



## CHAPTER TWO

*Saverio*

I catch up with Dante in the indoor garden. A few people with drinks in their hands chat between the orchids with their white and purple flowers dripping from the branches of a bigleaf magnolia tree.

The hothouse is the only room with some heat in the mansion. The place looks more like an art gallery than a home. Throwing the wedding here is the family's way of showing off their wealth and status. It makes a statement about the bride Raphael is about to marry. It says he's a lucky man.

There's no doubt in my mind that he considers himself lucky. He's gotten what he's always wanted, which is a foot in the door of Luigi's business. Being Elena's godfather, Luigi had considerable influence in choosing Elena's groom. Her father, Stefano, is Luigi's younger brother. He

used to be Luigi's right-hand man before health problems forced him to step down from his position as underboss.

Giorgio wasn't nearly ready to take over, but I was. That's why Giorgio got the title while I did the work. Giorgio inherited the responsibility, but I earned the recognition and respect. My payment was shares in the business and fifty percent of all profits from After Dark. Rachele was part of the package deal. Luigi knew if Giorgio became my brother-in-law, he'd always have my protection.

Then Rachele dropped the bomb, and my life as I knew it went up in flames. She always surrounded herself with sensitive, artistic men. I should've known already then that my rough edges would never be to her taste. It took another man to rub my face in the knowledge.

The man himself, Archibald fucking James II, cuts me off just as I'm about to turn into the hallway. His blond ponytail hangs down to his waist. The scruff on his jaw is supposed to resemble a beard. The curly sideburns hardly pass as that. His skinny pants end high above his ankles to announce to the world he's trendy enough to wear his shoes without socks. Golden chest hair peels through the V of his shirt like fungus growing on a piece of molded cheese. The gray silk jacket only serves to emphasize the bulk of his gym monkey muscles. Guys like him only work out for aesthetic reasons. They don't pump iron to fight.

"Sav," he says, extending his arm and offering me a soft, white hand. "I hope there's no hard feelings."

Dante shoots me an amused look. He doesn't intervene. Unlike Giorgio, he won't try to stop me if I decide to snap the dandy's neck. He merely observes me with a raised brow, curious to see if I'm going to kill the motherfucker or not.

I look at Archie's sweaty palm. "You're either brave, James, or very fucking stupid."

He withdraws his hand. "I hoped we could put the unpleasantness behind us."

Yeah, he's brave now because if I were going to cut him to pieces, I would've done so already, and he knows it.

Seeing that there isn't going to be any interesting action, Dante steps to the side to give us privacy but not so far that he's out of earshot.

I chuckle. "There's only two ways of doing things—the right or the wrong way."

Archie tilts his head. "Are you saying what Rachele and I feel for each other is wrong?"

I get into his space. "How long did you fuck her while she was married?" I don't add, *to me*, because I may just blow my lid and break his fingers so badly he'll never hold a paintbrush again.

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows, but he holds my gaze. "A year."

I'll give him this. I didn't think he was going to answer.

"Yeah." My smile is condescending. "See, James, that's the wrong way of doing it."

"Rachele didn't know how to tell you. She was scared."

I laugh at that. Rachele hasn't been scared of me for a single day of her life. "If she'd told me the real reason why she wanted to leave, I would've let her go without dragging things out and making it ugly and messy." I stab his chest with a finger. "The way you handled it is on the two of you."

The momentum makes him stumble. "I'm not going anywhere, De Luca, so you better get used to the idea of Rachele and me."

"I don't care what Rachele does or who she sees." I advance on him while he backtracks. "If you value your

pretty face and your soft hands, make sure I don't see you again."

Shouldering him out of the way, I continue down the hallway.

Dante falls in step next to me, a chuckle rumbling in his chest.

"What?" I snap.

"Anya is a nice girl, much nicer than you deserve. I hope for her sake you don't have feelings for Rachele any longer."

I march ahead. What I feel is anger, betrayal, and bloodlust. None of those sentiments involve romance or love.

"Stay out of my fucking business," I say, biting off every word.

"Fine." He quickens his stride to stay up. "It's not my business. Just out of curiosity, would you take her back if she changed her mind?"

I consider that. Will I welcome Rachele with open arms if she crawls back tomorrow with her tail between her legs? A few months ago, I would've said yes. Now, everything is different. Now, there's Anya, my treasure, and I don't want to give her up, not for Rachele or for anyone.

I always thought Rachele was self-assured and feisty. I wrote a lot of her bitchiness off to admirable traits. Yet now that I've discovered the softer side of a woman, I find that I'm more attracted to the gentleness and caring side of Anya. Her compassion and generosity are more precious to me than a good surname and the face of a beauty queen.

Admittedly, it doesn't hurt that Anya is the most exquisite being I've seen. If Rachele is an ice queen, Anya is a sun goddess. It's wrong to compare them. I refuse to submit Anya to such unfair treatment. It's just impossible not to notice the differences.

Anya brings out the protective side of me, which is something I need. I love to take care of her, not that she needs taking care of. She survived a life of violence and abuse. That makes her the strongest woman I know. Yet she somehow managed to retain the goodness inside her, something few people in her position would've achieved.

I'm drawn to her for all those reasons and for others I can't explain. All I know is that there's only Anya for me now, Anya and her baby, a baby I long since claimed as my own.

A spark of possessiveness ignites in my chest at the thought of the mother and baby. When it comes to them, my soul knows only one word.

