



A Dangerous Prize

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Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Natalie Miller thought she could gamble with my heart. But she's about to learn I always make the final play.

Released on bail, I'm a woman on the warpath. But vengeance will have to wait. First I need to reclaim my crown—and outplay my own Family.

But Natalie is a wild card I can't ignore. She fooled me, seduced me, and betrayed me.

I hate her.

Now she's back, begging for my help to expose the corruption festering in her agency.

I still want her.

We strike a bargain, but every charged encounter blurs the lines between ally and enemy, love and hate. And someone out there is willing to kill to ensure we never uncover their secrets.

To stay alive, I'm forced to put my trust in the woman who destroyed me once already.

And if she tries to play me again?

Natalie Miller had better watch her back.

Total Pages (Source): 67

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CHAPTER1

NATALIE

As I reach over to grab my glass of red wine, I bump the bottle instead, and watch as it falls in slow motion to upend itself all over my living room carpet.

Great.

The metaphor is a little too on the nose right now.

I grab the bottle, take it to back to my tiny, grimy-no-matter-how-hard-I-clean kitchen, and try not to burst into tears. The night is pressing up against the windows of my apartment, a silent witness to the turmoil within. After I throw some towels down on the stain—I guess I'll have to move the coffee table over to cover it, once it's dry—I slump back on the couch, surrounded by the disarray of my current life: unpacked boxes, scattered papers, and now a sinister dark red stain that portends nothing good.

I should turn on the overhead light, but I prefer the shadows right now as I keep sifting through the mess, grasping for some semblance of order, some way to make sense of everything that's happened.

But it's no use. Nothing is the same.

Not since Alessa found out who I really was. Not Natalie Moreau, wealthy heiress. But plain old Natalie Miller.

Or rather, Special Agent Natalie Miller, working undercover with the FBI to destroy her.

My fingers brush against a surveillance photo buried among the paper files I took with me from the Park Avenue penthouse where Natalie Moreau was living the high life during my undercover stint. Taken of me from across a ballroom, I'm wearing an elegant gown, and my face is frozen in a blank expression. I barely recognize myself. I look...like the person I was supposed to be, a bored, wealthy socialite.

But it's the woman beside me who draws my eye, even now. Alessa de Luca.

The Mafia princess who turned my world upside down from the moment I met her—and that moment is captured here in this shot.

I stare into her emerald eyes, vivid even in the distant photo. She looks like a queen holding court, elegant and untouchable. Yet I know the warmth that lurks beneath that cool facade, the heat that simmers just below the surface. I felt that fire...

And it left me scorched.

A tremor passes through me and I quickly set the photo down. I can't go there, can't let my mind linger on thoughts of her lush mouth, her provocative laugh, the way she looked at me as though she could see all the way inside.

The way she touched me...

I shake my head to get rid of that thought in particular, and rub my temples, trying to ease the headache coiling just behind my eyes. The lines used to be so clear for me—right versus wrong, justice versus crime. I was so certain about who I was, devoted to truth and integrity.

Now...now everything is a chaotic jumble of gray, and all I can do is try not to think too much about Alessa's freezer-burn eyes when she saw me there on the other side of the street as she was hauled away in handcuffs.

My phone buzzes, jolting me from my thoughts, but it's just a reminder to call Dr. Kristen Hays tomorrow, set up a meeting. Kris Hays, a profiler who worked with us on the operation, is also the psychologist who's been assigned to give me my first evaluation post-operation.

To see if I'm ready to come back to work.

To see if I'm losing it. Well, I already know the answer to that.

I scowl down at the phone. I know these sessions are standard procedure following an intense undercover op, but that won't make it any easier to bare my soul to her. How can I explain thoughts that I barely understand myself? The doubts that have wormed their way under my skin, eroding the rock-solid foundations of my convictions?

I know Hays will want me to talk about Alessa. She'll call my conflicted feelings some kind of transference, or trauma bonding, or something else that will sound rational and reasonable, and help me pretend that what I'm feeling right now will pass.

Maybe it will. But there are some things that logic and training can't explain away. The magnetic pull I felt—still feel—toward Alessa. The undeniable chemistry between us that refused to be constrained by ethics or reason. I broke rules for her that I never imagined I would and I don't know how to make sense of any of it.

And I don't think laying my psyche out on the autopsy table will make any difference.

Sighing, I begin gathering up the scattered papers again. When I packed to come back

home again, I swept up a bunch of things without thinking, including these notes and photos that I really should return to the office. But I'm on enforced leave right now, and honestly? The last thing I feel like doing right now is facing my colleagues, who will be celebrating Alessa's arrest.

My team leader Stephen Bell insisted on my leave time after my cover was blown, irritated with me. I let him down. He needed me to be the perfect agent, emotionless and relentless in her pursuit of justice.

I'm so far from perfect. The lines have blurred too much.

A wave of exhaustion sweeps over me. My limbs feel heavy, my mind sluggish and slow. Dragging myself to the bedroom, I peel off my rumpled clothes and crawl beneath the cool sheets. But sleep remains elusive, dreams taunting me from just beyond reach.

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I'm haunted by the ghost of Alessa's presence, even though she's never been here in this apartment. Hell, she'd be shocked if she could see it, so far removed from her rarified upbringing. But I can't help remembering the blaze in her eyes when she told me about the network she'd developed to save victims of the Mancini Family's human trafficking. She was like a storm gathering force. Her passion was always so startling in contrast to her elegant control—both regarding her work, and, well. And in bed.

And on the sofa. And up against the wall...

God, I need to stop thinking about that. But I miss the challenge of her, too, the way she forced me to question preconceived notions and look beyond the surface. She made everything feel alive, vibrant, painted in technicolor instead of black and white. With her, I felt like something more. Not Special Agent Miller, not even billionaire heiress Natalie Moreau, but just me.

The real me.

I imagine her here beside me, her riot of dark curls spread across the pillow, full lips curved in that secretive smile. My fingers trace the empty sheets, craving the silk of her skin. Heat burns low and insistent inside me as I remember the taste of her mouth, the sounds I drew from her with my hands and tongue.

The uninhibited joy she took in her own pleasure.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to force the memories away. But they remain, sweet and scalding, a bittersweet caress in the darkness. A reminder of all I've lost.

The shrill ring of my cell phone pierces the nights. I contemplate not answering it. Only the team has this number, and after the dramatic takedown of Alessa, any calls will mean more gloating—or it's Sam Wright, calling to blast me for walking off on him tonight.

He took me tonight to see her arrest. A surprise, he called it. Like it was supposed to be areward.

But Sam Wright makes me uneasy. He's my longtime colleague and was my handler on this case, but lately he's been leaving me feeling...unsettled. I know he cares about me, but his behavior has seemed almost possessive at times. Proprietary. He took an almost unprofessional satisfaction in Alessa's downfall, warning me away from her, as if she had somehow sullied me.

The phone continues to drill into the silence. I pick it up to find that my suspicions were correct: it's Sam Wright. With a resigned exhale, I accept the call.

"It's Miller."

Sam's voice comes through, terse and urgent. "She made bail, Nat. Alessa de Luca's been released."

Everything narrows down to those words. Alessa. Released.

Alessa and all that fury she's balled up inside her towardme.

Released...

My breath stalls in my chest. Will Alessa hunt me down, seeking revenge for what I did to her? Exposing her illicit empire, leading to her arrest and very public takedown...

God, that scene at the benefit gala flashes through my mind once again. Alessa dressed in her signature red, every inch the influential socialite, handcuffed and led away in front of New York's elite.

The shock on her face morphing to cold rage when she saw me.

I shudder, pulling the bedsheets up around myself. The fallout from that kind of public humiliation will be explosive. Cutting, especially for a woman who prides herself on invulnerability. I may not have planned the arrest, not even have been told about it until Wright sprung it on me, but that won't matter to Alessa. In her eyes, I am the enemy.

And it's true. What I did to her, she'll see as an unforgivable betrayal.

What will she do to me in revenge?

"Miller, did you hear me?" Sam prompts, jolting me from my spiraling thoughts. "They couldn't justify denying bail, but her family must've paid a fortune to get her out."

"I know how it works," I say faintly. Of course Johnny de Luca, Alessa's father and one of the most powerful Mancini Family members in the city, would have the means to buy her freedom.

He would move heaven and earth for his princess.

Including burying anyone who crosses her. So it's not only Alessa I need to be worried about. Johnny the Gentleman is a ruthless killer—and then there's her cousin, Juno Bianchi, a Mob Boss of her own Family, who wouldn't hesitate to put me down...

I suppress a shudder as Wright continues, oblivious to my rising panic. "I figured you should know, given your...connection to her." There's a definite note of hostility there. "We'll need to take precautions, of course..."

His voice fades to a drone as my mind fixes back on Alessa. She's out there right now, free to act. Every instinct screams that I'm in danger, that I need to run.

But where can I possibly go that she couldn't find me?

"Natalie?" Sam prompts more gently. "You still there?"

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I realize I've been silent too long. I force steadiness into my voice. "I'm here. You're right, we need to be cautious. But I don't want someone at my door 24/7," I add quickly. And certainly not Sam Wright, as he just proposed. "I'll find somewhere safe to stay—alone."

"Bullshit. The Bureau will find you somewhere. Look, Nat, I know this is difficult for you. Just remember, she's a criminal mastermind." I almost laugh at that, until his next words. "Whatever she made you feel...it wasn't real." His voice has shifted to a patronizing warmth, as if he's soothing a child. It grates, but I don't have the energy to fight it right now.

"We can talk about this in the office," I say shortly. "I'll come in tomorrow. I have some papers I need to drop off. Goodnight," I add as he takes a breath, and then I hang up.

Alone again in the darkness, I try to calm my breathing. I'm a trained FBI agent, I remind myself. I can handle this. But icy tendrils of fear wrap around my spine, impossible to ignore.

One vengeful Mafia princesses, bent on my destruction. One ice-cold Mob Queen in Juno Bianchi, who questioned me—and threatened me—herself, the night my cover was blown.

And Johnny the Gentleman, a ruthless assassin who even now might be finding the perfect silk handkerchief to lay over my ruined face after he's done with me.

The threat presses down on me, suffocating in its intensity. But I brought this peril

down on myself for daring to tangle with Alessa de Luca.

And for my breach of ethics in letting an undercover role become far too personal.

I'm in the crosshairs, in every way possible.

Moving through the darkened apartment on autopilot, I double-check the locks, the windows, keeping my service firearm close at hand. Protecting myself has become second nature over the years, but this time feels different. None of my training prepared me for Alessa's complete capture of me. And now that she's free, I can't shake the primal fear that she's coming for me.

But beneath the wariness lives something else—a flicker that feels dangerously close to anticipation.

Ever since that first electric meeting, some part of me has been waiting, wanting, reaching for Alessa. And as frightening as it is, some twisted part of me craves that intensity again.

I hate this conflicted state of being, this internal war between terror and longing. Everything is muddled, inside and out. Perhaps it would be easier if she just found me, unleashed her rage and had done with it. Almost a relief.

An easy way out.

I check the last lock and turn to look out the window again, battling the dark desires within me. Dawn is still hours away, but morning will come—and with it, the potential for my path to fatefully cross with Alessa's once more.

My body hums with adrenaline, on high alert.

Does Alessa feel the same conflicted magnetism that haunts me? Or has her rage eclipsed everything else? I wish I could be certain how she'll react, but she's always managed to surprise me. Another side effect of the tangled web between us: that even now, I can't predict her actions with any certainty.

I only know that she has a way of stripping everything down to its core and leaving no place to hide. Not here, not some FBI safe house.

Nowhere is safe from her, because despite everything, I'm still carrying her around in my heart.

CHAPTER2

ALESSA

The cold metal bench digs into my back, an infuriating reminder of where I am.

The holding cell.

The holding celldowntown, for God's sake. This was an indignity I was assured would be temporary, and yet here I remain hours later.

Waiting.

Seething.

There are two police officers nearby eyeing me warily, intimidated not by me but by the name that trails in my wake. De Luca.

I offer them a withering glare before turning my gaze to the other occupants of this dreary cage. Some stare at me with thinly veiled hostility, their eyes dragging over

my dress and designer heels. They made me remove all jewelry when I came in, and I'm glad for it now, as two women whisper together while glancing my way.

A heavily made-up woman with brassy blonde hair approaches me. "You one of them fancy society types, aint'cha? What you in for?"

I simply arch a brow in response, unwilling to indulge such crass prying. But my lack of reply only seems to embolden her and she tilts her head, considering.

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"Hey, I know you," she says, a knowing smile spreading across her face. "You that de Luca bitch." Her lips curl in a sneer as she takes in my clothes, my bearing. "You don't look so high and mighty to me, princess."

"Then that is your mistake," I tell her coolly. I hold her gaze until her eyes drop, and she moves away.

The other women stir, their postures changing as understanding ripples through them. I feel the shift in the energy of the holding cell. Where before there had been threatening hostility directed my way, now there is caution, even deference in some of their expressions. They've had a taste of the power behind my name.

One young dark-haired girl speaks up timidly, "Are you that lady Mob Boss?"

"Nah," says another. "That's her cousin. I saw her once. Juno Bianchi." Awe and admiration color her voice.

Great. Even in a jail cell I can't escape comparison with Juno. With a pang, I remember Juno and her wife, Caitlin, melting away in the crowd as I was led away.

I can't blame them for ghosting me. But it still stings.

From the corner, another woman speaks up, her voice deep. Commanding. "That's Alessa de Luca. You bitches leave her alone. Hear me?"

Whoever she is, she's someone the others fear. I give a slight nod of thanks, and then, to my discomfort, she comes over to look down at me.

And puts out a hand.

I shake it, and she says, by way of explanation, "You helped a friend of mine. She's doing good, I hear."

Before more can be said, a sharp rap at the bars draws my attention. "You made bail, de Luca."

Finally. I stand, ignoring the catcall whistles as I smooth down my dress, and give the room a general nod.

"It's been a pleasure, ladies," I say.

I get a few grins in return, and then I sashay from the holding pen, head high.

But inside, I'm still seething. This delay has been inexcusable. And were it not for a serpent in my garden, I would not have suffered this outrage.

Natalie Miller.

Special Agent Natalie Miller.

Just thinking the name fans my fury, and I've had to occupy my mind during my wait, lest I started screaming and couldn't stop.

But that treacherous bitch will pay for this insult, just as she'll pay for everything else she did to me.

For now, though, I'll have to swallow my ire and focus on the task ahead. Lucia Rossi waits for me beyond the clipboard-wielding officer processing my release, her impeccably tailored suit uncreased even at this late hour. Or early, rather. It's not far

off dawn, or so the clock on the wall tells me. Lucia mutters under her breath about incompetent bureaucrats as we complete the necessary paperwork. Normally such ranting irritates me, but today I share her frustration. The sooner we finish with these meaningless formalities, the sooner I can begin setting things right.

Her sharp eyes assess me. "You look like hell. Let's get you out of this dump."

The officer returns my personal effects. I put my jewelry back on, ignoring Lucia's impatience. The familiar weight of the rubies helps ground me. Then I turn without a word to the processing officer and head toward the exit, Lucia on my heels. She's already lecturing about discretion, but her voice fades to background noise as the heavy door buzzes open and we step out into the hallway.

As my lawyer and advisor, she is supposed to be one of the few I fully trust. But Lucia is also Don Mancini's cousin, and I trust her about as much as I'd trust a venomous snake.

"Your father is waiting outside," she says briskly. "I've kept the media presence contained, but there will still be questions." Her mouth twists. "Difficult to avoid when the FBI hauls off one of the city's most prominent socialites in handcuffs."

"I have nothing to hide or fear. Let them shout their questions. I'll bury their accusations under the weight of truth."

Lucia shoots me a sharp look. "This is not the time for grandstanding, Alessa. Discretion is critical. Anything you say can and will be used against you, especially if it's plastered all over social media moments after your release on bail."

I wave off her caution. "I know how to handle the press."

Before she can argue further we reach the double doors leading outside. Voices and

camera shutters filter through. I take a breath, straighten my shoulders, and push through the doors. Flashbulbs immediately flare, momentarily blinding. Shouted questions accost me but I tune them out, searching for one familiar face.

And there he is. A figure of strength amidst the chaos, my father's face settles something within me. Daddy's power simmers beneath his deceptively relaxed posture as he waits beside the town car for me. Though gray now wings his dark hair at the temples, he remains lethally capable. Now he comes forward to put an arm around me with a soft smile, the smile he reserves for me alone.

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But his eyes burn, promising swift retribution.

With my father's solid presence reassuring me, the baying press seems a petty nuisance. So I pause before entering the car despite Lucia hissing under her breath. Lifting a hand for attention, I wait for the clamor to subside.

"What happened tonight was an egregious miscarriage of justice. I am innocent of these absurd accusations. I have dedicated my life to helping others through my charitable works. My organizations uplift the vulnerable and give voices to the voiceless." I sweep the crowd with an icy stare. "And I am confident that justice will prevail."

Cameras flash furiously once more, but without waiting for the renewed shouts and questions, I slip into the waiting car. Lucia dives in the other side, and Daddy slides in beside me before rapping on the dividing window. "Drive."

As the media frenzy fades, Lucia twists in her seat to glare at me. "That was foolish, Alessa. Anything you say can compromise your case."

Daddy takes my hand, his expression unreadable. But he remains silent. I glare at Lucia defiantly. "I will not cower from those vultures."

"You've handed the prosecution fuel for their case," she snaps. But then she exhales, shoulders sagging slightly. "What's done is done, I suppose. We'll manage it."

I turn my gaze out the window, watching the city streets slide by. Despite my bold words, tension thrums within me. I must present an untouchable facade, but inside,

I'm churning with fury and frustration.

Bested by that two-faced snake, Natalie Miller.

My own heart used against me—that's the bitterest pill of all to swallow.

What kind of fool am I, to have so easily succumbed to Natalie's innocent posturing? She played the part of smitten lover convincingly, I'll give her that. All the better to stab me in the back.

Well, two can play this game. I will have my vengeance. But right now, I have other priorities to deal with. Vulnerable lives are hanging in the balance, lives that Natalie didn't bother to consider.

The car slows as we pass through the iron gates fronting my father's Long Island residence. The chauffeur opens my door and I step out. The doors fly open, and I expect my mother, but instead I see Juno and Caitlin. Caitlin runs down to throw her arms around me, but I keep my eyes on Juno. Her face is grimly set, eyes burning just like Daddy's were in the car. There's so much shared history that binds us, for good or ill.

And right now, her solidarity is exactly what I need to strengthen my spine.

Her dark eyes scan me head to toe, cataloging. "You look well enough for someone fresh out of a cell."

I summon a wry smile.

"Juno wentat onceto let your father know," Caitlin tells me, tucking her arm in mine as she leads me up into the house.

Ah, so that's where they went—not to ditch me but to help me. The thought warms me. As much as my cousin and I test each other, we do close ranks when threatened.

And then I hear it, the cry I've been dreading: "Alessa!"

I have to stifle a groan as my mother, tear-stained and over-dramatic as usual, throws herself at me. I pat her back reassuringly as she sobs incoherently, and my father has to come and lead her away.

"Give her a Valium," I mutter at him, and I'm not joking about it.

Juno is really fired up. We seem to have swapped temperaments tonight; she is raging, pacing the floor as we wait for my father to return, vowing bloody retribution on everyone involved in this sting operation. Lucia is on the phone, already trying to get the case against me dismissed.

But I just sit calmly, nursing the drink Caitlin hastily made for me, staring at the carpet.

And imagining all the delightful ways I am going to make Natalie Miller regret her actions, down to her very core.

At last, Daddy returns. He takes one look at me and turns to Juno and Caitlin and Lucia with a smile. "Ladies, I can't thank you enough for your help. But my daughter needs to rest now."

It takes a few minutes, but he shepherds them out. When he comes back, he stands in the doorway, looking at me with a fond expression, until one of my mother's wails from above cuts through the silence. "Come on, principessa," he says. "Let's go have a talk."

* * *

He leads me out to the familiar, ramshackle shed, and then down the secret stairs. Once the doors close behind us at the bottom, the stone walls of my father's underground surveillance room muffle all sound. Here we can speak freely, and I feel my lungs expanding in relief as he puts on some jazz music as a soft background for our discussion. He settles in his usual leather chair. I stay standing, too restless, my damn ass still too sore from that metal bench in the holding cell.

"First things first," I announce. "Elena Martinez."

Daddy gives a slow nod, and I feel a glow of pleasure in his approval despite everything. We've been working to disrupt the Mancini Family's human trafficking ring, and a young woman named Elena Martinez was next in line to be spirited away from their clutches. She managed to get word through that she needed aid.

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Aid that we were delighted to give her—but now that the Ruby Realm has been shut down, and surveillance will be ramped up on me, we need to rethink our original plans.

Aside from Natalie Miller, Elena's fate was the only thing on my mind during my time in that cell.

Daddy says gravely, "Thought we could hide her upstate until we could arrange a new identity and relocation for her. The usual plan's shot to hell now." He takes in my expression. "No, don't blame yourself, principessa. You didn't know."

"I should have known," I hiss.

Daddy sighs. "The girl is safe for now. She can wait a night. And our strategies can wait for tomorrow, eh?"

He's right, though I hate to admit it. Weariness tugs at me now that the initial outrage has cooled. I need privacy, time to order my thoughts and plan my next steps.

"In the meantime, Alessa, tell me what I can do to make you feel better. Anything at all."

My whole life, he's been like this. He'd move mountains to keep me safe and happy. And there's one thing I know I do want.

Vengeance.

I meet my father's dark eyes steadily. "Natalie Miller," I say. "I want you to bring her to me, Daddy. Somewhere private. Somewhere where she can scream her lungs out and not be heard."

"Alessa," Daddy says gently. "If you want this Natalie Miller taken care of, I can—"

"No," I say, almost violently. "No. I will be the one to do this. Please, Daddy, just—just bring her to me."

He stands to press a kiss to my forehead. "Consider it done, principessa."

CHAPTER 3

NATALIE

I walk back into FBI headquarters with a file of papers clutched to my chest like a shield. It hasn't been that long since I was last here—a week, ten days, maybe—yet it feels like a lifetime. And I don't feel the same sense of peace and rightness that I usually feel when I come into work.

But I came here for one reason only: to return these documents I inadvertently took from the Park Avenue penthouse when I left my alias Natalie Moreau behind. It's time to cut the ties still linking me to that glamorous undercover life. Time to remember who the hell I am. And then, soon enough, these headquarters will feel like home again.

I make my way to my team's bullpen on a higher floor, getting a few nods along the way. Smiles seem genuine, if a bit cautious. Heat creeps up my neck despite myself. Why do I feel so...out of place? I keep my gaze fixed straight ahead, trying not to catch any eyes as I make my way to my team's section. I'm here to do one thing, and then I can retreat back to the safety of my nondescript apartment. Alone.

"Hey, Miller, welcome back."

I turn to see Patrick O'Conner falling into step beside me, his boyish face creased into a friendly grin. "We've missed you around here. How are you holding up?"

I appreciate his kindness, but his question rubs my raw nerves. I resist the urge to wrap my arms around myself defensively. "I'm doing alright, thanks. Still on leave."

He nods, taking my hint not to pry further. "That case was some heavy stuff. You did good work bringing it home. Really impressive. When you're ready, I know Bell will want you back on high-priority cases."

There's an eagerness to his tone that both warms me and sets me on edge. I don't want to be seen as some hero, the brave agent who took down Alessa de Luca.

That's not...that's not how it happened.

So I simply incline my head in acknowledgment and offer a noncommittal, "We'll see what happens."

We've reached the corridor leading to my small office space. O'Conner gives me an encouraging slap on the shoulder. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you made it through in one piece. Just watch your back, huh?"

I take a sharp breath. Does he know of the danger I face with Alessa at large? Before I can ask, O'Conner disappears into the bustling bullpen.

I step into the dim, cramped space that serves as my office. It looks exactly like I left it weeks ago, but it feels so unfamiliar now.

Dropping the files on my desk, I sink into the worn office chair that molds perfectly

to my shape. As I glance at the mundane personnel notices and mentoring program posters my colleagues have tacked up in their spaces visible through the glass wall, I feel like an imposter. The Natalie Miller I once was doesn't seem to fit in this world anymore.

I left too much of myself somewhere else. Somewhere...somewhere dark and dangerous and deadly.

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I need to get back to the old me.

"Agent Miller."

I startle at the rap of knuckles against my door. Dr. Kristen Hays stands in the doorway, an expectant look on her fine-boned face. As the consulting psychologist and profiler for our unit, she's often ordered to assess our mental fitness after intense cases.

But my shoulders tighten. As kind and helpful as she always seems, I have no desire to be shrink-wrapped and analyzed.

"Dr. Hays." I keep my tone neutral. "What brings you by?"

"You, actually." Hays eases inside, leaving the door open. It's an intentional move meant to signal safety, but it only makes me feel wary. She settles into the visitor's chair, watching me intently. "You were supposed to make an appointment with me. I was beginning to worry you were avoiding talking to me. You know we need to have the required sessions before I can sign off on you returning to work. Really, you shouldn't be here at all unless it's to see me."

The genuine concern in her voice makes me bite back the defensive response on my tongue. "I'm just dropping off some papers."

Kristen raises a delicate brow. "And when are you planning to come in for a session?"

When I remain stubbornly silent, she sighs. "You didn't spend a great deal of time

undercover as Natalie Moreau, but it was a very dangerous operation. It's perfectly normal to feel conflicted and displaced."

Her accuracy unnerves me. Is my inner turmoil that obvious?

"I appreciate the concern, but I'm fine. The case was stressful, but nothing I can't handle." Even to my own ears, the words sound hollow. I fight to keep my face impassive as Kris studies me.

"Natalie," she says softly, "it's standard policy for all agents to attend mandatory counseling sessions after undercover work. How about we make a time for—"

A sharp knock at the door saves me from hearing the rest of that suggestion. But as I glance up, my stomach drops.

Sam Wright fills the doorway, his frame nearly boxing out the light. "Sorry to interrupt, Dr. Hays. Do you mind if I borrow Agent Miller for a quick word?"

Hays' lips thin, but she simply inclines her head and stands gracefully. "Of course." She focuses on me, her expression impossible to read. "I'll be in touch, Natalie."

I force a tight smile, unable to shake the feeling I've just failed some critical test. As Hays glides out, Wright steps in and closes the door behind him. My office instantly feels two sizes too small.

"So, you're back." Wright's voice is neutral as he sits in the chair Kris Hays vacated.

"I just had some final documents to return. Didn't realize I needed permission to come into my own office."

Wright raises his palms in a conciliatory gesture. "No need to get testy. I wanted to

touch base about precautions now that de Luca's out on bail. We should move you to a safe house until she's back in custody."

His assumptions ignite my simmering frustration. Not once has he bothered to ask me what I want.

"I'd prefer to avoid going into protective custody."

Wright's mouth tightens, a dangerous glint entering those flat eyes. "Nat, be reasonable. De Luca has an ax to grind after you sent her to jail. She could make a move against you at any moment. I won't allow that."

The ferocity edging his voice surprises me. Sam Wright has always been overprotective, but this seems...personal. And his commanding tone sparks my defiance. I'm not some fragile damsel in distress.

Leaning forward, I meet his stare directly. "Putting my life on hold indefinitely isn't an option. If I take precautions, I'll be fine on my own."

"This isn't up for debate. I have a safe house arranged. I'll handle the protective detail myself." Sam must read the objection on my face, because his expression tightens. "You reporting to me ensures complete secrecy. We can't risk involving other agents."

A caustic retort burns my tongue, but I swallow it down. I don't require babysitting to handle one mafia princess. Tempting though she may be...

"I understand the need for prudence." I slip some steel into my tone. "But as I said—repeatedly—I'll pass on the protective custody. I can look out for myself."

"Dammit, Natalie." Wright braces his hands on my desk until we're practically nose

to nose. "I'm not asking! Don't fight me on this."

I brace my hands right back, anger roughening my voice. "With all due respect, Agent Wright, I don't need a babysitter. I'm trained for this."

"Oh, really?" Wright straightens to his full height, scowling down at me. "Like you were so well trained during the de Luca op? I warned you not to get too involved. But you lost focus, let her get in your head. Compromised the entire case for a piece of ass!"

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"What the hell?" I storm back, ignoring the hot shame that floods me, and clinging on to my outrage. "You're way out of line. I did what needed to be done."

"And look where it got you! I'm trying to protect you, and you're fighting me every damn step of the way."

Does he really care about me that much, or is it just his male pride wounded by my refusal to fall in line? Either way, I'm done with this conversation.

I gather the papers in a businesslike manner and open my office door. "I appreciate your concern. But I won't be taking up the offer. Thank you, Agent Wright. You can see yourself out."

The muscle in Wright's jaw flexes, but finally he dips his chin. "Have it your way. But this discussion isn't over." His gaze bores into mine. "I'll keep you safe, Nat. Whether you want me to or not."

Before I can respond, he brushes past me and disappears down the corridor. I lean against the door, willing my racing heart to slow. Wright's protectiveness has shifted into something more rigid and authoritarian, and it leaves me deeply concerned.

Should I say something to our supervisor, Stephen Bell? Or to Dr. Hays? But no—if I did, they'd probably just agree with Wright that I needed protective custody.

Screw it. I can handle Sam Wright.

I return the papers to the appropriate file, and then make my way toward the

elevators, passing several more colleagues who greet me with reserved nods. By the time the elevator doors finally close behind me, I'm suffocating.

Coming back here was a mistake. Hays kept reminding me that I needed the psych sessions before I could come back to work, as though I'd be desperate to get back.

But I'm not.

And I should be. The old Natalie would be furious that she was on forced leave. That's who I need to be, now—the old me. The Natalie who knew right from wrong, who understood that Alessa de Luca was a cancer in this city, just like the rest of the Mob.

The elevator groans to the lobby and I step out with a feeling of relief as my old sense of justice seems to be returning. Hanging on to that glowing ember, I hurry toward my subway station.

I just need to make it home without incident. Lock the door behind me and pour a stiff drink. Pretend, just for a little while, that I have my life back under control.

I get back to my apartment without incident, and as soon as I'm inside, I let out a deep, relieved sigh. I turn to shrug off my jacket, and that's when it happens.

A pungent cloth clamps down over my nose and mouth.

Chloroform.

I hold my breath and slam my elbow back. A muffled grunt answers but the grip around me tightens, immovable as granite. I try to kick back, but my limbs already feel sluggish and uncoordinated. Spots dance before my eyes.

No...I have to get away...have to...

My struggles grow weaker as the sickly odor fills my nose and lungs. The world melts away as my legs give out. Strong arms catch me, lowering me gently to the floor.

I try to cling to consciousness, but the black tide rises too quickly. As my vision fails, I'm enveloped by the very shadows I've been fleeing from. They seem to rise up to claim me, a whispered promise on their ruby-red lips.

You can't escape what's coming for you, Natalie Miller...

CHAPTER4

NATALIE

A bone-deep throbbing in my skull drags me back from the void. Beneath me, the floor rocks gently, the familiar hum of tires on road filling my ears. The sickly aftertaste of chloroform coats my tongue. I try to move only to find my wrists and ankles tightly bound.

And then I have to fight down the panic.

Where am I? What the hell is happening?

Blindfolded and bound in a moving vehicle, being taken God knows where. Training kicks in, honing my focus. Cautiously, I flex my wrists, but the ties don't give at all. Same with my ankles. Whoever took me is a professional.

The engine's purr and lack of traffic noise suggest a powerful car on an empty road. The vehicle takes a smooth curve, the centrifugal force pressing me against firm panels—a van or an SUV.

