

## Prologue

Serafina

All my life I had been taught to be honorable, to do what was expected of me. Today I went against it all.

Dark and tall, Remo appeared in the doorway, come to claim his prize. His eyes roamed over my naked body, and mine did the same.

He was cruel and twisted. *Beyond redemption.*

Brutal attractiveness, forbidden pleasure, promised pain. I should have been disgusted by him, but I wasn't. Not by his body and not always by his nature.

I shut off the water in the shower, scared of what he wanted, completely terrified of what I wanted. This was his game of chess; he was the king and I was the trapped queen that the Outfit needed to protect. He moved me into position for his last move: the kill. Check.

He began unbuttoning his shirt then shrugged it off. He moved closer, stopping right before me. "You always watch me like something you want to touch but aren't allowed to. Who's holding you back, *Angel?*"

## Chapter One

Serafina

"I can't believe you're getting married in three days," Samuel said, his feet propped up beside mine on the coffee table. If Mom saw she would strangle us.

"Me either," I said quietly. At nineteen, I was already older than many other girls in our world when they entered the holy bond of matrimony, and I had been promised to Danilo for a long time. My fiancé was only twenty-one himself, so an earlier marriage wasn't very desirable. I certainly didn't mind. It had given me the time to finish school and stay home with Samuel for another year. He and I had never been separated for long, except for a few days when he had business to conduct for the Outfit.

Because of his father's sickness, Danilo was still busy taking over Indianapolis. A later wedding would have been even better for him, but I was a woman and supposed to marry before my twentieth birthday. I eyed the engagement ring on my finger. A prominent diamond in the center, we had to widen the band over the years as my fingers grew. In three days Danilo would put a second ring on me.

Mom came in with my sister, Sofia, who upon spotting us ran in our direction and wedged herself on the sofa between me and Samuel.

Samuel rolled his blue eyes but wrapped an arm around our little sister as she pressed up against him with big puppy dog eyes, tousling her brown mane. She had taken after Dad and hadn't inherited the blond hair of our mother like Samuel and I. "It's unfair that you're leaving right after Fina's wedding. I thought you would have more time for me."

I nudged her. "Hey." I wasn't really angry at her. I understood where she was coming from. Being eight years younger than us, she had always felt like a fifth wheel, since Samuel and I were twins.

Sofia gave me an embarrassed smile. "I'll miss you too."

"I'll miss you too, ladybug."

Mom cleared her throat, standing tall, her hands linked in front of her stomach. She was dressed in a fitted, elegant green dress. Her blue eyes lowered to our feet resting on the table. She tried to look stern, but the trembling of her mouth made it clear she was fighting a smile.

Samuel and I dropped our feet off the table at the same time.

"I thought I should warn you that Danilo just called. He's coming over because he just arrived in town and is supposed to meet your father and uncle."

Now I understood why Sofia, too, was dressed in a pretty summer dress. I didn't even know my father was expecting him. I was leaving for Indianapolis tomorrow.

I jerked to my feet. "When?"

"Ten minutes."

"Mom!" My eyes widened in horror. "How am I supposed to get ready with that much time?"

"You look fine," Samuel drawled, smirking, his short blond hair purposefully in a disarray. He could pull off the disheveled look, but I definitely couldn't.

I narrowed my eyes. "Oh shut up." I ran out of the room, almost bumping into Dad. He stepped back, looking down at me with a questioning smile.

"I need to get ready!"

I didn't have time to explain. He could ask Mom. I took the steps two at a time. The moment I stumbled into my bathroom and saw my reflection, I cringed. My God. My skin was flushed, and my hair curled wildly around my shoulders. My simple jeans and T-shirt didn't scream poised future wife either. Damn it.

I quickly washed my face then grabbed a flat iron. My hair was naturally curly, but I always straightened it when people other than my family were around. This time I had five minutes to do it. I stormed back into my bedroom, tore through my wardrobe. Choosing the right dress for such an occasion would have taken at least one hour. Now I had one minute, if I still wanted time to put on makeup. I grabbed a pink dress I ordered online a while ago but never wore and slipped it on. I was immediately reminded why I hadn't worn it before: it ended several inches above my knees, revealing more of my long legs than I usually displayed, especially when men were around. Danilo would be my husband in three days. It was only fair that he saw a bit more of what he was getting.

