make her face me. Mamma mia, she's...I have no words. I'm honestly rendered speechless by her beauty right now. It's always there, but...more pronounced now? Her cheeks are all flushed, her eyes bright, her smile glorious...

"More than okay..." She sighs softly and rests her head on my shoulder, her nose brushing against my neck. "Mmm, you smell good, mimmino."

I remember hearing her say that last night, too, but that was a first. I may be all but fluent in Italian, but I suppose every generation loses a little of the language. Mom and Dad know more than I do—me and my siblings.

"What does that mean?" Letting her rest on the pillow instead, I prop myself up on my elbow and dip down to kiss her forehead. I linger there, inhaling.

"You've never heard mimmino before?"

I shake my head no, still nuzzling her slightly damp skin. Her hair smells even better. Fuck. I might be growing obsessed with her body.

"It is a term of endearment," she murmurs and makes absent circles with her fingers on my chest. "Mimmo is a common nickname for Dominic in Italia."

"Really?" The corners of my mouth slant up. "Here, it's usually Dom." But I've always been Dee to my brother and sisters. Elisa thought my name was too difficult to pronounce when she was little, so she just started calling me Dee.
She hums softly, and I trail my fingers down her arm, watching as goose bumps appear.

"What's the plan today?" I wish we could've stayed here in bed a few more hours, but...fuck it, I kinda miss Lia. I clear my throat. "I guess you and my mother came to an agreement?"

"Si." She stretches her body and lets out a little groan. I stare like I'm some nut. "She offered to drop off Bambina here, or I could ask to borrow your car so I can drive out and pick her up."

"You're not driving my car, sweetheart," I laugh. "But I can drive—" I grasp her chin again and kiss her lips "—and then we'll order in." Growing up, we rarely had takeout, 'cause Mom's always been picky about food, and Dad only eats what his "hummingbird" has approved. So, as soon as I moved out, I went on a week-long bender—I ordered the works, McDonalds, Wendy's, Taco Bell, fuckin' KFC... "Whattaya say?"

"Fast food?" She scrunches her nose.

"Get the fuck outta hea'," I chuckle and bury my face between her tits. "I love fast food. Don't get started—not you."

"It is not food," she giggles as I motorboat her tits. "Stop it, Dominic!" She laughs harder. "It is an insult to food! And you call yourself Italian?"

"Mmm, but sometimes there's nothing better—" I get her lips again and steal a smooch "—than sinking your teeth into a greasy burger with extra cheese." That settles it; I want a fucking Big Mac today. Or two. "And yo, don't tell me you don't have McDonald's in Italy." I know they do; I've been there. Once in Rome and once in Sicily to visit distant family that my mom still has there. I was just a little shit, but I remember.

"Of course we do." She pokes my stomach and grins. "But we do not have even a tenth of the fast food chains you have here."
"Pity," I say, not really meaning it. I'll always prefer home-cooked, but only my mother has ever been able to actually forbid me to eat takeout. Never again. If I wanna stuff my face with some fried chicken that gets my fingers all greasy, or a burger that's all smashed together and looks nothing like it does in the picture, I fucking will. "Unless you want me to eat fast food every day, you're just gonna hafta cook for me."

"Have I not cooked for you every day already?" She smirks.

I nod, conceding. She has. And she's fucking great at it. "But we're still ordering big, fat burgers today—" I'm cut off by someone knocking on the door—the front door, and I curse. "You stay here, tesorina." I jump outta bed and pull on a pair of sweats. I grimace slightly, adjusting my sticky cock, which Dani notices and laughs. "We're showering after I get rid of...whoever." After grabbing my nine off the bed, I leave my room.

"Who is it?" I shout, getting closer to the hallway. The weight of the gun in my hand...now all I can think of is how else to use it—how Dani reacted to it—and I decide to pick up another one soon. One that I'll keep unloaded. 'Cause maybe she digs the danger, but I'm not comfortable going that far again. And fuck, what she doesn't know won't kill her. Let her think the piece is loaded.

"Joseph," I hear as I reach the door.

Placing my nine on the hallway table, I open the door and raise my brow at the sight of Felix's oldest. And this cat's our new consigliere? Well, my father still stands closest to Felix, but Joey's got the title now that Nonno is retiring. He's well-educated, a lawyer, and he's ridiculously smart, but my dad trumps him with experience—decades of a gangster's way of thinking.

Anyway, Joey looks like shit. So, I tell him that.
He snorts and enters, loosening his already-crooked tie. Shirt untucked, hair disheveled, eyes glassy...

"You drunk?" I cock a brow.

"I wish." He shakes his head. "Just tired. I've been up all night."

I frown, then jerk my chin toward the kitchen. "Anything I can do for you?"

Once there, I open the fridge and pull out two Cokes. I get the munchies, too, so I snatch the cookie jar next to the microwave and grin a little when I open it to see Ma's oatmeal and chocolate chip. She must've brought them over yesterday.

"After thinking about it all night—yeah, I think you're the only one who can help me." He scrubs his hands over his face. "Fuckin' mess."

I sit down across from him at the table and scratch my chest. "I'm all ears." I'm not used to seeing Joey like this. "Talk to me." Craving a smoke, I'm quick to get a new pack from a cabinet, then I sit down again.

"This will be between you and me," he tells me, eyeing me seriously.

I nod, 'cause...of course. My lips are sealed—unless whatever info threatens anyone who's ranking higher. Or someone in my immediate family.

"I'm serious, Dee. You can't tell anyone. Not your brother, definitely not Junior..."

I narrow my eyes when he pulls out a document from the inner pocket of his suit. "Before you show me...whatever that is—" I wave a hand at the document before I light up a smoke "—is it something my dad should know?"
"It has nothing to do with business," he assures me.

All right. That's all the answer I need. "Then...you've got my word. Uh—" I clear my throat, just remembering, "—just keep your voice down?" I give the direction of my bedroom a pointed glance.

Joey snorts a wry laugh. "Lemme guess. You already test driving the nanny?"

I don't really like how he worded that, but I don't let on. Instead I smile and kiss the tips of my fingers. "Madonn'...s'all I'm sayin'.'"

"Good for you, I guess." He shakes his head. "Anyway, I know I would've been able to trust Anthony with this, too, but there's something you're capable of that he ain't."

He's definitely got my interest.

"Forgery?" He keeps his voice low.

*My one artistic skill.*

I nod and take a drag from my smoke. "Go on."

He doesn't say anything else, instead just sliding the rolled-up document to my side of the table.

At first, I don't really know what it is I'm reading, but it dawns on me as Joey says, "It's no secret that there's animosity between Alice and Jasper." Understatement. My uncle got arrested before he and Zia Alice could solve their marital issues. "And Jasper's bitter. After hearing from Nico and Lucia about you and Lia...I don't know, he's trying to paint Alice as a bad wife? Or maybe it's an attempt to justify his cheating?"

The document...it's the results from a paternity test. "Whoa..."
Joey goes on. "Jasper demanded paternity tests on both Sophia and Marissa."

_Whatta douche._ I massage my neck. I mean...if I were that cunty, I could understand running tests on Marissa; she's only four—almost five—years old, and Alice was pregnant with her when my uncle was arrested back in '93. But Sophia? Fuck, she'll be fourteen this year, I think, and as far as I know, Jasper and Alice were solid back then. But what the fuck do I know?

All that aside, I don't get why Jasper would admit to _maybe_ having a wife who's cheated. Old-timers would laugh at him—or shake their heads in pity. 'Cause if a man can't control his own wife, what message does that send out?

"This is only one test, though, right?" I spot Marissa's name on the paper.

"Yeah. Jasper's Sophia's dad..." He pulls out another document, which I presume is Sophia's.

When I read further on the paper before me, however, I see that Jasper's _not_ the father of Marissa. "Holy shit," I whisper, my wide eyes meeting Joey's. "Is this a joke?" Zia Alice cheated on...? _Mannaggia._

He shakes his head, his lips pressed in a grim line.

"This can't get out, Dominic," he whispers, leaning forward. "Jasper will be released in a couple years, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out that there will be less drama if he comes home to kids who are his. You with me?"

Yeah...

My mother would be torn—heartbroken. Jasper's her brother; she's loyal to him, even if she wouldn't hesitate to kick his ass. It has happened, after all. My father, who despises drama, would bitch up a storm. He'd be
torn, too—between comforting Mom and being loyal to Felix, his boss. And Felix...Alice is his little sister. He's protective. At the same time, Alice and Jasper are married, and Alice has basically taken a huge shit all over their marriage by having another man's kid. Jesus Christ. I can't even imagine the shame and fury Zio Jasper would feel if this became public.

"You want me to make sure this paternity test has the same result as Sophia's," I state. It's not just a signature to forge. I have to change the results and ensure that the writing looks just like the doctor's. "I'll need an empty form, the same pen the doc used, and—wait." I frown. "Can't you just fake two results? Jasper won't exactly know how the doc's writing looks like."

"That would work if the doctor who performed these tests didn't try to blackmail me." He gives me a look, and I get it: the doc is now six feet under. So, Joey has two choices. Ask another doc for new forms, which would leave traces, or come to me. "The doctor offered to do what I'm asking you to do," he continues. "He had everything in his briefcase, everything I needed."

I smirk and stub out my smoke. "Then he pissed you off by demanding money?"

Joey shrugs. "It was more his fuckin' attitude. No respect. But still, the less people involved..."

"Well, if you have extra forms, you can still fill them out by yourself," I point out.

"With how suspicious Jasper's being?" He raises his brows. "Madonn', it wouldn't shock me if he compared notes. All he'd need is one peek at Lia's results."
"Oh." That surprises me a little. "This was the same doc who did our tests?"

He nods.

"Huh." I sit back and rub my jaw. "A'ight. So, lemme get this straight. Only you and I know about this?" I wave a finger between us, and he nods. "Alice?" "She doesn't know anything. Jasper wanted to keep her out of it."

Oh, I bet. "And not even Felix?"

"Fuck no," he spits out. "If my father knew—hell, it'd be worse than Junior knowing. I'm doing this to keep the peace in our family. Can I have your word that we'll keep this between us—that we'll take this to our graves?"

"I'm my father's son, Joey," I chuckle and place a hand on my chest. "I don't like drama, either. And since this, as you said, has nothing to do with actual business... Yes, you have my word."

"Good." He looks relieved. "Thank you. We can meet up at a location of your choice if you want."

That's not necessary, but I appreciate his offer. It's respectful. Had he told me to meet at a specific place that he's chosen, a man who didn't trust Joseph would get suspicious. After all, this is just another matter where the less people know, the better.

I wave it off. "Don't matta'. I trust you. I suspect Jasper will want the results soon, so just gimme a call and I'll fix the documents." I pause, touching the edge of the paper. "Do you know who is Marissa's father?" The paternity result here just states that Jasper is a negative match.
"I can only guess," he says grimly. "I think the world of my aunt, and I get that she felt betrayed when Jasper fucked around on her, but...but this? Bringing a kid into it all who isn't even her husband's?"

And who knows better than Joey himself? Felix did just that with Frankie. Gianna isn't Frankie's mom—some old goomah who died in the MGM fire was. Apparently, Frankie also had twin brothers, younger than him, and they died, too.

Technically, I was at the MGM, too. Mom was pregnant with me at the time.

"I can only think of one," I say wryly, bringing my Coke to my lips. Tommy. Zia Alice's driver and babysitter. They're...they're close. Which is kind of disgusting, 'cause I'm pretty sure Tommy's like ten or fifteen years younger than Alice.

"And if it is...?" Joey's clearly thinking about the same person.

I nod. "He needs to be taken care of before Jasper gets outta prison." God forbid if he saw some connection between Marissa and Tommy, or even the bond between Alice and Tommy.

I'm not saying it's obvious, but Alice and Tommy are good friends.

Meanwhile, whenever Dad tightens the security at home—such as right now, I suppose—and Mom gets her own driver, my father is clear on the rules. Drivers drive; they don't talk.

"Want me to take care'a him?" I arch a brow.

"Not yet," Joey replies. "But in a few months or so? When the results are old news to Jasper."

I nod. "Mi farò venire in mente qualcosa."
Junior's POV

"...and that's why we don't like Gotti, dolcezza." I point to the TV where the Discovery Channel is showing a documentary about the John Gotti trial from '92. "Now he's got cancer in his throat. Maybe from sucking too much prison d-i-c-k."

Lia babbles some shit and grabs my face.

"Remember what Nonno taught you?" I kiss her fingers. "A good gangsta' don't sign autographs, and he sure as fuck don't get his own documentary."

"Christ, Juniuh." Isabella enters the living room and shakes her head at me. "What're you teaching her? Come to Nonna, baby girl." She steals Lia from me. "Let's get some lunch in you before your nap."

"Sounds good," I say, standing up.

The wife laughs and pushes me down again. "I was talking to Lia. Not you."

I suck my teeth. "Rude." And I get up again, wanting food, too. But before I can reach the kitchen, the door in the foyer opens, revealing both Dominic and Daniela.

"Hey, Dad."

"How you doin', son?" I jerk my chin and re-tie my robe. To my surprise, he walks forward and hugs me, which he hasn't done voluntarily in months, so I gotta swallow my emotions. I squeeze him back, and a weight on my shoulders I hadn't even been aware of just vanishes. "You okay?" I palm his cheek and study him. No sign of drugs, but he's definitely been in a fight.
Anthony called me last night and told me what he could over the phone, but I don't need details.

"Yeah." He smiles. "You?"

"Very good." I won't fucking cry, but *Madonn',* this feels so good. I've been worried about my son. Draping an arm around his shoulder, I shift my gaze to Daniela. "And you, hon? Everything good?"

I don't miss the fact that they both look like they just got outta the shower.

As far as I know, there's only one at my son's place.

"Yes. Everything is fine, thank you." Daniela smiles and adjusts the scarf around her neck, then smooths down her black dress.

"We're just about to have lunch," I mention, turning to Dominic again. Truth be told, Daniela's mannerisms freak me out a little; she moves and acts just like Isabella does. She's polite yet carefree in her way of speaking, and I've already witnessed the fire in her. For my son, she can end up being everything or nothing. Time will tell. "You should join us."

"Yes, you should!" Isabella shouts from the kitchen.

"I guess that settles it." Dominic grins and follows the scent of his mother's pasta Alfredo with chicken.

"I thought you wanted McDonald's," Dani teases him.

"Don't you know me by now, *tesorina?*" He nudges her and waggles his eyebrows. "There's always room for more."

I raise a brow, then shake my head, and enter the kitchen last. I suppose I'll be keeping an eye on those two.
"Look who's here, Lia!" Isabella says excitedly. "It's Daddy. Can you say Daddy?"

"Yo, what is it wit'chu two?" Dominic widens his arms and gives Dani and his mother a look. "Don't push her." He walks over to Lia, who's sitting in a highchair, and sits down next to her. "How you doin', cucciolina?" He kisses her on the forehead.

"Hi!" Lia waves and grabs his face, which is definitely her thing. "Hi!"

Isabella clasps her hands under her chin and stares at them with a big smile on her face.

Dominic laughs and gives her another smooch before getting free.

And before my wife can squeal out how fucking amazing she thinks this is, I'm there to clamp a hand over her mouth. "Don't make a big deal out of it, bell'uccellino," I whisper in her ear. "It makes him uncomfortable."

"Capisce," she whispers back, nodding. She zips her lips and pretends to throw away a key, but her joy is unmistakable. Then again, so is mine. But as long as we don't comment on it... "And I don't wanna ask about the bruises on Dominic's face, do I?"

I shake my head no.

She sighs, shoots the floor a little glare, then claps her hands. "Okay! Time for lunch."

Soon, we're all seated around the kitchen table, and I chuckle to myself as the wife seems to take note of every little thing that Dani does, who is seated on the other side of Lia. From everything how Dani mashes Lia's food to how she helps her with the sippy cup and wipes her mouth.

Dani has Isabella's stamp of approval.
"How was your date last night, honey?" Isabella asks her.

While Dani acts well—smiles politely—Dominic struggles with his temper. His mother doesn't notice, but I do. He grits his teeth and stabs a piece of chicken as if it was Emilio.

"It was pleasant." Daniela nods. "I don't think I will see him again, though. I think he's gay," she whispers behind her hand. To which I bark out a laugh and Dominic chokes on his chicken, ending up coughing so much I gotta slap him on the back. "What?" Dani offers an innocent expression. "When he learned I have a male roommate, he was more interested in Dominic."

"Christ, Dani!" Dominic splutters.

"Oh, wow." Isabella doesn't really know how to act. "Well...um. I see."

I'm still laughing as I break off a piece of bread and dip it in garlic oil.

And I decide that I dig this little bunny. She'll keep my son on his toes.

I just hope she can be trusted. Anthony told me Dani witnessed everything last night, but I assume Dominic talked to her before they came here today. 'Cause there's no way Isabella's gonna find out about Emilio.

~oOo~

Over the next few weeks, we monitor things closely, but most of the shit outta Reno seems to have died with Emilio. However, with the death of Emilio, we're not surprised when Marcus Misone, the New York boss, calls Felix to say that Jersey wants and needs help to "deal" with Vegas.

In return, Marcus says he'll broker a sit-down—make sure everything runs smoothly.
One of the Jersey capos is missing—Emilio—and Jersey obviously think they can pin it on us and get away with it. They don't know New York's business—they don't know that New York and Vegas have an alliance, so Jersey hopes us clipping Emilio will get them New York's help to...I don't know, move in on us?

It's hard to tell with New York and Jersey. They're seemingly always at war with each other, but Marcus still has the Garden State by the balls. Plus, it's all about paper. It's better to make money outta Jersey and play nice every now and then than destroying it all.

Felix and I have our own agenda with the sit-down.

Jersey stays outta Nevada—end'a story.

The bell above the door rings, bringing me back to the present, and I watch as Isabella and Gianna, Felix's wife, enter my tailor's place with a bunch of shopping bags. Leanin back a little, I make sure that my wife's driver is still outside.

Just 'cause most of the Reno bullshit is over doesn't mean everything is. Dominic, Mario, Francis, and a few other guys are still working hard, cleaning up in Reno.

"Ooh, that looks amazing, ciccino!" Isabella comes over to the small platform I'm standing on and sidesteps to avoid knocking over old Alberto. He's nearly seventy years old, so I don't think he'd be able to take a blow from a Prada shopping bag. "Alberto, have I told you I love you lately? You always make my husband so handsome."

Alberto chuckles and waves her off. "You and that mouth of yours, Bella."

I dip down and grab Isabella's jaw, kissing her hard but chastely. "You been spendin' my money, hummingbird?"
"You know it." She hums and grins. "I wanna look good in New York."

I snort. "Yeah, 'cause you won't be shopping with Misone's wife in Manhattan?" I wink at her. "And you always look good, my love."

She giggles at that and starts chatting with Alberto, inquiring about his wife, saying they should come to Stella more often, and then goes on to order this suit in gray and black, too. The one Alberto's working on right now is dark blue, so Isabella then moves on to talk about matching ties and cuff links.

"Bella," Gianna calls, standing near the door. "We have our hair appointment in fifteen minutes."

"I'm coming." Isabella smiles and looks up at me. "Have you heard from Anthony yet?"

I nod and step down from the platform as Alberto hands me the jacket to put on. "He's told Dominic to check in on Gabby while we're gone. And Elisa will be there, too."

Anthony offered for Gabby to join us in New York, but she was torn—said it wouldn't be easy to travel with two little ones, and she's not ready to travel without them. So, she'll stay here, and my son has ordered her driver to stick around outside. And, like I told Isabella, Dominic and Elisa will check in on her.

I bet Dani will, too, 'cause she has become friends with both Gabby and Elisa in the past few weeks. Together, the three have planned my parents and Esme's goodbye party for when we get back from New York.

Feels a little weird to have my parents moving to Florida, but whattaya gonna do?
"Oh." Isabella pouts, having wished Gabriella would've come, too. "Well, at least I'll have Julia. She's so excited."

I smirk wryly into the mirror in front of me. "Just make sure she quits that vegetarian shit before we go." I'm happy to have my little princess with us—definitely—but I won't have her embarrassing me by asking for fucking tofu. I shake my head. "When I was a kid, I was happy for whatever my mother served—"

"I know, ciccino." She pats my hand, and it feels like she's merely humoring me. "I know. You had it so rough growing up in fancy Manhattan. So many hills to climb barefoot each morning to get to school, just like in the old country—"

I narrow my eyes at her. "What's that suppos'ta mean?"

"Nothing." She smirks and pops a kiss on my chin. "I'll see you later. Dinner's at seven. Love you!" she calls over her shoulder, walking out with Gianna.

I scoff and face the large mirrors again. "Women."

*Can't live with 'em.*

But when I wake up the next morning to all bags packed, breakfast on the kitchen table, my suit hanging on the bedroom door, and my shaving kit splayed on the bathroom counter, I'm once again reminded of why I can't live without 'em, either. Well, one of them.

*Next stop: New York.*
IMPORTANT NOTE:

If you've read SexyLexiCullen's Quiet Storm, you'll meet some familiar faces in this chapter and the next. And if you've read Riders on the Storm—the third story in Lexi's Storm Series—you already know that a couple Maisanos have appeared there. So, it's time for the Storm crew to show up in Grand. Let's just dedicate this to the Storm Freaks :)  

A quick (or not-so-quick) explanation of Lexi's characters:

Edward "Skip" Cullen (The Edward in Lexi’s Storm Series) – known as "Cullen's son/youngest," "Mini Cullen," "E," and "Baby skip" in Grand Finale. He is around 14-15 years old at this point—approximately eight years younger than Anthony—so for the Storm Freaks this will be a flashback to when Skip was a pervy little kid.

Carlisle Cullen (The Carlisle in Lexi's Storm Series) – known as "Cullen's son/eldest" and "C" in Grand Finale. He is Skip's big brother, and he's around 16-17 years old at this point – just like Julia, actually ;-)

Ed Cullen Sr. (Skip's dad in Lexi's Storm Series) – known as "Cullen" in Grand Finale, and he's the same age as Juniuh and Hummingbird. Cullen is also the consigliere, the New York boss's right hand man and advisor.

Marcus Misone – New York boss. Didi Misone – Marcus's wife. Victoria Cullen – Cullen's very young wife. (Not Skip and Carlisle's mother.) Josie Sposato – her daughter, Lizzie, used to be married to Cullen, but she died in a car crash. Lizzie is also Skip and Carlisle's mother, which means Josie is Skip and Carlisle's grandmother. Phil Battaglia – the Jersey boss. John Drasso – the Jersey underboss.

All right, let's bring the Maisanos to Brooklyn.
Chapter 8

Translation:

Era ora = About time.

O ti spacco la faccia = Or I'll break your face.

Anthony's POV

We didn't make it five minutes.

After resting up a few hours at our hotel here in Manhattan—Little Italy, to be exact—we're on our way to Marcus Misone's house in Brooklyn for dinner. But we didn't make it five minutes in the car before I had to pull over the rental and get something.

Fuck me, it's frigid in New York. I swear, I won't say it's cold in Vegas anymore.

"Buy me some smokes, too, tesoro!" Dad shouts from the car.

I wave a hand over my shoulder, acknowledging I heard him, and enter the bodega. In the back of the store, I open the fridge and reach for the water Mom asked for—

And something crashes into me from behind—or rather, someone.

I hear a squeak, a thump, then a pitiful little groan, and I turn around to see a young girl on the floor rubbing her forehead.

"You all right there?" I chuckle and squat down, helping her to sit up.

"Yeah." She's got her eyes screwed shut, and she's still rubbing her forehead. "I'm sorry. I didn't see you."
"Don't worry about it." I stifle my amusement and remove her hand, checking to see if she's really injured. But I think the only redness is caused by her own rubbing. "I think you'll live." She finally opens her eyes.

She can't be more than twelve years old, and she's even shorter than Julia, who's always been the little baby in our family.

"Oh." The girl lets out another squeak, and her cheeks turn bright red. "I'm such a—" She huffs and blows some hair outta her face. "I'm so, so sorry."

"Quit apologizing." I grin and stand up, holding out my hand. "Come on."

Another blush covers the fading one, and she takes my hand, letting me help her up. When she wobbles a little, I steady her and frown. Maybe she really hurt herself? But...nah, my back ain't that hard.

"You got a name, hon?" I dip down to catch her gaze. "Are your parents nearby?"

"Yeah, the restaurant across the street." She ducks her head. "We're waiting for our table to be ready—it's my dad's birthday. I wanted a soda. And it's Be-bella—my n-name, I mean," she stammers.

"That's a pretty name." I wink at her, thinking I could tell her it's also my mother's name—not to mention my daughter's middle name—but I don't exactly have time hang around here all day. "You sure you're a'ight?" She nods quickly, staring up at me with wide eyes. "Do you want me to take you to your—"

"Bella!" Some chubby kid, a boy, runs into the store. Her brother? "What's taking you so long? We have our table now."
Bella grimaces at the floor, then shoots the chubby kid a dirty look. "I'll be right there. Can't you see I'm busy here?" she hisses. She scoffs and turns to me again, jerking her thumb over her shoulder. "Big brothers can be such a pain in the butt."

I can't help but laugh at that, and I decide that the girl is definitely okay now. "I'm sure my younger siblings would agree." Grabbing my mother's water, I offer Bella a grin and say, "You take care, sweetheart."

After paying for everything, I head back outside and hurry to the car.

"Era ora," Pops bitches as I get behind the wheel.

"Madonn', I hate having him in the passenger seat. Worst conversationalist ever. God forbid you ask him how he is; he'll give you a ten-minute rant about everything that's wrong in the world, then finish it with, "But I'm not complaining."

"Did you get my gum?" Julia asks from behind me.

I reach into my pocket and throw it back to her, and Mom's already gotten her fucking water. Now we can finally go.

I bet Felix, Joseph, and Gianna are gonna beat us.

Truth be told, I'm excited as fuck to be here; it's New York, the city where my parents grew up—Dad in Manhattan, Mom in Brooklyn—and I've heard so many stories growing up. Sure, I've been here before, but not on business.

According to Felix, if he's impressed by my behavior this weekend, he'll make me capo when we get home. As it is now, I'm in fucking limbo. I run my own game, build my front, make connections, and I do have a couple guys who come to me and nobody else, but I'm still technically working for Dad and Zio Alec.
When I get my own crew, I'll pay tribute to my father, who still holds the unofficial role as underboss—although, I know Felix is getting ready to finally hand over that seat to my cousin Nico—and I'll be able to roll in more dough.

It'll be intense—long hours...I'll be working a shitload. But I'll do what my father did back in the day—and still does: I'll take a few days off every now and then and take Gabriella someplace. My wife loves to travel, and a trip never fails to make her forget the times I can't make it home on time. Which, sadly, is often.

But on the other hand, I like missing her. And cazzo, I always do. There's nothing better than coming home after a business trip or a gruesome day to dote on her, be worshipped in return, and spend time with my son and daughter.

Missing my wife makes it more intense to be with her than it already is.

Shaking my head, I draw a deep breath and focus on now instead. I may only be here as the muscle, but there's still an agenda. I'm the one Felix has chosen to run the family one day, and I won't fucking fail.

"I hope Misone's wife is nice," Ma says, a smile in her voice. "And Cullen's wife..." The smile is gone.

Before I can laugh out loud, Julia giggles and reaches forward to clamp a hand over my mouth.

"What was—what just happened there?" Dad narrows his eyes and Julia sits back again. "Youse're fuckin' weird."

I compose my face and focus on the road, although I'm laughing on the inside.
Thing is, when Dad announced that Mom and Julia were accompanying us to New York, he also spoke briefly about the Misones and the Cullens. It was during dinner, and afterward, Elisa was eager to gossip. She pulled me and Julia aside—and Gabriella, who'd been there, too—and told us about Mom's childhood crush.

Apparently, Mom told Elisa years ago—when my sister was crushing on that motherfucker Carmine—and it had turned into some reminiscing on Ma's part. So, back in the day, our dear mother was all starry-eyed whenever she saw Cullen—Misone's advisor.

"It was sad to hear about Lizzie," Mom sighs. In the rearview mirror, I catch her doing the Sign of the Cross. "I remember her."

"Who's Lizzie?" Julia asks.

"Anthony and Josie Sposato's daughter," Dad answers and cranks up the heat. "Also Cullen's first wife. She died a few years ago—and this doesn't fucking work!" He slams his fist down on the dashboard. "Where's the seat warmer button?!"

"Easy," I caution and throw him a look.

I'd ask him if it's been a while since he hit it, but one, that's my mother, and two, Julia and I happen to share the hotel room next to our parents', and the walls aren't thick enough to drown them out. Trust, it's only been a couple hours.

"Is there gonna be anybody my age?" Julia sounds annoyed. "And you've already mentioned Marcus and Didi's daughter. She was what, fourteen? I'll be seventeen this year! I can't hang with a kid."

Unbelievable. "In September," I remind her, thinking this year just started...Christ. "But yeah, there'll be—"
"No," Dad laughs, to which I shoot him a sideways glance in question. I know for a fact Cullen's got two sons, one at fourteen or fifteen, and another at sixteen or seventeen...uh, never mind.

Dominic and I have already given three guys at Julia's school black eyes.

Kinda makes me wish the girls in our family were ugly.

Instead it's a mini version and a mix between my mother and father sitting behind me. With the long hair—shades like my pops', dark brown but with some red in it—the big brown eyes from Mom that lure little sumbitches in, a crooked smile... She's Dad's princess, but man, she's got this temper.

I almost pity the fuckers who end up with a Maisano woman; I mean, look at Dad. Yeah, he runs a tight ship. He is the man of the house, but there's no denying that my mother's got him wrapped. Now Mario...Elisa owns his sorry ass. And Elisa, she is the true mini version of my mother. I'm a mix, like Julia, and Dee takes after Dad—and my father's nonno for some reason. Dad even told me once that he named Dominic after his grandfather.

**Hummingbird's POV**

Junior opens the car door for me, and I step out in the cold, quick to hold down my hair. Freakin' winds. My husband knows me; he knows I'm reaching into my purse for my makeup, so he steals a hard kiss before I can reapply my lipstick.

It's nostalgic to be back in Brooklyn.

Back then, who the hell was I? Just some little kid who could barely afford a movie ticket. Then I was the teenager who took care of my niece and nephew while Jasper did time in prison. I moved out to Vegas, became a stripper at Felix's club, then Junior's goomah...
A lot has changed.

"We ready?" Junior eyes Anthony, who has the Cuban cigars my husband brought as a present.

Our son nods, and I pull Julia close.

Felix, Gianna, and Joseph are already here.

Just a few seconds after we've rung the doorbell, we're let inside by a maid. It's a flurry of activity; our coats are taken off, I fluff my hair and smooth down my blue wrap dress—I think it's gorgeous, and it totally matches the tie my husband's wearing with his gray suit—and before we reach the parlor, two women join us.

I find out it's Didi Misone and Josie Sposato, and it's only the beginning of the introductions.

I remember the time Felix and Junior brought me and Gianna to St. Louis; it was years ago, and Alec was also there with Maria, but it had nothing on this. Maybe it's not as spacious as what I'm used, but it's still expensive taste, and it's how I witnessed the rich folk living when I grew up.

I'd sit on the stoop and watch the Cadillacs roll by, completely awed...

It's only a matter of seconds before Julia and I are separated from Junior and Anthony. They go in to the parlor to greet the men, and Julia and I are ushered into kitchen.

Gianna and another woman are there, about Anthony's age, and when Josie introduces her as Cullen's wife—Victoria—I gotta make sure to keep my face neutral. Mannaggia, the girl can't be more than twenty-two, twenty-three! And Cullen's my age—over forty.
"I know," Josie chuckles and links arms with me. Apparently she can read my mind, but since there's only amusement in her eyes, I relax. "I'm sure my Lizzie—God rest her soul—" she does the Sign of the Cross, to which I pat her arm "—would have a thing or two to say about this one." She jerks her head at an oblivious Victoria, who is busy checking on dinner.

I hum and keep my voice low. "Well, it can't be easy seeing your daughter's husband with a new wife." But we all know men, right? They can't be on their own for long.

"He certainly didn't trade up." Josie scoffs, and then two boys walk into the kitchen and try to steal food.

I grin, already knowing at least one of them is Cullen's son, 'cause it's like looking back in time. The boy—maybe he's fourteen or fifteen—looks exactly like Cullen used to.

And it turns out I'm right; Josie introduces them as Cullen's sons, both of them, and they're like night and day. Cullen's mini-me, although he's already taller than I am, walks like he owns the world. A cocky little shit—I see my sons aren't alone in that aspect. And forget walk; this kid's got a swagger that makes me giggle.

His older brother is quiet, a little awkward, and keeps pushing up his glasses. Still cute, though.

And my daughter seems to think so, too...

"You can call me E, sweetheart." Mini Cullen puts on the moves and grasps Julia's hand before she can even begin to flirt with the other one.

I widen my eyes at Josie, and she just snorts and shakes her head in amusement.

Whattaya gonna do? Kids.
"Julia." My daughter points to herself. "And your brother...?"

"Oh, I think the kids'll be fine on their own for a bit." Josie ushers me out of the kitchen and into the parlor instead.

And you know, when I see Cullen there, looking hella lot more distinguished and handsome than he did twenty years ago, I do get a little weak in the knees. But... I sigh. He still has nothing on my husband.

Junior smiles and holds out a hand, silently telling me to come, so I cross the floor and join his side. While Felix, Joseph, and Marcus are seated on a couch—who I think is the Misones' young daughter is also there—Junior, Cullen, and my son are standing to the side sipping...I don't know, scotch?

Junior introduces me to Marcus first, then to Cullen.

"Oh, I remember little Isabella." Cullen grins and takes my hand, dropping a kiss on top of it. *Mamma mia.* "You used to follow your brother around—Savona, right?"

I giggle and smile sheepishly, knowing exactly what a gangly little kid I used to be, and Cullen's right. Wherever Jasper went, I tried to go with him.

"And I see you're still attached to Marcus's hip," I tease.

He barks out a laugh, throwing his head back, and Junior yanks me close, a tight-lipped smile on his face.

*Men.*

He's so possessive.

I lived with him as his mistress for *years* while he was married to Jane. I know better *now*, but back then I expected him to do what most men did with their wives—fuck 'em and raise children. He never did that, but it's
still what I believed for so long, so I think my dear hubby can suck it up for two minutes and lemme have this moment.

Besides, when the husband gets territorial, he'll give it to me extra hard tonight.

"Excuse me for a second." Anthony glances at his cell phone with a frown on his face, then starts to walk out.

"Hurry back," I say, pushing down my worry. Knowing Junior, he's most definitely told our son to refuse calls unless it's a real emergency. It's disrespectful to take a call when we're guests. And it doesn't matter if we're guests of the Don of New York, the fucking queen of England, or at a friend's house.

**Anthony's POV**

Stepping outside, I shudder at the cold and side-eye the two guys, Cullen's sons, on the porch.

"Why you gotta be so fuckin' lame, C?" the youngest asks, speaking with his hands. "That Julia broad? She's mad fine, and if I didn't have my older brother playing babysitter, I'd bag her in a second—" He shuts up abruptly when he notices they're not alone. He jerks his chin at me. "'Sup?"

I raise a brow at the little prick, tempted to bop him one for talking about my sister that way. Alas, I don't think that would impress Felix. And with a voicemail from my brother where he's screaming, "**PICK UP THE FUCKING PHONE!**" I don't really have time, either.

So, I ignore them and turn away, my phone by my ear.

Dominic picks up right away. "** Fucking women, man!**" he shouts, making me cringe. "I didn't sign up for this shit! I know I usually handle Elisa's crap, but cut it out already! If you don't deal with this, I'mma leave this
goddamn house and get coked up more than Tony Montana ever—" A smack rings out in the background, and my eyebrows shoot up. "AY! What the fuck, Dani! C'mea'! Let's see how you like getting smacked around, huh?"

"Dominic!" I snap, massaging my forehead. "You think I got time for childish bullshit?"

What kind of emergency is this?

My brother returns to his call, snorting. "Yo, bitch would probably get horny if I smacked—what?" Now he's talking to someone else. "Gabby! Is she opening the door yet?" A pause, and I wonder where exactly they are. My house? "Stop shouting!" Dee shouts. "Whattaya doin'?! Youse're givin' me a fucking headache!"

I sigh and pull out my smokes; in the background, Dani's calling Elisa's name, and I hear my wife giving Dee a talkin' to—he shouldn't talk to Dani that way, blah, blah, blah, but we know my brother, and we've come to know Dani, too. They haven't announced a single thing, but they're fucking, and they're into some nasty shit.

Realizing Dad has my lighter, I look over to the kids and see the youngest fiddling with a Zippo, so I let out a whistle and jerk my chin. To which he scoffs then smirks. When I shoot him an impatient glare, he has the decency to wipe the cockiness off his fuckin' face, but he doesn't move. However, his older brother grabs the lighter and is quick to hand it over.

I light up my smoke, take a deep drag, and return it. "Thanks, kid."

He pushes up his glasses, smiles awkwardly, and walks back to his grumbling brother.

"Does Anthony let you talk to him like that, Gabby?" Dee cackles.
"Cool it, for fuck's sake, Dominic," I warn. "That's my wife. You watch your mouth or I'll crack your goddamn head when I get home."

"I'd like to see you try," he chuckles darkly. And he thinks I sound like our father? "And for your information, I was mindin' my fuckin' business. Then that sweet wife of yours called me and said Elisa was a mess. Your wife or not, she ain't gonna call me for help and then curse me out! Put a damn leash on her already!"

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "You gonna tell me what the goddamn emergency is?"

"It's our sister! I need you to talk to her!"

"So, get her on the fucking phone!"

He speaks quietly to my wife, something about watching Lia, then there's a pause, followed by something breaking. And I groan, knowing that my motherfucker of a baby brother just kicked the bathroom door open. He laughs and says, "It didn't break!" and the hope of them not being at my house has faded pretty fucking quick.

That kid earlier—the girl at the bodega? She said big brothers can be a pain? Yeah well, same goes for younger brothers. Madonn'.

"Hey, ciccio! Everything good in New York?" It's suddenly my wife on the phone, and she sounds amused.

I smile, missing her. "Yeah..." I clear my throat. "How you doin', micina? TJ and Allegra good?"

"Yes. My mother took them for a few hours." She giggles. "Christ, your brother and Dani are so messed up. I bet this is like foreplay to them." I roll my eyes. "Oh! He got Elisa out—and...shit," she mutters, "I'm gonna
hafta clean the bathroom later. Dee just locked himself and Dani in—Elisa? You wanna talk to Anthony?"

My sister sobs into the phone. "An-Anthony, is that y-yoou?"

"Who else?" I ask, aggravated, and widen my free arm. "Can you please tell me what's wrong?"

"I'm—I'm pregnaaant," she wails.

I think I need to punch a fucking wall.

*Hey, if it happened to Jesus, maybe Dad will believe in Immaculate Conception when it's Elisa, too?*

This is just...the last thing...I wanna deal with right now. My father, Junior fuckin' Maisano, thinks his precious angioletto is a virgin. Of course, she's also unmarried. Spell that shit out: u-n-m-a-r-r-i-e-d.

*Beautiful. Just fucking beautiful.*

**Hummingbird's POV**

Junior and I exchange a look when Anthony returns inside. We've already been seated in the dining room, so I can't exactly ask what's up. We're too far away from each other, the men occupying one half of the table and the women and children the other.

Shaking his head at something, Anthony takes his seat next to Junior, who is seated next to Cullen. Then Misone at the head, Felix on his other side, Joseph... I think it's something with rank—the way they're placed, I mean. I don't know.

"Everything all right?" Junior thankfully asks Anthony the question I want answered.
Our son just laughs. The kind of laugh you'd let out when the apocalypse is near and there's nothing you can do but laugh. Weak, incredulous, funny, and a tad crazy.

"Anthony's losin' it," Julia sings, giggling with Misone's daughter.

I think I recall Julia saying it wouldn't be cool to hang out with a kid?

I'm about to shoot her a glare to shut her up, but Mini Cullen does that for me. With his older brother in tow, they sit down near Julia, and he starts flirting with her.

*I'm too hungry to care.*

And Junior's too busy talking to Felix, Cullen, and Misone to notice, which is probably a good thing.

We start eating, and I purse my lips, wondering if I'm too old-fashioned, or...I don't even know. But in this family, they evidently don't say grace before dinner...

My husband is so spoiled; he freezes for a second with a mouthful of food and grimaces slightly, though he's quick to hide it. But I'm on the same page—we're used to better food than this.

*Stella Mia isn't one of Las Vegas' most popular restaurants for nuthin'.*

Victoria and Didi cannot cook.

"The gravy's like paste." Mini Cullen makes a face and holds his fork upside down, yet the gravy stays on the silverware. "What the fuck?" He laughs.

"Ay!" Josie sucks her teeth. "Manners, boy."

Victoria looks embarrassed and angry, but she doesn't speak.
"Sorry, Nanny." Mini Cullen doesn't look sorry at all. "The food's delicious." He sends Victoria a sarcastic smile and two thumbs up.

She ignores that and faces Josie. "Thank you." For...for sticking up for Victoria, maybe?

"Blah." Josie waves her off, then leans close to me and mutters, "I'll cook next time, hon."

A laugh bursts through my lips, but I stifle it quickly. Conversation flows, and the more I get to know Josie...she reminds me of my mother. She's a hoot. She's loud—we all are, but she, Cullen, and Misone take the prize.

Between sharing memories of our connected pasts and getting to know each other better, dinner and dessert pass in a blur.

By the time brandy and coffee are served in the parlor, we're all stuffed, although I can see my husband's still a bit dismayed by the cooking. He, Cullen, and Misone all spark up cigars, and I take my seat next to Junior on the sofa, knowing very well I have a role to play. Because in our world, a man needs a woman to look like a man. Or more correctly, an obedient woman.

*I know when to bark, bite, and heel.*

Earlier, at dinner, I noticed that Cullen loved to brag about his oldest son; meanwhile, Marcus was bragging about Cullen's youngest. An odd dynamic, and even more so when I find out that the youngest actually lives with Josie—his grandmother.

"Kids—a beautiful thing." Misone smiles as his daughter sits down next to him. "My princess."
I smile at the girl and cross my legs, taking a sip of my brandy. She smiles back, shy. At the same time, Julia walks over and sits down on the other side of Junior.

"How many kids do you have?" Cullen asks Felix and Gianna.

While Gianna says, "Two," Felix shoots her a look and says, "Three." I can't help but glare at Gianna for being such a bitch. Even after all these years, she's still bitter about Francis, who certainly doesn't deserve her bullshit. *Not to mention she's embarrassing Felix right now.* "Joseph's our oldest," Felix goes on, inclining his head at Joseph. "Then we have Valentina—she lives in St. Louis with her husband. And Francis, our youngest."

"Gotta love the little knuckleheads." Cullen grins as his sons enter the parlor, looking flushed from the cold outside. "Where've you been?"

Mini Cullen shrugs and sits down across from me on a love seat. "None'ya." He's got an attitude.

"Oh!" Cullen throws his head back and laughs, but I think I detect a hint of anger there, too. God knows Junior would kick Anthony’s ass if our son said something like that. Then again, my husband's middle name is Discipline. "Whattabout you, Juniiuh?" Cullen jerks his chin. "Youse have Anthony and Julia?" He winks at our daughter.

"Who's Anthony?" Mini Cullen asks, having not been around during the introductions.

Anthony smirks from where he's seated in an armchair, his elbows on his knees and a cigarette dangling between his lips. "That'd be me, kid."

"Oh..." Mini Cullen frowns. "I thought you was just a driver."
"I swear to Christ!" Josie waves her fist at her grandson. "Go learn to be polite!"

I purse my lips to hide my amusement, seeing a bit of Dominic in Cullen's youngest. 'Cause Dominic...maybe he's smart enough not to mouth off near Junior, but...that's about it.

To get back on track, Junior answers Cullen's previous question with a simple, "We have two more at home. Elisa and Dominic."

"Four kids?" Cullen's eyes flick to me, and he looks impressed. "Wow...I mean, look at'chu, Isabella...you don't look like you—" He gestures with his hands to my body, to which I gotta swallow the beaming smile threatening to escape. "You're so..."

Victoria makes a noise, not happy, but she's being ignored.

"Look at you, my friend," Marcus croons and reaches over to squeeze Cullen's chin. "All tongue-tied. Reminds me of that one." He jerks his chin at Mini Cullen's brother, who is painfully awkward and shy.

And he's got a staring problem.

Hell, so does Mini Cullen; I realize they're both eyeing my cleavage.

"Isabella, a word?" Junior stands up, grabbing my arm. His jaw is all clenched. "Now."

Uh-oh. Someone's pissed.

Josie looks like she wants to high-five me.

**Anthony's POV**

While Dad disappears with Mom down the hall, I level Cullen's youngest kid with a look and jerk my chin toward the front door.
Leaving the parlor, I step outside in the cold and take a final drag from my smoke before flicking it away.

When the door opens and closes behind me, I turn to see the kid's joined me.

"What's up?" he asks blandly.

I don't say anything for a while, sparking up another smoke instead now that I have my own lighter back. But in my head...I'm pretty much shouting at the boy. During dinner, the shit he said to Julia? Forget about it. Dad was too busy with Cullen and Misone, and Mom...maybe she didn't care, but I care. I also found it fucking disrespectful how he eye-fucked my mother.

"You as much of a cooz-hound as your father?" I ask.

He scowls. "I ain't nothin' like him."

I blow out smoke outta my nose and flick away some ashes. "Coulda fooled me." I pause, remembering how Misone spoke of this one during dinner. Almost as if he was his son and not Cullen's. Actually...sort of like how Felix is with me. And I know my future, so...with Misone not having a son, and...well, wiseguys are always looking ahead. Misone won't live forever, and he'll want someone to take over.

"You got somethin' to say to me?" He jerks his thumb to his chest. "I'm freezin' my balls off out hea'."

"Stay away from my sister...o ti spacco la faccia—I'll break your face," I say with a shrug. "I heard you at dinner. What you said—how you like your eggs in the morning?" I smile darkly when he laughs. "Yeah, it's actually laughable." That shuts him up, and he tilts his head. "When you chase pussy like that, it makes you look like a pussy." Now it's my turn to laugh.
"Fuck you," he spits out. "What do you know? I ain't gonna apologize for appreciating the view. And your mom?" He whistles. "What can I say—she's got big, you know—" He holds his hands up, commenting on my mother's rack. "So, fuck it. You don't tell me what to do! Cuz maybe one day—all this—" he widens his arms "—maybe it'll be mine. I'll be boss—the skipper."

"Right," I chuckle. "Then you'll have my respect." I put a hand to my chest...before I close the distance and smack him upside the head. "But right now you're nobody, baby skip. Capisce?"

He winces and rubs the back of his neck. "Capisce," he whispers. "That fuckin' hurt, man."

"Good." I rein in my anger and grin instead, knowing I've been in his shoes. He's just a kid—knows nothing but thinks he knows everything. "And there's a difference between appreciating the view and chasing it," I point out. "A real man lets the pussy come to him instead."

He doesn't reply, but it looks like he's mulling that over.

So, I go on. "Don't let a piece'a cooz cloud your judgment. And—" I poke his chest with my finger, hard "—definitely not my little sister." I glare. "She don't mingle with little shits that think with their cocks."

"Oh, trust me—"

"I don't trust anybody who tells me to trust him." I shake my head at him.

Now he frowns. Sticking his hands in his pockets, he stares at his feet, and I think he's using his brain—thank Christ. When I was his age, I was getting started, too, and judging by how Misone treats this kid... Misone's got the opportunity to mold this cocky little shit into anything he wants, basically. Had my father—and Zio Alec—not been around, I would've only had Felix.

"A'ight..." He nods slowly and rubs his jaw. "And what about—"

"And don't let your goddamn mouth run all the time," I add impatiently. "Madonn', my pops was right." I muttered that under my breath, but it's still true. All the times Dad has told me to shut the fuck up and pay attention instead... "When you babble—go on like a fuckin' broad on the rag...how you gonna know what's up?" I speak with my hands. "How you gonna know your surroundings?" I picked that word, surroundings, instead of enemies...'cause he's still a kid. But if he's talking about being boss already? Eh, at least he knows some shit. "Keep your mouth shut and listen instead."

Looking over his shoulder, he peers through the window, into the parlor, where Misone and Cullen are laughing about something. Felix is laughing, too.

"You get what I'm sayin'?" I ask, stubbing out my smoke.

"Yeah... Yeah, I get it. Thanks." He looks serious for another beat before a sly grin takes over. "'S'got a nice ring to it, though, doesn't it? The skip."

I snort a laugh. "Do us all a favor and keep that to yourself for a few more years, a'ight?"

*May the broad who ends up with this kid have a big pair'a balls.*
Chapter 9

Junior's POV

By the time Isabella's done in the shower, I've brushed my teeth, put shaving cream on my face, and started to run the razor over my jaw. Keeping an eye on her in the mirror, I watch as she slips into the white robe—which she's most likely taking with us when we check out tomorrow—and covers her hair in a towel, twisting it at the top of her head.

"C'mea." I pat the marble counter and take a step back so she can hop up and sit in front of me. "Lemme look at'chu." I set down the razor and untie her robe, letting it slide open and down her shoulders. "I'm sorry," I mutter, ghosting my hand over her thigh. In several places on her body, I can see marks from my fingers, hands…shit, even my teeth. "You shoulda bopped me one." I frown.

"Did I ask you to stop, ciccino?" She goes for the razor and motions me close. I step between her parted legs and keep still as she begins to shave me. "It was so intense," she whispers, her eyes searching mine. "I loved it."

My frown deepens, but I say nothing. Make no mistake, the wife and I can be like animals in bed, but it's been years since I got so rough that I left marks behind. Maybe some redness that fades within a few hours, and soreness…but this? Cazzo. There's some dark bruising around her hips from my tight grip, bite marks along her thighs and neck...

Yesterday, I lost my head—my fuckin' mind.

I have an insanely beautiful wife, but back home no one dares to look at her in a suggestive way. People know who I am, and when I take Isabella
out to dinner or a show, they know better than to gawk at the woman on my arm. *Unless they're suicidal.*

No matter how harmless Cullen was yesterday at dinner, I lost my shit and became some fucking savage. I don't know. It's hazy, truth be told. But I do remember dragging her into the downstairs bathroom and fucking her.

I'd been so furious, Christ—and instead of taking it out on Cullen, punching the daylights outta him, I took it out on Isabella. Then, when we returned to our hotel room last night, I'd had my way with her *twice.* And maybe we were discreet and quick at the Misone house, but here in our room, not so much.

"Up." Isabella taps my chin. Tilting up, I feel her moving the razor along my throat. "You know you have nothin'a worry about, right?"

I crack a small smile. "Otherwise I wouldn't let you hold a blade to my throat, hummingbird." She giggles, and I caress my way higher up her thighs, moving inward. "Yesterday just caught me off guard. I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing," she chides. The raspy sound of the razor against my skin pauses while she rinses the blade under water. "If you don't gimme'a repeat performance of last night soon..." She shivers. "...I'll be disappointed."

*This fucking woman...*

"You're not saying this to make me feel better?" Because I know she'd do that. However, I also know she's never been one to shy away from the truth.

"I'm not that charitable about my orgasms," she quips with a glint in her eye, shaving me above my upper lip. "If something feels good, count on me to tell you."
My mouth quirks up, and I study her as my thumbs brush over the lips of her pussy.

"That, for instance," she says breathily and swallows, "feels good." But her focus remains on her task. "Mannaggia, Juniuh...do you want me to nick you?"

"No." I step even closer, the towel around my hips tenting a little. "If you get me with the razor, I'll have to punish you." She shudders at that, and heat creeps up her chest. Which obviously draws my attention to her delectable tits. "These belong to me..." I cup them in my hands, feeling their weight.

She squirms and bites her lip. "I'm—I'm almost done." And then she does it. It's barely noticeable, but I still felt it. A small cut below my jaw. I pinch her nipples and shoot her a glowering look. "I'm so sorry." Liar.

She's goading me.

Reining in my temper, I stay still as she drags a wet towel over my cheeks and jaw, wiping away any traces of shaving cream.

"I was just a little distracted," she adds airily. "I kept thinking about how Cullen stared at me yesterday." She raises a brow.

*She did not just say that.*

But she did.

Oh, she fucking did.

I'm immobile as I struggle not to lash out on her; meanwhile, Isabella licks her lips and leans close, nuzzling my throat.
"What do you think he'd like to do to me?" she asks innocently, and I feel the tip of her tongue ghosting over the spot she got me with the razor. "Hmm?"

Swallowing hard, I gnash my teeth together and grip her thighs. Hard. "Don't push me, Isabella," I warn in a whisper. "I must've fucked up somewhere along the road if you think you can talk to me that way."

She shivers and keeps dropping small kisses to my neck and jaw. She hums.

"Oh, you talk, Juniuh."

Fuckin' enough already. I grab her jaw and squeeze it, forcing her to face me, and I level her with a murderous glare. "You wanna repeat that?" I ask softly, my own jaw ticking with tension.

My wife knows I'm a silent killer; when I shout and bitch, it's all good.

But when I get quiet? When I get rigid and soft-spoken?

_Fear me._

Isabella's eyes widen. "Did I—did I take it too far?" She squeaks.

I stare at her, at her beautiful skin, her big brown eyes, her full lips, and...and I wonder how flawless her skin will be by the time I'm done showing her who wears the pants in our marriage.

"Just a bit," I whisper, a sinister smile stretching across my lips. "Now get on the fucking bed."

Now...this time, she obeys like a good little wife. There's no stalling or snarky commenting or taunting. There's a pinch of fear in her posture as she hops down and hurries outta the bathroom.
Washing my face then putting on some aftershave, I take a few seconds to get my shit in order, 'cause as much as I intend to discipline her, I don't wanna lose control—much. I haven't lost control in a long time; I don't wanna start now.

When I'm done, I grab my smokes from the pants I wore yesterday and light one up. Then I secure the towel around my hips, swipe up my comb, and leave the bathroom.

*Now, that's beautiful.*

Isabella's seated on the edge of the bed, naked, and she looks a little scared. *Bene.* Running the comb through my hair, I come to a stop in front of her, then toss the comb on the nightstand.

"I don't wanna hear a word outta you until I say otherwise—we clear?" I take a drag from my smoke and flick some ashes into a glass of water on the nightstand.

I peer down at my wife, smirking a bit at the fire in those gorgeous eyes. In her head, she can fight me as much as she wants, as long as I don't hear about it.

She doesn't want to obey me right now, but she does. She presses her lips together in a tight line and nods, to which I grin and cup her cheek.

"You don't gotta close your mouth, though. Just don't talk." I brush my thumb across her lips and she fucking bites me. Just enough for it to sting. In return, I hiss a curse and give her cheek a smack. "Cut that shit out!" I growl as she glares up at me. "Remove my towel and put that mouth to better use. *Now, Isabella.*"

All while probably cursing me to the fiery pits of hell internally, she loosens the towel and drops to the floor. Then she lowers her gaze to my cock, grasps it, and puts me in her mouth.
I groan and take a pull from my smoke, slowly fucking her warm, wet mouth. And I go on like that until I'm down to the filter and put out the smoke in the glass. With both hands free, I touch her wherever I want, and I'm far from gentle.

She wanted it rough? I give her that and then some. When I pull her hair, I see her wince; when I reach down to palm her tits, I squeeze and pinch until she whimpers.

"Enough." I yank her away and point to the bed. "Get on all fours."

I follow once she's in position and give her ass a good fucking whack.

"Ow! Cazzo, Juniuh!" She hisses and rubs her left ass cheek. "That hurt!"

"Stai zitta." I tell her to shut up. Slapping away her hand, I kneel behind her and knead the soft flesh of her ass, my cock growing harder than it already was. "Maybe you should think of a good apology instead."

Isabella is usually a perfect wife; sure, I give her some leniency, 'cause a woman like her can't be tamed fully, but that's a good thing. If I'd wanted boring, I could've married a cold fish. Or a dog. Or I could've kept Jane alive. But goading me like she did in the bathroom? Fuck that. I have limits. I'm a possessive, territorial, controlling bastard, and just the thought of Isabella with another man makes my blood boil.

Grabbing the base of my cock, I guide it to her pussy and shove it deep inside, causing Isabella to cry out. I groan in pleasure, shivers running down my spine. My fingers dig into her hips as I fuck the disrespect outta her.

"This was what'chu wanted, wasn't it?" I grunt, ramming my hips forward. Our skin slaps together, and I love watching her ass jiggle. "A repeat of yesterday?"
"T-too much," she chokes out. Yet, she's fucking soaked...

"No," I laugh, outta breath, and push her down on the mattress. I fuck her into it. "You wanted me to lose it." I hiss and lean over her, my teeth nipping at her shoulder. "This is what you get—so, fucking take it."

Julia once told me I can be too "bossy" when it comes to her mother, and she rolled her eyes and said I was a victim of my generation.

Fucking ridiculous. Do I look like a victim? But...anyway, I got the message—her opinion. And yeah, I'm what today's kids would call old-fashioned, but I ain't the only one. In this hotel room, there's another person who was also born in the '50s.

We were raised by people who grew up during the war...

Isabella and I don't buy into this new shit; it's a whole lotta bitching, in our opinion. It was simpler in the old days. Everything had structure, and people knew their roles.

No matta’.

Flipping my wife over, I push my cock back in quickly and gather her hands above her head. The wet sounds from Isabella's pussy embarrass her; I can tell. She doesn't wanna be turned on, but she can't help it. And I milk that shit for all it's worth.

"You love this, bell'uccellino." Dipping down, I suck one of her nipples into my mouth hard. My teeth nip, my tongue tastes. My movements never cease; I keep thrusting my cock in and out of her. Deep, deep, deep into her wet pussy. Muscles straining, aching, tightening. Her inner walls squeeze me more and more the closer she gets.

"No," she lies, panting. "Are—are you gonna let me come?"
"I don't know." I haven't decided yet, honestly. "And I told you to shut the fuck up. Unless you wanna apologize." I speed up and grab at her harder. She winces when I suck on her neck, when I bite it. "Remember this the next time," I pant, "the next time you wanna play games wit'me."

"I'm sorry," she cries.

"That's better—we're getting there." I swivel my hips, grinding deeper into her. Hot breaths mixing, sweat beading, legs tangled, bodies sliding together... She arches into me, pressing her breasts against me. Her taut nipples tease me, against my skin, against my chest hair, and she drives me in-fucking-sane.

She lifts her hips when I slide in, taking all of me. "I'm sorry—please, please, please..."

"Yeah...beg me." This time I go for her lips, crashing mine to hers in a bruising kiss. "Beg your husband. Apologize to him."

"I teased you," she gasps, then moans. "I took it too far. I'm sorry!"

"Fuck." I swallow and scrub a hand down my face. Isabella's skin is already reddening in places. "Look what'chu make me do to you. This is your fault." The next time I push in, I grind harder, stimulating her clit, too.

My hooded eyes devour her.

"I'm sorry," she mewls.

I nod and kiss her, believing her. "Tell me you love me."

"You know I do. I love you—ti amo tanto." She gets clingy, holding on to me, and I fucking love it. It's how I always want her—totally dependent on me. Needing me. Wanting me.
Sometimes, when Felix fights with Gianna, he makes her beg for money—even if it's just to buy groceries. I can't do that, 'cause...well, it's thanks to Isabella that Stella runs so well—that it brings in so much scratch. But I have my own ways of turning my wife into a good girl again...

Nevertheless, it does piss me off that she sometimes—even though it's rare—forces me to go so far as to leave bruises on her body.

"Don't disrespect me again," I whisper, dropping my forehead to hers. "I hate hurting you." My movements slow down a bit. I caress and stroke instead of pinch and squeeze.

"Prometto," she promises, burrowing closer to me. She watches as I swipe my tongue over the pad of my thumb before bringing it between our bodies and down to her clit. That makes her flutter around me. Her breathing hitches and I know she's close.

"You wanna come, amore?" I nuzzle her temple and inhale her scent, shuddering. My balls fucking ache.

The wife nods against my neck and adds some begging, which definitely scores her some points.

Eager to get her there before I lose it, I apply pressure to her clit and fuck her deeper.

It's only a few seconds later that I feel her pussy clamping down, her muscles squeezing my dick.


She falls apart with a scream, and I hold my breath as I come undone, too. It takes all my strength not to close my eyes, but I manage.
Watching her face mid-orgasm only prolongs my own release. My neck, my shoulders, my back, my abs...everything goes rigid as my cock pulses inside of her. I thrust lazily, spilling into her in three hot streams.

"Oh, damn, damn, damn," she whimpers, outta breath. Her body goes limp under me, and as soon as I'm done, I can't help but collapse on top of her.

*Madonna mia, complaining about my aching back now will probably not sound very sexy.*

But fuck it, I'm not a teenager anymore—I'm taking a nap.

~oOo~

An hour later, Isabella and I are ready to part ways for the evening. This morning while I lounged around and watched some Discovery, she, Julia, and Gianna were at some spa with Misone's and Cullen's wives. Shopping followed. Then they met up with Josie Sposato for a late lunch before Isabella and our daughter returned to the hotel. Now I think they're going shopping some more before dinner at Misone's restaurant.

"Wear one of your scarf things, too," I tell her, adjusting the cuff links on my navy blue suit. "You got money?"

"Yeah..." She's busy inspecting her neck in the mirror. "You had to bite me, *ciccino*?"

"You had to be a fuckin' brat?" I cock a brow and grab the gray tie the wife picked out for me. "Youse got a driver, by the way?" No way in hell am I letting Isabella and Julia out in New York City without security. Especially not when Jersey's on their way over for the sit-down.

"Yes, Juniuh," she answers patiently. "We had Didi's driver this morning, too." She fluffs her hair—does her shit, and makes sure no bruises show.
She's always in dresses, but since it's so fucking cold here, she's wearing thin, black tights under that green dress. "Christ," she hisses as she steps into a pair of high heels. "I'm so sore."

*Don't do the crime if you can't do the time, toots.*

Walking over to the dresser, I grab my wallet and pull out a wad of cash for Isabella. She may say she has money already, but you never know. She's been talking about buying a new coat...

"You're lucky I didn't take out my belt," I say, putting the cash by her purse.

"Whatta comedian you are. You've never used a damn belt." She snorts and giggles.

I shrug. It's how my pops did it. You messed up? You got the belt.

"Even with our kids, you've... I mean, you've gotten rough with the boys a time or two, whatever..." Humming, Isabella walks over to me and hugs my middle. "I'm not saying this to be disrespectful, honey, but you've never really—"

I cut her off before she can finish. "There's a first time for everything." I kiss the spot between her brows. "Quit pushing me."

She sighs and makes a move to step back, but I hold her fast. I kiss her and give her sore ass cheek a squeeze, and she hisses a curse while I chuckle and back off.

"Mean." She juts out her chin at me, but there's a glint in her eye. "Evil, even."

"I can be." I wink at her, then it's my turn with the mirror. I fix my tie, put on my shoes—I tilt my head. "Did you shine my shoes?"
"Mmhmm."

"Grazie mille." I close the distance and give her a hard smooch. "I gotta go. Have fun tonight, but don't be out too late." When I get back, I want her to be here. "And you can reach Anthony if it's an emergency."

"I know." She smiles up at me and wipes away her lipstick. "And you be safe. We don't got anything to worry about, right?"

"Not a thing." I touch her chin, smiling. "It'll just be a bunch of fuckers trying to say everything while saying nothing."

"What?" she chuckles.

"Eh..." I wave it off. Sit-downs aren't my thing, really. The tension is high, and while I enjoy the thrill they bring, they can also be fucking boring. They're all about getting your point across by using few words. You talk in riddles, and you smile at the mamaluke you wanna kill.

"All right...um—" she tucks a piece of hair behind her ear "—where are youse going, anyway?"

"Eclipse?" I reply, pocketing my wallet and smokes. I make sure my nine is tucked into my pants, too. "It's a club. A friend of Misone's owns it."

"Another strip club," she says flatly. "Of course. What else would it be?"

"Who said it's a strip club?" I ask, widening my arms. "It's not!" A little white lie. It is a strip club, but...no matta'. Thing is, my wife isn't worried about that anymore, thank fucking Christ—not when it comes to me, at least.

Anthony, however...
Our son adores his wife—Gabby is everything to him. He's also faithful. He'd never do her dirty. But...every now and then, he likes a lap dance. It's nothing.

*I hope.*

It was different with me, 'cause...Isabella was once a stripper, and it's not a time that comes with only fond memories. A part of me resents strip clubs, and I stay away from the dancers, but *mannaggia,* it's part of the job. Nothing I can do.

Regardless, lap dances aren't for me, but if I wanted one, the woman I'm married to still has the fucking moves.

Isabella worries, though. 'Cause a few months ago, Anthony stumbled home sometime before dawn—drunk enough to forget that he doesn't live at home anymore. But I guess we can be thankful he forgot, since his shirt was covered in stripper dust.

I don't know...I got a good laugh out of it. It was funny—my baby boy drunk off his ass. It was a sight. And I think he'd been out celebrating. Either a heist or...maybe it was when Allegra was born? I forget. But my wife is hell-bent on believing Anthony's gonna cross the line. Or...maybe not believing, but fearing?

He won't. It's only sometimes, and he just sits there and enjoys it—doesn't touch. Then he takes that hard-on and goes home to fuck his wife.

*He better not cross the line, 'cause I'd never hear the end of it.*

"Do you promise it's not a strip club?" Isabella asks, hands on her hips.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "La mia parola non è abbastanza?" I ask her if my word's not good enough. "I told you. It's not a strip club. I
promise." Her shoulders slump. "What—you don't believe me?" I widen my arms again, irritated.

"Come ti pare, Juniuh. Come ti pare." She waves me off, and if I had a nickel for every time she's said that... *Whatever you say, Junior. Whatever you say.* It's a standard Isabella Maisano line. "Just...keep an eye on him?"

I neither confirm nor deny, instead checking once more that I have everything. Then I crush Isabella in a hug, knowing how to lighten her mood, and kiss her forcefully. "Love you, love you, love you," I mumble into the kiss. "My beautiful queen. I'll see you later tonight, all right?"

"Okay," she sighs and puckers her lips for another kiss.

I give it to her, and then I gotta go. I'm meeting Felix, Joseph, and Anthony for dinner before we head over to Eclipse.

Leaving the hotel room, I'm a little surprised to see Anthony leaning against a wall, waiting for me. I'd expected him to be downstairs instead.

"Is Mom alive?" he asks wryly.

I frown...before realizing he must've heard us before. So, I snort and start walking for the elevators.

"Where's your sister?" I ask.

"Gift shop."

I hum and step inside the elevator.

"Seriously, is Mom a'ight?"

I give Anthony a look. "What the fuck is wrong wit'chu? Of course she's all right." I shake my head and bring out my comb to run it through my hair.

*Lookin' sharp, Maisano. Lookin' sharp.*
The reflection in the elevator doors tells as much. I may be pushing forty-seven in a few months, but, like my wife claims, I'm like a fine Italian fuckin' wine. I only get better with age.

*Lower back issues notwithstanding.*

In this cold weather, my thigh—from when I got shot at the Dunes all those years ago—has been a bit of a pain, too, but I don't let that show.

Once we reach the lobby, I tell Anthony to go on outside and wait for the valet to bring the rental around, and then I head for the gift shop, wanting a smooch from my princess before I go.

"Dad!" Julia spots me the second I enter, her eyes lighting up.

I grin, although it fades a little when I see I'm basically surrounded by glass shelves and glass cases...everything's glass. And breakable.

"You break that; you pay for it, *principessa.*" I point to the figurine she's holding.

"I'm *gonna* pay for it." She chuckles and rolls her eyes as I kiss the top of her head. "It's for Nonno and Nonna—for the going-away party. See?" She shows it to me, two crystal cats with their tails linked. "I'm gonna buy something fun, too, but I thought this was cute."

"They'll love it." I nod, pulling out my wallet. When she rants about clothes made outta hemp—*my little hippie kid*—I make her use her allowance, but if it's for her grandparents who're moving to Florida, I'm all for pitching in. "You gonna get something for Esme, too?"

"Already did." She bobs her head, smiling like a princess when I give her some cash. "Thank you, Daddy." Money earns me a tight hug. "Are Mom and Gianna coming down soon? The gangsta' wives will be hea' any minute."
"Oh-ho!" I crack up. "Watch that mouth, you." I grasp her jaw, still chuckling, and kiss her nose. "Yes, Mom's on her way. I'm gonna head out."

"All right. I'm done here." She walks over to the register and the saleslady who smiles too wide.

On the counter, I spy a small case with jewelry, and I pause, thinking. The wife loves that shit, and I do love to spoil her... My eyes flick around, noticing there's no camera in the gift shop. In the lobby, there are a few, but these aren't eyes in the skies like in Vegas. These are aimed—nothing like the bulbs back home that don't miss a thing—and they're aimed at the reception desk, the doors, and the hotel bar.

"I wanna see the diamond bracelets," I say, placing an arm around Julia's shoulders. The saleslady is quick to obey, and she opens the glass case with a key and presents the bracelet collection. I press a kiss to Julia's hair. "Pick one for your mother."

"How romantic of you," she teases me.

The saleslady continues to wrap up Julia's purchase... She's not stupid; I can see she's keeping an eye on the display. But...she's not smart, either, is she? She should be watching the case. Simple fuckin' diversionary tactic.

"I'd like to write a note," I add musingly. "You got envelopes for these?" I jerk my chin at the small stand with cards next to the register.

"Of course!" The saleslady turns around to open a drawer...

Julia's eyes nearly pop out and her cheeks heat up, but she says nothing as her daddy quickly reaches into the case and swipes up two pairs of diamond earrings.
"This one," Julia squeaks, pointing to one of the bracelets. She's too fucking cute. "I think—I think Mom would l-like it."

"Molto bene." I nod and tell the saleslady to wrap it like a gift.

In return, the saleslady gives me an envelope, and she checks to see that all bracelets are still there. I stifle my snicker. Not that the woman is suspicious; she's only a good employee, keeping track of the valuables. Just...not good enough.

"Can you have it delivered to room 519?" I ask, bending over slightly to scribble a quick note to my wife.

Wear this tonight when I get back, hummingbird. Only this.

All my love,

Your husband

"Certainly, sir. Any specific time, or right now?" The saleslady returns the bracelet display to the case and locks it up.

"Right now, thanks." I fork over the cash to pay for the bracelet. "We done hea'?" I look down to Julia, and she nods silently, still blushing profusely. I grin and slide an extra twenty over the counter. "For good service." And with a wink, I usher my daughter out of the gift shop.

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God," Julia chants under her breath, and I guide her over to a seating area near the hotel bar.

In my periphery, I catch Felix and Joseph stepping out of the elevator, so that's good. I'm not too late. What I also see is a security camera that is, in fact, aimed at the gift shop, but a big marble pillar blocks the view of half the counter, glass case with diamond jewelry included.
"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God."

I chuckle and sit down with Julia on a leather couch. "Something wrong, sweetheart?"

She looks up to me, eyes wide. "You just—you just," she splutters.

Checking that no one's paying attention, I pull out the small diamond studs, saving the drop-shaped earrings for someone else, and wordlessly replace Julia's silver hoops.

She makes another squeaking sound. "Am I supposed to say thank you?"


"Th-thank you," she stammers. But a hint of amusement appears now, too, and soon she's giggling nervously. "That was...I mean—Daddy!" She slaps my arm.

I bark out a laugh and hug her to me before getting up. "Just wait for Mom here. She'll be down soon." I straighten my suit and nod at Felix and Joseph; they nod back and keep walking for the doors. "Order a soda or something."

"Okay..." Julia blows out a breath, offering a small crooked smile. "You're so not like other dads."

I smile, hiding the worry that just flared up in my chest. "Good thing or bad?"

She purses her lips, then huffs a laugh, then shakes her head, then sighs, then smiles genuinely. "Good," she finally decides, nodding firmly. "Definitely good."
"Good," I echo, relieved.

A few minutes later, I've said goodbye to Julia and I step outside as Anthony rolls up in our rental. Felix sits shotgun, and I pile in after Joseph in the back.

"Turn this shit down." Felix changes the station from the horrible hip-hop kids listen to these days. It's not fucking music.

"Tesoro," I say, retrieving the other pair of earrings. I toss them onto his lap, then lean back in my seat again. "For Gabby—for a rainy day."

Anthony has learned the power of a vacation—how late nights and broken promises can be forgotten by a weekend away. But jewelry's important, too; it melts away anger.

"Um..." Anthony raises his brows at me in the rearview. "You bought diamonds for my wife?"

"Chrissakes...someone should!" I shout. "Whose shoulder do you think Gabriella cries on when you don't come home? That's right, my wife's!" I point to my chest. "It ruins my fun, and I get crap for it—kids come runnin' as soon as shit's not gravy." My kids, daughter-in-law, godchildren, nieces, nephews...they're always welcome, but could they fucking call first? "It was—" I wave a hand "—it was Buy One, Get One Free. Basically a steal." I laugh to myself and slap my thigh. "I crack myself up."

Anthony chuckles. "Uh, a'ight. Thanks...Dad."

"You're welcome." I nod. "Now put on some Sinatra—God rest that genius's soul." I do the Sign of the Cross, still sad that he died last year.

Isabella wants to fly out to Palm Springs and put flowers on his grave.
Maybe I'll take her next time I fuck up.

**Anthony's POV**

At eight PM that night, we're checked for guns in the door at Eclipse.

We're told that Phil Battaglia—the Jersey boss—John Drasso—the underboss—and two other goons, security, are already here.

And just as we're about to enter the club area, Misone and Cullen arrive. I assume their muscle is already inside.

"Anthony!" Cullen grins and claps me on the shoulder. "How you doin'?"

"Good, sir." I nod and shake his hand. "You?"

"At this place? Always good." He grins widely and passes me to greet Dad, Felix, and Joey.

The greetings always take forever—handshake this, kiss on the cheek that, boisterous small talk here, slap on the shoulder there. But we get through it, and our group moves into the club area, Cullen quickly motioning for a corner booth. Fingers are snapped, and a waitress appears outta nowhere.

It's a fairly large club, though not bigger than Dawn and Twilight back home. But it's New York. A bit more crowded than it is in the desert. However, the establishment still screams of money, and I can tell it's a gold mine.

The Saturday crowd has barely begun to trickle in, but I bet it'll be full soon enough.

"And here are our friends from the Garden State." Misone is all smiles as the four men from Jersey arrive at the table. I notice that my father tends to watch Misone the most.
Since I'm essentially no one, I take a seat in the next booth before I can get dismissed, and a few other juiceheads follow. Two beefy fuckers from Jersey, one from New York…but with a subtle glance around the club, I can tell Misone's got a handful of guys here.

With the music blaring, I had no choice but to take the closest seat to Misone's booth, which means I have my back to them. But at least I can hear what's being said now.

"I'm Paulie." One of the Jersey goons points to himself, apparently expecting greetings. "This is Li'l Frank." He jerks his chin at his buddy; meanwhile, I'm missing an important convo at the booth behind me.

The New York guy stays quiet, just sipping his drink.

I don't reply, either. This ain't a fuckin' social gathering. It's a sit-down.

"Youse gonna tell me your names?" Paulie nods at me and the New Yorker.

I roll my eyes, then point to my chest. "Al Capone. Now shut the fuck up."

*Christ.*

The New York guy snickers but still says nothing, and I tune into Misone making idle chitchat while the waitress arrives with the last drink order. I get my Jack and Coke, too.

When Misone directs his little talk about the weather by saying it's warmer out west, it finally begins as he casually adds, "Speaking of the West, I hear youse been having fun in Nevada, Phil." He laughs a little. "Funny I didn't hear about that little business trip, huh?"

Phil is seated right behind me, so I hear when he clears his throat. "With all due respect, Marcus, there's nothing to tell."
Whatta load’a shit.

**Junior's POV**

I smile into my glass of scotch in response to Phil's comment—there's nothing to tell? All right. This oughta be interesting.

"It wasn't business," John Drasso clarifies.

Felix cocks a brow. "It sure felt like business when Reno was suddenly filled with tourists outta Jersey who were there to make money—so far from home."

Phil shakes his head, looking baffled. "No..." He frowns before turning to Misone. "I called you because one of my capos went out there—not to work—and he hasn't returned home." He faces Felix once more and glares. "I don't know what game youse'a playing, but this is bullshit." He stabs the table with a finger. "Let's be frank—we all know Emilio isn't coming back, and I have Vinny Malletta on the other side of the river very distraught over losing his only son—his only child. Are you really going to sit here and deny you haven't even seen Emilio in Nevada?"

I mull that over, wondering if Phil's really clueless.

"How is Vinny nowadays?" I ask.

My bet...I mean, when Vinny was boss, it made sense for him to give the seat to Emilio. Yet, he didn't. He gave it to a man he's only related to through his wife, and Emilio didn't even make underboss. I'm betting resentment and jealousy sent Emilio to Vegas, but a capo acting alone? Without approval from the boss? Eh, it's hardly unheard of, but it doesn't exactly go unpunished.

It's blatant disrespect. Not to mention it's a threat to Phil to have a capo who ventures out on his own. If that's what Emilio did.
"He's old and miserable," Phil answers flatly. "His wife—poor Guiliana, my aunt—died last year. Losing Emilio on top of it? Forget about it."

John looks stone-faced, blank. "Question is where he is." He shifts his gaze to me.

_I thought that was already established._

My mouth quirks up, but I say nothing.

"No, the question is why he was out there in the first place," Joseph says, speaking up for the first time.

"That's none of your business, but it wasn't work." Phil sneers. "Are we not allowed to go on vacation?" He scoffs. "Youse don't exactly own the state of Nevada." Facing Misone he says, "Would I go behind your back, Marcus?"

Misone smiles. "I don't know—would you?"

"Is Emilio coming home?" Cullen asks curiously. "Just to clarify."

I shake my head no. "Poor kid got lost on his way to the Grand Canyon."

Phil looks like he's about to explode. "Who took care'a him?"

Felix nods for me to answer.

"A friend of ours." There's no way I'm mentioning Anthony's name, but by saying it's a friend of ours, I make it clear that the responsibility lies with a made man. Dominic wouldn't have the right to go after a man who's got his stripes.

As far as I know, Anthony did clip Emilio, but I'm almost certain that Dominic was about to end him anyway. Probably with his fists, 'cause
that's just how my youngest son is. He plays with his victims, whereas Anthony just wants it over with.

"It was within our rights, Phil," Felix reminds him. "Emilio wasn't there taking in the sights. He was lookin'a branch out."

"And he didn't act alone," Joseph points out.

Misone hums and fingers the rim of his glass. "Seems like you gotta management problem, Phil. Can't keep 'em in line. What's up?"

That was a jibe directed at the underboss as much as it was at the boss.

John grits his teeth, but Phil shakes his head, denying John a comment.

I don't trust that shifty fucker for shit. John Drasso, I mean. Back in Vegas, we heard both Emilio's name and John's on the streets. But...if my guess is correct, that Emilio was pissed about his "low" rank, then he might've tried to throw John under the bus by spreading his name around.

I hope that's how it is, 'cause going after Jersey won't end well. My family isn't big enough right now to start a war, and we'd have beef with New York, to boot.

But considering how John evidently can't even look at Misone without giving away his feelings of hatred, I'd say we're safe. If John wants something outside'a Jersey, it's New York. Not Nevada. And not that any of it is gonna happen.

The day Jersey moves in on New York and succeeds is the day I'll suck a cock.

Phil lets Misone's insult fly over his head and states, "If Emilio went to Nevada in an attempt to take from youse—"
"There's no if about it." I empty my drink and slam the glass down on the table. "It's taken us two crews and almost a month to clean up the mess Emilio Malletta left behind in Reno. And let's not forget the business he tried to steal from us in Vegas." Reining in my anger, I sit back and light up a smoke.

Phil holds up his hands. "I didn't give him the green light for that shit." He turns to Misone. "I know our arrangement, Marcus. I wouldn't risk my neck for a few extra bucks from Las Vegas."

Cullen inclines his head when Misone doesn't answer. "Whattabout you, Drasso?" He jerks his chin at John.

"All due respect," John bites out, "Nevada doesn't have anything I want."

Felix and I chuckle at the motherfucker.

Cullen barks out a laugh. "Oh! Listen to you..." His shoulders shake with laughter. "Maybe I'm wrong, but I was under the impression that money's green in Vegas, too."

*Greener than an Irish fuckin' leprechaun.*

"Joseph, what you said—Emilio didn't act alone..." Misone brings us back on track and narrows his eyes at John.

"It's impossible." Joseph agrees. "We lost a lot of money—" he raises a brow at Phil "—and our guys had to put out too many fires for only one man being responsible. Besides, Emilio isn't the only one who's moved out there permanently."

That's right. Anthony took care of one of Emilio's buddies, too, and I know Dominic and Mario clipped two more.
"They had some fun in Reno before we realized what was going on." As agreed upon earlier, Joseph lists several business ventures shot to hell, although a few of them aren't really true.

But squeezing some money outta Jersey never killed nobody. Plus, it's an agreement between Felix and Misone. After all, Misone wants a "little" something brokering the sit-down tonight.

"Youse're looking for compensation," Misone states.

"Naturally." Felix nods.

I clear my throat. "And retribution."

Misone's nodding at that, too. "Of course, of course..."

By now, Phil's nearly purple with anger, but there's little he can do. Even if he had nothing to do with Emilio's bullshit, Phil is the boss. Emilio was part of the Jersey family, which means Phil has to answer for it.

If he knows what's best for him, he'll wipe his hands clean. He'll agree to our terms and walk away.

"We also want to know if Emilio had anyone else helping him," I say, looking to John. "I doubt the kid came up with this on his own."

He narrows his eyes at me. "Are you implying something? I don't give a flying fuck about Nevada—like I said." He shrugs.

"Don't worry—I won't hold that against you." I smirk and flick away some ashes. "But I was only telling you, 'cause...a man in your position oughta know, right?"

The boss is the boss, but we all know it's the underboss's job to make sure shit runs smoothly. He's the one who stands between the man who
makes decisions and the capos. The boss has no time, or desire, to deal with petty crap.

"I can only speak for myself, of course—" I place a hand on my chest "— but I know what our capos are up to. Because that's my job." That said, I flag down a waitress at the next table and order a drink, leaving John to his silent seething.

"What can I get you, handsome?" The blond waitress asks, dragging a finger down the lapel of my suit.

I look down to my chest, then cock a brow at the blonde. "For one, you get your fuckin' finga' off me. Then you can run and get me another scotch."

Cullen chuckles at the pouting waitress. "Sorry, hon. Juniuh hea's only into brunettes. But I got room for you later." He winks at her. "Get me a scotch, too."

She runs off with a "Yes, sir," and I face the men again.

**Anthony's POV**

When Misone suggests that he, Felix, and Phil go to the office to hammer out a monetary settlement for the business we've lost in Vegas, the sit-down is pretty much over.

Phil and John have promised to get to the bottom of this; they'll find out if Emilio had someone else helping him, and if he did, Phil has agreed to deliver that motherfucker to us.

Phil's wiping his hands clean of this mess, just wanting it over and done with.
John and the other Jersey boys head to the bar, looking none too pleased with the evening, and I move over to Dad's booth.

Cullen and Joey are there, too, and they're talking lawyer shit. I think Cullen's also a lawyer, so...

Felix advised me last year to let Joseph teach me more about that crap, and I suppose that's smart. I just don't look forward to it.

"Everything good?" I ask Dad. "I heard most of it, but..."

He nods and takes a sip from his drink. "Yup. It went well."

Satisfied with that, I get comfortable and look to the stage where two strippers have just started their shift.

_Madonn'._

They're too skinny for my taste, but I do dig the, uh, outfits?

There's something sinfully sexy about a good girl letting out her inner freak. Like, if she wears white—something innocent—and then takes that shit off to reveal something slutty.

I don't wanna ask my wife to do that, though. The last thing I want is to make her insecure, 'cause she really has nothing to worry about. I'm too fucked-up in love with her for that. And _mannaggia_, the sex with her blows my mind. I just...like the visual?

If Gabriella put on a skimpy schoolgirl outfit with fuck-me heels, I'd probably come before she even touched me.

Basically, Gabriella walks the walk and talks the talk, but she doesn't wear the outfit.

I snort to myself, wondering if that even made sense.
Whatever.

Sipping my Jack and Coke, I watch as one of the dancers bends over, letting the other dancer dip low and slide down her ruffled panties. They've got the whole pigtails-and-lollipops shit going on.

"Is everything cool wit'chu and Gabby?" Pops asks, shattering the image of my wife in pigtails.

"Uh-huh." I loosen my tie and chug down the last of my drink. "Of course. Why wouldn't it be?" Ha! One of the strippers nearly fell down, but her friend grabbed her. Some patrons holler and shout, throwing money on the stage. I chuckle.

But the chuckle dies when Dad grabs my jaw and forces me to face him.

"I told your mother she's got nothin'a worry about," he says, only for me to hear. "Was I lying to her?"

I frown. "What?"

He gives me his bitchface, which means he's run outta patience—as if he's ever had it. "Normally I wouldn't care. I know the world we live in, and if you're only putting up a front to look better, it's all good—but I didn't raise a fuckin' cooz-hound."

"What the fuck?" I flinch away and glare at him. "You outta your goddamn mind if you think I'd cheat on Gabriella."

He shrugs. "You was lookin' like—"

"Never you mind how I fucking look at strippers," I spit out, sick of his holier-than-thou personality.

He grinds his teeth together, his jaw clenching, and he jerks his chin toward the exit. "Let's have a word. Outside."
Laughing at his audacity, I follow him out of the club and promise myself not to shut up just because he's my father.

God knows I love him, but for hating drama so much, he sure as hell goes looking for it a lot.

He always tells us to mind our business, yet he's sticking his nose in mine now?

When Dad stops on the sidewalk, he adjusts his cuff links and waits for me to catch up.

"You wanna have words?" I smile and widen my arms. "Here I am."

Smoke dangling between his lips, he huffs a chuckle and shakes his head. "Knock off the attitude, son. You don't wanna take me on." He pauses, taking a drag. "I was merely asking because I don't want your family drama to take a single fucking step into my house. Capisce?" He gets in my face to stare me down, but I'm not intimidated. Yet...a small voice predicts. "If you're only looking—or getting a lap dance every now and then—"

"You're blowing this up!" I shout in disbelief. Seriously, what the fuck? "I can't believe this! And what happened to my business being mine, huh?"

"Lower your voice," he threatens and cups my neck. He squeezes, 'cause that's my dad. He gets close and rough. "Did you not hear me earlier? Who does your wife come running to when you don't come home?"

I roll my eyes. "Mom. I get it. But you of all people know I'm out there busting my ass—I'm working!"

He nods and squeezes harder, and it's almost impossible to withhold the wince. Almost.
"But does Gabby believe that when you come home with glitter on you?"

I huff a breath and try to take a step back, failing. "Look—I'm faithful, a'ight? I'd never, ever—"

"Answer my fucking question, Anthony," he whispers, smiling that sinister smile of his.

I don't reply, gritting my teeth, my face flushing with fury.

In return, he shoves me away, into the brick wall behind me. "You know I'm right." He stabs his finger to my chest. "Doesn't matter if you're a goddamn choirboy, an angel—but if you come home looking like you've done something wrong..." He trails off and throws away his cigarette. "This is your business—your marriage—but it's my house Gabriella comes to—" he points to himself "—when she's upset. And then I have your mother breathing down my neck. Do whatever the hell you want, but you keep your shit to yourself." With each word, he jabs his finger to my chest. Hard.

I wince. "The thought of being with someone else hasn't ever crossed my mind." It's the truth. My honest truth.

"Like I said, I don't care." He chuckles darkly. "Actually, I do. I was the one who walked Gabby down the aisle—I fucking care, Anthony. She might as well be my own daughter. But..." He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Fuckin' cool it already—wise up. Open your eyes and pay attention—not just to work but to your wife, too."

I blow out a breath and run a hand through my hair, Dad's words searing into me. Cazzo. Have I been too focused on work? But...no. Gabriella and I are solid—she's...I can't even describe what I feel for her, other than saying she's everything.
"Maybe I jumped the gun here," Dad concedes, "but I'd rather nip this in the bud than..." He waves a hand. "No matta'. Just be more discreet."

Swallowing, I stare at my feet, trying to resist fidgeting like some kid. Ironic, eh? Yesterday I was the wiseguy preaching to Cullen's son, giving him advice, but I still have shit to learn, too.

"Does she—does Gabby come to youse often?" I mutter.

I honestly thought things were good—perfect, even. Then again, my wife is one of those who rather vent to a friend than bother me.

"No. It happens, though. A few times." He gives my shoulder a squeeze, though not to be a pain this time. "Listen, tesoro. I've been with your mother for twenty-three years, and I still screw up. With what we do? We gotta lie to our wives all the time, and it's not like we have a nine-to-five job. We come and go at all hours. But a piece of advice? Don't make promises you can't keep." He's told me that before. "And change clothes before you go home if you feel the need to let strippers rub all over you."

I cringe. "It's really not like that." And it's not often at all. "It's just..." I shrug, squinting down the street as I debate—should I tell him or not? "I don't know."

"You do know." Dad gives me a pointed look. "But it's all right. If you don't wanna tell me..."

Maybe I'll tell him, but not now. I don't feel comfortable with it.

"Um, I think—I think I'm gonna call Gabriella." I just wanna hear her voice, I guess.

"Fallo." Dad tells me to do that, nodding. "I'll be inside." He turns to walk in, but then he's back, only to whack me upside the head. Ow—goddammit! "That's for being a little cunt earlier—fuckin' attitude."
"Cazzo," I hiss, rubbing my head.

Dad walks away muttering about "kids these days."

~oOo~

"I don't understand how Mom can sleep in the same room as him." Julia groans and buries her face against my bicep. "It's official—his snoring drowns out an airplane's engine."

I chuckle and reach over to my sister's side to kick the back of Dad's seat, but he doesn't move an inch. No matter the leg room in first class, you can't get in a kick hard enough. These days, he'll sleep through anything. And snore.

"Put on the headphones and watch the movie, piccolina," I suggest.

"I'm tired." She lifts my arm and uses my chest as her pillow. "Remind me to never fly with Daddy ever again—at least not when we take an early flight."

Early is correct. Our plane left New York at seven AM, and we're all drained after our weekend with the Misones and Cullens.

Aside from being anxious to get my hands on my wife, I'm also eager to call my brother. While we were boarding earlier, he called me nonstop for five minutes before I had to switch off the phone.

God forbid if you answer a cell phone with my dad nearby. He's still dead set on believing the FBI invented cell phones to spy on wiseguys.

Glancing across the aisle, I see Joey shooting Dad an annoyed look, to which I grin. Julia's not the only one unable to sleep, I see. Felix is also asleep, but it's Gianna who does the snoring in their family.

"He's worse than my mother," Joey mutters. "How does Bella stand it?"
"Beats me," Julia grumbles and pulls a blanket over her head.

"Earplugs," I answer. Mom's seated in front of me, and if I saw her now, I'd probably see her sleeping peacefully, but I'd also see yellow earplugs sticking outta her ears.

"God—she could've shared." Julia stands up and leans over the seat to shake Ma's shoulder. "Mom. Wake up."

"What?!" she shouts, jumping up. Next she tears off her sleep mask. "Where's the fire?!"

Joey and I stifle our laughs.

"You scared me, Julia." Mom takes out her earplugs before putting a hand to her heart. "Christ."

"You probably shouldn't shout 'fire' on a plane," I chuckle.

She sucks her teeth.


"Oh." Mom nods and starts digging through her purse. "Here. Anyone else?"

Joey happily accepts... I shake my head no, unable to sleep anyway.

For some reason, I can't help but think that something's wrong at home.

*I should've fucking answered the phone earlier.*

I bet it's something with Elisa. How that's gonna go over with Dad, we'll just have to wait and see. But either Mario will end up in a ditch somewhere, or Gabriella will be taking out my tux.
My sister confided in me; she told me the condom had broken, but Dad won't care. Elisa could've forced herself on Mario; Dad will still blame the dude screwing his daughter. Everything will be Mario's fault.

A few hours later, we're finally back in Nevada, and Dad's in a good mood.

He's also oblivious to the passengers who didn't get any peace with him around.

"You gonna cook for me when we get home, my love?" He's all over Mom, grabbing and kissing her as we head for the doors.

She giggles like some schoolgirl, and I hope I don't have to ride in the same car as them. It's actually Mario who's picking us up. And Tommy, Zia Alice's driver.

_Hundred bucks say Mario will jump at the chance to take Felix home instead of his future father-in-law or executioner._

"There's Dee!" Julia points, then runs for the exit.

Frowning, I follow and register the fact that our brother looks like death warmed over. His hair is standing up as if he's tugged at it a lot, he's pale, there are shadows under his eyes, and he's fidgety.

"If he—" Dad breaks off and bites his knuckles, pissed. He doesn't have to finish that sentence; I know it anyway. He fears Dominic's using again, but I don't think that's it.

When we reach them, Julia's attached to Dominic like a Band-Aid—literally, arms and legs wrapped around him.

"We gotta go," he says, skipping all greetings.

"What's wrong?" Dad asks.
Mom's already fussing over him, firing off questions while touching his forehead and whatnot, but he doesn't seem to notice.

"It's Frankie—your son," Dominic spits out at Felix. "He's at the hospital, and the doctors don't know if he'll live."

*What the fuck?*
Chapter 10

Translation:

E chi altro? = Who else?

Vallo a dire a tuo padre = Tell your father that.

Dominic's POV

Putting on a pair of sweats, I drag my half-sleeping ass outta the bedroom and count on the smell of coffee to steer me in the right direction. I roll my neck and rub a sore spot, then yawn as I finally reach the kitchen.

"Hi!" Lia waves madly, seated in her chair.

I grin tiredly and give her a smooch on her forehead. "Good mornin', love."

She nods, all business.

"Right." I chuckle and walk over to Dani by the stove. "Mornin'." Slipping my arms around her waist, I dip down nuzzle her neck.

"Buon giorno, mimmino." There's a smile in her voice. "Did you sleep well?"

I nod and yawn again, pretty fucking content to just stay here all day.

'Cause these past few days...I wanna pretend they never happened. Last night was the first one I spent in my own bed after spending three days at the hospital to be close to news about Frankie. Now his condition has finally been stabilized, so Dani convinced me to come home and get some proper sleep.

It seems like there's always gotta be some shit going wrong in my life. Work is good, and the court proceedings regarding Lia's paternity and my
taking full custody—all that's going well. But the rest? Forget about it. I'm surprised I haven't given in to my cravings and gone out to buy coke or something.

"Is Elisa still here?" I mumble, inhaling Dani's scent. *Madonn*. I lick her neck and squeeze a breast. 'Cause I fucking can.

Sometimes I wanna whip out my cock and piss on her leg, too.

She laughs and tries to squirm away. "Si, she is asleep. Go—sit down. I will bring you breakfast."

"In a minute." I brush my nose along her jaw, all while rubbing my morning wood against her lower back. "My shortie." I give her a squeeze. "I—" Fuck that. Almost told her I love her. Scrubbing a hand down my face, I curse under my breath and join Lia at the table.

I've only known Daniela a month—there's no way I'm going down that road already. Well, at least not until I'm sure she feels the same. If I'm already freaking out by the fact that I'm in love for the first time, imagine how I'll feel if it's not reciprocated.

It took me about two weeks to realize I love Lia, too—*that I love my daughter*; she's my fucking baby girl—but that didn't bother me one bit. It was kinda cool, if anything. It is kinda cool. However, realizing that I love Dani...

At first I feared I was losing my edge—that I was gonna turn into some sappy motherfucker. But then Zio Alec told me he was having issues with one of his dealers in Carson City, so I offered to deal with it.

Turns out I still have my edge. It's all good.

I'm just one of those stupid fucks who's fallen in fuckin' love.
Lia's babbling brings me back to the present, so I pick her up and sit her on my lap, and it earns me a toothy smile from her.


*Then there's that.*

Anthony's admitted that he cried shamelessly when TJ and Allegra were born—when they grasped his finger or some shit like that. I didn't have that. I missed out on Lia's birth. But last week when she said that...Dada...for the first time?

Let's not discuss it. I'm just glad it happened when I was alone with her.

"Yeah...that's me." I pretend to nibble on her chubby cheek. "*Mia bella cucciolina.*"

Dani walks over with a plate with scrambled eggs, bacon, and waffles. "Eat—you need it." She weaves her fingers through my hair, causing me to close my eyes in pleasure. But then she pokes my ribs, and I flinch.

"Knock it off," I chuckle.

She's gotten the idea I'm malnourished, but she's Italian and female. What'taya gonna do? My mom is the same. Doesn't matter that I'm more buff, more in shape that I've ever been.

I've gained some weight since I gave up the yak, so I don't know what she's talking about.

"Good morning." A tired Elisa joins us, and she steals Lia from me. "Come to Zia Elisa."

Leaning forward, I dig in, starving, and study my sister for a minute. Nope, no progress. Not only is she still in denial about her pregnancy—well...denial is wrong. She's fully aware and kinda excited, but only Dani,
Gabby, Anthony, and I know. Not even Mario. Definitely not Mom and Dad. But more than that, Elisa is still a mess from what's happened to Frankie.

Hell, so am I—don't get me started—but I can't just sit around and do nothing anymore. He's stable now; he'll bounce back. He has to.

Elisa's been staying in Dani's room since she peed on that stick.

I don't mind, but I hope she'll get better soon.

Hopefully, today will distract us. Nonno, Nonna, and Esme are moving to Florida tomorrow, so it's their going-away party today. It's also Joey's birthday—he turns thirty.

It might not distract me enough to make me happy, but I hope it'll push down my wish to plot Felix's death.

Trust, I know I gotta watch myself. I almost lost my cool at the airport last Sunday when they returned from New York, but I managed to swallow it down. I can't fucking touch him—ever—but that doesn't mean I don't want to.

It's common knowledge that Gianna's never loved Frankie since she's not his mom, but Felix has always defended him. Now? Not so much.

Elisa, Dani, and I are the only ones who know the "why"s and the "how"s about Frankie being brutally assaulted.

"When're youse driving out to Henderson today?" I ask, blowing some steam from my coffee.

Elisa, Dani, and Gabby are heading out with the kids early to set things up for the shindig. Mom will join them when she's picked up Zia Brianna from the airport.
Zio Riley couldn't leave Kansas City, but my aunt obviously wouldn't miss her parents'...what did the girls call it?...bon voyage party? Whatever.

Zia Victoria was gonna come, too, but something came up. I think she's flying down to Florida in a few days to help Nonno and Nonna get settled in instead.

"In an hour...?" Elisa looks to Dani in question, who nods and shrugs. "Yeah, an hour." She faces me again while pressing a kiss to Lia's head. "Will you visit Francis before the party?"

I nod and scratch my chest. "Pops was gonna drive by, too—said he wanted to talk to me." He suspects I know what's up, but I don't know what I can tell him.

"Don't tell him about...you know who," Elisa says, referring to Casey, Frankie's, uh, boyfriend. "You can't, Dee."

"Dani knows." I tilt my coffee mug in Dani's direction. "She's cool with it."

Don't ask me why I fessed up—told Daniela everything—but I needed to unload the other night, and she was there. Guess that means I trust her.

But yeah, she accepts it. She told me her upbringing was strict—although she's fucking vague about her childhood, which frustrates me—so while she doesn't understand homosexuality or bisexuality, she accepts it, says it's none of her business. And that's kinda how I feel, too.

My sister goes as far as to be encouraging.

"Okay..." Elisa nods. "Don't tell Dad about Case."

"I won't, but..." I wince. Sooner or later, our parents will notice Felix's new behavior toward his own son, and Mom and Dad will find out that Frankie's into dudes, too.
Seven fractures, countless cuts and bruises, one punctured lung, a crushed hand, and a stab wound in the gut—just barely missing any vital organs—is either Felix's way of sending Frankie a message or flat-out disowning him.

Since it happened while Felix was still in New York, his alibi is pretty fucking solid. But that doesn't mean he didn't put the guilty one up to it, and we're sure it's Louie, one of Felix's guys.

There's Frankie's apartment, too. I have an extra key, so I went over there to make sure shit was all right, but it's not. It's completely trashed, vandalized, and there's graffiti on the living room wall with the words, "Faggs are a disgrace."

That's right. "Fags" was misspelled. Go Louie.

"This sucks..." Elisa blinks back tears and takes a couple deep breaths.

I agree, and I hate that my hands are tied. Makes me feel fucking useless.

"Have you tracked down Casey?" As far as I know, Casey isn't aware of what's happened. With their secrecy and sneaking around, it's not like they see each other regularly.

I've only met him briefly, but Elisa's...perhaps friends is a stretch, but almost.

"Not yet," Elisa sighs as Lia reaches for Daniela. "I'll keep tryin', though. Yeah, you go to Dani, my pwecious widdle niece." She's got a thing for baby talk...

"It will be your turn soon," Dani sings, positioning Lia on her hip.

"Don't remind me," Elisa sings back mockingly. "Ugh." She pouts and places her hands on her flat stomach. "Daddy's gonna hate me." Like he
could. That's crazy. "Anyway..." She grins slyly. "What about the two'a youse, huh? You gonna make things official soon? I mean, it's not like it's a secret. Even Mom and Dad know." She reaches up to pinch Lia's cheek. "And I could always go for another niece or nephew to spoil."

I shake my head at her—fuckin' women, they're all the same. Weddings and babies, weddings and babies.

"I am in no rush," Dani chuckles. "Maybe one day—when I meet, uh, come si dice...Mr. Right—that's how you say it?" Elisa's eyebrows shoot up; mine pull together in a frown, and Dani makes funny faces with Lia. "Now it is time for Bambina's bath."

Daniela leaves the kitchen...

"Um." My sister looks uncomfortable.

I'm pissed. And, admittedly, a little hurt. Or more than a little.

*Mr. Right, huh? And what am I, chopped liver?*

"Mi sono persa qualcosa?" Elisa asks if she's missing something, keeping her voice down. "I thought youse were together."

I grin even though I kinda feel like punching a wall. "Guess not."

*Where's the coke when you need it?*

Elisa's eyes soften. "You wanna talk about it, little brother?"

"What's there to talk about?" I laugh, absently rubbing a fist to my chest. It feels tight and weird. Not able to pull off the charade much longer, I stand up and say I'm gonna get dressed.

"Dominic!" she calls after me.
"I'll talk to you later, sis," I call back over my shoulder, escaping into my room. "Fuck." I grimace and wonder what the fuck is up with my chest.

All right, so we're evidently just...I don't know, fuck-buddies?

That's fine. No problem. Got it.

~oOo~

Since I'm driving out to my grandparents' house in Henderson after this, I don't show up at the hospital in my regular jeans, boots, and leather jacket. Instead I'm uncomfortable in fancier clothes. Not a suit, but a pair of gray slacks, a fitted pullover that my mom swears is green but looks black, and shoes that are too expensive to get dirt on.

Sticking the end of a Twizzler in my mouth, I push open the door to Frankie's hospital room and see that Dad's already here.

Frankie hasn't woken up yet.

"Hey." I jerk my chin.

Dad looks tired—almost as if he's aged a few years overnight. "How you doin', piccolo?" He drags forth another chair for me, and I sit down next to him. "You clean up good. Your mother picked that out?"

"E chi altro?" I chuckle. "I'd tell her it ain't cool to be eighteen and have a mom who still buys me clothes, but would she listen?"

"She wouldn't," he agrees. "All'a youse will always be her babies. Hell, you're mine, too." He sighs and unbuttons his jacket, facing Frankie. "This breaks my fucking heart."

I don't reply as I stare at Frankie's sleeping form. All the bruises, the machines he's hooked up to, the bandages...will it still be heartbreaking for Pops when he learns why Frankie's here?
Mom broke down completely when she visited the first time—when they’d returned from New York—and I hope, I fucking hope we will have her support when all this blows up. My parents are Frankie's godparents; I pray that shit will matter.

"You gonna tell me why Felix hasn't stopped by at all?" Pops asks quietly, never looking away from Frankie. "Alice has been here. Joseph, too. But not Felix or Gianna. Your mother's even been on the phone with Valentina—she wants to come home and visit." That'd be Felix's daughter.

I chew obsessively on my fucking Twizzler.

"You know something." He's sure of it. "And I think Elisa knows something, too. Am I close?"

Considering that Dad is one of the few people in the whole world who Felix trusts, I find it weird that Dad doesn't know yet. Then again, this could be something Felix wants to sweep under the rug. He's clearly ashamed to have a gay son—nothing he wants to admit. So, maybe this was a warning.

"It's not my business to tell," I finally say.

And today of all days...with my grandparents and Esme moving, Joey's birthday...the last thing we need is to turn today into a gay-bashing extravaganza.

Dad scoffs. "Listen to you, baby. One might think you're my son."

"Aren't you proud?" I grin wryly.

At first, it looks like he's gonna give some smart-ass remark, but instead he sits back and squeezes my forearm. "You have no idea, Dominic."
I avert my eyes, not used to praise from him. Love and affection? Sure. Definitely. But it's been a while since I earned compliments for anything.

Slightly uncomfortable, I switch the topic. "Lia calls me Dada now. Feels good."

He smiles widely. "That's beautiful—your mother will be happy to hear that." Cupping my neck, he pulls me in for a hard hug and a kiss to my cheek. "I assume she doesn't know since I'm hearing this from you."

"Yeah," I chuckle, finishing my Twizzler.

"And speak of the devil..." He looks toward the door, and I turn just as Mom and Zia Brianna enter. "If it ain't my estranged baby sister." He walks over to them.

"Estranged." Zia Brianna scoffs, then hugs Dad. "I moved to Kansas City, not Greenland."

He does his thing, asks if my cousins are well, if Zio Riley still treats her good, and Mom walks over to this side of Frankie's bed. Tears well up in her eyes, and she sits down next to me, grasping one of my hands and one of Frankie's.

"We wanted to stop by before we drove out to Henderson," she says, sniffling. "God, he looks so broken." Standing up, she feels his forehead and caresses his cheek. "Our baby Francis... Juniuh, I swear to Christ—whoever did this, make him pay." There's fury in her eyes as she breaks down.

While Dad moves to comfort her, I give them some space and catch up with my aunt. I hug her and kiss her cheek, expecting the questions about Lia.
"Your mother sent me pictures. That little bambina's so gorgeous. And you know, she looks just like you did when you were a baby." She smiles wide and squeezes my hand in both of hers. "Except for her eyes. Mannaggia, those blues? Outta this world." I chuckle, agreeing but knowing I won't get a word in edgewise. "And look at'chu, Dominic." She stares up at me and shakes her head. "It's like every time I see you, you've grown. You're almost as tall as Junior, aren't you?"

"I got an inch on both my boys," Dad bitches.

I smirk at him and grab my junk. "Not where it counts."

The women giggle.

He glares. "Whatta you now, a pathological liar?" He wriggles his pinky, to which I flip a hand under my chin. "Oh! Fuck that. I changed your fuckin' diapers, son. I would know."

"Now who's lyin'?" Mom snorts.

"Eh..." Pop shrugs.

~oOo~

Mom obviously notices how I tend to scowl in Dani's direction at the party, but since we're surrounded by countless family members, there's little Ma can do.

Dani hasn't noticed, though. I'd like to think it's because the men and the women are mostly divided anyway...and not because she doesn't give a shit.

"What's with the cunt face, cuz?" Nico asks, seemingly unaware that both his sons are climbing him like a mountain on the couch. Christopher's only two, but Michael is five, and he's a meatball and a half.
I jerk my chin at him. "Who you callin' cunt, you motherless piece'a sh—"

"Hey!" Gabby gives me a look as she walks over to take Allegra from Anthony. "If I didn't know your mother, I'd think youse were raised by apes."

I wink at her.

Anthony looks offended. "What the fuck did I do, micina? I'm sitting here like a goddamn saint."

Nico and I snort.

"You tell'im, Gabriella!" Nonno shouts, seated across the room with Felix and Zio Alec. "C'mea and gimme a smooch."

"Enough outta you, Nonno!" Anthony hollers.

Gabby laughs, rolls her eyes, and walks out to the kitchen. At the same time, Dad exits the kitchen lookin' victorious, which means he probably copped a feel and made Mom give him snacks. Fucker can't wait 'til dinner's served.

"Cut me some slack," Nonno bitches, sounding like Dad. "Youse have no idea what stress I'm under. Did'ju know your nonna made me buy all new furniture for our house in Florida? I'm a poor man!"

Anthony and I cough "Bullshit," and bump fists.

Nonno cups his ear. "What was that?!"

"Why you always shouting, Pops?" Dad asks him.

"You're one to talk, Uncle Jun," Nico chuckles. Then he yells out for his wife, "Gina! Get me another beer!"
That's when Dani happens to pass with Lia who's giving her I've-just-done-number-two-in-my-diaper expression, and Dani frowns at Nico. "Do you always talk to my cousin like that, Nicola?"

Zia Alice, who pauses in the hallway with plates—likely on her way to the dining room—gives Dani an approving smile that my girl—oh, excuse me; fuck-buddy—can't see.

My aunt has complained about Nico's attitude for years, claiming he's too much like Zio Jasper.

"Oh, this oughta be good." Dad shifts in his seat to face the room. He turns to Alec. "Twenty bucks says Daniela decks him."

"Just keep walking, Dani." Nico smiles at her. "This ain't your business."

I flick my eyes to Daniela, thinking about jumping in, but I decide not to.

"Gina is my family—that makes it my business." Dani repositions Lia on her hip and raises a brow. Fuck, she's beautiful. Especially with all that anger waiting to be unleashed. "I was not trying to insult you, but you should know that politeness will take you far." That said, she leaves the living room to change Lia's diaper.

"Well, that was disappointing." Dad slaps a twenty to Zio Alec's hand.

"Gimme'a smooch, Daniela!" Nonno shouts after her.

"Ay!" I glare at him. "Watch it."

"Why?" He grins. "She yours?"

No. She's not.

I swallow hard.
"You at it again, Ed?" Nonna thankfully saves me from responding. "You can chase skirts in Florida instead."

"You're the only skirt I want." Nonno winks and grabs at her.

That's just wrong. They're fucking old.

In my periphery, I catch Elisa bolting from the kitchen down the hall. Shit. My guess is she's heading for the bathroom, not the dining room to set a fucking table.

Anthony nudges me, and I nod, aware.

It's always been like this. Anthony's got Julia; I've got Elisa.

"Yo, you keepin' an eye on Julia?" I ask him. "She keeps stealing Mom's wine."

Our baby sister has recently developed boobs, which she likes to flaunt after a couple glasses of wine.

That's also wrong.