I force myself to breathe slowly against the fear constricting my chest. Blind, immobilized, I'm terrifyingly helpless. And I have no idea who's taken me, the list of possibilities longer than it should be. The Mancini Family? Juno Bianchi? Johnny the Gentleman? Sam Wright, for God's sake?

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Or is it Alessa herself?

Despite the peril, heat flickers through me at the thought of seeing her again. God help me, but the prospect is almost more paralyzing than the danger I'm in.

Before I can process that disturbing reaction, the vehicle slows and pulls a hard left. The paved road gives way to gravel that crackles under the tires. We must be nearing our destination, an isolated place if the lack of ambient sound is any indication. Fear and anticipation coil tighter in my gut.

After a few more turns, the vehicle eases to a stop. Doors open and close up front. Heavy footsteps crunch on gravel, coming around to my side. When the doors open, male hands haul me out none too gently.

I'm still blindfolded, but the fresh air tells me we're outside. A large hand grips my arm as I'm steered forward. My heels catch on uneven ground, and then I'm swung up and over a broad shoulder, the air rushing out of me as I dangle upside down. Gravel underfoot again, and then the quiet creak of a door opening. We seem to be going down some stairs, and the air changes, opening up with traces of lemon and beeswax.

Polish. Wood polish. What the...

My apprehension deepens. Whatever awaits me, someone has gone to great lengths to transport me here, and it's not some dockside warehouse.

To my relief, I'm set upright again, and then hands grasp my shoulders, guiding me down into a cushioned chair. In short order I'm secured tight to it, wrists and ankles

freed before quickly bound again to the arms and legs of the chair.

And finally, the blindfold is ripped away.

I squint against the sudden brightness, though the light is still dim. When my vision adjusts, my breath catches. I'm in a large room, stone-walled, seated on—no, tied to—a heavy chair. But that's not the most alarming thing. No, the alarming thing here is that I'm in some sort of bunker, with a wall of screens on one side—all off, at the moment—hooked up to two humming computers. On the far wall there's a row of well-stocked bookcases, and to my left, there's...

Well, it looks almost like a living room, with leather couches and an armchair, and a well-stocked bar.

But most worryingly of all, Johnny "the Gentleman" de Luca stands over me looking supremely unconcerned for a man who just kidnapped a federal agent.

I meet Johnny's impassive gaze and lift my chin. Amusement flickers in his dark eyes. "Special Agent Miller. I think you're smart enough to guess why you're here."

My throat tightens. Of course I know. This is about his daughter.

His eyes slide sideways, and I follow them despite myself. At the side of the room is a tray, set on a side table, and on that tray is an array of...

Of instruments. Knives. Scalpels. A hammer. And pliers and—

But before my hysteria can really rise up, we both turn our attention to the stairs, hearing the clack of high heels coming down them. I can hear but not see as the door swings open behind me, but I smell her perfume before I see her.

And I know her voice.

"It's okay, Daddy. I'll take it from here."

She comes around to stand in front of me, her eyes washing over me, burning with emerald fire.

As Johnny bows out, Alessa prowls towards me. Her sheer blouse and lean black trousers hint at the sensual temptress within, but her expression is harder than diamonds. She halts just out of reach, staring down at me with impossible hauteur.

The power balance could not be clearer.

"NatalieMiller," she says with contempt, once the door has closed behind her father. "Well. Here we are again. Although this time you don't seem to have the upper hand." Alessa circles slowly, trailing a red-tipped finger over the chair. "How quickly fortune's wheel turns. One day you're flying high, the next..." She shrugs, red lips curving in a feline smile. "Why, the next, you're tied up at another woman's mercy."

Her husky voice shivers over me, mingling menace and temptation. She's enjoying this, repaying humiliation with humiliation. Part of me understands her anger, her need for vengeance.

But the darkest part of me simply aches to touch her again.

Alessa stills behind me, breath stirring my hair. "Nothing to say? I expected groveling for your life. Or at least some witty repartee." Her tone is mocking. "No crafty lies to soften me up? You played your role so convincingly before."

Anger burns through me. She wants a response? Fine.

"I did what was needed to do my job, Alessa." I twist to meet her piercing gaze. "But that doesn't mean I'm not sorry about it."

Something dangerous flashes in her stare. "Sorry about it?" Her laughter sounds like shredded glass. "Which parts, specifically, are you sorry about? Tell me, Natalie—was it screwing me senseless? Is that what you're sorry about? Was it putting that lying mouth on my clit and making me come? Or do you only regret what I did for you? The multiple orgasms got a little too much?"

Rage whites out my vision. "That's not what I meant," I snarl, straining against the restraints.

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Alessa grabs a fistful of my hair, wrenching my head back. Our faces are inches apart now, her breath hot on my lips. I'm panting and so is she, rage and twisted desire swelling between us, ready to detonate.

"You destroyed my life," she hisses.

"I did what I had to do," I hiss back.

Her eyes bore into me, seeking truth. Finding it. Her grip in my hair eases, the fury fading from her face. She looks torn, confused. Lost.

And seeing that vulnerability, my anger melts away. "Alessa..." I whisper.

Just saying her name unleashes a deluge of emotions inside me. The weeks of craving her, needing her. My despair when I realized how deep in I really was.

Alessa jerks back from those emotions bared naked on my face, conflict in her eyes.

"If you plan to kill me," I choke out, my throat tight, "just do it."

Without a word, she spins and strides from the room.

CHAPTER5

ALESSA

I practically run up the stairs and into the gardens, where I clench my fists and clamp

my teeth together to stop the scream building up inside of me. It's too much. I look at her, and the fury inside me...

It dulls.

And I hate that. I hate that she can make me weak, that she can tame the tempest inside of me with just a soft look.

I leave her there for an hour to think about things, and then I descend again, determined this time. Determined to take my vengeance.

But again, when I get down there—rouse her from a light doze, it seems—and she looks at me, some weak part inside me softens. Shivers.

Opens up.

I stare at Special Agent Natalie Miller, taking in every detail of the woman who betrayed me. Her blonde hair is in a haphazard ponytail, no longer tamed in the elegant up-dos she wore as Natalie Moreau. The makeup and designer clothes are gone too, leaving her looking younger, softer. More like the woman underneath who was trying to play dress-up in my world.

As expected, Natalie recoils again when she sees me, her shoulders curling in defensively. Good.

"Alessa, please just listen—"

"You betrayed me!" My voice is harsh even to my own ears, and Natalie flinches. "You lied about who you were, wormed your way into my life under false pretenses. You made me—made me care for you." I swallow hard. I can't afford to look weak.

"I never meant to hurt you." Natalie's voice trembles. "I didn't know—I didn't know they planned to arrest you, and especially not in public, at the gala. I had no idea—"

"That it was all part of their grand plan?" I snarl, venom lacing my words. "You, the central piece of their operation—you had no idea?" I widen my eyes in a mockery of innocence. Humiliation burns through me afresh. The stares, the whispers that night—and then the media circling for every scrap of dirt on the dethroned Mafia princess.

It was a meticulously planned takedown.

I lean in close. "I know how the FBI works. How long you spent burrowing into my life, whispering poison into my ear. Making me lower my guard. I wonder—do they know everything you did? Did they enjoy pimping you out, their obedient little whore, designed to entice? To entrap?"

Natalie shakes her head helplessly. "That's not..." She doesn't finish, her breath shaky.

The memory of her skin gliding against mine flashes through my mind. A flare of heat, quickly extinguished.

"So it was just part of the job for you, seducing me. Is that right?" My laugh sounds hollow to my own ears. "Tell me, how far would you have gone to get your evidence? There were no limits for the sake of your case, were there? Because someone planted evidence when they couldn't find what they were looking for. Was it you?"

Lucia told me in confidence that the only evidence they seemed to have against me was a bag full of cash, and a kilo of coke. Neither of those should have been in the Ruby Realm, and I told her as much; the casino staff never left money lying around in duffel bags, for God's sake, and drugs were always prohibited throughout the entire

club, specifically so there would never be cause for a raid.

I think Lucia even believed me. But now I'm starting to wonder who put them there.

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"What are you talking about?" Natalie surges forward against her bonds, eyes burning with intensity now. "I never planted anything. And I tried to keep things professional between us, I did. But what happened was..." She trails off.

I stare into her eyes. I've always been able to read people. It's a gift, and a necessity in my world. But this woman has always been a mystery to me. Even now, I can't tell if it's truth or manipulation shining in her eyes.

So I harden my heart. Safer not to hope, to let any flicker of warmth or light in.

"Enough." My fingers curl into fists. "I don't know why I'm wasting time listening to your lies. I should just—"

"Kill me?" Natalie's chin lifts, a spark of defiance piercing her fear.

I arch an eyebrow. "You're very quick to suggest it."

"Why the hell else would you have me abducted—tied up here—" She makes an irritated noise. "I knew what I was getting into when I took on the role, Alessa. And I know what happens to rats in the Mob."

I do want to kill her. God, I do. I want to erase her from existence, so that I can deny I was ever such a fool.

I lean in so close our faces are inches apart. "You seem very certain about who I am." Her breath flutters against my lips. Being this near her is a mistake, but I need to regain the upper hand. Prove to her—to myself—that she hasn't left me powerless.

My nail traces a slow line down her cheek. Natalie shivers. "I could make you beg for death long before it comes. And part of me wants that, so badly. To shred your composure until you show the weak, cowering girl that lies underneath all that cunning and spite."

Natalie swallows involuntarily. But she keeps her eyes locked on mine.

With a noise of disgust, I step back, putting distance between us again. "But despite what you and your Fed friends think, I run a legitimate business. The Ruby Realm provides a safe space for women, and my charity work does real good in the world. Your stunt has put all of that at risk." My jaw tightens. "I have too much to lose to play your games any longer."

Reaching behind her, I take up a knife from the tray that Daddy so thoughtfully laid out for me—as set dressing, if nothing else, because he knows me much better than I know myself—and Natalie's eyes go wide with shock.

I take a few brisk steps behind her and slice through her binding in one smooth motion, hands first, then ankles. Natalie tumbles out of the chair, lurching forward as her arms come free. She rolls over and stares up at me in bewilderment, rubbing at her wrists.

I gesture toward the door with the knife. "There. You're free. Run back to your handlers, with my compliments." My lips twist in a mockery of a smile. "Tell tales on me again if you like. It won't have any effect. I'm not going to be taken down so easily, Natalie Miller. Not me."

Natalie hesitates, confusion creasing her brow. "Alessa...I don't understand. You're just letting me go?"

"You seem disappointed, sweetheart. Were you hoping for a more dramatic ending?"

I'm so sorry to disappoint you—but I've rather lost my taste for you."

Natalie flushes. "No, that's not—I just figured you'd want revenge. After everything..."

Everything. Images flash through my mind on fast forward: first sighting her across a crowded ballroom, the adrenaline rush of our verbal sparring. Then later, the intimacy of whispered conversations in the dark, her fingers tangled with mine, bodies intertwined, my name gasped out of her lips.

I shut it down fast. Can't afford vulnerability; it already cost me too much. But Natalie's right—letting her walk does go rather against tradition.

If she'd messed with anyone other than me, she'd be fish food by now.

"Revenge would be satisfying, I admit," I tell her slowly. "And if this was only about me, I'd take my time with it, savor every moment." Natalie pales. "But it's not just my life at stake. If I go down for this, the Ruby fails. My initiatives for trafficked women collapse. You don't realize—don't care—how many will suffer, women and girls who have no one else. I won't let that happen."

Natalie looks unsure. "Alessa, no matter how much good you've done, it doesn't justify—"

I cut her off with a harsh, brittle laugh. "There's that black-and-white mentality. The law is always right, and those who break it deserve punishment." I step closer, anger simmering now. "Surely you don't still believe that? After seeing what I do, the spaces I operate in. The kind of people your righteous FBI partners are in bed with."

"Of course there's corruption now and then, but—"

"No buts!" I jab a finger at her. "You're so certain your Bureau is in the right, that I'm the villain here. When the truth is the evidence used against me won't hold up at trial. Hell, it won't even get to trial."

Lucia has already assured me of that, and she's very good at what she does. As long as I can keep Don Mancini on my side, Lucia Rossi will help me beat the rap.

Natalie gives me a wary look. "What do you mean? You were running an illegal casino, Alessa."

I give a smug smile. "What casino?" The casino disappeared from the secret speakeasy room in the basement the same night I threw Natalie out of the Ruby. "The evidence your team arrested me on had nothing to do with a casino. They claim that not only was I laundering money, I was dealing drugs for the Mancini Family—but I wasn't. I wasn't, Special Agent Miller. So how exactly did they find that sizeable brick of coke to use against the big, bad Mafia princess?"

I can see the uncertainty in Natalie's eyes. And I answer my own question.

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"They planted it."

She picks herself up off the floor. "They had no reason to do that."

"Oh, yes they did. You blew it, remember?" She winces, and I feel glad inside. Pleased to see her squirm. "By the time you vermin arrived to scurry around the Ruby, there wasn't a trace of anything there to find—not that there was in the first place, of course."

At that bald-faced lie, Natalie gives me a skeptical look. "If not the casino, they must have found something else."

"They found the evidence they planted themselves," I insist. "But it doesn't matter now. Myveryfucking expensive lawyer is going to get this case laughed out of court, and that's all that matters. As for you—"

I stalk over and grab her arm, steering her firmly toward the door. She drags her heels, slowing me down.

"Alessa, wait. If what you're saying is true, we need to investigate it, get to the truth—"

"We?" I whirl on her. "There is nowe."

Being this close is definitely a mistake. Natalie's nearness clouds my head, even after all she's done. Her lips are just inches away. It would be so easy to close the tiny gap between us, lose myself in her kiss for a few stolen moments...

What in the hell is wrong with me?

Daddy was right. I should have let him handle this.

With a growl of frustration, I seize her arm tighter and tug Natalie toward the door. She's fighting me now, twisting in my grip.

"Let go of me! We can't just leave it like this, you have to—"

"Quiet," I snap. "You'll wake my mother if you keep shrieking like that, and there'll be no peace at all if you do." I drag her up the stairs and wave at the waiting guard outside, one of my father's men. He takes hold of a struggling Natalie firmly.

I fix her with an icy stare. "We're done, Agent Miller. This is the last time our paths cross. The score is settled."

Even as the words leave my lips, they ring hollow. There's no settling this score that has left us both scarred. The man drags her over to a waiting car, and I slam the door on her with an air of finality.

And I don't stand and watch as she's driven away. I turn and leave immediately. Let her be the one to stare longingly after me.

Inside the house again, I sag back against the door after I close it. Natalie's presence lingers, her scent teasing my senses. I swipe an angry hand over my eyes. Damn her for this weakness she's awakened in me.

With a few deep breaths, I straighten my spine and smooth my tangled hair back into place. I am Alessa goddamn de Luca. I bend this world to my will, never the reverse. This is just another trial to endure, like the corrupt one the FBI is trying to build against me.

And I will endure it. Natalie Miller brought chaos into my world once. I won't let it happen again.

I turn despite myself, watching through the window as the car taking her home is lost from view.

There. She's gone.

And I have important work to do: shoring up my empire, yes, but also freeing the girls and women enslaved by the Mancini Family. And I have to find a way to do that while depending on the Family for my own legal defense.

It will be tricky. Very tricky.

But at least Natalie Miller is history. Soon enough I won't even remember the sound of her voice, the warmth in her eyes, the taste of her...

Soon enough I'll forget her completely.

CHAPTER 6

NATALIE

I stare blankly at the swirling darkness of my coffee, lost in thought. The buzz of diners in the bistro fades into white noise as my mind replays the dizzying encounter with Alessa over and over, just like I have for the past two days.

I was dropped off back at my building. That's where they'd kidnapped me from, after all.

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But what's been haunting me is the memory of emerald eyes blazing with betrayal—yet softened by vulnerability. And the conviction in Alessa's voice as she insisted someone in the Bureau set her up. Her icy composure cracking just enough to reveal hints of the passions roiling beneath that elegant exterior.

And she's right. I can't picture Alessa de Luca, nor any of her well-trained Ruby Realm staff, leaving a brick of coke and a bag full of bills just lying around to be found. Not when they cleared out the entire casino in less than a night.

Kidnapping me was a rare misstep, born out of her humiliation, I assume. But she didn't kill me.

She wanted to—I could see it. I could see the fury in her, directed solely at me.

But she didn't kill me.

"Earth to Natalie?"

Evelyn Chang's voice snaps me back to the present. I lift my gaze from the inky depths of my coffee to meet her knowing look as she slides into the booth opposite me. We're having lunch, on my request, and I'm hoping to ask her a few questions about the investigation—since I have no official access to information anymore, not until I come off my period of paid leave.

"You were really somewhere else," she remarks. "How are you doing? We miss you."

We? She does, maybe. Bell is still mad at me, and I'm dodging Kris Hays and Sam

Wright still. I offer an apologetic smile. "I'm okay. Just...processing everything. It's been a long couple of weeks."

The understatement of the year. And somewhere in this tangled mess, I've lost my grip on what's real and what's illusion. Nothing is as black and white as it seemed before Alessa de Luca exploded into my life.

Evelyn studies me, her perceptive gaze seeing far more than I want to reveal. She's always had that knack for reading between the lines. It's part of what makes her one of the Bureau's top technical analysts.

Finally she asks gently, "Have you thought more about protective custody? I know Wright is worried about you."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Maybe Wright means well, but his recent behavior has set my teeth on edge. I give my standard, crisp reply. "I don't need a babysitter."

Evelyn shakes her head in surrender, a wry smile playing about her lips. "Hey, just looking out for you. We all want you safe while this...situation with Alessa de Luca shakes out."

My fingers tighten reflexively around the coffee mug at the mention of Alessa's name. Just hearing it ignites a riot of turbulent emotions I'm nowhere near ready to confront. Evelyn's dark eyes are still fixed on me, and I struggle not to squirm under her scrutiny.

"I know you're worried, but I'll be fine." I try to infuse confidence into my voice. "I can take care of myself. I'm FBI, after all."

Evelyn sighs, picking up the diner menu. "I believe you. But it doesn't hurt to be careful. This could get...tricky."

I freeze with my coffee halfway to my lips. This is my opportunity. "What do you mean?" I ask, trying not to sound too eager.

She shakes her head. "Forget it. I shouldn't have—"

"Evelyn." Setting down my mug, I choose my words with care. "I admit, I've had some concerns myself. About the way the operation was conducted. About the charges, given that the illegal gambling can't be proven." I study Evelyn closely. "I've had some concerns about the evidence."

"How do you—"

"Wright told me," I lie baldly. "A kilo of coke and a few hundred k in a bag. That's all they had? Doesn't seem to me like there's enough for a conviction."

Evelyn lifts one shoulder in a graceful shrug, but her body language betrays her unease. "I can't say for certain. But something feels off. We both know how these operations can get messy."

Messy. That's a way of putting it. I finish my coffee to buy time gathering my turbulent thoughts, and Evelyn orders her lunch. Am I allowing my conflicted feelings for Alessa to breed doubts about the legitimacy of the case? Or is there true misconduct—corruption—lurking beneath the surface?

I need to find out the truth. I owe it to myself, and my oath as an agent, to be certain we have solid evidence before I aid in destroying a woman's life.

No matter how I might feel about that woman.

"Lay it out for me, will you?" I ask, as Evelyn takes a breath in her story about what she did on the weekend. "The case against Alessa de Luca."

Evelyn gives me a torn look. "Nat, I'm not going to do that. Certainly not here, in the middle of a diner."

I go on, determined. "I'm worried, Evelyn. I'm hearing rumors. Rumors that the judge will throw it out, that she'll walk. In that case..." I sigh, try to look scared. "In that case, I really might need protective custody."

Evelyn drops her head. "Nat, come on. Don't guilt me like that."

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Leaning forward, I ask in a low voice, "Come on, level with me. Do you really think the evidence could have been planted?"

She glances around before responding equally softly. "Honestly? I have my own concerns. Nothing concrete," she adds when my eyes sharpen with interest. "But there are several inconsistencies in the raid reports that don't sit right with me."

"What kind of inconsistencies?" I press.

Evelyn hesitates, clearly wrestling with what she should reveal. "I can't discuss details here," she says finally. "You want to know so bad, do the psych eval and get back in the office. But suffice to say, the higher-ups have nixed extra surveillance on de Luca, and they're already looking at other ways to hit the Mancini Family. Whatever they got on de Luca, they don't seem convinced it'll hold up." She reaches out for my hand. "And Nat, I really do want you back in the office. I miss you."

I have to smile at that, and nod. "Okay. Okay, I give in. I'll book a time with Hays."

Evelyn nods, relief flickering in her eyes. "It's the right thing to do." Her phone buzzes, and with a glance at it, she collects her purse. "Damn, I need to run. But let's do this again soon—your first day back, I'll take you out to lunch?"

"Absolutely." I summon a smile and we exchange goodbyes. But as Evelyn heads out, my thoughts drift inexorably back to Alessa.

Could she have been set up? The possibility of corruption in my own team sickens me.

There's only one way to find clarity. I need to talk to the one person who knows this case as well as I do. The one person who's heard all my doubts and concerns from the beginning.

The one whose clinical perspective might pierce through the conflicted tangle of my feelings.

Dr. Kristen Hays.

* * *

"You're distracted, Agent Miller."

Kris Hays' voice anchors me back to the present. I'm sitting in her office the next morning, staring blankly at a painting on the wall rather than meeting her too-perceptive gaze.

"Sorry." I take a bracing sip of the coffee she offered when I arrived. The earthy bitterness helps sharpen my focus. "I've just had a lot on my mind since the operation ended."

"Understandable. Going undercover can take a psychological toll even under ideal circumstances." She pauses delicately before continuing. "And I think we can agree, your situation was less than ideal."

I resist the urge to shift in my seat under her scrutiny. When I requested a meeting and she cleared her schedule for me to come in this morning, I should have known she would cut right to the heart of the matter.

"It got results," I say. "We took down Alessa de Luca." Saying her name still sends an illicit thrill through me. A visceral reaction I can't seem to erase, no matter how hard I

try.

Hays regards me steadily, her expression calm despite the tension thickening between us. "Yes, we secured an arrest. And she was out on bail only a few hours later. But there is also a human cost to consider." She leans forward, holding my gaze. "Natalie, be honest with me. What is really going on here?"

I briefly consider more evasions, but Dr. Hays has always seen through my defenses with eerie acuity. If I want the truth from her, I need to offer it in return.

I take a slow breath. "I have...concerns," I admit. "About Alessa. About the case, the operation." Needing an anchor, I wrap my hands tightly around my mug. "Maybe she's not the villain I thought she was. Her lawyer says the evidence was planted by the team." I glance at her to see how she takes that.

We were both part of that very team, after all.

"Do you believe her claims of being framed?" The question is delivered without judgment, but I backtrack anyway. This isn't going to get me where I want to be.

"I saw the casino with my own eyes. I know she was breaking the law. But from my understanding, that's not the evidence that the Bureau is bringing against her."

But Hays is too professional to let me prize any information out of her. "We're not here to discuss the case," she reminds me in a neutral tone. She assesses me with a psychologist's keen intuition, and I fight the urge to shrink from her scrutiny. "And I'm concerned this may go deeper than just stress, Agent Miller."

I stare fixedly at the dark surface of my coffee to avoid meeting her eyes. "What are you suggesting?"

"That your feelings for Ms. de Luca may have compromised your professionalism."

My hands spasm around the mug at her blunt delivery. I open my mouth to object, but she continues remorselessly. "You became emotionally entangled, Natalie. Don't insult either of us by denying it. Captain Bell informed me of your own confession to him—that you were sexually intimate with the target."

Heat creeps up my throat, and I lower my gaze, unable to refute her charge. Is my judgment so clouded by desire that I would actually entertain the idea that Alessa was unjustly accused? When I saw for myself that illegal casino in the Ruby's basement?

Have I been compromised?

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Perhaps sensing she's backed me into a corner, Hays softens her approach. "You're an excellent agent, Miller. But everyone has a breaking point. Undercover work takes a toll, especially deep cover. It can warp perceptions, distort realities." She sighs quietly. "If others knew the details of your...relationship...with Ms. de Luca, your integrity could be called into question. Your career threatened."

Her words send ripples of panic through me. She's right. Fraternizing with a target...it could end my career. I risked everything by allowing my feelings for Alessa to override my ethics and vows as an agent.

And yet, I can't fully silence the whispers that something about this case is rotten at its core.

That someone needs to think about justice, not just an outcome.

I raise my eyes to meet Dr. Hays' sympathetic gaze. "I appreciate your discretion in this matter. You know I only want to serve the cause of truth. I just..."

"You feel there are shades of gray here," she finishes with an understanding look. "That things aren't as black and white as they first appeared."

I nod mutely, a swell of relief rising in me. However this mess unravels, at least I have Hays in my corner, providing a compassionate ear and keeping my confidences. Not for the first time, I'm profoundly grateful for her.

"Well." She offers an encouraging smile. "Whatever questions or doubts you have, I know you'll get to the truth of the situation. You are a very dedicated officer." Her

expression turns serious once more. "But tread carefully, Agent Miller. I don't want to see your career unduly harmed by what was—let's be honest—a lapse in judgment. Right?"

"Right," I parrot.

"There's nothing else you need to disclose?"

I stare at her for a long moment. Yeah, there is. Of course there is. I should tell Hays—should have told the whole damn FBI—about myfreakingabductionby Johnny the Gentleman. About Alessa's threats. About...everything.

I don't plan to, though. It would just get me kicked further away from the team than I am now, and then I'd never be able to find the truth.

"Nothing else," I say firmly. "And actually, I'm relieved Bell told you about my...fraternization. I was worried he didn't take it all that seriously at the time."

"Oh, he did." Hays surveys me a moment longer, then nods. "I'm always here if you need to talk. But for now, I'll let you go." A ghost of a smile touches her lips. "A few more sessions and I think you'll be fit for duty again. When are you free next?"

I try to hide my disappointment, but I should have known that Hays would never sign off on my reinstatement after one little chat. I make another appointment, we exchange goodbyes, and then I'm exiting her office, my thoughts churning.

However this situation with Alessa plays out, I need to take care. If word gets back to Bell that I'm entertaining doubts about Alessa's guilt, or even simply inquiring about potential misconduct in the team, I'll have no chance at all to see the evidence against her, to judge for myself.

I could let it go, of course. From what everyone seems to be saying, the case will be quietly dropped. They're not even keeping up surveillance on Alessa.

But even if the case fails, someone still might have planted those pieces of evidence.

And that's not okay.

Too much is on the line. Because what Alessa said in that room was true—if the Ruby Realm closes, if she is imprisoned, if not now but later, then there will be hundreds of trafficked women left in misery, because no one else will do anything to save them.

They're not important enough to anyone but Alessa de Luca—and her father.

I shiver as I think of Johnny the Gentleman.

Outside, the day has turned gray and drizzling. I tug my collar up against the chill dampness, shoulders hunching as I head back to the subway station.

The truth has a way of coming to the surface. I just have to uncover it. But that will mean picking at the loose threads in this mess until it unravels completely, no matter the consequences.

I have to know that I'm on the right side of justice, even if the answer shakes my world. It has nothing to do with Alessa de Luca, not really.

Okay, not even I can convince myself of that lie.

With a sigh, I walk out into the rain, my path ahead obscured by shadows and looming threats. Somewhere in this city, Alessa is also moving in concealment.

Almost against my will, I feel myself anticipating our next encounter. That penetrating emerald gaze stripping me bare. The fiery clash of wills between us. The quickening of my pulse as she draws near.

This is such a dangerous game to play. I know the wiser path is to maintain distance, to cool the embers of this ill-advised passion. But right or wrong, my path keeps circling back to Alessa de Luca.

Maybe it's time I took a little more control of the situation.

CHAPTER7

ALESSA

The sleek town car pulls up to the red carpet outside the glitzy hotel where Madison Fontaine is hosting her Midnight in Manhattan party. I take a deep breath and smooth my hands over my evening gown—scarlet, backless, and slit to mid-thigh. My hair is swept up to show off the rubies at my throat and ears. The image of elegance and wealth...with an undertone of sensuality. Just the way I like it.

I wait as the driver opens the door and helps me out. The flash of cameras greets my arrival and reporters shout questions about the FBI case against me that I ignore with practiced poise. I keep my chin high, an enigmatic smile on my lips as I glide down the red carpet.

This is my first public appearance since being arrested, since the FBI raided my club.

Since Natalie Miller betrayed me.

I tense slightly at the thought of her name before forcing myself to relax. I can't show any weakness, not here. Tonight is about reestablishing myself in society, proving I'm as untouchable as ever despite the snakes snapping at my heels, trying to bring me down. I need to show I'm still in control.

Still queen of this damn city.

Inside, the soaring lobby glitters with light fracturing off crystals and diamonds. Men

in tuxedos and women draped in designer gowns and jewels mill about, sipping cocktails handed to them by servers in crisp white shirts. I snag a glass of Dom Perignon from one as I take in the view.

It's time to work the room. I move through the crowd, bestowing a smile here, an air-kiss there, exchanging greetings with those who approach me. The conversation flows, light and meaningless, all about appearances.

But I can feel the undercurrent. The discreet stares, the guarded reactions. Like sharks, they're circling, deciding if it's safe to engage with me after the lurid headlines surrounding my arrest. Wondering if I'm still in favor with the Mancini Family, or if they should keep their distance.

I'm wondering that myself. Lucia has been difficult to catch these last few days, and the case is proceeding against me, as far as I know.

Madison Fontaine herself eventually deigns to approach, air-kissing the empty space next to my cheeks. Her smile is bright and empty. "Alessa! Darling! I didn't think you'd be able to make it."

Bitch. I keep my tone smooth. "Of course. I wouldn't miss it." I gesture around. "It looks utterly sublime. You've really outdone yourself this year."

She preens. "Why thank you."

We exchange a few more empty pleasantries before she glides off to gossip about me. I resist the urge to roll my eyes and turn to observe the crowd again, resisting the dark thoughts that press in.

I built my reputation among these people. My club catered to the most elite women in the city, providing everything they desired behind closed doors. I connected with

CEOs, politicians, celebrities...now half of these ingrates won't even meet my gaze.

Maybe I shouldn't have come tonight. I knew what it would be like, how they would close ranks and shut me out. But I needed to show my influence hasn't waned. That my arrest was just some...minor inconvenience. A tiny misunderstanding.

I'm still Alessa de Luca. This city still belongs to me. That's the message I wanted to send tonight. But as the night drags on, it becomes apparent the message hasn't landed. The subtle slights continue, the conversations that awkwardly end when I approach, the circles that shift to exclude me.

I keep my polite, aloof mask in place, but anger simmers beneath it. These people welcomed me into the fold when it suited them to have the influential Alessa de Luca at their soirees and galas. They enjoyed the panache and style I brought, never questioning the darker roots of my wealth and connections. Now I'm shunned for the very underworld ties that once attracted them, that added an illicit thrill that they all secretly craved.

Fools, all of them. If they believe I'll be cast out so easily, reduced to groveling for their approval, they're sorely mistaken. The roots of my influence run deeper than they can imagine. I was raised amidst far more dangerous sharks than these.

And when I regain what is mine they'll come scurrying back, eager once more for my favor. The Ruby Realm is shut for the time being, but Lucia has promised to work on getting it back into my hands.

Soon enough I've had enough of this charade of civility. The whispers, the veiled insults, the pretense...I need to be somewhere else. Somewherereal.

Whatever that means.

* * *

The next evening finds me making my way downtown to Anna's Kitchen, the soup kitchen where I volunteer every Wednesday. Turning down the alley where it's located, I brace myself, unsure if I'll truly be embraced or just tolerated—or worse, turned away. The FBI's arrest made ripples everywhere. What if even this place wants to keep me at arm's length?