A nervous thrill took hold of my body, but I pushed it aside and quickly slipped on matching heels then hurried to my vanity. I didn't have enough time to put much effort into my makeup. My skin was quite flawless, so I decided against foundation and only put some blush and mascara on before rushing out of my room and down the corridor toward the stairs.

I slowed my steps considerably when I heard Danilo, Samuel, and Dad in the foyer below. It wouldn't be wise to appear as if I had rushed to get ready for any man, not even my fiancé.

They were shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries.

I had met Danilo a few times before. I'd been promised to him since I was fourteen and he sixteen, but this time felt more intimate. In only three days I would become his wife and share a bed with him. Danilo was very attractive and had much success with women, a ladies' man, but to me he had always been a perfect gentleman. He wore a white dress shirt and black pants, his dark hair immaculate.

I took the first step, placing my foot on the creaky stair on purpose, one long leg extended, my head held high.

All eyes turned to me. Danilo's gaze zeroed in on my exposed legs, then he quickly snapped his brown eyes up to meet my eyes, smiling. Dad and Samuel both looked briefly at my legs, but their reaction was less than thrilled. Dad was patient and loving with Mom and us kids, even Samuel, which made it easy to forget that he was Underboss of Minneapolis—and a feared one at that. I was quickly reminded just how scary he could be as he put his hand on Danilo's shoulder, wearing a hard expression on his face.

"I'd like to give you something in my office, Danilo," he said in a cold voice.

Danilo wasn't impressed by my father's mood change. He was going to be the youngest Underboss in the history of the Outfit, and he was practically already ruling over Indianapolis because his father was so sick. He gave a curt nod. "Of course," he said calmly, appearing so much older than his years. Hardened, grown-up. More man than I felt woman. Danilo gave me another smile then followed my father.

I descended the remaining steps, and Samuel barred my way. "Go change."

"Excuse me?"

He pointed at my legs. "You're showing too much leg."

I pointed at my arms and throat. "I'm also showing my neck and arms." I lifted one leg. "And I have nice legs."

Samuel stared down at my leg then up at my face with a frown. "Yeah, well, Danilo doesn't need to know that."

I snorted then quickly looked around, worried Danilo was close enough to overhear. "He will see more than my legs on our wedding night." Involuntary heat blasted my cheeks.

Samuel's expression darkened.

"Get out of my way," I said, trying to pass him.

Samuel mirrored my move. "Go change, Fina. Now," he ordered in a voice he probably reserved for business with other Made Men.

I couldn't believe his nerve. Did he think I would obey him only because he was a Made Man? That hadn't worked these last five years. I quickly reached for his stomach and pinched him hard, which wasn't easy considering Samuel was all muscle.

He jerked in surprise. I used his momentary distraction to slip past him then made a show of swaying my hips as I headed into the living area. Samuel caught up with me. "You have an impossible temper."

I smiled. "I have your temper."

"I'm a man. Women are supposed to be docile."

I rolled my eyes.

Samuel crossed his arms and leaned against the wall beside the window. "You always act like a well-behaved lady when others are around, but Danilo will get a nasty surprise once he realizes he didn't get a lady but a fury."

A flicker of worry flooded me. Samuel was right. Everyone outside my family knew me as the Ice Princess. Our family was notorious for being poised and controlled. The only people who really knew me were my parents, Sofia, and Samuel. Could I ever be myself around Danilo? Or would that put him off? Danilo was always controlled, which was probably why Uncle Dante and Dad had chosen him for my husband—and because he was the heir to one of the most important cities of the Outfit.

A knock sounded and I turned around to see Danilo step in.

His brown eyes met mine, and he gave me a small smile. Then his gaze moved on to Samuel leaning against the wall behind me. Danilo's expression tightened the slightest bit. I risked a look over my shoulder and found my brother glaring at my fiancé as if he wanted to crush him to dust. I tried to catch Samuel's gaze, but he was content killing Danilo with his eyes. I couldn't believe him.

"Samuel," I said in a forced, polite voice. "Why don't you give Danilo and me a moment?"

Samuel tore his gaze away from my fiancé and smiled. "I'm already giving you a moment."

"Alone."

Samuel shook his head once, his smile darkening, eyes returning to Danilo. "It's my responsibility to protect your honor."

Heat rose to my cheeks. If Danilo hadn't been in the room, I would have lunged at my brother and wrung his neck.