We're thankful this is a rare thing on family get-togethers, but we've lost count of the times her friends have called from parties, saying Julia's in the process of getting rid of her clothes. Safe to say, we've crashed a few parties in the past couple'a years.

"Fuckin' hell." Anthony groans and gets up from the couch. "You think we should duct tape her so her shirt stays on?"

I smirk. "We? She's all yours, bro."

It's a miracle that Dad has never seen Julia tipsy. But that just proves Anthony does his job.

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbles. "Go hold Elisa's hair or something."
I make a face but figure he's right.

On the way to the downstairs bathroom, I run into Joey, so I take the opportunity to congratulate him and give him an envelope with cash—standard gift amongst the dudes. I add that Dani's bought something from both of us, but I don't know what the fuck it is.

"Thank you, my friend..." He smiles and looks past me. "You seen my pop, by any chance?"

I jerk a thumb over my shoulder. "Living room." Like I wanna think about that motherfucker.

"Then I won't go in there," he replies, about to turn to the kitchen.

"Wait." I frown at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He shrugs. "I don't know what his fucking problem is, but..." He steps closer and lowers his voice. "He hasn't even visited Frankie. He's acting as if everything's normal."

"I've noticed," I say dryly. "Good luck with that."

"Excuse me, boys." Mom smiles and passes us with a big serving bowl of roasted potatoes.

Gianna, Esme, and Zia Brianna follow with more food.

In the living room, we hear Nonna announcing it's dinner, so I hurry down the hall to help Elisa.

**Elisa's POV**

I usually love parties—when the whole family comes together and every argument, each slice of drama, and every ounce of pain gets shoved aside, forgotten for a few hours. It lifts your spirits. A good party lets you
forget why you were bickering with this one, bitching with that one...and so on. But now? God, I feel suffocated.

About twenty people are gathered in Nonno and Nonna's house here in Henderson, children running around, women gesturing and talking loudly while they clear the table after dinner, men shouting and laughing. The air is stifling, smelling of food, smoke, and perfume.

Between dinner and dessert when no one's got a clue—too busy with everything—I sneak out to the front porch. It's dark and chilly, perfect for me. It's February and I'm only wearing a black skirt, a dark blue, ruffled top, and cute flats, yet I'm not freezing? I get goose bumps, but I still wouldn't have minded if it was colder.

I don't know how much is pregnancy related.

Hugging myself, rubbing my arms, I walk over to the porch railing and sigh, forcing myself to relax. The noise from inside is a muted lull, a few laughs—Dad's and Zio Alec's booming voices sometimes piercing through.

For no reason at all, I want to cry. Or maybe it's not without reason...blah. It's just too much right now. I have to find the balls to tell Mario that I'm pregnant, and this whole Francis mess...God... And my parents? Mom will probably only be excited to learn there'll be another grandchild, although she'll insist on a shotgun wedding. But Dad...he's gonna fly through the roof.

I don't even know how Mario's gonna take it. We've been together almost two years; I'd expected him to pop the question long ago.

Valentine's is around the corner, so maybe then?

Anthony...sh*t, he got married at eighteen—already has two children.

Gabby was still seventeen, for Chrissakes. I'm twenty-one, Mario's almost twenty-five. So yeah...it's time. I wanna get it over with.
Why did I even go to college? I busted my ass and graduated early, even. My parents were so proud 'cause I'm the first woman in our family to have a college degree. But it's not like I use it. I don't even think I want to. I love working at Stella—being close to family, and I'm a damn good hostess. But I don't know. Something feels...empty?

Not that I know why. Getting knocked up before I'm married aside...everything's good. Loving Mario is easy, like breathing, and he's a good friend. He's sweet, albeit nervous and stiff around my father and brothers.

I hope he'll unclench eventually, 'cause as it is now... After a dinner with my family, we usually end up at his apartment, and that's when he relaxes. But then he gets annoyed, and he takes it out on me. Nothing violent or anything; he just gets a little bitchy, as if it's my fault Dad is...who he is.

Mario will snap at me, which I hate, but I guess it's just frustration. Sooner or later, he's back to his normal self, sweet and doting. Okay, he can be a bit too sweet, but that's a good thing, right?

And the sex is good—or decent, at the very least. What do I know? I have nothing to compare with.

My hope is that once we get married, everything will work out. I'll have what my parents have.

And Mario won't avoid my family. Tonight, for instance, he said he had work to do, so he's not here.

"You look like you've got the weight of the world on your shoulders."

"Shit!" Clutching my chest, I spin around to see Joseph sitting on the porch swing.
He's leaning forward on his knees, a glass of...something, scotch? in his hand. Like my father and Anthony—and most other wiseguys, he's always in a suit, but Joseph's taken off his jacket and his tie is loosened.

"You scared me." I swallow and stay where I am, willing my heart to calm down.

He gives me a small smirk. "Didn't think anything could scare you, troublemaker."

I let out a breathy laugh, thinking back...God, it's been so long. He used to be my driver when I was, like, twelve? Thirteen? And he always called me his troublemaker 'cause I tried to sneak away. I'd find ways to get away, and I usually ended up at the mall to gamble with the boys from school.

I robbed those little suckers of their lunch money and allowances. Then I'd hide out at Stella until either Mom or Joseph tracked me down.

Since then...since I discovered the appeal of boys—other than taking their money—I've steered clear of Joseph. He unnerves me like nothing else. I get all weird; I swear my stomach fucking flutters. I don't understand it. And it hasn't changed.

"Aren't you supposed to be inside, birthday boy?" I tease, hoping to come off as casual.

"Nah..." He chuckles and shakes his head to himself, then takes a sip of his drink and leans back. "Wanted some fresh air. I see I'm not the only one."

"I'm just escaping kitchen duty." I smirk. "Or maybe it was the thought of putting thirty candles on your cake that drove me out here."
"Nice." He laughs through his nose and lights up a cigarette. "Aren't you cold?" He jerks his chin at his suit jacket next to him. "Wanna borrow my jacket?"

"No...but thanks." I look down at my feet and smile, though I'm still fucking confused. Does he intimidate me? Is that why I get all weird around him? Or maybe not weird, but I can't seem to relax.

I've been wondering lately why he hasn't settled down yet, and every time our family gathers, I keep expecting him to announce something. But so far, nothing. I've never seen him with a woman on his arm. That's not to say they don't exist, but he doesn't bring them around family.

I don't get it, 'cause he's so...

I sigh.

He's a catch. He's dangerously handsome. Tall, muscular—not bulky, far from it, but... Joseph Colucci is sleek. He has a sharp jaw, a killer smile, coffee brown eyes mixed with gold and amber, dark hair that looks so soft and silky...

He's also incredibly smart, nice, and... Despite that he's thirty now and hasn't settled down, he's very family-oriented. Unlike some others, he's protective of Francis—and just thinking about that hurts.

My breathing hitches, my mind wandering to the hospital room in town where Francis is all alone.

I should've visited him today, too.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Joseph walks over and leans back against the railing. "Want me to get Bella? Or Dominic?"
"No, I'm just..." I sniffle and roll my eyes as a couple tears spill down my cheeks. I wipe them away angrily. "Ugh. Stupid hormones. I'm sorry."

Joseph tilts his head. "What?"

"Oh, crap." My eyes widen, and before I can even begin to backtrack or maybe go TMI on his ass and say I'm about to get my period, it has dawned on him.

"Jesus Christ, Elisa..." He groans and scrubs his hands down his face. "You're—you're pregnant?"

"You can't tell anyone," I plead and grab his arm. "Please, Joseph. My parents don't know yet."

He narrows his eyes at me. "Does anyone know?"

I nod and release him, staring at my feet. "My brothers and Gabby and Daniela."

Joseph curses under his breath, then steps close and gathers me in a hug. It shocks me and sends a violent shiver down my spine, and once more when I automatically inhale his scent. With my face near his chest, I'm enveloped in warmth and solid muscle. Instinctively, I slip my arms around his midsection.

"You haven't even told Mario?" he murmurs against the top of my head.

"No," I admit in a small voice. "I'm trying, but I keep chickening out. What if he doesn't want it?" Teary-eyed, I lift my head and look up. "What if he's not serious?" My chin wrinkles and I press my eyes shut.

"He's serious." Joseph grasps my chin, his long fingers shaping themselves to my jaw. "If he wants to date Junior Maisano's daughter, he
knows to be serious." When I open my eyes again, I see his small, rueful smile. "I also know because he's been doing jobs for my pops lately."

Really? As far as I know, Mario works for my cousin Nico or Dad. Or even Anthony sometimes.

"Pretty sure he's saved enough to buy a house for youse."

"Oh..." I don't know what to feel about that. Suddenly exhausted, I rest my forehead to his chest. "Sorry for breaking down."

His shoulders shake a little with a barely audible laugh. "If this is you breaking down, I wonder what to call it when my mother runs outta Xanax and Valium."

I gigglesnort and inhale his rich scent again. It calms me, even though I get butterflies.

"Hey..." He lifts my chin. "Gimme'a smile, troublemaker."

I can't help not to.

"Better." He drops a light kiss between my eyebrows. "So, what're you gonna do about, ah..." He clears his throat. "The pregnancy? How far along are you?" Slowly releasing me, his forehead creases in concern and...something else. "You seen a doctor?"

"Not yet." I wince as the harsh reality returns. Perhaps it never left, but it felt nice to be wrapped up in Joseph. It was comforting. "I'm gonna make an appointment next week. And I don't know how far along I am—maybe six weeks?" I offer a one-shouldered shrug. "I know I gotta tell Mario soon, but I'm more worried about Mom and Dad." I wince again. "Dad's gonna be so mad."
When Joseph hasn't replied in a few seconds, I look up to see an unreadable expression on his face as he peers out at the cars parked in the street.

Noticing my stare, he sighs and asks, "What do you want me to say, Elisa? I can't blame Junior." He chuckles, but it sounds off. And humorless. "If he decides to give Mario a beating, I just might help him."

"Joseph!"

"What?" He widens his arms. Then groans and pinches the bridge of his nose. "It's none of my business, but there should be a ring on your fuckin' finga'."

"You do know it takes two to tango, right?" I fold my arms over my chest. "Not everyone saves themselves for marriage these days."

"Vallo a dire a tuo padre—you're his angel, Elisa."

"Don't get mad at me." My bottom lip trembles. "We used protection—"

He puts up a hand. "You think I wanna hear about that shit? Christ."

My shoulders slump and I avert my eyes to the porch floor. "I'm sorry."

"Cazzo... Come hea'." He sighs and hugs me to him again, which makes me cry once more. "What does Dominic say? Youse're usually attached at the hip."

I sniffle and hiccup. "I'm sorta living with him and Dani at the moment." I don't really have anywhere else to go, unless I wanna move back home. I've been staying here with Nonno and Nonna since I went to college here in Henderson, and then I stayed to take care of them. While waiting for Mario to take the next step.
"Dee's just said that I should fess up to Mom. Then she can break the news to Daddy when I'm far away—like, China."

Joseph chuckles quietly, absently stroking my back. "Sounds like a solid plan." He hums and presses his lips to the top of my head.

I sigh contentedly and let myself relax.

"This isn't the first time you planned on giving Junior a heart attack." Now there's a smirk in his voice. "Remember a few years ago when you and Francis got the idea youse were gonna get married?"

I huff a laugh and smack his chest. "Very funny."

Thankfully, Francis and I only told Joseph about that. At the time, I already knew Francis was gay—well, he claims to like women too, but I don't believe it—and he'd almost gotten caught. So, I proposed marriage to protect him—keep up the charade.

Mind you, I was like seventeen, tipsy, and stupid. But it still sounded like a good plan to me. For years, Francis has been one of my best friends, and I figured it'd be pretty all right to get hitched to someone you'd never stop loving.

Francis was hesitant, chanting a whole lotta "no"s, but I dragged him to Joseph's condo to ask his opinion. And Joseph laughed his ass off. No, seriously. I think it took him twenty minutes to calm down.

Joseph doesn't know that Francis is gay, so my reason back then had simply been, "Why not? We're great friends, and we love each other."

I'd had a whole speech prepared since Francis and I—and Joseph and I—are technically related, something Dad is hung up on. We're third cousins, but it's not through blood, so it's literally nothing.
Our great-grandfathers were stepbrothers. There was some scandal involved, whoever on one side married a girl who was pregnant with another man's baby. I don't know half the story, but I know the punchline: no blood relation.

Joseph had started laughing again...

"You were so mean," I grumble, reminiscing.

"You were kids," Joseph retorts with a laugh. "I'm glad my brother came to his senses."

"Oh!" Mildly insulted, I peer up and shoot him a scowl. "I would've rocked it, I'll have you know. You sayin' you don't want me as your sister-in-law?"

He grins and shakes his head in amusement. Then something that looks like wistfulness shadows his mirth. "No," he murmurs, "I wouldn't want you as my sister-in-law." I frown and he smiles tightly as he takes a step back. "We should probably head back in. I hear I have thirty candles to blow out, and you should tell Mario about the baby."

_Buzzkill._
Chapter 11

Translation:

Fine della storia! = End’a story!

Dominic's POV

The day after my grandparents and Esme have left for Florida, I get a phone call from Elisa where she sobs out, "Come to Mom and Dad's—they know!" before hanging up.

That could mean a thing or two.

As I get in my car and race toward my parents', I wonder if it's the pregnancy or Frankie they've learned the truth about.

Before I left my apartment, I called Anthony, and when I finally arrive at the house, I'm glad I did. I can hear Elisa's sobbing, Julia's crying, Mom trying to calm everyone down while not being calm herself, and Dad... I chuckle darkly at the shit he's spouting off.

It's about Frankie, so that answers my question.

Entering the house, I pass Duke and Duchess and stalk into the kitchen.

By the looks of it, I'd say my father's been in the process of getting ready for work. He's got the suit pants and his undershirt, but there's a towel around his shoulders and his hair is damp.

"Thank Christ!" he growls. "Dominic, talk some fucking sense into your sister!"

I ignore that as Elisa runs into my arms. "Hey—" I cup her cheeks and wipe away her tears "—you gotta calm down, a'ight?" I give her a pointed
look. This can't be good for the baby. "You gonna tell me what happened?"

"I—I..." She starts wailing, so I turn to rest just as Anthony arrives. Good thing he lives so close.

"Che diavolo sta succedendo qui?" He asks what the hell's going on.

"Nothing," Dad spits out. "Everything will be gravy as soon as Elisa gets her shit straight. She's losin' her fucking mind."

"AY!" I shout.

"Junior!" Mom cries out.

"Fuck it!" Dad shakes his head, looking nauseous. "It's disgusting. This makes me sick!"

I grit my teeth and nod. "Frankie? He makes you sick?"

"Damn right!" he shouts. "Youse won't visit him again—fine della storia! And I don't want him near TJ, Allegra, and Lia—any of the children!"

"Tell me what he's done," Anthony demands, walking over to comfort Julia.

"He hasn't done anything wrong!" Elisa sobs.

Dad turns to Elisa with an astonished expression, then he starts cackling. "Nothing wrong? That's hilarious!" His humor is soon replaced by disgust and pure hatred. "That's...that's—madonn', 'wrong' don't come close, Elisa. Try—try, fuckin' blasphemous! A goddamn fag—he should burn in hell!"

Aside from Elisa's crying, the kitchen grows silent. Anthony processes—grimacing, looking doubtful... Mom weeps silently into her hands, Dad's
furious... I roll my shoulders and clench my hands into fists, and I swear to God, I will fucking beat him.

"Francis is no longer part of this family." Dad wipes his hands clean. "Not another word about it. We don't speak his name."

"Then I'm not a part of the family, either!" Elisa cries furiously. "You're fucking horrible, Dad!"

Dad thinks that's funny. "Cute."

"Vá all'inferno." I tell him to go to hell. "Elisa, let's go." I usher her outta the house.

I'll get the story soon enough, but I won't have my sister in the middle of this shit when she's knocked up.

"Where do youse think you're going?" Dad shouts, following. "You actually side with that sick, twisted freak? He's a disease—you want that around your daughter, Dominic?!

"Stop it!" Mom weeps. "All'a youse—calm down! No one's leaving!"

"He's a disgrace!" Dad barks out. "I'd spit on his grave!"

Taking a deep breath, I hold Elisa back when she wants to charge. "Easy," I caution her. "Get in the car." I open the door for her and shoot her a glare, knowing she doesn't wanna just sit by. "Fa come ti dico, Elisa." I tell her to do as I say.

"Fine," she snarls.

"Is that it, Dominic?" Dad starts laughing again. "You a fanook, too? You take it up the ass?"
Slamming the door shut, I walk toward that motherfucker and crack my knuckles.

Mom's eyes widen. "Dominic, nooo!"

Her plea goes unheard, and I slam my shoulder into my father's chest, knocking him over.

"You make me sick!" I punch him in the face.

For being old, he's quick on his feet. He rolls us over on the pavement and gets me in the jaw. Pain radiates through me, and next he splits my bottom lip.

"You wanted to fight me?" he seethes. "Fucking fight!"

Sucking in a sharp breath, I use all my strength to get on top. While delivering a swift fist to his nose, I also ram my knee into his ribcage. He coughs, air leaving him in a whoosh, and I'd fucking love to get in a few more hits, but then Anthony's there to haul me off him.

"Cut it out!" Anthony yells.

In a blind rage, all I see is Dad, and I try to charge forward again. Pops tries, too, but Anthony gets in between us, his hands pushing against our chests.

When a crying Mom comes between us as well, joining Anthony in the middle, we know we can't risk a stray punch. Somewhere behind me, I can hear Elisa and Julia whimpering and weeping.

"Enough of this!" Mom screams.

Dad and I glare murderously at each other.
"If you leave now..." He breathes heavily. "If you decide to be friends with a freak who don't deserve to live, you're no longer my son, Dominic."

Guess his love isn't unconditional, huh?

"For fuck's sakes, Dad!" Anthony growls.

"Edward!" Mom seethes.

"Does that apply to Elisa, too?" I cock a brow.

He swallows, then nods firmly.

I chuckle, still panting, and spit out some blood. "All right. You just lost two kids, then." I start backing away.

Elisa's hand on my back tells me I was right to speak for her.

Mom lets out a gut-wrenching wail that cracks my heart.

"No, Dee," Julia whimpers.

My eyes sting, but I refuse to back down on this. "And you can forget about ever seeing Lia again," I tell him, close to choking up. "We're done—"

"You can forget about seeing my child, too!" Elisa screams.

My pulse skyrockets at her way of telling our family she's pregnant, and I gotta hold her back once more. I also gotta get her the hell outta here before the stress causes her to fuckin' miscarry.

With a final glance in my parents' direction, seeing their shock, I hurry and help my sister into my car again.
As I start the engine, I hear Mom's screaming and see her thrashing in Anthony's arms; Dad's standing stock-still, looking stunned, enraged, and sick.

I drive away without a single glance in the rearview mirror.

Elisa hiccups and cries...

Numbness sets in for me.

By the time we return to my apartment above Stella, my sister's completely worn out, and I feel like a goddamn robot. I help her up the stairs, ignore Dani's concern when we enter my place, and guide Elisa into Dani's room. I wanna know exactly what happened today, but it's gonna have to wait. Elisa drops to the bed, beyond exhausted, and shudders with hoarse cries until she falls asleep.

Then I grab a pack of smokes and a beer from the fridge before trudging up to the rooftop.

It's twilight, dark enough for all the signs and lights along the Strip to brighten the sky.

It's only a three-story building, so I hear the people down on the streets, too. Nothing's quiet around here. But the privacy still gives me some peace.

Twisting the cap off my beer, I take a long swig, ignoring the sting of my cracked lip, and sit down in one of the plastic loungers someone's put up here.

I close my eyes and wish I had a couple lines of coke.

Then again, it could be worse. Being numb suits me. It's easier than feeling everything.
Having no clue about time, all I can say is that it's dark out when Daniela comes.

She sets the baby monitor on the ground, then wordlessly joins me on the lounger and rests her head on my chest.

"Want to talk about what happened today?" she asks softly.

I sigh and let my head loll back. No stars out. Sin City is too bright for that.

"Not really..." I slide a hand up her back and under her hair. "Is Lia asleep?" My fingers stroke the soft skin of her neck, where I know she smells amazing.

"Yes." Dani sits up and straddles me, peering down at me with that fucking concern.

I can't take it. I don't want her to give me those looks if she doesn't care about us.

"Hey..." She gently palms my cheek and leans close. "I do not like seeing you this way, mimmino." Her accent always makes her words smoother somehow. I don't fucking know. "Is there anything I can do for you? Are you hungry? Want me to clean this?" Her thumb ghosts over my lip, and I shake my head no. "I feel helpless." She scrunches her nose—fucking adorable.

Tilting my head, I kiss her palm.

"There has to be something." She rests her forehead to mine.

My brows knit together as I stare into her eyes, the brown mixing with the gold flecks. Then I just close my eyes instead—easier that way.

Inhaling deeply through my nose, I place my hands on her hips.
"I want you to..." I swallow, feeling fucking stupid. "I want you to fall in love with me, tesorina. Can you do that?"

*Just a small favor, right?*

"Dominic..."

"I know." I force myself to grin and open my eyes. "It's cool—I get it." I can't help the bitterness from seeping into my tone.

She's unreadable now. Guarded.

"Forget it," I chuckle. "I didn't mean it."

*Aside from the fact that I did mean it, of course.*

Someone kill me. "I should go downstairs and talk to Elisa." Solid excuse, I think. "I'm gonna go out and get some Chinese, too."

**Elisa's POV**

After borrowing a pair of pajama shorts from Dani and one of Dee's too-big t-shirts, I join them in the living room where my brother is unpacking countless takeout containers onto the living room table.

My stomach rumbles at the sight of all that food, and I'm excited since the smell has a good effect on me. These days it's a damn gamble. Food I used to love can repulse me now.

With Dani on the smaller couch, I sit down next to Dominic on the larger one, happily accepting a container with chicken and fried noodles.

"Is there any sweet and sour—" Before I can even finish my question, Dee's holding up the sauce I want. I grin. "Am I that predictable?"
He chuckles quietly and digs into his dumplings. "You always order the same thing." Then he jerks his chin at something on the table. "Got you those disgusting crab wontons, too."

"They're delicious," I argue. "And thank you. This godawful day just took a turn for the better."

That's right; I'm trying to stay positive, although I have no friggin' clue how I'll be able. At least not for long.

"Yeah..." Dee sits back a little, still busy with his food, but focus is unfortunately on me now, too. "You might wanna tell me what happened today."

"Would you like some privacy?" Dani asks.

I shake my head no, but Dominic says, "Yeah."

Dani forces a smile and walks to the kitchen.

That makes me sad; she's just gonna sit at the table and eat alone? "What the fuck, Dee?" I scowl at him.

"Don't worry about. She's just the help." He said that loud enough for Dani to hear it, then he shrugs, totally faking. "Back to that other thing." He twirls his fork. "How did Dad find out?"

Since we do need to talk about this, I file away the Dani issue for later. But one thing is clear: Dani is not just the "help."

*My baby brother is in love.*

"I came clean to him," I admit, setting down my food on the table. "I found something, and he—I don't know. For one stupid second, I thought Dad was the best one to turn to."
Dominic frowns. "What did'ju find?"

And just like that, fury sears through me—it's all at the mere thought of my supposed boyfriend. If he...God, I can't even think about it.

"I was on my way to Mario's this morning." I take a deep breath to calm down. Aside from the fury, there's betrayal, heartache, and disappointment. Even fear, because...if he's capable of—oh, who am I kidding? All the men in my life are capable of pretty much anything. "I was gonna tell him about the pregnancy..."

Dominic nods me along.

"Before I left, he called me and asked if I could get his jacket from his car." No big deal. Mario lives down this street in another building, so it'd obviously be nothing for me to grab his jacket since I have a spare key. "But when I got to his building and was about to open his car, he came running out and said he'd grab it instead. I don't know, it was just weird—he acted all off."

"Uh-huh..." By the cocked eyebrow, I'd say Dominic's assuming there was something I shouldn't see in my boyfriend's car. And that's correct. "Go on."

"I got nosy," I confess.

My brother shakes his head, looking irritated with me. "If your man tells you not to look in his car, you don't fucking look, Elisa. You know what we do."

"I know! But..." I bite my lip. "You've always told me to go with my gut—"

"Pretty sure I've told you that once." He scoffs. "And it was when you tried to get me to talk about fuckin' nail polish."
"Anyway," I grit out, "it felt weird. I wanted to see. So, later, I made up an excuse, said I wanted to get us lunch from Stella..."

"You searched through his car," he states flatly. "Madonn'—first, you need to learn your fucking place, sis, and before you go off on a goddamn feminist rant—"

"Oh, do I look like Julia all of a sudden?" I ask incredulously.

"Second," he speaks over me, "Mario clearly needs to do his job better. He shouldn't be hidin' shit in his fuckin' car."

I decide to just blurt it out. "I found Casey's gold chain and Francis's leather jacket in a black garbage bag in Mario's trunk."

That sure shuts him up. Properly.

For a beat, his eyes widen, like he's shocked and at a loss, but then Gangsta' Dee is back in the house. Maybe many don't notice, but my brother has a special expression for when his mind races. Best way to describe the look...imagine a high school cheerleader trying to solve a math problem at college level. Or a virgin boy staring at a bra, wondering how to unhook the damn thing. Or Dad staring at a stove, wondering how food appears.

_Fucking Dad, I hate him._

After seeing that in Mario's trunk, I panicked. I was afraid Mario's involved in Francis's assault...and even worse, that Mario was the reason I couldn't get in touch with Casey. So, I was the blubbery idiot who called her daddy in need of help.

_I won't make that mistake again._

Once he found out Francis has a boyfriend, all hell broke loose.
"I never got to tell Dad about Mario maybe being involved," I add. "Dad freaked out before I could—right after I told him about Casey."

I'm so fucking stupid, but I hadn't been seeing clearly.

And if this is true—if Mario's involved...

I want him dead.

"Okay. I gotta send youse to a safe place," Dominic says, frowning in thought. He pinches his bottom lip, frown deepening. "Everyone knows you're here..."

"Who're you talking about?" I ask nervously.

His head snaps up as if he'd forgotten I was here. "All'a youse. Dani, Lia, you." He groans and slumps back, his hands tugging at his hair. "Fuck, this is gonna blow up." Sitting straight again, he releases a breath. "All right. Before I even let you near Mario again, I need to make sure he's not involved. You gotta friend you can stay with? Someone not connected."

The answer is no, but I say, "Yes."

He nods. "Bene." Jesus. He's sounds just like Dad sometimes. Only...Dominic has a fucking heart. "I'll send Dani and Lia to live at some hotel—"

"Why?" I gotta ask. "Are we in danger or something?" I get that if Mario finds out I've been snooping, he'll be pissed. But it's not like he'd hurt me, right? This is just my brother playing it safe, and I'm cool with that.

Dani and Lia, though...?

"I don't know who I can trust, Elisa," he says bluntly. "After today, it's only a matter of days—maybe even hours—before shit gets out. We keep secrets well in our family, but people're gonna notice the split. And when
Felix finds out how I'd rather support Frankie than be Dad's son..." He squints at nothing and scratches his jaw. "I gotta make sure Felix can trust me."

I swallow against the tightness in my throat, worry flooding me. "Can he?"

"What?"

"Can Felix trust you?" I don't know a lot about the "family," but I obviously know that Felix is the boss. I know some ranks—like Dad's, Zio Alec's, cousin Nico, and, um...yeah. Pretty sure Anthony's favored or something, too. Felix loves him.

"Yeah. He can." Dominic's straight-faced, but that means nothing. Everyone in our family is too good at lying. "Everything will work out, but I'll focus better if youse're safe."

That's basically what Dad has told us whenever we've gone on "vacation." Everything will work out, but.

"Do you have anyone you can turn to?" I ask anxiously. The thought of my little brother being out there—no matter how skilled and badass he can be—makes my stomach knot up. "Who do you trust most—when it comes to work, I mean."

He smiles bitterly and lights up a cigarette, taking a deep drag. "Frankie."

And he's clearly not an option...

"What—what about Joseph?" I can feel my cheeks heating up, but I hope he can't tell. Joseph's actually the man I intend to call. For some reason, I know I can trust him. Plus, no one will suspect I'm at his place—if he says I can stay for a few days.
"Maybe..." Dominic flicks away some ashes on his emptied plate. "I hope so. All I know right now is that I can't turn to Dad, Felix, fuckin' Mario, Zio Alec, or Nico." He takes a drag and exhales. "Anthony's got my back, but... With his position with Felix, it might be safer for Anthony to stay outta this. Plus, he's gonna have his hands full with Mom and Julia."

I nod and...oh, shit...I remember something. "Joseph told me at the party that Mario's been doing jobs for Felix."

He inclines his head in acknowledgment, and I can tell he's shutting down. A blank, yet determined expression takes over, ending Sharing Hour. I'm not a friggin' gangster, and my brothers and dad naturally don't talk business with me. Or any other woman.

"I'll take care of it. You got money?"

I nod. "I have a couple hundred in my purse."

Smoke dangling between his lips, he reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a wad of cash. "I don't know how long this'll be..." He counts out a few bills, and I try not to look so shocked at how much he carries on him. "I don't wanna know where you end up—the less I know, the less I can confess under torture." He smirks wryly, so I fucking hope that was a joke! "As long as it's someone you can trust with your life and that you take your cell phone wit'chu."

"Um." I look down at the bills he hands me—there's gotta be a grand here or something. "This is surreal, getting money and instructions from my kid brother."

Dee chuckles. "Next you know, I'll be using your fancy college words. What was it you called me a few months ago—obtuse?"

"That's not a college word." I roll my eyes. "It's common fucking English."
"Right," he laughs. "You're so street, sis. You call me obtuse and Mom calls me a goddamn wackadoo. You're right—she's the one who sometimes talks like she's gone to Harvard." He snorts.

Yeah...'cause Harvard has moved to Henderson?

But the teasing seeps out of me at the mention of Mom.

"We have to call her," I whisper. "She was so upset."

She shouldn't suffer because she married a goddamn idiot. And I'm an idiot for wanting to cry. He doesn't deserve my tears.

My brother sobers and nods. "It's nearly midnight, so we can do that tomorrow. Now I wanna get'chu a cab."

"I'm leaving tonight?" That seems rushed.

"Might as well make our move before someone else can."

Wow. Dominic really trusts no one on this.

~oOo~

I feel like a piece of runaway trash when I knock on Joseph's door. He knows I'm coming; I called him earlier, and he just buzzed me in. I haven't been here in years, but I remember it being big for a single man—like three or four bedrooms—and decorated for the typical bachelor. Sparsely furnished, lots of black and white and stainless steel, and without personality. But it beats the trailer I look like I belong in.

Okay, no trailer trash wears yoga pants from Calvin Klein or a zip-up hoodie from Ralph Lauren, but the rest of me? Forget about it. I need a damn shower real bad, I'm wearing fucking flip-flops—in February!—no makeup, and I'm pregnant and possibly on the "run" from my baby daddy.
Add Daddy Disownment to that and it's just too much. Literally. A few seconds before Joseph opens the door, everything from today comes crashing down on me, and I start sobbing uncontrollably.

"I'm s-sorry," I wail, not even seeing Joseph, my vision's so blurry. "I was—I was just f-fine a min-minute ago. This is—" I hiccup and gulp and try to breathe and, and, and, oh my God, what is wrong with me?! Meanwhile, Joseph is quick to usher me inside and to the couch in the living room. "I'm—I'm a little overwhelmed."

"Shhh, you don't have to explain." He hugs me and speaks quietly against my temple. "Junior's currently drinking himself into a coma at Twilight with my father, so I know what's happened."

Another cry slips through my lips as I curse Dad to the fiery pits of hell. What the fuck is he thinking? My mom...oh, God...Mom's at home all alone? Family is everything to her!

"He just l-left Mom?" I wipe fruitlessly at my cheeks, but tears keep streaming down.

"Ah..." He clears his throat, and when I blink away the blurriness I'm pretty sure I see him hesitating. "Your uncle—Alec picked him up."

"Why?" I realize that if Joseph knows, he knows it all. About Frankie, most importantly, and though it might be too soon to tell, Joseph doesn't exactly seem disgusted with his little brother. "Tell me," I demand when Joseph's stalling. "I know you're loyal, b-but—this is my mother. Why did Zio Alec pick up Dad?"

He sighs heavily and pulls me closer, which is comforting, but it has little effect. I need to fucking know.
"I spoke to Anthony," he says quietly. "Your father may have gotten a little rough with Bella. Anthony managed to get between; he called Alec—"

"Oh, no—God." I break down completely and try to push away from Joseph. "I need to go to her!" Frantic, I push and push and push, but the idiot is too strong. "Let m-me go!" I sob hoarsely.

"No. Listen to me, Elisa—" He cups my face; I'm shaking my head no, no, no, no. "Bella is fine, and she's not alone. Alice is with her, and so are Julia, Gabriella, and Anthony. It's not as bad as it sound, I promise," he implores. "Anthony stopped Junior before it got outta hand."

Too upset, too heartbroken, I just collapse against Joseph and cry.

He's wrong, though.

This went outta hand the second Dad decided Dominic and I weren't as important as hating Frankie.
Chapter 12

Translation:

*Zitta, tu* = Quiet, you.

*Faccio schifo* = I suck.

Hummingbird's POV

I wince in pain as TJ bounces a little on my lap, but I refuse to let him go. He's oblivious, happily watching a Disney movie, and I'm just as happy to have him here. I need it. Gabby is next to me with a sleeping Allegra, too, so the only one missing is Lia.

"I saw that, Bella." Gabby frown in concern. "You're hurt—you shouldn't have him on your lap."

"Zitta, tu." I stick out my tongue at her to lighten the mood, then I cuddle some more with my little TJ. If the momma in me can't be happy, the nonna in me damn well better be. Hence surrounding myself with two of my grandbabies today.

One is missing, and...will there be a fourth soon?

Elisa's outburst from yesterday weighs heavily on my mind—and my heart—and I need to know. I need to know she's okay, and if she's...pregnant? God...

But, as much as I want Elisa and Dominic here right now, it's better that they stay away. Firstly, Junior is still raging, and secondly...Dominic would go through the roof if he saw me now. And Elisa would be so upset.

Junior's not looking pretty, either. Dominic really pulled a number on him, and after my husband lost control with me, Anthony got his turn. He clocked Junior good before Alec showed up.
I can easily hide the bruises around my neck, although I don't feel the need around Gabby since she saw me last night, and the rest is already hidden under my yoga pants and snug hoodie, not counting a small bruise under my eye.

_Praise Jesus for makeup._

"I'm so mad at Junior," Gabby whispers, shaking her head.

As sad as it is to think like that, it could be worse. I don't make excuses for Junior's behavior, but in my opinion, slipping up—making a couple mistakes—doesn't make him a bad man. In my twenty-three years with him, he's only scared me two or three times. And compared to some other men, especially in our lifestyle...?

My husband loses it—he becomes someone else. He's never slapped me or outright hit me, he just...well, Junior Maisano squeezes. He's a squeezer. And definitely not always in an affectionate way.

"I got rough, too," I remind her.

After Dominic and Elisa left yesterday, I had calmed down enough to fake it while Anthony went to comfort Julia. And when we'd gotten back inside the house, I had been all fists. I charged at Junior, crying my eyes out, and pounded my fists to his chest; I scratched him up, clawed at him. In return, he had lashed out, gotten his hands around my throat, squeezed until I was choking for air, and then pushed me into the kitchen table. That's how my hip got banged up, and then my cheekbone as I'd hit the floor. He'd screamed at me, completely livid, yanked me up off the floor, only to push me down again.

Then Anthony had reached us and knocked Junior on his ass.
Anthony had ordered me to get into the bedroom, and when he'd come for me twenty minutes later, Alec had picked up Junior.

Word gets around so fast in our family; Gabby had been first to arrive, and then Alice. I also got calls from Brianna, who's back in Kansas City now after her visit.

"Junior's a lot stronger, Bella," Gabby points out. "And you're a woman—he shouldn't—"

"Don't think like that," I chuckle, honestly amused. "Don't buy into that crap. Where I come from—if you got balls to throw a punch, you got balls big enough to take one, too." I pause, phrasing my words, wanting Gabby to really understand. "God forbid—but if you and Anthony ever find yourselves in an argument where words aren't enough... I doubt he would ever raise his hand at'chu first, but if you slapped him or something? Honey, how would it look to others if Anthony was at home taking punches from the wife?"

Gabby *hmphs* and seems to mull that over, not looking satisfied nor displeased. Maybe somewhere in between? Like, I've given her a new perspective to consider?

She's young; she's got a lot to learn, but I have faith in her.

Some time later, I hear Junior moving around noisily in our bedroom, having woken up, and I hope his hangover is killing him.

He'd stumbled home at around three in the morning, and Alec had dumped him on the couch. Then my husband had woken up as I got ready to start my day, and he'd gone back to sleep in the bedroom.

Now it's past noon...
Just 'cause I'm not too upset about how our fight got physical doesn't mean I'm not mad. No, fuck that. Not mad—fucking furious.

He disowned two of our babies? Over my dead body.

I do see his point of view; I was raised the very same way. And this mess with Francis...

I wince internally and do the Sign of the Cross.

I've already been to church this morning to pray for him. Because...oh, I don't even know. It's considered sinful—two men together? But I'm a mother, and my love doesn't come with an off switch. I can't stop loving Francis, which means I'll swallow my old-fashioned views and support him.

It's a different world today; I'm just having some difficulty keeping up.

I'm so proud of Dominic and Elisa for sticking up for Francis, because I know I wouldn't be strong enough to do it without coaxing. I'd have been heartbroken if I had been the one to find out first, and torn—God, so torn. I still am. But now that I know where Dominic and Elisa stand, I've decided to stand with them.

The only problem is that I have to do it silently.

Junior's already forbidden me to go to the hospital and visit Francis, who, I've heard, has finally woken up. Anthony told me this morning; he'd heard it from Joseph, I think. But, regardless, if I get the chance, I will sneak over to the hospital without Junior's knowledge, which will most definitely prove to be nearly impossible. He's got eyes all over town.

I also need to track down Elisa.

I've lost count of the times I've called her cell phone—Dominic's too.
"Mornin'." Junior appears in the wide doorway to the living room, dressed in sweats and his robe.

I focus on TJ, who waves to his nonno but is still busy with the movie.

"Junior." Gabby nods curtly.

Junior tilts his head and chuckles. "Oh, it's like that, is it? Huh, Gabby?"

"Don't start," I warn him.

He glares. "Don't fucking tell me what to do, Isabella. I am in no mood for that shit." He points to the kitchen; with his free hand, he rubs his temple. "Go make me breakfast, and gimme some fuckin' painkillers."

"There's food in the fridge." I glare right back and wave my fist. "If you think you can walk all over me right now, think again!" God, I am so fucking livid. It feels like I'mma catch on fire. "Christ—" I make a face, disgusted "—I don't even wanna look at'chu."

My husband smiles, which means he's so beyond furious it's not even funny. "You don't wanna look at me?"

"Did I stutter?" My heart is racing, but it feels fucking glorious to leave any kind of verbal filter behind.

He purses his lips and nods. Then points to the kitchen again. "A word, Isabella. I won't tell you twice."

Steeling myself, I sit TJ down on the couch, then stand up. Gabby looks worried, but I shake my head at her; it's okay. I can handle this. So, after telling her to stay right here—to which I see her pulling out her cell phone—I follow Junior out to the kitchen.

Once there, I lean back against the counter, putting the kitchen island between us, and fold my arms across my chest.
His stance mirrors mine. "I'm sure you can listen while you make me something to eat."

I stifle a grin. "I'm sure I can, but like I said, there's food in the fridge. Knock yourself out."

"You think this is wise, Isabella?" He chuckles darkly and takes a few slow steps around the island, coming toward me. "I thought I made myself clear yesterday—you'll stand by me on this. Your place is here—"

"Oh, I'm fully fucking aware of my place," I snap. "I know my role—do you know yours?" Anger boils up, and I clench my hands into fists. "Because last time I checked, you were the father of four children, not two!" It's like my heart cracks all over again, just thinking about yesterday. "But if you can abandon that role, who's to say I can't stop being your goddamn maid?!

"Abbassa quella cazzo di voce." He tells me to lower my fucking voice and reaches me in a few quick strides.

Fear stiffens my spine as he cages me in, but with my heart already broken, it feels like no amount of physical pain can bother me.

"What the fuck is wrong wit'chu? Huh?" He grabs my jaw. Hard. "What's wrong wit'chu?"

"Stop it!" I plant my hands on his chest and shove him away as hard as I can. "Always with the fuckin' squeezin', Juniuh!"

Rage flashing in his eyes, he raises his hand as if to backhand me, and I can only imagine the force he'd put behind that blow, but I ain't backing down from this.
"Fucking do it," I seethe, flinching forward. "Slap the shit outta me—put me in my place!" My chest heaves with a sob that wants to rip out. "It don't matter anyway—you can't hurt me more than you already have!"

He lowers his hand and grins sinisterly. "Oh, poor little Isabella. Christ, you'd think the world was coming to an end if one of our kids scraped their knee—"

"Scraped their knee?!" I cry out. "You fucking asshole, Edward! You disowned them—told Dominic he's no longer your son!" Tears of fury and despair begin to roll down my cheeks. "I can handle a lot, but I won't stand for you pushing away our children!"

"You do as I say," he barks out, pointing at me. "I'm tryin'a protect our family by not letting a fuckin' disease, a goddamn fag—"

"You're not protecting shit! You're breaking us apart!" I scream, then count off on my fingers. "Dominic and Elisa are gone, Julia won't speak to you, and Anthony only runs interference when he thinks you're a threat to me!" I slap a hand to my chest. "And you think I'm gonna sit by and take that? You think I'm gonna be a good little wife and support you—cook for you, kneel for you and suck your cock? You might as well stab me in the fucking heart!"

A tense silence falls over us as we glare at each other. Tears continue to stream down my face, and that sob finally breaks free. With my hands covering my face, I weep and slide down to the floor, completely shattered.

Anger is still rolling off him in waves, and I cringe when he touches me. I don't want his fucking hands on me. They hurt.

"Don't!" I sob. "Don't touch me!"
He doesn't reply; he just grabs me by my arms and pulls me up again. I wince and hiss at the pain, to which he freezes.

Wiping my cheeks, I try to squirm away from him, but he holds me fast. Then he unzips my hoodie, ignoring my struggles to get free.

"Stay still," he whispers.

He pushes the fabric down my arms, revealing my shoulders and biceps. There's no doubt about what he's seeing. The dark bruises from his tight grip yesterday. The red marks from his fingers digging in.

He draws a ragged breath and shifts the strap of my tank top aside. His fingers shakily trace the bruising around my neck. Then he moves down and slips his hands into the waistband of my pants, exposing my hips. The left is fine, but the right...that's where I hit the kitchen table, purple and blue from the impact, then red and more blotches of purple from when I landed on the floor. It's the biggest mark I have. His hand slides over it in a ghosting touch, not covering all of it.

He chokes up.

"Let me go," I whimper. "Please let me go, Juniuh."

Ignoring me, he palms my cheek and forces me to look up. His jaw is clenched so hard that it's gotta hurt. On his neck, there's evidence of my scratching him up. Dominic and Anthony have left their own bruises.

"Never." There's a storm raging in his eyes, killing the gentleness of his touch. "Never, Isabella." His thumb brushes over the spot on my cheekbone I've covered with foundation, but my tears have undoubtedly erased it all. "You know I'll never let you walk away. I can't live without'chu—"
"I'm not talking about a divorce!" I scream, pounding on his chest. "Just gimme some fucking space!"

_God, I can't breathe._

"Junior—" Fuck. That's Gabby. In the doorway. _Please_ let me take care of her."

Shame washes over me; I don't want her to see me like this.

More tears rolling down my cheeks, I try to cover myself up as best as I can. I zip up my sweater, my fingers shaking, and stutter a breath of relief when Junior finally backs off.

He brushes past Gabriella without a word, and a few seconds later, I hear the door to his office slamming shut.

"God, Bella..." Gabby rushes over to me and hugs me, but I can't deal with it.

I'm so fucking embarrassed, I can't even look at her. "I'm f-fine. I'm sure TJ will want lunch soon." Christ, I'm shaking so bad. "I'll just—I'll go freshen up."

~oOo~

I can breathe again when Junior leaves an hour later. He mutters something to himself about Jersey, runs a comb through his hair, and walks out with a single word to me.

I'm fine with that.

By the time Julia comes home from school, I'm strong enough to fake a smile. While she does her homework at the kitchen table, Gabriella and I get started on a few desserts that will go on _Stella's_ menu for Valentine's, and we don't speak of what happened earlier.
The phone rings as I'm about to melt chocolate on the stove, so I set it aside, wipe my hands on my apron, and I walk over to the cordless by the microwave.

"Pronto," I answer lightly.

"Hey, Bella. It's Joseph."

"Hi. Junior's not home—"

"I know. I was actually looking for you."

Oh. That's unusual. Unless... "Have you heard from Dominic?" I ask with my heart in my throat.

"He's fine, Bella," he assures me. "He'll call you as soon as he can. I've spoken to him. He told me you can call Elisa now."

Blinking back tears, I take a deep breath and ask, "Do you know where they are? Are they okay?"

"Call Elisa," he repeats patiently. "She'll answer now. That's all I can say."

I nod even though he can't see me. "I understand." I don't, but...everyone's so fucking secretive in our family. I'm used to it. "Thank you for calling, honey. Ciao."

After ending the call, I open our little address book next to the charger and find Elisa's cell phone number, then dial it quickly.

She answers on the first ring. "Mom!"

"Oh my God, Elisa..." I suck in a breath and place a hand over my racing heart. "I am so damn worried! Tell me you're okay, or I swear to Christ—!"
"I'm fine," she giggles, although I can hear she's crying, too. "Perfectly safe, I promise."

Thank God. Filled with relief, I snatch up one of Junior's cigarettes, then leave the kitchen for the patio.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't call you sooner. I was waiting for Dee to tell me it was okay."

"That's fine. As long as youse're safe." I light up the cigarette and take a deep drag, something that proves to be a mistake, 'cause I really don't smoke. Maybe a few times a year. Clearing my throat, I take another pull and let the nicotine give me a small rush. "I'mma be blunt here, sweetheart—are you pregnant?"

She gets quiet, and that's answer enough.

"Are you happy about it?" I ask; that's all I need to know.

"I am," she says in a small voice. "Scared but excited. And I'm sorry if you're angry since I'm not married—"

I wave that off. "Whattaya gonna do?" I shrug to myself. "It is what it is. Just...I'm glad you're happy about it." 'Cause now that she is, I can be, too. I let the news settle in me—one ray of sunshine in this mess. "I'm sure Mario is thrilled, huh?"

"I, uh...well, um. Yes." She sighs. "Yeah...he's h-happy."

The first genuine smile today stretches across my lips. "Good. I'm glad. Just don't get married without telling anyone," I warn. I won't tolerate some quick getaway. "That's a day I reserve the right to share with you."

She laughs a little awkwardly. "I don't think you have to worry about that right now, Mom. But enough about that—how're you? Jo—er, I mean, I
heard you and Dad fought yesterday. I'm so fucking pissed at him. Tell me he didn't hurt you."

My smile wavers. "I'm fine, baby. I promise."

*We're all a bunch of liars.*

Elisa and I talk for another ten minutes or so until she has to go, but she promises we can talk whenever now. All I have to do is call and she'll answer.

Hours later, Dominic promises the same thing. He's not staying at his apartment at the moment, which worries me, but he's just a phone call away.

I know nothing, and that's not new, but it's when my kids...?

It hurts not knowing.

I feel helpless.

And alone.

But, I put a smile on my face for Julia, Gabriella, Anthony, TJ, and little Allegra. And whenever I talk to Elisa and Dominic, I assure them everything is fine.

**Elisa's POV**

*A week later*

Hanging up the phone after talking to Mom, I smile to myself and finish towel drying my hair. She'd called right as I'd gotten out of the shower, so now I'm pretty cold.

Since it's just me tonight here at Joseph's place, I only put on a pair of boxers—I might've stolen them from one of Mom's shopping bags for
Dominic once; he never even got to see them—and one of my own tank tops with spaghetti straps. Then I grab my blanket from my guest room and pad out to the living room, hoping there's a good movie on.

Or I can always check out Joseph's collection; the wall behind the part of the L-shaped couch that sticks out in the room is packed with movies. Shelves upon shelves. Mostly DVDs, but also many on VHS.

With a little smirk, I pick out one of Anthony's favorite movies—GoodFellas.

*Let's get inside the gangster mind, shall we?*

Ten minutes later, there's popcorn, a caffeine-free soda, and a small bowl of gummy worms on the coffee table, and I push play on the movie. Not used to being alone, I'm bundled up in the corner of the couch, and I've left a few lights on.

About twenty minutes into the movie, I sit up ramrod straight when I hear keys jiggling in the door. In the seven days I've occupied one of Joseph's guest rooms, no one has visited, so I should automatically think it's him coming home now. But it's only nine PM, and Joseph works late. The other nights, he's usually woken me up on the couch after coming home long after midnight.

"It's only me," he says before appearing in the living room.

*Whew.*

I relax, then grin at the pizza box he brought.

"How you doin', troublemaker?" He sets down the box on the table before getting rid of his suit jacket and tie.

*God, his voice just gives me the warm fuzzies.*
"Hungry, I just realized." To prove my statement, my stomach snarls. How very sexy of me. And I know I shouldn't worry about being sexy in front of Joseph, but... "Um, how was work, dear?"

I know that's it. I get anxious around Joseph because I...because I...oh God, I'm twenty-one and I can't even think about it. But I've never felt this way before. My physical reactions to guys haven't been this violent in the past.

"Just swell, honey." He winks. "I'm gonna grab a quick shower, then I'll join you and—" he checks the TV screen and chuckles "—and the rat that is Henry Hill." He speaks of Ray Liotta's character.

As I subtly check out Joseph disappearing down the hall, I wish I could call Gabby or Dani or Mom or, hell, even Julia! But they'd figure out where I am if I started talking about Joseph. And...yeah, probably not so smart to gush about a guy who isn't my unborn baby's father.

_Faccio schifo._

But I can't help it. Over the past week, living with Joseph Colucci, I've realized I have the biggest, most intense crush on him.

He's funny, so smart, protective of Francis, giving...he's also rational, and I say that because he explained the whole Mario thing for me. I could see that it upset Joseph to say it, but it's still true: if Felix ordered Mario to assault Francis and do whatever to Casey, Mario had no choice but to follow his boss's command.

That said, there are two men who won't stand for their little brother slash best friend ending up in the hospital; Joseph and Dominic won't let this go. Mario's just shit outta luck, and I'm trying to muster up sadness for him, but I just can't. Francis has been one of my best friends for years,
and the thought of my "boyfriend" brutally beating him is something I can't forgive.

He is the father of my baby, but...

I'm so turned off by him—I don't wanna see him, I dodge his calls, I don't wanna think about him. Because when I do, all I see are his fists pounding on Francis. It makes me sick. Angry. Nauseous. Devastated.

And Joseph's talked me down each time I've had a fit of rage.

He's distracted me, brought me my favorite foods, left little notes around the apartment to make me feel better...he even sent his aunt—Zia Alice—to buy me bath stuff, oils, salts, my own shampoo and conditioner, when I expressed the wish to try his Jacuzzi. Now, Alice probably thinks Joseph's dating someone, 'cause he obviously never told her it was for me.

He's just so amazing.

*I've got it bad.*

"Wonderful," I mumble to myself and flip open the pizza box.

Even in a perfect world, there's no way Joseph would go for me. I'm hot, mind you—I'm my mother's daughter—but the last few days haven't exactly painted me in a beautiful light.

Unless sweats, ratty tops, vegging out with takeout and candy, hormonal crying fests, and angry rants about my daddy issues and boyfriend issues are considered attractive by thirty-year-old sexy, successful lawyers these days.

*Doubtful, ragazza.*

It gets worse—no, I swear, it's possible—when Joseph returns to the living room wearing only a pair of sweats that cling low on his hips and a towel
around his neck. That's worse because I drop a pizza slice down my chest, with pepperoni and grease and cheese and fuck my life. But mother of Christ, what is that—a six-pack or an eight-pack?

"Shit." I duck my head to hide my blush and dab a few napkins over the gray top Julia got me 'cause she thought it was funny. It's Betty Boop, but under her face, it says Betty Boob.

"Want me to get more napkins?" He eyes my chest, then quickly averts his gaze and clears his throat.

Probably because I didn't put on a bra earlier, having expected to be alone, and to Joseph I'm the little brat he used to babysit. Now I bet I'm making him uncomfortable.

_Barf._

"No, that's fine." I curse myself. I'm not usually this...excuse me, but retarded. Socially challenged? Awkward? My sister would be on the floor laughing her ass off if she saw me now. "So, uh...why are you home so early anyway?"

He sits down next to me and opens a beer. "Once a month, my mother demands that Pop take her out, and he does it to shut her up. Tonight is that night."

I notice the hint of flatness he has in his tone whenever he talks about his parents, but I don't comment on it. Everyone knows Felix and Gianna aren't happy together.

My own parents are the exact opposi—nope, not going there.

These days, the Maisano house is anything but happy.
My heart broke for Mom when she told me Dad's barely been home this week.

*Where the hell is he?*

And I'm forbidden to leave Joseph's place...

Even Mom, who doesn't know where I am—just that I'm someplace safe, thinks it's a good idea for me to stay where I am until things calm down.

With a sigh, I turn to the TV again, and we eat in silence throughout the rest of the movie. But it's not a comfortable silence. Well, maybe it is for Joseph, 'cause he looks all casual, but me? *Mannaggia,* I'm stiff as a board and too aware of his presence.

Every little move, twitch of his muscles, reaction to the movie...I'm like a fucking voyeur. Pregnant voyeur.

After *GoodFellas,* he asks if I'm tired, and I kinda wish I was. It'd be good to escape to dreamland, but I guess I'm a masochist. So, we put on another movie—*Armageddon*—that was recently released on DVD, and I try to immerse myself in the hotness that is Ben Affleck.

Not that it really works. It's like watching a hot dog when there's Kobe beef next to you.

*At least I'm not making a fool out of myself.*

Until the end of the movie and I'm crying behind my blanket. I try to keep quiet, but we all know I'm a big fat fail. Sniffling and whimpering, I watch as Liv Tyler says goodbye to Bruce Willis, and tears roll down my cheeks.

Another daughter loses her father...
"Aw, come here." Joseph chuckles and holds up his arm, and I'm quick to scoot over for some comfort. "It's boring." I snuffle and shake my head, 'cause it's wonderful, just sad as hell. "Why you cryin'?"

"Because it's sad!" Isn't that obvious? "Ugh, men don't get it."

Adjusting the blanket over us, I snuggle close to Joseph's warmth, and he laughs silently at another Elisa Sobfest.

Like I said: I suck.
Chapter 13

Elisa's POV

Once the movie is over, Joseph inserts a VHS and explains that he missed the last two episodes of a new TV series called, um... *The Sopranos* or something. I don't know. Anthony watches it, too.

Why watch it when it's basically your life?

I saw the first episode when it premiered in January, but I don't know what's so great about it.

"You like this show?" I ask as he places an arm around me again.

He hums, absently brushing a few fingers up and down my arm. "Yeah, it's all right. Just..." He huffs a little laugh. "No wiseguy I know would ever see a shrink."

Yeah... I remember Dad saying something like that—why he won't watch this show, 'cause apparently "wiseguys who can't keep shit to themselves might as well roll over and die."

I lift my head. "Did you just admit to knowing mobsters, Mr. Colucci? I'm sure a judge would love to hear that."

He smirks a bit cockily. "It ain't a crime to have friends who're criminals. I didn't admit that I was a wiseguy, did I?" He taps my nose before turning back to the TV again. "I know my rights, sweetheart."

"I should hope so after busting your ass through law school," I giggle.

He reaches down and pokes me in the ribs but says nothing.

"Ugh..." I scowl as Tony Soprano meets up with his mistress. "God forbid one pussy is enough."
Joseph groans quietly. "Don't say that word."

I frown and lift my head again, one hand on his chest. "What—pussy?"

"Yes." His jaw ticks with tension, and he won't look at me. "Just watch the show."

"Oh, my God." It dawns on me, and I can't help but laugh. "Are you one of those men who don't like it when women curse?"

When I was little, my dad used to be like that. Anthony and Dee could talk however they wanted, but he got pissed if Julia or I said a bad word. We were supposedly too "innocent and perfect" for that.

Thankfully, he let that shit go pretty quick. I mean, it's not like my mother is a saint in the way she speaks, either.

"No, that's not it."

I shoot him a frustrated look. "Then, what?"

"Forget it," he mutters.

"No..." A grin slips into place. "If you don't tell me, maybe I'll just sit here and say pussy, fuck, damn, cock—"

He clamps a hand over my mouth and stares down at me, his eyes dark and intense. "Enough."

I suck in a shaky breath behind his hand as a shiver runs down my body, tightening my belly.

"You're testing my restraint." His voice is quiet and husky.

A rush of excitement slicks my pussy.

Holding his stare, I get bold and nip at the inside of his middle finger.
In response, his jaw clenches again, and he moves his hand from my mouth to cup my cheek.

God, I feel feverish.

The way he's looking at me causes my heart to slam against my ribs.

"Joseph..." It comes out as needy as I feel.

"Cazzo." The word leaves him in a sharp hiss before his mouth is on mine.

*I fucking die.*

This isn't the gentle and mechanical I'm used to. It's hot, passionate, and forceful. Moaning breathlessly, I grab at him and pull myself up to straddle him. He groans in return, and our tongues meet as my crotch comes in contact with his very hard cock. Fuck me, he's huge. His sweats and my boxers leave nothing to the imagination. He just might break me. *Whatta way to go.*

His hands slide up the backsides of my thighs, not stopping until he palms my ass under my boxers. "*We gotta stop, baby.*"

"No, we don't." No way. Hell no. Fuck that. Don't be stupid. Wait, unless...

"Is it because of Mario? Or, shit, 'cause I'm pregnant?" With another man's baby... Oh, Jesus Christ, I really am tacky. Cringing, I back away as mortification washes over me. "*God, I'm so sorry—*"

"Stop." He grasps my chin and forces me to look him in the eye.

"Whatever you're thinking, that's not it." He scoffs gruffly. "Mario? Fuck that. As far as I'm concerned, you're fair game until there's a ring on your finger." I shudder under his predatory stare. "If he's not man enough to step up, I know there're others who are."
It occurs to me—hits me so hard, that I think I want Joseph to be that man.

"I'm done with him," I whisper, saying the words out loud for the first time.

I've been sticking my head in the sand for days now. I'm done with that, too.

"That's what I wanted to hear." Then he takes my mouth again, even more forcefully than before. Consuming desire spiraling through me, I don't even notice he's lifting me up until my back hits the couch. "Fucking beautiful," he mutters, covering my body with his.

I moan as he hitches my left leg over his hip and pushes his cock against my pussy.

In comparison, Mario is the kiddie ride at an amusement park—safe and comfortable. Joseph is...he's the main event, the thrilling rollercoaster that will give you the ride of a lifetime. The ride that looms ominously in the back of the park, just waiting for you to gather the courage. The ride that scares you, but you can't help but be drawn to it. No matter how much it makes your heart race.

I want that rollercoaster, and not just for one night.

"I wanna—" I burrow closer, pull at him, literally wanting to get... "Under your skin—I wanna get under your skin." Now I'm a fucking freak, too.

Joseph doesn't take my words literally, though. Thank God. He laughs and tucks some hair behind my ear. "Sweetheart, you've been under my skin since you grew tits."

I let out a breathy giggle and draw my fingers down his sculpted chest. "You should've—you should've made a move sooner."
He grunts, slipping a hand under my top. "I have nine years on you, our fathers might as well see us as siblings, and I didn't even know I was on your radar."

When his thumb brushes over the underside of my breast, I arch into him and whimper—it's all the invitation he needs. And unlike Mario, Joseph doesn't hesitate. He's confident, so fucking passionate, and even with greed lacing his touches, there's care. He grabs at me as if he's a starving man; he doesn't treat me like I'm made outta glass, but he doesn't put too much weight on me, either. He's a kisser. An amazing one. And his focus is on me—not just to get laid, but...God, he's just everywhere.

"I want you." I gasp and break away from the kiss, needing air. And my shirt is in the way, so I start pulling it off. "I want you so much, Joseph."

"You have me." He tosses my shirt on the floor, then lowers himself to me again and begins to kiss down my neck. "Lemme look at'chu."

Without moving away, he watches my body, which makes me feel self-conscious in a way I've never felt before.

I could lose a few pounds...

"No—stop that shit." He bats away my hands when I try to hide my stomach. "Madonn', you're—you're fucking perfect, Elisa." Relief floods me. "And..." Slowly, he dips a finger down the waistband of my boxers. "I wanna see all of you."

I exhale shakily and nod, lifting my hips slightly.

Slipping off my underwear, they join my shirt on the floor, too.

I watch as Joseph's chest expands with a deep breath; he has his eyes set on my body. His hands slide up my thighs, up my hips, up my ribs, and he lowers himself to kiss me again.
"My little troublemaker grew up," he whispers in my ear.

I close my eyes and shiver as he palms my left breast and swipes his thumb over the pebbling nipple. Then when he claims my mouth and pushes his tongue inside once more, that hand makes a path down to my pussy.

"Stai tremando." He tells me I'm shaking.

"I'm horny," I correct him. While he has himself a little laugh at that, I reach down to push at his sweats. "Off."

"Patience." He does get rid of his pants, but I don't even get a friggin' peek. I do, however, feel the monstrosity against my thigh when he gets back to my breasts. He kisses them, sucks on my nipples, all while one long finger teases the slit of my pussy.

It's maddening.

"Joseph," I whine, bucking into him.

"Hey..." He lifts his head, then rests his forehead to mine. "I don't wanna know about your past experience, but I can tell you two things: I'm not a fucking two-pump chump, and this isn't a quickie. I'mma have my way with you." He gives my bottom lip a sharp nip that shoots a jolt of arousal to my pussy. "Over—" his thumb finds my clit, causing me to moan "—and over—" and moan again when he slides one finger inside me "—and over again. Until you can't walk. And fuck me, you're tight." We both shudder. "By the time we're done for tonight, you'll know exactly who you belong to. We clear on that, Elisa?"

I swallow and manage a jerky nod, seduced by his words and reduced to a needy mess.
"Good..." He kisses me softly, at the same pace as he fingers me. "Touch me."

*Oh, yes!* Sliding a hand between us, I find him hot, hard, and smooth along my thigh. *Mannaggia,* I can't even get my fingers around him fully. But Joseph doesn't seem to care; he groans a curse and deepens our kiss.

As the minutes pass, the moment swallows me whole—the entire scene is setting me on fire, and my body takes over. We move together as if we were made for each other, our breaths, scents, and intentions becoming one.

As I give him a nudge, he lets me take the lead and ends up on his back with me straddling him. I kiss and nip my way down his body, reveling in each moan and muscle clench he gives in response. 'Cause my God, those abs of his... *Whew.*

I hesitate for one beat when I reach his cock; my mouth is fucking watering, but I've never done oral before. Whenever I brought it up with Mario, he acted as if he was afraid my father was gonna jump outta the shadows.

"You don't have to, baby. You know that, right?" Joseph weaves his fingers through my hair, the touch comforting and soothing. But I do want to; God, do I want to. So, I throw caution to the wind and grasp his cock, slowly lick the underside from root to tip, then suck the head into my mouth. He tenses all over. "Oh, Jesus fucking Christ."

*Win.* He likes it. I get all giddy and even more enthusiastic.

Emboldened, I tighten my lips around his cock and take as much as I can, using my hand to cover the rest. He sucks in a sharp breath every time I use my tongue, so I make sure to do that a lot.
"That's fuckin'—" he grunts as I tentatively cup his balls "—fuckin' amazing."

I hum, tasting his salty pre-come, and rub my thighs together for friction.

"Enough." He gently halts me and sits up. "I don't wanna lose it already. C'mere." He pulls me close, kissing me deeply, and positions us so his cock slides against my pussy.

"Oh," I breathe out. "I, Joseph, I—" A moan escapes me as the head of him hits my clit. Gripping his shoulders, I roll my hips and crash our mouths together.

"Cazzo—that's it," he groans into the kiss.

I squirm, needing more. "More. I want you inside me."

He spits out another curse at that, his fingers digging into my hips and ass. "Christ, yes—you sure?"

I nod furiously, ready to devour him. And be devoured. "Um, you can—you can use a condom, of course, but..." My stomach knots up; the thought of feeling him, all of him, deep inside me, is all I want. I've never had unprotected sex before—one broken condom doesn't friggin' count.

"That's funny." He grins sexily and shakes his head. "But not happening. Not with you." He cups my face in his hands, kissing me gently. "And you can trust me; I've never—"

"I trust you," I say quickly, meaning every word. Leaning close, I kiss his collarbone and look down at his cock, slick with my wetness and nestled close to where I want it. "So hot." I stare unabashedly, and my pussy gives a small clench in anticipation and, admittedly, a little fear. Cuz...he's really big. "We're, uh, gonna hafta take this slow." I look up and raise a brow.
He cocks a brow too, then smirks lazily, as if coming to the conclusion that he's larger than Mario. In return, I giggle and playfully slap his chest, and he laughs and gathers me close and kisses the tips of my fingers and continues to steal my heart.

"We'll take it as slow as you want until you've adjusted."

"And then...?" My mouth quirks up, and I grasp his cock.

"And then." He nods and leaves it at that—a silent promise. "You're in charge for now, troublemaker." To emphasize, he leans back just a bit against the cushions, casually holding on to my hips.

Exhaling and pushing down my nerves, I guide his cock to my pussy, my free hand gripping his shoulder, and slowly start to sink down on him. Oh, my God. Before I screw my eyes shut, I catch the tenseness of Joseph's jaw and the palpable desire in his gaze.

"Fuck." He leans forward again, smashing my breasts against his chest, and holds me tightly to him.

I let out a whimper the second he's all in, feeling so fucking stretched and full.

"Breathe, baby," he whispers huskily, his own chest heaving.

I swallow and nod and try to obey.

It works when Joseph distracts me with deep kisses and his thumb slowly rubbing my wet clit.

"You're gorgeous," he murmurs, his eyes searching mine.

The fever is back, and I flush. "Oh, God...Joseph..." When I move a little, he applies pressure to my clit. I cry out and bury my face in the crook of
his neck. He makes me so damn needy. I have to have more. Shifting my hips, I move so he's almost completely out, then push forward again.

Joseph's groan spurs me on.

It's on from there.

Joseph takes charge and flips me over so I'm on my back again. Then he hooks one arm under my knee and drives his cock deep inside me. My heart stutters, my toes fucking curl, and my spine creates an arch.

Heat like I've never known before courses through me in powerful currents. Each thrust of his thick cock, each slide of him inside me, makes me moan, cling to him, and pull him impossibly closer.

"Tell me if it's too much," he says between kisses to my neck. "Goddamn, I didn't know it was gonna be this good."

"It's not enough." I tilt my head back to give him better access, and he increases his speed, fucks me a little harder, and drives me a bit more insane. "Please—kiss me."

I've barely gotten the last word out before his mouth is on mine. Our tongues mingle, as do our heavy breaths. I thread my fingers through his silky hair and tug, getting a hiss and a particularly deep thrust in return. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I register the fact that I'm breathlessly chanting more, more, more into the kiss, and Joseph delivers.

"I—fuck." He swallows hard. For one second, he slows down and looks slightly dazed, but with a small shake of his head, he's back to...normal?

Eh, I'm too horny to read into it. And I get even hornier when he slips a hand between us again to massage my clit. In tight little circles, he basically pushes me toward an orgasm.
"You're close." He releases my legs to dip down and suck on my breasts. With that same predatory stare of his, he keeps our gaze locked and captures a nipple between his teeth. My breathing hitches; my lungs feel too small. "Lemme feel you, baby. Come around me—squeeze my cock."

"Fuck!" I sort of sob out. In only a few seconds, the buildup becomes too much.

Feeling light-headed, I'm suddenly drowning in waves of fucking bliss. Tiny explosions burst through my body, causing every muscle in me to tighten and spasm.

When I come down from my high, I expect Joseph to be done, too. But boy, did I get that wrong. I'm still shuddering from the aftershocks of my orgasm as he throws my legs over his shoulders and shoves his cock deep-deep—God, really fucking deep—inside me. Did he just hit my damn cervix?

"You ready for more?"

I whimper, half dead. But a new round of need claws at me, and I pull him down to kiss me. He gives a surprised sound at that.

"What?" I mumble breathlessly, sucking on his bottom lip.

He lets out a low, sexy chuckle. "Didn't expect you to be this bendy. Madonna', Elisa...you're..." He groans and thrusts his tongue into my mouth at the same time as he pushes his cock inside me. "Fucking stunning. Look at us, baby."

Following his gaze, I look down at where we're joined, and the image of him disappearing into me has to be one of the hottest things ever.

The heat around us is fucking sizzling—scorching—as is his lust-filled gaze.
"You feel so good," I breathe out, catching sight of a lone bead of perspiration slowly trickling down his neck. Tilting my head, I close in and suck on his skin, moaning wantonly. "You should be careful, Joseph—I'mma grow addicted to you."

"Perfetto." His hot whisper tickles my shoulder. "'Cause I'll never be done. The list of things—" he slides out, only to ram back in "—I wanna do wit'chu—" another thrust, and I cry out as he grinds his pelvis to my clit "—is fucking endless."

My insides clench, and I blow out a labored breath. "Lemme get on top." He lets me, and he sits up, bringing me with him, and holds my hips tightly as he slams me down on him. "Fuck!" I throw my head back in ecstasy, and Joseph abandons my hips to palm my breasts. His greedy hands are all over, kneading and massaging. His mouth follows. "Tell me," I groan and cup his neck. "Tell me what you wanna do with me—to me."

"Tell me what you want first."

I don't hesitate. "I want hard fucking with a side order of flowers and chocolate."

He laughs, outta breath, and nips at my chin. "Listen to you—hard fucking." Then he nods, a smirk on his kissable lips, and brings us nose to nose. "If that's what you want, I'll give you diamonds, too."

"I want this." I frame his face with my hands. "This right here. I've never had it before." Raw passion, carnal need.

"A fucking shame." Something deeper, darker than just lust and desire swims in his eyes—possessiveness?

Trapped in that gaze, I don't look away for a second as he changes our position again. I find myself on my back once more, and he hovers
closely, his cock slowly pushing inside me, allowing me to feel every inch stretching me.

"I'll spoil you, baby..." he murmurs huskily against my lips. "Christ, you make me so fucking hard." He steals my breath with a bruising kiss. "But I won't always treat you like a princess." I shake my head, not wanting that anyway. "At times, I'll want to bend you over the couch and take you hard and fast." Yes, yes, yes. "And maybe I'll come home one day and find you in the kitchen...and I'll sit you on the counter...and eat your pussy for dinner."

He begins to rub my clit again—but slowly, almost gently. I gasp hoarsely, frustrated because of his teasing. But...it'll also make my climax even more violent. Joseph makes me feel it everywhere.

"Or maybe I'll decide to fuck your tits and come all over them..."

"Jesus Christ," I choke out, nearly blinded by the heat that engulfs me. My entire body feels like it's on fire. "Yes, yes, yes...please!"

"Yeah?" He speeds up a little, his lips brushing along my jaw. "That's what you want, Elisa?"

"Yes!"

I'm already dangling off the cliff, close to coming again, so when Joseph goes from slow and deep to rough and fast, it's only a matter of minutes before I'm lost. All I can hear is the sound of sex, his cock slamming into my soaking wet pussy, and our choppy breaths. A few dirty words, ragged whispers from him, filter through my haze, and I fall apart with a scream.

As if I'm underwater, Joseph's gritty moans sound far away and muffled.
Trembling with the force of my orgasm, there's nothing I can do but take it. I'm jostled a few times as Joseph pounds into me, then he slows down...groans, jerks, and growls out a curse...and stills...

Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God...

Out of nowhere, in the middle of panting, I get emotional. It catches me off guard, countless feelings rushing to the surface, and my breathing gets caught in my throat. My eyes well up, and I bite my lip to keep any sounds at bay.

He's too damn perfect. He...Joseph, he just feels so good—amazing. The thought of letting him go is like a knife to my gut.

"You okay?" He drops a soft kiss to my shoulder, his breathing just as heavy as mine.

I can only nod, knowing that if I open my mouth, I'll ruin everything.

Unfortunately, he lifts his head—frowns, and opens his mouth to speak, but I cut him off. I quickly shake my head; the last thing I want is for him to get the wrong idea.

"Hormones," I manage to choke out. He doesn't look convinced at all, so I take a few deep breaths and try to explain without sounding like an idiot. "I d-don't wanna be that girl, all clingy and needy. But just..." My chin wrinkles. "Um, don't let go of me—please?"

His brows knit together, and he supports himself on his elbow, but thankfully he doesn't move away completely.

He clears his throat and scrubs a hand down his face. "I have no idea what brought this on, but maybe I wasn't clear before. Or maybe you're just not convinced yet." The left corner of his mouth slants up. "You're
mine now, troublemaker. If you think I'm letting you go, you're outta your fuckin' mind."

A cry and a laugh bubble up at the same time, and I bury my face where his neck meets his shoulder. I'm so damn relieved, it's insane.

Maybe I needed to hear it—his promises—while we weren't in the middle of sex.

"You sure that's all?" he asks softly. "You're upset."

"That's all—I swear." I wipe at my cheeks. "I'm sorry for being a mess. It really is hormones, and...what I said." I blow out a shaky breath and look him in the eye. "For the record, you've been on my radar since I was like fourteen." It's true. I just haven't realized why I felt what I've felt, or what it meant, until now. "You've always made me nervous. I mean, you're so..." untouchable.

He's Joseph Colucci, the epitome of a man. Growing up, I've watched him stand next to his father and mine, always levelheaded, strong, and oozing with power. He's lethal. Sleek. Patient. He's quiet, and that makes some people underestimate him. Which is their mistake.

"Perfect," I finish somewhat shyly. "In my eyes, anyway."

A small smirk slowly creeps into place, but his eyes show something softer, more serious. Taking a breath, he slips out of me—I cringe slightly at the discomfort—and reaches over me to pick up the blanket off the floor.

"Come here, you." He tucks me close to his warm body and kisses me on the forehead. "During past few years, you've had no idea that I feel the same about you," he murmurs, absently playing with a strand of my hair. "I can't say I've been hung up on you, because you're you, Elisa—it was something I shoved out of my mind right away." He pauses, and I peer up
at him. "Elisa Maisano, unattainable. Junior's little angel, who's gone from a bratty little shit—always a sweetheart, but with a fucking devil on her shoulder—" I can't help but giggle, and Joseph's smirk morphs into a lopsided grin. "And now...the devil is still there, isn't it?" He raises a brow; I shrug and smile coyly. He snorts. "Oh yeah, it's there." He smiles and touches my cheek. "Which is a good thing."

"And the bratty little shit—am I still her, too?" I ask teasingly, although there's an undercurrent of worry.

He chuckles and pulls me on top of him, his hands roaming down to cup my ass. "You know you're not," he says quietly. "You'll always be a princess, but like I said, my little troublemaker has grown up. Now you're a college graduate—you're the young woman who has spent the past four or five years taking care of your grandparents and my grandmother...You're loyal, sweet—you're fucking amazing in the kitchen." He grins.

I laugh softly; I have Mom to thank for that. But Joseph is speaking too soon. I am good, but while I've lived here, he's only let me cook twice, stating that "in my condition," I'm barely allowed to do anything.

He's promised to relax a little once I've seen a doctor, but for now he's convinced that I've been under too much stress lately, so I should only rest.

All that aside, though...

"My life is still a mess," I say weakly.

I realize I'm scared shitless that he'll wake up one day soon and regret everything—think I'm not worth it.

"Eh..." He shrugs. "That's temporary. We'll work it out."

We—I beam at that; he said "We."
"You're amazing," I whisper. "I don't know what I would've done..." 

*Without you.*

"Oh, you would've found a way," he murmurs. "But I'm glad you turned to me."

"Me too." Understatement. "So...che succede adesso??" I ask what happens now.

"Now? As in, right this second, or in the near future?" He doesn't let me answer. "In our near future, you're going to rest, focus on the pregnancy, and *me*—" he smirks wickedly "—and you're gonna let Dominic and me handle everything."

"Oh." That certainly surprises me. "Has Dominic contacted to you?"

I've been stupidly honest with Joseph, but my gut is telling me I can trust him. So, I've told him everything I know—everything concerning Francis, Dominic, my dad, Mario...

In other words, Joseph knows where Dee stands because I've told him.

But I wouldn't have opened my mouth if Joseph's newfound anger toward Felix wasn't so obvious.

Joseph shakes his head no. "I went to him." He leaves it at that, and his expression tells me he wants the topic to close.

I respect that, having grown up in my parents' house.

I'm disappointed, but I do understand. "It's okay—you don't have to say anything." I smile. "I hope I can see him soon, though..."

I talk to my mom every day on the phone, and I've spoken to Dee a few times, but it's not the same. Even though I'm only a few blocks away from *Stella*, I feel so removed from it all. I can't even visit Francis at the
hospital, which sucks. Although, I was very happy when Dee called me a couple days ago from Francis's hospital room and I got to talk to him, even if only for a minute or two. He's in pain, but he's slowly recovering.

I just hope his physical pain will be the worst he'll ever feel, 'cause if we can't find Casey...God, Francis will be heartbroken. He's already worried sick, but there's literally nothing he can do.

I'm glad Dominic has Joseph now, though.

"Actually, you'll see him tomorrow," Joseph tells me, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. My own smile is huge. "You have your doctor's appointment tomorrow, yeah?" Yup. My very first one. I'm nervous, but also excited. "I've arranged for Dominic to meet you at a diner before your appointment."

I hug Joseph tightly and thank him over and over.

"Will you be there?" I ask next, hopeful.

"Wish I could." He seems reluctant and almost apologetic. "You'll take a cab, and I will have someone I trust follow you at a distance."


Just a few moments later, he says that now that he's covered the "near future," it's time to discuss "right this second." Which he does by picking me up and carrying me into his bedroom.

We make love—or is it too soon to call it that? Maybe. Probably. I don't know. Um, we have sex...once more...before falling asleep. But he wakes me up twice more that night.
He fucks like a god, I decide, and don't get me started on his talented mouth. He makes me see stars when he goes down on me—another first for me, something Joseph seems smug about. Then a couple hours later, I'm asleep in his arms, my back to his chest, when he wakes me up that last time.

Feathery light brushes of his lips along my neck and shoulder turn into a deep, open-mouthed kiss as his fingers draw wetness from my pussy. He plays me expertly, not even using words. He reads me, responds to my reactions, and doesn't stop finger me until I'm begging.

Still spooning me, he wordlessly guides his cock to my entrance, hooks an arm under my knee, and enters me in a swift thrust. Gritty moans from him, breathy pleas from me. He takes me slowly and thoroughly. Deeply. His hips press against my ass. His large hand alternates between massaging my breasts and caressing my stomach and rubbing my clit. Lazy kisses. Until we reach that peak and tumble over and come.

When we crash, it's nearly four in the morning, and Joseph was right earlier.

I won't be able to walk tomorrow.

I also know who I belong to.

*I can't wait to fall head over heels in love with Joseph.*

'Cause I know it will happen—that it *is* happening. I can feel it in my bones. This goes so far beyond lust and crushes.

The only problem... Having something you want so wholeheartedly means you have more to lose, too. And despite Joseph's reassurances, I worry that he's gonna get tired of me. I mean...I don't even know how I'm gonna deal with Mario. Joseph and Dominic keep saying, "Leave it to me" or "Leave it to us."
I'm flying blind here, and it's so frustrating.

~oOo~

Whoever Joseph has ordered to follow me is invisible, and when the cab pulls up at a diner a few blocks away from my new doctor's office, I feel alone. Not lonely or abandoned—just...like I'm here on my own. But I'm too happy about being outside that I almost skip into the diner after paying for the cab.

I find my little brother seated in the back, hood drawn up, leather jacket thrown over the table, and a smoke dangling between his lips.

"How you doin', sis?" He stands up only to dip down and kiss my cheek. Tall fucker.

"Good, but what about you?" I eye him, seeing the shadows under his eyes and how messy his hair is. Leaning close, I take a whiff and step back to raise a brow. "When was the last time you showered?"

"Uh..." He squints and scratches his jaw.

It looks like he hasn't shaved in a day or two, which is just weird. The men in my family always shave. I think I've seen Dad with scruff twice—once when he was sick with the flu for a whole week, and then the time he was at the hospital for a gunshot wound back in '93.

Eventually, Dee shrugs and sits down. "I don't know—two, three days? Whatever. I've been busy."

"Too busy to take care of yourself?" I ask softly and sit down across from him. "I'm not trying to mother you, but I'm worried, you know."

"Non hai motivo di preoccuparti." He cracks a crooked grin, telling me I have no reason to worry.
"Where're Dani and Lia?" I hope my brother never sent them to a hotel, 'cause at least with Daniela around, Dominic eats properly.

"Someplace safe," he answers absentmindedly and looks over my shoulder. Shifting his eyes to me, he smiles and jerks his chin at whatever's behind me. "Figured you'd want company at the docta's."

Following his gaze, I peer over my shoulder and gasp when I see Mom walking into the diner. She's dressed all classy in red heels, a matching skirt—or dress; I can't see under her black, form-fitting trench coat—and she's even got sunglasses and a silk scarf, her shiny, wavy hair lingering down her chest. Wow. She looks like a movie star from Hollywood's golden era.

If this is her going incognito, I need to take some pointers from her.

First: skip the flip-flops and the sweats when you go out, Elisa.

In my defense, I didn't arrive at Joseph's with a lot of clothes. And starting this morning, I've taken to wearing one of his button-downs.

He liked that. A lot.

The second Mom spots us in the back, she rips off the scarf and the glasses and hurries toward us. "My babies!"

Choking back tears, I run to her and throw my arms around her. "Mi sei mancata, Mamma." I tell her I've missed her.

She smells like home—her light, sweet perfume, and just...home. It's everything right now. It's Mom's cooking, her pastries, her lotion, Dad's cigars and cologne, cleaning products, the flowers in the backyard, and warmth.
"Get ova' hea', topolino." Mom's all choked up, too, and she waves Dee toward us. "God, I've missed you—so much. Lemme see." She lets go of me to reach up and palm Dominic's cheeks. "Oh, this won't work." She actually snaps her fingers at a passing waitress. "We need what youse call food," she tells the less-than-impressed blonde. "Eggs, bacon, hamburgers, today's special, whatever that is—the works. Chop, chop." With a dismissive wave, she returns her focus to Dominic while the waitress stomps off.

"Yo, hold up—" Dee walks over to Blondie and speaks quietly to her. Whatever he's said, it makes her widen her eyes and nod.

I scowl, not liking the way she's seemingly mesmerized by him.

Dominic gives the waitress one of his smirks as she tucks a piece of paper— with her number on it, I bet—into the front pocket of his hoodie. I grit my teeth, thinking about Daniela, but I'm glad Mom hasn't noticed. She's currently fussing over me, asking me questions, and I answer on autopilot. She wants to know where I'm staying but understands I can't tell her. She also wants to know why we're secretive about my whereabouts, but it's the same there: I can't tell her.

When Dominic returns, I give him a bitchy look. "What the hell was that?"

He rolls his eyes. "It was nothing." He tugs on a lock of Mom's hair. "Just didn't want the broad to spit in our food after this one's rude behavior."

"Please." Mom scoffs. "Like you're so polite."

He shrugs. "No, but that's when you cover your bases and make sure the waitresses don't give you anything you didn't order."

Still doubting his intentions, I walk back to our table and drag Mom with me; I need her close, having missed her more than I thought was possible.
Dominic tilts his head at me and frowns as we reach the table. "Why you walkin' funny?"

Fuck.

*I don't think you wanna know, little brother.*

"I'm *not,*" I insist and plop down in my seat. Oooh, wince.

Mom giggles. "I'm impressed—didn't think Mario had it in him."

*He doesn't.*

And at that thought, my cheeks heat up.

Dee gives me a strange look, knowing very well I haven't been with Mario in a while.

And now that I think about it, it only makes sense that he knows exactly where I've been staying. He and Joseph obviously arranged this today. Christ, what a fool I am for not coming to this conclusion earlier! Joseph's already told me that he's talking—working?—with Dee, so I can't believe I'm this slow.

*College graduate? Bah.*

"That's good, though." Mom nods, bringing me back to the present. "I'm glad you have Mario with you—wherever you are." Dominic coughs and I force a smile. "But enough about that." She grabs my hand and reaches across the table to take one of Dominic's. "Tell me everything. How's my little granddaughter? Tell her Nonna misses her..."

Mom chatters away to get caught up—asking us a bunch of questions and acting happy, but my brother and I see through her.

My heart breaks for her, 'cause hers is evidently already shattered.
Her eyes well up every now and then, especially when Dee says something about Lia and I complain about my morning sickness. She's tough, puts up a strong front, but everyone who knows my mother knows family is everything to her. She's not complete unless we're all together.

"So...what's Junior up to right now?" Dominic asks when we get our food. It smells repulsive—especially the eggs and the questionable-looking soup—but even the stench has nothing on the shock at Dee calling Dad "Junior."

"Dominic..." Mom's face falls.

I swallow hard; Dominic shrugs and averts his eyes.

But Mom doesn't add, *He's your father*. Not because Dad isn't, but because Mom's not in the mood to defend our father. For which I'm glad. Dad doesn't fucking deserve it.

Letting out a heavy breath and dabbing a napkin under her eyes, Mom repeats what she's already told me—that Dad's barely home these days.

"He didn't come home last night." She struggles so hard to keep herself together. "I—I don't know where he is."

"Oh, Mom." I cover my mouth with my hand, my vision blurring.

Dominic looks pissed.

"It will be *fine.*" Mom sniffs, offers a faint smile, and pats my arm. "I don't want you to worry about him—"

"We're not," Dee snaps. "He can go to hell for all I care. We're worried about you, Mom."
"Stop." Mom holds up a hand. "I don't have a single clue about what's going on, but I know something's up. You worry about that instead." She nods firmly. "I'm okay."

*Another liar.*

"Let's focus on something else, all right?" Her eyes turn pleading for a second. "This is a good day. My baby girl—" She links her arm with mine and kisses my cheek. "I'd rather plan your wedding to Mario right now."

*What is it the Jews say—oy vey?*
Chapter 14

Translation:

Per chi cazzo mi hai preso? = Who the fuck do you take me for?

Dominic's POV

Getting back into my car, I get the fuck outta that seedy neighborhood, which had been my destination after dropping off Mom and Elisa at the doctor's office.

Zio Alec has his orders about who dealers aren't allowed to sell to—no kids, no one who asks for credit, and no Dominic Edward Maisano.

But it's funny how compliant they get with a blade to their throat.

And after a week of little to no sleep, I'm fucking done fighting exhaustion on my own.

Finding an alley somewhere, I divide two lines of coke on a Smashing Pumpkins CD case. I've already tested the quality by dipping a finger into the bag and rubbing the powder to my gums. Novocaine can go fuck itself. The quicker your mouth goes numb, the cleaner the product is, and Alec only distributes the best shit.

When I pull out a fifty-dollar bill, I accidentally pull out the phone number to the waitress from the diner, too, so I roll down the window and throw it out. Contrary to what my sister believed, I really only approached the blonde to deliver a subtle threat about our food order. It ain't my fault the ho got an itchin' for some Dominic dick.

Rolling up the fifty, I lean over the case and snort the first line, reacting a bit more than I usually do. Fuck, it's been a while. I swallow a few times and shake my head, feeling the drug's effect almost immediately.
Instant wake-up.

~oOo~

An hour later, I meet up with Joey a few streets away from Twilight.

Felix is fucking cautious these days, but he trusts his eldest son with his life—Felix’s mistake—and Joey told me yesterday that Mario’s meeting up with Felix at Twilight soon.

That motherfucker, Mario, has been MIA the past several days, and I’ve spent countless hours searching for him.

Killing the engine, I get outta my car and pull my hood over my head. Joey’s already here, and his way of dressing down is fucking hilarious. Black dress pants and a black button-down—everything tailored to perfection, obviously—and expensive shoes.

"Check you out, homeboy." I smirk and slap my hand to his. "You look so fucking street."

He chuckles. "I apologize. I didn't read the latest issue of Ghetto Wear, but I see you did. You're one step away from dropping your pants."

"Vaffanculo." I laugh and shake my head, then sniffle and wipe my nose. "We ready?" I'm a little jumpy, just wanting to get this over with. "You know, this would’ve gone a whole lot faster if we'd just told Elisa to set up a meeting."

Mario's been calling my sister nonstop, and it would've been easy for Elisa to tell him to meet her somewhere, and then bam, Joey and I would've been there instead.

I'd never, ever put Elisa in danger, but I don't think a phone call would've killed her. However, Joey insisted that we leave her out of this.
"And then Elisa would've had information we don't want her to have," Joey points out, his eyes darkening a bit. "Tutto questa è fra te e me." He tells me all'a this is between him and me.

Good point. I nod, and we walk over to the inconspicuous car he's picked up for this. "You're awfully protective of her," I observe, deciding to feel him out.

After seeing Elisa at the diner today...Christ. Mom's comment about Mario not "having it in him"—to screw my sister six ways to Sunday—made Elisa blush like a whore in church.

And since I know Elisa's spent the past week living at Joey's place...

At first I was surprised when Joey came to me, telling me he had Elisa safe at his apartment, 'cause I didn't know they was close. Now I'm thinking they're a whole lot closer than just friends.

"That wasn't very subtle of you." Joey smiles wryly and gets in behind the wheel, speaking again when I've gotten in the passenger seat. "You wanna ask me somethin'? Go 'head. I'll be honest."

I nod, respecting that, and spark up a smoke. Wanting a reaction from him, I go for crude. "You fuckin' my sister or what?"

His hands tighten around the wheel as he drives out on to the main street and his jaw ticks with tension. "Fucking watch it, kid. You speak about your sister that way?"

A chuckle slips out, and I start drumming my fingers on my thigh. When he gives me a sideways glance, I grin...and he sighs and shakes his head.

"I walked right into that one..." he mutters and lights up his own smoke.

"So...?" I raise a brow, wanting an answer.
He makes a turn, almost at Twilight, and nods. "I love her."

Well, fuck me stupid. There's no hiding the surprise on my face. "You—you love her?"

Holy shit, I did not see that coming. I mean...it's Joseph. He's like...I don't fucking know, but I didn't think family—getting married—was for him at all.

As far as I know, he's had a few steady lays that he replaces when they get attached. He sets them up in a small apartment, fucks them, then gets the hell outta Dodge. He's a rude motherfucker to the strippers he's always surrounded by, never spending more time at Twilight or Dawn than necessary—like, when Felix is there—and he's said, "Business is my pleasure; I don't need the rest," many times.

"After all this blows over, I suppose I'll have the honor of sitting down with your pops," Joey says drily. "I can't wait."

I shake my head, instantly pissed, and face the window. By now, we've stopped, and we have a clear view of Twilight's entrance. "Don't mention that fucker." I haven't seen Lia in three days now, and that fucking hurts. The mere thought of pushing her away...that shit makes me sick. I'd never. But my own dad didn't seem to have that issue. "So, uh...this Mario thing—that's personal on more than one level, I take it?"

"You can say that."

From the get, Joey and I have had our eyes on Mario 'cause of Frankie. We don't give a flying fuck that Felix ordered Mario to beat up Frankie; that's Joey's little brother and my best friend. Motherfucker's gonna pay for that. But the idiot also happens to be the father of my sister's unborn kid. Then again, Elisa didn't seem to care. She's just as upset about Frankie—and just as vengeful.
"You gonna marry her—treat her good?" I tilt my head in Joey's direction and take a drag from my smoke. "Take care'a the kid as your own?"

I'm doing the brother thing—gotta make sure Elisa's taken care of, but I'm also fuckin' curious.

"No, I'm gonna marry her and dump the baby on the church steps," he deadpans, then faces me with a look. "*Per chi cazzo mi hai preso?* Of course I'mma step up."

"Don't get cunty," I chuckle. "It's a legit question."

"Is it, though?" He jerks his chin at a car that just rolled up, and we watch as Mario gets out. His eyes flick around, cautious, and he hurries into the club. "You think I want the kind of family I grew up in?" Joey goes on. "I was nine or ten—I forget—when my father comes home and tells my mother that she's supposed to raise a kid that ain't hers. Francis was what, three? Something like that. And my folks already hated each other..." He chuckles darkly. "Dominic, I'd never subject anyone to the shit we went through. My mom's a fuckin' pillhead, my sister—Christ, Valentina left Vegas as soon as she possibly could, and Francis got the brunt of Ma's jealously and anger. And Dad...? Forget about it. He doesn't even have the decency to hide the fact that he fucks around on her. Just a few months ago, we found out he's got another kid in Carson City."

"Get the fuck outta hea'. For real?" I look to him, shocked. But maybe I shouldn't be. I know that Zio Emmett had another family, too.

Joey nods. "A daughter—she's only seven or something. I don't know. Doesn't really matter, does it? We don't talk about it."

"Madonn'." I don't know what else to say. Tapping my fingers to my thigh, I face the window again, keeping an eye on Mario's car, and let everything Joey said sink in. So...yeah, maybe I got nothin'a worry about when it
comes to my sister. Joey'll take care'a her. "How the hell are your parents still together?" Rhetorical question.

Felix would kill Gianna before granting her a divorce, and I know...I'm one hundred percent sure that goes for my own dad, too. He can be a pig, treat her like shit, but everyone knows Mom is his biggest weakness. He rules our family with an iron fist, and his front always remains strong, but his heart...? My mother owns that.

Felix and Gianna, on the other hand... That's just image. The big boss doesn't get divorced. It could indicate that he can't keep a wife, 'cause it has nothing to do with pussy. He can get that anywhere.

And of course...divorce is a Catholic sin.

"My father didn't get divorced from his first wife, did he?" I scratch my head, thinking back. I know he was married before—some fuckin' politician's daughter—but she died before he met Ma. At least I think so. "She died before he could leave her, right?"

Joey snorts and rolls down his window a bit more. "Don't get me started. You don't have to be a college graduate to do the math on that one."

I frown. "What the hell are you talking about?"

He answers while lighting up another smoke and keeping his eyes on the club. "Lemme ask you this instead—and I won't tell you a tale that ain't mine to tell. But when did your parents meet?"

I shrug, not really sure. "All I know is what Dad's told me—that he met Mom through Nonno and fell for her."

Joey gives me a sideways grin. "All right. What about that family research thing Elisa did in high school, then? Youse found newspaper clippings from
Jane's death. The cops wanted to investigate, but there wasn't any reason for them to do it—they couldn't gather evidence against Junior."

"Yeah..." I nod slowly, the memory returning to me. "She overdosed." That had nothing to do with Elisa's school project, though, so we hadn't dug deeper. It was nothing we didn't know already anyway. "I don't remember when it was...late '70s, early '80s?"

"1980, actually. And that never raised any red flags?" He fucking laughs. "Dominic, seriously, even if it had been late '70s..." He's still finding this funny. "When were you born?"

"'80," I reply automatically before it dawns on me. "Shit!"

"And he gets it!" Joey nods, to which I punch his arm. "Ah, don't feel bad," he chuckles. "You're probably the first Maisano kid to piece it together."

"Fuck me," I mumble, my mind spinning. Anthony was born in '76...Jesus Christ... "This means—what the fuck does this really mean?" I speak with my hands, scowling. "Dad was with two women at the same time? He cheated on Mom?" That thought makes my stomach churn, and it's killing my buzz.

"That's not the impression I got, but what the hell do I know?" Joey makes a face. "I was only a kid, but I remember some. Junior was a fucking prick to Jane. She'd come over to our house and bitch to Mom—said that Junior was never home. And considering how little I saw him before he actually married Bella...?"

Slumping back in my seat, I glare out the window and shake my head. "I can't believe I didn't know about this before."

"Eh..." Joey shrugs. "Who knows how many secrets we have between the Coluccis and the Maisanos." True. "We don't share shit in our family."
I huff a chuckle. "Yet, we're sitting here like gossiping bitches right now."

"Well, let's put a stop to that." He nods at the club just as Mario exits and hurries toward the car he's driving. "Here we go."

Finally.

Joey starts the car, and we follow Mario at a safe distance.

With my pulse kicking up a few notches, adrenaline surging through me, my buzz is back. I feel alive, undefeatable.

Joseph's POV

We follow Mario to a motel just north of the city and see him climbing up the outside stairs to his room—number 17.

It's not as secluded as we would've preferred, but it makes no difference. We're prepared. After bringing out my nine from the glove box, I leave the car and follow Dominic up toward Mario's room. On the way, I attach my silencer. Dominic does the same.

"You ready?" he mouths as we reach the door. He presses his ear to the door and grins. "I can hear the shower runnin'."

I nod, making a mental note to rough up the kid later. He thinks no one's gonna notice he's sniffing coke again? I was there when Junior tracked Dee down—when he'd taken heroin. It's nothing I want to see again. Ever.

"This is gonna be fun," Dominic whispers with a big smile. Then he lifts his piece and fires off a quiet shot at the lock on the door. A swift boot, a grunt, and the door is kicked open.

We enter silently, and while Dominic heads for the bathroom, I shove the door closed as much as it's possible.
Mario must've heard the hinges coming off earlier, as he runs out of the bathroom with only a towel around his hips and stops short, his eyes growing large when he spots us.

"It's been a while, my friend." Dominic grins and widens his arms. "You've avoided us..." He purses his lips. "I'm insulted."

Mario eyes his gun on the nightstand.

*Too far away.*

I raise a brow. "I wouldn't even try if I were you."

"I..." Mario swallows hard and stiffens. "I-I'm under Felix's protection."

That's debatable. My father couldn't care less about Mario, but for the time being it seems Dad is utilizing him to carry out shit Mario's gonna die for.

"Oh." Dominic nods and looks around himself, then points to the unmade bed. "Is he under there? 'Cause I can't see him. Felix!" he calls, being theatrical. He's having fun. "Where are you?"

Stifling a smile, I jerk my chin to the chair in the corner. "Have a seat, Mario."

He knows he doesn't have a choice; he probably knows he's gonna die, too. So, the stupid fuck decides to try to make a run for it.

"Nah, muthafucka'," Dominic cackles and aims his gun. A muted shot pops off, and Mario drops like lead to clutch his knee.

"You shot me!" he screams.

"You couldn't fucking wait, Dee?" I ask irritably and grab the roll of duct tape out of the front pocket of Dominic's hoodie. Next I get down on one
knee and tape Mario's mouth shut. "Shut up," I snap. "You're giving me a
goddamn migraine."

"Yo, Joey. Look how tiny his dick is."

Jesus Christ.

One consigliere, one cokehead, and one dead man walk into a bar...

Whatta joke.

"Help me get him into the chair," I grunt, hauling a screaming Mario off
the floor. His sounds are muffled, but what annoys me even more now is
that he's getting blood on my pants.

Once Mario's been secured to the chair—Dee went nuts with the duct
tape—I sit down on the edge of the bed, facing Mario, and roll up the
sleeves on my black shirt.

Dominic drags another chair forward, turns it, and sits down in front of
Mario, his arms resting on the back of the chair. "Did'ju put Frankie in the
hospital?" he asks, and Mario makes some noises, frantically shaking his
head. "Don't fucking lie to us!" He aims his gun at Mario's other knee.
"Trust, I'll shoot. You piece'a shit—be honest. We know about Frankie's
belongings in your car. Just nod—give us the truth."

Leaning forward, my elbows on my knees, I light a cigarette and take a
deep drag. "Listen to me, Mario." I keep my voice down. "I understand.
My pops ordered you to do it. You didn't have a choice."

He whimpers behind the tape, his shoulders sagging.

"Oh, I get it." Dominic's eyes light up; he waves a hand between the two
of us. "Good cop, bad cop. I like it."
I refrain from rolling my eyes; God knows I love the kid—he's my future brother-in-law, after all—but he's one bloodthirsty motherfucker. He's like Junior, having fun with his victims—it gives them a rush, although it's been years since I really saw Junior in action.

"Don't pay attention to him," I tell Mario, jerking my chin at Dee. "He's hit the yak, and you know how he gets."

Dominic doesn't have a reply to that, nor did he expect me to be up-front about his habit.

Facing Mario again, I ask, "Did Felix order you to assault Francis?" I don't say little brother—to distance myself from Francis, and to avoid reminding Mario of it. "Because the thing is, if Felix put you up to this, we want your help in bringing him down."

Thankfully, Dominic is on board with my lie immediately, face straight and serious. "That's right," he agrees. "I don't know about'chu, but I can't trust a boss who goes against his own son."

Mario doesn't believe us—yet. He's desperate for it, but he's not that stupid, so I go on. "I'll be honest." I place a hand on my chest. "You're not leaving this motel room without a scratch." Case in point, he's already got a fucking gunshot wound. And now I bring in the little brother card. To justify my actions. "That's my baby brother you brutally assaulted. And Dominic's best friend. But...we'll let you live—if we can count on you."

That does it. He nods furiously and tries to speak again.

"We can count on your help?" Dee cocks a brow, and another nod from Mario. "A'ight. I'mma remove the tape—but if you scream again, you're dead. You follow me?" A final nod. Then Dominic stands up and rips off the tape from Mario's mouth.

"Cazzo," Mario chokes out, wincing.
"So, Felix ordered you to beat Francis?" I ask casually. This time, his nod is hesitant, and even though I knew it already, his confirmation makes my blood run cold. "And Casey?"

Learning that Francis is gay hasn't been easy, and I'm not gonna lie and say I think it's all right. But he's my brother, and he's had a shitty fucking life so far. The kid deserves a break, and...fuck, it's not like he's advertising it. What he does behind closed doors is none of our goddamn business.

I want him to be happy.

"F-Felix told me to give Frankie a clear warning and to make Casey d-disappear," Mario forces out.

Dominic grins darkly. "And where did he disappear to? If you don't mind me asking, of course."

Mario swallows and wipes some tears on his shoulder. "I, uh...I took care of him at Alec's deli."

I let out a low whistle. "That big industrial meat grinder, huh?"

"I didn't have a choice," he says pleadingly, imploringly.

I ignore that. "Was Alec in on it?" I doubt it; my father wouldn't seek out a capo for this. A low-man like Mario is easier to replace, should something go wrong. Plus, Alec is busy with Junior right now—not even in town.

"No! Felix was specific—no one could know. Not even Frankie. I wore one of those beanies."

"And why have you been in hiding?" Dominic asks, his calm slipping.

"Because Felix knew Frankie has an ally," Mario admits.
Dee smirks and points to himself. "Me? I'm honored."

That's not a good thing, although we've seen it coming. Dominic is the only one who openly visits Francis, and it's a big fuck-you to my father.

I've stopped going, under the guise of being on Dad's side. Elisa's not allowed; she needs to focus on herself and the baby right now. Also, we've wanted to keep her hidden so Mario wouldn't be able to find her.

Anthony's smart; he's sticking to the background for this, but I've spoken to him, and he's ready to step in to save his brother's ass at any minute. In the meantime, he's taking care of his family—Bella and Julia, mainly—and just observing, all while sipping scotch with my pops.

I'm gonna have my work cut out for me after this—to subtly and discreetly take some heat off Dominic. My dear old dad is already wary of him. And a wiseguy who's wary...? Forget about it. But if there's one man my father trusts in this world, it's Junior.

Disownment or not, Junior's not gonna allow Pops to harm Dominic.

*I'm fucking banking on that.*

"You should've asked for help, Mario," I bullshit. "You could've turned to Nico or Junior—asked either of them for advice."

Mario actually scoffs. "That's funny. Like Junior gives a shit about me? No offense—" his gaze flicks to Dominic "—but the only reason I put up with Junior is because I love Elisa." He becomes heated, pissed. "You know what he told me? He said I'm coming up in rank—fast—but I'm not! I've earned my stripes, yet I'm still a fucking low-man!" He struggles against the duct tape. "I was promised my button around the same time Anthony was—'cause of that shit at the Dunes. But now...? What, five years later, I'm still here, a nobody. Junior coulda put in a good word for me." He slumps back, looking defeated.
Oh, I'm afraid Junior's word wouldn't have done much.

*I* was the one who planted a seed of doubt into my father's head when it came to Mario's button—said he wasn't ready, said he needed grooming, said...well, I said he needed to practice with his fucking gun.

Because...when you think about it, Dominic wouldn't have gotten shot if Mario had just clipped EJ's buddy at the hotel. Mario thought he had, but that's what you get when you aim at the heart.

*Always go for the goddamn head, motherfucker.*

Granted, Mario helped, but call me petty—I didn't want Mario climbing the ranks.

He was already getting the girl...

"Joey..." Dee looks to me and scratches his cheek. "I'm bored."

I snort in amusement. "God forbid. All right, get the bag." Before we met up today, he had a list of supplies for me to get, and I made sure it was all in the car—shit he needs to make this place look spotless...DNA-less...after we're done.

"Finally!" He jumps up and heads for the door. "Don't get started without me."

*Can't promise that, I'm afraid.*

The second he's done, I tilt my head at Mario and smile. "You've been...most helpful. Thank you." Standing up, I walk over to him and get the tape over his mouth before he can react. The fear that returns to his eyes...I dig that. "But all this?" I twirl a finger. "It proves you ain't cut out to be a man of honor." I dip down and grab his jaw. "'Cause a wiseguy doesn't fucking talk." He offers some muffled noises that sound a lot like
begging, to which I shake my head. "Begging too, huh? Unfortunately I
don't have time to give you the Mafia 101 lecture, but it doesn't really
matter. You won't get the opportunity to use it." I place the gun to his
forehead and slowly slide it down to between his eyes. "Don't worry—I'll
take care of Elisa for you. The way she deserves." There's no way I'm
giving him the satisfaction of knowing Elisa is pregnant. "I'll be a good
husband to her."

His eyes flash with rage and heartbreak.

Fitting combo, as it was what I felt when I learned about Francis being in
the hospital.

"This is for my brother." I pull the trigger.

Addio.

"You—you fucker!" Dee bursts in, first angry...then sad. "No play makes
Dominic a dull boy."

~oOo~

Four hours later, Dominic is still pissed that he didn't get to be a part of
icing Mario, but he shuts up when I remind him to lay off the fucking coke.

"I'm tired," he grumbles in his defense. "Everything's shit. I'm homeless,
broad-less, covered in sand..." He makes a face and dusts a hand over his
arm. Burying a fucker in the desert does that. "Muthafuckin' orphan now,
too."

I frown, stopping at a red light near the hospital, which is where Dee
asked me to drop him off. Presumably to visit Francis. "Bella would be
offended if she heard you say that," I tell him. "And you'll be able to move
back to your place soon. Just gimme some time to smooth shit over with
Pops." I glance over at him, hesitating. "Broad-less? I thought you were with Daniela."

Elisa has told me a little, but to me it just sounds like there's a misunderstanding. I've only met Daniela a few times, but with the way she always stays close to Dee...? I don't think he has anything to worry about, as long as he takes the initiative.

"Nah, we're just fuck-buddies," he laughs, but it sounds hollow. "Meanwhile, I'm bending over backwards to please the bitch. Just a few days ago, she told me her aunt back in Queens is having problems with one of Dani's siblings—her youngest brother. So, I said he could come out here," he rants. "Yo, she rode me good—got all excited, lost her English on my cock, and—madonn'." He kisses the tips of his fingers. "But then...? When we was done, she nearly cried, couldn't stop hugging me, but that was it. Nothing like...'I love you, Dominic—let's make little Dominics together.' Broads are supposed to do that!" His attempt at keeping it light falls flat, and he rubs his chest. "I'm fucked." He releases a choppy breath. "And now I haven't seen them in three days, cuz I've been working my fucking ass off, so excuse me for needing a small pick-me-up!"

"Easy," I caution and place a hand on his shoulder, as he's getting all worked up. "Take a fucking breath, Dee." By now, we've stopped at the hospital, so I face him more fully. "If you love the girl, tell her, for Christ's sake."

For years, I was quiet when it came to Elisa. I told myself I was keeping my distance to respect her, to let her grow up, to let her be happy with whomever she chose. Which I can't regret more than I already do. I wasn't an option for her, 'cause I was never there.
"I'm not even gonna pretend to be some expert—" I show him my palms "—but right now you're no different from any other wiseguy who spoils his goomah. Gestures won't bring you shit in this case."

The moment Elisa showed interest in me...she'll never get rid of me now. I'll tell her and show her until the day I die. Hell, the only reason I haven't told her I love her is because it's literally only been a day. But I've still made my intentions clear.

"I'm not good with words," Dee mutters, opening the car door. "I don't know. I'll figure something out when I can think straight." With a humorless chuckle, he leaves the car, slaps his hand on the roof, and says, "Give my sister a kiss from me—" He quickly ducks his head to face me, a brow cocked. "Uh, a brotherly one, yo."

I laugh through my nose and shake my head. "Get the fuck outta hea', kid. And tell my brother I love him."

"Will do." He nods firmly, then closes the car door.

And I make my way home...

Elisa said she'd never felt this before, she'd never had this before—what we share...and I'd said it was a fucking shame. Which it is, but the thing is, I've never had this, either.

When I enter my apartment, I'm assaulted by the smell of a home-cooked meal, which means the doctor's visit went well earlier. Because I told her she was only allowed to start moving around if the doc gave the green light.

Some Eros Ramazzotti plays in the background, one of Elisa's favorite singers, and I peek into the kitchen to see her swaying her hips to the music while she stirs...whatever it is. And she's definitely been shopping. Since she didn't come to my place with a lot of clothes, I told her to take
out Bella for some girl time after her appointment, and now my girl is wearing a pretty dress.

With my hands in my pockets, I stay quiet for a while, leaning against the doorframe, and just watch her.

Did Mario love her?

Yeah. He did. I'd like to say he'd have been a shitty husband, unfaithful and a prick, but...no, he loved her. It was the pressure he couldn't handle. You need balls—you need to be a real man—to be the one Elisa Maisano deserves. Junior's little angel.

*I'll be that man.*

Having not been spotted yet, I head down the hall, wanting to take a shower and get rid of the desert grime, not to mention my bloodstained clothes, before I greet Elisa.

~oOo~

Dressed in a pair of sweats and a beater, I run a towel through my damp hair and return to the kitchen. I sneak up behind Elisa and shift her hair aside, dropping a kiss to her neck.

"God!" She jumps and spins around. "You—You scared me, Joseph!"

There's a fiery glare in her eyes for a beat—before it melts away and she gives me a radiant smile. "When did you get home? Your hair is wet."