The thought fills me with more dread than I'd expect as I reach the back door of the building. This work matters to me. Far more than those preening socialites and their extravagant galas.

This is real. A way to make amends for...for all of it. Everything I've been part of.

Inside, the air is warm and fragrant with today's meal—the rich aroma of beef stew. I nod to the regular kitchen staff, who glance up with quick smiles, and Anna herself, the woman who started this venture, a talented chef who decided to stop wasting those talents on the rich.

"Hey, Alessa," she says easily, as she sees me come in the door. She's setting out the condiments on the long tables. "You're late. Get that pretty ass moving and start peeling."

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No judgment, just the easy banter I'm used to here.

I choke out a greeting, rushing by so she won't see the tears stinging my eyes, and I grab an apron from behind the door.

As long as I still have this, I can handle everything else.

I've just started peeling the potatoes when a familiar voice speaks behind me.

"Alessa?"

I nearly drop the knife as I whirl to see Natalie Miller standing there with a tub full of potatoes for washing at the next prep station. For a moment we just stare at each other.

She's dressed down in jeans and a hoodie, a stained apron covering her clothes. Her hair is pulled back in a simple ponytail again and she has no trace of makeup on. She looks...

Real.

She gives a weak smile. "Please don't kill me."

I harden my tone, covering my surprise. "Too many witnesses. What the hell are you doing here?"

She pauses, sets down the heavy bowl of potatoes in her hands, and wipes down her

hands fingers before facing me again. "Wednesdays, right? I knew you'd come for your regular shift. It was the only way I could speak with you again."

Her gaze darts around, checking for eavesdroppers. The staff are occupied, used to ignoring the conversations between those they serve. She turns back to me, expression earnest.

I cross my arms, eyebrow raised. "So the FBI is stalking me now? And here I thought we'd moved past that stage."

She flushes slightly. "I'm not—I just want to talk."

"Save your breath, Agent Miller. Whatever game you're playing, I'm not interested."

"I looked into what you told me. About the evidence, the drugs and the money. And I...I think you were right." She swallows. "There's a corrupt officer working in my team in the Bureau."

I stare at her, thrown. I wasn't sure she actually believed me about the FBI misconduct and sabotage. But here she is, seeking me out to tell me I was right all along. That she believes me.

It's way too convenient. "You honestly expect me to believe you had some eleventh hour change of heart? Please. I wasn't born yesterday."

Natalie rushes on. "I don't know how far up it goes. But I'm going to find out." Her eyes harden with determination.

Interesting.

She takes a deep breath. "But I can't do it alone. I'll need help finding proof." Her

gaze locks with mine. "I thought, if you could be honest with me about everything—it would help. If you're willing."

I stare at her, thoughts spinning. Is this an elaborate trap to try squeezing more information from me? But no, her body language reads as sincere, her face open and hopeful.

Well, well, well.

"So you want my help cleaning up your mess?" I give a derisive laugh. "I can tell you right now what my lawyer would tell me to tell you."

She drops her voice even lower. "No lawyers. And no agents. I'm still on leave—a private citizen. And of course I don't expect you to tell me anything incriminating. I just want to compare notes."

"And how do I know this isn't just another plot to undermine me?"

Her expression tightens at the accusation. "You don't. You have no reason to trust me." She looks down, and when she meets my eyes again, I'm startled by the vulnerability there. "But I'm asking you to anyway. Please. For the—" She mouths the final words, but I understand them well enough.

For the women you're helping.

I'm momentarily at a loss. She seems so different. This Natalie is stripped bare, her emotions plain on her face.

The thing is, I have no idea what she thinks I know. The plain fact is, I've told her everything that I'm aware of, and whoever planted that evidence in the Ruby, I didn't see them do it. Besides, I've destroyed all the records pertaining to the casino. I

couldn't even tell her who was on shift that night, let alone which members of the FBI raided the place.

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But her mention of the women I'm helping has sparked an idea.

"I'll help on one condition," I say slowly.

Her shoulders sag slightly in relief. "Anything."

"Since your stunts got the Ruby shut down, I have no safe place to store our next package. You understand?" Natalie nods. "You'll help me get this package out of the city. Safely." I raise a brow. "And we do that before we compare any notes at all. Understand?"

Natalie thinks for a long moment, then meets my gaze squarely and extends a hand. "Understood. Partners?"

I regard her outstretched hand. She's almost too easy to fool, this woman who upended my life. She's placing herself completely in my hands by agreeing to this. It would be the easiest thing in the world to turn her in to her superiors, let them know that she's been harassing me. Telling me inside information. They'd believe it, too.

I wonder if she understands just what a foolish thing this is for her to do.

Because as much as I hate her...

I still desire her.

And I know now how I can seek my revenge against Natalie Miller. I'll use her like she used me. Seduce her like she seduced me. And when I have her exactly where I

want her, I'll expose her for corruption. Make sure I take down the whole of that worthless team she worked with, too. Taint the entire FBI.

And I'll break her goddamn heart as the cherry on top.

I take her hand in mine. "Partners."

CHAPTER8

NATALIE

The flashing neon sign of the diner pierces the night, a beacon cutting through the rain as Alessa and I head toward it after our shift at Anna's Kitchen. I steady my nerves as we approach the door, memories of a previous night with Alessa crowding in. Our first illicit "date", when I managed to charm an invitation to her exclusive domain. One more step in my carefully orchestrated plan to infiltrate the Ruby.

That night sparked more than I could have predicted. Even now, part of me wants to give in to the dangerous pull Alessa exerts on me. But I want to know what she knows. I need her perspective on it.

I need her help.

I'm surprised she agreed, actually. And I know she doesn't trust me. But I hope that won't mean we can't work together. When she asked me to help with the next trafficking victim, I was almost relieved.

Because, despite everything, I believe in Alessa's work. I believe that those women need rescuing. And if it's a Mafia princess from the same damn Family who's doing the rescuing? Well, all the better to wedge into that crack in the Mob and make it wider. Split them open and destroy them.

But I'm still on edge. Alessa even chooses the same booth we had the night of our date, and I hesitate for a moment before I slide in across from her. I meet her gaze steadily, refusing to be intimidated. "Alright. Where do we start?"

One elegant eyebrow lifts slightly. "Let's back up, Special Agent Miller," she says. "Why exactly should I trust you? I have no reason to believe anything that comes out of that pretty mouth of yours. You've already proven how easily you lie. How do I know you're not wearing a wire right now?"

"Do you want to search me? We could go into the bathroom."

She gives a small smile that grows, catlike. "Are you offering to strip off for me, Natalie? Would you let me run my hands all over you, searching out your secrets?"

She wants a reaction from me, and I refuse to give her the satisfaction. "You shouldn't trust me," I say bluntly. "Just as I have no reason to trust you. But we both want the same thing here—justice. If what you say about the planted evidence is true, then someone in the Bureau has gone rogue. I won't let that stand. And you need my help, too, Alessa. You said so yourself."

Alessa snorts, the inelegant sound at odds with her usual poise. "So noble. And so certain it must be a lone wolf, rather than your whole precious institution being rotten from top to bottom."

"I know there are moral complexities in our work. But the Bureau still represents justice and order. I joined to uphold those ideals." As I say it, I realize it must sound painfully naive to her ear. She deals in moral relativism and shades of gray. But I can't—won't—sacrifice my principles, or my belief that justice and integrity still matter.

Her smile turns wry and mocking. "Keep telling yourself that, Agent Miller. Maybe it

will help you sleep better at night."

Her contempt slashes at me, but I hold firm. I do need her, for now. And she needs me. "This alliance requires honesty on both sides. So I'm laying out ground rules. I can't be party to anything illegal in, uh, sending this package interstate. And I won't turn a blind eye to anything criminal I see along the way."

The server comes over to pour out our coffees, and smiles at Alessa. "Usual, hon?"

"Thanks, Dee," she says with a return smile. "And my friend here will have the same." Her eyes come back to me once the server is safely gone, and she sits back, one finger idly tracing the rim of her coffee cup. " "Despite what your team seems to think, I'm not some conniving villain."

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I spread my hands wide in a conciliatory gesture, sensing I've hit a nerve. "I'm well aware there are nuances, Alessa. But I'm sure you can understand my position here."

She snorts again, but I catch a glimpse of uncertainty in her eyes. She despises being viewed as one-dimensional. I know there are complexities beneath that ruthless facade. But I need to remain cautious until I understand where the boundaries lie.

"My networks are legitimate, if underground," she says at last. "There are no criminal enterprises involved. But my father will be one of the people involved. You understand?"

Oh, I understand. I force myself not to shudder. The last thing I want to do is work with Johnny the Gentleman. But needs must.

"Fine. As long as you understand that I need any information you have about this planted evidence, as soon as practicable. It's what you should want, too—if there's corruption in the case against you—"

"Yes, yes, it will be thrown out," she says impatiently. "And I'll disclose what I can. But not until after we get Elena Martinez out safely. She's the priority." Alessa's voice brooks no argument.

And I can see it in her face, what she's not saying. Elena's life hangs in the balance. "You're right," I agree. "She is the priority. I understand that your assets are frozen. You'll need resources to guarantee her safety. How do you plan to—"

"Uh-uh, Agent Miller." Alessa's eyes flash dangerously as she wags a warning finger

at me. "I have my ways. You don't need to know."

It's probably better if I don't. "I wasn't trying to pry," I say carefully. "And I assume that you'd reach out to your cousin for help. From what I know of Juno Bianchi, she has extensive connections that—"

"No." Alessa's sharp refusal takes me aback. "I won't involve my cousin in Mancini affairs." At my questioning look, she exhales impatiently. "I realize the complexities of Family loyalties are lost on you. But Juno can't be seen as interfering with the Mancini enterprises. If word got out that she was involved..." She trails off, dark with meaning.

I sit back, realization dawning. Of course. Juno is the head of the Bianchi Family. She would be in a delicate position if word ever got out that she helped this Elena Martinez escape the Mancini brothels. But I can see that Alessa's desire to protect her cousin wars with her need to help Elena.

Before I can respond, her expression shutters again. "Anyway, I'm not some penniless peasant just because the Ruby is closed for the moment. I'll handle it. Once Elena is safe, I'll answer your questions." Her mouth twists. "After all, we both want the truth...don't we, Natalie?"

Her use of my first name sends an unexpected spark through me. I ignore it, clinging to the familiar refuge of facts. I open my mouth to respond, but stop as the waitress reappears with our food—burgers and fries, just like last time we were here.

The tension in the air dissipates for a moment as we both dig in. But the closeness of Alessa tingles across my skin, impossible to ignore. This is dangerous, being near her. A dizzying dance on a knife edge, and any misstep could cut deep.

Alessa's knowing look tells me she senses it too, feels that electric hum between us.

Yes, it's a dangerous game. With a dangerous prize at the end of it, even if I win. Because what would I win? Proof of my team's corruption? Or I'll help complete the utter downfall of Alessa de Luca, and her charities and networks of salvation along with her.

There's no winning here, and this tentative alliance already feels like a powder keg, moments away from igniting. I just pray I can maintain control long enough to find the truth, no matter how terrible that truth may be.

The waitress gathers our empty plates and departs, leaving us staring at one another. Alessa breaks the silence first. "I'll set things up and tell you what I need from you."

"What exactly...do you need?"

"Another pair of hands, since Daddy and I will both be under heavy surveillance from you assholes."

"Actually," I say, and then shut my mouth.

Alessa stares at me. "Actually what?"

I sigh. "Actually...you might find there's less surveillance than you're expecting."

One of her brows quirks with interest. "I see. Interesting. Now, Natalie, I'll want you to keep that kind of information flowing. Nothing classified," she huffs, as I begin to protest. "But I will need to know when the FBI is looking the other way long enough to get Elena on a train—or a plane—or a boat. You understand?"

I hesitate, still uneasy, but eventually nod. That vulnerable young woman has to be my priority, just as it clearly is Alessa's. I remember Sienna, the last young woman, and how desperate she must have been to hide out in Alessa's safe room at the Ruby

for two weeks before it was clear to move her.

I've heard the stories about the Mancini brothels. I can't turn my back on helping anyone out of them, no matter who it means working with.

"Good." Alessa sits back looking satisfied. "I'll be in touch in the next day or two. Don't contact me until then." She sniffs. "I know how impatient you Feds get."

I bristle at her imperious tone, but simply incline my head in assent.

After settling up the check—I pay, after Alessa's cool glance at me—we walk outside together, keeping a deliberate distance between us. The rain has stopped but a chill breeze slices through my jacket, raising goosebumps along my arms. I shove my hands into my pockets and turn to face Alessa beneath a streetlight.

She stands haloed by its golden glow, the shadows accentuating the elegant angles of her face. A fallen angel tempting a foolish mortal. In this light, Alessa looks like something cut from marble, cold and remote.

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I need to focus. Remember why I'm here. "I'll be ready when you contact me," I say briskly.

Alessa surveys me a moment longer, face inscrutable. Then she inclines her head curtly. "We have an understanding, then. I'm trusting you to honor it, Agent Miller. Don't make me regret it." She turns away without a goodbye and walks off into the night.

I stand watching until she disappears, my breath a ghostly white vapor in the chill air, wondering what the hell I'm doing.

CHAPTER9

ALESSA

I close the door of my townhouse behind me and lean back against it, letting out a long breath. The click of the lock sliding into place echoes through the foyer, underscoring just how empty my home feels now.

Somehow I feel more shaken tonight, after sharing a meal with Natalie Miller, not to mention several hours of charity work, than I did when I set her free the other day. Still...Natalie surprised me tonight as much as she did that day, too.

And I still get that throb in my clit every time I'm around her.

That's a problem.

I shrug off my heavy coat and drape it over the banister. The crystalline chandelier overhead bathes everything in a soft glow. This house has borne witness to lavish parties and decadent sins beyond counting, the very walls steeped in hedonism and secrets. Now, only silence and shadows remain.

For the first time in my life, this place feels hollow. A gilded tomb.

I can't go upstairs and go to bed, despite the sudden exhaustion that crowds me. I can't go anywhere near my damn bed before I've processed tonight, because Natalie Miller is the only woman who's ever shared it.

I've never fucked anyone in that bed but her. Everyone else...I had them at the Ruby. Or in a club somewhere. Or up against a wall, or in a bathroom stall, or even their bedroom.

But Natalie's the only one who ever made it past my defenses and into my inner sanctum.

I pour myself a generous glass of scotch from the bar in the living room, determined to drown out the unwelcome introspection creeping through my veins. But as I sink down onto the plush velvet sofa, I'm assaulted by memories far more intoxicating than any liquor.

This is where Natalie and I...

The first time. It was here, on this damned sofa.

A spike of pain lances through me. I clench my jaw, forcing away the image of her above me, hair mussed and lips kiss-swollen, eyes dark with desire. A mirage crafted by a skilled deceiver. An act convincing enough to fool even me.

I take a burning gulp of scotch, willing it to scald away the lingering ghosts of her touch. Natalie played me masterfully, I'll give her that. She saw my weakness and exploited it ruthlessly. Let herself become a key into this forbidden world I've built.

I should have known better. My father always warned me against getting too close. Against letting anyone see beneath the armor. And now, thanks to my lapse in judgment, everything is at risk—everything important.

Not just my freedom, but Elena's as well.

I abandon the scotch on the coffee table, suddenly agitated. Nowhere seems free of my memories of Natalie at the moment. Pacing to the window, I peer out at the street.

Wait. Is that—

I blink, lean in closer to scrutinize a shadow. But my phone vibrates in my pocket, distracting me, and when I look up again, either the shadow has gone, or I've stopped being so paranoid, because there's nothing there. I retrieve my phone to find a coded message from my father awaiting me:

Red bird still in blue cage. Wings clipped.

I exhale slowly. Daddy hasn't been able to extract Elena Martinez from the Mancinis' clutches yet. Which means her situation remains dire.

We're running out of time.

I chew my bottom lip, considering something that Natalie said tonight.

Juno.

She might offer a way forward. One I've been avoiding out of pride or sheer stubbornness. But I'm not too proud to do whatever it takes to save that girl. Asking Juno for help is dangerous—for her and for me—but she understands better than anyone that family comes first. Blood before all else.

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I could ask her for a safe house. And if she thinks the safe house is for me, she'll come through.

Hard as it is to ask for help, trusting my cousin is a damn sight easier than placing faith in that honey-voiced Judas who pretended to care. Who whispered promises as the shackles closed around me...

"Enough!" I snap aloud, my voice sounding strangely loud in the silence. "God, go to bed," I continue scolding myself.

I'll do that. I'll go to bed.

And I'll ignore that throb in my core, because giving in to it would mean giving in to something dangerous. Something illicit.

Something that could destroy me completely.

* * *

I forgo my usual morning jog the next day, too keyed up to settle into any routine. Instead, I head straight for Juno's, determined to secure a safe house before my restless energy combusts. The Bianchi thug at the door raises an eyebrow at my early arrival, but lets me pass without comment. Perks of being the Boss's baby cousin. I take the stairs quickly, rapping my knuckles against the heavy oak door of her bedroom.

It swings open to reveal Juno, still in a black silk robe, her espresso eyes widening.

"Alessa? What is it? Has something—"

"Sorry to drop in unannounced." I flash an apologetic smile, allowing a glimpse of vulnerability. "I need a favor. A safe house, no questions asked."

Juno's gaze sharpens, probing. "The FBI's really got you on the run, don't they? Don't worry, we'll keep you safe." She reaches out to squeeze my arm. "But why not have your father handle it? Surely the Mancinis can shelter you?"

I hesitate, warring with myself. But the less Juno knows, the better. Things are tangled enough already. "I'd rather not be beholden to the Don more than I am," I reply tersely. "Thought I could count on you to help, no strings attached."

Juno tilts her head, scrutinizing me. Before she can press further, Caitlin appears behind her in the doorway, pulling her own robe shut. "Of course Juno will help. Juno, quit playing inquisitor." She clucks her tongue at Juno. "That's no way to treat family."

"Of course." Juno exhales, smiling ruefully. "Forgive me, Alessa. Consider it done." I follow her to her study, where she fishes out a key from her desk and presses it into my palm. "This one is comfortable as well as safe."

Relief loosens some of the tension coiled inside me. "Thank you, Juno. I'm in your debt." The words stick slightly in my throat.

Juno waves them off. "Nonsense. What's family for?"

I leave Juno's place at a brisk clip, emotions churning. Relief at securing the safe house vies with lingering unease. Natalie's words from last night replay in my mind, equal parts infuriating and uncomfortably appealing. The idea of exposing the rot inside her precious Bureau holds undeniable satisfaction for me. It would be a slap in

the face to all those rich bitches who turned their noses up at me the other night at Madison Fontaine's gala. But the truth is, I have no idea what more evidence the FBI might have.

Lucia Rossi keeps assuring me it's all under control...

But if there's one thing I've learned, it's not to trust anyone, and especially not lawyers.

At a corner bodega, I buy a burner phone. Can't risk a digital trail from my other phone, even if Natalie was being honest when she told me that surveillance on me has been dialed back. Outside again, I pause under the awning, steeling my nerves before I check the number on my old phone and then dial it slowly, cursing myself for the hesitance plaguing my movements.

One ring. Two. Then—

"Miller," comes the brisk greeting, guarded but undeniably her. Hearing that clear voice sends a wholly unwelcome spike of heat through my belly.

"Alessa," I reply neutrally, ignoring her gasp of surprise. Serves her right.

"I—I wasn't sure when you'd call."

Was that a tremor in her tone? Good. Let her stew in uncertainty for once. "I told you; this is a priority for me. That girl needs help." I harden my voice, clinging to righteous anger. "I've secured a safe house. I want to know when it would be possible to move her. I thought you might be able to help."

There's a very long pause. "I can't give you any specific information about FBI surveillance, Alessa."

"That's not what I'm asking," I snap. "What I need is your help, Agent Miller. Your thoughts about whether this safe house will be safe enough. And then, if it is, how to move the package there safely."

"Right. Of course." Eagerness reshapes her voice now. It curdles my stomach. "I'm free this evening to strategize," she offers. "Your place, for privacy?"

The audacity raises my hackles. I gave her no leave to set terms or terrain. That's my advantage to claim. But underneath the irritation, I consider the vengeance I've been nursing.

Tonight could be step one in teaching Natalie Miller a very profound lesson.

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"Fine," I reply, letting frost permeate my words. "Nine-thirty tonight. Don't be late."

I end the call before she can respond, pulse racing. Expectation mixed with defiance roils within me, a volatile cocktail.

A dark, lust-filled promise of action beckons, an exquisite temptation.

Yes. Tonight.

Tonight I'll rid myself of this annoying ache. I'll make her beg, make her grovel, make her come—and then I'll use our encounter down the line to keep her in check. I'll throw it in her face, make her regret everything.

I don't know why I feel some hesitation. Natalie's the one who opened this door, who weaponized sex against me first. I'll only be doing to her what she did to me.

She thinks someone on her team might be corrupt?

Bitch should look in the mirror some time.

CHAPTER 10

ALESSA

I stare at my reflection in the elaborate vanity mirror as I carefully apply my signature red lipstick. The rich color stands out dramatically and I like the way women can't take their eyes off my lips when I wear it. I went heavy on the eyeliner too, giving

myself a sultry, smoky look. Running my fingers through the tumble of dark curls spilling over my shoulders, I adjust the plunging neckline of my tight black dress.

I'm dressed to kill tonight.

She'll be here any minute. I push down the flare of nerves in my stomach, focusing instead on the simmering anger that's driven me since that humiliating arrest. Natalie betrayed any trust I placed in her. She deserves to get played at her own game.

I chose this dress deliberately, knowing it shows off my body to perfection. I'll have Natalie eating out of my hand before she even realizes what's happening. A smile curves my lips as I imagine how sweet my revenge will be. Natalie played me for a fool, but it's my turn to pull her strings now.

She'll regret ever crossing me.

I catch my expression in the mirror and am slightly taken aback by the fierceness of it.

Do I really care...so much?

This mission is what matters, of course. A young woman in jeopardy, my charitable works at risk, the FBI and Don Mancini both threatening to devour everything I've built. All because of Natalie's deception. That's why I'm doing this.

Tonight is a necessity, not a social call, and I cannot let myself forget why Natalie is really here. As much as I plan to bed her, it will serve a purpose higher than pleasure. A higher purpose than vengeance, too.

My work is what matters. Helping women who cannot help themselves.

The sound of the doorbell startles me from my thoughts. She's here.

Showtime.

I pull open the door to reveal her waiting on the stoop, shoulders hunched beneath a gray coat, hood pulled high over her head. She starts slightly as the door opens, eyes flying to mine. I see wariness reflected there.

Good.

"Right on time," I remark coolly, stepping back. "Come on in, Agent Miller. Welcome back to my evil lair."

She sighs. "Seriously?"

I rake my gaze over her deliberately before replying. "Get in or get off my stoop."

I catch a hint of something in her eyes before she drops them. Longing? Regret? It gratifies me to see traces of the real Natalie under her professional armor.

The Natalie who let her guard down with me.

She follows me silently into the living room. I perch on the edge of the armchair so that she has to take the sofa, and cross my legs slowly, noting how her eyes track the movement. "Well?"

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Natalie winces, but she gets down to business, too. "Where's the safe house?"

I say nothing.

"Alessa," she sighs, when I don't respond, "if you want my help, you need to at least tell me that. I know you don't trust me, but I want to build at least an understanding between us."

I lean back, considering her. The smart play would be to pump her for information first, find out everything I can, anything that might help me. But the sight of her there on my sofa again—where she gave me one hell of an orgasm—combined with the memory of how she played me, makes me want to provoke her further. Remind us both who really holds the cards here.

"What would you actually do, I wonder? To save the life of a young woman?"

Her answer comes immediately. "Anything."

"Anything is a dangerous word," I purr silkily. "But I like dangerous." Natalie's breath hitches as I rise and close the space between us. Tracing a fingertip down her jaw, I add, "Are you sure you'd do anything, Natalie?"

Her pupils dilate, lips parting involuntarily. Watching her frayed composure gives me a heady rush. I've got her right where I want her. Unable to resist, I close the small space between us until we're inches apart, my heart racing from the proximity.

I let my fingers trail down to her throat, brushing over her pulse. It's jumping like a

hare under my touch.

Before I can second-guess myself, I grasp her chin in my hand and crush my mouth to hers hungrily. Natalie responds immediately, kissing me back with equal fervor. The taste and feel of her lips is intoxicating, and for a blissful moment I'm lost in it, savoring her...

Then realization hits me like ice water.

What am I doing? I can't lose control like this! Wrenching back from the dizzying kiss, I turn away, working to calm my racing heart.

What the hell just happened? I was supposed to stay detached, to use this attraction against her. Instead, I'm the one who...

"Alessa, I..." Natalie's voice sounds flustered behind me. "I don't know if—"

"I was proving a point." I cut her off tersely, clamping down on the riotous feelings she evoked in me. "That's all, Agent Miller. And the point is, you won't do anything, so to offer that is foolish. But you don't need to worry. I won't demand from you anything you're not willing to give."

After a moment, Natalie clears her throat awkwardly. "Actually, there was something else I wanted to run by you. About moving Elena Martinez to safety."

I raise a brow, intrigued despite myself. "Go on."

"I thought one of my colleagues might be able to help. Evelyn Chang. She's still on the team and she...well, she's a friend of mine. She might be able to help—"

"Are you insane?" I laugh, disbelieving. "I didn't want one of the Fed working on this, let

alone two."

But I find myself impressed by Natalie's initiative. If she's to be believed, she's willing to take real risks to make this work.

"It was just a thought," Natalie says after a moment. "I understand you not trusting anyone who works at the Bureau. But Evelyn wants the truth, too. Some of us recognize that real justice can't be achieved through underhanded means."

"Justice? Is that what you were serving when you lied and seduced your way into my club, my home, my bed, for the sake of your case?"

Natalie flinches. "Are we back to that? You broke the law, Alessa, and I was doing my job." But her protest sounds weak even to my ears.

"The law isn't as black and white as you want it to be," I retort. "I'm not innocent in all this—but neither is the Bureau. You played a very convincing role, Natalie. So convincing that..." I falter, looking away again.

Natalie's voice softens as she prompts, "That what?" When I don't answer, she reaches out for my hand hesitantly. "Alessa. Talk to me."

I meet her gaze at last, drawn in by the tenderness there. In her eyes, I glimpse traces of the woman who looked at me with more than artifice or calculation. And I hate how it makes me waver, how it reawakens messy feelings I've tried to bury since her betrayal.

"I think you should go." My voice comes out hoarser than intended. Natalie looks poised to argue, then nods slowly.

At the door, Natalie pauses, meeting my eyes with an earnestness that gives me

pause. "I meant what I said, Alessa. I intend to help you with Elena. And I intend to make things right...somehow."

For a long moment, I'm tempted to pull her back inside. Take the pleasure I wanted from her body to prove I'm unaffected by her duplicity, unaffected by the memory of how we once made each other feel...

But that would be a lie. Because despite all my fury and hurt, something in me softened toward her tonight.

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And I despise my own weakness.

So I simply incline my head in silent acknowledgment of her offer. Natalie steps out into the night, leaving me alone with my bitter thoughts.

This is her fault, I tell myself as I pour a drink with unsteady hands. Natalie awakened feelings better left buried. I was a fool to let her disarm me, even for a moment. Sinking onto the sofa, I stare broodingly at the sofa where she sat, cursing the aching tenderness she resurrected inside me, so at odds with my hunger to see her suffer.

Sentiment makes a girl vulnerable. By showing even a flicker of it tonight, I've given Natalie power she doesn't deserve. I let her worm past my defenses. I won't make that mistake again. Next time, I'll be ready.

Resolved, I start planning our next meeting, determined to stay detached no matter how Natalie pleads her case or plays on my sympathies. She caught me off guard tonight, but I'm the one holding all the cards in the end.

And I fully intend to play my hand until she's begging for mercy.

As I go up to bed, I glance out the window on the way up, and I see, once more, that familiar figure standing out there, staring up at my home. According to Natalie—and I am inclined to believe her—surveillance has been nixed, so that means...

The Family.

I'll have to be very, very careful in the days to come.

CHAPTER 11

NATALIE

When I get home, I manage to eke out one last glass from the red wine bottle I dumped over my carpet not so long ago. I stare into my wine glass, watching the deep red liquid swirl as my hand trembles. The memory of Alessa's lips on mine haunts me. That electric moment when she grabbed me, fury and desire warring in her emerald eyes, her breath hot on my skin...

This constant conflict inside me has to stop. I'm an FBI agent, for god's sake, even if I am alone. I took an oath to uphold the law, no matter what.

So why does being near Alessa make me feel like I'm balanced on the edge of a precipice, about to throw myself off?

Pouring the very last dribble of wine into the glass, I curl up on the sofa, wishing sleep would claim me and grant some relief. But as I close my eyes, it's Alessa's face I see. The memory of our bodies entwined beneath her silken sheets, her wicked laughter ringing out, her emerald eyes dark with desire as she pushed me back against the pillows and...

A soft moan escapes me as I jerk awake, my glass tipping from my hand—mercifully empty. The dream dissipates like smoke, leaving me aching. I press a hand to my chest, feeling my heart hammering against my ribs.

Just a dream. That's all. I can't let my subconscious undermine my resolve.

But the tingle in my core refuses to die down. Cursing under my breath, I get up and

brew a pot of my standard terrible coffee. It's not like I'm going to sleep any more tonight, after all. As I sip the scalding liquid, the events of the past weeks play over in my mind like some chaotic movie reel. Going undercover, insinuating myself into Alessa's circle, watching as the FBI closed its net around her.

And then that devastating moment when everything changed. When Juno Bianchi exposed my deception right there in the Ruby Realm, shattering the person I'd become.

Natalie Moreau, glamorous socialite. Alessa's lover.

Just an illusion. A mask I hid behind.

But the feelings that mask unleashed inside me—that Alessa unleashed—those are real. Undeniable, no matter how much I want them to disappear.

I watch the clock and mope for the next few hours until dawn sends a grudging prod over my windowsill, and then I head for the shower. I have to pull it together. I have an appointment with Hays again this morning for another psych evaluation. She's already concerned about my mental state after being undercover. I can't afford to show any more problems.

I dress in my standard FBI attire—black pantsuit, white collared shirt, polished black boots. Sensible. Professional. The perfect image of an agent.

If only it matched what's going on inside me.

* * *

An hour later, I'm sitting in the familiar environs of Dr. Hays' office, surrounded by diplomas and psychology texts. She sits down opposite me with a polite smile.

"Good morning, Agent Miller. How are you feeling today?"

I resist the urge to fidget under her clinical gaze. "Ready to resume my duties?" I try.

She nods thoughtfully. "Are you, though? It's perfectly normal to need more time after an intense undercover operation. And developing...entanglements with the target is quite common, but a good reason to take a break. Make sure your head's on straight."

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My heart squeezes, but I keep my cool. "My relationship with Ms. de Luca was simply a means to an end. Becoming sexually involved was a mistake, but it's not like no agent in the history of the Bureau has never done the same. And I did what was required of me for the mission."

"Perhaps. But emotional transference often occurs in these contexts." She leans forward, probing. "Tell me honestly, Natalie. Have you developed feelings for her?"

I force myself to hold her shrewd gaze. "No. Whatever she made me feel, it wasn't real."

Hays doesn't look convinced, but she moves on. "Very well. Have you had any contact with Ms. de Luca since her release?"

I hesitate, the lie poised on my tongue. Hays' eyes narrow. I need to tread carefully here. "No. I assumed she'd come after me for revenge," I say, letting some real vulnerability seep into my tone. "But maybe she has more important things to worry about."

