



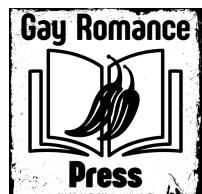
A close-up photograph of a pink flower, likely a gerbera daisy, with numerous water droplets glistening on its petals. The petals transition from a deep red/pink at the center to a lighter pink at the edges. The background is dark, making the vibrant flower stand out.

Abducted By The FEMBOY

JESSICA JACKMAN

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Gay Romance Press

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WARNINGS

Non Consent
Dubious Consent
Drugging
Somnophilia
Captive
Abduction
Restraints
Threat of physical assault
Suicide ideation
Suicide attempt
Attempted murder
Imprisonment
Threats of Sexual Assault
Violence (Not between main characters.)
Homophobia
Reference to conversion therapy
Emotional abuse from family members
Dissociation and dissociative episodes
Hallucinations

ABDUCTED BY THE FEMBOY

He's cute but he is completely unhinged.

He tricked me. Drugged me and tied me to his goddamn bed.

I'm used to being respected. Feared. Obeyed.

Not...this.

I've always liked my best friend's crazy little brother. I worry about him because being a femboy in a mafia family isn't safe.

But he has gone too far. He can't disrespect me like this.

He's still cute, though.

And, oh Lord, that mouth of his.

I swore I was a straight man. Now he's making me rethink things. Which the little minx says was his plan all along.

This feral brat thinks we're destined to be together, and after a few nights in his bed, I'm beginning to see the appeal. Having him in *my* bed is not a terrible idea.

So when this is all over and I escape... Do I kill him?

Or do I keep him?

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for picking up my book!

Ginni is an adorably unhinged, but in real life the things he does to Carlo would be utterly unforgivable.

So, if you need to, please check out the warnings page, next to the copyright page.

But just to be clear:
Carlo & Ginni are not relationship goals.
The mental health representation is terrible.

If you are okay with that, sit back and enjoy the escape from reality.

Love,
Jessica Jackman.

CHAPTER ONE

CARLO

Someone took a sledgehammer to my head and then finished the job with a jackhammer. The taste in my mouth is pure chemical bitterness, like I've been gargling cleaning products, and there's this weird fuzzy feeling behind my eyes that makes everything seem slightly out of focus.

What the fuck happened last night?

I try to lift my hand to rub my face and immediately discover a major problem with my current situation. My wrist won't move. Neither will the other one. They're both secured to something solid above my head.

Ice floods my veins.

My body jerks and my head thunks against the headboard, triggering a flood of fragmented memories. Last night. The family dinner at the Torrini mansion, where Ginni had sat across from me, those impossibly blue eyes tracking my every movement like I was prey instead of his older brother's business associate. The way he'd volunteered to walk me to my car when I'd finally made my excuses to leave. His hand on my arm as we stepped outside. The prick of something sharp against my neck. The way the world tilted sideways and went dark.

The little psychopath drugged me. Actually fucking drugged me.

It should be a relief to realize I've not been snatched by the Russians. Figuring out I've been abducted by my best friend's little brother, should be fucking fantastic news. But judging by the way my heart is racing, I think

I'd feel safer with the Bratva. My sanity and well-being would certainly have a better chance of surviving.

I blink hard, forcing my vision to clear, and take stock of where I am. The ceiling is low, painted white with recessed lighting around the edges that gives off a warm glow. There are no windows, but I can hear the faint hum of air conditioning. The walls are a deep charcoal gray, and what I can see of the furniture screams money. This isn't some dingy basement kidnapping scenario. This is a luxury bunker.

The realization hits me like a punch to the gut. I'm in the basement flat. Ginni's basement flat. The place the Torrini family built for their youngest son so they could pretend he doesn't exist while still keeping him close enough to maintain the illusion of family unity.

Underground. Soundproofed. Where nobody will think to look for me.

Where nobody can hear me scream.

I glance around frantically, trying to fully assess my new surroundings. I've never been down here before. Marco always meets me upstairs in the main house, or we go out. The basement is Ginni's domain, his gilded cage, and I've always respected that boundary. Now I realize that was a really fucking good idea. This isn't just a living space. It's a fucking trap.

Another major problem becomes apparent when I try to sit up. I'm not just handcuffed to what appears to be a very sturdy wrought iron headboard, I'm also completely naked under a soft gray sheet that's been pulled up to my chest with what seems like deliberate modesty.

And my ankles are chained to the footboard, leaving me spreadeagled.

“What the actual fuck,” I mutter, my voice coming out as a croak.

Panic claws at my chest. This is wrong. This is so fucking wrong. I'm Carlo Benedetti. I run the most successful nightclub in East London. I'm Dario Ajello's right-hand man, his closest advisor. Men twice my size cross the street to avoid me. I've tortured information out of grown men who begged for death rather than face another hour in my presence.

And some twenty-one-year-old boy has drugged me, stripped me naked, and chained me to his bed like I'm his fucking pet.

I test the restraints, pulling harder this time. The handcuffs are real metal, police grade from the feel of them, and they're attached to solid wrought iron. Professional hardware. The bed doesn't even creak under the strain. Every part of this has been planned, prepared, engineered.

I know he's had a crush on me for years, I'd be blind to miss that. But now it seems the deadly little menace has decided to take action.

The thought makes my skin crawl and my cock twitch at the same time, which is so fucked up I want to put my fist through something.

Just how long has he been planning this for? How long has he been watching me, studying me, waiting for the right moment to strike? And how the hell has he managed to pull it off, without any help?

But even as the questions form, I know the answer. This is Giovanni Torrini. The boy who set fire to his boarding school dormitory when he was fifteen because his roommate annoyed him. Who once stabbed a university classmate with a fork for making comments about his clothes. Who smiles sweetly while plotting the downfall of anyone who crosses him.

Beautiful, brilliant, and absolutely fucking unhinged. Capable of anything he puts his delusional mind to.

And now he has me exactly where he wants me. Helpless. Vulnerable. Completely at his mercy.

The worst part? Some sick, twisted part of me is getting hard just thinking about it.

The door opens with a soft click, and every muscle in my body goes tense. Fight or flight kicks in, but I can't do either. I'm trapped, exposed, powerless for the first time in my adult life.

“Good morning, Handsome.”

That voice, soft and musical with just a hint of Italian accent that gets stronger when he's emotional, makes something twist in my chest. Terror and rage and something else I absolutely refuse to acknowledge. I turn my head, and there he is, leaning against the doorframe like some sort of avenging angel.

Giovanni Torrini looks absolutely nothing like someone who should be capable of overpowering a man twice his size and twice his experience in violence. He's wearing a cropped white t-shirt that clings to his lean torso, and a pair of silk sleep shorts in pale pink that barely qualify as clothing. His dark hair is mussed from sleep, falling in soft waves around his face, and his blue eyes are bright with satisfaction and something darker that makes every instinct I have scream danger.

He's beautiful. He's always been beautiful. And that's always been a fucking problem. But now, seeing him like this, knowing what he's capable

of, he looks like a Renaissance painting of Lucifer. Perfect and deadly and absolutely without conscience.

“You drugged me,” I state, keeping my voice level despite the panic clawing at my throat.

“I gave you a little something to help you relax,” he corrects, pushing off from the doorframe and padding into the room on bare feet. There’s something almost feline in the way he moves, graceful and silent and predatory. Like a cat that’s caught a particularly interesting mouse. “You looked so tense when you were leaving. All wound up and conflicted. I thought you might appreciate some pharmaceutical assistance.”

The casual way he says it, like drugging someone is just a minor courtesy, makes my hands clench into fists.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done? What this means?”

“I know exactly what it means,” Ginni says, and his voice takes on an edge that makes my blood run cold. “It means you’re mine now. It means no more running away, no more pretending you don’t want me, no more hiding behind your reputation and your responsibilities.”

He perches on the edge of the bed, and I can feel the dip in the mattress, the warmth radiating from his skin.

“You’re insane if you think you can get away with this,” I tell him, putting every ounce of threat I can muster into my voice. “When I get out of here, when people realize I’m missing...”

“No one’s going to realize you’re missing,” Ginni interrupts, his voice cheerful like he’s discussing the weather. “Marco thinks you’re taking some time off after that mess with the Petrov contracts. Very reasonable, very believable. And my family won’t be back from Italy for two weeks.”

Two weeks. The words hit me like a physical blow. Two weeks alone with this beautiful, psychotic boy who’s clearly lost whatever thin grip on reality he might have had.

“Dario will notice...”

“Dario’s busy with his own problems. Besides, everyone knows you’ve been working too hard lately. A little vacation makes perfect sense.” Ginni’s smile widens, and there’s something predatory in it that makes my skin crawl. “I’ve thought of everything, Carlo. Every contingency, every possible complication. You’re not getting out of here until I’m ready to let you go.”

The certainty in his voice makes something cold settle in my stomach.

“People don’t just disappear without consequences,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “There are rules. Protocols. Even for family.”

“Especially for family,” Ginni agrees, his hand coming to rest on my thigh over the sheet. The touch is light, almost reverent, but it burns like a brand. “But you’re not going to disappear, are you? You’re going to stay right here with me, and we’re going to figure this out like civilized people.”

“This isn’t civilized. This is kidnapping.”

“I prefer assertive courtship,” he corrects, and there’s something in his voice now, something harder than his usual sweet act. “Traditional methods weren’t working. You’ve been avoiding me, and I was getting tired of waiting.”

His hand starts moving, a slow stroke up my thigh that makes every nerve in my body light up. I want to pull away, want to tell him to get his fucking hands off me, but the words stick in my throat because some sick part of me doesn’t want him to stop.

“You’ve been watching me,” I say instead. “Studying me. Planning this.”

“Of course I have,” Ginni says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “I’ve been in love with you since I was sixteen, Carlo. Did you think I wasn’t paying attention?”

The words hit me like a freight train. In love. With me. For years. While I’ve been trying so hard to pretend he doesn’t affect me, he’s been carrying this around, feeling this way about me.

In love. Ginni is claiming it’s not a crush. Not infatuation. Not obsession. He’s declaring he’s in love. With me. And has been so for five fucking years.

“You were sixteen,” I say, latching onto that detail because it’s the only safe ground I can find. “You were a kid. Kids get crushes. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“I’m twenty-one now,” Ginni points out, his voice patient like he’s explaining something obvious to someone particularly slow. “I’ve been away at university for three years. I’ve had plenty of opportunities to develop feelings for other people, to experiment, to figure out what I want.” His smile turns predatory. “And what I want is you. All of you. Forever.”

The intensity in his voice makes something cold settle in my stomach. He’s right, this isn’t just attraction or infatuation. This is something deeper, something more dangerous.

And what the fuck does he mean, he experimented at university? Did he really let some douchebag get his hands on him? More than one douchebag? How fucking dare those creeps touch him!

I shake my head to clear it. I can feel my blood pressure rising, and that's the last thing I need right now. I need to focus. I need to try to reason with Ginni.

“I’m not gay, Ginni. You know that.”

He rolls his eyes. “Denial.”

“It’s not denial.”

His soft lips lift up into what might be a pout. “We’ll see about that. A little conversion therapy shouldn’t hurt too much.”

“I’m not...” I try again, but he cuts me off with a finger pressed to my lips.

“Don’t,” he says softly. “Don’t lie to me. Not here. Not now. I know how you look at me. I know how your pulse jumps when I’m in the room. I know you want me just as much as I want you.”

His finger traces the shape of my mouth, and I have to fight not to part my lips, not to let him in. “The only difference is that I’m brave enough to do something about it.”

“This isn’t brave. This is insane.”

“Sometimes there’s no difference.” His hand moves to cup my face, thumb stroking across my cheekbone with a gentleness that’s somehow more terrifying than violence would be. “You’re so beautiful when you’re scared, do you know that? So much more honest than when you’re pretending to be the big bad mafia man.”

“I am the big bad mafia man,” I snarl, pulling against the restraints hard enough to make the metal bite into my wrists. “I’ve killed men for less than this. I’ve made grown men beg for death rather than face me.”

“I know,” Ginni says, and his voice is full of something that might be admiration. “It’s one of the things I love about you. All that power, all that control, all that carefully contained violence.” His smile turns sharp. “And now it’s all mine.”

The possessiveness in his voice makes something dark and twisted unfurl in my chest. This is wrong. This is so fucking wrong. But some part of me, some sick part that I’ve spent years trying to bury, finds the idea of being owned by this beautiful, dangerous boy absolutely intoxicating.

“I’m going to make you breakfast,” Ginni announces suddenly.

He stands up and smooths down his ridiculous excuse for shorts, giving me a view of his legs that does absolutely nothing for my blood pressure or my ability to maintain righteous indignation.

“French toast, I think. With that expensive maple syrup you like from Canada.”

Of course he knows about the maple syrup. Of course he’s been cataloguing my preferences like some kind of deranged stalker.

“I don’t want French toast. I want you to unlock these handcuffs and let me go.”

“But if I did that, you’d leave,” Ginni points out reasonably. “You’d go back to your old life and your reputation and pretend this never happened. And we can’t have that, can we?”

He moves toward the door, then pauses and looks back at me with those impossible blue eyes.

“Oh, and Carlo?” His voice is sweet as honey. “Don’t bother trying to escape while I’m gone. The handcuffs are top quality, the bed is bolted to the floor, and this room is completely soundproof.” His smile turns predatory. “But even if you did manage to get free...”

He reaches up to the top of the doorframe and produces a knife. Not a kitchen knife, but a proper blade, the kind meant for killing. He keeps weapons hidden around his flat?

But I’m not too surprised, because that’s Ginni. Beautiful and deadly, sweet and psychotic, all wrapped up in a package that looks like it should be raking it in on OnlyFans instead of planning kidnappings and making threats with knives.

He smiles sweetly. “Well, let’s just say I’d be very disappointed. And you know what happens to people who disappoint me.”

The threat hangs in the air between us, delivered with the same casual tone he might use to discuss the weather. Then he’s gone, leaving me alone with the sound of my own ragged breathing and the increasingly uncomfortable realization that I might not survive this intact.

Not physically. Ginni would never actually hurt me, not in any permanent way. But mentally, emotionally, the person I am now might not exist by the time he’s done with me.

And the most terrifying part? Some dark, twisted part of me is curious to find out what he plans to put in my place.

I can hear him moving around in the kitchen, humming something cheerful while he makes breakfast like this is all perfectly normal. Like drugging someone and chaining them to your bed is just another Tuesday morning. The domesticity of it is somehow more unsettling than the threats.

What the fuck does he think is going to happen? Does he really believe he can keep me here until I, what... fall in love with him? Develop Stockholm syndrome? Forget who I am and what I'm supposed to be?

The smell of cooking food starts to drift into the bedroom, rich and sweet and perfect. Of course it's perfect. Everything Ginni does is perfect, even when it's completely insane.

Especially when it's completely insane.

And as I lie here, naked and chained to his bed while he hums and cooks in the next room like this is all perfectly normal, I realize I'm nowhere near as enraged as I should be.

I'm fond of Ginni, of course I am, but that doesn't mean I should tolerate being abducted by the feral little twink.

So what the hell is wrong with me? Why am I lying here docilely? Is it the drugs?

The humming stops, and I hear his footsteps. Light and quick, but with purpose. He's coming back with breakfast and that sweet, deadly smile.

And despite everything, despite the handcuffs and the threats and the complete insanity of this situation, I find myself responding to his return with something that feels disturbingly like anticipation.

Cristo, it's not the drugs. I know exactly what it is.

I'm as fucked up as he is.

CHAPTER TWO

GINNI

I return with the breakfast tray, practically floating on air. The French toast looks absolutely perfect, golden brown with just the right amount of powdered sugar dusting. The maple syrup gleams like liquid amber in its little crystal pitcher. I've even arranged fresh strawberries in a perfect fan pattern because presentation matters, especially for special occasions.

And this is definitely a special occasion. This is the first breakfast I get to serve my Carlo in our new life together.

He's exactly where I left him, which is hardly surprising given the quality of the handcuffs. His dark eyes track my every movement as I approach the bed, and I can practically feel the tension radiating from his beautiful body that's naked under that thin, gray cover.

"I'm not eating that," he announces before I've even set the tray down.

"Of course you are," I reply cheerfully, settling the tray on the nightstand and perching on the edge of the bed. "You're always grumpy when you're hungry. It's one of your most endearing qualities."

I pick up the knife and fork, cutting the French toast into perfect bite-sized pieces with surgical precision. Each piece is exactly the same size, and I drizzle it with just the right amount of syrup. Marco always teases me about being obsessive with food presentation, but Carlo deserves perfection.

"I'm not a fucking child, Ginni. I don't need to be fed."

“But you can’t exactly feed yourself right now,” I point out reasonably, spearing a perfect piece with the fork.

The piece of French toast hovers near his mouth, golden and glistening with syrup. I can see his resolve wavering. He’s hungry, I know he is. And it smells absolutely divine.

“This is humiliating,” he mutters, but his lips part slightly.

“It’s intimate,” I correct softly. “How many people have ever taken care of you like this, Carlo? How many people have ever wanted to?”

Something flickers in his eyes, something vulnerable that he quickly tries to hide. But I see it. I always see everything when it comes to him.

He accepts the bite with obvious reluctance, chewing slowly like he’s trying not to enjoy it. But I know my French toast is perfect. I’ve been practicing for months, perfecting the recipe until it’s exactly how he likes it.

“It’s not bad,” he says after swallowing, his voice carefully neutral.

“It’s exceptional, and you know it,” I laugh, cutting another piece. “I can see it in your eyes. You’re trying so hard not to admit how good it is.”

I feed him another bite, then another. The rhythm becomes almost meditative. Cut, drizzle, offer, watch him try to pretend he doesn’t love every second of being cared for like this. It’s adorable how hard he’s fighting against something so simple as breakfast in bed.

“You’re enjoying this way too much,” he grumbles around a mouthful of French toast.

“I’m enjoying taking care of you,” I correct, dabbing at a tiny drop of syrup that’s escaped the corner of his mouth with my thumb. “There’s a difference.”

Without thinking, I bring my thumb to my lips and suck the syrup off. The taste explodes across my tongue, sweet maple mixed with something that’s purely Carlo, and I have to bite back a moan of pleasure.

Carlo’s eyes widen, his breath catching audibly. “Ginni...”

“What?” I ask innocently, though I can feel heat crawling up my neck. “Waste not, want not.”

The air between us suddenly feels thick, charged with something electric that makes my skin tingle. Carlo is staring at my mouth like he wants to devour me, and the intensity in his gaze makes me shiver with anticipation.

I clear my throat and reach for another piece of French toast, but my hands are trembling slightly now. “More?”

He nods mutely, and I can see the way his throat works as he swallows hard. This is progress. Real progress. He's starting to see what this could be like between us.

I feed him the rest of the French toast in increasingly charged silence, hyperaware of every brush of the fork against his lips, every soft sound he makes, every time his tongue darts out to catch a stray crumb. By the time the plate is empty, we're both breathing a little harder than we should be.

“Water,” he says hoarsely.

I reach for the glass, sliding my hand behind his head to cradle it gently as I bring the water to his lips. His hair is soft between my fingers, and I can feel the warmth of his skin, the rapid pulse at the base of his neck.

He drinks deeply, and I watch the column of his throat move with each swallow. Everything about him is so beautifully masculine, so perfectly made. I could spend hours just cataloguing all the ways he's gorgeous.

When he's finished, I set the glass aside and carefully gather the dishes, trying to ignore the way he's watching my every movement with those dark, intense eyes.

“Ginni, you have to let me go,” he says as I stack everything on the tray.

And just like that, we're back to this. The sweet intimacy of breakfast dissolves, replaced by his stubborn refusal to accept what's happening between us.

He's back to trying to be reasonable again. Trying to appeal to me with logic. It doesn't suit him at all. He's a man who takes what he wants, when he wants it. He doesn't ask.

“Come on, it's been a fun prank. Unlock the handcuffs, and nobody will ever know.”

His rough voice sounds all wrong in this cadence. It's a voice meant for growling orders, for making demands, for taking control. Not for begging.

I cross my arms over my chest and glare down at him. He stares back at me with smoldering eyes, darkest hazel, trying to contain his fury but failing.

It's delicious.

My eyes track down his body. Olive skin stark against my white sheets. A dusting of black chest hair between his dusky broad nipples. The gray cover is sitting just below his well-defined pecs.

It's tantalizing. A taunt and a tease. The anticipation of getting to slide it down, and down and reveal the rest of my prize, is sending delightful

shivers down my spine.

“Fuck’s sake, Ginni!” Carlo shouts.

He throws himself forward, trying to lift off the bed. His arms strain against the handcuffs, muscles bulging in a way that makes my belly swoop.

“Unlock these handcuffs right fucking now or you will regret it for the rest of your life!”

My eyes flutter closed as his growl reverberates through me. That’s better. Much better.

It only took an hour for him to unleash his true, sexy self.

Carlo swears aggressively in Italian. A long, adorable stream. Then the handcuffs clink and he falls silent.

I open my eyes. He has slumped back down onto the pillow. Head turned away from me and facing the blank wall. Sulking.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” he mutters.

I tilt my head. “Number one or number two?”

He turns to face me, eyes blazing. “Have you forgotten to take your fucking meds?”

I rub the palms of my hands over the skin of my arms. Pushing the goosebumps he is giving me into my flesh so I can feel the sensation even more intensely.

“No. I stopped taking them on purpose.”

He scowls ferociously. My nipples peak.

His gaze locks with mine. Carlo is giving me his full, undivided attention. It’s wonderful. It is making me a very happy boy.

He continues to glare. I could lap this up all day. All day every day.

But then he ruins it by sighing in surrender. “Number one.”

Actually, this ruins nothing. This is incredible. Best day ever.

I skip off to the bathroom and return with the urinal bottle. I hold it aloft for him to see how clever I am, how I have thought of everything I’m going to need to take care of him.

His eyes widen. His dark, thick eyebrows shoot up.

“Hell no!”

I roll my eyes. “You don’t want to pee the bed, do you?”

“Unchain me and let me go to the goddamn bathroom!”

I give him my best pout. “But then you’d overpower me, and while I’d love that, you’d be boring and only use it to escape.”

“Giovanni!” he snarls.

“Ginni,” I correct sternly.

His nostrils flare as he inhales sharply. “Ginni. Let me go.”

“Not until you’ve come to your senses and accept that we are meant to be together.”

Carlo swears and smashes his hands against the headboard.

“Now, shall I help you pee?”

His eyes narrow. “I’ll hold it.”

“For two weeks? Don’t be silly.”

He mutters something at me and turns away.

I sigh. “Carlo, my love. I’m going to be doing all kinds of things to your dick. Seeing it and putting it into a bottle is nothing more than a polite introduction.”

His eyes snap back to mine. Furious and bright with something else. Something that gives me goosebumps again. His expression looks almost pained. My poor sweetheart. He really is fighting this so hard. My silly man.

I step forward and take hold of the gray cover. Carlo’s entire body tenses. His lips press into a tight line. I can tell he doesn’t want to say no because when I ignore him, he will look foolish.

I slide the cover down. Slowly. Taking my time. Revealing my glorious prize one careful inch at a time.

His body is perfection. The definition of manhood. Broad, firm, defined. A man in his prime. Nothing like the boys my age. Carlo is a real man. Thirty-four. A dad bod. If dad’s worked out and had a scattering of scars from a life of crime.

The cover glides down and down. My heart beats faster and faster.

And then... it’s there. Carlo’s cock.

I glimpsed it when I stripped him, but I didn’t pause to ogle. I’m not a creep. I have standards.

But he is awake now, so I can feast my eyes to my little heart’s content.

I drop the urinal bottle onto the bed, and clasp my hands together in prayer because I am looking at something holy.

It is everything I knew it would be. Thick. Long. Two delicious visible veins running along it. Rich dusky skin tone. A base of neatly manscaped coal-dark pubes.

It’s even slightly hard. Very slightly. As in not completely soft.

It's a very good start. I'll take it as a victory.

Carlo's eyes are scrunched up tight. His cheeks are flushed. My poor love is embarrassed. But he doesn't need to be.

I move the urinal bottle towards his cock. Gently, I touch his pride and glory. It is hot and heavy, and it makes a feeling like electricity buzz all the way through me.

But I have to ignore that and be professional. Right now I'm looking after him. The fun can come later.

I place his cock into the bottle.

“You can pee now.”

“I can't piss like this!” he grinds out through gritted teeth.

“I'm not looking.”

“Ginni...”

“The sooner you pee, the sooner this is all over.”

A deep, heavy sigh releases from Carlo. As if he is thoroughly and utterly exasperated with me. Which I can understand. He hasn't received any of the perks of being mine yet. He has only experienced the small downsides. Like being drugged, stripped and handcuffed to a bed. And having to pee in a bottle.

For a man used to being in control, it is a big change. A lot to get used to.

He is going to need time, and I can be gracious and allow him some. Though not too much. I have been waiting five unbearably long years for his dick. There are limits to my patience. I'm not a saint.

The sound of pee filling the bottle reaches my ears. I smile. Another victory.

I wait until he is finished and then I give his cock a little shake, and remove the bottle. I straighten, and screw on the lid.

Carlo still has his eyes closed and his face turned away from me. But all his olive skin is naked before me. Motionless and compliant. Stark against the white sheets.

“Good boy,” I breathe happily.

His soft cock twitches. It's practically a bounce. My heart flutters and I bite back my happy squeal. This is perfect. Beyond perfect.

I skip back to the bathroom and deal with the pee. I wash my hands thoroughly and grab a bottle of lube before hurrying back to Carlo.

I cannot wait any longer. His cock twitched for me. At merely my words. He deserves a reward.

Carlo's gaze darts to the industrial-sized bottle in my hand. His eyes narrow. He watches me warily as I stalk towards him.

“Ginni... what are you doing?”

There is a breathless uncertainty in his voice. A slight hitch. It is music to my ears. A symphony composed by a maestro.

“It’s finally time to play,” I tell him as sheer giddy glee floods my soul.

I perch on the edge of the bed and diligently slather lube all over my hands.

“Ginni...” he says again, trying to warn. Attempting to growl, but he sounds a little too panicked for it to land right.

“Relax,” I tell him. “I’m going to give you a lovely handjob. It’s going to make you feel so good. You are going to be so happy.”

His dark eyes are enormous.

“Touching me is a line you can’t uncross,” he rasps, and then he licks his lips.

“I know,” I sigh happily.

“You’re Marco’s little brother,” Carlo blurts. “You’re family.”

“I’m not your family,” I say softly. “I’m not your brother or your cousin or your responsibility. I’m just a man who’s been in love with you since I was sixteen years old.”

Carlo’s eyes grow even wider. Color blooms again on his cheeks. Sweat beads his brow. He really is fighting so hard, bless him.

My hand moves towards him. His arms jerk, straining against the handcuffs, making the metal clang.

“Shh,” I reassure him. “Let me rock your world.”

“Ginni!” he snaps. “I will escape, you know I will, and if you do this, I will kill you! I’ll have to. For my name, my reputation!”

His eyes are like two fiery pits. The deep brown has turned molten. I meet his furious gaze. I lean forward and wrap my fingers around the base of his cock.

He jolts. The whites of his eyes show. His mouth forms an O.

“You won’t have to kill me if you don’t tell anyone,” I say sweetly. “It can be our little secret.”

His cock thickens in my hand. I bite my bottom lip. This already feels amazing. All my fantasies brought to life. I’m finally, finally, touching Carlo’s cock.

My lube-covered hand glides up his length, tugging on it. Then, I slide back down.

His lungs stutter. His eyes scrunch up tight. But his cock can't pretend.

It's growing. Swelling. Filling. Getting heavier and hotter. It loves my touch. Almost as much as I love touching it.

I move my hand. Again and again. A steady, relentless rhythm. In no time at all, he is fully hard. Glistening with lube. The squelching sound is exquisite.

Carlo's jaw has slackened with pleasure. His nostrils are flaring. All of his skin is flushed. He looks dreamy like this. Magnificent. Everything a boy could want.

I let out a happy little sigh. I have never been so full of joy. I knew Carlo was the man for me.

My hand works. I watch Carlo intently. Mapping every hitch of his breath. Every twitch of his hips. I need to learn him. So I can be perfect for him.

I tear my gaze away from his face to look down. A perfect bead of precum has formed on his slit. It is irresistible.

My hand keeps working as I lower my head. Using my mouth is for later. But I have to taste him.

Carefully, I poke out my tongue. I can catch his precum without touching him.

I inch closer and closer. I can feel the heat of him on my face. Smell his manly scent.

Suddenly, he gasps. His hips lift, and the tip of my tongue brushes against his cockhead. The precum soaks into my tongue, but there is no time to savor it because Carlo is yelling and now his actual cum is spurting out.

Oh well, this is more fun than a cloth.

I open wide and angle my mouth to catch it all. I keep my hand moving until I'm utterly certain I have milked every last drop.

He is writhing now. Whimpers that sound like pain. My poor oversensitive love.

I release him and sit up while wiping my mouth with the back of my spare hand.

Carlo is breathing heavily. Lungs heaving.

“See? That was lovely, wasn't it?” I beam.

His eyes open. Dark and feral. Angry and wanting. A dangerous beast whose cage I've just rattled.

I squeal and wriggle. My nipples harden against the fabric of my top. Carlo's eyes are full of all kinds of promises, and I love every single one of them.

CHAPTER THREE

CARLO

I wake up slowly, consciousness creeping back in layers like fog lifting. For a moment I'm disoriented, unsure where I am or why my body feels so heavy and strange. Then reality crashes back with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

I'm still chained to Giovanni Torrini's bed. Still naked. Still completely at the mercy of a beautiful, unhinged twenty-one-year-old who thinks kidnapping is a valid dating strategy.

Fuck.

I have no idea what time it is. There's no natural light down here in this underground tomb, just the same warm glow from the recessed lighting that makes everything feel artificial and disconnected from the real world. It could be morning, could be afternoon, could be the middle of the fucking night for all I know. The thought of Ginni living like this, cut off from sunlight and fresh air, trapped in this expensive basement like some kind of exotic pet, makes something twist unpleasantly in my chest.

The absence of windows feels deliberately cruel. No way to track the passage of time, no connection to the natural rhythm of day and night. Just this eternal artificial twilight that could drive a person slowly insane. How long has Ginni been living like this? Years? Since he was a teenager? The idea of spending your formative years buried underground like a dirty secret makes my stomach turn.

What the hell is wrong with his family? I know they're ashamed of him, know they prefer to keep their feminine youngest son hidden away from prying eyes, but this is worse than I thought. This isn't just discretion or old-fashioned values. This is imprisonment disguised as luxury accommodation. They've built him the most beautiful cage money can buy and convinced themselves that makes it acceptable.

The kid deserves better than this, even if he is completely fucking insane. He deserves sunlight and fresh air and the basic human right to exist in the world without shame. Instead, they've turned him into a basement dweller, isolated and forgotten, left to fester in his own thoughts until those thoughts became dangerous.

Maybe this is what happens when you lock someone away for being different. Maybe this is the inevitable result of years of rejection and shame and being treated like something that needs to be hidden. Not that it excuses what he's done to me, but it certainly explains it.

Despite everything he's done, despite the handcuffs and the complete violation of my personal autonomy, I have to admit I'm remarkably comfortable. The mattress is high quality, and the sheets are some kind of Egyptian cotton that feels like silk against my skin. Even the temperature is perfect, neither too warm nor too cool, maintained by what must be an expensive climate control system.

The pillows have been positioned perfectly to support my head and neck, Ginni adjusted them multiple times last night, saying he wanted to ensure I wasn't uncomfortable. I remember gentle fingers arranging and rearranging, testing angles and heights until everything was just right. The memory should be disturbing, but instead it's oddly touching.

Even kidnapped and chained, Ginni is trying to take care of me. The thought shouldn't warm something in my chest the way it does.

Something warm and solid is pressed against my side, and I turn my head to see Ginni curled up next to me like a cat seeking warmth. He's using my chest as a pillow, one delicate hand splayed across my ribs, his breathing slow and even. His hair is mussed from sleep, falling across his face in soft waves that catch the artificial light.

He looks impossibly young like this, all sharp cheekbones and long eyelashes, so small and fragile that I could probably snap him in half with one hand. His face is peaceful in a way I rarely see when he's awake, free

from the manic energy and calculated madness that usually defines his expressions.

Ginni is tiny. Hollow-boned, like a bird. Vulnerable despite all his carefully orchestrated plots of insanity.

There's something almost ethereal about his beauty when he's like this, unguarded and soft. It's easy to forget, looking at him now, that this same delicate creature drugged me, stripped me, and chained me to his bed. And then did other unspeakable things that I don't want to think about ever again.

It's easy to forget the knife he produced with casual menace, the careful planning that must have gone into every detail of my captivity.

He doesn't mean to be a menace, I realize with uncomfortable clarity. This isn't calculated cruelty or deliberate sadism. This is just who Giovanni is, the way his broken mind processes the world. He sees something he wants and takes it, consequences be damned. He feels something intensely and acts on it without considering that other people might not share his particular brand of logic.

In his mind, this probably isn't kidnapping at all. This is love. This is courtship. This is him finally taking action after years of waiting and watching and wanting. The fact that it's completely illegal and morally reprehensible doesn't factor into his calculations because Giovanni Torrini has never lived in the same reality as the rest of us.

This is such a mess. A horrible, tangled mess.

He's my best friend's little brother. The family member they hide away in a basement because they're ashamed of who he is, what he represents. So what the hell are they going to do when they find out about this? When they discover that their carefully contained secret has finally exploded in spectacular fashion?

Lock him up in some private institution where he can't embarrass them anymore? Disown him completely and cut all ties? Ship him off to some remote facility where he'll disappear entirely from their lives? The Torrini family has money and connections. They could make Giovanni vanish without a trace if they wanted to, and part of me suspects they've been considering it for years.

The poor kid can't help the way he is. His brain is just wired differently, and instead of getting him proper help or learning to accept him as he is, his family stuck him underground like something shameful that needs to be

hidden from polite society. They've spent years treating him like a problem to be managed rather than a person to be loved, and now they're all going to act shocked when that treatment produces exactly the kind of results you'd expect.

A shiver dances down my spine. I know what I need to do. It is the only option.

When I escape from this insanity, I'm going to have to cover it all up. Pretend it never happened. Bury the whole thing so deep that no one ever finds out what Giovanni Torrini is capable of when left to his own devices for too long. Because if this gets out, if people find out that Marco's baby brother drugged and kidnapped a capo, there might not be time for an institution or a gentle exile.

There might just be a bullet and an unmarked grave.

The thought makes something cold settle in my stomach. Whatever twisted feelings I might have about this situation, whatever confused arousal and unwilling fascination might be clouding my judgment, I can't let anything happen to Ginni. I know that much is true. He might be completely insane, he might have violated every boundary I've ever set, but he's still just a kid who's been failed by everyone who was supposed to protect him.

That's the reality, the cold, hard truth. Even though I'm furious. Outraged beyond words at what this little deranged nightmare has done to me. Ashamed of my own reactions, of the way my body responds to his touch despite my mind screaming that this is wrong on every possible level. Humiliated by how easily he's stripped away every defense I've spent years building, how completely he's turned my carefully controlled world upside down. Even through all of that, I still don't want anything bad to happen to him.

It's so fucking confusing, because if anyone else had the audacity to pull a stunt like this, I know exactly what I would be planning. I'd be thinking about which tools would cause the most pain, which methods would extract the most satisfying screams, how long I could keep them alive while making them regret every decision that led to this moment. I'd be planning their death in exquisite detail, savoring every moment of anticipated revenge.

But it's Ginni. And that makes this whole thing so damn bewildering that I want to put my fist through something.

He stirs against me, making a soft sound that's almost like a purr, and then those impossible blue eyes are blinking open, focusing on my face with immediate clarity. No gradual awakening for Giovanni Torrini. He goes from sleep to full alertness in seconds, like a predator that never truly rests.

And then he smiles. Bright and dazzling and completely unrepentant, like waking up next to a kidnapped man is the most natural thing in the world. Like this is exactly how he pictured his perfect morning.

My heart does something strange in my chest, a stuttering rhythm that has nothing to do with fear and everything to do with that devastating smile. The reaction bewilders me, makes me question everything I thought I knew about myself, about what I want, about what kind of person I really am underneath all the careful construction.

“Good morning, Handsome,” he says, his voice soft and musical with sleep. “Did you sleep well?”

The casual endearment hits me like a physical blow. Handsome. He called me handsome again, like it's a simple fact, like there's nothing strange about addressing a kidnapping victim with pet names.

“Do you need to pee?” he continues before I can formulate a response, already pushing himself up on one elbow. “Should I get the bottle?”

The memory of yesterday's humiliation floods back in vivid detail, nevermind the fact that I now have other needs.

“I need the bathroom,” I growl.

His eyes widen slightly, as he takes in my meaning. “Oh.” A pause, then his face brightens like he's just solved a particularly challenging puzzle. “I have a plan for this.”

Ten minutes later, I'm standing next to his bed, no longer spread-eagle but still very much captive. The handcuffs have been replaced with shackles that allow my hands to move but keep them connected with a short chain. My ankles are similarly restrained, forcing me to shuffle rather than walk properly. I can move, but only just barely, and certainly not enough to overpower anyone or make a run for it.

The metal is cold against my skin, heavier than the handcuffs. Professional grade equipment that must have cost a fortune and definitely wasn't purchased through normal channels. Where the hell does a twenty-one-year-old get access to this kind of specialized hardware? Even if he is the youngest member of a mafia family?

Ginni reaches under the bed and pulls out something that makes my blood run cold.

“Is that a fucking cattle prod?” I exclaim, staring at the device in his delicate hands.

He nods excitedly, like a child showing off a new toy. “I won’t use it unless I have to,” he assures me sweetly. “But it’s important that you understand the consequences of misbehaving.”

I shake my head in dismay, wondering how my life has come to this. “You’re completely insane.”

“I prefer passionate,” he corrects cheerfully, testing the weight of the cattle prod in his hands like he’s considering its practical applications.

The shuffle to the bathroom is the most humiliating experience of my adult life. Every step is awkward and degrading, the chains around my ankles making a soft clinking sound that seems to echo in the silence. They force me to move in a way that’s inhuman. Like I’m some wounded, lumbering beast. I’ve never felt more powerless, more stripped of dignity and control. This is what it feels like to be prey instead of predator, and I hate every second of it.

My legs aren’t used to moving in such restricted steps, and I nearly trip twice. Ginni stays close behind me, close enough that I can feel his presence like a shadow, the cattle prod a constant reminder of what happens if I try anything stupid.

But he allows me to go into the bathroom alone, closing the door behind me with something that might almost be respect for my privacy. The small gesture of trust catches me off guard, makes me wonder if there are limits to his madness after all.

I immediately search the space, looking for anything that could be used as a weapon or tool for escape, but there’s nothing useful. Just towels, expensive shampoo, toilet paper. Everything else has been carefully removed. No razors, no cleaning products, no medicine cabinet. He really has thought of everything.

I use the toilet and then attempt to shower with my hands cuffed together, which is an exercise in frustration and awkward maneuvering. The hot water feels good against my skin, washing away the lingering grogginess and the strange dreams that plagued my sleep, but the constant reminder of the restraints keeps me from enjoying even this simple pleasure.

The shower is enormous, clearly designed for luxury rather than efficiency, with multiple shower heads and enough space for several people. It's the kind of bathroom you'd find in a five-star hotel, not a basement apartment. More evidence of the guilt money that bought Ginni this beautiful prison.

When I emerge, Ginni is waiting with a soft towel and that same patient smile. He chains me back to the bed with efficient movements, then approaches with the towel held out like an offering.

“Let me help,” he says softly.

I want to refuse, want to maintain some shred of dignity and independence, but I'm still damp in places I couldn't reach properly, and the metal of the restraints has left my wrists and ankles slightly raw. When he begins patting me dry with gentle, careful movements, I can't bring myself to protest.

His touch is reverent, almost worshipful, as he tends to the places I missed. He dries under the cuffs with particular care, his fingers soft against the irritated skin, and despite every rational thought in my head, despite my fury and humiliation and outrage, I feel my body beginning to respond.

Heat pools in my belly. My pulse quickens. And when he notices, when those blue eyes drop to take in my growing arousal with obvious satisfaction, I want to disappear into the mattress.

“Would you like me to help with that?” he asks innocently, like offering to jerk off a kidnapping victim is perfectly normal morning behavior.

“No!” I snap, the word coming out harsher than I intended.

He shrugs, completely unfazed by my rejection. “Okay. What would you like for breakfast?”

And just like that, he's moving on, acting like nothing happened, like he didn't just offer to get me off with the same casual tone someone might use to ask about coffee preferences. I'm left staring at him, speechless and strangely disappointed that he listened to my refusal so easily.

What the hell is wrong with me? What kind of sick, twisted part of my brain is actually upset that he respected my boundaries?

Cristo, I really am as fucked up as he is.

CHAPTER FOUR

GINNI

I'm practically floating back into the bedroom, my heart still fluttering from watching Carlo eat the second breakfast I've made for him. A Cornetto that I baked myself with my own little hands.

Every bite he took felt like a small victory, proof that we're already settling into our new life together. The way he tried to hide how much he enjoyed it was absolutely adorable. My stubborn, prideful man.

Carlo is still exactly where I left him, and he looks so perfect against my white sheets. All that olive skin and dark hair, like a sculpture that's been brought to life just for me. I could stare at him for hours and never get bored.

"So," I say cheerfully, settling cross-legged on the bed beside him, "I've been thinking about our routine."

His dark eyes narrow. "Our routine?"

"Well, yes. We're going to be living together now, so we need to establish some structure. I've noticed you function much better with a proper schedule." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, already excited about sharing my plans. "I think coffee first thing in the morning, then breakfast at eight-thirty. You're always grumpy without caffeine, and I want you to be comfortable."

"Ginni, this isn't..."

“Then I thought we could have quiet time while I tidy up,” I continue, not letting him interrupt my vision. “You could read, or we could talk. I have so many questions about your work that I’ve always wanted to ask. And lunch around one, something light because you never eat much in the middle of the day.”

Carlo stares at me like I’ve grown a second head. “You’ve lost your fucking mind.”

“No, I don’t think so. I think I’m simply romantically determined,” I correct, reaching over to smooth down a cowlick in his hair that’s been bothering me. “And I think we should redecorate. This space is lovely, but it’s very much mine. We need to make it ours.”

His hair is so soft between my fingers, just like I always imagined it would be. I could spend hours playing with it, styling it in different ways, seeing how it looks when he first wakes up versus after a shower.

“I was thinking maybe a bigger bed,” I continue dreamily. “Super King size or maybe even Emperor, so we have plenty of room to spread out. What’s your preference for thread count? I like at least 800, but I could go higher if you’re particular about these things.”

“I’m not discussing thread count with you while I’m chained to your bed,” Carlo grits out.

“But these are important decisions,” I insist. His resistance is so nonsensical. “We’re building a life together. These details matter. I want you to be happy here.”

I hop up and start moving around the room, straightening things that don’t really need straightening, but I think better when my hands are busy.

“Oh, and I threw away your clothes. The cut was completely wrong for your body type. Very off-the-rack, very uninspired. I’ve already ordered some new things that will suit you perfectly.”

The look on his face is priceless. Like he can’t quite process what I’m saying.

“You threw away my clothes?”

“Yes,” I say happily. “I couldn’t bear the thought of you wearing such pedestrian fabrics when you deserve to benefit from my exceptional taste.”

I pause by the window that isn’t there, looking at the blank wall and imagining what it would be like if we had a view. Maybe of a garden, with flowers I could cut fresh every morning for our breakfast table.

“And I’ve been thinking about our dynamic,” I continue, turning back to face him. “I know you’re used to being in charge, and that’s just fine by me. I want to be the kind of partner who never says no, who never gets headaches or makes excuses. Men have needs, and I respect that completely.”

Carlo’s eyes widen, and I can see his chest rising and falling a little faster. There’s something in his expression that looks almost... interested? But then he shakes his head violently.

“This is insane, Ginni. You can’t just decide we’re in a relationship.”

“But we are,” I say simply. “We always have been, really. You just needed some encouragement to see it.” I perch on the edge of the bed again, close enough to feel the warmth radiating from his skin.

He glares at me. Eyes all molten with his frustration.

I give him a pat on his delightfully defined bicep. “I know you are a dangerous man, but you’re also the man who brings me gelato when I’m sick and remembers my birthday when my own family forgets.”

Carlo jerks. A physical recoil as if I’ve slapped him. But he stays silent and allows me to continue. It is either that, or he is lost for words.

“I’ll be such a good wife to you, Carlo. I’ll cook and clean and take care of all the domestic things so you can focus on your work. And I’ll never complain about anything, never make demands. I know how to make a man happy.”

The word ‘wife’ seems to hit him like a sucker punch. His whole body goes tense, and something flickers in his eyes that might be panic or might be something else entirely.

“You’re not my wife,” he says, but his voice is rougher than it was a moment ago.

“Not legally,” I agree. “Not yet. But in every way that matters, isn’t that what this is? I take care of you, you provide for me, we share a bed...” I trail off, letting my gaze drift down his body appreciatively. “We’ll share everything else soon enough.”

I can see him trying to process this, trying to find arguments against my perfectly reasonable logic. But what argument could there be? This is how relationships work. One person takes care of the other, and they build a life together.

“And think about the dinner parties we could have,” I continue excitedly, the ideas flowing now like water from a burst dam. “We could host Dario

and Molly, as well as Nicolo and Liam. Proper couple's dinners, with real china and flowers from our garden. Well, the garden we'll have when we get a proper house."

Carlo's expression shifts to something that might be horror. "Dinner parties?"

"Of course! We'll be part of that social circle now, the established couples. I've been watching how Molly manages Dario's entertaining, and I could do so much better. The menus alone need serious improvement." I bounce slightly on the bed, warming to my theme. "I could do that amazing osso buco recipe my nonna taught me, and pair it with a proper wine selection. Not whatever swill Molly usually serves."

I can see Carlo trying to picture it, his brain clearly struggling to process the image of domestic dinner parties while he's currently chained to my bed. It's adorable how his mind works, always trying to categorize and understand things that are perfectly simple.

"I've actually been thinking about children too," I add casually, straightening his pillow even though it doesn't need it. "Not immediately, of course. We should have at least a year to ourselves first, to really establish our rhythm. But eventually."

The color drains from Carlo's face. "Children?"

"Well, naturally. You're thirty-four, I'm twenty-one. Perfect timing, really. You're established enough to provide stability, but young enough to be an active father. And I've always wanted children, lots of them." I smile at the thought. "We could adopt, or find a surrogate. I know people."

Of course I know people. I've been planning this for years, thinking through every possible contingency. The Torrini family might have their faults, but they do have connections in every industry imaginable, including ones that help unconventional families grow.

"I was thinking maybe three or four children," I say dreamily. "Close enough in age to be friends, but not so close that it's overwhelming. The first one could have your eyes, they're so beautiful. Dark and intense, just like you."

Carlo looks like he might be having some kind of breakdown. His breathing has gotten shallow, and there's a wild look in his eyes that's absolutely fascinating. I love seeing him process new information, watching his careful control slip as he realizes how thoroughly I've thought this through.

“Ginni, you can’t seriously think this is going to happen?” he manages.

“Of course I’m serious. I don’t say things I don’t mean.” I trace a finger along his forearm, feeling the tension in his muscles. “I know it’s a lot to take in all at once, but you’ll adjust. You’re very adaptable when you want to be.”

I stand up again, too excited to stay still. “We could convert the spare room upstairs into a nursery. It gets lovely light in the afternoon, perfect for nap times. And there’s that little alcove that would be ideal for a reading corner once they’re older.”

The spare room that currently serves as storage for all the family’s unwanted furniture, shoved away like everything else they’d rather not acknowledge. But it could be beautiful with the right touches. Soft colors, quality furniture, everything a child could need to feel loved and wanted.

That’s if we stay living here of course. We might buy our own home and make it perfect.

“Your children would never be hidden away in basements,” I say softly, and something in my voice must change because Carlo’s expression shifts. “They’d never be treated like something shameful that needs to be kept secret. We’d make sure they know they’re loved exactly as they are.”

There’s a long silence, and I can see something working behind Carlo’s eyes. Understanding, maybe. Or recognition of why this matters so much to me.

“I could tell you were happy yesterday,” I say softly. “After dinner, you looked so content. So peaceful. You never look like that at family dinners or business meetings. Only here, with me, when you let yourself relax.”

“That’s not...” he starts, but I can see the uncertainty creeping into his expression.

“You like the picture I’m painting,” I observe with satisfaction. “You’re just scared because it’s different from what you planned for your life. But sometimes the best things are unexpected, don’t you think?”

I move to the dresser and start rearranging the bottles of cologne I’ve collected over the years. Some of them are ones Carlo has worn to family gatherings, scents I’ve memorized and treasured. Soon I won’t need to rely on memories and stolen moments.

“Picture Christmas morning,” I say, my voice taking on that sing-song quality it gets when I’m really lost in a vision. “Our children running down the stairs in their matching pajamas, you making coffee while I start

breakfast. The tree we picked out together, presents wrapped in paper I spent weeks choosing because every detail matters when you're building traditions.”

Carlo makes a strangled sound that might be protest or might be something else entirely.

“And New Year’s Eve,” I continue, completely carried away now. “Just the two of us after the children are asleep, dancing in our kitchen to music only we can hear. No more pretending we’re just family friends. No more careful distance. Just us, being exactly who we are together.”

I sigh happily. “Then you can bend me over the kitchen island and rail me until I scream and you have to put your hand over my mouth, so we don’t wake the children.”

I turn back to look at him, and his expression is so conflicted it makes my heart ache. He wants this, I can see it written all over his face, but he’s fighting it so hard. All those years of conditioning, all that internalized shame about what other people might think.

Carlo’s jaw works silently, like he’s fighting some internal battle. I love watching him think, love seeing all the emotions play across his features when he thinks no one is looking. He’s so much more expressive than people realize.

“And the best part,” I whisper, moving back to the bed and settling beside him again, “is that it’s all real. Not some fantasy or daydream, but actual possibility. I’m here, you’re here, and we have all the time in the world to figure out exactly how we want our life to look.”

“We are going to be so happy together,” I whisper, reaching out to trace a finger along his collarbone. His skin is so warm, so perfectly smooth except for the small scars that tell the story of his dangerous life. “No more pretending, no more keeping distance between us. Just us, here, building something beautiful.”

His breath hitches at my touch, and I smile because his body always tells the truth even when his mind is being stubborn.

“Just think about it,” I say, settling back to give him space to process. “Think about never having to perform in your marriage, never having to be the big bad mafia man with me. You can just come home and be taken care of. I can give you that, Carlo. I can give you everything.”

I can practically see the war happening behind his eyes, denial fighting against something that looks dangerously like longing. It’s exactly what I

hoped for.

“Eventually, when you’re ready, we could even travel,” I add casually. “Italy, obviously. I’d love to show you the village where my nonna grew up. There’s this little church where she was married, with the most beautiful frescoes. And France, maybe Scotland. Anywhere you want to go, as long as we’re together.”

The mention of travel seems to hit him differently, maybe because it implies freedom rather than captivity. Choice rather than coercion. I can see him trying to reconcile the image of voluntary vacation with his current restrained state.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I say gently. “You’re wondering how we get from here to there. But all the best relationships require some initial adjustment period, don’t they? Some time to really understand each other without outside interference.”

Soon, he’ll stop fighting and realize that this is exactly what he’s always wanted.

He just needs a little more time to accept it.

CHAPTER FIVE

CARLO

He is insane. Completely and utterly fucking batshit bonkers. Abducting me was one thing, but marriage, *children*? Talking about being some kind of deranged psycho tradwife?

He has seriously lost the plot.

I need to get out of here. As soon as possible.

“Oh! Is that the time?” Ginni says, looking at his wrist.

My blood pressure spikes. My headache intensifies. Ginni isn’t wearing a watch. He is staring at the bare skin of his wrist.

But at least he has stopped talking about kids and dinner parties and me fucking his tight little ass over the kitchen island.

“What time is it?” I ask. I need to keep him on this track. It is much safer.

He looks up at me and hits me with a truly dazzling smile. One that lights up his impossibly blue eyes.

“It’s blowjob o’clock!”

My mouth opens. It snaps shut again. “What?”

“Blowjob o’clock!” Ginni exclaims happily. “Part of our new routine. Coffee. Breakfast. Quiet time while I tidy up. Then a lovely blowjob for you so you can start the day really happy, and with all your needs met.”

I shake my head to try to clear it. To try to chase away this bewildering situation. It does no good. I’m still in Ginni’s basement being threatened with blowjob o’clock.

“I don’t need a blowjob,” I say. Words I never thought that I, or any healthy man, would ever say.

“Of course you do!” beams Ginni. “You need one every day.”

“Every day?” I repeat helplessly.

Oh lord. There are a million men out there who would think I was the crazy one. A beautiful twenty-one-year-old femboy is declaring he wants to blow me every day. And I’m objecting.

Maybe I’m the problem.

I take a deep breath. Of course I’m not the fucking problem. Jesus Christ. Is talk of blowjobs really enough to make me forget about drugging and kidnapping and being chained up? What kind of caveman am I? I’m better than this. I’m better than most men.

Running a club with exotic dancers has shown me that most men are animals. Incapable of self-restraint.

When I get out of here, I’m going to have to make sure Ginni is safe. If he had abducted someone else, I dread to think what would have happened. The world is full of bastards who would take advantage of him.

“I don’t need a blowjob,” I say.

He listened to me earlier, after the shower. He said, okay, and started babbling about breakfast. So he might listen to me now.

Ginni fixes me with a rather stern expression. “Yes, you do.”

He stands up and peers down at me. He is wearing a very short skirt today. He must have changed into it while I was in the shower. I’ve been trying to ignore it. Just like I’ve been trying to ignore his absurdly short crop top. The top is white and barely covers his nipples. It’s leaving his belly completely naked. His belly button is taunting me.

How does anyone have such a flat stomach? Such flawless skin? Even when I was twenty-one I didn’t look that perfect.

I tear my eyes away, only to be confronted with his skirt. It’s black and only barely covers anything. His long legs are bare. And incredible. They are better than all the dancers that work for me in my club.

If Ginni was a girl and walked into my office for an audition, I’d be shouting ‘hired!’ right about now.

How is it even genetically possible to have legs like that? It should be illegal. Not that I’ve ever given legality much consideration in anything that I do.

Hmm, maybe that's the problem. The whole reason I'm here. God, the universe, whoever is in charge, is punishing me for all my misdeeds. Sending me to my judgment by allowing a ridiculously pretty femboy to chain me to his bed.

My thoughts screech to a halt as Ginni takes hold of the blanket. I'm still buck naked under here.

“Ginni!” I warn, but the little psycho ignores me. He whips the cover off like a magician whisking off a tablecloth.

His blue eyes go straight to my cock. His entire face lights up. Like all of his Christmases have come at once.

He licks his lips. He kneels on the bed, and the mattress dips slightly.

My arms reflexively pull against the restraints. It is as futile as the first thousand times I tried it.

“Don’t you dare!” I snarl.

Ginni pauses. His eyes widen and his lips lift up in pout. “Don’t you like blowjobs?”

“Of course I fucking like blowjobs!” I bellow before I stop myself.

Ginni smiles, slow and seductive.

“It doesn’t mean I want one from you!” I snap.

Oh shit. Not antagonizing the nutter who has kidnapped you is probably rule number one in the how to survive an abduction handbook. And besides that very good piece of advice, hurting Ginni’s feelings makes me feel like the worst kind of monster.

Ginni tilts his head like a bird. “Yes you do. Stop being silly. I see the way you look at me.”

“I don’t look at you. Not like that.”

His smile is devastating. “You do. The first time was when I was making hot chocolate. That’s when you finally noticed me.”

All the air in my lungs vanishes. I knew exactly what he is talking about. The precise moment. The specific day. The point in time where the universe tilted and never righted itself.