"Just a little while ago." My hands roam her waist, feeling the silky texture of the dark blue dress. "I had a long day, so I wanted a shower before I attacked." I give her a slow once-over. "Not sure I can hold back much longer, though."
"Oh." She flushes, arousal darkening her eyes. "Um. Dinner's almost ready. I-I missed you."

Too fucking beautiful.

Judging by the shyness that appears in her expression, I'd said that out loud. Cupping one cheek, I kiss the other and murmur, "That's from Dominic." Then I weave my fingers through her long hair and kiss her slowly, deeply, coaxing her tongue out. "That's from me. And I missed you, too." Madonna mia, what an understatement. This girl might actually be able to bring me to my knees. "Christ, you smell good, baby." I let out a groan as I kiss her neck, my hands sliding down to palm her sexy ass. Shifting down to the backsides of her thighs, I easily pick her up, getting a cute yelp in return, and sit her on the counter. "Maybe I want you for dinner instead." My little troublemaker.

She giggles breathlessly. "I was actually thinking you could have me for dessert."

Oh, yeah?

I raise a brow as she slides down the straps of her dress and offers me a peek at the goods. "Fuck..." I swallow hard and lick my lips, my cock hardening. Her black bra is nearly fucking see-through, all lace, and would look incredible on the floor.

"And this..." Next she draws up her dress and parts her legs to flash me a matching thong. "I bought them today. You like?"

I shake my head no. "I fucking love." You.
Chapter 15

Translation:

*E senti questa = And get this.*

**Dominic's POV**

"No..." Frankie's face falls; he shakes his head and winces in pain as he sits up in the hospital bed. "No—tell me you're fucking with me, Dee."

I don't reply, my knee bouncing.

"No." His chin wrinkles and tears well up in his eyes before he covers his face with his hands. "No, no, no..."

Averting my eyes, I lean forward on my knees, wishing it was allowed to smoke in hospitals.

I knew it was gonna suck to tell Frankie about Casey—about what Joey and I did today—but listening as Frankie cries fucking kills me.

We could kill Mario a thousand times and it still wouldn’t bring Casey back.

"I'm sorry, bro." I clear my throat and blink past the stinging.

"It's my f-fault," he sobs behind his hands. "I should've left him, I should've left him. God—Casey..."

"It's not your fucking fault!" I shoot up from my seat, near explosion, but fuck it! There's only one man to blame, and that’s Felix. If he hadn't been untouchable—for me—I would've clipped him already. "Christ, Frankie." Groaning, I sit back down again, knowing everything I say will fall on deaf ears.

My skin is fucking crawling; it feels like I'm being suffocated. Everything—*every little thing*—is just falling apart, and there's *nothing* I can do.
While Frankie keeps crying and chanting Casey's name, I try to calm my ass down, but it doesn't work. I bring out my phone, my breaths coming out shallow, and call my brother.

Shit, my hand's shaking.

Maybe I should buy more coke.

Who gives a shit, anyway?

"Yo!" Anthony sounds like he's eating.

It's dinnertime, so...

"It's me." I clear my throat again and obsessively drum my fingers on the arm of the chair. "Where are you?"

"At Mom and Dad's." I hear him shuffling around in the background, and the noise fades. Maybe he left the kitchen. "What's up? I can hear something's wrong."

"Is Da—Junior there?" I ask dully, feeling left out for...so many reasons.


I nod even though he can't see me and look to Frankie just as he presses down on that morphine drip thing. Silent tears roll down his cheeks, but what's worse is the emptiness in his eyes.

"You gonna tell me what's wrong, baby bro?"
I shrug to myself, suddenly feeling that same sense of emptiness seeping into me. "I don’t know..." I lean back in my seat and draw a deep breath. "Today’s just been fucked."

"Where are you?" he presses.

"Um." I look around, then frown—what the fuck, it’s not like I didn’t know. But I guess I’m just as fucked as today has been. "At the hospital." I miss Lia. Dani. Mom... "Fuck, I'm tired." I scrub a hand down my face.

"I'll be there in fifteen, and you're gonna tell me everything."

~oOo~

I wake up to the sound of cooing and giggling, and to the smell of...home. Not my apartment. Mom and Dad's house.

"What the...?" I rub the sleep outta my eyes, completely disoriented. No sense of the time—hell, even what day it is.

I remember unloading—speaking for two hours straight to my brother. Shit, I think I even cried. I cringe. All the things I said... Trust, I've got my secrets, but...holy shit, I really vented—about Mario, about Felix, about Dad, about Daniela, about how Mom and Dad must've met years before his first wife kicked the bucket...

I groan.

"He's awake!" I hear Mom whisper excitedly in the fairly dark room. One of the guest rooms, I note drowsily. "Daddy's awake, bella bambina." With the light from the doorway illuminating more of the room, Mom walks over to the queen-sized bed and sits down on the edge, Lia on her lap.

She reaches for me, and ain't that a sight for sore eyes?
"Hey—" I clear my throat, all raspy and shit. "Uh..." Looking under the covers, I see I'm only wearing my boxer briefs and a black beater. "Did you undress me, Ma?"

She nods and pokes Lia's nose. "Like I haven't seen you naked before? You were born naked, you were naked for every bath, you used to run around the pool when you were a kid, doing the helicopter with your—"

"Sorry I asked!" I exclaim, my head hitting the pillow again. God. I massage my forehead.

"What? You were so cute. I have pictures—"

I make a face and pull the covers over my head. "Whatever. I wasn't eighteen back then. Don’t change my clothes again, Mom. It's weird." Then I push away the covers again. "Gimme my girl."

"Oh..." Mom fans a hand in front of her face and blinks rapidly. There's some sniffing, too. "I love this—that you're so amazing with Lia." She releases my daughter, who quickly crawls over to me and slobbers a kiss to my nose. "I wanna get my camera. I'll be back in a minute!"

I snort and pull Lia close, cuddling up with her. "Nonna's a freak," I tell her. "First she takes off my clothes and now she wants to take my picture. But we love her anyway."

"Pup-up!" Lia shoves her stuffed animal, the puppy, in my face. "Pup-up, Dada!"

"I know." I hug her, inhaling deeply—fuck, that scent, I wanna bottle it. "My cucciolina—my doorstep bundle."

In the clusterfuck that is my life...and it's fucked up, how I was so scared—that I actually tried to run away, when I learned about Lia. But now...Christ, she's the only light in my life.
"Pretty sure Mom's more interested in Lia's picture," my brother says from the doorway. He's leaning against the doorframe, more a silhouette than a real person. But even without the light, I know there's a smirk on his face. "You feelin' better, bro?" He walks over and switches on the light on the nightstand before sitting down.

I grunt, more focused on Lia. "Was I feeling bad?" I honestly don’t remember. Well...I do remember feeling like shit, but... "You drove me here?" I squint, tryin'a force the memory to return.

He nods and touches Lia's cheek. "You were muttering about puppies and ChapSticks. I figured Lia was one of those." He chuckles.

I do, too—at my own stupidity. I must've been really out of it. But a week with so little sleep, bad food, and then two lines of coke...? No wonder I crashed.

Puppies—that’s definitely Lia. My li'l pup. And the ChapStick thing...eh. Daniela's new obsession involves Lip Smackers. They’ve been around forever, but she's only just now discovered them, and apparently they didn’t have 'em in Italy when she was a kid. Now she's got like twenty of the little shits, and if I’m not tripping over them, I'm tasting them on her.

*Can't complain about chapped lips, though.*

"After dropping you off here, I picked up Daniela and Lia," Anthony murmurs, bringing me back to now.

My heart squeezes at the mention of Dani, but I push past the pain. "How did you know where they were?" They've been staying at the Bellagio, and I've been careful each time I drove over to see them.

"You...you were pretty damn chatty." Anthony purses his lips to hide a smirk. "But the second I dragged you in here, you were out for the count." Lia babbles some shit, and Anthony nods. "Exactly. Lia's been getting to
know her Uncle Anthony. Ain't that right, sweetheart?" He tickles her neck. "Can you say Uncle Anthony?"

"Unka't'ny!"

I chuckle tiredly and nibble on her chubby cheek. "Was that even English, baby?"

I guess that’s something that has changed with our generation. My pops has always said, "If you can't pronounce the word, fuckin' practice," and Mom's always been, "The day we forget Italian is the day we forget where we come from."

But saying "zia" and "zio" ain't easy for kids. So, with my generation's kids, we've replaced the Italian with English. Which...I don't really know how that happened, but I've been Unka Dom for TJ since he learned to speak.

"How long was I out?" I yawn, comfortable. I'm in a snooze mood, yet I feel more refreshed than I have in days.

I could lie here all day, but...I wanna head back over to the hospital soon.

"A long time." Anthony checks his watch, eyebrows rising before he laughs quietly. "Thirteen hours. I put you to bed around nine; it's ten AM now. Gabby's dropping off TJ and Allegra at her mom's. I think they're having a girls' day hea'—my wife, Mom, Daniela, and Zia Alice."

Automatically, I turn to the window, but the thick blinds have been drawn, so no wonder it's dark. "Shit."

"Fffit." Lia grabs my face—tries to mimic me. "Fit!"

"She's smart." My brother nods. "Not even a year old."
I grin. "Dude, she tries to repeat everything, but she forgets it right away. Check this out—" I get Lia's attention and ask, "Can you say 'fuck,' Lia? *Fuck*?"

She nods, all business. "Pup-up. Oof!"

"Oh..." I jut out my bottom lip. "You're suppos'ta say fuck."

Of course, that's the moment Mom chooses to return, and she's less than impressed. *Basta cosi!* She tells us that's enough, and makes a sweeping motion with her hands. "No pictures for you, you wackadoo!" Then she kidnaps my daughter and walks out, muttering about the foul-mouthed bastards that are her children.

Which reminds me...

It reminds Anthony, too, 'cause he widens his eyes at me. "We really are bastards, aren't we?" He chuckles. "I did some research last night—turns out you were born on the same day that Jane broad died. There are two years between you and Julia—think at least she's born within the marriage?"

I shrug and stretch my arms over my head, a yawn slipping out. "What I wanna know is if Dad cheated on Mom."

"He didn’t..."

"How do you know?"

He seems to consider; he runs a hand through his hair and checks the door—no one's there—then he puffs out a breath. "All right, truth?" He grimaces. "I actually already knew."

I frown and sit up in bed. "Knew...? What, all of it?"
He nods with a dip of his chin. "Ma told me years ago—back when I started dating Gabriella. It was the same time Zio Jasper's shit got out, that he'd been cheating on Alice."

I remember that. "So what, Mom just spilled her guts to you?"

He rolls his eyes. "She blurted it out. I was getting sick of the bullshit—that I had to settle down with a good girl, and I'd been furious when I found out that Gabby'd had a boyfriend before me." He waves a hand. "Long story short, Mom told me just how good of a girl she had been."

So much for being the first Maisano kid to figure it out—like Joseph said.

I nod absently and pinch my bottom lip. "So...I guess Mom was Dad's goomah." I look to Anthony in question.

"Yeah. They met in '75, same year Pops married Jane. But he wasn't, uh...with his wife—Mom swears by it. At least not after she and Dad started their relationship." He shrugs, then laughs. "E senti questa—" he leans closer and lowers his voice "—Mom was a stripper at Twilight. That's how they met."

My eyes grow large, shock tearing through me. "Are-are you serious?" I whisper-shout in disbelief. My brother nods with a "Yup." Shit. "How—I mean, why...and when..."

Anthony snickers. "Yeah, basically how I reacted. Felix hired her, then Pops snatched her up and brought her to Dawn—before, when Dawn was Dad's club. Set her up in a condo and everything. Made her stop working, too."

Brows knitting together, I'm stuck on "Felix hired her." 'Cause...I've been around long enough to know what some strippers do to get hired. Nico and Felix are notorious for "test driving" the talent.
Realistically...I mean, it wouldn't be strange if... I wince.

"What?" Anthony jerks his chin at me.

I make a face. "You think—you think Felix and Mom...?" I widen my eyes and punch the air.

"Aw, hell." He shudders. "I fucking hope not."

Word.

I already want to kill Felix as it is. Him plowing my mother, even if it was more than twenty years ago, would be the cherry on a shit sundae.

"Boys!" Mom shouts from the kitchen.

"What?!" we shout back.

"Come'n eat! Lemme feed youse!"

"I hope she don’t mean that literally," I laugh.

"You never know with her." Anthony leaves the bed. "But humor her, a'ight? Let her be intrusive. She’s been...I don’t know, not herself the past week. She misses her family."

I nod, sobering. "I'mma take a piss and get dressed—um." I look around, but before I can say anything, Anthony points to the chair in the corner.

"Gabby brought some of my clothes for you to use."

"Thanks," I answer, turning.

"Oh, and Dominic?"

I face my brother again.

He clenches his jaw. "The yak?"
Fuck. "Don't..." I close my eyes and shake my head. Open my eyes again. "It was just—" I wave a hand, hating the topic. And I wish the urge to do more blow wasn't there—within me. But it is. I can't deny it. "Uh, a one-time thing." I pray that wasn't a lie.

Anthony doesn't seem to believe me, and why would he? "I'll be keepin' my eyes on you. Just so you know. Trust me, I know coke is everywhere—no big deal, but it is a big deal for you. Think about my niece—she deserves better."

Lia—that hit where it hurts. Cazzo.

~oOo~

In Mom and Dad's ensuite bathroom, I end up taking a shower and shaving, too, 'cause I can't even remember the last time I didn't smell like a skunk.

After getting dressed in a pair of Anthony's sweats and a black t-shirt, I snicker to myself and dip Dad's razor in the toilet. While I'm at it, I do the same with his toothbrush.

*That's what you get, motherfucker.*

Then I leave the bathroom and walk down the hall to the kitchen...where I find Mom, Anthony, Zia Alice...and Daniela and Lia.

Does Dani hafta be so fucking beautiful?

"My baby boy." Mom comes over to hug my middle—squeeze me real tight. "I could just eat'chu. Lemme have a look." She reaches up to palm my cheeks. She sighs. "You need to take care'a yourself better."

I point to the massive spread of food on the kitchen table. "I can start right now." With a kiss to the top of her head, I join the others at the
table, taking my seat next to Daniela who has Lia on her lap. "Where'd you sleep?" I ask as I grab a stack of pancakes.

"Upstairs with Bambina," she answers softly, helping Lia with a mashed banana. "I was so worried yesterday when Anthony came for us." Her eyes flick over my face. "Are you sure you are okay?"

"I'm fine." I smile tightly and turn to Zia Alice, who's across from me. "Where's Marissa?" My youngest cousin is usually glued to her mother's side.

"Oh, she's at home," she replies lightly. "Tommy's watching her until Sophia comes home from school."

*Why am I not surprised?*

Mom raises a brow over her coffee mug. "Your driver is watching your daughta'?"

Joey and I the only ones who know that Tommy is Marissa's biological father—not even Alice knows, since Jasper wanted the tests done without her knowledge, and we lied to him, said he's Marissa's pops—so I make sure to keep my face composed.

*Too bad Tommy's gonna be sleepin' with the fishes soon.*

"It's just for a few hours," Alice says dismissively, and just a second later, Gabriella returns from dropping off TJ and Allegra at Carm's—her mother's house.

"Have a seat, honey." Mom smiles and gestures at the empty chair near Anthony. "Now that you're here, we can start planning the next few weeks."
I get comfortable and rest an arm at the back of Dani's chair. "What happens the next few weeks?"

"For one, it's Lia's birthday on March first," Mom says while she fetches her Filofax. "We also have Marissa's fifth birthday, Christopher turns two a week later—" she speaks of cousin Nico's youngest "—there's the opening of Mandalay Bay on the second—Felix got us all reservations at House of Blues; AJ turns fifteen the day after Valentine's Day—" that'd be Zio Alec's son "—and I gotta plan interviews to find a new chef."

My eyebrows shoot up, and I wonder how the fuck the news about Mario's death has already come out—but then I realize it hasn't. It's just because he'd been getting more and more involved with the organization that he hadn't been able to work at Stella as much.

"Mario's quitting?" Anthony asks casually, even though I've told him everything.

"Yeah..." Mom's distracted, flipping through the pages of her planner. But all this is normal; the women often sit down and make plans for birthdays and shit. With the size of our family, there's always a party. They sorta fade into the background. "In a few months, we'll hafta plan a baby shower for Elisa, too." Mom gets giddy. "And I guess there'll be a wedding soon as well."

Anthony and I exchange a quick look, 'cause sure, there'll be a wedding, but...Mario sure as hell won't be the groom.

"Mario will make an amazing husband," Zia Alice gushes. "Call it a gut feeling."

Anthony coughs and I bark out a loud-as-fuck laugh.

Sorry, but I couldn’t fucking help it.
My aunt ain't the best judge of character.

"What the hell was that?" Mom eyes Anthony and me, frowning. "You don't like Mario?"

I grin, thinking no; I wish I had killed him and drawn it out. "He's, uh, just buried in—" the desert "—work right now."

Ma sighs and nods. "Hence needing a new chef at Stella. But more on that later." She turns to Daniela. "What's this about your little brother?"

Concern flashes in her eyes, and she covers Dani's hand with her own. "Your aunt is having trouble? We can always help, you know."

I'm already helping, because I'm a fucking sap. "I've sent airplane tickets," I say, taking a sip of my coffee. "He's coming soon, right?" I look to Dani.

She nods, the relief still evident in her eyes. "Tomorrow." She turns to Mom. "Your son is amazing."

While Mom beams at that compliment, it just makes the knot in my stomach bigger. If I'm so fucking amazing, why can't she just let me be her man?

"This is the first I've heard of this." Anthony furrows his brows. "What's wrong with your brother?"

"He is, ah...come si dice, acting out? Being difficult." Dani has an apology written all over her face, but I don't know why.

There's not a lot I know about her family—her whole past is sketchy—but I do know she has a shitload of siblings. Six of 'em. Four brothers and two sisters, Daniela being the eldest. I think her sisters are twins—eleven years old or something—and her brothers are seven, thirteen, fifteen, and seventeen. And it's the youngest Dani's aunt is having problems with.
Since Daniela seems almost ashamed to talk about it, I fill Mom and Anthony in—the little I know—and shrug, not seeing the issue. I mean, how difficult can it be to deal with a seven-year-old?

Mom purses her lips, as if she's trying not to laugh, then tells me I have no idea. "Oh, non ne hai idea, topolino." A giggle bursts out at last, but she shakes it off. "That said, I think it's wonderful that you're willing to take him in, and I'll help as much as I can." Facing Dani, she asks, "Does your zia take care of all your siblings alone?"

"Yes." Dani nods jerkily, obviously uncomfortable. "Michael, the eldest of the boys—he is working now, too, and I send my aunt money every week. She manages with the money, but it is too crowded, and she needs help with Nino."

Nino, that’s her youngest brother. His real name is Antonino, but apparently Nino is a common nickname for it in Italy.

"Of course, of course." Mom's already in planning mode; I can tell. She's probably gonna butt in, but with her heart in the right place, and give Dani's aunt more assistance. "It's gonna get pretty crowded in your apartment too, isn't it, Dominic?" My mother cocks a brow at me, a miniscule smile tugging at her lips.

I keep my face straight, knowing she wants a fucking confession. Sure, everyone knows by now that Daniela and I are screwing, but Mom wants more than that—maybe to read a statement in the paper so it's really official. Except, it's not. Daniela and I aren't together.

"Not really," I answer with a shrug. "Dani and I have our rooms, and Lia and Nino can share."

_We just gotta move back home first._

Who knows? Maybe I'll be dead soon.
I'm pretty sure Felix once upon a time iced his own father. And then ordered the hit on his brother—Zio Emmett. Plus the assault he ordered Mario to carry out on Felix's own son.

Loyalty makes you family—not blood. I get it. And I'm certainly not loyal to Felix.

It's only a matter of time before Felix realizes how I feel toward him.

The way I keep visiting Frankie daily at the hospital is enough.

"Hmm, I don't know..." Mom taps her pen to her chin, conspiratorial. Ready to scheme. My li'l gangsta' mama. "I don't think a young boy would like to share with a little girl who loves pink."

I scoff, tempted to laugh out right. "Lia doesn't give a shit about pink. That's on you—you and Elisa and whoeva'de fuck that painted the room pink and yellow. Friggin' daises and ducks and shit all ova' the place."

"Fit!" Lia bobs her head. "Fit, Dada!"

I chuckle and let her bounce over to me. "Yeah, that's right. Shit."

Mom sucks her teeth. "Regardless, maybe you and Daniela should share rooms instead—that way, her little brother can have his own room." She jots something down in her planner. "All I need is two days to turn Dani's room into a little boy's heaven—"

"Mom, stop," I say. "There's no reason for Dani and me to share a room, so just fucking drop it."

Anthony clears his throat and shoots me a glare; I get it: *Humor Mom, and blah, blah, blah.*

"Excuse me, please." Dani offers a forced smile before she leaves the kitchen.
Mom's face falls...

And Dominic Edward Maisano is the biggest piece'a shit that ever lived.

No surprise there.

"You should go after Daniela and see if she's okay," Gabby says with a pointed look. "Apologize for being rude. Now." Knowing she's right, I sigh and get up from the table, wordlessly handing over Lia to Gabby, who says, "Yeah, come to Auntie Gabby, baby girl."

Before I leave, I dip down and kiss Mom's forehead. "Knock yourself out with my apartment, all right?" I know she has this need to help—be a part and make a difference—and I won't begrudge her that. "Do whatever you want."

"Well, I don't want to impose..." She's milking it, giving me those sad eyes.

I stifle my smile. "We need your help."

"Okay." Her sadness melts away, a radiant smile taking over. "I'll help you."

Anthony's nod of approval and the humor in his eyes are the last things I see before I start hunting down Daniela.

I find her outside, sitting on the edge of the pool. Duchess, that little shit, is on her lap.

"Hey..." I slump down next to her and draw up my sweats so they don't get wet. The water's cold but refreshing. "Perchè sei scomparsa?" I ask why she disappeared, as if I don't know... I roll my eyes at myself. "I'm sorry."
"I just needed some fresh air." _Lie_. She focuses on the French bulldog too intently—it ain't _that_ cute. "Please tell Bella not to go overboard for me and my brother."

I scratch my jaw, squinting. "Yeah, no. I've already given her the green light, and there's no Moderate button on her. It's all or nothing." I nudge her to try and come off as teasing. "Sharing a room with me ain't that bad, is it?"

She snorts softly, rolling her eyes and letting out a giggle at the same time. "We already share a bed, _mimmino_. I think I can manage." She watches as Duchess scurries away, then lets out a quiet sigh and rests her head on my shoulder. "I feel...what is the word, uprooted?"

I nod, feeling the same, and kiss the top of her head. And I kinda hate this. We can go from tense and uncomfortable to easy and close—always touching—in a fucking heartbeat.

"A few more days," I say quietly. Though, I'm not sure if Joseph can pull it off. If Felix decides he can't trust me...

What the hell do I do?

"Dominic," Daniela murmurs and lifts her head. I frown, having never seen this kind of vulnerability in her eyes before, but it's there now. "Can you kiss me?"

My eyebrows rise, 'cause she's never _asked_ before. But, regardless, I comply and kiss her softly, slowly. Her hand slides up my chest, and I halt it, covering it with my own hand and place it over my heart.

Joseph told me to be straight with her, yeah?

But it's strange...how clipping a motherfucker and doing illegal shit don't scare me as much as...as this—as Dani does.
"You want the truth from me?" I mumble against her lips, and my heart starts hammering. "Why I've been running hot and cold...?" I know I have. I've been sweet, acting pussy-whipped one second, only to push her away the next.

Daniela shouldn’t look vulnerable, 'cause she holds all the cards.

"It's because I don’t know where you stand," I whisper. "It's because I love you, tesorina."

**Junior's POV**

Empty, fuckin' drained and exhausted, I nod at the doorman and enter Eclipse where I'm meeting up with Cullen.

My little brother is there, too, sitting at a table in the back with Cullen. Sippin' scotch, scopin' tits.

The strip club is all but empty, since it's the middle of the day and all.

*And let's just say the lunch crowd don’t get the best talent.*

"About time, Juniuh." Cullen grins and pours me a drink.

I nod in thanks, loosening my tie as I sit down.

"Everything go well?" Alec asks.

"Yes." I guzzle that expensive shit down, needing to feel. Something. Anything. Needing to feel the burn as the scotch slides down, hoping it'll fill this goddamn void, heal the wound—make me feel something other than...completely fuckin' empty. "Turns out, uh—" My gaze flicks to Cullen. "Is it safe to talk here?"

"Oh, yeah. We sweep it regularly."
Well, I don’t plan on sharing the details, but... "Turns out Vinny goes to his barber—like clockwork, every six weeks." So, I had been there waiting for him.

Went in and slit his throat.

It'll be a message for everyone in Jersey that you don't fuck with Vegas.

We'd already received Misone's blessing, and the Jersey boss can't exactly go against that. Fuck, Battaglia, the boss of the Jersey family, was like a chastened little puppy after Misone told him to keep his fucking family in check. Because it turned out that Vinny and two of his son's old friends were in on the whole "Let's go to Vegas and shake shit up" plan.

Battaglia had no idea what was happening right under his nose.

Nor do we know why Vinny was so fucking vengeful in his old age.

Did he not have enough scratch? Nah, fuck that. He retired with plenty of money.

No matta'.

It's done now.

Felix ordered me to fly out here and do the job. Alec flew out to "keep me company," although that’s crap. He came here to keep an eye on me.

I don't know what the hell he's afraid I'mma do, but he's been like a guard dog ever since...

*Ever since I disowned two of my children.*

*Ever since I gave my wife bruises.*

I swallow hard, my chest hurtin', and stare at my drink.
"Aw, that little fucker." Cullen suddenly leaves the table, and Alec and I turn to watch him approach...

"Who's that?" Alec asks.

I snort, mildly amused. "That'd be Cullen's son—the youngest." Guess the kid thought he'd sneak into a strip club for some fun.

Both Cullens stand near the bar, gesturing wildly, obviously arguing, but the music drowns it out. That li'l shit ain't intimidated by his father whatsoever—has no respect for him—which I can chuckle at because it's not my son.

Had Anthony and Dominic had acted like that when they was kids, though...? I woulda beat some manners into 'em.

In the end, Cullen drags his son to our table, and I raise a brow as the kid sits down, grinning in triumph.

"This beats school—just sayin'." His grin widens as he looks around. "Shit, I'mma get a place like this some day." When he spots me, he finds his manners and says, "Good to see ya again, Mr. Maisano." I incline my head and pour myself a new drink. Next, the kid faces Alec, who he's sitting closest to, and jerks his chin. "Sup?"

"Try again." Cullen whacks the back of his son's head. "That's Alec Maisano—Juniuh's brother."

The kid actually sobers, and he offers his hand instead. "I apologize. It's nice to meet'chu, Mr. Maisano."

Alec smirks at me and cocks his head at Cullen's son. "This one remind you of someone?"
I give a blank look in return. "Only every kid I know." But mostly Dominic...

Cazzo.

"All right, you've seen the place now," Cullen tells his son impatiently. "I advise you not to push my limits. Back to school wit'chu—before Nanny notices where you've been. Or whattaya gonna do next, pay a broad to—"

His kid cuts him off. "I don’t pay for pussy. And I let them come to me." He points to his chest, lookin' proud now. "I don’t chase cooz."

My mouth quirks up. "What'a you, fourteen? Fifteen?"

He shrugs and scratches his nose. "Age is nuthin' but a number. Uh, sir...?" He looks to his pops. "Do I call them 'sir'? Cuz I don’t wanna be disrespectful." He places a hand on his chest.

Cullen rolls his eyes and points to the exit. "School. Now."

To which the kid looks like Cullen just kicked his puppy. "Not even a drink first?"

"They don't serve Yoo-hoo hea'."

"Oh!" Alec and I chuckle at that.

Cullen's son sucks his teeth, shakes his head, and stands up. "You're no fun."

"We should probably get goin', too." Alec adjusts his tie and checks his watch. "We have a plane to catch."

I nod, both relieved to go home and fucking dreading it.

*Check me out, afraid to face my wife.*
"You okay, bro?"

I give a small shake of my head and flag down the stewardess for another drink.

Two hours 'til we land in Vegas, and my brother's just told me that Anthony's honestly fearing for Dominic's life.

I'm not okay.

"Yes, sir?" The stewardess looks to me in question, and I hold up my empty glass. "Right away, sir." She's off again.

"When did you speak to Anthony about this?" I ask, keeping my voice low.

"Yesterday and today." He keeps his voice down, too. "Anthony couldn't tell me much, but some shit has gone down while we's been outta town, and he's afraid the boss is gonna have beef wit' Dominic." He leans closer, only pausing when the stewardess hands me my drink; then I wave her off. "Dominic found out who put Francis in the hospital—"

"Who?" I wanna know that, too. I'm just not sure why I give a fuck. Francis...that whole business makes me sick. I don't want my grandbabies around him; it's a disease that spreads more diseases. One day you take it up the ass, the next you die of AIDS—the gay fuckin' plague.

But with the way my wife and children reacted...?

It's obvious that they're all basically ready to support Francis, which I can't understand, nor respect.

Yet, the memory of Francis in that hospital bed—goddammit, I don't fucking know.
"I don’t know yet," Alec sighs, "but I understood that whoever'de fuck it was is gone now." That doesn’t surprise me. Dominic has certainly been, uh, clear about where he stands. "If I read between the lines correctly, I'm also pretty sure Dominic had help."

I frown and rub my jaw, wondering who would join Dominic for something like that. I mean, it's literally going against Felix, who is responsible for Francis being in the hospital. He ordered someone—possibly Lou, a low-man close to Felix—to take give Francis a warning.

It is what it is. I understand the shame Felix feels—no bones about it. I can't imagine having a son who's a fag. It's unnatural, disgusting, and wrong.

Do I agree with what Felix did?

I don’t know.

No...fuck, I honestly don’t know. I can't imagine giving my own children "warnings" like that. Getting into arguments, even fighting physically with Anthony and Dominic—I've done that a handful of times. It happens, especially when boys grow up and don’t wanna listen to their fathers anymore, but...

Shaking my head, I push that topic away for now, sticking to "I don't know," and ask Alec who he can picture siding with Dominic for this. Because whoever that is...not only does he have a big pair, but he might be fucking stupid.

"Mario?" Alec shrugs, grimacing. "Nico?"

I shake my head no. Mario's not cocky enough for that—the kid shits his pants every time he enters Twilight or Dawn.
And that motherfucker's gonna shit his pants again soon. 'Cause if it's true that he's knocked up Elisa...

I shake that off, too. For now.

Nico...well, he's Jasper's son—not the sharpest tool in the shed, but still a damn good wiseguy. Loyal, straightforward about work, efficient, follows orders. No. Nico's not in on this with Dominic.

"Joseph?"

I'm surprised my brother even brought his name up. "Can pigs fly?" I furrow my brows.

Joseph's too smart to go up against his own father. Not to mention loyal.

I get that Francis is Joseph's little brother, but nah. "No matta'." I wave that off, getting down to the big question instead: "You think Felix is gonna do something to Dominic?"

It breaks my heart every time I even utter my son's name, 'cause...I admit it; I took it too far. But he went against me—fucking fought me, and I still can't believe he did that. And now...my whole family's torn to shreds, and I carry much of the blame, which is killing Isabella.

"You gonna sit around and wait for Felix to answer that question by taking action?" Alec counters quietly. "Doesn't history have a way of repeating itself?"

I massage my forehead, a headache settling in, and I regret asking that question, because the answer is obvious.

"I'm not gonna pretend—sit here and say I know Felix best..." He pauses while a couple men pass in the aisle. "Because if there's one man Felix trusts, we all know it's you." Well, Dad and me, but he's in Florida now.
Retired. Oblivious. "Hell, you basically put that man on the throne. But, Junior—" Alec levels me with a serious look. "We know what he's capable of."

"That’s beside the point," I argue quietly. Yes, Felix took the lead when it was time for Carlisle to die. Yes, Felix ordered me to clip Emmett. Yes, it was decided that EJ was gonna get it, too—though, Anthony took care'a that before I could. And yes, Felix put Francis in the hospital. "Everyone in the past...? Come on, Alec."

Carlisle was turning "making a marriage" into his fucking catchphrase. If there was a wiseguy he could marry off to strengthen our family, he did. I married Jane, a New York politician's princess. Alec married Maria, a girl whose father was big in heroin in Sicily, effectively giving us that to distribute. Alice was next in line, though Carlisle died before she could be married off. And before me and Alec, there was Carlisle's sons. Felix married Gianna, getting us connections in the casino business. Emmett married Rosalie, a senator's or governor's daughter from Florida.

Then, later on, Emmett and EJ moved against our family—they fucking deserved to die. And Francis...the shame he has brought on to the Colucci family? Forget about it. Felix coulda had Francis killed, but he didn’t.

I point this out to my little brother, whispering by now, but he just shrugs.

"What's so different with Dominic?" he whispers back. "Pensaci." He taps his temple, telling me to think about it. "Don’t let a lifetime of friendship to Felix blind you. Dominic—to Felix—is no different from EJ."

I sit back in my seat, the realization that Alec is right hitting me in the fucking chest. But, the fact remains, that even though Dominic is disrespecting Felix much like EJ once did, this situation is different.

But is he stupid enough?

The Maisanos outnumber the Coluccis these days.

There's me and Alec...then there's the Savonas—both Jasper, despite doing a bid right now, and Nico. Four men with high ranks.

"You got a decision to make, Junior," Alec says softly.

I nod absently, torn between wanting to hit Dominic in the head with a fucking brick for being a goddamn idiot—so motherfucking reckless—and wanting to hide him, tell him Daddy's got this, that I'll cover for him...

For the sake of my wife's happiness, I have to fix things with Dominic—and Elisa, of course...Christ, my little angel... And, fuck it, I'd be a liar if I said it wasn't for my own sake, too.

Trust, I got beef with Dominic, but he's still my son, for Christ's sake.

You disowned him, Maisano.

Yeah well, shit happens. There are fucking circumstances. And if I say we're a family, we're a goddamn family. End'a story. My word is final. My children are obligated to love me—flaws and all. I gave them life; in return, they gotta deal with me.

"You know I can't let anything happen to my son," I whisper, searching Alec's eyes. "I can't even risk it. Ever."

He knows what I mean, and he stays quiet for a beat before inclining his head in a small nod. "I know."

I nod, too. Then I face the seat in front of me and make a mental note of the guys I need to talk to in order to get my facts straight. Anthony—granted. Alec's with me, which is reassuring. Nico...I doubt he's involved at all, but I'll feel him out, just ask a few questions about what's
happened while I was outta town. Joseph...hell no. He's a Colucci. Loyal to his father.

"You got a plan to get Bella on your good side again?" Alec's going for teasing now, but he has no idea.

He has no idea just how much work I got ahead of me. Because unlike him, I need my wife's forgiveness, not just the words. Diamonds won't fix this.

There are times when I screw up, and I buy her gifts, take her on a vacation, and literally love all over her, smothering her and forcing her to forgive me. But this? This is gonna take groveling.

I'm a proud man; the only one who has ever seen me on my knees is my wife. Unless I'm in the hospital after getting shot, or I've feared for my family's safety, I don't break down—I don't lose control and cry like some woman. I save that—those rare occasions—for when I'm behind closed doors. And I don't apologize to anyone. I'm pretty sure the only one who has received a genuine apology from me is the same woman who's seen me on my knees.

A man showing weakness ain't right.

But for once, just this one time, I know I'm in way over my head. Not only do I need Isabella's forgiveness, but I need her help. I need her to help me get our family back together.

I'll beg for her forgiveness.

And you're apologizing for...?

For being rough on her—just thinking about the bruises I caused makes my gut churn... And the emptiness in her eyes, fuck. I'll never forget it. Hell, I nearly got scared, and I don't fucking do fear. But that hit me hard,
to see that there was absolutely *nothing* I could've done to hurt her, because I'd already done the worst. By tossing two of our children aside like yesterday's paper.

That's the difference between me and Isabella, though. I'll live as long as I have her; she'll live as long as she has her family.

Make no mistake; I'd die a thousand deaths for my kids, but only one person has given me more. She's the mother of my children, the love of my life, one of the few I trust completely, the only one who's seen every side of me, and the one who loves me unconditionally, faithfully, and stupidly.

And I hurt her.

As much as I hate to admit it, I'm not much of a man without her.
Chapter 16

Hummingbird’s POV

"Have you heard from him?" I ask Anthony the second he steps into the house. To my surprise, Joseph is with him. "Hi, honey." I give him my cheek, and he kisses it. "How you doin'?" He looks tired. "You look tired." And a little skinny. "And skinny." He needs to eat more. "You need to eat more." But there's happiness in his eyes, to which I narrow mine. "You met a girl yet? A good, Italian girl who can take care'a ya?"

Anthony snickers and passes me to enter the kitchen. "You have no idea, Ma. Already a kid on the way, too. That’s magic for ya."

What the...?

"Do I look like I love riddles?!" I shout after him before facing Joseph again. "You gonna give it to me in English?" It's about damn time that boy settles down. He's thirty now, for Christ's sake.

As my mother used to say: "A man's gotta get married before his balls sag, and a girl's gotta get married while her nipples point up."

"Yes, Bella," Joseph chuckles and starts ushering me into the kitchen, "I've met someone. Satisfied?"

Hardly. "I need a name, birthdate, and preferably a social security number."

What? I gotta make sure she's a good one for Joseph. He deserves it.

"You'll get it when we're ready to announce it," he promises, accepting a soda from Anthony. "Anyway..." He raises a brow at my son.

Who nods. "Right." He turns to me. "We found Dee. He's all right."
"Oh, praise Jesus." I place a hand on my chest as relief fills me.

"Yeah, 'cause Jesus found him," Anthony deadpans.

I ignore that, tears welling up in my eyes, but I push them down and yell for Daniela to come downstairs. To the boys, I explain, "She's settling Lia down for a nap."

"Ah." Anthony nods and peers past me, in the direction of the living room. "And her brother is here now?"

"Oh, yes." I am so worried about that precious little boy. Nino arrived this morning, having flown all the way from New York by himself. Sure, many kids fly alone, as there are flight personnel to help them, but I didn't like the idea of a seven-year-old being on his own. "He's in the living room watching cartoons." I sigh. "He's very, uh..." Shy isn't the right word, and offensive is too strong. "On edge."

It's as if he's waiting for someone to yell at him, so he's all tense.

"Could you go in and say hi to him?" I ask. "Just—keep some distance, 'cause Dani..." I look over my shoulder, then lower my voice. "Dani told me he's had bad experiences with men being violent." Fury builds up at the mere thought of Daniela and Nino's father—'cause I'm fairly certain he's the one to blame—hurting his children. "Be nice to him. Offer him cake. I don't know."

Anthony shrugs and nods. "Sure. We'll go in."

He and Joseph exit the kitchen just as Daniela enters.

"Have a seat, honey." I point to the stools around the kitchen island and sit down myself. There's already wine open and glasses out, so I get busy and pour us some. "Anthony told me Dominic is fine. He's...somewhere."
frown, wondering where, exactly. But I'm a fucking wife; I don't ask questions—blah, blah, blah.

"Oh, thank God." Daniela's shoulders sag with relief, and she closes her eyes and does the Sign of the Cross. "It is all my fault—"

"Yeah, you keep saying that." I slide one glass toward her, eyeing her. She's been blaming herself for Dominic's storming out yesterday, but she won't tell me why or what happened. Now that I know he's safe, I can push aside the worry I feel and get some answers. "Lemme make one thing clear, hon—" I hold up a finger. "No one makes Dominic go anywhere. Regardless of what you think you did, he had choices. He didn’t have to leave. So, tell me what happened."

"I...he..." She opens her mouth, closes it, then squeezes her eyes shut, opens them again, sighs heavily, and takes on an expression of defeat. "He told me he loves me," she whispers.

Oh mannaggia, but that's a good thing! "That's wonderful!" I run around the island to hug her. Dominic and Daniela—beautiful couple, just beautiful. "Ooh, this makes me so happy!" I smile widely and palm her cheeks. "And I'm glad I did what I did this morning." I know I'm being vague, but it's a surprise. A wonderful surprise. One I won't regret, especially now that Dominic and Daniela are in—huh. "Is that why he ran off?" I release her, on guard now. And my fucking heart in my throat. "He was afraid you wouldn’t say it back, so he ran off before you could?"

That better be the reason!

But as Dani's eyes well up and she averts her gaze, doubt seeps into me.

My face falls. "You don’t love my son?"

The mama in me wonders why the hell not. Dominic—all my children, they're flawless and amazing and, and, and...I know that’s bullshit. But
Maisano temper aside, my sons are fine young men. Loyal, honorable, strong, and protective. And my daughters are fierce, maternal—well, Julia's getting there, but she's only sixteen.

"I cannot give him my heart, Bella," she whispers, discreetly wiping her eyes. "He is'a wonderful, and I have dealt with men more, uh, hotheaded than he is—it is not that." She sniffs, and I notice that her accent becomes thicker when she's upset. She looks so incredibly sad. It breaks my heart. "I promised myself years ago, before my mamma was—" She stops abruptly there but picks up again. "I promised myself, I will not fall in love with a man in the mafia."

Cautious—yet hopeful, because I don’t believe her heart is her own anymore—I sit down on the stool next to her and grasp her hands in mine. "Listen, cara. I've already understood that you're very private about your past." Her cousin Gina—Nico's wife—is the same. She won't speak about Daniela's upbringing in Italy. "I won't pry, but..." I hesitate. "Can I assume that you're familiar with our, uh...lifestyle?"

She chuckles humorlessly, rolling her eyes, and wipes at her cheeks again. "You can say that."

I nod slowly and proceed carefully. "And you don't have any pleasant experiences related to a woman bein' with a wiseguy?" She shakes her head and looks down. "Let me guess—because of the uncertainties, the mistresses, and the God complexes?"

"Bingo," she mutters and slips one hand free to sip her wine.

I sigh, seeing too much of myself in her. And I have a feeling she won't believe a word I say, unless... "Okay." I sit up straighter, knowing what I have to do. "I'm gonna tell you something, and you can't mention any of this to my children. They don't know." A small lie. Anthony knows the
basics, but none of the things a girl like Daniela might need to hear. "Can you promise to keep this to yourself?"

She frowns and nods.

I nod too, and take a breath. "When I moved to Vegas, I did it to take care of Nicola and Lucia, because Jasper was in prison, and our parents were dead." I pause, choosing my words. "I was young, but I had street smarts." For which I can thank my mother and the upbringing I had in Brooklyn and Jersey. "I started out as a waitress—I worked like crazy to support myself and my niece and nephew, but it wasn’t easy. So, I had a choice. I could go on like that, or I could get a job that paid better. But without work experience, an education, or any connections...? I couldn’t exactly afford to be picky, so I took a job as a stripper."

Daniela's eyes widen at that—I'm not surprised there—and I can still remember the day I walked into Felix's office with my chin up, thinking I had balls. Well…I did have balls, but I was also scared shitless.

"I worked fewer hours, but I got more money," I go on. "Then, very shortly after that, a man—a wiseguy—barged into my life and turned it upside down." I hide my smile at the memories, but it wasn’t all good things. "He wanted me, promised me jewelry, money, a nice condo—" I wave a hand. "The works, he wanted to give it to me."

"Sounds familiar." Her smile is small, and her eyes tell me she knows just how made men approach women they wanna fuck on the sly.

"I became his goomah," I confirm, nodding. "I had nothin'a worry about anymore. Nicola and Lucia had the best clothes, expensive bikes, the most popular lunch boxes, and good food. And I didn’t have to be a stripper anymore." I take a swig of my wine. "Then the man tells me he loves me."
It's hard to believe I held out for as long as I did. After all, it took me two kids—a third on the way—and a big fire to make me admit to my feelings for Junior. First to myself, then to him.

"You loved him, too?" Daniela guesses.

I shake my head no. "Maybe on some level, but I was too stubborn to see it. And, honestly? I was content with our arrangement. He was married, we had promised each other to keep feelings out of it, and I expected him to have a family with his wife." I certainly didn't think—or even dream—that he only had children with me. "Granted, the heart wants what the heart wants, but I only saw what I saw, too." I tap my temple. "I saw a man who was wonderful to me, took care of me—and a man who went home to his real family in Henderson on the weekends."

Dani nods. "You protected yourself. That is what I want—what I am doing." Well, you're trying, honey. "I want to meet a man who only wants one woman, one I do not have to worry about whenever he is late."

Cheating isn't reserved for mobsters, but I see her point, of course. "You want loyalty. A faithful man. Who doesn't?" I widen my arms. "I swore to myself, that if I ever had sons, I would teach them to respect women and be devoted to the one they marry."

Something dawns on Dani, as if she thinks she knows where I'm going with this. "I get it." But she doesn't look convinced, which I saw coming. "You raised Anthony and Dominic to be faithful. And you really think they are? Dominic...I've heard of his reputation."

I snort. "All the Maisano men have reputations." Junior certainly wasn't a stranger to fucking strippers before we met, Anthony fucked everything with a pussy, and Dominic was even worse.
Unfortunately, my own reputation is hardly a good one, either. Despite the fact that my husband snatched me up quickly, I "entertained" several men at Twilight before he did. And I wasn’t exactly a virgin when I moved to Vegas. Though, back in New York, I only gave up the goods after being dined properly.

I was far from a princess, like the ones I’m surrounded by today—Gianna, Alice, Brianna, Victoria...

"Anthony is faithful to his wife," I say, one hundred percent sure. Coming home with stripper dust on his clothes notwithstanding. God, that still pisses me off. But I can live with a lap dance. "He would never cheat on Gabriella."

Once again, Dani doesn’t look convinced. "How can you know? And what about...um." She wants to ask about Junior, but I suppose she's afraid it'd be too rude.

"My husband wouldn’t dare to fuck around," I chuckle, swirling the wine around in my glass. "More importantly, he doesn’t want to. But back to when I was a mistress—" I twirl a finger. "I found out later that he didn’t have another family. He didn’t even sleep with his wife, which took me a long time to believe, but he proved his loyalty to me." Over and over, really. "I was the only one for him." Still am. "And that slice of hope seeped into me—I started realizing I was head over heels."

Now she frowns. "So, what happened? You did not stay with him—even if he was faithful? It sounds like..."

I smile. "Like I should have?"

She nods hesitantly. "I can only speak for myself, but isn't it rare in this..." She waves a hand, looking for the word. "Ah, lifestyle—to have a man who is only with one woman?"
"Definitely rare," I agree. "What makes you think I didn’t stay with him?"

She actually giggles. "A made man does not marry his mistress." Then she sobers and sighs, a wistful expression taking over. "You fuck the help—you do not love it."

She is so jaded. And so young—too young to see it so black and white.

*The grand finale.* "It was Juniuh, Daniela," I say softly. "It was Juniuh who took a stripper as a goomah, then married her. And it was Juniuh who told me he loved me, all while being stuck in a marriage he’d had no choice but to enter, and he waited for years—not to mention that he gave me two children—before I admitted I loved him, too."

Looking pale all of a sudden, Dani sets down her wineglass and just stares at me.

I have a feeling she needs a minute to digest that, so I start to wrap it up. "You know, he once told me, 'Two women, twice the drama.' And it's true. I thank God for giving me a husband who hates drama." That’s not the reason he's faithful to me, but it doesn’t take any truth outta those words. "And he knows that a happy wife makes a happy life. My sons do, too. Dominic may be a shit-stirrer sometimes, but he wants the same things his brother and father have: stability, a good wife who knows his needs, someone who'll take care of him because she wants to, not 'cause it's her duty. Someone he can be devoted to, dote on, and drive completely nuts."

Leaning forward, I grasp her hands in mine again and speak when she looks into my eyes. "Sweetheart, I can't make you love Dominic, but I think I can make you realize that it's *okay* to love him. He put himself out there, made himself vulnerable—does that sound like something he'd do just for kicks?"

~oOo~
Only a few moments later, Daniela asks if it's okay she goes upstairs to process all this for a bit, and I certainly don’t deny her. Hopefully, she's one step closer to giving my son exactly what he needs.

Then I grab a juice box and a plate of cookies, thinking it's time to check in with the boys in the living room, and I pause in the wide doorway, curious. 'Cause I can hear Anthony and Joseph speaking quietly. But not with Nino, who is sitting between the men on one of the couches. No—fuckin' wackadoos—they're talking business.

"He came to you? Asked you for this favor?" Joseph wonders, and maybe my son nods, 'cause Joseph speaks again. "Well, if you're so busy, let him have the bid on the Carson project—"

"We're talkin' four hundred G's in pure profit." Anthony sounds frustrated. Hell, so am I now, 'cause I was under the impression they were gonna try to get Nino to interact and relax. "But with everything up in the air around here...I don't fucking know."

"Vuoi ascoltarmi?" Joseph impatiently asks him to listen. "Get him the bid—let him call that project his own, but on one condition."

"What?" Anthony asks dully. "I'll say, 'I'll collect some day’?"

"No. Christ." Peeking into the living room, I see Joseph pinching the bridge of his nose. "You tell him he has to give you a finder's fee and hire your people. Electricians, plumbers, what-the-fuck-ever. With your rates. Bill the shit outta him. You've been in the construction business a few years now, Anthony. Use your head."

Shaking my head, I enter the living room and deliver my most disapproving look the second Joseph and Anthony face me. "I thought youse were gonna make Nino feel at home." They offer sheepish expressions in return, which I ignore. Then I squat down in front of Nino,
who's still rigid as a stick, just sitting there. "How you feelin', topolino? I brought you some juice and cookies."

"Thank you, Mrs. Maisano—I mean Bella," he mumbles and places the small plate on his lap. "What if I get crumbs on the couch?"

Oh, sweet boy—what has happened to him? "Pshh." I wave a hand and smile. "Don't worry about it." Jerking a thumb at Anthony, I add, "You have no idea how many times this guy has spilled in here. In fact, if you turn over this cushion, you'll find a marinara sauce stain, and that's just from last week."

"Eh." Anthony shrugs and leans back, only to stick a hand down his pants. He's like the Italian Al Bundy, only young and handsome. "Whattaya gonna do?" He winks at me. "You make such delicious food—I get eager."

I laugh and roll my eyes. "See?" I face Nino again. "You see what I have to put up with?"

He cracks the tiniest smile, but I'll take it.

"Okay, I'm gonna get started on dinner." It's still hours to go, but I'm creating a new recipe, so it's trial and error. Either it'll be duck—something for the menu at Stella later—or...or it'll be ziti.

"What's for dessert?" Anthony asks, snatching up a cookie from Nino's plate.

"You eatin' here tonight, then?" I raise a brow.

He makes a face. "Gabby's taking the kids over to her mom's. Carm broke her toe or something this morning."

I frown and make a mental note to call and send Julia over with a casserole. "Gee, thanks for telling me."
"Te lo sto dicendo adesso." He says he's telling me now, as if that's the same thing.

Boys. "Whatever." I stand up, knowing it's no use to argue. "I picked up some gelato yesterday—that's dessert."

And my spoiled son has a look that asks, "Is that it?"

Since I don’t wanna fight in front of Nino, I just walk outta the living room. He doesn’t fucking live here anymore, so he can get his own damn dessert in that case. What does he think, we're running a hotel over here? Forget about it.

I've already signed up to be Julia's slave next week; I'm making sfogliatelle for the premiere of her drama club's musical. All the parents will be treated to coffee and pastries during the intermission, courtesy of one Bella Maisano.

But not today. Today I'm just focusing on the present, 'cause if I think further ahead than that...

Shit. Junior's coming home tonight.

And I don't want to think about that.

~oOo~

I've just taken the honey-glazed duck outta the oven when I spy Alec's car outside the kitchen window.

"Is that Dad?" Julia scowls out the window as she pours the rice into a serving bowl. "I wanna eat in my room."

"We eat at the table—as always." I swallow my nerves and focus on the duck, checking the result. I sorta wish we had a full house, but only Anthony and Julia are here now. Joseph drove Daniela and Nino to their
hotel a while ago, and don’t fucking ask me why they’re not staying in Dominic's apartment.

"I totally wanna punch him." Julia sniffs.

I grin wryly. "It's not true love unless you wanna wrap your hands around his neck on occasion."

Anthony chuckles from behind me, getting the silverware to set the table. He apologized earlier for being demanding and ungrateful, but it's all right. I know he's under a lot of stress, too.

"I guess I love Dad an awful lot right now, then." My daughter makes a choking motion with her hands. "A lot."

Satisfied with the duck, I put it on the kitchen island behind me so Anthony can bring it to the table. Then I wipe my hands on my apron and take it off just as the front door opens, but Junior doesn't say, "I'm home!" He says nothing.

I loathe that I'm a worrier—that while he's been a fucking asshole, I've worried about him—but that’s just love, right?

"Mom, you're shaking." Julia's eyes flash with concern, and she comes over to hug my middle.

I force a small chuckle and hug her back. "I'm fine, bambina. I promise. Just a little nervous." Peering over Julia's shoulder, I watch as Junior appears in the doorway.

My heart skips a beat, and I'm wary, but there's also so much anger toward him. His behavior has...I don’t know, but I'm so disappointed. And furious. And sad.
He doesn’t exactly look happy himself, though. I can see he's exhausted and on edge—almost like Nino before—and if I didn’t know better, I'd say there's wariness in him, too. But Junior doesn’t do wary.

It seems these days I'm always divided—split up in parts that want different things. The wife in me is so relieved he's alive and well, and that part wants to run over and hug the shit outta him, but I can't. Not while my family is in shreds. Not until he has apologized for playing a big part in this clusterfuck. Not until he has showed he is sorry.

"Giusto in tempo per la cena." I smile tightly, saying he's just in time for dinner, and release Julia.

He nods, coughs quietly into his fist, and looks down the hall. "I, uh...I'm gonna grab a shower. You eat. I'll join youse later." Next he picks up his bag and walks toward our bedroom.

I exhale.

"Well, that was...what it was." Anthony sighs and finishes setting the kitchen table. "C'mon. Si mangia—let's eat."

Grabbing drinks while Julia goes for glasses, we join Anthony, the three of us occupying one end of the table, me at the head.

"Anthony, you say grace." I clasp my hands and bow my head.

He clears his throat. "Dear Lord, we thank you for these gifts that we're about to receive. Bless this food, our friends, and family. Amen."

"Amen," I echo softly and do the Sign of the Cross.

I eat without really tasting it; only Anthony seems to focus solely on the food. Julia's got her script next to her plate, so she's silently practicing her
lines for the musical, and my thoughts are all about the man in my bathroom.

"Wait. Duck is meat, right?" Julia suddenly looks horrified, her cheeks puffed out with food.

I take a swig of wine to hide my smirk behind my glass, but Anthony laughs outright. Loudly.

"Oh, my God." Julia covers her mouth with her hand and runs outta the kitchen.

"She's gotta be the worst vegetarian ever," Anthony chuckles.

"It's just a phase." I keep saying that, knowing my baby girl. It's only a matter of time before she caves. For Christ's sake, her favorite meal is my lamb chops.

Settling down again, it becomes quiet and my mind once more returns to Junior, as does the ache in my chest. I've almost grown used to it. If I haven't been worried sick about Dominic or Elisa, it's been Junior. Along with fear, anger, and despair.

"Go, Ma." Anthony points toward the doorway and stuffs his mouth full. "I know you wanna."

"No, I don't." I cut a piece of meat and slip it into my mouth, pretending to look like I'm enjoying the meal. "Did you like the sauce? It's a new recipe."

Anthony's mouth twists into a smirk. "You ain't foolin' nobody. I know you. You wanna check in on Pops and see that he's all right before you rip him a new one."
I let out a shaky laugh, thinking he knows me too well. "You don’t mind?"
No more bullshit—might as well be honest.

"That you rip him a new one?" He grins darkly. "No. Trust, I don’t mind."

I stifle a laugh and throw my napkin at him as I stand up. "That’s not what I meant, and you know it."

"Eh." He goes back to eating, not bothered at all to be left alone with a table full of food.

Releasing a breath, I smooth down my dress and head down the hallway, passing the staircase as Julia trudges back down, and enter my bedroom. I expected to hear the shower running, but it’s quiet and Junior is sitting on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, and face in his hands.

He’s already showered, sitting with only a towel around his hips.

"Hi." I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear and close the door.

He looks up, and the heartbreak in his red-rimmed eyes nearly floors me. It causes my stomach to drop, and I walk forward on autopilot. To which he averts his gaze again, but I weave my fingers through his damp hair and tug gently.

"I need a minute." He sniffs and clears his throat.

I shake my head. "Don’t shut me out." Stepping between his legs, I grasp his chin and brush the pad of my thumb over the day’s worth of scruff. "You left without a word, Juniu—were gone for days..."

"I’m sorry." He squeezes his eyes shut and drops his forehead to my stomach. "I’m so fucking sorry." His hands slide up the backsides of my thighs to bring me even closer. "For everything." With a shudder, he peers up at me, tears glistening in his eyes. "I fucked up, Isabella."
It's close to impossible to keep my face composed, because it's so—so, so, so—damn rare to get this kind of reaction from my husband. So heartfelt, so sincere. And my expression does soften, but I cannot let go of this anger until my family is whole again.

Dominic and Elisa...I don’t even know where they are.

"What're you sorry for?" I brush some hair away from his forehead. The shadows under his eyes are enough to know he's slept as well as I have these past days.

"For hurting you." The words come out muffled, as he's resting his forehead to my stomach again. "For crossing the line. For going too far with Dominic and Elisa."

I press my lips together and blink past the stinging in my eyes.

"Tell me what to do to make it all right, hummingbird." He backs away to wipe at his cheeks. "I'll do anything."

Since I've done something I know my husband won't approve of right off the bat, I decide to milk it—to tell him while he doesn’t dare to be angry with me.

"You'll fix what's broken between you and our children." I sit down next to him, and he tilts his head away, only because...God forbid a man cries sometimes. Christ. "You'll also allow me to visit Francis." He stiffens at that, but after a few seconds, he heaves a sigh and nods. "And..." I bite my lip, nervous now. "You won't get mad that I've emptied the safe in your office."

"You did what?" His head whips around so fast that it's a wonder it didn’t snap.
I smile innocently, nervously, and inspect my red fingernails. "I, uh, might have bought a house for Dominic on Anthony's street."

But I have a really good excuse! I do not want to push Dominic and Daniela into a relationship by telling them to share my son's bedroom in his apartment. But Nino really deserves his own room—not to share one with Lia, a room that is all pink and girly—so...I sort of got the idea that Dominic could use a bigger place. A house. Closer to his parents. Closer to his brother. A place to raise his family.

"You—you bought a house?!!" Junior struggles not to raise his voice, but he fails.

"You can't get mad!" I wave a fist.

He chuckles sinisterly and stands up, pacing and tugging at his hair. "I can't fuckin'...believe this..."

"Believe it." I fold my arms over my chest and jut out my chin. "His apartment is way too small." I don’t think he knows about Nino yet, so I don’t mention it. Now's not the time. "Anthony and Gabriella live on a good street—this is a great neighborhood, wonderful schools—"

"Of course it's great, Isabella!" he whispers-shouts furiously and widens his arms. "It's one of the most expensive ones, too! There's not a house on our streets that sells for less than a mill!"

And Dominic's new house obviously didn't, either.

"Those were our savings." He glares at me.

Now, that...that pisses me off. "You gonna lie to me now? Really? You wanna go there? Right now?"
I hold his glare with one of my own, knowing all about the bank accounts in other countries, not to mention the two safes at Stella, one big trunk he's got buried in the yard—in the middle of my fucking rose bed—and another few stashes in the garage.

"I...I didn’t say they were all our savings." He drops the bitchface and groans and looks up at the ceiling and tugs at his hair some more.

"Nice save," I say dryly.

"Don't push me," he mutters.

"No, you're the one who pushes me," I shoot back, hitting him where it hurts. "Into tables, onto the floor...and let's not forget how you nearly choked me."

His face falls, and he looks away again.

I'm already regretting what I said. After all, I hit him, too.

"That was uncalled for." I stand up and close the distance between us.

"I'm sorry. I got physical first."

"Because I disowned two of our children," he whispers, staring at his feet.

"I don’t deserve your apology, Isabella."

I shrug and slip my arms around his midsection. "We always hurt our loved ones the most, right?"

Meeting my gaze, he says nothing for a while. He's beating himself up internally—I can tell—but he knows what I said is true. It is what it is.

"So, you bought a house, huh?" He does a good job of swallowing his anger there. He still sounds reluctant, but Rome wasn’t built in a day. The important thing is that he won't hassle me about my impulse buy. "There just happened to be one for sale?"
Well, no. But it's amazing how good money talks. Our last name speaks volumes, too, and the all-American family of four didn't dare deny me.

Just the thought makes me grin a little.

*I'm so badass.*

Okay, Anthony was with me, and Joseph's taking care of the paperwork, so maybe they instill some fear, too...

"Check you out." Junior huffs a chuckle and hugs me to him. I can feel him breathing in, his nose in my hair. "You made them an offer they couldn't refuse?"

I wanna squeal, but I don't. "I'm innocent."

**Junior's POV**

My wife—in innocent? No. Not by a long shot. But she *is* amazing. Guilty of spending too much money without asking me. A house, a motherfucking house. That's just...fuckin'...madonn'.

But if this gets me into her good graces again...

I sigh and squeeze her to me a bit harder, having missed her more than words can say—her face, those eyes, lips, her perfume, this fucking body, her heart. Christ. I'm *aching* for her, and I wanna say I'm ready to fuck her six ways to Sunday, but I'm not. All I wanna do—which makes me sound like a goddamn pussy—is hold her. Hold on and never let go.

"I'm sorry, bell'uccellino," I repeat quietly when it's been silent for a moment or two. I have a feeling I'll be saying those words many times in the near future. Actually, I'm surprised she's letting me hug her. Or even breathe the same air.
"I know." She looks up at me and ghosts her fingers over my cheeks. Fuck me, I'm crying again and I didn't even notice. "And I'll forgive you when my family is back together. And as long as you don't give me shit about visiting Francis." That's a hard motherfucking pill to swallow. Every part of me protests—but being on my wife's good side matters more. "And you won't give me grief about the house." Oh, that sneaky fuckin' woman. No, I won't give her grief. Christ. "And you'll take me to Palm Springs for a weekend soon to put flowers on Sinatra's grave." She raises a brow.

See? I already had a feeling that would come up the next time I fucked up.

I nod dutifully, which I'm sure as shit not used to, and remind myself that it's all for the sake of my wife—our family.

"Anything else?" I smile, half-amused. Isabella's smart; she's picked the best time to shake me down. "I'm sure there's something else you can squeeze outta my pockets."

She taps her chin, eyes twinkling. The brightness there…I've missed it. "Oh! There's one thing." She grins for a second, only to glare at me the next. Then she slaps my arm. Hard. "You can apologize for leaving without a word. You just stormed outta here!" She gets going with the gestures, the fire in her eyes, and a few more slaps on my arms and chest. "I even lost count of the days! I was sick with worry!"

"Ouch—goddammit." I rub my bicep, but before she can whack me again, I wrap my arms around her shoulders. "Cool it." I nip at her ear. "Jesus."

"No!" She pushes at me, getting more and more upset, and she starts crying. "You d-don't understand, Juniuh." Fuck, her cries tear at me. She must've kept this bottled up. "I've never felt so—so lonely. Even when I was surrounded by people…the most important ones were missing." Her struggling grows weak, and I loosen my hold on her but keep her in my
arms. "Even now, I don’t know where Dominic and Elisa are! They keep telling me they're safe, they're safe, they're safe, but I need to see it! I want them here!"

"Shh, shh...baby..." I palm her face and kiss her tear-stained cheeks, her nose, eyelids, and forehead. I don’t have the fucking guts to go for her lips, not yet. "I'll fix everything. Te lo giuro, Isabella." I swear to her.

My mind is already spinning, 'cause there's a lotta shit I gotta do. For one, I have to make sure Dominic gets outta Dodge—lies low for a while. I gotta feel Felix out. I gotta talk to Anthony, and... "Why don't'chu know where Elisa is?" I ask, frowning.

"I talk to her on the phone..." She rolls her eyes and wipes away some tears. "But I don’t know where she's staying. Joseph and Dominic—Anthony too, maybe—are keeping her hidden."

My frown deepens at the mention of Joseph.

Dominic might already be in danger, and there's no line Felix wouldn’t cross to get to him. Like, going after people my son loves.

"Where's Lia?" I ask, backing away. I'm exhausted as fuck; I can't even remember when I last slept through an entire night, but now my heart is racing. I have to get out there and find out where my children and grandchildren are.

"Lia and Dani and—um, they're staying at a hotel. Joseph drove them earlier."

_Again with that fuckin' Joseph._ Massaging my forehead, I get my shit together and walk over to our closet.

Time to put my family back together.
I'll bring Anthony with me, and our first stop is Joseph's condo.

*I gotta get some answers.*
Chapter 17

Translation:

*Ma che cazzo? = What the fuck?*

**Joseph’s POV**

"Now you don’t get any." I smirk and hold the dessert away from her. "You broke the rule—you went too fast again."

"You’re—you’re..." She whimpers into the crook of my neck, the water in the Jacuzzi splashing around us. "You're gonna deny a pregnant woman?"

"Mmm." I shove a spoonful of chocolate mousse, whipped cream, and chocolate flakes into my mouth. "Evidently." I tap the back of the spoon on her nose, earning a cute-as-fuck scowl. I chuckle. "Lemme get that for you." Leaning forward, I get the little spot of whipped cream, then sit back again. "Fucking delicious."

"Joseph!" she whines and bucks into me, effectively burying my cock deeper inside her.

I groan quietly, unable to help myself, and I have to struggle to keep my eyes open. She's too goddamn easy to get lost in—that pleasure...it's outta this world.

"Ask nicely," I murmur huskily, holding up a spoon for her.

She presses her lips together, staying still for a beat, and then she...oh, *cazzo*. "Give me some dessert, please?" Well, when she pushes her delectable tits in my face like that...

"That’s cruel," I tell her, feeding her the chocolate.
She giggles and licks the corner of her mouth. The candlelight makes her eyes sparkle. "A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. Now—" she leans close and gets that seductive look in her beautiful eyes "—can we get back to our lovemaking?"

"Don't go too fast." I set the dessert aside to slip my hands under the water and grip her hips. "Ride my cock slowly, troublemaker. I wanna enjoy you."

"This man drives me crazy," she mutters under her breath. When I grin, she realizes I heard her, to which she glares. "You know, it's your fucking fault your cock makes me see God."

"Damn." I reach around her and give her ponytail a tug backward, exposing her slender neck to me. "Keep going. Stroke my ego." I close the distance and kiss that wet skin.

"I'd rather stroke something else," she says breathily, her tight pussy clamping down around me.

I hum and circle a finger around a constricted nipple. "Go ahead. Rock my world, baby."

Not that she's not already doing it. Christ, around Elisa...it's like I'm losing my mind every fucking day. She drives me nuts in the best ways. I mean, I knew she'd be perfect for me—hell, I love her beyond stupidity already—but I didn’t expect how she'd turn my life upside down. Gone is the cold white, black, and gray. Now there's color and warmth whenever I come home. My place smells of home-cooked meals; there's always some music playing, and whatever cleaning products she asked me to pick up a week ago don’t have the strong, industrial scent my maid used to leave behind.

A maid Elisa fired recently.
That was an interesting day. I'd gone out to pick up some wine, and when I returned Elisa was arguing—in Spanish, no less—with the woman who came to my condo once a week. She'd told Elisa that only I can fire her, which, according to the maid, I would never do. So, when I got back home, I had to tell her that it was Elisa's home now, and if my girlfriend wanted to fire her...

I'd shown the maid the door, and then Elisa had said, "Only one woman picks up after my man. Guess who that is." She'd ended it with a huff, and my cock had gotten all hard, so we fucked right there in the hallway.

*Good times.*

Shifting on my lap, Elisa moves away, my cock sliding out, before she rolls forward again. A sexy moan slips through her lips, and I cup the back of her neck to bring her close. I kiss her hard, tasting the chocolate and non-alcoholic champagne on her tongue.

She enjoys a small glass of wine every now and then, but she's not like the women of our parents' generation. In all the photos from back in the day, there was a drink in a pregnant woman's hand.

"Christ, you're fucking beautiful, Elisa..." I place my arms along the edge of the Jacuzzi, just wanting to look at her lose it on my cock. "You're close, aren't you?" I feel every damn constriction, how her muscles flutter. It makes me act like a teenager; that's why I tend to ask her to slow it down. I don't wanna embarrass myself.

"Yes." Another whimper, and her head lolls back, and the view... "Oh, Joseph."

*Madonn'!*

Biting down on my knuckles, I capture every little move, every drop of water trickling down her stunning body, how her chest heaves with
shallow breaths...how she bounces up and down on my cock almost in slow motion.

She cups her tits, knowing it drives me bonkers, and makes me lose my composure the minute one of her hands slides down to play with her clit.

"Fuck that." I do it for her, also speeding up, slamming her down on me. My balls tighten as she reaches down, behind her, to massage them. "Jesus Christ." My eyes nearly roll back.

"Now!" She gasps and unconsciously digs her fingernails into my shoulders, her orgasm taking control of her body. I keep circling her clit and brushing over it with the pad of my thumb.

I come undone just a few seconds later and abandon her pussy to grasp her hips again and pump my dick as deep as I can. She lets out a breathless wail, and I growl against the soft skin of her neck.

Every. Fucking. Time.

It's like this every time I'm with her. In the past—those meaningless fucks...let's just say this is different. Mannaggia, it's a whole new universe.

"God, that was so amazing..."

I nod, breathing too heavily to respond verbally.

Afterward, I keep Elisa on my lap, never in a rush to let her go, but eventually it's time to get up. We can hear my little brother in the next room; he's probably struggling to leave his bed, since it's the only reason he's allowed—if he has to go to the bathroom.

He said he was fine at the hospital; Dominic and I ignored that. My little brother is far from healed, but there's no machine he's hooked up to anymore, which was why I made the decision to move him. It feels safer
to have him here, anyway. Plus, Elisa loves to play nurse—makes her feel useful.

After a quick shower to rinse off the suds, I wrap Elisa up in my black robe, pretty much drowning her in the fabric. Now, instead of looking sinful and delectable, she's...she's fucking cute.

"Posso dirti una cosa?" She asks if she can tell me something, putting toothpaste on her toothbrush.

"Of course." I secure a towel around my hips, then meet her gaze in the mirror.

She smiles. "I love you."

Fuck me.

"You..." I clear my throat, stunned. Never in a million years did I think she'd fall for me this fast. She's explained that I've always made her feel...something—something deep, something she couldn't understand. But this...? It hasn't even been two weeks since she moved in.

"I know my own heart now, Joseph," she whispers. "I love you."

A smile tugging at the corners of my lips, I walk up to her and hug her from behind, dropping a kiss to her neck. I'm at a loss for words—too relieved, still surprised, and...happier than a wiseguy during the Golden Age, before the RICO act was established.

"You can tell me that any time," I murmur eventually. "C'mere." I turn her in my arms and gently grasp her chin. "I love you, too. Both of you." I press a kiss to her lips as I place a hand on her stomach. "You're both mine."
"Oh—" She backs away, her turn to look stunned, but then she throws herself at me. The force of the kiss catches me off guard. "Oh God, Joseph. I love you, I love you, I love you."

She kisses me all over, and I choke out a laugh.

"Does that surprise you, sweetheart?" I tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. "Don’t tell me you didn’t know I plan on taking care of the baby, too."

"Well..." She flushes and bites her lip. "I didn’t want to assume...and you never really elaborated on the Mario issue—just said he won't come around anymore."

"And that’s all you need to know." I kiss the spot between her brows. "It's all you want to know, isn’t it?"

Having grown up around Bella, whom I consider an aunt even more than Alice, I know that Elisa has had a wonderful role model. And in some cases—especially for the women in our lives—ignorance is bliss. They can do the math, but do they want to?

Elisa scrunches her nose. "I think this is one of those times I should go to church with Mom and light a candle...and maybe donate some money."

"The beauty of Catholicism." I chuckle. "You know where my wallet is. And the safe."

She snorts a giggle and slaps my arm. "I have my own money, you know. And we still need to talk about me returning to work."

"Ah." Why she's so dead set on working is beyond me. "We'll get to that soon. Now—" I nuzzle her jaw and palm her ass "—get to bed. I'll be wit'chu in a sec."
"Okay." She pops a kiss to my chin. "I'm just gonna brush my teeth and say goodnight to Francis."

~oOo~

Just as I flick off the lights in the living room, there's a loud knock on the door. It ain't all that late, but it's not like I'm expecting anyone, either. Still only wearing that towel around my hips, I get my spare piece from one of the cabinets in the kitchen, then head to the hallway.

"Who is it?"

"Anthony," Anthony says, and his fucking father snaps out, "Junior!"

"Cazzo," I mutter.

This is just wonderful. Anthony may know about—and approve of—me and Elisa, but Junior...?

But fuck it, here we go. I open the door to reveal an amused Anthony and an impatient-looking Junior. Which means he doesn't know yet, 'cause he'd be murderous in that case.

"Gentlemen." I open the door wider.

Junior enters and runs a comb through his hair, and Anthony leans close to whisper that he's tried to warn his pops, but apparently the man's on a mission and won't listen.

Lovely.

"Joseph...?" Fuckin' hell, that'd be Elisa's singsong voice. She's not visible yet, but I can hear her walking down the hallway between the bedrooms and the living room. "Come to bed. I miss you."

I raise my brows at Anthony, silently pleading for advice.
Ironic, huh? The fucking consigliere asking for advice? But for once in my life I'm actually fearing for...well, my life. Because this is not how I pictured I'd be breaking the news to Junior.

"What the fuck?!" Junior shouts as Elisa appears.

Wearing nothing but one of my black button-downs.

"Oh, my GOD!" Elisa screams, horrified. She quickly pulls the shirt tighter to her body, not that she was flashing anything, and glares at me. Of all people.

The hell?

"What's Dad—that bastard doing here?" she growls like a kitten.

"Oh-ho!" Anthony's having fun.

"Ay!" Junior yells. "You shut your mouth when you talk to me, Elisa."

I groan and rub my temples.

"And you!" Junior throws me that murderous look I'd been expecting. "You wanna see the bottom of Lake Mead, huh? What the fuck do you think you're doing with my baby girl?"

"I—" don't get further than that...

"How dare you?!" Elisa shouts at her father and gets going with the gestures. "What he's doing with me is none'a your goddamn business. I'm no longer your daughter—you made that perfectly clear!"

For one second, it looks as if Elisa's words were daggers and hit Junior squarely in the chest, but I've got my priority, and that's not Junior. It's Elisa, so I walk over to her, turning my back to Junior—maybe not smart,
considering he has a gun—and gently grasp her chin, making her look up at me.

"You gotta cool it, love," I murmur, thinking about the baby. Elisa huffs and puffs, but she gets it and takes a calming breath. With that, I look over my shoulder to face Junior. "You know she's pregnant, right? I advise you not to upset her."

I respect the man, and I've always looked up to him more than I did my own father, but I won't risk Elisa's health. Ever.

Junior grits his teeth, anger rolling off him, but there's something else in his eyes. Elisa being hurt would kill him, and right now...he wants to take my place and comfort her, see that she's okay. But I have a feeling she won't let him.

Keeping my eyes on Junior, I speak to Elisa again. "Sweetheart, go check on Francis."

Countless different emotions flit across Junior's features—shock, perhaps to find out we're keeping Francis here, more anger, revulsion, worry...because I'm sending his pregnant daughter to check in on a fag?

Elisa smiles at her dad before pulling me down for a kiss. "I'll be happy to." Then as she walks down the hall, she calls, "I want that asshole outta here, Joseph," over her shoulder, and she ain't exactly talking about Francis.

"This is my home, Junior," I tell him. "You'll treat everyone here with respect, and that includes my little brother. Are we clear?"

He nods absently and rubs his jaw, and it's like he's not even here. Did he hear a word I just said?

"Dad...?" Anthony furrows his brows.
"Huh?" Junior snaps outta his...whatever that was. "Oh—nothin'." He turns to me with a frown. "You're going against your father's wishes to keep that cocksu—" I hitch a brow in warning, to which he makes a face "—kid...here?"

Ah. Junior Maisano—always thinking ahead. No matter the size of the shitstorm we're in, he's thinking about the outcome—who's gonna get hurt, who this'll affect, and who'll end up dead.

He doesn't trust me. 'Cause I'm a Colucci. And he wants to make sure Elisa is safe. Probably Dominic, too.

I don't know how much Anthony's managed to tell him, but I doubt it's much.

"We should speak in private," I say. "My office is down the hall."

Junior narrows his eyes at me, then nods and tells Anthony to wait here.

"Ma che cazzo?" Anthony widens his arms. "Why do I gotta stay behind?"

"Because three's a crowd," Junior answers flatly.

He's right.

I trust Anthony—I really do, and he probably already knows where all this is heading—but sensitive information is best shared with only one person. If you have to share at all, that is.

And I'm willing to share this, put my ass on the line, in order to gain Junior's trust.

Taking the lead, I head toward my office and open the door. "Help yourself." I point to the glass cabinet with scotch. "I'm just gonna throw something on." He enters my office with a dip of his chin, and I disappear
into the bedroom, finding it empty. But I can hear Francis and Elisa in the next room, so I know she's there.

My future father-in-law is not a man who likes to be kept waiting, so I hurry and put on a pair of slacks and a fitted pullover, then I get back to the office.

Of course, he's taken a seat behind the desk.

He smiles faintly, casually swirling the alcohol in his glass. "You don't mind, do you?"

I purse my lips, seeing his gun on the table, and I'm torn between worry and amusement. I'd heard how Mario nearly pissed his pants when he asked Junior for his blessing in marriage, but...then again, Mario got spooked easy.

I'm not Mario.

As I walk over to get myself a drink too, I ask if he'd really shoot me in my own home. "Mi spareresti davvero nella mia stessa casa?"

His tone is dry. "Beats the alternative." Which is...? My expression asks the question, and he chuckles. "Me—" he points to his chest "—getting shot in your home."

He really doesn't trust me.

I can't fault him for that, though.

"I wouldn't hurt you." I shake my head and sit down. "I want your trust."

He doesn't reply, and I have a feeling he won't say a single incriminating word in here.

"It's safe to talk here."
He remains quiet.

All right, then. I'll do the talking. "Elisa is my top priority," I say, clearing my throat. "That includes everyone she loves. Dominic." I give him a pointed look. "He's safe, Junior. He's staying off the grid until this blows over."

"And you know where he is," he states quietly and takes a sip of his drink.

"Yes."

Junior looks pensive for a moment, staring out the window, and... Christ, I wish I could say I wasn't nervous. But the man is a vicious bastard; the only people he cares genuinely for are his wife, children, and grandchildren. He's ruthless and smarter than many give him credit for.

At this point, I know one man who is underestimating Edward Maisano, and that's the man Junior put on the throne. My pops.

"Give me a reason to trust you, Joseph." His calculating gaze slides to me again. "Give me a reason not to just..." He trails off, his fingers tracing the shape of his gun on the table. "Hmm?"

At least we're acknowledging the rift that's been created between the Maisanos and Coluccis. Junior is fully aware that my father won't let Dee get away.

I was stupid to even think it'd be possible to smooth things over between Dad and Dominic.

"Not only are you your father's son," he mutters, "but apparently you're keeping my angel—my fucking daughter—as a bed warmer."
My jaw ticks with anger and I gotta struggle not to crush the glass in my hand, but I manage. 'Cause it won't get me anywhere, mouthing off to Junior about how one is supposed to speak about my girl.

"That’s the woman I love," I say, my knee bouncing. I roll my shoulders and take a deep breath. "She's also the mother of my unborn child."

He cocks a brow. "I didn’t go to college, Joseph, but I can do simple math."

I don’t give a flying fuck. I’m stepping up—that baby is mine. Only the closest will know that Mario is the biological father, but I'll dare anyone to come up to me and say it out loud.

"Mario's dead." I set down my glass. "He's been taken care of." I won't sell out Dominic, mention his name. "For what Mario did to Francis and—" I wave a hand, still uncomfortable with the topic. "Casey. Francis's partner."

Junior doesn’t show a fucking thing—his expression is intense but blank. I can't read him.

"I want to marry her, Junior."

His mouth quirks up, but the humor is dark. Sinister. "That’s funny." He looks down and fiddles with his cuff links. "I still haven't heard why I should trust you."

There's no use in beating around the bush, so... "We need a new boss."

My pops's gotta go.

I'll mourn the man he used to be, the father he was when I was a kid, but now...? He's a shell of a man, colder than ice, and it's affecting work.
Clipping Dominic would set a lot of shit in motion, and I want to be on the right side and prevent it from happening.

Junior would never allow his son to be killed; Alec stands with his older brother, Nico looks up to his uncle, and Junior already owns Jasper.

"Fighting words," Junior murmurs, that steely gaze studying me. "You could be killed for just saying it. You know that, right?"

Of course I know.

"I already have a plan." I maintain eye contact. "It's going to happen."

He blows out a breath and retrieves a pack of smokes from his pocket. He lights one up, and I see the first sign of what he's feeling. Frustration. Exhaustion. He pinches the bridge of his nose and leans an elbow on the desk.

"Why, Joseph?" He faces me, appearing aggravated. "Why are you doing this?"

"You know why." I lean forward and stab a finger to the desk. "If no one does anything—"

"No." He stops me. "Why are you doing this? Dominic is my son."

I lean back and shrug. "I've told you."

"Because of Elisa?" He seems to doubt that's my only reason. "You really love her? And when the fuck did this even start? Youse've never been close. How do I know you're not just using her to gain my trust?"

"It's new," I admit. "She came to me when Dee told her to turn to someone she knew she could count on—after all this happened with Francis and you...ah, when you told them—" I clear my throat "—that they were no longer your children."
"Saranno sempre I miei bambini." He spits out the words, claiming they'll always be his kids. "We had words—shit got outta hand. But that’s between me and my family. Why did Dominic feel the need to send Elisa away?"

"Because she's the one who found out it was Mario who assaulted Francis," I answer. "She saw something in Mario's car." I wave that off, as details aren't important. "Of course, it was my father who'd ordered Mario to give Francis that warning. And now Mario's gone, and Felix..." I arch a brow, silently saying my father is next.

"Who's in on this?" He's unreadable again, aside from anger. "Dominic? Anthony?"

I shake my head no. I haven't told anybody I plan to ice my pops. "You."

He chuckles tiredly, humorlessly. "I'm honored." He groans and scrubs a hand down his face. "Christ. You fuckin' kids..."

I press my lips together. *Kids?* "You can say whatever you want about me and Elisa, but when it comes to business...? Don't fucking insult me. You had to know this was coming."

Again, he doesn’t reply, but he knows.

"You're the most influential man in the organization, Junior." I widen my arms. "You'll separate business from family, you're old school, the capos trust you—hell, everyone trusts you."

That faint smile is back, and it's grating on my nerves; it's like he's only humoring me.

"You speak as if you have someone in mind for the big seat." He leans back, spinning the leather chair a few inches from side to side. "I have no desire to be boss. I never have."
I chuckle darkly. "Guess we're shit outta luck, then."

Anthony's too young. I'm...I'm not boss material. I'm the consigliere—a position I love. Alec could make it as an underboss, but boss...? No. Jasper's not smart enough. Nico's too hotheaded, and he's too much like his father.

Junior is the only option until Anthony's old enough.

**Junior's POV**

Jesus fucking Christ.

Can I just shoot him?

I've known, of course, since the get—since Alec and I spoke on the plane—that Felix has to die. But...I honestly didn’t wanna think about who the successor would be, because as obvious as it is, I don’t want the seat.

I know it'll be me, though.

It'll be the Maisano Family of Nevada.

And as much as I'd like to recreate the scene in Two, where Fredo Corleone dies—oh, what the fuck am I doing? I hate the *Godfather* movies. Except for the flashbacks, but seriously, a Mick, a fuckin' Irishman as the consigliere? Forget about it! But, anyway—I shake my head—as much as I'd like to put a bullet in Joseph's head...my gut tells me he's a good kid.

I hate my gut sometimes.

He's willing to say the words—that he's gonna kill his father—knowing they can get him killed. Joseph has taken that risk by coming to me, and I gotta respect that. Because, for all Joseph knows, I'm loyal to my boss.
Then this whole business with Elisa...? *Mamma mia, my angioletto.* I still see her as this precious little baby, and now she's gonna be a mama herself. With Joseph as the father. Not Mario. Who's dead. Who Joseph clipped.

I'm getting old.

I can't possibly allow Joseph and Elisa to get married, can I? I mean, they're fucking family! They're cousins! *Fine,* not by blood and not first cousins, but...

*Madonn'*. But a wiseguy stepping up to be the father of another man's baby...? That's admirable.

"You've been silent a long time."

I throw Joseph a look, then down the rest of the scotch. "I gotta fuckin' headache." Fuckin' kids tryin'a play chess, heading straight for the king instead of taking out one pawn at a time. Though, who am I kidding? There's no low-man to take out this time. It's just Felix. The boss.

*Checkmate.*

I just wish Joseph wasn’t involved.

I still don’t trust him.

*So quick to take out his own father.*

Had I not known for sure that Joseph doesn’t wanna be boss one day himself, I woulda just popped one in his head already.

"When?" I ask pointedly. I wanna know when he plans on clipping Felix.

"At the opening of Mandalay Bay." He looks confident, voice unwavering.
I chuckle wryly. "You want a show, kid?"

"Easy to get lost in the crowd." He shrugs and tents his fingers together on the desk. "Does this mean you're in?"

"This means nothing." I stub out my smoke in an ashtray, though it had already fizzled out on its own. "The only thing I'mma say is that what we's discussed here tonight won't leave this office."

I stand up and button my suit jacket.

"You're leaving me outta the loop?" he asks, standing up too.

I shake my head. "Outta the loop of what?" Rounding the desk, I come face-to-face with him, and I brush some invisible lint off his shoulder. "You do what you gotta do. I'll do the same."

I'm gonna stand by. And watch.

If he proves himself...then I'll know I can trust him.

"And what about Dominic, Junior? Elisa...?"

This kid.

I'm not willing to admit that I'll be on board with this union one day, but...

I look down and smooth down my tie. "I'm Mr. Maisano to you until I say otherwise. Capisce?" I raise a brow at him.

He fights a smile, knowing this is a step in the right direction. Right direction for him. I'm undecided, for many reasons.

"Yes, sir."

I nod. "I'll be in touch." Leaving the office, I add to Joseph that I want the location of Dominic's hideout, and then I tell Anthony to give my
informant down in Vice a call. And as the words have left my mouth, I spot Elisa coming out of a room. She stops abruptly when she sees me.

The fury in her eyes breaks my fucking heart.

"You're still here?" She glares at me and moves to open the door to another room. Presumably the room she shares with that motherfucker. Christ.

"Elisa—" I take a step toward her. "Can I have a word with you?"

"No." She scoffs, then looks to something behind me—Joseph—and rolls her eyes. "Whatever. What do you want? Make it quick, 'cause I'm tired."

I tilt my head enough to see Joseph behind me in my periphery, and I wait 'til he's gone. Then I take a breath and smile carefully as I approach my baby girl.

"For what it's worth, I never wanted this to happen." I keep my voice down and lean my left side against the wall. My leg is bothering me a bit after a few days of bad weather in New York. "I'm sorry."

Her defensive posture sags a little, replaced by disbelief. "Did you just apologize? You?"

"I, ah..." I clear my throat and avert my eyes to adjust my tie. My wife would call it fidgeting. "I can be wrong, too." I force the words out, knowing the truth of them. "I overreacted by saying—what I said. To you and Dominic."

Her eyes grow dark, a humorless chuckle escaping. "Right. To me and Dominic. What about Francis, huh? You know, your godson who apparently deserves to burn in hell—"
I show her my palms, cutting her off. "One step at a time, angioletto."
This is fucking hard, because my views haven't changed. "I think Mom can explain it to you better—" I massage my forehead, not good with this. I'm a parent, but I'm not always parenting...if that makes sense. Isabella's always taken care of that, at least with the girls. "It's how I grew up," I say, at a loss. "I won't apologize for that."

Elisa should be happy her nonna and nonno don’t know about Francis.

My mother would probably take a similar stance—as my wife has done—but not before praying for Francis's lost soul. And my pops...? Forget about it. He'd be devastated, as he considers Francis a grandchild, but my father would shun the kid. Francis would cease to exist in Pops' mind.

"It feels wrong, Elisa. Sickening." I place a hand to my chest. "But, may God give your mother strength—she might make me accept it one day. She's stubborn that way, you know?" I blow out a breath and run a hand over my hair. Irritation keeps building, because this is new territory for me. I'm not used to having to explain myself. A man shouldn’t have to. "I've already allowed your mom to visit him—I won't stand in your way of..." I grimace to myself, "...being friends with him."

"How generous of you," she mutters and stares at her feet. "God, you're so ancient, Dad—your way of thinking..." She shakes her head.

I'm not ancient, nor am I wrong. It's the fucking world that's gone bananas.

But I ignore her comment. "Do you think you can ever forgive me?" I ask, feeling extremely vulnerable. I do a good job of hiding it behind a clenched jaw, but had it been Isabella, she would've seen right through me.
"Yes," she sighs heavily and rolls her eyes. I notice they look glassy. "It'll take time, but... And only if Dominic forgives you. He's really hurt, but he refuses to admit it."

Well, he's my son. He doesn't show weakness until the breaking point.

"And you gotta accept me and Joseph together," she adds, jutting out her chin.

_Fuckin' Maisano women._

"Don't push it," I warn quietly. "You're already living in sin—"

"Oh, come on, Dad!" She throws up her hands, frustrated.

I say nothing, but...ah, fuck it, Isabella would give me this _look_ and wave her fist at me and...Christ. Plus, our little angel is pregnant, and I'd kill myself if I upset her and something happened.

"We'll see how it goes, all right?" I smile tightly, my eyes begging her—fucking begging!—to not take an arm when I offer a hand.

She huffs and blows some hair away from her forehead.

"Mi fai incazzare." Apparently I piss her off, but there's little to no heat in her words.

I hold on to that. "But you love me anyway." Taking a step closer, I palm her cheek and make her look up at me. "You have to."

"I don’t have to do shit," she mumbles.

I can't help but laugh; it's quiet and kinda hollow. Fuckin' wistful, even. "You're so much like your mother sometimes," I murmur.

She juts out that chin again. "I'll take that as a compliment."
I nod. "You should. I don’t know how she puts up with me."

There's some muttering under her breath, sounding too much like, "As if you give her a choice," to be a fluke, but I choose to ignore that, too. It stings, but I'm willing to swallow my pride—and some of my beliefs—in order to reconcile.

"Listen, angel." I take a small step back and reach for her hand. "You've grown up; I hate to admit it, but I can see it. I'm not blind." Brushing my thumb over her knuckles, I murmur past the thickness in my throat. "You're an amazing young woman, and I'm proud of who you've become." Giving herself to Mario notwithstanding. Had he not already been six feet under, I would've wanted to have some fun making him cry. "I promise to do my best and let you decide a bit more over your own life, make your own decisions, and—" your own mistakes. "Just...give me some time to get used to it, all right?" I swallow hard and blink back my emotions. "All I ever wanted was to protect you—keep you safe from all the shit out there." I put my fist to my mouth and clear my throat. "Clearly, I fucked up. And I'm sorry."

"Oh, Daddy..." Her voice cracks at the end and she throws her arms around my middle, and the latter gives me hope. It also feels fucking incredible to hug her again. "Now I know how Mom puts up wit'chu." Her words are muffled by my shirt. "It's 'cause you're a smooth talker."

I laugh under my breath and squeeze her tight. "I love you, baby."

"I love you too," she grumbles, releasing me. I kiss the top of her head, reluctant to let go, but I can hear Anthony pacing farther down the hall. "But can you please fix this with Dee, too? He's in a bad place right now."

The guilt stabs at me, and I nod before I look down. "I'll give you the same promise I gave Mom before I left the house earlier: we'll all be at Julia's premiere next Friday. As a family."
"Good." She gets cheeky and playfully elbows my side. "You've got a lot to do, then. With so little time..."

"That's why he's gonna get started right now." Anthony walks up to us, holding up his phone. "I talked to Moretti." That'd be the kid in Vice who is my eyes and ears in law enforcement. "Apparently, some of Felix's guys have been spotted near the Bellagio."

Cazzo. Isabella told me that's where Daniela and Lia are staying. And...something with Dani's kid brother? I didn't get the whole story before I left, but something did strike me as odd. Daniela's last name. Anyway—I'll have to think about that later. There's more important shit going on now. Besides, I might get info on Daniela soon enough.

"I'll take care of that," I say, frowning in thought. Thing is, Felix might be getting ready to pull a stunt I'd never accept, but he's not so stupid that he'd do it in broad daylight—as in, telling me anything. He'll try to do this in silence, behind my back, and if Daniela or Lia disappeared, everyone would know something's up.

My guess is that he just wants to know where everyone is.

So...before I drive to wherever Dominic is hiding, I should stop by Twilight, show my face, ask for him, and keep up the act. Felix won't be there; I know he's at his goomah's house, but he has to believe I have no reason to avoid him. It'll give me some time to figure out how many have to go.

I know I claimed it's only Felix, but...eh, I don't really count a few of his soldiers as casualties. More like annoying bugs that buzz by your ear when you're trying to watch a fucking documentary.

"Are Dani, Lia, and Nino safe?" Elisa asks, biting her thumbnail.

"Of course they are." I pull away her hand from her mouth and kiss her knuckles. "You go to bed, angioletto—rest, sleep."
Keep my bastard grandbaby safe.

Maybe it's a tradition? Three of my kids are bastards, too.

As for me...I guess the night is young. I doubt I'll be home before breakfast, even.

I sigh and face Anthony. "Call your mother and tell her I'll be late." He nods and starts walking down the hall again. "And tell her I love her, for God's sake!" I holler.

He chuckles.

Elisa giggles.

I make a mental note to call my jeweler, 'cause I ain't coming home without a few diamonds to protect my balls.

"What's so funny?" I jerk my chin at my daughter. "I bet you won't be laughin' when I tell you you can't marry your cousin."

That sure wipes her grin off her face. "We're not—DAD!"

"Da-ad," I mimic, laughing, and follow my son.
Chapter 18

Translation:

*Come fosse una novità* = Like that's new.

**Junior's POV**

When I enter Twilight, Nico's the first man I see, and I shake my head. The kid's our underboss, but he loses his head over pussy. He's fucking buried in strippers, having a blast.

"Yo..." Anthony lets out a whistle at the broads. "How many can he handle? There's gotta be seven of them."

"Never you fuckin' mind how many strippers he's got," I tell him as we head over. "How's Gabby? Been a while since she and the kids came over for dinner."

My son widens his eyes. "Are you shittin' me? Just because I comment on Nico, I gotta get the third degree?"

He clearly doesn't know what the third degree is if one question bothers him.

"And for the record...?" He smirks darkly. "She was at the house plenty while you were MIA."

He knows I wasn't MIA, so I don't dignify that with a response. Granted, I usually always tell my wife when I'm going outta town, but this was different. I'd needed to get away, clear my head, and push away all visuals of my hands around Isabella's neck, tears streaming down her face.

Those memories will haunt me forever.
But she's smart. Letting me off the hook so easy... She knows I will just punish myself that much harder.

Trust, it'd be easier if she slapped me across the face and screamed at me for a few hours. But nah...she just asked for her family and a couple material things.

"Uncle Jun!" Nico grins widely, comfortable in a booth with all those bunnies and a few bottles of booze. "What's up, cuz?" He bumps fists with Anthony.

"Your dick?" Anthony guesses.

I smirk and run a comb through my hair, then pocket the comb and jerk my chin at the broads. "Scram."

"We was havin' a party." Nico eyes one bunny's ass as she leaves. "Gina's on the rag—won't let me hit it."

Guess Isabella was wrong; she thought Gina was pregnant.

"What's wrong with the cooz at your own club?" Anthony sits down next to Nico, and I follow, lighting up a smoke. "You went through 'em all already?"

Nico laughs and scratches his nose. "A few times."

"Like father, like son." I absently tap my Zippo to the tabletop. "Felix around?"

"No, he's at that chick's house—in Carson City?" Nico squints.

I nod, as if I didn't already know Felix wouldn't be here. He flies to Carson fairly often—has a second family there.
"If you see him, tell him I'm home." I shrug. "I'll probably stop by tomorrow, though."

"Got it." He pours himself a drink, then holds up the bottle, silently asking if we want any. But I shake my head no, ensuring Anthony does the same. "Oh!" Nico snaps his fingers. "It's actually good you came in, Unc. I have a message for you."

I raise a brow and take a drag from my smoke. "From Felix?"

"Nah. It was at Dawn—before I came to Twilight." He pauses to light a cigarette, too. "A Cullen from New York?" Huh. That was quick. "He said if he couldn't reach you at Stella, he could contact you through me or Alec...?"

"Go on." I wave a hand, hoping Cullen's found something. I never really asked for the info, but he offered after I had drunk my sorrows at Eclipse, yapping about Dominic, how proud I was of him, yet disappointed and pissed because of...recent events. I didn't exactly specify or even mention Francis' name.

I can hardly remember what I said, just that I was careful not to say anything about fags, and...yeah. So, I talked about random shit; I mentioned Lia, Daniela...

In turn, he vented a little about his sons, work, politics, Josie surviving breast cancer, his new wife...

We were two miserable old fucks, but whattaya gonna do. Sometimes we need to get shit off our chests, too.

Regardless, when I said—mostly in passing—that Dominic was frustrated because Daniela wouldn't open up, Cullen offered to check it out. And I don't think I ever replied, maybe just waving it off, then continuing about some other crap.
And tonight, before I left the house, Isabella briefly told me about Dani’s brother, and how he had lived at Dani’s mother’s sister’s house in Queens, but...what was it?...money problems? Something. So, now the kid is here. But what I do remember clearly was Dani’s aunt’s last name.

*Cicero.*

But if that’s the name on Daniela’s *mother’s* side, why is it Dani’s last name?

I gotta say I’m curious myself now, and it’d be easier to get answers if my nephew’s eyes weren’t glued to the strippers on stage.

"Ay!" I smack the back of his head. "You gonna answer?"

"Shit, sorry." He rubs his head, wearing a pout. "He said you should call him from an outside line. Apparently the information's sensitive."

Fuck. It better not be something that can ruin whatever she’s got going on with my son. I don’t know if Dominic’s realized it yet, but that girl is the one for him. And I’d hate to send her packin’. Or worse.

"Hey..." Anthony nudges me. "We gonna head out?"

I release a breath, tired as hell, and stub out my smoke. "Yeah."

Next stop: the Bellagio.

I don’t want my granddaughter anywhere near Felix’s guys, and since they might know Lia and Dani are staying at the Bellagio, I figured I’d bring them to Dominic.

~oOo~

I sink low in the passenger’s seat when Anthony reemerges with Daniela and Lia and another kid, Nino, through one of the restaurants’ back exits
at the Bellagio. My son shakes hands with what looks like a waiter, probably slipping him some bills, then ushers Dani and the children toward the car.

Opening the door, I quickly snatch up my grandbaby before Dani can get her settled in TJ's seat, which is too big for Lia anyway.

"Hello, Mr. Maisano." Daniela smiles nervously, eyes flicking between me and Lia. "Is that'a safe?"

"Like I'd let something happen to her." I smile at Lia, who does her thing—grabbing at my face. "Yeah, you wanna ride in the front with Nonno, dontcha?"

I swear to fucking Christ, she shrugs. Intentional or not, I prefer to think my grandchildren are geniuses.

"Mr. Maisano—"

"You can call me Junior, Daniela." I face her, amused. "I've told you that before."

"Si, I'm sorry." She laughs quietly, nervously, and weaves her fingers through the little boy's hair. "This is my brother—Nino."

"How you doin', kid?" I tilt my head, noticing the boy is practically glued to his sister's side. "I'm Junior."

He doesn't look up from the ground. Shoulders stiff under his hoodie. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Junior," he mumbles, stepping impossibly closer to Daniela.

I frown, looking from him to Daniela, who looks more resigned and sad than anything.

Has something happened to the kid?
I'm looking forward to some fucking answers.

While Anthony, Dani, and Nino hop in the car, I get myself reacquainted with Lia. She updates me on the latest events in Las Vegas with that baby babbling, and I tuck her close, making sure her blanket is covering everything but her head. She rubs her eyes, sleepy, and lookin' so fucking cute in her jammies.

Anthony huffs and starts the car. "Sometimes I think you love your grandchildren more than your children."

"Sometimes I do." I make faces with Lia, then tilt my head to see the scowl on my son. "What's wrong? Your no-shows beginning to show up at work?" I joke.

"Funny." He focuses on the road, getting us out of the alley. "I'm just tired."

"He is annoyed with me," Daniela says from the back, her tone light. "I have spoken with Gabriella on the phone tonight, and—"

"Uh-oh." I cross my eyes at Lia, who giggles. "Our women are ganging up. Come fosse una novità. And lemme guess—Gabby's pissed at Anthony for some reason?"

I catch Daniel nodding in the side mirror. "Anthony has not called to tell her he'd be late. She worries."

"I'll call her, a'ight?" Anthony says irritably. Maybe he needs to get laid. Poor boy. "It's not like I've had the chance. Fuck." He shoots me a sideways glare. "This old bastard won't let me use my cell phone."

"That's only when we're in the car and I'm sitting right next to you," I snap. "You coulda called her when we was at Joseph's or at Twilight."
"Whatever," he mutters.

"Pup-up?" Lia yawns, her blue eyes glistening. "Pup-up! Dada!"

"Um." I purse my lips and nod. "Sure."

"Yes, bambina." Daniela taps me on the shoulder with something. A small stuffed animal. "We are bringing the puppy to Daddy."

Oh. Yeah, we are. I hand Lia the toy, and she snuggles with it against my chest, mumbling about puppies and Daddy.

~oOo~

Arriving at the only motel in the dead desert town of Nipton, just across the border in California, I tell Anthony to get a regular room in the main building for Daniela and the kids.

"I wanna talk to Dominic alone first," I add, returning Lia to Dani. I stretch my legs and roll my shoulders; a one-hour ride is enough to fuck me up these days. "I'll see you later, baby girl." I dip down and give Lia a loud smooch, earning myself that cute giggle again. "Can you wave to Nonno?"

Daniela does it for her.

I chuckle and begin walking over to the lodge Dominic's supposed to be in. There are several being built, but only one is ready, and I'm sure my son paid extra to get access to it.

Can't blame him, though. I hate the bed-and-breakfast type of motels. There's always some old lady who wants to introduce you to their useless fuckin' cats and get all up in your business.

It's completely dark out, but it looks like Dominic is still up. The small path to his lodge is illuminated by a porch light, and only one window is dark.
Climbing up the two wooden steps to the porch, I peek through the crack between the two drapes that hang down and spot my son in a ratty recliner by a small TV.

The TV is off. He looks...lonely. Just sitting there, smoking a cigarette. A beer on the side table, and—fuck.

He's got coke divided into a few lines on a CD case on the same table.

"Christ." My heart clenches, both fury and sadness seeping into me. Hauling in a breath, I act on instinct and twist the door knob, a bit surprised to find it unlocked. But I don't ponder further, instead taking a few quick steps to reach the sitting room Dominic's in.

He looks up at me, not surprised to see me—an unreadable expression on his face. Empty eyes.

I swallow hard, torn into pieces.

His mouth twists into a humorless smile before he faces the blank TV screen again. "I almost didn't believe Elisa when she called."

Of course she called him. I should've known. She's...Elisa and Dominic are like Anthony and Julia—close as hell and protective of the other. They're all close, but there's just something extra between the two pairs.

"Dominic—" I gotta clear my throat, my gaze traveling back to the coke. There's hope, though, 'cause he's not acting as if he's high. Unless he's taking downers; he's too mellow and calm to be on coke.

"I haven't used..." he mutters, and with that same humorless smile, he holds up a piece of something—a photo?—in his hand. I instinctively walk closer, only to see it's a small picture of Lia.
Pride swells in my chest, but I have a feeling my son won't listen to praise. Instead I grab a small stool and move it close to Dominic's chair, then sit down and snatch up the photo.

"She's a perfect reason to fight."

"Uh-huh." He takes a swig of his beer. "What the fuck are you doing here?" His voice is so dull, tired, that he didn't really phrase it as a question. "I got enough shit to deal with."

"I'm here to make things right." I spark up a smoke and take a drag. "I lost my head, Dominic. This whole thing with Francis—" I frown to myself, weary and at a loss. "I don't think Elisa gets it—how I grew up, but I was kinda hoping you will. Or do. Get it, I mean." Fuck. Have I mentioned I ain't good at this? "You know what it's like in our lifestyle."

"Yeah, so?" He scowls at me. "If Felix jumps off a bridge, would you jump too?"

I snort a chuckle, unable to help myself. "Ah, no. I'd probably be the one pushing him."

He cocks a brow in question, then rolls his eyes and shakes his head. "Whatever. Just because fags aren't tolerated in our business don't mean you gotta hate 'em personally."

I hesitate to speak, partly wondering when he got so smart, and partly disagreeing. And maybe agreeing...? My mind is too fried to work properly. I don't know what I'm supposed to think. Just that it all feels wrong.

"For whatever it's worth, I apologize." I search his eyes for a reaction, but there is none. "I went too far—never shoulda said what I said to you and Elisa."
He laughs, though it sounds empty. "A'ight. I forgive you. You can go now."

"No..." I frown again, then reach for his hand, but his eyes flash with fury and he breaks contact as if he's been burned. "Dominic—"

"Fuck you," he spits out and shoots up from his seat. "You have no—no fucking idea what I've been through these past couple'a weeks." I stub out my smoke and stand up too, to come face-to-face. "You're so goddamn quick to judge—quick to condemn—and now you realize, 'shit, maybe I shouldn't have disowned two'a my kids'? Nah, muthafucka." He chuckles darkly. "Screw that."

I grit my teeth, asking God for patience. "Are you done?"

"We are done," he seethes.

"You think we're done?" I ask incredulously. "You honestly believe I'd ever let my children—"

"It's what you said!" he shouts.

"Lower your fuckin' voice, son." I get in his face and cup his neck, squeezing in warning. "I made a mistake, Dominic—a big one, and I'm admitting I was wrong. I'm fucking apologizing. But what about you, huh? You say I'm quick to judge, and maybe that's true, but you were pretty fucking quick at going against me. Your own father. You showed me no respect—"

"Get outta hea' wid'at shit," he laughs humorlessly, pushing my arm away from him. "You want respect?" He stabs a finger to my chest. "You fucking earn it."
"Ay!" I shout, furious now. "You don't talk to me like that. Ever." Getting close again, I glare at him. "I've earned your respect as your father for the past eighteen years—you better show me some."

"Or what?" He widens his arms. "You want another round, old man? You'd love that, wouldn't you? Another chance to show how much you hate me."

He breaks my fuckin' heart. He can't really believe I hate him, can he?

I shake my head, forcing myself to calm down. "Lemme ask you a question instead." I take a step back to pinch the bridge of my nose. *Madonn',* I just wanna bop him one, but it won't fix nothin'. Instead I take a deep breath, then meet his gaze again. "If I tell you 'I love you' a thousand times, then why does it all go to shit the one time I don't?"

He frowns. "What?"

"I'm here, Dominic." It's my turn to widen my arms. "Would I be here to apologize to you—to make amends, if I didn't care about'chu? Huh? Or how about the time I drove you outta town to sober you up, to get you through detox? Or the times I've bailed you outta situations you couldn't fix on your own?" I'm getting pissed again, offended that he's questioning my loyalty and love. "Maybe I'm not the best father, but I have loved you—and shown it—since the day you were born." I jab him in the chest. "Don't you fucking dare say otherwise."

He exhales harshly, anger radiating from him, and slumps down in his chair again. "Trust me," he mutters gruffly, thickly. "All it takes is that one time." He leans forward on his elbows and runs his hands through his hair, tugging at it. "You'd probably lock up Mom in your bedroom if she told you—even once, only one time—that she didn't wanna be your wife anymore." Dominic looks up at me, daring me to defy him. "It's the only fear you have—admit it. If Mom didn't want you."
I stare at my feet, my gut churning at the mere thought, of that scenario playing out in real life, but my son is wrong. It's one fear—not the only one.

Isabella may be my rock, the one person I can't live without, but that doesn't mean losing my children wouldn't kill me. I can't even think about it without pain spreading through me like wildfire. I'd die a thousand deaths for each one of my babies. I'm nothing without either of them.

"Would you ever leave her?" Dominic asks quietly, and when I glance up again, he's got a faraway look on his face. His expression is clouded with hurt and anger. "If she didn't love you back...would you walk away so she could find happiness with someone else?"

This can't be about the shit between him and me; there's gotta be something else. But I answer him. I sit down on the stool once more and answer him truthfully. "No." To which Dominic looks me in the eye and silently asks me to elaborate. I manage a small smile and a mirthless chuckle. "I'm not that selfless." I point to myself. "Maybe that makes me a prick, a heartless bastard, but I only want Mom to be happy with me."

He purses his lips and stares at the blank TV—lost in thought, it looks like.

"I think I've done a decent job..." I think back on the two decades I've had with Isabella—good times and bad. "We all make mistakes, but I think our marriage is perfect."

Dominic doesn't respond, but he looks dubious.

This time, my smile is a bit more genuine. "Perfection to me—" I pause, trying to find the right words. "What I mean is, our marriage has its ups and downs, but that's what makes it perfect for me. We fight, we make mistakes, but we get through it and come out stronger."
"Oh..." He nods, now getting it, and fiddles absently with a tear in the chair's armrest. "Do you think Anthony would leave Gabriella?"

"No." I arch a brow, wondering what this is about. "What's this really about, *piccolo*?"

He shrugs and averts his eyes. "Nothin'..."

"Bullshit." I sit forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "Listen to me. If this is about you and me—Christ." I shake my head. "If you walked a mile in my shoes, you'd understand. Just now, when I saw you with the coke? It nearly fucking broke me. You have no idea how much I love you and your siblings—" I stop abruptly, catching sight of Lia's picture on the table. "Or maybe you do." When Dominic faces me, I nod at the photo. "Imagine—God forbid—if something happened to her."

My son's face says it all. Only a parent would understand. The raw anger, the despair, and the immense heartbreak.

"Yeah, you get it," I murmur. "It's no different from what I feel for you and your brother and sisters."

He lights a smoke and grows silent for a while, just quietly tapping his fingers to his thigh.