*Mine.*

I pause in front of the library and turn to face Dante. My tone leaves no guessing about how fucking serious I am about this. "I'm with Anya now. I'm not leaving her. Ever."

"Kay," he says, raising his palms. "I was just wondering where you stood on the matter." He grins. "Because if she ever became free game, I'd—"

I point a finger in his face. "Stop right the fuck there or I'll break a rule and kill you on this fucking spot."

"Kay," he says again with a smirk.

Fucking dick. He knows how to rile me up. Probably gets a kick out of it too.

Schooling my features, I grab the door handle and prepare myself to walk into the snake pit.

I push open the door to find the family men gathered around the fireplace where an electric fire shoots orange flames over a flatscreen. Artificial as shit.

Stefano sits in his wheelchair in front of the digital display, an oxygen mask strapped over his face and his skeletal legs hidden under a blanket. Luigi stands next to him, puffing on a cigar. Smoking around Stefano says a lot

about Luigi's concern for his brother's health. Raphael sits on the white designer sofa facing the group. His father, Michele, flanks him on the right, and Giorgio sits on his left.

Giorgio catches my gaze when I enter.

Dante closes the door.

"About time," Luigi says in a jovial tone, motioning for Antonio to pour the drinks.

Antonio breaks the seal of a ten thousand-dollar bottle of cognac. It's customary to open the bottle in front of all the men participating in the toast. Poisoning is still a popular method of eliminating rivals. Just because the unwritten law states no man will draw blood at a wedding, it doesn't mean someone won't slip arsenic into your drink.

Dante takes up a position at my side, eyeing Michele's men on the left who equals Luigi's men in number on the right.

When Antonio has handed the glasses around, Luigi raises his. As Stefano can't speak, it's up to Luigi to make the toast.

"Today is a memorable day," Luigi says, dipping his head and looking Raphael in the eyes. "Two great families will join forces. There'll be no wealthier or more powerful organization than the Bianchis and the Morellis put together. Let's drink on a bond that will be made in blood."

A few wolf whistles follow.

Raphael smirks at the mention of taking his bride's virginity tonight.

Motherfucker. It doesn't show much respect for his future wife.

The bloody sheet will be presented to both sides of the family soon after the married couple have retired to their room.

Even if Rachele had been a virgin when I bedded her on our wedding night, I never would've submitted her to the humiliation. Raphael, on the other hand, seems to have no qualms about fucking his wife upstairs while a bunch of old men wait in the library to see proof of the consummation of the union. Us men get a choice. We can either accept or decline. The women are not so lucky. They're stuck with whatever the groom decides.

Everyone watches Raphael with perverse expectation.

He accepts with a nod, making me respect him less and hate him more.

Luigi throws back his head and downs his drink, which is the cue for the others to follow. If you ask me, it's a waste of a perfectly good and rare cognac that needs to be sipped in a warmed glass to release the vanilla and lime blossom aromas.

Raphael is next. Then Michele. Stefano is exempted, seeing that he can only ingest liquids through a pipe in his throat.

Dante looks at me from under his lashes as he lifts the glass to his mouth, wetting his lips without drinking.

While the men congratulate Raphael on his upcoming conquest, I dump my drink in the vase on the side table next to me.

I not only refuse to drink to a vulgar tradition and a man I don't respect, but I also want to keep my wits about me when Anya is with me in the lion's den. Let's face it, half of the guests are from Morelli's side, and I trust a Morelli just as far as I can throw him. The drink I had at the bar is more than enough. Besides, I'm driving.

Stefano gurgles, pointing a shaky finger at me.

"What's that?" Luigi asks with annoyance he doesn't try to mask.

Stefano turns his crooked digit toward the vase, his eyes bulging in his head.

“That’s the urn with his wife’s ashes,” Luigi says to no one in particular. “Yes, Stefano.” He gives his brother a patronizing pat on the shoulder. “We know.”

Stefano goes red in the face, but Luigi is already ignoring him to shake Michele’s hand.

A nurse in scrubs enters. She goes to Stefano and wheels him out of the room.

Someone must’ve pressed the button to alert her that her patient needed her.

Dante makes big eyes at me.

Feeling Raphael’s gaze on my face, I turn my head in his direction. He studies me quietly while I measure him right back.

My smartwatch buzzes with an incoming message.

I break our eye contact to check the screen. It’s one of the men I stationed outside.

I go rigid in a second flat.

I read the message before I’ve even stepped to the side.

*Rachele is talking to Anya. It’s not looking good.*

Fuck.

Giorgio watches me, no doubt reading my expression. He gets to his feet, but I don’t give him time to ask what’s wrong.

“Excuse me,” I say, inclining my head toward Luigi. “I have a matter that needs my attention.”

Dante raises a brow, quietly asking if I need help with kicking someone’s ass.

I give a single shake of my head as I go to the door.

Pushing people out of my way, I stride briskly to the garden.

My man waits at the sliding doors.

“Where is she?” I ask, my voice tight.



He nods in the direction of the bar. “Where you left her.”

I turn my head in that direction and easily spot Anya’s fiery red hair in the crowd. And I don’t like what I see. Not one fucking bit.

Rachele has taken up a challenging pose in front of Anya. She says something, and by the bitchy expression on her face, I can just imagine what that is. Anya stares at her, aghast, her pretty peach-colored cheeks turning ashen.

Fucking Rachele.

I make it to them in a few long strides, just in time to hear Rachele say...