I'm lying. I, Natalie Miller, who joined the FBI to uphold the law, to fight for justice, is a big fucking liar.

And I should feel a lot worse about that than I do. Is it Alessa's gray morality rubbing off on me? Or am I starting to understand something I never wanted to see before, that sometimes the greater justice requires a smaller injustice, a white lie here and there?

But that's a slippery slope, isn't it? The same slope, maybe, that whoever planted the evidence started out on. A small injustice to create the justice they believed was necessary—Alessa's arrest.

Hays has made a non-committal noise. "Well, for your own safety, it's best to avoid any contact with her, of course. Although..." She taps her pen thoughtfully against her lips. "Perhaps you should try to reestablish the connection. If she truly had feelings for you, you may be able to extract more evidence."

I stiffen in shock. "You want me to seduce her?"

Hays shrugs. "Well, let's not go that far. I'm only talking about using your charm, playing on her emotions. Getting what we need to tighten the screws on her."

Revulsion sweeps through me at the clinical suggestion. This can't be ethical, even for the Bureau. Unless...this is some kind of test of my reactions. To see if I'll blindly follow orders. Or to see if I really have developed some attachment to Alessa.

Or what Evelyn said is true, and they just don't have any convincing case against Alessa.

And that thought really shouldn't spark joy in me like it is.

I force an appeasing look onto my face. "I'll consider all options that Captain Bell thinks are appropriate, but I don't think it would work."

She smiles. "Perhaps. Now, given the potential threats you face, perhaps you should accept protective custody." Her smile takes a second to place, the almost oily sheen of it... A used car salesman. That's what it reminds me of. "I believe Agent Wright offered his assistance?" she says cheerfully.

Oh, God. "He did. And I declined." Just the thought of being under Wright's watchful eye makes my skin crawl. "I'd prefer to lay low alone for now."

"As you wish." Hays checks her watch. "I think that's sufficient for today. And I think you're doing very well, Miller. I'll happily clear you for desk duty starting Monday—no field ops, though."

"Actually..." I take a breath, committing to the plan forming in my mind. "I think I'd like more time off. To fully process everything."

Her brows shoot up in surprise. "Oh? Are you sure isolation is what you need right now?"

"Yeah. Just another week or two." I inject a pleading note into my voice. "I'd hate to be stuck behind a desk, Kris. You know me. I like to be out there."

Hays considers me for a long moment, then sighs. "Very well. I'll inform Captain Bell." Her mouth tightens. "He won't be pleased, but I'll make your health a priority."

"Thank you." Relief flows through me. A week should be enough time to find a way to help Alessa move Elena Martinez.

And then when I come back to the Bureau, armed with whatever Alessa has to tell me, I can uncover the truth about my team's actions in this case.

I endure a few more platitudes about self-care and decompression strategies before I'm able to escape into the spring afternoon. The sunlight feels cleansing as it spills over me, warming my skin.

A week. Seven days before I have to resume my FBI duties, step back into that rigid, rule-bound world I once cherished. But now the thought fills me with dread.

When did upholding the law stop feeling so black and white?

Maybe it never truly was, and I just refused to see it. Until Alessa showed me those complex layers of truth and deception, desire and duty. She unlocked this undercurrent of defiance in me, the urge to follow my heart, my gut, my instinct, over the rules.

But afterward, when I've found out the truth, I'll step away from the darkness. Leave Alessa to her shadowy world while I return to the light. Our paths diverged long before we met—it's past time I remember that.

Whatever happens in the next seven days, I vow it will be the last time I see Alessa de Luca. The last time I let her sway me from the righteous path.

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No matter how much I already miss the fire she sparks inside me.

With new conviction, I make my way home. But as I round the corner onto my block, the hair on my nape prickles. I tense, my senses screaming that I'm being watched.

Casually, I turn, scanning the area behind me. For a heart-stopping instant, I catch sight of a familiar figure across the street, half-hidden beside a parked van. Even from this distance, there's no mistaking Sam Wright's wide form.

He's...he's tracking me. There can be no other explanation. But why? Does he know about my alliance with Alessa?

My gut twists, but I force myself to keep walking calmly. I can't let him see I've made him. Praying he's too far away to notice my shaking hands, I slip into my building. But I can still feel his eyes crawling over me.

Sam's surveillance makes one thing abundantly clear—I'm out of time. Whatever secret agenda is at work here, it's quickly spiraling out of control. If Sam's tracking me, he likely knows about my renewed connection with Alessa.

Our plans for Elena just got moved up. I take the stairs two at a time, adrenaline and determination surging through my veins. I'll contact Alessa ASAP so I can be done with her ASAP.

No more dancing around the fire between us.

ALESSA

The phone rings just as I'm sitting down with my morning espresso. I glance at the screen and see it's Lucia Rossi, my lawyer. I don't know if I have the energy to deal with her before coffee. She's sharp as a razor and has an uncanny ability to find loopholes in any legal situation—but she's also Don Mancini's cousin. I can only trust her so far. But I don't have much choice in the matter, since she's the best.

And I need the best.

"Lucia," I answer, putting her on speaker as I dose myself quickly with caffeine. "You have news?"

Her clipped tone comes through the line. "The FBI released their hold on the Ruby Realm late last night. I just received the paperwork finalizing it."

I nearly drop the phone in surprise. The Ruby can reopen already? It barely seems possible—but Lucia wouldn't joke about something like this. She's hinted more than once at getting her own invitation to membership, but I've always resisted. I certainly don't need Don Mancini's cousin snooping around the Ruby, not when I've been fiddling the books to hide my real profit margins. The extra money goes to my work resettling and supporting trafficked women from the Mancini brothels.

I think it's a fair trade.

A fierce joy sweeps through me at the thought of the Ruby being mine again, chasing away the darkness that's lingered since that disastrous kiss with Natalie. The Ruby is more than just a business—it's my sanctuary. A place where women can talk freely, scheme boldly, and be themselves without judgment. Losing it cut me deeper than I cared to admit.

But now, miraculously, it's mine again. At least for now.

I keep my voice airy. "Well, that's some good news. What changed their minds?"

Lucia sighs. "Does it matter? Just enjoy the small victory before they change their minds again. And I'd suggest getting in there quickly and straightening the place up. If you want to stay solvent, you should open again as soon as possible."

I refrain from snapping that I'm not paying Lucia for her business advice, and who the hell does she think I am, and just say, "I'll head over right away." I'm already moving toward the stairs so I can shower and dress upstairs.

"Good. And watch your back, Alessa," Lucia adds, a rare note of warmth entering her tone before she hangs up.

Hmm. Maybe she actually likes me.

I select a sleek black suit and my favorite pair of red-soled Manolos, every inch the powerful proprietor. It takes a little effort to tame my thick dark hair, and I forgo my usual dramatic makeup, leaving my olive skin bare save for bold red lips, and touch a little mascara to my lashes. The effect is elegant but understated.

Appropriate for dealing with my staff after so much chaos, especially since I suspect the FBI will have tossed the place from top to bottom searching for evidence during the shutdown. Better to present a composed, unruffled front.

In the car, I try to temper the exhilaration bubbling inside me. I want to throw open the sunroof and shout my joy to the city streets speeding past. But a lifetime lived half in shadow has taught me the virtues of restraint. Outwardly I'm the picture of refined boredom, while inside I'm already making plans.

The discreet sign marking the Ruby's doorway is still intact, I note with relief as we pull up. And inside, the damage is minimal, thankfully. Some scattered papers and overturned chairs, easily righted. The FBI tore my office apart, of course, but that's to be expected.

I make some calls, leaving instructions for my most trusted staff to spread the word: the Ruby Realm will reopen for business by Friday night. It takes tremendous effort to keep my tone cool and professional, when inside I'm ready to dance on the bar.

I can already picture the space coming alive again—the music, the hum of intimate conversations, the clink of glasses, even the work spaces. This haven for New York's elite women will rise from the ashes, more legendary than ever.

And the hidden basement where the real action happens, our secret sanctuary...well, I'll find something for that, too.

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Still, the thought of that discreet doorway concealed behind the bookcase in the library sends a little thrill through me. I can't resist going down to take a look, for old time's sake. I descend the narrow staircase carefully in my heels, trailing my fingers along the cold wall. At the bottom lies the secret I guarded most fiercely—the hidden casino.

It's a large, empty room, now. No hint of the cards and chips, barren of the green felt tables that were once scattered around. Natalie was the only agent to ever see this place, I recall with a twinge. I remember how wary she was, how she tried not to come down the stairs with me.

She must have known what I was leading her down to, of course. Interesting, then, that she hesitated between doing her duty and staying ignorant.

It was that night I realized I'd started to fall for the mysterious woman who turned out to be my undoing.

I squeeze my eyes shut, forcibly banishing thoughts of her.

The Ruby will open again on Friday. That's all I need to concentrate on right now.

* * *

I go out the side door an hour later, turning to lock it behind me, when a hand reaches out to grab me. I react on instinct, shoving back hard, and rounding on them when they stumble.

"Alessa, it's me!" comes a rushed, familiar whisper.

Elena Martinez.

I grab at her to stop her falling over. "Jesus, Elena! I could have killed you, sneaking up on me like that. What are you doing here?"

She looks rough, her lip split and left eye swollen and shadowed. She's favoring her right side too, I note, anger simmering inside me.

"I'm sorry," she sniffs, tears gathering in her eyes. "I didn't know where else to go. I couldn't wait any longer. I ran away, but Vince Ricci's men will be hunting for me."

The snake who runs the Mancini trafficking business. The same snake who waltzed into the Ruby and demanded to know the whereabouts of Sienna, the last young woman I smuggled out.

I should have killed him when I had the chance.

"It's alright, you're safe here," I soothe her, pulling her into a gentle hug. "Come inside." We go back into the Ruby and, after I've locked the door securely behind us, I pour her out a drink at the bar. "Tell me what happened."

She sinks gratefully onto a stool. "One of the other girls told Ricci I was trying to find a way out." Her breath hitches on a sob. "He had two of his guys work me over as a warning. Said next time..."

She trails off, but I can easily fill in the rest. There wouldn't be a next time. Ricci's thugs would make sure of that. As dangerous as it is to do under the nose of the FBI, we need to get her out of the city as soon as we can.

"Are you ready to leave New York, Elena? In the next few days, if I can manage it?"

She nods, her eyes terrified but resolute. "I thought about Los Angeles. But I have some distant family in Chicago..."

"Not Chicago, it's too much of a tinderbox." The stories coming out of Chicago at the moment make me almost glad the Mancinis are all I have to put up with. "But LA, Miami, Vegas, anywhere overseas—I can get you set up safely. Just say where."

Elena takes a shaky breath, wiping her eyes hard. When she meets my gaze again, there's steel within the fear. "LA. I'm ready."

"You're so brave, Elena. I promise I'll make sure you get there." I squeeze her hand, then grab my phone and walk a few feet away to call my father. It goes to his voicemail.

Dammit. I'll keep trying him, but in the meantime...

I grab my burner phone and bring up the newly-added number for Natalie Miller. My thumb hesitates a moment before dialing.

She answers on the second ring, tension evident even through the phone. "Alessa?"

Hearing my name in her voice sends an unexpected thrill through me. I force my tone to calm professionalism. "We need to move fast on Elena. She's here with me now at the Ruby. Can we meet tonight to check out the safe house?"

"What?" Shock colors her words. "You have her there right now? Is she alright?"

The concern sounds genuine. "She will be, once we get her out of this goddamn city. But she can't stay here in the Ruby long, not with the FBI sniffing around. I gave my

word I'd protect her, Natalie." My voice drops, allowing the slightest vulnerability to slip through. "Please, help me keep it."

A pause, then, "What's the safe house address?"

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"It's in Queens," I say. "I'll text you the exact location."

"Queens?" she says, an odd note in her voice. But she goes on before I can ask about it. "Meet me there at 1am." Her voice is all brisk efficiency again, but I sense the underlying currents. The ceasefire between us remains fragile as thin ice, threatening to crack and plunge us back into the frigid depths. Yet the thought of seeing her again sends a flutter through my belly I strive not to examine too closely.

I shake myself inwardly. Focus on the mission for now. "Thank you. I'll explain more tonight."

Elena is watching me closely when I end the call. I arrange my features into a reassuring smile. "You'll be out of here soon, I promise. For tonight, though, you'll need to stay here at the Ruby."

She flies off the stool to hug me tightly, wincing only a little at the pressure. "I knew I could trust you," she whispers.

I blink back an unexpected tear over her shoulder. All the money and power at my fingertips, and yet protecting my sisters feels more rewarding than any rush of adrenaline in the casino basement.

This is what gives my life meaning.

And Natalie Miller, for all her lies, understands that too. Together we can save Elena.

"Let me show you where you'll be staying," I tell her, before I start bawling.

The safe room beyond the lobby is still set up as it was, despite the FBI raid. Plenty of water and food, and entertainment, too. It's risky to keep her in there with both the Feds and Vince Ricci keeping an eye on me, but there's nowhere else for now.

Not until I satisfy myself that Juno's safe house is the better option.

* * *

I leave Elena there, after calling in the usual Ruby security detail to keep watch outside as well. The sun has just begun to set, painting the city in stunning hues of orange and pink. I pause for just a moment to appreciate the beauty before I get back in the town car, knowing harsher shadows will soon descend.

A prickling sense I'm being watched has me scanning the street. Sure enough, a dark sedan pulls away from the curb and begins trailing my car at a distance as my driver moves along the streets. I don't recognize the driver, but the bulky silhouette of the man next to him is unmistakable—Tony Sorento, one of Vince Ricci's men, and one of those who assaulted Elena.

That son of a bitch will get what's coming to him.

But for now, he'll have to wait. Elena is safe; the Ruby security is top notch. But clearly I'm no longer afforded even the illusion of privacy as far as this faction of the Mancini Family is concerned. Ricci and his thugs want me to know I'm now a target.

Fine. Let them watch. Better that they keep their eyes on me than look for Elena.

I instruct my driver in an undertone to take a circuitous route home, keeping to crowded streets and making unpredictable turns. It's just a test; Vince Ricci definitely knows where I live, but I want to see what the tail does. The goons following me are clearly rank amateurs; we lose them easily. But it's only a matter of time until I can

tell Daddy about this threat within the ranks of our supposed allies.

For now, I need to focus on getting Elena Martinez to safety. The rest I'll deal with as it comes. One thing the de Lucas excel at is adapting to survive. It's a skill I've had to hone further since the FBI entered my life.

The night has descended by the time I reach home, but I've never been afraid of the dark.

CHAPTER13

ALESSA

Just before one in the morning, I arrive at the address of Juno's safe house in Queens. The address is inconspicuous, nestled among the rows of aging brownstones and graffiti-tagged walls. I park my own car a block away and walk down.

Natalie stands on the opposite side of the street to the safehouse entrance, her posture tense. She's in what I've come to realize is actually her usual attire—dark jeans and a heavy coat, hair tied back in a ponytail. As I approach, her eyes flicker over me, a mix of relief and uncertainty etched on her face.

"Is this it?" she asks, glancing at the building. It's three stories tall, with a faded blue door and windows that stare out like blind eyes. It could be any other townhouse on the block, but I know better. This is Juno's handiwork, a safe house in the heart of Queens. I'm staying tight-lipped about the truth of its origin.

I nod, fishing out a set of keys from my pocket. "This is the place. Let's check it out."

We enter the safe house, the door closing with a heavy thud behind us. The interior is surprisingly modern, a stark contrast to the exterior. The walls are freshly painted,

and the floors gleam under the muted lighting. It feels less like a hideout and more like a well-kept home—but with no external windows.

As we move through the rooms, I take in the details. The living room is small but holds a comfy sofa and a flat-screen TV, mounted on the wall. There are bookshelves filled with a variety of genres, from crime thrillers to classic literature, and a small collection of movies. It's clear that someone has gone to great lengths to ensure comfort, not just safety in this place.

Very Juno. I have to smile to myself at her preparedness.

The kitchen is equally impressive, stocked with non-perishable food, a fully equipped first aid kit, and in one of the bedrooms there's a variety of clothing options. Elena should fit them. But it's the hidden panic room that catches my attention. Tucked behind a false wall in the hallway, it's a small, fortified space with its own independent power supply, a secure phone line, and monitors displaying different angles of the exterior.

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So even if those bastards get into the safe house, Elena can escape here and stay safe until help comes.

"What do you think?" I ask Natalie at last, attempting to gauge her reaction. I've been trying to focus on the surrounds so I don't do something dumb, like launch at her lips-first again.

But I have to look at her now, and my heart beats a little faster when I do.

Natalie's response is measured, her voice steady. "It's much more than I expected. Well-prepared." Her eyes search mine, a question in them about the origin of this place, but she doesn't ask.

I break the silence. "I think it will do very well. Certainly much less conspicuous than the Ruby. But Queens is so far away. I'd worry about Elena being out here."

"I live in Queens," Natalie offers. "So I could check in on her." She looks rather like she wishes she'd kept quiet after she says it, but I just nod.

"If you're sure. I'll also ask my father to provide some men to watch the place." Her lips thin and tighten, but she just nods. "Then we're done here. I'll speak to my father about moving her here as soon as we can, and I'll finalize plans for her to leave the city."

As we step out of the safe house, the quiet Queens street is very still. For a moment, there's a sense of deceptive calm, the kind that precedes a storm. I'm surveying the area, but Natalie is a few steps ahead as I pause to lock the door.

That's when the first shot rings out.

It shatters the silence like a thunderclap, a stark, violent sound that vaults me into action. Instinctively, I shove Natalie to the ground, covering her body with mine. My heart pounds in my chest, adrenaline flooding my system. I can hear Natalie's sharp intake of breath, feel her body tense under mine.

"Stay down!" I hiss, my eyes scanning the street for our assailant. There's a second shot, the bullet whizzing past us, embedding itself in the brick wall of the safe house.

I pull out my own gun from my thigh holster, a sleek, well-maintained Beretta that's become an extension of my hand over the years. Rolling off Natalie, I drag her with me behind a parked car, trying to get a visual on the shooter.

Natalie is crouched behind me, her eyes wide. "Who is it?" she whispers, barely audible over the pounding of my own heartbeat.

I don't answer, my focus entirely on locating our attacker. There's movement in the alley across the street—a shadow darting between the dumpsters. I take aim and fire a couple of shots in quick succession, trying to flush the shooter out.

But they're already retreating, disappearing into the maze of alleys and side streets that crisscross Queens. I know we don't have much time; the sound of gunfire will have already attracted attention.

"Come on, we need to move!" I grab Natalie's hand and pull her to her feet. We dart down the street, moving quickly but cautiously, aware that the shooter could still be nearby.

As we run, I'm acutely aware of Natalie's presence beside me. Her breath is ragged, her steps uneven, but she keeps pace.

We duck into a narrow alley, pausing to catch our breath. I press my back against the cool brick wall, gun still in hand, scanning the street for any sign of pursuit.

Natalie's gaze meets mine. "Thank you," she breathes out, her voice shaky. "I had to turn in my—my firearm for work when I went on leave. So I couldn't..."

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. My mind is racing, trying to piece together who could be behind the attack. It's a dangerous game we're playing, and the stakes are higher than ever.

"We need to get off the street," she murmurs.

"Yes. But where?"

"Let's go to my apartment," Natalie says after a moment. "I live around here."

* * *

When she said "around here," she wasn't kidding. It's only two blocks down, and when we reach the building, I'm taken aback. It's in a modest, somewhat rundown building, squeezed between a laundromat and a small grocery store.

We ascend a narrow staircase, and then Natalie unlocks a door on the third floor, and I step into her world.

The apartment is small, practically claustrophobic. The living room, if it can be called that, is a tight space with a worn-out sofa and a TV perched on an old coffee table. There's a tiny kitchenette in one corner and a door that I assume leads to an even smaller bedroom.

I can't help but ask, "But where on earth do you entertain?" The words slip out before

I can stop them, and as soon as they're spoken, I realize how out of touch they sound.

Natalie gives me a half-smile. "This isn't exactly a place for entertaining," she replies.
"It's just... functional, I guess."

I look around, taking in the stark reality of her life. The simplicity of her apartment, the lack of any luxury or excess, hits me hard. It's a living space born out of necessity, not choice.

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As I stand there, a fresh wave of realization washes over me. The people I serve at Anna's Kitchen, the ones I've vowed to protect and uplift, live in conditions much worse than this. The contrast between my world and theirs—and now, Natalie's—is jarring.

All this time, I've been fighting for a cause, championing the underprivileged, and I've been blind to the reality of their daily struggles. My life, surrounded by wealth and power, has insulated me from the hardships that some people face every day.

I've been living in a bubble.

I turn to Natalie, seeing her in a new light, and feel a surge of respect for her. She just grins at me. "It's not that bad, Alessa. Come on, I'd better patch up your arm."

Only then do I glance down and see that she's right; that second bullet grazed me. I'm bleeding a little, the red stain coming through my expensive cashmere coat.

Natalie helps me take it off, and then my blouse as well, so that I'm only in my black bra and skirt as I follow her into her bedroom.

This is not how I imagined things would go between us.

And yet...it kind of is, too.

In the quiet confines of Natalie's bedroom, the world outside seems almost irrelevant. The room is small and sparsely furnished, with a single window letting in the light from the street. Natalie shuts the blinds and then guides me to sit on the edge of her

bed, her movements gentle but firm.

She retrieves a first aid kit from the bathroom, her fingers deftly unzipping the bag to reveal its contents. Then, with careful hands, she begins to tend to the graze on my arm—a superficial wound, but a stark reminder of the danger we've just escaped.

The touch of her fingers on my skin is soft, almost tender, sending an unexpected shiver down my spine.

Her eyes are focused on the task, but I can feel something building up in her. Finally, she breaks the silence, sounding almost frustrated. "Why did you do that? Jump on top of me, I mean. You could have been killed."

I look down at my arm, watching as she carefully cleans the wound. The question deserves an honest answer, but the truth is something I've been grappling with myself.

After a long moment, she lifts her gaze to meet mine. "Because I couldn't stand the thought of losing you," I tell her quietly.

It's a revelation, even to me. An admission of the depth of my feelings for her.

And all I can do is wait with terrified hope, and see how Natalie will respond.

CHAPTER 14

ALESSA

Natalie has paused, her hands stilling on my arm as I spilled out the truth to her. She finishes bandaging my arm in silence, her touch lingering longer than necessary, but whenever she looks up at me, she's smiling.

She's smiling. She's not horrified, not angry, not shutting down.

Compelled by a force stronger than my own will, I reach out, running a hand through her hair. It's a simple gesture, but it feels like a crossing of thresholds, a venture into uncharted territory.

She doesn't move away.

Doesn't toss her head to get away from my fingers.

Slowly, I lean in, my lips finding hers in a soft, questioning kiss. It's tentative at first, a gentle exploration, but then she responds. Her lips move against mine with a hesitancy that mirrors my own, a dance of uncertainty and longing.

The kiss deepens, fueled by the pent-up emotions and the shared adrenaline of the day's events. We fall back onto the bed, still locked in the embrace. In this moment, there's only us—Alessa and Natalie, connected by something that transcends the chaos of our lives.

My hand slips under her shirt, fingertips tracing the soft curve of her waist. Natalie's breath hitches, a small, barely audible sound that sends a thrill right through me. To know that I can affect her like this with the lightest caress...it's intoxicating.

She's intoxicating.

"Natalie, I want you," I tell her, my voice husky with desire. "Right now. So if you don't want this—if you don't want me—now's the time to—"

I break off because she presses her mouth to mine in a hungry kiss. And then I can let myself surrender to the passion, a primal need that demands release.

I lose myself in the sensation of Natalie's body, her skin like silk beneath my fingertips, so familiar and yet so longed for. She arches into me, her hips pressing against mine in a movement that sets my blood aflame, helping me pull off my bra, my skirt, my panties...

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This isn't like before. I've never felt this connection, this all-consuming desire, with anyone else. Natalie is different—the sex is different—special, in a way I can't articulate.

And the world outside may be dangerous, our lives caught in a web of violence and deception, but in this moment, we're safe.

She pulls off her top in a swift, decisive move that catches me by surprise, but I move quickly to touch her again, my hands gravitating to those gorgeous, soft breasts. I cup them, feeling Natalie's breath hitch as my thumbs brush over her nipples.

I wriggle down under her to capture one hardened bud in my mouth and suckle at her while I pinch and flick at her other nipple with my fingers. Natalie moans, threading her hands through my hair, her nails scraping lightly against my scalp.

And then my other hand moves down her stomach, slipping into the waistband of her pants. She's soaked right through her panties, leaving them slick and hot.

"God, you drive me crazy," I breathe out. "So wet for me, sweetheart."

Natalie's breath is ragged, her hips arching into my touch. My fingers crawl into her underwear, circling her clit, drawing a gasp from her lips. I can feel my own need building, too, a fire burning through my veins.

"Get these off," I demand, and she strips quickly before laying back down with me. I roll us over so I'm on top and I push two fingers inside her, smirking as Natalie's eyes flutter shut. Her hands grip the sheets, knuckles white as she surrenders to the

sensation. I move my fingers slowly, taking my time to explore and tease, drawing out the exquisite torture.

"Please," Natalie whispers, her voice strained.

"Please what?" I murmur, my lips brushing against her ear.

Natalie opens her eyes, her gaze meeting mine. There's a mix of desire and need and, yes, even shame in her expression, a silent plea for more.

But I will make her say it. I will have her cast aside those irritating little morals of hers and give in to temptation.

Give in to me.

"You need to tell me what you want, darling, so I can give it to you."

"Alessa..." she whispers. "I want you."

Those words, so simple yet so loaded, send a rush right through my body. I recapture her lips in a fierce kiss, my fingers moving faster, harder, giving her what she needs. The sight of her lost in pleasure excites me even more than it ever has before. Knowing that she's doing this despite herself, that lust has overridden that lawful nature...

She's mine. Here and now, she has succumbed to me in every way, and I feel the most tender ache in my heart toward her. She's mine, and it's my job to care for her, to look after her, to make sure she is protected. Cherished.

Loved.

I can feel her body tense, her hips bucking as I work her closer to release. "Come on, darling," I murmur. "Show me how much you love having my fingers in that sweet little cunt."

When she comes, her body arches, a shocked cry escaping her. She's beautiful, a goddess bathed in the golden lights reflecting up from the streets below. The sight of her surrender is almost enough to send me over the edge, but I resist, wanting to draw out the moment.

I pull her close, cradling her in my arms as she rides the waves of pleasure. We lie there, breathing in sync, the world falling away.

I can't resist sucking my fingers to taste her. Natalie is such a ball of contradictions. Principled and analytical, yet passionate and carnal. And I'm so contradictory myself, that I feel as though I've finally met my matching puzzle piece.

Her skin smells like sweetness and sin and I'm almost frightened by the desire radiating off of me, the need to be closer to her, the urge to touch and taste every inch of her. Our chests are rising and falling in sync, our breasts grazing softly as we breathe.

She's not done yet. I can see the hunger in her eyes still, and her hands roam over my stomach and hips, leaving goosebumps in their wake. "Your turn," she murmurs.

I grin wickedly as she rolls onto me, pressing her thigh between mine so that I can feel her soaked pussy as she grinds it down, feel the heat emanating from her core, and it makes me shudder. "You're killing me, darling," I groan, my voice rough with need. My clit is pulsing in time with my heart, so sensitive that I buck as her thigh resettles, letting me find the perfect position to rub against her just as she is against me. "God, you're killing me. I'm dead."

Her lips curl into a smile against my neck before she nips gently, and I cant my hips up to meet her thigh again, wanting more of that sensation. "You're nowhere near dead," she murmurs back. "I can feel your heart racing."

And it is. It's beating so fast it feels like it could burst from my chest, a frantic thrumming that matches the pounding between my legs.

"You feel so fucking good," she murmurs, and I groan in agreement. Her tongue darts out to lick my collarbone, then my breastbone. My nipples harden under her touch, and she pinches one hard, making me whimper softly.

We're not women, not anymore. We're two wild animals in heat, teasing each other, testing boundaries we shouldn't cross but can't seem to resist.

As our kiss deepens once more, my hands slide under her ass and lift her fully onto me, our bodies finally meeting in a searing connection that makes me gasp. Her wetness on my skin, the feel of her soft thigh nestling into my spread cunt—it's all too much. We're moving together now, grinding against each other with a fervor that sends sparks shooting through my body. It's primal and desperate, a dance that could go on forever or end in disaster, and I'm not sure which scares me more.

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Because this isn't just lust; it's something more. Something elemental and powerful that scares me because it feels so real and raw. She's panting against me as we work together, her hands gripping my hair tightly as we kiss again, just enough to sting in a painful pleasure that only fuels my desire for her.

"Come for me," I demand against her mouth before sinking my teeth into her bottom lip, just lightly enough to sting. Her eyes flutter open in surprise but don't break our connection. She grunts out her agreement, her hips swiveling ever faster. The slick, wet noises fill the room as I feel a rush of her juice against my thigh, her need building as she writhes against me, her fingers digging into my shoulders as if she might drown without me.

"I...I can't...stop myself," she whispers, her voice strained with need.

"Don't," I groan, nipping at her jaw. "Come on, darling, come all over me."

Every stroke of her hips against mine sends waves of pleasure through my body, heightening my own pleasure. I reach up to pull her hair, drag her head back a little so I can look right into her eyes.

"Show me how hard I make you come, Natalie."

"Alessa," she gasps out, and it's all over for her. She bucks back, arching hard so that her tits are in reach of my mouth again, and I snap with blunt teeth at her nipples, making her squeal a little harder as she soaks me with her orgasm.

And I'm right there with her a second later, my clit so hard it could cut diamonds, as I

tug her ass hard against me and wrap my leg hard around hers, smashing her thigh against my pussy as I laugh and gasp out my own high.

There's a deep, satisfied silence after, punctuated only by the sound of our breathing as it slows from sprint-pace to something softer.

And then she pulls away, laughing softly at the mess we've made. She rolls onto her back and throws an arm over her eyes. "I'm so fucked up," she says, but she's laughing.

"Fuckedout, maybe," I retort, running a hand through her damp hair. "You act like you didn't enjoy yourself."

"Oh, I enjoyed myself. I enjoyed myself all over you."

I grin, running a hand over my still-damp thigh and sucking obscenely on my fingers as I turn in the bed to look at her. "You sure did."

Her eyes narrow playfully. "I'm not the only one who dripped everywhere. And I just washed these sheets," she says with a mock sigh. But there's a hint of arousal left in her eyes.

I'm reluctant to let the moment end. "We have all night," I say suggestively, running a finger along her jawline. "We could really dirty up these sheets if you're planning on washing them again."

She smirks, but shakes her head. "I think maybe we need to have an actual discussion, with words, instead of just fucking all through the night." She reaches out to caress my face. "But I'm tired. And you must be sore, with that arm."

I forgot all about my arm. But at her mention, it does start to ache a little.

"What do you suggest?" I ask.

"I suggest we get some sleep, and figure out all—this—" she waves vaguely "—in the morning."

"Sounds good to me."

"I better just clean up a little." I lie back in her surprisingly comfortable bed, my body still humming with pleasure as I listen to her wash up. The scent of sex and sweat lingers in the air, filling up my senses. I can't help but feel the still-illicit thrill from our secret tryst despite the consequences if we're caught.

This power dynamic between us is intoxicating, the forbidden nature of it all.

But it's more than that. So much more. And that's what I don't want to lose.

As she emerges from the bathroom, I watch her every move, taking in every inch of her nude form. She's like a goddess, all curves and softness, standing there unafraid yet vulnerable.