"You asked if I would ever leave your mother..." I sigh and give Dominic's knee a squeeze, getting his attention. "I said no, and same goes for all'a youse. I fucked up by saying you were no longer my son. It was in the heat of the moment; I was so fucking mad—seeing red and shit. I didn't mean it, and whether you forgive me or not, I'm your pops. Not only because I'm allowed to make mistakes—I'm human, Dominic—but because that's the deal." I nod. "I fucking made you. That means you're stuck with me."
He snorts, but I'm comforted by the fact that some of his anger seems to have simmered down. "That's the deal?" he repeats, mumbling. "I don't remember signing anything."

My mouth quirks up. "Yeah, well. When you was a baby, your fingers were so chubby you couldn't really grasp the pen, so I signed it for you."

For the first time tonight, I see amusement in his eyes.

"They're not chubby now—as you can see." He gives me the middle one.

I nod, flipping him off, too. "Yeah, looks like mine."

The humor only lasts for a few second, though. Dominic releases a heavy breath and lolls his head against the headrest, facing away from me.

**Dominic's POV**

I've already told Dad I almost didn't believe Elisa when she called me some time before he showed up, and I'm still in disbelief, I think. Junior Maisano just don't do apologies—*that's* the deal.

But now...?

His words are getting to me. He sounds so fucking sincere. And upset, by the thought of us not fixing things.

I don't know. I'm just so goddamn tired.

He's...*mannaggia*, he's a fucking asshole, but he's right about one thing: I went against him fast. I didn't even blink—hesitate. When that shit with Frankie went down, I simply followed my own lead. And I left. I broke away from family too quickly.

Family is everything to my mother, and my pops would do anything for her. And I get it, all right? We matter to him, too. But these past two
weeks...I haven't been thinking clearly, doubting everyone. Then this shit with Dani—fuck. After my declaration, she'd gotten all quiet before she whispered an apology.

I had fled.

I'm good at running, I guess. But the bitch fucking stomped all over my heart. I figured sticking around would only emasculate me more. Plus, I was already pushing it by being at my parents' house; it wouldn't have been very hard for Felix to track me down.

"Say something, *piccolo.*" Dad sighs. "Can you let me fix this?"

I empty my beer before shaking my head, thinking all this is nothing. I mean this thing with Dad and me. "Don't worry about it," I mutter. We'll work it out. Whatever. "*Siamo a posto.*" I say we're cool.

He takes the bottle from me and sets it down on the table. "As relieved I am to hear that, you're holding something back. You can talk to me, you know?"

I laugh, thinking about Daniela. "Eh. Just...fuckin' broads, man. I bet God made them to fuck with our heads."

*And hearts.*

Christ, I sound like a pussy. All that's missing is someone playing the violin.

A crease appears in Dad's forehead; he's confused. There might be some concern, too. "Did, ah, something happen between you and Daniela?" He scratches his eyebrow.

"Nope. That's the thing. Nothing's happened." I grin bitterly. "I told her I love her and—nothing."
"Oh, Christ." Dad puffs out his cheeks before letting out a heavy sigh. "Been there, done that." I frown at him, to which he chuckles a little. For a second, he purses his lips, as if he's deliberating. Then he speaks. "Would you believe me if I said it took Mom about five years before she told me she loved me?"

That makes no sense. Because I know the truth now—how they met, that Mom was his goomah, and that they had kids pretty quick. Anthony was born a year after they met or something.

"After my first wife overdosed and died—this was back in, um..." He squints and rubs the back of his neck. "Uhhh..."

I roll my eyes, betting he's lost himself in a sea of lies. He don't know what the fuck he can say, which is fucking hilarious. Had I been in that mood, I woulda laughed my ass off.

"Yeah, Dad—" I sit up straighter "—when was it?"

He opens his mouth, then snaps it shut again. When he speaks again, he sounds irritated. "You know, the fucking year isn't important." He waves a hand, and I kill my smirk. "What's important is that when I met your mother, I didn't want to fall in love at first. My first wife had just died—" Total lie. He married that Jane woman around the same time he met Mom. "—and I was just looking for some, uh, company."

He gives me a pointed look, 'cause God forbid he says the word "fuck"—that he was only looking for someone to fuck. And as much as I cherish my mother and think the world of her, I'm not blind, nor am I my brother. Anthony would punch me if I used crude words or bluntly stated the facts: Ma was Dad's piece of ass on the side. But facts are facts—get over it. My mom had a life before, so what? Yet, Anthony likes to believe that Bella Maisano is only a mother and a pretty wife. The countless times we've overheard Dad plowing her simply don't exist for my brother.
"Anyway..." Dad clears his throat, clearly struggling with the bullshit he's cooked up over the years. "Jane had been—well, a fucking cunt. And a cold fish." He glances at me quickly. "Arranged marriage, you know?" Oh, I know, Dad. I know everything. "Certain things just didn't, ah—they weren't there. If you know what I mean."

I'm enjoying this, I gotta say. "You gotta be more specific."

"Fuck you, kid." He scowls.

I grin. "No, I think you're trying to say you wasn't fucking her."

"You wanna hear the story or not?!" he shouts.

Snickering, I wave him along and say, "I'm sorry, Pops. Proceed."

"And Anthony wonders why it seems I love my grandkids more sometimes..." He's muttering to himself, always good at that. "Nah, you don't get the story now. You fucking ruined it."

That's okay. I know the truth. But what I don't know is why it would take Mom five years to fall for Dad.

"Why did it take her so long?" I ask. "Mom, I mean."

Dad shrugs, still a bit ticked off. "She was protecting herself. Thought I wasn't faithful."

"But you were?" I cock a brow.

"I'd never betray that woman, Dominic," he says softly, yet seriously. "Back then, I made a big mistake. I never promised fidelity out loud because it was obvious to me. She's the one and only." He shrugs again. "But she didn't know that. Just because I admitted I loved her..." He sighs and leans forward. "Dominic, just because you tell Daniela you love her doesn't mean her fears vanish."
What the fuck? "You think Dani's scared?" I ask incredulously.

Christ, he clearly doesn't know Daniela Cicero. That broad is fucking fearless.

"I honestly don't know," he replies. "But that could be it. Have youse talked about it? Said she's the only one—shit like that? Women gotta have promises. Some women—like Gianna, Gina, and Maria—they're raised to be good little wives, never ask questions... Hell, even Gabriella's like that. She's a sweetheart, and God knows I adore the girl. But we both know she'd forgive Anthony if he strayed. That's how Enzo and Carm raised her—to be a mafia princess. My sisters are the same, though your mother did a good job with Brianna; she would kill Riley in his sleep if he cheated." He laughs to himself. "But Isabella and Dani are the kind of woman who will drive you to the brink of insanity. They have strong minds, aren't afraid to speak up, and they refuse to share. To me, I like that. I want my wife to be possessive of me—to give a shit about what I do."

_Huh._

I slump back in my seat, comparing the different women in my family. Dad's probably right about Gabriella; she _would_ forgive my brother if he did her dirty. Which makes me thankful Anthony loves her too much to fuck that up. 'Cause...I don't know, but I never understood the mistress shit. Seems like too much hassle to me—not worth it. Just for some extra pussy?

Some do it just because they can. Some do it for the thrill.

Eventually, the truth comes out, and where does that leave you...? Gianna, Felix's wife...you won't find a woman who's more bitter and resentful. Imagine coming home to that. Yet, it was Felix who turned her into that cold woman. And Maria—well, her marriage with Zio Alec is all but dead.
They're married, going through the motions, but I'd rather cut off my dick than live with someone who bores me to death, who won't be there for me, or doesn't even like me.

Daniela keeps me on my toes. I love being around her; she's got a dirty sense of humor, and she's not a wallflower. She wouldn't hesitate to say what's on her mind. *Or crush my nuts.*

I'd never call Gabby a doormat, but she does surrender too fast, in my opinion. But Anthony wanted a sweetheart, and he got one. She'll always cherish him, and he better fucking take care of her, but I'm not sure that life is for me.

In fact, I know it's not.

I want the woman who ran away from me, knowing I would chase her and fuck her like a savage.

But she doesn't want me. Or...could she just be afraid?

Re-fucking-gardless, I ain't taking the initiative again. If she comes to me, I'll be honest; I'll tell her one pussy's enough for me, but she's gotta have some fucking faith in me. Even if she knows my reputation, which I know she does—my sisters sold me out on that one—she can't possibly think I told every whore I fucked that I loved them. Or that I would entrust my daughter to them.

"You okay, Dominic?" Dad asks, bringing me back to the present.

I haul in a breath and nod with a dip of my chin. "Guess so. I don't know."

Problems with women aside...maybe it all don't matter. 'Cause if Felix finds me, I'm dead. And while I'm good at running, I'd never run away from my life.
Joey told me he's got a plan—told me to stick around out here and lay low for a couple weeks—but that's about it. I have no clue how he's gonna work this out. He can be vicious as hell, and he's a good wiseguy, but it's not like he's gonna kill his own father.

Technically, I can't do it, 'cause I'd be up for grabs for any made guy. Everyone in the organization would have the right to kill me if I clipped Felix. That's how much those stripes, earning that button, protects you. So, if you're not made...? Forget about it.

I'm not sure where I stand with Dad right now, so I can't say I have the desire to spill my guts and ask for help.

Dad's gotta have questions, though. Does he know why I'm in hiding?

Before I can ask, he asks a question of his own. "What about us?" He clears his throat, looking a bit uncomfortable. "Are we okay?"

Truth be told, I had no idea this was so important to him. Recent events have obviously turned me into a cynical motherfucker.

"I'll make things right." He reaches for my hand, giving it a squeeze. "I'm gonna settle the score once and for all."

My brow furrows. "What do you mean?"

"It's probably best you don't know the details." He smiles ruefully. "And this mess with Francis... Dominic, I won't apologize for my upbringing, for my beliefs, but when all this is over, you'll know whose side I'm on. All right?"

I still don't know what the fuck he's talking about, but it doesn't look like he's in a sharing mood when it comes to...this, whatever the hell it is. "All right," I answer warily. "So...what now?"
"Now—" He slaps his thighs before standing up. "Now you forgive your old man for bringing Daniela here. Lia and Dani's brother, too." I open my mouth, shocked. "Before you get pissed, I didn't fucking know you had beef with Daniela."

"They're here?" I ask in disbelief.

He nods and jerks a thumb over his shoulder. "Anthony got them a room, 'cause I wanted to talk to you before, and I didn't know how long it was gonna be."

Cazzo. I groan and scrub a hand down my face, getting all jittery and excited and mad all at once. The thought of seeing my baby girl spreads warmth through me; I've really hated only seeing her here and there at secret locations or...briefly. But seeing Dani...? I don't know, man. I hate the power she has over me, and I'm still hurt from her rejection.

"You want me to go get them?" he asks, smoothing down his tie.

Yes. No. Maybe. I don't know!

"Sure," I mumble eventually and stand up. "You and Anthony gonna head home?"

He nods. "We have wives to suck up to." He smirks wryly. "We're heading over to Giorgio's shop before." That'd be Dad's jeweler, and he comes running at all hours when Dad calls. "I'll make arrangements so you can be there for Julia's play or musical or whatever it is."

I hesitate, knowing my sister wants me to be there, but... "Is that so wise?"

"Don't doubt my abilities, baby." He closes the distance between us and palms one of my cheeks. "We'll all be there—I promised your mother and Elisa." He pauses, something darkening his eyes. And his hand slides to
the back of my neck instead. "When you're ready, I expect an apology from you, too."

"Excuse me?" I splutter.

He's not fucking serious, is he? Aside from disrespecting him, I haven't done shit.

"You heard me." It's that soft voice he reserves for when he's barely able to control his anger. You can only see it in his eyes. "You may have done what you felt was right when you sided with Francis, but you have no fucking clue what danger you put yourself in—or your sister, or the rest of your family."

He's talking about Felix.

*So, Dad does know what's going on, then.*

"Not only did you go against our boss—" his grip on my neck tightens "—but you did it publicly."

I swallow hard, struggling not to flinch or break his gaze. "I didn't mean to put anyone in danger."

"That doesn't matter," he grits out. "You gotta think before you act, goddammit." He jabs a finger at my temple. "When I heard what's been going on while I was in New York..." More anger builds up, brewing like a storm in his eyes. It freaks me the fuck out. And even more so when they get glassy with emotion. "You scared the shit outta me, Dominic," he whispers through clenched teeth. "I don't know what I woulda done if something'd happened to—" He stops abruptly and steps back, clearing his throat into his fist.

My mind is spinning too fast, seeing things from his perspective. It's business; my Dad...he sees business. He's calculating. The first things that
come to him is how shit will affect business. And trust, business is all about family.

Dad often tells me to keep business and personal life separate, but...in many ways, they're the same thing. Everything is personal on some level when you're all related somehow. If not by blood, then by marriage.

"We make mistakes," he says, calmer now. "I don't always think before I act, either." True, but as far as I know, his mistakes haven't endangered anyone's life. Now I feel like shit. "That's why I'll forgive you the second you're ready to apologize. You understand?" He grasps my chin. "Chin up, baby."

I bite my lip, keeping it from quivering. Feeling like a pussy for the umpteenth time. Feeling weak. Like a motherfucking failure. And I nod jerkily, hoping he leaves soon. 'Cause I don't wanna cry in front of my pops.

"C'mere." He wraps his arms around me, hugging me tight. It feels like something snaps inside me, or rather...it breaks. My defenses—my guard or whatever. "Andrà tutto bene, figlio mio." He tells me everything will be okay.

I nod jerkily and squeeze my eyes shut. "I'm sorry," I choke out. For a few moments, I let go. I'm too fucking tired to keep up the charade, tryin'a be more adult than I am.

"I know." Ending the hug, he steps back to grasp my shoulders. "You want me to stick around for a while?"

I scoff and angrily wipe at my cheeks. "Maybe I'm acting like a broad, but I don't need a babysitter." He knows I'm pissed at myself, not him.

"It's just me here, Dominic." Dad throws an arm over my shoulders and gives my cheek a loud smooch. "I know what pressure you're under. You'd
be surprised if you knew how many times Mom has calmed me down over the years."

I bet.

Taking a deep breath, I nod to myself, feeling better now. "Thanks, Dad."

He smiles and nods, too, like ending a chapter. "You ready to see Lia?"

"Yeah..." I blow out a breath and look around me. "Send 'em in, I guess."
Eyeing the coke, I ask Dad to take it with him, to which his smile widens and he smacks my cheek.

"Good boy."

I snort, feeling two feet tall.
Chapter 19

Dominic's POV

"Christ, I've missed you, cucciolina." I hug Lia to me and close the door after Dani and her brother have entered.

"Dada..." Lia mumbles, half asleep.

"Yeah, Daddy's here." I kiss her on the forehead, and she settles with her head in the crook of my neck, her stuffed animal, the puppy, in a death grip against my chest. "You can put your bag in there," I tell Dani, gesturing at the bedroom.

She nods, keeping her eyes averted, and changes her direction. Nino follows, sticking to her like a Band-Aid.

I sigh and head to the little living room. "At least you love me." I sit down in the old recliner, leaving the small couch for the Ciceros, when they join us. If they do. "Long day, huh?" With my index finger, I gently trace Lia's chubby cheek and grin when she makes a noise in her sleep, as if I'm annoying her.

It hits me that I have no food here. Just a six-pack of beer—although, there are only four left—a couple sodas, smokes, jerky, and a bag of Milano cookies.

That won't last long. There is a small supermarket in town, though. I guess we'll go there tomorrow. Or today, as it is. Gotta be close to dawn already.

"Dominic...?" Dani appears in the doorway to the living room with her brother, both dressed in sweats and hoodies. "Do you mind if we sit down with you?"
"Stop acting so timid," I groan. "Yeah, sit down—do whatever you want."

Nino stiffens and tugs on Daniela's arm, to which she dips down to hear whatever he whispers. Then she straightens with a look of determination and shakes her head.

"No," she answers him softly, yet seriously. "Would you like me to ask Dominic?" Nino shrugs vaguely and shakes his head no at the same time, but Dani faces me anyway and asks, "Have I aggravated you, and should I apologize?"

My brows knit together, my gaze flicking between the two siblings.

Did Nino tell his sister to apologize for "aggravating" me?

Dani's told me Nino is wary around men, hinting that there's some violence in his background. Which would imply he's far from comfortable around me, and it's just the last thing I need. I don't want a kid to fear me.

"No," I say eventually, still frowning. "Yo, kid." Nino's head snaps up, his eyes wide. Yeah, there's actually real fear there. Christ. "Your sister's always busting my balls, but I kinda like her that way. A'ight? I don't want her to change that."

I sure as shit ain't saying that for Daniela's sake, even though it's true. But if Nino's afraid I'mma beat on Dani or him every time we butt heads, he's gonna live in a constant state of fear.

Considering Dani and her siblings have been in the country for about four years and Nino's only seven, I gotta wonder exactly what he's been subjected to, and if it only was in Italy. I mean, how much can a three-year-old remember? Right? Then again, maybe something happened here in the States, too.
Refocusing on my sleeping baby girl, I let Daniela and Nino have some privacy and settle on the small couch. They whisper quietly, Dani no doubt tryin'a reassure Nino, and I figure it's worked when his shoulders stop touching his ears.

Since Lia's out for the count and I don't got any plans to move any time soon, I grab a blanket and pull it over us, sinking lower in my seat to get comfortable. I'm tired as hell, but the bed doesn't appeal to me. I figure it's best Daniela and Nino take that.

I yawn and glance over at the Ciceros. "There's some snacks in the bag by the door if you're hungry. We'll buy real food tomorrow."

"Thank you." Dani looks down at her brother, who's looking beyond exhausted, too. "Are you hungry, ciccio?"

He shakes his head minutely as his lids begin to droop.

No fucking wonder; they can't have gotten much sleep tonight.

"Youse can take the bed," I say quietly.

Daniela seems to consider my offer as she glances between Nino and Lia. Then she stands up and leads her brother to the bedroom. A few words are exchanged, Nino mostly replying with a sleepy "yes" and "okay." The light is switched off in there, but before I can assume they're both staying in there, Dani returns for Lia.

"She can stay here with me," I argue, whispering.

"Please?" She shifts on her feet. "I would like to speak to you."

Can't really say I'm in a chatty mood, but I extend my arms and hand over Lia to her.
This time Dani stays in the bedroom a little longer, no doubt arranging the pillows around Lia. 'Cause shit...my girl's a wild sleeper, I've learned. Once, when she was taking a nap on the hotel bed at Bellagio, I forgot to place pillows around her and she just rolled over and hit the floor.

That's a mistake I'll never make again.

"They are both asleep," Dani whispers when she gets back.

I nod with a dip of my chin and light up a smoke, expecting her to take the couch again. But she doesn't. The broad has the balls to sit down on my lap, and I lean back to get a good look and raise a brow.

She stares back without wavering, but after my talk with Dad earlier, I pick up a few things that are new. Or maybe I just didn't notice them before. Like, how she twists her fingers together, as if she's nervous. Perhaps she's not as fearless as I originally thought.

"There's plenty of space over there." I jerk my chin at the couch.

She nods and looks down. "But that is not where I want to be."

I can't help but smirk. This bitch. "Yeah, well..." I take a drag and exhale through my nose. "We don't always get what we want, do we?"

She's fucking killing me.

"My papà is not a nice man," she blurts out, getting flustered. Both my eyebrows shoot up this time. "I will not apologize for trying to protect myself, but if you know more about—about me, then maybe you will understand." She looks up hesitantly. "Will you let me explain?"

I chew on my lip, my gaze hard.

Daniela's never offered anything about her past before.
"Ti ascolto," I mutter flatly, telling her I'm listening.

She releases a shaky breath and averts her eyes again. "Okay. As I said...my father is not a nice man. He was born into the mafia in Sicily, his own father being a capo." I've already guessed Daniela isn't a stranger to this life. "Giovanni, my papà, hid us—sometimes on the mainland, sometimes in Palermo, because he was always wanted for something. If not by the police, then by another Family. We were not his, ah, how you say—legitimate?" I nod cautiously. "Right. We were not his legitimate children; my mamma was his mistress." She pauses and brings my cigarette to her mouth, taking a quick drag. Which is rare; she only smokes when she's really upset. "In 1992, I was only eleven, and up until then, I had a normal childhood—somewhat. Giovanni visited when he could, and he...he was polite. He used to bring us gifts, but he never came too close. He is not an affectionate man." She takes another pull from the smoke and exhales shakily. "When I was eleven, he came to say goodbye. He didn't know when he—or if he—would see us again. At the time, Mamma was pregnant with Nino."

After taking a final drag, I stub out the smoke and place my hands on Dani's hips. It's obvious she's struggling with her words, and if I weren't so fucking curious, I'd tell her to take a break.

"A few days after he had left us, a man was murdered in Sicily. Car bomb." Her jaw clenches, and I guess it was her pops that had been killed. "A murder is nothing," she chuckles darkly. "Michael—the eldest of my younger siblings—we heard mamma talk about Giovanni like that often. 'Gio is a pig, a swine, ruthless killer.' There was no love between my parents, and we grew up hearing we had to get as far away as possible from the mafia. But this assassination, in May that year, was different." She glances up at me. "You have heard of Giovanni Falcone, yes?"
I frown, nodding slowly. Falcone was an Italian hero, a judge who had the law on his side. He turned the most fearless mobsters into rats and managed to throw hundreds of wiseguys into prison. My memory sucks, but it's part of our history, and my parents would probably have my head if I forgot the stories about the Maxi Trial.

Daniela clears her throat. "Before that, during, ah...il maxiprocesso—the Maxi Trial?" I nod. "Si, during that time there was a shift in Sicily. It was a mafia war, and so many people were caught in the crossfire." I know this much, but I don't know what it has to do with the story. 'Cause this took place before '92. The Maxi Trial was what led to Falcone's death. A day my father celebrated. "My papà became very powerful in this war, and his boss trusted him," she goes on. "And with the war in mind, my mother knew Gio had something to do with that murder in '92. She called it her gut instinct, and she wanted us to flee."

All right, so I guess her dad killed instead of getting killed.

"Gio's boss had issued the murder," she says. "And Gio's boss was—well, is...Totò Riina."

My eyes bug out at that. "Your pops worked for the Corleonese Family?"

I did a paper on that in school, for fuck's sake. The Corleonesi basically ruled Sicily, and they were cold, fucking ice cold. There's no comparison—my own father would be considered a humanitarian worker next to Riina.

"Si." She nods jerkily. "The man my father killed was Falcone."

"Madonn'," I mutter, stunned. "That means..." Shit, that can't be true. Can it? I search Daniela's face, painted in shame, and look for any similarities, but they're not there. For which I'm glad, obviously. The mug shots of Daniela's father aren't what anyone would consider attractive. "Your father is Giovanni Brusca?"
"Yes," she whispers, staring at my lap.

No wonder she's ashamed of her past. Wiseguys cheered the day Falcone was finally killed, and my dad and Zio Alec toasted to Brusca. But the shit that followed...? Holy fucking shit. It was enough to make Dad remorseful for ever declaring Brusca a hero.

There was a second man who was with Brusca the day Falcone died—Santo something. A man who became a rat and sang like a fucking canary in custody. In return—in an attempt to force Santo to retract his testimony—Brusca kidnapped the man's eleven-year-old son, tortured him for over two years, before he strangled the kid and dissolved the body in acid.

Dani lights up her own smoke this time and takes a deep pull, her hand shaking. "When Riina was arrested the following year, my father became the unofficial boss."

I stare at her, clueless as to what to say. This broad isn't merely familiar with the mafia lifestyle; she was born smack dab in the middle of it. I mean, Sicily in the '80s and '90s was a dangerous place.

We visited Mom's distant family there during that time, and the bullet holes in countless Palermo buildings have always attracted tourists, but "war" isn't an exaggeration.

Speaking of wars... "Brusca started a new war when Riina got taken into custody," I recall quietly. The Corleonese terrorized the entire country. Several tourist spots on the mainland were bombed. "Did your mother manage to get away with youse?"

"No." Daniela flicks away some ash, a bitter look on her face. "We'd been hiding in Mamma's little sister's old house—Gina's mother." Ah. I've been wondering where my cousin's wife fit into all this. "By then, Gina's family
was already in America, so the house was empty. But Gio found us." The next words come out in a small voice devoid of emotion. Robotically. "My mother tried to escape with us, so Gio killed her. A shot between her eyes. We all saw it. Then he brought me and my siblings to his hideout in Agrigento."

I say nothing, knowing there's nothing I can say to make shit better. Christ, the brutality she's been through.

"There were always a couple men watching us, making sure we couldn't run away." She stubs out the cigarette, still avoiding eye contact. "Nobody really knew we were his children, so we were allowed to go to school, but we were never left alone. Michael and I took care of our youngest siblings, and it was like that until '95 when Gio ordered his brother—Vincenzo—to take us to America to hide us there. Apparently, it had gotten too dangerous for us in Sicily." A hollow chuckle slips through her lips. "At first, I thought it was an act of mercy. But then I found out that if Vincenzo ever felt inclined, he could use me and my sisters for his pleasure."

Gnashing my teeth together, I remain quiet, despite the urge to shoot someone, preferably this Vincenzo motherfucker. The rage sears through me, nearly stealing my ability to breathe.

"He only demanded a handjob a few times, and it was over in minutes," she rushes out, as if that makes it better. "I am not traumatized, Dominic. I have had boyfriends since—"

"He still violated you," I choke out.

And the last thing I wanna hear about is Daniela with other dudes.

She ignores that. "We came to Philadelphia. Gio and Vincenzo had family there, and a woman homeschooled us for a while. She was nice, but the
rest of that family..." She shudders. "Nino has never known security—only briefly. He only knows how to hide. He stuttered a lot before, and Vincenzo's cousins—I think they were cousins—they made fun of him, slapped him around, and scared him."

That explains it. That poor kid.

"Then Vincenzo left—a business trip, he said—and we learned later, from the news, that the police had arrested Gio in Sicily. Vincenzo had been there, as had his wife, his two kids, Gio's girlfriend, and my father's only legitimate child."

I remember that. It was before the summer of '96, I think.

"Is Vincenzo still out there somewhere?" I ask, clenching my jaw.

I know both Riina and Brusca are serving lifetime in prison.

Brusca became a pentito—a nice fucking word for rat—which translates to "he who has repented," but everyone knows repentance has little to do with a mobster breaking the code of silence.

"No." A small, sinister smile tugs at her lips, and she finally faces me.
"Michael and I managed to escape with our siblings. We brought them to Mamma's big sister in New York. Gina had already met Nico, and her parents had moved back to Italia. But Zia Rosa took us in. She has connections, and she offered to call in favors for us, but Michael and I wanted to deal with Vincenzo ourselves."

I suck in a breath. "Tell me you fucking didn't, Daniela." At that point, she couldn't have been more than fourteen or something.

"Not right away," she admits. "Zia Rosa called her brother-in-law in Sicily to keep, come si dice...tabs? on Vincenzo—and Gio, but he was in jail. Not much to oversee there."
I caress her cheek, awed by her strength but sad that she's lived through all that. "Eri solo una bambina." I tell her she was just a baby.

"I grew up the day Mamma died," she whispers. "So did Michael. And we waited two years before we heard that Vincenzo was back in America, hiding from the law." She speaks faster, as if she's anxious to get it all out and move on. "We left in the middle of the night, took the bus to Philadelphia—Zia knew nothing." Leaning forward, she drops her forehead to my shoulder. "It was quick. We waited until it was dark the next day. Vincenzo was sleeping on the first floor. We knocked on the window so he woke up and saw us outside. Michael shot him in the head, then we ran as fast as we could."

Squeezing my eyes shut, I think of a million things that could've gone wrong. It's a goddamn miracle they got away in the first place, but to actually clip that motherfucker? God.

I would've liked to do the job for them. Slowly.

"When exactly did this happen?" I swallow past the rawness in my throat. "You was what, sixteen?"

"It was, ah...a couple of months before I turned seventeen."

"Christ, tesorina," I whisper, hugging her to me.

All I wanna do is protect her, and I realize that once again I'm at her mercy. I'd do anything she asked, and I'd do it with a fucking smile. Hell, I'd probably even thank her. Does she know what kind of power she has over me?

"I want to trust you, Dominic." She locks her arms around my shoulders and holds me tight. "If I am not too late, is there any chance you want more with me?"
I blow out a breath and bury my face against her neck, weeks of tension draining outta me. How long have I wanted those words? And I get it now, how Anthony and Dad need their women. It's insane, fucking mad, and I used to laugh about it, thinking they were crazy.

"What made you change your mind?" I murmur, inhaling the scent of hotel shampoo and Daniela.

Part of me doesn't believe it, though—that she's for real. Not yet.

"A wise woman told me the Maisano men were loyal to their wives."

I snort softly and lift my head. "My mom, huh?"

*Figures.*

She faces me timidly, hope and apologies in her eyes. "I am sorry my past experience with men screwed with my head." She gently presses her forehead to mine. "It is ironic: in the beginning, adultery was considered a bigger crime than murder in the Cosa Nostra. It was one of the Ten Commandments followed by mafiosi, but today..." I quirk a brow, wondering if that's true. Dani answers my unasked question with a small nod. "It is true. Made men have been, ah...'expelled,' so to speak, from borgatas for treating their wives badly. My nonno was a proud man, both respected and feared, but he worshipped my nonna and he would never look to another."

Sounds a whole lot like my own nonno. After nearly fifty years with Nonna, he's still whipped.

Reaching up, I brush my thumb over her soft cheek. "I wouldn't betray you, Daniela." Guess Pops was right there, too—women need that promise. But I'm happy to give it, and honor it, when it comes to this broad. "I'm sorry, too. If I'd known what you wanted to hear, I woulda said it a long time ago."
She sighs and hugs me again. "I think that is what they call miscommunication, no?"

Yes and no. "My mood swings probably gave you whiplash," I chuckle quietly. But it's a sobering thought; I've treated her like shit, and I regret it more than I can say. "I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing, mimmino," she whispers against my neck. "We have both been hurt."

I nod minutely and kiss her shoulder. "Okay."

It grows quiet for a while, and I both like it and find it tense. There are things left unsaid; I want this shit written in stone so I can call her mine already. I need it in order to relax. When things are all up in the air, I only get cunty.

But I force myself to let go for a few minutes. Dani's in my arms, where she fucking belongs, and I'll settle for that right now. It's more than what I expected after I told her I love her and she...didn't.

Wanting to feel more of her, I give the hem of her hoodie a tug, and she scoots away enough so I can pull it over her head. A snug tank top is left, clinging to her sexy curves, and before I can draw her close again, she tugs at my own hoodie. I yank it off, leaving me in a black beater.

"C'mea." I hold her to me, spending some quality time breathing her in, tracing her body with my hands, and absently kissing her shoulder and neck.

After a few beats, I focus on her little touches instead. Her fingers draw slow, mindless patterns over my chest—or maybe they're not so mindless at all? I furrow my brow, concentrating. Then my mouth twists into a smile when I feel the shape of a heart. But the smile fades when it gets more significant. A short line, topped by a "v." A circle. A curve.
I hold still—fuck, I'm even holding my breath—as she starts over.

A vertical line. A heart. Short line, a "v" above, creating a "Y". A circle. The curve shaping an "U."

Before I can demand to have that spelled out—with her fucking voice—she shifts away a few inches to look me in the eye. Nervously. Dani's definitely nervous.

"I am sorry I couldn't admit to it sooner." She swallows and tries to avert her gaze, but I grab her chin. There's no way she's looking away for this. "It is true, though. I do love you, Dominic—"

"Thank fuck." My breath leaves me in a whoosh, and I cup her neck to crash our mouths together. Thank fuck, thank fuck, thank fuck. She's stuck now. There's no taking that shit back. "Say it again." I taste one of her Lip Smackers in the kiss—pineapple, I think. She giggles, outta breath. "That I love you?"

"That's the one." The relief is bigger than my fucking dick, which is...well, I'm not gonna brag. "Say it."

She hums and drags her teeth along my bottom lip. "I love you."

_Cazzo._

I nod. "You're gonna tell me that every day for the rest of our lives. _Capisce_?"

"Are you already bossing me around?" She raises a brow and smiles wickedly. Pressing her tits to my chest and rolling her hips over my stiffening cock, she diverts my attention for a beat, but I wanna get this outta the way before we knock boots. "Maybe I will not take every order perfectly."
"I fully expect you to break my balls." I smirk and still her hips, 'cause I'm serious. "I wouldn't have it any other way." I mean that shit. Call me a twisted bastard, but there's just something about Dani when she gets going. When her claws come out, my cock wants to play. "But I meant what I said. I wanna hear those words often."

Her gaze softens and she leans forward to kiss my chin. "Non lascerò mai che lo dimentichi." She tells me she'll never let me forget.

"Bene. Right back at'chu." I release a breath and nod, another wave of relief washing over me. "And you'll, uh, help me stay sober?"

Or at least the drugs. Alcohol has never been an issue. But I gotta know Daniela won't accept a man who throws his family away for coke.

No doubt understanding the seriousness of the moment, she stops seducing me and places a hand along my jaw. "Dominic, I am all in, as you say. I will take this risk, because I know you are worth it. You are an incredible man, and I will do my best to deserve you."

"You're serious about this?" I gotta make sure.

If Daniela walks away—well, I'd hunt her down. Maybe that makes me more like my father; he'd never let go of Mom, but so be it. I wouldn't be able to deal with Dani denying me.

"All in," she repeats.

"Okay." I swallow, my stomach a knotted mess. Perhaps because, for the first time in my life, I have so much to lose. "This makes us a family. You know that, right?"

"Oh, Dominic..." She smiles tenderly. "I do not want to insult you, but Lia took my heart before you did. I could never leave either of you."
Finally—at fucking last—I feel calmer. I needed those words as much as I needed to hear she loves me.

"I love you." Cupping her cheek, I capture her mouth with mine and kiss her deeply but slowly. Setting the pace I want. My kinky bitch can make an appearance tomorrow, but I want it unhurried now.

Thankfully, Dani seems to want that, too.

I don't know what my pops has planned, but it looks like we have some time out here in the middle of nowhere. Time to talk—I don't know, play house? And I think we need it.

"I missed you," she breathes out as I pull off her tank top.

"You have no idea, baby." I shake my head, not wanting to think about these past couple'a weeks. Dipping down, I kiss her slender neck and palm her tits, groaning at the way she arches into me.

"Do—" She gasps when I pinch her nipples. "Do you have protection?"

That causes me to stop, not to mention frown. "What? No. Why would I?"

A faint blush spreads over her cheeks. "I haven't been able to refill my prescription—we have been hiding. I took my last pill the day before yesterday."

"Oh." I feel a crease forming on my forehead. "Well..." Refusing to let disappointment seep in, I kiss her again.

I pretend the last ten seconds never happened.

"Dominic." She gives me one of her sexy-as-fuck moans, all breathy and full of need. "What about—"
"Shhh." I slip a hand between us and find her smooth pussy slick and hot under her sweats and panties. "Lemme have you, tesorina."

She melts into me and lets me finger-fuck her to orgasm.

Fuckin' vision.

As I suck her juices off my fingers, I watch as the seductiveness reappears in her eyes. She slithers down my body, humming between open-mouthed kisses, and ends up on her knees on the floor.

I lift my hips when she gives my pants a tug, and she pulls them down with my boxer briefs.

She kisses the insides of my thighs, which is just fucking maddening. I groan when she lets those fingernails come into play, dragging them along my thighs. It makes my cock rock-hard, and I grip the base, hoping she'll take the hint.

"What do you want?" She cups my balls, massaging. I lick my lips and buck my hips. "Hmm? Tell me, mimmino."

I grunt. "I want you to suck your man's cock. That's fucking what."

"Mmm, my man does have a perfect cock to suck." She's killing me. And with her accent...? Goddamn indecent. Pushing away my hand, she grasps the length and licks the underside. "This is my cock now, Dominic."

I nod jerkily, sucking in a breath. "Knock yourself out."

"I am the only one who gets to touch it, see it, fuck it." Her luscious lips close around the tip, her tongue soaking me in wetness. God-fucking-dammit, she owns me. "No one else."

"No one else," I gasp. Her possessiveness is a massive turn-on. "Suck it, baby."
She answers by swallowing me whole.

I groan and curse, staring at her hungrily for several minutes. Her cheeks hollow out, and every now and then she leaves a thin trail of saliva between her mouth and the head of my dick. Whenever that happens, the beast in me roars to life.

"Stop," I growl, too close. "I wanna come inside you." I yank her up to straddle me. "Gimme that sweet pussy." My fucking pussy. "Madonn', you're finally mine, Daniela." Burying my face in the crook of her neck, I guide my dick inside her, inch by inch.

"All yours." She weaves her fingers into the hair at the back of my head, pulling me forward. Oh yeah, she smashes her tits to my face. "Oh...oh, so good." She moans and rides me slowly as I suck on her nipples.

_Fucking tit heaven._

I grin when she loses her English, then spit out a curse when her pussy tightens around my cock. With each push, her clit rubs against my pubic bone. She's so fucking hot and wet, our connection making those noises that drive me insane. _So much for unhurried._ I can't take it slow with this woman; I want her too much.

Slamming her down on me, I make her whimper and bite down on my shoulder. With a tight grasp on her hips, I thrust upward and drill into her over and over. Tiny drops of sweat trickle down my chest.

"Close?" I murmur, outta breath.

She nods quickly and clings to me, her nails digging into my shoulders. "Please."

Knowing I won't last much longer, I bring a hand to circle her clit, rubbing and massaging. At the same time, I fuck her deeper.
The second she stiffens in my arms, I know she's coming. Right after, her pussy pulses around me, and I struggle to keep the same pace. My own orgasm builds up rapidly, but I don't let go until she's finished. Then I pump my dick into her in quick, shallow thrusts before I ram as deep as I can and come hard.

Afterward, it's quiet. And I can take it. The silence is, for once, welcome.

I breathe in and out as my heart rate slows.

"It will be light soon." Dani rests her head on my shoulder.

I feel her soft breaths against my neck.

"Yeah..." I bring her hand to my mouth and kiss her fingertips. "You think we'll fit on that couch over there?"

Lifting her head, she smiles lazily and nods. "If we get very close."

Sounds perfect to me. "It's where I want you."
Chapter 20

Junior's POV

I wake up the day after around three in the afternoon to the sound of nothing. The house is completely empty, which is the last thing I want now. I want my entire family gathered, if only to see they're all okay. Instead they're...I don't even know.

*I need them with me. All of them.*

Tightening the robe around my waist, I peer down at the note Isabella left me on the kitchen island.

*Junior,*

*Elisa called and wanted to meet up, so we'll be at the salon. I'll be home around five to start dinner. There are leftovers if you're hungry—top shelf in the fridge.*

*Love, Isabella*

*PS: Julia, if you're reading this, keep it down. Daddy's sleeping.*

I smile to myself and feel around in the pocket of my robe, finding the small box with the amethyst earrings I bought from Giorgio last night. Since I never know when my wife is taking my suits to be dry cleaned, I don't keep things there.

"Guess it's just us for now." I pat Duke's head, then walk over to the fridge to get some breakfast. But I'm unable to shake the uneasiness. My chest feels like a cage several sizes too small, my breathing heavier than normal.
While I wait for the plate of leftovers to heat up in the microwave, the phone rings and I nearly dive for the fucker. Anything to distract me from the empty house.

"Maisano," I answer the phone.

"I heard you were home again, my friend." Felix. That motherfucker. "Nico said you came by Twilight looking for me?"

I plaster a grin on my face, even though he can't see me. "Yeah, but I figured you were in Carson." I need him to believe I'm still his closest confidant. "We should get together for a drink."

"Definitely. I'll be back in town in a few days," he answers. "It's my girl's birthday on Thursday." The day before Julia's musical. That oughta make it easier for me to sneak Dominic in. Even if he has to stay backstage or whatever. No matta'—I promised my wife and Elisa everyone was gonna show. "Just found out Tina's pregnant again—a boy this time."

"Congratulations," I say, not giving a fuck about his second family. "I know you've wanted another boy."

"Speaking of boys..." He clears his throat. "I've been trying to reach Mario and Dominic—got a job for 'em. You happen to know where they are?"

I grit my teeth, a rush of nausea hitting me hard enough to make me sway for a beat. "Sure as shit haven't heard from Dominic. He's dead to me." My fingers and mouth feel numb, tingling. Probably 'cause I'm ready to murder Felix and spit on his grave. "Haven't heard from Mario, either—that motherfucker's in the wind, too."

"Too bad." He hums. "There's a feast down in Florida for them. My guy's connection—he could use a hand."

So, that's his plan, huh?
I wanna laugh and vomit at the same time. I mean, does he think I'm stupid? That I was born yesterday? His guy, Louie no doubt, has probably been ordered to return home alone, then perhaps spin a tale about a freak accident that killed Mario and my son.

"Mario's a good kid," I bullshit, rubbing my tightening chest. "He could use the scratch to buy my daughter an engagement ring."

How he'd do that from six feet under in the desert is another matter.

The microwave dings.

"That's what I was thinking," Felix agrees. "And Dominic...I don't know, Junior. He's still a stand-up guy. Despite what he's done—hanging around Francis. I love Dominic as if he were my own."

Another dizzy spell washes over me, and I nearly miss his words. Fuck. What's wrong with me?

"Then, you take him." I chuckle humorlessly and squeeze my eyes shut. "Shit. I think I'm coming down with something." Wiping my forehead, I blow out a breath and shake my head to clear it. I'm all sluggish and anxious. "I gotta go lie down."

"Do that, my friend. We'll get together as soon as I get back." Felix ends the call.

For several minutes, I just stand there and focus on my breathing. I try to calm down, but with each breath I only get closer and closer to hyperventilating. Pain prickles across my skin; I get dizzier. Swallowing dryly, I end up coughing as the world closes in on me.

Where the hell is Isabella? And Julia? Shouldn't she be home from school already? Is Dominic really safe in that cabin? Is he careful with Lia and Daniela? Will Felix contact Anthony about Dominic? Will Anthony slip up
and end up on Felix's shit list, too? Are Gabriella and the kids safe? Do they have a driver? Shit, Julia doesn't have one. She's driving herself these days. I should've assigned someone to look after her. Joseph better not let Elisa outside without protection—

It suddenly feels like my chest is about to cave in. "Fuck...I-I can't breathe." The pain spreads quickly, fucking radiating. Gripping the counter, I try to hold myself up, but it doesn't work. My knees buckle, and I crash to the floor, dragging a tray of wine glasses with me.

**Julia's POV**

"Asshole!" I shout around my burger and honk the horn. That idiot totally cut me off. God. And thanks to him, I got mayo on my fingers. Sidling up with the other car at the stop light, I roll down my window and shout some more. "Ma vaffanculo! You think you own the street?!"

The man turns out to be a little old lady, and I feel bad for two seconds before I shake my head and glare at the startled-looking woman. Shit, I respect the elders, but there should be an age limit in the other direction, too—when it comes to having a driver's license. When you start dyeing you hair blue, it's time to get off the roads.

She coulda scratched my car! Daddy gave it to me—a custom-painted baby blue Porsche 996—when I got my license; he'd be pissed if I scratched it. Again.

As soon as the light turns green, I step on the gas and leave Miss Daisy in the dust, continuing my way home from school. Mom's not home, but Dad is, so I gotta finish my burger before I reach our street.

They think being a vegetarian is just a phase. Ugh. Well, I'll show 'em! I can eat meat in secrecy forever if that's what it takes for them to believe I'm serious.
"Here we go, one more time..." I sing along with the radio and crank up the volume. "Everybody's feelin' fine." Maybe it doesn't sound very pretty when my mouth's full'a hamburger, but whatever. "Here we go now." Did my phone just ring? Nah. "Yes, yes, yes, here we go now. 'N Sync has got the flow."

Yup, my phone is definitely ringing. In the middle of this song—just great.

"Shit." I accidentally smear mayo over the wheel, gripping it with my burger as I use my free hand to grab my phone. Combined with the heavy traffic, it's a wonder I haven't crashed yet. But I manage, and I answer the call before placing the phone between my shoulder and cheek. "Go for Julia," I say, taking a bite of my burger.

"Have you seen Gabby today?" It's my oldest brother, and he sounds pissed.

"Umm..." I chew, chew, swallow, and make a turn toward our neighborhood. "Hold on." I lower the volume, wishing I had more hands, then stifle a laugh as I recall this morning. "Maybe?" Truth is, I didn't see Gabriella earlier, but I heard her.

She came over with TJ and Allegra and had breakfast with Mom. Let's just say my brother's wife was in a ranty mood, and I didn't want them to stop just 'cause I got there. So, I'd sat on the last step of the stairs while Gabriella cried, bitched, and cursed.

First I'd gotten sad, because she doesn't think Anthony desires her, which is just bull, but he does hafta stop with the strippers. Anyway, then I'd laughed at my brother when she admitted that he wasn't awesome in bed. "Boring and slow" were Gabby's words.

Imagine my mother's reaction!

Mom was all sputtering and stammering.
"Which one is it, piccolina?" Anthony growls. "Have you seen her or not?"

"Ay!" I suck my teeth and nearly choke on a pickle. I cough. "Don't take this out on me, Anthony." I huff. "I'll tell Daddy."

He scoffs. "Grow up—and answer my fucking question!"

"Not with that attitude!" I shout and hang up.

And then I drop my damn burger.

"I'm not in the mood for this shit!" I whine to myself.

Easing off the gas, I slow down on the nearly empty street and glance at the road quickly before I reach down to locate my food. Mannaggia. This is so not my day. Rehearsals sucked, I'm crazy nervous about the musical, and now this.

With a grunt, I finally reach the wrapping, only to drop it and— "FUCK!"
Now there's lettuce, dressing, burger, cheese, and bread all over the floor.

I stop the car completely and slam my hands down on the wheel, screaming in frustration.

_Breathe in, breathe out. Do not throw a tantrum, Julia. Your siblings are wrong; you do not have ADHD._

I'm such a disaster. Sniffling, I look up at the road, realizing I've stopped in the freaking middle. Just like that.

I want my mommy. Or Daddy.

_No, you don't! You're still pissed at him, remember?_

Oh, that's right. He hurt Mom—

A tap on the window causes me to jump in my seat.
Jesus!

"Just what I needed." I wipe my cheeks with the back of my hand and roll down the window. Goddamn cop. Seriously. "What can I do for you, Officer?" I ask dully and reach for a napkin, wiping my hands with it.

"Well, well." There's a smirk in the cop's voice, and before I can look up to see who it is, he says my name. "If it isn't little Julia Maisano." Officer Moretti. That cocky, arrogant dumbass!

"Dip me in shit," I mutter. "It's Officer Confetti with nothin' else to do."

"Clever." He's smirking that fucking smirk as he bends over to rest his forearms on my door. It's a feat, 'cause he's tall and my precious car is not. "What is it with you and names, huh? You never really remember them, do you?"

I bite the inside of my cheek, suppressing the urge to say, "I remember the important ones." But it would only come back and bite me in the ass if I said that. Because the first time Officer Matt Moretti pulled me over, I got my high-and-mighty bitchface on and asked, "Do you know my name? Do you know who the hell I am?" To which he'd frowned and replied with, "You've forgotten who you are? That's not good, kid."

"Did you pull me over to discuss my memory?" I cock a brow.

"It would be the lack thereof, but no." He mimics me by raising a brow, too. He's so fucking annoying. Too bad he's hella hot. All dark hair, deep blue eyes, a body that belongs to a guy in the army, and this rich voice that makes my insides quiver. Hate him. "Are you aware that you're blocking the road?"

God, this guy.
Thing is, he's stopped me three times since I got my license, and after the last time, I asked Anthony to run a check on him. Turns out, this ain't Moretti's job! He's in Vice, so shouldn't he be undercover somewhere?

He's kinda young to have gotten that far—he's only twenty-six—but I guess having a dad who's the governor of Nevada helps.

"You were also swerving a bit. Have you been drinking?" he asks.

"What'a you, fuckin' nuts?" I widen my eyes at him. "I'm on my way home from school."

He chuckles, two dimples appearing in his cheeks. "That doesn't answer my question, Miss Maisano."

"Oh, come on!" I slam a hand down on the wheel again. "No, I haven't been drinking. I'm sorry for blocking the road—may I unblock it now?" By driving outta here! "Christ, it's like you live to torture me." I sneer at him. "I know this isn't your job, you know. Maybe my dad and brothers will be interested to find out I'm being harassed."

His cocky amusement doesn't fade one bit. "You been checkin' up on me, Julia?"

I offer a flat look in return.

"All right, all right." He laughs and straightens. "I guess my fun's over. You're free to go." He taps the roof of my car and dips down to face me. "Try not to crash, okay? Eyes on the road."

*Praise Jesus!*

I get the fuck outta there as fast as the law allows, scrunching my nose at the hamburger smell. Now I don't want it anymore, and definitely not defiling my interior.
Then again, it's better than Moretti's aftershave, 'cause that just makes me wanna hump his leg.

_Hate him._

I think I need to ask Anthony or Dominic if they can find out what Moretti's deal is.

In fact, I'll do it right now. I bring out my phone and click my way to Anthony's number, pressing dial. If he helps me out, I'll be helpful in return, telling him that Gabriella's probably with Mom and Elisa. At least that's my guess.

"Whataya want, Julia?" Anthony snaps.

"Jeesh." I check the rearview and pull down my Ray-Bans. "Nice greeting. Still pissed?"

"I'm trying to find my wife," he growls.

"So, that's a yes." I shift gears as I reach our street, slowing down. "Look, we can help each other. You tell me what's up with Officer Moretti—the fucko won't stop pulling me over—and I can tell you what I know about Gabby."

My brother groans, aggravated. "Never you mind what Matt is up to—"

"Then never you mind what Gabby's up to." I shrug to myself, spotting our house at the end of the street. But I'm not getting out of my car until Anthony's given me some answers. I can circle that cul-de-sac for an eternity and a half.

"Listen—he's following orders," he says. "That's all I can give you."

Fuck a duck. "You're on a first-name basis with this dude," I state. "Is he in your pocket or something?"
My brother actually chuckles. "Check you out—pocket. Nah, he's not in my pocket."

He put too much emphasis on "my." So, he's in someone's pocket? Can't be Dad. He hates cops, and I tell Anthony as much.

"Keep your enemies close?" He's smirking, I know it. "So...my wife?"

"Oh." I snicker. "Yeah, um...she came by this morning." I roll up on our driveway and kill the engine. "Had breakfast with Mom—TJ and Allegra were here, too. Gabriella's pissed at'chu."

"But I haven't done anything!" he exclaims incredulously.

"She agrees!" I laugh, slapping my thigh. "That's the thing."

"What?" Now there's a frown in his voice. "Can you just spell it out for me?"

"Sure," I gigglesnort. "Mom bakes it, Elisa shakes it, Gabby fakes it."

"Julia!" he shouts.

"Oh!" I yell back. "I'm tryin'a clue you in hea'! Will you listen?" I tug on my ear, as if he can see me. "There once was a girl who married my brother; he didn't even try, so she ended up dry—"

"I swear to fucking God!"

I nod, on a roll. "—and my brother didn't care enough to...um." I rack my brain, then snap my fingers. "My brother didn't care enough to make her slippery, 'cause he'd rather hurt her and do something stripper-y. So, when he comes home with stripper dust, the girl named Gabriella says fuck the lust!"

Silence.
Inspecting my nails, all in different neon colors, I give it to him in English. "In a nutshell, she's bored wit'chu in bed." I shake my head, irritated. "Who knew? Anthony Jasper Maisano doesn't know how to use the ol' braggiole. You should lay off the strippers and give it to her good!" I punch the air, then slump back in my seat. Cuz...kidding aside, I'm sad for Gabriella. She deserves better. "I don't wanna talk to you anymore. Hanging up." And I do just that.

Grabbing my bag, I leave the car and begin planning my revenge, 'cause I know Gabriella's too nice to get even herself. So, I'll do it.

Pride is like insanely important to the men in our family, so maybe I oughta take some away from Anthony.

The second I unlock the front door and open it, I hear a loud crash coming from the kitchen. It freezes me in place, along with my heart, for about two seconds before I'm thrown into fight-or-flight mode. Do I run away and call someone or do I hurry to see what's up?

"Is-Isabella," I hear Dad croak, which decides for me. Fight. I'm not running away now.

"Dad?" I dump my bag on the floor, pass Duke and Duchess, and rush into the kitchen. My eyes widen as I spot Dad on the floor, gasping for air. "Daddy!" Oh, my God. Fear wells up in me, but I push it aside to help. "What happened?" Since I'm wearing shoes, I ignore the shattered glass. "Did you fall?"

He sucks in quick breaths, and tears fill my eyes when I see the pain he's in. He didn't merely fall. Something else must've happened.

"I'm calling 911—"

"Wait," he coughs, grabbing my wrist. "N-no ambulance." Is he nuts?! "You t-take me. I—I'll be f-fine."
"Daddy, you need a doctor!" I stifle a sob as I try to help him up. God, he's heavy. But the stubborn fool doesn't take no for an answer. He grunts and chokes and pants, but he manages to pull himself up.

"My car," he wheezes out, clutching his heart. His heart! Oh my God, is he having a heart attack? "Get it, p-principessa."

My bottom lip trembles. "But—"

He gives my hand a squeeze and forces a pained smile. "Do it."

Knowing it's useless to argue with him, I run as fast as I can, grab his keys in the hallway, and dart outta the house. Someone usually picks him up when he's going somewhere, so his car is always in the garage.

By the time I've backed out and stopped right in front of our door, Dad is slowly walking down the stone steps, leaning heavily on the iron railing. Leaving the car running, I rush over to assist him, and considering how he hates accepting help from others, I know it's bad when he wordlessly leans against me and lets me guide him.

"Can you breathe?" I refuse to break down, I refuse to break down, I refuse to break down.

He sucks in another shallow breath and nods jerkily.

Stubborn fool. I shoulda called an ambulance, but noooo, Daddy's too proud for that shit.

He places a hand on my shoulder, using it as support to get in the car, robe and slippers and all. Then I shut the door and hurry to the driver's seat, and we're off.

"Don't c-call Mom," he pants, squeezing his eyes shut.
"What?" I speed down the street, not giving a crap about limits and lurking cops. "Of course I gotta call her! She'll wanna know—so will Anthony, Dominic, and Elisa!"

"Not yet." He screws his eyes shut and winces, a fist pressing to his chest. He's gotta be in so much pain, since he's usually so stoic. "Don't w-wanna worry 'em."

I grit my teeth, disagreeing but not saying anything. I'll sneak out and call Mom as soon as Dad's with a doctor. For now, my one goal is to get him to the hospital. Thankfully, it's not that far.

"I feel better a-already," he rasps, lying for my sake.

Side-eyeing him, I speed up and then spot a piece of glass stuck in his robe, near his collarbone. I reach over and brush it down on the floor. "You have a few cuts," I mumble.

He grimaces and waves a hand, although the hand never really leaves his leg, as if he's too tired and drained to lift it. "Superf-ficial."

"You're shaking." I get scared again and step on the gas once more. "God, Daddy. I should've called an ambulance. Are you having a heart attack?"

_No_. His mouth forms the word, but no sound comes out.

I stay quiet for a while, just watching him and the road. I can see he's trying to calm himself, focusing on his breathing, and every now and then he slowly flexes his fingers. They tremble, and his muscles appear weak.

When his shoulders lower slightly, easing the rigidness in his posture, I allow myself a small breath of relief. He seems to be getting better; he seems to realize it, too. He's still in pain and his breathing is labored, but not near hyperventilation as it was before.
"I—I think..." He exhales and swallows. "M-maybe it's over. You c-could drive us home again."

I roll my eyes, adrenaline seeping outta me. I leaves me frightened, which is weird. If he's feeling better, shouldn't I be happy and relieved?

"Whatta comedian you are," I say, blinking past my tears. "You gotta see a doctor, Daddy. End'a story."

He makes a face. "I hate hospitals."

*Well, they're there for a reason, numbnuts.*

~oOo~

"*Sto bene, bambina.*" Dad tells me he's fine, and his look says I gotta quit staring. But I dunno. It's like I'm afraid he's gonna die the second I turn my head. "We're outta here as soon as the doc comes back."

I nod and sink back into my chair, hating seeing him this way. All fragile-lookin' and without his comb to occupy his fingers.

"Did you call Alberto?" he asks, threading our fingers together.

He misses Mom. I can tell. He wants her here, but he doesn't wanna worry her. And I kept my promise about not calling anybody since he's better now. Except, I did call Alberto, Dad's tailor.

"Yes." Leaving my chair, I sit down on the edge of his hospital bed instead. "He's sending someone over with clothes." 'Cause God forbid Daddy comes home lookin' anything other than sharp.

Mom's gonna notice anyway; there's glass on the kitchen floor at home.

"Bene." He opens his arms for me, and I scoot close. "Smetti di essere spaventata." He tells me to stop being afraid.
"I'm trying." I chuckle shakily, unable to get rid of the memory of Dad all helpless on the floor earlier, surrounded by glass. The sheer panic on his face. "I think I hate hospitals, too. We're never here for a good reason, unless Gabby's popping out another kid."

I remember when Dad and Dominic got shot, and all this with Frankie...ugh.

Daddy hums and kisses the top of my head. "I can think of four times."

Lifting my head, I rest it on his bicep and smile. "When we were born?"

He nods and smiles faintly, his hair messier than usual. He hasn't shaved today either, so there's some scruff going on. Unreal. "With Anthony, I was proud," he murmurs. He's reminiscing, I think. "First son, you know? I was such a mush, too."

"You cried?" I widen my eyes.

"Oh yeah." He huffs a little laugh. "That so hard to believe? With all'a youse—Mom was brave, I was a mess."

I grin, remembering Mom telling me some stuff. "You missed Dominic's birth, right?"

"Well." He tips his head to the side, weighing his response. "Back in the day, fathers weren't present during delivery—not like Anthony was there with Gabriella. So, in that case I missed every birth. But yeah, I was a little late for Dominic's. Couldn't get away from work."

I hum. "Who made you cry the most?"

He snorts. "Whatta question." He pokes my side. "But it was actually you."

That surprises me. "Why?"
"Because of the complications," he answers, the light in his eyes fading slightly. "I was so fucking worried." All I know is that Mom lost a lot of blood, and that she can't have more kids. "They wouldn't let me see her at first. Took a while for the docs to—do whatever it is they do. Alec and Nonno had to hold me back."

"Really? Wow." I can't imagine Dad freaking out. He's always cool as a cucumber. Unless he's shouting. But he doesn't fall apart.

"I calmed down a little when they brought me you." He kisses my forehead this time. "You were so fucking tiny, and I miscounted your toes." I giggle and cock a brow at him. "It's true. At first I thought you was gonna be one of those special kids."

"What?!" I gape at him. "Special kids?"

"Hey, I woulda loved you anyways." He's teasing me. Great. "But then I counted again." He shrugs. "Ten perfect little fingers, ten perfect little toes—"

Before he can finish, the doctor enters the room, reading a chart. "Mr….Maisano?"

Dad nods and straightens, and I return to the chair, a nervous mess.

"Your results are back, and..." The doc pauses to read his friggin' notes.

"Oh, God." Dad curses under his breath, then sighs. "Okay. I'm ready. Give it to me straight, doc. Is it cancer?"

My eyebrows shoot up.

The doc slowly raises his.

"A brain tumor?" Dad presses, and my gaze flicks from Doc to Dad, Doc to Dad. "Am I dying?"
"No!" The doctor frowns. "No, not at all. The blood-work came back great with no cardiac enzymes present. That tells us you did not have a heart attack. Your ticker's doing just fine—your EKG was normal. Your blood pressure was slightly elevated, but that's understandable. Just get some rest."

"So, what the fuck happened?" Dad's impatient now.

Hell, I'm impatient, too. I wanna know what went wrong.

"As I told you when your daughter left to call your family," the doc goes on, to which I quirk a brow at Dad, 'cause I left to call his tailor, not his family, "you most likely experienced a panic attack."

"Oh, thank God." The words leave me in a whoosh, and I place a hand to my chest. "I'm so relieved."

Dad looks displeased and irritated. "You tellin' me I had a fucking fit—and I sought medical help for it?"

Oh yeah, I roll my eyes.

"While panic attacks are harmless, they can be highly uncomfortable," the doc reasons. "You're not the first one to seek a doctor. In many cases, the patient thinks he's having a heart attack, as the symptoms can be very similar—"

"Yeah, yeah—save the explanations for someone who gives a shit." Dad waves him off and leaves the bed. "So, I can go home now?"

The doctor looks to me, at a loss, and I shrug, as if saying, "Whattaya gonna do? That's my dad for ya."

"Well...yes, but—" Doc gives Dad a serious look, not that my dear father is intimidated. C'mon. "Mr. Maisano, has this happened before?" Dad shakes
his head no, irritated. "My point is, this could be hereditary. But if it's not, I suggest you find out what could've triggered the attack. Have you been under stress lately?"

I snort, then cover my mouth with my hand when Dad shoots me a quick glare.

"Nope. No stress at all." Dad's full of shit. "I'm practically retired. Did you not see me coming to the hospital in a robe? I sleep all day long. Life's great."

The doc hmphs.

**Junior's POV**

"You should eat something, Juniuh." Isabella draws a finger down my cheek to my mouth, and I kiss it.

But I don't open my eyes, and I don't pull away the covers. To me, the outside world doesn't exist, and it won't for another day or two.

"Not hungry." I burrow my face into her hair and breathe in. *Salon day.* Whenever the wife's been at the salon, which is often, her hair is silkier, softer, darker, and shinier than normal.

No gray in sight.

*Makes me feel older.*

No matta, though. Each inhale lets me relax a bit more.

It also helps to repeat to myself that I've ordered security for all my kids.

"Che ti prendi oggi, ciccino?" Isabella wonders what's gotten into me today.
I don't answer, instead hugging her to me tighter. "I love you." And the thought of losing her... Deep breaths, Maisano.

Wouldn't wanna have another fit.

"I love you, too." She sounds puzzled, confused about my behavior. But I'm not in the mood to explain. "Are you sure nothing's happened today?"

Well...

But, no. I don't want Isabella's fussing right now; just her warmth. I wanna hold her and just lie here, but if she knew about these past couple'a days, about the hospital...I'd never hear the end of it. Which is why I told her Duke must've found food on the counter, jumped up, and dragged down the tray of glasses earlier. I mean, he's a Doberman, a big boy; he can reach.

Julia's agreed to cover for me as long as I rest up and "stop being stupid."

"Everything's fine, hummingbird." I press my nose to her neck. And maybe, just maybe, my words are the truth. I've made amends with all my kids—Dominic, Elisa...and today, I apologized to Julia, too. After the hospital. I told her I'd snapped, lost it, with all this Francis bullshit.

"I hate that you took it out on Mom," Julia had told me, hiding her tears. "She was a mess, and she was faking it—putting on makeup to cover her bruises."

I had nothing to say to that, because I'm not sure Julia would understand. Hell, I don't even understand. But as Isabella sometimes says, we always hurt the ones we love the most...?

It's no excuse, and the guilt will tear at me until the day I forgive myself, which I don't see happening.
In the end, I had Julia's forgiveness when I promised her tickets and backstage passes for that 'N Stink band's next tour.

Lastly, I'd called Anthony and thanked him for taking care of everyone while I was away, but I'm not sure I got through to him. He seemed distracted and annoyed, though he didn't wanna tell me why.

"So, we're just gonna lie here all evening?" My wife grins against my temple. "We'll get restless."

I won't. Isabella might. She's the one who always has to stay busy.

"Just talk to me." I lift my head and steal a smooch. "Lemme hear your voice." Then I settle down again and groan in pleasure when I feel her fingers in my hair.

"Just talk, huh?" She hums and hitchs a smooth leg over my side.

My dick's already at half-mast for having her naked body so close. It was my rule when I dragged her in here before: no clothes. Gotta feel her properly.

Dipping my head, I rest it on her cleavage so she can do the back of my head.

"I'm done planning Lia's first birthday," she mentions.

That's March first, I think. The day before the opening of Mandalay Bay. "They won't be back in town by then, baby." I hate to say it, but it's true. Dominic isn't allowed back in Vegas until the second.

"Oh." Isabella pauses her magical fingers, and I feel her tense up.

"Can we do it the following weekend?" I ask.

She relaxes. "Sure. But you promise they're all right—wherever they are?"
"I promise." My brother was kind enough to do some babysitting, and he's personally watching Dominic in that shitty little town across the border. "Keep talking."

It takes a couple minutes, then she tells me Cullen has called, and I make a mental note to call him tomorrow. It's about the info he has on Daniela.

"Gabriella came over this morning with the kids—we had breakfast." Her soft voice lulls me into a perfect state of comfortable. More tension drains outta me. "TJ was excited; he and Allegra are spending the night at Carm's, and she always spoils him with McDonald's." Isabella doesn't like that. We're not a fast-food family. I'd die living on that shit. "I'll break Carm's face if I see her feeding Allegra crap from McDonald's."

I grin, having a feeling Nonna Isabella is afraid TJ will change his mind about who his favorite grandmother is, but my wife has nothin'a worry about. TJ adores Isabella. And that little worry aside, Isabella and Carm are good friends.

I'd probably understand Isabella better if Enzo was still alive. Alas, I'm the one and only nonno.

"Allegra's only a few months old," I chuckle drowsily. "I doubt Carm would go that far."

"She better not," she huffs. "But anyway, I got sidetracked. Gabriella's not, ah, happy about certain things in her marriage. You think you could have a word with Anthony?"

I groan and press my face harder against her luscious tits. "No. Don't ask me to do that, Isabella. Their marriage is their marriage. I ain't getting involved. Not my business." I slide my hand down to cup her ass and give it a squeeze. "Not yours, either."
And I doubt Anthony would be happy to hear that Gabriella airs out their issues to his mother.

"But they need help, Juniuh," she complains. "It is our duty to offer advice."

"Madonn'." I roll over onto my back and reach for my smokes on the nightstand. So much for peace and quiet with my wife. "What the hell does she even have to complain about? Huh?" I honestly don't get it. He's given her a big house, all the money she can spend, a nice car, two beautiful children, and he's faithful to her.

In return, I know Gabby's a good wife. She's almost as good as Isabella in the kitchen, she dotes on Anthony, and she's a great mom. No, I don't see what could possibly be wrong.

Lighting up a smoke, I take a drag and place a hand behind my head, peering up at Isabella's face. She's biting her lip, appearing almost...what, embarrassed? Huh.

"She said he doesn't, um—" she squeaks "—satisfy her. In bed."

"What the fuck?" I cough on an inhale. The smoke burns in my throat, so I end up coughing some more. "Christ," I rasp, quick to stub out my cigarette.

"I know!" Isabella moans and plops down on the bed.

I'm momentarily distracted by her tits jiggling, but she covers them with the sheets too fucking quickly.

I shake my head and sit up. "She really said that?" I can't fucking believe it.
"She did. And I know what you're thinking—it's embarrassing, but poor girl—"

"Actually, no. Fuck that." I laugh incredulously. "That's the last thing on my mind, Isabella." If anything, I feel bad for Anthony. "Don't let this get out, I'm fucking telling you." I point to her.

She narrows her eyes and sits up, too, pulling the sheet with her. "'Scuse me?"

I get irritated. "Put yourself in our son's shoes, amore. What if it gets out that he's bad in the—" I can't even say it. Instead I wave it off, speaking with my hands. "Look, all I'm saying is that he might feel the need to prove he's not a lousy lay." By going out and screwing half of Vegas.

Don't mess with a man's pride and ego.

Isabella blinks, then her mouth forms a small "o."

I nod, sure she's getting it now. "It's fucking humiliating. And I'm disappointed Gabriella would divulge something like that to you."

"Yeah, but..." She sighs and looks away for a bit, in thought. "Some conversations aren't meant to be had over the phone, and Elisa can rarely meet up these days. Same goes for Daniela. And Gabby can talk to me—I would never betray her trust. Who else was she suppos'ta talk to?"

"How about her husband?" I nearly shout.

But no, instead the drama comes to my home, to my bed. Literally!

"She's tried!" Isabella defends. "But Anthony keeps—" She clamps her mouth shut and groans behind her hands. "Can't believe I'm discussing my son's sex life."

"We can stop," I say flatly, more than happy to. "By all fucking means."
I wanna get back to groping my wife.

"Juniuh." Isabella gives me a look. "She's tried to talk to him, but he keeps treating her like a freaking china doll. And in the meantime, he comes home with stripper dust—"

"Mother of Christ!" I hiss, sick of this goddamn shit. "I get on his ass about that 'cause it's fun to see him all cunty, but he's not really that bad." I admit that he shouldn't replace Gabriella—have some nameless stripper do shit his wife can do instead, but this...cazzo, I'm done hearing about this. If he gets a lap dance a couple times a month, so what? "I don't see the big deal. It's not like he's cheatin' on her."

"Some would argue—" She pauses and tilts her head. "If you don't think it's a big deal, why don't'chu get lap dances?"

Dangerous territory, but at least I can be honest. "Because I don't see the appeal anymore." I stare at her blankly. "I married my stripper—end'a story."

"Awww." She melts for a moment, but before I can hope we're leaving this subject behind, she goes on. "But still, I'd be pretty hurt if you did. It would leave me wondering what I'm doing wrong, if there's something you're missing."

I get that, and I think there is something Anthony's missing, but it's not my job to figure it out.

"Well, you're safe. But remember that Anthony has a reputation to uphold, too," I tell her. "He's young—he still has to prove himself, show he's no pussy, that he can get as much cooz as he wants—if he wants it." I shrug. It's just how it is. "He can't have his guys thinking he's whipped at home."

Isabella raises a brow. "What have you done to get the same kinda rep, huh?"
I smirk, surprised she'd even ask that. "Are ya kiddin'?" Let's ignore the fact that I'm a ruthless wiseguy who only gives a shit about his immediate family. "I had this goomah once, knocked her up a handful times, spent more time with her than I did my wife, then said wife died *miraculously*—"

"Okay, okay!" She giggles and slaps my arm. "I get it. Christ, *ciccino*. When you put it like that..."

"I take what I want. Nothin' else to it." Scooting closer, I grab her and pull her on to my lap, quick to get rid of the sheets between us. "Can we talk about something else now? Maybe your man, who knows how to satisfy his woman."

"Oh, you do?" she teases.

"Damn straight." I lean in and kiss her neck. "The thought of you faking it..." I laugh and shake my head. *It would never happen*. "It's ridiculous."

She doesn't answer, probably 'cause she's busy kissing my shoulder. I can feel her smiling against my skin, and my dick wakes up again.

"I thought you just wanted to hear my voice." She lifts her head and pecks my nose. "But now...my, my, Juniuh, there's no room for the Holy Ghost between us."

I crack up, then roll her over. "Did you get that a lot when you was a kid—in Catholic school?" Whenever my brother and I went to a school dance, the teachers would tell us to leave room for the Holy Ghost between ourselves and the girls we danced with.

"Oh heavens, no." The wife puts on a serious face. "I was an innocent virgin until you swept me off my feet."
Well, that's what I like to believe. "Then I defiled you good and hard," I murmur, pressing my erection against her pussy. "For the rest of our lives."

She hums and drags her fingernails along my back. "Oh yeah. A true love tale."

"A grand one." I chuckle, then suck a nipple into my mouth. That earns me another one of her humming noises.

"But I'm not done talking, ciccino. For instance, I think Elisa's keeping something from me. Today at the salon—"

I shut her up with a kiss, knowing very well what our daughter is keeping from her. Such as Mario being dead, such as being together with a Colucci, such as that Colucci's gonna be the father of her baby...

"You're done talking," I decide, sliding two fingers down her pussy. "Unless it's you screaming my name. That's always okay." I grin against her cheek, feeling it heat up as I finger-fuck her into a wet mess. Wanting more, I kiss my way down and settle between her thighs, my mouth watering.

I get greedy, licking and sucking at her flesh. Whenever she gasps and bucks her hips, I tease her by staying away from her clit. Which earns me some hair pulling.

"Don't be mean, ciccino," she pleads breathlessly. Letting out a low chuckle, I swipe my tongue up the length of her newly trimmed pussy and apply pressure on her clit, sucking on it gently. "Oh!" Her back arches. "Gimme that cock, Juniuh."

_Happily._
"Or do you want me to suck you off?" she asks as we get face-to-face again. With a seductive glint in her eye, she slips a hand between us and grasps my cock. "Want me to wrap my lips around that big dick of yours?" She squeezes.

"Nnnngff—" I think that sound came from me, but she kinda fried my brain for a bit there. "Shut up. Yes. No—mamma mia." I groan and thrust into her hand. What do I want? No, I wanna be inside her. If she gets her mouth near my cock, I can't really kiss her the way I want to. "Lemme go." Batting away her hand, I grip my cock and push it deep inside her.

"God, that's it." She throws her head back, her hair fanning out on the pillow. "I missed you."

No more than I missed her. "Fuck, bell'uccellino." I drive into her and grab her jaw, wanting those lips. "Kiss me."

"Mmm." She kisses me thoroughly, tasting herself on my tongue. Fucking sexy. Rocking her hips, she lets me slide in deeper, causing me to groan a curse into her mouth. "You feel so good." Next she digs her heels into my ass and encourages me to go harder.

I moan, panting. Considering it's been a while since we fucked, it ain't gonna take much for me to come. And watching her, looking into those eyes...Christ.

I nip at her chin. "You're one gorgeous bunny, Mrs. Maisano."

She laughs, outta breath, and palms my cheek. "Rockin' it since '75?" Hell yeah. I nod and chuckle. "You're one sexy wiseguy, Mr. Maisano."

"And now he's gonna make you come before he embarrasses himself." I grunt and start rubbing her clit, enjoying her noises a bit too much. They push me toward the edge faster, when all I want is time.
Minutes later, I do make her scream my name.

Which, after some twenty-plus years, still drives me bonkers in the best ways.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I slam into her a final time and let go, soaking her pussy with my release.

"Oh, God..." Isabella exhales shakily, her heart pounding enough for me to feel it. I bet she can feel mine, too. "We needed that."

I nod, too spent to talk, and collapse next to her, staring up at the ceiling. Throwing an arm over my face, I swallow dryly and will my heart to slow the fuck down.

When my stomach growls, the wife laughs rolls closer to rest her chin on my chest. "Want me to make dinner now?"

"You'd do that?" I mean, I know she would, but I did tell her she didn't have to earlier—that I wanted her here in bed with me all evening.

"Well, unless you're gonna eat air..." She raises a brow and grins, then leaves the bed.

I stare at her naked ass until she shrugs on one of her satin robes, one that belongs to a hot lingerie set, if my memory is correct.

"Amazing woman," I mumble to myself once she's gone. With a grin on my face, I lean over to the nightstand and spark up a smoke and grab the cordless. By now, I can dial the number to our travel agent in my sleep.

Isabella did say she wanted a vacation in Palm Springs to put flowers on Sinatra's grave, didn't she?

I'm pretty sure telling her about the trip and giving her those earrings will get me dessert, too.
Chapter 21

Translation:

Lo sapevo! = I knew it!

Col cazzo! = Fuck that!

Anthony’s POV

Leaving Nico’s office at Dawn, I run a hand over my hair and cross the floor, getting back to Joey, Nico, and Tommy.

One of the strippers—Mandy—stops me on the way, a hand on my arm. "You look stressed out, Mr. Maisano." She pouts. "Want me to make it better?"

I look down at her hand on my arm, then raise a brow at her.

She removes it quickly.

"Maybe..." I give her a once-over. "We'll see. Get back to work." I smack her ass and send her off giggling, then join my friends. "Busy night." I pour a shot of tequila and throw it back.

"I'm doing better than my pops did," Nico says, eyeing the talent on stage. "Dawn hasn't seen this much money since it was Uncle Jun's place."

Joey checks his watch, looking impatient. We’re here because Tommy, Zia Alice's driver, asked to see us, and I have a feeling Joey wants to get back to my sister. But fuck, it's only nine o'clock. Elisa can wait.

It's taken me all day to calm down after the bomb Julia dropped earlier, and I ain't going anywhere for a while. 'Cause...shit, if I saw Gabriella now,
I'm not sure what I'd do. I did manage to find out where she is—at an old friend's house—and our kids are with Carm.

Nico turns to me with a smirk. "What's up with your wife, by the way? Gina said Gabby's pissed at'chu."

I chuckle darkly and pour another drink. "What's this, gossip hour?" I down the tequila and loosen my tie. "Gabby and I are just fine."

He nods and takes a drink, too. "You spendin' a lotta time with your goomah?"

I shrug, 'cause I never give straight answers to that shit. The guys have made their own assumptions about my life; I've never said I have a mistress, because I don't.

Joey cocks a brow at me but says nothing. I'm not sure he'd buy the tales everyone else spins about me. My brother-in-law to-be knows me better. But he also knows I'll be boss one day. I can't be seen as a pussy.

"I knocked mine up." Nico scratches his forehead and makes a face. "I didn't mean to."

"You mamaluke," I laugh. "Just keep that far away from your real family."

"Move her outta town," Joey advises, sipping his scotch. "You don't want your bastard and your legitimate children ending up at the same school—same district, even."

"True," Nico muses.

I shake my head and face Tommy. "So, what can we do for you, Tommy?"

He clears his throat and looks around. "I thought this was a sit-down. Where's Felix?"
I just smile.

Joey answers. "Why would the boss make time to see the guy whose main concern is taking my aunt to the nail salon?"

_Ouch_. Tommy grits his teeth, angry, but he'd never speak against Joey. That aside, Tommy's got his own business, and he kicks up to Zio Alec every week. Mostly dot-com jobs, some scamming, sending fake invoices to small businesses.

"How's my little cousin?" Joey asks Tommy, referring to Marissa. "Bet she misses her daddy."

I tilt my head, curious about the dark glint in Joey's eyes.

"Look—" Tommy shows us his palms "—I only came here to ask if I could join another crew. Alec's asking for too much."

Wow. The fuckin' nerve... "Alec doesn't know you're here?" I ask. "You go around your capo like that?"

"I've tried to talk to him," he insists.

"You know what?" Joey stands up and buttons his suit. "Let's talk in private, you and me." He faces me and Nico. "You cool with that?"

Nico shrugs, and I nod, waving a hand for them to take Nico's office.

I don't care.

Once they're gone, Nico lets out a sharp whistle, and we got four girls sauntering over.

"You want a private room?" my cousin asks.

I shake my head no, then nod at Mandy. She gets settled on my lap, smiling seductively, but I'm not really feeling it.
"You can touch if you want," she says in my ear.

_They always say that._

I never touch.

"Just do your thing." I scoot a little lower in my seat to get a good view. The broad's too skinny—they always are—but I love it when a whore throws herself at me. Makes me feel like a king.

I get hard whenever I think of Gabriella acting like a whore, but I hate myself for wanting it, hence getting that thrill from strippers a couple times a month. My wife's a good girl; she deserves someone who's sweet with her, careful and loving.

She's told me several times she wants more, harder, faster, but I just can't. That's the mother of my children; I can't treat her like trash.

But these broads don't mean a fucking thing. They can satisfy my sick urges, and then I go home and make love to Gabriella. Well...not now. Fuck. All I wanna do right now when it comes to Gabby would result in tears and bruises.

I've never been so fucking humiliated.

I get that Gabby doesn't have many friends—mostly my sisters and Dominic's girl—but to go to my mother? And Julia? And say I'm bad in bed?

I flush with fury at the mere thought.

"You're so tense." Mandy leans forward to rub her fake tits against my chest.

I look down between us. "Lose the thong," I say, which...is a first. My gut clenches, and I wonder if I should stop. A big part of me wants to. But the
anger...? And I get even angrier because I miss my wife even when she's being an emasculating bitch.

"Cazzo," Nico spits out next to me. "Yo, cuz. Isn't that Gabby?"

My head snaps up, and I watch a woman storming into the club, wearing a snug trench coat.

"Fuck." I'd recognize my wife from ten miles away. "Scram," I tell Mandy, and when she stands up, I do too. My hard-on dies, and I adjust my tie as I leave the table.

_Madonn',_ not only does Gabriella like to humiliate me, now she also wants to embarrass me by showing up at Dawn?

If I was angry before, I'm fucking livid now.

"Lo sapevo!" she laughs, only a few feet away. "I don't know why I even bothered—I fucking knew it, you asshole!"

"Cut it out," I hiss and grasp her arm. Hard. "What the _fuck_ do you think you're doing here?" Pissed, goddamn enraged, I drag her toward the exit. "Are you too stupid to remember I've told you this place is off-limits?"

"Let me go!" she shouts. "Anthony, that hurts!"

I chuckle darkly and push her outside, several guests looking up. "You shoulda thought about that before you decided to make a fool outta me."

Considering that Dee's apartment is only a few minutes from here, I start walking in that direction. 'Cause I don't think I'll last the drive home, and Dominic's not at his place anyway.

Gabriella struggles against me the entire way, but she's no match for me. I'm pretty sure I can smell booze on her, too, which makes each attempt to get free even weaker and more uncoordinated.
"You drinkin' now, too?" I ask, shaking my head.

She giggles, but it sounds thick with tears. "Se devo rimanere sposata con te, non ho scelta." She says if she's gotta stay married to me, she doesn't have a choice.

I gnash my teeth together, refusing to show how much that fucking hurt. I've given her everything—a nice home, two amazing children, cash to spend, my goddamn name...

"You screw around, I drink..." She shrugs. "We do what we gotta do to survive."

"What—" I stop talking, too incredulous, fucking shocked. I screw around? Seriously? The two times she caught me with that godforsaken glitter strippers spray all over themselves, I told Gabriella—I fucking told her—I'd never cross lines. "You're outta your goddamn mind, woman."

"I know." She sniffles and wipes at her cheeks with her free hand. "I'm batshit crazy for loving you."

**Thanks, sweetheart.**

"I'm not gonna forgive you, though," she says, then winces when I tighten my hold on her arm. "I already resent you—soon enough it'll be hate, and we'll be just like Felix and Gianna. Or Nicola and Gina."

"Sounds like you have it all figured out." I grin bitterly, finally spotting Stella up ahead. "I wish I'd known you'd turn into a greedy little cunt before I married you. Woulda saved us a lotta trouble."

"Wow," she whispers to the ground. "You really hit where it hurts."

"So do you." I fish out my keys as we enter the alley next to Stella. The gravel crunches under my shoes, and even more underneath Gabby's high
heels. They gotta be new. I've never seen them before. Black, glossy—the opposite of what she usually wears.

I punch in the code to get inside the building, and we climb the steps in silence. She doesn't ask why we're here; her eyes are practically vacant—as if she's just shut down and doesn't care anymore.

I don't know what kills me the most, her hurting me, or her looking like a shell of her former self.

There's no way I could've done that to her. Like I said, I've given her everything.

Using my spare key, I unlock the door and usher Gabby into my little brother's apartment.

It's too quiet.

I've spent the night here a few times when Gabby and I have argued or I've been too tired to go home, and it was just as quiet then. I'm used to having my son waking me up too early in the mornings, sometimes getting in a nut punch in the process.

"I want to leave," she says quietly.

"Dee's place was closer, and we gotta talk." I walk farther in and switch on the lights. "I'll make sure someone drives you home later, but I gotta get back to work."

"No." She lets out a breath, and I look down at her. The emptiness in her eyes is gone, replaced with pain. "I want to leave you. We're not happy anymore. And you know what? I'm not sure I give a crap."
Hearing her words, those fucking words, fills me with blind rage. I release my hold on her, take a step back, and just stare. I'm seconds away from going off, I know that.

"Nothing to say?" She smiles darkly, but she could never pull off evil. Not with tears running down her face and obvious heartbreak in her eyes. "Maybe you don't care, either. Me and the kids," she scoffs, "we're nothin'. As long as you have your damn—"

"Enough!" I shout, instinctively raising my hand.

Not even a flinch. Instead she juts out her chin. "I fucking dare you, Ant—"

She's doesn't get to finish before I snap and backhand her across the face.

She cries out in pain and shock, cups her cheek, and stares back at me with wide eyes full of fear.

But I've barely even started. I close the distance between us again and push her up against a wall, my fingers curling themselves around her throat. "Devi essere proprio stupida." I tell her she's really gotta be stupid. My mouth twists into a sinister grin. "Not only do you let that mouth'a yours run too much, but you make me look bad, and then you challenge me like that?" I chuckle as she whimpers and tries to remove my hand from her throat. "Now, let's go over the reasons you wanna leave me."

"Please—" She chokes and squeezes her eyes shut.

Her life is mine. I give her air. She belongs to me.
Easing my grip, I nuzzle her jaw and get my shit together. Fuck, I can barely think; I'm too furious, almost lost to it. The edges of my vision go blurry.

"You told my mother—my *mother*, Gabriella—that I don't do it for you in the bedroom." I pause, seeing red. "You even told my sister—"

"What—no!" She gasps for air. "I wouldn't. I'd never tell Elisa."

"Julia," I say flatly. "She's the one who told me."

"That's crap!" she cries out. "I only talked to Bella, and I didn't say you suck." She gulps. "I said I'm sick of being treated like I'm made outta glass. I said slow and gentle can get boring."

I laugh. Because if I don't, I'd probably do something else, something unforgiveable. "Poor you. Gotta be stuck with a boring fucker in bed. But that doesn't explain why I heard all'a this from Julia."

"I only talked to Bella," she repeats, having the balls to glare at me.

I narrow my eyes, stuck on this shit with Julia. Did she overhear it? Eavesdrop? It certainly sounds like something she'd do.

"You should've kept your mouth shut." I stare at my thumb as I brush it over her windpipe, applying some pressure.

"I'm sorry to disappoint," she spits out. "I know you want me to dote on you, be perfect, feed you, and pop out kids while you do whatever you want—fuck strippers and have mistresses all over town!" Her voice rises, even though she can barely breathe. "I'm so sick of it." She starts sobbing. "Sick of all the stories!"

"Stop with that shit already!" I shout. "How many times I gotta tell you I'm not cheating on you?!"
I swear to fucking Christ, if I hear another thing about infidelity, I...I don't even know what I'll do, but I'm so goddamn fed up.

"You're lying!" she cries. "I saw the lipstick on your shirt last week, you come home with that glitter, and you smell like pussy!"

I groan and knock my forehead to the wall next to her head.

"I hate you!" She starts to thrash and push at me, but I push back, caging her. "You've ruined us!" I grunt when she manages to kick me near my groin. "God—you've even made me hate myself!"

"Cool it!" I press my body to hers, effectively trapping her. She can't move. "You gotta cool it, Gabby."

"If-if I was hotter, like those strippers..." She hiccups through a sob. "If I looked like them, you'd want me."

Several layers of anger melt away at her confession, and I can't stand it. I can't stand her words, 'cause she has it all wrong.

"You don't have to lie to me—I already know," she rasps. "Gina told me. You gotta goomah in town."

"No! Fuck, no." I shake my head, struggling against her. "Quit it!" She finally stops fighting me, and I take a deep breath. Whatta shitstorm. "I don't know what fuckin' bullshit Gina's feeding you, but you'd rather listen to her than what your own husband says? Huh? What the fuck is wrong wit'chu?"

"Kinda hard," she coughs, so I ease up again, "k-kinda hard not to listen when you add it all up. Late hours, you don't call, and when you do come home... Even now—" Her face crumples when she spots something near my neck. She touches my shirt collar and whimpers, then averts her eyes.
Tugging on my collar, I peer down and curse when I see that Mandy's left a lipstick stain on the fabric. I cringe, for the first time really regretting my actions. Had a motherfucker even gotten close enough to touch Gabriella, I would've clipped him.

"If you say it's not what it looks like, I will scream," she says quietly, emotionlessly. "Please let me go. I'll go home and prepare your lunch for tomorrow, and I'm sorry for coming to Dawn. It was disrespectful of me."

It suddenly feels like a make-or-break moment, like if I let her go now, we'll never be good again. I'll never see her happy.

"I can't." I place my hands on the wall on either side of her head. "We're not leaving until you believe me."

"I believe you," she says dryly.

"Stop." Dipping down, I press my forehead to hers. "Look, if all I wanted was the pretty picture—the wife, the house, the kids...then I wouldn't give a shit about how you feel. I wouldn't care if you thought I was cheating on you or not. I wouldn't explain myself, Gabriella." I lift my head again, trying to rein it in. I'm still so fucking mad, but because I love her—more than she'll ever know—her happiness comes before my own. "First of all, forget about that fuckin' Gina. It ain't my fault she's bitter and wants to make everyone else just as bitter. A'ight? You're not her. We're not her and Nico."

She stares up at me blankly.

"I'm sorry, micina," I say imploringly. "I get it—I've been a pig. This?" I dip my chin at the collar. "I've hurt you with this, and you don't deserve that shit. But I fucking swear to you, it's not what it looks like." Gabby actually opens her mouth to scream, so I clamp a hand over her lips. "Don't be cute," I snap. "I swear on our kids' lives, I've been faithful to
you. Do I get a lap dance on occasion? Yes. I admit it. But I don't touch them—"

"Why?" she cries behind my hand. "You might as well. You still come home smelling—"

"If you say pussy, I'll slap you again, and that's a goddamn promise," I threaten. "You exaggerated there, didn't you? Think about it." I jab a finger at her temple.

She glares at me. "I can smell them on you, their cheap perfume."

_Perfume's not the same thing as pussy._

"I've been faithful, Gabriella," I say again, tryin'a keep my cool. "I do what I gotta do, and I'll look like an idiot if everyone knew that my wife owns me. I can't have that. Can't you see?"

Amusement flashes across her face, but it's anything but genuine. "Right. You're doing it only to uphold you reputation as a badass. Makes sense."

I ignore her sarcasm and nod. "Partly. And partly because..." I swallow, wondering if I should really be honest here. But I know I should. I have to be. "Partly because I don't wanna treat you like anything that's beneath you."

"Don't gimme that fucking crap, Anthony!" she shouts, the sound muffled by my hand, but I remove it to hear her out. "You get your rocks off elsewhere because you don't wanna do it with me. Don't say what's beneath me—it's bullshit. I'm your _wife_," she grits out, "and you promised me the day we got married that I'd be the only one for you."

"But you are, dammit!" I punch the wall behind her. "What'a you, fuckin' deaf? I don't screw those whores! I just—" I growl and take a step back, pinching the bridge of my nose. _Honesty, Maisano. Just fucking say it._ "I
miss the wild shit sometimes, all right?" I snap. "Call me a prick, but sometimes men want the fantasy of having it dirty and fast, where we can be selfish and just get off."

"You should wanna do that with your wife!" She starts crying again... "And you're stupid if you think women only want it sweet. I don't want that, and oh my God, have you ever met Daniela? Hell, your sisters, your own mother! Do they seem like women who just—"

"I don't wanna hear it," I bark out. As far as I'm concerned, my mother doesn't have sex—which...no, not even Pops has sex. All the times I heard them growing up, and even now when I'm an adult, they wasn't fucking. They were...arguing. Or watching porn. Mad loud. "And seriously? Dominic and Dani are fucking disturbed. There's something wrong with those two."

"Oh, really?" She chuckles, mocking me. "Guess I'm disturbed then, too! Guess we're all disturbed in this family. But you're the only one who refuses to let go. You insist on treating me like a china doll." She scoffs and shakes her head. "You know, the last thing I wanted was to embarrass you, but you wouldn't listen to me. I got needs, too!"

"You got needs..." I snicker. Sorry, can't help it. This I gotta hear. "Listen to you, 'I got needs.' But lemme hear it. Tell me what I fail at giving you."

"Passion," she says bluntly. I blanch. "When you want sex, you make love to me. But when you need sex, you leave the house."

That's bullshit! "I've never left the house because I'm horny," I laugh. "Are you even listening to yourself? And if you turn this into an argument about how late I work—"

"Have I ever complained about your hours?" she asks incredulously.
"Oh!" I yell. "Don't cut me off again, and you just fucking said it—some shit about how late I get home, like it's a reason to think I'm straying on you."

"That's because you never call!" she shouts. "I know your job, Anthony, and I've never once bitched about it. All I've asked is that you pick up the fucking phone and call me when you're gonna be more than an hour late. Is that so damn hard? Because you may not give a shit, but I do, and I worry." She gets worked up, gesturing all over the place. "I worry every goddamn day that you're gonna come home in a body bag, and you keep promising. God, these useless fucking promises! 'Sorry, I forgot to call, but I promise I'll call next time.' I believe that as much as I believe Clinton hates blowjobs!"

Frustrated and tired that this is going nowhere, I start pacing my brother's living room. At this point, I barely even know what we're talking about. Our sex life? My working late? That I forget to call? That everything I do is evidently wrong?

In the meantime, she's the one who let her mouth run about private matters; she's the one who barged into a place I've told her not to come to.

"What do you want me to say, Gabby?" I ask tiredly. "Let's get this shit over with—I gotta get back to work."

"Work?" she repeats, grinning. "Yeah, you looked like you was working real hard with that naked woman on your lap."

I wince.

"I've apologized for that," I tell her. "It was never my intention to hurt you."
"Noted." She nods and folds her arms across her chest. "It was never my intention to embarrass you or talk outta turn. I'm sorry. Can I go home now?"

I grit my teeth, 'cause...cazzo, if I expect her to accept my apology right away, I kinda have to do the same.

"We haven't solved this." I wave a hand between us. "You still haven't told me what you want."

"Isn't it obvious?!" She widens her arms. "I want my husband to stop having strippers all over him! If you want something dirty and fast, go fuck your wife!" She stalks over to me and jabs a finger to my chest. "If you want a whore, tell your wife to act like one—"

I get in her face fast as hell, pushing her up against the wall again. "You don't talk like that. Ever." I squeeze her jaw, speaking through clenched teeth. "You're my wife, the mother of my children—use that word again and I'll make you regret it."

"I think you're afraid," she taunts.

I smile and let my hand slide down to her throat like I did before. "You wanna go there again, sweetheart?"

She has no idea how lenient I'm being with her. I've killed men for a lot less than being disrespectful.

"Come on, Anthony." She smirks and begins to untie the tight, black trench coat she's wearing. "Show me what a man you are. Make me your whore—"

At that word, I cut off her air enough to make her wheeze. It kills her smirk, and I dig the fear that returns to her eyes.
If she wants to show me so badly, so be it. I untie her coat and rip it as I push it down her shoulders, causing buttons to fly. Then I stop short, my eyes widening.

*What the fuck is she wearing?*

Blood surges to my dick, but fury shoots through me at the same time. She walked outside with nothing but this...this black, lacy, frilly shit...under her coat? The corset pushes her big tits together, and the see-through panties let me see her pussy, which is...shaved? Since when does she do *that?*

Too busy gaping like I fish, I don't realize I've let go of Gabby until she speaks.

"You hate it," she whispers, closing the coat. My eyes flash to hers. Is she serious? She just said the last thing I'd agree with. "Am I too fat?"

"You—" I close my mouth, open it again. Close it. Open. "Shut the fuck up and lemme see." I pull away the coat again, ignoring her attempts to close it. Christ, when did she buy this?

I despise it already because of the visions in my head. The things I wanna do...

I'd break the girl.

*I love that outfit so fucking much.*

No. I hate it.

"Please stop," she whimpers. "I just wanna go home and forget this day."

I shake my head, letting my hands brush over her tits that are practically spilling over the black fabric. "You don't get to say no to me." Not when she's dressed like this. Not when she's literally goaded me into taking her.
She wants me to go rough? She'll regret it. "You don't get to leave me, either." Thinking about it, her wanting a divorce…it pisses me off as much as it breaks my heart. "What, you don't love me no more?" I meet her gaze, but my hands keep roaming her delectable body.

"I love you too much," she croaks. "That's the problem."

I unclasp the first little hook in her corset. "Why is that a problem?"

"Because you hurt me, Anthony." The raw honesty in her voice snaps me outta my anger-fueled, lust-filled haze, and I frown. "I want to be the only one you desire, but you won't let me."

*I'm beginning to.*

There are aspects of my wife I haven't allowed myself to see before, because I'm afraid she won't like what she has the ability to turn me in to. I've never fucking desired the strippers I let dance for me; it's just their getups, the cheap and dirty thrill, and the fact that I can treat them however I want and still have them throwing themselves at me that turns me on.

Gabriella says she wants to take their place, but I'm not comfortable letting her demean herself like that.

"You are the only one I want," I say quietly, cupping her cheeks. "But if I do whatever I want with you...?" I shrug and step back, at a loss. "What if you start hating me?"

"No, stop that." Once again, she closes the coat, and she hugs herself. "I will hate you if you keep seeking pleasure outside your marriage. That's a certainty. You say you haven't fucked anybody else—"

"I haven't." God, she has to fucking believe me.
"Prove it to me." She juts out her chin. I gotta admire the balls on her. "I wanna trust you—help me do that."


"Let me in." She taps my heart. "Don't underestimate me. Everyone does it, all the friggin' time. I'm tired of it. Sweet little Gabriella—col cazzo!"

Damn.

This is a new side of her.

"Go work, if that's what you're really doing." She spits the words out with a sneer. "But know one thing." A spark lights up her eyes. "I'll be at home, dressed like this, tryin' out my new toy."

My brows knit together, and I'm still pondering the meaning of what she said when she ties her coat again and starts walking for the door.

"Wait, what?" I ask.

She shrugs and looks at me over her shoulder. "You wanna play with plastic tits? I'll go home and satisfy my own needs with a plastic cock."
Chapter 22

Translation:

Lo faresti davvero? = You'd really do that?

Gabriella's POV

Anthony forces me to wait outside Dawn with the doorman, the sadistic asshole. Anthony, not the doorman.

My husband knows that the doorman can see the handprint on my cheek, not to mention the redness forming around my neck, which will ensure a rumor or two will fly about Anthony being able to demonstrate who's boss.

"I'll be back in five," he tells me, then enters the club.

He hadn't let me leave earlier—at Dominic's place. A couple seconds after I'd mentioned the vibrator I've bought, he went through the roof. He shouted at me, lost his shit, for a solid twenty minutes about his cock being the only thing allowed inside me.

Hypocritical bastard.

I hate him, love him, love that I actually do hate him a little, and hate that I love him with all of my broken heart.

One minute, I want to throw in the towel and give up. The next minute, I'm ready to cut a bitch for touching my husband. I want to fight for him, show him and everyone else he's mine, but I feel so damn betrayed.

Has he cheated? Does he have a mistress?

I...I don't know. I want to believe him so bad that it hurts, and I do know that Anthony's no bullshitter. He's shameless; if he didn't care, he wouldn't even try to appease me. But...with everything I've heard...
Gina and I aren't really close, but we see each other often enough—even more now when Daniela's entered our lives. Dani's wonderful, cool as hell, and strong. Gina's...different. She can be very sweet and chic, but she resents Nico something fierce, because he doesn't hide his infidelity. Anyway, Gina's told me that Nico has told her that Anthony's got a goomah in town. And I get it, I shouldn't listen to rumors like that, even less when you consider who my husband really is—coveted, feared, respected, desired, powerful...but if you add those rumors to all the nights Anthony hasn't come home and the goddamn stripper dust and lipstick marks...

I trust him with my life, but not with my heart, if that makes sense.

Yet, I can't help but love him so much.

Although...no way, asshole—I ain't forgiving that easily. He wants my trust? He better fucking earn it. He's gotta work hard for it, especially since I don't have a clue what he does when he's out.

Bella told me to be strong but fair.

I don't know what I would've done without my mother-in-law. God knows my own mom would only tell me to suck it up. I love her, and she's been a decent mother, but Anthony is a god in her eyes. He can do no wrong, and even if he did do wrong, Mom would remain on his side.

Bella, on the other hand? While staying true to her son, she also supports the family's women and gives us advice. About Anthony, she did say he's many people's meal ticket, so there's always gonna be someone who wants him and is willing to go far.

*I shouldn't have listened to rumors.*

Still... I did it. Can't change the past.
True to Anthony’s word—for once—he does return after five minutes, this time with Alice’s driver and Nico.

"Get my car," Anthony tells Tommy.

Nico raises a brow, eyeing my cheek, then lights up a smoke. Both ignore me, standing a few feet away, and my blood is starting to boil.

Did he just bring me here to humiliate me?

When Tommy gets back with Anthony’s car, my dear husband stops talking to Nico long enough to tell me to "get my ass in the back" before he refocuses on Nico.

I roll my eyes internally and get in the car.

I’m struggling to keep my coat closed and shut the door when I spot Tommy watching me in the rearview.

"You okay, hon?"

I open my mouth to answer when Anthony shouts, "Ay!" He points to Tommy. "Don't talk to my wife."

I sigh and give Tommy a look in the mirror. He stifles a grin and shrugs, averting his gaze.

After a while, Anthony nods and squeezes Nico's shoulder, the two bumping fists before my husband opens the door and gets in the passenger's seat.

"Where to, Maisano?" Tommy asks.

"Home."

The ride is silent, and thankfully quick, 'cause the tension is killing me. I can feel impatience and anger rolling off Anthony. But whenever he
watches me in the side mirror, I see lust and possessiveness in his eyes, too.

I see lust and love in his gaze often, but it's been a while since I saw raw need and possessiveness.

Right then and there, I decide to make sure he looks at me like that more often. Like Daniela once told me, we gotta throw our men for a loop sometimes. She's the one who helped me pick out a few dirty outfits, promising they'd work.

I wasn't born yesterday, but I don't have as much experience as some of the others. I'd say Elisa and I are more alike in that aspect, but she still knows more, having grown up with her crazy brothers, crazier father, and brutally honest mother.

I grew up sheltered from too much.

As soon as Tommy pulls up into our driveway, Anthony gets out and opens my door, quick to grab me by my arm and haul me out.

"Have my car detailed and returned by noon tomorrow," Anthony tells Tommy, then ushers me up the stone steps to our house. Once we get inside, he points toward the staircase. "Get that toy down here. Now."

I huff and walk toward the downstairs bathroom instead, 'cause that's where I have it.

This particular vibrator may be new, but Elisa and I actually bought our first vibrators together when she turned eighteen. If Anthony thinks his cock is the only cock-shaped thing that's ever been inside me, he's sorely mistaken.
As I step inside the bathroom, I get an idea. Since this is the bathroom Anthony never uses—our bedroom is upstairs—this is where I've stashed the outfits I bought. So...should I change into a new one?

*I want him to lose himself with me.*

I gotta hurry, so I snatch up one of the shopping bags, revealing the schoolgirl outfit, and I quickly strip out of the corset and panties.

The plaid skirt is short and really fucking tight, but I manage to pull it on. I forego panties. White kneesocks, black Mary Janes that I swore never to wear again after Catholic school, a white push-up bra, and a snug, white button-down that shows plenty of cleavage. Lastly, I muss up my hair and divide it into two high pigtails.

I hesitate when I look in the mirror to apply lip gloss. God, I look like a cow. Will he really like this?

*Will he laugh?*

"*Gabriella!*" Anthony shouts from the living room. Or the kitchen. "*Before we get old would be good!*"

I narrow my eyes at the mirror. *You can do this, girl.* I have a feeling this can't be done half-assed. It's all or nothing, so I swallow my insecurities, apply the gloss, and grab the smooth, pink vibrator from a drawer. Then I walk out and find my husband in the living room. He's standing near the TV with his back to me as he flips through the channels.

*All or nothing. I'm going with all.*

"*You wanted to see me, Mr. Maisano?*" I ask, twirling a pigtail between my fingers.
He can take this in whatever direction he wants. He wants me to be a stripper? That's fine. He wants me to be a naughty schoolgirl? That's fine, too. Anything, as long as we can leave mechanical and gentle behind us.

Anthony turns around, his eyebrows shooting up and his eyes growing large.

"What the f-fuck?" he splutters.

Good or bad? I can't tell, dammit!

Since he seems to be frozen in place, I take the opportunity to guide him over to the couch. With a small nudge, he plops down, still staring at me with those wide eyes. But the new position brings him to the same level as the vibrator in my hand, and that pisses him off.

"I want that thing outta my house," he spits out. "You've never used it before, right?"

I hold it aloft, appraising it. "Not this one." I smile at my husband.

He glares, his gaze shifting between me and the toy. "You've used other—whoa, is that thing bigger than me?"

I knew he'd pick up on that.

"A little bit." I shrug. Considering how little experience I have, all I can say is that Anthony is big enough that he has to go slow in the beginning if we haven't had sex in a while. Boy, can he stretch me out. But sometimes, a girl wants it to sting.

"Throw it out." He points toward the hallway.

"Why?" I let innocence seep into my voice. "I could fuck myself so good with the old one, but it stopped working." I pout. "I needed a new one."
His chest heaves underneath his suit with barely-restrained fury. And jealousy? "How long has this been going on?"

Oh my God, he's acting as if I've been having an affair.

"A few years?" I shrug and set down the vibrator on the coffee table. Then I use my seductive smile and straddle my husband. I decide to mock what he told me earlier at Dominic's apartment. "Call me a prick, but sometimes a girl wants it dirty and fast—"

"I fucking get it," he growls, slapping a hand over my mouth. He releases a breath and lowers his gaze to my cleavage. "God...mamma mia..."

That has to be good.

He swallows and licks his lips, suddenly impatient. His eyes flick from spot to spot, my eyes, my tits, my thighs... But he doesn't touch me. Not even a little.

Curious.

Twisting my body, I reach for the stereo remote and push play. It's one of Anthony's mix CDs, mostly sexy stuff. When I listen to music, I usually use the radio in the kitchen. An H-Town song comes on, one of Anthony's favorite bands, and I lean forward to kiss the spot below his ear.

"Do you want a lap dance from me, ciccio?" I ask in what I hope is a sultry voice.

"Wh...what?" He looks dazed.

I only raise a brow and bite my lip, 'cause I know he heard me.

He sucks in a breath and balls his hands into fists next to my thighs. "I, uh...yeah. Yeah." He nods slowly and eyes my cleavage again. "Lo faresti davvero? I mean...cazzo." His hands shift closer, as if he wants to touch,
but he catches himself and pulls back. *So odd.* "You shouldn't have to."
His eyes search mine now, and I can see he's torn.

"What if I want to?"

He continues to hesitate.

It's been like this since I gave birth to TJ.

"Do you honestly want me to beg?" I chuckle. "I'll do it." I lean forward again. "Please, Anthony," I whisper in his ear, "let me be your whor—"

"Stop that shit!" he snaps. He grabs my jaw and glares at me. "Didn't I just fucking tell you not to call yourself that?"

"Fine!" I've had it. "I'm done. You obviously don't want me." Pushing myself off him, I try to keep my hurt from showing. That can wait until I'm alone. "I'm going to bed. Go be with your skanky strippers instead." I escape as fast as I can when my vision blurs and my throat closes up.

I feel like such a damn fool. Ugly, fat—I'm just the mother of his kids. Nothing else.

"Gabriella..." Anthony follows me up the stairs, so I pick up speed, hoping I can lock myself into the bathroom. "Will you stop?"

*No.*

Swallowing a sob, I open the bathroom door and slam it shut before locking it. Then I slide down to the floor and hug my knees to my chest, which...ugh, it doesn't really work. My boobs are in the way, and my belly...

*Here come the waterworks.*

"*Open the door, Gabby.*" He knocks on it firmly. "*Come on.*"
I sniffle and wipe at my cheeks. "Just go away."

"No." Next he wiggles the doorknob. "Yo, I ain't leaving. You think the door's gonna stand in my way?"

Dominic's already busted the door downstairs once, so I'm sure Anthony can do the same.

"I don't want you to come in here!" I stand up to splash my face with some cold water. "Please just respect that and go."

I hear him chuckle. "Doesn't work that way, micina. I know you're upset. Come out here so we can talk about it or whatever."

"You're the last person I wanna talk to right now." I stare at myself in the mirror, disgusted with what I see. "God, you make me sick." I say it to both Anthony and myself.

"Excuse me?!" Oooh, another thing that pisses off my husband. "I make you sick?" The door rattles some more. "I swear to Christ, Gabriella, if you don't open this door right now...!"

What, you'll slap me again? I dab a towel over my damp face and chuckle humorlessly. "I'm ready for whatever you wanna throw at me." My eyes look dead. "But are you ready for me to fight back?"

That makes him laugh, and a second later, he rams his shoulder against the door. Didn't work. Another shove, and the hinges loosen from the doorframe.

"You're ruining the fucking door, idiot!" I shout.

He grunts out words with each push. "Sick of. That. Fucking. Mouth!"
A crack echoes in the bathroom, followed by Anthony pushing himself in. The broken door slams against the shower wall, causing me to jump, and my husband storms in with murder in his eyes.

"Vuoi essere trattata come una puttana?" He's fuming, asking me if I really wanna get treated like a whore. "So be it." In two quick strides, he reaches me, grabs my arm, and drags me outta the bathroom and into the bedroom. I wince from the pain that throbs in my arm, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of knowing he's hurting me. "Get on the bed."

"Not even in my most boring dreams," I cackle. I'm as exhilarated as I am afraid. It's like a strong buzz that flows in my veins. "If it's all right wit'chu, I'll just sleep in TJ's room tonight." Thank God they're with my mom. "Spare me the snooze-fest."

My head whips to the side before the resounding sound and pain from his hand registers on my already-bruising cheek. I lose my footing, a loud ringing noise filling my ears, and it hurts so much that I can't get air into my lungs.

Everything is out of focus as I meet Anthony's gaze. For a beat or two, he looks shocked, but I don't know why. There're too many emotions flitting over his features, and it's making me dizzy. Anger, remorse, hurt, regret.

The tears burn. I try to breathe. God. He packed so much force into that one. I choke.

"If only you fucked as good as you hit," I rasp out.

Like the flip of a switch, all traces of guilt vanish. "You gotta learn when to stop." He grasps my shoulders and moves me toward the bed, easily pushing me down on it. "Do you want me to hurt you?" He follows and hovers over me, and the sick bastard is hard as a fucking rock. "You goad me, force my hand, and emasculate me."
I turn my head when he tries to kiss me.

"Fuck that." He grips my jaw and smashes his lips to mine, groaning as he presses his cock to my pussy. "You think I don't want you?" He bites my bottom lip and thrusts. "You're wrong. I want you too much. I'm afraid that I'll hurt you."

I let out a sharp laugh and shove at him. "You hurt me when you see strippers."

"I'll stop." He straightens and shrugs out of his jacket, then starts unbuttoning his shirt. "I'll stop getting lap dances."

Promises, promises.

"Your words mean as much as your dick." I throw an arm over my face. Looks like he wants to *make love*. It's cool, though. It'll be over in a minute. "Which isn't a lot these days."

"There she goes again..." He mutters to himself as he gets undressed. "Tell me I can touch you."

What? Since when does he need permission? Jackass.

He throws me a look of impatience. "You wanna be my stripper? You gotta tell me I can touch you. Because—" he gets in my face, again grabbing my jaw, at which I wince "—contrary to what you believe, I don't fucking touch them."