Danilo stepped up to me and kissed my hand, but his eyes were on my brother. Releasing my hand, he said, "I can assure you Serafina's honor is perfectly safe in my company. I will wait until our wedding night to claim my rights ... when she is no longer your responsibility." Danilo's voice had dipped in a threatening way. He had never hinted to sex before, and I knew it was to provoke my brother. Power plays between two alphas.

Samuel rocked forward, away from the wall, his hand going to his knife. I turned and stepped up to my twin, placing my hand against his chest. "Samuel," I said in a warning tone, digging my nails into his skin through the fabric of his shirt. "Danilo is my fiancé. Give us a moment."

Samuel lowered his gaze to my face, and for once his expression didn't soften. "No," he said firmly. "And you won't defy my command."

I often forgot what Samuel was. He was my twin, my best friend, my confidant first, but for five years he'd been a Made Man, a killer, and he wouldn't back down in front of another man, especially not someone he would have to meet as a fellow Underboss. If I pushed further, he would look weak, and he was supposed to take over as Underboss from Dad in a few years. Even though I hated doing it and had never done it before, I cast my eyes down as if I was submitting to him.

Danilo might be my fiancé, but Samuel would always be my blood, and I didn't want him to look weak in front of anyone. "You are right," I said obediently. "I'm sorry."

Samuel touched my shoulder and squeezed lightly. "Danilo," he said in a low voice. "My sister will leave now. I want a word alone with you."

My blood boiling, I gave Danilo an apologetic smile before I left. Once outside, my smile fell and I stormed through the foyer, needing to vent. Where was Dad? I turned the corner and collided with someone. "Careful," came a drawl I knew well, and two hands steadied me.

I looked up. "Uncle Dante," I said with a smile then flushed because I'd barreled into him like a five-year-old throwing a tantrum. I smoothed my dress, trying to look poised. After all, my uncle was *pure control*. He had to be as Boss of the Outfit.

Dante tilted his head with a small smile. "Is something the matter? You look upset."

My cheeks heated further. "Samuel embarrassed me in front of Danilo. He's alone with him now. Having a word. Can you please check on them before Samuel ruins everything?"

Dante chuckled but he nodded. "Your brother wants to protect you. Where are they?"

"Living room," I said.

He squeezed my shoulder before walking away. Anger was still simmering under my skin. I would make Samuel pay for it. I made my way upstairs and into his room. A few knives and weapons belonging in a museum decorated the walls, but apart from that it was practically furnished. In a week or two Samuel would move into his own apartment in Chicago and work directly under Dante for a couple of years before returning to Minneapolis and eventually taking over for Dad.

I sank down on his bed, waiting. With every second that passed, I became more nervous. I got up and paced the room. When I heard his steps, I stopped and hid behind the door, carefully slipping out of my heels. The door opened and Samuel stepped in. I jumped, trying to land on his back and wrap my arms around his neck like I'd often done in the past.

Samuel caught me, hoisted me over his shoulder despite my struggling, and threw me down on the bed. Then he actually held me down, tousling my hair and tickling me.

"Stop!" I screeched between laughter. "Sam, stop!"

He did stop but gave me a smug grin. "You can't win against me."

"I liked it better when you were a scrawny boy and not this killing machine," I muttered.

Something dark passed over Samuel's eyes, and I touched his chest and lightly shoved him, a distraction from whatever horrors he was remembering. "How badly did you embarrass me in front of Danilo?"

"I went over the details of your wedding night with him."

I stared at Samuel in horror. "You *didn't*."

"I did."

I sat up. "What did you say?"

"I told him he better treat you like a lady on your wedding night. No dominant shit or anything."

My cheeks blazed with heat, and I hit his shoulder hard.

He frowned, rubbing the spot. "What?"

"What!? You *embarrassed* me in front of Danilo. How could you talk about something like that with him? My wedding night isn't your business." My entire face was burning from embarrassment and anger. I couldn't believe him. He had always been protective of me, of course, but this took things too far.

Samuel grimaced. "Trust me, it wasn't easy for me. I don't like to think that my little sister is going to have sex."

I hit him again. "You are only three minutes older. And you have been having sex for years now. Do you even know how many women you've slept with?"

He shrugged. "I'm a man."

"Oh shut up," I muttered. "How am I ever going to face Danilo after what you did?"

"If it was up to me, you'd become a nun," Samuel said, and I lost it.