She glances at me as she towels off, then pulls on a pair of pajama shorts and an old tee. "We need to have a serious talk," she says with a sigh, hopping back into bed. But her eyes are happy.

"We will," I promise as she snaps off the bedside light.

We will. But for tonight, at least, I want to enjoy just sleeping here by her side, pretending that everything will all work out like a fairytale.

Just for now.

In the morning, we can deal with reality—with our plan for Elena, with the danger we're in, and...

And the reality of us.

CHAPTER15

NATALIE

I wake all at once, suddenly conscious, with Alessa de Luca in my arms and my body aching for hers again.

And she's awake, too, looking at me with bright green eyes, curious and cautious.

Last night floods back to me. I suck in a breath as I remember the deep, soul-shaking orgasm—not one, buttwo—and then all the events before then. The safe house.

The shooting. God, the shooting, and Alessa throwing herself on top of me in a completely self-sacrificing move that makes my heart tremble now as I remember it.

What does all of this mean for me?

Forus?

I can't bear not to be touching her, so I roll onto her, kissing her with a feverish need, and she responds just as eagerly, the world beyond us fading into a blur. Alessa and I are the only two people in existence, our hearts beating in a harmonious rhythm.

But our private world shatters at the sound of a sharp rap at the door.

"Natalie?" Sam Wright's voice, laden with authority and concern, slices straight through our bubble, popping me back into reality with an unpleasant suddenness.

I pull away from Alessa, my heart pounding not from the kiss now, but from the sudden intrusion. Alessa's eyes mirror my alarm, a silent understanding passing between us. Intimacy evaporates, replaced by the stark reality of our circumstances.

Without a word, Alessa slips from my embrace, her movements fluid and silent. She scans the room, her survival instincts kicking in. In a swift motion, she slides behind the bedroom door, slim enough to be convincingly door-like.

It's as if she were never here at all. It's a stark reminder of the life she leads, always one step ahead, always in the shadows.

I pull on my robe quickly and take a second to compose myself. And then, approaching the door, I look through the peephole. "Wright? What's going on?" I ask, feigning exhalation with an edge of irritation.

And I don't have to feign all that hard.

"I need to talk to you. Open up. Come on, Nat."

I've never felt such grating indignation at the sound of my own nickname. "What the hell, Wright? It's not even six. Call me later or something."

"I need to talk to you," Wright insists, low and urgent. And there's something else there, something I can't quite place. He's glancing around like he wants to be sure no one is watching.

An actual chill runs down my spine.

"No," I say sharply. "I'm exhausted and you woke me up. Go away."

He takes a step back from the door, staring at the peephole as though he might be able

to see me if he just glares hard enough. After a minute, he says, "Okay, Natalie. But we need to talk later."

"Fine," I snap, hoping it'll be enough to send him away.

There's a pause, a silent standoff through the barrier of the door, before I see him receding, glancing over his shoulder a few times at my door. He goes out of sight and I wait, listening, as his footsteps fade away.

I blow out a long, slow breath. I turn back towards the bedroom, my eyes finding Alessa's. She's standing—naked—in the doorway, and if I wasn't so stressed out, I'd be drinking in the sight of all that gorgeousness. But I am stressed out.

I'm actually frightened.

"That man, he's a colleague of yours?" she asks, her voice edged with a hint of—what is that?

Jealousy?

"Sam Wright. He's...part of my team," I reply, feeling a twinge of guilt. "He's my handler. Was," I amend. "Was my handler—what are you doing?"

Alessa has moved to the window, twitching the blinds open, her gaze fixed on the street below. There's a sharpness to her movements, a predator's grace that's both alluring and intimidating. "He's still down there. You know, I think I've seen him before," she murmurs.

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"Yeah," I say. "He was...at your arrest. He's the one who took me there to see it." Everything I say just sounds so bad.

Her brows dip as she thinks. "I didn't notice him there. I..." She turns her face to me, expressionless. "I only saw you, Natalie. Watching." She turns back to the window. "But I've seen him lurking around my neighborhood."

"During surveillance, probably."

"No. This was before my arrest," Alessa says, her voice tight, "and after, too. The other night, when you were there, he was there, too. I thought he was one of Mancini's men, but—" She breaks off, eyes widening, and turns fully toward me. "Natalie, he's been watching us. Watching us both."

If that's true, Sam Wright is stalking us on his time off, not in any official capacity. The pieces start to fall into place in a disturbing pattern.

A colleague I trusted, now a potential threat lurking in the shadows?

I sag against the wall, my mind racing. No matter how overbearing I found him, I always assumed he was motivated by professional concerns. I replay our interactions, looking for signs I missed. The way he lingered a little too long, his eyes a little too watchful.

Realization dawns on me with a chilling clarity: Sam's interest in me certainly wasn't just professional.

"He's always been a bit overprotective," I confess to Alessa. "But this, it's something else. It's like he's obsessed, not just with catching you, but also with...me." I push off the wall, my thoughts a whirlwind. "The shots fired at us—could it have been Wright? Did you get a look at the person?"

Alessa's eyes narrow. "I didn't get more than a glimpse. I was focused on you." I swallow involuntarily at her words, remembering her instant protectiveness—without a second thought, she put her life on the line for me—but she's already going on. "But it's possible. And here he is, after all, banging on your door at five-forty-three in the morning."

It's all lining up. Sam's overprotectiveness, his insistence on being involved in every aspect of my work. He's not just a colleague who's concerned. He's too involved, too...obsessed.

Alessa watches me, her gaze intense. "Perhaps he's the missing piece in your puzzle," she says softly. "If he's obsessed with you, then I—" She breaks off.

"Would be a threat," I finish for her, and I hold her eyes. "Yes. Because he knows how I feel about you."

Alessa smiles.

And despite everything, despite the fear and the worry, I smile back, my heart lifting. But then her face hardens, lips pressing into a thin line. "If he's been watching us, then he knows about us. About this," she gestures between us. "We need to be careful, Natalie. More careful than ever. For Elena's sake, if nothing else."

I cross the room and take her hand. "This is a mess," I say baldly. "And you're right. Elena's the one who matters for now. So whatever is going on here between us..."

"We will deal with it after Elena is safe," she says at once, nodding agreement.

I hope like hell she understands I'm not trying to back away. But all I do is say, "What next?"

"Give me today to move a few chess pieces around on the board. And tonight, we'll meet somewhere low-key and hammer out the final details. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

And in the meantime, I'm going to speak to the Bureau about Sam Wright.

CHAPTER 16

NATALIE

Captain Stephen Bell, my team leader, hasn't spoken to me since I've been on leave, and I know he thinks I failed—allowed the mission to become too personal, blew my cover like a rookie, fucked up the whole operation.

And the thing is, he's right.

But these things aren't black and white. Alessa isn't some cartoon villain, and while she did break the law, she did it for good reasons.

So the ends justify the means? Bell asks sarcastically in my mind.

With a sigh, I raise my hand to knock on his office door and face the real man. I need to talk to him about Sam Wright. His increasingly erratic behavior has me on edge.

Taking a breath, I rap my knuckles on the door and open it at his brusque call to

enter. "Captain Bell? Got a minute?"

His eyes narrow. "Miller. I thought you were still on leave. What is it?"

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"I am still on leave, but..." I step inside, shutting the door behind me. "I wanted to discuss Agent Wright. He's been behaving strangely ever since the op ended. Showing up at my apartment, insisting on being involved in any protection detail for me."

Bell's mouth twists. "You compromised a vital undercover operation. Your judgment is highly questionable right now, Miller, so I'm going to need a little more than Wright showing concern for you before I pull him in for hard questions."

I try a different tack. "With all due respect, sir, my actions have nothing to do with the improper conduct of another agent."

Bell snorts. "Improper conduct? I wonder if you include your cavorting with Alessa de Luca during the operation as improper conduct." His mouth thins. "Miller, you're very quick to throw stones. I'd advise you to get your own glass house in order before questioning your colleagues."

I feel my professional composure cracking, and I'm afraid. Afraid that he might know that Alessa and I are still in contact. In contact and...

I don't dare push back any further. Not right now.

Not when things are so precarious with Elena Martinez.

"Understood, sir," I say at last.

He waves a hand in dismissal. "Then if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

Fists clenched tight, I slip back out, hoping like hell I don't run into Wright while I'm here. Because there's one more visit I have to make.

* * *

I push open the door to Dr. Kris Hays' office. There's a chill in here, one that has nothing to do with the temperature. It feels clinical, alien, and I can't help but think that every piece of minimalist furniture is judging me, sizing me up. My fingers twitch at my side, longing for the comforting weight of my gun. If I'd had it last night when Alessa and I were shot at...

Well, perhaps it's a good thing I didn't.

Hays, seated behind her desk, looks up with a smile that's too practiced to be genuine. "Good morning, Natalie. Please, take a seat. How have you been since our last session?"

I force a smile, settling into the chair that feels more like a witness stand. "Can't complain."

She doesn't miss a beat, jotting something down on her notepad. "Well, let's try that again, shall we? How have you been?"

I take a slow breath before responding. "Things have been going well overall. Nothing out of the ordinary."

Dr. Hays regards me steadily, her piercing blue eyes seeming to see right through my neutral tone. "I'm glad to hear that, because I have heard some concerning rumors circulating among agents lately."

My pulse quickens at the implication, but I keep my expression carefully blank.

"Rumors come and go around here. I wouldn't put too much stock in idle office chatter."

"Perhaps not," she concedes. "But these particular rumors pertain to you and a certain figure we've had under surveillance."

I meet her gaze unflinchingly, willing my face not to flush.

She sighs. "Alright. Tell me about your feelings regarding undercover work."

"My...feelings?"

"Yes. Do you like it, for example?"

I sink back in the chair, feeling its rigid structure against my back. "It's a constant balancing act," I admit. "Living a lie, remembering who I'm supposed to be at any given moment."

"And how do you think this has affected your sense of self? Your moral compass?"

I pause, considering her question. "It's like walking a tightrope. Every day, I'm Natalie the FBI agent, and then I'm someone else entirely. It's...disorienting."

"And how did that affect your work during the operation with de Luca?"

I shrug, trying to seem nonchalant. "It's part of the job. You know how it is."

Her eyes, sharp and assessing, don't waver. "Yes, I do. But it's essential to discuss how these factors might be impacting you personally, Miller."

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There's a shift then, subtle but unmistakable. Hays leans forward slightly, her tone softening. "You're emotionally involved. And that's dangerous, Natalie."

More than she knows. But I say nothing.

"Natalie, it's essential for your safety and the mission's success to remain objective. Please, be honest with me so that I can help you. Are you involved with Alessa de Luca outside the bounds of the operation?"

I feel a knot in my stomach. This is it.

This is my make or break moment, and what I say now could change everything.

But my response is immediate and firm.

"No. De Luca was a target, nothing more, and I haven't seen her since." The words taste like ash in my mouth, but my mind flashes to Alessa's smile. Her strength.

And she gives me strength.

Hays regards me for a long moment. "I understand this is a challenging situation, but remember why you're here. You're an FBI agent first and foremost."

"I haven't forgotten." I know the vows I made, and I know I meant them. I want to uphold justice. I want to make things right where they have been made wrong.

And I don't think the FBI is the place for me to do that any longer.

"Are you concerned about your safety, or the integrity of the mission?" Hays goes on inexorably.

I shift uncomfortably, feeling trapped. "I can handle myself, Dr. Hays. And the mission is on track," I reply, but doubt creeps into my voice. "But..."

"But?"

"But you're not the only one who hears rumors. And what I've heard is that there's something hinky with the evidence against de Luca." I stare back at her, a challenge in my tone. "And combined with some of the behaviors of team members, I'm wondering if the case will even hold up."

Hays regards me steadily for a long moment, as if carefully considering her next words. "Rumors can be insidious things, worming their way into even the most steadfast minds," she says finally. "It's never wise to believe everything you hear."

Finally, the session ends, but relief eludes me. I stand, feeling more isolated than ever. Walking through the corridors of the FBI office, I can't shake the feeling of eyes on me, watching, judging. Every nod from my colleagues feels like an accusation, every whispered conversation a potential betrayal.

As I exit the building, the weight of my double life presses down on me. It used to be just me, Nat, compared to Natalie Moreau, a mask I put on for work. Now my double life is far more complicated, and I can't hide behind a mask anymore.

There's only me, Natalie, choosing where to trust and where to betray. The session with Hays has only served to heighten my paranoia. I get the sense that I'm a pawn in someone else's game.

Well, I'm all in now. All in with Alessa de Luca, for better or worse.

CHAPTER 17

ALESSA

I sit alone in the private dining room of an upscale New York restaurant, surrounded by an ambiance of understated luxury. The mahogany table, polished to a mirror finish, reflects the soft glow of candlelight, creating a dance of shadows on the white tablecloth. Crystal flutes stand at attention, waiting to be filled, and the hushed murmurs from the main dining area barely penetrate this secluded sanctuary.

Choosing this venue wasn't just about privacy; it's a reminder of the world I once commanded effortlessly. Here, in this cocoon of elegance and power, my tainted legacy and that night in jail feels like a distant whisper. This room, this setting, it's a statement: I'm still Alessa de Luca, a woman whose name opens doors and demands respect.

I glance at my watch, feeling a flutter of anticipation. Natalie should be here any minute. The thought of seeing her again sends a surge of excitement through me, mingling with the adrenaline of our dangerous game.

I've always relished the thrill of the unknown, but Natalie...

She's a variable I never anticipated.

The sound of the door opening pulls me from my thoughts. Natalie steps in, her casual attire—a pair of well-fitted jeans and a simple top—clashing with the setting. She pauses, taking in the room with a raised eyebrow.

"Sorry I'm late, the subway was a nightmare," she says. "Alessa, I thought we were going low-key?"

I can't help but smile, rising to greet her. "Well, the FBI wouldn't think to look for us here," I reply, gesturing to the chair opposite me. "And they wouldn't be allowed in the door, either. Please, sit."

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"So by 'low-key,' you actually meant 'inaccessible to anyone with less than an eight-figure net worth.'"

I snort, and then I signal the server for Natalie's drink order. She requests a club soda with lime.

"I was turned away at the door, you know," Natalie says, eyes glinting with humor. "Until I mentioned your name."

I can't help preening a little. Maybe I chose this place partly to flatter my own ego, though I'd never admit that to Natalie. "Well, I'm glad some of my former influence remains intact," is all I say.

As she settles into her seat, her gaze lingers on the surroundings, an unspoken acknowledgment of the world I'm part of. "So, this is how the other half lives?" she teases at last, and I'm almost surprised to see her eyes twinkling. "Must be nice."

I play along, the familiar thrill of verbal sparring with her taking over. "It's a tough life, but someone's got to live it. And you, in those jeans that hug your ass, are a sight for sore eyes in this stuffy place."

She laughs, a genuine, unguarded sound that warms something inside me. "Well, I didn't get a memo about the dress code—again," she says, her gaze holding mine. I smile, remembering how I turned up at "Natalie Moreau's" penthouse in jeans, while Natalie hurriedly changed out of a dressy outfit so we could go and serve at Anna's Kitchen. "But I suppose I stood out less on the subway this way."

"I doubt that. You always manage to stand out, Natalie. Since I met you, I haven't been able to take my eyes off of you."

She catches her breath, and I'm pleased to see a flush. But she quashes her grin. "I suppose we should discuss business."

I nod, sobering. "Elena. We need to get her someplace safe, and soon."

"Agreed. But your safe house is clearly compromised." Natalie frowns. "I still have contacts within the Bureau. Perhaps WitSec..."

"Don't be absurd," I say briskly, and Natalie rolls her eyes. "Anyway, I've already arranged a few things. Since the Ruby is reopening Friday night—"

"It is?" she breaks in, eyebrows going up.

"Yes, it is," I say firmly. "That means I need to move Elena before then. And I do have a place. Not the safe house in Queens," I add quickly. "Somewhere else."

"Where?" she asks dubiously.

I shift a little in my seat as her drink arrives at the table. "I can't say."

Natalie regards me for a moment. "I'd ask why you think you can't trust me, but..." She gives a one-shouldered shrug.

"It's not that. Well, it's partly that. But it's...complicated."

Natalie nods, her expression hardening. "Yes, it's a mess. And Elena's caught right in the middle. She's just a kid. We can't let her become collateral damage." She hesitates. "Alessa, if we're caught..."

I reach across the table, grasping her hand. Her skin is smooth and warm. "We won't be. Have some faith, Natalie."

The air charges between us. Natalie's eyes lock onto mine. For a suspended moment, the restaurant fades away. I am lost in dark chocolate pools, pink lips slightly parted...

I pull back, the ghost of her touch still branded on my skin. Natalie ducks her head, a pretty blush blooming on her cheeks.

A distraction arrives in the form of our first course. We busy ourselves with small talk of the food and wine. But my mind churns.

Only days ago, I thought to seduce this woman to punish her treachery. But now, gazing at Natalie over flickering candles, my desire stems from a different hunger entirely.

The meal concludes with promises to reconnect soon. At the door, Natalie squeezes my arm. "Let me know when you're moving Elena. I want to be there to help. I'll ditch any unwanted shadows."

"You're sure you want to do this?"

"I am." She hesitates, and her hand on my arm trails down to mine, takes my fingers in hers. "Be safe, Alessa." Her voice resonates with unspoken meaning.

"You, too."

I watch her disappear into the night. Feelings were never part of my life plan, yet here they are, undeniable and growing stronger each time I look at her.

Even though she's on the side of the angels and I'm...well, on the side of humanity,

perhaps. Despite our differences, I'm besotted. Abso-fucking-lutely besotted.

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I give a quiet laugh as I exit the restaurant myself. The idea of being vulnerable, of opening myself up to someone, has always been anathema to me. But with Natalie, the rules I've lived by seem to be in constant flux, leaving me unmoored and uncertain.

The risk is enormous. Loving Natalie could be my undoing, a vulnerability the Mancini Family would exploit without hesitation. And yet, the thought of distancing myself from her, of severing this connection, fills me with a sharp sense of loss.

As I leave the restaurant, the cold night air hits like a slap, a sharp contrast to the warmth inside. And I know one thing.

This isn't a game anymore.

CHAPTER18

NATALIE

I glance at my watch as I wait at a quiet corner bodega, anticipation and unease churning inside me. It's nearly five. Alessa should be here any minute.

I pull my baseball cap a little lower and hike my hood forward over it, too. I took every precaution to evade potential tails on my way to this meeting spot. If Sam Wrighthasbeen tracking my movements, I surely lost him in the winding route I took through side streets and crowded subways.

Still, uncertainty gnaws at me, since I have no idea what Alessa has planned for

Elena. This woman has a knack for keeping me off balance.

Right on time, a nondescript sedan pulls up to the curb. The tinted window lowers just enough for me to glimpse Alessa's face.

"Get in," she says briskly.

I hesitate only a moment before opening the rear door. If I've learned one thing about Alessa de Luca, it's that she doesn't wait for anyone.

I've barely closed the door before the car is gliding away from the curb. The young woman in the front seat turns around with a small, shy smile. "Hi. I'm Elena." She offers her hand between the seats and I take it, pressing it warmly.

"Hi, Elena. I'm Natalie. It's great to meet you."

It really is. This is proof in the flesh that helping Alessa was the right thing for me to do. Elena's face is bruised, but I've rarely seen anyone look happier.

Alessa meets my gaze in the rearview mirror as I sit back and put on my seat belt, her eyes unreadable.

"So where are we going?" I finally ask.

"You'll see soon enough."

The last thing I need is more secrets between us. "Alessa..."

She sighs. "Very well. We're going to pay my father a visit."

My breath stalls. "Yourfather?You mean—"

"That's right," she says quickly, with a pointed look. "The family estate on Long Island." Her smile doesn't reach her eyes. "Surprise."

I gape at her, fear and anger warring inside me. "Are you insane? Why didn't you tell me—"

"Because I knew you'd freak out," she interjects calmly, turning on the indicator and changing lanes.

"What's wrong with Alessa's father's place?" Elena asks, turning again to look at me with wide eyes.

Alessa glares at me in the rearview.

"Nothing," I say at last. "I just...don't like Long Island."

"You'll be safe, I promise," Alessa says, and Elena seems reassured by that, at least. "Daddy's lovely. You'll adore him."

I stifle my cackle of disbelief and slump back against the leather seat, pulse racing. Maybe Alessa's right, and I'm overreacting. But every instinct screams that walking right into the home of Johnny the Gentleman—not just a stone-cold killer, but my own personal kidnapper—is a spectacularly bad idea.

But as I think it through, I begin to see Alessa's thought process. At least it's well away from the city, for one thing. "And then what?" I ask.

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"Then a boat to Miami, and a plane ride to Elena's city of choice." Alessa smiles warmly at the young woman. "Right?"

"Right!" Elena grins widely back at her and I have to admit, it's a better plan than getting her a plane ticket from New York. The Mancinis have deep roots in the city's transport industry, including the airports.

Resignation sinks through me. Whatever Alessa has planned, I'm committed to seeing it through.

I just pray I don't get knocked off by her "Daddy" before then.

* * *

My pulse quickens as the car enters the de Luca gates and goes slowly down the long drive toward the warmly-lit mansion. Whatever happens next, I need to stay alert. Johnny de Luca is not a man to be underestimated.

The car rolls to a stop beside an elegant stone fountain. I take a deep breath and step out into the night.

Despite my anxiety, the estate is undeniably beautiful, even at night. Manicured gardens stretch out on all sides, dotted with benches and marble statues that gleam in the moonlight. It's a world away from New York's gritty streets.

Alessa skirts the front steps and beckons us to the side, around the mansion to the back. "Elena, you'll be staying in my father's special getaway. This way."

I exchange an uncertain glance with Elena as we follow. But as we come into the backyard—if something so expansive can really be called that—I flash back to my abduction, and recognize the small wooden shed that Alessa pulled me out of that day.

Elena's face shows her disappointment at the sight of the shed, but I smile at her. "It's actually pretty cool," I tell her. "Wait and see."

Producing a key, Alessa unlocks the door and goes inside, where she hits a button to reveal the secret staircase down into the ground. She winks at Elena. "Why don't you go on down and see?"

Elena descends, and soon enough I hear her surprised gasp. "Wow!"

But I hesitate on the top step, anxiety washing over me. The last time I was here, I was bound to a chair, subjected to Johnny de Luca's scrutiny, and then Alessa's threats.

Sensing my hesitation, Alessa looks back and reaches out a hand to me. "I'm sorry to take you back here," she says softly. "But it was the only place I could be sure of. If you'd rather wait up here—"

"No. I'm okay."

I force myself to step forward, pushing back the dark memories as I follow Alessa down into the bunker. And this time, I can really appreciate it for what it is: a state-of-the-art security room paired with a comfortable living space. It has a very masculine feel, but it's...it's oddly comforting, all the same. Opposite the bank of screens—some of them are on this time, showing views of the outside of the shed above, and the driveway of the estate—the living area gleams with polished wood and leather. Those floor-to-ceiling bookcases that I noticed last time are laden with

leatherbound volumes and artifacts I can only guess at the age and value of.

"The sofa pulls out," Alessa says to Elena. "Daddy likes to sleep here overnight sometimes if he..." She pauses, very carefully not looking at me. "If he comes home too late from work."

That's not what she was going to say. I picture Johnny the Gentleman coming home at three in the morning, stinking of fear and death.

I guess he doesn't want to bring that kind of thing into the main house.

Elena hesitantly moves to the center of the room, her eyes wide. She takes in the rich surroundings.

"My father will protect you here until we can secure passage," Alessa says. "It won't be long now."

The girl nods, her expression guarded. But I notice her shoulders relax slightly. However ominous this place might seem to me, it represents a safe haven for her.

"You can watch what's going on outside, too," Alessa says, gesturing to the surveillance screens. "Or turn them off if you need to sleep and get bothered by the light."

"Thank you," she says softly, meeting Alessa's gaze. "For everything. I know the risks you're taking..." Emotion chokes off her words.

Alessa squeezes her hand gently. "You're safe now. That's all that matters."

I'm struck by the tenderness in Alessa's voice. With me, she's bold, flirtatious, always ready to undress me with her eyes. But here, her compassion for this frightened girl is

undeniable.

She turns to me, some of her usual bravado returning. "We should let Elena get settled in. I'll give you a tour of the house if you like, while we wait for my father to get back from the city."

Elena opts to remain in the room, already turning on the TV in the living area to a Real Housewives repeat.

"Or maybe you'd like to stay and watch, too?" Alessa asks me with a smirk.

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She remembers my RHONY obsession? I have to laugh, her playful smile helping set me at ease. "Come on, we have some time before dinner. I'll show you the gardens first."

Soon I'm strolling the grounds with her, breathing in the sweet floral scents on the night breeze. Fountains bubble gently around us, the only sound beyond the rustle of leaves. For a moment, I can almost forget all our problems.

Almost.

Too soon, I see Alessa glance at her phone to check the time, and announce that her father must be back by now.

We collect Elena and make our way into the house. The first person I see is a woman who looks remarkably like Alessa, but a little older. "Darling," she says in surprise, seeing Alessa, "I didn't know you were coming tonight."

"Sorry, Ma." Alessa goes to kiss her cheek. "It was a last-minute thing. Daddy didn't tell you? Oh, well, we're here now. Let me introduce you—"

I know now where Alessa got her charisma from. When Maria de Luca takes my hand and says my name in greeting, I feel like the only person on the planet who matters. A little dazed, I accept her dinner invitation at once, and we all follow her into the dining room, which gleams under the light of a crystal chandelier. Fine china and polished silverware adorn the long table set for two, but at Maria's nod, the house staff—there are house staff?—immediately set three more places.

And then Johnny de Luca comes into the room, his presence filling up the space. "Alessa, darling. Welcome home. And this must be Elena. How lovely to meet you."

He kisses both of Alessa's cheeks and smiles at Elena before turning to me, his expression unreadable. "Ms. Miller, isn't it? A pleasure to have you with us this evening."

"Thank you for having me, Mr. de Luca." My voice comes out steadier than I expected, and I'm glad of that.

We take our seats, Alessa and I side by side, Elena across from me. I sneak a glance at the vulnerable girl. She sits with her hands folded, gazing around uncertainly.

But when Johnny speaks, his tone is warm. "Elena, welcome to our home. While you are here, I hope you'll consider it yours as well. You're quite safe here. You'll come to no harm."

Elena's eyes widen. "Th-thank you, Mr. de Luca."

I'm taken aback by her earnest tone. I expected fear, not this genuine gratitude. Clearly there's more to Johnny's reputation than I grasped.

And as for Maria de Luca, she merely smiles at her husband in approval, and asks no questions at all. I guess that's how a marriage like that works: deliberate ignorance.

I don't think I could do it.

Servers appear, bearing trays of mouthwatering Italian dishes. Despite everything, I find myself relaxing in the culinary aromas and lilting background music.

Between bites, Johnny regales us with charming stories. With a pang, I'm reminded

of family dinners long ago, my father's hearty laugh. I have to stop myself from being drawn in by nostalgia.

Johnny de Luca is still a ruthless killer and kidnapper. I can't forget that.

The meal passes smoothly, but I sense Johnny's assessing gaze on me throughout. Is he trying to unnerve me? Provoke some reaction?

I won't give him the satisfaction. I meet his stare evenly, refusing to show weakness.

After the meal is over, and we're all making small talk, he smiles at me. "Natalie, would you mind giving me a few moments of your time?"

I glance at Alessa, who hesitates, then nods.

"Of course, Mr. de Luca." I follow him into what I think is some kind of drawing room. Alone with Johnny, the genteel atmosphere evaporates. I sit straighter in my armchair as he leans forward, his expression now hard.

"You seem quite taken with my daughter, Ms. Miller. And she with you. But you strike me as an intelligent woman. Surely you grasp that you are meddling in dangerous affairs."

I lift my chin. "I'm committed to protecting innocent lives. Just like Alessa."

He chuckles, though the sound lacks warmth. "Admirable principles. But understand, the choices you make have consequences."

"Is that a threat?" I ask sharply.

"Merely counsel, from someone who has a lot to lose." His eyes bore into mine.

"Tread carefully, Ms. Miller. My daughter's heart is not easily won, and I won't see it shattered."

I feel my eyes widen. "I...Alessa and I are..."

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"I can see it in her eyes every time she looks at you," he sighs. "But you must know, Ms. Miller, that a relationship between my daughter and a member of the FBI would be..." He chooses his words carefully. "Untenable."

I say nothing to that. What is there to say?

He's right.

And then Alessa, bless her, comes into the room with inquisitive eyes. "Everything alright?"

I smile at her and nod, even though her father's words linger in my mind. And soon enough we're on the road again, and I feel like I can breathe at last. Breathe again, breathe in her, Alessa. My heart is so warmed by her that when she turns to look at me with a serious expression, I can only smile back at her.

But what Johnny said still echoes in my mind.

CHAPTER 19

ALESSA

We're halfway back to Queens when I decide it's time to come clean. "Natalie."

"Alessa?" She smiles, playful. It hurts to see, but I need to be honest with her.

"You've kept up your end of the bargain. I'll get Elena out, now—thanks to you."

"You're amazing," she tells me roughly, her voice catching. "Really. This was down to you, your determination—"

"Yes, but Natalie," I repeat.

"What?"

"We had a deal. Remember? You help me. I help you."

She nods. "Yeah. I don't expect you to do anything right now—"

"I can't do anything at all."

She stares at me for a long moment. "What do you mean?" she asks at last.

My hands tighten on the wheel. "I mean, I can't give you what you wanted. I have no idea what evidence your colleagues have or don't have on me. Lucia barely tells me anything, she just expects me to let her handle it all, and I was only repeating to you what she said to me. That it looked fishy. That she'd get it thrown out."

"Oh, my God," Natalie says faintly, after a long silence. "You were just using me to help get Elena out."

That's not entirely true. But telling her that I planned to fuck her and then throw it in her face sounds way, way worse, so I just give a sigh. "Look, I'm sorry about it, I really am. And I can speak to Lucia if you really—"

"Alessa, I threw away my career for you," she says in a low, calm voice. "Do you understand that?"

I can't look at her. I keep my eyes on the road. "I...never asked you to do that."

It's not the right thing to say. It's ungracious and cold and I didn't mean it the way it sounded, but it's out now and I can't take it back. But Natalie doesn't respond.

She doesn't say anything at all. She just turns her face away and looks out the window as I drive us back toward New York.

* * *

On Friday night, the Ruby Realm finally reopens in all its lavish glory. The energy in the air is electric as I gaze out over the sea of glittering guests.

My empire. Returned to me at last.

The whole place glimmers like the jewel it is, and as I weave through the throng of guests, my presence commands attention. They've all come crawling back, of course. As soon as I was let out on bail, the tide turned. Now I'm a figure of infamy, not just influence. There's that extra little thrill in being here. Who knows what might happen next? If I'm arrested again, everyone wants to be there to make sure they see it.

Heads turn as I pass and whispers follow, which was to be expected, of course.

But my mind is elsewhere.

I drove Natalie home last night from Long Island, all the way to her door in Queens, but the whole ride was taken in silence after my confession.

Well. She did say "Thanks," automatically, without looking at me, when she got out of the car. Then she slammed the door and walked away without another word.

The laughter, the music, the clinking of glasses—it's all around me but it feels like a distant echo. Thoughts of Natalie linger in my mind, her smile, her strength, her vulnerability.

I fucked up.

And the thing is, I'm angrier at myself than anyone. I could have made it clear that I'd do whatever I could to help her, could have begged her forgiveness. But there was a nasty, stubborn little piece of darkness in me that wanted Natalie to know how it felt.

To understand what it meant to be betrayed.