I remember earlier, on the couch, he didn't touch me.

I assumed I didn't do it for him—that there was something wrong with my outfit, or more correctly, something wrong with *me*.

"Make me go crazy, Gabriella," he says huskily, his hands and eyes roaming my body. "Beg me, be desperate for me."
"I've been desperate for you for years, Anthony!" I can't fucking believe him. "Maybe I've given up."

He shakes his head no and rips my shirt, buttons flying. "So, now all of a sudden, you don't want it anymore?" He raises a brow at me. "All right...maybe I should leave—"

"Fuck you!" I manage to shove him away, but this time I ain't going anywhere. I pounce on him, using every bit of strength I have. "I hate you!" I slap him, claw at his neck, and knee him in the gut. One blow for every time he's hurt me tonight. "You're not supposed to want other women!"

"Jesus," he coughs. In a swift move, he rolls over me and pins me to the bed. "Bitch—you drew blood." He touches his neck where I scratched him, then gives me a sinister smile. "You're on, baby. No more sweet shit."

The next thing I know, he kisses me again, and his hand slides between us to cup my pussy. I struggle against his advances, but a small and sick part of my brain revels in the attention. Because...had I been someone else, I have a feeling he wouldn't put up with all this.

I guess I've been so neglected that I'll take whatever I can get...? Which...God, that just infuriates me.

"Stop," I snarl.

"Can't," he grunts, and a second later, he shoves his cock deep inside me and groans into my neck. I gasp at the intrusion, not used to that force. "Christ, micina." While I'm still in shock, he gets handsy. He palms my breasts, fucks me hard, and kneads my ass roughly. "This what'chu wanted?"
I choke on a breath, this time struggling against myself. I don't want my body come alive—not like this. My pussy stings because of the lack of wetness, but it won't for long, not if he keeps this up.

Self-hatred burns through me like acid. This isn't right. I shouldn't want this—not even a little.

"E' colpa tua," he whispers in my ear, telling me it's my fault, breathing heavily with each thrust. "Now that I've seen you like this, I won't be able to stop." He groans and drives deeper into me. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Go fuck your stripper instead!" I cry out as I push at his shoulders. I remember the slut from tonight, in the process of taking off her panties. "You had her naked on your lap..." For the umpteenth time, I crumple and begin to cry.

"Hey—" He slows down but stays buried in me. "Listen to me." He speaks with his lips brushing my cheek, my lips, my jaw. "What you saw—I'm sorry, Gabriella. I was so mad and humiliated, and I took it too far. Way too far." He forces me to meet his gaze. "But I want you to know, what you saw was the worst I've ever done, and I wouldn't have taken it further." The sincerity in his words makes me doubt everything, myself included. "It didn't feel right, okay? I fucking swear to you, and just the thought of touching someone that isn't you..." He shakes his head. "Even if you hadn't come to Dawn, I wouldn't have continued."

I whimper. "Please stop." Aside from this being the worst time in history to bring up other women, what guts me the most is that I get hopeful. I want this to be true. I want to know that having a stripper dance for him is the worst he's ever done. "I can't—I can't hear this."

"I'm gonna tell you anyway." Inch by inch, he starts moving again. "I've always kept my hands to myself. Always stayed dressed and zipped up."
He brushes featherlight kisses to my face. "Always found them too skinny." I watch as he licks his lips and stares down at my body. "I've wanted this—this with you, only you, Gabby. But..." He groans and drops his forehead to my shoulder. "It hasn't felt right. You're the mother of our babies; I shouldn't want to treat you like something cheap."

For the first time, I listen to what he's saying. I've heard the words before, but he's so damn hung up on this that I guess I have to take him seriously. But to me, it's still ridiculous. I just cannot understand how going behind my back would hurt less.

"Do you want to hurt me?" I ask, searching his eyes.

He frowns. "No. Of course not! What the fuck?"

I shrug against the pillows. "I'm just saying, using your wife's body for your pleasure won't hurt me. I'll even love it. But going to a strip club and to other women...? That kills me, Anthony. It also kills us."

His frown deepens and he averts his eyes. His dick has softened a little too, and I don't know if I'm glad or disappointed.

"Cazzo," he mutters, then pulls away. He lies down next to me—doesn't say anything. He just throws an arm over his face and grits his teeth.

I sigh and stare at the ceiling.

So...

Now what?

Too late to do laundry. My kids are asleep at Mom's. Not hungry. Bored. The house is spotless.

I could take up knitting.
"I've made you this insecure, haven't I?" Anthony asks quietly. "I've made you doubt that I desire you?"

As Julia would say, *duh.*

"Yes." I tilt my head to face him, but he's still hiding behind his arm. "Is that so weird?"

He removes his arm and shakes his head, staring at the ceiling now. "I never meant to do that," he whispers. Finally, he turns to me. "You've never been more beautiful to me, Gabriella. And to think I don't get turned on by you...?" He chuckles. Turns to the ceiling yet again. Scrubs his hands over his face. "I deserve a medal for all the times I've held back."

"You shouldn't have to hold back!" I sit up and crawl over to straddle him. God, he's dumb. "I want us to be like we used to, back before we had TJ and Allegra. I want you to lose it with me, take me however and whenever you want." I dip down and press my breasts to his chest. "I want you to prove it right now."

Anthony bites his lip and peers between us. At the same time, his hands glide up my thighs. "I'm not really in the mood." I can feel that, but maybe that can change. "I'm sick to my fucking stomach, knowing I've hurt'chu."

Well, that's good. But I want my husband back now.

"Okay." I feign indifference and make a move to leave. "I can use my vibrator instead."

That strikes a nerve. He goes rigid and tightens his hold on my thighs.

I go for broke. "You don't mind, do you?" I ask innocently. "In fact, I can't wait to feel that big cock sliding inside me—"
"Shut the fuck up!" He flips us over, instantly livid, and pushes me into the mattress. My heart skips a beat as he tears at whatever's left of my outfit. He's rough and angry in his touches. "Lift." I push up my hips so he can pull down the short skirt. He quirks a brow at the kneepants and shoes. "Those're stayin'." Kneeling between my legs, he points to his cock. "Suck it."

A rush of excitement surges through me, and I'm fucking giddy. Maybe that's weird, but he hasn't told me to do oral in a long time. And he's usually always so nice about it, throwing in too many "could ya please" and "if it doesn't bother you."

Evidently I take too long, 'cause my husband yanks me up and pushes my head toward his semi. Unf. "Get me harder," he demands.

I open my mouth and take him in, intent to please and satisfy. My tongue swirls around the head, my lips tightening. I suck until my jaw aches, but every moan and groan from Anthony makes it worth it.

"Jesus Christ, Gabby..." His hands are everywhere, on my shoulders, my breasts, my face, in my hair. He tugs and pulls, pushes his hips forward, and takes from me. "That's it—fuck yeah." Abruptly, he withdraws from my mouth, panting. "I want'chu on all fours." He swallows.

So do I, and I get in position and hope he'll at least—oh, yes, yes, yes, yeeees, he slides two fingers up and down my pussy, making me wet and ready.

In a move that stuns me with pleasure, he spanks my pussy three times, his middle finger landing directly over my clit. I gasp and push out my ass, then moan his name, much to his satisfaction.

Oh God, oh God, oh God.
"You'll forget that toy in no time." He guides his cock to my pussy, kneeling behind me. Grasping my hips, he rams forward and buries himself to the hilt. "Cazzo."

~oOo~

That night, he shows me over and over what he's capable of.

In the shower after our first round, he makes me scream so loud that the neighbors complain.

In the kitchen, after I've given him a midnight snack—friggin' sandwich, what else?—he makes me his snack. He hauls me up on the kitchen island and eats me out until I get more religious than the Pope.

Which brings us to the living room. He says he's gotta have me right-fucking-now, because feeling me coming around his tongue is evidently hotter than hell. So, he bends me over the couch and slams into me.

I forget the number of positions.

I'm his rag doll, finally getting my way.

"Anthony—" I whimper.

Somewhere along the way, he stops screwing me to prove a point. He ravishes me, can't get enough of me, and stares at me like I'm a tall glass of water in a desert. And by now, we're both on the couch, and he's fucking me into the cushions. He kisses me hard and deep, until we can barely breathe.

I ache all over, but I've missed him too much to even think about asking him to take a break. Instead I get needier, clingier, which he seems to enjoy.
"I love you..." He hooks an arm under my knee, leans forward—basically folding me in half—and pushes back in. "God, I love you, micina." He's breathing heavily, our lips just brushing together, as if we're too spent to do more.

"I want this," I gasp. Palming his face, I squeeze my eyes shut and nip at his bottom lip. "This is how it's suppos'ta be."

"Yeah," he groans through a long thrust. "You—you really...oh, fuck." He pants, but he doesn't stop to catch his breath. He jackhammers into me, acting possessed. "This, you want this? I'm not hurting you?"

I shake my head and lift my hips, allowing him to get in as deep as possible. "Keep going." I'm approaching my third orgasm for the night—right on that edge. His pelvis rubs against my clit with every push and pull, driving me bonkers with lust. "I love it."

"Shit," he breathes out. "My li'l freak. I've been missing out." He moans loudly when I slip a hand between us, creating a "V" with my fingers to squeeze the root of his dick. "Jesus, Gabriella." I think he actually whimpered there. "While I've been scoping bony hoes, I coulda had this..."

I make a noise—not sure his unfiltered admission is welcome while he's fucking his wife, but then again...*glad he's finally realizing*. More than glad. Ecstatic, relieved. And it helps me; I get more hopeful. Maybe he wasn't lying before. Maybe all he did was get lap dances. Maybe he never kissed them, fucked them...

"You really mean that?" I swallow, only to suck in a sharp breath and arch my back when he grinds against my clit. *Oh, God!*

"You have no idea, baby." He gives me a forceful kiss and palms my cheek with his free hand. "I swear to you. It was a cheap thrill—" He screws his face together, eyes shut; he's nearly lost to our...*fuckfest*. "Kept picturing
you, what I wanted to do wit'chu, what I wanted you to wear." With the next kiss, he coaxes my tongue out with his. "I'm so fucking sorry."

My heart soars at his declaration. He lets go of my leg, and I wrap them around him, along with my arms. I scratch his muscular, sweat-damp back with my nails and watch as goose bumps appear on his shoulders and arms.

"It never went beyond lap dances? Having them on your lap?" I hold my breath.

He's quick to shake his head, but most importantly, he's quick to look me in the eye. "Never." Forehead to forehead. "Not even once—never wanted it, wasn't even tempted."

My brain is quick to doubt him, but my gut instinct tells me he's speaking the truth. Tears of relief well in my eyes, and while it'll take some time to fully trust him, at least I can now allow myself to believe we'll fix this. That we can move on. That we can come out of this stronger. Closer. Better.

"Will you let me give you that cheap thrill whenever you need it?" This question makes me more nervous to ask. "I'll do whatever you want, Anthony. You can be as selfish as you want. I'll dress up—"

"Gabriella." He cuts me off, all serious-looking. And he slows down, if only a little. "I don't want you to turn into somebody else—God. Do I dig the outfits, the schoolgirl getup and that black shit you wore before? Hell yes. Fuck yes. But I want you." He releases a breath and kisses me almost tenderly. "If we do this, I want my stripper to be Gabriella Maisano. End'a story."

"Okay." I feel all giddy again. "So...no wigs? No fake names?"
He makes a noise and shakes his head. There's a mouthed *fuck, no* involved, too.

"But I do wanna dress up." 'Cause...Christ, it's hot. Makes me feel all dirty and sexy. Well, it does now. When I know it turns him on. Not so much before. Grinning, I trail my fingers up his arms, and I kiss his chin. "I can spend lots of money on sexy lingerie and role-playing outfits."

"Shit! Yeah—yeah, yeah, do that." He laughs, outta breath, and nuzzles my neck. "You gotta come, *micina*. I'm so fucking close. Let go of my cock—you're killing me."

I do let go of him, and I start rubbing my clit instead, which Anthony watches intently. In the meantime, he dips down and sucks on my breasts, moaning and groaning curses.

Already being so sensitive, it doesn't take many seconds for me to be close again. Anthony feels my clenching and takes over. At the same time, he whispers dirty words in my ear that make me feel light-headed.

"*Christ, I've never been this hard before.*"

"*That's it, milk my cock.*"

"*I wanna mark you, come all over your pussy and feed it to you.*"

"*You're gonna take every drop I give you.*"

"*Fucking beautiful. You're right there—let go, Gabby.*"

In the end, I fall apart with a silent scream, and Anthony drives into me once last time before he climaxes, too. In jerky moves, he fucks me throughout his orgasm, coming both inside me and along my soaked slit. I flush with unbearable heat, drowning in the ecstasy he brings me, and he prolongs my bliss by rubbing the leaking head of his cock over my clit.
Spent and exhausted, we collapse in a heap of limbs, our chests falling and rising rapidly with each shallow breath.

Anthony groans after a minute. "Can't...move..."

That works for me, 'cause I don't want him to. Although, I gotta pee soon!

"We should probably take another shower," I giggle breathlessly.

He hums and drops sweet, slow kisses along my shoulder. "Maybe a bath."

"I'll fall asleep." Without a doubt. With great effort, I might be able to pull off a five-minute shower, but a bath? Heck no.

"Then I'll just carry you to bed." He pushes himself up a little, peering down at me. "Come on. I kinda want to. Just..." He shrugs with one shoulder. "I wanna take care'a you for a bit. Let me?"

*I'm not gonna say no.*

I don't believe we're outta the woods just yet, but it feels like I can at least see the way out. So, I'll revel in his doting until it's time to deal with the next hurdle.

~oOo~

When I wake up the next morning, the delicious soreness of my lower body kicks in, though it only makes me grin. But that leads to the next pain, which is far from pleasant. With that grin, my skin tightens around my mouth, reminding me in the worst ways of how Anthony puts his foot down.

The left side of my face is burning hot; I don't feel any swelling—thank God—but it's gotta look awful.
Guess I was too high on endorphins last night to pay attention to it?

Anthony's side of the bed is cold, so he must've been up for a while. Dragging my ass into the bathroom to relieve myself, I avoid the mirror, then wash up carefully, brush my teeth, and pick out something comfy. As far as I know, I just gotta pick up our kids today, and I need to go shopping for little Lia's birthday.

Once I'm in my black cotton pants and a snug hoodie, I pull my hair back in a ponytail and head downstairs.

My stomach's in knots, hoping Anthony's still home. He usually doesn't leave early, but I can never be too sure. And doubts and insecurities will linger for a long time.

"Anthony?" Down the stairs, I peer into the living room, but it's empty. The backyard looks empty, too.

"Kitchen, baby."

Whew. I breathe a sigh of relief and walk into the kitchen, where I find him at the table drinking coffee and reading the paper. He's only wearing sweats and a t-shirt, so I doubt he's going anywhere soon. He's got some scruff going on, too. Hot. And messy hair. Even hotter.

"Good morning," I say, a little hoarse. I clear my throat.

"Buongiorno, my love." Anthony looks up at me, already with a tight smile on his face. That confuses me until he's gone to the freezer and retrieved an ice pack. For my bruises. Right. He walks over to me and gently presses it to my cheek, and I wince. "I'm so sorry," he whispers.

It's my turn to force a smile. "Starò bene." I tell him I'll be okay.
Truth is...I haven't really had time to process the fact that he's slapped me—twice—which has never happened before. He's been rough, pretty grabby, but he's never outright hit me before yesterday. Then again, I've never goaded him either—literally dared him, taunted him.

"C'mere." He hugs me close and kisses the top of my head, the ice pack placed between my cheek and his collarbone. "How could you even let me touch you last night? Huh?"

I shrug vaguely, breathing in his scent. "I was a bit more focused on our marriage."

He nods minutely and lets his lips linger in my hair. "I was a coward." Lifting my head, holding on to the ice pack, I peer up at him, surprised he'd admit that. He shrugs again. "I had nothing clever to say—you was right, so I did the only thing I could think of, cuz..." He squints at the floor, maybe searching for the right words? "Look, you didn't hafta fuckin' humiliate me, but I get it, a'ight?" He rubs the back of his neck. "I hurt'chu bad, and I don't got any excuse. I mean..." He makes a face. "Gabriella, I do have a reputation to uphold. If the guys knew how whipped I am—"

"You're not whipped," I laughed. The idea of him being whipped is insane. "You do what you want."

"Depends how you look at it," he points out. Taking my hands, he leads me to the table and sits down with me sideways on his lap. "Like, if they knew how devoted I really am...?"

I can't help but roll my eyes at that shit. "Right, so you can only be a good wiseguy if you screw around?"

"Well, no..." He gets impatient, trying to explain it to me. "A wiseguy gets judged by how he is at work, so to speak. But if you wanna know how that
wiseguy is as a man... Goomahs and screwing around have nothing to do with our choice of work, but it's one of the things that, you know, lets you see how the motherfucker is as a person. If a guy is whipped—his wife owns him, he'll be seen as a pussy." Another shrug, and he scratches his nose.

That's gotta be a load of crap. "Yeah, you must be right. 'Cause Junior really does act like a pussy," I deadpan. Anthony actually chuckles, which makes my face fall. "No..." No way. "Does your dad have a girlfriend on the side?" That would make me so fucking sad. And angry.

"Not anymore," he drawls. At my frown, he goes on. "Before I was born, Pops had another wife." I nod, having heard something about that. "Yeah well, he cheated on her—lived with her out in Henderson, but he had a girlfriend here in town." He rolls his eyes, his jaw ticking. It's like he's both amused and irritated. "His mistress was Mom."

"No!" I gasp and my free hand flies to my mouth. "You're kidding."

Wow, that's...I don't even know how to react.

He shakes his head no and presses his lips into a thin line. "Dad's first wife died, and he married Mom. Me, Elisa, and Dominic were all born while they hooked up in secret. They, like, had a condo together not far away from Dawn."

"I had no idea," I whisper.

"Not many do," he chuckles wryly. "But, anyway...trust, Dad has earned his rep. No one would dare to question him today. So yeah, he's faithful to Ma, but he hasn't always been a loving husband—not to his first wife."

I bite my lip and look down between us, hating this. "So, basically...you gotta keep up with the women to make the men...what, believe you get as much pussy as you want?" I cringe.
"Hey..." He palms my non-hurting cheek. "I'm done, okay? I told you that, and I'm sticking to it. I only want'chu anyway. Besides, my rep is kinda solid now as it is, 'cause evidently Nico talks, which..." He lets out a low laugh, a dark one. "I'mma talk to him about that. But you got nothin'a worry about, all right? I swear to you."

I stomp down the hope. "You'll never get a lap dance again?"

"I'll never ask for one," he vows. "I have no reason to—not now when you've smacked some sense into my head." He taps his temple. "That said, I wouldn't be able to disrespect a boss—like if Felix offered me one...?" He makes a face. "I don't wanna explain this to you, how it is at the clubs, but it don't matter anyway, 'cause—" He stops abruptly and pinches the bridge of his nose. Then he curses. "Okay," he says, facing me with a serious expression, "I'mma give you a hand, and if you try to take the whole arm..." He trails off with a cocked brow.

I nod, understanding. "I won't ask any questions, and I'll keep shit to myself. I promise."

Anthony never shares work stuff with me—only a hint here and there, enough to let me know that he ain't exactly an upstanding citizen.

Obviously, I know he's in the mafia. I grew up around that. I know most men in our family are involved, and I know that Felix is Anthony's boss.

"Bene." He nods. "There's gonna be a shift in management soon, so you don't gotta worry about my boss offering any lap dances, regardless of how much money I bring him." His mouth twists into a smirk; meanwhile, I'm trying to read between the lines. "In the future, I'll probably get a drink and a pat on the back."

Well, I'd prefer that! But I'm so fucking curious now...

There'll be a new boss? Felix is retiring?
"No questions," I sigh.

"Thank you." He kisses my cheek. "So...you see? You don't have to worry."

That's reassuring. Now I just gotta learn to trust him again.

"Can you try to call me whenever you're gonna be late?" I ask, as I don't think that's too much. I get worried so easily, and it's a constant battle between knowing and not knowing. I know the crime rates in Vegas. I know my husband's construction business is most likely only a front. I know that almost all our money comes in cash...

I know that he carries a gun, often surrounds me with security in the form of a driver, and I know that our security system is outta this world. State of the art. Expensive.

The list of things I don't know is even longer.

"Honest to God." He places a hand over his heart. "I'll do better at giving you a heads up. I'll even—"

"Up-up-up." I shush him quickly and put two fingers to his mouth. "Don't, um...no new promises. Please? If you ever wanna surprise me with anything, that's wonderful. But don't promise it, okay?"

He smiles ruefully and nods, pecking my fingertips. "Got it."

I relax for the first time in...I don't even know, and I put the ice pack aside to snuggle close to my husband. "I love you, Anthony."

He sighs contentedly and wraps his arms around me. "I love you more, Gabriella. I'll prove it to you." He kisses me on the forehead. "But right now, we're late for breakfast with my parents."

Oh... "We are?" My brows knit together. As much as I adore my in-laws, I guess I was hoping for some alone time with Anthony.
He nods, firm. "I called Dad a while ago. He's expecting me."

There's something in his expression that puts me on edge. "Why?"

"Because...because I fucked up." He brushes his knuckles over my bruised cheek. "When he hurt Mom, I made sure he knew what it felt like."

"So...what." I cock a brow and snort. "He's gonna backhand you?"

"I wish," he mutters. "I'll be lucky if he doesn't use the phone book."

He's gotta be kidding.

Right?

But Anthony's look tells me no...no, he's not joking at all.

"Come on." He gives me thigh a light smack. "Breakfast with my folks, then we're picking up our babies."

"You're serious," I state flatly. He nods with a 'fraid so, baby face. "Um. Okay, but...I gotta go put on a lot of makeup."

He winces. "Dad's already told Mom, so it's really no use."

"Are you outta your fuckin' mind?!" I slap his arm.

"Oh! Mind ya hands," he bitches.

I groan into my hands, completely embarrassed. I don't want Bella and Junior to see me like this.

Now I know what Bella felt after Junior got rough with her.

"This is on me, micina," he murmurs, hugging me to him. "Dee's gonna want a go next time I see him, too. And Mom...? Fuck. I'd rather take ten phone books to the head than face her."
Actually...that might be fun to see.
Chapter 23

Hummingbird's POV

By the time Anthony and Gabriella park in the driveway, I've paced the hallway for ten minutes, a furious and anxious mess.

Junior's smart, not telling me to cool it; in fact, he's quiet. It's our views, our ways as parents, that affect our children's views on life, relationships, and how to deal with a fucking argument. They take after us. And if Junior opens his mouth to tell me I gotta calm down, I don't know what I'll do.

I am so damn mad—and broken up about this.

My father smacked my mom around all the time, so I consider myself lucky to have a nicer husband. So lucky that the couple times where Junior's gotten rough barely register with me.

I'm a product of my generation as much as Junior is. Whenever Elisa and Julia tell Junior he's too old-fashioned—ancient in his way of thinking...they forget it's my way of thinking, too. But it shouldn't be our children's way of thinking, 'cause times have changed.

Women are more equal today.

Yet...all I wanna do the second Anthony steps foot inside our door...is smack the ever-loving crap outta him.

Violence is wrong, kids are told today.

But where I come from...? Lord, it's not even violence. It's discipline.

So, I'm left torn. Torn between wanting to give Anthony a dose of his own medicine—part of my own beliefs—and going by modern shit, talking to him, telling him calmly that violence is wrong, and...
I laugh to myself, going crazy. There's just no way. I'm sorry, but I can't let this slide. It's a world full of hypocrisy, and I just not the person to fix that.

"I wanna smack him," I whisper, ashamed.

Junior raises a brow at me, hands stuck in the pockets of his slacks. "Be my guest. I plan on doin' a lot more than that."

I nod, smoothing down my dress. I'm nervous. And glad Julia's not home. This was supposed to be a quiet day, just me and Junior. Like, with comfy clothes and good food and just...us spending the day together. But now...ugh.

"You okay with that?" I ask. "I mean...the double standard and all."

"Yup."

Just like that. Yup.

We won't stand for our son hurting his wife, but when it's us...? We don't practice what we preach.

"What's taking them so long?" I walk over to the slim window next to the door and peer outside, spotting Anthony and Gabriella by their car. Anthony looks like he's trying to calm his wife down. "Oh, God." I cover my mouth with my hand when Gabby turns and I see her face. "Oh God, Juniuh."

I feel sick to my stomach, and I turn away. "You deal with him. I can't even look at him right now."

Junior lands a kiss to my forehead, understanding, and I head to the kitchen instead. But...I can't not know what's gonna happen. I stay close
to the wide doorway and listen intently as Junior opens the door for Anthony and Gabriella.

After a beat of silence, Junior's the first one to speak, and murmurs to Gabby. "You okay, sweetheart?"

"I'm fine," she says quickly—too quickly. Like a woman of my own generation. "Really, Junior."

Anthony says something to his wife, too quietly for me to hear.

"Te lo riporto vivo." There's a wry smile in Junior's voice as he tells Gabriella he'll return Anthony alive. "Isabella's in the kitchen—you should keep her company."

Some more murmuring that I can't hear; possibly Anthony's reassurances, then some shuffling, Gabby's sighing...before she leaves the men and joins me in the kitchen. And the second she does, I throw my arms around her and squish her in a hug.

"Oh!" She's startled, but she catches on quick, chuckling nervously and returning the hug. "I'm fine, Bella," she whispers.

I'm fine. Yeah, I've heard that before. Said it, too.

"Lemme look at'chu, honey." I palm the cheek that isn't hurt and inspect the damage. Much like I did, she's covered the bruising with makeup, but not enough. I shake my head, so ashamed. "I'm so sorry he did this to you."

Gabriella's eyes well up, but she smiles at the same time. "The thing is, we worked some stuff out. This whole stripper thing..." She rolls her eyes and wipes away a stray tear. "I challenged him, Bella. I pushed him so hard, wanting him to snap. I needed some kind of reaction." She sniffs.
"Clearly, I got it—twice. But we also hashed it all out, you know? I gotta focus on that."

I nod, listening, and lead her over to the island where I have Bloody Marys prepared for us. "Have a seat." I slide a tall glass toward her, which she accepts gratefully. "While I'm...thrilled...that you've worked this out, or started to, this upsets me so much. I've always wanted my boys to respect women..." I trail off, my face falling.

"Like I said, I pushed him," she reminds me. "Literally, I dared him to do it the first time. He raised his hand, and I dared him."

I wince. "And the second time?" Junior was blunt about it after Anthony's call woke us up this morning. Twice, Anthony slapped Gabby.

She blushes and lowers her voice. "I, uh, I insulted his, you know..." She raises her brows and looks down, then up again.

"Oh!" I slap my hand to my mouth. "Oh, Gabriella." I'm not sure if she has the biggest pair of balls I've seen in a long time, or if she's a masochist.

I don't want to justify violence, but no man I know would accept insults about his manhood. God. Junior would go berserk if I offended him like that.

"Please don't tell him I said this," she whispers.

I place a hand over hers. "Certo che no—Of course not, sweetheart." I wouldn't dare.

Now I'm left even more conflicted than before.

Not knowing what to say, I take a big gulp of my Bloody Mary.

As my kids have grown older, I've always tried to stick with the program. I've looked outside our house to know what's popular, how old girls are
when they're allowed to date nowadays, how far a boy can go with a girl on a date...in general, how the world evolves. I even have a cell phone! And while Junior's stuck with our record player and VHS, I prefer CDs and DVDs.

But it's not enough. The world changes too fast—I can't keep up.

I've never been genuinely proper by any means, but I was still raised by my parents. Their views are mine, somewhat. At least the foundation of what a good marriage entails, and how a house is run.

Today's women would call me weak...

I'd like to think I'm a strong woman in my own generation, but by modern standards, I'm sure I'd be viewed as a pushover, a doormat.

"Whew. This was a strong one." I put a smile on my face and set down the drink, my eyes stinging with tears. "I should get started on breakfast." I need to occupy my hands, and my mind, so I head to the fridge and start pulling out ingredients for pancakes and scrambled eggs. In the cupboard, I retrieve a loaf of bread and muffins.

"Are you okay, Bella?" Gabby asks softly, joining me at the counter. She wordlessly takes the bread to slice, and I busy myself cracking eggs into a pan.

"Of course." I smile, pretending to be confused about her inquiry. My bet? I look as lost as I feel. "Why wouldn't I be?" I point to the bread. "That's one of Anthony's favorites—I'll give you the recipe later." Which reminds me, I have to drive over to Alec's deli later. I have few new recipes for entrees at Stella, and he sells the best prosciutto in town.

In my periphery, I can see Gabby eyeing me curiously, with concern, but I ignore it. And after a while, she lets it go and helps out with breakfast.
After some twenty minutes, I'm bringing scrambled eggs, bread, and a plate of cold cuts to the table when Junior and Anthony return. Considering I haven't heard anything, I assume they've been in the backyard and not in my husband's office.

Anthony's face looks just fine, but he's wincing and holding his side.

I look away.

"This looks great." Junior gives my forehead a smooch and takes his seat at the head of the table.

As I bring the pancakes and the syrup to the table, I lean close to Junior and ask, "You didn't break anything, did'ju?"

He chuckles, tucking a napkin into his shirt. "Of course not, hummingbird."

But still...seemed risky to go for Anthony's ribs. "Couldn't you just slap him or something?" God, listen to the words coming outta my mouth. What the hell am I saying? Anthony's my baby. Yet, looking over to Gabriella...

"He can't show up at work with a handprint on his cheek," Junior reasons patiently. "It's all good now."

"Mom..." Anthony tries to get my attention, seated next to Junior, but I...I just can't.

I shake my head and go back to fetch the juice, coffee, and the muffins.

Breakfast is quiet.

Junior eats as if nothing's wrong in the world, and I envy him for that. Gabby can definitely feel the tension, as can Anthony. He's trying to catch my gaze every now and then, but I focus on my plate.
"Definitely not hungry."

"When'a youse bringing my grandbabies ova'?" Junior asks around a mouthful of pancakes.

~oOo~

A few days later, I blurt out all my concerns to Junior right before I'm off to Julia's school. There's a handful of women who have prepared pastries and coffee for the intermission, and my task was to bring my famous sfogliatelle. Two others are bringing coffee and lemonade, one is bringing the rented china, and one is bringing condiments and napkins. So, with my car full of sfogliatelle and the ladies waiting for me at Julia's school, I rant to Junior while he snatches two pastries for himself. As if I hadn't already saved a whole plate for him.

"Lemme get this straight..." Junior swallows a bite and wipes his mouth with the towel around his neck. He's just outta the shower and will meet me at the school before Julia's musical. "Madonna mia, these are good," he mutters, licking little pastry flakes off his fingers.

I snap mine. "Focus, Juniuuh!"

"Easy," he bitches. "Look, you got nothin'a cry about. We're not wrong with our views, and those who say we are, well, fuck them!" It's his turn to get ranty. "Like I've said before, it's not us; it's the fucking world that's gone bananas." He steps forward to grab my jaw and give me a hard kiss. "I don't wanna hear another word about you being—what did you say?"

I slump my shoulders. "A doormat."

He laughs through his nose and shakes his head. "You're too fucking cute, bell'uccellino." Another kiss, this time to my nose. "If you're a doormat, I don't want'chu, 'cause you gotta be the most unwelcoming doormat in history—all that ball-busting considered."
I pout, not really sure why. He's actually making me feel better.

"Come here, you." He hugs me tight, and I take a whiff of his freshly showered hotness. "You're a strong woman, Isabella." He steps back to palm my cheeks and look me in the eye. "You've turned this house into a home I never wanna leave, you've raised four beautiful children, you're a wonderful wife, and we can thank you for Stella Mia's success."

Warmth seeps into me, though I still have doubts. "The violence, though..."

"Eh!" He disagrees, waving that off as silly. "It's over and done with. He got a little rough—but now? *Madonn',* I'mma drag his ass outta their house tomorrow, 'cause he hasn't showed up for work in a few days." I raise a brow, as this is news to me. He smirks. "I don't think you want details of what they've been up to."

Oh. Wow. Huh. "Really?" As awkward as it is, I'm very happy to hear this.

"Really," he confirms. "So, quit thinking about what's right and wrong. People today are fucked in the head. They're all about equal rights, feminist shit, yet they can go against themselves and say it was simpler before. How does that work, huh? And in my head...I don't see anything feminine about a woman who burns her bra, won't shave—"

My mouth quirks up. "I think we're a little past bra burning, *ciccino."

He shrugs, on a roll, and scratches his eyebrow. "No matta'. These so-called feminists complain about how sexist society is, but they still want their men to open doors, pay the check, and get down on one knee with a big fat diamond. They preach about equality in their lady book clubs, gyms for only women, and fuck, who knows what else." He blows out a breath, irritated. "I saw this thing on the Discovery Channel, and—"
And that's my cue! "Thanks so much for making me feel better, Juniuh." I hop up to pop a kiss to his chin. "I love you, love you, love you. See ya at the school before seven, all right?"

**Junior's POV**

Arriving at Julia's school, I'm a proud papa when I receive the program at the door and see that my daughter actually has one of the leads. Maybe I should've paid more attention, but no matta'.

"Dad!"

Whipping around, I spot Elisa in the crowd in front of the auditorium, and I walk toward her. She wanted Joseph to be with her today, but since Felix got back in town this morning, Joseph's keeping him busy. It's the only way Dominic can be here, and he is. He's backstage with Dani's little brother. Anthony picked them up earlier, but my brother's staying out there in that little town to look after Daniela and Lia.

"How you doin', angioletto?" I cup Elisa's cheeks, smiling at the happiness I see. "You look happy."

Her smile is radiating. "More than. My morning sickness seems to be over, so that's a relief."

"Oh..." I nod and look down to her flat stomach, getting a little mushy. My baby's having a baby of her own. "I missed you." I squeeze her to me, spotting my wife over by a few tables. "Have you said hi to Mom?"

"Yeah, but I'm going over again to help her." She looks over to Isabella, then smirks up at me. "She's trying to figure out what I'm hiding."

As far as I'm concerned, Elisa's not really hiding anything, 'cause I haven't given Joseph permission to be with my baby girl.
"You go do your thing," I say, bringing out my comb. I run it through my hair. "I'm gonna track down Anthony and Gabriella."

"Oh, they're already inside." Elisa points. "Anthony mentioned something about payback...?" She scrunches her nose, and I frown in confusion. "He's mad at Julia for something. I don't know." Then it can't be serious—nothing I have to worry about. "I'm not interested in talking to him anyway. Like I can't see what he's done to Gabby just 'cause she's wearing makeup?"

"Hey." I look to her in warning. "That's between those two, and do they look unhappy to you?"

"Let's not talk about it, okay?" She smiles tightly, pulls me down to kiss my cheek, then disappears amongst the proud parents and fussy kids.

Sighing, I make my way through the crowd in another direction, reading the little pamphlet I got at the door. I already know it's Rent they're reenacting, but I can't say I really know what Rent is about.

I find Anthony and Gabby somewhere in the middle where they're saving seats for all of us. My son tells me he's spoken to Dominic, and we're all gonna meet up in an empty classroom after the show.

Soon enough, the auditorium is full of people, and Isabella and Elisa have joined us.

"I'm so excited," Isabella gushes. "Julia's worked so hard."

"She's nervous," Gabriella murmurs. "She called me earlier—she's afraid she's gonna forget her lines."

"Yeah, she called me about that, too." Elisa smiles and shakes her head. "She'll be fine, though. She's rehearsed a lot."
Anthony grins darkly and faces the stage. "Her lines won't be an issue."

I quirk a brow at him, but then I'm distracted by a teacher taking the stage to talk about how good all the kids've been.

I smile and grab my wife's hand, lacing our fingers together.

Soon, there won't be any school plays and recitals to go to, which makes me a little sad.

Everything goes dark around us, but a few seconds later, someone starts playing the piano and eight people take the stage under spotlights.

Isabella buzzes with anticipation next to me, pointing at Julia in the middle. The wife is definitely excited.

I don't understand the first song; they sing about measuring a year in cups of coffee and love, which is just weird. But I focus on my princess, who looks at home on stage.

Her black leather pants are a little inappropriate, though. They hang way too low on her hips, and they fit tighter than skin.

The first scene morphs into the next one while two boys sing about paying rent and several other kids dressed in black roll in a new background. Okay, so...Rent. It's a musical about paying the rent?

They runnin' outta ideas on Broadway?

"What the fuck?" I mutter under my breath. During all that singing about having no scratch, two boys are holding hands, and Julia starts swinging around a goddamn stripper pole. There's a bunch of shit going on up there, probably fifteen or twenty kids on stage, but all I can see are two fags and my stripper daughter.
As if that's not enough, another girl steps forward and makes a show of shooting up drugs in her arm and Julia joins her to share a needle.

I tilt my head to Isabella and cock a brow.

She just grins and pats my arm. "It's not real, ciccino."

Well, obviously. Madonn'. But these'a bunch'a kids. Shouldn't they be singing about...I don't fuckin' know, going off to college?

"My baby's into speedballin' and takin' her clothes off?" I whisper.

"Shh!" Anthony leans forward and levels me with a mock-glare. "I'm tryin'a watch my sister take after her mother."

*What?*

It's Isabella's turn to glare, but there's nothing mocking about it. It's lethal, and Anthony shrinks back in his seat.

I can't blame him. He's been doing all he can to get back in her good graces these days. Such a mama's boy.

"Will you pay attention to the stage?" Gabriella scolds us.

"Oh-ho!" I chuckle, reaching over to pinch her cheek. "Look at'chu, sweetheart." I wink at my boy. "No leash on her, huh?"

He snorts and drapes an arm around her. "She chewed off her collar." Before Gabriella can comment, he shuts her up with a kiss.

Shaking my head, I face the stage again and grimace when two kids start talking about HIV and AIDS. Mother of Christ, what kind of morbid, disease-ridden show is this?

~oOo~
Half an hour later, I'm depressed and freaked out. Worst musical ever. Not only are the kids broke—don't have any money to pay rent, but they're all crackheads or fanooks, and/or carry the gay plague.

"It's so heartbreaking," Isabella whispers next to me and brings a tissue to wipe her tears.

"I think my dick has shriveled up and died," I agree, nodding.

"God, Juniuh." She gives me a look. "Show some class."

I roll my eyes and stifle a yawn. What's worse is that Julia hasn't really been on stage yet. She's the reason I'm here, dammit. Not all those other queer yahoos.

Then at last, at-fucking-last, Julia enters a dark stage with only another boy there. She's holding a candle, and music comes on. At least she's hiding her miniscule top now with a blanket around her shoulders, but she's still wearing those pants. Fuckin' pants.

Horrible plot and wardrobe aside, though... I get a little choked up when my daughter starts singing. I had no idea she was that talented. She's always been our goofball, never taking much seriously. But this...she's really amazing.

But again, the story ruins it. "Why does she keep asking him to light her candle if she insists on blowing it out?" I ask, keeping my voice low.

Elisa, seated between me and Gabriella, answers while chuckling quietly. "'Cause she's got the hots for that other boy, Dad."

I scowl. "But he's busy bitching about his dead girlfriend." That scowl of mine isn't going nowhere as I watch the boy eyeing my baby's ass while she's on the floor looking for her...stash.
I'm so proud.

And now she's singing about her ass...

"Is this a fucking musical or a coked-up porno?" I release Isabella's hand to fold my arms over my chest. "When's the intermission? I wanna give their teacher a piece of my mind."

And that piece is strapped to my ankle holster.

"Excuse me," some woman behind us hisses. "Keep it down or I'll have you thrown out."

Isabella looks over her shoulder and raises a brow. "Do that, and you and I are gonna have a problem." She huffs and turns around again, linking her arm with mine. I can't help but smirk. "The nerve of some people," she mutters. "Think they can come here with threats?"

"You're too cute." I hug her to me and kiss the top of her head. "Makes me wanna—"

"Shhh!" She slaps my thigh.

I sigh.

~oOo~

Some time after stuffing my face with sfogliatelle and coffee during the intermission, I'm watching my baby girl bonding with a boy over HIV medicine and baggage.

Romantic, huh?


"Right, because only gay people get HIV and AIDS." Elisa rolls her eyes at me. "You really need to wake up and smell the roses, Daddy."
"Be quiet!" Anthony whisper-shouts. "Any minute now." He taps his watch.

"What?" Isabella asks, and I'm confused too. "There's almost an hour left—"

The word has barely left her mouth when the fire alarm and sprinklers go off.

**Dominic's POV**

I curse Anthony as everyone starts running around backstage, the water from the sprinklers making people act as if they're on fire.

I know he paid off some stoner kid to get it all done, and that it had to happen when Julia was on stage. I don't know, some beef between the two. All he said was, "That'll teach her not to stick her nose in someone else's business." But all I can think of now is that the commotion is scaring the shit outta Nino.

It's taken over a week for him to feel just a little relaxed around me, and now I'm afraid it's all gone to shit. All the time we've spent in that cabin and just cruising around in that tiny town not doing much of anything has been good for all of us, albeit boring. But for all I know, the rigidness in Nino's shoulders will be back permanently now.

"Come on, kid. Let's get outta hea'." I squeeze his shoulder gently, but he's frozen. Students and teachers keep running behind the stage, several shouting that the water is ruining the set. "Nino." I squat down in front of him and brush a few droplets of water away from his face. No use, though. We're already soaked. "You want me to carry you?"

Can you still carry seven-year-olds?
I'm not good at this, but I was still the one who suggested I bring Nino to this shit tonight. I figured he'd been chill around me enough the past few days, and he did nod when I asked him if he wanted to tag along.  

Again, he doesn't answer, so I'm left without a choice. Knowing the classroom where I'm meeting up with my family, I pick up Nino and position him closer to my hip, then make my way outta the mayhem of hysterical broads, angry teachers, and dudes who're tryin'a look cool while the water soaks their Nikes.  

"Dominic!" I hear Julia shout.  

I turn around and see her hurrying toward me, so I jerk my chin at the door and continue out to the corridor that's rapidly filling up with upset parents and siblings. Thankfully, the sprinklers and the alarm are shut off then, too.  

"Anthony did this, didn't he?" Julia hugs herself, obviously cold. "He left a voice mail—said he couldn't wait to see me drowning in praise for my performance."  

I chuckle and shake my head. Speaking of drowning, my family looks like a bunch of drowned cats when we enter the empty classroom on the second floor.  

Dad's busy fussing over Mom, getting her warm with his suit jacket and holding her close. Meanwhile, she looks mostly worried about her hair and makeup. Elisa appears oddly dry, but I spot Mom's coat nearby, so I assume she used that to cover herself up. My big sister's the only one who isn't shivering.  

To my surprise—and definitely a smug-looking Anthony's—Julia runs over and hugs him, chanting, "Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!"
"Oh, Dominic!" Mom gasps as she spots me, and she squirms outta Dad's hold to crush me and Nino in a hug. She hasn't seen me in a while, so I know she's been worried. "You're here, you're here!"

I grin, not saying anything.

"Why the fuck are you happy?" Anthony gets cunty, scowling at Julia.

Julia beams like the fucking sun. "Because I've forgotten the lyrics to one of my songs. Had it not been for the sprinklers, I woulda looked like a fool up there!"

Anthony's disappointed.

Gabriella and Elisa crack up.

"Instead you looked like a stripper," Dad mutters.

Mom sighs contentedly and peers up at me. "The family's almost back together," she whispers. I kiss her forehead, and she proceeds to greet Nino, who feels better with my mother around. "Ain't that right, topolino?" She smiles at Nino. "We're just missin' Daniela and Lia, then everything's perfect."

In return, Nino smiles shyly and ducks his head, hiding in the crook of my neck.

For some reason, that makes my mom tear up. "Juniuh, get my camera! It better not be ruined." She spins around, only to get pissed at Dad. "Oh, Juniuh—" she stalks over and grabs the smoke he just lit up "—this is a school; you can't friggin' smoke in hea'. Christ!"

"I can't catch a break!" Dad holds out his arms. "Stop busting my balls, woman."

"Never." Mom winks and snatches her camera.
Elisa sighs. "Now I miss Jo—" She slaps a hand over her mouth.

My eyes grow large; hell, everyone is looking at her with wide eyes. Except for Mom.

And she can't fucking know. Not yet. God knows I love her, but she'd shout this shit from the rooftops. But most of all, she'd fire off a bunch of questions about Mario, and... *who is the real father of your baby, Elisa? How long has this been going on? What does Felix say about this? Oh, I gotta call Gianna!*

Mom tilts her head, suspicious. "You miss who?"

"Josephine," Dad is quick to say. He narrows his eyes at Elisa, then faces Mom with a shrug. "Elisa's switched teams, 'cause apparently that's what everyone is doing these days."
Chapter 24

Translation:

Come ti pare = Whatever you say.

Junior’s POV

When I wake up on March 2nd, I find myself remaining in bed for a while, staring at the ceiling.

All kinds of normal sounds surround me: Isabella doing whatever in the kitchen, Julia stomping around, late for school, the stereo on in the living room, the dogs whining for treats, which means my wife has probably received the weekly delivery from my brother's deli...

Hell, there are even birds chirping outside the window.

So normal. Peaceful and everyday-like.

It's basically how it's been all week, yet today is still different.

Yesterday, the wife was a little sad, 'cause baby Lia turned one, and we couldn't celebrate it. Dominic has been stuck in that town across the border for weeks now, and Isabella's only seen him that night of Julia's premiere. She hasn't seen Lia at all. But I managed to cheer her up a bit when I gave her cash to spend on decorating Dominic's new house, which he doesn't know he's getting yet. It'll be a surprise soon enough.

It's been a waiting game for all of us. I've spent a few evenings at Twilight with Felix, catching up, working...there've been a couple sit-downs, too... All the while, I've had to pretend Dominic's dead to me. I've told Felix I have no idea where Mario could've run off to, or where Francis is.

Joseph's been there, too. Acting normal, as if he's not keeping Francis at his place. As if he's not planning on killing Felix.
Tonight.

We have reservations at the House of Blues after the opening ceremony.

And with that thought, I drag myself outta bed and grab the cordless to call Alec's office at the deli.

"Maisano speaking."

"Here too." I smirk and my little brother chuckles on the other end. "Everything good wit'chu?"

"Good and busy," he answers. "I'm sending one of my boys over to your house soon."

Ah, the blueprints of Mandalay Bay. "Excellent. And your friend?"

"He said everything's taken care of."

Even better.

**Hummingbird's POV**

Dividing the last of the cold-cuts, I place the containers in the freezer, then get back to making a late breakfast for Junior.

The burger's almost done. Next is bacon.

"You know I'm not buying it, right?" I address Julia at the table, though I keep my eyes on the egg I crack over a skillet. As my husband prefers dinner foods, I figured I'd make him a bacon burger with eggs, sunny-side up. At least it will be breakfast-*inspired*.

"I really am sick," she insists with a pout in her voice. "My throat is all sore."
"Come ti pare." I let her get away with it, knowing she doesn't wanna tag along tonight. I'm sure she'll sneak over to watch the ceremony with her friends, but she has no interest in the dinner that follows, and I suppose I can't blame her. Alec and Maria aren't bringing AJ, either. It'll only be adults—Junior, Felix, Anthony, Alec, Joseph, Nico, and their wives. Well, Joseph doesn't have a wife. Yet.

Something's up with that boy.

Something's up with Elisa, too.

Junior was so fast to shut me down, leaving no room to argue, after Julia's premiere, and Elisa's slip hasn't stopped messing with my head.

It's been a while since I saw Mario...

"Good morning." Junior enters the kitchen, ready for the day. He runs a comb through his hair as he eyes Julia, then pockets the comb in his navy suit. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

"I'm sick." She gives him the puppy-dog eyes that make my husband melt.

"Oh, princess. Go rest. Mom will take care of you."

I snort quietly and roll my eyes, refocusing on the stove. *Mom will take care of you, Mom will take care of you.* Wiping my hands on my apron, I dig out lettuce and tomatoes from the fridge, and Junior meets me at the kitchen island as I pull out the cutting board.

I give him my cheek.

"Morning, my love." He kisses it, then grabs my jaw to get my lips, too.

"What're your plans for today?"
I giggle as he gropes me over my dress, making it difficult to pay attention to the vegetables. "Um, nothing much. The salon at noon—with Gianna and Gabriella. Maria and Gina cancelled. Oh, I'm also meeting with the decorator at the house."

He leans back against the counter. "And you haven't mentioned the house to anyone?"

Julia pipes up. "Dominic's new house?"

I point the knife at Julia but speak to Junior. "That one overheard me talking to Anthony's contact that's building the pool, but I told her we're keeping it on the down-low."

I don't know why the house has to be a secret for anyone except Dominic and Daniela, but as-fucking-always, I'm not allowed to ask.

Junior was specific: no mention of it to Gianna—by default, Felix. In fact, Dominic's name isn't to be uttered, and I've been told to mourn him as if he's dead.

Wine gets me through the days, is all I'm saying. And Junior's promise: this will all be over after tonight.

I'm guessing there will be an announcement at dinner...? But that doesn't explain the hiding.

"We gotta do something about your eavesdropping," Junior tells our daughter.

Julia's not taking him seriously. "But, Daddy, you know how you always say you have eyes all over Vegas? It turns out I have ears all over Vegas." She grins cheekily.
"They can be cut off," is Junior's flat reply, and he even moves toward the knives.

That kills Julia's amusement, and she huffs and stalks out of the kitchen, her messy ponytail swishing back and forth. She looks fucking cute, still wearing jammies with Disney characters.

I smirk and turn to Junior. "You can be cruel, ciccino."

"Who, a friendly paesano like me?" He grins, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "I'd never."

That's too laughable to reply to. Instead I finish Junior's breakfast, and he goes out to grab the papers.

When he returns, I bring the food to the table. "Anything interesting?" I ask as he sits down, already reading. I assume the opening of Mandalay Bay is big news.

"Nah. Grazie mille." He nods in thanks and cuts in to his burger. "Some shit in Africa, the buzz about Mandalay and the other one—the Venetian—that opens in a couple months..." He hums, then thanks me again when I bring him coffee and a glass of juice. "Someone's getting executed in Arizona tomorrow. Gas chamber."

"Oh, Juniuh." I suck my teeth and take Julia's seat. "Is there no happy news?"

We don't have to start our morning talking about someone getting gassed to death, do we?

He chuckles with his mouth full of food. "Here's a ridiculous one. A kid is going to trial soon—charged with murder for killing a fanook in Wyoming."
"How can you—" I gape in disbelief and outrage. The sheer fury that tears through me leaves me speechless, and I don't even wanna look at him. I stand up abruptly and walk out of the kitchen.

"I was kidding, hummingbird!" Junior hollers through laughs.

"Well, I won't stand for it!" I shout back, finding my escape in the laundry room. And as I begin sorting the whites from the dryer, I get angrier and angrier. My husband can be such an asshole; he doesn't think before speaking.

I'm so done with all the hatred toward homosexuals, and it's killing me that Francis is yet another person whose whereabouts I don't know. The boy needs his family, and Junior and I are supposed to be there for him. We're his godparents, for Christ's sake.

As Junior promised, there's peace within our family again, but we're not together by any means. I don't have my babies close. I don't even know where they are, and if I wanna talk to Elisa or Daniela, I gotta go through a string of men giving me their approval first. Junior this, Dominic that, Anthony here, Joseph there.

Junior appears in the doorway and removes the napkin tucked into his shirt. I only give him a glare before I get back to folding undershirts.

"Era un cazzo di scherzo, Isabella." He tells me again it was just a fuckin' joke.

I don't reply.

"Don't ignore me."

I ignore him.

With his undershirts done, I pile them away and sort out Julia's tank tops.
"Hey—" Junior grabs me, causing me to yelp, and he picks me up only to sit me down on the washer. "It was crass, okay? I know it's wrong to...you know..."

I arch a brow. "To what? Kill someone based on who they want in bed?"
He grimaces and parts my legs to step between them. "I'm struggling too, but I can't stop loving Francis just 'cause he happens to prefer men. And I won't tolerate that kind of joke around hea'."

He smiles faintly, but the seriousness remains in his eyes. "You givin' me orders, Isabella?"

About this? Hell yes. My expression says as much, and I jut out my chin at him.

"You talk smack—" I poke his chest "—say you hate fanooks and they should burn in hell, but you know what? I think it's all talk." He opens his mouth to argue, but I hold up a hand. "I know you don't approve, Juniuh. But would you be able to look Francis in the eye and tell him he should die?"

He doesn't respond, which is all the answer I need.

"He's our baby, too." I try not to get emotional, but the thought of Francis not having support breaks my fucking heart. I know he has Elisa and Dominic—and I pray he'll have his brother, too—but it's not enough. "Don't kick him outta this family."

I can tell he's irritated as hell, but for once, he doesn't blurt out what he really wants to say. He studies me, searches my eyes, and probably weighs the options. Piss of the wife...? Or don't piss of the wife.

He's still collecting brownie points.
When he sighs, I count that as a small victory, but before he can say anything, there's a knock on the front door, quickly followed by TJ running into the house.

"Nonna! Nonno! I'm hea'!"

Junior and I smile at each other, and he tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear.

"As much as you break my fuckin' balls, don't ever change," he murmurs.

I beam at him. "I won't."

"NONNA!"

"Christ." Junior steps back from me so I hop down from the washer. "He's got some set'a lungs."

"TJ! Get back hea' right now!" And that'd be Anthony. "What did Mommy and I say about running in the fucking driveway, huh?"

"So does Anthony," I laugh. "They get the shouting from you. I'm quiet as a mouse." I zip my lips and move toward the door.

"Full'a shit," he corrects, chuckling. "If your mouth's runnin', the town knows it. That's how all women are."

"Prick." I playfully smack his arm, then duck outta the laundry room to meet Anthony and TJ in the kitchen. "How's my perfect grandson?" I smile widely and hold out my arms as TJ comes running toward me. "Oh, whatta wonderful surprise." Picking him up, I position him on my hip and turn to Anthony. "No Gabby?"

"Hi, Nonno!" TJ waves at Junior, who enters the kitchen, too.
"She's taking Allegra to the doctor—just a checkup." Anthony walks over to me and kisses my cheek. "But I'm here. That matters too, right?"

"Uh-huh." I hand over TJ, who's reaching for Junior. Then I get some snacks and a juice box for TJ.

I'm still keeping my distance from Anthony. Not solely because of what he did to Gabriella, but for how he let his mouth run at Julia's premiere—about me being a stripper—and also 'cause the little shit needs to grovel from time to time.

"Daddy's still in the doghouse," Junior tells TJ. "We think that's funny, don't we?"

"Yeah," TJ laughs. "I'mma play wiv Duke!"

"So, what brings you here?" I ask Anthony.

"I wanted to come by and see my beautiful mother." He unleashes the sweetest smile to sway me. "Is that so bad?" I hmph. Un- swayed. "And, uh, I kinda need a word with Pops."

Having watched TJ run into the living room, Junior turns and raises a brow at Anthony.

"In private?" Anthony hints.

Junior nods, and the two walk to his office.

That leaves me standing there in the empty kitchen with a juice box and animal crackers.

Yeah, totally un- swayed.

God, I can't wait for tonight. I need some fun. To let loose and enjoy myself.
My husband better ask me to dance.

**Junior's POV**

Hours later, I have my wife on my arm decked out in her finest jewelry, a new dress that probably cost me pretty penny, and she's tipsy on champagne from Mandalay Bay.

She's having a good time.

For me...this is work.

I smile and toast with Felix, sipping my scotch while keeping an eye out for anything and everything. The grand opening is lavish, but not really my thing. Some famous actors come riding in through the main entrance on motorcycles, and the crowd goes wild. Too many people means there's more for me to keep track of. And with Anthony's revelation from earlier today...? Fuck me, I'm surprised I haven't had another one of those fits.

"**Dominic's missing. My guy tried to follow, but Dee shook him.**"

When Anthony told me that, I thought I was gonna blow a fucking fuse.

I glance around me for the umpteenth time, wondering if Dominic's here.

He better not be that stupid.

"**You afraid someone's gonna come over and steal your wife?**" Felix nudges me.

I smirk into my glass and take a swig. "**I'd kill a fucker for tryin'.**"

"**I know you would. But listen, my friend.**" He leans close to be heard over the music and the roar of the crowd. "**No need to look so tense. We're safe—enjoy yourself. I have my guys here.**"

*Actually, you don't.*
By now, Alec's boys have dealt with them.

That aside, I curse myself for not acting better. I've done this shit before, though not with a boss I give...gave...fuck, give...a fuck about. Felix has been my friend for over forty-six years. And he wants to take out my son?

Business is business, but I feel betrayed.

Plastering a more convincing smile on my face, I nod in response to him, then pull Isabella closer, who's busy chatting it up with Gabby and Maria.

"Isn't this gorgeous, Juniuh?" Isabella's beautiful eyes are full of wonder, taking in all the marble and gold, and decorations in the lobby.

"You're the gorgeous one, cara mia." Felix winks at her. Gianna glares and empties her cocktail. I count the minutes until he's no longer breathing. "I'm glad to see you in such high spirits, you know. Can't be easy not knowing where Dominic is."

Cazzo.

Isabella's face falls. She's remembering her act; she doesn't know why, but she knows she's supposed to be sad about our son. In addition, there's real worry written all over her now.

I hate getting her involved. Fucking hate it. "You had to remind her?" I grin wryly at Felix and shake my head. "It's taken me diamonds and the promise of a vacation for her to have a good time."

Hugging my bicep, my wife lets her manicured claws dig into my arm, no doubt disapproving of being painted as a materialistic brat, but I had to go with something.
To my relief, Felix actually looks remorseful. "I apologize, Isabella." When he says that, Gianna's eyes bug out. For what, I have no clue. "I know what you're going through. It ain't easy."

That cocksuckin' motherfucker...

Isabella musters a small, tight smile. "Alcohol helps." And a waiter turns up out of nowhere with a tray of champagne.

"I'll drink to that," Gianna drawls.

In the crowd, I see my brother reappearing from the elevators, and when he spots me, he gives me a subtle nod.

_Perfetto._

"We should head up to the restaurant," I suggest, checking my watch. In my peripheral vision, I catch Joseph adjusting his tie and looking as uncomfortable as he did the day he took the bar exam. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm fuckin' starvin'."

"Too bad it won't be as good as Mom's cooking." Anthony lays it on thick for Isabella, to which Gabby giggles.

Isabella chugs her champagne. "Un-fucking-swayed, figlio."

I don't know what that's about, but Felix and I share a grin. "Sons and their mamas, right?"

"You said it," he chuckles.

As the conversation ends, we make our way to the elevators along with all the others who have reservations at the House of Blues, and I note that Joseph looks stoic again. He's...definitely capable, but I take satisfaction in the small glimpses of discomfort.
'Cause you're not *supposed* to be fine killing your pops.

Felix didn't bat an eyelash when we clipped Carlisle, but then again, Felix had just lost Heidi and two sons.

Are Elisa and her happiness—not to mention Francis and peace in our organization—that important to Joseph?

I get that it's important, but Joseph's safe. Felix trusts him as much Felix can trust anyone. Joseph's risking a secured position with the family for my daughter and his brother.

He's smart, since he's also picking sides. In the case of a war, there's no doubt the Maisanos would come out on top, but there would still be casualties on our side.

Shaking my head, I return to the present and usher Isabella out of the elevator. Unlike many others, we don't wait for our table. The hostess greets Felix and me by name, and we're showed to a large, round table with a spectacular view of the Strip.

"I'm just gonna use the restroom." Joseph excuses himself.

Alec and I exchange a look, and I face Isabella as I give a small shake of my head. My brother doesn't have to follow. I will do that, but I'mma order our drinks first and give Joseph a minute alone.

"What do you want, *bell'uccellino*?" I drape an arm along the back of her chair and kiss her temple. "I didn't mean for you to get mixed up in this." I keep my voice low. "*Presto sarà finita. Te lo prometto.*" I promise her it'll be over soon.

"That sounds ominous," she whispers back. "But I trust you." She pats my hand, then points to the Merlot she wants. "I'm gonna go freshen up."
"I'll go with you." Gabriella makes a move to stand up, but not before Anthony hauls her in for a kiss.

He's been acting pissy whenever someone eyes his wife the wrong way—or any fucking way.

Wonder where he gets that from.

Standing up, I scoot out Isabella's chair and tell Anthony to get our orders. Then I follow the women, and while they get in line to go to the ladies' room, I duck into the men's room.

Joseph's at the end of the counter with sinks, and I cock a brow at the two fanooks at the urinal who're pretending not to watch each other's dicks.

What the fuck is happening to the world?

"Scram." I jerk my chin at the door.

One is quick to zip up and leave, but the other takes on a cocky expression. "This is a public—"

"This is me—" I point to myself "—not givin' a shit. Now, get the fuck outta hea'." I got no time or patience to show him my cock's bigger, so I flash my piece tucked into my leather belt instead.

He leaves.

Joseph smiles faintly in the mirror and reaches for a paper towel. "Checking up on me?"

I don't reply as I walk closer to him. He stands tall and confident in front of me, only a hint of uncertainty in his eyes.

"You're gonna follow through with your plan," I state.
"You know I am, sir." He throws away the towel. "I've got my priorities straight."

Tilting my head, I regard him silently for a beat. "It's the best option?"

"It's the only option," he counters.

I nod, trusting him. I've seen enough. "Do you know where Dominic is?"

"Is he missing?" His gaze doesn't falter, but it does grow a little more intense.

Only a master bullshitter would see through him.

I can't help but chuckle. "Give me the truth, son. You wouldn't wanna disrespect your boss, would you?"

Realization flashes in his eyes, a smile tugging at his lips. "Does that mean...?"

Yes. I'm on board—officially. I'm acknowledging, to Joseph, that I'll be boss of this family in approximately two hours.


He sighs and adjusts his cuff links. "Probably at your house now. He's been...tying up some loose ends."

My eyes narrow, and I almost tell Joseph that loose ends are tied...after Felix fucking drops...but I stop myself. Joseph deserves more credit than that. Which means this—whatever Dominic is doing—has nothing to do with Felix.

Since there's no time to stall, I get down to business. "I'll take it from here."

"You—" He stops abruptly, shocked. "What do you mean?"
"I don't think I have to explain myself. Stand down," I say and point to his right foot, or rather his ankle holster, "and forget whatever you had planned."

"I wasn't going to..." He eyes the door as someone steps inside, but the man clearly regrets his decision and disappears again. Joseph chooses his words carefully. "I was inspired by my mother."

*Pills.*

It's been ages since I amused myself by getting creative with the fuckers I've killed. These days, it's a simple bullet to the head. I get why Joseph would go with poisoning, though. If he's acting alone here tonight, which I firmly believe he is, he doesn't have the resources to get past the heavy security. There're cameras almost everywhere.

"Clever," I comment. "But like I said, I'm taking over. Everything's in motion already."

It's been my plan since I realized Felix was after Dominic, who doubted my love for him... This will show my son just where my loyalty lies. Despite the fact that he went against me, I'm in his corner.

But I needed to see that Joseph was ready to go through with it.

"I should be the one to—"

I cut him off. "*You should do as I say.*" I poke his chest. "And there's only one thing I want you to do."

He gives me a hard stare, deliberating. The end result is the same; Felix will drop tonight, but it won't be by Joseph's hand.

There ain't a lot I can, or will, protect Joseph from; he can take care of himself, and he's made his choices about this life. But killing his own
father is one of the things I refuse to let him do. Joseph may be calculating and smart as fuck, but he also has a heart. This would affect him.

"All right." Joseph concedes. "What do you want me to do?"

That one's easy. I clap him on the shoulder and squeeze. "After dinner, take him out on the balcony for a smoke."

~oOo~

"I gotta piss." Anthony stands up and leaves.

There are probably countless people waiting for a table, so that would explain the two waiters who're quick to take our plates as soon as we've put down our silverware.

"No wine tonight, Gina?" Isabella eyes Nico's wife across the table.

I stifle a belch into my fist and remove the napkin from my shirt.

"That would explain a thing or two." Gabriella smirks at Gina.

That makes me grin, 'cause the girl's been giving Gina attitude all night. The catty kind, the shit women like, venomous words behind thinly veiled compliments.

I've only caught the gist of it, but apparently Gina made Gabby think Anthony's been cheating.

"I'm not pregnant." Gina shoots Gabby a quick glare before facing Isabella with a smile. "I wasn't in the mood for wine tonight."

Nico laughs. "Since when're you not in the mood for wine?"

Bored, I tune out of the conversation and focus on Felix, Alec, and Joseph instead.
"He's already folded once." Alec shrugs. "Shouldn't be too hard to convince him a second time."

"He does need the money," Joseph agrees. "I ran a check on him, and he's buried in debt."

"Who is?" I ask.

Felix answers. "Some Russian who's up against Martinez in the next fight at the Grand."

I think my sons are already working on that. "He'll fold."

"Oh?" Alec grins. "You got somethin' to share with the class, bro?"

I chuckle and lean back as a waitress takes my empty glass. "Anthony's my new bookie." Which isn't really true; it's Dominic, but I can't really say that. "Talk to him. But the odds are already in Martinez's favor, so we're talking pocket change. Youse should work that Mexican instead. He's a fuckin' saint, but..." I shrug.

Joseph nods. "We could create something. I'll talk to Anthony."

"Excellent." Felix is pleased.

As Anthony returns to the table, a waitress appears to ask if we want dessert. Menus are handed out. At the same time, Alec's cell phone rings, to which Maria rolls her eyes and mutters something to Gianna about goddamn goomahs.

It's not his goomah.

"Cut that shit out, Maria," Alec spits out before he excuses himself. "Pain in my fuckin' ass..."

The waitress looks uncomfortable.
"Is the tiramisu any good?" I ask.

She turns to me, flustered, and fumbles with her words. "I-I haven't tried it personally, but—"

"Then you can't possibly know, can you?" I shake my head and hand over my menu to my wife. "Get me somethin'."

Isabella scans the menu critically. "At real restaurants, the staff tries everything on the menu so they know what they're serving." She closes the menu and smiles sweetly at the waitress. "You understand me, hon?" Meanwhile, I catch Alec's discreet nod as he returns and sits down again. "I'll have an Irish coffee and we'll go with two pieces of the chocolate cake." She glances at me in question. "You want an espresso instead with yours?"

I incline my head, patting the pockets of my suit. "I'mma go get smokes." Standing up, I grin at Felix and squeeze his shoulder. *I'll see you in hell, my friend.* "Don't eat my cake."

He chuckles and eyes his menu. "Get outta hea', Jun."

I'm going.

I give Joseph a quick glance, then take my leave. Outside the restaurant, I meet up with Alec's contact as decided, and we exchange brief nods before I follow him to the elevators.

"You have less than five minutes," he practically whispers.

Pimple Boy with the shiny Mandalay Bay vest is sweating buckets. *Employee of the month.*

And don't ask me why he's whispering. I cock a brow at him. "The cameras are already down, aren't they?"
"Yes, sir." He nods quickly, and the elevator takes us two floors down. "I created a blackout for the top three floors, but it'll only take the security a few minutes to—"

"I get it, I get it." I wish he didn't hafta be here buggin' me, but it's insurance. If he'd been too afraid to be seen with me, I would've wondered if the cameras were really shut off. These days, you can't count on red lights to indicate someone's watching.

"And you'll release my girlfriend as soon as this is over, right?" Pimple Boy asks nervously.

I smirk at him. "Of course, kid." Or not. I'm afraid Alec's already dealt with the girl. "You can trust me."

The elevator doors open, and he gestures to the eastern-facing corridor, which is fucking obvious. The hotel is a big, shiny monstrosity that's shaped like a "Y," but with equally long and rounded extensions, hence heading down the eastern point to get away from the restaurant.

"Thank you, Mr. Maisano," he says, relieved. "And I swear, I'll have your brother's money next week."

"Sure, sure." I reach into the inner pocket of my suit and pull out a pair of latex gloves.

At the end of the corridor, the kid hands me the key to the room, but I shake my head no. He can open the damn door, which he does, and we disappear into the room.

"It's in the closet." Pimple Boy's whispering again. "Alec instructed me to leave it there."

Opening the closet, I retrieve the sniper rifle and check the cartridge, then walk over to the window that's been unhinged to open wider. Damn
pussies just love to come to Vegas to end their sorry lives, which I gotta suffer for now.

"Should I b-be watching?" The kid gulps behind me.

I don't answer. Instead I take a few deep breaths and get into position, zeroing in on the House of Blues's balcony. I adjust the sight slowly, soon spotting Joseph, Felix, and Alec among several others. Joseph laughs at something and his father shakes his head fondly.

A sweet father-son moment.

Like all the times in the past, adrenaline courses through me, but it centers me. I'm focused. There's a task—not a man, not a father, not an old fuckin' friend. He's the job.

My finger brushes along the trigger. A featherlight caress. Before I aim at Felix's head and fire.

"Oh, my God," Pimple Boy cries out—a muffled sound. "You actually...oh, my God."

I stand up, stoic, and roll my shoulders. The rifle is left behind, and I grab for the unregistered gun in my ankle holster. Clock keeps tickin'. One, two, three. I close in on the kid, his eyes widening in realization just as I get ahold of his neck. Four, five, six. He lets out a sob mixed with begging for his life. Seven, eight, nine. I press the gun to his temple and shoot him in the head.

It's routine. He sags to the floor, and I make sure his fingers are the last to touch the sniper rifle before I place the handgun in his hand.

"No offense, kid." Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two. I check the mirror in the entryway. Twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one. I leave the hotel room and
pull off my gloves, tucking them into the inner pocket again. Forgoing the elevators, I shove an emergency door open and take the stairs instead.

*Getting too old for this shit.*

"Jesus," I grunt as I reach the right floor. I'm breathing heavily enough for my former self to laugh hysterically at. But at least I have an excuse, 'cause when I get to the restaurant, I follow the commotion and pretend to be worried when I hear someone screaming about getting shot out on the balcony.

Security is already there, but I push through the crowd easily enough.

The first one in the family I spot is Anthony, still far away from our table, and he's quick to hurry over to me.

"Your jacket?"

I nod and shrug out of it, handing it over. *Grazie, tesoro.* He'll get rid of it—and the only evidence I left behind, a few blood stains and gun powder.

Next I listen to Anthony filling me in. "Mom's consoling Gianna, Joseph's with the medics, Alec and Nico are talking to the cops—"

"They're all on the balcony?" I peer over the crowd, but there's too much in the way.

"Or just inside," he says with a nod. "I'mma take Gabby home. Oh—here." He hands me a new pack of smokes.

I chuckle and accept it. "All right, get outta hea', baby." I start to move toward the balcony, then stop to address him again. "Come over to the house later—with the kids, no matter how late it gets. Mom's gonna want everybody there."
He nods.

The area closest to the balcony's been sealed off, so I call Isabella’s name.

A security guard passes me to speak to one of the detectives who just arrived on the scene. "The system's up and running again." He keeps his voice down, but I'm close enough to hear. "We have a whole team trying to figure out why this happened. It wasn't exactly a short circuit."

I mask my amusement with worry and open my arms as Isabella runs into me.

"Oh, Juniuh," she weeps. "I can't believe it. He's dead!"

"Shh...shhh..." I hug her to me and press my lips to the top of her head. Scanning the direction of the balcony, I spot Maria and Gina with Gianna, who's crying but looks more shocked than sad. "It's gonna be okay, hummingbird." I kiss her hair.

She sniffs and hiccups, peering up at me with the saddest eyes. Her long lashes glisten with tears, the mascara making them thicker.

There's confusion creasing her forehead, too. "You're not asking any questions," she says, and I brush my thumbs under her eyes. "You left and—"

I shut her up with a kiss, to which she starts crying again. *Gotta love the effect I have on my woman.* "You gotta calm down, love." I kiss her wet cheek, then trail closer to her ear. "You're crying for a man who wanted our son dead for siding with Francis."

Isabella stiffens, her head snapping up. "What?" she breathes out harshly.

I give her a pointed look. Obviously I can't go into details with cops all around me, and I won't fucking do it when we're alone, either. All she
needs to know is that everything will get better now. No more hiding for our kids.

"Dominic?" she asks in a small voice.

I nod curtly, bringing out a tissue for her. She whimpers a thanks and wipes her cheeks.

"This is what'chu meant before," she croaks. "Everything was gonna change tonight. God, that bastard."

"Easy," I caution, looking around.

The cops have started ushering people outta the restaurant, and it's only a matter of seconds before we're asked to leave, too. The press has probably already caught wind of what's happened, and I wanna leave before they get here.

I've covered my tracks well. I won't be questioned. Alec might, for his association with Pimple Boy, but my brother can always go with the truth there. The kid owed Alec money; that's how they knew each other—end of.

After that, the police can spin their own tale, such as the kid not being able to pay off the debt, and in a stupid attempt to kill the man he owed money, he accidentally clipped the Colucci family's boss.

"I should..." Isabella releases a breath and collects herself. "I should make Gianna a casserole."

*There ya go.*
Chapter 25

Hummingbird's POV

Standing by my husband near the closed casket, I pray that God sends Felix to the ninth circle of hell.

He wanted to have my baby boy, my Dominic, murdered?

Even now, three days after Felix died, I'm seething. Filled with betrayal and rage toward the man.

If I hadn't been surrounded by family and associates—and let's not forget the FBI agents by the tree line taking pictures on this sunny day—I woulda spit on his grave.

I'm pretty sure Esme—who flew in with Ed Sr. and Elizabeth yesterday—would be offended, but it's not my fault her son was a monster.

It doesn't really feel like a funeral, and my fury aside, I'm empty and kinda...resigned.

Junior hasn't confirmed anything to me yet, but judging by all the men—even outta-towners—who have their heads so far up his ass, I've drawn the conclusion that he is now boss. It's no longer the Colucci family of Nevada. It's the Maisano family.

I think Misone and Cullen, both here with their families, are the only guests who aren't treating this like a business meeting. Everyone else wants a minute alone with Junior.

After the funeral is over, I ask for privacy and walk away to smoke a cigarette, and I watch him the whole time. Not a hair outta place, an expensive suit, a freshly-shaved jaw that could cut glass... He looks
distinguished and extremely powerful, surrounded by Alec, Joseph, Anthony, Nico, and all the guests who kiss his cheeks.

I can tell my husband would rather be home on his couch, wearing his beloved robe, smoking a cigar, and watching the Discovery Channel.

Instead he's surrounded by gravestones and ass-kissers dressed in black.

Taking a puff from the cigarette, I smile a little as Dominic starts walking toward me with Lia. She can walk on her own these days, but not on grass, so Dominic's holding both her hands, and she's running and stumbling like it's nobody's business.

"How you holdin' up, Ma?" Dominic smiles and comes to stand next to me, and Lia plops down on her butt and begins tugging on the grass.

"Eh..." I shrug and pass him the smoke when he holds up two fingers. "You? Gotta be nice to be home again, huh?"

It sure feels good for me to have them close again. I've forced them to come over every day since Felix died, and it's so incredible to see my son happy and in love. Daniela and Lia—even precious little Nino—are amazing for him.

He's a new man.

"It's great." He drapes an arm around my shoulders and kisses my temple. "How long're you gonna pretend you don't know about Elisa and Joey?"

Peering up at him, I catch his smirk, causing him to look so much like his father.

"Non so di cosa parli." I insist that I don't know what he's talking about, my mouth quirking up. Right now, Elisa's standing with Dani, Gabby, Julia,
and Cullen's sons, but she's staring longingly at Joseph, who, in return, often flicks glances her way.

Subtle, they are not.

I've had my suspicions since Julia's musical, but in these past few days when everyone's come outta hiding... Christ, they can't act to save their lives.

"Is Mario dead?" I ask softly.

Dominic sighs and rests his cheek on the top of my head.

His silence is answer enough.

"No, baby. Don't eat the grass." Dominic lifts his head to shake it in a silent no. Lia pouts and mimics her daddy, slowly shaking her head, though more in question. "That's right. Don't eat that shit."

She starts chewing on the hem of her purple dress instead.

I grin at the cutie, then glance over at the funeral party. Everyone's off in groups now, the most depressing being Gianna, Esme, and Alice. But while Alice mourns her brother, she's also worried about Tommy. Hell, so am I, but...in my experience, people don't really vanish. They either die or stick around. And he hasn't stuck around. No one has seen him in a few days.

Don't ask me why she's so worried about her driver, though.

It's suspect, but I prefer not to think about it, as Alice is my brother's wife.

"So, now what?" Dominic takes a final drag, then stubs out the cigarette with his shoe.
For once, he's not wearing sneakers and ratty clothes. A fine suit—even his hair is tamed. Though, it comes with worries, too. Because it makes me wonder if his position has changed. Not that I have the slightest idea what he did before, but he hasn't ranked as high as Anthony.

"Dinner at our house," I answer, and he grimaces. Yeah, he'd rather eat shit than schmooze with associates. "What is it your father always tells you and Anthony—"

"A lotta shit." He laughs.

I roll my eyes but grin. "No. Chin up." I playfully chuff his. "We face it all and we stand tall—and do it our way."

Of course, the Sinatra reference flies right by his head.

Kids.

It's gonna be nice to have a weekend with Junior next week—just the two of us—so I can put flowers on Sinatra's grave.

_God rest his soul._

"Yo, did you see Dad earlier when Frankie got here?" Dominic picks up Lia and positions her on his hip. "I think he's working on the fagophobia, 'cause he gave Frankie a _nod._" He widens his eyes. "Can you imagine?"

I giggle and snort and slap his arm. _Dominic. You gotta give Daddy some credit,"_ I chastise halfheartedly.

He chuckles, and Lia squishes his cheeks together. "I'm just fuckin' around." He kisses her nose and sobers. "I owe him."

I don't really see why, but I have a feeling it's business-related. Maybe about all this shit with Felix.
"Nonna pup-up?" Lia tilts her head at me.

I smile and touch her chubby cheek. "No, Nonna doesn't have the puppy, dolcezza. Ask Daddy."

Lia looks to Dominic.

He grins a little at her. "Uh no, but maybe Mommy has it."

Oh! My hand flies to my mouth, and I squeal as quietly as I can.

*It's a funeral, after all.*

"I fuckin' knew it," he mutters, then scowls at me, all while blushing adorably. "Don't make it a big deal, a'ight?"

"But it's a huge deal. It's official—Daniela will make a great mother." I sniffle and blink back tears of happiness. "Oh, this is wonderful, topolino." I link my arm with his, hugging his bicep. "Such a wonderful thing—a true blessing." I nod, making plans to tell him about the house soon. "Okay. Okay." I take a breath. "Time to look like someone died."

"Someone did die," my son points out.

"Someone important," I retort.

**Junior's POV**

At midnight, only a dozen people are still at my house. My parents, Esme, and Gianna left early, shortly followed by the Misones and Cullen's wife. They're all staying at the same hotel. And Riley, my sister Brianna, and their son are with Riley's parents before they take the flight back to Kansas City tomorrow.
A couple hours ago, Gina caught Nico flirting with Daniela—Gina's own cousin, for fuck's sake—at which she stormed out, Nico following before Dominic could rearrange Nico's face...

_Drama._

Another dozen associates left after they got a minute alone with me, having needed reassurances about their ranks and crews. _It's all good._ I mean, there will be a few changes, but nothing drastic. Say what you want about Felix, but he ran a tight ship.

Joseph left a while ago, too. Said he wanted to take some time with his brother.

I'm fucking exhausted at this point, but I have my closest family—and Cullen and his boys—right here in my home, which is the main reason for the pure joy in my wife's eyes.

She loves playing hostess, especially when our children are here so she can mother them to death.

Sitting in one of the chairs in the living room, I smile faintly at Dominic. 'Cause that's...new. Lost in his own little world, Daniela next to him, Lia knocked out on his lap, Nino next to his sister and playing on Dominic's old Game Boy. My son's a _family man._

And now that I'm aware, thanks to Cullen's sources, about Daniela's past, I couldn't be more pleased about her and Dominic being together. What she's been through...now I _know_ she has the balls to take on my son.

Dominic can thank God his father-in-law-to-be is serving lifetime in prison in Italy, 'cause holy fucking shit. I wouldn't wanna tell Brusca I'm dating his daughter.
"Nonno...?" TJ steals my attention, walking toward me in only his diaper. He's ready to fall asleep on the spot, blinking sleepily and yawning, but he probably won't admit it.

"How you doin', piccolo?" I pick him up to sit him down on my lap.

Just then, Gabriella walks in with TJ's pajamas in her hand, scanning the room before she narrows her eyes at the boy with me.

"Don't wanna sweep," TJ tells me, yawning. "Momma say I hafta."

My brother laughs.

"So, you think you can hide with Nonno, huh?" I grin. "Not sure that's a good plan."

One thing I've learned recently is that I've underestimated Gabriella's strength. She's not as meek and docile as she's led everyone to believe.

She's not thrilled about the fact that Anthony is taking over Felix's club, but she's got nothin'a worry about. Considering he's under my wing—the next boss in line—he'll be spending most of his time with me, and I have my restaurant. There will be no fucking sit-downs at Twilight or Dawn. We'll be at Stella—me, Joseph, and Anthony.

Besides, ever since Gabby and Anthony went through their shit, they've been acting like newlyweds.

There might be a pool going around on when Gabby gets pregnant.

"Come on, baby. Time for bed." Gabriella puts her hand on her hips, stern eyes focused on TJ. "Don't make me go over there, Anthony Junior."

"You can take me to bed instead," Cullen's youngest son suggests.
Cullen snorts and whacks the back of his kid's head. "When'ya gonna learn? Runnin' that fuckin' mouth'a yours..."

Anthony enters the living room, probably having raided the leftovers in the kitchen. Makes me wonder if Isabella's still out there. She's been on her feet all day.

"You wanna step outside with me, baby skip?" Anthony smirks lazily and tucks Gabby under his arm.

"I was just kidding—Christ." The kid rolls his eyes, but scoots a little closer to his brother.

"He can sweep, Daddy." TJ points to Cullen's boy. "He say so. I sweep t'mowwow."

"Piccolo's smart." Alec nods. "We gotta negotiator on our hands."

I chuckle and stand up, my knees popping like I'm a senior-goddamn-citizen. "Let's get'chu to bed, sweetheart." I walk over and hand him to Anthony. "Where's Mom?"

He jerks a thumb over his shoulder. *Kitchen.* "She and Elisa kicked me outta there."

That has me curious, so I leave the others behind and sneak up to the wall in the hallway between the kitchen doorway and the staircase.

Call it a gut feeling, but I think there're confessions going on.

"Are you gonna say something?" Elisa asks tearfully.

Isabella mutters something too quietly for me to hear; what I do hear is her filling the dishwasher.

"What?" Elisa asks.
"I said...I guess I don't have to ask Joseph for his girlfriend's social security number."

I laugh silently and creep closer to the doorway, poking my head in to see them on either side of the kitchen island. Elisa's wiping her cheeks, and my wife is grinning to herself. But our baby girl can't see that, 'cause Isabella has her back to Elisa.

"What?" Elisa repeats. "I mean...that's it? That's all you have to say?"

"Well." Isabella shuts the door to the dishwasher and turns to face the crier. Her grin is gone, replaced by blatant dismay. She's playing Elisa. "Youse'a family." Madonn', I love that woman. "What did'ju expect me to say? That I'm happy for you?"

"Oh, my God." Elisa clamps a hand over her mouth, horrified. She'd evidently counted on her mother's support. "Not you, too." She whimpers as fresh tears roll down her cheeks. "You and Daddy are the same. You know we're not related by blood—"

"No matta'." Isabella waves that off dismissively. She's channeling her inner...well, me...and it kinda makes me wanna fuck her stupid. "Truth be told, I'm fuckin' disappointed, Elisa." With our daughter staring at her feet, Isabella lets her radiant smile show. "I actually prefer Mario—"

That makes Elisa's head snap up, and fury shoots outta her eyes. But confusion joins in when she spots Isabella's amusement and happiness.

Go figure, my wife's completely on board with Elisa and Joseph's relationship.

"Why're you lookin' at me like that?" Elisa spits out.

"Because I'm obviously a better actress than I thought." Isabella flips her hair over her shoulder, then rounds the island. Her façade is slipping fast,
and she gets as emotional as the baby girl. "My sweet, sweet girl." She wraps her arms around Elisa. "I couldn't approve more."

Sighing, torn between wanting to hug them and shake my head at them, I reveal myself and lean against the doorframe. I fold my arms across my chest, and Isabella smiles at me through her tears.

"You're weak," I mouth.

She just shakes her head, too choked up to speak.

It breaks my fucking resolve, 'cause I need someone who can tell me it's okay to turn down Joseph the day he asks for my blessing to marry Elisa.

As much as it pains me, I'm finding it more and more difficult to be against it. It's not Joseph—I'm not sure he ever was the main reason—it's just...fuck. I still see Elisa running around in her diaper with Isabella's lipstick that she's using on the cupboards to draw a "pwetty" picture for her mama.

It's different with my boys. A whole other story.

"Why didn't you tell me, honey?" Isabella cups Elisa's cheeks. "Everyone knew... Why couldn't you tell me?" I detect some hurt there, which is partly my fault.

"Because you would've told Gianna, who would've told Felix, who would've put a stop to everything." And Elisa delivers my reason.

It's true. Despite it being a good union—business-wise—there's no way Felix would've wanted his perfect son to marry a girl who was pregnant with another man's child.

Isabella scoffs and wipes at her cheeks, and I get a little scowl.

It causes Elisa to turn around and see me.
I stand rooted in place, 'cause it's too much for me. We have guests in the living room, so I think I'll wait with the goddamn emotions until it's just me and my wife in our bedroom.

"Daddy, please say something." Elisa bites her lip.

I clear my throat into my fist, then look down and adjust my tie. What the hell can I say? That I wanna give her away? Fuck that.

"I'mma go find Julia," I say with a firm nod. "At least I have one baby left who's not itching to get married."

And I find Julia half-asleep in my chair in the living room. Sixteen years old or not, I pick her up, like I did with TJ before, and situate her on my lap.

Gabriella's probably upstairs putting TJ to bed, which would explain why Anthony's alone with Allegra.

He smirks at me, but he'll get it one day. He'll understand. So will Dominic when it's Lia's turn.

"I'm not tired," Julia mumbles, her head lolling to my shoulder. "I'm up, I'm up..."

"Why aren't youse girls?" Cullen eyes his sons.

The youngest laughs. "You want me in your lap, Pops?" A snort. "I'm never having kids, and especially not girls."

It's Anthony's and Dominic's turn to laugh.

I chuckle. "We've all said that once, kid."

"Whatevuh. I mean it."

_We've said that, too._
Hummingbird's POV

When I wake up the next morning, I'm surprised to find Junior's side empty. Not only that, but the house is full of life.

Only TJ spent the night; Junior kicked out the last guest around two, which means I don't know what's going on now. But I'm eager to find out, so I take a quick shower, then shimmy into my underwear. The sun's blazing outside the window, so I opt for a simple cotton wraparound dress.

Once I've applied makeup, I brush out my damp hair and muss it up, letting the waves appear. A spritz of the perfume my daughters gave me last birthday, and I'm ready to face the world.

In the kitchen I find Elisa, Daniela, and Gabriella.

"Good morning, Mom." Elisa smiles at me. "Breakfast will be ready soon."

"Hi, Nonna!" TJ runs into the kitchen—wearing swim trunks and his floaties—circles the island, then runs out again. "Bye, Nonna!"

"Go outside, Bella," Daniela orders with a grin. "Junior is waiting for you."

Oh, really? Dazed and confused, I start walking to the living room, only to pause to ask the girls if they need any help—

"Go!" they all laugh.

I hmph and obey.

In the living room, I see Joseph and Anthony arguing about what music to put on, both holding up their share of CDs. But they stop when I come in.

"Mornin', Ma." Anthony grins.

Joseph gives me a charming smile. "Buongiorno, Bella."
What is this, the freaking Twilight Zone with a pool theme? Everyone's dressed for a day in the backyard. And why are they here? I mean...they're always welcome—the more, the merrier—but I had no idea.

"Um. Good morning, boys." I frown and tap my mouth in thought, staring at them for only a second, then continue to the patio doors.

The first thing I hear when I exit the house is splashing. Julia, TJ, Dominic, and Nino are in the pool just horsing around. Well, Dominic's patiently waiting for Nino to let go of the edge.

That leaves Nonno Junior in the shade by the table, and I smile at his silliness. Dressed in his pajama bottoms, an undershirt, and his robe, he's staring down at the makeshift playpen for Lia and Allegra. Walking closer, I see my youngest granddaughter is fast asleep, surrounded by blankets and pillows, and Lia is watching the sleeping Allegra while munching on pieces of fruit that Junior gives her.

In the meantime, he's talking politics with them.

"Hey, Mom!" Julia shouts from the pool.

I wave and become the center of attention. I get more greetings and smiles, as if they didn't all see me before we went to bed, and then I'm enveloped in a tight hug by my husband. Who smells like mint, smoke, aftershave, and...hmm. I sniff.

He notices, chuckles, and ushers me to the table. "Mimosa for the wife," he murmurs.

I take it eagerly but halt myself and get suspicious. My eyes narrow at Junior.

"What did'ju do?" I accuse.
He just laughs and shakes his head. "I fucking knew it." Cupping my cheeks, he gives me a hard smooch. "I didn't do shit. Relax, hummingbird." He releases me so I can take a big sip of my drink. **Now, that's good for the soul.** "I only told our closest to be here—or else."

I smile widely at the "or else." Typical Junior.

"You brought me my family." I try not to get emotional, but Christ, I'm me. Family is everything to me. "Thank you, ciccino." Looking away, I wipe discreetly under my eyes. I take another sip from my drink and scan the backyard.

My heart clenches when I realize someone's missing.

Francis hasn't been a stranger since Felix died, but he hasn't been at the house while Junior's been here, either. And now...where is he?

He wouldn't leave without saying goodbye, would he?

The fact that Francis has told us he's moving to Los Angeles—to take a break from everything here and start over—is understandable but fucking sad. I'll do my best to convince him to come home often, and he'll never question my love for him.

"Where's Francis?" I'm almost afraid to ask. My husband's gone outta his way to set this up—hell, he's usually asleep at this hour—and I'm so grateful, but—

"He's bringing shit from the deli."

Relief washes over me. "You spoke to him directly?" I ask, hopeful.

He smiles ruefully, then looks out over the pool. "He's my godson." To that, I almost squeal in happiness, and Junior is quick to get some shit straight. He points at finger at me and everything. "Don't think I'mma hug
him or anythin', but he's part of the family, okay?" He pauses and huffs.
"I'll say this one time, and one time only: if I didn't give a shit, I wouldn't have bought him a condo in LA."

I gasp. "You did?"

He nods curtly and lights up a cigarette. He's uncomfortable talking about it, but it's not like he can get out of this. I gotta know.

"I went through Joseph—got the condo, a car, and set shit up so Francis can work for us out there." He exhales some smoke. "To keep the condo, he's gotta call you once a week—"

"Oh, Juniuh!" I set down the glass and hug him around the middle.

"Will you lemme finish, woman?" he mutters, though I can hear the amusement underneath. "He'll be here for every major holiday, and he's technically working under Alec, but he'll speak mostly with Dominic."

"Thank you," I say sincerely. "Thank you so much, ciccino."

He nods again, his way of closing the topic.

My husband wants everyone to think he's so badass, that he doesn't care, that he does all this for me, but I know better. He might not be ready to fully accept Francis's sexuality yet, but the key word is "yet."

~oOo~

Some time later, we're all—including Francis—gathered at the table, Junior and me at opposite ends. And I'm like a voyeur, just watching everybody. 
*Basking.*

Junior asks me who should tell Dominic about their surprise, and I give him the honor, 'cause really, I'm not in a chatty mood. It's been so long
since I had everyone here at the same time, so I'mma take this time and enjoy it fully.

"A house?" Dominic asks incredulously.

"We'll be on the same street," Gabriella gushes to Daniela, who looks overwhelmed.

Dominic's speechless. A rare sight. "I...I don't know what to say."

Junior inclines his head. "You can thank Mom for it—she felt youse needed more space." I blow my husband a kiss, and he chuckles and shakes his head. "With the...recent developments..." He grins a little at Nino, and I'm so glad that sweet boy is warming up to us. "I suppose she's right. You do need more space."

"This is'a too much...we are'a fine in Dominic's apartment—" Daniela stops abruptly and stands up, bursting into tears as she rushes inside the house.

My eyebrows shoot up, and I look to Dominic.

He shrugs and leans back to sip his coffee. "Probably her time of the month. She's been mushier than Elisa—"

"Hey!" Elisa gets offended at that, and when Joseph barks out a laugh, she turns her glare his way.

"Oh, you know it's true, troublemaker." He smirks and hugs Elisa to him.

Troublemaker—whatta fitting name for Junior's angel.

"Yo, I'd say you're lucky." Dominic scoffs. "At least Elisa don't cry so hard that she pukes."

Warning bells go off in my head, and I stiffen. *Momma alert.*
"What?" Junior and Anthony ask at the same time.

"Twice." Dominic nods. "The day before yesterday and yesterday morning. Girl's buggin'. And she won't let me comfort her!" he bitches.

Pretty much everyone at the table—not counting Julia, Francis, Nino, and TJ—react like normal parents or parents-to-be should react. Glances are exchanged; Junior looks like he's close to exploding with laughter, and I start making shopping lists in my head.

"Um, Dominic..." Gabriella shifts in her seat.

"No, no." Junior holds up a hand and shakes his head. "We's gonna let him figure that one out all on his own."

Julia throws a look around, wondering if we've all gone insane. She huffs. "Whatever. Does this mean I get Dominic's apartment?"

"Oh!" Junior's amusement is gone. "Didn't we have this conversation just yesterday, princess?"

What conversation?

Julia rolls her eyes. "Oh yeah, I'm not allowed to grow up, move away, and get married. Ever."

Junior nods and sits back, satisfied. "And don't'chu fuckin' forget it."

I giggle into my coffee mug, thinking he's too cute.

"Maybe I'll run away to LA and live with Frankie." Julia grins cheekily at her father.

Francis smirks. "Sweetheart, what makes you think I wouldn't just haul you into the trunk of my car and drive you back here? Duct tape over your mouth and everythin'."
"See?" Junior nods and points to Francis. "He knows what's up, Julia."

"Youse're no fun," Julia grumbles.

Dominic's head snaps up, causing me to turn toward the doors, and I finally see Daniela returning.

"You okay, hon?" I tilt my head at her, hiding my grin.

"Yes. I apologize." She blows out a breath and places a hand over her abdomen. "I do not know what came over me."

Anthony snorts a laugh. "Or in you."

"Anthony!" I chastise behind my hand. Mother of Christ, I wanna laugh.

Junior's POV

I knew I'd find myself here—in my office at home—with Joseph.

I knew it was gonna be soon, too.

But today...?

I don't wanna do this today.

After breakfast, the girls—Elisa included—wanted to catch some sun by the pool, which Joseph evidently turned into his opportunity to speak to me in private.

Slumping down in my swivel chair behind the large desk, I kick up my feet by the phone and fiddle with the terrycloth belt of my robe.

"You know why I'm here, Mr. Maisano." A small smirk tugs at his mouth, though his eyes show seriousness.
"Everyone knows why you're here," I reply dryly. "My wife knows why you're here, which is why—" I stop, then continue loud enough for Isabella to hear "—which is why she's got her ear glued to the door!"

I hear a muffled curse, followed by silence.

"She's not goin' nowheres." I lace my fingers over my stomach and sway a few inches in my chair. "But go on. If you insist."

Joseph looks over his shoulder at the door, then rakes a hand through his hair and faces me again. Next he slips a hand into the pocket of his shorts and produces a jewelry box that he places in front of him.

My chest constricts.

"I want your blessing, sir."

Leaning forward, I snatch up the box.

*Let's see what my daughter's worth.*

I get comfortable again and open the velvet box, revealing a big diamond ring roughly the same size as Isabella's. But instead of my wife's emerald cut, this is shaped like a fucking heart. Which Elisa will lose her shit over.

"You won't do her dirty." I hold up the ring to reflect in the sunlight shining through the window. "You'll give her everything her little heart desires." Outside that window, I hear kids splashing in the pool, no one having a fucking clue of the shit I'm suffering through in here. "That includes a house." I return the ring to the box and give Joseph a pointed look. "In this neighborhood."

"Understood." He inclines his head, collected and certain.

I'm not done. Pushing my feet off the desk, I lean forward in my seat and level him with a burning look. "If you ever...ever lay a hand on my
angel..." I laugh a little, the mere thought sending me directly to Psycho Town. "Not only will I kill you," I whisper, "but I'll draw it out 'til you're begging me to finish you off."

My wife would call me a hypocrite.

I'd tell her I don't give a flying fuck.

"I wouldn't cross a line like that." Joseph stares right back at me, and I gotta hand it to him. I'm not stupid; I can read between the lines, and he's got balls to even go there.

I have crossed that line. More than once.

"That would make you a better man than me." I nod with a dip of my chin and sit back once more. "The kind of man my baby girl deserves."

Every day, I thank God that Isabella loves me. 'Cause anyone with half'a brain knows my wife deserves better, too. But I'm too selfish to even consider letting her go.

"Elisa is everything to me, Junior," he says seriously. "She and the baby and future children—God willing. I'd never let them forget I love them."

"Bene." I drum my fingers on the desk, knowing there's really only one more thing to say.

It breaks my heart, but at the same time...Joseph is a good man, and Elisa's happiness comes first.

"You have my blessing, son."
Epilogue

Junior's POV

About seven months later...

I wake up in the middle of the night 'cause the phone is ringing off the hook.

Isabella says I've been snoring more lately, so she's sleeping soundly with earplugs.

Groaning, I reach for the phone and grumble my name.

"Fucking finally!" Dominic shouts, and I cringe at the volume. "I know they said mothers of twins often go into labor early, but I'm not fucking ready, Dad!"

Anthony's POV

I honk the horn, waiting for Carmen to stop yapping to Gabriella. "We gotta go, baby!" I yell out the window.

Gabby hands over our daughter to Carm and turns to the car. "I'm coming!"

That's what she was screaming half an hour ago before Dominic called, too.

Once Gabby's dropped off TJ and Allegra, she hurries to the car, and we're off to the hospital.

"I'm sending Elisa a text message," she says and brings out her phone.

"Don't bother. Dominic probably called her first." It's only been a couple months since our sister gave birth to a healthy baby girl, and ever since we learned Dani was pregnant, Dominic's called everyone in the family for
every little thing. Elisa, being the closest sibling to Dominic, has been the recipient of some crazy calls.

"And I'm telling her not to come to the hospital," Gabriella reasons. "I doubt Dominic is taking Elisa's exhaustion into account."

True. Elisa hasn't slept much 'cause my niece is colicky as hell, much to her parents' frustration. They're both loving parenthood, though. Joseph was probably born to be a father, which none of us woulda thought before he hooked up with Elisa.

When we finally get to the hospital, I'm surprised to see Alec and AJ in the ambulance bay.

"Isn't that Alec?" Gabriella asks as I get outta the car.

I frown, and then surprise morphs into confusion and worry when I see paramedics carrying Maria out of an ambulance on a gurney.

*What the fuck?*

**Hummingbird's POV**

Pacing the waiting room with a sleeping Lia in my arms, I wait for news from Dominic. Every now and then, he's come out to give us the latest, only to run back in to be with his fiancée. Last we heard, Daniela's prepped for a C-section.

"Mom," Julia whines sleepily. "Stop clickety-clacking. Your heels are buggin' me."

Junior doesn't even look up from the *National Geographic* magazine.

Nino's lost in his comic book.
"Go get Daddy some coffee," I tell Julia, 'cause I don't want her complaining right now.

"Yeah..." Junior flips a page, nodding slowly. "Go get Daddy some coffee."

She huffs and stomps out.

Just a minute later, Anthony and Gabriella come in hand in hand, not looking as happy as one would expect when you're about to welcome twins into the family.

"Che c'è che non va?" I ask what's wrong, and that makes Junior look up, too.

Anthony shakes his head in a daze. "Um." He rakes a hand through his hair and frowns at Gabby, who's crying silently. He hugs her to him, then faces Junior. "Maria killed herself tonight."

**Joseph’s POV**

I practically fly out of the bedroom when I hear the doorbell ringing. It's only been twenty minutes since Elisa fell back asleep, and God knows she needs it. For all I know, Alessia will wake up any minute.

*My baby girl's a ticking bomb that never stops going off.*

Retying the strings to my sweats, I hurry down the stairs and wonder if it's Anthony or Gabriella. They're our neighbors now, and maybe they want us to watch TJ and Allegra.

But it's not Anthony or Gabby. It's my aunt.

"Alice?" I open the door wider to let her in.

"I can't sleep." She sniffs and wipes her cheeks, entering the foyer and heading straight to the kitchen.
Sure, she's left Henderson again and lives nearby now, but this isn't her style. We usually see each other at family dinners.

Sleepy as fuck, I close the door, then groan when I hear Alessia's cry from upstairs.

"I'll wait!" Alice calls, sounding intoxicated.

I release a breath and hurry back upstairs. Stealth is key when I enter our bedroom and carefully pick up Alessia from her bassinet. My wife stirs, but I escape downstairs before she can wake up fully.

"What's wrong this time, sweetheart?" I murmur, nuzzling her soft, baby-smelling neck. "You don't want Mommy and Daddy to sleep, huh?"

No matter how tired I am...I can never keep even an ounce of irritation around her. All it takes is a finger grab, a sleepy blink, or one of her rare cooing noises she makes when she's finally managed to fart.

The sheer contentment on this baby's face when her tummyache lessens is pure win.

It's turned into a joke at work. Whenever Elisa calls me, the guys wonder if it's to tell me that Alessia's let one rip.

*They don't understand what it's like!*

"She's so precious," Alice gushes as I enter the kitchen. I see she's found some wine. "Want me to hold her?"

I press my lips together and shake my head no. Not to be rude, but no—fuck no. If she's drunk, she's not coming near my daughter.

"What's up, Zia?" I ask and open the fridge. Alessia's down to pitiful whimpers, hell of a lot better than screaming, and maybe some food will calm her down more.
Alice doesn't answer until I've started heating up a bottle of breast milk. She's been too busy chugging wine.

"I got the most awful fucking news today," she slurs. "Not only do I still not know what's happened to Tommy..." Her face crumples. He's dead—get over it. He was supposed to be your driver, not your baby daddy and boy toy. I'm relieved no one will ever know the truth of Marissa's biological father. Alice doesn't know for sure, and Jasper accepted the results Dominic forged. Alice hiccups and wipes away more tears. "Today...today I found out Jasper's been granted an early parole hearing. He might get released soon, and I don't wanna see him!"

**Julia's POV**

How the hell did I end up here?

Twenty minutes ago, I was gonna go get Daddy coffee, but then I figured I could sneak out and go across the street to get a hot dog since I can't eat meat around my parents unless I wanna admit defeat. Normal, yes? So, I was standing on the corner eating my hot dog with extra mustard, and then all of a sudden some motherfucker drives up and asks what I charge.

I'd said, "Oh, I'm a luxury ho, buddy. You wouldn't be able to afford me."

'Cause he was driving a shitty Ford Focus...

*Lesson: don’t make hooker jokes when it could be a police officer asking.*

I was cuffed after that and taken to the police station.

In the car, I was mainly trying to swallow the shock, and I was super busy struggling not to cry. But now...? What the fuck! The only thing I've managed to say so far is I'm innocent, I'm a minor, it's a misunderstanding, I was joking...
"They all say that, pipsqueak," the fucko had replied with a sneer.

So, now...I have more words to give him. "I really am innocent!" I growl.

He chuckles, taking me through a waiting room with a bunch'a other hookers. They don't look like me at all. And I think that woman over there is a guy. He may be wearing a sequined dress and have huge knockers, but that Adam's apple ain't foolin' nobody, toots.

"Still don't wanna show me identification?" the officer asks.

"I don't have it here!" I exclaim, wanting to throw up my hands. But the cuffs are keeping me from it. "Me and my parents were woken up in the middle of the night 'cause my brother's girl is in labor. I didn't exactly think to grab my driver's license!"

"Flaherty!" someone bellows.

I whip my head around, then slump my shoulders and groan in misery. Matt Fucking Moretti. Of course. 'Cause that's just what I needed tonight.

"Officer Confetti," I grumble.

He winks at me, all hot and sinful, dressed in normal street clothes but with his badge on a chain around his neck. "Do you know who you just booked?" he asks his buddy.

"A baby prostitute?" Flaherty drawls as he gets started on some paperwork.

My nose is itching.

Matt folds his arms across his chest and raises a brow at me. "You haven't dropped your name yet, hon?"

I huff. "Last time I did that, you made fun of me."
"But I didn't exactly arrest you," he points out, amused. "If a cop takes you in, you drop every name you can think of."

"Oh." I turn my scowl to Flaherty. "Um, Julia."

He doesn't look impressed.

Matt laughs through his nose and drapes an arm around me. Unf, aftershave. Yummy. "He needs the last name," he whispers in my ear. "Or have you forgotten it?"

I instantly get ticked off. I hate being mocked. "Piss off, you gigantic piece'a shit." I shoulder-check him, though he moves away of his own volition. "Ugh." I give Flaherty another scowl. "Julia fuckin' Maisano, all right?"

That does it. Like goddam magic. His face drains of color, which is kinda hilarious to see.

Matt seems to think so, too. "Yeah, you basically just told Edward 'Junior' Maisano that his youngest daughter is a whore."

I grin. "Can I call my daddy now and place both'a youse on his shit list?"

**Dominic's POV**

"That was fast." Daniela rubs sleep from her eyes and tries to sit up straighter in bed, but I'm quick to get to her side and push her back down.

"You were told to rest." I lean over her and kiss her forehead, then sit down in the chair next to her bed. "Sleep, tesorina."

She smiles tiredly and laces our fingers together. "Is your family with the bambini? You said you were going to take them to the nursery."
That was the plan. Only, when I got to the waiting room, it was empty.

"They're around." I smile and shrug a little.

Don't ask me where they are, and at this point, I'm too tired and blissful and fucking exhausted to give a shit.

Half of me wants to get into that bed and sleep for days with my girl in my arms, and the other half is itching to head to the nursery again to stare at our babies.

Twins. Twins, man. A boy and a girl.

A year ago, I was alone and thought I was happy that way. Now...? Well, I sorta have four kids—if you count Nino. I'm engaged to be married, I have a big house, and sometimes I gotta wear suits for work.

*Mind: blown.*

Unlike my brother and Gabby, Daniela and I have hired a nanny—an old woman Mom recommended from church. 'Cause otherwise...*Madonna,* we're human. We're young and fucking overwhelmed. But Mrs. D'Amico's been a big help with Lia, especially while Dani was close to term. I'm guessing she'll be an even bigger help as soon as we bring the twins home.

"I have been thinking about names," Daniela says softly. Reaching forward, I brush away a few tears from her cheeks. She says she's just overwhelmed, and I get it. I've been a mush, tearing up here and there, since we got to the hospital.

"Finally decided?" I murmur.

We agreed that I was gonna give the boy his first name—Dominic Junior, fucking obviously—and the girl her middle name, and I went with Renee
after my nonna on Mom's side. It's Elisa's middle name, too. Now we're just waiting for Dani to decide on our daughter's first name and our son's middle.

"Si. I would like to name our girl after my mother," she answers quietly. "If that is okay."

"Of course." I kiss the top of her hand. "You wanna go with the short version or the long?"

I know her mother's name was Eleonora, but she was nicknamed Nora. I'm good with either.

"The full name," she decides, "but I am sure she will have a nickname too, yes?"

I chuckle. "Probably. You wanna go with Nora?"

She purses her lips and looks down at our linked fingers. "No. I was thinking...Ellie? Is that how Americans would shorten it? Plus, it's close to Elisa."


"Oh, quello era facile." She says that's an easy one, and she giggles, only to wince and clutch her stomach. I stiffen in worry. "Dio, I am sore. But yes, very easy. Francis, since he will be their godfather."

I dig that a lot, but I'm still on edge about her being in pain. "You want me to get the doc?"

"No, no. I am fine," she assures me, and I only believe her 'cause she relaxes and smiles again. "I am surprised Bella has not barged in here yet.
She told me she was going to start planning the wedding as soon as the twins were born."

Oh, Mom's already planning. Like Elisa and Joey, and Anthony and Gabby before them, Dani and I will have the huge Catholic wedding in the same church my parents got married.

Just as I'm about to answer Dani, my brother opens the door, looking worse for wear, and he's got Lia in his arms and Nino coming in behind him.

"You are not Bella," Daniela chuckles sleepily.

"Ah...no..." Anthony wordlessly hands Lia over to me, then quickly rounds the bed to kiss Daniela's cheek. "Congratulations." For the babies, I presume. Or picking a fucking extraordinary man to marry.

"You look like shit, bro," I say bluntly, a crease of worry forming on my forehead. "Where's the rest of the Bradini Bunch?"

Anthony's the picture of shell shock, and his hair is sticking out all over as if he's run a hand through it a million times. "Yeah, so...I have some news."

The End

...sorta
Grand Future Takes

Alec's Finale Part I

Alec's Finale Part II

A Personal Vendetta Part I (Julia.)

A Personal Vendetta Part II (Julia.)

A Personal Vendetta Part III (Julia.)

Grand Theft Part I (Francis.)

Grand Theft Part II (Francis.)

Grand Theft Part III (Francis.)

His Finale (Junior.)

Her Finale (Hummingbird.)
March 2000

(1 year after Grand Finale, or some 4 months after the Grand Finale epilogue.)

Part I.

Alec's POV

Attaching my cuff links, I enter my kitchen and grin and shake my head at the sight. Junior's made himself at home, like always, but lately he's been bringing Bella with him. Or rather, Bella's insisted on tagging along.

It's been a little more than four months since Maria slit her wrists in the bathtub, and since then, my sister-in-law has come over like clockwork. At least three times a week—to cook, drop off leftovers, clean, help AJ with his homework—and there's no swaying her.

I'm grateful as fuck, but she doesn’t have to go to the trouble.

"We brought over more moving boxes, hon," Bella tells me as she closes my fridge. "And you gotta eat more—You know what'chu need? A good, Italian girl who can take care'a you instead of make you miserable." She closes her eyes, shakes her head, and does the Sign of the Cross. "Che Dio la perdoni." She hopes God will forgive Maria for committing suicide.
I turn to Junior. "Your wife is mothering me."

Guess it don’t matter that I'm older than her...?

"What else is new?" He shrugs and refocuses on the paper on the counter.

To me, it's new. My house wasn’t this spotless when Maria was alive. Her depressed ass was permanently glued to the couch, and her hand was shaped as if holding the remote.

"Where's AJ?" Bella asks. "Isn't he coming tonight?"