He’d been seventeen, maybe eighteen. Home for Christmas break from his first year at university. I’d walked into the kitchen looking for Marco and found Ginni instead, standing at the stove making hot chocolate and wearing an oversized sweater that somehow managed to be both completely modest and absolutely devastating. He’d looked up when I walked in, smiled that bright, uncomplicated smile, and asked if I wanted some.

I'd said no and left the room immediately. Spent the rest of the evening avoiding the kitchen and trying not to think about the way that sweater had slipped off his shoulder or the way he'd looked at me like I was someone worth smiling at.

That was probably the beginning. The moment I realized that Marco's little brother had grown up into someone dangerous to my peace of mind.

Now he is dangerous to my safety. Destructive to my freedom. Detrimental to everything I thought I knew about myself.

“See? I knew you remembered.” Ginni’s smile is nuclear.

He positions himself between my forcibly spread legs. Kneeling on the mattress. His expression is sweet and innocent. His eyes are anything but.

He bends down. Metal clangs against metal as I try to free myself. An absurd thought flies through my mind. Ginni is bending over now, and his skirt is so short. Anyone standing at the end of the bed would be able to see his underwear. If he is wearing any.

Then Ginni pokes his tongue out and gives my cock a kitten lick. A barely there touch that is still hot, wet and annihilating.

I grunt. My hips move and blood rushes to fill my cock.

Ginni makes a sound of pure delighted glee. He licks me again. One long lick all the way from root to tip. A caress along my rapidly filling cock.

“Fuck! How did you learn to do that?”

Marco’s little brother should not be good at sucking cock. That’s all kinds of fucked up. He is unhinged, but he is innocent.

I know he is good at handjobs, a fact I’m desperately trying to delete from my memory, but blowjobs are much more intimate. Demeaning for the giver, even though I know I shouldn’t think like that. But hey, I was raised in an Italian mafia family. Toxic masculinity should be my middle name.

And I fucking hate the thought that Ginni has debased himself like this for other men. It is infuriating that any man had the audacity to use a Torrini in this way.

“YouTube,” he says happily. Then he wets his puffy lips.

“W... what?” I stutter.

“I learned this from YouTube.”

That’s it. I’m out of words. I’m never regaining the power of speech.

“There are YouTube tutorials on everything,” he says happily. “You can learn anything you want.”

I stare at him.

“Of course, for blowjobs they have to use fruit and be careful about what words they use.”

I blink. If he is right and he is not recalling some fever dream delusion, then this is much better than him learning from actual doing.

“So, no glory holes at uni?” I ask.

Ginni scowls ferociously. “What do you take me for? I love you, remember? No one else.”

“You said you experimented at uni.”

“It is so adorable that you are jealous,” Ginni grins.

I open my mouth to reply but he lowers his head and all my thoughts disintegrate. There is only Ginni’s wet, soft tongue on my cock.

Pleasure surges. My eyes roll back. All words of protest die on my lips. Ginni has set his mind on this, and it feels so damn good. I’m going to hell. And the journey is going to be euphoric.

Ginni licks and licks. Each glide of his tongue curls my toes and swells my cock. I’ve never had a man blow me before. Ginni is only getting started, and I can already tell it’s going to be amazing. The best blowjob of my life. Does this mean I am gay? Or that men are better at this because they have cocks of their own? Or is it only Ginni who has this effect on me?

My cock is fully hard now. Aching and throbbing. Wet with Ginni’s spit.

He licks his way up to my tip. His plump lips wrap around my sensitive head. An unholy noise pours out of me. Shameless and depraved.

Ginni hums in appreciation, and the reverberations nearly kill me. I forget how to breathe. How to exist.

His lips roll down an inch of my length. My cock sinks into the soft heat of his mouth. Part of me is inside Giovanni Torrini. Life will never be the same.

Nevermind the mind-numbing pleasure that’s altering me at a cellular level, everything has changed because Marco is going to kill me. He is never going to believe his waif-like little brother overpowered me. And to be honest, I think I might rather die than suffer the humiliation of him knowing the truth.

I’ve been turned into a helpless sex slave by a twenty-one-year-old unhinged femboy. My pride has been destroyed. My manliness is seriously questionable.

Ginni’s head lowers and lowers. He is taking more and more of me. Any minute now, he is going to have to stop. His gag reflex is going to kick in.

I'm not small. Definitely not beginner size.

Suddenly, I'm crying out. Intense pleasure is burning through me. Lighting up all my nerve endings.

I'm in Ginni's throat and it is tight and perfect. The crazy boy doesn't seem to have a gag reflex at all.

He takes all of me. His nose brushing against my pubes. Every inch of my cock is enveloped in soft flesh. It feels so damn good.

Fuck. I want to take hold of his hair. Seize control. Guide him. Fuck his face.

But the cuffs are as secure as ever. I'm powerless. The only thing I can do is lie here and take it. Take whatever Ginni decides to give to me.

I should hate it. I should feel nothing but violated. So why have I never been more aroused? Why is lust thrumming through my veins hot enough to burn?

Ginni bobs his head. Up and down. Lips forming a tight seal. Adding friction to all the other wonderful sensations.

I was going to close my eyes. I was going to imagine it was a girl. I was going to survive.

But I can't look away. I'm transfixed. Ginni's dark head bobbing on my cock. When he is at the top, I can glimpse his pale perfect cheeks, the obscene stretch of his wet lips. His long dark lashes resting against his smooth skin. His serene expression. As if he is performing something holy.

Suddenly, his eyes snap open. Brightest blue. Dazzling. Ginni's eyes. Ginni's eyes full of lust and pleasure. Ginni's eyes when his mouth is stuffed full of my cock.

I grunt, and empty my load down Giovanni Torrini's throat.

Fuck my life.

CHAPTER SIX

GINNI

I sit up and lick my lips. Sending my tongue to capture any lingering drops of Carlo's cum. He tastes delicious. Just like I knew he would.

“You taste like caviar and love,” I sigh happily.

Carlo stares up at me. His expression is a little alarming. He's not having a heart attack is he? He's not a young man.

I bend down again and press my ear to his chest.

“What are you doing!” he exclaims, sounding a little frantic. As if having my head pressed to his naked skin is too much for him to bear. A step too far.

“Shhh. I'm checking you aren't having a heart attack. A man of your age can't be too careful.”

“What the fuck? I'm fucking thirty-four, not sixty!” he yells.

I ignore him and concentrate on the sound of his heartbeat. Strong. Steady. A little too fast perhaps, but I did just give him a lovely blowjob. I think he is fine.

I sit back up. Carlo glares at me. His face is all flushed and sweaty. His eyes are still dark with arousal. He has never looked more handsome.

But he does look quite grumpy. My poor love. I understand. I have been asking a lot of him.

I move off the bed and go to the bedside table. I open the drawer and pull out the brand new packet of cigarettes.

“I’m sorry I made you quit cold turkey. But you can have one now. Maybe one every day until we can break the habit.”

I unwrap the cellophane and pull out a cigarette. Nasty things. But their smell has become entwined with Carlo in my mind, and so I can’t resist having a long sniff all along its length. Filling my lungs with Carlo, just like my tummy is filled with his cum.

I rouse myself with a shake and place the cigarette between Carlo’s lips. Allowing my fingers to brush against his soft flesh.

He is back to looking conflicted again. He wants the cigarette, I can tell. But he is embarrassed by being served like this. My poor baby. He will get used to being spoiled and taken care of. I am determined he will.

I pull the lighter out of the drawer and bring it to the end of Carlo’s cigarette. It clicks and the flame lights. Carlo lifts his head a little, reaching towards me, and the flame and the intimacy of it makes me giddy.

I put the lighter away and watch Carlo puff on his gift. Gently, I reach forward and take the cigarette so he can exhale. He glares at me, but he complies.

We settle into a beautiful rhythm. Puff. Remove. Exhale. Return. The two of us working together in perfect harmony. The way it is meant to be because we were made for each other.

“Finished?”

He nods.

I dump the butt into the crystal ashtray hidden tastefully in the drawer.

“Feeling better now?” I ask.

His gorgeous eyes narrow, but he looks a lot more relaxed. The tension has gone from his shoulders. The nicotine has done the trick.

I pick up a bottle of water. “Thirsty?”

Emotions flow across his expressive face. I can see him arguing with himself. Thinking about being difficult. Considering demanding to be unchained so he can do it himself.

He nods.

My heart skips several beats. My love is such a fast learner. He is already getting the hang of this. I knew he would come around eventually, but this is even quicker than I dared to hope for.

Carefully, I slide my hand under his head. I cradle it and lift it up as I bring the bottle to his lips. He is perfectly capable of lifting his own head, he is not sick. But this is so much better.

His Adam's apple bobs as he gulps down the water, and I cannot tear my eyes away. The olive skin of his neck moving. So thin. So fragile. So very mesmerizing.

He finishes drinking, and I remove the bottle from his lips. Reluctantly, I lower his head and extract my hand from the feel of his soft hair and firm skull.

He looks sleepy now. A lovely orgasm, a smoke and a drink of water, have made his body all content. Nevermind the delicious breakfast I fed him earlier.

I'm so good at taking care of him. I knew I would be. And I'm not going to let him nap like this, all sweaty and dirty.

“Time for your bed bath!” I beam.

The look he gives me is positively ferocious. It's making him look so very dangerous and murderous. An alpha male, all naked and tied to my bed just for me.

It's giving me butterflies in my tummy.

I skip off happily to the bathroom to fetch a bowl of warm water, towels, washcloths and soap. I take my time selecting the perfect temperature, testing it against my wrist the way I've seen mothers do for babies in films. Not that Carlo is a baby, but he deserves the same level of care and attention.

The soap I choose is my most expensive one, imported from France and scented with bergamot and sandalwood. Carlo is worth every penny. I've been saving it for a special occasion, and what could be more special than this?

When I return, Carlo's eyes track my every movement as I set up my supplies on the nightstand. I arrange everything with the precision of a surgeon preparing for an operation. The water bowl in easy reach, the washcloths folded just so, the towels soft and ready.

“This isn't necessary,” Carlo grumbles, but his voice lacks its usual bite. There's something almost resigned in his tone, like he's finally beginning to understand that resistance is futile.

“Of course it is,” I say cheerfully, dipping the washcloth in the warm water and wringing it out carefully. “You're all sweaty and sticky. I can't have my man uncomfortable.”

I start with his face, gently dabbing at his forehead and temples. The cloth is just the right temperature, not too hot, not too cool. His eyes flutter closed

despite himself, and I can see him trying to fight the relaxation that wants to take over. It's adorable how he struggles against simple pleasure.

The warm cloth traces along his jawline, following the strong line of his bone structure. When I reach the corner of his mouth, he parts his lips slightly in an unconscious gesture that makes my heart skip. Such a natural response to gentle care.

“There,” I murmur softly, my voice barely above a whisper. “Doesn’t that feel better?”

He doesn’t answer, but his breathing has deepened, becoming slower and more regular. The fight is going out of him, replaced by something that looks almost like contentment.

I move to his neck next, washing away the salt and musk with careful, reverent strokes. His pulse jumps under my touch, a rapid flutter against his throat that tells me exactly how affected he is by my ministrations. When I reach the sensitive spot just below his ear, I can’t resist pressing a gentle kiss to the clean skin. He shudders, a full-body tremor that sends heat racing through my veins.

“Ginni,” he warns, but there’s no real heat in it. Just breathless awareness.

“I’m just being thorough,” I assure him innocently, rinsing the washcloth before continuing my careful exploration of his body.

I work my way across his broad shoulders, marveling at the play of muscle under his skin. Every ridge and valley deserves attention, deserves to be treated with the reverence it commands. Down his arms I go, taking special care with the places where the restraints have left faint marks on his wrists. I massage those spots gently, apologetically, my fingers working to soothe any lingering soreness.

When I reach his hands, I take extra time with each finger, washing and massaging them with dedicated focus. He has beautiful hands, I’ve always thought so. Strong and manly, with broad fingers that are equally capable of violence and tenderness. The thought of what else these hands might do, given the chance, makes me dizzy.

“You have such beautiful hands,” I murmur, lowering my lips to his palm for just a moment. “Perfect for touching.”

Carlo’s breath hitches, and his fingers curl slightly against my cheek before he catches himself and forces them to relax.

Moving to his chest, I let the warm cloth trail through the dark hair there, watching as droplets of water catch the artificial light. His nipples tighten

when I pass over them with deliberate slowness, and I file that reaction away for future reference. Everything about his responses is precious data, information I can use to bring him more pleasure later.

“You’re enjoying this,” I observe with deep satisfaction, watching the way his chest rises and falls with increasingly unsteady breaths.

“I’m tolerating it,” he corrects, but his voice is rougher now, gravelly with suppressed desire.

I laugh softly, the sound intimate in the quiet room. “My stubborn man. You don’t have to pretend with me.”

I take my time with his abdomen, tracing each ridge of muscle with the cloth. He’s so perfectly defined, so beautifully made. The result of years of discipline and care that I find absolutely captivating. I could spend hours just cataloguing every detail of his body, memorizing the map of scars that tell the story of his dangerous life, and the way his skin responds to my careful touch.

There’s a particularly fascinating scar just below his ribs, thin and precise like a blade wound. I trace it gently with the cloth, then with my finger, imagining the story behind it. How young was he when it happened? Did it hurt? Was he afraid, or was he already the fearless man I know him to be?

“Stop staring,” he mutters, but there’s no real annoyance in his voice.

“I can’t help it,” I admit honestly. “You’re so beautiful. Every part of you tells a story, and I want to know them all. All the missing puzzle pieces of the parts you’ve never told me.”

When I finish washing him and begin patting him dry with the softest towel I own, Carlo looks almost peaceful. His eyes are heavy-lidded, pupils slightly dilated, and for a moment he seems to have forgotten where we are and how we got here. This is how he should always look, I decide. Relaxed and cared for and free from the weight of constant vigilance.

“Better?” I ask softly, gathering up my supplies with reluctant efficiency.

He nods, the gesture small but unmistakably genuine, and my heart soars like it’s trying to escape my chest entirely.

I tidy everything away, humming softly to myself as I put the washcloths in the hamper and return the soap to its proper place in the bathroom. Everything has its place in our new life together, and I intend to maintain proper order. Organization is important in any household, but especially in ours where everything must be perfect.

When I return to the bedroom, Carlo is watching me with those dark, unreadable eyes. There's something different in his expression now, something that wasn't there yesterday. Not acceptance, not yet, but perhaps the beginning of understanding.

"Right then," I announce brightly, clapping my hands together with renewed energy. "Time for my Twitch livestream!"

Carlo blinks slowly, like he's surfacing from deep water. The peaceful expression fades, replaced by confusion.

"I don't know what any of those words mean."

I pat his leg affectionately, enjoying the way his muscle tenses under my touch.

"That's okay. Old people don't. It means I'm going to go talk online to my followers."

His eyes narrow immediately, suspicion replacing that lovely relaxed expression. The jealousy that flashes across his features is so obvious it's almost cute.

"OnlyFans?"

I sigh dramatically, putting just the right amount of wounded disappointment into my voice. "Of course not. You are the only one for me. You know that, Carlo."

The relief that flickers across his face is delicious, even though he tries to hide it behind concern. Such a possessive man, my Carlo. I pat his head gently, marveling at how mature I'm being about his insecurities. Most people my age wouldn't be so understanding about their partner's jealousy issues.

"Don't worry, you won't be bored. I have thought of everything."

I move to the corner of the room and bring out the projector. It's taken quite a lot of planning to get everything right, but I want Carlo's time here with me to be absolutely perfect in every way.

"What is that thing?" Carlo asks warily, eyeing the equipment like it might explode.

"Entertainment," I say simply, angling the projector toward the ceiling above the bed with practiced precision. "I found some lovely films for you to watch while I'm busy."

I fiddle with the settings until I get the image focused properly on the ceiling, the actors appearing in crystal clear high definition.

“Is that supposed to be us?” Carlo’s voice is strangled, higher pitched than usual.

I beam with pride, practically glowing with satisfaction at his recognition. “I know, right? I spent ages finding actors who look just like us. The resemblance is uncanny. The dark-haired one could be your twin, and the smaller one has my exact bone structure.”

Carlo makes a sound that might be a whimper, but I choose to interpret it as appreciation for my attention to detail.

“I thought you’d appreciate the careful casting,” I continue happily, adjusting the focus one final time. “Very realistic. Very educational.”

I press play, and the scene begins in earnest above Carlo’s head. The actor who looks like him is pummeling the one who looks like me. The aesthetic is deeply pleasing. A big older man and a younger femboy half his size.

“Ginni, you can’t be serious about this,” Carlo says, his voice climbing toward panic.

“Oh, but I am. It’s important for you to see what our future could look like. Think of it as aspirational viewing.”

I adjust the volume to a comfortable level, not too loud but clear enough for him to hear every delightful mewl the pretty little twink makes as his man slams into him.

This way, if Carlo is silly and closes his eyes, the wonderful sounds can still keep him occupied.

I need to leave now. I have to check that my camera and microphone are properly configured. My followers are expecting me in ten minutes, and I don’t like to keep them waiting. Punctuality is important in building a loyal audience.

“The production values are quite high too,” I add conversationally. “Much better than most of the amateur content you see online these days. I specifically sought out the premium options.”

“I’ll be back in a few hours,” I call over my shoulder as I head toward the door that leads to my gaming room. “Try to relax and enjoy the show! The plot really picks up around the thirty-minute mark.”

“Ginni!” Carlo yells after me, his voice cracking with desperation. “Ginni, you can’t just leave me here with this! This is insane! Get back here!”

I pause in the doorway and shake my head fondly, like an indulgent parent watching a child’s tantrum. Doesn’t Carlo realize the basement is

soundproof? All that shouting isn't going to accomplish anything except making his throat sore for our evening activities.

But I suppose he'll figure that out eventually. He's a very intelligent man, after all.

That's one of the many reasons I love him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CARLO

O h God, save me, please. This damn porn is on a loop. There is no escape. It's not a matter of bearing it until it ends, because it never fucking ends.

Closing my eyes doesn't work. If anything, it makes it worse, because my treacherous mind fills in the blanks. The little gasps and sweet moans stop belonging to the porn star and start belonging to someone else. Someone they really shouldn't belong to because I absolutely should not think of him that way.

I'm doomed.

The projector is displaying the actors in full life-size on the perfect white ceiling above me. It's too realistic. Too confusing. The twink is pretty enough to be a girl. And the way he is taking it...

I swallow. I'm not gay. It's porn in full volume right above my head. While I'm lying here stark bollock naked. Anyone would react to it.

The femboy's face is flushed pink. His lips parted. Eyes sweetly closed. His dark hair is all messy. He looks like he is in ecstasy. As if being stuffed with cock is the best thing that has ever happened to him.

If he is acting, he deserves an Oscar.

My pulse quickens. The porno is getting to the part where the guy doing the reaming yanks up the femboy's short black skirt and lets the camera see his incredible ass.

Heaven help me. My cock has never been this hard for so long. It's not like I enjoy torturing myself. If my hands weren't fucking cuffed to this frigging headboard, I would have sorted myself out an hour ago. I'm not above beating off to gay porn. Not that I ever have. Because I'm straight.

For fuck's sake.

I try lifting my hips. Maybe a bit of movement will provide some relief. Anything is worth a try at this point.

Cristo. This is ridiculous. I'm humping the air. It is beyond humiliating.

I turn my head, and freeze.

Ginni is standing in the doorway, leaning nonchalantly against the frame. Arms crossed over his slender chest. Watching me with an intense, hungry expression.

I can almost see him committing every tiny detail to memory, to replay in the future. Many, many times in the future.

I have never felt so naked. So utterly exposed.

When I get out of here, I'm never objectifying another woman ever again. Hells, I'm going to change the uniform at my club. No more Hooters-inspired aesthetic. It's time for a classy style, and I don't care if it costs me money. The club is mostly a front anyway.

Ginni shakes his head and straightens, as if rousing himself from a dream. He steps towards me and my stomach swoops. My cock twitches hopefully.

My body is confused. That's all. I don't want him. I'm not enjoying this. I'm not one of those powerful men who find peace in handing over the reins and submitting in the bedroom. That has never been my thing.

"Oh my poor love," Ginni coos softly. "Let me help you with that."

As he prowls towards me, every word of protest dies on my lips. I can't stay like this. And keeping your kidnapper happy is like rule number one in surviving an abduction. Allowing him whatever he wants is practically mandatory. It's not that I want him, it's because I have to.

Ginni glides to the bedside cabinet. He opens a drawer and pulls out an obscenely large bottle of lube. My heart flutters. I can cope with a handjob.

He pulls something else out of the drawer. Something that is bright yellow and about six inches long. With a sucker cup at one end. Tapered at the other.

I blink.

It's a dildo. One of those corn on the cob ones. The silicone all bumped and ridged.

My cock deflates a little. A shudder wracks my body as my blood runs cold. Surely not? He isn't crazy enough to use that on me, is he?

Ginni hums happily as he smears copious amounts of lube over the monstrosity. His happy little smile looks completely deranged.

I want to look away but the way his small delicate hand is working the dildo is hypnotizing. Swift, sure movements with a confident twist over the tip.

I lick my lips. How the hell do I talk him into using his hand and not that awful thing?

Ginni looks up. Blue eyes flashing. He pauses.

Then he giggles. An actual, real giggle. I've never heard him make such a sound. For all his strange brain wiring, he has always been a solemn little thing. All big eyes and silence.

Hearing him happy is making my chest feel hollow. It's fucking delightful to finally know what his laugh sounds like, and it is destroying me that I've had to wait so long. I've known him for years and this is the first time I've ever seen him cheerful. Nobody should be sad all the time. Not even little menaces like Ginni. It's a tragedy.

On the other hand, the fact that he is giggling because he has me chained naked in his basement and is about to do unholy things to me with a dildo, is a little alarming. More than a little alarming, truth be told. It's downright terrifying.

"Your face!" he chuckles. He shakes his head in fond amusement. "Relax my love, this is for me. I know you wouldn't like it."

I didn't think crying in relief was actually a thing. Apparently, it is. Not that I'm going to indulge. I'm going to blink ferociously and try to appear masculine.

Ginni moves to the end of the bed. He slams the sucker end of the dildo against the footboard with a level of violence that makes me flinch.

He flicks the corncob toy of depravity. It bounces but stays put. Honestly, he whacked it on so hard I doubt it is ever coming off. It's staying there forever. A permanent fixture.

I watch warily as Ginni climbs onto the bed. He walks on his knees until he is between my spread legs, facing me.

He bends down on to all fours and wriggles backward towards the dildo. My eyes widen. He hasn't paused to remove any underwear, which means I

was right. He isn't wearing any. This whole time, his little ass has been naked under that tiny bit of cloth.

Above my head, the porno is still playing. Ginni must have yanked the heating up because suddenly it is very, very hot in here.

His bright blue eyes fix on me. I force a swallow down my throat.

He's not just going to take it, is he? No loosening himself up first? Just taking it like a champ?

Ginni moves his hips backwards. His pupils blow, turning his eyes wide and dark. His lips part, and a soft exhale of breath escapes him. Color floods his pale cheeks.

I watch as my best friend's little brother impales himself on a dildo. The sight of it is doing something to my neurons. There is a zinging sensation dancing over every inch of my skin. As if I am about to detonate.

Ginni makes a noise that sounds an awful lot like the pornstar's vocalizations. All pleasure-filled and breathy.

My cock likes it. It likes it a lot. It likes it far too much for something that is supposed to be straight.

Ginni rocks his hips. He moans. His jaw slackens with pleasure. He likes it slow and steady. Sensual and languid. Not that I'm taking notes. Because I don't need to take notes.

His eyes glaze over. His expression flows into one of sheer rapture. Ginni is beautiful, he has always been beautiful. But seeing him like this is enough to take my breath away. It's enough to inspire me to want to take up art and attempt to capture him in this moment. To retain this perfect fragment of time. So I can keep forever this image of Ginni staring into my eyes while he slowly fucks himself on a dildo.

He has definitely done this before. Many times. Countless times. There is confidence in his movements. A familiarity with which he is embracing his obvious pleasure.

Giovanni Torrini likes to fuck himself with dildos.

I wonder what he thinks about? Is he picturing anything right now? Or is the sensation of those little sweetcorn bumps and ridges rubbing over his pink stretched rim, all-consuming?

Fuck. What is wrong with me? Why did I just imagine that? I don't need to picture what the dildo looks like as it slides in and out of him. I had absolutely no need to think about what Ginni's hole looks like.

I mean, he is deep in his femboy era. Has been for years now. So, it's likely he is as hairless as I am picturing. Waxing and grooming are part of the whole femboy vibe, I'm pretty sure.

But why did I imagine such a pale shade of pink? Ginni is dark-haired and Italian. Even though he has blue eyes and pale skin.

Goddamnit! I should not be lying here internally debating what color asshole my abductor has! I'm seriously losing the plot, and I've only been a prisoner for what... two days? I'm better than this.

Ginni smiles at me. A smile that Lucifer himself would be proud of. It's almost as if he knows what I am thinking. Knows and approves. Knows and is fucking delighted by it.

I growl.

Ginni smiles even more. He drops down onto his elbows, leaving his ass up and impaled on the dildo. He wriggles forward a tiny bit, until his face is right next to my cock.

Oh. I inhale sharply, but before my lungs are full, Ginni's lips wrap around my cock. Tight, wet, heat. An explosion of sensation and pleasure. Almost too much after craving any sort of touch for hours.

My eyes roll back and I groan. My heels drum on the mattress. Oh sweet Jesus, I have never experienced anything like this before. I've been happy with vanilla sex. Wham, bam, thank you Ma'am, and leave. I was convinced I didn't need anything else. That it was all a waste of time.

I think I was wrong.

The hours of buildup. The porn still playing loudly. Ginni still rocking on that obscene toy. His lips rolling up and down the first inch of my cock, making me burn with the need for him to slide all the way down, to take me all the way like I know he can... It's all wonderful, deeply and totally mind-blowing.

I need to feel the soft flesh of his throat all around my cock. I need it to squeeze me. I want to see stars again. I want to come so hard my toes curl and my calves cramp.

He pulls off of me. Leaving my cock bare. Wet with his saliva and throbbing with heat.

I open my eyes to glare at him, ready to snarl a command.

But the sight of him fucking himself destroys all my thoughts. His head is down and I can only see his silky dark hair. But I can see his thighs are trembling. I can hear that he is panting.

My balls tighten. Fuck. I might be able to cum hands-free. Just from watching Ginni. This is by far the hottest thing I have ever seen.

Ginni whimpers. My hips lift in response and I groan helplessly as reality hits me. I'm close, so very close, but I'm not going to be able to cum like this.

“Ginni...”

It was meant to be an order, a sharp reprimand, but it's come out sounding like a plea. I'm begging and it's pathetic.

Fuck it. I don't care anymore. I need to cum so badly. It's not a want or a nice-to-have, it's a need. As essential as oxygen. I'm going to fucking die if I don't cum right now.

“Ginni!”

His head lifts up. His eyes are so dark. His cheeks are so flushed. His hips are rocking and rocking.

“You need to admit you want me,” he pants. “Say it out loud, Carlo. Say that you want me.”

This little shit. He is a fucking menace and a fiend. I yank on the chains and growl.

Ginni puffs his lips up and blows cold air onto my wet cock. I yell as my hips bounce futilely on the mattress.

“Fine! Have it your fucking way! I want you Ginni! I fucking want you!”

The smile he gives me is supernova. Bright enough to burn through my eyeballs and reach the back of my skull.

A scream fills the air. It's mine. Ginni has swallowed my cock, all the way down in one swift, flawless move. Holy Mary Mother of Jesus.

I yell again as Ginni sucks on my cock. Hard and insistent, as if my balls contain milkshake, and he is trying to suck it right out of my dick.

My orgasm detonates. My nuts release. All my pent-up arousal flows through my cock and down Ginni's throat. He moans. He shakes. Oh fuck, he is cumming too. His hands are on either side of my hips, so he is cumming hands-free. Something in his ass, and my cock in his mouth is enough for him to shoot his load.

It's perfect. It shouldn't be, but it is. It's the most perfect thing I have ever experienced.

And now it's official.

This boy is going to be the death of me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

GINNI

I'm dancing back from the bathroom, my entire body still humming with satisfaction and joy. What we just shared was absolutely perfect, even better than I'd imagined during all those lonely nights planning our future together. Carlo looked so beautiful when he finally stopped fighting and let himself feel everything I was giving him.

He's lying against the pillows now, looking thoroughly debauched and slightly stunned, like he can't quite believe what just happened between us. His hair is mussed, his cheeks are flushed, and there's something new in his eyes that wasn't there before. Something softer, more open.

Progress. Beautiful, undeniable progress.

"That was amazing," I sigh happily, settling beside him on the bed and tracing gentle patterns on his chest. "You're so responsive, so perfect. I knew we'd be incredible together."

Carlo makes a sound that's somewhere between a groan and a sigh. "Ginni..."

"I know, I know," I interrupt, pressing a soft kiss to his shoulder. "It's overwhelming. All these new feelings, this connection between us. But you don't have to say anything right now. Just let yourself feel it."

I can see him struggling with what just happened, trying to reconcile his previous resistance with the way his body responded to my touch. It's adorable how hard he's fighting against something so natural, so right.

“You must be hungry,” I announce suddenly, sitting up with renewed energy. “All that... activity has given me quite an appetite. And I want tonight to be special. Really special.”

I carefully help him sit upright, adjusting his restraints so he’s comfortable but still secure. The new position is perfect for what I have planned. I want to see his face, want to watch his expressions during our first proper romantic dinner together.

“What are you doing now?” Carlo asks warily as I produce a lap tray from under the bed.

“Setting the scene for our first official date,” I announce happily, my heart practically singing with excitement. “Now that we’ve taken that beautiful step together, it’s time to do things properly.”

I reach down and pull the storage box out from under the bed. It’s stuffed full of everything I need. I hum happily as I remove the lid.

I spread a pristine white tablecloth across the tray, smoothing out every wrinkle with dedicated care. It’s real linen, imported from Italy because Carlo deserves nothing but the finest things.

“Ginni, what exactly do you think you’re doing?” he asks, watching as I begin arranging the table setting with museum-level precision.

“Creating the perfect romantic atmosphere,” I reply, positioning each piece of silverware exactly where it should be according to proper etiquette. The real silver catches the light beautifully, polished to a mirror shine that reflects the warm glow of the overhead lighting.

I place the crystal wine glasses with accuracy and reverence. These belonged to my great-grandmother, hand-blown in Venice and worth a small fortune. The single red rose in its delicate crystal bud vase adds just the right touch of classic romance.

Carlo watches all of this with an expression of complete bewilderment, like he’s witnessing something from another planet.

“This is insane,” he mutters, but there’s less venom in it than usual. More resignation, like he’s beginning to accept that this is simply who I am.

“This is romantic,” I correct, moving around the room to light the scented candles I’ve strategically placed on every available surface. Soon the air fills with the warm scent of vanilla and bergamot, transforming the basement into something magical and intimate.

I take my time with each candle, ensuring each one is positioned for optimal ambiance. The candlelight flickers against the walls, casting

dancing shadows that make everything look softer, more ethereal. Even Carlo's confused expression looks beautiful in the golden glow.

"There," I say with deep satisfaction, stepping back to admire my handiwork. "Perfect."

The transformation is remarkable. What was once just a basement bedroom has become an intimate dining room worthy of the finest restaurant in Paris. The candlelight catches on the crystal and silver, creating a warm, romantic cocoon that feels completely separate from the outside world.

I skip off to the kitchen, humming happily as I heat up the mushroom risotto I made yesterday. It's Carlo's absolute favorite. I know because I've spent years observing him at family dinners, noting which dishes he always finishes first and which ones he merely picks at to be polite.

The risotto is creamy perfection, each grain of arborio rice cooked to exactly the right texture and infused with the most expensive truffle oil I could find. I've added fresh herbs from the garden upstairs and a generous helping of aged Parmesan.

I arrange it artfully on my grandmother's best china, the Limoges pattern with the delicate gold rim that she only used for the most special occasions. The presentation is restaurant-quality, but infused with the kind of love and attention that no professional chef could replicate.

The wine selection requires careful consideration. I choose a Barolo from a vineyard in Piedmont, the kind of vintage that wine enthusiasts wait years to taste. I'm not sure my love's palette is that refined, but nevertheless, Carlo deserves only the finest things life has to offer.

When I return to the bedroom carrying the perfectly arranged tray, Carlo's eyes widen at the presentation.

"Alexa, play romantic dinner music," I command, and immediately the room fills with soft jazz, the kind of sophisticated background music you'd hear at an exclusive Michelin-starred restaurant. The saxophone melody blends perfectly with the candlelight and wine, completing the transformation.

"This is..." Carlo begins, then trails off, seemingly at a loss for words.

"Romantic?" I suggest hopefully as I settle gracefully on the edge of the bed. "Thoughtful? Exactly what you deserve after such a beautiful afternoon together?"

I pour the wine with practiced elegance, having spent hours perfecting the technique so the deep red liquid flows in a perfect arc, catching the candlelight as it fills the crystal glass. The sound is satisfying and sophisticated, like something from a film about beautiful people living impossibly elegant lives.

“To us,” I toast, clinking the two glasses together and then bringing a glass to Carlo’s lips since his hands are otherwise occupied. “To new beginnings and dreams finally coming true.”

He takes a sip, and I watch his throat work as he swallows. Everything about him is so perfectly masculine, from the strong line of his jaw to the way his Adam’s apple moves. The wine stains his lips slightly, and I resist the urge to kiss it away. There will be time for that later, when the evening reaches its natural conclusion.

“This wine...” he says, sounding surprised. “This is extraordinary.”

“Only the best for you,” I beam, thrilled that he appreciates the quality. “I’ve been saving it for a special occasion, and what could be more special than our first official date?”

I spear a perfect forkful of risotto, making sure to get the ideal ratio of rice to herbs to truffle. The aroma alone is intoxicating, rich and earthy and absolutely divine.

“Now,” I say brightly, “dinner is served.”

I feed him carefully, watching his face for every reaction. The risotto is creamy and rich, exactly how he likes it, and I can see his expression soften despite himself as the familiar flavors hit his palate. There’s something almost vulnerable about the way he accepts each bite, like he’s slowly letting his guard down.

“This is really good,” he admits reluctantly after the third forkful. “Actually, it’s incredible. Where did you learn to cook like this?”

“My nonna,” I reply, glowing with pride. “She taught me that food is love made visible. Every dish should tell a story, should show the person you’re feeding exactly how much they mean to you.”

We settle into a comfortable rhythm that feels as natural as breathing. I feed him, bring the wine glass to his lips when he needs a drink, dab his mouth gently with the expensive linen napkin. It’s intimate and domestic and absolutely perfect, exactly how I always dreamed our first real date would be.

“So,” I chatter happily as we work through the meal, “what do you think of the ambiance? It took a long time to find the right place.”

Carlo gives me a look that’s part concern, part fascination, like he’s studying some exotic creature he’s never encountered before. “Ginni, you do realize this isn’t actually a restaurant, right?”

“Of course I know that,” I laugh, delighted by his confusion. “But atmosphere is everything when it comes to romance. Just because we’re dining at home doesn’t mean we can’t have a proper date experience. In fact, this is better than any restaurant because it’s completely private. Just the two of us, no interruptions, no prying eyes.”

I continue my cheerful narration as we work through the meal, discussing all manner of topics, from sport to politics. But never his work, I was raised in Carlo’s world, I know better than that. I know when a man comes home, he leaves work at the door.

Carlo participates in the conversation despite himself, occasionally offering opinions about the food or asking questions about my cooking techniques. He keeps shooting me those worried looks, like he’s not sure if I’ve completely lost touch with reality, but he’s also clearly enjoying the meal and the attention.

The risotto disappears slowly, savored rather than simply consumed. Each bite is an experience, a moment of connection between us. When I offer him wine, our eyes meet over the crystal rim, and I can see something shifting in his expression. Not quite acceptance, but perhaps the beginning of understanding.

“You know,” he says quietly during a lull in the conversation, “this really is exceptional. The risotto, the wine, all of it. You’ve gone to incredible trouble.”

“It’s not trouble when it’s for someone you love,” I reply softly, meaning every word. “I want you to be happy, Carlo. I want you to feel cherished and cared for. You work so hard, carry so much responsibility. You deserve to be spoiled sometimes.”

Something flickers in his eyes at my words, something that might be gratitude or might be something deeper. He doesn’t respond verbally, but he accepts the next bite I offer with less resistance than before.

When we finish the last of the risotto, I carefully gather the dishes and silverware back onto the tray, already planning what I’ll prepare for

tomorrow's meals. Perhaps something French next time, or maybe those lamb chops he always talks about.

"Thank you for a lovely date," I say softly, leaning over to press a gentle kiss to his cheek. His skin is warm and slightly rough with stubble, and he smells like expensive wine and my soap and something that's purely him. The combination is intoxicating.

I pull back and give him my most charming smile.

"Do you want to come in for coffee?"

Carlo coughs and splutters, nearly choking on air. "Ginni! You do know we're in your basement and this isn't actually a date?"

I stare at him for a moment, blinking as if his words are slowly penetrating my consciousness. The romantic haze begins to clear, reality creeping back in around the edges.

"You're right," I sigh dramatically, my shoulders sagging with sudden disappointment. "What was I thinking?"

Relief floods across his features like sunrise, and he relaxes visibly against the padded headboard.

"I'm a good boy," I continue seriously, straightening up as the full implications hit me. "We can't have sex before marriage. I can't invite you in for coffee."

The relief transforms instantly into alarm, his eyes growing enormous as he processes what I've just said.

"What?" he whispers, his voice barely audible. Then he coughs. "Oh, that's such a shame," he says weakly, looking like he might be having some kind of breakdown.

But then the solution becomes perfectly clear, so obvious I can't believe I didn't think of it before. I brighten immediately, clapping my hands together with renewed excitement.

"We'll just have to get married tomorrow! I'll book a celebrant for an online wedding!"

Carlo's mouth opens and closes soundlessly, like a fish gasping for air.

"This is so exciting!" I squeal, jumping up from the bed with the energy of someone who's just solved the world's most complex puzzle. "I have to plan everything! The flowers, the music, the outfits! Oh, there's so much to do!"

I rush to my wardrobe, my mind already racing through all the possibilities. This is going to be the most beautiful wedding in history.

CHAPTER NINE

CARLO

Marriage.

The word keeps echoing in my head like a curse, bouncing around my skull until I think I might actually lose my mind. Giovanni Torrini intends to marry me. Tomorrow. He's talking about booking a celebrant, planning a ceremony, like this is something normal people do instead of the ravings of a completely unhinged lunatic.

I watch in mounting horror as he flits around the room, pulling dress after dress from his wardrobe with the excited energy of someone planning the social event of the season. Not someone who's just announced his intention to force a kidnapped man into marriage.

“This is not happening,” I mutter under my breath, testing the restraints for the hundredth time. The metal bites into my wrists, as unforgiving as ever. “This is absolutely not fucking happening.”

But even as I say it, I know it’s a lie. Everything that’s happened so far has been impossible, insane, completely beyond the realm of normal human behavior. And yet here I am, chained to a bed in a basement while a beautiful psychopath plans our wedding.

How the fuck did my life become this nightmare?

Three days ago, I was Carlo Benedetti. Respected capo. Right hand to Dario Ajello. Owner of the most successful nightclub in London. Men crossed the street to avoid me. People whispered my name with a mixture

of fear and respect. I had power, influence, control over every aspect of my carefully ordered existence.

Now I'm a captive audience to a deranged fashion show, watching my best friend's little brother try on wedding dresses while he chatters about flower arrangements and guest lists.

And there are so many dresses. Too many. This isn't something he just thought of today. The sheer volume of white silk and lace hanging in his wardrobe tells a story I don't want to understand. Full ballgowns with cathedral trains, sleek modern sheaths, traditional gowns with intricate beading... enough options for a dozen different weddings.

How long has he been buying these? How long has he been standing in front of this mirror, trying them on, imagining our wedding day? The thought makes my skin crawl and my pulse race in ways I don't want to examine.

"What do you think of this one?" Ginni asks, twirling in front of the full-length mirror in a creation that's more suggestion than actual clothing. The white lace clings, nearly see-through, to every curve of his body, leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination, all the way down to more than half-way past his hips, where it then flares out into a beautiful skirt. And the way it moves as he spins makes my mouth go dry despite my terror.

He looks fucking incredible. Like something from a wet dream, all pale skin and sharp angles and delicate beauty that shouldn't exist in the real world. The dress transforms him into something ethereal, otherworldly, and I hate how my body responds to the sight of him.

He's a man. A very young man. My best friend's little brother. It doesn't matter how breathtakingly beautiful he is. The fact that he is a femboy doesn't excuse me at all. I simply should look at him and feel nothing but brotherly.

"It's..." I start, then clear my throat when my voice comes out as a croak. "It's very white."

As much as I'm still trying to cling onto my denial, I can't escape the truth. My feelings towards Ginni are in no way brotherly. And haven't been for a while.

"Too racy for a church wedding," he decides, completely missing the strangled quality of my voice. "Even though we're not technically having a church wedding. I want something that says pure and innocent."

Pure and innocent. The boy who drugged me, stripped me, and chained me to his bed is worried about looking innocent on our wedding day.

I test the restraints again, more frantically this time. The handcuffs are solid metal, police grade, attached to a bed frame that's been bolted to the floor. The chains now have enough give to let me sit up, but not enough to reach anything useful. No weapons within range, no tools, no way to get leverage on the cuffs.

How long have I been down here? Two days? Three? Time has become meaningless in this windowless basement, marked only by Ginni's increasingly deranged behavior and his casual discussions of our future together.

By now, people must know I'm missing. Dario will have noticed my absence, he will be asking questions. But Ginni was right about one thing. Everyone will think I'm taking time off after the Petrov situation. It could be weeks before anyone realizes something is actually wrong.

Weeks of this. Weeks of being fed and bathed and treated like some kind of prize pet while Ginni plans our domestic future.

“Or maybe this one?” Ginni has changed into something more traditional, a full ballgown with a sweeping skirt and modest neckline that somehow makes him look even more beautiful than the scandalous number he just discarded.

The white silk catches the candlelight, making him glow like something divine. His dark hair falls in soft waves around his face, and his blue eyes are bright with excitement and happiness. He looks like a painting come to life, like something that should be hanging in the Louvre rather than standing in a basement planning a forced marriage.

My chest tightens with something that definitely isn't attraction. Can't be attraction. I'm not gay, and even if I were, this isn't romance. This is kidnapping. This is insanity.

But watching him move in that dress, seeing the pure joy on his face as he imagines our wedding day, I feel something crack inside my carefully constructed defenses. Some part of me that's been locked away for years, buried under responsibility and reputation and the need to be what everyone expects me to be.

“What about the guest list?” Ginni continues, apparently taking my silence as approval. “I was thinking small and intimate for tomorrow's ceremony. Just us and the celebrant online. But then later, when you're

more comfortable with everything, we could have a proper celebration. A big church wedding with all our friends and family.”

The way he says it, so casually, like he’s planning a dinner party instead of discussing a fantasy that will never happen, makes my blood run cold. He’s not just talking about tomorrow’s insane online ceremony. He’s planning a future where I’m his husband, where we have a social circle that accepts us as a married couple, where this nightmare becomes our reality.

“Dario and Molly would love to be there,” he continues dreamily. “And Nicolo and Liam, of course. Oh, and Marco will want to give me away, won’t he? Though he might need some time to adjust to having you as a brother-in-law.”

The casual way he mentions Marco makes my blood pressure spike. My best friend. The man who’s trusted me with his family, who’s considered me a brother for more than half our lives. What’s he going to think when he finds out about this? What’s he going to do when he discovers the truth?

Because that’s what everyone will think, isn’t it? That I seduced Giovanni, that I took advantage of his obvious mental instability to get what I wanted. No one will believe the truth, that a twenty-one-year-old femboy overpowered a seasoned capo and forced him into this situation.

My reputation will be destroyed. Everything I’ve built, every relationship I’ve cultivated, every ounce of respect I’ve earned, all of it will disappear the moment people find out about this.

Wait. Online ceremony. Tomorrow. With a celebrant.

“Ginni,” I say carefully, trying to keep my voice steady. “This online wedding... it’s not going to be legally binding, is it? I mean, it’s just ceremonial, right?”

He pauses in his twirling, giving me a look that’s part confusion, part pity. “Of course it’s going to be legal, silly. I’ve done all the research. The celebrant is registered, the paperwork is ready to be filed. We’ll be properly married by tomorrow evening.”

The words hit me like a physical blow. Legally married. To Giovanni Torrini. There will be documentation, records, proof that I participated in this insanity.

Even if I escape, even if I somehow get out of this basement, I’ll be married to him. Legally bound to the most unstable member of the Torrini family. The scandal alone will destroy me, but the legal complications...

“You can’t be serious,” I whisper.

“Of course I’m serious,” Ginni says, looking genuinely hurt by my doubt. “This isn’t some game, Carlo. This is our wedding we’re talking about. The most important day of our lives.”

He moves to another dress, this one with intricate beading that catches the light like stars. “And for the honeymoon, I was thinking somewhere tropical. The Maldives, maybe, or Bali. Somewhere private where we can really get to know each other as husband and wife.”

Husband and wife. He said those words with pure conviction. He’s not just talking about a fake ceremony to satisfy some deranged fantasy. He genuinely believes this is going to happen. Genuinely thinks that tomorrow he’ll put on one of these dresses and marry me, and we’ll live happily ever after.

The collection of wedding dresses suddenly takes on even more of a sinister meaning. I know this isn’t recent planning. And these gowns are expensive, designer pieces that would have taken months to acquire. Some look like they’ve been tried on repeatedly, the fabric slightly worn from handling.

Cristo. Just how long has he been fantasizing about this? How many nights has he stood in front of this mirror, imagining himself as my bride? The obsession runs deeper than I thought, rooted in years of planning and preparation.

“I’ve already found the perfect celebrant online,” he continues cheerfully, adjusting the beaded dress so it falls perfectly around his ankles. “She does virtual ceremonies, very discreet, perfect for unconventional situations. Five-star reviews, completely professional.”

I pull against the restraints with renewed desperation, not caring that the metal cuts into my wrists. The pain is better than this creeping sense of inevitability, better than the way part of me is starting to accept that maybe this is just my life now.

“The flowers will have to be white, obviously,” Ginni babbles on, completely oblivious to my growing panic. “Roses, maybe, or peonies if I can get them on short notice. And candles everywhere, just like tonight. Oh, and we’ll need someone to take photos! I want to document every moment of our special day.”

I have no fucking clue how he is going to bring a photographer to his basement boudoir and get them to ignore the fact I’m an unwilling prisoner. But this is Ginni. He will find a way.

There are going to be photographs. Evidence. Permanent proof of whatever ceremony he's planning to put me through. Even if I escape eventually, even if I find a way out of this nightmare, there will be photographs of Carlo Benedetti participating in a marriage ceremony with Giovanni Torrini.

"Later, we can have a proper reception," he continues, lost in his fantasy. "Maybe at the Savoy, or somewhere equally elegant. All our friends dressed in their finest, celebrating our love. Dancing until dawn, just like in the movies."

The easy way he switches between tomorrow's basement ceremony and some impossible future celebration makes my skin crawl. He can't distinguish between what's real and what's fantasy, between what's possible and what's completely delusional.

"I need to get out of here," I whisper, the words barely audible even to myself. "I need to get out of here right fucking now."

But even as I say it, I know it's impossible. The basement is soundproofed. The restraints are professional grade. Ginni has planned this too well, thought of too many contingencies.

And the worst part, the thing that makes me want to scream until my throat is raw, is that he looks absolutely radiant in every single dress. Like a fairy tale princess, like something from a dream, like the kind of beautiful creature that men go to war over.

"This is the one," he announces suddenly, stopping in front of the mirror in the beaded gown. "This is perfect. Classic but not boring, elegant but not stuffy. You love it, don't you? I can tell by the way you're looking at me."

The way I'm looking at him. Like a starving man looking at a feast. Like someone drowning in sight of salvation. Like a man watching his own destruction and finding it beautiful.

"Ginni," I start, my voice hoarse with desperation. "We can't get married. This isn't... people don't just..."

"Of course we can," he interrupts, his voice bright with certainty. "Everything's arranged. Tomorrow afternoon, two o'clock sharp. Our new life begins."

And looking at him standing there in white silk and pearls, surrounded by enough wedding dresses to stock a bridal boutique, glowing with years of accumulated fantasy and absolute certainty, I realize with crystal clarity that

Giovanni Torrini isn't going to let me leave this basement unless I'm his husband.

But the fairy tale wedding he's planning isn't the beginning of our happily ever after.

It's the end of my life as I know it.

CHAPTER TEN

GINNI

I woke up today feeling like I was floating on pure joy. And that feeling hasn't left. Why would it? It is my wedding day.

Everything is perfect. The flowers arrived exactly on time, each white rose and sprig of baby's breath exactly as I specified. The cake is a work of art, two perfect tiers of vanilla sponge with buttercream roses that look almost too beautiful to eat.

Even the morning sunlight filtering through the upstairs windows as I collected my deliveries felt like a blessing from the universe itself.

And my dress... oh, my dress is absolutely divine. Standing in front of the full-length mirror, I can barely contain my excitement. The beaded gown was definitely the right choice. Carlo has such good taste. The way the light catches on every bead makes me feel like I'm wearing captured starlight. My hair falls in perfect waves around my jawline, each strand positioned exactly where it should be, and the delicate tiara catches the artificial light like a crown of diamonds. I look exactly like the bride I've always dreamed of being.

Today is the day. Today, Carlo becomes mine forever. Legally, officially, eternally.

I take one last look at myself in the mirror, adjusting a tiny wrinkle in the silk and making sure the tiara sits at the perfect angle. This moment has

been five years in the making. I've imagined this day thousands of times, but reality is even more beautiful than my fantasies.

I gather my bouquet carefully, inhaling the sweet scent of the white roses and baby's breath. Classic and romantic, timeless and elegant. The florist followed my specifications perfectly, down to the exact shade of ribbon wrapped around the stems. Every element of today has to be perfect because this is the most important day of our lives.

I practically dance down the hallway to the bedroom, my heart beating so fast I feel dizzy with happiness. My silk slippers make no sound on the hard floor, and I pause in the doorway for just a moment to compose myself. This is it. This is really happening.

Carlo is sitting up against the pillows with the gray sheet draped modestly across his lap. He looks incredible, all tousled dark hair and olive skin against the white bedding, like something from a classical painting depicting ancient Roman gods. My husband-to-be. The man who's about to promise himself to me forever.

“Good morning, my love,” I say breathlessly, unable to keep the joy from spilling over in my voice. “Are you ready for the most important day of our lives?”

His eyes widen as he takes in my appearance, traveling from the tiara down to the flowing skirt of my gown and back up to my face. I see his throat work as he swallows hard, and there's something in his expression that might be awe. “Ginni, please. You don't have to do this.”

“Of course I do,” I laugh, setting the bouquet carefully on the nightstand where it will be visible in the camera frame for our ceremony. “It's our wedding day! The day we've both been waiting for, even if you didn't realize it yet.”

I reach into the drawer and pull out the ball gag I ordered specifically for this occasion. It's beautiful in its own way, black leather with silver buckles that catch the light. Carlo's face immediately drains of color, all that lovely olive tone fading to something pale and stricken.

“What the fuck is that?”

“Language,” I chide gently. “Think of it like blinkers for a horse. It's a way to soothe your nerves. I understand that things have been moving rather fast, and you're probably feeling overwhelmed by all these new emotions. This will help you relax and just let things happen naturally.”

I've researched this extensively, actually. The psychology of choice paralysis, the way too many options can create anxiety and prevent people from embracing what they truly want. Sometimes removing the burden of decision-making is the kindest thing you can do for someone you love.

"Ginni, no. Don't you dare..."

But I'm already moving, and Carlo is still chained to the bed with nowhere to go. He struggles, jerking his head from side to side, but there's not much he can do to stop me. I work the ball between his lips with gentle but firm pressure, the way the instructional videos showed me, then secure the straps behind his head with practiced efficiency.

My heart flutters as I step back to admire my work. There's something so beautiful about relieving Carlo of the burden of free will and autonomy. He deserves to be carefree, to not have to worry about making decisions or saying the wrong thing or overthinking every moment. I'm taking care of everything for him, the way a good spouse should.

"There," I say softly, reaching out to smooth his hair back from his forehead. "Doesn't that feel better? No pressure to find the right words or worry about what people might think. Just you and me and this perfect moment."

Carlo makes a muffled sound of protest behind the gag, but I choose to interpret it as gratitude. His eyes are so expressive, telling me everything I need to know about how moved he is by this gesture.

This is our version of wedding rings. Modern, discreet once I take the ball gag off. Perfect for everything we are to each other.

And best of all, it means one day, when Carlo is truly ready, we can exchange traditional rings. We are saving some joy for the future, and the beauty of that is bringing tears to my eyes.

I settle beside him on the bed, careful not to wrinkle my dress, and place my laptop across both our knees. The weight of it is reassuring, solid and real. My hands are trembling slightly with excitement as I open the video call application, the same nervous energy brides have felt throughout history.

"Here we go," I whisper, my voice barely audible as I click the link the celebrant sent me yesterday evening. "Our new life is about to begin."

The screen connects after a moment of loading, and I'm looking at a middle-aged woman with vibrant purple hair and a nose ring. She's sitting in what appears to be a home office, with crystals on the shelves and

certificates visible on the wall behind her. Wind chimes hang in the corner, and there are plants everywhere, giving the space a very earthy, spiritual feeling. Exactly the kind of person who would understand unconventional love.

“Giovanni and Carlo?” she asks brightly, consulting notes on her desk. Then her eyes fall on Carlo, and they widen considerably as she takes in the ball gag.

“Yes, that’s us!” I beam, my smile so wide it almost hurts. “Thank you so much for doing this on such short notice. We’re both so excited we could barely sleep last night.”

The celebrant’s gaze keeps drifting to Carlo, who’s making soft sounds behind the gag. Her expression is uncertain, professional concern warring with obvious curiosity. “Is... is he okay? That’s quite an unusual accessory for a wedding ceremony.”

“Oh, that,” I wave a hand dismissively, as if this is the most normal thing in the world. “It’s his kink. And he’s very shy about public speaking, performance anxiety, you know how it is. This helps him feel more comfortable and present in the moment. Doesn’t it, darling?”

I slide my hand behind Carlo’s head and give his hair a gentle but firm tug, making him nod. The movement is perfectly natural looking, exactly as I intended. “See? He loves it. It’s actually quite romantic when you think about it.”

The celebrant looks uncertain for a moment, glancing between us with the expression of someone trying to decide whether this falls within the bounds of normal human behavior. Then she shrugs, clearly deciding that she’s seen stranger things in her line of work.

“Well, I’ve certainly performed ceremonies for couples with... unique preferences. Each relationship has its own dynamic. I’ve received both your birth certificates, and I’ll mail the marriage certificate to the address you provided within three business days.”

Carlo makes a strangled noise behind the gag, and I feel a surge of pride at my own efficiency.

Actually, it was surprisingly easy once I knew how. I’ve always known Carlo’s full name, and I figured out his date of birth because I know how old he is and that his birthday is May 5th. I also know he was born here in London. I even know which hospital because one time, at a dinner party, he mentioned that he was giving a donation.

That information, together with fifteen pounds, is enough to order a birth certificate from the General Register Office in England.

“Shall we begin?” the celebrant asks, consulting her notes again and adjusting something on her computer screen.

“Please,” I say, my voice breathy with excitement and barely contained emotion. “We’ve been waiting for this moment for so long.”

She starts with the standard opening, her voice taking on the formal cadence of someone who’s performed this ritual hundreds of times. She talks about love and commitment and the sacred bond of marriage, about two souls choosing to walk through life together. I hang on every word, my heart swelling with each phrase. This is really happening. Carlo and I are really getting married.

The words wash over me like music, like poetry, like everything beautiful I’ve ever read about love and devotion. This is what I’ve been dreaming of since I was sixteen years old, sitting in family dinners and watching Carlo across the table, imagining a day when he would be mine forever.