Well, now she does. And now I'll never see her again, judging by our final interaction.

I signal the DJ to cut the music. As silence falls over the crowd, I lean on the railing and project my voice to reach every ear.

"Friends, welcome back to The Ruby Realm. It's been a difficult time, but we've

weathered the storm. Your loyalty means everything. Please, enjoy yourselves tonight!"

Applause and cheers erupt. I soak in the adulation, trying to let it bolster me. My reputation took a bruising, but I've reclaimed my influence. My den of iniquity is back in business. By all measures, tonight is a huge triumph.

So why am I not happier about it?

From the outside, I'm the image of confidence, back on top. But inside, doubt gnaws at me. My thoughts keep drifting, drawn to a small apartment in Queens.

To Natalie.

These feelings...they're foreign to me. I've always valued control, kept people at a distance. But Natalie disarmed my defenses. Made me imagine something more. A future beyond schemes and secrets, built on trust and love.

Ridiculous for a de Luca to hope for that. Yet I can't stop thinking about her.

A server approaches with a martini. I accept it with a distracted smile, which turns more genuine as I see a familiar figure.

"There you are!" Juno says, sauntering up. "I heard this was the hottest ticket in town tonight." Caitlin is at her side, her smile wide and delighted.

"Juno, darling. So glad you could make it." We exchange air kisses.

Caitlin hugs me hard, without warning. But I don't mind it. I rather...feel like a hug right now. But when she gives me a closer look and I see concern in her face, I pull away.

"Well? What do you think?" I ask, waving my glass around.

"The reopening is the talk of the town," Juno says. "Quite the show of strength." Her words hold approval.

We chat casually, but Caitlin is frowning a little as she listens. Juno doesn't seem to notice that my focus is split, slipping as I picture Natalie's apartment, wondering if she's thinking of me.

I'm terrified of these feelings, but more terrified of losing them.

Of losing her.

"...hear me, Alessa?"

I realize I missed something Juno said. I grasp for composure. "Of course. Just distracted with running things tonight."

Juno arches one groomed brow, about to retort, but Caitlin grabs her arm. "Well, don't let us keep you. You seem to have a lot on your mind."

I force out a laugh. "Perceptive as always, sweetheart." We exchange farewells, but Caitlin's eyes remain searching as they retreat into the crowd.

It's an odd thing to realize, that this world of ruthless ambition no longer satisfies me. That I crave the tenderness that Natalie and I found, safe in each other's arms.

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A reckless impulse overtakes me. Before I can think better of it, I'm striding for the exit, grabbing my coat from a startled Liana at the desk as the valet rushes to fetch my car.

This is madness, I tell myself. I should keep my distance, for both our sakes. There are too many watchful eyes on me—on her—

But I have to see her. The pull is too strong to resist.

My convertible is delivered curbside. I slide in and rev the engine, peeling away into the night. The city gleams around me as I head for Queens, even though doubts assail me. Natalie didn't ask for me to barge back into her life. And things are complicated enough without me making impulsive gestures.

But I've never felt this way before. Like everything up there in the Ruby is just an illusion, and now I'm racing after something real.

The Queens neighborhood is quiet when I arrive. I pull over a block from her building and walk the rest of the way, my heels clicking on the sidewalk. It's quiet, and as far as I can tell, no thuggish FBI agents are waiting around outside.

I'm almost relieved that the door at the bottom is open, that I don't have to give her advance warning by buzzing up. But by the time I get to her door, I'm a tangle of nerves. I raise my hand to knock, hesitating. Is this a mistake?

Before I can second-guess myself further, I knock softly.

CHAPTER 20

ALESSA

A few moments later, the door swings open. Natalie stands there in a worn FBI hoodie, looking unfairly gorgeous, shock flashing across her face. "Alessa? What are you doing here?"

Suddenly I'm unsure what to say. I just couldn't stay away. But that sounds ridiculous.

I take a breath, grasping for composure. "I'm sorry for dropping by unannounced. I was nearby, so I thought..."

I trail off lamely. Natalie watches me, expression unreadable. The silence stretches.

Just as I'm about to turn and flee, she steps aside in wordless invitation. Relief floods me. I follow her in, my heart pounding as she closes the door.

We stand awkwardly in her cozy living room. This feels right, being near her. But the air is fraught with unspoken words.

"Isn't the Ruby reopening tonight?" she says at last.

"Yes," I blurt out, "but I couldn't stop thinking about you." Natalie's eyes widen. I forge ahead. "I haven't been able to get it out of my head." I exhale shakily. "I tried to stay away. I know things are complicated. And I'm sorry I tricked you into helping me."

Natalie just gazes at me steadily. I feel exposed, but I push on.

"You've made me start to imagine a different kind of future. One I didn't think was

possible." My voice drops to a whisper. "I've never felt this way before."

She's silent so long, I fear I've made a grave misstep.

Finally she steps closer, her expression softening. "I've been doing a lot of thinking, too." She takes my hands in hers. "This thing between us...it scares me how much I want it. How I'm willing to upend my life." Her thumbs caress my knuckles. "But there's nothing wrong with listening to our hearts. With feeling love."

My breath catches at that word. "Love. Is that—is that what I'm feeling?"

Natalie smiles. "Only you can decide that, when you're ready. For now, just trust how you feel—and go with it."

Emotion clogs my throat. I tug her into an embrace, clinging tight. Her arms wrap securely around me, and for the first time in years, I feel truly safe.

And truly home.

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"Do you want to sit down?" she asks at last, muffled into my neck.

"No. I want to fuck you." She gives a surprised laugh. "I'm sorry. I'm not great at romance."

She pulls back, smirking into my face. "I don't know. You seem to be doing okay." She laughs again and then we're kissing, her mouth soft and pliant under mine, her tongue teasing against my lips. I groan into her mouth as she deepens the kiss, my hands sliding around her waist to turn her, push her back against the door, and I press up against her, keeping her my captive.

Her eyes are heavy-lidded and seductive when I pull back a moment to look at her. She reaches up to tangle her hands in my hair, tugging me back in gently so she can suck on my lower lip, eliciting another moan from me. I can feel myself getting wetter by the second, my clit throbbing with need as she wriggles her thigh between my legs.

"Ah, fuck," I gasp out as she trails kisses along my jawline before nipping at my earlobe. "Natalie..."

She smirks again, her voice low and husky as she murmurs in my ear. "Are we doing this here? Or should we move it to the bedroom?"

I yank off her hoodie, finding her naked and warm underneath, and she squeaks as I capture each soft breast in one of my admittedly chilly hands. "Since you ask," I purr, "I don't think I can wait another second." I kick off my heels and get to my knees,

looking up past those pretty little tits that are shaking deliciously as she breathes hard, and I catch her eyes again. "Well?"

She shimmies out of her sweatpants and underwear and kicks them aside. She's shivering a little, but I think it's more from desire than from the temperature.

And I think for a moment how appropriate my position is. Since the moment I met her, I've been down on my knees for her.

I slide my hands up her velvet-skinned thighs, parting them so I can get another look at her neat little pussy. I've beendreamingabout it; it's as compact and well-made as she is all over, her athletic figure so different from my rich curves, and I love her for that. I love her for being so different from me.

I lean in and kiss the crease where her thigh meets her hip, and she gives a soft moan, her hands tangling in my hair. I move to the other side and repeat the gesture, and she moans louder this time. I'm teasing her on purpose, and she knows it, but she doesn't seem to mind. I stroke through the soft, trimmed hair, petting her, and when I trail a finger down her crease I'm delighted to find it already slick with moisture.

I smile up at her, my lips still brushing the soft skin of her inner thighs. "You're wet for me."

She raises an eyebrow at me. "Not as wet as I'm about to be."

"You got that right." But I take my time, spreading open her lips and blowing gently over her pink clit, watching it swell for me. "Gorgeous," I sigh. And I can't hold off any longer. I lean in and give her a long, firm lick right up the center, flicking the tip of my tongue against her clit to make her shudder.

"More," she gasps, reaching out to pull my head closer. But I catch her wrists and

guide them behind her.

"You keep your hands to yourself, missy," I mock-reprimand. "You just let me do what I want with you. You'd like that, wouldn't you? To let me take control?"

She lets out a low groan of assent and tucks her hands up behind her back. Her thighs are trembling, and this time I'm sure it's not from the cold. I reward her obedience by leaning back in and sucking on her clit, flicking my tongue over it as I suckle. She cries out, bucking forward, but I hold her still with firm hands on her hips. I release her clit with a wet suck, and then slide two fingers inside of her, curling them against that sensitive patch of skin as I stroke in and out.

Her head falls back against the door with a soft thump as she relinquishes control to me, canting her hips forward so that her pussy opens up a little more. She's puffy and wet, lips a deep, glistening pink as I finger-fuck her, and I can feel her muscles fluttering around me.

"Oh, God," she moans, "oh God, Alessa..."

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I smile to myself and lean back in, lapping at her clit as I finger her.

"Fuck, Alessa."

It drives me wild to hear her saying my name like that, so I tongue her again, and then again, just to hear her. Natalie is gasping now, her hips rocking forward, trying to get more contact, but I hold her steady with one hand on her belly, her cunt spread open for me to look at, to taste, to fuck.

She smells like sunshine and cinnamon, and I'm high on it, like I am every time I'm with her. I drop my head and drag my tongue up her slit, from bottom to top, drinking my fill of her. I'm rewarded with another moan, this one deeper and rougher, and I keep it up, moving my tongue in circles around her clit, slow and firm, just the way she likes it.

She's so close now, I can tell from the way her breathing is coming in short gasps and the way she keeps rocking against my mouth. I suckle on her clit, swirling my tongue over it, and then I grab her ass, pulling her closer to me, but spreading her cheeks at the same time, so I can run a finger down her crack, find that forbidden little hole, and press against it.

"Alessa!"

Ah, there it is again, my name like a prayer—no, like a curse. I massage the rim of her asshole a few times, teasing, while I keep up my tongue-lashing of her clit, and then I press a fingertip into her ass, and slide my thumb back into her cunt so that I have her, I'm grasping her tight in my hand, possessive and dominant, so that

she's mine in this moment, so she knows her pleasure is mine to give or mine to take away. She writhes against me, making sounds I haven't been able to get out of her until now.

"You like that, sweetheart?" I murmur against her wet pussy. "You like it when I finger your ass?"

"Yes," she moans. "Oh, God, yes, Alessa."

I let out a moan of my own into her slippery flesh, and I start rocking my hand back and forth, fucking her in both holes as my tongue returns to flicker over the hot, hard bead of her clit.

It doesn't take long. She goes so tight, her muscles clamping down on my hand, and she cries out again, louder, her body shuddering as she comes, shuddering hard as she squeezes at my hand.

I keep licking and sucking as she rides out her orgasm, until she finally pushes me away with a breathless laugh.

I get up off my knees, and I press my mouth to hers so that she can taste herself, know her scent, her musk. I can't get enough of it. I don't know if I ever will.

"You okay?" I ask after I've kissed her senseless.

She nods, lets out a low chuckle, and shakes her head. "Actually, no. My knees are about to give way. That...was intense." She toys with the neckline of my dress, sliding a finger into my cleavage. "And I want more."

I kiss her again for that, and then I grab her by the wrist and pull her with me across her tiny, cramped living room. "Then hurry up. This time I want to sit on your face,

darling, while I make you feel like that again."

CHAPTER 21

NATALIE

My thighs are still wet with my own arousal as Alessa drags me to my bed and practically throws me on it, leaving me laughing and breathless as she pulls off her clothes. She sheds them more quickly than I imagined, and all that expensive couture ends up on the floor, kicked aside as she rips off her bra and panties and then dives back on me, breasts bouncing as she does, tempting, inviting.

My skin is hot and prickling under her touch, and she doesn't waste time, laying her hand over my pussy again at once, massaging softly. I'm still sensitive from that wild climax she gave me against the apartment door, but she knows how to handle me to build up the fire again.

How does she know? How does she know my body so well?

God, we must have been made for each other. That's the only explanation. I want her so badly I can barely breathe. All those lies and secrets between us don't seem to matter at all anymore. My worries, my fears—all gone.

All gone, as long as she's touching me like this.

She puts her lips to my neck and she sucks and kisses me until my body is humming. My hands are all over her, testing the weight of her glorious breasts, caressing the softness of her skin, slipping into the cleft between her ass cheeks, exploring her curves, memorizing her. Every touch of her skin makes my body tremble, and I can smell our mingling arousal rising hot and humid between us.

"You deserve to come again, don't you, sweetheart?" she teases, her voice all rough and husky with desire. I nod and I moan, my lips seeking hers. "What do you want?" she murmurs. "Do you want me to eat that pussy again? Do you want to come in my mouth?"

"I want what you promised," I tell her. "I want you to sit on my face so I can get my tongue right up into you while you make me come. I want to taste you. I want to lick you, suck you, make you gush all over me."

"Oh, I love it when you talk dirty," she sighs. "And that's just what I was hoping you'd say."

She settles herself down on top of me, and I spread my legs apart. She's so wet, she slips right down onto my face, and I open my mouth to give her a little kiss, a little taste, gently sucking her labia into my lips.

"Oh, honey, you're going to have to do better than that," she tells me, stretching herself out and pushing her cunt hard against my mouth. "Come on, darling, eat up. I want your tongue deep inside me, like you promised. I want you to tongue-fuck my pussy until I tell you to stop."

Her taste floods into my mouth as I drive my tongue up into her. Her juices are flowing freely and I drink them in greedily, savoring the sweet flavors, pushing my tongue in deeper, as far as I can reach. I swirl it around, exploring the contours of her cunt, and then I pull it out and lap her clit, stroking and swirling around it in a tiny, delicate pattern, sucking gently. I can feel it swelling and hardening under my lips, and I love the way it feels when she squirms and shudders above me, how her hips rock and gyrate against my face, pushing her pussy into my mouth and keeping it there.

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I slide my tongue back into her slit, wriggling up into her, and I'm rewarded by the feel of her fingers pulling open my labia, a light stroke of a fingertip over my aching clit.

"Oh, God, Natalie, yes," she pants out. "Give me your tongue, just like that—oh God, that's good. Oh, fuck, that's good."

She grinds her pussy against my face, rubbing, grinding, circling, and I can feel her clit swelling under the pressure. She's on the verge of coming just from this and I want to make it last, so I hold her hips and I hold her still, keeping her spread open on my mouth.

"Don't stop," she begs. "Oh, don't stop, darling, please don't stop—just like that..."

But even deep in her own passion, she hasn't stopped fingering me, gently working my clit, carefully massaging me past sensitivity and straight into unbearable need.

If I could talk, I'd be signing her praises, but all I can do is fuck her with my tongue as she rides me, as she tugs at my swollen, throbbing labia, flicks at my clit to send a mixed pain-pleasure scream right through my body, driving me into a frenzy. I'm dying for her, dying for her to come so I can drink her in, swallow everything she has to give me. And the fire in my core is building into an inferno, my body shaking, my muscles tensing, my heart pounding like a drum.

"Oh, I'm coming," she whispers, her voice all thick and honeyed. "I'm coming on your sweet face, darling, come with me, come with me, come with me—"

Her body arches and she pushes down hard against me, flooding my mouth as I obey her command and come with her, my cries muffled in her warm, wet flesh as I explode in bliss.

Later, when we've cleaned up and are lying wrapped up in each other, silent and satisfied, Alessa nudges me with her nose.

"We were supposed to have a talk. About this. About us."

I give a questioning grunt. It's about all I can manage right now.

"Last time we did this," she says, propping herself up on her elbow, "you said we needed to have a serious talk. But then we agreed we'd put that off until after Elena was safe."

"Mm," I mumble. "I guess I did." Well, so much for that. I can't even remember what I wanted to talk about. Something, something, should we really do this, yadda yadda...

It's amazing how little I care right now about all those obstacles between us.

"Maybe tomorrow," Alessa prods. "Maybe we could talk tomorrow night, after we get Elena out?"

That wakes me up. I open my eyes wide. "We're moving her tomorrow?"

She looks suddenly shy. "Well, if you still wanted to come...yes. Tomorrow night, my contact is docking at a marina near Daddy's house."

"Oh, I'll be there," I tell her. "I'll definitely be there. You're sure it's safe?"

"It's never safe, Nat," she tells me seriously. "None of this is ever safe. But it's the

best opportunity we have."

I take her hand in mine and press a kiss to the back of it. "Then let's take it."

* * *

And so the next night, Alessa's car speeds along the highway, carrying us away from her father's estate, where we picked up Elena, to the marina where we'll meet Alessa's contact.

Beside me, Alessa drives with calm focus, while in the backseat, Elena huddles in nervous silence. I glance over my shoulder to offer her a reassuring smile, even as my own nerves thrum with tension.

"We're almost there," Alessa says softly, her eyes never leaving the road.

My gaze lingers on Alessa's elegant profile, once again struck by the complexities of this fascinating woman. Mafia royalty turned protector and champion of the vulnerable.

Including me, even after I deceived and betrayed her. An old pang of regret pierces me at the thought, but I force it down. I can't change the past. I can only move forward and try to make things right.

Starting with ensuring Elena's safety.

And then following up with Captain Stephen Bell, despite the repercussions I know will be headed my way. But I'm not going to let Sam Wright get away with his stalking and—because I have to assume now that it was him—planting evidence.

Even suspects who might be guilty.

We can't take the law into our own hands, can't let people be tried on false evidence, can't avoid letting them have due process. It's a vile, rotten thing to do and it undermines our whole justice system.

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Alessa slows and turns onto a darker, narrower road into the marina. I glance back at Elena again.

"It won't be long now," I say gently. "We're going to make sure you get away safe. I promise."

She nods, eyes wide, still too fearful to speak. But I notice her body lose some of its rigid tension. This woman has endured so much, but she's persevered. She deserves a new chance. And she's not the only one. There are so many vulnerable women and girls out there, and Alessa's work with them is vital.

I'm startled from my thoughts as the car rolls to a stop. Alessa beckons us all out of the car, and we hurry down to an isolated section of the docks. It's eerily quiet, the normal hum of activity silenced in these late hours.

The lights of the marina stretch over the water like ghostly beacons. Somewhere among these shadowy docks, Elena's ride to freedom awaits.

Alessa puts a protective arm around Elena. The poor girl is trembling now, tears shimmering in her eyes. Alessa leans in close, speaking too softly for me to hear, but I see Elena relax slightly, managing a wavering smile.

I'm again struck by the tenderness Alessa shows her. This is what the FBI, what I failed to see about her for so long. That beneath that bloody family legacy and glossy veneer beats a heart filled with compassion.

Rounding a corner, we spot a rusty trawler docked at the end of a pier. A weathered

woman stands at the rail, cigarette dangling from her lips. She inclines her chin at our approach.

"Let's get the girl on quick." Her tone is gruff but not unkind.

Alessa squeezes Elena's shoulder. "This is it. You're almost free."

Elena blinks back fresh tears. "I'm scared," she whispers.

"I know." She brushes a stray hair from Elena's cheek. "Be brave just a little longer. Everything is waiting for you at the other end, I promise. A new life."

Elena takes a shuddering breath and straightens her shoulders. At Alessa's reassuring nod, she allows herself to be led aboard.

As she disappears below deck, Alessa and I share a look. "Your contact seems dependable," I murmur.

Alessa nods. "Rosie's worked these waters for decades. There's not a route or regulation she doesn't know." Her lips quirk. "Sometimes a life outside the law has its advantages."

I make a noncommittal sound, even as I acknowledge her point. The law has its limits, and sometimes justice requires coloring outside the lines. Isn't that what Alessa and I are doing here?

The trawler's engines rumble to life, vibrating the pier beneath our feet. The operation is underway. Alessa steps closer as we watch the boat edge away from the dock.

"Elena will have a good life now because of you," I say softly.

Alessa shakes her head. "Because of us." She meets my gaze, and in her eyes I see newfound respect. "I couldn't have done this without you, Natalie."

Her words kindle a warmth in my chest. Working together these past days, relying on each other, has changed things between us. We've both seen the truth of who the other is beneath the lies and mistrust.

But a shout from behind startles us both. I whirl to see a marina security officer approaching, one hand on his radio.

"Shit," Alessa breathes.

"Stay calm," I murmur. "Follow my lead."

The officer's footsteps echo along the pier. "Hey! This area's restricted." His gaze narrows at us.

"Good evening, sir," I say, infusing authority into my tone even as my heart hammers. I pull out my wallet, flipping it open to briefly flash the contents. "Agent Jane West, FBI. I'm here on official business, but I'm afraid this investigation requires some discretion."

The guard squints at me. After a suspended moment, he shrugs. "My bad. Didn't mean to interfere."

"Have a good night." The pleasantries feel surreal even as I utter it. But the guy turns away, suspicions apparently laid to rest.

I exhale slowly. Alessa steps closer as we watch him disappear into the shadows once more.

"What the hell?" she mutters low, with an incredulous look at me.

"He's about as useful as a mall cop," I agree.

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"You still have your badge?" she murmurs. "Even on leave?"

I allow myself a tight smile as I tuck my wallet away. "Turns out a driver's license in a totally different name works just as well on someone who really doesn't give a fuck." I meet her gaze. "Talk like a Fed, people treat you like a Fed. Right?"

She smiles faintly back. "Clever girl." Her eyes glint with new appreciation. Or perhaps it's renewed desire. My pulse skips, but I force myself to stay focused. We're not out of danger yet.

We need to leave, but neither of us can resist a last glance at the retreating vessel.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" Alessa asks at last, her voice subdued.

I follow her gaze to the dark slash of water where the trawler disappeared. "With the chance you've given her? I think she'll thrive." I touch her arm. "You did a good thing tonight, Alessa."

She bows her head, uncharacteristically somber. "I just hope it's enough to balance out some of my father's sins."

My breath catches at this glimpse into the weight on her soul. I've been so focused on bringing down the Mancini Family that I overlooked the toll it's taken on Alessa, born into a role she never chose, her father so well loved—but so violent, too.

My image of her shifts yet again, subtler shadings coming into focus.

"You're living proof that we're more than where we come from," I tell her.

She smiles, eyes shining with emotion. "I hope so. Let's get out of here, huh?"

"Let's," I agree fervently.

CHAPTER 22

ALESSA

I stir to the whisper of sheets as Natalie slips out of bed in the early morning. Through half-open eyes, I watch her dress: buttoning, strapping, smoothing away evidence of the night before.

She came back with me to my home last night, and I loved her for hours, until we both passed out in exhaustion.

She catches me peeking. Flashes that sunshine smile. "Go back to sleep, Alessa."

Longing creeps in to curl up in the warm spot she leaves behind. I stretch languidly beneath the sheets, body pleasantly tingling as memories of last night replay in my mind. Natalie's hands roaming my skin, her mouth worshipping every inch of me... I suppress a pleasurable shudder.

Every time. Every time it's incendiary.

I grab my robe and watch the sunrise bleed pink over Manhattan's silhouette. Early joggers loop by, a guy walking his French bulldog. My pulse picks up when Natalie steps onto the pavement, scanning the street.

She turns and waves up at me, and I wave down at her, but a pang goes through me.

Does she regret what passed between us under cover of darkness? I know this changes nothing about the obstacles facing us, but I'd hoped...

No. I won't let insecurities undermine this new beginning.

This is real. I must trust in that. In her.

I head downstairs. The townhouse is quiet, still slumbering. Moving to the front window, I peek through the curtains, looking after her again because I can't bear to know she's in sight and not see her. I spot her hurrying down the sidewalk half a block away, shoulders hunched against the morning chill.

Even from this distance, she takes my breath away. Memories of her above me, below me, surround me, make my body flush with renewed wanting. But deeper than the desire is a bone-deep rightness. As though she's meant to be here, with me. As though this is where she belongs.

Natalie glances back over her shoulder, as if sensing my gaze. I lift a hand in greeting, even though she can't see it. But she offers a small wave in return as though she can feel my eyes on her, then continues on her way.

I wish I could have awakened in her arms, lingered over coffee and caresses. Yet I understand her caution, her need to move carefully through this delicate new dynamic between us. I must be patient.

Turning from the window, I take one step away, but a sudden commotion outside catches my attention. Muted voices rising in anger. I turn back to the window.

Natalie stands rigid, face pale.

And before her looms Sam Wright, gesturing wildly as he crowds into her space.

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My chest tightens.

Natalie takes a step back, but Wright continues his tirade, jabbing a finger at her. Even from this distance, I can see the fear in her body language.

That does it.

I yank open the door and run out, pulse thundering in my ears. If that bastard lays one hand on her...

"I warned you to stay away from her!" Wright shouts. Natalie winces but keeps icy calm.

"I don't answer to you, Sam." My brave, stubborn girl.

I'm down the steps in an instant, bare feet slapping the cold concrete. "Get the hell away from her!"

Wright whirls with a snarl, but I don't slow. Reaching them in seconds, I put myself between him and Natalie. Up close, his eyes are bloodshot, his face mottled with rage, and his breath stinks of booze.

"This doesn't concern you," he spits.

"Anything concerning Natalie concerns me."

He scoffs, looking over my shoulder. "So you really are fucking the Mafia whore

now?"

Natalie gives a gasp, and grabs my arm in warning. Fury blazes through me, but I clench my jaw, refusing to be baited.

When I don't respond, Wright leans in even closer. "I don't know what she's told you, but Natalie belongs to me."

The possessiveness in his tone raises the hairs on my neck. "She belongs to no one. Now get out of here before I forget I don't hit men with little dicks."

"Listen, bitch—" He stabs his finger right in my sternum, and that's what I've been waiting for.

Physical contact.

Now I can physically contact him right back.

I grab his wrist and twist, forcing him to his knees. It's always surprisingly easy; men never expect to be physically overpowered by a woman. Wright howls, and it's music to my ears. "I think you'd better leave, unless you wanna explain in court how a little girl broke the big, bad FBI agent."

With a roar, he tries to jerk free, but I have the angle on him. I lean close to his ear and hiss out poison. "Hear me, little man. I know killers who remove intestines slowly, as a special courtesy to those who have paid them to do so. Who skin their victims inch by inch over days then feed those pathetic scraps of flesh back to them. You don't want to fuck with me. And you really, really don't want to fuck with Natalie again. Ever."

"Alessa!" Natalie grabs me away from him. Wright stumbles to his feet, chest

heaving. Natalie's voice trembles but remains steady. "Wright, you need to leave. Now."

For a long, tense moment we all remain frozen, the threat of violence crackling in the air. Then Wright exhales harshly and takes a step back.

"You'll regret this," he grates out at me. Then he turns and stalks away, shoulders rigid with barely leashed fury.

Only once he disappears from view do I release the breath trapped in my lungs. Natalie pulls me back toward my house, and once inside, sags against me, shaking in reaction. I gather her close, stroking her hair.

"It's alright. I've got you."

She clings to me, face buried in my neck. "I'm so sorry. I never wanted you involved in this. But Alessa—you should never have said—"

"Hush. He's too drunk to even remember what happened, I bet. And I'm exactly where I want to be." I draw back to meet her eyes. "This isn't your fault. Wright's clearly unstable."

She shudders. "I should have seen it sooner. The way he looked at me sometimes..." She trails off, arms wrapping around herself. Protecting herself.

Anger surges anew, but I temper it. Right now, she needs me to be calm. "You have nothing to apologize for. People like him are adept at hiding their true nature." I kiss her forehead. "Come back inside. I'll make you some coffee."

She nods and allows me to guide her back into the warmth of the kitchen. But I can feel the fine tremors still running through her. Wright's sudden violence has shaken

her to her core.

Seated at the kitchen island with a steaming mug, she stares blankly into the distance. I ache to see her bright spirit so diminished. I lean over the counter and take her hands in mine.

"Natalie. Look at me."

It takes a moment, but finally her eyes focus on me. Behind the lingering fear, I see iron strength. My brave, beautiful Natalie.

"We're okay. We'll figure this out, and we'll forge our own path together. I promise. Do you promise me back?"

Her throat bobs as she swallows, then whispers, "Yes."

I lift her hands and press my lips to her knuckles. I vow silently, here and now, to protect her from Wright's twisted fixation. She will never suffer such abuse from him again. Not if I have any say in the matter.

And since what I whispered into his ear was perfectly true, I do have a say in the matter.

Natalie gifts me with a tremulous smile, and something eases in my chest. She sets down her coffee and holds out her arms. I go willingly into them, tension leaching from her frame as I hold her close.

I will keep Natalie safe. No matter the cost.

CHAPTER 23

NATALIE

As I approach Stephen Bell's office later that day, my heart pounds in a metronome of trepidation. My gut twists with the cocktail of nerves and resolve churning inside me.

But I'm not going to back down. Not this time. If Alessa de Luca can get Sam Wright cowering on the filthy sidewalk with one twist of his wrist, I can sure as hell make a formal complaint against him—even if it means coming clean about my own missteps.

But I'm tired of hiding behind masks and cover stories. I want the slate wiped clean so Alessa and I can have a real shot at this.

Atus.

I round the last corner, pausing to smooth non-existent wrinkles from my shirt, buying time to steel my nerves. I booked an hour with Bell, because I also want answers about the questionable evidence used against Alessa. But confronting a superior is no small matter. Still, my quest for justice overrides apprehension. I straighten my shoulders and rap firmly on the door.

"Come in."

The brusque invitation makes me flinch, but I maintain my poise. "Agent Bell?" I say as I open his door. "I wanted a word—oh."

Bell sits rigid behind his desk, thunderclouds gathering on his brow. But what surprises me is the second presence with him. Dr. Kris Hays rises from a chair in the corner, face carefully composed into a polite mask.

"I want a word with you, too," Bell growls. "Sit."

"I didn't mean to interrupt—"

"Sit," he roars, like I'm a recalcitrant dog who won't obey. I pause a moment, just so he knows I'm here of my own free will, and then I perch warily on the room's remaining chair.

Hays' studiously neutral expression seems to shift, twitching into a hint of a smug smile. The change sends ice trickling down my spine.

What is happening here?

Hays settles back in her seat, folding her hands with elaborate composure. Her eyes bore into me, glinting behind pristine glasses. My pulse kicks into overdrive. This is a staged scene, and it reeks of a tribunal, not a meeting between colleagues.

Before I can say anything, Bell slides a file across the desk. It spins to a stop in front of me, revealing an official seal of the FBI. The sight fills me with dread.

"Open it," Bell orders flatly. Hands numb, I comply. Inside are photos of Alessa and me—grainy long-range surveillance shots. One captures us walking down a Manhattan street, passing an espresso stand. Another shows us seated in a dimly lit diner, heads bent in serious conversation—that was the night I went to Anna's Kitchen.

Wait. What...

My stomach drops even as confusion wars with denial. We look innocuous, even mundane in these frozen moments.

But they're damning all the same.

"Would you care to explain these interactions, Miller?"

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:39 am

Bell's biting delivery hits me like the crack of a whip. He and Hays watch, hawk-like, awaiting my reaction.

"That's...I happened to run into her," I hedge, scrambling for solid ground in this exchange turned quicksand. "She's been trying to take down a trafficking network—"

"Is this FBI protocol now?" Bell snarls. "Cozy private dinners with suspects? What information have you been feeding her, Miller?"

My mouth opens but no words form. There's no explanation to give, after all. I knew my actions were wrong. Reckless. Stupid.

And I did it anyway, because I wanted the truth. Not just an outcome, a statistic to make the Bureau look good, but actual justice.

"No need to fabricate more stories, Miller." Bell's acid tone etches the air between us. "We have all the evidence required."

I jerk my gaze up, pulse stuttering. Hays' cool stare bores into me. These colleagues I trusted now study me as if I'm the enemy. And perhaps...yes, perhaps now I am. A wave of dizziness overtakes me, the floor seeming to sway beneath my chair. I grip the seat hard, knuckles blanching bloodless white.