I shake my head no, my mouth quirking up. "He's on a date."

"No!" Her eyes widen, and she's as shocked as I am.

Even Junior's surprised. "But he's always so fucking quiet and shy."

Sounds about right, but this little bunny has pursued my boy for weeks. When he turned sixteen, I bought him a car, and evidently that gave him the balls to say yes the next time she asked him out.

"Maybe pigs can fly," I chuckle.

Truth be told, I'm more relieved than proud, 'cause I worried AJ was gonna become even more withdrawn after Maria died. But so far, so good. He's even heading in the opposite direction, growing more vocal and confident.

In the meantime, I'm the one who's lost his fucking voice. I'm not young anymore—it's like once you hit forty-five, you stop counting—and Maria's death was a wake-up call for me.

The clubs, the girlfriends, the booze, the drugs...they've worked as distractions for the past twenty years. But I'm so fucking tired. I'm done with it. Nothing holds any appeal anymore.
And now that I don’t have to come home to a woman who hates me, I’ve found myself staying in when I don’t gotta work. I've been spending more time with my son, and I'm looking forward to our move this weekend. ’Cause staying in a house where someone's killed herself...? Fuck that.

I've found a smaller house—a one-story, three-bedroom—in the neighborhood next to my brother's.

"Okay, I think I'm done." Bella stacks the rest of her containers in the freezer, then closes it. "We gonna drive to the restaurant together, or...?"

Junior shakes his head. "We gotta go to Dawn after the dinner."

And not for the first time lately, I'm not up to it.

I guess I know how Junior feels—same with his boys and son-in-law. It gets old. Which I never thought I'd say. Madonn’, I've never understood why they always wanna spend so much time at home.

"Great." Bella rolls her eyes. "My brother's gonna start whoring around right away?"

"Cool it," my brother bitches. "It was Jasper's fuckin' choice. It's his first day outta prison—let him breathe. You ever thought maybe he just wans'ta hang out with his buddies?"

Bella offers a flat look in return.

Yeah, even I'm skeptical. While being on parole, he's not supposed to be seen with "undesirables," and regardless if he's bribing his parole officer, it wouldn’t take much to throw him back in prison. Hanging around a strip club that’s linked to our family is like saying fuck you to the judge.

"Okay, maybe I don’t believe that, either," Junior mutters.

~oOo~
Junior and Bella head to *Stella Mia* shortly after, and I run upstairs to get a new tie.

I might be stalling.

But is that weird? The restaurant will be packed with family, most of whom fucking love playing house. It's actually sickening. Take Dominic for instance. The kid used to run around with his dick pointing him in his next direction, and now he's followed in his father's and brother's footsteps.

Never thought I'd see the day where he got married, but it looks like that's just what's gonna happen next month.

Outta love and everything.

That’s the concept that fails me. Love. I felt an ounce of it with Kate before she was blown to pieces, and immediately after, I was thrust into an arranged marriage with a Sicilian mafia princess who hated me from the get.

Through her family, we got the connections we wanted in the heroin business, and Maria's brothers are still working for us. But Maria herself never wanted to be part of it.

I understand why she resented me straight off the bat, but the woman never mellowed out. And unlike what she believed, I didn’t cheat on her right away. She was so quick to use that card—didn’t matter what I said.

A few years later, I checked out. I went from decent to being as horrible as she was.

I'm not gonna lie; I was a fucking prick to her.

The hatred was mutual for the last fifteen years.

No wonder I'm goddamn tired.
And Bella wonders why I don’t wanna be set up with a "nice woman from church?"

It's not for me. I'll probably get another girlfriend one day, but I'm never getting married again. It's me and my son—end of story.

I'll leave the big families and countless kids to my brother's side of the family.

Do they even keep track of 'em?

We used to joke around about that when we were kids. Mom thought we was all gonna end up with large families, and I guess I saw that, too. But shit changes.

Grabbing my wallet and car keys, I move toward the door, only to come to a halt when someone rings the doorbell.

I assume Junior or Bella forgot something, so I open the door without checking who it is. Stupid.

My brother's not that gorgeous.

I raise a brow, confused, and eye the young girl on the steps. "Can I help you?" I'm in no mood for this shit. The little broad's wearing a pair of too short denim cutoffs and a ratty t-shirt; she's also got long, messy-as-fuck hair and a guitar case, so I'm wondering if she's street performer who got lost on her way to the Strip.

She smiles widely. "Are you Alec Maisano?" Definitely an Italian accent, though not as noticeable as Daniela's.

"Who's asking?" I jerk my chin at her.
Still smiling slightly, her brows knit together, and she shrugs and looks around herself. "Me, of course." She sticks out her hand. "I am Gemma Rossi."

Rossi...? One of the most common last names in Italy, but also Maria's maiden name. Excuse me for reacting. But something in her accent is...different. Not all Italian, I think.

I shake her hand, waiting for her to say why the hell she's here.

"My papà told me Maria died," she admits, doing the Sign of the Cross.

Cazzo. So they're related. Somehow. This girl, Gemma, can't be more than twenty-five though, and Maria was my age. Granted, men can have kids for as long as they can get their dicks up, but still...

"You knew Maria...?"

"Oh, no." She shakes her head quickly, then nods. "Well. I'm her baby sister, but we never met. Maria was from Papà's first marriage." She grins and holds up three fingers. "I am from the third, and my father has always liked to keep his families very, uh, separate. I grew up partly in Spain. My mother is from there."

I blink, feeling temporarily retarded with how slow I am. "Um..."

"I just moved to Las Vegas from Boston," she goes on, as if I've asked for her life story. "I wanted to pay my respects, and Maria's brothers told me if I ever needed a place to stay, I could talk to Alec Maisano."

Oh, yeah? My eyebrows shoot up, and I laugh through my nose as I rub my jaw. "Hanno detto così, huh?" I ask if they said that.
I know, to Maria's family in Sicily, I'm the rich American who makes things happen, but I had no idea they'd actually tell people—or Gemma—to come to me if they needed help. I'm not exactly running a charity here.

A sick part of me wouldn't mind helping Gemma for...a favor or two. But I banish those thoughts fast as hell, irritated and slightly nauseated. Maria's little sister. Yeah, I need another Rossi like I need another wife.

And... I narrow my eyes at her. "How old are you?"

"Who, me?" She points to herself. "Twenty-eight. Why?"

Yeah, not even I'm that much of a horndog. Too young. And honestly? Way outta my league.

"You don't look like Maria." I fold my arms across my chest and lean against the doorframe.

My wife was a stick figure with dark hair and hazel eyes. Gemma is...not a stick figure. She's got the big rack working for her, a pert little ass, and legs that go on for days. And aside from her hair color being similar to Maria's, Gemma's eyes are a silvery green.

"Non mi credi?" Gemma cocks her head, asking if I don't believe her. "You can always call my papà."

Oh, I fucking will. I won't be taken for a ride.

Probably sensing my doubt, Gemma goes on. "I'm not here to, how you say, freeload? I've been in town for three days, and I already have two jobs. My only goal is to make enough money so I can get my son out here—"

"You have a son?" I mean, yeah, it's what she just fucking said. "Where is he?"
"With a friend in Boston." She doesn’t miss a beat. "I've lived there for the past eight years, but I lost my job and wasn’t able to find a new one, so I jumped at the chance when I got a gig here in Vegas." She taps the guitar case. Great. A musician. One of those quirky people. "I do need help—a place to stay, but only until I get my first paycheck, and I start working at my second job tonight. If I make good tips, I can afford a motel room."

Good tips... I nearly groan, but I do pinch the bridge of my nose. How many strip joints are there in Vegas? How many girls come out here thinking they can get rich on it?

"Where do you work?" I mutter, not really wanting to learn that she's actually taken a job as a stripper.

"Um, it's called Twilight."

I bark out a laugh, 'cause this is fucking ridiculous. Anthony's told me he needed new dancers, but he leaves that shit to Nico. Who is busy running Dawn at the same time, but if there's one thing Nico loves, it's hiring new talent.

For some reason, I hope Gemma didn’t take the job on one of Nico's conditions.

"You know it's a strip club," I state.

"Yes." Her jaw ticks with tension, but she's quick to compose herself. Maybe she's a broad with a backbone. "I also know it's a job that will give me my son faster."

Fair enough, but there's one other thing that doesn’t add up. "Your father's one of the richest men in his region."

Gemma nods. "He also has a husband lined up for me."
Wow. I see not much has changed there. But Gemma hasn’t agreed to it—like Maria did.

Then again, times were different twenty years ago.

"So, Daddy won't support you unless you get married?" I smirk.

She smirks right back and widens her arms. "Who needs' im?"

*Ballsy.*

"You do," I laugh. "You're here for help, aren't you?"

"But that is only for a few days! And I will pay you back." She really has a beautiful fucking smile. "I can cook, clean—" she ticks it all off on her fingers "—do laundry, and *Papà* told me you have a son, too; I can help with his homework, take him places—"

"He has a car," I cut in, shaking my head, "and I'm not looking for a housekeeper. Christ. If, and this is a big fucking if, your story checks out, I'll give you money to stay at a hotel." I'm moving this weekend anyway. This house is a mess, and the new one is empty. "I'm on my way out, so..."

"Oh, me too." She offers an easy smile. "Do you mind if I just leave my case here? I don't want it at the club, and I'm afraid it'll get stolen in my truck."

Understandable, but I don’t trust Gemma yet. "You can keep it in the garage." I point off to the side of the driveway and step outside the house. "So, you didn't meet the owner at Twilight?" After setting the alarm, I close the door and lock it.
"No...? I spoke to a Nicola Savona." She follows me to the garage. "He is the manager, I guess?" Not really, but no matter. "You have heard of Twilight."

I nod and open the garage door, fiddling with the key to my new Escalade. "My nephew owns it. Anthony Maisano."

"Oh. I see." She smiles in thanks and leaves her case just inside the garage, pushing it to the side. "Do you go there a lot?"

I used to. "What's it to you, hon?"

She widens her eyes, then stands down. "Jeesh. Sorry for asking." For the first time, she looks uncomfortable, and I feel like an ass. Which is also kinda new. "Um, have a good night. I'll pick up the case tomorrow—if that's okay." She starts walking away as if she can't get outta here fast enough.

I sigh.

~oOo~

"You're late," Junior tells me when I get to Stella Mia. "I thought you took off right after we left."

I shake my head no and greet a few guys I don't see on a daily basis, scanning the dining room for Jasper's ugly mug. "Where's Jasper?"

My brother jerks his chin to the bar. "Isabella's introducing him to the grandchildren." He grins and nudges me. "You shoulda seen Allegra and Lia when I got here. Who do you think they reached for?"

"Bella," I deadpan.

"No! Fuck you." He gets cunty. "Go say hello to Jasper, ya disrespectful fuck."
"I love you too, big brother." I chuckle and squeeze his shoulder, then make my way through the crowd of associates and their families. Alice looks like she's about to have a root canal—I'm guessing there's no love lost there. But their kids are thrilled to see their father outside prison.

I get held up on the way to the bar, and I shake hands with Joseph and kiss Elisa's cheek, who's holding their baby girl. "Look at that little face." I grin and touch Alessia's hand, to which she grips one of my fingers. "She takes after her beautiful mama." I wink at Elisa.

She beams, blushing at the same time. "She's a total Daddy's girl, though." She shoots Joseph a playful scowl.

They're another sickeningly sweet couple, and I ignore the way my chest constricts. I'm used to it by now.

"So, who's next?" I ask, straightening. "I'm surprised Gabby and Anthony have held out this long."

Elisa suddenly finds her feet interesting to stare at, and she's blushing harder.

This from the girl who got rich on tricking the boys at her school into giving her their lunch money when she was a kid.

Joseph looks casual at first, but after my niece has given everything away, he smirks and shakes his head at her.

Madonn', these kids work fast. "Does Bella know, hon?" I ask, keeping my voice low.

"Know what?" She looks up at me with too-wide eyes.

I purse my lips and cock my head at Joseph. "Don't let her play poker with anythin' other than Monopoly money."
"I hear ya," he laughs.

Pressing a kiss to Elisa's temple, I murmur a congratulations before continuing toward Jasper.

Maybe I can get another pool going and bet on Joseph and Elisa. I did win the last one—stating that Daniela would get pregnant before Gabby. Though, I didn’t think Gabby and Anthony would go this long. I mean, Allegra's over a year old now.

Spotting Jasper talking to Nico, Bella, and Lucia—who I know arrived from LA this morning—I walk up to them and clap Jasper on the back.

He startles a bit, then sees it's me and grins widely.

"Look at'chu!" I kiss his cheeks before looping my arm around his neck. "Did'ju get the cookies I sent?"

He chuckles and mock-punches me in the gut. "I did. And I bet my sister made them."

"You wouldn't wanna eat anything I've made." My son can vouch for that. I pull out an envelope from the inner pocket of my suit and slap it to Jasper's chest. Customary welcome-home-from-prison gift. "To get'chu up and running again."

"Grazie, amico mio." He pockets what's gotta be the twentieth envelope of the evening. I'm guessing Alice is holding on to the rest. "I heard about Maria—I'm sorry."

I wave that off, having no desire to talk about it. It's no secret that she and I weren't happy, so why dwell on it? We both fucked up.
"MOM!" someone—Julia, I think—shouts across the restaurant. Everyone sorta turns that way, and yeah, it was Julia. She's standing next to Junior and jerks a thumb at him. "Daddy's hungry."

Jasper, Nico, and I crack up.

Junior rolls his eyes. "I told you to get Mom. Not fuckin' scream."

"Selective hearing." She tugs at her ear.

Hard to believe that little clown graduates from high school this spring. A cheekier girl doesn’t exist.

~oOo~

Throughout dinner, my energy seems to vanish with every bite of food I take. I try to keep up with the different conversations around me, but more often than not, my thoughts drift over to Twilight and Gemma Rossi.

She said she needed my help, that she doesn’t have a place to stay, but where's she gonna be tonight? I assume she isn't coming over later, since she mentioned picking up the guitar case tomorrow.

It's mid-day in Italy, so I'll probably call Gustavo the minute we get to Dawn later.

If Gemma's told me the truth, I'll help her get her son out here—since she's technically family—and maybe I can set her up with a better job. But that’s down the road. First I gotta make sure she's not a fucking bug planted by the Feds, or worse, that it's part of a scheme from another family that wants to move in.

"Alec!" my brother shouts from across the table.

I look up from my plate and jerk my chin. "What's up?"
"No—" he twirls his fork "—other way 'round. What's up wit'chu? You're all quiet."

I plaster a grin on my face and shake my head. "Fatti gli affari tuoi." I tell him to mind his own business.

We have his wife, daughters, Joseph, Alice, Lucia, and a talkative Jasper between us; I'm sure there's better things to think about.

"Only I get to say that," he laughs.

Thankfully, Bella distracts him with food, Jasper pulls him into another conversation, and I make another effort to listen in when Joseph, Lucia, and Elisa discuss Los Angeles—Joseph wants to visit his brother out there. And when that doesn't work, I tune in to the story Jasper's telling about bribing the guards in prison.

Behind me, at the next table, Anthony and Dominic laugh about crazy shit their kids get into.

Half an eternity later though, dinner is over, dessert is over, and goodbyes are over.

Being the boss now, Junior always has a driver these days, so we wait while his guy gets the SUV. In the meantime, everyone with a family makes sure their wives and kids get into cabs or their own vehicles.

I light up a smoke and can't help but overhear when Nico suggests to his pops that we do Twilight, and then Dawn.

"One club ain't enough?" I raise a brow and take a pull from my smoke.

The last thing I need to see is Gemma shaking what God gave her.

But I think I do need to get laid, 'cause my mood is fucking depressing, and I'd prefer to find some bunny at Dawn—far away from Gemma.
"Have we decided?" Junior asks as the car rolls up.

We all look to Jasper.

"Apparently there's some new talent I should see at Twilight." He throws an arm around his son's shoulders. "So, Twilight first, then Dawn."

"All talent will be new for you," I point out.

In my periphery, I catch Junior studying me, which is just another thing I don't need. He's already on my case 'cause he doesn't want Nico to be his underboss anymore. Instead he wants me, but just like my brother never wanted the big seat, I never wanted a higher ranking than capo.

I'm happy with my crew, and I run one of the largest drug businesses on the West Coast. Ever since Francis moved to LA, it's only grown.

"Why you rainin' on my show, man?" Jasper bitches.

Joseph chuckles.

So do I. "Pretty sure it's parade, but no matter. We'll hit up Twilight, party boy." I clap him on his back and nod for good measure.

~oOo~

Anthony takes charge when we arrive at his club. All it takes is a sharp whistle and some pointing, and we have waitresses turning a booth into the beginnings of a large table for us near the left side stage.

It'll satisfy Jasper and Nico to have something close, but the rest of us can do whatever without the commotion from the main stage in the center.

Funny...not so long ago, I woulda been right there with Jasper and his boy, only I've never been that enthusiastic.
Rather than fucking around with strippers, I've had a handful of steady lays throughout the years, and I'm not completely sure why I ended it with my last goomah. I think I'm just tired of it. But we'll see later, when we get to Dawn. I gotta let off some steam.

After asking Anthony if I can borrow his office for a minute, I cross the large floor, not-so-subtly checking where Gemma is, but I don’t see her, and I have more pressing matters right now than to continue my search.

Unlike my brother, technology doesn’t scare me, so I do carry a cell phone for emergencies. I find Maria's father's number in there and dial it from Anthony's phone.

~oOo~

Huh...

It woulda been easier if Gemma turned out to be a lying gold digger who I could've discarded and then move on with my life. But in a mix of rapid Italian and broken English, Gustavo Rossi cursed his youngest daughter and said if she didn’t get back home soon, there would be no family to welcome her.

He was blunt. He wants Gemma to come home so some old motherfucker can make an honest woman outta her and give her son a name. Apparently she left Sicily eight years ago when she found out she was pregnant. Gustavo was quick to blame Gemma's "Spanish whore of a mother" and that Gemma just didn’t know better than to give up the goods before marriage.

Gustavo wants me to convince her to return to Sicily.

*We’ll see how that goes.*
Call me a paranoid fucker, 'cause I'm still not completely convinced, but that’s dealt with easily enough.

Leaving the office, I scan the crowded club and spot Joseph at the bar with Dominic, so I head over there.

"How ya doin', Zio?" Dominic grins. "You don’t look as happy as the rest of us do for a daddies' night out." He clinks his beer bottle with Joseph’s.

"Youse excited about tonight, huh?" I laugh through my nose, finding the kids in our family funny—and more often than not, fucking adorable.

"Yo, don’t get me started," Dominic says, getting himself started anyway. "Yesterday, Dani and Lia painted my fucking nails! Took me forever to clean off!"

Joseph nods. "Elisa wanted me to go with her to the salon—said men do that nowadays, too." He widens his eyes as Dominic and I laugh. "Not in my fucking lifetime."

"We was talkin'—" Dominic waves a hand between Joseph and himself "—and what do you think about skipping Dawn later and heading to a casino instead? It's been forever since I played poker, and they're hosting a tournament over at the Bellagio."


I smirk and look over to Jasper who's already got two bunnies dancing for him. "If you can convince his horny ass...? Sure."

Joseph frowns, probably realizing that’s a no-go.

Dominic narrows his eyes. "Fuck it. We's can go as soon as he's drunk on cooz. It's not like Pops will stick around forever, anyway."
Yeah, but Junior's our boss. He can do whatever the fuck he wants. And even if Dominic's taken the oath—is a made man now—Jasper outranks him, and it'd be disrespectful to leave. Rank speak loudest, but seniority counts as well. That’s why it'd be disrespectful if Joseph took off, too. Even if he outranks Jasper.

Being a senior in this bunch also gives you more experience. Solutions come easier. "Youse can always set up a game right here, you know."

*Ding-ding-ding, the boys are on board.*

"I'll raid Anthony's office for chips." Dominic takes his leave.

And I take the opportunity to ask Joseph a favor. "I need you to run a check on someone."

"Go on." He leans close.

"One of the new dancers here—Gemma Rossi."

He steps back and raises a brow.

I shake my head, not ready to divulge.

He inclines his head. "I'll take care of it."

"Grazie." Ordering a beer, I return to the table and join a few of the guys on my crew. Junior's comfortable over in the booth, probably talking Anthony's ear off about something he's seen on the Discovery Channel, and my plan is to keep my distance from my brother tonight.

"Finally!" Paulie Smack hollers when a new round of bunnies takes the stages. "I'mma fuck all'a them!"

Hence his nickname—he talks smack.
Not in the mood to be social, I angle my chair to face the left stage and get comfortable. Might as well watch the show, but...fuck my life, it would've been better if Gemma didn’t take the left side. Granted, she's new and hasn't earned the main stage, but there's always the right side, god-fucking-dammit.

I clench my jaw as she starts dancing to an R&B song with a heavy beat, wearing only a black lace thong and a matching bra that pushes her luscious tits together. *Don't forget the stripper heels.* No, but the girl actually takes them off. She grins to herself, kicking the traps to the side, then grips the brass pole and swings around it like she's done it a million times before.

There's no way this is her first time working in a strip joint.

She shakes her ass and rolls her hips like one of those South American belly dancers, and she grinds against that pole as if it's a dick she wants to fuck. Rock bands would go nuts to have her as a sideshow during concerts. She certainly looks like a rock chick. Her hair's longer than I originally thought, messy, straight, full of shimmer, and nearly reaches her perfect ass. Combined with the black eye makeup, she looks like a poster girl for Mötley Crüe.

Devil music, as my mother calls it.

Some twenty minutes into the show, Gemma spots me while she's slithering along the floor, her hands roaming her body.

And she's both Italian and Spanish? Double trouble.

I shift forward in my seat to hide just how happy a part of me is to watch her, but maybe she can tell anyway. She gives me a smirk, then closes her eyes and trails a hand between her full tits, down her stomach...and inside the flimsy fabric of her thong. The guys in my crew hoot and holler,
and at the same time, Gemma arches her back and tips her head back in
pleasure.

"Fuck," I mutter.

That body of hers makes me forget to blink.

I shake my head quickly, too distracted, and avert my eyes. Dominic,
Joseph, Junior, Anthony, and a couple others are oblivious, busy playing
poker. Jasper is...not here. I assume he's in one of the private rooms.
Nico's probably next.

Soon enough, my gaze travels back to Gemma. Either she's a good
actress and has been too nervous to take off her clothes, or she's a
fucking cocktease. She stands up gracefully and reaches for the clasp of
her bra just as the DJ thanks the girls and starts talking about tonight's
main event—fuckin' nurse theme.

Gemma grins and leaves the bra on, then jumps down from the stage. My
eyes follow her because I can't fucking help myself, and I watch her
hesitate for a beat.

*Don't come here, baby. Run back to Sicily. Or stay. Stay and I'll make you
feel so fucking good.*

Relief, lust, and resignation pummel through me as she targets me.

Like all the other dancers, they're here to make money, and after shows
they lure any motherfucker they can into one of the private rooms,
or...they stay on the floor and give simple lap dances.

At this point, I'll take what she offers.

"May I sit, Mr. Maisano?" She points to my lap. A smile graces her lips,
but there's uncertainty in those silvery green eyes.
"You lucky bastard, Maisano!" Pietro shouts.

In response to Gemma, I lean back in my chair.

The relief in her features pleases me a little too much. As does the desire darkening her eyes when she sits down on my hard dick.

*Madonna mia*, may God give me strength.

"I didn’t expect to see you here," she murmurs in my ear. "At your house, you wanted to get rid of me."

I don’t answer right away, not sure what to say. And when she places my hands on her hips—a way of saying it’s okay for me to touch—I take my time feeling her soft skin.

"I had a lot on my mind," is my reply. But I think it’s safe to say I don’t wanna get rid of her. What I do wanna get rid of is her bra, but I’d prefer privacy for that. I want my hands and mouth all over those bad boys, but the thought of everyone seeing her naked…?

I *shouldn’t* give a fuck.

Gemma rolls her hips over my stiff cock, eliciting a quiet groan from me, and leans forward again. Her forearms rest on my shoulders, giving me a spectacular view of her tits.

"I was—" she sucks in a sharp breath when I push her down harder on me "—oh God, *encouraged*…by Mr. Savona…to take someone to a private room."

Oh, I bet he encouraged her to do that. There’s more money in a whorehouse than a strip club. At Twilight and Dawn, we don’t care about laws in the private rooms.
"But I don’t know what's expected of me," she admits as she presses her chest to mine. I keep listening, but I'm definitely watching her rack. "Shaking my ass on stage is one thing—I have done that before. But I've stuck to the no-touching policy."

Glad to hear it. "You don’t gotta do shit you're not comfortable with," I tell her, caressing her smooth thighs. Cazzo, she feels good in my hands. "You get paid to dance and show off your body. You get paid to give lap dances, too. But no one's allowed to touch you unless you give them the okay." I grasp her chin to make her look me in the eye. "The extra shit is for extra money, but it's no obligation."

"Oh, okay." She smiles and weaves her fingers into the hair at the back of my head, and her other hand moves down my chest. "Mr. Savona made it sound like it was expected of me."

I'll talk to Anthony, 'cause that shit pisses me off. "That’s because he wants a piece'a you for himself." The next question is fucked-up, and I shouldn’t ask it, but I will. I gotta know. "Did he cross any lines when he hired you?"

A slow smile spreads across her lips. "Would it matter?"

I chuckle and slide my hands down to palm her ass. "Don’t do that. Don’t play games with me." I squeeze her ass. Hard. "Answer my question."

She hisses and bucks into me. "No—cabrań.″ Fire flashes in her eyes. Passion. "He made sure I knew what he wanted, but... No. I only danced for him."

When she tries to kiss me, my stomach does a fucking flip of excitement, but I tilt my head away so she gets my cheek.
"Not out here." My voice is like gravel, and I'm drowning in desire for this girl, but I can't lose my head. You don't just kiss a stripper you've supposedly never met before.

I don't kiss strippers, *period*. The few times I've taken a stripper to a private room, they've been a hole to fuck—end of.

"You want to go someplace else with me?" she asks.

"What do *you* want?" I have her on my dick; I think it's safe for her to presume I wanna take this further, but I want her to be honest.

She stares at me for a beat and bites her lip. "I want..." *Come on. Say it.* "I want to get my son out here as soon as possible."

*There we go.* I grip her hips again to still her slow grinding. "What if I told you I'd get him a plane ticket for tomorrow without conditions?"

Her eyes light up so much that I doubt she's been planning this. She most likely woulda let me fuck her for money, but I'm starting to believe she's no freeloader.

"I would pay you back," she says quickly. "With interest and everything—*mamma mia.*" Tears well up in her eyes, causing me to freeze, but she blinks past it and pushes down her emotions. "You would really do that? For me?"

"That's what I said." I don't want her to make a big deal out of it, because it would force me to figure out why I'm doing it in the first place. "So, where do we stand on the private room now?" I raise a brow and smirk at her, knowing her answer.

With no money on the table, she won't go for a guy on the wrong side of forty-five.
The minute the fog of lust lifts, I'll find her too young for me again anyway, so it's probably best I just head home and jack it in the shower like some loser who can't get pussy—

"Well. Your solution poses a problem for me," she says, closing the distance again. I gnash my teeth together when she slips a hand between us and palms my cock. "Now that you're going to fix everything, I can't hide behind that excuse." I feel the tip of her tongue on my neck. "But the truth is...I've wanted you to do bad, bad things to me ever since you answered the door."

"Christ," I hiss. My head is swimming—there's a whole lotta disbelief, but I'm too turned on to question her. "Get a fucking room for us." She giggles and stands up when I smack her ass.

"Don't take too long, papi. Or I'll start without'chu." She winks at me before shimmying off.

Pulling out my smokes, I light one up and keep my eyes on her until she's outta sight. Fucking hell. I gotta calm down. I turn the chair around to face the table again, and I reach for an unopened bottle of tequila. Not my preferred poison, but it'll do.

*What the hell happened to getting laid far away from Gemma Rossi?*

"How the hell did'ju manage to score with that one?" Nico asks incredulously. I'm kinda surprised he's still here. I thought he'd be in one of the rooms by now. "I gave her my best fuckin' moves, and—not a thing. No reaction."

"She's got good taste?" I answer, though I'm talking outta my ass. Maybe it's gratitude, maybe it's my reputation—who knows why Gemma wants to get with me.
I look fucking stellar for my age—we's got good genes in our family—and I still run five miles every day. Not even my brother can pull that off, but Gemma? She's goddamn sin. All smooth, soft, and intoxicating. What the fuck's she doin' with me?

"I'm sexy as shit," Nico grumbles.

I smirk darkly and take a drag from my smoke. "Literally."

"Oh!" Paulie Smack bumps my fist.

Nico gets annoyed. "Whatever. She works for me—I'll get my chance."

"The fuck she does." Anthony's been listening in, evidently. He cocks a brow at Nico and tosses two cards on the table. They're still playing. "You got your own playground. Act like Twilight's yours, and you and I are gonna have a serious problem."

"Easy, cuz." Nico forces a laugh and shows his palms. "I'm just messin' around with Alec. He thinks he's all that."

I smile. "You want a pissing contest, kid?" I don't need a little brat challenging me, but I have no issue showing him what's what.

In fact, maybe my brother's offer is looking better. "Nico's a good wiseguy, but I don't want a hotheaded cooz-hound representing me out there." Junior's words.

Regardless, it's not a decision I'mma make while I'm all riled up.

Taking a swig from the tequila bottle, I listen with one ear as Nico says he's gotta go make a phone call. I can feel Junior's eyes on me, but I ignore that. Instead I stub out my smoke and leave the table, aiming toward the corridor with the private rooms.
Gemma's leaning against the doorframe of one room at the end of the hall.

I'm wound up tightly, though I don't really know why. Nico and I always bitch at each other. It's nothing new.

"Mi hai fatto aspettare." Gemma's voice is a sexy purr, saying I kept her waiting.

I close the distance, nudge her into the room, shut the door, and back her into it. "Won't happen again." With that, I grab her jaw and take her mouth in a demanding kiss. She gasps; I use it to taste her tongue with my own. Her soft, luscious lips give in, and she catches on quickly, kissing back just as ferociously.

While she loosens my tie, I slide my hands down the back of her thighs and hoist her up, wrapping her legs around me.

She moans as I press my hardening cock against her pussy. "Fuck, Alec!"

That’s it. I wanna make her scream that when she comes later.

"Tell me I can fuck you." I trail kisses down her throat and carry her over to the L-shaped couch in the corner.

"I demand you do it," she says breathlessly. Then she giggles as I drop her onto the couch. She sits up quickly and pulls me to stand between her legs. "I must be the worst little sister in the world." She smirks up at me while undoing my belt and pants. "How inappropriate of me."

I cup her cheek, forcing my thumb into mouth. "Do I look like I give a fuck about appropriate, dolcezza?"
She shakes her head no and swirls her tongue around the pad of my thumb, sucking hard on it. In the next breath, she pushes down my pants and boxer briefs and replaces my thumb with my cock.

"Fuck," I spit out. Shockwaves of ecstasy render me immobile for several seconds. It's not until Gemma gags on what she can't fit into her mouth that I react, and I thread my fingers into her hair to slow down her movements. "Easy," I murmur. "Easy..."

She hums and closes her eyes and sucks on my cock as if it's the only thing she wants to do right now. Her tongue slides around the head, her lips tighten, and she begins to breathe solely through her nose. Relaxing fully, she takes me deeper and harder but keeps it slow and fucking amazing.

"Perfect..." I groan and look down to see her fingering herself under the thong. Jesus. Two fingers disappear inside of her, only to come out glistening with her juices. "Does it make you wet to suck my cock?"

"Mmhmm..." She nods and licks her way to the base of my cock, then goes even lower to suck on my balls. "So, so wet."

"Enough," I grunt. I nudge her away from me, 'cause I gotta get balls-deep in her pussy right fucking now. "I want'chu to ride me."

After getting rid of my clothes and tucking away my Glock, I reach for my wallet and get the condom that’s been in there for nearly five months now. Then I sit down and roll it on while Gemma sheds her heels, thong, and bra.

"Madonn'." I stare at her hungrily and draw her close. " Fucking beautiful."

"When you touch me..." She bites her lip, breathing heavily, and runs her fingernails down my chest, through my chest hair, over my nipples. "I feel
like I'm on fire." I hiss and push the head of my cock inside her. She's driving me mad, and I can't see past the fog. "Dio, you are so sexy."

Drunk on her, I stare at her face as I slowly pull her down on me. Inch by inch, and I see every expression. Desire, desperation, a pinch of pain, then more need.

"Ay, papi..." She tilts back her head and moans when I'm all in.

"Cazzo." I grit my teeth together and squeeze her ass, bringing her forward. She moans again and wraps her arms around my shoulders, and I gotta catch my breath. "Move on me, dolcezza. Fuck yourself on my cock."

She shivers violently and rolls her hips. She exhales in hot little puffs near my ear. I swallow a growl and slide my hands up her body, cupping her full tits in my hands. Then she moves a little faster, harder, and deeper. Her kisses return; she grabs my face and steals my fucking breath.

She gasps into the kiss and grinds her pussy over my dick until I can't get deeper. "God, it's been so long..."

Oh, yeah?

"Lemme take over." I gotta fucking move more than this. "Lie back on the couch." I help her get settled, then hover over her and drag my cock between the soaked lips of her smooth pussy. "Can I go hard?" I glance up at her flushed face, pupils dilated, thoroughly-kissed mouth, and I'm pretty sure I've never seen anything so sexy and beautiful.

She nods quickly. "Yes."

*Thank fuck.*
I study her for any reaction when I shift her legs to rest over my shoulders, but all I get is approval and lust. Tilting my head, I stroke and kiss her calf as I use my free hand to guide my cock to her pussy. She's tighter than ever in this position, and I sink deeper with a low groan.

"Kiss me, please?" she whispers.

I comply, leaning forward so she's literally folded in half, and then I kiss her deeply, passionately, while I start fucking her properly. Over and over, I slam into Gemma, and her reactions fuel me. When I lick the pad of my thumb and bring it to her clit, she cries out in pleasure as well as surprise, making me wonder what other men have done to make her come. When I suck and nip at her tits, she gets religious and mumbles deliriously about how she's never felt anything like this before.

With every thrust, she gets wetter and wetter.

The second time I bring her to the edge and don't let her come, she slaps my arm and glares at me.

I laugh, outta breath.

*Who knew you could laugh during sex?*

"You want me to beg?" She changes her tune and pouts at me.

Smirking, I sit back on my heels and wipe my brow. "Maybe I do." I point to the end of the couch that sticks out in the room. "I want you to bend over the couch there. And put on your heels again, shorty." I need her a few inches taller to turn great into perfect.

She's quick to obey. Like a good little girl.

Okay, *that* has to be the sexiest thing ever. Gemma, wearing only fuck-me heels, her ass in the air, and waiting for me to introduce her to God.
Getting behind her, I leave a trail of kisses along her spine as I rub her clit with the head of my dick. She starts pleading and trembling.

When she least expects it, in the middle of begging, I wrap her long hair around my fist, yank back, and slam my cock into her from behind.

She lets out a scream that morphs into sobs. I woulda been worried if she wasn’t crying out for more.

Fucking her into oblivion, I feel ten feet tall every time she lets me know how much she loves it. "You want me to make you come?" My chest rumbles with a low growl.

"Yes!" She arches her back enough to sneak an arm around my neck. "Please, please, please."

"Good girl." I flatten a hand along her spine and force her to lean forward again. "Touch your clit. I'll fuck you good."

I grip her hips and push inside, watching where we're connected the entire time. Gemma loses her English and begins to curse and moan in both Italian and Spanish instead.

At this point, I'm glad she can't see me. I may have stamina, but I'm itching to come and my legs are fuckin' killin' me. Fanning out my thumbs over her perfect ass, I spread her cheeks and nearly salivate at the juices coating her soft flesh. Makes me wish I wasn’t wearing a fucking condom.

I gnash my teeth together, my jaw ticking with tension, and a bead of sweat trickles down my temple as Gemma's pussy clenches down on me. She gasps and whimpers, her whole body shaking.

"Let go, dolcezza," I groan. "I'm gonna come."
When she finally stiffens and screams my name, I squeeze my eyes shut and release the last bit of restraint. I push as deep as I can and suck in a sharp breath, my orgasm rolling through me like fucking thunder. My balls ache, my thighs throb, my spine tingles, and I swear I can feel it in my goddamn toes.

By the time she's done draining the life outta me, I can barely stand up.

"Oh, my God, Alec..." Gemma slumps forward, causing my softening cock to slip out, and she rolls over the back of the couch to collapse on the cushions. "I can't...breathe..."

I take the opportunity to grip the same spot she was holding on to before and steady myself as I catch my breath.

With strength I don't really have, I lift my chin to see Gemma all sprawled out on the couch, a hand clutching her heart, those gorgeous tits rising and falling with each breath, long legs crossed over the armrest, flawless skin, beautiful face, a lazy smile on her lips, and her eyes closed.

That fog of lust is gonna wear off now, right?

Once I've helped her get her son out here, everything will go back to normal.

She's just a young bunny, one who this old fucker managed to score with.

*Yeah, and you're totally fine with the fact that her shift isn't over for the evening...*

I scowl at that thought.
March 2000

(1 year after Grand Finale, or some 4 months after the Grand Finale epilogue.)

Part II.

Alec's POV

I'm getting too old for this.

I've only run three miles and I'm already wheezing. The sun's shining brightly, and my t-shirt is stuck to my skin, soaked in sweat. But a workout with a big breakfast afterward has always been my best hangover remedy, so I push forward.

Anthony's smirk from last night fuels me enough to run past his house without lookin' like an old cripple.

Okay, so maybe I lost my shit a little last night after Gemma and I left the private room.

I was gonna play it cool; we fucked, end'a story. I returned to our table while Gemma hid her face and got back to work, but seeing her out there...? I got wasted and watched her dance and talk to horny fuckers,
but the second she was approached for a lap dance, I'd hauled her into Anthony's office and told her to stay there until I got back.

"You want me to tell her what?" Anthony frowns and leans against the bar, probably itching to get back to his poker game. Or go home. But instead I dragged him over here.

"I'll cover the difference," I say impatiently. "I might change my mind soon—Madonn', I fucking hope I do, but for now... No nudity, no lap dances, no private rooms."

Anthony stares at me for a beat. "You do know this is a strip club, right, Zio?"

I smack the back of his head. "Don't be cute, kid." I scowl while he laughs. "I don't care if you gotta chain her to one of the poles; no close interaction with the customers, and underwear stays on. Capisce?"

Of course I've said too much already; I knew that going in, so I ain't surprised when Anthony narrows his eyes on me.

"She your new girlfriend or something?"

I shake my head no. "Do me this favor, all right?"

He smirk.

He just...smirked that fucking smirk.

Ignoring the burn in my legs, I pass Junior and Bella's house, then slow down and do a double take at Julia as she lowers a rope from her second-story window at the side of the house.

Can't be a curfew thing. It's morning, for fuck's sake. I think I left the house around nine.
I grin and cup my hands around my mouth. "What'cha doin', Julia?"

She freezes, her legs and butt hanging outta the window.

Two seconds later, Bella comes out the front door. And I wonder if she wakes up like that. Unlike her husband, she's always dressed for company—more beautiful than ever—and I think she'd rather die than be caught in a robe.

"Good morning, Alec." She smiles and waves, then points to the side of the house. "Is my youngest sneaking out by any chance?"

I chuckle. "Looks like it." I watch as Julia tries to scramble back inside, but she doesn’t make it in time.

Bella's there already, and she puts her fists to her hips and shakes her head. "Are you outta your fuckin' mind, baby girl? Do you think Daddy was kidding when he grounded you?"

"It's an emergency!" Julia argues, grunting as she disappears into her room again. Then her head pops out, and she scowls down at her mother. "You're gonna rat me out, aren't you?"

Bella laughs gleefully. "You bet. The minute he wakes up. Then I'll call your brothers and have them put bars on your window."

Yeah, she's got that covered. Continuing my run, passing through some shrubbery to reach the next street, I hear Julia bitching and moaning, which will probably wake up my brother. He left before I did last night, but it was still late—around two.

Some twenty minutes later, I'm back in my own neighborhood after taking several detours to get all my miles in. And I’m not gonna lie; by the time I reach my street, I'm ready to keel over.
I walk the last bit to my house at the end of the street and pull up the front of my t-shirt to wipe the sweat off my face.

Two more nights in this place, and then AJ and I can finally start over.

Speaking of my boy... I'm kinda surprised to see him sitting on the front steps with his phone as I walk up the driveway.

"What'chu doin' out here, tesoro?"

My mini-me taps away on his phone, probably pausing *Snake*, then looks up. He purses his lips and looks over his shoulder toward the kitchen window. "Um. There's a woman in the kitchen." He glances back at me as I sit down next to him.

I grin and nudge his shoulder with mine. "So, that’s why you decided to sit out here?"

He just shrugs.

Despite being sixteen and surrounded by a loud family, AJ's quiet, socially awkward, and somewhat of a late bloomer. I remember Dominic, Francis, and Anthony tried to bring him outta his shell a couple times, but my son just hasn’t been interested in what most guys like. No sports, no broads—well, until now—and no roughhousing.

Instead he often has his nose stuck in a book—or his dirty magazines—and he doesn’t have a lot of friends. Just a couple geeks. And the only family members he's really close with are Colin—my sister Brianna's son who lives in Kansas City—and, oddly, Joseph. Then again, maybe it's not odd. AJ looks up to Joseph, and my son is a fucking genius, so he gets more out of a conversation with Joseph than, say, Anthony or Dominic.
I think the only thing my boy does that isn't tame is selling weed in school. It's how he makes money, and he's smart about it, too. He takes after his daddy there. *Who happens to be his supplier.*

Secretly, I'm happy AJ's different. While my brother's kids are affectionate and no strangers to "I love yous", hugging and sweet shit is usually followed by jokes and "get the fuck outta hea's". But not AJ. He's still a sweetheart, and he can blow off his friends to have a movie night with me.

The only issue I have is that it's extremely difficult to read him. Had one of my nephews acted the way AJ does, if only for one day, the whole family woulda come down on him wondering if someone's died.

Which, in AJ's case, is true. Someone did die—his mom. Yet, he's changed for the better...? I don’t get it, but there's no mistaking the difference. He walks around in the house with more ease now. No tiptoeing.

"How was your date last night?" I ask, keeping him in my periphery.

"Um...decent, I guess. Got to second base, but she's kinda dumb."

I snort a laugh and throw an arm around his shoulders. He smirks a little, then pretends to grimace at my sweaty shirt, but he says nothing.

"So, who's the woman?" he asks. *Technically, your aunt.* "A date or something?"

"No..." I'm not really sure how to put this. "Her name's Gemma. She's sorta family—in a way." I wince internally. I mean seriously, I fucked my sister-in-law? Who's more than fifteen years younger than me. "She's from your mom's side."

AJ side-eyes me, a brow cocked. "I've never met her before."
"Yeah, well." I scratch my jaw, squinting. "She's from Nonno Gustavo's third marriage, and I think she said something about growing up in Spain. Her mother's from there or whatever."

"Okay...?"

I blow out a breath and let my arm fall to my side. "She asked me for help. She has a son, but she can't afford to bring him out here right now. So...I'mma take care'a that."

"Jesus, Dad." He actually rolls his eyes at me. "You fucked her."

"Ay!" What the fuck. "What's wrong wit'chu?" I give him a hard stare, though I'm kinda freaked out. It's not like it's written on my fucking forehead, is it? And I know how to lie, dammit.

"Sorry, but it's true, isn't it?" He lifts a brow. "When I woke up, she was in the guest bathroom—the door was open—and she was scrubbing off glitter from her arms and stuff." He shrugs and looks at the ground. "I just figured you'd brought a stripper home."

Ouch. "I'd never do that—not like—" he's insinuating. I pause, choosing my words carefully. I've raised my son the same way my parents raised me: marriage is sacred, but...I haven't exactly practiced what I've preached. AJ's heard and seen me and Maria fight too many times to count, and I can only pray there's time for me to fix things. I don't want AJ to think every family is, or was, like ours. Hopefully he already knows, considering Junior and Bella. "I know I wasn't a good husband to—"

"Give it a rest, Dad." He sighs, but there's a small smile, too. "You don't gotta explain it to me. I already know why you and Mom had problems." He shrugs with one shoulder and pockets his phone. "Youse wrecked each other—whatever."

I don't reply, 'cause...what the hell can I say?
He's right. He's also too damn smart.

"Whatever happens in the future," I murmur, waiting 'til he looks me in the eye, "you're my priority."

Marriage isn't for me, as I've said, but if I find a girlfriend in the future, I'd never risk AJ feeling left out.

"I know." Another AJ shrug. He does that a lot. "You think something's gonna happen with Gemma?"

I shake my head no. "I ain't givin' you details, but whatever happened last night at Twilight was...I don't even know, but no, nothing's gonna happen." I frown to myself, wondering why even the smallest part of my brain doubts my statement. 'Cause as mind-blowing as last night was...no. I don't even know why I offered her a guest room; I coulda just given her money for a hotel. It's what I'll be doing today. "Come on." I squeeze his shoulder before standing up. "Let's see if Gemma's cooked." Or if she's just another Rossi—one of the very rare Italians who don't belong in the kitchen.

My legs are like jelly as we head inside, but I force myself to continue, which gets easier when I take a whiff of something delicious.

We find Gemma in the kitchen, singing quietly to herself while flipping pancakes in a skillet.

AJ and I exchange a look.

Dressed in a black gypsy skirt and a tight little t-shirt, she moves around in my kitchen without a care in the world. She's barefoot, and her long hair is gathered in a messy pile on her head; I'm pretty sure there are two chopsticks in there.

Why do I find that so goddamn adorable?
"Are you done spying on me?" she asks without turning from the stove.

Okay, I'm impressed.

"Good morning." I walk farther in and aim for the fridge. As I pass her, I spy pancakes that don't look like charcoal, so that's gotta be a good sign. "You didn't have to make breakfast."

She waves that off, not facing me directly. "It was the least I could do." Smiling carefully, she asks me if I'm gonna introduce her to my son, which...yeah, of course I will, but I find it weird that she won't look me in the eye.

Or maybe she's itching to get outta here. I did tell her I'm flying out her kid tomorrow morning, and I've already bought the airline ticket. Gemma just has to tell me who will pick it up.


"It's very nice to meet you, AJ." Gemma smiles brightly and extends a hand over the kitchen island. "You look a lot like your father." She winks. "Just as handsome."

Too handsome to fucking look at? Christ.

But I push away the trickle of irritation and smirk when I see that my son's blushing. He stammers a "good to meet you" and shakes her hand, then abruptly excuses himself to wash up for breakfast.

I just wanna hug him to death.

"Okay..." Gemma releases a breath and seemingly forces herself to face me. "Can you please go shower? Or at least put on clothes that aren't stuck to your skin?"
My brows rise. "Where do you get off bossing me around in my own house?"

She clenches her jaw and looks away stubbornly. "You have made things clear, Alec." She flips the next pancake with a little extra force. "We had a one-night stand, yes? But looking like that—" she waves the spatula in my direction "—is cruel. If I had teased like that, I would be called a cocktease. But men? Men can do it." She huffs.

I frown, repeating her words in my head to make sense of—wait. So she's saying...huh. I didn’t see that coming, that she would want—I can't even finish that fucking thought because it's ridiculous.

I'm no stranger to women desiring me, but with Gemma's age, it's safe to consider my name, status, and money three things that make me more attractive, and fuck that.

Gemma Rossi is wife material; she's not the kind of woman I'd take as a girlfriend and screw whenever I feel like it. Feelings and shit could get involved.

~oOo~

Why the fuck did I suggest taking her to the airport?

Yesterday, after her pancake breakfast—madonn', she rocked those—we parted ways. I booked a suite for her at the Bellagio, at which the weird broad started bitching about money—and not like Maria loved to bitch about money—and I made all the arrangements for Gemma's son to fly out today. That’s it. We parted ways. It was supposed to be end of story. But instead I put my foot in my mouth and suggested I take her to the airport to pick up her boy this morning.

Now we're here...
Standing a few feet behind her, I stick my hands down into the pockets of my slacks and just watch her. Not that she notices. She's sorta dancing on her feet, anticipation radiating off of her, and she's got her hands clasped under her chin, eyes glued to the screen of arrivals.

There's so much...life...in her.

Unruly and wild, yet there's a strong sense of stability about her, too. She's maternal and caring. Her love for her son is evident; she couldn’t stop talking about him on the way over. She dresses for comfort, weird combinations, like now: another pair of too-short denim cutoffs, and a light blue t-shirt with Ninja Turtles on the front. Neon pink Ray-Bans stuck on her head, and flip-flops.

She's...Christ, she's like an adult Julia, which is both highly disturbing and cute.

"Finally!" Gemma spins around and flies into me. Cazzo. I stagger back a couple steps as she wraps her arms and legs around me. "Any minute now." She's beaming like the sun, pointing at the screen. Meanwhile, I can't stop looking at her face. "I can't thank you enough, Alec." She hugs me again tightly, her face buried in the crook of my neck. "You are an amazing man." Something constricts in my chest, and Gemma lifts her head to smirk ruefully at me. "It is too bad you're not looking for something serious."

And with a wink, she's gone. Her warmth, her voice, the view of her face—gone. Back to looking for her son.

Blowing out a breath, I rub my chest and stare down at my feet. "It is too bad you're not looking for something serious." How can she say something like that? Li'l broad don’t even know me.
When I hear Gemma's muffled squeal from behind her hands, I look up to see her running toward the people just arriving from Boston.

"Michael!" she hollers.

A stewardess appears in the crowd, holding the hand of a little boy around eight years old. His whole face lights up at the sight of Gemma, and he struggles free to run to her.

"Mom!"

Gemma embraces him in a fierce hug and spins him around before lowering them both to the floor. Not a care in the world about their surroundings and the people crowding them.

I gotta look away, 'cause it feels like I'm intruding.

~oOo~

"That's the last of it," Joseph says as he carries a box into my new house on Sunday.

"Thanks." I kick the door closed and start hauling furniture that needs to be put together into the living room. Anthony's son nearly runs into me, so he gets a scolding from his mama who carries him out to the kitchen.

Junior's out in the backyard with Jasper and Dominic, and I think they're setting up the lawn furniture. The women are organizing everything in the kitchen, AJ's putting up posters on the walls in his room, Julia and Anthony are testing out my swimming pool while babysitting, and I'm the fool who can't stop thinking about Gemma and Michael.

Yesterday when Dominic and I were setting up shit in my new bedroom, I nearly crushed my toe under my bed frame 'cause I was busy wondering
where Michael's gonna be while Gemma works. They'll have the hotel room at the Bellagio for a month, but what about babysitting?

It went on like that all day yesterday, and now isn't better. My brother and Joseph have already asked what's up.

"Il pranzo è pronto!" Bella calls out, saying lunch is ready, then appears in the living room. "The kitchen's all done now," she tells me, smiling. "Elisa and Daniela have stocked the fridge, freezer, and cabinets, and Gabby and I will bring over some more food later."

Leaving the entertainment center behind, I walk over to Bella, drape an arm around her shoulders, and usher her to the patio door where Junior can hear me.

"Hey, Junior!" I holler, and he looks up from the Adirondack chair he's repositioning. "Bella just said she's leaving your ass to run away with me."

Bella giggles and slaps my chest.

"Oh!" Junior grabs a wrench from the table and waves it at me. "Get your hands off my wife and c'mea' and say that to my face, little brother."

I laugh and kiss Bella's temple. "Thanks for all your help, honey."

"It's what family's for." She shrugs, then pulls me down to kiss my cheek. "Wait, lemme—" She wipes away some lipstick she left behind.

I chuckle before disappearing back into the house. Behind me, I hear Junior reclaiming his wife with smooches and threats about "killing any fucker who touches my hummingbird."

I return to assembling the entertainment center with Joseph, until his cell phone rings and he asks if he can use my office. I just nod and wave him along.
"Did someone say lunch?" AJ resurfaces from his room.

At the same time, Bella comes back inside. "I did!" She's quick to run over to him and practically drag him to the kitchen. "You gotta eat more, sweetheart." She pokes his side. "Come here and let Zia Bella feed you."

"Sometimes she means that literally!" Elisa warns, laughing.

I grin to myself and get back to work.

And I wonder what Gemma's doing right now. I may or may not have gotten my hands on her schedule at Twilight, so I know she's not working today, but she did mention another job, too.

Michael's about the same age as Nino, Daniela's little brother; they'd probably get along great, as all the other kids are under four.

I'm losing it.

Just because a person made me feel something—something wild and strong—doesn't mean I should get all hung up on...her.

"Alec?" Joseph pokes his head in. "A minute, please."

I nod and stand up, ignoring how my knees pop, and follow him down the hall. Past my bedroom, the extra bath, AJ's room, and into my office. An office I don't really need since I have my office at the deli, but I didn't know what else to do with the room.

Joseph walks over to the desk and the fax machine. "Here's the info you asked for." He scans the papers while I try to catch up—info? Oh, shit. The info on Gemma. I'd almost forgotten that. Joseph shrugs and hands over the two sheets of paper. "She's squeaky clean."

No good. It'd be easier if she was a con artist or something. "No one's squeaky clean," I mutter, reading Gemma's employment records.
Her two jobs here in Vegas are listed, too. Twilight I already know, but the other one seems to be a bar. A rock bar off the Strip. She works there two nights a week.

Joseph chuckles. "Well, one speeding ticket in eight years and two gigs as a stripper aside, there's nothing. Pretty clean to me."

I guess I have to agree. Low credit score, but not low enough to be denied smaller loans, yet she took two jobs and asked for my help instead of burying herself in debt. She's healthy, uninsured but goes to a free clinic, no medical issues, never late with her rent...and she was involved in bake sales at her son's old school.

Squeaky clean. A genuinely good person.

Those exist?

~oOo~

Hours later, the younger generation has left with their kids; the house is pretty much done, and it's only us oldies left. Except for Alice; she left with her daughters, ditching Jasper here. AJ's here too, obviously.

Sitting in my backyard, smaller than the old one, I peer out over the pool and all the toys left behind. As Bella said, "Now you'll have entertainment for them when they come over."

And about ten sets of floaties.

"It's official." Junior sits back and pats his stomach as I light up a cigar. "I'm the fuckin' grill master."

I smirk and shake my head at him. He only flipped the burgers. Jasper and I took care of the steaks and the sausages.
"Yes, yes, you're excellent at everything, ciccino." Bella pats his hand, humoring him, then stands up to clear the table. My gentleman son stands up to help too, leaving me with Junior and Jasper. "AJ and I will be back with coffee and cake soon."

"Grazie, bell'uccellino." Junior sighs contentedly and is next to light up a cigar.

My gaze slides to Jasper. "So, where was Nico today?"

That kid is asking for a beating, not to mention a lesson in manners.

"Better be a good excuse." My brother's with me, thinking it's disrespectful not to show up.

"I fucking told him," Jasper says. "He shoulda been here, but there was some shit with his kid—the bastard." Right. Nico has a kid with his goomah. "The woman wants more money for their child—or whatever it was." He waves a hand, tired. "I have a feeling I know why you're lookin' at me like that, Junior, and I honestly don't blame you."

Junior inclines his head and takes a puff from his cigar. "I'mma be blunt with'chu, Jasper. I can't have him as my underboss."

"I know," Jasper answers soberly. "He'd be better as capo." He pauses and flicks his gaze between Junior and me. "You got anyone in mind for the seat?"

Junior chuckles wryly and jerks his chin at me. "When that fucker gets his head outta his ass."

I roll my eyes but grin. "You know I'll cave one'a these days, so stop bein' a cunt."
"Fuck you, you depressing dick," he laughs. "What's up wit'chu, anyway? I know you got laid recently, so what the hell are you PMS-ing about?"

I just flip my hand under my chin, 'cause it's none'a his business.

~oOo~

I cave the following Wednesday. Not to my brother, but to Gemma.

Well, truth be told, I caved last night too, when I drove over to Twilight just to "check things out." But I stayed hidden like some stalker, so she didn’t see me. I saw her though, and something's up. She moved flawlessly and made the crowd lose their shit without getting naked, but something was missing. Maybe in her eyes or her posture—I don’t fucking know.

That’s why I'm driving over to that other bar now, where she's working tonight.

Too much privacy might make me do something stupid, so I figured if there's a bar separating us, I can ask her if everything's okay, and then I'll get outta there.

*Keep telling yourself that.*

Knowing it's a rock bar, I skipped the suit tonight and put on a pair of jeans and a black button-down, which is kinda foreign to me on a night out.

Finding the bar is easy, and I park in the small lot next to the two-story building. I run a hand through my hair and pull out a smoke, lighting it up as I make my way to the front of the building.

I pass a few bikers and walk up to the bouncer. "Gemma Rossi working tonight?"
He eyes me up and down, unimpressed. "What's it to you, old man?"

I chuckle and extend my hand. "Alec Maisano. And you are?"

"Shit." Yeah, the shit's eyes widen. "Sorry, man. I mean sir." He shakes my hand. "No, she ain't workin'. Toby had to let her go, 'cause she couldn't find a babysitter for her kid." My stare hardens at that. "But, you know," he's quick to add, "if you talk to Toby, I'm sure he'll welcome her back."

Seeing an opportunity to make some dough for Gemma, I pull back my hand and pretend to think about his words for a few seconds. Then I say, "I think she'll be better off with another gig. But some severance pay wouldn't hurt, if you know what I mean."

"She, uh, only played here a few nights." He's already regretting his words.

Meanwhile, I just got a clue. Playing here. So, she hasn't been a bartender or waitress; she's been playing, and I remember she "jumped" at the chance to work out here when she was offered the job. My guess? Music is big for her; it's what she wants to do. Something with music, anyway.

"I'll talk to Toby," the man promises. "You still have that deli, right?"

I incline my head. "He can find me there next week, and he better not show up empty-handed. Firing a single motha' just like that...?" I shake my head. "She's part of my family, you know."

That said, I turn around and leave again.

As I make my way toward the Bellagio, my last words to the bouncer kinda echo inside. Over and over, on a damn loop. She's part of my family, she's part of my family, she's part of my family. In more than one way, I like the sound of that. Small technicality—having married Gemma's
half-sister—aside, there's a sense of...I don't even know, but it clicks? On another level, a deeper one.

Stopping at a red light, I pull out my phone and make a call. The first time, I get voicemail, but when I try again, he finally picks up.

"Yeah?"

"I know it's late, but I need backup," I say, feeling stupid.

~oOo~

By the time I get my ticket from the valet, AJ's already waiting for me.

I'm thinking he'd already gone to bed when I called. He's put on sweats and a hoodie, but his hair's sticking out and his smirk is just a little bit sleepy.

"I'm sorry, tesoro." I'm a grown-ass man and I can't talk to a certain woman without my son there.

He shrugs and we enter the hotel. "I went to bed 'cause I was bored, so no worries." He jerks his chin at the lobby when I lead the way to the elevators. "You not gonna...?"

I shake my head no and take out my wallet to get the key card. "The room's in my name."

"Convenient." His sleepy smirk is back. I can tell he wants to say something else, but he keeps quiet. For a while. Then when we enter an elevator and go up, he puts me outta my misery. "So, I thought you said you didn't want anything to happen with Gemma."

"I don't," is my automatic response, but of course AJ doesn't buy my bullshit. "What I mean is, I'm not sure it's a good idea, which is why I
asked you to come. I thought...maybe, I don’t fucking know." I run a hand through my hair, frustrated. "We could just...talk?"

AJ purses his lips, no doubt to hide a grin, and nods slowly, hands in the front pocket of his hoodie. "Just talk. Right. Or, you know...you could go after what'chu want."

I smack the back of his head, since I got nothin'a say.

He nods and rubs the spot I smacked. "Valid argument."

I open my mouth to say that’s enough outta him, but we arrive at the floor and fuck me if I don't get a little nervous. Fucking pathetic.

"Sono troppo vecchio." I blurt out that I'm too old as we stop in front of Gemma's door.

AJ raises a brow. "Okay?"

"For her, I mean. She's only twenty-eight."

He shrugs, 'cause what else would he do? He's my kid. "It didn’t seem to be a concern of hers when youse were having, uh—" he snickers "—tea and biscuits at Twilight."

I snort a laugh. "Whatta we, British now?" Shaking my head, I steel myself and knock on the door. For all I know, Gemma's gone to bed early. But at the very least, Michael's gotta be asleep by now.

"Hey, Dad? Um, thanks for calling me."

I tilt my head, smiling in confusion. His ears are a little red, his gaze downcast.

"Who else was I gonna call?" I pull him close and kiss his head. "You was the first one I thought of."
He looks up at that. "Really?"

"Of course." I chuff him lightly on the chin. "You're my little advisor."

"Yeah, okay." He flushes and grins at the floor. "Cool."

I get that urge again, to hug him to death, 'cause he's too fucking adorable for words.

Instead we both play it cool, 'cause Gemma opens the door, and what the fuck?

I'm very familiar with her too-short cutoffs by now, but I'm kinda familiar with that t-shirt, too.

"Isn't that your Dodgers shirt?" AJ stage whispers.

I nod slowly, wondering why I'm not pissed. It's a vintage shirt carrying the name of a team that my father used to worship. He took me and Junior to a few games before the Dodgers left Brooklyn for LA in '57—and before we left Brooklyn for Manhattan. I was only four, so I don't remember much—just that Junior and I felt like kings when we rode through Brooklyn in Dad's Thunderbird, wearing our game shirts.

I bought the t-shirt Gemma's wearing right now at an auction a few years ago.

"A-Alec," she stammers. She was definitely not expecting us. "AJ..." Her gaze flicks between us, then down to the shirt, and up to me again. "Um."

For some weird reason, I'm amused instead of angry. "You gonna invite us in, dolcezza?"

She nods quickly and stares at her feet as she opens the door wider.
I gesture for AJ to enter first, and he disappears farther into the suite, muttering about hijacking the TV. Smart kid.

When he's rounded the corner to what I assume is the bedroom, I tilt my head at Gemma again. "Where's Michael?"

"Asleep." She keeps staring down. "He likes to sleep with noise in the background, so I moved the TV into the bedroom."

I nod and walk slowly to the living room area, seeing papers strewn all over the place. The entertainment center, coffee table, on the couch... Newspapers, clippings, ads, printouts.

Gemma shuffles behind me, not saying a word, not asking why I'm here.

AJ pokes his head out of the bedroom. "Is it okay if I turn up the sound just a little?"

"That's fine," Gemma says. "Michael can sleep through a world war."

I give AJ a look, silently telling him not to overdo it, and he nods and disappears again.

"Would you like a drink?" Gemma asks politely as she clears the couch of papers and folders. "I'm sorry about the mess—I'm trying to find a better job and an apartment."

_Enough of this tiptoeing._

When she's set down everything on the coffee table, I step forward and grab her arm.

"I'm sorry about the shirt!" she whispers in a rush. That's...not what I wanted to talk about. "I know it was stupid, but I wanted..." She trails off and averts her eyes.
Now I wanna know. "You wanted what?" I murmur. With my gentle grip on her arm, I pull her closer and trace a finger along the team's name over her chest. "Tell me. You're usually not shy."

"You can be intimidating," she says, chancing a quick glance at me before she settles for looking at the floor. "You've been so helpful, and I don't want to mess up. I stole the shirt because, because..." She huffs, and I finally see some of her fire. "Because I knew I was going to miss you, okay?" I get a glare at that.

Warmth hits me squarely in the chest, and I wonder how this little broad got bigger balls than me. She's honest and knows what she wants—although I still don't see why—and I'm...a pussy?

Fuck that.

"You keep the shirt. Looks better on you, anyway." I release her arm and sit down on the couch. "I heard you got fired from the bar."

She frowns and sits next to me, hugging one knee to her chest. "I'm not even going to ask how you know that. Yes, they let me go. When I work at Twilight, there's another dancer who looks after Michael. I babysit her daughter when she works."

I know a lotta strippers do that.

"Why are you here, Alec?"

Sighing, I lean back a bit more and loll my head against the back of the couch to face her. "I wanted to see you." Wouldja look at that, I can go with the truth, too.

"Oh?" She straightens a bit, hope lightening her eyes.
I don’t get it. I'll learn to accept it and I'll fucking revel in it, but I don’t understand. "Can I ask whatchu want, Gemma?" I reach out and playfully tug on a strand of her hair.

"I thought I made that clear." A smile tugs at her lips.

I nod with a dip of my chin and circle that strand of hair between my fingers. "To an extent. But I mean...in detail, what is it you're looking for?"

There's the girlfriend option, which makes most sense—I set her up with an apartment and support her financially, and in return, I get laid.

Goomahs aren't only for married men.

But I'm not sure I can do that. Not with Gemma. She's made too big of an impression on me.

"I want a family," she says bluntly, causing my brows to furrow. Family? Like marriage and shit? "I don’t know you very well yet, but I have learned enough to know I want more."

"Marriage." I'm kinda in disbelief. Partly because I'm not as opposed to the idea as I've told myself I am, partly because I don't wanna fuck up, and partly because Gemma could find someone her own age.

"And another child." She nods for emphasis, and her shyness is gone. She's simply stating what she wants.

I gotta chuckle, 'cause this is nuts. "Do you know how old I am, hon?"

"Of course. You're the same age as Maria." She scowls at me. Fucking scowls. "I am not stupid, you know. If age is the problem, then you're a fool."

I'm a fool, then. "I admit that I found you too young at first, but now it's the other way around." I twirl a finger. "I'm too old."
She scrunches her nose and shifts her hair over her shoulder, leaving my fingers empty. "You are only as old as you act."

I laugh through my nose. "Yeah, still old."

"Fine." She juts out her chin and points to the door. "Then leave, you stubborn idiot."

Well, fuck.

"I can't do that." So, maybe it's time I get my shit together and follow my son's advice. Go after what you want. "I've tried," I chuckle humorlessly and kneel on the couch. "God knows I've tried, but I can't get'chu outta my fuckin' head." I tap my temple and move closer, towering over her. "And maybe..." She lies back, more hope brightening her eyes, but at the same time her pupils dilate. I release a breath and settle on top of her, and Jesus fucking Christ, it feels good. "Maybe I want the same things that you want."

Her breathing hitches, and she fists my shirt.

Closing my eyes, I ghost my lips over her temple and breathe in her hair. I grab her hip to feel more of her under me, and I slide that hand underneath her t-shirt and caress her soft stomach. Gemma trembles and lets out a small whimper, causing blood to surge to my cock.

By accepting that there's something great here, that Gemma and I can build something together, that I just might get the chance to have something real with someone amazing who I already care about...not only is it overwhelming, but it also opens the floodgates. When a Maisano wants something, he fucking gets it.

Now I want everything all at once.
Opening my eyes again, I inch away a little and look down at her gorgeous face. The to-do list writes itself as I memorize her features, and I know there are several things I should ask her about, but at the same time, there are a few where I won't take no for an answer.

"Hai intenzione di baciarmi?" She smiles a little, asking if I'm gonna kiss her, her hands moving up my chest.

My mouth quirks up. "I'mma do a lot more than that, but first things first." I pause, the smooth texture of her cheek under my thumb distracting me. "You won't work at Twilight no more."

Instinct tells her to argue, but she wisely snaps her mouth shut to consider what I've actually said. She's a strong woman, and unlike Maria, I think Gemma is one of those women who wants to work. Which I don't understand but accept and admire; regardless, it won't be at a strip joint.

"I accept that," she says slowly, then narrows her eyes. "You know, I asked Mr. Maisano—I mean Anthony, why I was only allowed to dance on stage, and he wouldn't answer me. Did you have anything to do with that, Alec?"

"You bet I did," I answer gruffly. "I didn't want nobody touching you." She makes a happy noise at that, and I get back on track, 'cause I wanna settle this work thing. "Tell me what'chu want."

She bites her lip, hesitating. "I've always wanted, um...to work at a place where I can play music."

At least she doesn't dream of leaving this place to become a rock star or something.

I nod absently and trace the shell of her ear with a finger. "Like the bar?"

"More like a café—daytime hours—but yeah, the bar was okay, too."
Done. I can set her up with her own fucking café. There's money all over Vegas, and I'm a creative fucker. If I run it past Junior, I'm sure we can work together, maybe open up a café version of *Stella Mia*. Bella will most likely go nuts with excitement, filling up a whole menu with her pastries or whatever. And Gemma can add her own touch with whatever she wants to do.

"What's going on inside this head of yours, *papi*?" She taps my temple.

I hum and dip down to kiss her jaw. "Plans for the future." I rumble a groan of pleasure when she drags her fingernails along my scalp. Tired of holding myself up, I shift to the side and lie down next to her—well, half on top of her. "I want'chu in my house."

She shivers. "Really?"

I smile against her collarbone, enjoying the happiness in her voice. "You've reeled me in, *dolcezza*. If there's one thing you gotta know about us Maisanos, it's that we don't go slow once we get started."

Only, I didn’t know that applied to me until now. I figured it was a Junior thing. He and his boys—always rushin' to have it all.

Gemma laughs and sneaks her hands under my shirt, circling my middle. "I can live with that. And I'd say it's a Rossi thing, but it's more from my mama's side." She grabs my chin, making me face her. "I love with all my heart—" she steals a quick smooch "—and I hate just as passionately. Don't betray me."

Ironically, it's the last thing she has to worry about. I'm the lucky one here.

"Wouldn’t dream of it." My turn to kiss her, and I manage to keep it chaste. "Come home with me." With *us*, I amend internally. My reason for
bringing AJ as a buffer didn’t play out as I’d thought it would, but I don’t regret asking him to come along.

I don’t have all the details yet, but I like the idea of the four of us taking it from here, not just me and AJ.

"Right now?" Gemma asks, surprised. "It's almost midnight."

"I can drive in the dark," I deadpan. "You're safe."

She giggles and slaps my chest. "That is not what I meant."

I capture her hand and kiss the tips of her fingers. "Come on. Let's go home."

"I like the sound of that," she whispers. "I knew I could teach an old dog to sit."

*Brat.*

~oOo~

It takes a week before my family has had it with my secrecy.

One week of dodging as much work as possible, of having Gemma and Michael in my house with me and AJ, of turning my office into a bedroom for Michael, and one week of waking up extremely happy each morning.

Will I ever get used to it?

Regardless, Anthony called me yesterday—warned me and said his parents were gonna come over here today after breakfast.

"We should get ready," Gemma whispers sleepily. "I've heard stories about your brother's wife. I want her to like me. She is the matriarch of the family, yes?"
I chuckle drowsily and shift forward, pressing my morning wood against her delectable ass. "Bella's a sweetheart, dolcezza. You got nothin'a worry about." Gemma moans softly, surrendering, when I teasingly run my middle finger between the bare lips of her pussy. "Cazzo, I can't get enough of you." Kissing her neck, I finger-fuck her gently at first, mostly for me, mostly because I've grown addicted to the feel of her pussy. "So warm, tight, and wet for me..."

"Please, papi." She pushes her ass onto my aching dick. "Give it to me."

I let out a growl as I suck my wet finger into my mouth, tasting her. I gotta get that from the source one day soon. In my mid-fourties and I haven't eaten pussy since I was a teenager.

As Gemma lifts her leg and arches into me, I grip my cock and slide it through her juices before I slam right in.

"Dio—yes, yes, more..." She whimpers and exposes her neck for me, but I want her mouth instead. Then she stiffens a little. "Oh Alec, you didn't put on a—"

I grab her jaw and kiss her hungrily until she melts into my arms. That's my girl. When I release her, she clings on, kissing me for all she's worth. In the meantime, I let my hand trail down her front, palming her luscious tits and rolling her nipples between my fingers. That earns me the sexiest noises from her, and they only increase when I cup her pussy instead.

"You like that?" I murmur, my thumb stroking downward across her wet clit. "I know you do. You squeeze my cock so tig..."

"Don't tease me," she pleads, tensing up. All over.

I groan, her pussy clenching just as I push in. "Fuck, Gemma..."
Over the next several minutes, the only things I can hear are our labored breathing and the wet sounds of sex. Then when I can feel that she's getting close, I change our position so she's riding me. 'Cause seeing her going to town on my cock...? There's nothing like it.

"Take it all." I sit up, outta breath, and focus all my attention on her. "Take everythin' you need."

"Oh, my God..." She moans and rides me faster, harder, literally impaling herself on my dick. And the closer she gets, the more she digs her fingernails into my shoulders. "Love your thick cock," she whimpers as I push her tits together. "Feels so good—oh, so good, so good!"

Panting and groaning, I still chuckle, unable to help myself. I lower my mouth to suck on her nipples, and at the same time, I rub her clit in tight little circles.

"You gonna come for me, dolcezza?"

"Yes...yes..." She picks up even more speed, her "yesses" coming out in a breathless chant.

I grit my teeth together, 'cause Gemma brings me to the edge, and I refuse to come before she's completely done. Thankfully, I don’t gotta wait much longer. She stiffens above me and crashes her mouth to mine, gasping as her orgasm takes over.

A curse falls from my lips. She's just too fucking sexy, and when she comes, the intensity is like nothing else. I deserve a medal for getting through it without losing control.

But the second she collapses on top of me...?

All bets are off.
I flip her over, earning a wheezing giggle from her, and hook an arm under her knee. Then I slam home and groan against her neck. Gemma's fingers in my hair, her dirty whispers, and how she arches into me...it all brings me there faster. I lose it after a few hard thrusts when she asks me in a sultry voice to fill her up with my come.

Indescribable pleasure explodes inside me, and I rock jerkily into her as black spots cloud my vision.

Madonn', if this is any indication of what I'll have for the rest of my life, I'll die a happy man.

~oOo~

Junior and Bella ring the doorbell at ten on the dot, and whereas I'm only in a pair of sweats and the towel around my neck, Gemma's ready to play hostess.

She's in another one of her quirky outfits that I've come to love on her, but she's toned it down with the coloring—unnecessary in my opinion. Her gypsy skirt is white, and her tank top is a faded yellow, to which she has added matching accessories.

With the diamond stud earrings I got her a couple days ago, she's wearing yellow plastic bangles on her wrists.

She has a ring on her toe and a bracelet around her ankle.

Odd.

But I kinda dig it. My girl's different. And smoking hot.

"I'm so nervous." She flits around in the kitchen, bringing out a pitcher of the lemonade she made yesterday, glasses, cookies from the oven, and switching on the coffeemaker. "Last time I worked at Twilight, Junior was
there to meet with Anthony, and they don’t like strippers very much, do they?" Oh, I'd say it's a bit more complicated than that. "Junior was only there for maybe twenty minutes, and he still managed to scare three of the girls."

Must've been new dancers, 'cause that’s one of the first things they learn at Twilight and Dawn: don’t go near Junior Maisano if you like being alive.

As I hear AJ greeting my brother and sister-in-law in the hallway, I step up behind Gemma and kiss her neck. "Listen to me, dolcezza." I know what'll ease her fears. "You're so afraid my family won't like you? But you have no idea how much you have in common with Bella." At that, Gemma tilts her head to look up at me, dubious. I smirk and step away, stealing a cookie in the process. "Twenty-five years ago, Bella stole my brother's heart while working as a stripper."

Her eyes widen. "No way," she whispers.

I take another step back 'cause I can hear voices coming closer, and I offer Gemma a nod in reply.

I was there all those years ago when Felix hired Bella. The balls on that girl...Christ. I remember she was nervous as fuck, but she hid it well and she didn’t cower to Felix's intimidation tactics.

There were other things she didn’t shy away from, but that’s between her and a dead man. And my memories.

Leaving the kitchen, I take a bite of the cookie—mamma mia, that’s what I'm talkin' about—and meet Junior and Bella in the hallway. By now, a curious Michael is there too, and he's half hiding behind AJ.

Michael's cute as fuck, shy one second and brave the next. So far, he's bonded plenty with AJ, who I think secretly loves the role of being a big
brother, because when my son pretends to be annoyed with Michael, it's way too fake.

"I'm your Zia Bella." Bella leans down and greets Michael with a beaming smile. Unbeknownst to her, she's also giving AJ a look down her dress, which he ain't complaining about.

Probably a good thing my brother doesn’t notice.

I snort a chuckle. "Tesoro, youse're family, for fuck's sake."

AJ smirks and looks away, blushing.

"What?" Bella's oblivious, then she straightens and smiles wider. "You got some 'splainin'a do, Alec!"

Junior looks up from Michael and grins wryly. "Would'ja look at that, my little brother's alive."

"He's your brother, Alec?" Michael asks, pointing to Junior.

"Yep." I bump fists with my brother, and the fucker steals the rest of my cookie. "He's also a pain in the ass." I wink at Michael, who giggles.

Junior isn't listening, busy nodding to himself about the cookie and wiping crumbs off the front of his suit.

When Bella's smile turns into one of curiosity, her gaze focused on something behind me, I turn around just as Gemma joins us.

"Well, no wonder Alec's been hiding out!" Bella brightens further and takes charge, basically kidnapping Gemma. With a hand to Gemma's back, Bella ushers her toward the kitchen. "It's very nice to meet'chu. I'm Isabella Maisano, but please call me Bella. And excuse my brother-in-law's manners. I can't believe he didn’t introduce us sooner. I'll make sure you
get to meet the rest of the family this weekend..." Her voice fades as they disappear into the kitchen, and I turn to Junior again, slightly dazed.

Although, I shouldn’t be. This isn't the first time Bella's taken over to make a newcomer feel welcome in our family.

The next time I see Gemma, I know she'll be relaxed.

"Backyard?" I suggest to Junior.

He nods and follows me, and the boys take off to change so they can jump in the pool.

Sitting down at the table, I wait for Junior to speak, 'cause he's being too fucking quiet. But he takes his sweet-ass time, shrugging outta his suit jacket and running a comb through his hair before he sits down and rolls up the sleeves of his button-down. Next he lights up a cigarette and gets comfortable, absently tapping the lighter against the armrest as he peers out over the backyard.

He does this sometimes—it ain't often, but occasionally, and it makes me feel as if there're twenty years separating us instead of a measly one.

I've mellowed out a shitload over the years; I used to be a hotheaded motherfucker who never shut up, but my brother's stayed the same. A silent killer back then, a silent killer now. Sinister, calculating, and intimidating.

He's never intimidated me worth'a shit, but he does make me irritated—on edge.

"No verdict, asshole?" I drawl.

Junior frowns at me. "I didn’t know you were waiting for one."
I barely refrain from rolling my eyes. "Don’t gimme that shit. You always have an opinion."

He nods slowly. "I'm guessing this is the Gemma Rossi Joseph and Anthony told me about."

I chuckle darkly, having figured he'd play the boss card to squeeze the truth outta his son and Joseph.

"I was fuckin' worried about'chu, so don’t get startin' on loyalty," he warns. Fair enough. I didn’t know that. That he'd been worried, I mean. Junior shakes his head and faces the pool again, taking a long drag from his smoke. "I'm assuming this broad's gonna be around to see family?"

In other words, he wants to know if Gemma's a goomah or a future wife.

I clear my throat and snatch up his pack of smokes on the table. "She'll be around."

Junior inclines his head. "Then I advise you to not be as stupid as Jasper and Nico. Keep your goomahs outside'a town, 'cause we don’t need more drama, and my wife gets attached to these girls—"

"Whoa, whoa—calm the fuck down," I spit out. But, ironically, he's cool as a cucumber; I'm the one getting riled up. I pinch the bridge of my nose and take a few calming breaths. "It's not like that, bro." I keep my voice down and look him in the eye. "She's not another Maria. And for your fucking information, I didn’t start off being a bastard to Maria—"

He cuts me off with a lift of his eyebrows. "Don’t bullshit a bullshitta'. It's your business, but you don’t gotta lie. You was with Kate for a long time after you married Maria."

I nod, knowing that’s what everyone believes. "Does that mean the rumors about Anthony having a mistress are true?"
He scowls and leans forward. "Of course not. He's young—he's got a rep to—"

"And you don’t think I had a rep to uphold back then?" I laugh incredulously. "I was the same fuckin' age Anthony is now. Everyone just assumed I kept screwing Kate." I shrug and take a pull from my smoke. "I ain't gonna lie; I didn’t end things completely with her. I took care'a her, took her to dinner, and she stayed in the apartment I got her. But I didn’t so much as kiss her when there was a ring on my finga'."

It was my way of having it all, despite how empty and fake it was. Maria hated my guts, so I kept Kate around for the comfort. She was...nice. She didn’t glare at me the minute I walked in.

With the feelings I have for Gemma, and the way they just get stronger with every day that passes, I'm not sure I felt an inch of love for Kate, which I've always thought, but I still cared for her. I needed the companionship she provided, but then...then she was killed.

"Are you serious?" Junior stares at me intently, brows furrowed. "I'm not doubting you. I'm just tryin'a understand."

I shrug. "Shouldn't be that hard, Junior. We have the same parents."

Same upbringings, same values. Same views on marriage.

"Huh." My brother sits back again, processing. "But you're not tryin'a tell me you didn’t fuck around on Maria later, are ya?" He side-eyes me.

"No. I did what I did." I've never been an angel, but I was brought up to be loyal, and it's still something I want. With Gemma. "Anything else you wanna know, boss?"
"Don’t do that," he tells me, but there's no heat to his words. "I'm not Carlisle or Felix. I'm asking as your fucking brother, Alec. I want'chu to be happy."

My shoulder sag with relief, and I feel all tension leaving my body. "Gemma makes me happy."

"Bene." He nods and stubs out his smoke in the ashtray on the table. "You love her?"

"I'm getting there." Too soon for my liking. If Gemma wasn’t so open with her feelings, I woulda been worried, but it appears we're on the same page. And for the first time since my son was born, I get giddy. "She's fuckin' dangerous."

"The best ones are." Junior laughs through his nose and shrugs. "Trap her with a kid. Worked for me."

I bark out a laugh at that, remembering back in the day when he told me he'd knocked up Bella the first time. He'd been on cloud nine, and…and I guess, in a way, he hasn’t left that cloud.

Behind us, we hear the boys walking out, and they pay us no attention as they head over to the pool. AJ’s explaining the rules to some game they’re gonna play, and Michael's soaking it up. He's at that age where he constantly reminds people he's a big boy.

"You should call Dominic and Daniela," Junior mentions. "Nino doesn’t have many friends, and he's gotta be the same age as this one." He jerks his chin at Michael.

I nod, having already thought of that. Michael starts his new school after the weekend too, and he'll be at the same place as Nino. Gemma argued at first, saying public school was more than fine, but I convinced her to go with a private school instead.
"Juniuh!" Bella hollers from inside. "We're coming out!" In a quieter voice, I hear her explain to Gemma that she knew Junior wanted to talk to me in private first.

The two women appear with trays of coffee, mugs, plates, cookies, and lemonade, and like I already knew would be the case, Gemma looks at ease. Overwhelmed but at ease.

Bella gives me the first plate, but only to murmur her approval. "You did good, hon. And you know, she's got good hips for childbearing." She winks, then sits down by her husband.

I shake my head in amusement as Gemma sits down next to me, and at my girl's questioning look, I lean close and tell her what Bella thinks of her hips.

"Oh." Gemma grins and folds out a napkin on her lap. "Now I understand why she asked me about children in the kitchen."

Well, Bella's always looking to expand our family.

"Did'ju make these, Gemma?" Junior's got a mouthful of chocolate chip cookies.

"Yes, sir." Gemma nods, being too polite.

"You don't gotta do that, sweetheart." Bella grins and shakes her head. "Just Juniuh will be fine."

"My wife speaks for me, if that wasn't clear," my brother deadpans. "But she's right. And these are good." He grabs another cookie and dips it in his coffee.

That was his way of welcoming Gemma to the family.
Judging by the relief in her expression, she understood what he was saying.

A smile plays on her lips as she pours me coffee. "I like them," she whispers.

I shift my chair closer and kiss the spot below her ear. "They like you, too."

As for me...?

Yet another Maisano bites the dust.
"Flaherty!" someone bellows.

I whip my head around, then slump my shoulders and groan in misery. Matt Fucking Moretti. Of course. 'Cause that’s just what I needed tonight.

"Officer Confetti," I grumble.

He winks at me, all hot and sinful, dressed in normal street clothes but with his badge on a chain around his neck. "Do you know who you just booked?" he asks his buddy.

"A baby prostitute?" Flaherty drawls as he gets started on some paperwork.

My nose is itching.

Matt folds his arms across his chest and raises a brow at me. "You haven’t dropped your name yet, hon?"

I huff. "Last time I did that, you made fun of me."
"But I didn’t exactly arrest you," he points out, amused. "If a cop takes you in, you drop every name you can think of."

"Oh." I turn my scowl to Flaherty. "Um, Julia."

He doesn’t look impressed.

Matt laughs through his nose and drapes an arm around me. Unf, aftershave. Yummy. "He needs the last name," he whispers in my ear. "Or have you forgotten it?"

I instantly get ticked off. I hate being mocked. "Piss off, you gigantic piece'a shit." I shoulder-check him, though he moves away of his own volition. "Ugh." I give Flaherty another scowl. "Julia fuckin' Maisano, all right?"

That does it. Like goddamn magic. His face drains of color, which is kinda hilarious to see.

Matt seems to think so, too. "Yeah, you basically just told Edward 'Junior' Maisano that his youngest daughter is a whore."

I grin. "Can I call my daddy now and place both'a youse on his shit list?"

~oOo~

Problem is, twenty minutes later when my parents enter the station, I end up on the shit list instead of Matt.

I watch in pure disbelief as Dad shakes Matt's hand, quiet words are exchanged, and then how Matt walks away scot-free after my father thanks him.

"What the fuck," I mouth to myself as Mom crushes me in a hug.
"I am so damn mad at'chu right now," she whispers tearfully. "Thanks to you, I've missed the twins' birth." I try to break the hug, but Mom holds me tighter. "You have no idea how relieved I am that you're okay, but Julia?" Now she inches away, but only to face me properly and cup my cheeks. "I won't interfere with Daddy's punishment this time. If he says you're grounded for two weeks, so be it."

Holy shit. I'm so used to Mom bailing me out. Now she won't? At all?

"Mom," I plead.

She shakes her head and steps back, brushing away the last of her tears. "Don't start." She averts her eyes, like she can't stand looking at me, and it fills me with dread. "Maybe Elisa's right. She says I've coddled you too much because you're the baby in the family."

Anger flares up at that. "You takin' parenting advice from your daughter? From my sister?"

And I'm sick of being the fucking baby.

"Princess." Dad's quiet, steely voice makes me recoil and quit glaring at Mom, and I turn to him instead. But I don't got the balls to so much as scowl. "Be smart and shut your mouth." He gives me a hard stare. "Can't'chu see you're breaking Mom's heart?"

The goddamn guilt, man...

Mom sniffs for effect.

Dad shakes his head at me, then walks past to talk to Flaherty, who has been pretending not to listen in.
My dad smiles, but it's cold. "You thought my baby girl was a whore?"
Flaherty gulps as Dad clamps a hand on his shoulder. "Let's see how long it takes before people take you for a homeless person."

While Dad takes care of...that...Mom turns to me again. Seriousness in her eyes.

"We need you to calm down, Julia," she whispers. "Can you promise me to try?"

Um...

May 2002

(3 years after Grand Finale, some 2 years and 4 months after the Grand Finale epilogue, and 2 years after Alec's future take.)

Julia's POV.

A lot has changed in the past couple years.

Ever since I graduated high school, Mom and Dad have marveled at how much I've "calmed down." Sure, I've matured plenty, but mainly?

I've learned how not to get caught.

I'll be twenty this year; getting caught is for babies, and I have layers of excuses and reasons for my parents not to suspect how much money I really make.

Now that Gemma's home with the newest Maisano baby, the hours I work in her café and my babysitting business bring me enough to keep Mom and Daddy from wondering. I mean, Daddy and Zio Alec pay for my apartment that I share with my cousin AJ—Dominic's previous place above Stella—so it's not like I have rent, and Mom always sneaks food into our fridge and freezer.
They both like to gimme money, too.

AJ goes to college out in Henderson, which is close, so Zio Alec was ready to buy a new house they could all fit in when his and Gemma's daughter was born last year, but AJ said he was ready to try living on his own. Alec and Dad agreed it would be perfect for me and AJ to share the three-bedroom apartment, and at first I thought it was gonna be a drag, 'cause I was getting used to finally having a place all to myself. But I was wrong.

AJ may be two years younger than me and sorta quiet and awkward, but we get along so well. We complement each other; I bring the action, he's the mastermind, and together we make serious dough. Plus, on the rare occasion we bring home hookups, we help each other get them outta there the day after.

My personal favorite is when I barge into AJ's room and cry out, "In our bed, AJ?! When I'm pregnant with our baby?!!"

AJ's told me he prefers to just pop his head in my room and casually ask, "Is it almost my turn, sis?"

We have a blast.

And the best part? Our parents don't have a clue.

They think we're good. According to Mom and Dad, AJ has "mellowed me out," which is true in a sense, I guess, considering AJ provides great weed. And according to Zio Alec, I have made AJ "come outta his shell a bit more." Sure. Let's go with that.

I snicker to myself and refill the glass jar on the counter with biscotti.

"Sorry I'm late." A pregnant Gabby waddles into the café, and I wonder if it was a good thing I asked her to close up today. She's asked me several times before, stating that she gets bored at home sometimes, so helping
out at the café or at the restaurant makes her happy, but...I don’t want her to pop while she's making coffee.

*Would you like that latte to go, sir? With or without baby juices?*

"No worries. Only two weeks to go, huh?" I smile and brush a high-five to my niece or nephew in her belly. "I'm surprised Anthony let you outta the house."

She grins and rolls her eyes. "That’s why I'm late. He got a little bitchy, saying I should stay home and rest. But, you know, boring."

"You sure you're up for it, though?" I untie my apron and she nods.

"Don’t you dare take this away from me," she chuckles. "All I need is a few hours away from home every week, then I’m golden."

Yeah...she really does love that housewife gig. My sister's the same. After baby JJ was born, she gave up being the hostess as *Stella* altogether, much to Joseph's satisfaction.

All of that...it's not for me. Babies, fine—I love children, and I want a kid of my own too, but I'd go batshit crazy if I had to stay home all day.

"Well, call me if it gets too much," I bargain, mostly 'cause I don’t want Anthony breathing down my neck. If Gabby goes into labor while working, my brother will blame me.

"Go." Gabriella mock-scowls and points at the door, but then her expression morphs into curiosity instead. "By the way, you never told me where you were going. Babysitting?"

I'd say yes if it wasn't for the fact that I'm related to all my clients. Word gets around, and it wouldn’t take a genius to sniff out the bullshit.
"A friend of mine got dumped." The lie rolls off my tongue with ease. "I'm on vagina support duty for a few hours before another friend takes over."

Gabriella sputters a laugh. "'Vagina support duty'?"

I nod solemnly. "Yeah, like, right after a chick gets dumped, she needs to hear how useless men are and how much more worthy the broad is." I shrug. "Hate penises, support vaginas."

"Ah." She gets it. "Sorta how we get together when one of our husbands has fucked up?"

Exactly, only I tend to stay away from those gatherings, 'cause if they're not complaining about one of my brothers, it's my father or uncle.

"Yup." Eyeing Gabby's neck, I wonder if she'll bitch and moan about the hickey next time she gets together with the women, or if that's a thing to brag about. "So yeah, call me if there's any baby shootin' outta ya."

She smirks. "I'll make sure to do that, Julia."

~oOo~

As we agreed, AJ and I meet up in an alley just off the Strip, and I leave my car behind for his.

"Everything good?" I reach behind me to the backseat and grab the duffel I instructed him to bring.

He nods and flicks some ash from his smoke out the rolled-down window. If he was old as hell and didn’t dress like a skateboarder, AJ would look just like his dad.

"We have another hour before he leaves the blackjack table—more if he's on a winning streak." He guides us through the afternoon traffic as I pull my t-shirt over my head, leaving me in a strapless bra. My freaky cousin
takes a peek, to which I laugh and whack his arm. He shrugs. "A rack is a rack, and yours..." He trails off with a raised brow and a li'l smirk.

I huff a laugh and struggle into the flimsy cocktail dress. "So you've told me before."

In fact, his exact words after seeing me in underwear at home were, "Your boobs are too big to be related to me."

"Can I ask you a serious question, Jules?" he asks quietly.

"Shoot." With a grunt, I shimmy outta my jeans and adjust the sequined hem of the dress. My killer heels are next, and it's taken a few jobs like the one I'm looking forward to now, but I've finally learned to walk in them.

"Have you ever been in love?"

I side-eye him, curious if he's ready to admit his feelings for his study buddy. She's this sweet and quirky Asian girl from school, and the first time I met her, AJ was super fast to introduce me as his cousin.

"Can't say I have." I flip down the visor and zero in on the little mirror as I bring out a dark red lipstick and a charcoal eye shadow. I'mma look like the ho I didn't look like a little over two years ago. "You should talk to your dad." I've learned they're very close. "I'm guessing it's about Erin?"

He stares ahead a little too intently and shrugs.

"Go for it. She checks you out whenever you're not looking." I smack my lips and inspect the whore-ness. "Good enough?" I blow a kiss at AJ and do a rawr sound as I wink and claw the air like a cat.

He chuckles. "Mr. Reid will lose his shit."

That's the idea, along with his money.
The Mirage is the location for today, and I'm excited about this British high-roller who works at night and plays during the day. AJ's done his research, as he always does.

"Don't forget this." He hands me the pin that isn't really a pin. It's a personal alarm; one push of the button and AJ comes running.

I attach the small piece to the inside of the one and only shoulder strap as AJ rolls up to the line to the valet.

"I'll find you in there," he says. "He's at table seven."

I nod and blow out a breath, ready to work. "Did you find anything else on turn-ons?"

He makes a face. "Not really, but go for the youthful approach. His wife is old—fifty, like him."

Oh, I think I can do youthful.

"So...does he have kids or something?" I wonder, as children are usually a reason to fight for a marriage.

AJ snickers and holds up his fist. "Even better. No pre-nup."

"Booyah!" I bump his fist with mine. "Let's blow this popsicle stand."

~oOo~

Half an hour later, Mr. Reid and I are on a first-name basis, and I've made it clear to him that I am not hanging on his arm because I'm a prostitute. Instead I've made him think I'm a lost, rich little girl who may or may not have serious daddy issues.

Mr. Henry Reid is soaking up the attention.

Prick.
Well...truth be told, other than letting his hand rest a little too low on my back and scoping my boobs, he hasn’t really earned prick status yet. He's just a business tycoon who happens to be on this list of high-rollers AJ got his hands on, and I'm...temptation. If Henry fails, AJ and I get richer. If Henry passes...good for him.

"For you, miss." A waitress appears with a tray with what looks like a Coke.

I'm guessing AJ has a message for me, but I pretend to be confused and move a little closer to Henry. "I didn’t order this." Frowning, I take the glass and the napkin.

"A lovely girl such as yourself..." Henry murmurs and tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. Yuck. "I'm sure you have many admirers."

"Sir?" The blackjack dealer is waiting for Henry's move.

I giggle and smack his arm playfully, then lean close to whisper in his ear. "There's only one admirer I want." Next, I sip my soda through the straw and lower the napkin, discreetly reading AJ's message.


Adrenaline spikes, and as I take another sip from my soda, I lean my cheek on Henry's shoulder so it's not obvious that I'm searching the roulette tables to my left—

I don’t fucking think so!

Yeah, I'm being watched, all right.

He looks mad.
It's been over a year since I last saw Matt Moretti; I thought he'd moved. But now he's back? Argh, and so is my anger. I won't fucking allow him to ruin this for me.

One night, about a year ago, I got high with AJ and I reminisced about the hot police officer, so my cousin knows all about it, just not Matt's face. AJ also knows about my theories—that Matt was on my dad's payroll or something. Which I don’t understand, 'cause Matt's dad used to be the damn governor of Nevada, and he's still a very influential man. Talk about hanging with the wrong crowd.

Heat simmers below the surface of my skin, a reminder of the crush I had that always pissed me off.

One game ends, another is about to begin, and Henry takes the opportunity to pull me even closer.

"Now you must elaborate, sweet girl." He trails a finger down my arm, giving me the wrong kind of goose bumps. But he doesn't know that. "Which admirer is it you want?"

*Sorry, AJ. Abort is so not an option. I'mma reel this motherfucker in.*

"Someone with a firm hand." I suck my bottom lip into my mouth and give him my most innocent expression. "Someone who can tell me if I'm a good girl or a bad one."

Henry's gray eyes darken with obvious desire.

My bet? If I leave the casino with Henry, Matt will interfere and destroy everything. He'll make assumptions that are so far from correct, but plenty can be done in plain sight, and AJ can be real subtle with a camera.

We've done it before.
"Can you be that man?" I whisper in Henry's ear as I guide his hand up my ribcage.

He gasps and continues upward even after I've released his hand. Too horny to be discreet. Too arrogant to be careful. I brush the gentlest kiss to his neck and murmur a plea, to which he gets bold and cups my breast.

"Definitely," is his husky reply.

I shudder and grimace, but then put a sultry expression on as I ease back and face him. "Do you have a room here?"

He nods and stands up, quickly collecting his chips.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Matt standing up as well, probably ready to play hero.

Being as affectionate as possible, I hug Henry's arm and link our fingers together as we walk through the casino. A couple times he pauses to kiss my neck and cop a feel.

Then I'm done. "I just gotta go to the little girls' room first, okay? Wait for me right here."

"I have a bathroom in my suite, you know." He smirks and kisses my cheek.

I giggle again, 'cause he seems to like that. "True, but as soon as we get upstairs, I have other plans." Walking backward toward the bathrooms, I grin salaciously at him. "Now, don't move."

"Hurry back, darling." He winks.

I spin around and walk briskly, only to duck behind a row of slot machines and change direction.
AJ intercepts when I reach the lobby and we hurry toward the doors.

"Tell me I didn’t get my tits groped for no reason," I say, keeping my voice down.

"You're solid." He ushers me outside first, quick to follow. "I got plenty of shots."

Awesome. Mr. Henry Reid will find himself in a blackmail situation soon, then. Normally, we take it further. Normally, I go as far as taking the elevator up to the dude's floor. Normally, I get on my knees right before the elevator doors open and push the man's pants down his hips. And then AJ will be there with his camera to say "cheese" when the doors slide open with that delightful ding.

That’s where the big money is, but this works, too.

Unfortunately, the thrill isn't as big. So now I'm kinda sad. And pissed. At Matt.

"It's Matt, by the way." I fold my arms across my chest as AJ hands his ticket to the valet. "The cop in there. It's Matt Moretti."

AJ’s brows rise. "Are we in deep shit? What if he goes to Zio Jun or your brothers?"

"He won't do that." I glare at the entrance to the hotel as Matt stalks out, looking around for me. "Yo, Confetti!" I holler, widening my arms.

Matt narrows his eyes at me and walks toward me, and fuck me if he doesn’t look as hot as I remember. If not hotter. His messy brown hair is a little shorter than before, his deep blue eyes are still intense as hell, his body still belongs to an army dude, and I bet his dimples are still there when he smirks.
If I'm not mistaken, he recently turned thirty or is about to.

"Julia." Same rich voice. Still tall as fuck.

And I'm still fucking angry! "What're you doing here?" I glare up at him.

"I followed you," he seethes. "I saw you getting dressed in a fucking car, and I followed you. But think a better question is, what the fuck are you doing?" he shoots back.

I don't got time for this. AJ's car is here, and he has weed to distribute while I get started on the next high-roller to blackmail. A bunch'a rich gamblers from Macau are flying in next week, and several are married.

"Hey, Jules?" A few feet away, AJ jerks his chin at his car. "We gotta go. Tell him to meet'chu somewhere."

"Fuck, shit, dammit." I growl and slide my glare back to Matt. "I live above my parents' restaurant. Follow us there and I'll explain everything." Or a little bit. There's no way I'm giving out all the details.

"Don't even think about running away," Matt warns.

I laugh. "Wouldn't dream of it, Officer Confetti. After all, we know whatta fuckin' rat you are for my family, and I don't want you driving over to Dad to tattle on me."

At first, his eyebrows pinch together in what looks like shock or disbelief, but then rage flashes in his eyes. If he was mad before, he's furious now.

I'm kinda regretting what I said. But it's true, isn't it? If he's a cop working for my dad, then he's probably a rat.

Matt grabs my arm and pulls me closer to speak quietly in my ear. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about." Cazzo. He does that thing Dad does. Gets all quiet and deadly. "But I guess I shouldn't be surprised,
huh? You Maisano girls are brought up to pop out kids, not use your brains."

I flinch back as if I've been slapped. Masking the hurt with anger is easy enough, 'cause I don’t think I've ever been this offended.

Never mind the fact that he's full of shit, but even if that were it...?

I think about my mother and sister, my sisters-in-law and newly recruited aunt, women I admire and view as fucking strong.

"You're begging for a goddamn beating, son," I spit out.

Then I leave his ignorant ass there and get in the car.

The first five minutes are spent in silence, my chest heaving with rage every time I catch sight of Matt's mug in the sideview mirror.

"Want me to stick around?" AJ asks.

I shake my head no. "Thanks, but it's okay. We doin' the rave tonight?"

We don’t work parties often, but when there's a big event, like a rave, AJ scores ecstasy from Zio Alec. AJ gives his dad a cut of his earnings, but we operate on our own and we stay under the radar. Alec doesn’t even know I'm involved.

AJ nods with a dip of his chin in response. "What about Moretti?"

I'm guessing it won't be easy, but I'll make sure he won't talk. "I'll figure something out."

~oOo~

After AJ’s dropped me off at home, I hurry upstairs to our apartment, knowing I only have a minute or two before Matt's here. I rip off my clothes and wash away the heavy makeup, then stalk into my bedroom
and put on a new pair of panties and the snug *My Little Pony* t-shirt Elisa's given me.

I'm thinking I need to show Matt two sides of me. The pastel purple of my shirt and baby pink of my panties can remind him of how young and innocent I am. *Don't rat out the sweet little lamb, officer.* Then the other side of me... I'm *not* a kid anymore. I'll show off my legs and curves, plenty of skin, 'cause he's gotta understand I'm adult enough to make my own decisions. I don't report to my parents.

The doorbell rings just as I'm pulling my hair back into a high ponytail, and on the way to the hallway, I kick a toiletry bag full of cash to the side and snatch up the two Chinese food containers on the hallway table that have bags of weed in them. After placing them in the fridge, I head for the door again and check the peephole before I open up to let Officer Confetti inside.

He gives me a slow once-over and knits his brows together.

Okay, so he's got the innocent visual now. That’s all he's getting, 'cause I sure as hell won't *act* like a victim. I know what I'm doing, dammit.

"Let's talk." I make my way to the kitchen, expecting him to follow, and grab two sodas before I sit down at the table. In front of me, I have a half-smoked joint in an ashtray, but I don’t see why I gotta hide that shit. Instead I light it up and take a pull as Matt joins me.

He eyes the joint and me like I'm some exhibit at the zoo. Like he's seeing me for the first time.

Then he clears his throat and leans back, folding his arms across his broad chest.

If he's going for intimidation, I ain't buying it.
"Give me a reason to stay quiet, Julia," he murmurs. "There's no way your dad knows about this."

Like I said: rat.

I smirk lazily and bring my knee to my chest, resting my forearm on it. "What is it you think I'm doing?"

"I don't even know, but it doesn't look good." He cocks a brow. "If I hadn't been there today, you would've left with that old motherfucker."

I knew he'd get it all wrong. "You're wrong." I chuckle, 'cause damn, he's really wrong. "But even if I did...? Matt, I'm not a kid—"

It's his turn to chuckle, and it's low and condescending. "Not a kid? You're what, seventeen?"

"What the fuck." My eyes widen. "I'll be twenty this fall, you asshole. You've seen my damn driver's license."

He stares at me blankly for a beat, then exhales a curse and scrubs a hand down his face.

I don't know what's going through his head, but I'm not done talking. "Listen, I'm not sleeping around with these men, okay? I get that it looks that way, but AJ and I are working together." I pause, not wanting to divulge more, but...ugh. "It's a scam thing, all right?"

"Jesus Christ." He pinches the bridge of his nose. "You're just a chip off the old block, huh?" He sighs and shakes his head, looking me in the eye again. "You were supposed to take after your mom, though. Not your pops."

"Fuck you." There's little to no heat to my words, but whatever. "Don't pretend to know shit about me and my family."
"I know enough." He stares at me intently, and it's almost as if he's debating with himself. Maybe there's something he wants to tell me but shouldn’t? Or should tell me but doesn’t want to? "I'm not a rat, Julia."

"Um...okay?" I take a final pull from the joint, nearly burning my lips, then put it out in the ashtray. "Good for you. I'm not dumb as a box of rocks, either. Maybe I grew up spoiled, maybe most of the women in my family are housewives, but you have no idea—"

"Actually I do, and I'm sorry about that." He runs a hand over his head and shifts in his seat. "It was uncalled for, but you just..." His expression tightens and he lets out a dark chuckle. "You piss me off like nothing else."

I snort. "It's mutual." But I gotta look away, 'cause it kinda stings. He gets under my skin so easily, so I don’t really wanna hear about how much I infuriate him. "I thought you left town."

I see his nod in my peripheral vision. "I did for a while. Got another job lined up in LA soon, too." Guess that's a good thing. "Don’t worry, I won't pull you over anymore."

Yeah, about that. "Were you my babysitter back then?" I tilt my head at him, needing to know.

"In a way. Not all the time, just every now and then. Junior asked me to keep an eye out." He releases a breath and rests his forearms on the table. "If I'd known the truth, though...? Your pops played me." I raise a brow and he smiles wryly. "I thought your license was fake, 'cause he painted you as this helpless li'l thing—said you were a magnet for trouble and too young and innocent to take care of yourself."

*Thanks, Daddy.*

"Do you still work for him?" I ask.
He doesn’t reply right away, which is basically all the answer I need. "We have mutual interests."

Well, that’s vague. "But you’re not a rat."

He shakes his head no. "Not unless you count the few times I told him that you’re a reckless driver and—"

"Hey!" I glare at the bastard. "I drive just fine, fuck you very much."

He doesn’t laugh or comment. Instead he just keeps staring at me. "You’re really twenty? I mean, it’s still fucking young, but I thought..." He purses his lips and gives a small shake of his head.

"In September." I wonder what the hell he’s thinking, but first things first. "So now that you know I’m an adult, you’re gonna stay quiet about what you saw today?"

That wry grin is back. "I wouldn’t go that far, kid. You and your cousin may think you know what you’re doing, but what if you get caught? You think Daddy’s gonna automatically bail you out? He’s good, but he’s not a magician. What you’re doing is wrong."

How dare he?

"You’re not so honorable yourself, so I don’t see why you think it’s your responsibility to butt in," I say irritably. "AJ and I do what we do, and we’d take the consequences if we got busted."

"But I’m in the middle of it now," he points out, his temper flaring. "Junior has eyes all over this town, and if you get caught and he starts digging...? Julia, for fuck’s sake. There are cameras everywhere; it wouldn’t take much to find out I was there today, and then it's my ass."

I press my lips together, pissed.
He sighs heavily. "Lemme think about it, all right?"

Sorry, but no can do. My mind's already spinning, 'cause I gotta stop this. I gotta find some dirt on Matt—make sure he won't talk.

~oOo~

A few days later, I'm over at my parents' house babysitting Dominic's kids, 'cause their nanny is visiting her grandchildren somewhere. Lia and Ellie are so easy; they fall asleep right after dinner, but DJ...? Fuck me, at a little over two years old, he's wild and crazy curious about everything. How Daniela copes is beyond me.

While Mom clears the kitchen table, I decide it's best to keep DJ in my arms so he don't run into my mother.

"I wanna pway!" DJ has inherited Dominic's scowl, no doubt. "Weuh's Mama an' Dada?"

They're at home bumping uglies.

"Maybe they're workin' on giving you a sibling." I shrug and nibble at his fingers. He giggles at that, and Mom sighs wistfully. As if she doesn't have enough grandchildren to spoil rotten.

My dad is just as bad. He calls DJ, JJ, and TJ his "Li'l Junior Pack," and he wants more of them.

I don't mind. It means more money for me, 'cause my siblings are really into date nights, which is just a kid-rated term for screwfest.

"Oh, Daddy's early," Mom tells me, peering out the kitchen window. Walking over to one of the cupboards, she pulls out a box of tea—which...I don't think anyone in our family drinks. "Don't tell him, okay?" She produces two hundred-dollar bills and hands them to me with a smile. "I
know he and I have our deal—that'chu gotta make it more on your own, but I'm just so damn proud of you, topolino." She palms my cheeks and kisses me on the forehead. "You've really turned your life around."

"It's not necessary—" I start.

But Mom waves it off, still smiling, then goes on to reheat Dad's dinner.

I grin and tuck the bills down my bra. "Grazie mille, mamma."

DJ's eyes grow large, and he grabs the front of my shirt to peer down. "Boobies. Dada woves boobies. He 'quishesh Mama's."

Mom gasps a laugh and slaps a hand over her mouth.

Gigglesnorting, I bat away his chubby little hands and hand him his sippy cup instead. "Oh, I bet he squishes Mama's boobies a lot."

"Julia," Mom admonishes, holding back laughter. "You don't gotta encourage him."

I shrug and smirk.

DJ drinks his juice for several seconds, then lets out a huge breath. "I wanna pway now."

I wipe his mouth, hearing Dad entering the house. "Nonno's home." I widen my eyes in excitement. "You think he wans'ta play?" I'd do it in a heartbeat, but I'm fucking full. Now that I've given up the whole vegetarian shit, there's no staying away from Mom's lamb chops.

It was a hard pill to swallow, but Joseph helped me. He fabricated an article about vegetarian diets being bad for your health, to which Dad said, "I coulda told you this a long time ago," and Mom got scared and pressured me into eating meat again.
"I'm home, hummingbird!" Dad calls, and I hear his footsteps coming closer.

"Nonno!" DJ shouts happily.

Letting him down on the floor, I watch as he takes off running, and he barges into Dad's legs just as he enters the kitchen.

"Oh-ho!" Dad grunts a chuckle and picks DJ up. "How you doin', li'l junior?" DJ starts rambling about his toys, and Dad walks over to slobber a bit over Mom.

"If I'd known you wasn't gonna be more late, I would've waited with dinner," Mom explains.

Dad grins at something DJ says, then dips down to kiss Mom's cheek. "It's all good. I thought my meeting was gonna be longer." He turns toward the table and smiles at me. "If it ain't my princess. That explains DJ bein' hea." He pokes DJ's tummy.

Yeah, I prefer to be here when I can't be where my nieces and nephews live. Too much weed and cash strewn around at my place.

"Sit, sit. I'll get you your dinner, ciccino." Mom does her fussing thing.