He had a way to drive me up the wall. I lunged at him again but like before it was futile. The last time I stood a chance fighting Samuel was more than five years ago. Samuel wrapped his arms around me from behind and held me in place.

"I think I'll carry you downstairs like this. Danilo is still talking to Dante. I'm sure he'll love to see his future wife this disheveled. Maybe he'll decide against marrying you if he sees you're not quite the obedient lady you want him to believe you are."

"You wouldn't dare!" I kicked my legs but Samuel carried me, lodged against his chest like I was a puppet.

Dad came in, his eyes moving from me pressed against Samuel to my twin gripping me tightly. He shook his head once. "I thought you'd stop the brawling once you got older."

Samuel released me and I stumbled to my feet. He smoothed his clothes, righting his gun and knife holsters. "She started it."

I gave him a look. Smoothing my hair and clothes, I cleared my throat. "He embarrassed me in front of Danilo, Dad."

"I told Danilo I'd rip his balls off if he didn't treat her right on their wedding night."

I scowled at my twin. He hadn't mentioned that detail to me.

Dad gave me a wistful smile, touching my cheek. "My little dove." Then he moved to Samuel and clapped his shoulder. "You did good."

I gave the two of them an incredulous look. Stifling my annoyance—and worse, my gratefulness for their protectiveness—I walked out of Samuel's bedroom into my own. I sat down on the bed, suddenly overcome with sadness. I was leaving my family, my home, for a city I didn't know, a husband I barely knew.

At the sound of an unfamiliar knock, I stood and walked toward my door, opening it.

Surprise washed over me when I saw Danilo's tall form. I opened my door wider but didn't ask him in. That would have been too forward. Instead, I stepped out into the corridor. "I can't ask you in."

Danilo gave me an understanding smile. "Of course not. In case you're worried, your uncle knows that I'm up here."

"Oh," I said, overwhelmed by his presence and the memory of what Samuel had done.

"I wanted to say goodbye. I'm leaving in a few minutes," he continued.

"I'm sorry," I said with as much dignity as my burning face allowed.

Danilo smiled with a small frown. "What for?"

"For what my brother did. He shouldn't have talked to you about ... about our wedding night."

Danilo chuckled and moved closer to me, his spicy scent wrapping around me. He took my hand and kissed it. My stomach fluttered. "He wants to protect you. That's honorable. I don't blame him. A woman like you should be treated like a lady, and I will treat you that way on our wedding night and on every night that follows."

He leaned forward and lightly kissed my cheek. His eyes made it clear that he wanted to do more than that. He stepped back, letting go of my hand. I swallowed.

"I'm looking forward to being married to you, Serafina."

"Me too," I said quietly.

With a last look at me, he turned around and left. My heart pounding in my chest, I returned to my room and plopped down on my bed. I wasn't in love with Danilo, but I could imagine falling for him. That was a good start and better than many other girls in my world got.

A few minutes later, someone knocked again. This time I recognized the unabashed pounding of a fist against wood. "Come in," I said.

I didn't have to look up to know who it was. I recognized Samuel's steps with my eyes closed. He sank down beside me. "Thank you for obeying me when Danilo was around," Samuel said quietly. He took my hand.

"You need to appear strong. I didn't want to make you look weak." I looked up at him, tears gathering in my eyes.

His expression tightened. "You hated it."

"Of course I did."

Samuel looked away, glaring. "I hate the thought that you will have to obey Danilo or anyone for that matter."

"I could do worse than Danilo. He's a gentleman when he's around me."

Samuel laughed darkly. "He is as good as the Underboss of Indianapolis, Fina, and despite his age, he has his men under control. I've seen him in action. He is a Made Man like me and Dad. He expects obedience."

I regarded him curiously. "You never expected obedience from me."

"I wished for it," he muttered jokingly then turned serious again. "You are my sister, not my wife. That's different."

"Will you expect obedience from your wife?"

Samuel frowned. "I don't know. Maybe."

"How do you treat the women you are with?" I'd never met any of them. Made Men took outsiders into their beds before marriage, and those women weren't allowed into our homes.

Quickly and unexpectedly, Samuel's face seemed to close off. "It doesn't matter." He stood. "And it doesn't matter how Danilo is used to treating his whores. You are a mafia princess, my sister, and I swear by my honor that I will hunt him down if he doesn't treat you like a lady."

I smiled up at my twin. "My protector."

Samuel smiled back. "Always."