“Marriage is not just a legal contract,” the celebrant continues, “but a spiritual and emotional bond between two people who choose to share their lives, their dreams, their futures. It’s about trust, respect, communication, and above all, love that transcends all obstacles.”

Yes, I think, exactly. Love that transcends all obstacles. Love that refuses to be denied or hidden away in basements. Love that’s strong enough to overcome fear and doubt and the expectations of others.

“Giovanni,” she continues, turning her attention to me with a warm smile, “do you take Carlo to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, for better or worse, till death do you part?”

“I do,” I say immediately, my voice clear and strong and ringing with absolute certainty. “I absolutely do. With all my heart and soul and everything I am. Forever and always.”

The words feel sacred as they leave my lips, a vow that goes deeper than law or ceremony. This isn’t just a legal formality; this is me promising the universe that I will love and protect and cherish Carlo for the rest of my life.

“And Carlo,” she turns to address him directly, her voice warm and encouraging, “do you take Giovanni to be your lawfully wedded husband,

to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, for better or worse, till death do you part?"

Carlo just stares at the screen, his eyes wide and unblinking, making no sound except for his slightly labored breathing. The moment stretches, filled with tension and possibility. I slide my hand behind his head again, fingers tangling gently in his soft hair, and give it a firm tug. His head jerks forward in what could charitably be called a nod.

"He's just overwhelmed with emotion," I explain to the celebrant, my voice soft with understanding and love. "This is such a special moment for us. He's always been the strong, silent type. Still waters run deep, you know."

"I can see that," she says with a knowing smile, the kind of expression that suggests she's seen all types of couples in her years of performing ceremonies. "The strong, silent type can be very romantic. There's something beautiful about love that doesn't need words."

"There really is," I agree, gazing at Carlo adoringly, taking in every detail of his face, the way the light catches in his dark eyes, the way his chest rises and falls with each breath. "He's absolutely perfect. I'm the luckiest person in the world."

The celebrant continues with a reading about soulmates finding each other across time and space, about love conquering all obstacles, about two hearts becoming one. Her voice rises and falls with practiced rhythm, each word carefully chosen to evoke the magic and mystery of true love. It's everything I've ever dreamed of hearing at my wedding, every romantic fantasy I've ever harbored coming to life.

"Love is patient, love is kind," she reads from what sounds like a modified version of the famous passage. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails, never gives up, never loses faith in the possibility of happiness."

Tears are already starting to gather in my eyes. This is so beautiful, so perfect, so exactly what I always imagined my wedding would be like.

"Now for the vows," she announces, setting down her notes and focusing her full attention on us. "Giovanni, would you like to share your feelings with your husband-to-be?"

"Oh yes," I breathe, turning to face Carlo fully. His eyes are so wide, so beautiful, fixed on mine with an intensity that makes my heart race. There's

so much I want to say, so much I need him to understand about what this moment means to me.

“Carlo,” I begin, my voice trembling with the weight of all the emotion I’ve been carrying for years, “from the moment I first saw you, I knew you were my destiny. My soulmate. The other half of my soul. You are everything I never knew I was looking for and everything I’ll ever need. You make me complete. You make me whole.”

My voice breaks slightly as the words pour out, years of pent-up love and longing finally finding expression. “I promise to love you, cherish you, protect you, and make you happy for the rest of our lives. I promise to be everything you need, to give you everything you deserve, to never let anything hurt you ever again. You are my today and all of my tomorrows.”

Tears are streaming down my face by the time I finish, my vision blurred but my voice steady. Carlo’s eyes are suspiciously bright too, glistening with what might be tears of joy, though that might be from the gag making his eyes water.

“Beautiful,” the celebrant says softly, her own voice slightly choked with emotion. “Absolutely beautiful. Carlo, would you like to share your vows?”

I reach behind Carlo’s head again and guide him through another nod, then answer for him with the words I know he would say if he could find them. “He told me earlier that his feelings are so deep, words can’t express them. He prefers to show his love through actions rather than speeches. He’s never been one for grand gestures with words.”

“How wonderfully romantic,” she sighs, pressing her hand to her heart. “Sometimes the deepest emotions transcend language. Very well then. By the power vested in me by the state and by the universe itself, I now pronounce you husband and husband.”

“Husband and wife,” I correct.

The celebrant pales. She picks up papers from her desk and starts furiously flicking through them.

“Oh my!” she gasps. “Have I been using the wrong pronouns? I can’t apologise enough!”

“No, not at all,” I reassure her warmly. “I am a boy, my pronouns are he him. But I prefer wife. It embodies our dynamic, as well as allowing me to express my feminine side.”

She sags in relief and then smiles brightly. “How lovely.”

Then she straightens up. “By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss!”

My heart stops. This is it. The moment I’ve been dreaming of for years, the culmination of everything I’ve worked toward, the beginning of our real life together.

I lean in slowly, savoring every second of this perfect moment, and press my lips gently to Carlo’s. The ball gag is between us, but it doesn’t diminish the magic of the moment. Nothing could diminish this. It’s perfect. We’re married. He’s mine forever.

I kiss him deeply. Thoroughly. Utterly. I kiss him until he makes a quiet sound that goes straight to my impatient cock.

“Congratulations!” the celebrant beams, clapping her hands together with genuine joy. “I’ll get that certificate in the mail to you right away. May you have many years of happiness together.”

“Thank you so much,” I manage through my tears of pure joy, my voice thick with emotion. “This has been absolutely perfect. Everything I ever dreamed of.”

I close the laptop and set it aside carefully, my hands shaking with happiness and the overwhelming realization that it’s done. We did it. We’re actually married. Legally, officially, forever and always.

“Let me get that off you, my darling husband,” I say, reaching behind Carlo’s head to unbuckle the gag with gentle, reverent fingers.

He spits it out the moment he’s free, working his jaw and running his tongue over his lips. “Ginni, this is insane. You can’t just...”

“Shhh,” I interrupt, pressing a finger to his lips with infinite tenderness. “No negativity on our wedding day. I have cake!”

He stares at me with a utterly dumbfounded expression. It makes him look younger. Even more handsome.

I quickly grab my phone from the bedside cabinet. “Sadly, there wasn’t a way to hire a professional photographer. They can’t do it via a laptop camera, and I didn’t want strangers in our love nest.

I hold the phone up and angle my head next to Carlo’s, making sure to capture the bouquet. I smile and take several photos in quick succession. Only stopping when Carlo’s daze ends and he starts scowling. But that’s fine. I have enough photos for now, and everything else is stored safely away in my memory.

“Cake time!” I smile brightly.

I retrieve the small wedding cake from the kitchen, carrying it like the precious treasure it is. Two perfect tiers of vanilla sponge with buttercream roses, absolutely perfect for an intimate celebration. I cut us each a piece with ceremonial precision, and when Carlo opens his mouth to say something, I feed him a large mouthful with a silver fork, the way newlyweds are supposed to do at every wedding since the beginning of time.

“Isn’t this delicious?” I ask, taking my own bite and savoring the sweet vanilla flavor. “I specifically requested extra vanilla because I know how much you love it. I remember you always taking seconds of vanilla cake at family birthdays.”

Carlo chews mechanically, his eyes distant and unfocused. He’s probably just overwhelmed by how perfect everything is, how seamlessly all the pieces have come together. Sometimes happiness can be just as shocking as sadness.

“And now,” I announce, setting the plates aside and standing up with renewed energy, “it’s time for our first dance!”

I consider untying Carlo for a moment, imagining how romantic it would be to dance with him properly, to feel his arms around me as we sway together as newlyweds. The image is so beautiful it makes my chest ache with longing.

But then he speaks, hope creeping into his voice in a way that’s almost heartbreakingly sincere.

“I’d love that,” he says quickly, too quickly, his words tumbling over each other. “I want our first dance to be special. Really special. Just the two of us.”

I pause, studying his face with the kind of careful attention I’ve learned to pay to his expressions over the years. My poor Carlo. He’s such a terrible liar, it’s absolutely endearing. The hope in his eyes, the way he’s trying so hard to sound sincere when what he really wants is freedom... it all just makes me love him even more.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I sigh, reaching out to stroke his cheek with infinite gentleness, “you’re not ready for our first dance yet. But that’s okay. I love you so much, I don’t even mind that you’re still fighting this beautiful thing between us.”

Instead, I move to the center of the room and begin to sway to music that exists only in my heart. I close my eyes and picture Carlo standing with me,

his strong arms around my waist, spinning me around the most beautiful dance floor in the world.

In my mind, the basement transforms completely. The concrete walls disappear, replaced by soaring ceilings painted with cherubs and clouds. Crystal chandeliers cast rainbow light across polished marble floors. The air smells like roses and champagne and happiness.

Elegant guests in formal wear watch us from candlelit tables, their faces glowing with joy for our happiness. Dario and Molly beam at us from the front table, Molly dabbing at tears with a silk handkerchief. Nicolo and Liam raise champagne glasses in an eternal toast to our love.

And there's Marco, tears streaming down his face as he watches his little brother marry the love of his life. No more shame, no more hiding, just pure joy that I've found someone who loves me exactly as I am. My parents too, finally understanding that this is who I'm meant to be and who I'm meant to be with, that love conquers all their old-fashioned fears and prejudices.

Everyone we care about is here, celebrating our love instead of hiding from it, embracing our happiness instead of trying to bury it in basements and silence.

The music swells in my imagination, a full orchestra playing the most beautiful waltz ever composed, and I spin faster, my dress billowing out around me like a cloud of starlight. This is what love feels like. This is what happiness feels like. This is what forever feels like.

When I finally stop spinning and open my eyes, slightly dizzy from the movement and the overwhelming emotion of the day, Carlo is watching me with an expression I can't quite read. But that's okay. He's probably just as overwhelmed as I am by how perfect this day has been, by how seamlessly we've transitioned from two separate people into one unified whole.

"I love you, husband," I say softly, settling back beside him on the bed and taking his hand in mine.

And for the first time in my entire life, I am completely, perfectly, utterly happy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CARLO

Ginni seems lost in a daydream. He is sitting beside me on the bed, holding my cuffed hand, but fuck knows where his mind has gone.

His slender chest is rising and falling rapidly, making the beads on his dress sparkle like captured stars. An aftereffect of his dancing. But there's something else too. Something dreamy and distant in his expression, like he's still somewhere else entirely, still lost in whatever fantasy he conjured while spinning around the room.

And what incredible dancing it was. I know he was swirling around a frigging basement, imagining it was our first dance, after forcing me to marry him through some insane online ceremony.

Nevertheless, he looked amazing. Absolutely breathtaking. Gliding across the concrete floor with grace and poise that would put professional dancers to shame, his dress flowing around him like liquid silk. The expression on his face was pure bliss, utterly transported, like he could actually see the ballroom he was imagining, and could hear the orchestra playing just for us.

There were moments when I cursed these chains because I yearned to get up and join him. I wanted to place my hands on his narrow hips and twirl him around like he deserves, and feel his lithe body pressed against mine. The urge was so strong it was almost painful, watching him dance alone

when every instinct I had was screaming at me to be his partner, to give him the first dance he was so clearly craving.

Oh lord. I take a deep breath. Is insanity contagious? Have I finally lost my grip on reality completely?

I need to be working out how to escape. I have to plan the most discreet way of getting an annulment, assuming that ceremony was actually legally binding. I should be cataloguing every weakness in his security, every moment when he lets his guard down. I should not be lying here, hypnotized by Ginni's dancing, mesmerized by the way his body moves like poetry in motion. I must keep my wits about me.

But Cristo, he's beautiful. Even knowing what he is, even understanding the depth of his madness, I can't deny the raw magnetism that radiates from him. It's like he's been designed specifically to short-circuit every rational thought in my head.

The way the dress clung to his curves as he spun, the way his hair caught the light, the pure joy on his face as he lost himself in the moment... it was impossible to look away. And that's the problem, isn't it? Even when I know I should be horrified, even when every logical part of my brain is screaming that this is wrong, I'm drawn to him like a moth to a flame.

Suddenly, Ginni rouses. Shaking himself like someone waking from the most beautiful dream, his eyes refocusing on the present moment. Returning from wherever his mind drifted to, probably some elaborate fantasy about reception parties and honeymoons and whatever other domestic bliss he's cooked up in that twisted imagination of his.

He turns to face me, and the transformation is immediate. Gone is the dreamy, distant expression, replaced by something sharp and focused and entirely too knowing.

He's grinning broadly. Blue eyes flashing with mischief and anticipation and something darker that makes my pulse spike.

"It's our wedding night!" he beams with sheer delight, like he's just announced we're going to Disneyland instead of... whatever the hell he has planned for me now.

My stomach fills with icy dread, a cold weight settling in my gut like I've swallowed lead. My lungs fill with horror, each breath suddenly requiring conscious effort. But my cock fills, betraying every rational thought in my head. And my heart starts fluttering all over the place like a teenager's.

Heaven help me, I'm so conflicted and confused I don't know which way is up anymore.

The combination of terror and arousal is making me dizzy. How can I be this scared and this turned on at the same time? What kind of sick psychology is that? But watching Ginni's face light up with anticipation, seeing the way he looks at me like I'm his greatest treasure, I feel like I'm drowning in contradictions.

Ginni stands up slowly, gracefully, like everything he does. He pads to the end of the bed on silent feet, positioning himself where I can see every inch of him. Then he gives me a sweet smile, innocent and wicked all at once, and slowly, delicately slides off his satin pumps.

The movement is pure elegance, each motion deliberate and purposeful.

I force a swallow down my throat. Oh hells, I think I'm in for a striptease. A wedding night striptease from my brand-new husband, who drugged and kidnapped me into this marriage.

I should look away. I should close my eyes. I should fucking do something other than stare like a starving man at a feast. But I can tell I'm not going to. Some part of me that I've spent years trying to suppress has taken control, and all I can do is watch with fascination and dread as Giovanni Torrini prepares to seduce me on our wedding night.

Ginni is beautiful. Stunning in a way that defies description. And I have a pulse. I'm not strong enough to not watch, apparently I'm not even strong enough to maintain even a shred of dignity in the face of his particular brand of temptation.

My pulse quickens as Ginni continues to move, and I realize this isn't just undressing. This is performance art. His hands speak a language of their own. One of grace, refinement and pure seduction that he's clearly spent time perfecting. Every gesture is calculated for maximum impact, designed to render me speechless and helpless.

He turns around, presenting his back to me. He looks over his shoulder and smiles sweetly.

The beaded bodice of the wedding dress requires careful handling, and Ginni takes his time with each tiny clasp and hook. His fingers work with practiced precision, effortless grace, as if he's rehearsed this moment a thousand times in his mind. Which, knowing him, he probably has.

When the clasps are all undone, he turns around to face me. His eyes blaze with naughty promise as laces are undone with ceremonial slowness.

Each loop loosened with deliberate care, the bodice gradually releasing its hold on his torso. The white wedding dress slides off perfect skin in a fall that doubles as a caress, silk and lace pooling at his feet like water.

I blink, and somehow the transformation is complete. The dress is in a pool of silks at Ginni's stocking-covered ankles, and now he is standing before me in lingerie.

A snow-white lacy bralette that does nothing to conceal his rosebud pink nipples, the delicate fabric a work of art in itself. White suspenders embrace his hips with mathematical precision, creating perfect lines that draw the eye downward. White silk stockings gleam on his legs like liquid moonlight, while the flash of naked skin on his thighs, nestled between the stockings and suspenders, does terrible things to my blood pressure.

The contrast between the stark white lingerie and his pale skin is hypnotic. Every piece fits him like it was custom made, which it probably was. Ginni would never settle for anything off the rack, especially not for something this important to him.

I tear my gaze away from the taunting skin of his thighs, desperate for some kind of anchor to sanity, only to discover white silk panties. The feminine underwear skimming over a pronounced bulge starts short-circuiting my brain wiring entirely. The sight is so incongruous, so perfectly Ginni, beautiful and feminine and undeniably masculine all at once, that I can't process it.

Ginni makes a happy sound, somewhere between a sigh and a purr. He is beaming. Glowing with satisfaction and joy and anticipation. I've never seen him so happy, and it really damn suits him. The radiance coming off him is almost blinding, like he's lit from within by pure contentment.

This is what he's been waiting for, I realize. Not just today, not just this moment, but this feeling. This sense of complete satisfaction, of dreams finally becoming reality. Of being wanted and desired.

He looks like someone who's gotten everything they ever wanted for Christmas, and I'm apparently the gift he's most excited about unwrapping.

The thought should terrify me more than it does.

"It's a G-string!" he boasts, hands artfully fluttering over his panties. "You can access my hole without having to take them off."

My mind screeches to a full and utter stop. I cough. Several times. His fear about me having a heart attack might not be entirely unfounded.

Ginni reaches behind himself. He wriggles, and his pink tongue pokes out a little. He makes a noise of satisfaction.

His hand comes back around to his front. But now it is holding a butt plug. A chrome one with a diamond set on the edge of the flared base.

He places it carefully on the bed by my feet. Jesus Christ. He had that in while we were getting married. He recited vows about true love while his little hole was stuffed and stretched. He is such a fucking minx. A sheer and utter menace.

“See? I didn’t have to take my panties off, and now I’m all ready for you!” he exclaims proudly.

Before I can process what’s happening, he snatches the blanket and pulls it off. Exposing me utterly.

His blue eyes go to my cock. My very hard cock that is standing proud.

Ginni squeals in delight. “And you’re ready for me!”

He skips over to the bedside cabinet and grabs the industrial-sized bottle of lube. Then he dances his way back down to the foot of the bed.

I yell as a giant glob of cold lube hits my dick. The shock of it is intense. Painful.

“Whoopsie!” Ginni says cheerfully.

His hand glides up and down my cock. Mechanically smearing the lube around. His hand is hot, and combined with heat from my cock, it is warming the lube up.

Now everything is warm and wet, and I can’t stop the little groan that stutters out of my throat.

Ginni smiles at me. A devastating smile. One that makes me believe that making him happy is the best thing I’ve ever done.

I blink and suddenly Ginni is on the bed, knees on either side of my hips. Straddling me. A very determined expression on his gorgeous face.

Fucking hell. He is going to do this, isn’t he? He is going to ride my cock. Consummate our nonconsensual marriage.

I’m about to have my cock inside Marco’s little brother’s ass.

“What about condoms!” I blurt out in desperation, clutching onto the first thing I can think of that might stop this, or at least delay it long enough for me to think of something else.

Ginni pauses. He tilts his head. “We are married, silly,” he says. As if that makes any sense at all. “I trust you.”

His fingers wrap around the base of my cock. He notches me against his hole. I groan again.

Ginni stares into my eyes, and he starts to lower himself onto my cock. His body opens for me. Welcomes me in. Envelops me in softness and heat.

His eyes are enormous. Wide and dark. Cheeks flushed.

“Oh. Oh. Oh,” he gasps.

It doesn’t sound entirely like pleasure.

My heart thuds against my rib cage. “Ginni. Be careful. Take it slow.”

He is a tiny little thing, and I’m a big man. He needs to be careful.

He whimpers. My chains clang sharply as I try to reach him. For fuck’s sake! I need to hold his hips. Steady him. Help him to take me without hurting himself.

He cries out again, but I can feel the smooth skin of his ass cheeks. I can feel that my cock is fully buried in his ass. He has made it all the way down. Far too quickly, but it’s done.

He feels incredible, but I need to hold back against the overwhelming pleasure that is threatening to consume me. I need to make sure Ginni is okay.

His head is down now. I can’t see his face, only the sheen of his dark hair. His lungs are moving fast and shallow. His spread thighs are trembling.

Shit.

“Ginni? Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Slowly, he lifts his head. His blue eyes are glazed. His bottom lip puffy and blood red where he has been biting it.

“It feels so good,” he breathes. “I knew it would. But I didn’t know it would feel this phenomenal.”

Relief flares briefly, then withers and dies. He is not hurt, but I think he is saying something that is equally as bad.

“Wait. What,” I babble inanely. “You’ve never done this before?”

Ginni shakes his head. “I saved myself for you. I wanted you to be my first.”

Horror and dismay flood my veins, colder than ice. But worse than that, far worse, is the little gleaming flame that ignites in my soul. A dark flame. One of pride, possessiveness, and avarice. Part of me is delighted I’m Ginni’s first. Part of me is vowing to be his last. Ginni’s first and only. Mine to keep.

I shake my head to clear it. “Are you telling me I’ve just taken your virginity!”

Ginni’s lips lift up in an adorable pout. “That’s such an old-fashioned term. I prefer to frame it differently.” His chin tilts up. His eyes gleam. “This is my sexual debut.”

I stare at him helplessly. I’m all out of words.

“Sounds much more exciting, doesn’t it!” He grins.

I open my mouth to say something, but then a tsunami of sensation hits me and all I can do is groan in delight. Ginni is moving. He is riding me, and the pleasure is profound. Far beyond anything I have ever experienced.

He is tight and hot and perfect.

And I can’t take my eyes off of him. He is loving this, really loving this. This boy was born to take cock.

The look of rapture on his face is utterly mesmerizing. His eyes are closed, his cheeks flushed, his soft lips parted. My cock is giving him ecstasy. I’m not just filling his guts, I’m filling him with profound joy.

Watching him is making me realize that everyone I’ve ever been with was faking it. I’ve clearly been a shit lover. A fact I need to remedy immediately. I have to stop being a selfish bastard.

But in my defense, I’ve never fucked anyone I’ve cared about, and they were only fucking me for money or prestige. Because they wanted something.

Ginni only wants me. I’m pretty sure he’d still ride my cock if I only had a cardboard box to my name. And that’s exhilarating.

He picks up the pace. Bouncing away. His ass is so tight. The little noises of joy he is making are so sweet. Each one is making my cock even harder. Sex has never felt this amazing.

Ginni’s head tilts back, exposing his long, pale throat and making him look utterly wanton. His hands are tangled in his dark hair. He is wailing with euphoria.

He clenches tightly around me. Quivering and milking. The front of his white silk panties floods with wetness, growing dark.

He just came hands-free. From my cock alone.

I grunt and see stars. My orgasm burns through me, hot enough to burn. It rolls on and on. My cock spurting and spurting deep inside Ginni’s ass. Fireworks sparking through my psyche. Nerve endings humming with rapture.

Ginni shivers and sighs. Taking each rope of my cum with obvious appreciation. When I'm finally done, he smiles down at me like a benevolent god.

He reaches for the butt plug that's still by my chained foot. "I want to keep your cum for as long as possible."

A groan escapes me. Deep inside Ginni's ass, my softening cock twitches.

I'm doomed. So fucking doomed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

GINNI

I climb off the bed slowly, my entire body still humming with satisfaction and wonder. What we just shared was beyond anything I could have imagined, better than every fantasy I've harbored for the past five years. Carlo was so gentle with me, so careful, treating my gift to him with the reverence it deserved.

My legs are slightly unsteady as I pad across the room, but I feel like I'm floating on air. Everything is different now. I'm different. We're truly husband and wife in every sense, bound together by something deeper than law or ceremony. The physical connection we just shared has transformed everything between us, made us complete in ways I never dared hope for.

The butt plug is keeping his cum where it belongs, and there is a delicious ache in my ass. I can still feel an echo of him inside me. The memory makes me shiver with residual pleasure and something deeper, more profound. I gave him everything I had to give, my most precious gift, and he accepted it with such tenderness that I nearly wept from the beauty of it.

I retrieve the cattle prod from under the bed, noting how Carlo's eyes track the movement but without his usual panic. There's something different in his gaze now, something softer.

Progress. Beautiful, undeniable progress that makes my heart sing with hope.

“Time for your evening routine,” I announce cheerfully, moving to unlock his restraints with practiced efficiency. The key turns smoothly, and I help him sit up properly, working the circulation back into his arms with gentle massage.

Carlo doesn’t fight me as I guide him to his feet. His movements are careful, almost deferential, and I have to bite back a pleased smile. He’s learning to trust me, to accept that I only want what’s best for him. The change in his behavior is subtle but unmistakable. Less resistance, more cooperation. Like he’s finally beginning to understand that fighting this will only make both of us miserable.

It is wonderful not to have to shackle him. So much progress in such a short amount of time.

“Take as long as you want,” I tell him softly as we reach the bathroom door, my voice warm with genuine care. “I’ll be right here if you need anything.”

I close the door behind him and lean against it, listening to the sound of running water and allowing myself a moment of pure happiness. This is what I’ve dreamed of for so long. Taking care of Carlo, being his partner in all the small intimacies of daily life. Even something as simple as his evening shower becomes magical when we’re truly together.

The shower runs for a long time, longer than last time, and I wonder if he’s taking extra care tonight. Perhaps washing away the last remnants of his old life, preparing himself for our future together. The thought makes me giddy with anticipation for all the nights to come.

When he emerges, hair damp and skin flushed from the heat, he looks almost ethereal in the artificial light. Droplets of water cling to his shoulders, and I have to resist the urge to lick them away. There will be time for that later, when we’re both ready.

He walks directly back to the bed without prompting, without hesitation, without any attempts to test boundaries or look for escape routes. He simply settles against the pillows and extends his wrists for the restraints like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

Of course, it could be the cattle prod I’m pointing at him, but surely it’s more likely that he is behaving because he is accepting our glorious future.

My heart nearly bursts with pride and love. “Such a good husband,” I murmur, securing the cuffs but leaving them significantly looser than before. His skin looks slightly raw from the metal, angry red marks that

make my chest ache with sympathy. I can't bear the thought of him being uncomfortable, especially not because of something I've done.

I trace the red marks gently with my fingertips, feeling the slight heat of irritated skin. "We'll get you some padded cuffs tomorrow," I promise, meaning every word. "Silk-lined, much more comfortable for extended wear. I should have thought of that sooner."

"Ginni," he says quietly, and there's something different in his voice. Softer. Less combative. The sharp edges of anger and defiance have been worn smooth, replaced by something that sounds almost like acceptance. "Are you going to keep me chained forever?"

The question catches me off guard, not because I haven't considered it extensively, but because of how he asks. There's no anger in it, no accusation or demand. Just genuine curiosity, like he's trying to understand the parameters of our new life together.

"Not forever," I assure him, settling beside him on the bed and taking his hand in mine. "Just until you're ready. Until you understand that this is where you belong, that this is what happiness looks like."

He nods slowly, as if he's actually considering my answer rather than dismissing it outright. His thumb brushes across my knuckles in a gesture so gentle it takes my breath away. Another small victory in our ongoing negotiation of love.

"I should make us dinner," I announce suddenly, energized by the domesticity of it all. "Our first meal as a married couple. What would you like?"

"Whatever you want to make," Carlo says, and the easy compliance in his voice makes my chest tight with happiness. No arguments, no demands, just trust in my ability to take care of him properly.

I practically skip to the kitchen, my mind already racing through possibilities. Tonight calls for something special, something celebratory but also nourishing. He needs protein after our activities, something substantial and satisfying. I settle on steak and baby potatoes, perfectly seasoned and cooked exactly how he likes it. Medium rare, with just a hint of garlic and rosemary, the way he always orders it.

The cooking itself becomes a meditation, each step performed with loving care and complete attention. The sizzle of meat in the cast iron pan, the herb-scented steam rising from the perfectly roasted potatoes, the satisfaction of timing everything to absolute perfection. This is what

marriage should be. Taking care of each other, creating moments of simple pleasure together, building a life one meal at a time.

I select our best plates, the ones with the delicate gold rim that catch the light beautifully. Everything must be perfect for our first dinner as husband and wife. The presentation matters almost as much as the taste, because Carlo deserves to feel cherished in every possible way.

When I return with the tray, Carlo's eyes light up at the sight of the perfectly prepared meal, and I feel a warm glow of satisfaction. "That smells incredible."

"Only the best for my husband," I beam, settling on the edge of the bed and cutting the steak into perfect bite-sized pieces. The meat is exactly the right temperature, pink in the center and perfectly seared on the outside. The knife glides through it like butter.

I feed him slowly, savoring each moment of intimacy. The way he opens his mouth trustingly for each piece, the satisfied sounds he makes as he chews, the way his eyes drift closed in appreciation of the flavors. It's better than any restaurant could ever be, because it's ours. Because I made it with love, just for him.

"This is incredible," he murmurs between bites. "You're an amazing cook."

The compliment makes me flush with pleasure. "I wanted tonight to be special. Our wedding night deserves a proper celebration."

A drop of juice escapes the corner of his mouth, and without thinking, I lean forward and catch it with my tongue. His sharp stubble rasps against me, and the taste of him mixed with the rich meat makes me dizzy with want, and I see something flicker in his eyes that looks dangerously like desire. Not the resigned acceptance I've been working with, but genuine heat.

"Delicious," I whisper against his skin, and he shivers in response.

We finish the meal in comfortable silence, Carlo accepting each bite with increasing ease. The tension that's been his constant companion for days seems to have finally begun to ebb, replaced by something that looks almost like contentment.

When the meal is finished, I sit back to study his face properly. The stubble that was charming yesterday morning has grown past attractively manly and into simply scruffy territory. It won't do for my beautiful husband to look unkempt, especially not on our wedding night.

“You need a shave,” I announce, hopping up with sudden purpose. “Don’t move, I’ll be right back.”

I return with my shaving kit, arranged on a silver tray with the same care I’d use for afternoon tea service. Everything gleaming and perfectly organized. The razor, the brush, the soap, warm water in a porcelain bowl, soft towels folded just so.

Carlo’s face pales dramatically when he sees the centerpiece of my collection. “Is that a cutthroat razor?”

“Of course!” I say proudly, lifting the beautiful instrument for his inspection. “Only the best for my husband. This one belonged to my great-grandfather. Italian steel, perfectly balanced, professionally maintained. It’s a work of art.”

The razor really is magnificent, its ivory handle worn smooth by generations of use, the blade sharp enough to split silk. It’s been in my family for over a century, passed down from father to son as a symbol of masculine tradition. Marco wanted it, but the lock on his safe was rubbish. So now it will serve Carlo, as it should.

Carlo swallows hard, his throat working visibly as he stares at the gleaming blade. “Do you know how to use it?”

“Of course I do, silly,” I laugh, beginning to lather the shaving soap in the warm water with practiced circular motions.

The soap creates a rich, creamy lather that smells of sandalwood and bergamot. I test the temperature with my finger to make sure it’s perfect. Warm enough to soften the hair, but not so hot as to be uncomfortable.

“I rarely need to shave myself,” I continue conversationally. “My genetics on my mother’s side blessed me with very little body hair. I tend to use hair removal cream for what little I do have. But I’ve watched several YouTube videos on the proper technique.”

His eyes go wide with alarm, panic creeping back into his expression. “Ginni! Use a safety razor!”

I pause, giving him a genuinely wounded look. “But that’s not classy. This is so much more elegant, more traditional. The way gentlemen have been shaved for centuries by their valets, their wives. It’s romantic.”

I approach with the razor, its blade catching the artificial light like liquid silver. The weight of it in my hand is satisfying, perfectly balanced for precision work. “Now hold still. Very, very still. Trust me.”

Carlo closes his eyes tightly and goes completely rigid, every muscle in his body tense with concentration. His hands clench into fists where they're restrained, and I can see him fighting every instinct that tells him to flee. The trust inherent in the gesture makes my heart flutter with overwhelming love. He's putting himself completely in my hands, literally trusting me with his life.

I begin with the gentlest possible strokes, the razor gliding smoothly through the lather. The blade is incredibly sharp, requiring almost no pressure at all. Each pass reveals more of his beautiful face, the strong jaw and elegant cheekbones emerging from beneath the stubble like a sculpture being freed from rough stone.

The intimacy is intoxicating. Holding his face in my hands, being trusted with something so delicate and dangerous, taking care of him in the most fundamental way possible. This is what marriage should be. Complete trust, absolute care, perfect devotion expressed through the smallest acts of service.

“You’re actually good at this,” Carlo murmurs as I carefully wipe foam off the blade. His voice is barely above a whisper, surprise evident in his tone.

“I’m good at taking care of you,” I correct softly. “It’s what I was made for. What we’re both made for, really. To care for each other.”

I work with methodical precision, cleaning the blade frequently, checking my progress. The transformation is remarkable. With each careful stroke, Carlo looks younger, more refined. The harsh edges softened by stubble give way to classical beauty, the kind of face that belongs on sculptures.

When I’m finished, I clear away the remaining foam with a warm, damp towel, taking extra care around his lips and the sensitive skin beneath his nose. His face emerges clean and smooth, absolutely perfect.

“Beautiful,” I breathe, unable to hide my satisfaction as I step back to admire my handiwork.

Carlo opens his eyes cautiously and seems genuinely surprised to find himself not only intact but unmarked. The relief on his face is almost comical, like he expected to find his throat cut.

“I think I’ll do this every morning,” I decide, gathering up my supplies with renewed enthusiasm. “A proper shave is essential for a gentleman. It’s one of those rituals that separates civilization from barbarism.”

I skip off to tidy everything away, already planning tomorrow's routine. Coffee first thing, then breakfast, followed by a proper shave and perhaps a manicure if his nails need attention. I want every detail of his grooming to be absolutely perfect, a reflection of how much I cherish him.

A quick shower washes away the day's activities, leaving me feeling fresh and ready for our first night as a married couple. The hot water soothes muscles I didn't even realize were tense, washing away the last vestiges of nervous energy and leaving only contentment in its wake.

I select a sapphire blue silk slip from my wardrobe, something that barely skims my thighs but feels like liquid luxury against my clean skin. The color complements my eyes perfectly, and the cut is designed to showcase rather than conceal. Tonight is special, it deserves special attire.

When I return to the bedroom, Carlo's reaction is immediate and extremely gratifying. His eyes go wide, pupils dilating as he takes in the sight of me in the revealing silk. The way his gaze travels from my face down to my legs and back again makes heat pool low in my belly.

“Good night, Husband,” I whisper, moving to turn off the main lights and activate the projector. Stars bloom across the dark surface above us, a perfect recreation of a clear night sky complete with constellations and the soft glow of the Milky Way.

I curl up beside him, using his broad chest as my pillow, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. I imagine his arm settling around me, a gesture so beautiful it makes my eyes sting with happy tears. This is what I've dreamed of for so long. Being held, being cherished, being wanted.

This has been the best day of my life. My wedding day, the day all my dreams finally came true. Carlo is mine now, truly and completely, and tomorrow will bring new adventures, new moments of perfect domestic bliss, new opportunities to show him just how good our life together can be.

I can hardly wait.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GINNI

I wake up softly. Gently. Like floating to the surface of warm water, consciousness returning in gentle waves rather than jarring interruption. There's no sudden panic clawing at my chest, no racing heart hammering against my ribs, no flood of anxiety washing away the remnants of dreams.

Just pure, crystalline contentment, because I am waking up in Carlo's arms.

Well, not technically his arms, since they're still secured to the headboard with restraints, but the intention is what matters. The important thing is that I'm waking up in bed with my husband, my beloved Carlo, and that simple fact makes everything else in the world fade into insignificance.

My head is resting on his naked chest, rising and falling with the steady rhythm of his breathing. Each breath lifts me slightly, a gentle rocking motion that's better than any lullaby. His skin is warm beneath my cheek, and I can hear the strong, steady beat of his heart, proof that he's here, that he's mine, that this isn't just another dream.

The sound almost matches the rhythm of the gentle waves the projector is now displaying on the ceiling, and I congratulate myself on being thoughtful enough to program it with multiple scenes. The starry night has given way to a perfect tropical sunrise, all golden light and turquoise water lapping at pristine white sand.

Now Carlo is going to wake up to the most beautiful sight imaginable, the beaches of the Maldives painted in soft morning colors. Languid waves washing across sugar-white sand, palm trees swaying in an endless summer breeze. It's the perfect start to what is going to be a perfect honeymoon, even if we're technically still in the basement. The location doesn't matter when you're with the person you love most.

I yawn delicately and stretch like a contented cat, feeling every muscle in my body respond with pure joy. It feels like my veins are full of liquid happiness instead of blood, every cell in my body singing with sheer bliss. I wish I actually were a cat so I could purr my contentment for the whole world to hear, let everyone know exactly how good I feel, how perfect my life has become.

I study my new husband's sleeping face. He looks so peaceful, so completely relaxed and at ease. Not a single worry line mars his handsome features, no tension in his jaw or furrow between his brows. He looks younger in sleep, almost boyish despite his thirty-four years.

Of course, it's possible the mild sedative I flavored his steak with last night is contributing to his current state of serene unconsciousness. Just a tiny amount of something to help him sleep deeply and wake refreshed, nothing harmful or unpleasant. But I prefer to think Carlo's profound ease is actually because I am simply the world's most perfect wife, naturally gifted at providing exactly what he needs.

I know instinctively how to take care of him, how to banish all his cares and worries and responsibilities. My poor sweet love carries far too much weight on those broad shoulders. The pressure of running a successful business, the constant vigilance required in our world, the endless decisions and negotiations and delicate balancing acts that make up his daily life.

He needs me to help him forget all of that for a while, to create a space where he can simply exist without having to be Carlo Benedetti the capo, the businessman, the man everyone turns to for solutions. Here, with me, he can just be Carlo. My Carlo, my husband, my beloved.

I sit up suddenly as an incredible idea strikes me, inspiration hitting like lightning in my perfectly peaceful brain. I know exactly how to wake him up. The very best possible way to transition from sleep to wakefulness.

All warm and cozy under silk sheets, with a tropical sunrise painting the ceiling above us, his body being lovingly worshipped by his devoted wife.

It's absolutely perfect, romantic and sensual and exactly what every man deserves to experience on the morning after his wedding night.

I carefully ease the blanket away from Carlo's sleeping form, moving with the patience of someone who has all the time in the world. He doesn't even stir, so deeply relaxed that my movements barely register. The sedative really was perfectly calibrated, enough to ensure he got the deep, restorative sleep he desperately needed.

His magnificent body is revealed inch by inch, like unwrapping the world's most precious gift. Broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist, olive skin that seems to glow in the artificial sunrise, the scattered scars that tell the story of his dangerous life. Every line and curve is absolute perfection, masculine beauty in its purest form.

It's almost impossible to believe that he's really mine. All mine. Forever and always.

The morning light from the projector plays across his skin, creating patterns of gold and shadow that shift with each simulated wave. He looks like a classical statue brought to life, like something Michelangelo might have carved from the finest marble. But he's real, he's warm, he's breathing, and most importantly, he's my husband.

I take a moment just to appreciate the sight of him, to memorize every detail of this perfect morning. The way his dark hair falls across the pillow, slightly mussed from sleep. The way his lips are parted just slightly, soft breaths escaping in the most endearing way. The way his body has finally, completely relaxed, all the tension and wariness of the past few days melted away in the safety of our bed.

This is what I've dreamed of for so long. Carlo at peace, Carlo protected, Carlo exactly where he belongs. With me, in our bed, in our life together.

The first time I drugged him, to get him to my basement lair, we weren't married. It wasn't right to even look at his naked body, let alone touch it beyond what was necessary. But everything is different now. He is legally my husband. I am his wife.

And now I get to show him just how much I love him, how grateful I am that he's finally stopped fighting what was always meant to be. I get to worship him the way he deserves, to make him understand through touch and devotion that this is his new reality.

A reality where he wakes up every morning to love and care and absolute devotion. A reality where he never has to face the world alone again. A

reality where I get to love him exactly the way I've always dreamed of.

Sighing happily, I make my way down the bed. Moving carefully so I don't jostle Carlo too much.

Getting into position between his legs feels like coming home. It is a thousand times better than finding an oasis after endlessly trekking in the arid desert. This is where I belong. Where I am meant to be.

I lower my head until my nose is brushing over his neatly trimmed pubes. I sniff as deeply as I can. Imbuing my lungs with his manly scent. It's heady. The best smell in the entire world.

His beautiful cock is soft. Hanging slightly to the left. Allowing me to feast on the sight of his right ball. And what a magnificent sight it is. Big. Heavy. Proud and unashamed. A ball that knows its worth.

It's so very perfect.

I'm so excited, I'm shaking. I'm so hungry for him, I'm drooling. I will never get tired of blowing my husband. It is forever going to be the highlight of my day. What I live for.

I nuzzle into his groin. Rubbing my face against his cock and balls. It feels wonderful. Soft, flaccid flesh massaging his sublime scent into my skin. My face is going to smell like his junk, and it is going to be heavenly.

Carlo is not even stirring. My little gift is helping him to sleep so sweetly. He deserves it. And it is allowing me the opportunity to explore him thoroughly. To take my time, with no pressure of impressing him. Right now, there is no need to prove anything or to endeavor to make him realize that he loves me. In this moment, I'm free to simply enjoy him. Savor him and appreciate everything he has to offer.

It's enough to make me giddy.

I poke my tongue out and lick one long, broad stroke all along his length. His flavor fills my mouth. Clean, musky, pure Carlo. I swear I can taste concentrated testosterone. It's delicious. Addictive and so fucking sexy.

I lick and lick. His cock stays soft. All floppy and relaxed. It's so cute. I take all of him into my mouth, for the sheer novelty of having him flaccid.

I moan around the weight of him. He is still heavy and hot, despite being soft. And now he is twitching. His body responding to my attentions while his mind dreams.

I suckle on him softly and get comfortable. Gently nursing on his cock as he slowly fills, swells and hardens, is going to be unfiltered exhilaration. A core happy memory to cherish forever. Fifty years from now, when I'm

bouncing our grandchildren on my knee, I'm going to be thinking of this moment and grinning.

I hum contentedly as my tongue glides and my cheeks hollow. He is swelling beautifully. Growing large in my mouth. His breathing has picked up pace. I bet he is having a lovely dream. It better be of me.

He twitches and makes a soft sound. I wonder if I can make him cum like this? A lovely orgasm while all languid and dreamy. That would be nice.

The thought makes me moan. His cock throbs, reaching full hardness. I start bobbing my head and am rewarded with a blast of salty precum. Incredible flavor. Exquisite.

I pick up my pace and tighten the suction.

Carlo wakes with a gasp and a clang of chains as he jerks. He swears profusely, then sucks in another breath.

“Ginni!”

I think he meant to say it like I was in trouble, but his throat is all thick with pleasure, and the way he said my name sounded like worship instead of reprimand.

I pick up my pace even more. He yells. He bucks. His cum spurts down my throat. Salty and perfect. Pieces of him, his literal DNA that I get to absorb into myself and keep forever. A most precious gift.

I keep on blowing him until I'm sure he is spent, and I have sucked him dry.

I pull off of his cock and settle on his stomach. Straddling and sitting on him.

He looks up at me with dark eyes. His face is all flushed and a little sweaty. His hair all mussed. I can tell he loved waking up like this. The best alarm clock ever.

My hand drifts down to my own cock. I'm so hard it hurts.

I stroke the edge of my silk slip over my cock. The sensation makes me tremble. Carlo's gaze fixes on my busy hand. A new fire lights in his eyes. He doesn't look away.

I whimper and continue stroking my cock with the soft silk of my slip. It feels so good. But not as good as the way Carlo is looking at me.

He licks his lips as if he is hungry to taste me. His cheeks are rosy.Flushed with arousal. My husband is not fighting his desire for me.

My heart is racing. Fluttering against my ribs. This is everything I ever wanted. Carlo's attention. All of it. Watching me and liking what he sees.

I whine. My hand flies up and down. My hips dance. My thighs tremble.

My orgasm comes quickly. Suddenly and completely. I shudder and gasp my way through it.

I feel all tingly now. Glowing and transcendent. I can feel air currents gently caressing my skin. Sparks are firing in my mind. Bright and pretty.

My eyes open. Carlo is staring at me as if I'm something holy. My heart swells and butterflies take flight in my belly.

Oh. Wait. My hand is sticky.

I look down. My cum is all over my hand. In my frenzy, I must have made the slip slide off my cock.

“Whoopsie,” I breathe as I stare at my fingers.

Carlo is staring at them too.

A wave of jitters washes over me. Slowly, oh so slowly, I reach out. I move my fingers towards Carlo's lips. His gaze never wavers. Tension thickens the air between us.

I pause less than an inch from his mouth. His heated eyes lift to mine. His head rises off the pillow, and his hot lips wrap around me. He sucks my fingers into his mouth and cleans the cum off of them. Drinking me down like I drank him down. Taking my DNA just like I took his.

This really is the best morning ever.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CARLO

I 'm sitting propped up against the pillows, still naked under the sheet, watching Ginni flit around the room like a domestic whirlwind. He's already fed me breakfast, after feeding me himself, but I'm not thinking about that. That's going into the denial part of my memories.

What I am going to think about is the proper breakfast he fed me afterwards. Perfectly prepared eggs Benedict with hollandaise that would make a Michelin-starred chef weep, fresh fruit cut into precise geometric shapes, and coffee that was somehow exactly the right temperature and strength. Then he gave me a thorough wash with warm cloths scented with bergamot, trimmed my fingernails with the precision of a professional manicurist, and even cleaned my ears with cotton swabs like I'm some kind of prize show dog.

Now he's settled cross-legged beside me on the bed, completely absorbed in something that is making my blood pressure spike.

He's scrolling through my phone. My fucking phone.

He's wearing a silk robe in pale green that makes his eyes look like jewels. His hair falls in soft waves around his face as he goes through my messages with the casual entitlement of someone who owns it. Which, apparently, he thinks he does now that we're "married."

"You have so many messages," he says cheerfully, his fingers moving across the screen with practiced efficiency. "People are very worried about

you. It's sweet, really. All these tough, dangerous men fretting like concerned mothers."

I watch in growing horror as he types something, sends it, then moves on to the next message. He's responding to my texts. Pretending to be me. The casual violation of privacy is staggering, but what's worse is how natural he looks doing it, like this is just another normal morning activity. As if answering someone else's phone is as routine as brushing your teeth.

"What are you telling them?" I demand, pulling against the restraints hard enough to make the metal bite into my wrists.

"That you're taking a well-deserved break," Ginni replies without missing a beat, his tone suggesting this is perfectly reasonable. "That you've gone away for a while to clear your head after all that stress with the Petrov situation. Very believable, considering how wound up you've been lately. Everyone's being very understanding."

He shows me the screen, and I read a text conversation with Dante. The response Ginni sent is so perfectly in my voice that for a moment I wonder if I actually wrote it myself and forgot. He's captured everything. The way I write, my sense of humor, even the specific abbreviations I use. It's uncanny and deeply unsettling.

"You sound exactly like me," I say, unable to keep the amazement out of my voice despite my horror.

"I should hope so," Ginni says with a pleased smile that transforms his entire face. "I've been studying your communication style for years. The way you phrase things, your sense of humor, how formal or casual you get depending on who you're talking to. How you use punctuation differently when you're stressed versus relaxed. It's all very systematic once you understand the patterns."

Years. He's been analyzing my texts for years, cataloguing my personality like some kind of behavioral scientist. Building a psychological profile that's apparently so accurate he can impersonate me flawlessly.

The implications are staggering. How many of my conversations has he been monitoring? How much of my private life has he been dissecting and analyzing? The thought makes my skin crawl, but there's also a grudging admiration for the sheer scope of his preparation.

"Here's one from Dario," Ginni continues, opening another message. "He's checking in, wants to know if you need anything during your vacation. Very thoughtful of him."

He types a response, reads it over, then shows it to me before sending. It's perfect. Exactly what I would have said, down to the casual mention of a book I've been meaning to read and a joke about Molly's latest interior design obsession.

"How do you know about the book?" I ask, genuinely curious despite myself.

"You mentioned it to Marco," Ginni replies without hesitation. "You said you'd been meaning to read that biography of Churchill but kept getting distracted by work. It was a throwaway comment, but I file everything away. You never know what details might be useful later."

The casual admission that he's been cataloguing every aspect of my life for years should terrify me more than it does. But watching him work, seeing the meticulous attention to detail, I can't help but be impressed by the sheer competence of it all.

An email notification pops up, and Ginni opens it immediately. His eyes light up with interest as he scans the content. It's from my club manager, Keith, and I can see it's marked urgent with multiple red exclamation points.

"Oh, this is interesting," Ginni murmurs, settling back against the pillows to read more carefully. "Problem with the sound system for tonight's event. The main speakers are completely dead, and the backup system isn't powerful enough for the crowd they're expecting. He's asking what you want to do, and he sounds rather panicked."

I feel a familiar spike of stress. This is exactly the kind of crisis that always seems to happen at the worst possible time. Tonight's event is a big one. The highlight of our calendar. A lot of money is going to be laundered through the bar. If people leave early, it's a fucking disaster.

Keith has been with me for three years, and he's good at his job, but he's not particularly creative under pressure. He follows protocols well but struggles with improvisation when things go sideways.

But before I can even begin to think through potential solutions, Ginni's fingers are flying across the screen. He types with a kind of focused intensity that wouldn't look out of place in a military operation or a surgical procedure.

As he works, his brow furrows in concentration, and it definitely doesn't look cute. I'm not daft enough to think that.

“There,” he says after maybe thirty seconds, setting the phone aside with obvious satisfaction. “All sorted. Keith should have everything he needs now.”

“What did you tell him?” I ask, genuinely curious despite the circumstances.

Ginni picks up the phone again and reads his response aloud, his voice taking on the same cadence and tone I use in professional communications.

“Contact Meridian Audio on Brick Lane immediately. Tell them it’s for Carlo Benedetti and you need their premium portable system delivered and set up by six PM. They owe me a favor from last year’s New Year’s Eve event when their driver nearly got robbed and I personally escorted him to the venue. If they give you any trouble about short notice, mention the Williams wedding situation where I recommended them despite their higher prices, and they’ll prioritize it. Also, have them bring Danny specifically for setup, he knows our acoustics and can optimize the sound for the space. Charge everything to account seven seven four, and tell Danny there’s a bonus if everything’s perfect by seven.”

I stare at him, completely speechless. It’s a perfect solution, one that addresses every aspect of the problem while leveraging relationships I’d completely forgotten about. I never would have thought of Meridian Audio, and I definitely wouldn’t have remembered the Williams wedding leverage or the specific details about their driver nearly getting robbed. Most importantly, I wouldn’t have thought to request Danny specifically. He’s their best technician, but I’ve only worked with him once.

“How did you...” I start, then trail off because I don’t even know how to finish the question.

“I pay attention,” Ginni says simply, but there’s something almost predatory in his expression now. “I know your business almost as well as you do. Who your suppliers are, which ones owe you favors, who has the best equipment, which technicians understand your setup. I’ve been watching and learning for a very long time, Carlo. Years of collecting information, building relationships, understanding how everything fits together.”

The casual way he says it makes my blood run cold. This isn’t just obsession with me personally. He’s been studying every aspect of my life, my business, my relationships. Building a comprehensive map of my entire existence like some kind of corporate spy.

“You’ve been spying on my business dealings?” I ask.

“Spying is such an ugly word,” Ginni replies with a delicate shrug. “I prefer to think of it as... research. Due diligence. When you’re planning to spend your life with someone, you want to understand all the important parts of their world.”

The matter-of-fact way he discusses this level of surveillance is chilling. How many conversations has he overheard? How many private meetings has he somehow monitored? The scope of his knowledge suggests access that goes far beyond casual observation.

“Why?” I ask, though I’m not sure I want to hear the answer.

“Because I love you,” he replies as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “When you love someone truly, completely, you learn everything about them. Their favorite foods, their business contacts, their fears, their weaknesses, their strengths.” His smile turns sharp, predatory. “Knowledge is power, and power is protection.”

He sets the phone aside with finality, as if the conversation is closed. Then he reaches under the bed. What he pulls out makes my heart stop beating for several long seconds.

A leather roll, the kind used for storing and transporting delicate instruments. Professional grade, well-worn, obviously expensive. But when he unrolls it on the blanket between us with ceremonial care, it reveals a collection of knives that would make a professional chef weep with envy.

Or a professional killer.

“Time for maintenance,” Ginni announces cheerfully, selecting a particularly wicked-looking blade and examining it in the artificial light. The knife is beautiful in a deadly way, the blade gleaming like liquid mercury, the handle wrapped in what looks like genuine leather worn smooth by use. “I like to keep my tools in perfect condition. You never know when you might need them.”

He begins cleaning the blade with practiced movements, each stroke deliberate and precise. There’s something almost ritualistic about the way he works, like this is a meditation or prayer made of steel and violence.

“You have a lot of knives,” I observe, trying to keep my voice steady despite the way my pulse is racing.

“I collect them,” Ginni says, moving on to sharpening the blade with a whetstone that produces a sound like whispered threats. The scraping noise sets my teeth on edge, metallic and ominous in the quiet room. “Different

types for different purposes. This one's Italian, from a little shop in Florence that's been making blades for four hundred years. Perfect balance, holds an edge beautifully. Very versatile for both kitchen work and... other applications."

The casual way he discusses the weapons while maintaining them is somehow more terrifying than any direct threat could be. This isn't posturing or intimidation meant to frighten me. This is simply part of his routine, like someone else might clean their glasses or organize their desk. The normalcy of it is what makes it so chilling.

He picks up a piece of paper from his kit and tests the blade's sharpness against it, and it parts like silk without any pressure at all. Satisfied, he sets it aside and selects another knife, this one with a thinner blade that looks almost surgical in its precision.

"This one's German," he continues conversationally, beginning the same careful cleaning process. "Specifically designed for delicate work. Amazing what you can accomplish with the right tools and sufficient knowledge of anatomy."

The way he says anatomy makes my blood turn to ice water. This isn't a cooking enthusiast discussing kitchen equipment. This is someone who's given serious thought to the practical applications of sharp objects on human bodies.

"Ginni," I say carefully, my mouth suddenly dry as sand, "what exactly are you planning to do with those?"

"Nothing, hopefully," he replies, his tone suggesting this is a perfectly reasonable question with a perfectly reasonable answer. "But it's important to be prepared for various contingencies. For instance, if Marco decides to visit."

My blood pressure spikes so hard I see spots. "What about Marco?"

"Well, he might not understand our relationship at first," Ginni continues in the same conversational tone, moving on to sharpening the second blade with methodical precision. "Big brothers can be so protective, so possessive. He might try to interfere with our happiness, maybe even try to take you away from me."

The blade he's working on is thinner than the first, more surgical in its precision. The kind of knife designed for delicate, precise work rather than slashing. The kind that could slip between ribs or find the space between vertebrae with surgical accuracy.

“And if that happens?” I ask, though I’m not sure I want to hear the answer.

“Then I’ll have to help him understand why that’s not going to be possible,” Ginni says with a sweet smile that doesn’t reach his eyes at all. “I’ll explain very carefully, very patiently, why you belong with me now. Why our marriage changes everything. Why interfering with our happiness would be... unwise.”

He tests the second blade’s edge, nodding with satisfaction when it easily slices through another piece of paper.

“And if he still doesn’t listen after your explanation?” I press, morbidly fascinated despite my horror.

“Well,” Ginni says with an elegant shrug, “sometimes people need more convincing than words can provide. Sometimes you have to demonstrate the consequences of poor choices in more... tangible ways.”

The matter-of-fact way he discusses potentially torturing or murdering Marco makes my stomach turn. This isn’t just delusional romantic fantasy anymore, if it ever was. This is genuine planning for violence, delivered with the same casual tone he might use to discuss weekend plans or grocery shopping.

“Marco is your brother,” I say desperately, pulling against the restraints hard enough to make them cut into my wrists. “You can’t seriously be talking about hurting him.”

“Half-brother,” Ginni corrects with clinical precision, his attention seemingly focused on the blade as he works. “And family is only meaningful when it’s reciprocated. Marco has spent years pretending I don’t exist, ashamed of what I represent, happy to leave me buried in this basement like some dirty secret he’d rather forget.”

There’s real pain in his voice now, quickly masked but unmistakable. For just a moment, I catch a glimpse of the wounded boy underneath all the madness. The child who was hidden away because his own family couldn’t bear to acknowledge him.

“He brings his people to family dinners and never once mentions that he has a brother,” Ginni continues, his voice taking on a harder edge. “I sit downstairs, invisible, forgotten. He’d rather I didn’t exist than have to explain me to people. If you hadn’t met me when I was a child, I’m sure he wouldn’t tell you about me either.”

The knife in his hands gleams as he turns it, checking every angle for imperfections.