"Dominic's picking them up here at ten," I tell Dad, standing up to kiss his cheek. Then I sit down closer to his seat and take DJ so Dad can get settled. "Lia and Ellie are already asleep upstairs."

Dad nods in acknowledgment, pouring himself a glass of red. "Where's Nino?"

"Sleepover at Zio Alec's," I reply. Nino has finally started to come outta his shell, and he's kinda close to Michael, Alec and Gemma's son. "So, Mom told me youse're going on a cruise?"
I'd say that’s the biggest con about moving outta my parents' house. Not as much free travelling.

This time, according to Mom, she and Zia Brianna will go to San Francisco where the vacation begins. Then Dad and Riley will join them when the ship docks in LA before heading down to Mexico for a few days.

Since Mom doesn’t see Brianna very often, what with her and Zio Riley living in Kansas City, she's very excited.

"Yeah, I got business in LA next week," he says, nodding in thanks as Mom sets a plate of food in front of him. "The ladies can get their spa shit outta their system before Riley and I get there." DJ gets bored, so I let him down to the floor and keep an eye on him while he plays with his trucks. "Mom knows what I want the minute I board that ship."

I scrunch my nose.

Mom laughs. "I haven't forgotten, Juniuh." Turning to me, she deepens her voice to mock Dad. "'Hummingbird, you gotta make sure I don’t notice we ain't on solid ground no more.'"

I can't help but giggle at Dad's scoff.

He got worse last September, after 9/11. Getting him on a plane today doesn’t come without a whole rant about terrorism and being violated at the airport. "It’s a queer guy's dream to go through security, for fuck's sake."

At least he’s stopped using the word fag so much...

"Aw, you scared of water, Dad?" I tease him.

"I don’t fuckin' get scared," he says irritably, tucking a napkin into his shirt. "I just happen to prefer the desert. I'm like a Jew that way."
"Yeah, 'cause the Jews loved wandering in the desert for forty years," I drawl.

Dad shrugs and digs into his food. "Steve Wynn is out hea', and he seems to love it."

It's no use arguing with him.

"I'm gonna head over to Gabby and see if she needs a hand." Mom unties her apron, probably itching to check in on Mrs. Current Babymaker. "I'll be back in an hour or so. And Juniuh, there's cheesecake in the fridge for later. Coffee right there—" She points to the coffeemaker.

"Okay, baby. Just don’t kidnap TJ and Allegra." Dad taps his cheek, and Mom dutifully kisses it. "We've had them three nights this week."

Mom rolls her eyes, holding up one finger for me. One night, apparently. Dad likes to exaggerate.

"Nonna pway?" DJ perks up.

"Oh." Mom pouts at DJ, and I see it coming even before her eyes light up. "Hey, you wanna come with me to Zia Gabby? Maybe TJ wants to play—"

"Yeah!" DJ cheers.

Mom looks to me in question, and I wave her along.

"You make my job easy. Be my guest." I'd be a much better babysitter today if I hadn't eaten like a man. Feels like my stomach's gonna explode.

"Oh, it's my pleasure." Mom makes kissy noises to DJ's cheek, carrying him outta the kitchen. "Let's change your diaper first, baby boy."

"I don’t know where she gets the energy from," Dad mutters. "If I ever find out, I'mma steal it." He stabs a cherry tomato and shoves it into his
mouth. Then he reaches into his inner suit pocket and pulls out his wallet. "Don’t tell Mom—she thinks I spoil you." My mouth quirks up in amusement as he hands me a hundred bucks. "That’s 'cause you helped Mom with that church thing last week. I'm proud'a you."

"Aw, Daddy. This isn't necessary—"

He waves me off and pinches my cheek, then resumes eating.

So, I suppose helping out at a coat drive with Mom gets me money from Dad. *Noted.*

A couple minutes later, Mom rejoins us with DJ. "Okay, we'll be back in a bit—"

"Tell Johnny to drive you," Dad tells her, referring to his beefcake driver. Who is always here, it seems like. "I forgot to tell you, but you'll have your own driver before the vacation."

Uh-oh. That usually means trouble. My gaze flicks between Mom and Dad, waiting for my mother to ask questions. In my opinion, she never asks enough, but there's usually *something* she wants to know.

"Didn’t it go well with the Moretti boy?" Mom asks, concerned, but...

*What. The. Fuck.*

Moretti, as in Matt?

"It went fine," Dad says tightly, wiping his mouth with the napkin. "Nothin' for you to worry about, amore. Let it go."

I keep an expression of disinterest on my face, when in reality, I couldn’t be more interested. And please, please, for the love of God, don’t obey, Mom. Ask more.
"So you're still gonna..." Mom trails off with a pointed look. "You know, next week."

Dad shoots her an impatient look, 'cause maybe, just maybe, he can see through me. I'm always interested.

"Yes, Isabella. Now let it go."

Mom takes the not-so-subtle hint and leaves with DJ, and the kitchen gets too quiet.

My mind is reeling, puzzle pieces slowly being dragged together. Next week. It's about next week. Dad will be in LA, then. And something about Moretti—most fucking likely Matt.

Thinking back to when he was at my place...didn’t he mention he had a job lined up in LA soon?

Oh, my God.

Whatever's going on, I'm gonna take a wild guess and say my dad doesn’t want me involved. Not in business. Never in business. But if Matt is in the middle of that...and I somehow got mixed up in it, too...

Matt wouldn’t want Dad to know.

Matt might even do anything to prevent Dad from knowing.

Such as keeping my gig with AJ...secret.

Guess I have a trip to LA to plan.
May 2002

(3 year after Grand Finale, some 2 years and 4 months after the Grand Finale epilogue, and 2 years after Alec's future take.)

Part II.

Julia's POV.

What was once a mission to keep Matt from telling Dad about my gig with AJ has turned into a personal vendetta. Because when I woke up this morning, there was a note from Matt that he'd slipped under our door.

He apologized but said he feels the need to tell Dad about everything. *I just don’t want you to get hurt, Julia,* he'd written. *You may not think so, but you're in way too deep.*

I speed along the highway toward Los Angeles, angry music blaring outta my speakers. The top's down, wind blowing in my hair, and I check the rearview every now and then to make sure I'm not being followed.

Dad and Zio Riley are already in LA, but I can never be too careful. Driving was the only option since I don’t wanna flash my driver's license to alert anyone to my whereabouts, but there's always the risk of being followed by one of Dad's security goons.
I don’t know what the hell’s going on, but it’s gotta be big. My sisters-in-law have drivers now, as did my mom before she went on her cruise outta San Francisco with Zia Brianna yesterday. And Dad made me promise to stick close to Zio Alec this weekend.

It's only a matter of time before they wonder where I am, but I gotta deal with this first. Matt's going down. After that, I can head back and hide out while Dad does his mob magic.

AJ managed to eavesdrop on a conversation his dad had with Francis over the phone, and now I know which nightclub Matt will be at tonight, so it shouldn’t be too hard to track him down.

Behind my need for revenge, there's a strong current of curiosity, especially regarding Matt's involvement. This runs deeper than being my babysitter, and I can't shake the memory of Mom's look of concern when she spoke of the "Moretti boy."

Why is there a reason to be concerned about him? He grew up wealthy and privileged. A politician father, a doting mother, two younger brothers, both of who're in college at fuckin' Harvard right now. They're twins or some shit. The Morettis, law-abiding Italian-Americans. Cuz they exist, evidently.

But how law-abiding can Officer Confetti be if he's in business with Dad?

When my phone rings, I curse at the sight of AJ's name on the green display. He's only supposed to call to warn me, so this can't be good.

"What's up?" I place the phone between my shoulder and cheek, then return both hands to the wheel and pass a trucker.

"Gemma's asking where you are," AJ says in a hushed voice. "When she starts getting worried, you have maybe an hour or two before my dad will send out a search party of fucking pit bulls."
"Shit." I elbow the padding in my door, pissed. "I'm still a couple hours away from LA."

"I told you this wasn’t a good weekend for revenge, Jules. You should head back before you jeopardize everything we built."

"Don’t you get it?" I argue. "Matt's gonna tell Dad everything, and he's got a great opportunity to do that in LA. And if I can't stop him, then I can at least fuck with whatever it is he's doing for my dad."

AJ doesn't reply, knowing I'm right.

"I'll be careful," I add, sliding on my Ray-Bans. "And if things go to shit, I can always wave the white flag and turn to Francis."

"That’s the thing, though. He's working on this, too," AJ replies, frustrated. "He's Dad's right-hand man in Cali, and I'm pretty sure all this is related to you-know-what." Drugs.

"Then why isn't Alec here instead of my dad?" I ask.

"No idea, but I wouldn’t rule out my pops not going somewhere. There’s a bag by the door."

Fuck. That can't be good—if so many of the oldsters are gonna be in LA.

"What's Alec doing now?"

"Feeding Beth," he answers, referring to his little sister. She's named after our dads' mom, at which Nonna bawled during the christening. "Gemma's on the phone with Zia Bella."

Double fuck. This isn't going as well as I'd thought.

I sigh. "I'll be careful. That’s all I can say." Eyeing the glove box, I think about the small handgun I have there. It's unregistered; my brothers
gave it to me when I turned eighteen. They also taught me how to use it, 'cause Dad refused.

Elisa has one too, and I'm sure the same goes for Gabby and Dani.

~oOo~

I check into a hotel near the nightclub, using a fake ID and fake credit card. For hours, I sit around and do nothing except staying under the radar and trying not to feel too stupid. AJ has warned me; Zio Alec is looking for me, and he's mad instead of worried—thanks to the message I left on his phone earlier. "I'm fine. Don't look for me, Zio. I'll be home soon." And this means...oh, I'm pretty sure it means my brothers are mad at me, too.

And Dad...?

They'll all be pissed, but what're they gonna do? Torture me into telling the truth? I don't fucking think so. They'll never find out I've been in LA.

AJ was right earlier. I picked a horrible time to get even, but it's too late to back down now.

My phone buzzes for the umpteenth time, and I expect it to be Alec or AJ, but it's not. It's official; Anthony's been dragged into it.

I sigh and pick up the phone, walking over to the window facing the ocean.

"Hello, dear brother." I shift the curtain aside and peer out, seeing nothing outta the ordinary.

"Porto il culo a casa. Adesso." He says I gotta get my ass home—right now—his voice full of barely-restrained anger. "You have no fucking idea what you're getting yourself into."
I narrow my eyes at nothing and step away from the balcony. "You don’t know where I am." He can’t know.

Suddenly, he’s gone and Dominic’s furious voice takes over. "I swear to Christ, Julia, if you don’t get back to Vegas right fucking now—!" A chill runs down my spine, and Anthony snatches back his phone. "Trust, we know. We LoJacked your car last week—"

"You fuckin' bastards!" I shout. Instantly outraged and humiliated, I curse myself for committing such a rookie mistake—holy hell, I didn’t check my car—and I take it out on my brothers. "Unlike what you idiots seem to think, I'm not a clueless little brat—" Anthony's dark chuckle pisses me off further. "Stai zitto!" I scream for him to shut up.

Tears of anger and embarrassment well up in my eyes, and I can't deal with any of this right now. I hang up the phone and hurriedly grab my bag to change clothes. And all the while I change into a short denim skirt and a black, tight leather vest, I struggle not to cry like the baby I still am.

I'm desperate at this point, needing to prove that I can take care of myself without the men in my life.

Why would they take you seriously if all you do is screw up?

I snuffle and put on a pair of hoop earrings. Then I stuff a few bills into my pockets and pause to eye the gun next to my wallet.

"That’s not gonna work." I huff, peering down at myself. Everything I'm wearing is skin-tight and I can't exactly tuck a gun into my heels.

In the end, I rip apart some pantyhose and tie it around my upper thigh, tucking the small gun to the inside.

"Is that a gun between your legs or are you just happy to see me?" I snicker and wipe the remnants of my emotional outburst from my eyes.
Walking over to the mini fridge, I grab two small bottles of vodka and down the contents, knowing it'll be enough to get my ass back in the game.

I'm stupid. I'm young. I'm a fucking failure—okay, not back in the game just yet. Soon, though.

"Whew." I roll my shoulders and shake it off.

Nightclub time.

I leave my ringing cell phone behind.

I won't return to this room, seeing as my brothers know where I am, but I have enough cash to get home somehow.

On the way, I try to convince myself that this is all Matt's fault, but I can't go that far. I'm so damn angry that he's gonna rat me and AJ out, though that's about it. I'm the one who picked today of all days.

~oOo~

I feel dumber than dumb when I enter the club.

Surrounded by Mexicans, tequila, and shifty expressions—knowing exactly how Zio Alec is tied up in the drug world—there's only one reason he would conduct business here. Or Dad, if Alec isn't showing up.

I should've figured this out sooner.

But why would Matt help out in a drug deal?

The whole neighborhood is upscale, though the hoes eyeing me up and down for walking near their men could use a trip or two to a fucking salon. The club seems to have morphed into a playground for mamacitas and their meal tickets.
I accidentally bump into one of the broads who's busy macking on her man.

She throws me a death glare. "Ay, gringa pendeja. You gotta be in the wrong place."

I take a step back and give her the same once-over she gave me, then cock a brow. "Trust me. You do not wanna go down this road with me." I grin and get in her face. "Your tacky claws might hurt, but unlike you, I won't stop until you're in a body bag. We clear, hon?"

All bark and no bite, the bitch glares at me again, then drags away her chuckling man.

I suck my teeth and continue through the crowd, though I stick to the sides as much as I can. Mainly, I look around for my dad, because if he's here, I gotta bail mad fast.

Instinct tells me he's not here, though. He's too powerful to go to a...what does he call it...sit-down, yeah that’s it—a sit-down somewhere that isn't his domain. He's got men flying to Vegas; he doesn't leave for nobody.

So maybe he's nearby...? Regardless, I bet he's got guys here, and those are the ones I gotta be on the lookout for. I gotta be careful about it too, because I may not know them, but they all know Junior Maisano's daughters.

It's when I approach one of the circular bars that I spot Matt, and son of a bitch, Francis is there, too. Matt's broad frame is in an expensive-looking suit, sans jacket, whereas Francis is dressed like always, jeans and a leather jacket.

If there's one thing I've learned about my father's business, it's that rank is found in what they wear. Hustlers won't exactly put on Armani, but someone who ranks higher...?
I'm already screwed, so I might as well go for broke.

I steel myself and walk closer, and Francis sees me first, his eyes widening in shock before they narrow in fury.

*Uh-oh.*

"You gotta be kidding me." The music drowns out his voice, but I can see the words falling from his lips.

Ignoring that, I smirk darkly and lean against the bar. "Yo, Officer Moretti!" At that, Matt casts a brief glance over his shoulder, only to do a double take and turn fully to me. And the fury is there now, too. "I've got beef wit'chu—"

The last word is barely out before he's towering over me and clamping a hand over my mouth.

Panic stiffens my spine as he dips down and speaks in a low growl. "You better fucking pray no one heard that." I gasp as he grabs my jaw. Hard. "Are you suicidal, girl?"

In my peripheral vision, Francis twirls his finger in a circle, as if signaling "go on" to someone.

"Let go of me." I push at Matt's chest, masking fear for anger. "What're you doin—"

He cuts me off again, this time by squeezing my windpipe. "Shut up," he says in a rush, and he's eyeing something or something behind me. "Just shut the *fuck* up. You wanna live? Follow my lead and don't speak outta turn."

I cough and splutter, wheezing for air as he releases me. My eyes tear in relief at the ability to breathe again, but right before my vision blurs too
much, I catch a glimpse of alarm in his expression. I blink, and his eyes are back to normal, steely resolve tightening his features.

He says something to Francis, the music too loud for me to hear, and Francis nods stiffly.

Then there's a hand on my lower back, and I flinch as I see some greaseball cholo leering at me.

"Teo, who's this sexy li'l thing?" the Mexican asks.

Teo? Guessing it's short for Matteo, Matt's full name, and that clues me in to the fact that we're not using our real names.

"Not worth paying child support to," Matt replies dryly. Instinctively, I glare up at him and snap my teeth. "Yeah," he chuckles, facing the other one, "bitch almost bit my dick off once."

The Mexican shows his palms and laughs. He also takes a step back. "Maybe a little too feisty." He jerks his chin to the back of the club. "The man's ready to see you now. Want me to take care of her for you?"

"Ay, you motherf—" A hand returns to cover my mouth.

I flush with embarrassment, knowing I really should shut the fuck up. It's clear I've walked into something I sure as hell can't handle on my own, and my safest bet is to do whatever Matt says.

Which stings like crazy.


I get panicky again, and I look up at Matt to catch his hard stare silently telling me to fucking behave.
I gulp.

"Fine by me," he says casually, but he's far from fine. "Make sure she stays in line." Matt pushes me toward Francis, who grips my bicep in a firm grasp. "Feel free to slap her around if she doesn’t listen."

**Asshole.**

But I get it. Maybe I'm not completely dim-witted, 'cause I get that he's tryin'a make the other dude think I'm a nobody. No one to be used against him.

The Mexican guy walks first, Matt following and adjusting his tie, and Francis keeps me close as we trail behind them.

"You come heavy?" Francis asks, only for me to hear. "Knowing your brothers, it's best to ask, right?"

I glance at him and offer a small nod.

He curses and raises a brow. **Where?**

"My skirt," I admit.

He nods and looks straight head. "Get rid of it. Be discreet. No fingerprints."

Since we're surrounded by drunk people dancing and having fun, it's not too difficult to grab the handgun. But I don't know how the fuck to get rid of my prints. My denim skirt is too tight, so it leaves me no choice but to give the gun to Francis.

He inclines his head, accepting it, and maintains a look of ease while he wipes off the surface of the gun on his jeans. Then the gun is dropped on the floor, forgotten.
"We gotta treat you like trash." He eyes his grip on my arm pointedly. "You won't be the only broad up there, so make sure to stick to Teo."

I release a shaky breath as we start walking up a spiral staircase, but with each instruction and piece of information Francis gives me, a surge of adrenaline pumps into my veins like a drug.

It's more powerful than anything I've done with AJ.

"Madonna mia, sei una causa persa." Francis calls me a lost cause. I frown, confused, and he rolls his eyes. "You're like Dee—you get off on this shit. Too bad you was born with the wrong body parts."

"Right, 'cause only the boys are allowed to have fun," I spit out.

"This kinda fun? Yeah."

We'll see about that.

We come to a stop in a narrow corridor, and the cholo speaks quietly to two security dudes with ponytails and scarred faces.

In that time, Matt looks back at me and lifts an arm, and I move as if I'm drawn by a magnet.

He kisses my temple, most likely to be subtle about whispering to me. But that doesn't mean my traitorous crush isn't returning. Fucking tenfold. He makes my knees go weak and the whole shebang.

His lips lingering, he lets a hand slide up my throat. "I could fucking strangle you for putting yourself in danger." I squirm, both wanting to run away and get closer. Fucked. Up. "Listen closely. You stick to me like a goddamn Band-Aid in there, all right? And right before we go in, pretend to do coke off my hand. Otherwise they'll offer it to you." I swallow my nerves and nod jerkily. "Good girl. You done coke before?"
"No," I whisper.

He nips at my jaw. "Snort what I give you. It's not real. Pretend it gives you a calm instead of a rush. It'll let the others believe you're deep into it. *Capisce*? Get clingy and serene instead of excited and jumpy."

"*Capisce.*" I nod again.

Matt reveals a small vial from his pants pocket and pours a thin line of powder on the top of his hand.

"We're open for business, *gringo.*" The Mexican faces us with a grin, which widens when he sees what we're doing. "Ah, is this the child support?"

Matt chuckles in agreement, and I lower my face to snort the powder. *Mannaggia,* whatever it was, it stings everywhere. My nose tickles, my throat is all scratchy, and my vision goes blurry.

With a hold on my neck, Matt tips back my head and kisses my neck. "Swallow and close your eyes, baby."

I shiver violently and comply.

"There we go." He straightens and gives the Mexican his full attention. I'm like an appendix. Just there without use.

We're let into the office where a handful of men and the same number of women wait for us. A thin man is seated behind a sleek desk, his black eyes and sinister smile reminding of a snake. He's got two scantily clad bimbos on either side, begging for his attention with their racks and roaming hands.

Beefcake cholos with machine guns stand along the walls, all of them facing the large, low table in the middle of the room that is stacked with bags of...coke? Heroin?
It's like walking into one of the thousand stories Dad has told us over the years. He's never revealed partaking in anything, but whenever one of the Maisano siblings picked something that had to do with illegal activity as school projects—papers on mafia, immigration, drug smuggling, trafficking—he'd argue with what's in the books.

Like the time I did a paper on the prohibition—he'd sit with me, read the books I'd borrowed from the library, and shake his head. "This wasn't how shit went down, principessa. Listen to me instead."

Say what you want about my dad, but he knows how to tell a story, and this room is like giving some of them images. Because I remember the time Anthony came home from school and he was gonna do a group project about tourism. He and his friends had chosen Miami. And Dad told him—and me, since I was there—how Miami was built up from being a small hick town in the fifties to what it is today. Drugs were a huge factor, as was the immigration.

Clinging dutifully—trying not to enjoy it—I follow Matt to one of the wide leather sofas, and Francis sits down so I'm in between.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Aiello," the snake greets smoothly—barely an accent.

Fake names all over the place.

"You too, Mr. Vásquez." Matt nods with a dip of his chin and places a hand high up on my bare thigh. "How is your father?"

"Living the life." Mr. Vásquez tilts his head, studying Matt's hand on me, which reminds me that I have a role to play. "He misses the States, but he knows better than to come here."

Pretending I'm off in my own little world, I lift Matt's arm and rest my head on his chest. My legs sprawled out, one over Francis's lap. I'm
probably flashing someone my panties. I play with Matt's tie a bit too, as if I couldn't care less about what's going on around me. In return, he stills my hand with a look of irritation, but I catch the glint of approval in his eyes. Stupidly, this is the moment I choose to realize we've never been this close before. Face-to-face, only a few inches between us.

I'm such a ho.

"He's a great man," Matt murmurs. He nods in thanks when he's offered a cigarette from one of the others. "Left a big legacy behind, assuming he's retired."

Mr. Vásquez's smile grows creepier. "It's not like Pablo Escobar, but..." He shrugs faintly; meanwhile, I scoff internally. 'Cause my dad's told me that Pablo Escobar was just a front—that the real boss of the Medellín Cartel was someone named Fabio Ochoa Vás...oh, shit. Vásquez.

It couldn't be, could it?

That was back in the '70s and '80s, and the whole operation was shot down by American and Colombian authorities.

If—a big if—this is a son or nephew to one of the Ochoa Vásquez brothers, it makes no sense for him to yap about Escobar.

"Gimme..." I lean toward Matt's mouth, the smoke dangling between his sexy lips. He lifts a brow at me and lets me take the cigarette. Mr. Vásquez and a couple others chuckle at me, but I feign obliviousness.

"She is certainly enjoying herself, no?" Mr. Vásquez muses.

Matt laughs through his nose as I take a puff from the smoke. "Beats dealin' with her when she's sober."
"Be nice," I say with a lazy smile. "I've given you a kid and everything." Pulling myself up, I get closer and kiss his neck. I can't help but smile when I see goose bumps on his skin. "Don't trust him," I whisper, breathing in his aftershave.

"I know," he grits out, and then his hand slides to my ass. "A kid I didn’t fucking ask for. Now sit back and keep your mouth shut."

I pout and slump back to watch the table full of drugs. One of the security guys pours us drinks, and since it's from the same bottle Mr. Vásquez is already sipping his own drink from, I'm not too worried.

"For the feisty one." The guy we met downstairs winks and hands me a glass of golden liquid.

In the corner of my eye, Francis takes a swig from his and nods subtly. *It's okay.*

I sip mine carefully, focusing on Matt's hand roaming my lower body. My ass, my thighs, my hips. It's all business talk now, and it's difficult to follow when they're talking in code. Not much is said.

"We work in between the cartels in Mexico," Mr. Vásquez is saying about their operation. "Everything's from Colombia, but Florida's too hot—DEA controls the borders these days."

Matt nods slowly and hums. "We'll need weekly shipping." The alcohol heats me up, as does his hand absently traveling up my ribcage. "Once we've eliminated the Vegas family—"

I gasp in shock, which Matt must've anticipated because he cups my breast in a tight hold at the same time, and I let out a low cry in pleasure I'm not sure I wanna feel. No one knows the storm raging inside me, instead figuring it's his hand on me that made me react.
He can't be serious, can he? No. No, I refuse to believe that. Burying my face against Matt's armpit, I bite my lip in order to hold back all the questions.

My gut tells me Matt is trustworthy, but I don’t know why. I don’t really know him, and he's done nothing to prove himself loyal to my family. At least not as far as I know. My father is another matter. He would never be associated with someone he didn’t trust. Does that mean I can trust Matt?

_No matter what, I can trust Francis._

"Once a week will be no problem." Mr. Vásquez inclines his head and tents his fingers on the desk. "We'll ship to your organization exclusively in the States once the Maisanos are gone." _Shit, shit, shit._ A Maisano's sitting right here. "And this..." I glance over just as he gestures to the table with all the drugs, "...is a gift. My men will deliver it to your warehouse outside of Vegas in two days."

"That’s very generous, my friend." Matt nods at Francis, who stands up and pulls out a small pouch from his jacket. "I say we drink to our mutual interest."

Mr. Vásquez's eyes glimmer when he empties the pouch and several small diamonds fall out on his desk. "Diego, get my finest cigars." He faces Matt. "A toast—to the fall of the Maisano Family of Nevada."

Pure hatred simmers below my surface, and I lazily lift my glass. "I like-like to gamble." I pretend to hiccup for effect, and it works.

The Mexicans—or should I say Colombians? Fuck if I know—crack up and everyone toasts to gambling.

I gulp down my drink as if it's water.

~oOo~
By the time we're leaving, there's not an ounce of unease left, but there's a whole lotta rage.

Diego, the guy who first met us downstairs, follows us outside the club with one of the beefcake cholos, and Matt's grip on my arm tightens when Diego says something in Spanish about my ass.

They think they can mess with the Maisanos?

"Keep walking," Matt whispers, his jaw ticking with tension.

Francis unlocks a black car with tinted windows in the small parking lot behind the club, and he nods for me to get in to the passenger's seat.

"Lookin' forward to doin' business with you, Teo." Diego smirks and shakes Matt's hand.

"You too." Matt nods and begins to usher me into the car.

But as Francis drops to the ground to...huh, check underneath the car, Diego speaks rapidly in Spanish, too fast for me to understand, and I watch as he reaches for his hip. My eyes widen.

In the blink of an eye, acting on pure instinct, I lurch forward and crash into Diego. A pained groan slips through my lips, though it's drowned out by Diego's hiss, and we tumble to the ground.

Matt shouts my name, and as I reach for the gun strapped to Diego's holster, I hear feet crunching on gravel. Spanish insults are thrown at me, and Diego pushes me off of him with ease. However, I already have the gun, and when I roll onto my back, looking up at his tall frame, I aim it at him and fire without a single thought about it.

Um, I hit his ear.
"Madre de—!" He howls and cups his ear, and right before I fire again, another shot rings out.

Matt. I see him out of the corner of my eye—his gun raised. The other goon falls to the ground with a choked cry, but I can't look away from Diego.

I got him in the stomach this time.

Blood gushes out, but he's still alive.

"Enough, Julia!" Matt yells.

"The car's been rigged," Francis growls. "Get her to safety—I'll take care'a this!"

Matt hauls me off the ground and drags me into an alley. "Be quick about it, Frankie!"

I hear a final shot coming from the parking lot, a shot I'm sure ended Diego's life.

"Run, Julia—fucking run." Matt's words come out in a jumbled rush as he pushes me forward. "It's not far, baby."

My eyes are still open wide, and I don't think I'm breathing. Had it not been for Matt making sure I keep moving, I woulda been frozen in shock. I am in shock—I think. I don't know. I don't fucking know.

I...I shot someone. Twice. I didn't hesitate. Sucky aim, evidently, but...

"I shot him," I say breathlessly, running as fast as I can in high heels. Sick of it and feeling like I'm about to break, I pause to kick off my shoes, and then I run barefoot. "I shot him, Matt."
"You saved Frankie's life and got my ass in gear." He looks behind us to see if we're being followed. "Don't feel bad for what you did." He slows down a little and grabs my hand, giving it a light tug for me to face him. "You understand what I'm saying? What you did was fucking brave."

"I didn't think," I admit.

Thing is, I'm not sure I feel bad about shooting Diego. But I feel as though I should. Am I a horrible person?

"Hey." Matt halts our steps completely and cups my cheeks. He's breathing heavily, something dark swirling in his eyes. Jaw still clenched, muscles straining. "You did the right thing."

"I think I'm in shock." My hands are kinda shaking.

He nods. "It'd be weird if you weren't. Come on." He pulls me close and gestures at the hotel across the street. "Watch your step." Instead of simply tiptoeing over the shards of glass, I find myself picked up in his arms. "We have a room here—it's safe." He nods again, this time at a car that's parked farther up the block.

I'm guessing whoever's in the car belongs to Dad.

"Where's Francis?" I swallow hard as we enter the hotel, and he lets me down on my feet again. The cold marble makes me shiver; it's like a wake-up call.

"He'll be here within five, I promise."

Matt guides me up to the ninth floor and opens the door to a suite, and he strides over to the windows and peek outside between the shut curtains.
It's dark and cold. I glance around and hug myself, seeing various stages of preparation the guys went through earlier. Guns on the small dining table. Phone cards, a sheet of numbers, a blueprint of what I assume is the nightclub, a map, a couple cell phones... Everything's strewn all over the suite.

"Why wasn't I allowed to have my gun earlier?"

Matt frowns at me over his shoulder. "You were strapped?"

"Francis made me get rid of it."

He nods. "Woulda been fucked for a woman to be armed." Matt leaves the windows again and starts pacing. "He's on his way up." Relief washes over me.

Matt yanks off his tie, he tugs at his short hair, he stops.

He stares at me intently...debating? Or something. Whatever conclusion he's come to, he walks over to me and palms my cheeks, much like he did across the street.

"Are you all right?" His gaze flits over my face, his hands moving down my neck to my shoulders. I nod numbly, not really knowing what the fuck I am. "Jesus fucking Christ, girl." He hugs me to him.

I can barely deal with it. His comfort puts a dent in my internal defense, and if he doesn’t stop being all sweet soon, I'mma fall apart like the little girl I don’t wanna be no more.

"You're cold." He quickly unbuttons his shirt and takes it off, leaving himself in a white wifebeater. *So not the time to drool.* "Better?" He eyes me carefully when the shirt’s been wrapped around me, his hands moving up and down my arms.
I go with another nod.

"Why the hell did you come?" he whispers.

Ugh, I don’t wanna answer. I’m painfully aware of how juvenile it is, and after tonight it's like a world away. Personal vendetta—Christ, I need to grow up.

"I was mad at'chu," I croak, snaking my arms around his middle. "I live for my family, but you gotta understand that I've always been around people who've wanted to protect me, help me, shield me, and fucking steer me in the right direction. This gig with AJ...it was ours, Matt—mine. We run that. And you barging in, saying you were gonna tell my dad in order to protect me..." I groan and sniffle, attempting to break free of his hold, but he hugs me tighter. "It's kinda hard to be a grown-up when nobody lets me. I'm sick of being the baby."

He's quiet for a beat, just holding me.

I try not to relax too much, but it's impossible. I practically melt into him.

"I get it," he murmurs. "That doesn’t mean you’re not reckless, but I get it." He chuckles quietly, then sighs and kisses the top of my head. "I'm willing to compromise, but it's the least of our problems right now." He tilts my chin up. "You do know your dad will find out about tonight, right?"

I nod glumly. "Yeah, I really fucked shit up."

He smirks, but it's kinda hollow. "Doesn’t matter. Junior won’t hold a grudge against his daughter."

My brows knit together, and I immediately see where Matt's going with this. "You're a fool if you think I won't make sure Dad doesn’t hurt you. I know what he's capable of, and I know what I'm capable of." If Daddy hurts a hair on either Matt's or Francis's head, I'll be nothing but a
memory to him. This is my screwup, and I'll own up to it. "I'll tell him everything about tonight, and I know his weaknesses." Me and Elisa are two. Mom is probably the most important one.

Matt's grin becomes a tad more genuine, and he opens his mouth to say something, but Francis returns at that point.

"You okay, man?" Matt asks him.

Francis answers in the affirmative while I run over and squeeze the shit outta him.

He laughs through his nose. "If it isn't our little shit-stirrer." He kisses me on the forehead. "Thanks for saving my life." That’s better. I grin up at him, and he chuffs me lightly on the chin. "Think you could save it again before Uncle Jun pops a cap in my ass?"


Francis chuckles and raises a brow at Matt. "She in shock?"

"Yeah." Matt's all business, his expression serious when I look to him. "I'll stay with her until I know she's all right."

"I am all right," I insist. Sure, I'm still shaking a little and I feel empty, but how bad could it be? A crying session in the shower later will fix everything.

"I gotta check in with Alec and Anthony," Francis says, walking over to the phone.

I bite my lip, not looking forward to any of that. But, like I said, I'll own my mistake. "Where's Dad?"

"He's not in LA—that’s all I can tell you," Frankie replies.
"Come on." Matt loops an arm around my shoulders and leads me to the bedroom. "Tell me why you didn’t want me to trust Vásquez while I get you some sugar."

Weary and numb, I sit down on the edge of the bed and rattle off some shit about the stories Dad used to tell me and my siblings. And in the meantime, Matt raids the mini fridge and brings me OJ, a chocolate bar, and cashews.

He sits down next to me. "So...because he implied that Escobar was the top dog back in the day, you knew I shouldn’t trust him?"

"Yeah." I break off a piece of chocolate. "If Vásquez really is from Colombia and Medellín—"

"He is." Matt nods. "Most his guys are from Mexico, but yeah, he's from Medellín. Way back, his dad and two uncles helped start the cartel."

That’s what I figured. "So, he's one of the Ochoa nephews—or however I'm supposed to pronounce it."

Matt's mouth slants into a lopsided smile. "You know your shit, Maisano."

Sometimes, I guess...

"You never trusted him, did you?" I glance up at him.

He shakes his head no. "I'm not exactly allowed to go in to details, but tonight was only a game. We've known for a while they wanna move their stateside business to Vegas."

And Dad's gonna stop it.

"Are you a part of all this?" I whisper.
He hesitates and gestures for me to drink my OJ. "Not really. Not in the long haul. It's not for me."

For some reason, I'm so relieved. Having grown up smack-dab in the middle of the mafia lifestyle, it's refreshing to know a man who isn't a fucking wiseguy.

"Junior and I are helping each other out, that’s all." He opens the small jar of nuts for me. "The last few years, we've had—"

"Mutual interests," I finish. He's already told me as much. "And you won't tell me about it."

He sighs and rests his chin on top of my head. "Maybe one day. My part of it, anyway."

We grow silent for a few minutes while I force myself to finish the juice and the chocolate. Cashews aren't really my thing, and all I wanna do is...well, I wanna sleep, but not alone. The mere thought of being alone in the dark spooks me now.

"You don’t gotta babysit me, you know." I look down to my lap, wanting to get rid of my leather vest and skirt. I want comfy PJs, but Matt's dress shirt works, too.

Most of all, I wanna be strong. Especially in front of Matt.

I'm fucked.
May 2002

(3 year after Grand Finale, some 2 years and 4 months after the Grand Finale epilogue, and 2 years after Alec's future take.)

Part III.

Julia's POV.

"You don't gotta babysit me, you know." I look down to my lap, wanting to get rid of my leather vest and skirt. I want comfy PJs, but Matt's dress shirt works, too.

Most of all, I wanna be strong. Especially in front of Matt.

I'm fucked.

"I know." Once again, he kisses me—my hair—and I've kinda had it. It's just mean. I want him, so his comfort isn't helping me worth'a damn. "I keep telling myself to go out and help Frankie."

Another kiss, this time lower, at my temple, and it changes everything.

With every second that his lips linger, the air grows heavier and more charged.
I feel his breaths coming out in small puffs against my skin. "Tell me to stop, Julia."

My own breathing hitches, and all I can muster is quick shake of my head.

*Please, for the love of God, give me everything.*

"Christ..." He nuzzles my jaw as I tilt up, and then after a second of hesitation where he stares deep into my eyes, he takes my mouth with his in a bruising kiss.

Blinding pleasure mixed with shock course through me.

I had no fucking clue that he wanted me. No clue. I thought—

"You drive me crazy," he groans. "Fuckin' bonkers."

Yeah, I thought *that.*

Fueled by this intense need I've never felt before, I climb on top of him and push him back against the bed. "Ditto."

He cups my ass roughly, all while stroking our tongues together. "You scared the shit outta me tonight. Fuck—I should stop. You're in shock."

"Shut the fuck up," I argue, unbuckling his belt. "Right now there's only one thing I wanna do, and you won't deny me, will you?"

Matt lets out a low laugh that morphs into a moan when I grind against his dick.

"Well, *hi.*" My mouth waters, 'cause someone's obviously planning on breaking me in half with that cock. "Lift up." I tug at his pants and boxers, and we both lift and squirm around to push them off. At the same time, Matt yanks his beater over his head, then gets to work on the zipper at the front of my tight vest.
The minute my vest and skirt end up on the floor, I kiss Matt frantically as he unclasps my bra and shoves down my panties.

"Wait, wait—" He grunts and rolls me over, only to go still and stare down at me. "Slow down." His jaw clenches and he breathes in through his nose.

"But I want you." I arch into him and slide a hand between us to grasp his thick cock. Fuck, all smooth and warm and hard as steel. "Mannaggia, I want you, Matt."

He shudders and grits his teeth. "I said slow down." Lowering his face, he steals a hard kiss and rests our foreheads together. "You've been fucking with my head for a long time. Lemme look at you."

"A l-long time?" I stutter like a fool and flush all over.

His mouth quirks up in a small smile, and he traces a finger down my chest, between my breasts.

"You're fucking incredible," he whispers. "I thought I was a sick fuck—checking you out that night you was brought into the station." Oh, damn. Even back then? More than two years ago. "Moving away to distance myself from you clearly didn't work." He releases a breath and kisses me deeply, stealing my own breath.

I whimper and tremble. I cling to him, and now it's no act. I gotta get closer, feel all of him, have all of him. My hands roam down his muscular back, and I slide my feet up his calves as if I'm making sure he can't escape.

"I hated you," I gasp as he pushes his cock along my wet slit. "Hated the fucking crush I've had on you for years."
"Oh, yeah?" He breathes out a curse and cups one of my tits before sucking a nipple into his mouth. I cry out, once again twisting my body to get closer. God, a magic fucking mouth. "Goddamn sexy..." He moves farther down and circles my belly button with his tongue. "Cazzo. So sweet—I can fucking smell you, baby. You're wet, aren't you?" Before I can answer—with something other than a moan—he drags a single digit all the way from my opening to my clit. "I gotta taste you."

I slap a hand over my mouth as he replaces his fingers with his tongue. Bolts of pleasure shoot through me, causing me to gasp and quiver.

Matt goes deep, a day's worth'a scruff rasping deliciously against my folds and inner thighs. Sucking on my clit, he pushes two fingers inside me, and I nearly arch off the damn bed.

*It's never been like this before.*

For several minutes, he eats me out like a starved man. He squeezes my thighs, he hums, he groans, he takes me to the edge.

"I wanna come," I plead.

Instead I stiffen up when he stops. He kneels between my parted legs and strokes his cock, all while staring down at my body with a hungry expression. Drawn to him, I sit up and glide my hands along the back of his thighs until I cup his firm ass.

"You on the pill?" he murmurs huskily.

"Yeah."

I don't break our gaze as I lean in and nuzzle the base of his cock.

"Fuck." He shifts my hair over my shoulder and caresses my cheek. "Good. I don't wanna use rubbers with you."
"Why?" I breathe out, but I'm not sure I care. All I can think of is his cock—in my mouth, in my pussy. "You're not a safety guy, Confetti?"

He chuckles darkly and fists my hair, tugging it back. I gasp at the sting, and then I'm trapped in the possessiveness darkening his eyes.

"Do I have anything to worry about, Julia?" He raises a brow, and I shake my head no, dazed. "Bene." He brushes a thumb over my bottom lip. "For the record, a guy is never safe around you."

I lower my mouth to his cock, flicking the tip of my tongue over his glistening tip. "How do you figure that?" I taste the salty pre-come, then go back for more.

He curses, still holding on to my hair. "Because you're you—not like anybody else. Now stop teasing me and suck my cock."

I take him as far as I can. For once in my life, I wanna impress a guy, render him stupid, and...I don't know, maybe make him stick around.

"Un-fucking-real," Matt moans. Humor seeps into his voice. "I've wanted to shut you up like this more times than I can count."

A grin tugs at the corners of my mouth, and I flick his balls—hard—as I take him to the back of my throat.

He laughs again, this time through a loud groan, and winces. "You little shit. Come here." He grabs my jaw and dips down to kiss me passionately. "I had that coming."

The amusement lingers while he lowers me to the bed and hovers over me. But there's more. Desire, affection, and...conflict? Except, I don't know what he can be conflicted about.
With a loose hold on my throat, he keeps that penetrating gaze fixed on me as he slowly presses his cock inside me. Inch by inch, he stretches me to the point where there's as much bliss as there is pain.

I exhale and force myself to relax, to which Matt gnashes his teeth together and pushes all in.

My eyes close, and I revel in his weight on me. I feel him everywhere and acknowledge how easy it would be to grow addicted to him.

"Julia..." He kisses my eyelids, then rests his forehead to mine. "Are you okay? Look at me, baby."

I don't wanna. This is like losing my virginity—but with feelings involved. The pain has already subsided, but I feel fucking exposed and vulnerable. I don't do that.

"I don't wanna like you," I mumble, cracking one eye open. "I don't know what I'm doing."

He frowns at first, before, maybe, it dawns on him that I'm not used to this. This, the string thing. Strings attached—or attaching. There are a whole lotta pools I'll jump in at the deep end without a single worry, but I'm still emotionally safe.

Now? Not so much. He can ruin me.

"I don't know what I'm doing, either." He presses his lips to mine gently, lingering. "You're so different."

I crack a grin and shift my hands to his ribs. "I'm a pain, right?"

There's no humor in his expression now, though. "You're something else, that's for sure." The way he looks at me makes me tingle. "Beautiful,
unbelievable, dangerous." I suck in a breath at his slow thrust, equally in reaction to his words. "Sexy as hell—and yeah, a pain in the fucking ass."

I giggle, outta breath, then whimper when he starts moving in earnest. He keeps it slow, but he hits deep and never falters in his pace. And he touches me...everywhere.

"I'm already screwed." He nuzzles my jaw and moves a hand to my tits, massaging them, pinching my nipples. "Don't force me to make you my mission."

I offer a quizzical look at that.

He grins, and it's devastatingly sexy. "You'll see." Then he ends all conversation by kissing me deeply, his tongue doing things that make me delirious.

Spurred on by his movements, I lose myself in him and let my body take over. I meet every thrust as my hands begin their quest to find out everything about Matt's body. Like when I slowly rake my fingernails down his sculpted chest and he responds by slamming into me. Or when I pull at his hair and he curses and shudders.

After a while, he rolls us over and sits up, me straddling him. He pushes me down hard on his cock, then abandons my hips to focus on my tits.

He sucks on my nipples, nips at the flesh, and pinches them until they're tingling and aching.

I take control but keep the same pace he did, swiveling my hips to bring him as deep as possible. This position also stimulates my clit every time I push forward, and it drives me wild.

"God, Matt..." I throw my arms around him and crash my mouth to his.
He kisses me back hungrily and squeezes my ass. "Fuck—you feel so damn good."

When he flips us over again, he throws my legs over his shoulders and rams so deep into me that my mouth pops open in a silent scream.

He fucks me mercilessly, takes me so thoroughly, and acts like he hasn’t gotten laid in forever. But this is Matt fucking Moretti; he probably has chicks lining up to get a piece.

"Gimme that mouth." He grabs my jaw and plants one on me that doesn’t stop.

I feel the kiss down to my damn toes. "Oh my God!" I throw my head back as he grinds against my clit. "Please—"

In an instant, I go from teasing the edges of an orgasm to being right there. Adrenaline surges forward along with the ecstasy of having his cock working me, and I try to warn him. So close, so close, so close. I'm not even sure any sound comes out, but I keep chanting it. Maybe it's just in my head.

"Come." His moan seems grittier and rawer than before. "Jesus fuck—come, Julia."

I'm pulled under within seconds, my entire being tensing up. I flush feverishly and gasp for air, then squeeze my eyes shut and ride out wave after wave of pure fucking euphoria.

Moments later, Matt drives into me one final time before he goes rigid, his cock throbbing and his teeth sinking down into my shoulder.

The aftershocks of my orgasm run through me in the shape of violent shivers, and I draw shaky breath after shaky breath.
Honest to God, I don’t think my body’s ever been this sensitive and properly fucked.

Hell, even my mind’s been fucked.

While we catch our breaths and exchange sloppy kisses, I'm a hundred percent sure I'm so cooked and done that I won't be able to move for days.

But Matt proves me wrong.

He wakes me up an hour later by sliding two fingers inside me, only to gather some of his own release and spread it along my slit.

"I need you again, baby," he murmurs in my ear.

I mumble some sleepy nonsense, half-expecting him to be a dream.

To which he spanks my pussy lightly.

And takes me again.

~oOo~

I grin and pull the covers over my head, not ready to leave this bubble.

Matt chuckles drowsily, dropping featherlight kisses along my spine.

I'm waiting for him to get back to normal. It's with a sliver of dread that I soak up the attention he gives me, because I know this can't last. I'm too much of a mess for him to take seriously—and maybe want more with.

But for now...? I pretend the sun isn't here with the morning. I pretend I can't hear Francis stomping around in the living room area. I pretend Matt is only this affectionate with me.

I pretend he's not responsible for this serene calm that has washed over me.
I'm in no rush to go anywhere, which I always am otherwise.

"Maybe I fucked the shock outta you." He smirks against my left butt cheek, then bites it playfully. "You have two sexy dimples here." He kisses both and breathes in deeply. "I can still smell us. Fucking addictive."

Yeah. You are.

Three rounds of amazing sex and the most peaceful sleep I've ever had.

He hums and crawls up my body, his chest to my back, and drops a soft kiss on my shoulder. "You're quiet this morning. The Julia I know is never quiet."

Madonn', I'm glad we're under the covers and he can't see me.

My eyes sting, but I smile. Because if I don't, I'll break.

"We haven't shared mornings together before," I manage to whisper as he rolls me over. I can only see his contours, but even those are hot. I'm in so much trouble. "Maybe I'm quiet in the mornings."

Another hum from him, and he rests his forehead between my boobs. In response, I weave my fingers through his hair and scratch his scalp.

"I—" love your weight on me, I almost said. Shit. I sigh. "I should probably get going, huh? I mean, I'm sure you got more important things to do."

"Running already, Maisano?" He lifts his head and pushes away the covers, much to my dismay, and he peers down at me with an unreadable expression.

I bite my lip, drinking in this moment. Everything—I wanna remember it all. His bed hair, the sleep lines on his chest, the ache between my legs, the weight of his cock along my thigh, his kisses, the rumpled sheets.
His gaze softens, and he brushes the pad of his thumb under my eye. I spot the smoky dust of mascara and eye shadow, and I groan and throw an arm over my face.

"Classy," I mutter to myself.

He leans down close to my ear. "Natural and beautiful." Oh, motherfucking shiver. "Now come on." He taps my thigh. "Take a shower with me. I'm not done feeling you up."

But after the shower you will be?

~oOo~

Wanting to make a lasting impression, I stop Matt from whatever he had planned for the shower.

I carry out my own agenda.

Under the hot spray, he drops his chin to his chest as I take my time to rub his shoulders and back with bodywash. The water washes away the suds, and he reaches behind us to pull me close. I kiss his warm skin, taste him, and circle him until we're facing each other.

He's hard by the time I wrap my fingers around his cock, and without breaking eye contact, I sink to my knees and take him in my mouth.

Aside from clenching his jaw and caressing my cheek, he doesn’t do anything, doesn’t say anything, while I suck him as good as I can. Every now and then, he tenses and lets out a labored breath, but his main focus seems to be holding me trapped with his gaze.

I don’t know what he's looking for.
Stiffening up a bit more, he conveys that he's close and slaps a hand to the tile. He lets out a low groan and shuts his eyes, his head tilting back. And I swallow everything he gives me.

Releasing him, I lick my lips and catch the drop that’s trickling down the corner of my mouth. Matt sees it and groans again, then pulls me to a stand and palms my cheeks. He leans close too, our noses almost touching.

He stares at me for another beat before his mouth slants into a small smile. "I've been trying to figure you out." Well, that can't be good. "You think this is the end of it, right?"

I do my damndest to give nothing away, and I kinda wish the floor would swallow me whole. Anything, so I don’t gotta deal with rejection.

"You always do what you want." His brows knit together. Maybe he's thinking out loud...? "But now you're... You're holding something back. You're too quiet."

I force a grin and pretend to zip my mouth and throw away the key.

He shakes his head. "You're not always as ballsy as you think you are."

"Fuck you." There's no heat in my words; they only bring me closer to fucking tears.

Instead of smirking or cracking a joke, he dips down and kisses me languidly. Slowly, deeply, passionately. I grab onto his arms to steady myself.

Then he inches away and glances at my thoroughly-kissed lips. "Non vado da nessuna parte, Julia." He says he's not going anywhere, then steals a quick kiss while his words zing through me. "Remember last night you said you like to gamble? I'll go all in if you do."
I suck in a breath and search his eyes. *Does he really mean...?*

His little smirk appears again, wry but affectionate. "I'm ready to face your pops—if that's any indication of how deep into it I am."

It's more than an indication, and my chin quivers as my vision blurs. *So much more than an indication.* Because Matt isn't Joseph, who also had to face my dad in a similar way. Matt is not family. He's Italian, thank God, but he's a police officer and an outsider. He's also got shitty luck, having to run into me in places my dad can easily misplace blame. Actually, replace "luck" with "taste." 'Cause Matt's got questionable taste in women if he's gonna take a chance with me.

That said, if he's really willing to gimme a shot, one of the first things I wanna experience again is that calm—the calm from earlier. It felt so fucking amazing—indescribable—to just lie in bed like that and have no need to rush.

It's unlike anything I've ever felt.

"Are you sure?" Those are the only words I can get out without choking up completely. I release a breath and hope the shower masks the tear rolling down my cheek. "I'm not like my sister. I mean, Elisa hasn’t always been mature and she can still cause trouble, but I'm worse. I'm a mess—most of the time, really—and I'm not housewife material—"

He cuts off my rambling by kissing me once more, which works. Oh, it works so well. "I'm not looking for a housewife, Julia," he murmurs into the kiss. "I want you—someone who can keep me on my toes."

"You'll be a freaking ballerina, man," I mutter.

He laughs, sounding as happy as I am, and goes back to kissing me.

~oOo~
When we leave the ensuite bathroom, I stop short at the sight of my bag on the bed.

The bag I left at my hotel before the club...

Tightening the towel around me, I cautiously walk over to the double set of doors leading to the living room area and press my ear to one of them.

"Who's here?" Matt frowns and walks over to his stuff to get dressed.

I sigh in defeat. "Dominic." At least it's the lesser of two evils; Anthony's like Dad, but fuck, this still blows.

A glance at the alarm clock says it's only nine, so Dee must've driven most of the night.

"I can talk to him." Matt pulls on a pair of jeans—no fucking underwear—then grabs a gray t-shirt. "Don't worry about it."

I shake my head to clear the fog and put on panties and a bra. "No, I'll deal with them first. You'll get your chance—trust. But they tend to speak with their fists unless there's a daughter or a little sister in the way."

Matt chuckles, unaffected, but I don't care. His face is too pretty to mess with.

"Give me five minutes," I request. He doesn't look happy. "Please."

After pulling on a top with spaghetti straps and a gypsy skirt, I locate my Chucks and Ray-Bans, then leave the bedroom to face the first sexist in the family.

Dominic's on the couch smoking a cigarette, and he lifts a brow as he spots me.
I glance between him and Francis, who's standing in the adjacent kitchen making coffee, and try to gauge their mood. *Casual.* Both of them. So casual.

"Good morning." I fake cheerfulness and plop down next to Dominic. "How are you?"

He laughs through his nose, then blows out a couple smoke rings. "Oh, I'm fucking great, Julia. I had to leave my wife and kids in the middle of the night to drive to LA and pick up this one sister I have, who either has a goddamn death wish, or maybe she just wans'ta send her brothers into early graves."

*Ouch.* "You didn’t have to do that." I look down to my lap and fidget with my hands. "I'm sorry—"

"Dee." Francis gives Dominic a pointed look.

To which my brother groans and irritably puts out his smoke before slumping back against the cushions. He drags me with him, placing an arm around my shoulders.

"You nearly gave me and Anthony heart attacks, a'ight?" He speaks against my temple, refusing to let me back up. "Frankie's told me everything, and I'm—*Madonn*." He jumps up, jostling me, and begins pacing. "I wanna say I'm thankful and proud—for what you did, but..." He stops to glare at me. "It's not your fuckin' place, Julia."

I point to Francis. "Then he'd be dead."

*And you're not my parent.*

Dominic grits his teeth and squeezes his eyes shut. *Mamma mia,* someone give me strength."
Is he like Dad now? Talking to himself?

"She's right, bro. You know that." Francis sits down in the armchair and sips his coffee. "Trust, I was pissed like nothing else when she showed up. You know she's like my sister, too. But she did save my life."

Dominic chuckles darkly and rubs his temples. "And I'm fucking glad, but did it ever occur to youse that if Julia hadn't been there, Matt woulda been ready to save your ass when you was checking the car?" He stares at Francis; meanwhile, I swallow a pile of guilt. 'Cause he's right. If I hadn't been there, forcing Matt to prioritize me...

I avert my eyes; so does Francis.

And of-fucking-course that's the moment Matt decides he's waited long enough.

Dominic looks over at him, only to snort and roll his eyes. "Finally got to stick your dick in my sister, huh?"

"Oh!" I shout.

Before I even know it's happening, both Matt and Dominic fly at each other, and Francis jumps up to intervene.

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about," Matt growls. He takes a fist to the jaw, then grabs onto Dee's shoulders and knees him in the gut.

"Quit it!" I yell, getting to my feet.

"Dominic—cazzo!" Francis gets in between them and plants his hands on each man's chest. "Fuckin' cool it!"

Dominic wheezes a chuckle, clutching his stomach. "I know plenty, Moretti. I know you've had a hard-on for Julia the past two years."
"Stai zitto!" I snap at my brother, telling him to shut up. Then I nudge Matt back farther and turn to face Dee. "This isn't some one-night stand, you know. But even if it was...?" I scoff and point to myself. "I make my own damn choices."

I'm so goddamn tired of having to answer to everyone in my family. Everywhere I turn, someone is there—Dad, my brothers, my uncle...whoever-the-fuck. Always telling me what to do, what I'm doing wrong.

My brother smirks and shows his palms. "You don’t gotta soapbox. But your new man's gotta lotta balls to take shit this far." He steps back and brushes Francis away from him. "He's already risking a bullet for yesterday."

"I'll deal with Dad," I snarl.


For what, fuck if I know.

Dominic nods. "Good luck with that. He'll be home in a week."

I roll my eyes. "I already know. He's on a cruise with Mom."

"Yeah, sure." Dee grins and sparks up a new smoke, then addresses Matt behind me. "That's how much she knows. I'll have your balls removed if you let her know more. There's family and there's family. She's only part of one."

Confused and annoyed as fuck, I peer over my shoulder and frown up at Matt.

He smiles at Dominic, though his eyes are cold. "You forget I know how to play the game, kid."
Can someone give me the rules?

Dee nods. "Keep that up, thinking it's a game, and you'll lose faster than you can have your shit greased. You got no future in this organization if you—"

Matt cuts him off, a brow cocked. "Who says I'm looking to be a member?"

That seems to confuse both Dominic and Francis, and it's not like I'm getting any of my questions answered, either. In fact, I get madder and madder with each passing second, and not for the first time in my life, I wanna get outta here—get someplace where I can breathe. And not be near my family.

I want space.

I want it so fucking bad.

"What the fuck is Pops up to?" Dee furrows his brows at Francis. "I thought—" He glances at me real quick, then sighs and obviously decides not to speculate.

'Cause there's a girl in the room.

I'm so done.

"We're exchanging favors, Junior and me—that’s all I can say." Matt drapes an arm around my shoulders.

My brother sucks his teeth. "How convenient my sister runs into the mess."

"I'll stand up to Junior, don’t you worry," Matt chuckles.
"Oh, I'm not worried." Dominic seems to think something is funny, too. "I'm gonna enjoy the show, though." He spares me a brief look. "You're staying with Anthony and Gabby until Mom and Dad get back."

And that's it. "No." I shake my head and stand up straight. "I've had it up to here." I flatten my hand near my throat. "I'm not going back."

I get a blank stare from Dee, because he doesn't get it. He doesn't know what I mean.

"I need a break." My heart starts racing as I realize what I want. What I need. "I'm sorry, but no. Just the thought of going back makes me wanna hurl—"

"That's home you're talking about," Dee says flatly. There's confusion in his tone, too. "What the fuck? Am I missin' somethin'?"

I fold my arms across my chest. "I don't wanna go home," I whisper, choking up. Why didn't I realize this before? Like a normal person, I coulda gone off to college. I should've. "I need space—maybe try another city or something."

His eyes widen, and in my peripheral vision, Matt's do the same.

"Where the hell is this coming from?" Dominic asks.

"I don't know." That's honesty. I guess it sorta snuck up on me, and now the truth is staring me down. "I've always tried to break free, you know that." I shrug with one shoulder. "But I won't be able to grow up as long as youse're sheltering me."

Dominic stares at me, and he gets it now. I can tell. He doesn't understand why, but he gets where I'm going with this.

"Dad won't let you," he replies quietly.
I bristle. "It's not fucking up to him."

It hits me just how much I need this, but for once, I'm not gonna rush into it. I'm gonna take responsibility and talk things through with my parents, but the end result will be the same. I'm leaving Vegas for a while. I gotta see places, learn on my own, get away from overprotective family members. Make my own mistakes, grow, mature.

I turn to Matt, resolved and determined. "Do you have work today?"

He shakes his head no, and I catch a glimpse of hurt in his gaze, though he's quick to hide it. But for me, it matters. He doesn't want me to leave, which...which gives me hope.

Facing my brother again, I tell him I have money. I'm good for longer than he can possibly know, and I add that I'll stay hidden if that makes him feel better—if there's still danger or whatever—but I'm not going home.

"Mom and Dad can see me right here when they get back from wherever they are," I finish.

I doubt it's often that Dominic is speechless, but he definitely is now.

Francis clears his throat. "She can always stay with me—just until Junior gets back."

That's not what I want, but I'll take it. If something big really is going down, I'll thank them for any protection, but after that...? I wanna be far, far away. Removed from it all.

"Uh." Dominic scratches his head, then points to the door. "I gotta call Anthony and Dad." He steps forward and pauses by me, tilting his head and frowning. "You serious, sis?"
"Yes."

He studies me for a beat, and when he leaves, I excuse myself to Francis and drag Matt back to the bedroom.

He sits down on the bed, looking kinda weary and confused. The latter is evidently the running theme.

Dragging a hand over his head, he releases a breath and glances down at the bed. "So...everything last night...that was, what, nothing?"

I shake my head quickly and join him, crawling up on his lap. "Come with me." I palm his cheeks and plead with my eyes. "I know this has to sound crazy—fucking nuts—but come with me."

His expression doesn’t give anything away. "You want me to be your sidekick on your grand adventure?" Frustration seeps into his voice. "What—I don’t fucking get it, Julia."

So I do my best to explain it. I tell him what a fucking amazing family I have and how much I love them, but that I can't turn around without someone watching over me. I tell him that while I can be spoiled and bratty, I don’t wanna be that way. I tell him I wanna live on my own—with Matt—and grow up, see the world, and be in charge of my own life.

"I've traveled to the most exclusive places with my family, but it's not the same," I go on. "When I return to Vegas, I wanna know what it's like to live day-to-day, work for pocket change, be in places where my name doesn’t give me shit, and know how uncomfortable beds can be at hostels."

Last year, a couple of my friends from high school backpacked across Europe.

I should've gone with them.
Instead I stayed at home, babysat, and then listened to my friends' stories when they came home.

Matt has to understand that. Coming from the family he comes from, I can bet my life on him having a big, fat trust fund, yet he wanted to be a police officer. They don't exactly cash in like kings.

"I know my family has the best intentions for me, but..." I trail off and look down between us, my hands falling down to rest on his toned stomach.

This is something I need, but with everything that happened between me and Matt... God, I'm already so hooked on him that I know I won't leave if he can't come with me. Which might be stupid considering how little we really know each other, but I can't help it.

"If you're worried about your job—"

"Hey." He touches my cheek, making me look him in the eye. "You're not the only one who can drop a last name." His mouth quirks up. "I can get my job back." *Fuck me.* He's gotta be able to see the hope in my eyes. "I see where you're coming from, baby. I understand it all too fucking well."

His words make me think—about his own family. The politics, the fancy lifestyle. Did he break free from that in some way?

"I'm not gonna bore you with my life story," he chuckles quietly. "Let's just say my pops had big plans for me."

"I wanna hear it, though," I murmur. "I wanna know everything."

He kisses me on the nose. "I'll give you every detail if that's what you want." Another kiss. "You really want me to come with you?"

"More than anything."
"All right. Count me in." He smiles and wraps his arms around me. "But you gotta let me talk to your parents first. Not to ask for permission about the traveling or anything." He's quick to clarify. "It's about respect. They deserve to hear from me—my intentions."

I breathe out in relief and throw my arms around him. "Thank you. Thank you so much—" I swallow my emotions. "I'll make sure Daddy doesn't kill you."

Matt lets out a breathy laugh and kisses my hair. "I appreciate that."

~oOo~

Matt and I are on the couch with Francis when Dominic returns.

It's like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders, and now I'm itching to prepare for our trip. Luckily, we have a whole week here in LA for that, and then I'll take a couple days to smooth things over with my family before we set off.

Both Matt and Francis have convinced me to get back to Vegas when my week here is over, which I'm not thrilled about, but they're right. People deserve to hear from me in person—mainly AJ and Gemma, whom I have work responsibilities with—and we gotta get our passports, anyway.

"How did it go?" I look to my brother and slide off Matt's lap, setting next to him instead.

Dominic yawns and plops down on the coffee table. "Dad's pissed, but I'm not sure he believes you're really leaving." I'm not surprised about that. "He and Mom are meeting up here in LA in a week—after her cruise—but he's adamant about seeing you at home—"

"That's okay," I say quickly. "Matt and I are sticking around here—Francis is letting us stay with him—and then we'll come home to pack."
Dee smiles tiredly. "Have we been that overbearing?"

I hesitate for a second before going with the truth. "Yeah, but I know youse just wanna protect me. I also know I haven't made shit easy for you. But..." I shrug, at a loss.

He nods and grins ruefully. "Well, Elisa's on your side. She's staying at Anthony’s house—"

"Where's Joseph?" I frown, hoping nothing's wrong between him and Elisa.

"Outta town," Dominic replies and leaves it at that. Which has to mean work. Maybe Joseph's with Dad. "Anyway, Elisa was there when I called Anthony, and she nearly ripped us new ones for not being supportive of you—qualche cazzata del genere."

"Some shit like that," I translate, mocking. But it feels hella good to have Elisa's understanding. "How would you feel if you had a whole family to answer to, huh? Like everything you do, you'd hafta explain yourself—"

"I'm a man." Dominic points to himself. "That’s the difference. It's our job to make sure youse're safe."

God, they're so fucking frustrating!

"I'm not gonna argue wit'chu." I smile tightly. "But count your fucking blessings Dani loves you and married your sexist ass."

Matt clears his throat. "You know, I'm not much different, baby."

Dominic and Francis laugh.

I do not, 'cause I don’t buy it. Matt’s different.

I narrow my eyes at him. "What year is it?"
His brows rise. "2002."

See? He's different. And to prove it, I point to my brother. "What year is it?"

Dominic rolls his eyes but grins. "I know why you're asking, and I'll fucking humor you. It's 1953. But in my defense, Anthony's worse than me. Dani would cut off my balls if I bossed her around too much."

Very true. "That's how we grew up," I tell Matt. "It's the fifties in Mom and Dad's house, and my brothers are pretty much the same. Maybe it's the seventies in Elisa and Joseph's house. Maybe."

Matt chuckles and kisses the side of my head. "I can get you to the eighties, whatever that would entail."

I'm good with the eighties. It's practically the future compared to my parents' house.

"Before you take her any\textit{where}..." Dominic gives Matt a pointed look, irritated.

"Didn't I already fuckin' tell you that?" Matt responds impatiently. "Chill, for chrissakes."

"Yo, lemme tell you how it's gonna work," Dominic laughs humorlessly and stands up.

"Sit the fuck down." I point.

To my surprise, he actually does. "That's not how it works," he mutters.

I grin and blow him a kiss.

"Welcome to the family, Moretti," Francis says with a smile. "They drive you crazy—"
"AY!" Dominic and I shout.

Francis nods and points between me and Dee. "See? One second, they're at each other. But they'll gang up on you just as fast."

"What the fuck're you talking about?" Dee asks, speaking with his hands. "You talk as if you're not an honorary Maisano yourself."

"Yeah, you better watch your mouth, son." I jut out my chin at Francis. "And just so you know, you're breaking Mom's heart by not visiting more often."

"Exactly." Dominic agrees.

Francis looks up at the ceiling and sighs. "Why did I open my fuckin' mouth?"

Feeling Matt's shoulders shaking, I look at him to see he's tryin'a hold back laughter.

I smile carefully, suddenly nervous. "Still wanna take a chance on this madness?"

The amusement fades slightly. "More than ever." He cups my cheek and pecks me softly. "I'm all in."

_Mannaggia_, I'mma fall in love with him so fast, aren't I?
May 2002

(3 year after Grand Finale, some 2 years and 4 months after the Grand Finale epilogue, 2 years after Alec's future take, and just a few days after Julia's future take.)

Francis's POV.

I open the door, but instead of finding Dominic and Anthony with their families, it's just the two of them with their sons. TJ and DJ barge in like they've been here a thousand times instead of just once, shouting a "Hi, Unca Frankie!" on the way, and Nino sticks close to Dee.
"Thank fuck youse're finally here," I say.

Maybe now Julia and Matt can take a break from fucking apart the guest room.

Five days. That’s how long it's been since all that shit went down with the spic gangsters outside that nightclub. Five days of clearing the streets of Vasquez's people with Matt and a few others, five nights of involuntarily listening to Matt and Julia.

"Wassup, bro?" Dee gives me a man-hug before Anthony and I bump fists. "Joey and Elisa here yet?"

I shake my head no. "Where are your girls?" They're all supposed to be here. Junior still doesn’t believe Julia's actually leaving for Europe in a couple days, and Bella don’t know about it, but, regardless, Junior said Vegas is too hot right now. We're not sure about all the Vasquez motherfuckers, so in case some are still out there—not counting the big man himself, 'cause he's definitely alive—Vegas is off-limits.

Anyway, Junior's playing along. He's humoring Julia, so he told her if she wants some good-bye party, it can't be at home, hence having all come here to LA. When Junior and Bella get back the day after tomorrow, it'll be interesting to see his reaction to the fact that she is leaving. As far as I know, Elisa's bringing Julia's and Matt's passports and whatever belongings they requested. They've already taken care of all that visa crap.

"My wife's having her baby shower at the hotel in a few hours. They're preparing—calling for food and shit," Anthony replies, shrugging outta his suit jacket. "Where's that little sister of ours?"

I jerk a thumb over my shoulder. "Guest room."

Dee cringes, probably guessing what's going down.
Anthony shakes his head, lookin’ more than a little ticked off. He hasn’t seen her since Vegas, so I know it’s gonna be a while before he calms down. He doesn’t really believe she's going, either.

"Isn't Bella gonna be mad if she misses the baby shower?" I ask.

"Sto cercando di non pensarci." Anthony says he's trying not to think about it and winces. "In our defense, Gabby had one planned ages ago, but Mom asked to postpone. Then all this shit happened, and Gabby's gonna pop any day. Elisa suggested tonight for the shower, so..." He chuckles humorlessly, "I'm pretty sure she did that, knowing Mom's gonna unleash a world of pain on me."

I laugh, and we head to the kitchen. "Am I gonna host a Maisano Sibling War hea'?" God knows Elisa's on Julia's side. I think even my brother’s on Julia's side, and that’s not because of Elisa. When I talked to Joseph on the phone a couple days ago, he was blunt about it. Said Julia needed to get out before she could come back voluntarily and settle down.

"It's possible. I'm pretty chill now, but..." Dominic throws Anthony a look, Anthony who isn’t chill about Julia's move. Or her shacking up with Moretti. "Dad doesn’t know Moretti's with her yet, so tomorrow will be fun—" He cuts himself off when Nino tugs on his shirt, and Dee bends down to listen to his kid. "What, tesoro—oh. A'ight, I'll show you." When he passes me, he mouths "bathroom," then disappears down the hall with Nino.

I slide my gaze back to Anthony as he opens a beer. "I thought Nino was getting less shy," I say, keeping my voice low. "Last time I visited, he wasn’t this quiet." Far from it, actually. Alec and Gemma's son, Michael, who's Nino's age, has apparently helped a lot.

"It's nothin' bad." Anthony sparks up a smoke and sits down on one of the stools around the kitchen island. He finds something to smile about, too.
"Couple'a days ago, he asked Dominic if he could call him Dad." Holy shit. That's kinda huge. "My brother's all for it—already sees Nino as his kid." Anthony shrugs. "Nino's just... Gabby says he's self-conscious about it or whatever, so he whispers a bit more."

I nod, understanding that. Being an adult doesn't make that shit go away, either. When I left Vegas two years ago, Bella hugged the shit outta me, cursed me for leaving, and said there was no difference—in her opinion—between me and her kids. Godson or son—don't matter to her. And fuck, I was so humbled. Not to mention all awkward about it. I didn't know how to react.

"What about Dani, though?" I ask. She's a parent to Nino just like Dominic is, but she's also Nino's sister.

Anthony snorts a laugh. "Yo, that was a family dinner you missed. Was a while ago, but anyway. Remember when Mom, Elisa, and Gabby came out here to see you?" I nod, recalling how quickly my fridge and freezer had filled up. "Right. So Dad got a cold, and as a joke he called her Mama Daniela 'cause she was mothering him—bringing over soup and stuff. Then a bunch of us came over for dinner, and everyone sorta called her Mama Dani. The broad was fuckin' adorable—" Anthony cracks up, speaking with his hands "—she wanted to curse us all out, but she didn't dare." Yeah, for some reason she sorta fears Junior. Valid fear for most people, but Dani's family. She's got nothin'a fear in that department. "So anyway, Nino played along, too." He's down to chuckles, looking fond of the kid. "But he continued with it—still calls her Mama Dani."

I'm guessing it's not as a joke for him, though. I can imagine doing something like that when I was his age—had I gotten the chance. But with Gianna? Fuck that. Mannaggia, she's always hated me, and had it not been for the fact that she thinks the world of my brother, I'm sure she woulda left Vegas the minute my father was killed at Mandalay Bay.
"Um, hi?" I hear Julia say behind me. She walks farther into the kitchen, though not as far as going to Anthony's side of the island. "I didn't hear the doorbell."

That's because I answered the door after the first knock. Hell, I even went out earlier and bought kid-appropriate snacks and stuff just to have something to do away from my condo.

"Maybe because you was busy fucking Matt?" I ask casually.

Anthony shoots me a glare.

Julia huffs. "What the fuck. We were sorting through the maps we've bought and organizing our tickets."

I shrug while Anthony rolls his eyes and says, "Fuckin' quit it already, piccolina. Youse're not goin'a Europe."

"Watch me," Julia grits out, and that's when Dominic and Nino return.

"Loving the tension." Dee smirks. He jerks his chin at Julia. "Where's Moretti?"

"He's getting ready to go out," Julia responds tightly. "He got a call from some friend who needed help stat."

That ends the sibling bullshit for now, and the guys and I exchange looks. Who the fuck needs help?

"Who's this friend?" Dominic asks impatiently. "One'a his or ours?"

"How should I know?" Julia throws up her arms. "You guys never tell me anything."
I purse my lips to hide my grin, and Anthony rolls his eyes again. Then he tells Dee to check in on Moretti to find out what's up, and Dominic leaves the kitchen.

"Look, Anthony." Julia takes a breath, frustrated. "I love you, and I don’t wanna leave things like this between us. I mean, this is you and me. We hardly ever fight—"

"You ain't goin' nowheres, capisce?" Anthony speaks in a low voice, anger simmering below the surface. He stabs a finger to the island top. "Your family is right here, and you want me to think it's okay to leave? Huh? It don’t work that way. Your place is in Vegas with all of us."

Not wanting to get more involved than I already am, I grab a beer for myself, juice boxes for TJ and DJ, and a soda for Nino, then murmur quietly to him about seeing what his brother and cousin are up to.

Nino nods and follows me into the living room.

Despite being only five, TJ has managed to work my technology and put on some kid channel. Both he and DJ are cheering for their favorite Power Rangers when Nino and I join them.

"Wheu's Daddy?" DJ asks. "Yay, juice!"

So easily diverted.

~oOo~

Only fifteen minutes later, my entire day has changed. What was once the beginning of an evening with my family—and probably a fight or two between the Maisano brothers and sisters—is now a...I don’t even know what to call it. But the one and only guy Moretti brought into this—with Junior's permission and approval—has run across two hustlers who might have a supplier linked to Vasquez.
Anthony states he hasn’t seen much action lately, so he tells a silently seething Dominic to get the kids and Julia and take them to the hotel they’re staying at. Then me, Moretti, and Anthony get in my car, and we drive toward East Compton.

"Dee's gonna fuck me over later," Anthony mutters, rolling down the passenger's side window to get a smoke. "Did’ju see the look he gave me?"

Was that so weird? I switch lanes and eye Moretti in the rearview, knowing very well Dee expected Matt to take the kids and Julia to the hotel instead. As an outsider—even more so than I am—Matt doesn’t have a lot to bring to the table. Then again, we might not know everything here. Junior knows what he's doing, and for some reason he thinks it's best to keep that from us.

I respect that of course, but there's something going on there. I wonder if it dates back to a couple years ago when Matt was having issues with his politician pops. He used to be the damn governor of Nevada, and whatever happened, it had to be bad. Otherwise Matt wouldn’t have sought out a mafia boss for help.

"So, Moretti..." Anthony flicks some ash out the window. "My brother tells me you think you're serious about our baby sister." He smiles darkly to himself, facing forward. "Ain't that cute?"

I gotta hand it to Matt, he hasn't cracked once. Not a single time. These past few days have been full of shit that could give him life in prison, but he hasn’t batted a goddamn eyelash. Nor has he failed to deliver. And to prove himself, he's taken on the killings of Vasquez's spics instead of letting me or someone else do it.
"Was there a real question there or was it all rhetorical?" Matt responds. "You and Dominic can threaten and attempt to scare me all you want, but we both know only one man can pull the trigger on me."

*Junior.*

Anthony grins back at Matt. "I'm looking forward to that."

I sigh.

~oOo~

We roll up at this rundown brick building behind a basketball court, and Moretti takes the lead to show us the apartment his buddy's at. Who also happens to be a cop, but I think he quit or something. All I know is this Cohen guy—fuckin' Jew—has helped with the cleaning several times this week. The fucker doesn't leave a goddamn trace behind; he may even be more methodical and thorough than Alec and Junior themselves. Matt said he's OCD or some shit, but whatever, the kid gets the job done. And...what it boils down to is: Junior has approved it.

I haven't met Cohen yet, but Dominic and I had to circle back to one of the places we'd clipped someone, and Cohen had already been there. Cleaned everything in less than an hour. Spotless.

"Where's Cohen from?" I ask Matt. "Ain't a lotta Jews workin' on the force in Vegas."

Matt shakes his head no. "I was undercover with him in Florida recently. He had to bail—some shit went down—so Junior helped us."

*Interesting.*

I nod, and we pass a handful of Bloods hanging out near the door to the building.
"I thought this street belonged to Crips," I joke.

"Don’t matter," Anthony chuckles, "both red and blue look good on the ground."

They obviously don’t hear us, so we enter the building without trouble. Passing a broken elevator, we take the stairs to the fourth floor, and Matt stops when we get to the right apartment.

"I need to work out more." Anthony grimaces. "I thought fucking my wife and chasing the kids around the fuckin' house was enough... Cazzo."

I ain't telling him shit about his physique. He's ripped as fuck, but he'd take it the wrong way if it came from me. We're still close and all, but Anthony's arrogant enough to think if I make a comment or initiate a damn hug, it has to mean I wanna fuck him.

Fucking with him is the only thing I wanna do where he's concerned, though. So I say, "Don’t worry about it, ya fat fuck. Just more of you for Gabby to love—"

The last word has barely left me before Anthony takes a swing at me, but I dodge and come up laughing my ass off.

"Ti acchiappo dopo, stronzo." He half-grins and calls me an asshole, stating he's gonna get me back later.

Matt raps his knuckles on the door.

"Non dimenticare di riposarti prima." I shoot back with that he should rest up before, and then my phone buzzes in my pocket. I check it to see a message from Joseph.

I'm surrounded by screaming children and women who are either pregnant or getting drunk. You guys better show up soon.
I laugh and show it to Anthony, who lets out a guffaw.

Then Cohen opens the door a few inches, the chain lock still in place. Seeing it's Matt, he removes the chain and opens the door fully. And I get a look at Cohen for the first time, which feels like a mixture of a punch in the gut and a cold shower.

Ever since I lost Casey, nobody's caught my eye, and I've preferred it that way. Drugs and booze kept me sane the year following Case's murder, and it was ironically Dominic who yanked me out of it. But even without the coke, I've remained disconnected from certain feelings. Fuck it, I've been damn near asexual to the point where it's worried me. But this motherfucker...

For some reason, I've been picturing a lanky kid. Maybe Cohen's lean, but he's no kid. Probably my age—around twenty-five. Tall as me. But a fuckin' punk. Or rockabilly, with the hair a lot shorter on the sides. Messy, dark. A shitload of ink. Skintight t-shirt from whatever police academy he attended in Florida, and faded, well-worn jeans that are torn over his knees. A pen behind his ear, a recently healed cut across his right eyebrow, scraped-up knuckles, and his lips wrapped around the end of a red Fla-Vor-Ice popsicle.

I kinda wanna fuck him into next week.

I also despise him on sight. Almost as much as I despise my reaction to him.

He takes out the popsicle and jerks his chin at Matt. "What's up—come on in."

I'm the last one to enter, so I shut and lock the door behind me, then follow Anthony and Matt down a narrow entryway and into an open space, the combination of a kitchenette, dining area, and living room.
It's completely empty, aside from a ratty couch and a boom box on the floor. A few magazines and a newspaper are strewn by the couch too, along with a couple bags from McDonalds.

It's hot as fuck in here as well, so I shrug out of my hoodie and toss it onto the small kitchen counter. Fuck, it's gotta be triple digits.

"Yeah, sorry about that," Cohen says, scratching his bicep. "The AC's broken." For a beat, he looks self-conscious, but then his eyes flick away from me, and he shrugs. "Just like everything else in this shitty apartment. But there's ice, popsicles, and vodka in the freezer. And," he huffs a chuckle, "barely any hot water in the shower, which is a good thing for once." He slumps down on the couch next to a smirking Matt. "So you wanna see the hustlers?"

Anthony eyes the living room, then slides his gaze to Cohen. "That’s why we're here, obviously."

Cohen nods and points his Fla-Vor-Ice at the door near the barred window. "They're both in there. Room's empty, but I found pipes to cuff them to in the closet."

"Are only cuffs enough?" Matt frowns.

"No," Cohen replies. "I used rope and duct tape, too."

Matt nods and stands up, and Anthony takes out his piece—just in case.

"You stick around out hea'," he tells me. "You know I don’t trust Jews."

I snort a chuckle.

"Hey!" Cohen smirks and his middle finger comes up. "The only time I’d wander in a desert is if I get unlimited cheeseburgers."
Anthony smiles sinisterly. "That’s cute. Hope someone won't shoot that fuckin' finga off ya."

Cohen doesn’t say anything else, just stares casually until Anthony and Matt have gone into that other room and closed the door.

"You got a brass pair to give a Maisano attitude," I note, walking over to sit on the couch. "Could be the last thing you ever do."

"Eh." He shrugs and throws the plastic wrapper from his popsicle on the floor. *So much for being OCD other than when he's cleaning crime scenes.* "My days are already numbered."

Resting my elbows on my knees, I glance back at him and light up a cigarette. "You got someone after you?" I look away from where his shirt is riding up, exposing just a sliver of his toned abs.

"Yeah, my nana." He widens his eyes, and I nearly choke on some smoke. What the fuck? "She's already putting up with so much. My not making it to Shabbat three times in a row will be the last nail in my coffin."

Good God. I roll my eyes and flick some ashes into an empty soda can. "I'm sure she'll survive."

Fuckin' idiot.

"Of course she will," he says. "It’s me I’m worried about. She's survived my tattoos, my addiction to McDonalds, *and* me being gay." I freeze at that, my blood running cold. Not that Cohen notices; he yammers on while I face forward and try to breathe. "When I had to leave Florida in the middle of the night and drag her with me, she took it with grace. But this...? No. Missing Shabbat is not okay."

I swallow dryly and stub out the smoke. "You can stop talking now."
I gotta get outta here.

"What—oh, jeez." He snorts. "Is it the gay thing? I know it bothers ignorant people, even in this day and age, but relax. It doesn’t catch."

That pisses me off. "I know it doesn’t fucking catch," I growl, glaring back at him.

He sucks his teeth. "So touchy." Then he jerks his chin. "Can I bum a smoke?"

_Maddonn’,_ this guy…

Throwing him the pack, I stand up and begin to pace instead. Anthony and Moretti better be fucking done soon, ’cause I’m itching to get the _fuck_ outta Compton.

"What're you even doin' in this 'hood?" I ask irritably. Takes fuckin' forever to get back to LA.

He sparks up his smoke and shrugs. "I gotta lay low for a while, and I could only afford a nice place for my nana. Since I don’t want her in any crossfire, I added some distance between us, too. Just a precaution. We're safe."

I stop pacing to stare at him, and I grit my teeth, hating that I'm curious. "What the hell did you really do in Florida?"

To be honest, I wasn’t expecting an answer, but Cohen seems to have a thing for talking.

"I got busted when Matt and I were undercover. He managed to keep his back clear, but I had to go."

A'ight. And I’m guessing he didn’t trust the force to keep him safe. At least I wouldn’t.
I eye him skeptically though, a new thought having popped up. "What kind of cop goes from catching criminals to being one?"

He slides me an easy smile. "Who says I was ever a cop?"

What the fuck. "Matt," I reply, beyond irritated. "And going undercover with one sort of implies it, not to mention your academy shirt."

He wets his bottom lip, and I avert my eyes before he can catch me. *Fuck me.* "Yeah, well."

And that’s it. He goes from being Chatty Cathy to a damn mute.

Done with this shit, I walk over to the door and lean in, hoping to hear something. But other than low murmurs from Anthony and the occasional whimper and cry from one of the hustlers, I got nada. Hopefully this won’t take long, though.

*Shouldn’t* take long. Just fucking clip them already. I'm sure Cohen can do the cleaning afterwards, and then we’re done.

"Can I ask you something?" he asks.

My jaw clenches, and I keep my eyes on the door. "I'd rather you didn’t."

"Friendly," he chuckles. "So. Italian mobster—"

"Half-German, actually," I say just to fuck with him. It's true, but I doubt it has anything to do with wherever he's going with this.

"Whatever." It's the first time I hear frustration in his voice. "Italian enough. Presumably Catholic. Wiseguy. And you don’t think homosexuality is a disease you can catch?"

I ain't touching that one.
"A bit stereotypical, dontcha think?" I dodge, which I admit was lame. I grew up around stereotypes and believe in several. Blaming Cohen for being stereotypical couldn't be more ironic.

When he hasn't responded in a while, I turn around to see him watching me. There's a half-smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, and fuck me if I can read his expression.

I cock a brow. "Motherfucker, stare a bit longer and I'll start charging."

He grins at that and slowly shakes his head. "You're funny... What's your name?"

"Frankie." I fold my arms across my chest. "Frankie Collucci."

"Oh?" That seems to have his interest. "Relation to Felix or Joseph?"

It's been a while since my name made the papers, mostly 'cause a Maisano is boss now, but I suppose it's still known enough for regular people to remember the former Don of the organization. And if Cohen is mixed up with whatever's going on between Junior and Matt, I'm sure Cohen's met my brother.

"What's it to you?" I narrow my eyes.

"Unclench." He rolls his eyes and leaves the couch, taking a couple steps closer. "I'm just curious. I figured if you're rolling with Anthony Maisano, you're either a top dog yourself, or...the goon doing his dirty work."

"Go fuck yourself," I tell him, getting heated. "And trust, my rank don't matter where you're concerned."

Push me, you son of a bitch. Give me one reason, and I'll break your neck.

Thankfully, he backs off. He shows his palms and sits down again.
Don’t fucking ask me why he pisses me off this much. It doesn’t make sense to me. Sure, I got this fucking temper, but it's usually nothing compared to Dominic's.

Yet, this Cohen...

*You fucking know why, Collucci.*

I sigh internally and close my eyes, my chin dropping to my chest.

I'm overreacting, I know that. It's just not easy. Losing Casey was one thing—nearly impossible to deal with—but to physically experience the feelings fading over time is a whole other shitshow. And the fact that I never felt any attraction to anyone else helped a lot while I was falling out of love with a dead man. The memory of him is still a treasure I'll guard forever, and now—when I think about Case—there isn't that biting pain from grief and love anymore.

Still, it nearly bowled me over to see Cohen. Or rather, being attracted to him. That reaction... It was different. I knew Casey from school; we sorta morphed into more. It was slow. We were constantly watching our backs. Friendship came first. It was comfortable with him. Easy to love. But Cohen? *Mamma mia,* I wanna kick his face in as much as I wanna fuck him.

The timing couldn’t be worse, though.

Or more right?

Fuck.

I blow out a breath and open my eyes again, having cooled off a bit. And this time I don’t find Cohen staring at me. Instead he's grabbing another popsicle from the freezer, and I notice he doesn’t seem casual anymore, either. More...fidgety. Out of place.
Maybe I owe him an apology.

"Look," I say, clearing my throat. "I didn’t mean to get all cunty—"

Cohen’s surprised gaze meets mine just as the door opens and Anthony reappears with Moretti. Judging by the bloodied napkin Anthony's wiping across his knuckles, he’s gotten some of the action he said he's been missing. His grin confirms it.

"One of them stopped breathing," he says. "Like magic. The other one’s got seven fake IDs on him, all of them the same first name, but one of the last names is Vasquez."

"The reason I called Matt about it," Cohen fills in with a nod. "You think he’s related to Vasquez from the nightclub?"

"We don’t know." Anthony looks annoyed by it. "Thing is, we can't risk it. If he's a relative, we might be able to use him."

"You need Junior for that," I conclude quietly.

It was only yesterday I was clued in about Junior's whereabouts—same with Joseph and Alec, though the latter two have been in Vegas, too. But some's been saying they've been in Mexico, some in LA, some in Colombia…but it turns out they've been in New York. And as far as I know now, only the Maisano kids—except for Julia—and I are aware of the truth.

"And he's not returning until the day after tomorrow." Matt smirks wryly. "So who's on babysitting duty?"

Anthony shoots him a snide look. "Well, you’ve got my sister on your babysitting resume, so you're the expert."
Matt nods, not letting Anthony get to him. "Or...you know, maybe you wanna be on good terms with Julia before we leave, and maybe you need me to keep her calm."

Nice.

Moretti just might make it in this crazy family. He's got a bargaining chip right there—to be Julia's personal Xanax.

At the same time, this ain't Anthony's first rodeo.

"Who the fuck do you think handled her for twenty years before you came along?" he retorts, then shakes his head. "Cohen, you take care of the body. Moretti, you bring Mr. Split Personality and all his IDs to the safehouse in LA. Frankie, you're with me."

I nod, not sure why there's a sense of disappointment in me, and glance over to Cohen, who's watching me. My gut clenches in response, as if I'm nervous.

*I don't fucking do nervous.*

"Let's go. I have a baby shower to crash." Anthony heads for the door, and Matt returns to the bedroom for our hostage.

Cohen parts his lips, hesitant to speak, and in the end he keeps quiet.

*Cazzo.*

He turns around and grabs my hoodie, which I probably shouldn't forget and leave behind. What's wrong with me?

"Here you go." He hands it to me before shoving his hands down the pockets of his jeans. "It's Adam, by the way."

I tilt my head.
He smiles crookedly. "My name, jackass."

"A'ight." I nod stiffly and take the coward's way out: the front-fuckin'-door. "See ya," I mutter, closing the door after me. Running down the stairs to catch up with Anthony, I groan internally and curse myself. I mean, there was an opening there, right? I don’t think I'm reading too much into things if I say I could've had a shot there.

I kinda want a shot.

I think.

I have no clue how to get that shot, but...

Being out of the closet is a tricky fucking thing. I'm supposed to be all open about it, but I'm not. I never will be. I'm a private guy, and while I want what everyone else wants, there's always gonna be a difference between me and the rest of my family.

~oOo~

When we get back to my place, Anthony and I head up the elevator, and he wonders why the fuck I don’t wanna come with him to the hotel where the rest are.

I shrug and watch the numbers light up as we pass each floor. "I'll hang out hea'—wait to see if Moretti needs help."

I can practically sense his frown.

"You're all glum and shit. The plan was to make sure Julia's not leaving the country, and now you're bailing. Che razza di fratello che sei." He scoffs and calls me out on being a shitty brother.

But a brother, nonetheless.
I grin at that, appreciating every reminder of who my family is. But no, I can't say I feel like joining that spectacle today. Anyone with a brain knows Julia and Matt are leaving. Elisa's gonna be smug, and Dominic and Anthony are gonna get bitchy.

Add a baby shower and all those screaming kids Joseph mentioned in his text message in that mix...?

_Not enough alcohol in this world, man._

"I'll be there for lunch tomorrow," I compromise.

He grimaces. "Brunch. Gabby and Elisa made reservations for ten thirty."

"Okay. I'll be there." We exit the elevator, and I stick a hand down the front pocket of my hoodie to get my keys. What the...? The keys are there, but I coulda sworn I had my phone in there, too. "Unless Gabby pops," I say absently, thinking back on where I could've put my phone. "I think I got a hundred on tomorrow."

"Joseph wanted to put down money for tomorrow," he chuckles. "He got all pissy when I said you'd beat him to it."

Maybe he's got insider information from Gabby. Well, through Elisa.

The women are sticking together, saying it's not funny to bet on pregnancies, but they sure are good at helping their husbands bring home the money.

This time, we're betting on gender, too. Anthony's hoping for a boy, and then he'll want a girl in a couple years. That way, he'll be following the exact same order he and his siblings came. Boy, girl, boy, girl.

We'll see. I think it's gonna be another girl.

"You think Julia's next?" I fuck with him.
He shoves me away, and I crack up.

"Fuck that," he spits out. "She's just a baby." She's older than Anthony was when he had TJ, for fuck's sake. "Nah, it'll be Dominic and Dani."

No way. I honestly think those two are done. They ended up with four kids in the span of a goddamn year. They're both loving parenthood, but they're set. Dee has sorta taken Nino under his wing, like Dani's done with Lia, and then there's the twins. They can thank God for having money to spend on a full-time housekeeper. That old lady's a godsend; otherwise, I'm sure Dominic woulda been worse to deal with. Maisano temper and all.

"Joey and Elisa, maybe...but not Dominic," I say, unlocking my door. Still don't know where my fucking phone is. I know I brought it with me, and I know I had it when—wait... I tucked the phone into my hoodie, then tossed it on the counter in Cohen's kitchen. Then it was Cohen who handed it back to me. "That motherfucker!" I slam a fist into the wall.


"That fucking Cohen," I growl. "He stole my phone!"

That makes Anthony's eyebrows shoot up.

There's no goddamn way the phone fell out. The Jew musta' taken it. I'm fucking sure of it.

"Lemme borrow your phone." I didn't mean to snap at Anthony, or maybe I did, 'cause he looks like he's about to go into hysterics with laughter. "Laugh it up, fucker."

He does, and hands me his cell.

I punch in my own number and shove open my door, waiting for Cohen to answer.
"Golden," Anthony cackles. "Why would he even—" He cracks up too much to talk but picks back up again soon enough. Too soon. Asshole. "Can't wait to see what'chu do with'im."

*Do with him?*

Cohen finally answers. "*Took you long enough.*"


A warm chuckle comes from his end, and I grit my teeth so hard it's a surprise they don't crack.

Throwing my keys on the side table in the hallway, I head to the kitchen to grab a beer. "Yo, if you know what's good for you, you'll get your sticky fucking fingers and my phone ova' hea'. Right now—I ain't playin'."

Anthony grabs a beer too, and keeps chuckling.

I flip him off.

"*Give me the address.*" Cohen's unfazed. "*And, Frankie? I only took it because I wanted to talk to you. Without the others there.*"

"Shit," I mumble, fumbling with the phone. *Mannaggia,* I almost drop it, causing Anthony to give me a strange look. Still too damn amused for my liking, but whatever. Bigger concerns right now, such as Cohen wanting to talk to me alone. *Fuck. Me.* "Uh..." My ears feel warm.

*Talk about what?*
May 2002

(3 year after Grand Finale, some 2 years and 4 months after the Grand Finale epilogue, 2 years after Alec's future take, and just a few days after Julia’s future take.)

Part II.

Francis's POV.

The reason Anthony came back with me was because he'd forgotten his suit jacket here earlier, so once he's grabbed that and called for someone to pick him up, it's just me.

He thinks I'm gonna beat the crap outta Cohen for stealing my shit.

I should.

Normally, I would.
I sit for a while, just mulling over Cohen's words and behavior. Like I'm some goddamn chick—overanalyzing and whatnot. Which annoys me, so I leave the living room and tidy up a bit in the kitchen, then my bedroom, then back to the living room, and...what the fuck am I doing?

"Screw it." Walking over to the liquor cabinet my brother bought and stocked for my twenty-fifth birthday, I pour myself two shots of something that should be cold. The vodka burns its way down my throat, and I grimace as I take it to the kitchen and stuff it in my freezer. Who knows, I might need more soon—

The buzzer sounds, and I kinda wanna throw up.

This isn't gonna fly with me. I'll just get my damn phone, and that’s it.

I can do that. Get the phone, kick him out.

With a nod to myself, I reach the hallway and look through the peephole to see it's him. And a bag from McDonald's. Christ.

I'm not gonna kick him out, am I?

If he's here because "talking in private" actually means screwing each others' brains out, I'll probably be fine with that.

I open the door and find Cohen's easy expression, though behind that casual smirk, I know I can see some apprehension, too.

Good.

"Hey." He holds out the phone and takes a step forward.

Blocking half the entrance, I lean against the door and accept the phone.
"All this hassle... Must be something really important you wanna talk to me about."
He swallows and takes another step. "I have my hopes, I won't lie."

"No," I murmur, eyeing my phone. "Just steal."

"I'm not sorry." A final step, and then we're only a foot or two apart. "Can I come in?"

I look to him, studying. This isn't a fucking social call; that much is clear now. And I can't exactly deny that I wanna see where this goes, so I nod with a dip of my chin and move back a few inches.

As he passes, I tilt my head in his direction and inhale slowly, deeply, getting a whiff of his aftershave. God. I groan internally.

I'm guessing he showered right after getting rid of the body with Matt, then just waited for me to call.

"Is it all right if I just leave this in the fridge?" he asks, referring to his McDonald's bag.

"Sure." I point toward the kitchen, and he walks first. And yeah, I check him out—definitely that ass—but also how he takes in my place. He tries to be discreet, maybe not show his curiosity? Fuck if I know.

"I miss having air conditioning," he mutters. "Hell—this place..." He scans the kitchen. The counters, the appliances, everything. "I'm guessing you're a top dog like Anthony." He throws a wry little smirk over his shoulder then opens the fridge to stuff his food inside.

I don’t reply right away, wanting to get a better read on him. He's inquisitive, but I can't tell if it's only curiosity or something else. He's wordy as fuck and appears to have no qualms sharing details about his life, but I don’t know how far that goes. Would he sing like a goddamn canary about others, or is he loyal and can keep a secret? He's no cop—I think—but he went to a police academy and later on worked with Matt.
He's a cleaner—makes bodies disappear as good as the desert outside'a Vegas.

Cleaners don’t cash in like kings unless they ice fuckers too, but affording AC doesn’t take much, for chrissakes. Though, he did mention something about putting his grandmother in a nice place.

"I do all right," I answer eventually, leaning against the doorway leading to the living room. "I'm a good earner, but no, I'm no top dog." It's not a secret who I am, so he might as well know. "My Uncle Jun gave me this place." I twirl a finger. "His wife decorated."

"Jun..." Cohen's brows rise. "Junior Maisano's your uncle?"

I lift one shoulder. "He and my pops were second cousins. He's my godfather."

That makes him narrow his eyes. "So you are related to Joseph and Felix."

"Never said I wasn't," I remind him. Then I incline my head. "Joseph's my older brother. Felix was my dad." Which...I'd rather not think about. He stopped being my pops the day he ordered the hit on Casey.

"Jeesh." Cohen comes closer and hops up to sit on the kitchen island. "I can't imagine being the son to a mafia boss. Or former, whatever."

"Alleged." I smile.

I don't fall into traps about who I'm connected to. I ain't stupid.

"Right," he chuckles. "I get it. I'm not gonna say you can trust me, either—" I cock a brow and straighten, and he's quick to clarify. "I mean you can, but I get it'd be futile to tell you."

Oh. Well, yeah. I don't trust anyone outside my family who tells me to trust them. It usually means I shouldn't.
"Always on edge, huh?" He flashes a small grin, not looking entirely comfortable. "Maybe I shouldn't have come."

Fuck that. He's given enough—it's time I give something back.

"Or maybe you should've," I tell him. "Come on—" I ignore his look of surprise and, God willing, if I'm right, hope. "Let's go into the living room."

"Okay."

He follows me.

I sit down on the couch and lean back, pulling up one leg to rest a foot on my knee. Hopefully, it looks like I'm relaxed, anyway.

"There's something I gotta know," I say, watching as he mirrors my position on the other side of the couch. "I'm not gonna ask how you and Matt are involved with Junior, but this whole cop thing..."

"I quit before I could really start," he answers. "I graduated from the academy, but it was never really for me. I applied because my dad is on the force." Huh. I thought his parents were dead or something. "The gig with Matt was a fluke. I stumbled on to something and got involved. It was Matt's case. Sort of."

"Sort of?"

He grins. "That's where Junior comes in. I won't talk about that—the little I know."

I'm glad, actually. Means he might be trustworthy.

"I respect that. But how does one stumble on to a case?"
He snorts a laugh. "One is drunk and tries to take a piss in an alley where an undercover cop is in the middle of a drug deal." He sobers a little, enough for me to not crack up at the image of his drunk ass walking in on a drug deal. "They were gonna kill me, but Matt rolled his eyes, told the other two to chill, and said I was with him." With the thought of a bullet hole between Cohen's eyes, there's suddenly nothing to laugh at anymore. The mental picture upsets me—maybe more than it should. "Afterward, Matt told me to get outta Miami for a while, but the guy had just saved my life. I wanted to repay him, and my computer-hacking skills came in handy when he was muttering about dead ends. Something about tracking a money transfer. I offered my help, and that was that. I became his unofficial partner—until I got busted a few months later."

Which brought Cohen to the West Coast with his grandmother.

I nod slowly in response, processing the hacking thing. Combined with his sticky fingers and ability to erase a crime scene like a pro, I guess it's safe to agree being a cop ain't for him.

Miami's full of free agents—hustlers, con artists, and smugglers working on their own, looking for the next big gig. If they're good enough, they invest in property, have offshore bank accounts, roll in millions, and sleep with their contact books under their pillows. But at the same time, those free agents are disposable. Once they know enough, have too many connections, there's gonna be one boss who says it's too much—time to off the freelancer for having too much information.

Wanting to test Cohen, I ask, "How thick is your little black book?"

A slow smile takes over, but he says nothing.

It's enough, though. Definitely a free agent. I'm guessing he has plenty of connections in that book, too. Whether it's a real address book or he keeps it all in his head...he's too sure about what he's doing to be a rookie.
"Be careful on the West Coast," I advise. "It's not a playground like down in Florida."

Here, his competition is more organized. Mexican cartels, gangs, my family's borgata, not to mention other outfits doing work for East Coast Families.

"Your brother's already warned me," he replies with a smirk. "Although, he wasn’t as friendly."

No doubt. Joseph didn’t get to where he is by being friendly. He likely told Cohen to mind his fucking neck and stay outta Maisano affairs.

"Doesn’t matter, though," Cohen continues. "Starting over is too much work, so it might be time for me to go legit."

"Unless you find an affiliation," I say, then kinda regret it. I have no business inviting him to join or nothin'. That’s not how it works. But...I wouldn’t mind if he stuck around LA. "Have you moved here permanently, by the way?" I had to ask. "Or are youse planning on returning to Florida?"

"Nah, I’m done there. Not sure about LA, though." His gaze goes from my DVD collection to me. "It depends on whether or not I gotta go into hiding for stealing this one wiseguy's cell phone."

I stifle a grin and keep my face composed. "Valid concern." My only slip is when I can't help but give him a once-over, because fuck, he's gotta be the hottest guy I've ever met. And the thing is, what I've seen of his personality only makes him sexier.

Being curious about what makes a man tick has only happened to me once before.
"Heh." Cohen swallows and shifts in his seat. *Green*. His eyes are green—just fucking noticed—and they darken. "You, uh...you think I could make up for it?"

*God, yes.*

I hope he's playing, though. That he doesn't really think he has to make it up to me. Now that I know why he stole it, it's...fucking adorable. Flattering and funny, too.

"Yeah." I adjust my cock through my jeans, something he definitely sees, and pull up my leg so I'm facing the length of the couch. "You could come here."

"Fuck," he whispers. Rising from his position, he moves closer until he's kneeling on the couch between my legs. In response, I slide down in a half-sitting position and hook a finger into one of the belt loops in his jeans. *Closer*. I want him so much closer.

I get my way with a single tug, and then I have him on top of me. He curses again on an exhale before I cup the back of his neck and kiss him. He groans quietly and parts his lips, to which I follow suit and deepen the kiss. I taste him—*what the... Strawberry*?—and my body fucking buzzes with lust. It's been ages since I last felt the full weight of a man on me, and feeling it now makes me realize how much I've missed it.

My hands roam his sides and slide underneath his t-shirt. I feel his shudder almost as much as I feel his hard dick pressed against mine.

"Why do you taste like strawberry?" I nip at his bottom lip.

He hisses and digs his fingers into my side. "Had a milkshake on the way over." Of-fucking-course he did. "Can we lose some clothes now? I wanna see you."
Ditto.

Instead of using words, I tug on his shirt, and he breaks the kiss to pull it over his head. Fuck me, he's...beautiful. My mouth goes dry, and I stare unabashedly.

Ink everywhere, intricate and elaborate designs, yet my eyes land on three simple lines within a shadowed heart on his chest.

Sitting up, I lean forward and ghost my palms over his defined torso. "What're these for?" I brush a thumb over the ink and drop an openmouthed kiss between two abs.

He lets out a low laugh, followed by a moan as I slide a hand down his thigh, close to his cock. "It's a joke, I guess." He grins down at me and wets his lips. "I call it my trifecta tattoo. Everything that goes against either my religion or my ignorant parents. Being gay, loving cheeseburgers, and having tats."

Cazzo, this guy.

Would it be fourfecta if he got fucked by a Catholic?

"Why the heart, then?" I chuckle, confused.

He smiles a little, shrugs a little. "It's who I am, and my nana loves me no matter what."

I can relate. While some abandoned me when they found out, others stepped forward and loved me twice as fiercely.

"Come on," I murmur. "I want you in my bed."

~oOo~
By the time we land on my bed, we've shed our clothes and forgotten all about serious talk. I grunt as he cups my ass to pull me down harder on him. In return, I slip a hand between us and stroke as much as I can of both of us.

"What's—fuck," he pants. "What's Frankie short for?"

"That's where your mind's at? My name?" I smirk, outta breath. "It's Francis."

He hums and grazes his teeth along my neck. "Francis..."

"Cazzo," I curse. Funny how I've always sorta disliked my name, but hearing it from Cohen makes me dizzy with want. "Gimme that mouth." I grab his jaw and kiss him hungrily until my lungs burn for air. "I wanna fuck you."

He nods right away and tries to kiss me again, but I got my priorities. So I send him a quick grin, then kiss my way down his unbelievably sexy body. If I ever get the time, I'll spend hours studying all his tattoos, tasting every inch, and hopefully get the stories behind the ink.

Why do I care?

There's just something.

My mouth waters as I wrap my fingers around his cock and nuzzle the base of him.

"Shit." He shivers violently.

I inhale deeply and feel myself growing harder. Then I lick the underside of him before I slowly suck him into my mouth, and the feral look in Cohen's eyes sends me on a fucking power trip. The raw need, the way he tenses up and goes rigid...fuck.
"Fuck, Francis." He breathes shallowly. His chest heaves, and the muscles in his thighs and stomach clench and unclench. "Don’t stop—please don’t fucking stop."

My eyes close, and I groan when I really taste him. Cohen...Adam...weaves his fingers through my hair and thrusts slowly. In fluid movements, never changing his pace, he fucks my mouth, and every time I glance up at him, there's more anticipation in his eyes.

The only thing that picks up speed is his breathing. I stare right back and swirl my tongue around him, then suck hard enough to get more pre-come. Which makes me nearly lose my shit, and it seems he's getting close.

Time to stop.

"What the—" He widens his eyes. "Unless it's my turn, there's no damn reason for you to stop."

He gets a sharp nip to his inner thigh for that, and I chuckle at his wince.

"So you don’t want my cock in here?" I press a digit against his ass, my own cock throbbing. He gasps and groans out a yes, please. "Rubbers and lube in the nightstand." I jerk my chin, hoping to God they haven't expired.

Adam quickly yanks out the nightstand drawer and finds the lube and an unopened box of condoms. He snorts and mumbles "Closeted manwhore" under his breath, which I sorta blanch at.

"Excuse me?" I say, sitting back on my heels.

He offers a contrite look with the protection and the bottle of lube. "Sorry. Jealous moment." At that, my brows shoot up, and he goes on. "A new box or an empty one usually indicates a person gets around a lot.
Considering...everything...I can hardly blame a guy for trying to get with you. I'll stop rambling now."

 Probably a good idea.

 I take the box, torn between being insulted and flattered. Maybe I'm a little of both, and when I see there's only a month left until these little shits expire, I grab one and throw the box at his head.

 "Check the date, motherfucker."

 Jealous moment, huh?

 "So violent." He rubs his forehead, where the box hit him, and squints at the stamped date. "What..."

 "Yeah, I'm a manwhore who's got rubbers that're about to expire." I give him a deadpan expression, then focus on rolling a condom down my cock. "Don’t assume things about me, Cohen."

 "I'm sorry," he murmurs.

 Except, he looks like he's pleased and trying to hide it.


 After lubing up, I coat my fingers too, and lean over Cohen to bite his chin. He opens his mouth, no doubt to tell me I'm violent again, but I prevent him from wording fucking anything by pushing three fingers inside his tight ass.

 He sucks in a sharp breath and screws his eyes shut.

 I frown, 'cause there’s a little too much pain on his face. "Cohen?"
"It's good—just," he grits his teeth, "slower."

Cazzo. "I thought..." I mean, if he's got theories about how many rubbers a manwhore has in his drawer, he can't be all that inexperienced, can he? "You've fucked before, right?"

He nods jerkily, eyes still closed. "Been a few years, though."

"Shit, I'm sorry." Feeling like a prick, I pull out and start over, wishing I'd fucking known. "Tell me." There's a story there, and I need a few minutes to get his mind off the physical.

"Not much to tell." He breathes deeply through his nose and finally opens his eyes. "I had a few casual relationships, then met someone when I was eighteen." He shudders and relaxes slightly when I begin to kiss his chest and gently circle his ass with my middle finger. "It was on and off for a few years—he was, uh...popular."

He may have said that, but I heard manwhore, and it pisses me off that someone hurt him.

"He played you." I kiss him slowly and slide one finger inside him.

"I guess." He downplays it, but I choose to focus on his body relaxing further. His hands glide up my arms, and he spreads his legs a bit more. "I came out to my folks, and it blew up in my face. Afterward, I went to his house. He was busy." Whatta keeper. "Which—God, more, Francis." He lifts his ass to take more of my finger, and I kiss him again, hard and deep, and add a digit.

He moans.

"Tell me you dumped his sorry ass," I mutter into the kiss.
"Yeah." By now, he's meeting every thrust and pouring more passion into his kissing. "I swore off guys and hustling altogether. Focused on getting on my parents' good side again, became the perfect son, followed in my dad's footsteps and got into the police academy. But—" he pants. "But it wasn't enough." But being himself was enough for the family member who did step up. "That's it."

Peering down between us, I see he's hard as a rock again, and when I push that third finger inside, he just groans for more.

Having heard how he's been treated, the sight of him writhing in pleasure—because of me—does weird shit to me. My stomach flutters, and I take a deep breath and let it out to make it stop.

It doesn't.

"Fuck me," he whispers against my mouth.

I nod and swallow dryly, withdrawing my fingers to grab my dick. Without teasing, I push in carefully and watch for any signs of pain. *Fuck me, that's hot and tight.* For every goddamn inch he takes, it gets increasingly difficult to focus on how he's doing.

When I'm balls deep, I still for a beat and drop my forehead to his shoulder. *Don't lose it. Don't be that guy.* My jaw tenses—hell, my entire fucking body's straining with tension.

Maybe it makes me a prick, but I only manage to do nice and slow for a few minutes. But at least he spurs me on, so perhaps it's all good. He doesn't look to be in pain.

On my next thrust, I grab his hands and hold them above his head on the pillow before I push in hard. I swallow his curse as I kiss him, and he squeezes my hands and lifts his hips to give me all of him.
"Better than I imagined," he mumbles, dropping wet kisses along my neck and shoulder.

I chuckle through a moan and reach between us to stroke his cock. "Did'ju think about this all day, sticky fingers?"