"Natalie..."

Hays' gentle tone slices through the tension. I jerk my gaze to her familiar face, my name a lifeline.

"Rumors have persisted about inappropriate relations between you and Alessa de Luca." Hays clasps her hands, radiating false sympathy. "As your psychological assessor, I had a duty to report any suspicions of misconduct, as I'm sure you understand."

Her words send me reeling all over again.

"You told them that?" I rasp out. "Based on gossip? You know how agents speculate—"

"Oh, my dear." Condescension drips from her tongue. "We have moved well beyond speculation now." She looks at Bell and nods. He pushes a button on his phone.

"Send him in," he says into it.

Before I can try to weave an apology or explain again, the door opens and Sam Wright strides in. His entry feels rehearsed, timed for maximum effect—the culmination of this perverse act.

"Good morning, sir." Wright strides forward, cocksure and smooth. He's cleaned up since this morning, I note wryly, though his eyes are still red and bleary. His smile remains but his eyes turn glacial as they rake over me.

Red flashes across my vision. The Sam Wright I once trusted with my life has become an unknowable menace. Has everyone here fallen into insanity?

Sam stands beside Bell, smugness shrouding him like a tailored suit.

"Take a seat," Bell snaps, and Wright grins at me when he hears the tone in our Captain's voice. "Wright, would you like to make your report?"

Oh, boy, would he.

Sam Wright spins it out, every single time he's seen Alessa and me together, and some times that I know are complete horseshit, too. But I'm too cautious to speak up. Not yet. I want to hear it all, know what I'm up against.

"None of those surveillances were mandated by you, were they, sir?" I ask Bell at last, when the recitation stops.

For the first time, Bell looks uncomfortable rather than furious. "No. But—"

"Then I'm not sure they're admissible in any disciplinary action."

"Natalie," Hays says, leaning in with a fake-sad smile. "We have the photographs. You can't deny them. If Sam here happened to run across you in his civilian life, while you were bringing the Bureau into disrepute, it was his duty to follow you. To photograph you. To keep an eye on you..."

"Quite," Bell says shortly. "In any case—"

But Wright can't help himself, interrupting the boss. "So now that we've all stopped pretending Miller's still on our side, maybe we should discuss how to handle her mafia bedmate."

Rage whites out conscious thought. I half-rise from my seat but Bell's bark cuts through the roaring in my ears.

"Sit down, Miller! You're not helping yourself. Give me one reason I shouldn't slap cuffs on you this instant."

I think of Elena Martinez sailing off to her new life. In contrast, I'm a ship adrift in a

tempest with no safe harbor in sight. Wright and Hays loom like circling sharks awaiting blood.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:40 am

And I'm their prey.

"I...would like to speak to a lawyer, I think," I say cautiously.

Hays merely tuts as though my request was a full confession, while Wright smirks.

And Bell's mind closed long before I stepped into this garish mock trial. Nothing I say now will convince him. I'll just have to go with this, ride it out.

Bide my time.

I sink back into my seat. I know what's coming.

"Alright, that's enough." Bell slaps the photos back onto his desk with an air of finality. "Your actions have destroyed the integrity of your badge, Miller. As of today, you no longer serve the Bureau."

He stands, nodding at Wright, who grins as he comes around behind me to yank me up—and slap handcuffs on me.

"Natalie Miller," Bell intones, "you are under arrest for collusion, conspiracy, and corruption of justice. You have the right to remain silent..."

The familiar words seem to echo hollowly down a long tunnel, and then they lead me out of Bell's office and parade me right across the floor.

Around us, the office stills with interest. They march me down the familiar hallways

under accusing stares from colleagues and strangers alike as they take me for processing.

And all I can do is try to hold myself together, clinging to that last shred of poise as my life unravels.

CHAPTER 24

ALESSA

The laughter and chatter and clinking glasses create a familiar backdrop as I lean against the bar, surveying my kingdom. But despite the relaxed energy of the Ruby Realm lounge at night, my mind is far away. I check my phone for what feels like the hundredth time, but still no word from Natalie.

I try to ignore the dark trepidation building up inside me. I'm actually amused at how quickly I became accustomed to her steady presence, her texts, always with abundant emojis, so that the little ding of a new notification always got my heart racing.

But the last text I had from her was about going to speak to her superior officer at work.

After that....silence.

I sent multiple texts asking if she was okay. I even abandoned all modern protocol and called her. I got her voicemail, and I hung up without leaving a message.

And now I wonder exactly what that superior officer said to her about me. About our relationship. About her choices...

Just when I'd lowered my defenses and begun to trust that this thing between us might

have a future, it seems to have gone off the rails.

I'm starting to worry I've been ghosted.

Me. Alessa de Luca.

"Another cranberry club soda, boss?" Devon asks from behind the bar, interrupting my brooding.

I nod, wanting to keep a clear head tonight. Devon slides the drink over with her usual easy smile. She's off to an extended "vacation" soon, courtesy of a certain Congresswoman. The thought makes me smirk. At least someone's getting a happy ending out of all this mess.

I scan the crowd again, as though there's any chance of glimpsing Natalie's smooth blonde waves. There's no way she'd be here. For one thing, we agreed to keep things between us quiet for now. And for another, she's not technically a member. Liana—not to mention Jeremiah, my security head—would turn her away.

With a sigh, and hating myself a little, I pull out my phone again. Still nothing.

Alessa de Luca does not chase women. She gets chased. But I fire off another text before I can think better of it.

Where are you? I'm getting worried. Please just let me know you're ok.

Nothing.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:40 am

"Trouble?" a smooth voice inquires.

I look up to see my cousin Juno sidling up to the bar, an eyebrow quirked. With her black hair in finger-waves and her deep red lips, she looks like she just stepped out of some gangster movie.

"I'm just busy running this place," I reply breezily, hoping she can't see the turmoil roiling beneath my facade. Juno has a knack for sensing weakness. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Her eyes narrow, seeing far more than I'd like. "Thought I'd stop in, see how you're holding up. No news yet about the charges?" I shake my head, and her gaze sweeps the club. "Back to business as usual, I see."

I lift my chin. "No point wallowing when there's money to be made."

"True," she agrees. "But since that undercover rat was arrested, I thought maybe that silly little case against you had finally collapsed."

I freeze in place, then slowly lower my glass to the bar before turning to face her fully. "What did you say?"

She blinks. "I said I thought the case against you—"

"Before that."

But before Juno can answer, Caitlin runs up, throwing her arms around her wife.

"Here you are!" she cries out, peppering Juno's cheek with kisses.

But I grab Juno before she can kiss Caitlin back. "Say that again—about the officer being arrested?" I squeeze her arm a little too hard and she pulls away with a scowl.

"For God's sake, Alessa, I'm sorry I found out the gossip before you did. That Natalie Moreau, or whoever she really was. She got herself arrested by her own people, the Feds."

For a split second the words don't compute. Arrested? Natalie? But as Juno turns to smile at Caitlin, everything starts spinning.

Natalie...she was working to uncover corruption. She's not the criminal here.

But as I grasp for explanations, the reality of our situation crashes down on me. Natalie and I have been breaking about a dozen laws these past few weeks, and certainly whatever professional ethics the FBI would have around consorting with suspects.

And then there's Sam Wright. I recall his threat to me the other morning. You'll regret this.

Well, I am now. But Natalie seems to be the one who's paying the price for my humiliation of him.

Oh, God. Natalie.

A wave of fear threatens to pull me under. I force air into my lungs, clinging to the last frayed threads of my composure.

"That's impossible," I rasp out. "Where are you getting this information?"

Juno shrugs, but Caitlin has sobered, fixing me with those knowing, cornflower-blue eyes. "One of my Capos mentioned it earlier this afternoon. Apparently the FBI is keeping it all very hush-hush for now. But you know how news travels."

I slide off my seat and turn abruptly, nearly knocking my drink over. "I need to make some calls."

Juno snags my wrist before I can flee. "Alessa," she says, surprised, "what is it? I thought the news would make you happy."

Caitlin rolls her eyes. "Juno, I love you, but you're an idiot. Let Alessa go. Or better yet, go and help her."

Juno looks between Caitlin and me, confused. But when Caitlin leans in to whisper in her ear, Juno's eyes go wide with shock.

"Are you insane?" she just about shrieks, turning on me.

"Juno," Caitlin says sharply, as I yank my wrist out of her grasp.

"If you're not going to help, at least get out of my way," I snarl, and stalk off. But Juno strides along with me, hurrying as much as I am.

"Alessa, you need to be careful. I know you and this Natalie...got close. But she's a federal agent. You don't know where her true loyalties lie."

Her words echo my worst fears. That in the end, Natalie's sense of duty will win out over her feelings for me. That this has all been part of an elaborate long con to keep me from rebuilding my empire.

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That I'm still just a mark to her.

"I don't need a lecture on loyalty right now," I snap, as we reach my office door. "Not from you."

Hurt flashes across Juno's face before she smooths her expression. We stare at each other, the weight of our shared history hanging between us. My cousin. My rival.

And my friend.

"I can't let her take the fall for me," I say at last. "It would be...dishonorable."

That, at least, is something that Juno understands. With a sigh, she nods. "If you need anything, call me. I'll do what I can."

I nod in thanks, because I can't speak, fear forcing my heart into my throat, and Juno retreats.

Right now, only one thing matters: getting Natalie out of this. Whatever it takes.

I duck into my private office, slamming the door harder than necessary. My hands are trembling as I pull out my phone. Please let Alicia Crane answer, I plead silently to whichever deity might be listening. The Congresswoman owes me after I didn't pull her membership immediately after I realized she was the one who introduced Natalie to me.

And if anyone has a hope of pulling strings to get Natalie released, it's her.

The phone rings five times before clicking over to voicemail. I resist the urge to hurl it at the wall.

"It's Alessa de Luca," I grind out after the beep. "Call me back immediately. It's an emergency."

I know she's been busy avoiding me, but this is one favor I won't let her dodge. I call again, pacing the carpet like a caged animal. Still no answer.

"God damn it, pick up!" I snarl at her voicemail. "If you want me to keep my mouth shut about your extracurricular activities, you'll return my call right away."

I end the call before I can spew more threats. Blackmail is a dangerous game to play against someone like Alicia. But if it gets her attention, I'll do what I must.

I scroll through my contacts, looking for anyone else who might be able to help. Senator Clark? He's too deep in the Sabatino Family's pocket these days. My father? No. This isn't really a problem that muscle can solve, and I'm not convinced he's all that keen on Natalie, anyway.

I thought I was so clever, surrounding myself with powerful allies I could call upon in times of need. Now they've all abandoned me.

No. Not all of them.

My thumb hovers over the name Lucia Rossi. She's not only my lawyer, she's served the Mancini Family for decades. She might at least be able to give me some advice, or pass on a contact name.

I hit dial before I can overthink it, listening to it ring with bated breath. After five agonizing seconds, Lucia's crisp voice comes on. "Alessa. To what do I owe the

pleasure?"

Hearing her familiar polished tone nearly brings me to tears of relief. "Ciao, Lucia, I'm sorry to call so late but I urgently need your help," I say in a rush. "It's about Natalie Miller. I heard she's been detained by the FBI and I need to get her legal counsel immediately."

A heavy pause. "And by Natalie Miller, you are referring to the federal agent who infiltrated your circle and tried to take you down?" Lucia asks carefully.

My face flames, but this is no time for discretion. "Yes. Look, obviously things are complicated between us, but I need to get her out of this. Please tell me you can recommend a defense lawyer or someone to advocate for her release. I thought—maybe...you might do it yourself?"

Another endless pause. I clutch the phone tighter, praying Lucia will agree.

Finally she sighs. "Alessa, I do not represent federal agents. Especially not ones investigating my own clients." Her tone is incredulous.

Panic rises, sharp and acidic. "I don't have any other options," I plead. "Please, Lucia. I'll—God, I'll give you whatever you want. The Ruby! I'll sign it over to Don Mancini," I say recklessly, "if that's what it takes! Just please—please—" I choke into silence. Offering up the Ruby feels like tearing out a piece of my soul.

But for Natalie, I'll pay any price.

CHAPTER 25

ALESSA

Silence stretches once more. I'm on the verge of full-on begging when Lucia speaks again, carefully. "I cannot represent Agent Miller directly. However, perhaps some...indirect advocacy could be arranged."

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"Anything," I breathe out. "Whatever you can do."

I hear papers shuffling on her end of the line. "My assistance will not come for free."

"Name your price."

"Two conditions. First, I expect a lifetime membership to your lovely establishment, the Ruby Realm."

Despite everything, I let out a watery laugh. That's all she wants? "Of course. You'll dine for free every night."

"And second, you must give me your word: no matter what comes of this business with your Agent Miller, you will continue your charitable work helping women in unfortunate circumstances." Lucia's voice takes on an unfamiliar intensity. "And the work you've been conducting more discreetly, too, Alessa. You understand me?"

I can't breathe. She knows.

She knows what I've been doing, rescuing those women from the brothels her own cousin, the Don, makes such a fortune on.

Lucia goes on before I can pull myself together to answer. "The good you've done...it matters, Alessa. You must keep fighting for it, no matter what tries to stop you. Promise me that, and I will do what I can to help you."

I squeeze my eyes shut, hot tears escaping down my cheeks. Lucia has always quietly

supported my work with Anna's Kitchen, even when Don Mancini scorned it. And, it seems, she has been keeping quiet about my work undermining the Don.

I never realized...

"I promise," I whisper.

"Good." Satisfaction fills her voice. "Give me until morning to make some calls. I will let you know what I discover about Agent Miller's situation."

The swell of gratitude nearly chokes me. "Thank you, Lucia. Truly."

We ring off, and I sink down onto the leather couch on trembling legs. It's only one step, barely a lifeline. But right now, it's the only thing keeping me from drowning.

I don't know how long I sit there, mind spinning uselessly. Long enough for the noise outside to fade as patrons trickle out into the night. Long enough for the silence to become deafening.

And the whole time, all I can think about is Natalie.

Is she safe?

Is she scared?

Is she thinking about me, wondering if she'll ever see me again, crying like I'm crying?

A soft knock at the door finally stirs me. I scrub the lingering tears from my face as Jeremiah, my head of security, pokes his head in.

"Sorry to bother you, ma'am, but it's closing time," he rumbles.

"Of course. Thank you, Jeremiah. I was just on my way out."

He nods and ducks away, leaving me alone again. I smooth my hair and straighten my dress, trying to regain some shred of composure. But inside, I'm still reeling.

What if Lucia can't find anything? Or if the charges against Natalie are legitimate? What if...

No. I can't go down that rabbit hole. My only choice is to trust Lucia and stay focused on the next step ahead. Anything else and I'll spiral down into the dark unknown.

I shut off the lights and step out into the empty club. Without the crowd, it seems cavernous, like a hollow shell. Or perhaps it's me who feels empty inside, carved out.

This place was my empire, my hard-won success wrought from nothing. Now, with Natalie's arrest, it seems meaningless. As I close up the Ruby Realm tonight, none of it seems to matter anymore. The only thing that means anything is getting Natalie back safely.

I wish I could talk to her, just hear her voice. But I don't even know where they're holding her.

Natalie, I think fiercely, praying she can somehow sense it, wherever she is. Stay strong for me. I'm coming for you.

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For now, all I can do is go home and try to quiet my relentless thoughts. Try to find some faith that between Lucia's connections and my sheer force of will, we can bring Natalie home.

Home tome.

I'll burn the whole damn city down for her if I have to.

* * *

It's five in the morning before I hear back from Lucia, and it's a quick, enigmatic text: Come to my office.

I head right there. It's early enough that Lucia is the only person there, or perhaps she never went home last night. She ushers me into her office, and gestures for me to sit in front of her desk.

She doesn't waste time on pleasantries.

"The best I could arrange is a phone call. And they're barely allowing that, Alessa."

My temper flashes. "A call? That's it?"

Lucia's stern gaze checks my building tirade. "It's something. And you need to take care with what you say. The FBI will be recording." She picks up her landline and dials a number, and after seemingly endless transfers, pushes the handset across her desk toward me, green light flashing. "Make it quick."

Her voice resonates with quiet urgency. I know she's taking a risk even making these calls on Natalie's behalf. But I won't back down now.

"Natalie...?" I force steadiness into my voice but emotion strangles the rest. "Natalie, are you there?"

The line crackles. That's the FBI, I bet. Then, "Alessa! It's so good to hear your voice." Natalie's warm relief washes over me. "Are you alright?"

Hysterical laughter threatens to erupt. Trust Natalie to forget her own predicament and fret about me. "I'm fine, just worried for you," I manage unevenly. "Are they treating you well? Have they allowed a lawyer?"

Questions spill urgently through the limited connection but Natalie gives vague answers and brushes aside my questions. Within moments, she's saying she has to go.

"But Natalie," I plead, "please—I need to help you."

"Alessa," she murmurs, "you already have. Just hearing your voice, it...it gives me strength. Truly."

"But—"

"Trust me, Alessa. Truth can't stay hidden forever."

She's trying to tell me something. I know it, though I'm not sure what it is. But her quiet conviction resonates through me, kindling hope.

"I trust you," I say softly. "Be careful."

"You too, Alessa. I love—"

The call cuts out, the dial tone sounding in my ear. But I keep the phone pressed there against my ear as I replay those final few syllables and hope like hell she was about to say what I think she was going to say.

Because I love her, too.

And I want the chance to tell her in person. To say it again and again until the words themselves lose all meaning.

I replace the handset and take a shaky breath.

"Well," Lucia says after a moment, "I hope it was worth it."

"You're goddamn right it was worth it," I tell her, lifting up my chin. I stand, then pause, reaching into my purse. "Before I forget, Lucia."

I slide a small rectangular jeweler's box over to her, and she opens it to see the gold card nestled in ruby-red velvet. "Your lifetime membership to the Ruby."

Lucia smiles. "Thank you."

"Thankyou," I tell her.

"Oh, and Alessa? " she calls, as I head for the door. I pause in the doorway. "I think getting those charges against you dropped should be quite easy after this shit-show with Agent Miller."

After a moment, I say, "Great."

I should be thrilled, of course. But I won't be happy again until Natalie is free.

CHAPTER26

NATALIE

The stark walls of the cell press in on me as I sit on the edge of the cot, elbows on my knees. I've been in here for what feels like endless days now, though time blurs together in the unchanging monotony.

Hearing Alessa's voice—knowing that she was still thinking of me, still on my side—it buoyed me, kept me going for another day. But time drags in here. I'm alone with my thoughts in this cramped space.

Almost alone, anyway.

The heavy door clanks open and I look up to see Dr. Kristen Hays at the bars, perfectly composed as always. The guard with her drags up a chair and sets it down for her, then gives her a nod and leaves.

"Good morning, Natalie," Hays says briskly, taking a seat. "I hope you're doing well today."

"As well as can be expected, under the circumstances." My tone is flat. She's not getting anything from me.

Hays smooths her skirt and crosses one leg over the other. "Yes, well, staying positive is key."

"Positive. Right." It's an effort not to lunge across the small space and throttle her elegant neck through the bars.

Hays regards me with a small smile. "Now, I know this is a difficult time for you. That's why I offered to see you, to offer what psychological support I can. I think it would be productive for us to have an open and honest dialogue. To clear the air."

My hands clench so hard they hurt. Honest. This should be interesting.

When I stay silent, she presses on, undaunted. "I know you cared deeply for Alessa de Luca. It's understandable that you would be...conflicted, after her arrest. But we are all still reeling from your actions in continuing a relationship with her. In turning on your own team, and to support organized crime. Can you give me any insight into your decision-making process around that?"

The urge to laugh bitterly rises in my throat. As if my relationship with Alessa was some fleeting crush.

But I swallow it down and keep my tone neutral. "I did my job. And when I discovered that someone had planted evidence against her—"

"That's a very serious accusation, Miller," Hays says at once. "Are you sure you want

to go there?" I stare at her, and she tilts her head, studying me. "It's alright, Natalie. This is a safe space between us. I asked specifically for professional privacy. No cameras. No audio. No one else will know what you say here." Her voice drips with false sympathy. "You must have developed some complicated feelings for Alessa. It can be traumatic when cases become personal—"

"You know nothing about my feelings," I cut in coldly. Time to go on the offensive. "But since you're so concerned, let's talk about your feelings. Specifically your collusion with the Mancini Family to plant evidence, and your continuing efforts to corrupt the FBI from the inside. How do you feel about all that?"

Hays stiffens almost imperceptibly. But I see the flash of uncertainty in her eyes. The first crack in her composure.

"Now, Natalie, you've clearly been under tremendous strain—" she begins.

I barrel on like she hasn't spoken. "I know you had Wright plant evidence to frame Alessa. How did you convince him?"

The smile is slow in developing, but she can't suppress it. "Wright," she sighs at last, "was a useful idiot." She leans forward on her chair. "So infatuated with you that he couldn't think straight. He just couldn't bear the thought of you being seduced by Alessa de Luca. It was child's play to convince him that you needed to be saved from the Mafia princess—at any cost."

I'm angry, but I have to maintain control. "Let me get this straight," I say, forcing myself to speak slowly and calmly, as if processing her confession. "You manipulated Wright into framing Alessa de Luca?"

"Wright was desperate to find any evidence of wrongdoing at the Ruby, even when our initial raid came up empty. So, naturally, he was more than willing to plant some

of his own. All he needed was that little push." She chuckles, the sound grating on my nerves. "He went a little further than I expected, when he took that potshot at her in Queens. Yes, he told me about that," she adds at my reaction. "Very suggestible, Sam Wright. Not like you, Natalie. You're rather more difficult to handle. Though we got there in the end, didn't we?"

She pauses, waiting for my response. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I say at last.

"Who do you think recommended you for the undercover role? I knew you'd be the perfect bait for Alessa de Luca. A strong, independent, self-contained woman like you? Irresistible. And the two of you share that ridiculous savior complex, the need to save people who won't even lift a finger to save themselves."

The anger at her description of women like Elena and Sienna fades a little as I consider what she's saying to me about myself. About Alessa. I suppose she's right. Alessa and I do share that need to make the world a better place, only I don't think it's a weakness. Not like Hays seems to think.

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Kristen Hays, puppeteer of hearts and minds. Or so she likes to think.

I almost laugh at the irony. So Alessa and I were match-made by this traitor?

It has a poetry to it.

And what I feel for Alessa is real. Well beyond the capability of Hays to taint it.

"The question is, what's your endgame?" I rise and come forward to the bars. "Did you want her out of the picture so your mafia pals could move in on her territory? Take over the Ruby? Or are you just hell-bent on destroying people for the fun of it?"

Hays' smile remains, but it's frozen in place. Good. I'm getting under her skin.

I snort derisively. "I get it. You're a snake who wormed your way into the Bureau to feed intel to your real bosses. What did they offer? Money? Or are you just power hungry?" My lip curls in disgust.

Hays shoots to her feet. "That's enough. I'll be reporting your statements from today's session. Clearly you are unstable."

Shit. I still need a little more. "So, what happens now? Is this your grand victory?"

"Victory?" Hays laughs, her eyes gleaming with malice. "Oh, Miller, you still don't get it, do you? This isn't about winning or losing." She comes to the bars and lowers her voice to a hiss. "This is about showing that girlfriend of yours just how easily she can be controlled. She thinks she's so strong, so untouchable...but in the end, both of

you are mere pawns in Vince Ricci's game."

Ah. So there it is at last.

Vince Ricci, the Mancini Capo who runs the brothels. He's the one behind all this. The one trying to shore up his power, to remove Alessa from the Ruby and take it over himself. I shudder as I think about what his vision for the place would be.

And in the end, I bet I know who Ricci's ultimate target will be: the Don himself. I bet Vince fancies himself as a Godfather.

A thrill of victory flashes through me, but I keep my expression stony. "I guess he'll have to keep playing that game without your help, Hays. You're finished. Everyone knows what you are now."

Her lips peel back from her teeth in a snarl. For a moment I think she might actually attack me.

But then the side door swings open and Stephen Bell strides in, accompanied by two armed agents—and Evelyn Chang, whose eyes meet mine burning with triumph as she gives a firm nod.

We fuckinggotit.

"Dr. Hays, stand away from Agent Miller," he orders tersely.

The color drains from Hays' face. "Steve—what is this?" she stammers.

"It's over, Hays," he says quietly. The fury in his eyes speaks of a deeply personal betrayal. "We heard every word. This cell has been recording your entire conversation."

"What?" Her head whips around, eyes bulging. "That's—you can't—"

"Actually we can, with the signed consent of the inmate," Bell says. He pulls a document from his jacket and holds it up. My signature scrawls across the bottom.

It was my idea. And it took a hell of a lot of convincing to make it happen. Evelyn Chang actually put her badge on the line with Bell, threatening to walk herself if he didn't at least let us try.

"No..." Kris Hays looks a little deranged now, her sleek hair coming loose around her shoulders. "She's lying, Steve, trying to save herself—"

"Enough." Bell's voice cracks through the cell like a gunshot. "Dr. Kristen Hays, you are under arrest for obstruction of justice, conspiracy, and collusion with organized crime." He nods to the two agents, who step forward and take hold of a sputtering, wild-eyed Hays.

As they drag her out, one of them reciting the Miranda warning, her burning gaze locks with mine. "You'll pay for this, you backstabbing bitch," she snarls. "You don't know who you're dealing with."

"I think I've got a pretty good handle on who you are, actually," I reply evenly.

And then she's gone. The cell seems twice as large without her toxic presence suffocating the air.

I let out a slow breath and sink down onto the cot. The confrontation has drained me, but there's also sweet relief. We did it.

Chang hangs around, trying to speak to me, until Bell orders her away. And then he lingers there outside the bars. I meet his gaze, seeing my own exhaustion reflected

there. Exposing corruption within the Bureau has devastated him deeply.

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"Thank you, sir," I say quietly. "I know this must have been difficult for you."

He nods, mouth set in a grim line. "You have behaved in a manner unbecoming to your office, Miller. I think you know that." I look down, biting my lip. "But...you uncovered a viper in our midst."

"We got there in the end, sir. That's what matters."

He gives a brusque nod and makes to leave. But then he pauses, looking back at me. "I'll speak on your behalf, Miller. I want you to know that. I can't guarantee anything, but..." He shakes his head. "It'll be hard to make anything stick with the mess Hays and Wright have made."

It's not exactly a promise, but it's more hope than I've had since those handcuffs wrapped around my wrists. But the first place my mind goes is to Alessa.

Alessa. God, I'd give anything to see her again. To kiss her. To laugh with her about Kris Hays and Vince Ricci thinking they could ever diminish her.

They don't understand her at all.

But I do. I understand her completely. And I'll be with her again soon. I feel it. I know it.

I'll be with her again and I can tell her, face to face, what I wanted to tell her during that phone call that gave me hope.

CHAPTER 27

NATALIE

The heavy steel door swings open with an echoing clang that reverberates through the empty hall. I stand motionless, almost afraid to move, as if this is all a dream that will shatter if I take even a single step. But the guard clears his throat impatiently and I force myself forward, my legs stiff and unsteady after several days confined in this small cell, only taken out for an hour a day to shuffle around.

But as I cross the threshold, the weight begins to lift. The sterile fluorescent lights, cold concrete walls, and stale recycled air fade behind me as I walk down the hall toward freedom.

After the revelations of both Sam Wright and Dr. Kristen Hays' corruption—and the extent of their conspiracy—the charges against me quickly unraveled. Hays' arrogant confession, captured by the bugs in my cell, tore open that festering wound at the center of the agency I'd devoted my life to.

And I've been vindicated and exonerated.

No one will tell me anything about the charges against Alessa. Even Chang, who came in to visit me once under special permission from Bell, couldn't tell me anything—because all discussion about Alessa's case is happening at a higher security level these days.

I don't know if that suggests something good or bad for her. But I know I'll be there for her, whatever happens.

And now, ahead of me stands Captain Stephen Bell in the hallway, his shoulders rigid, face set in stern lines. As I approach, his eyes meet mine, unreadable.

"Miller," he says with a curt nod. His voice is even, controlled, but I can sense the undercurrent of emotions swirling beneath that calm surface. Disappointment. Regret. Relief. Respect.

"Sir." I resist the urge to fidget under his piercing gaze like a reprimanded rookie. I may have made choices he disagrees with, but I uncovered the truth. We both know I'm not some nervous probationary agent anymore.

Bell studies me a moment longer before exhaling heavily. "I think you know how much I disapprove of your actions over the last few weeks. But your instincts were right in the end." He shakes his head, lips twisting in a humorless smile.

I stay silent, sensing he has more to say.

"You'll be facing an internal review board, of course. Probation, probably suspension, for your...extracurricular activities." His tone makes it clear what he thinks of my affair with Alessa. "But I suspect they'll go easy on you as the agent who brought down Hays and Wright. Corruption is our greatest enemy." He pauses, and when he continues, his voice is lower, edged with gravel. "You got results, I'll give you that. But there are rules and chains of command for a reason. You crossed lines that shouldn't have been crossed." His dark eyes bore into me. "We serve the law, Miller. We don't make our own decisions about it."

I meet his gaze unflinchingly. "With all due respect, sir, you didn't want to hear what I had to say. And as far as the law goes..." I take a breath, steadying myself. "I became a federal agent to serve the higher ideals of justice, not just enforce laws. When those two came into conflict, I followed my conscience."

Bell's expression doesn't change, but I see a flicker of anger in his eyes. Followed—perhaps—by a glimmer of respect. After a moment, he simply nods.

"And I think we both know," I go on, "that my time with the FBI is over."

His shoulders visibly relax. "We can agree on that, at least. Come in next week to pick up your things, Miller. There's nothing more for you at the Bureau."

His words, though not unkind, strike me with unexpected force. But he's right. This chapter of my life is over. For better or worse, after I step out of here, I cease to be Special Agent Natalie Miller.

* * *

I'm processed out, and my personal effects are returned to me. I feel so much older, even though it's only been a few days. But so much has changed in such a short period. I spent years shaping myself into the perfect agent, and then I spent time making myself into different people when I worked undercover.

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Without that, without my core purpose, who am I?

Pushing open the heavy glass doors that lead out into the open, I step outside into the crisp air. After days trapped in a cramped cell, the sudden expanse of sky takes my breath away. I close my eyes, letting the gentle warmth soak into my skin. When I open them, Alessa is there, leaning casually against the hood of a sleek town car.

My heart leaps and the knot of tension within me finally unfurls. I run down the steps and then I'm in her arms, holding her close, breathing her in. Her embrace is fierce, protective, flooded with wordless emotion. We cling together without speaking, our bodies communicating what cannot be captured in mere words.

Finally Alessa draws back, studying my face with tender concern. Her emerald eyes are bright with unshed tears. "Are you okay?"

Her voice, low and smoky, wraps around me like a caress. I manage a tremulous smile. "I am now."

The answering smile that curves her full lips holds a promise. Alessa takes my hand, opening the back seat car door with the other. "Then let's get out of here," she murmurs. "I'm allergic to law enforcement."

I let out a half-laugh, half-sob, as I slide gratefully into the car, settling in close beside her. As her driver guides the car smoothly into traffic, Alessa keeps my hand clasped in hers, grounding me. Her thumb strokes gently over my knuckles and her expression is tender, touched with lingering worry.

"How are you doing, really?" she asks quietly, even though I know her driver can't hear us at all back here. "I know that couldn't have been easy. Any of it."

I consider for a moment, taking comfort from her nearness. "It was hard," I admit finally. "But it's over now."

She lifts one eyebrow in a wordless question.