“But you,” he continues, looking up at me with those impossibly blue eyes that seem to see straight through to my soul, “you see me. You value me. You’re worth protecting, even if it means making difficult choices about people who don’t appreciate what they have.”

He returns to his blade maintenance, the scraping sound of metal on stone filling the silence like a countdown timer. Each stroke is methodical, precise, almost meditative. This is someone who’s thought through every contingency, planned for every possible threat to his happiness.

Including the possibility of having to eliminate anyone who tries to separate us.

I’m lying here, chained and helpless, watching my beautiful, psychotic husband sharpen weapons while casually discussing murdering his own family members. And the most terrifying part isn’t the threats themselves.

It’s how competent he is. How thoroughly he’s planned this. How easily he solved my business crisis with knowledge I didn’t even know he possessed.

Giovanni Torrini... Wait. Fucking hell, if that ceremony was legal, does that mean he is Giovanni Benedetti now? Cristo. I can’t even go there right now. It’s too much.

The point is, Ginni isn’t just unhinged. He’s brilliant, capable, and absolutely ruthless when it comes to protecting what he considers his.

And apparently, that includes me.

The question is whether being protected by someone this dangerous is better or worse than being threatened by them.

I’m starting to suspect I don’t want to know the answer.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CARLO

Ginni puts his knives away with swift, practiced movements, each blade returning to its designated slot in the leather roll with the precision of a surgeon organizing his instruments. Then he stands beside the bed and stares down at me with an utterly unreadable expression on his beautiful face.

The silence stretches between us, heavy with unspoken tension. His blue eyes seem to be cataloguing every detail of my expression, reading things I'm not even aware I'm revealing.

“What?” I ask uneasily, shifting against the restraints.

He sighs dramatically, like someone facing an impossible decision. “It’s time for my livestream, but I don’t want to leave you alone on our honeymoon.”

“It’s fine,” I say quickly, perhaps too quickly. “You should do your work.”

Maybe if he leaves me alone for a couple of hours, I’ll figure out how to escape. Because with him here, wearing that silk robe that barely covers his thighs, there isn’t a chance in hell I’m going to be able to think clearly, let alone formulate any kind of action plan.

“You are such a kind husband,” Ginni beams, his entire face lighting up with genuine pleasure. “But you shouldn’t be fine with me working during our honeymoon. You should have more self-respect than that.”

My eyes narrow. "I have plenty of self-respect."

At least, I did. Before I was abducted by a femboy. Whether I have any dignity left is a question for when I've escaped. And had therapy. So much therapy.

"Oh!" Ginni exclaims suddenly, bringing his hands together like he's just received divine inspiration.

I think he's had an idea, and I'm pretty sure I'm not going to like it. Or maybe I will, and that's precisely the fucking problem with everything that's happened between us.

"I'll bring my equipment in here! I can sit on your lap while I stream. That way we don't have to be apart."

That doesn't sound too bad, actually. In fact, it might be the least insane idea he's had since I've been chained in this basement. At least it doesn't involve cattle prods or cutthroat razors.

"Stay here, I'll be right back!"

He turns and practically skips out of the room, his robe fluttering behind him and giving me tantalizing glimpses of pale skin that I absolutely should not be noticing.

Stay here. Did he really just tell me to stay here while I'm chained to his bed? The cheeky little psychopath. When I get out of here, I'm going to put him over my knee and spank him until he learns some respect.

Images of doing exactly that flash across my mind's eye, vivid and detailed and completely inappropriate. I swallow hard. It's suddenly very warm in this basement.

Okay, when I get out of here, I'm going to punish Ginni. But not in any way that could possibly be misconstrued as sexual. At all. This is about justice, not whatever twisted dynamic has been building between us.

He may temporarily, possibly, legally be my husband, but he's not really. He may have temporarily confused my sexuality even more than he usually does, but I'm still straight. I have to be straight.

This whole situation is a horrible mess that's going to end, and I'm going to work extremely hard on forgetting it ever happened. After making absolutely certain that Ginni never talks about it to anyone.

I swallow again, my throat suddenly dry. He's clearly unhinged. Surely nobody would believe his version of events? Maybe I won't have to hurt him to keep him quiet? Because despite everything he's done, the thought of actually harming Ginni makes me feel physically sick.

He's a little psychopath, yes, but somewhere underneath all that madness, he's just a lost, vulnerable twenty-one-year-old who's been failed by everyone who was supposed to protect him.

The squeak of wheels rouses me from my increasingly dark thoughts. A computer desk on casters, loaded with two large monitors and equipment I don't recognize, rolls into the room. Ginni emerges behind it, pushing it with obvious effort while grinning happily.

The setup is impressive and clearly expensive. Multiple monitors, professional lighting equipment, a camera that looks extremely high end.

He positions everything carefully at the foot of the bed, then gets to work running extension cords across the floor and plugging various components into a power strip that looks like it was designed for a recording studio.

When he presses a button, the entire setup comes to life with a symphony of whirring fans and electronic chirps. The keyboard illuminates in rainbow colors, cycling through patterns that are actually quite mesmerizing.

I don't know much about computer equipment, but this looks professional grade. It seems the Torrini family is only stingy when it comes to affection and acceptance. Money, apparently, they're happy to throw around.

Ginni steps back, places his hands on his hips, and admires his handiwork with the satisfaction of an artist viewing a completed masterpiece. His pleased little smile is making my stomach do things that I refuse to acknowledge.

"How many followers do you have?" I ask uneasily, desperate to ground myself in reality rather than getting lost in admiring how pleased and proud he looks arranging his workspace.

He makes a dismissive gesture, like the number is barely worth mentioning. "Oh, not many. Just a few hundred thousand."

A few hundred thousand? My stomach drops. That's not "not many" by any reasonable standard. I have no idea if it's a lot for whatever this platform is that he uses, but that's a hell of a lot of people who might potentially see me.

"Time to get dressed for the show!" Ginni declares, practically bouncing with excitement as he skips out of the room again.

He leaves me staring warily at his flashing, whirring, blinking setup. If there's a camera pointed this way, I'm probably positioned too low to be visible. The lens would be angled toward the wall above my head, not down at the bed.

I slide down slightly, just to be absolutely certain I'm out of frame. Now I'm lying completely flat, definitely below the camera's line of sight. But I still can't help glaring at the machine like it might suddenly develop the ability to see me.

Where exactly is Ginni planning to sit? He hasn't brought a chair in. Although he did mention sitting on my lap while he streams. Surely he didn't mean that literally?

Ginni glides back into the room, and my heart immediately starts performing gymnastics in my chest. It beats fast and frantically enough to make me genuinely dizzy.

The little menace is wearing what can only be described as a fantasy designed by someone with a very specific fetish. The top is white cotton, cropped so short it doesn't even fully cover his very pink nipples. The skirt is even worse, pleated and short enough that it's basically a wide belt, paired with thigh-high white socks that emphasize every inch of the naked skin between them and the skirt's hem.

Everything is pristine white, as if he's clinging to the bridal theme from yesterday's ceremony. The overall effect is simultaneously innocent and absolutely sinful.

"I knew you'd like it!" he says with obvious satisfaction, noting my stunned expression.

I tear my gaze away from all that exposed skin and focus on his face, only to be confronted with headphones. White and pink, over-ear headphones with cat ears protruding from the top, complete with pink interiors that match the blush spreading across my cheeks.

A sound somewhere between a groan and a whimper escapes my throat. How the hell are headphones sexy? How is that even physically possible? They're just sitting there, nestled in his dark hair, the padded leather conforming to the shape of his skull, those ridiculous cat ears sticking up with their stupid pink interiors taunting me.

Ginni gives me a smile that a foolish person might mistake for angelic. But I know better now. I've learned the hard way that the only thing angelic about Giovanni is his appearance. Everything else about him is pure, concentrated danger.

He picks up a wrench from beside his computer setup and approaches the footboard of the bed with purposeful determination. For one wild, hopeful moment, I think he's decided to free me.

Then reality reasserts itself, and I realize how ridiculous that thought is.

I watch in growing alarm as Ginni proceeds to remove the footboard with the efficiency of someone who's done this before. Before I can fully process what's happening, he's attached the chains securing my ankles to the actual bed frame underneath the mattress, giving him much more room to maneuver.

He flashes me another one of those devastating smiles, grabs my legs with surprising strength, and yanks me down the bed until my ass is nearly hanging off the edge and I'm positioned exactly where he wants me.

I let out an undignified yelp of surprise. His strength is genuinely alarming for someone so delicate-looking. There's clearly far more to Giovanni than his pretty exterior suggests.

He adjusts the chains connecting my wrists to the headboard with practiced precision, humming softly to himself like he's arranging flowers rather than positioning a captive. When he's satisfied with his work, he returns to the foot of the bed.

And then, with breathtaking grace, he drops to his knees between my spread legs, his dazzling blue eyes gleaming up at me with an expression that's equal parts predatory and adoring.

My cock twitches, catching on before I do. I open my mouth to protest, or maybe to plead. I'll never know which because whatever words were in my throat, turn into a yell as Ginni's hot little tongue starts lapping at me.

The bloom of pleasure is intense. Shocking in its suddenness. Overwhelming with just how abruptly it has consumed me.

My breath has stuck in my lungs. My eyes have rolled back. How is he so damn good at this?

His wet tongue licks and licks. Slowly running over every inch of my cock as if savoring the taste.

Up and down. Up and down. Around and around.

As all my blood rushes south, the sensations become more heightened. More pronounced. More exquisite.

I groan helplessly. Overcome with pleasure. Sparks igniting behind my eyelids.

His tongue caresses me with feelings. With ecstasy and euphoria. Tracing over me with reverence and obvious delight.

Ginni loves working my cock. He loves the taste of it. The feel. This is far from a chore for him. And I'm amazed at what the difference feels like.

I don't think I can ever go back to having my cock sucked unenthusiastically. Not now that I know how it feels to be worshipped.

I groan again. Deeper. Louder. With even less shame.

Ginni has reached the tip of my very hard cock. His clever little tongue flicks at my slit, and I see stars.

I need his soft lips. Need them to wrap around me and roll gently down. All the way down. I need all of me to be inside Ginni, and I need it now.

I growl in confusion as his tongue leaves me. I open my eyes and glare at him.

He smirks at me, and places something on my cockhead.

“Is that a cock ring?” I exclaim.

“Hmm mm,” he nods. “I know they should go on when soft, but I got excited. This is a nice stretchy one, so it should be fine.” The tip of his tongue pokes out between his plump lips. “I think so, anyway.”

“Ginni!” I warn.

His hand moves, and the tight silicone starts rolling down my length. I grunt. He stops and adds a dollop of lube. Then his hand moves ruthlessly until the cock ring is snug around my base.

“There!” he declares in triumph.

“Ginni...”

“Sssh! The live stream is about to begin.”

My mouth shuts so quickly my jaw clicks. He cannot be serious. Oh heaven help me, this cannot be happening. I am a feared mafia man. I can't be on twitch chained naked to a femboy's bed, with a bloody cock ring on!

Wherever the bloody camera is pointing, it's far, far too close for comfort.

I pull on my chains, but it is no good. Ginni has made sure my new position is just as secure as my old one was.

Ginni's hand disappears under his absurdly short skirt. He squirms and then his hand returns with a butt plug. The little menace loves having his hole filled. And it is giving me serious flashbacks to our so-called wedding night.

He flashes me another malevolent smile, and turns around to face his computer. I watch in dismay as my new reality unfolds.

When he said he was going to sit on my lap, he really meant it. And there is nothing I can do to stop it. Even worse is the fact that I'm not entirely

sure I do want to stop it. Getting to enjoy Ginni's ass again doesn't seem all that terrible.

His evil little fingers take a hold of me and hold me steady. He wriggles a little. Then he starts to sink down. Letting my cock slide into his silken heat.

My lungs stutter. My heart races. Pleasure curls my toes.

Fuck. He feels so damn good. So incredibly good. If he were a drug, I'd seriously worry about getting addicted.

Noise fills the basement bedroom. I blink with disorientation. What is happening?

Oh lord. The livestream has begun. Ginni has pulled the computer desk right up to the foot of the bed. His hands are on the brightly lit keyboard, and he is fully facing the screen.

And his tight little ass is on my cock.

This feral little brat is talking to his followers while stuffed with my cock. It's insane. It's ludicrous. I've never heard of anything like it.

Wait. Oh no. My little unhinged twink isn't moving. He is just sitting here. Warming my cock, keeping it inside him, but not moving.

He is trying to kill me.

He is going to succeed.

I close my eyes and bite my bottom lip. I can't make a noise. No one can know I'm here. They can't see me, so I can't give the game away by making a sound.

I need to stare at the ceiling. Think unpleasant thoughts. Think of anything I can to get my cock to go down. Though with the cock ring on, that's going to be difficult. My little menace has thought of everything, as usual.

He starts chatting away to his followers. I can't hear them, and maybe they are sending messages rather than talking into his headphones. Whatever the cause, the result is unnerving. Ginni is babbling away to people I can't see or hear, about things that are far beyond my comprehension.

Cristo. When did I get so old?

He wriggles a little, and it takes everything I have not to groan. He pauses for a moment, and I just know he has figured out just how much he is torturing me.

I hold my breath and try to clear my mind. Try to focus on anything that is not Ginni's tight little ass encasing my cock but not moving.

Eternity passes. Universes die and are reborn. Sweat drips off my brow. The torture and humiliation is endless.

“Ooh!” Ginni says suddenly and out of nowhere, the exclamation making me flinch. “So exciting!”

He bounces up and down. Up and down. Fucking himself on my cock while live to his hundred thousand followers. Pretending he is just bouncing in excitement.

Up and down. Up and down. Tight and hot. Friction and pressure.

I gurgle as my orgasm detonates. It burns through me devastating in its intensity. A wildfire that obliterates everything in its path.

My cock spurts and spurts, filling Ginni's tight little hole with my cum.

He sighs. A happy little sigh. His thighs quiver slightly. And then he continues talking to his followers.

He is such a fucking brat.

I heave in a shaky breath. The oxygen feels good, but all my muscles are still trembling and shaking. I'm tingling all over with aftershocks.

That was the most intense orgasm of my life. But one thing has become perfectly clear. Nobody can treat me like this and get away with it. Nobody.

I'm going to have to kill him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GINNI

I end the livestream. That was a good session in more ways than one. Very satisfying. Ten out of ten, no notes. Would recommend.

Carlo's softening cock is still mostly inside me. But sadly, it is time to move. I stand up, and sigh at the feel of Carlo leaving me. But Carlo's cum dribbling out of my stretched hole is a delightful sensation, it's not a bad consolation.

I turn around, and quickly remove the cock ring. Damaging this magnificent cock would be a travesty.

As soon as it's off, I glance up at my husband.

His dark eyes are full of fury.

I shiver. My nipples peak. My hands drift up to them and start tweaking, intensifying the sensation. Prolonging it. Savoring it. It is a gift from my Carlo and should be cherished.

Carlo's heated gaze fixes on what I am doing, even though he is still burning with a dark rage.

“Oh my poor love,” I croon. “I’ve pushed you too far. I’m so sorry.”

He doesn’t answer, but that’s okay. He is rather distracted by my nipples right now. It’s understandable.

I arch so that my very short top rides up, allowing Carlo to fully see what I am doing. His eyes darken and his cheeks flush. He is full of rage and lust. It’s positively delightful.

“You prefer to be in control.” I say. “I understand, I really do. I would prefer for it to be like that too.”

My hands fall down to my sides. Carlo glares at me. I can tell that it’s on the tip of his tongue to order me to continue, and while that would be lovely, I have an even better idea.

I nod thoughtfully. “You are ready.”

His expression turns concerned, but soon he will see there is absolutely nothing to be worried about. Quite the opposite, in fact.

I glide over to the bedside cabinet and retrieve the lube along with the special butt plug. As I hum *O Mio Babbino Caro* softly, I slather the plug with a generous amount of lube.

Carlo’s eyes are glued to my actions. He can’t look away. I have his full, rapt attention. Some might say he is a captive audience, but they are wrong. Carlo wants to be here, with me. He just doesn’t know it yet.

There, all lubed up and ready. I flash Carlo a happy smile. Then, I move the gloop-covered plug to my hole. My husband is well-endowed, and he was just inside me, so now I’m all open and sloppy with his cum.

Still humming opera, I ease the plug in. The fresh lube mixes with the old, as well as Carlo’s gift. It makes a loud squelching sound as it goes in.

Carlo groans. A deep, manly groan, all the way from somewhere deep in his chest. He immediately bites his bottom lip and looks aghast that he made a sound. My silly man, he should know by now how much I love hearing him. There is not a single thing about him I don’t love.

My humming turns into soft singing as I reach into the drawer and pull out the special handcuffs. Carlo’s eyes widen, and a worry line forms on his brow. He really is the sweetest man alive.

It’s a bit tricky to put the handcuffs on myself, but I manage it. The lock clicks into place with a soft digital beep. Now my wrists are bound together in front of me.

Carlo is staring intently. It’s the most intense look I’ve ever seen on his handsome face.

A happy giggle bubbles out of me as I press the small remote into the palm of his bound hand, and gently close his fingers around it.

I step back and hold my cuffed wrists up for him to see.

“There is a timer on the lock. My own invention.”

Carlo’s eyebrows disappear into his hairline.

“I can’t get out of these. I’m stuck until the timer runs out. And you are stronger than me. Now that you have the remote, I can’t get it off of you.”

I pause. The flow of emotions crossing Carlo’s face is fascinating to observe. He is really going through it as he processes his new situation.

I take in a deep breath and let it out with glee and satisfaction.

“For the next hour, I’m all yours, my love. You are in full control.”

It’s true. With my hands like this, I can’t remove the plug. I certainly can’t wrest the remote control from him now that it’s in his grip. I’m entirely at his mercy.

His eyes gleam. Predatory. Feral and wicked. It’s a look that dances over me and shivers down my spine.

Carlo’s thumb fumbles over the remote. He can’t see the controller, bless him, but he will figure it out soon, I have no doubt.

I yelp as the butt plug in my ass springs to life with very strong vibrations. It’s overwhelmingly intense. Probably because my insides are still all tingly and tender from his cock.

See? I knew he would figure out the remote quickly! He is so impressively clever.

Grinning, I climb onto the bed. I straddle him and rest my cuffed hands on his stomach. It’s only fair that he sees close up exactly what he is doing to me.

I hiss as the butt plug vibrates harder. Carlo’s lips twitch. A faint curl at the corner.

The plug switches from a continuous buzz to a throbbing rhythm. Waves of pleasure instead of a blast of sensation. My lungs stutter through a gasp.

Carlo’s eyes light up.

“You like it slow and steady,” he murmurs. His tone is one of confirming, not discovering.

My soul ignites. It blazes with life and perfect joy. Incandescent and all-consuming. I knew Carlo was my soulmate. He already knows everything about me. He’s been paying attention. Taking notes. This is divine confirmation of everything I hold dear.

My cock is so hard it is leaking. It’s been hard for so long. All through my livestream while Carlo was inside me.

I suppose I could kind of stroke it with my hands cuffed together, but it would be tricky, and more importantly, it would be cheating. And I’m not a cheater.

My hips rock. They roll, moving my ass cheeks over the skin of Carlo's stomach, and moving the plug inside me.

Carlo grunts. His face is flushed. His eyes bright. My wonderful husband is enjoying this, and that makes me so very proud.

The vibrations inside me surge, they press against that special spot, and my orgasm erupts. Out of nowhere. No warning at all. I whimper through it while my cock paints Carlo's abs with cum.

I shudder and jerk.

The vibrations don't ease. They don't wane, fade or stop. They continue. Steady. Relentless in a devastating rhythm.

I shoot Carlo a pleading look. He grins. Malevolence glowing in his eyes, bringing out all the hazel shades of his iris.

My stomach flips over. My love really does want to assert himself. Take back control. It is only fair after how hard I have been pushing him.

A new wave of sensation crashes over me, leaving me even more sensitive. I throw my head back and wail. My hips are twisting now, trying to get away from the merciless throbbing on my delicate insides.

Suddenly the buzzing slows. My lungs heave, gasping for air, but then I'm crying out as my body is hit anew. The vibrations even stronger than before.

My body bucks and writhes. Helpless mewls pour out of me. Then everything goes white as I cum again. Every muscle in my body locks and goes rigid. It hurts, but it also feels so good.

Dizziness swirls. The vibrations are slow now. Barely there. But far too much for my agitated nerve endings. A tease on my body that wants to calm down. A caress of just enough to keep me squirming, but not enough to do anything else.

“Carlo!” I whimper.

He chuckles darkly. “Why should I listen to you, little menace, when you don't listen to me?”

It's a fair point. A very fair point. And an extremely fun one. Carlo taking control is a thousand times better than my wildest and dirtiest dreams. He is a sexy, experienced man. He's not going to hurt me. I can surrender, submit, and allow him to make both of us feel good.

The buzzing moves to a new beat. Fast. Ruthless. Demanding.

Pain and pleasure are swirling and consuming. I'm sobbing and screaming.

“You’ve got one more for me, little menace. I know you do. Stop fighting it and give it to me.”

An unholy noise pours out of my soul as my balls clench and my cock bounces. Only a dribble comes out.

The butt plug slows to an awful pattern. A long gap of mercy, then an intense blast of brutality.

“Look at me, Ginni.”

I obey, even though I don’t really want to. I’m a mess. Tears, snot, sweat. All hot and flushed. My throat is raw from screaming, and my ass feels like it is on fire.

Carlo’s eyes are luminous. Naked. Exposing his soul. His love for me has never been clearer or more apparent.

He inhales sharply. “You have never looked more beautiful.”

Fresh tears fall down my cheeks. This is so perfect, so magical. There really are no words to describe it.

The handcuffs beep and click loudly. We both flinch.

I stare down at them dumbly for a moment. Is it that time already? Has it really been that long?

The butt plug pulses. I gasp and shudder. Arousal is still swirling through my body and soul.

“Take the handcuffs off,” Carlo says gently.

Numbly, I follow his instructions, and allow the heavy cuffs to fall on the floor with a loud thud that sounds far too final.

“Good boy. Now take the plug out.”

The butt plug falls silent and still. It’s like losing my oldest and dearest friend. This is terrible. Our magical evening can’t be ending already, it’s too soon. And far too long until I’ll be able to orchestrate this again. It takes a lot to get Carlo angry with me, because he loves me so much.

The dead plug thuds on the floor next to the cuffs. It feels like I should say some words, find a fitting eulogy.

“Ginni.”

I look up.

Carlo’s eyes are dark. His mouth set in a stern line.

“Put my cock in your tight little ass and ride me until I pump you full of my cum.”

I blink. My heart thumps. My tummy does a cartwheel. I stare at him a moment to make sure I heard him right. He nods at me with a ‘get on with it

gesture' and I shriek with delight.

This is my new favorite day ever.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CARLO

“**M**assage time!” Ginni announces suddenly, bouncing up from where he’s been curled against my side like a contented cat.

I blink at him, still muzzy from the post-coital haze that’s been keeping me floating in a state of satisfied exhaustion for who knows how long.

“What now?”

I’m not sure I can keep up. I’m getting whiplash from my changing emotions. After the stunt with the livestream, I was ready to kill him. But then came his unique style of apology, and I was utterly swayed.

I’m really not sure I can cope with anything else today.

“You need a full body massage,” he declares with the authority of someone who’s just made a medical diagnosis. “All this lying in bed is going to cause muscle atrophy if we’re not careful. Plus, you’re getting tense again in your shoulders.”

He’s not wrong about the tension. Despite the relatively comfortable bed and Ginni’s devoted care, spending days chained in the same position is starting to take its toll. My back aches, my shoulders are stiff, and there’s a persistent knot between my shoulder blades that’s been bothering me since yesterday.

“I’m fine,” I grumble, though even as I say it I can feel the tightness in my neck when I turn my head.

“No, you’re not,” Ginni says firmly, already moving to rearrange the pillows. “You’re carrying tension in your trapezius muscles, your deltoids are knotted, and I can see the stress lines around your eyes. Roll over onto your stomach.”

I stare at him. “You want me to do what?”

“Roll over. On your stomach. So I can give you a proper massage.” He says this like it’s the most reasonable request in the world, not like he’s asking a grown man to put himself in an even more vulnerable position than he’s already in.

“Ginni, I’m chained to your bed. I’m not rolling over for anything.”

“The chains have plenty of slack,” he points out, which is annoyingly true. “I made sure of that when I adjusted them this morning. You can lie comfortably on your stomach without any strain on your wrists.”

“That’s not the point.”

“What is the point then?” He tilts his head, genuinely curious, and the gesture is so innocent it makes my chest tight. “Are you worried I’m going to hurt you?”

The question catches me off guard. Am I worried about that? The boy who’s spent days feeding me by hand, bathing me with reverent care, shaving me with a cutthroat razor without so much as nicking my skin?

“No,” I admit reluctantly. “I’m not worried about that.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Ginni asks, settling cross-legged beside me on the bed. “I’ve been watching YouTube tutorials on therapeutic massage. Deep tissue work, sports massage techniques, pressure point therapy. I want to take care of you properly.”

Of course he has. Is there anything this boy hasn’t researched in obsessive detail?

“I don’t need a massage,” I say, but the protest sounds weak even to my own ears.

“Yes, you do,” Ginni replies with patient certainty. “Your body is your most important tool in your line of work. You need to maintain proper muscle tone and flexibility, especially when your mobility is restricted. Especially at your age. Besides,” he adds with a sly smile, “I think you’ll enjoy it.”

The way he says it, with that hint of promise in his voice, makes heat pool low in my belly despite my exhaustion.

“Is this another sex thing?” I ask, and somehow my voice sounds far more excited than wary.

“Not everything is about sex, Carlo,” Ginni replies, laughing softly. “Though I won’t lie and say I don’t enjoy touching you. But this is about your health and comfort. Let me take care of you.”

There’s something in his voice, a note of genuine concern mixed with that devoted affection I’m becoming accustomed to, that makes my resistance crumble. I think I can cope with this.

“Fine,” I mutter, already starting to shift position. “But if you try anything...”

“I’ll be the perfect gentleman,” Ginni promises, though the mischievous glint in his eyes suggests his definition of gentlemanly behavior might differ from mine.

Rolling over while chained is more awkward than I expected, but Ginni helps guide me, adjusting the chains and pillows until I’m lying comfortably face-down on the mattress. The position does feel vulnerable in ways I’m trying not to think about, but there’s also something oddly relaxing about it. Like surrendering control, letting someone else take charge of my comfort.

“There,” Ginni says with satisfaction, running his hands along my shoulders with professional assessment. “I can already see the problem areas. You’re carrying so much tension here.”

His fingers find knots I didn’t even know I had, pressing gently to assess the damage. The touch is clinical, impersonal, but I can feel my body responding to the contact anyway.

“I’ve been watching YouTube tutorials on therapeutic massage,” he continues, reaching for something from the collection of bottles he’s apparently arranged on the nightstand while I wasn’t paying attention. “Sports massage, specifically. Deep tissue work, myofascial release, trigger point therapy. It’s fascinating how interconnected everything is in the human body.”

The oil is warm when he drizzles it across my shoulders, and I can’t help but sigh at the sensation. It’s scented with something floral. Jasmine, maybe, with hints of sandalwood and bergamot underneath. The kind of luxury aromatherapy blend you’d find at an exclusive spa in Switzerland.

“Just relax,” he murmurs, his voice taking on that soothing, professional tone I’m beginning to associate with his caretaker mode. “Let me take care

of you.”

His hands are smaller than mine, delicate-looking with their fine bones and soft skin, but there’s surprising strength in his fingers as he begins working the oil into my shoulders. He starts with long, sweeping strokes to warm up the muscles, then gradually increases pressure as he finds the knots and tension points.

“You’re really good at this,” I admit, unable to keep the surprise out of my voice.

“I told you, I’ve been studying,” Ginni replies, his hands now working on a particularly stubborn knot near my shoulder blade. “YouTube tutorials, online courses, even some video calls with actual licensed massage therapists. I wanted to be able to take care of you properly. All aspects of your health and wellbeing.”

The knot gives way under his persistent pressure, and I let out an involuntary groan of relief. Years of stress and tension seem to be melting away under his skilled touch. The constant vigilance required in my line of work, the weight of responsibility, the physical strain of always being ready for violence. All of it dissolves as Ginni’s hands work their magic.

He moves methodically down my back, finding tension I’ve been carrying for months. Places where stress has settled into my muscles like sediment, creating painful knots that I’d learned to ignore because there was never time to deal with them properly.

“Better?” he asks softly, working along my spine with gentle, circular motions.

“Much better,” I admit, and I can hear the amazement in my own voice. “Where did you really learn to do this?”

“I told you, online courses. There’s a massage therapy school in Switzerland that offers intensive video training programs.” His hands move to my lower back, finding muscle groups I didn’t know could be sore. “I also studied anatomy and physiology textbooks. I wanted to understand how your body works, what you need to stay healthy and strong.”

The thoroughness of his preparation should disturb me, but instead I find myself impressed by his dedication.

This is what it feels like to be pampered, I realize with something approaching wonder. To be the focus of someone’s complete attention and devoted care. When was the last time anyone touched me like this? Not sexually, though there’s certainly an undercurrent of intimacy in Ginni’s

hands on my skin, but simply to make me feel good. To ease discomfort and provide comfort with no expectation of anything in return.

My mother used to rub my back when I was sick as a child, but that was decades ago. Since then, touch has mostly been functional. Medical exams, the occasional massage at upscale clubs that was more about status than actual therapy, sexual encounters that were about release rather than connection.

This is different. This is someone studying my needs with scientific precision and then meeting them with generous devotion.

“Your gluteal muscles are very tight,” Ginni observes, his hands moving to my ass with clinical professionalism. “All that sitting and driving. We’ll need to work on your hip flexors too.”

I could get used to this. The thought hits me with unexpected force, and not just the physical pleasure of the massage. I could get used to having someone who adores me, who studies my needs and preferences with scientific dedication, who wants nothing more than to make me feel special and cared for.

Someone who notices when I’m tense before I do. Who remembers exactly how I like my coffee and what foods I prefer. Who goes to extraordinary lengths to ensure my comfort and happiness.

My mind drifts to what happened earlier, the way Ginni had surrendered himself so completely to my guidance. The trust in his eyes, the way he’d followed my lead with such beautiful submission, the grateful pleasure on his face when I took control.

He’d been so responsive, so eager to please, so ready to give me everything I asked for and more. Like he’d been waiting his entire life for someone to claim him, to show him what it meant to be desired and treasured and thoroughly possessed.

And the sounds he’d made... Cristo, the memory alone is enough to make me hard again.

“You’re thinking about earlier,” Ginni observes with obvious satisfaction, his hands now working on my calves and thighs with methodical precision. “I can tell by the way your breathing changed. And your pulse rate increased.”

Heat floods my face, though he can’t see it with me lying face-down. “How can you possibly know that?”

“Because I pay attention to everything about you,” he replies simply, his hands working the oil into my legs with possessive thoroughness. “Your breathing patterns, your heart rate, the way your muscles respond to different stimuli, how your body language changes with different emotions. I’ve been studying you for years, remember? I know you better than you know yourself in some ways.”

It should be unsettling, this level of observation and analysis. But instead, it’s oddly comforting. To be so thoroughly known, so completely understood, even in ways I don’t understand myself.

I let myself sink into the sensation, floating in a haze of complete relaxation. The artificial starlight from the projector, the scent of expensive oils, the skilled hands working away tension I didn’t know I was holding.

Being abducted is turning out to be a much better experience than I anticipated.

The thought should horrify me, but I’m too relaxed to care. Too comfortable, too well-cared for, too thoroughly seduced by this beautiful boy’s devoted attention.

Maybe this is what Stockholm syndrome feels like. Or maybe it’s just what happens when someone loves you with the kind of obsessive intensity that Ginni brings to everything he does.

Either way, I’m not sure I want it to stop.



I wake to the sound of whimpering, soft and distressed in the artificial darkness of the basement. For a moment, I’m disoriented, unsure what roused me from the deep, dreamless sleep that’s become my norm since Ginni started his devoted care routine.

Then I feel the movement against my shoulder, small tremors running through the body curled against me. Ginni is using my chest as a pillow, just as he has every night since my abduction began, but something’s wrong.

Another whimper escapes him, followed by a soft, broken sound that might be a sob. His breathing is rapid and shallow, panic breathing.

At first, I think he might be having some kind of erotic dream, reliving our afternoon activities. But as I listen more carefully, the sounds aren’t pleasure. They’re fear. Pain.

He's having a nightmare.

Guilt crashes over me like ice water, sudden and overwhelming. Did I push him too far earlier? He was inexperienced when this all started, a virgin despite his seductive confidence and apparent knowledge. What if I was too demanding, too rough? What if I hurt him in ways I don't understand, ways that are only now manifesting in his dreams?

The boy gave me his virginity on what he considers our wedding night, trusted me with something precious and irreplaceable.

What if I damaged him in my selfishness? What if in my desire for revenge, my need to soothe my humiliation, I went too far?

I carefully shift my shoulder, the movement gentle but enough to rouse him from whatever dark place his mind has gone.

He wakes with a start and a sob, immediately clinging to me with desperate strength. His whole body is trembling, and I can feel wetness against my skin where his tears have leaked onto me. He's shaking like a leaf, small and vulnerable and utterly heartbreaking.

"I'm so glad you're finally here," he whispers, his voice thick with emotion and relief. "It's so nice not to wake up alone."

The words slice into me, eviscerating my heart. How many nights has he spent down here in this beautiful basement prison, waking from nightmares with no one to comfort him?

My chest aches at the thought of it. My poor sweet, little Ginni. How could I ever have been angry at him? I'm ashamed of myself.

"Ginni, sweetheart, I'm so sorry," I start, the endearment slipping out without conscious thought. "If I pushed you too far today, if I hurt you..."

"No," he interrupts, his voice fierce despite the tremor running through it. "No, you didn't hurt me. I loved every second of what we did. I loved letting you take control."

He's still shaking, still clinging to me like I'm his anchor in a storm. "My nightmare was about Camp," he whispers.

"What camp?" I ask, even though something cold is already settling in my stomach, weighing down any relief I might have felt at not being the cause of his night terrors.

"Conversion camp."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. Conversion therapy. The kind of barbaric practice that's been banned in civilized countries, the psychological torture that masquerades as treatment.

“Your family put you in conversion therapy?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

I feel him nod against my shoulder, the movement small and defeated. “After I told Marco I was in love with you.”

Guilt overwhelms me, a crushing weight that makes it hard to breathe. This is my fault. Not directly, not intentionally, but my existence in their lives. Ginni’s feelings for me led to this horror being visited on him.

Everything suddenly makes terrible sense. The obsession, the careful planning, the complete disconnect from normal social boundaries. An innocent teenage crush twisted into something dangerous by trauma and abuse, left to fester in isolation for years.

“When was this?” I ask, though I’m not sure I want to know. “How did I not know about it?”

“The summer I turned sixteen,” Ginni replies, and I can hear the indignation creeping into his voice despite his distress. “I didn’t need to go to summer school. There was nothing wrong with my grades. I had straight A’s.”

Even now, even recounting this horror, he’s offended by the cover story they used. The slander against his academic achievement. It’s so quintessentially Ginni that I feel my heart crack a little more.

Of course his grades were perfect. This brilliant, beautiful boy who can solve my business problems in seconds, who speaks multiple languages, who’s mastered everything from blade maintenance to massage therapy. The idea of him needing remedial education is laughable.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” I say, the words feeling inadequate but necessary. “They shouldn’t have done that to you. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with being gay, or feminine, or exactly who you are.”

He doesn’t respond, just makes a small sniffling sound that breaks what’s left of my heart.

Ginni shouldn’t ever need to cry. Ginni should never feel this sad. He is incredible and strong. Clever and cunning. And I’m so proud of him. After everything his family has done to him, he is still unashamedly his glorious self.

Oh god. Marco knew. Marco played a part in this.

Marco, my oldest friend, the man I’ve trusted with my life countless times. The man who knew his little brother was in conversion therapy and

never said a word. Never asked for help, never mentioned that his family was torturing a sixteen-year-old boy for the crime of having feelings.

Rage builds in my chest, cold and calculating. Not the hot fury of the moment, but the kind of anger that plans and waits and never forgets.

Two decisions crystalize in my mind with perfect clarity.

First, I'm getting Ginni away from his family. I don't know how yet, don't know where, but I'm not letting him go back to people who would do this to him. He needs safety, protection, people who will love him exactly as he is.

And second, Marco is dead to me. Friendship, loyalty, shared history... none of it matters anymore. He participated in the destruction of his own brother, and I will never forgive him for that.

“Sleep now,” I whisper, pressing a gentle kiss to the top of Ginni’s head. “I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

I mean it. Truly, utterly and completely. I’m a mafia man, a capo. My word is a vow. My word is law.

Ginni is safe. With me, he’s safe.

And I’m going to make sure it stays that way.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GINNI

I wake up feeling absolutely wonderful, like sunshine and rainbows and everything beautiful in the world has been distilled into pure energy and injected directly into my bloodstream. The projector is displaying a gorgeous spring morning scene, complete with blooming cherry blossoms and birds singing in animated trees. Perfect for such a glorious day.

Carlo is already awake beside me, watching me with an expression I can't quite read. Something soft and concerned that makes my heart flutter with happiness. He's so attentive, so focused on me. What more could a new bride ask for?

"Good morning, my darling husband," I chirp, bouncing up to sit cross-legged on the bed. "Isn't it a beautiful day? I have so many plans for us!"

"Ginni," Carlo starts, his voice gentle in a way that makes warmth spread through my chest, "about last night..."

"Last night was perfect," I interrupt brightly, already climbing off the bed to start our day properly. "You were so wonderful, so tender. I'm still glowing from it. But today is a new day, and I have the most marvelous ideas!"

I practically dance around the room, my silk nightgown swirling around my legs like I'm the heroine in a romantic movie. Everything feels heightened, more vivid, like someone has turned up the color saturation on the world. The air itself feels sparkly, charged with possibility and joy.

“First, breakfast,” I announce, clapping my hands together with excitement. “Not just any breakfast, but a proper celebration meal. Eggs Benedict with hollandaise made from scratch, fresh croissants from that divine bakery in South Kensington, that heavenly jam I ordered from France, and coffee made with beans from that little plantation in Jamaica that only harvests during the full moon.”

Carlo blinks at me, clearly trying to process my enthusiasm. There’s something in his expression that looks almost worried, but that’s probably just lingering wedding nerves. All new husbands feel a bit overwhelmed at first.

“Ginni, we should talk about...”

“And then,” I continue, spinning around to face him with my arms spread wide like I’m embracing the whole world, “we need to plan our proper honeymoon! I’ve been thinking about it all night, and I have the most incredible ideas. The Maldives, obviously, but not just any resort. I found this private island that you can rent entirely for yourselves. Just imagine, Carlo, our own little paradise where we can walk on the beach naked and make love under the stars without a care in the world.”

I hurry to the dresser and start pulling out the travel brochures I’ve been collecting for months, my movements quick and excited. Glossy magazines full of crystal-clear water and white sand beaches, luxury resorts that only special people like Carlo can afford. I spread them across the bed like a feast, each one more beautiful than the last, creating a rainbow of tropical paradise across the white sheets.

“Look at this one,” I gush, pointing to a stunning overwater bungalow that looks like something from a dream. “Private butler, infinity pool, direct access to the lagoon where we can swim with tropical fish. And this one has a spa where they do couples massages with oils made from rare tropical flowers that only bloom once every seven years. We could spend weeks there, just the two of us, learning every inch of each other’s bodies.”

The images blur together in my mind, becoming one perfect fantasy of endless blue skies and Carlo’s hands on my sun-warmed skin. I can almost feel the ocean breeze, taste the salt air, hear the gentle lapping of waves against our private dock.

“Sweetheart,” Carlo says softly, reaching for my hand with movements that are careful and deliberate, so elegant that the chains barely rattle. “Can we please slow down for a moment and...”

But I'm already moving on to the next exciting topic, my mind racing ahead like a thoroughbred at the starting gate. There's so much to plan, so much to organize, so many beautiful dreams to make reality.

"Oh, and we absolutely must discuss our children! I've been thinking about names all morning. For boys, I quite like Alessandro or perhaps Matteo. Strong, classic Italian names that will suit them whether they're artistic like me or formidable like you. They'll grow up bilingual, of course, and I'll make sure they appreciate culture and beauty from the very beginning."

I grab a notebook from the nightstand, one I've been keeping for years with lists and plans and dreams carefully organized by topic. The pages flutter as I flip through them, showing Carlo all the careful planning I've done, years of preparation for exactly this moment.

"For girls, I'm thinking Isabella or Sofia. Elegant names for elegant daughters who will grow up knowing they're loved and valued for exactly who they are. And we'll need to start thinking about schools, won't we? I know it's early, but the best nurseries have waiting lists that are years long. I've already put our names down at several, actually. Just to be safe."

Carlo's eyes widen slightly, something that might be alarm flickering across his features. "You've put our names down at nurseries?"

"Of course!" I beam at him, delighted that he's showing interest in the practical details. "I believe in being prepared. The Montessori school in Chelsea has an excellent reputation for fostering creativity while maintaining proper nurturing. And there's a lovely bilingual program in Kensington that would be perfect for raising properly cultured children. They'll speak Italian and English flawlessly, maybe French too if we hire the right nanny."

I can see it all so clearly in my mind, like watching a movie of our perfect future. Our beautiful children playing in manicured gardens while we watch from a sun-drenched terrace, sipping coffee and planning family holidays to Tuscany. Christmas mornings with perfectly wrapped presents under an enormous tree, birthday parties with all the right people, school plays where our talented offspring shine brighter than all the other children.

"And we'll need a bigger place, obviously," I continue, the ideas flowing out of me like water from a burst dam, each one more exciting than the last. "This basement is lovely for this phase of our honeymoon, but it's not suitable for raising a family. I've been looking at houses in Hampstead and

Primrose Hill. Somewhere with a proper garden where the children can play, and enough bedrooms for guests when your business associates come to dinner.”

I grab my laptop and start pulling up property websites, showing Carlo the listings I’ve been bookmarking for months. Grand Victorian houses with period features and modern amenities, elegant Georgian terraces with private gardens, contemporary mansions that scream success and sophistication.

“Now, don’t get me wrong,” I add quickly, not wanting him to think I don’t appreciate what he’s already accomplished. “Your current house is absolutely magnificent. That beautiful place in Mayfair with the stunning kitchen and the garden that looks like something from a magazine. I’ve always admired it. It’s exactly the kind of home that shows how far you’ve come.”

“But darling,” I continue, turning back to the laptop screen with renewed enthusiasm, “our new life together should begin in a new home, don’t you think? A fresh start for our fresh beginning. Somewhere we choose together, somewhere that’s ours from the very first moment. We can pick out every paint color, every piece of furniture, every beautiful detail together.”

“This one is my favorite,” I say, pointing to a stunning white villa with floor-to-ceiling windows and a swimming pool that looks like it belongs in a luxury resort. “Six bedrooms, five bathrooms, a wine cellar for your collection, and the most divine kitchen I’ve ever seen. The estate agent says it has the best natural light in all of North London, and just look at that garden. Perfect for children to play in, with enough space for a proper vegetable plot and maybe even a greenhouse.”

Carlo is watching me with increasing concern, his dark eyes tracking my movements as I flit from topic to topic like a butterfly in a garden full of the most beautiful flowers. But that’s just because he’s not used to having someone who plans ahead so thoroughly.

“Ginni,” he says gently, his voice carrying undertones I can’t quite identify, “I think we should...”

“Oh, but first we need to plan the move itself!” I interrupt, already three steps ahead in my mental planning. The logistics are going to be fascinating to organize. “I’ll need to coordinate everything properly. The packing, the cleaning, the redecoration. We can’t just throw our things in boxes like

common people. Everything must be carefully wrapped and labeled and arranged in the new house exactly as it should be.”

I start making lists in my head, categorizing our possessions by room and importance. It’s going to be a beautiful melding of two homes into one.

The good china will need special acid-free boxes, Carlo’s suits will require cedar-lined garment bags to protect them from moths, my book collection will need to be organized by subject and author before being packed in climate-controlled containers. It’s going to be a magnificent project, the kind of domestic challenge I was born to tackle.

“We’ll need the very best professional movers, obviously,” I continue, my excitement building with each detail. “Not just any company, but specialists who understand how to handle valuable items. I know a firm that moves art collections for museums. They have temperature-controlled trucks and insurance policies worth millions.”

The more I think about it, the more perfect it becomes. Every detail falling into place like pieces of an intricate puzzle that’s been waiting years to be assembled.

“And we’ll need to throw a housewarming party, won’t we? Nothing too elaborate for the first one, just close friends and family. Dario and Molly, obviously, and Nicolo and Liam if they’re not too busy with their own wedding plans. Maybe thirty or forty people, with proper catering and flowers from that divine shop in Mayfair that creates arrangements that look like living sculptures.”

I can already see it unfolding in my mind like a scene from the most beautiful movie ever made. Elegant people in beautiful clothes wandering through our perfect home, admiring our taste and commenting on how well we’ve done for ourselves. Carlo looking handsome and proud in a perfectly tailored dinner jacket as he shows off our accomplishments, his arm around my waist as we accept congratulations on our marriage and our new life together.

“The menu will need to be carefully planned,” I continue, already mentally composing the perfect balance of flavors and textures. “Nothing too heavy, but substantial enough to satisfy your business friends. Perhaps that divine lamb with rosemary and garlic that everyone always raves about, and a selection of fresh seafood for the ladies who are watching their figures. And we’ll need vegetarian options too, of course, because everyone has dietary restrictions these days.”

Carlo reaches for me again, his movements gentle but insistent, like he's trying to anchor me to something. "Ginni, please. Stop for just a moment."

But I can't stop. The words keep pouring out of me like champagne from a shaken bottle, effervescent and unstoppable. Everything is so clear, so perfectly planned, so absolutely meant to be. It's like the universe has finally aligned all the stars in exactly the right configuration.

"And we'll need to establish proper traditions, won't we? Sunday dinners with all the family, holiday celebrations that become legendary, anniversary parties that people talk about for years afterward. I want our home to be the kind of place where everyone feels welcome, where love is so obvious that it fills every room like the most beautiful perfume."

I grab Carlo's hands in mine, squeezing them with all the excitement and joy bubbling up inside me like the finest Italian prosecco. His skin is warm and real and perfect against mine.

"We could have a different theme for each anniversary," I continue, the ideas cascading over each other in my eagerness to share them all. "The first year could be paper, so we'll do everything in beautiful handmade papers from Japan. The second year is cotton, so maybe a garden party with white linens and cotton flowers. By the time we reach our silver anniversary, we'll have created so many beautiful memories that people will beg us to write a book about entertaining."

His expression is so tender, so full of something that might be love or might be concern or might be both. But it doesn't matter because we're here, we're together, we're married, and our whole beautiful future is spread out before us like the most magnificent feast imaginable.

"And the children will help us plan the parties when they're old enough," I add, spinning another beautiful thread into the tapestry of our future. "They'll learn proper hospitality from watching us, and by the time they're adults, they'll be the most sought-after hosts in all of London. People will compete for invitations to events planned by the Benedetti children."

The name sounds so perfect, so right. Our children will be Benedettis, carrying Carlo's name and my love into the future like the most precious gifts.

"It's all going to be perfect," I whisper, leaning in to press a soft kiss to his lips. Carlo tastes like morning and possibility and everything beautiful I've ever dreamed of. "Everything is going to be absolutely perfect."

And it is. It has to be. Because I've planned it all so carefully, down to the smallest detail, and nothing in the world is going to stop us from having our happily ever after.

Nothing at all.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CARLO

I wake slowly, consciousness drifting back like fog lifting from still water. The projector above us is displaying a perfect tropical sunrise, all golden light and gentle waves lapping at pristine sand. For a moment I'm disoriented, unsure if it's actually morning or if this is just another of Ginni's carefully curated atmospheres designed to make captivity feel like paradise.

There are no clocks down here, no natural light to mark the passage of time. Only eternal artificial light punctuated by whatever scenes Ginni chooses to paint across our ceiling. It could be dawn or midnight for all I know. Time has become meaningless in this beautiful basement prison.

Ginni is curled against my side, using my chest as his pillow in the way that's become our nightly ritual. His breathing is deep and even, peaceful in a way that makes something twist in my chest. After yesterday's manic episode, the frantic planning and excited chatter about our future, he looks almost fragile in sleep.

The silk shorts he wore to bed have ridden up slightly, and his crop top has shifted to reveal more skin than it should.

Even unconscious, even after everything he's put me through, he's still impossibly beautiful. Dark hair falling across his face, long eyelashes casting shadows on his cheekbones, lips slightly parted in sleep.

He looks so young like this. Too young to have planned and executed something as elaborate as my abduction. Too young to have endured conversion therapy. Too young to carry the kind of trauma that breeds the particular madness I witnessed yesterday.

The memory of his excitement makes my stomach clench with worry. The way his words tumbled over each other, the manic energy crackling around him like electricity, the brittle edge underneath all that joy. Something is fundamentally wrong with Ginni, something deeper than obsession or romantic delusion.

I'm contemplating this, trying to make sense of the beautiful, broken boy who's somehow become my husband, when I hear it.

Footsteps on the stairs.

The sound cuts through the artificial paradise like a knife through silk. Dress shoes on concrete, measured and deliberate, getting closer with each step. My entire body goes rigid, every muscle tensing as pure terror floods my system.

Someone is coming down here. Someone who doesn't know what they're about to walk into. Someone who's about to discover Carlo Benedetti, respected capo of the Ajello family, chained naked to a twenty-one-year-old boy's bed like some kind of perverted trophy.

The humiliation crashes over me in waves, each one more devastating than the last. This is how they'll find me. Not standing tall with dignity intact, not armed and dangerous, but helpless and exposed and utterly without power. My reputation, carefully built over decades, will be destroyed in an instant. Every conversation will stop when I walk into a room, every meeting will be preceded by whispered speculation about what really happened in this basement.

My hands clench into fists, muscles straining against the restraints in pure reflex. In any normal dangerous situation, I'd be reaching for my gun, calculating angles and exit strategies, preparing to fight my way out. I've spent my entire adult life armed and ready, never caught off guard, never vulnerable.

But now all I can do is lie here. Chained and naked, and completely at the mercy of whatever's about to happen. The utter powerlessness is almost worse than the fear, this complete inability to protect myself or control the situation.

The footsteps are getting closer, echoing in the stairwell like a countdown to my destruction. My heart hammers against my ribs so hard I'm surprised it doesn't wake Ginni, each beat a violent reminder of how fucked I truly am.

This is it. This is how my life as I know it ends. Not in a hail of bullets or a business deal gone wrong, but in a basement bedroom with my dignity stripped away along with my clothes.

The footsteps pause, and I hear the soft sound of the main door opening. Whoever it is, they're inside now. In the apartment. Close enough to hear if I make any noise, close enough to investigate if something seems wrong.

Close enough to find me.

“Ginni?”

The voice makes my heart stop beating entirely.

Marco.

Marco Torrini, my oldest friend, is standing just outside the door calling for his little brother. The man who's trusted me with his life countless times, who considers me family, who has no idea his best friend is chained naked to his brother's bed.

Ginni sits bolt upright beside me, instantly alert in the way of predators who never truly rest. There's no gradual awakening for him, no confused transition between sleep and consciousness. One moment he's peaceful and vulnerable, the next he's completely focused and utterly dangerous.

He reaches under the bed with smooth, practiced movements and produces a dagger. The blade gleams in the artificial sunrise, and I realize there must be a sheath attached to the bedframe. Of course there is. Giovanni Torrini-possibly-now-Benedetti doesn't leave anything to chance.

The knife is beautiful and deadly, and my blood turns to ice as I realize what he's capable of, what he might be planning to do to his own brother.

Ginni presses a single finger to my lips, the gesture gentle but absolutely firm.

“Shhh, my love,” he whispers, his voice soft and sweet and completely at odds with the weapon in his hand.

Then he's moving, sliding off the bed with feline grace, hiding the dagger behind his back as he pads toward the bedroom door on silent feet. He moves like a dancer, like death in silk shorts, and I watch in growing horror as he disappears into the hallway.

I'm alone, chained to the bed, listening to my best friend call for his little brother while said little brother approaches him with a concealed weapon.

All I have to do is call out. One shout, one word, and Marco will know exactly where I am. He'll find me, free me, put an end to this insane situation. He'll see my utter humiliation, but my nightmare will be over.

The temptation is overwhelming. Marco is right there, so close I could probably whisper his name and he'd hear me. One moment of courage, one word, and I'd be saved from this beautiful madness.

But the memory of Ginni's nightmare crashes over me with devastating clarity. Ginni shaking in my arms, telling me about conversion therapy, about being sent away for the crime of having feelings. About waking up alone from nightmares with no one to comfort him.

My heart aches thinking about it. Sixteen years old and shipped off to be tortured for being different. For being gay. For being exactly who he is.

And Marco knew. Marco knew his little brother was being destroyed and said nothing. Did nothing. Let it happen.

That's not who I want to call out to.

But what's the alternative? Staying quiet means staying here. Participating in my own abduction. Accepting whatever twisted relationship Ginni has built in his broken mind.

As deranged as that seems, it might not be a stupid choice, because I heard the way he spoke about Marco the other day, the casual way he discussed what he might do if his brother tried to interfere. Ginni has a dagger and years of carefully suppressed rage. Shouting could get Marco killed and Ginni locked away forever.

The thought lands like a punch to the jaw, the pain sudden and all-consuming, and I'm alarmed to discover which possibility terrifies me more. Marco dead would be devastating, the loss of my oldest friend, but Marco dead would also be final. Clean. Over.

But Ginni behind bars? Ginni in prison?

The image forms in my mind with horrifying clarity. This beautiful, delicate boy locked in a cage with the worst men society has to offer. Without his knives, without his meticulous planning, without the safe haven of this basement or his cattle prod. Just a tiny, gorgeous waif surrounded by frustrated monsters who would see his feminine beauty as an invitation.

Ginni wouldn't last a week. Maybe not even a day. He's small, he's pretty, and he's exactly the kind of vulnerable target that predators circle

like sharks smelling blood. All that blazing intelligence, all that fierce spirit, crushed under the weight of casual brutality.

He'd be destroyed. Completely crushed by men who would take pride in claiming something so beautiful. And there wouldn't be a damn thing I could do to protect him.

The realization makes me sick to my stomach. When did protecting Ginni become more important to me than my own freedom? When did the thought of harm coming to him become worse than the thought of staying trapped here?

I should be more concerned about Marco's safety. Even though I have already vowed that the man is dead to me. He is still a living breathing human being. He was my friend, my brother in all but blood.

But all I can think about is the way Ginni trembled when he told me about conversion therapy. The way his voice broke, the way he clung to me like I was his only anchor in a world that wanted to destroy him for existing.

Ginni is not evil. He's not a monster. He's just broken in ways that make him dangerous, and he deserves better than to be fed to the wolves in some concrete cage.

The thought of anyone hurting him makes something violent and protective rise in my chest, something that feels dangerously close to love.

Cristo. What the hell is wrong with me?

I strain to listen, catching fragments of conversation from the main living area.

“You look ridiculous.” Marco’s voice carries down the hallway, flat and disapproving. There’s no warmth in it, no brotherly concern. Just tired resignation, like he’s inspecting something distasteful that he’s obligated to deal with.

“Good morning to you too, fratellino.” Ginni’s voice is bright and cheerful, but I can hear the steel underneath. The careful control.

“Mamma sent me to check on you. She’s worried you’re not taking care of yourself while she’s away.” The way Marco says it makes it clear this is a chore, an unwanted responsibility foisted on him by their mother.

“How thoughtful of her to worry about her disappointing son.”

There’s a pause, tension crackling through the air even from this distance. I can almost picture Marco’s face, that expression of long-suffering patience he gets when dealing with problems he’d rather ignore.

“Are you taking your medication?” Marco asks, his tone suggesting this is a conversation they’ve had many times before. Like he’s reading from a script, checking boxes on a list of obligatory concerns.