"Worse," he admits. "Almost a week."

My pace falters, but only for a second. That's all it takes for me to connect the dots. "Matt had you on standby this week?" I mean, I knew he'd been close, but I never knew he was watching. I figured he'd arrived later.

He nods, then hisses when I push in again. "Fuck. Yeah. First time I saw you was after the meeting with Vásquez. You were running back to the hotel after the shooting." He slips his hands free from my hold and moves them down my sides to palm my ass. "Sexiest wiseguy I ever saw."

I grunt. "Damn right." I kiss him firmly, first on his lips, then softer along his jaw. He's been open with me; it's only fair I'm open in return. "I wanted to fuck you the second I saw you, Adam," I whisper in his ear.

He stiffens and shudders, his dick throbbing in my grip. Looking down, I both see and feel the pre-come that seeps out at the head.

"Christ—you feel amazing on my cock." I lick my lips and watch my hand stroke him harder, smearing the come all over. "Can you smell us? Makes my fucking mouth water."

"Yeah—Oh my fuck," he grits out, his body trembling.

I fuck him faster. My cock slides in and out of his tight ass, making these sexy-as-hell wet noises from the lube.
In a matter of seconds, I go from wanting to draw it out for hours to fighting off my orgasm. All I wanna do is come and make him do the same.

Time blurs, and everything is about the chase. I go harder, claiming his mouth roughly, wetly, and grip his jaw to keep him there. Every now and then, our eyes meet, and when they do, my gut tightens. *There's more here.* I don't know what.

"I'm—so close," he whimpers and screws his eyes shut. At the same time, his muscles clamp down on my cock, and I feel myself swell inside of him.

*Me too,* I try to say, but no sound slips out. Instead I lose it. As the first rope of come erupts from Adam's cock, pleasure surges down to my spine and I explode. With a strangled groan, I rock deeper into him and release in several streams.

My vision goes black, and fuck, I don't think I'd notice if a world war started.

Motherfucking God, he feels perfect underneath me. Underneath me, against me, in my arms, under my control. I can't even imagine how good it'd feel if he fucked me.

That thought causes a shudder to rock through me, and a final spurt of come fills the condom.

"Oh hell, Adam..." I collapse on top of him, his sticky, warm release slickening our torsos. I heave an exhausted breath and smell us even stronger than before. "Fucking delicious."

Adam hums through a shiver, his chest rising and falling rapidly.
Straightaway, where I would've expected to want him to leave, I'm thinking about ways of making sure he stays. 'Cause I ain't fuckin' done with Cohen and his sticky fingers.

He should spend the night. I want him to.

"So..." He doesn't say anything else. Just stares at something to the side of us.

Expecting things to get awkward?

"Hang on." I roll off him and leave the bed to get rid of the condom and clean up, but I hurry back like some pussy. No time for him to get out. And it doesn't look like he's trying. He smiles faintly when I toss a damp towel on him, and then I get under the covers.

He faces away from me slightly while he wipes off his chest. "I kinda need you to give me an inch now."

I slip a hand under my head and stretch out. "I just gave you eight."

He snorts a quiet chuckle, at which I grin to myself.

"Not that kind." He drops the towel on the floor, then turns my way and props himself up on an elbow.

"First off, get under the covers," I tell him. Whatever he's talking about can continue after that's taken care of. Honestly, I have no idea why I'm so hell-bent on having him here with me tonight, but no-fucking-matter. It's what I want, and I get what I want.

"That's half an inch." He smiles and lifts the covers to get underneath.

"Ah." I shift closer, understanding what he's getting at now. And he's right. He's been open and straightforward; it's my turn again. Scooting even closer, I feel his body heat. My right arm circles his midsection, and I
pull him against me and nuzzle his neck. "Stay." I drop a kiss on his shoulder, and this time I feel his smile rather than see it. "Spend the night with me."

"Gladly," he murmurs.

I'm sorta hungry, having only eaten breakfast today, but I can't bring myself to leave this spot. Food can come tomorrow. Now I just wanna feel Adam against me, explore more of his body, and fucking revel.
May 2002

(3 year after Grand Finale, some 2 years and 4 months after the Grand Finale epilogue, 2 years after Alec's future take, and just a few days after Julia's future take.)

Part III.

Francis's POV.

I wake up early the next morning, feeling Adam's hands moving slowly up and down my front. My back is to his chest, leaving nothing to my imagination about his state. Hard as a rock, pressed against my ass. Soft lips along my neck and shoulder.

His warmth brings back the memories of yesterday, and I find myself hoping there's more.
I'm done being alone, and I like Cohen—fucked as it is. And if this ever goes far enough to reach my family, Dominic will laugh his fucking ass off. Me, being with a thieving Jew?

I can't help but grin at the situation, something Adam apparently catches as he kisses my temple.

"Good morning," he says quietly. He takes a breath and lets the silence stretch, as if waiting for me to tell him what's next.

You're not fucking leaving.

Yep, I might be screwed here. I hardly know him, yet the idea of him walking out right now pisses me off. It unsettles me, which...damn, that's new.

Reaching behind us, I slide a hand down to his perfect ass and push back against him. God, I wanna feel him. All of him.

He gives an experimental thrust, slow and uncertain, and I let out a breath and nod.

"Yeah?" he whispers hoarsely.

"Yeah." Heat spikes in my body. If only he knew I've only bottomed a couple times in the past. Dunno, I never really cared for it before, and Casey had no interest in topping.

I was dealing with too much shit back then too, and taking it up the ass made me feel weird—less of a man. I could never relax. But I'm done holding back, done denying myself. So fucking what if I want to bottom every now and then, huh?
Adam's careful and passionate. His hand trembles as he rolls on a condom and slicks his fingers with lube. We stay in our position, my back to his chest.

It's way different from last night.

It's slow and unhurried. Fucking maddening.

And when he finally pushes inside me, he goes still for several beats while he kisses me, strokes my cock, and touches me all over.

"When you're close, let me know." He hooks an arm under my knee and drives deep. "Fuck." We both curse, and a burning sensation blossoms throughout my body. I flush, pain and pleasure warring inside me. "I wanna taste you," he pants against my neck. "When you come, it'll be down my throat."

"Jesus," I groan. "Gimme more."

"No. I wanna fuck you slowly. Make it last."

I shudder and tilt my head back, and his mouth is on mine in an instant.

He makes good on his word. I try to spur him on, but he's a persistent little fucker.

Like the steady—and slow—climb of a ladder, he takes us both to the edge, and he lets go of my dick when I tell him I'm there.

Then he slams into me, moans my name into the crook of my neck, and brings himself to orgasm. His cock throbs inside my ass, a sensation that drives me crazy with lust.

"God..." He groans and buries himself deep one last time, and I feel his ass tensing under my hand.
Sexiest man ever.

A few seconds later, he withdraws from me and wraps the condom in a tissue before his focus is on me, com-fucking-pletely. Without a word, he kisses his way down my front and then my cock is swallowed whole. *Wet, hot, amazing suction.*

My eyes nearly roll back, and it doesn’t take long before I'm close again. He encourages me to fuck his mouth, so I push my fingers into his hair and thrust upward, my cock sliding deep past his soft yet firm lips, along his tongue, to the back of his mouth. He swallows repeatedly around the head of me, and I let out a string of hissed curses.

Combined with his predatory gaze, I'm a fucking goner. I manage to grit out a warning, and then I'm filling his mouth with my come.

The fucker sucks me dry, leaving me panting, exhausted, sore, and boneless.

~oOo~

I wake up again some time later, having no clue how long I slept. My stomach drops when I realize the space next to me is empty, but then I hear the TV in the living room, and there’s an unmistakable smell of grease. McDonald's. Did he go out? Or maybe he heated up his leftovers. Fuck if I know, but I'm relieved he stayed. Too relieved.

Leaving the bed, I take a quick shower and then pull on a pair of sweats and a t-shirt.

Adam's on the couch, dressed in yesterday's clothes, eating a goddamn cheeseburger when I get to the living room, and he sends me a quick, tentative smile.
"Let me know if you want me to leave," he says. "I don’t wanna crowd your space, but it didn’t feel right leaving while you were asleep."

He seems as unwilling to leave as I am to tell him to get out. Good. The weird flutters in my stomach are back. Maybe I'm going crazy.

"Share your fries and you can stay for as long as you want. Deal?" I sit down next to him and steal his...strawberry milkshake, of-fucking-course. "Dude, you have an unhealthy obsession with McDonald's."

He smiles in what looks like wonder and slides a burger and fries my way. Judging by the taste, it's all new. He must've gone out and bought it while I was in my fucking coma. Pun intended.

He gives a slow shake of his head. "You're nothing like I thought you'd be, Collucci."

I figured. My bet, he thought I'd be up for a one-night stand. Realistically, it's the safest bet, too. It would've made more sense than this...whatever this is...that's for sure.

"We're not through." I wave a fry between us, and I don’t know what else to say. "The last thing I expected was to go googootz over a Jew who stole my fucking phone, but here I am."

Adam grins, and fuck me if his ears don’t turn red. He's a sweetheart.

If I get my way, it'll be an eternity and a half before he returns to his rat nest of an apartment in Compton. What kind of place is that to live in anyway, huh?

"You can take all the cheeseburgers for all I care," he tells me, eyeing his McDonald's bag. He bites his lip. "Well, we can share."

I laugh. "Grazie, baby. You're a real gentleman."
At that, his green eyes flash with something I can't decipher, and he pounces on me. I'm caught off guard, French fries fly all fucking over, and I let out an *oomph* as my back hits the couch.

The never-dying mobster instincts kick in for a quick second. Then I register his lips on mine, and I go from wondering where my gun is to slipping my hands underneath his jeans to palm his ass. *Commando. Nice.*

"Nothing's gonna stop me from stealing more now," he mutters into the kiss.

I chuckle, outta breath. "Touch my car and I'll hurt you."

He grins and breaks the kiss, his eyes full of indecency and playfulness. "While I *am* aiming for grand theft, it's not of the auto variety." His gaze falls to my chest, and he dips down to drop a kiss over my...fuck, over my heart.

Did he just go *there*? Really? When he looks up again, I search his eyes, but he averts his gaze too fast.

"Forget I said that." He flushes, appearing embarrassed. Maybe 'cause it's been, what, twenty-four hours and he's already made his intentions clear?

Fuck that. If he can have balls, so can I. I don't know what the hell the future holds, but a guy can always hope, right?

Ignoring his last words, I grip his chin and kiss him deeply.

"Go for it, sticky fingers," I murmur. "I'm game."

~oOo~

Hours later, we're watching some action movie when Adam's phone rings.
I check the clock next to the entertainment center and see it's almost three in the afternoon.

It's not until now I realize Julia and Moretti never came back last night, but perhaps that’s not weird. Matt is still on babysitting duty, and Julia probably stayed with the others at the hotel.

"What's up?" Adam answers his phone and leans back, our shoulders touching. "Huh?" He picks up my hand and absently plays with my fingers. "I thought he was getting here tomorrow."

I tilt my head, curious.

Adam holds a hand over his phone and speaks quietly to me. "Junior's back in town. Got in early with his wife—apparently his daughter-in-law is in labor."

Labor...

_Gabby._

"Shit!" I shoot right up and rush into the bedroom, looking for my phone. The brunch! Fucking hell, this entire day got away from me.

"What? No one," I hear Adam reply to whoever. "Whatever, Moretti. It's not your business. What did you need my help with?"

So Matt calls Adam to inform him about Junior being in LA. I guess if it's just something Matt mentions in passing, it makes sense. Like, _"Julia's sister's in labor and her parents are here. Can you come babysit the hustler at the warehouse?"

Or something. Because I know Matt is itching to talk to Junior—show respect and all.
Finally, I find my phone, and I wince at the eleven text messages and thirteen missed calls.

The first one’s from Elisa, letting me know I actually didn’t miss brunch. Hell, she texted me at four in the damn morning.

**Gabby’s water broke! I called Mom, and she cut her cruise short in Mexico to fly here with Zia Brianna. Any chance you can pick them up at LAX? They land at eleven thirty.**

"Motherfuck." I wince again.

Second message is also from Elisa.

**In case it wasn’t obvious, brunch has been canceled. Get back to me as soon as you can about picking up Mom. Alec and Riley are picking up Dad. Love you!**

Then it’s my brother’s turn.

**Gabriela’s still in labor, but you should get to Cedars-Sinai ASAP. Where are you? Elisa’s trying to get in touch with you.**

Dominic’s next, and it was sent at eleven.

**Where the fuck are you, bro? I thought the baby was just gonna slide right out. The cafeteria food sucks. Bring food. By the way, Julia picked up Mom and Brianna. Elisa says hi, but she’s got the bitch brow cocked.**

I release a breath, hoping like hell I'm not in too much trouble.

Then it's Julia's turn.

**I need you here to cushion the blow. Mom knows I'm leaving now, and she starts weeping every time she looks my way. When Dad**
gets here in twenty minutes, it'd be nice to have you here to put in a good word for Matt.

Moretti needs a helluva lot more than a good word, but considering I was there when Julia barged into the nightclub, I suppose I can give it a shot. Junior would listen to my version more than he'd listen to Matt's, I'm pretty sure.

Scrolling down, I get to another one of Elisa's messages.

Everyone is here. You were supposed to be at brunch, which was hours ago, so I know you didn’t have other plans. Did something happen? I'm getting worried. And fucking angry, Francis!

"Shit," I mutter, walking out to the living room again.

"Matt called me," Adam says. "They're looking for you."

No shit. "Are you gonna babysit the hustler in Matt's place?"

He shakes his head no. "Riley Biena...something—"

"Bienatì," I supply.

He snaps his fingers. "That's the one. Yeah, he and an Alec Maisano took over. Who are they? I'm guessing Alec is related to Junior."

"They're brothers. And Riley's married to their little sister." I sift through a few more messages from Elisa, and about an hour ago, my brother took over because now I've upset his wife.

If you're not at the hospital within the hour, I'll send people looking for you. Fucking get here, Francis.

"Fuck, we gotta go to the hosp—" I'm cut off by a knock on the door.

I hang my head.
"Frankie!" I hear Matt shout. Bang, bang, bang. "Frankie!"

Go fucking figure. He was probably the first one to volunteer, seeing an escape from Junior and all the others.

"Heh." Adam clears his throat. "Yeah, so he asked me if I'd seen you. I dodged the question 'cause he heard someone in the background." Me. He heard me. "He asked who was there, and I said no one—wasn't his business. I, uh...I didn't know what I was allowed to say."

I appreciate that, but I'm not hiding. Much. "We're both going to the hospital," I tell him. "You open the door; I'mma get my shit in order so we can go." With that said, I disappear into my bedroom again and change into a pair of jeans instead. Then I grab my wallet, the customary baby gift for Anthony, my piece, and my car keys.

I find Moretti, Adam, and AJ—Alec's kid—in the hallway. I'm a little surprised to see AJ here. Then again, he's graduating from college soon, and I know he's interested in getting involved in the family. But he's a quirky little fucker, so I think Alec will set him up with something along the sidelines, if he hasn't already.

"Okay, I'm ready," I tell Matt, jerking my chin in hello to AJ.

Matt glances from Adam to me. "No explanation about why Cohen's here?"

"I thought we were in a hurry to see Gabby and Anthony's baby," I say with an easy smile.

"She was eight centimeters dilated when we left," AJ says.

My brows furrow. "I don't know what that means, but let's go. I gotta suck up to Elisa, too."

~oOo~
As we arrive at the hospital, I've about had it with Matt's questioning looks.

I peer over my shoulder, sensing no trouble, and figure one little thing can give Matt all the answers he needs. So when we get into the elevator to get to Gabby's floor, I link my fingers with Adam's.

He smiles at the floor and gives my fingers a squeeze.

AJ lets out a low whistle before facing forward.

Matt's brows rise. "Never mind, then."

Two down, a hundred to go.

The elevator dings, and I swallow hard. *Madonna*. Can I face Junior like this? I loathe the anxiety creeping up my spine, but I can't fucking help it. He's stuck up for me a lot lately, but there's no forgetting his initial reaction to my sexuality.

Adam leans close to whisper in my ear. "Is your entire family here?"

I nod once as the doors open.

In my periphery, Adam nods too. Then he lets go of my hand. "There's good timing and bad timing."

Unsure, I side-eye him, and he gives me a look of understanding.

"Really, Francis." He nods again. "There's no rush, and I know the stakes. You don't have to prove anything to me."

I'm fucking torn, but I think he's right. Now isn't the time to go all out. Too much is going on, and there's more than my closest family up here. All the high-ranking men know, as well as their wives and so on, but all it takes is for one low-man to see me—a driver or whatever—and then
they'll be questioning Junior's authority. Keeping a fag alive? Letting a queer stay on as a top earner? Doesn’t fucking happen.

I left Vegas for LA so I could get at least a semblance of freedom. A fresh start. Showing up with a guy won't do me any good.

The waiting room is only a turn away, so a few steps after stepping outta the elevator, we walk into a big-ass family reunion. And I'm fucking thankful for Adam's acceptance 'cause this woulda killed me.

Sitting among Dee and his family, Joseph and his, Junior and Bella, Carm and a few kids and grandkids, is security. Junior's bodyguard and driver looks up from a newspaper, then looks down again once he knows it's just me. Same goes for the security Junior ordered to go with Bella and Brianna on their cruise. Lastly, I spy two more drivers I recognize from Vegas. Maybe they're with Alec or Joey—fuck if I know.

"Oh, Francis!" Bella's the first one to notice me, and she leaves her spot between Junior and Gabby's mom. A second later, she flies into me and hugs me tightly. "We were so worried—" She whacks me in the chest, at which I grunt and grimace. The tiny woman packs a mean punch, just like her oldest daughter, who is glaring at me from across the room. "Are you okay?" Bella peers up at me, hands on her hips. "Where were you? You got here just in time. Anthony came out a minute ago and said any minute now. And God knows I need the distraction; Julia says she's leaving for Europe with Matt—"

"Easy, hummingbird." Junior walks up and places a hand on her lower back, halting her rambling. "Youse can catch up later. I need a word with Francis."

That’s no better than answering to Elisa, but judging by the steely look Junior slides Matt, I think I'm safe. This is about Moretti and Julia, not me.
"I'm next, Dad," Elisa says with another glare my way.

"I'm sorry," I mouth to her.

She rolls her eyes.

Gotta love her.

"Scram." Junior jerks his chin at Moretti, Cohen, and AJ.

They walk off, and it's just me and Junior in this corner of the waiting room.

"You're late, son."

Goddamn. "I'm sorry," I tell him. "I never heard the phone." Because I lost my head. My focus was on Adam, not work or family. "Won't happen again."

If Adam wants something real with me, I hope he can get used to me always being on call. If Alec tells me to do something, I fucking do it. No questions asked, no stalling. Same with Dominic. Alec is my capo officially, but I work a lot with Dominic, too. Mainly bringing him high rollers for his poker tournaments and helping him with shipments of booze.

Thankfully, Junior's satisfied with my promise to not be late again. He doesn't care about whys and hows—as long as shit gets done.

"Okay. Now this shit with Julia and Moretti." He twirls a finger. "I show up here, thinking all I gotta do is convince my baby girl that going off to Europe is fucking stupid. Then I find out that not only did she get caught up in our business, but she's now dating Moretti?"

Yeah. Surprise, surprise. "You want the short version or the long one?"
"Tell me what you know—right now."

I nod, gathering my thoughts. "I don’t know what brought Julia to LA; that’s between her and Matt. But she showed up at the club right before our sit-down with Vásquez. We got the message across, and Julia played along—"

"She was actually at the sit-down?" Junior gets heated, furious, and I can only hope he won't shoot the messenger.

"We didn’t have time to get her out," I reply. "Her safety became a priority for both me and Moretti, but there really was no time to get her outta there. It woulda looked too suspicious."

Junior looks down and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Then what," he asks flatly. "Was your cover blown? Why did they plant a bomb under your car?"

"We’re not sure," I answer, keeping my voice down, "but we don’t think it was the cover. If anything, I believe Vásquez just didn’t think we were important enough. He wanted to meet with a Maisano, and he got one he's never heard of and a Collucci who don’t rank high enough."

Vásquez wanted infiltrators. People from our organization who could help him destroy and wipe out the entire Vegas family, and he was disappointed in what he ended up with. That’s what I think, anyway. Unlike Matt, I didn’t go under a fake name. I was bait, there to lure Vásquez in. He even knows my exact link to the throne. He knows Felix was my pops, he knows Junior's my godfather.

"I think he knows I'm not a made man," I murmur. "You don’t gotta dig deep to know my mom wasn’t Italian." Junior nods pensively and folds his arms across his chest, eyes still directed at the floor. Calculating. "My
guess is Vásquez took that as a sign—that I wouldn’t be able to get far enough to take anyone out for them."

"No matta'. Everyone but Vásquez himself is dead now, and I got everything done with the higher-ups while he was wit'chu." Junior's ready to move on. "Was Julia injured in any fucking way?"

I shake my head. "No, sir. Once the sit-down was over, I focused on making a quick exit. Moretti was keeping Julia close—his focus was all on her. And when I was checking under the car, the fucking spics opened fire."

"They didn’t expect you to check the car," he concludes quietly. "Dominic told me Julia shot someone. Who was stupid enough to let a girl go armed to a sit-down?"

"She wasn’t armed," I say quickly, because fuck, I’d been fast to get rid of Julia's own piece before the meeting. And here's the thing. In order to clear Matt's name, I gotta throw Julia under the bus just a little. Junior won't harm a hair on her head, and this is the fucking truth, anyway. "Since Matt was so focused on Julia's safety, he was watching her and putting himself between her and the cholos. So he couldn’t back me up. He didn’t see when they drew their guns."

"But Julia did." Junior knows his wild child well.

I nod. "She rushed forward and took Diego's gun, shot him twice before Moretti and I got ahold of the situation. I cleared out and called for backup while Matt got Julia outta there. That’s it." And at some point, Matt and Julia started fucking, but no need to state the obvious and piss off Junior further.

"Madonna mia, I could wring her fucking neck," he whispers.
"Matt's a good guy," I say quietly in his defense. "I'm sure Julia's already told you—"

"I haven't listened," he responds frankly. "I wanted your side of the story first. Now I'm gonna get Moretti's. Then Julia can say her piece before she doesn't take off on a goddamn trip."

I nod in understanding but say nothing else. It's none of my business, and I've said all I had to say.

"All right." Junior squeezes my shoulder. "Go talk to Elisa—" He frowns and grasps my chin, tilting my head to the side. "Che cazzo è successo al tuo collo?" He wonders what the fuck happened to my neck.

"What?" My right hand flies up to cover whatever spot he's eyeing.

"Oh..." He grins and gives my cheek a light smack. "A fuckin' hickey. I gotta feeling I know why you was late."

Shit. Involuntarily, my eyes seek out Cohen on the other side of the room where he's pretending to read a magazine.

And being the observant motherfucker he is, Junior follows my gaze. "Ah." He's not exactly comfortable, but he tries. "I'm guessing that’s Adam Cohen. Haven't met him in person yet, but Joseph says he's good at what he does, despite being Jewish."

"It's not—" what you think. But fuck that. It's exactly what he thinks, and I can't lie about this. I won't.

"Uh-huh." Junior looks over to Cohen again, then back to me. It's officially fucking awkward. "So, uh..." He clears his throat. "You two, you know—" At a loss for words, he brings up his hands, gives them a pointed look, and slowly bumps the tips of his index fingers together.
"Oh my God." I hang my head and close my eyes, praying that didn’t just happen. What in the ever-loving fuck. Did he just illustrate two dicks bumping together?

"What!" he whisper-shouts. "Don’t get cute with me, Francis. I don’t fucking know the terminology."

"It's all good, Uncle Jun." I rub my temples, beyond mortified and probably as uncomfortable as he is. "Dating is probably the most common word, though this is extremely new." I gather enough courage to face him again. "But don’t worry, I'm being discreet."

Junior's forehead creases, and he stares at me silently for a beat. Long enough for me to get nervous 'cause he's the most unreadable man I've ever met.

I love Junior more than I ever loved my own dad, and I have a huge amount of respect for him, but unfortunately—given the past—it doesn’t come without some fear, too. I hope it'll fade with time, but for now...

At that point, Bella walks up to us again, smiling curiously. "Va tutto bene qui?" She asks if everything's okay here.

I wait for Junior to answer her, but he doesn’t. He keeps staring at me for a while longer, and I do my best to stand tall.

Eventually, he speaks up in a low but firm voice. "It's fine, Isabella." Then he turns around and tells Johnny—his driver—and the other low-men to leave.

"What's going on?" Bella whispers.

"I have no idea." I watch as the drivers slash guard dogs head for the elevator.
"There." Junior turns to me again once the security's gone, and he takes a step forward to cup the back of my neck. "Listen, Francis," he says, only for me to hear, "you know I'm no good at this, and I can't change the world. I can't change our lifestyle either, or the expectations our associates have and the rules we live by." He levels me with a look. "It doesn't matter what I think in this case. I'm trying my best, and Isabella thinks I'll get there some day. But what I can say—right now—is that no kid of mine has to hide among family, and as you can fucking see, there's only family here now. *Capisce*?"

I nod stiffly, grateful and relieved. Considering where Junior started off, Bella might be right. He's gone from thinking I should burn in hell to viewing me as his son.

It's plenty enough for me to remain hopeful, because I know all the circumstances. I know the generation he's part of, how our organization works, how he was raised, and his influences.

"*Bene.* Chin up, *tesoro.*" Junior gives my neck a final squeeze before he wanders off.

I'm left with Bella, who undoubtedly heard most of it. Hands clasped under her chin, she beams at me with tears glistening in her eyes.

"You're seeing someone, Francis?"

I clear my throat and shrug vaguely. "I think so."

Really, I should've known better than to worry about timing. In this family, people find out regardless. Good timing or bad—don't matter. There's probably an ocean of secrets between the people in this very waiting room, but some shit can never be kept private, no matter how hard you try.
"We just met yesterday," I say in a hushed tone. "I didn’t plan for this to get out already."

"Bah." She waves that off and hugs again. "I’m happy for you. And if you ever want a baby, there’s a black market for that. I know a guy. When can I meet him?"

Jesus fucking Christ.

"Adam—He's over there." I nod at Adam, refusing to process the other stuff she said. Because fucking hell, did I not make it clear that we just met?

"Oh, he's handsome, topolino." Bella appreciates the view for sure. "A shame he's ruining his body with all those tattoos, though. I should go over and introduce myself."

"His last name is Cohen." I throw that out there, figuring I might as well go for broke.

Bella purses her lips and looks up at me. "You know, your version of settling down with a nice Italian girl is a lot different from mine." She grins and reaches up to pinch my cheek before heading over to Adam.

I blow out a breath, fucking dazed.

Bella's nosy and inquisitive but probably the sweetest woman alive, so I'm not worried about Adam. He can handle her. Which means it's time for me to face Elisa. But after all this with Junior, I feel pretty damn invincible.

I don't gotta hide.

First off, I walk up to Joseph, who's in another corner talking to Dee, AJ, Matt, and Dani.
"Hey, guys." I turn to my brother and point to baby JJ in his arms. "Can I borrow my nephew for a sec?"

"Oh, I've done that before." Dominic nods. "Using kids as human shields always works."

"I'm banking on it," I reply.

"Men." Dani gigglesnorts.

"You love yours." Dominic steals a kiss from her.

Joseph smiles wryly and hands over my one-year-old nephew. "Have fun groveling, little brother. What were you up to, anyway?"

"Uh..." I focus on JJ as I rack my brain for an answer. "I don’t wanna lie to you, so..." So I leave.

"That was no acceptable explanation," I hear Dominic say.

"We can save answers for another day," I tell JJ. "Ain't that right?"

He bounces and squeals when I give his side a tickle.

He's totally agreeing with me.

"Don’t you dare use my own son against me, Francis," Elisa warns.

I give her my most charming smile and sit down next to her. "I wouldn't dare."

She huffs.

"Momma, Momma, Momma!" JJ keeps bouncing on my lap. "Hi!"
"Hi, baby boy." Elisa makes a move to take JJ from me, but he just giggles and changes his mind, his arms looping around my neck. "Fine, be with the traitor."

"Aw, you love me, honey." Leaning close, I drop smooches on her cheek, causing JJ to mimic me and do the same. That oughta melt her in no time. "I'm sorry for not picking up the phone. I didn’t hear it."

"Momma, kith-kith!" JJ plants sloppy kisses on her.

A smile threatens to break free, but Elisa does a good job at pretending to be unwavering.

"I thought something had happened to you," she snaps. "Especially since you had plans to see us for brunch. Then hours went by!"

"It was an honest mistake." I hug her close. "We were in the living room all day—I didn’t hear the phone in the bedroom. I'm really sorry, Elisa."

Elisa opens her mouth, only to shut it again and narrow her eyes. "We?"

Cazzo.

I run a hand through my hair and look over to Adam, who’s laughing about something with Bella and Brianna. They're practically fawning over the guy, although I can tell the tattoos bother both women. Dominic got the same treatment when he came home with his name inked across his shoulder blades. Hell, Bella basically mourned his skin.

It'll be fun to see if Bella will ask Adam to convert, too. Wouldn’t surprise me. She knows no boundaries, and I can imagine her saying something like, "So...have you considered Catholicism, dear?"

"I met someone," I admit, sliding my gaze back to Elisa. "That’s why—I mean today, I lost track of time."
And just like that, Elisa's not mad anymore. Instead she wants gossip, and she forgets that I'm not a woman. But I do humor her for a while, and I tell her a little about him. Then we join Bella, Brianna, and Adam so I can introduce them.

"He's fucking hot," Elisa whispers on the way. "Don’t tell Joseph I said that."

"Uh-huh." I adjust JJ on my hip so I can have one hand free. Reaching the others, their conversation halts, and Adam's smile widens a little. He looks at ease, if not slightly overwhelmed. Which isn't a surprise. "My family hasn’t sent you runnin' yet?" I smirk and bump my shoulder to his.

"Why would he?" Bella asks, eyebrow cocked. "We're delightful to be around." Taking a step closer to Adam, she links her arm with his and pats his chest. "We were just talking about Adam's birthday. It's coming up in a few weeks, and wouldn’t he look great with a nice gold cross necklace?"

Brianna nods thoughtfully.

"Uh..." Yeah, Adam has no response to that.

I gotta physically hold my lips together to prevent from laughing.

Didn’t I fucking call it? I knew she was gonna go there.


She shakes her head and holds out a hand. "It's nice to meet you, Adam. I'm Elisa."

"You've met Joseph, right?" I'm sure he mentioned that, and Adam nods in response as he shakes her hand. "Yeah, this is his wife."
"Gotcha. Nice to meet you, too." Adam smiles politely, and his ears heat up like they did earlier. Probably one the little things of his I'mma get hooked on the quickest. "I'm sorry, it's a lot of names to remember."

Damn, maybe he's more than a little overwhelmed.

"There will be more, hon," Bella supplies helpfully. "Dominic and Daniela traveled with their nanny, so she's watching a few of the kids back at the hotel. And Alec—you'll meet him later—and his wife and their kids are there, too."

_Actually, _Alec is probably beating the shit out of a drug dealer with too many IDs at the moment, but...semantics. And right now, my priority is getting some privacy for Adam before Bella decides to introduce him to more people.

"There's plenty of time," Elisa reassures Adam with a warm smile. "Hey, Mom? Zia? Can I talk to you guys for a second over there?" She points to where Junior appears to be teaching Nino how to play poker by a side table. "I need your advice on something." As she takes JJ from me, she sends me a little grin, and she has no idea how thankful I am.

"Thank you," I mouth.

She nods and then ushers her mother and aunt away.

It's only a matter of seconds before Dominic and Joseph know, too.

"Holy something." Adam plops down in a chair. "I didn’t see this coming."

_Neither did I._

"I'm sorry." Taking a seat next to him, I try to come up with something to say that will make shit better. But thing is, this is my family. Most of us are up-in-your-face people. All the time. There's no off switch. "It doesn't
really get any easier, either. They'll always—the women, anyway—wanna know every aspect of your life."

"That’s..." Adam lets out a low chuckle and shakes his head, looking as dazed as I felt before with the baby-black-market crap. "That’s not what I meant, Francis. I was more thinking this is a too-good-to-be-true situation."

"Really?" My shoulders sag with relief, and I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. Mannaggia. Maybe he'll stick around, after all.

"Fuck, yes." He smiles and mirrors my position. In my periphery, I see Dominic and my brother glancing over. I don’t have to worry about them, though. They've always supported me. "But you gotta catch up. Your aunt probably knows more about me than you do right now. She's a curious little thing."

"You have no idea." I smile back. "I guess we can start with your birthday."

He chuckles. "First things first—I'm not converting."

I definitely crack up at that, and I throw an arm around his shoulders. "Whatta travesty." Inching close, I press a quick kiss to his temple. "Like I give a fuck about religion."

He flushes again, smirks, and puts a hand on my knee. "We should put your aunt and my nana in the same room. They'd go nuts trying to convert each other—"

"It's a boy!"

My head whips around, and I watch Anthony exit through the doors with a tired but triumphant smile.
Well, at least I won the bet on *when* the baby was coming.

Over the next several minutes, it's like the volume in the waiting room has been cranked up. The women gush, cry, and talk over each other, and the men bump fists, hug, kiss cheeks, and congratulate Anthony. He also accepts a few envelopes with cash.

I stall until Junior, Bella, and Carm have gone to see Gabriella and the new baby before I step up and wait for Dominic to be done. He and Anthony hug and speak quietly, then hug again, and break away as Anthony gives a firm nod.

"One more thing," Dominic says and leans close to his brother again. While he whispers or mutters whatever, Dee briefly looks my way before averting his gaze. "*Capisce?*

Anthony chuckles. "Fucking lighten up. I'm not Dad." He playfully shoves Dominic away and faces me with a wide smile. *Cazzo*, he really looks beat, but fucking ecstatic.

"Congrats, man." I grin and squeeze his shoulder, slapping an envelope to his chest. "How's Gabby doin'?"

"Yo—" He widens his eyes. "She's gotta be the strongest woman I know. Fourteen fucking hours of labor. Can you imagine?"

Of course I can't. "Well, she's gotta be strong to put up wit'chu."

He laughs. "Can't argue with that. Thanks, bro." He refers to the envelope, pocketing it. "So you're with the Jew now, huh?"

*Jesus.* It's my turn for the wide eyes. I knew gossip traveled fast, but fuck.

"I'm standing right here, dude," Adam chuckles from behind me.
"I ain't blind," Anthony says matter-of-factly, though there's humor in his eyes. Thank fuck. I don't need any hostility. "Dominic filled me in," he tells me before addressing Adam again. "For as long as there's pussy in the world, I won't understand guys going after each other. But I know Frankie—trust him with my life—and if you screw him over, it'll be my fucking pleasure to cut your life short. We got a deal?" He holds out his hand.

Temporarily too stunned to speak, I only watch as Adam steps forward and shakes Anthony's hand firmly.

"Deal, Maisano," he says, undeterred. "Additionally, considering someone still hasn't shot off my middle finger, I'll take the liberty of using it every time you insult my religion."

"Oh-ho!" Dominic cracks up a few feet away, having obviously heard that. "Check him out, Joey."

A smile stretches across my lips, and I gotta say I dig this a fuckload. With me, Adam has already showed an almost shy side of him, one I happen to like immensely, but the guy has balls. He'll stand up for himself, no fucking doubt. Even to Anthony.

Anthony's mouth quirks up, and he raises a brow at me. "There's hope for him, I guess."

I nod, agreeing. "Go be with your family, bro. We can have pissing contests anytime."

"Yeah." But before leaving, he leans in and keeps his voice down, face serious. "Outta curiosity, you think he's hotter than me?"

What the...

I cough. Shocked doesn't come close to describe it. Did he really ask that?
"Uh, yeah?" I give him a strange look, then glance around us. Maybe I'm being fucked with, but I doubt anyone's in on it. Dominic and Joseph are occupied, talking to their women now, and Adam's backed off enough to be outta earshot.

"For real?" Anthony's eyes grow large, and then he gets cunty. "Vaffanculo. You don't know shit." He stalks off.

_That_, Adam notices.

He comes closer and frowns. "What's wrong?"

I...I don't even know how to explain.

"Just Maisanos being Maisanos," I go with, chuckling. "It's all good."

More than good.

It's been a mind-blowing and fucking weird twenty-four hours. And now, after having gone all backwards—screwing before sharing a single meal, already involving family, plus some stealing—I wanna chill. I wanna close myself in with Adam and not resurface for a long time.

Sure, there's still Julia and Matt's going-away shindig—more drama there—but that's only a bigger reason for shutting out the world first. We gotta mentally prepare for that shitshow.

"Wanna get some dinner and go back to my place?" I ask.

"I thought you'd never ask." He grins and brushes his hand against mine. "You're not gonna see the baby first, though?"

I shrug and scratch my eyebrow with my car key. "They'll be in town for a few more days. There's time."

"Okay. Wanna go to McDonald's?"
This fucking guy and his obsession with McDonald's, man...

"It's gonna be fun getting to know you, Cohen." My shoulders shake with silent laughter. "Come on. Let's go home."
"His Finale."

May 2002

(3 year after Grand Finale, some 2 years and 4 months after the Grand Finale epilogue, 2 years after Alec's future take, just a week after Julia's future take, and only a day after Frankie's.)

Junior's POV.

Leaving the hotel bathroom, I walk into the bedroom and see Isabella's already unpacked my suitcase. And I see a dark gray suit hanging on the closet door, so that's settled.

By the time I've put on briefs, undershirt, and my pants, there's a firm knock on the door. Yesterday was all—mostly, anyway—about Anthony, Gabby, and their newborn son, but today is work. Today I'm getting to the bottom of all the things that've been going on while my focus has been on taking down Vásquez.

I walk to the little entryway and put my foot close to the door so I can't open it more than a few inches. Look at me, I'm a human security chain. But it's safe—it's Joseph and my brother.

"Come on in." I leave the gentlemen to finish getting dressed.

"Where's Bella?" Alec calls as I disappear into the bedroom.

"Hospital," I call back. I woke up around noon to a note from my wife; she's visiting Gabriella at the hospital after having lunch with Brianna, who's going back to Kansas City with Riley tonight.

There's gonna be a big shindig for my fiftieth birthday next month, and Isabella and my sister have a whole fucking book full of shit to do, which will probably cost me a fortune and a half. I asked for a quiet dinner with
my family, but last time I heard them talkin', they was discussing goddamn venues. And if our restaurant's too small, it's gonna be too big for me. Women. But my wife needs a distraction, especially with Julia's plans on leaving, so I've stopped bitching about the party. Let Isabella go nuts.

Once I'm ready, I adjust the cufflinks on my suit and return to the living room area, where I find Joseph and Alec in the seating area discussing my youngest.

"I'm with Junior on this," Alec's saying, shaking his head. "Julia belongs in Vegas, and I don’t trust Moretti."

Joseph sighs but doesn’t speak up—good call. I know he, Elisa, and even Dominic now, are supporting Julia's crazy ideas. As far as I know, Dominic was shocked—a little hurt, too—when he first heard about it. But if there's one thing I know about my kids, it's that Elisa and Dominic eventually end up on the same side. Same with Anthony and Julia, although I don’t know how that’s working now.

Anthony's as against her leaving as I am.

Julia don’t think I know she's serious; trust, I know she is. But I'm gonna do everything in my power to stop it. It would tear me apart, and Isabella? Fuggedabboudit.

As for Moretti...

I grunt to myself and sit down in the chair between the two sofas my brother and son-in-law are occupying.

"Matteo's a good kid," I'm fucking reluctant to admit. God knows I resent the motherfucker for crossing the line with my princess, but he's loyal to a fault.
Unlike most pigs that give up inside information to various crime organizations, Moretti's been up front with me from the get. He didn't get sucked in—bribed or blackmailed—by a wiseguy to be a rat. He's had his own agenda from day one, and he picked me to help him. And in return, he's given a lot back to me.

Alec raises a brow at me. "You trust him with Julia?"


Alec chuckles.

"I'm feeling the love," Joseph says wryly.

I shoot him a look, 'cause I ain't admitting I wouldn't be able to find a better husband for my angel. Madonn', given the fact that I actually gave her away to Joseph at their wedding, he already knows. He don't need a fucking reminder.

"Just you wait until Beth's ready to get hitched," I tell my brother. Then he'll know. My youngest niece may be only a toddler right now, but fuck, time flies. 'Specially with girls. Christ. All the grays they've given me. "Youse're lucky if she picks a man who won't sell out his pops."

Seriously, both'a my babies. First Elisa with Joseph, who was willing to pull the trigger on Felix. Now Julia with Matteo, whose pops's days are numbered.

Even if both boys had valid reasons...

Joseph slides his observant gaze my way. "What's with Moretti's father?"

"Yeah." Alec leans forward, interested. "We don't know the whole story with Matt. Mind sharin', bro?"
I pluck some lint off my shoulder, knowing it's time I confide in my two closest. "Parts of it stay between me and him, but I can tell you our former Governor Moretti didn’t step away from politics because he 'felt it was time.'"

Back when Matteo's father was elected, a lot of people in our organization were proud to have an Italian governor. But then we learned his whole game was to give "Italians a good name." The fucker said the mafia's given Italians a bad rep for decades, and it was time for a new era.

No matta'.

What drove Matteo to my office at Stella—years ago now—was that the good Italian governor wasn’t so good behind closed doors. The disgusting son of a whore had a taste for his twin sons, Matteo's younger brothers.

I shudder at the memory of Matteo telling me. Luckily it hadn't gotten so far that the boys were beyond healing. One of the twins had come crying to their big brother about...touching...and Matteo had been rightfully livid. Murderous. That's what he'd been when he showed up at Stella, asking for a favor.

I'm no upstanding citizen, and I've clipped women in my days—going against some borgatas' codes—but molesting innocent children? If I hear about it, you're gonna wish you was dead. End'a story.

"The governor did something...?" Alec presses.

I nod. "I trust youse as much as I can," I tell them, "and I know you won't breathe a word about this to anyone else. Moretti came to me even before he became a cop. He was honest—told me he was gonna be a police officer soon but wasn’t naïve enough to trust the law on this matter, nor did he give a shit about what we were...are," I correct myself, "up to."
Matteo's ultimate goal is to help take down trafficking rings. No money in it, but to each his own?

No matta', my Family sure as shit ain't involved in trafficking, so there was never any conflict.

"He asked me for a favor," I continue. "Let's just say his pops had gone too far—" *gross understatement* "—within their family, and Matteo asked for my help to secure their future." That's all I will say about the kid's reason. Instead I go on with my conditions and the end result. "I don't gotta tell you the governor's still alive, 'cause you know. He's worth more alive than dead."

The twins deserve the best life, which they're living on the East Coast right now. I think they're at Harvard or something. On their dad's dime. Matteo's mom is well-off, too. *And oblivious*. I get a cut from any money the former governor cashes in, and trust, he makes bank—these days in the corporate world.

"He'll pay for the rest of his life, though." I lean forward to grab the smokes on the table and light one up. "Which will end in a few years." That's when the twins want to come home, but they're hesitating, simply 'cause their father is here. So Matteo and I will put a stop to that so the boys can come home after school. Not that their pops knows this. He's under the impression I'll keep him alive as long as he keeps his cock in his pants and I get money. "In return for all'a this," I say, twirling a finger, "Matteo's in my pocket until his pops is gone. I requested he joined Vice, too—made his father pull strings to make it happen fast."

"Because a cop in Vice is more useful," Joseph concludes quietly.

Of-fucking-course it is. I got no use for a mall cop. But Matteo wanted to be in Vice anyway, so it don't matter. I just made sure it happened
quickly. Otherwise it woulda taken him years to climb the ladder and get into that department.

"What else did you ask of him?" Alec wonders. "I know he babysat Julia for a while there."

I incline my head and put out the smoke. "God knows I love that girl with all my heart, but she's a natural-born killer on the road." Sometimes I still can't believe I gave her a custom Porsche. The fuck's wrong with me? "I didn't tell him to stalk her or nothin'—just keep an eye on her when he saw her."

"I'm guessing he did." Alec smirks.

I flip my hand under my chin at him. *Motherfucker.*

"Anything else?" Joseph asks.

"Eventually," I reply. "He got word—I think it was about a year ago—about a few hustlers coming in from California. Moretti concluded we wasn't distributing the wares, so he gave me a heads up and promised to look into it."

Alec nods and points to me. "I remember that. Mexicans working outta LA, right? I thought we took care'a that. I put Francis on it."

"Yeah, but Matteo managed to dig deeper," I tell him. "Dominic and Anthony got the fuckers to talk, and only lowmen were coming in from LA. We got a lead about higher-ranking members from Florida."

That's when Joseph starts putting together the pieces. He narrows his eyes, thoughtful until it clicks.
"You sent Moretti to Florida," he states. "It wasn't a case from the force. It was you." Bingo. "I remember you talking about one of your informants going undercover in Florida."

There we go. And Joseph phrased himself politely there, 'cause I'm pretty sure I was bitching like a fucking woman. But the Moretti kid's been really fucking useful, and the streets didn't talk as much—I didn't get as much info—when I sent him to the Sunshine State.

He'd been all for it, too. He'd told me he wanted to get outta town for a while—some shit about distance from...I don't remember, but I'm guessing his parents, and it settled that. He flew to Florida.

"The lead brought us to Vásquez," I confirm. "I didn't believe it first, but Matteo gave me proof for months until I couldn't ignore it no more." Can you blame me, though? I never fucking thought the Medillín cartel would rise from the dead. "He really did put his ass on the line and went undercover. He got as far as to figure out Vásques is like their underboss—one who's way outta line. His pops is still running shit down in Colombia, and Vásquez wants to take over operations stateside."

"This is fucking unbelievable," Alec mutters, no doubt remembering how it was back in the '70s and '80s. Miami—hell, all of Florida—was crazy. "Seems like a big risk, though. First send Moretti undercover and get close, then send him to the sit-down in LA with Francis—as another person."

I shake my head slowly, elbows on the armrests and my fingers tenting in the middle. "That was deliberate. Back in Florida, Vásquez and Moretti never crossed paths, but we had hopes he'd still be recognized. At least to the point where Vásquez got suspicious. That's why we had so many of our guys nearby outside the club. I expected some shit to go down." I just hadn't expected Vásquez to plant a fucking bomb under their car.
"We needed all of Vásquez's focus and attention on this," Joseph supplies. "That way, he was too distracted to point his ears to the east where we had the sit-down."

"Did Matt expect it, too?" Alec asks.

I nod. "Only him, though. I left Francis out of it." Hence, him having his own theory on everything. "Too many know already, and now that New York's involved, there's no reason to include more people."

The Misone Family has ears in Cali—the Gaetano brothers for one—so I wasn't surprised when Cullen called me. If anything, it was good. They made it easier to arrange a sit-down with the Colombia boss's advisor. So Joseph and I sat down with him and Misone and Cullen, and now we know Vásquez was acting on his own. He's got no support from Ochoa at home.

"All right," Alec says, bringing out cigars from his inner pocket, "I need somethin' to say to Francis before he hits the streets tonight. How many allies do we think Vásquez has left?" He hands me one cigar and another to Joseph.

"Not many." I hold a lighter under the end of the cigar. "We have practically all our guys in LA right now, and they've cleaned up the city good the past week." I pocket my lighter and take a couple puffs from the Cuban. "Wherever Vásquez is hiding, it's not with people he trusts. His inner circle is wiped out."

Dominic and his trigger-happy finger had fun with plenty of them. So did Francis with his love for torture.

"That's good. Do we have outside help?" Alec looks to Joseph.

My son-in-law inclines his head. "New York has a crew out here, and we have a handful of informers with LAPD." Next, he slides his gaze to me. "It's from one of those informers I heard about Nico."
I'd almost forgotten about that. "Remind me," I say, twirling a finger in a circle. "He and Jasper were instructed to stay in Vegas, so what's this I hear about Nicola being here in LA?"

If it's true... Madonn'. It pisses me off just thinking about it.

"Is it all right I head out?" Alec interrupts. "Dominic's itchin' to hit the streets. Francis, too."

"Tell my son I want him in a fucking suit at dinner," I say. "Isabella thinks a public setting will keep me calm when I tell Julia she ain't goin'." I chuckle at my wife's cuteness. "You and Gemma are welcome to join, of course."

"I'll let her know," my brother says with a laugh.

Once we've said goodbye to Alec, I turn to Joseph, wanting to get back on track.

He gets to it right away. "It was Nico's top earner I heard about first," he tells me. "Max found out about a score—a shipment, and he planned to intercept outside of LA."

"And Nicola allowed it," I assume.

My nephew's begging for a fucking beating. I get that if the money's good, one guy could be spared—if he'd asked Alec or me first—but that only applies to Max. I would've okayed sending Max. But Nicola? No, fuck that. I told him and Jasper to stay back for a goddamn reason. We still have family in Vegas, and I wanted the Savonas to make sure everyone was protected.

Joseph nods. "Max and his boys carried out their plan—ended up with a truckload of cigarettes. And for some reason, Nico headed out here to meet up with Max afterwards."
I chuckle darkly, taking a puff of my cigar. "That little motherfucker. I bet he didn’t trust Max to split the money or some shit."

Given Nicola's appetite for women and being so fucking stupid he doesn’t wear rubbers, he's ended up with a handful of bastards by now. I don’t even know how many goomahs he's got, but I'm sure they're getting expensive to take care of. And after stepping down as my underboss, he ain't making as much green as before, either.

I honestly can't believe him.

"You've spoken to Nicola, yes?" I pin Joseph with an expectant look.

"Of course." He nods with a dip of his chin. "He's afraid you're gonna make him a lowman again. I told him to wait at the safe house with Max until I'd talked to you."

I can't help but laugh at that, 'cause my nephew's doing this all wrong. A wiseguy isn't supposed to go from underboss to running a crew to being in one.

"Max knew you wanted everyone in Nico's crew to remain in Vegas," Joseph goes on pointedly. "And I don’t have to tell you that this is Frankie's domain. He knew exactly what was going on."

I cock my head. "Did Francis talk to you?"

"He did." Joseph presses his lips together grimly. "My brother called Max and Nico once he heard of the interception. It appears Max knows about Frankie and Adam, and Frankie and Max had words. Of course, Frankie won't rat anybody out, and insults don’t touch him, but threats piss me off, Junior."

"What?" My blood chills. "Max threatened Francis?"
"If I read between the lines correctly, yeah." He shakes his head. "Frankie was tight-lipped about it when I spoke to him this morning, but I know enough to think a warning is necessary."

"Oh, I definitely have a warning in mind." I smile sinisterly. "Who else am I supposed to meet with today?"

He replies without missing a beat. "Alec again later tonight; everyone's kicked up to him for this week." Gotta love payday. "After dinner, Matt wants to speak to you in private." That won't go down well for him. "Other than that..." He shrugs. "Two capos have requested sit-downs, but I told them to go through Alec first. It's just some petty shit."

Good enough for me. "Then let's head out to the safe house." I stand up and button my suit jacket. "I'd like a word with my nephew and his buddy."

~oOo~

I have Joseph call Anthony on the way to the safe house on Washington Boulevard. My son bitches about leaving Gabby's side, which means he's fucking spoiled. He got all yesterday to spend with his wife and family. Enough is enough. Duty calls.

He arrives at the same time we do, and I steal the smoke he just lit up.

"Ti dispiace aggiornarmi?" He casts an irritated glance my way, asking Joseph if he minds filling him in.

I wave a hand, letting Joseph speak.

I nod in hello at the two lowmen sitting outside the yellow-painted warehouse, and they're quick to leave their card game behind and stand to attention like some soldiers.
The large warehouse is packed with crates; Alec's LA crew—with Francis leading them—uses it as a hub for distribution. Nothing looks suspicious. But it's not the smuggled goods I'm here for. It's the basement, which serves as both a safe house and a holding place.

Behind me, Joseph tells Anthony about Nicola and Max, and I look straight ahead as one of Francis's boys leads the way to the basement. We reach the far corner, and the kid pushes a screen aside to reveal concrete stairs.

He fidgets with a key and flicks me several glances.

"It's—it's an honor to meet you, Mr. Maisano," he tells me eventually.

I flash him a brief smirk and clap him on the shoulder, then look pointedly to the steel door down the steps.

Taking the hint, he walks down and unlocks it.

"Grazie." I enter a narrow corridor and see several doors along the way.

By then, Anthony's all caught up, and he joins me at my side and asks quietly what I want him to do.

"Your mere presence is enough, tesoro." I take a drag from the cigarette and blow out some smoke. "If I want Nicola pissed, all I gotta do is have you with me."

That's no lie, either. Nicola's always resented Anthony for climbing the ranks so quickly. Especially after shit went down at the Dunes where Anthony saved my ass.

But, the real reason I wanted Anthony here is for the nostalgic in him. There's something he always carries on him, strapped to his ankle, despite
being outdated and the more modern and efficient piece he's got tucked underneath his belt at the base of his spine.

"Somehow I doubt all you want is Nico pissed, Pops," Anthony says with a wry grin. "I'm guessin' Max won't leave this basement alive."

Stubbing out my smoke, I check my watch. It's already four PM, but we still have two hours 'til dinner across town.

"Yo." Anthony jerks his chin at the guy standing guard outside the last door. "Did'ju strip them of weapons?"

"Yes, sir." The guy nods and twists the doorknob. "Anything else I can do?"

I shake my head no. "Just stay out here." I let Anthony enter first, and then I follow. Joseph walks in behind me, and the door clicks shut.

The room with bare, concrete walls is humid and dank, only a single light bulb illuminating the space, and I see Nicola and Max sitting at a plastic table in one of the corners. Hoodies thrown on the floor, sneakers unlaced, belts thrown on the table, and sweat darkening their t-shirts.

"Finally." Nicola stands up, lookin' relieved. "We've been here for hours, Uncle Jun."

Anthony chuckles, earning him a glare from his cousin.

"Le mie scuse," I apologize with an incline of my head. "I'll do better next time."

"That's not what I meant," Nicola replies quickly. He musta realized he's in some serious shit. "I'm really sorry about everything, sir. But the score was so good—"

"Quiet," I murmur.
Then I tilt my head at Max, a tall and skinny guy. Such potential. He's stone-faced, always thinking about the next job that will bring in more money, but...going against my orders and crashing someone else's turf? Who the fuck does he think he is?

I give Anthony a glance and jerk my chin at Max.

My son takes the hint and pulls out his piece, attaches the silencer, and aims it at Max's head.

"Uncle Jun." Nicola's eyes widen. Hopefully, he understands I ain't fucking around.

I ignore him though, and address Max. "You knew I wanted Nicola's crew in Vegas, si?"

Other than a small tic in his jaw, Max keeps his expression blank. "Yes, Mr. Maisano."

"And you worked Francis's grounds—my fucking godson—without speaking to him first?"

Max doesn't move an inch at that, and I take it as confirmation.

That's all I need to know. I give Anthony another nod, and a single shot pops off with a muted thud. It's quickly followed by a trail of blood slithering down Max's forehead, and he falls down to the floor.

"Shit," Nicola whispers, eyes full of panic.

"Now—let's talk." I step over the body and sit down where Max once sat. I gesture for Nicola to sit down too, and he complies with shaky movements. "How's the family?" Unbuttoning my suit, I reach into my pocket to retrieve my smokes.
Nicola appears unable to look away from Max's body. "G-good." He swallows nervously and finally looks me in the eye. "I didn't think it was a big deal, Uncle Jun. You gotta believe me."

"Oh, ma io ti credo." I tell him I believe him and get comfortable, inhaling from the smoke. "You definitely didn't think my instructions were a big deal."

"That's not—" he rushes out. "I meant—fuck. Everyone's safe, Junior. I wouldn't put anyone in the family at risk—"

"Not your fuckin' call to make," I cut in. "I specifically told you to stay in Vegas—your crew included. You went against my word, and not for the first time." I shake my head, fucking disappointed. "His blood is on your hands because of it." I point to Max.

"He recently got married, didn't he?" Joseph cocks his head at Nicola. "His wife—widowed at such a young age."

Nicola grits his teeth and looks to me again. "It won't happen again, sir. I swear."

I can tell he's furious, but more than that, scared for his life.

I'll take it. If he's stupid enough not to see why going against his own boss is wrong, at least I can have him pissin' in fear.

"You're family." I flick some ashes on the floor. "Isabella practically raised you back in the day. I bought you your first bike and got you and your sister into a good school. I'm gonna give you one chance." I point to the door. "One chance to walk outta here alive."

He gulps audibly and a bead of sweat trickles down his temple. "I'll do anything, sir."
I nod, hiding my true feelings, and face Anthony. "You still carry your .357?"

I know he does. I got it for him—a birthday present when he was younger. Back in the day, I favored that piece myself, but I've since moved on.

"Yeah." Anthony bends down and reveals the revolver strapped to his ankle, and he gives it to me.

It feels good in my hand. Heavy. Not like the semi-automatic handguns today that look futuristic compared to this one. In the '70s and '80s, I had a lotta fun with this model.

"You've heard of Russian roulette, haven't you, Nicola?" I don't look up from the gun. It's like riding a bicycle—it comes back to me quick—and I spin the cylinder before checking the chambers.

Six chambers. Six hollow point bullets.

When I don’t get an answer from my nephew, I look up.

He jerks his head in a nod, perspiration glistening on his forehead.

"Bene." I smile, absently playing with the hollow points in my hand. My smoke dangles between my lips. "Do you regret disrespecting me yet?" I insert a bullet back into one of the chambers. "We can go back a bit if you want. Like...the time I told you to stop screwing the strippers at Dawn because they either ended up with STDs or another one of your kids." I tuck one more bullet into the gun, keeping it hidden below the table. "Or the time you was late kicking up to Alec—and when you did, you was thirty Gs short." Three more bullets. "How about the time you arrived late to your aunt's birthday dinner coked up and reeking of pussy?" Isabella had hidden it well, but I could tell she was sad. "But...you're family."
I spin the cylinder once more, then place the gun on the table for him and take a final drag from the cigarette.

Outta the corner of my eye, both Anthony and Joseph raise their pieces—just in case Nicola tries something stupid.

"Will..." Nicola covers his mouth with his hand, close to throwing up. It's completely silent in the room while he fends off nausea. "If I do this...and I live...will I be forgiven?"

"You have my word." It's not a lie—technically. "One chance." Except, his definition of one chance isn't the same as mine. He thinks it's one round of Russian roulette.

I say it's one round where only one chamber is empty.

He stares at the Magnum.

"You shouldn't have fucked me over," I whisper, leaning forward. "Si raccoglie quello che si semina." I tell him you reap what you sow, then nod at the gun. "Now, get it over with."

Nicola lifts the gun with a trembling hand.

I'm dead inside. For this—moments like this one—it's impossible to show my heart. I didn't build this organization by cutting anybody slack. I demand respect, and the wiseguys who do good...they get rich. They have my respect in return, and protection under the Maisano name.

Everyone else don't mean shit, and those who betray me stop breathing.

"Fuck, this isn't fair," Nicola grits out. He glares at me and points the gun to his temple. Tears well up. "I can't believe you're makin' me do this, Uncle Junior."
I don’t reply. The son of a bitch has had this coming since I became boss. Even Jasper—his own goddamn father—hasn’t been able to set Nicola straight.

Nicola sucks in a breath and then pulls the trigger, a shot blaring out in the small room.

The next sound is his body falling forward, his head hitting the table.

Anthony blows out a breath. "Cazzo."

Pulling out my comb, I run it over my hair and stand up. "You take care of this, tesoro." I pocket the comb again, heading toward the door. "Tie up every loose end and don’t be late for dinner." Glancing back at my son, I add, "They disappear. For all we know, they’re still in Vegas."

Then I walk out with Joseph.

~oOo~

Back at the hotel, I have enough time to shower, change, and touch base with my brother. He tells me he and my capos are busy tryin’a find Vásquez and declines to join us for dinner. The good news is they’ve found a couple leads about Vásquez’s whereabouts, so Joseph and I are off to the restaurant in a better mood.

My son-in-law hands over the keys to the valet, and we enter the high-end, frou-frou establishment, scanning the place for our family. There. Isabella knows I prefer sitting in the back, and I spot two round tables occupied in a corner. One for my wife, kids, and their spouses, and one for my girls' drivers.

"Our party’s here already," Joseph tells the host.
Running a comb through my hair, I follow Joseph through the busy restaurant, catching my wife's smile as she spots me. Fucking beautiful.

"Hi, Dad." Elisa smiles up at me, and I dip down to kiss the top of her head.

I grin and nod hello to Dominic and Daniela, and aside from a small cut on my son's cheek, he's spotless in a gray suit. Kids are with their babysitters, and the only family member absent is Gabby, who's still resting up at the hospital.

"I ordered our wine, ciccino," Isabella says as I sit down between her and Anthony. "Oh, and Francis and Adam couldn't make it. Apparently work is more important to them than seeing me."

"Always with the drama, bell'uccellino." I lean over and give her a smooch, having missed her face today. "What's good to eat around hea'?" Picking up my menu, I pretend to scan it.

Across from me, Julia and Matteo are speaking quietly among themselves, and Elisa reaches over to squeeze Julia's hand in support.

I shake my head and refocus on the menu, the blurry lines making me knit my brows together.

"I think you'll like this one," Isabella says softly, pointing at an item. "They're famous for their prime rib."

I nod. "Sounds good to me." I put down the menu and drape an arm along the back of Isabella's chair. "Thank you," I murmur for only her to hear. She knows I refuse to use my reading glasses.

"Of course. My stubborn Juniuh." She cups my cheeks and gives me a sweet kiss. "How was your day?" She brushes her thumb across my lips, wiping off lipstick traces, no doubt.
"Good." I shrug and my mouth twists up. "Calm. What about yours?"

"Well, not calm." She smiles sadly and sighs, shaking her head. I catch a silky lock of her hair and wind it around my fingers. "Lunch with your sister was fine, and then we visited Gabriella. Dani and Julia were there too, so afterward I took them out for espressos." Pain flits across her soft features, and I don’t miss the emotions she blinks away. "Our daughta' really wants to leave, ciccino."

I shake my head, pissed that Julia's set on breaking our hearts like this. "She's staying in Vegas—end'a story."

"Maybe..." Isabella bites her lip, hesitating. "Maybe she needs it. Maybe we've sheltered her too much."

I smile and pick up her hand, brushing my lips to her knuckles. "I'mma pretend you didn’t just say that, hummingbird." There's nothing wrong with sheltering our baby girls. Sheltered means safe. Safe means I can sleep well at night. "Let's enjoy these last couple'a days in LA, and then we're all going home."

When the waiter arrives, we place our orders, and the private conversations between couples and siblings and in-laws morph into one where everyone's included, and it's about places in the world they wanna visit.

Isabella and I have traveled a lot with our children, so I don’t fucking get what this is about. What's so fucking wrong with staying at home?

"Will you take me to Paris?" Elisa bats her lashes at Joseph, who chuckles and whispers some shit in her ear. Whatever it was, she blushes and beams at him.

"Dominic and I have talked about going to Greece next summer," Daniela reveals. "It would be fun to go together, wouldn’t it?"
"Oh God, yes," Elisa gushes.

Dominic clears his throat and absently traces the rim of his wineglass. "Yeah, the shit I had in mind for Greece doesn’t exactly involve my sister, tesorina."

Anthony and Dominic bump fists.

"You’re just like your father," Isabella chides.

"I've never heard you complainin'." I raise a brow at her.

I enjoy about fifteen minutes of sightseeing when we're on vacation, and the rest I prefer to spend in bed with my wife. And the thing is, she's not that far behind. She starts off with a whole fucking list of activities, but once day two is over, she shucks the list and drags me to the bedroom, where we basically stay until it's time to go home.

"Isn't it my traveling we're here to discuss?" Julia asks.

I shoot the girl a glare. "Not unless it's a regular vacation. You wanna go off for a week or two and see Europe? Be my guest, but you ain't staying a whole fucking year."

The table grows silent as Julia and I stare at each other.

In my eyes, she's still this devilish little princess who got kicked outta Catholic school and yelled at her teachers that she was sick of being "nunified." She's the sweetheart who cockblocked me and Isabella at night when there was a thunderstorm.

She's supposedly a young woman now, but what if I don't agree to that? Huh?
When Anthony, Elisa, and Dominic left us, only one remained. Even Julia's moved outta the house now, but this is too much. Moving halfway across the world and falling in love?

No.

"I'm leaving with or without your permission, Dad," Julia says quietly.

"Oh!" I nod and chuckle humorlessly. "Then what the fuck are you even bringin' it up for? Just go—"

"Juniuh," Isabella warns, fire flashing in her eyes.

"It's stupid, that's what it is," Anthony tells Julia. "If you're off in another country, how the hell can we protect you?"

Exactly.

Julia bristles and stabs the table with a finger. "You can take that protection and shove—"

"I think—if I may..." Elisa covers Julia's hand on the table with her own, calming down her furious little sister. "Julia's not looking for protection." Elisa faces me and Isabella. "She's looking to find herself. She wants to grow up and be more independent, and it's impossible to do that with two older brothers and a father who constantly guard her."

I swallow my rage, taken aback by the maturity in Elisa's warm voice. She sounds like her mother, and it's difficult to not listen.

"I can keep her safe too, Mr. Maisano," Matteo reasons as the food arrives. "I wouldn't let any harm come to her."

I flick a hand at him, dismissive. It's becoming abundantly clear my daughters don't give a shit about my sanity, so fuck it. "Have fun in Europe," I say flatly, focusing on my food.
"Will this make you happy, topolino?" Isabella asks Julia, all while gently dabbing a napkin under her eyes.

Seeing my wife in tears makes my gut twist, and the food is suddenly tasteless.

"Oh Mom, it's not about that." Julia's bottom lip quivers. "I just need this. My home will always be with my family, but I need to explore on my own a bit first."

Isabella nods and sniffs, and Julia leaves her seat to round the table and hug her mother.

"I love you, Mama."

"Oh, I love you too, my sweet girl." Isabella composes herself, like only she can, and offers our baby girl a brilliant smile and cups Julia's cheeks. "I'm gonna miss you so much."

I tune them out, feeling extremely upset. I can tell Anthony's on the same page, and we stay quiet for the rest of dinner while the others discuss Julia's plans. There are promises of calls, emails, postcards, and letters. Dominic and Daniela make loose plans on meeting up with Julia and Matteo for one weekend in Amsterdam. Joseph and Elisa follow by suggesting a few days in Vienna or Paris.

"I can't fucking believe you, Dee." Anthony chuckles darkly, obviously disappointed. "You're actually on board with this shit? And you, Joey? You that pussy-whipped, huh?"

Joseph arches a brow.

"You better chill, bro." Dominic shakes his head, his mouth thinning. "I'm not happy with her leaving, but it beats the alternative. She'll hate our guts if we force her to stay."
"Whatever." Anthony throws his napkin on the table and stands up, buttoning his jacket. "I think I'm done hea'. Have a nice trip, piccolina."

"Anthony..." Julia looks pleadingly to him.

He ignores it, kisses Isabella's cheek, gives my shoulder a squeeze, and then he leaves.

I can't blame him. He's hurt, too.

"He'll come around, hon," Isabella reassures Julia.

I can't help but be irritated with my wife, 'cause I depend on her. I need her to be inconsolable so I can use that as an excuse to guilt-trip Julia into staying.

"What time are youse leavin' tomorrow?" Dominic asks.

Tomorrow? So soon... Fuck, my chest constricts.

"We leave for the airport at eight," Julia replies. She flicks a glance my way. "We were wondering if you and Mom would like to have breakfast before we leave."

I shrug and polish off my wine.

"Of course," Isabella murmurs. "How about we try the breakfast in the restaurant at our hotel?"

"Okay." Julia nods and looks down.

Matteo leans close and presses a kiss to her temple, to which I sigh heavily. Before this year is over, all my kids will be in their twenties, and I'm not ready. Three of them already have spouses they turn to for comfort these days, and now it looks like Julia's found her new place for comfort, too.
What about me?

I used to be the only man in my daughters' lives, and now I've been replaced.

"Dad, do you really not have anything to say to me?" Julia asks me, hurt.

Oh, I have a hundred things to say, but I won't. She's made up her mind, and I have no desire to look like a fool.

"It's your life, principessa." I mask my true feelings with a blank expression. "I don't know what you want from me." After wiping my mouth, I place the napkin next to my plate. "I'mma skip dessert." As I stand up, I pull out a wad of cash so Isabella can pay later. "Excuse me. I'll wait outside."

I hear Isabella calling after me, but I can't fucking do it. I head outside, sensing one of the drivers following.

Once outside, I light up a smoke and incline my head in acknowledgment, the driver—Johnny, I think—keeping his distance on the sidewalk.

The LA traffic is heavy but at a standstill, cars waiting in line for the valet and to just get the fuck outta here, but the sidewalk's pretty empty, at least.

Blowing some smoke into the night air, I try to think ahead. My princess is leaving, and while it tears me to pieces, there's still shit I can do.

As much as I hate to admit it, the only real reason I dislike Matteo is because he might mean more to Julia than I do. I believe he'll keep her safe, but, that said, I ain't takin' chances. Julia will always be my responsibility, and I'd kill myself if something happened to her and I wasn't doing everything I could to stop it.
A couple more drivers flank me outside the restaurant, though they give me a wide berth. I eye one of them—Michael, who's driving my wife around here in LA—and I wonder if it's time to break my rule about cell phones. To this day, I've never used one.

I'm too smart for that shit. Mark my words, the Feds are behind that invention. They wanna spy on people. But in this case, I don't really got nothin'a hide.

"You got one of those cell phones?" I jerk my chin at Michael.

He nods, confused, and steps closer. "Yes, sir. You need it?"

"Call my boy," I instruct. "Anthony. I gotta talk to him. You have his number?"

"I have it." Michael clicks away on his little phone and then hands it to me. "It's ringing, sir."

Oh. I grab it and place it to my ear, wondering if the phone's big enough or if I should move the mouthpiece closer when I speak. I've never seen anyone do that though, so I'm guessing it's all good.

"What?" My son answers the call in an irritated voice.

"It's Dad," I say lamely.

There's a beat of silence before he replies. "Where—where the fuck're you callin' from?" Now he doesn't sound annoyed, though. There's wonder in his tone.

"Never you mind," I bitch. "Where you at?"

"Just got back to the hospital," he mutters. "What's up?"
I get right to it. "Who can I trust enough to send to Europe to tail your sister?"

I can practically sense the wheels turning in my son's head.

"Depends," Anthony finally responds, pensive. "Trust's gonna cost ya money." True, the ones I trust are all top earners, but there's only one Julia. "Who're you rulin' out?"

"Capos and higher," I answer, taking a pull from the smoke.

Anthony hums, and I hear him closing a car door in the background. "You willing to piss off Zio Alec?"

Oh...

Oh, that's fucking brilliant.

Not the part where I piss of my brother, but...yes. I can trust Francis.

"Done," I say. "You call him. Tell him he can bring his new friend." I ain't calling Adam Francis's boyfriend—Madonn'—in front of outsiders. A shudder rips through me, but it's better than the past. Whenever I think about Francis and his twisted preferences, I repeat my wife's words to myself.

"Sometimes it's not about understanding, Juniuh. It's about accepting."

I married a wise woman, and she's right. Despite the fact that I don't understand Francis's way of thinking, I love him as much as I love the rest of my children.

"If you ever wanna send me to Europe, I'll be cool with that," Anthony says casually.
I grin down at the ground and scratch an eyebrow. "I'll keep that in mind. Now, call Francis and help him make all the arrangements. I'mma have Joseph call Alec to cancel our meeting later."

Anthony snickers. "Afraid to face your little brother?"

"Fuck you," I tell him. "I ain't afraid'a shit. Tell Francis I expect daily reports. We're talkin' twenty-four-seven surveillance hea'. Capisce?"

"Capisce," Anthony replies, going quiet for a moment. "I'm gonna miss her like hell, Dad."

Fuck. I can't even think about it. "Me too, tesoro. Me too." As I stub out the smoke, I rub my chest, willing the ache to go away. "If anything happens to her—God forbid." I do the Sign of the Cross and shake my head. "Maybe I'll let Mom drag me with her to church."

Anthony chuckles quietly. "Light a candle for me."

I hear someone approaching behind me, so I look over my shoulder and see Matteo.

"I'll call you later, son," I tell Anthony. "Give Gabby and the baby a smooch from me." Not knowing exactly how to end the call, I just hand back the phone to Michael. "Where're the others?" I ask Matteo.

"Ordering dessert to go," he answers, coming to a stop next to me. Hands in his pockets, a pensive expression, serious... "This wasn’t how I planned it, Mr. Maisano. I want you to know that. I never wanted to go behind your back."

Not really sure what he's referring to, I wait him out. Either he's talking about dating my princess, or it's this trip crap.
He opens his mouth to speak, but then closes it again. He sighs. "Mind if we speak in private back at the hotel?"

That was already the plan according to Joseph, and I guess it can't hurt to hear him out. Plus, I gotta talk to him about Vásquez, anyway.

"The hotel bar," I tell him. "Wait for me there."

~oOo~

"Juniuh?" Isabella calls from the bathroom in our suite.

"Yeah?" I loosen my tie and walk over to the window, peering out over LA's nightlife.

"I noticed you didn’t wear the suit I picked out for you today," she observes, but if she's in there, she knows I wore it. I just had to change out of it after we went to the safe house.

"Cut the shit, amore." I remove my jacket and toss it—and the tie—on the bed. "What do you really wanna ask?"

She huffs and exits the bathroom. "Why's there a bloodstain on it?"

There's my nosy wife.

Rolling up the sleeves of my white shirt, I walk over to her and squeeze her to me. "I love you." I nuzzle the soft skin of her cheek, inhaling her sweet scent. "Have I told you that lately?"

"Ciccino," she complains.

I nip at the tip of her nose. "You know better than to ask." With a slap to her hot ass, I march out of the bedroom. "I'mma go downstairs and have a drink with Matteo."
"Just a sec, Juniuh." Her voice has grown sweeter now, and I pause in the hallway and look to her. She's holding up a container with whatever dessert she ordered at the restaurant, and my eyes get stuck on the satin robe she slowly loosens, exposing a sliver of her cleavage. "Should I eat this in bed alone...?"

Mannaggia. I bite my knuckles, wondering how the hell she's still got her claws so deep in me. Over twenty-five years together, and I come running like a fucking lapdog. But fucking look at her—so gorgeous. Sinful.

"You got an ulterior motive?" I narrow my eyes at her, wanting to get my facts straight before I jump her. If it's just sex, goddamn glorious. But if she plans on hashing shit out while seducing me, I ain't interested. Much.

"Why don’t you join me in bed and find out," she purrs.

Cazzo.

She disappears, though not before making sure I see the robe landing on the floor.

I check my watch as I war with myself, and who the fuck am I kidding? Like there's a question. Matteo can wait a little while longer.

Unbuttoning my shirt, I head into the bedroom again, only to come to an abrupt stop. Mother of fucking God. My mouth goes dry. My cock thickens, all blood surging south.

Lying in the middle of the bed, Isabella's deliciously naked, her head thrown back, one finger circling her clit while she sticks another finger dipped in whipped cream into her mouth.

She hums.

I eye the to-go box with cake next to her.
So I pounce.

I crawl over her exposed body, shedding clothes and dropping kisses as I go. As I kick off my pants and draw my nose along her inner thigh, she giggles huskily and extends two fingers.

"Taste, ciccino."

I'm more interested in tasting her pussy, but I close my lips around those little digits and smile, tasting creamy frosting with a citrusy twist. "Good. But not as good as your pussy."

"That's some compliment," she laughs softly. Then a moan slips out when I trace her wet slit with my tongue. "Oh fuck, Juniuh..."

That's it.

It doesn't take me many minutes to have her writhing beneath me. I eat her out greedily, sucking on that clit and fingering her. She loves it when I rasp my day's worth of scruff along her sensitive lips, and combined with tonguing her clit, she stiffens and clenches tightly around three fingers.

Knowing she's close, I stop what I'm doing and shift higher up her body. I stroke my cock and ignore her gasped pleas, as sexy as they are. For the fuck of it, I slap the head of my dick against her clit 'cause it's hot to see her juices coat me.

Then I've had it with the teasing, and I push home in one hard thrust.

Fuck, yeah.

"So damn good," she whimpers. "I just have one favor to ask you."

"Here we fucking go." I can't believe her. Part of me knew she was gonna work this angle since my mind's on fucking my wife, but Christ. "Spit it out, Isabella."
"Tomorrow..." She lifts her head and kisses my neck sensually. "Don’t let Julia leave without telling her you love her and support her." Cupping my cheeks, she forces me to look her in the eye. "She's young, Juniuh. She may think she doesn’t need your approval, but she certainly wants it. You're her daddy—always."

I grunt, grinding my cock in Isabella's wetness. "Yeah, well. Right now that daddy's tryin'a get laid. Can we talk about this later?"

"Sure..." She arches a brow. "Maybe we can fuck later, too. In fact, I'm feelin' awfully sleepy all of a sudden." She yawns for effect and lets her eyes close.

I can't help but chuckle. "You don’t know me well if you think I need you to be awake for this." To prove my point, I pull out and slam into her pussy hard, and fuck, goddamn amazing.

"No, but you want me to be awake," she replies in a sexy tone. "So I can tell you how much I love that cock..." Oh God, yeah. "Touch you." That’s what I'm talking about. "Kiss you." Seduced by the witch I married, I begin to move a little faster and a little harder. "Worship you."

"I love it when you worship me," I groan. Her delectable tits jiggle with each movement, so I dip down and capture a nipple between my lips, sucking it hard.

She hisses in pleasure and coats her other nipple with frosting from the cake, and I dive for that shit.

"What do you say, my love?" she murmurs. "Can you make peace with Julia before she leaves?"

I stare hungrily, my mouth watering, as she leaves a trail of crumbles and frosting along her chest, neck, and even her soft, kissable lips. Inside her, my cock throbs, and my balls start to feel heavier.
"Yeah..." Madonn', I can't get enough. I lick, bite, suck, and kiss. "Yeah." I fuck her harder, speeding up until I have her moaning and gasping uncontrollably under me. "Lemme taste that with your pussy," I pant.

Her breathing hitched, and she swirls a finger over her clit, then sticks it into my mouth with traces of cake.

"Perfect." I push in deep and suck her finger clean. Then I get her mouth and slide my tongue along hers. It always gets me off to have her taste herself. I don’t know why, but it's fucking hot.

"So—so, you promise?" she asks, and I can tell she's close. "You'll talk to her?"

"Yeah, I fuckin' promise," I grunt. "Get on all fours." I back away, breathing heavily, and I'm both annoyed and beyond turned on. Then again, I play dirty in my everyday life, so I guess I can live with my wife playing dirty in bed.

Isabella throws me a salacious grin over her shoulder and wriggles her ass at me.

Unable to stay mad, I smack that ass and feel my mouth twisting into a smirk. "If it weren't for that rock on your finger, I'd call you all kinds of names right now." I shake my head at her, amused.

She just blows me a kiss before facing forward.

And I grip my cock, guide it to her pussy, and ram into her.

I fuck her jackhammer-style until I'm about to burst. Jesus, all my muscles strain in protest, but no matta'. I'll rest later. Now I just wanna get us off, so I slow down a bit and reach around her to rub her wet clit between my fingers.
The sounds she makes are enough to drive me insane with lust.

"Oh my God, now," she cries out.

I hear the breath she sucks in and feel how she stiffens. Her pussy constricting around my cock is the last straw, and I let go with a groan, spilling my come into her.

"Holy hell, Juniuh."

I can't talk yet. Collapsing on top of her, I try to catch my breath. Shivers run down my spine, and all I wanna do is throw the covers over us and breathe us in. Sex and dessert—whatta win.

"I think I'll talk to Matteo another time," I mutter, yawning. "Let's cuddle."

Isabella hums and turns around in my arms, weaving her fingers through my hair. My eyes close. "You should go talk to him."

"Shoulda, woulda, coulda." Fuck that. This is more important.

"Juniuh." Now there's a light warning in her voice. "Go talk to him, please. Give him your blessing. He'll feel better after that, and you know he's good enough for Julia."

Do I?

"Why you gotta break my balls?" I grumble, cracking my eyes open again. "They started dating without my fucking blessing; I'm sure they can continue dating without it, too. Not my goddamn job to ease their guilt."

"Ciccino," she says in that reasoning tone, "when it comes to Julia, you know that the harder we push, the farther she'll run. And this is her life. We gotta let her live it. If we don't...? If we don't support her in this, who's to say she won't come back married or knocked up?" She taps my nose when I try to glare at her. "Anthony, Elisa, and Dominic got married in the
same church you and I did. I want Julia to do the same when that day comes. Don’t make me miss out on her big day."

"Mother of Christ!" I groan and get off the bed, irritated. "She just started seeing the bastard—now you got them married and expectin' their first kid? Mamma mia, someone give me strength."

Isabella snorts a giggle and pushes herself up on her elbows. "Given this family's track record, would that be weird?"

She's got a point, but fuck me if I'm admitting that. "I'll go talk to the motherfucker." I pick up my clothes from the floor and start putting them back on. "You better be awake when I get back. I deserve a second round after all this chop bustin'."

"I'll be right here, baby." She pats the bed, lookin' all delicious. Hair messy from our fuck, a sheet draped lazily over her upper body, sexy legs on display.

"Women," I mutter and leave the bedroom.

~oOo~

Having left my suit jacket upstairs, I don’t got my comb with me, so I just run my fingers through my hair as I exit the elevator.

A couple of our drivers are sitting in the lobby drinking coffee and shooting the shit.

Across the marbled lobby, I enter the bar that couldn’t look stuffier and more like an office. In fact, I saw this murder-mystery documentary on Discovery once, and the narrator sat in an office that had the same leather chairs, green reading lamps, and pretentious dark wood furniture. Just...instead of desks, these are lower and come with a stack of coasters.
It's not difficult to find Matteo. Aside from two Oriental businessmen at the bar, Matteo's alone in there, seated in one of the groups of leather chairs by the window that faces the pool in the back.

I sit down across from him in a leather chair and jerk my chin at the bartender some twenty feet away. "Two bourbons," I tell him, and Matteo's head snaps up and he quickly tucks away his phone. "Top shelf for me and bottom shelf for this mameluke."

The bartender quirks an eyebrow and grins faintly.

Matteo clears his throat and shrugs at the bartender. "I'm dating his daughter."

"Ah." The bartender gets it.

I slide my gaze to Matteo and push the sleeves of my shirt past my elbows. "All right, kid. You wanted to speak to me in private."

He nods. "Just got a message from Joseph." He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, so I do the same. "I'm not as used to speaking in code as you guys are, but this can only mean one thing, I assume."

He shows me a message on his phone that reads, **DE flushed out the frog. Awaiting recipe.**

I smirk at that, proud of my baby boy. Figured Dominic would be the one to find Vásquez. He must’ve headed out again right after dinner. And if Francis has learned about his departure tomorrow, I bet he was there too, wanting to get as much done as possible before he left.

"DE stands for Dominic Edward," I explain quietly. "Recipe is just instructions. And the frog...?" I chuckle. "You've never seen Scarface?"

Colombians are called many things.
"It's been a while," Matteo says wryly. "Want me to type out a reply on your behalf?"

Well, I sure as shit ain't typing it. "Yeah." I rub my chin, phrasing my words. "Okay, write this: The chef says we have enough. Release it at 9th."

"Um." Matteo types it out, but I can tell he's got questions. "Release it?"

I suck my teeth. "You didn’t pay attention in school? 9th ain't some street number. It's the ninth circle of hell. Underground. Our frog will disappear."

Matteo chuckles. "Clever. All right, sent."

At that point, the bartender stops by to give us our drinks, and I observe Matteo in silence until the bartender's gone again.

"There's a place reserved for you in hell too, if you don’t bring back my daughter in one piece." I sit back and take a small swig of my bourbon, and Matteo stares at me, probably wondering if this is my way of okaying the trip. I guess it is, but I have demands. "My wife wants me to give you my blessing, but since I don’t know what liberties you and Julia would take with that, I won't. I'll tell you this instead." I level him with a hard stare and rest my arms along the armrests. "You won’t marry her while youse're away. You won't get her pregnant. No bungee jumping or any other shit that can get her killed. If you visit Italy..." A touristy visit in Rome is nothing, but all it takes is a wrong turn and they'll reach bad turf. My name isn't unfamiliar there. "Stay with family. My wife has cousins on her mother's side in Sicily, and Alec's wife—Gemma? She's got plenty of family in the region. Oh, and stay away from Eastern Europe. Too shifty."

I gotta give Matteo credit. He doesn’t make any jokes about the leash I got on Julia or dismiss my warnings. He nods seriously and agrees to my terms.
"Her safety is as important as her happiness to me." He peers down into his glass and swirls the amber liquid around a little. "I love her. We haven't actually said those words yet—I don't wanna rush her."

That’s good, I guess. But if I know Julia, she's in love with the motherfucker, too. Whether she's realized it or not. She may be a daredevil and act without thinking at times, but she only trusts people she loves, and she clearly trusts Matteo with her life.

The romantic in me is happy for my princess. She gets to go to Europe, and who knows where she'll be when she realizes she's head over heels. Paris? London? Barcelona? It'll just be the two of them—no obligations, no arranged marriages, no bullshit.

It's more than what Isabella and I got.

We've seen some of the most exotic places in the world since then, but our first five years together weren't easy. I had to hide my children, deny my love for Isabella, keep her on the side, and show up at family functions with a society-bred little cunt I'd been forced to marry.

"I'm curious," Matteo murmurs. "You haven't once asked Julia about money for the trip."

My mouth twists up, and I take another swig from my drink. "I have eyes all over Vegas, kid. I know she's got plenty enough to go around Europe and then some."

Admittedly, it wasn’t long ago I learned about Julia's business with AJ—my brother's eldest. They've been hustling at rave parties and casinos. But I suppose a part of me knew it was nothing I could stop without pushing Julia outta my life. Instead I made sure she was tailed. Her brothers always knew where she was at, and they sent people along to tail my daughter and nephew when they were out.
"So you know about the casino?" Matteo looks surprised. "Christ, Julia still wants to chop off my head for wanting to come clean to you."

I incline my head. "I trust that will stop now, though."

"Oh, it definitely will." Looks like the kid's got balls enough to handle Julia. That's good. He needs it as much as my sons' wives do. "That was what brought Julia to LA, you know."

I lift a brow, making sure he knows he's got my attention.

"I caught her and AJ working a casino," he goes on. "I was honest—told her I had to tell you. She was fucking fast to call me a rat." He chuckles quietly, and I can't help but grin. "She chased me down in LA to stop me."

And that went so well.

"I appreciate you wanting to tell me," I admit. "If you and Julia become a permanent thing, I won't expect you to tell me everything, of course. But just like I told Joseph once... If my girls are ever in danger, I demand to be the first to know."

"Of course, sir."

Knowing the size of Matteo's trust fund, I got no issues closing the subject with, "Lastly, my wife wants all her children in the same neighborhood. When the day comes, you'll find a house within a two-street radius of mine."

Matteo looks a bit taken aback by that, but no matta'. He might as well learn. Maisanos have always worked fast once we've found our spouses, either by having kids or getting married. Julia holding out on both for a year will be a miracle, though I trust none'a that will happen in Europe.
A man is only as good as his word, and it's up to Matteo to show he deserves Julia.

Wanting to get this over with so I can return to my wife, I inquire about the night everything went to shit at the club. I've already gotten Francis's version, and I'm pleased to learn that Matteo's isn't different.

It's all over and done with now—Vegas is safe again—and I'm itching to go home.

As we head up in the elevator a while later, I feel calmer. Saddened as fuck to say goodbye to Julia tomorrow, but confident enough in Matteo to trust him with my daughter.

"Thank you for giving me a chance, Mr. Maisano." The elevator stops at his floor, and Matteo holds it open while extending his other hand to me.

My eyes flick between his hand and his gaze.

*Don't let me down, kid.*

"Take care of her." I grasp his hand firmly. "Keep her safe, be faithful, love her the way she deserves."

"Always."

Then it's just me in the elevator, and I blow out a heavy breath.

Who knew I'd end up with a fucking cop in my family one day?

* 

The morning after, I find myself holding Isabella's hand in a death grip as we make our way to the airport.
Breakfast was somber. I made peace with Julia but kept fairly quiet. Matteo didn’t talk much either—Julia and Isabella wouldn’t let anybody get a word in edgewise.

More promises of phone calls, emails, and letters. "Take pictures of everything, topolino." This time, I promised Isabella we could meet up with Julia and Matteo one weekend. "I swear, Mom. And you gotta send pictures of the babies and all the parties we're gonna miss."

"I think this will be good," Isabella murmurs thickly, peering out the window. "I'm gonna miss her so much, but she needs this."

I don’t reply.

Right before we left the hotel, Anthony called Julia. She and Matteo took a separate car to the airport so she could have some privacy when she spoke to her brother on the phone. Hopefully, there's more peacemaking going on the car ahead of us, 'cause I know Julia will feel better once she has Anthony's support.

Before long, we arrive at LAX, and Isabella and Julia are quick to burst into tears and hug.

I help Matteo with their luggage, which is surprisingly light for such a journey. Although, I've heard they wanna carry few belongings and "live day-to-day."

Haven't I worked my ass off since I was a teenager so my own children would be set for life?

Kids these days, man...

With their luggage on a cart, Matteo and I watch as Isabella and Julia finish their goodbyes.
"So..." Matteo clears his throat and speaks for only me to hear. "Who've you ordered to follow Julia and me around?"

I slide my gaze to him, mildly surprised he figured that one out. "Have a good trip, Matteo." I smile and shake his hand.

He chuckles. "Thank you. I will."

I look back to the girls just in time to see Julia coming at me and throwing her arms around my middle.

"I'm gonna miss you, Daddy."

Christ.

A kick in the gut woulda hurt less. "I'm gonna miss you too, principessa." I squeeze her to me and press a kiss to the top of her head. "Conterò I giorni." I tell her I'll be counting the days.

She smiles up at me, and I brush away her tears, feeling way too fucking close to crying myself.

"I love you." She smirks crookedly and sniffs. "You'll always be number one, I promise."

Fuck me, my eyes burn. "Oh, my little sweetheart. Thank you for lying to me." I manage a weak smile before I hug her to me again and screw my eyes shut. "I love you, too."

Then it's time for them to check in, and I bring Isabella close to me as Julia and Matteo get their tickets and passports from a carry-on.

"We'll see you soon," Julia says, smiling through her tears as they walk toward the check-in desk. "Love you, guys!"

I'm unable to form a single word unless I wanna fall apart like a woman.
"Have the time of your life, topolino!" Isabella calls after her.

We get a beaming smile in return, and then there were two.

As discreetly as possible, I rub my eyes with my thumb and forefinger and sniffle quietly. *Today can go fuck itself.* Our children are all grown up. I'm not in the comfort of my own home. Isabella can't cook for me. I miss my goddamn robe.

"Oh, ciccino." Isabella hugs me tightly. "What do you wanna do? Please don’t tell me you have work right now."

No, fuck that. Even if I did, I'd be canceling. "We're going home," I manage. "I wanna be home and surrounded by grandchildren who can piss me off while I'm tryin'a catch up on my shows."

"Home sounds wonderful." She pops a kiss to my chin. "Love you, Juniuh."

"So much." A sliver of contentment seeps into me, all thanks to this bunny I snatched up in '75. "Let's go home, hummingbird."

She hums. "Yes—" Her brows knitting together, she peers behind me. "Odd. I could've sworn I just saw Francis and Adam heading into the airport."

"You're seeing things now, woman," I tell her. "Come on, let's go."
"Her Finale."

May 2003

(4 years after Grand Finale, some 3 years and 4 months after the Grand Finale epilogue, 3 years after Alec's future take, 1 year after Julia's and Frankie's future takes.)

Hummingbird's POV.

I smile out the kitchen window when I see Dominic and Daniela arriving. True to Dani's word, my son looks irritated as hell, which is why they're here early. She wants to speak to me in private about her husband.

I hear the front door being ripped open, and then Dominic's booming voice. "Your favorite son is hea', Mom!"

"Anthony?" I ask lightly, continuing cutting up vegetables for the skewers. "That would be weird—their flight doesn't land 'til noon."

Julia and Matt are coming home today—at long last. It's been a whole year. Approximately eight months since Junior and I met up with them for a quick weekend getaway in Tuscany. But now they're coming home, including Anthony and Gabriella, who've traveled with them for the last week in Scotland and Ireland.

Gabriella and Julia sent gorgeous photos of castles, green hills, and rustic cottages.

Anthony and Matt sent one photo together. It was of the two of them holding up beers, wearing deadpan expressions, and the photo was attached in an email with the title "Just a bunch of micks here."

Boys.
"Why you bein' mean?" Dominic walks up behind me and steals a stuffed mushroom.

I clear my throat pointedly and give him my cheek.

He dutifully kisses it and then goes back to sulking and bitching. "Oggi tutti mi odiano." He says everyone's hating on him today.

"Oh, pooh." I just barely refrain from rolling my eyes. Whatever it is, it can't be that bad. "You can go help Daddy by the grill. Take a couple beers wit'chu." I see Daniela entering the kitchen, snapping her phone shut. Maybe she's talked to their housekeeper or something.

All the kids will be with babysitters today, and I'm torn. I love the sound of little feet running in my house, especially if they're chasing their nonno around. But it'll be nice too, welcoming Julia home with only adults present.

We'll be able to focus more on her.

"Maybe Dad can take pity on me," Dominic grumbles. He grabs two beers from the fridge and then leaves with a glare sent Daniela's way.

"Wine's over there, honey." I nod at the kitchen island behind me. "Start talkin'.'"

She sighs and fills two glasses for us. "Elisa and I went out yesterday," she says, getting another cutting board. "We had drinks at her and Joseph's before we headed out. The guys stayed back to play pool and have a few beers." I nod her along and hand her a knife; she gets started with the onions. "It was so fun to be just us girls for once."

"Uh-huh." I chuckle, having a feeling I know where this is going. "So someone hit on you, and now my son is furious."
"Close. I mean yes—that is what happened, but..." She huffs, her accent becoming more pronounced when she's irritated. It's so cute. "Elisa and I were about to leave. Joseph and Dominic were picking us up at one outside the bar, so we were just going to the bathroom quick before. And right outside the bathroom while I was waiting for Elisa, a man cornered me. I told him I was not interested; he didn’t care. I told him I was married; he kept flirting and getting close. So I told him my last name, and he flew out of there like his ass caught fire."

I figured that was coming. Dropping a casual "Maisano" in this town works wonders.

"It angered me, though—that he did not care about what I wanted, but my husband's name makes him run away just like that." Daniela pauses and takes a sip of her wine. "I guess I did not hide my anger fast enough. Dominic noticed as soon as Elisa and I stepped outside. And I did not want the whole drama, Bella. I knew if I told him the truth, he'd go after the man."

"He would, yes." I pour mushrooms, bell peppers, and the onions Daniela has finished into a large bowl with oil. "So what did you tell him?" I reach for tray of seasoning and add herbs, garlic, and a little bit of soy into the bowl.

"I froze," she admits. "I am usually quick on my feet, but I was just so annoyed. So..." A deflating sigh escapes her. "Now Dominic thinks I am hiding something for him, and of course he believes it is much worse than it truly is."

Well, of course. The Maisano men claim they loathe drama, but perhaps that’s 'cause they're brimming with theatrics all their own.

"Do I tell him the truth or is it too late?" she asks me.
"Troppo tardi per quello, cara mia." I tell it's too late for that and turn on the water to wash my hands. "What you need is a cover story. Shouldn't be too hard to find."

God knows I've become a master of cover stories when it comes to my own husband.

"I don't think I have ever lied to Dominic," she confesses. "Nothing big, anyway."

After wiping my hands on my apron, I pat her arm and smile sympathetically. "Don't worry. Elisa was nervous the first time she lied to Joseph, too. And, for the record, this isn't big." I lean my hip against the counter and bring my wineglass to my mouth, taking a sip. "You know how our husbands provide for us and protect us by breaking who knows how many laws?"

She nods.

"We do the same in a way," I say. "If you wanna get technical, I break my wedding vows every time I lie to Juniuh, but it's for his own good. I protect his ego—hell, I feed it. The less he knows about other men making eyes at me..." I shrug. "It's not like our husbands come home and give us the rundown on every woman who hit on them."

"True," she concedes. "What else do you hide, my sweet mother-in-law?" Mischief lights up her beautiful eyes.

I grin. "We all have our skeletons, Daniela. Our men's are hidden in the desert. I keep mine up here." I tap my temple.

A wiseguys's wife has to be shrewd and look out for herself. If something happened to Junior—God forbid—I have no doubts I'd be well taken care of. But having my own backup plan doesn’t hurt. I'd be a shell of a woman
without my husband, but I'd have the means to survive. Those means are buried in the yard, and he doesn’t know.

The time before I became Junior's goomah doesn’t exist for him, which works in my favor. He knows very well I slept with customers before he snatched me up, but if he thought a bit further... Let's just say that if Junior wanted a blowjob by the women he hired at his own club back in the day, who's to say Felix didn’t demand the same at his establishment?

Junior also doesn’t know that I sometimes slip a sleeping pill in his coffee when he's exhausted but dead set on working more.

Hey, he's my fucking husband. I want him well rested and healthy.

Same applies for his cigarettes. I stock his packs with light smokes whenever I can. Beats the regular Marlboros.

"Would you mind helping me with a simple lie for Dominic?" Daniela's sheepish question brings me back to the moment.

"Of course!" I smile and walk over to the fridge, taking out the meats that've been soaking in marinade since this morning. "Make it something you're embarrassed about—enough to hide it from him." I hum as I ponder the options. "Are youse still set on not giving me more grandbabies?"

"We have four, Bella." She widens her eyes. "Yes, we are set."

Okay, okay, she doesn’t have to throw it in my face like that. Nino—oh, the most precious boy. In a couple years, he'll start noticing girls, but for now I'm his favorite Nonna. Also the only, but whatever. And Lia...she's Junior's darling. DJ is as wild as Dominic was as a baby, and DJ's twin sister Ellie is the only one who can calm him down, which is such a beautiful thing to witness.
A fifth couldn’t hurt, could it?

After all, the twins are four years old already. And they have their housekeeper to help out. They’re not crowded by baby screams no more.

"I see," I answer. "Well, you could always tell him you feared you was pregnant. Perhaps you and Elisa talked about it at the bar, and you got worried. You panicked and miscounted your cycle, and you’d just figured out your mistake when Dominic and Joseph showed up, and you were still rattled from it."

"Cazzo, pensi in fretta," Dani mutters, saying I think fast. "Why would I hide that, though? If it happened, I’d probably laugh it off when I realized I miscounted."

"That one’s easy." I turn to her with a smirk. "Of course you’d be rattled, honey. You’d be terrified that Dominic would get mad or get tired of you. It would never happen, of course, but hearing you say that—that you was so worried—would make him feel like a king."

"You’re so devious, Bella," she laughs. "But you definitely know your son. He always puffs out his chest when I stroke his ego."

"They are surprisingly fragile, despite the bragging those men can do," I agree. "So do you have your lie or should we keep thinking?"

"I think we're good," she replies with a firm nod. "Besides, it is half true. I do not believe he’d leave me if I turned up pregnant again, but I would certainly work to make sure he did not have to suffer."

Interesting...

I keep that little tidbit to myself and move on to finishing the potato salad I started preparing last night.
When the doorbell rings, Daniela offers to get it, and I peer out the window to see Francis and Adam.

Oh, those boys. Like I don’t know why I've seen so little of them this past year?

Junior can try, but I am not fooled. It was no coincidence that Francis and Adam "stopped by to visit" only when Julia and Matt had company in Europe. The first time, it was Elisa and Joseph. They went to Europe, and suddenly Francis turned up with Adam. Then Dominic and Daniela flew to see Julia in Greece, and Francis showed up again.

Like he was on some break from fucking babysitting. In Europe.

"There's my favorite woman in the world," Francis says as he enters the kitchen, and I guess he's ready to kiss up. "How can you look younger every time I see you when you're married to Junior?"

"Nice try." I give him my cheek, and he kisses it. "Don’t let Elisa hear I'm your favorite." Next, I smack his chest. "I haven't seen you in months—what's your excuse, son?"

"I'm just gonna talk to Dominic, Bella," Daniela pipes up before ducking out again.

"Ouch." He winces and rubs the spot I smacked. "I've been busy, Bella. You know how it is. LA's crazy."

"LA!" I scoff, nodding. "That’s fuckin' rich." Adam enters the kitchen too, and I'm quick to send him a scowl. "And I suppose you've been too busy in LA to visit as well, huh?"

Adam grins and gives me a hug. "Blame your husband for giving us so much work."
That was clever. And sneaky. He's speaking the truth, technically, since I'm sure it was Junior who sent them to Europe. Not sure I'd call it work, though...

"How's your grandmother?" I ask Adam, inspecting them both. They look happy, healthy...in love. So precious.

"Almost as violent as you are." Adam winks.

Francis chuckles and leans back against the kitchen island, his hand disappearing behind Adam's lower back.

"You clearly have no respect for your elders. None'a youse—" My voice cuts off when I see the gold band on Adam's left ring finger. "What's this?" I grab it, and I'm fast to snatch up Francis's left hand, too. Yes, another ring there. Looking up, I search their eyes and their goofy fucking smiles. "You didn’t get married without me there, did you?"

God, don’t cry, Bella.

"No!" Francis rushes out. "No—it’s not like that, Bella. I promise."

Oh, good. I don’t know the laws in Europe—maybe same-sex marriage is allowed there? I've only looked into it briefly in our country, and I know they can do that whole domesticated partnership thing in California where they live.

I do want them married—it's only right—but I want to be there, goddammit.

"We can't get married in the US, Bella." Adam's smile is both wistful and holds a flash of confusion, as if he's keeping up the charade of where they've been the past year.
"Before God? Of-fucking-course you can," I argue, getting riled up. "Who gives a shit about the lawmakers. Retarded motherfuckers—"

"Oh!" Francis cracks up and slaps a hand over my mouth. "Check you out, li'l Maisano."

"Bah." I wave that off and collect myself. "One day—mark my words. We can't have youse livin' in sin forever. But anyway—" I blow out a breath, slightly calmer now. "So...you're engaged or what?"

Francis smiles at Adam, then faces me again. "Yeah. This bastard asked me one night in London—oh, cazzo." While his eyes widen, mine light up in triumph.

"I knew it!" I shout.

"London's a new restaurant in LA," Adam adds quickly.

"Pffft," is my response. Then I hug my boys tightly, happy about their engagement. It's a first step, at least. "Congratulations, you two. And I'm sure you had an amazing time in Europe."

They don't deny it.

Fuckin' knew it.

~oOo~

By the time Elisa and Joseph have arrived, we've all moved outside, and we're just waiting for Julia, Matt, Anthony, and Gabriella. Junior sent a car to have them picked up a while ago.

The skewers are on the grill, the table's been set, Junior's nursing his third beer—pretending not to be antsy about his princess's homecoming—Dominic and Joseph are in the pool with Francis and Adam, and Daniela and Elisa are speaking quietly among themselves.
"What time is it?" Junior asks for the tenth time in the past hour.

I hug his bicep and kiss his shoulder. "They'll be here soon, ciccino."

He nods with a dip of his chin and kisses the top of my hand. "I'm glad it's just us today."

Me, too. The rest of the family—children included—will be here tomorrow. That includes my brother, who's very depressed these days. We still don't know where Nicola is, though experience tells me no one just disappears like that. Which saddens me incredibly. I know Nicola isn't—or wasn't?—a good husband, barely a decent father, and neither Junior nor Jasper were pleased with his work, but... He's my nephew. I love him dearly, and I will always remember the time we had together after Jasper got thrown in prison and I moved out here with Nicola and Lucia.

How our lives changed...

"Why you lookin' sad, hummingbird?" Junior lifts my chin. "Anything I can do?"

I smile and shrug dismissively. "Just thinkin' about Nicola."

"Ah." He hugs me to him, resting his chin at the top of my head. "Technically, there's always hope he'll turn up, but..."

Yeah. But.

"Okay—no sadness today." I shake it off internally and smile up at my husband. "Kiss me."

"Gladly." He dips down and gives me a hard smooch, gently cupping the back of my neck.

"Mmm, I feel better." I hum. "Thank you, ciccino."
"Anytime, my love." He takes another smooch and smacks my ass. "Get me another beer, will you? I'mma check the grill."

I'm halfway to the kitchen when Daniela catches up to me in the hallway.

"I thought I'd let you know that Dominic took it well, Bella," she says, her lips twisting up. "Maybe a little too well." She arches a brow.

"Oh?" I tilt my head innocently. "What did he say?"

"Well, to quote him..." Daniela clears his throat. "'Tesorina, not only would I never leave you, but right now I kinda wanna bend you over that table and knock you up the way only I can.'"

How romantic...

I withhold my victorious grin and smooth down my dress. "Ah. Yes. Don’t you know by now that my sons enjoy reclaiming what's theirs whenever their wives have doubts?"

"But I do not have doubts!" she whisper-shouts. I’d take pity on her panicked expression if it weren't for the cautious hope and relief in her eyes.

"That’s what you told him, though." It's getting difficult to hide my smirk.
"You were afraid he'd leave, no?"

"You—" She breaks off, no doubt understanding just how devious I can be. "You played me?" She squeaks.

"Oh, no." I cup her cheek gently. "I only put an idea into your heads—something that was probably there already, to tell you the truth."

"I should be mad," she chuckles shakily.
"Shoulda, woulda, coulda." I grin and kiss her cheek before continuing on to the kitchen.

In some ways...it takes a boss to be married to one.

~oOo~

I've just handed Junior his beer when I hear the front door opening inside the house. It's followed by, "Mom! I'm home!"

"Oh, good Christ." I place a hand on my chest, my heart hammering. Everyone's quick to rush indoors, and Junior and I seek each other out to join the others as a united front.

"Why am I so fucking nervous?" he asks quietly, holding my hand tightly.

"Because you fear she wants more traveling," I murmur, voicing my own fear.

We walk to the hallway where Julia is engulfed in a hug by Elisa and Dominic. Joseph greets Matt warmly with a handshake, same with Anthony, and Gabriella and Dani hug, too.

The sight of Julia takes the breath outta my lungs, and judging by the stunned expression on my husband's face, he feels the same.

Our baby girl has grown up. Not all that much has changed in her appearance, but there's something... The way she carries herself. The way she speaks to her siblings. She's gained a few pounds, and in all the right places. At the same time, her face looks leaner, more mature. Her eyes hold experience and wisdom that weren't there before. There's confidence in her posture. A beaming smile.
With tears rolling down my cheeks, I let go of Junior and steal Julia away from Dominic and Elisa. I hug her so tight, and I can't help but cry. I've missed a lot, but I'm so, so incredibly happy for her.

"Mom," she whispers tearfully. "God, I've missed you."

"Words can't even describe." I sniffle and cup her cheeks. "So beautiful—oh, my baby." I hug her again.

I feel Junior's hand along my lower back, and soon his arms wrap around both me and Julia. "Welcome home, principessa." He kisses the top of Julia's head, his eyes closed. Always closed, so he doesn't show anyone he's capable of emotions. God forbid.

*Men.*

"I missed you, Dad." Julia hugs him back, and I smile at the serene look on her face when she rests her head on his collarbone. "I've had the most awesome time, but I'm so glad to be home."

The relief is evident on Junior's face. "You stayin', then?" He looks down at her and palms her cheeks. "No more misery for your old man?"

"This is where I belong," she says simply with a grin.

He huffs a hoarse chuckle and shakes his head. "I fucking told you that before you left. We all did."

"Don't start, ciccino." I giggle and hug Junior's arm. Then I leave them to it and go greet Matt, Anthony, and Gabby. I crush them to me one by one, happy to have them home, and save Matt for last.

"She looks so happy." I smile up at Matt. "Thank you for being there for her."

A dimple appears with his crooked grin. "She's my life, Mrs. Maisano."
"Bah—it's Bella. And I'm thrilled to hear that." I bite my lip, too nosy and curious for my own good, but I can't help it. "So, does this mean you're gonna request to speak to Juniuh in private soon? Perhaps?"

Francis and Adam snicker next to me, having heard me, but I don't care. A mother has to know, dammit.

"Today, actually." Matt smirks, but behind that confidence, I detect nervousness. "When Joey and Elisa joined us in Europe, Elisa brought a file she'd put together herself of the houses in this neighborhood."

Sure. Elisa did that. It wasn't her mother who insisted Elisa bring it.

"You've found a house you like?" I ask.

"We did," Matt admits. "But it's not for sale—though, Anthony says that's no problem."

"It isn't," I agree and pat his arm. "So this talk with my husband—is that only about you and Julia moving in together?"

"You're relentless, Bella," Francis chuckles.

I shoot him a look. "You guys are next, so you'd be wise to shut up." I realize they have more freedom in LA, but that doesn't mean they can't have a vacation home here, and it looks like Julia won't be needing Dominic's old apartment above Stella much longer. And I have it on good authority that AJ, Alec's eldest, is moving in with his girlfriend soon.

"I'm asking for his blessing, too." Matt puts me out of my misery in a quiet voice only I can hear. "Julia doesn't know though, so we'll keep this between you and me?"

This boy just made my fucking day. "Your secret's safe with me," I whisper, pretending to throw away the key. "Gah!" I gotta hug him.
About fifteen minutes later, everything is just perfect in the world.

Junior and I occupy the ends of the table, and we have our beautiful children and their significant others between us. Food is being passed around, drinks are being poured, the sun is shining, and everyone's talking loudly except for me and my husband.

We exchange a smile, one that says it all. *Everything is the way it's supposed to be.*

He raises his beer at me, and I blow him a kiss.

"Adam, honey," I say, getting his attention. "Juniuh's about to say grace—it'll be good practice for you." I wink.

Dominic groans.

Adam's shoulders shake with laughter. "Don't ever change, Bella."

What's so funny?

"Mom." Elisa rolls her eyes.

"Everyone shut the fuck up," Junior bitches, then bows his head. We all follow suit, and I release a breath, relaxing. "Dear Lord, we thank you for these gifts we're about to receive that my wife cooked but apparently doesn't want credit for." Our sons crack up, and I sigh at Junior's silliness. "Bless this food and my family. Amen."

"Amen." I do the Sign of the Cross and then raise my wineglass. "Before we dig in, I'd like to make a toast—to family. To Francis and Adam's engagement, to Julia and Matt finally being home, and to any pregnancies that may occur in the near future. *Salute.*" I grin and take a sip of my wine.
"Salute!"

"Who the fuck is pregnant?" Junior narrows his eyes at the girls.

The End