"I quit," I say simply, and her mouth falls open. If I wasn't so emotional, I'd probably laugh. "Of course I quit," I go on. "What else could I do, Alessa?"

Her face darkens with worry. "I don't want you to change who you are for my sake—" she begins, but I squeeze her hand.

"That life shaped me, made me who I am. Letting it go feels...unmooring. But it was time." I exhale slowly. "I don't belong there anymore."

Alessa watches me intently, brow creased. She lifts our joined hands and brushes a feather-light kiss to my knuckles. "Where do you belong, then?"

Her eyes search mine, and I see my own hopes and fears reflected there. I think of the trials we've faced, overcoming impossible odds again and again. A bittersweet smile tugs at my lips.

"With you," I tell her. "And by the way...I love you."

Emotion flashes across her face and she catches her breath. For an endless moment we stay suspended there, and then she smiles. "I love you, too," she says, and then lifts her other hand to cup my cheek, drawing me near until our foreheads touch. "Together then," she murmurs, breath fanning my lips. "Oh my God, I love you so much it hurts." I chuckle with her, but then she turns serious. "We'll find a new life for

you together. As partners. Lovers. Soulmates." She pulls back just enough to meet my eyes. "You and me against the world, darling. That's all I want."

Her words sink into my heart, sealing the cracks, making me whole. I close the scant distance between us to seal her promise in a kiss. Her lips yield beneath mine, tongue sliding sensually along my own. Kissing her feels like...

Salvation.

I pour every ounce of my love, longing, and relief into our connection until we're both breathless and trembling. When we finally break apart, Alessa's eyes are glowing.

"Just wait until we get home, Natalie," she whispers. "I'm never going to let you leave my bed again."

Home. Together. To start a life we've earned and fought for.

I lean forward to brush one last tender kiss to her lips, a promise of all that's still to come. "No arguments here."

* * *

We spend a long time in bed, long enough that the shadows are stretching out lazily by the time we take a break. Take a break to laugh, to talk, to confess our love to each other, again and again and again.

I'll never tire of saying it. And I'll never tire of hearing it returned.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

After a while, though, our conversation turns to more practical matters. The thought of pouring my energy into our shared cause, helping vulnerable women rebuild their lives, sparks a sense of rightness within me.

I could still fight for justice. But on my own terms.

Alessa's eyes shine as we discuss our ideas for the future. "We need to ensure the Ruby's profits fund the programs," she muses.

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"The Ruby could become a force for real change," I say slowly. "But Alessa..."

"No more basement iniquities," she says quickly, reading my mind. "I promise. The Ruby will be absolutely above board. Untouchable from now on. The charges against me—Lucia Rossi has told me they will be dismissed, that it's just a matter of paperwork now. But I never want to make myself vulnerable like that again."

I'm so glad about it, I can't help grinning.

She sighs dramatically. "You're such a goody two-shoes, sweetheart. I hope you won't expect me to give you every delight." She trails a finger over my hip with a suggestive wiggle of her eyebrows. "I need to figure out a way to get Don Mancini off my back, though. He won't be happy to learn the Ruby's gone legit." She makes a face.

And then she catches sight of mine.

"What is it?" she asks curiously.

"I think I have some information that you might be able to use." And then I tell her about Vince Ricci, being the one who was pulling the strings all along. Special Agent Natalie Miller would never have leaked intel like that.

But the new Natalie? Oh, hell, yes.

Alessa sees the implications at once. She takes a sharp breath in. "This is vital information," she says, her eyes wide and a deep, dark green. "I should be able

to get Lucia to broker a deal with the Don for information this valuable. That bastard would be in my debt. I really could get out of having to pay him any more money from the Ruby. And if I don't have to cut off fifteen percent routinely—God, I could do so much more for marginalized women," Alessa finishes excitedly.

The possibilities unfolding between us seem limitless. We spend the remainder of the afternoon crafting plans in between orgasms, and every minute with her helps me step more into my new life.

My new life as plain old Natalie Miller. Alessa's partner, lover, soulmate, like she said. No longer divided between two worlds, but wholly, freely, hers.

CHAPTER 28

ALESSA

The heavy footsteps down the stairs to my father's secret room alert me, and I glance up from my phone to see Daddy enter with a smile. Even in his own home, he carries himself with a quiet power that commands respect. But for me, he always has an extra warmth.

"Principessa," he says, opening his arms for my hug. "Maria told me you were down here."

"I like it down here. Also Ma doesn't, so it meant I could get away from her oh-so-helpful critiques while I waited for Nat to arrive."

Natalie and I are having dinner here again, her first as my official girlfriend. Daddy nods with a knowing grin at my comments, but what I said first is true, too. I like it down here. Glancing around at the shelves lined with books and knickknacks from his travels, I get a sense of nostalgia.

"I'm glad you're here. I wanted to talk to you." We take a seat, and he gets straight to the point, thankfully. "Now that Don Mancini has revoked all claims on the Ruby Realm—well played, by the way—I don't feel the need to keep such a close eye on him. I'm thinking of taking a step back, Alessa."

I raise an eyebrow, surprised by this unexpected revelation. "Retirement? That doesn't seem like your style."

He chuckles, a raspy sound like sandpaper on stone. "Change is coming, whether I want it or not. Might be time for this old dog to find a quieter corner to sleep in."

My pulse quickens with unease. The idea of my father withdrawing from the protective umbrella of the Mancini Family alarms me. However capable, he could become vulnerable without their support structure.

"What will you do instead?" I ask carefully.

He gives a crooked smile. "I've had some conversations with my niece," he says.

"Juno?" I can't hide my shock.

"Your uncle Carmine, may he rest in peace, always treated me like a blood brother, not just a brother-in-law. Juno suggested we make it official, and that she welcome me into the Bianchi Family. In a consulting role, of course. She's still looking for a consigliere. She thought I might suit."

I nod slowly, considering. Aligning with the Bianchi family would strengthen his position. And Juno would certainly watch over him.

He leans in conspiratorially. "That cousin of yours, Alessa, I know your mother wants you to be more like her, but you must promise me, principessa, you'll stay well away

from a job like hers."

"Oh, I will, Daddy," I say at once. "Besides, Natalie's not all that comfortable with, well." I smirk. "It's a fine line we tread together."

"It is," he says, with a cautious smile. "So far, so good. So you'd approve of my move to the Bianchis, if I made it?"

"I would."

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"I've been thinking of dropping by Chicago again, too," he continues in a musing tone. "See the old neighborhood where I grew up. I still have connections there."

Chicago? "No, Daddy," I say at once. "Chicago is..."

Chicago is on the brink of war, too many Families and organizations vying for power. It's a powder keg, and he of all people must know that.

Sensing my unease, he lays a hand on my knee. "Don't look so concerned. I won't go unless I have protections in place. I'm not ready for the boneyard yet. No, like the cockroach, I'll be around forever."

Despite myself, I laugh at the comparison. "I'd hardly call you a cockroach, Daddy."

"No? I'm hard to kill and adapt to any environment. Sounds fitting to me." His expression grows serious again. "But you, Alessa...you're more like a phoenix. You've gone through the flames these past months and you keep rising again, stronger than before."

I'm struck by his words. The phoenix born anew from the ashes of destruction. An elegant metaphor for this period of upheaval and rebirth in my life.

"Whatever you decide, you'll have my support," I say finally. "But I'll worry regardless. I can't help it."

He smiles, a flash of white teeth. "Of course you'll worry. You have your mother's tender heart."

I start to protest, but the teasing gleam in his eyes gives me pause. The hardness I've had to cultivate, a necessary armor in the world I inhabit, has concealed parts of myself even from those closest to me. Until recent events stripped that armor away, exposing the vulnerability beneath.

And now, perhaps, my father sees me with new eyes.

Impulsively, I embrace him, breathing in the familiar scents of tobacco and cedar that forever mean safety to me. His arms come around me, still strong.

"Whatever the future holds, don't hide your light, Alessa," he murmurs. "You've been given a rare second chance. Share your fire with the world."

I nod against his shoulder, suddenly fighting back tears. When I pull back, the tender look on his craggy face undoes me completely. No one but this man has ever glimpsed behind the walls I've erected around my heart. No one but him—until Natalie...

A glance at the antique clock on the wall reminds me of the hour. "I should get ready for dinner," I say. "Natalie will be here soon."

My father smiles knowingly, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "Better not keep your sweetheart waiting then. I'll see you both at dinner."

For the first time in years, the path before me finally feels clear. My father's steady wisdom has seen me through the darkness and now, as he prepares to leave the Mancini Family behind completely, I find myself ready to step into the light.

No more hiding in the shadows. This red phoenix will spread her wings at last. And with Natalie at my side, I'll make a calm, steady flame to light the way for others looking to escape the darkness, too.

CHAPTER 29

NATALIE

The gravel crunches beneath my tires as I pull up to Johnny de Luca's sprawling Long Island estate once again. Though more familiar by now, it still impresses with its vast grounds and imposing architecture.

I smooth my hands over my dress, an elegant black number I picked up just for these family dinners, when it became clear that they were a common occurrence for Alessa.

Alessa herself greets me at the door, throwing her arms around me as violently as she did when I was released from jail. The scent of garlic and tomatoes wafts out with her and my mouth waters.

"Are you ready?" Alessa whispers, after rubbing her red lipstick off my lips.

I can't resist sucking her fingertip into my mouth for a moment, and then give a crooked smile. "As I'll ever be."

"Well, you look stunning. I'd fuck you right here on the front steps if we didn't have this dinner to get through."

Heat rushes to my cheeks at the compliment. Sometimes I still can't believe a woman like her could want someone like me. But Alessa has a way of making me feel like the most captivating woman in the world.

"So come in before I do something highly inappropriate," she goes on. "Ma's been driving me crazy, asking when you were coming."

Maria de Luca seems to have taken a liking to me, based on her warm welcome—or

maybe, like Alessa, she just has the kind of personality that makes everyone feel like the center of the universe. Either way, I'm grateful for it, because I'm nervous about tonight. About meeting Johnny the Gentleman again. As much as I love Alessa, and as much as I can overlook some of her more questionable activities, it's a lot harder to forget the crime scene photographs that her father left behind him.

And last time I was here, he basically warned me off his daughter.

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But Johnny also smiles when he sees me, kissing both my cheeks in greeting. "Welcome, Natalie. We've been looking forward to seeing you again."

After a little small talk, we go into the dining room, where we take our seats and Maria directs the serving of salad and bread. Despite the abundant staff and the private chef, Alessa has told me she oversees the meals herself, ensuring every dish meets her own exacting standards. And after the first bite tonight, I think it's clear where Alessa got her perfectionist tendencies.

Throughout the meal, Johnny keeps the conversation lively with humorous stories from his youth. A far cry from the intimidating kidnapper who once had me bound to a chair. It's hard to reconcile that fearsome reputation with the charismatic man he appears to be tonight.

After dessert has been served and devoured, Johnny leans back with a satisfied sigh. "Delicious as always, my dear." Maria nods graciously at the compliment, even though she didn't cook it herself. I have to hide a smile. "But now, I'd like a private word with Natalie, if you'll excuse us."

Oh, shit.

Maria and Alessa exchange a brief, knowing glance before rising to clear the table, granting us privacy.

Once alone, Johnny fixes me with a thoughtful look, then dives right on in. "I owe you an apology, Natalie."

I blink in surprise. "You—do?"

"I do. For misjudging you. When I first heard about you, I thought you were a threat. Another do-gooder determined to bring my Family down." His expression turns reflective. "But you've proven yourself loyal to Alessa. And thanks to you, she's happier than I've seen her in years."

"Your daughter means the world to me," I tell him simply. "I would do anything for her."

He nods slowly. "I can see that now. You're clearly committed. That's why..." He pauses, watching me closely. "I've decided to retire."

My eyes widen. This was more momentous news than I could've expected tonight. "Retire? Are you certain?"

"Oh, I am. This business requires youth, hunger. And the business has begun to sicken me. It used to be that my orders required me to take care of bad men. These days..." He sighs. "I find myself in disagreement with Don Mancini more than agreement." He smiles wryly. "And I'd like to enjoy some leisure while I'm still spry enough to do so."

"Have you..."

"Told Alessa? I have." His expression turns serious again. "I thought it would give you two a clear run, too, if I stepped away. I don't want my daughter used as leverage against me, and I don't want to be used against her." He goes on with a wide grin that reminds me a little of a shark. "Of course, a man like me needs to stay busy. Likely I'll consult with Juno Bianchi as a—what do they call it these days? A side hustle."

At the mention of Juno Bianchi, I stiffen slightly before catching myself. Old habits.

But Johnny's eyes don't miss a thing. "Won't that cause...problems?" I ask. Moving from one Family to another isn't unheard of, but it's certainly not common.

"Families are complicated," he says gently. "Bonds run deep, even when we wish otherwise. But Juno Bianchi is my niece by marriage. Don Mancini will allow it—or he will regret it. Either way, he will let me go."

I exhale slowly. "I see." I pause, wondering what the hell to say. Congratulations seems pretty damn inappropriate. "Perhaps your distance from the Mancini Family will widen your contacts. That could be helpful in Alessa's work."

He looks pleased by my diplomatic response. "That's a very good point, Natalie, a very good point. You're quite a strategic woman. I can see why my daughter is so fond of you." After a pause, Johnny slaps his hands on the table. "Enough business. Welcome to the family, Natalie—the de Lucas, I mean, of course."

Laughing, I shake his extended hand, and then he pulls me up and into a hug. After that, we rejoin the other two in the next room, and as I sit next to Alessa on the sofa, I feel a sense of peace.

* * *

After bidding Johnny and Maria goodnight, Alessa and I make the drive back. The cozy chaos of my Queens apartment welcomes us home. It hardly compares to the grandeur of the Long Island estate, or Alessa's townhouse, but she still seems to enjoy being here.

Alessa immediately kicks off her heels and collapses onto the couch. "Come join me," she urges, patting the cushion.

I curl up beside her with a contented sigh, her familiar warmth and scent embracing

me. Here we can simply be ourselves, all pretenses cast aside. We talk, Alessa idly playing with my hair as we chat. Our conversation turns to the future, contemplating all that lies ahead.

"With your father stepping back, so much could change," I say tentatively.

Alessa nods thoughtfully. "It will be an adjustment for him. But I'm glad he's doing it. And I'm particularly glad he'll be under Juno's protection." She gives me a sidelong look, just to see how I react to that, but I keep my face schooled.

"I just hope the transition goes smoothly," is all I say.

"It will," she assures me. "And it opens up more options for us, too. Daddy mentioned to me that you pointed out that yourself to him." She turns to me on the sofa, looking serious. "Nat, I have so many ideas for expanding our outreach programs. Now that the Ruby is going fully legitimate, and I won't have to skim off the top to keep the Mancinis happy, we could do amazing things."

I take her hand, understanding her desire. To transform the Ruby Realm into a true force for good, without any shadows. It's a worthy dream, if an immense challenge.

"It won't be easy," I tell her gently.

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"Easy is boring," she retorts. "And anyway, I'll have you with me to help. Right?"

I give a soft snort. "Are you offering me a job, Ms. de Luca?"

"I am. With perks, of course; like going down on the boss every night."

I crack up at that, but she seems serious about the job thing, at least. And hell, it's not as though I don't need one.

Plus secretly, I think it might be a good thing for me to be in a position to give a little guidance here and there, if Alessa's ever tempted off the straight and narrow.

We brainstorm late into the night, crafting plans and dreams. Slowly but surely, the possibilities take shape—a revamped Ruby Realm that retains its exclusive allure while operating on the right side of the law. No backroom gambling or money laundering, but the same magnetic atmosphere and female empowerment that first drew women to it.

And all that money and power could then be funneled into the charity arm of Alessa's work. "A shelter. And a community center," Alessa suggests, eyes lighting up. "With networking, educational classes, a fund to help women escape dangerous situations. And members of the Ruby will be required to donate either time or money as a condition of their membership. No, fuck it—they'll be required to donate both."

I squeeze her hand, equally inspired. "It's perfect. The best of both worlds." And I lean in and kiss her.

When we finally pull apart, Alessa cups my face tenderly. "By the way, Nat, I'm not offering you a job. I'm offering you a partnership."

I catch my breath. "A—partnership?"

"In the Ruby. In the charities. And..." She pauses, then gives a nervous smile. "With me, of course. I love your apartment, Nat, I really do, but I think it makes more sense for you to move into my place. For one thing, I'd have nowhere to put my shoe collection here."

I laugh, but there are happy tears in my eyes as I agree. "Okay. Your place it is...partner."

Partners in every sense, bound by forces even greater than vows or bloodlines.

Bound by love.

"Well," Alessa says after a moment, "since we've decided that, maybe it's time to give Queens a final farewell." Her mouth tips up at one side and she gives me a seductive look from beneath her lashes. "A very loud, enjoyable final farewell."

"I'm game," I reply at once.

Alessa lifts my chin, gazing into my eyes. "You'd better be, sweetheart," she says softly. "Because I am going to leave you absolutely wrecked." She gives a wicked smile. "Stand up."

I stand.

She resettles into a comfortable position on the couch, her legs tucked up under her. "Now undress for me."

And I do, piece by piece, taking my time, making it a show. I can feel her eyes on me as I strip, and my whole body buzzes with arousal at the attention.

I know she's watching the way my nipples tighten when the cool air hits my skin, the way my breasts sway as I turn, the way my hips roll as I bend to finish stripping off my panties. I pull my hair over one shoulder and look back over my shoulder at her, shifting my hips in a blatant invitation. "Like what you see?"

She laughs. "Very much so." She uncurls her legs and stands, pushing me down until I'm lying across my two-seater couch, head on a cushion, my legs dangling over the other end. "Every time I look at my sofa at home," Alessa says conversationally, while she strips off quickly, her eyes still on me, "I think about that time we fucked on it. So I feel it's only fair to make some memories on this old thing as well. Agreed?"

I snort. "I don't know if it'll hold up, to be honest. But I'd be delighted to test its limits." I spread my legs wider, feel my pussy open up. Her eyes laser in on it.

"You're a little tease, aren't you?" she murmurs. But when she moves, she comes to stand at my head. "Move down a little, sweetheart. I want to ride that talented tongue again."

I shuffle a little further down the sofa—it's pretty cramped, but that just makes it hotter, as she kneels down right above my face, her cunt right there above me, tantalizingly out of reach, and she reaches down and spreads herself open. "Touch yourself, Natalie. Show me how you like to touch yourself when you think about me."

And while I reach down to obey, to slide my fingers over my clit, she does the same, her hand brushing over herself from base to clit, massaging as she watches me. After a moment, she focuses on her clit, rubbing it in fast circles. She lets out a little moan

and I do the same, my fingers seeking out my own nub, rubbing it in sync with her movements.

"Do you want to taste me, darling?" she asks breathlessly.

"Yes."

"Yes, I think I'd like that too." And then she's lowering herself down onto my mouth. I groan as her wet lips brush over my mouth, and I spread her open with my thumbs to lick right up her open, wet flesh with languid tongue strokes that make her shudder. She tastes so good, like heaven, like everything I've ever wanted.

And I can feel her fingers on me, opening up my pussy and spreading the lips wide, tickling a fingertip over my clit.

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"I'm going to ride your face now," she tells me, and my heart rate picks up, my breath shudders. "And I want your tongue. I want you to fuck me with it until it's aching, and then I'm going to come in your mouth, Natalie. And you're going to have to swallow every drop."

I moan impatiently, lifting my face higher so that she can seat herself, and I press my tongue into her hole, just as she commanded. "Yes," she pants out. "Yes, that's a good girl. Now fuck me, darling."

I do exactly as she asks, tongue-fucking her pussy, open-mouthed and wet and messy, letting her ride my face, her moans muffled by the silky thighs that are pressing against my ears, but I feel all of her heat and her wet, feel her shudder as I use my tongue on her, snake an arm around so I can get my fingers on her clit.

I can feel her rolling her hips faster, harder, and I'm matching her, my tongue buried in her pussy, when I feel it—her own tongue stabbing into my clit, lashing at it like she's trying to provoke me. I buck, try to get more of it, and she gives in, settles her whole mouth over me, and gives a slow, increasingly-hard suck at my clit until I arch off the couch with a strangled yell.

"Oh, you like that?" Alessa murmurs. She slides her tongue over it and then she does it again, the pressure sending all my nerve endings into overdrive, my body jerking under her even as she continues to fuck my mouth. I'm helpless, writhing, moaning and begging into her pussy. "That's a good girl," she croons again, as I thrust my tongue deep into her. "So good for me."

She's so wet and so open that I feel the orgasm taking her before she starts moaning it

out, her body shaking and quaking. I hold her hips as she rocks against me, her pussy gushing a little extra into my mouth as she comes.

And then I stay there, my tongue buried in her, my nose filled up with her, as she bends again to eat me, wide-mouthed and moaning as her post-orgasm shudders keep thrilling through her. When takes my clit in her mouth, sucks hard and then gives it a little twist with her tongue, that's when I burst, my whole body on fire under her, and she stays on me, tongue lashing, even as I struggle to push her away, because I can't take any more.

I've never come so hard in my life. And just as the peak of my bliss dies away, the sofa gives a loud, ominous creak, before the legs give out, and it crashes down on one side, making us both tumble off, shrieking in surprise and then laughter.

"I was right," I pant at last. "It couldn't take it."

"Just as well we have the other one at my place," she pants back. "And hell, what a way for it to go. Right?"

I roll over on the floor and give her a sloppy kiss. "Whata way for it to go," I agree. "Alessa de Luca, Destroyer of Couches, I love you."

CHAPTER30

ALESSA

SEVERAL MONTHS LATER

The grand opening of the newly expanded Anna's Kitchen is a bustling kaleidoscope of hope and community. There's a sea of people—socialites, politicians, celebrities are rubbing elbows with the women and children who use the services of the kitchen.

Staff are scurrying about, or sliding behind the banquetts to help serve out food.

Natalie and I worked in close consultation with Anna, of course, but Anna has never been much interested in paperwork. She left most of it up to us, approving things as we suggested them. So now, the once-dingy soup kitchen has been extended into a full, working shelter, a haven adorned with vibrant colors that seem to dance off the walls, just as I always imagined.

I've always thought of Anna's Kitchen as a place of hope, not a last resort. And now it actually feels that way.

I swap serving shifts with Liana, who insisted on coming to help today, and I gratefully pull off the hairnet as I leave her to it. These hairnets are vital for the work, but still ugly. I wish Marc Jacobs would consider adding a few in his next accessories collection. Perhaps I'll have a word with him.

"Alessa!" The new shelter's new manager, Deanna, hurries over, her face flushed with excitement. She was a great hire. Natalie's pick. "I wanted to say congratulations, and thank you for the opportunity to work here."

I give her an impulsive hug. "It's pretty darn satisfying, right?"

She hugs me back, laughing, and then rushes off to make sure there are enough forks available on each long table.

As I walk through the crowd, I pause to greet the people who have come to support Anna's Kitchen. I embrace old friends and make new ones, laughing along with their stories as if we'd known each other for years. I'm in my element here: building connections, bridging gaps, and using those links and networks to help those who need it most.

A young girl approaches me hesitantly, clutching a bouquet of paper flowers. "Miss de Luca, I made this for you," she whispers, her voice barely audible over the din of the party.

"Thank you, sweetheart," I say, bending down to accept the gift. I take a moment to appreciate the simple joy in the mass of colored paper, and blink back the sudden stinging in my eyes. "My goodness, you've got quite the talent there." Her face lights up, and my heart beats a little faster to see the pure joy that radiates from her.

If I can change even one life for the better, then it's all been worth it.

This can be my legacy. I can move out of the shadows of my past, into a future filled with hope and love.

And Natalie. God, where is she? I lost sight of her when I went to serve out food, and I have a sudden, desperate need for her.

I catch a glimpse of her across the room, her sharp eyes scanning the crowd, always on alert even in the midst of celebration. You can take the girl out of the FBI... I grin to myself. But despite her guarded exterior, I can see the warmth and love that I know lies under the cool surface.

As I approach her, our eyes meet, and she smiles, a smile that lights up her beautiful brown eyes. The noise of the party fades into the background as we share a quiet, intimate moment.

"Fancy meeting you here," I tease as I take her hand.

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She squeezes my fingers gently. "Quite the turnout. Can you believe we pulled it off?" Her voice is tinged with wonder. There were so many objections by so many people—council approvals for the extensions, zoning approvals, federal regulations around the amount of money that could be poured into anything at any one time—but together Natalie and I simply bulldozed over them and got it done.

"Come on, let's check on the courtyard." I lead her out to the small courtyard in the back, away from the commotion, though it's just as busy out here. Overhead, twinkle lights are dancing along strings, and it feels almost magical against the dusk of the New York sky.

"Thank you for everything," I say, turning to face her.

"You did most of it," she says. "I just followed your lead."

"I don't mean just this. I mean thank you for taking a chance on me. For showing me who I could really be if I stepped out of the shadows."

She strokes my cheek tenderly. "You did all the hard work, Alessa. I'm glad I got to be a part of your journey."

I kiss her then, a sweet, lingering kiss under the stars and string lights. No matter how chaotic life becomes, Natalie is my rock, my safe harbor.

She's perfect for me.

She told me once that Kristen Hays was the one who thought we'd be attracted to

each other, an almost tentative admission, but I laughed so hard I cried.

"I'm sorry," I gasped at last. "But it's just so—so perfect. You, the upstanding federal agent, and me, the Mafia princess, brought together by someone straddling both our worlds. That heinous cow gotonething right."

And when Natalie had laughed too and told me she'd thought the exact same thing? It just confirmed all over again how perfect we are for each other.

As for Kristen Hays and Sam Wright, they're both where they should be: locked up and awaiting trial. Bail was denied for both; I suspect someone I know might have had a word in the right ears there. Maybe Daddy. Maybe Juno. Maybe even Lucia Rossi, who is here tonight and has made a sizeable personal donation to Anna's Kitchen already.

Or—in my wildest imaginings—maybe it could even have been Alicia Crane, who is also here tonight and acting like nothing at all happened. I met her at the door trailed by her campaign people—including a goddamn cameraman, filming for some promo she's putting together—and smiled just as brightly as she did, while stating firmly, "No. Fucking. Cameras," from between my clenched teeth.

She looked into my eyes for only a moment before turning around to shoo away her entourage. And I even saw her taking a turn to serve out food tonight, so perhaps there's hope for the Congresswoman yet.

And as for those Mancini thugs who barged into the Ruby Realm looking for Sienna, who beat Elena and threatened her—they've met their own justice. Don Mancini doesn't take kindly to his underlings getting ideas above their stations, and my tipoff left himverydispleased indeed.

So now Vince Ricci, Tony Sorento, and the rest of them, have all taken vacations.

Extended, permanent vacations. The kind with cement shoes. Daddy tells me he saw them off himself, one last job for the Mancinis.

And it couldn't have happened to a nicer bunch of assholes.

Just as I lean in to kiss Natalie again, the door to the courtyard opens and Juno Bianchi sweeps out, followed closely by Caitlin.

"Sorry I'm late," she says. "I hope you haven't been waiting on me."

"Ah, the guest of honor has arrived," I say sarcastically, releasing Natalie's hand reluctantly as we prepare to greet them. "Now we can really get the party started."

"Congratulations, Alessa," Caitlin says, hugging me. "Anna's Kitchen is amazing!"

"Thank you," I reply. "It wouldn't have been possible without Natalie."

"Indeed," Juno agrees, her eyes flicking briefly to Natalie.

Natalie and Juno seem to have silently agreed on a cold war, which I much prefer to a hot one. They both get very cool around each other—but they're polite, at least, which is about all I can ask for. Juno doesn't like Feds—evenex-Feds—and Natalie, bless her, will never approve of Juno's line of business.

But they make an effort to get along for my sake, and I'm more than satisfied with that.

Juno studies the mural spanning the wall of the courtyard. "I never pictured you as the artistic type, cousin."

I smile wryly. "The shelter kids painted it, actually. I provided pizza and a drop

cloth."

Juno's laugh carries genuine delight. And then Juno says something to Natalie that just about bowls me over.

"You and my cousin may have arrived here from very different paths, but I can see you share a common goal: making this world a better place."

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Even Natalie looks taken aback. "Thank you," she says sincerely. "And thank you for your generous donations, too."

Juno inclines her head like a gracious queen, and I try not to snort. I signal one of the servers over, and she trots up with four glasses of champagne.

"Here's to making the world a better place," I say, raising my glass in a toast. As we clink our glasses together, I can't help but marvel at the strange twists and turns life has taken, bringing Natalie, Juno, Caitlin, and me together in this one moment.

In the end, perhaps that's what life is all about – finding beauty in the darkest places, forging connections amidst chaos, and embracing love wherever it may appear.

Juno's concession to Natalie isn't my last surprise of the evening. "What is she doing here," I murmur to Natalie nervously, spotting a woman that I know to be Evelyn Chang making her way towards us through the crowd. Her smile is infectious, and she seems nice enough...

But she's still FBI.

"Hey, you two!" Evelyn exclaims, pulling both of us into a warm group hug, even though we've never been formally introduced. "This is amazing!"

"Tell me about it," Natalie replies, her eyes crinkling with happiness. "Are you sure you should be here, though? Won't Bell get a bit, you know...Bell about it all? Your being here with some of these, uh, guests?"

"Ah, well," Evelyn begins, tugging at her blazer, a hint of pink blooming on her cheeks. "You'll be the first to hear this, Nat. But I decided to leave the Bureau and start my own tech security firm. I quit last week."

"Really?" Natalie asks, her eyebrows raised in genuine surprise and delight. "That's fantastic, Evelyn!"

"And..." She looks down, smiling. "Patrick asked me out last week, too, as soon as I turned in my resignation." She glances at me, explaining quickly, "Patrick O'Conner is someone from the team Nat and I were in. So yeah, we're dating, kinda, I guess. He's leaving the Bureau too, though. He wants to go back to school to get his PhD."

"Evelyn, I'm so happy for you." Natalie pulls her in for a hug. "You deserve it. Both of you."

"Thank you," Evelyn smiles, her blush deepening. "I owe a lot of it to you two, actually. Seeing your story unfold made me realize that life's too short not to take risks and follow your heart."

I'm actually touched. "That's...lovely, Evelyn. Thank you for saying so."

"Thankyou," she repeats. And then she lowers her voice. "And thank you for the other work you're doing. If you ever need to talk tech security, I'll work gratis for you." A little louder, she goes on. "So that's enough about me. Let's celebrate!"

As the party continues, I find myself stealing glances at Natalie, who seems lost in thought. She notices and gives me a reassuring smile before taking my hand.

"Let's step outside for a moment," she suggests, leading me towards the exit.

Once outside, the chilly air embraces us, contrasting with the warmth we left behind. The sky above is a vast canvas splattered with stars, providing just enough light to

illuminate the shelter's still-modest facade. We stand there, hand-in-hand, our breaths mingling with the evening breeze.

"Look at what you built," Natalie whispers, her voice filled with awe and reverence. "And all those lives changed for the better."

"What we built. None of it would have been possible without you," I remind her, squeezing her hand gently. "If I had a glass, I'd toast you, sweetheart." I mime it instead, and Natalie grins and mimics my gesture.

"Here's to us," she says, and then entwines her fingers with mine. "We made it. We actually made it."

"And the prize at the end of all this was worth more than I could ever have imagined," I tell her. "I hope you know how much I love you, Natalie Miller."

I kiss her softly.

"I do," she says afterward. "And I love you, Alessa. Never doubt it."

A sudden gust of wind sweeps through the street, lifting our hair, carrying with it the distant laughter of the women inside the shelter.

And I close my eyes and kiss Natalie again, with all of my ruby-red heart behind it.