“I don’t need medication.”

“The doctors said...”

“The doctors said a lot of things. Most of them were lies designed to make other people feel better.”

I can hear movement now, Marco probably looking around the apartment, maybe noticing things are different. More lived in. More well-supplied. Signs that Ginni isn’t living alone anymore.

“What’s with all the candles and flowers? This place looks like a bloody wedding venue.” There’s disgust in Marco’s voice now, like he’s personally offended by his brother’s attempt to create beauty in this underground prison.

My heart stops. Wedding venue. If Marco starts asking the right questions, starts looking more closely...

“I like beautiful things. Is that a crime?”

“You’re wearing silk shorts and that absurd excuse for a shirt. In the middle of the day.” Marco’s voice gets sharper, more cutting. “Christ, Ginni, you’re not even trying to be normal. What would people think if they saw you like this?”

The casual cruelty in Marco’s words hits me like a physical blow. This is a side of him I’ve never seen, never suspected existed. The man I’ve considered a brother for over half my life, speaking to his actual brother like he’s something distasteful that needs to be corrected.

“People don’t see me,” Ginni replies quietly. “That’s rather the point, isn’t it? Keep the embarrassment hidden away where it can’t reflect poorly on the family name.”

“Don’t start with that martyr complex again. You chose this lifestyle, you deal with the consequences.”

Lifestyle. Like being gay is a choice Ginni made to spite his family, rather than simply who he is.

“Not that you’ll ever be normal,” Marco continues, and I can hear the tired resignation in his voice. Like he’s given up on Ginni entirely, written him off as a lost cause. “But you could at least make an effort. Put on proper clothes. Act like you have some self-respect.”

The words hang in the air like poison. I lie there, chained and helpless, listening to my best friend carelessly destroy what's left of his little brother's self-worth. Each casual cruelty delivered with the practiced efficiency of someone who's been doing this for years.

And I thought Marco was a good man. I thought he cared about family. I thought he was someone worth respecting.

How many times has this scene played out? How many visits where Marco comes down here, delivers his obligatory check-in, and leaves Ginni feeling smaller and more worthless than before? How many years of casual contempt disguised as brotherly concern?

No wonder Ginni is the way he is. No wonder he's built this elaborate fantasy where someone actually wants him, actually chooses him over the rest of the world. When your own family treats you like a shameful burden, obsessive love probably seems like the only alternative to complete isolation.

"I should go," Marco says after another long pause filled with uncomfortable silence. "Call if you need anything. Actually call this time, don't make everyone worry."

Everyone worry. As if anyone in that family actually worries about Ginni rather than worrying about what embarrassment he might cause them.

"Try to take better care of yourself," Marco adds as an afterthought, the words perfunctory and hollow. "Maybe try dressing like a man. Or try sticking to your therapy schedule. Try to remember you're a Torrini, even if you don't act like one."

Each suggestion is a small knife. The implication that he's a failure unworthy of the family name. That everything wrong with his life is a personal failing rather than the result of systematic neglect and abuse.

Footsteps again, heading back toward the stairs. The sound of the door opening and closing. Then silence.

I wait, heart pounding, until Ginni appears in the bedroom doorway. The dagger has disappeared, hidden away as efficiently as it appeared. His face is bright with genuine happiness, eyes sparkling with joy and satisfaction, but I can see the slight tremor in his hands, the careful way he holds himself. Marco's words have hit their target, even if Ginni would never admit it.

"You stayed quiet," he says, wonder and delight coloring his voice like he's witnessing a miracle. "You could have called out, could have ruined

everything, but you stayed quiet.”

He practically bounces as he approaches the bed, any distress completely hidden behind that brilliant smile. Whatever damage Marco’s visit might have done is buried under layers of practiced performance.

“You chose me,” he continues, settling beside me on the bed with obvious pleasure. “When you had the chance to be rescued, you chose to stay with me instead. That deserves a reward, don’t you think?”

The word ‘reward’ sends heat racing through my veins despite everything that’s just happened. Some twisted part of me is already anticipating what form his gratitude might take, already eager for his hands on my skin. The way he says it, with that breathless excitement and underlying need, makes my body respond in ways I’m trying desperately to ignore.

A saner part of me is screaming that I’ve just made the worst mistake of my life. That I’ve chosen captivity over freedom, madness over sanity, a beautiful broken boy over my oldest friend. That by staying silent, I’ve become a willing participant in my own imprisonment.

I had my chance, and I didn’t take it. I chose to protect the person holding me captive instead of saving myself.

And the most terrifying part is that I’m not sure I regret it.

The image of Ginni in prison is haunting me, his delicate beauty surrounded by predators who would destroy him. The thought of Ginni, scared, injured and confused, is too much to bear. Would he even understand why people were hurting him? Would his delusions try to twist it into something else?

Cristo. My lungs don’t want to move, they are weighted with feelings I can’t quite name, but feel dangerously like the kind of love that burns down the world to keep one person safe.

“Ginni,” I start, though I don’t know what I want to say.

“Shh,” he whispers again, pressing closer to me with cat-like contentment. “No regrets, my love. No doubts. You made the right choice. The only choice that matters.”

His hands are already moving, already working their familiar magic, and I can see the desperate need underneath his gratitude. The way he touches me like I’m his anchor, his proof that someone chose him over safety, over sanity, over everything that should matter more than a broken boy’s feelings.

His touch is a way of seeking assurance that someone in this world actually wants him.

“Now let me show you how grateful I am,” he murmurs, his voice thick with emotion and desire and something that sounds suspiciously like genuine love.

I close my eyes and let myself sink into the sensation, into the worship of his hands and mouth, into the twisted comfort of being wanted this desperately. Because maybe he’s right. Maybe this was the only choice I could have made.

Maybe I’ve been his all along, and I’m just finally admitting it to myself. The realization terrifies me more than anything else that’s happened in this beautiful basement prison. The thought that I might actually want to be here. With him.

The thought that when I had the chance to leave, I discovered I couldn’t bear to break his heart.

Not when I finally understand how many people already have.

CHAPTER TWENTY

GINNI

Carlo was such a good boy. I'm so very proud of him. I thought it would take him a lot longer to come to his senses and realize he loves me. Yet here he is, staying quiet so he can stay with me.

It's amazing. We really are going to have the best marriage ever. A very long and happy one. So many people are going to be envious of us.

My hands glide over his incredible body. His strong, masculine, well-defined muscles quiver under my touch. It's positively delightful. He is so responsive, it is like his body already accepts that it's mine.

Carlo's eyes are closed, dark lashes exquisite against the rich tones of his skin. His expression is almost serene. He isn't protesting. He isn't trying to fight this. He is simply lying back and accepting the pleasure I am giving him. He is enjoying this as he should.

I brush lightly over his nipple, and it pebbles. I let out a happy sigh.

"It's early for blowjob o'clock, but you deserve it."

Carlo murmurs something that might be a half-hearted protest, but I can tell he doesn't mean it. He is happy to receive his reward. His cock even twitched a little when I made my announcement.

Carefully, and with as much grace as I can muster, I settle into position between his spread legs. His glorious cock is right in front of me, and my mouth is watering at the thought of getting to taste it again.

I inhale his scent, and my eyes roll back. It is so good it's making me giddy. I can't contain myself anymore. Waiting is torture.

I wrap my lips around the head of his mostly soft length and suck him into my mouth. He grunts and his hips buck. He loves taking what I give him.

My tongue swirls lovingly around his crown. He is rapidly swelling. Hardening and heating. Growing.

Soon he is going to be a heavy weight in my mouth. Silk and steel. Hot and all mine.

My head lowers, rolling my lips down his cock, taking more of him into my mouth. I can't wait to have him all the way down my throat. Stuffing me so full my eyes water. But all good things come to those who wait.

For now, I will concentrate on tasting him. Feeling him grow bigger and harder. Delighting on the way his silky flesh rubs over my lips.

I could do this all day, every day. Worshipping Carlo's cock could become my religion. He won't regret marrying me at all. What man would? I was put on this Earth to be a perfect spouse. Specifically for Carlo, but I'm sure other men would appreciate my skills and my devotion.

I slide lower, and his cock nudges the back of my throat. I moan in pleasure. Carlo groans in response. This is perfect. Heaven and paradise and all my wishes come true.

I hum in contentment and start to really work his cock. Bobbing my head up and down. Sucking. Providing pressure with my tongue.

The salty taste of his precum floods my mouth, and it tastes so damn good. A real cock is a thousand times better than all the dildos I practised with.

Desire and need coil low and heavy in my guts. Potent and insistent.

I pull off of Carlo's perfect cock. A string of saliva connects us. He is glistening from my attentions.

My lungs suck in a breath. Carlo growls a protest. A deep one. I feel the rumbles of it in my own chest, and it makes me shiver.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. "Oh my love, I'm sorry, but you need to be patient."

He opens his eyes and glares at me. Need and hunger naked in his blazing eyes.

I shudder with delight. "Riding you is going to be much more fun for both of us, but Marco ruined our routine and I'm not ready for you."

Carlo stares at me. I can practically see him lighting up with the realization that his reward is going to be more than a blowjob. It really is adorable.

I slide off the bed. “I won’t be long.”

I skip off to the bathroom while humming a merry little tune. I shut the door behind me and hurry through everything I need to do, while taking care to still do everything properly.

It feels like it takes forever, and when I finally waltz back into the bedroom, my fears are confirmed. I did take too long.

My poor love is nearly all the way soft.

“Oh, I am a terrible wife! I should have put the porn on for you. What was I thinking?”

“Ginni...”

“Shh, don’t worry. I’ll have you hard again in no time at all.”

I wriggle out of my silk shorts and let them fall to the floor. Then, I do the same with my top. I’m completely naked, and it is so freeing.

Carlo’s eyes widen, and then darken. Color floods his cheeks. His gaze rakes up and down my body. Then up and down again. He can’t look away. He has never been able to admit it to himself, bless him, but he has been wanting to see me naked for years. This is all his Christmases come at once.

I climb back onto the bed. I stare deep into his eyes. Certainty settles over me like a comforting blanket.

“This needs to be a very special reward,” I tell him. “And I know how much you like to be in control.”

I swing my leg over his torso and straddle him while facing his toes. I wriggle backwards and hold my ass right over his face.

Carlo makes a noise that is pure sex incarnate. If only I could bottle it and keep it forever, it would be my most cherished possession.

“Whatever you do to my ass, I will do to your cock,” I say.

A strangled groan gurgles out of Carlo’s throat. A helpless whimper.

“If you want fast, go fast. You get the idea.” I’m sure he does. My husband is a very intelligent man.

I sigh happily and sit right on his face. I can feel his nose buried in my crack. It’s fantastic. But sadly, I can’t stay like this all day.

I lean forward and bend down until I’m practically lying on top of him. I suck his half-soft cock into my mouth, and I wait. And wait.

My poor love is trying to cling on to his denial. His mistaken belief that he is straight.

I suckle gently on his cockhead for encouragement. He groans, and sure enough, his warm, wet tongue tentatively licks at my hole.

The sensation is divine. Intense enough to make me whine. Gentle enough to make my heart flutter.

Another lick comes. Much more confident this time. It pulls a depraved cry from me. Then suddenly I'm whimpering as his tongue attacks me. I'm seeing stars. My veins are glowing with pleasure.

Carlo's tongue is soft, wet, hot and clever. I never dreamed it would feel this good. This euphoria is profound.

Diligently, I try to focus on sucking his cock with the same fervor he is eating my ass. But it is hard. Ecstasy is making my jaw slack. My throat wants to sing my rapture. Nevermind that everything he is doing to me is all kinds of distracting.

His hands grab my hips. I'm so happy I have been giving him a little bit more slack in the chains every day. He deserves it, and this is so worth it.

I yelp as he pulls me back, pressing me even closer to his face, and burying himself deeper in my ass. He is devouring me like a starving man. All sloppy, and fervent. Passionate and delicious.

His cock falls out of my mouth. All I can do is wail, whine, whimper. My thighs are shaking. My balls are tight.

Suddenly I'm screaming his name as blinding white light consumes me. My orgasm rattles through me. My untouched cock dumps a load of cum onto Carlo's chest. I shudder and groan.

Carlo's tongue leaves my ass. He sags against the pillows, breathing heavily.

I pant above him, head down. I'm not sure I can move right now, my muscles feel too weak.

“Whoopsie,” I breathe.

I wasn't meant to cum yet, and certainly not first. But Carlo is an extraordinary lover, and I'm not at all surprised.

Carefully, shakily, I turn around to face my wonderful husband.

“Don't worry, darling. I promised you I'd ride.”

“Ginni...”

“Shh. It's okay. I want to.

Carlo's eyes are beautiful. Burning and intense. Full of lust and desire. Barely any conflict at all. He is doing so well. He's learning quickly what he likes and what is good for him.

I shuffle backwards. I line his cock up to my wet and open hole. The hole he opened up so well.

I hold his dark gaze as I start to sink down.

Oh lord. The burn. The stretch. He is big, and I feel all tingly from just cumming. This is a lot. It's almost too much. But I'm going to do it. I want to. I want to take my husband. I want to have the love of my life's hard cock deep inside me, rearranging my guts and making me feel so good.

Carlo reaches for me, but the chains clang and bring him up short. He snarls in frustration.

“Slowly, Ginni. You keep going too fast. You are going to hurt yourself. There is no rush.”

I slow down. Savoring things is not a bad idea.

“That's it.” He nods encouragingly. “Now breathe. Big slow breaths.”

I obey my husband, and his face lights up.

“Now, bear down against me. Like you are trying to push me out.”

I close my eyes and follow his guidance. There is a strange sensation, almost like a pop, and suddenly he is in. I pant in relief.

“Good boy,” says Carlo, his voice husky and ragged.

I moan and sink the rest of the way down. He is all the way inside me. Firm. Solid. Divine. I'm so full. Stuffed and stretched. I love it more than words can say.

“Now wait. Give your body time to adjust,” Carlo rumbles.

“I know.”

I love that he cares so much, but I'm not a sexual novice. I have done a ton of research and practiced with dildos. And it's not like this is our first time. I had my debut on our wedding night. And there was the Twitch Stream. He really doesn't need to worry about me so much.

My insides quiver. A little spasm of clenching around him.

I throw back my head and moan. “You feel better every time.”

Carlo grunts. “Cristo, Ginni. Don't say shit like that.”

“Why not? It's true.” I smile.

He swears and shudders. “Okay. Move now... please.”

I grin. “Anything you want, my dear husband.”

I lift up a little and sit back down. Oh. Oh my. That feels amazing. I'm going to get hard again, I can just tell. But for now, I can concentrate on Carlo. He gave me a lovely orgasm with his tongue, so now all my urgency has gone and I can fully focus on his needs.

I lift up again. I undulate my hips. I try squeezing my core muscles and holding him tight.

I stare into his eyes. I examine his face. I map every twitch. Every widening of his pupils. Every bead of sweat that gathers on his brow. I catalogue every twitch of his fingers, every aborted reach for me.

I try slow, and try fast. I find a rhythm, pace, and movement that drives him wild.

Satisfaction and pride bloom in my chest. I keep doing it the way he loves. I rock his world.

He grunts. He groans. His hips buck. A beautiful flush spreads over his face, down his neck and all the way to his chest. His head starts to thrash back and forward.

The magical sound of flesh slapping against flesh fills the basement. The best music ever invented. My favorite soundtrack. I want to hear it every day. My man deserves no less.

His gaze stays fixed on me. Magnetic and powerful. Sometimes his eyes roll back, but they always snap back. He wants to watch me riding him. He doesn't want to miss a thing. I have never been happier.

“Ginni!” he yells suddenly.

His body goes rigid. His heels drum on the mattress. Wetness gushes deep inside me. Pulse after pulse of it. The best feeling in the world.

He lets out a long exhale. His body flops, turning all loose-limbed and languid. His softening cock stays inside me where I'm going to keep it for as long as possible.

“Fucking hell, Ginni,” he pants.

I grin with pride.

I'm hard again. I reach for my cock and tug lazily. Carlo opens his eyes and stares at my movements. His pink tongue pokes out and licks his lips.

My body jerks, my insides flutter around his cock, and I cum. A nice, languid, tingly orgasm.

My cum lands on Carlo's stomach. Not far from the puddle I dumped earlier.

Carlo chuckles. “I forgot what it's like to be twenty-one.”

“No,” I tell him sternly. “You forgot how to be happy.”

He blinks.

I give him my best smile. “But that’s okay because I’m here to teach you.”

He blinks again. He looks surprised. Taken aback. Then his expression shifts, and I beam with delight.

Carlo looks as if he is finally starting to believe me.

This is all going so much better than I planned for.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CARLO

Happy.

Ginni promised to teach me to be happy, and until he said those words, I hadn't realized that I wasn't.

It's a lot to think about. Too much to think about.

The cigarette appears between my lips before I've fully processed what's happening, Ginni's slender fingers brushing against my mouth as he positions it with practiced care.

"There," he murmurs softly, bringing the lighter to the tip with steady hands. The flame dances between us, casting golden light across his face as I lean forward to meet it. For just a moment, we're connected by fire and breath and a simple intimacy.

He settles on the edge of the bed, close enough that I can feel the warmth radiating from his skin. The silk robe he's thrown on hangs open slightly, revealing the elegant line of his collarbone, the pale smoothness of his chest. He's impossibly beautiful in the artificial light.

"Better?" he asks, watching me take the first deep drag with that attentive expression he gets when he's focused entirely on my comfort.

I nod, unable to trust my voice yet. The nicotine hits my system like a blessing, and for a few precious moments, there's nothing but the simple pleasure of smoke and silence while my body basks in the afterglow of the most incredible sex of my life.

Ginni takes the cigarette from my lips, allowing me to exhale. He holds it with the reverence of someone performing a sacred ritual. His movements are so careful, so precise, like he's memorizing every detail of this moment to treasure later.

The chains have enough slack in them now that I could do this by myself, but it doesn't seem worth the argument. It's not something I want to fight.

"I used to watch you smoke at family dinners," he says quietly, his voice taking on that dreamy quality it gets when he's lost in memory. "You'd always step out onto the terrace during dessert, and I'd find excuses to walk past the windows just to catch glimpses of you."

The confession is delivered with such gentle honesty that it makes my chest tight. "You were just a kid then."

"Sixteen when I started watching you." He brings the cigarette back to my lips, timing it perfectly with my need. "I thought you looked like a film star from the fifties. All sharp lines and dangerous elegance. I used to imagine what it would be like to light your cigarettes, to be the one taking care of you."

There's no manic energy in his words now, no brittle excitement. Just quiet longing and the kind of romantic devotion that poets write about. It's harder to resist than his more intense moments, this soft vulnerability that makes me want to protect him from the world.

"You had other things to worry about at sixteen," I say, thinking about what I now know of his family, the conversion therapy that was waiting for him.

"I worried about you too." His smile is gentle, tinged with old sadness. "Whether you were eating properly, whether you were getting enough sleep. Whether anyone was taking care of you the way you deserved."

The cigarette is halfway gone now, consumed in a comfortable rhythm. Ginni's fingers brush my lips each time he gives it back, small points of contact that feel more intimate than they should.

"I studied everything about you," he continues, his voice growing even softer. "Not just for this, but because I wanted to understand what made you happy. Your favorite foods, the authors you mentioned liking, the way your expression changed when you talked about music."

"You remember all that?"

"I remember everything about you." He takes the cigarette. "You mentioned loving Puccini once, just in passing, when someone asked about

your record collection. I spent months learning everything I could about opera just so I could understand what moved you.”

The admission catches me off guard even though I don’t know why I’m surprised, he has already shown me the depths he has gone to in order to feed his obsession.

“You studied opera for me?”

“I wanted to know what you heard when you listened to *La Bohème*. What emotions it stirred in you.” His cheeks color slightly, as if he’s embarrassed by his own romanticism. “I thought maybe someday I’d be brave enough to sing for you.”

The image of teenage Ginni learning arias in secret, dreaming of serenading me, is so heartbreakingly sweet that I can barely stand it. All those years of silent devotion, all that careful study of my preferences and needs.

It’s flattering. Immensely so, and it would take a better man than me to resist the allure and not allow it to swell the ego.

“Do you still remember any of it?” I ask, surprised by how much I want to hear the answer.

“Every note.” His voice is barely above a whisper now. “Though I’m not sure I have the courage to prove it.”

“Sing for me now.”

The words escape before I can stop them, and I’m not sure who’s more surprised by the request. But something about this moment, this gentle intimacy, makes me want to hear the voice he’s been hiding all these years.

Ginni’s eyes widen, and for a moment he looks exactly like the shy sixteen-year-old he used to be. “You really want me to?”

“Please.”

He extinguishes the cigarette in the crystal ashtray with careful precision, buying himself time to gather courage. When he turns back to me, his expression is vulnerable in a way I’ve never seen before.

Then he begins to sing.

The first notes are tentative, barely audible, but as his confidence builds his voice grows stronger. It’s “O soave fanciulla” from *La Bohème*, Rodolfo’s love song to Mimi, and Ginni’s voice is absolutely beautiful. Pure and sweet with just enough roughness around the edges to make it interesting, to make it real.

He's not performing for me. This isn't the calculated seduction I expected. This is just Ginni, sharing something precious and fragile, offering up his heart in the form of Puccini's most romantic aria.

The Italian flows from his lips like honey, every emotion carefully rendered. I can hear years of study in his technique, but more than that, I can hear years of love. This isn't just a song he learned to impress me. This is his heart set to music.

When the last note fades into silence, we stare at each other across the small distance between us. The artificial sunlight from the projector catches in his eyes, making them shimmer with unshed tears.

"That was..." I start, then realize I don't have words for what I just witnessed.

"I used to practice in the shower so no one would hear," he says softly. "I dreamed about the day I'd finally be brave enough to sing it for you."

"Your voice is incredible, Ginni. You could have been professional."

He shakes his head, a self-deprecating smile crossing his features. "My family made it clear that wasn't the kind of attention they wanted me to attract. Torrini men don't sing opera. They don't get noticed like that. They run businesses and make money, and if they are gay they hide it like it's a shameful secret so they can protect their reputation."

The casual way he delivers this devastating assessment of his family's priorities makes my chest ache. How much talent has been suppressed, how many dreams crushed, in the name of maintaining their image?

"Their loss," I say firmly. "That was the most beautiful thing I've heard in years."

The compliment lights up his entire face, transforming him from vulnerable boy to radiant angel in the space of a heartbeat. It's the kind of pure, uncomplicated joy that most people lose by the time they're ten years old.

"Really?"

"Really."

I reach up without thinking, but the chains stop me from reaching him. He sees my attempt and leans down, close to me. I smile and brush a strand of hair away from his face. His skin is warm and soft under my fingers, and he leans further into the touch like a cat seeking affection.

"Thank you for sharing that with me."

“I’ll share everything with you,” he says simply. “Every song, every dream, every secret thought I’ve ever had. You’re the only person who’s ever made me feel like I had anything worth sharing.”

The words hit like a sucker punch, because they’re not manipulative or calculated. They’re so obviously true. This beautiful, brilliant boy has spent his entire life being told he’s too much, too different, too impossible to love. And somehow, impossibly, my presence in his life has given him permission to be exactly who he is.

“What else did you dream about?” I ask, genuinely curious now. “Besides singing for me.”

“Ridiculous things,” he says with a soft laugh, settling back against the pillows. “I wanted to cook for you, properly cook, not just the simple things I’ve been making here. I imagined elaborate dinner parties where I’d serve you seven courses and everyone would see how well I could take care of you.”

“That doesn’t sound ridiculous.”

“I wanted to read to you too. All the books you mentioned loving, I’d read them and imagine sitting by a fireplace somewhere, reading aloud while you worked on business papers. Just being useful, being... wanted.”

The simplicity of his desires is heartbreakingly simple. Not fantasies of wealth or power or revenge, just the basic human need to be valued by someone.

“I practiced conversation topics,” he continues, warming to the subject now that he’s seen my genuine interest. “Current events, art, politics, literature. I wanted to be the kind of companion you’d never get bored with. Someone who could match your intelligence and understand your work.”

The memory of the other day surfaces, Ginni solving my club’s sound crisis with casual expertise while I lay here stunned by his competence.

“You do understand my work,” I point out. “Better than most of my actual associates.”

“I studied that too.” His cheeks color again, endearingly embarrassed. “Business journals, financial reports, anything I could find about your industry. I wanted to be able to help if you ever needed it.”

“Why?” I ask. “Why put so much effort into me?”

“Because you were kind to me.” The answer comes immediately, heartfelt and sincere. “At family dinners when everyone else ignored me or made uncomfortable jokes, you’d always include me in conversations. You

asked about my studies, my interests. You treated me like a person instead of an embarrassment.”

Because you were kind to me. Cristo, my heart is going to break.

I try to remember those dinners, those casual interactions that seemed so meaningless at the time. Basic politeness, the kind of courtesy I’d show any family member. But to Ginni, starved for acknowledgment and acceptance, it clearly felt like salvation.

“And you were handsome,” he adds with characteristic honesty. “Not just physically, though you certainly are that. But the way you carried yourself, the quiet confidence, the way you never needed to prove anything to anyone. I wanted to be close to that kind of strength.”

“I’m not that strong, Ginni.”

“You are.” His voice is soft but certain. “You survived things that would have broken most people. You didn’t come from a privileged family, you built something meaningful from nothing. Everyone admires you, and your name now means something. You command respect without demanding it. That’s strength.”

The way he sees me is intoxicating and terrifying in equal measure. Not as the flawed, often ruthless man I know myself to be, but as some idealized version that exists only in his imagination. How can I possibly live up to that kind of devotion?

“What about now?” I ask. “Now that you know me properly, are you disappointed?”

“Disappointed?” He looks genuinely puzzled by the question. “Carlo, you’ve been everything I hoped for and more. Kind when you could have been cruel, patient when I know I’ve been difficult, protective even when you had every reason to hate me.”

“I should hate you,” I point out, though the words lack conviction.

“But you don’t.” It’s not a question. “And I think maybe that means something.”

The projector above us shifts from sunlight to sunset, painting our ceiling in shades of gold and pink. Another artificial close of day in our underground world, another marker of time that has no real meaning here.

“Tell me more,” I say, not ready for this moment of raw honesty to end.

“I used to write poetry about you.” The admission comes with a self-conscious laugh. “Terrible, melodramatic verses full of yearning and romantic clichés. I burned them all before... before this.”

“I wish you hadn’t.”

“They were embarrassing.”

“They were yours.” I reach for his hand, threading our fingers together in a gesture that feels natural despite everything between us. “Everything about you is interesting to me, even the embarrassing parts.”

“Why?”

It’s my turn to consider the question seriously, to examine the feelings that have been growing stronger every day despite my best efforts to deny them.

“Because you see the world differently than anyone I’ve ever met,” I say finally. “You find beauty in things other people ignore. You love with an intensity that should be frightening but somehow isn’t. You make me feel like maybe I’m worth all the effort you’ve put into understanding me.”

“You are,” he says immediately. “You’re worth everything.”

The certainty in his voice is overwhelming. When was the last time someone spoke about me with such unwavering conviction? When was the last time I felt genuinely cherished rather than simply useful or feared? The answer is never. Nobody has ever felt this way about me.

“I’m a dangerous man, Ginni. I’ve done things that would horrify you.”

“I know what you are,” he replies calmly. “I know what you’ve done, what you’re capable of. It doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

“It should.”

“Why? Because violence makes you unworthy of love? Because protecting what matters to you makes you a monster?” He pauses and shakes his head. “I’m not some innocent civilian off the street. I was born and raised in your world, Carlo. Mafia is my blood.” His voice gains strength. “And more personally than that, you think I don’t understand darkness? You think I haven’t studied every shadow in my own soul?”

There’s steel in his voice now, the strength that lurks beneath all that delicate beauty. Evidence of the dangerous intelligence that makes Ginni far more than just a pretty boy with romantic delusions.

“We’re the same, you and I,” he continues. “We both know what it means to do terrible things for the right reasons. We both understand that sometimes love requires violence, that protection demands sacrifice.”

“You’re twenty-one years old.”

“Age doesn’t determine capacity for darkness, Carlo. I’ve been planning this abduction since I was seventeen. I drugged you, chained you,

threatened to hurt your friends. I'm fully prepared to kill my own brother if he tries to take you away from me." His smile is gentle but his eyes are sharp as blades. "Does that sound like innocence to you?"

The casual way he discusses potential murder should terrify me, but instead it's oddly comforting. He's right about our similarities. We're both capable of monstrous things. The difference is that Ginni's monster wears silk and sings opera and makes the most incredible breakfast I've ever tasted.

"You don't frighten me," I realize aloud.

"Good." His smile turns genuinely warm again. "You shouldn't be afraid of someone who loves you. Even if that someone is a little bit insane."

A little bit. The understatement makes me laugh despite everything, and Ginni's face lights up at the sound like he's just accomplished something magnificent.

"There," he says with satisfaction. "I knew I could make you laugh eventually."

"You've made me do a lot of things I didn't expect."

"I hope I've made you happy too."

The question in his voice is so hopeful, so vulnerable, that I can't bear to give him anything less than complete honesty.

"You have," I admit, and I'm not just thinking about the mind-blowing sex.

"Even though I kidnapped you?"

"Maybe because you kidnapped me." The admission surprises us both. "You absolved me of all my responsibilities. Gave me an opportunity to just be."

He smiles at me and it feels like benediction.

"Ginni?"

"Yes?"

"Sing for me again."

And he does.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

GINNI

I wake up before Carlo. I'm using him as a pillow again, which never fails to make my heart flutter with joy. Such a small thing, but it feels like the most wonderful gift. That he trusts me enough to sleep so deeply while I'm resting my head on him.

The projector is displaying a gentle spring garden scene above us, complete with blooming cherry trees and butterflies dancing among the flowers. I programmed it to cycle through the most peaceful settings during sleep hours, wanting Carlo's dreams to be filled with beautiful things rather than the darkness that used to haunt my own nights.

Carefully, so as not to disturb him, I extract myself from his embrace and pad barefoot to the kitchen. The morning routine has become sacred to me. Coffee first, prepared exactly how he likes it, then breakfast that will nourish and delight him. Today I'm thinking French toast with the brioche I baked yesterday, served with fresh strawberries and that heavenly maple syrup from Vermont.

But first, I have something special I want to do for him.

I retrieve my sketchbook from its hiding place behind the cookbooks, running my fingers over the worn leather cover. Inside are dozens of drawings, all of Carlo, created during the quiet hours. I've been sketching him since our first morning together, unable to resist capturing the way the

artificial light plays across his features, the elegant line of his profile, the way his hands look when they're finally relaxed.

Some are quick gesture drawings, just a few lines capturing the essence of a moment. Others are detailed studies, lovingly rendered portraits that show every eyelash, every freckle, every tiny scar that tells the story of his dangerous life. All of them are acts of worship, visual love letters to the man who's become my entire world.

Today's sketch is going to be special though. Not just another study of his sleeping face, but something that captures the contentment I saw in his expression last night after I sang for him. The way he looked at me like I was something precious, something worth treasuring.

I settle cross-legged on the floor beside the bed, opening my sketchbook to a fresh page. The morning light from the projector is perfect, soft and golden and forgiving. Carlo is lying on his side facing me, one arm stretched across the pillows where I was sleeping, as if even unconsciously he's reaching for me.

My pencil moves across the paper with practiced strokes, capturing the curve of his jaw, the way his dark hair falls across his forehead, the slight smile that's playing at the corners of his mouth. He looks younger when he sleeps, less burdened by the weight of responsibility and reputation that he carries when awake.

I've always loved drawing. Even as a child, when the world felt too big and too hostile, I could lose myself in creating something beautiful on paper. Art was my escape, my way of making sense of emotions too complex for words. My family never understood it, of course. They saw it as another sign of my fundamental wrongness, another way I failed to be the son they wanted.

But Carlo appreciates beauty. I've seen the way he looks at the flowers I arrange, the careful attention he pays to the presentation of our meals. He notices aesthetic details that most people miss, finds pleasure in elegant design and thoughtful composition. When I show him this drawing, I know he'll understand the love that went into every line.

The sketch takes shape gradually, each mark deliberate and considered. I shade the hollow of his throat, the strong line of his shoulder, the gentle curve of his lips. This is how I want to remember him forever, peaceful and safe and mine.

As I work, my mind drifts to all the other things I want to create for him. The paintings I've planned, scenes from our life together that I'll capture in watercolor and oils. The garden I want to design for our future home, filled with herbs and flowers and quiet places where we can sit together in the evening. The meals I want to cook, the songs I want to learn, the thousand small ways I want to show him how much he means to me.

People think love is about grand gestures and dramatic declarations, but I know better. Love is in the details, the careful attention to what makes someone happy. It's in remembering that Carlo prefers his coffee strong but not bitter, that he gets a particular expression when he's thinking about work, that he unconsciously hums when he's content.

It's in learning every plane of his face so well that I can draw him from memory, in studying his moods and needs until caring for him becomes as natural as breathing.

The pencil catches on a rough spot in the paper, and I pause to examine the mark. Not a mistake, just a tiny imperfection that adds character to the drawing. Like the small scar on Carlo's temple, barely visible unless you know to look for it, or the way his left eyebrow sits slightly higher than his right.

I love his imperfections as much as his perfection. The slight roughness in his voice when he first wakes up, the way he sometimes gets grumpy before his morning coffee, the stubborn streak that makes him argue even when he knows I'm right. These aren't flaws to be corrected but features to be cherished, proof that he's real and human and wonderfully, beautifully himself.

“What are you drawing?”

His voice, soft and slightly gravelly with sleep, makes me jump slightly. I've been so absorbed in my work that I didn't notice him stirring.

“You,” I say simply, because there's no point in pretending otherwise. “I hope you don't mind.”

Carlo sits up slowly, running a hand through his mussed hair. The sheet falls away from his chest, and I have to resist the urge to add him to my collection of figure studies. There's something so unselfconsciously beautiful about him in the morning, before he's fully awake and alert.

“Can I see?”

I hesitate for just a moment. Sharing my art has always been terrifying, like offering someone a piece of my soul for judgment. But this is Carlo,

and if I can't trust him with my creativity, who can I trust?

I stand up and turn the sketchbook toward him, watching his face carefully for any reaction. His expression shifts as he takes in the drawing, something soft and wondering replacing the sleepy confusion.

"Ginni," he breathes, reaching out to trace the air above the paper without quite touching it. "This is incredible."

"It's just a sketch," I say, but I can't hide my pleasure at his reaction.

"It's beautiful. I had no idea you could draw like this." He looks up at me, and there's something almost awed in his expression. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Since I was little. My nonna taught me when I was five or six. She said it was important to create beautiful things in a world that could be so ugly." The memory makes me smile, one of the few purely happy recollections from my childhood. "She used to sneak me art supplies when my parents weren't looking."

"She sounds wonderful."

"She was. The only person in my family who ever really saw me, you know? She died when I was twelve, and I think that's when I really started to understand how alone I was."

Carlo's expression grows soft with sympathy. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. She gave me something precious before she left. A way to make beauty even when everything else is falling apart." I flip through a few pages of the sketchbook, showing him other drawings. "She used to say that art was how we put love into the world where everyone could see it."

The pages reveal study after study of Carlo in various poses and moods. Sleeping, thinking, that intense expression he gets when he's listening to something important. I've captured him in charcoal and pencil, watercolor and ink, each medium chosen to highlight different aspects of his beauty.

"These are all me," he says, wonder and something that might be touch of vulnerability in his voice.

"I couldn't draw anything else if I tried," I admit. "You're all I see when I close my eyes. All I want to see."

He's quiet for a long moment, studying the drawings with an intensity that makes me nervous. What if he thinks it's too much? What if the sheer volume of my obsession finally frightens him?

"I've never been anyone's muse before," he says finally, and his voice is so soft I almost miss it.

“You’re not just my muse. You’re my everything. My inspiration, my purpose, my reason for creating anything beautiful.” The words tumble out before I can stop them, raw and honest and probably far too intense for a morning conversation. “I know it’s overwhelming, but I can’t help it. Loving you makes me want to fill the world with art.”

“Show me more,” he says quietly.

I flip to the beginning of the sketchbook, where the earliest drawings live. These are rougher, more desperate, created during those first days when I was still terrified he’d somehow escape before I could make him understand. But they show the progression, the way my artwork has grown softer and more tender as our relationship has deepened.

“This one was from our first morning together,” I explain, pointing to a sketch of him sleeping. “You looked so peaceful, and I was so afraid you’d wake up and hate me. I wanted to capture that moment before everything changed.”

“And this one?”

“The day after you let me shave you. You were starting to trust me, and I could see it in your face. The way you weren’t quite as tense when I touched you.”

We go through page after page, and I find myself telling stories about each drawing. The emotions I was feeling, the tiny moments of progress I was celebrating, the way my understanding of his character has deepened with each careful observation.

“You see things I don’t even know about myself,” Carlo says when we reach the most recent pages. “This expression here, I had no idea I ever looked like that.”

“That’s from yesterday, when you asked me to sing. You looked like you were seeing something wonderful for the first time.”

“I was.”

The simple words make my chest tight with emotion. This is what I’ve always dreamed of, sharing my art with someone who understands it, who sees the love I pour into every line and appreciates it instead of dismissing it as frivolous nonsense.

“I want to paint you too,” I say, already imagining the possibilities. “Oils, watercolors, maybe even try my hand at pastels. I want to capture you in every medium, show the world how beautiful you are.”

“The world?”

“Well, maybe not the world exactly. But someday, when we have our own place, I want to fill it with art. Portraits of you, landscapes of places we’ve been together, still lifes of objects that remind me of happy moments.” I close the sketchbook and clutch it to my chest. “I want our home to be a gallery of our love story.”

Carlo reaches out and touches my face, his fingers gentle against my cheek. “That’s very sweet, Ginni.”

The validation makes me want to cry with happiness. All my life, my artistic impulses have been treated as embarrassing quirks at best, evidence of fundamental wrongness at worst. But Carlo sees them as gifts, as expressions of something valuable and worthy of preservation.

“I have paints hidden away,” I confess. “Watercolors, acrylics, even some oils I’ve been saving for the right subject. I could start today if you wanted. Create something special just for you.”

“What would you paint?”

“You,” I say immediately. “That moment yesterday when you smiled after I sang. You look like you loved it.”

“I did,” he says simply, and the admission makes my heart skip several beats.

“Really?”

“Really. Your voice, your talent, the way you poured your heart into that song. How could I not love it?”

I’m definitely going to cry now. Happy tears, the kind I used to think were myths until Carlo came into my life and showed me what it felt like to be genuinely cherished.

“I’ll make breakfast first,” I say, standing up and carefully placing the sketchbook on the nightstand. “But then I want to start a painting.”

“What can I do to help?”

The question stops me in my tracks. “Help?”

“With the painting. I’ve never posed for anyone before, but I’d like to learn.”

The offer is so unexpected, so generous, that for a moment I can’t speak. The idea of Carlo actively participating in my art, wanting to collaborate rather than just tolerate my creativity, is more wonderful than anything I could have imagined.

“You’d really do that? Pose for me?”

“Yes,” he says simply, as if it is the most obvious thing in the world. As if it is no big deal and not a chore.

I clap my hands together in glee. Today is going to be a perfect day. I can feel it in my bones, see it in the gentle morning light, taste it in the anticipation of creating something beautiful with the man I love.

Today, I’m going to paint our happiness, and it’s going to be the most beautiful thing I’ve ever created.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CARLO

The afternoon light from the projector casts dancing patterns across the ceiling, a gentle forest scene complete with dappled sunlight filtering through leaves. I'm lying here in a state of lazy contentment, still floating from the massage Ginni gave me earlier. His hands had worked magic on muscles I didn't even know were tense, and now I feel more relaxed than I have in months.

Before that, I enjoyed posing for him far more than I thought I would, and I'm far more excited to see the end result than I ever thought possible. Hopefully, he will relent and show me at least the work in progress soon.

Right now he's perched on the edge of the bed, wearing nothing but silk sleep shorts in deep blue that make his skin look luminous. He's got my phone in his lap, tongue caught between his teeth in concentration as he works through what appears to be my entire inbox.

This feels like an established routine now. Sitting here while he goes through my messages like a personal assistant, crafting responses that maintain the illusion of my peaceful retreat from the world. It should bother me more than it does, but watching him work with such dedicated focus is oddly endearing.

“Your accountant is very persistent,” he murmurs, showing me a string of increasingly urgent emails about quarterly reports. “I’ve told him twice that you’re taking a proper break, but he keeps sending spreadsheets.”

“Ignore him. Martin panics if he doesn’t hear from me for more than forty-eight hours.”

Ginni nods seriously and deletes the emails with decisive swipes. “People really don’t understand the concept of rest, do they? No wonder you were so wound up when you arrived.”

When I arrived. Like I walked in here willingly instead of being drugged and abducted. But there’s something charming about the way he’s rewritten our origin story in his mind, turning kidnapping into a romantic rescue mission.

He’s gotten faster at mimicking my writing style, barely pausing now as he types responses that sound authentically like me. The attention to detail is remarkable. He’s even picked up on the fact that I use different tones for different people, more formal with business associates, casual with friends, slightly sarcastic with people I don’t particularly like.

“Oh, this one’s interesting,” he says, opening what looks like a group text from some of the other capos. “They’re planning a poker night next week. Should I accept for you?”

“Tell them maybe,” I say automatically. “Depending on how I’m feeling.”

The reply comes so easily. Founded on my stubborn belief that I’ll be back to my normal life soon, that this is all temporary. Even though with each passing day, the idea of leaving this beautiful basement feels less appealing and more like stepping back into a world that never felt quite right to begin with.

Ginni’s fingers fly over the keyboard, and I find myself admiring the elegant way he moves. Everything he does has this unconscious grace, like he’s performing a dance only he can hear the music for.

“Keith wants to discuss the lighting system installation for the new VIP section,” he continues, scrolling through more messages. “Should I schedule something for when you’re back?”

“Tell him to handle it himself for now. He’s competent enough.”

More typing, more casual management of my life. I watch him work and realize that in some ways, he’s better at this than I am. More patient with people’s anxieties, more diplomatic in his responses. If he weren’t completely insane, he’d make an excellent personal assistant.

“Your gym membership is about to expire,” he informs me. “Should I renew it?”

“Sure, whatever.”

He pauses in his typing, looking at me with those impossibly blue eyes. “You know, you could set up a proper home gym in our new house. Much more convenient than traveling across town every time you want to work out. Plus, I could spot you.”

The casual way he mentions our imaginary future home makes my chest do something complicated. He talks about it like it’s inevitable, like we’ve already picked out curtains and chosen paint colors for the nursery.

A new notification pops up on the screen, and Ginni opens it with the same casual efficiency he’s shown with everything else. But then his face changes. The color drains from his cheeks, his breathing becomes shallow and rapid, and the phone flies from his hands like it’s burned him, falling onto the blankets like a yeeted scorpion.

I crane my neck to see the screen, catching a glimpse of the contact name before Ginni scrambles to flip the phone face-down.

Crystal.

Fuck.

Crystal. Dancer at my club, all long legs and blonde hair and the kind of practiced sensuality that comes with years of performing for men with money. Our hookups over the past months have been nothing serious, just convenient stress relief when I needed it. She’s beautiful, skilled, and completely uncomplicated. No emotional demands, no expectations beyond what we explicitly agreed to.

Ginni opening that message thread means he has seen everything. The arrangements to meet after closing. The explicit messages about what we wanted to do to each other. Months of casual sexting and hookup coordination that would obliterate any illusion that I’m some devoted romantic who’s been pining for him in secret. It would have smashed any notion that I’m his loving husband.

The look on Ginni’s face is devastating. Like something precious inside him has just shattered beyond repair. He’s wrapped his arms around himself, shoulders hunched, staring at nothing with wide, unseeing eyes.

“Ginni,” I start, though I don’t know what I could possibly say to fix this.

A rational part of me is screaming that I shouldn’t care, that this isn’t my fault. I haven’t cheated, and I’m not responsible for the well-being of a maniac. But it is a small part of me, and easily drowned out by my deep concern.

Ginni shudders, a full-body tremor that seems to start in his bones and ripple outward. When he looks at me, there's no manic brightness in his eyes, no carefully constructed joy. Just raw, devastating awareness. A startling lucidity that is so full of pain that suddenly I'd sell my soul to see that delusional gleam return.

"I know you don't love me," he says quietly, his voice stripped of all its usual music. "Nobody does."

All the oxygen whooshes out of my lungs. Ginni sounds so lost. So utterly alone. So broken.

I didn't know he was capable of moments of clarity, and it's a shock to discover how much I hate it.

"But the fantasy was so alluring, I... I couldn't resist it. I'm so sorry."

The words are crushing. They fill me with ice and pain. This isn't the Ginni who's been planning our future with manic enthusiasm. This is a broken boy who's just had his dreams destroyed by the harsh weight of reality.

It's awful. I can't stand it. I want happy Ginni back.

He climbs off the bed with movements that seem to take enormous effort, like he's fighting gravity itself. There's something defeated in his posture, something that makes alarm bells start clanging in my head.

"Where are you going?" I demand, pulling against the restraints.

"I need to..." He trails off, shaking his head like he's trying to clear it. "I need to... to make this stop."

The way he says it, with that flat, hopeless tone, makes my blood run cold. This isn't someone going to make a cup of tea and have a good cry. This is someone who's decided they're too much trouble, too broken to exist.

He's moving toward the door with that same defeated shuffle, and panic floods my system like ice water.

"Get your fucking ass back here this instant or I swear to God I'll spank you so hard you won't sit down for a week!" I roar, lunging against the chains with enough force to make the metal bite into my wrists.

The words tear out of me with desperate fury, part command and part plea. There's nothing calculated about it, nothing thought through. Just pure, animalistic terror at the thought of losing him.

Ginni stops in the doorway, turning back to look at me with wide, startled eyes. Like he can't quite believe what he just heard.

“Come here,” I growl, my voice rough with emotion I don’t want to examine too closely.

He blinks at me, confusion replacing some of the devastating emptiness in his expression. But he obeys, moving toward the bed with the instinctive compliance of someone who’s spent his entire life following orders from people who claim to care about him.

The chains have just enough slack for me to reach him when he gets close enough. I cup his face in my hands, forcing him to meet my eyes, feeling the delicate bone structure beneath skin that’s far too pale.

“You are wonderful,” I tell him fiercely. “Amazing. You’re clever and caring and passionate and beautiful. One day some lucky bastard is going to be so in love with you he won’t know what hit him.”

Ginni’s expression is skeptical. “No, they won’t.”

I shake him gently, just enough to make sure he’s listening. “Ginni, you are perfect. Dangerous and sexy and brilliant. There is no one like you in the entire world. Who wouldn’t want that? Who wouldn’t want someone so devoted, so creative, so completely themselves?”

“You.”

The single word is delivered with such quiet brutality that it stops my heart for several beats and tilts the very universe.

“You don’t want me,” he continues when I don’t respond.

We stare at each other across the small distance between us, and I can see years of rejection and disappointment in his eyes. Every cruel word from his family, every person who treated him like something shameful, every moment of being told he was too different, too impossible to love.

“I don’t blame you,” he adds softly. “I’m too much. I’m trouble and I’m crazy and I kidnapped you. Of course you don’t want me. No one in their right mind would.”

Something breaks open in my chest at the resigned acceptance in his voice. This beautiful, brilliant boy who thinks he’s unlovable because everyone who was supposed to protect him told him so.

“One day,” I say gently, stroking my thumb across his cheekbone, “someone is going to see you and their heart will just... stop. And they’ll think, ‘That one. That boy is the one. He’s absolutely insane, but he’s mine.’”

Ginni’s eyes fill with tears, but he shakes his head. “No they won’t. They’ll be scared, and they’ll run away. Just like you would if you weren’t

chained to this bed.”

“Then they’re fucking stupid,” I snarl, sudden fury blazing through me at the thought of anyone not seeing Ginni’s worth. “Blind, idiotic cowards who don’t deserve you anyway.”

“Are you stupid?” he asks softly, gently.

As if he knows I am, and he is resigning himself to a lifetime of unrequited yearning while I blunder around wasting my life and being an idiot.

The question hangs in the air between us, simple and devastating and absolutely loaded with everything I’m not sure I can face.

Am I stupid? Stupid for not wanting this beautiful, dangerous boy who’s turned my life upside down? Stupid for not seeing his worth like I just raged about?

A funny feeling spreads through my chest, warm and terrifying and undeniable. Recognition, maybe. Or acceptance of something I’ve been fighting against forever.

“I think I might be,” I admit quietly, and the words feel like jumping off a cliff. “I think I might be very stupid.”

Ginni’s eyes widen, searching my face like he’s trying to determine if I’m lying or just being kind. What he sees there makes his breath catch, makes him lean into my touch like a flower turning toward sunlight.

“Really?” he whispers.

“Really,” I say.

The smile that breaks across his face is like sunrise after the longest night, radiant and beautiful.

My heart thumps in my chest, a hollow feeling, deep and heavy. As if it is settling into a new rhythm. A new reason to beat.

Is it possible to stop being stupid?

I don’t know. All I do know is that in this raw, honest and vulnerable moment... I want to try.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

GINNI

This is perfect. Absolutely, utterly perfect.

I microscopically adjust the lap tray one more time, making sure everything is positioned just so. The white linen cloth drapes elegantly over the sides, the crystal wine glasses catch the candlelight like captured stars, and the spaghetti bolognese is plated with the kind of artistic precision that would make a Michelin-starred chef weep with envy.

Carlo is sitting up properly for the first time in days, his restraints loosened enough to allow him full use of his hands and arms. I know it's a risk, that he could try something, but after this afternoon I think we've moved past that particular concern. The chains are still there, still secure, but there's enough slack now for him to eat like a civilized person instead of being fed like a child.

I miss the intimacy of feeding him, if I'm being honest. The way he would open his mouth for me, trusting and compliant, the soft sounds of appreciation he'd make when I got the flavors just right. But this is different, special in its own way. More like a real dinner date, the kind of romantic evening I've dreamed about for years.

The projector above us displays a perfect Parisian evening, complete with the Eiffel Tower twinkling in the distance and couples strolling hand in hand along the Seine. The artificial starlight mingles with the glow from the dozen candles I've placed around the room, creating an atmosphere that's

pure romance. If I close my eyes and listen carefully, I can almost hear accordion music drifting on the evening air.

Earlier today, Carlo had a breakthrough. He admitted he was stupid for denying his love for me, and now we are having dinner in Paris. Our honeymoon really is turning out to be spectacular. I can't wait to tell our grandchildren all about it every Christmas. They will groan and pretend they think it's boring, but secretly they will cherish it. A tale of true love, to inspire them to find their own special person.

"This is incredible," Carlo says, twirling another forkful of pasta with the kind of focused concentration that tells me he's genuinely enjoying the meal. "The sauce is perfect. How long did it take you to make this?"

"About four hours," I admit, unable to keep the pride out of my voice. "I started the base this morning with real San Marzano tomatoes, then added the meat and let it simmer all afternoon. My nonna's recipe, but I added my own touches. A splash of aged balsamic, some fresh basil from the herb garden upstairs, and just a hint of dark chocolate to deepen the flavor."

Carlo makes an appreciative sound that goes straight to my heart. There's something so satisfying about cooking for someone who truly appreciates the effort, who understands that food is love made visible and tangible.

"And this bread," he continues, tearing off another piece of the crusty sourdough I baked yesterday. "Where did you learn to bake like this?"

"YouTube, mostly," I laugh, delighted by his obvious enjoyment. "And a lot of trial and error. I wanted to be able to make everything you love from scratch, not just order it from restaurants or buy it pre-made. This loaf took me six attempts to get right, but I think it was worth it."

"Definitely worth it." He reaches for his wineglass, taking a sip of the Burgundy Pinot Noir I selected from the cellar. His expression shifts to something approaching awe as the complex flavors hit his palate. "Christ, this is excellent. This is really, really good wine. Where did you get this?"

I can't help the mischievous smile that spreads across my face. "I stole it from my father's wine cellar. It was in the safe, along with some other bottles he was saving for special occasions."

Carlo goes completely still, his fork halfway to his mouth. Then he starts coughing, nearly choking on his spaghetti as my words sink in.

"Ginni!" he gasps when he finally catches his breath. "This could cost hundreds of thousands of pounds! Your father is going to notice it's missing!"

I shrug. "You're worth it, my love. Besides, Papa never drinks the really good stuff anyway. He just likes having it to show off to his business associates. Most of those bottles have been sitting there for years, gathering dust."

"And if he does notice?" Carlo asks, though there's something almost fond in his voice now, like he's talking to a particularly reckless child who's just admitted to stealing cookies.

"Then I'll tell him I drank it to celebrate my new life with my soulmate," I say simply, taking a delicate sip of the wine myself. The flavors are extraordinary, complex and layered with hints of cherry and tobacco and earth. "Some things are worth any amount of trouble, don't you think?"

Carlo stares at me across the candlelit space between us, something soft and complicated flickering in his dark eyes. For a moment, the basement fades away entirely. The restraints, the circumstances that brought us here, the complicated reality of our situation all disappear. There's just us, sharing a perfect meal by candlelight, the warm glow making everything feel golden and magical.

This is what I've always wanted. Not the kidnapping, not the chains, just this. A quiet evening with the man I love, talking and laughing over good food and excellent wine. The kind of simple domestic happiness that other people take for granted but has always felt impossibly out of reach for someone like me.

But then something flickers at the edges of my vision. A flutter of uncertainty, like a candle flame disturbed by an unexpected breeze.

Carlo isn't here willingly. He's my captive, not my loving husband. This isn't a romantic dinner date, it's just another day in his captivity. The wine was stolen, the setting is artificial, and none of this is real no matter how desperately I want it to be.

The image stutters and jumps like a broken film reel. One moment I see my loving husband, learning to accept the wonderful truth between us, his eyes soft with affection as he savors the meal I've prepared with such care. The next moment I see my unwilling captive, playing along with my delusions because he has no choice, probably planning his escape the moment my guard drops.

Which one is real? Which Carlo am I looking at right now?

The uncertainty makes me dizzy, makes the candlelight seem too bright and the artificial Paris skyline feel oppressive rather than romantic. My

hands start to shake, just slightly, and I have to set down my wine glass before I drop it.

Focus, I tell myself. Send the bad thoughts away. This is real. This is good. This is what we both want, even if he's not quite ready to admit it yet.

But the doubts keep creeping in, insidious and persistent. What if I'm wrong? What if this afternoon's breakthrough was just him telling me what I wanted to hear? What if he's still planning to leave the moment he gets the chance?

The room starts to feel smaller, the walls pressing in despite the projected Parisian vista. My breathing becomes shallow, rapid, the kind of panicked gulping that never brings enough air to my lungs.

“Ginni?”

The voice seems to come from very far away, even though I know he's sitting right across from me. I blink hard, trying to clear the static from my vision, trying to make sense of the concerned expression on Carlo's face.

“Ginni, where did you go?”

There are fingers against my cheek, warm and gentle and completely unexpected. Carlo is leaning forward as much as his restraints allow, his hand cupping my face with a tenderness that makes my chest ache.

“Nowhere,” I manage to say, though my voice sounds strange even to my own ears. “I'm right here.”

“You looked like you were somewhere else entirely,” he says softly, his thumb stroking across my cheekbone in a gesture so caring it makes tears prick at my eyes. “Somewhere not very nice.”

I lean into his touch without thinking, starved for this kind of gentle contact. No one has ever touched me just to comfort me. No one has ever cared enough to notice when I was struggling.

“I'm okay,” I whisper, though we both know it's not entirely true. “Just thinking too much.”

“About what?”

How can I explain the war going on in my head? The constant battle between hope and despair, between the fantasy I've constructed and the harsh reality that keeps trying to intrude? How do I tell him that sometimes I can't tell the difference between what's real and what I desperately want to be real?

“Nothing important,” I lie, because the truth is too complicated, too frightening to put into words.

Carlo studies my face for a long moment, those dark eyes seeing far more than I'm comfortable with. But then he smiles, a genuine expression that transforms his entire face.

"I'm glad you're back, Menace," he says, with such casual affection that my heart nearly stops beating entirely.

Menace. He called me Menace. Not Ginni, not Giovanni, but something that is clearly an endearment. Something that acknowledges all that I am while somehow making it sound fond rather than accusatory. He's referred to me as a little menace before, but this is different. This is Carlo bestowing a pet name on me of his own free will.

I melt. Actually, physically melt into a puddle of pure happiness, my earlier anxiety evaporating like mist in sunlight. This is real. This moment, this man, this impossible tenderness in his voice when he looks at me.

"Menace?" I breathe, unable to keep the wonder out of my voice.

"That's what you are," he says with another one of those devastating grins. "An absolute menace."

Carlo releases my face and returns to his meal, acting like he hasn't just turned my entire world upside down with a single word. But I can see the satisfaction in his expression, the way his mouth curves slightly at the corners like he knows exactly what effect he's having on me.

I finish my own pasta in a haze of contentment, barely tasting the food that I spent hours preparing. All my attention is focused on Carlo, on the way the candlelight plays across his features, on the satisfied sounds he makes as he enjoys the meal, on the casual intimacy of sharing this space with him.

This is what happiness feels like, I realize. Not the manic energy that used to drive me, not the desperate planning and scheming and hoping. Just this quiet satisfaction, this sense of rightness, this feeling that everything in the world has finally aligned exactly as it should be.

When the last bite is gone and the wine glasses are empty, I practically bounce to my feet, energy and excitement coursing through me like electricity.

"Time to clean up!" I announce, already gathering plates and silverware with quick, efficient movements. "And then we're having Netflix and chill."

Carlo raises an eyebrow at my terminology, but there's amusement in his expression rather than concern. "Netflix and chill?"

“Well, not Netflix exactly,” I admit, balancing the tray carefully as I prepare to take it to the kitchen. “But we have the projector and an extensive collection of romantic comedies. Same principle.”

I practically skip out of the room, my heart light and my spirits soaring. Everything feels possible now, everything feels right. Carlo called me his menace, and that single word has rewritten my entire understanding of what we could be together.

By the time I return, I’ve changed into a silk robe in the exact shade of blue as my eyes. It’s loose and flowing, designed to hint rather than reveal, elegant rather than obvious. The kind of thing that says I’m confident in my own skin without being desperate for attention.

I redirect the projector toward the wall facing the bed, scrolling through my carefully curated collection until I find the perfect film. Something light and romantic, with just enough humor to keep things from getting too intense. The kind of movie that’s designed to be background noise for more interesting activities.

“What are we watching?” Carlo asks, settling back against the pillows with obvious contentment.

“You’ll see,” I say mysteriously, pressing play before moving toward the bed with deliberate grace.

The opening credits begin to roll as I settle myself between Carlo’s spread legs, my back against his chest, his body warm and solid behind me. He lets out a soft grunt of surprise at being used as a backrest, but he doesn’t object or try to push me away. He simply accepts it.

I let out a sigh of deep satisfaction, feeling more relaxed and happy than I have in years. It seems as if a miracle is happening and for the first time ever, reality is catching up with my dreams. Soon, there will be no difference between the two.

And I’ll be the happiest boy in the world.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

GINNI

I'm so relaxed, I could fall asleep. Carlo's body heat is seeping into me. His muscles are firm against my back. The film is flowing along with its familiarity. I've seen it so many times I could recite it in my sleep.

But most of all, the thing that is filling me with profound joy, is the sheer miracle of not being alone. I have company. I'm being held.

The touch of another living being is a holy experience. Spiritual in its intensity. I never want to go without it again. And now I have Carlo, I don't have to. He won't let me. He really is the best man in the world.

Right now, he is engrossed in the film. His body is at ease, but there is an undercurrent of sharp focus. He is enjoying himself and I'm so proud of that. The mafia world that I was born into, and that he clawed his way to the top of, is rife with toxic masculinity. He has probably never seen a romance film before. He wouldn't have allowed himself to. It's another new experience I am gifting him with.

Idly, his hand runs over my chest. The chains are still long from our perfect dinner, allowing him nearly an unhindered range of movement. He can't leave the bed, but he can do pretty much anything else that he wants to do.

It's an absentminded caress. The movie has carried his mind far away, leaving his body behind. His body that clearly wishes to touch me. His

instincts are not hampered by denial or ingrained, mistaken beliefs. His body knows the truth.

Carlo's large, strong hand glides over the silk of my robe. The thin material does nothing to conceal his touch, instead it enhances it. Adding a liquid smoothness to his heat and strength.

I can ignore the clank of the chains. I can disregard the weight of them sliding over my chest as they follow the trail Carlo is scorching into me. His touch is wonderful enough to banish everything else to the far corners of my mind.

His palm brushes over my nipple. I shiver and gasp. Electricity shooting all over me.

Carlo's hand freezes right over my sternum. Stopping motionless and still. His attention snaps away from the romance playing out on the wall.

Damnit. I was hoping he wouldn't realize what he was doing. At least, not for a while. I was looking forward to savoring this for a bit longer.

I wish I had been capable of keeping still and silent, but his touch is incredible. I'm powerless to resist the magic he wields.

“Do you like that?” Carlo says, his voice thick.

Wordlessly, I nod.

He inhales sharply. Silently, but I'm leaning on his chest, so I feel it. It rocks my entire body. Lifts me up and down. I'm a little boat caught on the waves of his sea.

“Are they... sensitive like a girl's? Mine aren't.”

His cautious question swells my heart. My love has so much to learn.

Gently, I place my fingers just below his cuffs. I slide my robe open with my other hand, and move his hand to my nipple. “Why don't you find out?”

His breath stutters. Time holds her breath in empathy. And then... then, Carlo moves. His thumb rolls my peaked bud.

I moan and fight to stay still. Very still. I can't break this spell. Carlo is choosing to touch me of his own free will. It's a big step. A brave one for a man as closeted as he is.

He takes my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. He pinches gently. Exploring. Experimenting. Learning and discovering.

My body undulates helplessly. My nipples are little buttons of pleasure, and Carlo is turning them on.

“Your nipples are the exact same shade of pink as your hole,” he whispers in a tone of awe.

I'm not sure he intended to say that out loud, but I'm so glad he did. It's a gift to treasure forever. Proof he is no longer fighting his attraction to me quite as hard as he used to.

It's also interesting information. I never knew that before. I've never really examined my hole. The most I've looked is to check if the hair removal cream has done its job. It never crossed my mind to note its color, let alone compare it to my nipples.

Now Carlo has done all that for me. Now I know I match, and that is very pleasing. It's cute and attractive, and my husband finds it sexy. It's the best news ever.

His hand flicks and tugs. I whimper and gasp. My head falls back and my eyes flutter closed. His free hand moves and claims my neglected nipple. Now he is working both of them. Two little buzzers of pleasure lighting me up.

My cock is swelling and swelling. I'm wriggling. My hips are writhing.

Suddenly, hot, gentle lips suckle on the delicate skin of my neck, and I see stars. My loud keening sound of pure ecstasy echoes around and around the basement.

When Carlo took control with the butt plug, I didn't get to experience the joy of his touch directly. His caress was via the proxy of the vibrating butt plug. And afterwards, when I rode him at his command, it was my movements that were driving things.

This, this is entirely different. This is Carlo touching me directly, with his own hands. This is the first time his movements have been controlling everything and allowing me to bask in the golden glow of his attentions. It's like dying and going to heaven. Beyond perfect. Sacred and immaculate.

His lips kiss me. His clever hands play with my nipples. My body dances for him. Pleasure and rapture spark and burn. My mind is peaceful. No twisting, twirling, spinning thoughts. There is only Carlo.

His right hand leaves my nipple. I look down in dismay. My nipple is swollen and engorged. Puffy and dark. Several sizes larger than usual.

My robe has fallen all the way open. I'm naked for my husband's gaze. His hand has drifted down. It's resting on my stomach. Right by my hard and leaking cock.

His neck kisses have stopped. His tugs on my left nipple have become languid. He is distracted. Consumed by the temptation to touch my cock.

My lungs lock. My heart races. Touching my nipples was a big step, this is an enormous one. My love has been in denial of his sexuality since puberty first hit him. Touching his first dick is a big deal.

Of course, it's going to be the first and only cock, apart from his own, that he ever touches. Because if anyone tries anything, well, they won't have a dick for much longer. I'll slice it off and keep it in a jar. Carlo is mine. The world will learn to respect this.

I force my lungs to move. I need to calm down. The only person Carlo is thinking about touching right now is me. Everything is fine. Everything is wonderful.

I let out a pleasure-drunk moan and allow my hips to lift beseechingly. If my love needs a little encouragement, then my love will get a little encouragement. Anything he wants. Anything he needs. If it is within my power, it is his.

Carlo groans. He moves. His large, strong, battle-scarred hand wraps around my modest cock.

The noise that pours out of my soul is deeply unholy. My hips buck. My blood fizzes and turns into lightning.

Carlo kisses my neck. He caresses my tender nipple. His hand glides reverently up and down my cock.

My eyes roll back. I'm catapulted into a screaming, full-body orgasm that wipes out all my senses until the only thing that's left is bliss.

Eons later, I find myself a panting, sticky mess still sprawled against Carlo's chest. I can feel his very firm erection pressing against me. Happiness is buzzing in my ears. Louder than a swarm of bees.

“Fuck. I'm sorry, Ginni. I shouldn't have done that.”

I pout. Do I really have to pull myself out of my happy daze to deal with this? “Why not?”

Carlo sucks in a pained breath. “Because you are a very vulnerable young man. Taking advantage of you is a terrible thing to do. The... the plug thing was wrong too.”

Oh my poor, honorable love. His morals have got him all twisted up and confused. It's understandable, because he is fundamentally such a decent man. It's part of his charm and a big reason why I love him so much.

I sigh happily. “I am your wife. And you were doing so well in realizing that. But I suppose a little relapse now and then is to be expected.”

I pull myself up and turn around to face him, straddling his lap. He smells wonderful. All aroused and manly.

I reach for his hard cock. I'd be a terrible wife if I left him in this state.

My body flinches as strong fingers wrap around my wrist. I blink and then relax. I forgot for a moment that Carlo's chains are super slack at the moment.

I stare into my husband's eyes.

"No," he says sternly.

"No?" I repeat. He doesn't want a lovely handjob? Am I hearing him correctly?

"No," he repeats.

His eyes are smoldering, and there is a stubborn set to his jaw. There is no talking to him when he gets like this.

"Okay," I sigh happily. It's no big deal. There will be plenty of other times to play with his magnificent cock in our glorious future.

Carlo blinks. His eyes widen. His dark eyebrows lift.

"You're listening to me?"

He sounds so surprised. My silly love. "Of course I'm going to obey my husband! I take my wedding vows very seriously."

Carlo's eyebrows lift even higher. He looks completely taken aback. Shocked and incredulous. I smile and wait for him to wrap his head around the truth.

After a while, he just shakes his head slowly, as if he is all out of words. He lifts his cuffed hands and rattles the chains for emphasis. Making his point very clearly.

I giggle, giddy with delight. "Once you have adjusted, of course."

Then I clap my hands together in prayer, and an excited wriggle takes over my body, and makes Carlo grunt.

"I can't wait!" I exclaim.

And I really can't. The future I have always longed for is nearly here. So close I can feel its breath on my shoulder.

All of our tomorrows are going to be golden. It is exactly what we deserve.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CARLO

My body is still humming with the memory of Ginni whimpering and gasping in my arms. Now he is curled against my side like always, using my chest as his pillow, but everything feels different now. More intimate. More real.

I shouldn't have done it. I should not have touched him. I know that. Ginni is beautiful and enticing and he worships me, but he quite literally is not in his right mind. He believes with his whole heart and soul that he wants me, but surely he can't know what he wants.

Taking advantage of him proves that I'm the monster, despite the fact that he abducted me.

But out of all the terrible things I've ever done, it's the one I regret the least.

Last night was... Cristo, I don't even have words for what it was. Intense doesn't begin to cover it. The way Ginni responded to me, the trust he showed, the vulnerability he offered up like a gift. And when I told him to stop, he listened. Actually listened, without argument or manipulation or sulking.

There's hope for my beautiful menace after all.

And that's exactly the problem, isn't it? The fact that I'm thinking of him as mine. The fact that last night felt less like captivity and more like... love.

The fact that I'm starting to plan ways I can keep him. Now, when I think of escaping, I'm imagining taking him with me. I don't like being a prisoner. Being kept is humiliating. But Ginni in *my* bed? That is something I can get fully on board with.

I stare up at the artificial sunrise painting the ceiling above us and try to make sense of what's happening in my head. Is this Stockholm syndrome? Am I developing feelings for my captor because my brain is trying to cope with an impossible situation? Or are these emotions real, based on genuine connection and compatibility?

The uncertainty is maddening. How can I trust anything I feel in this basement? How can I know if what's growing between us is authentic when the entire foundation is built on coercion and control?

I look down at Ginni's sleeping face, peaceful and unguarded, and something fierce and protective rises in my chest. Whatever's happening between us, whatever name you put on it, one thing is absolutely clear. This boy needs to be protected. From his family, from the world, from his own self-destructive impulses.

Getting him away from the Torrini family isn't about us. It's about basic human decency. No one should have to live the way Ginni has, hidden away like a shameful secret, subjected to conversion therapy for the crime of being himself. He deserves better. He deserves safety and acceptance and the chance to be exactly who he is without apology.

So that's my focus. Not figuring out my feelings, not analyzing the psychology of captivity, but planning how to get Ginni somewhere safe. Somewhere his family can't hurt him anymore.

The obvious choice would be away from London, somewhere rural and away from the reach of traditional mafia families. Maybe Scotland, somewhere remote where he could pursue his art without interference. I have money, connections, resources. I could set him up with a new identity if necessary, make sure he never has to depend on family approval again.

Would the Torrinis care? Would they be grateful? Or would they take it as an insult? Frame it as me stealing their youngest son?

As for Ginni himself, would he go willingly? Or would he see it as another rejection, another person trying to get rid of him? The logistics are complicated enough without factoring in Ginni's particular brand of emotional instability.

Maybe I could frame it as a fresh start for both of us. Tell him I was coming too. A chance to build something together, away from the expectations and prejudices of our families. It wouldn't exactly be a lie, if these feelings turn out to be real rather than circumstantial.

The thought of leaving London, leaving everything I've built, should terrify me. But lying here with Ginni warm and trusting against my chest, it doesn't feel like sacrifice. It feels like possibility.

Ginni stirs against me, making a soft sound that's half sigh, half purr. His eyes flutter open, focusing on my face with immediate awareness. No gradual awakening for my menace. He goes from sleep to complete alertness in seconds, a predator that never truly rests.

"Good morning, my love," he says softly, the endearment falling from his lips with such natural affection that my chest tightens.

"Morning," I reply, brushing a strand of hair away from his face. "Sleep well?"

"Perfectly." He stretches like a cat, all fluid grace and unconscious sensuality. "Last night was..."

"Amazing," I finish, because it was. Whatever else might be complicated about this situation, that part is a simple truth.

Ginni's smile could power half of London. "I was going to say life-changing, but amazing works too."

He starts to sit up, probably planning to begin his usual morning routine of coffee and elaborate breakfast preparation, when everything goes dark.

The projector dies. The gentle hum of the air conditioning stops. Even the small LED lights in the recesses go black. We're plunged into complete darkness, the kind of absolute black you only get in windowless underground rooms.

"What..." Ginni's voice is small, confused, already edged with panic.

I can hear his breathing change, becoming rapid and shallow. In the space between one heartbeat and the next, my confident, controlling captor has become a frightened boy in the dark.

"It's just a power cut," I say calmly, my voice loud in the silence. "Probably a blown fuse or a tripped circuit. Nothing serious."

"But I didn't... I don't know how to..." Ginni's voice cracks, and I can hear him moving in the darkness, probably wrapping his arms around himself. "I didn't plan for this. I don't know what to do."

The desperation in his voice triggers every protective instinct I have. This isn't the calculating mastermind who planned my abduction. This is a twenty-one-year-old boy who's suddenly out of his depth, lost and scared and looking for someone to take charge.

"Ginni, listen to me," I say firmly, injecting authority into my voice. "You're going to be fine. We're going to fix this together. Can you feel around for a candle? They are still all over the place from dinner."

I hear rustling, movement in the darkness as he follows my instructions. "Yes, I've found one on the nightstand."

"Good. Now the matches. They were on the nightstand too."

More fumbling, then the blessed sound of a match striking. Light flares in the darkness, warm and golden and infinitely reassuring. Ginni's face appears in the glow, pale and worried but no longer panicked.

"There," I say approvingly. "Much better. Now we can see what we're doing."

"The power," Ginni says, his voice still shaky. "How do we get it back?"

"Circuit breaker probably tripped. Do you know where the electrical panel is?"

He nods, then seems to realize I can't see the gesture clearly. "In the utility room. But I don't know how to... I've never..."

His voice trails off, and in the candlelight I can see his hands shaking. He's completely out of his element, all his careful planning useless in the face of something as mundane as a blown fuse. The competent, dangerous boy who's been managing every detail of my captivity has dissolved into someone who has been thrown out of their depth.

"That's okay," I tell him gently. "I do. But I'll need my hands free to work on it."

The silence stretches between us, heavy with implication. We both know what I'm asking for. Freedom, even temporarily. The chance to fix this problem because he can't.

Ginni looks at me for a long moment, fear and trust warring in his expression. Then he reaches under the bed with trembling fingers and produces the key to my restraints.

"Fix it," he whispers, his eyes bright with unshed tears. "Please. Fix everything."

There's so much more than electrical problems in that request. Fix the power, fix his fear, fix the mess that's his life, fix the broken boy who has

never been loved.

“I will,” I promise, and I mean it.

He unlocks the cuffs with careful precision, his hands still shaking slightly. The moment my wrists are free, I could overpower him. We both know it. He’s small, I’m trained in violence, and he’s holding nothing more threatening than a candle.

But I simply sit up and stretch my arms, working circulation back into my wrists with matter-of-fact efficiency.

He diligently frees my ankles and then looks up at me expectantly. Biting his bottom lip in a way that is utterly adorable.

“Lead the way,” I tell him.

He takes me straight there, candle held steadily. A no-nonsense edge to his stride. Calm, now that he has instructions to follow.

I follow behind him, utterly naked, and wonder why I don’t feel absurd.

The utility room is small and cluttered, filled with the mechanical guts of the building’s systems. Ginni holds the candle high, casting dancing shadows on the walls as I locate the electrical panel.

There is a dent in the fascia that’s making it difficult to open. Ginni taps me on the shoulder with a flathead screwdriver. I take it and prise the panel open.

It’s a simple fix, as I suspected. One of the main breakers has tripped, probably overloaded by all the electronics Ginni has running down here.

“Hold the light steady,” I instruct, and he moves closer, his body warm against my side as he tries to illuminate the panel properly.

When the power flickers back on, Ginni’s sigh of relief is profound.

“Thank you,” he breathes, and there’s such genuine gratitude in his voice that my chest tightens. I’m so glad I could help.

I hide my pleased grin by fiddling with the fascia and getting it neatly back in place. Then I turn around and find myself looking down the business end of a cattle prod.

When the fuck did he get that? I swear this boy should be an assassin. His ability to move silently is preternatural. While my inability to keep my guard up is laughable. I gave Ginni my back. I should have known better. I did know better. But strangely, the betrayal doesn’t sting like it should.

Ginni’s holding the cattle prod with steady hands now, his composure fully restored along with the electricity. But there’s something almost apologetic in his expression, like he hates having to return to this dynamic.

“Thank you,” he says again, softer this time. “For fixing it. For... taking care of me.”

I nod, understanding flowing between us without words. He’s not ready. Not ready to trust that I won’t run, not ready to believe that I might actually want to stay, not ready to let go of the control that makes him feel safe. And I’m not ready either, not ready to make promises I might not be able to keep, not ready to declare feelings I can’t fully trust.

So I walk back to the bedroom and settle on the bed, extending my wrists for the restraints without being asked. Ginni follows, securing the cuffs with the same careful precision he used to remove them.

“Better?” I ask, and he nods, visibly relaxing as the familiar dynamic is restored.

But something has shifted between us. In those few minutes of crisis, we glimpsed what we could be together when the artificial barriers are stripped away. Partners. Equals. A team.

And now we both know it’s possible.

Ginni curls against my side, using my chest as his pillow. He’s locked the cuffs back onto my wrists, but he’s let the chains spool out to the longest they have ever been. So I wrap my arms around him. He sighs contentedly, the crisis already fading into memory.

“I should have planned better,” he murmurs against my skin. “I should have anticipated power problems.”

“You can’t plan for everything,” I tell him gently. “But you handled it well. You asked for help when you needed it.”

“I don’t like not knowing what to do,” he admits. “I don’t like feeling... helpless.”

“Nobody does. But sometimes letting someone else take charge isn’t weakness. Sometimes it’s wisdom.”

He’s quiet for a long moment, processing this. “Would you have fixed it even if I hadn’t been upset? Even if I’d just asked?”

The question is so soft I almost miss it, but the vulnerability underneath is impossible to ignore.

“Yes,” I tell him honestly. “I’d fix anything for you, Ginni. Electrical problems, family problems, whatever you need.”

He lifts his head to look at me, those blue eyes searching my face for deception and finding none.

“Really?”

“Really.”

The smile that breaks across his face is worth every moment of confusion and moral complexity this situation has created. And lying here with him warm and trusting in my arms, I realize I’m not confused about one thing at all.

Whatever happens between us, wherever this leads, Ginni is never going back to this basement of his family’s shame. Not if I have anything to say about it.

One way or another, I’m getting my menace somewhere safe.

Even if it means giving up everything I’ve built to do it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

GINNI

The afternoon light from the projector bathes us in golden warmth, a perfect recreation of a Tuscan sunset that makes everything look like a painting come to life. Jazz music drifts through the room, something smooth and sophisticated that Carlo chose from my collection. Miles Davis, I think, though I'm too absorbed in my work to pay proper attention to the melody.

Putting the finishing touches on what might be the most important painting I've ever created, might just be the very best way to spend an afternoon.

Carlo is reclining against the pillows, completely relaxed, one arm behind his head in a pose that shows off the elegant line of his torso and the play of light across his olive skin. He's been incredibly patient, holding the position for over an hour without complaint, occasionally shifting when I tell him it's safe to move.

“Tell me about the first time you noticed I wasn’t just your best friend’s annoying little brother, that I was an adult.” I say softly, adding a highlight to capture the way the artificial sunlight catches on his collarbone. “Really noticed me, not just family dinner politeness. I know the first moment you wanted me was when I was making hot chocolate, but there must have been a shift before then, when you realized I was a person.”

Carlo's mouth curves into a small smile, the exact expression I've been trying to capture on canvas. "You were seventeen, I think. At Christmas dinner. You were wearing this burgundy velvet jacket that was completely inappropriate for a family meal but somehow looked perfect on you."

"I remember that jacket," I laugh, my brush moving with practiced precision. "Papa hated it. Said I looked like a Victorian courtesan."

"You looked beautiful," Carlo says simply. "But it wasn't the jacket that caught my attention. It was the way you argued with your uncle about art restoration techniques. You knew more about fourteenth-century fresco methods than a man with three degrees in art history."

The memory makes me warm all over. I'd been so nervous that night, desperate to make an impression, terrified of saying something wrong and embarrassing myself in front of Carlo. To know that he was actually listening, that he was impressed rather than annoyed is far beyond my wildest dreams.

"You asked me about my studies afterward," I continue, mixing a slightly darker shade for the shadows beneath his jaw. "No one ever asked about my studies. They usually just tried to change the subject when I started talking about art."

"Because they were idiots," Carlo says with casual certainty. "Anyone with half a brain could see how passionate you were about it. How much you knew."

"I went to bed that night thinking you might actually like me," I admit, then immediately flush at how pathetic that sounds. "Not romantically, obviously. But as a person. Someone worth talking to."

"I did like you. I always liked you, Ginni. Even when you were being an insufferable know-it-all about art techniques."

I pause in my painting, looking at him over the canvas. "Really?"

"Really. You were this brilliant, beautiful boy who lit up whenever someone showed genuine interest in the things you cared about. How could I not like you?"

The validation makes my chest tight with emotion. All those years of feeling invisible, of believing I was too much for people to tolerate, and Carlo had actually enjoyed my company. Had seen worth in the things that made my family roll their eyes and change the subject.

"I wish I'd known," I say softly, returning to the painting. "I spent so much time feeling sad about how everyone only put up with me out of

obligation.”

“Not me. Never me.”

The simple honesty in his voice makes me want to put down my brush and kiss him senseless, but I’m so close to finishing this piece. Just a few more details and it will be perfect, a visual record of this moment when everything feels possible between us.

“What about you?” Carlo asks. “When did you first think of me as more than just Marco’s friend?”

“Honestly? When I was sixteen. You came to Sunday dinner wearing this gray suit that made your eyes look like dark chocolate, and when you smiled at something Mama said, I literally forgot how to breathe.” I mix a warmer tone for his skin, trying to capture that golden quality the light gives him. “I spent the entire meal inventing reasons to ask you questions just so you’d look at me.”

“I remember that dinner. You asked me about fifteen different things. I thought you were just being friendly.”

“I was being desperately infatuated,” I correct with a laugh. “Though I’m pretty sure everyone else just thought I was being my usual overly talkative self.”

“You were perfect,” Carlo says, and the warmth in his voice makes my hand shake slightly as I add the final touches to his mouth. “Curious and engaged and so alive. You made that boring family dinner actually interesting.”

We fall into comfortable silence, the kind of easy companionship that feels like we’ve been together for years instead of days. The music swells around us, romantic and perfect, and I can see perfectly how this is our real life. This isn’t a fantasy, we’re married, and this is a taste of our future, living in our beautiful home, spending lazy afternoons creating together.

I’m adding the last few brushstrokes when Carlo’s phone rings.

The sound cuts through our peaceful bubble like a knife through silk. I freeze, brush halfway to the canvas, my heart immediately starting to race. Carlo’s expression shifts from relaxed contentment to sharp alertness in an instant.

Calls are for emergencies only.

I hurry over to the dresser where I keep Carlo’s phone. The caller ID makes my blood turn to ice water.

Dario Ajello.

Carlo's boss. The heir to one of the most powerful crime families in London. The kind of man who doesn't call for social chats, who expects immediate answers when he reaches out. If Carlo doesn't answer, Dario will think something has happened to him...

Images flash through my mind with horrifying clarity. Armed men attacking the Russians, rival families, whoever they decide to pin Carlo's disappearance on. A war between crime empires, blood spilled because of my selfish desires. People dying because I couldn't bear to let Carlo go.

Dazedly, I realize I've drifted over to Carlo. Subconsciously seeking safety. My port in any storm. The one person in the world who always makes everything better.

Numbly, I hold up the phone so he can see the screen. Our eyes meet across the small distance between us, and I can see the same understanding reflected back at me. This is it. This is how it ends.

"Ginni," Carlo says softly, his voice carefully controlled. "I need to answer this."

My carefully constructed paradise is about to come crashing down, and there's nothing I can do to stop it. Carlo will answer the phone, and within hours this beautiful dream will be over.

But I can't let innocent people die because of my choices. Whatever the cost to my own happiness, I can't be responsible for starting a war.

With my heart hammering against my ribs so hard I'm surprised it doesn't shatter, I answer and put the call on speaker.

"Everything alright, Boss?" Carlo says, his voice steady and professional despite the circumstances.

"Yes," Dario's familiar voice fills the room, warm and casual. "Just calling to let you know dinner's been canceled tonight."

My chest tightens with desperate fear. I checked Carlo's schedule obsessively before bringing him here. There was no dinner planned with Dario tonight. This is a test, a way for his boss to check on him without arousing suspicion if someone is listening. A simple code that tells Carlo to confirm his safety or signal for help. Some pre-arranged phrase or word that no one else knows.

Silent tears start streaming down my face as I stare at Carlo. This is it. Within hours, men will be breaking down the door. My beautiful, impossible love story will end in violence and blood, just like everything else in our world.

I don't know why I'm so upset. I always knew it could end this way. Either something like this, or my parents returning from holiday. Our time here in my basement love nest was always limited. There was always a chance it would be over before I managed to get Carlo to see sense and realize we are perfect for each other.

But all the logic in the world can't heal a breaking heart. And mine is breaking. I can feel it. Tearing in half. Destroying itself. I had one chance for love. One chance for happiness, and I've lost it.

Carlo will never be mine now, and my family are going to put me away in an institution. My life is over. My hope is crushed. I have nothing. Nothing and no one. And now I never will.

Carlo stares back at me, his dark eyes unreadable. I can see him thinking, calculating, making the choice that will determine both our futures. His lips part slightly, and I brace myself for the words that will destroy everything.

He licks his lips and sighs, a sound that seems to come from somewhere deep in his chest.

"Tell Molly he owes me a tiramisu," Carlo says.

The casual fondness in his voice freezes my mind completely. His tone was warm, relaxed and at ease. It clearly was the code for saying everything is fine.

It is so utterly and completely different from what I was bracing for, that for a long moment I can't even begin to process it. There are no thoughts in my head. Only static.

Dario chuckles on the other end of the line. "You've just won me a hundred pounds. Molly and Dante both bet you'd been kidnapped and weren't really taking time off. I told them you were probably just lying on a beach somewhere eating too much and forgetting the rest of us existed."

"Smart money," Carlo laughs, and the sound is so natural, so perfectly him that I can barely believe this is happening. "Sorry to disappoint them, but I'm exactly where I want to be."

"Good for you. Enjoy your break, you've earned it. See you when you get back."

The line goes dead, leaving us in silence that seems to ring with possibility.

I stare at Carlo, hardly daring to breathe. He had a chance to leave, to end this, to return to his normal life. Dario was right there, ready to send help, ready to rescue him from his obviously deranged captor.

And he chose me.

The tears flowing down my face now are pure joy, overwhelming relief mixed with love so intense it feels like it might actually kill me. Without thinking, I launch myself across the space between us, landing on the bed with enough force to make the mattress bounce. Paint-covered hands and all, I grab Carlo's face and kiss him with everything I have.

He's startled for just a moment, probably not expecting to suddenly have an emotional, paint-covered artist launching themselves at him. But then his arms come around me, and he's kissing me back with equal intensity, his mouth moving against mine like he's trying to pour years of unspoken feelings into this single moment.

"You stayed," I whisper against his lips between kisses. "You could have left, but you stayed."

"I stayed," he agrees, his voice rough with emotion.

I'm probably getting paint all over both of us, but I don't care. Nothing matters except this moment, this choice, this handsome man who just gave up his freedom to keep me safe. Who looked into the face of escape and chose love instead.

When we finally break apart, both of us breathing hard, I can see paint smudged across his cheek and probably in his hair. He looks thoroughly debauched and absolutely perfect.

"The painting," I say suddenly, remembering my abandoned artwork.

"Can wait," Carlo says firmly, pulling me back down for another kiss. "We have more important things to do."

And as his hands tangle in my hair and his mouth claims mine again, I think that he's absolutely right. The painting captured a moment, but this... this is creating a future.

A future where Carlo Benedetti chose love over logic, where he picked his personal menace over his autonomy, where two people found something worth fighting for in each other's arms.

I couldn't have painted anything more perfect than this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

GINNI

The kiss grows deeper and deeper. It burns hotter and hotter. Carlo is pressing me close to him, so close it's like he is trying to meld us together. Combined with how deeply he is kissing me, he's clearly trying to reach my soul one way or another.

His hands run down my back, rubbing the silk of my very short robe against my skin. His hands reach my ass, slip under the thin material, and cover my bare ass. One cheek in each palm.

I gasp and arch into the touch.

Carlo pulls away from our kiss. "Want you."

My heart and cock both swell. Love and lust. A perfect symphony. The best combination in the universe, nothing goes together better, nothing at all.

"I douched earlier," I say.

Carlo's eyes darken.

"But I haven't opened or lubed."

One of Carlo's scorching hands leaves my ass cheek. He scrambles at the bedside table where I thoughtfully placed a bottle of lube.

I'm so glad I gave his chains so much slack. If this is what he does with his longer leash, then he definitely deserves it.

His other hand leaves my butt, and I whimper at the loss. My ass cheeks are cold now. Naked under the short robe in a way they weren't before his

touch.

Carlo smears two of his fingers with lube. I blink at the sight. Then I blink again, just to be sure. Why isn't he handing me the lube and telling me to get on with it?

He drops the bottle of lube and yanks me towards him for another kiss. My startled squeak is muffled. But then I melt into Carlo's kiss. He tastes divine. And the way he is taking control and plundering my mouth is exquisite. He is an exceptional kisser. I shouldn't be surprised. Carlo excels at everything he does because he is perfect.

I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back thoroughly. I hope I'm doing it right. Learning how to kiss was the hardest subject to find tutorials on. Everyone seems to think it should come naturally, be instinctual. And actually, judging by the way I'm turning into a puddle of goo in Carlo's arms and how hard his cock is, it seems they were right. Kissing my husband is as easy as breathing.

A lubed finger brushes over my hole. I whine into Carlo's mouth. My hips buck.

Carlo rumbles a sound of appreciation. His touch turns light, teasing. He is choosing to prolong this.

His finger goes around my rim. Around and around. Rubbing sparks into the sensitive flesh, while his lips never leave mine.

I cling on to him. I bounce, wriggle and gasp.

His finger changes direction. Swirling around and around the other way. Every lazy circle makes my skin even more sensitive. The sensations are growing and growing. The lube is hot now. Heated by our arousal. Wet, slick and oh so good.

Suddenly, I'm crying out, and my eyes are rolling back. Carlo's finger has slipped inside me. Penetrating and claiming. It's a taunt and a tease. Neither wide nor long enough for what I am craving. I need stretch. Burn. To be so full of Carlo that I can barely breathe.

His finger glides in and out of my hole. A cruel mockery of the fucking I'm yearning for. I rock my hips and try to make the most of the sensation. I kiss him with renewed fervor. A hungry pleading in my sloppy kiss.

I moan loudly as he eases a second finger inside me. That's better. Much better. But still nowhere near enough. My mind is still busy, still swirling and spinning. I want Carlo to make me forget everything. I need the peace I know he can give me.

This is nice though. It is certainly a breakthrough. Carlo is kissing me. I'm sitting on his lap and he is fingering me. He isn't trying to resist or fight. He is fully participating in what he wants. He is actively taking what he desires.

He has wanted me for years, I know he has. Showing him how good we are together, as well as how perfectly our bodies fit, was the right thing to do. It has shattered his denial. Crumpled his resolve. Now that he has tasted me, he can no longer go without. He knows exactly what he has been missing now, and he is never going to choose to miss it again.

A moan escapes me as Carlo spreads his fingers. Scissoring inside me. Opening me up. Getting me ready for his cock. I can't wait to take him. I want him deep and hard. For hours and hours. I want my husband to fuck me until I don't know my name and I can't walk.

I throw back my head and yell as a third finger stretches me. Oh god. Oh god. Oh god. That's much more like it. Yes. Yes. Yes.

"You love being filled, don't you? Little menace," Carlo growls, his voice thick with lust.

I lower my head to meet his dark eyes. "Only by you."

He grunts. The color on his cheeks deepens, and I swear I see flames ignite in his eyes.

He shoves his three broad fingers deeper into me. I gasp. My thighs tremble. My balls tighten. Oh fuck. I'm so close.

Everything stops. Carlo's fingers become motionless. Still stretching and stuffing me, but nothing else.

I whine and glare at him.

His eyes are so dark and wide, I can see myself reflected.

"You are coming on my cock and not before," he declares.

I pout, and thrust my hips. Oh that feels good. I can rock myself on his fingers like this and chase my peak.

Suddenly, a firm, strong hand is on my hip. Holding me still. I look down. Carlo has three fingers inside me and his other hand on my hip, stopping me from moving.

"On my cock, and not before," Carlo repeats sternly.

My eyes narrow. He is so bossy. I know he likes to take control. I should let him take the lead, but I'm burning with pent-up arousal and lust. My orgasm is so close, I can taste it. Hovering on the edge like this is torture, and I'm too impatient.

With a hiss, I stand up and lift myself off his fingers. I move away from his lap and stand beside the bed instead.

Carlo blinks at me in surprise and confusion.

Before he can gather his thoughts, I act. I move to the end of the bed, grab his ankles and yank him down. He yelps as he finds himself flat on his back.

I jump back onto the bed, and kneel while straddling his waist. He stares up at me with a dazed expression.

I smile sweetly as I wrap my fingers around the base of his cock and line it up to my hole. He opens his mouth to say something, but his unspoken words turn into a gurgling cry as I sink down onto him.

Oh that's better. He is sliding in so easily because he opened me up so well. This is bliss. His hot, silken heat is burrowing into me.

My ass cheeks reach his hipbones, and I let out a happy sigh. He said I couldn't cum until I was on his cock, well now I'm on his cock.

I breathe slowly and carefully. My body needs time to stretch around the intrusion. My guts literally need to rearrange to make room for him. His cock has to carve a passage within me.

One breath, two breaths, three breaths. Carlo's eyes are closed, his lips parted. His features are twisted into the shape of ecstasy. And I haven't even begun yet.

Oh fuck it. I can't wait anymore.

Slowly, I start to move. A gracefull dance of my hips. An undulation of my body. A languid glide up, and a sensual slide down.

Carlo groans. A deep sound of carnal pleasure. One that makes my toes curl.

I repeat my slow, gentle movements. His cock feels so good inside me. I can feel it nudging at my flesh. Rubbing over my tender rim.

“Faster,” Carlo pants, almost sounding like he is in pain.

Faster? After he stopped me from my orgasm? My husband is a cheeky man. This is what he demanded. So this is what he is getting.

I continue my elegant dance, with a smirk on my face.

He opens one eye. “Menace...”

The warning note in his voice makes me shiver. This is delicious. I'm going to keep this up.

But oh fuck do I want to cum. This is torture. Beautiful torture, but torment all the same. At least we are united in our suffering.

Both of Carlo's eyes open. He gives me a look that makes my belly swoop, then suddenly the world is spinning. I yelp and bounce as my back hits the mattress.

I blink up at Carlo, who is now looming above me, his cock still buried deep in my ass.

Whoopsie. I forgot to tighten his chains. He can't get off the bed. But he can do this.

His hands brace on either side of my head. I gulp.

He moves and my eyes roll back. A deep, powerful thrust. The strength of a mature man. Everything I have been inadvertently missing by riding. Oh my.

Carlo plows into me. He fucks me hard, fast and deep. I can't breathe. I can't see. I can only feel immense pleasure.

Slapping sounds are filling the air. The mattress is bouncing. Little grunts are being forced out of my lungs by sheer force and pressure.

This is heavenly.

Carlo has me pinned down. I'm overpowered. I can't reach the cattle prod, and my intelligence is of no use against such raw animal magnetism. Even the chains are useless. Carlo could even use them against me, wrap them around my throat and throttle me while he fucks the life out of me.

What a way to go.

Stars and fireworks and galaxies explode in my mind. I scream high and long as my orgasm burns through me with the force of a thousand suns. My ass clamps down on Carlo's cock, clenching him tightly. Carlo groans, grunts, shakes and shudders his way through his own orgasm. Spurts of wetness fill my ass.

With one last groan, Carlo collapses. He falls on top of me, squishing me flat and knocking what little air I had out of my lungs.

But then he quickly rolls away. He lands on his back beside me, panting heavily.

My heart is beating far too fast. My muscles are quivering. Aftershocks are sparking through me. Sweat is starting to cool in places I'd rather not think about.

And my soul is full. It's brimming with joy. Carlo didn't kill me. He didn't seize the opportunity to keep his power over me. He didn't try to run away. When it came to it, when push came to shove and he was in his

truest, wildest state, he had no desire to escape at all. He didn't even think of hurting me.

When he could have had anything, the only thing he wanted... was to make love to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CARLO

The sound of hushed talking coming from the kitchen wakes me up. Ginni's voice is soft, restrained. He barely sounds like himself at all.

The projector above me is displaying a perfect autumn morning in Central Park, all golden leaves and soft sunlight filtering through bare branches. But there's still no natural light down here, no real sense of time beyond what Ginni programs for us. Fuck know's what time it really is.

I lie still, listening to the one-sided conversation drifting from the next room. Phone call, clearly, though I can't make out individual words. Just the musical cadence of Ginni's voice, punctuated by long pauses where whoever he's talking to responds.

When he returns to the bedroom ten minutes later, his face is bright with nervous energy. Not the manic excitement I've learned to associate with his planning sessions, but something more fragile. More uncertain.

"That was Mama," he announces, settling cross-legged on the bed beside me. His hair is still mussed from sleep, and he's wearing those silk pajama shorts in pale blue, the ones that make his skin look luminous. Along with a baby blue crop top that's capturing nearly all of my attention.

"They're coming home tomorrow night."

The announcement hits me hard and throws me into disarray. Two weeks. He'd said two weeks when this all started, but somehow I have forgotten that time is actually passing outside this basement paradise. That his family

would eventually return from their holiday in Italy. Has it really been two weeks already? Or are they coming home early? I really have no idea, and that's deeply unsettling.

But despite that unease, there is a real fucking problem with what Ginni just said.

“Tomorrow night,” I repeat, testing the words.

“Or the day after, depending on their flight.” Ginni’s fingers twist in the silk of his pajama shorts, a nervous gesture I’ve never seen from him before. “Papa wants to inspect some property in Tuscany before they leave, and you know how he gets when business is involved.”

I do know. I’ve seen Guiseppe Torrini at work, the way he approaches every decision with methodical precision. The kind of man who would absolutely extend a holiday by a day if it meant closing a profitable deal.

“Are you worried?” I ask, though the answer is obvious from the tension radiating from every line of his body.

Ginni laughs, but there’s no humor in it. Just a sharp, brittle sound that makes something cold settle in my stomach.

“Worried? Why would I be worried? It’s not like I’ve been keeping their business associate chained in my bedroom.”

The way he is trying to joke about it is somehow more unsettling than outright panic would be.

“What do you think will happen when they find out?” I ask carefully. I have no idea what reality Ginni is inhabiting right now, and I need to know.

“Oh, I know exactly what will happen.” Ginni’s smile is bright and terrible, the kind of expression that belongs on beautiful angels delivering terrible news. “Papa will be furious about the scandal. The embarrassment to the family name. The risk to business relationships.”

He stands up and begins pacing at the foot of the bed, his movements quick and agitated. The silk shorts cling to his legs as he moves, and despite everything, I find myself momentarily distracted by the elegant grace of his stride.

“Mama will cry,” he continues. “She’ll say she doesn’t understand how I could do this to them, to the family. She’ll wonder where they went wrong, what they could have done differently.”

“And Marco?”

“Marco will want to kill you.” The matter-of-fact way Ginni delivers this makes my blood run cold. “Not because he cares about me, but because

you've compromised his little brother, and that reflects poorly on him."

It seems Ginni's reality is currently aligned with mine. And his bitter assessment confirms everything I've come to understand about Ginni's relationship with his family. Not loved, not valued, only tolerated as long as he stays hidden and doesn't cause problems.

"They'll try to separate us," Ginni says softly, stopping his pacing to look directly at me. "Send me away somewhere, probably. Another institution, somewhere more secure this time. Somewhere I can't cause any more embarrassment."

"Ginni..."

"But they won't understand." His voice grows stronger, more certain, that manic brightness creeping back into his expression. "They won't see what we have, what we've built together. They'll think it's just madness, just another example of my fundamental wrongness."

He settles back onto the bed, reaching for my hand with fingers that tremble slightly. "They won't understand that this is love. Real love. The kind that transcends everything else."

The fervor in his voice makes alarm bells start ringing in my head. This isn't just dread about his parents returning. This is something deeper, something that speaks of decisions already made and consequences already accepted.

"What are you thinking, Ginni?"

"I'm thinking that some stories are too beautiful for this world." His smile is radiant and absolutely terrifying. "I'm thinking that maybe they're right about one thing. Maybe there's no place in the world for someone like me."

Cristo. My heart stops beating entirely for several long seconds.

"People like us," he corrects gently. "Star-crossed lovers, kept apart by family prejudice and social conventions. It's very romantic when you think about it."

"Ginni, what exactly are you saying?"

"I'm saying that Romeo and Juliet knew something about love that most people never understand." His fingers tighten on mine, and his eyes are bright with unshed tears and something that looks dangerously like ecstasy. "Sometimes the most beautiful love stories end in tragedy. Sometimes dying together is the only way to stay together."

The words hit me like ice water, shocking me into complete clarity about what I'm hearing. Ginni isn't just worried about his parents returning. He's planning what he sees as a romantic solution to an impossible problem.

A murder-suicide.

The casual way he's including me in his fantasy, assuming I'll be a willing participant in this grand tragic gesture, is more than a little alarming. But worse than that is the thought of beautiful, brilliant Ginni destroying himself rather than face another round of family rejection. The very idea makes me want to commit murders of my own.

"That's not romantic," I say firmly, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. "That's just wasteful. Two people throwing away their lives because other people are too stupid to understand what they have."

"But if they separate us anyway..." Ginni's voice breaks slightly, and I can see the scared boy underneath all the overly romantic delusions. "If they lock me away somewhere I can't reach you, if they make sure we never see each other again..."

"Then we find another way," I tell him, keeping my voice steady and reassuring even though I have no idea what another way might be. I'm saying what he needs to hear, buying time, trying to talk him down from the ledge he's building in his mind. "We don't give up. We don't let them win by destroying ourselves."

Playing into his delusions is probably a terrible thing to do, but right now I'm all out of options. I know damn well that my little menace doesn't listen to reason. Telling him to let me go, is not going to work. The suggestion could unsettle him, make him even more unstable, and that's the very last thing I need.

Ginni stares at me for a long moment, searching my face for something I'm not sure I can give him. Certainty, maybe. A promise that everything will work out despite the impossible odds stacked against us.

"You really think there's another way?" he asks softly.

"I think you're too smart and too stubborn to let anyone else write the ending to your story," I reply, and I mean it. "Including me."

The smile that breaks across his face is like sunrise after the longest night, but there's still something fragile underneath it. Something that tells me this conversation isn't over, just postponed.

For the rest of the morning, Ginni seems almost normal. He makes breakfast with his usual elaborate care, washes me with gentle efficiency,

chatters about trivial things with determined brightness. But I can see the cracks in his performance, the way his hands shake when he thinks I'm not looking, the manic edge to his laughter when he finds something amusing.

He's falling apart, and he's trying to hide it behind the same cheerful facade he's used to survive his family's rejection for years. But this time, the pressure is too much. This time, the fantasy he's built around us is colliding with reality in a way that threatens to destroy him.

When his parents return tomorrow night and find me here, one of several things will happen. Best case scenario, they'll be angry but pragmatic, willing to find a discreet solution that protects the family's reputation as well as mine. Worst case, they'll see this as the final evidence that their youngest son is beyond help and needs to be permanently removed from their lives.

Either way, Ginni will be hurt. Either way, he'll interpret their reaction as final proof that he's unlovable, unwanted, fundamentally wrong. And in that moment of ultimate rejection, he might very well decide that death is preferable to another round of institutional torture disguised as treatment.

I can't let that happen. My feelings for my captor, this beautiful and broken boy, might be fueled by Stockholm syndrome, but I can't be responsible for his destruction. And I definitely can't let him destroy me in some misguided gesture of romantic tragedy.

I need to get out of here. Not because I want to abandon Ginni, but because staying puts us both in danger. If his family finds me here, chained to his bed like some kind of perverted trophy, it will be the final nail in his coffin. The ultimate proof of his madness, his danger to himself and others.

But if I'm not here, everything will be fine. At least for long enough for me to find a way to get Ginni to safety. I can find the best institution money can buy. The kindest, most caring one. Or perhaps, even better, I can set Ginni up in a lovely house with a team of carers to look after him. Personalized care.

The point is, I can untangle this mess if I get out of here before his parents return.

The irony isn't lost on me that I haven't actually tried to escape in days. Not really tried. Those first few days, I was constantly testing the restraints, looking for weaknesses, planning different scenarios. But somewhere along the way, I stopped. Got comfortable. Let myself be lulled by Ginni's devoted care and the strange peace of this basement paradise.

Now I'm forced to think tactically again, and I realize the situation has actually improved from an escape perspective. The restraints are looser now, the cuffs aren't so tight, and there's enough slack for me to sit up properly, to move my arms freely. When Ginni takes me to the bathroom, he keeps more distance with the cattle prod, relying on the weapon rather than close supervision. His guard has dropped as he's started to trust that I won't run.

It's still going to be damn hard. The basement is very secure, the door upstairs is probably locked, and I have no idea what security measures might be in place. But the increased stakes of saving both our lives makes the risk worthwhile.

Whatever I try is going to be better than waiting around for Ginni to decide that we should die together rather than live apart.

There is also the question of how to get free without alerting him to what I'm planning. Ginni might be falling apart, but he's not stupid. If he suspects I'm planning to leave, he might very well accelerate his timeline for our romantic tragedy.

I need to be smart about this. Patient. I need to wait for the right moment and then act decisively, without hesitation or second thoughts.

Because if I stay, we're both going to die. And if I leave, we have a chance at surviving this beautiful madness.

I just hope that when this is all over, when Ginni is safe somewhere getting the help he needs, he'll understand that leaving him was the hardest thing I've ever done.

And that I did it because I care about him too much to let him destroy himself for a love story that was always too dangerous to survive.

CHAPTER THIRTY

GINNI

I can't sleep. Every nerve in my body is crackling with electricity, my thoughts racing so fast I can barely catch them before they slip away into something else, something worse.

I slipped out of my marriage bed hours ago, leaving my husband sleeping peacefully. It was the right thing to do, but the spare room feels so empty, so lonely. There is nothing and no one to stop my thoughts from spiraling.

A Romeo and Juliet ending would be so artistically beautiful, but it would be a tragedy. And Carlo deserves better. He is worthy of a long and happy life. And he had such faith in me that I could find another solution.

He's right, there has to be a better way. I just need to think harder. Faster. Better. All while time is running out.

My hands are shaking as I fold and refold the same silk shirt for the fourth time, trying to make everything perfect, trying to control something in a world that's about to explode around us.

Today. They're coming home today.

The words keep echoing in my head like a death knell, each repetition making my chest tighter and my breathing more shallow. In just a few hours, Mama and Papa will walk through that door upstairs, probably tired from their flight, expecting to find their problematic youngest son exactly where they left him. Hidden away in his basement like a shameful secret, causing no trouble, making no waves.

Instead, they're going to find Carlo.

Handsome, perfect Carlo, chained to my bed like some kind of kinky prize. The evidence of everything I am, everything I've done, everything they've always suspected about their fundamentally wrong son finally laid bare for them to see.

"Focus, Ginni," I whisper to myself, pressing my palms against my temples. "Think. Plan. There has to be a better solution."

But every solution I can think of is impossible. I can't hide Carlo. I can't explain him away. I can't pretend this never happened. In a matter of hours, my perfect fantasy world is going to collide with reality, and the impact is going to destroy everything I've built.

I move to the dresser and start arranging my jewelry box with obsessive precision, each piece placed exactly where it belongs. Order. Control. If I can just make everything perfect enough, maybe somehow...

But who am I kidding? There's no making this perfect. There's no explaining this away. When Papa sees Carlo here, when he understands what I've done, what I've risked, the scandal I've brought to the family name...

A sob escapes my throat before I can stop it. I've seen Papa angry before. The cold fury that turns his voice to ice and makes grown men tremble. But this... this is going to be beyond anger. This is going to be the final proof that Giovanni Torrini is beyond redemption, beyond help, beyond love.

They'll send me away again. Somewhere worse this time, somewhere more secure. Somewhere I can never escape from, never cause another moment's embarrassment to the precious family reputation. And Carlo...

My handsome Carlo will be taken from me forever.

The thought makes me double over with actual physical pain, like someone's reached into my chest and torn something vital away. How can I live without him? How can I go back to being alone after I've tasted what it feels like to be loved, to be wanted, to be someone's everything?

I can't. I literally cannot survive being separated from him again.

I sink down onto the floor beside the dresser, wrapping my arms around my knees and rocking slightly. Think, Ginni. Think. There has to be another way.

Maybe we could run. Just disappear before they get home. I have money, jewelry I could sell, enough to get us somewhere far away where no one

knows who we are. We could start over, build a new life together somewhere safe.

But even as the thought forms, I know it's impossible. Carlo is chained to my bed. He's not going anywhere willingly. He thinks he doesn't love me, that we are not destined to be together. But I know the truth, and he is so close to accepting it. So very close. If only we had a little more time together, then everything would be perfect.

But time is one thing we don't have. Time is something I can't control. Just like I can't control Carlo's state of mind. I can give him every opportunity to realize he loves me, but the final step can only be taken by him, when he is ready.

And he is not ready yet. He's not going to agree to run off into the sunset with me.

And even if I could convince him somehow, even if I could make him understand, where would we go? How long before someone found us? How long before my family's reach caught up with us?

But... maybe. The world is a large place, and Carlo is a rich and powerful man with connections. My money could get us there, and then he could access his funds.

My laptop is across the room, and suddenly I'm scrambling toward it on hands and knees, desperate with new purpose. There has to be something. Some country, some remote island where we could hide, some way to disappear completely and never be found.

I pull up travel sites with trembling fingers, searching for the most remote, most isolated places on earth. The Faroe Islands. The Kerguelen Islands. Antarctica. Places where no one would think to look, where we could live simply and love each other without interference from families who don't understand.

I search and search. Hands flying over the keyboard and touchpad until a low battery warning pops up on the screen. The red flashes at me, and zaps reality into my brain. A laser beam of unrelenting truth.

It's all fantasy, isn't it? Beautiful, impossible fantasy. Carlo would never agree to it. He has a life, a business, responsibilities. He can't just disappear into the wilderness with his unstable captor, no matter how much I love him.

If I unchain him, he'll run away *from* me, not with me. I'll never see him again. He might even tell my parents so they lock me up to stop from

abducting anyone else. Not that I would. Carlo is the only one I'd ever steal. He's the only man for me.

The tears are coming faster now, hot and desperate and full of years of accumulated pain. This is how it ends. Not with running off into the sunset. Not with the beautiful second wedding and the house in Hampstead and the children with dark hair and blue eyes. Not with anniversary parties and growing old together and becoming legends of romantic devotion.

This is how it ends. With my parents finding us, with Carlo being taken away, with me being locked up somewhere I'll never see sunlight again.

That's what is about to happen if I don't take action.

I suck in a deep, shaky breath.

There really is no other option. No Choice. Because a tragic ending, is the right ending. It's preordained. Destiny. The way things are meant to be.

The certainty creeps in quietly, almost whispered, like something dangerous trying not to be noticed. But once it's there, it grows stronger, more insistent, more beautiful in its terrible simplicity.

I shouldn't fight the truth.

They can't separate us if we're dead.

I stop crying, stop shaking, stop moving entirely. The laptop screen blurs in front of me as acceptance settles into my bones. The solution is perfect and terrifying and absolutely logical.

Romeo and Juliet. Star-crossed lovers whose families could never accept their love. Two people so devoted to each other that death seemed preferable to separation. The most beautiful, most romantic, most tragic love story ever told.

And they died together. In each other's arms. United for eternity while their feuding families wept over what their hatred had cost.

My hands are steady now as I close the laptop and push it away. This could work. This could actually work.

Not violence. Not pain. Just... sleep. Peaceful, eternal sleep in each other's arms while my family realizes too late what their cruelty has cost them. They'd find us here, beautiful and serene, and finally understand that what we had was real, was precious, was worth dying for.

They'd never be able to hurt us again. Never be able to separate us or shame us or try to change us into something we're not. We'd be together forever, exactly as we are, exactly as we're meant to be.

I know where Papa keeps his sleeping pills. The strong ones, the ones the doctor prescribed after his heart attack last year. He never uses them, says they make him groggy the next day. There are probably dozens of them, more than enough for both of us.

We can have a beautiful last meal together. Something perfect, something that tastes like love and devotion and everything we've shared. Wine, candlelight, soft music. I could tell Carlo how much he means to me, how grateful I am for every moment we've had together.

Then we could lie down together, hold each other close, and simply... go to sleep.

The vision is so beautiful it makes my chest ache. Carlo's arms around me, my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat slow and stop while mine does the same. No more fear, no more pain, no more families who can't understand that love is love regardless of what form it takes.

Just peace. Perfect, eternal peace.

I'm already moving toward the stairs before I fully realize I've decided. My feet are silent on the hard floor, my breathing steady for the first time all day. This is right. This is the answer I've been searching for. I didn't need to try to think of something else.

Papa's study is exactly as he left it, all dark wood and leather and the lingering smell of expensive cigars. The sleeping pills are in the bottom drawer of his desk, hidden behind files and documents like he's ashamed of needing help to rest.

The bottle is nearly full. More than enough for what I need.

I slip it into my pocket and head back downstairs, my heart truly calm and sure for the first time since Mama called. No more panic, no more desperate planning, no more impossible fantasies about futures that can never exist.

Just one last perfect evening with the man I love more than life itself.

Then we'll sleep, and dream, and never have to wake up to a world that wants to tear us apart.

They'll find us tomorrow when they come home. Beautiful and peaceful and finally, eternally together.

And maybe, finally, they'll understand what love really means.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

CARLO

The wine glass hovers at my lips. I can smell something wrong. Not just the rich, complex notes of the Barolo, but something else underneath. Something chemical. Bitter.

My blood turns to ice.

“I don’t want to drink right now,” I say carefully as I put the glass back down. “Actually, I’m not feeling great. Think I might be coming down with something.”

Ginni’s face crumples with immediate concern. “Oh no! Are you feeling nauseous? Do you have a headache? I could get you some paracetamol, or maybe some ginger tea?”

“Just not hungry,” I say, eyeing the beautiful carbonara with new understanding. “Sorry, I know you worked hard on this.”

“But you have to eat something,” Ginni insists, his voice taking on that edge of desperation again. “You need to keep your strength up. Here, just a few bites?”

He lifts the fork toward my mouth, and I turn my head away. “Really, I can’t. My stomach is too unsettled.”

Ginni sets the fork down with exaggerated care, but I can see the frustration building in his eyes. The way his hands are starting to shake again, the manic brightness returning to his expression.

“Well, I suppose I should have some then,” he says with forced lightness, reaching for his own wineglass. “Can’t let it go to waste.”

I watch in horror as he takes several sips of the drugged wine, his throat working as he swallows. “Ginni, don’t...”

But he’s already setting the glass down, licking his lips with satisfaction. “Mmm, that really is extraordinary. Papa has excellent taste in wine, even if he never appreciates it properly.”

My heart is hammering against my ribs. How much did he drink? How long do I have before whatever he put in there takes effect? I need to keep him talking, keep him distracted from the fact that I haven’t touched anything.

“You’re right about your father,” I say, trying to keep my voice casual. “He’s always been more about collecting than actually enjoying.”

“Exactly!” Ginni’s eyes light up, pleased that I understand. “He treats everything like a trophy. Wine, art, even his children. Things to be displayed when convenient and hidden when not.”

He takes another sip of wine, smaller this time, and I feel a flicker of hope. Maybe it won’t be enough. Maybe whatever dose he calculated was meant to be the full glass, and if I distract him, all will be well.

But I can already see something shifting in his posture. A looseness around his eyes, a slight delay in his movements. Whatever drugs he dissolved in that wine are working fast.

“I should tighten your cuffs, and the chains,” he says suddenly, though his words are slightly less crisp than usual. “Make sure you’re comfortable for dinner. And maybe I can help you drink, the way I used to. You always liked that.”

Fuck. If he tightens the restraints now, if he realizes how loose they’ve become, I’ll have no chance of getting free once the drugs take effect.

“Come here first,” I say softly, putting everything I have into making my voice gentle and loving. “I want to kiss you.”

Ginni’s face transforms with pure joy. “Really?”

“Really. You’ve gone to so much trouble for this beautiful meal. I want to show you how much I appreciate it.”

He moves the lap tray to the bedside table, and then practically floats closer to me, all thoughts of chains apparently forgotten in the face of romantic possibility. When he’s close enough to touch, I cup his face in my hands.

“You’re so beautiful,” I tell him, and the terrible thing is that it’s true. Even drugged, even planning our mutual destruction, even completely unhinged, he’s still the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

I kiss him with everything I have. Not the desperate lust of the last few days, but something gentler. Something that tastes like goodbye even though I can’t let myself think of it that way. His lips are soft and warm and taste like wine and sleeping pills and years of accumulated sadness.

Ginni melts against me, making that small sound of contentment that always goes straight to my heart. His hands come up to tangle in my hair, but the movement is sluggish now, uncoordinated.

I deepen the kiss, holding him close, feeling the exact moment when the drugs finally take hold. His body goes limp against mine, his breathing deepening into the rhythm of artificial sleep.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper against his hair, even though he can’t hear me anymore. “I’m so fucking sorry, Ginni.”

I ease him down onto the pillows, arranging him carefully so he looks peaceful rather than unconscious. His face in sleep is so young, so vulnerable, all the manic energy replaced by an innocence that makes my chest ache.

My hands are shaking as I check his pulse. Strong and steady, thank Cristo. Whatever dose he took, it wasn’t enough to be dangerous. Just enough to knock him out for a few hours.

The restraints slide off my wrists like they’re barely there, the cuffs so loose now that I could probably have escaped days ago if I’d been trying. All those mornings when Ginni adjusted them with such care, making sure I was comfortable, never realizing he was giving me exactly what I needed to leave him.

It’s embarrassing how easy this is, now that I’ve decided to be free. Just how much of my time here was truly unwilling? It’s a question I already know is going to haunt me forever.

I stumble to the kitchen on unsteady legs, my body protesting after weeks of limited movement. The wine and food go straight down the disposal unit, evidence of Ginni’s beautiful, terrible plan disappearing down the drain in a swirl of red and cream.

A carefully folded note on the counter catches my attention. *To Mama, Papa and Marco*, is written across it in beautiful calligraphy on thick cream vellum.

I snatch it up, scrunch it up and throw it into the trash.
But it's not enough. It's not nearly enough.

I need to leave him a note. Something that will stop him from doing anything stupid when he wakes up and finds me gone. Something that will keep him alive long enough for me to figure out how to save him properly.

I find the expensive stationery he used in the kitchen drawer, heavy cream paper with Ginni's initials embossed in gold. Even his suicide note supplies are elegant.

My hand is shaking as I write.

My beautiful Menace, wait for me. I will come back for you. I promise. This isn't goodbye. This is me saving us both. I love you. C

I fold the note carefully and place it where he'll see it immediately when he wakes up. It's still not enough, not nearly enough to explain everything I'm feeling, but it will have to do.

Clothes. I need clothes. I've been naked for so long I've almost forgotten what it feels like to wear anything, but I can hardly escape through London like this.

The built-in wardrobe is where I expect it to be, taking up most of one wall of the spare bedroom. But when I open the doors, I freeze completely.

It's full of men's clothes. Beautiful, perfectly tailored men's clothes in exactly my size.

Suits from Savile Row, casual wear from Italian designers, everything from formal dinner jackets to comfortable weekend clothes. All of it in my exact measurements, all of it clearly chosen with obsessive attention to style and ways to make me look good.

Back on my first day here, he said he was going to buy me new clothes, but this is extraordinary. How long has he been planning this? How much time did he spend quietly ordering clothes for me, building a wardrobe for the life he imagined we'd have together?

I grab the first things I find. Dark jeans that fit like they were made for me, a soft cashmere jumper in deep blue, expensive leather shoes that somehow manage to be exactly the right size. Even the socks and underwear are perfect, brands I prefer, cuts I find comfortable.

Everything fits flawlessly, because of course it does. Ginni has been studying me for years, cataloguing every detail of my preferences with the same obsessive precision he brings to everything else.

The clothes feel strange after weeks of nakedness, heavy and constricting, but also comforting in their familiarity. Like putting on armor before a battle.

I take one last look at Ginni, peaceful and beautiful in sleep, and something inside my chest tears in half. Leaving him like this feels like abandoning a wounded animal, like turning my back on someone who needs me more than he's ever needed anyone.

But staying will kill us both. And I can't save him if I'm dead.

The basement door is locked, but Ginni keeps the key on a hook just inside the kitchen. Of course he does. He never really expected me to make it this far, never imagined I'd actually try to leave.

The stairs feel endless, my legs weak from weeks of limited mobility. By the time I reach the main floor, I'm breathing hard and my heart is racing from more than just exertion.

I'm in the Torrini family home. The place where Ginni grew up, where he learned to hide himself away, where he was taught that love is something to be ashamed of. Every room I pass feels like a mausoleum, all expensive furniture and careful arrangements that speak of wealth but not warmth.

This is what shaped him. This cold, beautiful prison where appearances matter more than happiness, where a son can be hidden away in the basement like a dirty secret rather than loved for who he is.

The front door is solid wood with multiple locks, but none of them are engaged. Why would they be? The Torrinis assume their son will never try to leave.

London air hits my face like a blessing, cool and sharp and full of life. Real air, not the recycled atmosphere of the basement. Real light, not the artificial glow of projectors and screens.

I've escaped. After weeks of captivity, I'm finally free.

So why does it feel like I've just made the biggest mistake of my life?

I walk quickly through Mayfair, keeping my head down, trying to blend in with the early evening foot traffic. Every step takes me further from Ginni, further from the basement that became both prison and sanctuary.

By the time I reach my own house, my legs are shaking with exhaustion and my chest is tight with something that feels suspiciously like grief. I fumble with the keycode lock, hands trembling as I let myself into my own home for the first time in weeks.

Everything is exactly as I left it. Mail piled on the hall table, bananas turning black on the kitchen counter, the faint smell of expensive cologne and leather that I associate with my old life.

It feels like walking into a museum. Like visiting the preserved home of someone who died a long time ago.

I sink down onto my sofa, still wearing Ginni's perfectly chosen clothes, and try to process what just happened. I escaped. I'm home. I'm safe.

I saved both our lives.

So why do I feel like I've just destroyed something beautiful and irreplaceable?

Ginni will be waking up soon, if he hasn't already. He'll find my note and hopefully, hopefully it will be enough to keep him from doing anything desperate.

His parents will be arriving any minute now. They'll go check on the son they are ashamed of. Find him either asleep or distraught. Whichever they find, they'll conclude nothing has changed. Their child is still crazy. Still an embarrassment.

And here I am, safe in my own house, wearing clothes chosen by a boy who loved me enough to plan for a future that could never exist.

I should feel relieved. I should feel vindicated in my choice to leave.

Instead, I feel like I've just abandoned the only person who ever truly understood me. And despite everything he put me through, despite the drugs and the chains and the complete insanity of our situation, I find myself wondering if I made the right choice.

Because sitting here in my own home, surrounded by the trappings of my old life, I realize something that makes my chest tight with panic.

I miss him already.

I miss my beautiful, broken, dangerous menace. And I have no idea how I'm going to live without him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

GINNI

The voice cuts through my consciousness like a blade through silk, sharp and disapproving and utterly unwelcome.

“Giovanni!”

I surface slowly from what feels like the deepest sleep of my life, my head pounding with each syllable of my name. Everything feels heavy and wrong, like I’m swimming up through honey. My mouth tastes like metal and bitter almonds, and there’s something scratching at the edges of my memory that I can’t quite grasp.

“Giovanni Torrini, wake up this instant!”

Mama’s voice. Oh God, Mama is here, and she’s using that tone that means I’m in trouble. Deep, terrible trouble that will require groveling and apologies and promises to be better that we both know I’ll break.

I force my eyes open, immediately regretting it as the artificial light from the projector stabs into my brain. The ceiling above me shows a perfect tropical afternoon, all azure skies and swaying palms, but the beauty feels mocking now. Fraudulent. Like everything else in my carefully constructed paradise.

“There you are,” Mama says, her voice dripping with disapproval. “Sleeping in the middle of the day like some common layabout. What time did you go to bed last night? And why are you still in your pajamas?”

I try to sit up and immediately regret it. The world spins violently around me, nausea rising in my throat like a tide.

“I don’t feel very well, Mama,” I manage, my voice coming out as a croak.

“Of course you don’t feel well. Look at the state of you.” She’s standing beside the bed now, immaculate in her Chanel suit, every hair in place despite the long flight from Italy. Her dark eyes take in my appearance with the kind of clinical disgust usually reserved for something unpleasant she’s found on her shoe. “When did you last shower? Eat a proper meal? This place smells like...” She pauses, nostrils flaring delicately. “Like candles and wine and God knows what else.”

The candles. The romantic dinner I prepared. The drugged wine that was supposed to solve everything but somehow solved nothing at all. The memories start trickling back, each one more painful than the last.

I look around the room desperately, searching for any sign of Carlo, but there’s nothing. No warmth beside me in the bed, no indication that anyone else has been here at all. Just me, alone and sick and facing my mother’s disappointment like every other morning of my adult life.

Where is he? Where is my handsome husband? Did our plan work after all? Are we together somewhere else, somewhere better, while this is all just some terrible nightmare my dying brain is conjuring?

“What are these?” Mama’s voice goes up an octave, sharp with shock.

I follow her gaze and feel my blood turn to ice. She’s staring at the handcuffs, still attached to the headboard where Carlo should be but isn’t. The chains gleam in the artificial sunlight, impossible to ignore or explain away.

“They’re...” I start, then stop. What can I possibly say? How do I explain restraints attached to my bed to a woman who already thinks I’m twisted and abhorrent?

“They’re for art. An art installation. Very avant-garde. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Art?” The word comes out like she’s tasting something rotten. “Giovanni, these are restraints. Actual restraints. What on earth have you been doing down here?”

“Nothing,” I say quickly, too quickly. “Just experimenting with different mediums. Exploring themes of captivity and freedom. Very conceptual. Very modern.”

Mama's face goes through several expressions in rapid succession. Confusion, horror, disgust, and finally that particular brand of resigned disappointment that I know so well. The look that says I've once again confirmed every terrible thing she's ever thought about me.

"Art," she repeats flatly. "You're calling this art."

"Conceptual art," I insist, struggling to sit up properly while the room keeps tilting around me. "The kind that challenges conventional thinking. The kind that makes people uncomfortable because it forces them to confront difficult truths."

"The only truth this confronts is that you've completely lost your mind." Mama's voice is getting shriller, more panicked. "Giovanni, this is... this is not normal behavior. Even for you."

Even for you. As if my ingrained wrongness is so established that she has to qualify which particular variety of madness this represents.

"Where have you been?" she continues, beginning to pace at the foot of the bed in that agitated way she does when she's building up to a real tirade. "We've been calling and calling. Papa tried to reach you three times yesterday. We were worried you'd done something..." She pauses, her gaze flicking meaningfully to the restraints. "Something foolish."

Yesterday. She's talking about yesterday like it was recent, but yesterday feels like a lifetime ago. Yesterday Carlo was here, warm and solid and real. Yesterday we had our beautiful romantic dinner, our perfect last evening together. Yesterday I thought I'd found the solution to all our problems.

But where is he now? If the pills worked, if we both took the journey into eternal sleep together, why am I here alone? Why is Mama yelling at me instead of mourning my beautiful, tragic death?

"You look terrible," she continues, settling into the chair beside the bed like she's preparing for a long conversation. "Pale and thin and..." Her nose wrinkles in distaste. "When did you last change these sheets? This whole place reeks of... I don't even know what. Desperation? Madness?"

The words hit like physical blows, each one confirming what I already know. I am terrible. I am pale and thin and desperate and mad. I am everything disappointing about the Torrini family legacy rolled into one shameful package.

"I've been fine, Mama," I lie, pulling the silk sheet up to my chest like armor. "Just working on my art. Exploring new themes. You've always said I should find productive outlets for my creativity."

“Not this kind of creativity.” Her voice drops to the particular tone she uses when she’s about to deliver devastating truths. “Giovanni, look at yourself. Really look. This isn’t art, it’s a cry for help. And frankly, I’m not sure we can keep helping you if you insist on...”

She gestures vaguely at the room, at me, at the general disaster of my existence. The gesture encompasses everything from the candle wax on the nightstand to the restraints on the bed to my too-long hair and sick complexion.

“If I insist on what?” I ask, though I’m not sure I want to hear the answer.

“On being this way,” she says simply. “On refusing to get better. On wallowing in whatever this is.” Another vague gesture. “We’ve tried therapy, medication, institutions, everything. But you just keep getting worse.”

The words settle over me like a shroud. Getting worse. Yes, I suppose I am getting worse, aren’t I? Normal people don’t kidnap the men they love. Normal people don’t drug their perfect romantic dinners with sleeping pills. Normal people don’t wake up alone and confused, wondering if they’ve died and gone to hell.

Maybe that’s what this is. Maybe everyone was right about me ending up in hell. Maybe the sulfur smell they always talked about isn’t literal fire and brimstone, but the stench of my own disappointment. Maybe hell is just this. Waking up to your mother’s disapproval for eternity, alone in a basement that used to feel like paradise.

“Where is Papa?” I ask, desperate to change the subject from my obvious moral failings.

“Upstairs, checking the house. Making sure you haven’t destroyed anything else.” Mama’s mouth forms a thin, disapproving line. “He’s very disappointed, Giovanni. We both are. We left you here trusting that you could manage on your own for two weeks. Clearly, that was a mistake.”

Two weeks. Has it really been two weeks? Time moved so differently when Carlo was here. Days flowed into nights in a seamless rhythm of meals and conversations and perfect domestic bliss. But now, trying to count backwards, I realize she might be right. Two weeks of the most beautiful happiness I’ve ever known, and it’s all gone like it never existed at all.

“I haven’t destroyed anything,” I protest weakly.

“Haven’t you?” Mama’s eyebrows climb toward her hairline. “Those restraints didn’t install themselves. And this place...” She looks around with visible disgust. “It looks like a brothel. Candles everywhere, wine glasses on every surface, the smell of...” She pauses, trying to identify something that clearly disturbs her. “The smell of sex and desperation.”

Heat floods my cheeks. Can she really smell that? Can she tell what Carlo and I shared in this room? The thought that our beautiful intimacy has been reduced to something sordid and embarrassing makes my chest ache with fresh grief.

“It’s not what you think,” I say quietly.

“Then what is it, Giovanni? Explain it to me. Make me understand why my youngest son has turned his bedroom into some kind of... of dungeon.”

Dungeon. The word hits like a slap. Our love nest, our sanctuary, our perfect underground paradise, reduced to a dungeon in her eyes. Everything beautiful Carlo and I built together, dismissed as evidence of my sickness.

“There was someone...” I start, then stop. How can I explain Carlo to someone who’s never understood love? How do I describe perfect happiness to someone who thinks emotion is weakness?

“Someone?” Mama’s voice goes very quiet, very dangerous. “What someone?”

“A friend,” I lie, the word tasting like ash in my mouth. “Someone who needed help. I was helping them.”

“With restraints?”

“They were... struggling. With personal demons. I was providing support.”

The lie builds on itself, becoming more elaborate and more pathetic with each word. But what else can I say? That I kidnapped Carlo Benedetti and kept him chained to my bed for two weeks while I played house with him? That I drugged his food and tried to kill us both in some romantic murder-suicide that apparently failed spectacularly?

Even I know how insane that sounds.

“Where is this friend now?” Mama asks with the patience of someone questioning a particularly slow child.

“This girl,” she adds with a stern expression and a stubborn gleam of hope in her eyes. As if she would make allowances for me chaining someone to my bed and doing kinky things, if they were the gender she deemed appropriate.

I tilt my chin up stubbornly. “Man,” I correct ruthlessly, destroying her hopes and dreams.

The corner of her lip curls up in disgust. “Where is this *man*?”

“Gone,” I whisper, and it’s the first honest thing I’ve said since she walked in.

Gone. The word echoes in the sudden silence, carrying all the weight of my loss. Carlo is gone, and I don’t understand how or why or where. I don’t understand why I’m still alive when we were supposed to die together. I don’t understand anything except that the only happiness I’ve ever known has vanished like it never existed.

“Perhaps that’s for the best,” Mama says, her voice gentler now that she thinks she’s getting somewhere. “Giovanni, you can’t keep taking in strays. Broken people will only make you more broken.”

Broken people. She thinks Carlo is broken, when the truth is that he was the only thing that ever made me feel whole.

“You need professional help,” she continues, settling back in the chair like she’s made a decision. “Real help, not just the weekly therapy sessions we’ve been paying for. I think it’s time we looked into residential care again.”

The words hit me like a physical blow. Residential care. Another institution, another place where they’ll try to fix what’s wrong with me. Another place where I’ll be medicated and monitored and slowly worn down until I’m too tired to remember what happiness felt like.

“Please, Mama,” I whisper, hating how young and desperate I sound. “Please don’t send me away. I’ll be good. I’ll be normal. I promise.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” For just a moment, her voice softens with something that might be genuine sadness. “You’ve made that promise so many times before. And every time, we end up here. With you in some state of crisis, having done something...” She gestures at the restraints. “Something that proves you’re not safe to be left alone.”

Not safe to be left alone. The words confirm what I’ve always known but never wanted to admit. I am too broken to exist independently. Too damaged to be trusted with my own life, let alone anyone else’s.

“I’ll think about what to do,” Mama says, standing up with the crisp efficiency that signals the end of uncomfortable conversations. “But Giovanni, this can’t continue. Do you understand me? This fantasy world you’ve created down here, it has to stop.”

Fantasy world. She thinks our love was fantasy. She thinks everything beautiful Carlo and I shared was just another symptom of my madness.

Maybe she's right.

"Get dressed," she continues, moving toward the door. "Properly dressed, in clothes that cover your body appropriately. Have a shower, eat something substantial, try to look like a member of this family instead of a..." She pauses, searching for the right comparison. "Instead of a lost soul."

A lost soul. Yes, that's exactly what I am, isn't it? Lost and wandering and desperately searching for something I'll never find again.

"We'll talk more later," she says, her hand on the doorknob. "When you're more coherent. When you can explain to me exactly what's been happening down here."

The door closes behind her with a soft click, leaving me alone with the artificial sunlight and the lingering scent of her expensive perfume. Alone with the empty restraints and the candle stubs that are the only evidence of our final meal together.

I sit there for a long time, trying to process what just happened. Mama found me alive instead of dead. She found evidence of Carlo's presence but no Carlo. She thinks I'm sicker than ever, more in need of institutional care than before.

All true, probably. But none of it explains where Carlo is.

Slowly, carefully, I get out of bed and begin searching the room. Maybe he's hiding. Maybe he heard Mama coming and found somewhere to conceal himself until she left. Maybe he's waiting for me to find him so we can figure out what went wrong with our beautiful plan.

But there's nothing. No sign of him under the bed or in the bathroom, the kitchen, the spare room. Nothing to indicate he was ever here at all.

It's only when I return to the kitchen that I find it. A folded piece of paper, my own expensive stationary, sitting prominently on the counter where I couldn't possibly miss it.

My hands are shaking as I unfold it, my heart hammering with desperate hope. Maybe it's a love note. Maybe it explains where he's gone, when he's coming back, why our perfect ending didn't work the way it was supposed to.

The handwriting is definitely Carlo's, strong and masculine and heartbreakingly familiar.

My beautiful Menace, wait for me. I will come back for you. I promise. This isn't goodbye. This is me saving us both. I love you. C

I read it three times before the words sink in. Then I crumple the paper in my fist and sink to the kitchen floor, sobs tearing from my throat like something being ripped apart.

It's a beautiful lie. Every word of it.

Carlo is gone, and he's not coming back. He escaped while I was unconscious, while I was drugged by my own stupid romantic gesture. He got free and ran back to his real life, his normal life, his life without the crazy boy who kidnapped him and tried to kill him.

Wait for me. I love you.

Such beautiful lies wrapped up in pretty words. The kind of thing you tell someone when you don't want their actions weighing on your conscience.

He doesn't love me. How could he? I'm exactly what Mama said I am. Broken and desperate and too damaged to love. I'm the kind of person who kidnaps someone and calls it romance. The kind of person who drugs their perfect dinner and calls it salvation.

I'm a lost soul who mistook captivity for love and madness for happiness.

And now I'm exactly where I started. Alone in my basement, unloved and unwanted, with nothing but beautiful lies to keep me company.

The only difference is that now I know what love could have felt like, if I'd been worthy of it. Now I know what I'm missing, what I'll never have, what I destroyed with my own undeserving hands.

I clutch the crumpled note to my chest and cry until there's nothing left inside me but emptiness.

Beautiful lies are still lies, no matter how much you want to believe them.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

CARLO

The law offices of Holdan, Drake & Associates occupy the top three floors of a glass tower in Canary Wharf, all chrome and marble and the kind of understated elegance that screams expensive discretion. I've never needed their services before, but they come highly recommended for sensitive matters that require absolute confidentiality.

The kind of matters that respectable men don't want traced back to them. So much so that they can't use their usual people.

"Mr. Benedetti," the receptionist says with professional warmth, "Mr. Holdan will see you now."

I follow her down a hallway lined with original art, my footsteps muted by carpet thick enough to muffle secrets. Everything about this place is designed to make wealthy clients feel safe sharing their most embarrassing problems. Divorces, paternity disputes, blackmail situations that need to disappear quietly.

Annulments of marriages that should never have happened.

Holdan himself is exactly what I expected. Mid-fifties, silver hair, Savile Row suit, the kind of man who's spent decades cleaning up the messes of people with more money than sense. He doesn't bat an eye when I explain my situation, though I edit heavily. A brief ceremony in a moment of... poor judgment. No consummation. Obvious grounds for annulment.

None of it is true. My judgment wasn't involved. Ginni decided we were getting married, and that was that. As for consummation... well, that happened several times and it was the best sex of my life.

But none of that is this man's business. He doesn't need to know. He just needs to do his job.

"These situations are more common than you might think," Holdan says, making notes in careful script. "Particularly among men of your... background. The important thing is acting quickly before any legal complications arise."

Legal complications. They can't be as bad as the kind of complications that might emerge if anyone discovered Carlo Benedetti spent two weeks chained to a bed playing house with his femboy captor.

"How quickly?" I ask.

"A few months if you require absolute, untraceable discretion."

"I can pay to make delays go away."

"Very well," Holdan says smoothly. "We'll proceed on the basis of fraud or misrepresentation. A ceremony performed under false pretenses. It's clean, efficient, and protects all parties involved."

False pretenses. Yes, I suppose that covers it. Ginni's delusion that I was a willing participant. My temporary insanity in enjoying my time in his basement. The whole beautiful, terrible mess we created between us.

I sign the initial paperwork with steady hands, my signature committing me to erasing the only marriage I've ever had. My first, and my last.

From Holdan's office, I drive out of London to a different kind of consultation. Dr. Elizabeth Lyons runs the Meadowbrook facility in Surrey, a private psychiatric hospital that caters to patients whose families have both the means and the desire for discreet, compassionate care.

The grounds are beautiful. Lush lawns, carefully tended gardens, buildings that look more like a country estate than a medical facility. The kind of place where wealthy families send their inconvenient relatives to be cared for with dignity rather than simply warehoused.

"We specialize in treatment that honors the whole person," Dr. Lyons explains as she shows me through the facilities. "Not just their symptoms, but their identity, their interests, their individual needs."

She's a small woman in her forties with kind eyes and an air of competent authority. The kind of doctor who actually listens to her patients instead of simply medicating them into compliance.

“LGBTQ patients are particularly welcome here,” she continues, apparently having read my emails carefully. “We understand that sexual and gender identity are not pathologies to be cured. Our treatment focuses on underlying mental health issues while fully supporting our patients’ authentic selves.”

Perfect. Exactly what Ginni needs. Somewhere he’ll be safe and cared for without anyone trying to change fundamental parts of who he is.

“The young man in question,” I say carefully, “he’s very artistic. Creative. Would those interests be supported here?”

“Absolutely. We have extensive art therapy programs, music therapy, even a small theater group. Creative expression is often crucial to healing.” Dr. Lyons stops beside a window overlooking a sculpture garden where patients are having some sort of lesson that involves easels and a lot of paint. “Many of our residents find that artistic pursuits help them process their experiences in ways that traditional therapy alone cannot achieve.”

I can picture Ginni here. Painting in the garden, singing for other patients, finding ways to channel his intensity into something beautiful rather than destructive. He’d be safe here. Protected from his family’s disappointment and his own dangerous impulses.

“What about visitors?” I ask, though I’m not sure why. It’s not as if I’ll be visiting.

“Encouraged, with appropriate boundaries. Family involvement is often crucial to long-term recovery.” Dr. Lyons studies my face carefully. “Though we understand that family relationships can be... complicated. We work with each situation individually.”

Complicated. That’s one way to put it. How do I explain that Ginni’s family would rather he disappear entirely? That the person most invested in his welfare is the man he kidnapped?

That I can’t visit because seeing him again might shatter the careful walls I’m building around my own sanity?

“I’ll need to think about timing,” I tell her. “The young man is... currently in crisis. His family are exploring options.”

“Of course. We do have a waiting list, but our intake coordinator can work with you whenever you’re ready. These decisions should never be rushed.”

But they should be made, shouldn’t they? I need to get Ginni somewhere safe before he does something genuinely dangerous to himself. Before his

family loses patience and sends him somewhere that will try to fix what isn't broken while ignoring what actually needs healing.

The drive home takes me through Mayfair, past streets that should feel familiar but somehow don't anymore. Everything looks exactly the same, but nothing feels right. Like I'm viewing my own life through glass, present but not really participating.

I stop at my usual coffee shop and order the same drink I've been ordering for three years. The barista knows me, makes small talk about the weather and the football results. Normal interaction with normal people living normal lives that don't involve kidnapping or marriage or love letters left on kitchen counters.

But the coffee tastes like nothing. The conversation feels hollow. The whole routine that used to anchor my days now feels like performance art, like I'm playing the role of Carlo Benedetti while the real me is somewhere else entirely.

My phone buzzes with a call from Marco. I stare at his name on the screen for several long seconds before letting it go to voicemail. I've been avoiding his calls for days now.

I can't talk to Marco without asking about Ginni. Can't ask about Ginni without revealing my interest. Can't reveal my interest without exposing the whole impossible situation. So I don't answer. Don't return the calls. Don't reach out to the one person who might be able to tell me if the boy I left sleeping in a basement is safe.

It's the responsible thing to do. The smart thing. The only way to protect both of us from the consequences of what happened.

Besides, I vowed that Marco was dead to me, for the part he has played in destroying his little brother. I'm a man of my word. It's right that I'm not talking to Marco.

So why does it feel like cowardice?

Back in my house, I try to settle into work. Emails to answer, contracts to review, the endless administrative tasks that keep businesses running smoothly. But I can't concentrate. Can't focus on profit margins and licensing agreements when my mind keeps drifting to silk pajamas and artificial sunrises and the way Ginni's face looked when he sang for me.

I find myself checking my phone obsessively, though I don't know what I'm looking for. Messages from Holdan about the annulment progress. Updates from Dr. Lyons about the waiting list. Anything that gives me the

illusion of taking constructive action instead of just sitting here missing someone I should be grateful to be free of.

The rational part of my mind knows exactly what's happening. Stockholm syndrome doesn't end the moment captivity does. The psychological bonds formed in extreme situations take time to fade. This constant preoccupation with Ginni's welfare is just my brain trying to process trauma by maintaining connection to the source.

It's not love. It's not longing. It's just my psyche trying to make sense of an experience that defied every assumption I had about myself and my life.

But if that's true, why does everything feel so fucking empty?

I walk through my house, noting details that should be comforting but somehow aren't. My expensive furniture, chosen for style rather than comfort. My pristine kitchen, barely used because I eat most meals at restaurants or the club. My bedroom, functional and sterile, nothing like the warm cocoon of silk and candlelight where I spent two weeks learning what it felt like to be wanted.

Really wanted. Not just tolerated or useful or feared, but actively desired by someone who studied my preferences like they were sacred texts. Someone who remembered every small kindness I'd ever shown him and built a fantasy around the idea that I might be capable of love.

I pour myself a whisky and try to read, but the words swim on the page. Try to watch television, but the voices feel distant and meaningless. Try to listen to music, but every song sounds wrong, too harsh or too sentimental or just too much without Ginni's soft commentary to filter it through.

When did I become dependent on his presence? When did his voice become the soundtrack I needed to feel settled? It's disturbing how quickly I adapted to having him there, how natural it felt to have someone anticipating my needs and working to meet them.

That's all it was, I tell myself. Convenience. Having someone devoted to my comfort and pleasure. Any reasonable man would miss that level of service. It doesn't mean anything deeper.

But then I remember the way he looked at me when I asked him to sing. The pure joy on his face, like I'd given him the greatest gift imaginable just by wanting to hear his voice. The way he'd melted against me when I kissed him, soft and trusting and so fucking beautiful it made my chest ache.

I remember him drawing me that afternoon, the way I'd posed so patiently while he sketched, chattering about art and technique and his nonna's lessons. The way his whole face had lit up when I told him I was honored to be his muse. As if being important to me was all he'd ever wanted.

When was the last time anyone looked at me like that? Like I was the center of their universe, the answer to every prayer they'd ever made? When was the last time someone was grateful just to be in my presence?

Never. The answer is never, because normal people don't worship their partners like devotional objects. Normal relationships involve compromise and negotiation and the gradual erosion of romance into comfortable routine.

What Ginni offered was neither normal nor sustainable. It was obsession disguised as devotion, desperation dressed up as love. The fact that it felt good doesn't make it healthy.

But Cristo, it felt good. It felt like coming home after a lifetime of wandering. It felt like finally being seen and known and valued for exactly who I was rather than what I could provide.

The whisky burns as it goes down, amber fire that does nothing to warm the cold spreading through my chest. I'm doing the right thing. The responsible thing. Getting the annulment, finding proper care for Ginni, returning to my real life before this temporary madness does any more damage.

But sitting here in my perfect house, surrounded by all the trappings of success that used to feel like accomplishments, I can't shake the feeling that I'm making the biggest mistake of my life.

The world feels dimmer without Ginni in it. Quieter. More ordinary.

And maybe that's the real problem. Not that I was traumatized by my captivity, but that I was spoiled by it. Two weeks of being someone's entire world, of being loved with an intensity that burned away everything ordinary and safe and predictable.

How do I go back to normal after that? How do I settle for being just another successful man in an expensive suit when I've tasted what it feels like to be someone's salvation?

The whisky bottle sits on the coffee table, catching the evening light streaming through windows that face the real world instead of projected fantasies. Everything here is real. Solid. Dependable.

So why does it all feel like scenery in a play I'm no longer sure I want to be in?

I close my eyes and try to imagine my life moving forward. The annulment finalized, Ginni safely settled in Dr. Lyons's care, this whole episode buried so deep it becomes something that happened to someone else. I can see it clearly. Rational, responsible, exactly what any sane man would do.

But when I open my eyes, the empty house stretches around me like a mausoleum. Beautiful and lifeless and achingly quiet.

And for the first time since I escaped, I fully allow myself to admit the truth I've been running from.

I miss him. Really miss him. I miss my beautiful, broken, dangerous menace. I miss his laugh and his intensity and the way he made even the most mundane moments feel charged with possibility.

The world is darker without him in it. And no amount of rational thinking is going to change that.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

CARLO

The doorbell rings just as I'm pouring my third whisky of the evening. Or maybe fourth. I've lost count, which isn't like me. Nothing about the last few days has been like me.

I check the security camera and see Dante standing on my doorstep, hands in the pockets of his expensive coat, dark eyes scanning the street with the automatic vigilance that makes him so good at what he does. And what he does is extract secrets from people who thought their secrets were safe.

Fuck.

I consider ignoring the bell, pretending I'm not home, but that would only make him more suspicious. Dante doesn't make social calls. If he's here, it's because he's noticed something. And when Dante notices something, he doesn't let it go.

I open the door and try to arrange my face into something resembling normalcy. "Evening, Dante."

"Carlo." He steps inside without waiting for an invitation, and strides straight to my living room, his gaze immediately cataloguing details. The whisky glass on the table. The fact that I'm still wearing yesterday's clothes. The way I'm holding myself like someone trying not to fall apart.

"Drink?" I offer.

"Please."

I pour him a whisky, noting the way his eyes track every movement. Dante sees everything. It's what makes him invaluable and terrifying in equal measure.

“You look like shit,” he says without preamble, accepting the glass.

“Thanks for the pep talk.”

“I’m serious.” Dante settles into the armchair across from me, all fluid movement and predatory grace. “When’s the last time you slept? Properly, I mean. Not passed out drunk on your sofa.”

“I sleep fine.”

“Bullshit.” He takes a sip of whisky, never breaking eye contact. “You’ve got shadows under your eyes that weren’t there a week ago. You’re drinking alone on a Tuesday night. And you answered the door like you were expecting someone you owe money to.”

I force a laugh. “Bit dramatic, don’t you think?”

“Is it?” Dante leans forward slightly, and I’m reminded why people are terrified of him. It’s not just his reputation. It’s the way he looks at you like he can see straight through to your bones. “Because from where I’m sitting, you look like a man with secrets. And secrets make people unpredictable.”

“Everyone has secrets, Dante.”

“Not like this.” His voice is quiet, matter-of-fact. “This is the kind of secret that changes people. The kind that eats at them from the inside until they make mistakes.”

My hand tightens on my glass. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you?” Dante’s dark eyes never leave my face. “Something happened. Something that’s got you spooked. Something you can’t talk about to anyone else.”

The accuracy of his assessment hits like a physical blow. I force myself to stay still, to keep my expression neutral, but I can feel sweat breaking out across my forehead.

“You’re imagining things.”

“Am I?” Dante takes another sip, completely relaxed. “Because the Carlo I know doesn’t disappear for days without explanation. Doesn’t ignore calls from friends. Doesn’t drink himself into a stupor and call it a normal evening.”

Friends. Marco. Of course Dante would have heard about my radio silence, my complete withdrawal from normal social obligations. In our

world, sudden changes in behavior are cause for concern. They usually mean someone's either dead, compromised, or planning something stupid.

"I needed some time to myself," I say carefully. "Clear my head, think about what I want."

"And what do you want, Carlo?"

The question hangs in the air between us, loaded with implication. What do I want? A basement bedroom with silk sheets and projected sunrises. A beautiful boy who sings opera while he cooks. A marriage that should have existed only in his imagination but felt more real than anything else in my life.

"The usual," I lie. "Money, power, a peaceful retirement."

Dante studies me for a long moment, and I have the unsettling feeling he can see right through the careful facade I'm trying to maintain. This is why he's so effective at what he does. Not just the physical techniques, but this. The ability to read people, to find their pressure points, to know exactly where to push.

"You know what I think?" he says finally.

"I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"I think someone's got under your skin. Someone you can't have, or can't keep, or can't forget." His voice is conversational, almost gentle. "And it's driving you fucking crazy."

The words hit so close to the truth that I actually flinch. Dante's eyes narrow slightly, cataloguing my reaction like data in a file he's building.

"That's a hell of a theory," I manage.

"Isn't it?" He smiles, and there's something almost sympathetic in his expression. "The thing about obsession, Carlo, is that it's obvious to everyone except the person experiencing it. You think you're hiding it, but you're not."

Obsession. The word sits between us like an accusation. Is that what this is? Have I become obsessed with someone who kidnapped me, drugged me, tried to kill us both in some romantic murder-suicide fantasy?

"I'm not obsessed with anyone."

"No?" Dante tilts his head slightly. "Then why are you sitting here alone, drinking yourself stupid, looking like someone died? Why are you avoiding your friends? Why are you canceling all your social engagements and leaving all your business decisions to your underlings?"

Because I can't stop thinking about him alone in that basement, or locked away in some uncaring institution, or worse. Because every quiet moment fills with memories of silk pajamas and gentle hands and the way he looked at me like I was something precious.

"I'm fine," I insist.

"You're many things, Carlo. Fine isn't one of them." Dante finishes his whisky and sets the glass down with deliberate care. "But here's the thing about secrets. They have a way of coming out eventually. Usually at the worst possible moment, in the most damaging way."

The threat isn't explicit, but it's there. Dante knows something's wrong, and he won't stop digging until he finds out what. And when he does...

"Is that a warning?"

"It's advice," Dante says, standing up with that same fluid grace. "From someone who's seen what happens when good men get eaten alive by things they can't control."

He moves toward the door, then pauses, looking back at me with those dark, knowing eyes.

"Whatever it is, Carlo, deal with it. Before it deals with you."

And then he's gone, leaving me alone with my whisky and the terrible certainty that I'm not as good at hiding my feelings as I thought.

I drain my glass and immediately pour another, trying to wash away the taste of Dante's too-accurate observations. Obsession. Secrets eating me alive. The uncomfortable truth that I'm not fine, haven't been fine since the moment I walked out of that basement.

My phone buzzes with a text. For one ridiculous moment my heart races, thinking somehow it's Ginni, or at least news about him. But it's Crystal, asking if she can come over. Beautiful, uncomplicated Crystal, with her perfect smile and her simple expectations. Exactly what I need to remind myself who I really am.

I text back yes without thinking it through.

Twenty minutes later, she's at my door, looking absolutely stunning in a black dress that hugs every curve. Her blonde hair falls in perfect waves, her makeup flawless despite the late hour. She's everything any reasonable man would want. Sophisticated, gorgeous, successful in her own right.

"Hey, stranger," she says, stepping into my arms for a kiss. "I've missed you."

I kiss her back automatically, my body going through the motions while my mind remains stubbornly elsewhere. Her lips are soft, her perfume expensive, her body warm against mine. Everything should feel perfect.

Instead, I feel nothing.

“Drink?” I offer, pulling away perhaps too quickly.

“Wine, if you have it.”

We walk to the living room and I pour her a glass of the Chablis she prefers, automatic hospitality for someone I should care about more than I do.

“You’ve been impossible to reach,” Crystal says, settling onto the sofa with practiced elegance. “I was starting to think you’d found someone else.”

Someone else. If only it were that simple.

“Just work,” I lie. “Big deal falling through, had to focus.”

She nods sympathetically, and we fall into the kind of easy conversation we’ve perfected over months of casual dating. Her job, mutual friends, plans for the weekend. Normal conversation between normal people living normal lives.

It should be comforting. Instead, it feels like speaking a foreign language I’ve forgotten how to use properly.

“Carlo,” Crystal says after a while, setting down her wineglass and moving closer. “Are you alright? You seem... distant tonight.”

Distant. That’s one way to put it. How do I explain that I’m here but not here, present in body but with my heart and mind trapped in a basement ten streets away?

“Sorry,” I say, forcing myself to focus on her face. “Just tired.”

“Maybe I can help with that,” she murmurs, leaning in to kiss me again.

This time the kiss is deeper, more insistent. Her hands slide up my chest, fingers working at the buttons of my shirt. Everything about her touch should feel good. Should remind me of pleasure, of connection, of all the reasons I enjoyed her company before.

Instead, all I can think about is how wrong it feels. How different her hands are from the ones that touched me with such reverence, such desperate tenderness. How her kiss tastes like nothing but wine and lipstick, not like sweetness and sleeping pills and years of accumulated longing.

I try to respond, try to lose myself in the familiar dance of seduction, but my body won’t cooperate. Every touch feels hollow. Every kiss feels like a

betrayal. Like I'm breaking wedding vows I never meant to take.

"Stop," I say suddenly, pulling away from her.

Crystal blinks in surprise, her hands still resting on my chest. "What's wrong?"

Everything. Nothing. The fact that she's not Ginni, will never be Ginni, can never make me feel the way he did with just a glance across a room.

"I can't do this," I say, standing up abruptly.

"Can't do what?" Crystal's voice is confused, hurt. "Carlo, what's going on?"

"You should go."

The words come out harsher than I intended, but I can't take them back. Can't explain that sitting here with her feels like cheating on someone who probably hates me. Can't tell her that every moment I spend pretending to be normal feels like dying a little bit more.

"Excuse me?" Crystal's confusion is giving way to anger, which is fair. I'm being an absolute bastard, and she doesn't deserve it.

"I'm sorry," I say, but I'm already moving toward the door, desperate to get her out of here before I say something even worse. "I just... I need to be alone right now."

"Are you serious?" Crystal follows me, her heels clicking on the hardwood. "You invite me over, pour me wine, let me think we're having a nice evening, and then just... what? Kick me out because you've decided you'd rather be alone?"

"Something like that."

She stares at me for a long moment, and I can see her trying to understand what's happening. Trying to figure out when the man she's been casually dating turned into this hollow, distant stranger.

"There is someone else," she says quietly. "Isn't there?"

The question hits like a physical blow. Is there someone else? Is Ginni someone else when he's probably locked away somewhere, when our marriage was never real, when everything between us was built on madness and desperation?

"No," I lie.

"Bullshit." Crystal's voice is calm now, resigned. "I don't know who she is, but whoever has you this twisted up... I hope she's worth it."

She grabs her purse and heads for the door, pausing only to look back at me with something that might be pity.

“For what it’s worth, Carlo, you look miserable. Whatever happened with this woman, maybe you should try talking to her instead of drinking yourself stupid and treating everyone else like garbage.”

The door closes behind her with a soft click, leaving me alone in my perfectly appointed house that feels more like a mausoleum than a home.

I sink back onto the sofa and reach for the whisky bottle, but my hands are shaking too badly to pour properly. Because Crystal was right about everything. There is someone else. I am miserable. And I am treating everyone like garbage because I can’t admit what I really want.

I want Ginni. I want my beautiful, broken, dangerous menace. I want his voice in my ear and his hands on my skin and his absolute devotion wrapping around me like armor against the world.

I want the only person I can never have.

And sitting here in my empty house, surrounded by all the trappings of my old life, I finally understand what Dante saw so clearly.

I’m not fine. I’m not healing. I’m not moving on.

I’m obsessed. Completely, helplessly, destructively obsessed with someone who tried to kill us both rather than face the possibility of living without me.

And the worst part is that right now, in this moment, I almost understand why he felt that way.

Because living without him feels a hell of a lot like dying.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

CARLO

The club is packed tonight, music pounding through speakers that Ginni arranged, lights strobing across bodies that move in perfect rhythm to the beat. From my position in the VIP area, I can see everything. The beautiful people spending beautiful money, the carefully orchestrated chaos that generates enough profit to make this entire operation worthwhile.

Everyone here knows who I am. They nod respectfully when they catch my eye, keep their voices down when they pass my table, make sure I never have to wait for a drink or ask twice for anything. It's the kind of automatic deference that comes with real power, the kind that's built on reputation and fear rather than just money.

None of these people would ever dare chain me to a bed. None of them would look at me like I was something precious they couldn't bear to lose. None of them would drug their own wine rather than face the possibility of living without me.

I take another sip of my whisky and try to focus on the numbers scrolling across my tablet. Revenue projections, staffing costs, inventory reports. The cash that is carefully cleaned. All the mechanical details of running a successful business that should ground me in reality, remind me of who I actually am instead of who I was pretending to be for two weeks in a basement.

But the numbers blur together, meaningless marks on a screen that can't hold my attention for more than a few seconds at a time. Everything feels hollow. Even here, surrounded by the proof of my success and the respect of my peers, I can't shake the feeling that I'm just going through the motions.

A commotion near the VIP entrance catches my attention. One of my security guards is trying to block someone's path, but the man pushes past him with the kind of authority that suggests he's not used to being told no.

Marco.

Fuck.

I haven't returned any of his calls in over a week, haven't responded to his increasingly concerned messages. I've been avoiding him because I can't trust myself to ask about Ginni without giving everything away. And because this man is dead to me but I can't tell him why. Not without letting everything slip.

"Why the fuck have you been ignoring me?" Marco demands as he strides over to my table, his usually immaculate appearance slightly disheveled. His hair is mussed like he's been running his hands through it, and there's something wild in his eyes that immediately puts me on alert.

I take a long, slow sip of my drink, using the time to arrange my face into something resembling calm indifference. "Good evening to you too, Marco."

"Don't give me that shit." He drops into the chair across from me without invitation, his movements sharp and agitated. "I've been trying to reach you for days. Where the hell have you been?"

"Busy."

"Busy?" Marco's voice goes up an octave. "I called twelve times yesterday alone. Twelve times, Carlo. And you couldn't be bothered to pick up once?"

I shrug, still maintaining the facade of casual disinterest even as my heart pounds against my ribs. Something's wrong. Something's happened. I can see it in every line of Marco's body, hear it in the edge of panic underlying his anger.

"My phone's been acting up," I lie smoothly. "What's so urgent that it couldn't wait?"

Marco runs a hand through his hair again, the gesture so familiar it makes my chest ache with unexpected recognition. Ginni does the same thing

when he's nervous, that unconscious attempt to impose order when everything else is falling apart.

“Ginni’s been arrested.”

The words knock all the air out of my lungs. My glass slips from my suddenly nerveless fingers, whisky splashing across the polished table as I choke on the sip I’d just taken.

“What?” The word comes out as a croak, barely audible over the pounding music.

But Marco hears it, and his eyes narrow as he takes in my reaction. The way I’ve gone pale, the way my hands are shaking as I pick up my dropped glass, the complete absence of the casual indifference I was trying so hard to project.

I’m on my feet before I realize I’m moving, my chair scraping back across the floor. “What the fuck happened? When did this happen?”

Marco also jumps to his feet and actually takes a step back, clearly alarmed by the explosiveness of my reaction. His gaze flicks over my face, cataloguing details, filing away information that I can’t afford for him to have.

“Couple of days ago,” he says slowly, his voice careful now. “Why are you... Cristo, Carlo, you look like someone just told you your mother died.”

Because that’s exactly what it feels like. Like something vital and irreplaceable has been ripped away from me, leaving nothing but a gaping wound where my heart used to be.

I try to pull myself together, to find some rational explanation for my reaction, but all I can think about is Ginni alone in a cell somewhere. Ginni surrounded by criminals who won’t understand his sensitivity, his gentleness, his complete inability to defend himself against the kind of casual violence that permeates places like that.

“What was he arrested for?” I manage to ask.

Marco’s expression grows even more guarded. “He stabbed a policeman.”

The bottom drops out of my world entirely.

Ginni. My beautiful, gentle Ginni who spins gracefully across the floor in wedding dresses. Ginni who secretly sings opera. The boy who creates stunning art. Who cries at nightmares and when the lights go out.

That Ginni stabbed someone.

“That’s impossible,” I say flatly. Even though I’ve seen his knife collection. Seen how professionally he sharpens each blade.

“I was there,” Marco replies. “Saw it happen. He walked up to a constable outside Harrods in broad daylight and put a kitchen knife between his ribs. No warning, no provocation. Just... did it.”

I sink back into my chair, my legs suddenly unable to support my weight. This doesn’t make sense. Nothing about this makes sense. Ginni doesn’t have it in him to hurt anyone, let alone attack a stranger for no reason. Abduction, yes, actual grievous bodily harm? That’s not his style.

Unless it wasn’t for no reason.

Unless it was for a very specific reason. A calculated decision made by someone who wanted to be arrested, who needed to be locked away somewhere his family couldn’t reach him. Someone who was trying to escape a situation that had become unbearable.

Fuck. I was so close to getting him out. Days at most. The Torrini family mansion is a fortress, but one of the maids just needed a little more incentive to leave the main gate unlocked and the cameras off.

I wanted to whisk Ginni away and leave no trace. No way for his family to ever find him. I wanted him to be able to settle down and never have to be moved again. I wanted it to look like I had nothing to do with it, because there is no rational answer to why I suddenly need Ginni to be in the very best care that money can buy.

I thought I had time. Time to do it my way. Time to hide the truth. I should have known I was being a fucking idiot.

“When are you getting him out?” I ask.

Marco shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “It was in broad daylight, Carlo. In view of dozens of witnesses and CCTV cameras. It would be tricky as hell to get him off, and...”

“And?”

“Papa thinks prison is the best place for him.”

The words hit me like a sledgehammer to the chest. For a moment, I can’t breathe, can’t think, can’t process the casual brutality of that statement.

Prison. They think Ginni belongs in prison.

Beautiful, fragile, damaged Ginni who needs silk pajamas and expensive cologne and someone to tell him he’s precious. In prison with hardened criminals who will see his beauty and his vulnerability and his complete inability to protect himself as an invitation to destroy him.

“Prison?” I snarl, the word tasting like poison in my mouth.

Marco nods grimly. “He’s clearly having another breakdown. Maybe being locked up will force him to accept treatment, to get the help he needs.”

Help. They think prison is help. They think putting him in a cage with predators is somehow going to fix what’s miswired inside him instead of shattering him completely.

I force myself to take a breath, to think rationally. “Surely a psych evaluation will send him somewhere else? A hospital, proper treatment facility?”

Marco shrugs with heartbreakingly indifference. “He passed. Declared mentally competent to stand trial. Which means he’s going to be processed like any other criminal.”

The casual way he delivers this information, like he’s discussing the weather instead of condemning his own brother to hell, sends a wave of rage through me so pure and violent I can barely see straight.

Before I realize I’m moving, I’m on my feet again, my hands fistling in Marco’s expensive jacket as I slam him back against the wall behind his chair. The sound of his back hitting the brick is drowned out by the music, but I can see the shock and fear in his eyes as my face hovers inches from his.

“Like any other criminal?” I growl, my voice barely recognizable even to myself. “How dare you call Ginni that!”

Marco’s hands come up defensively, but he doesn’t try to break my grip. Smart man. Right now, I’m operating on pure instinct, and every instinct I have is screaming at me to hurt someone for what they’re doing to Ginni.

“Carlo, what the hell...”

But I can’t find the words. Can’t explain the murderous fury that’s consuming me, the need to make someone pay for abandoning the most vulnerable member of their family when he needs them most.

I release him abruptly and spin away, unable to look at his face for another second. Unable to stand here while the only person I’ve ever truly loved is rotting in a cell because his own family thinks he’s disposable.

“Where are you going?” Marco calls after me as I stride toward the exit.

I don’t answer. Can’t answer. Because if I open my mouth right now, I’m going to say something that reveals exactly how much Ginni means to me, and that’s a secret I can’t afford to share.

Not yet.

The drive through London passes in a blur of rage and panic. My hands are shaking on the steering wheel, my foot pressing the accelerator harder than it should as I weave through traffic with reckless desperation.

Ginni is in prison. Alone, terrified, probably convinced that I've abandoned him just like everyone else. Probably thinking that the note I left him was just a pretty lie, that my promise to come back for him was meaningless.

He has no idea I've been falling apart without him. No idea that every day since I left has been a struggle just to remember how to breathe.

The industrial estate on the outskirts of the city is dark and mostly empty, the kind of place where legitimate businesses pack up and go home at five o'clock, leaving only the operations that prefer to work in shadows.

I screech to a halt outside a unit that looks abandoned, its windows blacked out and no sign indicating what might be inside. But I know Dante's here. He's always here when people need the kind of help that can't be found through official channels.

I bang on the metal door with my fist, not caring about subtlety or discretion. "Dante! Open the fucking door!"

The door opens almost immediately, revealing Dante's tall frame silhouetted against the dim light from inside. He takes one look at my face and steps aside without a word.

"We need to talk," I say as I push past him into the warehouse.

"I gathered that," Dante replies calmly, closing the door behind me.

I spin around to face him, and whatever he sees in my expression makes his own features sharpen with interest.

"It's about my secret," I say without preamble. "The one you knew I was keeping."

"I'm listening."

And just like that, the last of my defenses crumble. Because Ginni is in prison, and I'm the only one who gives a damn about getting him out. And if that means trusting Dante with the truth about what happened between us, then so be it.

"I need your help," I say quietly. "And when I tell you why, you're probably going to think I've lost my mind."

Dante's dark eyes study my face for a long moment, and then he nods once.

"Try me."

“I’m in love with Giovanni Torrini and I need you to help me break him out of jail.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

GINNI

Today is the day. I can feel it in my bones, in the way the morning light filters through the barred windows of my cell, in the particular quality of anticipation that fills the air like the promise of rain.

Carlo is coming for me today.

Yesterday I thought the same thing, of course. And the day before that. But today feels different. Today feels inevitable, like everything that's happened up to this point has been leading to this moment when my handsome husband finally realizes that stabbing that policeman was actually a love letter written in the most dramatic language I could manage. A sign that I understand he needed just a little more help to embrace our beautiful love. One final incentive to enable him to see clearly.

He's probably been making plans ever since he heard the news. Pulling strings, calling in favors, assembling the kind of resources that only someone like Carlo Benedetti can command. I can picture him now, pacing his elegant living room in one of those perfectly tailored suits I bought for him, his dark eyes blazing with determination as he orchestrates my rescue.

My cellmate thinks I'm delusional, but he doesn't understand. Probably because he spends most of his time taking an alarming amount of drugs. Even when he is coherent, he doesn't know what it's like to be loved by someone who commands respect and fear in equal measure, someone who wouldn't hesitate to move heaven and earth for the person he cares about.

And Carlo does care about me. He has to. Why else would he have left me that beautiful note promising to come back? Why else would he have told me he loved me if it wasn't absolutely true? My initial panic at finding the letter was understandable, but I've long since come to my senses. My wonderful Carlo would never lie to me.

Sighing happily, I leave my cellmate in his drugged haze, and make my way down to lunch.

The lunch hall is a symphony of clattering trays and crude conversation, the kind of place where civilized behavior comes to die. I navigate through the line with careful precision, selecting items that won't completely offend my palate while trying not to think about how different this is from the elegant meals Carlo and I shared in our beautiful basement sanctuary.

The mashed potatoes look like wallpaper paste. The meat is an indeterminate brown that could be beef or shoe leather. But it's temporary. All of this is temporary, because any moment now Carlo is going to burst through those doors like an avenging angel and sweep me away from this terrible place.

I find a seat at one of the long metal tables, positioning myself where I can see the entrance clearly. When he arrives, I want to be the first thing he sees. I want him to know that I've been waiting for him, that I never doubted for a moment that he would come.

I've washed and styled my hair as best I can. Salvaged this hideous uniform by rolling parts up and leaving poppers undone. It's imperative that I look my best for my love.

“Well, well, what have we here?”

The voice is gravelly and unpleasant, belonging to a man with prison tattoos covering his arms and the kind of smile that suggests violence is never far from his thoughts. He slides onto the bench across from me, flanked by two equally unsavory companions.

I've seen this trio before. Usually they have a younger man with them. A blond-haired youth who never looks up.

I heard he was taken to the infirmary this morning and that it doesn't look good. I don't know why his friends are talking to me instead of worrying about him. They should be busy making Get Well Soon cards.

“Looks like we got ourselves a new pretty boy,” one of them leers, his gaze traveling over my face with obvious intent. “Bit young to be in here with the big boys, aren't you, sweetheart?”

I straighten my spine and fix them with the kind of cool stare that should send them scurrying for cover. These creatures clearly don't understand who they're dealing with.

"I'm married," I inform them with dignity. "Happily married."

The response is immediate and devastating. All three men burst into laughter, the sound harsh and mocking in a way that makes something cold settle in my stomach.

"Married!" the first man wheezes. "Oh, that's rich. To who, your cellmate?"

"My husband," I say firmly, though their laughter is making my chest tight with an unfamiliar sensation. Uncertainty. Fear. "He'll be collecting me shortly."

"Will he now?" The man leans forward, his breath reeking of tobacco and decay. "And what makes you think your husband gives a shit about you anymore? Most wives drop their men the minute they get sent down. This so-called husband of yours has probably already found himself something even younger and tighter."

The crude words hit me like physical blows, but I refuse to let them see how much they affect me. Carlo isn't like that. Carlo loves me. He promised to come back for me, and he's a man of his word.

"You don't understand," I say, my voice perhaps a bit higher than I intended. "My husband is... he's important. Powerful. He won't leave me here."

"Sure he won't, princess." He grins, displaying an alarming lack of teeth. "But while we're waiting for Prince Charming to show up, why don't you and I get better acquainted?"

His companions snicker appreciatively, one of them making a vulgar gesture that suggests exactly what kind of 'acquaintance' they have in mind. Other prisoners are starting to gather around our table, drawn by the promise of a show. Some look excited, others merely interested, but none of them look like they're planning to intervene on my behalf.

The crowd is pressing closer now, the smell of unwashed bodies and stale cigarettes and something darker, more predatory. Their voices getting louder and more aggressive. Comments about my appearance, my perceived inexperience, what they plan to do once they get me alone.

The tattooed man's hand suddenly lands on my thigh under the table, thick fingers squeezing with unmistakable intent

The touch sends revulsion through me so pure and violent that I actually gag. I shove his hand away with both of mine.

“Don’t touch me,” I gasp. “Don’t you dare touch me! My husband is Carlo Benedetti!”

I expect the name to have the same effect it would have in civilized company. I expect them to go pale, to stammer apologies, to back away in fear and recognition.

Instead, they laugh even harder.

“Who the fuck is that?” the second man asks between guffaws. “Sounds like some pasta-eating nobody.”

“Never heard of him,” another voice calls from the growing crowd. “Must not be very important if he lets his boytoy get locked up with the rest of us animals.”

The words hit me like a sledgehammer to the chest. They don’t know. They don’t recognize Carlo’s name. They don’t understand that they’re sitting across from the wife of one of the most feared and respected men in London.

For the first time since I’ve been here, genuine terror begins to creep through my carefully maintained composure. These aren’t just crude criminals. They’re... common. Petty thieves and small-time dealers, so far removed from Carlo’s world that his name means absolutely nothing to them.

Which means his protection doesn’t extend here. Which means I’m not safe.

“Carlo Benedetti,” I repeat desperately, as if saying his name louder will somehow make them understand. “He owns the best club in London. He’s connected. Important. If you touch me, he’ll...”

“He’ll what?” A large, sweaty man grins, showing teeth stained brown with neglect. “Send us a strongly worded letter?”

The tattooed man’s hand is back on my thigh, gripping harder this time, fingers digging into my flesh through the rough fabric of my prison uniform. The other men are laughing, making crude suggestions about what they’d like to do to Carlo Benedetti’s pretty little boy-wife.

“I bet he’s never been properly broken in,” one of them speculates loudly. “Rich little gay-boy like that, probably all silk and perfume and no experience with taking it rough.”

“We’ll fix that,” another promises with obvious relish. “Teach him what it means to be a real man’s property.”

My heart is hammering against my ribs so hard I can barely breathe. This isn’t how it’s supposed to happen. This isn’t what I envisioned. Carlo is supposed to arrive before anyone can touch me, before anyone can treat me like some common criminal instead of the cherished wife of a powerful man.

But he’s not here. And these animals don’t care who I’m married to because they’ve never heard of my husband.

The crowd is getting bigger now, more aggressive. Men pressing closer, hands reaching out to touch my hair, my face, my body. Comments getting cruder and more explicit about what they plan to do once they get me alone.

“Get your hands off me,” I hiss, trying to pull away, but the tattooed man’s grip only tightens.

“Or what, princess? You’ll call your imaginary husband? Scream for guards who don’t give a shit what happens to pretty boys who think they’re too good for this place?”

The mockery in his voice, the casual disregard for my dignity, the complete dismissal of everything I am and everything Carlo means to me, sends something snapping inside my chest.

I grab my fork with my free hand and drive it deep into the flesh of his wrist.

The man screams, jerking his hand back as blood wells around the metal tines. “You fucking psycho!”

But I’m already moving, already on my feet, the fork still clutched in my hand like a weapon. Because if they don’t respect Carlo’s name, if his protection doesn’t extend to this place, then I have to protect myself.

“I told you not to touch me,” I snarl, and I barely recognize my own voice. This is something primal and desperate and absolutely murderous.

The wounded man lunges for me, his companions right behind him. Other prisoners are shouting, some backing away, others moving closer like sharks drawn to blood. Guards are blowing whistles somewhere in the distance, but they’re too far away, too late.

The fork isn’t much of a weapon, but it’s all I have. I slash out wildly, catching someone across the face, feeling warm blood splash across my hand. Someone grabs my hair, yanking my head back, and I bite down hard on the nearest piece of flesh I can find.

More screaming. More blood. Hands grabbing at me from all directions, trying to pin me down, promising to hurt me in ways I don't want to think about.

This is hell. This is what happens when you're abandoned by everyone who's supposed to love you, when even your husband's name can't protect you from the wolves.

A fist connects with my ribs, driving the air from my lungs. Another catches me in the face, splitting my lip and filling my mouth with the metallic taste of blood. But I keep fighting, keep slashing with my makeshift weapon, because if I stop they'll tear me apart.

“Carlo!” I scream his name even though he’s not here, even though he can’t hear me, even though he might never come for me at all. “Carlo!”

But Carlo doesn’t answer. Nobody answers except the brutal hands and cruel laughter and the terrible realization that I’m completely, utterly alone.

The guards finally reach us, batons swinging, tear gas filling the air, but it’s too late. The damage is done. My beautiful fantasy about being rescued by my powerful husband lies in pieces around me, mixed with blood and broken teeth and the complete destruction of everything I believed about my place in the world.

As they drag me away in restraints, my face already swelling from the blows, I catch sight of my reflection in the metal surface of a tray that’s been knocked to the floor.

I look exactly like what I am. Not the cherished wife of Carlo Benedetti. Not someone important and protected and loved.

Just another broken prisoner who got what was coming to him.

And somewhere in the back of my mind, a terrible voice whispers that maybe Marco was right all along.

Maybe prison is exactly where I belong.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

CARLO

Dante's warehouse feels like the center of the universe right now, all concrete walls and industrial lighting and the absolute privacy that lets a man plan the impossible without interference. I've been pacing for the better part of an hour while Dante sits calmly at his desk, making calls and taking notes like we're planning a business merger instead of a jailbreak.

"Transport route is confirmed," he says, hanging up his latest call. "Prison van takes the A40 to the Old Bailey every Tuesday and Friday for court appearances. Single escort vehicle, two guards plus driver. Standard procedure."

I stop pacing long enough to look at the crude map he's sketched out on the whiteboard behind his desk. Roads marked in black, potential intercept points circled in red, escape routes highlighted in blue. It looks simple. Clean. The kind of operation Dante could probably execute in his sleep.

"Traffic patterns?" I ask, forcing myself to focus on the technical details instead of the growing panic in my chest.

"Rush hour works in our favor," Dante replies, consulting his notes. "Convoy moves slowly, plenty of cover vehicles. We can position ourselves at this roundabout here." He taps a red circle on the map. "Natural bottleneck, easy to create a delay that looks like normal traffic congestion."

"Security response time?"

“Depends on the nature of the incident. If it looks like an accident, mechanical failure, something non-threatening, they’ll probably wait for backup before moving. That gives us maybe ten minutes.”

Ten minutes to extract Ginni from an armored prison van and disappear into London traffic. It sounds impossible when he puts it like that, but I’ve seen Dante pull off operations with tighter margins and higher stakes.

But it’s not happening until Friday. Four days away.

Four days of Ginni alone in that hellhole with God knows what kind of animals circling him like vultures.

“We can’t wait that long,” I say for the tenth time in the last hour. My voice is getting more strained with each repetition, the words feeling like gravel in my throat.

“We don’t have a choice,” Dante replies with the patience of a man who’s used to dealing with irrational colleagues. “The courthouse transport is our only viable option. Trying to break him out of the prison itself would be suicide.”

“There has to be another way.”

“There isn’t.” Dante’s voice is flat, final. “I’ve looked at every angle. The only time he’s reachable is during transport. Friday is the earliest we can move.”

I resume pacing, my hands clenched into fists at my sides. The warehouse floor is going to start showing a path where I’ve been wearing it down with my restless movement. Four days. Anything could happen in four days. Ginni could be hurt, brutalized, broken beyond repair while I’m sitting here making plans and waiting for the perfect opportunity.

“What about inside?” I ask desperately. “Someone we can buy, threaten, whatever it takes to keep him safe until Friday?”

Dante shakes his head. “Already checked. None of our people are in his wing. Different classification, different security level. The guys we know are all in the high-security blocks with the serious criminals. Your boy hasn’t been sentenced yet, so he’s in remand with the petty thieves and drug dealers.”

Which should be safer, in theory. Less violent, less organized. But it also means less predictable, less controllable. At least with professional criminals, you know the rules. With desperate amateurs, anything can happen.

“I’m working on it,” Dante continues, his voice gentler now. “Got feelers out to see if anyone has connections in that wing. Guards we can lean on, inmates who owe favors. But it takes time to establish contact, longer to build trust.”

Time we don’t have. Time Ginni might not have.

The irony isn’t lost on me that I’m sitting here worrying about Ginni’s safety when I was the one who put him in danger in the first place. If I’d acted sooner, if I’d gotten him away from his awful family and into that lovely institution I had lined up. If I had gotten him proper help instead of letting him spiral into whatever desperate state led to that stabbing...

I sink into the chair across from Dante’s desk and bury my face in my hands. The rational part of my mind knows he’s right. Knows that rushing in without proper planning will only get us all killed or arrested. But the rest of me is screaming that every minute we delay is another minute Ginni is in danger.

“Tell me about him.”

Dante’s voice cuts through my spiral of anxiety. I look up to find him studying me with those dark, unreadable eyes.

“What?”

“Ginni. Tell me about him. Help me understand why Carlo Benedetti is willing to risk everything for one boy.”

The question catches me off guard. In all the frantic planning and desperate strategizing, I haven’t actually explained much about my relationship with Ginni beyond the basics. The heavily edited basics, carefully scrubbed of anything that might make me sound like I’m completely irrational for loving him.

“We’ve been... seeing each other,” I say carefully. “For a few months. His family doesn’t approve. Too worried about their reputation to accept that their son is gay and feminine.”

It’s not entirely a lie. The timeline is wrong, and I’m leaving out some rather crucial details, but the basic emotional truth is there. His family does disapprove. They are worried about their reputation. And I do care about him far more than is sane, sensible or safe.

“So you’ve been sneaking around,” Dante observes.

“Something like that.”

“And then?”

I pause, searching for a version of events that doesn't involve kidnapping and attempted murder-suicide and escape from a basement prison that had started to feel like a sanctuary.

"I got freaked out about my own reputation. About Marco's reaction... and I broke it off."

"And he couldn't handle it."

"No." That part, at least, is absolutely true. "He's not... he's sensitive. Emotional. The thought of being separated from me... he snapped."

Dante nods slowly, as if this all makes perfect sense. "So he stabbed a cop to get arrested. Force your hand. Make you choose between him and your comfortable life."

The cold delivery of his assessment makes my chest tight. Is Dante right? Were Ginni's actions less about escaping his family and more about getting my attention and forcing me to act?

Is that really what Ginni was thinking? That I needed to be forced to choose him? That he had to create a crisis dramatic enough to prove my feelings were real?

If so, he was right. Without this incentive, I would have kept hiding, kept making excuses, kept telling myself I was doing the right thing until I shipped him off to an expensive institution and never saw him again.

But now... now the thought of Ginni in danger has blown away all of my denial. I can't escape my feelings when they are clawing at me like this. Ginni is in prison and I can't eat, can't sleep, can't think of a single other thing.

"I remember him," Dante says suddenly, his voice startling me out of my spiral. "From Christmas. At Dario and Molly's."

The memory hits me hard. Christmas dinner, not so long ago but also an entire lifetime ago. Ginni sitting quietly beside me with that carefully controlled intensity radiating off him like heat.

"You brought him," Dante continues. "Said he was Marco's little brother, needed somewhere to spend the holiday because his family had gone back to Italy without him."

I nod, not trusting my voice. I remember that evening with painful clarity. The way Ginni had watched everyone with those assessing eyes, how he'd only really come alive when Molly started talking about wedding planning.

"He barely spoke," Dante observes. "Just sat there watching, taking everything in. Most people would have called him sullen, antisocial."

“But not you.”

“No. Not me.” Dante’s smile is sharp and knowing. “I recognized it. That stillness, that way of cataloguing threats and opportunities. He wasn’t being rude. He was hunting.”

The word sends a chill down my spine because it’s so accurate. That’s exactly what Ginni was doing that night, even in a room full of my friends. Assessing, calculating, deciding who was safe and who wasn’t.

“Didn’t seem weak to me,” Dante continues. “Quite the opposite, actually. Takes a special kind of control to sit in a room full of predators and never show your throat.”

I look up sharply, surprised by the insight. “You think he’s strong?”

“Don’t you?”

The question forces me to really consider it. Ginni, strong? My beautiful, fragile boy who falls apart when there is a power cut?

But then I think about everything he’s endured. His family’s rejection, their attempts to institutionalize him, years of being told he’s broken and wrong and fundamentally unlovable. The fact that he survived all that with his capacity for joy intact, his ability to love still fierce and uncompromising.

And then there’s the fact he managed to abduct me and keep me prisoner for two weeks.

“Yes,” I say slowly. “He is strong. Stronger than I gave him credit for.”

“Then why are you so worried about him in prison?”

The question cuts right to the heart of my terror. “Because he’s strong, not invincible. And his grip on reality...” I pause, trying to find a way to explain without revealing too much. “It’s fragile. When he gets desperate, when he feels cornered, he doesn’t always make rational choices.”

“Like stabbing a policeman.”

“Like stabbing a policeman,” I agree. “And in prison...” I trail off, unable to voice my worst fears.

“You’re worried he’ll snap again,” Dante finishes. “Do something that gets him hurt or killed.”

“He’s entirely capable of stabbing the wrong person,” I say quietly. “Someone who’ll retaliate in ways that...” I can’t finish the thought.

Dante leans back in his chair, considering this. “The boy who charmed Molly with his wedding planning ideas?”

“The same boy who put a kitchen knife between a constable’s ribs in broad daylight,” I remind him.

“Fair point.” Dante’s expression grows thoughtful. “But that wasn’t random violence, was it? That was calculated desperation. A man making the only play he could see to change his circumstances.”

I want to argue, but I can’t. Because Dante’s right. I strongly suspect that Ginni didn’t stab that policeman in a fit of rage or in an episode of heightened delusion. He planned it, chose his target carefully, made sure he’d be arrested rather than shot. It was the act of someone who saw no other options and decided to create one.

“Which means he’s probably not randomly attacking people in prison,” Dante continues. “He’s more likely to be calculating his survival, figuring out the social dynamics, looking for angles.”

“Or he’s terrified out of his mind and about to do something monumentally stupid.”

“Maybe. But I think you’re underestimating him.”

I sigh heavily. “Perhaps. But you’ve seen him. He is beautiful. He looks small and delicate, and he’s locked up with men who aren’t exactly gentlemen. All the brains in the world can’t defeat brawn, in a small enclosed space.”

Dante’s expression shifts. Something that might be pity fills his dark eyes, and seeing that, makes me wince. Part of me was hoping he’d dismiss my fears, tell me I was jumping to conclusions.

The fact that Dante agrees with me, the man who excels at reading situations, is turning my blood to ice.

Dante pulls out his phone, scrolling through contacts. “Let me make another call. See if my guy has heard anything about a pretty Italian boy in trouble.”

While he goes through his contacts, I try to convince myself that his first assertion was right. That Ginni’s strength will carry him through this. That the same intelligence that helped him plan my kidnapping down to the smallest detail will help him navigate prison politics until I can get him out.

But all I can think about is how he looked that night at Christmas. Beautiful and delicate. My best friend’s little brother. All wide eyes and short skirt.

“He’s young,” I say quietly. “Twenty-one. Sometimes I wonder if I’m...” I trail off, not sure how to voice my doubts without sounding like I’m

fishing for reassurance.

“If you’re what?”

“A creep. For wanting someone so much younger than me.”

Dante shrugs with the casual indifference of a man who’s seen every possible variation of human depravity and found most of it boring.

“He’s an adult. He chose you. And you’re right, he’s very pretty, like a little china doll. I can see why he caught your attention.”

The last comment hits like a punch to the gut. Something possessive and violent ignites in my soul, and I find myself halfway to my feet before I catch myself.

“Careful,” I growl.

Dante’s eyes narrow immediately, and for a moment the temperature in the room drops ten degrees. I remember, suddenly and vividly, exactly who I’m talking to. This isn’t just my friend Dante who helps with difficult problems. This is the man who can extract any secret from any person given enough time and the right tools.

The man who could probably kill me with his bare hands if he decided I was a threat.

The silence stretches between us, heavy with the promise of violence. Dante’s posture hasn’t changed, but something in his stillness reminds me that predators are often most dangerous when they appear calm.

“Sorry,” I say quickly, sinking back into my chair. “I didn’t mean to...”

“Yes, you did.” But Dante’s sharp look has lost its edge, returning to something closer to amusement. “Possessive bastard, aren’t you?”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. The truth is, the thought of anyone else even looking at Ginni the way Dante just described him makes me want to commit violence. The idea that he’s trapped in prison with men who might see him as prey, who might hurt him...

“Relax,” Dante continues, leaning back in his chair. “I’m not interested in your boy.”

The casual dismissal should be reassuring, but it isn’t. Because if Dante, who’s seen everything and has no reason to lie, thinks Ginni is pretty enough to comment on, then every man in that prison is thinking the same thing.

“You two are good together. I saw that at Christmas. You were stupid not to have realized it sooner.”

The simple statement hits hard. Because he's right. I was stupid. unbelievably, devastatingly stupid to waste so much time denying what was right in front of me.

I hang my head and pull at my hair, frustration and regret warring for dominance in my chest. "I know."

"But you realize it now."

"Too late."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Dante leans forward. "Are you willing to do this?"

"Absolutely."

"Despite everything that could go wrong? And even if the rescue goes right, everyone is going to know Carlo Benedetti is gay and in love with a pretty little femboy he stole from the Torrini family. Are you ready for that?"

The questions should give me pause. Should make me consider what I'm risking, what I might lose. My business, my reputation, my freedom if we get caught. The life I've carefully constructed over years of hard work and careful planning.

But instead, all I can think about is Ginni's face the last time I saw him. The way his eyes lit up when I said I wanted to kiss him. The way he melted into my arms like he'd finally found home.

"Yes," I say without hesitation.

"Good." Dante nods once, sharp and decisive. "Then we'll get him out. Friday morning, when they transport him to court. Clean intercept, minimal violence if we do it right. But violence is always an option if we need it."

The casualness with which he discusses potentially deadly chaos is both reassuring and terrifying. This is why I need Dante. Not just for his technical skills, but for his complete lack of moral squeamishness when it comes to protecting the people in his circle.

I close my eyes and try not to think about what might be happening to Ginni right now. Try not to imagine hands that shouldn't touch him, voices speaking to him with disrespect, violence that he's not equipped to handle.

Four days feels like a lifetime.

But Dante's right about one thing. If anyone can survive four days in hell and come out the other side, it's my beautiful, stubborn, completely unbreakable little menace.

I just have to have faith that love is enough to carry him through until I can get him out.

And if anyone has hurt him by the time I reach him, I'll make sure they regret it for whatever's left of their lives.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

GINNI

This cell is nothing like the basement.

There are no silk sheets here, no projected sunrises painting the ceiling with gentle light. No warmth, no beauty, no careful attention to comfort and happiness. Just bare concrete walls that weep moisture in the corners, a floor so cold it burns through the thin fabric of my prison uniform, and darkness so complete it feels like drowning.

They gave me a piece of foam to sleep on. It's barely an inch thick, stained with things I don't want to identify, and it does nothing to cushion the unforgiving hardness of the floor beneath. One thin blanket that smells of industrial detergent and other people's despair. That's it. That's everything they think I deserve.

Every part of my body aches from the fight. My ribs throb with each breath, my split lip tastes of copper and salt, and there's a constant ringing in my ears from where someone's fist connected with the side of my head. The swelling around my left eye has gotten worse, turning my vision into something fractured and uncertain.

But the physical pain is nothing compared to the cold. It seeps through the concrete, through the pathetic excuse for bedding, straight into my bones. I've been shivering for hours, my teeth chattering so hard I'm afraid they might crack. The guards took my shoes when they threw me in here, and my bare feet are so numb I can barely feel them anymore.

Worst of all is the darkness.

I've always hated the dark. Even as a child, I needed at least a sliver of light to feel safe, to keep the whispers at bay. In the basement with Carlo, there was never true darkness. The projector cast its gentle glow and there was always something to push back against the terrible emptiness that lives in absolute black.

Here, there's nothing. Just an endless void that presses against my eyes like a weight, making shapes that aren't there, summoning voices that speak in languages I don't recognize. They're getting louder as the hours pass, more insistent, more real.

But I need to be brave. I need to hold on to what matters.

Carlo loves me. He left me a note promising to come back for me. He said he loved me, and my wonderful husband would never lie about something so important. He's probably making plans right now, gathering resources, assembling the kind of operation that will get me out of this nightmare.

Any minute now, he's going to burst through that door and sweep me away from this place. Back to warmth and light and the kind of love that makes everything else bearable.

I just have to hold on a little longer.

The sound of footsteps in the corridor makes my heart leap with desperate hope. Heavy boots on concrete, getting closer. This is it. This has to be it. Carlo has come for me, just like I knew he would.

The slot in the door slides open with a metallic scrape, and I scramble to my feet despite the protests from my battered body.

“Carlo?” I whisper, my voice hoarse from hours of silence.

But it's not Carlo's face that appears in the small opening. It's a prison guard I don't recognize, middle-aged, with small eyes and a smile that makes my skin crawl.

“Oh dear,” he says, his voice carrying a tone I don't like at all. “Look at the state of you.”

The door opens with a grinding of metal on metal, and he steps into my cell. The space immediately feels smaller, more dangerous. He's not particularly tall, but he fills the room with a presence that makes every instinct I have scream danger.

He looks up at something in the corner near the ceiling, reaches up, and turns it toward the wall with a casual gesture that sends ice through my

veins. The security camera. He's just disabled the only thing that might have protected me.

"Cold in here, isn't it?" he observes, his gaze traveling over my shivering form with obvious satisfaction. "Solitary's no fun. Especially for someone like you. Someone soft."

I wrap my arms around myself, trying to preserve what little warmth I have left. "It's fine. I'm fine."

"Are you, though?" He takes a step closer, and I automatically back away until my shoulders hit the wall. "Because you look pretty miserable to me, pretty boy. Hurt and cold and all alone."

The way he says 'pretty boy' makes my stomach turn. It's not Carlo's voice wrapping around those words with love and desire. It's something ugly and predatory and completely wrong.

"I could help you out," he continues, his voice dropping to what he probably thinks is a seductive purr. "Make things more comfortable. An extra blanket, maybe. Some real food instead of the slop they usually serve in solitary. Hell, I might even be able to arrange a shower. Bet you'd like that, wouldn't you? Getting clean again?"

Hope blooms in my chest. Perhaps I misjudged him. Maybe there are still good people in this place. Maybe not everyone sees me as just another criminal to be punished and forgotten.

"That would be wonderful," I breathe. "Thank you. That's so kind of you."

His smile widens, showing teeth stained yellow from years of cigarettes. "Oh, I'm very kind. Very generous. But you know what they say about free lunches."

The hope dies as quickly as it came, replaced by an understanding so terrible it makes me nauseous. "What do you mean?"

"I think you know what I mean." He takes another step forward, and now I'm trapped between him and the wall with nowhere to run. "A pretty thing like you, all alone in here with no one to protect you. You're going to need friends. Someone to look out for you."

His hand reaches out toward my face, and I jerk back so violently that my head cracks against the concrete behind me.

"Don't touch me," I gasp.

"Now, now," he chides, his voice taking on a patronizing tone that makes my skin crawl. "That's no way to treat someone who's trying to help you.

I'm offering to make your stay here much more pleasant. All you have to do is be nice to me."

The word 'nice' carries implications that make bile rise in my throat. I think of Carlo, of the way he touches me with reverence and desire and perfect love. The idea of this stranger putting his hands on me, demanding things that belong to my husband...

"You can't," I whisper. "My husband... he's a dangerous man. Important. Connected. If you touch me, he'll..."

The guard throws back his head and laughs, a sound so cruel and mocking that it echoes off the concrete walls like breaking glass.

"Your husband?" he wheezes. "Oh, that's rich. What husband, little psycho? The imaginary one who was supposed to rescue you before you ended up in here?"

"He's not imaginary!" The words tear from my throat with more force than I intended. "His name is Carlo Benedetti, and he's going to come for me!"

"Carlo Benedetti," the guard repeats slowly, like he's savoring each syllable. "Never heard of him. And trust me, if he was as important as you think, I'd know the name."

"He owns a nightclub," I insist desperately. "He's powerful. He's..." I stutter to a stop. I can't tell a prison guard that Carlo Benedetti is a capo in the mafia. The trusted right-hand man of the Ajello heir. "He... He'll be here soon, you'll see." I finish lamely.

"I don't see him anywhere, do you?" The guard looks around the empty cell with exaggerated confusion. "Where is this powerful husband of yours? Why hasn't he gotten you out of here already if he cares so much?"

The questions hit like physical blows because they're the same ones I've been trying not to ask myself. Why isn't Carlo here yet? How long have I been in this place? Hours? Days? Time has no meaning in this lightless box, but surely it's been long enough for him to have done something.

"He'll be here soon," I repeat, but my voice sounds hollow even to my own ears.

The guard shakes his head, his expression shifting from cruel amusement to something almost pitying. "Oh, pretty boy. They were right about you. You are fucking mental, aren't you?"

The casual cruelty of the words, the dismissive way he says them, makes something inside my chest crack and bleed.

“Nobody is coming to save you,” he continues, his voice gentle now in the way people use with the very sick or very stupid. “And I can do whatever I like to you because nobody believes little psychos. Who’s going to take your word over mine? A delusional prisoner with a history of violence, against a respected prison guard?”

He takes another step forward, close enough that I can smell the stale cigarettes on his breath and see the predatory gleam in his small, dark eyes.

“So here’s how this is going to work,” he says softly. “You’re going to be very, very nice to me. And in return, I’m going to make sure your time in solitary isn’t completely miserable. Refuse, and I’ll make sure every day you spend in here is worse than the last.”

I stare at him, my mind struggling to process what’s happening. This can’t be real. This can’t be how the story goes. Carlo is supposed to save me. Love is supposed to triumph over everything else. Beautiful stories are supposed to have beautiful endings. That’s how it works. That’s how it always works. In movies. In books. In my visions.

But as the guard reaches for me again, his intentions written clearly across his leering face, I finally understand the truth that’s been staring at me all along.

He’s right. I am crazy. I’m wrong about everything.

My vision stutters and flickers. A nauseating dance between truth and delusion. Like a candle burning out, my carefully constructed fantasy dies in one last splutter of light. Leaving only cold, stark, horrifying reality behind.

The real world is a crushing weight on my chest. I’d scream if I could breathe. It’s too much. Too awful. Too real.

Carlo doesn’t love me. If he did, he’d be here by now. He’d have moved heaven and earth to get me out of this place instead of leaving me to rot in a concrete cell where guards can do whatever they want to me.

The note was a lie. A pretty fiction to make me feel better about being abandoned. A cunning trick to stop me from taking more sleeping pills on my own, so Carlo wouldn’t feel bad. The kind of thing you tell a child to stop them from crying, not a promise you actually intend to keep.

Nobody is coming to save me because nobody loves me enough to risk anything for me. Nobody ever has. Not my family, not any friends, and certainly not the man I was stupid enough to think of as my husband.

The man I abducted and chained to my bed. The man I did things to that he didn't want, at least not at first. The man I nearly killed because I thought it was romantic.

Of course he escaped the first moment he could. He's probably celebrating his freedom right now. He doesn't love me. He is just my brother's best friend. A man whose only crime was to be nice to me. To show an interest in me.

It's not his fault I latched onto it. Twisted it into something false. Wove a beautiful fantasy out of scraps of off-handed kindness.

Carlo had no idea what I would turn his casual, polite attention into. He didn't know he was the only person to be nice to me. Or that I would make such a big deal out of something so small.

He didn't foresee that he would be imprisoned and violated simply because he tolerated his best friend's crazy little brother.

He's just nice to everyone. I'm not special. Our love and our marriage exist only in my hallucinations. It's not real.

The only thing that's real is this cell. This cold, this darkness, this guard who's about to take things from me that I wanted to share only with the one man who deserves them.

This is my life now. This is what I actually deserve. I abducted and abused the only person who ever treated me well. So it is only fair that I pay the price.

The beautiful dream is over, and I'm finally awake.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

CARLO

The roundabout looks exactly like every other piece of London infrastructure. Unremarkable, functional, a place thousands of cars pass through every day without a second thought. But from our position in the stolen van parked behind a lorry delivering office supplies, it feels like the center of the universe.

Everything hinges on the next few minutes.

I check my watch for the fifth time in as many minutes. The prison transport should be here any moment, following the same route they've used every Tuesday and Friday for the past eighteen months. Dante's intelligence has been flawless so far, but that doesn't stop the cold sweat breaking out across my forehead.

"Relax," Pietro says from the driver's seat. He's the best wheelman I know, completely unflappable even when the job involves intercepting government vehicles in broad daylight. "You're making me nervous with all that fidgeting."

"Sorry." I force myself to stop checking the time, stop adjusting my position, stop running through everything that could go wrong.

But Cristo, there's so much that could go wrong.

The transport could be late, or early, or take a different route entirely. The guards could be armed. There could be backup vehicles we don't know

about. The whole thing could be a trap designed to catch people exactly like us doing exactly this.

And even if everything goes according to plan, even if we manage to extract Ginni without anyone getting killed, there's still the question of what state we'll find him in.

The contact Dante finally managed to reach inside the prison had been frustratingly vague. Ginni had been in a fight in the lunch hall, multiple injuries, taken to solitary confinement afterward. But no details about how bad the injuries were, or what might have happened to him in the days since.

The not knowing is eating me alive.

I think about my beautiful menace, alone in solitary, probably convinced I've abandoned him. The thought of him scared and hurt and thinking I don't care enough to come for him is eviscerating me.

I've tried telling myself Ginni is safer in solitary. But I don't believe it. I know guards can be worse than inmates. And thinking about that makes me want to scream.

He should never have been in that place. Should never have felt desperate enough to stab a policeman just to get my attention. Should never have doubted, even for a moment, that he was precious and wanted and absolutely worth fighting for.

I remember the conversation we had in the basement, when he was spiraling about his worth, about whether anyone would ever really want him. I'd told him that someday, someone was going to look at him and think, "That one, that's the one for me, he's crazy but he's mine."

I just wish I'd realized sooner that someone was me.

Ginni, with his impossible beauty and his fierce intelligence and his capacity for joy that can transform even the most mundane moments into something magical. The way he sang for me, putting his whole heart into every note. The way he looks at the flowers and candles, as if he is seeing the divine made manifest. The way he touches everything with such reverence, like the world is made of spun glass.

He should have been cherished his whole life. Should have grown up surrounded by people who saw his sensitivity as a gift rather than a flaw, who nurtured his creativity instead of trying to crush it out of him. Ginni should never have had to resort to kidnapping someone just to feel loved.

But his family sees him as an embarrassment. A problem to be managed and hidden away. And I was too fucking blind to see what was right in front of me until it was almost too late.

“There,” Pietro says quietly, nodding toward the road ahead.

The prison van comes into view, exactly on schedule. White with reinforced windows and government plates, flanked by a single escort car just like Dante predicted. It looks so ordinary, so unremarkable, except for the fact that somewhere inside is the most important person in the world.

“Remember,” I say into the radio, speaking to the crew positioned at various points around the roundabout, “minimal violence. We want this to look like an accident, not an assassination attempt.”

A chorus of acknowledgments crackles back through the static.

The van approaches the roundabout at a steady pace, the driver following normal traffic patterns, completely unaware that he’s about to become part of someone else’s plan.

Pietro eases our van forward, timing our approach perfectly. As the prison transport reaches the roundabout, a lorry that’s entering on the far side suddenly lurches forward, its driver apparently having mechanical difficulties.

The resulting collision isn’t serious enough to hurt anyone, but it’s spectacular enough to block two of the four exits from the roundabout. The escort car immediately moves to investigate, leaving the prison van momentarily isolated.

That’s our cue.

Pietro guns the engine, bringing us alongside the prison transport just as its driver realizes something’s wrong. I’m already moving, jumping from our van before we’ve come to a complete stop.

The rear door of the prison van opens as a guard tries to assess the situation outside. He’s middle-aged, soft around the middle, clearly not expecting to deal with anything more dangerous than a routine traffic incident.

I barrel into him with enough force to send him sprawling back into the van’s interior. His head slams against the metal floor hard enough to knock him out.

His partner, a younger man with nervous eyes, reaches for his radio, but my attention is focused entirely on the figure slumped beside him.

Ginni.

My heart stops beating entirely.

He's barely recognizable. His beautiful face is a map of bruises, one eye swollen nearly shut, his lip split and crusted with dried blood. The prison uniform hangs loose on his frame, making him look smaller and more fragile than I've ever seen him.

But it's the expression in his visible eye that destroys me. Hollow. Defeated. Like someone who's given up hope entirely.

The younger guard still has his hand on Ginni's arm, holding him in place with casual indifference to his obvious injuries. The sight sends rage through me so pure and violent that for a moment I can't see anything but red.

"Get your hands off my wife!" I snarl.

The guard looks up at me with confusion and dawning terror, but he doesn't let go fast enough. I move without conscious thought, my fist connecting with his jaw hard enough to snap his head back. He crumples immediately, joining his partner in unconsciousness.

Ginni stares at me with an expression I can't read. Shock, maybe. Or disbelief. Like he's seeing a ghost instead of the man who's spent every waking moment of the last four days planning this rescue.

"Come on, Menace," I say gently, reaching for him. "Let's get you out of here."

He doesn't resist as I help him to his feet, but he doesn't seem entirely present either. Like part of him is still trapped somewhere else, somewhere darker than this van.

We jump down from the transport together, and Pietro already has our vehicle positioned perfectly. I bundle Ginni into the back seat and throw myself in beside him as Pietro pulls away from the scene with the kind of smooth precision that makes him worth every penny I pay him.

In the distance, I can hear sirens, but they're still far enough away that we should be clear long before they arrive. The whole operation took less than three minutes from start to finish. Clean, professional, exactly what Dante promised.

But none of that matters now. All that matters is the broken boy sitting beside me, staring at nothing with those haunted eyes.

I turn my full attention to Ginni, my hands moving over him automatically, checking for injuries I might have missed. The bruises on his face are the worst of it, but there are others. Defensive wounds on his arms,

scraped knuckles that suggest he gave as good as he got in whatever fight landed him in solitary.

“Are you okay, baby?” I ask softly.

He doesn’t answer. Doesn’t even seem to hear me.

“Ginni?”

The worry in my voice finally seems to penetrate whatever fog he’s lost in. He blinks slowly, like someone waking from a dream.

“I got into a fight,” he says quietly.

“I can see that, sweetheart.” I brush a gentle finger across an unbruised patch of his cheek. “What happened?”

“They put me in solitary.”

“I’m sorry.” The words feel completely inadequate. Sorry doesn’t begin to cover the guilt eating at my chest, the knowledge that he suffered alone while I was making plans and gathering resources.

Silence stretches between us, filled only with the sound of London traffic and Pietro’s careful, yet swift navigation through the city. But there’s something in Ginni’s expression that’s setting off alarm bells in my head. Something haunted and deeply sad that goes far beyond just physical injuries.

“Did anyone...” I start, then stop. The question is too terrible to voice, but I have to know. “Did they...”

Ginni shakes his head quickly. “No.”

Relief floods through me.

“Would you still love me if they had?”

The question hits like a sucker punch, knocking all the air out of my lungs. The fact that he even has to ask, that he could doubt for even a second how I feel about him, makes my chest tight with something that feels like grief.

I cup his face carefully in my hands, mindful of the bruises, trying to pour everything I feel into my voice.

“Of course I would,” I tell him fiercely. “Nothing could ever change how much I love you. Nothing.”

He blinks at me, and for a moment some of the hollowness leaves his eyes.

“I had to bite a guard who wanted to,” he says matter-of-factly. “I bit him hard. There was so much blood and his screams were so high-pitched.”

The casual way he delivers this information, like he's discussing the weather, tells me everything I need to know about what he's been through. My beautiful, artistic boy, forced to violence just to protect himself from predators who saw his vulnerability as an invitation.

I lean forward and press a soft kiss to his forehead, breathing in the familiar scent of him underneath the institutional soap and fear-sweat.

“That’s my little Menace,” I murmur against his skin.

Ginni goes very still. When I pull back to look at him, he’s staring at me with an expression I can’t identify. Something between wonder and disbelief and terrible fragility.

He reaches out slowly, hesitantly, and pokes me gently on the nose.

“You can’t be real,” he whispers. “You can’t really have come for me. You don’t love me. I abducted you. I did terrible things to you.”

The broken way he says it, like he’s confessing to the worst sin imaginable, makes my heart crack in half. This is what he’s been telling himself. This is the story he’s been living with. That he’s a monster who deserves to be abandoned and forgotten.

“I am real,” I tell him, catching his hand and pressing it flat against my chest so he can feel my heartbeat. “I did come for you. And I do love you. More than anything in this world.”

He stares at me for a long, long time, searching my face for signs of deception or pity or obligation. Finding only the truth I should have told him years ago.

“Have I gone crazy again?” he asks in a small voice.

Instead of answering with words, I lean forward and kiss him. Soft and careful, mindful of his split lip, but real and warm and absolutely present.

When I pull back, his visible eye is wide with something that might be hope.

“No, my love,” I whisper. “This is very real.”

The sob that escapes him is heartbreakingly intense. All the fear and pain and abandonment of not only the last few days but an entire lifetime, pouring out of him in a single broken sound.

He climbs onto my lap like a child seeking comfort, curling himself against my chest with desperate need. His whole body is trembling like a leaf in a storm, and the quiet sounds he’s making are tearing my heart into smaller and smaller pieces.

I wrap my arms around him and hold on tight, my own tears falling silently onto his dark hair. Because this is my fault. All of it. His desperation, his imprisonment, his suffering. If I'd been brave enough to admit my feelings sooner, if I'd said yes to that hot chocolate invitation all those years ago instead of running scared from what I was beginning to feel...

“I’m so sorry I was so stupid for so long,” I whisper against his ear. “I should have said yes to that hot chocolate that day you were back from uni. I should have said yes and I should have stopped anything bad from ever happening to you.”

Futile words. Useless ones. Sentences that don’t even make sense, not least because the moment I’ve picked for my fantasy is still too late. That day with him smiling at me, sweater slipping off his shoulder, is not soon enough. That day was years after Ginni had been sent to conversion therapy. Bad things had already happened to him. Terrible things. Awful things done to him because he told his big brother he loved me.

And he still smiled at me with all the sunshine in the world.

Ginni doesn’t respond with words, just cries harder, his tears soaking through my shirt to the skin beneath and his grip on me tightens, like he’s afraid I might disappear if he lets go.

I think about how happy he was in the basement. So exuberant, so capable of finding joy in simple things like a perfectly prepared meal or dancing alone to music only he could hear. The way his whole face would light up when I smiled at him, like my approval was the only thing in the world that mattered.

Beneath his intensity and fondness for knives and abduction plots, Ginni is someone bright and joyful and precious.

And I’m never going to let anyone hurt him again.

As Pietro navigates us through London towards home, I hold my broken wife and make silent promises. Ginni is never going to have to cry like this again. Never going to doubt that he’s loved and wanted and perfect just the way he is.

I’m going to spend the rest of my life making sure he knows exactly how much he means to me.

Starting right now.

CHAPTER FORTY

GINNI

The house is perfect.

Not just the decor, though I've spent days making sure every detail is exactly right. Fresh flowers in crystal vases, candles at precisely the correct height to create ambiance without overwhelming the conversation, table linens pressed to mathematical perfection. Everything arranged with the kind of dedicated attention to beauty that I bring to all my favorite projects.

But it's more than that. It's the warmth filling every room, the sound of laughter drifting from the sitting room where Carlo is entertaining the first of our guests, and the knowledge that this elegant space is ours. Really ours. Home in a way I never thought I'd have.

My dreams of Carlo and I choosing a house together were unnecessary. I fit perfectly here, and there is something magical about that.

I smooth my hands down the front of my sapphire silk shirt, the one that makes my eyes look like jewels, and check my reflection in the hallway mirror one more time. I want to look perfect tonight. For Carlo, for our friends, for this beautiful life we're building together.

It's been three months since the rescue. Three months of healing and learning to trust that this is real, that I'm not going to wake up in that prison cell and find it was all another delusion. Carlo has been endlessly patient with my fears and my nightmares. I'll never get tired of him holding me close and whispering sweet nothings into my ear.

This house helps. It's so much bigger than the basement, with proper windows and natural light and rooms I can wander through whenever I need space. There is a lovely room to paint in and my art has never flowed so freely through my fingers.

Carlo says I can go out soon, once we sort out a proper disguise and maybe some documents that don't have my real name. For now, though, I'm happy to stay here in our beautiful sanctuary.

The police won't look for me here, in Carlo's home. They have no idea that we are connected. They have no reason to look for marriage records. And if they somehow find the connection... well, Carlo has contacts that can make it all go away.

I may be a wanted criminal, but I'm safe. And I get to host dinner parties.

The sound of voices grows louder as the last of our guests arrive. Everyone is here now.

Dario and Molly, Nicolo and Liam, even Dante who rarely socializes but who agreed to make an exception for our first official dinner party. Our chosen family, gathering to celebrate the fact that Carlo and I survived everything the world threw at us and came out the other side stronger.

Of course, none of them know that I kept Carlo chained to my bed for two weeks. Carlo wishes to keep it a special secret just for us, and that's just fine by me. A pretty version of events, where he courted me as he always should have, is a lovely setting for our love story.

I slip into the kitchen to check on the final preparations. The canapés are arranged on silver platters with the kind of geometric precision that makes my heart sing. Prosciutto-wrapped figs, truffle-infused crostini, delicate salmon roses that took me hours to perfect. Each one a tiny work of art.

“Need a hand with anything?”

I turn to find Liam standing in the doorway, looking elegant in charcoal gray, his engagement ring catching the light as he gestures toward the platters.

“No, thank you,” I say, adjusting the angle of a garnish that was already perfect. “Everything's under control.”

Liam steps further into the kitchen, his expression shifting to something more serious. “How are you doing, Ginni? Really doing?”

The question catches me off guard. Not the words themselves, but the genuine concern behind them. It takes me a moment to realize what he's asking about.

Prison.

I feel my chest tighten with something that might be gratitude. Of all the people in that sitting room, Liam is the only one who truly understands what those concrete walls can do to a person. He spent five years locked away, five years of surviving in a place designed to break people into smaller and smaller pieces.

“It was only a week,” I say with a casual shrug. “I could never have survived five years like you did.”

Liam gives me a rueful smile that speaks of hard-won wisdom. “I’m not sure I did survive. Not the person I was before, anyway.”

The quiet honesty in his voice makes me shiver. I think about the man I was a few months ago, so desperate for love that I thought kidnapping someone was a reasonable romantic gesture. So convinced that dramatic tragedy was the only way to preserve something beautiful.

That person feels like a stranger now. Someone I used to know but can barely understand.

“I’m so very lucky I have Carlo,” I whisper, more to myself than to Liam. “A wonderful man who came to rescue me.”

“You are,” Liam agrees gently.

Before I can respond to that, he continues with what sounds like practiced casualness.

“Molly and I have lunch every Wednesday. We talk nonsense and practice our awful Italian. It would be nice if you joined us sometime. We could definitely use the help of a native speaker.”

I just stare at him.

The words don’t make sense at first. Or rather, they make sense individually but not together. Lunch. Friendship. People wanting my company for reasons that have nothing to do with obligation or pity.

Liam’s expression shifts to confusion, then concern. He takes a small step backward, clearly misreading my silence.

“I should probably get back to the others,” he starts to say.

“Wait!” The word comes out sharper than I intended, making him pause in the doorway. “I’m sorry, I just...” I struggle to find the right words, my hands twisting nervously in front of me. “I’m not used to people wanting to make friends.”

The truth of that statement hits like a slap in the face. All my life, the only attention I’ve received has been negative. Disapproval from family,

concern from doctors, fear from strangers who sensed something dangerous underneath my careful facade. The idea that someone might actually want to spend time with me, just for the pleasure of my company...

Liam's face softens with understanding. "You'll get used to it in no time at all," he says simply. "Trust me."

And somehow, I believe him.



This dinner is everything I dreamed it would be.

The food is perfection, each course timed to flow seamlessly into the next. The wine pairings are inspired, the conversation flows like music, and everyone seems genuinely happy to be here. To be celebrating Carlo and me, our love, our future together.

I watch from my position by the head of the table as Molly tells an elaborate story involving a mishap with hair dye that has everyone laughing. Dario contributes dry observations that make the story even funnier. Nicolo and Liam exchange the kind of fond looks that speak of deep contentment.

And Carlo... Carlo watches me watching them, his dark eyes warm with love and approval. Like he's as pleased with my success as a host as I am.

This is everything I ever wanted. Not just the elegant dinner party, though that's lovely. But this feeling of belonging. Of being part of something larger than myself. Of having people who choose to spend their evening in my company not because they have to, but because they want to.

"Carlo," Dario says, raising his wineglass with mock solemnity, "I have to say, this dinner is absolutely incredible. This is all clearly Ginni's work, you couldn't organize a piss-up in a brewery."

The words turn the room dark and cold. I don't understand the English phrase, I've never heard it before, but I understand the tone. I understand that Dario, Carlo's boss, a powerful and dangerous man, has just questioned my husband's competence in front of a room full of people.

Something dark and violent unfurls in my chest.

Because Carlo is brilliant. Carlo is capable and strong and absolutely worthy of respect. And no one, no matter how powerful they are, gets to speak about him with such casual dismissiveness and put his reputation in jeopardy.

The knife is in my hand before I consciously decide to reach for it. Not the chisel knife that's laid out ready for the cheese course, but one of the sharp blades for the penultimate main course service. The weight of it feels comfortable, familiar, like an extension of my own hand.

I'm halfway to my feet, the blade angled toward Dario's smirking face, when Carlo's hand covers mine.

"Menace," he says quietly, his voice carrying just enough warning to pierce through the red haze clouding my vision. "How about you don't stab my boss."

The word 'boss' penetrates where nothing else could. Dario is the Ajello heir. He's going to be The Don one day. Stabbing him might not help Carlo's career at all.

And maybe Dario isn't actually attacking Carlo, he's simply expressing appreciation for my work. Perhaps Carlo isn't being diminished, he's being celebrated in a way I don't understand.

I blink, suddenly aware of the silence that's fallen over the table. Everyone is staring at me with expressions ranging from alarm to fascination. Even Dante looks impressed, which is probably not a good sign.

"It will ruin the dinner party," Carlo adds conversationally.

The practical consideration is what finally breaks through my protective fury. He's right. Stabbing someone would absolutely ruin the lovely evening I've worked so hard to create.

I take a deep breath and release my grip on the knife, letting it clatter back onto the table with what feels like enormous self-control.

"More wine, anyone?" I ask brightly, as if nothing at all unusual has just happened.

Dario immediately extends his glass, his expression shifting from wary to amused. "Please. And I apologize for the poor phrasing. It's just a light-hearted English expression that means someone couldn't organize the simplest thing. I was joking. No insult to Carlo was intended."

"None taken," I reply smoothly, though I'm filing away this new cultural information for future reference.

"Though I got to admit I appreciate having such a devoted protector," Carlo says with something that might be a proud and indulgent smile. Whatever it is, it makes my heart flutter.

“You’ve got some fire there, kid,” Molly grins, clearly delighted by the whole display despite the fact I nearly threatened his man. “I like that. Shows proper loyalty.”

Relief floods through me as I realize the lunch invitation is probably still valid. These people understand loyalty, understand the lengths you go to for the people you love. They’re not going to judge me for wanting to defend my husband’s honor, even if I misunderstood the nature of the threat.

Dante is actually chuckling, like the whole thing was hilarious rather than potentially violent. “Remind me never to insult Carlo at your dinner table,” he says to me with something that might be respect.

I flash him a pleased grin. He chuckles again and raises his wineglass to his lips.

“You know, I’ve been thinking of taking on an apprentice.”

Carlo chokes suddenly on his braised root-vegetable puree. I whack him on the back and hand him a glass of water. Thankfully, my love recovers swiftly, and I return my attention to Dante.

“That sounds fun,” I say excitedly.

A career in Carlo’s world? An active part of The Family? I’d love that. Especially since I’ve had to give up Twitch and could do with a new hobby.

Of course, once the children come along, it could be a bit tricky, but I’m sure we could find an excellent nanny.

Dante smiles. A small, subtle smile. One that would probably scare most people. But I understand it.

“Take some more time to settle, and talk it over with Carlo. There’s no rush.”

“Thank you!” I beam, even though everyone else is squirming uncomfortably in their seats. My guests aren’t enjoying this topic, so it’s time to drop it.

The conversation gradually returns to normal as I refill wine glasses with steady hands. But I can feel Carlo’s gaze on me, warm with affection and maybe just a touch of pride. As if, now he’s over the shock, and has had a moment to reflect, he’s pleased that I want to join his line of work.

My heart swells. This really is turning out to be the most exceptional dinner party.



I t's late now. All our guests have gone home with promises to do this again soon. I'm very pleased with how well everything went, but now there are other things on my mind.

I stand before the full-length mirror in our dressing room and admire my reflection.

The lingerie is new, purchased during one of our online shopping sessions when Carlo insisted I deserved things that made me feel beautiful. Silk and lace in deep burgundy that makes my skin look luminous, cut to emphasize every line and curve I want highlighted.

I've paired it with the delicate gold anklet that was Carlo's first gift after the rescue, and the matching bracelet that followed a week later. Small tokens of affection that mean more to me than the most expensive jewelry.

When I emerge from the dressing room, Carlo is standing by the bed in his shirt and underwear, clearly in the middle of getting undressed for the night. His eyes go enormous when he sees me.

“Cristo!” he splutters, his hands frozen on his shirt buttons.

I glide toward him with the kind of predatory grace that always makes his breath catch, ready to show him exactly how grateful I am for this perfect evening. But he holds up a hand to stop me just before I reach him.

“Wait!” he says, and I immediately pout at the rejection.

“What is it?” I ask.

Don't I look pretty enough? Did he drink too much wine?

“I have something for you.”

“A gift?” The words come out in an excited squeal. “For me?”

This can't really be happening, it is too good to be true. Far beyond my wildest dreams.

Something like pain flickers across his eyes. He brushes my cheek softly and I lean into the tender caress.

“You deserve gifts, Menace. So many gifts. I'm going to start giving you some every day.”

Well, I have absolutely no objection to that. It might be the best idea Carlo has ever had and he's a man who's full of good ideas.

Carlo's expression grows serious, almost solemn. “The solicitor stopped the annulment proceedings. We're still officially married.” He pauses, his dark eyes intense with meaning.

My heart crashes against my ribcage, all wild and unstoppable.

Carlo licks his lips. He takes a deep breath. “And I want everyone to know it.”

My breath hitches. I’d squeal except my lungs seem to be frozen.

From his pocket, he produces a small velvet box that makes my heart stop beating entirely. Carlo opens it with a flourish, and inside is the most beautiful ring I’ve ever seen. Not huge or ostentatious, but perfect in its elegance. A band of gold set with diamonds that catch the light like captured starlight. And it flawlessly matches my anklet and bracelet in a way that is beyond satisfying.

He takes my left hand in his, and slides the ring onto my finger with reverent care. It fits like it was made for me, like it was always meant to be there.

“Perfect,” I breathe, admiring the way it looks against my skin. “It’s absolutely perfect.”

“Just like you,” Carlo says softly.

The simple words, the love in his voice, the solid weight of the ring on my finger, all combine to create a moment so beautiful it feels almost sacred. This is real. We’re really married. Really committed to building a life together despite everything we’ve been through.

I have everything I ever dreamed of. I have Carlo.

I push him backward onto the bed with playful force, climbing on top of him to capture his mouth in a kiss that tastes like wine and promises and absolute happiness. Our future is stretching before us, bright and glorious. A stream of perfect days and perfect love.

Abducting Carlo was definitely the best thing I ever did.



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